

Album Review: KT Tunstall - Invisible Empire // Crescent Moon

Distinct discoveries and desert solitude pervade KT Tunstall's new album; [Katrina Northern reviews](#)

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KT Tunstall's fourth studio album *Invisible Empire // Crescent Moon* is an honest and consistently folk-blues record which finds catharsis in its restraint. Rippling through it all is a pervasive sense of self-discovery, both within the record and in the manner in which it was composed. For this album Tunstall went into the wild, spending weeks in Tucson, Arizona with Giant Sand frontman Howard Gelb. The desert atmosphere feeds into each song, evoking a quiet solitude where only nature bears witness. Most songs were recorded live in one take, capturing and embracing the imperfections - working towards a purity of performance. Consequently, this is by far the most intimate and personal album Tunstall has made to date.

Invisible Empire is the first half of the album, until the piano-ballad tones of 'Crescent Moon' signals the slightest shift in direction. The recording process was distinctly of two parts as midway through Tunstall's marriage fell apart and she lost her adoptive father. Many of the tracks written before the events have an eerily prescient quality. But this is not a 'breakup album', nor is it conventionally cathartic outpouring of grief - instead it is a mature, meditative chronicling of a period of self-reflection and a consequent attempt at individual rebirth.

The opening track, 'Invisible Empire' sets the atmosphere perfectly with its calming melody, introducing the soft guitar and steel drum which will recur. Lyrically, it suggests a fantasy of perfection and security yet uses the image of a precariously balanced house of cards ('I wear a rusting crown / I know this dynasty is falling'). This is the song in which Tunstall's subconscious seems to be most ahead of her, anticipating a

fall to come.

The first half contains poignant reflections on mortality. 'Made of Glass' is song about a friend whose sudden death from cancer cast an existential irony over the fragile glass vase he had given Tunstall ('we're all made of glass / cheating ourselves to believe we'll be last'). The highlight is a deeply melodic whistling solo, which echoes and rebounds as if within the vase itself.

Lead single 'Feel it All' is the crowning glory with its twanging bluesy riff. The tempo hardly changes throughout but the gradual implementation of distortion adds a dimension and depth that seems to offer an equivalent progression. Tunstall's voice is beautiful, fragile but controlled. The simple refrain of 'I feel it all' (also varied to 'they' and 'we') has a goose-bump inducing, hypnotic tone. Somehow it lays open the listener, encouraging them to share in the cathartic experience.

It all comes to a gentle kind of climax in 'No Better Shoulder'. It is not any more up-tempo than the rest; instead more voices and harmonies are added with each verse until it becomes a swelling chorus. It seems an appropriate ending from a record that began with individual fragility and ends with a hopeful, collective evocation of solidarity.

If you are a fan of Eye to the Telescope (2004) or Tiger Suit (2010), this album will be unlike anything you expected. The sass of 'Black Horse and a Cherry Tree' is gone and there are hardly any of the marks of pop or electronic music that she has experimented with. This is an earthy blues record, with folky undertones which feels truer than any of that. But there is one constant - KT is still a one woman band (literally, more than ever) who can conjure melodies from air and write lyrics that read like poetry. It is an album that deserves the listener's full attention and immersion, as if they too were in the desert, ready to feel it all.



One comment

Andrew

3 Sep '13 at 3:51 am

Took me about three listens and now it is my favourite album. Invisible Empire is my fav song. I just love this singer - why she hasn't had more success I have no idea. You really can get tangled in her lyrics and tone.

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