

UNDERWORLD

Karl Hyde and Rick Smith have an insanely busy year ahead: 52 releases in 12 months!

It's daft, isn't it? It's a mad experiment that is fascinating, exciting and terrifying all at the same time." Underworld's sound sculptor Rick Smith, along with frontman Karl Hyde, are sitting in the pair's Essex studio discussing *Drift* – their hugely ambitious and unimaginably relentless new project. Over the course of the next 12 months, the longest-serving duo in British electronica plan to release material (as “episodes” in the form of film, music and poetry) via YouTube *every week*. Both are fully aware of the daunting nature of such a bold move. “We’ve publicly made a ridiculous pledge to ourselves and others that we are going to do this,” says Smith, “and I’m still looking for the stupid bastard who said they’d do it!” “That’ll be me then, haha!” quips Hyde with perfect comic timing.

There’s an unforced bonhomie and rapport between the two which reflects a friendship that began in Cardiff in the late-’70s when they formed electronic outfit The Screen Gemz. That it has lasted nearly four decades is down to how the duo work together. “We’re absolutely putting untold pressure on ourselves with this project,” says Hyde, “but at the

same time it’s exciting because it’s the most creative we’ve ever been. We listen to each other and challenge one another constantly – Rick’s forever moving the goalposts so we spontaneously respond to what’s going on around us and now we can publish work right there in the moment.”

Underworld employed a similar spontaneous modus operandi when they collaborated with Iggy Pop for Q readers’ Best Track of last year, *Bells & Circles*. “Working with Iggy helped too as he’s an incredibly inspiring person,” says Smith. “But the roots of who we are and how we end up making these odd decisions go back to 1990, well before we even thought it possible to work with someone like him. The joy of working with Iggy was down to how quick and spontaneous it all was.”

Hyde also stresses the importance of the pair working with other people: “It gives us the opportunity to widen our circle. Whether it’s in film, with [*design/film collective*] Tomato or the Olympics or plays, it’s imperative we have that network and give other people a voice because the richness that is required couldn’t just rely on the two of us.”

The first episode of *Drift*, “Dust”, was released at the start of November last year and began



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with a series of templated Underworld missives which veered from streamlined, chrome-clad techno to throbbing acid bangers and languid street poetry. While the 10-minute ambient-jazz wig-out *A Very Silent Way*, a collaboration with Aussie experimentalists The Necks, is the most far out the duo have

ever gone. Each weekly release thematically bleeds into the next, creating a weaving storyline that threads through the whole. Watching and listening to this ever-evolving project feels like unpacking a Russian doll. But apparently the duo weren’t the first to come up with the idea. “Someone was telling us, after we started *Drift*,”



“Suppose we better get on with it, hadn’t we?” Karl Hyde (left) and Rick Smith prepare to go to work, Essex, December, 2018.

says Hyde, “that John Lennon and The Plastic Ono Band had wanted to release a single every day for a week like a newspaper. What we’re doing is similar: being reactive and rooted in the now.”

With the second episode of Drift beginning on 24 January, any worries that such a prolific work rate might mean a dip in quality control down the line

seem unfounded. “We skim around what’s going on and stay light on our feet,” says Hyde, “but more importantly the closeness that Rick and I have, we’re meeting all the time now and exchanging ideas...” [Smith interrupts with freaky, high-pitched voice] “It’s a lie! Help me! Save me! He’s got me trapped! Ahhh!” “...Right, I’m bringing the dragon

out if you do that again!”

Clearly these mischief-making dance music visionaries are fired up and having the time of their lives. But there is a downside to the Drift challenge. “There’s a new problem that we’re discovering in this process,” says Smith, “you can deal with the problems and aggravations, but how do you

deal with the excitement?

It’s unbearable. It’s a problem because you can’t sleep and it’s exhausting. But then things are possible beyond what you imagine sometimes, so have a go, you know?” With that, the two hardest working men in show business get back to plotting out the future.

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