
Cyclic Defrost
THE RESERGENCE OF THE CASSETTE TAPE
THIS THING COLLECTIVE / THE NECKS / JONATHAN KEY

Cyclic *Defrost* Magazine

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Contents

EDITORIAL

It was foolish to think that *Cyclic Defrost* could go on forever in print. And it is quite amazing that has lasted as long as it has.

Born in 1998 as an illicitly photocopied zine when Dale Harrison and I were running our long running Sunday club night, Frigid, with Luke Dearnley and Shane Roberts, *Cyclic Defrost* operated as a combination of flyer and newsletter. In 2002, Marcus Westbury alerted us to a new grant that the Australia Council for the Arts had just announced and we applied to make a proper magazine. We wanted a magazine that could support and promote the burgeoning electronic music scene in Australia, and one that could also operate a little outside the normal rules of the street press. We wanted a magazine that could also showcase a different graphic designer on the cover, and not be littered with irrelevant and compromising advertising. What a bourgeois luxury.

To our surprise the proposal got accepted and we suddenly had to publish a proper magazine with a print run of 5000 copies. We did a deal with Inertia Distribution, then run by our friends, and started pulling together as many writers as we could from around Australia who were interested in doing something new. Inertia would send copies to record stores around the country with regular orders - it worked well for many years.

The magazine filled a gap. Several hundred artist interviews and many thousands of reviews attracted wide readership and international prominence.

We took *Cyclic Defrost* to Mutek in Montreal, Sonar in Barcelona twice and to Popkomm in Berlin, and collaborated with local labels and projects to have a number of issues include free promo cover CDs. It was hard going - print was difficult and every undelivered copy would pile up in our houses gathering dust.

Dale quit after Issue 12 and Bim Ricketson took over as designer, and Matt Levinson joined me as editor. Thommy Tran took over from Bim after Issue 21. Matt and I both stepped down after Issue 26, handing the reins over to Shaun Prescott and Lex Savvides and together with Thommy have done a splendid job carrying it on through to this final issue.

Everything has to come to an end.

We were always lucky to get consistent Australia Council funding for as long as we did. Eleven years is great run.

Print is expensive. Laying out a print magazine is time consuming and fiddly. Chasing advertising to help contribute to print costs is hardly worth it.

And mailing bundles of paper magazines around the country is increasingly expensive.

I had always argued for the value of print on the basis that it had a presence in the world - that an issue could sit on a student's coffee table amongst the pizza boxes and discarded beer bottles for weeks and be picked up by a friend and read, in a way that digital just couldn't.

The PDFs all the way back to 1998 are staying online. As are all the reviews.

I figure it is a good archive, if a very biased one, of what a bunch of us thought was interesting between 1998 and 2013 in Australia. We got lots of things wrong but a biased history is better than no history at all.

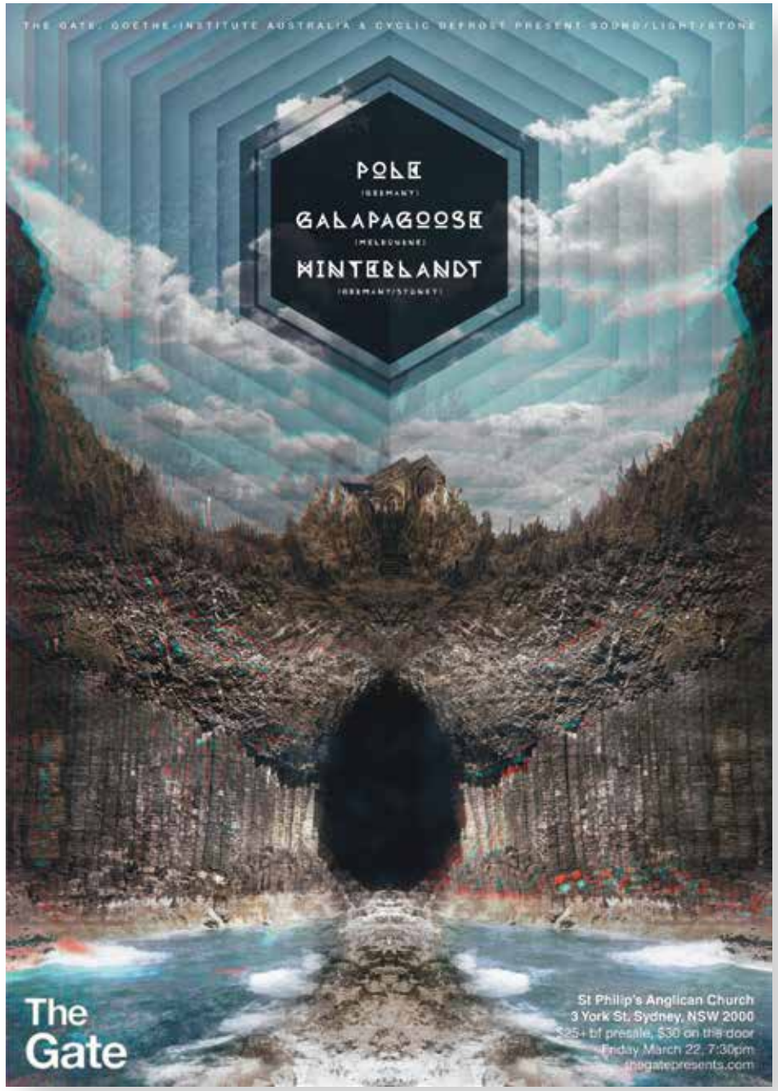
So its not completely over - but it is scaling back. A collective of the longest serving writers are keeping the site alive and the reviews churning over. They might even do the occasional interview. Keep an eye on the website for everything. www.cyclicdefrost.com

There's far too many people to thank - all our writers and contributors; our guest cover designers; the shops long since gone that stocked us; Ash, Justin, Nick, Chloe and Ruby from Inertia who made those early years happen; Giv, Chris, and Adam who kept the website operating; our legendary printer Hugh, who stuck with us for almost the whole last decade; all the advertisers and regular subscribers who put their faith and money behind it; and you, our readers.

CD

Cover designer

JONATHAN KEY



Jonathan Key is a nineteen-year-old graphic designer and multidisciplinary creative from Sydney. He has previously created artwork for bands like Valar, live music event The Gate and the Yes Please record label. Jonathan shares thoughts on his design process and the inspiration behind this issue's cover.

What is your take on the *Cyclic Defrost* cover this issue?
I wanted to try something completely different in terms of style and go back to my roots with illustration. The initial idea was to create something that captured the spirit of the creative community and make it look like a DIY zine. Stylistically, the cartoons are reminiscent of the cartoons I grew up with when we were all still using cassettes and the look and feel is a mix of underground subcultures.

Since this is also the last issue of *Cyclic Defrost*, I wanted it to be special and made a custom logo. The cover is intended to look welcoming. It could almost be the artwork for a really old cassette tape, which was another idea I had in mind.

Growing up, what sort of visual styles were you looking to produce?
My childhood was wonderful, my parents always encouraged me to follow the things that interested me. They knew I loved to draw and supported me all the way. In primary school, I used to sell these awful comics and got completely discouraged because I didn't sell many; it's hilarious looking back at them now of course.

The biggest influence on me artistically would have to be Radiohead, I'm a huge fan and I still play their albums on repeat late into the night. I thought that Radiohead's albums were the purest sense of art: the music, album art, lyrics and structure of their songs have been so well thought out and executed in such a passionate and honest form. A lot of artists at the time started using computers to sound pitch perfect, Radiohead would instead use it creatively to distort their sounds.

Lately I've been experimenting with glitch art where you purposely mess up the data that makes your digital image to create something unexpected but beautiful in its own way. I've also been getting back into illustration and learning film and animation in my free time. It's not

always a style I'm looking to produce, but a medium or a new way to express myself.

How do you approach cover art when you are trying to visually interpret music?

It always begins with immersing myself in the music. Listening to the artist's discography, reading the lyrics and pulling out certain themes and feelings from the songs. I avoid working with artists if I don't love their music, I'd find it very hard to create for something I don't believe in. I always do my research to ensure I'm not making something that already exists and then start roughing out concepts. I've been lucky that my clients have faith in my ability to create something unique but they'll also let me know when the art isn't reaching the level of quality they wanted (which is awful but always leads to a better idea). Creating art for the music is always a collaborative process because without the music, I can't be inspired to create.

Your work draws on some amazing photography as well as photo-realistic elements from elsewhere in your portfolio. Where do you source these images, and how do you manipulate them to create a piece that is totally your own?

Thank you. I generally source them from stock photography sites or use photos I've taken at places like the Blue Mountains, Thailand and Hong Kong; I'm always taking photos when I'm out because I can't help myself from thinking 'That could be useful for an idea I have.'

In terms of creating the artwork, the layout and ideas always start on paper. I don't spend too much time refining a sketch because I like to experiment in Photoshop but it's good to know what direction the art is heading before jumping onto the computer.

I then go into Photoshop and composite my photos. It's a long process of cutting out the photos to put in and matching the perspective, hue, saturation and brightness. Once I have a structure I'm happy with, I layer on textures and colour grade the whole thing, fixing any mistakes. The final step is adding text where I'll balance hierarchy, weight, letter and line spacing.

What role does music play in your design process?

Music plays a huge role both during the design process and my life. If I had to pick a top three: Radiohead, The Beatles and The Red Hot Chili Peppers. I usually listen to the artist I'm designing for during the process but the playlist is ever changing. At the moment, it's a lot of Daft Punk's *Random Access Memories*, Christopher Willits and Battles.

Your work contains quite a lot of (what seems to be) organic elements, do you think this is something that comes across as a natural extension of your personal aesthetic, or is it in response to particular projects?

I guess it comes as a reaction to the very sterile/digital look we're seeing a lot of these days in graphic design. Whilst my projects definitely have a digital look to them, I always strive to ensure they're never too far one way or the other. In the same way that I can love going for a hike in the mountains or exploring a new digital experience, one is not better to the other, just different and striking a balance is good.

Independent events and record labels are strongly represented in your portfolio. How important have these outlets been in supporting your work?

They're incredibly important. Though their budgets are lower, they share the same love for music and art I have, which makes working with them a pleasure. I think a lot of my favourite work has come from them giving me a lot of creative freedom, I really can't thank them enough for the opportunities. I'm also pretty sad The Gate stopped, lots of good gigs came from that and making posters for it was always fun, hopefully there will be many new initiatives to fill in the gap.

Do you feel like you can draw particular themes from your work, or do you see the work only in visual terms?

Whether I am conscious of it or not, my art always relates to whatever stage of life I am in. There are common themes that run throughout much of my artwork, I hardly ever feature people and when I do, they are heavily distorted or stylised in an abstract way. I guess this represents the isolation and conflict I feel with society's way of living. Thom Yorke said "I think the most important thing about music is the sense of escape." I feel the same way, so I want my artwork to inspire a world in the viewers' mind and allow them to escape, even if it's just for a few seconds.

More of Jonathan's work can be seen at www.jonathankey.com

OPEN THIS THING UP

This Thing
Local
By Samuel Miers

At ten in tears, late for Saturday morning tennis, as No Doubt's 'Don't Speak' is taken from the top spot on Rage by Savage Garden's 'Truly Madly Deeply', to high school packing on dripping eyeliner in my 'Tonight I will feast on your flesh' shirt, before a Parkway Drive show. Next, my best mate gets his licence/first car and somehow has a copy of Mr Oizo's still seriously underrated and still my favourite beat album *Moustache (Half a Scissor)* blasting us, windows down, around Batemans Bay. Then, I started going on adventures to Sydney to the only festivals I knew existed like Big Day Out and Future Music. I would wander around all the stages with all the pilled-out Batemans Bay-ins (like the ones who beat up Axemen and Mad Nanna at Wandella Hall) trying unsuccessfully to find grooves in *Half a Scissor* territory.

This search continued in Melbourne when I moved here. I mean I was always satisfied, until midnight as I came across Lost Animal and Fabulous Diamonds pretty quickly, but I could never quite find the music I wanted to party to. I had a bit of an idea of what was going on overseas with Plastic People in London and LA's Low End Theory. I knew there must be people in Melbourne doing something like this. I found Tom (Forces) and Spike playing edgy disco bangers at Jerome's and pretty decent minimal/electro/house at 3rd Class, but it wasn't until late one Thursday night in October 2010 at No Vacancy's Leif Podhajsky Exhibition that Galapagoose sorted me out. He played his jerky future soul rhythms live. All the drum parts on a pad with his left fingers, while his right hand flew around his Monome, triggering samples from buttons that light up when hit. The experience was especially interactive for the crowd, something very few beat producers and DJs achieve. My friend Tess wanted to have sex with his fingers by the end of it and finally for me it was a music all the parts of my body could move in different directions to. I tried to hassle him to find out where he usually played, but it didn't matter - I had already booked my bus to move back to Batemans Bay the next week.

On arriving home I typed Galapagoose's name into Google to try and open this thing up and was dealt Dane Dare, Martin L, and Rambl's killer 3RRR program, The City Rises. They speak with an exciting Mary Anne Hobbs-ish tone and seem to be frothing to deliver you the freshest sounds of that week. There are highlights from local beat producers to forward thinking groove labels the world round like Hyperdub, Rushhour, Honest Jon's, Ninja Tunes etc. and always a couple of classics from Detroit. So this is how we spent my favourite summer of 2010/2011, streaming episodes of The City Rises, bouncing around on the balcony with our new barefooted high school girlfriends, and my little brother yelling from downstairs "I gotta work at 2pm tomorrow man, show some fucking respect." I was also pumping the tail end of Declan Kelly's long running Against the Arctic show which was hugely influential on the development of the current Melbourne beat scene.

Early that summer as I played on my balcony, a group of inspired Melbourne beat makers, broadcasters and visual artists were brought together by Dylan Michel (Wooshie) for a barbeque and online email group called 'thisthingmelbourne', which Wooshie, Galapagoose, Electric Sea Spider, Andras Fox, The City Rises Crew, Kane Ikin, James Ireland, Declan Kelly, BabaX, Mike Kay, Naps, Max Crumbs et al quickly evolved into the label/collective, This Thing. Frustratingly, I had to watch online from Batemans Bay as This Thing's events started popping up on Melbournebeats.com and The City Rises blog. Shows followed at the Buffalo Club, Horse Bazaar and Able 8's regular Uncomfortable Beats (another great Melbourne groove institution that sometimes crosses over with This Thing) night at Bar Open.

> "It was kinda special for me that night, seeing around a thousand people of all sorts, dressed their own way and moving their own way - something rare to find in any scene"

However I did happen to catch Electric Sea Spider's first live show that January, closing the evening at Canberra's Clubhouse for the incredible Flying Lotus Trio (they played *Half a Scissor*'s 'Stunt' as a band!). I was still flying on one of those day's red stars when Electric Sea Spider came on at 4am, banging his tuff-wobbly jams like 'Milk Bar' to a quarter-full dance floor. I was stoked, finding new ways for my body to move to music I wanted to party to with the funny Canberrans, until I realised what time it was and had to disappear for an hour nap in the car before a two hour drive back to my Bin Run Manager job in the Bay. A coupla months later I drove down to Melbourne for a Schulmädchen-Report show and luckily that night there was a huge Espionage gig on at the Revolt Art Space in Kensington organised by The Operatives (the crew responsible for bringing many of the best international beat makers to Melbourne). It was packed out for a night with Mount Kimbie, Lorn and a bunch of Melbourne producers including This Thingers Mike Kay, Rambl, Wooshie and Electric Sea Spider. It was kinda special for me that night, seeing around a thousand people of all sorts, dressed their own way and moving their own way (something rare to find in any scene), partying hard and eager to hear a fresh sound. There was also a room for 'experimental' music at the back of the venue where the likes of The Tantrums and Netzair played. This crossover of the beat and band scene has been something that has been very important to This Thing boss Wooshie from the beginning and is making Melbourne a continually exciting place to see a show. You can find the Thing guys playing with many of Melbourne's best bands like Circular Keys, Legendary Hearts and Standish/Carlyon. The increasingly eclectic line-ups that our city is seeing will lead to some next-level artists coming through in the next few years.

When I found my way back to the Victorian capital at the start of 2012 and began a show on the memorable online radio station Radio Valerie, I had to have the boys in for a This Thing special. On the back of the gang's massive multimedia performances at the Sugar Mountain and Meredith Festivals, Wooshie, Crumbs and Electric Sea Spider arrived in the little studio on top of the Gasometer, to the sounds of my favourite track and the most original thing to come out of the collective: Galapagoose and Wooshie's Nang Remix of Young Magic's 'You with Air.' The cruising attitude hi-hat groove gathers some serious momentum, to the point where all the bups and pows begin walking over the top of the mix and like nangs, it feels as if your head is gunna explode.

So anyways it was fascinating to hear each of them talking about their backgrounds in punk and hardcore, even though it seems that's where everyone I know and I came from. Max Kohane aka Crumbs still happens to drum in a couple of the finest grindcore/pianocore bands around: Agents of Abhorrence and PIVIXKI. It's pretty amazing to see him on stage thrashing blast beats one night, then dropping his shiny Dilla-style floor fillers, singing in a high voice with hand stretched out towards the crowd the next. He says, "Ice T's *Body Count* affected me greatly, more than you can ever believe." The interviews were filmed for a This Thing section in a documentary I toured China with, just before Galapagoose and Wooshie took their actual selves to Los Angeles, where they performed at the classic Low End Theory club (launching pad for Flying Lotus, Daedelus - and fucking Gaslamp Killer is one of the resident DJs). Their trip also included a live set on Matthewdavid's (Brainfeeder/Leaving records) Dublab radio show and an in-store at Poohbah records. Wooshie says "we think we're pretty similar but it's very different over there and there's things that would never work or go down over here and perhaps there's aspects of the attitude we could adopt here, and would make the scene a little more supportive or open minded, but I think Melbourne is poppin' and there's a lot of opportunity here."

This Thing brought out their all-star crew for Galapagoose and Wooshie's Grand Homecoming party at KIPL in September, with two suave noir cut outs as backdrops, each holding a copy of Jet's *Get Born* LP (which happened to be lying around at the venue) and future dreamin' projections by Naps. After some group cutting up of the Jet vinyl, Kane Ikin soothed the night in with his floaty textural grooves, followed by some serious business from Crumbs, Wooshie, Baba X, Galapagoose, Electric Sea Spider and two slick house sets by Andras Fox who is developing a reputation as the smoothest DJ/man in Melbourne.

What This Thing is doing is certainly one of the most exciting things in the country at the moment, and they've proven they can mix it with the best in the world. You notice on nights like this how close they are to breaking new territory. You can hear hip-hop, J Dilla drum patterns, Detroit techno, deep house, drone techniques, trap, jazz and pop swirling together to create their modern sound. But, like Chicago has its footwork/duke, Washington its Moombahton, Los Angeles its Jerkin I'm hoping – even though This Thing already owns the modern Australian dance floor – that they find Melbourne its own signature sound, something that reflects the city. **CD**

Local
By Chris Downton

THE LONGEST DAY

Since their earliest beginnings as the result of jamming sessions in a Sydney share house in 1997, inspired by the likes of Flying Saucer Attack and My Bloody Valentine, space rock/shoegaze duo The Longest Day have gone on to outlive many other similar bands. While co-founders Jay Annabel and Brad Stafford now live in two different cities (Annabel in Canberra, Stafford in Sydney), they've continued to build up a steady body of work. After initially emerging on the recording front with 2005's debut collection *Slumber*, apparently the result of an idea idly raised during a drunken conversation, the duo's two ensuing albums, 2006's *Sounds Of Jupiter* and 2008's *Night Falls* saw their dreamlike fusion of blurred vocals, ethereal guitar drones and almost icy soundscapes reaching an even greater level of depth and poignancy. Following an almost four year break, The Longest Day's latest album *Beyond Your Skies* illustrates just how much they've progressed once again during the intervening time, with this release easily coming across as their most cohesive and fully realised collection of songs to date.

One of my first impressions upon listening to the new album was just how much larger the duo's sonic palette appears to be, with an increased scope and depth present on all of the tracks that's a discernible jump from their early, more laptop-centred work. When I catch up with Jay and Brad via phone and email respectively, I venture that the new album strikes me as a big leap forward for the band. "I'd tend to agree with you," Jay agrees modestly. "It definitely sounds a lot more complete to me. We have the huge tracks and the droney tracks … you get a lot more out of this album if you listen to it in order rather than shuffle. It was definitely designed that way. Sometimes less can be more. On our last record *Night Falls*, some tracks are very heavily layered and in hindsight maybe there's too much layering, but I think we've learnt to restrain ourselves a bit more effectively between then and now. That's not to say that there's no layering – there's one song that has seven or eight guitar parts, but we're probably getting better at leaving space in the music."

"We also spend a long time on mixing, and part of that is panning," Jay continues. "So some songs can sound a bit bigger when we for instance record a guitar part twice, then separate them slightly in the mix. Other things come by accident. For instance, there's a double tracked vocal part on the album that came about because we weren't happy with the first take so we recorded it again, then discovered by accident that it sounded really good if we used both takes at the same time. "Also, we've used an electronic drumkit for this album, so the mix is better," adds Brad. "For our last album we used a real kit with one mic to record it, so it was a much more lo-fi outcome, which suited us at the time, but obviously produces a very different sound."

I also suggest that there's more of a focus on lyrics this time, with the duo's vocals sitting more prominently in the mix on many tracks. "It wasn't a conscious thing, but I agree that's what happened," replies Jay. "We didn't discuss it, it just turned out that way. It's interesting because this is the first album where I'm singing on three songs, mainly because I had lyrics that were worth singing. I've never asked Brad what he's getting at (in his lyrics). We never really ask each other what each other's lyrics are about. The thread is more the music than the lyrics. Having said that, there are two really vague songs about climate change issues, but they're not overt and most people wouldn't notice."

"Some people have said that they still can't hear what we're singing, but that could also be because the lyrics for one song contain bits of Swedish and Icelandic. Mixing takes about as long as recording because as we live in different cities, coming up with mixes we're both happy with can be a long, iterative process. Perhaps this means we listen more closely to what we hope listeners can get out of the record, and maybe nudging the vocals up a bit came out of that. But we didn't have a plan for it."

"I think you'll find more vocal tracks and a progressive upping of those vocal tracks in the mixes of each album over time, probably for two reasons," Brad suggests. "One, I think our songwriting has delivered more traditionally structured rock/pop songs that naturally call for vocals to be more prominent in a song's make-up, and two, it probably reflects at least for me a developing confidence in vocal ability and the lyrics themselves. But then again, as Jay said, it's never been a point of conversation between us."

As well as appearances from FourPlay's Peter and Tim Hollo on 'The Tempest', *Beyond Your Skies* also features longtime 'third' member and Boston resident Christy Romanick on guitar and vocals, and she's also responsible for the album's striking sleeve photography. "I don't know how she does what she does," admits Jay. "She's done all the art since the second album. She doesn't treat anything, it's all unfiltered. It was really hard to get a visual palette on the last album that suited the music, but this time we really got it right."

In parting, I ask the duo what plans they currently have in terms of playing live shows surrounding the release of *Beyond Your Skies*. "We recently played a gig at the Phoenix in Canberra, which went extremely well," replies Jay. "It was, however, our first gig of 2012. We have a couple of ways of performing given there's just the two of us, but we want to sound like a four-piece. We've previously borrowed bass players and drummers from other bands, which has worked well in the past, but adds an extra degree of difficulty to organising a show."

"The alternative is to use a laptop on which we play the bass and drum parts we'd recorded ourselves earlier. It sounds similar, but maybe it's an odd dynamic for an audience to see two people playing that sound like four. But even with just the two of us plus laptop, we still don't seem to find the time to play very often. It would be great to get the opportunity to play in Melbourne or Brisbane, and playing a show in Boston with our friend Christy remains the dream."

The Longest Day's *Beyond Your Skies* is out now through Feral Media

EMBRACING DECAY, THE RESURRECTION OF TAPE

"A minority of people are listening to music on tape, but I really love the medium"

Local
By Kate Carr
Photos courtesy of
Marcus Fischer

Tape is finding its way back.

Two thousand and thirteen marks exactly fifty years since Philips launched the compact audio cassette at the Berlin Radio Show, and more than 20 years since the format was widely considered to be in its death throes at the hands of the mighty CD. But a funny thing has happened lately. The cassette, so long derided for its sound quality and dismissed as outdated, is making a resurgence. From cassette shaped iPhone covers, to tattoos and even the rediscovery of the Walkman, tapes are turning up everywhere, and not just as fashion accessories. In the ambient scene in particular, cassettes and the broader tape format have been enthusiastically embraced both as a tool for creating particular aural outcomes, and as format for releasing music.

Perhaps one of the most well known exponents of tape in its many guises is Portland musician Marcus Fischer, who performs live with giant suspended tape loops and drew heavily on the medium for his album *Monocoastal*, which was released in 2011 on 12k. Like many of us, Fischer says tape played a huge role in his childhood. ''As a child I felt like the stuff we had on tape was my domain. Records for the most part either belonged to my parents or my older sister. For whatever reason, my dad always had a lot of tape recorders stashed away in his closet and a seemingly unending supply of blank tapes so I often helped myself to both,'' he said.

But is it just nostalgia which has brought us back to tape? In the recent BBC Radio 6 showcase on the medium, Samantha Urbani from Brooklyn band Friends states that she hates CDs and has managed to find a second hand Walkman to listen to music on. Nicholas Jaar, the pin up boy for hipsters everywhere, is well known for his hatred of CDs, having gone so far as to release music on a shiny silver cube to escape the tyranny of the silver disc. Taking aim at this contemporary embrace of kitsch items, Christy Wampole, in her divisive *New York Times* opinion piece, 'How to live without Irony', which looked at the rise of the hipster, wrote: ''Manifesting a nostalgia for times he never lived himself, this contemporary urban harlequin appropriates outmoded fashions (the moustache, the tiny shorts), mechanisms (fixed-gear bicycles, portable record players) and hobbies (home brewing, playing trombone).'' It would be easy to add cassette to this list of outmoded mechanisms.

CDs have become deeply unfashionable it seems, but can this along with a widespread embrace of the 'outmoded' account for the rise of the tape? Or is there something more to it for ambient musicians in particular? Fischer for one seems a bit bemused by the ascendancy of tape in the ambient scene. ''I'm not sure what it is that triggered this renewed interest in tape and why it seems to resonate so much with the ambient music community,'' he stated. ''I think it really feels like something of a trend at the moment. Maybe it is a reaction to the very cold and processed sounds that seemed so popular in electronic music several years ago ... or maybe people are just getting bored with the sound of Max/MSP or Ableton Live. Who knows?''

That hissy hazy sound

One thing most people seem to agree on is that tape has its own unique sonic fingerprint, one which is both instantly recognisable and yet unpredictable.

UK musician David Newlyn released his album *Deterioration* last year on my own label Flaming Pines, basing it on an exploration of recording techniques ranging from cassettes to dictaphones to camera mics. He says nothing can quite compare to the distinctive sound of tape. ''I began multi-tracking my own music using the two cassette recorders. Sounded awful usually, but I always found the hissy, hazy-sounding instruments quite fascinating,'' he explained.

This interest in degeneration in some ways echoes the earlier glitch movement, which began with Yasunao Tone's *Solo for Wounded* CD in 1985, and revolved around scratched and skipping CDs.

According to Kim Cascone, the glitch which reached its apogee with Oval's albums full of softly skipping sounds, was characterised by an aesthetic of failure. In his oft quoted article on the genre he wrote back in 2002, ''... failure has become a prominent aesthetic in many of the arts in the late 20th century, reminding us that our control of technology is an illusion, and revealing digital tools to be only as perfect, precise, and efficient as the humans who build them.'' He and other theorists noted glitch's celebration of error and malfunction. But while tape decay too is about damage it is not so much an anomaly or deliberately introduced error like a scratched CD, but a characteristic of the medium, and an authentic marker of use and age. Like a well-worn book, a loved tape becomes slightly damaged every time we use it. On a tape our favourite songs, like our favourite pages in a book bear the tiny signs and scars of our affection. Newlyn stated: ''the most compelling sound of tape to me is the gradual degeneration of the sound when you use a tape to record a tape. The way the original recordings become more muffled and distant and the hiss of the tape on tape becomes more prominent. I love that sound.''

Furthermore, unlike glitch which used digital tools to investigate deliberately introduced digital failures, the tape movement represents a shift away from the digital realm altogether. Tape is an unwieldy medium, full of limitations. It is unpredictable and impermanent; it wears out in random and subtle ways that have no digital equivalent. 12k founder Taylor Deupree says he returned to tape when he began taking more interest in mastering, and has grown to appreciate it more and more. ''It can be a little unpredictable, which I like,'' he stated. ''It just sounds really good ... different than digital,'' he said. According to Deupree, using tape adds 'non-linearity, warmth, idiosyncratic effects and imperfections' to a recording. ''Tape distorts certain frequencies easily, so you have to be careful about resonant peaks but it has a very nice rounding of higher frequencies that is so much more effective than a plug in,'' he says.

> ''Tape is an unwieldy medium, it wears out in random and subtle ways that have no digital equivalent''

For Fischer, the physical properties of tape provide the means to 'blur the boundaries between texture and melody'. ''One thing that is amazing about our minds is how it can fill in the gaps in the details of what you are hearing, much like how memory is an imperfect thing. Some of my favourite recordings I've made play with this quite a bit,'' he stated. ''In the lower fidelity recordings that I often use you can start building up beds of pretty dense tones that start fuzzing out and changing shape. Once you achieve certain relationships between sounds, you can sometimes think you hear overtones or harmonics that aren't really there. That is something that I've never been able to do digitally.'' It seems almost perverse that at a time when faster computers, better sound cards and cheaper mics have opened up vistas of sound quality almost unthinkable in a home studio even five years ago, many musicians have rediscovered the virtues of mediums like tape, but this is what has happened.

Like other musicians here, Seattle's Seth Chrisman is revelling in tape's limitations just as much as its strengths. Chrisman, who releases music under his own name and as Widesky, cites the tape's unwieldy noise floor, limited frequency response, compression, saturation and slight variances in playback speed as just some of the reasons he loves the medium. Tape is not just a tool in Chrisman's work, but the end product at well. He founded Holyoak! Resounding, a tape-only label last year, which has two releases with runs of just 43 and 50 copies so far. ''Obviously a minority of people are listening to music on tape, but I really love the medium and try to release work which specifically caters to it,'' he said. And in an era when releasing music can happen as quickly as uploading to Bandcamp, Chrisman's Holyoak releases take him several months to put together, as he individually dubs each cassette and painstakingly packages it.

I want to get physical

The computer and advances in software gave many people the tools to dabble in sound, who in the past perhaps would not have been able to. At first perhaps a drum machine or stand alone synth was needed as well, but now nothing more is required than a very average laptop to pick and choose from an entire symphony of sounds. Yet just as the laptop stood on the precipice of musical domination, offering near limitless access to different sounds, ambient and experimental musicians, many of whom were the first to embrace the possibilities offered by digital music, have begun to abandon it. Some have fled into the arms of acoustic instruments, others analogue pedals and homemade effects, and still others, as has been explored here, towards tape.

Deupree offers a vivid example of this shift. Starting out making acid techno with Prototype 909 before moving into ambient music, he launched 12k in 1997 and quickly carved a name for both himself and his label 12k on the cutting edge of synthetic minimal music, which was largely produced using computers. Yet now Deupree says the album he would most like is one using just guitar and his voice. Faint released on 12k in late 2012 wasn't that, but it did chart his continual evolution towards real instruments, and physical as opposed to digital tools. As for

One of Portland musician Marcus Fischer's giant tape loops.

its final mix down, he opted to do it to cassette.

Fischer is another musician who was initially seduced by the computer, only to slowly turn his back on it. ''I tend to lean toward more physical tools in my music, pedals instead of plugins,'' he said. ''Tape feels like an extension of that idea. I love being able to manipulate tape with your hands, pushing and pulling the sounds. I feel like I stepped away from tape briefly when I first really got into making music on a laptop but quickly realised that a hybrid approach felt much more true to who I am musically.''

The importance of touch and physicality is something many of the artists interviewed for this article returned. Newlyn for example said he found the point and click required to make music on a computer 'uninspiring'. In its place he has adopted an elaborate recording process using tape recorders without output jacks, so the sounds have to be re-recorded with mics aimed at the on-board speakers. ''I just enjoy the process and it gives me more of a sense of achievement creating my own odd sounds,'' he said.

Did music making simply get too easy? Or was it just that the endless choice offered by the net and powerful computers got too hard? For Chrisman, it was the latter. Overwhelmed with options, he said he opted to distance himself from the digital realm in order to make things a bit simpler. And he seems determined to make things simpler still, saying he is now considering going back in time even further than the stereo tape, and exploring mono recordings. ''I really like the dense sound that mono recordings can lend, and being held to one channel of audio provides another self-imposed limitation, which I'm always a fan of,'' he said.

This desire to slow down, disconnect and take stock also forms part of Chrisman's rationale for founding Holyoak! Resounding, and how the label has embraced physical formats. ''I personally was overwhelmed with the amount of music in my iTunes library, and felt a sort of 'MP3-fatigue.' I've always been an album person, and have found that listening to music is more meaningful for me when I disconnect from the distractions of my computer or iPod and focus on absorbing a record in its entirety, taking the time to flip sides on the record or cassette,'' Chrisman said.

In this age of instant digital access to almost anything, musicians it seems are among the first to start thinking about the importance of having less and taking their time. In an interview with Fluid Radio last year, Deupree cited the psychological weight of his laptop as one motivation for trying to abandon it, particularly for live performances. ''The laptop to me is this box that has my emails on it, 12k's accounting on it and all this stuff. It feels just bloated and heavy and in a way this box represents just so much of my life and it's perhaps too much of my life,'' he stated. ''... when I can play with my pedals, my microphones and instruments, it's very pure: it's all I'm using to create.''

Like Chrisman laboriously dubbing his tapes, Deupree, Fischer and Newlyn's approaches offer the ultimate rebuke to the efficiency of the computer, and the 'new is best' motto of the digital age more generally. They are taking more time than they really need to, using far older equipment than they have to. These musicians have opted to do less with more, and to do it slowly.

Scarcity, imperfection and time

In the Radio 6 tape documentary, Mike Skinner from The Streets said that while it is wonderful to be able to access any song you want by clicking a button, it has eroded the emotional intensity we used to attach to music we spent a lot of time and energy desperately searching for. ''There is no scarcity any more, you can have any music you want all the time ... it is what we always wanted was to have any song you want.'' But this situation of abundance has come at a cost and according to Skinner and has eroded the value we place on music. ''The scarcity of tapes just means that you put more time in and probably have got a better relationship with the songs you did like,'' Skinner said. ''You don't get so sort of obsessed with things now because you can get it out of your system too easy.''

By going offline and resorting to older tools like tape, the musicians interviewed here seem to be attempting to find a way to re-value music in the digital era by re-introducing imperfection, physicality and time into their work. The endless re-takes, flawlessly executed melodies and quantised beats of digital music combined with unlimited access to the world's music catalogue has strangely enough left some us feeling a bit empty and lost. For some, this search to find a place in such a complex and overloaded musical landscape has led to the embrace of tape, a recording medium that by its nature offers slight imperfections and uncertainty. As tape stretches and pulls, catches and flows through old spools and dirty heads, it perhaps offers us a glimpse of some of the virtues of a time now past – where music took a long time and was crafted by bodies and instruments, recorded imperfectly and played back on vinyl or cassette. Fragile mediums, which like us, change, age and have to be handled with care.

THE NECKS AT 25: A CHANGING SAME?

Local
By Tony Mitchell

Tony Mitchell interviews Chris Abrahams and Lloyd Swanton of the celebrated Sydney improvisers the Necks in their 25th year. Tony Buck was unavailable, as he is based in Berlin for most of the year.

Tony Mitchell: I was reading an interview with (Sydney trumpeter) Phil Slater where he described the Necks as the "pushbike of jazz." He was talking about carbon footprints, and comparing you guys to an opera production, which consumes a huge amount of energy and uses a lot of technology, whereas you don't require much in terms of technology …

Chris Abrahams: It is basically a standard jazz piano trio, which there are lots of …

Lloyd Swanton: But some jazz groups are defiantly acoustic, like the bass player won't use an amp at all – they could play anywhere, without any infrastructure. If he's referring to the level of efficiency of what we can get out of what we put in, fine, but if he's talking about carbon emissions, there are far smaller and more humble forms of music that impose a far smaller footprint. If he's suggesting that the bicycle is a really efficient technology, which I think it is, it's one of the great inventions … I would humbly say that I'm sometimes amazed at what opens up to us from the humblest of beginnings we've set up. If that's what he's referring to, I think it's a really nice thing to say.

CA: I think also we take things as we find them, what we're given. There'd be very few instances of when we turn up to a venue and say, no we can't play here, the sound isn't adequate. And we'll play totally acoustically in certain venues. There has to be a piano, so there's a carbon cost there. As long as the thing works, I think I'm quite broadminded about what I'll perform on, I'm not particularly fussed about it. And Lloyd's taken now to playing almost a different bass every night when we're on tour – he's not travelling with a bass any more.

LS: Not overseas anyway.

CA: Tony doesn't even travel with cymbals. A lot of drummers hire their own snare and cymbals, but none of us are particularly fussed.

LS: I think Tony's point was they're just fucking pieces of metal! I think it's a great attitude. He has his own drum kit back in Berlin, when he plays the clubs there. But when he tours, he decides to turn that into a positive, as Chris is alluding, it's 'let's find what we can make of this'.

CA: Not just a challenge in hoping that we can conquer it, but actually placing ourselves in a sometimes foreign situation in order to see how that's going to affect us. I think a lot of what we do, when we start to play a piece, we begin to understand the way the sound is working in the room, from the instruments we're playing, from the PA if there is one, and rather than trying to assert a stable performance, we all work with what we've got, and that's part of the structure of our music, the changes are dependent on the kind of context we play in.

TM: When you toured the States in 2009 you got a really bad review in Chicago by John Litweiler, who's a renowned jazz critic, the author of books on Ornette Coleman and free jazz, and a long-standing reviewer for *Downbeat* magazine. I think it was a really insulting put-down, which you wrote a reply to, Lloyd. He really treated you like some sort of upstarts from nowhere. I presume you were being ironic when you referred to his comments about how you reminded him of "the ad hoc ensembles of conga, bongo and other hand-drum percussionists who play for hours at the 63rd Street beach house here in Chicago on every warm summer evening". You said the Necks were "not unlike a bunch of hippies jamming in the back room at a party. You listen for a while, wander off, and when you come back they're still playing the same groove, but it's morphed into something else".

LS: No, not at all. I've said that in interviews many times, we're basically doing what hippies do in the back room of a party, we just set something up. That's maybe a very facetious response, but we were really inspired in the early days by the notion of traditional societies that do all night music sessions, people are coming and going, someone goes off to feed the baby, then comes back and picks up a drum and continues on. We have the same personnel from beginning to end, but there's still that same basic idea of just keeping something going, and just maintaining some sort of momentum about the thing, so that it can just go where it wants … so I wasn't, really, being ironic. I should say that I went against company policy in even responding to this review, and I hope Chris and Tony have forgiven me, but we basically have a policy of ignoring bad reviews.

TM: On the other hand, you get a review in *The New York Times* by Geoff Dyer which said you are 'one of the greatest bands in the world', and in the UK John Walters in the Guardian called you 'one of the most extraordinary groups on the planet'.

LS: When we first started to play the UK we were prepared to cop the full brunt of the press there – they can really do a hatchet job when they feel like it. But it just clicked, and we've had a really positive response. I don't recall any bad reviews on the UK.

CA: In terms of negative responses to what we do, one of the responses that's always intrigued us is the audience member who's obviously hated the whole show, but still has decided to stay for the entire set, and allowed their anger to build slowly, until the piece has reached its climax, and then just ejaculated effusively. It happened at the Brighton festival once, it happened in Ostend, it happened at the Basement –

LS: Someone shouted out 'Yeah, but can you play?' just in that silence at the end of a piece, just before people applauded. It was agony.

CA: As a performer, there's a moment when you've just finished something, before the audience responds to it, and I think that gap is an incredibly crucial part of the performance. That moment, as the last dying sounds of the piece happen, and there's this suspended breath … If someone busts in on that, it's incredibly offensive, and it's an incredibly cheap shot, it's going to affect everyone else in the room, because some people may have really liked it as well. I think it's incredibly disrespectful, not only to the band, but for everyone else. The one at the Brighton Festival, we weren't even playing on a stage, we were set up in a hall on the floor, and this person from about four rows back stood up – he'd waited for the applause to start, but he was extremely angry and said (Colonel Blimp accent) 'How can you come to Brighton and play such rubbish?' And people thought it was funny, and we thought it was funny too, but then he started clambering over chairs, and because there was no stage, we thought it might come to blows. He was in his late 60s, early 70s, so it wasn't actually physically intimidating, but you don't want to be grappling with an audience member.

TM: Talking about your Australianness, there's a quote in John Shand's book, *Jazz the Australian Accent* from Mike Nock, who says groups like the Necks and the Catholics could only exist in Australia. I mean, it's not as if you go around in Akubras or anything, but it does define you as being from here.

LS: We often get asked if we think coming from Australia has affected the way we sound, or if we have an Australian sound. It's a very valid question.

CA: I think I would even go higher resolution than that, and say the Necks could only come from Sydney. I do think there was a very big difference in approaches to jazz, for want of a better term, between Sydney and Melbourne. I think Melbourne's always tended to be much more open to irony, the idea of showmanship, putting on a performance, analysing various performance strategies, whereas I think Sydney jazz musicians have tended to be more intuitive. I think somebody like Vince Jones, for example, would never have been a product of Sydney, he's sophisticated – Lloyd's played with him - and sort of inhabits the showmanship aspect of jazz. I think the Sydney jazz scene that I was involved in as a young person was very physical, and involved playing your instrument in a physically, or technically adept way, and being passionate and honest, in inverted commas. These are big generalisations, but I do see the Necks as being a product of that … the influences coming out of that scene are there.

LS: What you're suggesting, if it's true, is the absolute inverse of how the two cities are actually seen in general terms, in that usually Sydney's shallow and glitzy, and Melbourne's the cultured, deep thinking one. Which is interesting, because there's a parallel with the Sydney Swans! I mean Sydney's supposed to be so shallow and superficial and here's this team that's really no nonsense, nitty gritty, just a hard working team of champions, and Melbourne has the show ponies - as a city I mean, not Melbourne the club. That's an interesting theory, I'd need to think it through.

CA: I remember going and seeing a couple of Melbourne bands, and at the time being really appalled in that they appeared to be playing around with the genre of jazz. At the time, as a young person, I was into the pure statement of John Coltrane, or how I understood it.

LS: So how do you think that then tumbled into the origins of the Necks, what aspects of it do you see?

CA: Well I sense that there was a certain point in time when I just tried to rebel against that. I mean I had these idols, and I was someone who'd grown up in suburban Sydney, and I shouldn't be quite this quixotic. I think when you're a young person, a lot of people tend to idolise people, and somehow empathise and see some vague glimmer of hope that one day you too will … and there comes a point in one's maturation that you realise that certain things are not really [able to be] accomplished. And at that point I broadened my scope about what it was I'd actually been doing. I don't think I would have gone so far as what the Necks represented in the early days had I not been trying to remove myself from the way I'd been thinking up to that point. So in some ways the Necks' initial thing was a reaction against the display of virtuosity, the naive display of what I considered to be passion, and much more trying to bring a conceptual element into what I was trying to do rather than just getting up and trying to be expressive.

LS: It's interesting that Chris says it was his reaction to what he saw as being a Sydney orthodoxy, whereas my pat response to the idea of the Necks as an Australian creation is that the lack of a strong jazz history has made it possible. It wouldn't have been so likely to have come into being in one of the cultural centres of the northern hemisphere because there's some pretty heavy boxes that have to be ticked before you can go any further and we don't have that. It was a real revelation for us the first time we toured Europe (in 2000), we had a pretty substantial tour of 16 or 17 shows, and we honestly just didn't know what they'd think of it. We didn't know if they'd just say they had no idea of what these guys were getting at. The impression we got was that they'd never heard anything like it, and it really clicked with them. They understood what we were doing, and that indicated to me that it was waiting to happen, but it had to be in a certain situation with the freedom to imagine it and not feeling inhibited in throwing it out. It did start very much as an experiment, it was an experiment before it became any kind of product or any kind of performance.

TM: This year Screensound added *Aether* to their heritage list of Australian recordings. Any idea why it was that particular album?

LS: My understanding is, someone has to nominate it. I think any individual can, I have no idea who that was – it wasn't me! And then I think it gets vetted by a panel of experts, and I have no idea who they are. People ask which is your favourite release, and I always say there's nothing we've done that I'm not really proud of, but I would have to say that I have a particular affection for *Aether*, so I'm really happy to see that there, but I'm really surprised because I have this perception that the public doesn't necessarily think that is our most significant work. I also think it has some significances that some of out other albums might not have. It was just a random happening, and we were really chuffed, but I can't quite say where that came from.

TM: It's not your most commercial release! Whereas *Sex* is still a good seller, and I assume you're aware that it's apparently a big hit in birthing centres?

LS: Oh yeah. If someone said in an abstract sense which one of your albums would be likely to end up in the National Film and Sound archive I would definitely say *Sex*, that would be the one. If nothing else, it's sold far more than any of the others.

TM: Another point I wanted to mention is that there's often a difference between the studio albums and the live albums in that you seem to generate a lot more intensity in live performance, and usually things rise to a crescendo and a climax. I remember seeing you supporting the Swans at the Metro, and it was almost as if I was watching a rock band.

LS: That's one way we play. It's not unprecedented.

CA: In terms of discussion of the two different approaches, I think that crescendo, that dynamic arch, once you've experienced that once in a piece, in an album it would wear a bit thin to have that amount of excitement or teleology. We felt early on that the studio album, if they are to build interest or maintain interest, have to rely on other things apart from a big build in volume, because people can really only listen to that once. And also aspects of the sound the band can get live, part of the audience's interest I think is being amazed at the sorts of sounds that seem to be happening when instruments and frequencies start colliding in ways not even we can predict. But on a record, ironically that magic is untranslatable, because I think people would just assume it's a studio album, and therefore it had a harmoniser, or overdubs. It's like going to a live magician or seeing a cartoon magician. We have released live albums, obviously, but there has to be something else in the crescendo that's beautiful to listen to for it to work. I think a lot of people find it exciting to see things draw to a huge conclusion, and sometimes we do that better than others, in fact there's probably only a rare occasion when we do that and the recording will have something in it that we feel is actually worth keeping. It seems to be quite a small percentage of what we record.

LS: A binaural recording is where you can only get the true sensation with headphones, and that is indicative of the difference between us performing in a live environment, and us trying to replicate that in a studio. The only way you can replicate that in a studio is to use studio effects, which instantly the listener would just go 'oh, they're using studio effects'. The knowledge that something is a live album is very important with us.

CA: It's kind of ironic that our studio albums have been more successful, but our live shows are successful too. I mean people get different things out of them, but the live recordings we've released, although I'm very proud of them, they're not necessarily the biggest in terms of critical response. A lot of people have said 'I prefer your studio albums to your live shows', but I think a lot of people also prefer the live shows to the records. But it doesn't translate as records of live performances.

TM: You've got 16 albums and you've been going for 25 years, and your output is like a continuum: it's all linked together. There's an evolution, there's a development, but you can see an ongoing pattern in it, perhaps more than a lot of other groups. What you could refer to crudely as a formula.

CA: I don't know if this is relevant to that, but one thing that's always struck me is how the band goes about doing things as a band. It's very similar to the way we make music. You've got to have a few years behind you before a pattern starts to emerge, but if you want a very basic concept of what the group's about, it's just one thing follows another, and that's almost the atomic level of what it is we do. It sounds like a truism, but I don't think we've ever really pushed things. I've shied away from this idea that you can predict what's going to happen, or you can make things happen by planning ahead. If you've got ambitions, you've got to be very careful about having a strategy that's going to put you somewhere in the future at some point. And I don't think the band has ever operated like that. Not only was the reaction against the formal structure of the music I was playing before the Necks, but also having been in a couple of projects that went cactus (laughs) ... I mean at the end of a particular project that you might have had a lot of hopes for, you start thinking about what you're going to do, and there's a certain disheartenedness or fear. And I think part of the Necks wanting to play and not perform in public was possibly based upon the idea of 'Let's not push this too hard', 'Let's forget about wanting to be the most successful band', or whatever dream you had, 'Let's just get back to enjoying playing music, and not worry about an audience'. And I think that still lingers. Obviously we have commitments, people offer us gigs, and looking into the future, to say that we're not without ambition is possibly being disingenuous, because it takes a lot to make albums, and clearly we are ambitious, but this idea of whatever happens, happens, just let it go and don't worry about it. The Necks has been the most successful thing I've been involved in, and possibly the most haphazardly managed.

LS: One other element too is with all of us coming from a jazz background, I think I could safely say that all three of us are very influenced by those artists that continued to evolve, particularly like Miles Davis and John Coltrane. That to me seems the natural way to play jazz, to continue searching, not just in the solo that you're playing, but in the broader context of moving the music forward. That always struck more of a chord with me than the notion of setting up some sort of classic model that is then just worked within, so I guess it was second nature to us that it would evolve over time, because that's what we expected.

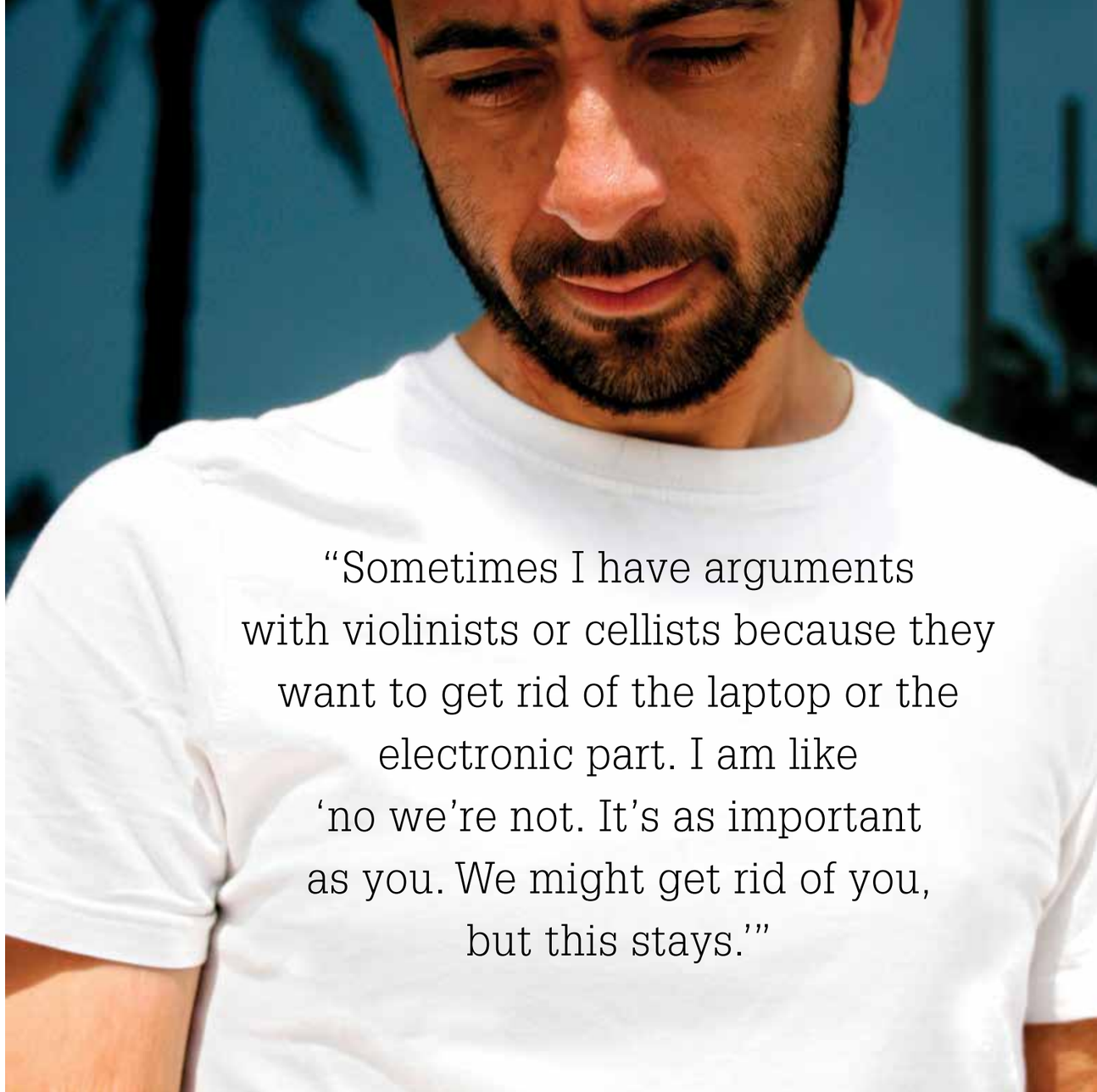
TM: That's more or less what Richard Williams is saying in his book *The Blue Moment*, where he's looking at the way jazz has developed since *Kind of Blue*, and you're mentioned very favourably there.

LS: It's remaindered now, so I can go into lots of bookshops and say 'that's me in the index there - ten dollars!' Its a nice book, I really enjoyed it. Apart from being a music writer, he's the sports editor for *The Guardian*, and he comes to our gigs and says hi. And he interviewed us for *The Guardian* a few years ago. You can imagine all the events he goes to, like the Grand Prix, and Formula One, and he goes to the World Cup - imagine getting a press pass for the World Cup for *The Guardian*. He might be worth getting pretty chummy with! Ascot!

The full version of this interview can be found at cyclicdefrost.com

HARNESSING THE QUIET STORM

Arbol
International
By Christopher Mann



"Sometimes I have arguments with violinists or cellists because they want to get rid of the laptop or the electronic part. I am like 'no we're not. It's as important as you. We might get rid of you, but this stays.'"

It's an unusual summer day in Barcelona. A freak sand storm has come in off over the Mediterranean and scattered the beach goers in a matter of minutes. The opaque skies have given the normally picturesque seaside suburb of Barceloneta an infernal look. Amidst all this, Miguel Marin comes rushing inside the café all smiles. He's worried about his friend's bike being stolen from outside, a common local preoccupation, though almost nobody is around. He's dressed in dark clothes and wields the dashing charm of a 19th century poet with enough mischief, humility and modernity to suggest that he is genuine and not a persona. Marin's demeanour is light hearted and calm despite the conditions, and we begin the conversation somewhere in the middle: ruining my careful planning and notes, which lay untouched. Somewhere therein lies the perfect ready-made metaphor for Arbol's music. Somewhere in the centre, Marin is the eye of his own musical storm, calm and outward looking even as he fosters and encourages the tempest of sound into bigger or more unpredictable things. Another way of seeing it would be that Marin is the steady trunk of an arbol (tree), while the shapeless and restless canopy of leaves and sounds swirls and unfurls around him.

Perhaps also like a tree, Marin's career has taken on many branching paths with many active and past collaborations from around the world, from fields as varied as contemporary dance, film scoring and several years with the much loved British group Piano Magic. Marin was the percussionist in Glen Johnson's constantly changing band during their most important and productive period, beginning from 1998 until 2003, when Marin left to start Arbol after the *Writers Without Homes* album. When I mention that I saw Piano Magic at the legendary Kosmische Krautrock club night in Highbury, London in 1999, Marin begins to ooze enthusiasm.

"Kosmische was such a mad place. We played there loads of time as Piano Magic and we always loved it. It was always great and afterwards that party with all the people dancing really crazy, like they really felt the music. I also played drums for many other bands as well there and around London at the time. They'd ask me on the day could I fill in and we'd improvise something." It was Piano Magic's ease at shaping experimental sounds and primitive electronics into clever pop forms - not to mention their invention of tiny, imaginary worlds - that would heavily inform the future Arbol sound. A good comparison to the present Arbol sound is from bands of the time, like Antony Harding's July Skies, or some lost Hex-era Bark Psychosis teleported to the 21st century, or even a more ethereal Spiritualized. "I can't really find bands like that now," says Marin. "I had a chance to share that time with loads of bands at festivals, playing together with Third Eye Foundation or Hood. They were incredible. There's none of that now."

Sadly Piano Magic's brush with fame and fortune marked the end of their innocence. Around the turn of the millennium Piano Magic moved from respected indie label Rocket Girl to the bigger pond of 4AD with mixed consequences. "Moving to 4AD was a big change. Obviously within the change, there was money. We were always small, not like a big band. The band was in the evenings, but then during the day we had other jobs. Once we signed to 4AD, that was gone basically. I don't think they follow the same way of working now, it's impossible." Pressure from the label and pressure from within the band brought questions of ambition, artistic direction and audience to the fore, leading Marin to eventually leave Piano Magic and found Arbol before returning to Spain. "I think it was a little bit too big for Piano Magic. We didn't really know how to handle it that well. I had a different idea and I wanted to keep doing what we were doing before we signed to 4AD. But 4AD wanted a bigger sound, more like a Mogwai sound. It was more attractive when we were a bit more a mix of electronics and guitars."

Strangely, it was not only Marin's return to Spain that he owed to Piano Magic, but also his refreshed appreciation of Spanish culture and particularly the Flamenco music of his childhood. Marin was born in Seville, in the southern Andalucian region of Spain which is the native home to Flamenco. "My dad was a [Flamenco] dancer and my mother was a singer," he says. "We didn't have a TV at home for quite a long time. We had a stereo and my dad was really obsessed with the radio. He used to wake up really early in the morning, even when he retired, he'd be like waking up at five or six in the morning and he'd just be there with the radio and headphones. When everybody was up, he'd play the radio with the speakers. Watching TV is less interactive. When you're watching TV, you're watching TV. You hardly share anything. We'd be dancing and even putting costumes on and doing some silly stuff. Obviously, he was more fun than watching TV."

Flamenco culture can often be a way of life as much as a style of music, especially with performers in the family. Even so, Marin's enthusiasm for Flamenco was harder to arouse during his teenage years. "It was kind of hard to escape. I wouldn't say that I hated it, but I didn't like it at all. It was only when I went to live in London that one of the guys in Piano Magic, John Cheves who played guitar, got me into it again. Whenever I was going around to his house, he'd always be playing Flamenco music to me. He'd be like 'Listen to this guy Paco Lucía, do you know this guy?' and I'd be like 'Yeah, but I don't listen to it anymore", and he'd be like 'How can you not like this man, this is incredible!' And he'd be playing all the time Flamenco music to me, a very, very English guy. I kind of started to realise this was really good. John was married to a Japanese girl, Manami, and she's really into Flamenco as well, but more as a dancer. That was really bizarre."

Piano Magic's first release for 4AD was a soundtrack to the Spanish film Son de Mar (Sound of the Sea; 2001), directed by Catalan director Bigas Luna. The soundtrack was another departure for the group,

"My music is not for a big audience, it's more for one person."

shifting the pop sounds and fireside poetry further into a sweeping ambience, coloured by environmental samples of bells, clocks and the sea, and coupled with a more mature sound augmented by strings and arrangements that aimed to transform the tracks from one state to another. All of these tropes would find their way into Arbol's music and within a year of releasing Son de Mar, Marin would return to Spain, but this time to the Catalan capital, Barcelona.

It was here, in Sonar of all places, that Arbol began to take final shape, along with an array of new projects, broadening Marin's influences into the more classical worlds of music and dance. "In 2003 I did Sonar for the first time. I was still living in London and I came and did a solo set. I had a laptop and a keyboard and some percussion like a glockenspiel. It was really special because there was a friend of mine, Elestudio, doing the visuals. We met working together for Bigas Luna. He was doing some graphic design for the film. He died a couple of years ago and I have very fond memories of that show. That was the first Arbol show."

Ironically the next Arbol release is likely to be a hybrid of Flamenco and the Arbol sound, but as with most Arbol albums, it has lengthy gestational roots, extending from 2003 to the present. "I basically have an album finished of Flamenco. I say Flamenco because I picked up three Flamenco singers, but the music has nothing to do with Flamenco. The music is more Arbol. It's some music I did for a theatre play, a modern opera kind of thing in Valencia in 2003. So basically I reworked that music, put more strings on it. I'd say to these Flamenco singers "Do you want to do something with this music, but it's not Flamenco?" and they'd be like "Yeah, sure" and basically they adjust their way of singing to the music. A good Flamenco singer can basically sing to whatever. If you get a nice drone, they can sing to it."

Surprisingly, one of the singers turns out to be Marin's mother, Mercedes Pavón, who quit singing thirty years ago, but came up to record in Marin's studio flat in the Barcelona suburb Poble Nou. However, Marin himself admits things could have turned out differently. "I remember when I was little and we would go to a wedding or something and my mum would always end up singing. It was that thing of when you're little and you're with your parents, you get embarrassed. I'd be going to my mum tugging her skirts "Please don't do it, don't sing." And now, finally I got into music and I'm saying to my mother "No, I want you to do it, I want you to do something with me!"

Many of Marin's other collaborations have also had teething problems, despite their eventual success, including a well-received show playing for a contemporary dance company at London's Queen Elizabeth festival hall in May. "I found myself working once with the orchestra here in Barcelona and they were laughing. Really. They were like 'This is not music!' I played a show once at Caixa Forum [Science museum] for the LEM [Gràcia Territori Sonor] Festival. It was eleven minutes of music with orchestra and in the end the musicians loved it. But the process of working with them was really hard as most of them are 40-50 years old and teaching at the Conservatory and music school. So you go in and tell one of these guys what they need to play and they take the piss out of you. You go there with a laptop and a keyboard and a midi controller and they take the piss out of you. They're playing an instrument like a cello that costs something like €10,000 and they've never heard any kind of electronic music. They're listening to like a chain of beeps and saying to you 'are you serious, is this music?'"

Marin has even had similar problems with members of his own group, even though Arbol's music doesn't always come across as particularly electronic, despite the ubiquitous presence of the laptop. There are always strings, live instruments and drums to supplement the beats, glitches and drones of the computer, and the emphasis is more on mood, storytelling and layers of textures more than anything resembling conventional dance music. "Sometimes I have arguments, which is what happens when you play with musicians like a violinist or cellist. Sometimes we have arguments because they want to get rid of the laptop or the electronic part, and I am like 'no we're not. [this element] is as important as you. We might get rid of you, but this stays.'"

Although he has a clear definition of what the Arbol sound should be, Marin is far from the domineering task master. Indeed, his curious and mischievous nature, as well as his love of improvisation learned during the Piano Magic days, drives some of the best moments of the Arbol sound, both in the studio and especially live. "There's one thing I really like about being in Arbol, and that's not having to tell everyone what they have to play, especially when we play live. I like them to try things and I like me trying different things. It's like when we played at the L.E.V. festival in Gijon, [Spain], just before going on stage, I asked [vocalist and keyboard player] Lucrecia Dalt to do something we hadn't rehearsed before and I also asked [violinist] Sara Fontán 'Will you play drums?' She answered me 'Why are you telling me this now? We didn't even do it in the sound check?' I told her 'It's fine; I'll show you what you need to do.' So I really like doing these kinds of things. The one thing I tell everybody in the band is if they feel like doing something new, feel free to do it."

Despite having played Sonar almost every year for the last decade and incorporating the laptop into the band, Marin is still somewhat unconvinced by a lot of electronic music. "In electronic music, sometimes even if there are two guys or twenty guys it can be really cold. You need something human. I find it very bio-organic and very stimulating to interact with the other musicians and that we all play something. It's quite risky because you could be failing, you need to be there, within the track, otherwise it could fail. I also like when we look at each other when we are playing. There are a lot of moments when we need to look at each other to know when to start or when to end. I still appreciate that."

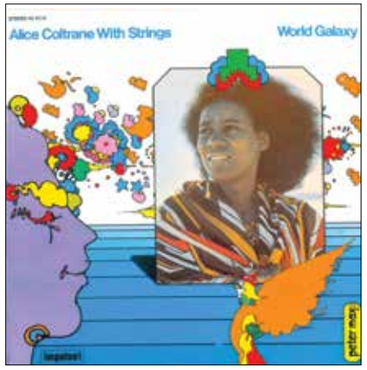
Such risks underpin Arbol's fifth and most recent album, *She Read the Wrong Book*, released at the start of the year on local label spa. RK. Like all Arbol albums, it started as a concept and then a title. Marin explains the story. "It is about this woman who bought this book about life or life instructions. You have loads of them, but she picked up the wrong one, so she keeps failing all the time." Like most Arbol albums, production and recording took several years as Marin worked on all the side projects and somewhat like Jason Pierce, honed the details into perfection. "When I make an album I take years to make an album. I take three or four years, never in a rush. The last track ['Koen'] was a difficult one. Originally there were words, there were lyrics and melody and stuff, but it didn't work because it was taking loads of power off. On this track I was always obsessed with the sound that comes in at the beginning. I didn't want this sound to get lost in a way. I wanted it to be really there, quite obsessively. Eight minutes of just that. This track reminds me a bit of that Kosmische time in a way."

While 'Koen' was the first track to be written, the opening track 'In this Castle' was the last, leading to a fundamental shift in how the previous material finally emerged. "I thought: this track can't open the album and then it goes down, I need to take more risks." The key is Evagelia Maravelias, the vocalist from New York group Elika, and the doubt they create combined with the cinematic tension of the music. At times the words and phrasing seem gloating and ironic, at others fragile and anxious. Once her voice is present, the rest of the album seems to be about her, but which her? 'Koel' then feels like a beautiful resolution to an atypical story told through the intervening tracks, one that never quite resolves.

But Evagelia's vocals were late arriving and were nearly replaced by another, male vocalist. "I originally had two singers for this track because she wasn't sending me the singing and I really wanted to release the album. She was really busy so I gave it to another guy in New York to see what comes out. He sent it to me really quickly and I quite liked it, but I thought that it didn't really sound like Arbol. I didn't want people to think that the whole album was with this guy." Intriguingly, all Arbol's album and the current live group are based around women and female performers, except for the current bass player. Given his fondness for female characters and colleagues and the attentive, psychological way of portraying them in the music, I ask him if he considers himself to be like an Ingmar Bergman or Lars von Trier of music. He laughs heartily before answering. "If I need to put a face to my music it would be a woman´s or a female figure. I find that my music is always closer to being like a woman than a man because a woman is more fragile. My music is not for a big audience, it's more for one person." But that one person is never Marin alone. Instead, listening to Arbol is something of a creative process for the listener. Doubts, contradictions, ambiguities and scenarios are presented and it is up to the listener to provide the meaning. But Marin is somewhere at the centre of it all, smiling and easy, knowing something and about to conjure up the next unexpected change as if waiting for the next gust of wind.

cyclic selects

Bob Baker Fish



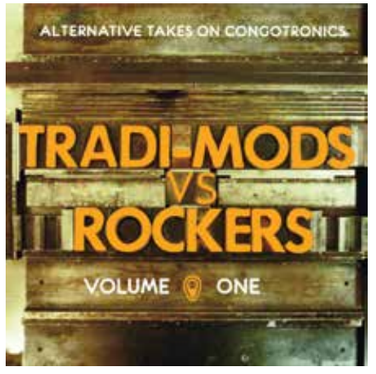
Various Artists – *Footy Favourites*
As an AFL mad kid, actually back then it was the VFL, this is the first album I ever bought with my own money. Back then I'd never heard classics like Danny Boy and Macho Man and I gave it a pounding. Now I enjoy it for different reasons, as death on vinyl, a devastating collection of classics being murdered by pre-autotune footy players of the day. Tim Watson's 'Ruby Don't Take Your Love to Town' is a dead set classic if like me you think pitching all over the tune is classic. Oh, and it's on Studio One. But not the good one.

Alice Coltrane With Strings – *World Galaxy*
So I'm sitting with Warren Ellis at my workplace, which at the time was a homelessness service and I'm pretty nervous about meeting him. So right off the bat I start babbling about Alice Coltrane and he just lights up. He tells me about this album which he says has an acid jazz version of 'A Love Supreme'. It took me a while but I finally tracked it down. There's a pretty cosmic though ultra funky take on 'My Favourite Things', and everything is grand and stately. Part free jazz workout, part funk fusion, part soothing meditation. This is as spiritual as you can get with your feet on the ground. What an amazing, beautiful woman.

Squarepusher – *Music Is Rotted One Note*
About 13 years ago I moved to the country for about three years, about an hour and a half out of Melbourne in Traralgon. And I was starved for music. Triple J was almost as terrible as it is now, so I started listening to Radio National. Every trip to Melbourne found me in record stores like Missing Link harassing the staff for new music. I was desperate. Then I discovered the SBS music show alchemy, where I saw an incredible Squarepusher clip set in an asylum. So next time in Melbourne I bought this album. When I got it home I freaked. I couldn't categorise it. Some kind of future jazz maybe. What I loved about this music is Tom Jenkinson just made it, he doesn't care how you deal with it. That's your problem. This album was the entry into Warp's repertoire, including Plaid, Plone, Aphex Twin and more.

David Fanshawe – *African Sanctus*
This was an op shop grab, bought solely for the cover. And wow. The story is that Fanshawe, an Englishman, hitchhiked through Africa and the Middle East recording tribes and indigenous music. There are reports of tribes who refused to have any contact with foreigners for years after his visit. The recordings are remarkable, pristine documents of a rapidly vanishing culture. But Fanshawe didn't want his recordings to sit gathering dust in a museum vault. No, he wanted to contribute to the vibrancy of the sounds. He was after all a trained composer. What would work well with the raw primal field recordings he wondered? Then it came to him. Latin chorals. Equal parts genius and car crash. Fanshawe is a hero to me.

Neil Young – *Trans*
It's hard to narrow down one Neil Young album. In fact when I first hooked up with Dan in Children of the Wave, Neil Young was pretty much the only artist we both agreed on. Though I'm not sure Dan knows about this record. It was recorded during Young's difficult Geffen years in '82. Six of the nine tracks have vocoder and Young's voice is barely recognisable, strongly influenced by Kraftwerk and by attempts to communicate with his son who was born with cerebral palsy. 'Sample and Hold' is a freaky electronic stomper, one of the best songs he's ever written. Young's albums can be patchy, but this, despite being something of a black sheep is all gold.



Various Artists – *Tradi Mods Vs Rockers: Alternative Takes on Congotronics*
Remix albums have gotten a bad wrap, but there are some good ones out there. Pluramon's *Bit Sand Riders* springs to mind. But this in my opinion is one of the best albums of the last decade … period. When I first heard Konono No1 it felt like music that just dropped out the sky fully formed and perfect. The notion of getting the likes of Juana Molina, Animal Collective, Deerhoof, Burnt Friedman, Shackleton, and Mark Ernestus amongst others to remix is genius. When I had the opportunity to speak with the band they said the record company chose the artists. What an amazing record company. The highlight for me is Yamataka Eye from the Boredoms' banging take on 'Konono Wa Wa Wa'. This music is perfect.

Hard-Ons – *Dickcheese*
So what 14 year old boy isn't going to be excited by a band called Hard Ons? Back in 1988 it was all soft drinks, sneaky sips of beer, skateboards, and all-ages shows. My world was mostly Melbourne punk rock bands, The Meanies, Nursery Crimes, S.I.C, PFA, Depression, but the Hard Ons in far away Sydney felt like a league above, and this album, which was all punk rock energy and metal guitars with sweet melodic gestures, will be forever etched into my brain. It's perfect punk rock. I got along to every show (age permitting) and even wrote a fan letter, which Blackie kindly replied to. My girlfriend now wears my Hard–Ons t-shirt to bed. But we won't get into that.

Alan Lamb – *Archival Recordings*
These are the most exciting lyrical field recordings I've ever heard. If you weren't told what it was you'd have no idea. There is something violent and majestic about these sounds of wind hitting decommissioned power lines. I first heard them a long time ago on what I assume was Radio National, though I didn't track the album down until years later. They were released on Darrin Verhagen's really incredible but now defunct Dorobo label, that also issued his own Shinjuku Thief recordings and lots of other strange dark ambient stuff. There's another album of Lamb's material remixed by the likes of Ryoji Ikeda and Thomas Koner. I used to like to go and listen to Darrin talk when he worked at Peril records in Melbourne, later he became my lecturer at RMIT.

Naked City – *Naked City*
Well I enjoyed the first Mr Bungle album but it was their producer, downtown musician John Zorn's work that really intrigued me. This is the first album I heard and it's probably the best. Musical genres collide, often every few seconds, it was a mix of jazz, punk, funk, metal, surf guitar and sound track. Inspired by everything from free jazz to cartoon music, some of the cover versions like Mancini's 'A Shot in the Dark' and Morricone's 'Sicilian Clan' just opened up fascinating new worlds for me. This was a record I would play at blistering volumes annoying the neighbours to no end.

Kyuss – *Blues For The Red Sun*
Kyuss – Blues For The Red Sun
The first two times I heard this music I threw up. Admittedly I wasn't in the best state, but there was something raw, unhinged about this album - something overwhelming. I loved that the guitars weren't shrill, that they'd just chug on riffs endlessly and it seemed more about psychedelia than metal. That said, the lead singer sounds like a cowboy. A friend of mine saw them when they toured with Metallica and he told the story about the singer punching on with security while trying to help a kid to stage dive. Meanwhile the band just played the same riff over and over, and when he finished with the dust up and the kid managed to jump, he just returned and continued singing the song like nothing had happened. My friends and I liked that story, enough to persist through the vomitus.