
CYCLIC
DEFROST
#17

CYCLIC DEFROST MAGAZINE

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EDITORIAL

Welcome to Issue 17. Yes, there is a ghost on the front, but, no, this issue isn't about 'hauntology'. Instead, illustrator and music maker Jeremy Dower delivers our cover art and there are interviews with Australian veterans Chris Smith, David Thrussell and Warren Burt; youngsters Aleks and the Ramps, Underlapper, and overseas folk Mira Calix, Panda Bear, Sam Amidon and Christopher Willits. We also introduce a new section, Storm the Studio which explores a local studio and producer, beginning with Tony Dupe. And then there are our regular sleeve design reviews and Unkle Ho takes us through his favourite records in Selects.

Cyclic Defrost is pleased to announce that the Music Board of the Australia Council for the Arts has agreed to offer financial support to Cyclic Defrost for another three issues through to Issue 20. This support is vital and when combined with your generous donations and selected advertising from independent labels helps keep us afloat. We have some special things planned for the next three issues including a limited edition cover CD so do think about donating and we'll make sure you get Cyclic Defrost sent directly to your door.

Sebastian Chan and Matthew Levinson
Editors

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MORE TEA ?

JEREMY DOWER'S WIDE-EYED, SOFT-SPOKEN MANNER HINTS AT HIS SPECIAL TALENT FOR DEVELOPING IMAGINARY REALMS.

As a young boy growing up in country Bendigo he entertained himself with drawing, painting, drums and guitar. He recalls the cruelest punishment his parents could wield was to lock him out of the room while his kindred folk enjoyed the magical world of Astro Boy, a sentient kid robot with an evolving sense of humanity. Hailing from a self-professed working class background, Jeremy notes that while he was broadly interested in creative pursuits he never anticipated how that would transpire into a successful hobby producing electronic music and a career in film as a character designer and concept artist.

His first real break was designing pixel art for games, "No one said to me, 'you can work as an artist, you can make money, you can have a job that you really enjoy'. I sort of came from the perspective that you have to get a job, you have to work, everyone has to do things they don't like. And then to get into a creative industry like that was a real breakthrough and that was good because I was being paid to learn software and develop my skills."

Working in the gaming industry allowed him space to hone his talent for developing characters with rich emotional lives, attitudes and quirks. They do not fight and bear no weapons, but are imbued with special knowledge. They evoke their own sets of mysteries. Some are cute and playful, others dark and brooding, weird or sad. They all wish for you to understand them and seek a space for life in tiny corners of hearts and minds. Jeremy's gentle nature shines through them, dissolving transitional borders that separate children from adults.

Recently snapped up by Sydney-based animation powerhouse Animal Logic, he's well-placed as part of the team bringing the next installment of *Happy Feet,* a blockbuster tale about the adventures of a tap-dancing penguin.

Looking at his current work, I'm curious as to whose ideas and artistic expressions he finds most inspiring now. After a short pause he replies, "In terms of the whole package, I really like Friends With You (a Tokyo-based collective). I really admire their ability to combine art and commerce with no tension. They direct a commercial and then they have an exhibition of inflatable toys and they don't draw a line between the two. Like Jeff Koons really, 'make stuff people like and make lots of money'."

This approach is, for Jeremy, the antidote to the disillusionment that he experienced as an undergraduate student in fine arts. "I think definitely, going to university in Melbourne... the art scene is really Left and as a young person to say 'I want to make lots of money with art', it would have been sacrilegious. I never really thought about it until I went to Japan and there's not really a scene of unemployed artists who have the luxury of having such high ideals about it. It's like, if you want to make fun stuff you have to make fun stuff that people want to buy. And it makes perfect sense to me because you can stay at home in your bedroom painting and making music that nobody will ever hear. Maybe you will enjoy it, but it seems like a waste of time to me."

Perhaps as a response to his waning dissatisfaction with the culture around him and his chosen course of study, Jeremy also turned to music for creative inspiration. His first album is a DIY production that never really hit any great heights as far as distribution went. Produced on a 386 PC running Windows 3.1 it has a beautiful tech-nostalgia about it. Funky little beats and melody lines that bleep their way across an inconsistent tempo, swinging slightly off kilter, this shakiness more an artifact of the medium than an intentional touch, but charming nonetheless.

His second effort was a tad more ambitious. A romantic concept album, *Sentimental Dance Music For Couples* was picked up by US-based Plug Research, known best for minimalist electronica at the time. With label mates like fellow Melbournian Voiteck, Jeremy quickly found himself a broader audience.

But rocketing out of the local Melbourne scene and into the international sphere soon proved to have both its highs and lows. While double vinyl and CDs were pressed and sales took off steadily, Jeremy never received any monetary benefits from his work. Like many artists it boiled down a misunderstanding of how record labels work - that no money flows to the artist until the label recoups its costs, indie and major alike. Often the artist underestimates the costs involved, especially in marketing a record. It was a bad experience, "If I'd gone into it knowing I wouldn't make any money, I wouldn't have been disappointed, but for it to go like that... After that I never made music with the intention of making money from it."

"Would you like more tea?" he asks with a tiny, awkward chuckle.

Just after the release of the second album Jeremy quit his job in Melbourne and relocated to Japan where a modest following garnered enough success to release a third album titled *Music for the Young and the Restless*. Working with his new boutique label, A Small Bit Of Heaven, coverage crept across Japan and soon Jeremy had his own section in the infamous Tower Records.

He describes his style of instrumentation as, "Old analogue synthesiser on a random cycle imitating the way a double bass slides. It never repeats, but is so monotonous that it sounds like it is. Vibraphone and jazz piano (play) over the top. They are fake, obviously fake, but if you step back with less of a critical ear it sounds like it could be a jazz band." There were many comparisons to contemporaries like Amon Tobin but Jeremy reiterates that it wasn't sample based. Instead of remixing records, as is done in the turntable tradition, he imitated the sounds to produce his 'faux' jazz.

Despite his successful dabblings with music Jeremy felt a stirring back towards visual art that he attributes largely to his new Tokyo environs, populated by animated characters and their kooky creators. If you've ever been to Tokyo you will be accustomed to the omnipresent role that characters hold in society. Afro-Ken (the cool dog with the multi-coloured 'fro) adorns pens and stationary, strawberries have many moods and dance on the packets of ichi-go Poki treats, the Bathing Ape helps sell streetwear to the J-hop crew, while other make-believe wonders assist celebrities with public service announcements.

Is the kowaii trend (where characters are scary, like a cute bear with killer nails who accidently eats his kid owners) viewed as a stand against the suffocating cuteness of the characters in Japan?

"Western people are positive and excited about it" he says, recalling his visit to a pixel festival in Berlin, surrounded by peers who were heavily influenced by the vast semiotic landscape of Japanese characters. "A Japanese artist came to talk and he did a modernist

Paul Klee style of work. Someone asked him about cute characters and he replied that he hated them."

Still, there is a commercial downside to the anti-cute movement. They don't always sell. Two of his characters, Uma and Bliss, were worked up in a Victorian Gothic style for an illustrated children's book. When presented in all their darkness the publishers decided they wanted it happier and friendlier so in the end the project didn't get made.

Is Jeremy influenced at all by the American style of animation with its big budget price tags? While confessing to be an early Disney fan, he also finds that, "American animations these days are just so devoid of any content at all. It's just sad that they are so condescending to children, they don't really give kids enough credit."

So what positive kids role-models does Jeremy see in the animation world at the moment?

"I really like Sponge Bob, he's just a total geek, he's got square pants and little socks and shiny shoes and stuff and has dorky faces, but he's really lovable as well. I think that's a good message for kids."

"AS A YOUNG PERSON TO SAY 'I WANT TO MAKE LOTS OF MONEY WITH ART' IT WOULD HAVE BEEN SACRILEGIOUS. I NEVER REALLY THOUGHT ABOUT IT UNTIL I WENT TO JAPAN AND THERE'S NOT REALLY A SCENE OF UNEMPLOYED ARTISTS WHO HAVE THE LUXURY OF HAVING SUCH HIGH IDEALS ABOUT IT."

OVERPAGE: *SKETCHES*: JEREMY PREFERS TO FIRST SKETCH ON PAPER, TO GET IDEAS AND 'FIND A WAY INTO IT'. ONCE HE HAS A CLEAR IDEA IN HIS HEAD HE SKETCHES STRAIGHT INTO THE COMPUTER, WITH PHOTOSHOP BEING THE PREFERRED TOOL OF CHOICE.
LEFT: *COKE*: CHARACTER DEVELOPED FOR RECENT COMMERCIAL WORK FOR COCA COLA; BLISS: BLISS CAME TO LIFE FOR A GOTHIC CHILDREN'S NOVEL. SHE SEEMS TO BE INTO EARLY SCIENTIFIC DISCOVERY AND MUTANT TAXIDERMY BUT NOW WE WILL NEVER BE TOO SURE ABOUT HER SINCE THE BOOK WAS NOT APPROVED OF BY THE PUBLISHERS.
ABOVE: *BLISS*: BLISS CAME TO LIFE FOR A GOTHIC CHILDREN'S NOVEL. SHE SEEMS TO BE INTO EARLY SCIENTIFIC DISCOVERY AND MUTANT TAXIDERMY BUT NOW WE WILL NEVER BE TOO SURE ABOUT HER SINCE THE BOOK WAS NOT APPROVED OF BY THE PUBLISHERS.

CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT:
UNTITLED PAINTING, 2006. 'GOLDEN' LIQUID ACRYLICS ON CANVAS. "I LOVE THE SETON ANIMAL LEADER CHARACTERS AND TOYS (DOUBUTSU BANCHO), AS WELL AS MINA DAISUKI KATAMARI DAMARCY, THE BEST GAME EVER."

OSHARE ROBONERD 2007.DIGITAL PAINTING. "I PAINTED THIS CHARACTER IN JAPAN, INSPIRED BY TOKYO'S ARCHITECTURE... VINTAGE JAPANESE PUBLIC INDUSTRIAL DESIGN, AND THE DISTANT MEMORY OF ANIMATIONS FROM MY CHILDHOOD LIKE."

BABY RADISH. BABY RADISH LIVES IN THE FOREST WORLD, CONCEPTS FOR A GAME DESIGNED IN CONJUNCTION WITH ANIMATOR PAUL ROBERTSON.

MIXED-UP SALARY MAN. THE SALARY MAN IS AN ARCHETYPAL IMAGE IN JAPAN, WITH ITS 'SEA OF BLACK SUITS' IN DOWNTOWN TOKYO. HERE JEREMY PRESENTS HIM AS A CONCEPT FOR A TOY. HE SPORTS THE 'REGENT HAIRCUT' A 'YANKEE' STYLE THAT IS POPULAR WITH THE JAPANESE EQUIVALENT OF A 'BOGAN'. MUCH LIKE THE MULLET, BEFORE IT BECAME CHIC.

ALEKS AND THE RAMPS

BY RICHARD MACFARLANE

ACTING SILLY

THE LAST TIME I SAW MELBOURNE TROUPE ALEKS AND THE RAMPS IT WAS A SOMEWHAT BEWILDERING EXPERIENCE.

It wasn't because they started their set with a choreographed dance routine to a Beyonce medley, or that one of them was wearing a tight leopard skin dress. In fact, I wouldn't have expected anything less. But because the unusually low turn-out seemed very odd; there were not many people there at all. I thought the show was going to be a sell-out because of the collective buzz about the band: media coverage, positive reviews of debut album *Pisces vs Aquarius*, but mostly word of mouth.

Even though Aleks felt certain the show was going to be a success, his perspective was somewhat different. Maybe it's the benefit of hindsight.

"I guess that's the thing about being on a first time tour and being a no-name band, with an album that no-one's ever really heard of and which isn't available in stores. One thing I have learnt from playing in a band and putting on shows is that there's absolutely no way of telling. No matter how much promo you do and who you tell there's no way of knowing. It's so unpredictable. Some of the most heavily publicised shows we've put on have sort of bummed out. Then two nights later you play a show that you haven't told anybody about (or actively tell people not to come to) and they all turn up, I don't even know how people found out about that show."

I was convinced, however, that there was hype building and that the show was going to be huge; a ridiculous sexed-up dance fiasco of the funnest nature. It's difficult to gauge.

"I don't know how you gauge success," Aleks responds.

"There's mentions of us in some of the music press, there have been a few reviews. But reviews come and go and bands come and go. I try not to read them. I figured out it wasn't really a healthy thing to do. I've tried not to read the Mess+Noise article because it's just really personal and I don't feel comfortable reading it. But I really hate reading the reviews of the album and live shows. A review is never going to please an artist, I don't think. Because, you know, we are so stuck-up and set in what we think it is that we do," he laughs. "I just don't really like reading them because I find myself thinking about it too much. I sort of don't want it to taint the process of creation. But then again, the whole art of reacting to public opinion and press is also an art itself that maybe should be learned as well."

This could make a lot of sense considering the nature of Aleks and the Ramps' music It seems like there's a very big element of interaction with the audience, with the listener. They don't do crowd participation or anything, but there's definitely a gap that is bridged. Making audiences uncomfortable seems deliberate in a way, or at least challenging their expectations takes precedence.

"Some of my favourite art involves me being amused and uncomfortable at the same time. Todd Solondz is a pretty good example of that. It's the sort of thing that we do actually strive for, partly at least. Especially in live shows, to maybe disturb people a little bit."

"It's a pet hate of mine in reviews where the band is compared by just taking two bands; like, 'Oh, it sounds like Sonic Youth or The Beach Boys.' But taking two film directors seems like a pretty good analogy for music, especially ours."

Aleks has not heard The Fiery Furnaces' Blueberry Boat, but elements of this record manifest themselves on *Pisces vs Aquarius*. Both are lengthy, quirky, all over the place; haphazard with moments of brilliance and often extreme poignancy. Theatricality plays an obvious part; some people might consider it brave to wear matching leotards and prance ridiculously, shrieking all high-pitched and wild-eyed. But acting silly is not couragous for Aleks and his Ramps.

"People have said to me before things like 'Oh, you know it was really brave how you guys do that.' I remember at Film School, making some kind of strange films that people had said were brave; it never really made sense to me.

I GUESS BRAVERY IS WHEN YOU HAVE A FEAR AND THEN YOU FACE IT AND YOU OVERCOME IT. WE'RE NOT REALLY FEARFUL OF ACTING LIKE IDIOTS; IT'S NOT BRAVERY AT ALL."

Self-deprecation and just simply having fun is more important. It might be braver to just sit on stools and go through the songs in a mellow sort of fashion. But there is an element of the personal in their lyrics; like Aleks' unwillingness to read personal-focused writing about the band. If there is bravery involved, it would be with the lyrics, even if they still could be described with words like absurdist.

"I know that people will make all kinds of assumptions on my character and personality and other people's personalities by listening to lyrics and the music in general I guess. I don't really like people thinking that I'm a pervert weirdo," he laughs, "but I don't necessarily care that much. It is hard, writing the lyrics for *Pisces vs Aquarius* was much harder than writing for the previous EP. On that, I wasn't really expecting anyone to really hear it; the lyrics were quite perverse and really strange. But once you actually sit down and put pen to paper with the knowledge that other people are going to hear this stuff, it shifts; there's a complete difference in the mode of writing".

In the current climate of Australian music, I do genuinely think Aleks and the Ramps' approach and concepts are different from the rest, unique. It might be a little bit overt for some; it could even be slightly reactionary compared to more conventional trends and aesthetics in this country's music. The notion of a novelty aspect to their music seems unavoidable, but it obviously has the potential to be reductive. Having a point of difference doesn't have to equal novelty; it just so happens that the band's points of difference are fairly novel. They don't play post-post-punk. Is it reactionary?

"Partly, I think. But it's just where I find inspiration. I think I enjoy and get inspired by really ill-conceived ideas that are badly executed. Just because, you know when you go to see a band and it's really full and everyone paid $30 to get in, and then they're pretty crap and everyone still seems to be digging it. I started thinking about what I would actually want to see. It's not so much that I want to start a band to draw attention to being different from other stuff happening, it's more just like there's a band out there that I want to see that doesn't exist at the moment. This might sound a bit weird, but I imagine being an audience member and what would please that person the most if that person was me. In a roundabout way, it's about making music to please yourself; but not yourself as in the individual playing music, moreso as the listener. It just seems to me that there is a massive void in music sometimes."

This makes sense to me; especially considering the sort of Australian music that gets the most attention. It's probably just the nature of the music industry, but to me it seems the mainstream of Australian 'indie' that is most publicly focused on can tend towards the similar, the post-post-punk or the standard rock with record label driven hype being the most important factor in getting heard and thus getting popular.

That might sound cynical. But the cyclical nature of music today begs the question of the fate of the 'novelty' band.

"We're having a break at the moment because we're looking for another drummer," Aleks says. "We're probably going to go in a different direction after that, whatever that is. But as far as reacting to the novelty tags, up until this point we've been doing what we want to do, regardless of what people say or what people think and the 'N' word has been thrown around, but has only been thrown around really over the past couple of months. Whether or not it will affect what we do in the future, I'm not sure. It sort of doesn't really seem worth thinking about. I don't even really know what a novelty act is. And I don't know if there's any point in trying to be or trying not to be. We don't like it when people say the 'N' word in regards to us, we don't like it; we're not really that thick-skinned. But at the same time, we make music that we want to make and people can do with it what they want; if they think we are a novelty band – maybe we are a novelty band? – but I don't know. Whatever".

The novelty is at its peak in their live show, even if their album does have a cover of Roxette's 'It Must Have Been Love,' sung in Spanish.

BUT THE FUTURE COULD HOLD A SLIGHTLY MORE SERIOUS CHANGE, WHATEVER 'SERIOUS' IS FOR A BAND THAT BLURS THE LINES BETWEEN STUPIDITY AND POIGNANCY.

"It's one of the reasons why I'm sick at the moment, I've been up really late working on some demos we've been doing at home," reveals Aleks. "Without really meaning to, the new batch of songs have been turning out a lot more melancholic and sad; not that I've been either of those, I've been fairly happy recently. I've just sort of wanted to listen to sad music. So I guess I've been writing sad music too. The next album is still going to be pretty strange, but I don't know just what the new stuff is going to sound like."

Pisces vs Aquarius is available on Cavalier Records.

HEALING OLD WOUNDS

CHRIS SMITH IS SOMETHING OF AN UNDERGROUND ICONOCLAST IN THE AUSTRALIAN MUSIC COMMUNITY.

A signpost artist in avant-guitar, experimental and ambient circles, his mood and drone-heavy guitar explorations, abstracted field recordings and abrasive improvisations – best exemplified on 1998 debut Cabin Fever, 2000's Replacement, 2003's Map Ends and last year's Eponymous collaboration with Justin Fuller – have been consuming listeners in a dense textural fog for the best part of a decade. But for Smith, his most recent opus – the ragged, blues-stained Bad Orchestra – represents a considerable stylistic and dispositional departure. A work of intense personal catharsis and aesthetic polarity, *Bad Orchestra* sees Smith poised somewhere between his most vulnerable and adroit.

A gently twanged feedback drone rises from silence, gently at first, wavering faintly in tone and pitch. The lazy rumble of a freight train sinks into the midground. A guitar peals out, strong and stark – as if across fields, as if under sky, as if against decaying weatherboard and rusted tin. It stabs, resonates and then fades against the din.

Seconds pass, maybe half a minute. Then in an instant, all hell breaks loose. Clanging, smashing, burning, screaming hell. Guitars snake and scythe and strike; they unfurl in a tearing, bloodstained, blues-sullied clamour. Drums rattle and shake and vibrate and shatter. A voice wails out; distorted, urgent, guttural even. And then, as before, all is silent.

To describe Goose Run and Living Dead Blues as intense would border on gross understatement. The two tracks – the opening stanzas of Victorian sound artist Chris Smith's latest work – stunningly merged into one extended introductory phrase, go some way to sum up *Bad Orchestra*. The record, Smith's fifth in nine years, is both opaque and austere, dulled and serrated, considered and visceral, and in many ways completely different to anything he's done before.

But for Smith, more than anything *Bad Orchestra* stands to represent a somewhat difficult phase in his life. Racked with personal fissures and dramas, the last two years have proven a time of personal and geographical upheaval for the reserved 30-something guitarist. And Smith, who is tonight chatting from his home in the tiny eastern Victorian town of Rosedale, is the first to admit that it's been anything but easy.

"Um, not wishing to dramatise, but yeah, it has been two or three pretty complicated years," he sighs. "I kind of moved out here from Melbourne partly out of necessity and, well, it's a long story, but amongst other things, I wasn't super keen on having my daughter grow up in the city."

"I think I had a lot of catching up with myself to do in terms of being a musical bum for 14 years and still essentially having nothing to show for it, and working crap jobs and having nothing to show for them either," he continues. "So I moved back here basically because I could afford to invest in a property and offer us some stability."

It's been something of odd a homecoming for Smith, who actually grew up on a farm just out of town. "It's been a real experience," he says. "I never ever imagined coming back here. Moving away from here was my attempt to leave it all behind."

"Everyone pretty much knows each other; it's a pretty tiny place. I have no idea what the population is now, but I remember when I was growing up, the sign on the way into town said 1800. I mean, that was a fair while ago, but it's definitely still a one-horse town and it's pretty quiet. I keep bumping into people from when I was growing up. Thankfully, some who I hope don't remember me don't seem to, and others do, and that's good too."

It's where, two decades earlier, Smith was first introduced to the idea of making music, when an aunt gave him a classical guitar for his 10th birthday. "She was full of good intentions," laughs Smith.

But even from the start, he had little curiosity in making music via the usual means. "Of course, I wasn't the least bit interested until I bought a cheap electric guitar from my brother when I was 14," he recalls.

"... I COULD NEVER PLAY IN THE CONVENTIONAL SENSE."

"I consider myself to have only started to learn to play in the last six or eight months, which is interesting and a lot more fun than I thought."

This shows on *Bad Orchestra*. When compared to the glacial guitar structures and fragmented melodies of some of his earlier material, much of *Bad Orchestra* – namely the band dynamics and vocals of the aforementioned Living Dead Blues, and later in the record, Grain Elevator Blues – veers closer to the dirty, primal rock of bands Crazy Horse, or even Australian rockers the Drones, than the ambient and noise-based guitar craft he is known for.

For the ever-humble Smith, the shift was a real achievement. "Just personally, that was a real coup for me," he offers. "I was actually a bit shy about those two tracks – Living Dead Blues and Grain Elevator Blues – which really stand on their own, I guess, in terms of the rest of the album… It's very much a new thing, I suppose. I've always loved that kind of stuff, and it always made a lot of sense to me on an intuitive level, but in terms of actually pulling something like that off I had no idea even where to begin."

"I mean, it's a very poorly played, rudimentary version of conventional music or whatever," he continues. "And I think the only thing that really made it work was getting Warwick Brown around to get the guitar down, not to mention the band."

Interestingly, Smith cites 70s LA punk band the Germs as one of the chief conceptual influences on the record. Smith had been reading a biography of front man Paul Beahm – aka Darby Crash – during the recording sessions for the album and soon became captivated by the group, drawing parallels to some of his own experiences.

"There are a lot of references there, including the actual artwork," he says. "So yeah, it's sort of embarrassing to talk about. But it's just a result of being a big fan and then reading a biography, which was filled with some really interesting, twisted tails."

"I was really having a lot of trouble coming to terms with, well, just personal stuff. I was having a lot of issues, a lot of drama, and the guy from the Germs was a similarly troubled guy and I kind of related to that. It was kind of like, for him, and maybe for me, doing music was scratching an itch."

In many ways, Smith's link to punk and dirty rock isn't all that surprising. Having left Rosedale for Melbourne in 1993 – soon after forming the Golden Lifestyle Band – he served his musical apprenticeship in the working-class Geelong rock scene. As Smith remembers, the early nineties was an active time in Victoria's second most populous city.

"I spent a year in Melbourne after school, but didn't really meet anyone," he recalls. "All my friends were down in Geelong, so I cut to the chase and moved there."

"I just had no aspirations for a day job or a conventional career in music, but it's all I ever wanted to do. That was about the extent of my thinking…I got to go and see shows at the Barwon Club, and there was so much exciting stuff happening at that time."

Of course, not all of *Bad Orchestra* is informed by retrospective rock. A great deal of the record – including the dense piano melody and haunting field samples of Glue Factory, echoing drones of The Orbit and sinister, abstracted collage of Your Tunnel – stays truer to form.

Yet, Smith is as baffled as anyone when it comes to actually deciphering what that form is.

"IT'S ALL VERY BASE, THAT'S ALL I KNOW"

One thing he is sure about though, is his music's effect on his own personal and emotional state.

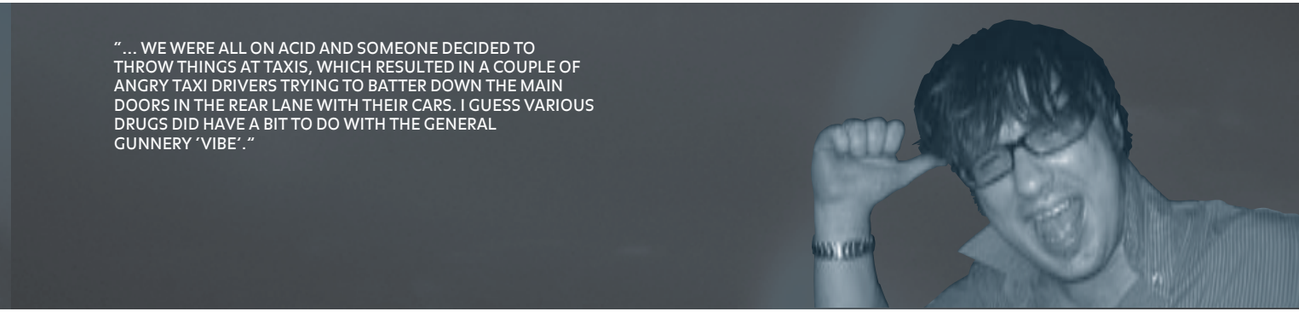
"It's very much therapeutic," he pauses. "Maybe a lot of what came out in this record was...well, there's a lot of wrestling with being raised in a really conservative, Catholic environment. There are no direct references in there, but I think it's me being a recovering Catholic in a sense."

"I don't know," he pauses again, mulling over the thought. "When it comes down to it, it's really very selfish music and it's a really selfish record."

"The whole reason I made it was because it was extraordinarily cathartic."

Bad Orchestra is out through Death Valley

GUNNERY MAN



"... WE WERE ALL ON ACID AND SOMEONE DECIDED TO THROW THINGS AT TAXIS, WHICH RESULTED IN A COUPLE OF ANGRY TAXI DRIVERS TRYING TO BATTER DOWN THE MAIN DOORS IN THE REAR LANE WITH THEIR CARS. I GUESS VARIOUS DRUGS DID HAVE A BIT TO DO WITH THE GENERAL GUNNERY 'VIBE'."

SCOT MCPHEE'S GIRLFRIEND WAS OFFERED A GUN BY CRIMINALS, THAT'S AS CLOSE AS HE'S BEEN TO GRIME'S GUNMAN MYTHOLOGY. BUT THE PRODUCER WHO LIVED THROUGH SYDNEY POST-PUNK AT THE GUNNERY, AND PLAYED A LEADING ROLE IN THE ICONIC CLAN ANALOGUE LABEL IS NOW PRODUCING BREAKBEATS THAT ROLL LIKE GLACIERS, HEAVY ON THE BASS.

"Sorry for the slow reply, I've been out bush for the long weekend," says Scot, when I finally catch him. The laboured restraint of Scot's latest musical incarnation, Brisbane-based industrial dubstep outfit, Victor Xray Sound System, reflects our interview's geological progress.

Dubstep is boys' music; female producers or DJs are extremely rare, even in the UK's increasingly popular scene. Like hip-hop, the language is encoded aggression; it's 'ruff' or 'bad', the music 'chops' and 'clashes'. Scot is a 42-year-old software engineer, for accomodation website Wotif.com, but his music comes from a different place. His overall sound is harsh - "I guess as an old industrial head I simply appreciate that rough, masculine aesthetic" - but the diverse scene growing around dubstep in Brisbane, with bands like Monster Zoku Onsomb and the Nam Shub of Enki, and even a female dubstep DJ, is quite different from elsewhere.

Machismo isn't limited to dubstep though. Scot recalls, with shock, hearing a well-known DJ describe the number of women at a Clan Analogue party (featuring B[if]tek) at Sydney University by saying there was a lot of "pussy". Scot moved north when his wife, who "doesn't like a lot of wobble, but quite likes Skream", was offered a plum job in Queensland. It's a small point, but instructive; although dark and harsh, Scot's music is not particularly aggressive. That steers it closer to well-established producers in the dubstep scene, like Kode9 and Horsepower Productions, whose music is rooted in dub and deeper electronic production.

Scot's music reaches back to dub too. Through alter-egos like Nerve Agent (Clan Analogue), Now:Zero (Trans:com) and now Victor Xray Sound System, Scot has tended to filter the Jamaican roots of the scene through Berlin's ultra-minimal dub techno or East London's dubstep. From Burial Mix to Burial, then.

Scot's a geek at heart. Take his progression in alter-egos, for example. From G-Type Nerve Agent (a nerve gas like Sarin, used in the Tokyo subway attack), he moved to a newer nerve gas, V-Type, VX or in the lingo, Victor Xray. That tendency extends to his studio set-up, which has changed since G-Type, from using external sequencers, hardware synths and a sampler, to Ableton Live and a Nord Modular synth. These days he avoids sample-based production, starting with live bass or guitar, he "builds out", playing the composition into a keyboard and recording into the computer.

"I think there are several points of contact with dub," says Scot, whose first exposure to dubstep was a Kode9 show at a Frigid night at Sydney's Hopetoun Hotel, several years ago. "I love bass and rhythm... Speaking as a producer, all this music shares a sense of time and space. The idea that music can be formed from the silences between notes as much as the notes themselves. To take things and turn them inside out with delays and other processing to get a lush, layered and textured sound out of sometimes initially basic elements."

Scot is reflexively alternative. A natural position, perhaps, for someone who's spent so long in counter-cultural scenes. He was born in Brisbane, and grew up on a diet of Gary Numan, Talking Heads and 1970s *Countdown*, but catapulted himself into Sydney's nascent post-punk scene when he moved into Woolloomooloo squat The Gunnery in 1981. Sydney has a long tradition of naming warehouse spaces after their original function: Imperial Slacks was a clothing factory, Lanfranchi's was known as The Chocolate Factory before its residents changed name, and the Gunnery used to be a Naval Gunnery School.

The city's musical underground was peaking on a mixture of nihilistic hedonism and new technology. Inspired by the city's 'little bands' scene, especially Severed Heads, the Brisbanian found his niche. "There were some pretty wild things going on in the Gunnery, especially in the early days," he says, recounting the night his girlfriend was given a gun by criminals who had moved into the squat. "I was pretty freaked out by that."

"Another night we were all on acid and someone decided to throw things at taxis, which resulted in a couple of angry taxi drivers trying to batter down the main doors in the rear lane with their cars. I guess various drugs did have a bit to do with the general Gunnery 'vibe'. I lived there for about a year, until it got too much battling the squatter's demons. Four of us moved out around the corner, into another squat, where we lived for over seven years, outlasting The Gunnery. In fact, some of the soon-to-be Vibe Tribe guys moved into the place next door to us, although at that time they where all anarcho-punks and not at all into electronic music."

It's evidence that from very early on, there was an explicit link between warehouse spaces and the emerging music scene in Sydney. A link that cemented with time, from the post-punk and experimental performance art/music early '80s to rave. As Ben Byrne noted in a recent essay, warehouses have provided a unique environment for artists to produce and present their work free of the expectations and limitations of the more heavily codified spaces that dominate society.

Wild parties and performance theatre electrified venues like The Gunnery and Lost In Space, supported by illegal beer and wine sales. Scot recalls: "Some transgender friends dressed as Easter bunnies, skipping around, handing out lollies and god knows what mind altering substances to the audience." The inner city property market was yet to explode, and squats like these weren't just places to live. Residents were artists, musicians, addicts and criminals, sometimes a mixture of all of the above. People got caught up in the highs and lows.

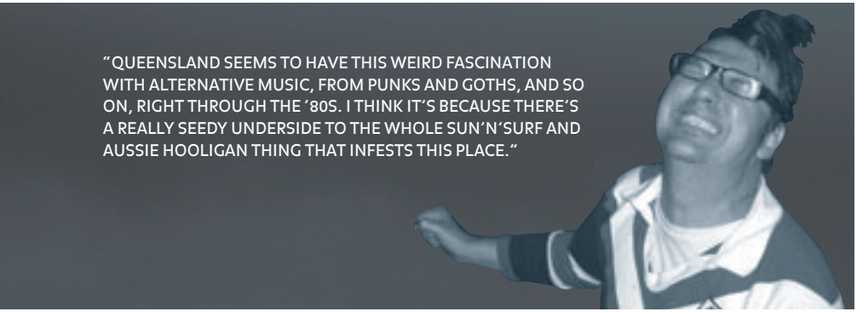
"There was a great Gunnery Festival night where I did the big party upstairs after the theatre event downstairs. We had separate ticketing and in the mad rush after the theatre we didn't get the thing sorted out correctly. It was fixed by one of the theatre people, a tall imposing woman called Helen who was still made-up, practically naked but body-painted to look like some sort of she-devil, demanding to see people's tickets until we got it set up right. It was pretty funny, watching all these people's completely startled expressions when she challenged their right of entry."

Do scenes like that they still exist? The kids are still around, creatively inspiring collectives too, but there's no doubt they're controlled by the real estate market. "Even after the Gunnery shut, there were still interesting rented warehouse spaces around Sydney," says Scot. "But I hear that the last, Lanfranchi's, closed. That's a real pity, because those spaces always gave the interesting stuff a place to be performed. It may be only a tiny minority of people who go to see some obscure music played, but those events do have an effect on a city that's more than the immediate audience. They give a city its texture."

As the Gunnery ebbed, collectives like Clan Analogue and Jellyheads picked up the slack. "I think the biggest change occurred in the late 1980s and early '90s," says Scot,

"when the big dance parties hit their stride - as opposed to electronic music that you might dance to. A lot of venues either shut down their stages for poker machines or turned into music barns powered by DJs. Both those things pushed live electronic music to the margins."

"Clan Analogue was formed in part as a reaction against this trend - a way to promote local electronic music, particularly stuff that wasn't so... cheesecake? I guess that might be a word to describe it, that's why I joined, around the time of EP2. It was pretty exciting. I think over time, Clan and its allies - directly and indirectly - were quite successful at championing this scene."



The music scene has changed hugely, home studios come bundled with laptops and live electronic music is hotter than ever. "It's different, but primarily in the economics of its organisation, its political economy. The major record labels are dead, they are actually just walking zombies who don't yet realise they are dead."

"On the other hand, what becomes 'popular' is, in a sense, vastly more controlled than before. Look at some of those *Countdown* specials that Rage runs around the new year. You will see these ugly, totally non-photogenic people on TV performing their hit - people you just know couldn't be on TV today, parading as pop stars. The cult of celebrity has taken over. In the old days to be a celebrity you had to have at least done something notable at least once. The nature of celebrity has completely changed music at that end of the spectrum."

For someone who recorded for iconic Australian electronic labels like Volition and Clan Analogue, Scot's been unusually accepting of the new music environment. He records quickly and mixes down in a day, often posting MP3s to his blog (modular.autonomous.org/music) immediately. His 12-inch single has attracted interest in Australia, but the recording is also available globally on iTunes, via Brisbane netlabel Trans: com. He finds the traditional process frustrating, describing releasing a record as being, "almost like an archival task."

"There's a splintering of musical cultures, there is no longer the large, almost monolithic, cultural movements there were in the past. There's a weakening of control over distribution from the record majors, but a fascistic semi-autonomous image machine that self-organises the notion of celebrity around itself. At the fringes, we can have a great party, but there's no real mainstream anymore to crossover into, unless you really want to play the celebrity game. I guess there's a sort of 'indie-mainstream', which might go as far as having some US college students buy your record."

"On the other hand, you've got the ability for all sorts of small communities, united by interest and real passion, to develop around particular sorts of obscure music. The dubstep communities you might find on Dubstep.com.au or Baredubs.com are just one of countless thousands, whatever you're into you can find something online for it nowadays."

"I don't drive a car so I certainly never listen to [music] the same way most people do. Instead, I make a special space at least once a week when I listen to new music. I don't use music as wallpaper, except at social events. I try to sit and listen to it and see what I can hear in it. I still listen to heaps of reggae, rock like Bowie or Roxy Music, lots of electronic music, both modern, like dubstep, and more nostalgic, like Kraftwerk." Scot downloads tracks and DJ mixes, then mail-orders vinyl that takes his fancy, though he's recently shifted to buying MP3s to save on shipping costs. Whatever the format, Brisbane's sun and surf-brand t-shirts are a long way from London.

"Well," starts Scot, "Queensland seems to have this weird fascination with alternative music, from punks and goths, and so on, right through the '80s. I think it's because there's a really seedy underside to the whole sun'n'surf and Aussie hooligan thing that infests this place. It's really 'mainstream Australia' in a way you can be almost totally insulated from in inner-city Sydney nowadays, especially if you've got any money. So there's a side of me that wants to push back against that culture, to confuse it with something that doesn't gel with its own values."

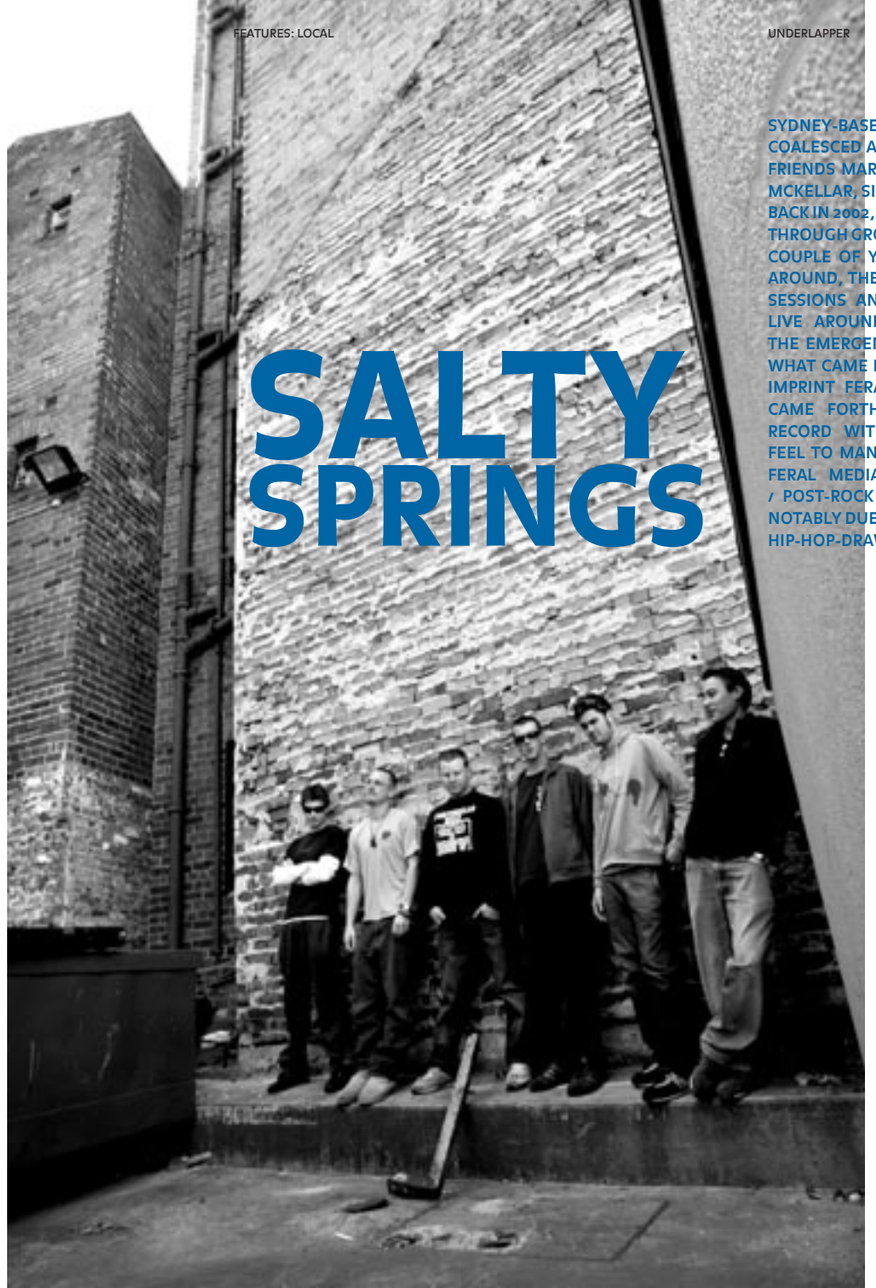
"When I came up here, I guess I realised I could continue on in a happy little bubble of my own making, reggae's pretty big up here, or I could challenge myself a little and stretch out in different directions." Inspired by the city's well-established industrial goth community, his music got darker. That darkness, and dubstep's inherent and calculated use of repetition, must make it a challenging sound in a place like Brisbane. Despite this, there's a thriving community of DJs pushing the sound.

"It seems to fit into the spaces between other music like drum'n'bass, minimal techno, and even electronic goth and industrial music, but it seems to be pretty well received by people who come to it from those territories. There is always a mixture. But currently it's lacking a regular weekly or monthly night, they are sporadic. Hopefully that will be rectified in the near future from talking to some people around town recently."

The Dark Arts of Dub 12 inch is available through Vinyl Factory Distribution, or online from Trans:com/iTunes. *The Horse, He Sick* blog can be found at modular.autonomous.org/music.

BY CHRIS DOWNTON

SALTY SPRINGS



SYDNEY-BASED SIX-PIECE UNDERLAPPER FIRST COALESCED AROUND THE CENTRAL CORE OF SCHOOL FRIENDS MARC CHOMICKI, MATT FURNELL, MORGAN MCKELLAR, SIMON OH, GREG STONE AND SIMON TYTE BACK IN 2002, WHO FUSED THEIR DIVERSE INFLUENCES THROUGH GROUP JAMMING SESSIONS OVER THE NEXT COUPLE OF YEARS. BY THE TIME 2005 HAD ROLLED AROUND, THE RESULTS OF THESE FEVERED CREATIVE SESSIONS AND EXPERIENCES GAINED PERFORMING LIVE AROUND SYDNEY BUILT TO FRUITION WITH THE EMERGENCE OF UNDERLAPPER'S DEBUT ALBUM WHAT CAME FORTH FROM THE SEA THROUGH LOCAL IMPRINT FERAL MEDIA. UPON ITS RELEASE, WHAT CAME FORTH... IMMEDIATELY STOOD OUT AS A RECORD WITH A CHARACTERISTICALLY DIFFERENT FEEL TO MANY OF THE OTHER ARTISTS POPULATING FERAL MEDIA'S ARGUABLY LEFTFIELD-ELECTRONIC / POST-ROCK DOMINATED ROSTER, PERHAPS MOST NOTABLY DUE TO ITS PROMINENT INCORPORATION OF HIP-HOP-DRAWN ELEMENTS.

While tracks such as '3 Sides' and the grand piano and melodica-strewn 'Pa's On Heat' certainly showed stream-of-consciousness MC vocals taking the foreground however, the fusion of intricate 'widescreen' instrumental arrangements took proceedings to a distinctly different place than that currently being explored by other Australian hip-hop practitioners; one that was arguably much closer to the sorts of post-rock majesty forged by Morr/Anticon supergroup 13 & God. With leftfield electronic influences smoothly coexisting alongside the energy of instrumental performances, many of *What Came Forth*'s tracks showed Underlapper moving through a wide range of different moods, the tone of instrumentation frequently counterpointing the intensity of verbal flow, to the point where it was frequently impossible to discern just who was leading who.

If the level of detailed arrangements packed into the 12 album tracks reflected the scope of Underlapper's creative ambition in the studio, then that same factor is also

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arguably a barrier the band were forced to confront head-on when translating their intricate works to a live setting. Indeed, by all accounts these same difficulties encountered during the live performance of tracks from *What Came Forth* served to exert considerable changes upon the band's creative approach, providing a fresh level of perspective when it came to writing and recording new tracks. If hints of these considerable shifts in Underlapper's sound first revealed themselves amidst the feathery glitch-electronics, chiming gentle guitars and vocal harmonies of May's preceding *Little Tapioca* single, then the significant changes are certainly evident in the band's newly-released second album *Red Spring*. Clad like its predecessor in gorgeous sleeve art by Sopp Collective, the delicate and drifting moods generated by the 10 tracks contained within certainly act as an apt sonic metaphor for the beguiling visuals, which appear to depict hand-drawn octopi against a mysterious dark-hued subaquatic backdrop. While the marine theme is distinctly still present, perhaps the most immediately obvious change is the virtual complete absence of hip-hop elements; a genre previously inextricably associated with the band's output.

"I think the first album was only a very small representation of what we were interested in as a group at the time," Greg Stone explains. "We wanted to make hip-hop music that did not rely on cliches and that showed a different side to a genre that is often misrepresented. On the new album, we've returned to using many of the elements such as post-rock, folk and downbeat electronica which have always interested us as a group. I think this album is a return to the music we began making from the beginning and it gives the listener an insight into where we are at as a band today."

"After trying, usually unsuccessfully, to adapt the last album to a live setting, we wanted to make an album that could pretty much be taken straight from the studio to the stage," Greg explains. "This seems to have worked and we definitely feel more comfortable playing this (latest) album live. The approach we took this time was to write and record a cohesive album, as opposed to throwing a bunch of songs together and hoping they fit. We definitely wanted to use more 'singing', as opposed to spoken word vocal and we also wanted to create an album that would be interesting when played in a live setting."

"This time around, we did most of the recording ourselves on a farming property in northern New South Wales. We travelled to the farm with the intention of recording a new album and I think this allowed us to focus and write music more as a group. The songs from the last album were usually written by one or two members and then added to by the rest of the band."

"Whereas, this time around, we were able to figure out our individual parts and decide what was needed in a song before the foundations were set," Greg continues. "There are some songs on this album which were written by playing together and jamming on particular ideas. Then, there are others which started as ideas from one or two members in the group, and were then looked at by all of us to decide what the song needed."

Underlapper have already had several opportunities to perform *Red Springs* live in both Sydney and Canberra and they have worked well.

"The shows so far have been very positive," says Greg. "We seem to get a good response from the new material and once the album is officially released we will be heading down to Melbourne to play a couple of shows and will hopefully get back down to Canberra over the next few months. As well as playing a Feral Media showcase in the sound lounge at the Seymour Centre in early July alongside Barrage and SA duo School Of Two (who both have upcoming releases on the label), we are also planning an official Sydney album launch at the moment."

"I guess one of our constant struggles is just trying to fit on the stage," Greg confesses. "We have played plenty of venues where we are cramped and spend most of the gig running into each other. Apart from that, trying to get everyone together is always a task, although we seem to have a pretty good routine at the moment."

"[Feral Media] have given us plenty of room to work with creatively and have always been supportive of what we are doing. Hopefully, the label will continue to grow and gain the recognition it deserves. We need more people like them who are willing to experiment and take a chance on music that may not appeal to everyone, but deserves the attention of those willing to seek it out."

Red Spring is available through Feral Media/Fuse Distribution

CAPITALIST PUNISHMENT

A LEADING FIGURE IN THE HEAVILY COLLABORATIVE WORLD OF ELECTRONIC MUSIC, DAVID THRUSSELL IS ALSO A SELF-CONFESSED RECLUSE WITH AN OVERWHELMING DISTASTE FOR THE TRAPPINGS OF CONSUMERIST CULTURE.

"I live in the hills. I'm the anti-networking guy," he admits, happily, from his home "on a dark slope of a forgotten mountain" some 100 kilometres outside of Melbourne. Here, he's free from the elevator music and bombardment of ad-noise that cramps public space and "lodges something in your head that displaces the area that might otherwise be taken up with thinking". Hermit or not, Thrussell remains one of Australia's most prolific Australian electronic producers and performers, an increasingly sought after soundtrack composer and, in his spare time, the curator of a label dedicated to unearthing neglected radical country music.

Thrussell's flagship project, the ominous industrial dance act Snog, emerged when he "ran screaming out of art school". In music he found the spark that had been missing from the "public service drudgery" of art school. "Even if you're doing dark or intense stuff, there should be some joy about it, because you're grasping the innate, important stuff of life."

The group combined the timbre of European EBM artists like Front 242 with the more prosaic songwriting approach of Tom Waits, Nick Cave and Swans. "I think the only way you can get excited about art is to feel, rightly or wrongly, that you're doing something that no one else is doing." Snog's 1992 debut album Lies Inc was an alternately beat-driven and ambient synth-heavy excursion with a lead single, underground club anthem 'Corporate Slave', that resounded with audiences around the world. Snog's evolving lineup included composer/audio engineer Pieter Bourke until 2000, and an increasing number of collaborators have contributed to more recent albums such as *Beyond the Valley of the Proles* and *Vs The Faecal Juggernaut of Mass Culture*.

Simultaneously anti-capitalist and concerned with the minutiae of daily life, Snog was in part a reaction to the mass produced music that had little relevance to Thrussell's, or anyone else's, existence. "It's astounding how much so-called pop music avoids reality. If we're going to write pop songs, they should be honest and address day-to-day things that are a big part of my life."

Thrussell's other main vehicle, Black Lung, emerged not long after Snog. A solo techno act, it took influence from sonic magicians Coil, Sydney industrialists SPK and dark ambient pioneer Lustmord, all acts with varied but strong philosophies behind their sounds. Black Lung evolved from haunting ambience to encompass vicious techno and scattershot electronica that, despite its lack of vocals, packed an even more explicit political charge than Snog.

With references to the Illuminati and secret government manifestos, the early work of these two key projects seemed to draw on the extravagant conspiratorial musings of Robert Anton Wilson and Milton Cooper. Fast forward fifteen years, and nothing about Snog and Black Lung is particularly far fetched. In a world where chart-topping artists are openly manufactured through reality television and the media industry crusades to keep a dubious value on its increasingly vapid output, Snog's 2006 album *Vs The Faecal*

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Juggernaut of Mass Culture is a valid take on the state of the arts. Meanwhile, Black Lung's suitably industrial dance-floor wrecking epic, *The Coming Dark Age* envisaged the effects of an oil famine on economies dependent on cheap petrol. It's hardly the stuff of a deluded conspiracy nut.

Anyway, the politics of his music are not as alienating to some audiences as might be expected. "There are areas that I cannot go into, but we have fans in strange places. In strange positions in society." No amount of cajoling will pry from Thrussell who these fans are, or what their positions are, but he is adamant that he's not making it up. "We have hardcore Snog fans who are in quite powerful situations." Does this suggest, perhaps, that some of his subject matter rings true for the corporate slave masters? "I don't want to get too excited about myself, but the thought has crossed my mind. If I told you, you wouldn't believe me. It's astounding."

While Thrussell's anti-capitalist sentiment is strong, he's no reflex left wing reactionary. He had to dispel an interpretation of Snog's recent song 'De-evolutionaries' as a paean against intelligent design theory, insisting that he doesn't buy the obvious alternative either. "I'm highly suspicious of evolution, because there's too much of an ideological fit with capitalism – 'survival of the fittest, the fittest have the right to dominate, we're on this linear path of progress, so everything gets better all the time'. The universe is just too incredible for that scientific, rational explanation. Do I have a reasonable alternative to suggest? I'm comfortable with acknowledging that I am too limited to understand. In fact, it's one of the things that gives me hope, that the universe is enormous and unfathomable."

One of the cornerstone ideas behind *Faecal Juggernaut* was the intrinsic problem of trying to be an honest cog in a corrupt machine. For Thrussell, this contradiction is most blatant in his reliance on technology to convey his message. "I can stand up and yell at the top of my lungs, 'I'm a hypocrite'. They were the tools available. They're the only ones I can use." Naturally, the dilemma extends to his position of respect in an industry he openly scorns. "It's caused me to lay awake at night. As much as you think you're honest, you're part of the machine. Our motives are sincere but it's difficult not to reflect on the fact that we're involved in this."

So, how does he sleep? "I've nearly thrown in the towel many times, but a pragmatic voice pipes up and asks 'what the hell else are you going to do?' The only things that really interest me are these artistic pursuits. If you're making art, you clearly feel that it has something important to say. (If) you don't share it publicly and are completely sitting in a cave, and I'm half way there, you can never really make things better or different."

Thrussell insists his relationships with labels have been amicable for the most part – with a notable exception. "Black Lung was on a real scallywag label that didn't pay me properly. In 1997, I was playing a whole lot of Black Lung shows in Europe. I thought 'has anyone ever bought a Black Lung record in Italy?' Then I go to Italy and I'm headlining these outdoor festivals. I'm doing interviews on the TV with my own translator! Every interview, they'd ask me "What's it like having a rave hit all across Europe?" And I'd go 'I don't know. What's it like?'"

As it turned out, Black Lung single 'The More Confusion… The More Profit' had become a minor rave hit across the continent. "In retrospect, a highly ironic title, but not for the reasons I was thinking at the time."

At the same time as he was exploring techno with Black Lung, Thrussell formed Soma with Snog collaborator Pieter Bourke as an outlet for stylings influenced by one of his other loves – films and their soundtracks. A renowned devotee of Ennio Morricone, it was natural that this would lead, despite his anti-networking tendencies, to work on film scores.

"I'm really not very good at selling myself," he mentions, referring to his first meeting with the producers for the Scott Roberts' crime thriller *The Hard Word*.

"I got a message while I was on tour that the film people wanted to have a chat with me. So I got back, got straight off the plane from the States and I was jet-lagged out of my mind. I went into the meeting not thinking that I'm supposed to go tell them how great I am." The producers screened a chase scene that ended on a familiar train. "(It) was the train that takes me up to Hepburn Springs where I live. So I jump out of my seat, and say 'Fuck me, that's my fucking train!' I've caught that train hundreds of times. The producer swears to this day that it was the moment when I got the job. What I didn't know was that they'd had other musicians in before me, and they'd got all crawly and gone 'the editing's fantastic' and 'blah, blah, blah.' I don't blah very well. Normally," he acknowledges, "being a real person doesn't work in my favour."

Thrussell's love for heartfelt songwriting by real people, seeded in childhood exposure to Johnny Cash and Lee Hazelwood, has manifested in another way. He's tackled an astounding excavation of forgotten country music through his Omni Recording Corporation label and has overseen the re-release of the work of a dozen artists who are a world away from the established clichés of the genre.

"They're quite challenging. People have this bias that country music is about intolerance." The work unearthed through Omni is far from conservative, and highlights what Thrussell sees as an important lost tradition. "Before the age of now, when people just watch television, poor white people had a culture. You could get a strong sense of it. Some of it is quite radical. For example, Jimmy Driftwood has a song called 'My Church' which is a nature worshipping ode dressed in flimsy Christian garb. He's singing abtout how nature is his temple."

The Omni release schedule yields some tantalising titles and lavish cover art. Porter Wagoner was the first to champion a young Dolly Parton and is still active as a recording artist, but had a stash of gems that were languishing as deleted vinyl titles. The lyrics of Wagoner's 'Rubber Room' would not be out of place on a Snog album. A padded cell is depicted as a happy panacea to the ills of the modern world. When they come to take Porter away, they find him "screaming pretty words, trying to make them rhyme." Other highlights include *The Open Mind of John D. Loudermilk*, a Nashville psych-pop opus from a man whose songs insinuated themselves into the catalogues of Johnny Cash, Laibach and Jewel, and a collection of genuine country hits and zen moments from Henson Cargill on *A Very Well Travelled Man*.

To bridge the gap between Thrussell's world and the country curios, Omni is testing the waters with a series of early electronic records. The first release collected Gil Trythall's *Country Moog* and its sequel *Nashville Gold*, but a particular treat for aficionados of proto-electronica is Bruce Haack's *Electric Lucifer*. Mountain-born in an isolated Canadian mining camp, Haack was a Juilliard dropout who found his greatest success with children's music, which he composed on homemade electronic instruments. He performed *Electric Lucifer* on a synthesiser he crafted from parts purchased for $50 on Canal Street in New York, and the results were a psychedelic anti-war odyssey unlike anything else of its time. It would go on to influence Thrussell as well as contemporaries like Luke Vibert, but, until now, has never been released on CD.

Not content with two active projects and a thriving re-issue imprint, Thrussell's latest project takes Snog's caustic attack on over-hyped consumer culture a step further. 'The Enemy' spins into diabolical pop music (sample lyric - "It takes a special kind of psychosis to bomb the living fuck out of Iraq"), for which Thrussell has proposed his label hire good looking teenagers to mime in the videos while he relaxes, Svengalian, behind the curtain. "It'll work much better than having grumpy old me in there. We'll see if they take it on." Meanwhile, he stays bunkered in his hillside cave, recording new Snog material in preparation for a performance in August at a most unlikely venue: Disneyland, California. Friends in high places? Maybe he wasn't exaggerating.

Snog's *Vs The Faecal Juggernaut of Mass Culture* and Black Lung's *The Coming Dark Age* are out now on Psy-Harmonics. A release from The Enemy is forthcoming on Negative3. Bruce Haack's *Electric Lucifer* is available through the Omni Recording Corporation.

WARREN BURT

BY OLIVER LAING

RADICAL AMATEUR

TULLAMARINE AIRPORT, MELBOURNE, 1975: WARREN BURT IS ASKED TO DEMONSTRATE THE WORKINGS OF HIS CASSETTE RECORDER BY A CUSTOMS OFFICIAL. INSERTING A TAPE OF HIS OWN COMPOSITIONS, THE AIRPORT IS GREETED WITH A 'GGGGGRRR-A-A-A-A-NWH!' CONFIRMING THAT THE CASSETTE RECORDER WAS IN PERFECT WORKING ORDER, BURT EXPLAINS THAT THIS IS HIS OWN MUSIC. THE STORY MAY BE APOCRYPHAL, BUT IT PERFECTLY ILLUSTRATES THE APPROACH OF AN EXPERIMENTAL MUSIC DYNAMO WHO HAS CALLED AUSTRALIA HOME FOR OVER THIRTY YEARS.

I first stumbled across the work of Warren Burt in the hallowed music library of Sydney community radio station 2SER. I was burrowing around, trying to find some freebies to give away on my radio show. The cover looked intriguing, a photograph of some battered lumps of aluminium, which turned out to be tuning forks. The name of the album piqued my interest further, *The Animation of Lists/And the Archytan Transpositions*. What beguiling sounds could be contained within? Knowing that one should never judge a book, or indeed a record, by its cover, I was pleasantly surprised to find the music contained was as transcendent as its wordy title alluded.

The liner notes painted a brief biography of Warren. Here was a Yankee composer who had associated with John Cage, Pauline Oliveros, Robert Ashley and Alvin Lucier. His association with Serge Tcherepinn and Joel Chadabe had honed his formative interest in electronic music. An undoubtedly impressive lineage, but what really floored me was that the man had moved to Melbourne in 1975, and I had never heard of him! This information hit me like a tonne of bricks, and was furthered with the subsequent discovery that Warren had relocated to Wollongong in 2004 to take up a position at the university and complete a PhD. The conventional orthodoxy, at least in my mind, had avant-garde composers based in seemingly refined and distant locations such as the Darmstadt and possibly New England.

The Animation of Lists/And the Archytan Transpositions has a spacious beauty that is at once soothing, yet also engaging. Its gorgeous, sinuous tones and overtones envelop the listener in a sound world far removed from the humdrum and the mediocre. For such otherworldly music, it was, rather amusingly, recorded where the dining table usually sits, adjacent to the kitchen of Warren's townhouse in suburban Wollongong. The recording sessions took place in the evenings between Christmas and New Year, Warren and his wife, fellow composer and artist Catherine Schieve, were involved: "There are three takes for each track. One of us would be playing the forks and the frame, which for each particular section, we would have to change over. Usually Catherine did the hand held things, hitting them and moving them back and forth in the air. In fact, she got a bit of RSI over the course of the 10 days of recording. These forks are fairly heavy; she developed these shooting pains up her arms for about three weeks after the recording session. I decided I wouldn't make her a permanent tuning fork (player)–at least we wouldn't go out and do that on a weekly basis".

Between 1971 and '75, Warren was a postgraduate student at the University of California San Diego studying under Kenneth Gaburo. Gaburo's interdisciplinary approach involved what he termed 'compositional linguistics', or music-as-language and language-as-music. One of the most striking characteristics of Warren Burt's work is its enormous scope, or as he so humorously stated during the interview: "Interdisciplinary work R US for the past 30 years". He draws inspiration from the worlds of experimental music, video synthesis, dance, graphic arts, intellectually rigorous writing and post-modern theory, all executed with a sense of humour and a lightness of touch that is rare to encounter within the stuffy confines of academia.

Australian composer, pianist and conductor Keith Humble was part of the faculty at San Diego, and was given the task of setting up a New Music department at Latrobe University in Melbourne. Humble recruited Warren, along with fellow composer/performers Ted Grove and Jeff Pressing, to form the nucleus of the young university's New Music department. Warren had already formed connections with Australian musicians during his time at San Diego, including Barry Cunningham, Chris Mann and Ron Nagorcka.

Warren knew Melbourne was going to be an interesting place, but didn't realise just how interesting; "In the second half of the '70s, Melbourne was one of the best artistic cities on the planet, one facet of this was a vibrant and supportive New Music scene. There was just this incredible sense of inventing a new culture from various local and international historical roots. Melbourne has always had a pretty aggressive new art culture going right back to the 1880s. A lot of Melburnian artists are aware of that idea, that historic continuity. It didn't feel like they felt that they were inventing the world from scratch. Whereas, I did get that impression when I visited Sydney, that the artists there felt like they were inventing the world from scratch, what existed before 1960 didn't exist."

"Melbourne had great access to culture from around the world. We had bookstores such as Collected Works and well-stocked record stores like Discurio. Their selections might have not been quite equal with what was available in New York or Paris, for example, and of course, things were way more expensive in Melbourne, but you just bit the bullet and paid the money! Money is no object when it comes to art or knowledge. As Keith Humble said, what we do in Australia is share our resources. Somebody buys a really expensive book and then they lend it to a bunch of people."

After three years at Latrobe, Warren spent part of 1979 living and working in New York when he came to a decision; "I would really rather be working and living in Melbourne. I'd rather be within that scene and helping that particular group of people, and putting my own efforts into developing that scene." Undoubtedly generations of Australian musicians have benefited from this decision, as Warren shares his musical knowledge and enthusiasm with a largesse that has contributed to the continued evolution of the arts in Australia. I can only reiterate Andrew McLennan's praise contained in the liner notes of Warren's tuning fork piece. "As a node of information, Warren is often first stop for a quick or even an epic fix". My time with Warren conducting the interview and subsequent research opened up my mind to possibilities and tangents that were previously unknown to this writer. Indeed the challenge proved to be how to shoehorn the over-abundance of information into an article!

"Melbourne was close enough to the rest of the world, in a sense, that you could always get out and go somewhere else". Warren proved that living geographically removed from the New Music nexus of North America and Europe was not a hindrance for the passionate and involved musician.

"In 1984 I ended up at the University of Iowa, doing an extended residency. I was in LA for most of 1986, doing an Arts/Science residency, I had a big installation at the expo in Brisbane in 1988, and in '92 I was in Switzerland doing an installation there. In 1995 I was in Minneapolis for the American Composers Forum, 1998 I was in the San Francisco Bay Area for a good part of the year. My prodigious work output had to keep going, as I had no other form of income. Basically, for many years I faithfully read the Australia Council and state arts council booklets and kept writing away to people, and networking. I've found that numerically, I had to do twice as many free gigs as paid gigs, but the fact that I did those free gigs meant that people knew my work, and asked me to do the paid gigs".

"As William Burroughs says, in one of his novels, 'And so the years passed!' Catherine and I have both had health problems in the past few years, which have taken a long time to come back from. With Wollongong University, various financial plans turned to vapour, so we spent some time being both poor and sick. The trip to Canada last year to play at the Sound Symposium in Newfoundland was a real re-entry into things. We've both done this thing in the past, performing at the highest level at national forums; it's just when your sick, you can somehow think that your not going to be there again. This year, I've been invited to be the keynote speaker at the Australian Computer Music conference in June, which was a nice surprise. It's about interdisciplinary work, so in one sense I'm a logical guy to ask. In July, I'm going down to the Liquid Architecture festival

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in Melbourne. In August, we'll be up in Brisbane, working with US composer Bill Duckworth, on his interactive project *I-Orpheus*".

The creative milieu of Melbourne led Warren to co-found the energetic, anarchic and influential Clifton Hill Community Music Centre (CHCMC) not long after his arrival on our shores. As Andrew McLennan states in the liner notes to *The Animation of Lists*, "If Warren Burt had not come to Australia in 1975, we would have had to kidnap and smuggle him in illegally". The CHCMC was the brainchild of Warren, Ron Nagorcka and John Campbell in 1976. Located in an old organ factory, the basic concept of the CHCMC was for it to function as an 'alternative space' where

"THE TECHNOLOGY TODAY IS UBIQUITOUS, CHEAP AND AVAILABLE. WE'VE NEVER BEEN IN A SITUATION OF SUCH ABUNDANCE. FOR EXAMPLE, FOR A YOUNG MUSICIAN STARTING OUT, WHAT IS THE CHEAPEST HIGH QUALITY SOUND PRODUCING INSTRUMENT YOU CAN HAVE? THE COMPUTER, IT'S CHEAPER THAN A GUITAR. A BAD GUITAR IS $40; A GOOD GUITAR IS GOING TO COST YOU $1000. A GOOD LAPTOP THAT IS SUITABLE FOR MUSIC IS GOING TO SET YOU BACK ABOUT $800-900."

musicians, artists and the multifarious denizens of the Melbourne scene could perform. The pragmatic constraints of fiscal prudence were not a concern, as "absolutely no money would be involved. Anyone could perform, as long as they were enthusiastic".

Over the next seven years, Essendon Airport, Laughing Hands, Ernie Althoff, Ros Bandt and Plastic Platypus, Burt and Nagorcka's duo, all played regularly at the CHCMC. Speaking about his duo performances with Nagorcka illustrates the anything goes nature of the CHCMC: "We would just speak into a cassette recorder, play that back while recording on a second cassette recorder, stop, rewind, play that back and record that on the first cassette recorder, just with their little internal microphone. Play that back onto the second cassette recorder, and keep swapping back and forth. Cassette recorders have plenty of distortion and noise, and it only took about five or six generations before you had shrieking noise, or the resonances of the room. Alvin Lucier's *I am sitting in a room* was the first exemplar of that, done very elegantly. What we had was a cheap, bargain basement version of *I am sitting in a room*!"

"The end of Clifton Hill was very nice. I was overseas, Nagorcka was overseas, and Ernie Althoff, Robert Goodge and Andrew Preston were in charge. They found that a concert season came along and nobody wanted to perform. They had just gotten $1000 from Arts Victoria, the first time they had gotten any money. They said: 'Nobody wants to perform, the place has fulfilled its purpose, we'll shut it down and send the money back.' In the late '80s, the St Kilda council made the Linden Art Gallery available for Ernie, myself, Brigid Burke and Carolyn Connors to hold a monthly series of concerts. They worked really well and ran from 1986 until 1994. Once again, it was totally unfunded, but how many thousands of people saw those concerts? How many hundreds of musicians did we interact with? How many arts bureaucrats got to know our stuff? That ends up paying off in more tangible ways."

"I made my living as a freelance composer of weirdo music from 1981 to 2001. I did all sorts of interesting and strange projects. When I left Latrobe in 1981, I got a job at the Council of Adult Education in Melbourne doing distance education, writing pamphlets about music for people out in the country. We used to say that our target audience was a 64-year-old farmer's wife who had a BA. So think country, think needing access to cultural things, but think smart."

This is where Warren honed his discursive and entertaining writing style: " It had to be clear, it had to be clean and friendly, like you were talking. It couldn't be hiding behind a wall of objectivity like academic writing. And it worked, so I decided that even when I was doing academic writing, that's the way I would write. A number of academics have, through the years, said; 'You're not writing like an academic', and I go, 'That's right, I am opposed to that, you have just described the enemy.'"

Five years later, synchronicity, and the untimely demise of a CSIRO computer operative led Warren to the production of the tuning forks that were used to such stunning effect on *The Animation of Lists*.

"The Australia Council were setting up this project called Art and New Technology. I had been doing a lot of video synthesis, and the next step was obviously computer graphics. CSIRO had a big computer graphics facility in Sydney. I went to talk about the project, the previous day the CSIRO's computer graphics guy had died at his terminal. I thought, 'Well, I'll have to do another project.' I asked if there were any CSIRO facilities in Melbourne. There was the National Metrology Lab at Monash University. Their raison d'ètre was to measure things, but they had metal shops, woodworking, and a chemistry lab, I decided to figure out a project and work with them. In 1970, a friend of mine had made a single tuning fork out of aluminium, just a little tiny guy, and I had used it in several pieces. So I thought, I'm going to make a bunch of these".

"The manufacture of the tuning forks took about three and a half months. They weren't cast; it was standard 25x40ml aluminium construction bar cut to an approximate length. The scientists thought they had a nice computer program to work out the frequencies I wanted. They were certain that they had it all nailed down, but I told them, 'don't you believe it, there are lots of impurities in aluminium and this is street grade aluminium!' I wasn't buying the really pure stuff! On a milling machine, we cut them to length, drilled out the hole in the middle and then with a bandsaw, sliced down to make the tines. After that we used the milling machine to clean them up and remove up to a ten thousandth of a millimetre at a time off the end to adjust the pitch. The forks are tuned in just intonation, which is simply a way of tuning musical intervals so that the intervals don't beat or throb they have a purer sound. As Bill Duckworth states in his essay in *The Animation of Lists*, it's as if you were listening to music and then you tune it in just intonation and it seems to come into focus. It's just a means of getting a clearer intonation."

Warren's long time friendship with US composer Phil Niblock, now based in Gent, Belgium, led to the commissioning of the tuning fork pieces for Niblock's Experimental Intermedia (XI) label. Warren was instructed to refrain from writing an electronic piece, but it certainly sounds very electronic at times; "There is a heck of a lot of beating in my tuning fork pieces. That's because I have two different major seconds from the fundamental, which in this case was the note G on the piano. We've got one major second that is large, it's slightly bigger than a major second on the piano, and the ratio is nine over eight. The other major ratio is small, that's the ratio ten over nine. These two major seconds are about a quarter of a semitone apart, and when you play those two together you get lots of beats. My scales are actually designed so that you can get lots of beating tones and also plenty of clear tones. This is helped by the tuning forks themselves, which after the initial attack dies away, are making pretty much a pure sine wave. That is one of the reasons the piece sounds so electronic, we are not used to acoustic instruments having a very pure sustaining tone, although lots of them did. For example, glass harmonicas and various bells, although they're outside the mainstream of what would be conventionally be regarded as an acoustic instrument, such as guitars and pianos or even violins."

Having been so intimately involved in the Australian music scene over the past 30 years, I was curious to know Warren's thoughts on where electronic music in Australia was heading; "I notice that everyone these days is playing turntables, turntables as instrument, as opposed to just playing records. As someone who was playing with cassette recorders for many years, that's very nice. It's hard to say stylistically where it is going. Everybody loves to bash the avant-garde, it's everybody's favourite whipping boy. So people are making predictions that we are all going to be making electronic pop music, or we are all going to be making this or that. I don't think so, it's just completely fragmented and there are hundreds of streams, and no one stream is more important than the other. I think the people involved in the further fringes of art music, are wrangling with conceptual challenges in a particular way that other segments of the music community are not. It's those particular sort of intellectual challenges that I think spill over into a lot of the other fields".

"The technology today is ubiquitous, cheap and available. We've never been in a situation of such abundance. For example, for a young musician starting out, what is the cheapest high quality sound producing instrument you can have? The computer, it's cheaper than a guitar. A bad guitar is $40; a good guitar is going to cost you $1000. A good laptop that is suitable for music is going to set you back about $800-900. If you use open-source software, away you go! In terms of high quality musical instruments, the computer is the cheapest one of them all. If we believe that tools will affect the music that you make, then who knows where things are going to go? There is a symbiotic relationship between the engineer, the composer and the performer. At the same time, I look at a lot of new plug-ins, little synths and effects things, the amount of people who are coming up with really new ideas is very small. But to make a lot of those ideas available that society hasn't even processed yet can only help".

A person with limited musical training, who is just starting out with a computer and learning their way around the software, might be inclined to think; 'Right, I'm going to make techno'. They find out what software the big names in techno are using and then try to emulate that sound. It takes years to become adept with the software and to find a unique voice with it, to actually start to hit your creative stride. Many musicians give up before they get to that point, maybe because they get despondent that they are not making a sound quite as chunky or polished as the people they are aping.

"Composer Elaine Barkin has a wonderful quote: 'On the way to becoming, we each put others on for fit' and that process can take years. It's also learning about the software. For example, the British magazine, *Computer Music* continually annoys me, (I also continue to read it); because they say 'Sound like this Pop Group!' they actually have their market targeted to be young males who want to imitate their musical heroes. For those of us who thought that imitation was something that you left behind in high school, well, OK…"

Warren Burt certainly left school yard imitations behind quite some time ago. Having swum in the deep end of New Music for over thirty years, he has amassed a substantial back-catalogue, which is currently being archived. Stretching to 75 albums, his work spans environmental recordings, sound poetry, noise, electro-acoustic manipulations, inscrutable electronics and more. Warren Burt is a man infatuated with process, visualising the polished diamonds, where others may only see uncut stones. Or, to modify that metaphor somewhat, hearing the resonating tuning fork, where others see battered, street grade construction aluminium.

STORM THE STUDIO: TONY DUPE

TONY DUPE LOVES MAKING RECORDS. THE PRODUCER, MUSICIAN AND STUDIO OWNER BEHIND THE INSTRUMENTAL ACOUSTIC/ELECTRONIC HYBRID SADDLEBACK, WHO HAS JUST RELEASED HIS SECOND ALBUM *NIGHT MAPS*, BELIEVES RECORDING IS THE BEST THING ABOUT BEING A MUSICIAN.

"Making a record is probably one of the times in your life that you feel good about being a musician, you feel excited about it, you know what you're doing," Tony says.

"Gigs are so transient and there's so much other stuff involved. But actually just focusing on the music and trying to understand the music and understand the person… It's a pretty beautiful and interesting process."

When Tony says he is trying to "understand the person," he is talking not only about the many and varied guests who appear on Saddleback records, but also his work as a producer for other recording artists such as Holly Throsby, Jack Ladder and the Woods Themselves.

"I guess because people come out of their environment and into my environment, that probably helps them focus on what they're doing. Working somewhere you feel good and focused is probably going to bring about the best result, regardless of where it is."

In his role as a producer, Tony subsumes his own ego to the creative vision of the artist he is recording.

"When I'm making records for other people I'm trying to cast a light through them in terms of how I deal with the music. It's about them, basically."

Apart from making records for himself and others, Tony's other love is living in the country. It has been quite an achievement for him to marry those two loves, but with his studio in Kangaroo Valley, south of Sydney, he has managed to create a reality most of us can only dream of.

"It's just a house in the middle of nowhere with cows all around it. I've heard them eating. If one sneezes you really know about it!" Tony says of his bucolic surrounds.

Saddleback has recorded two full length albums since 2005, on Preservation Records. 2005's *Everything's a Love Letter* and this year's *Night Maps* were both recorded in rural locations in southern NSW.

"The environment is so beautiful and so relaxing. It informs the recordings, because you're in a position to focus to the exclusion of everything else," Tony says.

"I think the things that affect the music most are the instrument choices and how I'm feeling, and also where I'm living – the environment seems to have an effect on it all."

For Tony, it's not so much the perceived quality of the studio gear that's important, it's more about the process - and that is all about setting the scene.

"When I make records I don't think too consciously about what I'm trying to do. It's more a situation of improvising, it's more about playing and then pulling it together, making it work together. I try to make it as natural as I can."

Saddleback is a pleasantly simple and functional project. Tony is the driving force; his improvised audio sculpting combines with the performances of various guests, who nearly always contribute acoustic instruments.

"I buy instruments I find interesting, and they just get played, poorly, but I pull it together. I got a bass clarinet after the last record. That's been a lot of fun".

Both Saddleback albums were recorded using a combination of digital and analogue gear, but Tony's preference certainly lays in the tape and microphone realm.

"I'm in a house with nice rooms; I like acoustic instruments. I try to process as much as I can with the tape machine rather than the computer, especially when I am doing different reversing and pitching of things."

For the Saddleback recordings and for the other artists who approach Tony to work with them on their albums, Tony takes a measured, methodical, almost forensic approach. Like a detective piecing together the answers to a mystery, Tony gets inside an artist's head, works out what makes them tick, and how best to translate this to the final mix.

"I usually get to hear what people are doing, then I talk to them about how they hear what they're doing. I quite often get a mix tape, too, to see how they hear things, so I can get it from their point of view," Tony says.

"Sometimes there's already players involved, sometimes not, and I am the player, or we pull people in. So it's really just collaboration and trying to be on the same page. I don't really plan things too much in terms of arrangements and things."

By doing the research and understanding the motives of the artist, Tony is able to switch off any overly-analytical tendencies that might emerge, and let the music speak for itself. "It's more about just playing instruments against the track and seeing what falls out. I like the idea of it coming from somewhere other than your head."

TRACK FOCUS: 'DANCE CARD' - *NIGHT MAPS*

"This one I used a fair amount of playing along at half speed on the tape machine then speeding it up. It took on a baroque sound because the instruments' sustain was stymied (and) they had very short sustain, so a piano sounded like a harpsichord and a guitar sounded like a lute. And it just came about just from playing and seeing what worked."

THE ALBUM PROCESS

Recording an album can be an open-ended process, depending on the skills and working practices of the artist/s involved. There are so many options available to an artist who is ready to record, even on a tight budget, that unless some focus, deadlines and discipline are applied, the journey from ideas to a completed album can literally take years.

Tony Dupe's experience of working with other artists to create recordings has been dependent on the artist's preferred method of working.

"It depends on how much is live, and how much is created and goes down in that way, and how much is made by me, which probably takes a little bit longer than the live thing," Tony says. Working consistently full-time, Tony estimates an album could take around one month to complete.

NOT QUITE A MIRACLE

IN MAY 2007, FOUNDING ANIMAL COLLECTIVE MEMBER PANDA BEAR RELEASED *PERSON PITCH*, HIS THIRD SOLO ALBUM, IGNITING A RARE LEVEL OF BOTH LISTENER PASSION AND CRITICAL PRAISE. MAGAZINES WERE FILLED WITH WONDER AND THE BLOGOSPHERE LIT UP LIKE AN OVERSIZED CHRISTMAS TREE. PEOPLE ADORE THIS RECORD.

Those familiar with the work of Animal Collective – especially those who have witnessed their astonishingly loose, instinctual live performances – will not be entirely surprised by the spirit that moves through *Person Pitch*, swooping and bending, shifting tempos and displacing harmonies with a flicker. Panda Bear, known more prosaically as Noah Lennox, incorporates a medley of influences from Basic Channel to Black Dice (both name-checked in the album's liner notes) without ever sounding contrived. The arrangements are complex but not formidable, built upon semi-porous vocal layers, and samples that echo and melt as if they had been sucked out from damp tunnels. At work is a tension between the oceanic and the airbourne, the half-submerged and the sun-kissed. It's best expressed on the glorious 'Take Pills', which begins with several obtuse, competing rhythms and a lysergic, reverb-drenched vocal melody. So far, so freak-folk, but at precisely the halfway point the entire song comes bubbling up (quite literally, with a sample), shaking itself dry with a celebratory, looped chorus – *I don't want for us to take pills/take pills/take pills* – and a foot-tapping beat that any decent 60s pop group would have been proud to call its own.

Many of the songs from *Person Pitch* were initially released as a series of 12 inches, and for an album that was recorded over an extended period of time (in Lisbon, where Noah currently lives with his wife and young daughter) *Person Pitch* has an assurance that's almost eerie. As an artistic statement it's fully resolved, and yet as Noah explains below it's far from perfect, and all the better for it.

[Emmy Hennings gave us the perfect excuse to run this piece as a Q&A, something slightly different in approach for us. The interview was so conversational and in-depth we have decided to keep it this way - Eds]

Firstly, how have you felt about the reaction to the album so far? Everyone is just in love with it.

It's pretty mind blowing, I certainly wasn't expecting anything like it at all. That's not to say that I thought the album was shitty – I mean, I was happy with it, but I didn't think it was anything extra special. I'm really glad that people have liked it.

Does it make you a bit nervous that everyone has taken it to heart so quickly? Or is it just exciting?

It's more that I know that I'll probably get slapped pretty hard the next time around. You can't keep these things going for more than a brief period of time: looking back at history, that's the way these things work. So I'm bracing myself to get seriously slammed.

Do you feel like that's ever happened with Animal Collective, that you've been praised one record and then slammed the next?

Actually, I kind of feel like we've gotten some sort of special treatment. Well, we have and we haven't. On the critical side I feel like we've always been pretty well treated. It's always been a natural progression [for us] – upwards, if you like – but we also get so excited about changing around so much, doing something different every time, that I feel like with every album we lose a whole section of our fans because they're so pissed off that we're not doing the kind of things that they liked about us before. Which is okay.

Well, it's a way of side-stepping people's expectations. People can never second-guess what you're going to do if you keep doing something different.

Yeah, we keep people on their toes.

How does this apply to your solo albums? Do you view them quite separately or do you think there's something that ties them together?

Well, I think the approach I've taken for everything I've ever done is that I always like the music to be an accurate representation of who I am at that time: the kind of things I'm thinking about, the kind of things I care about. And that's never changed, really. Obviously with *Young Prayer* it was written after a significant death. I tried to be as positive as I could about the experience of making the album. Whereas with this one it was a mixture of making a conscious decision to try and do something that was way more casual - that didn't take itself quite so seriously, I guess – and also wanting to reflect what's happened to me in the past couple of years. I feel like I'm a much happier person, much more positive. And the environment I live in is a super, super sunny place, so I think that it would be impossible for that not to come out somehow.

Do you think that Lisbon was the place you were trying to evoke on the record, or was it some place different? Because there's the place where you record an album, which obviously has an impact on the sound, but then there's the place that you're trying to evoke.

I don't know that that's what I set out to do; I wasn't really trying to capture this place. But at the same time I was referencing experiences and thoughts that I've had while I've been here, so I was trying to represent this place in a roundabout way.

For me as a listener there might be a real space, but there's also a totally dream-like, fantastic space that the record has as well. And that comes through visually.

I feel like a lot of my favourite music is music that takes the edge off reality in some ways, and again that's not something that I consciously set out to do, but I feel like it's my sensibility with music and with sound, to try and make it feel like I'm dreaming or – it sounds cheesy – like some kind of alternate reality.

How did it feel to make? Was it an enjoyable, energetic process to make the record?

Yeah, totally. When I was done working with Animal Collective or touring with Animal Collective and I had free time, I'd work on it. I never really had any agenda or schedule with it: I was without deadlines. I didn't have to be doing it if I didn't want

to be, so I was only making music when I wanted to be making music.

And it took a couple of years to put together, is that right?

Yeah, I only did it a song at a time. One of the reasons is that I never really had a large chunk of time when I could be working on it, but also I figured that if I worked on it a song at a time, and put out one single at a time, then all the songs would be as strong as each other.

Was there a point when you were putting out the singles where you realised that it was going to be an album? Or was it always going to be an album from the start?

I kind of knew that it was going to be an album from the beginning. The first song, which was 'Search For Delicious', came out with a magazine, and I wasn't sure at the time that I was going to use that song, but everything after that I knew for sure. And that song became something where I was like: "I don't really have any other song that sounds quite like this one on the album, and I feel like it would be good to put on there as a departure from all the other stuff." After a while I felt like it fit with the rest of the songs.

"IT'S QUITE A BIT MORE STRIPPED DOWN THAN THE ALBUM SOUNDS: IT'S SIMILAR, BUT I FEEL LIKE IT'S A LITTLE MORE AGGRESSIVE AND A LITTLE MORE ESOTERIC. I FEEL LIKE THE ALBUM IS EASIER TO FOLLOW THAN A LOT OF THE SHOWS ARE, FOR BETTER OR WORSE."

Was it hard to sequence the album, once you had all these individual tracks, or did it feel like the whole thing worked together?

It was a little bit difficult. I feel like I stumbled upon the sequencing in a really lucky way, and for me it worked really well once I felt like I'd got it. I tried to be symmetrical about it, in terms of the lengths of the songs, and that's ultimately how I put it together. 'I'm Not' is at the centre of it, and then long songs like 'Good Girl/Carrots' and 'Bros'. Then medium-length songs, and you keep going out to tracks like 'Take Pills' and 'Search for Delicious', which are the shorter songs. I had it in my head visually like that. It's really technical and stupid, but it's true.

I hadn't thought about it that way, but that's so true. Each half is like a mirror image.

I don't know if you've got the artwork for the album, but that was the inspiration for the artwork, that we were trying to make it symmetrical like that.

The artwork is incredibly elaborate. And when I was reading some other interviews with you, you were talking about the fact that you don't necessarily listen to music all the time –

Yeah –

So I was wondering about other influences on the record, visual influences and things that are non-musical, which you were drawing on?

It's mostly – almost exclusively I think – my relationships with people and things around me that are the most influential, as far as making stuff goes. It's hard to point out specific examples, but I guess the point is that for me it's not really art-type stuff that has an impact. My family is definitely a major inspiration and an influence on me.

And this goes back to what you were talking about before, that you think of each record you make as a reflection of where you're at, at the time. Does that make it easier to go back to each record once a few years have passed, or do they start to feel distant?

I hardly ever listen to them after they're done. But I think that also has to do with the fact that you spend so much time writing the songs, practicing the songs, playing the songs live, recording the songs and then mixing the songs that by the end of the process you're sick of it. By living through the material so much you've actually distanced yourself from it. *Person Pitch* is kind of an exception to that, in that even though I spent a whole lot of time doing each song, I had space in between each of the single releases so that when I came back to listen to it again it still had some sort of fresh quality for me. I may find myself listening to this one more.

Have you played much of the album yet?

As I was going along [recording], I'd play

a show every once in a while, and play all the songs that I was writing. Just recently I've been putting in the effort to do what I guess are "official" *Person Pitch* shows. I've taken a lot of the songs plus a couple of newer things and jumbled it up. Songs like 'Take Pills' and 'Bros', I've split them up and arranged them differently, to try and keep it new. It's kind of hard.

And how are you doing that live, are you using sampling?

Yeah, I have two samplers and a microphone. It's quite a bit more stripped down than the album sounds: it's similar, but I feel like it's a little more aggressive and a little more esoteric. I feel like the album is easier to follow than a lot of the shows are, for better or worse.

Are people dancing at the live shows?

There were a couple of people who were dancing the other night. I don't really lift up my eyes too much when I'm playing, and if I do I don't really notice what's going on.

I ask because it's such a danceable record in so many ways -

Oh, thanks.

It is, and every time I listen to it, especially with a song like 'Carrots', I have a vision of it being blasted through an enormous sound system.

That was totally my dream for it when it was released, that it would be played in a club or something.

Did you find with any of the 12 inches you put out that they were getting any club play?

I don't know, I kind of I doubt it. I guess somewhere in the world it's being played on a club system, and hopefully people are dancing [*laughs*], not just leaving.

Well it's certainly a context that I've been imagining it in. And a few people have talked about it in terms of dance music, for instance the Basic Channel connection?

With something like Basic Channel I definitely want to move around to that kind of stuff, but it's not easily danceable in any way. There's such a dream-like sweetness to it, I definitely want to move but I don't want to get too hectic about it, do you know what I mean? There's something private about that music, when you're dancing to it, it's a private, personal experience. Maybe that's just me.

I think that's true, and that's maybe because a lot of it is so sparse? Whereas with Person Pitch *it feels so – and maybe you see this another way – there are so many parts to it, and with your vocals being multi-tracked it sounds crowded, and it makes me think that everyone should be up and dancing, like it was a tribal thing? Whereas with Basic Channel, it's much more stripped back.*

I see what you mean. Thinking about it now there's some kind of raucousness [to the album], very subdued but still raucous. I'm thinking about the latter part of 'Take Pills' where the parts are bouncing off each other and it sounds like a crowd.

I wanted to ask about the list of influences, like Basic Channel, that appear on the inside of the album cover. It's always really exciting to hear something that you like and then to start tracing back the influences on it, so I wanted to ask whether that had ever happened to you, whether you've ever heard something that you really liked and then started to trace where it's come from?

Yeah, for sure. Two things spring to mind immediately. One is The Orb. I think I can safely say that they were the first electronic music that I ever heard. I was about 17 and I moved into this kid's room, and he had left a whole bunch of music behind, and it just blew my mind. I sort of had a vague sense

of what techno was and what house music sounded like, but it was from there that I went backwards into the world of electronic music. And something like Daft Punk worked in the same way, where I really liked the sound of it. I think there's a song of theirs with a voice booming out "Carl Craig", a list of all these names, things like Underworld.

And where did you end up, when you started tracing back from The Orb to early house music?

It happened over a couple of years and it was really awesome for me because I was living in New York and I was hearing all the original tracks, all the original Chicago house, in clubs, and it really hit home for me. Because that was the experience it was supposed to be, in that environment. I feel like you're supposed to experience that music with lots of other people and you're really supposed to feel it in your body. There was a period of five or six years where I was learning about that.

I was interested to read that you found a lot of the samples for the album on iTunes and stuff like that, just grabbing bits from different places. Was it fun or was it frustrating to trawl through a source as big as the Internet, trying to find the sounds that you wanted?

I think that I didn't really know what I wanted: it was more that I took what I got and then tried to make something that I liked out of it. Otherwise I would have been totally disappointed, it would have been a wild goose chase trying to get what was in my head. Whereas the other way around, no matter what I was doing I always found something.

In pre-internet days were you a crate-digger, searching through old records?

I really wasn't at all. As soon as I got the sampler that was my instinct – I guess because I don't play many records – to go to the Internet for what I was after. About halfway through the process of making *Person Pitch* I got really psyched about the album being this Internet age thing, and that's what initially influenced my decision to release it only on CD. It's only because I got a massive amount of emails that I decided to do the vinyl, and also because I got excited about the artwork being big. But it's supposed to be experienced on CD.

And why is that?

Well, all the samples were made on a digital sampler, a really shitty piece of equipment. It was recorded on to a computer, it was multi-tracked on a computer, there was absolutely no analogue part of the process. And particularly because it leaked on the Internet and I felt like a lot of people were experiencing it on that level, rather than getting pissed off about it I decided to embrace it. I wish that there had been a way to let people steal the artwork, too. I really wish that I could distribute music for free on a website, but that there was a place where you could print off the artwork for yourself if you actually wanted it.

That's conceivable. I was wondering if that would be the next logical step for you, to ditch the object altogether, to ditch the CD and just go for a download?

I think I might try it. In some ways I feel like that's where everybody is headed. For people these days, the younger generations, a CD copy or a physical copy doesn't mean anything. All their music is in their iPods. For people who are our age or people who are older than us who are super-keen on vinyl, that [other format] is what you're used to. That's what music is to you and you take it for granted, you know what I mean? I feel like you have to respect the way someone experiences music. That's why I'd like to make it so that if you wanted your own physical copy of the album, then you could have it.

As we're talking about the different ways of listening to the album the thought occurs to me that there's a contrast. Your experience of Person Pitch *might be to download it and to listen to it on your computer or on your iPod, which is quite an individual way of listening to music, and then there's what we were talking about before, which is people listening to it en masse, in a club.*

[*Enthusiastically, as if the thought has just occurred to him*] I like to think that you could listen to a release of a new album somewhere like a movie theatre, so you get that crowd atmosphere, and a visual element to it. I probably won't be doing that, but it seems like a really nice idea right now.

Even though the album was recorded entirely digitally, a lot of people have comparing it to things which are completely analogue. Does it surprise you at all that people have been talking about it that way? [Right at this point in the interview my phone disconnects itself and I endure a mild panic attack whilst trying to redial a 25 digit international number. Noah picks up again.]

Hello. What happened there? I still remember the question. Are you ready?

Sure, go ahead. You've had a few moments to think about it now.

Well, I was going to bring up the Beach Boys/Brian Wilson thing. I don't know if I was naïve or stupid, but I wasn't expecting that at all. I mean, Animal Collective has gotten it a little bit, especially with *Sung Tongs*, because of the multi-tracked vocals and the multi-part harmonies and that kind of stuff. I assumed that I'd get a lot of dub references [from critics] and maybe a little bit of Buddy Holly and that '50s, early '60s pop-rock, but definitely not the Beach Boys, specifically. It makes me feel a little bit disappointed in myself, more than anything, either that I didn't notice that and nip it in the bud, or that I didn't do something that was totally mine.

You say that you're disappointed in yourself for not picking up on it earlier, but it would be impossible to approach making a record in a way where, all the time, you were trying to second-guess what other people might think of it.

It's also interesting that if it comes off that way – like the Beach Boys – to people listening, when the basis of all the songs is a really repetitive two seconds of sound, then that's totally the opposite to how people back then were making music. It's kind of crazy to me that people can have the same feelings about two very different kinds of music.

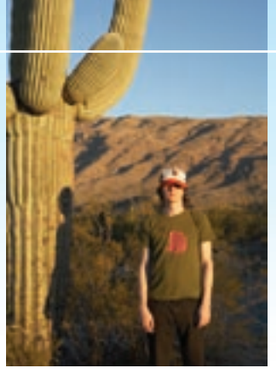
I think that for me, there's a tension between the fact that it's a sample-based record and quite methodically constructed in that way, very repetitious, yet at the same time there's all these free-wheeling harmonies.

I think that I was scared of feeling too robotic about the methods that I using. The way that it was mixed was all about using the mouse, volume lines and stuff like that. I started rebelling against that. With all the songs I wanted to make sure that I could play them live before I recorded them, and if I couldn't play it live then I wasn't going to try and record it. I wanted all the songs to be based a performance vibe, and I think that helped the album to feel natural, on some level, despite it being methodical. There are a lot of little imperfections in terms of how I played it.

In terms of the multi-tracked vocals, I was intrigued to read you talking elsewhere about the fact that you used to sing in classical choirs as a kid. More than the Brian Wilson/Beach Boys thing that's what the vocals have evoked for me: that polyphonic texture, quite a liturgical, church-based sound.

There are a lot of interesting things about that. One is that a lot of people get bummed out that they can't understand the words to *Person Pitch*, and how that takes away from the emotional strength of the record for them. But when I listen to a lot of choral music I can't understand what they're saying: the nature of how it sounds in a church is that when you have forty people singing the pronunciation doesn't really come across, but there's an atmosphere. So it's not a problem for me that people can't understand the words. But at the same time it made me think about the fact that some people were saying: "I don't like this album because I don't understand what he's talking about", and I thought: "Why don't I want people to know what I'm talking about, am I afraid of that?" So eventually I put the words up on the Myspace page.

But in terms singing during school in choirs and stuff, I feel like I developed the way I sing because of that, because you don't want a voice that sticks out too much, you want to really blend in with everybody's



"I WANTED ALL THE SONGS TO BE BASED A PERFORMANCE VIBE, AND I THINK THAT HELPED THE ALBUM TO FEEL NATURAL, ON SOME LEVEL, DESPITE IT BEING METHODICAL. THERE ARE A LOT OF LITTLE IMPERFECTIONS IN TERMS OF HOW I PLAYED IT."

voices. So I've hardwired this way of singing into my brain where I try not to put too much character into my voice, I try to keep it like another instrument.

To go back to that idea of listening to choral music, you do attribute meaning to the vocals, but it's coming out of things like the texture of the voice and the sound of different syllables.

It's like you feel it more than you understand it, or more than you think about it.

Yes, and you start to create your own narrative or meaning to go with it. You mentioned the fact that you let imperfections into the recording, and I've been thinking about the fact that the title, Person Pitch, *suggests imperfection. I was thinking about the title with regards to polyphony, and the fact that in the really early days of church music there was no such thing as a written system of pitch or intonation. The album is imperfect, it slides here and there, so even though it's built from various pieces of new technology it doesn't sound codified, if you know what I mean?*

It's like imperfection is the natural state of things. That's really interesting. There's a Zen aesthetic called wabi-sabi which I think is exactly that, and it's something I really believe in though I can't often articulate it. It's like these old potters who'll be making a pot for years at a time and make it totally perfect, but as it's drying they'll take the top off it so it's got this imperfection to it, because that's actually more perfect than perfection. And it's also interesting in that the title of the album was originally going to be Perfect Pitch.

Oh, really?!

I was totally fascinated by people who have perfect pitch. I don't think that I have it. I can tune a piano pretty good, but if you ask me to sing a C flat, I can't do it. Some people have that natural ability, they know where the note is [in isolation], and that's so awesome to me, I wish that I had that ability. I was thinking about using the word 'perfect' for a title but then I thought: "No, no. That sounds really arrogant." I don't want people to think I have that attitude to music. And then I came out with *Person Pitch* as I was writing the album and thinking about it, and that rang true for me a lot more than Perfect Pitch did.

That is interesting, because in a way perfect pitch is what you get when you can start tying sounds into a system of notes, but person pitch is what you get when you don't have that.

I feel like I'm really good at knowing whether something is in tune or not, I can listen to the harmonics and the vibrations, but this instinctual knowledge of knowing where a single pitch is in the scale, I have no idea. I don't understand how it's possible. It seems like a miracle.

Person Pitch is available on Mistletone/Fuse.

FIDDLING ABOUT

AMATEUR FILM MAKER, ACTOR, CARTOONIST, FORMER CHILD PRODIGY AND TALENTED MULTI INSTRUMENTALIST SAM AMIDON MAY BE A NEW NAME TO MANY EARS, BUT IN THE SECOND SMALLEST US STATE OF VERMONT AND BEYOND, HE'S BEEN MAKING WAVES AS A MUSICAL FORCE FOR OVER HALF OF HIS LIFETIME.

He's also starred in and scored a major motion picture, *American Wake*, and has a creative CV that makes most people tired just reading it. Learning fiddle at the age of three, and recording/performing since the age of seven, Sam has been involved musically with The Amidon Family, Popcorn Behavior/Assembly, Doveman, Stars Like Fleas, Nico Muhly, Childsplay, Wild Asparagus, Siucra, Markus James, Seamus Egan, Billy Budd, Tall Firs, Elysian Fields and Eye Contact, to name quite a few. His newest release for the much lauded and respected Plug Research label is the honest and homespun album *But This Chicken Proved Falsehearted*.

Taking a dip into a rich heritage of American folk music and following trailblazing musical archaeologists Alan Lomax and Harry Smith, Sam Amidon and childhood friend Thomas Bartlett uncovered 12 Appalachian folk gems as well as a wonderful treatment of an '80s pop classic on a record that is both warm and rewarding on many levels.

Folk music runs freely throughout the New England heartland of Vermont, and the Amidon family are a strong lifeline in that movement's heritage. Both Sam's parents, Peter and Mary Alice Amidon are performers and teachers of music. Growing up in this solid environment with strong family ties most certainly set the scene for Sam's musical trajectory.

"I grew up in a small town called Brattleborugh, I lived there along with my friend Thomas who produced the Chicken record and who I play along with in a bunch of musical contexts, and although it's a pretty rural place, I didn't grow up in the woods or anything but he was further up in the hills," Sam explains. "There's a lot of folk music being played in that area, predominantly by a bunch of ageing hippies who settled there some time ago and as part of their 'back to the land' thing they got into folk music. My parents were part of that movement and went on to become musicians and teachers."

"Growing up, I mostly played the fiddle and sang with my parent's group, performing concerts here and there as well as singing in choirs. It wasn't until my voice broke that I was able to sing along properly, so I concentrated on playing fiddle and it was mainly Irish and New England folk music. Then in high school, Thomas and I had a band that performed all over the place, again playing folk music."\The band Sam refers to is Popcorn Behaviour, later to be renamed Assembly. Originally formed when Sam and Thomas were entering their teens, and accompanied by Sam's 10 year old brother Stephan on drums, Popcorn Behaviour released their self titled debut in 1993. Following recordings included critically acclaimed albums *Journeywork* and *Strangest Dream*. They changed their name to Assembly in 2002.

"I BEGAN TRYING DIFFERENT HARMONIC IDEAS BY MESSING AROUND WITH AND SOMETIMES CHANGING THE CHORDS AND ARRANGEMENTS, AND THE ALBUM UNCONSCIOUSLY GREW OUT OF THAT WITH NO REAL INTENTION TO RECORD…"

The Assembly sound fell into the realms of 'avant-folk.' Influenced by Tom Waits, Astor Piazzola and many traditional sounds, they quickly became one of the hottest contradance acts in the region - contradance being a derivative of 17th Century English country dances involving many styles of movement to reels and jigs, later renamed and appropriated by the French, then adopted by the New England region of the USA.

Although steeped in tradition and historical sounds, Sam soon became enamoured with newer musical facets.

"Around this time I started buying random shit from the CD store in Brattleborough and discovered free-jazz, some indie rock stuff and experimental music of various kinds. I never really played this music myself, I was just curious about it. It wasn't until I came to New York City a few years ago that I started playing different kinds of things."

Not only was Sam blessed by having talented musicians as parents, he also received tutelage and mentorship along the way from some very well respected artists, including fiddlers Mary Lea and Sue Sternberg, free-jazz legend Leroy Jenkins, and downtown/jazz violinist Mark Feldman. I was most curious about his time spent studying under former Anthony Braxton sideman and musical theatre director, Leroy Jenkins.

"I went to a school north of the city called Sarah Lawrence, and although it had a pretty small music department, they had a program whereby you could choose a musician in the city to study with. I had been listening to a lot of free-jazz, but I didn't just leap in and start playing it," Sam explains. "I needed somewhere to jumpstart that, and I didn't really know Leroy's music that well apart from a couple of early Anthony Braxton records that he plays on which I loved, but I knew that he was a violin player who had been part of the free-jazz movement."

"I called him up and he was really sweet and an incredible person to learn from. On the first day I went to his house and met him, a 72-year-old man with way more energy than I had, and he told me 'OK, we're just gonna play now.' I was terrified, I was thinking, 'OK, play what?' So we just played together for half an hour on that first day's lesson and it was just crazy. He took me through all these different sound areas that sent me home that day with so much to think about. It was incredible."

"I worked with him for six months at his house, sometimes just listening to music such as his own records and he would talk about them, other times he gave me little exercises to work on. He had a simple, structural way of approaching music, while his improvising was really amazing. He was a wonderful guy."

Primarily a fiddle player all his musical life, Sam decided explore new areas in singing and playing, inadvertently resulting in the much-praised album that originally prompted me to conduct this interview.

"The *Chicken* project came about when I started exploring songs I had heard my parents sing, or stuff from old field recordings as a way of learning the guitar and finding my singing voice. I began trying different harmonic ideas by messing around with and sometimes changing the chords and arrangements, and the album unconsciously grew out of that with no real intention to record, it was really just a way to learn music by getting back to some of those songs, many of which eventually turned up on the album."

By nature, the folk song itself is an oral tradition passed down through many a mouth and spanning generations. On his album, Sam doesn't attempt straight cover versions of these old tunes, nor does he reconstruct them entirely. Instead, he makes them his own by showing a love and respect

for an artform that is obviously a huge part of his life. I enquired as to the sense of responsibility in carrying on the lineage and the essence of the stories when presenting these songs to a new audience.

"I'm not sure about the notion of carrying it on. The thing that occurred to me about a lot of the traditional folk songs is the mysteriousness of a lot of those songs. In terms of how they travel, it's not just a linear thing of generation to generation. They get crossed, they get passed weirdly through a culture so a song that was an English or an Irish song came through the US, therefore the version I heard from my parents is much more of a Southern version. For example, the banjo is an African instrument that came over here and was really just a gourd, a fretless instrument, and like the music that was passed back and forth, it was a cultural exchange that you can hear in the music, but you'll never really know exactly how it happened."

"What I also find exciting about these songs is because they're patched together as people would learn them, then forget a verse and teach that new version or change a word by mistake, or on purpose. It's really quite strange, and it's often really amazing to me that what you might end up hearing and learning is this strange object that has a whole part of the plot missing or a whole new detail that was from some other strain of the song. The mystery and excitement comes from the people's sharing of the songs."

Being on Plug Research obviously exposes these past glories to a very different crowd. I pushed further the notion of providing these tunes with a new home, thereby transporting them once again, as is the folkloric tradition.

"I hope that people notice that I didn't write them and become curious and seek out some of the old originals. I was really happy for the album to come out on a label like Plug Research and have this folk music living in a context that is not a folk context, even though there's a lot of interest in the music within that scene right now. A lot of people I know in the more experimental or indie rock worlds are listening to things like the old field recordings, but maybe they aren't so aware that there are people still playing that music, so I was curious about presenting these songs from the perspective of somebody who grew up with a lot of them but also in this totally different context."

Let's not forget the other cog in the Sam Amidon wheel, Sam's childhood pal Thomas Bartlett. Bartlett has been a driving force in Sam's life and also a member of some of the many groups that Sam has played with over the years. I haven't heard much output from Sam's other projects, save the odd MP3 file hosted on various websites. He elaborated on his involvement with Thomas's group Doveman, as well as several others.

"Thomas Bartlett and I were housemates up in Harlem when I made the Chicken record and we had a very domestic way of making it which involved me recording the songs and then Thomas adding stuff to it. Doveman is his band. He has an extremely interesting voice and writes the songs. I don't sing within this group, just play banjo and guitar alongside an incredibly talented drummer named Dougie Bowne who's been around forever and played with the Lounge Lizards, Yoko Ono, Iggy Pop, Cibo Matto, people like that. Also we have Peter Ecklund, who's an old swing trumpet player and guitarist Shahzad Ismaily. The sound is kinda slow and very textural, based around Thomas's songs and singing."

Another outfit Sam is a regular with is Stars Like Fleas, who, by their own admission, juggle the disturbing, confrontational, direct, sincere, romantic, and the blatantly contrived, in quasi-improvised song cycles. They've played along side acts such as Deerhoof, Gang Gang Dance, Man Man, Blevin Blectum, Hrvatski and Comets On Fire.

"Stars Like Fleas is a messy experimental freak folk collective consisting of eight to 10 people, depending on who's around for each gig. The singer Montgomery Knott and another dude named Shannon Fields are the masterminds of the group, but it's really a bunch of people from totally disparate musical things playing drums, harp, myself on violin and banjo, a singer, two guitars, peddle steel, piano, electronics, cello, a clarinet player who's studying with Ornette Coleman right now. It's definitely a 'let's see what happens' approach and it's a lot of fun. I also have other projects of my own that are not so folk based, as well as making videos and creating comics."

"WE'RE GOING TO THROW IT ALL INTO THE MACHINE AND SEE WHAT COMES OUT. MY ROLE AND THE SOURCE MATERIAL IS PRETTY SIMILAR – IT'S ALL FOLK SONGS."

SELECTED COMICS
BY SAM AMIDON

A recent concert Sam performed at took place at the hallowed Carnegie Hall conducted by rising classical composer Nico Muhly. Sam's involvement was based primarily around the performance of the folk song 'Two Sisters', a murder ballad that recounts the tale of a girl drowned by her sister, entwined with themes of sexual jealousy and betrayal. Sam told me of his history with Nico and the event that took place in March of this year.

"Nico Muhly and I went to Iceland last October where Nico had just finished an album called *Speak Volumes* on the Bedroom Community label run by Valgeir Sigurðsson in Reykjavík. Valgeir also produced the last three Bjork records, Bonnie Prince Billy's *The Letting Go* and the new Coco Rosie release. Valgier has another small label for his own stuff and a release by Australian artist Ben Frost."

"Nico lives in new York and I've known him for a few years. He and Thomas went to college together. He actually spent some time growing up in Vermont, but I didn't know him there. So the latest album Nico put out is chamber music, but produced by Valgier, it's a very different sound than any classical record. For example, the violin is really close-miked so you can hear the scratchiness that would be smoothed out on any other recording, and there are subtle electronics giving another element of colour throughout. We went over for the Airwaves Festival and I did a Samamidon set there and Nico did his set."

"Nico grew up with parents who listened to a lot of English folk and he was totally haunted and mesmerised by the song 'Two Sisters' as a kid, then subsequently curious about it later on. He then hatched this whole scheme of having me perform it in different contexts starting with pre-recorded parts done in Valgier's Iceland studios where I put down some banjo and some singing. Amazingly, there was never a score until after the piece was done, it was all in Nico's head. Over the next couple of months he added some midi stuff and some electronics, cello, viola and so on."

"The concert itself was an evening of Nico's music, which he alternated with some early choral music with a choir – it was a blast. It was terrible weather that night, a real blizzard swept the city, but the show was sold out, at full capacity and was a really wonderful evening. I was terrified! The piece will be on the next record for Bedroom Community. The version is fragmented between traditional and experimental elements, going through permutations along the way."

"I'm actually leaving for Iceland today to complete another record similar to the *Chicken* project, but with those guys in their studio which I'm very excited about. I have no idea how it will end up sounding, as we each add stuff to it without hearing what the other person is doing. Tomorrow morning, we're going to throw it all into the machine and see what comes out. My role and the source material is pretty similar – it's all folk songs."

"I CERTAINLY DIDN'T SET OUT TO BECOME A SOLO SINGER-SONGWRITER. IT GREW OUT OF TRYING TO LEARN THE SONGS AND THEN MESSING AROUND WITH THEM. SO I HAVE NO IDEA WHAT'S TO COME."

I had noticed with pleasure, in a recent magazine top 10 list that Sam had compiled the self titled quiet storm and lost classic made by former Talk Talk singer Mark Hollis. On this album, Hollis uses quiet spaces as a major strength and it's almost definitely an album that needs to be heard on headphones, a quality I felt was shared by the Samamidon release. I asked Sam about the disciplines needed in constraint and judgement when making an album, in other words, resisting the act of throwing too much into the mix and overloading the end result.

"In regards to my album, it was very much a response to the solitude of being tied up in recording at home. Obviously you can get the same sound in a studio, but you're pressured for time restrictions, etc. For that album, I was alone a lot. Thomas had gone away for the fall and the album was allowed to grow out of that solitary situation which in turn, gave the album a certain quality. However, working on your own in your house can go totally the opposite way because there's no time constraints and really, you can just keep on adding stuff to the tracks every day, and then you have a huge mess. This can sometimes work as well – just take a listen to the Stars Like Fleas albums!"

"For *Chicken*, being alone and approaching it in that way worked for me. I loved being able to record at any time, like maybe I would wake up and have a cold or a hangover and like how my voice sounded. The solitary aspect was great."

One track from the album that seems to have gathered attention is the cover version of 'Head Over Heels' by '80s pop duo Tears For Fears. A seemingly odd choice at first glance, especially when nestling amongst songs by Mississippi John Hurt and his kin. However, Samamidon treat the song their own way and turn it into a fragile plea that befits the rest of the album.

No mean feat, considering that Sam heard the song for the very first time the night before he recorded it, while watching VH1 on the box. Mesmerised by the clip, Sam ran from the room shouting "tears for fears, head over heels" repeatedly so he'd remember the title. The recording was conducted in his room whilst reading the lyrics from his computer monitor.

"People either love or they hate it. I've no real plans for another such cover on the next album, it'll be more straight up folk songs, but with a skewed arrangement on certain pieces. I don't want to repeat myself."

For one so young, and seemingly tireless, I suggested to Sam that this project seems far from being the pinnacle of his career.

"You never know how things are going to go. The first album kinda came about by accident, initially at least. I certainly didn't set out to become a solo singer-songwriter. It grew out of trying to learn the songs and then messing around with them. So I have no idea what's to come. I've totally left the violin behind in a lot of ways in the last few years and that's all I played. I took up the banjo in high school but it was just something I did when I was bored, sitting on the couch. I didn't perform on the banjo at all until Doveman and then Samamidon. I was totally a fiddle player and I do still play the fiddle around New York, just as a gig playing straight ahead folk music."

"In this other world of the creative music scene, or experimental music I have not been playing violin, but there's more that I'd like to do on the violin, but I don't quite know what that is yet. I just like to keep busy and to be able to pay the rent making good music here and there. I was glad to get the album out, as we recorded it over two years ago. It often takes a long time to find a home for these things, but I'm totally happy with the reaction it's been getting."

But This Chicken Proved Falsehearted is out now on Plug Research. Sam's next album is due in September 2007.

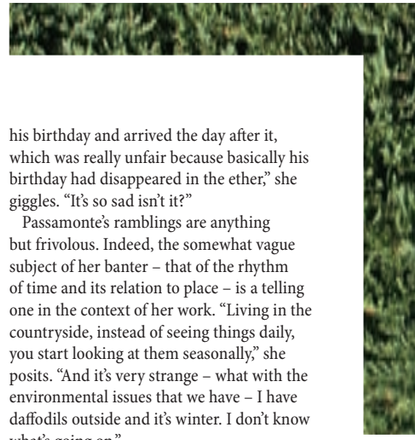
FIELD DIARY

DRAWN FROM AN EXPANSIVE AESTHETIC PALETTE OF ORGANIC AND ELECTRONIC TEXTURES, MELODICS AND RHYTHMIC PHRASES, CHANTAL PASSAMONTE CREATES A BRAND OF AWKWARDLY PRETTY AND DENSELY CHALLENGING LAPTRONICA, STREWN WITH ABSTRACTED FIELD RECORDINGS AND FRACTURED BEATS. BUT WHILST SEEMINGLY COMPLEX AND SYNTHESISED, THE SUFFOLK-RESIDING, SOUTH AFRICAN EXPATRIATE'S UNDERSTANDING OF MUSIC IS A GREAT DEAL SIMPLER. IT RESTS IN CAPTURING AND EVOKING SNIPPETS OF TIME, ARTEFACT AND LANDSCAPE; IT RESTS IN 'HAVING A GO'.

A central figure of the international sound art clique over the last decade, working under her Mira Calix nom-de-plume, Passamonte has built an inimitable catalogue of commissioned installation work and recorded material, issuing three official long-players for Warp Records – 2000's *OneOnOne*, 2003's *Skimskitta* and this year's stunning *Eyes Set Against the Sun* – and exhibiting in international art spaces as divergent as London's Barbican and Geneva's Natural History Museum.

Chantal Passamonte is in something of a spritely frame of mind today. Chatting over the phone from her countryside home in Suffolk, England, the woman better known as Mira Calix is in the mood for a laugh. She giggles; she goads; she poses pleasantly inane questions about international datelines.

"Wow, so you're almost a whole day ahead there?" she whispers, seemingly bewildered. "Isn't it weird that we can be talking to each other on completely different days. My friend once left for Australia the night before his birthday and arrived the day after it, which was really unfair because basically his birthday had disappeared in the ether," she giggles. "It's so sad isn't it?"

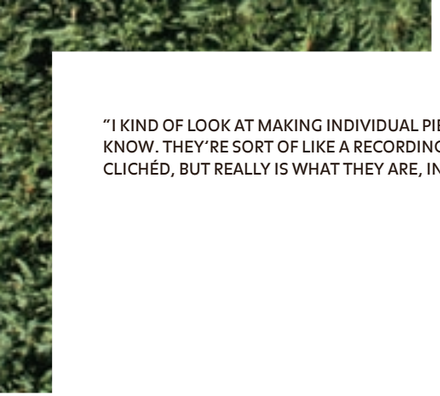


Passamonte's ramblings are anything but frivolous. Indeed, the somewhat vague subject of her banter – that of the rhythm of time and its relation to place – is a telling one in the context of her work. "Living in the countryside, instead of seeing things daily, you start looking at them seasonally," she posits. "And it's very strange – what with the environmental issues that we have – I have daffodils outside and it's winter. I don't know what's going on."

"But you know," she continues, correcting her course. "I went outside today and the first thing I thought was, 'Oh my god, they're up! The daffodils!' So you really notice these things in a different sort of system than you would in a town or in a city."

"I kind of look at making individual pieces of music as very much like a diary, you know. They're sort of like a recording of a moment in time, which kind of sounds clichéd, but really is what they are, intentionally or unintentionally. So if I'm working on something and I go outside and record, it really is that seasonal thing; it starts floating around and becomes part of that track."

It's certainly a dynamic prevalent in Passamonte's fractured, beauteously amorphous output as Mira Calix. Since signing a contract with Warp and releasing her debut single *Llanga* in 1996, she has balanced often austere and highly abstracted electronic, melodic and percussive fields



"I KIND OF LOOK AT MAKING INDIVIDUAL PIECES OF MUSIC AS VERY MUCH LIKE A DIARY, YOU KNOW. THEY'RE SORT OF LIKE A RECORDING OF A MOMENT IN TIME, WHICH KIND OF SOUNDS CLICHÉD, BUT REALLY IS WHAT THEY ARE, INTENTIONALLY OR UNINTENTIONALLY."

with faintly warped and twisted recordings from the field.

Having made a living as a DJ and promoter in London – then later as a publicist for Warp Records – she released her distortedly ambient debut EP *Pin Skeeling* in 1998, before dropping her maiden full-length *OneOnOne* and recording a Peel Session in 2000. The same year, she decided to up stumps in London and move to the pastoral east English county of Suffolk. Embracing her surroundings, Passamonte began to further exploit the use of field recordings as a sound source, and by the time she released her second long-player *Skimskitta* in 2003, recordings of the Suffolk woods and countryside – however manipulated and abstracted – were taking an expanding place in her compositions.

As she explains, her Suffolk surrounds have proven an essential creative trigger. "I grew up in South Africa, and so I'm going to make a tenuous link that maybe it's a bit like being in Australia, in the sense that where I live now is kind of how you imagine English countryside to be," she says. "If you live in an ex-colony you'll probably be familiar with this idealised version of what English countryside is, and that's pretty much where I live," she giggles. "It's really lovely, kind of like an Enid Blyton book or something. I don't mean that the people are like that, but the actual landscape is just very green and lovely."

"Obviously I grew up with a lot of space, which you kind of do, again, in our kind of countries. Everything's kind of very spread out and you can really see the sky, and living in London – I really like London – but you don't really see the sky much, which kind of sounds like an inane thing to say. But I think when you've had something like that, you really notice when you don't. You know, and London is a very green city – there are a lot of parks and a lot of trees and it's not sort of a concrete jungle – but you just don't have that view or that horizon. I think I've kind of realised that I actually really like that."

"There's something in me that must sort of need that slight view of the savannah, you know," she laughs. "And it's a different kind of thing, English savannah, but it's still the savannah, and it makes me feel quite comfortable, personally and creatively."

The international contemporary art community's obsession with urban spaces – and the oft-inferred notion of nature as art's antithesis – couldn't be further from Mira Calix's affected, yet increasingly organic sound worlds. Indeed, Passamonte invites comparisons to visual and sculptural 'field artists' such as Richard Long and Chris Drury, who compose challenging conceptual works out of found materials in natural surroundings. "Oh yes, I love that kind of work," she exclaims. "And Andy Goldsworthy, he sort of makes art in a field. He does things that are very localised, like moving stones from one part of a field to another, but then changes the aesthetics of it."

"I use a lot of things that people probably think of as totally inorganic," she continues. "I mean, people think that technology isn't organic at all, but I disagree. But obviously, you know, it's a philosophical/technical argument, I guess, that I don't want to get into… But it's funny, because with computers you are actually dealing with zeros and ones – and you have amazing pieces of software that create a perfect ring reverb or a perfect plucked string, which actually I find incredibly exciting on one level – but then, I think you can really hear and you really know when something is real."

"You know, stepping on a twig – I mean, I screw around with things so they don't sound like they would have originally, and even by the fact that you record it means that it doesn't sound the same – but that's okay. The source is real and organic and it generated that particular sound, which is why I don't do everything on the computer; computers can't generate a feeling like that."

Indeed, Passamonte's work even incorporates what most would consider as silence.

"I like to do this thing where I keep the microphone running, so you sort of have this presence of the room or the space where you can sort of hear the air. It might make people laugh – it's one of those sort of idiosyncrasies of mine – but to me it makes some kind of difference, so I'm really into that."

A prominent strand of her creative vision can be traced back to her background in non-musical art. Growing up in Durban, South Africa, Passamonte's early creative interests revolved around visual art and photography, which she went on to study at art school. Tellingly, she became obsessed by the technical elements of photography as much as its conceptual and artistic facets. "I loved reading all the manuals," she says with a laugh. "Really getting to know the camera."

"IT'S MY BEYONCE OR DESTINY'S CHILD RECORD; THERE'S LIKE EIGHT BALLADS AT THE END AND YOU'RE THINKING, 'I CAN'T TAKE MUCH MORE OF THIS!'" SHE LAUGHS AGAIN. "YOU CAN BE THE FIRST PERSON TO EVER WRITE THAT IN AN ARTICLE: 'MIRA CALIX, GREATLY INFLUENCED BY R'N'B'."

Passamonte draws a strong lineage between the sensibilities she developed during these years and her music-making today. "I honestly think of my songs more as photographs," she says matter-of-factly. "Obviously, it's using a different sense – photography is working on visual observation, and music is of the auditory – but to me there were so many parallels."

"Photography is really a case of learning to use your tool and understanding your tool, and understanding that – depending on your knowledge of that tool – the picture you take can vary so much. All that kind of stuff really helped me learn to deal with computer interfaces for music; realising that you don't have to fight against it, that you can enjoy what technology can do for you. It can be an extension of you, like a brush for a painter or something."

This synthesis between artist and apparatus rings truer than ever on new album *Eyes Set Against the Sun*. Where her previous records echoed with ornate yet emotionally detached electronic textures and shattered beats, her latest effort sees her go bush. Resonating through her uncomfortable, computer-enabled visions is a flood of forest sounds, found sounds and organic flotsam and jetsam, not to mention the Woodbridge School Junior Choir and Britten-Pears Orchestra.

The record's centrepiece 'Protean' casts a series of layered melodic phrasings and obscured orchestrations against a gently bristling undertone of singing birds, wafting breeze the crackling of feet on a forest floor. Austere opener 'Because to Why,' on the other hand, merges a spectral string arrangement, with running water and the spooky, dreamlike vocals of the children's choir.

It's a gorgeous, eerily awkward vision, and one that Passamonte considers her strongest and most personal to date.

"Yeah, I think it's definitely the purest expression so far," she says. "I think that hopefully you should feel like that whenever you finish a record. It's weird, I finished this record what must be seven months ago, so there's quite a bit of time between finishing it and then it coming out, so then you start to work on other things, and this becomes something of the past. Like, I haven't listened to it since I've finished it. I might have done it once to check the test pressing or something. But at the time, when it was completed, it sort of has to feel like that, for yourself as an artist – it doesn't matter what anyone else says – otherwise you feel like you've failed."

One of the most interesting aspects of *Eyes Set Against the Sun* is its sequence as a work. Although it begins in a relatively structured and conventionally song-like manner, the further the record plays, the more the tracks fall to pieces, "unravelling" – as Passamonte puts it – from wholes to halves to barely congruous fragments. "There is something in that, of just sort of letting something unfold," she offers. "I mean, I really like that idea of it just sort of starting very clearly and sort of altering along the way."

"I think, for me, particularly the second track is definitely one of the most straight-up things I've ever done, and it almost follows the verse-chorus-verse thing, you know. It's really conventional. But I learnt this great trick," she giggles. "With R'n'B records, they put all the pop hits at the front, then right at the end they put all the ballads. It's a really strange thing, but they all do it. And I guess that's what I did, which really makes it quite different. Music that's more indie or academic usually goes the other way around, you know, where it's like things are weird at the start and then it all comes together to create this sort of euphoric conclusion at the end. The single is at the end somewhere and you finish listening and you're satisfied. I kind of went in the opposite direction."

"So I don't know, maybe I've been listening to too much R'n'B," she says breaking into laughter. "It's my Beyonce or Destiny's Child record; there's like eight ballads at the end and you're thinking, 'I can't take much

more of this!'" she laughs again. "You can be the first person to ever write that in an article: 'Mira Calix, greatly influenced by R'n'B.'"

Outside of her recordings, Passamonte has also garnered a glowing reputation for her commissioned, and often collaborative, sound design and installation work. Since her early musical career she has exhibited and collaborated across the UK and Europe, including shows with the Geneva Natural History Museum, London's Barbican, Madrid's Compania National de Danza, the Generating Circus Company and London's National Theatre. She also toured her commissioned Nunu work live to Paris, Rome, Brugge and Tallinn.

According to Passamonte, working in the realm of commissioned art presents a whole set of new challenges. "It's really different, because I think that when it's on this record it's so personal – it's so sort of self-absorbed on so many levels – and you don't have to consider anything else but what you're feeling. I go into the studio, I feel something, I make a piece of music, you know. I think it's crap or I think it's good and then it goes on from that point."

"But then with commissioned work you're thinking, 'Oh, the room is like this and I need to think about how it's going to work in the space, and I need to think about how I'm supposed to make the audience feel', and they're not necessarily an audience in a conventional sense. Then I need to think of the story that the director is trying to convey, or the emotion of an actor or a dancer or whatever, and still take something from that and make it personal, because if I don't feel it, then I haven't got a hope in hell."

"Music should make you feel something, so I've got to make it really personal at the same time as considering all those other things. And I find that really exciting. It's such a weird way of working for someone like me, who's sort of basically never thought in that way before. There's a lot of problem solving and you kind of have to do all the problem solving and then disregard everything you've thought about, and just go into the studio and feel."

But whether in the recorded or the commissioned realm, Passamonte thrives on such challenges.

"I kind of hate it when people use the word 'challenging' in a negative way. Like, 'Oh, it's so challenging!'. Being challenged – by your circumstances, by environment, by yourself – it's kind of sometimes quite scary, and that's the brilliant thing about it. I think if I hadn't started DJing originally, I probably wouldn't have ended up making music," she pauses. "It taught me to have a go, sort of thing, which is the only thing that really separates you from creating something. That sort of 'I'll have a go at that' mentality."

Eyes Set Against the Sun is out through Warp/Inertia.

SEASIDE SOUNDS

CHRISTOPHER WILLITS HAS BEEN CRAFTING PROCESSED GUITAR WORKS SINCE THE LATE NINETIES, BUT WITH THE RELEASE OF *SURF BOUNDARIES*, HIS ART HAS REACHED A NEW AUDIENCE. ON THE PHONE FROM HIS HOME IN SAN FRANCISCO, CHRISTOPHER DISCUSSES HOW HIS UNIQUE APPROACH TO PERFORMANCE, INSTRUMENTATION, AND PRODUCTION LED THE *SAN FRANCISCO BAY GUARDIAN* TO CALL HIM, "THE CENTER CELL OF A RATHER COMPLEX INDIE-ROCK-AVANT-GARDE-ELECTRONIC-ART VENN DIAGRAM IN THE BAY AREA."

I first stumbled across Christopher's work with his release for the Irish label Fallt. *Pollen* first hits you with its aesthetic beauty (not an unusual thing for Fallt). Amber colouring and white boxes make up a beautiful exterior for the jewel case, implying a honeycomb formed from the pollen of Willits' guitar. Looking back now, that aesthetic is getting rarer with MP3 players everywhere. Press play on *Pollen* and the first stuttering note softly pierces the room. It builds and morphs, combining and growing, to envelope you in Willits' sound world.

Pollen was the starting point for Christopher Willits' technique of sampling and 'folding' his guitar parts. He improvises and plays whilst feeding his guitar send through custom sound patches that record the input then skip to different locations in the recordings. Willits expanded on his idea of 'folding' in an interview with Fallt a few years ago: "Folding… well it's about form generated from other form, a kind of morphogenetic process, emergence, and the interrelation of parts; parts folded into other parts, things being separate yet continuous. The fold is about lines, folded lines weaving together and forming other masses, but lines still; not atomised points. In terms of the music, the folds are creases in a rearranging plane of sound that is being spontaneously generated. The notion of a fold is a really accurate way to describe the way I'm thinking about this particular music and the actual synthesis technique that is being applied; that of indexing continuous flows of live guitar samples."

I quickly picked up *The Folding And The Tea*, released on Taylor Deupree's wonderful label 12k (Willits is a big fan of tea, apparently), after hearing *Pollen*. It was released before *Pollen*, but actually sits after it in recording chronology, and mines the same sound pallette. Prior to these releases there had been a few CD-Rs, but it was here that Willits' sound solidified and more releases started showing up. "In the *Folding* press release, I really wanted to make the idea of the fold clear, but it still managed to be misinterpreted in many reviews as just a fancy name for a 'glitch'. The folds are not glitches. On the surface it may sound like a glitch, but it is not generated by any type of malfunction, and it is not some comment on the being-ness of digital audio. I am really not interested in foregrounding the medium of digital audio in such ways. Video and film perhaps, but not so much with audio."

"So - to set the record straight - ontologically speaking, there are no glitches in this music. I don't find accentuating the malfunctions or failures in the medium to be incredibly interesting. It's important to distinguish between these things. The notion of 'glitch' has been abstracted and misused to the point of meaninglessness. I think it's important for us to find new ways to talk about what is happening in the music we make; the processes, the structure of it, and where it is located in a cultural sense. I'm much more in love with the geometry of music and how it emerges. I'm also interested in how all of this relates to other things in the world like biological forms and linguistics, and flowers, insects, eating organic food, and living sustainably."

Appearances followed on a few compilations, collaborations with artists including Taylor Deupree (most notably 2004's Mujo on the Japanese label plop), and about this time the Michigan-based label Ghostly International started to take notice. They featured his work on their SMM 12 inch series and have now followed that with his newest full-length, *Surf Boundaries*, taking Willits' sound to a new level. The imagery and aesthetic of the record is different (created by college friend Maiko Kuzinishi of Decoylab). There is a new label; everything cried out to me that this might be a different sound. And yet, amongst the addition of vocal harmonies and instrumental arrangements, Willits' trademark sound is there. And here's the other thing–the record is just as soothing as his past work. It's a slab of pop with a twist. The Beach Boys for the 21st Century perhaps?

Christopher elaborates, "It's kind of interesting looking at the progression of my last stuff. The SMM compilation, which was actually more like a LP, was most related

"EVERYTHING I WAS FEELING AND THINKING ABOUT AT THE TIME REALLY KIND OF SOAKED AND SEEPED INTO THESE SOUNDS. I DIDN'T INTENTIONALLY TRY AND MAKE SOME KIND OF EMOTIONAL RECORD."

to this work. That's when I first started playing with vocals on a couple of tracks which I hadn't done since I was in bands I'd played with years ago. It just felt natural.Then I started making this stuff, and honestly, when I work I don't ever decide what I'm going to be making before I make it. I just sort of improvise and follow my intuition and before I knew it I was making these sort of… more poppy songs! I've never been loyal to any specific genre or sound palate. The ability to extend my guitar sound in so many directions in the last five years or so has really added to my compositions."

Willits originally comes from Kansas City, from a fairly musical family. His grandmother was a band leader in the 1920s and his mother and father supported his creativity as a child. His father even bought him his first guitar at 13. "After that it was over!" Willits says, "I just knew I had to be making music. When I listened to Sonic Youth and Jimi Hendrix it really inspired me to push the instrument into different areas which started integrating into compositions and whatnot. So from that point on I knew that my path in life was to make music and to try to connect and inspire people."

"I went to art school after that actually, on a painting selection. I decided to bypass the whole music thing from talking to other people. They said it's going to be hard to keep making art in music school, but you could probably keep doing music if you are in art school. Before I knew it I was doing short films and making the music for them. Then I was making the sound design and kind of forgetting about the film side."

Willits soon tired of the slow video rendering in the mid nineties and concentrated on his music. "I was really introduced to digital editing through video, so I was always making music but I didn't start using computers until I started editing video. Then I started to see the creative potential of it all and the non-linear aim of it. I quickly got into Max/MSP software after that. I use it to make plug ins and make full on performance systems with that. Cutting up my guitar in different, non-linear ways that are not possible with a traditional linear chain of stomp boxes."

After graduating from art school, Willits moved to San Francisco to pursue his Master's Degree in Electronic Music at Mills College. He studied with Pauline Oliveros, Fred Frith and John Bischoff. Some esteemed teachers and support for a burgeoning creativity! However, Willits doesn't pin his evolution to a precise influence. "I can't draw a specific tether to that necessarily but I think it's just related to everything. Everything is affecting the decisions I'm making creatively. Like touring - the first couple of tours I did with Taylor in Japan really opened my eyes to the fact that I even had a fan base outside of America. That was really mind blowing to me and these people were coming out to shows and knew the material. Really inspiring you know? I can't even have a conversation with that person who's a fan of mine, but we're connected on another level at least in terms of the vibrations of the tunes, these sounds and stuff. And how that relates to my plane I'm not exactly sure, but it definitely related to my energy and my creative body of work."

Surf Boundaries has a sumptuous sound pallet. Willits layers his guitar with horns, bells, vocal harmonies and various other live instrumentation. It was an incredibly personal record to make, created during the rise and fall of an intense relationship.

"Everything I was feeling and thinking about at the time really kind of soaked and seeped into these sounds. I didn't intentionally try and make some kind of emotional record. I've never been against that either but my other work has just been about what I'm feeling and just different energy levels. I think they've been lumped more into process oriented music, but for me I was never really doing it like that."

"I think any music is process orientated that I make whether it has words or song structure or whatever - it's always been building from the bottom up. It's never been like, 'this songs about being getting dumped and feeling good about it!" Willits elaborates, "It's nothing like that. I think a lot of what I was feeling was coming through and the lyrics as well kind of emerged just though the feelings I was getting from the music. It was growing from the bottom up and I was just making sense with different things I'm feeling but more in an analytical way. It's hard to describe but it's like these intuitive sounds emerged without even thinking about anything and then I kind of more analytically recognised that those things were happening and that's where the words came from."

Hearing Christopher Willits talk about his composition process sheds light on how natural his music sounds. "I say it's personal music and what I mean by that is it really emerged from a personal space. But at the same time I didn't steer it and I didn't really feel as though I was really making it. I've mentioned this before when I am making something, I don't really feel like my ego's a part of it. I try and open up the process so much it's like all of a sudden it's just like coming through me."

"It was an amazing cathartic process. In the end it helped me to meditate and pull me through this rough relationship I was going through. It is an ironic thing as I just had to leave it – it was so great and amazing but I had to ask myself, 'do I really want to have a family right now?' It's was like, no thanks." With such commitment to his art it is little wonder that Christopher Willits' sounds are being heard all over the world.

Surf Boundaries is available through Ghostly International/Inertia.

SLEEVE REVIEWS
WITH BEC PATON

Artist: Si Begg
Title: *Jetlag and Tinnitus Part 1*
Label: Noodles Recordings
Format: 12"
Designer: Precursor

Nothing says 'menace' in these, our days of terror, quite like a brown paper parcel with a vacuum-sealed pouch. Anthrax paranoia aside, the contents are killer.

This thing's designed. Simply. It would have been cheap to produce too. Ah, the beauty of good design! The record lives in a stock standard brown cardboard 12 inch cover, (a bulk order job). There's a yellow bond A3 poster printed only with black ink, (a single ink on cheap, rough and ready stock). This is put into the vacuum sealed pouch and stuck to the front cover, (hell, the distro guys could have finished this part before they shipped them far and wide!)

When folded in the pouch, the poster just shows the record's details in type that's reminiscent of some computer generated form. Unfolded, negative space rules and slick typography and layout breathe in the space. A detail of an aeroplane fuselage shot as if from a passenger window swipes diagonally across the bottom corner, reminding you of travel stare scenarios. The computer blatt type is used stylistically to reinforce that this record is part one of a series but also add to the air travel look and feel.

Besides the digital form typeface, a clean gothic is used in a readable, but fine size. This is laid out in little blocks that are pleasingly but loosely arranged, alluding to scanner or office-use-only details. Without obviously referring to a remittance slip, the yellow paper sops up the process black ink to show you Begg's experience of jetlag and tinnitus and allow you to relate on your own terms.

Artist: DJ Signify and Six Vicious
Title: *No One Leaves*
Label: Bully Records
Format: Double 7"
Designer: Unknown

This little seven inch's design is unique and attractive but in terms of usability, form flusters function! What does a record cover need to be able to do? Bare minimum? House the records and let you know the details of the recording.

Despite a pretty cool aesthetic, this sleeve sort of fails at either one or the other of these functions—you can read it or it can hold your wax. Ash coloured, linen textured card is folded in half and sealed with a massive silver sticker. The track names and recording's information is all printed in black on the inside. Dying to know what the third track, which is a really killer ditty, is called? Slash! You've got to rip the sticker and from now on, you'll need a plastic sleeve or a mending job of some description. Way to make sure you don't get played on radio—is a back announcement worth a busted sleeve? Probably not…

Meanwhile, the silver sticker's been screen printed in matte black ink and it looks sexy, shimmery and cool where the sliver shows through the porous parts of the paint. No One Leaves is echoed down the front in a distressed grunge font called FT Nihilist Philosophy and other than that, a clean, condensed sans-serif plays the typographic support role.

There's something really appealing about the construction of this sleeve, the way it relies on the intrinsic beauty of the screen print and the peek-a-boo liner notes. Chances are, most people would happily pop the seven inch records on, and not concern themselves with the track names but rather enjoy the sticker mechanics. Trainspotters, however, beware!

Artist: Various
Title: Various
Label: Feral Media
Format: CD
Designer: Sopp Collective

How smart. This small but important label has decided to invest in beautiful design and quality production that can be shared across and customised for various projects. What a fantastic way to get label recognition, make sure all of the packages are unique but linked to the body of work and economise by doing a larger production run.

Great quality, brown recycled card is folded to a gatefold case. A 'FM' (Feral Media) label is sewn onto the top of the spine and the stitching and change of material adds to the textural approach to creating a plush package. This template can be screen printed, stamped, stickers added or any imaginable way of making a mark to give a unique visual for the project at hand. I hope they get adventurous playing with this element.

A condensed, gothic, sans-serif typeface is used for any text, simply printed in black onto brown recycled paper. This is just folded and slips into the left pocket of the gatefold for each release. Simple, effective and adaptable, this could be printed and inserted on demand quite easily, as the paper's forgiving.

The CDs themselves are gently branded and then the specific release's details applied as an unobtrusive sticker. The design is great because it empowers the label to be able to customise and create on demand slick, sexy and thoughtful packages. It is green-minded but still luxurious and speaks of a thoughtful and quality label—great communication!

Artist: Toxic Lipstick
Title: *When the Doves Cry…*
Label: Self Released
Format: CD
Designer: Toxic Lipstick

This sleeve has the perfect combination of pink and green—teen girl sassiness and the use of recycled materials. Black and fluoro pink inks have been screen printed onto off-white, textured card. These prints are used to wrap unused covers from Dual Plover albums, which provide the structure for the package. You can peel the black lining off to find Sro, Spazzmodics or Nora Keys CD covers underneath apparently!

The graphics are poppy and fun, with contrasty photocopy-esque illustrations of the wee, lippy ladies. The type is a cutesy foray into free display fonts, but is playful and hot in the pink. It really does pack a punch with its personality too. You sort of feel like you've stumbled on a pubescent's diary—the love, the hate and the curiosity, (bodge tech quality and all!)

For an outfit whose lyrics are a big part of the appeal, making them into a zine with illustrations and freestyled layout is a damn fine way to get people to check them out. All the pictures are cartoons and are obviously heavily influenced by Japanese manga styles. They're saucy and it's easy to believe they're a 14 year old girl's doodles with works like 'Poodle Cunt', angry aliens and dishevelled geisha dolls. The CD itself sports hearts, ice cream and space invaders.

A little bit of care that was smile maker, was including a piece of black felt where the CD slides in to protect it. Way to care, guys! And CD scratching would have definitely been an issue, given the coarse card and roughness of the solid pigment laden ink used for the screen print.

It's rude, crude but oh so quirky and is interesting to explore. So much care and thought has gone into it and the character pours out of the pulp. Sweet.

SELECTS: UNKLE HO / KAHO CHEUNG

The Bar At The End Of The Universe is the setting for Kaho Cheung's second album as Unkle Ho, according to *Cyclic Defrost* reviewer Emmy Hennings. It's a place where Cheung, the erstwhile beatmaker for Australian hip hop coruscaters The Herd, rocks a soundtrack to lazy evenings of cocktail sipping; where mahjong tables are nestled alongside dry martinis, and the walls are lined with portraits of fallen Communist leaders. Holed up in China, Cheung concocted the rollicking blend of Eastern European gypsy jaunts and Arabic harmonies, which gallops headlong into hip hop beats and dancehall riddims. Guest musicians play double bass, clarinet, harp, guzheng, trumpet, flute and electric guitar, filtered through the gritty, heavy prism of dub and folk music. It's optimistic and inclusive.

We cornered our favourite Unkle to question him on some of his most memorable musical moments.

Squarepusher – *Music is Rotted One Note* (Warp)

This was Squarepusher's third full-length album, released in 1998. His first two albums showed that he had already mastered the art of acrobatic schizoid electronic music. For this album, Squarepusher ditched all his famed gear and relied soley on live instruments. To get an idea of the sound, imagine cloning four Squarepushers to play bass, drums, guitar and keys, then resurrect Miles Davis to conduct them and get Aphex Twin to engineer and record them. The output is a major departure from his other albums, I actually prefer this to the other Squarepusher material. I'm still waiting for the day he loses all his gear in a firestorm and makes Music is Rotted Two Notes!

I had a chance to meet the big man when an early version of The Herd called Dase Team 5000 supported Squarepusher at Frigid's fifth birthday. Squarepusher apparently had not only a highly developed brain for music, but also a highly developed ego; he didn't hang out with us peasants backstage. He managed to piss everyone off so much that a certain hairy nosed DJ plucked a fistful of nostril hairs and inserted them into the chocolate éclairs that Squarepusher had requested for his rider. Suffice to say, the éclairs and nostril hairs were nowhere to be seen after the gig.

Coldcut – *70 Minutes of Madness* (Journeys by DJ)

The definitive DJ mix album, it still holds up after all these years. My only copy of this album was on a good ol' cassette. I caned this tape so much that I started hearing the other side in reverse. I also remember watching *Plan 9 from Outer Space* in the cinema and thinking that this was going to be a great movie, as I realised Coldcut had sampled the intro for this album. The movie still sucked.

As part of the Electrofringe Festival in 1998, Coldcut did a live internet cross from England and performed a DJ/Video set. Because internet speeds were very slow back then, Dase Team 5000 was asked to play music whenever the connection dropped out. We had three desktop computers (this was when laptops were very expensive), with the Coldcut visuals projected behind us. I remember Traksewt having major problems with his computer that night. The audience was probably wondering why he was staring so intently into his monitor, little did they know that he was doing a complete reinstall of Windows while onstage.

Black Sabbath – *Greatest Hits* (Griffin)

Like any self-respecting 17-year-old with long hair, I went through a heavy metal stage. I would bang my head earnestly to Metallica, Megadeth and Kyuss. After going to metal gigs I would rate how good they were depending on how sore my neck was the next day.

A friend of mine demanded that I get schooled by the originators, so he copied Black Sabbath's *Greatest Hits* onto cassette for me. Though famous for their heavy riff lined tracks such as 'Paranoid' and 'War Pigs', my favourite Sabbath song is 'Planet Caravan'. This is an almost acoustic ballad with a morphine preset on Ozzie Osbourne's vocals and delicate hand drumming from Bob Ward. Yes, bongos in a metal track, that is how heavy Black Sabbath are.

A few years later I had this album up very loud in the car, singing my guts out to 'Sweat Leaf', I didn't realize the traffic had banked up in front, I then proceeded to ram the car in front of me. That accident was 10 years ago, but whenever I hear Black Sabbath now I always wipe 10km off.

Ida Kelarova – *Old Gypsy Songs* (Self-released)

My first foray into Romany music; Ida is a legendary singer from the Czech Republic. She identifies herself as half Czech and half Romany, and is very active in promoting Romany culture. Although she struggled with her Gypsy heritage in her early years, the death of her Romany musician father was a major turning point in accepting her heritage. She never learnt to speak the Romany language, as her grandparents thought that her Romany blood was a liability. Nowadays, Ida is a passionate voice for her people, from organising the annual Gypsy Festival in the Czech Republic to performing traditional gypsy songs all over the world.

I lived in the Czech Republic for three months and saw some great Romany music that inspired me to buy this album. Although I don't understand the lyrics to the songs, the music makes you feel immediate empathy for the injustices that Romany people have suffered. However, this tone is always contrasted by the frantic celebratory mood that is still able to be conveyed, despite the odds. I also bought another album by an equally legendary Czech singer called Iva Bittova and found out months later that they are in fact sisters.

"I LIVED IN THE CZECH REPUBLIC FOR THREE MONTHS AND SAW SOME GREAT ROMANY MUSIC... ALTHOUGH I DON'T UNDERSTAND THE LYRICS TO THE SONGS, THE MUSIC MAKES YOU FEEL IMMEDIATE EMPATHY FOR THE INJUSTICES THAT ROMANY PEOPLE HAVE SUFFERED... CONTRASTED BY THE FRANTIC CELEBRATORY MOOD THAT IS STILL ABLE TO BE CONVEYED, DESPITE THE ODDS."

King Tubby – *Dub Explosion* (Roots)

King Tubby would be my favourite, out of all the other famous dub producers. He started out in the 60s as a recording engineer, but ended up amassing an uncountable number of releases by the time of he died in 1989. Many people regard Osbourne 'King Tubby' Ruddock as the inventor of the remix, as he pioneered the art of using individual tracks of songs and manipulated them into an unrecognisable form to the original. A keen audio scientist, he wired up his own ground breaking mixing desks and delay units to achieve sounds that nobody could emulate. Such mechanical ability is a good example of how genres often originated from new technology.

Certain tracks on *Dub Explosion* like 'Love of The Jah Jah' and 'Black Out' make me uncontrollably squint my face along to King Tubby's skanks and homemade delays. I remember making a dub compilation with some of these songs for my girlfriend as she was not convinced about the merits of dub. She was also concerned that I was not a lover of ska. She finally succumbed to the dub, but I've held firm on the ska.

C.W. Stoneking – *King Hokum* (Low Transit Industries)

I had just arrived back from China after living there for six months, a few of my friends were raving on about this Australian blues guy that sounded like the albino brother of Mississippi blues legend Robert Johnson. I was intrigued as I have a special place in my heart for early blues and jazz. I couldn't remember his name though, something like C.L. Stonehenge, W.C. Kingston or C.L. Smoothking. I went to a friend's place for dinner and he had the elusive album I was after, however the CD was missing from the case. By this stage I was gagging to hear the damn album.

When I finally got it a week later, I had to stop myself from listening again straight away. You know that feeling when you hear an album so great, you have to restrain yourself from over playing it, otherwise you risk getting sick of the album too quickly.

Best songs are 'Don't Go Dandin Down the Darktown Strutter's Ball' and 'Handyman Blues', the latter about Stoneking's experience as a tradesperson in an isolated country town. Equal to the blues mastery on this record is the skillful production by J.Walker in making this release sound like an authentic Delta blues record minus the scratches.

Mikelangelo and the Black Sea Gentlemen - *Journey Through The Land Of Shadows* (Self-released)

I remember being blown away by this gypsy group at the Cockatoo Island Festival. Mikelangelo spoke with a heavy Balkan accent, yet his humour was very familiar. I was convinced such distinguished musicians must have traveled from faraway places in order to perform in Australia. In fact they caught the local ferry just like the rest of us and Mikelangelo even went to uni with a friend of mine.

I eventually met Mikelangelo at a party and got to hear his Australian accent. I remember giving him a CD-R copy of my first album, *Roads to Roma*, in return he generously gave me a proper copy of his. I felt quite foolish and thought such a dignified man would not bother to listen to a CD-R of ripped-off gypsy beats from some guy in an Australian hip hop group. To my delight he got in contact and gave the album the thumbs up.

I've had the pleasure of being invited to see the group's performances a few times now. Mikelangelo always manages to slip in small Unkle Ho references during these shows, much to the confusion of the middle-aged theatre going audience.

Unkle Ho's *Circus Maximus* is available from Elefant Traks/Inertia.