

The chemistry of affect and devotion



David Sylvian remains an influential voice in the contemporary music scene after three decades. In this in-depth e-interview, Sylvian answers questions about his thirty-year musical journey.

In 2003 David Sylvian returned to the music scene with a new album, *Blemish*. It was the first piece of new work after an absence of four years; his previous album had been *Dead Bees on A Cake*, which in turn had appeared seven years after the previous release. Before that similar stretches of five or six years intervened between albums, whether the collaboration was with the small, mobile and intelligent unit of Robert Fripp, for *The First Day* or the Rain Tree Crow reconfiguration of Japan or the early solo albums of the early and mid-eighties. This occasional release schedule gave the impression, accurately or not, that album releases were far and few between.

Within a few months of *Blemish* another release, a remix, *The Good Son Vs The Only Daughter* appeared, as did a collaboration, *World Citizen* with long time friend and musical colleague, Ryuichi Sakamoto. All of these were on a new web-based label, samadhisound, which served as a release hub for a constellation of musicians and mixed-media artists connected by a common theme; their relation, in closer or more distant ways, to Sylvian. Interested in all these new energetics, and as a long-term admirer of Sylvian, I approached Sylvian's and many of the Samadhi scenes management people, Opium Music about interviewing Sylvian. I wasn't particularly confident that an interview would be granted, but it was, fortunately, though all via the electronic intermediary of the Internet. The management folk said that when I was ready to send questions through to Opium they would be passed on to Sylvian, who would respond.

In 2005, buoyed by this openness, and with the imminent publication of *Fourth Door Review 7* about to happen I sent a set of questions over the net, believing optimistically that this could be a lead piece in the next *Fourth Door* edition. What I didn't know at the time,

was how over-optimistic I was about getting *Fourth Door* on to any regular rails. I also didn't know that Sylvian was about to release another new piece of music later that summer, music with a small band of collaborators, under the group name, Nine Horses. The collaborators included guitarist Burnt Friedman and Marc Ribot, as well as a host of individual appearances from musicians connected to Nordic climes. The latter added an extra slant to the release's title, *Snowborne Sorrow*. The record turned out to be one of the major releases of 2006, and heralded something of a popular comeback for Sylvian after years of absence and the personal, inwardly focused *Blemish*. The interview, already done, took no account of this, however, and I, uncertain about the future of *Fourth Door* and struggling to find the funding to continue the publication, had to put any imminent new edition to one side. The Opium management rang a couple of times, enquiring about when the interview was to appear and I gave vague uncommitted answers, embarrassed and frustrated by the situation. They must have given up as the contact halted, but Sylvian and samadhisound continued with its regular if small roster of releases.

I also listened many times to *Snowborne Sorrow* over the next months. *Blemish* had given the impression that Sylvian was turning his back on a popular audience. He seemed to be lining up with new musical partners from the out there avant-garde, like Austrian Sound artist, Fennesz, and the late Derek Bailey. I guess I was expecting *Blemish II*, an extension of the tortuous mix of self-analysis, angular dissonance and introversion, which marked the first volume, a kind of personal, interiorised record. When it finally arrived *Snowborne Sorrow*, completely surprised me, remarkable as it was in the degree of musical extraversion, even if, as its title alluded, the lyrics documented both the world at large and an individual life in turmoil. Here was Sylvian playing in band format, which right from the outset adhered to a broad, open rhythmic language. From the opening *Wonderful World*, much of the album provoked, excited and alarmed. The opener ran this gamut, and continued through the rest of the album in rock, motorik disco, and industrialised guitar automata, courtesy of Ribot, expressing the alienation and unease of modern living that was spread across much of the lyrical allusions of the tracks. The first seconds introduced a moment of 'A Love Supreme'; Coltranesque uplift before Sylvian's voice entered, and then the lyrics turned mordant, playing off the titles' Louis Armstrong association, and we were off into a world which many listeners at that time, half way into the new decade, would know, but Armstrong would likely find unrecognisable. The lines about buildings and people falling down set the filmic



Trophies cover artwork by Russell Mills

landscape, the register of dislocation and affect absence continuing on through the rest of album, broken only by some quite harsh divorce love songs.

It was a pity but the interview was quickly dating. There were various themes that I would have liked to discuss with him, such as the apparent consolidation of his new musical company, with this cast of yet another list of the hip and the avant-garde musicians, and, with its noticeably northward tilt; featuring Stina Nordenstam, Nils Petter Molvaer, Supersilent's Arne Henrickson to name but three. I wanted to explore whether Sylvian's new found collaboration meant the centre of his musical gravity had also shifted to those snow borne countries. There was the language of the lyrics, some of his best and most evocative yet. And there was the larger, still tortuous psychological backdrop, as with *Blemish*, of the separation and divorce from his wife, the singer, Ingrid Chavez, which permeated deep into this album as it had into *Blemish*. How had he managed to find a way to mix the personal with the general post-Dubya, post-Iraq sense of despair, ennui and fear, so far from the plangent lyricism of some of the earlier releases? He seemed to have had it with America, at least that was what he was telling the

mainstream media, as he talked about returning to Europe. During a languid moment on *Snowborne Sorrow*, and four tracks in on *A History of Holes* he sings of the United States of Amnesia, and is supported by a band of musical partners from the European side of the Atlantic.

But, as I said, I hadn't known to ask at the time and it wasn't to be. In fact after this splenetic fit of activity, it looks as if Sylvian has gone to ground again. Two years ago there was another remix album, *Money For All*, and in 2007 an extensive world tour, and also *When Loud Weather Buffeted Naoshima*, another in his long history of sound-art works, this time taken from an installation piece commissioned by the Naoshima Fukutake Art Museum Foundation on the Japanese island of Naoshima. Samadhisound also continue with their irregular releases or re-releases, the latest by the Swedish musician Thomas Feiner, and Anywhen, the rather wonderful *Opiate Remixes*, and another by Sylvian's brother Steve Janson. All this though is really to preface the interview printed here, and to acknowledge its time-weathered quality.

While the internet interview may be somewhat dated it is pretty extensive, and although at times this