

Mike Cooper: Tropical Gothic

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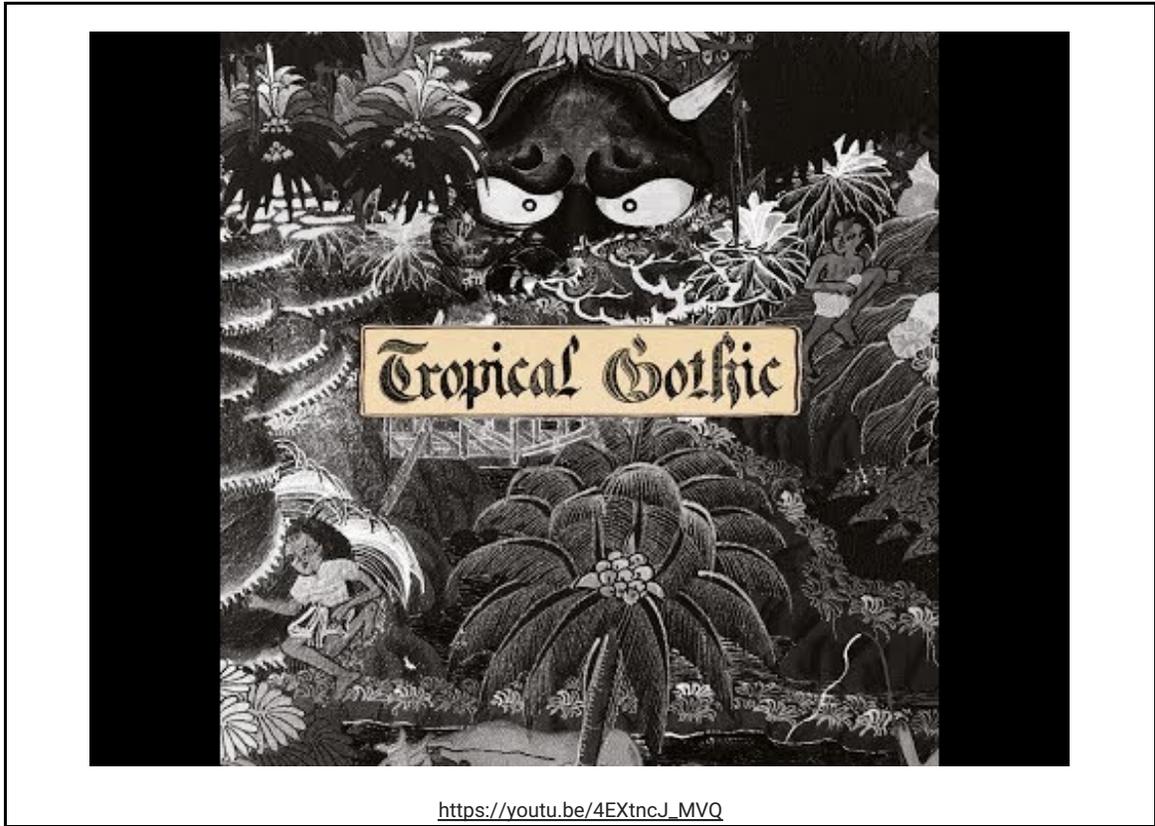
Mike Cooper is a world traveler, and this time around, he's moored his boat in the bayous of the Deep South. But Cooper being Cooper, the South looks a little different than it does in life or in movies or in folklore, and sometimes it blurs into Bali and ancient Japan as if the whole world was a vast neural net made of bits of data that drifted errantly across the earth's surface. It's not "Southern gothic" but *Tropical Gothic*. He casts his net more widely than most.

Since 2004's *Rayon Hula*, the 76-year-old guitarist has honed his sound into something he calls "exotica" but is a little smarter and more mischievous than that. Exotica was the '50s genre, popular with an American imagination inflamed by memories of the South Pacific, that sought to conjure far-off non-Western locales. That music was often infantilizing, relying on a "savage" view of non-Western peoples and cultures and bearing little resemblance to the music actually coming out of the places it made port. Cooper deconstructs this. When he mixes up countries, it's not in the ignorant way of a movie producer mixing up China and Japan but as a sort of bricolage that serves to deliberately throw us off on what far-off place we're supposed to be thinking of. Last year's *Raft* used slide and slack-key guitar styles from Hawaii to conjure a rugged journey that's anything but paradise and where the dominant life-form seemed to be biting insects rather than the dancing hula girls of exotica. His albums are never really about Bali or Japan or Hawaii or the Deep South, anyway, but the jungles of his mind.

On *Tropical Gothic*, the "South" is more of a mood than a sonic reference point, one of tangled vines and swampy mists and the threatening arcs of alligators' backs beneath the water. The mode here is "scary," but not in a way that flirts with real sonic horror but in the way of a good thriller. Guitars bend like vines as a persistent low rumbling suggests the putrid, slow-moving flow of brackish water. These visions of the South are often tied to its black history, to syncretic religions and swamp priestesses, to the Faustian cult of Robert Johnson. But the left-wing, anti-colonial Cooper isn't the kind of man who would thoughtlessly exploit the South's bloodstained history to conjure some facsimile of hoodoo blues, and it's to his credit that there are no explicit nods to Southern musical traditions in his work (beyond the natural blues influence in nearly all rock guitar). It's his usual mix of samples, drawn from all around the world, and his own guitar playing.

There are two stunning moments of relief. "Running Naked" rides a backdrop that could be a keyboard preset but lifts the mists of the record so jubilantly you want to throw your clothes off and hop in the water, too. And the entire B-side is comprised of one piece: "Legong/Gods of

Bali," which abstracts a sample of what could be gamelan for 18 minutes, running it through all kinds of bubbly filters and aqueous effects until it resembles nothing so much as Oval's "Do While." After the eerie pall the first half casts, it can be a little disconcerting to flip the record and stumble into blinding sunlight. But if there's one thing constant about Mike Cooper's music, it's that you never know where you're going to end up. I can't wait to see where he'll weigh anchor next.



https://youtu.be/4EXtncJ_MVQ