



On-U Sound Head

Adrian Sherwood

Four Japanese space cowboys and a white English boy are back in the studio creating killer dub. It seems an unlikely combination but, over the past 10 years, Adrian Sherwood and his On U Sound label have been responsible for some of the best brain altering dub registering on the Richter scale.

Sherwood began deejaying around the age of 12, and built up a system from hustling at schools and discos. "We used to make 50

pounds a week," he says. "We were the richest kids on the block."

The disco got mobile and became a reggae club. He went on to work for the 75 and Carib Gem labels, before founding Hit Run Records, in 1978, and working with Prince Far I and the awesome dub sound of Creation Rebel. He founded On U Sound in 1981, after touring with the Clash, and melded punk and reggae. At the time, Sherwood was renowned for the way he would dub live from the mixing desk, something no one else was attempting.

On U may not have the MTV generation in mind, but they churn out consistently good, interesting music. With a new studio complex in an East London industrial estate, Sherwood says he's trying to build the new Black Ark, a reference to Lee Perry's legendary Jamaican recording studio that spawned many of reggae's best tracks. He aims to have the studio available 24 hours a day so the "sufferer" artists who don't sell records can come in and record for virtually nothing during the quiet times.

Ask Sherwood what he's currently working on and the answer's a bit like the River Nile. Out pours an inexorable flood of words from the man who, just over a year ago, was ready to close down the label he created. He was frustrated — felt he wasn't doing justice to the artists.

"But then I look at the alternatives and think: 'Fuck it.' We're not doing such a bad job."

Plenty would say they're doing a great job, pumping out killer rhythms.

The four aforementioned

space cowboys are Audio Active and Sherwood says their album is going to be "brilliant". If Sherwood is excited about the new tracks, I'm ready to queue for the result.

Prince Far I, Lee Scratch Perry, African Head Charge and Dub Syndicate — he's crossed tracks with them all. And still, he doesn't slow down. There's a new album, recorded in Bombay, with Bim Sherman singing over the top of an Indian orchestra. He's been in the studio with an all-women band from London. *Pay It All Back 5* — with most of the On U artists represented — is due out any time. On U Sound has started a roots reggae label to release original classics. He's about to go back in the studio with African Head Charge, who are due out for three concerts in New Zealand at the end of March. As he says, life's good.

"I've been in this business all my adult life — since I was 15 or 16. I've got a bit of respect now. I've got... kudos. Is that the word? I'm not rich or nothing, but I've got confidence and I don't really give a fuck."

"In the old days I made noise for the sake of it. I concentrated on making music that would leap out at you. I still want that, but I'm also trying to make music that will stand up in 10 years time."

"A lot of the things I did in the early days I think sound old now. We're still very fast at laying down rhythms — I can lay down an album of rhythm tracks in a day. But the actual scanning process takes a lot longer. I like to take the music home, listen to it round the house, play it to friends, get tuned in. I like to get a kind of a vibe about it." Sherwood laughs: "That's a horrible Americanism. I seem to be picking up a few of them."

"I work quickly — I usually have about five things going at once — but it might take two years to give a project time to develop. I have a clear idea of what I want and I'm prepared to re-record things to make sure I realise that original idea."

One of On U Sound's latest releases, the brilliant *The House That Wolf Built*, by Little Axe, the band led by Tackhead guitarist and On U producer Skip McDonald, took two

years. "We weren't working on it all the time, but it took time getting all the ideas together and collecting all the samples."

Sherwood says he's really proud of the result — a sort of Tackhead meets the blues, heavy on atmosphere and a main contender for album of the year. He's just as excited about the Bim Sherman album. While he expects *Little Axe* to be a slow burner and sell mainly by word of mouth, the Bim Sherman album has been licensed to Island Records, who can give it the sort of promotional push he thinks it warrants.

"It needs lots of press because it's such an unusual record. It's the first acoustic album I've produced, and we also spent a lot of time on it."

The all-women project is also about one third acoustic. Sherwood says they've done a lot of backing singing over the years and he wanted to concentrate on getting the feel just right.

"They're a really militant bunch — I wouldn't want to upset them — but they've also got a very feminine side. We could have done just a reggae album, but we got into the acoustic thing because they've got such fantastic harmonies. I really wanted to get across the spirit or feel of what they're all about."

Talking to Sherwood, you get the impression he's like an author searching for that illusive kernel of truth in every record. It's no longer just a matter of making noise — but also "communicating with the listener," he says.

"I'm not much of a musician. I usually get introduced to people and get involved that way. Someone says: 'Oh, this person's absolutely fantastic,' and we either involved in repeated projects or it's just a passing relationship. I have to trust the people I work with."

As long as On U can keep on moving, keep making records and keep doing concerts, Sherwood says he will be happy. You get the feeling his focus is as sharp as ever. He's happy with the challenges ahead, and he's still making wicked music.

MARK REVINGTON

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