

'Midtown 120 Blues' - DJ Sprinkles' Deep House Elegy, Turns 10

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Terre Thaemlitz's strategy on *Midtown 120 Blues* is simple and devious. She starts with house music as deep and vast as the forlorn hum of an endless city. Then, she speaks. Venom seeping through her resigned sighs, she describes how house music has been corporatized, commodified, and decontextualized since its origins in the queer clubs of the eighties.

These are not protest songs. There's the music, and there's Thaemlitz's voice. You cannot separate one from the other, and it's physically impossible to listen to the music without the context. Thousands of people may well have found out about the 80's Midtown New York drag scene through this record. It's hard not to learn something from this album, or at least come out of it with a new perspective.

Thaemlitz characterizes clubs as a place where the downtrodden can find "The Occasional Feel-Good." But she makes it clear that the club is not an oasis from suffering; "suffering is in here, with us." She's wary of platitudes like the one in Madonna's "Vogue" ("It doesn't matter if you're black or white, if you're a boy or a girl"), because in the real world, it matters a lot. To paint the club as a place where those distinctions fall away in the euphoria of unity is an unrealistic fairy-tale. For Thaemlitz, dance music is about suffering. That'll be the hardest pill for most listeners to swallow. Is that what you *want* to be thinking about when you listen to this kind of music? Perhaps to be able to think about it that way is a privilege.

This isn't political music that gives us clichés to viscerally agree with. It puts us on the spot. It asks us to question how we consume dance music, what it means to buy and sell the music of "sexual and gender crises, transgender sex work, black market hormones [...]" It asks us to excise the myth of dance music as something that belongs to anyone, because music that belongs to everyone belongs to no one—and usually just ends up in the hands of the ones with money and power, anyway.

But as potent as these speeches are, they compose only a small percent of the music.

Most of *Midtown 120 Blues* is occupied by house that seems to bleed right out of the record's 80 minutes, its lights and buildings and industrial hinterlands sprawling towards nowhere. When there are no distant flickers of voice there might be a beep, perhaps of a train pulling into a station, or the distant dragging of metal— as if some sort of construction is taking place deep in the bowels of the record. It creates the feeling of being lost in a city.

There's no singing, though there are always voices. A diva's voice flickers for a moment and disappears deep into "Midtown 120 (Blues Mix)." A fiery orator fights to stay afloat in "Grand Central—Part 1." "Ball'r (Madonna-Free Zone)" opens with a description of a marvelous ballroom outfit, and as it tunnels deeper and deeper it is illuminated by peals of queer laughter. It's incredibly sad, because we understand those voices may have been silenced. In any document of eighties queer culture it's a given that many of the participants are dead.

It feels like a small miracle this record weathered the modern EDM storm intact; a time capsule filled with the voices of a bygone era, bouncing quietly over the waves of dance music's most monstrous commodification. Ten years after its release, *Midtown 120 Blues* seems more valuable than ever, and its cult following that has slowly developed means it won't be easily forgotten.

The fact that it's impossible to stream and only officially available on vinyl inadvertently helps foster a camaraderie among modern day file-sharers. This is an easier album to hear about than to get your hands on—but can you imagine if it had its own Pandora, full of "high-energy vocal shit" that DJ Sprinkles would despise?

Something about streaming would cheapen this particular record. Streaming makes the act of listening to music more casual. Those confused about what to listen to can just cue up an algorithm, context (even the song name) be damned. It seems almost quaint to encounter an album that asks us to consider *how* we listen to music. That argues for music as more than a commodity. As something that matters. As something that can make us better people.

-Daniel Bromfield



Photo courtesy of artist Facebook

