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Underworld

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 MEDIA WITH PASSION

Karl Hyde (left) and Rick Smith (right) pose for their Madame Tussauds' waxworks



Mention Underworld and most people think of Karl Hyde, the band's bleach-haired frontman. He's the one who gets noticed on stage, he's the one whose voice ripples through every track and he's the one who does most of the interviews.

There is, of course, another member of the band, Rick Smith. Shy, softly-spoken, he's been working with Hyde for 30 years now and has spent the vast majority of those 30 years tucked away in east London/Essex studios, endlessly tweaking and manipulating Underworld's sonic skeleton.

"I'll be honest with you... I never really felt comfortable with interviews," admits Smith. "People wanted to know which machine made which noise and which synth made which bassline,

was saying about 'enjoying' Underworld. Maybe it's the fact that we're both getting a bit older. Maybe it's the fact that this is our 30th anniversary... but something has definitely happened to us. Although I don't think we're what you'd call a downbeat band, there is often a downbeat quality to our music. On this album, it's more about celebration... trying to capture that feel of the live shows. Making people dance and putting a smile on their faces."

So, where did all that misery come from?

"I can only talk for myself here, but I suppose it was all to do with obsession. In the studio, I can get a bit... lost in the music. To most people reading *Future Music*, that probably sounds like a very romantic idea. Spending three days sorting out a drum sound. Spending a week adding a bit of atmosphere to the chorus. But after a while, you

answer. The opening track, *Bird 1*, began life in 1998 or 1999. So, in one sense, we've been working on the album for 11 or 12 years. Like all the other albums we've done, it's pulled together from many different places. The way I work in the studio is quite... random. No, random isn't the right word. I'm very strict in the studio. I clock-on in the morning and put the hours in, but you can never be sure what's going to turn up. Just because you're in a good mood and the band's doing well and you feel like you're in a 'songwriting' mood, it doesn't mean you'll come up with anything useful.

"For every 10 ideas that go somewhere, there'll be a hundred or more that just get put into the computer and forgotten about. The beauty of computers, of course, is that you can come back to that idea one month or one year or ten years later and listen to it with fresh ears. There might be one great groove in there. Or one incredible sonic idea. Or maybe just a snare drum that you like. You pull all those bits together – the old and the new – and, at some point, it starts to feel like an album."

What's the main Underworld setup at the moment?

"We've actually got four studios and I've tried to make them all identical. That way, I can take an idea from one room to the next and, theoretically, I shouldn't have to do too much messing around. Each one has the same Macintosh Intel machine running Logic and whatever room I'm working in will have a Roland VP-330 Vocoder.

"Obviously, Karl's words often get cut up and re-sequenced, but the main treatment on his vocals is the vocoder. We've been using it for 20-odd years and it's all over this album. I love how the vocoder can work with the voice... sometimes taking the lead, sometimes offering very subtle support. What I normally do is feed Karl's vocal into the vocoder and then play bits of the backing track live. Or I go along one bar at a time, tracking his vocal to give the illusion of a harmony. Apart from the Macintosh and Logic, the VP-330 is the one piece of gear I couldn't live without."

Is Karl there for the whole recording process?

"No! I wouldn't wish that on anyone. Who the hell wants to sit there for two days because I have a vague idea that there might be something wrong with the drums? I seem to be heavily geared towards being able to sit there for 18 hours a day, messing around with intangibles, but Karl is a very different kind of artist. He comes in and does his vocal and, often, that will be one take. People sometimes forget what an amazing vocalist he is... what an amazing poet he is.

"As well as Underworld, he might also be involved in any number of projects around the world. He just lets me get on with it and that setup seems to work for us. C'mon, we've been together for 30 years. We must be doing something right."

Don't four studios get a bit confusing and even more expensive?

"I certainly don't find it confusing. There's the studio at my house – that's where I do most of my

Underworld

Electronic music legends return with a new album packed with collaborations. **Danny Scott** heads to the underworld to talk plugs, Abbey Road and DX7s

but I was afraid of getting bogged down in specifics. I was more interested in the music as a whole... the whole journey."

Luckily for *FM*, Smith says he's mellowed in his (relatively) old age and he's finally – after many years of asking – agreed to talk about, 'which machine made which noise and which synth made which bassline'.

"I've been reading *Future Music* for years and I would always get inspired by interviews with other artists and producers. Just a little bit of information about how someone else works in the studio can often set you off on your own musical journey. I figured it was about time I stopped getting hung up on all the silly little details and actually enjoyed what Underworld was doing. It's about time I stopped being such a miserable git!"

FM: For a self-confessed miserable git, the new album is remarkably upbeat. There's even a couple of, dare we say, 'happy' songs on there.

Rick Smith: "[laughs] It's strange, isn't it. We've written a happy song. I guess it's all part of what I

begin to lose your sense of perspective. Others might call it obsession, but I call it idiocy.

Bloody-minded idiocy. It got to a point where I just couldn't let go of a track. I couldn't actually bring myself to say, 'This is... finished'. See, even now, I find it difficult.

"I hope you don't think I'm being melodramatic here, but it tainted the music for me for many years. I couldn't listen to any of our stuff, because I was so critical of it all. I had no idea what we sounded like and I had no idea if we were any good. At last, I'm learning to let go. We've got quite a few collaborations on this album [Toolroom's Mark Knight and D. Ramirez, Welsh Drum'n'Basser, High Contrast, Grammy-winner, Dubfire, Bristol's Dubstep duo, Appleblim and Al Tourettes] and that meant I had to, literally, take a step back from the mixing desk. And guess what... my world didn't fall apart!"

When did you start work on *Barking*?

"Unfortunately – and I'm not trying to be facetious, here – that's not an easy question to

work – the live setup and a couple of other rooms. I actually like the idea of changing the area I'm working in. I like to listen in different rooms and on different monitors. Even if I'm at home, I constantly shift my listening position and I have several sets of monitors to mess around with – a big pair of Focals, a little pair of battery powered portable speakers, a set of NS10s and a pair of huge PMCs to fill the room with vibe.

"As for the expense... yes, it can get pricey. Especially as I wanted all the four rooms to have the same software. Of course, that meant I had to buy four bits of software every time I wanted to try a new plug-in. In the end, it got a bit silly, so I just concentrated on the main ones that I used... things like GForce's impOScar, Oddity, M-Tron Pro and the Virtual String Machine, FXpansion's Guru, D16's Drumazon and Nephaton and iZotope's iDrum."

That's a lot of drum-related gear. No room for the real 909 and 808?

"Definitely. Live, the 909 sounds fabulous, but there's so much new, fun stuff out there that it seems a bit narrow-minded to not try it out. All the Native Instruments stuff... things like Skrewell. Sonic Charge's Synplant is wonderful. Anything by Spectrasonics... mind you, I've not been getting on with Trilian for some reason.

"I think the digital recording revolution was an amazing step forward. Logic is just... well, it takes care of 85% of everything we do in the studio. Wonderfully! And some of the digital pianos are just sublime. When we were recording the *Breaking And Entering* soundtrack with Gabriel Yared at Abbey Road, we had access to a £70,000 Steinway, but we ended up using Synthogy's Ivory!

"Digital technology is wonderful, but it does have its drawbacks. For a start, we are told very little about how all this technology works. I'm a great believer in knowing what's happening...

As soon as you bring the sound out of that digital box, there's a space and a magic that I really, really love

I like to know how things do what they do. Sometimes, there really is no substitute for breaking out of that mysterious digital box and putting things back in an analogue environment. I've still got the Soundcraft 600 console we had in my spare bedroom when we were recording *Dubnobasswithmyheadman* and we actually used it on this album – firing the mixes through two or three RME audio interfaces."

Analogue sounds better than digital?

"Unquestionably! As soon as you bring the sound out of that digital box, there's a space and a magic that I really, really love. Just being able to hit mute on certain groups or check the EQ... analogue



Rick Smith's Studio Tips

1 "I'm a great believer in the old fashioned work ethic. I know it's very romantic to think that great art gets made in a few minutes down the pub, but I really do think you have to put in a bit of time and effort."

2 "It's always worth taking a long hard look at the first take. When Karl and I are working together, we will often keep that first take, even if we make 15 other versions. We always find ourselves coming back to that first one. There's always something in there... a reason why it turned out like it did."

3 "Don't be too hard on yourself. If you've spent the day in the studio and all you've got to show is a couple of half-finished ideas, just stick them to one side. Come back to them later. Or never. It's not always a good idea to judge the marks you make in the moment that you've made them."

4 "If you're going to ask me questions about EQs and how I make the drum and bass work together... well, I don't know. I honestly don't know how that works. It is what it is. Just chill out, be at peace with yourself and get stuck in."

music is a thing of rare beauty. And, on top of all that, I can record about 10 times faster on an analogue console!

"The only problem is that, once you've done all your recording, you spend about 10 times as long making notes about all your settings and all your different effects boxes. An analogue mix is very 'of the moment'. It won't sound the same ever again, but that's no bad thing."

up to the Atari, an SPX90, a Yamaha compressor, the Roland SIDE3000 delay line, a couple of dbx gates and the odd single-channel compressor. Keyboards were... OSCar, Arp 2600, Juno, the DX7 Mk 1 and a Casio FZ-1 sampler. It was a good two or three years before we got hold of an Akai.

"It was an incredibly strange time for Underworld and for me. We'd just come back from a US tour with the Eurhythmics – when we were

still a seven-piece live band – and it very quickly became apparent that the whole thing was about to collapse. We were 40-50 grand in debt, Karl had stayed in America... I had no money and no work.

"For about 18 months, I wasn't even sure I wanted to be

a musician any more. The whole experience of the music business in the '80s had left me very jaded. I just wanted to have some fun. I wanted to enjoy music. I sold all the live gear, set up a little studio in the spare bedroom and started messing around... helping people put radio shows together, doing music for adverts.

"Bit by bit – and very organically – me, Karl and Darren [Emerson] started working together and we came up with *Dubnobass*... There was no interference from record companies. Nobody breathing down our necks. We were just enjoying ourselves and making music that we wanted to make. I think that's why I'm so attached to that equipment. We've still got most of it and we still

You mentioned *Dubnobass*... there. What do you remember about recording it? Did you know it was going to be such an important album?

"Did I know it was going to be an important album? No! What do I remember about recording it? Everything! It's funny, but those early days are etched into my mind a lot deeper than anything we've done in the last 15 years – especially the equipment we were using.

"There was the Soundcraft, a pair of Tannoy Gold monitors, a knackered Quad amp, a Sony portable DAT machine that we mastered on to and the trusty old Atari running C-Lab – a fantastic machine and a fantastic piece of software. We had one of those Akai 12-track tape machines synched

use most of it. The Arp, the OSCar and DX7 all got plugged in for this album."

Ah...the DX7. Is that why there are so many bell-like sounds on Underworld tracks?

"Oh, you spotted that did you? I love bells! I love bell-like sounds, as you call them – remember that we did call the last album, *Oblivion With Bells*.

"Bell-peals have always fascinated me and I've spent a lot of time experimenting with the idea of maths and music... the mathematical shifting of a sequence of notes. Think about it. That Sunday morning sound of the church bells. The Trance-like repetition. The sequence of notes that gradually reveals itself. I think that's how I got into Steve Reich and Systems Music. If you take bell-peals, Systems Music and this idea of intelligent repetition, you can see how we get to Dance music. All you need is the four-four kick drum to act as an anchor!"

What was it Faithless said? 'God is a DJ'.

"Exactly! There is a rhythm and a mathematical sequence to bell-peals that we might not understand, but it draws us in. It takes its time... it doesn't just do four bars of this and four bars of that. If you take that as your starting point, you don't get hung up on Detroit or Chicago. You just become Welsh Rick.

"I remember walking down the road, once, and hearing this beautiful peal of bells. Somewhere in the distance, there was also a road drill. In my head, the two sounded amazing. Ordinarily, I have the most appalling memory, but the idea of sound – the memory of a particular sound in a particular place – will often stay with me for months. Eventually, I go into the studio and try to recreate it. Now, I might recreate it in a musical way or start thinking about maths. I always loved maths at school and it's always been a friend to me in the studio. Numbers, sequences, patterns and shapes on a screen. Gradually shifting those sequences and patterns and shapes into whole new sequences, patterns and shapes."

So, that's the secret to the Underworld sound, is it... bell peals, road drills and maths!

"[Laughs] I know that sounds ridiculous, but there's a lot of truth in what you just said. It's all about what's out there... what you hear and what you see. Yes, there are times when I'm sitting in the studio and I pull up a sound on a string machine, and that will inspire me to start writing.

"But a finished song involves so much more. There'll be things I've seen and heard last week or last year... floaty intangible stuff. Random numbers. Sequenced numbers. Visual memories. Audio triggers. Call it spirit if you want to get all airy-fairy about it. If you've got all that and you hang it on the right kick drum, you will make people dance and you will make people smile." **FM**

WANT TO KNOW MORE?

Underworld's new album *Barking* is on sale now. Visit their official website for the latest news underworldlive.com

Rick Smith... The Abbey Road Sessions

"I loathe to call myself a producer. To me, a producer spends as much time worrying about personnel and creating the right environment. That's not my thing. I just concentrate on sound. I suppose I think of myself as an engineer.

"But, after *Dubnobass...*, I realised I needed to teach myself how to do all this stuff. I had no choice, really. I had no money to pay for someone else to produce the music I was interested in making. I guess that's when the problems started. The obsession. The idiocy. Never knowing if a track was finished. Never knowing if it was any good. People used to ask me what I thought Underworld sounded like and I used to say, 'I don't know'. Apart from Karl's vocals, I had no idea.

"I suppose things started to change when we worked with Gabriel Yared and Anthony Minghella on the *Breaking And Entering* soundtrack in 2005-2006. For a start, we were working at Abbey Road... not in our own studio. I was outside of my comfort zone. Outside of my little studio in Romford.

"Those sessions were also very different because it wasn't just us... it wasn't just Underworld. We were working with a great composer and a great film director. Was I worried? Yes, of course! I'd got so used to being locked away in my home studio, getting buried in every little detail, that I was actually worried about working with someone else. I was worried about 'letting go'. It became apparent, very quickly, that my fears were completely unfounded. If you look at the pictures from those sessions, we were having a great time. It actually felt good for me to 'let go'. To not have to worry about every tiny little detail... every single hit and note. To be able to sit down with Gabriel and know that he was going to come up with something truly amazing. It was an honour to be in the studio with him.

"Looking back, that time at Abbey Road was the start of a whole new journey for me. It gave me the confidence to actually take a step back... to be a bit easier on myself. On the new album, we've worked with a load of different musicians and producers, and we even had an executive producer. With so many people involved, it was impossible for me to keep on top of things on my own, so we called the brilliant Steve Hall from Junior Boy's Own, who put out *Skyscraper* for us all those years ago. It felt great!

"For the next album, we've already talked about me just being a musician and not worrying about the production at all. I'm actually quite excited by that idea, so we'll see what happens!"

