

LEFTFIELD

SUMMER 2010

Leftfield's impact on dance music can only be described as seismic, applying to anything from demolishing musical barriers to the plaster-stripping effect they had on the ceiling of Brixton Academy in 1996, resulting on the sound system itself being banned.

Neil Barnes and Paul Daley approached their music with such relentless perfectionism they only released a stellar clutch of singles and two albums before calling it a day in 2000, safe in the knowledge that they'd paved the way for multi-hued innovation, genre-spanning collaboration and outer limits of nuclear groove power in dance music along with what could be done with the live experience. They could lead the charge from acid house's initial bull-in-a-china-shop fumbblings into more exotic stratas, all built on the eternal foundations of bowel-quaking bass.

The pair operated fiercely on their own terms, bitten badly enough by the music business early in their career to achieve their success entirely through the sheer, often jawdropping quality of the music, devoid of hype, backslapping and Big Tune desperation.

Although Neil emerged with the Leftfield name 20 years ago, his story goes beyond dance music's usual decks-to-riches stories. Born in Kentish Town in the early 60s, Neil was the right age to experience the life-changing impact of punk, swapping his school-imposed violin for guitar and doing the small gig rounds in a variety of bands. Punk's natural assimilation of reggae ignited by Don Letts at the Roxy club led to a percussive fixation during the 80s which he backed up with lessons, ending up playing congas and bongos for the London School of Samba. Neil experienced his electronic epiphany witnessing Afrika Bambaataa and his Soulsonic Force shake London in the mid-80s, struck by the power of the drum machine. He started creating his own music after the catalytic thunderbolts of acid house and the sampler hit London later that decade, adopting the name Leftfield when Rhythm King subsidiary Outer Rhythm signed his future club classic 'Not Forgotten', which is widely regarded as one of the first examples of progressive house.

While working on the track in a London studio, Neil met and hit it off with Paul Daley, then percussionist with A Man Called Adam, who he had also encountered at the Sandals' debauched acid-beatnik nights at a Soho strip club. Growing up in Margate on the Kent coast, Paul had also been smitten by punk, drumming with local bands with names like Johnny and the Haters before moving to London, becoming both barber and post-punk DJ. After discovering the city's rare groove scene, Paul started playing percussion at club nights and with bands including the Sandals and A Man Called Adam.

'Not Forgotten' was released in 1991, establishing a template for a new strain of British house leaning away from American styles dominating UK clubs. Neil asked Paul to remix the track as a bonus cut with 'More Than I Know', the follow-up single released later that year. Now preparing to launch themselves as Leftfield, the duo then ran into a legal quagmire with Outer Rhythm preventing them releasing records under that name, so they embarked on the fabled string of remixes which revolutionised the UK's clubbing soundtrack, including monstrous reworks of React 2 Rhythm's 'Intoxication', Inner City's 'Hallelujah' and names including Renegade Soundwave, Stereo Mcs, Pressure Drop and Yothu Yindi. While turning away big name hopefuls looking for a hip club boost, they reached something of a pinnacle with their take on David Bowie's 'Jump They Say'.

'That was when remixing was at its height,' recalls Neil. 'We stopped when remixing started being used to sell records big time and things started to get cheesed up. We could have made a lot of money if we'd kept doing it. U2 asked us to do 'Lemon' but we turned it down. Bowie asked us to do his next record but we turned it down because we didn't feel like it was interesting enough to keep doing it, also we were using up ideas that we wanted to put into our own music.'

After the Outer Rhythm nightmare, Leftfield vowed to avoid encountering any such record company nightmares again, starting their Hard Hands label in 1992 with the monumental 'Release The Pressure, a groundbreaking collision between dub-splattered house and reggae veteran Earl Sixteen, who Neil had first encountered on classic 70s reggae tunes like 'Trials And Crosses'. For the rest of the decade, Leftfield would be untouchable as every release became an event, starting a snowball rolling for British dance music which saw them joined by outfits like Orbital, Underworld and the Dust/Chemical Brothers.

Leftfield soon became renowned for weaving disparate musical influences over their bass-heavy turbo-grooves, creating exotic dimensions beyond normal big room anthems. As Neil says, 'I've never belonged to any scene really. Paul fits into that world of DJing very well, but I can't sit there and enjoy a two hour DJ set that doesn't have any surprises in it. What's interesting to me is what ideas they bring in. That was the thing about Leftfield. I didn't want to just make music for DJs, nor did Paul, which is why the influences of African music, hiphop or rock were part of the framework as much as possible. Obviously I come from the club world as well. I started going to clubs and listening to disco records in 1974 when I was 14. I love club music, the bottom end. There's nothing like it.'

1993 started with the stratospheric emotional charge of 'Song Of Life' causing more ructions before Leftfield started work on their most audacious project yet, bringing in John Lydon to contribute his inimitable vocals to the incendiary 'Open Up'. For months, the track was cloaked in secrecy as business details were sorted out, building a gigantic buzz before being turned out in the clubs with devastating impact, eventually hitting number 13 in the charts when released in November.

At the time, Neil said, 'It was about using John's voice. He's always had a voice that's very exciting. We just thought he was the most suitable singer for what we were trying to do. It's just a matter of experimenting. It's the only way you can go anywhere. You can't stay instrumental forever. That's been interesting but now there's got to be another human element come back in to make it more interesting. Not all the time but...'

Although Lydon was inspired to write the 'burn Hollywood burn' chorus after a run-in with a Californian studio, the record appeared around the time that Hollywood's Hills were ablaze with forest fires, stunting airplay and causing the video to be banned on British pop TV.

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In retrospect the first three Leftfield releases on Hard Hands are a staggeringly-diverse trio of floor-destroying, barrier-blasting monsters. 'We really pushed the boat out,' reflects Neil now. 'For me it was a lifetime's worth of ideas in those three tracks.'

Leftfield didn't release anything in 1994 as they crafted their debut album, *Leftism*, released the following January as one of the defining statements of 90s dance music, a gloriously inter-woven bombardment of musical styles and immaculate grooves, nominated for a Mercury prize and later voted eighth greatest all-time album by readers of Q magazine. The album spawned two top 20 singles in March's 'Original' [featuring Curve's Toni Halliday on vocals] and July's 'Afro-Left' in July [with vocals by Neil Cole, aka Djum Djum]. 1996 saw the now infamous *Leftism* tour set a new precedent in sonic presentation as the behemoth sound system, which aimed to replicate the cataclysmic bass effect of reggae sound systems, incurred more complaints than Motorhead, even a ban from Brixton Academy when plaster started flaking from the ceiling. The tour elevated dance music from anonymous club PA to major event, with guest singers joining the party.

It would be September, 1999, before the second Leftfield album appeared. *Rhythm And Stealth* worked with a darker hue and more pronounced techno influence, guests including Roots Manuva, MC Cheshire Cat and Afrika Bambaataa on first single 'Afrika Shox', which reached the UK top ten. The album would also be nominated for a Mercury prize while one of its tracks, 'Phat Planet', sound tracked the award-winning 'Surfer' advert for Guinness. After one more single, June 2000's 'Swords', Leftfield wound down operations, Neil returning in 2002 to remix the Sex Pistols' 'God Save The Queen' while Paul concentrated on DJing.

Both have since embarked on solo albums, although Neil's went on the back-burner last year when he finally buckled under mounting pressure to bring back the name he'd launched at the turn of the 90s and show a whole new generation where much of modern dance music had come from, while making a fair few veteran cavorters very happy.

Ultimately, it's the music which is being celebrated when Neil back Leftfield this summer in the way he brought it into the world - without Paul, who's opted to continue working on his solo album and DJing.

'The possibility has been bubbling around for the last three years,' he reveals. 'I've been so badgered, but nicely badgered by people for so long about doing the live show again and always said I wouldn't dream of doing it without Paul. I'd be in the pub and people would be coming up, saying it was the best live show they'd ever seen. I just started to think about it. Obviously it was very important for me to do it right. Ideally, it would be great to do it with Paul but he decided he didn't want to do it. I want to do it for the love of the music; to have one last opportunity to do it as right as I possibly can and feel that I'm doing it as much as possible in the spirit in which it was originally intended. That is exactly how I'm putting it together. It's taken me a year to get to this stage.'

Working with long-time studio collaborator Adam Wren, Neil will also be joined by the expected array of guests. 'Everybody that I can get. I'm doing some tracks that I've never done before. We're doing 'Original' and this version of 'Release The Pressure' with Earl Sixteen and Cheshire Cat, which is like a hybrid. Neil Cole is doing 'Afro-Left'. I've got a fantastic new drummer called Bid, who loves it. I found him through Adam Wren. Just watching him playing with a big grin on his face. I thought the guy would fit in! It's all going to be in the spirit of Leftfield. I won't do anything if it doesn't look good. If I'm not happy with it I won't do it.'

Neil lives in hope whether John Lydon will add his rabble-rousing wail to 'Open Up'. 'There's a chance it could happen. It's such a great track, I'd love to do it, and to do it with John would be the biggest thing. I've always wanted to do that track live but it's never happened before.'

'It's all going to be in the spirit of Leftfield. I've got no illusions. It's a nostalgic thing on one level, apart from the fact that I've brought the whole thing up to date so the actual sound is incredibly crisp, really electronic and pumping.'

And shaking plaster?

'It would be nice, wouldn't it? We've got the same sound system but potentially this new version is much louder! Whether we can get away with it is the problem. Everything's changed; they've got massive EU regulations for things.

'I just want to do the best by the music as I can. I'll make it as good as I possibly can up there and just hope everybody really enjoys it and sees it with the spirit of when it was formed. I'm doing the tracks as closely as they were intended, obviously in a live way. That's the whole intention, because that was why people liked *Leftism* and *Rhythm And Stealth*. I have to hit the ground running this time. Baptism of fire; in at the deep end.'

Then the only way is up but, from the first bass roar, the return of Leftfield will quite possibly set the tone for another decade. Just wear a hard-hat.

Kris Needs, March 2010

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