

## Bjork - Biophilia (2011)

Written by bluelover

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01 – Moon 02 – Thunderbolt 03 – Crystalline 04 – Cosmonogy 05 – Dark Matter [play](#) 06  
– Hollow 07 – Virus 08 – Sacrifice  
[play](#)  
09 – Mutual Core 10 – Solstice

The biggest artists in the world might look on in envy at the advance publicity for Björk's eighth album, Biophilia. It's been heralded not merely as an important new release but the future of the entire record industry. "Björk Fights to Save Music" offered the headline in Mojo, not a magazine renowned for working itself up into a state of breathless over-excitement. According to a cover feature in Wired, it represents not merely an attempt to "define humanity's relationship with sound and the universe" but also to "pioneer a music format that will smash industry conventions", neither of which are claims anyone was in a hurry to make for, say, Beady Eye's Different Gear, Still Speeding.

But then, who can blame them? Biophilia invites a degree of grandiosity. It is, by all accounts, the first album to be released as a suite of iPad and iPhone apps, intended as "a semi-educational project for children using sound, texts and visuals" covering, among other topics, plate tectonics, genetics and human biorhythm. It took three years to make, a period that involved discussions not merely with Björk's record company, but Apple and National Geographic. It required the employment of an immense supporting cast. David Attenborough provides narration. Dr Nicola Dibben, a senior lecturer in music at Sheffield University, wrote the essays that accompany every song. An American mathematician and a British scientist and film-maker, bonded by their desire to collect every element in the periodic table, developed some of the apps, and a robotics company's director of engineering was commissioned to build four "gravity harps", which, according to their creator, "make music using the oscillating transformation of gravitational potential energy into kinetic energy and back again".

The fact you feel a bit of a mouldy fig for actually mentioning the music – you have Attenborough announcing you're "on the brink of a revolution that will reunite humans with nature through new technological innovations" and you want to talk about pop songs? – means Biophilia has already succeeded as a kind of multimedia event. At least one critic is entirely prepared to believe his own intellectual deficiencies are what led him to find the apparently direct correlation between the scientific topics and the composition of the music hard to grasp. But even if you loved every minute of the extravaganza, it would be a shame if the tap of fingers on touchscreens drowned out the music, not least because the music doesn't need any support. There's a moment on Crystalline when sparse electronics and the tinkling of the gameleste – another of her specially commissioned instruments – unexpectedly give way to a fizzing, old-fashioned drum'n'bass breakbeat; it provides a visceral thrill that no academic explication or interactive game can really improve on. The lovely, gasping choral swell of Cosmonogy's chorus communicates a sense of wonder at the universe's vastness more directly than the accompanying stuff about orbital ratios and holistic imperatives can.

Indeed, there's a strong argument for uncoupling the music from the apps entirely. Once you've read the essays, there's virtually no room for the listener to put their own interpretation on the songs, which at a stroke cancels out a portion of the pleasure of listening. The whole thing has clearly been designed to make music more malleable and interactive, but risks unwittingly robbing music of the malleability and interactivity it's always had.

Perhaps it's better to just listen. Though it's exquisitely controlled and filled with space where its predecessor Volta was packed to bursting with sound, Biophilia still teems with invention. There's something audacious and impressive about the way Hollow attempts to strike a weird balance between menace and calm, the vocals as lulling as the staccato backing is unsettling. Or Mutual Core's repeated shifts from a wheezing keyboard – it was doubtless built in a laboratory by the provost of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and professor Brian Cox, but it sounds like a 13th-century portative organ – to electronic bombardment. For an album that presents itself as an academic exercise, it's big on moments of pure, indulgent pleasure: though you're some considerable distance from the comforts of standard verse-chorus structure, the melodies of Virus and the closing Solstice are so beautiful they carry you along regardless. It's certainly restless and innovative, but Biophilia never feels like hard work, however much the accompanying bumf tries to convince you it is.

Whether the app album becomes the industry standard or whether it's even a good idea for it to become an industry standard is up for debate: it's hard not to feel your buttocks involuntarily clench a little at the thought of, say, Kings of Leon having a go. Far less questionable is the quality of the music on Biophilia, which would underline how far apart from the rest of rock and

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pop Björk is, regardless of how it was delivered.---Alexis Petridis, theguardian.com

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