**sunking**

“At its core, this is experimental music,” says Bobby Granfelt. “There’s elements of jazz and indie rock and hip-hip and electronic music, but ultimately, sunking is all about exploring the nooks and crannies between those genres, about throwing out all of the rules and expectations in search of something completely fresh and original.”

On *Smug*, the LA duo’s captivating debut for ANTI- Records, it’s safe to say they’ve found it. Crafted piecemeal over the course of several years, the collection is wildly inventive and utterly hypnotic, filtering the pair’s bold vision and virtuosic musicianship though the brash, DIY ethos of an underground punk band. Live horns and dreamy guitars brush up against lush synthesizers and propulsive beats here, with each of the album’s 19 immersive, instrumental tracks clocking in around the two-minute mark. As mesmerizing as it all can be, there’s also something perpetually unsettled about the music here—sometimes it’s a dissonance or cacophony that craves resolution, sometimes it’s a groove that resists fitting neatly into any recognizable time signature—and that’s by design. Nothing is sacred, nothing is precious. Like Johnny Greenwood scoring a David Lynch videogame, *Smug* is at once beautiful and unnerving, hyper-focused and surreal, challenging and transcendent.

“We’re trying to embrace a certain amount of discomfort with the music,” explains Granfelt. “Whether it’s the unexpected tonalities or the abstract song structures or even just the raw approach we took to recording, we’re committing to everything we do in such a way that by the end of the experience, it all feels right and cohesive.”

Commitment is the name of the game for Granfelt and bandmate Antoine Martel, who first bonded over a shared love for progressive jazz, punk, shoegaze, and underground electronic music while still in high school. Over the years, the powerhouse drummer and keyboard wizard would collaborate in a variety of configurations—most notably as members of the sprawling Seattle collective High Pulp, which garnered a cult following and rave reviews on the strength of its “nuanced amalgam of funk, jazz-fusion, and R&B” (*The Stranger*) and “expansive, cinematic, intricately detailed sound” (*KEXP*)—but sunking always remained distinct from any of the pair’s other projects, in large part because it always remained just the two of them.

“There’s a bit more of a loose, shoot-from-the-hip approach we’re comfortable taking as a duo,” says Granfelt. “I’ve always loved music that was rough around the edges—Alex G, Guide By Voices, Modest Mouse—and we don’t shy away from that kind of grit. We’ll just throw up a couple microphones and start recording anywhere: a studio, a bedroom, a moving vehicle, it doesn’t matter.”

“We have a bit of a telepathic thing going on where we don’t even need to speak to communicate at this point, either” adds Martel. “With sunking, there are fewer filters between us and the music.”

That’s not to say the music on *Smug* is entirely improvised, though. While the groundwork for the album is drawn from a series of freewheeling, lo-fi drum sessions captured back in 2016, the horn and keyboard-fueled arrangements on top are part of a more deliberate vision of the band’s sound that’s been evolving ever since the release of their 2019 self-titled debut.

“We had a little bit of horns and melodies on that first record,” explains Martel, “but this time around we wanted to push things in a more composed direction, even as we held on to that rawness and roughness.”

“I think this album was a gateway for me to start thinking of myself less as a drummer and more as a composer,” adds Granfelt. “There was something really liberating in that shift, like all the arbitrary limits on what this kind of music could and couldn’t be were getting thrown out the window.”

That sense of liberation is plain to hear on *Smug*, which revels in subverting convention and leaning into the unexpected. Album opener “Natural Monopoly” sets the stage with a relentless sense of forward momentum and discovery that quickly gives way to escalating tension and uncertainty. As brief as these tracks are, they still manage to pack a narrative punch, refusing to settle for simple scene setting and instead utilizing a wide range of melodic and rhythmic tools to create entire story arcs in 120 seconds or less. The melancholy “You Left Early” evokes the moments of clarity that often arrive in the midst of loneliness and isolation, while the psychedelic “Wormhole To Andromeda” leaves trouble and worry behind as it blasts off into another dimension, and the airy “Good Intentions” (along with its more grounded counterpart, “Bad Habits”) captures the descent from promise and hopefulness to disappointment and regret. Elsewhere, the duo taps into the extremes of human nature, flying high on the explosive “Uncle Kane” and dizzying “Salt Body” and mellowing out on the more meditative “Black Friday” and hazy “Had a Few Religious Experiences, Forgot Them All.”

“One of the things I’ve always loved about instrumental music is how much agency it gives the listener,” says Granfelt. “The images and feelings these songs stir up will be different for everybody, and they’ll change and morph over time, too. We didn’t go to conservatory or come up playing in orchestras, so it’s never been so much about the technical side of things with us as it is about the emotional side. These songs are meant to grow and evolve with you.”

Though the band consists solely of Granfelt and Martel, the two make generous use of samples (drawing from past projects on tunes like the off-kilter “…Anxiiety” and glacial “Inheri[past]tense”) and guest spots, inviting some of their High Pulp bandmates to join them for tunes in addition to welcoming unplanned new collaborators like saxophonist Donny Sujack, who appears on several tracks.

“Donny was a friend of our housemate’s who came to stay us while we were in the middle of recording,” recalls Granfelt. “We’d never met the guy, but we heard he played sax and just asked him if wanted to jump on some tracks, which I think really encapsulates the loose, DIY spirit we approached this whole project with. No matter what we had in mind when we started a song, we always tried to stay open to exploring the moment and being receptive to whatever the universe presented us with.”

It’s a spirit the pair credit in part to Herbie Hancock and Wayne Shorter, whose “Open Letter To The Next Generation Of Artists” turns up as a spoken word passage on the trippy “ESP.” “As we accumulate years, parts of our imagination tend to dull,” the jazz legends wrote. “Whether from sadness, prolonged struggle, or social conditioning, somewhere along the way people forget how to tap into the inherent magic that exists within our minds. Don’t let that part of your imagination fade away.”

With *Smug*, Granfelt and Martel aren’t just tapping into that magic, they’re living and breathing it, one thrilling sonic experiment at a time.