

# ELECTRONIC SOUND



THE ELECTRONIC MUSIC MAGAZINE

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**EXCLUSIVE INTERVIEW**

# SOFT CELL



**THE RETURN OF SYNTHPOP'S DEFINING DUO**

CATE LE BON / BONOBO / MICHAEL ROTHER & VITTORIA MACCABRUNI / SEVERED HEADS / JAH WOBBLE

SOFT RETURN



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When Soft Cell appeared on 'Top Of The Pops' for the first time in 1981, Marc Almond stole the show. He wasn't a flamboyant character like Boy George, but seeing him on our TV screens that night, with 'Tainted Love' on its way to being a Number One record, somehow made it possible to be alternative without going full tilt. Dressed head to toe in black, with his eyeliner and bangles and mop of hair, he changed countless thousands of lives. Suddenly, almost miraculously, it was OK just to be you – whatever flavour you were.

Soft Cell have always been in a league of their own. It started as "a weird idea", as Dave Ball puts it. "We were very anti the shoegazing bands in Leeds being all serious, trying to be political," he adds. "So I said, 'Let's do a northern soul record, but with synthesisers. That'll fuck them up'." And that's exactly what they did. Their take on 'Tainted Love', a firm favourite at the Wigan Casino, really hit a nerve and getting it to the top of the charts was a huge deal. In the early 1980s, it meant you were shifting records by the truckload. It meant everyone was listening to your song.

'Tainted Love' is one of those records you recognise within seconds, but there's so much more to Soft Cell than this monster hit. They had lots of other monster hits – and there may well be more yet. For this month's cover feature, we're catching up with Marc and Dave as they prepare to release their first new album since 2002. 'Happiness Not Included' boasts some of the best songs they've ever written and is nothing short of stunning. Both now in their 60s, the pair are unquestionably as essential as ever.

We've got plenty of good stuff to keep you entertained elsewhere too. Our interviews include Cate Le Bon, Bonobo, Michael Rother and Vittoria Maccabruni, Tom Ellard from Severed Heads, and Mercury Rev and Midlake man Jesse Chandler, aka Pneumatic Tubes, who have all served up excellent records just recently and have interesting tales to tell.

This issue we're also welcoming Claire Francis as Electronic Sound's new Reviews Editor. Claire has been writing for the magazine for a while and she will be bringing her extensive knowledge to our Back section. And in a super-duper-double-bubble move, we've promoted our former editorial assistant Isaak Lewis-Smith to Front Editor as well. Congratulations to both!

**Electronically yours,  
Push and Mark**

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## KRAFTWERK

Oyten, Germany

14 DECEMBER 1981

It was a cold night in Oyten, a village near Bremen, Germany. Warnings of snow storms and black ice had kept some people away, but there was still a decent crowd for the last night of Kraftwerk's legendary 'Computer World' tour.

The band had been on the road since May. By the time they reached the Zeppelin club in Oyten, they'd racked up nearly 100 appearances.

In the audience that night was 26-year-old musician Wolfgang Wiggers and his trusty camera. He'd been taking pictures at gigs since the 1970s, documenting the punk scene around his hometown for fun. A fan of Kraftwerk since their first album 10 years earlier, this was the first time he'd had the opportunity to catch them live.

The gig was originally scheduled for a larger venue in nearby Bremen, but had been postponed and hurriedly rearranged.

"I was just lucky that the Bremen performance was cancelled at short notice," says Wiggers. "Oyten is very rural. A few shops, a village pub, a large commercial/industrial area, and little else. Kraftwerk played in the local discotheque.

"The venue was a typical 70s disco. The audience was very mixed, mainly young people from the suburbs between Bremen and Hamburg coming to dance at the weekends. It was the last show of the tour and I assumed that the musicians were already a bit tired, but it was perfect, as always. There wasn't really much reaction from the audience, though."

Wiggers didn't meet the band that night ("They disappeared right after the performance. There was no chance of a conversation"), but years later he was tracked down by his ex-Kraftwerk namesake, Wolfgang Flür, who phoned to ask permission to use the photos at his concerts.

"He went to lot of trouble to track down my number," says Wiggers. "We had a long chat about music and mutual friends. I'm always happy when my photos are shown somewhere, and the fact that Wolfgang used the images at his shows made me very proud."

At the time, Wolfgang Flür wasn't to know that the photographer had captured his last live show as a member of Kraftwerk, and the band didn't play live again until 1990.

Wiggers joined the band Kastrierte Philosophen not long after the Kraftwerk show, and played organ, violin, saxophone and "treatments" on their debut album, 'Love Factory'.

"When I started playing in a band, I stopped taking gig photos, which annoys me immensely today," he says.

After a career split between working at a brain research institute in Bremen and teaching biology, these days Wolfgang Wiggers is retired. Wolfgang Flür is currently preparing for the release of his new solo album, 'Magazine 1', on Cherry Red in March. It's reviewed on page 76 of this very issue.



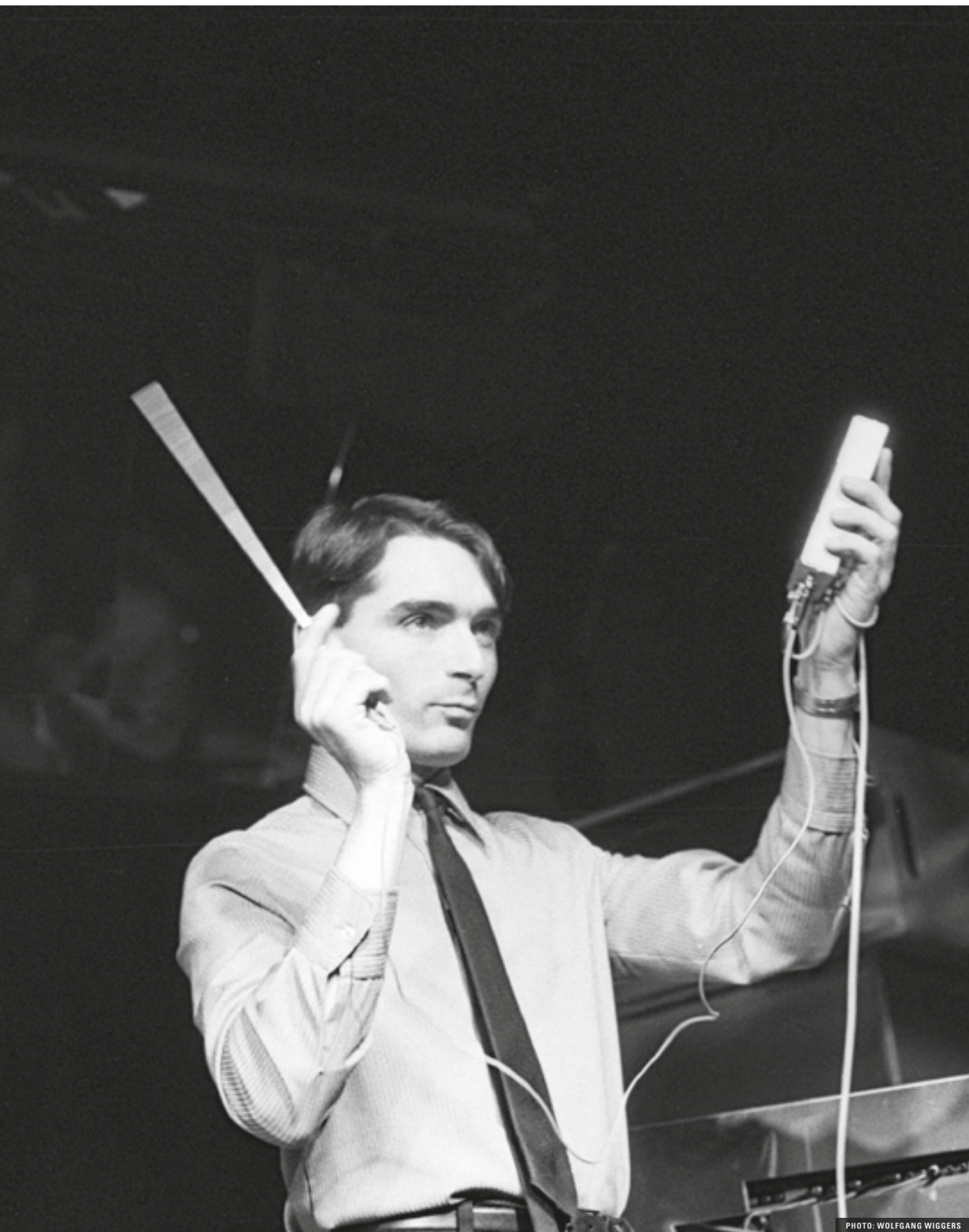


PHOTO: WOLFGANG WIGGERS



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# Soft Cell

## 'Happiness Not Included' / 'Bruises On All My Illusions'

### Purple vinyl seven-inch

This month's Reader Offer is an exclusive seven-inch showcasing two superb tracks from the forthcoming new Soft Cell album

#### 'HAPPINESS NOT INCLUDED' (SPECIAL REMIX EDIT)

The A-side of our seven-inch is an edited remix of the title track of Soft Cell's new album. A blast at today's confused world, it's one of the angriest songs the duo have ever recorded. Marc Almond's infuriated monologue takes in authoritarianism, information overload, so-called "cancel culture", and much more besides. The line "I don't want to know how the magic works" seems to refer to the way that everything is endlessly scrutinised in the internet age.

Almond, of course, grew up in an era when David Bowie singing 'Starman' on 'Top Of The Pops' – gravity-defying red hair, different-sized pupils and all – started playground debates over whether he was an alien. With scant public awareness of Bowie's backstory, it was like the glam rock icon had arrived from nowhere, as if indeed by magic.

"One of the expressions that I find I most dislike is 'It is what it is'... when more often than not, it isn't," says Almond. "Surely you don't want to know how the magic works? The expression was overly used throughout lockdown and I remember writing this song on a day when the news was bombarding us with images.

"I don't feel that I'm a person who needs to know the truth about everything. It's too much and too often a burden in the light of what we, as individuals, can do about it. Somewhere between truth and lies, I suppose finding your own truth is a survival mechanism I've had to live with. This is an angry song, a lyrical rage, and it took a lot of editing because once I start, well..."

For Almond's musical partner Dave Ball, meanwhile, the track brings back childhood memories.

"When you got a toy at Christmas and it said 'Batteries not included', you couldn't play with it because all the shops would have been shut back then," notes the keyboardist. "To me, that's what 'Happiness Not Included' conjures up. Something within your grasp, but out of reach."

#### 'BRUISES ON ALL MY ILLUSIONS' (SPECIAL RADIO VERSION)

Flip the record over for a radio edit of another track from the 'Happiness Not Included' album. 'Bruises On All My Illusions' is trademark Soft Cell, full of lyrical melodrama and darkly pulsating synthpop.

The title is borrowed from the dialogue in Douglas Sirk's 1959 Hollywood drama, 'Imitation Of Life', and the song is rooted in Marc Almond's pre-fame days, with aspirations for and the promise of a better and glitzier life. The line "Had a job in the club, but I wasn't making me much money" refers to Almond's time as a cloakroom attendant at The Warehouse in Leeds, where he was "Fighting off the gods and monsters every night".

"The title is self-explanatory in many ways," reflects the singer. "This song is about promises made and later let down. You have a dream which is shattered by the gods and monsters who run these things, whether that's music or film or whatever. So there's the promise of a career, but it's at an unacceptable cost, and the bruises are the scars of failure or disappointment that we all have to live with. I also thought of this as a sequel to 'Bedsitter'. In my mind, it has the same characters. So a sequel or perhaps a prequel."

"It's like a heavy horror film," adds Dave Ball. "Dark and filmic gothic pop."

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## STRING THEORY

### Rethinking the electric guitar

Innovative and sustainably built, the Cosmo guitar from Verso Instruments claims to use 60 per cent fewer parts than conventional electric guitars, which historically, have used rare tropical tonewoods such as mahogany, rosewood and ebony. With the Cosmo, just one curved sheet of metal constitutes the body, while the neck, fingerboard and bridge are all made from sustainably grown wood from central Germany.

But this isn't just a green guitar – designer Robin Stummvoll is genuinely moving functionality forward with the inclusion of a neodymium magnet mount pickup that can be moved and even detached to be held over the strings (with the option to add another if desired), giving you a much-increased range of sound colours to play with. Made to order with a bunch of customisable features and colourways, prices start at €1,670.

[versoinstruments.com](https://versoinstruments.com)





**PULSE**

## TENO AFRIKA

Producer at forefront of new genre

### WHO THEY?

Teno Afrika, aka Lutendo Raduvha, is a young DJ and producer from South Africa's Gauteng Province. His intuitive and evolving take on amapiano, the exciting new genre of electronic music coming out of the country, puts him at the heart of a sound that is hugely popular both across the African continent and internationally. Teno Afrika's 2020 debut album 'Amapiano Selections' was one of the first amapiano long-players to be pressed to vinyl. Two years on, he's back with scorching follow-up, 'Where You Are'.

### WHY TENO AFRIKA?

'Amapiano Selections' was an excellent introduction to South Africa's musical history, presenting bright, jazz-inspired dance music that borrows from the country's own Kwaito tradition as well as deep house and R&B. It was mostly an instrumental affair, but this time round Teno Afrika invites more vocalists into the fold. The silky-smooth title track features singer Leyla's moody velvet harmonies, 'Fall In Love' enlists vocalist KayCee, and there are also vibrant collaborations with musical peers Don Diego and Stylo MusiQ, though Teno Afrika's own darker, more dancefloor-driven cuts – like 'Bells' and 'Gomora Groove' – show that he's just as proficient when flying solo.

### TELL US MORE...

Hot on the heels of other compelling South African music movements like Gqom, Kwaito and Bacardi, it's easy to hear why amapiano has taken hold. Raduvha spent much of his early life "moving between different townships on the outskirts of Johannesburg and Pretoria" and 'Where You Are' is the sound of a producer intrinsically intertwined with the area's unique sonic palette. On the album closer, 'Duma ICU', he goes one step further, teaming up with Stylo MusiQ to craft a glassy, atmospheric style of amapiano that they've dubbed Skrr Gong. Talk about staying one step ahead of the crowd.

### CLAIRE FRANCIS

'Where Are You' is out now on Awesome Tapes From Africa

## SCHOOL OF ELECTRONIC MUSIC

Resident archivist **Jack Dangers** rediscovers an old favourite by sorely-missed Cabaret Voltaire mainstay Richard H Kirk, and it's on cassette...



This month, I picked a cassette out of my collection – Richard H Kirk's first solo album, the 1980 release 'Disposable Half-Truths', which I really liked when it first came out. I recently listened to it again on YouTube – because, I have to admit, I haven't got a cassette player handy – and it reminded me just how good it is.

The tracks that impressed me most are what you might call the sound pieces. The first piece, 'Synesthesia' is almost ambient, but overall the album is far too noisy and beat-driven to be described as ambient, and too abstract to be thought of as songs. They're tape experiments, really, all based around manipulating tape – using loops, slowing it down, making it go backwards, making it noisy.

There's a bit of clarinet on the track 'Information Therapy'. I always liked Kirk's clarinet playing, but he abandoned it on Cabaret Voltaire records after 'Extended Play'. It's so expressive, you can get all kinds of sounds out of it, by biting the reed for example. He'd send it through all these effects, and the EMS Synthesi Hi-Fi. I missed it after he put it down, and there wasn't much guitar after that either.

'Disposable Half-Truths' was recorded at Western Works, but the Cabs spent years earlier recording in an attic somewhere in Sheffield, making music before they put anything out. Some of that material was released on another tape, Cabaret Voltaire's '1974 – 1976', which I also bought around the same time. I'd love to know where that attic was, so I could go and look at it on Google Earth.

The tapes were released by Throbbing Gristle on their Industrial Records label, and advertised for sale in the classifieds in the back pages of Melody Maker or one of the other weekly music papers. It was the only way you could get them, they weren't for sale in the shops. I recently went on Discogs to look at the Industrial Records catalogue and I was surprised by just how many tapes they had put out, including quite a few I didn't know about.

Both the Richard H Kirk and the Cabaret Voltaire tapes have been re-released on CD and vinyl so they're easy to get hold of. If you want the original cassettes, though, be prepared to pay quite a bit.

## FISSION IMPOSSIBLE

Marvel at the weirdness of nuclear energy

Way back in 1957, photographers started recording daily life at the Karlsruhe Nuclear Research Center, Germany's first major nuclear facility, but only in 2017 was the decision made to digitise 10 per cent of this vast and intriguing five-decade image archive. This year, German publishing house Spector Books decided to compile some highlights into an epic 520-page tome titled '10%: Concerning The Image Archive Of A Nuclear Research Center'.

Specialist electronic music labels looking for artwork inspiration, this is your new bible. As well as banal pictures of men in suits (sample caption: "Retiree send-off") there are lots more curious shots, like 'Burnt-out glovebox', 'Dancing couple in costumes', 'Scorpion with a microchip', 'Damage to a waste drum' and, er, 'Puddle'. There are also fascinating accounts from those who worked at the facility, plus perspectives on nuclear research from artists, sociologists and scientists. You can order a copy now for €32. [spectorbooks.com](http://spectorbooks.com)



## MUSEUM OF MODERN ELECTRONIC MUSIC

The institution we've all been waiting for

Seven years in the making, a museum dedicated solely to electronic music is set to open its doors in Frankfurt this April. The Museum Of Modern Electronic Music (soon to be known by the snappy acronym MOMEM) will document the evolution of the sound and the pioneers behind it. The brainchild of Andreas "Talla 2XLC" Tomalla, a DJ and producer from Frankfurt credited with coining the term "techno", he has joined forces with fellow producer Alexander Azary to bring the idea to life. The design of the building is inspired by 12-inch vinyl records, while the museum itself will feature exhibition rooms, performance areas and installations. There will also be an extensive library space along with instruments, turntables and music-making software, giving visitors a chance at knocking out the next 'Strings Of Life'. Help speed the process up by going to [donate.momem.org](http://donate.momem.org)



## MUSIC FOR TURNTABLES

## Brian, you're glowing

In a Venn diagram with Brian Eno on one side and a bespoke turntable on the other, the overlapping sweet spot is likely where you want to be. Good news, then, because Eno has created a series of record players in conjunction with the London-based Paul Stolper Gallery. Limited to 50 units, the turntable is signed by the artist and made from acrylic and LED lights, which phase through cycles Eno is calling "coloursapes". "The light from it was tangible as if caught in a cloud of vapour," explains the ambient don. "We sat watching for ages, transfixed by this totally new experience of light as a physical presence." Priced at £20,000, you might want to think twice about leaving your cup of coffee next to this one. [paulstolper.com](http://paulstolper.com)



## COLD SPRING PRESENTS



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## DELIAPHONIC

Coventry-based festival is back with a bleep

Returning for its fourth event, Coventry's annual DeliaPhonic festival – celebrating the work of Cov-born Delia Derbyshire – is scheduled to take place from 3-6 March, and this year's edition promises sets from LoneLady, Cosey Fanni Tutti, Dr Alex Patterson, Richard Norris and others. "We will produce four nights of events made up of film screenings, talks, live music, DJ sets, projections and performance art," says organiser Martin Leape, "as well as sonic installations which reflect the breadth of Delia's work. We also have a host of family-friendly events to inspire children, just as Delia has inspired so many musicians, composers, artists and filmmakers." Day tickets are priced at £22.50, and weekend tickets are going for a bargain £37.50, so don't hang about – book now. [deliaphonic.co.uk](http://deliaphonic.co.uk)



## COUNTER FLOWS

All aboard for Scottish weekender

After a couple of years spent watching streams on the sofa, 2022 is already spoiling us for live music, and top of that list should be Counterflows Festival, which returns to Glasgow from 31 March to 3 April.

With its sonic manifesto seeking to blend both local and international scenes, there are a number of collaborations those attending will want to jot down. There's London-based organist Alexander Hawkins, who will be performing with Iran's Grammy-nominated saxophonist Hafez Modirzadeh, for instance. Also, South Korea's minimalist composer Park Jiha who has been working with Liverpool-based Roy Claire Potter, and the The Gorbals Youth Brass Band who welcome the exotic modular synthesist Tom Mudd from Edinburgh.

And best of all? Tickets for the long weekend are tiered at £80, £50, and pay-what-you-can, which allows anyone to pay somewhere between £1 and £49, no questions asked. Good people and badass music? Count us in. [counterflows.com](http://counterflows.com)

## NEEDS MUST

Freewheeling through time and space, **Kris Needs** continues his adventures in sound. This month: 'Holland Tunnel Dive' by impLOG



"Warning: The National Institute Of Recorded Music Has Determined That Playing This Record May Be Dangerous To Your Tweeters' Health."

Not even this caveat on the sleeve could prepare unsuspecting listeners for the mind-blasting impact of this obscure nugget spewed from New York's downtown no wave underground in 1980.

Setting up a pulsing synthesised throb – vaguely resembling a springier Martin Rev disco groove – as its increasingly fizzed-up vamp gains momentum, the track is strange enough, but after the heavily treated sleaze-marinated vocal appears like robotic excrement sliding up from a radioactive chemical toilet, it's even quite disturbing.

Then this low rumble starts stirring in the groove's sonic bowels, like a distant subway train gaining volume and intensity until its deafening screech seems to be replicating how it might sound to get caught on the runway in front of a marauding Concorde – louder and louder until your cranium feels like it's being cleaved like a hapless melon, before dying down to let the mangled robo-voice return, slavering like a masturbating space-bison on heat. After another toupee-savaging sonic interruption, the startling icing on this deranged cake appears as a jaunty sax section playing a riff-motif before tootling away like a trad jazz band that's hit the wrong room.

I used to love playing 'Holland Tunnel Dive' to unsuspecting post-pub gatherings or lolling stoners, watching reactions veering between extreme terror, puzzled repulsion or jaw-dropped delight. The B-side's electronic desecration of 'On Broadway' was also admirably depraved.

Released on Charles Ball's no wave hotbed Lust/Unlust (home to Mars and Teenage Jesus And The Jerks), impLOG was the brainchild of Don Christensen and guitarist Jody Harris from James Chance's Contortions (saxes parped by Paul Colin). The pair only released one more single that same year, the more KONK-like 'Breakfast', which was coupled with the sinister, sonorous hypno-dirge of 'She Creatures' (although Christensen revived the impLOG name in 2005 for a Philip Glass remix).

'Holland Tunnel Dive' is nothing less than anarchic New York post-punk's most mind-blowing masterpiece. Still capable of causing havoc, I played it on my WNBC London radio show with Jay Burnett last month, and the lift-off eruption prompted a flurry of sudden knob-twiddling as the dial flew into the red.

I'll be spinning it again on Saturday 19 February, when I venture into the outside world of DJing for the first time in years, joining the mighty Alex Paterson at Coventry's LTB Showrooms. Hope to see some of you there!



## WOOD AND PROPER

### Audio cabinets to die for

High-end furniture makers Hervet Manufacturier have been pushing all the right buttons lately, yet given their electronic pedigree, it should come as no surprise. Launched in 2008 by cousins Cédric and Nicolas Hervet, the former was actually the creative director for none other than Daft Punk in the early noughties. And at least some of the cosmic aesthetic has rubbed off on their designs, like the Arcadia pictured here. Fitted with a Bose SoundTouch system, this chunky arcade machine comes preloaded with a whopping 520 8-bit video games ('Pac-Man', 'Space Invaders' and more), and is housed in veneered wood with a natural wax finish. "Luxurious" undersells it. The £23,800 price tag does not. [hervet-manufacturier.fr](http://hervet-manufacturier.fr)




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# SOUND BITES

If you thought 2021 was a busy year for Library Of The Occult, 2022 is going to be a different beast entirely. We caught up with founder **Tom McDowell** to hear how he's combining electronic music and literature to scare us even more...

**WORDS: FINLAY MILLIGAN**



"It's the kind of thing I've wanted to do since I started the label," admits Tom McDowell, "because there's not many other people doing original music to original stories and releasing it on vinyl."

'Tales From The Library Of The Occult' is the latest chapter in the imprint's ever-expanding discography, and each month will bring us a new music release with its own original story, starting with 'Wolf'.

Penning by comics writer John Reppion (who is writing all the stories in the first year of this series) and featuring music by McDowell under his Dream Division moniker, the narrative follows Carolyn Ashton and her daughter Gwen as they start afresh in the village of Greenwood. They soon find out, however, that this is a place where "things best forgotten have a habit of resurfacing"...

"It was John who got in contact with me and said he liked the stuff on the label," explains McDowell. "I liked his work anyway, and I spent a few months trying to work out a good way for us to work together. And then I had this idea."

There's another collaborator who McDowell was particularly excited to work with on 'Wolf'

– Matthew Holness, who narrates the story. Holness is the co-creator of cult Channel 4 horror-parody 'Garth Marengi's Darkplace' and writer/director of the 2018 psychological horror feature 'Possum', for which he commissioned the Radiophonic Workshop to compose its chilling score. He looks a perfect fit for Library Of The Occult, then.

"It was late, gone one in the morning," purrs Holness over the chime of McDowell's ghostly electronics. "Snowflakes drifted on the breeze..." But how did McDowell get him involved?

"I was gathering a list of musicians and artists I wanted, and also people I wanted to narrate," he says. "Top of that list was Matt Holness."

With John Reppion already on board, a Zoom call with Holness followed, and with a gap in his schedule, he was more than game.

"He liked what we were doing and was super-enthusiastic about the idea," adds McDowell. "I tried not to fanboy when I spoke to him!"

'Wolf' certainly looks the part as well, with McDowell going for more of a "book-type design". There's a deluxe edition gatefold record pressed on red vinyl, as well as a large-case cassette version that opens out like a 1970s pulp novel.

The 'Tales' series also marks the first time the label will be releasing CDs.

These next few months will be busy for McDowell. As well as 'Storm', the second entry in the 'Tales' series – scored by Klaus Morlock and narrated by Kathrine Peach – this month also sees the release of a new record by Hawksmoor. Then March will bring a new album by Ivan The Tolerable and the third 'Tales' entry, 'Crust', with Blood & Dust and Peter Baker on music and narration duties respectively.

And just in case all those goodies weren't *quite* enough, this year's LPs will also include lathe-cut seven-inches, purely because, as McDowell professes, "I really like doing singles and I need some excuse to do them". That's good enough for us. There's a couple of other surprises coming that he's keeping under wraps for the moment, but trust us, they're worth the wait. For now, switch the lights off and give 'Wolf' a spin. Just ignore that scratching at the door.

**'Wolf' is out now on Library Of The Occult**

## IN A SPIN

### Portable decks from Japan

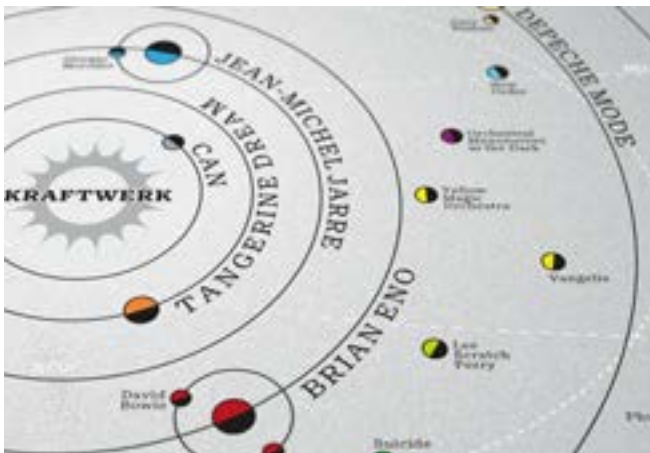
This little gem from Stokyo is quite the looker – a fully portable two-channel DJ set-up, it's based on the popular Japanese Columbia GP3 import, which is now out of production. Consisting of two RM-1 turntables and an RMX-1 mixer, this nifty gizmo plays both seven and 12-inch records, with speed adjustment, crossfader, built-in speakers and a neat little handle on top for easy transportation. But for anyone wanting to take this to the club, do be warned that the company calls it "more of a collector's item than an actual DJ setup". Still, it's perfect for DJing on the go or for those impromptu vinyl sessions after the pub. At around \$670, it's a snip. [stokyo.world.com](http://stokyo.world.com)



## SOLAR FLAIR

### Mapping the force of electronic history

Liverpool design studio Dorothy strikes gold again. Their latest Electronic Solar System print maps out the influencers of electronic music across a solar system – a slam-dunk for any fan of machine sounds with an eye for design. With Kraftwerk as its solar centre, it charts a course through German kosmische, Jean-Michel Jarre, Ennio Morricone, Depeche and beyond. It doesn't get better than this. At £30 a pop, you know what to do. [wearedorothy.com](http://wearedorothy.com)



### PULSE

## LIAM MOUR

### Analogue synthing Nils Frahm protege

#### WHO THEY?

Liam Mour is a gifted multi-instrumental keyboardist, who began playing piano at the age of six. Born in a remote mountainous region of Central Asia, but now based in Berlin, he's been taken under the wing of the pre-eminent experimental neoclassicist Nils Frahm. A firmly-established resident at Berlin's renowned Funkhaus and with support slots for the likes of Four Tet, Gold Panda and Max Cooper already under his belt, word-of-mouth is spreading.

#### WHY LIAM MOUR?

Mour is recognised for his light-filled, exuberant dancefloor-friendly sound heard in last year's releases, the soaring 'Ode To Youth' and 'Dreaming Of A Better Place'. His third EP, 'Above', travels to more exploratory soundscapes, exemplified by its texturally nuanced title track – a thrilling downtempo sci-fi fantasia suffused with the muted shades of twilight, its cavernous spaces and choral sequences are filmic and brilliantly transporting.

#### TELL US MORE...

Born high in the remote Tian-Shan region of Kyrgyzstan, where life was hard (little electricity, no warm running water and only horses or donkeys for transport), and then later raised in Germany, there's a transcendent quality to Mour's work that is surely part-explained by his unique high-altitude upbringing. What really appeals though, is his tendency for the emotive qualities of analogue synths, and the inimitably expressive sound of the Korg MS-10 in particular. He deftly juxtaposes its singular tones alongside the organic textural qualities of traditional instrumentation in a manner which marks him out. We'll be keeping a very close eye on him this year.

#### CARL GRIFFIN

'Above' EP is released by Ode To Youth on 25 February

## DATA BREACH

### Soundwave graphics for your walls

After successful funding on Kickstarter, Sheffield-based creative designer and printmaker Alex Szabo-Haslam has come up with a novel way of turning your favourite music into a striking piece of art. With Waveform, Szabo-Haslam will transform a track or album of your choosing into a print based on the visual data representation of soundwaves, widely used for decades in art, music hardware/software and science. Made using traditional, hand-pulled silk-screen processes, each print is also signed by the artist. Fans already include the likes of Stephen Mallinder, Mark "LFO" Bell and Surgeon, who have all had their songs turned into eye-catching wall art. Currently available in three sizes, prints can be ordered from Szabo-Haslam's website. Prices start at £50. [szabohaslam.co.uk](http://szabohaslam.co.uk)



## EAR WE GO

### Tidal streaming aids fairer artist payouts

Streaming is a contentious topic, to say the least, and while it has allowed listeners to discover lots of new music, smaller artists are often not paid their dues. But streaming giant Tidal is aiming to change all that with a new subscription tier that adds "fan-based royalties". Basically, streaming tends to work by pooling together every user's subs and then dividing them out to artists, depending on the total number of streams – which is fine if you're Adele or Coldplay, but lesser-known artists don't get a look-in. Tidal's new £19.99 HiFi Plus subscription seeks to rectify this by paying artists based on users' individual streaming activity – in effect, the more you stream a specific artist, the more money they get. It's a good idea, and one that might catch on if successful. [tidal.com](http://tidal.com)

# UNDER THE INFLUENCE

Oslo-based electroacoustic musician **Natasha Barrett** reveals her influences – from owls and raspberries to Soundfield microphones

WORDS: JO HUTTON

### RAVEL'S SPELLS

"When I was very small, I used to listen to my dad's extensive classical LP collection. I wasn't allowed to touch them, but he would let me listen on his very nice headphones. I didn't know it at the time but that was my first immersive sound experience.

"One of my profound memories when I was about eight is from Ravel's 'L'Enfant Et Les Sortilèges'. It's just a two-minute section, an evocation of this magical place, of spells that have been cast, with animals and plants coming to life. These sounds and imagery have somehow transferred into my music, I take care of every sound with attention to tiny details and that is also what I notice in Ravel's orchestration."

### GETTING IN THE ZONE

"I often think about Tarkovsky's film, 'Stalker'. In particular, the scene when they travel into 'the Zone' which is like a constantly shifting maze where there are these sand dunes, like on a beach but indoors. A raven flies across the screen and suddenly disappears mid-flight – pop! – for no reason. It's a fantastic, amazing scene. I try to capture this moment in so much of my work. I made a piece called 'Zone 1', which was inspired by 'Stalker', but I wasn't happy with it. Maybe I was trying to make something as incredible as Tarkovsky's film in a piece of music, which just wasn't possible."

### MICROPHONES AND MIRRORS

"I don't have any valuable things, except in my studio, because I spend all my money on sound equipment. But I do have one of those convex mirrors that you see in some of the Dutch Masters' paintings, that reflect the whole room. I always wanted one, and some years ago I managed to find a very old one in a second-hand shop in Paris and squeeze it through customs to bring home to Norway.

"My microphones are my most lovingly cherished items. I guess my original A-format SPS200 Soundfield microphone bought in 2007 is the one thing that I still love to use. It is an ambisonics microphone and will pick up directional





sound over 360 degrees, a bit like the convex mirror. I always use it when I'm outdoors recording. You can focus on the sounds without worrying where the microphone is pointing because you get back to the studio and just correct the rotation of the sound field. You have to know a bit about ambisonics to decode it in the correct way to get the best results. When I started it was all word of mouth, test it, read a paper from the 1980s, gather your own information. Now it's much easier to find out what you need to know from the internet."

### THE NIGHTMARE OF HIDDEN SETTINGS

"One of the rules for me now when I'm out field recording, is to only use my own equipment. Even with the best borrowed equipment, if you don't know how to use it properly it will end in a disaster. Once, I travelled a long way to record all day – sounds of water, animals, a donkey. I was using multiple microphones and had borrowed an eight-channel recorder because my batteries had failed. I got home and found it was all completely distorted. I did get the donkey though, who performed perfectly on cue."

### SUGARS AND ACID

"I don't particularly like vegetable gardening but I love raspberries, so I grow them. They don't taste any good from the shop because they are grown too quickly and kept too long. If their flavours accumulate over a long period of time and if you eat them straight from the bush they are so tangy and sweet with a very strong and unique flavour, but about an hour after they're picked they start to go acidic."

### FACTORY LINE

"My first job was on the production line at a Rank Xerox plant, manufacturing photocopiers. I could assemble components really fast because I was very good with my hands, putting a cable shoe onto a cable repeatedly, all day long. I was working night shifts too. That was tough, but it was OK because I needed the money for my first cello."

### BATS OVER OWLS

"I love the sound of a night owl. I live on the edge of a forest, and in summer I leave the window open to hear owls and other night animals. I haven't yet recorded any. Last year, I bought some sensors for recording over a long period of time – little computer circuit boards with built-in microphones. You can programme them to record for a certain period of time at particular times of day and even leave them out for a whole month. They can also capture ultrasonic sounds, so I could deploy my little recording devices and record bats over a whole season without having to stand out all night in the cold."

"But I realise there's a big difference in the equipment bioacoustics scientists use for the data they are after and what I need. I have to make sure I've got really high-quality sound for my music, which is different to just having a nice owl noise."

### RISSET RHYTHMS

"I was always a bit intimidated by older composers, but when I met Jean-Claude Risset he was the most interesting, fun, cosy man you'd want to be your granddad. He created rhythmic versions of Shepard tones, where you perceive the sound as if it is speeding up forever and ever."

### FOGGY DEW

"One summer, I visited Værøy, an island off the north-west coast of Norway, with my partner. We took a small boat across the sea and went on a long hiking trip. We climbed the mountain, although we could hardly see because there was dense fog everywhere. Through the low-hanging mist, you could see the glowing refraction of the sun. When we got to the top, the fog around our feet kind of rolled over the peak and down onto the other side revealing a bright summer landscape of mountain and sea. This transition from one secret, magical place into an expansive clear vista has had a lasting impact on me and is in all my music."

'Heterotopia' is released by Persistence Of Sound on 4 March

# A LABOUR OF LOVE

Like the mad machines he builds, Swedish designer **Love Hultén** is one of a kind. We got together to find out what inspires him to keep building

**WORDS: WILLIAM STOKES**



Imagine a universe where Korg, Atari and Frank Lloyd Wright join forces to open a synth boutique-cum-games arcade, and you're somewhere near the visual realm of Gothenburg's Love Hultén. At once fascinated by the haptics and audio-visual characters of musical interfaces and classic video games, Hultén says he specialises in "audiovisual contraptions that combine traditional craftsmanship with modern technology".

So whether deftly rehousing existing units like the Korg Minilogue or the Super Nintendo, or creating his own (witness the outrageous Axoloti Core-based VOC-25, a conceptual vocal synth consisting of 25 sets of plastic *teeth*), Hultén's aesthetic leans toward the retro-futurist but eludes definitive categorisation. Time to meet the man behind the machine...

**Your work moves freely between the worlds of video games and musical instruments, often combining the two. What's the link?**

"I grew up playing video games and making music, so my projects are just forms of my own personal interests. And for me, both those areas are based around tactility and interaction. A sense of control with instant physical feedback, a sort of reaction to numb touch technology, I guess. I try to combine them both occasionally. Sometimes it works, sometimes I'm just creating strange monsters. But strange monsters are part of my creative process – they tickle the conceptual artist in me."



BOB180

NOISTATION

**More broadly, there's often a retro aesthetic there. Is that a nostalgic thing?**

"What is affecting product design negatively today, in my opinion, is the industry itself and the throwaway products it keeps churning out to consumers desperately craving the latest iPhone model. My work is a reaction to that. I'm quite inspired by mid-20th century concepts, when we had a different view on quality and craftsmanship – material knowledge in combination with accomplished execution. For instance, using a material that grows a unique patina without regular maintenance and daily care extends the expiration date of the final product. It will breathe through time, rather than get suffocated by it."

"The mashed-up references in my work have a triggering effect on people, I guess. But I want them to be enlightened, not just feel nostalgic. Nostalgia is involved to a certain extent, yes, but it's not about looking backwards. It's about taking steps in different directions simultaneously by using fragments from both the past and today, creating unique and balanced objects."





SLAGWERK-101



BIVALVIA SYNTHESIS



EC1

### How did you get started in woodworking?

"I attended a local school of design in 2010 and discovered my passion for woodworking there. I then had an exam in traditional cabinet-making, only to realise that classic carpentry was not my thing. The raw materials found in the wood shop were a perfect complement to the electronic projects I'd been experimenting with since my youth. Creating straightforward furniture will never be my go-to, but every now and then I break from my tech-y routines to make the occasional chair or table!"

### If you had to choose one design that best represents your approach...

"My Bivalvia Synthesis is a good representation for me and my work. It's small and precious, makes sound, has that recognisable but still inexplicit interface that triggers curiosity and uses a revealing/folding clamshell casing. It's an alien gemstone. On the more conceptual side, I think VOC-25 is a great piece that speaks about my need for dysfunctional joy, as an artist and in life."

### Anything you're particularly excited about for 2022?

"I'm very excited about diving into 2022 with fresh perspectives and crazy visions. This year will be focused on sound, not so much game-related work. I will also dive deeper into the more dysfunctional and conceptual stuff, but I'll try to be wiser and kinder to myself. I need to start prioritising! I'm doing props for a surrealist French low-budget movie – now, that's fun. I would love to take on more projects like that... shape a room and create a full atmosphere. It's fun doing the individual pieces, but for me they often feel taken out of context somehow."

For more, visit [lovehulten.com](https://lovehulten.com)

## YOU'VE GOT MAEL

### Sparks soundtrack gets the wax treatment

Last year saw the release of Edgar Wright's documentary about eccentric art-poppers, Sparks. Waxwork Records, the label specialising in exclusive vinyl-issue soundtracks and film scores from cult movies, is now releasing 'The Sparks Brothers' as a deluxe four-LP set to accompany Wright's film, featuring 42 tracks spanning the five decades of fabulous music we've been given by Californian brothers Ron and Russell Mael. The album is available in pink or black and white marble pressings, with extensive liner notes from Wright and the Maels themselves, and comes housed in a heavyweight, book-style gatefold jacket. As well as all the obvious hits, there are live tracks and a recording of author Neil Gaiman (who features in the film) reading the lyrics to 'Amateur Hour'. Not to be missed. [waxworkrecords.com](http://waxworkrecords.com)



## UTILITY MAN

### Modular synth diary is an essential listen

Josh Mason's musical/literary project 'Utility Music' is the fruit of a year-long endeavour which saw the Floridian construct and record a new patch on a Doepfer A-100 modular synthesiser each week. From January to December 2019, Mason would begin patching from scratch every Monday and continue to flesh out his experiments over the course of the next seven days.

The resulting music – or as Josh puts it, each "mosaic assembled from these weekly stems" – is a meditative bath of accomplished texture and melody, at times drifting toward the melodic vignettes of ambient pioneer Hiroshi Yoshimura and the explorative abstractions of Morton Subotnick.

Equally intriguing is the gorgeous 72-page paperback that accompanies the music, meticulously detailing each patch and offering insights into Mason's work, approach and his enviably pastoral weekly routine. "On Saturday, I would freeze the patch and 'perform' it without making any new additions," he says. "Sunday was set aside for recording the result, taking down patch notes, then taking the patch apart so that the process could begin all over again the next day." A man of considerable talent, look out for his next project at [joshmason.info](http://joshmason.info)

# TIME MACHINE

Producer **Pascal Gabriel** revisits his innovative work on a brace of 1988 megahits, 'Beat Dis' and 'Theme From S-Express'

**WORDS: JEREMY ALLEN**

It was a Monday morning in February 1988 when Pascal Gabriel realised he had a massive hit on his hands. The freelance Belgian sound engineer had popped by the Rhythm King label offices on Harrow Road in west London in the hope he might be paid for his services.

"They weren't very good at paying up on time, so I went round there," says Gabriel, who was born in Brussels and has been based in London since 1979. "I turned up, and the phones were off the hook! All the dealers were going, 'We're running out! It's Monday and we're running out. You have to give us some more vinyl!'"

The vinyl they were running out of was the Bomb The Bass debut single 'Beat Dis', a collage of hip hop, film samples and an electric alarm clock, all held together by a groovy, repetitive bassline that Gabriel had recorded with the DJ Tim Simenon. Radio play for the track had been scarce, but the combination of dancefloor exposure and word-of-mouth enthusiasm was paying dividends. The demand had caught the label completely by surprise.

By midweek, Rhythm King's distributor had run out of seven-inch singles and they were up against Kylie Minogue's 'I Should Be So Lucky', which was selling very nicely...

"So we ended up being Number Two that week," says Gabriel with some disappointment. "But I was pleased because it was a little venture of mine and Tim's that had suddenly gone global. It was fantastic."

Ironically, Gabriel would go on to work with Kylie in later years, but that's a story for another day.

The origins of 'Beat Dis' were inauspicious. Gabriel had done several freelance engineering jobs for Rhythm King when they approached him to make a medley of material from the label with a DJ friend of theirs.

"And so Tim and I got together, and originally this project was going to be called the Rhythm King Allstars. After about a day in the studio, we decided



there wasn't really enough material and Tim suggested we add some samples from hip hop records, which sounded like a good plan. And then Tim came up with loads of kettle noises and other stuff, and we put it all together."

Gabriel says the real boon was having the Akai S900 at his disposal, an affordable 12-bit sampler with more than one output that had come onto the market quite recently.

"By the end of the week, we had five S900s fully loaded into my little Commodore 64 computer, with a crap MIDI thing hanging out the back of it. It was great! It was a real adventure. It was really pushing the available technology to its absolute limits."

Around the same time Gabriel and Simenon were working on 'Beat Dis', another group of DJs were doing something similar down the road under the name M|A|R|R|S. 'Pump Up The Volume' beat 'Beat Dis' to the punch, though it didn't provide the inspiration for its acid house counterpart some might have assumed.

"The only record we were aware of that made use of samples back then was PWL's 'Roadblock' [Stock Aitken Waterman]. So in this case, we were both in our respective studios thinking the same thing, probably with the same gear."

Rhythm King were impressed with what Gabriel had done for Bomb The Bass and suggested he work with another DJ, Mark Moore, who ran a successful night at Heaven nightclub playing early Chicago house records.

"So the label said, 'Here's 500 quid, off you go,'" says Gabriel.

The pair recorded 'Theme From S-Express' in a Hackney lock-up owned by producer Johnny Edward, who was responsible for novelty one-hit wonders Renée And Renato and, more strangely, the kids' TV show 'Metal Mickey'. Gabriel and Moore got on like a house on fire, though there were never any drugs taken in the process.

"We did an article about the making of the track a while back," recounts Gabriel. "And the journalist was trying to find out if we were high on E when we did it. I don't think Mark and I ever took anything like that together – he was almost a teetotaler when I first met him. I smoked a bit of pot like most people, but that was only after the session, because everything sounds *great* when you're stoned. You know what I mean?"

While Simenon had elected to mash together hip hop, John Barry records and found sounds, Moore was keen to utilise 'Is It Love You're After' by Rose Royce with TZ's 'I Got The Hots For You' chopped up, quantised and sprinkled on top. S'Express also came up with the impressive innovation of sampling hairspray to replicate the sound of a hi-hat. This time, Rhythm King was fully prepared and made sure it had enough polyvinyl chloride.

"So yeah, I got my Number One in the end," says Gabriel proudly.

'Theme From S-Express' spent two weeks at the top in April 1988. It wasn't all happy-ever-after though.

"Clearly, like everyone else who used a lot of samples in those days, you get done," says Gabriel, referring to copyright issues that ended in litigation. "We never cleared any of it. At the time we didn't know because it was all such a new thing."

In his defence, he points to the fact that nobody envisaged the tracks would be such big commercial hits.

"It wasn't radio support that got them there," he says. "It was the clubs. We thought they'd do well in clubs, but we never imagined they'd end up in the charts. I went around with white labels of 'Theme From S-Express' to record companies trying to get a job as a producer and writer, and they'd say, 'Oh, well that's a club record, isn't it? It's not going to do that well'. Of course, after it went to Number One they'd call me and say, 'Oh Pasc, we told you it was going to be a hit, didn't we?'. Whatever..."



## SOS

The British Library's Save Our Sounds project aims to save UK recordings from extinction. **Andy Linehan**, Curator of Popular Music, digs through the archive's priceless audio treasures. This month: Rex Keating



Rex Keating was a radio broadcaster, writer and traveller who was born in London in 1910. At the age of 19, he moved to Egypt where his father was based, and found employment as a ship inspector on the Suez Canal. An amateur radio enthusiast, he sent scripts and programme ideas to the Egyptian State Broadcasting service, eventually joining the organisation and becoming head of its European Programmes Division. His transmission of the playing of Tutankhamun's trumpets in 1939 led to him being accused of invoking a curse which started the Second World War.

Keating spent the war reporting on the conflict in North Africa and afterwards became Deputy Director of the Palestine Broadcasting Service, then the Near East Broadcasting Service in Cyprus. He founded and headed up the Cyprus Broadcasting Service before returning to London, where he briefly became a newscaster for ITN.

In 1956, Keating became head of English language radio for UNESCO. He was based in Paris, but travelled extensively throughout Europe, Africa and Asia on recording trips. His resulting programmes didn't just feature UNESCO World Heritage Sites but also museums, schools, universities, and places of historical, archaeological, and architectural significance. Keating was heavily involved in and documented the International Campaign to Safeguard the Monuments of Nubia, which were endangered by the construction of the Aswan dam.

His tapes also include a variety of music, some live and some dubbed from the radio, ranging from Yoruba talking drums and Hausa rock gongs in Nigeria to traditional Cambodian dances. He describes the world around him, too, as he travelled on planes, trains and boats, and by car, tram and trolleybus, recalling making his way through Budapest on a train line run by children, travelling in an unstable canoe to the lake village of Ganvié, and being on an icebreaker on the Danube.

Alone in his hotel room at the end of the day, and with the help of a whisky and soda, Keating often recorded his reflections on the trials and tribulations that go hand in hand with travel. These monologues include comments on the food, grumbles about hotel mix-ups, broken-down cars, missed connections and unreliable tape machines. They give a valuable insight into his working methods and the times he lived in, as he assesses the quality of the day's recording and looks ahead to his next mission.

Rex Keating's tape collection was donated to the British Library Sound Archive in 2002, three years before his death. The range of languages, cultures, subjects and music contained within it presented a major challenge to those tasked with documenting and cataloguing the contents, but their laudable efforts will shortly be revealed for all to appreciate as the collection is made available through the Save Our Sounds project.

For more about Save Our Sounds visit [bl.uk/save-our-sounds](http://bl.uk/save-our-sounds)

## TRUNK CALL

Electronic Edition Pop Trumps? Deal us in...

Fans of esoterica will adore the latest in the Pop Trumps series, Jonny Trunk's twist on the classic 1970s card game which is now available in an electronic edition. And as we've come to expect from the eminent Mr Trunk, you're in for some surprises. Each card details key facts, mint value and a rarity score for various key electronic releases from the 1950s to the 1980s, spanning albums, private presses, seven-inch singles and more. Expect pioneers such as Yellow Magic Orchestra, Suzanne Ciani, Pierre Henry, Joe Meek and The Radiophonic Workshop, plus plenty of other switched-on, knob-twiddling gems you likely won't even have heard of. Only £13, too. [trunkrecords.com](http://trunkrecords.com)

## ELECTRONIC POP TRUMPS



## GOING VIRAL

Covid-derived music, anyone?

In a startling development, data organisation Viromusic have taken the genetic code of Covid-19 and transformed it into a series of tracks that, in turn, have been made into a selection of audio NFTs. We'll say that again for the people at the back.

An NFT (or non-fungible token) is a unique digital token that is part of an Ethereum blockchain (a cryptocurrency). By using a technique dubbed "DNA sonification", which creates sound using gene expression – with codons (code) played as musical notes – Viromusic have created a melody in which every note is drawn from the viral sequence of Covid-19. They describe it as "a direct musical representation of the viral code". Wow.

There have already been around 10,000 tracks created, with each of them going for about 0.07 ETH (at time of writing, that's around £126). For that, you get the tune, as well as info about what part of the Covid-19 viral sequence the track belongs to.

[viromusic.io](http://viromusic.io)



**Ned Rush - The Plunderer Expresses**  
**Probabilistic Electro Modular Dub**  
[expertsleepersltd.bandcamp.com](http://expertsleepersltd.bandcamp.com)



## PULSE

### HOLODRUM

Yorkshire disco-spangled synthpop

#### WHO THEY?

The assorted members of this Leeds seven-piece have variously been kicking around together – sharing bands, mixing each others records and promoting shows – for a while. This is the first time they've made music together (save for a one-off New Year's Eve show in a covers band, that story for another time), and oh, what music.

#### WHY HOLODRUM?

You know their self-titled debut mini-album will be on heavy rotation from the moment you hear the squiggly synth and handclaps intro of opener 'Lemon Chic'. They draw on New York no wave, checking Tom Tom Club and Liquid Liquid among their go-tos. 'Free Advice', with the sweet pipes of vocalist Emily Garner taking centre stage, has the euphoric feelgood vibe of The Go! Team, with sleek production licks to match – when the drums on 'Stage Echo' kick in, they'll take your head clean off. The idea was for Holodrum to be a live electronic ensemble. You can feel the joy pouring off the record. They played a couple of live dates earlier this month, with more to come. Best not missed, we'd say.

#### TELL US MORE...

The line-up is something of a who's who. It revolves around guitarist/vocalist Sam Shjipstone (currently enjoying the limelight as a member of Yard Act) along with his former Hookworms bandmates Jonathan Nash (drums), Jonathan Wilkinson (guitar) and Matthew Benn (production, bass, synth). Benn is XAM Duo with Christopher Duffin (sax/synth), who has also played live with James Holden & The Animal Spirits. Percussionist Steve Nuttall played with Nope and vocalist Emily Garner is one half of VIDEO. Leeds is piping hot right now. Get on this lot while you can.

#### NEIL MASON

'Holodrum' is released by Gringo on 25 February

## HACK TO THE FUTURE

### London collective leading the DIY future

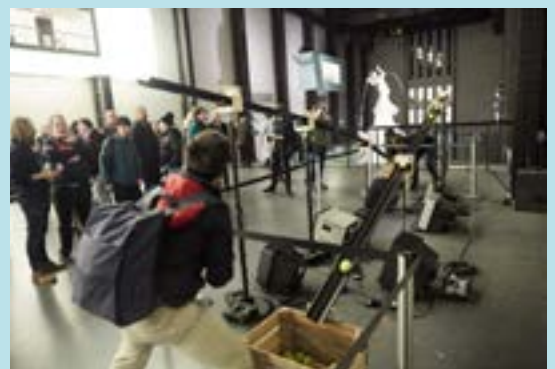
Next time you find yourself in Wembley, cup an ear. If you listen hard enough you may just hear the clanging, strumming and general thrumming of London Hackspace. A hotbed of experimentation, this community-run, non-profit workshop is a veritable utopia for anyone looking to build, well, just about anything. It features an electronics lab, an amateur radio facility, a library, a woodwork shop, bio-lab and much, much more. There's even a room simply allocated to "get your head in order".

It's the perfect home, then, for Hackoustic. Dedicated to exploring acoustics and instrument-building, the collective was founded in 2014 by sound artist Tim Yates and musician/artist Saif Bunni. We caught up with them in Issue 36 of Electronic Sound, but since then, they've appeared at the Tate Modern's Tate Lates, Abbey Road Studios (for the brilliantly named Abbey Road Hackathon) and most recently the London Jazz Festival, all the while maintaining their "spiritual home" at London's IKLECTIK, a non-profit creative hub.

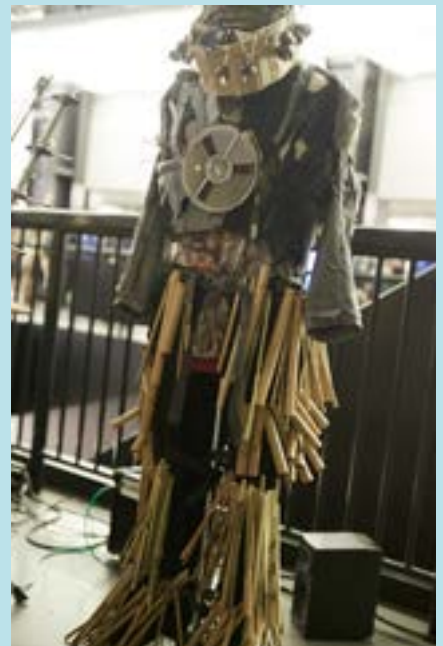
"My background is as a classical musician," says Yates. "But I found the more time I spent doing that, the less I was able to find the music in it anymore. What I wanted to do was explore things. It's not really relevant, the label you attach to it. If it's interesting, then we're interested in it!"

Their impressive list of associates include the likes of My Panda Shall Fly, Vulpestruments, Jen Haugan and composer Gawain Hewitt, whose CV includes composing with code and hydrophones on (and in) a frozen fjord with Norwegian jazz veteran Arve Henriksen, as well as winning the European Space Agency Prize for a piece that "sonified satellite data".

With live Hackoustic events hopefully resuming this spring, be sure to follow their brilliant work at [hackoustic.org](http://hackoustic.org)







# LANDMARKS

**Jah Wobble** talks us through his 1990 *Invaders Of The Heart* epic '**Bomba**'

**INTERVIEW: ROBERT HARRIS**

"We'd completed the 'Without Judgement' album in the spring of 1989 while on tour in the Netherlands. 'Bomba' was the first thing that we did when we got back, with the new line-up of *The Invaders Of The Heart*.

"We recorded it at Alaska Studios, which was a complex of rehearsal rooms on Alaska Street in Waterloo, near the station, on *The Cut*. It was a classic little demo studio really. The desk would have been a Fostex 16-track. I'd been working in a glass warehouse around the corner from there under the same group of railway arches. Buster Edwards, the guy from the Great Train Robbery, used to sell flowers just over the road.

"We'd been using Alaska as a rehearsal space since back in the days when I was still drinking in the mid-80s. It was a pretty rundown kind of place. Our guitarist Justin Adams lost an original Gibson Les Paul there. He left it outside the studio one day, and somebody just walked off with it.

"It was our percussionist Neville Murray, who sadly died last year, who convinced me to reform and make *The Invaders Of The Heart* mark II. He was the one who found Justin. I'd told him that I wanted to do something more Middle Eastern and Neville said, 'I've got a guitarist who gets what those scales are about, the only thing is he's an Old Etonian'. That's like the archetypal toff for me, so we were like, 'Oh no!'.

"But you should just take people as you find them. I mean, when I met Justin, he was super amenable and bright-eyed and enthusiastic – he was an important part of it back then. David Harrow had gone, Mark Ferda was there by that time and Nick Burton played drums. They joined via Ned Morant, a London boy of Anglo-Indian background – a lovely geezer.

"Mark and Ned had been in a band together called *Savage Progress*. Mark was a programmer – in the days when you had a programmer! It was exciting for me because the issue had always been finding a good solid drummer.

It was always a bloody problem to get someone who could groove, so drum machines were getting used a bit more. We were programming and then bringing real percussionists in around that.

"Then there was Dawson Miller, who I knew via Annie Whitehead – Annie was in the first *Invaders*. Dawson had studied Middle Eastern percussion. He played this Algerian instrument, a darbuka, and I really wanted that sound in there. And finally, I met Natacha Atlas through Kath Canoville, who ran the record label *Nation* with Aki Nawaz. When I heard her voice I was like, 'What the fuck! I've got to work with this person'.

"'Bomba' was the first track that we did with Nat. It was that exhilarating time when everything's in a state of flux, you're just putting this new team together and everyone's really keen. It was the beginning of the realisation of this vision that I'd had.

"Whereas 'Without Judgement' had this dark, European sound, with 'Bomba' what I had in mind was something quite colourful. It was a bit like, 'Right, I'm going to cook a fusion dish and I'm going to utilise a bit of chilli, a bit of coriander, a bit of smoked paprika... you know, this is gonna have a tang to it, yeah?'.

"We probably recorded it in a day – in an afternoon because I don't like to start in the morning. I had a bassline, the groove worked out, the sequences, the changes. I put the basic track together and then I got the others to come and play and do their thing on it.

"I paid for the session, but was so happy with the results that I spread the publishing equally between everyone. We were working with loops, maybe more obviously than we had before, and the track's very textural. I wanted an ambient vibe. The dreaminess. Sort of like the *Steve Hillage* records that I used to listen to in the 70s.





"We did a tour with that line-up, which was very good, but we couldn't get arrested. I thought, 'This is a really great sound and it's a great band'. I just couldn't understand why anyone wouldn't want to sign us.

"David Jaymes, who'd been in Modern Romance and who was helping to manage us, was trying to get us a deal with Charlie Gillett at his label, Oval. But a friend of mine, Bobby Marshall, had given a copy of the 'Bomba' demo to Andrew Weatherall.

"I knew Bobby through Adrian Sherwood. He was Gary Clail's manager, and had been getting me to do stuff with Gary. Andrew heard it, loved it, and immediately was like, 'I want to do a remix'. That's how it all happened.

"Nina Walsh, Andrew's girlfriend at the time, was working with their label, Boy's Own, and she pushed things along. When I heard the remixes I was really delighted and just thought, 'This is fucking great!'. I mean, selfishly I was thinking, 'This could really do a job for me'. I was surprised to hear Miles Davis in there. Fucking Miles!

"It was great for me, because I'd been through all that corny drink and drugs bullshit where you self-destruct. It had been a dark time and then suddenly I was in demand. People wanted me for sessions – at the time it was that new generation of musicians, that acid house thing. It was a lovely feeling. I remember we were at Dingwalls in Camden when Andrew played the track and the place went potty. People were coming over and saying, 'This is your song? I love it', and I was like, 'Fucking Hell!', because I'd been out in the wilderness for a little while and it felt like, 'Wow, I'm back again!'.  
 "Andrew was a big part of me getting back in the game. He was a real enthusiast. With his help, 'Bomba' turned out to be an absolutely key track. It got me the album deal with EastWest. When I look back, I've got very vivid and very happy memories of it."

## FIELD DAY

### Electromagnetic listening from Amsterdam

Field recording has never been easier, with even your humble mobile phone offering the capacity for high-quality pickups. But the EMF v1.2 from Amsterdam's Sorte Muld offers something a little different. Described by creator Martin Kofoed as "a sensitive handheld device which enables you to listen to the hidden realms of electromagnetic fields", the EMF emits all manner of glitched-up interference, depending on the electromagnetic character of whatever you point it at, and you can even modulate the incoming signal. "I was fascinated with the idea of using an instrument as a vehicle for different sounds, like a microphone," Kofoed tells us. "The EMF is quite straightforward – we only ever hear what is actually there." Hard to resist at €65. [martinkofoed.com](http://martinkofoed.com)



## STANZA TO REASON

### Poetry collection touches on all things Apex

'You've got so many machines, Richard!' is a dizzyingly weird 33-poem collection about Apex Twin that you need on your bookshelf. Inspired by the many myths associated with Richard D James, one of the editors even has a personal tie to the famed producer. "I grew up in the shadow of Apex Twin," says Broken Sleep Books boss, Aaron Kent. "Richard grew up in Redruth, Cornwall, and went to the same school as me many years prior. But once I found myself down the rabbit hole, I saw signs of him everywhere, from rumours he lived in a treehouse at the top of Lanner Hill, to him driving a tank around town at night. And that's what this anthology offers – absolutely no answers."

"You won't get to know Apex Twin better through these poems," agrees co-editor Rishi Dastidar. "But you will be intrigued all over again. And moved. That often gets forgotten, or lost. For all the electronics, the calculations, the futurity, the complexity of what he makes, he is actually the most emotional of musicians, and a reminder that brain and heart can get pulled at by the unexpected as much as the nostalgic familiar." Available to order now for £6.99. [brokensleepbooks.com](http://brokensleepbooks.com)

## KING OF THE RHODES

### Legendary electric piano gets a reboot

After Rhodes Music Group's 2021 relaunch and much teasing of a new electric piano, the Rhodes MK8 has arrived with a splash. Aficionados will immediately notice a raft of new features, from stereo effects including delay, chorus and phaser to an onboard preamp with drive, parametric EQ and vari-pan. Still, arguably the MK8's most headline-grabbing attributes are its new customisation options, with a range of colourways available for almost every part of the instrument – and even the ability to remove the FX panel entirely. With each piano made to order, and a maximum of 500 units produced per year, the Leeds-based company advises that wait times may vary – but rest assured there will be no favouritism. "All piano orders are assembled chronologically," they say. "If your purchase is order #273, your piano will be built directly after #272." Prices start at £6,795. [rhodesmusic.com](https://rhodesmusic.com)







PULSE

## NYOKABI KARIUKI

Eclectic African-flecked electronica

### WHO THEY?

Nyokabi Kariuki is a Kenyan composer whose music fuses East African instruments like the mbira and xylophone with sparse electronics, dreamy vocals and field recordings. A classically trained pianist, based between Nairobi, Maryland and New York, her musical taste is technicolour – from Francis Bebey and Pink Floyd to Ravel – and she’s wise to being pigeonholed. “Everything I create,” she says, “is an amalgamation of everything I’ve ever listened to.”

### WHY NYOKABI KARIUKI?

Her debut EP was written while marooned Stateside during the height of the pandemic. Titled ‘Peace Places: Kenyan Memories’, the six tracks incorporate field recordings taken from her homeland and eerie production to form a nice representation of memory as pastiche. ‘Ngurumo, Or Feeding Goats Mangoes’ pits the lullaby metal tines of an mbira against her unsettling soprano, while livestock bleat somewhere in the distance. ‘Galu’, on the other hand, is a cinematic track that gently swells until you find yourself dealing with a Björk-like crash, harmonic singing and mbira carried by free jazz drumming, a whirlwind you’ll want to get caught up in.

### TELL US MORE...

Inspiration often comes from unexpected places. “At the start of the pandemic,” she recalls, “I had the idea from a creative writing class to start journaling. I decided to create a *sound* journal. Each day, I’d record whatever sounds were around me and build musical worlds from these recordings. I’ve been finding music everywhere – in nature, in conversations and languages, in noise... in silence. Audio from videos I used to take casually, with my phone, became musical to me. Field recordings are a big part of my artistic language today.”

### ISAAK LEWIS-SMITH

‘Peace Places: Kenyan Memories’ is released by SA Recordings on 25 February







# THE JD'S **THE TEXAS CHAIN STORE MANAGER** DOUBLE LP

Direct from Jack Dangers' Tape Lab studio in San Francisco to Electronic Sound comes the Meat Beat Manifesto architect's latest side project. An explosive double album of trademark electronic pointillism and relentlessly inventive rhythm, written and bolted together by Jack and his partner-in-crime Jon Drukman (Bass Kittens / Pretension Records).

[electronicsound.co.uk/chainstore](http://electronicsound.co.uk/chainstore)

# CELL MATES



Splitting up, getting back together (twice), a farewell gig that wasn't quite goodbye... and now Soft Cell are making another welcome return. Marc Almond and Dave Ball remain as thick as thieves and 'Happiness Not Included', their first album for 20 years, shows why the duo are still the undisputed kings of twisted synthpop

**WORDS: DAVE SIMPSON**

**PICTURES: ANDREW WHITTON**



Marc Almond can pinpoint the exact moment he lost his anonymity and realised that life would never be the same again. "It was just after our first 'Top Of The Pops' appearance," says Almond, referring to Soft Cell performing 'Tainted Love' on the TV show in 1981. "I was in Leeds, buying cigarettes at the corner shop, and I suddenly became aware of this thing, being recognised, which is unlike anything you imagine. It is oddly invasive and intimidating, as you have no real sense of what reaction it might evoke. I don't think anyone thrust into the limelight is ever prepared for it, regardless of how many times the movie in their head has played out. I wish I'd said it, but 'fame is a mask that once you put on, you can never take off'."

Almond's musical partner Dave Ball has a recollection of a similarly "scary" episode, when the duo were recording 'Bedsitter', the follow-up single to 'Tainted Love', and the pressure was full-on.

"It was harder for us because our first hit was a Number One," explains the synth legend. "But every band who's been called a one-hit wonder must have gone through that terror... 'What if it's all over, already?'."

He needn't have worried. Soft Cell went on to notch up 12 UK Top 40 singles, including six Top 10 hits, and four UK Top 20 albums between 1981 and 1984, totalling 25 million record sales to date. After last November's live shows celebrating the 40th anniversary of their platinum debut, 'Non-Stop Erotic Cabaret', the duo are now getting ready to release a new album, 'Happiness Not Included', their first for 20 years, which brilliantly reconciles their pop and experimental sides. It's also somewhat unexpected, given that their concert at London's O2 Arena in September 2018 was billed as their final farewell.

"Which was the intention," insists Almond. "It felt like the right time and I sang knowing I wouldn't sing those songs again as Soft Cell."

Although their O2 set was rapturously received, Almond admits that he "didn't feel elated". He says it didn't seem like it was a true Soft Cell show, never mind the way that he wanted to bow out.

"The scale of it meant it felt difficult to connect," he explains. "There were magical moments, such as 20,000 people singing 'Say Hello, Wave Goodbye' holding up lights, but I came away with a flatness. It was too long and we tried to please too many of the fans. Ironically, it felt incomplete."

Ball asserts that "at the back of my mind I knew it wasn't going to be the last gig", and Soft Cell have split up and returned before. They first parted in 1984, after being so burned by success and drugs that Ball says they were "losing touch with

reality". A reunion in the early 2000s (which produced their 'Cruelty Without Beauty' album) was derailed in 2004 when a near-fatal motorcycle accident left Almond in a coma for a month and Ball "absolutely mortified".

The 2018 O2 performance had been intended as a one-off to promote the band's career-spanning 'Keychains & Snowstorms' boxset and bring the curtain down, but Ball admits that he'd never been comfortable with Almond ("who can be impulsive") announcing it was their last show. Then, after they'd had two years to "think about what Marc had said", Covid-19 brought a dramatic volte-face.

"The world changed and in many ways we all changed, so what we thought was a mapped-out future wasn't," explains the singer. "I found myself with time on my hands and suddenly in a bizarre dystopian world of Covid and panic, real tragedy and sadness coupled with everyone going crazy, and I think Dave and I thought, 'Why the hell not?'."

O

nce they'd made the decision, they started working on Soft Cell songs – as opposed to Marc Almond solo material, which Dave Ball has penned before, between stints in The Grid or working with artists as diverse as Genesis P Orridge and Kylie Minogue.

"Dave sends me musical ideas and if they inspire me, which they usually do in some way, I write around them," says Almond, explaining that they worked remotely during lockdowns – but then they always did. "We don't sit down and write together. Never have."

"I sort of know what makes him react," explains Ball. "I will [adopts a Kraftwerk voice] 'play a little melody' and try to get a response. We've always bounced off each other like that. Then once we get together, it sounds like Soft Cell. It can't be anything else."

Although the pandemic hardly left Almond short of lyrical ideas, what he didn't want to do was fall into the trap of writing about it. Not directly, anyway.

"There was an early song called 'Strange Kind Of Dance', which was inspired by trips to the supermarket where everyone was trying to social distance, but it never made the album. It's not an album of Covid songs, but it reflects that period."

As well as much else. 'Happiness Not Included' certainly isn't a record by a veteran band trying to recreate their youth. Contemplating their experiences and their time on the planet, if a theme emerges it's one of disillusionment that a promised vision of tomorrow – of hover cars and endless periods of leisure – has never actually materialised, and yet the lyrics are ultimately hopeful.







"The picture on the cover is the abandoned radioactive funfair at Chernobyl," reveals Ball. "There's a Ferris wheel and an old dodgem car. We're both in our 60s [Ball is 62, Almond is 64] and when you get to middle age and beyond you're looking forwards and backwards."

"Very early on we gave the album the working title 'Future Nostalgia', which of course then became the title of Dua Lipa's album, as odd as that seems and as annoying it is," expands Almond. "So I suppose the general theme was around that idea. I think you deal with themes that are meaningful to you when you get to a certain age and discover that everything you hoped or imagined has come true, but only in part. A kind of warped and disappointing view of the future."

"There is so much madness presently in the world that it is hard to process it. I find I usually start from a point of negativity. But in the end – if indeed this is the end – there is a thread of optimism that comes with accepting who we are and where we are in the world."

This is most apparent on the track 'Purple Zone', a favourite of the Pet Shop Boys when Soft Cell unveiled it during the 'Non-Stop Erotic Cabaret' 40th anniversary shows. It seems to explore the issues of ageing, digging deep into anxieties. Almond isn't censoring himself – not that he ever did.

"'Purple Zone' is such a lockdown song," he notes. "I think you sum it up actually better than I could have! I was also reading about synaesthesia, where your senses are displaced and contorted. Within the condition is something called a 'purple zone', a no-man's land of senses, disconnected from the past and therefore fearful of the future. That song came to me very quickly. It is as much about the fear instilled in us by the media, about control, about consumerism. There are countless references to purple zones, be they in religion, politics and, of course, areas of quarantine in China."

If 'Purple Zone' is a sublime electronic banger, 'Light Sleepers', another standout, has a gently swayable, almost symphonic vibe. It's one of the most mesmeric tracks Soft Cell have ever recorded. It's certainly a long way from 'Sex Dwarf' on 'Non-Stop Erotic Cabaret'.

"I was working with a friend of mine, Jon Savage, who's a concert pianist," explains Ball. "I made an album called 'Photosynthesis' with him in 2016. I'd stay with his family in Essex – a lot more peaceful than London – and I said I wanted

to do a ballad. So we wrote something that was slower and more pastoral, with an orchestral arrangement. John Barry is one of my heroes."

Almond penned the lyrics – a eulogy to outriders, rebels and dreamers – in a cafe in Los Angeles at six in the morning, thousands of miles away from his musical companion.

"I'd been there for a couple of days and was still suffering jet lag," remembers the singer. "I was watching the other early risers and it just came to me. LA gives an air of nostalgic decay. I'd always wanted to evoke that feeling of a city waking up, a city yawning. For me, LA exists in my mind like a 1970s West Coast album cover – Joni Mitchell, The Eagles, or The Doors' 'Waiting For The Sun'."

Perhaps the most outrightly nostalgic song on 'Happiness Not Included' is 'Polaroid', a semi-fictionalised account of a real-life meeting with Andy Warhol in New York. As befits their very different personalities, Almond was slightly disheartened, Ball was blown away.

"I was expecting to be let down," admits the keyboardist. "Because what if Warhol had turned out to be this really nice and normal chap? I mean, maybe he was when the public weren't around, but no one understood him. He was worth millions and he had properties all over New York. He was probably the first person to fully understand celebrity culture. Did I like him? I liked the fact that he was Andy Warhol, the most famous artist in the world."

Their encounter took place in 1982 when, as the latest hot English celebs in town, the electronic duo were invited over.

"We were sat across from Warhol and I was thinking, 'I can't believe we're here'," continues Ball, still sounding slightly incredulous even now. "And it was so... mundane. 'So, how do you like New York?' he said. He started taking Polaroids of us, so we took Polaroids of him, and it became a weird game. He gave us some signed copies of 'From A To B And Back Again [The Philosophy Of Andy Warhol]' and we gave him our album. We had our hour and that was it."

In 'Polaroid', Almond imagines what it might have been like had they met in the 1960s, when Warhol was still based at The Factory and The Velvet Underground, Nico and Candy Darling were milling around. Ball, however, insists that Warhol "was exactly what I had expected and I was really pleased he was like that."

E

xperiences like that would have seemed the stuff of fantasy when Almond and Ball met as art students at Leeds Polytechnic in 1977. They formed Soft Cell after Ball started composing electronic music for Almond's performance art pieces such as

'Mirror Fucking'.

"He'd be naked in front of a full-length mirror, smearing himself with cat food and shagging himself," says Ball. "It provoked quite a reaction."

For Almond – as private and introvert offstage as he is extrovert on it and someone who has endured the isolation that can accompany fame – their chemistry was obvious from day one.

"We are so different, but our roots are firmly from the north and north-west of England," he explains. "The affordable glamour and heart of Blackpool [Ball's home town] and seaside resorts out of season like Southport [Almond's]. The darkness of Leeds in the time of the Yorkshire Ripper, the anger and the excitement of the music scene with northern soul, disco, punk and electro... this was new to all of us."

"I was angsty and spotty and gay – the least likely pop star – and Dave was tall and handsome and charismatic. As Jung said, 'The meeting of two personalities is like the contact of two chemical substances – if there is any reaction, both are transformed'. We were both transformed by each other."

It's not always recognised that Soft Cell were one of the first British electronic duos – predating the Pet Shop Boys, Erasure et al, never mind Orbital or The Chemical Brothers.

"There was Sparks in America, but they'd been a five-piece rock band," reflects Ball. "And Suicide, but they were more about the Farfisa organ."

When Soft Cell performed 'Non-Stop Erotic Cabaret' in 2021, Ball was surprised how great it sounded. The same for the duo's non-album cult single, 'Memorabilia'.

"A lot of people say it was a precursor to Detroit techno, but I can't take full credit for that," he says. "A lot of that was down to Daniel Miller, who in my view was one of the inventors of techno. He was doing his version of Kraftwerk and he had sequencers and an ARP synthesiser. He gave Depeche Mode their basic sound. If you listen to the bass drum sound on 'Memorabilia' and Depeche Mode's 'Speak & Spell', they're exactly the same. It's the same Roland drum machine."

Ball – who is full of wonderful, tiny details – points out that Miller bought his Roland from Elton John, while his own second-hand Maxi-Korg 800DV duophonic/monophonic synth (purchased for £450 in Blackpool) had once belonged to Jethro Tull.

"So in a way, both Elton John and Jethro Tull had a hand in the development of British electronica," he laughs.

Ball meanwhile suspects that his group had a hand – or at least an elegantly black varnished fingernail – in goth. The Sisters Of Mercy frontman Andrew Eldritch was an occasional visitor to the duo's scruffy Leeds flat and could regularly be sighted around the Woodhouse area wearing a leather cap like Almond's. Pre-goth but post-punk, the Leeds bands all knew each other because they drank in The Fenton pub, a stone's throw from the Polytechnic and the University.

"Gang Of Four, The Mekons and Delta 5 all used to take the piss out of us – 'What are those two doing with a synth and a

tape machine?'," remembers Ball. "And probably rightly so! We all thought Gang Of Four were going to be the next Clash. They were incredible. But if someone had walked in and said, 'Which one of these groups is going to have a Number One single?', and pointed to us, they'd have been laughed out of the room."

As the synth man tells it, Phonogram Records had been surprised when 'Memorabilia' made an unlikely impact in New York clubs and gave them another £2,000 to record a follow-up. Almond suggested covering 'Tainted Love' after he heard it at The Warehouse in Leeds and ran to the DJ asking, "What's this?". Ball knew the 1964 song – written by Ed Cobb and originally sung by Gloria Jones – from northern soul nights. It was the B-side to a flop single.

"When we started on our own version, it felt twisted and strange. That suited us. We were an odd couple. Marc, this gay bloke in make-up, and me, a big guy who looked like a minder."

Ball credits Mike Thorne for his role in producing what became 1981's second biggest-selling UK single. It was also a massive global hit.

"He put a Synclavier on 'Tainted Love' when no one had heard of a digital synth before. And the intro was a classic pop trick. You think of 'Jumpin' Jack Flash' or the opening chord of 'A Hard Day's Night', and the moment you hear the first note you can name that tune in one."

'Tainted Love' changed everything. Almost literally overnight, Soft Cell went from would-be experimental contemporaries of Throbbing Gristle and Cabaret Voltaire to an internationally successful pop outfit, albeit one that never compromised their subversive tendencies.

"It was never by design," says Ball. "We just found ourselves in the charts all the time. In our minds, we were still an art band. We were trying to be as rebellious as we could."

"It was deliberately instinctive," adds Almond. "Part of me was so full of anger and frustration. I wanted to shock."

Ball vividly recalls their 'Top Of The Pops' debut and the American bands on the programme gawping at them – "Marc with his make-up and me stood behind my synth" – like they were from Mars.

"The BBC are still slightly nervous of us, but back then we were considered this weird duo," chuckles Ball. "The record company asked Marc to tone the eyeliner down, get rid of all the bangles, get a bass player and a drummer... so instead Marc wore more eyeliner and more bangles. After that, the BBC switchboard was jammed, which was exactly what we had wanted."

Almond had seen David Bowie playing 'Starman' on 'Top Of The Pops' in 1972 – when the glam icon's androgynous look, striking hair and different-sized pupils prompted many a playground debate over whether he might actually be an alien – and wanted the same impact. He got it.

"My dad was absolutely outraged," says Ball. "'What the hell is this?!' He was a straight up, Tory voting, Glenn Miller fan. Still had his Brylcreemed hair and his demob suit. When he saw Marc, he didn't know if he was a man or a woman. I always thought Marc looked like Liza Minnelli. The same short hair and make-up. Marc was into the whole Berlin 'Cabaret' thing as well."

After the 'Tainted Love' appearances, sales of eyeliner, bangles, leather and black cap-sleeved T-shirts rocketed.







Soft Cell aren't always given enough credit for the way they upset the mainstream, in terms of outfits, sonic landscapes and the lyrical content they took to the Top 10.

"If I shone a light, that's great to know," says Almond, the thoughtful conceptualist yin to Ball's anecdote-dispensing yang. "Other people before me shone a light in my darkness, so it's the most you can hope for."

Although the singer didn't come out publicly or officially until 1987, his sexuality was a constant guessing game for both the press and the public.

"What is 'officially' coming out?" he ponders. "Saying the words 'I am gay'? I always stood by the belief that we should not be compartmentalised. I loved the blurring edges. I thought the androgyny was important and I refused to be categorised. But in many respects, did it really need saying? I was also terrified by the press officer at the record company – who was ironically gay himself [laughs]. He told me it would end my career, that I'd let everyone down, and he was constantly trying to invent heterosexual situations for me.

"But it certainly didn't seem to be a secret to mainstream TV, where certain performers would do distressing homophobic impersonations of me. I never once denied being gay, and frankly it wasn't anyone's business but mine, and of course it fed into the subversiveness. That is also why I write songs that are genderless, in particular when they are romantic."

A good example was the pair's third smash single, 'Say Hello, Wave Goodbye'. One interpretation is that the protagonist is a gay man who tries to make a heterosexual relationship work and the lyrics celebrate his realisation that he can't live a lie, that he needs to be himself. Almond insists that ideally it can mean whatever the listener wants it to.

"I would never want there to be a correct reading of the song. At the time of writing it, I had a particular idea of a politician or an aristocrat in a relationship with a call girl. But if you take 'Non-Stop Erotic Cabaret' as a song cycle concept, you could think of 'Frustration' as an opening of that. He has an affair but it doesn't work out so, as with all of us, the gravitational pull is back to ordinariness. The Soho neon-drenched film noir quality was inspired by 60s movies like 'The Small World Of Sammy Lee' [the Ken Hughes crime thriller] or 'The World Ten Times Over' [the Wolf Rilla drama]."

We live in a very different world to the one into which Soft Cell emerged. Sexuality of all kinds is far more widely accepted. Is Almond – now an OBE – proud to have been part of that national conversation?

"If indeed I have been, then of course," he says. "Unless you lived through that period from the late 60s to the mid-90s, it is all but impossible to appreciate the level of homophobia that gay men and women faced, and then the onset of AIDS added levels of personal loss and suffering, heroism and struggle. People talk about Covid, but for most gay people above 50 years old, this is their second pandemic. At least there is a collective sense of the nation working together with this one.

"During AIDS, that was far from the case. Many gay people were poisoned by that time – myself included – searching somehow for an antidote to it. Others were nailed into their closets, unable to come out, to accept themselves as valued or worthy. The 1970s promised so much hope – a new decade with the decriminalisation of homosexuality, the androgyny of Bowie and Marc Bolan, the gay rights movement – but it would be another 40 years before any tangible change would really happen in society. Even today, homophobia hasn't really gone away, it's just taken another face – the double-edged sword of social media or whatever. It's a different kind of fear."

Similar thoughts perhaps underpin 'New Eden', the closing track of 'Happiness Not Included'. Ball's concept of a fantasy musical collaboration between Brian Eno and John Barry, with its gentle piano and gospel-tinged female backing vocals, may just be Soft Cell's most beautiful – and hopeful – song ever.

"I think I wrote the lyrics for older people who feel lost in this current, polarised, black-and-white world," says Almond. "I wanted to evoke the optimism that comes with at least a belief of a better place. I loved the song 'Go West', first sung by the Village People, as it was filled with a promise of something better and freer in the period before AIDS. Then there was the Pet Shop Boys' remarkable version, which taps into the post-AIDS world and shifts the theme to East-West relations and political freedoms, and there's also this lovely sadness and Neil Tennant's melancholic delivery."

For Ball, Soft Cell's existence in 2022 is all about creativity and ideas and reflecting the times they're living in. Maybe the fact that the duo have only made five studio albums over 41 years explains why the well is far from dry.

Which begs the question, will they play this new material live? And might there yet be even more to come?

"I think I'll probably say, 'Never say never'," teases Almond. "I think no is the new yes."

**'Happiness Not Included' is due for release by BMG in the spring, along with a new version of 'Purple Zone' by Soft Cell and Pet Shop Boys**

# HELLO, GOODBYE, HELLO

Five albums, two farewell shows and two reunions...  
Dave Ball documents the ups and downs of Soft Cell

**WORDS: NEIL MASON**



## October 1979

Soft Cell form after Marc Almond and Dave Ball meet on an art course at Leeds Polytechnic, where another future electronic star, Fad Gadget's Frank Tovey, is also studying.

"We had this music studio at the college and Frank Tovey used to muck about in there," remembers Dave Ball. "I'd gone into the studio to do something with my minimal bits and bobs – I had a Stylophone and a guitar – and there was a cheap compact electric piano lying there. I took it and put it through a flanger, just messing about, playing stuff and recording it and overdubbing it. I did a couple of tracks like that.

"Frank overheard what I was doing and he was going, 'How did you make those sounds? What instrument did you use?'. I said, 'Oh, I just used that keyboard', and he said, 'That's my keyboard! You didn't ask me!'. We never really saw eye to eye after that, but it was thanks to Frank that I got into synthesisers."

## September 1980

Soft Cell catch a break at the 1980 Futurama Festival.

"We were booked to play at the Futurama Festival at Queen's Hall in Leeds. It was the biggest thing we'd ever done. U2, Siouxsie & The Banshees, Echo & The Bunnymen, Robert Fripp, The Psychedelic Furs, Hazel O'Connor and Altered Images were all on the bill. We were on in the afternoon. It was quite good because the hall was half-empty, but there were still 2,500 people there.

"Before the gig, I thought, 'I'll take some tapes with me, just in case...' and just in case happened! John Peel was there. I went over to him and said, 'Excuse me sir, could I give you this? It's my band Soft Cell. We're playing today', and he was like, 'Oh, thank you'. Lo and behold, he played 'Metro MRX' three times on his show. Bloody hell, we got three plays on Radio 1 – with no record label, no manager, no anything. I thought that was quite encouraging."

## October 1980

The duo's 'Mutant Moments' EP is released on their own Big Frock label, funded by a loan from Dave Ball's mum.

"I'd recorded various songs with Marc, very low quality, and I thought we should put out an EP. I'd sent loads of cassettes to indie labels and we couldn't get arrested, so I decided I'd price it up. What would it cost to press 1,000 singles with record sleeves and little postcards? It was 400 quid. So I thought I'd ask my mum. 'Can I borrow 400 quid? I promise I'll pay you back, Mum.' I eventually bought her a flat in Blackpool. You got quite a lot of flat for £40,000 in those days, so she got a good return on the 400 quid."

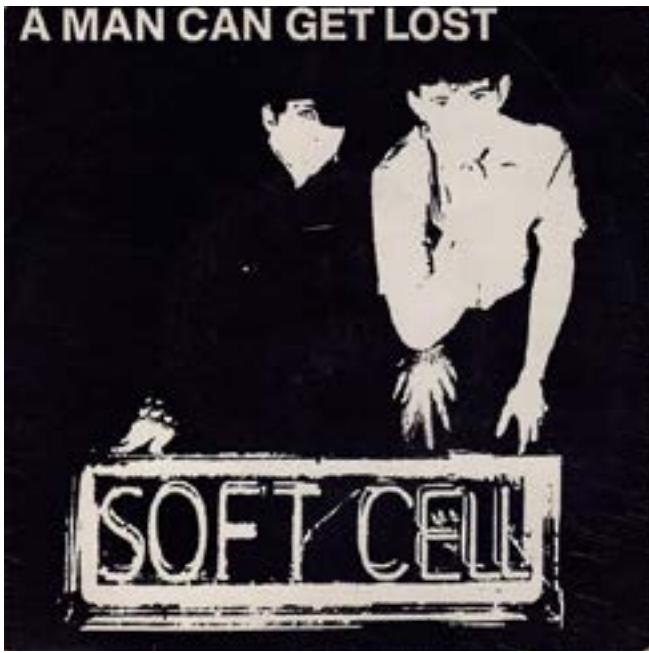
## January 1981

The group sign to Some Bizzare and 'The Girl With The Patent Leather Face' appears on the iconic 'Some Bizzare Album'.

"Stevo had been asking around about any interesting unsigned electronic bands. And apparently our name came up. So he somehow tracked us down. He was DJing at places like the Chelsea Drugstore and the Hamersmith Clarendon in London, playing whatever weird electronic music he could get his hands on, and he was also working for Sounds, where he used to do a futurist chart. We'd send him tapes of our latest stuff and he started putting us in his chart.

"Then Stevo came up to Leeds to meet us. He said he was putting together the 'Some Bizzare Album' compilation and was looking for unsigned bands, so would we want to be on this album? 'No, not much!' We were sat in our little bedsit in Leeds going, 'We want to be on a major record label'. Then he said he'd got a major distribution deal for the album with Phonogram..."





### March 1981

Some Bizzare release the Daniel Miller-produced 'A Man Can Get Lost' / 'Memorabilia' single. The 12-inch version of 'Memorabilia' becomes a club hit.

"Steve Strange and a lot of those Spandau Ballet types and Blitz Club people went off to New York and started setting up camp there. New York was like, 'Wow, this English scene is amazing and there's all this electronic music'. Rusty Egan in particular championed 'Memorabilia'. He used to do 30-minute mixes of it. That's probably how the track found its way into New York. Getting in Stevo's futurist chart was one thing, but suddenly we're getting into the American club charts, and then into Billboard. Our label must have gone, 'Hmm, what's this? Don't we own this band? What's their contract? One single? Do we have an option for another one? Maybe we should take up the option for the next one'."

### June 1981

While recording in New York, the duo meet Cindy Ecstasy, who introduces them to... a new experience.

"It was the first time Marc had been to New York. Stevo came along too and that's when we met Cindy. We'd been recording 'Bedsitter', the follow-up to 'Tainted Love', and we were having problems with the record company saying that they didn't like it, so it was all getting a bit stressful.

"I think Marc met Cindy in a club. Marc and Stevo came back one night saying they'd found this amazing new drug. Stevo showed me a little white capsule and said, 'When we go out, try one', so off we went to Studio 54 or Danceteria or maybe this club called Berlin, and dropped one of these capsules. It was like, 'Fucking hell, where do I get more?'. Cindy, this party girl from Brooklyn, seemed to always have a supply. But she never pushed them on anyone. Didn't have to."

### August 1981

Despite club interest on both sides of the pond, the major label bigwigs express disappointment at the lack of chart success for 'Memorabilia'. The follow-up, 'Tainted Love', was the group's last chance saloon. All merry hell lets loose.

"It was Marc who did the 'ping-ping' drum sound on the record. We were just faffing around with a drum synth – it looked like a spaceship and was triggered by hitting these rubber pressure pads – when it suddenly went 'ping-ping'. So Marc went 'ping-ping' and I was like, 'Stop! Move away from the machine! Just hold the drumstick. Don't touch it. That's the sound'. It was all just trial and error, really."

### September 1981

Soft Cell make their debut on 'Top Of The Pops'.

"Marc and I lived in the same housing association building in Leeds. There was a communal payphone in the hallway, which is how we got the news that we were going on 'Top Of The Pops'. The phone rang, Marc answered it, and then he goes, 'Fucking hell. It's Number 52. We're going to be on "Top Of The Pops" as a new entry'.

"I remember going down to London. 'Are you in the MU?', 'What's that?', 'Musicians' Union', 'No'. So they picked us up in a car and took us to Clapham to join the MU. I couldn't join as a synth player because the union didn't recognise a synth as a musical instrument. What did Brian Eno, Kraftwerk and Giorgio Moroder put down as their instrument? So anyway, I said bass guitar and piano. That was fine."



#### November 1981

'Non-Stop Erotic Cabaret', the band's debut album, is released. Two more UK Top Five hit singles follow soon after – 'Bedsitter' and 'Say Hello, Wave Goodbye'.

"We'd normally record a long version of a track. With 'Bedsitter', for example, we recorded a 12-inch version and then edited it down. 'Memorabilia' was also a 12-inch edited down. We did 'Say Hello, Wave Goodbye' and suddenly, 'Oh, that's going to be the next single?'. We'd hadn't done a 12-inch of it, so Mike Thorne, the producer, asked a jazz player called Dave Tofani to record some clarinet on it for an instrumental B-side and Mike just spliced the two tracks together. I call it the 'Frankenstein Edit'."

#### May 1982

'Torch' almost lands Almond and Ball a Number One record with a song of their own. It peaks at Number Two.

"It should have been Number One, but apparently there was a problem with the people who compiled the charts. We heard it was outselling Adam Ant's 'Goody Two Shoes' threefold, but somehow it got stuck at Number Two."

#### June 1982

'Non-Stop Ecstatic Dancing' follows, blazing a trail for the remix album and hitting the shops one month ahead of 'Love And Dancing', The League Unlimited Orchestra's 'Dare' reworking.

"I love 'Travelogue', it's one of my favourite electronic albums of all time. And obviously there's 'Dare', which is a phenomenally brilliant pop record. I think with the remix albums, everyone had the same idea at the same time.

"'Dare' producer Martin Rushent was a good friend of mine. We had various arguments – which is the best song, 'Tainted Love' or 'Don't You Want Me'? – and he liked to wind people up. He was a funny man. Martin would have something to say about us being first, I'm sure! Whenever we fell out, I'd go, 'OK, get down the pub, what do you want for lunch?'. It was always on me."

#### January 1983

The aptly titled second album, 'The Art Of Falling Apart', lands just as cracks begin to appear in the band, a lethal combination of fame and drugs taking its toll.

"We had gone through our pop version and then we got into our darker side, which was 'The Art Of Falling Apart'. I think our original trio of albums, along with 'Non-Stop Ecstatic Dancing', is quite a nice little body of work. They are classics of their time. I mean, we are a part of history!"



#### January / March 1984

An amicable split is announced. After farewell shows at the Hammersmith Palais in January, a "final" album, 'This Last Night In Sodom', arrives in March to largely positive reviews, although commercially it fails to meet expectations.

"It was the album that came out of us at the time. What people forget is 'This Last Night In Sodom' still got into the Top 20. And a lot of people, in retrospect, say that was probably their favourite album because it was the most honest. There are some great moments on it."

#### March 2001

Soft Cell reunite with a series of live dates. 'God Shaped Hole' is included on Some Bizarre's extravagantly titled compilation 'I'd Rather Shout At A Returning Echo Than Kid That Someone's Listening'.

"The reunion had actually gone quite well. The gigs especially had been really good and it was the first time that we'd done festivals. The American tour wasn't so brilliant, though, because half of the shows were cancelled."

#### October 2002

A new studio album, 'Cruelty Without Beauty', appears. It contains a cover of 'The Night' by Frankie Valli & The Four Seasons, which Almond and Ball had almost recorded back in 1981 instead of 'Tainted Love'.

"Originally, we were only going to do one cover and we had a choice. The two tracks that we really liked, because of the subject matter and the titles, were 'Tainted Love' and 'The Night'. The Frankie Valli version of 'The Night' is phenomenal. The bass on that, the brass... the whole thing is genius. When we were recording 'Cruelty Without Beauty', we thought we might as well do 'The Night' because we'd always said we would."

"I actually prefer the originals of all the tracks we've covered. I still prefer the original of 'Tainted Love'. I'm quite happy to listen to Gloria Jones all day."

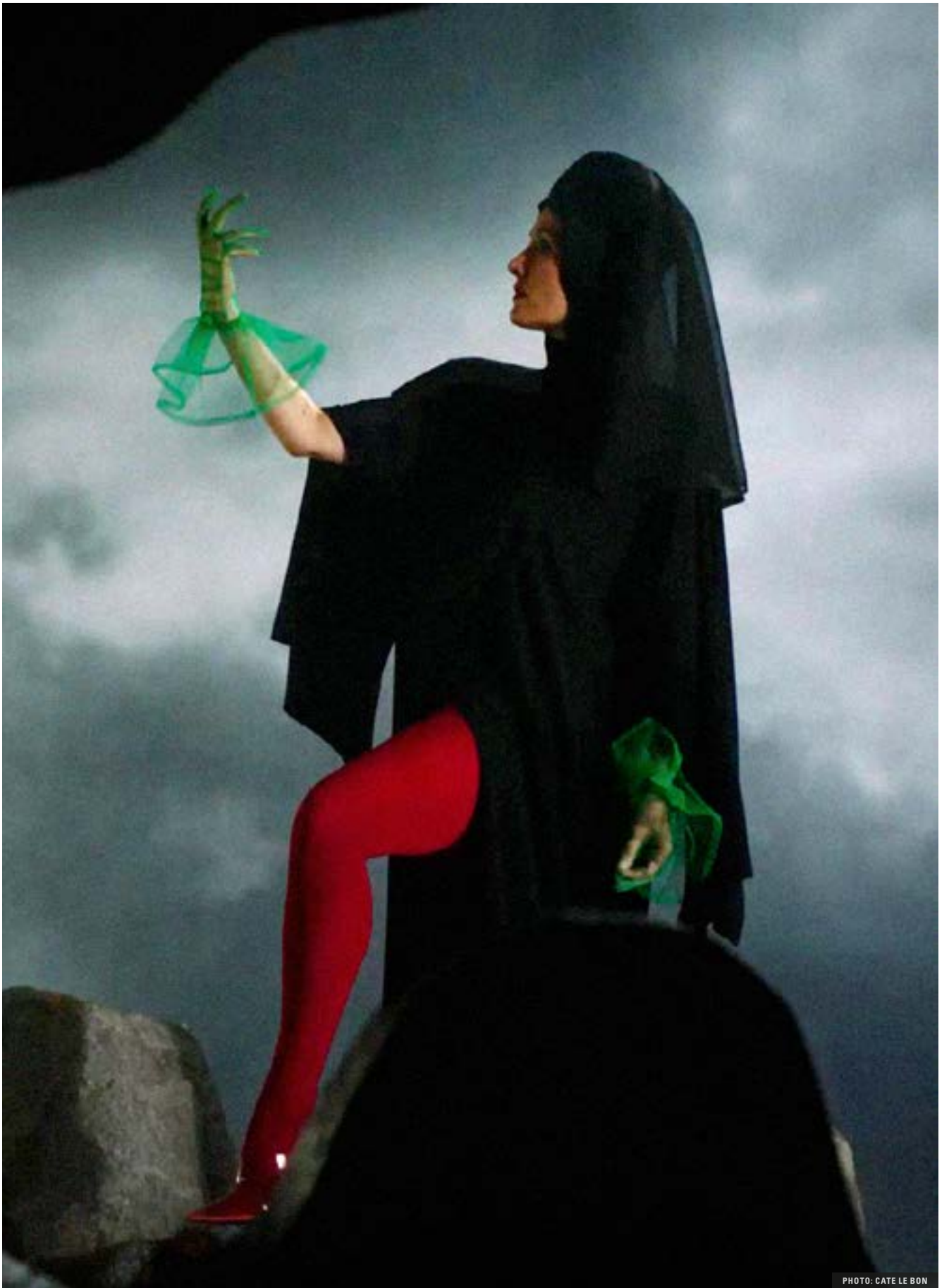
#### February / September 2018

A second reunion is supported by a singles boxset, 'Keychains & Snowstorms', and one "final" show at the O2 Arena in September.

"We'd kind of lost contact when the boxset was on the cards, so we met up at The Connaught hotel in Mayfair. Very posh. I had some very expensive beers and Marc had some very expensive cups of tea. The management and record company were present, and they were all hinting that it would be great if we could do a show."

"We were both up for it, but then it was like, 'Where are you thinking?'. I was saying, 'What about the Royal Albert Hall?', but Marc had played there twice. The next thing I know, the O2 Arena was being suggested. I said, 'You what? The O2? Are you sure about this?'. My manager said, 'As long as we sell 5,000 tickets, we should be alright'. How many tickets did we sell? It was 16,000."







# BON VOYAGE

From folk singer/songwriter to the electronic music top table, Cate Le Bon has been on quite the journey. With a new album, 'Pompeii', ready to roll, we find her at the peak of her powers

WORDS: SHARON O'CONNELL

When Cate Le Bon pops up on screen, she apologises for not being fully awake. It's 9am and she's in Topanga Canyon, the Los Angeles neighbourhood whose residents in the 1960s and 70s included Joni, Jim and Neil. More specifically, Le Bon is holed up in Neil Young's old house, where producer/engineer Samur Khouja, her long-term collaborator, has built a studio in the lounge so the pair can work with Devendra Banhart on his new record. She picks up her laptop and walks over to a window to show me the view – big skies and woodland-covered mountains stretching far into the distance.

"It's been very dreamy," she says of the residential sessions. "I feel spoiled."

Place is important to the Welsh artist. LA has been her home for years now but when it comes to making her own albums, she prefers "going somewhere totally alien and isolated". She wrote 2019's 'Reward' while living alone in a cottage in Cumbria, playing piano and singing late into the nights, but for 'Pompeii', her sixth and latest work, she and Khouja had considered the

rather more exotic winter locales of Chile and Norway. Le Bon explains that during the three months they spent in Iceland in 2020, producing John Grant's 'Boy From Michigan', they'd fallen for "that kind of biting cold and how when you're in the studio, it feels like a womb".

However, the pandemic nixed any plans for South America or Scandinavia – and, since the US had just closed its borders, for Le Bon's return there, too. With travel options fast disappearing, she admits "fear and panic were telling me to fly home to my family". In the end, she did just that, later renting a house in Cardiff she'd lived in 15 years previously. It was there, during the lockdown of early 2021, that she and Khouja started work on her new record. Familiarity instead of novelty, then, and isolation of a very different kind.

"It was perfect," she recalls. "We just worked and worked and worked because there was really nothing else to do. And I guess when you feel helpless and can't change all these things that you want to, at least you can change what you're working on. It's like total escapism, which is great. It's what music should be."



PHOTO: H HAWKLINE

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ate Le Bon has been defining music's purpose in her own terms since 2012's 'Cyrk'. It was her second album and a considerable departure from the mix of folk-ish pop and wonky 60s psych of her debut, 'Me Oh My', three years earlier. That was a path she'd found herself being directed onto as a female singer/songwriter and

it wasn't a natural fit. She found a truer expression with 'Cyrk'.

"I'd just discovered krautrock," she reveals. "Listening to Faust was like everything I needed to hear. I liked some of this folk scene and psychedelic music but it didn't resonate with me. Yet it seemed to be the only thing people wanted to listen to or had any time for. I hadn't found anything that had inspired me to the point of, 'Break through the ceiling of folk!'. And then I heard 'Faust IV' and thought, 'Oh, my god!'. It's still my favourite record ever."

Since then, Le Bon has released three more albums and bagged a Mercury Prize nomination for 'Reward' along the way. She's now recognised as an artist with a singular, left-field pop voice and though she visibly cringes at the "auteur" tag ("I reject all terms"), her music is identifiable by its lightness of touch, mutability, playfulness and slightly melancholic joy.

'Pompeii' is an elegant distillation of those elements, led by bass and with a vintage DX7 synth and saxophones doing much of the emotional work. It's also an exploration of weighty themes – "existence, resignation and faith" – brought into sharp focus by Covid-19, with its attendant uncertainty and enforced isolation seeing Le Bon ditching most of the lyrics she'd already written and starting anew.

"I think it's what everyone struggled with," she reflects. "The things you distract yourself with are completely removed and you've been gifted the greatest currency, which is time – and yet there's this associated guilt. You don't feel like you're using time properly because you're locked down. So it was a huge glut of all these things – feeling guilty about stuff and culpable for the fact we're in a global crisis because you're connected to everything and everything is passed on."

"You start thinking about all the tiny incremental decisions man has made that have turned into this huge mess. That's the 'existence' part of it, and within that you're trying to find out what your touchstones are. I'm not religious, but what are my touchstones of faith? Where do my morals sit? How do I want to live? The pandemic challenged all those things – at least it did for me and a lot of people I'm close to."

Another of Le Bon's anxieties at the time was the possibility her sixth album might never see the light of day – or might even be her last. The thought was as exhilarating as it was daunting.

"All of a sudden, the future was dark," she says. "At times, it was wholly exciting to think you could be making something no one's ever going to listen to. But it was also terrifying – this duality of hope and despair existing alongside each other in huge spikes, maybe six or seven times a day. I think that very much affected the fuck-it-ness of the record – we can do whatever we want and it doesn't matter, as long as we're having the best time and it's making us feel something. It's like the extreme version of what I've always tried to manifest when I'm making an album."



PHOTO: H HAWKLINE



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usical independence has been won gradually for Le Bon and was fully realised in the making of 'Reward'. At the stage when pressure was building and sessions were becoming strained, they were abandoned. Le Bon and Khouja decamped to a house in Joshua Tree, California, where Khouja set up a studio and they began again.

"It was this process of just living together and working on the songs, kind of deconstructing and reconstructing. I felt totally involved in a way I hadn't before, which made me think, 'This is how I want to work from now on'. I want to touch everything, you know? So when it came to making 'Pompeii', I wanted to record in that way, where it's just me and Samur for the most part, and I'm playing everything."

'Pompeii' also started to take shape in Joshua Tree. Before she went to Iceland, Le Bon had stayed there for a month with her friend Stella Mozgawa (Warpaint's drummer, who contributed to the album remotely). They jammed some of Le Bon's more solid ideas, resulting in 'Harbour' – a dreamy, synthpop song with a prowling bassline – and 'Wheel' – a sweetly seesawing number featuring piano, where Le Bon's voice swims up through reverb and drifts into the ether.

Although Le Bon says she knew then how she wanted 'Pompeii' to sound, she didn't know what its make-up would be. 'Reward' had been written on piano, which involved the problem of translating for guitar, but she approached her new record differently.

"It seemed like the bass was maybe the most important element – where the playfulness and the joy were," she explains. "After coming back from working with John [Grant], I was playing a lot of bass and thinking, 'God, this is the thing. This should be the centre point of the instrumentation'. Then the grief would be in the saxophones, the synths would bind everything and the guitar would be the playful voice but also where the tension was at times."

Le Bon plays all instruments on 'Pompeii' aside from the drums ("Why would I even bother, when Stella is just like..." she trails off, admiringly) and the saxophone.

"I was told I had trumpet lips," she laughs. "So no saxophones for me – and I don't like trumpets."

Two albums had an inspirational role in the genesis of 'Pompeii'. In the run-up, Le Bon had been listening to a lot of Japanese city pop – it was popular in the late 70s and 80s and became a benchmark for vaporwave – and she fell for one particular LP, 'Kakashi' by Yasuaki Shimizu, due to its meditative basslines and their centrality to his songs' construction. The other was by LA-based artists Sam Gendel & Sam Wilkes.

"It's called 'Music For Saxophone & Bass Guitar'," reveals Le Bon. "And I was like, 'Ah, right up my street!'. I just couldn't stop listening to it. I liked the idea that the scene – or the vibe – didn't change from start to finish. I particularly wanted to have a record that sounded like one era, so the feel throughout was never disrupted, and when I heard this I thought, 'God, it can be achieved – and it can be really satisfying'. It plays with your perception of time, which also ties into the themes of 'Pompeii'. That was an important album for me when I was piecing it all together in my mind."

Also significant for Le Bon, especially on the track 'Moderation', was the life and work of trailblazing Italian architect Lina Bo Bardi. A strong advocate of social housing and an early repurposer of old buildings, Bo Bardi practised recycling and designed furniture, as well as stage sets and costumes. Le Bon

was struck by an essay Bo Bardi had published in 1958, entitled 'The Moon', which addressed what she saw as the folly of space travel.

"It sums up the stupidity of man," surmises Le Bon. "That there's this idea of development and, in doing so, you're trashing the very place you live in because you're just looking to conquer. It's the massive downfall of humanity obviously, and that's what we're living in right now. And still, no one changes anything."

"I guess that's what 'Moderation' is about – knowing all of this, being tethered to the mess of these decisions man has made, and still wanting to go to the Moon, wanting to do the things you know are not good. I was also reading an amazing interview with [late American ethnobotanist and psychedelic guru] Terence McKenna where he was saying much the same thing – about men being moved either by habit or novel things."

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f course, Le Bon herself is a great cheerleader for things that are novel or, more accurately, for the newly imagined and the different, because repetition means dullness and disengagement. Switching writing instruments and seeking out unfamiliar recording locations are two ways to force change

but, fundamentally, Le Bon's sound is the result of her open mindset. It's one Samur Khouja shares, which is what makes their partnership so fruitful.

"Samur has never once tried to obstruct any ideas I've had or ever made me feel stupid because maybe I don't know the right terminology – that's a small part of it," Le Bon explains. "And he's a facilitator. He's excited, he's curious, so there's no saying, 'No, you can't do that' or 'That's a stupid idea'. It's always, 'Yes, give it a go'."

"It's like we're holding hands and going through this forest together. It feels like a voyage of discovery. It's exciting. I've worked with people where it's exhausting. It's this series of sandbags and I'm like, 'Why can't I do that?'. Sam's got no preconceptions of what cool is, and I'm the same – it's just whatever feels good and feels right."

'Pompeii' certainly sounds (very) good and is entirely on point in terms of Le Bon's particularity. It plays like an artistic peak towards which she's been steadily advancing for years, but that implies finality, when in fact fresh terrain is everywhere and hers for the exploring.

"This is why I like to look forward," she concurs. "I hope with every record I make I'm getting closer to that and so, as it stands, it's probably the most definitive album I've ever made. And the next one will be even more so. You just want to get better at distilling everything you've learned and everything you do and everything you want. Also, working with other artists is so informative. You take something from every session and, whether it's a negative or a positive, you learn from it and you hope the next time you step into a studio, you'll be better at your job or better at expressing yourself."

"I think that's what I strive for. I don't see the point of making the same record over and over, just because that's what people expect of you – 'We liked "Mug Museum" [her third album, from 2013]... so why can't you make another "Mug Museum"?'."

Cate Le Bon laughs at the madness of such an idea.

"It's like, 'I don't want to. I've already made it.'"

**'Pompeii' is out now on Mexican Summer**

# THE LIGHT FANTASTIC



## Recorded in a Pisa living room rather than his Forst home studio where he's worked for five decades, 'As Long As The Light', Michael Rother's collaboration with partner Vittoria Maccabruni, fizzles with life

WORDS: JOE BANKS

I t is, I'm assured, a grey day in Pisa when I speak to Michael Rother and Vittoria Maccabruni, despite the light flooding into the room where they're huddled together on a small sofa, gently cajoling and ribbing each other throughout our conversation. As a guitarist and sonic visionary in Neu! and Harmonia, and a solo artist since 1977, Rother needs no introduction. But this is Maccabruni's first brush with the public eye. Friends since 2005, and more recently a couple, Rother and Maccabruni have made a very fine album titled 'As Long As The Light'.

When Electronic Sound last spoke to Rother, at the end of 2019, he was finalising his 'Solo II' boxset, which included the recording/assemblage of 'Dreaming', his first album in 16 years. Much of it was derived from material left over from 2004's 'Remember (The Great Adventure)', so why the big gap?

"I was happy and busy playing live – Japan, China, Russia, Mexico, America, South America," says Rother. "There was a 20-year gap between the end of Harmonia and my first live performance in 1998. And that wasn't even my plan – I was invited by a friend to play at their festival. It was such a wonderful change for me, that feeling of being connected with people directly, to be on the stage and see them smiling. In China [where Rother's work has never been officially available], I had no idea what to expect, but people went crazy. They just instinctively understood the music – although it's not like you need a theory to understand it. It's very straightforward."

It was at a show in Italy in 2005 where Vittoria Maccabruni first encountered Rother. Was she already a fan?

"No, I didn't know any of his history – I went to this gig because I knew a member of Kraftwerk was playing!" she admits, as Rother groans in the background. "Of course, I then went back to his catalogue and was greatly impressed. I did something maybe a bit childish and wrote an email congratulating him the next day, and we started chatting and finding out we had things in common, and we became sort of pen pals. We met again in December 2015 after a concert in Bologna. And then we met a few more times, and life happened!"

While Maccabruni has never been in a band, she had been recording at home for a number of years, producing what she describes as sketches rather than songs. "I was playing around with sound and creating atmospheres, just experimenting with electronic instruments and programs and playing a bit of guitar.

I was eager to play these sketches to Michael to get his advice. It was the first time I'd really asked anyone to listen to them and I was perhaps even a bit pushy. I'd send him files while he was working on 'Dreaming' saying, 'Oh, would you listen to this?', and he'd say, 'No, I'm busy!'."

The couple had been travelling between each other's homes in Germany and Italy, but with Covid restrictions making that increasingly difficult, Rother arrived at Maccabruni's Pisa apartment in June 2020 with a carload of possessions and recording gear, and he's been there ever since.

Rother: "When I came to Pisa, it wasn't to jump into the next music project. It was just to be together. But of course, I knew Vittoria had all these sketches, and after two months she asked, 'Would you like to listen to them more closely and maybe play guitar on one track?'. When she played the sketches to me, there were parts I liked and parts I didn't like, so we had some disagreements and some fights. We transferred her material to my computer, and I listened to the individual elements... and the fighting continued."

Maccabruni: "Sometimes he would listen to something and say, 'There's nothing to add here', and I'd say, 'Well, I think some guitar would work!'. He'd say, 'I'm not sure', but he'd try it and find it actually did work. This happened quite a few times."

Rother: "So that was the working method – to take what I would regard as this goldmine of ideas, listen to them, analyse them and perhaps filter them through my old-school way of thinking! Because she's much more radical than me in many ways. So, without any pressure or haste, whenever we had time, we made music together. The months passed, and gradually the idea dawned on me that this could become an album."

The end product of that process is 'As Long As The Light'. While 'Dreaming' introduced elements of modern electronica into Rother's work, the record he has made with Maccabruni is a decidedly spikier, darker and more percussion-driven affair. And in contrast to 'Dreaming', just about every song features Rother's classic surging, sky-scraping guitar sound, from the chiming, elliptical opener of 'Edgy Smiles' to the rousing, motorik melancholia of closing track 'Happy (Slow Burner)'. It's a brilliant and wholly successful marriage of German avant-rock and software composition – as though Harmonia had been born in the middle of Warp's Artificial Intelligence heyday.

Sitting at the heart of the album, 'Curfewd' in particular has a penetrating, almost gothic sound, crackling with black electricity and harking back to the proto-industrial claustrophobia of Neu!'s 'Negativland'.

"Ha, I never thought he'd pick up on that one," says Maccabruni. "The initial sketch was very dark, a bit troubling even. But Michael thought it was interesting and different from what he'd been doing, and he was excited to work on it."

"I don't want to be limited," concurs Rother. "I can do very soft music, like most of the songs on 'Dreaming', but if you look at my past, I also like very dynamic and forward-reaching music. I always imagine myself to be open to strong musical ideas and when Vittoria played this sketch to me, I thought, 'This is strong meat, not middle-of-the-road'. I don't want to scare or depress people, but I can personally expose myself to some dark material. I added some order and a glimmer of hope."

With its mechanical heartbeat, 'CodriveMe' is the most experimental track, although Rother is having none of my suggestion that it's reminiscent of early Kraftwerk, jokingly pretending to terminate the interview.

"It's OK, you can say that!" he laughs. "There are worse bands one can be connected with than Kraftwerk. I have a lot of respect for them."

"This was the only track I developed after we started working on the other pieces," remembers Maccabruni. "It came out of a random session on my own on the computer, around the time we were watching the third series of 'Twin Peaks'. And I suddenly thought, this reminds me of Woodsman – the atmosphere was very frightening and intense, and maybe it was a bit influenced by that. Michael didn't want to watch the dark stuff!"

While Rother's albums often evoke a sense of motion in expansive environments, 'As Long As The Light' feels like a voyage into inner space.

Rother: "I'm sure that's Vittoria's influence."

Maccabruni: "It could also be a result of the struggles we had to make things match – his aspirations and my ideas – so there is this tension that keeps things together."

Rother: "But let's not stress the difficulties too much, as we totally agreed on everything in the end."

So where does the album's rather cryptic title come from?

Rother: "Vittoria came up with the title. And I said, 'Where's the sentence?'"

Maccabruni: "Well, it's an open title. Maybe it reflects this feeling that even though there's darkness, there's still always glimpses of light. Or maybe it refers to the world situation – the climate here is very chaotic, but it's always very bright. We have big windows and sometimes we'd stop working just to watch the sunset. It's a bit cheesy..."

As someone who's said they never wanted to go solo in the first place, what's it like being back in a musical partnership?

"Ask me next year!" jokes Rother. "Being in a couple adds some danger, but Vittoria has very good ears and I couldn't fool her – she sometimes heard mistakes I hadn't even noticed. So there's mutual respect around the music."





MICHAEL ROTHER & VITTORIA MACCABRINI



"If I look back on the collaborations in Harmonia or Neu!, those were very different times. With Neu!, everything had to happen in just a few days in the studio, so there wasn't much time for discussion. Although in fact Klaus Dinger and I agreed on just about everything – the reality is quite different from what people often say. Yes, we were fighting about nearly everything else, but not over music."

**S**ince 1973, Rother has lived in an old farmhouse in Forst, a rural district in Germany, and it's where he has done much of his recording. What was it like making the new album in Maccabruni's living room in Pisa?

Rother: "I complain all day long! I wish we had more space. But the real answer is when I'm sitting in front of the monitors and working on the music, it's all the space I need. The advantages of working at home are great. Maybe the environment of Forst, the peaceful nature, the beauty... Why are you laughing, Vittoria?"

Maccabruni: "Because I know you struggle a bit with this. Here it's a completely different situation. I have a chaotic life because I have a nine-year old daughter who's always running around and I also have an office job to do in the mornings."

Rother: "The beauty of Forst has always left its mark, but my music has never been about looking out of the window and trying to pull those impressions into it. It's always been about musical structures and melodies and technology."

When I ask Rother about how he views his musical legacy, he seems slightly bemused by the question, as perhaps you might if you'd just made your most adventurous album in decades.

"I don't feel a lack of recognition," he says. "Quite the contrary. I think of myself as fortunate that during my lifetime I've had all this positive feedback."

The krautrock scene of the 1970s has exerted such a powerful hold on the imagination of legions of musicians, with "Neu!-esque" practically a recognised genre now. I imagine that must feel incredible.

"That's true," agrees Rother. "For many years, I thought that maybe this was some fashion that would blow over – and it could still do that – but younger generations keep picking up the baton."

As it is, Rother and Maccabruni's musical partnership is still very much an ongoing thing. As well as 'As Long As The Light', the pair have contributed an extended ambient track, 'Klöppeln', to Thorsten Drücker's recent album about Joseph Beuys, and also a piece for Hollywood music supervisor Randall Post for a project called 'Birdsong'.

"And Jarvis Cocker reached out to me to participate in a charity project which will come out later this year," adds Rother. "I'm very happy about the music we did for it. I couldn't have done it on my own."

Do the couple have any plans to play together live?

Rother: "The simple answer would be yes, but as of today, we haven't had time to transfer the music into the right combination of electronics and guitars – we need a technological solution. This year, I'm playing concerts with Hans Lampe and Franz Bargmann, and there's the Neu! anniversary coming up too, so we will have to juggle all that. But yes, I would definitely love to play it."

Maccabruni: "I'm feeling frightened!"

Rother: "She will have to sing!"

Maccabruni: "It would be a wonderful experience, but we need to make sure it works. It's a bit complicated..."

There may be edgy smiles all round, but for Michael Rother and Vittoria Maccabruni, this feels like just the start of their musical journey together.

**'As Long As The Light' is out now on Grönland**



# SON OF HIS FATHER

Infused with the spirit of Woodstock and resolutely “bound to the mountains”, Midlake and Mercury Rev’s Jesse Chandler pays tribute to his late father on a second album as Pneumatic Tubes

WORDS: BOB FISCHER

PICTURES: LARISSA HOPWOOD





**"M**y dad and I connected over a lot of things," remembers Jesse Chandler wistfully. "Music was something he definitely imparted to me. His favourite was Jimi Hendrix – dad saw him five or six times. He went to Woodstock in 1969 when he was 16, hitch-hiking up there with his buddy from New Jersey. So that was one of the things we'd always talk about. And we'd go walking in the Catskill Mountains, where I grew up, and in the Adirondacks, a few hours north.

"So that's where my mind was when I was making the album. Thinking about mountains. And my childhood. And the summer camp my dad went to – a place called Treetops in the Adirondacks. This was in the 1950s and 60s, and it was very organic before 'organic' became a hipster buzzword! They would make their own peanut butter and tap the trees for maple syrup. So he had a lot of fond memories."

For Jesse, it's 10am on a "chilly" Texas morning when we chat. For me, it's 4pm on a winter afternoon, 10 miles from Middlesbrough. I tell him he's probably got the better deal, weather-wise. He graciously chuckles. He's gentle, thoughtful company and over the course of the next hour, memories of his late father, Dave Chandler, become a moving touchstone. They are woven through our conversation, just as they dominate the mournful, woodwind-filled grooves of Jesse's new record, 'A Letter From TreeTops'.

"My dad passed away in 2018, at the end of the fall," he explains. "I wasn't really recording much music then and there wasn't any intent to make an album. But as anyone who's lost someone close to them will know, you're left processing the feelings. Especially when it's sudden, which was the case here. So I kind of used music to sublimate those feelings. I went in with a blank mind, feeling like an empty vessel. I just took all my instruments and put them on the floor. I had coloured Christmas lights and I was burning palo santo – a wood from South America that makes this really pleasant scent. And, almost in a trance-like state, I started recording without really thinking about it."

**T**he resulting album is the second to be released under Jesse's solo nom-de-plume, Pneumatic Tubes. You might assume he'd be busy enough already. A consummate keyboardist and woodwind player from rural New York State, he upped sticks to Texas in 2008 to join folk-rock goliaths Midlake. The band split in 2014 and days later he was recruited by Mercury Rev. Eight years on, Midlake's unexpected lockdown reformation has left him as a full-time member of two globe-straddling acts.

'A Letter From TreeTops' is melancholy, pastoral, eerie – a very US take on the aesthetic of the haunted childhood. It reeks of campfire ghost stories and abandoned cabins on desolate mountainsides. If the sound of English weird is the rustic folk music of the fields, the American equivalent is perhaps more jazz-infused – all drifting clarinets and spectral rhythms.

The record comes across as two childhoods combined, I suggest. Dave Chandler's memories of his 1950s summer camps, and Jesse's 1980s reminiscences of hearing those blissful, sepia-tinted stories on long mountainside walks. It's a delightfully fuzzy album, one that exists in the nebulous gaps in factual family history.

"Getting in touch with childhood and the wonder of it is something I've been obsessed with for years," agrees Jesse. "And I love the idea that memories become hazy. Even if you see a photograph or a home movie of your family, the memory still remains the way you've always felt it. The way it's evolved over time. You can never remember things exactly as they were.

"And I'm sure I'm not the only one who feels this. When you're away from your childhood home, you miss it and you think about it all the time. But when you're actually there, it's depressing. And I don't know why. Maybe it's because you can't go back to the way you once felt about it? You want to feel, as an adult, the same way you did when you were a kid. But you never can."

Well, that's the key, isn't it? You can listen to the records of your youth as you walk nostalgically around the streets of your home town or scour eBay for those missing childhood action figures, but you can only recapture a tiny fraction of those original feelings. However hard you try, you can't actually be 11 years old twice in the same lifetime. As Thomas Wolfe and The Shangri-Las alike have perceptively pointed out, you can never go home again.

"Exactly!" says Jesse. "And even right now, I can't express that feeling in words. A great writer could, but with me it comes out in music."

**J**esse Chandler's childhood sounds idyllic. He comes from a musical family. His father, a school psychologist, was a keen drummer and trumpeter. His grandparents were early-music enthusiasts, and the home-built harpsichord they bequeathed to him can be heard on Midlake's 2010 album 'The Courage Of Others'.

Above all, home life seems to have been paramount. His mother, Cheryl, ran a nursery from the family basement, providing pre-school care for a host of local children, including Jesse's three younger brothers. And the setting for this blissful domesticity? The actual town of Woodstock. Which, he wryly points out, is over 60 miles from Max Yasgur's legendary farmstead. The local shops sell T-shirts with a map, an arrow and the legend, "You are HERE. The festival happened HERE". And everything comes back to those mountains.

"Even though it's so famous, Woodstock is really a sleepy town of 2,000 or 3,000 people," he explains. "And from almost anywhere, you can see Overlook Mountain. It looms above everything. And if you hike up it, there are the ruins of an old lodge. You can read some of the history online. At one point, it was a thriving vacation home for anyone from New York City, for anyone who wanted to be in the mountains. But now there are just the foundations and some of the walls. It's super-creepy. The last time I went, an old guy was coming down. He said, 'Watch out for the snakes, young man'."

Bloody hell, Jesse. You grew up in 'The Shining'.

"It really is like that!"

At this point I have to admit, to his amusement, that virtually everything I know about American summer camps is based on 'Peanuts'. Did he have his own Camp Treetops, I wonder? His answer, as always, comes back to music.

"When I was 10, I went to New England Music Camp in Maine," he smiles. "We stayed in cabins and there was a library filled with books from the 1800s. That was a little creepy, too. I stayed for a month and, out of the hundreds of kids there, I was the youngest in the whole camp. So I was in a bunk room with 13 and 14-year-olds who were going through puberty... and there was little me! After two or three days, I called my parents, crying. I wanted to come home. But I think I talked to my clarinet teacher and he convinced me to stick it out. And in the end I had a great time."

And ghost stories? Please indulge me with ghost stories.

"Well, they did a musical at the camp every summer," he recalls. "And one was based on 'Dracula', but with kids. I was terrible at acting and really shouldn't have been in the play, but they needed someone. And I remember having trouble sleeping. You're basically in the woods, in those cabins, and your imagination runs away."



**T**he track titles on 'A Letter From TreeTops' are an evocative read in their own right. 'Mumbly-Peg'? A throwing game, played with penknives, once immortalised by Mark Twain. 'Witch Water'? From an Adirondack aphorism, imparted by his Auntie Gail – "He who drinks from the Witch Water shall be forever bound to the mountains". It's this quirky combination of warm childhood nostalgia and vague disquiet that makes the album a perfect fit for his adopted label, Ghost Box.

"I've been a fan for nearly 15 years," he explains. "There's a download service called eMusic, with some really good curators. They ran a feature on Ghost Box and I remember the compilation that came out, 'Ritual And Education'. And then I became friends with Nottingham band The Soundcarriers, so during a trip to the UK I went to see them and did some recording with them which eventually turned into their Ghost Box release 'Entropicalia'. Through that I ended up emailing Jim [Jupp, label co-founder] and I've kept in touch with him ever since."

It's a label that, in its early years at least, specialised in a very British brand of nostalgia. The sound of regional ITV idents and 'Open University' jingles, of power cuts on rainy Tuesday afternoons. What, of all this parochial oddness, appealed to a child raised in 1980s New York State?

"I think, as an outsider, you come at it from a different angle," ponders Jesse. "Different enough for the experiences to be educational, in a way. But I always loved oddball Britishness, like that show in the early 2000s called 'Look Around You'."

What? Peter Serafinowicz and Robert Popper, spoofing 1970s schools programmes on BBC2? It's brilliant. You've seen *that*?

"It's so great. I don't think it even made it to America, but a friend burned it onto a DVD for me. That kind of British education has always been fascinating to me. Your 'copybooks'..."

He laughs at the thought of tatty jotters in freezing classrooms in Hull, Birmingham or Watford. The joys of life, he says, are in the "very small things". He likes jogging past picket fences for the zoetrope-like view it affords of the houses behind them. Even the name of his solo project – Pneumatic Tubes – has deliciously obtuse origins in the antiquated pipe system for transporting paperwork between offices.

"I was watching a Truffaut film, 'Stolen Kisses'," he recalls. "And there's a scene where one of the characters sends a love letter using pneumatic tubes. They show it weaving through all the pipes, and I just love it. For a certain period of the 20th century, there was magic and wonder about the idea of sticking something in a tube in one part of the city and a few minutes later it ending up in another. You could send a lock of hair. And there's the fact it uses woodwinds and electronics, too. The tubes are like clarinets and flutes, so that kind of resonates."

**J**esse talks with a clear passion for both of his adopted bands. His membership of Mercury Rev is riddled with ironies. As a New York teenager, they were his "hometown heroes", their music infused with the eerie spirit of the Catskills. He describes them rather heart-warmingly as "the older brothers I never had". The invitation to join them came six years after Jesse had settled in Texas to work with Midlake. It's a 1,500-mile commute but clearly worth the air miles.

"Ironically, Mercury Rev are now based very close to Woodstock," he chuckles. "I think the stuff we're working on is fantastic. I really respect Jonathan Donahue's drive to never repeat himself. And I don't think he'll ever lose that mystique. He's like a sage. He sometimes speaks in riddles. For a few years, he's been referring to 'jazz without the notes'. What does it even mean? I grew up playing and listening to jazz, but I think I now finally understand, and that's how 'A Letter From TreeTops' came about. Capturing the essence of jazz. The freedom. Everything that's amazing about jazz, but with it almost sounding like ambient music."

In the meantime, Midlake are back. 'For The Sake Of Bethel Woods', their first new long-player since 2013, is imminent. Bethel Woods is a concert venue and arts centre built on the original site of – wait for it – the Woodstock festival. The sleeve is a blurry, watercolour depiction of a floppy-fringed teenager in the middle of a jubilant crowd. It doesn't take a great leap of imagination to join the dots. Dave Chandler is the direct inspiration for a second album to bear his son's name.

"Yes, it's my father," confirms Jesse. "If you've seen the Woodstock documentary, the camera pans across the crowd during John Sebastian's set and you can clearly see my dad. So the cover is a painting of the screenshot."

But that's not all. The pre-publicity boasts quotes from Midlake singer Eric Pulido. Paying homage to Chandler Snr, he says, "He was a lovely human, and it was really heavy and sad, and he came to Jesse in a dream".

True?

"Yes," smiles Jesse. "Every so often, he'll turn up in my dreams. It's always a little bit jarring, but I'm getting used to it now. This one came a few months into the pandemic and was very simple. We were in our original Woodstock home and he said, 'You're all still there. You're not doing anything. You should make a Midlake album'. I told Eric, and it somehow turned into... us! I just love how matter of fact it all was. Every time my dad appears it's just, 'Oh, OK. He's here'."

And with that, it's time for Jesse Chandler to go. A Midlake rehearsal session is imminent. But those connections between father and son remain profound. And both – one suspects – have drunk from the Witch Water and are proud to be bound to the mountains.

**'A Letter From TreeTops' is released by Ghost Box on 25 February**







# BITS AND PIECES

When lockdown drudgery stalled Bonobo's creative process, inspiration for his new album 'Fragments' came in the shape of modular synths, sweeping strings, vocals galore and, well, a bagpipe choir

**WORDS: FAT ROLAND**  
**PICTURES: GRANT SPANIER**

**T**he sun beats down on desert scrubland, stretching as far as the eye can see. The ground is scattered with boulders and defiant cacti. In this heat, Joshua Tree National Park is in no mood for visitors. Simon Green, the musician better known as Bonobo, is climbing onto a rock to get a better view of this lunar-like landscape.

He knows the terrain. He's already braved the Mojave Desert's Death Valley, famously the hottest place on earth. As he scrambles over the stones, he nearly meets a sudden end. A rattlesnake rears its head, confronting him with a trademark tail-shake, the gravelly rasp warning him the desert belongs to the reptiles. No place for musicians here.

Green gives a slight shrug, and the moment of jeopardy is broken. We're chatting online, me in my writing room wallpapered with record cover designs, him in his studio lined with synthesizers. It's a mild winter, a little damp, and the closest wildlife to me is a ladybird meandering on the windowsill. Despite nature trying to kill him, Green seems bored with the memory of his ventures into the Californian desert.

"The record company's press people kept saying I should make the story of the album more interesting," he says. "So I said there was this snake once. They put the rattlesnake story in the press information and now everyone wants to talk about that."

But he's also quick to point out the truth of the story.

"It did happen. You're definitely just part of the food chain out there."

The album in question is 'Fragments', Green's seventh as Bonobo, released on Ninja Tune and accompanied by a world tour that will take him from Milwaukee to Munich, and from British Columbia to his old home town of Brighton. 'Fragments' is not arid scrubland. It has soul singers, proper orchestration and some pretty banging dance beats.

It's his first album since 2017's 'Migration', for which he earned two Grammy nominations despite scrabbling together the tracks on a laptop

while touring. 'Fragments' seems squarely aimed at urban life, whether it's nightclub dancefloors, coffee-shop playlists or headphones during a morning commute. However, his forays into the American wilderness played an influential role in its creation.

Green grew up in Brighton, an English seaside resort that has counted Fatboy Slim, Nick Cave and Warp's techno don Clark among its residents. It also gave us the independent label Tru Thoughts, who released Bonobo's first album 'Animal Magic' over two decades ago. After living in London and New York, Green now finds himself in Los Angeles.

He describes his current home as "mostly too hot, and everything's on fire for three months of the year" – a far cry from the chip shops and the shingle-strewn deckchairs of Brighton's beachfront. Although admitting to being a city boy at heart, he has found himself increasingly obsessed by the geology of the western United States. Its sprawling deserts caught his eye from tour bus windows, travelling from Colorado to California.

"I saw all this red stuff, this rocky terrain, and I'd want to come back and be among it for a bit," he says. "Utah and Arizona and Nevada are mad if you grew up in Brighton. It's just very alien."

**E**yes widened by the American countryside, Green took up photography, driving out to places like Bryce Canyon National Park in Utah, with its gravity-defying rock spires reaching for the sky, and Monument Valley, its sweeping sandstone instantly recognisable from John Ford and Sergio Leone westerns.

"Photography was a nice way of getting out of the monotony of touring," he explains. "I wanted to learn something new, something that had the same excitement you get from learning how to make beats. I could drive for an hour and find these stunning lakes and mountains, then turn up for a soundcheck in muddy hiking boots the next day."

Buoyed by the stillness of the world around him, ideas for 'Fragments' slowly formed, like ancient volcanic rocks. A rambling Detroit-y instrumental was one of the first pieces to take shape.

"I was trying to sound like Theo Parrish," says Green.

This became the album's second track, 'Shadows', fronted by his touring partner and Grammy-nominated Disclosure collaborator, Jordan Rakei.

And then the pandemic happened. Stillness became a necessity, although the drudgery of lockdown stalled Green's creative process. He talks about the functionality of dance music not existing without dancefloors, and with club culture on a seemingly never-ending hiatus, he had a problem.

"What's the point of doing this if we're not all out there having experiences?" he says. "Music, especially mine, is based on optimism, right?"

He uses two words to describe this time: "existential" and "yeeugh". He had been texting track ideas back and forth with Jamila Woods, a Chicago poet and singer who had previously worked with Chance The Rapper. The conversation had come to nothing, but as lockdown eased and bars began reopening, things suddenly started moving forward. Like a rattlesnake ready to pounce. While Green was out boozing, Jamila sent him an excited text saying she was in the studio and he could expect some material that same evening.

"I'd had a few glasses of wine, so I was excited too," he says. "When I got home, I pressed play on what she'd sent. She'd smashed it. It wasn't even a demo – what she'd done ended up being on the album track, with no need for re-dos."

He credits Jamila for kick-starting his creativity, calling the resulting track, 'Tides', a centrepiece for the album.

"It got me out of a creative hole, so it was a turning point. A montage moment of, 'Right, let's finish this record'."

Other collaborators followed. Bluesy emo singer Joji features on 'From You', bringing with him fans from his former career as YouTube personality Filthy Frank, inventor of the Harlem Shake.

"There are now these very excitable kids turning up on my feed, all Joji fan accounts. It's real pop star stuff."

Then there's O'Flynn, a London producer previously included by Bonobo in a mix for Fabric. He added dynamic pizzazz to 'Otomo', which reverberates with an ear-popping sample of a Bulgarian bagpipe choir called 100 Kaba-Gaidi that Green discovered on Bandcamp.

"The choir sounds quite cathedral, like a dense harmonic kind of drone. Their artwork showed a lone bagpiper standing in a valley by a riverbank or something. I don't think that's an accurate reflection of the record!"

And there are the soulful tones of LA singer Kadhja Bonet, who popped up from Orange County and laid down so many vocals that Green was too tired to deal with it all.

"We had tons of takes, so I had to tell her, 'I'm fried, I'm going to look at this tomorrow'. It's exciting when you have those kinds of sessions, with eight-part harmonies and so much to wade through."

As well as finding his way around a camera, Green also embraced modular synths for 'Fragments'. This wave-form-wrangling style of music creation has been on trend, with his Ninja Tune labelmates Floating Points and Amon Tobin exploring some interesting modular works in recent years. Alongside his expeditions into the rocky wilderness, this gave Green a useful lockdown distraction.

"I feel like modular is where the most interesting stuff is happening right now," he says. "It doubled as a nice hack to jump-start ideas during 2020, learning how to build a system when nothing else was really happening. I've used a Doppler for clocking my Prophet and MS-20 before now, but I'd never really got into the actual sound source part of it until then."

He talks about "Euclidean patterns", "randomising LFOs" and letting generative patterns play around with each other to "spew out sometimes awful but occasionally amazing melodies and sounds". In other words, he discovered new joy in making lots of tangly wires make buzzy analogue noises.

Such sonic and scenic wandering needed two final contributors to ensure this album would come to be billed as Bonobo's most emotional work to date. The warm orchestration of harpist Lara Somogyi and the multi-instrumentalist Miguel Atwood-Ferguson can be heard throughout the tracks, from the waterfaling harps that start 'Polyghost' to the flowing backing strings on closer 'Day By Day'. Atwood-Ferguson's string arrangements were so grandiose that Green insisted on letting the last minute of 'Tides' melt into a sweeping showcase for them.

"I thought it could be like the end of Curtis Mayfield's 'Right On For The Darkness', where we could just have this whole string suite happen on its own," he recalls.



Somogyi is no stranger to electroacoustic tricks like loop pedals, and a lengthy session using her home set-up gave Green a whole database of potential samples.

"She's great," he enthuses. "There are not many harpists who really understand left-field music, and she's very much in that world."

Orchestration is not new to the Bonobo sound. 'Black Sands', from 2010, opens on a memorable symphonic note, and what would 'Migration' be without its heart-melting harps? The synth work gives Green's albums a technological foundation but it is so-called "real" instruments that create his trademark soulfulness.

"I like working with acoustic sources," he tells me. "A sound that has travelled through the air into a mic or has been plucked... sorry, I'm going to tell these guys to just stop drilling. Give me a sec."

Our interview has been interrupted by an unwelcome acoustic sound – someone seems to be excavating a road right outside Green's window. Maybe digging for rocks. But he's not phased. Unexpected audio interventions are pretty much his trade.

"I'm into embracing accidents, even if it makes things a bit loose," he says once the noise has died down. "That's the main thing, avoiding loops of four and having everything slightly moving to some degree, even if it's very subtle. So every time a snare hits, it's in a slightly different place at a slightly different volume."

The sloshing sun-kissed waters of the 'Fragments' artwork, using footage by 'Migration' photographer Neil Krug, reflects this fluidity. Motion in landscapes, motion in music-making.







**A**s we speak, Green is gearing up for a world tour and a return to life on the road. The live show is usually an expanded version of his solo set-up, so he spends a lot of time in rehearsals parsing each track into different performance sections. Audiences on previous tours would have seen his synths accompanied by a drummer, a guitarist and a gaggle of brass players. And you can't beat a trombone for extra oomph. This time will be different, however.

"I don't want to make everything a band performance if it's not created that way. There are modular, more clubby bits on this record, so it might be that the band is on stage sometimes, and sometimes I'm incorporating more solo electronic parts."

This planning hasn't been without its challenges, with the pandemic predictably causing disruption.

"We had a couple of weeks of rehearsals in London, then I had to pull the plug because Omicron was approaching like an army of zombies. But we're back rehearsing soon in Nashville. It's nice to have the experience of having done this a few times before – it's a bit like getting the old band back together."

These new-found musical and geographical freedoms have left Green in a place of reflection. He remembers the 1990s in Brighton, when he was swapping beats with his old mate Amon Tobin. He recalls sleeping on kitchen floors, waiting in the drizzle for his promoter to pick him up, and taking Ryanair flights to his next gig, hangover raging. He's grateful for that time, but he's certainly in no rush to repeat it.

"I'm going to approach this tour cycle with a healthier mindset," he says. "Not overschedule myself, not do things that exhaust me. Take a bit more care of myself."

Has he even got the energy for live touring anymore? Having asked this, I remember that this is the musician who scrabbles over desert rocks and faces up to battle-ready rattlesnakes. Meanwhile, the ladybird is still exploring every corner of my windowsill. Simon Green is optimistic.

"We'll find the energy, right?"

# FAST FORWARD



SEVERED HEADS AT HEURISTIC VIDEO STUDIO 1984. L - R STEPHEN JONES, TOM ELLARD, PAUL DEERING, GARRY BRADBURY- PHOTO: RHONDA THWAITE

While he might be curating an online archive for his maverick Severed Heads outfit, Tom Ellard is not a man to rest on his laurels. “Don’t you want to jump full-bodied into the future?” he asks

WORDS: CLAIRE FRANCIS

“In 1981, I made a compilation,” begins Tom Ellard. “I asked anyone who had ever recorded anything to send stuff in. I made a set of three cassettes and called it ‘One Stop Shopping’, which was a stupid name. It featured 61 bands and sold for \$6.50. It was like, ‘Here you go, here’s a fuckload of music’. What was interesting was how many of the acts who handed tracks in had really stupid names. And a lot of them were pretty funny.”

As stupid band names go, it’s fair to say that no one is more in on the joke than the Severed Heads’ long-standing ringleader. The idiosyncratic Australian outliers to the UK’s flourishing industrial scene began making music in 1979 as Mr & Mrs No Smoking Sign. Initially a duo formed by his schoolmates Richard Fielding and Andrew Wright, Ellard joined soon after, and their revised name, Severed Heads, stuck.

“It was supposed to be a joke that no one would fall for,” he laughs. “But the Americans got a hold of it, and Americans are true believers. They really believe in things.”

For a band with a cult-like status among fans of the weirder end of the electronic music spectrum, the story behind the name is part of Severed Heads’ folklore, but it’s one that bears repeating. What has always set the group apart from their English counterparts is the sense of fun ingrained deep into their strange tape loops, discordant synthesiser sounds, punchy beats and penchant for pop hooks.

“I take what I do very seriously,” admits Ellard. “But at the same time, if someone thinks it’s a bit of a joke, I’m quite happy to say, ‘Yes, of course’. It can be completely serious but completely tongue-in-cheek at the same time. The English always seem a little bit wistfully confused between those two extremes. And they seem to feel bad about being silly.”

“Throbbing Gristle used to have this thing,” he continues. “They’d say, ‘Is the world as sad as it seems?’. And we thought that was bullshit. We always thought, ‘No, is the world as ridiculous as it seems?’. They wanted to convey angst, whereas we were much more interested in the ridiculousness.”

The story of Severed Heads stretches across four decades and more than 20 albums. It’s been a colourful journey for Ellard, who became the group’s frontman after both Fielding and Wright departed the band in the early 1980s. In 1979, he was still just a 17-year-old school kid who’d got into collecting tape recorders.

At the time, the memory of disco was still floating about the Sydney suburbs but it was soon overtaken by coldwave, a sound that struck him as a completely different idea of reality.

“With some people, quite early in life, they think, ‘Is this all there is?’. The world is something you either have to take as being, ‘That’s what you

get’, or you can try and change it. Some people become poets, some people become murderers, and some people become politicians. I think poets and musicians and people like that reinterpret their own part of the world into a pattern that suits them.”

Fielding had a synthesiser, and together with Ellard’s tape recorders, it was enough to form the backbone of Severed Heads’ first record, which they skipped classes to make.

“When we got to the studio, they asked if we had a record label,” he recalls. “The woman at the front desk was eating a sandwich from a white paper bag with a label on it. So Richard just ripped the label off it and said, ‘There you go, there’s the label’. So we were incredibly ignorant but also incredibly enthusiastic.”

Fast-forward to the mid-80s and Severed Heads had six albums under their belt. ‘Since The Accident’ and ‘City Slab Horror’, from 1983 and 1985 respectively, marked their first major label releases. There was a world tour where they were touted as “Australia’s most innovative electronic band”. According to Ellard, mainstream success was always elusive, though he does concede that “throughout the 1980s we became more popular”. What did that mean for the band?

“We had to become more sophisticated in the ways we irritated people,” he fires straight back, laughing.

In conversation, Ellard frequently refers to his music-making process in terms of turmoil, havoc and creating chaos, but part of the complex beauty of Severed Heads is that they were never averse to a pretty tune.

“I’m not afraid of popularity,” he agrees. “To become popular is a very good goal and it allows you to then be able to do things. In 1986, for whatever reason, my management got me a deal with a publisher. I was in America, in a hotel room in Atlanta, and there was a knock at the door. Somebody delivered an envelope and in it was a cheque for \$120,000. But that immediately got turned into the creative tools that energised the next album. It was never squandered. We never just took it and drank the whole lot. It always came back into the service of the music.”

Severed Heads officially disbanded in 2019 following a farewell tour across Australia, Europe and the USA. Seattle-based label Medical Records have recently reissued three of the band’s 1980s albums – ‘Since The Accident’, ‘City Slab Horror’ and ‘Rotund For Success’, from 1989, with Ellard on remastering duties. He’s still very much in service to the band’s music but also resolute about looking forward.

“An argument I have with people at the moment is that everybody is so fucking fascinated with the past,” he exclaims. “They want retro. Everything is retro. And I’m going, ‘Don’t you want to jump full-bodied into the future and cause some shit with what we have now? Why do you want to live where things are already done?’. It’s all about comfort, and I don’t understand comfort in music. It’s not about comfort.”



PHOTO: TOM ELLARD



So what does he think music should be about?

"It's about blowing things up," he says. "We started with cassette recorders and by the time we got to 'Rotund' I'd traded up to a 16-track recorder, which was just amazing. Sixteen tracks meant you could have an orchestral way of thinking about things. Technology is not the point, but you have to dance with it. It's not about, 'I can do this'. It's about, 'What can I do with this?'."

"Everything that came along with each of these records was like, 'Here's a door that's opened, so what's in this room? Here's some potential for fun. This is really going to fuck people up'. When sampling came along in 1985, for example, I went to England and one of the electronic music magazines was reviewing the first sampler and let me play with it. I was excited by all the kinds of terrible havoc I could cause with this thing."

There's something in the way that Ellard talks about technology, nostalgia and the friction between present and past that seems to frustrate and intrigue him in equal measure. He's pleased about the reissues and is eager to make Severed Heads' back catalogue as accessible as possible. What he's not quite so keen on is vinyl.

"Vinyl is a silly thing," he declares. "It's the idea of having to have an artefact that has nothing to do with the music. It's like having something for your wall. I used to walk home past this house and inside I could see one of our albums framed on the wall."

Which one was it?

"Ah, it was 'Clifford Darling, Please Don't Live In The Past', which was particularly apt," he laughs.

This sort of nostalgia paradox is something Ellard is exploring as part of his current project, an online archive called Nilamox. With the tagline, "The Future Of Your Nostalgia", the site hosts the Severed Heads Museum, which catalogues an array of music, images and videos. Does this make him a curator, and what kind of story does he want to tell?

"You're a curator when you make an album," he affirms. "An album is an exhibition and a way of making a museum of those years. So with this museum, I'm trying to be honest. Actually, 'honest' sounds like a very pretentious word. But I've seen other bands where the fanbase is in charge of keeping them alive. The fans will always put their heart and soul into it, but they won't have the insight that only the musicians themselves can have. It's a sense of duty..."

He pauses.

"Maybe the word honest is correct. That's part of being a musician – you need to document."

For Ellard, the impetus to commemorate and celebrate the band's history is particularly apt at this moment, with the death of former Severed Heads member Garry Bradbury in January. Bradbury and Ellard worked together on four albums, beginning with 1981's 'Clean' through to 1986's 'Clifford Darling...' retrospective.

"Gary had this amazing collection of artefacts and he was still working on music, so I'm going to gather up all of the sound recordings he's got there and preserve them all," says Ellard. "I've had a lot of success with preserving the Severed Heads work. I bought a digital recorder in 1984 and started backing it all up. I've got this hard drive with everything on it, as far back as 1979, so that's why I'm able to do all these reissues."

A

s well as maintaining the Severed Heads archives, Ellard has recently got into video games, blurring the distinction between album and computer programme.

"In 1994, me and a couple of others said we were going to make a video game. Back then it got a write-up in Nintendo magazine. We were actually going to make a game based around JG Ballard's novel 'High-Rise'. And then 'Doom' came out with all the 3D shooter stuff and completely blasted our idea out of the water. I spent year after year trying to catch up with that whole thing. Why? Because I don't think an album should be something which is a straight line from one end to another. I think you should be able to walk around it and be able to sit within it and navigate within it."

In 2013, the dream was finally realised when he created a computer game called 'Hauntology House' for the Adelaide Festival. At the time, it was his vision of what an album should be, but with an ever-inquisitive mind, Ellard is yet again already one step ahead.

"The moment you use the word 'album', you've lost," he insists. "The concept of an album is the thing that has kept us under the heel of history for all this time. We should stop talking about albums – they're gone, finished. And once you do that, you've got a hope for the future."

Instead, he's now focused on a project called LUNA, a virtual architectural space inspired by early 20th century World Expositions and, in particular, the 1939-40 World Fair in New York.

"A World Fair used to be a huge thing," he explains. "In the 1930s, all the countries in the world would come together and build a 'white city'. It was the future, like 'The Jetsons'. The thing they didn't understand was that when you build the perfect place, the imperfect place forms next to it. Wherever you've got Jekyll, you're going to end up with Hyde. And that's what happened with all the World's Fairs – you build something pristine and all the sleaze builds up too."

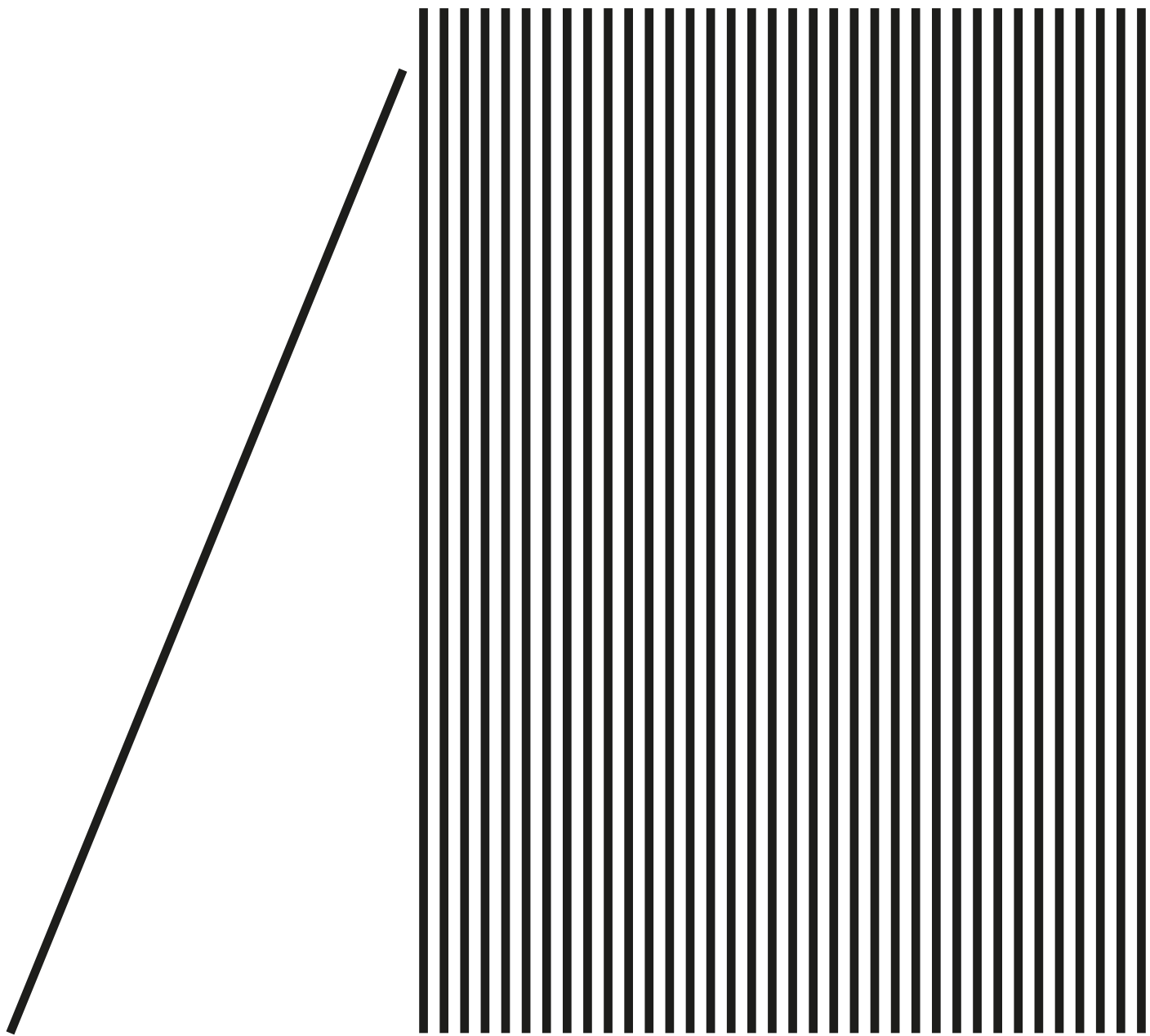
He points to the poetry of yin and yang, or good and evil, as a part of human psychology he finds endlessly interesting. We spend some time discussing architecture, modernity and Lawrence Ferlinghetti's poetry collection, 'A Coney Island Of The Mind'. Which leads us, funnily enough, to talking about amusement parks.

"In Australia, we have two historic amusement parks called Luna Parks," he says. "There's one in Melbourne and one in Sydney. Luna Park in Sydney is a very beloved place. But Melbourne's Luna Park took on a dark air. Around the Second World War there was a series of murders there. Amusement parks are the fulcrum of intense human psychology. What other topic would you want to talk about after you've learned about that? They're fear and joy brought together."

He has a point, as anyone who has been terrified on a roller-coaster will attest. It makes sense that a musician would feel a kinship with these places. After all, his journey through Severed Heads has been something of a roller-coaster ride itself. Yet it's the dying out of amusement parks that fascinates Tom Ellard the most – and there's that nostalgia factor again.

"People are nostalgic for trivial things," he says. "If you're going to be nostalgic, be nostalgic for things that are at the edge of their existence. And recover them."

**'Rotund For Success' is out now on Medical. For Severed Heads' online archive, visit [nilamox.com](http://nilamox.com)**





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# PAGE TURNER

## WOLFGANG FLÜR

### Magazine 1

CHERRY RED

You can take Wolfgang Flür out of Kraftwerk (he removed himself, frustrated and unfulfilled, in 1987), but you can't take Kraftwerk out of Wolfgang Flür. He is forever associated with the Kling Klang mothership, whether or not he or his former employers like it. Because no matter how impressive the current touring machine we call Kraftwerk is, with its stunning 3D audio to match the sense-mangling 3D graphics, the drums-and-wires Kraftwerk of Flür's era remain the platonic ideal for the faithful. They were the defining Ralf, Florian, Karl and Wolfgang years, their names immortalised in neon tubing, their airbrushed faces on 'Trans-Europe Express' an ironic Mount Rushmore of electronic music.

Flür has since created a pop persona wildly at odds with the Kraftwerk aesthetic, and a perpetual touring machine of his own, albeit a more modest affair than his former band's. He became the Musik Soldat, his charm, humour and anti-war messaging packaged into a fleet-footed DJ show; musique non-stop. But those years as part of Düsseldorf's Fab Four still dominate and shape his musical life.

So if his new album sounds like a series of contemporary techno hymns in thrall to the electronic music blueprint he played a part in, well, what else would he do? Revisit the beat group stylings of The Beethovens, his 1960s cover band? No, thought not. Flür might have redesigned himself thoroughly, to the point where he is almost antithetical to the slick minimalism of the Kraftwerk machine, yet he remains intimately bound to its foundation.

'Magazine 1', then, is a concept album, his best and most coherent yet. It's a long-player as lifestyle monthly, with an editorial policy to cover power, money, sex, travel, politics, shopping and, yes, technology. It's a place where fact and fiction blur into each other, where the high gloss of the beautifully melodic electronics and sharp beats provide the glossy pages for Flür to file his copy. He is the editorial voice of authority, guiding you through this curated experience of counterculture futurism. Think Playboy of the 1960s, when you would find essays by Gore Vidal and Kurt Vonnegut on its pages, but with more emphasis on drum machines and robots.

Flür harnesses the talents of his starry collaborators – Midge Ure, Juan Atkins, Claudia Brücken, Peter Hook, Carl Cox, Maps, Mexico's Ramón Amezcua and Germany's U96 (remember their techno er, reboot of the 'Das Boot' theme?) – to produce an experience that's as vivid as it is strange. Strange because Flür's singular take remains resolutely eccentric and unfettered by fashion. A true one-off, there is no one quite like him, and the album exerts the same pull as his magnetic personality.

At times, it revels in goofiness. 'Electric Sheep' channels the simplistic thoughts of a domestic robot designed to help around the house. He plays the role wholeheartedly, with a gleeful and childlike lack of irony, the music cheerfully bouncing with electronic precision and maddening catchiness.

But then he juxtaposes this primary colour cartoonishness with 'Billionaire (Symphony Of Might)', another ventriloquist act, this time voicing someone not a million miles away from Donald Trump and his ilk. It's a bilious takedown of the motivations of the super-rich, with a doomy bassline supplied by Juan Atkins. And there's its partner track, the electronically epic 'Say No!', which makes a startlingly direct and earnest appeal to anyone involved in manufacturing products for warfare to walk away. This son of the Ruhr Valley knows what he's on about.

With 'Best Buy', the oddness is ramped up again, playing the part of a smiling patron as he sells you multi-buy tat you don't need. The manipulations on his voice are truly disturbing, an intentional distortion of the ruthless marketing messages we're bombarded by.

Musically, the ghost of Kraftwerk past floats through these editorial offices. Flür's shouts of "Extra! Extra!" over the mechanical screams of an old Mannesmann teleprinter recall a newspaper rather than a magazine, but when he sings "Mag-a-zine!" through a vocoder, you can't help but think of the robotic chants of "Man Ma-chine!" echoing through time from 1978. That sensation continues with 'Zukunftsmusik', where you might find yourself reminded of 'Showroom Dummies'.

Flür describes himself as a "non-singer", and that certainly holds true in part. He's more of a storyteller, arranger and performer than a composer and producer – that job has been farmed out to his contributors and collaborators, who have done him proud. It sounds like they took their brief to place Flür at the heart of the electronic music legacy which inspired all of them.

With 'Magazine 2' already in the starting blocks, I recommend you take out a subscription immediately.

MARK ROLAND



# WOLFGANG FLÜR MAGAZINE 1





## DAVE BESSELL / LIAM BOYLE

### Imaginator

GROOVE UNLIMITED

Dave Bessell you will doubtless know from his work with Node, and here he teams up with London-based indie film score composer Liam Boyle (check his 2018 'Off World' album – very Johnny Jewel) for a wide-ranging debut collaboration. Bessell pegs it as being “on the borders between ambient, a soundtrack and the Berlin School”. The Tangs’ influence duly colours this widescreen adventure throughout, while cinematic ‘Blade Runner’ sweeps seep into the likes of ‘The Future Belongs To Dreamers’ and ‘Beauty In Infinity’. Properly shimmery stuff. **NM**

## VEKTROID & NEW DREAMS LTD

### Fuji Grid TV II: EMX

BANDCAMP

Released in 2011, Vektroid’s ‘Floral Shoppe’ – under her Macintosh Plus alias – was the ne plus ultra of the vaporwave set, but what’s become of Vektroid (aka Portland, Oregon’s Ramona Andra Xavier) over 10 years on? The answer lies partially in the extreme digital headspace that bred this collection of hyper-sampled tracks, which fell out of Xavier’s PC at the beginning of 2022. ‘P • V’ is twitchy and surreal, but whatever it is that you might find unsettling is offset by the riotous, up-all-night spirit of tracks like ‘Channel3’. **JS**

## FORT ROMEAU

### Beings Of Light

GHOSTLY INTERNATIONAL

A photograph by Salvador Dalí protege Steven Arnold acts as a muse for London producer Michael Greene’s third album, as the cover’s cosmic queen nestles amid soft fabric and harsh light. The textural metaphor works. Fort Romeau’s softness became more calloused on 2015’s ‘Insides’, a dubbier, detailed approach that’s further developed here. Woodblocks clatter, vocal snaps skitter, someone suddenly coughs – every tumble of dust adds depth. The highlight? That’ll be the playful ‘Spotlights’, infectious good house music with crazy paving. One for the queens, kings and everything in between. **FR**

## RATKILLER

### A Curious Lack Of Limbs

TENDING THE VOID

Estonia’s Mihkel Kleis, aka Ratkiller, curates sound quite unlike anyone else. Here, he transforms a curious brain soup of ideas and influences into two head-melting but addictive suites of experimental electronics. The 18-minute A-side ‘Legless/ Aimless’ opens with the shuffle and clack of a moving train, traversing screwy free jazz, blown-out ambient and slow-moving cosmic synth textures, while the more frazzled B-side, ‘Mutilomania’, feeds on computer glitches, cut-up vocals and ecstatic rushes. Weird and completely wonderful. **CF**

**UÈLE LAMORE****Loom**

XXIM / SONY

French/American composer Uèle Lamore's debut album is a dizzying display of eclecticism, packed with dense layers of strings and vibrant electronics. 'Currents' is the album's defiant pop highlight, finding Lamore's soulful voice pushed through a vocoder over crystalline synths, a haunting style that recalls Maps at his most pensive. The rapid changes in direction of 'Dominance' arrive on cycles of twitchy piano and dissonant strings, before fully opening out into mournful, grandiose orchestration. Consciously postmodern and comfortably, gloriously post-everything. **MS**

**SPACESHIP****Ravines**

WIAIWYA

Mark S Williamson, aka Spaceship, not only uses field recordings, but also makes music on location, bringing a real depth to his distinctive brand of environmental ambient. Directly inspired by the valley-side streams near his home in Todmorden, West Yorkshire, he seems to capture the noise of the land shifting imperceptibly beneath our feet. From the blurry orchestral drones and mournful digital birdsong of 'Pudsey Clough' to the freezing mist and obliterating gush of 'Jumble Hole Clough', it's a timely reminder that a trickle of water can soon become a flood. **JB**

**SOSHI TAKEDA****Same Place, Another Time**

CONSTELLATION TATSU

Is there an aural equivalent of a sweet tooth? If there is, having one might come in handy when listening to this six-tracker from Japanese producer Soshi Takeda. Tunes like 'Two Weeks Later' serve up a platter of shiny, sugary keyboard sounds that are an acquired taste, ticking the zeitgeisty boxes marked "new age revival" and "1990s technology". But there's something heartfelt about its best moments – as on the Sakamoto-esque 'Blue Dress', for example – that end up overriding any saccharine allergy. **BW**

**ESCUPEMETRALLA****Tres Trillizos Trotskistas**

NOVAK

Barcelona's enigmatic Escupemetralla never cease to impress. The conceit is that their releases are the result of retro-transmissions from the mid-21st century, "virtual entities that will actually exist in several years' time". Their sleeve notes are always well worth your attention. Here, the theme seems to be "the world famous Trotskyist triplets". Nope, us neither. It's a wildly experimental record – 'Magdeburgisieren' is like a very loud radio being tuned by a bulldozer, while their cover of a cover of 'Itchycoo Park' is properly unhinged. I love these people. **NM**





## GOD IS GOD

**Metamorphoses**

BUREAU B

As you might expect from a project formed by Turkish producer Etkin Çekin and Belarusian composer / singer Galina Ozeran, there's a culture clash of sorts at play on this debut album from God Is God. Acoustic and electronic textures rub up against pop and experimental aesthetics, while vocals are delivered in both English and Russian. An electro-noir version of Tim Buckley's 'Song To The Siren' is a drama-filled highlight, but more freeform improvisations like the tremulous 'Masha-Marie' are every bit as thrilling. **BW**

## FRANCIS PLAGNE

**The Refrain**

BLACK TRUFFLE

Australian musician Francis Plagne continues to create music that's as confusing and bonkers as it is completely brilliant. Comprising two pieces, each around 20 minutes long, Plagne has created surreal soundscapes of breathy drone and abrasive clatter. The first part sounds like a church organ slowly sinking into a river, while the second could be the foley for a Radio 4 play about a haunted boiler. In lesser hands, 'The Refrain' might well have been absolute rubbish, but in Plagne's, it's utterly compelling. **ST**

## SEA CHANGE

**Mutual Dreaming**

SHAPES RECORDINGS

Norway's Sea Change (Ellen A W Sunde) continues to explore club-influenced music on her third album, consisting of tracks that pulse with such suppressed energy it's as if you're hearing them from beyond the shadiest corners of the dancefloor. 'Is There Anybody There' is one of the few slow cuts here, edging forward with an aching melodic sensuality, the polar opposite of the atmospherics, thunderous rhythms and skewed euphoria of the title track. An album full of dance music's staple tensions, deconstructed to their base elements. **MS**

## PAN AMERICAN

**The Patience Fader**

KRANKY

As a member of oblique post-rockers Labradford, Mark Nelson received quiet acclaim but perhaps not the success the group deserved. 'The Patience Fader' suggests there are no hard feelings, as his solo vehicle Pan American retreats further into a quiet place where obscurity is just fine. On 'Outskirts, Dreamlit' and 'The North Line', Nelson plucks his guitar and teases his tremolo over ambient soundbeds of pure pleasantness, redolent at times of Michael Rother's early solo albums. Even when he embraces dissonance on tracks like 'Corniel', it's still roomy and meditative. **JA**





## BLACK FLOWER

### Magma

SDBAN ULTRA

This Belgian quintet are right at the future-jazz vanguard, and proffer a mesmeric, Ethiopian-leaning psychedelic magic that's just spellbinding. Led by flautist and composer Nathan Daems, and taken on a thrilling keyboard-centric trajectory by new recruit Karel Cuelenaere (on vintage Farfisa organ), their outstanding musicianship dazzles with rich texture and kaleidoscopic colour right from the off. The trippy title track sets a breathtaking scene, and the dazzling 'Deep Dive Down' is an absolute blinder. **Knockout. CG**

## ALESSANDRO BOSETTI

### Plane/Talea 31-34

HOLIDAYS

'Plane/Talea 31-34' consists of four long pieces made by Italian sound artist Alessandro Bosetti in Marseille, Vicobarone and at the Venice Art Biennale in 2017 and 2018. Structured from voice recordings, analogue synths, ondes Martenot and traditional keyboards, each piece takes looped voices disassociated from context to create skittering, insistent utterances, which are then reflected back in the accompaniment. On '31' and '32', the response is bubbling, exhilarating electronics, while '33' and '34' are nuanced and light. Richly detailed and rewardingly restless. **MS**

## VILLAGER

### Frontier

MCMXCV

Imbuing a sense of personality into music made on machines can be a difficult job, but it's a skill that Maryland's Alex Young already has an impressive grasp of, despite 'Frontier' being his first album. The title may offer a clue – there's a sense of carefree, optimistic exploration in evidence throughout, not to mention a healthy disregard for genre confines. Tracks such as 'Peace Creek' and 'Brain' blend breaks, techno, electronica and ambience and make it all sound like the most natural thing on earth. **BW**

## KANO

### Kano

FULL TIME PRODUCTION

For the first time since its original release, Kano's self-titled album is now available on remastered and reissued vinyl. The pioneering Italo disco ensemble was formed in Milan in 1979, and their debut album from 1980 is considered a post-disco masterwork that foreshadowed the electro scene of the coming decade. Tracks like 'It's A War' don't come much closer to dancefloor perfection, while the funk grooves of 'I'm Ready' are a reminder of why this tune was an international hit. A feel-good classic. **CF**



**ROB BURGER**  
**Marching With Feathers**  
 WESTERN VINYL

The new album from veteran session musician and Iron & Wine keyboard player Rob Burger was inspired by family hikes in the hills near his Nashville home. A sense of peaceful contemplation and spiritualism dominate the gentle percussion and delicate piano notes of 'Library Science', while a plaintive wonder creeps into 'Waking Up Slowly', full of elusive heat haze and tender reflectiveness. Further on, inchoate melodies and scratchy electronics frame 'Hotel For Saints', highlighting Burger's capacity for powerfully emotive composition. **MS**

**LE MOTEL**  
**Sueños**  
 MALOCA

Big, bold percussive sounds drive this latest effort from Belgian artist and Maloca label founder Le Motel. 'Sueños' dips into grime on 'Love Talk Bad', glitchy breaks on 'Libet's Delay' and sultry reggaeton with 'Rápido'. Featuring vocalists from the UK, Ghana, Spain and Belgium, Le Motel's club-ready collaborations are global in scope, while his solo cuts 'Talking To Drums' and the title track are humid, heady and will definitely appeal to fans of DJ Python, Khotin and the like. **CF**

**BATANG FRISCO**  
**Batang Frisco**  
 BFE

First released in 1986 when they were cult figures in the San Francisco underground, Eric Jensen and Bill DiMichele's only album as Batang Frisco gets a welcome reissue here. It offers raw minimal wave bangers aplenty, yet it's the ambient ballads that really turn up. 'Myth' pits elegiac organ and oceanic field recordings against the late DiMichele's sober and elegant vocals, which have a blanched David Sylvian tone to them. Worthy of soundtracking life's poignant moments, it's only when it ends that you realise you can't move. **ILS**

**JOSEPHINE FOSTER**  
**Godmother**  
 FIRE

From the mountains of Colorado comes this superlative album of psychedelic devotions. There's a hint of Jandek's outsider discordancy to the detuned guitar of opener 'Hum Menina', but Foster's pitch-perfect whisper was honed in church choirs and transcends all. "I feel like a ghost / Denied the holy host" she sings on 'Guardian Angel', and 'Dali Rama' even finds space for a Latin recitation. Traditional folk, woozy synths and hymnal melodies combine to create a plea for salvation, capable of touching the steeliest of heathen hearts. **BF**



## SUSO SÁIZ

### Resonant Bodies

MUSIC FROM MEMORY

'Resonant Bodies' begins with the sound of, well, bodies being resonant. Spanish ambient composer Suso Sáiz employs swathes of amniotic drone and whooshing pulse on opener 'Inside The Egg', the most corporeal iteration of the record's titular concept, while 'When I Sleep' and 'Outskirts' shift more towards introspective sound worlds. Sáiz often builds projects around similarly bold themes, but by imbuing these pieces with such emotive clout, he forges understated intimacy where others might have relied on the broad strokes of cliché. **ST**

## HYACINTH & THE CENTRAL OFFICE OF INFORMATION

Passing Cars In The Rain

SUBEXOTIC

'Passing Cars In The Rain' pairs Portland beatmaker Ryan Durfee (Hyacinth) and Sidcup's Alex Cargill (The Central Office Of Information) for a soundtrack to a film that doesn't seem to exist. Durfee's concise tracks are loaded with wonky funk and melodic electronics, with 'I Don't Know What To Tell You' standing out for its emotional, jazzy flourishes. Cargill's longer pieces, in contrast, mine a rich seam of analogue synth sounds, yielding a heart-wrenching sense of melancholy on 'Dream Onset'. Blooming wonderful. **MS**

## MYMK

### Crack A Light

SOUNDS ET AL

The latest album by prolific Brazilian producer MYMK (aka Bruno Sres), 'Crack A Light' is an intriguing and playful foray into processed electronics and textural sound design. Veering between abstract excursions and shimmering ambience, it's typically rich in cinematic detail. 'A Gesture' is all chilling Morricone-esque tension, the distorted, careening thrum of 'Antics' is like free falling down a cavernous icy fissure, and 'Pay No Mind' pays homage to the loping widescreen scores of Alessandro Cortini. Fabulous. **VI**

## YUKIHIRO TAKAHASHI

Neuromantic

ALFA MUSIC

Yukihiro Takahashi was already established as the drummer in the Sadistic Mika Band and as a member of Yellow Magic Orchestra before he embarked on a solo career. First released in 1981, his third album 'Neuromantic' sent up the concomitant new romantic scene and also predicted the future – William Gibson's cult sci-fi novel 'Neuromancer' arrived three years later. 'Drip Dry Eyes' is Bryan Ferry-style sophisti-pop, while 'Glass' could be David Sylvian doing eccentric electronica. Whip-smart, postmodern and positively teeming with ideas. **JA**



## BRECON

**Fore**

WILL BELLS

The twig-crossed canopies and mottled bark of British forests are evoked on this remarkable debut from Bristol/London composer, Will Brown, aka Brecon. With enough corrugated stuttering to make Rival Consoles jitter, 'Fore' delivers shadows of punchy, half-step electro and sunny rays of techno elegance. The latter is expressed beautifully on the enchanting 'Transference'. Whether skimming snares with ease – he's a talented drummer – or with his Prophet Rev2 in full analogue workout mode, 'Fore' scores an easy four out of four. **FR**

## CHRISTINA GIANNONE

**Zone 7**

ROOM40

The new album from Brooklyn's Christina Giannone was inspired by escapism – not away to some faraway beach but within the subconscious. Built from long tones, ephemeral sounds and strung-out passages, pieces like 'Zone 1' have a meditative, contemplative depth without veering into over-researched new age territory. The 10-minute long 'Stratosphere' is lovely, too. A constant ethereal drone structured from amorphous sounds, it's what Buddha might call – to paraphrase – the "quietness of a broken gong". **MS**

## VARIOUS ARTISTS

**Bonnie Tropical 6**

PARADISE PALMS

Edinburgh label Paradise Palms have put together an eye-opening collection of quirky electronica, smart synthpop experiments and nonconformist club bangers by 15 of Scotland's most exciting emerging artists. The compilation opens with the sweet synth melody and bubbly patterns of 'Golden Turtle' by T\_A\_M, before winding a path from the arty post-punk of Nightshift's 'Make In' and spacey dancefloor beats from Aberdreamin on 'Carrier', to the bleepy breaks of Sooakxa's 'Hexagonal Water Trace'. There's certainly enough good stuff on here to make you want to book a trip to Scotland, pronto. **CF**

## MAYA SHENFELD

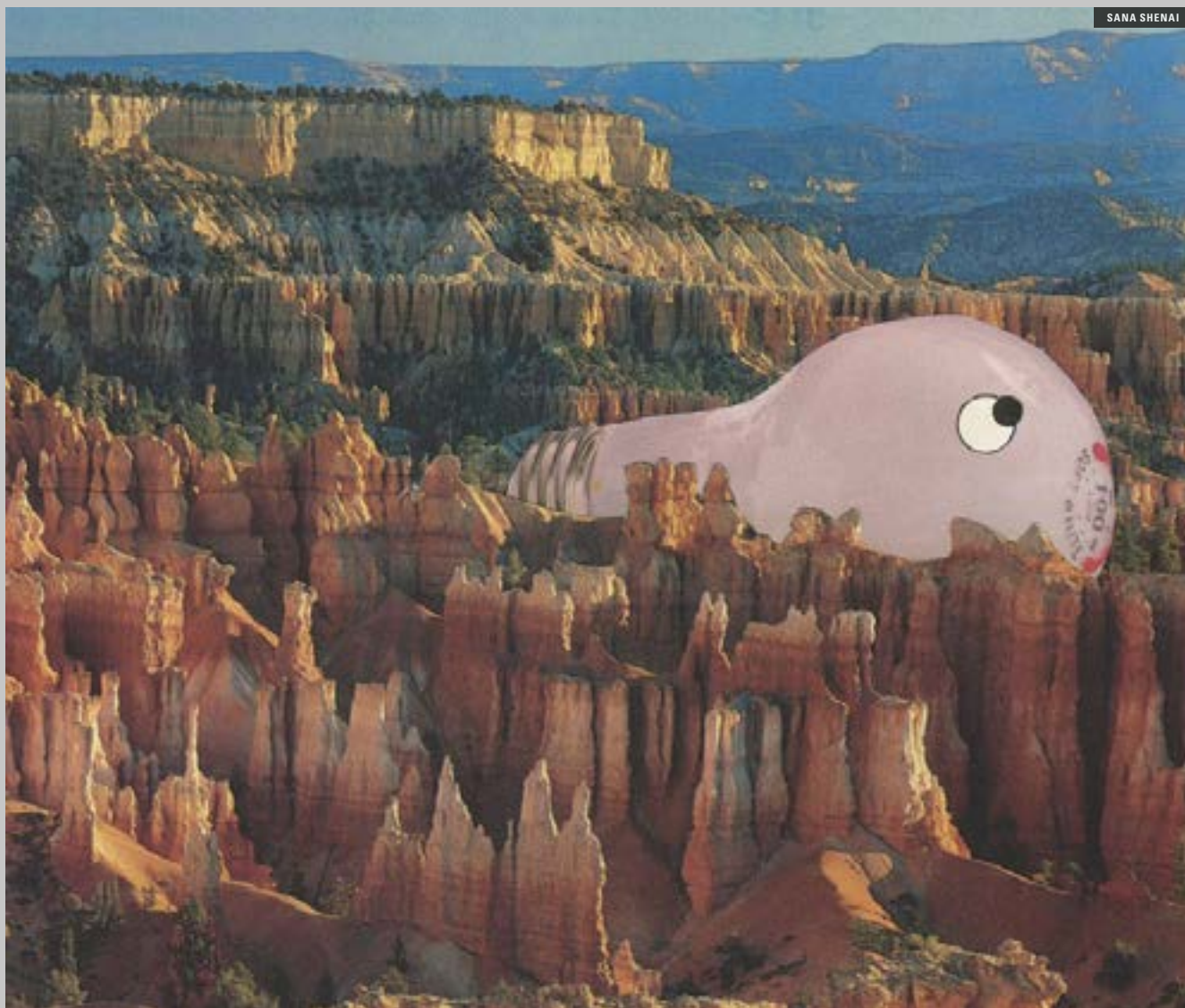
**In Free Fall**

THRILL JOCKEY

Maya Shenfeld is a Berlin-based musician and composer whose debut album of electroacoustic synthesis is an impressive statement of intent. On 'Cataphora', horns and synths combine into a single incisive drone, a slow-motion fanfare that recalls Philip Glass circa 'Koyaanisqatsi'. The pure, arpeggiated dance of electronics on 'Body, Electric' is just wonderful, while 'Sadder Than Water' is a processional into the heart of the machine. Yet this is an album full of human poignancy as well, as the ghostly cascade of voices on 'Mountain Larkspur' makes clear. **JB**



SANA SHENAI

**SANA SHENAI****Warm Former**

LES ALBUMS CLAUS

Los Angeles' Sana Shenai – aka Mitchell Brown and Jimmy Tamborello – make music that sounds like the Super Furry Animals at their most wonkily electronic, or Wagon Christ if Luke Vibert composed his songs on a circuit-bent candyfloss maker. 'Warm Former' comprises cuts from 2018's 'Forewarm' EP alongside seven new compositions, and the mild weirdness of those earlier pieces is bolstered by the shimmering unease of tracks such as 'Laqua', which sways and wobbles in a deliciously disorientating haze. **ST**

**SAINT ABDULLAH****Inshallahland**

ROOM40

This sound collage by Brooklyn-based Iranian brothers Mohammad and Mehdi Mehrabani-Yeganeh seeks to challenge imposed uniformity on the Persian identity. Co-produced by Lawrence "philosopher of listening" English, the 22-minute opener 'Glamour Factory' tessellates recordings (speeches, YouTube vloggers) with evocative musical samples, and it's a fascinating listen. The remaining three tracks are mostly voiceless, ambient surprises, packing warm synth melodies over glitching samples. In a word, exceptional. **ILS**

**OTIS SANDSJÖ  
& NIKLAS WANDT****Compagni Di Merende**

KRYPTOX

Eclectic German producer Niklas Wandt joins Swedish saxophonist Otis Sandsjö for this bold experiment in free jazz and electronics. The pair met in a now-shuttered Berlin bar "that hosted improvised concerts almost every night of the week" and 'Compagni Di Merende' feels like a manifesto for free improvisation as the new techno. The ferocious 'Per'e'muss' has the intensity of dark four-to-the-floor, while the wheezy beginnings of 'Inzevat' ends in a violent death rattle. It's not the kind of music that will set dancefloors alight, but by design, it's equally liberating. **CF**

**LUCY****Lucy Plays Wanton Witch**

STROBOSCOPIC ARTEFACTS

Last year's lauded debut album by Wanton Witch is reimaged here by Stroboscopic Artefacts founder Lucy (aka Luca Mortellaro). This complete revisioning is painted with gloom and streaked with rust. In the scrapes and clangs, industrial rhythmic bolts become the gloopy oil that greases them. It's a sonic strangulation that sandpapers the jack-hammering 'Do I Pass' into a wire-woolled lamentation led by a computer coldly declaring "Identity!". Terrifying. If you want to make black magic, borrow a witch. **FR**



## HAWKSMOOR

### Saturnalia

LIBRARY OF THE OCCULT

"Pagantronica". That's how Bristol modular maestro James McKeown describes this splendidly squelchy homage to the Roman god Saturn, partly inspired by his discovery of that most holy of tomes: the Reader's Digest 1977 'Folklore' book. Clearly looking to ensure a decent harvest in the wider Avon area, McKeown offers up nine gently beat-driven modular instrumentals, possibly even sacrificing an overworked Moog Mother-32 in the process.

There are whiffs of proggy bombast. The title track brings to mind Ken Freeman's fab widdly synths on Jeff Wayne's 'The War Of The Worlds', and also – oddly – his theme to ace 1980s BBC series 'The Tripods'. 'The Drowned King' adds driving organic bass and a hint of Suicide.

But the overall mood is one of languid somnambulism. 'The Vestal King' is an incoming tide of melodic ambience, and 'Kama Loka' adds soothing arpeggios to the mix. All in all, it's a mightily impressive feast. **BF**

## CABARET DU CIEL

### Raintears

QUINDI

Cabaret Du Ciel are the Italian ambient outfit formed in 1986 by Gian Luigi Morosin, joined later by Andrea Desiderà and Giorgio Ricci. Originally released in 1991 on Morosin's Ionisation Tapes, and reissued now by exciting Florence label Quindi, 'Raintears' was written by Desiderà.

It's a nice summation of CDC's music – unabashedly moody and romantic. With no percussion, just guitars, synth and piano, it's much more bedroom than chill-out room, particularly when compared with the dancey ambient sounds of their 'Skies In The Mirror' album from 1992.

Aside from 'A New Day', with its sumptuous, Harold Budd-like strings and dreamy synth interplay, the title track is the most evocative listen, based around spontaneous piano improvisations from the group's friend Francesco Martignon, and buoyed by sweeping keys and trickled textural sampling. With a bunch of original music in the offing from the newly-reformed CDC, 'Raintears' is the perfect primer for anyone wanting to jump in. **ILS**

## ROMAN ANGELOS

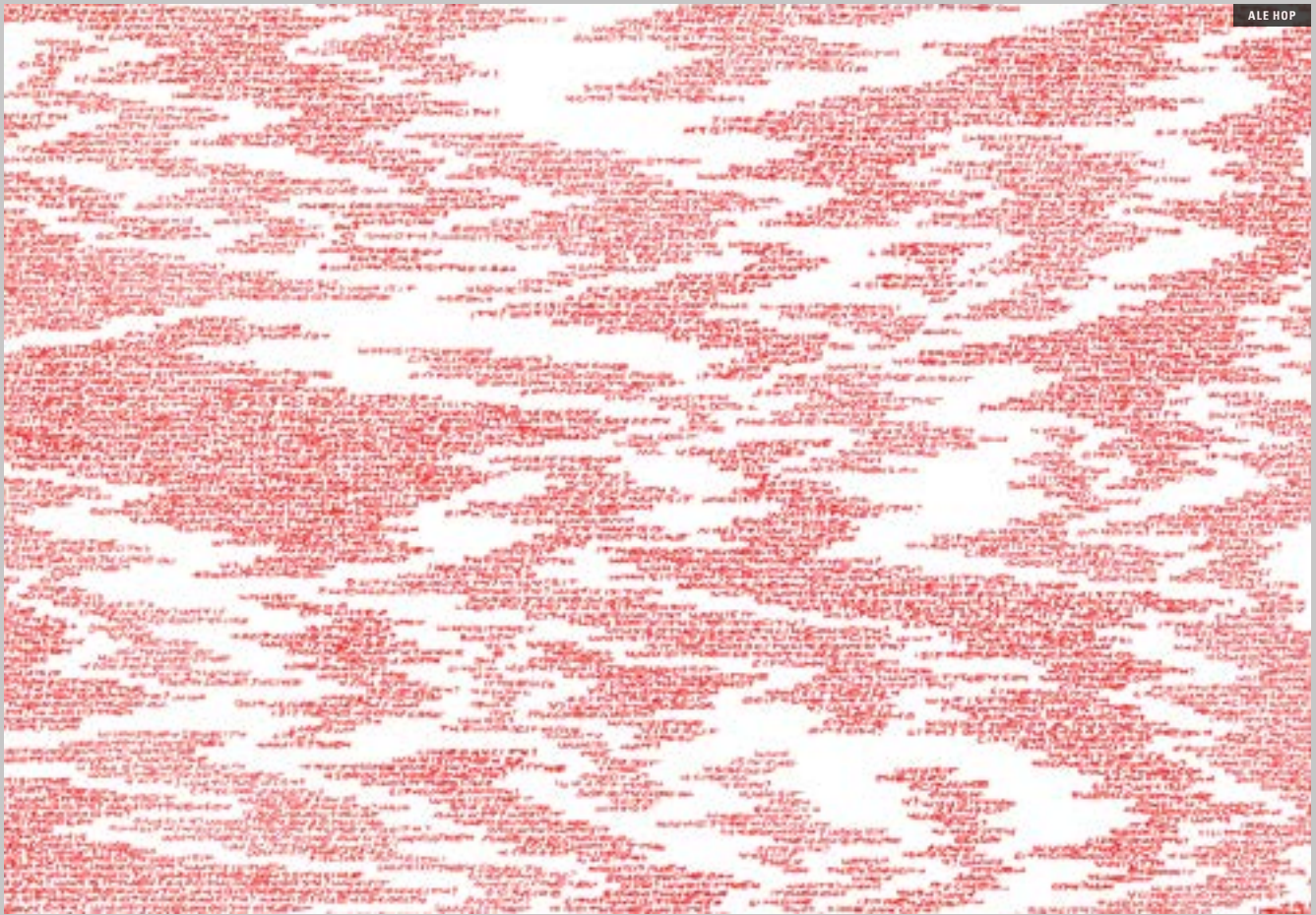
### Music For Underwater Supermarkets

HAPPY ROBOTS

Who is Roman Angelos? Technically, he's New York library music obsessive, Rich Bennett. But when Bennett amused himself on an overnight ferry to Croatia by concocting an imaginary life story for the ship's resident handdog organist, the fictional Angelos was born. And if 2020 debut album 'Spacetrone Lunchbox' was a brief raid on a Tesco Express – 11 one-minute tracks, pitched somewhere between 'Miami Vice' and 'The Jetsons' – then 'Music For Underwater Supermarkets' is a full-blown weekly shop, spilling over the sides of the trolley.

Inspired by the jazzy muzak of the malls of his childhood, it's apple pie Americana with a melancholy twist. The Miles Davis trumpets on 'Swimming Through The Aisles' elbow aside a chorus of lilting flutes for the last tin of Spam on the bottom shelf. Meanwhile, 'The Looking Glass' is pure 1960s easy listening, the sound of James Coburn pondering the grooviest brand of marrowfat peas. Batchelors, obviously. For those not averse to shopping in a silk kimono, it's an album of rather splendid vibes. **BF**





## ALE HOP

Why Is It They Say A City Like Any City?

KARLRECORDS

Ale Hop is Peruvian musician Alejandra Cárdenas, and she makes records which leap neck-deep into weirdness rather than paddling around its shallow edges. 'Bodiless' from 2018 had the visceral unease of a David Cronenberg film, while 2020's 'The Life Of Insects' amplified creepy-crawly scuttle to a grotesque scale. This latest release is no less strange – opening track 'The Mountain That Eats Men' registers like a sinister past life regression conducted via the emergency tannoy in a faulty cable car.

As the record progresses, the settings become increasingly unfathomable and exotic. 'Latitud 0' contorts electronic garble into what sounds like alien beasts bellowing in synthetic undergrowth, while 'They Thought Of Themselves' swells to a rainforest mulch, the chirp of cicadas and tropical birds magnifying the ominous rumble of the spaceship drone below. It's world-building of the most curious kind which, like the work of Spencer Clark or Ambassador Dulgoon, finds mystery nestled among the vegetation. **ST**

## TIM HECKER

The North Water (Original Score)

LAKESHORE

If you can picture one of those colossal freighters emerging from the mist, then you can imagine Tim Hecker's soundtrack to this television mini-series as the grim foghorn advising all concerned to make way – nothing good takes place on board here. The programme itself, which is based on the 2016 Ian McGuire novel, might focus on a 19th century whaling expedition, but it's not faux sea shanties or period pieces that the Canadian experimentalist has put together here.

Over 15 tracks, Hecker manages to convey that uncomfortable sense of displacement you normally encounter on sci-fi soundtracks. Cellos moan and boomy synth strings come in one unsettling wave after another.

Only when we get to 'A Breather', with its artificial whale cries, do you get the sense that things have gotten a touch too on the nose. But overall the vibe here is one of dark contemplation. Not for the easily queasy. **JS**

## BLESSED ARE THE HEARTS THAT BEND

Sadness Be Damned

SPECTRAL INDUSTRIES

When London filmmaker Luke Seomore isn't busy behind the camera he composes poised instrumental music under the evocative moniker of Blessed Are The Hearts That Bend. The textures Seomore conjures have an undeniably cinematic quality, and he duly suffuses this resoundingly great album with emotive widescreen allure.

Part-written in Covid isolation on the edge of an unnamed desert, Seomore conceived the album as "an antidote to loneliness", and it's a sentiment that translates beautifully. Composing collaboratively for the first time with renowned musicians such as Nashville guitarist Luke Schneider, Emma Smith from Jarvis Cocker's current band and Italian cellist Belaqua Shua (aka Pier Giorgio Storti), there's a fully-orchestrated quality at play here that often astounds.

Storti's lush strings in particular abound through opener 'Present', with its exotic field-recorded birdsong, before segueing into the majestic ambient/experimental 'I Feel Weird All The Time'. We then move into the more nuanced sci-fi soundscapes of 'The Pines Are Laughing', before the album's triumphant, spiritually healing close. Unmissable. **CG**



## DEBIT

### The Long Count

MODERN LOVE

For her debut on Manchester label Modern Love, Mexican-American producer Delia “Debit” Beatriz leans back into history to breathe life into ancient Mayan whistles and ocarinas, while simultaneously jet-packing into a technological future by interpreting those instruments with machine learning. A long count indeed – this album spans eras.

The resulting audio swirls are appropriately panoramic. Pea-souped flutes turn into breathy sirens, electronic birdsong evaporates into grainy digital clouds, and on the softly ebbing ‘2nd Day’, animalistic hoots accompany the sounds of sighing circuitry.

Beatriz found her feet with Mexico City party collective NAAFI, and although there’s a gentle nod to circuit-bending culture, the industrial club leanings of her previous work are long dissolved. ‘The Long Count’ feels more naturalistic, as evidenced on the insistent wind hum of ‘6th Night’ where squealing murmurations flock over a subterranean rumble. There are challenging moments to be found, but these machine-made Mayan melodies are epochs beyond our puny present lives. **FR**

## TIMESHARD

### The Planet Dog Years

CHERRY RED

As part of the 1990s Planet Dog scene, Timeshard might well be seen as the er, underdog to main attractions Banco De Gaia and Eat Static. Founded on the free party Liverpool scene of the 1980s, Steve Angstrom, Psy and Gobber flew under the radar until Michael Dog released their debut album ‘Crystal Oscillations’ on his influential label in 1994.

This set serves up those Dog years, collecting said debut LP along with 1996’s ‘Hunab Ku’ and a disc of rarities, Peel session tracks and the ‘Zero (Ouroboros)’ EP. What really stands out in the sleeve notes by our own Kris Needs are the influences. Early doors, they were using radio and TV soundbites to make wild sound collages influenced by sci-fi, The Radiophonic Workshop, Faust, Can and The Residents.

Listening now, their psych-trance sounds entirely contemporary, very much in the Sendelica or Fruits De Mer ballpark, whether it’s the brilliant hypnotic swirl of ‘Oracle’ from their debut, or the throbbing groove and acid squelches of ‘Dream Messages’ from ‘Hunab Ku’ – both fine examples of their very welcome oeuvre. **NM**

## LION’S DRUMS / VARIOUS ARTISTS

### La Batterie

COCKTAIL D’AMORE

Harold Boué is a name you might not recognise, but the French producer boasts some impressive credentials. Under his Abstraxion alias, he’s released music on the likes of Nicolás Jaar’s Other People label, while his debut 2018 EP as Lion’s Drums came out on John Talabot’s Hivern Discs. Last year, he also self-released the first Lion’s Drums studio album, ‘Kagabas’, which was recorded with a community of indigenous Kagabas people in Colombia’s Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta mountains.

Lion’s Drums is Boué’s outlet for making inventive and often beautiful music suffused with heavy percussive sounds, and ‘La Batterie’ explores “the transcendent potential of the drum” via a combo of remixes, edits and original works.

On ‘Journey To Middle Earth (Lion’s Drums Edit)’, Freddy Spins’ 1990s techno is remoulded into chugging tribal euphoria. On the flip side, Boué uses original material by electronic pioneers Suzanne Ciani and Roberto Musci as the basis for the angelic, thrumming ‘Paris 1971’. Bang on. **CF**





## THE BLACK DOG

### Music For Photographers

DUST SCIENCE

#### Sheffield IDM trio get snap-happy

Sheffield's landscape and heavy industry have long been a source of fascination for its resident musicians – Martyn Ware, Richard H Kirk and others have often spoken about how the echoes and clangs of the city's drop forges influenced their formative electronic dabbings. The sounds of Sheffield's industrial past have frequently been hinted at in The Black Dog's abyssal minimal techno too, but it's the city's architecture that's the major inspiration on 'Music For Photographers', which finds TBD trio Ken Downie, Richard Dust and Martin Dust leaning into their more ambient side.

The natural follow-up to last year's 'Dubs' EPs – three volumes of "angular futurism", chronicling Sheffield's brutalist and modernist buildings via music, photography and words – 'Music For Photographers' is just what it says on the tin. Originally devised as a "functional tool", it was used as a looped audio backdrop to set the mood and aid creativity while on location. The resulting images can be seen in Martin Dust's 'Brutal Sheffield' book, a photographic study of the city's "past, present and future".

TBD's work often taps into that all-enveloping "soundtracks for imaginary films" vibe – 2010's 'Music For Real Airports', for example, subverts the idea of Eno's genteel 'Music For Airports' into something distinctly edgier and more aligned with the buzz of a busy airport – and 'Music For Photographers' follows suit. Capturing "the isolation a photographer seeks with their subject", there's certainly a detached element to the album's tranquil electronic timbres, but it's very easy to lose yourself in its vast cinematic swathes.

A melancholic, rainy day feel pervades throughout, with a sense of dark clouds looming overhead, in keeping with some of Sheffield's stark, often dilapidated old buildings and monuments. And yet the entire listening experience is wholly exhilarating. The vast ambient expanse of opener 'Dust Bunnies' glows with wonder and a strange nostalgic warmth. 'Re-Phokuss', a collaboration with producer Oliver Ho, cocoons you in its dense, muffled palpitations. 'Sensor' feels like a serene levitation, floating among the stars. And the atmospheric 'Nighthawks', punctuated by haunting piano, is a gorgeously mesmeric midpoint somewhere between Sarah Davachi and This Mortal Coil.

More than just simple background music for photographers, this is a highly absorbing and often emotive snapshot, the sound of a distinguished and revered electronic band still cutting it after 30 years. Highly recommended.

VELIMIR ILIC

## Brief Encounters



#### The Black Dog's Ken Downie pulls up a chair and faces down the quick-fire question machine

##### Where are you right now and what can you see?

"At home in Sheffield, nothing but fields. We're starting a campaign to make it more grey."

##### 'Music For Photographers' is an interesting title. What's behind the thinking there?

"It's a description of what it is – that's who it was made for and tested on. It's part of two years of working on projects that involved music and photography. Putting them together made sense and they just kept feeding each other."

##### The Black Dog has also been photographing local architecture.

##### What's the appeal of the bréton brut?

"It's part of our youth and influence. It holds some beauty in our eyes and is often misspoken about and that's enough reason to be interested. The fact it gets people's backs up makes us laugh."

##### You say photography, like music, is a constant battle that needs to be practised. Care to expand?

"All art needs to be practised. To find the 'soul' of what you're doing, you have to search for it. It doesn't just appear, you have to learn how to look properly."

##### So the album was made at the same time the photographs were being taken, on location?

"That's correct. A lot of the music was written on the road and in the car."

##### There's also a new EP, 'Brutal Minimalism', which was produced "within the architecture of the car parks, streets and nearby green spaces". That must have provided some challenges?

"Not really. Sitting in the car with a MacBook Pro and Ableton while it pisses it down outside is pretty easy after a while. It becomes normal while you're waiting for the light or the right weather."

##### One of the rules you set for 'Music For Photographers' was that it should be played in full when visiting any location. What does that mean in practice?

"It meant staying at the site, often for a couple of hours, finding the photograph and checking that the music worked for the purpose. Lots of tracks didn't work so they got dropped, and a few were just too miserable."

##### Does that rule apply to the listener too? A map would be handy?

"That's something we can't decide, but I think we've turned a few people on to Brutalism so maybe a map would be useful for the future."

##### Have you thought about listening parties in the shadows of these great monoliths?

"We've played at Park Hill with Richard H Kirk, but aren't listening parties a thing of the past?"

##### Why are music and architecture such good bedfellows?

"We've always made music about where we live. It makes perfect sense to reflect that back – I think people get a better idea about where we live from the music and photographs... well, we've sold a shitload so they must do."

##### You know what's coming now... is this the ultimate "dancing to architecture" album?

"I think it's part of something. The next EP could have you dancing, mind!"

## Buried Treasure



### KINGS OF CONVENIENCE

**Versus**

SOURCE, 2001

'Quiet Is The New Loud', the debut album from Norway's Kings Of Convenience – Erlend Øye and Eirik Glambek Bøe – is the gentlest strum and pluck of a record, and the Bergen duo were cast very much from an old school folk tradition. Think Nick Drake, Tim Buckley and John Martyn, who at the turn of the millennium were going through a regular resurgence in popularity as a new generation discovered their tender charms. Add to that the rise of artists like Bright Eyes and the much-missed Elliott Smith and, well, Kings Of Convenience were on point.

As the album title suggests, Kings Of Convenience's world was one where they stepped back from the guitar noise of the 1990s. That they could pen a tune was in little doubt. Tracks like 'I Don't Know What I Can Save You From', with its earworm melody and rich strings, and the tippy-tappy rhythm of 'Toxic Girl' should be on every playlist worth its salt. The whole thing is a glorious late-night kickback of a record.

I'm never quite sure how these things happen, but KOC's simple, stripped-back, six-string salvos chimed with the dance music fraternity. It was one of those records that tended to find its way to the top of the pile at the "back to mine" sessions after a night on the tiles.

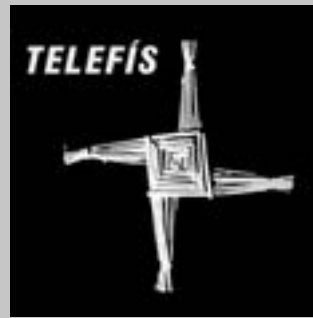
Inevitably perhaps, the dance kids took the pair under their wing and with 'Versus' they gave 'Quiet Is The New Loud' a sprinkle of electronic stardust. But this wasn't about moulding dancefloor bangers – it was way more subtle. It's not a straight remix album, more a work in its own right featuring new arrangements, collaborations and remakes. Four Tet serves up a couple of swings at 'The Weight Of My Words', adding a shuffling beat, a warm squeezebox refrain and a looping vocal to brilliant effect, while his instrumental version is similarly delightful. Ladytron bring an arsenal of swooping synths to 'Little Kids', while Kings themselves chip in with a new, beefier arrangement of 'Failure'.

There's a real Norway/Manchester axis to proceedings. Representing Manchester, Andy Votel's take on 'Winning A Battle, Losing The War' reflects the vibe of his own Twisted Nerve label, while TN labelmates Alfie also contribute with a clattering remake of 'Failure'.

Pick of the Norwegian charge is a staggeringly good remix of 'I Don't Know...' by Röyksopp, who turn in a version that's equal to the original. And there's the brilliant Evil Tordivel, who's clearly in party mood with his upbeat reinterpretation of 'Leaning Against The Wall', sounding not unlike Badly Drawn Boy, who of course was Votel's partner in Twisted Nerve.

I can heartily recommend filling a playlist with both albums and hitting shuffle for the perfect after-hours soundtrack. Pleasingly, Kings Of Convenience popped back up last year with 'Peace Or Love', their first long-player in 12 years. All back to mine?

**NEIL MASON**



**TELEFÍS**

**a hAon**

DIMPLE DISCS

### Mischievous Irish dissenters join forces

They say nostalgia ain't what it used to be. In Cathal Coughlan and Jackknife Lee's hands, that's truer than ever. There's no sepia-tinged unrequited love here. Coughlan (Microdisney, Fatima Mansions) mercilessly wields nostalgia, by turns as a stiletto knife and a hammer, while composer/mixer/producer Jackknife Lee's music displays a staggering range of rhythms, beats and textures.

Although now separated by thousands of miles (Lee lives in LA, Coughlan in London), both men share an experience of growing up in Ireland. They've seen this childhood time become co-opted and rose-tinted. Indeed, the name 'Telefís', a portmanteau of the English and Irish words for television, deliberately evokes what the pair have dubbed a "corrosive nostalgia". The purpose, of course, is so that it can be subverted, whether on 'Mister Imperator', a tale of a 1960s' light entertainer held aloft by LCD stylings, crystalline arpeggios and the nagging "Come on, let's go" outro, or 'The Symphonies Of Danny La Rue' with its vivid evocation of a 1984 cinema showing 'Lucifer Rising'. Coughlan's arcane lyrics paint rich worlds and simultaneously dissect them with pitiless glee.

Two standouts are 'Archbishop Beardmouth At The ChemOlympics' and 'Sex Bunting'. The first boasts a driving hands-in-the-air funkiness that recalls imperial-phase Underworld. The second features a brief technicolour guitar loop and a discreet nod to Kraftwerk's 'Autobahn', but spends most of its time heads-down with minimal noir beats and Coughlan's vocal stretched to implausible lengths. The result is a peculiarly cinematic but merciless put-down of slumming hipster filmmakers patronising locals in East London. Such is the talent of this welcome collaboration that even after all the bile and crazy shouts of "Hold the holdall", its final lines are curiously affecting.

Ultimately, 'a hAon' is the perfect marriage of Coughlan's evocative lyricism and caustic humour with Jackknife Lee's extraordinary economy and subtle electronic phrasing. But the music does so much more than simply provide a backdrop to Coughlan's outpourings, weaving inextricably with his voice to produce a whole that dazzles. 'a hAon' is inspired by artists including Can, Suicide and The Normal, who create music that Jackknife Lee says "doesn't care if you like it". The album may not care, but you will love it.

**ANTHONY THORNTON**



## GROUP LISTENING

### Clarinet & Piano: Selected Works, Vol 2

PRAH RECORDINGS

Gifted Welsh multi-instrumentalist Stephen Black, who records as Sweet Baboo, and experimental jazz pianist Paul Jones, caused quite a stir a few years ago with the first volume of this series, featuring radical but delicate reworks of some of their favourite tracks, redefining the cover version in the process.

And this intimate, tranquil follow-up is just as perfect. Taking a less straightforward “ambient” approach this time around, the best tracks here, originally by artists such as Big Star, Laraaji and influential American steel guitarist Robbie Basho, work as beautifully reinterpreted neo-classical chamber pieces.

The pair’s deft musicianship gives everything a gentle, life-enhancing air of luminous joy, as with their breathtakingly pellucid take on legendary composer Beverly Glenn-Copeland’s ‘Sunset Village’. Neu!’s ‘Seeland’ in particular is lent such a gossamer-light, spiritually elevating feel that after experiencing it, you somehow feel like a more enlightened human. A bold claim perhaps, but just listen. **CG**

## KIT GRILL

### Spirit

PRIMARY COLOURS

We praised London-based Grill’s previous album ‘Fragile’ for its “retro-simplicity”. What we have here is – and you can quote us – extra proper mega simplicity. ‘Spirit’ was recorded alongside ‘Fragile’ and is like a photographic after-image of those sessions. The synthpop drama is gone, leaving only the aura.

The NTS Radio host balances chunky chords on a sonic pedestal and lets them linger for our consideration. Occasional found-sound samples pop their heads around the corner, tannoy-scratchy and distant, but this really is just big fat synth washes with everything else taken out.

The closest we get to the New Order pop energy of ‘Fragile’ is a melodic line on ‘Orchid’ that’s so vibra-thin, it’s almost all afterglow. ‘Somewhere’ raises the frequencies into a ‘Smokebelch’-y splendour, a woolly bassline providing a counterpoint to warm the cockles. Each porous synth line on ‘Spirit’ just oozes with the enveloping analogue warmth of its sister work. Simply lovely. **FR**

## LORIS S SARID & INNIS CHONNELL

### Where The Round Things Live

12TH ISLE

The latest album on Glasgow’s genre-melding 12th Isle label slots easily into their established catalogue of otherworldly sounds from disparate geographic locations. Innis Chonnell is the alias of Frazer Graham, a musician who lives in a converted horse trailer “in a field near Edinburgh”, who moulds music’s magnetic rhythms from contact mic recordings taken from his workshop.

Glasgow producer and composer Loris S Sarid released his Mort Garson-esque ‘Music For Tomato Plants’ a couple of years back, and contributes dreamy kosmische-style synth melodies here. Add in some Tascam reel-to-reel treatment, and the duo’s take on new age-ish electronics is fresh and dynamic.

‘Glide’ makes a palpitating collage of rushing water, sonorous bells, and fluttering beats and ‘Sanity Beach’ goes off on a bubbly jazztronica trip, while ‘Sun Cylinder’ feels like your face being warmed by the sun’s rays and ‘Langoustine Psychomagic’ is as spacey as the title suggests. Consider ‘Where The Round Things Live’ as plant music for exotic, undiscovered species. **CF**



## RICHARD PINHAS

Iceland

BUREAU B

It makes perfect sense that Hamburg label Bureau B have turned their attentions towards space rock outfit Heldon in recent years – the 1970s trio might have been French but they were one hundred percent krautrock in demeanour. Richard Pinhas left the mothership in 1979 to record this third solo album, out in the cold for the first time. Cold is the operative word here, and 'Iceland' more than lives up to its name with blustery, sub-zero temperatures and angular edges.

It's a record of its time, exploring the glacial sonics that cinematic contemporaries like Tangerine Dream and Vangelis made their own, though these pristine, eerie textures haven't really dated, their retro-futurist ambience oddly comforting in these strange times. It's minimalist where Heldon were usually maximalist, an oasis of electronic calm. The spooky undercurrent of tracks like 'The Last Kings Of Thule (Part 1)' keeps you on edge, before the elongated denouement of 'Greenland', a triumphant waltz with spangly effects aplenty. **JA**

## KUMA

Hounds And Echo In Conjunction

WAXING CRESCENT

"This isn't your momma's bootgaze record," says James "Kuma" Graham of this ambient journey across the American Southwest. No, but if you've an uncle who runs a flyblown desert diner and keeps rattlesnakes in cages, he'll be delighted. Graham is an electronic scenester from Vancouver, but is clearly enthralled by the dark, hallucinatory Americana of 'Easy Rider' and Hunter S Thompson.

So, the likes of 'Spooky Action At A Distance' and 'Stretched Halfway To The Infinite' combine hummadruz drones with spectral pedal steel guitars, and elsewhere there's the creak of motel signs and the clank of lonesome trains.

'Falls Out Of You By Gravity', meanwhile, is the nightmarish choir and throbbing church organ of some long-corrupted congregation. "Low and lonesome sounds for dark nights" is how Graham himself describes the album, and it's certainly a distant cousin of The KLF's windswept 'Chill Out', with genetic traces of Ry Cooder's score for 'Paris, Texas'. An exquisitely evocative road trip. **BF**

## ANDY BELL

Flicker

SONIC CATHEDRAL

A rapid follow-up to 2020's 'The View From Halfway Down', this is more brilliance from the Ride man. While he's probably best-known to most as a guitarist, his sonic adventures as electronic alter ego GLOK are mightily impressive. Working under his own name, he seems to marry these two sides perfectly.

You have to admire the thought that goes into these records. Here he serves up a double, an 18-tracker, as a conversation with his teenage self. "I was halfway down," he sings on the drum machine clatter of 'It Gets Easier', delightfully referring himself back to his previous album (or forwards, as he's talking to his younger self).

He can't half pen a tune, too. The deep synth line meets guitar jangle of 'Jenny Holzer B Goode' is a proper corker, while 'Way Of The World' has the feel of 'Cars' being covered by Jason Pearce on a sunny day.

One of our most innovative practitioners, Bell deserves way more attention than he gets. This is a shining beacon of an album. **NM**





## TEARS FOR FEARS

### The Tipping Point

CONCORD

#### Solid return to form by Bath's finest

Tears For Fears have always shilly-shallied, though 16 years is an impressive gap even by their dilatory standards. This, after all, is the group who tried the patience of their session musicians by making them play 'The Seeds Of Love' in the studio for three solid years, irrespective of expense. The band's erstwhile management company discouraged Roland Orzabal and Curt Smith from making a new record, then encouraged them to work with professional songwriters, seemingly forgetting that Tears For Fears had sold more than 30 million albums thanks to their own compositions. Only hired hitmaker Sacha Skarbek, who Orzabal formed a strong writing partnership with, managed to survive the cull.

The trauma of their situation, and graver life events, brought Orzabal and Smith closer together, an unlikely boon given their well-documented ups and downs. Resumption of writing on their own terms also coincided with the death of Orzabal's first wife in 2017, which he addresses on the accomplished title track. Orzabal's own health problems consolidated the partnership further, and helped bring 'The Tipping Point' into sharp focus.

Opener 'No Small Thing' implants itself indelibly in your brain after only a few listens, a folk song of the Simon & Garfunkel ilk, at least until it takes off and becomes something entirely different – the musical divergence is typically atypical of a band who are never easy to compartmentalise. There are traces of the aforementioned 'The Seeds Of Love' – more so than their early 1980s synthpop heyday – though 'The Tipping Point' is also very much a modern pop album. It understands 21st century production techniques, adding drama to the marvellous 'Master Plan' (a dig at their former management) and the 'Doctor Who'-referencing 'My Demons', though it's a little too on the nose on their marquee showstopper 'Rivers Of Mercy'.

It's a mature offering all in all, which is logical given that both men are now officially sexagenarians. If there are odd moments that feel a bit mutton dressed as lamb, like the chorus of 'Break The Man', there are also plenty of other moments that feature that very specific though hard-to-define magic we call Tears For Fears. It's great to have them back once again, writing songs that permanently imprint themselves in your head.

JEREMY ALLEN

## Label Profile



**Label:** 12th Isle

**Location:** Scotland

**Est:** 2014-2016

**Potted History:** "We all got together through Subcity Radio here in Glasgow," explains 12th Isle's co-founder Fergus Clark. "We began to throw parties under the 12th Isle name after meeting through Subcity and the label grew from that. The first release from Dices + AEM Rhythm Cascade came about in a convoluted way, but involved French library albums, Soviet graphic design and me nagging them to send more and more music – until eventually, with help from Lindsay Todd, previously of Firecracker Recordings and now of Tending The Void, we got hooked up with a production and distribution deal with Glasgow record store, Rubadub. They've played a massive part in making the label reach the places it has over the years. In terms of who's behind 12th Isle, we are all different ages and have backgrounds in philosophy, musicology, broadcast production, media studies, IT software development, printmaking and graphic design... and an incredible knowledge of slot machines."

**Mission Statement:** "To hopefully keep doing this for at least as many years as we've already been around for," says Fergus. "And for some young kid to find our records in a bargain bin at some point in the far-away future and give them a fresh context!"

**Key Artists & Releases:** "We've had 16 releases to date – 11 albums and EPs, three 'point fives' as we call them, a digital release with accompanying screenprint map, and a mixtape. The point fives have included a 10-inch single by Lucy Duncombe, and a live set from Parisian artist DK, recorded at an intimate gig in Seoul. Being able to put out Christos Chondropoulos' 'Athenian Primitivism', Tarotplane's 'Horizontology' and the Vague Imaginaires EP during the challenges of Covid has also been rewarding."

**Future Plans:** "We have a cassette album due out imminently by Loris S Sarid & Innis Chonnell – pro tip, give that second name a Google search," suggests Fergus. "The ongoing vinyl-pressing crisis really has fucked the majority of small labels' release schedules. We've been waiting almost 11 months for something we signed off in 2019 and sent to press in 2020. It's a vinyl LP by Russian duo S A D and will be followed by the second Cru Servers album. That Cru album is proper amazing and features a bonus seven-inch of tape recordings found in their dad's garage, from a no wave-type band he used to play in here in Glasgow that never properly released anything."

**Any Other Business?** "No real lessons learned so far other than trust your ears/taste," says Fergus. "Try and keep in mind the direction of the label, if your own personal music taste occupies anything and everything. Having an aesthetic and staying true to yourself and the music you believe in will bring you a dedicated audience at some point. Keep going!"

For more, see [12thisle.bandcamp.com](https://12thisle.bandcamp.com)

# First And Last And Always



**Letters From Mouse's** Steven Anderson on the first and last records he bought... and his go-to album

## FIRST

### THE STRANGLERS

**The Raven**

UNITED ARTISTS, 1979



"I picked this up in the local chemist, who happened to have a little vinyl section. Those were the days! The Stranglers pretty much soundtracked me turning from boy into man and come on, who didn't want to be JJ Burnel? I only ever picked up their early stuff as they just weren't the same without Hugh Cornwell."

## LAST

### FRANK ZAPPA AND THE MOTHERS

**Grand Wazoo**

BIZARRE/REPRISE, 1972



"I'm slowly plugging the gaps in my Zappa collection and this is a fine addition indeed. Zappa is, to my mind, the most genius musician who has ever graced this planet. I get that it won't be to everyone's taste, but there's no denying the amount of ability and vision that he had."

## ALWAYS

### BOARDS OF CANADA

**Music Has The Right To Children**

WARP/SKAM, 1998



"This is the album I play the most and have done so since buying it. For me, it's perfect. It changed things and opened my eyes. It doesn't matter what kind of mood I'm in, it always fits. Those first notes of 'Wildlife Analysis' are like a magical teleport into a world where everything is good."



## LETTERS FROM MOUSE

**Tarbolton Bachelors Club**

SUBEXOTIC

### Downtempo electronics from Edinburgh

It may sound like something from the sitcom 'Phoenix Nights', but the Tarbolton Bachelors' Club was in fact a gentlemen's club chaired by Scottish national poet Robert "Rabbie" Burns just before his first poems were published. Established in 1780 in a small thatch-roofed house in Tarbolton, South Ayrshire, the Bachelors' Club was a place for local single men to come together, talk, dance and debate the issues of the day. The Tarbolton group would go on to inspire many Burns Clubs around the world, observing the founding rule that members were not permitted to acknowledge any club's existence. So, less 'Phoenix Nights', more 'Fight Club' – and seemingly the perfect subject matter for Edinburgh-based Steven Anderson's latest album, the follow-up to 2021's 'An Gàrradh'.

Like 'An Gàrradh', which was inspired by Anderson's own back garden, 'Tarbolton Bachelors Club' uses the notion of locality as the jumping-off point for a collection of electronic pieces, all infused with a storied sense of detailed research and legacy. Despite the use of modular systems, there's a serene, pastoral dimension to tracks such as 'NS92476494', full of spiralling synth arpeggios intertwined with introspective chiming melodies, before 'Trefoil' unfolds on fluctuating bubbles as fluid and vibrant as a mountain steam. These pieces are gently naturalistic and softly undulating, like an unbroken Scottish landscape, while on 'Lily Bonie' and 'Candles' we hear warm notes of mystery and promise.

Snatches of echoey poetry emerge out of the intricate ambient mist on pieces like 'South Church Beastie' and 'A Man's A Man For A' That', reminding us of the long shadow cast by Burns, a figure who has become an international beacon for Scottish culture. The effect is not unlike Kemper Norton's exploration of Cornish tradition, placing unique folkloric signifiers into electronic music's typically futuristic topography.

It's a testament to Anderson's confidence that he finds it so easy to haunt his electronic communications in this way. "Dare to be honest and fear no labour," as the Bard of Ayrshire might well have described Letters From Mouse's bewitching and exploratory endeavours.

**MAT SMITH**



MICHAEL ROTHER &amp; VITTORIA MACCABRUNI

## MICHAEL ROTHER & VITTORIA MACCABRUNI

### As Long As The Light

GRÖNLAND

Michael Rother's 'Dreaming' from 2020 was his first solo offering in 16 years. Although he'd toured and released some well-regarded retrospectives via Grönland, somehow he hadn't gotten around to updating his studio album discography. But the pandemic provided a silver lining for the Neu! and Harmonia legend, who was able to focus on finishing off a series of sketches from his hard drive. Barely two years later, here's another album recorded with his partner, Vittoria Maccabruni.

Rother's earliest solo releases were insular affairs, even with the production nous of Conny Plank and the rhythmic savoir-faire of Jaki Liebezeit, and his albums became more solitary as time went on. But on 'As Long As The Light' he appears recharged, and is collaborating with a sense of curiosity.

The otherwise dreamy 'Curfewed' slips into a splenetic passage of drum 'n' bass; and 'Codrive Me' is hypnotically mechanical, before pulling you closer with intimate human breathing, emulating a rhythmical combustion engine. It all adds up to an engaging album that's often as surprising as it is joyously playful. **JA**

## ANIMAL COLLECTIVE

### Time Skiffs

DOMINO

Animal Collective's last studio album, 2016's 'Painting With', felt somewhat congested, like they'd hoarded all the sounds they'd ever made and stuffed them into 12 hyperactive songs. Five years on, 'Time Skiffs' signals a serious change of pace.

The Baltimore group's latest album shows considerably more measured songwriting, with less in-yer-face sugar-rush froth. 'Prester John' begins like an ice-cool Khruangbin jaunt, with its head-nodding beat and explorative guitar noodling, before fading into an atmospheric outro of ToiToiToi-esque ambience.

It's a sign of what's to come. Delicate flourishes proliferate, as compositions recline amid reverberating melodica, tropical xylophone and pitch-shifting synths. It's untypically plaintive, a mood best captured on 'Royal And Desire' (previously released as 'DownDownDown', trainspotters). A beautiful piece of psychedelic pop brimming with melancholia. Bravo. **ILS**

## PATRICIA WOLF

### I'll Look For You In Others

PAST INSIDE THE PRESENT

Stirring synthesisers swell and fade on 'Distant Memory', the opening track of 'I'll Look For You In Others', signalling a bittersweet meditation on grief. Patricia Wolf's debut album was written and recorded following the deaths of both her mother-in-law and a close friend. The producer and sound designer from Portland, Oregon has turned to music-making as a form of catharsis, channelling her emotions into new ways of working by transforming synth sounds and vocals, pulling them apart via digital FFT algorithms.

The spectral tones generated from this processing technique give the album its often unsettling but ultimately transcendent spirit.

Track titles like 'Funeral', 'Lay To Rest' and 'Letting Go' speak directly to the experience of loss, while on 'The Culmination Of', otherworldly layers of vocals float over deep, slow-moving electronics, and on 'Severed', guitar samples from Brazilian ambient musician Carlos Ferreira are spun into a plaintive drone. A beautiful and brave journey through the stages of heartbreak. **CF**



## KEELEY FORSYTH

### Limbs

THE LEAF LABEL

You'd think that following up 2020's widely acclaimed 'Debris' would be a daunting task for Harrogate singer Keeley Forsyth, but seemingly not. As with her sublime debut album, 'Limbs' is gorgeously bleak, deeply intimate and steeped in ennui, with Forsyth's remarkable voice at its core, full and deep, singing of "the darker corners of domestic life". It's a potent tool – imagine a tremulous vocal hybrid of Nico, Aldous Harding and Nadine Shah, and you're getting halfway close. There's even a touch of late-career Scott Walker in there.

Made in collaboration with electronic/ambient producer Ross Downes, the sonic palette here is noticeably broader than on 'Debris'. Sparse, slow-burning arrangements and rumbling drones proliferate, an aesthetic Downes cannily describes as "British rural gothic".

From the yearning strings of 'Bring Me Water', through the soaring beauty of 'Wash', to the stirring, ornate flourishes of 'I Stand Alone', it's a highly compelling listen that holds you rapt from start to finish. **VI**

## VARIOUS ARTISTS

### Excuse The Mess: Volumes 1 + 2

HIDDEN NOTES

Sometimes, the best tunes are made on the fly. That's certainly the case with the award-winning Excuse The Mess podcast, founded and hosted by London-based electronic composer Ben Corrigan.

The premise is simple – all guest artists are required to write a spontaneous piece of music with Corrigan, to be completed the same day, using only one instrument which can be "electronically manipulated". The fruits of those impromptu sessions appear on this excellent two-volume compilation, and as you might expect from such speedy collaborations, they're nothing short of electrifying.

All manner of electronica glitterati lend their talents – Hannah Peel, Mira Calix, Manu Delago, Gold Panda and Oliver Coates, to name just a few. But special props go to violist Robert Ames for his terrifyingly screechy '400 Feet', which feels like teetering precariously on a rooftop in the middle of a Hitchcock movie, and Anna Meredith's typically playful 'Oopsloops', an inventive gabba-esque number made with... a pesto jar. Go figure. **VI**

## ADULT.

### Becoming Undone

DAIS

These Detroit synthpunk leviathans can always be relied upon to deliver a stirring dose of ammonia to wake us from the fog. But never has their excoriating energy felt more necessary than on 'Becoming Undone', their ninth studio album – made, as they say, against a backdrop of "unprecedented planetary discord".

The odd collaboration aside, ADULT. is husband and wife duo Adam Lee Miller and Nicola Kuperus. They take their references – early Siouxsie & The Banshees, Throbbing Gristle and their hometown's world-changing 1980s techno – and fire them through a prism of dystopian cynicism, with a dose of good, old-fashioned political dissent.

And so robo-blitzkrieg opener 'Undoing / Undone' fizzles with righteous fissile vitality, marrying hard dancefloor abandon with tight, laser-guided focus. It sets you up for quite the ride, which is brilliantly replete with deft tempo changes from the unsettling 'She's Nice Looking' to the beatless ethereal incantation of 'Teeth Out Pt II'. Essential. **CG**





## CATE LE BON

**Pompeii**

MEXICAN SUMMER

Smooth avant-pop, heavy on the bass

'Pompeii', Cate Le Bon's sixth full-length studio album, was written primarily on bass guitar, and the warmth of that instrument underpins what is hands-down her smoothest and most beguiling effort to date. The follow up to the Welsh musician and producer's acclaimed 2019 record 'Reward' is bathed in her characteristic avant-pop sensibilities, but it also brims with comforting nostalgic touchstones.

Place also defines 'Pompeii', and isolation certainly agrees with Le Bon's songwriting process. For 'Reward', she retreated to the Lake District alone. This time around, against the backdrop of pandemic-driven isolation, she rented a house in Cardiff and wrote and recorded the new album, playing every instrument herself except for drums and saxophones.

While making 'Pompeii', Le Bon was inspired by the easy listening grooves of Japanese city pop from the 1970s and 1980s. Her unfussy palette of bass, vintage Yamaha DX7 synth, saxophone (and "jazz-thinking" percussion by long-term collaborator and Warpaint drummer Stella Mozgawa) also taps into artists she has previously cited as influences – think Bowie's moody brass and atmospheric Berlin-era sonics, and even Television's intricate guitar work – paving the way for an album that is more playful, sensual and surreal than anything she has done before.

It's impossible not to be drawn into the swooning brass and slowly unfurling rhythm of opener 'Dirt On The Bed'. Like a tasty amuse-bouche, it primes you for the more sumptuous 'Moderation', a track that, despite the name, is a banquet of shimmering guitar chords, skywards vocal harmonies, yearning sax and gorgeous Wings-era McCartney bass. As Le Bon sings "Moderation / I can't have it / I don't want it / I want to touch it" she puts a finger on current, world-weary malaise.

Opulent synthpop structures abound, and 'Pompeii' ebbs and flows with its own stirring internal rhythms. The chugging basslines of slow-burners like 'French Boys' and 'Harbour' complement the swaggering pulse of 'Running Away', the woozy, tumbling 'Cry Me Old Trouble' and the steady percussive drive of 'Remembering Me'. Lyrically, Le Bon eschews straightforward narratives, instead favouring poetic vignettes and slippery turns of phrase. "I've pushed love through the hourglass", she sings on the title track, before admonishing a companion – or perhaps herself – "Get dressed / You're a mess, you're a sight / Did you dream about Pompeii?" Who knows what it all means, but it's beautiful, nonetheless.

CLAIRE FRANCIS



## TANGERINE DREAM

**Raum**

KSCOPE

Stellar cosmic excursions

Can you remember your dreams? As soon as I've glugged my first toothpaste and Diet Pepsi of the day, they're often stricken from my memory. And that's the challenge for 'Raum', Tangerine Dream's second full album of new music since the death of founder Edgar Froese in 2015.

As with 2017's 50th anniversary album 'Quantum Gate', the band is keen to lay a clear paper trail to its instigator. The album is built on Froese's old Cubase arrangements alongside an Otari tape archive stretching back 45 years. Not that it's easy to tell the old from the new, as this is a superbly kinetic flow of symphonic instrumentals.

The stillwater sheen of 'Portico' and the wavering flutes that ride the excitable arpeggios in 'Along The Canal' are oiled with the same bright optimism of their recent work. This is despite the apparent absence of Mr Smiley-Synth himself, Ulrich Schnauss.

The band members this time round are Thorsten Quaeschning, Hoshiko Yamane and, crucially, the band's first non-Froese appointed member, Brandt Brauer Frick's Paul Frick. The forums are already sniffy about this. "Something doesn't add up," says one commenter. Still, as TD move further away from their source, you could worry his influence might fade.

Two long tracks assert their status pretty well. The 15-minute single title track boasts generous synthetic strings bedded by a carpet of bubble-wrapped harmonic percussion, a Moog Minotaur adding moody depth in its stillest moments. There's also the 19-minute joy of the whirlpooling 'In 256 Zeichen'. Despite being in 4/4 time, its hovering plucks give the impression of intertwining polyrhythms. There's a genuine thrill when an ever-so-polite snare drop makes way for bolder, declarative pseudo-baroque musical themes.

The dramatic highlight is 'You're Always On Time', its opening clockwork rhythms underpinning PPG Wave-driven fuzzy chords worthy of 'Tron: Legacy'-era Daft Punk. It's whimsical, yet its massively replayable chorus and growing analogue bite reminds me of Kiasmos at their best. Extra points for the squelchy end. It might be a long time since, say, the more primal sequences of 'Phaedra', but with music this positive and transformative, Edgar Froese's Dream is unlikely to be forgotten.

FAT ROLAND

REVIEWS BY  
JEREMY ALLEN,  
JOE BANKS,  
BOB FISCHER,  
CLAIRE FRANCIS,  
CARL GRIFFIN,  
VELIMIR ILIC,  
ISAAC LEWIS-SMITH,  
NEIL MASON,  
FAT ROLAND,  
MARK ROLAND,  
JOE SILVA,  
MAT SMITH,  
ANTHONY THORNTON,  
SPENSER TOMSON,  
BEN WILLMOTT

# BANGING ON

If we took a holiday, reckons Madonna, it would be, it would be so nice. It'd be way better if we could lose the hanger-on. Can you be deported from Whitby?

**WORDS AND PICTURES: FAT ROLAND**

"We're all going on a summer holiday" sings Cliff Richard on 'Summer Holiday', despite the song charting in February 1963, a month as summery as a polar bear humping a sled. For most people, holidaying means package jaunts to Malaga, lounging by child-infested hotel pools, sun-cracked skin flaking into watered-down Pina Coladas. Horrible. Thankfully, Cliff has much better taste.

According to the lyrics of 'Summer Holiday', his idea of a vacation involves unwinding on the back seat of a double decker bus guzzling ice cream and shoving candy floss down his trousers. Probably. Never listened to the song.

I do like the idea of a traditional English seaside holiday, though. Eating overcooked fish and chips paint-stripped with vinegar, building sandcastles on sewage-streaked beaches, hearing kids scream at TB-ridden donkeys, admiring beach-balled bellies wedged into inflatable rings, chortling at seagulls using bottles of sunblock as lube, clambering to a viewing platform of a tourist tower and going, "Oh, is that it?". I can smell the bank holiday traffic jams now. Lovely.

Electronic music is brilliant at holidays. 'Theme From S-Express', the signature song by Mark Moore's acid house popsters S'Express, opens with a vocal sample saying "Enjoy this trip, enjoy this trip... and it is a trip, and it is a trip". The trip they are raving about is a National Express coach journey to Whitby beach.

Moore famously loves boozy singalongs up duel carriageways, with the musty air conditioning and one-hour toilet breaks at York services. As their follow-up hit 'Superfly Guy' chants, "He is mad, he is smooth, he's the man that makes you move as long as it's on the designated A-Z route". Like a coach hastily speeding past Hull, it doesn't stop there.

Urban Hype's frantic toytown techno hit 'A Trip To Trumpton' raises some important holiday points too. Is Trumpton better than Center Parcs? Are there chalets? Is there a water slide? Does it have a little shop where I can buy tea towels with different trees on? If I survive a week in Trumpton, do I get a half-price windmill timeshare in Camberwick Green? There's a lot of talk of trips on the rave scene, and it gladdens my heart that the kids are so respectful of journey planning.

Brian Eno isn't interested in buses or coaches. Brian makes music for airports. This gives plane passengers something really big and high to listen to. Ever seen stewards pointing down aisles and at emergency exits? They're throwing shapes to the ambient classics, man.

Eno's airside ambience helps drown out noisy skies full of screeching seagulls, wayward drones and clouds waffling about how great it is to be a cloud. It's lovely that Brian did something for the planes. They look so lonely up there.

Of course, if I was a proper electronic music nut, I'd be writing this column from a Sangría-soaked bar in Ibiza, some washed-up ex-Hacienda DJ hanging off my arm.

I'd be in a hammock slung between sagging palm trees while a well-trained starfish battered out all this nonsense on a typewriter. No, Stanley, you can't appeal to Electronic Sound readers for clams, keep writing, dammit.

Maybe I should take the advice of Underworld's 'A Hundred Days Off' album. Take a break. Paddle on a beach. Make a knotted handkerchief hat. Have my blisters nibbled by jellyfish. Stick seashells up my nose. Push a pensioner off a pier. All the good old-fashioned traditional English holiday things.

Goodness knows I've earned it, right, readers? I might even send you a postcard.







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