

ULAN BATOR « ECHO:ECHO » 2000 PRESS – REVIEWS U.S.A. (COMPLETE)

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MICHAEL GIRA, producer

« Last summer, in the midst of a debilitating heat-wave, Ulan Bator and I (complete strangers to each other at the time) locked ourselves up in a tiny recording studio in a village just north of Florence, Italy, for 18 hours a day for three weeks. We got to know each other pretty quickly! Of course I'd heard demos of the material that eventually became the songs on this recording, and I'd heard (and been a fan of) their earlier records, but as we started to work it became obvious to everyone that we had to be open to anything, to be willing to start from scratch in some cases - just throw everything out the window and make something happen right now if we were going to rise to the potential of the moment. So, much (though certainly not all) of this music was written and/or (re)arranged on the spot, as we worked, under increasingly intense pressure. Adrenaline, stress, heat, chaos, and panic, combined with the language barrier (they're French, the engineer was Italian), forced us into places we never expected to end up in, which to me, was incredibly elating. In some cases the basis for the song started with just a groove, or an electronic sound, or a vocal idea, or an accidental noise, and was eventually wrestled into the final version you'll hear on this CD (though other songs are re-arranged versions of material they'd previously worked out). To watch them play, cramped up in the miniscule (about 8' x 12', as I recall) recording booth - bass, drums, guitar and amps included - strangling the groove out of their instruments with completely uncynical and unselfconscious commitment (and this from unrepentant, intellectual "art rockers" - a breed I usually find to be pretty anemic, at best, and merely clever, or "hip", at worst), was a joy I'll never forget. Their musicality and their dedication to making something powerful and clear out of whatever raw materials were at their disposal at the time (sometimes a grand piano, for instance, or other times a piece of looped digital feedback), coupled with their immense knowledge and enthusiasm for the music they love that's gone before them - from the Beatles and Beach Boys to New York No Wave to Krautrock to experimental electronic music - combined to make this, I think, a great "experimental rock" record - or whatever genre you want to call it. To me personally, it's one of the most rewarding records in which I've ever been involved, and it's an honor to be able to release it on Young God Records. I think if you listen to it with even a fraction of the pure enthusiasm of its intent, you'll find much to enjoy here. As for the lyrics being sung in French: Tough luck, they are French. »

Michael Gira

TIME OUT New York — 1/4/2001 | Issue No. 276 | Jordan N. Mamone

Simply put, *Ego:Echo* is an out-of-nowhere, art-rock masterpiece. The French trio Ulan Bator has expertly assembled tempestuous guitar clang, mood-enhancing loop/keyboard exploration and oddly played yet sensual pop flourishes into a magnificent, natural whole that dramatically pulses with vivid ideas and gnashing severity. Undulating drones give way to soothing, breathy vocals, which dissolve in acidic tone clusters and hard, sternly stated rhythms—often within a single, shockingly cohesive track. This immaculately performed album jars when you least expect it, then anesthetizes with low-key beauty once you've grown accustomed to the full-on assault. Ulan Bator's enthusiasm, dapper hooks and nimble racket fully counter the asexual, antiseptic cool that too often plagues the rock avant-garde. There is nothing bloodless, self-conscious or distant about this demanding—but never unmelodic—music. Each song is a richly arranged suite of transformations: When the paranoid, sinister nerve-punk of "Santa Lucia" finally explodes, it reorganizes itself into a minimalist flutter of mellow bass figures, wispy drum vapors and abrupt stabs of electric sunshine. A one-note, lengthy mantra of fuzz tones and guttural incantations eventually overpower the continental, soft-funk glide of "Soeur Violence." Elsewhere, the three-part "Echo" begins as a synthesized exorcism, then thins to an emotive, fragile tiptoe before resolving as a punishing, repetitive trudge to the gallows. Revealingly, *Ego:Echo* boasts contributions by Faust's Jean Herve Peron and ex-Swans/current Angels of Light mainstay Michael Gira, two visionaries who doubtlessly influenced Ulan Bator's outlook. The latter—who, during a hellish heat wave, produced the disc in an economy-size studio just north of Florence, Italy—can be thanked for the up-front, intimate quality of the recording. He also released the work (the band's American debut) on his own Young God label. Fortunately, though, Gira never steals the spotlight from his crafty, personality-filled clients: He simply brings out the best in them.

YOUR FLESH — Issue #45 | 6/1/2001 | Howard Weulfing

"Ulan Bator is Frenchies pickled in post-psych Eurovant-Garde of old and their post-punk nouveau-novators alike". Overall structures are fairly simple just a couple chords apiece. Where it all happens is in the interaction of the instruments, and these guys limit themselves to 4: drums, bass, guitar, keyboards; their respective playing is loop-centric, so narrative thrust proceeds from phase relations shifting in the course of a given song.. Add to that variations like changes in dynamics (e.g crescendo), violent eruptions and anomalous bits (keyboard scree, a flailing guitar, etc.), and so on. If you catalogued reference points it'd be Can (specifically chunks built outta marching band snare, stumpy bass and glistening organ), La Monte Young (towards album's end there's a nice breakdown where ensemble parts tumble gently like snow while a swarm of hums fade in and out like car headlights emerging and disappearing in a blizzard at night). And Sonic Youth in modal segments arising outa single-minded strummed tuned guitars. Producer M.Gira has helped bump all this away from imitation by adopting a dry, muted sound throughout. Where all source material tended toward excess, reverberation and so on, the sound here is clipped and compressed. Though all instrumental sounds are kept discrete, through arrangement and mix they often blend into composite sound FX that are novel and delightful. As the worldwide underground gathers its forces for its next attack on the mainstream, the small triumphs are begging to build momentum, this being one.

ROLLING STONE — 3/1/2001 | David Fricke

...a unique and addictive sadness...

The coronary pulse of Can, the spatial trickery of dub reggae, the throbbing gravity of Joy Division: The French trio Ulan Bator build the stark architecture of EGO:ECHO (Young God CD), their US debut, from familiar materials. But the result, produced by grim-rock priest Michael Gira, once of Swans, is a unique and addictive sadness, a profound synthesis of gonglike guitar, medieval despair and the consumptive drama of singer-guitarist Amaury Cambuzant's rich, low singing. At sixteen minutes, the album's centerpiece "Let Go Ego," is a particularly stunning display of Ulan Bator's black magic. For best effect, turn the lights off before you turn the volume up.

LA WEEKLY — 3/1/2001 | Jay Babcock

Rituel Humain.

Ulan Bator: two words that conjure up some sexy female assassin from a forgotten Roger Moore-era Bond flick but are actually the name of an obscure and incredible French rock group (as well as the capital of Mongolia, 'course). The album Ego: Echo was released in late 2000 by its producer, ex-Swans leader Michael Gira, on Young God Records (his label/labor of love), but has received nowhere near the audience it deserves. That's unfortunate, because here, on full display for 65 minutes, is everything that "post-rock" promises but almost never delivers: Rock instruments (guitar-bass-drums-Hammond-vocals) are used, but rock-music rules (4:30 max, verse/chorus/verse structure, standard chord progressions) are relaxed — and often jettisoned altogether. For some reason, this new freedom usually means we're in for some intellectual exercise — music that ignores the senses, the groin, the flesh, e.g., Tortoise, Sonic Youth's last two discs. But Ego: Echo is defiantly, intensely alive: Its songs are sweated out, its vocals delivered past wine-stained lips. Its instruments touch, grate, rub and reflect on each other, intimate to the point of claustrophobia, reproducing on audiotape the 96-square-foot Italian recording booth in which the songs were recorded in ensemble. So "Santa Luci" is undeniable and in-your-face-and-through-to-your-brain: a thundering, supertight cabaret groove that breaks into Can-space in its third minute; "Etoile Astre" is a wicked version of the Meters' full-ensemble locked funk; "Let Go Ego" is an epic 16-minute banishing ritual that collapses/climbs from ring-drone to Savage Republic march to four minutes of four repeated syllables — "Letttt go/Eeee-go." But for all this tight music made in tight quarters, there's a strange spaciousness, too: Tracks like the opening "Hemisphere," the lovely, downbeat "Hiver" and the late-Swansesque "La Joueuse de Tambour" are not without a certain sensual grandeur. This is music without a manifesto (or Jim O'Rourke) — music that remembers it's played by human beings.

LA Weekly | Ego:Echo Review

MOJO MAGAZINE — 2/1/2001 | Andrew Carden

It's always good to know there are people out in the world are assembling a basic guitar-bass-drums framework into new and unusual forms. One such bunch are France's Ulan Bator, whose EGO:ECHO(YOUNG GOD) weighs in somewhere between Killing Joke and Faust, no kidding... Ulan Bator are something strange and beautiful and other. Other than rock or pop or world or any simple label that could be slapped on their music. They are Outlanders -- not mere "foreigners" but something so alien and different from what is heard every day that they can only come from someplace beyond what you know. Released on former Swans kingpin Michael Gira's label, Ego:Echo offers glimpses of this other place, a sepia-and-shadow world where Truth is Beauty and Beauty is Ugliness, and all the permutations of that conundrum spin and collide and whirl into streamers of glorious music. When truth is beautiful in Ulan Bator, the music is sinuous and flowing. Amaury Cambuzat and Olivier Manchion lay simple patterns of piano, bass and various keyboards over Matteo Dainese's skipping drums (the record also features a guest appearance by Jean Hervé Peron of Faust). Languid voices surface, repeating phrases in accented English and the group's native French tongue, then submerge in the depths. Then truth becomes ugly, and Dainese's drums galvanize into whip-cracks and pistol reports. Electric guitars spark and shriek, wailing single notes above running bass lines and frantic torrents of clipped, menacing words. The transformation occurs again and again throughout Ego:Echo, so effectively blurring the line between Beauty and Ugliness that when you emerge from the other side, there no longer is any difference between the two. The cumulative effect is akin to cradling your sleeping hand in your waking hand: Your own flesh is numb and dead to itself, until some unheard signal revives it and your hand becomes so sensitive upon waking that it burns and tingles with Catherine Wheels of pain and pleasure that are indistinguishable because they are the same. That is the world of Ulan Bator.

AMG Expert Review — 5/1/2001 | **Allmusic.com** | Andy Kellman

Musical train wreck scenarios? Wait—here's one. What do you get when you lock an American producer and label head (Swans' Michael Gira), an Italian engineer, and an experimental rock band from France in a dinky sweat box located in Florence? You've got oppressive heat and three languages. Is that not enough? How about this? The band has to materialize most of the songs on the spot. It sounds like a mess, but this unlikely situation produced an hour's worth of heavy duty, top-drawer avant rock. It would be lazy and limiting to merely say that Ulan Bator's first U.S.-distributed record will appeal to those who think Sonic Youth lost it once they entered the '90s. You can hear their oddly tuned menace during the first two minutes of "Santa Lucia," but that passage—which sets up several minutes of plodding malaise—manages to sound nastier and better produced. And if it weren't for the French vocals and periodic piano tinklings, "La Joueuse de Tambour" would be right at home on the second side of Sister. The first ten minutes of "Let Go Ego" offers dubby flow motion (who knew the French could dub it up?), followed by the entrance of dynamic guitars and Hammond atmospheric, capped with wordless chanting and the repeated phrase of "Let go ego." Experimentalism and self-consciousness seem to go hand in hand, but not here. That's what makes the record all the more exciting. It would be wise of Ulan Bator to continue working with Gira. Their collaboration clearly yielded something greater and more powerful than they had expected. It's an ideal mix of noise, rhythm, and filmic sound sculpting. Very clearly, this power(ful) trio is the finest French rock export since Metal Urbain.

UNDER THE VOLCANO — 3/1/2001 | Paul Lemos

With the release of France's Ulan Bator's second album, the group has progressed tremendously. Former Swans founder, Michael Gira's Young God Label is quickly establishing itself as one of Manhattan's most vital outlets for consistently challenging new music. With the release of France's Ulan Bator's second album, the group has progressed tremendously. Cleanly produced by Gira himself, Ego:Echo brings together a wide spectrum of musical ideas and influences with its nine extended pieces. Many of the tracks meld elements of Jazz, Noise, and electronic music within carefully composed, continuously engaging structures. The haunting quietude of "Hemisphere" sounds somewhat like a collaboration between early Tortoise and recent Yo La Tengo, whereas tracks like "Santa Lucia" feature the dissonant guitar squall reminiscent of early Sonic Youth. Although Ulan Bator show their influences, the band generally maintains a fairly distinct sound, moving from passages of somber melodic subtlety to others of controlled chaos. Ego:Echo is a mature, complex record by a band that shows significant promise.

MEAN MAGAZINE — 1/1/2001 | Dave Clifford

Where pop music lirts, Ulan Bator soars; where it finds respite, Ulan Bator scratches, carves and gnaws. French culture has a way of imposing a certain sado-masochistic, reverent disdain for upon its art – particularly music. For the French, it's not enough to love pop music: One must love it with a co-dependent disgust of a couple on the verge of murder-suicide. French avant-rock abusers, Ulan Bator, clearly love the pop-music tradition in the same way – because its first release on an American label is like tracing the trio's finger-shaped bruises all over the throat of classic Brel, Bacharach, Morricone, Spector, Beatles, Krautrock and early Pink Floyd. However, where pop music lirts, Ulan Bator soars; where it finds respite, Ulan Bator scratches, carves and gnaws. Produced by the master of musical attrition, Michael Gira (Angels of Light/Swans), Ego:Echo merges elements of psychedelia, chamber pop and droning folk. "Santa Lucia" nabs Sonic Youth's bent-guitar approach to detuned pop, but further mangles it with jagged jabs of ringing bar-chords and sinister bass lines creeping beneath the dissonance. Elsewhere, a fuzzed-out, mechanistic bass line, fanged Wurlitzer organ chords and a barely audible chorus of men's voices announce the marching drone of "Etoile Astre." The tune builds upon its repetitive groove, systematically adding then subtracting instrumental and vocal harmonies. The closing epic, "Echo," pits a flowing haze of sounds against a laconic revision of Mitch Mitchel's slashing beat from "I Don't Live Today." The droning layers disperse beneath the guitarist's string-raking chord chops and a pulsating bass line as the album staggers to a close, exhausted and eviscerated. Although there is nothing "radio-friendly" or traditionally "Pop" about Ego:Echo, the passion for music which Ulan Bator exudes clearly indicates that violence is being done to the thing they love.

SAN FRANCISCO WEEKLY — 2/7/2000 | Dave Clifford

Listening to the trio's first American release (and fourth overall) is like tracing its finger-shaped bruises across the throat of pop history. For the French, it's not enough to love music; one must embrace it with the codependent disgust of a couple verging on a murder/suicide. The French avant-rock group Ulan Bator clearly loves the pop tradition in this way. Listening to the trio's first American release (and fourth overall) is like tracing its finger-shaped bruises across the throat of pop history. Produced by Michael Gira, master of musical abrasion for Swans and Angels of Light, *Ego: Echo* merges elements of Pink Floyd's early psychedelia, Jacques Dutronc's snide lounge-pop, and Nick Drake's droning folk. The nine-minute epic "Hemisphere" opens the album with a murmuring bass line and a trickling of piano, building to minor crescendos with ringing cymbals and violently strummed guitar, then slowing to a chanted lyric about repetition by vocalist/guitarist Amaury Cambuzat. On "Santa Lucia," the band nabs Sonic Youth's angular guitar approach and further mangles it by placing jagged guitar jabs and sinister bass rhythms beneath the dissonance. Elsewhere, "Etoile Astre" features a fuzzed-out bass line, fanged Wurlitzer organ, and another repetitive vocal chorus -- approximating swinging go-go joyfully maligned by distortion. The closing epic, "Echo," moves through three sections: an initial, flowing haze of sound pitted against a laconic revision of the slashing beat from Jimi Hendrix's "I Don't Live Today"; an almost sweet, organ-and-vocal torch section; and finally, a staggering string-raked guitar riff and a pulsating bass line that abruptly end as if the band has beaten the tune to death. With *Ego: Echo*, Ulan Bator places itself in a long line of French artists -- Situationist International, Jean-Luc Godard, Serge Gainsbourg -- who both embrace and desecrate tradition. Beyond the quality of the music itself, it is this gleeful appropriation that makes the album sound as though Ulan Bator is doing violence to the thing that it loves.

MILK MAGAZINE — 5/23/2001 | Jeffrey Norman

Repetition, focus, and intensity define this album. The last few minutes of *Ego: Echo*'s opening track "Hemisphere" says much about their approach here. Over a slowly decaying bed of acoustic guitar, acoustic and electric pianos, Casio, and bass and drums, vocalist Amaury Cambuzat intones the word "repetition" (fortunately, this word means the same in the French this album is sung in as it does in English). The vocals are recorded in surgical focus: no doubt a talented team of acoustic technicians and pathologists could reconstruct Cambuzat's teeth, lips, and tongue by careful analysis of the recording. Repetition, focus, and intensity define this album: many songs develop over long periods of time (up to sixteen minutes in the case of "Let Go Ego"). Fortunately, that focus is rewarding: Ulan Bator deploys an impressive array of instruments and techniques, from the crystalline delicacy of "Hemisphere"'s largely acoustic instrumentation to the disturbed intensity of the dentist-drill electric guitar assault halfway through "Santa Lucia." It's appropriate that ex-Swan Michael Gira (also Young God label guy) produced this CD: the blend of dark power and eerie delicacy is reminiscent of Swans' best work. Ulan Bator's music often evokes a potent sense of gloom and darkness, but the band never resorts to "industrial" clichés of cybermetallic guitars or doomy synths to achieve it. Instead, a full range of instruments is used: aside from guitars, bass, and percussion, Ulan Bator use harmonium, electric piano, a wheezy old Hammond organ, mellotron, trumpet and French horn (played by guest musician Jean Herve Peron of Faust), and such exotica as bowed

percussion and "electronic sinfonia." That last instrument powers the one-two knockout punch of the album's last two tracks. "Soeur Violence" ends with a braying drone featuring horns, electronics, and Gira's impression of a dying Buddhist monk, segueing directly into another, more apocalyptic drone that begins "Echo": sirens, mellotrons, guitars, and the sinfonia build to a peak and then suddenly cut off. One glassy Wurlitzer electric piano sounds a slow, deliberate series of notes, gradually enshrouded in a murky keyboard texture, until a series of pounding, razor-sharp guitar discords and martial drumming lead to the sheer cliff of an ending. This isn't easy listening, and as Europeans Ulan Bator bring a more inclusive tolerance for musical approaches Americans might tend to call pretentious—but the band doesn't slacken or strive primarily to impress: all their intense focus is on the music. [www.milkmag.com]

INK 19 — 5/1/2001 | Ink 19 | Mitchell Foy

Ego:Echo steadily flows through so many moods, there's always a sense of discovery about what's waiting around the next corner. Though Ulan Bator is most certainly a distinct group that existed before Michael Gira crossed their path, so much of the Young God magistrate's musical personality can be heard in Ego:Echo, it's hard to separate the two. If you've been following Gira's career from Swans to Angels Of Light, you likely have a sense of the man's taste for the dark, the grandiose, and the artfully minded. The release of this disc on his label, then, makes perfect sense, and is probably as essential as anything in the Gira repertoire for understanding what makes the man tick. Ego:Echo steadily flows through so many moods, there's always a sense of discovery about what's waiting around the next corner. The candlelight dinner opening (suggesting Angels Of Light) gives way to a sweeping Godspeed You Black Emperor! arrangement. By the second track, we're in pulsing post-punk NYC circa 1984, but just briefly. Halfway through, the bottom drops out, and we are smack in the middle of a nod to Lard Free—an equally fascinating and adventurous band of fellow Frenchmen from the '70s that Ulan Bator probably grew up listening to. And so it goes, bobbing and weaving through textures and tones for over 60 minutes. There's a strong sense of the unknown and unheard in Ego:Echo that's refreshing, and it's easy to see why Gira digs the band so much. They have a fearless desire to plunge into deep waters, with a faith that through music very real and important fragments of understanding can be gleaned. The record as a whole plays out like an unfolding journey that is by turns sparse, enchanting, stirring, and rich. Next to Angels Of Light's New Mother, it's the best new record YGR has released thus far.

SHREDDING PAPER — 4/1/2001 | Anthony

I can say this is the most entertaining and intriguing record I reviewed this issue. Ulan Bator is the capitol of Mongolia, but sadly these guys are not Mongolian. They are a French trio who do a post-modern neuvo-rock mambo, cross breeding elements of art rock, Euro-industrial and post-punk. Michael Gira (Angels of Light/Swans) produced this, arranging the songs with the band, and it's on his label. He also sings on two songs. Going in it may be safe to say this might sound a tad like Swans. It is not the case that they rely on that alone. They dredge up some organic fragments in their music, finding space between guitar, bass, drums, and other parts and escaping the box. They have the mid-tempo groove thing, but they take it beyond world music eccentricity and industrial monotony into cosmic otherness, like the sixteen-minute "Let

Go Ego." Any complex record cannot possibly be summed up in a paragraph. I can say this is the most entertaining and intriguing record I reviewed this issue.

ALTERNATIVE PRESS — 4/1/2001 | Andrew Lentz

Ego:Echo is a kitchen sink experiment that sidesteps the too-many-cooks syndrome. Virtually uncategorizable, Ulan Bator should appeal to fans of hypnotic drone, whether they approach it by way of Femi Kuti or Hovercraft. The record is a shimmering warp of Mellotron loops, effects-pedal sustains, pulsating amp squelch, strains of Hammond and Wurlitzer organs, and snakey, molten bass lines—an unlikely collision of soothing rhythms and acid-trip surprises. The only time Ego:Echo falters is on the Zen catechism "Let Go Ego," whose title is repeated after we hit the 14 minute mark with mantra-like fervor until you wanna scream. It's reminiscent of Michael Gira's occasional bouts of pretentiousness, but even Red Crayola's Mayo Thompson has never been as annoying as singer Olivier Manchion is here. But then Manchion and vocalist/guitarist Amaury Cambuzat redeem themselves with the mesmerizing French-sung ballad "Hiver," the two-tone sashay of "la Jouese De Tambour" and the rousing Chorale "Soeur Violence." Even at its most jarring, Ego:Echo works—not in spite of—but because of its fearless embrace of all that is clunky and unharmonious...

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