

# OFF THE SPINE MYSTERY SEA

## Label Profile

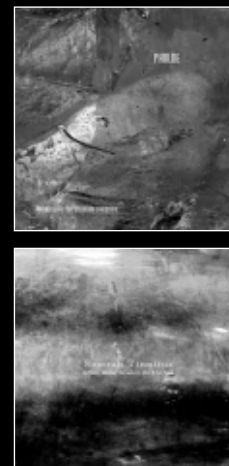
Belgium has never exactly been the nexus for minimally-considered ambient and drone music (Vidna Obmana notwithstanding) but Daniel Crokaert, founder of “night-ocean drone” CDR label Mystery Sea, seems determined to alter that condition. “I have been fascinated by erosion and decay for a long time,” he explains. “I suppose it’s a love for what’s beyond appearances...all those “seas” that flow in various directions, and have so much happening in their hidden layers.” The label’s approach is as dogmatic and steeped in the same enthusiastic zeal as the vital experimental cassette underground of the 80s, CDRs having now replaced that former, clumsier mode of audio transport. Emphasizing the importance of packaging (again mirroring the underground/DIY ethos) as noted on the label’s website, Crokaert also believes in the power of interaction? between music and visuals, stating that “a peculiar care will thus be brought to design in the hope of some mutual enrichment, and the opening of new learning fields...” Paradoxically, with most of the label’s catalog either being pressed on-demand or in extra-limited micro-quantities, virtually guaranteeing that its releases vanish like ships passing in the night, Mystery Sea’s allure nearly eclipses the very music it shadows.

It is fitting that collaborators of Zoviet France legend Robin Storey launch Mystery Sea’s catalog on its maiden voyage. *Key Ray* by **Birds of Tin & Ene** (aka Brooke Oates and Scott Hudgins) is an amalgam of lugubrious, buzz-laden resonances. “Key Nell” outspreads into a gray auditory mist, sucking you in to the dusky twilight by some mode of strange yet most welcoming rite of initiation. Then there are the plangent reverberations of “Open Doors” that trail the screams of corporeal chrome. The voice of a talk-radio evangelist appears in “Paper Lock,” only that what was once a grating, proselytized blather is reimagined as a purgatorial gospel of cacophonous proportions—an oozy love supreme.

The rusted metal of *Key Ray* gives way to the deep and airy oscillations to be found on **Ultrasound’s** *Encomium*. Former Stars of the Lid conspirator Kirk Laktas joins forces with Dutch digital pixel wizard Rfovetz to create a gorgeous collage of soft French utterances and water-windwashed field recordings peppered by pulsing notes of guitar and bass. Vast and vastly wrought, the enshrouded rigors of *Encomium* might best be summed up by the title of its nine-part “symphonies” first movement: “A Drop Becomes the Ocean, Ocean Becomes the Drop.” Let’s get metaphysical.

Current Ad Noiseam craftsman **Wilt** (James P. Keeler) soars on his *White Chrysalis in Blue*. The blur of cobalt blues, subtle expanses of radiant orange, and moon-through-the-trees miniature on the cover of the disc’s booklet captures a journey into the nocturnal thrum and whirr of Keeler’s otherworldly aviary. Once inside this twelve-sectioned enclosure one can only listen in disbelief as the metamorphosis commences. From shivering pupa to glowing winged creature, a sonic chrysalis unfolds to reveal many-splendored things.

Longtime underground sound-sculpturist and environmental documentarist **Mnortham’s** *A Great and Riverless Ocean* is one long extended track of subtle,



meandering disturbances that creep into tributaries of oil-slick surfaces and primordial soups. Minutes later, disembodied vibrations capsize only to re-emerge with a bidding sense of urgency, aural marine life emancipated out into the wide-open, sparkling spaces. In *At the Fountain of Thirst*, **Aidan Baker’s** amplified expressionism is put on dramatic yet subtle view, a standout being the eerie “Lorelei,” its seesawing, choir-drenched waves sensually massaging your waiting senses. **Heath Yonaite’s** plunges head first into an *Abyssal Plain* of lush life and rolling tundra, amidst the pitter-patter of little metallic feet losing themselves in the thickening squalls of underdrones. Aptly subtitled “Whistling Psalms For the Taffrail,” a nautical phrase meaning “good advice that will not be taken,” provides the ideal prelude of what is to come. Yonaite’s manipulated field recordings of Pacific Ocean surf and the murmur of the Lake Michigan harbor meld effortlessly into one begging-to-be-discovered waterworld. **Coelacanth** (Loren Chasse and Jim Haynes) plunges deep within the murk and muck of *Mud Wall*. Based on a 40-minute re-treatment of a live performance, this is one of the most aggressive of the label’s recordings to date. Rather than patient, unfolding washes of din, Coelacanth’s extended track is an utterly engrossing foray exploring the attenuated geographies of soils decayed by rampaging bacteria. Pithy yet degenerate.

**Dale Lloyd’s** *Aionios the Fundament*, which belies its phonetically-challenged title to yield some extremely intriguing new directions. Beginning with the soft stuttering, water-through-the-barrel hiss of “Saline Crystals Born of Mother Solutions,” Lloyd imbues limpid pools of stagnant algae with an admixture of sonic chemicals that bring them quivering to life. By the time the sea is actualized on “This Sea, Our Lodestone,” the algae curtains have fabulously overtaken us in their tangled meshes of drone.

Nautical metaphors are abundant throughout the seven sections of **Pholde’s** *Relating to the Ultimate Purpose*. “Matter in Suspension” and “Anathema” haunt with images of gloomy, aluminum-scrap shipyards. The anodized bits of iron ore that rain down during “Relating to the Ultimate Purpose” are eventually organized into

pier-rubbed scrapes and the scree of hulks tossed against weathered surfaces by wayward fronts. Pholde’s sounds are primal odes to the beautiful voice of steel itself.

Literary seas of historical majesty and epoch-spanning eras describe a number of further MS works. Australian **Caesar Ursic’s** *Lithophonia* is an assemblage of four opaque, downright crepuscular, field-recorded manipulations. “Antiquarium” is a fine representation of the work as a whole, its deep, swarming exhalations evoking a centuries-old sense of disquieted time, while **Whitebass’** *Depth of Field* is a somewhat introspective composite of hypnotic whispers and small utterances. On the searing sonic undertow of *A Rain Water Stratum on the Sea*, Italian **Sostrah Tinnitus** presents a series of fascinating noise canvases. “The Drowned City” scores the great Italian author Italo Calvino’s blissfully visual *Invisible Cities*, only here, it’s as if John Cage has appropriated the raw materials and created a music from deep in the bowels of a burned-out building’s flooded basement. By contrast, **Cria Cuervos’** *Leitfossilien* is a series of tenuous meditative trajectories, setting you adrift in a veritable Bermuda Triangle of apparitions, confused realities and involuted oceans, not quite a Sea of tranquility but a compelling Mystery all the same. **BEN FLEURY-STEINER**