

Childhood'send

Based on a creative mis-hearing of hyperreal 1980s chartbusters,

Hypnagogic pop

is a phenomenon sweeping America's DIY underground: a questing post-Noise network that worships New Age music and uses half-remembered hits as portals to the subconscious.

David Keenan meets The Skaters' James Ferraro and Spencer Clark, Pocahaunted, Emeralds and Zola Jesus, and hears why Don Henley's "The Boys Of Summer" is required listening for the *Ghostbusters* generation.

Illustration by **Will Sweeney**

Hypnagogic pop is pop music refracted through the memory of a memory. It draws its power from the 1980s pop culture into which many of the genre's players were born, and which is only now being factored into underground music as a spectral influence. Hypnagogic realms are the ones between waking and sleeping, liminal zones where mis-hearings and hallucinations feed into the formation of dreams. James Ferraro, one of the music's most powerful conceptualists, has described his Lamborghini Crystal recordings as approximating the headspace of the moment just before you go to sleep as a child, while somewhere in the distance the sounds of pop and disco come muffled through the wall and infiltrate your subconscious. In keeping with this idea of being haunted by pop, his back catalogue is populated by revenant 1980s forms freed from their historical context: slimmers from *Ghostbusters*, straight-to-video surf movies, TV dinners, old episodes of *Beverly Hills 90210*. The theories of the Russian Theosophist PD Ouspensky, present in the work of both Ferraro and his Skaters partner Spencer Clark, are also a key influence in terms of the Hypnagogic pop concept. Ouspensky described "half dream" states as portals to knowledge. Ferraro and Clark's music expands this idea further, opening up ways of understanding the structure of your own personal reality by going back to the formative voices of your youth and treating them as gateways through which you can access altered states. "There is a personal connection to memories that, through a process of spiritual recognition, can take the form of a world of its own," Clark suggests. "Creating symbols to identify mirrors in that world is an avenue for progress. Forme it's really important that this personal world remains a reality, so that true communication is possible." In Hypnagogic pop, the 1980s conduit works as a scrying mirror to reveal occult truths through the ruling deities of the time.

Like Noise before it, Hypnagogic pop fetishises the outmoded media of its infancy, releasing albums on cassette, celebrating the video era and obsessing over the reality-scrambling potential of photocopied art. Many of the main players' recordings come with crude black and white Xeroxed artwork, paralleling the inchoate feel of the music while taking on the appearance of the smoky depths of a crystal ball. In Hypnagogic pop, tape hiss and background atmospherics are often amplified, as in the music of Ferraro and Ariel Pink, thus highlighting the aspect of deliberately degraded or misheard pop. In keeping with its genesis, it often sounds like an echo, an after-image, with the players using modern time-travelling tools - drone, improvisation, FX-saturated tape - in order to amplify its powers of future dreaming while rescuing it from the thrall of era-specific values.

"The 80s were dynamite!" Clark insists. "There is a level of longing and retrospective mystery from that

world that later seems to get hit hard by the whole WiFi/iPod era. But to each his own generation. It's more important to say that the patina of different eras is like time travel; to recognise the essence of the past is to imagine the future. The sound of the music is so important to me, the feel of it, and I can imagine that what it is that I want to hear comes from a time of memories, as though holding onto the patina of those memories and to continue to express that feeling itself is a form of time travel."

1980s pop was pop at its most fantasist, an exaggerated mirror of the era's cultural values. In its urge to excess, its artificially heightened quality, there was evidence of the desire for quick-fix transcendence which defined the era as a whole, whether through rampant materialism, self-help, plastic surgery and body modification or the emotional bombast of its soundtrack. The garish, synthetic production values that characterised the mainstream sound of the time seemed designed to elevate trivial feelings and everyday ups and downs to the level of tragedy while rendering null any attempt at introspection or sensory withdrawal. But in its ability to mythologise trivial adolescent states, 80s pop was seductive, functioning both as emotional aspiration and would-be teenage prophecy. The corpus of 80s pop puts a new six-figure spin on William Blake's adage about the road of excess leading to the palace of wisdom. A track like Don Henley's 1984 hit "The Boys Of Summer" - an ode to baby-boomers at summer vacation beach parties, loaded with the melancholy perception that all this has to end - would situate the drama in a mythic context, the same old boy meets girl scenario amplified to the status of Nietzschean eternal recurrence through alchemical studio technique, haunting synthesizer and a hazy production style that would attempt to reify the process of memory in sound. Coming after Henley's career in The Eagles - perhaps the ultimate manifestation of everything cynical and dinosaurish about big-budget pop rock - the track had an accidental innocence that repaid emotional investment, while the production style has since become fetishised by a new generation of explorers, eager to connect the inarticulate pleasure of their youth with more interrogative and transformative musical styles. With the passage of time and subsequent developments in technology, even the boldest of 80s studio sounds has come to seem primitive, now accessible to bedroom artists via home recording set-ups and old keyboards. The result is a music that has a cheap grandiloquence, a feel of transcendent tack, a dreamy punk aura. The magic of Hypnagogic pop is its combination of innocence and experience, its drive to restore the circumstances of early youthful epiphanies while reframing them as present realities possible futures.



Ferraro and Clark have been at the forefront of the development of Hypnagogic pop's dream logic. The duo started out in San Diego in late 2003 as The Skaters, a psychedelic drone outfit that fed wordless vocals, hand drums and cosmic free jazz keyboards through endlessly murky loops. But over the past few years, The Skaters have splintered into countless pseudonymous solo guises that have maintained an umbilical link to mainstream 1980s pop culture while refracting it through the prism of their own sci-fi and occult influenced vision.

Ferraro's solo work, most of which he has released on CD-R and cassette via his own New Age Tapes imprint, represents one of the most radical investigations of Hypnagogic pop. Across his extensive back catalogue, which already runs to more than 40 albums, he inhabits a plethora of alternate identities through which he explores various hyperreal scenarios informed by a combination of dystopian adolescent nostalgia and extrapolated vision and a deep connection with 'trash' media. "I've always viewed my music as just sort of plugging into a matrix of human-alien culture, through plugging into a world broadcast of media entities that jump out of the screen and merge with life via people internalising them as soundtracks for life temples," he explains. "I think aspects of human culture that some people regard as unimportant actually operate within a really deep system of ancient symbolism and human archetypes. Hard Rock Cafes, strip clubs, gyms, celebrities, etcetera are all great examples of this, of roadside temples. My albums are like downloads from that body of information, or an interface with that body accessed through the mediation of experience or imagination/visualisation."

Operating under the group moniker Lamborghini Crystal (the name itself underscoring the process of gazing into the future via the most totemic

manifestations of the past), he works hallucinatory reifications of 1980s disco and funk via pitchshifted vocals, crude tape assemblages, instrumental garage rock and fake radio broadcasts from his alter-ego JC Peavey, all rendered in extreme lo-fi and assembled using nothing but cheap boomboxes. The *Jarvid 9* series, a run of three double CD-R sets, is an extended exploration of inner and outer sci-fi landscapes populated by alien lizard deities. Then there's Edward Flex, an over the top body-building persona who releases albums with titles like *Do You Believe In Hawaii?*, which feature muscle pumping mutants grappling with oversize cans of Budweiser to a minimalist soundtrack of exaggerated pituitary grunts. It's uncanny how something so apparently opposed to the early drone based vision-of-Godhead style of The Skaters can re-produce almost exactly the same psychoactive effects. It's as if Ferraro wants to make over the common transcendental urge that informs 'authentic' ritual and contemporary 'disposable' culture. With his *Multitopia* album, just reissued on vinyl by Olde English Spelling Bee, he extends this hypothesis even further, using imagery lifted from *Terminator* movies combined with complex synth drones, electro-punk melodies and artwork that incorporates extreme body modification in the form of a ritual that confuses and conflates future and ancient power sources. Ferraro appears on the back cover leaning against a 1980s arcade game while sporting augmented breasts.

"For the past few years of my life I have become increasingly aware of how the worlds you can create in a CD can, on a larger scale, be applied to life," Ferraro reveals. "That dreams can come true in every sense that you can imagine them to be; that there are no limits in life, which is the temple of materialising dreams. Not just the cover art, but my albums in their entirety have become sigils in a personal sense, in that

they help structure the world around my head matrix, which is like my will but uplinked from other people's heads and the life experiences I am able to create for myself there. For example, I belong to the first church of Lenny Kravitz in West Hollywood. My membership there has helped me with this process: trying to download someone else's headspace - sometimes the most extreme being that of a virtual celeb image - opened up different aspects of consciousness and life potential and interactions beyond my wildest dreams. I try and bring this to fans of my music via the albums, hoping that the listener will tap into the different worlds represented through the two-step flow of cover art observation to it, then opening up in multiple dimensions through the music joining in, in a progression, to create a virtual reality experience, thereby tapping into their own dream/our dream."

Ferraro's upbringing was steeped in cartoon culture. Popular entertainers and Hollywood studios functioned as the stations of his youth. His father was a collector of original psychedelic LPs, as well as a connoisseur of American popular culture at its most hamburger. After a difficult break-up with his mother, Ferraro's father would take him on pilgrimages to the legendary Hannah-Barbera cartoon studio, and the locations of various Three Stooges skits, as a form of personal therapy. One of his earliest childhood pictures shows him posing next to the gravestone of Curly from The Three Stooges.

In its exaggerated plasticity and its feel for the hyperreal, Hypnagogic pop often resembles the hallucinatory landscapes of exotica or Easy Listening, with microwaved 1980s USA as its own Bikini Atoll. With its New Age gospel choirs over rolling Polynesian percussion, Ferraro's classic *Marble Surf* recording makes the most explicit connections. Spencer Clark's work deploys classic images of exotica - Hawaiian

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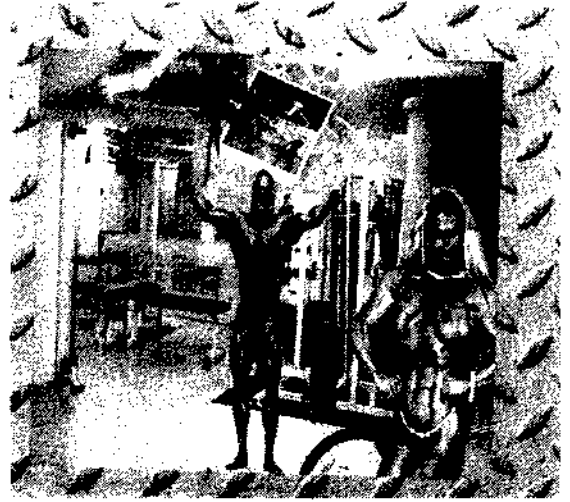
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Spencer Clark



James Ferraro *Jar'id 9: Gecko* (2009)



Edward Flex *Do You Believe In Hawaii?* (2009)

shirts, pineapple drinks decorated with umbrellas and straws, tropical jungles populated by parrot calls and native choirs - while using cheap 80s keyboards and boomboxes to soundtrack endless beach parties.

Using pseudonyms such as Black Joker, Monopoly Child Star Searchers and Vodka Soap, Clark has created a soundworld that similarly confuses the simulated and the authentic while bolstering the transcendent qualities of both. Vodka Soap's *Un Chand Pyramidelier* - released on cassette and CDR by New Age Tapes - is one of the most significant recordings in his back catalogue. Images of chandeliers and mandalas crop up on many of his releases as a visual counterpoint to the music, paralleling his use of loops of ornate, infinitely reflective keyboard patterns and polyrhythmic hand-drums to create kaleidoscopic compositions that posit a form of murky, dreamlike exotica. "Chandeliers, parrots, camels and mandalas are all examples of a personal symbol system," Clark elaborates. "A 'system' meaning more like a catalogue that can begin to bring to life alternate parts of yourself, like the parrot being the gateway for human and animal communication. It's not so necessary for me to know that Native Americans think like this, but it reinforces a natural notion of creating relationships with elements, both in our imagination and in the outer world, and that can generate a further dialogue with the metaphorical world. Chandeliers early on represented to me the process of our synapses in our brain reaction, as though the light in the chandelier was continuing to reflect in a multiple series of directions. Applying this idea to a world of sound - Vodka Soap - led me to imagine a separate emotional system of reactions to soundworlds that are a mirror of your experience."

Clark's concept of DIY exotica as a model for new garage band sounds has been most explicitly furthered by Matthew Mondanile's Ducktails group, named in tribute to the Disney cartoon *Ducktales*, which ran from 1987-90. Ducktails started off in thrall to the post-Skaters vision; tracks like "Pizza Time" from their debut cassette were simple skits on Ferraro and Clark's early work. But since then Mondanile has incorporated more traditional group dynamics into his tropical visions, minting a form of exaggeratedly cheap garage pop that feels like an

80s-inflected take on the Utopian teenage style of the early Beach Boys. Mondanile has also launched a Ducktails offshoot, Predator Vision, which he describes as being influenced by "watching the movie *Predator* while listening to soft rock records of Fleetwood Mac, Paul Simon and Todd Rundgren". Over in Belgium, meanwhile, Lieven Martens's Dolphins Into The Future picks up on Ferraro and Clark's obsession with Atlantis and dolphins as symbolic formulations of parts of the unconscious, combining New Age synth with hazy ritual atmospheres.

Hypnagogic pop is 1980s-inspired psychedelia. But whereas the actual 1970s/80s psych scene was about revival and second generation tributes, today's '80s psych' has no authentic tradition. The pop music of the era - the raw material that Hypnagogic pop draws on - was all virtual, airbrushed, un-punk. So the new 80s-inspired psych focuses more on a virtual canon, one that doesn't include the core of the tracks. Instead it homes in on the futuristic signifiers of the 1980s, the parts that, out of context, still sound extremely psychedelic: the echo on the guitar in Marc Hunter's 1981 dream-pop hit "Big City Talk", the low-rent retro-futurism of the *Beverly Hills Cop* soundtrack, the constant background drone of microwave ovens and video game soundtracks, the power vocals on Kate Bush's 1985 single, "Running Up That Hill". Pocahaunted, a group from the West Coast, featuring the twin vocals of Amanda Brown and Diva Dompe, have most successfully integrated wasteland 1980s cultural signifiers with traditional psych rock aesthetics. On their 2008 album *Chains* they cited Tina Weymouth of Talking Heads and her conceptual 1980s pop group Tom Tom Club as the main influence. while cutting puffs of FX-glazed vocal confusion with acid guitar straight out of the Father Yod songbook Across the Pocahaunted back catalogue, bombastic 1980s power vocals are transformed from theatrical emotional shorthand or cheap will-to-power into transformative gateways personal enough to allow direct access to subconscious states and dormant personas.

Zola Jesus, the solo guise of Madison. Wisconsin's Nika Danilova, has successfully married 80s vocal bombast with a dark Industrial edge, incorporating



Vodka Soap *Un Chand Pyramidelier* (2006)



Pocahaunted's Amanda Brown (top) and Diva Dompe

the epic, out-of-focus qualities of Kate Bush's *Hounds Of Love* with psychedelic atmospherics drawn from Diamanda Galás, SPK and The Velvet Underground. Her music is beguilingly balanced between epic teenage romance and dark avant garde process. "The 80s definitely had a lot of really progressive music which has had influential effects on me," Danilova admits. "Especially coming off of the birth of so many different experimental movements of the 70s. The 80s were a sort of apex for all of those newly born notions of Noise and synth music, and there were definitely more vocalists in the 80s who had an amazing sense of authority with their voices. I was born late in the 80s, so I've never really identified with it as being 'my era'. Maybe for the other artists they have a better connection with that decade due to their childhood. However, the decade has still affected me in a unique way. Aside from the expansion of experimental Noise music, I also find myself entertained by the miscellaneous pop culture and films of the era. All those slasher and zombie films and 80s porn really keeps me in this artificial state of nostalgia for the decade."

Danilova describes "The Boys Of Summer" as "a total classic". "But my favourite 80s summerjam has to be "Lady Luck" by Breakfast Club. It was the band Madonna was in before she went solo, and the only place you can find this song is occasionally throughout the movie *Alphabet City*. I have replayed certain scenes from that movie over and over again to hear that song against the backdrop of the summer heat."

The Shdwply label out of Norfolk, Virginia, one of the premier exponents of the Hypnagogic pop aesthetic, has made overt connections between the Utopian garage of first generation psychedelic voyagers like The Thirteenth Floor Elevators, The Golden Dawn and The Red Krayola and exotic 1980s pop by cultivating a catalogue that blurs the lines between the virtual worlds of 1980s pop, lounge and Easy Listening and 1960s psychedelia. Gary War, also a member of Ariel Pink's group, makes records that sound like the ultimate extension of 1960s Texan label International Artists' aesthetic, with hooky original compositions deformed by spectral, barely-there arrangements. Recent label signings The Super Vacations base their hallucination even deeper in the past, with surf instrumentals that could almost be The Pyramids or The Fantastic Baggies given a surreal selfconscious modernity. Sore Eros, a group led by Robert Robinson, another Ariel Pink collaborator, make some of the most dilated pop, with song structures lifted from Syd Barrett's Pink Floyd and re-situated in a glossy candy-floss of soft reverb and dislocating studio process. The Shdwply back catalogue, meanwhile, exists in a hallucinatory temporal space upwind of the 1960s and downwind of the 1990s.

True to its quest to uncover secret survivals of authentic spiritual/creative prima materia, Hypnagogic pop takes New Age at its word, as legitimate devotional music filtered through the particular ethos of the time. The Detroit based Emeralds have most convincingly expanded on this

idea, augmenting 'traditional' drone aesthetics with crystal clear melodic synth projections and minimalist electronic percussion. Emeralds draw inspiration less from classic Kosmische sources like early Kluster or Tangerine Dream and more from post-Body Love-era Klaus Schulze, Edgar Froese solo albums and privately pressed hippy synth LPs like JD Emmanuel's 1981 *Wizards*. Emeralds member Mark McGuire's solo work goes even further, with a series of cassette and CD-R releases that combine 1980s Police-style delayed guitar and endlessly repeating loops to create an unlikely form of pop reverie.

"I was born the last day of 1986," McGuire relates. "So even though I only lived through a few years of the 80s, they definitely lingered well into the mid-90s and most of my childhood. I loved a lot of movies from that time as a kid, and I can still appreciate them now. I watched *Ghostbusters* multiple times every day when I was really young, a taped copy that was extra grainy. There's something about the colours, the saturation, the production, all the little things, that I'm really drawn to. And of course the music. The production of all the music from that time and those movies was amazing, so polished and synthetic, but at the same time fuzzy and homemade. I think it influences my music in the way that I want to create something totally surreal, which is how all those records sound to me. It's the same with New Age music and Krautrock and synth stuff, it's like creating an entire universe of sound. I'm trying to make my universe incorporate many different styles." Indeed, McGuire's music often sounds like the coda from an epically sad 1980s Top 40 hit extended to infinity.

It's vaguely serendipitous that the post-Noise underground would finally find its spiritual side in New Age music and 1980s pop culture - both regarded as artificial and spiritually moribund by most serious thinkers. But it's in precisely such areas - unpoliced by critics and cultural watchdogs - that the opportunity for true creative freedom lies. Beneath the radar of most cultural commentators, there exists in 1980s pop culture a mine of 'meaningless' imagery and sound 'vapid' enough to facilitate colonisation by restless experimentalists. Despite its hippy trappings, New Age is a punk-simple form of music, as 'easy' as meditation and therefore a readymade DIY form of devotional process.

American groups like Infinity Window (who feature Taylor Richardson, briefly a member of Sunburned Hand Of The Man, and Daniel Lopatin, who also records under the name Oneohtrix Point Never) and Fragments, the duo of Jeff Hatfield and Zach Troxell, make punk-primitive teenage symphonies to God using cheap 1980s synths and collections of analogue electronics. Belgium's Orphan Fairytale, aka Eva van Deuren, plays minimal synth music using a simple Casio sampling keyboard. She records the sounds of toys and small instruments before re-composing them with an inquisitive, childlike logic that is immediately engaging, working through traumatic events from her youth using the recombined sounds of her earlier environment.

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James Ferraro



Mark McGuire of Emeralds

Without a serious critical agenda to dictate how it is 'supposed' to be interpreted or received, a decade's worth of 'worthless' art and culture is ripe for hallucinations, interpretations and the plundering of idiosyncratic personal canons. Indeed, if Hypnagogic pop has any genuine historical lineage, it can be found in the kind of idiosyncratic one-offs that occupy the autonomous space between unselfconscious mainstream ambition and accidental cult elevation - where aspiration outstrips ability and so is reinterpreted as a conscious creative process. Its main historical mode is one of recuperation, rescuing context-less one-off recordings and enthroning them as part of a virtual canon salvaged from the cut-out bin of history: anomalies like the sole 1968 album by Chicago garage band The Bachs, *Out Of The Bachs*, which falls short of and yet somehow exceeds the expressive demands of the era; The Department Store Santas' unclassifiable *The Medieval Castle* (1984) or Bobb Trimble's two LPs, cut in the early 80s even as it bridges 70s basement styles with the influence of Queen and David Bowie. Call their appeal a particularly generous form of camp, but it's camp only in Susan Sontag's definition of the phrase: "a kind of love, love for human nature. It relishes, rather than judges, the little triumphs and awkward intensities of 'character.' [...] When something is just bad (rather than Camp), it's often because it is too mediocre in its ambition."

Offering a refreshing antidote to Noise's refusal of dialogue, Ariel Pink's *Invisible Jukebox* (*The Wire* 305) underlined the reciprocal relationship between underground music and pop, insisting that "...everything in rock'n'roll music comes from experimental music, even Hall & Oates... it's all experimental to me, everything that's pop. Every

time there is a breakthrough in pop is because of the experimenter behind it that lifted it up." Pink talks of pop as a music that had been successively degraded across the decades, and of his desire to degrade it even further. His methodology dovetails with that of artists like Spencer Clark and James Ferraro and their endlessly Xeroxed pop concept, as if the only way to fully recuperate it is to debase it completely, to deflate its ambition while amplifying its intent, and in the process somehow give birth to a new musical universe via sonic sleight of hand.

Hypnagogic pop thus represents the creative flowering of a new breed of underground musician, who has grown up in the era of mass communication and its attendant cultural ground-leveling. "I'm a species of Generation neXt," Ferraro insists. "This reality is twisted, but for me it's really fascinating because seeing past the deranged hypnosis, or merging with it, can also represent our human potential. So it inspires me in that way. KFC, TV, etcetera are perfect examples of dark energy temples that alter people's reality in a psychotic way, but it also shows the power of dreams and is a testament of our ability to plug into our dreams and experience them on Earth."

In seeking to transmute the kind of wretched pop culture long denied entry to the officially sanctioned environs of underground music, artists like Ferraro have enriched and expanded upon the variety of sources experimental music can draw on while performing a form of psychic self-surgery through rituals of recuperation. A profound form of musical reflection that generates creative gold from long-abandoned cultural detritus, Hypnagogic pop is true modern magic, a music that dreams of the future by dreaming of the past. All you have to do is believe.