MGMT: Little Dark Age

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One imagines a pang of dread shooting through the members of MGMT as their debut album, *Oracular Spectacular*, turned 10 last month. For better or for worse, *Oracular Spectacular* is now a classic, and its three titanic hit singles—"Kids," "Time to Pretend" and "Electric Feel"—show no signs of going away. Most bands would be pleased to have a legacy set in stone, but MGMT have spent the better part of the last decade trying to distance themselves from pop stardom and prove to the world—or to themselves—that they're a serious experimental band.
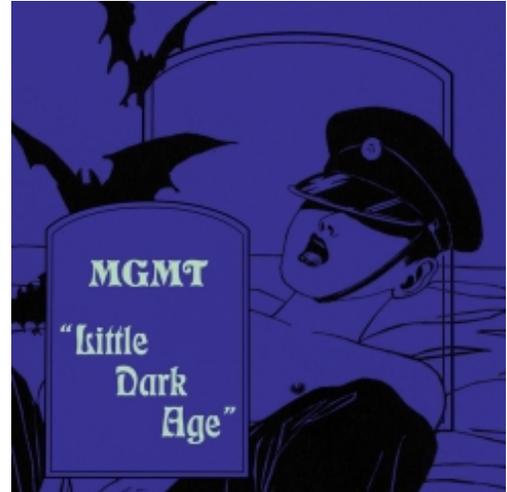
They've succeeded, sort of. Though most of the world will always know MGMT for their hits, we no longer have any safe expectations for the "next MGMT album," and it makes perfect sense that they're ditching the psych-poppet affectations to reposition themselves as compadres of Ariel Pink and John Maus. *Little Dark Age*, the duo's long-gestating fourth album, casts them as graveyard goths whose madcap sense of humor barely keeps the bad vibes at bay. That it works is a testament to just how unpredictable this band has become in its experimental period.

This feels like the logical endpoint of the band's hermeticism. While Andrew VanWyngarden and Ben Goldwasser once presented themselves as cult leaders, with "*the handshake under our tongue,*" here they're more like mad prophets broadcasting their ravings to the world from a dingy basement. The music is mid-fi, shrouded in filters that feel like the musical embodiment of the band's misanthropy, and the dominant instrument isn't synth or guitar but Matt Asti's bass, which burbles nauseously out of the gloom. Even VanWyngarden's vocals are rarely unscathed.

Bad vibes never lurked far beneath the surface of MGMT's music, but *Little Dark Age* drips with unease. A lot of the album sounds like forgotten commercial music, slathered as it is in peppy but oddly sterile synths. Opening track "She Works Out Too Much" heavily involves the voice of a fitness instructor that must have been sampled from an old workout VHS. It's an effective trick that adds an undercurrent of warped '80s nostalgia as well as steering the music towards the same uncanny valley Radiohead explored on "Fitter Happier," with its eerie text bot.

This paranoia is better implied than stated. Lyricism has never been MGMT's strong suit, and on "TSLAMP" they succumb to the temptation to wax political. Their white whale here is smart phones, though we're never quite sure why; "*Last thing that you need is the new shiny feature/*

All the memories you've shared devoured by perverted creatures," sings VanWyngarden. Is he decrying social media's callous disregard for privacy or just the fact that you might miss, say a sunset because you're staring at your phone? It's hard to say, so what's the point of the song?

There are a lot of frustrating ambiguities like this. "Me and Michael" and "James" both celebrate homosocial camaraderie, but it's hard to say if they're sincere or just cheap "I love you, man" jokes. There's also a moment on "One Thing Left to Try" where VanWyngarden sounds a lot like Empire of the Sun's Luke Steele. It might be a coincidence, but it could be a self-referential joke; Empire of the Sun and MGMT emerged from indieland at almost exactly the same time, and the two very different bands inevitably found each other sharing space on playlists and festival bills.

If it's a gag, that's the first time MGMT has acknowledged its status as, essentially, a pop band from a bygone era. It might just be time for the first wave of electro-indie-festival-pop nostalgia; God knows the "blog house" movement that preceded it is having its day, with a retrospective by the great critic Meaghan Garvey in the works. Will MGMT finally warm up to its stature as a beloved pop band? It's hard to say, but until then, we're stuck in the wilderness with these guys.

- Label:
  Columbia
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  February 9, 2018