

THE BLACK DOG BARKS

Reverb talks exclusively to long time electronic collective The Black Dog about their recent return to the live scene, re-releasing of their back catalogue and their forthcoming album.

The idea of a band or collective out with the sphere of rock'n'roll is still a relatively rare concept, especially where electronic music is concerned. But mention The Black Dog to any discerning electronic heads, and you'll find it evokes recognition and respect across the board. Having come together some time in the late 1980's in the formative years of the UK electronic/techno scene, The Black Dog have been responsible for some of the most genre-defining albums of their era and now, after several incarnations of the lineup over the past decade, the band are back with a new album on the horizon and renewed presence on the festival and touring circuit. In a rare interview opportunity with sole original member Ken Downie and fellow kennel mates Martin and Richard Dust, Reverb found out a little about their working methods, thoughts on the current music scene and what's in store with the new album.

It's been about 2 years now since the last album 'Silenced' came out, looking back over that period how well do you feel that was received, and more importantly how do you feel about that album now that it's had some time to gestate, from your own perspective?

Ken: I think the album was very well received. We believed in the album enough to release it, and in that respect, nothing has changed. It's a Black Dog album, and I'm chuffed to nuts with it.

Martin: I'd agree with that, we do what we do and that's it, we've never chased anything – I feel it's much better to just publish and be damned.

Richard: I don't think there'd be anything I'd change on there. It captured a particular moment and was almost a re-assurance that we could really work together as a band on a significant project!

How difficult (or easy) has it been to re-establish the Black Dog project over the past couple of years with the new lineup, especially among older fans who've been following your output since the early '90s, people that might continually draw comparisons to the perceived golden era of Bytes and Spanners?

M: I think this is where Black Dog's own history has never been made clear, people tend to think it's just Ken, when in fact it's only ever been Ken for one album (Music For Advert's). I haven't even thought much about the past or anything to do with "establishing" anything. We just make stuff happen.



K: Re-establish? No, I don't see it like that...I've kept moving, while the gaze of public infatuation moved elsewhere. The band has had different three lineups since it's inception. It's not my fault that some people keep banging on about 1992. I refuse to live in the past like that and I find the notion of a "golden era" laughable.

R: Bytes and Spanners do get mentioned every now and again - they're great albums but that was from another time. Like Ken said, he's moved on and I suspect everyone else has moved on too (in their own way). Anyway, who really wants to get trapped in repeating something from over a decade ago?

How formal has the working relationship been in terms of writing new material - is it a loose arrangement under the collective name or do you tend to contribute on a more or less equal basis to each of the tracks or certainly a release as a whole?

M: I think in the past tracks were written individually but that tends not to happen anymore, we tend to work on tracks together. Someone will pick something up

from our archive and start work on it and pass it on and from that a strong vibe starts to form, which leads to more tracks and then a release.

K: I agree...Working with Martin and Richard...and previously with Steve and Ross, we would all chip in. Nobody would 'own' the song, or be the sole author. That stuff belongs in rock bands, where only one of them is "the songwriter". It's a greedy approach. The drummer works just as hard as everyone else, so why doesn't he get equal credit?

M: True enough, how can you be in a band and be a hired hand like the rest of Oasis?

Does this involve working together in the one location, or does material get passed back and forth a lot?

M: Sometimes but most of the time we work apart and pass things along to each other.

K: Yeah, it's a bit of both. It costs a lot of money to travel anywhere physically, so it's often easier to just shunt stuff down the wire. Tunes we work on get bounced back and forwards several times

industry b****cks with Soma, and I'm very grateful that they give us space to come up with whatever we want. It's immensely liberating and full respect to them for it.

A lot of classic Black Dog back catalogue has been re-mastered and re-released via Soma Recordings over the last few months, what was the thinking or plan behind this and how have the releases been received so far?

M: The plan was to get the back catalogue sorted and out of the way as well as finding a good home for it. I approached Soma with the idea and from there things have gone really well, the guys are Soma have been very supportive and understanding - which made a big difference to us and it's one of the reasons we'll continue to work with them in the future.

K: Martin insisted that I venture into the loft to retrieve it. As mentioned previously, I hate looking backwards. Releasing stuff from 20 years ago wasn't high on the agenda but now it's done... and I can hear how crisp and lovely it's sounding, I'm glad for his insistence. I was worried that vinyl collectors might feel cheated and angry, but so far, the feedback has been universally positive.

How is the new album 'Radio Scarecrow' coming along and when do you expect it will be released, presumably early in the New Year?

M: It should have been finished on September 22nd but it won't be. We are working towards the end of October now and I've got a good feeling about everything being finished by then, no idea when it will be released yet.

R: We're just in the process of pulling together all the different tracks and ideas that have been developed over the last year or so. There's a lot of material to sort through but we can already see a definite tone and style forming.

Where has the name for the album come from, and what's the general idea of feeling behind the album?

M: We've been addicted to Numbers Stations and EVP (Electronic Voice Phenomena) recordings for a long time now, the fact that something so simple, abstract and impossible to crack is a fantastic communication

method and with EVP records, it's the fact that people will cling to anything as a belief system that interest me a lot. The album name comes from the kids in the village where I live. There's a local guy who's had some kind of breakdown and he walks around with a radio to his ear all the time, they call him Radio Scarecrow. I see him around a lot and wonder what he's listening to.

In terms of production, the world of electronic music has obviously changed beyond all recognition since the earliest Black Dog releases, but how have your methods of working changed and what have been the most significant advances in technology over the past decade, from your own perspective?

K: My working setup is still pretty much the same. An Amiga computer, and stack of outboard gear. The biggest single factor for me has been disc space. It used to cost 700 pounds for a 1GB drive. Now we can get 500GB for 70 quid!!

R: A fair bit of the final mix-down is done digitally now, but that does give us the flexibility of jumping between projects without having to re-patch the mixer every time! A lot of the writing and creative is still approached in the old way though (whatever gets the ideas going).

Has new technology made the writing process easier, or like many, have you found the almost limitless sound designing possibilities afforded by the latest software and hardware to be a hindrance in making final decisions?

M: The studio has only ever been a tool to me, the problem has always been getting the feelings/emotions out of my head. I just pick stuff up and play - Rich goes a lot deeper into this kind of stuff, I only start asking when something isn't working.

R: Kit and software can become a major distraction from actually writing. There was a period of trying out loads of software plug-ins, but most of these we're uninstalled long ago. The actual list of items in use now is quite small and restricted to those I actually know well. It can also be good to impose some limitations on yourself now and again.

K: I did dabble with soft-synths and digital plug-ins for a while,

but I found them to be cold and un-inspiring (a bit like a plaid record...lol). So now I prefer the warmth and fuzz you get with old gear. True, I sometimes get frustrated with the rats nest of cabling in the studio, but moving knobs and sliders is more fun for me than clicking a mouse, so that's the way it is.

While on the subject, what sort of tools have you been using on the writing of the new album, in terms of your choice of sequencer/DAW and any favourite plug-ins?

M: Cubase, Ableton, Fruity Loop, Acid and Soundforge are the main tools but I'll use just about anything that's at hand, I'm a bit of a studio slag actually.

R: I really need to learn how to use the Virus TI at some point. Not really had chance to get stuck into it yet. Fabfilter's synth plugin "Twin" has got my attention at the moment, everything's on one simple screen, very flexible and it's dead easy to use. With the right treatment it can make some nasty raw noises.

K: I use the Creamware "tripleDat" and "Pulsar" systems for mastering. I hate their capitalist marketing approach, but their hardware/software tools are quality. Amiga sequencer of choice is "Dr Ts", written by Emile Tobenfeld. I love it so much because it doesn't require you to make your music in a straight line, from left to right, like Cubase. It's a bit like a jigsaw, and you can put the pieces where you want.

What about hardware...still using some classic outboard and synths in the Black Dog studio?

M: Yeah, Ken swears by it, I'll take what ever is going.

K: Definitely. I'm still futzing around with the DX7, TX81Z, and assorted junkshop synths. Many people ditched their old gear to 'go digital', but not me.

What kit have you picked up most recently and what's next on the wish list?

M: Virus TI and I'm looking at getting a Machine Drum and Moog perhaps.

R: Maybe new monitors/amp are required - I think we finally knackered the current ones mixing down "Floods".

K: I think I have all the equipment I'll ever need. If money were no object, I would purchase "one of everything" from Roland's back catalogue. But I'm not losing any sleep over it.

Within the electronic music scene, The Black Dog has been and still is regarded as a seminal and influential act, but what are your own musical influences and backgrounds, and what sort of stuff do you listen to at the moment?

K: A friend called me "seminal" the other day, and I was shocked and embarrassed about it. Though it was 30 years ago, I still listen to a lot of punk rock...and of course, dub reggae. I've no time for "polite" music that just shuffles along in the background. Life is too short.

What artists interest you most from the current scene, both electronic and otherwise?

M: Loads, Bitstream, Andy Stott, Claro Intellecto, Terrence Dixon, Rob Hall, Bola - I love loads of the new stuff coming through.

R: And DNCN, Rubens, Bass Soldier are all doing interesting stuff, but then I would say that being as we've been working with them!

How have you found the gigs so far this year, any particularly tough or unexpected crowd reactions or stories worth telling?

M: I love playing gigs but sometimes find crowds

impossible to read, it's a lot easier when we are playing a DJ set but nothing easy is worth doing so we'll struggle on.

K: Every gig has it's own saga and cast of characters. They're all different. If it got to the stage where they were all the same, I think it would be boring. I'm often touched by the warmth and humanity of people who come up and say "hello". For me, that's one of the best things...to know that our hours of tinkering away in the studio actually has a point to it. It makes everything worthwhile.

Having endured the floods of '07 in your base of Sheffield, what sort of year has it been overall, looking back, and what's next for the Black Dog in terms of releases, we gather there's a new 12" due before the album itself?

M: The flood was a bit of a nightmare because it cost us 3 weeks of studio time and myself and Richard lost both our cars. The 12" is called Floods and should be out next month, the tracks deal with Numbers Station and Prozac - make of that what you will.

Thanks for taking the time to talk to us.

The Black Dog's new album 'Radio Scarecrow' should be out in the New Year period, date to be confirmed. www.somarecords.com www.dogsquad.co.uk

