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Album Review: Forest People Pop by Derek Piotr



There have been a few albums whose titles have imagined new musical categories to describe the sounds contained within. Brian Eno's "Music for Airports" (among many others of his), Equivel's "Space-Age Bachelor Pad Music" and, Atom TM's "Pop HD" come to mind, albeit as a somewhat diverse set of examples. "Forest People Pop", an ambitious new album by New England based Derek Piotr, fits firmly into this noble tradition of music created for a bespoke genre.

Track 1 of the conceptual "Forest People Pop" provides some clues for what we should expect over the course of the 10-track album. "Tonic/You Move" begins with a light, pleasant drone, perhaps created via some grain-manipulation technique, which is quickly overtaken by heavily auto-tuned vocals. The "pitch-correction" here is applied as an effect, not a new concept in itself, but Piotr purposefully abuses the software's instability to create expressive arabesque trills, deep vibratos and stepped slides, which moves Antares' pop trope of robotic cool to an place of wildly ecstatic digital ululation. These unique vocal components are allowed space - there is a lot of air in the forest. As the reverb tails of the introduction linger in the generous fade out, we can hear faint sounds of woodland insects. Precise electronic percussion sounds, woodblocks and short noisier elements soon appear, fluttering and stuttering, before eventually settling into syncopated patterns and incorporating coarsely snipped samples of exotic instruments as the song proper develops. Piotr returns to these building blocks on nearly every track. This consistent sonic vocabulary brings an intuitive coherence to his imaginary space, yet each track sees these elements combined in ways that produce a rich range of results.

<http://derekpiotr.bandcamp.com/album/forest-people-pop>>Forest People Pop by Derek Piotr

"Hear You" stands out as the anthem of the album. Vocal lines snake around shifting stuttering drum patterns and a consistent, fierce, distorted stab sound building into a glitchy freak-out before eventually unraveling into sparse percussion variations. "Light" re-imagines Aaliyah-style R&B with all variety of bent percussion, a low-gravity bounce and a glorious noise outro. "Crush on You" teems with ideas, one section anchored by a 4-to-floor kick around which a deconstructed pop-maelstrom swirls, later melting into a repeated glitched-out vocal harmony under which an IDM electronic break beat builds up. While most of the tracks on the album are quick to evolve, "Sky" feels almost hypnotic. A regular repeating hip-hop beat underpins dueling vocal lines that blend into soothing mantra.

Piotr's pop, much like his use of auto-tune software, takes something that is well known, and makes it new. In contrast to much of the music commonly placed in the genre, there is neither lazy nostalgia, nor arbitrary futurism in its construction. Each element that he uses seems carefully selected to add to the cohesive mixture that makes up these fourth world woodland hits. So who are these forest people? They are not rustic or provincial, and there are no beard-y folk-guitar pastorals. These forest dwellers are surprisingly sophisticated, pixilated sprites and tracks with names like "Sky", "Light" and "Sunup" give a good indication of the tone that their popular music conveys. This forest bright, open and alive and while it is masked by technology, it's still very much connected to our world. Many of the sounds have a glassy, digital sheen, and perhaps the overall atmosphere is something akin to the worldly electronica of Fatima al-Quatari. The album is ambitious in concept and thorough in execution. Piotr succeeds in finding a mode of expression that feels both genuine, and genuinely new. This is an album that can be enjoyed both for its clever experimentation and also, simply, as pure, honest pop music.

Eamon Hamill