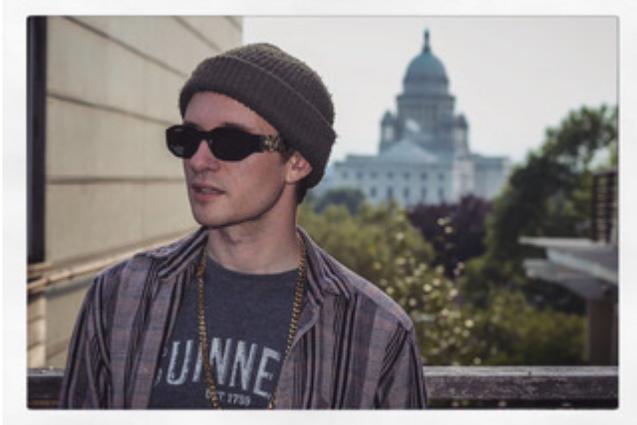


Latest from Electro-Pop Artist John Phelps Was Written in Lockdown: This collection of songs is as raw as it gets



My first impression of John Phelps' self-titled EP *John* was the lead single "Streetlights," which features a super catchy beat and a danceable chorus hook. An artsy and aesthetic video that Phelps directed accompanies the single. During a brief chat with him, he revealed that with this project, he took some liberties with the mix and mastering of the record, reflected through a greater focus on honest energy and a good vibe, even if the production was slightly rougher than usual industry standards. His second focus was on viewing sonic texture as a creative medium.

With influences running the gamut from Marvin Gaye to The Red Hot Chili Peppers and Rage Against the Machine, *John* is an incredibly honest and inventive look at what it means to be human in an age when we are increasingly challenged to be anything but.

"[*John*] was all written, produced, recorded, mixed and mastered by me at my home studio during lockdown. The sessions were sporadic and free. I tried to abandon a lot of rules and conventional methods I learned as a recording artist / engineer and just go for what felt right," Phelps said.

1. American Spirits

Opening the EP is a sound effect crossed between the "Stranger Things" intro and Iggy Azalea's "Fancy." The beat drops with ambient, echoing chords that float above the lyrics and the song becomes

a bit of a dreamscape. It feels like an empty urban street with neon lights flashing in the silence. "I could never understand it, but maybe that's the whole point" is a relatable sentiment. Honorable mention also goes to the clear bass riffs crawling underneath the mix; I love the depth this brings to the song. "It ain't so bad if we live in the moment / love the way you look tonight / you're the baddest and you know it" is a poetic and clever line. Toward the end of the song, I loved the jazzy funk-inspired clean guitar licks - they acted as a mirror of the bass lines.

2. Just Like That

Another cool sound effect opens this song; it's hard to describe, but it reminds me of finger snapping. Rhythmically, this song places most of its emphasis on the lyrics, which is interesting. "You're beautiful girl / and you can't hide that behind a mask" is subtly romantic and clever given the current situation (and I'm convinced it would be perfect printed on merch).

Like poetry throughout history, this one could be an interesting snapshot of time - and that's exactly what John set out to do. But it's ambiguous enough to also be timeless - the mask could be literal or figurative. Soaring guitar notes resonate in the instrumental interlude, proof that improvised solos rarely have to be complicated to be sonically effective.

3. Centipede

This one brings a lot more auto tune and dub step into the mix. The message of the song was slightly trickier for me to pick out, but my best guess is that it's saying to enjoy life and not take things too seriously, especially in the midst of struggle. There is a bit more *colorful* language here, which I found slightly jarring without context, but it's consistent with the overall idea of being real and raw without limitation.

I also noticed a sort of vocal trill that could be simulated by an electrified keyboard, but it adds something really surprising to the song. It ends with most of the layers dropping out, then into a jazzy bass section and then just the guitar lick breathing the last notes.

4. Ready Willing

A heavy dub step enters the soundscape here as echoing vocals take the lead. "No use fighting a feeling / lean in on it" is great advice for anyone dealing with uncertainty in a relationship. In this powerful

depiction of navigating dating drama, twinkling piano chords climb up and down the major scale — there's almost a bit of word painting placed near the lyrics "dress you down." Overall, it's a clever and inventive component.

5. You Could Run Away If You Want To

Slow, dramatic piano chords open this piece, and then collide with spoken word. I also love the shout-out to Phelp's influence Marvin Gaye and his song "What's Going On." The addition of bongos is surprising, but enjoyable.

"Your eyes so wide they consume me / colors in the sky like mood rings" is a really pithy line that's so descriptive. "Sometimes I know where I fit in / sometimes I'm just not sure" is an example of the relatable contradictions in this song. More bass holds down the bottom of the mix while anxiety is painted as quick bursts of keyboard notes played in succession. It's a powerful mix of sounds and ideas that contradict each other.

6. The Frame

"You just pushed me out of the frame / and I'm having trouble staying mad" are relatable lyrics to a lot of people. "Get choked up on the shards of my broken heart" is well, heart-breaking and made me want to give the artist a hug. I think everyone understands that feeling in one way or another. Techno beats keep this more melancholy tune branded consistently with the rest of the EP. I loved the guitar solo in this - once again, simple enough, but starkly effective in the context of the sonic backdrop.

7. Streetlights

"Streetlights guide me like memories I wanna hold onto / the rain comes down as it all crashes around you" - another great line. If the music thing didn't work out as well as it did, I'm convinced the artist could've been a very successful poet. Because clean piano chords are at the center of this piece, this song feels much more R&B than the rest of the EP. I enjoyed learning about the different stylistic influences that made this EP, then hearing the subgenres within it.

Watch the very aesthetic video directed by John for "Streetlights" here:
youtube.com/watch?v=NdZezXoUqBU

8. Rumors

Resonant arpeggiated guitar chords begin this song, and suddenly there's no dub step or auto tune — it reminds me a bit of Nickelback or Shinedown. The lyrics are more melodic and sung instead of rapped, which I found to be a really refreshing change from the rest of the established EP. The chorus featured layered gang-vocals, which builds nicely on the theme of rumors. “You fell out of love like a moving car / drop-dead gorgeous just like a movie star / I’m in the background / I could never play the part” is a line that gave me chills. It’s thematically beautiful and deep. I think this song might be my favorite on the EP - Phelps has a beautiful voice, and although he might feel most at home with the electronic effects, this ballad is incredible. I hope he embraces this side of his music more in the future.

John Phelps’ new self-titled EP John is out now (fanlink.to/jpep)! YouTube: youtube.com/user/Lunchbagg401; Twitter: twitter.com/itsjohnphelps; Instagram: instagram.com/itsjohnphelps