It’s no coincidence that Bolis Pupul’s music sounds the way it does. Born in Belgium to a Chinese mother and Belgian father and raised in the super-cool creative city of Ghent, Bolis’ music is a joyous cross-cultural assemblage. Mixing widescreen electronica – think early Mr Fingers-like techno and Yellow Magic Orchestra’s exuberant man-machine minimalism – with the warm-hearted and wonky naivete of Belgian New Beat, Bolis’ singular sonics are at once playful, emotive, unrelenting and tender.

The real key to unlocking Bolis’ musical secret, however, is that conversation he has between his Eastern and Western roots. It was something he subconsciously touched upon on his first two releases for David and Stephen Dewaele (Soulwax/2manydjs)’s DEEWEE label.

“The first demos I made for DEEWEE had some Oriental melodies without me knowing,” he explains. “David and Stephen pointed it out. The melodies – without thinking – had that feel.”

However, it’s something that he has unapologetically and enthusiastically explored properly on his solo debut LP, ‘Letter To Yu’, following his acclaimed 2022 collaboration with Charlotte Adigéry, ‘Topical Dancer’. Growing up Bolis had not negated his Chinese roots exactly – his mother was born in Hong Kong – but he certainly hadn’t embraced them. However, in the wake of his mother passing away in 2008, he began coming to terms with his heritage.

“When I started to think about my roots, instead of being ashamed of them, I started to become proud of them,” he recalls. “And so it became more and more important for me to get in touch with them. I went to evening school here and began learning Chinese. I did that for four years. That was the first step.”

His first visit to Hong Kong in 2018, further crystallised how Bolis wanted to incorporate his Chinese legacy into his music. While there he was encouraged by David and Stephen to write every day.

“It could be just one melody, it could be a rhythm, or some field recordings,” he says. “I had my laptop with me. I could work on the subway, in restaurants, in parks or near the sea”

A primary intention on his first trip to Hong Kong was to locate where his mother – Yu Wei Wun – was born. He had a street name, but initially no house number. So, on his first day in the city, he went to the Ma Tau Wai Road, a gargantuan expanse of road and one of the city’s main thoroughfares in the Kowloon City District.

“It was a very busy street with a lot of buses and cars passing by the whole time,” he remembers. “A lot of loud noises sounded muted to me. Partly because I was so moved to finally be there but also because Hong Kong sounds muted due to all the tall buildings. When I crossed the pagoda in the street, I was so overwhelmed by the scent of incense that it really hit me. The chanting of the monks and the smell made me break into pieces. I missed her so hard but strongly felt her presence in that moment.  
Gratitude and regret, hand in hand, far away from home, picking up on our conversations.”

Not wanting to forget this overwhelming experience, Bolis began writing a letter to his mother so he could properly grasp his thoughts. Much later, when the album began to properly take shape, he remembered the letter. “It became the centerpiece of this album,” he says matter-of-factly.

This communicative outpouring not only provides the album with its title, but introduces this stylistically rich, sonically nuanced and emotional piece of creativity via its titular opening track.

A sparse and crepuscular slice of electronica, Bolis, his voice purposefully pitched down, recites the letter (“My heart is in my throat, my eyes filled with tears” it begins). In framing the album in such a fashion, Bolis immediately transports the listener to the bewilderingly colourful Kowloon.

That 2018 trip – and his subsequent visits to Hong Kong – provide the emotional heft at the heart of ‘Letter To Yu’. Tracks such as ‘Completely Half’ (built around field recordings on the subway), ‘Ma Tau Wai Road’ (which Bolis wrote while staying in a hotel on the street where his mother was born), ‘Spicy Crab’ (“An ode to the spiciest crab I ever ate, a signature Hong Kong dish”) and more, not only encapsulate Bolis’ quest to locate his mother, they also evoke a pleasing modern sense of humanity where his differences – in both a Western and Eastern sense – are celebrated rather than shunned.

Discussing ‘Completely Half’, for example, he notes revealingly: “Sometimes I see people who remind me of her and for an instant I believe it’s her, although it’s a sad feeling I also see some beauty in it, as if we are all connected to each other.”

As well as touching upon some of life’s big themes – memory, loss, family and coming to terms and making peace with all of that – the album is also a resounding audio triumph. It reconciles the competing sonic strands that make up Bolis’ aesthetic – his European and Asian roots, alongside the overarching presence of the twin American pillars of Detroit techno and Chicago house – in a manner that is pleasingly familiar and creatively inventive.

For instance, ‘Kowloon’ fuses the rock’n’rave licks that defined the Ed Banger generation to a hypnotic groove. ‘Goodnight Mr Yi’ brings to mind the innovative soundscapes of electronic auteurs like Four Tet and Kelly Lee Owens, while ‘Doctor Says’ aims for the heart of the disco in the manner of The Chemical Brothers or Bicep. Dancefloor bangers and beguiling experimentation coexists beautifully.

So, by harmonizing the various strands of his cultural backstory, Bolis’ illuminating sonic travelogue and musical journal has not only enriched his life but also made sense of it. Even better, it sounds great too.

“Even though this trip was very emotional and at times sad I also had some great times that just made me really happy,” he concludes. “This resulted in a very uplifting melody where I felt like I could handle my life.”

A letter well worth writing, reading – and listening to.