“You are in another space here,” declares Lee Gamble. “It has a different timescale to this one, a different language, there isn’t any physicality to it. It’s a cerebral, odd time space.” Spend long enough with Gamble’s music and you notice what he means. Drawing on his background in computer music and rave, it’s elegant and sculptural yet also fluid, ambiguous and fleshy. Drums and bass echo into a void, time moves at a dissociated crawl, and motifs flicker and vanish, leading you to suspect they were never there at all. His description of his 2012 Pan album Dutch Twashtar Plumes captures its effect: “A music that’s in your brain, a hallucination of a music.”

Within this space, familiar sensations mingle with the otherworldly. Drizzly green tones contrast vividly against lashings of radioactive colour. Playful track titles that recall Autotchre heighten the mood: “Plos 97’s”, “Yvah Kwaw”, “Yehudi Lights Over Tottenham”. Their techno beats are detached yet lucid, beautifully capturing the sensation, late in a long and heavy night, of your internal and external worlds blurring together – of dissolving into unconscious pure sensation while still shockingly out on the dancefloor. Not for nothing is one of his tunes called “Goma Skank”.

“I like to work things out,” says Gamble. “Break stuff, fuck about with stuff, open it up, see what’s in there for me.” He speaks rapidly and his sentences blur together, as if ideas are forming faster than he can express them. He admits to being wary of sounding pretentious, but is keen to discuss subjects far beyond his music. “I’m constantly fascinated by the stars, space, I have been since a kid, just completely blown away by it,” he says at one point, sitting in his garden in North London. Shortly afterward he reminds me: “Don’t get me wrong, I also love music that bangs the fuck out of a club.”

Gamble describes his work as “a dismantling of one reality into another one. I think this dimension is a form of escapology. Something that has always drawn me to art is its natural affection for ambiguity – the grey areas are welcome, and you’re encouraged to dream and work things out for yourself.”

Yet what purpose might this escape serve? At their most translucent, Gamble’s tracks feel almost post-traumatic in their dislocation from the external world. He alludes occasionally to the world’s grim current sociopolitical situation; you wonder if this slip into another plane is a retreat from reality’s challenges. But Gamble’s forthcoming album and EP on Pan are tinged with romance and possibility. He claims any politics in his music are “part of its anatomy”, implicit in its suggestion that retreat is needed at all. “For me, there has never been an option not to create stuff, to concoct virtual space to breathe in,” he elaborates. “It’s one of the ways of devising something to assist in traversing this world without it swamping you.”

Gamble experienced his dance music epiphany while growing up in Birmingham. Both techno and jungle, he says, were “part of the soundscape in the areas I was hanging about in”. But it was jungle that captured his teenage imagination. Learning to DJ on a friend’s decks, by the time he was 16 he was spinning on a local pirate radio station and starting to make tracks. He released a pair of jungle 12”s while still a teenager, admitting with a laugh that he’s relieved they were under a pseudonym.

Gamble did however recently resurrect one of those early tracks – its translucent breaks emerge during the final minutes of 2012’s moving Diversions 1994 – 1996, released on Pan. A half hour collage of breakdowns sourced from his jungle mixtape collection, he describes Diversions as “the extraction of a place. A particular atmosphere in that music, this particular headspace within it.” Moments of calm snatched from within the breakbeat storm are expanded into reverberant zones to linger within.

The effect is eerily intimate, like being allowed to step right into Gamble’s emotional memory, which is just as attenuated as you’d expect after many years of raving.

Diversions introduced his music to a wider audience, but also found him aligned with hauntology and the so-called death of rave. It’s something he feels ambivalent about, given that the record is clearly an outlier in his work. “I don’t ever want to seem like I’m some old dude that wants to be back in 94,” he states firmly. “I don’t give a fuck about that, it’s done.” If moments of the EP feel elegiac, they weren’t intended to be. Diversions emerged after a “pretty heavy” time, and for him its retrospection was less dancefloor nostalgia, more an attempt to take stock. “Post-awkward period of life, all of a sudden you’re like, this is pretty cathartic. It’s the initial music I loved, that I had an epiphany with in a club – why wouldn’t I go back to that? My records were stored somewhere and I needed to take them, so all of a sudden I got all these records and tapes back. I was just like, wow, some of this is beautiful.”

Gamble’s main ongoing connection to those teenage years is his longtime friend and regular collaborator Dave Gaskarth. A designer and visual artist, Gaskarth has created artwork and videos for several of Gamble’s releases, and Gamble happily admits that his music wouldn’t be the same without that creative exchange. They also formed the Cyrk collective after moving to London in their twenties, initially with two other friends, to host nights featuring laptop improvisors alongside dance DJs. These days, Cyrk mainly refers to the pair’s joint endeavours, which have included several radio series for Resonance FM.
They now present audiovisual performances pairing Gamble’s music with Gaskarth’s paranoid visuals, where faces, figures and familiar motifs distort and mingle. Their effect is transportive: one show at a Pan night in London this year built on Diversions, mimicking rave’s fractal visuals but with a whirlwind bad trip intensity laced with violence. It was less a comment on rave culture than a reflection on a particular era of the duo’s lives, says Gaskarth, who adds: “Hardcore was a very immersive lifestyle at the time. In school art classes we used to make hybrids of 1930s surrealist and 90s rave imagery, which was obviously massively influenced by surrealism too. So there was never really a distinction between art and clubs.”

At the end of his teens, Gamble reached a transition point. Jungle was evolving into drum ’n’ bass and the dancefloors he was DJing to demanded he rein in his exploratory impulses. Simultaneously he’d left school having, in his words, “fucked about”, and found himself working at a factory but hungry to learn. Birmingham Library proved a crucial source of music and inspiration, and reading about John Cage and the avant garde opened conduits for further studies: “Philosophy, art, poetry, dada, futurism, surrealism, minimalism, Japanese culture, the I Ching, Deleuze, Baudrillard,” he reels off in a rush. “It was just, like, wow.”

This audiodidactic approach has remained constant since. “For me that crate digging mentality doesn’t have to be physical 12”s in a dusty old crate, it’s more a way of approaching things, and fundamentally I’m just a nosy bastard,” he laughs. He became fascinated by the “anarchic, bullish” laptop music of Mego artists like Pita, Russell Haswell and Hecker. Jazz, a short step from jungle, was another major influence. “The noise of Photek or Source Direct records, that cool poise, it’s pure Miles, it’s pure Bitches Brew. It’s on the off, it’s back – it’s rude as fuck, but it’s still back, you know? So you pick up Bitches Brew and you’d like, fuck! This is that! I listen to that record now, and at points I feel like [I’m in] a club in 84 in Brum.” John Coltrane’s Ascension was another obsession. “I was drawing that shit, it was just this mad chaos, these sounds, these things that were going on.” He marvels. “It was like, how the fuck would you even score this?

“That’s why I love radio,” he continues. “It guts that fascination. Radio in a sense is acousmatic. It has no visual representation, apart from the one you’d have in your head.” Much of Gamble’s most exciting work has been for radio. His Resonance FM mixes blur the lines between DJ mix and composition, with techno tracks violently EQ’d and scrambled with noise and voices from music, film, science lectures and politics. These point towards Gamble’s own preoccupations. Last year’s mix Your Sociometric Afterlife for Secret Thirteen staged encounters with lurid characters in digital silence, alluring to anxieties around surveillance, corporate corruption and online memory. Its concept spilt into the composition process, a running theme in Gamble’s work – he embedded a secret text within the MP3 code. “It doesn’t matter if you can hear it or not,” he says.

“The suggestion that it is there is enough.” Gamble also hosts a monthly mix show on London’s NTS Radio, an immediate platform for his club DJing.

“People always speak about how back in the day they’d listen to Radio Luxembourg through a radio on their pillow or something,” Gamble reflects. “They’re really trippy things, these spaces you allow yourself to go. And today, you walk down the high street and you’re bombarded with religious preachers, Sainsbury’s, the cinema, cars. Sometimes it’s nice to just drift a bit. There’s a whole world in there [in your head]: make your own thing up with it. I’m really keen with that for my music, too, for it to offer that ambiguity. Is this a real technoradio record? Would this play in a club, or not? It’s not being distant in the world; I like the art to be distant. My mum would just say, ‘Oh, you’re a dreamer’. I think that’s a kind of compliment.”

Gamble’s garden feels like an oasis, secreted away from London’s background noise. His studio is in an upstairs room, he resumes, and even as his music has evolved, his composition process remains playful and exploratory. Intuitively sculpting self-synthesized source material on the computer screen, he’ll spend hours lost within a track’s emerging headspace.

Following his teenage years, Gamble’s encounters with Mego’s computer music and composers like Xenakis sparked off fresh obsessions. He sold the gear he’d previously acquired and bought an Apple computer before starting from scratch with a handful of sound softwares, learning to program – “not my thing at all,” he sighs – and using digital synthesis and signal processing to generate vast libraries of tones. These he assembled into dynamic, writhing compositions, with fits of harmonic activity amid the maelstrom. The motivation was pure fascination, a desire to wrench out the freakiest sounds possible, and he recounts with glee inducing his soundcard to crash and recording the output: “I was really interested in trying to dehumanise it utterly, to get the computer to do it for me.” The results of these experiments were released on Entr’acte, including his recorded debut, a 3” CD, in 2006, a split cassette with Yutaka Makino, and 2009’s excellent album Join Extensions.

Around this time, Gamble spotted composer John Wall at the bar of London’s Red Rose Club. A fan of Wall’s work, Gamble introduced himself. “John’s got The hallucinatory club visions of

Lee Gamble
intermingle rave, drum ’n’ bass, computer music and improvisation to warp distance and confound perception.

By Rory Gibb.
Photography by Leon Chew
a very astute sense of timing, of when things should happen," he enthuses. "His compositions are like precision clocks." Once they became friends they began collaborating on improvised live performances, at The Wire’s 25th anniversary shows in 2007 among others, and most recently a 2013 set in London. These proved a leap into new territory for both. Gamble had been largely studio based, and Wall, who has been releasing music since the early 1990s, recalled in The Wire 329 that their spontaneous nature freed up an impasse he’d reached in his own work.

"John’s a lot older than me, he comes from a different approach," says Gamble. "I think I brought something to his sound world that made him think, ah, that wasn’t from a certain period, and vice versa." For the shows, "we’d just play for 30 minutes together and see where we went, how we felt. It was difficult. John’s a difficult guy, in the greatest sense. He’s very particular." For these improvisations Gamble used his existing studio processes to reshape sounds in real time. Shows were entirely laptop based, with both limited to using the mouse trampoline. Next to the rigour of both artists’ solo recordings, their collaborations were structurally volatile: skittish trebles and CD skips colliding with penetrative bass and air raid siren wails. "He and John weren’t very in control," he says, resulting in "errors, clashes, weird stuff going on". Yet he admits that audiences were possibly oblivious to their improvised nature, and the experience brought forward a desire to write music that was engaging on its own terms.

Like his tracks, which are alive with enticing distractions and sub-narratives, a conversation with Gamble doesn’t follow a linear trajectory. His thoughts intermingle, and past recollections — crushing his sound card, for example — lead smoothly into current fascinations: online video game hacking, string theory, time perception, the edge of the universe. Despite the gulf separating Join Extensions’ upfront abrasion and his graceful new music, it’s similarly difficult to tease apart the different phases of his work. Gamble explains that he doesn’t really consider Join Extensions to be music. "That wasn’t my interest," he adds. The album was made while Gamble was reading into biology and physics, and its alien worlds emerged from his attempt to sonically mimic processes of bifurcation, where micro level shifts trigger exquisite larger scale patterns to emerge.

In contrast, he describes his motivation from Dutch Tsevshar Plumes onward as “Fuck this ‘art’ stuff, I want to start making some music now.” But his newer tracks are audibly hewn from similar stuff. While they’re assembled using off-the-shelf software, Gamble’s self-generated sound banks still provide base materials to sculpt “right down to the molecular level”. On his new album for Pan, whose working title is KOCX (pronounced notch) and its sister EP Kuang, this micromanipulation is instead used to give tracks grain and viscosity. The intention, he says, is to create an alternate reality, to lend them the presence of self-contained other worlds. The impact is often felt subconsciously. "Flatland" seems desolate but bristles with hidden activity; somewhere at the furthest margins of your perception, a phantom piano plays jazzy clusters of notes. "I was never taught music; I’m all ears, in a sense. So the idea of having some idea to map from — why is it going to do that?

It’s got to do its job," he says. "A lot of tracks will deconstruct at the end."

To demonstrate, Gamble shows me a sketch mapping the final moments of a piece from KOCX. It looks like a diagram from a physics lecture: clustered particles split into many tiny directional vectors. Both “Kail Wave” and “H Mix” decay this way, the fabric of their reality torn and scattered in all directions. “Breaking this thing into tiny bits, its sound points; getting back to my early days with a computer, where I was interested in just one bit — one computer bit — of sound. I like the idea of having a track that’s banging at Fabric, but actually breaks down into just one computer bit — the smallest denomination of sound you can have in the end."

Gamble’s history with rave and club culture underpins this impulse to craft convincing — and often unsettling — alternative realities. It extends further than the studio, too.

He describes an upcoming Dyk project to create larger scale immersive spaces, involving sound, mirrors, projection. “I’m sort of talking about the music you can only get so far with. It exists in someone’s cerebral space or imagination. Whereas I actually want to build these places,” he enthuses.

Fitting his propulsive club DJ sets, Gamble’s current tracks often assume techno beat structures. Yet somehow these genre traits feel like temporary housing, as if his music has inhabited them, like a hermit crab, for only the current phase of its life cycle. Behind the hollow jackhammer drums of “Motor System” and “Margin Dome”, stark landscapes stretch to near infinity. Crystalline melodies gracefully recede further into the distance the harder you try to grasp them. The effect can be confounding; how can you even get close to this, let alone dance to it? Yet, as Gamble would say, it does its job. Chase those fleeting sensations deep enough and you end up falling right through the looking glass.

“There’s a neurological syndrome I’ve had since I was a kid called AIWS,” reveals Gamble. "Comically, Alice In Wonderland Syndrome. All of a sudden, you can’t tell how far away something is, it’s impossible. That wall," he gestures at the house a few feet away, "could seem like it’s about where Wood Green station is, or it could seem like it’s here.” He holds his hand right in front of his eyes. "You get it with sound, too. Sometimes when I was a kid, it would be pretty terrifying, because you wouldn’t know. So the idea of hallucination, of this place you’re in not being as steadfast as you think; and then, you know, you start reading, and you realise the molecular aspect of this,"

he raps on the empty table, "isn’t absolute. It’s basically more blank space than it is solid.

"About three weeks ago I was making this track for the new record," he continues. "And I was like, fuck, I can feel it happening. But now I’m older it doesn’t freak me out, it just feels weird. So I carried on. It was really intense, but I liked the idea that I could document that. I ended up making this blissed out nine minute ambient thing. Of course the distances sound different to me now. It sounded like this huge place, I could hear the synth drifting off for miles. It was mad. Of course, it doesn’t go that far," he laughs. "I just had the reverb as far as I could get it." Luke Gamble’s Kuang is released by Pan this month; his album KOCX will be released by Pan in September.

Lee Gamble | The Wire | 31