

“The numbing is not working anymore.”

Instant Holograms on Metal Film and the return of alternative pop band Stereolab

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Instant Holograms on Metal Film (2025) is Anglo-French group Stereolab’s first album in 15 years. The general political and social situation may have contributed to the alternative pop band’s decision to end its long hiatus and record new songs. The new album responds, in part, to the resurgence of fascism, the revival of the Big Lie in politics and the expansion of war. At the same time, Stereolab seems to have picked up where they left off in 2010, which is not necessarily a good thing.

Stereolab was formed in London in 1990. Guitarist Tim Gane, one of the two founders, was born in Ilford, in East London, in 1964. During the austerity and social reaction overseen by Margaret Thatcher, he became a fan of punk rock and began making his first recordings. In 1985, Gane helped form the band McCarthy, which was ironically named for the anticommunist US Senator Joseph McCarthy and espoused leftist politics.

Singer and lyricist Lætitia Sadier, the other founder of Stereolab, was born in Vincennes, an eastern suburb of Paris, in May 1968. At the time, Paris was experiencing a student uprising that would escalate into a workers’ general strike of millions. The Stalinist Communist Party finally betrayed it, thus rescuing the government of President Charles de Gaulle. In the aftermath of the sellout of the general strike, anti-Trotskyist and postmodernist thinkers like Cornelius Castoriadis and Guy Debord, among others, would hold sway among France’s intellectuals and would, unfortunately, have an impact on Sadier. The latter met Gane when McCarthy played in Paris in 1988. Sadier sang on the band’s final two albums and, when McCarthy broke up, she and Gane immediately formed Stereolab.

The band quickly developed a unique style that eclectically combines lounge, bossa nova, krautrock (i.e., German bands of the 1970s such as Faust and Neu!),

French pop of the 1960s and electronic music. They favor old synthesizers, electronic organs from the 1960s (such as the Italian-made Farfisa), drones and repetitive, Velvet Underground-inspired rhythms. The result sounds like a 1960s’ view of the future. Sadier’s usually abstract, cerebral lyrics alternate between English and French, and she sings them in an attractive but detached alto. Undergirding it all is an ironic, almost clinical, distance.

Stereolab’s notable albums include *Transient Random-Noise Bursts with Announcements* (1993), *Emperor Tomato Ketchup* (1996), which is arguably their peak, and *Cobra and Phases Group Play Voltage in the Milky Night* (1999). The band went on hiatus in 2009 and released a collection of outtakes in 2010.

On *Instant Holograms on Metal Film*, Sadier’s clear, largely affectless singing remains a focal point. Several songs include the vocal counterpoint that has been a hallmark of the band. The arrangements include saxophone, trombone, marimba and vibraphone, which are relatively new additions for the band. These instruments, particularly the horns, bring welcome warmth and humor to the music. Many of the songs incorporate changes in tempo and arrangement, but their melodies are not always interesting.

“The numbing is not working anymore,” Sadier sings on “Aerial Troubles.” “Greed is an unfillable hole.” The song seems to suggest, correctly, that the world’s historic levels of social inequality are untenable. Already abstract, the lyrics become stilted: “The juncture invites us to provide care ... / While offering antenatal care for the inception / of the new yet undefined future / that holds the prospect for greater wisdom.” Though the sentiment is positive, this is a bit chilly and unhelpful (and characteristic of Stereolab).

Beneath its cool surface, “Melodie Is a Wound”

suggests that the band is troubled by the rise of authoritarianism. “Cultivate ignorance and hate,” Sadier sings. “Snuff out the very idea of clarity, / Strangle your longing for truth and trust.” President Donald Trump’s foul bigotry and brazen mendacity inevitably come to mind. “The war economy is inviolable violently,” Sadier continues, before referring to the suppression of dissent.

This is the album’s longest song and, apparently, its centerpiece. But the bright tempo and lush chords of the accompaniment suggest elevator music, undercutting the lyrics’ urgency. An overblown saxophone solo brings a touch of humor to the song. How seriously does the band take the situation that they’re describing? Do they think themselves to be at a safe remove from it?

But more good signs emerge on “If You Remember I Forgot How to Dream, Pt. 1,” which features a disco beat. “I belong to the Earth. / I say no to war,” Sadier sings in French (“Je dis non à la guerre”), giving voice to worldwide opposition to the relentless war drive by all the powers and no doubt Israel’s homicidal war on Gaza. She refers to “permanent revolution” in passing, cryptically adding that its “implications / are yet beyond our grasp.”

“Colour Television,” which features a reggae-inflected guitar, bears the influence of postmodernism. In it, Sadier asserts that a middle-class lifestyle has been “violently imposed as the / universal narrative / of progress and development and of civilization.” The result is not only inequality, but the foreclosure of the possibility of “other stories, / conceptualizations / of progress and development.” Not only is this academic and abstract, but also it prioritizes thought over material reality.

Elsewhere, Sadier encourages us to explore “the rhizomic maze,” which is a concept developed by post-structuralist philosopher Gilles Deleuze and psychoanalyst Félix Guattari. The allusion shows Sadier’s attraction to philosophical and political trends that flourished as French intellectuals moved to the right after the 1968 general strike.

Adding to the confusion, Sadier’s lyrics often lean toward mysticism. The singer opens “Transmuted Matter” by seeking the “fully human, fully divine.” She hails “the receiver, the transmitter of higher frequencies” and anticipates “a time that lifts the veil.” In another song, she sings of a “capacity to love that shatters the ego,” “the myth that lives within” and “deep subjectivity.” Such images represent a retreat from the social engagement contained in the other songs.

In a 2024 interview with *Jacobin* magazine, Sadier referred positively to the postmodernist Castoriadis and

explained that “I’ve always been quite open about my politics, though sometimes it’s more metaphysical than it is hard, on-the-nose politics.”

She expounded on this, explaining that for her,

Love is the opposite force to fear. That’s the choice we have in this moment. Either we choose to go down with fear or to rise to the much higher frequency of love. Love is a higher frequency than fear or jealousy or envy or anger.

Asked whether she saw Stereolab and similar projects “leading a cultural vanguard for societal change,” Sadier forcefully rejected the idea: “No, no, no. That’s the idea of the savior coming from outside. An external force acting as savior. A big shift we’re experiencing is that the savior is not from outside but is within us.” Various baleful trends are at work.

Instant Holograms on Metal Film suggests that Stereolab has been shaken by the deepening world crisis and is trying to grapple with it. This is a positive sign. Yet, true to form, the band addresses the burning questions of fascism, inequality and war using general terms and rather academic diction. The largely expressionless quality of their music flows from the character of their outlook.

Though critics sometimes label Stereolab as “Marxist,” this is a misunderstanding, confusing postmodernism and various forms of academic pseudo-leftism with genuine Marxism. In fact, the band never mentions capitalism on this album or concrete social phenomena in general. Instead, they see the crisis (and, implicitly, its solution) in subjective, psychological terms, as evidenced by their allusions to Deleuze and Guattari (along with their implication that love is the answer).

In sum, *Instant Holograms* shows the great distance separating this variety of middle-class intellectual from the working class and its struggles. Though the album encouragingly demonstrates these artists’ sensitivity to the intersecting and intensifying threats we face, it also underscores the inadequacy of their response.



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