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JOHN ROBERTS - GLASS EIGHTS (CD, Do-LP)

DIAL RECORDS (distribution by KOMPAKT)

Release date: 27th of September 2010

by Brooke Chroman

In 2008 John Roberts was asked by Carsten Jost, Pantha Du Prince and Lawrence to be the first American artist on the influential German Dial Records imprint. His releases for Dial and sister label Laid have all received major accolades for their distinct and refined aesthetic. Roberts currently lives in Berlin and performs regularly in Europe's preeminent clubs. His first full-length album debuts a sound impeccably curated!

GLASS EIGHTS weaves a fragile lace of melancholy punctuated by intricate 808 patterns, as a synthesized splice confronts the pull of a violin in minor key; the echoes of a disco clap pierce the loom of a somber piano refrain. The narrative of a classic house track begins to deconstruct and unravel itself as Roberts reveals something off-kilter, darker and contemplative of its own genre. This self-reflexive quality is, in part, caused by Roberts' hyper-acute sense of percussion: a beat drops just after instinct beckons and seems to both unravel and collect itself, resulting in tracks that negotiate the space between a solitary night with headphones and the center of a packed dance floor.

With its contemplative instrumental weave, GLASS EIGHTS asks broader cultural questions about the psychological function of music as it blurs distinctions between sublimation and expression, escape and confrontation, medication and symptom, repression and reserve. The electric and grand piano, organ, violin, modular synthesizers and eclectic percussion split, shatter and reform, disclosing an aesthetic sensibility which delicately reflects on the eerie stillness of a grey day, the repetition of a single note on a detuned upright piano, a deflated balloon, the white of a funeral arrangement, exhibiting a kind of discrete, perverse hopefulness.

Complicating melancholy, the emptiness of a mechanized loop serves to reveal a particular humaneness, caused by a percussive rapping, shattering into slow-motion, or an off-keyed drunken note of a piano begins to sound strangely in tune, finding itself transmuted into something more obscure, potent, and hard hitting. Rendering awkwardness enigmatic and anxiety beautiful, effectively, Roberts' questions if there is not something more natural, more human, in the hesitation of a clap that rings a moment too late. The album's interior reserve heightens the potency of its immaculate transitions, which harness a primal sense of rhythm and, at times, the utter impossibility of standing still.

Echoes of influence can be found in The Smiths' self-deprecating charm of the tragic, the muted, off-key eroticism of Bonny Prince Billy, introverted house music of early 80's Chicago, undermining its own progression, falling apart and collecting itself into darker psychological territory. The album nods to the production of mainstream Rap and R&B, cultural and ethnic

appropriations/dialogues between early European and American electronic music and modern anxiety, acknowledging both the productive and problematic nature of exchange, appropriation and technological innovation.

The complex sounds of GLASS EIGHTS, the snag and pop of an old record looped into percussion, the eerie clanging of glass come from a subtle curation of samples drawn from overlooked second-hand dollar record bins, his mother's piano, Roberts' own instrumentation and musical genres born before the synthesizer was employed as an instrument itself. This disparate collection of material insists on the non-hierarchical nature of sound, proposing that a new auditory aesthetic comes from not only the way the album sound is collaged, but more specifically, Roberts' ability to hear his own sound, if even for a spit second or two, in music often left contained in the press of its vinyl. This highly personal aesthetic harbors the intimacy of Roberts' sequencing process: working mostly at night on headphones in bed. Roberts uses a sequencing software (originally designed for the Amiga computer system in the early 1980s), virtually antiquated by the infinite possibilities of the day, to create a structure that delivers the contemporaneity of his sound. GLASS EIGHTS does not just generate a new auditory experience, but also builds an ornate frame through which to view the intricate psychological undertones in music of the past. More importantly, Roberts' constructs an anomaly that sounds a lot like the future.