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Ed Buller & Gary Stout: Node

People : Artists/Engineers/Producers/Programmers

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Not many bands would set up banks of modular and analogue synths in Paddington station and play free for the delight of weary commuters. Node did -- but then that's the kind of guys they are... NIGEL HUMBERSTONE talks to half of the band about free-form composition, inspired mistakes, and the lack of sex-appeal in electronic music.

In electronic terms, a node is a point of zero current or voltage, whilst in general terms it is a point of intersection, a junction -- which aptly explains its adoption as a name for the freeform electronic retro-pioneer group consisting of famed producers Ed Buller and Flood along with Gary Stout and Dave Bessell. The underlying impetus for the group is their passion for analogue technology.

Buller: "I've always wanted to do this kind of free-form electronic music with a group. Me and Flood had been talking about it for ages, but I think that both of us were worried that we'd end up in a studio being producers playing with their 'toys'. At that time me and Gary were doing the Suede album, and quite often if it had been a particularly bad day, we'd sit in a corner of an evening and just play."

An important milestone was an invitation for Node to perform at the opening of the Museum of Synthesizer Technology in Hertfordshire (see SOS October '94).

"We actually recorded the gig," recalls Buller. "Well, Flood, one of the most respected producers in the world, brought along one of the most battered DAT machines I have ever seen in my entire life! But it was a really great gig, with Bob Moog dancing in the garden."

Rob Deacon at Volume Records then got involved pretty quickly and the seeds were sown for Node to release their debut album on the new Deviant label.

"We didn't want to get involved with a big record company," explains Buller "because with Flood -- who he is and what he does -- we didn't want the whole thing being hijacked by some A&R man who got the wrong idea. It's really back to the whole idea of recapturing what was going on in the '70s."

The next step was a performance at the EMMA electronic music festival in Derby, a great experience, but by their own admission Node didn't really fit in with the melodic, new-age expectations of the audience. Retro it might be, but Node's music is an evolving blend of industrial harshness and experimental electronics.

Stout: "At EMMA we set up across the back of the stage and dropped a big curtain in front, because it can take anything up to four hours to set up, so we have talked about building wheeled trolleys so that we can have pre-wired gear set up and just wheel it on and off."

In a live situation, everyone on stage has a 16-channel Mackie mixer which they balance themselves with a L/R feed sent to the other members' monitors and FOH. In much the same way, this was the procedure adopted for recording their album at Master Rock studios, where the only requirements were that there be a large recording area.

DIRECT TO DAT

The key element in Node's musical practice is that their recordings are made live and direct to DAT, with no multitracking or overdubs. But in order for this to work effectively, everyone sets up a palette of sounds using their headphones.

Stout: "Everyone previews their own sounds and then says 'let's go'. But no one actually knows what everyone else is doing. They might ask 'well what have you got there?', 'I've got this 'clinky' thing' -- and that's it."

Buller: "One of the tracks on the album, 'Slapback' was a bit tricky to set up, as was 'Olivine', where we couldn't work out the parts, and that's where Dave came in useful. He'd work out the time signatures for us, which often didn't make it any easier. The thing about these machines is that they tend to generate quite complicated things without you realising it. With 'Olivine', Flood was doing a lot of the bassier stuff while I was doing the treble stuff -- but the bar lengths and downbeats were constantly changing, which was a combination of delays and different sequencing lengths. And again, the great thing about this gear is that you can have a seven-note sequence running against an eight-note, running against a two-note, running over a three-note -- which is pretty complicated stuff. 'Olivine' had a basic rhythmic structure so I knew that would work, but other sequences had to be pre-planned so they didn't clash with Flood's."

"The one thing we can't do is key changes, because by the very nature of a key change it's very difficult for us to all change key at the same time, although it happened once by accident! For the album, one of us used to go out into the middle of the room and shout 'OK, at the end of the next bar!' -- but I like the fact that we're not all doing similar things at the same time."

Discussions are a prerequisite for establishing tempo, key and general theme for the piece to be recorded.

Buller: "We tend to have long chats about what we'll be doing. Me and Flood do a lot of the rhythmic stuff, so we make sure we're working together -- and we just set a palette, if you like, of sounds that we've got and agree on a general direction. Gary and Dave usually end up doing a lot of the melodic stuff and we try to come up with two or three themes before we start, so for instance there'll be something like a five-note motif that we all agree upon. Invariably all the things we've discussed are completely ignored and we go off at a tangent, but that's where it gets exciting."

Dave Bessell (whom Buller has known for 20 years) studies orchestral composition at Goldsmith College, and is the musical theorist behind many of Node's pieces -- not that this holds much meaning, especially with Flood.

Buller: "We'll start reading out notes in the scale and Flood will say 'Oh, bollocks -- I'll figure it out'. And invariably he'll come up with something that fits perfectly."

Bessell also plays treated guitar, which blends seamlessly with the other electronic instruments.

Buller: "There's guitar all over the album, especially on the track 'Slapback'. He originally went through an amp, but it was getting too 'guitar-like' so we persuaded him to go direct into the desk."

"Dave's the one who will be in the middle of the room discussing a dilemma or some aspect of the piece like the 'quadratic modulation'."

Stout: "He's the musical train spotter in the band."

Buller: "It's like he'll come up with these really good scales that we force ourselves to learn. For instance, on one occasion we adopted a Bartok scale, and there are several tracks on the album where we used these 'rules'. We have these rules, and everyone's idea of where to break the rules is different, so we have a huge grey area of taste. Flood tends to break the most rules and I think that's come from working with Eno, where he's picked up that kind of 'method' approach."

CLASSICAL APPROACH

Node's approach to recording has many similarities to the method used by classical and orchestral sound recordists, whereby multiple stereo takes are made, from which a master composite is later edited. Buller, whose father is a classical composer, cites another classical similarity of trying to get as much of the piece done in one take as possible. Stout also points out that like many modern-day classical players, they are so attuned to this working method that they often stop playing when a mistake is detected.

Buller: "Yeah, that does happen with us. We'll hear a mistake and there'll be a great lull for about five seconds as half the band consider stopping, and invariably the person who was seen to 'fuck-up' didn't 'fuck-up' at all -- you know, it was 'inspired'."

"The hardest thing is keeping levels right; we've got to get the balances right so that we can hear each other. You've got to be able to hear yourself loud enough but also hear what everybody else is doing -- and sometimes that can take hours."

I asked if there are ever times when the band don't know who is playing what -- and maybe one person is playing the sound another person thought they had...

Buller: "Of course. Obviously we all have our own style of sounds, but often after a recording we'll be listening back and saying 'was that you?' Other times you'll be playing and hear this awful sound and wonder who's doing that -- and of course it's you! And that's when it starts becoming fun -- if you're thinking in a disciplined, controlled and scientific manner then you're not going to come up with the music that you really want to write. You have to go out of that and it's almost trance-like -- I would describe it as ethnic, because I do think it is quite ethnic really. You sit down, play and drift off into your own little spaces and you start coming up with things for different reasons. And you're not intellectualising about it because the great thing with sequencers is that because they're repetitive it forces things on you."

Node's music comes about through the creation of the right kind of atmosphere -- some wine, maybe, during pre-session discussions, and afterwards whilst analysing the results.

Buller: "It's great when it all comes together, but frustrating when things don't gel. And that's what's strange about us having jobs as producers -- we tend to see these things happening from the other side of the glass. With Node it's often difficult to pinpoint when something is going wrong, whereas as a producer it's your job to get people playing well together. We get situations where maybe me and Gary are in a particular 'mood'. Dave might have dropped out, and Flood is bored. You can see it on his face, and he'll patch up a few leads and launch in with this huge, completely 'at-odds' sound -- and it works brilliantly. The thing is that you can either give up or hold your ground whilst he (Flood) drives a 'bulldozer' through this 'rose garden' that we've made. And that's what Node's all about really -- it's those extremes."

PULSES

Strangely, a computer running *Cubase* is employed to act as a glorified metronome.

Buller: "That's sending out pulses, two to a bar, four to a bar and 16 to a bar -- and we use Pro 2s and Pro 4s [Kenton MIDI-CV converters]. I tend to use my own pulse system, but Flood and Gary use pulses supplied by the computer. What I use is a Roland drum machine -- I just take a sync pulse from the computer and with the drum machine I can decide what beat of the bar a sequence is going to trip over on, or a trigger is going to go to an envelope or whatever. So that means I can get fairly complicated rhythmical patterns going."

"The best way to describe it is that the computer is sending out different pulses which we put through various MIDI-CV boxes; the Kenton Pro 2 and 4, and the MPU101, on top of which you've got dials and can switch between MIDI channels -- so you can select which pulse you want at any one time. These are then used as triggers for the equipment."

With literally banks of equipment to contend with, space is at a premium and mistakes can occur.

Buller: "At the Synthesizer Museum gig I'd placed the computer keyboard on the floor because there was no room for it, and during the set I stepped on the space bar, stopping the pulse. Now me and Flood have an agreement where we're allowed to do pretty dramatic things, but I remember the look on his face as he looked across, saying 'not *that* fucking dramatic!' But the whole idea of the band is that disasters will happen and you deal with them."

Apart from computers being used to provide timing stability, Buller has little time for their use as creative tools.

Buller: "Computers -- and I've got to say this -- are the biggest problem because they are inherently restrictive and they tend to put the development side in a very small area from which you have to adopt a computer language."

But surely there is an operational language required for using analogue machines?

"Not really, because it's invented by the people who operate them.

"Analogue gear also gives you room for more experimentation. Whereas with a computer you have definite rules -- if you type in blurb then the computer won't understand it. But if you touch a knob then it doesn't matter.

"It's this concept of logic, really -- 'I'm a computer, I operate logically, tell me what you want'. Well, if I want a sound like a pear being dropped on to a washing machine, a computer's not going to understand that and you're going to be very limited."

Buller cites the frustrating experience of witnessing computer crashes and breakdowns as further justification for his aversion.

"That kind of thing's always happening -- whereas with this sort of stuff [his analogue equipment] you know it's not going to work properly from the start, and the whole idea is for you to get a result out of it. There's almost something 'final' about computers because they do exactly what you want them to do. But the great thing about these [analogue] machines is that you may not know exactly what you want to do -- you're after some degree of inspiration, a mistake or something that's going to drag you away from your thoughts."

EDITING

Following recording, very little is done at any 'mixing' level of post-production. The important assembly comes with digital editing.

Buller: "We have four stereo feeds which constitute our final stereo mix. The only other production is after we've done our stereo DAT, when we invariably stick it all back through the desk and muck about with it by sending it through a reverb or maybe a Leslie cabinet. But that's the only bit of post-production that goes on."

Stout: "We'll normally do three or four takes, because the gear has been set up specifically for that track, and then edit it all together."

Another reason for multiple takes during the album project is that invariably during a take, a piece of vintage machinery would break down or malfunction. Sound Tools was employed for editing, but for future recordings the group are considering using a 20-bit digital system, in order to capture the immense overtones and frequency range created.

Buller: "Matthew Denny at KPM, who used to produce Gong, suggested we use the Sonic Solutions 20-bit mapping system. Tangerine Dream have recently had all their stuff remastered and the difference is like chalk and cheese."

'Olivine' was one of the most edited tracks, but in general tracks would require no more than one or two long crossfades between different takes.

"We could have tried taking out sections that didn't work", explains Buller, "but one of the things with this music that we do naturally, is that it doesn't work if you start taking bits out. It's difficult to explain, but things like that little 'lag' is doing the job, it's setting you up for another interesting bit."

PRODUCTION VALUES

The essence of Node and their whole approach to making and recording music is ultimately very different to the production work that Buller is normally involved with. Is it in some ways a release?

"Totally, yeah. With the production work my responsibilities are totally different. In many ways you're overseeing the development of a band and you work within certain guidelines. With Node it is an opportunity to say 'there are no rules'. I think a lot of bands we work with would love to be able to do this, just sit down, play, and that would be their record.

"We are getting better at playing and recording in this way. A lot of spooky things will happen -- like we'll all do a key change at the same time. And that's what we're going for really -- those musical moments which are unplanned and yet happen."

ANALOGUE ELECTRONICA

Flood's main equipment is his Roland System 700, whilst Buller exploits his Moog 3P.

Buller: "We tend to pile the systems up and have this competition to see who can have the highest stack, and Flood always wins but his gear is always in far more danger of falling down. Of course, this type of equipment has become very hip all of a sudden and ultimately very expensive. The good thing is that you have to be a very dedicated user to put up with that. It does take 20 to 30 minutes just to get a sound out of it. You've really got to treat them like you would an old car -- you've got to be prepared for suffering all the grief and consequences.

"I often find myself getting lost within the equipment, especially with the Moog, because it's so big a system. Invariably I'll end up in one corner where there'll be maybe five knobs that I've learnt what to do with, and you're made aware of the infinite possibilities just with these five knobs, let alone the rest. The great thing is that you can have something like a vibraphone sound just there and then 'whoops' it's turned into a gong."

Such is the equipment's inherent unreliability and uniqueness, that few attempts are made to memorise or catalogue presets.

Buller: "It's just not worth trying. If I have a patch up at home that I'm fiddling with, then I'll try to recreate it but I'm never going to get it the same. And that's part of the appeal, having one-off sounds that you can never repeat."

Buller has his Moog 3P modular system set up at home in what is best described as a small broom cupboard. The door is left open and the sequencer lights left running, to create a kind of therapeutic electronic 'folly'.

"Yeah, I just sit here looking at it -- I'm quite sad really," jokes Buller. "I've always wanted one since seeing the cover of a Walter Carlos record."

Like Walter (now Wendy) Carlos, Buller has a great deal of respect for other technical pioneers in the advancement of analogue synthesizers -- people like Christophe Franke.

"The whole idea of syncopated rhythms on sequencers, Franke came up with that. There was this whole thing going in Germany in the early '70s where Tangerine Dream were unfortunately always seen as 'highbrow', but they were so original. You listen to the guitar on U2's 'The Streets Have No Name' and then play 'Ricochet', and don't tell me that one didn't beget the other. I mean the whole idea of syncopated rhythms and playing against yourself was Christophe. A lot of modern synthesizer technology came from those people as well; they liaised with the back-room boys that built the stuff. Modern synthesizer development came from people like Tangerine Dream and Kraftwerk building things specifically, and then that being reinterpreted later by manufacturers. The biggest mistake was sampling -- Christophe came up with this thing called 'core memory' where using a lot of magnets you write 1s and 0s into a magnetic programme, much like a digital memory but based on electro-magnetic currents. Using that he sampled -- and this was 1976 -- drum and voice sounds and had it on this little machine. He thought 'Christ, I should patent this', rang up the US patent office, and apparently Bell had beaten him to it for use in their phone messages.

"Nowadays synthesizer design tends to be based on market demands and what it wants rather than people coming out with great ideas and trying to sell them."

MODERN SYNTHS

Buller: "One of the irritating things about modern synths is that because they are sampler based, the sample is small and the loop is quite often atrocious, so you've got a terrible building block from which to start making a sound. Whereas something like the PPG Wave has digitally generated waveforms, all very high class, and they've got an awful lot of high harmonics in them."

But modern-day synthesizers are not totally spurned by Node. Gary Stout is perhaps the 'modernist' amongst the group and incorporates a Roland D50, JD800 and Akai S1100 in his setup. But in his defence he states "I use them so that I've instantly got the sounds there. But basically they're modern interpretations of analogue synths. In the case of the sampler, I use waveforms as raw data rather than specific sounds."

NO SEX PLEASE -- WE'RE ELECTRONIC MUSICIANS

During our meeting Buller and Stout would often break off at a tangent and discuss another related, but obscure topic. I had mentioned press photographs, and this led to an admission that they had briefly played with the idea of having politically incorrect images of models draped over their vintage equipment -- the idea being based on the observation that electronic music is 'mens' music.

Buller: "Let's face it, electronic music has a majority male following. There's something fundamentally unsexy about electronic music, as far as the ladies are concerned. Kraftwerk's the only exception -- because you can sing their songs -- 'she's a model, and she's looking good' -- great piece of music. What a band!"

PADDINGTON SHOW

"We'd always said that if we were going to do any gigs they should be in strange places", insists Stout. And to confirm that, Node recently performed (or legally busked, it might be said) in the cavernous surroundings of Paddington mainline train station. As a lifelong ambition of Buller who had frequently travelled through the station, the event nonetheless presented a huge logistical problem that required careful organisation and pre-planning.

Buller: "We went down for a provisional meeting, which was all pretty complicated because the company who manage the concourse are answerable to Rail Track, who own the station. We met this guy who was really into the whole idea, but explained what Rail Track said we could and couldn't do. One of the things they were worried about was us being loud and drowning out public addresses. So we suggested the easiest thing was for them to give us a feed from the public address system which we could put in our PA, and (using a noise gate and compressor) when anybody spoke it would 'duck' our music in their favour. So we went upstairs to look at the cabling for their public address system -- which was an incredibly tiny office with a little box and mic on top. Then they couldn't work out where the cabling went --

it was chaos.

"The biggest problem was going to be noise. It started raining whilst we were there at this meeting and it was 90dB and that's bloody noisy! It was torrential rain falling on this huge glass roof. The actual noise floor of the place and the ambient sounds alone is around 40-50dB. There's also a resonant tone, so the whole idea is that we're going to play in tune with the environment. And there is a note, you can definitely sit there at the keyboard and play a note that's in tune."

For the event, 'get in' time was 10pm the night before, with everything finished at 5am, leaving only a couple of hours for sleep at a nearby hotel before the day's first performance at 7.30 am. Sadly, the morning show amidst London's unsuspecting commuters was plagued by tiredness and malfunctioning equipment -- especially Buller's Moog, which he admits is in desperate need of a 50,000 mile service! They received about three complaints, which Buller expected -- he realistically sympathised that many travellers may not have wanted to have to hear their music.

The PA rig was flown, with a second flown system being placed at the other side of the station (wireless fed), but this remained inoperative due to an untraceable problem. Monitoring was via wedges, one of which spontaneously combusted next to Buller, due largely to the vast frequency range that the Moog 3P puts out -- purported to be as low as 2Hz.

During the evening rush hour, the second performance was much more of a success, attracting a crowd around the raised stage. The majority of the set was new material, interspersed with elements from earlier album sessions. Both performances were recorded onto two DAT machines (one dry, one ambient, to be released later as a live CD).

THE PRODUCERS

Ed Buller and Flood's relationship stems from them both having the same management company -- their extensive production, engineering and mixing credits confirm their position as two of the most sought after producers around. Flood is perhaps best known for his work with Depeche Mode and U2, and has the uncanny ability to reinvent an artist's career.

FLOOD'S PRODUCER CREDITS

- * PJ Harvey: *To Bring You My Love* LP
- * Tom Jones: 'A Girl Like You' single
- * U2: 'Zooropa' LP and singles
- * Curve: *Cuckoo & Doppelganger* LP's
- * Depeche Mode: *Songs Of Faith And Devotion*, *Violator* LPs and singles
- * The Charlatans: *Weirdo* LP
- * Gavin Friday: *Adam & Eve* LP
- * Erasure: *The Circus* and *Wonderland* LPs
- * Five Thirty: 'Abstain' and 'You' singles
- * Pop Will Eat Itself: *This Is This*, *Cure For Sanity* LP and 'Ciccolina' single
- * Renegade Soundwave: *Soundclash* LP & singles
- * Wolfgang Press: *Birdwood Cage* LP
- * Nitzer Ebb: *Ebbhead*, *Belief*, *Showtime* and *Big Hit* LPs
- * Nine Inch Nails: *The Downward Spiral* LP and various singles

MIXING CREDITS

- * The Inspiral Carpets: 'This Is How It Feels' 12-inch
- * James: 'Come Home' 7-inch and 12-inch
- * Nick Cave: *The Good Son* LP
- * U2: Various tracks on *Achtung Baby*
- * The Cranes: 'Paris and Rome' and 'Lilies' EP tracks
- * The Boo Radleys: 'Lazarus' remix
- * Massive Attack: 'Protection' 7-inch and 12-inch remix

ENGINEERING CREDITS

- * U2: *Achtung Baby* & *The Joshua Tree* LPs
- * Jesus & Mary Chain: 'Some Candy Talking' single
- * Soft Cell: Various singles
- * King: 'Love and Pride' single
- * Wah: *Come Back* LP and single
- * Nick Cave: Various albums

Ed Buller spent much of the '80s playing keyboards with the Psychedelic Furs, and has recently worked with Echobelly, Suede and the re-formed Raincoats.

ED BULLER PRODUCER CREDITS

- * Suede: *Suede* and *Dogstar* LPs and singles
- * Pulp: 'His 'n' Hers', 'Babies', 'O.U. She's Gone' EPs and singles
- * That Uncertain Feeling: 'On The Edge' 7-inch
- * Delicious Monster: Debut LP
- * Ultra Vivid Scene: LP tracks
- * Catwalk: 'Damascus' and 'Ballerina Country' EPs
- * Primitives: 'Spells' EP
- * Spiritualized: 'Feel So Sad' and 'Run' EP's and LP tracks
- * Thieves: LP tracks
- * Hollow Sunday: 'Wait For It' 7-inch

* The Boo Radleys: 'Boo! Forever' and 'Adrenalin' EPs, and *Everything's Alright Forever* LP

ENGINEERING CREDITS

- * Thieves: 'Through The Door' EP mix
- * Lush: 'Sweetness and Light' EP
- * Hearthrobs: 'Turn Away' 7-inch remix
- * Primitives: 'Smile' LP track mix
- * Jennifers: 'Just Got Back Today' 7-inch
- * Mica Paris: 'Great Impersonation' 7-inch
- * Aswad: 'On and On' 7-inch remix
- * Jim Capaldi/Eric Clapton: *Some Come Running* LP
- * God: LP tracks
- * David McComb: LP tracks
- * Nomad Souls: LP tracks

MIXING CREDITS

- * Slowdive: LP
- * This Picture: 'Highrise' single

Node the debut album, is out now on Deviant (dvnt5cd). *Terminus*, recorded live at Paddington Station, will be the next single release.

NODE EQUIPMENT

ED BULLER

- * ARP Omni synth
- * Kenton Pro2 MIDI-CV interface
- * Korg Poly 60 synth
- * Moog 3P (x2) modular system
- * Moog 2P modular system
- * Roland JD800 synth
- * Roland Juno 60 synth

FLOOD

- * Akai S1000 sampler
- * Apple Mac Quadra 800 computer
- * Eventide H3000 & H4000 Harmonisers
- * Moog MiniMoog synth
- * Moog Series 3C modular synth + sequencer
- * Roland System 700 modular synth
- * Oberheim 4-Voice synth

GARY STOUT

- * Akai S1100 sampler
- * Alesis Quadraverb effects
- * Alesis D4 drum module
- * Korg Poly Six synth
- * Mackie mixer
- * Roland D50 synth
- * Roland JD800 synth
- * Roland Juno 60 synth

DAVE BESSELL

- * Alesis D4 drum module

- * Atari STE 1040 computer running *Cubase*
- * Digitech Whammy Pedal
- * Emu Proteus 1 and 2 sound modules
- * Gibson Les Paul guitar
- * Marshall JMP1 Preamp
- * Rocktron ProGap
- * Roland volume pedal
- * Yamaha RV1000 reverb
- * Yamaha 10/10

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