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Cyclic *Defrost* Magazine

Issue 30 | March 2012

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Founder

Sebastian Chan

Editor

Alexandra Savvides

Sub-editor

Luke Telford

Art Director

Thommy Tran

Advertising

Sebastian Chan

Advertising Rates

Download at cyclicdefrost.com

Printing

Unik Graphics

Website

Adam Bell and Sebastian Chan

Web Hosting

Blueskyhost

www.blueskyhost.com

Cover Design

Alex Mustakov

Issue 30 Contributors

Adrian Elmer, Alexandra Savvides, Bob Baker Fish, Chris Downton, Daniel Gottlieb, Henry Andersen, innerversitysound, Joshua Meggitt, Luke Bozzetto, Luke Telford, Mateo Szlapek-Sewillo, Michael Moebus, Nick Giles, Oliver Laing, Peter Hollo, Sam Gillies, Samuel Miers, Stephen Fruitman, Wyatt Lawton-Masi

Cyclic donors

Huge thank you to the additional financial support from Murray Woodman, Ben Askins, Daniel Brophy, Alan Bamford, Kath O'Donnell, Scott Berry, John Irving, Alex Cameron.

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latest reviews

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Editorial

In the process of delivering the thirtieth issue of Cyclic Defrost, a great deal of change has been going on behind the scenes. Seb Chan, one of the magazine's founders and former editor-in-chief, has started a new life in New York and we've brought on board plenty of fresh new writing faces. Daniel Gottlieb is one such scribe who looks at the idiosyncratic, whimsical world of Moon Wiring Club. Later on, Samuel Miers chats with David Cunningham of The Flying Lizards, a band once considered one hit wonders now cited as a significant influence on contemporary Australian artists. Oliver Laing gleans some amazing insights from a luminary of electronic music, Michael Rother, ahead of his tour in March, while Luke Telford offers a reflective take on the continuing Deerhoof legacy.

We send our thanks to the Australia Council for their ongoing support of the magazine, as well as all our wonderful contributors who keep delivering writing that digs deeper into the musical subconscious of local and international artists. Make sure to keep an eye out online for our web-only exclusive interviews with Konono No. 1 and Amini, as well as all the reviews for this issue.

If you have ever thought about subscribing to the magazine, now is a great time to do so. Along with the magazine delivered to you three times a year there's also plenty of subscriber-only bonuses thrown in as well. Contact us for more information. Additional thanks for issue 30 go out to Hugh and the warehouse staff at Unik graphics, Michael Moebus aka Meem for his take on Cyclic Selects, and Alex Mustakov for our thirtieth birthday design. Enjoy the music, Alexandra



Australian Government



This project has been assisted by the Australian Government through the Australia Council, its arts funding and advisory body.

Of GIF and Type

Alex Mustakov
Local
by Alexandra Savvides



s the old adage goes, inspiration can be found in the strangest of places. For Alex Mustakov, cover designer for issue 30 of *Cyclic Defrost*, one source in particular is most unorthodox. “I know they’re cheesy but I really love animated GIFs,” he says, recounting the halcyon days of the World Wide Web with the sort of reverence that might ordinarily be reserved for great works of art. “I think they’re the most rewarding piece of art on the internet. I couldn’t give a toss about Flash and all that serious animation, I just love how crude and how silly it is. It’s cheap, it’s fast, it’s fun ... you can actually be really nostalgic about those first things that made the internet really explode, or at least when we



were first teenagers.”

It’s not just the memories imbued in these animated pictures that tick Mustakov’s design boxes. Hand-drawn typography and the look and feel of photocopied, mechanically reproduced work comes through prominently too. “At the end of college, art and design tended to lean heavily toward a clean and clinical look,” he recalls. “Over time people are getting messier as they go along, in a good way. It’s a lot more creative and interesting. Typography is being celebrated again – people want it now. When I left college, no one cared. It was important to know how to do it well, but it wasn’t that much of a commodity. That’s probably where my head is at for this issue. I want to put actual hand work into it and make something that no one else has.”

Mustakov is one half of Kitty & Rosevich, a creative duo co-founded with his wife and business partner Emma. Together they have been responsible for producing work for a range of clients and friends in the music industry like Totally Barry at The Abercrombie, The Gate series of live music events in the northern suburbs of Sydney, and several east-coast bands. It’s a diverse back-catalogue that also encompasses a clay Loch Ness Monster character called Barry, crafted by Emma. Incidentally, there’s also an animated GIF of him gracing their website.

The pair seem to share a love affair with low-level

“I think the GIF is the most rewarding piece of art on the internet. I couldn’t give a toss about Flash and all that serious animation, I just love how crude and how silly it is. It’s cheap, it’s fast, it’s fun.”

reproductions, and it comes through distinctly in a range of Mustakov’s previous work – most notably in posters and promotional material for The Summervilles. There’s quintessential 50s and 60s iconography in the photos chosen, all artfully manicured hair and luxurious lips, which brings to mind a more innocent time. It was the band themselves who gave the direction for this particular look. “They never wanted to use any new imagery,” Mustakov explains. “The collaboration between us became a thing where everyone got involved and, I guess, making the EP art was like a fun working bee rather than a job.

“I get a bit of a nostalgia trip – with all the stuff we were looking for stills from movies or images from old magazines. Photocopied and doing stuff to them. I would love to own a photocopier. The first time I fucked around with that stuff was way back in college. We had a really good typography lecturer,

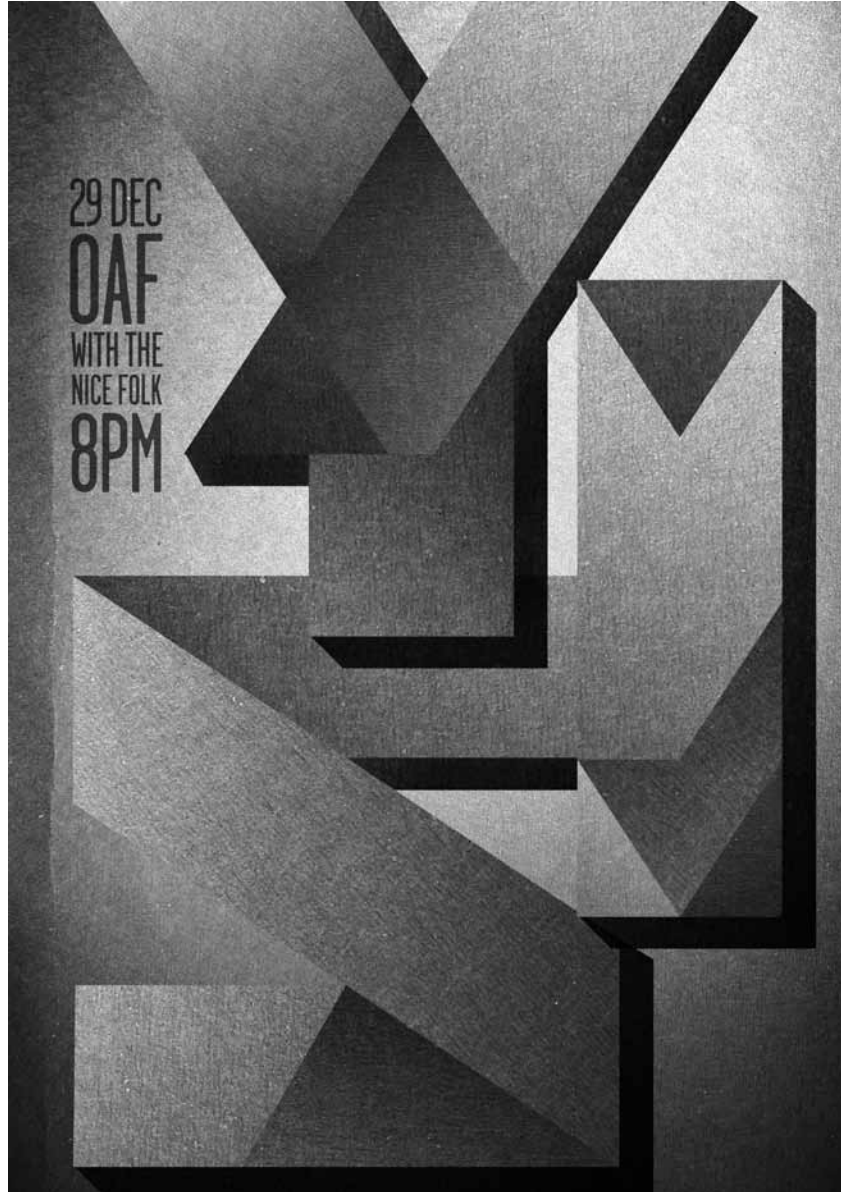
he was a bit of a fruitcake, but at the time he was one of those people who is really good at pushing your preconceived ways of doing a certain job. So we had this free brief where we had to produce this work, a reaction to some quote, something random and profound, but we had to do this typographic reproduction in any style you wanted. I ended up taking all these things; the main thing was I did all the reproduction by photocopying, blowing it up and distorting it. That’s where the love affair with low quality reproduction came from.”

Last year Mustakov dedicated time away from his full-time creative day job to personal projects, which helped him realise that he wanted to spend less time on commercial freelance work and work more with musicians, writers and “people I actually find genuinely interesting. They’re not big money clients but they are people I get behind what they are doing. I’d really work with them and hang out with

them and do a bit of freelance agency stuff on the side because that pays the rent.”

Many of those creative types are involved with *PAN* magazine, where Mustakov is Art Director. It’s a publication that links art, design, literature and music in a beautifully designed package, founded by Emma Dallas. “There’s a look in my head that the editor and I have,” he says, “we know exactly what it’s going to be like. It’s pretty straight how it currently is – A4 and glossy – but we’re going to do different things with it. We’re printing 100 plus pages, we might as well do something unusual with it.” The Holy Soul’s lead singer, Trent Marden, is involved in an editorial capacity.

Being one’s own boss presents as many challenges as it does freedoms, particularly for a designer. “I have to come up with something quickly that’s quirky or imaginative, but at the same time I don’t have to worry with someone saying ‘you have to put the terms and conditions here or we need a big URL on this’. Most people don’t actually care, they can use Google.”



All the headway made during the previous year came to an abrupt halt with what Mustakov, almost affectionately, dubs the great hard drive crash of 2011. Even though he lost the majority of the build files for many projects, it was a reflective rather than regretful time. “I realised how much I had done and how much I was really enjoying it ... for this issue I had some bits and pieces, some research, which I lost, but I’m thinking of going the typographic approach. The main thing I’ve been mucking around with in terms of finishes, that low level reproduction stuff. I like layers, texture, really basic things. Where I was kind of thinking the bits and pieces, stuff I want to scan, I kind of want to do something I guess quite contrasting and typographic.”

On that typographic tip, there are plenty of reference points of contemporary designers who stoke the creative fires, like Sonny and Biddy of We Buy Your Kids, who were responsible for designing the cover for issue 22 of this magazine. “They are pretty much at the top of the game as far as artwork and working with musicians, arts events or whatever, I think they do a pretty stellar job. They have similar motifs – I remember looking at their work about four or five years ago, the Youth Group stuff ... to me that was really unusual, I’d never seen anything like it.”

Other local artists that inspire include Kindred Studio (Andrew Fairclough), Hana Shimada and Jeremyville, who gave Mustakov his first paid gig out of college. It was a t-shirt to promote TV-1’s Seinfeld marathon, a giant picture of Elaine Benes’ face with the phrase ‘Get Out’ plastered on it. Then there’s Jonathan Zawada, who has created work for musicians like Rustie and Canyons. “His stuff is even more different and crazy than what other designers and artists are doing,” Mustakov says. He also cites the neo-psychedelic works of UK designer Jiro Bevis as “amazing,” with his Lichtenstein-like raster effect incorporated on canvases bursting with cartoon imagery.

As for his own methodology, it’s all very much a custom build for each project. “I try to do things per purpose, I don’t really have things saved up. It’s from scratch every time. Whenever something comes in I like to look at things with fresh eyes and think what is the most appropriate, quirkiest, or right thing to do for this situation.

“So far I don’t really have a style of any kind, or not anything that I can really put a name to. Hopefully all the things are kind of tongue-in-cheek, funny or slightly unusual.”

See more of Alex Mustakov’s work at cargocollective.com/kittyandrosevich

Deerhoof

VS.

Deerhoof

International
by Luke Telford



In 2007, Deerhoof played the Factory Theatre in Enmore. It was in support of their ninth album, *Friend Opportunity* – a palimpsest of eccentric guitar pop that bristled with experimentation

and seemed ripe with creative frustration. Using a backline borrowed from supports My Disco, they were inordinately loud, and played with the desperate intensity of a trio trying to remain faithful to material that was meticulously assembled as a quartet.

Guitarist John Dietrich was visibly distressed at the magnitude of this undertaking, his jaw swinging involuntarily as if under the influence of some devilish stimulant, his hands flying between guitar, synth and sampler. Satomi Matsuzaki's bass rig was easily a foot taller than she was; when the music threatened to fall over itself, she'd stop playing altogether, channeling the madness into kicking and gesturing like an impressionist cheerleader. Stage right, drummer Greg Saunier frantically threw himself into the music, leaning heavily into its wilder passages, reigning himself in before it became formless.

Although the chaos of the set was exhilarating, it was the experience of witnessing the machinations of a band at its most fragile that made it truly intoxicating – the music only seemed to become stronger, wilder and more bizarre as a result of the panicked improvisation and ad hoc rearrangements.

In 2008, the band recruited a second guitarist,

Ed Rodriguez, with whom Dietrich had played in Gorge Trio, and released *Offend Maggie*. While that was a more straightforward guitar album than its predecessor, the music felt no less restless or circuitous.

"It was intended to be a great relief when Ed joined the band to take some of the pressure off of John, but it just ended up that both of them are all over the place all of the time," explains Saunier, on the eve of Deerhoof's 2012 Australian tour. "It takes a conscious, deliberate effort to make us want to simplify, you know?"

He's a vividly warm presence over the phone, laughing good-naturedly at spurious comments, and answering questions at length, without stopping, each idea falling over the one that preceded it. He explains that this glorious chaos is incidental, a product of how the band works together.

"It's something we try not to create," says Saunier. "Sometimes the music makes you want to express something in a more and more extreme way. You want to squeeze or twist more expression out of the music than is maybe there. You end up adding decoration. It happens a lot when we're on tour, too. You're playing the same song every night, and it starts to change. Sometimes it gets more and more complicated or busy, and then a lot of times somebody else in the band will go to the person who's getting more complicated and say 'Hey, I liked it more a few days ago before you started adding in all this craziness.'"

“For the first time that I can ever remember, it’s really been a year when it’s started to feel like making music does have a point.”

This anecdote makes sense in light of how the band sounds on record. Deerhoof’s albums are riven with a restlessness similar to that of their live shows, though it’s less visceral, less persistent. The clarity of their recorded material reveals an undercurrent of curiously stubborn pragmatism, as though the members had gone through great personal turmoil to bypass their musical chops and whittle enormous ideas down into their simplest components, with comfort and linearity being the primary casualties.

“Sometimes it’s actually harder to play something that’s really severe and really plain, and that’s unembellished,” says Saunier. “It sounds less smooth and more chaotic than when Ed and John are playing something fast, when it kind of just flows off the fingers. It’s a very wonderful quality that they have, which I think is not one that they intend. When you hear Satomi forcing them to play

something simple, they don’t sound comfortable with it the way a lot of rock guitar players do. They sound like they’re having to stop themselves, and I think that’s a really neat sound.”

The notion of comfort is useful in describing Deerhoof’s music. At its core, it’s guitar rock, but its instrumental façade, arrangements, and generic allusions are continually shifting, resembling mild-mannered J-pop one minute, and unbridled improv or Miles Davis-esque guitar fusion the next. This restlessness has garnered comparisons to the likes of Captain Beefheart – another hermetically idiosyncratic act fronted by an inimitable voice – but their live show is unhinged in a way that feels closer to a group like The Who.

“It’s funny how the attempt to make it simple also adds a chaos to it. It might sound strange. The chaos is not necessarily because of fast playing or because of busy playing – that’s definitely what



it was in a lot of cases with The Who,” he says. “I actually think The Who sounds less chaotic than we do. Although they were very busy players, I think that they were also more together than we are. They sounded more comfortable. It’s like it was an engine that was really working; it didn’t sound like it was stuttering or faltering, where we often have that sound and it’s not intentional.”

Saunier dismisses the idea that the band’s writing

“The purpose of the band has been to find the purpose of the band”

process is in any way democratic (“we aren’t voting on anything”) explaining that everyone contributes, dismantling and reconstructing each other’s ideas until a track feels finished. Their most recent record *Deerhoof vs. Evil* is very much a product of the process he describes, so generically schizophrenic are its individual tracks.

“It’s the tension of not knowing where you are, not knowing exactly how far you can go before you get on somebody else’s nerves,” he says. “Not

CD

being sure what you can get away with in terms of pushing and pulling and taking risks playing something out of rhythm or removing something altogether, or the difficulty of playing something in a simple way when you’ve gotten really used to playing it in some kind of overwrought way. It’s constantly fluctuating, and that’s part of the reason that I think it sounds [chaotic].”

If the fleeting madness that makes Deerhoof such an enigmatic prospect isn’t planned, then it makes one wonder what the initial purpose of the band was, and whether that has changed from album to album.

“The purpose of the band has been to find the purpose of the band,” says Saunier, laughing. “I think that may be true for a lot of bands. It keeps changing, or our theory keeps changing. Each album is almost like a test to see one possible reason to play music, and a lot of the times, when it’s done, it can start to feel like we’ve failed, basically. Each one is a kind of failure.

“When we first started, it was more like maybe we wanted to make some kind of musical point, but I think less and less it’s that. I’m almost completely non-interested in that anymore. I’m only interested in the human point that the music might make, and I’ve really lost all interest in the point it might make to other musicians, or how it fits into music history, or how it compares to other bands.”

Failure isn’t a word many would choose to describe the work of a band that has released 11

albums in 17 years (and at least as many EPs), to exhaustive praise from critics, fans and fellow musicians. That’s a long time to be in a band, and Saunier intimates that his attitude to music has changed considerably since its inception.

“I’m surprised. I wouldn’t have necessarily expected this at the time we started the band, but I almost have the feeling that I’m only now starting to understand what the purpose of music is – not Deerhoof, but music in general – and the role it can play,” he says. “I get so close to music, and feeling notes and rhythms and harmonies, that it was easy for me to be blinded to the simple fact that music can really encourage a person to act a certain way, to feel a certain way, to think a certain way, that I really, really like. When I feel something lacking in myself, I can often turn to music in my small collection that will sort of point me in another direction.”

He singles out Cuban bandleader Perez Prado, a major figure in the popularisation of Mambo dance music in the 50s.

“I just find that when I listen to it – I’ve listened to it so many times at this point – it changes my posture, it changes the way I walk. If I’m writing an email to somebody, it changes what I have to say to them. If I’m talking to a person in a conversation, it makes me smile at them, and it makes me want to look them in the eye. It makes me want to joke with them rather than be serious.

“For the first time that I can ever remember,

it’s really been a year when it’s started to feel like making music does have a point. For many years I really doubted it. I saw a lot of my friends working for non-profits, or going into some kind of social service or becoming doctors – doing things that have this real, tangible benefit to other people. What do I do? I play drums in a rock band. I always found it really hard to defend it to myself. ‘Why am I bothering to do this, and who cares?’

“And it’s great having this band going so long. I feel like we are building something, and I never used to feel that.”

When the four walk on stage in Sydney the next week, they’ve just stepped off a plane, and look worn out. This fatigue extends to the music; it’s played with a weird aggression that dispenses with none of their familiar complexity or tunefulness or madness. Rodriguez swings his guitar about like Marc Bolan in a matador’s outfit. Dietrich meekly presides over the chord changes, carefully watching and listening to his bandmates. Matsuzaki’s bass is so deep, the air in the room appears to shake. Her micro dance routines are punctuated with anxious looks over her shoulder to Saunier, whose playing burns with a frustrated, reckless fury. The whole energy of the set seems to flow through him; he tears it down, and winds it up, only to mischievously shatter it all again. Quite some beautiful failure.

Deerhoof’s *Deerhoof vs. Evil* is released through Polyvinyl.



David Cunningham Flies his Lizards back to the *Fourth Wall*

International
by Samuel Miers
Photo by: DB
Burkeman



“One of [Michael Nyman’s] bands with five grand pianos put out a cassette, and I reviewed it and said it was rubbish, really... and there was Michael Nyman sitting on the table, swinging his legs, reading a really bad review of himself.”

n their time, and up until the last couple of years, The Flying Lizards were mostly thought of as a joke band. Australian artists have been among the first of a new generation of musicians to appreciate and benefit from what The Flying Lizards were doing. You can hear their smart pop gently filtering through the sounds of Fabulous Diamonds, Absolute Boys and Naked On the Vague (Matthew Hopkins of NOTV speaks later on about the impact of The Flying Lizards on his music). Everyone knows The Flying Lizards’ hit cover of Barrett Strong’s ‘Money’, from their debut self-titled album (which also sold pretty well), but this article brings to light their incredible, largely unnoticed

second album, *Fourth Wall*, which collided many of the best avant composers of the 70s and 80s – Michael Nyman, Steve Beresford, Patti Palladin, Robert Fripp, Peter Gordon, etc and the man who is The Flying Lizards, David Cunningham – to make a pop album. 1981’s *Fourth Wall* really proves how great a producer David Cunningham had become. He samples everything from the flute music of New Guinea to audio from a Hitchcock documentary, adds some colouring from some special music friends, then swirls these layers of abstract sounds into some very romantic grooves; years ahead of those days.

“Of course, if you’ve got J.J. Johnson thrashing away on the drum kit and you’ve got orchestral instruments there in a rehearsal setting, you can’t hear a thing.”

CD

I visited David Cunningham 30 years later at his London pad to talk about the album. Piles of paper, records, and machines as tall as people fill each room of the apartment (including the bathroom) with comfortable pathways to all the household necessities. He sits me down at his small circular dining table with a cup of tea and begins the story of *Fourth Wall*.

David Cunningham: It took the best part of a year and then a bit. ‘Cause I had sort of finished it and Virgin were saying “Get a move on, get a move on.” Then I finished it, and they said “Oh well it’s not very good, go and do a bit more.” There was also sort of a phase of ... we had a version of the record and we went and tried it out live. Just as a one-off thing with this really weird collection of people. Most of Michael Nyman’s band on one side of the stage; that was the strings and brass and bits and bobs, and Nyman on piano. Then on the other side of the stage was the rock bit. J.J. Johnson of The Electric Chairs on drums, Georgie Born out of Henry Cow on bass and um, I can’t really remember what else.

Samuel Miers: Did Patti sing as well?

DC: And Patti Palladin singing, yeah. We rehearsed separately which is kind of odd. Basically, with rock musicians and orchestral musicians, you have to work with them differently. You have to get the orchestral ones playing the parts sort of right, and the rock ones have to work with a vaguely improvised structure, or else working around

the chords of the song. Of course, if you’ve got J.J. thrashing away on the drum kit and you’ve got orchestral instruments there in a rehearsal setting, you can’t hear a thing. The day of the gig was actually, I think, the first time we put the two together. It was very mixed, what came out of it. There is a tape but nobody’s heard it except for me and Patti. It was only recorded on a 4-track though, that 4-track (*David points to the other side of the table and laughs*).

SM: So how did you come across Patti Palladin? Was it through Snatch?

DC: I was a big Snatch fan. To me they were kind of like in the tradition of The Ronnettes and The Crystals and stuff like that, and that was music I really loved since I was a kid. They were pre-punk as well, you know. The first Snatch single might have been in 1973, I think, I’m not sure. I was very aware of them being around, [but] I had no idea that they were kind of like real people that you could talk to or meet, or anything. I worked with Jane County/Wayne County in 1979 producing her last album as Wayne, before she became Jane. She knew Patti, she asked Patti to come in and do backing vocals with her. I met Patti, obviously, I was producing, and we got on very well and I enjoyed working with her. She liked what I was doing, because if you know Wayne County’s work before that, you know it was very kind of straight line punk stuff. I took it

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in a slightly different direction, maybe two slightly different directions, at the same time. Patti could hear what was going on and she thought this was interesting and we have had an ongoing dialogue after that, I guess.

SM: You produced some things for her after *Fourth Wall* as well didn’t you?

DC: Kind of. It’s more co-producing, I guess, basically just decorating. She pretty much looks after her stuff. She’s a superb producer. There aren’t very many records under her name. Copy Cats with Johnny Thunders, that’s Patti as a producer, but not in name, because Johnny wouldn’t let her. His chauvinism is too much to be produced by a woman.

SM: What about Michael Nyman, what was he like to work with?

DC: I can’t remember if it was when he formed his band, but ‘round about maybe 1974, I came across him performing in art galleries. I used to write for a magazine called *Musics*. *Musics* mostly dealt with improvised music and a bit of the composed avant-garde. People like John White, Michael and Gavin Bryars and so on. While I was a student – I was an art student from 1973 to 1977 – you had to kind of produce something written every term, and I basically just went and reviewed these gigs and wrote those up as kind of little comment, essay, critical essay things. I also published them

in *Musics*, simply because I sort of felt it was important in that context of improvised music to make a reference to composed music as well, because they traditionally sort of hated each other. While there was a vibe building up, partly because a lot of the composers like Cornelius Cardew and Gavin Bryars decided that improvisation was a dead end and they weren't going to do that anymore, whereas they had been quite involved before. There was a bit of factionalism going on, and I just thought 'let's mix it all up again', 'cause I like both. So I was reviewing Michael's gigs, releases etc. One of his bands with five grand pianos put out a cassette, and I reviewed it and I gave it a really sort of ... I said it was rubbish, really. I said it very eloquently in terms of the way experimental music was working. I said, you know, it's got all the things that experimental music has; it's recycling old tunes, it uses repetition, it's got multiple instruments – multiples of the same instrument – it's got a lot of those key elements that a lot of experimental music had, but yet it's awful. So I wrote this review; musicologically, a very sound review. We had Gavin Bryars teaching us at our art school at Maidstone in Kent. Gavin actually decided to give up teaching us, so I came in on a Tuesday morning or something. The issue of *Musics* had apparently hit the streets in London but I hadn't got my copy out in the sticks in Maidstone, and there was Michael Nyman sitting on the table, swinging his legs, reading a really bad review of himself. He appreciated the fact that I'd

actually done the work to kind of say why it was rubbish, this particular piece of music. We sort of developed a kind of conversation out of that, which basically continues to this day. After I'd done a few bits and bobs with a few other people in the late 70s, Michael asked me to come and help him mix some stuff he'd done for a Peter Greenaway film called *The Falls*. I'd heard the band he put together playing this stuff and I liked it, so basically we ended up doing an album.

SM: So how was the collaboration process working in the studio, with all these contrasting music brains?

DC: So I'd record a bunch of stuff with different people, loads and loads of just backing tracks and bits. Kind of just guiding them into: 'try this, play this, play along with that', and then I'd take those tapes, mix them, and then chop them up and repeat bits, and re-edit and so on. I didn't know at the time, but that's how David Bowie worked as well, except he was using two 24 tracks. He'd get the band sort of playing something, if he got a verse that he liked, he'd just copy the verse and edit all the verses together or something that would become a verse subsequently. It's a way of basically constructing stuff without actually having to write the song in advance, if you see what I mean.

SM: 'Glide/Spin' smooshes together as probably my favourite track on the album. The vocals are so sad. How'd this one happen?

DC: I was putting together the song shapes for

'Glide/Spin' without Patti, and she'd kind of listen to what I'd done and say "Oh this fits with this song that I've got," you know, rhythmically, lyrically or whatever. So there was a song that she had called 'Spin the Bottle', and a backing track that I had fitted her words to. So the two kind of get superimposed. I had a backing track, started off with a drum machine, added some kind of strange tabla thing. There are two mouth organs; oh, this is a good one. It's two tape loops of mouth organ playing and

they're just cycling out of time.

SM: Why do you think that *Fourth Wall* didn't do as well commercially as the self-titled?

DC: Because Virgin hated it and they wouldn't promote it. Also 'cause the general expectation was that The Flying Lizards made cover versions of R&B classics.

Matthew Hopkins of Naked On the Vague on *Fourth Wall*

Since I began making music, The Flying Lizards have always been on my brain as a major influence. Their music really made me think about how strange pop music could become. The *Fourth Wall* album is one of my all-time favourite records. There are some really weird noises and incredible ambient moments on this album. This has probably been the most influential element of their sound – the use of loops and tapes and bits of noise amongst a basic pop song structure. The use of guitars on this album was particularly ear-opening for me. I grew up listening to metal and crappy punk and mostly guitar music. I thought the guitar was essential if I wanted to start a band. But when I heard stuff like Flying Lizards I saw that guitars did not need to be the 'thing'. The guitars on *Fourth Wall* use simple interesting effects – they blend with the tapes, synths, brass etc., and don't stand out in stark

contrast or anything – and there are some mean solos going on! When I first started making music, I was incredibly worried that you needed to be able to write everything on guitars. The Flying Lizards taught me a valuable lesson otherwise. 'Lovers and Other Strangers' is one of my favourite songs; it sounds like it could be the theme song to a Surrealist sitcom or something. 'An Age' is also a highlight; it's such a futuristic sounding piece, such a great 'riff'. The track 'Cirrus' and the other ambient moments on the album make the perfect break between the songs. Since hearing *Fourth Wall*, I've always made a conscious effort to include short intros, or ambient breaks in between longer, more structured songs on my own recordings. I feel this strategy makes more of an album, more of a whole. These pieces act like small pauses for relaxing and gathering your ears and brain.

Subtle Magic



Michael Rother
International
By Oliver Laing

ometimes the most radical ideas are the simplest; so natural, in fact, that upon first exposure to their subtle magic, you would be forgiven for wondering what all the fuss was about. Especially when looking back from the present day, with all the subsequent descendants to that first risky gesture firmly in place, it can be a stretch of the imagination to comprehend of how profoundly influential those formative statements would be. So it is with the music of Michael Rother who is returning

to Australia in March, with Harmonia and Neu! compatriots Dieter Moebius and Hans Lampe, to play the Adelaide Festival plus a string of East Coast dates.

Searching for a metaphor to describe Rother's music and influence, seismic activity seems too sudden, glacial processes too frigid and imperceptible. Possibly a short-term, rock and roll approximation of the geologic time scale comes closest to hinting at the dynamic, cyclical nature of Rother's creative output and influence. From his short tenure in an early version of Kraftwerk, through the creative pinnacles of Neu! with Klaus Dinger, and in the company of Cluster's Roedelius and Moebius for the trio, Harmonia, plus his solo work of the late 70s and beyond; the twists and

turns, the creative tensions, critical acclaim and ambivalence in Rother's path could almost be the basis of a (kraut)rock opera. Rother's unique approach to harmony and melody is instantly recognisable, and seemed to appear fully formed on

“The idea is to not replay the songs like in the original versions, it's more about the idea of this music, about how I feel about the music today”

the first *Neu!* album, released by the Brain label in 1972.

Taking time out from preparing for the forthcoming Australian tour, Rother explains the processes that lead towards his unique musicality. “When I started to play rock and pop music at the age of 15, I learnt the guitar by copying the heroes of the time, which is a typical approach for most musicians. After a few years, I got bored with that, I had to try and find some musical language of my own. It was a process of slowly deconstructing music – I was a solo guitar player in earlier years,

and I decided to forget all about fast finger movements, soloing was completely cancelled from my performance! It was a very thoughtful process; considering how the elements I wanted to include were to be arranged.”

During the late 1960s and early 70s, there was a growing sense of disenchantment with German culture especially amongst young people growing up in post-World War II society. The populace was steadily fed a diet of Schlager (an anodyne and overproduced Germanic take on late 60s pop) and the latest bands from the UK and the US. These uncertain times led to the development of a youth movement that encouraged people to break from their past, in order to create an authentic and original cultural expression that was not dominated by outside influences. This milieu gave rise to many influential German bands including Can, Faust, Kluster, Amon Düül II, Popol Vuh and Tangerine Dream. For Rother it is “difficult to imagine my development without all that unrest. There was a feeling of change in the air in the late 60s, at all levels of life – politically and socially, there was an urge to overcome the feelings of the post-war society. Of course, I was influenced by all these ideas of change. There were a lot of new artists, films and ideas that were becoming known about, not only from Germany. I guess I was lucky, I don't know what I would have become, if I had grown up in the 80s! It is very difficult to detach my development from the cultural environment I was

immersed in.

“These times were a very important factor in shaping my thoughts about my own individual personality; about being an artist, attempting not to be an echo of some other musicians’ ideas. This was quite a common feeling in Germany during the early 70s; every single artist came up with his own conclusions, but it also depended on the capability of the musicians to create new music. I remember not being particularly interested in what some other German bands that were trying to steer away from traditional music were doing, I felt that they were still very close to the traditional approach of rock music. I was fortunate to meet people like Florian Schnieder, Klaus Dinger, Conny Plank and later on Roedelius and Moebius from Cluster. Those were the music makers that interested me and inspired me with their work.

“In the late 60s, I was working in a mental hospital near Düsseldorf. I was a conscientious objector – having refused to serve in the military I had to do some other form of service in a civil institution. I was interested in psychology at the time, so I chose a mental institution. That was a big challenge for my young soul, to see people in that state, but it was also a very rewarding time. By pure chance, there was a guitar player working there with me, one day he asked if I wanted to join him at a recording session for a band from Düsseldorf called Kraftwerk, they were supposed to record some music for a commercial. I hadn’t

heard of Kraftwerk, I didn’t know anything about the band, in that session I ended up jamming with Ralf Hütter. For the first time, here was someone else that was walking on the same road, who had similar ideas about melody and harmony to me. This was a big surprise; until that day I had felt completely alone. We got along really well and Klaus Dinger and Florian Schneider were sitting in the studio listening to our jam. A few weeks later, Florian rang me and invited me to join the band, and in the end Klaus, Florian and myself performed as Kraftwerk for several months.

“Through Kraftwerk, I met the producer [Konrad] Conny Plank, who was a very important figure in all of our music. Conny was all over our albums, he left his mark; he was a great inspiration. To this day, when I am working on music, I remember some of Conny’s recommendations. I admired his approach to music, his musicality and creativity on the mixing desk. He knew where we were heading for. It was quite amazing; sometimes he picked up on our ideas before we had even begun to express properly what we wanted to do. He had this sensitivity, he was a very modest guy, he didn’t try to push us in any way, he just tried to help us give birth to our musical ideas. He said in an interview once that he compared his role to that of a midwife.

“Personally, around the time of the first Neu! album, I was starting from close to zero, from scratch. The music gradually came together; it was not like waking up one day and knowing exactly

where I was heading. If you listen to the first album, there is only one song that has a harmony change. I recall very clearly how much time I spent thinking about the necessity of actually changing from one harmony to another; that’s in the track ‘Weissensee’. It was like breathing, inhaling and exhaling, if you listen to ‘Weissensee’ with that in mind, maybe you understand what I was trying to express. All other tracks on Neu! are on the one scale, it was very simple music. I was trying to avoid clichés, to avoid the unnecessary bombastic elements that were predominant within the music of that time.”

The interplay of Rother’s unique musicality with the visceral thump of Klaus Dinger’s percussion and the studio alchemy of Conny Plank was the genesis of the first Neu! album. Recalling that intense period, Rother shares that “we had to do the first Neu! album in four nights, that was all the time that we had for the recordings. That was quite stressful and crazy, but it also forced us to move very quickly.”

Most aficionados of German progressive music from the 70s would rate the motorik thump and emotive, spacious instrumentation of the three ‘classic’ Neu! albums as pinnacles of this creative epoch. As later Rother collaborator Brian Eno stated, “there were three great beats in the 70s: Fela Kuti’s Afrobeat, James Brown’s Funk and Klaus Dinger’s Neu!-beat.” The insistent backbeat only tells one half of the Neu! story; as atmospheric,

almost ambient tracks augmented with nocturnal piano, field recordings and fuzzy ululations sat between and differentiated the glorious motorik minimalism of tracks like ‘Hallogallo’ and ‘Weissensee’. The sustained, echoic bowed percussion and effects of ‘Sonderangebot’ hints at the lowercase territories that left-field musicians have been exploring ever since. Likewise, on *Neu!* ‘75 – starting off with two variations of Dinger’s Neu! beat (‘Isi’ and ‘Seeland’), the first side ends with ‘Leb’ Wohl’, where cascades of piano descend into soporific, mumbled vocals and stereo-panning washes of breaking waves.

In quick succession, the duo reconvened in the studio during 1973 to record Neu! 2, which opens with another classic extended Neu!-beat workout in the form of ‘Für Immer’. On the second side, the band descended into a gaseous, wrong-footed firmament of reconfigured tracks played at 78 and 16rpm. Surely these are some of the earliest examples of remixes, hinting at the predominant role that post-production and the studio has exerted on musical culture. The legacy of Neu! looms large in Rother’s personal history as well. “Sometimes people focus on Neu! too much for my tastes. Of course, Neu! was always much more successful, I guess it was more easily accessible for listeners, the strong rhythm always helps people. The magic of Harmonia, I wouldn’t have wanted to miss that, (I can say magic, I was only part of the team). It’s impossible to imagine my music without

Harmonia.”

Personally, the music that Rother made in the company of Hans-Joachim Roedelius and Dieter Moebius as Harmonia remains to this day some of the most illuminating and transcendent sounds in my personal musical pantheon. After the intensity of the early Neu! recordings, Rother retreated to the German countryside at Forst with the electronic music progenitors from Kluster and Cluster. “That’s something that filled me with so much joy, I fought very hard in the 70s to survive with Harmonia. We had lots of rejections back then, which was a big disappointment, but in the long run, we can’t complain. There has been so much positive response in the past 15 years it’s become stronger and stronger. Grönland re-released the collaboration with Brian Eno, *Tracks and Traces*, which has helped to spread the word in recent years. Eno was obviously interested in finding out how Harmonia worked. He told us that he knew all of our music, when he came to our concert in Hamburg in ’74 – we were very surprised! He also mentioned that he had discussed our music with David Bowie; these were quite well known artists, we all enjoyed Brian Eno’s work with Roxy Music. This was the first time that I was aware of the echo that our music was receiving in other countries. Two years later in ’76, I guess he was still very interested in watching us at work and wanted to exchange ideas with us.”

Melding the subtle, soaring guitar lines of Rother with masses of analogue keyboards and banks of

formative electronics, the template that Harmonia established and refined across their self-titled debut album from 1973 and 75’s *Deluxe* remain a potent and endlessly absorbing musical journey. In 2007 Grönland Records added to the Harmonia discography with the release of Live 1974, highlighting the fact that the dense and futuristic sounding collision between the trio reached new heights in a live setting. Eno and Cluster went on to record two albums for the Sky label (1977’s *Cluster & Eno* and *After the Heat*, from 1978), but “*Tracks and Traces* was laid down before Cluster recorded with Brian in Conny Plank’s studio,” recalls Rother, “the collaboration with Brian Eno and Harmonia was the beginning of their musical journey, that was a very special situation in the studio. There was no pressure we just enjoyed the exchange of ideas and inspiration. I think that’s what you hear on *Tracks and Traces*.” An abiding image for this writer is the back cover of Harmonia’s *Deluxe*, where the trio relax next to the river that runs past the studio at Forst. “That photo was taken from the window of the house where we lived. I still live there, the water that you see in the background, that’s where Brian Eno’s song ‘By this River’ came from, which was included on his 1977 album, *Before and After Science*.”

As the 70s inched towards the new decade, Rother struck out under his own name in 1977, ably assisted by legendary Can drummer Jaki Liebezeit and producer Conny Plank. After the popular disdain

that the futuristic sounds of Harmonia encountered in Germany during the mid 70s, society had obviously caught up with Rother’s frequencies by the end of the decade. “My first three solo albums sold incredibly well in Germany, strangely

“It was something close to a miracle that Herbert Grönemeyer managed to bring Klaus Dinger and myself together”

more than 90 per cent of all sales were domestic – outside of Germany, hardly anyone knew about that music. Suddenly, I had enough money to buy professional recording equipment. It was a dream for me to be able to work on music without having to keep an eye on the studio clock. Even with Conny Plank, when he opened his own studio in 1974, there was only limited time and he still had to observe the commercial aspects of the music industry. When *Flammende Herzen*, *Sterntaler* and *Katzenmusik* sold so well, it enabled me to go on the path of recording and working for days without end ... I started with my own studio in 1979; looking back I was an amateur really, taking a lot of risks, as I had no idea about studio technology. I just had all of the gear, and I started to play around with the concepts that turned into my next album, *Fernwärme*, which was released in 1982. The tricky part with your own recording studio is that in the first moment you think that you are gaining only advantages, but the circumstances of being able to

work without time limitation changed my approach to music.”

The creative tensions that had sustained and invigorated the first three Neu! albums were starting to erode the partnership between Rother

and Dinger. La Düsseldorf was the post-Neu! vehicle for Dinger, joined by his brother Klaus and Hans Lampe, both of who had played on *Neu!* ’75. Between the original Neu! duo, there were numerous false starts, misunderstandings and creative differences that eventually led to a situation where the work of Neu! was only available as low-quality bootlegs and pre-loved original pressings. Recalling these difficult years, Rother muses; “it’s really strange, there was little interest in the late 80s and early 90s, there was quite a gap.” This may be understood by the cyclical and faddish nature of the music industry and audiences, and has certainly made the critical acclaim that has descended upon the humble and down-to-earth Rother since the mid 90s even sweeter. “I had to survive when the music of the early 70s and my solo music was not that well received by the audience. It was completely ignored by the media, especially in Germany. It took some musicians from America and the UK to help the media and also the fans

to focus on the music.” Stereolab were one such band – I was interested in what Herr Rother had to say about that space age bachelor pad group. “Stereolab, what a wonderful band. It was very curious – I didn’t know what they sounded like, a friend took me to a concert. I heard them play something that, well ... very strongly reminded me of ‘Hallogallo’ and ‘Für Immer’ and other aspects of our music as Neu!, I guess they helped people to focus on the original music again.”

By the turn of the century, the wheels were grinding into motion for an official re-release of the Neu! back catalogue. “We were very fortunate, the owner of Grönland Records is a musician who’s completely famous. At least he’s a household name in Germany, Herbert Grönemeyer. He had a very tragic time in the late 90s, his wife and brother died in the span of one week. He was completely blocked, unable to create music, so he looked for something positive to focus his energies on. By chance, he stumbled across some Neu! recordings during a photo session in London; he liked the music, and started asking questions. People related the story about these two crazy musicians who were unable to find agreement. The 2001 re-releases took him about a year and a half to get together; they involved a lot of negotiations, and also money. Herbert’s a trustworthy guy, and he was able to convince Klaus Dinger to help with the releases. I had a lot of problems with Klaus during the 90s, they got worse and worse, unfortunately

he seemed to live on a different planet. I don’t want to go into too many details, but it was something close to a miracle that Herbert Grönemeyer managed to bring Klaus Dinger and myself together. We sat together and discussed the problems, but it was quite a struggle even then. If I were in the habit of prayer, I would send a prayer of thanks to Herbert Grönemeyer every night! We managed to re-release the three Neu! albums, since then it has been a pleasure to see the response that we have gathered from these albums.”

In 2010, the label gathered together the complete Neu! discography, including *Neu! 4*, which was recorded in 1986. This album had previously only been available on the Japanese Captain Trip label, after Dinger had reached an agreement with them in the mid 90s, unbeknownst to Rother. “Klaus Dinger’s widow Miki Yui and I got along very well, she’s a very talented artist and quite a lot more capable of collaboration than Klaus was. It seemed almost impossible for Klaus to find agreement with other people in the later years.”

To many outsiders, it seemed readily apparent that Rother and Dinger were contrasting characters. The inner sleeve of *Neu! ’75* illustrates this well – Rother glances with a slightly bemused look directly at the camera, Dinger scowls in dark shades, grasping a cigarette, with a look reminiscent of Mark Bolan or The New York Dolls. “We were very different personalities, the crazy thing is that in the studio, this added up to the music, without

any problems, we didn’t argue in the studio. The problems started outside of the studio. As an artist, I still admire Klaus Dinger’s work, everything that he did for Neu! and for my music, and the inspirations that he gave to me. That’s the two sides of my collaborations with Klaus Dinger.”

Rother visited Australia at the beginning of 2009. “I was on tour with Harmonia for All Tomorrow’s Parties; that was a fantastic trip.” For the 2012 dates, Rother is not touring under the auspices of Harmonia. “I was invited to play by the Adelaide Festival, I started thinking about how I was going to perform, as a solo artist, or as a band? Last year I played with Steve Shelley and Aaron Mullin; that was my project Hallogallo 2010. I started talking to Dieter Moebius, and he was quite thrilled by the invitation to join me. Also Hans Lampe, after a long period of not being involved with music, was happy to come to Australia. The idea is to perform my take on a selection of music I’ve been working on for the last 40 years, I’ve been moving around an imaginary centre of music throughout my career. The concerts shall focus on the music of Neu!, also some Harmonia pieces and selected solo works. The idea is to not replay the songs like in the original versions, it’s more about the idea of this music, about how I feel about the music today. The audience can expect the music to be challenging, because it will not be like ‘He’s playing our old favourite tune again.’ Personally, I would be bored if I was just to repeat myself. Obviously I cannot

perform all of the music, I will focus on specific ideas, which shall be different at every concert.

“In the 70s, when Neu! played live, I had a mono cassette player and one delay machine; there was no looping functions, or a hard disk with pre-prepared sounds. These days, it is about trying to combine all of the sound sources, recording certain parts live to use them straight away; the possibilities are endless. Right now, I’m trying to work out the right balance, so that I can present a music that has layers, that has more than just one guitar. This is what I had in the 70s, when I tried to play live with Klaus Dinger; that was so frustrating. Maybe even a non-musician can understand that with one guitar you cannot reproduce the sound of the studio work, where I had a multi-track recording machine, and played maybe five, six or seven guitars, several pianos, backwards and forwards. That’s what I’m interested in, presenting a music that has those facets, not just being a comic book reproduction of the old musical ideas. Just before you called, I connected some Moog machines and echo devices, and I thought that it sounded really nice. I’m really looking forward to presenting this music in Australia.”

Michael Rother, Dieter Moebius and Hans Lampe play on Thursday March 15 in Brisbane, Friday March 16 at Adelaide Festival, Saturday March 17 in Sydney, Monday March 19 in Melbourne.

Roll The Dice

Black Dice

International

By Bob Baker Fish

Photo by Bárbara Soto

Art by Black Dice



Brooklyn's art noise ensemble Black Dice have been delighting and terrifying audiences for over 15 years now with their strange and beautiful music. They began as noisy, often violent experimentalists, though quickly took on a more exploratory approach to their instrumentation, leaving traditional sounds and structures behind and focusing more on stringing guitar pedals together and bizarre combinations of electronic devices. The results have been positively hypnotic, referencing everything from afrobeat to the repetitive rhythms of krautrock. Yet they're a band that doesn't like to sit still, their sound and approach continuously evolving. Their last album, *Repo*, came across like a scattered form of mutant funk, yet that was two long years ago, and these days anything is possible.

"We're just finishing recording our new one," offers Eric Copeland from his home in Brooklyn, "we're finishing it tomorrow."

Copeland states that they'd been working on the tunes, testing them live and tweaking them before they went into the studio. As a result the trip to the studio was relatively pain-free and mostly about capturing a performance.

"This set we've been working on for about a year," he explains slowly, "and then we play it out and test it and kind of change it. So about 90 per cent of it was complete and we just had to do a performance and there's about ten per cent that required more studio attention I guess.

"It was fast and it sounds good so I'm really

stoked,” he continues. “It just seemed to go faster this process, I don’t know why. I’m glad it wasn’t the other way, I’m glad it wasn’t a pain in the ass. ”

Of course it wouldn’t be Black Dice if it wasn’t a departure from their previous work, their approach dramatically affecting the outcome.

“To me it’s a little bit simplified,” he suggests. “It’s more like a punk band in some way. I’m sure it’s a very different vocabulary, but I think it’s been played a little more like that. I think it’s a little bit more hands on, less programmed, even though there’s a lot of programmed stuff. More handmade.”

“I feel all the ideas are really direct,” he elaborates. “I’m sick of hearing delay, and I’m sick of hearing reverb and I’m sick of hearing moaning, and drones. I love all of that stuff but I don’t want to spend my time making that music now. I guess it’s kind of a reaction to make something that’s more punk and direct.”

Perhaps the most interesting aspect of Black Dice is the humanity inherent in their sound. Aesthetically it rings true like electronic music, yet it’s approached without the coldness or precision of most electronic artists. There’s a human element that prevents the perfection; in fact often it feels like the sounds are careering out of control and the members are doing their utmost to reign them in.

“I feel like we just play the instruments,” explains Copeland. “I think we’re gradually becoming more

like an electronic band. Each person had their own progression so we’re not really linked in a way. We’re all somewhat independent for the most part. But I think we’ve approached it with a band approach where someone would play a rhythm or someone would play a guitar or melody line.”

Yet it’s not that simple, the reality is that their approach to music making has developed over the years to the extent that they aren’t even entirely sure what each other is actually doing.

“I think everyone has their own relationship to it [their instrument]. For instance I don’t really understand what they do and they don’t really understand what I do either. It’s a subjective thing.

“We all know the nuts and bolts of it, ” he continues, “the connections, the wiring, but I think mostly it’s just stuff we like, that makes sense to each of us. Again it’s not like a master brain where we have to have a relationship to each other that way.”

Their relationship is almost telepathic, though given the bizarre structures and approach to music, at times you have no idea which of them is making the sounds and how they’re actually enmeshing. Surely this structural looseness would raise some difficulties from time to time.

“I don’t think it’s any different from more traditional play,” Copeland suggests sounding perplexed. “I mean I don’t necessarily know how



to play a trumpet but I don’t have to, to play with someone who can. It’s like an isolated instrument that they’re playing. That’s cool to me. I know what their abilities are, how low they can go or how high.”

Then there’s the notion of improvisation. Live performances have traditionally been joyous feats of noisy abandon, where it’s near impossible to tell who’s doing what and where the songs begin and end. For the audience it can be strange and disconcerting, never entirely sure where the music is going. Copeland suggests that to some extent the band experience this too, however they do set some vague parameters around their set that

provides space for improvisation.

“You know how to go from the beginning of the set to the end of the set, you know what’s going to happen pretty much but there’s a lot of looseness you know. It’s not James Brown or something,” he laughs.

In 2004 the band parted company with their long-time drummer Hisham Bharoocha reducing Black Dice to a trio, and they have remained that way ever since. On subsequent albums *Broken Ear* (recorded in Byron Bay), and 2007’s *Load Blown* the band picked up the slack using electronic beats and pulses to create percussion. It’s an approach they’ve ultimately embraced, not looking back.



“To be honest it’s really exciting to play beats, it’s another sort of vocabulary in the sound.”

“Sometimes we think that it would be a nice thing [having a drummer] but it’s also there are complications with drummers too, like having a drums set,” Copeland laughs. “For instance we couldn’t travel in the US with a drummer right now because we couldn’t fit everything in the car. But if there was somebody who made a lot of sense I don’t think would be opposed to it.”

Then of course there’s the impact upon the music, with Copeland finding that the absence of beats opened up space for creativity.

“To be honest it’s really exciting to play beats,” he offers enthusiastically. “It’s another sort of vocabulary in the sound. I think with a drummer you’re less likely to take that on, but when he left it was kind’ve the next step, it was what was missing. Now anyone can do what they want, to bring in beats, it’s really nice to have that option.”

“But it’s been Bjorn, Aaron and myself for so long that it doesn’t feel like we need anybody,” he continues. “We’re also travelling with a projectionist that we used to use forever but we haven’t been busy so we haven’t used him for a long time, this guy Danny Perez. He travelled with us for almost 10 years and he’s really familiar with what we do and how we do it, and what our shows are like. It’s another perspective on what’s going on.”

Perez is probably best known for his work with Animal Collective on their audio visual *ODDSAC* album in which sound and vision are hopelessly entwined. His projections are the latest in a long

line of techniques designed to push the boundaries and continue to keep both the music and the process interesting.

“Everybody is doing what we want. Nobody is making anyone do anything. In some ways I feel if one person changes everyone has to respond to it. Right now it’s a pleasant place to be because it’s been fast and it’s been fun. I’m enjoying it a lot.”

It is a testament to the band’s continuing artistic vision that after 15 years they’re still discovering new avenues and feeling invigorated by the music, yet it isn’t just the music that is keeping them together.

“One of them is my brother so it’s kind of a given,” Copeland laughs, “and the other one is basically my brother. To be honest the older I get the more special our time together becomes. Because everyone has a real life and families, so to me it’s a real pleasant relationship for the most part that involves making music and travelling. But it also involves us hanging out and talking as friends, because I don’t know how much everyone would have that steady relationship otherwise. Like I don’t have many friends that I call everyday to hang out.”

Black Dice’s *Mr. Impossible* will be available in April 2012, released through Ribbon Music.

Tripping in the
Elizabethan Sense –
The World of Ian
Hodgson's Moon
Wiring Club

International
by Daniel Gottlieb



“The iconic idiosyncrasies of English life, like ‘teashops, stately homes, ruined buildings’ become fertile ground for exploring the odd, uncanny and magical.”

ick up a tourist guide to the town of Clinkskell, perched amongst the cold and misty moors of Northern England. Walking past the usual *mise-en-scène* that accompanies such a town – one of oak trees, unassuming tea houses and free-standing thatched cottages flaking against the wind – you will eventually come to Old Gloaming Street.

This street is unlike most streets you are likely to encounter in England, however. There, you will find the *Blank Workshop*, where, amongst many others, Mr Arnold Van Rensburg sells his famous hallucinogenic Scrumptytons Sweets that induce ‘conversations with unseen feline acquaintances’ and ‘night terrors.’ Mr Kemble Oldknow will be busy compiling material for Gelographic Radiotelevsion; serials such as *13 O’Clock Hallucinations* and *Ghost Telegrams*. Frederick Spoons is researching his newest book on secret bird languages, and

Gecophonic Recording Productions is releasing its newest otherworldly sonic explorations.

One couldn’t be blamed for thinking that the quick survey above was all lifted straight from an English fairy tale or children’s novel. Instead, this phantasm exists not in a book, but at a URL. Spend some time clicking around the *Blank Workshop* website, and soon the town of Clinkskell will reveal itself in intimate detail. Browsing through the site becomes an act of discovery, as if one was actually treading its streets. One can pop into the local bookstore to buy fantasy fiction, meet the mysterious locals in full illustration, read the Mayor’s welcoming address to the town, and even look around at some of the town’s strange architecture.

All this springs from the mind of Ian Hodgson, whose electronic music project, Moon Wiring Club seems at first to play only an incidental role in the

wider fanfare of this odd but delightfully coherent world. It is not surprising, then, to find that before he was making music, Hodgson was already writing books and fairy tales for children: “The whole idea of Clinkskell derives from the children’s book I was writing years ago, and it predates any music I’ve composed.” This knack for storytelling – for ‘spinning a tale’ – has never abandoned Hodgson. Primary to anything else, it is the irrepressible legacy of C.S. Lewis, of English folklore, and illustrated children’s books, that looms as the largest influence on Moon Wiring Club’s musical style. What initially attracted Hodgson to these stories was how “the world presented [was] similar to the actual one around us, but you have to take the time to look for it.”

This trope of the strange being enmeshed in the familiar endures in the eight albums he has self-released since 2007, including two from 2011 – *Somewhere A Fox Is Getting Married*, and *Clutch It Like A Gonk*. Like in the fictional worlds of *The Prisoner* or *The Adventures of Alice in Wonderland* that play on a similar ethic (think how an antique wardrobe acts as the portal to Narnia, for example), in Clinkskell, the iconic idiosyncrasies of English life, such as “teashops, stately homes, ruined buildings”, become fertile ground for exploring the odd, uncanny and magical. It is a combustive combination that gives insight into an imagination that seems both boundless and irrepressibly spontaneous. Under Hodgson’s eye, teapots,

antiques, and matrimony take on warped second lives, almost as if taunting their former selves. In the stories that Moon Wiring Club weaves into sound, the bizarre always rubs shoulders with the inane, the normal always borders the absurd.

A fascination with the double life of pastoral imagery would not seem to naturally lend itself, at least intuitively, to the sonic vocabulary of modern electronic music. Generally speaking, synthesizers, drum machines and MIDI controllers have served to imagine images of the future, not to re-articulate stories that stand as period pieces of English civility. It has not been electronic music, but rather television costume dramas like M.R. James’s *Whistle and I’ll Come To You*, the Victorian illustrations of Richard Dadd, and a corpus of children’s literature that has kept this storytelling tradition alive. Moon Wiring Club breaks this standoff by making the themes of fairytales and children’s stories both the subject matter and working material of the music. “The idea of marriage is obviously a strong theme throughout folk tales and fairy tales, and has romantic weight,” Hodgson notes, “I like the use of romance and magic to frame electronic music in something other than (and I’m clearly generalising here) ‘dystopian future’ or ‘grid pattern’”

This change in focus required Hodgson to look at fresh sources and techniques for his sampling. A self-described “avid collector” of “vintage British films and television, and 2nd hand spoken word/



children's LPs," he takes snippets of their "spoken atmosphere" and reassembles them with other samples to form his own dialogues and characters. For example, in the track 'RSVP VIP Fresh', from last year's excellent *Somewhere a Fox Is Getting Married*, it is a line from a Lord Tennyson poem ('fresh as the first beam glittering on a sail/that brings our friends up from the underworld') that forms the centrepiece of the track. It's dropped in the style of an Ice Cube punchline, had he lived in Cornwall his whole life and attended performing arts school. But unlike how sampling is used in say, hip-hop, where the basic source material is manipulated into the melodic or rhythmic fibre of the track, Hodgson uses his samples mainly for plot creation. This has allowed Hodgson to exercise his storytelling prowess, "to present an 'audio story' in a way that purely instrumental or vocal music cannot." Relying on the weight of the words with their natural cadences and intonations, the samples act like the narrative voice-over, skewing the plot towards unexpected ends. It gives every Moon Wiring Club track its own discernible role in the story, forming chapters or scenes in a vivid narrative album arc.

Hodgson combines this novel sampling technique into a musical style that leads to a disorientating and often unnerving listening experience. Limited by his equipment – by modern standards, a blasphemously primitive set-up of a Playstation 2 and a second-hand copy of *MTV Music Maker* –

Hodgson can only sample very brief portions of dialogue at a time, and builds up his drum lines hit by hit. Thick, dank layers of bass and clunky drum lines coil between the manic swirl of voices, utterances, sighs and exclamations, with which he crams the track's space, snuffing it of breath. One can very easily get lost in the over-stimulated nature of the music, despite its minimalist origins. It does not take much to be dizzyed by a swarm of abstract meanings and heavy reverb, the compressed spaces of dialogue and drum patterns. It is with a degree of tongue-in-cheek, then, that Hodgson can construct a track around the cycling phrase "disorder, derangement, disunion, jumble, mix up," delivered in the most plum of English accents.

Beyond the disorder and derangement that can be heard, what really lends Moon Wiring Club its unique taxonomy is a groundlessness that is not aurally represented, but is rather felt, or sensed. The most striking feature of listening to a Moon Wiring Club album is struggling to find a way of confidently placing one's finger on what is actually being listened to. We are hearing sounds and voices, but where do they actually exist? After all, the music is ultimately delivered as its own fairy tale, told through the appropriation of troves of salvaged audio from other fairy tales, that takes place within the fictional town of Clinkskell, which supposedly lies amongst the reality of Northern England. Hodgson uses past artefacts to reinvent a new type of reality; a fantastic world of bizarre creatures

and plot lines that exists amidst the hyperreality of the internet. In short, Moon Wiring Club seems to float in a world of its own making: it is not exactly music from our time, but neither is it entirely from the past. It does not seem to be of this world, but nevertheless exists within it. The overwhelming sensation one gets from listening to a Moon Wiring Club album is that one is experiencing an apparition – the ghost of sounds that once had a firm existence, but now lie only in the semi-reality of a new assemblage.

This eerie feeling of semi-reality, of presence-absence (or absence-of-presence), places Moon Wiring Club's work alongside a wave of English contemporaries whose output since the early-to-mid 2000s has typified the Hauntological shift in modern music. Artists like The Advisory Circle, Belbury Poly and The Focus Group (who have all found their home on the extraordinary Ghost Box label) represent a generation of musicians who spent their youths glued to English television programs like *Dr. Who*, or listening to the library music of Delia Derbyshire and the BBC Radiophonic Workshop – perhaps the source of the greatest mass exposure to experimental music ever. All, in their own way, explore the immanent creative potential of cultural relics from childhood, and how these figments morph, corrupt, endure, and inevitably 'haunt' the present, but never in their original form or with their preserved essence. Time, in the music of the hauntologists, always seems out

of step, never quite sure of where it should lie.

Hodgson, who has previously collaborated with Belbury Poly, and has a full-blown collaboration with The Advisory Circle's Jon Brooks due soon (once they get past the usual distractions of "playing antique board-games, sampling Edwardian savouries or discussing Lovejoy"), also explores the fantasies and wonder of the childhood mind. Many of the samples in his tracks focus on "never want[ing] to grow up, [to] remain a child forever." Not only would his music naturally appeal to children for its novelty, but when one listens to Moon Wiring Club, a child-like suspension of reality is required to fully enjoy the experience. It echoes the grandeur of not only the stories that children find fascinating, but the way in which children find things fascinating – the leaps of reality, the suspension of disbelief, the delight they find in being completely immersed in something so absurd. And if Moon Wiring Club's music sounds scary, then Hodgson reminds us: "if your creativity produces things that are presented as dark/sinister/ghostly/horror etc., then it's worth considering that there's very little more dark/sinister/ghostly/horrible than in fairy tales, which are supposedly much beloved of children." A much needed reminder about how much attracts the youthful mind, and the *jouissance* that comes from indulging it once again.

Moon Wiring Club's *Clutch It Like A Gonk* is released on Gecophonic.

Cyclic Selects

Cameo – *Cardiac Arrest* (1977)

The debut album from the hard-hitting funk legends still blows me away now. This came out in 1977, way before their crossover 80s pop hit 'Word Up'. Many tracks here are still getting a



good workout on the dance floor today.

Banda Black Rio – *Gafieira Universal* (1978)

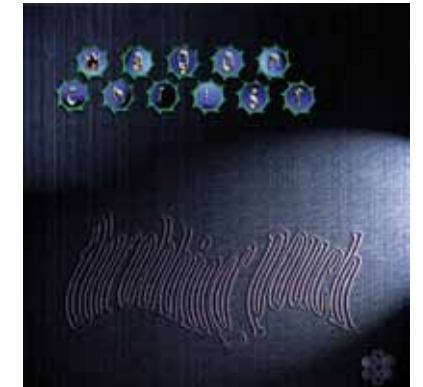
Tight Latin jazz funk with great changes and syncopated rhythms throughout. The band's second album and one of the best Brazilian funk releases I



know from this era!

Wagon Christ – *Throbbing Pouch* (1995)

Probably the pinnacle of 90s downbeat for me. The album sounds warm and woody, is laid back and slow, and has a remarkable coherency that has allowed it to stand the test of time. This album was unlike anything that was coming out back then, and surprisingly was released on Rising High Records, mainly known for releasing trance music. Luckily the album



skipped the trance genre, and in my opinion is the best thing the label ever put out!

Plug – *Drum 'n' Bass for Papa* (1996)

Another Luke Vibert production and this is still the standout and most interesting drum and bass record I have ever heard. Although I don't produce drum and bass and rarely play it out anywhere, I still find this album surprising, innovative and an inspirational feat of music production. Not sure if this is commercially available anymore

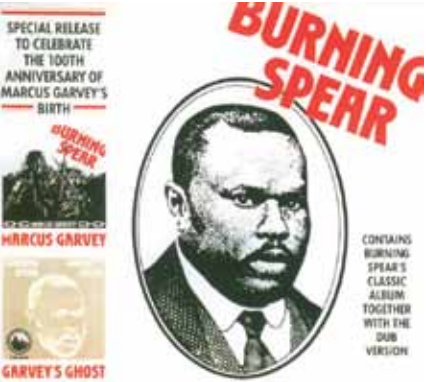
as I heard there were some issues with some samples on it, but well worth tracking down if you haven't heard it before!

Burning Spear – *Marcus Garvey/Garvey's Ghost* (1976)

Hard to pick a classic reggae



album out of my many, many favourites, but this one is well worth a mention. Guaranteed to relax you and make your day better, this release is made all the more great with the inclusion of Garvey's Ghost – the dub version of the original album. This was one of the first dub



reggae records I came across many years ago, and I still find it an amazing listen now.

Mungo's Hi-Fi Meets Brother Culture – *Self titled* (2002)

Forward thinking, bass-heavy reggae. Gives the bottom end a thorough workout without it being dark and too overly dubsteppy. Mungo's still runs with the positive vibes, which in my opinion is what reggae is all about. A little hard to track down a copy nowadays, but big tunes on here.

Thomas Mapfumo – *The Chimurenga Singles* (1976-1980)

I was lucky enough to interview

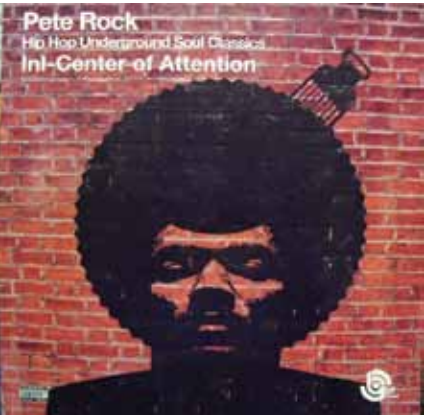
“The Lion Of Zimbabwe” a few years back on my radio show



Back To Funk on 2SER, and also caught him live while on tour here in Sydney. A massive political and musical figure in Zimbabwe, his music has been banned and he has been imprisoned due to its popular influence in the country. This is uplifting African music with a message, and downright impossible not to dance to. This is the first real African dance music I was exposed to, and it has a special place in my heart.

Pete Rock – *Lost & Found: Hip Hop Underground Soul Classics* (originally recorded 1995)

Nice and smooth hip-hop from a master producer. These recordings were originally shelved (why? they are so good!). I bought this from a record store years ago - the guy behind the counter said “trust me. You don't need to listen to this. Just buy it. This is good shit.” It's a double record release



here with two separate albums, but the real gold is with Center Of Attention by INI. Classic.

The Roots – *Do You Want More?!!!!!!* (1995)

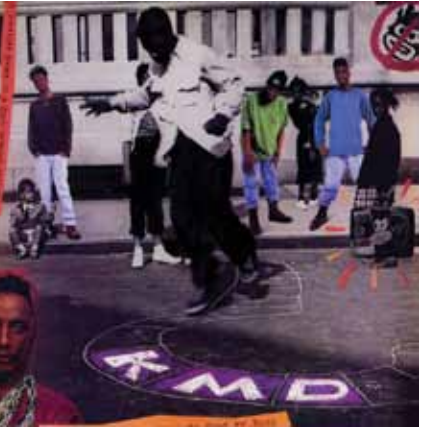
The best live hip-hop band I have seen yet, and this album is one of my favourite recordings from the legendary band. Black Thought is a hip-hop treasure, and his words and style are a phenomenon.



KMD – *Mr Hood* (1991)

This album used to be a much-loved tape (copied from a friend back in the day) that was on rotation in my car until my box of tapes were stolen one night in Redfern. I came across this album again in an isolated

shopping mall on the outskirts of Perth, sitting dusty on a rack, and I'm sure it was originally ordered fresh back in the early 90s and lay dormant in that shop for 15



years. It was a jaw-dropping find, and it is still the most fun and playful hip-hop I know, with clever sampling and rapping. This was the group that launched the career of MF Doom, who at the time was known as Zev Love X. **Wynonie Harris – *Women Whiskey & Fishtails*** (1950s) The great rhythm and blues/ jump blues shouter is a standout of the genre. I listen to a lot of blues, swing, country and folk



in my downtime, but always love to find the party people in these roots music styles that know how to blast out the dance tunes. This album is a collection of songs loosely dedicated to hard drinking and women (as the title suggests), and makes you feel like getting rowdy. After years of playing urban club and warehouse spaces, or outdoor parties and festivals – the idea of a real hoedown in a dirty old pub or barn is completely romantic to me. Those screamers from the 40s and 50s knew

how to party just as good as any of us I bet!

SINGLES

Hugh Masekela – ‘The Disco Kid’ (Promo Only 12”) (1975)

A very rare one sided 12” promo from 1975, that is one of my favourite Hugh Masekela tracks of all time! Hard to believe this didn’t get wider circulation at all – it’s a excellent blend of afro, disco and funk – and a really great example of the influence



disco and funk music had on African artists in the 70s. Hope this gets re-released someday so more people get a chance to hear it!

Panache – ‘Every Brother Ain’t A Brother’ (1979)

Sampled by DJ Shadow for the Latyrx tune ‘Lady Don’t Tek No’ – this track was way ahead of its time. The b-side instrumental is the



business here – a stripped down electro funk jam with an awesome bassline and funky, funky guitar. The production is right-on the money too, with the drums all sharp and snappy. It’s no wonder ‘Lady Don’t Tek No’ was such a winning tune for Latyrx! Meem’s *Monsters Don’t Sleep OK* is released through Non-Label/Creative Vibes.



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