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Interview with Jack Dangers of Meat Beat Manifesto

By Cara Cotner



The driving force behind electronic pioneers Meat Beat Manifesto, sound sculptor and audio-visual synthesist Jack Dangers has been redefining musical boundaries for 25 years, mixing elements of dub, techno, jazz and industrial along the way. The current tour combines the more ambient sounds of his latest album *Answers Come in Dreams* (Hydrogen Dukebox) with an expanded visual vocabulary, resulting in a more sensorially intense live experience, as you might find at Volksbühne, where MBM performs on Sunday, April 10.

What was the inspiration behind your current album's title, *Answers Come In Dreams*?

It's a mnemonic for a start: If you take the first letter of each word, it spells out the word ACID. It was more of a reference to [house] music than any drug reference. I used some acid lines on a couple tracks through the album, so it just sort of fit. Originally, I came up with that title for a remix I did for Coil of a track called "The Snow" in 1990. They used the title then, and I told them that I'd be using it in the future at some point. I just didn't know it would be this far away, 20 years later.

This album is more minimal and ambient than your previous release, 2008's *Autoimmune*.

Initially, I was leaving a lot more space in the tracks because I was making a video for each song. I use audio from things that have a visual component, and those visuals are incorporated into the live show so you can experience two things at the same time. A lot of the earlier spoken word stuff that I've used on the albums over the years had a video source, like from a film or television. And there's a recognition that happens when you see the video. For example, on a track of mine called "Helter Skelter," there's a scream that goes through it, and it's actually from the scene in *A Clockwork Orange*, where he's got his eyes peeled back and he's being forced to watch stuff.

Though I don't think you have to see the video to experience the entire thing; it works on its own with just audio. It's just an added bonus when you see us live, that it's very heavy on the visual front. There's more of a visceral connection with video than with audio. You can get away with more with audio, but the eye doesn't lie. That's why there's more space in the tracks, because I knew I'd be filling it up later in the live sense. There are more visuals than we've ever done before.

How are the processes of making music versus making video art different for you?

They really are two completely different things. I come from an audio background; I was originally a studio engineer. It's taken me a few years to actually completely crossover, take the audio head off and put the visual head on – it took me about 10 years to wrap my head around being able to control audio and video at the same time. It's pretty easy to do one or the other, you could do a DJ set or a VJ set, but to be able to control video samples, it's a whole different thing altogether. The video would go through a video mixer, and the audio will go through another mixer. It's alien if you've grown up using synthesizers and samplers. It's completely different.

I'm not a trained musician or a trained engineer. I've always learned stuff myself. But with visuals, you do sort of need a few lessons. But these days, people can sort of jump into it without any previous knowledge. There are programs out there which have a lot of pull-down menus and it does all the work. You don't really need to know. Same thing for audio now.

What do you think about that new technology?

I think you can sort of lose imagination a little bit. If you've got a pull down menu or a selection of filters and compressions from some famous engineer and you can just go and open it, you're not really learning anything. You're just copying someone else's sound. It's the same with visuals. But being able to make a video and put it up on YouTube or Vimeo and having people from around the world see it, I think that's pretty amazing.

***Answers Come In Dreams* seems to be less political than some of your previous releases.**

Probably because there's less lyrics. What can you get across in a song title? Though I don't tend to get on a pedestal and preach my own personal views. I haven't got any answers for the problems of the world. The last album had a lot more vocals on it, and it was released in the US intact, but in Europe, it came out on Planet Mu and all the vocal tracks were taken off. It was a different market, I suppose. You can spend ages writing down a message; thinking that you nailed it, and then the record label doesn't want it because it's a human singing, or whatever. It's like, "There you go then, the album's finished." I don't have to sit down for another six months writing lyrics and going over everything I've said already

20 years ago anyway. But these days, when is anything finished, really? When you see the show, if you know the tracks off the new record, you'll see how they've progressed. This summer when we're done touring, I'll probably just put all these on YouTube or Vimeo, and to me, that will be the end of the record.

Your music has always resisted easy classification in any one genre, although many people have tried.

I know – it's all over the place. I like too many different things. I wish I could just do one thing like Boards of Canada. But I work in different areas; that's the way my brain fires. If I'm supposed to be doing something, I've got this inbuilt self-destruct mechanism that kicks in and trips me up.

Does it bother you when people try to assign labels to your music?

No, because I do the same sort of thing if I'm trying to describe something. I definitely fall back on stereotypes. And if you're writing about something, you have to do that, don't you? You have to compare it somehow. I always liked listening to radio, because you're hearing it rather than reading a review. And I don't understand the point of live reviews. What is the point of reading a live review if you weren't there?

There are certain labels which can wear out their welcome. I think that's the sort of thing that irritates people. You can oversimplify in a commercial sense, like describing Britney Spears' new record to someone, you know? Who cares? But that's always been there, for the moms and pops, the normal media. But at the other end of the spectrum is this "I'm up my own asshole," elitist twat who doesn't like anything but utter noise. Nurse With Wound... whenever you look at their records on eBay, this type of writing crops up everywhere. And to me, that falls into that category of elitist. It's nothing to do with the band; they've always just done what they've done. But suddenly, their name has become the moniker for anything that's experimental.

Is there any label that has been assigned to your music that you feel is particularly off the mark?

I don't know, really. When people say "industrial"... well, there is an influence, because I grew up listening to Throbbing Gristle and Cabaret Voltaire. Not Nurse With Wound, though. And on records I've done, I've distorted my vocals and used noise. So, that one's valid. And I've used dub in almost everything I've ever done, certainly every album, anyway. Techno, bits and pieces of jazz, spoken word. Just things that have inspired me. And it comes out in my music. When people have to categorize it in some way, they usually say that it's "difficult".

You've previously said that you didn't appreciate the industrial tag.

In terms of it being the main one, yes. Sure, there's bits of it in there, but it's not just that only. That more or less came out of the fact that we were licensed to Wax Trax! for a year, back in 1989. We were signed to an English label, Sweat Box. And I'd never even heard of Wax Trax!, but it was licensed to them only for a year, only the first album, no other records. But it's like, what's industrial? Nine Inch Nails? Einstürzende Neubauten? There's a big difference there. To me, a real industrial band is Einstürzende Neubauten or Test Dept. or SPK from around 1983 or 1984. You know, the visual thing onstage, lots of banging of metal and grinders.

But for me, off the top of my head, the only true American industrial band that I can think of would be the Beatnigs, which was Michael Franti's first band before Disposable Heroes of Hiphoprisy, and now he's doing Spearhead. But the Beatnigs had Rono Tse, who used to do all the visual, running around, metal-grinding, choreography stuff. Adrian Sherwood produced the record. That's great stuff. That's the sort of stuff I like and would go back to and cite. Anything that Adrian Sherwood worked on... "Television." He worked on frickin' Ministry records and I don't know what else, but he worked on what would be called industrial over here, which has to have a guitar in it somewhere, or six guitars playing the same thing all at the same time. I've never been into that scene. That's an American sort of takeover of industrial, the American injection of the rock guitar was back in it again. Bands tried to extract it in the early 1980s and managed to do it, a lot of the bands who were on Some Bizarre, the main industrial label.

Throbbing Gristle was the old label, it had nothing to do with guitars or sing-songs, verse chorus, verse chorus. It was about breaking ground. I saw those shows. I was there. I was around when it was happening, and I can definitely see the difference. These are the things that irk me about being called industrial.

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