



UNDERWORLD

Strawberry Hotel SMITH HYDE PRODUCTIONS

9/10

Cinematic and dreamlike, the Essex duo's 11th offers multiple paths to transcendence. *By Wyndham Wallace*



ON "Black Poppies", the striking yet serene opener to Underworld's latest 68-minute odyssey, Karl Hyde's conversational, electronically treated vocals, blanketed in little more

than quietly pulsing synths, are layered like gospel harmonies. They're akin to Brian Eno's on "We Let It In" and "Garden Of Stars" from *FOREVERANDEVERNOMORE* two years ago. Where that record, however, presented a world in danger, this offers optimism. "You may feel a little strange at first, but keep changing", Hyde reassures us, and that sentiment seems to sum up the duo's dogged unwillingness to rest on their laurels, so crucial to *Strawberry Hotel*.

Since '94's almighty *Dubnobasswithmyheadman* Underworld – like LCD Soundsystem – have soundtracked abandon with distinctive style, beckoning fans of many musical persuasions to cast aside fear of the dancefloor. They'll continue to do so as well. "And The Colour Red" epitomises techno's pounding kick drums, insistent acid squiggles and repetitively intoned, disembodied hooks, while "Hilo Sky" compensates for melodic monotony by rushing towards a celebratory climax: "We've arrived/Come feel the noise/Lights up the night". "Black Poppies" finds Hyde's repeated reaffirmation of the uncontainable euphoria he and Rick Smith can provoke – "You are beautiful!" – delivered with satisfied jubilation. "Techno Shinkansen", too, combines jellied synths with Georgio Moroder's bubbling arpeggios, its propulsive vitality redolent of A

Hundred Days Off's "Mo Move". And if "Lewis In Pomona" keeps its powder dry – "And it feels good", Hyde mutters – until a cacophonous rush of brutal bass, the technique also works in reverse. "Sweet Lands Experience" begins with Hyde snarling, "I was more smashed than you were", shifting disorientatingly across the stereo spectrum as the song is fleshed out, before malfunctioning music box and twitching cymbals usher in a surprisingly sober coda.

Of course, Underworld regularly leave behind the delirious, with *Dubnobasswithmyheadman*'s brittle "Tongue", *Second Toughest In The Infants'* spacious "Stagger" and *Barbara Barbara We Face A Shining Future*'s lugubrious "Motorhome" illustrating more cerebral tendencies. *Strawberry Hotel* likewise explores both their celebrated

and less acknowledged inclinations, and "Black Poppies" wasn't its only pre-emptive warning. "Denver Luna" first materialised as a perplexingly short a cappella with a mystifying rallying cry, "Strawberry jam girl!", but they've always had tricks up their sleeves. A month later it was revealed as the crowning touch to an ecstatic, "mega mega" marathon worthy of comparison to "Born Slippy" and "Cowgirl".

Both versions appear here, with the full song their first 'banger' and the teaser and a cappella forming part of a downtempo trajectory during the album's more refined second half. That's heralded by "King Of Haarlem", Hyde unusually vulnerable despite his increasingly madcap text: "Harley Farley Mister Nicky Marley Shirly Whirly Nick and early Pam and Barley". "Gene Pool", meanwhile, mysteriously but magnificently evokes Paul Buchanan's raptures on The Blue Nile's "The Downtown Lights".

Most unforeseen is "Ottavia"'s theatrical, increasingly urgent, spoken-word performance by Esme Bronwen-Smith – an accomplished opera singer (and also Smith's daughter) – of her translation from Monteverdi's *L'incoronazione di Poppea*. Nonetheless, Nina Nastasia's contributions to "Iron Bones"'s Eno-meets-Yorke somnolence reminds us how *Strawberry Hotel*, like so much of Underworld's catalogue, frequently renders the prosaic romantic and the banal consequential. Indeed, despite rapid, impressionistic imagery as bright and unpredictable as a club's spotlights, they were never only suited to dancing. Merely to be in motion with them, watching humanity pass by in a blur of colours, is one of life's greatest pleasures.

Just look at how Hyde shapes his lyrics. "The animal is on the telephone", he rants on "Denver Luna", "the telephone call me tomorrow when the moon the moon will burst out of the water..."

If at first strange, this narrative arguably exemplifies their entire aesthetic, with Smith's bewitchingly surreal mash of energy, dynamics, drama and tension always changing and almost always beautiful. So when *Strawberry Hotel* unexpectedly ends with "Sick Man Test"'s steel-stringed guitar conjuring empty American vistas like *Barbara Barbara...*'s "Santiago Cuatro" did a nocturnal Middle East, it no more signals the end of a journey than an opportunity for another.

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Produced by: Rick Smith and Esme Bronwen-Smith
Recorded at: The Pig Shed, Essex
Personnel: Rick Smith, Karl Hyde, Esme Bronwen-Smith (spoken word on "Ottavia"), Nina Nastasia (additional vocals on "Iron Bones")

Q&A

Underworld: "We wanted to keep people on their toes"

Why did you choose an a cappella "Denver Luna" and "Black Poppies" as tasters?

Rick Smith: We wanted to keep people on their toes! Our live shows are raves. With albums, we like to give space to harmony. We relish the juxtaposition of ambience versus a hard kick drum, so we put both of them into the album.

Do you think of the dancefloor less when you write these days?

Smith: If anything, we think of it more. Music naturally has a place where it fits best: playing

techno in an abandoned warehouse, or a symphony in a concert hall. In our live gigs we have control – to a certain extent – over the space, but with our records, the power is with the listener. They're the boss and we try to always keep that in mind. The context in which people listen is so important. Music fills different parts of people's day and the different moods they're in.

The album ends on a downtempo trajectory. What was your thinking?

Karl Hyde: Good stories have a beginning and an end. We think it gives the record a completeness, leaving you with a gentle hug... maybe even a smile. *INTERVIEW: WYNDHAM WALLACE*