

# review music

this week's essential reading

'U2: bring back the irony' by  
Joshua Rothman, *The New Yorker*

'It's said they got scared when "Pop" didn't sell ... Also, the media landscape which felt so problematic in 1991—frivolous-yet-momentous, trivial-yet-urgent—is now a mainstream, daily experience'



The Chemical Brothers perform in June during the Sonar festival in Barcelona, Spain. The electronica act released last month its eighth studio album. Matthias Oesterle / Zuma Wire / Corbis

# Electronic age

*Exit Planet Dust*, the futuristic first album by the epochal electronic act The Chemical Brothers, came out in the summer of 1995, which means it is now 20 years old. Such a distinction – two long and dusty decades endured – makes it mature enough to drive a car or secure a bank loan. It could be married or in the military, or otherwise occupied with some decidedly adult concerns.

*Born in the Echoes*, the eighth album by the Chemical Brothers, came out last month, which makes it, among other things, a new offering by what can effectively be called an oldies act. That might seem hyperbolic for a duo aged only 44 and 45, but the fact remains: two decades in the context of an upstart and pointedly progressive sound is a long, long time.

Electronic music has been around much longer, of course, going back to techno in the 1980s, Kraftwerk in the 1970s, and various avant-garde experimentalists all the way back to the earliest parts of the 20th century. But “electronica”, the mantle under which The Chemical Brothers got their start, eclipsed them all in its scale and potential for staying power.

Count it as a victory then that *Born in the Echoes* is solid,

strong, formidable – an album made by an act with little to prove but still, it seems, a lot on the line. Or at least a lot left to play with.

For a recent interview in Pitchfork, a photo shows the two Chemical Brothers in a studio room with an almost comical array of synthesisers and gear connected by wires that grow like jungle vines. It's dark, with lots of blinking lights switched on, and you can practically hear the hum that emits from so many machines lying in wait. In bountiful ways, *Born in the Echoes* proves to be a kind of machine record, with a focus on sounds and textures that could only come from minds deeply invested in the means of making them.

The Chemical Brothers are clearly of such a mind, with a collection of gear that would seem to rival any on the planet. But they evince a reverence for the history of dance-music styles and cultures too. History is never far from a Chemical Brothers track, however new or divergent it might seem.

*Sometimes I Feel So Deserted* opens the album in a smart and powerful mode, with a steady build-up of energy that never quite crests. Everything about it runs counter to the current EDM

obsession with the big-moment

The Chemical Brothers have been making music for two decades and are still going strong. But they are hardly the only old hands making fresh beats. **Andy Battaglia** reports

drop. The result is more acute and all the more persuasive.

*Under Neon Lights* is a club banger that gingerly evokes the composer Philip Glass, and *Just Bang* teaches a masterclass in how to do a throwback tribute to beloved old house music without throwing new ideas away. Other tracks have garnered attention for making use of vocals by St Vincent and Beck, but the success of *Born in the Echoes* owes to the Chemical Brothers alone.

Wisdom of the sort is on display all across the dance-music universe, with work from an elder generation continuing on in probing and pleasing fashion. Chill-out masters The Orb, whose origins trace back to 1988, just put out a new album, *Moonbuilding 2703 AD*, that continues a resurgence late in the artists' careers. It opens with a visitation on a theme that aims big: “If you believe in God,” a voice intones, “you believe in good, and that's as it should be – you are just fine / If you believe in evil, then you probably need a whack on the back of the neck ...”. The rest unfurls in a wandering style, with ambient swells sloshing against evocative samples and meticulous minimal-techno beats meted out with evident expertise.

Basement Jaxx, another UK treasure that got their start in

the same mid-90s milieu as The Chemical Brothers, have remained spirited evangelists for the euphoric joys and fricative effects of dance music for decades now. At a big outdoor performance last month in New York's Central Park, they had an eager audience of aged fans wriggling and jumping around, while members of the performing collective led the festivities on-stage in gorilla costumes, ballerina garb, and intergalactic attire of shiny and gleaming kinds.

Opening that same show were Masters At Work, two fabled makers of classic house music in New York. Their story dates back to 1990, when house was still finding its form as a descendant of disco, and the duo – “Little” Louie Vega and Kenny “Dope” Gonzalez – remain as revered as any electronic luminaries anywhere. The hometown crowd went crazy for them, as it has increasingly for other veterans of the scene, including Nicky Siano, a disco pioneer who recently threw a spectacular 60th-birthday party for himself and hundreds of dance-music faithful at an amusement park in Coney Island, Brooklyn.

Another way to age in dance music is to grow more serious and austere, as exemplified by Germany's Moritz Von Oswald.

A legend of techno from around the fall of the Berlin Wall, Von Oswald, born in 1962, has done as much to steer the form as anyone, especially when it comes to the pulsing, throbbing dub-techno he essentially invented.

Studiosness and solemnity have always been part of his enterprise, but they're amplified in his current incarnation with the Moritz Von Oswald Trio. It's a live band, in effect, in which improvisation and interactivity are part of the premise. With sounds played and logged, or oftentimes simultaneously, it all gets mixed down by Von Oswald's masterly hand at the mixing board.

*Sounding Lines*, the group's new album, sounds as distinguished as any dance music being created right now. It's stately, subtle, deliberate – and confident enough in its own standing to avoid needing spectacular sounds or dramatic drops to make its case. It does its duty and takes pleasure in modest aims and an honest day's work. It's old and wise – a blast from the past whose rockets are still thrusting, however more measuredly than the fiery explosions at the start.

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## ▶ the playlist three acts that show no sign of slowing down

**Don't Think**  
The Chemical Brothers  
(2012)

Lest anyone be surprised that Brothers still have energy to burn, this DVD chronicles a live performance full of supercharged rhythms and psychedelic visuals as filmed by 20 cameras and edited into a multimedia fantasia.



**Junto**  
Basement Jaxx  
(Atlantic Jaxx; PIAS, 2014)

When not putting on their magnificently madcap live show, Basement Jaxx still make spirited albums—including this offering full of memorable sing-song anthems with thwacking house beats.



**Safe in Harbour**  
Vilod  
(Perlon, 2015)

Max Loderbauer is a member of the Moritz Von Oswald and also this new duo alongside Ricardo Villalobos. Here they make smart, searching creations that double as sound-art and dance music for the minimally inclined.

