

review the music

this week's essential reading

'Rave new world revisited' by
Matt Diehl, www.pitchfork.com

'NASA took the UK acid-house movement, the warm, sunny, friendly rave scene of LA, and then the gritty deep house and hip-hop of New York, and put it all in one place'



As a DJ and music producer, Theo Parrish can meld disparate styles and genres into something entirely new — not always completely successfully. Courtesy Violette Esmeralda

Beats working

An ever-experimental techno trailblazer, Theo Parrish exemplifies the sound of Detroit, a city in decline but where stories of rebirth abound, writes Andy Battaglia

From the mysterious American city of Detroit, where sounds from the past slide into the silence of the future, Theo Parrish makes dance music that dares you not to dance. In a realm known for its aversion to subtlety, he is so subtle sometimes as to be a cipher, obscuring the beat or otherwise making it hard to find. When he's not — when he slips free the surly bonds of nuance for an approach more earthy and direct — he is so ecstatic that it would be impossible not to dance. Sometimes a groove is as good as it gets.

Parrish has made a career of affirming such simple truths. Among fellow electronic-music makers and practitioners of the elusive art of the DJ, he is a legend, revered and respected in equal measure. Part of that is because he is good — and not just good but really, really good, in ways that are unique. Part of it, however, owes just as much to how he can be bad, or at least very difficult.

As a DJ, Parrish can be as fun and commanding as anyone who ever took the controls. With an adventurous ear, he moves through styles — disco, house, techno, recent R&B, old soul — in a way that suggests such styles should more often intermingle. With his hands, he plays with the actual sounds in theatrical ways, working equaliser dials and knobs to toggle the treble, drop out the bass and then send both rushing up together in the mix. When he's at the top of his game, Parrish can make a dance floor positively tremble.

He can also do the opposite. In his many years of reputation-making, Parrish has built up as much renown for stretches that are slow or flat or in some

or other way confusing. His liking of R&B can make for moments of string-streaked euphoria, but R&B is often not nearly fast enough to keep a dance floor moving. Jazz, too, can be as rewarding as anything, but it's not always what a prospective fan went out to the club to hear.

Part of the thrill of going to see Parrish is contending with the risk that he might be in a mystifying mood while also knowing, with certainty, that even his most confounding moves are part of a whole that is more complex and complete than almost anybody else.

The same goes for his recordings. Since the late 1990s, his releases have suggested several different artists at work at once — the mark of a significant artist indeed. His latest, *American Intelligence*, on his own label, Sound Signature, is his best album. He hasn't made many actual albums, though (he prefers singles and compilations instead), so the distinction only means so much.

American Intelligence is distinct, however. Over two CDs or three vinyl LPs, Parrish puts a lot of his allure on display as the running time wanders beyond two hours. *Drive* gets off to a sultry start, with a burble of a bass line beneath a spacious beat meted out on cymbals and a snare. A voice repeats the question "Where's your drive?", calling you — the listener — to attention.

Life Spice follows with a sample of a squiggle of electric guitar and some strange-sounding strings that ratchet up the drama to a fever pitch. In the middle of it, as drums start crashing and the head has reflexively taken to nodding along, it's worth pausing to appreciate how Par-



American Intelligence
Theo Parrish
Sound Signature
Dh200

rish's music can be so funky and so abstract at once. There's nothing like a familiar beat to direct you, but somehow *Life Spice* is hypnotic and catalysing at the same time — an engine for zoned-out spells and constant motion.

The album gets better and busier as it goes along. *Cypher Delight* is startling for how much it does with essentially nothing other than drum sounds. As it changes emphasis and inflection over seven minutes, it seems to turn, like a sculpture placed on a pedestal that spins to give the viewer a chance to spy the same object from all angles. In *Enjoy Watching You*, a small crew of voices tilts the titular words to repeat the phrase "I enjoy what you do," at one point even yelling it in a manner that lends a bit of menace to a sentiment that would seem to be simple and complimentary. It's clear, as is usually the case with him, that Parrish isn't out for plain enjoyment but rather something more lasting and pure.

At the end of *Ah*, a lone mystifying misstep that goes on way

too long (10 very slow minutes), a man asks a child a couple of questions about his homeland: "Do you know what I'm talking about when I talk about Detroit? What do you like about Detroit?" The child thinks, then says: "I'm still figuring it out." The man laughs and says: "You're still figuring it out? I heard that," and then laughs some more.

There's no separating Theo Parrish from Detroit, a city as rich with significance as any in America. Its story is one of rise and fall and, depending on how things go, either further falling or miraculous resurrection. Since the 80s, when techno was effectively invented there, Detroit has endured an ongoing state of collapse, and it only gets more dire.

For the past year, until just last week, the city was declared financially bankrupt, and news in the US abounds with lines such as this, from a recent story in *The New York Times*: "In and around the abandoned houses on Mount Vernon Street, brawls and shootings have erupted, a dogfighting ring has been established, stolen cars were traded and drug deals consummated." So many buildings in the city are abandoned that a new genre of photography has been born, as identified by the artist James Hoff in a painting titled *Photographing the Ruins of Detroit Syndrome*. It's abstract, quizzical, confounding — like the state of Detroit itself.

Stories of rebirth are percolating too. Artists and young people are moving there, lured by the prospect of big, paid for little money and armed with noble ideas aligned with notions of community activism, food of community and mindful food. A cultural institution in New York,

the Galapagos Art Space, just announced plans to leave Brooklyn after nearly 20 years for a new home in Detroit instead; the news made mention of securing an enormous 600,000-square-foot building "for the price of a small apartment in New York City".

The mythology surrounding Detroit, some of it bad and some of it good, has informed music from there for ages, from the classic 60s/70s era of Motown soul to the later years when techno took root. At a recent symposium at MoMA PS1, an art museum in New York, the Detroit dance-music collective Underground Resistance held court, with a DJ set followed by a heady panel discussion on how the sound of Detroit jams the signals of the future, the present and the past.

For the musical segment, DJ Nomadico summoned African music, mechanised electro and spacey disco in the service of a set that represented the beloved home city well. During the talk, Mad Mike Banks tried to sum up the spirit of dance music in Detroit at the fabled beginning. "Everything was coded," he said. "Nothing was revealed. If you could engineer the sound of a rumour..."

Theo Parrish grows from the same ground, where mystery makes its own kind of currency and poetry turns real. It might help explain his tendency to play hide-and-seek with the beat and make dancing during the hiding parts — and dancing like crazy — the only reasonable response.

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

▶ the playlist

Four more releases that capture the special ambience of modern Detroit



Forevernevermore
Moodymann,
Peacefrog (2000)

Moodymann is one of Theo Parrish's stylistic brothers in arms, with a wonderfully weird sound that floats among house music, techno and disco like a radio dial on the fritz. He's also a total eccentric known to throw rollerskating parties with free soul food in Detroit.



Interstellar Fugitives
Underground Resistance
Underground Resistance
(1998)

This collection from the late 1990s gathers a lot of the main Underground Resistance members — including Suburban Knight, The Aztec Mystic and Mad Mike — in a banging, burbling example of techno at its most elemental.



Sessions
Carl Craig
IK7 (1998)

This compilation by one of Detroit's most refined practitioners of the techno arts plays like a DJ playlist for a club of everybody's dreams. Styles combine nicely and many of the tracks are either originals or remixes made for others who invariably wind up sounding better.



Uget
Theo Parrish
Ugly Edits (2011)

Aside from making classics of his own, one of Parrish's hobbies is creating "edits" of others' work — like remixes but tending to be more unofficial and comprehensive. This two CD collection gathers 21 festive anthems.