

Eiko Ishibashi: sickly sweet cocktails with a spike at the bottom of the glass



# EIKO ISHIBASHI

**Antigone** DRAG CITY

9/10

Greek myths inspire dystopian soundtracks to the 21st century. *By Rob Young*

TARO MIZUTANI



**A**NTIGONE, daughter of Oedipus, heroic challenger to male authority, has stamped her identity on Western culture over millennia, the subject of ancient Greek tragedy and French drama, European operas and world cinema. In Sophocles's play, she ends up hanging herself rather than being walled up alive in a tomb. Eiko Ishibashi's latest album may share a name with the tragic heroine, but there's no melodrama here. The prevailing mood is a stalling world nudged by invisible forces off its axis, beginning its slow spin into decay or disaster. Which makes it a pertinent listen for the wobbly historical moment we find ourselves in.

The sleeve art sets the tone perfectly. Computer-generated blobs and geometric solids loom above

Taro Mizutani's monochrome land- and cityscapes. They are like stills from an alien disaster movie, where an unimaginably advanced civilisation arrives in unfamiliar, gigantic craft and floats, menacingly and soundlessly, above our home planet, making us feel suddenly very, very small.

With *Antigone*, Ishibashi's music has reached an astonishing level of maturity – at the level of tone, texture and text. The creative partnership she has achieved with the mercurial Jim O'Rourke, since they met over 15 years ago, continues to pay wonderful dividends. They share an interest in film soundtracks by Jack Nitzsche, Lynch and Badalamenti, and Ennio Morricone. And like O'Rourke she is also the master of numerous instruments – from drums and keyboards to composition and electronics. The palette of her band – a mix of Japanese stalwarts and a few US and European emigres – is similar to the one on her soundtracks to the films of Ryusuke Hamaguchi, *Drive My Car* (2021) and *Evil Does Not Exist* (2024). Eiko herself sings and plays keyboards, including a Fender Rhodes. Her chord and key changes make unexpected offramps and U-turns; her melody lines are artificially sweetened – a grin without a cat. She has expressed her admiration for films where what you see in the frame seems disconnected or belied by what you hear on the soundtrack. David Lynch is one example, and tracks on *Antigone* like "The Model" and "Nothing As" seem to have traces of Julee Cruise's still-incredible, *Twin Peaks*-related album *Floating Into the Night* identifiable in their DNA. Eiko sings in a similar register to Cruise, and her compositions are similarly treacherous. Sickly sweet cocktails with a nasty spike at the bottom of the glass.

The presence of Norwegian accordionist Kalle Moberg lends two tracks a continental European air, or a tinge of Latin saudade. Elsewhere there is a small string section, saxophones, deployed where needed. O'Rourke plays the Bass VI, a rare Fender guitar with six low-end strings. Arranged with a beautifully light touch, the eight tracks bob like soap bubbles, sparkling with as many rainbow

## Suggestion, inference, imbued with tantalising specifics

colours. Eiko mostly sings in Japanese, but the lyrics – helpfully printed inside the package – tell other stories. In the opener, "October", a watcher in a control tower observes an aircraft, "a pale baby in an empty sunset's hold", slipping out of the sky towards a tall skyline. A 'disaster' is mentioned, ashes falling and blood, but that is as much as we get. This is Eiko's method – suggestion, inference, impressionistic lines freighted with tantalising specifics. Songwriting as speculative fiction. The post-disaster setting of "Coma" is "covered with ashes". It evokes a traumatised "survivor in Eden", forced to stay within a grid watched by security cameras. The universe of this music includes security cameras, hospital gurneys, fractal patterns, cocaine and thongs, air ionizers. There are repeated references to defying gravity, and to graveyards. In "The Model", a digitally distorted voice reads (the sleeve notes tell us) a passage from Michel Foucault's *The Politics Of Health In The Eighteenth Century*. Where that fits into the song's conceptual framework, which may have something to do with pandemics and the medical market, is hard to identify, as the words are sadly inaudible.

Still, *Antigone* is one of the most intelligent, beautiful and entrancing albums you're likely to hear all year: a delivery system for a collection of lyrical conundrums and end-time pastel-blues. Even though the mythic heroine's persona is difficult to locate within the final song, "Antigone", it's a gorgeous piece of chamber pop, blurry with melancholy, drifting across datelines up to the edge of outer space, floating inexorably into the night.

### SLEEVE NOTES

- 1 October
- 2 Coma
- 3 Trial
- 4 Nothing As
- 5 Mona Lisa
- 6 Continuous Contiguous
- 7 The Model
- 8 Antigone

Produced with Jim O'Rourke [NB: this is how it is worded in the credits]

Recorded at: Hoshi To Niji Recording Studio; Steamroom; Atelier Eiko, Japan  
**Personnel:**  
 Eiko Ishibashi (vocals, piano, Rhodes, synths, sound collage), Jim O'Rourke (synths, Bass IV, drum machine), Tatsuhiya Yamamoto (drums), Marty Holoubek (bass), Ermhoi (vocals, backing vocals), Joe Talia (percussion, drums), Kalle Moberg (accordion), Kei Matsumaru (alto and tenor sax), Toshioaki Sudoh (bass), Mio.O (violin), Kirin Uchida (cello)

# AtoZ

## This month...

- P29 DESTROYER**  
**P30 BOB MOULD**  
**P31 JETHRO TULL**  
**P33 THE LOFT**  
**P34 BROWN HORSE**  
**P36 BEIRUT**  
**P38 SONGS OF GREEN PHEASANT**

### SAM AKPRO Evenfall

ANTI-  
8/10

**Fab debut from south London skater**



Peckham songwriter Sam Akpro has been releasing EPs since 2019, gaining acclaim for his eclectic, layered

songs that combine influences from indie, electronica and hip-hop to build something thoroughly original and modern. *Evenfall* maintains that approach with a rich but laidback sound on songs like the title track, "Death By Entertainment" and the glorious "Cherry". Even on songs like "Tunnel Vision", a track about dislocation, or a seemingly abrasive instrumental like "Baka", there's an enduring warmth to the record that comes from the fuzz of psychedelia that holds everything together.

PETER WATTS

### MARSHALL ALLEN New Dawn

MEXICAN SUMMER  
8/10

**The exquisite results of a life steeped in cosmic jazz**



The solo debut of 100-year-old saxophonist Marshall Allen, leader of the Sun Ra Arkestra since

1995, is a charming, confident voyage through sonic moods he's explored throughout his career. Recorded with help from Arkestra members (especially longtime saxophonist Noel Scott) and guests like Neneh Cherry, *New Dawn* is a beautifully balanced album: the space lounge of "African Sunset", the crime jazz of "Sonny's Dance", the baroque-infused grooves of "Boma". Classic composition "Angels And Demons At Play" closes the album, incorporating dubbed out moments that send the music of the Arkestra in yet another galactic direction. ANA GAVRILOVSKA

### JULIEN BAKER & TORRES

Send A Prayer My Way

MATADOR  
7/10

**Musical beginnings revisited for Mackenzie 'Torres' Scott and boygenius' Baker** →

## Q&A

**Eiko Ishibashi** "I try to use sounds and words that clash in meaning"

**Do you identify with the mythical figure of Antigone?** It seems our fate as human beings is to live in a daily conflict that we cannot separate from one another. However, as social and personal matters have become too close to each other, it seems like the default has become ease of understanding. Also, when I go for a walk, I always end up in a cemetery. I like cemeteries because I feel at home there, and although I have no sympathy for Antigone, I thought the title was fitting since the song contains such things. I don't know why there are so many references to graveyards in the lyrics. Perhaps it is because I'm experiencing more and more the loss of people we love.

**Are there any secret audio techniques that you or Jim O'Rourke use in production?** A lot depends on Jim's mix, but Jim likes to work alone, so I don't know exactly what is going on. For my part, I take my time and try to use sounds and words that clash in meaning as much as possible.

**Could you share anything about the text by Michel Foucault which is read out in "The Model"?** I was really surprised when I read Foucault's book. I feel there are many hints about the way medicine selects and controls life to keep life alive in society, about the changing frameworks of power, ethnicity, nation and race, and about how to decipher the problems of eugenics. The same goes for the issue of euthanasia. It makes us reconsider whether we are beings to be discarded when our bodies are no longer able to move.

INTERVIEW: ROB YOUNG