

## Music | Bittles' Magazine: The music column from the end of the world

After almost three decades in the music business electronic duo **Underworld** have been reasonably quiet of late. Yet, even though there has been no new **Underworld** material in the last six years, neither of the duo have been sitting around twiddling their thumbs. Vocalist **Karl Hyde** has released a pair of albums with ambient icon **Brian Eno** as well as his debut solo LP *Edgeland*. **Rick Smith**, meanwhile has scored both **Danny Boyle's** acclaimed **Frankenstein** production and the film *Trance*. Together they also directed the music for the 2012 Olympics opening ceremony, which included psychedelic wig-out moments by **Fuck Buttons** and more. By **JOHN BITTLES**



With the recent reissues of *Dubnobasswithmyheadman* and *Second Toughest In The Infants*, the duo's most critically lauded and successful LPs, it could be argued that the pressure on any new material from the band would be immense. Both albums are rightly considered landmark releases, their mixture of 'proper' song-writing and dance floor sensibilities meaning both have more than stood the test of time. Their mixture of dark, paranoid lyrics and, at times, brutal techno beats still make the hairs on the back of your neck stand on end, while tracks such as *Dark/Long*, *Mmm Skyscraper I love You*, *Dirty Epic*, *Barnstyle/Sappys Curry*, *Rowla* and *Pearls Girl* still sound more thrilling than *Mad Max: Fury Road*.

One of the greatest things about **Underworld**, though, are the moments of calm and reflection which sit side by side with the pounding beats. These have always been more than mere intros, or build-ups, with songs such as *Tongue*, *River Of Bass*, *Confusion The Waitress*, *Oich Oich*, *Blueski* and *Beautiful Burnout* putting their more celebrated output such as *Born Slippy* to shame. New album *Barbara Barbara, We Face A Shining Future* gamely furthers this tradition, with some of its most rewarding tracks containing no more than the murmur of a beat.

Named after one of the last things **Rick Smith's** dad ever said to his mum, *Barbara Barbara, We Face A Shining Future*, is a welcome return, if not quite the unmitigated triumph we may have hoped for. There are moments of startling clarity and beauty to be found within the album's electronic grooves. Yet, there are far too many moments of filler which don't really warrant inclusion on a mere seven track LP. It is never truly dull, nor awful, yet one can't help feeling that it is the sound of a band going through the motions, lacking direction, focus and drive. I wanted to love it, but even after numerous listens it seems more acquaintance than close friend.

Yet, opener *I Exhale* gets the album going with an epic bang. Over a decadently sleazy electronic jam **Karl Hyde** dons his best lager lout impersonation and almost caricatures his London accent to create a track which is as close to techno bliss as it is possible to get. Recalling indie noiseniks **The Fall** should **Mark E. Smith**

ever give in to his inner disco diva, the song is tough, thoughtful, and undeniably good. When the track hits the six minute mark a crazed yet funky hand-clap percussion arrives, so orgasmic sounding you should beware listening to it with your mum.

*If Rah* continues its predecessor's post punk style groove, but with disappointing results. An amalgamation of **LCD Soundsystem** and **Sleaford Mods**, it comes across as a bit so too in debt to its influences which means that it seems somewhat derivative. It tries hard to reach the glorious heights of the past, yet never quite grasps for greatness with the determination required. Now I know that **Underworld** heavily inspired both bands, yet it's hard to shake the suspicion that *If Rah* is something of a cheap rip off. And, surely a band of **Underworld's** stature should be aiming far higher than that!

From here things improve dramatically as side A finishes on a high, as the loose techno throb of *Low Burn* really does recall the band in their prime. The song's euphoric trance style riffs and frenzied, almost indecipherable vocals unite perfectly to create a thrilling rush of adrenaline condensed into six minutes of beautiful noise. Just as you are getting settled into *Low Burn's* beautifully hypnotic groove, it suddenly erupts into a crashing bedlam of percussion and synths. Ending with a bang, the track is the bona fide highlight of the entire LP, illustrating perfectly just how fantastic **Underworld** can be when they let themselves go

Side B opens with *Santiago Cuatro*, a subdued piece of instrumental ambiance. As nice as its middle eastern-style guitar sounds, one can't help thinking that it has very little to say. Thankfully, the following tracks, *Motorhome* and *Ova Nova* show a more thoughtful, melancholy side of the group, and find the band back on form. On the former, **Karl Hyde** sings with emotional vulnerability and raw passion over a minimal backing of bass pulses and electronic squiggles. *Ova Nova* meanwhile, is a gentle synth-driven affair, whose lightness in tone is only there to lead you astray. Recalling the sense of loneliness that can grip you hours after leaving the club, the song employs just the hint of a beat and the ghost of house to echo the joys that have been and gone. While neither of these tunes will spark excitement at a festival or a club, they illuminate a band not afraid to get intimate, and tell you exactly how they feel

As good as both these tracks are, they merely pave the way for the gorgeously romantic stirrings of *Nylon Strung* which brings the album to a quietly euphoric close. The song's lovelorn vocals and 80s style synth pop backing bring to mind **Depeche Mode**, or even **Erasure** at their best. Nostalgic sounding and containing a heart-breaking sense of wistfulness the song practically reaches out of the speakers to gently caress your soul. A thrilling final set piece, *Nylon Strung* is almost good enough to rescue the entire LP. The fact that it doesn't quite succeed should in no way detract from just how beautiful this song really is.

While *Barbara Barbara, We Face A Shining Future* is undoubtedly a mature body of work, it never maintains the heights we have come to expect. Containing a mere seven songs at 45 minutes long it is too short to contain the amount of filler that it does. While *I Exhale*, *Low Burn* and *Nylon Strung* wouldn't sound out of place on an **Underworld** best off, there are too many songs which appear pale imitations of what the band used to be. Far from being a disaster, the record merely enters the ranks on being one of those albums we buy, enjoy, and then never listen to again. And from such a talented duo, this is a bit of a shame.

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