

AjoiA interview

AjoiA are a musical collective headed up by former M People percussionist Andrew "Shovell" Lovell and acclaimed producer Anthony Gorry (Gwen Stefani, Moby, Richard Ashcroft). Formed after Lovell retrained as a psychotherapeutic counsellor and Gorry recovered from a stroke, the band's aim is to "redefine the boundary between electronic music and wellness", informed by the latest in nervous system science. They release their debut album, *The Essence of Being*, on 31 October via Defected Records.

You guys met while living in Ibiza, but how did you come to form AjoiA?

Anthony: When Covid hit I ended up with terrible anxiety. I rang Shovell up, started talking about anxiety, built-up stress, and all this kind of stuff, and he said, look, I've been making these sound baths with therapeutic sound instruments, gongs, singing bowls, all this stuff, shall I send you some? And I was just like, definitely not, it sounds like total hippy crap. But eventually I went into the studio, and started creating this music with him. He then shared it with his clients, people who were in end-of-life care, some people that were having cancer treatment, parents that were struggling with their kids etc, and he said, mate, they're all loving it, shall we do more?

Shovell: I wanted to bring back the chill out room via ancient instruments and the technology of today and tomorrow, and I wanted to take it to football fans, to the pub, people who go to clubs... And he was the man to do it with!

Anthony: But then the day before Covid restrictions were lifted, I woke up and said to my missus, I feel really unwell. Within a couple of hours, I was at Ipswich General Hospital, and a couple of hours from that, I was on a stroke ward. While I was there, the only thing I had with me was my phone with this relaxing, calming music that we'd been making.

Shovell: When he was on the stroke ward, he'd lost his ability to speak, and for a time, he lost all mobility down his left-hand side. So all he had was the energy to use his right hand to listen to the music. He could see the vitals machine – his blood pressure, his pulse oxygenation – and he could see it all coming into more of a balance while he was listening. So it was like, oh my god, there's scientific proof!

Anthony: We spent the following year, once I'd recovered, working in rehabilitation. We took that first year to make sure that we were solid in our story, and the only way to do that was by aligning ourselves with some of the leaders in the world of trauma and wellness, people like Dr. Stephen Porges, Bessel van der Kolk, Peter Levine and Gabor Maté. We call them the Trauma Beatles and these four men embraced us. We spent the next year in America, working in rehabilitation centres and we went to Iceland and worked with a group of people that just came out of prison. We were working with schools, with charities, because we just wanted to make sure that we were authentic.

What are the aims and philosophy of Ajoia?

Shovell: Our interest isn't smashing the charts and getting on the radio all the time to get to number one. That'd be nice, but right now, our conscious intention is to create music as this collective, music that everybody can feel and receive, and potentially benefit from. This idea of social connection is really important. It's not just about how music can heal, it's about how we as people can heal each other – being in a space with others who are involved in experiencing the same kind of experience.

I imagine you two couldn't have foreseen your lives doing this 20 years ago.

Anthony: My life has changed in every single way. I seem to have had quite a few lives, and they've been pretty interesting.

Shovell: I thought at the time that being in M People was the pinnacle. I was a plumber for nine years, dreaming about being in a band, got chucked out of school, and then it happened. But my childhood trauma from adoption and being fostered gave me adrenaline that would never turn off. That fuel was from trauma. In the band, I was encouraged to be the crazy man, which led to addictions. Now, I'm a therapist with my own practice, travelling to conferences with doctors. The rhythm of my life before was rocket fuel. Now I can sleep, have a conversation, enjoy noodles, and look at the sky.

When people see you play live, what can they expect?

Anthony: The focus is to create scalable immersive experiences for everyone to enjoy, and the way you do that is by creating multi-faceted haptics, things that you smell and see when you're in the event. So Shovell will burn sage sometimes, just creating as many vibes for the body that we can possibly bring, to take people where they're not used to going.

Shovell: I always like to say, it's setting the frequency of the room. Before anything's even been played, our nervous system is already aware.

The album comes out on 31 October. Do you have any guidance about how and where people should listen to it?

Anthony: This album is designed to help relax. You can listen to it anywhere. It's designed to be used like a supplement – play it as much or as little as you want. Are there any rules? No, listen to it however you want!

Shovell: I drove from the northeast to Oxford with it on. I offer it to my clients, I play it for children, I play when I'm relaxing, gardening, cooking... But it's not background music – even when you're not sitting there listening, its frequencies, its energies, its vibrations, they're coming through.

Anthony: I've got mates in their late 20s, early 30s, and they love to have a smoke to it!