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Cyclic *Defrost* Magazine

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Editor-in-Chief
Sebastian Chan

Editors
Shaun Prescott | Alexandra Savvides

Art Director
Thommy Tran

Advertising
Sebastian Chan

Advertising Rates
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Cover Design
Jessica Brennan

Issue 27 Contributors
Adrian Elmer, Alexandra Savvides, Bob Baker Fish, Cimarron Corpe, Chris Downton, Chris Hearn, Dan Rule, Doug Wallen, Ewan Burke, Heath Killen, innerversitysound, Jacinda Fermanis, James d'Apice, Jason Edwards, Jennifer Moses, Jessica Brennan, Joshua Meggitt, Oliver Laing, Samuel Miers, Shaun Prescott, Wayne Stronell

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Contents

Editorial

Generational shifts by their very nature necessitate the consumption of music in extremely different ways. As the concluding months of 2010 saw the cassette Walkman exit portable entertainment history, we present the striking cover for issue 27 by Newcastle-based illustrator Jessica Brennan. Amidst a generation that is increasingly familiar with album art as a highly abstracted form - trapped as a digital rendition on an iPod screen - her take on the importance of cover design is particularly timely.

This relationship between the visual and aural is explored elsewhere with Broadcast discussing the organic process behind their multi-faceted collaboration with the Focus Group. Closer to home, Adelaide's Melissa Agate/sanso-xtro continues our emphasis on strong female music-makers, and Samuel Miers explores the contributions to Melbourne's avant garde scene with Sunshine & Grease's Patrick O'Brien. Chris Hearn,aka Alps, provides another excellent take on Cyclic Selects further on in this issue, while Jacinda Fermanis profiles the elusive Fabulous Diamonds.

Online at www.cyclicdefrost.com is a stack of extra content, including an interview with Sophie Hutchings and plenty of album and event reviews. As always, we value your feedback, so please do get in touch. Enjoy the issue.

Shaun, Lex
Editors

The future transformed

Jessica Brennan
Local
by Shaun Prescott

Jessica Brennan is an experimental graphic designer and illustrator based in Newcastle. Responsible for this issue's cover print, Brennan recently completed a thesis paper for the University of Newcastle called 'The Effects of the Transforming Album Cover on Music Listeners'. We speak to Brennan about what a "transforming album cover" actually is, and whether album art is a dying art form in the digital age.

What draws you to album sleeve design?

I think like most things I'm initially drawn by colour and composition. An artwork that can manage to grab your attention from the shelf as you walk into a store will be something I would take notice of. I actually also like the cardboard wallets as well when flicking through CDs, just because they have a tactile quality that differentiates them from the crappy plastic jewel cases, and I think that the ink on the cover also appears warmer and deeper on the better quality stock. It's these qualities that add up to make you feel like your purchasing something more personal and alive from the artist.

What are some of your favourites, and why do they work well?

A current album cover I really like is MGMT's *Congratulations* created by artist Anthony Ausgang. The image is so vivid and amazing! It complements the music perfectly. There was also a limited edition scratch version of the cover, which when rubbed with a coin revealed a collage of photographs of the band. Everything about the cover is a magnet for your attention.

I have to mention The Beatles album *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band*. The artwork managed to encapsulate all that was the music on this album; it brought forth an entirely new concept in the capabilities of the album cover, and was totally representational of the experimental sound and song writing. This album cover was well and truly beyond functioning as simply just a protective casing for the record inside.

I also like a lot of Alex Steinweiss's work. It must have been insane to be the first artist to create an album cover, and I think that he naturally set principles that are going to be forever relevant to this particular art form. Combining original typography with bright, graphic, original illustrations Steinweiss was influenced by poster design and the music of his era. An example of this would be *Contrasts in Hi-Fi* by Bob Sharples.

What is a "transforming album cover"? Any examples?

The "transforming album cover" refers to the changing state of album cover artwork, from a tangible object, to a virtual experience. For example, in an attempt recreate the experience of staring at a tangible album sleeve, iTunes has introduced the 'iTunes LP'. It is essentially an interactive form of album artwork, which is there to give the listener some kind of multimedia visual element to experience as they are listening to the album. This can be viewed in action with transformation of Bob Dylan's *Highway 61 Revisited* cover artwork from record sleeve, to CD, to iTunes LP format.

Another side effect of online artwork, as noted by designers, are the challenges presented in designing for the new formats. The accompanying thumbnail on most new music players now is restricted to a 240 pixel artwork. The tiny JPGs displayed on computers and iPod screens now demand simplicity, bold colour, and plain type. An example of this would be Datarock's self titled album: its simply crafted, bright illustration with large plain type is suitably minimalist for viewing at a small scale.

In your mind, what are the rules, or the essential considerations, for an effective album cover?

More importantly than jumping out from the shelf to the consumer, to me, effective cover art should extend the listeners experience of the music beyond aural interpretation. It should heighten the bond between musician and audience, taking the music listeners experience to a higher level of understanding. It should essentially, function in the way of an artwork.

Given the rise of digital music formats, do you think there's a risk that album cover art may become irrelevant? Are there ways to combat this?

I strongly believe that in regards to recorded music, the accompanying artwork – whatever form that may take, will always be important and relevant. The first album cover artwork was created in 1939 by art director Alex Steinweiss, who suggested that the use of original artwork on the previously plain record packages might entice more customers to stop and explore the albums. One of Steinweiss's first experiments was designing the package for *Beethoven's Hits*; following this sales rose by a dramatic 800%. The results speak for themselves.

It wasn't until the introduction of the digital music format that we were faced with, for the first time in almost seventy years, a practically non-existent artwork, its maximum size reaching only 5x5cm. With consumers now carrying new iPods and MP3 players the industry had decided for us that there was no need for substantial artwork any longer. In return we would receive bargain prices on all of our music file selections….and then the sales results came in. It had become apparent that tangible album sales were still outselling their digital counterparts. They had not reached the album purchasing audience.

It seemed that even though tangible artwork had not been pushed as heavily in the marketing campaigns, the consumer still had an underlying want for the visual communication, not just the aural sensation. The following year then saw the beginnings of larger scale digital artworks, with the introduction of new digital album booklets that were to accompany album files. Thus acknowledging the power of the visual imagery to connect an audience more fully with an album and increase its inherent value.

I think it will be exciting to see how this idea continues to evolve as designers explore the infinite possibilities presented to them as technology continues to develop, and also how far groups who are determined to keep a tactile experience in place for their consumers will push their artwork in order to compete and maintain value with the listener. **CD**

CUT NOW:

BLANK REALM Deja What? LP

KITCHEN'S FLOOR Loneliness Is A Dirty Mattress LP

The Sunshine on Clifton Hill

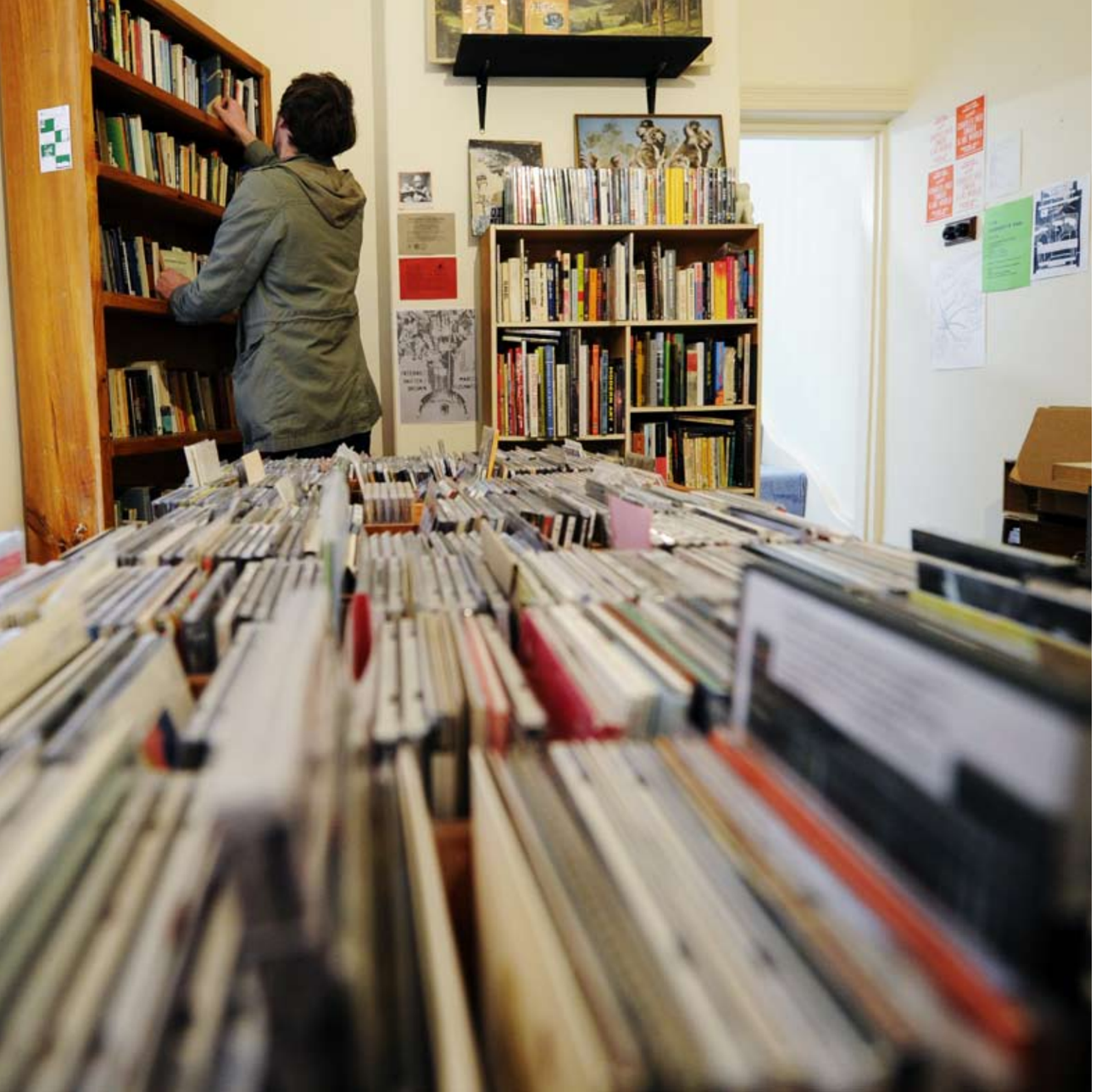
The Sunshine on Clifton Hill
Local
by Samuel Miers
Photography by Jason Edwards

Patrick O'Brien has moved the epicentre of Melbourne's avant garde music scene back to Clifton Hill.

Pat lives in his aptly titled Sunshine & Grease space - just around the corner from the old Community Music Centre, home to the experiments of artists like Essendon Airport and Laughing Hands, in our last golden era of the late 70s and early 80s. Speaking to Pat means looking through an ever-present pile of CDs on his desk - next to a soap box full of cassettes. Today he is sleepy as he has been at a friend's drinking into the night with Japanese guitarist Tetuzi Akiyama, who he had applauded the two previous evenings at other Melbourne hubs Make it up club and Stutter.

Sunshine & Grease is becoming more and more essential to the Melbourne musical landscape as our best fringe musicians begin to congregate at the refuge for the increasing number of monumental performances, generally only heard about through a message to the mailing list on the day of the event. "They put on so many great shows – improv, noise, weirdo-folk or punk shows, field recordings, sixty-hour video installations. Suddenly the place transforms into a party, or a church, an exhibition space or some sort of acoustic ecology safe-house," tells Duncan Blachford of various Melbourne free-form acts such as Snawklor, and the Endless Melt label.

"It's amazing how many people you meet who are supposedly into good art and have absolutely no musical taste. I find that really weird."



up sell you something, even on the quietest day.

Though Pat was constantly frustrated by the quiet days growing up in Victoria's bushfire capital, he couldn't get enough of the city. "I would come to Melbourne on the weekends and blow off all the tensions, 'cause I had been in Kinglake hating life all week. Everybody was telling me what a freak I was, but I guess I embraced it."

In 1996 he took off to Canada where his tastes continued to expand. On returning to Melbourne he struck a friendship with Mark from the legendary Synaesthesia Records and ended up working there for three years. Pat had also been on the Bus Gallery board for six years; at the tail end of this time, he set his sights on a small dead space at the front of the building.

So his baby Sunshine & Grease (named after a Royal Trux song) was born in a Bus on Little Lonsdale Street, 26th July 2008. The relocation to Clifton Hill came at the beginning of this year with the closing of Bus Gallery, and the fact that Pat, together with many of his friends, prefers to stay out of the city these days (howbeit not too far away).

Although there are many standout independent record stores in Melbourne such as Round and Round, Missing Link or even Malvern's Vicious Sloth Collectables - Sunshine & Grease is certainly the most eclectic, focusing on underground music of the past and present by losers and never-weres. It is for Melbourne what Bimbo Tower is to Paris and Volcanic Tongue is to Glasgow. "Sunshine & Grease is the kind of store you can only hope exists in whatever town you're living in and the 'city' is a hell of a lot better for it," says Duncan Blachford.

Pat prefers to deal with labels directly, ordering boxes from his favorite imprints around the globe. While his loves stem "everywhere from folk music to ethnic music, to 20th century composition, to noise and lots of pop stuff", he has taken a particular fancy to Los Angeles' hypnotic pop label Not Not Fun lately, whose textural-layer master Sun Araw visited Australia recently.

Furthermore, the store is important for outskirt Australian labels such as Breakdance The Dawn, Trapdoor Tapes, Sabbatical, Chapter, Near Tapes, Inverted Crux, Albert's Basement and Endless Melt. While these labels have developed a following online, Sunshine & Grease often gives you the only chance to "get a physical clue about a release before purchasing, instead of clicking 'buy' on the internet," as Michael Zuliki of Albert's Basement points out. Here their latest offerings are given, in Duncan Blachford's words, "a home amongst great avant-garde germs from the ages."

"I would come to Melbourne on the weekends and blow off all the tensions, 'cause I had been in Kinglake hating life all week. Everybody was telling me what a freak I was, but I guess I embraced it."

Pat has also started his own label this year, releasing music on tape and CD-R from Paul Kidney Experience, Dylan Martorell, Aaron Wallace and Tom Hall. Most of these have already sold out, which has been especially rewarding. "The Paul Kidney Experience CD – I can send that to labels overseas that might be able to afford to produce vinyl or larger-scale editions of things, and by doing that, that music will reach a lot more people." Due next is a tape from Wisconsin's Pink Reason: a collection of live recordings from his Australian tour last year that included a stop at Sunshine & Grease.

The owner's heart is certainly not only in music; Sunshine & Grease holds many obscure zines, books, films and art. "It's amazing how many people you meet who are supposedly into good art and have absolutely no musical taste. I find that really weird. For me my focus is fairly equal, I mean I'm interested in all of these things – I'm interested in culture."

This is evident in the sort of exhibitions he commissions, especially the Victor Meertens-curated show of 20th century avant-garde artifacts. "He turned the gallery in to very much a living museum," Pat recalls, "in that he was there every day. He's a great storyteller and a great conversationalist, and that was a very big part of the show, people would come in to the gallery and spend two and a half hours there, sometimes more. This is a 7 by 4 metre space. There were also musical instruments that he designed and built. He would play those and let people play them. I felt really privileged to have that show."

With the continual struggle for the post-MP3 record store to survive these days, the gallery/gig space has proved to be a successful diversification for Pat, as he can make a little from renting the space out for exhibitions, as well as the usual $6/7 cover charge for bands. Sunshine & Grease is still only open from Thursday to Saturday with Pat working at the RMIT library the first three days of the week to get by.

The environment is very much a community and is not elitist; everyone is welcome. There is also no rivalry with other venues. Pat often attends Make it up club and Stutter nights – together they've provided a laboratory for local and touring experimental/improv artists on Tuesdays and Wednesdays, collectively for around 15 years. The people organising and frequenting these events are also part of the Sunshine & Grease community. At Make it up club, when introducing artists to the stage, curator Sean Baxter will sometimes drop in things like, "you will be able to buy this person's music at Sunshine & Grease, is that right Pat?" Sean also joined Pat on his multifarious O'tomorrow radio show (where he is known as Downpat) for the Triple R Radiothon.

In the 30 years since the existence of the Community Music Centre, this milieu has certainly grown. Possibly the most unique thing about this new place in Clifton Hill is not just its evolving impact on Melbourne's experimental artists but on the pop/indie music scene. Bands such as Panel of Judges, whose members are regulars to the store, can find avenues for their avant-explorations in pop sounds. As Ariel Pink once said, "every time there is a breakthrough in pop is because of the experimenter behind it that lifted it up." **CD**

Fabulous Diamonds
Local
by Jacinda Fermanis

FIXED APPEAL

While it's been said that any publicity is good publicity, visit Fabulous Diamonds' MySpace page and it will most likely come as a surprise that Jarrod Zlatic and Nisa Venerosa have quite proudly chosen to display the negative reviews they have received over the course of their career. "I find them a little stagnant, as though the Melbourne duo are no more than the sum of their parts" for example. Or, more abrasive, "taking a good ten to fifteen minutes to drag out a flatly intoned lyric was no crowd pleasing move."

Whether the duo are truly apathetic to media hype or simply unwilling to show cracks in their seemingly nonchalant veneer, Zlatic is forthright and blunt in his opinion on the subject. "I didn't put those reviews up there for ironic purposes," he states somewhat abruptly before contemplating the polarising effect that Fabulous Diamonds' music often seems to have on people. "It was more to do with how I find it kind of weird that people will always choose to display positive things on their MySpace pages over anything critical. It's like weird, introspective promotion. I like that people are questioning what we're doing instead of just taking it at face value, however it depends on the nature of the criticism because those particular things displayed online were about the first record and I think the points made were that obviously the music wasn't necessarily for those critics, and that perhaps they simply had to come up with something to say."

"Reviews are merely different perspectives from different people with different areas of expertise," he continues. "At the same time however, I don't want it to have to have an effect on us, and I can understand why many other artists talk about never looking at reviews because they don't want to get into that weird cycle where they become overtly self aware about that sort of thing. I have taken criticisms and comments on board before, but you only have your own angle when you're making music and I guess reviews are enlightening in being able to see how everybody else interprets your sound."

Delivering a near peerless aural experience, the Fabulous Diamonds back catalogue is so wonderfully extensive and varied that people have a difficult time defining where the band fits within contemporary music. A combination of pop, dubstep and minimalist drone-rock, their sound could be described as almost wilfully difficult. It seems inevitable that the band's music elicits a variety of strong reactions. This musical breadth and myriad of multiple personalities pushes the confines of traditional songwriting. As listeners we are almost conditioned to expect certain boundaries within our musical consumption, but for their normal audience Zlatic is sure that what the band is giving them isn't anything new.

"We're not totally defining within our genre. There's lots of different little bits and pieces in our music but it's not anything particularly one thing over another. I guess I'd describe Fabulous Diamonds as experimental pop music because obviously there are a lot of experimental ideas going on but you can't just squarely place it in one bag, figuratively speaking."

"I imagine that we don't have the sort of listeners that are totally unaware of our influences and the things that we draw upon in our sound, but Nisa and I don't really think about it all too much. My dad was a punk growing up and he always played good music when I was younger so in a lot of ways I guess I was exposed to certain things maybe earlier than other people were. You know, obvious minimalist and The Velvet Underground and Krautrock and certain seminal stuff has been in the back of my mind when we've been doing things, but now I think that's becoming less so."

Characterised by fixed arrangements and spanning a scope of genres, much of the commentary on *Fabulous Diamonds II* has questioned whether their approach to songwriting and performing is largely improvisational or something more structured in general. However upon mention of this ambiguity, Jarrod is swift to clarify "we don't improvise at all. It is very much fixed."

"People seem to think we jam," he explains. "When you play a ten minute long song people generally think that there has to be some sort of improvised element to it. We do kind of play around with things and improvise to a degree but we've got very definite structured points. Playing live, things will go longer than others sometimes but there is very much a framework which everything operates within."

"I was kind of worried that our new material would kind of sound the same live as our old material," Zlatic says of the band's live performance technique. "Whenever you go to see a band - myself included - you've heard old stuff and then you hear new things that can be a bit kind of dislocating and may trip you up a bit, not in a bad or good way but just as something new. With us, we've got so many variables because of our old equipment and depending on the venue or the amp we're using, the keyboards will sound very clear and clean whereas other times it will sound very bass heavy or really distorted. Those types of things do really affect the end product. When we went and recorded the latest album [we] made sure that there wasn't particularly too much buzz and that everything sounded just right to a point where you can't really replicate that live."

That isn't to suggest that *Fabulous Diamonds II* is merely a highly-produced manifest of technical nonpareil. Nor does is suggest that the record doesn't prove an equally compelling experience live. Far from it. Veering closer to melodies more approachable even as they still operate under the firm minimalism of drums and organ, Zlatic is willing to admit that their live aesthetic is continually subject to change, and also acknowledges that the "unknown" is exciting and attractive within it's own means. It makes a lot of sense given the way that both Zlatic and Venerosa have chosen to leave each track untitled, instead only referred to by the exact length of the song.

> "People seem to think we jam... we do kind of play around with things and improvise to a degree but we've got very definite structured points."

"There's a couple of reasons we don't title our tracks. The second song's main lyrics is 'obligational animal' and so yeah, we could title it based on that but it's obvious and is essentially kind of boring. In many ways by leaving songs untitled I suppose it adds a bit of mystique but simply put it just seemed like the thing to do. It's easier than calling them anything," Zlatic laughs.

It's not simply mystique that appeals to Fabulous Diamonds though; throughout our conversation it is clear that Zlatic is obviously passionate about gradually extending his ideas and concepts over time into something more refined, in an almost reductionist sense.

"With any artist your concerns change depending on where you've gone and what you're listening to and what kind of headspace you're at. With our second record, particularly the first and last song, around that period of playing I was very specifically interested in trying to push the songs as long as possible with an obvious kind of minimalist influence. At the moment we've been trying to craft our sound a bit more. With some songs on the record, like the second song [3 mins 56 secs], technically that isn't even finished. The sparse lyrical thing was more that I'd come up with a set of lyrics and we'd want to add more to them but I just couldn't think of any more to add. We always say we should go back and finish it but we never do. Now we're trying to make sure we don't take the easy way out and just leave unfinished things as is."

With an upcoming overseas tour looming on the horizon the band are preparing to plough the familiar furrows of flights, hotel rooms and suitcases. "Compared to travelling interstate to places like Sydney where there seems to be a strong experimental scene and a strong rock scene but not many things existing in between, places like America are really healthy with so many more people and so much more to see," Zlatic explains before hazarding a guess about their overseas achievements.

"It's much harder to measure audience receptiveness. Do you gauge it on how many records you sold or how many people came to the show? When you've toured somewhere outside of your hometown before, it's interesting to see whether people remember you or not. I'll be very curious to see how the shows will go this time and whether that will be more of an indication of how successful last time was. Personally speaking, our last overseas tour was totally satisfying and regardless of profit or sales I imagine this tour will be equally fulfilling."

***Fabulous Diamonds II* by Fabulous Diamonds is out through Chapter Music.**

Space is the place

sanso-xtro
Local
by Alexandra Savvides

"W

oaaaaaaaah.. sanso returns from outer space" reads the subject line of just one of the dozens of my electronic exchanges with Melissa Agate, otherwise known as multi-instrumentalist and electronic musician sanso-xtro. It's an email that's particularly important in shaping our correspondence as she confirms the whispers of a follow-up to Sentimentalist, her album which appeared on the Type label five years ago.

Agate, who affectionately signs off every piece of correspondence with "sanso", is at one with her artistic moniker. The latest sanso album, *Fountain Fountain Joyous Mountain*, is a particularly intimate collection of songs that carries on the delicate synth-laced whispers of its predecessor and builds upon them with additional layers of complexity. It's a working document of a musician left to her own devices, or the aural result of being tucked away in a structure that has lived the best part of a century and a half on the north edge of the Barossa Valley, which Agate calls her home.

This album couldn't have been recorded in a house more quintessentially Australian. Once the centre of attention as the town's General Store and Post Office, a rain water tank sits around the back, a constant reminder that its past is still well and truly an integral part of its contemporary existence.

Within the house exist two separate recording areas; the first a studio room with a wooden floor and white stone walls, the second a cellar directly underneath which is home to a cement floor, and more stonework. These areas are "two nice, interesting acoustic spaces," with cables and microphones running up and down the stairs.

This spatial reference has a lot to do with Agate's music practice in piecing together *Fountain Fountain*. Her relocation to South Australia after working as a Telecine Assistant in London sparked a definite shift from the compositions heard on Sentimentalist. Apart from the clear definition between phrases and musical motifs found on *Fountain Fountain*, which could easily be inspired by the recording space, there's also a theme of the natural world that runs through the sanso landscape (think song titles such as 'Wood Owl Wings A Rush Rush', or 'The Origin of Birds').

Moving home was her chance to "kick back", to swim in the Southern Ocean and be away from the mental and physical pollution of living in a big city. "I must admit I've been in hibernation, and am not really very involved with what's going on in [Adelaide's] electronic music scene. I've played a few shows both as sanso and as a drummer in an improv group and the guys who organised those shows are pretty enthusiastic about putting interesting shows on around the city. But that's about all I can say. It seems a little bit like there is not much going on but as I said... hibernation sanso!"

Fountain Fountain is the first time that Agate's vocals feature with any prominence in her music. It's something that happened when the time was right. "With *Sentimentalist* I didn't even try...

"I must admit I've been in hibernation, and am not really very involved with what's going on in [Adelaide's] electronic music scene."

it actually didn't occur to me to sing on any of those songs, except for the slight vocalising at the end of 'Like White Fire'. All of the songs on *Sentimentalist* are about something or someplace. But I wanted the music to tell the stories there."

On *Fountain Fountain*, there are narratives of sort, but more often than not Agate's voice acts as a decadent glossolalia-like foil to the instrumentation. Melodies bubble to the surface with a subtle playfulness that permeates the entire album. Take for example the stop-motion video for 'Hello Night Crow', by friend and artist Fergal Brennan, which acts as a visual tip-toe through this delicate landscape. Composed from a variety of forest images and animated sequences, the clip's subdued palette cleverly lulls the viewer into the album's alternate reality.

Colour is particularly important to Agate, a trait carried over from her work in post-production. She sees colour correction in everything she watches. "Certain colours are so deluxe in a delicious kind of way that they make my mouth water," which she thinks could be weird, but shrugs off in a playful manner.

Despite this, the sanso live show, which was most recently performed at Decibel Festival in Seattle, doesn't rely on visuals. "I'm not into the idea of my performances being audio/visual. I think that unless the music is specifically arranged with this stuff in mind then it's kind of a bit more of a distraction from the music being played. I guess, when it's someone performing solely with a laptop that makes more sense because that live scenario is a little lacking in the visual stimulation department for the audience."

Her live set-up is exhaustive in its scope and rattling off its list of contents takes more than a single breath. It seems to consist of more equipment than one person can possibly manage in a single performance. Yet somehow, she makes it happen. There's an old Roland Juno-6, a Watkins Copicat tape echo/delay from the 60s, an Alesis micron synthesizer plus delays, loopers, an accordion, melodion, acoustic guitar, custom-made percussion contraptions, a glockenspiel and kalimba. Then, there's vocals on top. "I like to be completely surrounded by instruments... I put my multi-task instrumentalising down to being a drummer. I'm really coordinated and I'm pretty much ambidextrous, although I am right dominant. I find trying to imitate my recordings by playing multiple parts all at once a very pleasant challenge. It can be quite euphoric and my mind feels like its going to explode sometimes, but its all for a good cause! It's a lot of concentration, focus, and splitting ones mind into separate partitions."

The sanso sound seems like a world away from Agate's previous incarnation as drummer for the avant-rock band Sin Dog Jellyroll. Signed to Sony Music in 1996, the band split up in 1999, resulting in Agate's relocation to London. "I had felt really let down by the other band members. Obviously as the drummer of the band I wasn't in the position to keep it alive. So I decided I would go solo."

After first picking up her father's acoustic at age ten, percussion soon became Agate's persistent love. "When I was twelve I was in a classroom next to the music room at school and I started to arrive at school early everyday so I could play the drum kit in there. This was a surprise to everyone as I hated school and put up a pretty big fight to not go most days."

After a period of guitar-hiatus and the split of Sin Dog Jellyroll, the instrument wound its way back into the hands of Agate, now crafting the sounds of *Sentimentalist* and re-imagining herself as sanso. At first listen, *Sentimentalist* doesn't really sound like it was conceived by a musician whose primary love was percussion. The album excels in its brevity; songs are sharp and honed to within an inch of their key idea, with just a hint of movement from cymbals and drumsticks. Parcelled into bite-sized pieces that rarely exceed the two-minute mark, the *Sentimentalist* sound featured little to no vocals, just drifting synth-atmospherics.

Fountain Fountain is by contrast much more lush in both its recording process and final presentation. Mastered by Lawrence English, it's Agate's first record for the Digitalis label. "I love the mastering process. Lawrence is excellent and has done a fantastic job! I find mastering really exciting, because it means the recordings are finished, also because it always sounds sooooo much better after mastering. Punchier, more deluxe." Added emphasis, sanso's own.

"When I work out the artwork for my releases I don't usually have any kind of preconceived idea... it's important to me that it makes sense, that it's a connection to where my mind was at when I was writing and recording the songs. With *Sentimentalist* I had to be a little less fussy. Type had some strict guidelines, for example I wasn't allowed to use any font except for the Type font, the one they use for everything. This bugged me because it was all a bit too tidy, and my music is far from tidy! But I do like the way it all looked aside from that."

Digitalis gave Agate creative freedom on this album, from concept to final packaging. The artwork is hand-drawn by Brennan, based in Ireland, and in a limited run will appear as yellow coloured vinyl as well as in CD form. "I hypnotised Brad from Digitalis to let me do coloured vinyl... it was all part of my plan for this one."

Agate hopes her next release will follow soon after *Fountain Fountain*, with the majority of the record complete. Surrounded by the pleasantries of her recording environment, its aesthetic is sure to be closely tied in to the delicate euphoria of *Fountain Fountain*. "It's about finding something, someplace or someone extraordinary... climbing to the top and embracing it 100 per cent."

Fountain Fountain Joyous Mountain is released through Digitalis Industries/ Boomkat.

"I like to be completely surrounded by instruments... it's a lot of concentration, focus, and splitting ones mind into separate partitions."

Markus Popp/Oval
International
by Dan Rule

TRADING PLACES

Taking his role as one of the experimental electronic community's most strident deconstructionists into account, the idea of Oval's Markus Popp re-emerging as a musician would seem curious, if not utterly perplexing, at a glance.

In a career that has spanned the best part of two decades and several of the glitch movement's foundational and most celebrated releases – 1993's Wohnton, 1994's *Systemische* and 1995's classic 94 *Diskont*, which he made with early Oval collaborators Sebastian Oschatz and Frank Metzger – the Berliner has made a point of eschewing himself from anything even approaching conventional process.

Where Oval's early records saw the then trio distance themselves from the synthesisers and other electronic instruments to craft an oddly beautiful sound via mutilating compact discs and intricately compiling, processing and collaging their remaining sonic detritus, Popp's later experiments saw him remove himself from the music altogether.

Indeed, for Popp, the skittering rhythmic intonations, hyper-fragmented melodic shards and dense, static-drenched textures that comprised records such as *Ovalprocess* (2000) and *Ovalcommers* (2001) – which were made entirely on a Mac Powerbook using a customised software interface – weren't music as we knew it, but a means for reassessing the role of the author or composer in contemporary electronic production. In Popp's world, the traditional position of the composer was all but extraneous to the production of electronic music via software. The composer was now, rather, a pilot whom could navigate a path through a defined set of possibilities and parameters only relevant to the particular software in use. Put simply, unlike the work of a traditional composer, contemporary electronic music compositions could not be achieved without the software. The role of the musician as we knew it was all but null and void.

So it was with much surprise that after nine years in creative hibernation, Popp reappeared with in mid-2010 with two releases – first, the 15-track EP Oh, then the sprawling, 70-track double-disc album *O* – that seemed to entirely re-imagine his approach again. While both records shared several of the agile, fragmented sonic qualities of their predecessors, there was one particularly marked difference: these were the sounds of instruments – drums, guitars and strings – being played. Indeed, the shimmering suite of tracks that comprise *Oh*, and *O* even more so, were the result of Popp the musician, kitted with little more than a cheap, stock PC fitted with standard plugins and sounds.

We spoke to the affable, endlessly talkative Popp about misconception, denial and becoming a musician.

“Some of the reviews seem to stop at the mere fact that I am now playing this stuff, be it on an instrument or be it through an interface... but they didn’t seem to ask: ‘What is he actually playing there?’”

I'd kind of lost track of you for a few years…

I did too, by the way (laughs).

What surprised me about this record was that there was this real methodological and conceptual shift, but by the same token, this relative aesthetic continuity. Do you feel that way about the album?

Yeah, I'd put it in pretty much the exact same way. I knew that the continuities would creep in, ultimately, and that's why I focused on a different approach and a different premise altogether. I knew that at some point there would be continuities, because in the end music goes through me, so to speak, so I will always be the final instance and responsible for the music in terms of approving certain elements and discarding others. So in the end I was almost sure that there would be continuities regarding certain elements, atmospheres and so on.

I'd love to hear a little about this new approach, which from what I can understand, is much more about you playing instruments and the computer in a much more directly musical way. What was the trigger point for that departure?

I guess one way to put it is that I wanted to challenge music on its own turf because, for me, that's a much better position to be in. Being the 'creator' of your own music is a much stronger stance or position to me in compared to being the music 'observer' or the music 'navigator'.

But having said that, you know, the real challenge was to actually make it happen in that way. It's very easily said – "I'm going to be the musician now and I'm going to play my own music" – but it's a totally different story to be actually able to pull it off.

Pretty much all I have done over the quiet years is practice. I was sort of building up a set-up I could tack down, because at the time I was doing these other records, I didn't even know what a compressor was or what a compressor does, you know? Now I think I do. So that research was what had to happen to make the music happen in that way. Of course, this new record could have still been recorded in mono, like the other old Oval stuff. All that stuff was recorded in mono just because I couldn't afford stereo. It was not because I was this anti-musician, anti-establishment, anti-music business guy; I just had this ancient sampler and that's what I was using.

It was sort of the same thing as the $500 PC. It's not a statement as such; it's just a statement that that's what I can buy and that's what I can use. I've always sort of been a kind of low-tech guy, so there's always this question these days where it's like, 'What happened to all your high-end Macs?' (laughs). I've never used high-end equipment in any way. Recording this double album, I was one month's rent away from sleeping or living in my car. So it's not exactly about me being part of some music reducers establishment in Berlin or something (laughs). That's just how it comes about, just to give you a picture. Of course, there are conscious decisions, and many of them, that go into the musical concerns or musical approach that went into this new record. But the other stuff is just a pure set of constraints I have to work with.

Sure. Taking this more direct kind of musicianship into account, do you feel that there is a different relationship between you and the music now? Do you get something very different out of making music in this mode?

(Long sigh) This question has two dimensions, you know. First, there's the dimension of me connecting to music as in music legacy or listening to music. Then the second dimension is me connection to producing the music, you know. So I'll start with the latter. Getting more out of working on music or producing music in this manner, as opposed to how I did it before, that's not so fundamentally different. It's pretty much the same building blocks and, while it's a totally different process, the same mindset, I would say. In the end, there's more continuities in the producing of the music than there is new aspects, which for me is a very comforting and very reassuring thought, because in the end it means I can still rely on being in love with labelling certain recordings and certain fragments of sound and making up my own visual scenario that goes with it. So there's more continuities, I would say, than new elements.

However, in the other dimension, as in me connecting to musical legacy, there's a huge difference. Now, it's like me playing the music game, which is not so much like a defeat or even a compromise. It's me playing the music game and being part of this music thing, because in the end I was drawing the big red line, but music is part of my life everyday – it motivates me, it's part of me, listening to it is really important – so why not be part of it in that sense?

The old Oval records were also part of musical legacy so to speak. They were products on the shelf and could be considered a proper CD and a proper piece of music just like any other piece of music. But I had this huge reluctance to be actually using the language of music because I didn't consider myself to be in a position to do so. I'm a very systematic person and I want to consider myself authorised to do something rather than just play around with something. So it just took this much time until I considered myself to be in a position to be using a musical language.

Do you think there was an element of denial in your earlier practice, in that sense? On the one level, you were disengaging yourself from musical language, but you were still kind of part of it whether you liked it or not.

Yeah, of course. This is exactly that systemic element, you know. I was totally aware at the time that even disrupting the process or the methods or approach would eventually, ultimately only optimise the system. So there was no outside of the system. After all, the old Oval CDs were proper retail products on the store shelves, which are probably long gone today. It was never anti-music; I was never an anti-musician. There was just this certain reluctance – I wouldn't call it denial, even though I know that 'denial' has been used as a quote before – but I would say that denial was at work in the sense of me being aware of music being such a huge part of my life. But on the other hand I didn't, myself, feel authorised or prepared enough to be part of it. So I had to take a different route and a different path and do Oval in the way I did it with the old records.

That was my only legitimate way to do music at the time because I couldn't play music in the way I can play it today. It took me that long to be able to play it the way I play it today. Of course, I could have released something in the meantime, some intermediate beta version of something or a prototype of something, but I just didn't feel that it was good enough. And I don't even know if I consider it good enough now. I was listening to the record yesterday and I was like 'Hmm, yeah' (laughs). It's fine if I can get away with it (more laughter). Put it this way, if I can get away with this, then a lot of exciting stuff is possible.

I think you're getting away with it…

Cool!

I'm especially taken by the second disc. While they're very short, fragmentary tracks in the one sense, it's very enveloping as a grouping of tracks. It works more like an atmosphere.

I'm glad that it works for you! I mean, some reviewers, they approach this in terms of a kind of value proposition per track or something. They always claim that the tracks are so short, but overall, you're getting value for so money because there are so many (laughs). Some people are almost angry that they're too short.

In a really odd way, it reminds me of Madlib's approach to making mixtapes and his various Beatkonducta series, where all his tracks are about 40 or 50 seconds up until 1:20. People often describe him as having a short attention span, but I've always felt like he's bringing all these moments together to create a much more expansive, holistic mood or dynamic.

Who would claim that, say, piano pieces by Ligeti would be in themselves a bad value proposition because they are only two minutes each or something? It always depends on the framework you see music happening in and if it makes sense to you to have that hip-hop reference in mind then I'm glad because I didn't get so far. I would be just as happy with people gratifying these tracks on the second CD as ringtones because that was kind of a concept I worked with while doing these tracks, just to make them really concise and to-the-point and to have a document – a CD – that in the end is like a sketchbook. That was kind of the purpose of the CD too because I just simply didn't see

“I was never an anti-musician”

the necessity to make them longer or to add variations in order to make them longer or to loop them around at the end, because emotional essence and the emotional impact is absolutely there already in the short version and it would just be watered down by just extending the track artificially.

I would rather put it the other way around. I think there are a lot of people out there who maybe should ask themselves whether looping a track around at the end or cutting and pasting parts to extend the track artificially is such a great strategy in 2010, you know. In my opinion, everything is there with these short tracks, you know. The essence is at its purest and very concentrated and across the spectrum of all the tracks you get a huge range of atmosphere and harmony and tempo and rhythm – of course, within a limited range – but that was purposeful. No one would say that a collection of piano pieces is limited because there’s not enough of a sonic spectrum.

For me, this is kind album, almost like a thing I’m most happy I intended to do and of a starting point. The double CD is like a debut relaunch of the entire thing, and for me the about with the album is, a) I could pull off what challenge music on its own turf, and b) I kept everything as pure as I wanted. Of course, on CD one there’s tracks that use electronic sounds and sounds from synthesisers and things like that, but I wanted to keep them to an absolute minimum. So for a debut album, I think it’s just the right kind of design. I think it’s the right kind of essentialist kind of design.

From where did you derive the sounds sources on this record?

I mean, the most important unit or category in starting out trying to do what I did with the record was a riff, as opposed to a loop. You can argue that a riff and a loop can be pretty much identical or have many things in common, but for me the most important difference is that you are able to define a riff all by yourself, as opposed to navigating through a loop that you have extracted from some arbitrary other person’s CD. For me, that made all the difference. The riff was like this totally new world, because I was fully in control – which I didn’t even want to be for the old Oval stuff, I was fine with being an observer or navigator and just organising the sound – but here I was the composer, I was the author.

That said, it was a very subjective choice in a way. I like riffs, I like to listen to riffs. I don’t really listen to electronic music myself, so I’m not into quantised stuff and I was never a kind of sequence guy. So once the riff thing was established, the rest was actually just sitting down and recording the perfect take. Just like I could have spent an entire day with the old Oval recordings trying to extract this one loop that would actually work or actually be good enough, here it was sitting down and practicing until I got it right.

Yeah, I’d love to hear about that process of ‘becoming a musician’ if you will.

Well, there were so many more parameters to take into account, first of all, to be able to actually play this stuff. That goes for the guitar parts and the string parts and the drum parts, which are kind of worlds unto themselves. It’s not only to be able to play the drums and pull it off and be able to understand how drums work, but of course, it’s much more important to realise what’s your personal approach, what’s your signature, what’s your contribution to the legacy of drums in music.

Playing isn’t the objective, but the way in which you’re playing…

Yeah, so I didn’t want to use any drum machines; I don’t like electronic drums sounds very much, which is really just a personal thing. I didn’t want it loop-based, because that’s just like a compromise. So I had to take the detour and sit down and listen to lots and lots of music and to understand, first of all, how drums work and what they do in music and then, in the next step, figure out what my contribution could be without ending up as an amateur drummer or a super-drummer, over-the-top kind of bullshit guy (laughs).

The real importance, as I see it, comes after deciding to use instruments or play stuff physically. The crucial question is: ‘What is it that I am going to play? How exactly am I going to play?’. Some of the reviews seem to stop at the mere fact that I am now playing this stuff, be it on an instrument or be it through an interface – real instruments, virtual instruments, whatever – they kind of got that aspect but they didn’t seem to ask: ‘What is he actually playing there?’. That’s what makes all the difference. Your favourite musician, provided you have one, how he or she plays is what makes all the difference. It isn’t the fact that he or she is playing a certain instrument. Listening to your favourite guitar band as opposed to the high school dropout band is what makes all the difference. It’s this certain something and certain way of playing that makes your favourite band your favourite band.

Of course…

It’s on this certain something that I have spent the most time working. Getting the tech aspect down, but then to actually do something you want to do as a musician, that’s kind of the hardest part. People are like, ‘Oh wow, he’s playing instruments now’. But it should be ‘What is he playing with them?’

But maybe we’re getting into proper ‘Music Journalism’ here, so maybe that’s something that not everybody wants to be identified with, and I wouldn’t read it (laughs). But I would say, all in all, I’m happy with how things went. I could pull it off and I’m content and if I do a good job in preparing the live shows, then a 2010 live Oval gig would be one that as a listener I would actually go and see, whereas I as a listener might not have gone and saw a laptop show. In the end, if the main premise is to show that Oval is about music, I would say that I kind of got that across.

O is out via Thrill Jockey/Fuse

Witch Cults

Broadcast
International
by Alexandra Savvides
Live pics by Cimarron Corpe

It's a balmy Spanish afternoon as Trish Keenan and James Cargill sit in the courtyard of a well-to-do hotel in Barcelona. This is the afternoon before Broadcast's debut at Sonar, Europe's largest music festival for electronic and experimental music. The pair have come straight from a soundcheck; the interviewer fresh off a 26-hour flight.

Perhaps it's fitting that their latest release Broadcast and *The Focus Group Investigate Witch Cults of the Radio Age*, which emerged in 2009, is so closely entwined with sensations associated with altered realities and at times, woozy, almost lullaby-like melodies. A mini-world within a mini-album, if you will.

> "We're not part of a genre that we can back ourselves up with. We're very much 'we've done this thing now and alienated all those people'."

With Ghost Box co-founder Julian House, the pair created an album that fused long-term collaboration plans from both Broadcast and The Focus Group.

"I didn't really have an idea of what it was going to turn out like," starts Cargill, speaking of his expectations for the record. "It was constantly this discovery of 'bloody hell, that works'. It was very much an evolving thing of 'this is turning out to be something we really like'. So I didn't really have any expectations before. We set out just to do a little EP, it was way beyond what we expected. I don't think that had ever happened to me before."

As Cargill and Keenan sit across from each other, a wobbly tape recorder placed between them, it becomes clear they are very much attuned to the mood of what the other is saying. It's this dynamic that rears its head throughout the rest of our conversation.

"In a way, a real album happened, it wasn't one of these constructed, slogged-out albums that everyone seems to make, where you love tape, you love the colour of analog but reality is it all has to go onto a hard drive, chopped up and tidied and cleaned, in order to make some sort of produced, professional-sounding album," Keenan continues. "So it was completely unprofessional and real."

Does this mean the opposite, the professional album, is not real? Keenan explains:

"Yeah. Well, it's not really about performing songs onto tape. And that album really came together in a very constructed way, which kind of sounds like it shouldn't work really. It just shows you it's the ideas, they carry the whole thing. When Julian said this is the title: Broadcast and The Focus Group Investigates... that was kind of such an inspiring title that I immediately went away and wrote a bunch of songs with that in mind. That's how it should happen. Mostly it's been quite a long process recording albums."

"Definitely," Cargill says, "conceptual elements were in place before some of the music, which was a really good way to work."

"You're feeding in to something," adds Keenan. "There's a reason for your album. You're not just this band talking as yourself as a band. It's not your music about music, it's got a purpose, you've got this aim and you're trying to trigger responses in the listener, not just autobiographical music."

The band started to piece together elements of *Witch Cults* over the course of a few weekends. House took pieces of Cargill and Keenan's music and according to Cargill treated it "in the same way that he makes the collages of his own music. Basically our stuff was the source material, and he'd give us stuff back and then we'd arrange a bit more. Sometimes you miss what you're good at yourself. So we definitely contributed to each other's ideas."

"We gave him a whole lot of stuff you know, not all of it he used. It was interesting to see which ones he plucked out and thought were valid for the idea," Keenan adds.

"It felt properly collaborative."

"More so than somebody coming in and doing a guitar line."

"It didn't feel like how it might have been in the past," continues Cargill, "'send me a few files' and then they send you something back that's kind of finished. We built the relationship with Julian over like 15 years anyway from him doing the sleeves... [we're] on the same wavelength anyway." The process was "kind of perfect" for Cargill and Keenan, as given the existing relationship with House, and each knowing the other's interests and references, nothing else needed to be said. This sense of mutual perfection even comes through in House's sleeve art for *Witch Cults*. The usual Ghost Box template of stark, clean-cut typography is put aside in favour of this whimsical design. It feels quite different from any of House's previous sleeves for the band: cartoonish and playful, but still retains that undercurrent of uneasiness.

The last time that *Cyclic Defrost* checked in with Broadcast was in 2005, after drummer Tim Felton parted ways with the band. Losing a dedicated percussion player wasn't just significant for the structure of Broadcast. The ensuing years have seen a gradual shift of the band's sound as a result of this departure, directly or otherwise. *Witch Cults* is filled with pace and propulsion but not necessarily driven by rhythm as we know it.

Indeed, the rhythms from the Tender Buttons album onward feel more peripatetic. As Cargill and Keenan explain, this shift is as much to do with logistics as it is with any new songwriting approach.

"Well, we struggled with drummers right from the very start," Cargill says. "After *Haha Sound* we ended up in this scenario where we generally can't go and work in studios, it just doesn't work out for us, we're not together enough and we're probably missing a drummer or a keyboard player. It ends up that we just make records in the house... it immediately restricts your noise levels. Rhythm sort of dies away a little bit. Songwriting came to the front."

This "domestic music", as Keenan terms it, naturally changed the way they used rhythm as a backing to vocals, or a way to move a song forward. "You know, the drummers we like are expensive. It always comes down to economics or space," she says.

"The thing is I do think *Tender Buttons* has a lot to rhythm to it, it's just not complicated rhythm," Cargill continues. "There's certainly beats in there. The acoustic drummer element had gone by that point. That wasn't a conscious thing to do because the songs for *Tender Buttons* [were] kind of what we wanted it to sound like and then we'd take that to a drummer and [get] real drums on it. It was still going to be sparse but have acoustic

> "In a way, a real album happened, it wasn't one of these constructed, slogged-out albums that everyone seems to make."

“It was constantly this discovery of ‘bloody hell, that works’.”

drums. We tried it a couple of times and it just didn’t work. In the end we just thought we’re going to use it as it is. Since then, well, we haven’t done anything since then,” Cargill laughs.

Even if a conventional notion of rhythm has been displaced over the course of several albums, Keenan feels the construction of songs for *Witch Cults* shows it is still there, albeit in less obvious ways. “Neil Bullock’s drumming is great, it’s really charged and so if you write a song on top of Neil’s playing it’s going to sound very rhythmical and pacy.” she says. “There’s these internal rhythms and conceptual rhythms throughout the whole thing [*Witch Cults*]. I think it’s actually the paciest album we’ve made in terms of scene changes and timbre and mood changes. It’s the most complex rhythmical album in that respect.”

This complexity is at its most apparent on ‘Ritual/Looking In’ from *Witch Cults*. There is this odd stop-start motion that purposely jolts you out of any feeling brought across from earlier tracks - as if it is an entirely different thought altogether.

“It’s almost like this idea of traditional rhythm is becoming less focused,” says Cargill. Keenan comes in too at the same time with her take. “The idea of a voice on a beat, that they go along together, it’s almost... we’re broken in that sense. Kind of limping a little bit. But I think that will come back when the moment’s right. Again, when things align nicely. I think with Neil, the references we gave him, the things we wanted him to do really excited him.”

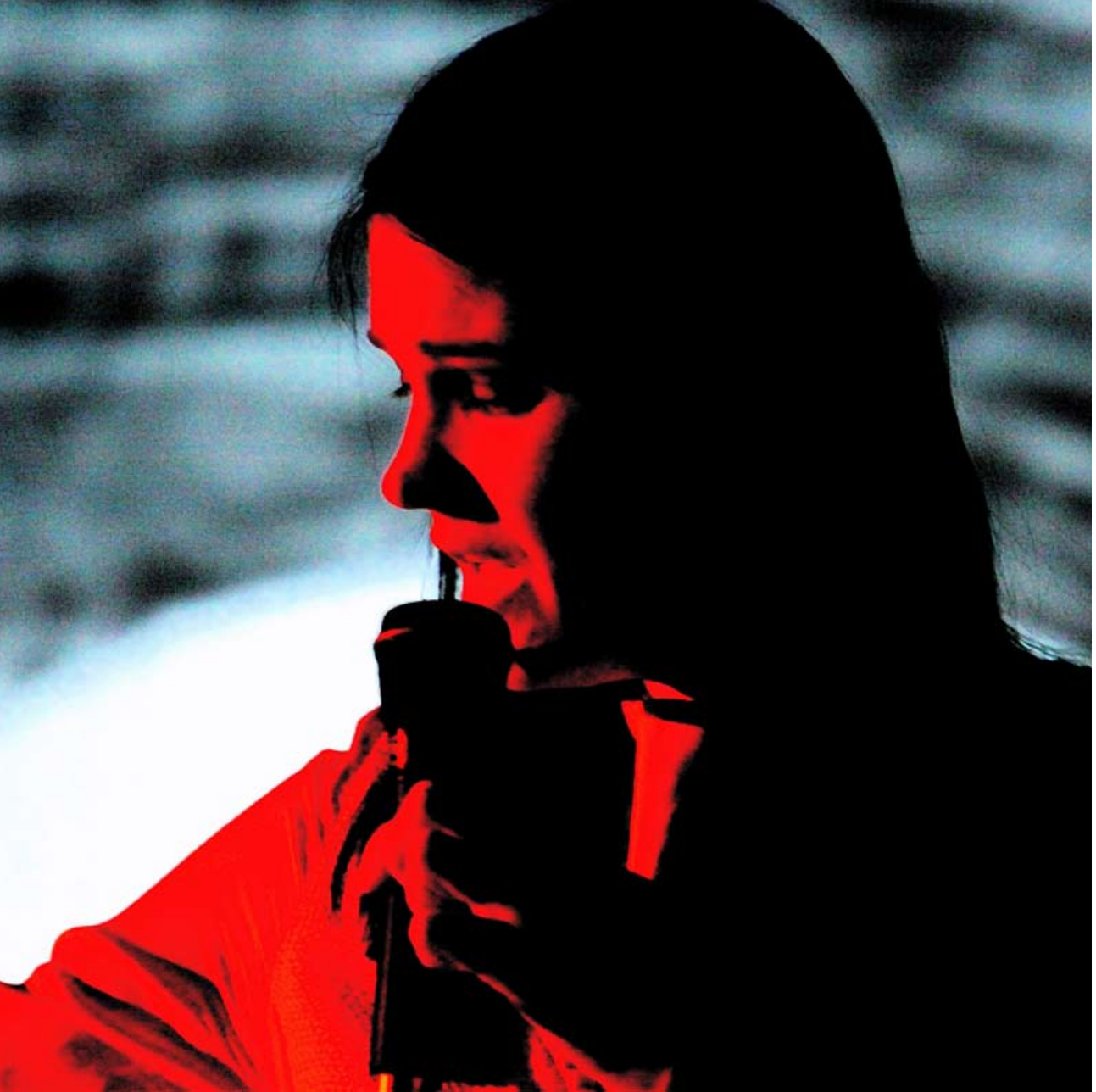
“I think that’s one of the things I like when I look back at everything we’ve done,” Cargill continues, “when we’ve been forced in these situations where at the time we think ‘this is a bit of a disaster you know, it’s not how I wanted it to turn out to be’ but then I look back and I think ‘well actually that’s good because it’s a lot more interesting and we’re not taking these predictable routes and repeating ourselves’.”

Since this interview there’s been another release between The Focus Group and Broadcast, *Study Series 04: Familiar Shapes and Noises*, released on the Ghost Box label. “I think what I like about Ghost Box is that they’re constructing these worlds that you can totally understand,” says Keenan. “There’s titles and very clear concepts.”

We move on to the topic of influences from the past. Initially, they both felt the reaction to Broadcast’s early sound was tarnished by the seeming irrelevance of ‘old’ music. In an era characterised by drum and bass and “future music”, anything that sounded different was thought to be wrong.

There was also an implication that all these sounds which had come before had gained enough attention, according to Keenan. “A lot of things that we love were totally missed by everybody. For me, it’s like, I think it is valid looking back because a lot of things that were focused on [at the time] were boring by today’s standards.”

Cargill credits Simon Reynolds, and the hauntology tag used to label the output



of Ghost Box and Mordant Music in particular, with bringing more mainstream acceptance to this sound. Nostalgia as a creative springboard has certainly experienced a Renaissance in the intervening years, though this isn't to say Broadcast produces "retro" music. Certainly, from *The Noise Made By People* through *Mother Is The Milky Way* and beyond into their work with The Focus Group, Cargill and Keenan have never followed a particularly straight sonic trajectory.

"We seem to do that every album," says Keenan. "I don't know whether we butterfly around a bit, whether it dilutes the trajectory of the band."

"I think that's why we feel like outsiders a lot of the time," says Cargill. "It's not like we're part of a genre that we can back ourselves up with. We're very much 'we've done this thing now and alienated all those people'."

Keenan continues, "I always feel like we're not working. I think that's what I meant when I said we're a bit of a broken band, because I've always felt that people come and go 'oh I really love that *Tender Buttons* album and then we hit them with *Witch Cults* or *Winter Sun Wavelengths* and they just think 'oh'. And then the people who love those things are going to come to the next show and go 'oh I really love the way they improvise' and we're just going to hit them with a load of pop songs. So we're always kind of slightly out of sync."

"But when I look back at all the bands that I of love, and this is why I think it feeds in to our own aesthetic anyway, is that they all did that," adds Cargill. "All the great bands like United States of America and White Noise, they didn't quite fit at the time, they weren't really that popular. In a way that ties in with what we are a little bit."

The performance that follows our interview in the evening, in Sonar Hall, matches music to visuals provided by House. It's a show that is divided into three modules, the first being a twenty-minute improvised piece to *Winter Sun Wavelengths*, a short film by House, followed by a set filled with "colour, harmony and pop songs", and concluding with *Dream/Ritual*, another film-based piece.

"We've never recorded that soundtrack to Julian's film so I like the way it exists as each performance," Cargill continues, "it could go either way, it sounds different each time. That's definitely purely something that exists on the stage. We do the songs after that... they're still reinterpretations. The *Tender Buttons* songs are a bit easier because they're quite sparse so it's easier for just the two of us to do them but I'd say most of the set is kind of like, pretty, interpretive of things. It tends to differ a lot each night. It's been called kind of 'difficult' our new stuff, because it is twenty minutes [where] we're doing this kind of soundtrack with lots of different stuff going on. I think sometimes people who come in to us who've never seen us before like it more than people who know our songs."

Eventually, the band would like to compile all their work with House together and make an audio-visual album. There are another six films in the pipeline, and perhaps even a comic book. Keenan is also working on a project called Let's Write A Song, where she asked for one sentence submissions that would then be crafted into songs. "I've got two songs already so I'm hopefully looking to do an EP," she says. "It's been really good, a really good editing exercise. I think the words are really strong, the way they've come out. And strangely they sound like Trish, sound like me!"

Perhaps it wasn't so strange after all, if people were consciously trying to write like Trish. "Well I wonder," she continues, "a lot of different people from all over the world contributed, and it's interesting how much your creative work is really about editing. That somehow the text, the music the songs you generate is really this slightly general cloud of stuff... it's about what you choose out of it that is you. The choices that you make are the important ones."

Also in the pipeline is the soundtrack to a film by Peter Strickland, writer and director of the 2009 film *Katalin Varga*. Cargill explains the concept behind the film: "I think the idea is this slightly awkward, British guy who takes music and musique concrète, who goes over to Italy to work on the soundtrack of this kind of slasher film, and he's totally out of his depth. You start losing the idea of reality in the film, and the sound effects that he's working on, you stop knowing whether they're part of his tape or reel. But he wants us to do the real Morricone-esque, haunting songs."

As for *Witch Cults* and the rest of Broadcast's output over the years, it makes sense in the here and now as much as it would have before our time. "You know, for me the film references, or the way the album kind of depicts a film on record is understandable," says Keenan. "There's these layers that once you kind of peel back... the cultural 'glue' if you like, there's all these layers you can really enjoy the album on. The way that Julian's production breaks down some of the structures of some my songs is exciting for everybody who likes music."

Broadcast and The Focus Group Investigate Witch Cults of the Radio Age is out through Warp/Inertia. Study Series 04: Familiar Shapes and Noises is released through Ghost Box.

Ous Mal
International
by Shaun Prescott

Finnish textures

"This record exhibits none of the sex and gusto of your Flying Lotuses or Mount Kimbies"

While most listeners will associate Finland with the prolific free-folk drift of the Fonal label and countless metal bands, Olli Aarni's Ous Mal project filters a panoramic melancholy through deteriorating hip-hop beats and a disorientating mush of electronics, archaic samples and acoustic textures. Ous Mal's 2010 release *Nuojuva Halava* may be cosmetically reminiscent of the current trend in hip-hop production towards thickly textured instrumental dreaminess, but this record exhibits none of the sex and gusto of your Flying Lotuses or Mount Kimbies: this is mournful night time music, instilled with just a modicum of hope to keep it from becoming dour.

Based in Helsinki, and a student of Finnish language, Aarni doesn't have any ties with Finland's famous free-folk scene, and nor does his music betray any direct connection. What it does share is a peculiarly surrealistic approach to sound design. If you've ever wanted to hear hip-hop completely removed from its urban sonic roots, you'd couldn't do much better than to check out *Nuojuva Halava*, which follows a series of CD-Rs released on labels such as Under the Spire and Finnish label 267-Lattajjaa.

"I have some friends who make similar stuff, but I don't see myself as a scene person," Aarni says via Gmail chat on a "cold and windy" Helsinki night. "Most of my friends listen to different stuff than what I do." Aarni does listen to a bit of modern hip-hop, with which he shares a minor affinity primarily for its sampling aesthetics. But he insists that he isn't "concerned about how people locate me on the map of electronic music".

"Decay is one of the main themes of the record," Aarni says of *Nuojuva Halava*, "and some kind of presence of the past in everything. Maybe some kind of presence of different times in a single moment. I haven't put it into words really, I try to capture and document that kind of feeling."

Aarni juxtaposes conventional acoustic instruments – cello and guitar chief among them – with the disjointedness and syncopation of hip-hop. In a way, *Nuojuva Halava* sounds like many histories worth of Western classical music trying desperately to adjust itself into the framework of modern urban music; like its restless spectre is haunting an alien palette. "The live instrumentation sounds the way it does because I want it to fit into the mix," Aarni says.

"I use old and partially broken equipment for recording. I'm not sure that I feel truly nostalgic for the past, I just like the way the past seems (to us) now, in the present. It's just an interpretation and I don't know why it's such a recurrent theme for me."

Ous Mal's aesthetic bears some similarities with the hauntological murmurings of William Basinski and The Caretaker. Often it feels like Aarni's source material is breathing its last exhausted sigh before its inevitable relegation into a buried obscurity, but unlike those artists, Ous Mal isn't exclusively ambient. There is a melodic and

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songwriterly sensibility here reminiscent of Boards of Canada and even, at a stretch, some of the more forward thinking Anticon producers.

"The [fact that] the past can't be reached again allures people to try to do it," Aarni says when I suggest his approach is reminiscent of William Basinski and the Caretaker. "The sound quality of a recording itself can evoke a feeling of looking backwards. I like the crackle and hiss a lot just for the way it sounds."

But all conceptual considerations aside, does it take a sad person to make music this melancholic? "Sometimes I'm feeling great and make something more upbeat, and then another day I'll add another layer onto it that might have (a sense of) yearning. I maybe see it as more melancholic than sad, if there's a difference. I want it to evoke feelings.

"I record music pretty much every day," Aarni continues. "I was studying and doing normal stuff [when recording the album]. I think the thing that affected me the most during this recording was the weather – it was autumn and winter, the darkest part of the year."

Aarni's songwriting process varies from song to song. "I usually start by going through lots of records and cassettes, trying to find some sounds that fit together. Sometimes it's a very long process, other times everything just clicks very fast. For example, I made the first version of 'Marraskuu' (the opening track on *Nuojuva Halava*) in 2006 but I never felt it was complete, and then years later I finally added the missing parts to it. Other times it might only take a couple of days or so to record a piece. I get my records from flea markets and thrift stores, and I try to buy records I don't know and that no one listens to anymore."

Determining which disparate textures will ultimately gel together is probably the crucial consideration in Ous Mal's music. At what point does Aarni feel certain that a cello or guitar line will compliment the crackling undertow? "Usually I try to hum some notes over a song. I like to add the kind of tone the song doesn't already contain. For example sometimes I might find some samples that make a great texture but not much of a song. I avoid using live instruments, but sometimes a song needs that kind of push to be more exciting, or more complete."

At this early stage in his recorded career, it will be interesting to witness Aarni's development over the coming years, given the rate at which he's already evolved since his early CD-R releases. Perhaps his next record will be conceived at the height of a northern summer, and we'll get to see the joyous side of Aarni's already well-honed aesthetic.

Ous Mal's Nuojuva Halava is out now on Preservation

By Jessica Brennan

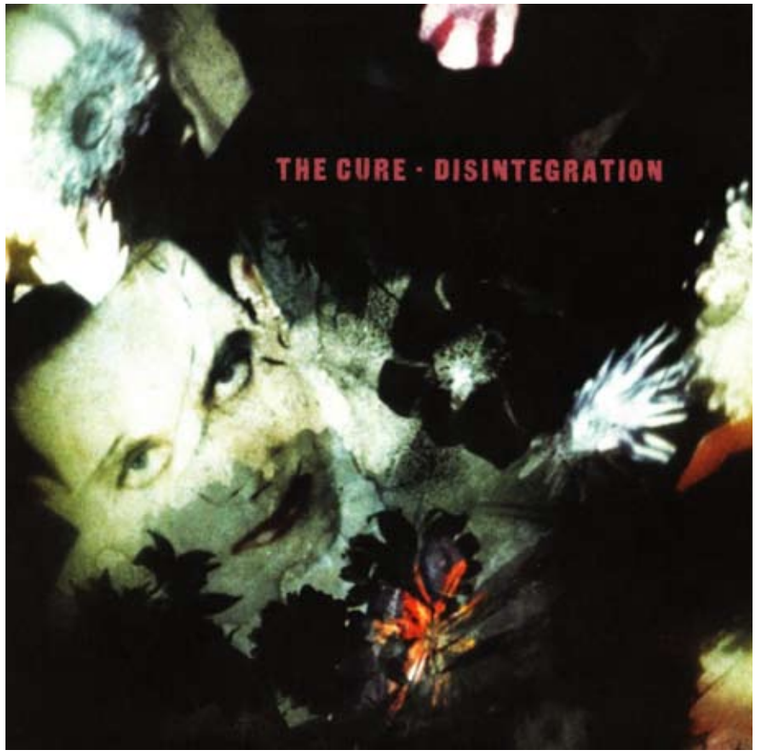
Sleeve Reviews ☞

Joni Mitchell – *Clouds* [1969]
Joni Mitchell's *Clouds* plays to me exactly as described upon listening; like clouds floating slowly by, twisting and shadowing into shapes of the imagination, leaving the listener laying on the ground below completely absorbed in the experience. I chose this album cover as I am not only a fan of Mitchell's music but also her artwork. Trained as a commercial and fine artist, Joni's skills as a visual artist are staggering. *Clouds* features an original self-portrait by the artist herself.
Created over a period of two weeks in 1969, Mitchell notes the subtle changes in her face, in its lines and fullness throughout the days and manages to capture a beautifully textured, vivid image. I love this marriage of visual art and music, and find it amazing that both came from the same person.

M.I.A – *Arular* [2005]
I remember when I heard one of M.I.A's first songs from this album late one night on the radio; I went and bought the album the next day. I'm sure everybody is familiar with M.I.A's music, but what grabbed me when I picked up *Arular* for the first time at the record store, still unsure of what to expect, was the artwork. It was bright, raw and had its own voice. As eclectic as her music, *Arular* features spray-painted stencils

of sharp collage style patterns overlayed by yet more stencils of brightly coloured tanks, guns and missiles. Everything about this album is BANG BANG! Sometimes literally, with gun shot sounds I ittered throughout.
The artwork has a cleverly composed structure with bold graphic symbols that resonate like swiftly dealt punches, symbolising M.I.A's experiences growing up in Sri Lanka and urban Britain. This is another example of musician/ fine artist, with the artwork created by Mathangi Arulpragasam herself.

Cream – *Disraeli Gears* [1967]
One evening in London in 1967, Australian born artist Martin Sharp was approached by a musician to produce artwork for an album cover. That musician was Eric Clapton.
A collage comprised of photography, Victorian decorative engraving images and hand-drawn elements, *Disraeli Gears* is an overflowing cartoonish fantasy land. I am a long-time admirer of Sharp's work, especially his cartoon and collage origins, both of which I experimented with as a kid. I remember when I was first listening to Led Zeppelin, Jimi Hendrix and the list goes on till I inevitably discovered Cream. The music from this era was intense and highly creative, as were the artworks accompanying them.
I became a bit obsessed with the different styles in high school and began to mimic some of the techniques shown on posters and albums, replicating the various styles of hand-drawn typography and decoration of each prominent artist of this time to teach myself the art. It actually taught me a fair bit as well I think about layering colour. Like a lot of work from this time *Disraeli Gears* was first produced in black-and-white, upon which a separate layer of colour was applied. In this case Sharp used his new favourite paints – fluorescents. Sharp described his use of these fluorescent colours as trying to capture the warm electric sounds of music in London at the time. I think that it is these techniques he employed and use of colour that make an artwork that is still fresh today.



The Cure – *Disintegration* [1989]
Disintegration feels like you're soaring upwards through the ocean to take your first breath.
In the first track 'Plainsong', Robert Smith's vocals are warped and echo like rays of light in water. The album cover conjures much the same feeling in an image of pure dark romance, with Smith's pale face looking upward, appearing from the murky depths. His expression is framed by layers of flowers, some dark and some bursting with light. The lighter flowers appear to have the same effect as projected images, and feel like collaged memories. *Disintegration* is I think one of the first albums from The Cure to feature an image of Robert Smith on the cover, and I think that his ghost like face fits beautifully with the artwork. This album is refreshing, natural and genius.

The Jayhawks – *Blue* [1995]
I was introduced to the Jayhawks album *Tomorrow the Green Grass* by my Dad, and agree that the album is a classic. I remember when he was trying out a set of speakers he had built and 'Blue' was one of the first songs he wanted to hear through them. The artwork for *Tomorrow the Green Grass* itself isn't that great but the album is brilliant, and if you don't have it you should go out and buy it now.
'Blue' is the first track from the album and was released as a single. I think the cover image is really interesting, and the way the blurred, scratched photograph is covered in dust speckles gives a visually simulated texture to the otherwise smooth gloss paper sleeve. The type used for the title 'Blue' is almost organic to the photograph. This is a technique I admire and find can be challenging but especially rewarding – when an original type is intentionally sprung from the lines of an artwork.

Black Sabbath – *Paranoid* [1970]
Paranoid appears like a creepy dream, if you dreamt that you were being chased in the woods by a guy dressed in his undies, t-shirt and bike helmet…whilst waving a samurai sword.

The album cover presents a brightly coloured, sword-wielding blur of a figure which jumps out brightly from the dark forest surroundings. The composition is great and the vivid fluoro colours only heighten the effect of this crazy figure piercing the night. I read that the album title was originally meant to be 'War Pigs', after one of the album tracks, and so with this in mind the night maniac was born.

Beastie Boys – *License to Ill* [1986]
In New York 1986, three young Beastie Boys were evolving from a punk-rock group to a rap crew. *License to Ill* is an exciting display of the musicians' diverse musical interests and influences, mixed with their own brand of wise guy humour. Reviewed by Rolling Stone with the headline "Three Idiots Create A Masterpiece," *License to Ill* was one of my favourite albums as a kid in primary school, which I owned on cassette tape.
The album cover features a jet liner tail, smooth and polished seemingly powering through the sky on the front cover, but when flipped over out reveals the front of the plane has crashed into a mountain. The legend on the side of the plane also reads 3MTA3, which when read backwards in a mirror reads 'EATME'. Love it.

Cyclic Selects ☞

by Chris Hearn (Alps)

Dark Day – *Exterminating Angel* [1980]
Luis Buñuel's film *The Exterminating Angel* is about a dinner party at which all of the guests find themselves unable to leave. There is little explanation as to why they cannot leave. The doors do not seem to be blocked off, there does not appear to be a nuclear war kicking off outside; all of the guests are simply overcome by a paranormal, assumedly psychological condition, which locks them inside. Buñuel was a Surrealist, and sense can only be made of it in this context - explanations are not really the point.
Dark Day is the project of Robin Crutchfield, a previous member of DNA, Arto Lindsay's No Wave group. Being from DNA, you'd probably expect something quite lo-fi and shambolic, but it's quite the opposite. Dark Day's record *Exterminating Angel* is one of the clearest recordings to come out of the No Wave era, perhaps even more so than Brian Eno's No New York compilation.
I picture this album recorded in a perfectly anaesthetised setting, with whitewashed walls, perhaps an asylum for the few un-brainwashed members of a futuristic society, run by Hal from Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey*. Every sound here is effected. "I'm only human", speaks the most inhuman voice imaginable over a synthetic synthesizer pattern. Keyboards flawlessly arpeggiate, echoing perfectly in time with incredibly minimalist live drums. A bass line is floating in the distance, subdued in chorus effect, sounding like computer-generated speech, as it sounded to the 80s contemplating how it might sound in the future. The guitars are similarly processed. Different characters seem to appear, perhaps through different vocal processing effects, and create surrealistic narratives, some appearing nonsensical yet eerie, some uncomfortably honest snippets from tales of dysfunctional modern lives, some crushingly nihilistic. "No. Nothing. Ever", Dark Day echo throughout a six-minute track. Although Dark Day's aesthetic feels quite distant in *Exterminating Angel* from Buñuel's film, the claustrophobia, and the feeling of cold, is just as present.

Philip Glass and Robert Wilson – *Einstein on the Beach* [1976]
Einstein on the Beach is an opera spread over four LPs in the box-set that I own – I believe it may have been longer when performed, but some of the movements were edited to fit it on record. Talking about the entire opera would be too time consuming, and I'm potentially not qualified to speak at length on classical music, having never studied it and barely read a word on the topic. However, this opera can be spoken of in the same breath as *Exterminating Angel*. Both are based around the synthesizer, repetition, and nihilistic narratives. The second piece on the first record's A-side, 'Train/Spaceship', kicks off with two female singers repeating a two note (upon the syllable of the word) anti-melody of "Nothing nothing nothing nothing" (repeat). Two synths, flute, and sax all repeat along, changing only subtly, throwing you off now and then. It's still easy, though, to let this whole piece consume you and get inside your nerves. It's interesting watching segments of this piece on YouTube. Philip Glass has this massive 70s afro, and he headbangs, but not in the sense that you see people headbanging at metal shows. Perhaps a couple times per minute, he pulls his head back slowly and looks upwards, as if communicating with something out there, then bam, drops his head, shaking his 'fro all over. Watching this, you get the sense that he's found his own rhythm in the piece, and try all you want, it's impossible to tap into. But this is one of those expansive pieces that everyone will experience differently, as hidden everywhere are different rhythms. You find your own, and go with it.

Flying Saucer Attack – *Flying Saucer Attack* [1993]
What would a flying saucer attack sound like? We all have some sort of idea in our minds, probably derived from the plenty of films out there with some sort of spaceship landing or invasion scene. The first that springs to my mind, though not quite an attack scene, is the scene in Spielberg's *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*, in which the spaceship has landed and is attempting to communicate with the military, by way of music, playing a sequence of notes (likely coming from an analogue synth) with a sequence of coloured lights.
'My Dreaming Hill', the first track off Flying Saucer Attack's debut record, has some pretty strange sounds, like what a laser or tractor beam might sound like. Not long after, a washed out guitar kicks in and the pop song begins, but the strange sounds continue. Layered over this track is a dissonant sequence of notes, seemingly guitar-based feedback, that somehow neither add to nor detract from the existing melodies; they do not harmonise, but at the same time do not distract. It's easy to imagine these notes as the voice of the spaceship in Close Encounters, perched upon a desert hill (or dreaming hill?), sending a message of peace or war or indifference to the populous of another world.
This record kills me. I heard it was all recorded to four-track, and I wouldn't be surprised if the guitars were plugged straight in, amp-free,

and the gains just flicked all the way up so that everything is in the red. It's got this amazing maximalist feeling about it, where everything is so high in the mix that it just collapses into itself. Like an implosion. Like the big bang, everything getting sucked into the centre and then pushed back out, as new shapes and forms. I watched a documentary the other night about swarms of insects, and scientists were discussing them in terms as though they were a single organism, due to the unified nature of their group behaviour. I immediately thought that they could be tapped into a collective unconscious, either the same one that humans have greater difficulty accessing, or one of their own. Flying Saucer Attack sound like that. Like a swarm, a collective unit, so close together that you can't find the space between the individual units comprising it. It's easier to imagine it as a swarm of bees, the way this record buzzes. And like the supernova, the swarm expands and contracts, and in moments like the entry of the second guitar in the chorus of 'A Silent Tide', and the interlude at around 2:00 in 'Wish' the bees all explode out at you and sting you in the fucking face.

His Hero is Gone – *Monuments to Thieves* [1997]

The last time that I was on tour in the United States, I played a show in Santa Cruz, California that was put on by a hardcore punk kid. After the show, he let me stay at his apartment. When we walked through the door, he put on a DVD with the sound off and asked if I'd like to pick a record. I scanned through his collection, and it was pretty comprehensive as to the staples and standards of punk music and everything that came after. I picked out an old favourite, His Hero Is Gone's *Monuments to Thieves*, a raging down-tuned punk record full of sludge and d-beats.

A few songs in, I looked over at the television, and it was a Miyazake film playing that I hadn't seen before; I'm still not sure what it was. I didn't watch much of it, but got quite a kick out of how well the scene I caught synced up with the music on the stereo. The hero was galloping on a horse down a mountain and through a forest, while being pursued by a floating dark spirit in a huge cape. Both moved across the screen at breakneck speed. I have often thought about the sound and rhythm of horse's hooves when listening to d-beat and crust punk bands, and in this instance, the drums in His Hero is Gone seemed to be the hammering of the hooves into the earth, in perfect timing, as if the speakers of the record player were somehow linked up to his television audio system. I got to thinking about how there was a deeper similarity still, between this scene and the music of crust punk (or neo-crust if you want to get really specific) bands. Crust is deeply rooted in its ideals and traditions, and carries it's own mythologies with it. The themes discussed in the lyrics of many bands often centre around concepts of dystopia, apocalypse, and post-apocalypse, whether brought about by nuclear war or the uprising of anarchists bringing about an end to the modern world. The crust punk is active, he more likely than not subscribes to anarchism, and that anarchism is either a personal, self-sustaining notion of anarchy or a collectively driven spirit focused upon bringing change. Either way, the crust punk feels a sense of urgency, and this is expressed as much through their lifestyle as it is through the tempo of their music. The crust punk is driven to keep moving, galloping. The black spirit that floats behind him cannot actually be identified; its presence is certain, it is perhaps even omnipresent, but it is intangible. The crust punk cannot stop moving or he will be consumed by it. This dark force is often referred to in terms such as "capitalism", "the system", "corporations", "society". It is evil, and it is powerful, but the crust punk is heroic, he gallops onwards, he gallops through the forests and the burrs of black metal cling to his jean-legs, he gallops through the hills from San Francisco and heads into northern California, or perhaps he exits the woods to find nothing but a wasteland, the concrete and tar artifacts of progression and modernity. But no matter how far he runs, or how fast, the black spirit will be always just over his shoulder, haunting him, driving him. But the crust punk is the antithesis of the black spirit, he is the hero, he will not admit defeat, and he will most certainly never slow down.

Neil Young – *Harvest* [1972]

As a practicing vegan, people often ask me how I get manage to get by finding food to eat on tour. Traveling far and wide, and staying with many different hosts, it might seem like a bit of a thorn in the side to have an ideological attachment to such a specific diet. I've never starved, though, and among other things, this is largely due to peanut butter and toast. It's a staple, in every pantry, not just universally accepted but widely loved. I'm going to draw a parallel here to Neil Young's *Harvest*, not only to help describe it's appeal, but also to help explain the development of my relationship with it. I'm not going to claim *Harvest* to be the best Neil Young record, but it's certainly the most widespread. *Harvest* is a record that you can expect to find in almost any record collection. To the individual with refined musical taste, it is what peanut butter on toast is to the vegan. As someone who for a very long time did not own an iPod or a laptop and would travel for months without my own music, it was a blessing to come across this record so often, and I grew closer to it with each listen, in each new location with each new person. Wherever I went, I would find this record. Young kids in New Jersey, friends in Melbourne, couch-surfers in Italy, hipsters in LA, old field-recording fanatics in Berlin – everybody owned a copy. Even my Dad owned a copy, and he didn't own many records, maybe ten or fifteen, I assume he got rid of the majority of his collection when he converted to Christianity in his late teens. The first time I played *Harvest* at home, my Dad said to me: "You can't listen to Neil Young without a doobie in your hand!" It's the only time he's ever made reference to drugs in my presence. I don't know if we bonded at that moment, I didn't admit it to him but I have of course shared a joint over this record in many a household. When the crowd cheers at the end of 'The Needle and the Damage Done', and is spliced straight into the smashing opening chords of 'Words (Between the Lines of Age)', it sends shivers down my spine, and the guitar solos that close that track smatter my brain into cosmic sludge. I feel like I can hear the notes dropping from the frets as Neil melts the strings into the neck, his fingers dripping with some sort of audible fragility that seeps deep into my person, causing me to feel faint and sink into my seat, closing my eyes and starting to see pinpoints of blue and red and green fuzz flickering throughout the enveloping black, spinning, until the needle lifts and I open my eyes to find the black still there, my hosts having switched off the lights and left me half-submerged into the couch to fall asleep, still blanketed by the warmth, and familiarity of *Harvest*.