

Review Album 'Cerulean' de Danny L Harle

(English version)

The introduction that follows is, I admit, a little long, or let's say "unnecessarily detailed", if you're not inclined to read through the sentimental confession of a listener in search of meaning. You're free to linger on it (which, I confess, I hope you will) or to scroll straight down to the review below, where the tone becomes more analytical and less self-focused.

Either way, thank you for being here. You can't imagine what it means to someone writing alone, without support, without visibility, driven solely by the need to do it. Thank you.

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I have a particular fondness for Danny L Harle, an affection that's both irrational and perfectly justifiable, at least if we agree that certain musical obsessions act as biographical markers, signposts we plant along our personal journeys without ever knowing whether they point forward or backward. So yes, this affection can be traced to a series of stories, places, listening contexts, countless small moments where his music, his persona, and even his world (that blend of synthetic flamboyance and hyperpop melancholy) crossed paths with my life, quietly weaving a thread through it. Over time, those moments have crystallized into tiny landmarks, like fluorescent pins on the map of an inner journey.

I discovered Danny L Harle's music in 2013, through the track *Broken Flowers*, when Eclair Fifi played it on BBC Radio 1. It was during the summer of 2013 (I think). I was living in Paris, immersed in a period of intense writing, my master's thesis, devoted to music and artists on social media which, looking back, feels both naïve and oddly prophetic. I listened to that track on repeat, alternating with a *She Wolf* edit by Ghibli (from Manicure Records). A strange pairing, but for neurochemical reasons I'd rather not examine too closely, it gave me a kind of almost spiritual balance **(1)**.

(1) There's an uncanny correlation between the obsessive repetition of a song and the emotional stabilization of a person finishing their master's thesis. No study has ever proven it, but everyone knows it's true.

At the time, I listened religiously to Eclair Fifi's residency on British radio. First, because I was an early fan of Hudson Mohawke, and therefore, by logical extension, of the LuckyMe label, of which she was a member. I had discovered her through my Belgian friends from Folie Douce (a collective now dissolved or rather, evaporated into the great entropy of Europe's electronic scenes), who were genuinely close to her. She even appears on one of their compilations, a fossilized trace of that time when the Internet hadn't yet fully absorbed local communities.

That same collective (Folie Douce) had also invited A. G. Cook to play in Paris for the first time, at the Social Club, as well as SOPHIE, for a show in Liège, between 2013 and 2014.

I met Claire (that is, Eclair Fifi) later, in 2014 or 2015. I'm no longer sure of the date, but it was after a party at the Hotel EDITION in Soho, London. She had come to attend that very event where SOPHIE, A. G. Cook, Hannah Diamond, Palmistry, Le1f, and a few others were performing. I was there thanks to Sébastien (aka Konnie), one of the members of Folie

Douce, and afterward we took a cab with Claire and one of LuckyMe's founders (Martyn, I think?) to East London. I remember that night as a kind of blurred tracking shot: we were laughing, talking about music, and, a detail I'll never forget, that's when I learned that Claire was an absolute fan of Black Devil Disco Club, a discreet but essential pioneer of French disco, for whom, ironically enough, I was doing booking in the UK that same year.

But let's rewind a little.

In September 2013 (with my thesis finally in hand), I moved to London. I lived in Bethnal Green, five minutes from Shoreditch, fifteen from Kingsland Road and Dalston. That precise geography is not incidental: it defined the radius of my nights out, that nocturnal map where identity and memory are shaped in equal measure. I often went to the Dance Tunnel, Birthdays, Plastic People, Bar A Bar... but above all, to one place that, for me, was pivotal: Power Lunches, a simple, worn-in bar with a damp, lively basement that hosted countless sets, and where the very first Club Late Music party was organized. I've since mythologized that night, probably because it's where I met most of the people who would later form my small, personal and musical pantheon.

The years 2013 and 2014 (and, to be honest, 2015, 2016, and 2017 too, since by that point the seasons blurred into one continuous soundtrack) were probably the most musically intense of my young adult life. From Dance Tunnel to Plastic People (both of which closed not long after), to the JACK nights at Power Lunches (which also shut down around that time), I was everywhere, literally, or at least everywhere orbiting, near or far, the artists affiliated with PC Music.

I have one particular memory (and I say *one*, because there are others, hazier like echoes lost in a too-long reverb field) of crossing paths with Danny L Harle at Power Lunches once. I can't remember which night it was, maybe the one featuring Ideal Corpus, the duo Moesha13 had at the time, whose early tracks we had released on the Club Late Music label. We exchanged a few words at the bar while, behind us, a long line formed for the venue's single restroom (that detail matters, because memories often hinge on the comic discomforts). There, in that self-managed space, everyone crossed paths: the members of PC Music, friends, strangers, a whole fauna of emerging artists who all seemed to be waiting for their turn on that same stage where everything appeared to be happening.

It was the time when PC Music was living through a kind of mythological effervescence, the kind one only recognizes as such in retrospect, and when Simon Whybray **(2)**, the organizer of the JACK parties, would sometimes invite people, seemingly at random, to eat pastrami sandwiches in some improbable corner of South London, somewhere between Peckham and Dulwich, an invitation that, at the time, felt like a kind of initiation ritual.

(2) A crucial, yet too rarely mentioned figure in the London diffusion of the label and of the early artists associated with what would later be called *hyperpop*.

So yes, the first time I saw Danny L Harle was at Power Lunches. Then, in my slightly hazy memories (as if recollection itself had retained the saturation of the neon lights), there was another night, in a bar overlooking Hoxton Square (maybe Colours Hoxton?) where Danny was also there, fleeting, smiling, already carrying that aura of gentle, benevolent energy. After that, I saw him again: at the Ace Hotel London Shoreditch, at the Scala, at XOYO.

These are among my most vivid musical memories, not only because of the music itself, but because at that time I barely knew anyone in London; those nights were laboratories of belonging. I met people there, recognized faces there, and, more importantly, I began to recognize myself.

I also remember Field Day Festival 2015: a temporal landmark still intact, perhaps because memory sometimes chooses not to erase anything when the experience goes beyond mere listening. There was the improbable (and, truthfully, nearly unique) live set by QT and SOPHIE in the middle of the afternoon, a meteor-like performance that launched the weekend in collective euphoria. Danny L Harle played right after, on the Crack Magazine Stage, before FKA twigs. I ended that Saturday in the state typical of any festival-goer (that is, filled with joy and a fair number of beers) in front of Hudson Mohawke, who closed the day with his brand-new live set.

I saw Danny L Harle again later, in other London venues, then in Paris, in that infamous bar in the 19th arrondissement (whose name, mercifully, escapes me), and later still, at the Peacock Festival, closing out the so-called “alternative” stage under pouring rain, knee-deep in mud, a moment both absurd and sublime.

Since 2013, I’ve carried the same affection for Danny L Harle... through his tracks, his live sets, or that brief exchange at Power Lunches. It isn’t a fetishistic or merely nostalgic affection, but a form of recognition: the acknowledgment of a musical project that radiates a rare authenticity, one that goes far beyond mere stylistic exercise (as some critics, mistakenly, have accused him of). I believe this deeply because I’ve seen it evolve; I’ve literally seen sincerity take shape. And it’s that sincerity (something almost disarmingly evident in a world built on posture) that leads me to think Danny L Harle isn’t just a brilliant producer. He’s one of those authors who end up translating their era without intending to, and who, by sheer force of honesty, become the myths they never set out to embody.

I’ve read (far too often, in fact) that Danny L Harle’s music is a matter of pastiche, irony, even humor; in other words, not to be taken seriously, always in “second degree.” And yes, at first glance (or rather, first listen which amounts to the same thing in a world saturated with sonic imagery), one might think so: his *Jungle Survival DJ Challenge*, his *Summer Set*, his signature vocal loops (“*Huge Danny*”, “*Yes Mi Lord*”, etc), all that could easily be read as play, as winks, as a refusal of gravity. But to me (and with all due respect to the critics at Pitchfork, who seem to have settled comfortably into that interpretive groove since 2015), it’s never been about parody. It isn’t ironic, it’s simply how Danny L Harle plays music: with a seriousness so absolute it becomes joyful, almost childlike, and therefore, paradoxically, suspicious to the adults who write reviews.

When I read that *Cerulean* seeks to turn the legacy of hyperpop into something more serious or artistic, as if Danny L Harle had suddenly decided to distance himself from past irony, I can’t help but feel that misses the point entirely. Yes, *Cerulean* is more ambitious, broader, perhaps more narrative, but it remains in perfect continuity with the world Danny L Harle has been patiently weaving for over fifteen years. The spontaneity is intact: that almost tactile pleasure of creation persists, but it has shifted. It’s gained in poetry, in storytelling, in emotional breath. It’s no longer just a game; it’s a game that tells a story.

What strikes me most is his ongoing desire to explore new forms of composition, to *play* with music: technically, melodically, almost physically. The storytelling, meanwhile, has deepened, particularly through the extraordinary thirty-minute film directed by Lilian Hardouineau (and produced by Premier Cri): a work that, more than a mere visual accompaniment, acts as a symbolic echo chamber for the album. Image and sound reflect each other there, in an almost symbiotic balance, a kind of intersensory experience where music becomes landscape, and landscape becomes poetic and visual memory.

I've listened to the album several times. I was at the Paris screening of Lilian Hardouineau's film, surrounded by people I didn't know but with whom I shared that strange tension between excitement and reverence. And all of it, the listening, the screening, the resonance of those moments, has become another marker on the mental map I've been drawing since 2013, since the day *Broken Flowers* crossed the BBC Radio 1 airwaves and lodged itself in my memory like an indelible melodic line.

So I took all of it (the record, the film, the years, the memories) as a personal corpus, a material for analysis but also for intimate recognition. I listened again, and again, and again, and began to write this review. Not to decide whether it's good or bad (those categories are utterly meaningless, let's be honest), but to try to articulate a personal reading, a traversal of the project through my own listener's history: what Danny L Harle's music has represented, still represents, and continues to awaken within that affective memory which, at times, vibrates more powerfully than criticism itself.

Review – Album *Cerulean* by Danny L Harle



With *Cerulean*, Danny L Harle delivers the kind of album that both demands and resists a genealogy. It's been said that he aspires to inherit a certain form of electronic lyricism (Euro-trance, rave-pop, hyperpop hues) while at the same time claiming less expected lineages: from the minimalist trance of Philip Glass to the cinematic austerity of Andrei Tarkovsky, and even the dark, meditative game aesthetics of the Dark Souls universe.

And it's true, one could say that the gesture operates on two levels: assembling some of today's most distinctive contemporary voices and submitting them to a sonic matrix that feels at once ceremonial and playful. The result, frankly, defies classification, and it's precisely there that the most stimulating lesson of this record resides.

I'll state my central hypothesis right away, the angle I want to defend, one that, as far as I know, hasn't been quite formulated this way before: *Cerulean* is not an album about rave

nostalgia, nor a mere collection of star-studded collaborations. It is a deliberate attempt to map, through music, a *poetic-affective geometry*. Danny L Harle transforms tonal and textural registers into coordinates (azimuths, constellations, ocean currents, rafts) and then invites the singers to take position within them as instruments of orientation.

In other words, instead of using the voice as a mere lyrical vehicle, Danny employs it as a *beacon*, a tracer of emotional position that redefines our notions of “chorus,” “bridge,” and “climax.” This shift (conceiving the song as a navigational device) will therefore be the interpretive thread of my reading of *Cerulean*.

To begin, the album’s vocabulary is significant. Opening track: *Noctilucence* (one minute). This brief prelude acts as an orienting lever, a sonic GPS that establishes night as the condition of listening. Then come *Starlight* (with PinkPantheress), *Azimuth* (with Caroline Polachek), *Facing Away* (with Clairo), *Raft In The Sea* (with Julia Michaels), *Two Hearts* (featuring Dua Lipa), and finally *Crystallise My Tears* (with Oklou and MNEK).

The lexicon (sea, star, azimuth, raft) is not decorative. It defines a narrative framework, structuring the album’s dramaturgy as if each track were a single point on the map of an emotional territory, one we traverse by following meridians of feeling.

This toponymic logic serves a precise musical process: Danny L Harle conceives of “micro-spaces,” closed sonic environments (interludes, vignettes) that function as islands between which the more “navigable” tracks take on meaning. *Noctilucence*, *Facing Away*, *O Now Am I Truly Lost* (short, often nearly instrumental) are not reprises but stations. When the voice arrives (from PinkPantheress, Caroline Polachek, Dua Lipa), it reveals and measures the emotional position: it doesn’t merely express a text; it signals an azimuth. This reading radically alters the way we listen: we no longer await the “hook” as such, but a latitude, a direction.

From a musicological perspective, Danny L Harle performs an interesting and remarkable technical hybridization: he combines hyper-produced sound-design techniques (synthetic arpeggios, “virtual rooms” reverbs, auto-tune and pitch-shifting circuits) with older resources (synth counterpoint, modulating harmonic progressions, and repetitive motifs) in the minimalist tradition. The contrast is central: the voice is often placed not at the center of a neatly balanced mix, but as a *transducer*, a signal whose alteration (timbre change, fragmentation, pitched doubling) creates a field of emotional refraction. Thus, on *Starlight*, PinkPantheress’s voice becomes a polarized star: processed, compressed, sampled, it glides between intimacy and artifice, tracing a curve of intensity that indicates precisely where the listener stands within the emotional landscape.

Musically, this gesture can be linked to two traditions: on one hand, the practice of vocal counterpoint transfigured by technology, a kind of spectral counterpoint in which voices act as harmonic objects fixed in space; and on the other, the minimalist logic of modulated repetition (a little in the vein of Philip Glass) where repetition is not merely a motif but a means of mapping perceptual time. Danny L Harle merges these inheritances but adds a third ingredient: the pop structure (verse/chorus/bridge) is slashed, fragmented, reduced to the role of waypoint. These songs progress by beacons, not by thematic accumulation.



Let's continue.

The album's title (*Cerulean*) is meant to be taken literally: it names a color, a light. Of course, this palette serves the album's framework, its world, its poetry. But color, for Danny L Harle, is not purely visual, it's operative: a spectral field where frequencies, timbres, and emotional intensities are inscribed. The blue (*cerulean*) becomes a metric value. One might call it algorithmic synesthesia, synthetic patterns corresponding to affective hues. When he employs synthetic flutes or panpipes (as noted in several reviews), these timbres do not serve exoticism alone; they calibrate the degree of blue, a way of measuring the emotional distance between narrator and situation. The process recalls, in its ambition, certain works of spectral music in which timbre and orchestral color replace traditional harmony, but here Danny renders it accessible, wrapping it in the vocabulary of pop hooks and refrains.

Now I'd like to linger (at the risk of repeating myself, something I fully embrace as analytical insistence rather than stylistic flaw) on a few tracks that embody the album's cartographic project, these point-songs that function as emotional longitudes or landmarks. The idea here

is not to be exhaustive (impossible, unless turning this review into a two-hundred-page sonic atlas), but to push the reading further: to see how Danny Harle literally traces his geography of listening within the texture of his tracks, each sound becoming at once territory and trajectory.

To begin (and this beginning already assumes we enter the album not as we would read a table of contents, but as one sinks into an atmosphere), I find that *Noctilucence* acts as a kind of preliminary breath, a discreet threshold, a lung-track of barely a minute. It's not a prelude in the classical sense, but a tonal lock, a way of shutting out the external world before plunging into Danny L Harle's own. Night installs itself as a condition of space: we're no longer in time but in a place, a dark sea studded with points of light, as if illumination existed only on the surface of sound. Its function, plainly put, is topographical: to set the night, to chart the darkness.

With *Starlight*, Danny Harle constructs an icon of distance. The voice (distant, spectrally filtered) seems captured by a digital telescope, both close and unreachable. The track combines intimate tension and pop artifice, demonstrating once again the producer's rare ability to turn a pop star's voice into a measuring instrument, as if each syllable were calculating the exact distance between emotion and sonic surface.

Then comes *Azimuth*, a geographer's word, an engineer of the sky's term, proof that the album thinks in coordinates. The presence of **Caroline Polachek**, already familiar with deformed vocal lines, finds here an almost scientific space: the melodic line becomes direction, and the treatment, a map. Each modulation traces a latitude; each resonance inscribes an emotional meridian. It's no longer a song, it's an affective planisphere. And even if the lyrics tell us we're lost and alone, beaten by the waves, the music itself seems to keep carrying us somewhere.

In *Facing Away*, a short, almost a cappella piece, brevity functions like a miniature lighthouse. No décor, no artifice, just the bare, suspended voice acting as a marker within the album's sonic navigation. It's often there, in these stripped-down interstices, that the album's compass reveals itself, not directional, but existential: the quiet certainty of always searching, adrift in a calmer sea, under a finer rain.

Finally, *Crystallise My Tears* shows Danny L Harle as orchestrator of a vocal duo, master of a small synthetic choir where each voice illuminates the others, like beacons reflecting light until they merge. The track stages a dialogue between pain and shimmer, affect and transmutation. *Crystallise My Tears* becomes a literal metaphor: the idea of emotion solidified, polished, rendered transparent through the work of sound. A tear, yes but faceted.

This, then, is my reading of the tracks of *Cerulean*.

While magazines and reviews keep trying to box Danny L Harle in *hyperpop*, *PC Music*, *Euro-trance revival*, all these readings strike me as profoundly insufficient. My approach, as I've said, is to consider him instead as a practitioner of affective topology, a discipline borrowing from mathematics (concepts of azimuth, field, neighborhood), semiotics, and musicology, particularly notions of timbral form and controlled repetition found in minimalist and spectral music.



I could go a bit further by positing two additional conceptual parallels I find within the album: first, the notion of generative constraint (think algorithmic composition), where the artist defines a set of rules (here, a nautical/astral lexicon, vocal treatment, micro-topographies) and allows the material (voices, timbres) to fill the structure; second, the idea of the voice as instrument, treating the voice not as an expressive subject but as an agent that shapes sonic space. Danny L Harle applies both paradigms: his songs don't so much "tell stories" as they position the listener. There's a distant kinship with minimalist opera in its modulating repetition, and a more conceptual lineage with hyperpop in its obsession with timbre and artifice, but one doesn't explain the other. Danny merges them to produce his geometry.

The project stands out for its ambition, fully assumed, perfectly self-aware. Some listeners may perceive moments of imbalance, where formal experimentation takes precedence over immediate emotion, or where certain passages verge on near-conceptual sophistication.

Yet the album unfolds qualities few contemporary pop productions achieve: rare conceptual coherence, an architecture designed in meticulous detail, and that singular ability to transform color into a true unit of sonic measurement. Where others stack collaborations as mere prestige signatures, Danny Harle arranges them with the precision of an emotional

surveyor, each voice becoming a landmark, an instrument of orientation within the affective map he draws. This method, both rigorous and poetic, grants the work a peculiar accuracy, sometimes meticulous, often luminous.

One might also note a tendency toward profusion: certain tracks seem to want to embrace multiple constellations of reference simultaneously, from Andrei Tarkovsky to Philip Glass, from Dark Souls to European trance. But rather than seeing this as excess, one can read it as the manifestation of total appetite, that of an artist refusing to compartmentalize imagination. These influences function less as quotations than as magnetic fields orbiting the true nucleus of the album: its *method*. For *Cerulean*'s real innovation doesn't lie in the enumeration of its references, but in the rigor with which Danny transforms vocal material into point of reference, and sound itself into navigable space.



This record doesn't target only the club-goer or radio-pop fan. It addresses the sonic wanderer, the listener willing to be guided by non-linear maps. If you're the kind to await the catchy melodic line and cathartic drop, certain passages may frustrate you. But for those who love sonic architectures and the challenge of being oriented rather than simply transported, *Cerulean* is rich in insight. It reminds us that pop can be a science of emotional positioning.

Moreover, the album raises a pertinent question for today's pop: how can one preserve the *hit dimension* while exploring conceptual sonic frameworks? Danny L Harle responds by inverting the equation: he doesn't attempt to insert hits into an experimental frame, he builds an experimental frame that occasionally allows pop moments to emerge. It's an intriguing and undoubtedly stimulating strategy.

At the end of this reading, I return to my hypothesis: *Cerulean* is an attempt at affective cartography, one born of sincerity. A map that charts not places but orientations: angles, lights, rafts, constellations. The collaborators (PinkPantheress, Caroline Polachek, Clairo, Julia Michaels, Dua Lipa, Oklou, MNEK) aren't stars for the sake of the industry, but beacons serving an emotional chart through which one navigates. The aesthetic success of the enterprise depends, as always, on one's willingness to accept the album as a navigational tool rather than a chest of hits. It is the dashboard of a vessel crossing a world, the world of the album itself.

On a broader level, *Cerulean* raises this question: what if the next evolution of pop were not a new sound but a new way of imagining the listener's position within an emotional field? Danny L Harle offers a bold answer: to chart sensitivity using transformed instruments (voices, synths, interludes) and the album, for all it still has to refine, deserves to be read and heard as the prototype of a pop-geography still unfolding.

And within that new map taking shape, I have the distinct impression that Danny L Harle has quite literally placed us at the helm of a vessel. We lean over the console, watching the regular blinking of indicators, the oscillations of dials and compasses, as the ship travels through the very world we've just listened to... the world of *Cerulean*. And that shift, that moment when listening becomes navigation, when music ceases to be a landscape and becomes a means of traversal, perhaps encapsulates Danny Harle's entire project: to make pop an environment to pilot, not a mere décor to contemplate.

- Brice Reiter