



ATOM HEART BROTHER

ALEXANDER TUCKER

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Seemingly plucked from the love drenched, psychedelic late sixties and dropped slap bang onto a stool behind a neatly lined up series of effects pedals in the unforgiving noughties, softly spoken artisan Alexander Tucker is in every sense a man born at the wrong time. But it's our gain and the 60s loss. Constructing mind altering, foreboding folk with guitar and electric mandolin Tucker's latest album *Portal* is frankly a masterclass in invention and acoustic manipulation. Meeting up at his North London home for a cup of tea and a chat about the album and his other projects our conversation began with talk of Syd Barrett. Obviously.

I remember hearing Syd Barrett for the first time when I was staying with friends in some ramshackle house in North Wales and I just couldn't believe it

When I was living in Brixton, I was living with my friend Duke Garwood, he's a smashed up, free improvisation, sort of blues player, really good...erm... yes so there were loads of records at that house. They had Pipers At The Gates Of Dawn and The Madcap Laughs and the Barrett album as well. I liked some Pink Floyd stuff, but it wasn't until I got, until I got into that album [pointing at his copy of Madcap Laughs]... it's incredible, so good.

If you haven't had access to music like that before, it sounds cheesy, but it opens up a whole new world

Yeah, getting stoned as well helps. I hate it when people say you have to be caned to hear...but I think it's true for some kinds of music

Definitely. I can't imagine how I would have got into King Crimson and Steve Hillage without marijuana, my friend's house and a lot of time on my hands

And you know those people were doing exactly the same when they were making the music

It'd be rude not to then wouldn't it?

Exactly, like when someone from The Wire writes about Bardo Pond I'm like, 'that reviewer doesn't smoke ganja!' You know he doesn't understand them at all, I think they're an incredibly misunderstood band, they're amazing.

The Wire is often so...

With rock stuff it's so narrow minded, you say you're totally open to all...someone plinging a rubber band through a ring modulator or something, but you can't see the intricacies and depth in rock and metal.

Like anyone, I think they have favourites

Oh god I know, at the moment it's grime, obscure free-jazz and older, like they do an article on a 70s experimental band or something and something that's connected to the arts in some way.

I guess we should talk about the new record. Last time I spoke to you was after *Furrowed Brow* had come out and you mentioned you'd already started *Portal*

Yeah I'd started the last track on *Portal* here and a track called Husks I'd started those two, and that was at the same place I'd recorded *Furrowed Brow*. That

was in Kent, an amazing place, it's an old converted granary with an amazing 70s desk, nice mics and two inch reel-to-reel. It's fucking great man. So many places have gone over to digital now and it really does make such a difference when you're making stuff for vinyl, you can really hear the warmth and the depths that you get from recording onto tape. I think now they're quite expensive to buy, there's plenty of reels on eBay, second hand stuff you can use, I think it's fine I don't think it affects the quality that much.

So did you record the new album at the granary?

Yeah it was really good. This one took a year to record the parts, really I don't why it took so long. It was a lot of to-ing and fro-ing, I always work quite slowly, I've always liked to just do bits and pieces you know? Start off with an idea then do a rough mix of that, then keep listening through and see what that kind of presents to me, and what that suggests. The way I write the things is by sort of figuring them out on the loop pedals, but when it comes to recording the actual things I don't use the loop pedals hardly at all. I get mistaken for being a loop artist or some computer sort of whiz, I can just about send emails and look on the Internet and that's about it.

So when you're recording you have to play and record each and every part separately rather than just recording the layers of guitar captured by the loop pedal?

Basically rather than loop songs they're repetitious songs really, the compositions are built on repetition, which is something I've always been interested in since I was in my band Unhome. I was just taking these vocal lines, taking one piece and stretching it over the whole composition in a repetitious way. Yes... so...yes I would basically play what I would play for a few seconds to put on the loop pedal, I would play the same thing for five or ten minutes and by the end your hands are 'arghh!'. It's quite laborious, but I think you can hear the dexterity in the music if you know what I mean? I think when something's looped it doesn't have as much character or movement in it, when you actually play something through over and over you can feel the undulation, the movement, the ebb and flow of the music, rather than, 'ok I'll record this, take this slab, then I'll loop it on the computer and lay these things next to each other'. I don't think you can get the same syncopation that I'm looking for in the music. I really like everything to be one homogenised kind of solid block, even though they're loads of different parts. But there's something about playing along to a repetition that's totally different from playing along to a loop.

Some people do tend to dismiss you as 'that loop guy', which I imagine you'd take as an insult to your guitar playing and your song writing

Exactly. It's funny I have no problem with the loopers, but there's boundaries. You can't pass however many seconds you're allowed to travel forward on the loop pedal. It's taken me down a path I wouldn't necessarily gone down had I not been using them. I use the loops with recording for building up a vocal drone kind of sound or like err...the track *Energy For Dead Plants* that was kind of built up partly built up using loop pedals, sending nano-loops onto the other loopers and building up these sort of phasings, blipping electronic layers...

Watching you play live the thing that strikes me is that you bring it back to absolute basics in that as you're listening you're hearing the song being built

I love that, I love seeing the bare bones. I mean that's what I love myself, sitting down, putting down the first layer and figuring out what'd be good next.

It's fascinating to watch...

I would see people play live and they'd have a four track or just have some files all ready and just press play. They might play along or sing, but that was kind of the only interaction, but that's not enough, I really want to see the whole piece evolve in front of me.

It gives you more leeway to change things according to the mood

Oh god yeah, every gig I do is a variation upon a theme. I remember reading about Bob Dylan, that he'd never play the same song twice, there'd always be a variation on the composition. Obviously there's staple things that I have to do to build the thing up, but I've always wanted that balance between improvisation and composition and song and sound. It's trying to get all those separate elements to sit in the same place.

Another thing I took from your live show is that you seemed very nervous performing

Oh yeah totally, oh god yeah. Before I play I'm so nervous and when I'm first sitting down and putting the first layer down, because I still want the flow of the gig to obviously go well. Like when I do fuck up I just turn it off and say 'sorry!' and start again. And I think people appreciate that and they see the humanity behind it and there's definitely no bravado with it at all. I'm so happy when I get the first layer down, 'great'. The thing is I've learnt with these things is when I do make a mistake now I almost just go with it. If there's a slight chord that goes wrong or a slight pause or if something's not right

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then I'll embellish it on the next layer and go with it. So by the time it's built up the mistakes are in there, but they're actually a part of the composition.

And now working within song

Yes and that's very much where I've come from with music. I remember there was a point where I was, 'oh my god I'm never going to be able to play like my mates or people that I like', when I try and play guitar like that it just never works for me. So I'll just go with the mistakes, I'll play around with the fuck ups and see what happens. That was really good for me, really liberating to be like, 'fuck it, that's me' I can't fake it, but I really want to do it my way as well, I don't want to have to learn chords and how to read the music, the ways you're supposed to do. I've always hated that as well, I've always been a real contrarian, if I'm told I'm supposed to do it one way I'll want to reject it immediately and I'll just want to do it the way I've been able to figure it out. I've been playing piano a bit more recently, I've just been playing the black keys as there's less of them and they're more spaced apart (laughing). It's really seeing the relationships between them and suddenly I'm doing these little songs. I love it when I get a new instrument I don't know how to play or anything and I just go to work on it, pull out of it what I want.

It's good that you're continuing to expand your musical horizons by trying to get to grips with new instruments

Definitely, I've been playing loads more cello recently and I think the album after this one will have lots more cello and piano on it. For me the new album has got a orchestral edge to it as I love a lot of contemporary classical stuff like Steve Reich. The cello I'm still doing my open tunings, almost blues tunings, which is the same as guitar. If someone gives me a guitar with a straight tuning or if someone wants me to improvise with them in a straight tuning I'm like, 'fuck, I don't know where to put my fingers'. If I put one finger down with an open tuning it sounds great. But tunings are amazing they open such a huge world of possibilities and I can see relationships clearer with a tuning.

Have you thought about integrating other people into your work, either playing live or in the studio?

I've got to get it together actually pretty soon as I'm

supposed to be doing more of an ensemble thing at Supersonic this year. I've been playing a bit with Darren O'Sullivan from Guapo and my friend Duke Garwood, I did a Latitudes session recently for Southern and I got him in to play some saxophone and clarinet. It's difficult, from playing solo and using the loop pedals you obviously become self-sufficient, if I could I would just play everything, if I could multiply myself I'd do that. Not that I'm a control freak really, but as soon as you get other people in so many other things are out of your hands and it becomes a different and new thing. Part of me thinks I should just do a separate project with a band, under a different name as I feel it's a totally different thing. But I think it could still be good, with Dan he's playing like keys and effects pedals and things and Luke's playing some horns and I'm thinking of getting a drummer in as well, but...

Oh that's some step

That's why a band like SunnO)) are totally stuck in that place, if they bring in a drummer then everyone will just say they're just another metal band. I mean I love music without drums, but a shit-load of it does. Like loads of Spaceman 3 stuff doesn't have drums on in it, but then the tracks that do I just fucking love it. Like the track 'Suicide' on *Playing With Fire* when the shaker comes in at the beginning and the kick drum comes in, you're like, 'oh yeah fucking excellent'.

It'd be interesting to see how it could work

It'd be something quite Moe Tucker-ish in a way, floor tom, kick, snare, cymbals. Like Faust had that really splashy cymbal, you can tell he had a really small kit...

I think it would have to be like that, something quite understated

Definitely, definitely, I'll see how it goes. I've got to get some practices in. When is Supersonic again? (laughing). I've got plenty of time.

Moving on are you still gilding buddhas to pay the bills?

I haven't been doing that much, I've been doing a bit of specialist decorating to bring in the pennies. I haven't been doing too much though, this year I've only worked three or four weeks so far. I've had a bit of money coming in from music and that, but I haven't done gilding in ages. I love gilding though (laughing).

You're lucky to be able to work that little

Well I'm always ten pounds left on my overdraft or borrowing money off my girlfriend, so it's not that great. I should work more really (laughing). It just shags me out so much man. When you don't do it that often, you're building all these massive scaff towers and stairwells to do all this cornice work, yeah it's pretty knacker. But it's good though for the playing actually. When you do that work, when you come home you're a lot more dextrous, you've been using your muscles all day so you can really sort of surpass your playing in a way. I've written some of my best stuff when I've come home from work.

If you're physically tired it clears your head too I find

Oh yeah totally. I've been sort of recording an album with a friend at Bush House on these old studio reel to reels, he works nights there, so he pops off to do a programme now and again and we record in between that time. And yeah it's weird being totally sleep deprived and really stoned at the same time. One of us has been playing while the other one manipulates the tape loops, so we've got three tape machines going round all these microphones. He was manipulating the tapes while I was playing cello and I was so tired, I was totally out of it, everything's so laconic and slowed down. It's really good though, it's really deep, layered of spooling tape and feed-backing tape sounds, it's sounding really good, we've just got to finish it and find someone to put it out. I think it's called *Imbegoden*, the project, but we'll see (laughing). You could do these tape things forever, they sound so delicious.

You're very fortunate to have found that place then

Totally. I don't know the legality of recording stuff down there and releasing it...fuck knows. p

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