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Jeffrey Konrad’s *Shadow Boxing*, his second “official” release under the name Konrad, is all over a pop map written mostly in crayon, with keyboard cheese and drum machines aplenty. If the album weren’t so layered and carefully constructed, it would be an easy mistake to dismiss many songs as amateurish outsider art produced largely on a synthesizer.

The wrongheadedness of that should be evident solely from “Hang-Ups,” which foregoes electronics entirely for a poignant, country-tinged ballad that recalls Neil Young in its instrumentation and sleepy vibe. The two-line chorus is plainspoken but clear, with understated vocals that capture a character both self-aware and lost: “Getting over you has been difficult / ‘Cause I’m faking it through my future.” The verses are loaded with phrases both cryptic and evocative – “Open season on the polygraph,” “Shadow-boxing with the angel of death.”

Written by Jeff Ignatius  
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“Hang-Ups” is exceptional in two senses: outstanding and an outlier. Closing track “Luxury of Wishful Peace” follows its lead down a lovely chamber-pop hallway, while “Puppet Strings” – dominated by a sitar guitar, fiddle, and tabla – is another aberration, a stew blending Indian and Celtic flavors.

These songs help contextualize the remainder of *Shadow Boxing*, dominated by exercises in plasticized pop. I don’t intend that term as derogatory: Konrad’s heavy, willfully excessive use of synthesized sounds is not a crutch but a largely successful artistic choice.

In a recent phone interview, the Quad Cities musician said he crafted the songs “freestyle,” composing them in the studio. He said he starts with a few parts, and “after a few layers get down, a melody will pretty much just pop into my head. And I’ll record the melody with mock lyrics right then and there, so then I’ll have the melody.” That process, he said, is drawn from jazz improv – using chords and harmonies as the ground from which melodies spring.

He said he then builds on top of that – usually exhausting Pro Tools’ 32 available tracks – before scaling things back.

As you might expect, the album is exceedingly dense. Konrad isn’t blending like things as often as he’s combining wildly different components. Lead track “All You Thought” manages to make even its organic elements (trumpet and trombone) sound synthetic, while the lyrics – sung with a stiff but eager earnestness – seem like a socially inept mating call, as if generated by a robot with no grasp of figurative speech: “Then we can go home and get in your neck.” The song has a winning awkwardness, both musically and lyrically: “Are you all torn out of shape? ‘Cause if you are, I’ve got tape.”

That’s followed by the innocently horny “So Who Are You?”, and its narrator seems only slightly more adept at human interaction. But again the musical setting and words are charmingly vivid: “I’m going oo-oo crazy as a break-dancing ghost.”

“Klairsvoyance” is an environmental call to action that’s at once optimistic and dystopian, with its futuristic sonic textures drawn deeply from the past; on a musical level, it’s everywhere but the present. Konrad’s words seem ironically, bitterly bleak: “Our parents did a pretty good job / Teachers did a mighty fine job / Politicians did a swell job / Of ruining our planet.” But it’s

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fundamentally positive, with its opening – “I can see the future / The planet’s okay / Never mind what they say on TV” – confident in a revolution.

Somewhere between the straightforward, conventional “Hang-Ups” and the aggressively processed tracks are a few songs that seek a middle ground. “Sticks & Stones” and “Time Is After,” for example, try to have it both ways, and they never quite reconcile their equally weighted dual natures.

The Beatles cover “I’m Only Sleeping” works better, with thick snakes of chunky, synthesized melodies nearly devouring the source material. “Silence Inside Us” employs a similar approach in a more aggressive rock context, with the electronic elements freaking out and steamrolling an otherwise perfectly serviceable song.

*Shadow Boxing* is, in other words, hardly a unified whole – and that often applies to its individual songs as well as the entirety. But there’s a distinct, strong artistic voice throughout, one that for worse but usually better has no self-censorship mechanism. Konrad typically employs an everything-including-the-kitchen-sink approach, but he’s got the conviction and the ear to make it work.

*Konrad will perform on Friday, May 11, at [Rozz-Tox](#) (2108 Third Avenue in Rock Island). Doors open at 7 p.m., and the show also includes [Cowboy Indian Bear](#) and [Centaur Noir](#). Admission is \$5.*

*For more information on Konrad, visit [KonradMusic.net](#).*