

March 31, 2015

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The Muse in Twin Shadow's Midnight Ride

Leaving New York for Los Angeles drew George Lewis closer to realizing his grand plan

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Ambition is a hell of a drug. Sometimes, you have to get on a bike and chase it.

George Lewis had a dilemma heading into *Eclipse*, his third album under the Twin Shadow moniker. He was hungry for the big leagues, so he switched up his scenery, rode to Los Angeles, and went in a new direction. Making the major move to Warner Bros. sets up his loftier visions, inching him one step closer to teenage dreams.

Twin Shadow is a man of particular principles.

While serious about his music, Lewis keeps a balance with a healthy sense of humor. His “dumpster show,” a collaboration with Funny or Die that pokes fun at a typical South by Southwest shindig abuzz with selfie-snapping hipsters, is Exhibit A that he doesn’t take himself too seriously. In the video, he performs in a trash receptacle, his band accompanying on toylike Casio keyboards.

“It wasn’t even filmed at SXSW! It was filmed almost a month before in a parking lot in Los Angeles, which made it even funnier,” he says. “We wanted to do something together, and the Funny or Die guys [and I] all sat down and had a writing session. We had a lot of really weird ideas.”

Lewis’s send-up of “exclusive” pop-up shows is pitch-perfect. It’s also indicative of an artistic maturation: He can laugh at himself, since he’s the one writing the jokes. Plus, he could do it from the comfort of his new home turf.

There’s a transition at play, but not a total transformation. Just because he made a move to a major and shifted scenes doesn’t mean he’s abandoned his DIY aesthetic. Lewis is still at the helm, continuing his trend of self-producing.

“I actually recorded [*Eclipse*] under my other label,” he says, hinting at his prior relationship with 4AD. “It’s funny, because a lot of people think, ‘Oh, George got all this money and went crazy on production.’ But the truth is I made it for the same amount as my last record.”

The budgets may not have changed too much, but there were other seismic shifts afoot that influenced the new record. Lewis moved west, replacing Brooklyn brooding with peeks of L.A. sunshine. A major impetus for the cross-country trek was a desire to enjoy his motorcycle year-round. His ride helps him unwind.

“I’m kind of a loner with my motorcy-

cle,” he says. “I like riding alone; I like riding at night. I like doing it in a peaceful kind of way. It’s a way to clear my mind. One of my favorites things is L.A. at night, Hollywood at night — basically any time after 2 a.m. on a weekday is kind of amazing. There’s no one around. It’s much safer to drive and it’s really relaxing.”

This noir vibe is present throughout his discography, but it’s fully realized on *Eclipse*. In addition to late-night joyriding on two wheels, he’s a nocturnal worker. He routinely records into the wee hours of the morning. Knowing this, it makes sense that Lewis recorded *Eclipse* in a makeshift studio, isolated from noise complaints. There were no neighbors, as the studio was in a graveyard.

At first glance, the Hollywood Forever Cemetery is an unlikely place to record an album, but in the case of a band called Twin Shadow, it seems fitting. Gothic overtones abound. The cemetery proved to be a peaceful spot, despite the nearby revelers at the Masonic Lodge. It was an ideal space for Lewis to incorporate the sounds he heard on his nightly cruises around the city — namely, pop and hip-hop radio. It was the first time in a while that he had listened to mainstream music on a regular basis. He was struck by the staying power of the songs, even if he wasn’t always intently tuned in.

“I don’t even keep track of some of the artists that are playing on the radio. I’m a very removed listener,” he says matter-of-factly. But there are certain cuts that lodge themselves in your cranium, and Lewis takes notice. “I was enamored with iLove-Makonnen. Songs like ‘Tuesday’ — I’m amazed how these very simple songs take over people’s minds.”

The “Turn Me Up” instrumental wouldn’t sound out of place with Drake or another MC on it. Despite this, Lewis doesn’t lean too heavily on beats and rhymes for inspiration, although he is a fan. “I don’t think I wear my hip-hop influence on my sleeve; I don’t think it shows up in a heavy way,” he says. “I just happen to listen mostly to hip-hop these days. I don’t find myself listening to what the business calls ‘alternative music’ or much indie. I don’t listen to rock ‘n’ roll as much as I used to.”

Lewis’s pop-centric listening habits trickle into *Eclipse*, for better or worse. There are some vocal detractors of the stadium-suited sound. The *Boston* >> p34

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Globe wasn't a fan, saying, "Bombast overrides any sense of nuance on these overblown songs." *Pitchfork* was even more unflinching: "on *Eclipse* Lewis plummets, hard, into a deep valley of ridiculousness." Leaving the more cryptic, Depeche Mode- and Prince-inspired shtick behind in a clear move to climb the pop ladder is not going to please everyone. There will be haters, but there will also be those who go along for the ride. Songs like "Old Love/New Love," a slinky, danceable duet with D'Angelo Lacy, are reminders of the good stuff, the midnight mystique and inherent sexiness that help pull you back in.

Lewis puts New Yorkers squarely in the latter camp. In advance of his upcoming shows at the Music Hall of Williamsburg, he's giddy to return to his former city, the place where he lived for ten years and that gave birth to Twin Shadow.

"I'm excited about coming back to New York. I always love coming home," he says. "Playing [Williamsburg], we always have an amazing time. There's something about New Yorkers: They just get it on a level that a lot of people don't. When New Yorkers know how to have a good time, it is *the* best time."

The NYC homecoming may be emotional, seeing old friends and faces, but it won't be nearly on the level of *Eclipse*. Throughout the recording process, Lewis was hit with a double whammy of shitty things, with a crossroads in a relationship coinciding with his father experiencing an extended period of mental illness, later diagnosed as bipolar disorder. For an artist like Lewis — a songwriter with a penchant for vulnerable, confessional styles — these painful issues brewing in the background made this album his most personal to date. Despite these hardships, Lewis resists falling into the trap of romanticism. Suffering and art don't have to go hand in hand.

"Making music is such a strange and unpredictable thing," he says. "I don't really know what's required. Everyone says you have to be in pain to make art, or you have to be under someone's thumb, trying to break free. I don't really know that making art requires those things."

That's good news, especially since Lewis seems to have found a type of West Coast bliss. None of us need to worry about writer's block setting in just because he's riding around on his bike late at night, loving life.

"You hear about David Lynch making movies, and you think that because of how strange his movies are that it's born out of a lot of pain and frustration," he says. "But he would probably tell you different. He's coming from a very Zen place."

It's a strange example, but oddly apt. Lewis is a phoenix of pop, and the fiery catharsis will undoubtedly continue — while he's at peace rounding one of the curves of the Pacific Coast Highway.

Twin Shadow will be at the Music Hall of Williamsburg on Wednesday, April 1, and also at Governors Ball in June. Tickets for the former are sold out but available on secondary sites.