

Alex Zhang Hungtai

Dras

Shelter Press DL/LP

Orion/Mother

American Dreams DL/LP

Born in Taiwan and now based in New York, multi-instrumentalist Alex Zhang Hungtai released his first album *Old Blood* under the Dirty Beaches pseudonym in 2007. Almost 20 years on, the time in between has been spent globetrotting, acting (he appeared in an episode of David Lynch's revived *Twin Peaks* TV series) and spreading his wings across a wide landscape of solo and collaborative musical experiments.

Capitalising on his gift for coaxing music from fascinating angles, Hungtai's *Dras* album was completed during lockdown. After gaining permission to use Montreal basilica the Saint Joseph Oratory, Hungtai wandered around the empty building in 2019, freestyling fluttering melodies, drones and honks on his saxophone, which he later broke down into layered, reverb-heavy intonations. The result is an expressive set, one that articulates many of the darker thoughts suffered by millions during the Covid-19 pandemic. "Xilitla" in particular is riven with delicate, rueful melancholy, while closing track "Mazil" sounds positively mediaeval.

Orion/Mother is a collective project, with Hungtai calling in a list of crack New York improvisors to record sessions of spontaneous, freewheeling ideas. Flautist and TAK Ensemble executive director Laura Cocks features, as do cellist/composer Lester St Louis, artist/tap dancer Melissa Almaguer and noisemaker Kwami Winfield. Hungtai recorded moments with the team individually, using hand gestures to conduct their reactions, partly in tribute to American composer and conductor Butch Morris's gesture-led conduction method of directing improvisation.

In addition to leading from the front, Hungtai plays trumpet throughout, adding in untreated field recordings, then digitally sampling and reworking them into individual tracks. Crucially, Hungtai relied on instinct, purposely avoiding any temptation to polish all the grit out of the recordings. This means *Orion/Mother* feels like something found, rather than a boxfresh finished article, and is all the better for it.

From *Orion*, "Sidewinder" is over eight minutes of clanging and thumping with Hungtai's blowing sounding like Miles Davis stuck down a well with only his trumpet to call for help. The title track of *Mother* is equally subterranean, a labyrinthine confection of slowed beats, echoing whoops and trumpet squalls.

Simon Coates