

## Splintered Allegiance

The air feels arid in Adelaide. I take off my jumper as I watch preoccupied professionals stride purposefully around Rundle Mall purchasing flavourless beverages and plasticky take-away sandwiches. Teenagers wander in and out of chain clothing stores like Cotton On and General Pants. The strip of somewhat-authentic Chinese restaurants near the bus station and chaotic food market is a necessary break (calculated diversity?) from the monotonous grid of streets and Y2K business architecture that indicate a moderate level of prosperity for what is a small-ish Australian city.



I remember being surprised when I first saw a poster for an event in Adelaide: it had a hand-drawn and digital collage at a time when polished hi-definition renders of sports cars and kitschy futuristic tropes were standard fare for online dance music culture (it's hard to describe the zeitgeist in a satisfying way except that it had something to do with SoundCloud and "the future"). It was a launch for Mya Gomez's debut EP on the now well-established label Non Worldwide. This particular gig was unusual for a number of reasons: the few times I had spoken to Dexter Duckett he complained about a complete lack of bookings in his hometown, Mya was essentially an unknown artist at this point (although I heard later from her that she had had a previous incarnation in her musical life making noise music in Austin and LA) and the fact that

it was in a city that I associated with relatively isolated and internet-reliant artists like Strict Face (who seemed to really come into their own when they were written up in FACT or toured internationally) but not with distinct local nights. The event was one the many incarnations of Club Sync (a crew made up of Sacrifices, Rosa Maria and Sofia Athanasopoulos) and, while the members of the crew may have never intended it to be, it seemed to be an event for and not just in Adelaide. Like many of my favourite events, like Sydney's EVE and Genome in Shanghai, it seemed to arrive fully formed with its own attendant aesthetics, an extended crew of contributors and part-time DJ's and a regular crowd. It appeared to me as a revelation and as a welcome departure from the tired futurisms of the previous 5 years or so.



We often talk, especially in the context of underground rock music, about the oppressiveness of cities like Brisbane, Canberra and Adelaide. “In the face of total obscurity in their local scene, young rock musician A found freedom in isolation (from expectations) and gave birth to a unique musical vision, capturing the character of the city within it.” In this case, instead of ironically or otherwise accepting the badness of their home city, what these artists share is their desire or realisation of



escape from Adelaide; Club Sync now live in Europe, Waterhouse is a resident of Melbourne as of before Club Sync started, and, more recently, so is Mors.



To put it another way, the requirements for a new musical scene are time and space. For the alt-rock/pop movement Shibuya-kei it was the ascendant buying power of the record-buying Japanese middle class and, for Canberra's emo/ post-punk scene that I had witnessed living there, it was a strip of houses running down MacArthur Avenue that the owner refused to renovate (these are huge oversimplifications but not necessarily untrue either). Cheap venues and cheap housing allow a kind of freedom and remove the necessity for events and ideas to emerge as fully polished entities. For Club Sync it was a combination of youth (free rent) and venues like Animal House and Format (the anarchist-run Format collective's space where they began putting on their shows was alternately a gallery, a café, a bar, or a venue depending on the whims of the large group of involved ). These venues were either free or cheap and musically open-minded, Animal House being an unofficial and all ages sharehouse-cum-venue. From what I hear, the mixing at these early shows was sloppy, and the crowd was an unpolished group of people, broadly young and with a variety of prior musical allegiances, including bands and projects that would appear at Animal House. When approached by the police during the Club Sync nights (Format was not licensed as a nightclub, but the events were free entry) the defacto manager Stu protested that what was happening in the basement wasn't dance music but art, a

parody of dance music's tropes of ecstasy and excess. It easy to see how one might read irony into the patchwork of saccharine and creepy piano and guitar motifs gently warped by software and accompanied by big-name rap producer sample pack drums – to a purist it is an uncomfortable and incoherent mix but to Club Sync's adherents and contemporaries it made a lot of sense. The Faraones, as they were nicknamed, originally populated their soundclouds with sharp and almost atonal club offerings, owing more to M.E.S.H. and Iannis Xenakis than local oblique club auteurs like Air Max '97, before giving way to the current run of shrieking and billowing loops (Sacrifices' "es" edit, "Close," "Joined" and Rosa Maria's "Tenerrezza"). The thematic through-line is an ambitious fragility, whether that be displaying aggressive catharsis, emotional vulnerability or excessive luxury.



There are a number of Adelaide or ex-Adelaide musicians that seem to display this spirit, and as far as I can gather, they seemed to have all known each other at some point growing up. Melbourne-resident Waterhouse manifests a kind of candidness in her obsessive vision of baroque and classical aesthetics, the audio equivalent of a misty Caspar David Friedrich landscape, translated into something loosely related to club music. Real and organic string sounds (she has a viola resting against the wall in her dilapidated St. Kilda apartment), voice, cavernous reverb and sub bass are the main players in her compositions, but I would struggle to describe them in more detail than this. Mors' is a more nervous kind of experimentalism - careful contrasts of



dissonant/ aggressive drums and fractured audio with phrases of string parts and folk songs (in “Nonna Nonna” and “1919”) almost have a postmodernist kind of irony to them. He is enrolled in the sound art course at RMIT and had previously had a post-punk band when he lived in Adelaide, and it is helpful to see this project as a carefully delineated area in his broader musical existence. Bygone’s tracks have the (emotive? oceanic?) deep space of the aforementioned but dip in and out of delicate indecipherability. Bordering on the industrial sound palette of club music, but without its functional focus, they prioritise the narrative or ornamental, with each track (tags read: “rubble,” “armoured heart,” and “ice and sand”) seeming to suggest a dream of a distant premodern reality. Each of these artists displays the utopianism of contemporary dance music but instead of envisioning an ideal future suggest an idealised alternate history, and a physical distance (a hypothetical Europe). The impulse to leave Adelaide seems to go hand in hand with this sound - in response to their surrounds these artists have created a liveable alternate reality in the vision of their ideals and dreams.



Emily Glass is more of an outlier to this specific group but nonetheless shares these characteristics of Adelaide escapism (a new generation of the cultural cringe?) and world building. She is a savant with a multitude of projects (Gungame and Princess Object are the two still visible on her online profiles) with different musical directions

and visual aesthetics mainly leaning toward Y2K-era anime and video game references. I became aware of her work (along with that of artists like Yeongrak and DJ Internet Visions) on twitter some time in 2014~15 after the death of vaporwave. Her new work, however, draws more from the broader club continuum framing precise arrangements of bass and ASMR-inducing percussion in monumental washes of ambience (with the same granular neuroticism that allowed her to balance the onslaught of tempos, melodic lines and cinematic sound effects in chaotic tracks like “Threat Scan Dancer”).



The future of this SA escapist group is probably in the fulfilment of their foreign ambitions - Club Sync now live in Europe, where Sacrifices models for New York fashion brand Barragan and Emily Glass’ tracks have been picked up by Pan’s Bill Kouligas, and M.E.S.H., among others. As for the other artists I’ve mentioned, releases on foreign labels or foreign tours don’t seem like such distant concepts (Bygone is working on an EP for Austrian label, Amen). It is only a matter of time before they will have left Adelaide behind completely and Adelaide has likewise forgotten them, just an anomaly in an otherwise indifferent city.

- Felix Idle 2017