

FLYING SAUCER ATTACK

It's been some time since the Terrascope checked in with Dave Pearce, the sonic auteur behind Bristol's Flying Saucer Attack. A lot of changes have transpired in recent years regarding both the FSA camp and Pearce's personal life, and in fact Pearce dropped out of sight for over two years, temporarily silencing what was once one of the most prolific voices operating in the indie world. Yet he's come back with the strongest FSA statement to date, 'Mirror' (available in the UK on the FSA label and in the U.S. -- with different artwork -- on Drag City). As you'll shortly read, making the album was a painstaking process for Pearce, and it involved a conscious moving away from some of his trademark lo-fi drone elements and adopting new strategies, including a heavier reliance on simple acoustic guitar arrangements and clear (as opposed to previously murky and poorly mixed) vocal passages. Meanwhile, it's great just to have Pearce back among the working musicians. He did, after all, play a hugely important role in the '90s explosion of droney spacerockers, not to mention the fact that many of the FSA recordings still maintain an otherworldly effervescence years after their release. And while it was never Pearce's intention to be an icon or a spearhead -- as he puts it, when he and Rachel Brook initially formed FSA some 7-8 years ago, and even later when many of their Bristol associates such as Third Eye Foundation, Crescent, AMP and Brook's other band Movietone began operating under the glare of international fanzine attention, it was simply a case of a couple of people having a go at making some music -- he should be content to know that his legacy is assured among his many fans and friends. Given his artistic talent and the insightful manner in which he ponders matters of the larger cultural picture, Pearce would seem to be a variation of the Robert Frippian archetype: a small, not-so-mobile, highly intelligent musical unit.

I reached Pearce via telephone from the U.S. to Bristol one wintry evening on Dec. 27, 1999, and rambled with

the man for the better portion of two hours.

PT: Tell me what music you've been listening to lately -- I assume you've amassed a big collection of records since you've worked in a record store and haven't been moving as often as you did in the early '90s.

DP: I've been in the same house here in Bristol for several years now, but I've only got maybe 40 CDs -- I had more, but I cracked up for a little while, and I ended up taping some of the CDs and trading them in. So now I just have a hard-core bunch of CDs. Things like The Monks, that demo album; the (English) Birds, their CD with unreleased stuff added on it; things I'm really attached to.

I'm all for the reissue of vintage albums, and with CDs, the archival movement appears to be stronger than ever, both here in the States and in England.

Yeah, for awhile you couldn't get a lot of stuff. Remember Simon [Edwards] who did the first FSA album? He's done my new album over here, and we did the Electric Prunes in Stockholm CD as well. He did all the money side; I did the persuading, making all the phone calls to people and making the connections, kind of the packaging too. Simon used to do the English punk label Riot City, Vice Squad, in the '80s, and a label before that called Heartbeat who did early Blue Aeroplanes, Glaxo Babies. Now he's thinking of starting up another label. And we're seeing about maybe doing some other Stockholm radio stuff.

The Konserthuset venue has generated its share of bootlegs over the years. Off the top of my head, I know I've got both some Hendrix and Doors shows from there.

Yeah, that's where they were recorded for radio. They're all proper recordings, Swedish radio broadcasts. They're like the German TV stations but unlike the BBC, generally the Europeans keep their masters -- if not the 4-track masters, then the mixed-down masters. But not in Britain; the BBC just destroys them. It would be interesting to see what was recorded at the time. Apparently some of the tapes were remixed for stereo and rebroadcast in the mid '80s, like that Traffic bootleg, that was a

rebroadcast. The BBC is finally waking up to the fact that they have a lot of stuff on those old transcription discs. Like the Small Faces BBC sessions CD that just came out; those are plainly taken from the [transcription] albums because of the interviews. Those are not the full sessions, just three or four songs from each session, along with sort of introductory/interview, "we're gonna do this next song" stuff.

In addition to the increasing availability of old and archival material, the Internet is opening up new avenues for musicians -- of all ages! -- to make their music available.

Yeah, bands don't have to wait for the record label. They can just shove it all up onto the Internet. You know, back in '84, when I was 18 and we had a band at school, no one was interested at all. You didn't have a hope in hell of even getting the indie labels like Rough Trade interested. They were "up there" somewhere while you were "down here." You had to save up an awful lot of money even to put out your own single, which we did. And not only just the pressing cost for a 7-inch single; the recording cost, too. Then, you had to go into a studio. Even if it was someone's shed it was still going to cost a lot because the only recording equipment was the "proper stuff." The first basic 4-tracks were available over here, but they were horrible.

I wanted to ask where you fall on the side of technology nowadays, since I know you don't have a computer and you prefer to record at home.

Well, as a process of communication I think computers are fine. My friend Rocker [long-time FSA cohort/collaborator], because he's a dentist he has lots of money and he likes all this modern stuff, you know? He's got the computer, sampler, what have you. But round here it's just the basic setup. And I have had some experience with using computers for the visual arts; when I was in college they had one of the earliest painter programs, and I played around with that. But my problem with computers is that when you seem to say that the digital way is the only way. I still can't agree with that. In music, there is a bit of place for that. But there's still a place for the old fashioned approach. The thing is you always

have to adopt an apologist's position, and sometimes it doesn't have to be done digitally because the texture, either pictorially or soundwise, the digital way is different to the analog way. That's not to say you can't record some digitally and transfer it to cassette or load it up to an 8-track. It doesn't have to be one or the other; you can still hand-draw something then scan it onto a computer and work with it that way. But there seemed to be a lot of talk that you had to go digital like, 3 or 4 years ago. Everytime I'd talk to the label in London they'd always ask me, "When you gonna 'go dance'?" In my mind dance meant digital. And there was all that trying to kill off the vinyl thing, you know. And it's just a different sound. Okay, you could say to me, "Your records are pretty scrappy." And I wouldn't disagree with you. [laughing] You can hear there's a difference. When I'm round at Rocker's we'll do stuff from time to time. We might knock out something that's completely and utterly digital, and then he'll mix on DAT and I'll take home a cassette and listen to it here on my hi-fi. And I'm not a purist, but it does sound different because it's in digital.

Care to discuss any new approaches you might have indulged while recording 'Mirror'?

I don't have any approaches anymore! [laughs] I dunno, the last two years have disappeared completely. I've been taking Prozac, which probably explains while I'm still here. Just something that runs in my family, you see. My sort of sense of purpose and even musical purpose just sort of... it was about the time that previous album came out.

That would have been around the same time we last spoke, for the Magnet magazine 1997 year-end wrap-up article, and you told me then I'd caught you a bit of a low ebb. 'New Lands' had come out shortly beforehand, and then there had been your Terrastock appearance earlier in the year, so there was quite a buzz about FSA. Then you basically disappeared.

It wasn't to do with career things. About that time things just weren't working upstairs in the attic, ha-ha--ha! I'd gotten the test pressing of 'New Lands' and thought, "Oh

no..." You can't say, scrap this! I remember standing up for pretty much everything up until that one; you ship them off to a label in the States or somewhere and you know that what they get is the finished thing. But that one... it was wrong. But it wasn't just, "oh, my music's all wrong." It was more... stuff. And as I said, [depression] runs in my family. So yeah, you spoke to me when it was the start of all that.

It seemed like a long lay-off, especially considering the sheer volume of records that came out under the Flying Saucer Attack Name prior to that.

Those early FSA records occurred in such a blur! In many ways, it was a nice time. Then about the time of Chorus we tried to do some gigs in Germany, and it was a complete disaster. I'd always assumed music was a recording thing anyway, not a sit-in-the-back-of-the-van thing. And it was like it had reached an end. Matt [Elliott] wanted to do his Third Eye thing, was in the process of getting his first album done and he was not interested in FSA. Which was fair enough. And Movietone was really what Rachel should be doing. And I didn't have any musical ideas at all! I had no tapes or half-finished songs or anything.

But then there was quite a flurry of releases between 'Chorus' and 'New Lands'. Collaborations with Roy Montgomery, Jessamine and Tele:Funken, compilation appearances like Harmony of the Spheres, singles, the live album, the Pearls Before Swine tribute album and the EP with the Trees cover...

Yeah, well, I thought I'd better honour all these commitments! The Harmony of the Spheres material, of course, I realized it was quite a liberation. You're not trying to be "Mr. Flying Saucer": loads of distortion, bad singing and a snare and a cymbal drum kit. Which was not what the HOTS was like at all! Then I sort of came up with what I thought was a good album at the time....

Until you got the test pressing for 'New Lands', and then...

Silence! My general approach has been to think everything happens for a reason, that things work out for the

best in the long run. But I stopped believing that, you see, just before we last spoke.

Were you songwriting? Or was there ever a period when you weren't doing anything musically?

Right. The "new album phase". Yeah, there was a good long time I was doing absolutely nothing at all. The 8-track didn't get switched on for a year. This new one was recorded over a long period of time. Each song was done individually; they weren't done like three going at the same time. It was just the odd bit of musical activity going on here and there, each recorded separately. So I'd heard these songs so many times, individually, that when I got the test pressing for Mirror I thought, "There's something I really like here!" Maybe, not so much personally, but this whole period has been very, very good for the music. I dunno what happened this time. What I think I was trying to do before, I've done a bit better this time. By 'better' I mean 'nearer' to what I've been trying to do all along.

The title, then: indicative of what was going on in your head?

Well, I might have had it even before I started. But it was just the easiest title, and I just knew all along it was going to be called that, I think. Whether that affected some of the songs, I don't know. I still don't know why that's the title, really. You should tell me!

I think I picked up on personal elements. Like the song-titles could indicate mental states and moods and emotions. Even how you'll have a pretty element in the song suddenly overtaken by a raging portion, suggesting someone casting their moods against one another. Is this the culmination of what the other albums were building up to, or a fluke?

A fluke! [laughing] In this case, you're talking 11 songs, nothing else released, and there's nothing else recorded in two calendar years, from mid '97 to mid '99. And I've recorded one finished thing since. So my work rate's even slower now! There's no outtakes -- that's it! And yet, it's more complete, in a way. You can look at and say that song's like one of the old ones, of course. Unfortunately,

however much I wish I could turn into the king of jungle music overnight, I can't.

You said you have "no approach," but how does this album differ in the way it was constructed?

Well, parts of it that were recorded at Rocker's were then put onto a DAT. I'd take it home, tape it onto the 8-track cassette, listen to it, think, "Hold on, I hear something in this!", get a bassline, get an acoustic part, improvise lead guitar, add a vocal... Admittedly, at separate times. But that's the basic way. Then mix it, and bingo! So it's part analog and part digital. The record starts out like this acoustic-y folk record and then suddenly it's NOT an acoustic-y folk record. The weird thing is, if I sat down and worked out the order they were recorded in compared to the final sequence on the album, they're almost

be a sort of statement, with inaudible vocals. But you can't carry on that way. You've got to sing out a bit. Fortunately, I have learned to sing out. Too many cigarettes of course have been a help! And it's a blessed relief. Without spending a whole lot of time trying to sing. It's one of those odd things, isn't it? I guess the new album really is a fluke. But it's probably the one I was trying to do all along. And I ended up doing it when I was in no state to do anything. So very slowly... that odd thing, that something came out right this time. It was the same working method; it's just that this time it wasn't an affectation, it was more, "this is what it is." You're talking about the vocals being a bit better, the lyrics being more on the nail, the sound quality is a little less muddy, and these things have maybe to do with "improvement." But other stuff got in there as well this time.

I saw John Martyn opening for Yes in the '70s with his acoustic guitar and echoplex effect, and it sounded like an orchestra of guitars...

I do an extremely simplified version of that! [laughs] I always wanted to go on like he did. I saw him doing a gig, and he always seems to do this awful white soul thing nowadays, but this one gig he went off in the middle with the Echoplex, and it was just amazing. Roy Harper's another one. He might go out and play with loads of echo and distortion running off an acoustic. Nigel Mazlyn Jones was another guy who was doing that in the '70s and still does. I've actually bought an acoustic guitar now. That makes a difference! It's very expensive, and I can't play it because it's too damn good! But the long term plan, if I ever get to 40 or 50, would be to just sit down and play a nice bit of



exactly backwards, with just a couple of exceptions. The first song was the last one I recorded.

The obvious change is how you're singing -- really singing, a la Nick Drake -- on the new album...

On the early records I just found the singing too difficult to do. Fortunately, with the first few records, you mix the singing down and it can

You seem to have found new confidence in yourself. What, then, would it take to get you out playing live again? Your distaste for the stage is well-documented at this point.

If I was gonna try to play live nowadays I'd learn up my acoustic guitar playing better and try to do it that way. Just sit there with my acoustic.

acoustic guitar, like all these proper people do.

There are rumours of your next project being an acoustic one...

That's a possibility. It won't be much more flash in the playing than on the new album -- and that's no flash at all, I'm afraid! The longer it doesn't come out, the better the playing's going to be, I'll put it that way! [laughing]

Because I've got a few acoustic songs and I can't play 'em! Even to just get a rough take down, I can't get from one end to the other without stopping. And they're not up to the standards of those people we've been talking about.

Well, you think of Skip Spence, that kind of cracked, idiot-savant, once-in-a-lifetime slice of genius...

Yeah, but I think he had a hell of a lot more talent than me. So his 'modern primitive' was Oar; my 'modern primitive' is some of the worst tracks on some of the worst FSA albums. So I'm afraid I have to try and improve a bit.

You've said in the past you don't feel a participant in the music business. Has that changed at all? Do you feel a need to get into the marketing or internet side?

I do plan to get a computer soon. And I send stuff to them from time to time to put up on the website. I'm just about to send Michael [Stutz, website operator] a list of my 70 favourite albums. [NOTE: At this point in the conversation, Pearce rattles off, at length, his 70 favourite albums, including selections from the Trees, Pink Floyd, Tim Buckley, Group 1850, the soundtrack to Wickerman, etc.

The website indicated that the new album is out in the UK with 1000 copies in clear vinyl, right?

Yeah. They were warped, unfortunately! It's got no label on it, just totally clear. Where the label would be are those little rings that come out you can sort of see. It's in a brown card sleeve with a plain line drawing in blue ink. The Drag City version in the U.S. has a full-on Savage Pencil colour sleeve. Nothing like any previous FSA record! Drag City asked him because I told them they could come up with their sleeve, and next thing I knew, they had him -- cool! And I think he likes the CD. Very nice guy, we spoke a few times about the songtitles and credits.

Where do you thing Flying Saucer Attack "fits in" as far as the state of modern rock 'n' roll these days is considered?

I don't know if what I do is "rock." I picked up the NME for the first time

in a year and a half the other day, and half the titles were drug titles! The editor is a sad bastard -- and you can quote me on that! -- and he wrote a 3-page article in praise of Guns N' Roses explaining that the band is great because of all their debauched behavior. And this is supposedly a left-wing, subversive music publication!

Raygun magazine here in the States proclaimed Stone Temple Pilots the band to save rock 'n' roll, so there are idiots on both sides of the Atlantic.

Rock 'n' roll is the myth, the 'road' and the smack and all that. Then there's the music. Some of us are trying to make some music because we've grown up on it and we want to have a go at it, try and contribute to the cause. You can't always explain what you're trying to do, so some musicians will say, "Well, this album I was on cocaine, this one on weed...." And that's what the NME can understand. It's like art criticism. Most art criticism is post-Freudian crap because that's the easy way to describe an artist, to look for the kid masturbating in the corner, and there's the mother over there. Of course, rock isn't high art, like painting is.

But don't you think that rock shouldn't be cast aside as mere "low art?" Just because it's more often created in a smelly bar as opposed to being displayed in a shiny gallery doesn't make it less vital in one's life.

To agree with you there, let me point out that some of the best rock 'n' roll is done by 17, 18 year old kids who don't know how to play their instruments at all! It doesn't have to be this sad drug story. Oddly, with painting, the best seems to be that comes at the end of the artist's life, whereas rock 'n' roll, maybe the younger you are the better.

You remind me, both in how your voice sounds and how you think about music, of Pete Townshend.

Well, the other person I sound like is Sid Vicious, same voice. But I'm trying desperately not to end up like that. I heard this interview on "Carry On Some Product" and his voice, and thought, 'Oh dear...' Now, Pete Townshend, the difference is that he has a whole lot of talent! The thing

I've always said is that I'm a fan and a listener of music. There's an age thing, of course, that makes you change with time; you're into the Dickies when you're 14, then into Coltrane at 18. But the relationship to the music is the same.

I hope I never lose that ability to get the same charge out of a new record as I did when I was 15...

I don't think you would, would you? But it's an experiment, really; we're in the middle of an experiment because no one knows. This stuff's going back to the mid '40s, mid '50s, and no one really knows what rock 'n' roll or blues will sound like in a hundred years. We know what classical music sounds like at 500 years old. But with this kind of stuff we've only had 40 or 50 years distance at most. And I've found that you don't really recognize what the good records were until 5 years after they've come out. So that perpetual cry of, "There's nothing good around at the moment!" could just be this delay that it really takes to get into something. I mean, some records you get into on the initial buzz, because of the hype or something. Then after a year you think, no, that was crap! I thought Britpop was a load of it! Then of course, no one bought 'Oar', did they? Now people know all about it. And one good thing about CDs is that a lot of the shit has inevitably sunk to the bottom. I still hope that one or two of the records I've done are gonna have a long life, you know?

You could think back to the first FSA album and make an argument that it was the album that launched a thousand drones...

I hate to speak above my station, but I have a horrible feeling that might be the case! What it might have done, in an odd way, was open a few doors. Because when we did that first single and first album, in England there was nothing for it to connect with. The English press did write about the second single and the first album, and they were having to put it into context with Slowdive and Chapterhouse. "Is this a shoegazing band three years too late?" What it was, of course, was a couple of people trying to play a few songs. But, it was something else as well, and whatever else it was, it didn't really pertain to what was going on at the same time.

It got swamped by all these labels and 500-run singles and all these people -- this is an awful thing to say! -- just droning, droning.... I think people mean to say that I'm to stand up and say I love all these bands. But you do have to move on, after all. And you have to pay your bills. People say, "You did those bloody adverts!" [NOTE: FSA music was used in commercials for Nike shoes and Saturn cars.] And I say, "I wouldn't have been doing any more records if I hadn't!" I mean, I'm sorry, but the sellout happens, and I guess I've gone for the corporate sellout with a few ads in order to fund a non-sellout on the actual record!

The Who's music is turning up everywhere, on soundtracks, in car and computer commercials...

The Who did car commercials in the '60s. They did Coke commercials! That's why they called the album Sell Out -- they knew what was going on! So I've had people come up to me about the ads and say, "You bastard! You did a Nike ad!" And I realize there's absolutely no excuse, but I had to pay the fucking rent, you know? And when you're going fucking nuts, you're stuck and can't work. Desperate times. So I'm afraid without that and the car advert, this new album would've never come out.

You're obviously proud of Mirror.

I am proud of it this time! I was listening to the first single, 'Soaring High,' and I thought it was a statement of something, and the first album as well. And 'Further', in a way -- but that's a difficult album, because it reminds me of a very grim time. I think this new one has something as well. It's a blessed relief, because all these years down the line you may have completely blown it, you know? It's like there's something going on there after all, in terms of the musical side. So it may be a fluke, but I think this one works. I don't know what people are going to think about it.

We might not know for a few years, based on what we've been discussing.

I'm almost looking back two years with it anyway! And in another two years I might say it's a total disaster! But I don't think I will. Whether you say it's a culmination of what the

other records are trying to do, that's going to be the question, isn't it? [laughing] "Is it downhill from here?"

Dave Pearce was interviewed by Fred Mills, © Ptolemaic Terrascope, 2000.