

# Andrew Bird



The phone rings out a half dozen times. Finally, he answers, his voice soft and weary, unenthusiastic. Andrew Bird has been composing; fusing the seeds of separate musical ideas into an overarching medley. "This happens a lot, where I don't realise that I've been writing the same song in three different songs, so then I take the best parts of the song, see how they fit together and distill it into one song." Such compositional deconstruction is analogous to Bird's famed looped performances. The man adores playing live, "I pretty much hate the rest of the day", and has turned looping into an indispensable instrument of interpretation. Building a melody around a pizzicato rhythmic frame, he layers on more amorphous flourishes "a gaseous state, you can almost visualise in front of you", "this blob of sound that you're trying to carve and shape". "The songs have a certain amount of built-in room, I try to make sure I don't write songs that are gonna pin me down too much, but even the most conceptually overburdened arrangement, it's up to you to make it live and breathe again."

Working with percussionist Martin (Luther King Chavez) Dosh and multi-instrumentalist Jeremy Ylvisaker, Bird creates an

intricate vertical landscape, traversed by eerie whistled riffs and his trademark 'apocrypha' of concrete imagery.

He writes words "speaking in tongues", that "stand in to fill the crevices of the melody". Like Owen Pallett, Bird's loops build epic soundscapes and shivering violent crescendos. I ask him how much further such techniques can be pushed. "The variables keep multiplying, because I'm playing with Martin, who's also developed his own technique in a vacuum with drums and keyboards. But what's really cool, in the year and a half I've played with him, every time we get together we try something that kind of multiplies the possibilities. All three of us on stage, Jeremy Ylvisaker as well, we're all manipulating sound or noise and shaping it with looping." "I came up with my approach to it in my own vacuum. It was during a time when I was very isolated, and just saw it as a tool to turn a linear instrument into a vertical instrument. I just kind of stumbled into using it live. I was vaguely aware of people like [Ohio born singer songwriter] Joseph Arthur, Jon Brion and people like that using the same technology, but I think it's the ultimate tool for



someone who enjoys solitude. So it's interesting to see everyone using it in different ways."

Educated under the Suzuki method, playing violin from the age of four, Bird has developed an organic relationship to performance and composition. He describes Suzuki as "this prefab oral tradition", which turns children into natural musicians, "teaching kids to play music like they're learning a language, when they're really young and their brains are still developing" but one that leaves them ill-equipped to deal with the formal elements and pressures of the classical world.

"Suddenly there's this rude awakening when you're thirteen or fourteen and you're supposed to play in an orchestra and read music. That was kind of a nightmare. It was very competitive, I couldn't read music at all, but I could learn entire concertos by ear." Bird almost burnt out during his early twenties, "playing eight to ten hours a day trying to prove that I could make a living as a musician." Surmounting the experience, he made a conscious decision to never again allow a performance to feel empty, "like a wasted moment." "Whenever I'm in a musical situation and it starts to feel jammy or futile, I get really uncomfortable. So every moment I'm making music, I'm putting a lot of pressure on myself to make it 'musical'."

With a head full of melodies ("One thing I never worry about, is that drying up. It'll happen as a result of being alive"), Bird is sceptical of semantics; "Words are trickier, words fill you with self doubt". Lately he's been seeking a way to escape language entirely, looking for "some sort of springboard into just making sounds with my mouth". So far his experiments have made themselves known in coruscating logos, lyrics that bring to mind the tongue twisting impenetrability of poly-rhythmic naturalismo nymphet, Joanna Newsom. On this year's 'Armchair Apocrypha' LP, his eighth studio album and third solo outing, lyrics drift from references to neuroscience 'they'll fight for your neural walls and plasticities' [Plasticities], 'as if you lack the proper chemicals to know' [Armchairs], to subtle scientific wordplay, 'despite what all his studies had shown / what's mistaken for closeness / is just a case of mitosis' [Imitosis]. Pitchfork's review speaks of the album exhibiting a distrust of science and psychology, but I find here more a fascination with uncertainty, a yearning for unknowable things. Bird insists that any such coherence is emergent, not a deliberate commentary or theme. "I have words that sort of stand in to fill the crevices of the melody and I just wait till something starts to make a little more sense or seems emotionally true. But more or less the beginning of the process is not concerned with meaning or intention at all. At the end of the process I'm like 'now I see what I was talking about'. I find the common threads. People have suggested doing an instrumental record, and for some reason the words feel really important none the less. One gives the other a reason to exist. Armchair Apocrypha, I guess the Apocrypha part for me has revealed itself to be about the origin of ideas being a little more dubious."

'Apocrypha' is an explosion of fury in contrast to Bird's last, more experimental record, the wonderfully titled 'Mysterious Production of Eggs' ("a nod toward 'Where do these ideas come from?' The mysteriousness of the creative process"). The albums didactic melodrama grew out of the process of live collaboration with Dosh, "I went from a couple of years of playing solo and kind of more subtle textured stuff, to playing with a drummer again, and I was doing songs from 'Eggs' like 'Tables and Chairs' where I sing 'We were tired of being mild' and the song became so extroverted compared to the record, and I heard the record for the first time in a while, and I head that line, and I thought, well Jesus if I'm so tired of being mild, why do I sound so restrained? So I've tried to get closer to that kind of fever, that kind of intensity, that comes over me in a live

show", According to Bird there are two species of album and "You're going to either make a decidedly living room or bedroom type record, which is carefully balanced and measured, or you're going to make a live type record, that goes for it." Despite his protests to the contrary, 'Apocrypha' manages to scupper such divides, seeming both energetic and perfectly controlled. The record mixes the scratchy veracity of Buckley's 'Sketches' LP, with the tightly measured pop of a Ziggy-Era Bowie album, and the unselfconscious classical flourishes of Final Fantasy.

A love of touring has insulated Bird somewhat from the fear currently coursing through the recording industry. "My bread and butter has been playing live, and I've always written off the recorded product - never expecting to see anything come of that - except being this reason to tour and play live." I ask about rumoured plans to toy with the visual aspect of performance, a favoured tactic amongst independent musicians of all means these days. Bird's reply is typically understated. "We're dabbling in a little bit in the projection thing lately, but it's a different way of experiencing music and it can be slightly less personal. Really what I'm trying to do is to think of the stage as a thirty five mill' frame, and how are you going to fill that frame with as much cool functional stuff as possible. I've been working with a lot of artists in Chicago to make the actual instruments on stage visually interesting." One such practically elegant gizmo is Bird's twirling double headed Victrola speaker, built by Chicago sculptor and instrument maker Ian Schneller's 'Specimen Products'. Despite a fear of overwhelming the performance, Bird plans to extend such visual elements, "We're trying to use projections as just an interesting way of casting light." Fans in Ireland had the pleasure of Bird's visuals at his November 3rd show in Tripod, but missed out on the spinning 'Janus Horn'. "Right now I'm trying to figure out how to get that stuff over seas, it's really sad but it's almost impossible at this stage. But yeah, I really enjoy employing really creative people. It's been my diversion, I don't like to hang out with other musicians, I like to hang out with visual artists mostly and to collaborate with them on stuff." Such a collaboration was evident on 'Eggs', where Bird worked with musician and artist Jay Ryan to build narrative illustrations for each song. "Jay's a good friend of mine, and we just hung out and joked around, and he was just sketching while we were talking and that was it. I love it when things are that easy."

Moments of 'Eggs' were reminiscent of the swing-influenced Jon Brion cut of Fiona Apple's Extraordinary Machine LP. Perhaps this touch of bassy waltz was a shadow of Bird's first brush with fame, collaborating with North Carolina 1920's revivalists 'Squirrel Nut Zippers'. Off his own pressings Bird had made a habit of guesting on releases as various as Ani DiFranco's 2005 'Button Down' and Neko Case's early 'Canadian Amp' EP. "Every Winter seems to be the season for side projects, and a more collaborative phase. So I'm starting to concoct different ideas to pull me out of my own universe and play other people songs. I like getting little homework assignments now and then. Even if I'm like not really into it at first, like getting asked to cover that Bob Dylan song for Mojo a year ago... I like to pick the most elemental songs I can find, that don't really have too much of a stamp on them, and then totally rethink the whole thing."

*Andrew Bird's latest album Armchair Apocrypha is available from all good music sellers. He is currently touring Europe.*

**Words: Gareth Stack**

**Illustration: Sarah Jane Comerford**