

Laurel Halo: Dust

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Laurel Halo is one of the most exciting techno producers to emerge this decade, and she's now operating at the peak of her powers. She came up as a producer-vocalist, but her last album, *Chance of Rain*, spoke through the slam of fingers against bank pads and seemed like a reaction against the inordinate focus on her vocals (Halo chalks it up to the sad fact that women are still typecast as singers). Now that we can be reassured she can hold her own behind the mic and the boards, here's *Dust*, a confounding, capricious album that dances with the freedom of having nothing to prove.

Dust is really good—as good as *Chance of Rain*, maybe better. But it's not good in a way that plays to expectations; it doesn't come off as a culmination or a blog-conquering statement so much as another dash of mischief from an artist who does what she wants. It feels giddy with invention, benefitting from both Halo's wild whims and those of the collaborators on which she presumably spent most of her label money—keyboardist Craig Clouse, who contributes chintzy organ, or the installation artist/percussionist Eli Keszler, whose congas and vibraphones bring an organic messiness to the texture.

Halo can come across as academic. Indeed, "Sun to Solar" finds her reciting an obscure Brazilian poem, and the Greek titles she loves might make this a non-starter for some. It's easy to mistake the spell of disorientation her music casts as "not getting it." But if there's a curriculum, I'll skip the reading; it's churlish to dig for subtext when there are so many ideas in plain sight on the surface. Halo's called this "the happiest music I've ever made," and though the album doesn't give us many emotional cues, it's easy to see where Halo's coming from. Rather than being stiff and cerebral, this music proceeds effortlessly.

Dust is alive with ideas at every turn. Even during the long ambient stretches that populate the latter half of the album, something's always bubbling, hissing, whistling, clanging or banging. Halo is a hardworking musician who's not content to kill time with loops. Many sounds appear once and vanish, never to be heard from again. If not for Halo's vocals, "Syzygy" and "Do U Ever Happen" could pass for cuts by Vladislav Delay—a brilliant ambient artist who likewise could simply let a chord loop for 12 minutes but puts in enough elbow grease to keep us on our toes. She's generous in the way she takes a little extra time to insert sounds most listeners will never notice.

If Halo's phrasing can be stiff—more like chanting than singing—her delivery is playful, almost teasing; she's a likable presence, no more so than when she castigates her lover in sing-song on "Jelly." It's usually hard to make out what she's saying underneath all that's going on around her, but the obfuscation is part of what makes *Dust* so listenable. As in the mush-mouthed music of Young Thug, Sly Stone or *Exile*-era Stones, the murkiness makes it impossible to catch everything she says after one or two or 10 listens. That she provides no lyrics in the liners makes me suspect that she sees her vocals as as much part of the mix as anything else, so no need to worry about the poem.

This could all be a mess. One of the great strengths of *Dust* is how it hangs together. Halo likes brevity and has yet to make a record surpassing 45 minutes. *Dust* feels especially fleet because of its structure. The opening two songs are behemoths, refusing to sit still during their five minutes. Then we pass through two interludes before the astounding "Moontalk"—a song that incorporates phone beeps, funky congas from Keszler, horn hits out of a Jam & Lewis joint, and sampled laughter, both friendly and orgasmic, yet it's still the album's most concise pop tune. The



initial tumble slows to a drift as the record unspools into its final ambient stretches, carrying us gently to the ground.

If you love *Dust* from the moment it touches your ears, you can rejoice in the fact that you won't tire of it quickly; there's so much to chew on that you could spend a lifetime with this thing and still find new things that pop out. But the truth is you probably won't love it immediately. It's a grower, and I can see even those who give it one listen and decide it's nothing special coming back to it down the road and trying to wrap their heads around it.

- Label:
Hyperdub
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