

artificial intelligence

HOW A FAKE BAND LIKE THE GORILLAZ CAN KEEP IT REAL

Christ, I wish more bands were this fake. Galvanized by the vagaries of fiction, interviews would be animated affairs filled with colorful insight, industry hacks might have to find real jobs and, who knows, someone eventually might zero in on the music. I know, it's a pipe dream, but one can hope, right?



By now, the back story is common knowledge: In a bid to remove himself from the tedious side of the music business, Blur's Damon Albarn hatches a master plan for an eclectic side project. Enlisting the visual talents of *Tank Girl* illustrator Jamie Hewlett, Albarn creates a virtual band of cartoon misfits, who go on to catch worldwide attention with a 2001 debut.

Like any good series, we're getting drama, rising tension and some new faces with the sequel. The latest Gorillaz installment is a dense work of surprising substance, and quite possibly one of the strongest chapters in Albarn's career. And, no, that's not hyperbole.

Any fan of serious comic books will quickly tell you that the preferred nomenclature is "graphic novel." It's a bit of an open-ended term referring to those more expensive comics with darker themes (and often nudity). If the group's eponymous debut was tagged as the work of a catchy, cartoon band, then the new one is clearly more deserving of the graphic novel tag. A brooding, deep and haunting disc, *Demon Days* is still very much in touch with the group's fondness for dub and British melancholy. Morphing its composition like a wily virus, the band has replaced the loping, off-key tenor of Del the Funky Homosapien with an army of guest vocalists, from London's Roots Manuva to De La Soul, Dennis Hopper and the Happy Mondays' Shaun Ryder. Meanwhile, the buoyant, feel-goodism of Dan the Automator's production is replaced by the urgent artistry of Atlanta-based DJ Dangermouse.

If this were, in fact, a graphic novel, Dangermouse's presence would far exceed that of a passing novelty or a snarky new sidekick. Make no mistake, this a fully decorated, totally new super hero crashing the scene to combine powers against the forces of evil. So, let's meet our new hero...

danger mouse

THE MAN WHO SAVED GORILLAZ



Having split so much of his time between London, Nigeria and New York over the past few months, downtime at home in Atlanta must feel a bit disorienting for the twentysomething DJ. As we coordinate some details for our interview, Dangermouse's Clark Kent side is bumbling around trying to remember his own home phone number.

If his beat-mixing prowess counts him as a super hero of sorts, then this slightly sluggish start on a warm June morning reveals his cover as the mild-mannered, former University of Georgia communications major, Brian Burton. His account of working with the Gorillaz is as cool and removed as a veteran's, as though the man sitting to chat in his living room is only a muted version of the real deal, the compromised face necessary to interact with civilians who, without having been there, just couldn't understand.

"The whole thing was a challenge," he says. "We were in the studio a long time. I learned so much from Damon as far as making music. I just feel really proud to be part of such a great record."

He ought to feel proud. After all, he's the only real human being who's taking credit for the record. Working with a fictitious band has its benefits in the studio as well as on press junkets. Burton says he found the arrangement refreshing.

"I think it helps to separate the music from the people who are making it," he says. "You've got a lot to do that has nothing to do with the actual music. This can relieve some of this tension, being able to free yourself from all of that."

As a producer, Burton is used to dodging the limelight. Although he's worked with luminaries such as MF Doom, Jemini and Goodie Mob's Cee-Lo, more often than not, the press has zeroed in

on the MCs rather than the beatmakers. All that changed a few years ago when Burton's limited-run remix album, *The Grey Album*, rocketed the Atlanta producer to international notoriety. Reconstructing Jay-Z's *Black Album* solely through source material lifted from the Beatles' *White Album*, the record set off critical acclaim and numerous legal battles between Burton, EMI and Sony. The trouble sparked skirmishes between the companies and Internet activists defending filesharing of the album.

Eventually, the DJ was contacted by Damon Albarn and invited to try working with the Gorillaz for the group's sophomore album. Anxious to get back behind the scenes and a long-time fan of Blur, Burton jumped at the chance.

"We have similar taste in music, but different ways of thinking about making music," he says of Albarn. "The thing that attracted me to the record was that they already had so many great demos of some great songs written. It was just a matter of figuring out what to do with them. Some were beefed up, some were totally redone until you didn't even know where you'd started."

At this point, it's just as surprising to think of Burton's own roots. Two days after our last conversation, he's flying back to Nigeria to continue working with Albarn on an as yet unnamed project. Meanwhile, his full-length collaboration records with Cee-Lo (collectively dubbed as Gnarlz Barkley) and MF Doom (Dangerdoom) set to drop in coming months. It would seem Burton's got it made. When asked if there are any MCs or artists he still daydreams about someday working with, he diplomatically the names to himself.

"There's a couple," he says. "But, I'm getting ready to work with them." ►►

EMI, THE WORLD'S THIRD LARGEST MUSIC COMPANY, REPORTED A 13-PERCENT DROP IN RECORD SALE PROFITS THIS YEAR. THE COMPANY ATTRIBUTED THIS IN LARGE TO DELAYS ON TWO MAJOR ALBUMS: COLDPLAY'S X & Y AND GORILLAZ'S DEMON DAYS.

BAD SEEDS

Asking why *Demon Days* is so much darker than the debut seems reductive. As Albarn has offered in recent months, the first was recorded in 2000, while this one was recorded in a period characterized by an unpopular war, civil liberty clampdowns and the looming threat of terrorism (or at least the threat of heightened terrorism warnings). Murdoc, 2D, Noodle and Russel don't directly finger many of these symptoms specifically, instead translating it all into a pervasive anxiety and disillusionment.

Foregoing the familiarity of guitar-based pop, *Demon Days* references stumbling dub, Middle Eastern influences and hints of societal decay—a reflection of Albarn's work in Blur as well as with Terry Hall and Turkish dancehall artist Mushtaq.

Burton spent a total of six months working with the band in London, although one of the album's strongest and descriptive moments was tracked here in the States. Enlisting the help of the San Fernandez Youth Choir, Burton has created a reverb-heavy throng of zombie schoolchildren to people the record's first single, "Dirty Harry." The track reads like a post-apocalyptic mash-up between Pink Floyd's "Another Brick in the Wall, Part II" and the Specials' "Ghost Town."

This is the second time, chronologically, the album visits the idea of disturbing children. After a campy, horror B-movie introduction and the slurred-speech haze of "Last Living Souls," *Demon Days* veers into "Kids With Guns." Half critique on socialized violence, half nod to the Japanese horror industry's obsession with youth gone mad, "Kids" echoes the distrust of youth in *Suicide Club* and *Ringu* (Yanks caught it remade as *The Ring*) and a post-Columbine unease.

Perhaps it's no surprise the group's aesthetic should mirror aspects of Japanese pop culture. Both parties have shown themselves keen on youth street fashion, pop music, a subtle fear about what the future may hold and a hyper-awareness of the artificial.

It is the Japanese, after all, who brought us the world's first computer-generated pop star.



Allegedly hand-picked by Murdoc for his good looks, 2D sings in a melancholy drawl reminiscent of, say, Damon Albarn. With drain-pipe jeans and tussled blue hair, he's a sure sex symbol for the two-dimensional.

On team work: Singer is a more important role than bass player, but every time I've mentioned this to Murdoc, he's punched me right in my face.

On idols: Personally, I like to see myself as the singing man's David Beckham. I do think Mike Skinner bases his voice on me.

Parting words: Can you lend me 50p for the bus? My driver's not here yet.



According to Gorillaz lore, this teenage orphan was delivered mysteriously to the doorstep of the band's studio in a FedEx crate. Trained as a special operative for the Japanese government, she's more together than the rest of the group and wrote the majority of the new album.

On Albarn: Damon has been incredible supportive of my musical explorations. He's quite a bit older than me and therefore is in a position to offer a great knowledge of music through his record collection. His iPod is bulging!

On the new album: Our studio is built on top of an old graveyard and situated next to a landfill site. But, I think some of the darkness is due to the fact that I became a teenager. I just started mopping around, throwing tantrums and feeling like the world didn't understand me. Typical adolescent stuff.

On band solidarity: I think it is wise not to sleep with your mouth open if you have any gold teeth. Murdoc has stolen many of 2D's personal possessions and sold them on eBay. Including, I've heard, 2D's own liver.



The sole American of the group, Hobbs relocated from Brooklyn to England, where he was picked up by Murdoc. After having the ghost of his late friend, Del, exorcised from him, Hobbs spent the majority of his downtime haunted by eating disorders, health nuts and living like a recluse in Ike Turner's basement. At least it produced a cameo on the new record.

On collaboration: Working with the people who made *Three Feet High and Rising* [De La Soul] was just great. He's [Roots Manuva] got a real color and vibrancy to his works. They sound like urban psychedelia. I guess we'd still like to work with Dr. Dre. He's held the heavyweight belt for so long.

On the Gorillaz sound: Gorillaz take sounds and music from everywhere. One of things we try to avoid is the "filing" side of music. We more try to combine it together. For me, hip hop sits alongside grime, crunk, banger-anthems and chilled-out dub. It's all good.



A conniving, ill-mannered Satanist, plagued by halitosis and megalomania, Nicalls may be the real brains behind the Gorillaz machine. Recently ejected from the Playboy mansion for stealing ashtrays, we find him about as caustic as the Fall's Mark E. Smith.

On haters: Most people would rather criticize other people for being outstanding than to do anything great themselves. That makes my personality a living reminder of what a bunch of losers they are.

On fair warnings: That's the classic villain mistake. "Look, foolish humans, I'm about to destroy your planet, and you've only got a short amount of time to stop me." Forget it. I'd just do it before they realized.

Parting words: Whatever.

IDORU

Idoru: A Japanese word derived from the English 'idol'. An artificially generated or virtual celebrity persona.

Developed by music promoters at Hori Productions, Virtual Science Labs and JVC Records, "Kyoto Date" was designed specifically as the perfect virtual idol. As one of her fan websites boasts, she never slights her fans, misses a gig or loses sex appeal. Ten people collaborated strictly on designing the face and facial expressions of Date, also known as "DK-96" ("Digital Kid 1996"). Some 40,000 polygons comprise her intricate body, while stats on her personality have been disseminated with similar detail. Despite steady fan mail and two singles ("Love Communication" and "Touch") charting in Japan in 1997, she failed to take the country, or the world, by storm.

The cast of the Gorillaz, meanwhile, seems like Kyoto's perfect inversion. These aren't easily manageable, prefab stars, but management's worst nightmare. Since their last album, these virtual musicians have allegedly spent time in a Mexican jail, fallen in with religious cults, battled drug addiction, fought an infestation of zombies and holed up in their studio deep inside a haunted English castle. All this on top of weathering a Hollywood meltdown surrounding various film deals.

Finding a band of *real* humans capable of soldiering through such a year would be a tough task, even for the Libertines. For the Gorillaz, it's all just a good laugh.

Requests to interview the band are deflected by publicists who explain the characters insist on doing their own press. No talking to Damon, 'cuz it's not his band.

At the foundation of the band's two-dimensional existence is Jamie Hewlett's art. According to Albarn, his partner is influenced from everyone from Bugs Bunny creator Chuck Jones and Scooby Doo's Iwao Takamoto to the Japanimation team of Studio Ghibli (*Spirited Away*, *Howl's Moving Castle*). The illustrations that bring the Gorillaz into existence are impressive, and crucial to maintaining the illusion.

From the start, Albarn has been careful to stay in character. Chatting with *Rockpile* back in 2003, talk of the Gorillaz was cleverly and politely dodged with a near supernatural cool. At the mention of the side project, a cell phone or a soundcheck issue would pull the Blur frontman away momentarily.

"Talking about [the music] is something that [the band] likes to do," Albarn once told MTV. "I don't think they appreciate us stepping on their turf."

"I think Gorillaz showed Damon that he can have commercial success apart from Blur if he wants it," Blur bassist Alex James reflects.

"Jamie is amazing," says Dangermouse, describing the Gorillaz studio environment. "He'd bring in pictures of the band as we were doing the songs, and it just helped us visualize what we were doing."

One can't help but wonder if there were any plans to integrate Dangermouse into the band as a character himself. Burton denies it.

Even if he's revolutionized the group's sound, he knows where the boundaries lie.

"I'm producing them and doing some music, but really they're the band," he levels. "I'm not trying to be in the band."

gray areas

GORILLAZ MIST KEEPS
DANGERMOUSE IN THE CLEAR

The Grey Album at once sensationalized and popularized DJ Dangermouse (Brian Burton). It also threatened to bury him in a morass of copyright law and legal morass.

"I was trying to test out a new method of sampling, which was not adding new elements musically, just making them sound differently," he explains. "Using the Beatles record, I wanted to see if I could do recontextualize the whole thing."

Burton says he originally intended *The Grey Album* to only go so far as friends and mix-traders. Given the celebrity value of the source material, it wasn't long before *The Grey Album* had become one of the most downloaded albums on the Internet. It soon caught the attention of EMI Music, the owners of the Beatles recordings contained on the *White Album*. The underground phenomenon wasn't lost on Sony Music/ATV Publishing (a joint venture between Michael Jackson and Sony), who owns the Lennon-McCartney songs themselves as compositions. Oddly enough, no one's quite sure *who* owns the rights to the George Harrison songs. And, of course, Jay-Z's people weren't keen on anyone else making money off of Hova's retirement speech.

The cease-and-desist letters began pouring in, not only to Dangermouse, who had only made 3,000 "promo" copies of the CD, but also to retailers and websites distributing the album online.

To protest against EMI's clamp down, music activists held "Grey Tuesday" on Tuesday, February 24, 2004. Thousands of websites posted free downloads of *The Grey Album*, despite harsh warnings from EMI.

"There was a long time where I was wondering what I was going to do, and what I'd be able to do in the future," says Burton.

The Atlanta DJ's fears really kicked into high gear when litigious threats began to suggest he might owe EMI money generated by future projects of his, as the *Grey Album* wasn't an official, trackable release.

Sony posed much less of a threat, because of the burden of proof is greater where the rights to compositions (as opposed to specific, master recordings) are concerned. Previous court rulings have said that even sampling portions of a composition does not constitute infringement, so long as the work's "overall essence or structure" is not appropriated. As Burton had cut up and modified so many disparate pieces of the Beatles' original songs, Sony was left with a weak case.

This left EMI Music as the main danger to 'Mouse's professional and financial future.

"Morally, I didn't do anything wrong," Burton insists, even now. "So, I was just going to stick with it and see what happened."

As it turns out, his wait-and-see approach may have paid off. In what must be one of the music biz's most incredible "if you can't beat 'em, join 'em" moment, Burton seems to have dodged a mountain of trouble by fraternizing with the enemy.

The Gorillaz are signed to Virgin Records, an EMI Music company. As a collaborator and producer for Gorillaz, Burton is in effect a Virgin artist. What this means, according to journalist Richard Cromelin of the *LA Times*, is that so long as Dangermouse is working with Gorillaz, it's an EMI-subsiary cutting his checks.

Naturally, Burton is hesitant to talk too boisterously about the sort of unspoken amnesty this arrangement has granted him. But, it looks like it's done the trick.

"It's safe to say that I'm not in any kind of mess now," he says finally, probably more than a little relieved. ■