

Blitzed



INTERVIEW



IN SYNCH
HUGH PADGHAM INTERVIEW

By Eoghan Lyng

Hugh Padgham is smiling. He's not working on anything at the moment because he's "in Greece." It's a very different environment from 1980s England where he worked as an engineer and a producer. Padgham's smile returns for a second time when he remembers a funny anecdote about Paul McCartney. "It was weird," he chuckles, "because when I first went to meet him at his manager's office which I think was at Manchester Square, we were discussing musicians. I suggested Jerry Marotta on drums [for the album]." The Beatle chimed in to ask who should play the bass, which amazed Padgham. "Are you kidding me?" Padgham laughs.

Invariably, McCartney played bass on *Press to Play* (1986), although he would "get into a tizz about it, and fiddle for hours". "It's not that he lost confidence," Padgham says, "but probably thought he could do it better." Padgham pencils himself as an "amateur bass player", and gushes at McCartney's bass prowess with The Beatles. The album was largely co-written by Eric Stewart of 10cc fame. "Eric and I seemed to differ wildly on the circumstances on *Press to Play*," Padgham says. "I remember it in a different way to Eric, and I kind of regret the way he talks about me. I had mucho respect for him, because I grew up listening to 10cc. I thought he was a brilliant engineer, guitar player and musician, so it's a shame. Eric always seems to talk about [*Press to Play*] in a sort-of-sour-grapes way, which I don't recognise. But that's by the by."

No one, not even the creative team, considers *Press to Play* a triumph for the solo Beatle. Nevertheless, *Press to Play* is noteworthy in that it features 'Pretty Little Head', a bouncy, giddy track that incorporates faders and abstract rhythms. Indeed, the track could easily have slotted into Peter Gabriel's jauntily produced *So*, a record that contrasted the nocturnal, compressed grooves on the third Gabriel album. "I never thought of it like that," the producer responds. "I do know from my point of view, I was about twenty-four when I recorded [the third album.] The sessions were on and off, nearly a year. Unheard of! The XTC album *Drums and Wires* was done in four weeks, which was hard work and fast. A year to make [laughs] ..." Patience has its rewards: Gabriel's third album has a sonic

energy that has aged remarkably well, and it might be the most satisfying album he made, inside or outside the Genesis sphere.

Padgham developed a trebly drum sound on Gabriel's 'Intruder', which likely netted him a gig as a producer on Phil Collins' *Face Value*. His drum treatments must have won him favours with Stewart Copeland, considering the way snares cut through the monitors on *Synchronicity*. "Stewart must have been aware of the drum sound on the Peter Gabriel album, and on Phil's album, *Face Value*," Padgham admits. "I loved his drumming; he's absolutely brilliant. A total one-off. I tried once or twice to get him to play on sessions, but it wasn't easy. Unless he did his own thing, it didn't work. A session player is a different animal. But I love a lot of Stewart's film stuff; very talented."

Padgham wants to correct a misconception. It's commonly believed that he separated the individual members

// Those Genesis records I did were generally pieced together

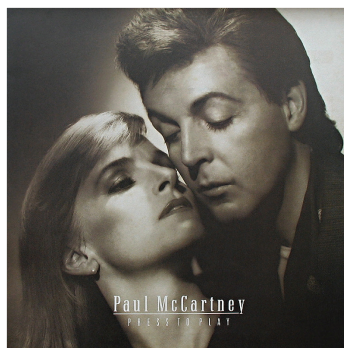
// of The Police "because they weren't getting on". "That is wrong," Padgham points out. "When we first went to Montserrat to do *Ghost in the Machine*, I hadn't seen the studio before. Although it was very big, from an acoustic point of view, the actual main area was very dead. Nigel Gray's studio, where they recorded the first couple [sic] of albums, had a livelier sound to it."

On the understanding that he probably wasn't to "get an exciting drum sound" in the main studio, Padgham elected to place the drums in the "dining room adjacent to the studio" which was built out of wood. "When you clapped your hands, it had a really good live sound to it, so Stewart and I decided it was a better place to put the drums."

Sting, it seems, liked to play his bass guitar in the control room. "If you're in the studio wearing headphones," Padgham explains, "you don't really get any headphones for bass, really. And him and the whole reggae thing, he wanted to hear the bottom end." So, Sting would plant himself in the control room "plugged into the board", leaving guitarist Andy Summers "on his own in the studio." Separating the trio, Padgham adds, was done for "purely a sound point of view" although he is a little more sombre when he reflects that "back then we didn't have very good communication systems." "We could see Andy, and he could see us," Padgham says, but it was harder to get messages across to the other two. "They'd never recorded drums in that room before, so we had one camera and a little monitor. So, we had the camera setup looking at Stewart, and us at a little screen in the control room. So, sometimes it was difficult to communicate because we would finish a take, and Sting would say something to me, but the only way we could talk to Stewart was through his headphones. If it was nowadays, it would be much easier because everybody's got phones, or GoPros." The producer chortles, suggesting that "everything now has a camera", but it wasn't so straightforward during the 1980s: "This was a time when Sony Walkmans had only just come out."

The interview coincides with the release of the deluxe box set; *Synchronicity* has now turned forty, which tickles the producer. Padgham entered a shop half an hour before the interview; "and they were playing 'Wrapped Around Your Finger'." The *Synchronicity* box set is a must for fans of the reggae trio, as it contains previously unreleased alternate takes of the songs - not forgetting that the original track listing has been gloriously remastered.

Padgham can't remember whether or not Sting played the track on acoustic guitar for the group before recording but confirms that the album was recorded at Montserrat; "where we had all been before to record *Ghost in the Machine*." The *Synchronicity* album features a swagger that is in keeping with stadium rock from the 1980s. Padgham pinpoints two tracks. "The opening and closing parts of *Side one*, 'Synchronicity 1' and 'II', are kind of stadium-rock numbers." They're certainly



up-tempo.

The move to Montserrat was likely Sting's idea, because their manager Miles Copeland "only likes London and L.A." "I hadn't even met Andy Summers when I went to make Ghost In The Machine," he says, acknowledging that he did meet the other two "very briefly" beforehand. "It sounds crazy now, but basically it was through my work with XTC. They toured with The Police as their support on two or three tours."

Padgham lets out a laugh: "It's all connected." Work with Peter Gabriel led to a stint with Phil Collins & Genesis, just as a gig with XTC culminated in two albums with The Police. Having a solo Beatle on the resumé didn't hurt either.

The Police had worked with Nigel Gray on three albums, but by the early 1980s, the trio felt that a change was needed. XTC frontman Andy Partridge recommended Padgham ("You should try Hugh: he's pretty good,"), a suggestion Sting welcomed. "All I knew was that I was to start on 'X' date," the producer laughs. "These days, you'd have to go through all sorts of interviews. In those days, you'd make an album, and someone from the record company would choose a single." Padgham says it is common to have as many as ten producers these days, particularly in the field of hip-hop.

These days, Padgham maintains contact with Andy Partridge, and enjoyed Peter Gabriel's newest album, I/O. He can't hide his disappointment about the Genesis reunion shows which occurred in 2021, lamenting Collins vocal struggles. How very different Collins sounded in 1986, commanding stadiums with epistles to nuclear warfare as he did on Invisible Touch standout 'Domino.'

'Domino' is divided into two distinct sections: one slow and melancholic, the latter explosive and rippling with energy. Was it recorded in two different

sessions the way George Martin arranged 'Strawberry Fields Forever'? "That isn't entirely wrong," Padgham says. "How they used to do their writing was a few weeks before we went into the studio, they would gather but not necessarily with me there. They would jam, and bits would come out. They recorded everything onto cassette. Domino came out of a bunch of jams knitted together. They tend to be credited as a band all in one. Those Genesis records I did were generally pieced together."

The producer notes that The Police would play as an ensemble once the arrangement had been settled, which would culminate in a "backing track". Overdubs and enhancements were added. "With Genesis, I don't remember it being so band oriented," he muses. "And even on Phil's solo albums, sometimes as the song evolved, he would go back and replay his drum part. Being the drummer, he could do whatever he wanted. If inflection had occurred from horns or something, he would have the luxury and ability to play it again."

Padgham concedes that keyboardist Tony Banks "could be difficult" and sympathises with those who feel drove original singer Peter Gabriel out of the band. "I think they both wanted to be in command." But that's not necessarily a bad thing: "If everyone got on great all the time, no good music would get made."

Padgham highlights Copeland's drumming on Synchronicity as an example. "There's a tension to the way Stewart is playing," Padgham chuckles, waving his arms in drum-like fashion. "Music is all about egos. Andy and Colin from XTC fell out eventually." Like McCartney, Sting was keen to play different instruments, thereby delegating bass duties to Darryl Jones on The Dream of the Blue Turtles. "I think Sting just wanted to be front of stage with his

guitar," Padgham muses. "He is the most incredible bass player. I so admire bass players who can sing at the same time. You're playing a rhythm locked in with the drums, and you're singing a melody." The producer smiles, confessing that his "brain can't compute that."

What about Mike Rutherford of Genesis fame: guitar first or bass? "Depends on the song," Padgham replies. "There were no rules. He's an idiosyncratic player. He's very laid back and might not dazzle you with an amazing solo a la Jeff Beck, but his melodic sense is amazing. You didn't know what was going to happen, and then he would come up with something amazing."

Invisible Touch proved to be a runaway smash in 1986, reportedly selling 6 million albums in the US. The Police's swansong Synchronicity performed more than admirably, hitting the number one slot in the UK and the US. Even McCartney's relatively disappointing Press to Play hit the UK top 10.

These days, Padgham works with Gearbox Records, a label that has released jazz records and "other old tapes including Thelonious Monk." "I keep a hand in recording, but mostly with jazz, which don't take long to make," he says. "Completely different to a pop record, which were pieced together in the 1980s. And with jazz, there's often very little vocals. The musicianship is very, very high with jazz."

Padgham admits that he has "being doing loads of interviews" "thanks to the Synchronicity box set. He has appeared in a number of documentaries, including one about ABBA. "Phil and I did a record with Frida," he says. "There seems to be a lot of interest in the 1980s: The Golden Era. I feel very lucky that I was around, starting my career with great musicians."

It wasn't like a job, he quips. "It was like a hobby you got paid for," he chuckles. ●