

The Guardian

Still House Plants: 'In experimental music there's a lot of whiteness, snobbery, pretension'

August 2020

by Katie Hawthorne

The trio, formed at Glasgow School of Art, have made one of the underground records of the year. They discuss how self-sabotage, phone recordings and UK garage all spill into their sound

A show by Still House Plants might start with drummer David Kennedy thoughtfully assembling his kit. Only once the kick is weighted down, the snares are positioned and his stool is comfy do vocalist Jessica Hickie-Kallenbach and guitarist Finlay Clark join him on stage. These gentle theatrics reflect the trio's eclectic, sometimes erratic, always intentional approach to performance. Even their setlists are part of it: sprawling and colourful, with arrows bursting in all directions. Yet despite the plan, there are no guarantees. "We just rehearse the beginnings and ends of songs, get them tight," says Clark. "You can really pull and stretch a song if you know how to start and stop."

Still House Plants have spent five years pulling and stretching at what it means to be a band. They've just released their new album, *Fast Edit*, one of the best underground releases of the year so far; their experimental sound is inspired by the repetition of club music, R&B, jazz drumming patterns and the ethos of improvisational saxophonist Mette Rasmussen. When musicians as unrelated as post-hardcore band [Shellac](#) and avant-garde pop producer [Sophie](#) come up in conversation, it's an oddly accurate reflection of the group's traditional guitar-drums-vocals setup as well as their bold inventiveness.

They met at the [Glasgow School of Art](#) in 2013 – Hickie-Kallenbach and Clark lived in the same student housing, Kennedy was in their painting class – and were originally a collective in the art-world sense, working on exhibitions and residencies as well as gigs often accompanied by dancers. Music underpinned their friendship from the start, they explain as they Zoom in from their separate lockdown locations: Hickie-Kallenbach and Clark both in south London, where they grew up, and Kennedy in Glasgow.

Clark realised that Hickie-Kallenbach had an extraordinary voice, brassy but tender, and talked her into writing together. “We did this weird dance at first,” she laughs. “I had to do my vocal takes in a different room because I was so shy.” Kennedy studied drumming prior to university but was reluctant to take it up again. It wasn’t until he watched the duo’s first gig that he finally felt the pull: “I just thought, I want to do that too.”

The concept of being in a band felt tainted to him, he says. “Being a Glasgow band’s a bit of a curse.” He found his home town’s prestigious [musical heritage](#) stifling and restrictive, as if there was just “one way” to be a band. “It’s that tweeness!” he says. “But I just hadn’t been exposed to what I actually like.” Still House Plants feel similarly about being labelled as an “art-school band”, and groan theatrically at the mention of it. “We can’t be annoyed because it’s true!” says Hickie-Kallenbach, “but I just don’t want us to be seen as pretentious.”

Their early releases, put out on experimental [Glasgow](#) label GLARC, were exercises in brevity. Often recorded in a single day, with minimal production trickery, they were snapshots of the band at a moment in time. “There’s something about the permanence of recording that can feel a bit freaky,” Hickie-Kallenbach explains. So they made a virtue of their restrictions: time, money, space, equipment. That ethos fuelled their earlier live shows. “I used to play with really fat strings so that they’d break during the set and I’d have to figure it out,” Clark laughs. “It was self-sabotage.”

Those mishaps birthed a kind of philosophy. Fast Edit is an intricate collage blending ghostly audio from rehearsals with voice notes and cleaner studio takes. Its ethos stems from the introspective, loping centrepiece, [Shy Song](#). One night, before a show in Budapest, they forgot how to play it. “I said, shall I just play it out on my phone through the mic?” says Hickie-Kallenbach. They performed to a rehearsal recording, enjoying how they fell in and out of time with that earlier version. “We used the recording as the rhythm and then just messed about over it,” Clark enthuses.

They credit this interest in layering recordings to a love of UK garage. “At school everyone played garage out of their phones and that built into our idea of using phone recordings,” says Clark. “That ethos of chopping things up and sampling it.”

“Obviously our music isn’t garage,” adds Hickie-Kallenbach, “but it was always around when I was growing up, and so it was there when I needed words to describe what I meant when writing songs. I just want to acknowledge what I grew up with; some things get pointed to [as influences] too much, too often, and some things don’t get pointed to enough. I think in experimental circles there’s a lot of whiteness, snobbery, pretension – and loads of really nice people, too – but it can undervalue music that should fall under that same category.”

The trio’s approach can be challenging. Another new track, Do, is intensely repetitive to the point of frustration: Clark’s guitar chirps like a fire alarm running low on batteries and it’s only in the last 30 seconds that the song reaches a satisfying peak. “We know we make sounds that can be quite harsh, but it’s about being generous too,” explains

Hickie-Kallenbach. “If you’re making things difficult, you should also make things beautiful.”

Even while they’re separated by lockdown, there’s a gravitational force between the three. It’s been five months since they last played together and they’re visibly excited to bring new experiments to the table. There’s just one problem: “I need to get my drums back,” Kennedy admits sheepishly. “I lent them out to lots of people and now I’ve got to put them back together.”

<https://www.theguardian.com/music/2020/aug/18/still-house-plants-in-experimental-music-theres-a-lot-of-whiteness-snobbery-pretension>