

## Nostalgia for Modernism: The Focus Group and Belbury Poly

‘Myself and my friend Jim Jupp had been making music, independently and together for a while, and also obsessing over the same things – the cosmic horror of Machen, Lovecraft, the Radiophonic Workshop, weird folk and the occult. We realised that we wanted to put our music out, but also create our own world where we could play with all these reference points. Starting our own label was the only way to do it.’ Julian House is describing how he and his school-friend Jim Jupp came to found the Ghost Box label.

Off-kilter bucolic, drenched in an over-exposed post-psyche-delic sun, Ghost Box recordings are uneasy listening to the letter. If nostalgia famously means ‘homesickness’, then Ghost Box sound is about unhomesickness, about the uncanny spectres entering the domestic environment through the cathode ray tube. At one level, the Ghost Box is television itself; or a television that has disappeared, itself become a ghost, a conduit to the Other Side, now only remembered by those of a certain age. No doubt there comes a point when every generation starts pining for the artefacts of its childhood – but was there something special about the TV of the 1970s which Ghost Box releases obsessively reference?

‘I think there definitely was something powerful about the children’s TV from that period,’ House maintains. ‘I think it was just after the 60s, these musicians and animators, film makers had come through the psychedelic thing and acid folk, they had these strange dark obsessions that they put into their TV programmes. Also, someone like Nigel Kneale had obviously come from a tradition of HP Lovecraft – 20th century science used as a background to cosmic horror and the occult. The themes he explored in the Quatermass series eventually found their way into Doctor Who, *Children of the Stones*, *Sapphire and Steel*. If you look at the BBC Radiophonic workshop, people like David Cain also studied medieval music, and he did a great dark folky electronic album called

*The Seasons*. And a few of Paddy Kingsland's arrangements bring to mind Pentangle. It's like there was this strange past/future thing which had come through psychedelia.'

The affect produced by Ghost Box's releases (sound *and* images, the latter absolutely integral) are the direct inverse of irritating postmodern citation-blitz. The mark of the postmodern is the extirpation of the uncanny, the replacing of the unheimlich tingle of unknowingness with a cocksure knowingness and hyper-awareness. Ghost Box, by contrast, is a conspiracy of the half-forgotten, the poorly remembered and the confabulated. Listening to sample-based sonic genres like Jungle and early hip-hop you typically found yourself experiencing *déjà vu* or *déjà entendu*, in which a familiar sound, estranged by sampling, nagged just beyond recognisability. Ghost Box releases conjure a sense of *artificial* *déjà vu*, where you are duped into thinking that what you are hearing has its origin somewhere in the late 60s or early 70s: not false, but simulated, memory. The spectres in Ghost Box's hauntology are the lost contexts which, we imagine, must have prompted the sounds we are hearing: forgotten programmes, uncommissioned series, pilots that were never followed-up.

Belbury Poly, The Focus Group, Eric Zann – names from an alternative 70s that never ended, a digitally-reconstructed world in which analogue rules forever, a time-scrambled Moorcockian near-past. This return to the analogue via the digital is one of the ways in which Ghost Box records are not straight-up simulations of the past. 'We like to confuse the boundaries between analogue and digital. Jim uses a combination of analogue synths and digital technology. In the Focus Group stuff there are samples of old percussion albums and digital effects, electronic sounds generated on the computer and processed found sounds. I think it's do with this space between what happens in the computer and what happens outside of it. The recording of space, real reverb/room sound and the virtual space on the hard drive. Like different dimensions.'

'It was bang on 1980 when Fairlights and DX7s appeared in electronic music,' Jupp points out. 'I suppose that digital technology is a tipping point in culture in general, even in the way that television is made.' Yet Belbury Poly's sound relies on digital equipment. 'At the heart of it is a computer and we don't hide that fact. Having said that, I'm sitting in the studio now and it's mostly analogue synths and a pile of acoustic

instruments, what we do couldn't exist without hip-hop and sampling culture and the access to cheap electronic instruments. It's revisiting old textures and old imagined worlds with new tools.'

Jupp laughs when I suggest that there was a certain *grain* to 70s British culture that got smoothed away by 80s style culture gloss. 'It's almost as if we became totally Americanised, got our teeth fixed and had a proper wash. I was talking to someone the other day whose girlfriend can't stand him watching old sitcoms, she always calls it grot TV. I know what she means. But maybe in TV, radio and records then there was a feel that was washed clean in the 80s when everything was angular, digital, American, upbeat and colourful.'

Ghost Box explore a sonic continuum which stretches from the quirkily cheery to the insinuatingly sinister. The most obvious predecessors lie in 'functional music', sounds designed to hover at the edge of perceptibility, not to hog centre-stage: signature tunes, incidental music, music that is instantly recognizable but whose authors, more often (self-)styled as technicians rather than artists, remain anonymous. The Radiophonic Workshop (whose two 'stars', Delia Derbyshire and Daphne Oram, became widely recognised only after their deaths) would be the obvious template. House agrees: 'I think the key reference is the Radiophonic Workshop, which is wildly experimental (Britain's electronic avant garde, the equivalent of GRM Pierre Schaeffer in France etc.) but it's also incredibly evocative of radio and television with which we grew up. It's got a sort of duality to it, it's haunting in its own right but also serves as a memory trigger. I think this dim, half remembered aspect of old Hammer films, Doctor Who, Quatermass is important – it's not like an I Love 1974 reminiscence. Rather than being just nostalgia, it's triggering something darker, you're remembering the strange ideas in these programmes, the stuff under the surface, rather than just knowing the theme tune. I think this is why Library music is such an influence – you listen to the albums divorced from context and it operates on an unconscious level, like musical cues for missing visuals.

When I grew up Doctor Who episodes like *The Sea Devils* haunted me, the way slightly shaky monsters and sets have their own uncanny horror. The loud blasts of Atonal music. The first time I saw the Hammer film of *Quatermass and the Pit* really affected me. And those dimly remembered eastern European animations had a certain quality. Also, certain public

information films and adverts.’

Ghost Box preside over a (slightly) alternative world in which the Radiophonic Workshop were more important than the Beatles. In a sense that is our world, because the Workshop rendered even the most experimental rock obsolete even before it had happened. But of course you are not comparing like with like here; the Beatles occupied front stage in the Pop Spectacle, whereas the Radiophonic Workshop insinuated their jingles, idents, themes and special FX into the weft of everyday life. The Workshop was properly *unheimlich*, unhomely, fundamentally tied up with a domestic environment that had been invaded by media.

Naturally, Ghost Box have been accused of nostalgia, and of course this plays a part in their appeal. But their aesthetic in fact exhibits a more paradoxical impulse: in a culture dominated by retrospection, what they are nostalgic for is nothing less than (popular) modernism itself. Ghost Box are at their most beguiling when they foreground dyschronia, broken time – as on Belbury Poly’s ‘Caermaen’ (from 2004’s *The Willows*) and ‘Wetland’ (from 2006’s *The Owl’s Map*) where folk voices summoned from beyond the grave are made to sing new songs. Dyschronia is integral to the Focus Group’s whole methodology; the joins are too audible, the samples too jagged, for their tracks to sound like refurbished artefacts.

In any case, at their best, Ghost Box conjure a past that never was. Their artwork fuses the look of comprehensive school text books and public service manuals with allusions to weird fiction, a fusion that has more to do with the compressions and confluences of dreamwork than with memory. House himself talks of ‘a strange dream of a school textbook’. The implicit demand for such a space in Ghost Box inevitably reminds us that the period since 1979 in Britain has seen the gradual but remorseless destruction of the very concept of the public. At the same time, Ghost Box also remind us that the people who worked in the Radiophonic Workshop were effectively public servants, that they were employed to produce a *weird* public space – a public space very different from the bureaucratic dreariness invoked by neoliberal propaganda.

Public space has been consumed and replaced by something like the third place exemplified by franchise coffee bars. These spaces are uncanny only in their power to replicate sameness, and the monotony of

the Starbucks environment is both reassuring and oddly disorientating; inside the pod, it's possible to literally forget what city you are in. What I have called nomadalgia is the sense of unease that these anonymous environments, more or less the same the world over, provoke; the travel sickness produced by moving through spaces that could be anywhere. My, I... what happened to Our Space, or the idea of a public that was not reducible to an aggregate of consumer preferences?

In Ghost Box, the lost concept of the public has a very palpable presence-in-absence, via samples of public service announcements. (Incidentally one connection between rave and Ghost Box is the Prodigy's sampling of this kind of announcement on 'Charly'.) Public service announcements – remembered because they could often be disquieting, particularly for children – constitute a kind of reservoir of collective unconscious material. The disinterment of such broadcasts now cannot but play as the demand for a return of the very concept of public service. Ghost Box repeatedly invoke public bodies – through names (Belbury Poly, the Advisory Circle) and also forms (the tourist brochure, the textbook).

Confronted with capital's intense semiotic pollution, its encrustation of the urban environment with idiotic sigils and imbecilic slogans no-one – neither the people who wrote them nor those at whom they are aimed – believes, you often wonder: what if all the effort that went into this flashy trash were devoted to a public good? If for no other reason, Ghost Box is worth treasuring because they make us pose that question with renewed force.