

At this very moment, I am sitting by my office window at 8:30am, watching two little neighborhood boys play street hockey outside. There's something rather magical about them, but not because of their hockey skills or charm, not even because sparkly dew still sits on the grass. It's the ease of these boys, their complete absorption in physicality, their breathing. They never forget to breathe. The pace is natural. It slows when they rest. It quickens when they run, or score, or miss. But the oxygen flows, their minds are completely with their bodies, the game, the moment, which is exactly the sensation I receive from Galliano Somnavilla's newest album, *Breathe*. Not only would this album perfectly soundtrack a slow motion version of the scene I just described, but it reminds us as listeners, both musically and in its track titles, to reclaim our relationship with the present, and take in what we need to feel most alive: air.

As a whole, *Breathe* accomplishes one of the hardest things for an instrumental album – it feels, overall, like a symphony, one long piece thematically divided into movements, while also somehow allowing each track to have enough visceral, tangible individuality to stand on its own. For example, “Breathe Now”, the first track, has an urgency not limited simply to the title. The sound of an echoing church bell provides a commanding opening moment to the tune, underscored with low strings playing slow, beautiful whole notes and a much faster, rhythmic line of what sounds like the triangle. Not long afterward, low vocals and electric guitar pulsate into the mix, along with a consistent snare drum loop. The juxtaposition of all these moving parts creates a complexity that keeps a listener engaged, but the melodic lines weave in and out of each other so perfectly, and the chords are so deep and lush, this track successfully sets the meditative tone of the entire album.

At the close of “Breathe Now” the chimes resurface, as if to mark a transition, snap the listener out of the slow-motion trance that was the bulk of the tune, and begin a journey forward, rather than a dip into further depths (at least for now). In other words, it sets the stage for “Breathe Once More”, a tune that begins with an oddly pleasant vocal distortion effect, which immediately establishes a lighter, slightly less contemplative mood. The percussion then starts right in along with an upbeat guitar riff, and followed closely by a very catchy piano melody that's eventually mirrored (with variations) by synth, then guitar later in the song. The tempo and activity do slow down a little over halfway through, then again toward the end in yet another perfect transition into what comes next, but ultimately “Breathe Once More” feels like a different world from “Breathe Now”, as if that one more hit of oxygen allows the listener to float a little further above the troubles of the world, the troubles of his/her mind, to jog with more ease through the sky.

The most notable (and thus amazing) piece of the next three tracks, “Live and Breathe”, “Just Breathe”, and “Breathe Freely” is Somnavilla's unique choices for instrumentation. “Live and Breathe” opens with a syncopated, calypso-like rhythm played on what sounds like bongo drums (or something similar), layered with the sound of a wooden flute and high register piano riffs. “Just Breathe”, on the other hand, begins with high, synthed female vocals and the echoing ring of a gong. The vocals reappear many times over the course of the piece, along with the excellent surprise of harmonica, brilliantly played by Barry De Marco. “Breathe Freely” features an organ right at the onset, layered with a a Spanish sounding electric guitar – a haunting feat by Gary Ritchie. Each of these choices,

once again, prompts the listener to stay engaged, and allows each tune to have the aforementioned individuality (much like each individual breath we take); however, the way the instrumentation is integrated into each tune keeps the strand of trance like meditation strong throughout the album as a whole.

The way the album mirrors the actual experience of breathing – its changing nature, its individuality, its meditateness – only becomes more pronounced in the next two tracks, “Breathe Out” and “Breathe”. “Breathe Out” actually *sounds* like a relaxed sigh. Between the repetitive melody that rises slightly, then falls, and the use of lengthening effects (pedal, echo, synth, washes of percussion), I am instantly, then for the entire song, reminded to let go. “Breathe” has an even more distinct breathing pattern in its melody—a rise up the scale on piano, the pause at the top of the inhale marked by vocals—but then the pace picks up, the slow motion evaporates, and the tune represents the pure joy of breath, of the body, of life, of movement, much like the early morning street hockey in my neighborhood.

“Breathe Again” transitions the listener once again from a more playful moment into a more meditative one, but not only is this tune hypnotic, it’s also steady. With very few musical or instrumental surprises, it seems to represent not the changes and shifts in the breath, but the constancy of that change. “Change is the only constant”, some say, and this tune embodies that sentiment. As long as we’re alive, the changes in our days, and in our breaths, will continue, ferrying in the surprises and the calm moments. That said, the last track, “Breathe In” might be my favorite. Not because it’s the most interesting or representative, but because it’s the most comprehensive. It’s the vibe of the whole album, complete with transitions and catchy melodies and small, subtle guitar solos and calming waves of instrumentation, all rolled into one tune, and therefore is the best possible closing track for the album.

We humans, especially adults, tend to hold our breath when our minds are on the run, or when we feel stuck, trapped, or afraid. We forget that the body, its rhythms, can release us from our overwhelmedness if we allow it to do so, and what better way to be reminded than the beautiful, intriguing musical journey of *Breathe*? Once again, Galliano Somnavilla has created something interesting, original, and I would argue quite necessary for these hectic, sometimes unbelievably difficult times when we need to make especially sure we remember to inhale, pause in the moment, exhale, then repeat.

Rating: 5 out of 5

Reviewer: Alice Neiley