

Side lines

THIS WEEK: NICK CAVE ★ BIRDLAND ★ MAXI PRIEST GETS SHRINK RAPPEL ★ FANZINE ROUND UP ★ JON HASSELL



PICS: PHIL NICHOLS

DEAD CAN DANCE

We don't live in an ivory tower. There has been a false illusion created around us in the past that needs dispelling. Lisa and I don't belong to any esoteric clans, nor do we live in the past and suffer from nostalgic pangs. I have no wish to live in an earlier age – this is a very exciting time to live in.”

While the notoriously interview-shy Lisa Gerrard is holidaying in Australia, the Dublin-based Brendan Perry is discussing the music and methods of 4AD's Dead Can Dance, perhaps the most outre experimentalists on a label with its lucky share of left-field mavericks.

For sheer articulacy and breadth of ideas, Brendan makes yer average pop theoretician seem like he's just risen from the primordial swamp in comparison, but he's no Tarquin or Quentin-ish over-educated toff (his accent actually has a cockneyish twang), and he never lords his enviable grasp of (mostly alien to pop) concepts; he's just very matter-of-fact about it all.

“We draw on the music of several centuries,” he says. “At the moment, we're also interested in the neo-Platonic philosophy of The Golden Age, and the related theory that benevolent energy comes from the eternal. Actually, our favourite musical period is the 400-500 year span that takes you from the early Middle Ages to the early Renaissance.”

This isn't locquaciousness for its own sake. Here, Brendan is talking specifically about “Aion”, the fifth Dead Can Dance album to be released in the 10 years since Gerrard (who lives in Barcelona and recently acted in a film directed by the celebrated Agustin Villaronga) and Perry (currently working on a soundtrack for a new Villaronga film, as well as composing music for a live pageant in Cavan, near Dublin) met in Melbourne in 1980.

“Aion” (an archaic spelling of aeon, meaning age) sees DCD drift even further off into their own world than 1988's “The Serpent's Egg”, a world of intense speculation on the past not, as Brendan insists, as a way of escaping, but as a means of drawing inspiration for the present.

“I'm not obsessed with the past. But it's like a modernist disease, the idea that the past is redundant. There have been some incredible things in history, some of which should never have been kept, of course, and others that ought to be continually explored.”

What kind of themes are explored on “Aion”?

“Euthanasia – that age-old question about people's right to die – existence, our role in the world, the

problem of whether or not we can control our own destiny, and how we should make provisions and not put too much faith in fate.”

For some reason, it's hard to imagine having this conversation with Ian Brown. Do you feel detached from pop, Brendan?

“In terms of resonance and satisfaction, pop is superficial. I like to dance, and I go to discos in Dublin, but that's purely for physical/sensual pleasure. The music I really love has to have a greater depth, it must have the ability to move me in places not normally stirred. I don't want to sound quasi-mystical here, I'm just talking about the fact that the pre-established level at which the listener becomes involved in pop is sometimes a bit . . . shallow.”

You won't see too many people shaking a leg to “Aion” this Summer, that's for sure.

“Aion” is very demanding of the imagination. It compels the listener to become involved.”

Passing rustics who wouldn't know their arse from their Elgar might look at all of this and scream, “Pretentious!” However, as last week's MM review of “Aion” suggested, charges of pretentiousness levelled at DCD can mostly be countered by one small fact: they actually know what they're talking about. Lisa and Brendan aren't just coyly dabbling in, say, traditional Arabic music, they have thoroughly studied its forms and learned how to play the right instruments.

With all their knowledge and expertise, have DCD ever been tempted to knock out a quick pop song, just for the hell of it, to see what happens?

“Not really,” Brendan says. “We want to create the framework that will be the perfect medium for the passions and emotions that need conveying. On ‘Aion’, the musical styles employed are the appropriate ones. Let's just say that pop simply doesn't have strong enough wings to make our ideas airborne. There'd be too many inconsistencies, too many sacrifices we'd have to make.”

Shame. Dead Can Dance would look great on “Top Of The Pops”. Meanwhile, discover the past-modern pleasures of the timeless “Aion”.

PAUL LESTER

