

# music

# 21st century creatures

Andy Battaglia looks at two avant-garde American artists who use surreal musical and video landscapes to draw attention to the foibles and absurdities of the digital age

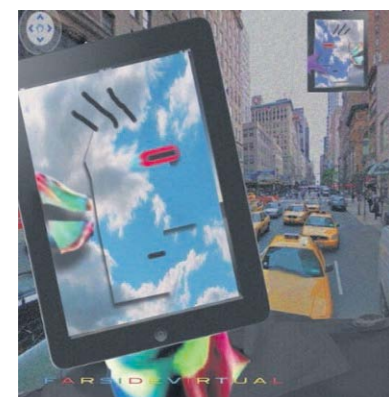
Virtual sushi in Dubai, beguiling fashion in New York, a repurposed mansion in the California hills – what do all of these have in common? Everything and nothing at once.

They're all sources for fantasy, of a sort. Each is tantalising on its surface, a subject worthy of impulse and aspiration. But then, as they linger, each begins to turn weird, to reveal itself as mysterious or somehow void of meaning. What is "virtual" sushi? In what scheming or devious ways might fashion beguile? How could anything in California be anything other than really weird?

The essential vacancy of them all makes each more tantalising still, until a feedback loop sets up an alternately fascinating and dispiriting link between desire and repulsion, serenity and despair.

This might be the resting state for some of us living in the modern world. Most certainly it is a subject for some very interesting art.

James Ferraro, a musician connected to New York and Los Angeles, writes pop songs about such a state, and to resounding effect. His music is bright and approachable, and his ambition to entice and endear a listener is clear. Or at least they are on *Far Side Virtual*, a new album that is as irresistible as it is hard to pin down. Ferraro, for his part, has not always been mindful of pop. Work of his in the past has tended towards the smeary and the



**Far Side Virtual**  
James Ferraro  
Hippos In Tanks  
Dh23

impressionistic, with a collage-like aesthetic guided by esoteric gestures and marked by an obscurely lo-fi sense of sound. Some of it has been beautiful and moving, to be sure, but none of it would be mistaken as a soundtrack for realms outside the most patient and attentive musical underground.

For *Far Side Virtual*, he cleaned up, comparatively. The welcoming strains of the opening track include heartrending trills of piano, bouncy rhythms from a chirpy drum machine, and synthesiser tones tuned to woo.

It's all very pleasant and pleasing, almost aggressively so. It's also wordless except for a title, *Linden Dollars*.

For those with no sense of what that might mean, a clue arrives in the next song, in which a stilted computer voice asks, "Sir, would you wish to receive *The New Yorker* on your iPad?" It's a consumer query for a heady old-fashioned magazine to be delivered in a distended virtual form, presented out-of-context enough to suggest just how strange and incongruous such a query could seem to be. But it doesn't come across that way; it's more natural and familiarising, in fact, than any contrived song lyrics could hope to be. It's a mode of communication we have all come to know, intimately.

It's also disarming for the ways it plays as both surreally funny and sad. More than we might like to admit, as early 21st-century creatures we are wowed by means of technology and modes of communication that are certain to prove dated with time. Even the most high-tech of our advances are fated for anachronism, so that voice-controlled requests for directions from an iPhone or halting conversations on Skype will come to sound, some time soon, like a 1920s character barking commands for the transmission of a telegram.

Ferraro doesn't labour to force such associations, but part of the impact of *Far Side Virtual* owes to how his music is grounded in an immediate and fleeting sense of the present. The concept for the album, inasmuch as a concept



The concept for James Ferraro's album stems from the virtual worlds of Second Life (above) and SimCity.

seems to exist, stems from Second Life and SimCity, virtual online worlds that play like fantasy videogames while focusing on such mundane matters as the accumulation of status and goods. This leads Ferraro, followed by computer voices cooing updates and invitations, on trips through inner and outer worlds.

A short song called *Dubai Dream Tone* summons a rapturous sense of drama with gleaming sheets of sound from synthesisers and keyboards, all made to sound very much ephemeral and manufactured. In *Palm Trees, Wi-Fi* and *Dream Sushi*, Ferraro is treated to a fancy meal by way of awkward robo voices speaking as ambassadors for iCuisine. "Please take a look at the virtual sushi menu," a waiter says. "One has chosen California roll, right away sir." A voice that identifies itself as Virtual Chef #2 urges Ferraro to "try the masterful taste of Dubai's finest wine".

The voice continues: "Sir, Richard Branson's avatar says hello." Songs of the sort make up the whole of *Far Side Virtual* and ad-

dress, with a mix of mania and glee, notions of luxury and excess, of fruitful fantasy and utter ridiculousness. Ferraro himself seems simultaneously critical of and consumed by such ideas, to the point where easy interpretation proves elusive. His music is at times pointedly gaudy, tacky, and cheap, made with hokey keyboard presets and sounds that could fit into theme songs for TV sitcoms from the '80s. At the same time, it's elaborately imagined and composed, turning notions of artful evocation and "taste" inside-out.

Another young American artist, Ryan Trecartin, guides a similar project by way of awkward and appealing form of video art. Shown to great fanfare this summer in New York and on view overseas now at the Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris, his wonderfully ostentatious videos collected under the title "Any Ever" address contemporary manias – scattered states of mind, information overload, inexplicable cravings for excessive commercialism – and smear them all around. There's a

sense of hapless horror at play in his work, which moves in a thousand different directions at once, but there's also a radiant and infectious desire for more, more, more.

His videos are put up for view online (including on the avant-garde art site www.ubuweb.com), but a new book, *Any Ever*, takes on the daunting task of translating their frenetic energy to stillness. Page after page is slathered with layers of stimuli, from actors in attractively monstrous makeup and farcical clothes to settings inside the California "McMansion" that Trecartin took over and turned into an outlandish home for him and his friends. On top of the images are bits of surreal and strangely poetic dialogue, delivered in the videos in fitful bursts of sped-up or otherwise distorted voices:

"Remember back when time was money?"  
"I'm touch-screen sensitive."  
"I hate gay people, I hate straight people & I hate iTunes."

"I've been a CEO since birth."  
"Am I over-existing or am I over-existing, that's my inside joke."  
"I'm going to name my first-born VISA and then I'm going to abandon her."  
"I need to feel endless in both directions."

On the page, the disjointed lines of dialogue make up a kaleidoscopic tome that reads like a freakish transcription of what zings through the ether in any given moment in any given day. Fed through the post-production prism of the videos, they work as well as a sort of human-alien music. In an essay in the book, Linda Norden, a curator and critic, considers ways that Trecartin "intends his viewers to be listeners as well, something a younger generation may be better primed to embrace".

That multimedia aspect of Trecartin's work – the way it feels reductive to think of it in isolated terms of video or sound or stage-settings for images in a book – comes across as thrillingly new.

It's multimedia art expanded out into a new form of omnimedia or, even more so, transmedia art.

The same applies to James Ferraro, whose music is understood best in a context wider than just music itself. The cover for *Far Side Virtual* hints at a sort of all-encompassing, post-taste aesthetic that plays out for him visually as well as aurally, not to mention through a beguiling fashion sense that finds Ferraro in real life sometimes sporting ludicrous moustaches or talking about the significance of Carrie Bradshaw on the TV show *Sex and the City*.

The cover art features an iPad and a bad-bit-rate photo of a New York street scene from Google Earth. It looks both dated and conscripted by the here and now. It serves as a tribute to a contemporary moment that is fleeting but also totemic to our time. Is there really any difference?

Andy Battaglia is a New York-based writer whose work appears in *The Wall Street Journal*, *The Wire*, *Bookforum* and more.

## this week's essential reading

{ Artistic licence to kill' by Jonathan Jones, The Guardian

} London's Design Museum has added the Kalashnikov AK-47 assault rifle to its collection. But can a killing machine be a design classic? asks Jones

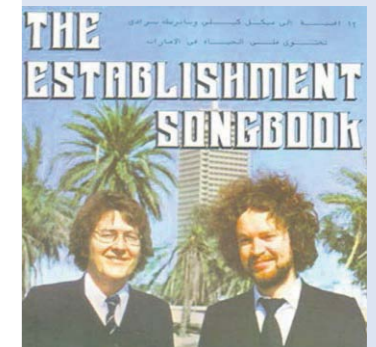
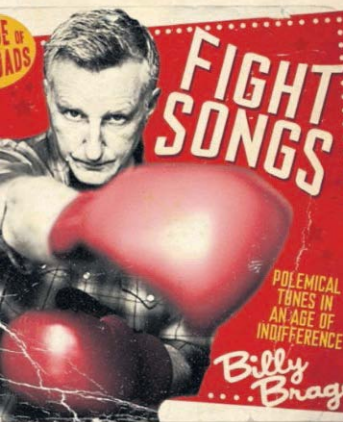
## playlist

### From Dubai Dream Tone to Billy Bragg's Abu Dhabi moment and DJ Stex's Ajman opus

#### Billy Bragg

Last Flight to Abu Dhabi (2011)

The second track on Bragg's latest collection of pared down protest songs finds the Essex artist in typically punchy mood, musing over the plight of "Jonty the Banker" who went from boom to bust betting on derivatives before catching on a plane to our capital. I don't fancy Jonty's chances of getting residency, do you?



#### The Establishment & Sal Davies

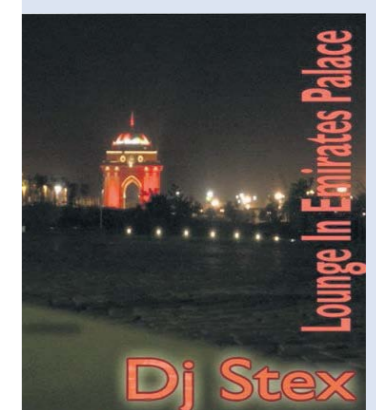
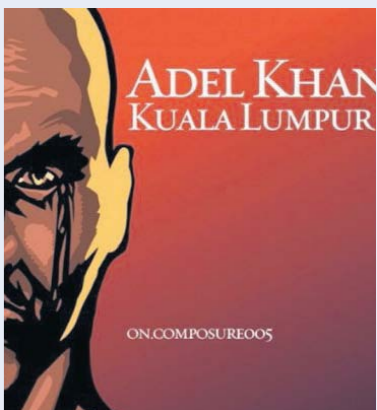
Back in Dubai (1984)

Regarded as something of a "lost" mid-1980s classic, this song is sure to induce a tremor of nostalgia in all but the most restrained of long-term expats, even if it does sound like Davis is either a poor man's Neil Diamond or a rich man's Joe Fagin.

#### Adel Khan

Sharjah Sundown (2009)

Khan's globe-trotting dance album name checks Dubai, Hollywood, Malaysia and Sharjah in the course of the 14-tracks that make up *Kuala Lumpur*, his 2009 debut. And just like the northern emirate it references, *Sharjah Sundown* is well worth a visit.



#### DJ Stex

Ajman (2009)

Culled from *Lounge in Emirates Palace*, Stex's nine-track album cites no less than six emirates and the garden city of Al Ain in this distracting collection of chilled dance music. Oddly, Umm Al Qaiwain doesn't make the cut, while for once, little old Ajman manages to outshine all the rest.