

review music

this week's essential reading

'Up from the hold: the story of tap'
by Joan Acocella, The New Yorker

'At its high tide, the nineteen-twenties through the fifties, tap was everywhere: in movies, in musicals, in vaudeville and above all in clubs. Then something happened'

Electronic avant-garde

The sounds of Oneohtrix Point Never reside in the realms of fantasy. **Andy Battaglia** enjoys a journey through utopian and dystopian worlds, along with some mesmerising, discordant beats



Garden of Delete
Oneohtrix Point Never
Warp Records
Dh44

Oneohtrix Point Never is a maven of strangeness. The signal-scrambling begins with his name, which is evidently a reference to a radio station near where he grew up.

"I can't remember how it happened exactly," he said in an interview years ago, "but it's my homage to Magic 106.7, Boston's continuous soft rock".

Say the numbers out loud, preferably in a silky smooth radio announcer's voice, and you come close to his unwieldy – but also weirdly intriguing – moniker.

The inscrutability ranges far and wide, however, to almost every aspect of the artist also known as Daniel Lopatin. He first came to attention less than a decade ago as a vintage-synthesiser fetishist with an ear for ambient sounds rooted in the 1970s and '80s, when acts like Cluster, Vangelis, and Tangerine Dream roamed the Earth.

His was the kind of style that burbled and oozed in soundtracks to movies at the time, many of them bad (the movies, not the soundtracks), and still proffered a sense of fealty and devotion to electronic sound as a signifier of utopian/dystopian science fiction dreams.

Gradually his music turned grittier and more discordant, almost immediately in fact. After the plaintive and mesmerising *Rifts* introduced him to much of the world in 2009, *Returnal*, an eagerly-awaited album the next year, opened with a blast of static and screaming that fought for supremacy beneath layers and layers – and still more layers – of noise.

The opening song title, *Nil Admirari*, is a Latinism and translates as "to be excited by nothing", suggesting a state of balance or poise that prepares a person for anything out of the ordinary that might stand to happen. It was a fool's game, though, to imagine such a measured state of mind around music so assaulting.

The rest of *Returnal* mellowed out for the most part, enough so that a gentle piano-based rework of its title song with the angel-voiced singer Antony Hegarty (of Antony and the Johnsons) soon followed, and a mix of dynamics and new directions in sound has defined the One-



Oneohtrix Point Never, real name Daniel Lopatin, is an American experimental musician. The name Oneohtrix is a homage to a radio station in Boston. Courtesy Andrew Strasser

ohtrix Point Never oeuvre ever since.

Many musicians change from album to album, or at least aspire to, but Oneohtrix Point Never truly has been a study in shape-shifting from the start.

The latest shape, stretched and twisted and mangled as it is, arrives in the form of *Garden of Delete*, a new album as beguiling and captivating as any he has made.

"I like sculptures and films," Lopatin said in a recent interview in *Vanity Fair*, when asked what non-musical sources give him inspiration.

"I mostly just like the cinema and sitting in a park or garden, and if I'm lucky, there might be a Tony Smith [sculpture] there."

Tony Smith was an artist in the 1960s and '70s who helped to introduce Minimalism as a movement and an idea. His sculptures, radical at the time and arresting even still, are stark, elemental geometric forms that work to both encourage and refute any and all suggestion of easy meaning or interpretation.

Art like his inspired the enigmatic monolith in Stanley Kubrick's epochal film *2001: A Space Odyssey*, which attached much of the evolution of the world to the presence of a big,

black rectangular shape whose significance and purpose remain a total mystery.

Oneohtrix Point Never is a musician to be sure – and more of a maximalist than a minimalist at any rate – but the language of sculpture comes in handy when appraising sounds so at odds with any conventional notion of melody, harmony, symmetry and all the other elements that define the common language of songs.

Garden of Delete is less an album of songs than a collection of aural-sculptural things to be approached, surrounded, picked up, scrutinised and observed at different angles. Each track rewards such activity and to make their points fully, each in fact requires it in the end.

The album also comes with a back-story signalled by the first full track, *Ezra*. The boy named Ezra, it turns out, is a pimple-faced teenage music geek who likes a hypothetical rock genre called "hypergrunge" and is also an alien from outer space. Prior to the album's release, a torrent of mysterious multimedia missives introduced Ezra to the world online, with little hint as to who he was or how (or even if) he was related to Oneohtrix Point Never. He had an active blog and a Twitter account, and

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he was an avowed fan of Kaoss Edge, the preeminent hypergrunge band on the theoretical scene.

It was all imaginary (the teenage geek as well as the band) but instructive too – Ezra was a stand-in for Oneohtrix Point Never, and Kaoss Edge was the kind of group one can easily imagine moping its way through the 1990s cultural firmament.

"It's a fantasy construction of a kind of vague recollection of my childhood, a composite of traumatic memories," Lopatin told *Fact* magazine.

He was talking about the intense and sometimes scary exhilaration that feeds into early fandom as well as reactions to bodily changes that attend a child beginning to morph into an adult – the kind of changes that equate, in Lopatin's metaphorical mind at least, to horror movies and the dejected aesthetics integral to disaffected movements like grunge, "hypergrunge" and all that follows.

Garden of Delete is, suitably, an abstracted sort of rock 'n' roll album, with gnarled guitars, pummeling drums and all manner of other sounds snarled in Oneohtrix Point Never's usual electronic morass.

It was inspired by an unex-

pected tour stint opening for Nine Inch Nails, whose writhing angst and industrial heaviness clearly left an impression. But everything is so thoroughly deconstructed and rearranged that the result sounds like nothing before – by Oneohtrix Point Never or anyone else otherwise.

The all-out abstraction is not going to appeal to the idle listener – this is harsh music that even a seasoned avant-gardist might find taxing at times – but the kinds of otherworldly tension and release at play in tracks such as *Sticky Drama*, *Animals* and *Mutant Standard* are transporting in their effects.

The last one, aptly titled for the whole (*Mutant Standard* – what a pleasing paradox), is an eight-minute fantasia full of elastic electronic pulses, wide-eyed synthesiser sounds and rhythms that rumble at a seemingly tectonic scale.

It's so dramatic as to be disquieting more than savage or severe – strange music in which the mutations and changes make the most abnormal state make sense.

Andy Battaglia is a writer based in New York, whose work appears in The Wall Street Journal, Frieze, The Paris Review and more.

▶ the playlist three more albums that push aural boundaries

Channel Pressure

Ford and Lopatin
(Software, 2011)

With Joel Ford, Daniel Lopatin made glorious would-be pop music that sounds pleasingly out of time. It combines krautrock, synth-pop and prog-fusion. The sounds are rooted in the past and the future but somehow never the present.



My Love Is Rotten to the Core

Tim Hecker
(Substratif, 2002)

Fellow cracked-ambient master (and sometime Lopatin collaborator) Tim Hecker reworked the world of Van Halen on this bizarre experiment that enlisted old songs and interviews and slathered them with noise.



Aurora

Ben Frost
(40:25, 2014)

Seething and intense but stirringly beautiful too, this recent album by the Australian, Iceland-based Ben Frost takes electronic music towards rock but winds up somewhere else entirely. It was critically acclaimed and lauded as one of the best of the year.

