

# music

# The old new wave

A growing force in Brooklyn's vibrant underground music scene, Ford & Lopatin use analogue synthesisers and old drum machines to take sounds recognisably rooted in the 1980s and recast them as something entirely new, writes Andy Battaglia

Ford & Lopatin, two young artists at work in New York, make music that teaches a new lesson for the ages: vintage matters less these days than advantage. Every tone and note they manufacture, using old synthesizers and MIDI sequencers, sounds rooted in a particular era – specifically the 1980s. And not just the impressionistic whole of the decade, but carefully chosen moments within it – montages from certain movies, scenes of leisure on the patios of particular pools, forgotten stories of idle everyday happenings.



Channel Pressure Ford & Lopatin

It's all very period-faithful even though Ford & Lopatin's music is not really Eighties at all. It's true that many of the tools used to make it are the same as they were way back when, and the results could easily have made sense on that era's radio playlists. But the whole mindset of the music is different, not to mention the presence of a question that continues to linger: what does the idea of the 1980s mean to those who can barely remember living within it? Joel Ford and Daniel Lopatin met when they were kids in high school and have made music, together and apart, for many years. Not that many though – they are both only 28 years old, born in 1983. The allure of Ford & Lopatin is more than mere historical simulation, however. Theirs is less a project in recreating history than an exercise in revising, rewriting, recapitulating – an exercise in turn-

ing history inside-out so as to push it forward and ultimately dispense with it altogether.

That might sound like a lot for a pop act to take on, but Ford & Lopatin seem smart enough – and definitely technologically agile enough – to do such a project justice.

Lopatin, especially, has established himself as a sort of sage philosopher and theorist of the young and humming musical underground, in New York and further afield. Under his alias Oneohtrix Point Never, he's charged to the top of the list of young artists using old gear – analogue synthesizers, cruddy vintage drum machines, and so on – to make sounds fit for inclusion in the old new wave.

The style he favours in his Oneo-

trix guise is more ambient and experimental, but Lopatin pulls all of what he does together in the end. And he does so with a full awareness of what it might mean in an era when technology is all around him.

In an interview in 2009 with *Im-pose* magazine, Lopatin sketched out the contours of a context for his own work and that by similar artists of his generation. More important than any one particular sound or style, he said, is "something even grander in scale that is happening, something that deals more broadly with new technologies that enable us to detour rigid works into malleable works". He continued: "Really, we're entering into a very crude, very rude age for the digital arts. The dreams of 1970s and 1980s engineers working in the field of media arts are now easily retrieved, processed and ultimately dispatched back into society without all the smoke and mirrors. Lots – to do such a project justice."

One need not look far for work that adheres to such values, from odd web experiments that use remixed video and repurposed sound to ambitious ventures into hacking old software for established galleries with white walls.

In New York for instance, digital artist Cory Arcangel has become the youngest artist in nearly 40 years to garner a full-floor exhibition at the prestigious Whitney



Joel Ford and Daniel Lopatin. Courtesy Shawn Brackbill

Museum of American Art, thanks in part to a breakthrough piece in which he removed everything but the slowly floating clouds from the graphic interface of an old copy of the *Super Mario Bros* video game.

Nowhere are such practices more prevalent, however, than in the murky margins of underground music where Ford & Lopatin thrive. Practising their craft in public for a few years now (until recently under the stage name Games), the duo live in the hi-fi hinterlands of bohemian Brooklyn, where old analogue synthesizers and computer modules have increasingly come to replace things like guitars and drums. They are figureheads of a scene, so much so that they've started their own imprint (called Software) for a sizeable indie record label, Mexican Summer, whose ownership also set them up with their state-of-the-art studio to work and mess around in.

To that end, Lopatin has spoken of his new home as "a vertically integrated label studio" where he and Ford can produce their label mates and friends, some of whom – Laurel Halo, How to Dress Well, and Autre Ne Veut, among many others – have been gaining in terms of notice and regard.

The most focused attention, however, has gone to Ford & Lopatin themselves, who just put out their debut full-length album, *Channel Pressure*. A good way into it comes by way of the cover: a stylised photograph of a guy splayed out in bed in an iridescent bedroom. What else do we see in that image? There's a big TV, a joystick, a keyboard, sets of looming speakers, blinking screens, floods of alternately soothing and eerie white light. It looks like an idyll of a teenage boy at home, or else the aftermath of a visitation by whatever was on the other

side of the TV screen in *Poltergeist*.

The music sounds like that, too. After a flurry of introductory sound-effects and a calming title track, *Channel Pressure* strikes out most forcefully with *Emergency Room*, a song that goes big on 1980s pomp and drama while managing to subvert the expectations of what such sounds are normally made to service. Borderline-embarrassing splodges of MIDI bass – imagine something Ferris Bueller might have tapped out on his keyboard while goofing off in his room – angle the song towards the past, but then there's a vertiginous swirl to the production of it that couldn't have actually happened decades ago.

Speaking about such an effect in an interview with the website *Altered Zones*, Lopatin said: "We've always wanted to experiment in this way, to cut up music

that doesn't want to be cut up." That goes a long way towards signalling what's most interesting about Ford & Lopatin: the way they take sounds, tones, and timbres so recognisably rooted in a certain time – in this case the 1980s of new-wave designs and synth-pop dreams – and recast them, by way of contemporary computer tools and holistic ways of thinking common among young artists for whom computers themselves are tools, as something new.

It's not quite deconstruction, either; instead of channelling their energy into dressing such sounds down or pulling them apart, Ford & Lopatin manage to build up a sort of mutant form of tribute or homage that steers around the sentimental aspects of nostalgia and drives down into the sense of wonder that has yet to fall away from aspects of the past. That sense

of wonder isn't always easy to locate, as evidenced by any number of musical acts who go through the motions of touting their historical lineage too closely to leave anything to the imagination. But it's all over *Channel Pressure*, in songs that sound totally 1980s but which, if they were to travel back in time, would totally freak out anybody who heard them.

In the same interview with *Altered Zones*, Lopatin likened his working process to "something more in line with hybridisation or alchemy." At their best, Ford & Lopatin make one wonder where the two of those – clinical hybridisation and mystical alchemy – begin and end.

Andy Battaglia is a New York-based writer whose work appears in *The Wall Street Journal*, *Artforum*, *Spin* and *Pitchfork*.

## this week's essential reading

{ *The ghettoisation of pink: how it has cornered the little-girl market* by Peggy Orenstein, *The Observer*

} 'It's not that pink is intrinsically bad, but it is such a tiny slice of the rainbow and, though it may celebrate girlhood in one way, it also firmly fuses girls' identity to appearance'

## playlist

Releasing the pressure: four artists who spring to mind when listening to F&L's new album

### Scritti Politti

Absolute (2011)

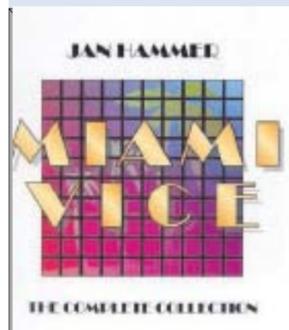
Green Gartside and company are perennial favourites of these pages and, indeed, impossible to ignore in this context. *Emergency Room*, F&L's recent single, sounds so true to the brand of perfect pop that Scritti Politti crafted in the mid-80s, it wouldn't look out of place on this recent retrospective of their work.



### Jan Hammer

Miami Vice: Complete Collection (2002)

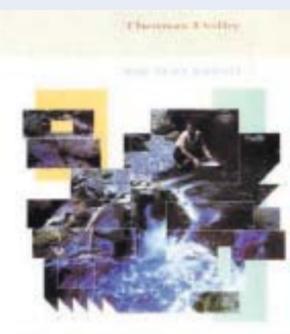
Hammer is also hard to ignore in this context. F&L used his studio to record their debut, a nod, perhaps, to the kit they expected to plunder in pursuit of their sound and, obviously, because nothing says mid-80s more than settling down on the sofa and listening to Hammer's belting theme tune.



### Thomas Dolby

The Flat Earth (1984)

A few fan sites are awash with the influences F&L wear on their musical sleeves, from Depeche Mode to Gary Numan – and this man. By his own estimate, Dolby has released 26 albums. He will (one suspects) be best remembered for this gem, which includes *Hyperactive*, a big hit in both the US and UK.



### Carly Simon

Why (1982)

F&L use this as the closing track on a recent mix compilation that also features (naturally) Scritti Politti. Originally produced by Nile Rodgers and Bernard Edwards of Chic-fame, the song is a perfect fit for the duo's chilled sound. Getting lost in music has rarely sounded this good or (oddly) this contemporary.

