

Jon Hopkins

Immunity (Domino Records 2013)

Bi Nuu, Berlin May 22<sup>nd</sup> 2014

“I want to make something with guts and purpose, that isn’t pussy-footing around...”

The shifts in *Immunity*, Jon Hopkins’s newest electronic album, are so engrossing and well-orchestrated that one is, as it were, unaware of them to the extent that they seamlessly develop within consciousness: like being so absorbed in a vision of the setting sun that ten minutes later one realizes, as if waking from a trance, that the orb has almost sunk beneath the horizon.

Inside the club the amplified force of the beat is like a sledgehammer slamming against the earth as one simultaneously dissolves into Hopkins’s immaterial atmospheres. The body’s membranes rippling under the sonic pressure of the journeying oscillations, an ur-captivating experience of music, the mind is sensorily fixated in the present, yet I am elsewhere—“up here, somewhere”—like a demonstration of spiritual liberation through awareness at one’s present location within the physical universe.

It is a music that could only be created in its time—a tautology that speaks with knowledge of what that time is.

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Someone who tries to get the drift of the past few hundred years (which probably encompass more change than the human race has ever collectively experienced) is led to

an hypostatized chronology of “events” whose meanings we may or may not ever understand.

At the beginning of a new era (or not), we are pushed inexorably forward by “an economy” whose conditions shape those in whose potential it originally came to be more than they, themselves, seem to control it. Caught in the relentlessness of its technological world-domination, we seek to understand what’s happening to us. The greatest mystery in the simplest question: *What does it want?*

And one day amidst this racing development—after the future was unleashed from fossil fuels, after the electrical grid was introduced to the cities that began to pulse with the comprehensive demands of its exacting tempos, opening realms of possibility: like the light bulb that gave a new life to the night—humanity woke up entangled in the untold ramifications of globalized computation: one of them being the alchemical synthesis of beautiful sounds within microchips—as in one of alchemy’s spiritual definitions: the transmutation of common materials for the regeneration of the human soul.

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Hopkins is said to use outdated software in an epoch when obsolescence can mean months or years. Seen from the perspective of an increasing rate of invention, such a work is a cryptic snapshot of a technological instant: the conditioned state of man and his apparatus within the artificial life-world at their furthest historical juncture.

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With digital technology, the music is created in an abstract domain of suspended time where sounds begin to resemble undying entities no longer held back by physical

constraints, their practically infinite mutability only deepening a certain resemblance to eternity.

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The music, so freely *designed* beyond space and time—to which it remains strangely bound as its source and parameter, and as that to which it must return—is in some unaccountable way like listening to one version of a dimly foreseeable future in which practically all experiences were influenced by human invention except the ineffable encounter with matter itself: the fact that there is something rather than nothing.

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Electronic dance music is thoroughly of the city as a major center for the artificial elaboration of life—an ideational matrix that anchors the historical realm (carried by all of us and no one in particular) to the present through the innumerable activities that produce human reality as it amounts to more than bare life.

Taking part in this living exchange, despite its often demoralizing intractability today, means the difference between being *subsumed* by the world and *living* in it. It means encountering the truth of the human condition in the 21<sup>st</sup> century (whatever it might be and however many things it might be.)

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As we understand ourselves through what exists, yet create what does not yet exist as that which will come to define who we are, we consider a cultural phenomenon as a reflection of ourselves.

Emerging spontaneously from the present and depending on possibilities that were once unimaginable, *Immunity* is part of an indigenous culture of our time.

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The music finds a home within the life-world of the city—the fate and arbiter of civilization—where the soil is covered for miles by the man-made environment, where the activities of dwelling conform to grid structure and time itself is divided into blocks, where the influence of the diurnal cycle dwindles because the incessant demands of business for survival cut across time zones, ignoring sun and moon—where what one fears to be an original violence (seen from the system’s harrying requirements) is sublimated in the constant unrest of interminable competition.

It exists in a “globalized” world where cause and effect overflow intuitively graspable geographies, where we disappear into the opacity of a system whose processes exceed human scales, where our deeds seem to devolve into mere consequences that are only traceable with the help of quantificational methods (climatology, statistics, managerial politics) whose informational judgments outstrip the measure of the human individual—where that which purportedly determines our personal and collective fates is not a “story,” not something we know and understand, but a set of circumstances, numbers about market forces: grossly and theoretically expressed desire.

It exists in a time when the universalized sum of human actions—a sum we’ve been forced to make by unexplained imperatives of thought, the historical accidents that put “everyone” (and every “culture”) potentially in touch with everyone and everything

else—is the total material effect of a species heading toward a predicted ecological collapse. It is a time when humanism according to “the facts” can only mean that we are all dying animals with spectacular gifts.

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At night we stare into space with our headphones on and wonder—as if this infinite, center-less expanse weren't already our home, like “a memory you can't put your finger on.”

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If the native place of music and dance in human culture remains rooted in love—sex, death, and our children—it sometimes seems as if the gross magnetism of popular music and the letting off of fruitless vital energies within the walls of a club were the only thing that a younger generation could share: the need to escape into contrived ecstasies to the side of some unbearable quotidian anxiety.

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Hopkins's weaving of sounds from his everyday life into his music—a door shutting out the distant drone of cars powered by an industry consuming itself, the nostalgic whistle and burst of fireworks, the creaking pedals of a childhood piano—quietly sustains them within a qualified forever, elevating the poignancy of what was and never will be again.

Time is passing and the temporality of our lives is mundane. Hopkins heard the door shutting every day when he came to the studio to work.

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The long process, the repeated manipulation of natural sounds into barely unrecognizable states like causes within the course of history (the sympathetic vibrations of his studio windows, the echo of his rooms), will die with him.

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Confronted with the weird and overwhelming multiplication of seeming possibility within our present—when a convergence of access to all ideas, tropes, and styles from throughout recorded history creates a space in which the most sundry things float around in a kind of cultural no-time or limbo, so that time itself moves strangely or not at all in the consequent disorganization of human ritual (leaving one perhaps with clocks, the workweek, bank holidays, and aging as the only ways to keep track of time)—how does a person who is awake overcome paralysis, personal style as a collage of the past, retrogression into more unified times and milieus?

From the careful stewardship of rhythms and melodies that originate in the mind as if from nothing, to managing the staggering technical possibilities for acoustic transformations in the service of an holistic vision, to the countless number of things one could have done in a year that is now gone besides dedicating oneself to a dubitable end—what else could guide one through this but faith in an intuition?

*Immunity* is a labor of love, if love is that which guides without explanation to the end of creation. Any less endurance to see it through to the end, nothing less would have been the gift Hopkins has given to a world that never asked for it.

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In Hopkins's music the singular coincidence of past, present and future in the unfolding "now" of musical experience casts spell, induces psychological states. His music demonstrates a more than "rational" understanding of mind as a whole: the conscious organism.

(Occurrent music would not be itself outside its dynamic relation to its past in which it constantly escapes its present moment into its future potential. These temporal relations create musical duration: in a simplified analogy, a single note with no relation to a previous note—that is, without a past—and deprived of the musical influence contained in its future does not make a melody, does not make the whole of music.

It has been argued that "consciousness" involves representations of the past—memories, emotions, experiences, categories—that endow present experience with meaning. The fact that we experience music *as* music (instead of a sequence of incoherence) is one example. Thus consciousness, too, arises from a special convergence in time and music is a gateway into the self-reflective study of mind. It is indeed a common philosophical point of departure for thinking the immediacy of our experience.)

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The repetitive days are an oblivion cut through by consciousness. Every once and a while we are led out somewhere new.

Deep into *Immunity*, the world becomes saturated with itself: normal objects stand out, uncanny to the extent that they appear exactly as usual. Sometimes you catch your reflection in the mirror and realize how much time has passed, how much has happened, how much you've aged.

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*Immunity* opens a clearing. Hopkins has loosely discussed his music in relation to meditation and as an attempt to cause “states.”

A common compositional form in his pieces is something repeating with something gradually changing over time. The repetitive patterns quiet the mind—perhaps neutralizing interference by synchronizing the brain—while gradual changes and morphing textures awaken the attention. The mind opens and focuses, sinks deeper into the composition and spreads across its surfaces. Musical elements coalesce and cut across the hypnotic progression at intervals, creating intense, orchestrated moments that spill over the whole.

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Unlike most electronic dance music that bears a family resemblance to *Immunity*—in which catchy phrases and predictable progressions lead the organism on with psychic rewards that appeal to its lowest faculties: pleasurable stimuli, the overdone cycle of build up and cheap release—Hopkins pieces sway in their own balance, cresting a wave that swells, breaks up, coheres and complexly dissipates into something new.

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The hypnotizing progressions cultivate a state of *beholding* that enters a duration beyond the temporality of daily concerns. In this state of absorbed detachment, things in the world appear for their own sake, illuminated by the mystery of their individual existences and their places in a higher order that rebuffs understanding.

The album opens wide, as if in preparation for larger things.

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The great nothingness.

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What is it like to die, to drift away beneath a sky that surpasses? (*Abandon Window* is about death: “If you’re crushed under buildings, the point at which you give up and just float away...”)

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The beginning of *Collider* evokes the disquieting initialization of a colossal machinery, the eerie background hum of a totalizing system: an emergent juggernaut comprised of

millions of human beings to which you are inescapably bound and in which your role is uncertain. We believe that this juggernaut is unhappy, forced onward by a sum of desires it doesn't understand within a system it doesn't grasp.

It came to you from nowhere. And you found yourself here.

Someone's breathing is tight, an angst-ridden gasp. The walls are closing in around this endless expansion. The never-ending dilation has become the suffocating sharpness of a single point.

The pressure builds, like a run-away impetus: the music glimmers with the panic of a loss of control: the nervous system dances with an overpowering stimulus at the vertiginous edge of pleasure and pain.

The beat begins with an erotic feminine moan that recapitulates to the pace of something inescapable. The voice swoons under the weight of an unbearable pleasure that calls out intimately from the depths of an unknown desire.

Something must happen to you. You stop fighting it. The pressure recedes. The tight-chested anxiety gives way to a soaring release still comprehended by its original containment.

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*Collider* is mesmerizingly traumatic. It breaks you up. A migrant light enters through the cracks.

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Hopkins's live set is particularly brutal and severe. Between pieces, all sounds collapse together in an explosion. The transfixing forms are pulverized in a fluid cacophony as if he were intentionally breaking his own spell.

(Consciousness has been described in “emotional terms” as a reaction to a disruption: the attempt of an organic system to re-establish homeostasis. Waking up is often violent. The seriousness of the album could be described as ascetic: the willed breaking of psychic habit for the sake of consciousness and self-determination.)

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One of the last tracks at the concert is a period of organized violence. Hopkins's skeletal frame jolts epileptically above the electronic apparatuses he manipulates for a transcendental end.

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As you sink deeper into the music—you're just there: disappearing in the flood of sound, transported outside the “prison of time.”

The trance breaks down, the clocks start ticking. Your feet are on the ground, the sun rises and sets—24 hours a day, 365 days a year.

There are perhaps 30,000 days left in the lives of Hopkins's young audience members in industrialized nations where you can freeze your oocytes to buy time for a career: *What does it want?* Many of these young audience members have probably given

up on the afterlife for an ecstatically embraced and anxiety wracked immanence whose meanings and implications are not yet understood as a communal undertaking.

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In hallowed moments the simple clarity of the piano reverberates through the antechamber of a church that doesn't exist. The beat is re-established with the force of a primordial compulsion older than humanity.

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Listening to *Immunity* I sometimes feel that the health of the world would be enough.

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In the numinous title track *Immunity*, the human heart beats warmly beneath the surging calm of an oceanic infinity. A human voice sings unrecognizable sounds; the potential of the word floats within the ether, offering all meaning in the absence of any: as if to be born and to die were enough, to make it from this side to the other with immunity.