

# THE ORB

THE FUTURE ACADEMY OF NOISE, RHYTHM &  
GARDENING PRESENTS

## THE DREAM

The Orb, for years the most fearlessly fascinating sonic marauders on this or any other planet, are set to return in September with a new album marking a long-awaited reunion between eternal mainstay Dr Alex Paterson and lifelong friend and original intergalactic conspirator Youth.

*The Dream* sees a return to the original spirit which spawned the first two classic albums, *The Orb's Adventures In The Ultraworld* and *U.F. Orb*. Working with former Dreadzone studio-wiz Tim Bran and a gaggle of guests, Alex and Youth have created a work of stunning beauty and immediacy while never losing sight of The Orb's original quest to homage personal musical obsessions while exploring sonic territories few dare to tread. One of those rare albums which weaves its own unique magic after repeated listens.

The story of The Orb has indeed been the proverbial long, strange trip. Now it's come full circle as a laugh and labour of love for two old mates. Alex and Youth went to school together, played

football on Wandsworth Common and made adolescent discoveries from drugs to punk rock. When Youth achieved notoriety as bassist in apocalyptic post-punk funksters Killing Joke, Alex was the roadie, howling the Sex Pistols' 'Bodies' or Stooges' 'No Fun' during encores. In the mid-80s, Alex moved in with Youth at the Coach House on Wandsworth Common. For years, Alex and Youth had been enthralled and inspired by tapes of New York's groundbreaking radio stations KISS FM, WBLS and WKTU where tracks were mashed up and edited into wild, extended soundclash masterworks which predated sampling and the aural anarchy of acid house. It was in Alex's tiny bedroom that the germs of a musical project started sprouting in the acid house hurricane. By this time, old mucker Jimmy Cauty, who'd been in Youth's post-Joke band Brilliant, was on board and joined Alex in marathon DJ sets in the chillout room at London's earliest acid house clubs like Land Of Oz and Trancentral.

Itching to realise their growing musical visions, Alex and Youth started the W.A.U.! record label. 1989 saw The Orb's *Kiss EP*: proto-acid with hints of the aural mayhem to come before 'A Huge Ever Growing Pulsating Brain That Rules From The Centre Of The Ultraworld' slapped its hallucinogenic hosepipe on the table and squirted a delirious nation down the trouser-legs with widescreen Orb-style musical rule-breaking. After Jimmy departed to the KLF, Alex signed to Big Life and worked with, among others, engineer Kris 'Thrash' Weston and Youth on the first Orb album. This trio's first outing was the

monstrously-successful 'Little Fluffy Clouds', created in a buoyant atmosphere of rampant invention.

Alex and Youth collaborated again on the ensuing *U. F. Orb*, which surprised many by steaming straight into the album charts at number one. Although remaining friends, the pair saw each other less often as their careers followed their own trajectories. By this time, Youth was busy on a string of other projects which included building his Butterfly studio and Dragonfly record company, both ambitious projects which later ran aground. Meanwhile, Alex was dealing with his new chart-rider status, leaving Big Life in 1993 to sign with Island Records. He then spent the 90s wilfully steering The Orb into whichever strange waters he felt like taking it, sometimes with dark and twisted consequences. The music became more low-key and relaxed after Alex greeted the 21st century working with respected Berlin producer Thomas Fehlmann on albums like 2005's *Okie Dokie It's The Orb On Kompakt* for Cologne's mighty Kompakt imprint.

Two years ago Youth started building another studio at the end of his garden, across Wandsworth Common from the old Coach House: The Dreaming Cave [maybe referencing the transcendental Aboriginal dreamstate which inspired Kate Bush on *The Dreaming*]. Alex popped round and the pair started hanging out again. Inevitably, this turned into throwing musical ideas around like in the bedroom of the Coach House. Alex and Youth discovered that, although trends and technology have changed immeasurably, the bond between them was still as strong, along with the

thrill of throwing together disparate elements and drawing from mutual inspirations to forge something startling and, indefinably, The Orb. During that period, Youth produced albums including Primal Scream's *Riot City Blues* and, most recently, the return of The Cult. Tim Bran, who was with Dreadzone from their early 90s inception until 2000 and has a solo album under the project name of *Subsonar* ready for release on Youth's Liquid Sound label, was his studio partner on these projects and slipped into working on what would become a new Orb album. Alex describes it as the follow-up to *U.F. Orb*.

'It's very much full circle,' he reflects. 'Youth and I had that record ['Little Fluffy Clouds'] being played out in 1990 but we made it in '89, which is 18 years ago, almost a full lunar cycle! With Youth it goes so far back. I remember going round the Coach House when I was 14 to see if he would come out and play football during our school holidays! But we were becoming like rock 'n' roll fiends where, although we live about a mile from each other, we'd meet each other at a gig in Tokyo or somewhere like that. Then we realised that we were likeminded people again. It wasn't like we'd changed or anything.'

Youth laughs when he thinks how long it is since he started working with Alex. 'It's almost 20 years since the W.A.U. days! That was great fun, really. They were the formative years, our first label emissions. It gave us opportunities like Alex being able to start the Orb. We wouldn't really have thought of those ideas had we not had the label and

thought what do we do with it? That's what led to those albums and the whole Rolling Stones' worth of rock 'n' roll ups and downs since!

'We started to work together again a couple of years ago really. We'd done a few demos and stuff in Butterfly, but we didn't really kick in for some reason. When we started working on it here there was still the idea of making some great music but it was an opportunity for us to hang out because we'd not done that for ten years.'

Alex: 'We kind of looked at the blueprint of the first album and, in a way, tried to analyse why it was so successful. We tried to take out all the complicated parts that The Orb had become and make it more simple again and easier to listen to, basically. That was the beauty of the first album. It had that pure virgin, "this is my first album, I'm gonna do it my way, nobody's gonna get in my way" quality. Nobody thought for a minute that *Adventures* was going to be a successful album but this was what we used as a blueprint for *The Dream*.'

Youth: 'But at the same time we didn't really give ourselves too many limitations. We'd just turn up, Alex would bring some tunes and I'd bring some tunes. "What do we wanna do today?" It was like being seven years old again. That's the great thing about it. We just made a lot of tracks and then whittled them down.'

Tim: 'There are elements of the early Orb on the album. We didn't deconstruct it in any way. I think when Youth and Alex work together there is a magic.'

I've been really pleased to be involved in that and bring what I do. I like melody and intricate, deep landscapes of sound. I think It's worked really well. It's been kind of effortless really. There was never any point where we've gone, "What are we gonna do?" It's been very smooth sailing.

'We've come up with what I think is another classic Orb album. For me it's really full circle because The Orb influenced. For somebody who's loved The Orb from the beginning it's great for me to be involved to bring what I know and the echoes that I got from The Orb.'

Youth: 'We spent two years making this album, put a lot of heart, blood, spit and soul into it, but it's been really good fun. It's not something we're doing as a hobby or trivial thing. I think the idea was to go back to the essence of what we did in the early days, what brought us together and what excited us. Also back to the same sort of production values and standards of the first two albums, but not make it a retro record, make it contemporary and relevant and reflect where Alex is at the moment. And where we're at. So that was the mission plan really.'

*The Dream* was created without pressure from record companies or the studio. As with previous albums, the basic Orb nucleus is joined by guest singers and players, including System 7's Steve Hillage, who goes back to the earliest recordings, Battersea toaster-singer Eric Walker aka The Corpral and vocalists Aki Omori [the Japanese singer who appeared on 2001's

*Cydonia*], singer Andy Caine from the W.A.U.! days, and renowned soulstress Juliet Roberts who, according to Alex, is 'the cherry on the cream on the gateau on the bed of Smarties.'

Apart from Alex's inimitable barrage of speech bites from wildly disparate and secrecy-cloaked sources, 'a major difference was that all the music is played by Orb and friends. 'It's all played,' says Tim. 'I played a lot of keyboards, we used a lot of live guitar, programmed drums, Youth plays bass on every track and there's a lot of live percussion and live vocalists, so it's been quite a live experience.'

The original Orb spilled the beans, kicked them into the next galaxy and cooked up a heavenly stew. *The Dream* is a much-needed injection of aural frivolity and musical boundary pushing in the safe, bloated rump of the 2007 music scene. From the first swelling washes of sound in the title track [here in the future academy of noise, rhythm and gardening mix], this is obviously The Orb in classic form. Below a barrage of conversations and speech snippets there's that familiar all-enveloping warmth and soaring majesty as Helen Boulding's vocals and Matt Chandler's guitar soar over subterranean flurries and huge bass like the Creature from the Black Lagoon's awakening scrotum. Nobody plumbs such dazzling sonic vistas or wide-ranging emotions from laughter to tears in the same track.

After establishing a quirky, electronic funk groove with dub splashes, 'Vuja De' bowls in as the

album's most immediate track, even single material. Orb-pop with warm chord cushions evoking an early 90s feel-good mood, up and happy with chunky rave chords and Aki Omori's exotic, soaring vocals. 'It's obviously a take on Déjà vu,' explains Alex. 'It's been an old Orb saying, like Mornin' at any point in the day and having the Mornin' t-shirts. "Vuja De" fits into that kind of mould.'

The brief, ethereal interlude of 'Something Supernatural' glides into the pulsing, melodic bubblebath of 'A Beautiful Day'. Orb Funk with a bassline sometimes recalling the Doors 'Riders on the Storm'. After the first two albums, The Orb navigated some darker, brain-boggling straits but now it sounds like the sun's come out. Rather than structure and musical content, it's this happier, more exhilarated feel which likens this album to early works. With vibrant vocals from Juliet Roberts, this track exudes calm joy, taking some inspiration from an aeroplane flight. The Orb humour is never far away as midway someone seems to fall out of the plane while later the flight attendant asks, 'would it be permissible for me to manoeuvre your doughnuts?'

'DDD' stands for dirty disco dub and is the most noticeable embodiment of that long-term fixation with KISS FM mastermixes as it rides a funky groove underpinned by 'Atomic Dog'-style bass heaves topped with distant horns and a gamut of disco chant mutants like 'For the love of money', 'Hey ho, let's go, we're going down to the disco', along with the Corpral's toasting. The Orb go disco - except they

were there years ago and they've invented a different beat!

Lustrous and haunting, 'The Truth Is...' plants shimmering piano chords over tribal beats with heavenly choir joined by further female backing vocals singing 'Only truth can set you free'. The overall effect is acoustically-enveloping, warmly rolling and emotional as it burrows from the brain into the heart with gentle soulfulness.

After further scenesetting stratospherics with 'Phantom Of Ukraine', the pace hots up with the strident tones of 'Mother Nature' and its Eastern string themes riding a kind of Indian dubstep groove which acts as another belting platform for a sublime Juliet and the Corpral. As on the rest of the album, the vocals are brilliantly produced. Steve Hillage is present on typically silver-surfing form on this and the next track, 'Lost And Found'. Alex and Youth's long-time immersion in dub reggae made the Orb awesome purveyors of the form on tracks like 'Perpetual Dawn'. 'Lost And Found' rides a deep, crashing African Dub-style rhythm, splattered in efx and blessed with a classic roots refrain. Alex's other-worldly speech-bite transmissions sometimes sound like Can's Holger Czukay's hacking into a King Tubby dub session.

The brief mountain-goats-unplugging-the-sink interlude of 'The Forests Of Lyonese' heralds the album's jawdropping home stretch, where songs give way to a series of mainly instrumental explorations which at times can be likened to modern European

classical or avant garde forms, while at the same time nodding at spaghetti westerns or even Hendrix's South Saturn Delta. 'Katskills' - 'named after a mountain range in upstate New York, which is very, very beautiful and well worth a visit' - follows its atmospheric intro to growling bison-bollocks bass, wafting flutes, Eastern percussion, sitar drones, crashing beats and spectral melodies, creating a kind of lazily-anarchic space-blues. The journey continues into 'High Noon', where Steve Hillage saunters in with a twangy spaghetti western guitar and sets fire to a dense dust-bowl of widescreen mood music which places Ennio Morricone in the craters of the moon. Next the gorgeous strings of 'Sleeping Tiger & The Gods Unknown' lead into the ethereal 'Codes', whose bottomless Earth's core heartbeat funk and resonant chord-bursts create a dreamy-jam mood not unlike the first album's 'Spanish Castles In Space' meets Giorgio Moroder's *Cat People* soundtrack with a dash of Norman Whitfield as Youth uncurls the funky side he first displayed in Killing Joke and turned into a fine art with Brilliant. The whole marvellous voyage lets down gently and beatlessly on 'Orbisonia', named after a small American town of the same name. The last soundbite says, 'Next please'.

Indeed. *The Dream* does echo *Adventures* in its sense of majestic grandeur, immediate songs and evocative mood-stretches but it's neither throwback or tribute.

Alex: 'I've been playing the rough mixes in clubs and they sound fucking great. Really current and not

too old school or - I don't even want to say it - being a 90s band. We've almost recreated ourselves but using that blueprint from the first album, making the Orb more simple again. We're not sitting back on our laurels and making an *Ultraworld*-y album though. It's elements of what we listen to, what we can get away with and what we think works with each other. Experimenting with different types of music, be it ambient, bluesy, reggae or house.'

And The Orb's original influence was even invoked, according to Tim. 'We even brought up some KISS tapes to get some of the disco feel back. We'd stick those on as a bit of inspiration now and again and reference the beats. So it was harking back but it was also moving forward. We didn't make another album the same but we've used a lot of the inspirations.'

'That essence!' beams Alex. 'We didn't call The Orb's first EP *The Kiss EP* for nothing! On that all we did was use a lot of KISS FM samples! We wanted to get little bits of their adverts. You'd be listening going, "this is brilliant" then suddenly there'd be a thing about cleaning your teeth or the Alarm playing at Roseland. It was just getting that sort of surprise element back into it.'

On a roll from the album, The Orb now plan to hit the road and festival circuit with a five-piece group consisting of Alex, Tim on keyboards and mixing, drummer David Nock, the Corpral MC and Youth playing bass onstage with the Doctor for the first time since

Killing Joke days. First time The Orb has toured with a band since 1996.

'We're still getting out and doing some gigs,' says Youth. 'In our hearts we're still 17! I think rock 'n' roll music on that level is an adolescent thing. You still have to somehow retain that spirit without becoming a complete jerk in middle age. You still have to find that enthusiasm to be able to do it and give it what it needs to be good. '

Since their early studio expeditions, Alex and Youth have experienced their fair share of business problems, ripoffs, rock 'n' roll excess and personal ballsup while following their individual trajectories. Now the old friends have crossed paths again, rekindled the spark and the result is an album that's startling and euphoric.

'It's all lessons learned', reasons Youth. 'I think we've lived through the shallow waters and hollow mirrors of success and excess. You learn your biggest lessons from your biggest, harshest failures. Hopefully you pick up a little bit of wisdom along the way but I'm not complacent. I work harder now than I've ever worked in some ways. I'm more committed and more serious about our music than I was before and I get more out of it now than I ever got. In that sense, it's a total renewing experience. They were formative years for us, weren't they? We were all experimenting and trying different things. Maybe the rest of the world has caught up with us.'

And maybe dreams do come true.

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Kris Needs, June 2007



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