

SPOTLIGHT



Adrian Rodriguez, Daren Taylor, Mikel Jollett, Anna Bulbrook, Steven Chen

AIRBORNE TOXIC EVENT

The critical favorites rewrite the rock rulebook on a *Dope* new album

IT'S OFFICIAL: THE AIRBORNE TOXIC Event is no longer a "proper rock band." The California quintet's new album, *Dope Machines*, pairs loud guitars with glitzy synths and canned beats with live drums, and although leader Mikel Jollett struggles to define the sound, he knows it's not what people were expecting.

"There's a set of rules you're supposed to follow as a rock band," says Jollett. "You're supposed to work with a big producer, have your radio single, and the song you wrote that sounds like this reference and that reference. It all felt like such a farce."

Rather than acquiesce to such prescribed rules, Jollett opted to self-produce *Dope Machines*, ATE's fourth full-length and first for new label Epic. In sound and spirit, the album derives from "Hell and Back," an Americana synth-pop dance jam Jollett wrote for the soundtrack to the 2013 film *Dallas Buyers Club*. "It was a fusion between acoustic guitar and foot-stomping—what you're hearing is literally me and [multi-instrumentalist] Anna [Bulbrook] stamping our feet on the ground—mixed with this crazy drum-and-bass loop and all these keyboards doing octaves and stuff," Jollett says.

"Hell and Back" resurfaces on *Dope Machines*, and it embodies the disc's hybrid sound. "There are parts of the record that

sound like traditional rock," Jollett says. "There are parts that probably sound like traditional dance music. Most of the record I don't think sounds like either of those things. It's in its own little world."

Jollett was in a little world of his own when he wrote the tracks, and working solo, he'd often put in 12-hour days. He says his bandmates supported his experiments with new tones and textures, even though ATE's last album, 2013's *Such Hot Blood*, was a more collaborative effort born out of jamming.

"Some of that was great, but the core of Airborne, to me, has always been these 2 a.m. songs," says Jollett, referencing tunes like "My Childish Bride," a dreamy *Dope Machines* synth ballad that's among the biggest departures for this crew of proven arena rockers. "Those don't always come from jam sessions. You've got to wrestle with an idea, and if you write about it, there's something very personal. If you're just jamming, an idea might sound good to a group that doesn't really capture the essence."

Little about *Dope Machines* sounds accidental or off-the-cuff. "So much time was spent listening to reverb and trying to figure out beats," he says. "Every second of this record was poured over. I guess that makes me not Mick Jagger."

—Kenneth Partridge

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