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new album

## OPTICAL DELUSION

# Orbital

“A human being experiences himself, his thoughts and feelings as something separate from the rest [of humanity] – a kind of optical delusion of his consciousness. This delusion is a kind of prison for us, restricting us to our personal desires and to affection for a few persons nearest to us. Our task must be to free ourselves from this prison...”

You many have seen this quote attributed to Albert Einstein on social media, the archetypal Smartest Guy Ever apparently having an out-of-character religious epiphany. It certainly leapt out at Paul Hartnoll of Orbital who spotted it in Michael Pollan’s 2018 book *How to Change Your Mind: What the New Science of Psychedelics Teaches Us About Consciousness, Dying, Addiction, Depression and Transcendence*.

“As soon as I saw ‘optical delusion’ I thought Oh hey, that’s the album title,” says Paul. “It just seemed to say so much about how people construct their own realities, how we see patterns that aren’t there, how we see what we want to see.

“But it’s actually a misquote. He never quite said that. In the German original what he’s really saying is that human experience is as relative as physics. Wouldn’t it be good if we could accept that, and find a kind of universal theory of everything for the human race? Then you look at everything from history to art to your Twitter feed and you think yeah, that’s what we’re all trying to do all of the time...”

Hence ‘Optical Delusion’, the tenth original Orbital album and the latest in a burst of renewed post-pandemic creativity for two brothers who’ve stayed at the top of their game longer than anyone from the post-1988 Class of Acid House. Earlier this year an Orbital thirtieth anniversary package ‘Thirtysomething’ – featuring reinterpretations of ‘Chime’, ‘Satan’, ‘Belfast’ and more by fans ranging from Jon Hopkins to ANNA to David Holmes, Nplus studio versions of Orbital live favourites – reintroduced Paul and Phil Hartnoll to a worldwide fanbase.

Then the return of festivals showed new fans across the world why the Orbital live experience is rightly regarded as the must-see of electronic music. Not that there wasn’t a false start and a couple of cancellations. “I’m not saying we’re the victims here,” says Phil, “but when your first two dates are Moscow and Kyiv...?”

Now with ‘Optical Delusion’ the Hartnolls dig deeper into the unquiet psyche of our increasingly surreal and disordered world. Sketched out partly during lockdown but fully recorded in the uncertain After Times, the album summons up conflicting emotions and sometimes beguiling images from years when the science fiction doomsdays that the Hartnolls watched on TV as kids finally came true. There are mesmeric tracks with names like ‘The New Abnormal’ and ‘Requiem For The Pre-Apocalypse’ and ‘Day One’. But there are also straight-up bangers and ethereal cosmic dreams, abstract sound wars and deeply human songs of separation and loss.

And it all starts with a bang. Lead single ‘Dirty Rat’, an outright Fall-meets-Front-242 class rant with vocals by Sleaford Mods mob orator Jason Williamson, harks right back to the Hartnolls’ days of politicised anarcho-squatpunk. It began as a remix swap (Orbital did the Sleafords’ ‘I Don’t Rate

You') and morphed into a comic, brutal, bass-driven harangue not so much against our rulers but at the petty, mean-spirited, frightened, Mail-reading voters who put them there: the people who are "blaming everyone in hospital/blaming everyone at the bottom of the English Channel/blaming everyone who doesn't look like a fried animal."

"That track is just a capital letter, isn't it?," says Paul. "Big, simple, loud statement. It's punk rock, a real wake up kind of track." He likens it to, of all things, ancient illuminated manuscripts like the Book of Kells, where the monk would give the first letter of every story a huge treatment for maximum impact.

"I love Jason's presence," says Phil Hartnoll, "he's just brilliant and this is an old-school dance music vibe, with bits of Cabaret Voltaire and even The Shamen in it. And it's really simple statement. You voted for them, so take responsibility for your own actions."

Also key to the album is opening track 'Ringa Ringa (The Old Pandemic Folk Song)' which returns to an Orbital truism, that time always becomes a loop. This chugging, cyclical Orbital groove gives way to an unnerving past-meets-present timeslip fit for 'Sapphire And Steel' as goth maenads The Mediaeval Baebes materialise to sing 'Ring O'Roses' – the innocent nursery rhyme whose roots are in the Black Death.

"I've always liked folk music and mediaeval sounds," says Paul, himself an occasional Morris dancer. "I had the basis of that track and I wanted to spin it off somehow." Trawling his archives he stumbled on The Mediaeval Baebes' version of 'Ring O'Roses' "and my hackles just went up. I was like, my God, this is the original pandemic folk song."

The creepiness of such a dark song of mass death morphing into a playground chant nagged at him. The ring of roses being the fatal buboes on the skin of plague victims, the sneezing and the sudden falling down... the COVID resonances were impossible to dismiss. And yet it had been diluted over time. "It just fitted so perfectly. It kept haunting me that it was suddenly relevant again." Now as track one on 'Optical Delusion', 'Ringa Ringa' sets the scene for a tour of the post-plague world and all its illusions and strange wonders.

This being Orbital, there are collaborations galore on the album, the roles once played by Alison Goldfrapp, Lady Leshurr or David Gray now filled by new talents. London singer-songwriter Anna B Savage contributes a compellingly fragile, Anohni-like vocal to 'Home', in which nature reclaims the scorched and vacant mega-cities. 'Day One' is a pulsing techno track featuring the singer Dina Ipvavic. Paul got in touch with her after working on a score for a sculpture show of giant robotic installations by his friend Giles Walker during the pandemic. First Paul cut up his own score and Ipvavic's vocals on the track The Crane, which appears on the deluxe version of the album. Then he thought, Why not work with her for real? The result is school of 'Belfast', a bassy dreamscape with vocalised clouds billowing above.

The pensive 'Are You Alive?' adds to the Orbital product range of existential questions ('Are We Here?', 'Where Is It Going?') in collaboration Bella Union signings Penelope Isles, AKA brother and sister act Lily and Jack Wolter. "They're our studio mates, they work upstairs!" says Paul happily. "And they've both got amazing voices."

The prototype came from a 6Music project called 'The Virus Diaries' that Paul did with his old schoolmate, the poet Murray Lachlan-Young. Every Wednesday the two had to deliver a track; this one was originally called 'Garden Centre'. Then Paul began to wonder what it would be like with sung vocals. Lily Wolter's lyrics developed it into a haunting breakup song and it grew a gorgeous musical box melody – all the poignancy of the last few years in one place.

The burbling, Protean, self-spawning acid track 'The New Abnormal' seemed to almost choose its own name ("I envisaged a sort of 1970s public information film of the new situation, like, this is how you're going to have to live now..."). And 'Requiem For The Pre Apocalypse' skips between retro, Orbitalised drum'n'bass a la 'Snivilisation' and a strange nostalgia for the days before the world stood still.

"When the pandemic hit, the aggressive tracks went by the wayside a bit," says Paul. "I went more into soft or melancholy mood. The 'oh fuck, what have we done? What's going to happen now?' vibe."

But Orbital are Orbital and never far from the dancefloor. “Eventually the more abrasive bits came back into the fold...” ‘You Are The Frequency’, first of two tracks to feature mysterious vocalist The Little Pest, surrounds the listener with warped voices ordering you to the dancefloor (Phil: “we wanted the idea that the music is kind of absorbing you”). And the second, the sinister ‘What A Surprise’, traps you in a paranoid electronic hall of mirrors.

Phil recorded ‘What A Surprise’ in a late night session with The Little Pest “whispering, muttering words into his phone, just for placement really,” says Phil, “but it sort of stuck.” The result is an insidious internal monologue of fear and distrust. “It’s all about how we’re all radicalised, not just fucking terrorists,” says Phil. “We’re all driving each other to extremes.” The optical delusion again, the human curse of seeing patterns that aren’t there, from gods and demons to modern conspiracy and QAnon.

In another nod to Orbital’s resurgent past the cover artwork once again comes from fine art painter John Greenwood, creator of fantastical grotesques for the covers of ‘Snivilisation’, ‘In Sides’ and Orbital’s most recent album, 2018’s ‘Monsters Exist’. Orbital had just had a slick Mark Farrow cover for ‘30 Something’ – this is a return to the overripe and bulbous techno-organic constructions that somehow express Orbital’s own uncontrollably fertile sound.

“There’s just something about the his paintings that resonates with our music absolutely perfectly,” explains Paul. They told Greenwood the title and concept and the painter came back with “this weird golden robot creature that’s somehow trapped in in the shrapnel of its own luxury. That was his take on it! And we were like, Oh my God.

“We just love his work. I don’t think he ever shows us anything that we don’t like.” Paul thinks that Greenwood approaches art the way Orbital approach music. “It’s like he wants to fill every space with something weird and interesting, and we find ourselves doing that too. Look, there’s a gap there, stick something in it...”

There are gaps in the future that Orbital are desperate to fill too; there will be tours and festivals and rooms and fields full of people. Those long paralysed months when we had little to look forward to but a Zoom DJ set made Paul and Phil appreciate the things that make life worth living.

“Oh my God, it was so nice!” says Phil “So good just to get out and about and see people’s happy faces again in the crowd. We really missed it. The dynamics seem to be changing so getting a lot more younger people too...”

But before then, time to embrace the Optical Delusion – not those malign systems of self-deception, but our own powers to shape the world by how we see it, and so make it more beautiful. To discover patterns we create simply by perceiving them, like music itself.

To find all the wonderful things that aren’t really there – but mean everything anyway ■

