Detroit techno artist Robert Hood's *Motor: Nighttime World Volume 3*

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Motor: Nighttime World Volume 3, the latest album from Detroit techno artist Robert Hood, is a collection of a dozen instrumental renderings of the decline of his hometown.

The downfall of Detroit is a process of great significance, bound up with the movement of powerful social and economic forces and the overall decline of American capitalism. Its effects have been far-reaching and traumatic, forming the context within which life in the city takes place today.

Artistically addressing this process in all its complexities is an ambitious undertaking, to say the least. Hood's album looks at the large-scale evolution of the city and tried to boil that down into the ways people feel it personally, to how it has affected the rhythms of life and the emotional states of some of those caught up in the ongoing social disaster.

Hood came to prominence in the early 1990s, when he was a member of seminal second-wave Detroit techno collective Underground Resistance, along with founders Mad Mike Banks, Jeff Mills and others. The group was known for its fantasy and science fiction themes, racial politics and the musicians' explicitly stated view that free expression through loosely defined "futuristic" music offered the way forward for humanity—ideas influenced by the Afrofuturism of artists such as Sun Ra and George Clinton.

Hood is commonly credited with having invented what is known as "minimal techno." The style, which he pioneered on early albums like *Internal Empire* (1994), *Minimal Nation* (1994) and *Nighttime World Volume 1* (1995), was opposed to the flashy, rapturous trends of "rave" music from the United Kingdom, and was instead geared toward listening closely for subtleties in rhythmic interplay, timbre, texture, movement through the stereo field and other sonic variables that had not usually been considered substantial enough to serve as focal points in a composition. Minimal techno is dance music, but it's also often described as "meditative."

Hood has attributed his innovation partly to the limitations of the relatively primitive drum machines that he first used, noting that he needed to "squeeze blood" from simple tools. The influence of minimal techno on subsequent electronic music styles in America and Europe is hard to exaggerate.

Today, the lion's share of electronic music is produced with sophisticated software and computers vastly more powerful than those available 20 years ago, and much of the music retains a focus on spectacular manipulation of these new sonic elements in preference to melody, harmonic progression or lyrics. That said, Hood doesn't abolish traditional musical variables. He is quite capable of writing melody and harmony, and even performing jazz solos on keyboard synthesizers.

A press release explains that Hood's inspiration for recording an album about the decline of Detroit came from his viewing of the 2010 film, *Requiem for Detroit?* (Julien Temple). A review of that work is beyond the scope of this article, but it is worth noting that the documentary presents a muddled history of the city and places racial issues at the center of developments.

While *Motor: Nighttime World Volume 3* is by no means a soundtrack to Temple's film, both Hood and the filmmakers shy away from an understanding of concrete historical and economic processes that have produced so much suffering in Detroit and from squarely placing the blame where it ought to lie, with the corporate elite.

This helps lend Hood's latest album its overall pessimistic and exasperated feeling. About all the artist

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can do is stand back in pained awe, beholding a tragedy that is immense in scale and apparently beyond reason—and implicitly at least beyond help or alteration.

Opening track "The Exodus" builds a galloping, frantic rhythm, while a sinister synthetic string section looms ominously on the horizon. Something bad seems about to happen, and it is time to escape. The title and the music are clear references to the city's population decline. In 1950, Detroit had 1.8 million residents—and by the mid-1950s, perhaps 2 million. The city's population has fallen precipitously, to less than 40 percent of that number today.

But why did people flock to Detroit in the first place, and what caused them to leave? Are the answers to these questions so obvious that we can take them for granted? Hood doesn't attempt to explain the process, musically or in any other way.

It is telling that he begins *Motor: Nighttime World Volume 3* at this point and in this manner, leaving out of the picture whatever may have come before. The title of musical highlight "Slow Motion Katrina" compares Detroit's decline to a long-term natural disaster. The tune is very beautiful and haunting, but in the end we are no wiser about the nature of the disaster, only convinced of its tragic and momentous dimensions. This one-sidedness tends to persist throughout.

Though he displays a limited perspective and approach, Hood is a talented and practiced musician and producer. From a technical and emotional standpoint, he takes his work seriously. He is able to provide an impressive and often exciting sense of scale and movement. When things really get going, the overall effect is that of being in a very large space, face to face with an apparatus containing huge objects in motion, often whizzing by at great speed—a city, a factory works, a highway. Hood's detailed sounds are rich and convincing, seemingly tactile, which adds to the effect. One can almost feel the breeze.

Perhaps the strongest track is the 10-minute-long "Black Technician." It is unmistakably a depiction of working on an assembly line. The sheer variety and quality of Hood's sounds is quite compelling here; drills whirr, ratchets croak, robotic arms articulate and squelch, valves hiss, various metal components are fitted together—somewhere in the distance, car doors slam and engines ignite.

At first, the rhythm is heavily syncopated and disorienting, creating a twitchy, jerky, uncomfortable vibe. But then, a string pad enters and gradually forms a regular chord progression that provides some grounding, and the factory sounds weave together tightly into a danceable beat. A searching minor key melody of bells completes the arrangement and seems to play the role of the wandering mind of the worker.

Just when things become satisfyingly groovy, the breakdown snaps us back to cold metal reality. In the end, however, the bells' melody comes back with a vengeance and overwhelms the factory, eventually shaking its sounds off completely to end the song alone, lost in thought and unresolved. It is an ambitious attempt to evoke the contradiction between repetitive physical labor that requires almost no conscious thought and a mind yearning for stimulation—a contradiction discussed by auto workers in *Requiem for Detroit?* On past releases, Hood has unabashedly indulged in racial politics. *Nighttime World Volume 2* (2000) opened with comic Richard Pryor's joke about the need for more black movie directors and closed with a track called "Blackness," featuring a black-supremacist spoken-word vocal performed by Hood's wife Eunice.

It is perhaps telling that 12 years later, *Volume 3* maintains a focus on material facts and conditions. The album's cover and sleeve art cleverly cast Detroit's illuminated night skyline as a feature-detected waveform—as will be familiar to many electronic musicians. In this context, the rounded towers of the Renaissance Center—head quarters today of General Motors—suggest nothing more than a cluster of Hood's big burly kick drums.

The sounds attempt to correspond to the physical city itself, its structures and machines and movement. Song titles such as "Motor City," "The Wheel," "Drive (The Age of Automation)" and "Assembly" leave little question but that Hood recognizes that immense industrial and historic forces are key to Detroit's rise and fall, even if he can't quite put them into context. Where will his music go from here?

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