



Light years past tangerine dreaming, British trio **Radio Massacre International's** celestial mechanics have forged a near perfect union of sequencer electronics, Floydian trippery, and kosmische psychedelia. Story by **Darren Bergstein**. Photos by **Dustin Fenstermacher**.

THE STARS MY DESTINATION

Fade in: November, 2007, winter's cusp, an evening's air revealing the barest tincture of seasonal frost. A church on a Philadelphia campus, straddling the city's razor's edge, anchoring the college's expansive landscape to the ballast of nearby housing projects. Within the cathedral's scalloped walls, isolated from the grim urban confines surrounding it, there escapes an array of sounds determinedly incongruous to the avenues of concrete and monolithic dormitories rising outside. On a makeshift stage near the cathedral's central dais, two figures stand seemingly motionless, contained by an oasis of illuminated boxes, rectangular white keyboards and a spider's web of cables, knobs, connectors. Emanating out of a black tower at stage rear is a steady stream of light pulses, dancing about architecture. A third figure sits behind another keyboard, a guitar dangling from his neck. The speakers flanking the stage might well be resurrected Van de Graafs; the sonic torrents they exeunt mime bolts of electricity arcing between poles, igniting the air, shaking the pew's foundations, rattling cochlea. Inside the churches' centuries-old vessel stirs an altogether different vessel, one shoring up the necessary propulsive thrust to depart its terran moorings, but the destination isn't quite the heavens—beyond any corporeal metaphors, point of arrival transcends the Magellanic Clouds, into the blackest ever black of space.

Faces, styles, genres, even: such signposts become hazy, indistinct, losing whatever caché they'd gained because of the musicians' sensate approach, but immersion into any of British trio Radio Massacre International's sprawling recordings emphasize greater schema, broader strategic imperatives. Meeting at university in the Northeast of England at the end of the '70s, RMI (as they are often nicked)—Steve Dinsdale, Duncan Goddard and Gary Houghton—sit atop the mantle of a long-vibrant underground "scene" (néé, association) whose impetus stems from a 70s Berlin iconography orbiting around avatars

named Tangerine Dream and Klaus Schulze. However, unlike many of their brethren, some notorious (and well-regarded) in their own right—Wavestar, Mark Shreeve, AirSculpture, Redshift, Andy Pickford—RMI's pedigree doesn't collapse under its own weight precisely because they eclipse the sum of their influences. The band has raised on-the-fly composition to a fine art, bringing to bear, on both their back catalog and live performances, a near two-decades worth of intuitive synergy the likes of which have not been seen since, well, the force majeure of a previously aforementioned trio. It would be foolish to deny that TD's sequenced mini-fugues don't cast a familiar glow on RMI's surface, yet the opulence on display is neither pallid homage nor celebrity rip-off.

Looking in the mirror, the reflection bounces back brutal but clean—perhaps this is why the group christened their label Northern Echo (their geographical lineage actually has something to do with it). Like many Krautrock aficionados, Dinsdale had his mind blown away by the complexity of 70s prog and the storied epic synth constructs shored up by his idols. In person, his passionate exuberance for those musics comes out with obvious brio, an integral component that informs his, as well as mates', playing. As we chat informally before the evening's performance—Dinsdale eagerly assuming the role of group "spokesman," Houghton interjecting when he can get a word in edgewise, while Goddard is away on stage prepping their equipment—it's clear that RMI share one important TD maxim. "We're more about sound exploration rather than straight-on composition. I always went for the extended idea in music. I remember looking at Tangerine Dream's *Zeit* when I was a kid, checking out the cover, looking at the track titles, being fascinated by them, getting immersed in the mystery of the whole package and knowing that I had to hear it. We undoubtedly carry on that tradition."

Dinsdale, in fact, isn't shy to admit the

elemental physics of their m.o., most of which arises from their own history as a performing unit. Predating RMI, he had been a drummer for five years, gigging with various bands around London. Fame and fortune were not forthcoming, so when he met Goddard and Houghton, the idea was finalized to stick to their own guns, make their own destiny. "From 1980-1987, we recorded approximately 12 albums on cassettes, all of which was a precursor to RMI as it is now known, all of which allowed us to hone our collective skills together. The reason the band developed was purely because we wanted to create something we could enjoy doing and listening to ourselves."

Electronics certainly are the be-all/end-all when it comes to RMI's stock-in-trade, yet attendance in the Berlin School doesn't take up all the hours in their day. You want stylistic transcendence (in more ways than one)? Look no further than their latest opus, *Rain Falls In Grey* (Cuneiform), wherein the group say hasta la vista to the late Syd Barrett, as much a formulative influence on their post-adolescence, their compositional dogma and continuing evolution, as the sequencer brigade. Here's where RMI's space rock tendencies nova in all their Floydian glory, silver machines embarking on interstellar overdrive in their quest for the Rubycon. The album not only works wonders, it sardonically references a title from the band's venerable back catalog: people would really like space rock if they would only give it a try.

"It's been a natural development to introduce "rockier" elements into our sound," Dinsdale explains. "We also function as a guitar/bass/drums trio, which is our collective history. Thanks to some recent great collaborations with Damo Suzuki, Ian Boddy, Martin Archer and Cyndee Lee Rule (who plays violin on *Rain Falls in Grey*, and accompanied the band on their recent Northeastern U.S. mini-tour), we've expanded our style considerably. We've been active nearly 15 years—we have



opposite and previous: Radio Massacre International in Philadelphia, November 2007.
left to right: Duncan Goddard, Gary Houghton, Steve Dinsdale.

to take things elsewhere. The new album illustrates this well. We are aware that there is more of an audience for progressive rock than purely synth-based music and we're happy to attract that audience. After all, no one wants to play for 10 people when you could play for 300, but our motivation remains purely musical."

Hardly a space rock novice myself (a complete catalog of Pink Floyd, Ozric Tentacles, and Hawkwind attests to that), I had brought some expectations, and no small measure of trepidation, with me into the church on that crisp November night. Halfway in to the first half of RMI's gargantuan set, any prior worries evaporated into the late autumnal air. Sans any MIDI set-up, and the conspicuous absence of laptops or computers of any kind, guitarist Houghton, mellotronist/keyboardist Dinsdale and master knob-twiddler/electronics whiz Goddard blasted away on all nacelles, creating a tableaux of synthesized galactic anomalies that became a palpable force of nature. It reaffirmed to me how stunning electronic music can be in the flesh when done properly—barring few exceptions across the categorical divide (Taylor Deupree and Steve Roach, each occupying quite opposite poles, come to mind)—RMI fairly brought down the tabernacle.

Such latent power is even implicit in the group's name. Originally a duo known anagrammatically as DAS (Duncan and Steve), the moniker dates back to the early 80s and those unsung epic cassette marathons, the two, prior to Houghton's involvement, largely jettisoning traditional and hackneyed methods of composition. Interestingly enough, RMI's recording ethos conforms to the kind of aesthetic that improv jazz musicians often ascribe to. The group does, in fact, consider themselves totally freeform musicians. "Oh, very much so," says Dinsdale. "I like the comparison, being a jazz-head myself. I love the fact that jazz records were made in a day, yet created to last forever. We're actually at our best when we are totally free, when we lose any harmonic constraints and explore abstract/dissonant sound. We don't have the astounding 'chops' and harmonic understanding of the great jazz improvisers, but we do have an idea of how to use space and texture. Though there is some reliance on traditional scales, the improvisational magic comes out when we create that freeform ease of flow."

So what defines a typical RMI recording session? Therein lies the rub, and that innate magic, that is so characteristic of the group on disc. Dinsdale reveals that "typically we will get together with a blank canvas, start to play informally, do some impromptu jamming. We record everything as things do occasionally take an unexpected direction. It's all pretty much a collective effort with no one really in charge—the core idea is the process of

music making itself. Sometimes we will arrive with the odd composition and expand on it. 'Better Days', from *Rain Falls In Grey*, is a good example of this. That track started life as one of Gary's chord sequences." Houghton does indeed sparkle on the piece, his lines rippling the fabric of spacetime, recalling both the graceful fluidity of David Gilmour and the axlegrease of Hawkwind's Dave Brock, whom the guitarist cites to be as profound an influence on RMI as the Berlin-school alumni.

Considering the forces that pull at the trio's collective muse, their formidable back catalog speaks volumes about the dichotomy between styles. RMI's early albums on the UK Centaur label are hopelessly out of print (usually fetching a king's ransom when they crop up on eBay), but they remain well-documented on their own Northern Echo imprint, alternating studio-bound excursions with equally fiery live events. Cuneiform's involvement with the group (beginning with the ometimes astounding *Emissaries*, then the *Rain Falls* follow-up), in addition to their presence at several notable progressive rock festivals here in the US, has solidified their standing in the EM "community" and made for a reputation approaching legendary proportions. Dinsdale elaborates that "the main rule in making albums is there are no rules. That includes instrumentation. We create really with no master plan—the structure is imposed after the fact. We spend a lot of time editing. I am very keen on getting the track running order and flow of an album correct, and I like to spend time making a piece sound cohesive rather than just a collection of performances." Pluck out any Northern Echo recording—the variety of tonal colors, the vivacity of a given sequence, the juxtaposition of contexts in the overall mix, is nothing short of riveting, precisely the kind of imaginative sweep and ideastic fervor that gave Tangerine Dream's Virgin recordings their unique stamp.

Progressive (in both the literal and genre-defined sense) they might be, but TD's legacy is still a tough nut to crack—that outfit's history, the pervasive forensics of its influence on all manners of contemporary electronica, cannot exist out of RMI's innate dream theory. Which begs the question: where to take the template? With the Berlin school curriculum so pertinent to the group's fundamental design, are they capable of fomenting a widening dynamic within such clearly-defined contexts? Does such an operative mode feel like an albatross, or is it simply the syntax within which the band functions? Artists always need to ask such difficult questions: are there limitations?

"I think you're spot on when you say it's a syntax," Dinsdale concedes, with a wry tone in his voice. "I don't think true progression is really relevant or possible, but it's enough for us to just sound like Radio Massacre Interna-

tional. That context is an established musical form, but I think we bring a freshness and authority to it. Free jazz could only have been invented once and yet I really love seeing the established free improvisers just doing it because each night it's an in-the-moment experience, pure unadulterated, unmediated music. We're not concerned with progression so much as the continued exploration of a language. When you come and see us play, you can see that we're striving for something important. As long as there's a sense of occasion and a feeling that the music is unfolding in the present, then we're doing our jobs. We truly haven't thought about Tangerine Dream or Klaus Schulze for years. I remember Schulze once saying that music is only a matter of quantity, not quality, which pretty much sums him up. We're really not that impressed with what these artists achieved on the whole."

Uh-oh: anyone hear the sound of a slowly opening can of worms? Dinsdale's inference seems to be simply that working in an understood, established context is fine, but where is the barometer? Is it necessary to maintain a vitality of ideas, or is it enough to achieve a vibrancy of sound and sense of cumulative energy rather than hoping to innovate record to record? "We keep our music vital and fresh by continually changing the technical set-up we use," Dinsdale says, "so we always have to think a bit about what we're doing. I listen to our old recordings when duty calls and am frequently baffled as to how we did certain things and what certain sounds ended up like. The aim is to serve the music in any way we can by being there to play it whenever the chance presents itself."

Robert Fripp has long embraced similar perspectives in attempting to describe how and when the muse beckons—and when the time is right to access it. Dinsdale: "We're all agreed that *Rain Falls In Grey* is a milestone for us; our out-of-print *Borrowed Atoms* recording has a scale and cohesion we're very proud of. *Zabriskie Point* is also a band favorite as it was a bold decision at the time to eliminate sequencers and go for an arrhythmic, textural approach." Of course, taking in to account RMI's considerable oeuvre, context really does become key. In that regard, ingratiating oneself in the band's consistently excellent recordings can only be complimented by sharing in that penultimate live experience; such a connection is absolutely necessary to exalt in the trio's molten power. Nevertheless, whether in the sanctity of your domicile or the hallowed atmosphere of the cathedral makes for an arresting time spent in front of Dinsdale's, Goddard's and Houghton's stroboscopic boxes. Just dive in, man, and let the silicon chips fall where they may. *

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