The new music of Brood Ma reveals undiscovered dimensions of rave. By Rory Gibb

Brood Ma
Daze

Tri Angle DLAP

Londoner James Stringer aka Brood Ma’s music has its genesis in the shape-shifting electronic noise-club milieu around his online label collective Quantum Natives, but Daze reveals Brood Ma’s beating heart to be nothing if not darkside, rolling out around sidewinding rhythms recalling grime and jungle, its 21 minute long barrage of nerve-shredding beat-noise taps into a long-running history of chrome-cool, cybernetic UK rave musics, evoking amped up nervous systems, darkened alleyways and futuristic weaponry.

Yet what’s fascinating about Daze is how it differs from its forebears. Both Stringer’s and Quantum Natives’ work exists within an intricately constructed universe of narrative references, linking recordings and track titles with online media and interactive web platforms, to suggest a dynamic, opened-ended narrative. His Brood Ma alias evokes Giger’s xenomorph queen, social insects and notions of non-human and human collective intelligence, while Daze’s scuttling percussion and passages of birdsong suggest meldings of fleshy and digital modes of communication. Present throughout Stringer’s work is a fascination with the internet as a space of military engagement, from social media aggressions and videogaming to mass surveillance, hacking and financial sector manipulation (one of Daze’s interludes, a 54 second shroud of digit-brass, is poignantly titled “Goldman Sax”). These interests are all encompassed within Quantum Natives’ Google Maps-styled website, a drone’s eye view of a Command & Conquer-esque scorched future landscape which users navigate to discover releases, videos and image galleries.

This multimedia space permeating Daze and its predecessor Pervolus exemplifies how multiple online platforms now provide even relatively little known producers with unprecedented opportunities to construct entire aesthetic environments around their music. With websites, sound and video streams and even Twitter feed content now increasingly treated as extensions of musicians’ artistic personas, the music itself is rarely the sole prism through which their work is interpreted. Over the last few years in electronic music, for example, it’s become increasingly common for new records to arrive complete with well articulated narratives and concepts, which then tend to dominate the tone of press coverage. On the positive side, for listeners this can feel like they’re being plugged into an artist’s world and offered insights into their lived experience; it’s no coincidence that these new online music ecologies have emerged in tandem with a growing awareness of identity politics and structural privilege dynamics within underground music scenes (as elsewhere).

Yet well-constructed aesthetics can also help to glass over knottier conceptual aspects of musicians’ work. Many artists currently exploring themes of technological acceleration and augmented realities — Amon Tobin’s scan ’n’ zap cyberpunk mix radio play As Angels Rg Flood is one recent example — are producing sonically striking work that fetishises aesthetics of alienation, but frequently without clear comment or critique. As with vaporwave’s mood-muzak echo jams, the conflicted emotions such ambiguity evokes can be part of the music’s appeal; but at further extremes, the poker-faced irony of Sophie or PC Music’s marketing-speak slicktack feels particularly uncomfortable at a time where real pressures exist on young artists to align themselves with corporate-funded entities to stay afloat.

If there’s a fetishistic element to Stringer’s work, it’s present in the way that Daze renders virtual warfare as a hyper-sexualised, immersive feast for the senses. Mixed as a continuous stream of music, the album’s digital environments are constructed in ear-bogging, panoramic hi-def, all machine-gunned percussion and oily robotic moans (“Hard War”), splintering metal and scrambled shortwave messages (“Sex Compressor”, “Sex Contortion”) and kickdrums that land in cluster-bomb barrages (“Molten Brownian Motion”) — as slick, luridly brilliant and demanding of your total attention as an IMAX 3D blockbuster. But unlike the mega-spectacle of a Hollywood disaster film, they’re not offered as depoliticised pure entertainment; Daze’s exorbitant work is tempered by an undercurrent of grit pleasure in physical discomfort, warning under your skin like Tri Angle labelmate Rabit’s similarly caustic “Pandemic”. On an earlier album Stringer twisted the Masters At Work “The Ica Dance” sample into a vicious metallic scream, with the aim, he explained to Adam Harper in an interview in The Wire 375, of critiquing its flippancy appropriation by young white producers influenced by ballroom house and Jersey club. Similarly, one of the most striking aspects of Daze is Stringer’s extreme manipulations of his sample sources, raising questions about provenance and context. Its tracks are riddled with the mechanical whirls, shattering glass and sampled pop vocals that are hallmarks of contemporary digital club music, but here they’re dramatically wrenched out of shape, shredded to ribbons or, as on the dizzying peak of “Sacificial Youth”, time-stretched into scaly walls that suggest both anguish and ecstasy. Such ambiguities are double-edged intentional; is this meant to be subversive or celebratory?

It’s notable, then, that Daze is released through Tri Angle, which has lately become a focal point for this neulous style of highly processed club-not-club music. Music in the house, techno and rave traditions often remains celebrated for some supposedly inherent subversive character, yet in 2016 even nominally underground dance musics are a globalised business, and their capacities to critique or provide alternative spaces are often undermined by increasing reliance on corporate capital. The DJing and collage tracks of Total Freedom, which structurally undermine familiar club music styles, play as reflections on these challenges and inevitable hypocrisies, as do the scrambled rhythms of more recent records by producers like MSH, Rabbit and Lotic. Yet, paradoxically, this disjointing often reduces their effectiveness as music for the dance, and as with Lotic’s 2014 Damsel In Distress, individual tracks often work best when presented within a continuous mix for headphone listening.

Daze feels aware of this. It’s built like a grim mixtape, packed with jump-cuts in intensity and with few tracks exceeding two minutes. Its somewhat anachronistic presentation — a mixtape of sorts released as a vinyl album — still further emphasises the essential strangeness of Stringer’s music recalling Autechre in its precise yet oblique compositional logics, and rocketing along with the springloaded bounce of Drexciya electron and drum ‘n’ bass, yet mixed fast and hard like a grime DJ. You could dance to this, should you wish to try, but it’d be a pretty nerve-shredding workout.

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