

# KEEPING IT REAL

Adrian Utley is low-key and matter-of-fact about life in Portishead. He is guitarist and musical director for Bristol's finest, bringing live playing and jazz credentials to the task of keeping it real.

Utley is 10 years older than Geoff Barrow, so he leaves Sony Playstation to younger members of the entourage (the DJs) but he now takes his boredom-busting computer on the road as he's getting into the internet.

As our conversation starts, the guitarist alludes to Rolling Stones drummer Charlie Watts' famous quote about being 'in rock 'n' roll 25 years - 5 years on stage and 20 years waiting to go on stage'.

Keeping it real, for Utley has included using a 30-piece orchestra for the New York launch of their second album *Portishead* and creating their own 'samples', a real drummer playing 'loops' and a live sequencer-free show.

Portishead at times appear precious, snubbing Awards shows and saying 'no' to pop TV shows but Utley just doesn't like trash whether its American TV or music biz gloss.

**Are you enjoying the travelling?**

"Yeah, trying to remain positive. There's so much hanging around, as Charlie Watts said. You have to think of stuff to do when you're not playing, and then you can enjoy it."

**Are you managing to see any of the places you're visiting?**

"Yeah. I think the most difficult thing is finding where to go when you're there for one day. When we were in Berlin, we picked the most naff places to go. I'm not sure how we managed to do that."

**Why don't you tour with a string section?**

"We couldn't afford to do that, it costs as much to buy a house as to do one gig with an orchestra, it's absolutely outrageous. Everything you hear we're playing, we don't have any A-DATs or any sequenced stuff going on. The way we do the string-thing live, is we have an old string synthesiser which we adapted a lot of orchestration to, which John plays."

**You did the MTV performance with a string section didn't you?**

"No, that was our own gig at Roseland, in New York, not MTV. That was the gig we did to launch the album. We used a 30 piece orchestra. That was a one-off event really, we've used an eight-piece twice - once in England on *Later With Jools Holland* and once in New York on *Saturday Night Live*, that was really nice to have but we've only got a few tracks with strings. When we played in New York we orchestrated everything and we were able to add parts that were never originally on records like 'Cowboys'. Obviously things like 'Roads' and 'Humming', we could re-create and play it as we did on the record. It was totally a different thing, the Roselands thing."

**Was it an ordeal working with an orchestra?**

"There's been misunderstandings between bands and orchestras. I think a lot of bands in the past have had orchestras cos they look great. It just seemed to work for us and they were into it. We're very into orchestral textures anyway so it wasn't just a matter of getting them to re-create some one or two chords off a synthesiser. We were involved in lots of different techniques, trying to get sounds that you would get from an orchestra. So I think they were interested in what we were trying to do and they were cool because they were involved."

**In America would the musicians be less unionised?**

"We booked them for a three hour rehearsal and we had a lot of music to get through and they dropped it on us that they had to have 15 minutes off every hour and that was a union restriction, so we lost 45 minutes. Nick England [arranger] and I were absolutely terrified that we wouldn't be able to get through the work."

**Is Portishead a meeting of like minds or very different minds?**

"It's a meeting of like minds which is what makes it so good, for us. The reason we got together, I suppose like all bands is because of a mutual belief in the same thing, the same music. Although we listen to slightly different areas of music, there's massive areas we have in common and we're all trying to achieve the same thing. There's a certain amount of diversity between us that creates enough friction to be creative as well as all being into the same thing. Between Geoff and I and Dave when we're working in the studio we are always trying to find the same thing and we're usually turned on by the same thing, when certain things happen we're usually all into it together."

**The music you have grown up with, because you're older than Geoff would be a different set of influences wouldn't it?**

"Yeah, that's right, but I'm into music from all eras, so is Geoff. He was more brought up on hip-hop in early formative days and I was more brought up on jazz and kinda rock music like Jimi Hendrix and stuff when I was very young. He's into film

mean, to have that same vitality and Clive was tremendously good at that. We've all learnt to do that more. I think we've got it, we had it on the *Dummy* tour but I think now we've got new techniques, things that we're doing, we've built on over the couple of years."

**As you've worked as a live musician did you want to see Portishead tour?**

"I was one of the ones saying 'christ we can't do it live'. I wasn't the one saying, 'yes we can'. It was a mutual decision we came to."

**I read how difficult making the second album was. Did you think you were never going to pull off a second album?**

"I think it was always going to be a matter of time, I don't think there was ever a point where we said we not going to be able to do this ever. There were some terrible times - difficult, frustrating, not being able to write something you thought was any good, but I don't think there was ever a sense we

"No, in a word. Geoff and I have been doing some remixes, not other peoples', our stuff. Over Xmas when we came back from America the first time and before we toured Europe we had a few weeks off, so we shot into the studio and did a couple of remixes."

**Are the remixes for singles or for an album?**

"We're gonna finish them and we don't want to put any pressure on them at all. We're doing them with a possible idea of releasing a few things on their own. But there's no solid plan. We're hoping to do a re-mix record but we'll see."

**Have you managed to avoid playing *Top of the Pops*?**

"Yes. We've never done it. We're not into it, really. It's a tacky show. Although other people manage to do it and still retain some sense of credibility. I just think it would be crap for us to do it, we all think it would be crap, none of us watch it - don't want to play on it."

## portishead



L-R: DAVE McDONALD, BETH GIBBONS, ADRIAN UTLEY, GEOFF BARROW.

soundtracks from the 60s and 70s and so am I, so we kinda transcend that [generation] kinda thing."

"There are things that we found later and probably found together, all of us together now. So there's a whole new set of stuff. It's corny, but music is a totally international, timeless language. If you're into John Coltrane, you could be into Jimi Hendrix as well. They're kinda coming from the same place and the same vibe. Anyone who is trying to be honest about what they're doing - Kurt Cobain or whoever - that's the spirit that comes through."

**Do you do any work beyond Portishead at all?**

"Occasionally but not very much, there's not much time to do that really. This is what we do and we're involved in all areas of it. We haven't stopped since we started doing the second album."

**Did you always know that Portishead would work live?**

"There was definitely a question mark over it because when we made *Dummy*, it was a studio project. There was never any question of us playing live. When the record became successful, there wasn't pressure on us to play live, but it was mentioned and we started to consider the idea, there was always a sense of 'how the hell are we going to do this live?' Clive Deemer who plays drums, has played on both records. That was a major point getting the drums to sound like loops but not to sound boring if you know what I

wouldn't finish it. I don't remember it being like that, it couldn't be, we had to do it. We couldn't walk away from it."

**Did you change studios to get a breath of fresh air?**

"Yeah I think so, because we'd been in our own studio for a year. We'd spent a lot of time there and it just wasn't happening, although everything that's on the album was generated from our studio. Sounds that we'd made, loops, all that stuff was done in our studio but we moved out to a residential studio."

**It was the solution?**

"I think it probably was. It was, but I don't know if it would have worked if we had stayed at home. It was horrible there though, I'm not whingeing or anything, the whole experience was not something that any of us particularly enjoyed."

**You don't like residential studios?**

"The experience was unpleasant, trying to write and not being creative when we should have been and it wasn't happening and then not being at home on top of that made the whole thing grim. Until we managed to finish something - 'Half Day Closing' - that was a live track and then we kinda got ourselves by the scruff of the necks and moved it on. Once we managed to get stuff finished and started to get our confidence back about what we'd done, we were digging up all this stuff that we'd done over the last year in our own studio and we were really into it and we started to make it happen."

**Have you made any progress on the third album?**

**Have you actually attended the Brits yet?**

"The Brats was the first thing we ever went to. It was full of pop stars and stuff, there was Oasis, Blur and Manic Street Preachers, the whole place is full of people you've seen in bands for years. It's just a weird kind of event really. We went to the MTV Awards in Paris once and we'll never ever do it again."

**Is it just too many of the wrong kind of musicians?**

"It's incredibly diverse for a start and it's full of record company people and press and liggers. You'll be talking to someone and they'll be looking over your shoulder to see if there's anybody else they can go and talk to. It's just a fuckin' drag and none of us want to be in that situation. We went and saw Radiohead the other night in San Francisco who we've met a couple of times and we went back to their dressing rooms and I'd rather do that, cos we've got a kind of mutual respect for each other. You can have a laugh about things other than music, we talk on the same level. Those [awards] events are appalling for us anyway, they're just so utterly fake and grim. We'll never go again."

After hearing Radiohead rave about visiting the Karekare studio, Utley was looking forward to getting out of his hotel. New Zealand sounded 'real' if he could find the time to take a look.

Murray Cammick