

Analyses of Vaporwave Albums

Melchior Philips - 10/06/2022

Vektroid



Vektroid - *MACINTOSH PLUS* (2011)

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What do we see?

The album cover for MACINTOSH PLUS is a pastel ensemble that suggests a virtual space. The visual style of the album is striking and recognisable, and it has been parodied many times. It served as a template for many of the Vaporwave albums that came after it. The chequered floor insinuates depth, but the surrounding pink void has no demarcated ends in the form of walls or other features. This creates a dream-like, hyperreal space, which serves as the context in which the other elements are to be interpreted. In the void we find a picture of the New York skyline that appears lifted from old VHS footage, anachronistically presented with the Twin Towers still intact. This harkens back to a time before the new millennium, a time where optimism still triumphed over the fears for the War on Terror. Above it, we find a logo that is ostensibly a retro Japanese logo for the Macintosh Plus personal computer, cementing a theme of retro technology. The most recognisable element of the album art can be found at the front, and it is an ancient Greek bust of the God Helios. The author of this sculpture is unknown, but it is made in the style of the Greek sculptor Lysippos. In Ancient Greece, statues were applied with lurid paints and gold coverings, which have long since withered off. The dilapidated state of the statues has inadvertently created an aesthetic of decay, one that is now synonymous with our contemporary idea of Ancient Greece. The weathered ancientness of the bust is anachronistic in this virtual space, and invites consideration of the fact that one day, our contemporary artistic products will become old and withered as well, and that this withering can be enjoyed as an aesthetic in its own right.

What do we hear?

2. リサフランク 420 / 現代のコンピュー (Lisa Frank 420 / Modern Compute)

Music researcher Vincent Meelberg notes that the original song – Diana Ross’ *It’s Your Move* – is still intelligible, and its original lyrics are maintained. The song is slowed down, making the song feel more sluggish than the upbeat original. The track employs ‘chop ‘n screw’ techniques, making harsh cuts and replaying certain parts. Meelberg explains that “the slowness and reverb have decreased the definition of the musical phrases, essentially backgrounding the song and making it easy to listen to as background music, similar to *muzak* or elevator music.” The synthesised sounds present in the original song – the Yamaha DX7-esque keyboard synth and the primitive drum machine – do not yet have the refinement they gained in more recent years, adding to the nostalgia. Narratively, the repetitions create build-up and expectation, only to return previous musical phrases. Meelberg concludes that “it is like a musical representation of boredom.”

The juxtaposition between Ross’ original lyrics and the new meaning it has adopted in its anachronistic context plays into the nostalgia for the retrograde years of the 80’s and 90’s. Ross sings “It’s your move, I’ve made up my mind | Time is running out, make a move | Oh, we can’t go on, do you understand? | It’s all in your hands.” In the original context, the lyrics urges the addressee to act, implying that there is a world of opportunity if they would just choose to act. Ross expresses her impatience with the addressee’s inaction. Listening to a slowed-down version of the original in the 2010’s, there now exists an asynchronous dissonance between Ross’ impatience, and Ross’ decades-long continued urging to act. The line “Time is running out” becomes especially poignant in this new context. Whatever opportunities there once were have long gone, but the echoes of Ross’ original invitation still linger in the distorted memory of the song as it is portrayed in *Lisa Frank 420*. The song invites us to reflect generally upon the lost opportunities of 1980’s futurism, which has since been supplanted with our conventional reality – and it also invites us to reminisce about our own lost opportunities.

Daniel Lopatin



Chuck Person's EccoJams Vol. 1 (2010)

What is it?

Daniel Lopatin, currently better known under his musical alias Oneohtrix Point Never, released *Chuck Person's EccoJams* in 2010, and it is often cited as the first Vaporwave album. It contains repeated phrases of commercial pop music from the 1980's and 1990's, pitched down and reverberated in a style that is akin to DJ Screw's chopped and screwed remixes of hip-hop albums. The album title refers to the 1992 video game Ecco the Dolphin. It is an unusual game in which the player controls a bottlenose dolphin that must ward off attacking aliens by travelling to Atlantis. The game is noted for its difficulty and its Pink Floyd-inspired soundtrack, with the game even naming its penultimate level – Welcome to the Machine – after the 1975 Pink Floyd song. Several of the tracks on the album appeared in Lopatin's 2009 audio-visual project *Memory Vague*, and the album is a deliberate attempt to divorce the feeling of the music from its contents.

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“well - the entire point of ecco jams was that it was a DIY practice that didn't involve any specialized music tech knowledge and for me it was a direct way of dealing with audio in a mutable, philosophical way that had very little to do with music and everything to do with FEELINGS and im happy to see that it actually turned out to be true, that people make the stuff and find connection and meaning through that PRACTICE is all i could ever hope for. its folk music now.”

Lopatin in his 2017 Reddit AMA.

“Daniel Lopatin is an expert in delivering such transformations, in playing with the ambiguity and disorientation before a reversal sets in. His music finds us where we're vulnerable, between our fragile mythologies and the memories of our material experiences. This is why his music can sometimes feel uncomfortable: working primarily as Oneohtrix Point Never, Lopatin routinely destabilizes our expectations, unsettles our desires, and disrupts our narratives. Out of this rubble, he constructs new experiences through a sensual, provocative combination of sound and image”

Lin, Marvin (2020). "Daniel Lopatin's Chuck Person's Ecco jams Vol. 1 (2010)". In Stockton, Will; Gilson, D. (eds.). *The 33 1/3 B-Sides*. Bloomsbury. pp. 168–169.

What do we see?

The album cover interpolates the box art for the video game Ecco the Dolphin, with elements taken from both the SEGA Mega Drive and SEGA Mega-CD box art. What the cover deliberately omits, however, is the eponymous Ecco the Dolphin, despite his name appearing four times. Instead, the shark, which on the original box art is a backgrounded element, is inflated and foregrounded. The most striking feature of the album named for Ecco, then, is its absence of Ecco. The haphazard concatenation of fragments is analogous to how the album art could appear in an imperfect memory: the name 'Ecco' resonates – or echoes – but its main protagonist is forgotten. This divorcing between content and affect aptly visualises what happens in the album's music: some residual phrases from popular music repeat and echo, but its original meaning is lost in an emulation of imperfect recollection.

2 8 1 4



2814 - 新しい日の誕生 (Birth of a New Day) (2015)

What is it?

2 8 1 4 is a collaboration between dreampunk producers Hong Kong Express and telepath テレパシー能力者.

What do we see?

We see a dreamlike rendition of a densely-populated urban cityscape at night, plastered with Japanese advertising signs displaying, among other texts, the title of the album: Birth of a New Day. The lights of the advertising and the buildings bleed into each other, and are rendered in a purple haze. Advertising signs and telephone lines are affixed to the image haphazardly, incongruent with the buildings that should be supporting or contextualising them. The cityscape itself is even overlaid with different perspectives of itself, frustrating attempts to interpret the three-dimensionality of the image. This visual chaos creates a dreamlike, unnatural space of which is it impossible to gauge its beginnings and ends, and the viewer is suspended within it.

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猫シ Corp.



猫シ Corp. – *News at 11* (2016)

What is it?

猫シ Corp's *News at 11* contains American radio broadcasts from September 11th, 2001. Each track is what a different radio station broadcasted in the minutes before the 9/11 attacks, and the tracks end at the second the broadcast would switch to the news of the planes hitting the Twin Towers. A double-sided tape, side A contains 9 tracks, and Side B contains 11 tracks. In listening to this album, the listener is temporarily transported to the last few minutes of blissful ignorance and optimism before the terror attack that shook America that day, and rippled through the world.

Responding to a question asking where he was during 9/11, Cat corp answered: "i was in my room, making french homework when mom suddenly called me to watch the tv in the livingroom. That moment the old world died."

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What do we see?

The design of the album is minimal, containing only the glitchy VHS rendering of the American flag and the title of the album in blocky white letters. The album contains a piece of American history as we wish we memorised it, purposefully omitting the terrible event that we wish to forget.

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James Ferraro



James Ferraro – FARSIDEVIRTUAL (2011)

What is it?

James Ferraro intended *FARSIDEVIRTUAL*, released in 2011, to be a set of ringtones to be experienced on a smartphone, which he refers to as a “post-structuralist medium.” He describes the songs as musical still lifes of the 21st century, incorporating purposefully synthesized soundscapes created in Apple’s Garage Band software. The tracks contain standard MIDI sounds and recognisable sounds from computer software such as Skype, and incorporate elements of easy listening and elevator music. Ferraro was inspired by grime rappers, who would rap over heavily compressed hip-hop beats played from their phones. The album attempts to replicate this experience.

FARSIDEVIRTUAL was only labelled as Vaporwave – or sometimes proto-vapor – in hindsight, but regardless, it is credited with the development and dissemination of the genre in its early years. The music even spawned its own sub-genre called Utopian Virtual, in which retrofuturistic utopias are created through muzak, without the sinister undertone found in Faux-Utopian works such as Vektroid’s *MACINTOSH PLUS*.

“A pastiche [of] a kind of music you never knew you knew existed: techno-capitalist stock promotional music for the era of the personal computer ... Each track is bristling with the maximalist promise of a world of possibilities waiting behind the screen for your double-click, and evokes a time when we were much less familiar with and cynical about the virtual world technology has brought us into.”

Harper, Adam (June 12, 2012), "Comment: Vaporwave and the pop-art of the virtual plaza," *Dummy*

What do we see?

The album cover is backgrounded by a low-resolution Google Maps Street View screenshot of 6th Avenue in Manhattan, New York. In the foreground is an iPad with an abstract design utilising clouds and indecipherable shapes, which appears a second time in the upper right-hand corner. The foregrounded iPad is placed on top of a tuxedo, guiding the interpretation of the abstract design as a face. This iPad-faced and tuxedo-clad person is the embodiment of Far Side Virtual: empty semiotics

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of a virtual, corporatized world. The title of the album is rendered in the colours of Google's logo at the bottom.

"Far Side Virtual mainly designates a space in society, or a mode of behaving. All of these things operating in synchronicity: like ringtones, flat-screens, theater, cuisine, fashion, sushi. I don't want to call it "virtual reality," so I call it Far Side Virtual. If you really want to understand Far Side, first off, listen to [Claude] Debussy, and secondly, go into a frozen yogurt shop. Afterwards, go into an Apple store and just fool around, hang out in there. Afterwards, go to Starbucks and get a gift card. They have a book there on the history of Starbucks—buy this book and go home. If you do all these things you'll understand what Far Side Virtual is — because people kind of live in it already."

Ferraro in *Altered Zones*, 2013.

What do we hear?

"This is what Far Side Virtual does for 45 minutes—it reminds the listener that these sounds were born digitally and will die digitally. This is a digital album for a digital age."

Degnan, Luke (2012), "James Ferraro's Far Side Virtual," *Bomb*.

Blank Banshee



Blank Banshee – *Blank Banshee 0* (2012)

What is it?

When Blank Banshee – real name Patrick Driscoll – released *Blank Banshee 0* in 2012, it was not listed as Vaporwave, but as Vaportrap. The album uses musical elements of trap, and mixes it with the broken dreamscapes of vaporwave – although whether this genre is truly to be understood as a subgenre of Vaporwave remains contentious.

What do we see?

The subject of the album cover is a low-polygon 3D model of a female face, placed on top of a blue gradient. Specifically, the face is an edited version of a face model of Lara Croft from promotional art for the 1996 video game *Tomb Raider*. Part of the head and the eyes are gouged out (as is customary for 3D models for video games), creating a sense of entry into someone's mind, and accessing their memories and feelings. It takes up the primitive computer graphics that were already entrenched in Vaporwave album cover art, but steers clear of using Greco-Roman sculptures.

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What do we hear?

All songs on the album are produced with the same drum, 808 and snare samples.