

MOBY

No one could say that Moby toes the line. Each new album released has been radically different from last. Christopher Holder learns how to stay fresh.

I think we all secretly hate people with cool nicknames. While the rest of us mere mortals labour under monikers such as Davo and Spazz, you've got wise guys like this Richard Hall bloke who have spent their lives being called Moby. Cool... I mean... bastard!

No, it's not some showbiz name that a record executive invented, or a deft marketing move, it's actually because his family are direct descendents of the author of *Moby Dick*. Even worse – cool nickname with an historical significance.

Over the course of fifteen years or so Moby has emerged from his thrash rock roots to be a member of the suavely alternative Ultra Vivid Scene, to then explode onto the emerging rave scene with the Twin Peaks inspired dance anthem *Go*, to then return to his beginnings with the heartfelt and uncompromisingly bleak, *Animal Rights* LP. Recently his latest work, *Play*, sees Moby combining hip hop beats, with housey piano lines, intriguing vocal samples, and angular synth work.

He's performed, composed, sung, engineered, produced and mixed pretty much everything he's ever released. Artistically, Moby does what he likes, when he likes, in the way that he likes it. Moby operates on an emotional level. Sure the final product has got to be well recorded, performed, and mixed, but he's none too fussed about jumping through hoops to eliminate the human touches in his recordings. For instance, a Moby vocal performance will include him sniffing, breathing, shuffling paper, and probably have the sound of a SMPTE generator in the background if you listen hard enough. But it doesn't matter, the emotion shines through. He freely admits that his latest album, *Play*, 'sounds like a homemade record', but by the same token believes it benefits from it.

Moby: We're human beings, I like organic sounding records – there's nothing wrong with hearing the process. Why do people in the TV and music business work so hard to make it look and sound sanitised? Human beings make mistakes, we don't play things perfectly, sometimes we say the wrong things, why not incorporate that into the finished product?

"I have my suspicions that this obsession with perfection also has something to do with the fact that a

lot of times people have songs and recordings that aren't actually any good. So, rather than trying to make the songs or recording better, they focus on the minutiae. Like the one about the reason for the song being bad is 'because the vocals are too noisy'. I've never heard a song ruined by a noisy vocal.

Found Sounds

Talking of vocals, Moby turned a lot of heads with the use of vocal samples taken from early 20th century field recordings. The acappella samples showcase eery and sometimes heart-rending black American voices from the Deep South.

Moby: The way I discovered these recordings was via a friend of mine who is a journalist in New York and he had been sent a box set, called the Sounds of the South – a collection of recordings compiled by Alan Lomax early this century. Alan Lomax was a musical historian who travelled around and recorded people singing and playing instruments. So my friend lent me these recordings and I just loved them. I then sampled them and started making songs around them.

CH: *Were the recordings in good shape?*

Moby: That's the amazing thing, a lot of recordings from the early 20th century would be impossible to sample just because the fidelity was so poor, but the fidelity of these recordings is outstanding – really well recorded. I didn't have to do any audio restoration myself, in most cases I didn't even change the tempo or pitch. The only song where the vocals have been pitch shifted was on 'Find My Baby', I sped up the vocals and tuned them down.

CH: *Can we talk about your studio and how you got this album together?*

Moby: My studio setup is pretty old fashioned, I'm looking to rebuild it soon. The core of my setup for *Play* was Cubase running on an old Macintosh IIci, a Soundcraft Spirit 24:8:2 mixing desk, four Akai samplers – an S950, S1000, S3000, and S3200 – an electric guitar, electric bass, and a bunch of Yamaha and Roland synths. In terms of effects processing all I really used was a couple of dbx 160 compressors, a Yamaha SPX900, an Eventide DSP4000, and occasionally Alesis Quadraverb for digital delay.

CH: *No live room or cupboard to do the vocal and guitar overdubs?*

Moby: No, it's all done from within the one room. If I want to record drums I'll go to another studio. For instance the song *Southside* has a lot of live drumming on it and lots of live vocals. So in that case I put the sequenced stuff on ADAT, took the ADAT to the outside studio, dumped it onto their 24-track analogue tape machine and recorded the live stuff onto that.

CH: *Most of the drumming was programmed?*

Moby: Yeah, I use live drums more for atmosphere. If I'm recording live drums I'll do it with just a stereo mic in a room or two overheads, just to get the sheen of a ride cymbal, or to add a stereo room atmosphere to a song.

CH: *Do you take samples from those live drumming sessions?*

Moby: All of my drum loops come from sample CDs, or old hip hop, dance or funk records. There are so many interesting and readily available recorded samples in the world, I don't feel I need to record my own.

CH: *So you don't enjoy the process of tailoring your own perfect drum loop?*

Moby: Not really, I just like drum loops that work. All these nifty programs, like Steinberg's ReCycle, hmmm, I've looked at it, but nah. I actually like changing the pitch of drum samples. If you want the drum sample to be faster... tune it up – it's interesting when the pitch changes! I think with ReCycle that you're looking at one problem with contemporary electronic recording technology, it allows people to be too perfectionist. I like messy recordings. I like noise. For instance, at one point I was mixing on a friend's ProTools setup and he had this wonderful noise reduction DSP. We were using it on some of the vocals on this record, which had some ambient noise. The plug-in ruined it.

CH: *So are people too caught up in the process rather than the emotional impact of recording?*

Moby: All I care about when I'm writing a song, or engineering and

mixing a song, is how it affects me when I listen to it. There are no hard and fast rules. I hate getting these records where every song has the same sound to it. It's almost like they've recorded everything to the same track, mixed the first song and basically left the same mix up for the rest of the album. With a lot of alternative rock records every song has the same guitar sound, the same vocal and drum sound, and after three songs you think, 'why do I need to listen to any more of this?'. I like a record that constantly refreshes you and constantly surprises you. Like Beatles records, or The Stones, Crosby Stills and Nash, or Prince, John Coltrane even, records that keep you interested. There are so many records that by the fifth or sixth song, you know what the seventh and eighth song is going to sound like. Predictable. I suppose that there have been good records made that way, but off hand I can't think of any. Perhaps Nirvana's *Nevermind*. That was a record where the sounds were pretty much the same for each song, but the performances, and the songs were so great that it didn't matter.

CH: *So you think that it was a good record in spite of the production and mixing?*

Moby: Yeah in spite of the fact that it's not a very inventively mixed record. It's a cool sounding record. Andy Wallace is a good mixer but he does have 'a sound'.

“If you listen to *Play* up against Madonna's *Ray of Light*... my record sounds home made, but I like that”

CH: So how do you breathe a freshness of approach into your mixes?

Moby: Good mixes are a combination of experience, technical know how, and a love of music, but also a lot of accidents. You can do a mix, and it can sound completely bland, then you might change one or two elements and suddenly it's the greatest mix ever! You can bring up the gain structure on a kick drum and suddenly the kick drum comes to life. You can't quantify what makes a good mix. I'm not saying that I'm a great mixer, I make very personal records, and if you listen to *Play* up against Madonna's *Ray of Light*, Madonna's record is going to sound a million times better – my record sounds home made, but I like that. With the type of music I make, if it was too slick I think that it would detract from the qualities of the record.

Play Time

CH: Can we go through how you recorded *Play*? Starting with guitars?

Moby: All the electric guitars were done with a Tech21 SansAmp pedal. In the past when I've miked guitar cabs, there's only one way of doing it in my opinion, and that's putting an Shure SM57 up against the speaker as close to the grille as possible. It really works, it gives you a very usable guitar sound. I know some people go in for ribbon mics but the engineers that I really respect use SM57s for a lot of things. It's the workhorse mic.

For acoustic guitars I use an SM57. I know that the acoustic guitar is one area that would benefit from using different mics to get a variety of sounds, but I'm not too concerned about that.

I think perhaps people see an expensive mic as being the answer to their problems, but I think that for a lot of home studios it's actually the preamp that is the weak link. This might be heresy, but I think a lot of mics are really quite similar. In most case all you'll need for a home studio is a Shure SM57 and SM58. They're multi-purpose mics and you can record just about everything with them. Maybe not a violin, or a full drum kit, but for most stuff you can use an SM57. Meanwhile, if you don't have a good preamp you're ability to make the recording sound

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good is going to be really compromised. I've got an Aphex Tubessence unit at the moment, but I'm thinking a Focusrite preamp might be my next purchase.

CH: What mic do you use for your vocals?

Moby: Same thing, an SM57. The SM57 works for me on vocals, but for many people it wouldn't. Because of the shape of the mic it's very easy to breathe into. If you get up too close to it and you breath out through your nose it goes straight through it into the diaphragm, and you get an obvious wind noise.

CH: What compressor do you use?

Moby: I have a couple of dbx 160s. I like them because they really can squash. I don't like gentle compression, I like nasty compression that you can hear, something that is really going to squash it to death.

CH: I remember when we last spoke you were telling me about the perfect way of capturing ultra-squashed distorted vocals. How did that go again?

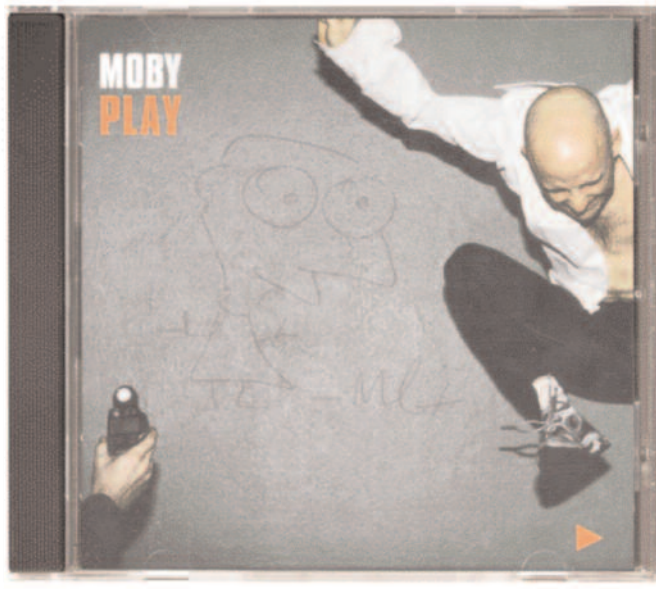
Moby: It's a weird trick, it's not even a trick, I discovered it by accident. You take your vocal from tape, and put it

into your effects processor, then take the output of your effects processor and run it mono into your compressor. The final sound is what's coming out of the compressor, so you don't hear dry vocal mixed with the effects return of the vocal, all you hear is the effected vocal after the compression. If you lose a little low end on every step of the chain then you end up with this very usable interesting vocal sound. To me low end is what kills live vocals, the area between 80Hz and 400Hz. If someone's having trouble with vocals, or if you're vocal recording is badly pitched, I found that if you really kill off 400Hz, a lot of the time an out of tune vocal suddenly sounds in tune.

CH: String sounds figure highly on *Play*, where do they come from?

Moby: An old Yamaha SY22 and there are two patches on there that I use for a good 80% of my strings sounds. In fact some people have criticised that, because I do tend to use the same string sounds over and over again. But I'm not concerned with using innovative new sounds, I'm concerned with making sounds that affect me emotionally.

Also I have an Yamaha SY85 that's



The cover of *Play*, complete with Moby self portarait.

got this really terrific Mellotron string sound on it. It sounds like a Mellotron, only it's better than a Mellotron. Mellotrons are fun, but oh they're a pain in the arse. What a nasty machine, they sound cool, but, thank goodness for synthesisers. Moving it, the tapes, and tuning them, you have to tune each key...

CH: Where do you get your synth bass sounds?

Moby: Most bass sounds I get from a Roland Juno 106. Because it's an analogue synth with loads of knobs and sliders, you can really tailor the sound to the song. It's got some high pass filters which sound nice as well. One of my problems with bass sounds is they go too low, an analogue bass might extend down to 4Hz. I don't think for most songs that you need a bass sound that goes down much below 40Hz or 50Hz. Even for dance music. I mean, most clubs provide low end themselves. It's nice to have a little something going on down there but that's a danger with all low end, whether its kick drums or bass sounds, to add too much. A lot of times the raw sound itself is perfectly fine.

CH: The piano sounds on Play work well, where do they come from?

Moby: It's an E-mu Pro Piano. That goes through my SPX900. There's only one preset on the SPX that I use. It's No. 57 and I use it on everything. Occasionally I'll use the Eventide DSP4000 for reverb but the SPX works like a charm. It's funny, I'll go to commercial studios and use Lexicons and the fancy reverbs, and no, none of them sound as good as my SPX900. Maybe the Lexicon 480L you can get some great reverb out of, but most of the rackmount studio effects I just hate.

CH: What's your attitude to quantising, there's some pretty freeform piano lines going on in Play?

Moby: Sometimes yes, sometimes no. Depends on the song, sometimes I'll quantise a little bit. I have a new Apple G3 tower and I have a new version of Cubase on it, and I don't like the quantising on it. That's why I'm still using my Macintosh IICx, because the quantising on the older version of Cubase just feels nicer. It's got

these great shuffle quantise templates. I'm sure Steinberg will be nice enough to provide some nice quantise tables for me to download in the future, but for now I don't like them on the new version of Cubase – as obscure as that might sound, but then again this is a gear head magazine!

CH: That's just the sort of obscurity we live for here, thanks. What are the other synths in your rack that you find yourself turning to in times of need?

Moby: I have an old Oberheim Matrix 1000 that I use a lot. It's a very thin sounding synth. For flute or any sine wave type of sound it's beautiful. If you hear on the record a flute sound or a wavering woodwind that's where it's probably come from. Probably my favourite synth of all time is my Casio CZ101. I love it. It was the first synth I ever owned and there's never been anything like it since. In terms of the architecture of the sound generation is really interesting, it's a weird hybrid of FM and I don't know what else. I tried the subsequent Casio CZ follow ups, but it never got any better. It's the best thing that Casio have ever made.

CH: Why the four Akai samplers?

Moby: I love having a huge pallet of sounds to work with. I love having 500 breakbeats, I love having more kick drums than I know what to do with. I love having tons of little sound effects just sitting there. So I'll have the same pallet of sounds there for every song, but such a vast pallet of sounds that its not like all the songs sound the same. I also like the way they look!

I'll work on as many as 10 songs at a time and go back and forth between them. When you change to work on another song generally you've got to load up all the samples, get out the disk, load them up, make sure everything's okay. I wanted to turn on the samplers in August and just keep them going for the next year and a half! The only thing I do to them is play with the filters and change the pitch, but I leave them all on and don't even think about them.

One Of Us?

Anyone with a home or project studio will be heartened by the words of Moby. He's one of us. He uses samples because 'they sound cool', he has synths sitting around the studio not doing very much, he only has a couple of cheap mics, he gravitates towards methods that allow him to get on with it, and despite best intentions he hasn't got around to fixing up his studio. Makes me realise... we're not so different. Makes me realise... all I need now is a cool nickname.



Some of Moby's gear

Recording: Spirit 24:8:2 console, Yamaha NS10 monitors, Alesis ADAT, Shure SM58, Shure SM57, Steinberg Cubase, Apple Macintosh G3 and IICx.

Synths & samplers: Akai S950, S1000, S3000, S3200; Yamaha SY22, SY85; Roland Juno 106, Oberheim Matrix 1000, Casio CZ101, E-mu Pro Piano.

Outboard: Yamaha SPX900, Eventide DSP4000, Alesis Quadraverb, dbx 160, Aphex Tubessence preamp.

