

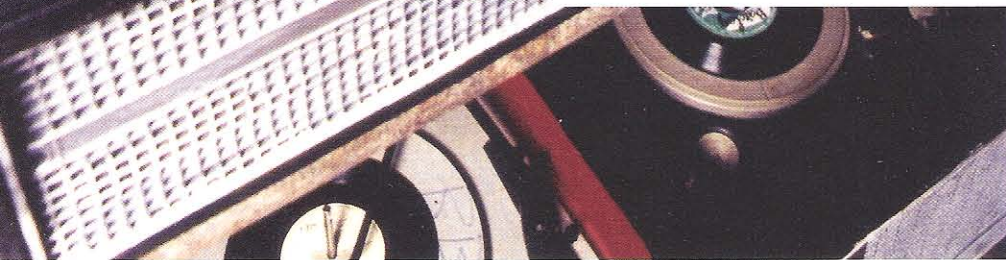
IT IS NO GRAB-BAG  
 NOT A MIDDLE-ROUGE OR WHATEVER COME  
 TO MIND. THE SOUND DRIPS WITH THE  
 WELL WORN LAURELS OF ACCEPTANCE, OF  
 HONOUR, OF LONGEVITY. THERE IS A  
 TOUCH, A METHOD THAT CHANGES  
 WITH THE MOOD OF THE TIMES, OF  
 THE MUSIC. THE TOUCH IS ALWAYS  
 PERSONAL, PASSIONATE, EMBRACING  
 MEMORY.



## none shall pass

Words: Abi Bliss

**Philip Jeck uses vintage turntables and orphaned vinyl to unbundle forgotten memories and free lost souls**



"When I listen to the playbacks from concerts I have no memory of doing some of the things that I did. Some of the best playing that I do is when I barely remember any of it when I've finished. It tends to just take over. I'm not really sure what I've done, or how I got there."

In one sense, everything Philip Jeck does comes from vinyl. In his hands, the records that languish unloved in charity shops' 25p boxes or slowly warping in humid attics are rescued from oblivion, only to be recast as lost souls in a kind of slow-motion limbo, their voices drowned out by rising waves of fizz and crackle. But like he himself acknowledges, it also comes from somewhere else. When he brings together his portable record players, delay pedal and Casio sampling keyboard, it's as though he's channeling an unstoppable lava flow of the recent cultural past, a crushed-up magma of vinyl releasing its last faint vapours of sound before melting and crumbling over the edge into history.

Growing up in the Sixties before turntablism established itself, Jeck first dabbled in playing guitar and keyboards, but didn't pursue his dreams of a musical career. "What I could do with that was never grand or big enough or good enough to

satisfy me," he says on the phone from Liverpool. "I could draw and paint a bit so I ended up going to art college."

But in 1979 he came back from a trip to New York with armfuls of 12-inches by Larry Levan and Walter Gibbons, got himself a second turntable and a mixer and started trying to work out how they did it. "People like Walter Gibbons did really long, extended workouts of the breaks and the rhythm parts. His stuff is of its time, but I still think it's incredible." He played warehouse parties in London, but when he began working with choreographer Laurie Booth in 1984, his sound moved away from the dancefloor, becoming more a slow waltz for the mind. The key moment was when he bought an old record player from a junkshop so he could play 78rpm records, but found on getting it home that he was more seduced by 16rpm. "Just slowing stuff right down so you almost get this physical presence from the sound. If you're playing a 45 at 16, sometimes you can barely recognise the record. All these other things start happening."

'Vinyl Requiem', his 1993 collaboration with Lol Sargent, brought the turntables out from the accompanist's chair to centre stage. "It was just at the time when the CD sections in record stores had

got bigger than the vinyl sections," Jeck explains. "Some time earlier I'd had an idea, with my old record player that had a little speaker in it, of putting four of them together so it was like a quartet. The idea grew and we ended up with thinking it could be an orchestra."

In the end, 'Vinyl Requiem' involved scaffolding holding 180 simultaneously playing Dansettes ("I had a rule of never paying more than £5 each for them. And some people at boot sales didn't want more than 50p"), two film screens and 12 slide projectors. The passing of vinyl and the dawn of digital was commemorated with neither a bang nor a whimper, but crackle and volume. Despite this, Jeck maintains that he's not a vinyl purist: "I don't think I'm a Luddite or anything. I buy a lot of CDs." He adds, "What I like about the sound of the records is that their history is transparent. You hear the crackle and the scratches and the extra patina of sound that wasn't there when it was first pressed. It's gathered these things to it."

The concept of nostalgia in Jeck's music generally is a tricky one, as there's no warm glow to be had from hearing decay and fragmentation. "People have always said that [the records are nostalgic] to me and I think I probably denied it, like it was a dirty word. But actually there is, there's no way there can't be. There's something poignant about playing snatches of music. Even if people don't actually get what the record is, there's something about the sound that can transport you," he says. "It's like collecting records as a kid: you get home and put the needle to the record you just bought and as the first bars come in there's that rush, the sense of occasion, the emotional content in the music."

Earlier this year, Touch records released *The Sinking Of The Titanic*, an updating of Gavin Bryars' 1969 piece, featuring Jeck playing with string group Alter Ego. "I don't think Gavin Bryars really knew who I was, but he asked around and luckily everyone he asked seemed to say nice things." As the doomed liner resurfaces in our imagination, only to sink again, Jeck's fragments – sine wave records, a steam train theme – whirl around the strains of the hymn 'Autumn', widely believed to have been what the ship's stoic band were playing as the waves crashed over.

More recently came the solo album *Sand*, born out of tracks recorded live and edited down to their emotionally stark cores. It took a while after Jeck's last album, *Seven*, for him to feel that he'd come up with anything better. "I wanted the next one



**'There's something poignant about playing snatches of music... something about the sound that can transport you'**



to have moved somewhere else, and it wasn't until about two and a half years in that I felt I had something that had that leap. I'm really pushing the sound a lot and being quite extreme with some of the effects and overloading the mixer."

The result embodies "the grittiness, the graininess and the infinite, the eternity of sand," and the sadness of how what time breaks down can't ever be reassembled. "My mum died at the start of this year and she'd been badly ill for some time," he says. "There's elements on there of how I felt about that. The very odd thing that happened was that I was working on it at home and I finally felt that I'd finished, and I went down the post office and posted it to Mike [Harding] at Touch and I when I got home and walked through the door the phone went and it was my sister to tell me that my mum had just died. So I really feel there's some connection to her in it."

There's a plangent trumpet-like theme running through *Sand*, a snatch of Aaron Copland's 'Fanfare For The Common Man' whose bright optimism persists as the sample wavers and fades. "One or two people thought it was Emerson, Lake And Palmer's version, but actually it's a sample record from the Sixties of a rival

organ make to Hammond, showing the sort of things you can play. People have almost never recognised most things and have actually got them really, really wrong."

Does he agree that much of his music is about that unreachable quality of memory, how you can never be sure how much of what you remember is genuine and how much you've absorbed from elsewhere? "Yeah, your memories are clouded by the things that are around you now. When I go back to my parents' house and look through some old photographs, in some way the photograph is a memory of the time, but I'm remembering that memory, not the real thing. It shifts with the telling. Sometimes when you ask your parents, they tell you a different story each time."