

Worthy successor to Nick Drake

Jai Agnish adds drums, sampling to folk basics

The label "folk singer" can be as unfairly restrictive as the term "Christian artist."

You've thus gotta feel for singer, songwriter and New Jersey hinterland dweller Jai Agnish, who somewhat uncomfortably fits both categories, yet defies most of the preconceptions associated with them.

Agnish is a stereotypical folk performer only insofar as drum machines, sampling gear and a chattering arsenal of scavenged videogames and children's toys constitute traditional folk instruments. Above the erratic, programmed beats and myriad electronic squeaks, squawks and shrieks darting hither and thither on his self-recorded debut disc, *Automata*, though, you'll find forlorn, affectingly human acoustic melodies and a warm croak of a voice that mark Agnish as a techno-savvy, 21st-century descendant of Nick Drake or Leonard Cohen.

Likewise, Agnish — part of the same loose-knit New York/New Jersey scene that gave us the loopy Danielson Familie — is a Christian artist primarily in the sense that he's an artist who also happens to be Christian. *Automata* only makes one overt reference to matters of faith, and the resulting track, "Jesus Song," is a skittish,

Clubs

BEN RAYNER

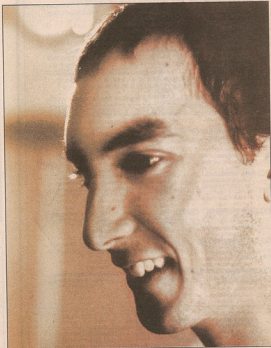
childlike piece of Aphex Twin-ish analogue electronica that isn't likely to land Agnish a performance slot on 100 Huntley St. until ... well, Hell freezes over.

"It's kind of refreshing when people say 'I can't stand Christian music, but these people are cool,'" admits Agnish. "I wish people wouldn't term me a 'Christian artist,' though ... It's kind of limiting as far as people's initial response to music, where you can play and that sort of stuff."

Like the iconoclastic Danielson troupe before him, Agnish — thanks to widespread underground acclaim for *Automata*'s surreal electro-acoustics and his riveting, beatbox-abetted live shows — is gradually finding fans outside the almost built-in audience for mainstream faith-based music, and there's been tentative indie-label interest in releasing his next album.

"I'm going to wait. I kind of made a decision not to release anything on my own again," Agnish, an English student by day, says of the next record. "I really want to write a lot and not push the music on my own as much as I've been doing. I'm really burned out right now ..."

"I've been working on new material. It's kind of exciting, because I'm taking a little more time on what I write. Instead of just writing, like, a song a



JAI AGNISH

night, I work on them over a week and just really concentrate, work piece by piece.

"I've got tons of songs. There are sort of two sides to how I write — one's more spontaneous, just hit 'record' and see what comes out. I've been wanting to do that again, but I've just got so many songs I'm working on the 'long' way right

now."

Agnish plays Graffiti's (170 Baldwin St.) tomorrow at 10 p.m., part of a strong North By Northeast songwriters' bill that also includes lovelorn Boston melodramatist Ad Frank, Jack Breakfast, John Mars and winning local newcomer Astral is Annie.