


## Jai Agnish - Automata

[Blue Bunny; 2000]

Rating: 7.6



I did everything I could to delay our departure: "Oops, didn't brush my teeth yet." "But I haven't had breakfast!" "What do you mean I can't wear this t-shirt?" "Wait, I forgot something." "I need to go to the bathroom." Although, inevitably, we would all pack into the station wagon and drive to church, these delays were nonetheless essential, for my parents are chronically overpunctual. The less time spent sitting in the pew, awaiting the priest's grandiose processional entrance, the better.

But as much as I hated his religion, I couldn't bring myself to hate Father Bussen. For one, he had an endearing lisp that rendered him both humble and fragile. He was also a very nice man, I had to admit. He didn't talk down to me as most adults did. And, perhaps most importantly, he didn't push Catholicism as shamelessly as one might expect from a priest. His sermons weren't Joycean diatribes about the wrath of God and the depths of hell, but instead, applied real stories to show how some of the church's tenets can make lives better.

On *Automata*, Jai Agnish employs a similarly inoffensive approach. Yes, he gives "thumbs up to Jesus," and one of the songs is entitled "Jesus Song," but this is as close as he comes to grabbing God's Mallet and hitting you over the head (I think Creed have it on personal loan from heaven). The picture provided in *Automata* isn't of a religious zealot, but of someone made better by his beliefs. He even refers to his collaborators as "kind souls." Try and tell me this guy doesn't want to hug you, no matter who you are.

And already I have expounded more explicitly religious thoughts than Agnish does in the entirety of the album. The woman speaking of flying in the "Introduction" gives one the same feeling of haphazard, childish fun as the rural-romping of children on the album's cover. The first "real" song, "Surprised Eyes," continues in the same vein, offering a simple cowbelled drum machine beat, a kid's organ, some toy gun sounds, and distorted vocals.

"How You Dream" clarifies the heretofore muddled sound with a crisp, high-pitched blip that hovers over another mechanized yet lush beat, acoustic strums, keyboards, and Agnish's frail, unaltered voice. The intimate, self-recorded sound is not unlike East River Pipe. But whereas F.M. Cornog revels in drives past big, bright billboards, Agnish seems to prefer places where there are no roads, let alone billboards. When he sings, "Depends what you mean/ Depends how you dream/ The matter and style/ Are you willing to lie down awhile?" it seems that there's no need to move, that he's content where he is.

In fact, he confirms this on "Smile to the Pretty Angel," in which he sings, "I'm satisfied with my life." Thankfully, he doesn't insist on linking his religion to his happy state. Even "Jesus Song," the only overtly religious track on the record, doesn't take itself too seriously. Sure, he sings, "I got Jesus in my heart/ I got the Lord in my life/ And he's got me," but does so alongside an irresistible, funky beat and '80s-ish hops on the keyboard. Even though the lyrics and sound are a bit out of place, the song somehow works. It's as if Agnish had to let it out-- to just once blatantly spell it out for you-- and thus did it self-mockingly.

Otherwise, like Father Bussen's sermons, *Automata* is consistent and digestible. Agnish blends electronics, toys, and folk into a chalice and offers it to you as a gift. Both familiar and unlike anything else, you'd be wise to taste it. It may not (permanently) free you of worry, but if this music is what it feels like to be wholly satisfied with one's life, then it'll make you strive for such a life. And that's a step for all of us sinners. -Ryan Kearney, 2000