

# NOTION

DARKSTAR  
MINIMAL EXPOSURE

NICK ROBERTSON  
COLLECTING NEW TECH '10

CRYSTAL FIGHTERS

LIVING WITH FREQUENCIES

PLEEK  
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BACKSTAGE

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WANT TO GET A HEADLINE? READ US.

DARKSTAR

THE NINTENDO AND STRANGERS TAKING ELECTRONICS FORWARD IN WILLINGBOLIC MASTERPIECE NORTH



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# DARKSTAR

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## MINIMAL EXPOSURE

*After releasing the best track of 2009 in Aidys Girl Is A Computer, dance and electronic fans are expecting big things of DARKSTAR's debut album. The only problem is, once they'd made it, they decided they didn't like it and threw it away. After another year of struggle, they've come up with the majestic, melancholy North, a sparse, synthetic and personal reimagining of their home.*

*“I read an interview with Martin Scorsese talking about how he’d burned through four marriages because of work. I found it amazing that some guy can be that selfish, that he can have that vision and that drive, that tunnel vision. It made me think about my work and my own relationships,”*

There is a flat above a shop somewhere in Clapton, East London, I believe on the corner of a block (from what the members of Darkstar pointed out as an example to me). It has two bedrooms on the level below the living room, which is at the top of the building, with walls sloping in on two sides. For two years, James Young and Aiden Whalley would face “waking up, coming upstairs and it’d be Groundhog day, in this kind of little enclosure.” It was here that they wrote and recorded North, their debut album on Hyperdub; it was also here that they wrote ‘Check My Machine’, their intended debut record which they scrapped at the end of last year.

If the mood of North is anything to go by, should Darkstar move out, I wouldn’t advise moving in. The walls must be soaked in sadness, saturated by synth chords, grey and flat and vaporous like late winter clouds, seeping into the cracks. As I imagine it, the record playing in my head as I do, it is forever lit by the faint fading light of February afternoons and the hard glare of MacBook Pro screens. There, they write and record, write and record, repeat, repeat, delete, repeat; only interacting with machines and instruments; occasionally glancing out the window, discovering that it’s later than they think.

This, at least, is the scene described to me by the album: its mood transforms everything, desaturating life: things are more beautiful, but they are sad and distant.

This naturally colours my impressions of the place it was conceived. The Darkstar boys still seem to like the place, mind. Young no longer lives there, but James Buttery, their vocalist, has moved in with Whalley. When they talk about it, their voices take on a semi-reverend air: you can hear that process of mythologising of a personal place, productive and emotionally significant, where something important happened. North was evidently not an easy record to make, but it is testament to their vision, and the drive of Young and Whalley in particular, that this gorgeously bleak synth pop album should exist as it does at all.

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 ~~ FORWARD OF FWD ~~  
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 Darkstar came to prominence with a series of woozy, vocoder-fronted 2step 12”s, first for their own, prophetically named 2010 imprint,

then – once Kode9’s ear was pricked – for Hyperdub, bastion of forward-looking electronic and dance, home to Burial, Zomby, Ikonika and on. Remarkably, considering the company they keep, Darkstar might be the label’s most out-there act: with North, they have first reacted against, and then plain ignored the blueprints of the last 10 years of bass music the label has done much to create or subvert.

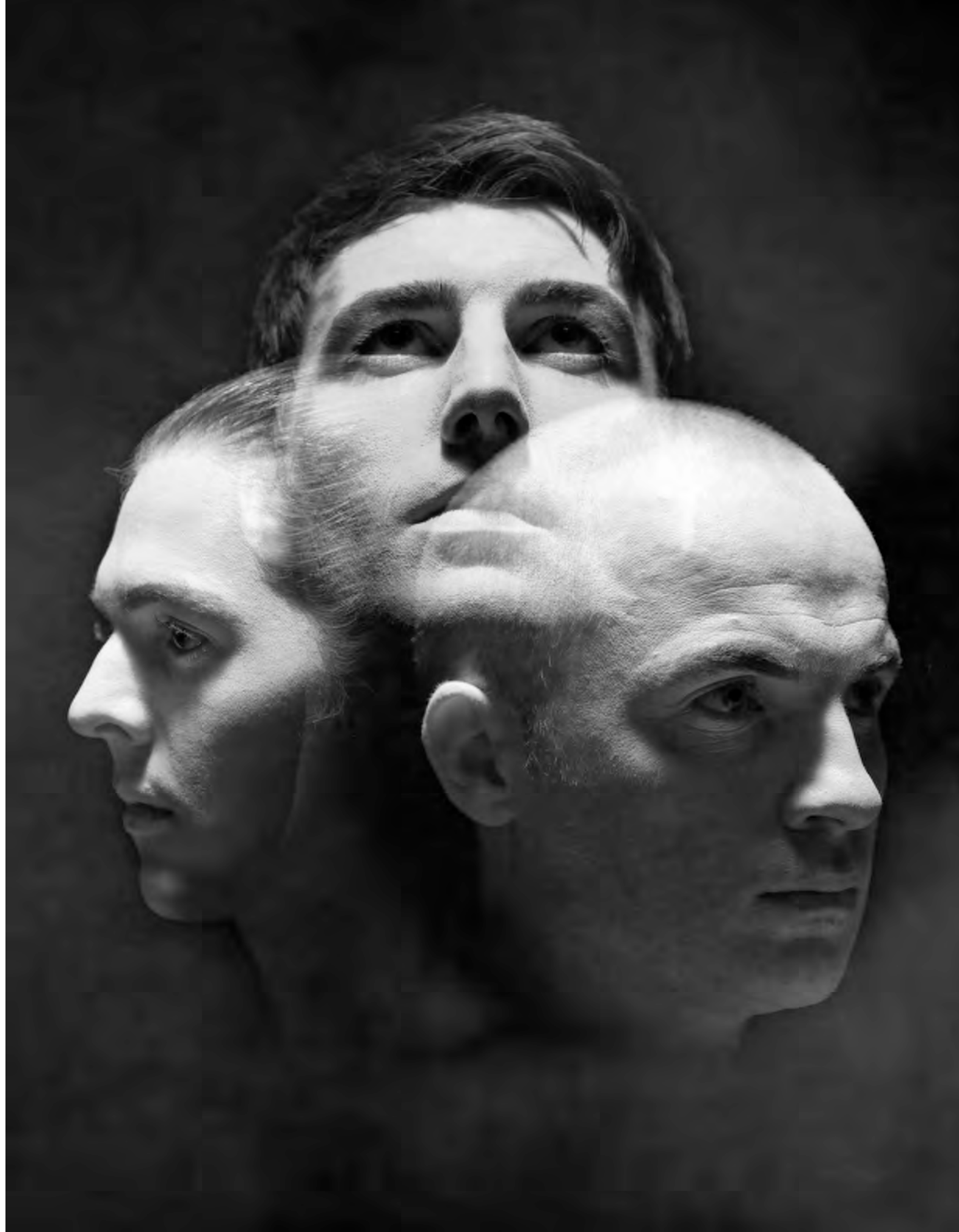
It helps to understand what came before that, even. Young and Whalley, the primary members of Darkstar, began five or six years ago on the fringes of FWD>>, the launchpad of the last ten years of bass. The first time they really get lucid in the interview is when they start reminiscing about it. “When we were really into it as a scene, it was basically a group of people playing each others’ records. It was this new sound and everyone was really enthusiastic towards it,” Whalley says. Young takes him up: “When we started making tunes, we only

started making them for Youngsta. At that time, Youngsta was only cutting five producers. There was something kinda mythical about it, like, ‘Is anyone gonna break this five producer thing. It was Benga, Skream, Loefah, Digital Mystikz. We’d keep taking Youngsta CDs, and he was like, “Ehhh, I’m into it, but...”” Aiden finishes the thought, “So we really struggled to get a foot in the door with that kinda thing.” It must have been educational? Both, together: “Yeah, man, totally.”

Young had been deep into DnB in the north before he moved to London, and he describes going to FWD>> the first time as a revelation “because of the space in the sound, it was so different to what I’d been hearing.” That sense of space is perhaps the only thing from those days that they’ve retained in North – the record has vast expanses of it, bleak wastelands punctuated only by sonic texture.

The 12s which brought them to prominence, however – 2008’s Need





*“When I listen to Joy Division, I can hear the labour, when I listen to Radiohead I can hear the labour, when I listen to Burial I can hear the labour. If we hadn’t of struggled it would have significantly less labour.”*

You and last year’s Aidys Girl Is A Computer – still very much related to that scene, with a strong 2step influence and fronted by screechy, near-incomprehensible vocoder in place of vocals. Their plan at the time, oft-quoted, was ‘to make Apples sing’. What happened? “Yeah, that didn’t work,” Young laughs. “Sounded terrible. Weird scratchy singing over everything. Not right.” This was the scrapped record ‘Check My Machine’, of which only two tracks (including Aidys Girl) survived. It’s not really that it sounded terrible, more that it “just felt too easy. It felt like we weren’t getting anything out of it. It was convenient and boring.” So out went the bathwater, and the baby with it. They dispensed with beats, largely, and vocoders, and almost anything they’d previously associated with. In came Buttery on vocals. Then: write and record; delete; repeat.

~INFLUENCES &~  
CONVENIENCES

How their attitude changed towards what they intended for the album, you can tell from the titles. ‘Check My Machine’ swaggers

with music geek bass bwoy braggadocio; ‘North’ is stark, imposing, personal and emotive. All three members of Darkstar are Northerners. They get that there’s something inherently funny about being northern, calling an album North and releasing it on the most London label around. They find something fruitful about the tension, in fact, and it helps understand it as an oddity, but a worthy one, within the label’s canon, as well as playing up just how different they are from what might have been supposed their peers.

Why they decided to change course is quite obvious. It has roots in Young’s dismissal of the scrapped record: ‘convenient, boring’; and as Aiden says of their distance from the FWD>> scene: “We’ve always wanted to keep that excitement we had when we were first there, the excitement of writing new stuff.” Quite simply, these are guys who want to keep imagining what could be, and aren’t interested in what’s around now. They want to stretch themselves as much as possible.

Admirable enough. It’s all the more remarkable when you realise what THIS cost them, or almost

cost them, to scratch that first record. They’ve worked and paid their way through this. “We have literally faced eviction three times. We got a section 51, innit. All sorts,” James says. Aiden grins, “We’ve been to the landlord, ‘Listen mate, the album’s nearly finished! Trust us, we’ll have money then.’” “I’ve had Warp on the phone, who are publishing it, and I’ve promised them the album, like ‘Monday, it’ll be on your desk Monday.’ Fully intending the album would be wrapped up, but then we’d switch direction.”

Darkstar are very much an amalgamation of their influences. However, if that includes a past spent at bass nights, it also includes a much broader swathe of music besides, too: Human League are a semi-surprising influence, with the album’s lead single a cover of their little known track ‘You Remind Me of Gold’, inspired by a friend of Young’s would play it to him slowed to 33rpm. When they were writing, Young would start the day by blasting himself for an hour with techno

like Romanthony and Cajmere. I suggest this was a way of rinsing the beats out of himself. He umms and ahhs, before Aiden pitches in: “You needed that bit of energy to get it out of your system, to settle down to what we were working on, which was a lot more ambient.”

By their responding to so many influences, at times by reacting against them, at times by their absence, the record transcends them. They’d watch tonnes of films, with Aiden reworking scores for their structure and playing with their chords for ideas. You can see this particularly in Ostkreuz, an oozing, cosmic synth track, one of three without drums on the record, with a more than passing resemblance to Twin Peaks – something borne out by Aiden’s excited response to mention of its composer, Badalamenti.

Another example is Shane Meadows’ This Is England composer Ludovico Einaudi. Aiden talks tellingly of the film’s use of the

score: “I love when he cuts out the audio – it brings the intensity.” That care for structure is fascinating, because some of the most effective moments on North come from the way its songs are structured as much as from its palette, mood and conviction. ‘Deadness’ wraps you in layer after layer of synths and beats as it grows before ripping it all away and leaving you bare for its chorus, then rides off on a yearning guitar line. ‘Two Chords’ builds ominously but never provides that moment of release, a seemingly metaphorical interpretation of its lyrical concerns of the slow climb back to normality after a break-up. Brilliantly, it was inspired by reading an interview with Martin Scorsese, “talking about how he’d burned through four marriages because of work. I found it amazing that some guy can be that selfish,

*“We didn’t start out knowing we were going to write from the heart, it just became the natural thing for us to do. Once you get a bit of momentum – then you spot a pattern.”*

that he can have that vision and that drive, that tunnel vision. It made me think about my work and my own relationships,” says Young. Not that lyrical concerns are always clear. Buttery’s voice deserves heaps of praise, both for his performance and for the way it has been produced: washed out, cut into, chopped up. His voice sounds flattened by overwhelming emotion, and his delivery varies from heavy, to weary, to distant. He’s the perfect point of connection for their music. What lyrics that come through clear amidst the production are abstract or evocative, snatches which set the mood for a song rather than telling a story to you through it. This is intentional; as Young says, “I quite like that, though. I don’t want people going, ‘Oh, he’s talking about his fucking girlfriend.’”

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 ~ ~ MELANCHOLY ~ ~  
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North is an album. Simple statement, but it means a lot here. It’s the reason Darkstar found the dance orientated record unsatisfying, unchallenging, and avoided “making an LP of 12 Aids Girls.” When I ask whether they were conscious of making an album in the blah cohesive, artistic sense, they immediately respond absolutely. “A lot of the time,” says Young, “we’d get to a point where we had 8 tunes and needed two more. We don’t come up with an idea and translate it onto keyboard, we work on the mood until it’s right. I think that’s what ties the record together. A lot of the time, we’d write stuff that didn’t fit.” All the while, it is also an expression of a mood, something like the melancholy of artificial intelligence caught between humanity and unfeeling. Darkstar were obviously conscious of wanting to express something, bigger than a track, which the album format fits perfectly. It’s not just that they wanted to take music forward from FWD, though this is definitely

a part of it. In an interview with Blackdown for Pitchfork, Young says, “When I listen to Joy Division, I can hear the labour, when I listen to Radiohead I can hear the labour, when I listen to Burial I can hear the labour. If we hadn’t of struggled it would have significantly less labour.” This isn’t a band with a label breathing down their neck after they’d blown an advance on gear, demanding a record be delivered so it’s Mercury-eligible. They paid their own way through the making of it. As Buttery says, “I might be biased, but you don’t get more real than this.” For them, I think, there is pleasure in the challenge of work and working something out, finding something new. That’s definitely a part of their long period of labour, but there’s more – they struggled through writing, recording, deleting, repeating the process until this particular point because they overcame whatever challenge they’d set technically, but also because they’d managed to express something. “It’s important sometimes

to put yourself on the line,” Young says of the personal side to the album. It’s obviously significant that Darkstar, a band of London-based Northerners, called their album ‘North’. In itself, that statement marks the record as something personal: not, like ‘Check My Machine’, a direction to look at something outside of them; it marks it as being part of them, integral. Yet London, where they’ve all lived for 8 years, is present here too, all the more noticeable for being unspoken. I find both most evident in the title track. In Young’s words, “North was supposed to be the stand up track, it wasn’t meant to be beautiful, or a great piece of music. It was meant to be those snare drums, up-front and industrial.” The snares are indeed front and centre – opening the track vicious and sharp, before Buttery comes in with a sneering vocal with reverb. Then: a maudlin synth drifts in, changing the track’s tone completely. The synth oozing behind, the sharp rap of the snare in front: the memory of the north and the nag of London’s grind; Buttery’s vocals caught in the middle.

In an interview with Kode9 posted on Hyperdub’s blog, Young talks movingly of both his past in the north and his life in London, a lyrical passage listing the day to day diversity of life here. On calling the album North, he talks about how both he and Aiden lost people close to them from back home; how lyrics would reference things that happened there; how “it all kept going back to things up north.” It’s as if, to take music a leap forward, personally they had to go back. Maybe that’s why the album has that gorgeous, melancholic mood, of memories artificially brought back to life. It reimagines the north as it might be, as it possibly was, leaving vast tracts of space empty and populating it only with the aches of remembering train rides, ex-girlfriends, childhood fights. The north that Darkstar conjure is a beautiful, barren place, at once future-perfect and an ideal past, created from the confines of the living room of a flat in Clapton. It’s intimate, open and beautiful. It’s an incredible place.

