

# POP MATTERS

by Jeremy Hart



Going into this expecting some cheesy synth-pop or vague ambient soundscapes, I'm immediately caught by how much I just plain *like* Jai Agnish. I don't mean that I necessarily immediately like the music, although it's pretty darn good (I'll get to that in a minute), but rather that, well, Agnish himself sounds like a genuinely nice guy, y'know? There's an endearing quality to his voice, in particular, a sort of shy-boy-next-door sound that makes you think he was probably that strange kid back in middle school who hid in the far corner of the lunchroom, scribbling passionately in his journal. His scratchy, unsure voice (which makes me think weirdly of the last Archers of Loaf album, by the way) winds its way in and around the melodies so carefully, his heart worn so unabashedly on his sleeve, that it makes the sometimes naive lyrics forgivable.

Now, as for the music: the whole of *automata* reminds me a great deal of both Money Mark's *Push the Button* and The Secret Stars' *Genealogies*, partly because, like those albums, *automata* veers back and forth between more "experimental" pieces and all-out pop songs. Tracks like "Deaf Today," "Climb to Remind," and "How You Dream," are among the latter -- they're all three beautiful, plaintive love-lost songs played out over a gentle bed of sampled toys and bleeping keyboards.

The sounds he uses are interesting in themselves (extra points go to those who can identify the various toys Agnish mutilates and manipulates to create his songs, eh?), staying pretty far from "traditionally" sampled fare. However, the problem comes on the tracks of the former variety above, the experiments where he allows the "playing with toys" aspect to overwhelm the songs themselves. On "Finding Ways," for example, the meandering folk-song that forms the basis for the song is completely buried beneath an offbeat collage of toy noises, and the track is much the worse for it. It's a tricky balance, I'm sure; the urge to experiment and keep layering sound on sound on sound is hard to resist, and here it becomes a detriment. On the plus side, there seem to be fewer of the truly experimental tracks than the pop songs -- the only other real casualty here is "Green Series No. 1," which suffers from much the same fate as "Finding Ways," Agnish obscuring a quiet guitar with irritating buzzing and clicking.

The climactic moment of *automata* has got to be "Jesus Song," an odd little bit of pseudo-gospel, with an almost toneless voice repeating "I got Jesus in my life, and he's got me" over samples and beats straight out of "Funkytown." The press materials make a big deal about how Christian Agnish is, but this is the only overt evidence, and that's part of why it's so striking, just because of its subtle difference from the rest of the album. Finally, *automata* closes out with "Send Me," a hopeful, mournful ballad accentuated by distant-sounding drum samples and tinkly noises -- and again, it's a fine balance, between keeping the integrity of a truly delicate song and making the most of the samples and noises at his disposal, but thankfully, Agnish pulls it off, as he does throughout, with only a few errors in judgment along the way.