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Interview with Graham Massey

Total Music: Was your family very musical?

Graham Massey: “No not really. My Dad was into electronics a bit and made me a few things like a tone generator and a fuzz box once I’d got my first guitar. He also made me the Astroban which is a one stringed instrument with a pick up at both ends end, you’ll find it at various points of my musical history. He also built our first Radiogram (a combo of radio and record player the size of a cupboard - everyone had them back then). One of my older brothers was into prog and I drifted into listening to his LP’s. It seemed everyone on our street had the common musical bond of [David] Bowie and we all dressed accordingly. I think it was compulsory. We all swapped albums around on our street and it was pretty mixed, music seemed important and exciting, being a teenager in the 70s was mint!”

Total Music: What were your musical experiences leading up to 808 State playing in bands like Biting Tongues?

Graham Massey: “I got an electric violin when I was 15 and used to try and play along to Mahavishnu Orchestra LPs. Anything with electric violins on I gravitated toward - there was a lot of electric violins in music back then, Hawkwind, Curved Air, Roxy Music, Frank Zappa etc. I Must have been hard to live with Wah Wah-ing away on that thing. But it got me into a band via a school mate (Colin Seddon) and we mostly did cover versions of Gong which is quite challenging. Our first gigs were three street parties on The Silver Jubilee day in 1977. Punk was raging around us but we were propping out to a load of kids and pensioners.

Then the same year some of us started a ‘Punk’ band called Danny And The Dressmakers. We just made an ungodly row and filled up cassettes with profanity, then sold them in the back pages of ‘Sounds’. But it got us our first tour with a bunch of Ladbroke Grove Squatters called ‘Fuck Off Records’ who were older than us. A bit of a baptism of fire [but] it taught us to be musically fearless, then Colin and I joined up with some older guys to form Biting Tongues, whilst Alan went off to form Crispy Ambulance (which we all had a go at playing in) and we shared a rehearsal room for a few years.

The Post Punk period was a great space to make music in - there was a lot of interesting stuff coming out and Colin worked in Virgin Records, so we got access to new stuff and import records. You have to remember that access to music was fairly limited back then. It seemed like a time of discovery but all the music was kind of that time, a record made in 1974 seemed ancient in 1978, but is that just an age perspective maybe its like that for 18 year olds now?

The Tongues was like university to me. It was a well balanced band that could effortlessly make music on the spot and had some unusual working methods that have stayed with me even now. We hardly ever played outside of Manchester and London but I think the gig scenes were more colloquial which tended to hot house it in some ways, giving bands a competitive edge .

Total Music: Do you still remain in contact with early 80s-er (A Guy Called) Gerald?

Graham Massey: “I know Andy (last name) and Darren (last name) bump into him on the DJ circuit quite a bit. He lives in Berlin now. Me and Gerald got together for an acid jam in London about a year ago. It was a bit daunting as I guess there was a lot of expectation, but all we ever did was jump in with the machines and vibe out, which is what we did. It was a lot of fun, just a table full of Roland gear. I thought we’d done 40 minutes but it was more like 90 minutes, which was of course our old standard of time, a C90 cassette almost to the second!”

Total Music: (bit of history one early label here -What prompted your signing to ZTT?

Graham Massey: “A combination of things. Our manager was well in with them back in ‘89, and they courted us hard. We were talking to a few others back then like Factory. I think there was some rivalry between Paul Morley (ZTT) and Tony Wilson. ZTT didn’t really want to mould us, they realised we knew our onions, especially as Martin (last name) had Eastern Bloc records and we had made an impact already on our own label, Creed. ZTT kind of just plugged us into Warners which meant we got some weird stuff onto daytime radio, which back then was pretty groundbreaking. ZTT also hooked us up with Tommy Boy Records in the US, which was a good move - they were the right people to handle us. Shame there wasn’t some equivalent hook up in Europe.”

Total Music: It must be a bit of a blur now but what are your strongest memories of the whole Acid House scene?

Graham Massey: “Partying hard, working hard just a great flow where one thing fed the other, and no experts breathing down your neck, it was all new and open to ideas. The Hacienda obviously contains a lot of that energy in my mind but it was also all over the UK back then. We used to be down in London a lot more regularly and had many good weekends there.

And then visiting the U.S and Japan at the beginning of their rave scenes doing some big raves. I was getting a sense of the Global Village for the first time. It now seems like a very optimistic time where goodwill carried things forward, but again that could be my perspective by simply emerging from the hopelessness of 80s dole existence.”

Total Music: Obviously Manchester was at the centre of things around this time, but for the first time musical boundaries were really being blurred, did you feel part of a scene with bands like the Mondays and the Roses?

Graham Massey: “Well yes and no. There was a great civic pride in the music scene. But the scene wouldn’t have happened if it wasn’t centred around American dance music. The club scene was the source of that energy and the MCR bands fed off that energy. I think 808 took the bull by the horns musically. Some of the Madchester music seemed a bit retro to us at the time - you couldn’t really see where it was going other than mutating into dance music.

But we didn’t fit into the media as easily - there was no identifiable front man, we didn’t really know how to put it on as a gig at the beginning and once we were popular that was a big issue. It was all a learning curve and we probably made a lot of daft decisions, it was rolling chaos apart from in the studio which was filled with the oxygen of new technology- computers, samplers, synths - there was a parallel revolution going on there that would have been enough to deal with.

Total Music: Would you agree that you more or less invented that whole 'guest appearance by an indie/alternative rock singer' that later proliferated on the dance scene by asking Bernard Sumner to appear on 'Spanish Heart'?

Graham Massey: “I guess this lack of a front man was what we were addressing, but I would say it was more about balancing an album rather than searching for a single. One reason we differed from a lot of other dance acts back then is we thought ‘the album’ was the media, and we approached the work as a wider canvass because of it, structuring in the ‘70s tradition of ‘side one’ and ‘two’, and building drama and balance across forty minutes like a film.

We released ‘Ooops’ as a single but I think we knew it wouldn’t be as successful as our anthemic bangers like ‘In Yer Face’. We never considered ‘Spanish Heart’ as a single.

Total Music: It could also be said that you helped Bjork reinvent herself after the Sugarcubes given that her first real dance track was with you guys on *Ex: El?*

Graham Massey: “I think we are often given too much credit for that. I think Bjork was heading out on her own path anyway, but she was listening to our early records a lot and wanted to do something as complex, beat-wise. We actually ended up bonding over all kinds of other music that we liked not just dance music, we had both been on similar musical trajectories, from the punk thing onward. She seemed like one of us, we had the same references. If you know Bjork, it’s the differences she’s interested in, the creative attrition, I wish we had explored it further.

She was very brave to get up at some of these big raves with us and do the material off Ex: El. Must have been daunting, but she’s got balls of steel as she has demonstrated in her artistic adventures to date. I have nothing but admiration for where she has got to on a musical level and I mean on a musical level not just as a singer (which would be enough) but as an artist. She is a figure like Bowie was when we were growing up, responding to work around her but growing it into new forms and presenting it as a body of work where you build up trust and can follow on an adventure and mark times with it.

Total Music: Are you happy with the latest raft of expanded re-releases and do you still enjoy listening to 'em?

Graham Massey: “Over all yes. I think most of it holds up quite well and now sounds more like it did when it left the studio. Some of the early CD mastering was a bit cautious and now we’ve addressed that and it sounds as powerful as it should.

I can just hear the money we spent back then - this is good and bad - the quality of equipment and craft is high but sometimes caution got the better of us in some posher studio situations. We always produced ourselves – I’m sometimes curious to have known what it might have sounded like if someone else had produced us.

I’m a staunch defender of *Don Solaris* (the fourth ZTT album). Some reviews have tried to bag it up as a trip hop thing but, though its from that period of music, you couldn’t really put it next to that kind of stuff. I think its a good mature 808 thing, its legacy comes from what went before, we were at the height of our craft and got nearer the music you imagine and can hear in your head. To me the four ZTT albums aren’t the whole picture, the three early albums that Rephlex have re-released are important to the overview of 808 and though we’ve got a clearer picture through the extra CDs on the ZTT re-releases, there’s still the *State To State* releases and the 1996-to-2002 period. Also if someone were to compile our remix work that’s a box set in itself. The remixes do blur into my overall view of 808 State...

Total Music: You were very involved with digging out the previously hard to find and unreleased material, what was the most exciting rarity you managed to find?

Graham Massey: “Well I had in mind using some of the vocal orientated stuff we had experimented with but the reasons we didn’t use them in the first place were still there, ie I really think lyrics can be too grounding for the music. I like lyrics to be fairly abstract. We all had different views on that and so there is a weird bin of 808 pop songs that didn’t come out, and there wasn’t too much to choose from the 808:90 sessions as we were moving quickly along at that point.

I did have some material from that time but only on cassette and it didn’t hold up in the mastering. I made a lot of last minute decisions whilst at the mastering. I didn’t want to end up with six mixes of ‘Pacific’ and eight mixes of ‘Cubik’. We could have done that but hopefully that’s all going to be available online. There were a lot of mixes of 808 by other artists we could have used. We only used a couple of those on the re-releases. There s a great discography at www.808state.com.

Total Music: What would be your fondest memory of your life between 88-93?

Graham Massey: “To do with the band? Tons of them. Our Big G-mex gig in MCR. Headlining Glastonbury. Touring and travelling the world. There was a golden moment playing Hollywood Bowl with the sun going down, playing ‘Pacific’ with a warm sax being lost in the playing where I realised that dreams come true! (I sound like I’m on X factor!)

Total Music: What is the current state of 808?

Graham Massey: “Well we’ve all gone off into different lives now, but it’s great to meet up for the odd gig, all the old humour comes back and its nice to play the greatest hits set for a change. For many years we were always doing ‘This is our new direction’ type sets , which is not always what people wanted. I get that out in so many other ways now.

I think new music is the most important thing but once you’ve become a brand it becomes difficult to breath. I’ve tried to diversify to keep music flowing as I believe I’m capable of my best stuff based on what I’ve learnt about being a music maker (and with a sense of urgency), but I also believe in taking care of the music that we’ve done. It struck me doing the reissue project how fragile music is - tapes get lost or broken and that’s it gone. Albums get deleted in more ways than one.

Apart from a few guardians of the knowledge (namely our web boys) you’re prone to the Wikipedia breeze. Music like the economy has a low stock at the moment. I’m just protecting it for the future. And I see that you can’t make that music now, it was a product of a moment in time. We probably should have split up years ago but we are tenacious northerners who never do what they should, which is what made it in the first place. You wont find sense in any of it...