



**Hyperactive! – After varied and numerous other projects, synth-pop's tech-savvy scientist returns to the stages of the UK**





# I HAVE AN EXHIBITIONIST STREAK, BUT I DON'T NEED THE APPLAUSE

IN THE 80s HE WAS THE MAD PROFESSOR OF SYNTH, NOW TURNED ACTUAL PROFESSOR. AS THOMAS DOLBY TAKES A BREAK FROM ACADEMIA FOR A SERIES OF LIVE DATES IN HIS NATIVE UK, WE TALK AI, MUSICAL RESURRECTIONS AND, ER, SAILING NOVELS WITH ONE OF POP'S MOST CEREBRAL ARTISTS... **STEVE O'BRIEN**

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op star, record producer, film composer, tech entrepreneur, author, academic, filmmaker... few people embody the phrase 'renaissance man' more than Thomas Dolby. In the last 10 years alone, he has put out a best-selling memoir (2016's *The Speed Of Sound: Breaking The Barriers Between Music And Technology*), joined the famed Johns Hopkins University as lecturer and written his first novel, of which more later. And now, if that wasn't diary-busting enough, Dolby is about to go on the road for a series of dates around North America as part of the Totally Tubular tour (alongside the likes of Tom Bailey, Modern English, Bow Wow Wow and others), and six headline shows in his native UK. A rarity indeed.

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## THE REAL McCOY

For the moment, the determinedly forward-looking Dolby is, for once, harking back to the past, with a place on the nostalgically-driven Totally Tubular tour which kicks off in Seattle in June, taking in L.A., Phoenix, Boston and Washington DC. While his UK gigs will be tailored for the hardcore, these Tubular shows promise a hits-heavy set.

"It's a walk down memory lane, but there is a delicate balance," he says about mixing in the occasional obscure cut with the chart-friendly favourites. "There's a thin line between an artist that's viewed as milking that retro thing versus somebody that's still relevant and authentic. I'm fairly unique in the sense that I never broke up or have been in and out of rehab. With me, you know you're getting the real McCoy. The question is whether it can spark an interest that would lead to me thinking, 'Maybe it's time to throw in the towel with the teaching and making some new music and getting back on the road.'"

Though Dolby isn't yet making new albums and lining his diary with tour dates, he is more involved in music now than he was in the 90s and Noughties, when much of his time was spent as CEO of Headspace (later Beatnik). From popstar to businessman wasn't a wild career swerve for Dolby, as he was never, by his own admission, as fame-thirsty as some of his more extroverted peers.

"I have an exhibitionist streak, but I don't need the applause," he admits. "So in a period when I'm not making music, it's not like I'm just jonesing to get out there. I've had offers to go out and do things, but they seem to come in waves."

"When I look at some of my contemporaries, they appear to be residing in the 'where are they now?' files, then suddenly they'll have this enormous comeback and enormous hit out of the blue – it's fantastic when that happens. I look at Kate Bush, for example – what a phenomenal story that was with *Stranger Things*. Anybody would dream of having that wave of interest. That's a motive to make new music and get back out there."

"For a lot of, let's say, legacy artists," he adds, "it's intimidating, because you worry, maybe my best years are behind me, maybe I'm going to do something mediocre, and people are going to slag it off, saying, 'It's not 1982 anymore.'"

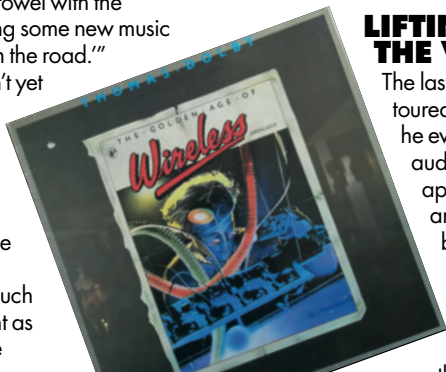
"But you have to forgive yourself for growing up, and forgive your audience for growing up and not wanting to get in your pants anymore. You have to be willing to take a deep breath and say, 'Yeah, I'm going to do it anyway.'"

Those Brit-based Dolby-heads who will be booking tickets for his one-man shows later this year should expect a deeper dive into the singer's rich catalogue than those at Tubular will experience. The last time we spoke to Dolby, he described his fanbase as, "compared to the average... quite literate, thoughtful and articulate," those who, presumably, will want something more than a faithful recreation of whatever track he's playing. "I tend to take people under the hood to unpack the songs," he reveals. "Sometimes I will loop-record them in and build on layers so that people can hear the individual components. And sometimes I'll tell stories about the songs."

## LIFTING THE VEIL

The last time Dolby toured back in 2014 he even invited audience members to approach the stage and pick ping pong balls out of a hat, each of which had a different song title printed on them. He would then, "pick the songs to pieces, playing some of the individual parts and explaining how I recorded them", bringing a little of that lecture hall learnedness to a pop gig. "I think my audiences really appreciated dropping the

fourth wall, and taking them on the inside," he smiles. "As time goes on, people that have lived with this music for years become increasingly interested in the stories behind them. In those situations, I tend to go for the deeper cuts, songs like *Screen Kiss*, *I Love You Goodbye*, *Airwaves* and *Oceanea*, which were never the most played on the radio. They didn't chart as singles, but they were the songs [the audience] got most fired up about and were most affectionate about. It's not *She Blinded Me With Science* or *Hyperactive!*. I think my audience accepts that's the commercial end of what I do and I've always got that element up my sleeve. I have fun with those more superficial, frilly songs, but mainly I see them as a springboard to get people into the deeper cuts."



# ORCHESTRAL MANOEUVRES



Though Thomas Dolby is still awaiting a *Stranger Things/Running Up That Hill* moment, in the 80s and 90s his songs graced a number of films, including *Howard The Duck*, *FernGully: The Last Rainforest* and *Toys*. Not only that, but he was also hired as composer for a number of movies, including 1985 drama *Fever Pitch* and 1986's Ken Russell-directed *Gothic*, a historical horror telling the story of Percy and Mary Shelley's visit to Lord Byron in Villa Diodati by Lake Geneva in 1816.

"It's my most comprehensive film score," Dolby says, "but it wasn't a great experience. It was eye-opening, because it was the first time I'd worked with an orchestra, which in this case was the London Symphony Orchestra – but unfortunately I was paying them! It's a wonderful thing to hear an orchestra playing your music, but when you're the one paying for the overtime, that's not good news."

"A few other musicians have [moved into film scoring], people like Danny Elfman, Trent Reznor, Mark Mothersbaugh... They've been really successful crossing over, into a world that was quite stuffy. It's less so now, but there used to be a feeling in the Hollywood film-scoring community that an untrained musician from the rock world doesn't really know what they're doing. In reality, some of the most exciting scores have been made by that route in the last 20-30 years, rather than the John Williams, Jerry Goldsmith-type community. I think now in Hollywood, it's accepted. It's like, you don't have to be a conservatory-trained musician in order to be able to make good film scores."

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# WHAT WOULD DAVID SYLVIAN DO?

With five albums and various film and video game scores to his name, there's a wealth of music that Dolby can choose from when planning a setlist. But while certain songs choose themselves, there must be others he thinks are just as good, if not better, than those world-conquering chart hits. So does he have one song in his back catalogue he wishes was as well-known as *She Blinded Me With Science*?

"My record companies never really had the balls to take a song like *Screen Kiss* or *I Love You Goodbye* and put that out front and say, 'This is the song that you should be listening to'. In the UK, they tended to pander to a BBC producer's A-list mentality, and go, 'Well, this wouldn't fit in the radio'. In the era after I first hit, I think, the media became more eclectic, and it became not so taboo to put the industry's weight behind something that's a little bit unusual.

"There is depth to my music, but also this more accessible, more extroverted fringe with those songs [like *She Blinded Me With Science*]. So if you're a record company, you're always going to go with those because you think they sound more like other stuff on the radio. I should have stuck to my guns, like David Sylvian post-Japan – he did his thing and it was gorgeous and totally uncommercial. He did it with great conviction, and any record company that wanted to release his records got that and never put pressure on him to write hit singles."

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Thomas Dolby has had five UK Top 40 hits, his highest being *Hyperactive!* (No. 17), and a trio of Top 40 albums

## NEW GOLDEN AGE?

Despite a career stretching back to 1982, there are just five Thomas Dolby albums for the singer to pick from. That Tubular crowd may only crave the hits, but those at the solo shows will likely know every track from LPs as wilfully awkward as 1988's *Aliens Ate My Buick* (described in Dolby's book as "a crazy postcard home from a British expat on a debauched visit to Hollywood") to the genre-jumping *A Map Of The Floating City*. That album – his first in nearly two decades – was 13 years ago. Academia has, for now, taken priority.

"Every social media I post, regardless of the topic, there are going to be comments going, 'When do we get a new album?' and 'When are you coming to Indianapolis?' It's as if you're their property, and it's like, 'you owe us'. I can sort of understand that, but I think the majority of my audience understand that I have to keep things fresh. I've always been attracted to the new, new thing, whether it was making MTV videos or starting a software company, or doing video games and interactive stuff, making a film or now teaching."

Talking of new trades, the latest string to Dolby's bow is fiction-writing. Coinciding with his UK dates this summer, will be his first novel, a historical epic titled *Prevailing Wind* about the America's Cup (he's a keen sailor and is, he admits, "obsessed with classic yachts").

"I'm so out of my depth as a writer," he admits. "It's not my number one medium. Yet that's why it's exciting to me, because it's challenging. With music, I've kinda been there, done that."



So, does he ever think he's done with creating music? He ponders the question.

"Not to say I can't get back there," he says, "but if there's something else that's beckoning, where I have to learn new skills and find new ways to express myself, it's always my inclination to go that way. I think people who follow what

I do, they get that about me, despite the few that feel I'm their property."

As regards a new album, well, that's really up to the gods. Dolby admits it's "not on the immediate horizon", but who knows? If, for instance, one of his older numbers got a

*Running Up That Hill*/Murder On The Dancefloor-style revival owing to its use in some blockbuster film or TV show, he admits he could be tempted back. But until a *Stranger Things* or a *Saltburn* exhumes a Dolby classic like *Windpower* or *Field Work*, he's happy to teach, write, or do whatever new comes up.

"I don't like blowing my own trumpet and getting up every day and having to make a splash about my own product," he says, "but if there was an upsurge of demand and I heard that sucking sound, it would encourage me."

So there you go. If any movie or TV directors are reading, you could do a lot worse than raid the Thomas Dolby discography for your next project. Because if any 80s star deserves a second coming in the 2020s, it is synth-pop's nutty professor, blinding us with science one more time. ■

● For details of live dates, visit [thomasdolby.com](http://thomasdolby.com)