One of the driving themes of Anthony Powell’s roman-fleuve, *Dance to the Music of Time*, is the contrast between those characters driven solely by power and those more in tune with life’s more sensual pleasures. Inevitably, time and fate catches up with each protagonist and the reader can ponder if their fates are justified or not. *The New Sound*, Geordie Greep’s debut solo album, often feels as if it is a rerun of Powell’s theme, soundtracked by a miscreant - and totally wired - Palm Court Orchestra.

Is The New Sound a tonic for these times? One hopes so: the album boasts a brand of high quality, all-embracing alternative pop fun not heard in a very long time. Maybe Associates were the last act to walk the line between the ridiculous and brilliant with such a teflon-coated aplomb.

Is the record an attempt to break away from preconceived ideas of what popular music should be? Let’s ask Geordie Greep. “Music can be so much more than learning to play the same as everybody else. It can be anything you want. It’s strange to me, to follow the dictates of what has ‘proven to be what people like’ about a particular kind of music. With recording The New Sound, it was the first time I have had no one to answer to. And with every impulse I had, I was able to completely follow it through to its conclusion. Being in a band (black midi), we often have this ‘we can do everything’ feeling, but you are also kind of limited in that approach, and sometimes it's good to do something else, to let go of things.”

How the record came about is another thing to marvel at. Over thirty session musicians were involved in its making, on two continents. Geordie Greep; “Some of the tracks we had recorded already, elsewhere, but it just wasn’t right, so we re-recorded them with new people. Half of the tracks were done in Brazil, with local musicians pulled together at the last minute. They’d never heard anything I’d done before, they were just interested in the demos I’d made. The tracking was all done in one, maybe two days. Then we did the overdubs later, in London.”

The playing is of an incredibly high standard, which also imparts a sense of freedom and gives emotional heft to the sound: simply, you can believe what’s going on because the players commit to their cause. Greep again; “I came in with chord charts, to say, ‘here are the chord changes.’ I remember giving them to the bass player, the keyboard player, drummer, and the percussionist. And all four said, ‘No we don’t need it, we already know it!’ The bass player had already written his own music and notation up.” Nothing happened by accident, and matters were discussed in exacting detail. Greep; “The drummer and the percussionist would be arguing about what they would play in each section, because they can’t clash. You’d get to hear things like, ‘You can’t play it like that, especially with a hi-hat.’” Though not everyone spoke English, the process was “really easy; each track took an hour or two to get down. The recording happened in chunks - working in the studio for two or three days then out, then back again.”

The resulting music is “all feel, not super relaxed, but liquid and propulsive and there is also an intense rigidity to it.” Greep is adept at adding words into this sonic cauldron. “The main theme of the record is desperation; you don’t hear an unreliable narrator but someone who is kidding themselves that they have everything under control, but they don’t.” All the lyrics for the songs “came really quickly,” some on the way to the recording session. Greep; “It was a case of, ‘Oh fuck, I’m going to have to sing something now.’ [Laughs.] You can plan out a narrative but it has to feel right.”

Themes of desperation or not, there is a tangible sense that the players loved playing the music. Nothing feels laboured or self-absorbed: the sounds are outward facing and inquisitive. The instrumental title track is a jazz-funk workout that could double as a soundtrack for a TV series or the intro music for a Broadway musical. Brass, wah-wah pedal and bass stabs, choruses and polyrhythms, all fizz and tumble around the place creating a sense of excitement and expectation. Tracks often start and end on a bang, never with a whimper or a fade out. ‘Terra’ squeals to a halt courtesy of some giddy horn playing and opener ‘Blues’ ends expertly, with the same abrupt bass squiggle as it began.

This inquisitiveness is also heard in the stories themselves, which act as a shopping list of the Active Male Imagination. They are a set of vignettes, where Geordie Greep plays the role of narrator and conductor. The characters we hear from are engaged in wild fantasies and situations in which they inevitably come a cropper. It’s an ignoble tradition; and throughout The New Sound we can imagine the likes of Walter Mitty, Raymond Novak, Jim Dixon, Mohun Biswas, Jay Gatsby, Kenneth Widmerpool, the taxidermist Vasu or William Brown, or any of the Soho and military bums and wannabes portrayed by Julian Maclaren-Ross, ranting on. When did a pop record last do that?

Geordie Greep has had plenty of practice with black midi over the years in performing musical and lyrical Cruyff turns, full of stop-starts, blasts and bangs and whispered soliloquies. Here the method is employed to ask: what part of the narrative should we listeners believe, or take as our emotional crutch? The mercurial, insouciant tone set in ‘Terra’, or the gruesome imagery it is juxtaposed with? After all, Greep tells us, this is the story of “the museum of human suffering.” Consider, too, the strange emotional undulations created in ‘Through a War’, where the music makes a very polished stab at aping a soul revue; or a salsa class. It’s there to give colour to a set of imaginings which include cannibalism, being boiled alive, and a woman giving birth to a goat. You’re never quite sure when, or whether, you are supposed to be shocked; or laugh. Even if, as with the latter, Geordie Greep gives us the punchline; “And that’s how I spent my adolescence.” It’s the kind of charm offensive you would expect from Professor Woland.

Street life is all around: the listener is thrown into a world of cafes, bars and clubs, visit theatres, cabarets and strange museums, or rented rooms. Here we see our heroes carry out a series of naughty assignations, military cosplay or socio-economic triumphs. A line like “Love on your lunch break” in ‘The Walk Up’ plays very much into the tradition of ‘The Bogus Man’, or *Non-Stop Erotic Cabaret*. The lines between parody and sermon are often blurred with this urbane sound; what is there left to believe?  Greep; “I was often thinking of walking through a city, and thinking about a million dollars, showing that kind of feeling, you know?” Taking on The New Sound in its entirety can feel like you are trying to cross Piccadilly Circus after a skinful. Single ‘Holy Holy’ is possibly the best example: has urbane romantic fantasy ever sounded this way? Probably not since Noël Coward. This story of an imaginary liaison in a nightclub is soundtracked by ’noughties indie pop chords and bravura Latin big band arrangements - including a three-piano attack (Steinway, Bechstein, electric, if you must know). The spirit of Greep’s increasingly febrile and furtive tale has something of ’eighties Scottish indie, too; the witticisms of Orange Juice and baroque whimsy of Associates spring immediately to mind. This is not a record to play in a remote cottage in Pembrokeshire.

Nor one to think you’ve got down pat after a few numbers. ‘Motorbike’ sees a change in vocal duties which can catch you out: bassist and album producer Seth ‘Shank’ Evans starts up a doleful soliloquy about not getting what he wants. Guitars rev and blast like engines and things get progressively more aggressive, because, as Evans points out, “All I want is a Yamaha motorbike to ride and ride and ride.” It’s a classic adolescent revenger's fairytale, with the guitars’ moronometers set to 11. John Waine ranting to no-one in particular in a Midlands pub, about things not being fair. That kind of thing. Are we *really*sure this is a good time record?

It’s certainly one that fully engages the listener, throughout the eleven tracks. Greep; “I was worried about the length in terms of not overblowing it. But I’m also really bloody bored of listening to music and, for better or worse, knowing in advance what it means or what it’s trying to do. All my favourite music is about the listener coming to terms with what is going on. My favourite singers, like Peter Hammill or Nat King Cole, are literally one of a kind. I love that. Especially with lyrics, where you’re not sure what they’re going on about, but you know it’s not just abstract thoughts.”

What next? Could we see The New Sound as a live concept or is the album going to stay forever in our collective imagination? Greep; “My plan is to ‘do a Keith Jarrett thing’, have a different group of session musicians in a different place and lean into the fact that we’re not going to get it the same.” How can anything ever be ‘the same’ with Greep at the helm?