REWIND AND COME AGAIN

George Evelyn's Nightmares on Wax project has navigated the sonic crossroads between hip-hop, dub, jazz, soul, funk, and electronic music for over three decades. With his recent project, *Echo45 Sound System*, he's delved deep into his roots to plot a course for the future.

BY ANDY THOMAS

"In my neighborhood, I was very lucky because it was super multicultural," says Nightmares on Wax founder George Evelyn. "But, once you stepped outside of that, you discovered shit wasn't like that elsewhere."

Growing up in Hyde Park, in northwest Leeds, Evelyn—the son of a Caribbean father from St. Kitts and a British mother—spent his formative years in a melting pot where music bonded the community. But the Leeds of the 1970s was also a divided city where racial tensions were never far from the surface. On November 5, 1975, three hundred Black British youths clashed with police in the Chapeltown area, in a precursor to the broader 1981 riots that occurred there and in inner-city communities across England, from Toxteth, Liverpool, to St Paul's, Bristol.

The uprisings in Chapeltown followed years of stop-and-search tactics by the West Yorkshire Police, and attacks by far-right National Front skinheads. For the Black communities of Leeds, Huddersfield, Bradford, and Sheffield, a network of reggae sound systems provided both a sanctuary from inherent racism and a cultural hub of resistance.

FOUNDATION RHYTHMS

Most Leeds sound systems were based in Chapeltown, home to the city's annual West Indian Carnival. Among these were Mavrick Internash, Count Johnny, Ras Sparta, Ambassador Emperor, Genesis, Jungle Warrior, and Sir Yank's Heavy Disco, whose operator owned Sir Yank's record shop on Gathorne Street, where local selectors bought their Jamaican imports. But George Evelyn's Hyde Park neighborhood was also rich with reggae. The Belle Vue Youth Centre—the "anchor of the neighborhood," according to Evelyn—regularly held sound clashes to compare with those across town at Chapeltown's West Indian Centre.

Beginning in the mid-'70s, two competing Hyde Park sound systems battled for neighborhood supremacy: Concrete Lion and Messiah. The latter was founded by Clifford Smith, the older brother of George Evelyn's best friend at school, Dennis. "Across the road from the playground of our middle school was the lock-up [garage] where Messiah used to build and maintain the sound system," Evelyn recalls, speaking from his current homebase in Ibiza. "We used to go after school and sit in the basement of the lock-up and watch them build speaker boxes. I was brought up with this behind-the-scenes access to this culture. But I didn't have access to the clashes because I was too young [to enter]."

Awed by the bass he heard rattling through the windows of Belle Vue Youth Centre—where Messiah battled with visiting sounds from London like Sir Coxsone, Saxon, and Jah Shaka—Evelyn became an avid collector of sound clash cassettes. "Because we couldn't go to the dances, the mixtapes became very important to us," he explains.

The fact that sound-system culture was so close—yet tantalizingly out of reach—made it even more intriguing for Evelyn and his neighborhood friends. "These guys were like our superheroes," he says. "You'd be hearing about this culture all the time: '*This* legendary sound system from London came to Leeds and had a clash with *this* sound.' Or, '*This* sound dropped *this* dubplate.' And, because we were just kids, it was all legend and myth."

Decades later, this early foundation would provide Evelyn with fodder and inspiration for 2025's *Echo45 Sound System*, his latest full-length as Nightmares on Wax. "I had started reminiscing about mixtapes, which led me back to my younger days of growing up in sound systems," he explains. "But I was like, 'Everyone does mixtapes. It would be better if I did something that was also a cross between a pirate radio show and a sound clash.' Then I remembered my mom lending me £5 to buy this speaker box from a jumble sale that I named Echo45. And that opened up all these other memories."

Inspired by watching the Messiah sound men in the late '70s and early '80s, Evelyn had pieced together his first rudimentary sound system before he even cracked his teens. "There was a shop in our neighborhood called [Domestic Electric Rentals] where they used to repair old rental TVs, and I worked out there were speakers in the back of them," he recalls. "So I would take the speakers out, then get shoeboxes, cut holes in them, and wire them up to this old, direct-drive Fidelity turntable. That became my bedroom setup."

By this time, Evelyn was becoming a disciple of dub, namely the future-minded early '80s output of engineer/producer Hopeton "Scientist" Brown. "I had this massive attraction to Scientist and those albums on Greensleeves," he says. Founded in Shepherds Bush, West London in 1977, Greensleeves is perhaps best known as the first international label to champion dancehall. But its iconic red, gold, and green label was also stamped on records by one of dub's most adventurous sonic auteurs. "When I discovered records through Clifford of Messiah, like *Scientist Meets the Space Invaders* and *Scientist Rids the World of the Evil Curse of the Vampires*, I was just blown away," says Evelyn.

To match the sci-fi dub in the grooves of these albums, Greensleeves cover designer Tony McDermott created playful cartoon illustrations that Evelyn and his friends pored over for cultural clues. "Those cartoons would also have all the sound system imagery, and that's how I learned the importance of bass to dub," says Evelyn. "So the attraction was there with the music, but you can also see the [appeal] of those cartoons from a child's point of view." Decades later, he would return to these sleeves for inspiration in conceptualizing the cover art for *Echo45 Sound System*.

'ROUND THE OUTSIDE

A teenage Evelyn was soon to experience another life-changing culture shock where sound and imagery collided when the video for Malcolm McLaren's "Buffalo Gals" was beamed into living rooms across the U.K. in early 1983. Four years earlier, the Sugarhill Gang's "Rapper's Delight" had reached #3 on the U.K. singles chart, the first time most people in the country had heard rap. Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five's "The Message" and Afrika Bambaataa and the Soul Sonic Force's "Planet Rock" followed in 1982, but it would take the prophetic McLaren to expose young U.K. ears and eyes to the four elements of hip-hop: MCing, DJing, breakdancing, and graffiti.

"The ["Buffalo Gals"] video opened up the Pandora's box of Bronx street science; it was a full-frontal introduction to what we would later learn was hip-hop," DJ and Wax Poetics contributor Greg Wilson wrote of the moment on his blog, Electrofunkroots. "It would be no exaggeration to say that, from this moment onwards, British youth culture was never the same. The contents of this video quite literally changed people's lives."

One of those people was the young George Evelyn. "We had experienced the disco side of hip-hop through Kurtis Blow, then 'Rapper's Delight,' followed by the *Street Sounds Electro* 1 album that Morgan Khan brought out," Evelyn says. "It was like every week I was getting something from another planet. But seeing the video of 'Buffalo Gals' was the real epiphany because of how it connected the four elements."

Looking back, he notes the strong parallels between his two early cultural influences. "I find [there is] the perfect lineage between

(*opening spread*) George Evelyn mixing *Carboot Soul* at Touchwood Studios, Leeds, in 1997. All photos courtesy of George Evelyn and Warp Records.

(*top*) George Evelyn (at left) performing a routine with Solar City Rockers crewmates Jonny Bell, Steve Watty, and Patrick Cargill at Bradford's Mayflower club in 1984.

sound systems and hip-hop," he says. "There was that bravado and competitive side with dubplates and versions in the sound systems, and it was the same in hip-hop. Also, in those times, it didn't matter how good your dubplate was, or how good your sound [system] was, if you didn't have a community. And the same with hip-hop."

Soon, all the Northern towns had crews of young breakers and poppers, who would come together to compete on lino laid down outside shopping centers and inside youth clubs. "For most of those involved in the formative stages of the bleep and bass movement, their chosen release was dancing, and their tribe one of the many organized crews that were popping up across the Midlands and the North of England," Matt Annis wrote in his erudite 2019 book *Join The Future: Bleep Techno and the Birth of British Bass Music.*

"We'd all seen Jeffrey Daniel [of Shalamar] body popping on *Top of the Pops* and other bits on programs like [Channel 4 music showcase] *The Tube*, but 'Buffalo Gals' showed us what b-boying was all about," says Evelyn. "All of a sudden, this thing that was so distant was right close to us now. That shattered everything. Sound-system culture had given us a voice, but this was ours now. Anybody could do it with minimal means. We could all express ourselves through breaking and popping with our little crews."

BREAKER'S REVENGE

It was a rift with friends at age thirteen—over the very same Echo45 speaker box referenced in the title of Nightmares on Wax's latest project—that led the young Evelyn to connect with what would become his own breaking crew. "When I started to get this idea for [*Echo45 Sound System*], I started thinking about this box, and all these emotions came out of the thirteen-year-old me," he explains. "When my friends stopped talking to me, I was really lost. My sister saw this so [she] introduced me to her boyfriend's cousin, who was a breakdancer and popper. He invited me over [to Bradford], and I met [early Nightmares on Wax partner] Kevin Harper. So I was like, 'If it wasn't for this speaker, my life would have been completely different.'"

A contemporary of crews like Broken Glass in Manchester, Rock City in Nottingham, and SMAC 19 in Sheffield, Bradford's Solar City Rockers were formed by Kevin "Boy Wonder" Harper and future members of the DJ collective Unique 3, who, a few years later, would go on to pioneer the bleep and bass movement with records like "The Theme."

While b-boying with Solar City Rockers, Evelyn and Harper became obsessed with the sonic vibrations of early electro. "We really connected with these electro records because of the bass. The lineage was there with the sound systems, but it was also the whole futuristic thing around it," says Evelyn. "As kids, we really did believe we were living in the future. You would hear records by Cybotron, and you couldn't even explain what it was. But if you are body poppin' and doing these robotic dances, it made total sense."

Electro opened new portals for music discovery beyond the records themselves, thanks to the samples and DJ scratching that factored into the sound. "These records would be coming out like 'Break Dance-Electric Boogie' by West Street Mob, 'Two, Three, Break' by the B Boys, and 'Rockit' by Herbie Hancock with [Grand Mixer D.ST]," Evelyn recalls. "I'd be like, 'What is it they are scratching?' So you would try and find that record. And you would discover James Brown. So, through cutting and scratching, I really started digging and becoming a collector. I was about fifteen years old, going to flea markets and record fairs."

The next revelation for Evelyn would be learning how these records were cut up. "I have to give a huge shout to 'Boy Wonder' Kevin Harper, because he was the first person I would see scratching on his mum's hi-fi," he says. "I was like, 'You have to show me how to do that.' He taught me. That really got us looking for the cuts, then hearing the breaks of the hip-hop tracks we loved. It was like, 'Oh my God, that's where they got that from.'"

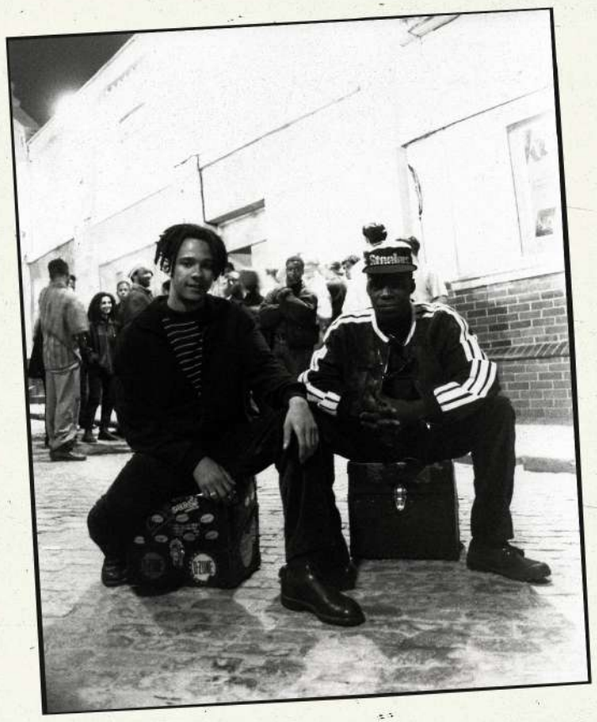
Around this time, Evelyn was introduced to a fellow digger from Leeds named John Halnon, who had two turntables, a reel-to-reel tape recorder, and a double cassette deck. Together they created pause-button mixes, sampling records they had been c,ollecting, and mixing them with film dialogue and other audio snippets. One day, John turned to his friend and said, "This stuff sounds like your worst nightmare." To which George replied, "Yeah, it's a nightmare on wax."

The two soon went on their own paths, but Evelyn returned to this name when he and Kevin Harper began creating music together—initially on account of free studio time they were given by a local youth worker. "Because we had come from the whole turntablism thing, with all these Steinski things and [Herbie the Mastermind, mixer of the *Street Sounds Electro* series] mixes coming out, we wanted to do our own megamixes," he recalls.

Already spinning together at Solar City Rockers parties at venues like Checkpoint in Bradford, Evelyn and Harper began mixing together on pirate radio shows and at student house parties while rooming together in Leeds. In need of an alias of his own to go on with Harper's Boy Wonder, Evelyn took on the moniker DJ E.A.S.E—as in Experience a Sample Expert—for his mixing gigs. "At one of these parties was Rob Wheeler, who ran a student night in town," recalls Evelyn. "He said he was going to be away in a few weeks and [asked] would we fill in. We completely smashed it. That night turned out to be Downbeat at Ricky's, where we became co-promoters."

BASS, BREAKS, AND BLEEPS

(*opposite*) George Evelyn (in front) with Solar City Rockers crewmates Darren Pascal, Jonny Bell, Patrick Cargill, and Steve Watty, at Bradford's Checkpoint club in 1984.



(*opposite top*) George Evelyn and Kevin “Boy Wonder” Harper in Sheffield in 1989, in the first Nightmares on Wax publicity photo.
(*opposite bottom*) Evelyn and Harper at Leeds Warehouse in 1990, during a shoot for *A Word of Science: The First and Final Chapter*.
(*above*) Negatives from the 1989 publicity shoot.

Downbeat, while also serving up an eclectic mix of hip-hop, house, electro, soul, funk, and jazz for Leeds's most serious dancers, would become an important hub for a new musical movement that Evelyn and Harper would soon find themselves immersed in. As affordable home studio gear became widely available in the late 1980s, a distinctly British dance sound exploded across the North of England. "There was this real feeling at the time that, all of a sudden, rather than looking to the States, we started to think, 'We could do that,'" Winston Hazel of Sheffield production team Forgemasters told me in "Forged in Steel City," a 2023 Wax Poetics feature on that city's electronic music scene. "So you had this whole new DIY bedroom vibe coming through in the music."

The most influential of these early bedroom producers was a Mancunian jazz-funk and fusion dancer turned 808-loving techno convert named Gerald Simpson. "'Voodoo Ray' [by A Guy Called Gerald] changed everything," Richard "DJ Parrot" Barratt, Winston Hazel's partner at the Jive Turkey club nights in Sheffield, told me in the same article. "It was like hearing the room you were in coming back out of the sound system at you. A sonic-kinetic feedback loop. Feet to speakers to ears to feet to speakers."

George Evelyn—who would experience the full force of the Northern dance scene at the infamous Blackburn raves held in that town's disused warehouses between 1988 and 1990— recalls his own introduction to "Voodoo Ray": "We knew of Gerald because we were all breakdancers and poppers. But, when 'Voodoo Ray' [came out], it was like, 'Shit, we have to do something to match that.' It was that sound system mentality of having to come up with a tune to represent where we're from."

The next pivotal record after "Voodoo Ray" was by Evelyn and Harper's old Bradford comrades Unique 3, who began making tracks on a Roland TR-909 drum machine after buying early Chicago house records at Manchester's Spin Inn. Originally released in 1988, the raw and sparse U.K. acid-house warehouse party anthem "The Theme" was, in the words of Matt Annis, "every bit as alien and otherworldly as 'Voodoo Ray' [but] crucially nowhere near as polished."

By the time "The Theme" exploded at Downbeat and Jive Turkey, Evelyn and Harper had already been experimenting with their own second-hand equipment. "I begged my mom to get me this Fostex four-track cassette deck and Casio SK-1 keyboard on credit, so we started with that," Evelyn recalls. "Then we borrowed someone's 808 drum machine, and I bought a Roland SH-101 keyboard from a friend. So we started making tunes and recording onto cassette."

Out of this DIY experimentation came the first Nightmares on Wax track, "Let It Roll," a raw bleep house cut that sampled Doug Lazy's hip-house smash of the same name, and, by extension, that track's sample of "Set It Off" by Big Daddy Kane. "We decided to play it out at Downbeat, and the place went berserk, so that was the first time of having that feeling of playing your music to your crowd," says Evelyn. "We must have played it off of cassette about six times that night. It was like, 'We really need to try and get a label interested in this.'"

It was a different, raw DIY track that would ultimately open the door for Nightmares on Wax to reach the market. "We had been so inspired by 'Voodoo Ray' that, in our cheeky way, we sampled it," says Evelyn. "So that is how the first version of 'Dextrous' came about with a sample running underneath, and Kevin creating this great bassline.

(*opposite*) Lounging in Leeds LS6 at the *Carboot Soul* photo shoot in 1998.
(*top*) George Evelyn aka DJ E.A.S.E. at an early Nightmares on Wax appearance in 1987.

We played it at Downbeat, and it totally went off."

Pressing up a stack of white label 12-inches, Evelyn and Harper released "Dextrous" (alongside "Let It Roll" and two versions of a third track, "Stating a Fact") under their own, one-off Poverty Records imprint, and trawled it around record shops across Yorkshire. One of these was FON Records in Sheffield—soon to become the launchpad for a label that would change everything for electronic music in the North of England, and beyond.

WARP SPEED AHEAD

It was in Sheffield, home of electronic music pioneers Cabaret Voltaire and Human League, where the Northern dance movement truly began to coalesce. Located above one of the city's many old metalworks, FON Studios—it stood for Fuck Off Nazis—had become a focal point of the city's music scene following its founding in 1985 by members of industrial funk outfit Chakk.

An offshoot of the studio, the FON record store on Division Street in the city center would become the premier outlet for homegrown Northern dance sounds, with Jive Turkey DJ Winston Hazel heading up the dance and import section. Hazel, along with FON Studios engineer Robert Gordon and mutual friend Sean Maher, would soon make one of the bleep movement's defining records on a home recording setup (Akai S1000 sampler, Korg M1 synthesizer) that Gordon had purchased with checks from his mixing jobs. The Forgemasters' "Track With No Name" gave FON staffer Steve Beckett, Gordon, and the late Rob Mitchell the push they needed to set up a label to platform this new Northern dance sound. Financed through a government Enterprise Allowance Scheme grant, "Track With No Name"—described by Beckett as "an evocation of the nocturnal energy of an industrial city in decline, whose empty, industrial spaces were being turned into illegal and autonomous party zones"—was the first in a string of seminal bleep anthems on the label, dubbed Warp Records as an acronym for "We Are Reasonable People."

A key testing ground for these raw Northern electronic sounds was a Wednesday-night session in Sheffield at Occasions, formerly Mona Lisa's, where the Jive Turkey parties had first begun. As it turned out, Nightmares on Wax was already in the mix there. "When I turned up at the FON record store with the EP, the man behind the counter—who turned out to be Steve Beckett—said, 'I've heard your tune 'Dextrous' down Occasions,' Evelyn recalls. "'Winston Hazel has been playing it.'"

Soon after, Beckett contacted Evelyn and asked if he and Harper would be interested in remixing "Dextrous" and putting it out on the newly formed Warp. "We went to Rob Gordon's house [to mix the record]," Evelyn recalls. "He had all this equipment, so it was like being in a sweet shop. We always had the ear, but we didn't have the technical knowledge, and that experience gave us that."

Released in November 1989, "Dextrous" was the second 12-inch on Warp, following "Track With No Name," and preceding Sweet Exorcist's "Testone" and "LFO" by LFO—four records that sounded immense in the cavernous warehouses of the North of England. "It was New Year's Eve 1989, we were at this illegal rave in an old abattoir, and had gone outside to have a smoke—then we heard 'Dextrous' come on," Evelyn remembers. "We ran back inside and, like, ten thousand people [were] going off to our record. And it was the same at the Blackburn raves. It was beyond our comprehension."

"Aftermath," Nightmares on Wax's second 12-inch for Warp, followed in October 1990. Sampling "Happiness Is Just Around the Bend" by Cuba Gooding and "Jam on It" by Newcleus, it was, in the words of Matt Annis, "a thrillingly bombastic rush of low-end power and mutant Yorkshire funk."

Released in September 1991 on Warp—as all of the outfit's subsequent releases would be—Nightmares on Wax's wildly eclectic debut album, *A Word of Science: The First and Final Chapter*, threw together Evelyn and Harper's disparate musical influences, from bleep and techno to soul, hip-hop, and jazz. "With that record, it was like, 'Let's just tap into everything that has ever influenced us,'" Evelyn explains. "All that digging from over the years came out in the foundations of that album. And, with regard to sampling, there was a real guerrilla mentality at that time."

Teasing the downtempo direction that would define the next phase of Nightmares on Wax, *A Word of Science: The First and Final Chapter* opened with the horizontal instrumental "Nights Interlude," which sampled the opening notes of Quincy Jones's "Summer in the City"—a loop the Pharcyde would use a year later on "Passin' Me By," and which Evelyn would revisit at the start of each of his next two albums.

COLLECTIVE COMEDOWN

"I already had the idea for *Smokers Delight*, and was working on ideas for it, well before that first album came out," Evelyn says of Nightmares on Wax's second and most influential LP. "It came from going out to parties, then back to friends' houses. Clubs then finished at 2 a.m. so you would go on to the blues parties that always existed in the hood. Then it was back to friends' houses, playing music while coming down."

Evelyn credits ambient mavericks the KLF and their 1990 album *Chill Out* with helping him move his sound forward at this time. "*Chill Out* was a huge inspiration to me," he says. "We had been taking acid and tripping while listening to things by Tangerine Dream and Pink Floyd, and pretending like we were revolutionaries living in the '60s.

(*opposite*) Mixing *In a Space Outta Sound* with engineer Mike Pela in 2005.

Then this KLF record came out that we could really associate with because of all the samples."

Working from an Atari ST computer and an Akai S950 sampler at his home studio, Evelyn began diving into his vinyl crates to create his own downtempo collages. "Now I [could] sample all the breaks from all this music I had been collecting, which led me into my whole record collection," he recalls. "I was looping all this stuff up onto cassette, and we were listening to all my sample tapes at the afterparties."

After playing his chill-out cassettes for years at these gatherings, one night he had an epiphany. "I was back at a friend's house, and I was like, 'I'm going to do my chill-out album but [unlike the KLF], it's going to be a hip-hop, sample-based, chill-out album, and I'm going to call it *Smokers Delight*," he says. "Me and my friends had lived with the making of that album for four years."

Following the 1992 single "Happiness!," Kevin Harper had drifted away from the project, leaving George as the sole member of Nightmares on Wax—a solo act by default. "When Kevin left, I didn't really know what was going to happen. It was a bit of a nervy time," Evelyn recalls. "But Steve and Rob at Warp had been at Nightmares on Wax events, and had heard all these sample tapes I had been making. They said, 'Why don't you just do that [*Smokers Delight*] idea as the next album?'"

Following *A Word of Science*, Evelyn had begun working with musicians across a string of 12-inches, including keyboardist Robin Taylor-Firth, who would become a key figure, if not quite a full-fledged member, in this next iteration of Nightmares on Wax. While *Smokers Delight* was deeply rooted in sample culture, it also found Evelyn expanding his sonic palette even further, with live elements from Taylor-Firth, guitarist Chris Dawkins, bassist Hamlet Luton, and percussionist Andrew Lovell, better known as Shovell. "That really helped the project come to life," Evelyn says. "Robin, coming from a high-level classical world, combined with my raw, electronic hip-hop approach to things, it really worked together."

Released in September 1995, *Smokers Delight* tapped into the zeitgeist of a collective rave comedown that went far beyond the erroneous tag of trip-hop. "The making of the record had been so organic, created at these afters with my friends, that to now see it being relived with people in their own way at their own afters was really special," Evelyn recalls of the response. "I feel like music is a reflection of where we are at. It is a mirror and echo—all I was doing was documenting and expressing where we were at during that time. And now kids will come up to me saying they were brought up [with] this record. So the next generation is experiencing this record in their own way. Which is unbelievable to me because all we were doing was sharing what we were living."

ORCHESTRAL MANOEUVRES

Nightmares on Wax's next full-length, *Carboot Soul*—its title referencing the second-hand sales where Evelyn would source many of his samples—would be another four years in the making. Tapping into the same core of musicians from *Smokers Delight*, and with Robin Taylor-Firth as co-producer, the 1999 album found Evelyn making the transition from collage sampler to master producer, writer, and arranger. "This whole idea of the ghost in the sample had started to emerge," he says. "When I was expressing melodies to Robin and getting him to play them, these were things I was picking up from the samples. When those two worlds came together, it really worked."

This evolution was underscored by the opening track "Les Nuits," which revisited the Quincy Jones "Summer in the City" motif that had opened the previous two albums, this time in the form of a fifty-two-piece orchestral arrangement. "I had that Quincy Jones album [*You've Got It Bad Girl*] on my shelf for three years before I had a sampler [and] I always said, 'One day I'm going to sample that,' which I did on *A Word of Science* [as "Nights Interlude"]," Evelyn explains. "We then brought Robin in, and I remember me and Kevin listening on the Walkman to his beautiful version ["Nights Introlude"] for *Smokers Delight,* and saying, 'Oh my god, we've created a baby.' Then Rob Mitchell at Warp says, 'You should do an orchestrated version.' So that became 'Les Nuits.'"

Smokers Delight had been an era-defining release, inspiring a boom in sample-based downtempo projects. Given the inherent pressure in following such a statement, I wondered what impulses drove Evelyn as he set about creating *Carboot Soul*. "The next record was always going to be challenging," he says. "So I really did my best to not repeat what I did on that album. That is why *Carboot Soul* doesn't have any segues or interludes, and it has song structures in there. I wanted to try and escape what I'd done [before], even though I was proud of it. From a producer's point of view, I really wanted to expand working with musicians and vocalists."

Not long after recording the strings for "Les Nuits," Evelyn flew to New York to hit the studio with his hip-hop heroes, De La Soul. The result was "Keep On," a single included on 2000's *Sound of N.O.W. EP* and, years later, the deluxe reissue of *Carboot Soul*. "I was on the phone with [Posdnuos,] and told him my idea for this long, old-school track. So I sent him the cassette in the post, and he was really into it," he remembers. "Halfway through the session, Dave [Trugoy the Dove] was in the booth doing the chorus. I'd been smoking a blunt with the engineer, and I could see a reflection of me in the glass of the booth. And that kind of froze me: I was there with a group I call the 'John Coltrane of rap.'"

As Evelyn moved between different projects for Warp as its longest-serving artist, he continued to seek inspiration through organic collaborations. These took the form of *In a Space Outta Sound from* 2006, featuring Evelyn's old friend and collaborator Shovell on percussion and Sara Garvey on vocals, to *Feeling Good* (2013) and *Shape the Future* (2018), which brought on Jazzanova trumpeter Sebastian Studnitzky as arranger.

"Through these albums, I was still sampling and trusting my ears," he says. "I wasn't doing cassettes anymore, but I was still doing my

versions of loops that I would listen to, and allow the ideas to come. So things just fall into place. And it's the same with my collaborations and how I meet and connect with people. That just happens. Every project that comes alive—once the music starts telling me what it is—I then share it with whoever I am working with."

With Evelyn having emerged from DJ and sampling culture, I wonder if his lack of formal training brought any advantages for him as a producer working with musicians. "To be honest, I struggled at times," he replies. "I would often be in a room with next-level musicians, and wished I could speak their language. Chris Dawkins told me, 'If you are taught something, you build a wall, and it's very difficult to get past that—but you have no walls.' And that was when the penny dropped. Having that freedom has been really important. Even though I am always learning from these great musicians I have around me."

For *Echo45 Sound System*, Evelyn called upon a broad list of collaborators, including Yasiin Bey, Greentea Peng, and Skratch Bastid, to help execute his most high-concept release since *Smokers Delight*. "After [2021's] *Shout Out! To Freedom…,* I still had a load of music that I hadn't done anything with. And then Kazim, my manager, had this idea for a mixtape," he explains of the project's origins. "That led me back to my younger days. And this idea to do something that's in between a pirate radio show and a sound clash."

To tie everything together, he invited vocalist Liam Bailey to act as *Echo45's* MC, toasting on the tracks in a Jamaican deejay style. "[After] I already had much of the music, [I] started to look for someone to present the sound clash side of me," says Evelyn. "It was like, 'OK, he's gonna be the presence throughout it all. He's gonna be my deejay. Then I said, 'Now it would be cool to get loads of shoutouts.' So I started hitting people up for jingles." Gilles Peterson, Louie Vega, and Goldie were among the many who answered the call.

"Bang Bien," the project's heady lead single, features Bey, the former Mos Def, who works an otherworldly primal chant around lyrics that talk of finding "tomorrow in a fossil yesterday."

"I had already written that track with Yasiin when he came over to my house for three days," says Evelyn. "[The] lyrics really connected with the whole concept of the album." The single is supported by an animated video from Andy Baker based on Evelyn's formative years around the sound systems and b-boy culture of Leeds. Together with the Greensleeves-inspired cover art and a comic-strip insert entitled "The Journey of the Speaker Box," the album's packaging paints an evocative picture of the early '80s music culture that Evelyn pulled from in making the tape.

One of the tracks that chimed most poignantly with the *Echo45 Sound System* concept is "I Remember," featuring Greentea Peng. "I hit her up and told her my story about being young around the sound systems and all that," says Evelyn. "So I sent her some beats, and she came back and shared her youth club story. It all started to fall into place."

The album's release arrived as Evelyn was preparing for his most ambitious live project to date: a full orchestral presentation of *Smokers Delight* and *In a Space Outta Sound* at London's Royal Albert Hall in March 2026. "This is really a monumental moment for me, and I can really take this anywhere," he says of the musical possibilities afforded by such a vast stage. "But I also understand the importance of respecting the records. They mean so much to me, and I know they do to other people."

Those albums were recorded just over thirty and twenty years ago, respectively. Yet, in Evelyn's musical universe, they are still evolving. The next Nightmares on Wax release is a dub version of *In a Space Outta Sound* mixed by Adrian Sherwood, *In a Space Outta Dub*. The twenty-fifth anniversary of *Smokers Delight* was celebrated in 2020 with a companion EP, *Smokers Delight: Sonic Buds*.

Fittingly, our conversation ends with Evelyn taking stock of how his music-making process has evolved through the years. "In the beginning, you have this power of naïveté, then you can get over observant and start questioning what you are doing and become a bit lost," he shares. "You have to find yourself again. I feel like I now trust the process [and] allow the music to tell me what it is, rather than trying to fit it into somewhere. That is not how creation works. With all the experience I have, I have to trust in what I do."

To explore Nightmares on Wax's Wax Poetics Collection, visit Waxpoetics.com.

(*opposite*) George Evelyn in 2025. Photo by Ollie Trenchard.