

# Futuromania: Electronic Dreams, Desiring Machines and Tomorrow's Music Today

*Simon Reynolds*

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In his latest collection of essays, *Futuromania*, Simon Reynolds picks up where his 2011 *Retromania* had left off. Where *Retromania* saw Reynolds tracing a lineage of (mostly rock) musics which looked to the past as fodder for a very uncreative and under-stimulating present, *Futuromania* charts a history of musics that have sounded, and still sound, future oriented. *Retromania* was in effect built on the premise that early twenty-first-century music suffered from a lack of creative inspiration and an incapacity to evolve into novel forms and genres. *Futuromania* advances no comparable overarching claim: it leaves open the question of what future-looking music might, in practice, sound like, instead offering us a glimpse into the ways in which developments in sound technology shape not only music but equally also the cultural imaginary that accrues around it.

The text is a collection of largely chronological writings on different and interlocking developments in electronic music. Some pieces are fully developed essays that provide detailed historical overviews, such as Reynolds's examination of British synth-pop in "Electronic Dreamers". Others take the form of curated lists highlighting records that have influenced forward-thinking genres, such as his exploration of UK Grime in "GRIME: We Run the Road". Still other essays focus on the work of individual artists, such as the analysis of Jlin's music in "FOOTWORK: Jlin's Martial Artform". The result is a diverse set of texts

united by a common, yet subtle, thread: the ways in which innovations in sound technology, when fused with the singular creative visions of artists, have the power to spark movements, countercultures, and subcultures that are nothing short of world changing.

The roots of Reynolds's obsession with the future are by now well documented. His strong affinity for rave culture reflects a devotion to a scene built (or at least remembered as being built) on the promise of liberation through dance, the collective energy of crowds, as well as the hypnotic surrender to the intricate and machinic rhythms of techno, jungle, and acid house. It is fitting, then, that *Futuromania's* Afterword would reckon with the origins of Reynolds's passion for rave, which boils down to an admixture between his fascination with Deleuze and Guattari (after all, part of the book's title references "desiring machines") and his enthusiasm for the utopian potential of MDMA. Naturally, within the context of his writings on eighties and nineties electronic music collected in this book, the influence of the Cybernetic Culture Research Unit (CCRU) looms large; Kodwo Eshun—a writer, theorist, and filmmaker best known for his influential (and at times controversial) postmodern and posthumanism-inspired music journalism, *More Brilliant than the Sun* (1998), developed during his tenure with the CCRU—is even explicitly cited. At that point, Reynolds's posthumanist-inflected critique becomes easy to read as symptomatic of a broader *fin-de-siècle* narrative about the capacities of machines to redirect desires—one that, in retrospect, may have overestimated the transcendental power of technology.

But *Futuromania* is less a book about futuristic music than it is about coming to terms with the fact that there have been times when the future seemed to hold far greater liberatory potential than it does today. For Reynolds, the 1990s clearly represented one such moment; the 2020s, judging by his relatively sparse writings on the present, appear decidedly bleaker. In this regard, the book can be divided into three broad sections which reflect Reynolds's own feelings about musical developments. The first, spanning the 1970s and 1980s, focuses primarily on the evolution of synthesizers and the synth-driven music that emerged alongside them. Here, the author's most compelling contribution lies in his balancing of the dominant Anglophone canon with equally significant, yet often overlooked, developments from other regions: he draws attention to, among others, Japan's Yellow Magic Orchestra which, often omitted from mainstream synth music histories, has nevertheless played a pivotal role in shaping the evolution of electronic dance music, even influencing Detroit's legendary techno outfit Cybotron (Reynolds 2024: 52).

The second section, spanning the 1990s to the 2000s, explores the rise of electronic dance music and the cultural impact of electronic instruments. Here, Reynolds's enthusiasm is at its most infectious, reflecting his personal investment in the era. The third section on the other hand, covering the early 2000s to the present, takes a more fragmented approach, weaving together a range of loosely connected electronic acts that appear future facing yet are not tied to any singular advancement in sound technology. This is not to say that technological developments are absent, but rather that no overarching narrative emerges. One notable exception is Reynolds's essay on Auto-Tune, "THE LIFE OF AUTOTUNE: How Pitch-Correction Revolutionised Twenty-First Century Pop, from Afrobeats to Atlanta Trap", which touches upon long-standing debates in popular music studies—chief among them, the contested notion that authenticity lies in an absence of technological mediation. Instead of framing Auto-Tune as a tool for masking artistic inadequacy, Reynolds of course takes a

nuanced approach to the topic: he argues that, like earlier innovations such as the microphone, the tool does not conceal imperfections so much as redefine the creative possibilities of the human voice.

However, if contemporary music can be understood, as Reynolds suggests, through the interplay between different and often fragmented acts and movements, it is just as important to consider what has been left out of his narrative. Two major omissions stand out. First, Reynolds devotes little space to women's contributions to electronic music beyond a few well-established figures like Wendy Carlos, Bebe Barron, and Delia Derbyshire. Even in the one chapter dedicated to contemporary female artists, Reynolds acknowledges his analytical limitations, grouping together musicians with little in common. More perceptual acuity in categorising and making sense of this otherwise disparate set of acts would have been salutary here.

Likewise, Reynolds engages only minimally with the rapid evolution of internet-driven music scenes, leaving readers to piece together the significance of genres like hyperpop and SoundCloud rap to today's musical landscape. This oversight may stem from his lingering retromantic tendency to idealise the 1990s as a golden era of innovation. In this sense, while Reynolds does acknowledge some recent trends, those looking for a more thorough engagement with the forward-thinking corners of electronic music today may find his treatment forbiddingly cursory.

Despite these challenges, in *Futuromania* just as much as in his past works, Reynolds excels at demonstrating how music journalism may complement and expand the work of musicology—perhaps more so than in other humanistic disciplines. His impact on properly scholarly efforts to understand the interplay between technological advancements and the development of electronic music scenes is undeniable. Equally undeniable is his dedication to uncovering even the most fleeting artistic currents, using them as entry points to reveal deeper truths about the cultural and historical trends shaping past, present, and future eras.

## References

- Eshun, K. 1998. *More Brilliant Than the Sun: Adventures in Sonic Fiction*. London: Quartet Books.