

Redshift

Interview December 1996 with David Hughes

Mark Shreeve is one of the best known and most popular of the current crop of British electronic musicians. Mark began his musical career in the 1980's with a number of groundbreaking albums such as 'Legion', 'Assassin' and 'Crash Head' and his powerhouse style of music has been extensively used in films, TV and radio and has even taken Mark into the nation's mainstream pop charts. Redshift is Mark's latest venture into the world of electronic music, featuring a style which is heavily influenced by the free-flowing, improvised music of the early seventies, recalling what many feel to be the "golden age" of electronic music. Here, the members of Redshift, Mark Shreeve, Julian Shreeve, James Goddard and Rob Jenkins, discuss the band, their influences and the evolution of their sound with David Hughes.

DH Having heard a few pieces by Redshift, the first question has to be why the apparent sudden change in direction?

MS Yes, this is different from what I normally do - although I'm going to continue doing that anyway. Redshift is a completely separate project.

DH How did Redshift come about?

MS When we performed at the KlemDag Festival in Holland last year we added a fifteen minute, semi improvised, piece using a sequencer-driven style of music and we actually enjoyed doing that more than the other stuff! It was much more relaxing, although we weren't really sure how it was going to turn out. When we came back from Klem I more or less had the new modular system (Moog 3C) sorted out and we simply decided to make some music using that as the central instrument. Graham Getty and Dave Law heard the Redshift album and asked me to perform at Jodrell Bank and, although we hadn't actually considered doing the album live—largely because I didn't want to think about taking the modular synth out into a live situation—we sort of fell into it.

DH How did you get into the Moog modular synth?

MS Essentially, it was Ed Buller and Chris Ringham who really got me into it. Ed is the producer of the band Suede (and a founder member of NODE) and has lots of money. Chris runs a company called "IO Digital Productions" and he also repairs vintage synths. They convinced me that I wouldn't be able to get the sound that I was after with just a MiniMoog and persuaded me to part with all of my money. And, it turns out, they were right. You just can't get the depth of sound with a basic synth. When I bought it I spent 3 hours unpacking it and then two hours fiddling with it before deciding I couldn't get a sound out of the thing! Then I finally admitted defeat and got on the phone to Martin Newcomb of The Museum of Synthesiser Technology and he helped me out! It's a full time job just controlling the thing!

DH Do the logistics of controlling the Moog detract from actually making the music?

MS If it's working, no. Taking it out live for the first time, my main worry will not be that it will go wrong while I'm using it, rather the worry will be if the thing will work at all when we take it out of the crate! Frankly, I have kittens thinking about it. The oldest bits are roughly thirty years old and it originally came from somewhere in Beverly Hills. I've customised it quite a bit by adding lots of modules to it - I even have some of Keith Emerson's modules in there. Martin Newcomb has also lent me two envelope generators to help me out for the gig.

DH Do you have any kind of backup?

MS No, not really. I am taking a basic computer along, an Atari ST, which will provide trigger signals for some of the synth voices and also drive the sequencer modules so that they will sync with each other. I've got the basic sequences written into the computer but the problem with those is that you can't change them easily. With lots of the sequences on the analogue system you can change them while they're running and that's the beauty of analogue synths - you can keep things moving smoothly from one section to another. You can't easily change sequences if they're in the computer.

DH What sort of gear will you be using for the live event?

MS My gear list for the live concert is along the lines of... I'm using the extended Moog 3C, a normal MiniMoog, a Studio Electronics Midimini, a Roland D550 module, an Akai S1000 for some sampled Mellotron sounds of my own and an Oberheim Expander. There's also a Korg Wavestation which I'm using as a keyboard controller and also a Yamaha DX7 as a keyboard controller so there will be lots of digital stuff in there but we'll be trying to keep that hidden as much as possible! Actually, we're not really anti-digital, we just want a wall of sound.

DH What about the rest of the band?

MS James will be playing a Kurzweil K2000, basically for sampled Mellotron sounds - we're not daft enough to use a real Mellotron. He's also got his Korg Wavestation which has some wacky sounds and also a Logan string machine which sounds fantastic through a phaser unit. Julian will be playing his Juno 60 through a Lexicon Vortex and he'll have an ARP 2600 modular system - brave man that he is...

DH There's a fair mixture of digital and analogue gear in that list. Do you think that the "retro" revival has about run its course?

MS The retro-analogue revival has now been going on for about eight years and that's the longest revival I've ever heard of! This kind of (analogue) technology has now been around since the mid 60's and since then, there's been revolution after revolution in keyboard technology. More powerful, better, faster, cleaner. One thing that you notice about the seventies was that the music changed with the technology. Then you get to the 80's and the DX7 and everything goes digital. Suddenly everybody's using the same presets and then people begin to realise that everyone is starting to sound the same. They're all playing the same bloody presets. We've had thirty years to get used to synthesis of one kind or another and I think that everyone is now taking a step backwards and looking to see which bits we liked the best. I don't think that analogue synthesisers were ever used enough or that we ever got the best out of them. When I kick the modular into action and it does the bass sequencer sound, I cannot conceive of what other instrument, any other instrument, that can get even close to the richness and quality of the modular. It's not just a question of low end, or the amount of bass in the sound, it's the sheer quality of sound - and the reason that the sound feels so 'fat' is that it's moving constantly, to the extent that it's going to give you grief at some stage. All the time it's moving, almost to the point of being out of control. With a digital synth, every time you throw a key you get the same sound, and it's the same as the last time you pressed that key. It never changes. It doesn't matter how many parameters you stick on a (Roland) JD800 you're still playing the same sampled transient - it's like a photograph. It never changes. It's dull. Whenever you play the modular it's different. Every time a note comes out it's different from the last one. There's something liquid about the sound, something sumptuous about it. You can sample it to your heart's content but then you're just playing back the same transient. Every new synth that comes out these days is the same apart from the (Kurzweil) K2000 which is a very warm instrument. And there's the (Korg) Prophecy which has a terrific sound - maybe a little too dance orientated but still very warm.

DH What sort of school does the music follow? The smooth AirSculpture school or the hard, industrial NODE school of EM?

MS If I could do the NODE sort of music, I might. I love listening to their sort of stuff but it's never the sort of music I've been involved in myself. Redshift's music is a sequencer driven kind of music, more like (Tangerine Dream's) Rubycon except that we'll be using a guitarist for the second half.

(At this point, the other members of Redshift, Julian Shreeve, James Goddard and Rob Jenkins, join in the conversation...)

DH What's it like working with Redshift?

JG It's very much a group thing. We're all contributing in more-or-less equal amounts although Mark spends a lot of time on the modular, sequencing. Essentially, we sort of get the sequencer going and then improvise quite a bit. We will literally play around, playing chords on the mellotron and then maybe merge that with one of Mark's sequencer lines over the top, and our parts more or less evolve naturally.

JS It's all good fun actually. Everybody seems keyed into this style of music. Everyone comes from a

different sort of background which see
MS to make it more interesting.

DH Rob, how did you get involved with Redshift?

RJ I've not known Mark for all that long actually, about a year I think. I helped him set up a Soundscape (hard disc recording) system and we became fir

MS friends after that. Then he found out that I played guitar quite a bit, helping out on Ash Prema's first CD, and then we did a small radio jingle together and that's when Mark asked me to join Redshift.

DH What do you bring to the Redshift party?

RJ Basically, some texture that you can't quite capture with synths. The style is more Robert Fripp, Adrian Belew or Dave Gilmore-ish. I have my own studio although most of the (live) album will be recorded as it's played on the night though we'll put it together here in Mark's studio and we may do a few little overdubs in my studio if we need to.

DH Do any of you have any ambitions to follow Mark into the business?

JS I think I would although it's very much a case of making time for it. I have a day job although I would like to do this sort of thing so it's a problem of fitting it all in.

JG Not right now. Personally, the band is really turning out good stuff and its starting to look like an ongoing thing and not just a live act. We're just at the first album point and it will be interesting to see exactly what happens. It could go in all sorts of directions. Of course, there's the usual problem in that it's a small market because the music doesn't get played on Radio 1 and so people don't get to hear it so they don't go out and buy it.

RJ I've been working at 'Real World' studios with Simon Collins, Phil Collins' son, and also with my own band. We're about to release an ambient album called 'Under Dark Skies' and we've had some interest from 'Time Recordings'.

DH Where does Redshift go from here?

JS If there's enough demand for this, I can see it going on for a while. There's already been some interest from over in the States, with one of the TV channels showing a lot of interest. Depends on how many people show they are interested. How long's a piece of string? Also, a video is definitely in the pipe line. This kind of music definitely lends itself to images.

DH Chris Franke's Sonic Images label released Mark's previous album, 'Nocturne'. What's the relationship like with Sonic Images? Have they heard the Redshift material?

MS I sent them two tapes many moons ago and I haven't heard anything from them since so I have to assume they're not interested. This is the problem with the electronic music market. It's extremely small but it's the same old problem: if you don't get any radio play, you don't get any sales and the electronic music market is so small these days that, well, I'm only having an initial batch of 1000 made, just to see how it goes. I don't really know how it will be received. I'm afraid the days of 'Legion' selling 20000 copies are long gone. Of course, when we released 'Legion' we were with a major record label and there was some airplay but now, I'm afraid there's basically just dear-old Ashley playing this kind of music.

DH Finally, the most important question has to be, is Mark a nutter on his bike?

JG I couldn't possibly comment...

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