

GHOSTPOET

Dark Days & Canapés - 18.08.17

On August 18th 2017, Ghostpoet aka Obaro Ejimiwe returns with his eagerly anticipated fourth album. As the title suggests, *Dark Days & Canapés* is a record that siphons the sense of unease hanging in the air throughout the time of its creation and uses it as a fuel source. It's also a record that dramatically foregrounds the continuing evolution of twice- Mercury nominated Obaro as one of our most perspicacious and original songwriters. In the wake of 2015's universally acclaimed *Shedding Skin* - an album which found him moving away from the beats-driven arrangements of the first two records - *Dark Days & Canapés* completes the transition to a fuller band sound. Integral to that transition was Obaro's choice of producer for the record. "On previous records, the production side of things has run along 50:50 lines," he explains, "But this time around, I wanted to see what would happen if I relaxed that a little." Early in the process, he hooked up with producer/writer/ guitarist Leo Abrahams, perhaps best known for his work with Brian Eno and Jon Hopkins (*Small Craft On A Milk Sea*) and *Wild Beasts* (*Present Tense*) as well as his own feted solo albums. The two clicked immediately. "I went to his studio in East London," recalls Obaro, "And the thing that struck me about him was that he was impossible to faze. I was describing the mood I was after in quite fanciful, surreal terms, and yet he knew exactly how to translate that into music."

The results of those early sessions - which saw guitarist Joe Newman assisting, fleshing out guitar parts on the early demos - quickly established the momentum of what followed. You can hear the velocity between conception and execution on those first songs. *Live>Leave* sees Obaro engaged in the life-long attempt to come to terms with the fact that his time on this planet is finite. "Not much has changed since I was about six and I first realised that, at some point, I was actually going to die," he smiles, seemingly amused by his own morbidity. Indeed, like so much what surrounds it, the song is oddly life-affirming. Obaro navigates an arrangement which recalls the pensive yet propulsive Soul Mining-era songs of Matt Johnson's *The The*. Time and time again, what strikes you is the crackle and fizz of the performances. On *Many Moods At Midnight*, Obaro is a punch-drunk presence attempting to haul himself up off the floor as sonorous piano strikes push the song along at a merciless tempo. On the first song to be released from the album, *Immigrant Boogie*, Obaro doggedly attempts to ride a straight course over the alternating restraint and release of the guitar. "No-one knows/How many/On the boat/ Violent skies/Won't tell us/Where to go." Of the song, Obaro explains, "I'm usually more comfortable writing in more ambiguous terms, but as my wife said, but for an accident of birth, it could have been any of us in one of those flimsy boats, risking everything to try and get our families to a safe place."

Elsewhere, *Dark Days & Canapés* finds Ghostpoet back on more allusive territory. On the achingly pretty chorus of *Trouble + Me* and the shimmering 4am confidences imparted in *Woe Is Meee*, his vocals sit beneath the surface. “That was something that felt right for this record,” explains Obaro, “I wanted the vocals to be part of the tapestry of the songs rather than dominating them. But then maybe that’s how I feel about the world and my place in it at the moment.” After the revolving door roll-call of guest artists on *Shedding Skin*, the only vocal cameos this time around come courtesy of singer-songwriter EERA, whose cut-glass Nordic tones offer a perfect counterpoint to the lolling jazz-noir languor of *Dopamine If I Do* and Massive Attack’s *Daddy G*, who reciprocates Ghostpoet’s appearance on Massive Attack’s *Come Near Me* with a turn on the sinuous subterranean *Woe Is Meee*.

Named after the Japanese word meaning “death from overwork”, *Karoshi* is another standout on the album, a fin de siècle synergy of intensifying sequenced beats and plangent unyielding guitar played out over perhaps Obaro’s bleakest vocal turn on the record: “Stock pile food/Panic button glued in place/And we’re.../Fighting for what?” “The title actually came after I finished the song,” he explains, “But actually it was perfect in terms of what I was trying to evoke – this sense of people feeling powerless in a polarised world... in which technology is supposed to be making us all happier. I think it’s just a matter of time before ‘karoshi’ is co-opted into the English language, because that’s the way it’s all going. All these apps like Uber or whatever, promise you ease of use and less steps to satisfaction, but obviously, it comes at a price. The modern world is also very good at putting in systems that distract from human hardship on a massive scale.”

Both here and elsewhere, Obaro’s demos for the record weren’t short on detail, but the moments he relished the most usually came when his plans were supplanted by something entirely unexpected in the studio: be it the hysterical edge conferred upon *Freakshow* by the manic laughter of the gospel choir who actually turned up to sing on another song, or the slurring somnambulant intimacies of *Blind As A Bat*. Of the latter, Obaro says, “One record I was listening to a lot was Talk Talk’s *Laughing Stock*. One thing they did on that record was lay down the basic tracks and get in different string players to play whatever came into their heads. Then once they’d all gone, they reviewed what they had and overlaid their favourite parts, just the same way as you would with samples. That was also the song on which we dropped beads into a baby grand, just to see what would happen.”

It’s strange to spend time with the creator of these songs, because the first thing that strikes you is how utterly unlike them he seems to be. If Tooting-raised Obaro, now 34, is never less than phlegmatic and equitable in person, he says there might be a couple of reasons for that. Firstly, he’s eight years into making a living out of something he never dreamed would sustain him financially. Between graduating at Coventry University in 2004 and finally releasing his 2011 debut *Cash & Carry Me Home*, Obaro got by doing a series of customer service jobs. The second reason, of course, is that the songs now serve as the natural outlet for his darker

moments. “That’s definitely where all those feelings go,” he laughs, “And it’s for the best that they stay there.”

For all of that, Ghostpoet’s fourth album is a record that takes great care not to make undue demands of its audience. In finding an equidistant sweet spot between structure and serendipity; between luck and judgement, he has returned with his most inspired album to date. In accounting for that, Obaro is typically self-effacing. “There’s a sort of life-force that Leo and the other musicians brought to the record,” he says, “and that was crucial. I want people to listen to the songs and be able to say, ‘So it isn’t just me then? Phew.’”

Dark Days & Canapés is released on 18th August through Play I Again Sam and available digitally, ltd white vinyl, vinyl and CD.

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