

The Masthead

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Rock 'n' rollers discovering electronic music in their later years has become almost a familiar a story as picking up a paintbrush and taking a crack at abstract art. Symptoms of the former include suddenly singing the praises of modular synthesizer set-ups, epiphanic encounters with club culture, and wowing at the band-in-a-box potential of laptop computers (often with half an eye on a competitive tour budget). Sometimes, the change is signalled with pretensions of European sophistication, suddenly and disingenuously juxtaposed with American authenticity. The overall sensation is usually of a sleek new exoskeleton being used to prop up an ageing guitar-slinger.

In the case of electronics, and with visual art also, the narrative that an artist often tries to draw is of dedicating themselves to a somewhat grander, more abstract and therefore more selfless calling than just bashing away at a guitar. Often, though, interest in such lofty pursuits, far away from the messy, difficult stuff of grappling with people or places, betrays a lurking desire on the part of the musician to exert total control over their environment. In other words, the same old power games, which are even more a projection of the ego than getting up on stage and singing your heart out to the audience.

If the case is different with Stephen Malkmus, in part it's due to sheer bloody-mindedness. His detour into electronic dabbling with his new album *Groove Denied* is as much a matter of self-indulgence as self-improvement. As he tells Raymond Cummings in this month's cover story, "I got more focused on self-recording, how I could [record] the way solo producers make things, like Oneohtrix Point Never or James Ferraro. I don't think I even sound like them, but in this world there are a lot of individuals just making things – it's just a different feel. I thought maybe I could get some inspiration, a new sound."

A major part of the album's charm is that it's less

Man Machine and more a Heath Robinson contraption. There's the same elliptical songs and voice familiar from both Pavement and his post-2000s career with The Jicks, but now with extra bells, whistles, whooshes and whirrs, all of which draw you in with perplexed fascination rather than exhilaration. You can hear the difficulty, the lack of fit. As Malkmus himself puts it, with characteristic perversity, "Why don't I try these other things that are hard to translate to a rock band dynamic?".

Pavement, Malkmus's best-known group, were always a paradoxical proposition. As any fool know, they sounded a lot like The Fall and REM, but there was a unique meta quality to their stream of consciousness songwriting that meant they would steal melodies ("Everyday" by Buddy Holly on the opening of their best album *Crooked Rain, Crooked Rain*) in a way both satirical and sincere. They were a "Conduit For Sale", maybe, as one of their tracks put it.

If Pavement were a vehicle for Malkmus, it was a jalopy which you couldn't fathom how it kept going but which you couldn't take your eyes off. As the group rolled on, they became more self-referential and wrapped up in their own mythos, the vehicle became emptier and more noisy. With *Groove Denied*, he deserves praise for flinging the doors wide open once again.

It's a fond goodbye this month to Gustave Evrard, vinyl deep digger, multilingual whizz-kid, canine daycare expert, a key member of our crack advertising team, and the guy who can tell you about record labels in places where you didn't even know they had places. He departs this month for new opportunities in Europe. In the two and a half years he's been with us, a ball of rubber bands on his desk has been growing to gargantuan size, and if we can continue his legacy, it will one day yield the biggest sub-bass bounce ever.

Derek Walmsley

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