

The art of manipulation

Producer and guitarist David Torn's hypnotic harmonic shifts have made him an in-demand sonic manipulator for the last two decades. Now this self-confessed "functioning psychotic" is about to return to live performance with saxophonist Tim Berne. By David Davies

Listen to David Bowie's last two albums, *Heathen* and *Reality*, and you'll hear him, embedded in those dense, dusky mixes. Bent notes, sudden harmonic shifts, unexpected detours – David Torn refuses to play anything straight. But perhaps that's not surprising for a guitarist/producer who once proclaimed that "if I play something that's too pretty, I feel compelled to go after it with razorblades."

Over two decades, his wonky sonics have been applied to countless albums by the more left-field of pop artists, including David Sylvian, Ryuichi Sakamoto and Mark Isham. Now, after three busy years of studio work, he is returning to the live stage as a special guest with eclectically-minded alto saxophonist Tim Berne's Science Friction Band.

The centrepiece of this tour – which comes to the UK for six dates this month – is a new, semi-improved composition entitled 'untitled (still)', originally commissioned by BBC Radio 3. Little more than a week before the trip across the Atlantic, Torn is evidently wondering what he has let himself in for.

"I'm just looking through what has been notated," he says, "and this is a very dense piece of work – and, to be honest, I'm not coming up to the bar! Like most of Tim's writing, it's a combination of very complex, through-composed elements and an aspect of improvisation. But we won't actually play it until the day before the first show, so I can safely say that this is the biggest challenge I've faced for a long time."

The tour will find Torn switching between guitar and assorted processors, samplers and other weapons of sonic disfigurement. This purveyor of "arrogant ambient music", however, recognises no distinction between these roles.

"I think of it all as playing," he states, flatly, "I don't distinguish between playing, improvising and sampling. It's all the same thing to me."



Lost in the woods

This live excursion is a brave step indeed for a player who admits to being "somewhat socially reclusive" and lives in a particularly remote part of upstate New York. The home studio revolution and the ability to send freshly-minted music to anywhere in the world via ISDN have been a boon for Torn, who describes himself at one point as "a guy who just lives in the woods and works on music everyday".

Take his recent, transcontinental session for Annie Lennox and composer Howard Shore on a song destined to end up in the third and final Lord of the Rings movie. On the face of it, a collaboration between Torn and the Eurythmic with a recent penchant for rolling herself in flour prior to press shots is an unlikely one.

"I know!" laughs Torn. "I ended up doing quite a bit of rhythmic and non-rhythmic playing on it, but it was a strange experience because I only had a vocal and orchestral backing to work with. It was one of those times where we probably could have stood to be in the same room, because I don't think they knew where they were going with it at that point... So, it will be interesting to hear what actually emerges."

Torn's own wide-ranging solo work has necessarily been the province of small labels, but his next album – due to be released in autumn 2004 – finds him on jazz stalwart ECM. Having now dispensed with the Splattercell pseudonym, this own-name project will combine Torn's more recent passion for orchestral writing with an unexpected "air of Bollywood" along with his more characteristic sonic flourishes.

Devotees should rest assured, however, that those Warp-friendly instincts are still present and correct. Oval, Squarepusher and Aphex Twin remain near the top of Torn's listening list, although film composer Thomas Newman and some out-of-print Paul Bley records have been helping to push him into a fresh mindset.

The days of endless sessions are long gone, but Torn still retains a limited "dreamspace" of artists he would "simply like to serve": "Joni Mitchell, I mean just to be invited to work with her..." The demoralised Canadian's decision to 'do a Beefheart' and pack it all in for the life of a painter has sadly scuppered that ambition.

Although still energised by the "intense communication" of some studio work, Torn is most at ease shaping and reshaping his music at home, out in the middle of nowhere, quietly indulging that outsider sensibility.

"I'm basically a functioning psychotic," he laughs. "I've ended up exactly as I said I would 15 years ago."

Tim Berne's Science Friction Band featuring David Torn and The Arte Quartett is on tour in the UK between 17-22 November. For more details, visit www.cmntours.org.uk.



Tim Berne