

# MARK LANEGAN BAND PHANTOM RADIO

Mark Lanegan is almost 50. He is also about to release a new album, titled Phantom Radio. It will be the ninth under his own name, but combine it with the collaborative albums he's made, be it with Isobel Campbell, or Duke Garwood, or as 50 per cent of the Gutter Twins (his ongoing partnership with Greg Dulli), or his legendary first band the Screaming Trees, then the total is nearer 20. Then there's his guest spots with Queens Of The Stone Age, and, before then, Mad Season, the mid-'90s Seattle supergroup that featured members of Alice In Chains, Pearl Jam and Screaming Trees. And that's before we count his many occasional or one-off collaborations, as the singer on records by the varied likes of UNKLE, Martina-Topley Bird, Moby, Soulsavers, Melissa Auf der Maur and Creature With The Atom Brain. In total, Mark Lanegan has made close to 50 records. Fifty years, 50 records. What has this life taught him?

Mark Lanegan smiles broadly and gives a chuckle.

## **“That there's more to life than writing songs every day.”**

He used to get up every morning and write something. Leave it for a few hours, come back, chip away again at night. By the time it came to make a record, he had a mountain of material, only a small portion of which survived onto the finished article. But for Phantom Radio, just like its celebrated predecessor Blues Funeral (2012), he recorded every song he wrote. It took two and a half months to make, but that's because these days Mark likes to take things leisurely. He would write a song. Bring it to Alain Johannes, his producer, who then arranged the recording at his West Hollywood studio. Once the song was recorded, Mark took a few days off and then wrote another. He estimates he worked a couple of days a week, and no more than five hours a day. This is not the workshy regimen of a slacker, however, but the discipline of a true craftsman.

Mark, typically, regards his modus operandi in rather more modest terms.

“I've got better at distilling what makes a successful song for me and what doesn't. I think I've become more



discerning. But,” he laughs, “less active at the same time. It's a nice balance to strike when you're 50! I don't get as crazy about it when I was younger. It was a lot harder, when I was younger, to write songs.”

Mark's younger days were crazy by any definition. A troubled kid in the small Washington State farm town of Ellensburg – in and out of jail for theft and drug-dealing – at age 20 a doctor told him he would be dead by 30 unless he addressed his alcohol intake. Lanegan would subsequently joke that heroin therefore saved his life. He saw more violence in the Screaming Trees than in any correctional institution: the band he joined in 1984 whirled around a vortex of sibling strife as its songwriting brothers punched their way through a succession of progressively more powerful albums, until 1992's Sweet Oblivion brought the Trees a modicum of commercial success to match the respect they had earned among Seattle scene peers like Nirvana.

Parallel to his band's turbulent journey, Lanegan began releasing a succession of solo albums, primarily acoustic, which revealed a stentorian voice and forbidding

persona at which the Trees' florid, rootsy psychedelia barely hinted. His debut, *The Winding Sheet* (1990), grew out of an aborted attempt by Lanegan and Kurt Cobain to record an EP of blues covers. Lanegan's treatment of Leadbelly's *Where Did You Sleep Last Night* survived (and indeed provided Cobain with the template for Nirvana's later celebrated version), but it would be the masterful follow-up, *Whiskey For The Holy Ghost* (1993), that confirmed Lanegan's credentials as a truly unique artist.

Another 10 years elapsed, however, before he made an album that pricked the Ghost's aura. *Bubblegum* (2004) saw Lanegan emerge from the wreckage of the Screaming Trees and his on-off struggles with addiction to create a new version of the blues: part-acoustic, part-electro-rooted contexts mostly produced by Alain Johannes, with a floating cast of helpers, some illustrious (Josh Homme; PJ Harvey) others not. Seven years of collaboration followed before Lanegan, now a paragon of clean living, delivered the towering *Blues Funeral*, its Krautrock curlicues adding new textures to his molasses-thick doom canvas.

And now *Phantom Radio* builds on the same foundations: produced by Alain Johannes, and that voice intoning deep truths hewn from the bleakest realm. "I saw the feet of pilgrims bleeding," Mark sings on *Judgement Time*. "I saw whole cities drowning, I saw whole armies dying." You believe every word; no other living singer's voice feels so charged with Biblical portent.

Which is all part of the craft, because Mark Lanegan is not as black as he's been painted. His chief compositional tool on *Phantom Radio* was his phone – specifically an app called *Funk Box*. "I didn't bother to hook up my 909 and 808 this time," he says, "because the app had 'em. I'd write drum parts with it then add music with the synthesizer or the guitar."

*Phantom Radio* grew organically from these synthetic roots, taking in Mark's ongoing love of Krautrock and also an '80s new wave show on Sirius satellite radio, his favoured aural companion as he drives around Los Angeles. "They have a few good shows – Little Steven's garage punk one is great – but the '80s one in particular I like," he says. "That's the music that was happening when I started making music. And although the Trees drew on Nuggets psychedelia, 13th Floor Elevators and Love, we were actually listening to Echo And The Bunnymen, Rain Parade, the Gun Club. A lot of British post-punk. We loved that stuff. I just waited until I was in my late forties before I

started ripping it off."

Trip-hop – a peculiarly British '90s post-punk variant – is the inspiration for at least one of the album's peak moments: *The Killing Season* ("My soul's in traction/Cops and criminals and all that crawl get into action"), co-written by Dutch violinist Sietse Van Gorkom.

Lanegan's generous collaborative spirit delivered another co-write, from British guitarist Duke Garwood, with whom Mark made 2013's dustbowl-desolate *Black Pudding* and who now offers the music for *I Am The Wolf*, a Lanegan signature tune. Mark's favourite song on the album, meanwhile, is *Torn Red Heart*, an intensely tender meditation for a broken heart that's like The Velvet Underground's *Pale Blue Eyes* orchestrated by Angelo Badalamenti. He also has a special mention for *Floor Of The Ocean*, which balances sheer catchiness with a deceptively bleak lyrical reflection on a life lived on the hard shoulder: "Clear eyes, can't avoid the searchlight/Hope that they don't find me/Find me where I'm lying." Joining him on vocals is Shelley Brien, Mark's girlfriend for the past 10 years. The singer considers the song, and offers a telling observation.

"It's rare for me to be moved by my own, but that song has a sadness that actually affected me when I heard it back. I'm very fond of it."

The album title stems from a lyric in *Smokestackmagic*, which features on the EP, *No Bells On Sunday*, that will precede the album's release – five songs written during the same period but which were, in Mark's judgment "too goofy" to fit with the rest. "I'm less apt to throw away a song that might be a little weird nowadays. I can make it work with whatever I've got going."

Amidst this new Mark Lanegan album's spooked headspace, reeling at the beauty and danger amid each melody, it feels like the *Phantom Radio*'s been switched on for all eternity. Notoriously hard to please, its creator pronounces himself as happy as he can possibly be. "I never have really questioned the lyrical process," he says. "I go with whatever presents itself. And often what presents itself is considered dark or moody. But sometimes I'll actually hear the same thing I'll hear in somebody else's song. When that happens it's a pleasant experience."

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