

Burial's debut shot to the top of *The Wire's* 2006 poll by virtue of its convincing evocation of a wounded city. In a rare face to face encounter, the South Londoner preserves his precious anonymity while revealing how forbidden siren vocals, Edwardian ghost stories and a yearning for the lost era of orbital raves feed the sanctified peaks and spectral melancholia of his new album. Words: Mark Fisher. Photography: Georgina Cook

With his self-titled debut LP last year, Burial established himself as an extraordinary sonic mythographer, a sound poet capable of articulating the existential malaise of an era and a place using only sampled voices, broken breakbeats and musique concrète sound effects. *Burial* was a vivid audio portrait of a wounded South London, a semi-abstract sound painting of a city's disappointment and anguish. Burial's was a sound saturated in dance music, but his unsequenced beats – more like the klak-klak of a graffiti-splashed ghost train idling in sidings than rhythmic punctuations – were too eccentric to dance to. His sound was too out of step to fit into dubstep, the genre his records were most likely to be filed under because they were released on Kode9's Hyperdub label. Burial's sound might have fallen between the cracks, but it wasn't some eclectic melange of existing forms. What was most impressive about it – and no doubt one of the reasons that it was *The Wire's* Record Of The Year for 2006 – was the consistency of its sonic concept. There was an impersonal quality to Burial's desolate elegies, a quality reinforced by his doing only a few interviews and refusing to allow a photograph of his face to be used in any promotion. Swarming rumours filled the hype-vacuum. Many didn't believe he actually existed, attributing the record's production to Basic Channel, The Bug, Kode9 himself – a massive backhanded compliment to how fully realised Burial's (syn)aesthetic was. In fact, his sound has been gestating slowly, semi-secretly, for at least half a decade. The tracks on the first album had been selected from recordings Burial had made since 2001. His first appearance on vinyl was the track "Broken Home" on Wasteland's *Vulture Culture Mix 2* in 2004. And the 12" EP *South London Boroughs*, which trailed some of the most potent tracks from the first LP, followed a year later.

I met Burial – an elfin, quietly intense presence who speaks in a low whisper – at Kode9's flat. Burial's refusal to 'be a face', to constitute himself as a subject of the media's promotional machine, is in part a temperamental preference, and in part a resistance to the conditions of ubiquitous visibility and hyperclarity imposed by digital culture – "It's like a ouija board, it's like letting someone into your head, behind your eyes. It lets randoms in," he says of the Internet. "I'm just a well low key person," he admits. "I want to be unknown, because I'd rather be around

my mates and family, but there's no need to focus on it. Most of the tunes I like, I never knew what the people who made them looked like, anyway. It draws you in. You could believe in it more." Burial doesn't DJ or play live, so photographs of him can't even be surreptitiously taken and circulated. "I just want to be in a symbol, a tune, the name of a tune," he explains. "It's not like it's a new thing. It's one of the old underground ways and it's easier." Burial is more sensitive than most to the way in which people are shaped by impersonal forces. "When you are young you are pushed around by forces that are nothing to do with you," he says. "You're lost. Most of the time you don't understand what's going on with yourself, with anything." He knows that his sound does not come from anything with a face.

Without being chauvinistic, Burial is fiercely loyal to the British 'Hardcore continuum' from which his sound has emerged. "If you're well into tunes, your life starts to weave around them," he says. "I'd rather hear a tune about real life, about the UK, than some US hip-hop 'I'm in the club with your girl'-type thing. I love R&B tunes and vocals but I like hearing things that are true to the UK, like drum 'n' bass and dubstep. Once you've heard that underground music in your life, other stuff just sounds like a fucking advert, imported." Indeed, one track on his new album *Untrue* is called "UK"; another, one of the most sorrowful, is called "Raver". Burial's London seems to be a city populated by dejected ravers, returning to the sites of former revels and finding them derelict, forced to contrast the quotidian compromises of their post-rave life with the collective ecstasy they once lived out. Burial's is a re-dreaming of the past, a condensation of relics of abandoned genres into an oneiric montage. His sound is a work of mourning rather than of melancholia, because he still longs for the lost object, still refuses to abandon the hope that it will return. "A lot of those old tunes I put on at night and I hear something in the tune that makes me feel sad," he says. "A few of my favourite producers and DJs are dead now too – and I hear this hope in all those old tracks, trying to unite the UK. But they couldn't, because the UK was changing in a different direction, away from us. Maybe the feeling of the UK in clubs and stuff back then, it wasn't as artificial, self-aware or created by the Internet. It was more rumour, underground

folklore. Anyone could go into the night and they had to seek it out. Because you could see it in people, you could see it in their eyes. Those ravers were at the edge at their lives, they weren't running ahead or falling behind, they were just right there and the tunes meant everything. In the 90s you could feel that it had been taken away from them. In club culture, it all became like superclubs, magazines, Trance, commercialised. All these designer bars would be trying to be like clubs. It all got just taken. So it just went militant, underground from that point. That era is gone. Now there's less danger, less sacrifice, less journey to find something. You can't hide, the media clocks everything." He checks his pessimism: "But [dubstep nights] DMZ and FWD have that deep atmosphere and real feeling. The true underground is still strong, I hear good new tunes all the time."

After a statement as definitive as his first LP, it was difficult to imagine where Burial would go next. But *Untrue* substantially modifies the sound auditioned on *Burial*. The most obvious difference from the first record is the amount and type of vocal on the new LP. His mentor Kode9 describes it as "weird soul" and, if the reference points for the debut were early to mid-90s rave and Jungle, the touchstones on *Untrue* are late 90s Garage and two-step. The cut-up and pitchshifted voices – looped fragments of longing – make *Untrue* even more addictive and even more keenly moving than *Burial*. Burial had in fact produced a whole album's worth of material in another style – "more technical, all the tunes sounded like some kind of weapon that was being taken apart and put back together again" – but he scrapped it. "I was worrying," he recalls, "I'd made all these dark tunes and I played them to my mum, and she didn't like them. I was going to give up, but she was sweet, telling me, 'Just do a tune, fuck everyone off, don't worry about it.' My dog died and I was totally gutted about that. She was just like, 'Make a tune, cheer up, stay up late, make a cup of tea.' And I rang her mobile 20 minutes later and I'd made that "Archangel" tune [on *Untrue*], and I was like, 'I've made the tune, the tune you told me to make.'"

Burial's treatment of voice has always been crucial to his sound. Too much dub-influenced music is content to simply erase the voice and turn up the echo, but