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SOME DAY ALL MUSIC WILL BE MADE THIS WAY

The Future Sound Of London album is here and it is the real thing: a superbly realised record to scare away the legions of ambient pretenders. Edgy, psychologically messy, paranoid even, you don't have to be strange to make this stuff, but it helps.

Freudian slips: Andy Pemberton

IT'S late 1993. The Future Sound Of London are broadcasting on Kiss FM, beaming their music to thousands of radios throughout London. In a gloomy flat somewhere in North London a young man is with his girlfriend. They are about to have sex. He gets up and flips to Kiss FM and accidentally tunes in to the strange, mind-sucking weirdness of the Future Sound Of London broadcast. He leaves his girlfriend where she is and moves to sit between the speakers, listening to the melodic sweeps, extreme pans and distorted film cut-ups filling the room. He is transfixed.
Maybe he doesn't know it, but he is listening to the most forward thinking, innovative music being made today. It's not dance music in the narrow sense, it's not ambient either. This is the Future Sound Of London and some day all music will be made this way.

EARTHBEAT Studios, Future Sound Of London's HQ in North West London, is planted where the inner city begins to turn into suburbia. By dance music standards it's the last word in luxury, paid for by the hit 'Papua New Guinea' and the subsequent £200,000 signing fee to Virgin Records.
FSOL's studio is the size of a living and dining room combined. It is panelled with electronic ephemera ranging from synthesizers to computer equipment. Inside are Garry Cobain and Brian Dougans, the Future Sound Of London. They're both in their mid-20s, Cobain is good-looking, talkative and displays flashes of arrogance. Dougans is shy, intense and immediately likeable. He busies himself making tea and rolling spliffs while talking about their new album 'Lifeforms' and why it's the best thing they've ever done.
"Before, we could listen to the radio, focus on what was selling, knock up something in that area and make money on it. We were trying to make a living. When we signed to Virgin it was a chance to be free. With that freedom we returned to what we were doing before, which was scrapping around with sound and playing."
The result is some of the most original music you will hear. 'Lifeforms' is way beyond simple categories like 'ambient' and 'techno'.
Beautiful melody and teeth-grinding samples are fused for a trip of velvety paranoia. Forget the 4/4 fascism of house music, disregard the hippy floatiness or sci-fi stupidity of much of ambient. FSOL are not into dressing up as spacemen or sitting cross-legged on the floor sipping herbal tea and thinking beautiful thoughts.
They gather up all the edgy, scary and paranoia-inducing aspects of modern life and fling them into the future. Think of Ridley Scott's film Bladerunner, where futuristic technology is juxtaposed with the shittiness of urban life today, the pissing rain, the junk food bars, the crowded, dirty streets. 'Lifeforms' is a musical vision of a future suffering from delusions of persecution.
"Music definitely provides a feeling and ours projects a feeling of insecurity and angst," says Dougans. "It's one of our concepts that Earth is a pretty strange place. Instead of us sticking on spacesuits, we reflect what's going on around us. A cross between what you might hear right now and this cold electronic feel. Brutal Realism, that's what we call it."
If you're trying to picture what he means, try this for an image:

“There’s a track on the album called ‘Dead Skin Cells’. That’s us flaking away in our old studio,” says Cobain grandly. “It was small, cluttered with technology, there was no room, we couldn’t clean the fucking floor and it was dusty. It’s the kind of sordid things people don’t really talk about that our album is about. It’s a paranoid microscopic look at the world around us.”

‘Lifeforms’ provides discordant sounds that are rich and strange but fit together like a mosaic, without using straight-up beats as a fixing agent. Sometimes sounds hang in the ether before being blown apart by enormous blasts of techno bass bubbles, like on the spooky flow of ‘Ill Flower’. Other times dark rumblings are circled by beautiful piano passages or fluttering guitar. Listen hard and every musical influence is present: dub, techno, house, rock, it’s all squashed into one record. But the sounds FSOL produce, they are like nothing else you’ve ever heard.

THE Future Sound Of London actually started life in Manchester, in 1985. Cobain had come from his hometown of Bedford to do an electronics degree at the University and Glasgow born Dougans, whose father used to work for the Scottish BBC, was studying sound engineering. Cobain didn’t like university, he had just left school and was out for a good time. In his first year he fucked it all up. Then he met Brian, and two things happened.

“Brian introduced me to both hot knives and extreme ambience and electronics,” says Cobain.

“A double blow,” chuckles Dougans, puffing on an early morning spliff.

“I’d come round,” continues Cobain, “and he wouldn’t say, ‘How about a cup of tea?’ but ‘Hotknife?’ He’d always make sure I was absolutely blasted before he ever played me a tune. So I’d sit down and think, ‘Phew, this is the weirdest shit I’ve ever heard.’”

They teamed up, but not for the most noble of reasons. Dougans was after Cobain’s electronic gear, and Cobain reckoned Dougans had talent and was going places. But soon Cobain got fed up with sitting on the bed in Dougans’ bedroom directing the action, he wanted to get involved in the technical process. Sacking university, he went on the Enterprise Allowance Scheme and set up his own studio. This was pre-’88 and they didn’t have a clue what they were doing. They came up with the weirdest stuff.

“It was a real frightening, paranoid time,” remembers Cobain. “We were doing stuff that was really strange. I couldn’t work out whether it was good or bad.”

Then house music came along and gave them a set of rules to structure their previously directionless experiments around. There followed the hard techno anthem ‘Humanoid’ under the name Stakker in 1988 and of course the massive hit ‘Papua New Guinea’, which despite it’s low bpm count was played by both techno and house DJs alike. Inbetween there were tracks on the Jumpin’ And Pumpin’ label under a host of names, like Smart Systems, Mental Cube, Indotribe and Yage, records that went from artful, shiny technology to mad hardcore, hundreds of them. And then in disguise and under the name Amorphous Androgynous they recorded the 1993 LP ‘Tales Of Ephidrena’ for Virgin, a taster for ‘Lifeforms’. The Future Sound Of London were one of the first acts to realise there was more to dance music than the stuff you hear in clubs.

“I’m not sure ‘Papua New Guinea’ was a killer club tune,” says Dougans now. “And ‘Amorphous…’ was us coming out of the clubs.”