

Guided Radiohead to stardom has his own chillout project to shout about. ANDY GILL talks to Chris Hufford

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Talent and Management tend to occupy completely different parts of showbiz. Talent is those rare, brave souls who face the camera or the microphone, who come alive on stage or on film, and who often seem to live in a fantasy bubble quite at odds with the world inhabited by you and I. Since the 1960s, rock music has become a multi-billion-dollar industry, and music management has accordingly become a specialised branch of business. There are specialised courses about it, and well-attended discussion panels at music-industry events; which is where Chris Hufford found himself a few years ago, feeling like a fish out of water.

"I sat on a board at South By South West (SXSW) once with all these other managers, answering questions about the business," he says. "They were serious, professional types, giving it all this highfalutin nonsense, and when it came to me, I felt like an amateur!"

The irony was that while these other, "professional" managers may have had all the answers and all the connections, and knew the theory and the economics inside-out, they didn't manage Radiohead, and he did. They must have hated him.

Hufford is immensely likeable when I visit his base in leafy Oxfordshire to discuss *Between Voices*, the new album by Anti Atlas, the orchestral chillout project that he has created with the producer/composer Ned Bigham. A self-confessed "sad old hippy", Hufford grew up listening to Pink Floyd, Jefferson Airplane and The Doors, and

was naturally drawn to the music industry - albeit originally to the technical side, rather than the business end. With his business partner Bryce Edge, he built the Courtyard Studio, in the right place at the right time to record the "shoegazing" indie scene that came slouching out of the Thames Valley in the early 1990s. He engineered albums for Slowdive and Chapterhouse, and, somehow along the way, he and Bryce found themselves managing Radiohead, and, subsequently Supergrass.

When Radiohead's "Creep" took off in America, he stopped doing studio work and devoted himself to the band, packing away his own dreams of musical creativity. "The last studio work I'd done had been the final Slowdive album, and it was a nightmare," he recalls. "I was effectively working 20-hour days, and it was physically draining, so I decided I had to stop doing that and put all my energies into Radiohead."

Then, sometime in 1994 or 1995, he got a call from Ned Bigham, the drummer/composer he had met and befriended while engineering sessions for Bigham's band D'Influence a few years before. "He called me again with this idea for using orchestral samples," explains Hufford. "I was quite intrigued. Everybody was sampling drums by then, but nobody was sampling much else. Ned needed someone he trusted, like me, to take it further. And it was something I could do without being 'musical', more of a producer/engineer thing - just chopping things up, adding beats and other stuff,



Happy to be making, rather than marketing, music for once: Chris Hufford (left) and Ned Bigham are Anti Atlas

sending files back and forth to each other. The first album, *Future Nostalgia*, was basically Ned's, with me effectively just advising him."

Featuring leisurely downtempo and chillout grooves built around orchestral samples and fronted by mild, cooing vocals, *Future Nostalgia* received an unexpected boost when the instrumental track "Caves" started to get played on Classic FM's late-night programme. "The DJ asked if we had any more stuff, so we thought, let's strip the vocals off the album, add some other stuff and see if we can make it a bit more interesting," says Hufford. "So we started doing that, and every time we finished a track, we'd bang it in to him, and he'd play it! We had a fan! Knowing how this industry is, it was unbelievable to get this kind of airplay. We ended up having the

whole album played, track by track; then when it was all finished, he ran a special on it."

Well aware of which side their bread was buttered, Chris and Ned decided to record the follow-up as an instrumental album, so Ben would play tracks, and then think about adding vocals later. Thus did *Between Two* appear earlier this year, followed recently by its vocal sibling *Between Voices*, on which various singers add their own lyrics, with surprisingly effective results.

Peaceful, sleek and unhurried, the Anti Atlas sound is painstakingly built from a vast archive of string and horn fragments sampled by the classically-trained Bigham, mostly drawn from late Romantic composers, this being his favourite musical era.

"I'm a huge fan of Mahler," says Bigham. "For me, he's the

king of composers. I was reading a history of ambient music the other day, and the first chapter was on Mahler - he's seen as the godfather of ambient music, because he has these moments, particularly in his slower symphonies, where everything kind of freezes, and these high string notes are held. So he was definitely the main inspiration. Other late Romantic composers whose work lends itself to this are Debussy, of course, Dvorak, Puccini occasionally, Suk, Holst... I even trawled through the whole Ring Cycle in search of usable moments! My only criterion was that composers should have died at least 70 years ago, for copyright reasons."

Are there, I ask Bigham, any affinities between different composers that ensure their samples work well together?

"Well, the Nielsens, Mahlers and Bruckners all create nice low, droney string figures that work well as string pads," he says. "Then the French and Czech composers, the Dvoraks and Debussys, have nice motifs which can work really well on top of the pads. But there are no rules; it's a huge amount of trial and error. One song might have 300 different samples that have been tried out before we find the one that works right."

"One thing I like about working with strings is that they're very forgiving about timing,

when you're matching loops together," he adds. "I do a lot of transposing and reversing of the samples, too. And I might get three samples of the same piece and [use] them all differently, to make something new."

Having completed the instrumental album, the duo cast around for suitable vocalists to augment the pieces.

"We had a few people in mind that we thought would be good," says Hufford. "Gemma Hayes we knew through our sister management company, and another guy, Richard Walters, had been doing stuff with Ned. The others came via One Little Indian, who gave us a list of Myspace sites of people who were

doing similar stuff, so we filtered through those and picked the ones we liked. We gave them the instrumental album. The singers wrote the lyrics, the top lines, everything. Bizarrely, they all picked different tracks!"

Hufford is clearly enthused by his return to the creative end of the music industry: "I've only just started being an artist again, but hopefully I've been doing this long enough now to know how to keep them separate. But I don't want to trade on the connections with Radiohead and Supergrass - I've too much respect for them."

'Between Voices' is out now on One Little Indian

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