

Noir friends eclectic

Film-maker David Lynch and record producer Danger Mouse's collaboration, *Dark Night Of The Soul*, is an artful blend of surreal imagery and haunting electronica. 'We're bringing imagination back to music,' they tell Steve Rose

Steve Rose

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"Danger Mouse came to my house and he explained the concept, and I thought it was a really great kind of modern experiment: to listen to the songs and see what ideas came from each piece." In his familiar nasal drawl, David Lynch is explaining why he agreed to provide visuals for the new album *Dark Night Of The Soul*. "Plus I had just gotten a brand-new camera. A Hasselbad HD3 ... 39m pixels. It's really an incredible machine, Steve."

One likes to imagine Lynch as utterly divorced from the 21st century, listening to a 1950s jukebox in a windowless room with a dancing dwarf, say. So what's he doing hanging out with Danger Mouse - AKA Brian Burton - versatile musician-slash-producer? Burton is already one half of an odd couple with Cee-Lo Green as chart-conquering duo Gnarls Barkley, so what does that make him and Lynch? Especially when you throw in Sparklehorse - AKA Mark Linkous, impeccably "alt" singer and battler of personal demons. Not to mention a Who's Who of indie-friendly singers, including Iggy Pop, Suzanne Vega, Black Francis, Wayne Coyne and Julian Casablancas of the Strokes: it's a veritable confederacy of oddness.

The outcome is a collection of songs sketching out a landscape of loneliness, angst, revenge and other outsider qualities through a mix of psychedelic rock, twisted folk and haunting electronica. And the picture is completed by an accompanying book of Lynch's trademark familiar-yet-surreal imagery: a family staring in quiet confusion at a giant head lying on the dinner table; a woman in a 1950s chiffon dress brandishing a fork at a midnight barbecue; police apprehending a screaming bearded man in his underpants who has bright blue liquid gushing out of his crotch. It's like stills and a soundtrack for a movie that doesn't exist. Technically, the album doesn't exist either but we'll deal with that later.

As Burton explains, the idea just grew. Having worked together on the last Sparklehorse album, he and Linkous met again a couple of years ago in LA to make some music, with no particular goal in mind. They then assembled a wish-list of vocalists and persuaded them to sing over the tracks before Burton decided to add a visual element "to bring the whole thing together and take it to another level."

No stranger to mixing up his media, Burton has previously produced 2-D popsters Gorillaz, collaborated with Banksy to sneak prank Paris Hilton CDs into record stores and referenced movie duos with his Gnarls Barkley costumes. Only one name came into his head for this visual dimension, he says. So he wrote a letter to Lynch. Within a week, he was going over to meet him at his house: "If I'd thought too much about it I probably wouldn't have asked him. But I've seen all his films and know how he uses music. I thought he would get it."

"Sometimes somebody comes in the door and one thing leads to another and things exist that wouldn't have existed otherwise," says Lynch. "That's what appealed to me."

Had he actually heard of Danger Mouse? "Well, I'd heard of Gnarls Barkley. And I'd probably heard his music but I never know who did what. I think Danger Mouse is like a modern hipster musician who is not only great with music but all the things we have to do these days to get music out into the world. He gets the modern way."

So Lynch isn't stuck in the 1950s? "No, I listen to the radio. I'm a big fan of Au Revoir Simone [Brooklyn synth-pop trio; he played them at his wedding] and Moby, I did the video for one of his songs. And ... there's a bunch of people I like. Um ..."

He might not have his finger on the pulse but it's hard to think of anyone better than Lynch for the job. He's long exerted his own influence over the world of music: retrofitting Roy Orbison with a surreal undercurrent, breaking Chris Isaak via *Wild At Heart*, and giving us Eraserhead's *In Heaven*, "the girl-in-the-radiator song" which has been covered by everyone from Pixies to Devo to Bauhaus. And let's not forget, he also turned a single song into two hours' worth of unforgettable images with *Blue Velvet*.

It was similar with *Dark Night Of The Soul*, except that these days, Lynch has his own home recording studio in which to play tracks. "I listened to it on big speakers, one song at a time, and I have a yellow pad and a pen," he explains, "and the images came at once until I had four for each song." So what's with the blue-liquid crotch guy? He laughs: "I guess you'd have to imagine the evening that led to that photo. Or that whole day before it."

To Burton's surprise, Lynch even offered to sing a couple of songs on *DNOTS*. Yes, Lynch sings! He already sang a song on his last movie, *Inland Empire*, in fact - a haunted, electronically garbled ballad, much like his *DNOTS* tracks. "I don't know what happened," he says. "I'm not a musician. But I'm an experimenter if anything." There's more to come. He's currently "working on some stuff" in his studio.

Lynch's songs are among the most evocative on the album. There's some glorious music here - tracks featuring the Flaming Lips, Gruff Rhys and James Mercer (of the Shins) stand out - though not everybody seems to have set out to break new ground. Still, *DNOTS* was created in a climate of complete creative freedom, all bravely bankrolled by Burton. Nobody was paid for their work, and nobody was told what to do: "I never told David whether there was or there wasn't a concept to it; I could tell he didn't want to know. And I never asked him what the images meant. I don't want to know myself." It was all down to trust, mutual respect and other such ideals often absent from both the film and music industries.

Although *The Man* may not have been invited to the *DNOTS* party, he's gatecrashed it anyway. Burton is currently involved in a legal dispute with EMI over the album, which has blocked its release. He refuses to go into details but it boils down to the fact that EMI consider Burton and his output theirs, having taken over a label he'd been signed to. Reckoning on consumers' ability to seek out and download the music anyway, the *DNOTS* photo book (a limited-edition of 5,000) includes a blank CD-R for owners to use as they wish.

Whatever *Dark Night Of The Soul* turns out to be - a movie without a movie, an album without an album, a cross between an old-school art book and pirate CD - it's a refreshing case of like-minded people doing what they like. "The whole idea was to bring little bit more imagination back into music," Burton sums up. "I've missed a lot of that and when I was younger it seemed easier to do than it is now."

Lynch, no stranger to artistic interference himself, sees both the music and film industries as going through a painful transition into a new digital age. "Sometimes the house burns down and you build a new one," he says. And obviously the new house shall be one in which freedom reigns. "Because the world is so, sooo, completely backwards and absurd, people think it's strange or an exception to have freedom to create something. It's ridiculous. The exception should be that sometimes people do not have freedom. What went wrong?"