

GET WELL SOON THE HORROR

Release: 08th of June 2018
Caroline International

“Fear is a theme that comes up pretty quickly if you try to understand the strange mood of our society,” says GET WELL SOON’s Konstantin Gropper about his stylistic volte-face from LOVE to THE HORROR. “It seems to be a big common denominator.” Inevitable then, but also entirely in keeping with an artist who has already made an album about the apocalypse – 2012’s grandiose The Scarlet Beast O’Seven Heads – and writes songs titled ‘I Sold My Hands For Food So Please Feed Me’ and ‘We Are Safe Inside While They Burn Down Our House’.

GET WELL SOON
THE HORROR



Dissecting basic human emotions brings out the best in Gropper, an approach he’s honed since the sweeping, cabaret-style vaudeville of his critically acclaimed debut Rest Now, Weary Head! You Will Get Well Soon in 2008. Five more albums have followed, earning him rave reviews in his native Germany, France, the UK, and the rest of the world. As a result of his early success, opportunities came knocking, and Gropper took full advantage, lending his musical ability to numerous projects. To date, he’s worked extensively as a soundtrack composer, scoring five feature films – including work for Wim Wenders – a television series, and several theme songs for TV shows, alongside composing for the theatre and working as a producer for a number of artists, ranging from platinum-selling rap-albums to chamber-pop singer-songwriters. All of which shows the range and diversity of his prodigious – and prolific – talent.

But it’s as GET WELL SOON that Gropper has found the freedom to fully express his songwriting skills and musical ideas. He’s been compared in the past to artists as diverse as Arcade Fire, Tom Waits, Beirut, or the elegant, baroque-pop of Rufus Wainwright, Richard Hawley and The Divine Comedy, but like every artist, as his stature has grown, so too has his musical palette and sources of inspiration. 2016’s LOVE was a beautifully poised collection of tender songs exploring the mystery of humanity’s most crucial emotion, full of pop flourishes and wry observations, and while THE HORROR sits at the opposite end of the thematic spectrum, the widescreen, cinematic soundscapes remain, inspired by film scores, classical 20th Century composers such as Charles Ives and Morton Feldman, and Nelson Riddle, Frank Sinatra’s arranger and orchestrator.

That last name is significant. Always keen to set himself new challenges, THE HORROR is, among other things, Gropper's homage to Sinatra and the concept albums of his 1950's heyday. "I've always wanted to be a crooner," he says by way of explanation, "and Sinatra's work is among the best and most complex ever arranged in pop music." In less skillful hands, such lofty ambitions could lapse into easy-listening pastiche, but Gropper is far too meticulous for that. Daring and open hearted, THE HORROR is a rich tapestry where soaring strings mingle with booming pop and queasy field recordings; his voice, always warm and sonorous, has never sounded better, flowing through songs like liquid chocolate.

While THE HORROR is guided by fear in all its forms – "fear as a motivator, as an obstacle, as a consultant, and as a political weapon, both socially and privately," Gropper explains – it's also an album of stark contrasts that revels in slow reveals, tantalizing with each listen. This starts with the cover itself, an expressionless black dog – an image forever associated with depression – staring unnervingly into your eyes from the corner of some rustic, sun-dappled room. "It's an understatement compared to the opulence of the music," says Gropper of the image he came across in a photography book. "That's a nice counterpoint." Is the dog benevolent, or intent on stealing your soul? Such tension lies at the heart of the record, lurking under every surface and around every corner.

For many artists, inspiration is a fickle beast, only sporadically striking. Gropper has always worked methodically though, beavering away at musical ideas and dealing with topics as they come to him. By his own admission, he gets bored quickly, "so I jump to something very different. 'Love', as a subject, came to me, then 'fear' urged itself on me." He didn't explicitly set out to make a political album, but found that "it's hard these days to make something that doesn't capture the current climate. I've never consciously taken notice of the state of the world, but there was always this aspect to my previous records, a reaction to what was going on around me; it's always there, and I wouldn't actively work against that. At the moment, doing an escapist album just wasn't as option; it's not the time for that."

Contrasts have long been one of Gropper's motifs, and THE HORROR is no exception. Built around three of his most unedifying nightmares – "the most honest fears I have to offer," he says – the music stands in opposition to the weighty subject matter. "Subversive," is his succinct summary. "On first listen it's 'nice', but here and there it starts to fall apart and feel weird." It certainly sounds uncomfortable; from the opening rumble and sickly strings and woodwind of 'Future Ruins Pt.2', THE HORROR walks the line between uneasiness and dreamy detachment, discomfort acting as a correction to the album's airier flights of fancy.

In the realm of horror, that which is unseen (or unheard) inspires the greatest fear, and as a film aficionado, Gropper knows to keep his listeners on edge, leaving his monsters in the shadows. "I didn't want to make an album that sounds horrifying – if you make it too obvious, you ruin the whole thing," he reasons. He's also aware that the dramatic depictions of dystopia so commonly found in sci-fi promulgate complacency, a failing he gets around by anchoring the nightmarish mood in reality; the thunder of collapsing buildings is looped and repurposed as a beat, as are sirens, and an entire track is constructed around the spectral hum of an Amsterdam air vent. Such field recordings emphasise the themes' "realness" and effect on our lives; we are really here, and this is really happening.

And so opening THE HORROR with the sound of buildings crumbling to the ground makes perfect sense, ruins acting as a metaphor for the sense of history repeating itself. From there, the album unfolds in compelling directions, a shock or surprise never far away. "History is on the hunt", Gropper warns on the elegant, orchestral sigh of 'The Horror', a sad fable that asks a pertinent

question: Does predictability make history more tolerable or just more tragic? It's followed by the easy bustle of 'Martyrs', whose jaunty pace sits at odds with its stories of torture and execution.

*The grim reality of misogyny and sexual violence is explored in 'Nightjogging', a stark, pointed song inspired by Rebecca Solnit's seminal essay *The Longest War*. "Violence doesn't have a race, a class, a religion, or a nationality, but it does have a gender," she wrote, a thought that's dissected over syncopated drums and clean guitar lines. "We should not scare our daughters / We should teach our sons" he sings, skewering blame culture and the sad truth about culpability. Such internalized fears are also explored on '(How To Stay) Middle Class', a song that starts with a smoky, late night jazz feel before morphing into a breezy, whimsical romp complete with plucked strings.*

Partly inspired by Foucault's ideas around "technologies of the self" and the visions we have of our ideal selves, it's just one example of the eclectic, diverse roots Gropper builds his narratives from. An age-old Arabic poem ('Future Ruins Pt. 2), Herman Göring's hunting chateau ('Nightmare No. 2 (Dinner At Carinhall)'), Franklin D Roosevelt's most famous quotation ('The Only Thing We Have To Fear'), and dramatist and poet Heiner Müller ('(Finally) A Convenient Truth') are just some of the sources employed to fuel his creative fires and filter the madness of modern society through his unique lens. Much like documentary film maker Adam Curtis – another notable inspiration – Gropper plays with the idea of mass public delusion and our collective refusal to process uncomfortable truths, something he seeks to right by pulling by back the curtains to let light into the dark corners of our society.

And yet THE HORROR is not a sad album, nor especially melancholic. It's defiant, and contains more than a sprinkling of humour. "I still hope and believe that this is my most humorous album. How else are you going to cope?" asks Gropper. The light at the end of the tunnel is perfectly encapsulated by closing number '(Finally) A Convenient Truth', a glorious orchestral ballad that's as elegant as it is uplifting. "Come on, you gotta fight", he implores over swelling strings and triumphant brass. "So join hands, in horror unite! / Together lets stand in the darkest night". The voice of reason is a new role for Gropper but one he embraces with relish. It's also led to his most powerful work yet as GET WELL SOON, and cements his status as one of the most original and artful songwriters of our generation; we're lucky to have him by our side, leading us through the madness.

