

# Blood on the Cracks

By Andrew Clifford

Even in the midst of all the sonic weirdness in Melbourne's Liquid Architecture festival, it's hard not to be captivated by a lone guy in bare feet, standing in the middle of a club, screaming into a sheet of glass that is wired to a superhero-style utility belt of effects pedals. At first it might seem funny watching him fumble at the controls with his spare hand while smearing his face across the glass like a demented blowfish. Even though the performance is aborted after only a few minutes, this short, sharp assault has made its mark so it is a relief when Justice Yeldham and the Dynamic Ribbon Device returns a few nights later in a downtown bar for another go. A few years later Yeldham (aka mild-mannered dualplover music distribution and pressing guru Lucas Abela) performs in Auckland with the outrageous Schimpfluch Gruppe as part of the Audio Foundation's 2007 Alt.music festival. This time the routine is noticeably sharper, with dual banks of pedals on the floor and a distinct sense of studied precision and control. Curious to learn more, White Fungus caught up with Yeldham in the midst of a US tour and asked about the evolution of the Dynamic Ribbon Device...

*For readers not familiar with your earlier work, could you describe some of your previous projects and how they evolved into Justice Yeldham?*

Initially I began fucking around with turntables, which somehow, however strangely, evolved into glass playing. I'll explain: at first it was the usual shit, dismembering and reassembling records, drilling off-axis holes, carving out the grooves, building little jumps etc. I tended to play the decks a little

rough and was breaking styli like you wouldn't imagine. So I started modifying the decks themselves, first by replacing the needles with pins and razors, and then removing the tone arm entirely to create handheld, glove mounted and clip-on mag carts with sewing machine needles as styli. These quickly evolved into skewer, bowie knife and samurai sword type styli, which led me away from the traditional decks altogether, replacing them with a series of high powered motors with various discs of varying texture attached, like grinders, circular saws, record platters, humming bowls, stainless steel plates, as well as vinyl. At this point it was like a cross between turntablism and percussion.

The critical moment that morphed me into being a vocalist of sorts happened during my first tour overseas. I couldn't take my bulky and heavy instruments with me so I decided to rebuild them in Japan. Unfortunately the motors I acquired in Osaka weren't powerful enough to deal with the friction caused, simply stopping every time I brought down my amplified skewers. So on stage, in a desperate effort to make some sort of sound, I shoved them in my mouth and began to manipulate them orally. From the first moment I was excited by making music vocally, loving the primeval nature of the guttural vocal techniques, which had to be employed to vibrate these bars as singing directly into them did nothing; you had to vibrate your lips against them to get any type of note, which is why I called them humming bars. Over the next few years I experimented with playing various amplified objects with my mouth until one day, in early 2003 during a sound

check, I noticed a sheet of broken glass in the corner of the room. I played it that night and haven't been able to look back since.

*When I first saw you play in Melbourne circa 2005, you were performing with a string of FX pedals strapped around your waist like a utility belt, brewing up a storm of destructive chaos while you flailed at the controls and manipulated the glass, kinda like an out-of-control electric Godzilla. By the time you got to New Zealand in 2007, you had stereo sets of pedals laid out on the floor, which you triggered with your feet, more like the high-precision cyborg destruction in War of the Worlds. What has changed?*

My pedal set-up is constantly in flux. I even ran the glass through a laptop using MAX MSP for a short period. I'm mostly interested in pedals that enable me to create an interesting tone, much like a guitarist; I hate it when pedals take over and make the music for you. I use them to enhance what I'm creating orally, giving my sounds more colour and textures. Removing the belt was a conscious decision as I found, when I had it on, I would constantly fidget with the knobs and not concentrate on how I was manipulating the glass itself, so now I keep them at a distance.

*Until your 2007 Cicatrix CD, all your releases were live-recorded vinyl singles. Do you have a difficult relationship with recordings and CDs?*

If I had my way I wouldn't release anything at all. I managed to avoid this custom for the first couple of years playing the glass but eventually relented to the constant requests with the live series of vinyl records. All these

recordings have been captured by audience members and promoters who have been nice enough to send me a copy. I never set out to document anything I do so the quality and choice of material is limited; therefore the releases so far hardly capture what I'm capable of. Sometimes, after an extraordinary show I wish that I had made sure it was recorded professionally or something, but in reality I'm glad it's not. In reality that music was created for the people in that room and can only be experienced properly in that environment. Everything else is just a souvenir, which is how I've come to consider the releases – as something for people to take home from the shows to hopefully trigger good memories.

*With recordings from around the world spanning 2004–2006, Cicatrix is divided into four sections; (your first Yeldham) studio recordings, sound-checks, live recordings and a video. How differently do you approach your routine in each of these contexts? Is a sound-check likely to have more experimentation as you put everything through its paces for the sake of testing, whereas performing for an audience would have more structure? How much more gear do you tap into in a studio?*

That studio session was a miserable experience; I truly hate playing to myself and had a hard time getting inspired. The actual session barely lasted half a day using whatever pedal configuration I was using at the time. I think I put down two hours of material which was mostly unusable rubbish that I managed to salvage the four tracks from. Since then, I've recorded in a studio once again in Berlin, which I've never listened back to. Suffice to say, I'm in no hurry to get back into a studio anytime soon. Although I do hope that one day I'll have a pleasurable experience in the environment.

The digital sound-checks were from my brief laptop period. MAX MSP has a recording function, so during some sound-checks I decided to record and listen back through the PA, adjusting EQ etc. I basically forgot all about

those recordings until months later when cleaning out my hard-drive – they are so strange and hardly sound like my show at all. Like, even compared to the only show I remembered to record that tour (I actually wanted to record all 25 shows of the digital tour for an album but, in my pre-show nerves, forgot to press record all but once) the compositions are totally foreign to my usual sound.

*Damo Suzuki has strong beliefs about music or performance requiring an audience and only releasing live recordings of music composed on the spot as part of a shared moment and dialogue with others in the room. How much is your performance reliant on the presence of an audience, and also the visual presence of the performer, as opposed to an audio recording?*

I 100% agree that the conversation between musician and listener is a magical one. I can feel their energy and literally feed creativity from which is why I have trouble being satisfied in a studio environment. It's the audience which allows me to transcend myself and become someone like Justice Yeldham, who's impervious to pain. I rarely rehearse for this reason and, quite literally, my entire musical evolution has been carried out on stage. Almost every single technique I use was created if not inspired by those who listen and make me want to please.

*There is a certain humour (or is it humility) that can be taken from a barefoot guy in an old t-shirt making faces into a piece of glass and stomping on pedals with all the heroic bravado and virtuosity of a heavy metal guitarist. Is Spinal Tap an influence? Can you be both glam and grotesque?*

When I play I tend to imagine in my mind a backing band not unlike Spinal Tap. Definitely glam-rock type stuff – well certainly the rhythm section which I tend to play lead all over. The show is definitely funny. Whenever I start pressing my face against the glass to play, I tend to hear chuckles from the crowd which dissipate as the show goes further.

*Artists like Christian Marclay (and before him fluxus, dada, and the likes of Townshend, Hendrix, Cobain, Sonic Youth) have made a career of defining destruction as an important part of the creative act, using it like a liberating force to generate something new. Your act seems to bring violence and pain to the equation too.*

I wouldn't define destruction as an important part of creativity, just an



element of the creative processes which may suit some more than others. I do destroy my instrument every time I play, but for boring technical reasons rather than just the mere act of destruction for destruction's sake. I find that the glass's timbre will alter as the sheet gets smaller and I utilise this element within the show, starting with the bass-heavy full sheet and ending with the trebleicious shards. The instrument is thus broken down during the set in a violent fashion with me either biting it or breaking it over



my head. I don't consider these acts as violent myself as, for me, violence is born of anger and there is no anger within my performance. It's more a celebration of life and a reaffirmation of the pleasure it gives me. I don't set out to bleed and have never purposely cut myself during a show (except for that one time I sliced my neck open on purpose when a sound-guy refused to give me volume) and a lot of the

ing I would get transfixed by the blood-flow and watch it trickle out. This may stem from my earliest memory, or at least my girlfriend Keg seems to think so! The actual memory is that of being placed bleeding on a yellow floral pillow on the side of the Pacific Highway when I was two years old. This took place during the aftermath of an auto accident my family experienced; we were driving a Range

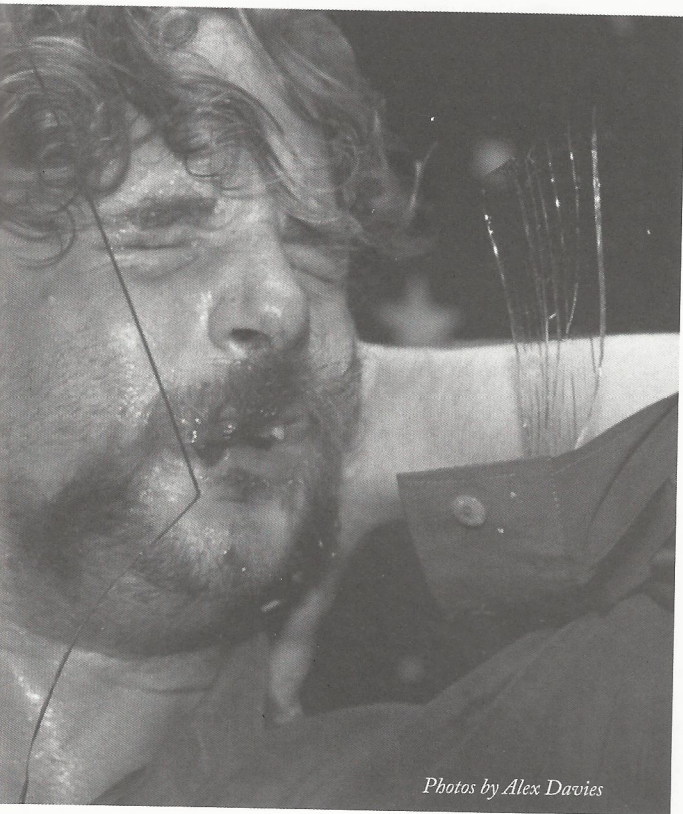
*munching elements versus the digital-sounding, sci-fi FX pedals? Do ancient vocal techniques like Tibetan throat chanting contribute to your arsenal of sounds as much as the battery-powered tools?*

Lately I've been stripping down my selection of effects pedals in favour of the more guttural sounds I can make using nothing but extreme gain. My main musical interest has always been making the little sounds big, so definitely my compositions stem more from my vocal techniques using the throat and lips and tongue rather than just mere FX. Although I still keep a couple of sci-fi type elements like a pitch-shifter and envelope filter in the chain for variety, as I'm also trying to extend my show's length, which at the beginning lasted only 5 minutes and now averages 15-20 minutes.

*Are you interested in how your work relates to traditions in the visual arts, such as (self-destructive) body-focused performance art by the likes of Mike Parr and Chris Burden? Or the confrontational strategies of the Viennese Aktionists and the Schimpfclub Gruppe, who you toured NZ with last year?*

Although I've become familiar with all the artists you've mentioned (besides Chris Burden) since I began performing, none have been an influence. My primary focus has always been music and my influences have always been musicians, not performance artists. Things that have influenced me to make music were the no-wave take on punk, Neubauten's use of unconventional instruments, the sheer emotion of the Birthday Party and the fun of The Boredoms. One element that the glass gives that no other musical instrument can deliver is the anxiety it induces in the audience. It's like a mesmerizing fear that comes over the crowd, which in a way must resemble the feelings induced by some of the artists listed above. So I get the relationship, I just didn't have that as an intention.

*Any bizarre tour stories from such an interesting group touring together through the provinces of New Zealand?*



*Photos by Alex Davies*

time don't bleed at all. It also must be said that I do not experience any form of pain when I play as I manage to find an ecstatic place when I play, which I liken to what people must use to walk over hot coals etc.

I must admit also that I find blood calming and have always been fascinated with my own blood, not that I was ever a cutter in high school or any of that bullshit. But whenever I happened to injure myself, instead of gripping the wound to stop the bleed-

Rover from Melbourne to our holiday house on the Gold Coast's Broadbeach. How the vehicle rolled, no one really remembers, but apparently it did so several times, throwing everyone bar my oldest brother and grandmother (whose hair fell out after being smacked in the head by a toolbox!) from the car, so I must have gone through the windscreen at some point.

*What about the relationship between the very primitive, bodily voice-face glass-*



Rudolf had the worst case of tour-feet I've ever smelt, and he would breathe his feet at every given opportunity, dispensing the most rancid smell. The actual sight of his feet was worse – they had turned white with a hint of iridescent blue; the kind of skin you'd imagine belonging to the type of aliens that like anal probes. During one internal flight in NZ, Rudolf decided to take off his shoes. Every single passenger surrounding us (including me) requested to be moved while the cabin crew searched high and low for the source, which was so beyond anything they had previously smelled that they assumed it couldn't be human, and not once questioned Rudolf. I teased him constantly about his feet hoping the humility would force him to do something about it, and during our last show together in Sydney, Rudolf got his revenge from all the taunting. I always play barefooted so when I took my shoes off on stage, he did the same in the audience so that everyone in the crowd thought the stench was coming from me as the odour filled the venue and people started leaving. All anyone talked about for weeks after was my foot odour problem.

*Are there relationships between the networks you establish with remote music communities from running your dualplover CD-pressing facility and the people you hook up with in person when you're touring?*

Of course, when I first started touring it was very cool to meet some of the people who had pressed CDs with us. Considering the bulk of our business is within the international experimental community it only makes sense that my business life and touring life cross paths. I think a lot of the people that press with dualplover do so because not only are we cheap and ship internationally but they also like the idea of their money staying within the community knowing any profits are contributing to another like-minded label.

*With endless talk about the so-called collapse of the music industry, at least at the multi-national level of things,*

*supposedly brought about by down-loading, are things better or worse at the more independent end of things, where profit is usually not even a factor?*

The phenomenon of the mainstream consumer who buys into whatever they are told to and are now down-loading instead (due more to the fashion of iPods than a rejection of the CD), then throws away or deletes the music in favour of the next big thing without thought, is so far removed from the DIY community I know that it's almost farcical. If these people are now increasingly down-loading instead of buying, that's great as there will be less Britney Spears in landfills in the future. The musical community I know has always had a form of downloading; whether it be the mix tapes of the past or ftp now, we have always tuned into new music in illegal fashions like this as we can't turn on the TV and hear the latest ZU record being performed on the Opera House steps. What makes us different is that after we download the album, if we love it we will (if still available) buy it. This is self-evident with the underground's love of vinyl; as a community we like to collect and our collections are archives of what is really going on musically in our age, beyond the forgettable world that serves up Nickleback and other such rubbish, which is a world slowly disintegrating as the dissemination of real music is growing through the likes of file-sharing – their enemy is our saviour.

*With so much media – independent and mainstream – focussed on what happens in the Northern Hemisphere, what kind of scene do you find yourself dealing with in our neck of the woods, especially in Asia? Have you noticed any significant growth in experimental music in these areas or distinct local characteristics? Is this measured by international coverage and recognition?*

Although underground music is exploding in Asia, my experiences in the region unfortunately reveals a tendency for the music to mirror western tendencies and not create anything new, unlike some of the underground dance movements in

South America and India. However, it's impossible for me to know everything that maybe happening and possibly there are some emerging artists in the region that transcend Western influences and can bring something new to the table. I'll be living in Beijing soon and hopefully can be proven wrong as I get more immersed into the community.

*For most people, quitting their day-job to work with experimental music is never going to be an option. How big is the dualplover operation and what kind of career ambitions do you have for yourself and the company?*

Dualplover barely keeps the two of us under a roof. Realistically, we make less than the dole but I'm satisfied that I can even make this meagre living doing what I love. As a business, it's grown considerably since I started it while living in my van and I hope it continues to grow. We do several things: we broker CD and DVD manufacturing using a factory in Taiwan who ships directly to our clients internationally, we've pressed for everyone from Acid Mothers Temple to the Yeah Yeah Yeahs, who had us produce their first EP 'master' when it was still an independent release. As I travel and visit record stores worldwide, I'm always fascinated to see our work pop up everywhere, especially on signature cardboard wallets with felt inlays that are getting increasingly popular. Along with this we also distribute music across Australia, stocking all the specialty independent stores (as well as online), promote tours and gigs including our weekly club consolador de dos caras, and of course the initial reason for our being the label, which releases a wide variety of music. I'm particularly keen to have the label side of the business do better as that's where the true passion lies. I love the music we release and hope that more people will take interest in what we represent.

[www.dualplover.com/justice.htm](http://www.dualplover.com/justice.htm)