

ALBUMS

The Mountain Will Fall

DJ Shadow

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DJ Shadow trades in his turntables and MPC for a copy of Ableton and embarks upon a freewheeling, low-stakes journey through the contemporary sounds that inspire his practice.

Josh Davis passed a milestone recently: the artist known as DJ Shadow now has a greatest hits collection to his name. This suggests, of course, that he's had a fruitful career; it also suggests that his best work is in the rearview mirror. His enduring masterpiece,

Endtroducing is now 20 years old, its cover art accurately dating the music contained therein: two men thumbing through the same dusty crates where Davis himself once sought out obscure samples. In an era where beatmaking revolved around physical hardware, vintage records and vinyl manipulation skills, Shadow stood at the vanguard. In the years since, however, he's struggled to find his footing, even as a younger generation of producers have successfully adapted his omnivorous sampling approach to suit the current climate.

It's been a while since we've heard a full-length from Shadow, but wherever he's been for the last five years, he's been keeping his ears open. He hinted at as much on "Ghost Town" from 2014's *Liquid Amber* EP, a fizzy trap instrumental that's more reminiscent of current trendsetters like Hudson Mohawke than the reverent classicism and breakbeats for which Shadow is known. Tellingly, "Ghost Town" appears again on *The Mountain Will Fall*, and serves as a sort of statement of purpose: this is a record where Shadow seeks to draw as much inspiration from contemporary artists as they have from his back catalog.

Opening number "The Mountain Will Fall" announces as much by exploring the distance between Shadow and his progeny. Given the hazy sonics and flutes, you'd be forgiven for thinking this was a Clams Casino beat, until the errant record scratches that punctuate the track whirr into the frame. The song closes with the sound of a cassette being flipped—a cheeky reminder that Shadow has been in the game since before many of today's producers were born.

Davis has had too few collaborations with rappers over the course of his career, so "Nobody Speak," a collaboration with Run the Jewels is sure to raise eyebrows. Unlike some of his past work with emcees, however, this is a laid back affair, more boom-bap spaghetti western than furious rapping workout. Killer Mike and El-P don't quite bring their A-game here—"I don't work for free/I am barely giving a fuck away" is the best quotable you're going to get this time around—through there's an undeniable thrill to hearing these three elder statesmen in a room together, building a Run the Jewels track atop what is decidedly not an El-P beat.

Elsewhere, Shadow invites in collaborators who can pull him out of his comfort zone. “Bergschrund,” a collaboration with experimental producer Nils Frahm, is the album’s most sonically adventurous song and one of its best. In the marriage of their divergent approaches, the pair manage to find a middle ground between IDM and EDM: warped, decaying tones that ping-pong between channels, a pleasantly tactile beat and an almost dabke-like keyboard run that cuts through the song’s final section.

As contemporary as much of *The Mountain Will Fall* sounds, there are still a few reminders that we’re listening to a DJ Shadow record. The second half of “Three Ralphs” is the closest thing here to vintage Shadow: echo-laden minor key piano chords, sputtering synths, a morbid snippet of movie dialog. Still, the drums fire off in inhuman machine gun blasts, an immediate reminder that what we’re hearing wasn’t built on an MPC. “The Sideshow,” however is a period piece through and through, a track where Shadow shows off his scratching ability over a cache of enigmatic samples, as surface dust crackles in the foreground. While the vocal sounds like it’s pulled from hip-hop’s golden era, it’s actually an original performance from relatively unknown Sacramento rapper Ernie Fresh. The song feels like a particular kind of flex: a reminder that Shadow’s ear for and knowledge of musical history runs deeper than most of us will ever be able to fully comprehend.

Admirably, Davis takes a lot of risks on *The Mountain Will Fall*; unfortunately, not all of them pay off. “Depth Charge” is a bit too goofy for it’s own good—built around an ominous surf guitar line, it comes out sounding like a trap remake of the *Jaws* theme. “Pitter Patter” chases some easy thrills, with a breakdown that nods toward stadium EDM; worse yet is the iTunes bonus track “Swerve,” a dubstep number constructed from Pac Man chirps and cartoon sound effects. If Shadow continues to push in this direction, one imagines the offers for multi-million dollar Vegas residencies won’t be far behind.

Even these flops are revealing in a sense, though: they point to a playfulness that Davis has managed to maintain despite the heavy yoke of expectation that he’s worn ever since *Endtroducing*. It wouldn’t be an overstatement to say that Shadow is a foundational

figure in hip-hop; with *Endtroducing*, he helped elevate both sampling and hip-hop instrumentals to the art forms they are today. And yet here he is, more than two decades in, experimenting, having fun, trying out new sounds and not being afraid to fail. Far from aiming for some grand unified statement, *The Mountain Will Fall* feels a lot more like a DJ set—a curated grab bag of ideas that overlap and collide, sometimes in unexpected ways. It's as if Davis has no agenda beyond putting his own spin on the music he finds exciting—what higher calling could there be for a DJ?