

## UNDERWORLD Beneath the Beats

After a decade of being, in their own words, “not very good,” most musicians would throw in the metaphorical towel. Underworld, however, are not most musicians. They reincarnated themselves in the '90s as one of the best dance acts in the world, with widescreen Floydian atmosphere, killer live shows and their monster single from the *Trainspotting* soundtrack, “Born Slippy” (come on, you remember: “Shouting lager, lager, lager!”), leading the way. Their new record may be called *A Hundred Days Off*, but as A&F’s Sean T. Collins found out, for musicians Karl Hyde and Rick Smith, the beat goes on.

**You guys are known for your phenomenal live gigs—far from the conventional wisdom about dance acts. Why do you put so much into it?**

**Rick** The “why” is because we have to, really. It’s no different from making an album, or a 12-inch, or a remix. We have to try very hard, because that is what we are supposed to do. I don’t mean to sound trite, but we found a long time ago if we cut corners with creativity, it doesn’t suit us. We don’t work very well like that. That’s the “why,” really: because it demands it. It demands the effort. And electronic equipment is not made to jam—it’s made for just the opposite. It’s sort of this fixed thing. And we have to work very hard to overcome that. **Karl** It’s a lot of preparation that Rick puts into it. When I was off doing press for a few months, Rick was just locked away for 18 hours a day making these machines something that was usable—that weren’t just inanimate objects anymore. They became something expressive. And it takes, I suppose, years of experience and frustration and a lot of hours of effort to turn it into something that functions.

**So how do you learn to jam with computers? Rick** Through good experiences in the '80s playing live in semi-electronic-cum-acoustic bands. You know, very simple things that took us a long time to learn. Basically, when things screw up, things go great. It’s really that simple. **Karl** I think, as well, in the early '90s we saw DJs who had worked really hard to get the vibe in a club going, and then it would be killed by someone coming up to promote their latest record. And that’s sad. And we thought, “Wouldn’t it be great if we could play in a club but it was seamless—the vibe wasn’t changed at all?” We kind of thought it would be great if we could do that: improvise like a DJ or a traditional musician can. Kind of fuse the two together. That’s what we have been doing for the last few years, anyway.

**Is it more important for you guys to put together a record that connects with somebody who’s sitting listening to it in their bedroom, or to make clubbers move their asses? Rick** We work on the records until they make us happy. That’s fundamental, really. That’s being very simplistic about it. As a soundtrack to movement—whether it’s physical, in a car, or whether it’s mental, sitting in front of your computer working—our music seems to have had that without any effort. Clubs-wise, we love making people dance. It’s really nice. And it’s a real good route to a special place when you can get people’s bodies moving.

**In the mid-'90s, there was that whole record-label-spawned “electronica” trend. What was it like being the Great Rave Hope? Karl** Horrible, absolutely horrible. I mean, we sort of tried to keep away as much as possible. It was literally said, “Now that Nirvana isn’t here, now the gods of grunge are no longer, something has to fill the void. It must be electronica.” Oh well. In that case we’ll go and design gardens and let them get on

with it, and then we can come back and get on with playing music. We’re not comfortable with trends; we’re not comfortable with being part of waves. The notion that the British wave of electronic music is going to come to America is so silly. From everybody from here or the U.K. you heard, “Now’s the chance to go over there! They’re all waiting for it!” Well, you go do that; we’ll just make another record and be at home for a while. **Rick** I often think it would be really good to do seminars and talk to young people who desire to stand onstage and meet girls and get out of their heads: “Understand this: This guy’s going to come up to you and try to say, ‘This is the way you do it. And it works like this.’ Don’t believe it. Gamble, whatever you do.”

**When you guys came into the dance music scene you’d already been in two bands. What kind of perspective does that give you? Rick**

Absolutely priceless. We had an assuredness about our lack of respect for major record companies, because we’d done it twice and fucked up twice and been stitched up. And this band didn’t start pursuing a record deal and putting out records in America and touring—quite the opposite. Underworld was a really good laugh. It was a way to make club records because we loved it. We love making people dance and we loved going to clubs with friends. It was all fun. **Karl** And it was an immediate response as well. It wasn’t any marketing department at all. There it was on the turntable, and people are dancing and they’re buying it. How do you know that? Well, ‘cause we just went and sold it out of the back of the car!

**Making that leap from your old, more traditional sound to dance music was a pretty bold transition. Karl**

When you realize that the process you’re doing is not your forte, you’ve got no choice, really, but to do the thing that comes naturally and hope people like it. When Rick went back and focused on making dance music, that was massive. It might seem brave, but it was common sense to me. **Rick**

**Bravery? Actually, bravery is not on our list of stuff. It’s more like we can’t do it the other way, because we’re shit at that.**

It would be stupid *not to* try it like this, rather than courageous to try it like this. We explored other ways and we are proud of them, but I think we are quite good at this. **Karl** Because we’ve been together for so long, we can say we’re crap at that, that’s a fact, so don’t do that anymore. We’re still together; we just don’t do the thing we are shit at. I suppose there’s the advantage of staying together. We have a kind of rule: If you’re upset, don’t leave the room, but if you do, come back in five minutes with a cup of tea for both of us. We’ll get this thing sorted. It seems to work.

*Underworld (Rick Smith, left, and Karl Hyde) photographed by Perou.*

