

Daft Punk's *Random Access Memories*

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French duo Daft Punk—Guy-Manuel de Homem-Christo (born 1974) and Thomas Bangalter (born 1975)—have returned with their first full-length album since *Human After All* (2005).

In a switch-up long in the making, *Random Access Memories* is not a typical electronic dance music (EDM) album. It takes many cues from classic disco, soft rock and progressive rock, and is built not from computer generated sounds or pre-recorded samples, but from immaculately recorded live performances by professional studio musicians. In its theme and method it is a reaction—but a relatively warm and friendly one—to the current state of the popular computer-created music scene that has been significantly influenced by Daft Punk's prior work.

Daft Punk's full-length debut, the aptly titled *Homework* (1997), offered an assortment of EDM tracks produced cheaply at home. Drawing inspiration largely from Chicago House music and disco music, the album would become known as the first internationally popular “French House” album. French House is distinguished by its slow to medium tempos, melodic lead lines and strong “filter” effects that give the music a warm, undulating timbre.

The single “Around the World” is a characteristically fun and infectious example, and the music video —directed by Michel Gondry (*Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*, many Bjork music videos...)—gives a good taste of the duo's whimsical, entertaining approach to EDM.

The duo truly came into their own in the 2001 follow-up, *Discovery*. Here they indulged in lyrical pop songwriting alongside their trusty repetitive loops, collaborated with likeminded American producers DJ Sneak and Todd Edwards and performed melodic lead vocals through a vocoder and talk-box—two analog effects units that transform the human voice into an electronic instrument—while they convincingly created and presented an anonymous robot as lead singer.

Singles “Digital Love,” “Harder Better Faster Stronger” and “Something About Us” are genuinely enjoyable. The songs artfully convey a variety of human emotion through the nonthreatening, cartoonish robot persona and they beg to

be danced to.

Daft Punk made more of an effort to be accessible than “traditional” underground styles of EDM like techno, rave, or drum and bass, which were associated with particular lifestyles and subcultures and were meant to have a more limited appeal (and which all predate the popular usage of the word term EDM, a catch-all neologism).

Daft Punk's work on *Discovery* appealed to popular music fans in a way that the efforts of few EDM musicians, especially in the US, had done to that point. The album went on to sell several million copies worldwide, and 750,000 in the US, by 2005. And while the influence of any particular album on a living, changing music scene is impossible to gauge precisely, *Discovery* certainly played an important role in bringing EDM and related stylistic elements into the commercial radio repertoire in the US.

In particular, Daft Punk's heavy use of vocoder and talkbox presaged the popular explosion of the superficially similar computer software effect called Auto-Tune, which digitally quantizes the pitch of a vocal performance along an appropriate scale, so that no wrong note can be sung.

The French duo followed *Discovery* with *Human After All* (2005), which was a darkly ironic commentary on the computerization of life and popular music. Track titles like “Brainwashed” and “Robot Rock” give some sense of the proceedings. Bangalter called the album an “extremely tormented and sad and terrifying look at technology”. Overall, it is cruelly robotic and sarcastic, purposely leaving the listener cold.

They were then commissioned to provide the soundtrack to Disney's *Tron: Legacy*, released in 2010. The film is a vapid, computer-generated “epic” of the most mind-numbing kind. It did, however, offer Daft Punk an opportunity to record with an 85-piece orchestra, and no doubt it made the pair a good deal of money.

In the last several years meanwhile, the explosive development of the Internet and cheap computer technology has proven to be a watershed for—along with everything else—popular music. For better or worse, these advances provided the infrastructure for the simplified creation and distribution of cheaply made, amateur electronic music,

which also quickly became mainstream. Skrillex won three Grammy awards in 2012 and three more in 2013.

All of which brings us to *Random Access Memories*, released in mid-May, in which Daft Punk, sparing no expense, shun computerized loops and pre-recorded samples, and instead assemble a cast and crew of their idols and peers, as well as some of the most renowned studio musicians of the 1970s and 1980s, with the express goal of bringing “life back to music.”

And within the first twenty seconds of the first track, “Give Life Back to Music,” the value of this approach becomes evident. The playing has the subtle, spontaneous variation that comes naturally from human players, but which is a painstaking task to create artificially on a laptop or MIDI controller, and one that is rarely even attempted. The mix as well is crystal clear and pleasing to the ear, the melody catchy, the rhythm danceable. Among the contributors to this song are: Nile Rodgers, lead guitarist in the 1970s disco band Chic and legendary producer, and Paul Jackson Jr., a session guitarist who supported Michael Jackson on *Thriller*.

Track two, “The Game of Love,” continues to make a good case for their methods, featuring a wonderfully morose vocoder/talk-box performance that warbles and glissandos and falters in the most human way. On the breakdown, he (Bangalter or de Homem-Christo—Daft Punk never reveal who is singing behind the effect on any given track) blows into the vocoder to play a wordless solo.

Track three (“Giorgio by Moroder”) is where things get the most interesting. It’s built around an interview with disco producer Giorgio Moroder—who pioneered the use of still emerging synthesizer technology in disco music in the late 1970s, particularly with his production work on Donna Summers’ “I Feel Love” (1977), which set the stage for the development of purely electronic forms of dance music that would follow.

Moroder recounts some of his experiences as a young person trying to make it as a professional musician in Germany, leading up to his signature innovation. All the while, the background music follows the story he tells, leading to a triumphant jam wherein many sounds of the synthesizer are joined by guitar, drumkit and orchestra, as Moroder announces, “Nobody told me what to do, there was no preconception of what to do.”

Having thus established their intent and demonstrated their ability, however, much of the remainder of the album tends toward either the overblown (“Touch,” “Contact”) or the insipid and forgettable (“Within,” “Instant Crush,” “Fragments”). To be sure, there are lovely or charming moments in virtually every track. On the whole, however, much of the material, though evidently created with care,

fails to make a strong impression.

This has something to do with Daft Punk’s limited idea of what it means to bring “life” back to music. The variety of emotions expressed—excitement, light-heartedness, sadness and wistfulness, but remarkably never a hint of cynicism—is essentially healthy, and can only be welcomed in a popular electronic music scene too often dominated by fist-pumping bombast. But what is not on the table is a compelling examination of life outside the dance floor. This is hardly criminal, especially for a dance album, but nonetheless it’s a costly (and unnecessary) limitation.

That said, lead single “Get Lucky”, again featuring Nile Rodgers, as well as vocalist Pharrel Williams of The Neptunes, is irresistible. Here, the general theme of the album—getting back in “touch” with the human side of music—is refreshingly explicit, and the focus is entirely on the groove and the hook. And the vocal effects on the bridge are marvelous, a true “raising of the bar” in technique. The relatively simple “Doin’ It Right,” featuring the unfiltered lead vocals of Noah Lennox—who sounds like Brian Wilson of the Beach Boys—is another highlight.

Random Access Memories sold over 300,000 copies in its first week, making it the second fastest-selling album of 2013 so far. The album also set records for online streaming. That so many people have come clamoring for this offering tells us something about the current state of popular music: its all too frequent inability to satisfy the natural desire of listeners for amusement, liveliness and entertaining distraction.

No album could be expected to solve all the problems of popular music. There’s certainly something to be said, however, for a sincerely human and professional approach, taking one’s time, engaging with the history of the form and a straightforward, good-natured attempt to delight an audience.



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