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JUNIOR BOYS

The white noise backdrop of modern life means that without some fine-tuning on our part, even established and progressive artists can become elusive on occasion. But since musical creativity involves a healthy drive to self-determination and often a keen collaborative spirit, out of earshot doesn't necessarily mean out of action. Certainly not in the case of Junior Boys, who've readied a new album, *Big Black Coat* - due for release on 5 February 2016.

A strikingly energised and intuitively dynamic set that reconnects them to their techno roots without sacrificing their soulful pop nous or riding a revivalist wave, it's also shaped by what Jeremy Greenspan and Matt Didemus have been doing in the five years since their last release.

The Hamilton, Ontario duo have racked up four albums since they formed in 1999, including their 2004 debut *Last Exit* and 2006's *So This Is Goodbye*, two rapturous – and rapturously received – records that were as poignant as they were impeccably produced, and prefigured the digital R&B so beloved of many an artist in the last few years. Two albums followed, the last in 2011, by which time high expectation had begun to leach the fun from making records.

The years since then have been filled with nourishing independent pursuits. Greenspan released two solo singles and a collaborative EP on Jiaolong, the label run by his old friend and fellow Hamiltonian Dan Snaith (aka Caribou, Daphni – Greenspan also mixed several songs from *Swim*). Greenspan also co-wrote and co-produced *Pull My Hair Back*, the acclaimed 2013 album from Hamilton singer, songwriter and producer Jessy Lanza (more recently they remixed *le1f*). Meanwhile, Didemus – who's now based in Berlin – started releasing solo tracks under the name Diva and launched his own label, Obsession.

This shift in both Boys' focus was crucial to the making of *Big Black Coat*. "One of the nice things about doing the solo stuff," Greenspan explains, "and in particular the album with Jessy, because it did so well, was that I could stop thinking about Junior Boys as being the thing I do and start thinking about it as a thing I do. That meant I could work on Junior Boys music with the same spirit as I did when it was new. It was hugely liberating and invigorated me, because I was doing things I felt really good and confident about. I was really happy with the last two Junior Boys albums, but if I look back on it, they were challenging records to make, in a way that this one absolutely wasn't."

This renewed vigour surges through Big Black Coat. It's what carries its overall sharp mix of sounds, and it's responsible for the use of a footwork tempo on 'You Say That'. It's what encouraged the pair to strip their original "complicated" version of 'Love Is A Fire' down to its compellingly looped bare bones and made Greenspan experiment with vocal treatments, as he does on the idiosyncratically Auto-Tuned 'Over It'. But it's the title track that sets the album's scene. Starting with a decidedly wintry feel, 'Big Black Coat' gradually warms and spreads light as it builds over seven minutes, nodding to Yellow Magic Orchestra ("their records are so strange," reckons Greenspan) and Plastikman as it goes. It also features a conceptually crucial percussion sound, made with a modular synth. "To my ears, it's the sound of fabric swishing," Greenspan says. "That day, I bought a coat – in fact, a big grey coat, but singing 'big black coat' worked better. And it really encapsulated everything I was thinking about when I made the album, so I wanted that as the title."

Fusing disco and soul with the industrial pop and techno of Greenspan's formative teens may not exactly be a dangerous act, but it is what makes Big Black Coat so distinctive and compelling. It's the sound of Junior Boys both cutting loose and reconnecting. As Greenspan sees it: "The fact that we haven't put out an album in a long time has been liberating, in that we haven't been so phenomenally successful that everyone knows who we are. With this album, a lot of people will be hearing us for the first time. There's a freedom that comes from that."