

Will Schube Writes About Music

Dec 29 Favorite Albums #10–6

Year End

#8 High Water — *Crush*



I don't think High Water's *Crush* would have impacted me the way it did if I had heard his work before listening to this record. High Water is the performing name of Will Epstein, a New York based musician on Nico Jaar's Other People label. *Crush* is an album of skewed pop songs, tracks left to simmer in post-apocalyptic radiation for eternity. These tracks are crunchy and aloof, profoundly original takes on traditional popular music.

I first heard Epstein's music when I found his Lucinda Williams cover, "Change the Locks" on Resident Advisor. Holy shit that song. It's so hard to cover a song faithfully, even harder to add an original take to an existing piece of music. Epstein not only captures Williams' song in a wonderful way, he totally re-focuses the song's emotive values without undermining the structure of the original. I had the pleasure of speaking with Epstein a while back, and he talked about how his version of the song just came out sadder than her's did, which is a really interesting thing to note about cover songs in general (we also talked about psychedelic directness which instantly became my favorite phrase of all-time). It's odd that more artists don't take this approach—not necessarily

dictating an emotion in opposition of the original, but letting any emotion at all overwhelm the structure of the cover. Epstein's cover of "Change the Locks" wouldn't be nearly as effective if it was more traditionally faithful to the original. It fits perfectly with the rest of the album, with tracks like "Forecast" and "Seattle," which are downcast wanderings attempting to find a sense of self.

The album begins with "Moonlight Mind," a twisted lullaby backed by dubby doo-wop and smooth synth beds. "Bad Touch" is the slickest song on the record, almost demonically sexy in its aggressive presentation. "Railroad Song (Reprise)" sort of just drifts along until Epstein's dramatically beautiful voice comes yelping in from the bullpen, reaching the sort of anthemic heights that helped propel M83's earlier work into the atmosphere. The album concludes with "Crush," and it's the sort of finale that albums epic in scope tend to finish with. Over an '80s era piano lick, Epstein's voice flutters along in an upper register, delicate but carrying serious gravity with it. The song features only piano and voice, and it's the simplest track on the record. But *Crush* is a tremendous record because the complexities are unending and miniscule. Each listen comes with new, exciting intricacies to latch on to. It's astounding that an album this cohesive and confident in a defining aesthetic is Epstein's debut. It's refreshingly original music that looks unflinchingly at its creator. It's a self-critical affair, dazzling in its assuredness and the questions it seeks to answer.