

Far In

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When Roberto Carlos Lange, the musician known as Helado Negro, began writing *Far In* immediately following the release of his acclaimed 2019 *This is How You Smile*, he could not have predicted that we would soon need to learn how to stay at home and be the stars of our domestic dance floors with intimates and online communities. The titular pair in “Gemini and Leo” stay indoors to discover each other anew with music recalling Lange’s youth growing up in South Florida listening to 80s club songs, and their return sampled in 90s hip hop. Visions past and future meet in a euphoria of uptempo drums, Jen Wasner’s (Flock of Dimes) funky bass line, and Opal Hoyt’s (Zenizen) galactic swirl of warm and steely synths and bright backing vocals. What was a prophesying rehearsal for the musician, we can hope will be our fresh start, a choice to bring that energy home, or go out to meet it.

The constellations aligned with optimism to create this song and several others when Lange invited a steady flow of friends to his Brooklyn studio before embarking on tour in the winter of 2019. The crooning “Wake Up Tomorrow,” offers the reassurance of a new day, while Kacy Hill’s hum soothes, as much as it haunts. The sound was inspired by the eerie persuasion of Bonnie Beecher’s voice in “Come Wander with Me,” as a mysterious folk singer caught in a deadly time loop in a final episode of the *Twilight Zone*. Throughout all of Lange’s recordings imagined beings, ghosts, haunted machines, atmospheres, and doubles appear from science fictions and his own conjurings. These affecting elements rarely appear at the center of Helado Negro summations, in spite of touring for years with uncanny dancing tinsel creatures on stage. His sonic storytelling is so capacious, that weird tales and scifi make themselves at home amongst the autobiographical narratives that invigorate community and solidarity for which he is often more known. “It’s My Brown Skin” on Helado Negro’s 2016 *Private Energy* and “Please Won’t Please” on *This is How You Smile* assert an affirmation of Latinx identity and community through recurring images of brown glowing complexion, a perception that is rooted as much in a spiritual consciousness of guiding light, resilience and protection, as a physical experience. On *Far In*, Lange says he “celebrates the ghosts,” embracing pleasure and freedom to follow the metaphysical further; the glow appears without words, as “Brown Fluorescence” in a minimal arrangement of layered, ethereal, vocal loops. *We grow younger to stay strong*, he sings on “Purple Tones” with the playful bells of steel pan drums and reveling in the creative time-space of twilight and dusk, waking dreams, and transit — the self dispersing nowhere and anywhere, but the touch of hair maintains an earthly connection to who you are and what you care about.

“La Naranja” opens with long, slowly bowed violin tones, joined by a creeping tea kettle frequency. This identifiable flying sound of our cinematic imaginations anticipates the blow of a

meteor crash, or THX deep note. Rather than a brutal jolt, at the point of contact Lange's voice gleefully bounces in to tell us that we will survive the end of the world. "Some of these songs are about facing anxieties" Lange says, "talking about the end, allows us to begin knowing how to deal with the end." It's possible to hear the world on fire and the abundant fruit of collective courage turning round at once. Supported by the grounding baseline of Taja Cheek's (L'Rain), Lange's faith in survival persists in the sheer buoyancy of the drum beat, soaring and plucky synth and string arrangements, and his voice climbing new registers. This recent vocal inclination ascends in moments throughout the album, most notably his falsetto embracing openness and growth in "Mirror Talk."

In March 2020 after returning from tour, Lange and his partner artist Kristi Sword, the "loyal freaks" of "Outside the Outside" set off for Marfa, Texas just before the pandemic hit. They intended to stay for a two-week residency working on their collaborative project, "Kite Symphony" and decided to stay put through the summer. Here he wrote "Thank You For Ever," saturated in reverb and gratitude for their experience of the desert expanse. In the verse and chorus, Lange's voice repeats and stretches high notes across a horizontal vastness, while Angela Morris and Nathaniel Morgan's saxophone melodies delicately tumble in for the instrumental bridge. With melodic sparkling layers of a detuned Moog Grandmother joined by vibraphone overtones, "Aguas Frías," summons a somatic consciousness immersed in nature, specifically bathing in the mineral-rich waters of an ancient coldspring, so transforming that names and faces fall away. Guided by a Rhodes electric piano in the studio, he wrote "Agosto" with his thoughts on the humid atmosphere of his hometown where flower petals and fruit fall and sweetly decay on concrete. For this song he collaborated with Buscabulla, the tropical synth duo who are no strangers to the melancholy pull of home in a Caribbean climate.

Driving back to Brooklyn in the fall inspired by his work in the desert, Lange auspiciously purchased a Rhodes from a friend who 20 years earlier gave him his first synthesizer, an Arp Odyssey 2800. The electric piano was a catalyst that guided much of the remaining songwriting for the album. After time apart from a changed city, his base for fifteen years, "Hometown Dream" and "Outside the Outside," unapologetically look forward to new places and possibilities. On the soulful "Telescope," Benjamin Julia's (Benamin) heartache tears into the room against Lange's low and gentle invitation to his mother, the combination wasting no time to articulate love's urgency thrown into sharp focus by the state of the world.

"Escape is never out there, you have to go inward," Lange reflects on developing an epic Helado Negro double album during these extraordinary times. Heavy, pulsing, rhythms drive "Aureole" through a dystopian landscape, but as Lange sings of endless psychological restrictions, the shimmering radiance of expanded realms bursts through. This chiaroscuro

effect suggests a path that isn't tuning out beneath monumental forces and anxieties, but embracing the dark of the unknown with openness, pleasure, and growth.

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