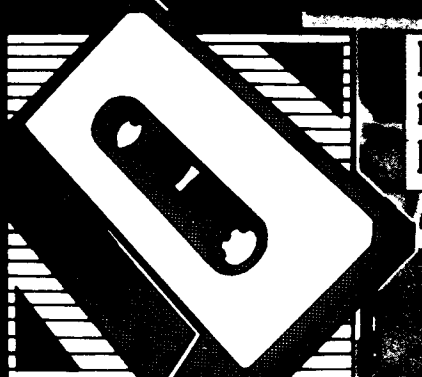


David Elliott discovers that prolific innovator Bill Nelson shows no sign of letting up.



A Full Nelson

After a year which gave us just one single (and an old remixed one at that) it gives me great pleasure to say that Bill Nelson is back, and with a vengeance.

Apart from a short North American tour in the summer Bill spent most of '84 cocooned in his Yorkshire studio, The Echo Observatory, preparing backing tracks for his forthcoming album on CBS/*Portrait*. That'll be out later this year, but in the meantime there's an absolute deluge of vinyl coming out on his own *Cocteau* label.

Already released are *Trial By Intimacy* (*The Book Of Splendours*), a 4-LP box set of instrumental music complete with postcards and a book of his photographic work, plus *The Two-Fold Aspect Of Everything* which is a double album of rare tracks, B-sides and remixes. In addition to these two there's a mini-album by Yukihiro Takahashi called *Wild and Moody* (on which Bill guests) and the excellent *Jump Cut* LP by Man Jumping.

Describing the release of the box set as "both a labour of love and a personal exorcism" I asked him to elaborate.

"The whole process of making records, the way it's been built up, having to think about radio play and singles — particularly if you're signed to a major company — it negates the

idea that you can do things very quickly and yet they can be quite pertinent pieces of music. I just like the idea. I mean, I've got another three albums waiting at home!"

The tracks seem to be very fleeting. Why so brief?

"It's the same reason why I find it harder and harder to write lyrics — often the title says enough. I'm finding that most musical statements don't need to go on that long. Having said that I've just done a 57-minute magnum opus which I'm very thrilled with. I've sampled bits of Faure's *Requiem* into a very cheap digital delay and also parts of a TV play with a girl saying over and over again "Do you think I've got what it takes?" and "Are you a photographer?" and so on, mixed in with some overdubbed instrumental work. You wouldn't recognise it's Faure's *Requiem* because the samples are so short and it's looped and turned into a rhythmic base. It's quite evocative."

It certainly is, but don't just take my word for it — *Sex, Psyche, Etc* is on this month's tape.

I wondered if there was any special way he'd like listeners to approach the albums.

"Initially it has to be approached fairly casually. It's a daunting task to go through 83 pieces of music for anyone. I think it's best first of all to play it while reading a book or have the

TV on with the sound off, and then when you feel comfortable with it start to go into it in some detail."

Back Tracking

Some of the pieces are quite simply backing tracks.

"I thought it would be more fun to leave them open so that people would maybe like to doodle over them themselves. It's like a colour by numbers thing: I provide the shape and you colour the bits in."

And if that isn't an invitation I don't know what is.

But how does Bill structure his pieces? Is there a standard procedure?

"They tend to work from a rhythm base, but with the pieces that aren't drum-machine orientated I'll often put down a chord pattern, then slow them down or reverse the tape, then delay it and so on until I get a particular mood happening from that chord. And then I overdub. It's literally first take. If there's a mistake that doesn't jut out too much and the rest is good I won't drop in and correct it. For a start it stops you moving on to the next stage quickly, and the idea is to do it very quickly. It's switching off

the conscious mind and allowing the subconscious to have its say. There's bound to be a few technical errors that way but actually the music has more weight, more depth with that process."

The advantages of having his own studio are obvious. Recently refurbished with 16 track (another thing that kept him busy last year) Bill can record when the time suits him.

"Usually I wake up at about eight because I've got two children who go to school, and so I probably start at around 10.30 in the morning and I'm up there 'till dinnertime. If I've got a bit stuck for ideas then I'll go and watch TV for an hour and then go back. I've worked until two or three in the morning sometimes.

"I've only been doing it that intensely since I had my studio refurbished. It's tempting though, because not only do I not come down here much nowadays (London) but I don't go out much in general. My friends have to drag me out of the studio!"

The Echo Observatory is, as Bill says, a fairly professional studio now. There's a Fostex B16 tape machine with an AHB System 8 desk (32/8/2), plus the Sony PCM F1 Digital Recorder and a Revox B77 tape deck. The monitors are Tannoy with quad amplification and effects units include the MXR 01 digital reverb, 2 Eventide Harmonisers, a Marshall time modulator and the Roland SDE 3000 Delay.

For synthesisers Bill's got a Yamaha CS70, the ubiquitous DX7, the Casio CP7000 and MT30 plus an old Mini-Moog. And for guitars he has the Yamaha SG3000, a Violette-Citron, the Aria Pro bass, and Ovation 6 and 12 strings. There's also a Wurlitzer piano and 2 rhythm machines — a TR808 and AHB. Impulse-One drum computer. Not forgetting the vase of roses from the garden and red Habitat blinds!

What, no Fairlight?

"I've never been lucky enough to actually mess around with one. I've got demonstration

tapes and I like some of the things it's capable of doing. From what I can gather there are differing opinions — some people say the Synclavier is a much better instrument and also the PPG sounds good. But it's so beyond my budget that there's no way I can think about that at the moment. I've been used to making the most of primitive equipment so I still work that way and in some ways I think that's quite an admirable thing.



"I must admit I've given the old DX7 a lot of whack — more whack than I should have done. I feel at the moment, well, everyone's done hi-tech recordings — let's go the opposite way. Find an old studio somewhere that's never been updated since the '50s and rehearse solidly for several months until the music can be performed. Go in and just record it in an afternoon with no overdubs and on valve equipment, just with acoustic instruments. I'd probably come out sounding like The Incredible String Band or something!"

Talking of bands, how did the American tour go?

"It went down really well. They were clubs mostly, but good ones with nice stage size, good sound systems and so on. I didn't look

forward to it at all but despite a lot of traumas on the road and with the organization I was well pleased.

"The drummer was Preston Hayman who played percussion on *Chimera* but he was actually playing a Simmons kit plus Linn Drum triggering the Simmons and live percussion over the top. He had a system whereby he could assign a basic pattern for the Linn which could either play with its own sound or it could trigger the Simmons kit with the same pattern, or he could assign a percussive pattern to the drum machine, play the Simmons kit live and then dabble about on the racks of other stuff. Or he could have all the basic stuff going off the computer with the Simmons and Linn working together and just play percussion over the top. He'd improvise every night — take a bit out here and then take over manually.

"The bass player was Ian Denby who's from Leeds and has never been in a pro band before. He's got all the right influences like Mick Karn and Jaco Pastorius although he's developing away from that. There were three keyboard players, one of which doubled on alto sax and oboe. And I just played guitars and sang.

We can expect a similar line-up for the tour that accompanies Bill's upcoming 'commercial' album (which incidentally will be called *Getting The Holy Ghost Across*).

"Yes, I think so. I'd like to expand it a bit more. I'd really like someone to play marimbas live."

How about bringing Steve Jansen along?

"Yeah, that would be great!"

Well, that remains to be seen, but it's a nice thought. . .

Lots happening, then, on the Bill Nelson front. Interview over I journey back to my flat just in time to catch Richard Skinner playing excerpts of *Trial By Intimacy* on "Saturday Live". Instrumental music on Radio One? — things are looking up indeed! ■