

Half Of Where They Lived

Childhood experiences have left German producer **Till Rohmann** aka Glitterbug married to his mortality – new record *Dust* draws inspiration from his labelmate Gold Panda to take it further

Interview: Simon Jay Catling

“Death and disease are old acquaintances,” chuckles Till Rohmann from his studio in Berlin. Before he’d reached double figures in age, the German producer, who writes and records under the name of Glitterbug, had already been forced to stare his own mortality in the face enough to last him a lifetime. Stricken by cancer as a child, the first seven to eight years of his life were soundtracked by the dull bleeps of hospital machinery, and left behind memories filled with the sterile smell of hospital linen, intrusive tubes and needles, and a constant, persistent cycle of sorrow, as those in the beds around him gradually disappeared one by one.

“It all became part of a routine though,” he tells, his warm, matter-of-fact intonation belying the weight of our conversation. “As out of the ordinary as it might seem to other people, our own experiences are very normal to ourselves. So for me life, death, sickness – not being able to function ‘normally’ in the society I grew up in – they were very obvious things to me as a child.” Rohmann suffered three relapses before recovering, a process extended thanks to the limited medicinal knowledge of the 1970s and the consequent trial and error approach to his treatment. The experience left him weak as a teenager, but it was at this point he began to immerse himself in music. He fondly recalls crying at the first listen of Meredith Monk’s *Dolmen Music*.

“I started to get deep into experimental music around 14 years old,” he explains. “I guess I was trying to find other odd people so I wouldn’t feel so lonely. I was never into pop music as a child – I skipped that phase. It was the life of ‘the others’ – the normal people – and I couldn’t really relate to them. I had to shape my own parallel universe and music was definitely a big part of it.”

Beginning his self-tutelage in the industrial Ruhr district of Germany at the dawn of acid house in the 1980s (“with so many abandoned warehouses and mines, it was inevitable it would become a Mecca for illegal raves”), while also immersing himself in the gay house scene of the time, Rohmann’s recorded output has only come into focus over the last few years under the name Glitterbug. After two albums and a series of EPs, he revisited his childhood with the weighty deconstructed techno of *cancerboy* in 2012 – which, as well as being a sonic manifestation of thoughts and emotions around his own battles, was also inspired by a series of conversations with a friend going through their own, tragically unsuccessful fight against the disease. “Going through these experiences, it’s like you’re marked – whether you get through it and survive or not,” Rohmann says. “To revisit my own emotions for that album wasn’t necessarily a painful place to go. I mean it’s scary and not pleasant – but it’s just there.”

It becomes easy to join the dots in Rohmann’s work with the indelible marks left on him through experience. Much of his material is imbued with a sense of solitude; the sparse arrangements of *cancerboy* feel vividly spectral, the rhythms that are there brittle and quick to disintegrate under the weight of the surrounding silence. For the breath-taking *Dust*, his latest album, Rohmann has removed himself – and his music – a step further. Still focusing on the ideas of death and departure, he’s expanded it to take on entire cities and the sense of those they have left behind. “*Dust* is... imagining this notion of people disappearing or dying and leaving their traces, which evaporate into dust but are still there,” he ruminates. “It’s trying to imagine a city as a multitude of all these memories piling up, in addition to what is there in the present and just



Photo: Romni Shendar

pulling back layer after layer. It’s a story of dealing with mortality and thinking about what we leave behind and the traces of memories, as well as the physical marks that we leave behind with our beloved ones.”

One of the idiosyncrasies of *Dust* is that it’s an album that – despite being put together by a producer who’s spent much of his time in the techno powerhouses of Cologne and Berlin – has a distinctly British feel to it. Rohmann agrees when that’s put to him, but admits he’s not entirely sure why such cross-channel pollination has come to be; certainly though, *Dust* sits well alongside the hauntology of the Ghost Box label, Boards Of Canada’s seminal 90s works and, more recently, the foggy detachment of Leyland Kirby’s bleaker plains. There are two names from England, however, who Rohmann openly admits draw tall shadows over the record – the first is the late film director Derek Jarman, whose final auto-biographical film was also titled *Glitterbug*. “What I love about his movies – *Glitterbug* in particular – is that they don’t have a clear narrative but retain this super personal storytelling,” he enthuses. “It’s just a kaleidoscope of his life – there’s a lot of footage that he probably shot without originally intending it to be a part of anything. With my music, I’m writing very personal stories that convey a certain mood to the listener, but also allow them to draw their own pictures.”

The other big touchstone for *Dust* in particular is his close friend and fellow producer, Gold Panda. The pair met at a festival in Amsterdam, bonding over a shared feeling of

awkwardness backstage. “Some famous people I won’t name had done too much coke and were being obnoxious,” Rohmann laughs. “Derwin and I were the only sane people in the room and we bonded over this discomfort.” Consequently striking up a firm friendship together, while Gold Panda lived in Berlin – where Rohmann still resides – *Dust* has since come out in the UK on the producer’s NOTOWN Records. The album’s ideas were not in fact crystallised until several conversations with Derwin over where his latest record, *Half Of Where You Live*, was heading. “I already had this idea of doing something about memory and remembrance – to walk down streets wondering what they meant to someone else. It was very vague though, until Gold Panda told me of the concept for his album,” Rohmann says. “That record is all about – as he puts it – ‘celebrating urbanity and manmade things’ so I became keen on taking that notion further.”

“I had to shape my own parallel universe”

Till Rohmann

Where Gold Panda’s record shimmers in representation of the present day, the clarity of his samples conveying the constant desire for material newness, Glitterbug’s *Dust* pulls downwards as it looks to the past and the ghosts of

what might have been. Far less beat-driven and dictated by fewer samples, the singular pulse of *Silent Glory*, for example, feels like the loosest of links to *Half Of Where You Live*, as though picking up that record’s transmission from a parallel universe. Rohmann claims he’s far more comfortable working in large studios than his contemporary, with Gold Panda a bedroom producer to this day, and unable to resist the lure of a more dance-floor-friendly sound. “But there’s something about the mood of our music that’s similar,” the German artist explains. “There’s a certain depth to his music that I really love – although he’s a bit more playful than me, certainly.”

To listen to Rohmann’s back catalogue in chronological order is to hear an artist gradually withdrawing from that side of things himself; *Dust* continues that trend, focusing around a self-enforced limited selection of instruments and effects, instead attempting to put a lot into not very much at all. The producer has long since left behind Berlin’s clubbing scene, finding it far removed from his own ideals of what club life should be. “My idea of a club was a place where all things can literally come together,” he says, “just as much as *cancerboy* was a techno album about cancer and death. But a lot of people found it bizarre and were almost like ‘how dare you bring death into the club!’ But it should be there, you know? It’s a part of life. I think with *Dust* it’s a little bit the same; but I really like telling stories through my music and that’s very hard to do with just a drum machine and a bass line.”

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