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TIM LOVE LEE BACKSASHES ADULT MIKE CLARK BETA BOBSEA DEFOCUS LAOTHRON

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**Boards of Canada are back. We probe them on subliminal messages and their new album in an exclusive US interview.**

# BOUTIQUE



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Many of *Geogaddi*'s songs use spoken-word samples to embellish their bizarre moods, such as the sexually heated female voice that repeatedly counts from one to 10 in "Gyroscope." *Naked Gun* actor Leslie Nielsen speaks of "when lava flows underwater" in "Dandelion," and from there, the album grows more involved and detailed, with all manner of deranged children and computer voices mumbling over hopscotch hip-hop and cranky trip-hop.

"We wanted the general sound to be simple melodies played on unrecognizable textures," says Eoin about *Geogaddi*.

"We want to evoke the feel of old TV recordings," adds Sandison. "We go to ridiculous lengths sometimes to make a piece of music sound dated and damaged." Although Sandison notes that they generally tried to accomplish this sound without simply sampling old TV recordings, a few notable exceptions made their way to the final recording. Trainspotters will enjoy ferreting out various actors' voices or bits of '70s television-show and commercial dialog, which, according to BOC, could originate anywhere from ill-fated actor Robert Blake's *Baretta* to *The Rockford Files* to the horror-movie schlockfest, *Final Victim*.

Eoin and Sandison learned to play various musical instruments when they were children. Sandison formed a band and began making experimental tracks with old synths, drums and tape decks in 1980, when he was only nine years old. Influenced by television documentaries and soundtracks, particularly those by the National Film Board of Canada, Sandison named his band Boards of Canada. When Eoin became the band's bassist in 1986, Boards of Canada were mixing real instruments with computer effects and found sounds from radio and television broadcasts. Sandison dabbled with Super 8 home-movie visuals for the band early on, and by the late '80s, BOC were

making full-length films accompanied by their own soundtracks.

BOC's first official release was "Twoism" (1995) on their own Music 70 label, followed by the 1996 *Hi Scores* EP on the Skam label. Gigs at the UK's Phoenix Festival and opening for Autechre brought the group to the attention of Warp Records, which signed Boards of Canada in 1998. BOC's first Warp release, *Music Has the Right to Children*, was met with overwhelming critical and popular acclaim, scooping up several Top 20 spots in 1998 year-end polls in UK music publications such as *DJ* magazine, *Jockey Slut*, *Muzik*, *NME* and *The Wire*.

Since releasing *Music Has the Right to Children*, Boards of Canada have remained conspicuously out of action. They performed only a small handful of live performances, including a John Peel Session for the BBC's Radio 1, and released the 4-track EP *In a Beautiful Place Out in the Country* in 2000. Eoin and Sandison spent most of the past four years recording *Geogaddi*, which, incidentally, is exactly 66 minutes and six seconds long. Like its predecessor, *Geogaddi* is garnering rave reviews from critics, showing skeptics that BOC's early success was not a fluke.

The incredibly elusive duo stepped away briefly from the soothing hum of the analog machines in their studio to give some insight into the thought process behind Boards of Canada's strange, beautiful music.

**What role does reflection or memory play in your music?**

**Marcus Eoin:** I suppose it's a big part of what we're about, whether we like it or not. We need that element to give tracks some sort of emotional purpose, because it's always been a driving factor in what we love about our favorite music—the time period that you mentally associate with whatever you're listening to. Sometimes even new music that you've not heard

"Sometimes the whole point of the track is about what the voice is saying, so we create a song around it, like with 'In a Beautiful Place Out in the Country.'" —Marcus Eoin (right)



before can still achieve that effect of throwing your mind back through time and triggering some sort of feeling. It's nice when you get a potent, sad vibe from a bit of music that ultimately has a positive, inspiring effect on you, like reminding you of an excellent summer or something.

*There is not only an orchestral feeling to some tracks on Geogaddi but also a surreal, nightmarish quality. Do you consciously seek to evoke dynamic swings in emotion?*

**Eoin:** Yeah, the surreal element is deliberate. It's there on *Music Has the Right to Children*, too, particularly in the voices, but I think we went further this time because there was a vague plan to compile a record that had a sort of *Through the Looking-Glass*, mashed-up adventure feel about it.

*Do specific childhood musical memories influence certain tracks?*

**Michael Sandison:** Definitely. I once did a track that starts with a synth flourish that sounds like an amalgam of every

*vocal samples. Do the vocal samples act simply as texture, or are they meant to imply meaning?*

**Eoin:** Sometimes the whole point of the track is about what the voice is saying, so we create a song around it, like with "In a Beautiful Place Out in the Country." We often get friends to sing things for us with the intention of building a melody around it. It's different every time. Sometimes we deliberately disintegrate the vocal so your brain has to do a bit of work to reconstruct the phrase. Often, a tune can work beautifully with no voices on it at all, so you have to know when to say "hands off" and just leave them as they are.

*You reside in a rural environment. What influence does nature play in your music, and did it play any role in the "geo-" prefix of the album title?*

**Sandison:** Usually, our titles are self-explanatory, but this record's title is a composite that has more than one meaning. We have a meaning we understand from it, but it's up to listeners to



"I'm convinced I can hear the difference between modeled and real analog in music." —Michael Sandison (left)

ABC, Lorimar, Stephen J. Cannell musical ID I'd ever soaked up as a kid. Most of the musical memories we try to put back into our music come from TV rather than pop music, especially stuff from the '70s or early '80s, like John Carpenter soundtracks and cheap American matinee TV movies that are about a fat kid with magic powers or something.

*"Gyroscope" has a vocal that sounds like a woman in a porno movie counting to 10. Do you ever sample pop-culture sources such as TV and movies?*

**Sandison:** That's not from a porno, although we've used porno speech a few times in the past, such as on "Sixtyniner." The voices are sometimes from old TV shows or tapes we've made. We have a lot of stuff we've collected, going back to the early '80s. But half of the time, it's things we've had friends record especially for us. We create tapes all the time. Practically everyone we know has been roped into recording something for us at some point. We don't sample music, just occasional bits of speech.

*Does a vocal sample sometimes spark a track?*

**Sandison:** Sometimes it can. I think that's what I did with "The Color of the Fire" on our first album.

*Some tracks have disembodied, even ominous-sounding*

choose their own meaning. I suppose the nature thing has an indirect effect on us while we're writing, because we're out here in the country most of the time. We're both heavily interested in science, too, which crosses over into nature and probably comes through in the music.

*Does "Music Is Math" have anything to do with the mathematics and geometry that run through nature and, consequently, art, music and architecture?*

**Sandison:** We've been interested in these things for a while, but on this album, we thought it'd be fun to put it in as a theme. The golden mean is nothing new in architecture and music. All through history, there have been guys like Mozart who got into the Masonic knowledge and were fascinated by this stuff. On *Geogaddi*, there's a vague theme of math and geometry and how they relate to religious iconography.

*How has your gear changed since Music Has the Right to Children? Do you still rely more on tape and samplers than synths?*

**Eoin:** We use computers, too, but shortly after *Music Has the Right to Children*, we started trying to work differently. We were composing primarily on computers, but pretty soon, it just started to bog us down and take away the spontaneity. So,

adds something to the sound—maybe the lower bit depth has something to do with that.

But most of our sound is achieved through a bunch of tricks we've taught ourselves. We've been experimenting for years. One of our techniques is to use a lot of hi-fi gear and outboard stuff. We have a brilliant old Rotel hi-fi that we run sounds through to get the feel we want, and we use various Drawmer compressors and filters to give sounds a specific time and place. Sometimes we get a bit carried away with the science of it, like even specifying what year we're imitating by the type of filtering used on the drums or the synth parts. It's a bit of a joke between us to aim at a specific sound, like the subtle dif-

ference between the graininess on a synth in a PBS jingle and a bit of incidental music from a British public information film from the same year.

*How has your recording process changed, and can you elaborate at all on your creation process?*

**Sandison:** Our songs almost always start with a melody. We usually make up little melodies, like sketches, and when you hit on something you really like, the rest falls into place around it.

*Do you try to avoid blatant complexity in your compositions?*

**Eoin:** Certainly on *Geogaddi* that's what we were going for. In the past, we've taken a much more minimal approach to the texture, like single melody lines where you could clearly hear the


instrument. I guess we're heading back toward that empty sound now after *Geogaddi*, but sometimes it's nice to make a track that just sounds like a weird cacophony of undefined instruments. Most of "Julie and Candy" was actually made up of recorders and flutes.

*You don't seem to be too concerned about having all the latest technology.*

**Sandison:** Not really. If you let yourself get carried away with technology, then you end up spending all your time reading magazines and talking about high-tech gear but never actually writing any music. We'd much rather use what we've got and push it to do things it was never designed to do. But we do keep our ears to the ground, because there are certain instruments we've kind of invented in our minds and we're waiting for somebody to come along and make them. We read a comment recently where someone said they didn't like our use of digital plug-ins to make distorted sounds, which made us laugh because we don't use digital plug-ins. We use analog hi-fi units and overloaded tapes!

*Do you want your music to reflect a clean, futuristic ideal or more of a rough, nostalgic archetype?*

**Sandison:** A bit of both, really, although I think we lean towards the old rough sound. So many people in electronic music are making clean, futuristic sounds. There's nothing wrong with that. It obviously has its place, but then again, all you have to do to make clean, futuristic sounds with electronic gear is to switch it on. It's a lot more appealing to us to make dirty music. *Is your music new music or folk music?*

**Eoin:** I think it's obviously new music because it references older things, and those references only work in the context of it being understood as being new music, if you get my drift. 

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now, we use computers sparingly for arranging things. Our stand-alone samplers are our primary instruments. Lately, we've returned to a really simple, stripped-down approach: just getting a sound or melody in a sampler and jamming it down to tape quickly, because it captures the moment.

*Do you play the bulk of the instruments yourself and then treat them in the mix?*

**Eoin:** We both play piano as our first instrument, and we both play guitar. Mike's a good drummer, and you can hear bits of that in there, too. We record a lot of stuff that doesn't make it onto BOC records because, stylistically, it doesn't fit. Maybe one day, we'll put that stuff out somehow. We've got a pretty weird col-

lection of instruments at our studio—quite a few cheap guitars and a lot of flutes, percussion and old foreign instruments. We don't have that much money, so we just pick things up in second-hand shops for pennies. Mike recently picked up an Aeolian harp for £30 that plays itself in the wind. Our studio looks like a junk shop. A lot of the time, we play things quickly on a "real" instrument, get it into the sampler, and then we just destroy the sound. There are a lot of tunes on our records where you think you're listening to a synthetic sound when it's actually an acoustic guitar or voice that we twisted into something unrecognizable. It's a nice idea taking slack organic sounds and regimenting them in an unnatural way with a sampler and a sequencer.

**Sandison:** We made a lot of our percussion sounds by just wandering about with a portable DAT, denting things with drumsticks. On some tracks, we get people we know to record their voices making weird phonetic sounds. We chop it all up and use the plosive and fricative sounds for percussion and so on. All of the percussion on "An Eagle in Your Mind" was done with my girlfriend's voice.

*How do you create your drum patterns?*

**Sandison:** It's a mixture of live performance and step sequencing. Sometimes, we make up sounds and then program them tightly in a really synthetic way. Other times, we want it to sound really rough, so we'll just jam on the drums live. For instance, "Dawn Chorus" is a single-take jammed beat that I played, while "1969" has a live beat all the way through mixed with other beat tracks.

*What are your favorite instruments?*

**Sandison:** I have a lovely new Taylor Big Baby steel-string guitar. It didn't cost much, but it has a really great crystal sound with long sustain. And it's unvarnished, so it still smells like the workshop, like sawdust in the woodwork classroom. Our electronic gear is a mixture of old and newer stuff. We like early-'80s analog synths quite a bit, and we have some other things from that era that we're a bit protective of. We don't use any of the recent analog-modeling kit. I'm convinced I can hear the difference between modeled and real analog in music. We drop a lot of our music down onto a Tascam 4-track that has a great saturating effect on the sound. We have five or six samplers, but my favorite by far is still the Akai S1000. It's an old tank now, and the screen has faded so that I almost can't read it, but I know it inside out. It's the most spontaneous thing for making up little tunes. It

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# NORTHERN EXPOSURE

EXPLORING UNCHARTED  
ANALOG FRONTIERS WITH  
BOARDS OF CANADA

BY KEN MICALLEF • PHOTOS BY PETER IAN CAMPBELL

"All you have to do to make clean, futuristic sounds with electronic gear is to switch it on," says  
Boards of Canada's Michael Sandison (standing), pictured with his musical half, Marcus Foine

A

lthough Marcus Eoin and Michael Sandison—the duo known as Boards of Canada—allegedly live in a commune on the northern coast of Scotland, near Edinburgh (not the Great White North as their name suggests), their music is neither pastoral nor hippie-dippy-like. Instead, their odd combination of ambient electro and downtempo experimentalism is about as warm and fuzzy as a horror-porno B-movie soundtrack.

Boards of Canada's debut album, the oddly titled *Music Has the Right to Children* (Matador, 1998), was a minirevolution in ambient electronic music, a travelogue of spiraling space loops and woozy melodies that introduced the post-*Nevermind* generation to the Brian Eno-esque joys of chilling out. BOC's sophomore effort, *Geogaddi* (Warp, 2002), is even more stripped-down and beautiful than its predecessor, featuring simple circular rhythms, eerie melodies and unusual samples that create an airless, ethereal ultraworld. An overwhelming feeling of darkened, almost dangerous sentimentality permeates *Geogaddi's* surreal atmosphere, like a child recalling a nightmare to another small friend. Perhaps this is music for the inner child who everyone has left behind.



**Things Boards Of Canada like:** The wobble you get on an off-centre record ("We even decide if it's wobbling at 33 or 45rpm!"). The little bursts of music you get behind a logo. Things that are a little bit out of tune: 'Space Oddity' by David Bowie, 'God Only Knows' by the Beach Boys, 'Wonderful World' by Louis Armstrong, and 'Tomorrow Never Knows' by The Beatles (Marcus: "In modern music everything is perfect, rationalised, bland..."). "The sounds between notes." Progressive rock. (Mike: "For at least trying to get somewhere no one's been"). Kung-fu. "Listening in increments." Devo, Twins Cocteau and Aphex, Nilzer Ebb, acid folkies the Incredible String Band, the Wu-Tang Clan. "RZA," it seems, "listens like we do." A record Marcus found in America which featured a Christian robot that sang songs if you pressed a button in his stomach ("The scary part is that it was very Old Testament, sitting the throats of first born and stuff"). 'Geno' by Dexy's Midnight Runners. "The sound when you're at a fairground and you're caught between two different sound systems and they combine to create something new and outlandish."

Marcus Eoin: cold



Secretiveness is congenital to Boards Of Canada. These, after all, are people who refuse to reveal the location of the commune they inhabit in the Pentland hills near Edinburgh, who won't give out their phone numbers or even, for the most part, give interviews. They've chosen jockey Stuart Broomer in favour of the covers of a number of major national publications, and as a person, these childhood friends radiate a warmth and amiability that's anything but enigmatic. They finish each other's sentences, listen intently to questions, and in contrast to most ego-blinkered musicians, even ask questions themselves. "It's one of the reasons we don't like playing live," says Marcus, still running with his theme. "You worry about who might be in the audience, scouting for ideas..." He pauses. "Then again, last time we played live, it was a disaster."

"The monitors exploded in the middle of the set," Mike explains, laughing. "People were cheering because they thought it was deliberate pyrotechnics!" Marcus adds.

"Yeah, well, shame it was out of time," says Mike.

While an EP, 'In A Beautiful Place Out In The Country', is issued this month (a BoC manifesto if ever there was one), the eagerly-anticipated second album is running more than a year behind schedule with no release date in sight. Hmm, three year gaps between records: you're pretty much a Warp artist now then? Slightly embarrassed grins.

"When you've got Aphex on your label, everyone else seems easy..."

So did the impact of the first album just make it hard to follow?

"No," says Marcus, thoughtfully. "I think we lost about a year just rebuilding our studio."

Less Stone Roses than My Bloody Valentine, then?

"Well, we haven't put sandbags around it yet!"

"We wanted to record 'Leonardo Di Caprio is a wanker' and put it on the advert music backwards"

Equally, you don't need a City & Guilds engineering diploma to deduce that the densely atmospheric, otherworldly aspects of the Boards' music painstakingly achieved. "We take such long, individual paths to get where we go, paths that nobody else could ever follow," says Mike.

"So it takes us ten times as long to finish things," says Marcus.

"Where some people will work on a track solidly for four days, we'll spend that long just on a hi-hat sound," Mike laughs.

"It'd be funny if it wasn't true," Marcus chuckles.





Photos: Peter Iain Campbell

"...again, if there was a way of doing it easily, by pushing a button, or something else because it wouldn't be special any more," says Mike.

"We learn to make things hard for ourselves," shrugs Marcus. "We retreated away in the Scottish hills, 'getting it together in the country', as a way of life for Boards Of Canada. Even taking into account occasional sojourns in Canada, they've never known anything different. We're listening to contemporary music, keeping away from the back-stage musical backstage, rarely reading magazines, living in what was a commune (Mike: "People had kids, or went off travelling. It's down to numbers of four or five now") but is now effectively a hill-bound commune - theirs is a deliberately rarefied world. "It's the only way to live," says Mike. "Cut yourself off, pull the shutters down."

"The world's getting smaller and smaller now," continues Marcus. "We're all wearing the same clothes, the same magazines and the same ideas: everyone's got the same reference points..." He laughs. "It's globalisation, man!"

"It's those people who are part of the general flow who make the amazing art," says Mike.

"Everyone's collectively going down one particular branch of music. With the last album we were too affected by what was going on in that particular moment in history. But the new one is going to be in its own beautiful and unique universe. It's like we're inhabiting an alternative, parallel present where maybe someone in the past took a different branch in the way things actually went."

Sometimes, the pair's penchant for privacy can border on the paranoid.

It's like when you glaze over when you're listening to something but you're still there at the same time"

"I'm so concerned about hackers that they've both got completely separate computers for using the net. "They can't jump through thin air," says Mike.

"I'm really paranoid about security," adds Marcus. "We've got all these tapes and discs going back 15 years or so. I've got this really complicated solar alarm on my house so that it's impossible to switch it off without cutting five different wires in different places simultaneously."

aware that their bunker mentality may be getting out of hand, the pair have made a conscious effort to get out more recently. "You have to remember we've got a body with two legs," says Michael. Before 'Music...' took off, there was a more leisurely isolation, their music simply soundtracks for the Red Moon events they and their friends would organise in the hills near the commune: "Just 50 people around a bonfire with a ghetto blaster."

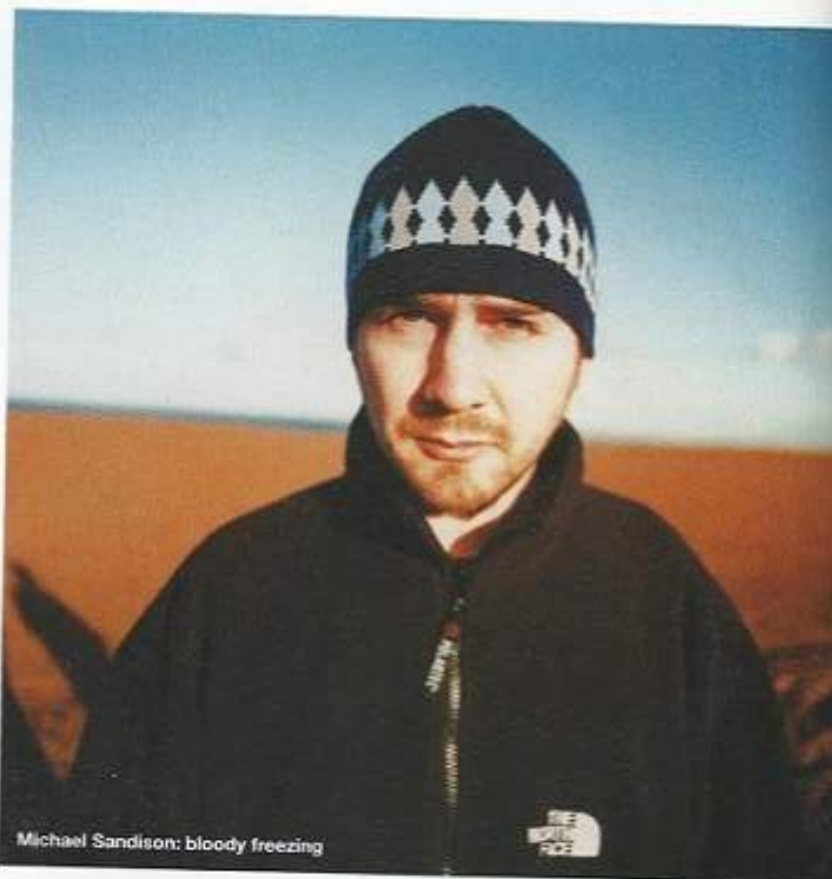
These days, they still drive out into the country with their friends, set up camp and make bonfires. Bonfires, you will notice, figure large in the Boards Of Canada world. You can almost hear the crackling twigs on many of their tracks.

As the title indicates, the new EP is typically BoC. 'Kid For Today' sounds like what it is - a 'Music Has The Right...' contender, while 'Amo Bishop Boder' and 'Zoetrope' (named after Francis Ford Coppola's San Francisco studio) go deeper into the hazy territory between sleep and waking. "It's like when you glaze over when you're listening to something," says Marcus, "but you're still there at the same time."

"There's a sort of running theme of melancholy to it," says Mike, "but it's true, it's not a great leap from 'Music Has The Right...'. The nearest clue to where we're going is on the title track. But a lot of it will be even more outlandish than that. If you could call the last album electronica, you definitely couldn't call the new album that..."

"We've split and gone in two directions," continues Marcus. "There are some things which are just acoustic instruments playing acoustic music, while

**Things Boards Of Canada don't like:** Electronic gadgets that don't work (Marcus: "It makes me sad to see things that have just been thrown away. I'll pick it up and take it back home and try and make it work... I've still got a brown valve television set from the '70s and it works better than my friends' wide screen TVs"), Meat (in Marcus' case). Napster. Marcus: "It's not the big rich artists who'll suffer, it's the smaller artists. Why should people buy their records when they can download them for free? The issue of choice is illusory. If lots of musicians go out of business, then there's only going to be a small number of extremely commercial crap artists to choose from."



Michael Sandison: bloody freezing

we've also done some even more electronic tracks. Some of the best ones manage to achieve both at the same time..."

Apart from this EP, the only Boards Of Canada music that's emerged since their characteristically immaculate contribution to Warp's tenth anniversary album has been the music for, of all things, an advert for Telecom Italia. Not just any old advert, either, but one which also features Leonardo Di Caprio. Today Boards Of Canada are full of surprises.

"It's not the first one we've done either," grins Mike. "We did one for Nissan last year. Then again, I drive a Nissan."

Always did, or do now? He laughs. "I'd have been more than happy to have been paid in cars, believe me!"



# THE SECRET LIFE OF BOARDS OF CANADA

*Airfield of dreams:  
Marcus Eoin (l) and Michael  
Sandison get away from it all*

IN AN **NME** EXCLUSIVE, THE MOST MYSTERIOUS AND REVERED MEN IN ELECTRONICA GIVE THEIR FIRST EVER INTERVIEW

TEXT: JOHN MULVEY

**f**rom the Pentland Hills, just south of Edinburgh, it's possible to examine the world at a different angle. Nature becomes reduced to a pattern of hexagons. Melodies sound better in reverse. Bonfires make for better nights out than clubs. And the colour of the universe is, unequivocally, turquoise.

This is where Boards Of Canada, Britain's most exceptional and reclusive electronica group, see things from. Or, at least, how they may see things. In comparison, the *Ashes & Ice* is an open book, as straightforward in art and life as Fran Healy. A trawl of the internet for facts about the Boards duo of Michael Sandison and Marcus Eoin turns up a proliferation of wily rumours but precious few hard facts. They record in a deserted nuclear bunker, it's suggested. They belong to some defiantly obscure all-collective-cum-cum named Turquoise Hexagon Sun. They fill their music with backwards messages, alternately sinister and playful, that range from invocations to a "horned god" (one old side project was named *Hell Interact* to samples of ELO's Jeff Lynne).

In the Boards Of Canada section of the Warp Records website, alongside cover images and a few scant details about release dates, is a link to a *Guardian* news story which offers conclusive proof of the average colour of the universe is "A greenish blue halfway between aquamarine and turquoise" when all visible light is mixed together.

All very intriguing, of course. But when BOC have made one of the most anxiously anticipated albums in years, hardly satisfying. To date, Sandison and Eoin have made a tremendous amount of music, most of which has either never been released or else is long unavailable; their 1995 debut EP for the Slam label, *Twizten*, is currently available for a tidy £7.50 on eBay. For most people, their reputation rests on *Mush & The Right To Children*, the 1998 album that mixed spectral, quasi-ambient melodies and

dilled hip-hop beats with the constant chatter of infants, hovering tantalisingly beyond comprehension. Deceptively simplistic, there was something about the way the melodies twisted backwards and forwards around each other, about the tangibly creepy atmosphere that pervaded it, that made for an extraordinary debut.

By the time *In A Beautiful Place Out In The Country*, an uncommonly beautiful EP, was released at the end of 2000, the band enjoyed a near-holy status among electronica fans – not to mention artists, plenty of whom had diligently adapted BOC's spaced, rustic kindergarten vibes for themselves. And when the long-promised second album, *Geogaddi*, unexpectedly appeared on release schedules a month ago, the grassroots hype became phenomenal.

Knowing that part of the band's allure is their inaccessibility, Warp embarked on a campaign to make hearing *Geogaddi* as difficult as possible. Virtually no new music made it onto the internet; download apparently new tracks from Audiolibrary and you're as likely to discover an ambient fake, four minutes of looped speech samples or an o'lan Eno bane. The track files, meanwhile, could only be located on HMV's Japanese site.

Eventually, *Geogaddi* was premiered in six churches around the world – in

London, New York, Edinburgh, Tokyo, Berlin and Paris. Slides of children playing, of sunsets where the sky is bent into a hexagon, were projected above the altar; small turquoise hexagons took the place of hymn books.

And then there was the album: 66 minutes and six seconds of music that is both soothing and disorienting, lushly beautiful yet creaky and unswerving. One track, 'Opening The Mouth', sounds like a heavy-breathing call from a banshee. Another, the truly horrible 'The Devil Is In The Details', shimmers between the instructions on a relaxation tape and a despondent crying child. There are ghostly organs and distant flutes, warnings of volcanic explosions, an ecstatic vocal about "1989 in the sunshine" and an overall feeling that this heady, saturated

us, perfect music sounds sterile and dead. The tunes we write are imperfect, the sounds are imperfect, even the artwork. I can't listen to perfect music, it bores me. We actually put a lot of effort into making things rough and difficult and noisy, even more so on this than on the last album. I think most bands get more polished and over-produced as they go along. But one of the ideas with *Geogaddi* was to go the opposite way, to get it to sound as though it was recorded before the last one."

**E**arly February 2002, and Boards Of Canada have consented to a rare interview with *NME*, on the understanding it runs after the album's release. To preserve their privacy, it's to be conducted by email, but the resulting answers still shed a little light on the

**"There is an intention to let the more adult, disturbed sides of our imaginations slip into the pretty tunes" – Michael Sandison**

world of Sandison and Eoin, without ever completely dismantling their mystique.

To begin, their name derives from the National Film Board Of Canada, whose nature documentaries enraptured the Scottish-born pair when they spent some time living in Calgary as children. "My parents worked in the construction industry out there," writes Sandison. "My memory of Calgary is a picture of busy 1970s office blocks dumped in the middle of nowhere against a permanent sunset."

CONTINUES PAGE 33

Boards Of Canada:  
tortoise is the new  
black, you know



FROM PAGE 24

They started making tapes around 1982 or '83, when they were still children. At their Henagen Sun studio, there's an archive of 20 years of music. "We're a bit anal about this," admits Colin, "and I guess one year we might hunt through it all and release some of it. Though we've actually already got the next album half finished, which will surprise some people to hear. There's a lot of music."

Though the pacific of their releases might suggest otherwise, Sandison and Colin are anything but lazy. "A typical day for us," writes Colin, "is something like 15 hours thumping the shit out of drums and synthesizers and computers, with frequent breaks for coffee or a beer." Expectations and pressures from the outside world hardly make an impact, either.

"We're too busy to give a shit," reckons Sandison. "Either working in our studio or being out in the fresh air with our friends somewhere. We put pressure on ourselves more than anything. Marcus and myself are pretty ruthless to one another, musically. That's the toughest criticism we get, which is another reason the album took a long time."

Why is it so much better to live in the country rather than the city? Mike: "I don't think it's easy to be truly independent as an artist at the same time as being part of an urban community. I'm not saying it's impossible, but it just doesn't suit us. Besides, when I'm faced with the choice of hanging out with my friends round a bonfire where we live, or being squashed in a London tube with some cunt's elbow in my face, it's an easy choice to make."

What's the significance of hexagons to you?

Marcus: "The hexagon theme represents that whole idea of being able to see reality for what it is, the raw maths or patterns that make everything. We've always been interested in science and maths. Sometimes music or art or drugs can pull back the curtain for you and reveal the Wizard Of Oz, so to speak, busy pushing the lovers and pressing buttons. That's what maths is, the wizard. It sounds like nonsense but I'm sure a lot of people know what I'm talking about."

The tortoise hexagon sun idea, the ring of people on the 'Oogeddy' cover, and that slightly eerie bucolic feel there is in a lot of your music, suggests something outish, vaguely pagan.

Mike: "That's probably just a reflection of the way we live our lives. We are a bit ritualistic, although not religious at all. We're not really conscious of it in our music but I can see that it is happening. We're interested in symbols. I don't know, we never

just make a pleasant tune and leave it at that, it would be pointless. So I suppose there is an intention to let the more adult, disturbed, atrocious sides of our imaginations slip into view through the pretty tunes."

What's the fascination with children's voices? Is it to do with a nostalgia for childhood?

Mike: "It's something that has a peculiar effect in music, it might not be there, especially in atonal, synthetic music. It's completely out of place, and yet in that context that you can really feel the sadness of a child's voice. Being a kid is such a transient, fleeting part of your lifespan, if you have siblings, then if you think about it, you'll have known them as adults for a lot longer than you ever knew them as children. It's like a little kid lost, gone."

You've talked in the past about subliminal messages, hidden ideas, bombs planted in your tunes. What's the fascination, and what form do these take?

Marcus: "If you're in a position where you're making recordings of music that thousands of people are going to listen to repeatedly, it gets you thinking. What can we do with this? We could experiment with this..." And so we do try to add elements that are more than just the music. Sometimes we just include voices to see if we can trigger ideas, and sometimes we even design tracks musically to follow rules that you just wouldn't pick up on consciously, but unconsciously, who knows? 'The Devil is in the Details' has a riff that was designed to imitate a specific well-known equation, but in musical terms. Maybe it won't mean anything to anyone, but it's interesting just to try it. We do things like this sometimes."

One thing Boards Of Canada are emphatic about, for all the talk of London and rural retreats, is that they're not hippies. We ask if they are a psychedelic band, and Marcus replies: "If you mean psychedelic in a scientific way, then, yeah, that's probably fair. But if you mean it in a lifestyle way, you know, hippy large floppy hat, patchouli oil and colourful trousers way, then nothing could be further from who we are."

Further from what, though? Tempt BOC into the open for a few moments and still, you can only make out the faintest of outlines. And ask them, finally, how important mystery and a lack of information is to their music, and they'll prove it by sidestepping the question. "We just try to keep ourselves to ourselves," concludes Marcus Colin. "The music is what is important." Of course.

**GET YOUR CLICKS!  
NME RECOMMENDS:**  
SEE AN EXAMPLE OF BOARDS OF CANADA ON [NME.COM/NOW](http://NME.COM/NOW)

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Last week we made her brilliant 'Bad Babysitter' the NME Single Of The Week - now we're giving her away!

NME has **FIVE SETS** of the **ALBUM**, 'Princess Superstar Is' - from which 'Bad Babysitter' is taken - to give away, as well as **T-SHIRTS** that state 'Fuck Off! Am Princess Superstar' or 'Fuck Off! Want Princess

Superstar' - the choice is yours! To win one of five sets, simply answer the following:

**From which city does Princess Superstar hail?**

Answers to 'Rock Royalty', NME, 29th Floor, King's Reach Tower, Stamford Street, London SE9 0BB. Please state your T-shirt preferences! Usual competition rules apply.

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There's no excuse for a dull night in if you win one of **FIVE SETS** of three classic films on DVD! Starring Bob Hoskins, Michael Caine and Robbie Coltrane, **MONA LISA** is a true Brit underworld drama available

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limited edition DVD version of **THE EVIL DEAD** to give away!

To win a set simply tell us: **Who are the two leading stars of Withnail And I?** Answers to 'Home Movies', at the usual address. Usual competition rules apply.



## COMEDY STUFF TO BE HAD!

From the creator of *Father Ted*, **BLACK BOOKS** has become a Channel 4 comedy cult classic. Starring Dylan Moran and Bill Bailey, BAFTA award-winning 'Series One' is out this week

to buy on DVD and VHS from VOVchannel 4. But NME has **TEN COPIES** - five of each format - to give away!

To have a chance to win just answer the following:

**In Black Books, what is**

**the name of the character played by Dylan Moran?**

Answers to 'Oh The Shell', at the usual address. Usual rules apply. Please remember to state whether you would prefer DVD or VHS.

## HMV CROSSWORD



### CLUES ACROSS

- 1+20D** Now if only you'd listened when I said that this is your new favourite band (4-2-3-1-4-3-2)  
**9+27D** It's a rebble turning out - namely Rebel MC, Terry Fox and Birmingham Levy (8-4)  
**10** (See 12 across)  
**11** The unofficial start of Muzo (3)  
**12+10A** Film based on the life of boxer Jake LaMotta, and starring Robert DeNiro (6-4)  
**13** Alien... manager for both The Beatles and The Rolling Stones (5)  
**15** "So just you what the hell am I doing... .. at 20", 1905 (8-2-5-1)  
**16+21D+19D** "...and my brain

- and body need, it very good indeed", 1977 (3-3-5-3-4-3-4)  
**22** Annabelle - ... vocalist with Bow Wow Wow (2-5)  
**24+23D** Blues artist known for US R&B hits 'Got My Mojo Working' and 'Mannish Boy' (5-6)  
**26** 'The ...', Macy Gray's latest album (2)  
**28** (See 15 down)  
**29** Soul beat arrangement by Scars Patrol (6)  
**30** Formed by Julianne Regan as part of comic entertainment (4)  
**31** Band that half rocked to the 'Dessert Wind' (1-1-1)  
**32** Love to make a comeback with Benji Youth (4)  
**33** New Zealanders who thought 'How Bizarre' (1-1-1)

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Simply cut out the crossword and send it, along with your name, address and issue date, to the address above, before Wednesday, March 6. First correct one out of the hat wins!



### COMPILED IN A MEXICAN BORDER TOWN JAIL BY TREVOR HUNGERFORD

#### CLUES DOWN

- 1** Broken hearts caused by So Solid Crew (6)  
**2** "Roger on the ...", and I tell you he gave us quite a scare", from Eels' 'Mi Es Beautiful Blues' (7)  
**3** American's steering along with the track 'Sha's On Fire' (3)  
**4+5D** You get into a song by Suede - or The Corrs (2-5)  
**6** Keen for getting excited over a Gary Numan album (3)  
**7** He did the 'Mambo No 5' (3-4)  
**8** A James record that has to be heard (5)  
**14** The ... Alfred Hitchcock film starring Rod Taylor (5)  
**19+20A** Just imagine someone

- having written to tell you of Tim Buckley's album recorded live in London in 1988 (5-4)  
**16** Flying ... indie record label for New Zealand (3)  
**17** Sounds like you are into gold as a member of Faith No More (5)  
**19** (See 18 across)  
**20** They met up with that 'Nice Guy Eddie' (7)  
**21** (See 18 across)  
**22** (See 24 across)  
**25** (See 1 across)  
**26** British rapper who did the 'Boom Drop Boom' (3-1-1)  
**27** (See 9 across)

#### ANSWERS FROM FEBRUARY 9 ISSUE

**Across:** 1 The Dark Is Rising; 6 Indian Rope; 9+27D Copper Blue; 10+14D Joy Crime; 12+21D In the End; 13 Shack; 15 Amber; 17 Chic; 20 No Time; 22 Naked; 23+10A Jet Harris; 24 Over; 25 As; 27 Bodine; 29 Today; 30 PDD; 31 Uka; 33 Free.  
**Down:** 1+6D+33A The Train Don't Stop There Anymore; 2 Dolly; 3 Runnin'; 4 I Don't Think So; 5 Breeze; 7 Nuts; 11 Ruby Tuesday; 16 REM; 18 Chadwick; 23 Jasper; 26 Nym; 28 Adge; 32 R

**KNOW THOSE RULES.** THE EDITOR'S DECISION IS FINAL. NO CORRESPONDENCE CAN BE ENTERED INTO BUT A LOT OF WINNERS IS AVAILABLE ON REQUEST OF AN SAE. NO CASH EQUIVALENT IS OFFERED AND NO RESPONSIBILITY CAN BE ACCEPTED FOR ENTRIES LOST IN THE POST, ETC. DEADLINE FOR ENTRIES IS THE DATE OF THE ISSUE DATE (USERS BEYOND OVERSEAS).  
 WE WOULD BE PLEASED TO RECEIVE YOUR COMMENTS ON THIS PAGE. PLEASE WRITE TO US AT THE ADDRESS ABOVE TO GAIN A BETTER UNDERSTANDING OF OUR MAGAZINE READERSHIP. WE MAY SEND YOU DETAILS OF OUR MAGAZINES AND SERVICES. PLEASE WRITE TO US IF YOU PREFER NOT TO HEAR FROM US. WE MAY PASS YOUR DETAILS TO OTHER REPUTABLE COMPANIES WHOSE PRODUCTS AND SERVICES MAY BE OF INTEREST TO YOU. PLEASE WRITE TO OUR COMPANY IF YOU PREFER NOT TO RECEIVE SUCH OFFERS.



## YOUTHFUL TRANSGRESSIONS

Some people just never grow up. Take Michael Sandison and Marcus Eoin of Boards Of Canada.

Their music recalls long-forgotten video-game themes and documentary film scores colored with a bittersweet sense of longing. The "Canada" in their name refers to a portion of Sandison's and Eoin's youth spent in that country, even though they now work and reside in their secluded Hexagon Sun bunker in Scotland's Pentland

Hills. And their new album, *Music Has The Right To Children* (Matador/Warp/Skam), presents a cryptic musical manifesto for the world's reluctant adults. Perhaps they've discovered the key to eternal youth; but like all children, they know how to keep a secret.

"We prefer to invite the listener into our work, not to smother them in it," Sandison says of the duo's creative approach. "The most quietly spoken people command the most attention from listeners, and it's also true that people who speak very loudly are often ignored. Once you start decoding things in our music, you'll be drawn into it forever."

Now in their late 20s, Sandison and Eoin have been making music both separately and together since the early '80s. Initially drawn to the goth pop of Cocteau Twins and the proto-electronic groups DAF and Devo, Boards Of Canada wrote music for a small group of family and friends. (This is still evident in their continuing stream of limited-edition releases under pseudonyms as well as the BOC moniker.) Eventually, the group's ranks diminished to the core of Sandison and Eoin, and they were discovered by Autechre's Sean Booth. A series of 12-inches on the intelligent dance music label Skam indicated the duo's instinctual

knack for naive rhythms and bittersweet melodies. As Sandison describes the BOC partnership, "It's as though we're psychic about music. We don't need to put it into words or to explain anything to each other. We have unspoken criteria."

Already hard at work on a follow-up to *Music*, Boards Of Canada are also keeping busy with a low-budget feature film project and planning to visit North America for a spring 1999 tour. It seems as if BOC are poised for success, which may force maturity on them after all. But Sandison sees this as unlikely. "For a lot of people, growing up means giving up everything that excites and stimulates you, and replacing it with repetition and conformity. If that's really what it is, then I don't intend to grow up. Sometimes I think we are adults trying to capture the sounds and feelings of childhood, but then I remember that we're actually kids, just mucking about like we've always done." —Justin Hampton

## BPM CHART

2cb / 'S' (2CB)

Clo / "Shake City" (GREEN)

Tony Dax & Ben Sims / "Stability" (THEORY)

Thomas Brinkmann / "Clara" (EMERY)

Wolfgang Voigt / "Diskoschinken" (PROGRAM)

Pole / "Berlin" (OFF SIRE)

Jasper Dahlback / "JD's Power Tools Vol. 1" (BLANK)

Adam Beyer / "Rout" (CODE RED)

Basic Implant / "Audio 012" (AUDIO)

Matt Kew / "Tracer" (SIDEREAL)

Regis / "Games" (DOWNWARDS)

Jay Denham / "Wastland" (CLONED VINYL)

Heiko Laux / "101/100" (TRINSON)

Robert Hood / "Stereotype" (M-PLANT)

Ratcava / "732" (COLOURS)

Joel Mull / "Code Red 5" (CODE RED)

Andreas Kramer & Thomas Pogadt / "Collective Thoughts" (CONSTRUCT NOTHING)

Puentes Latino / "Journey To The Core" (MORNING)

Alibade / "Polaroid" (ALIX)

Henrik B / "Mullpikarens" (TRIV)

Chart courtesy of John Cellera, who programs "Inaudible" on WCSB 89.3 FM, Cleveland, Ohio, Wednesdays 9-11 p.m. EST [www.inaudible.com](http://www.inaudible.com); [www.bentcrayon.com](http://www.bentcrayon.com)

## TURNTABLE REVOLUTIONS

Each month this column spotlights a DJ and his/her current top-10 spins.



### DJ GRAZZHOPPA

#### RESIDENCE

Ghent, Belgium

#### AWARDS

Has won the 1991 DMC European DJing Championship and the 1998 Belgian IFF DJing Championship.

#### SELECTED DISCOGRAPHY

*Runa Beat* (1997)

*Down River, Up Stream!* (with David Shai) (DOWNBALL PLASTER, 1997)

"Limitless" and "Subconscious" from *The End Of Utopia* compilation (SUE ROSS, 1999)

Has also contributed to Rik Vestrepen's *Zheal* (SUNLAMP, 1998) and Pae Gonzalez' *Whizz* (THE P.?, SUE ROSS, 1997)

## DJ GRAZZHOPPA'S TOP 10

01 • DANJA MOWF WITH MAD SKILLZ

"Mood Of Madness" (804 FLAVOR)

02 • RAS KASS

"The Music Of Business" (WHITE LABEL)

03 • DYNASTY

"Wild Cat" (DJ ECLIPSE)

04 • COMPANY FLOW

"End To End Business" (MANKUS)

05 • THE BASEMENT KHEMIST

"Vibrato" (BEYOND REAL)

06 • YESHUA DA POED

"The Hasidim" (BAMSHADG)

07 • THE COUNCIL

"Barabas" (RAMDRE)

08 • AMOLAB

"New Days" (FREE CHOICE)

09 • POSTMAN

"Cocain' vs

10 • GRAZZHOPPA VS. SMIMOOZ

"Green Vs. Solid" (SUE)

# BOARDS OF CANADA

MUSIC FANS AROUND THE GLOBE WAIT PATIENTLY FOR THE SECOND FULL-LENGTH RELEASE FROM MYSTERIOUS SCOTTISH DUO **BOARDS OF CANADA**, WHO TURNED MUSIC ON ITS HEAD WITH THEIR DEBUT RECORDING'S GENTLE, PSYCHEDELIC AMBIENCE. FAN TO THE CORE, ENGLAND'S STEVE NICHOLLS FULFILLS A DREAM, TRAVELLING NORTH TO THE GROUP'S SCOTTISH HIDEAWAY TO INVESTIGATE THE SOURCE OF THEIR SORCERY. PHOTOGRAPHS BY IAIN CAMPBELL.

## C O U N T E R Y

I'll never forget the first time, over two years ago, I heard Boards Of Canada's debut album *Music Has The Right To Children*. Prior to its arrival I was expecting something kind of special, because of the quality of their previous single "Aquarius" and the "Hi Scores" EP, released on the UK guerrilla-tactics electronic label Skam. I clearly remember receiving the album, by then released jointly with Warp Records, and time stopped. I sat and listened to the whole album, overpowered by the myriad kaleidoscopic layers, messages, hallucinations and images it relayed. It was like the tantalisingly elusive parts of a beautiful dream that you struggle to grasp after waking.

Two years later and I finally get to interview Marcus Eoin and Michael Sandison, Boards Of Canada. I say finally because I firmly believe that, in *Music Has The Right To Children*, they made one of the great records of the last decade, and with the advent of a new album in the next few months, there is a distinct possibility that they might repeat the feat. And it's not just me—Eoin and Sandison also freely admit that they are trying to make the perfect record.

"We are being pretty ambitious with what we are trying to do with it musically," says Sandison.

"We want to do this one at our own pace and only deliver it when we think we've got something that is absolutely perfect, with no flaws. We want it to be so that every track on it is a really long lasting track that we personally love, and keep on loving, and play over and over again. It's a difficult thing to achieve, and the chances are that we're not going to do that because no one ever gets to that point. Sometimes I hear albums by bands that are so perfect that they could have, and in some case should have, retired, like My Bloody Valentine's *Loveless*. I would've been happy if they had never made another record after that."

"It's like that thing..." adds Eoin. "What do you do if you make the perfect album?"

In some ways, for Boards Of Canada to have disappeared after releasing one album would have suited the image of mysteriousness that has sprung up around them. Partly due to the cut-up and added vocal samples that littered *Music Has The Right To Children* and instantly initiated talk of subliminal messages, and partly due to the unavoidable feeling that there was something very strange going in their music just beneath the surface, people were fascinated by what they were all about.

I DO  
ACTUALLY  
BELIEVE  
THAT THERE ARE  
POWERS  
IN MUSIC  
THAT ARE ALMOST  
SUPER  
NATURAL

But the fact that they live in Scotland has far more to do with their lack of involvement in the still remarkably London-centric UK music scene than any kind of Howard Hughes-type elusiveness.

On their new EP, "In A Beautiful Place In The Country," it is gratifying to hear that they have continued to strive for the perfect beat, because Boards Of Canada were an anomaly in the '90s electronica scene into which people tried to fit them, and it's still impossible to fit them into any kind of timeline of electronic music. They admit to liking late '80s and early '90s industrial electronic bands like Front 242, Consolidated and Meat Beat Manifesto, and then the Cocteau Twins and Siouxsie and the Banshees, but that's about as far as they go. As Eoin rightly says, "I don't really like singling people out as influences because it's too specific. I prefer to see all that as just branches coming off a completely chaotic, random tree, where some people are closer to each other than others."

Eoin's analogy with nature is one that constantly reappears when discussing Boards Of Canada's music. Much has been made of the strangely rural and organic sounds and images they create. In the countryside area surrounding Edinburgh, it is not uncommon to see a double rainbow appearing over the barrenly beautiful countryside, the image a visual analog to much of their music.

Eoin and Sandison fully admit that if they lived in a city it would be detrimental to their work, and you can see how a more structured environment would hem the natural ebb and flow of ideas and sounds that emerged from *Music Has The Right To Children*. On that album, sounds or loops or melodies would only be heard once in a track, and other tracks frequently only lasted for thirty tantalizing seconds, a simple melodic refrain, a ghostly beat, or a plaintive note, disappearing as quickly as it appeared, taking on the presence of a fleeting memory—a cloud that momentarily takes a recognizable shape, or a captured snowflake that melts on your hand.

"I think we are trying to do that more and more now," says Sandison. "I like to think that where we are going is trying to compose totally horizontally. The vertical way of composing is the lazy way, where you just build stuff up and build stuff up, and then just bring them in and out. I think the way we work is so much more orchestrated, so that you can hear something that just happens, and you want it to carry on because it's so tantalizing, and you want to hear it again and again. We both understand the principle that if you put something beautiful into a piece of music just once, it makes people put the record back on because they want to hear it again."

"Someone criticized me once," recalls Eoin, "and asked why we'd made 'Roygbiv' so short. For us, that is exactly how long it should be. It's like that famous bit at the end of 'Strawberry Fields' by The Beatles, where you get the little voice at the end that says something like 'I buried Paul,' and it happens once, and it's such a transitory thing that's mixed in one ear really far away, but people went on and on about it for decades."

"You know," Sandison says, "if a contemporary producer, with that kind of '90s or 2000 mentality did something like that, it would be going 'bang, bang, bang, I buried Paul' over and over again all the way through it, and you would never want to hear it again. I really like putting things into songs that don't initially jump out at you, and you're not quite sure that you've actually heard it, like putting things really far away in the mix, so people are like, 'Am I imagining that, or is it just on my copy?'"

It all adds fuel to the fire that there is something mysterious about their music. As sweet, and frankly, listenable as their melodic head music may be on the surface, you can't escape the feeling that still waters run deep, and that there are strong currents running beneath the surface. Indeed, although it's always asking for trouble by drawing the parallel, Boards Of Canada's work has far more in common with something like The Beatles' *Sgt. Pepper* than anything from the more recent past, as its unerring tunefulness and song craft masquerades and alludes to something far deeper.

Those allusions are there all the way through *Music Has The Right To Children*, particularly come the last track, "One Important Thought," which warns of the dangers of censorship, and leaves you wondering what you might have just listened to that could ever be censored, so sublime, relaxing and apparently innocent was the music. So you have to listen to it again with new ears. Although

Eoin and Sandison are still struggling with the idea that a lot of people are going to hear this new record, unlike many an experimental producer, they want their music to be listenable, to be a pleasurable experience, but one in which, if you choose to delve deeper, the rewards are there to be had.

"We've had that a lot with the new EP," says Eoin. "People have said they liked it instantly, and that's kind of amusing because it's hitting the nail right on the head. For us the aim is to try and make something that you like instantly, but the important thing is actually the hidden mystery hypothesis that happens after ten listens."

"It's almost like bait," Sandison joins in. "You disguise a track as a nice big juicy worm, and then put a hook inside it. There is almost a critical point, a threshold, and if you get past that, then you are going to be completely immersed in what we are doing musically. We always assume that the listener is the most intelligent person imaginable. If you always think like that, you never mind the listener, and someone wanting to analyse what we do will always get something out of it."

As well as crediting the listener with intelligence, which, as Eoin later points out, so few electronic "dance" producers do, Boards Of Canada also credit us with an imagination. They leave space in their music for us to project our own ideas, images, and thoughts. Their messages are in there, but they are encrypted allusions hinting at what might lie within. It might explain why they are becoming so popular, because in a way each Boards' track becomes very personal to the individual listener, alluding to different things in different people's lives. I ask them about the often-mentioned nostalgia element in their music—people have constantly remarked how their music vaguely reminds them of something else, and how that differs from being retro.

"Retro is a consensus isn't it?" says Eoin. "Like the '70s where everyone shares that popular myth of what the '70s were like. Nostalgia is very personal, and music is very powerful at recalling images or feelings from your past."

"I do actually believe that there are powers in music that are almost supernatural. I think you actually manipulate people with music, and that is definitely what we are trying to do. People go on about hypnotizing people with music, or subliminal messages, and we have dabbled in that intentionally. Sometimes that's just a bit of a private joke, just to see what we can sneak into the tracks."

"If we were to explain all the tracks and their meanings, though," says Sandison, "I think it would ruin them for a lot of people. It's more like viewing something through the bottom of a murky glass, and that's the beauty of it."

And happily, after finally meeting them, Boards Of Canada's music remains as much of an enigma as it always has, because some myths and mysteries you don't really want to be explained away. Later on, Sandison goes on to talk about their music as a spiral or a fractal that gets more detailed the further you go in, and how they have experimented musically by using Fibonacci's Golden Ratio, a fraction close to two thirds that strangely occurs again and again in nature, and has allegedly been used in works of art by Da Vinci, Mozart and many others over the centuries, to space moments in tracks, write melodies and tune frequencies. And all of a sudden a friend's blithe request prior to the interview, to "find out what their magic ingredient is" begins to ring almost eerily true.

Whatever that ingredient may be, at the start of the 21st century, where, culturally and in terms of music, we are being increasingly discouraged from thinking for ourselves, where our attention is directed more than ever, where the gaps for our own imagination grow ever smaller, Boards Of Canada are an anomaly of timeless artistry that should be cherished. As Sandison says: "The original reason we started was just to make a beautiful little string of tunes which you just love playing in your car, and you don't really care whether anyone else is going to hear it, but I really like the idea of planting bombs. I'm not a bomber, but I like the idea of planting bombs of some kind, of doing things that in five, ten, or twenty years time will be able to reveal something about our music, that will make people completely re-examine what we've done, and see it in a completely different light."

ALBUM  
OF THE  
ISSUE

# COOL boarders too

## BOARDS OF CANADA

**Music Has The Right To Children**

(Warp/SKAM)

Boards of Canada? An all but unknown act getting picked as album of the issue. Superb. It may be a rare occurrence but at the same time it's one of those great moments that make writing for a music magazine all the more worthwhile.

Michael Sandison and Marcus Eoin hail from the Pentland Hills of Scotland and have been making music for a long time. Very little of it has seen the light of day or even made it off of cassette. There's the self released 'Twoism EP', a twelve and a seven on SKAM (it was these tracks that brought them to Jockey Slut's attention), a couple of remixes, compilation tracks and now 'Music Has the Right to Children'. So what's so special about their sound?

It's so simple it's almost embarrassing. Melody. Boards of Canada have tapped into something so primitive that it blows electronica wide open for all to enjoy. Tracks like 'Open the Light', 'Wildlife Analysis', and 'Turquoise Hexagon Sun' cut through all the guff you've ever theorised about music to create something emotionally complex and richly rewarding. The tunes are simple, whistleable, child-like even, but they affect you in a way that electronic music rarely does in its pursuit of indefinable abstract emotion.

The same intangible qualities that made Aphex Twin's 'Selected Ambient Works 85-92' and Galaxy 2 Galaxy's 'High Tech Jazz' so brilliant has briefly surfaced again. And that, I'm sure you'll agree, is something to talk about.

★★★★★ RHJ

## MIKE PARADINAS (Warp)

I'm into what they do, in fact I actually tried to sign them to my label. The album sounds like a 70's wildlife documentary. That's a good compliment to pay them. They've definitely listened to the last Autechre album for the crunchy drums and the more minimal melodies. A lot of electronic music concentrates on the beats but they have very strong melodies instead. They use a 101 a lot but they make it sound good in the way Aphex does, rather than say The Shamen. Track 10, 'Rogbiv' is my favourite. I wouldn't have put every song on it though, and they could have perhaps ended on something more majestic.

## STEVE BECKETT (Warp)

They were both brought up in Canada and grew up watching the Education Board of Canada's nature programmes. That has affected their sound so much. I find their nostalgia a strange and brilliant thing in electronic music. Another thing I love about it is that it works as an album from start to finish. That's still a rarity. When they play live they use loads of Super 8 footage of when they were young which works well with the children's voices. Favourite track? 'Aquarius'.

## SURGEON

When it started I thought I was really going to like it. I really liked the first six tracks but I wanted it to go further in some places. Some tracks made me think of strange eastern European animation. Some weird line drawings that would go with the melodies and those children's voices. I'm sure I put it on because I was in that mood rather than you asking me to play it. I might really get into it. I'll definitely be going back to it late one night.

## ROCKITT (Ambient Soho/ Dragon Disc)

I'm a big fan. I love human voices like this in electronic music though I was aghast at some of the production. It's like Kraftwerk meeting Autechre. The live bass was really cool too. The album's full of little hooks and short melodic ideas. I hope people give it a few listens because it is well worth it. You should get this album.



kings



of

Boards Of Canada don't let other people photograph them. They supply their own artwork instead of posing for the camera — because, they say, 'we look like potatoes'

Arthur's Seat is an 850ft outcrop of volcanic rock that melts into the outskirts of Edinburgh; Scottish electronica duo Boards Of Canada are perched halfway up. It's not quite, as their new EP would have it, *A Beautiful Place Out In The Country*, but it's near enough to the grainy, rural influences that seep through everything they create. This is as close as we're allowed to get to their secret countryside studio. 'It's only to keep unwanted visitors away,' explains Mike Sandison. 'We receive a lot of strange mail. One guy sent us mail addressed to 'Jesus' and 'Alien'. I'm not sure which one I was...'

Myth: Boards Of Canada are easy to define. They don't let other people photograph them. They conduct media relations by email. They live out in the wilds of Scotland, making distressed, nostalgic electronica and esoteric short films. Truth: Boards

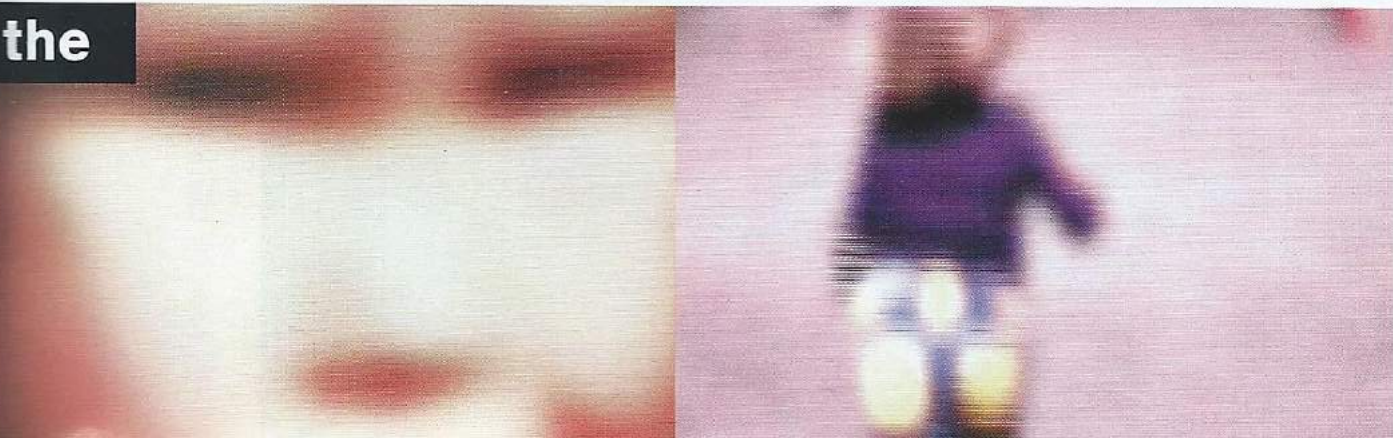
Of Canada are all this and more. But also: Boards Of Canada want to make parallel-universe pop records that sound like an electronic version of The Beach Boys' *überemotional* zenith, *Pet Sounds*. Sandison and his musical partner Marcus Eoin supply artwork instead of posing for photographs — because, they say, 'we look like potatoes'. Actually, that's not strictly true. But this is: Boards Of Canada are the kings of the quiet, grand rulers of tune-laden analogue electronica, and despite their insistence that it is not the sound of coming down, it is the sound of 3am... only more so.

Their 1998 debut album *Music Has The Right To Children* became a word-of-mouth sensation, selling 100,000 copies worldwide. Electronic, quiet, sonorous and off-kilter, every track showed that electronic experimentation could live in peace with beautiful melodies. Boards Of Canada tunes

became a fixture on Chris Morris' Radio 1 show *Blue Jam* (he's a ten-times-more-intelligent Jeremy Paxman who woke up one day and decided not to lie any more,' says Sandison). Doves were desperate to tour with them. Then a type of quiet (or quietist) revolution happened in music. Folksy Norwegian duo Kings Of Convenience called their album *Quiet Is The New Loud*. The most successful indie bands (Travis, Coldplay) were no longer loud and macho, but mellow and folksy. The current stream of bedroom electronica, from Melodic label's Minotaur Shock to Warp's ambient trash can hip hop outfit Prefuse 73, makes calmness the new virtue in experimental music. Shh!

Boards Of Canada may be influential, but they wear it lightly. 'We just want to make something that sounds like a pop record from another dimension,' shouts Eoin over the noise of a growing downpour. ▶

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'Something that everyone is listening to, but that sounds really, really strange.' Standing between the clouds and the earth, looking over a busy city from an ancient explosion of rock, Boards Of Canada, with their ageless, melancholic, otherworldly music, seem uniquely placed to do just that.

Though they'd rather die than be bombastic about it, like all great pop bands, Boards Of Canada define themselves by what they dislike as much as what they love. They stand for childlike innocence, not adult cynicism; natural awe, not chemical thrills; and above all, a rural ideal completely opposite to the fast-paced urban excitement that has powered pop music for nearly 50 years. 'Our music is a negative reaction to the city,' declares Sandison in a voice that mixes well-bred Edinburgh vowels with a softer, countryside burr.

'In cities, the clubs and DJs all influence each other. It's like a soup,' agrees Eoin, enjoying the very non-urban view of the North Sea with a rainbow high above. 'Like clothes-shop music. If I ever heard our music in a clothes shop, I'd quit!' Not that they've anything against commerciality per se. After meeting Chris Cunningham through their label, Warp, Boards Of Canada composed music for a handful of his promos, including a 1999 Nissan ad and a 30-second Telecom Italia short that featured Leonardo DiCaprio. 'Chris gets really excited about the music,' they smile. 'He was nearly exploding on the phone last time we sent him some tracks. He reckoned the new EP sounded like vocoder music at a Sunday school.'

Surely drugs must have inspired such weirdness? Boards Of Canada – typically – disagree. 'We want to reiterate this,' says Sandison. 'This isn't drug music. I've always imagined it as daytime music: it's a beautiful day, in the middle of the afternoon, and you're with your friends listening to twisty music.'

Boards have, of course, done time under the influence (mushrooms!), but now their musical vision is unadulterated. 'Imagine going back in time to a point where music branched off, but it went down a slightly different alley,' Sandison sighs. 'So it's still music, and it's still 2000. But it sounds brilliant, fresh and strange.' In a parallel universe of their making, there would be 'more colour' (Sandison), 'more extremity and less grey' (Eoin), and 'no Starbucks' (both).

Eoin and Sandison grew up in Cullen, a small fishing village on the west coast of Scotland. Their fathers were both construction managers. Each family emigrated within a few months of each other, and between 1976 and 1980, Eoin and Sandison found themselves living only a few streets apart in Calgary, Canada. 'We knew each other before, but it was just coincidence that both our families went,' says Sandison. 'It was a thing to do in the late Seventies – everyone seemed to be going to try something fresh, to get some more specc.' Canada, they say, wasn't that different from home (it's just a big, inflated Scotland). But the piece had a lasting

influence, if only in Boards Of Canada's name – inspired by the hours they spent watching nature documentaries made by the Film Board Of Canada.

After their families moved back to Cullen, Eoin and Sandison spent their adolescent years getting into trouble (for breaking windows and stealing things), experimenting with electronic music and making basic stop-start animation with an old Super-8 camera and zombie movies with masks and fake blood. Their work still mines this freewheeling, innocent, DIY aesthetic. Live, Boards Of Canada perform banked by TV sets playing clips from safety information films, grainy images of children in faded rainbow colours, and their own family cine films showing them cycling round in circles in bright suburban gardens. Their record sleeves are decorated with pictures of trees, birds, buses and children's paintings. It's a hidden, half-forgotten world, a million miles away from sophisticated, grown-up personality-led pop music.

'Cullen's one of those places where there's nothing for kids to do, but that's a good thing

women in traditional dress singing these unbelievable harmonies! It's the kind of music that is totally divorced from normal music, but I love it. It resets my clock.'

The new album, as yet untitled, also promises to reset your clock. 'Some artists air their dirty laundry. We know which songs fit the Boards umbrella,' they say. Neither Sandison nor Eoin will be drawn into specifics, although they say things like 'my dream album would be an organic, really melodic electronic album'; 'it's a lot darker, and some tracks really sound like they're 25 years old'; and 'we use a lot of subliminal messages. You'll have to reconstruct them in your mind.' They have based a number of new songs on mathematical equations (working out frequencies for melodies that directly correlate to the changing amount of light in one day, for example). They've also painstakingly downgraded the production, so that it sounds like it has been made on ancient equipment: 'We like the nostalgia of it.'

Two books of their photography and artwork are



In a parallel universe of Boards Of Canada's making, there would be 'more colour' (Sandison), 'more extremity and less grey' (Eoin) and 'no Starbucks' (both)

because you're creating everything yourself,' reckons Eoin.


'I'm still conscious of being in our own little world,' says Sandison.

The pair finally ventured out of village life to study at Edinburgh University. Sandison studied music; Eoin dropped out of an artificial intelligence degree. The students, he says, wanted to 'do mad things like grow DNA and leave it to learn', but the lecturers were more interested in equations. In 1996, the pair released *Twoism*, an EP of grainy melancholia on their own label Music70. Autechre's Sean Booth heard it and hooked them up with Manchester electronic label Skam, who released their single 'Aquarius'. Autechre's links with Skam made a move to Warp almost inevitable. *Music Has The Right To Children* was a joint release between the two labels.

Driving around the outskirts of Edinburgh, drying off in warmth of his plush, silver BMW, Eoin ejects a Stevie Wonder CD out from the car stereo and rummages through his rucksack. 'You have to hear this. It's *The Mysterious Voices Of Bulgaria* – 30

also planned: one to accompany the album, the other a 'proper, glossy' coffee-table affair. All of which goes some way to explaining the long gaps between releases. 'Someone wrote that we smoke too much and that's why the music takes so long,' splutters Sandison. 'They have no idea! The fact is that, like the countryside itself, Boards Of Canada can't be rushed. The gentle, ageless beauty of their art is the result of months and years of evolution, and of constant, back-breaking work which brooks no metropolitan distraction. Their sound may happen to be fashionable, but they themselves are beyond fashion.'

Mike Sandison once had a dream that he was in Edinburgh, near the castle. All the stonework of the buildings and the roads were covered in flowerbeds sown with a tapestry of bright flowers in concentric patterns. 'It was the most amazing thing, and it stuck with me for ages. It made me think, there's nowhere in the world like that! Nowhere at all! So I thought we should try and make tunes that people in that town would be listening to.'



**Four years after their classic debut album, these Scottish IDM stars return with a new downtempo masterpiece, *Geogaddi*.**

**What took so long to record the new album?**

**Marcus Eoin:** We took a year off writing after *Music Has The Right To Children* and did a bit of traveling and filming. Then we spent a year or so changing and rebuilding our studios, and we had a lot of technical problems that took time to settle down. We were doing favors for people like remixes and so on. Most of the work for *Geogaddi* was done in the last two years. I guess we work slower than other bands, but we're not interested in churning out record after record. The next one will come out a lot sooner.

**What do you feel is the major difference with *Geogaddi*?**

**Mike Sandison:** We recorded so much music over the past couple of years, hundreds of tracks. A lot of what we've done that hasn't been released yet is totally different from what anyone might expect us to sound like. But we decided that we weren't finished exploring the kinds of sounds we used on *Music*. We'll be releasing records in the near future that will probably surprise people, so it was important to us to come back right now after this gap with an album that sounded like a partner to the last album, to reinforce the foundation. No matter where we go next, we want people to know that we'll keep returning to our roots, because we love our early records.

There is a difference though between the themes of the two records, because *Geogaddi* has a more layered, darker sound. [It's] just a reflection of the mood we both had while writing. Maybe it reflects some of the incidents that affected us in this time, because there have been some deaths of people close to us, and other personal traumas. We had a loose idea to make a record on the themes of art, geometry, mathematics and religion, and that was it. It just seemed that the tracks that went well together turned into *Geogaddi*.

**You're clearly indebted to psychedelia, and your cover photographs point to a certain pastoralism. Now that "bucolica" (Fridge, Manitoba, etc.) seems to be making such strides, how do you position yourselves with respect to that particular sound? Do you think there's a reason listeners are lapping up this kind of electro-organic sound?**

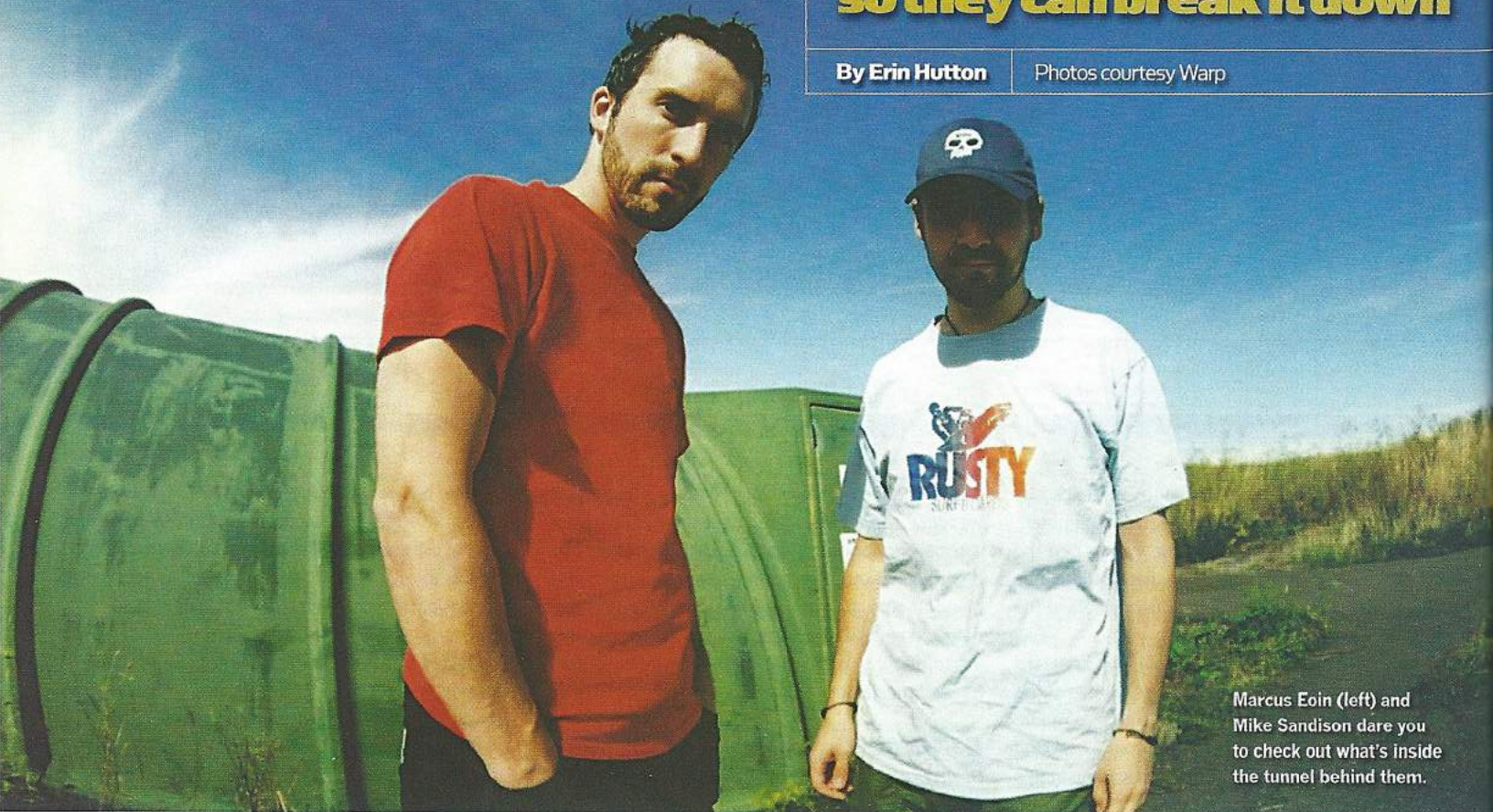
**Sandison:** Our sound probably comes from the fact that we listen to music from all time periods; in fact we're not influenced by much current electronic music at all. We just try

# Emotional ABUSE

**Boards of Canada's Mike Sandison and Marcus Eoin build beautiful music just so they can break it down**

By Erin Hutton

Photos courtesy Warp



Marcus Eoin (left) and Mike Sandison dare you to check out what's inside the tunnel behind them.

Perfection is a nebulous concept, one that varies dramatically depending on who or what is directing the point of comparison. In terms of music production, perfection is now generally sought after through true-to-life analog emulations and pristine digital recordings. But that ideal doesn't appeal to Scottish duo Boards of Canada, which seeks the opposite in its music. Mike Sandison and Marcus Eoin's idea of audio perfection exists in a surreal wash of imperfection—sound and instrumentation crippled and maimed to reveal a vintage beauty inspired by the sights and sounds of the past.

Indeed, late-'70s television and film have historically played a large role in the Boards of Canada sound—specifically, the 16mm educational films produced by the National Film Board of Canada (hence the pair's name). Sandison and Eoin also draw from the vast well of early-'80s American TV dramas and weekend matinees, as well as the closing sequences from the Lorimar (*Dallas*, *Eight Is Enough*) and Stephen J. Cannell (*The Rockford Files*, *The A-Team*) production companies, for inspiration. Although Sandison and Eoin had been dabbling in

recording since the early '80s (when they weren't yet teens), they began synthesizing their influences into proper recorded form in 1995 with the glorified demo *Twoism* (Music70; rereleased by Warp, 2002). Warp released the heralded *Music Has the Right to Children* in 1998 and the stellar follow-up, *Geogaddi*, in 2002. Now, BOC is back with *The Campfire Headphase* (Warp, 2005), and the group's '70s and '80s cinematic inspiration has given way to re-creation.

"We usually imagine our music to have a visual element while we're writing it, so we were picturing this character losing his mind at the campfire and compressing weeks of events into a few hours, in that time-stretching way that acid fucks with your perception," Sandison says. "We wanted to simultaneously shift and reduce the sound palette, too, making it more like a conventional band gone over the edge. It's taking away the reliance on samples, vocals or cryptic references and adding more organic instrumentation. That's not to say we left all that behind for good; it was just the feel we had for this particular collection of songs."

**The Bass Rock** is barely visible in the late summer heat-mist, lying about three miles off the deserted coast near North Berwick. The crag rises 350 feet out of the turquoise sea, and faintly visible against its sheer cliff sides is a white lighthouse. A millennium and a half before the light was set on the rock at the beginning of the last century, a Lindisfarne monk, St Baldred of Bass, lived a hermit's existence alone on the island, shuttered in a rain-lashed cell to confront alone his god and, doubtless, his demons too. Today gannets are the island's sole visitors, as well as the occasional tourist boats ploughing through the surf to visit the martyr's chapel.

As I crunch along the Ravensheugh Sands with Boards Of Canada's Mike Sandison and Marcus Eoin, the guano-stained Rock takes on a mythical hue: the distance and the sea mist cause it almost to melt into thin air, the wraith of a giant white molar on the horizon. There's a Moby-Dick quality to it – you could spend a lifetime staring at it but it would remain eternally out of reach.

"When I was a kid, about five or six years old," Mike Sandison is saying, "a relative of mine had one of those tacky ceramic owls on their mantelpiece, and it had multifaceted diamante eyes. I was totally obsessed with these sparkly glass eyes, for ages. I felt like looking into them was like looking sideways through everything, right through time. That's what we're trying to do with our music."

When you think about Boards Of Canada, the idea of hermits is never too far away. For the best part of a decade and a half now they have dwelt in what appears to be – to a London/urban-centric media, anyway – an isolated wilderness in Scotland (in fact, they've always lived within a half-hour's drive of the capital city Edinburgh, not in the Highlands, as is often reported). Their interviews have invariably been conducted by email. Since their wistful, queasily nostalgia-soaked electronic music began to appear in the mid-90s, they have only done a handful of face to face interviews, none of those on home turf. Careful managers of their own public image, even today their homes and studio are out of bounds, but they do willingly and generously drive us all over the stretch of coast and countryside that's close to the place they call home. Until recently they lived in the Pentland Hills, south west of Edinburgh; without much fanfare they have moved eastwards since then, into the flatter terrain of East Lothian. "We're not far away from where we were before," explains Sandison, "we relocated, but we're trying to let that slip by without anyone knowing about it, because we felt that if we made a big deal of it, it would start that whole thing again of the geography being more important than the music."

"I always got this feeling that people were saying, 'because they were surrounded by the Pentland Hills, this is why their music sounds this way'," sighs Eoin. "And I don't really like that, because it's almost like saying, 'you're just like anyone else, and it's just because you happen to be there'. That's unfair – it's not giving you credit for actually just doing music the way you want it to be."

For better or worse, the Boards' 'secrecy' has

endowed them with enigmatic status; the relative media silence has opened a space in which fans can speculate, mythmake, invent and interpret to their hearts' content – much of which happens in chatrooms and message boards, thankfully well out of harm's way. But the pair certainly monitor these discussions and while they don't take part in them, they do seem somewhat confounded by the kind of rumours that have got out. As Eoin says, "if there's no apparent facts or information about you, then what happens is stuff just floods in to fill that gap, and very often it's basically a flood of bullshit that fills in your silhouette. And we've really suffered from that."

It's not as if these two aren't well travelled. Sandison once lived in London for a couple of years; they've lived in Edinburgh itself and, when they decide to take a break from their recording (and each other) to spend time with their partners, they're off travelling on the other side of the world – Sandison mentions recent trips to France, Australia and New Zealand (where he's thinking of moving), while Eoin's considering a new life in Hong Kong with his Chinese girlfriend. Those are decisions still to be made, as their current live/work set-up is working well for them. "This whole project has come about with us living on the outskirts of Edinburgh," he says, "and for the last two decades we've been working on it from here, and we've had no reason to want to relocate to the city or to the south or anything, it's as simple as that. In fact, we actually find to some extent this so-called hermetic bubble that we live in is actually making it a lot easier for us to do our thing and not feel any urge to make it DJ friendly, or make it work for a certain social or club environment."

Meeting these two objects of so much speculation, it's refreshing to discover they're not the dysfunctional electronic droids you might expect. They're actually a deal more open, articulate and opinionated than many other musicians of their generation, and don't appear terribly secretive. A kung fu manual is prominently stuffed in the back seat pocket of Eoin's car, and Sandison rabbits away as we motor through the Scottish countryside, eulogising about being a parent and at one point asking his wife to text him a photo of his baby daughter at the dinner table so that he can show us.

They've broken cover to talk about *The Campfire Headphase*, the latest in their very occasional series of records, and only their third album since *Music Has The Right To Children* (1998) and *Geogaddi* (2002). As they're at pains to point out, the long gaps between releases aren't because they're lazy or aloof, it's because of the perfectionism of their craft. Six months of 2005 alone were spent on post-producing the album to get the idea-germs into a state they call finished. "There are textures in what we try to do," explains Eoin, "which borrow from certain sounds or eras – even in visual things that we do as well, artwork – to trigger something, almost a cascade. It's like a memory that someone has – even though it's artificial, they never even had the memory; it's just you're ageing a song. And then people feel, is that something familiar I knew from years ago?"

There's always been a warm, woody hue to BOC's music, but the dominant flavour has been synthesized. On *Campfire*, guitars have taken over: steel strings, rippling chords and plucked notes dappled with reverb. "ChromaKey Dreamcoat" ends with a blend of hillbilly steel and keyboard swirls not unlike the original BBC *Hitch-Hiker's Guide To The Galaxy* theme – a typically BOC reference to the organic science fiction of the 1970s they love so much. The duo's clunkily satisfying rhythms – often played on a kit by Sandison – and analogue drum machines still govern the downtempo flow, but it's geared down to a pace Sandison describes as "that 70s truckstop diner feel". "Satellite Anthem Icarus" is especially gorgeous, a scudding oceanic cruise, riding on the sound of waves crashing on a beach, a woman's muffled voice and electronic tropical peeps.

"On this album it's interesting," says Sandison, "because we are really overtly playing riffs on guitars, and although we've aged it and made it more like it's been recorded 25 years ago or something, with each track that we've used the guitars on, we've put things in it which are impossible on a 1970s record. Sometimes we'll construct an entire song out of samples that we'll make, so we'll maybe take instruments and play parts or play notes and we'll make entire spans of notes out of sounds we really like, and then play them in ways that the original instrument couldn't have played. You could take a span of lots of notes on the guitar, and then you would play chords on that guitar by hitting them all at once, in a way that a real guitar could never be played. And then of course we would do a lot of other things to the guitar to really tweak it and make it sound very, very gnarly and damaged."

The two of them spend most of their time together doing the spadework that yields the raw produce for their music, creating sounds with what they describe as a collection of 200 instruments – not only synths, but flutes, stringed instruments, guitars, exotic percussion – sampling them, twisting them like sugar candy, and the thing that makes them Boards Of Canada pieces more than anything else: artificially ageing them. The songwriting is one thing, but the process of transforming the melodic ideas into the finished product is what takes time. Tunes can wait around several years in a demo state before undergoing the duo's deliberate degradation technique.

"One thing we tried to do," pursues Eoin, "and we're trying to do more of, is a sense that you're hearing a piece of music that's come through the wringer a bit – it's definitely not coming literally, it's not just a guy standing in front of you with the latest keyboard workstation. There's a sense that you're listening to a tune, but how many times has that been copied from tape to tape to tape... by the time it's reached you it's crumbled, it's turned into powder."

"You hear about monks in the Middle Ages using a pin to create a Bible or a piece of art, and they'll do it for 40 years in the dark underneath a monastery," he continues, "and they'll be blind by the time they've finished. And some people really appreciate art like that, because there's something really tragic about it. It's almost like it's more beautiful than any other art, because instead of it being someone comfortably

painting something in a day, there's something absolutely tragic and destroyed about it. So I always think you can still go further up the rung from 'beautiful music', and that's beautiful music that seems to come out of some tragedy or brokenness. It becomes even more beautiful, the shards of the sound coming through are even more vibrant and affecting."

From the start, circumstances forced them to invent their own universe. Both born around 1970, they've been friends since they were toddlers, when their parents relocated to Canada to take up jobs in the construction industry. There, they were exposed to public education films on nature, science and the Earth, often narrated by actor Leslie Nielsen, made by the National Film Board of Canada. When they were around 13 years of age and living back in a bleak harbour town in the north of Scotland, they began "bullying" their friends into making experimental films with a Super-8 camera. "We'd say, 'This is what you're going to do, because the other options are playing the Space Invaders machine down at the chip shop or breaking windows on phone boxes'," Sandison says. To fit their pocket money budgets, the films involved time lapse, stop motion and 'sound to light' techniques. "We'd seen a lot of Norman McLaren animations while growing up," explains Eoin. At the same time Sandison, later joined by Eoin, began making music in various indie rock configurations. From the early 90s, university studies and unrewarding jobs were interleaved with more esoteric activities in the company of a large group of friends, artists, photographers, graphic designers and musicians, collectively known as Hexagon Sun. Their parties outgrew their homes in the Pentland Hills, spilling out into the woods. "It totally enhanced the experience," recalls Eoin. "Once you take it to an isolated, outdoor location, away from organisation, there's a sense of freedom that kicks in. It's sexier and less inhibited than an indoor event. You can have 50 or 100 people hanging out around fires, some rare music echoing around... the sound of two melodies clashing over one another, or maybe a melody to your left but a voice talking to your right, off through the trees, Doppler-shifting and filtering because of the wind or the random shapes around you. It creates a giddy, surreal sound that doesn't normally exist on records." In these unique outdoor communions, a large part of Boards Of Canada's sound aesthetic was forged.

In 1996, after privately circulating cassette compilations of tracks they had been recording, Sandison and Eoin sent tapes to other labels including Skam in Manchester. Autechre's Sean Booth picked up on it immediately, and Skam released several BOC tracks before Warp swung into action and issued *Music Has The Right To Children* in 1998, with the distinctive treated cover image of a family Polaroid holiday snapshot with all the faces wiped blank. *Geogaddi*, appearing four years later, was decked with hexagonal, kaleidoscopic prisms that became something of a calling card. "I guess you could get a better idea of what these things symbolise by reading [Aldous Huxley's] *The Doors Of Perception*," says Eoin when I ask him about the significance of those shapes. "Also, I've always had an interest in the

yamabushi of ancient Japan, the 'mountain men'. They used symbols as a way of having a willpower that would always outlive any challenge. They used repetitive hand symbols or drawn characters to create a neutral place they could visit mentally whenever they faced hardship. For us, Turquoise Hexagon Sun always returns us to a zone where we can throw off the baggage and begin again."

Somewhere up in the Highlands, they tell me, lies a valley that's the last remaining site in the UK where radio signals, microwaves and mobile phone signals can't reach. An Eden such as this, free of the harmful effects of technology and sheltered from penetration by foreign chatter, sounds like the kind of place Boards Of Canada's music could happily live. A place where you might be able to start to observe the world directly, anew, unmediated by outside influence. In such places you can build your ark, rescue yourself from being dragged along with the flood. Most of the music they love and admire is made by folk who have built their own bubble, where the music lives in its own epoch, its own specially crafted box. The "Victorian fairy lights" and "looking-glass world" of fellow Scots The Cocteau Twins are one; Devo, inventors of their own theatrical universe and whose early songs they admire because they sound like advertising jingles for washing powder, are another. They are currently enthusing about William Basinski's *Disintegration Loops* ("Funnily enough, when we first heard that, we thought, 'We've got tapes like that ourselves'") and Stevie Wonder's rapturous mid-70s funk – "that bit in 'Living For The City' where there's the descending chords, and it's all transposing all the way down, and it's just going chromatically all down the scale... I recognise something there where it feels like he's trying to translate into music something that is otherworldly, that's not about the mundane," explains Sandison.

"There's usually a visual element in the tracks we write," he continues, "and it probably comes from an obsession with film and TV. When you're a kid, a three-second long animation with rainbows morphing into A-Bomb blasts can be massively affecting and influential. I think you see these things more vividly when you're younger, but as an adult your brain starts to filter out things it considers irrelevant background noise. The downside is that you become desensitised to a lot of things and that leads you to not really feel much at all."

Boards Of Canada's music is awash with sadness at the loss of the child's vivid perception. It struggles constantly to regain that enhanced sensation of encountering the world afresh, while planting a nostalgia for the sounds and images of the particular time in which they grew up. They are addressing their own specific generation – you might call them the analogue-to-digital transfer generation – whose formative years straddled huge changes in geopolitics (the Cold War and its nuclear threat which hung over 80s teens had evaporated by the time they left college), domestic and computer technology (typing in the 80s became word processing in the 90s), and the nature and role of the media. Hence their music's slathering with textural referents, deliberate sonic aides memoires that are almost recognisable but remain just out of memory's reach.

"We could only exist in the short pocket of time when music has made the transition from analogue to digital," agrees Sandison. "There's this little moment where there's enough nostalgia attached to the former recording media and the faults that it had, that certain people will get it, and understand what we're doing. If there's a sadness in the way we use memory," he goes on, "it's because the time you're focusing on has gone forever. I guess it's a theme we play on a lot, that bittersweet thing where you face up to the fact that certain chapters of your life are just Polaroids now."

The faded turquoise and yellow packaging of *The Campfire Headphase* contains a gallery of Polaroid photos they've collected over the years, family snapshots digitally mildewed and rotted with similar artificial ageing techniques they use for their music. The idea, they tell me, is to create the feeling that you've just found all these pictures in someone else's old house and that the people shown in the pictures are all dead. As an aural analogy, they describe the degrading process on their sounds as introducing a "toxic, poisonous" element. Sandison articulates the fascination with the imperfect: "Even when we sound like we're being conventional, there's always something in it which is kind of dark, that's doing that bittersweet thing. Sometimes we deliberately construct songs to be pretty conventional sounding, and then we abuse them, we throw something in that's kind of a spike."

"If you ever see these American makeover programmes where they get ordinary looking people and they give them these regulation whiter-than-white teeth and veneers and all that, quite often I find the finished product really sinister, because they've got these really symmetrical faces with perfect teeth and everything, make-up and the hair. If you actually compare the before-and-after pictures, the person you could imagine being friends with is the one with squint teeth and everything and the gnarly face. And it's the same sort of thing with music and other art. If there's something a bit rough about it, it feels more personal to you, like something that belonged to you on a cassette tape that you've been cherishing for years, rather than something digital and perfect and straight. The drop-outs, the flutter on the tape and everything, you get used to where it happens."

Eoin: "I think it's a reaction to mundanity. Britain, for example, is a safe place to live, and a lot of people in the rest of the world come here to live because it's better than where they are, the grass is greener here than it is there. But when you've lived here for a long time, you can start to feel a crushing mundanity, you need strange things to bring you out of it, otherwise you start feeling like a corpse."

Sandison elaborates, "I think we try to make music that's more like normal music that's heard through a damaged mind, so you're hearing it diagonally..."

Boards Of Canada's eccentric orbits, their unstable tones and disorientating sonic additives are all carefully calculated effects. In conversation they'll often talk about chords coming in at weird angles and diagonals, zapping melodic expectations. As one of *Geogaddi's* song titles reminds us, "The Devil Is In The Details": their mastery of numbers and geometry has its own part to play in this Confucian confusion.

"You can use rules or set theory to dictate timings and note intervals," expands Sandison about their composition strategies. "For instance, you can imagine your melody to run vertically instead of horizontally, so that you're thinking of it as a vertical spiral, running on the spot. There's a thing you can calculate for plants called divergence, which is a ratio of complete turns of spiral leaf positions relative to the number of leaves in that spiral. In plants, this usually gives a Fibonacci number, which is pretty uncanny, but it's basically a natural law that's trying to create optimum distribution of leaf positions, to stop leaves from obscuring each other in sunlight. You can apply a similar idea to a vertical spiral of music, to calculate optimal temporal event positions in a pattern or texture. It doesn't always make for easy listening though," he adds, laughing.

Time to puncture a few myths about Boards Of Canada. "The kind of thing that gets up my nose is when people describe us as 'approaching New Age' or something like that," moans Sandison. "To me that's completely missing the point. If we do something that remotely sounds a bit like that, it's because we're actually doing it deliberately, we're doing it almost as a pisstake."

Google Boards Of Canada and you'll soon find fans with plenty of time on their hands, identifying all manner of psychedelic Easter eggs in the music: reversed samples and tapes, aural palindromes (sentences like "I've been gone about a week" that sound the same when played forwards or in reverse), buried phrases that hint at paganism ("You Could Feel The Sky" contains the words "a god with hooves"). Titles like "Music Is Math", "A Is To B As B Is To C", and "The Smallest Weird Number" (the number 70, which they adopted for the name of their own label/production company, Music70) imply numerical sorcery; musical structures arranged, tuned and sequenced at root level according to mathematical equations such as the Fibonacci sequence and Golden Ratio. Someone's even found that the total playing time of Geogaddi is 66:06, and its total hard drive space when ripped to MP3 is 666 megabytes, etc. All of which leads to speculation that they are involved in some kind of cultish activity – a belief that gathered pace with the release of their 2000 EP *In A Beautiful Place Out In The Country*, which contained overt references to David Koresh's Branch Davidian community and its annihilation by the US military in 1993 during the Waco siege.

"Not in the slightest," counters Sandison when I ask him for a definitive answer on their "cult" status. "We're just purely coming at what we do from the angle of being interested in subjects. You get a lot of painters or film directors who are complete atheists who'll make films all about religion, or Christianity, not because they're obsessed with the subject or they're actually evangelists, but just purely because it's something they're interested in for that project. It's exactly the same with us – we'll hit on some of these things, but at the end of the day we're just totally ordinary people that just happen to be making music."

And why the particular focus on Waco? "We take a great interest in the whole spectrum of everything, religions and cults, anything connected to that," says

Eoin. "Because they are a break from the norm. So when you see something like that, a group of people doing their own thing, going away and living together like that... it's the fascination with that, and a sense of injustice..."

"And the outrage at what happened," interjects Sandison.

"I'm not a religious person," Eoin continues, "but what I felt seeing what happened there was a sense of outrage – they're devoutly religious people, but what happened to them – were they just singled out because of this, and attacked? The victor always writes history, and the only history we know of David Koresh and those people is what's been written about by reference to things like what the FBI were investigating afterwards."

"Which was why," Sandison swings back to the record in hand, "we thought we'd make a record that on the surface feels really sweet and very spacious and it'll be titled *In A Beautiful Place Out In The Country*, but what were these people doing in a beautiful place out in the country? They were getting shot and burned. [Laughs] It's a typical thing that we would do..."

Eoin: "Even when you go away and have that existence, something still chases you there, still follows you home. And that's the impression I get off that story."

With every retreat from the world comes the need to protect and survive. Eoin once described a complicated solar alarm system he had installed in his house. Neighbourhood watch scheme broken down, has it? "No, it's just paranoia," he laughs. "No, when you've got things like master tapes going back to 1984, and irreplaceable musical equipment, honestly, you're gonna be paranoid. It's not really to do with past experiences, it's a kind of precautionary attitude, a *Red Dawn* attitude..."

And so we take our leave of these hermits, as they sit and wait for someone to put knobs back on digital TVs to change the colour and contrast (newer technologies not necessarily being better than old); leave them to their fervent belief that they can inoculate their music with the mould of the past, warding off the viral spread of mediocrity.

"We're not even remotely religious people," repeats Sandison, "but I understand what that is about when you're trying to channel into something that's more about the cogs behind the workings of the universe, and it feels like sometimes everything you're looking at is a simulation that's based on a much more geometric background. And a lot of the time, this machine that we are seeing, the world as it is, is so smooth and predictable, that even art has become really predictable. It's all following rules and patterns that have already been set by somebody who programmed it. But if you really stand back and look away from it, the potential's there for art and music to go into absolutely bizarre territories where everything is utterly fresh and weird and new. The challenge is to imagine: how about just stop where we are, and let's just for a minute try and backtrack a way up here, and imagine what would have happened if, in 1982, music had taken this other branch on this side, and where would it be now, and what would it be sounding like now?" □ *The Campfire Headphase is released this month on Warp*





# Boards of Canada

NOSTALGIC PASTORAL ELECTRONIC DUO, HOLED-UP IN THE SCOTTISH HIGHLANDS...

**What Warp record had the greatest influence on you?**

Dragon Window (Aphex Twin) - Surfing On Waves. I first heard it at a bonfire in the hills - friends used to make us tapes before we knew what it was. We were Warp fans - we probably did them out of a lot of money before we started making money from them."

**How should Rob and Steve celebrate?** "By presenting a cheque for ten thousand pounds to every artist with 'Canada' in their name!"

**What'll you be doing in ten years time?** "Publishing books and releasing movies. That was the masterplan before we started doing Boards of Canada."

**What's your weirdest Warp moment?** "We were in Germany with Autechre and we were all pissed off 'cos we hadn't been provided with a trailer. Sean from Autechre broke into someone else's trailer and stole loads of champagne, distributed them to everyone then got so plastered that he rugby-tackled a certain electronic artist into the mud!"

**Who's your favourite Warp artist?** "Slum - they did this limited edition called 'Twilight Mushroom' - like a hybrid of Ween and My Bloody Valentine. It's probably the very un-Warp track - that's probably one of the reasons why I loved it."

**What's happened to your next album?** "It'll come out in the spring of 2000. It'll be more organic - we're using a lot of vocals and flutes. It's not hippie music though - it's all still synthesized. It's a psychedelic behemoth!"



# boards of canada

Interview by Kelley Schwartz

In the course of less than a year Scotland's Boards of Canada has three remixes, a debut album, a track on Warp's celebrated 100th release and a new album in the works. Mysterious and undefined- could BoC be the KLF of a new generation? Marcus Eoin and Michael Sandison set us straight and there's more to Scotland than just Mogwai, Glasgow Underground and bagpipes.

off, why the name Boards of Canada, why not Mysteries of Beer Bottles of Juice...?

The name is derived from the National Film of Canada. We used to listen to those records as kids, and we made imaginary tracks for imaginary documentaries. It's one source of inspiration for us in naming *Mysteries of Egypt*? A band name like that would upset me.

Recently, BoC went through major member changes before it was just the two of you- do you

like what you do now to what you did then (musically)?

I think there's always been a consistency to what we do. I've recently been archiving some very old material, some from the early 80s, when we were about twelve years old or something. A lot of it is like what we do now. When we experimented with other live musicians over the years in between, our music went through some huge changes, then we came full circle and started doing experimental electronic things again. Now that it's just the two of us we can be ruthlessly singleminded about what we do.

In the U.S. you've kinda crawled out of nowhere now with the album and Mira Calix remix- any plans for world domination?

We might dominate the world, but not through selling records.

How did you hook up with Warp/Skam?

We did a self-financed EP in 1995 called "Twism," just for friends, and it was sent as a gift to about a half-dozen of our favorite artists, and Sean Booth from Autechre, who is involved with Skam, called us the next day. He asked us to release an EP on Skam (the "H-Scores" EP in '96). This one thing led to another.

You seem to have a strong art connection (use of super 8, graphics, et al) any art background?

Neither of us studied art in further education, if that's what you mean. It's just something we've done since we were kids. We started making super 8 films when we were about twelve, mucking around with borrowed equipment, and our friends and families are all involved with art and music to some extent. We've got strong opinions about other people's art, music, and film-making, so we're a bit megalomaniacal about our own work.

Be as secretive as you want but I'm curious-what gear do you use?

Heh, a real mixture. This is a common question. We have a mixture of old and new gear. We record a lot of live sounds into samplers. We like making things sound as though they've come from a film or an old record, but you'll be looking for a long time to find those sources, because they don't exist. Almost all of our sounds are created on acoustic instruments such as guitars or drums or voices, then processed and faked over in the samplers, and turned into something completely different. For instance, all the percussion on "An Eagle In Your Mind" was made with the human voice.

Sometimes we treat sounds like old synths. A lot of kids who want to get into electronic music ask that question, and they're missing the point really. If you have a strong musical vision, you should be able to achieve it with whatever comes to hand. If you gave us a bucket and two pieces of plywood we would try to make a good album with them.

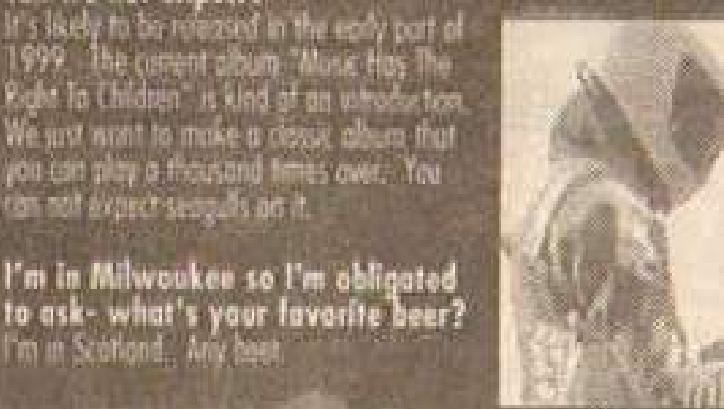
Any plans to release the BBC session?

Probably not. We're quite pleased with that session, especially the odd version of "Aquatics," but we're very particular about what goes out on our records, because you have to imagine them being picked up and played ten or twenty years from now.

The next album is slated for late this year... I'm hearing that it's supposed to be "different" what can we not expect?

It's likely to be released in the early part of 1999. The current album, "Music Has The Right to Children," is kind of an introduction. We just want to make a record album that you can play a thousand times over. You can not expect seagulls on it.

I'm in Milwaukee so I'm obligated to ask- what's your favorite beer? I'm in Scotland... Any beer.



**ED RUSH**  
LATE, STONED, VAGUE

**MOODYMANN**  
BLACK LEGEND

**DJ LOTTIE**  
GETS HER KIT ON

**DAVE BEER**  
DISASTER AT WORK

# JOCKEY SLUT

DISCO POGO FOR PUNKS IN PUMPS

## BOARDS OF CANADA

"WE NEVER EXPECTED TO HAVE THIS KIND OF IMPACT!"

### TECH-HOUSE EXPLOSION

BUSHWACKA, MR C, CIRCULATION,  
PEACE DIVISION, LAPO, R-FOUNDATION,  
TERRY FRANCIS, GET F\*\*KED,  
JAMIE ANDERSON AND HOUSEY DOINGZ  
ARE BLOWING UP

### 2000 SINGLED OUT

THE CHEMICAL BROTHERS  
ON 'SPACED INVADER'  
JAMES LIVELLE ON 'JAGUAR'  
PETE TONG ON 'THE COMPASS'  
NORMAN JAY ON 'DOOMS NIGHT'  
MIDFIELD GENERAL ON 'TOGETHER'  
ASHLEY BEEDLE  
ON 'THE MAN WITH  
THE RED FACE'



STEVE LAWLER / JOE CLAUSSÉL / TAZZANOVA / FUTURESROCK / JOHN HENRIKSEN / KREIDER  
SOUTH / DU SPIN / DIONIZ / RU SPIRIT / HELSINKI / ARIL BIKRA / NE GROVE / BREATHING  
IN PATRIS / REDN HEIGHTS / RED CLOUD / PRONEHEADS / SAVATH & SAVILES / ROB

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# BOARDS OF THE UNDERGROUND

**They're the fire-starters, the rustic fire-starters, who've influenced everyone from Air to Radiohead. Boards Of Canada invite Richard Southern to their secret den and share with him their bluffer's guide to making the perfect bonfire and why they have little time for Leo Di Caprio...**

"One time we were out in the woods on a really wet day," remembers Boards Of Canada's Marcus Eoin. "My friend bet me I couldn't start a fire using only one match. But I managed to get this meagre little flame going in this damp little patch of ground. Then when we were about a mile down the road, we looked back and it was like, 'whoosh!' - the whole wood was on fire!"

Everybody's favourite commune-dwelling creators of pastoral electronica, arsonists? Whatever next? Adverts for Shell oil? "I love the countryside," Marcus protests, adding, "I hate the idea that animals or trees or anything might get hurt. I had dreams about it for months afterwards."

This isn't the only fire that Boards Of Canada have unwittingly started. Just over two years ago, their debut album 'Music Has The Right To Children', a muted, un-ostentatious collection of haunting, home-made melodies initially just seemed like one of electronic haven Warp's more consistent releases. Then, slowly, word of mouth began to crackle like sparking kindling. Here was a record not only spotters and electronic obsessives could love - a hazily nostalgic record which snuck its way into your head and set up a commune. The album's muttering voices seemed to speak in tongues; rumours of occult dabblings only added to the Boards Of Canada enigma. Sales, while impressive for a leftfield release, were a meagre glow compared to the blaze 'Music Has The Right...' caused amongst Boards Of Canada's musical peers.

Suddenly, those slo-mo, slightly melancholy synth-loops were everywhere. On Super Furry Animals' 'Guerilla' (see: 'Something's Come Of Nothing'), on Danmass' 'Happy Here' on the 'Sunday Best' compilation, on Air's 'Virgin Suicides', even on the ever trend-tailing Texas's new material. As if that wasn't enough, Boards' influence can also clearly be heard on new

albums by both the barometer of all things buzzworthy, Madonna, and Radiohead, whose much puzzled-over 'Kid A' sounds rather closer to 'Music Has The Right...' than it does to the stadium-conquering 'OK Computer'.

"We never expected to have anything like this kind of impact," confesses Michael Sandison in the rather sterile confines of Warp's new London offices. "We've had people ringing up wanting us to produce them and it's been like (mimes covering the receiver while gesticulating excitedly), 'Marcus, you'd never believe who's on the phone!'"

The pair are sprawled relaxedly on the purple sofa, Michael long-haired, Marcus shaven-headed, hooded-topped and baggy-trousered, gear simultaneously eterna-hip and, as is the way with country folk, strangely practical. "We don't mind influencing people like Super Furry Animals," continues Michael in his precise, (Miss Jean) Brodie-esque brogue. "We know they're really into music. But we've got fed up with the magpies. The people who just pay minions to keep their ear to the ground and check out what's hip."

Like Radiohead?

"No. We think they're brilliant," Michael demurs.

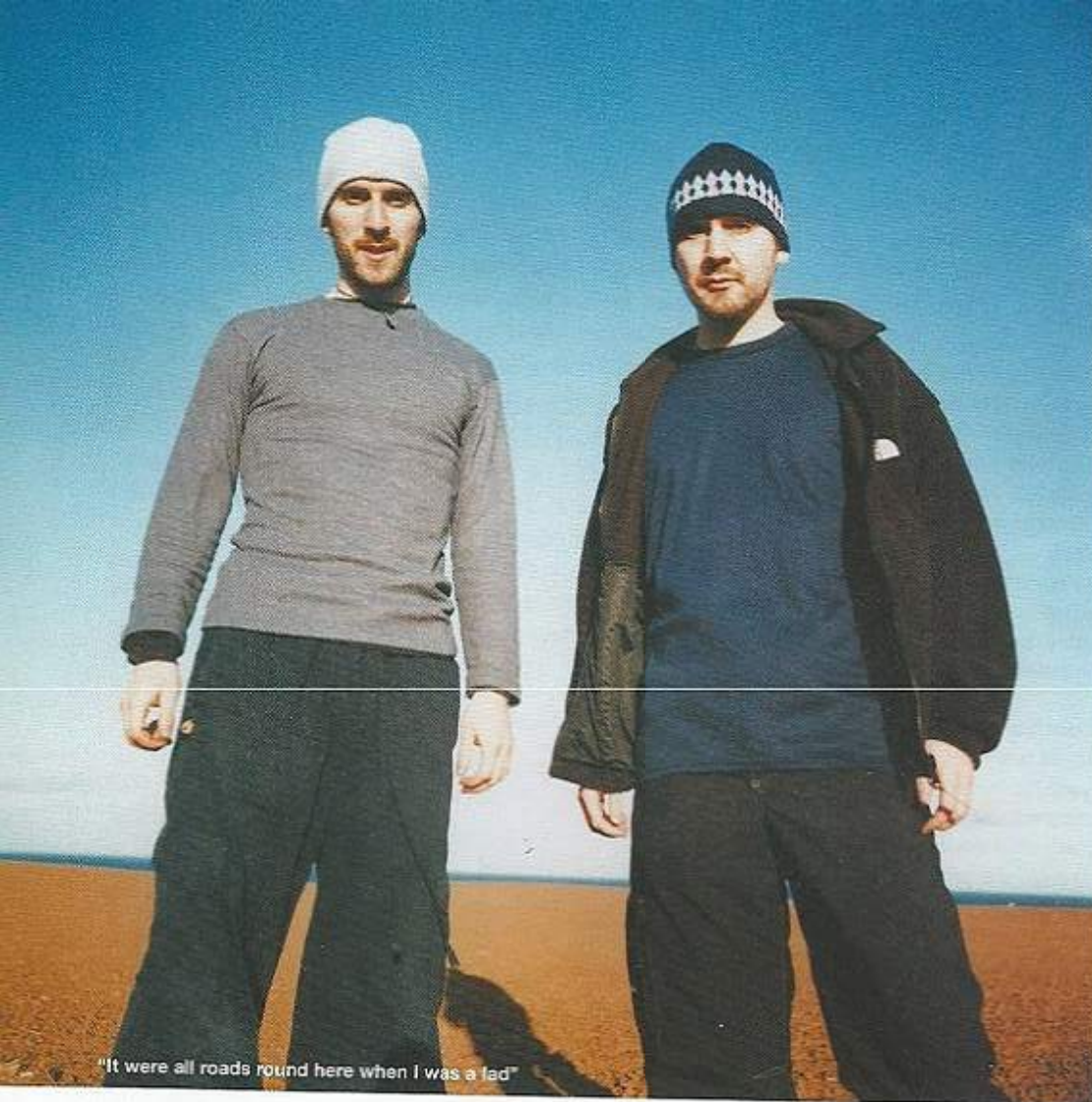
"I think 'Kid A's the best thing they've ever done," adds Marcus in his thicker Scots slur.

So who are we talking about?

"Bigger people than that."

Bigger?

"Artists whose status is somewhere between Radiohead and God," answers Marcus, mystifyingly. They won't be drawn any further.



"It were all roads round here when I was a lad"

The explanation is that both adverts were done with filmmaker du jour Chris Cunningham, "because he asked us and we respect him". They're not saying, but rather than heralding that Shell advert, could it be that the Boards have their eye on Cunningham's future feature work? It isn't, after all, a big step from imaginary soundtracks to actual films, and it'd be hard to contemplate a more perfect union.

"We actually gave him an hour and a half's worth of music, of which he used one 20 second fragment. He was just really excited to have new Boards Of Canada tracks that no one else has heard, that's why he likes working with us. But we trust him. We know he wouldn't do anything else with it."

Marcus grins: "He also knows we'd break both his legs if he did."

And no, they didn't get to meet Leo. "He utters one word. God knows what he got paid. We wanted to record 'Leonardo Di Caprio is a wanker' and put it in the advert music backwards..."

The future of music may be uncertain, but Boards Of Canada seem very definite about their own future musical direction. "We've got a better notion now than we ever did of what Boards Of Canada is," says Mike. "Now we know that we're supposed to be doing really psychedelic, organic-sounding music. I think to some extent we've pandered to the electronic scene previously, putting elements in that we're not necessarily into..."

Marcus continues: "It's going to be simultaneously more listenable and more out there... psychedelic, gorgeous and strange."

We may have a long cold wait on our hands, but it looks like there might be another blaze about to start crackling. **BT**

*'In A Beautiful Place Out In The Country'* is out now on Warp

### Boards Of Canada's tips on bonfires:

**Marcus:** "For kindling the best way to ensure it catches is to get loads of pieces more or less the same length and lay them in a grid, then overlay them in a lattice."

**Mike:** "You don't need matches or a lighter. If it's wet or windy they often won't work. But two twigs will. The trick is to tie string to either end of one twig, then you can rub them together faster than your hands ever could."

## DISCOGRAPHY

### 'Acid Memories' (Music 70, 1989)

Absurdly rare, cassette-only release from the barely teen Boards, then six-strong. Guitars meet electronics in embryonic but recognisably Boards-ian melodicism.

### 'Play By Numbers' (Music 70, 1994)

Five-track CD from what was now a trio, boasting a My Bloody Valentine influence in places, shifting further into electronics in others.

### 'Hooper Bay' (Music 70, 1994)

Closer still: the use of kids' voices was a hint of what was to come. People pay small fortunes for copies.

### 'Twolism' (Music 70, 1995)

The last record as a trio when everything slipped into focus and pricked up record company ears.

### 'BOC Maxima' (Music 70, 1996)

Twenty tracks: half of which would appear on later EPs and albums; the others remain an impossibly elusive prospect (50 copies only).

### 'Hi Scores EP' (Skam, 1996)

Essential for the Eno-esque 'Everything You Do Is A Balloon' and the spooky electro of 'Nlogax'.

### 'Korona' (from 'Mask 100' compilation) (Skam, 1996)

Darkness visible: slurring synths and an uneasy, off-kilter rhythm.

### 'Untitled' (from 'Mask 200' as Hell Interface) (Skam, 1997)

Even darker, harder, faster side of the Boards. 'Who are Hell Interface?' they ask.

### Michael Fakesch 'Surfaise' (Boards Of Canada Trade Winds mix) (Musik Aus Strom, 1997)

Spacious, dissonant, slightly disembodied ambience.

### Mira Calix 'Sandsings' (Boards Of Canada remix) (Warp, 1997)

Boards render Warp's press officer's warblings intelligible.

### Jack Dangers 'Prime Audio Soup' (Boards Of Canada remix) (Play It Again Sam, 1998)

Respectful to the Meat Beat Manifesto man, this is a curious, slightly gothy hybrid.

### 'Aquarius' (seven-inch single) (Skam, 1998)

A different version to the one on 'Music...'. 'Sesame Street' meets Kraftwerk meets the between-scenes bits from 'Seinfeld'.

### 'Music Has The Right To Children' (Skam/Warp, 1998)

'Music...' claimed not just children but grown adults of - shock! - both sexes.

### Bubbah's Tum 'Dirty Great Mable' (III, 1998)

Unusually beat-heavy, balanced by their trademark use of kids' voices and big, spooky chords. Their final remix.

### 'Orange Romeda' (from 'We Are Reasonable People' compilation) (Warp, 1999)

Very much in the 'Music...' vein. Children's voices, bird's wing percussion and yearning, half-heard synth melodies.

### 'Peel Sessions' (Strange Fruit, 1999)

Reworks of 'Aquarius' and 'Olson', plus newie 'Happy Cycling'.

### 'In A Beautiful Place Out In The Country EP' (Warp, 2000)

OK, so it's an EP not an album, and it's not exactly a revolutionary departure, but when familiar ground is this gorgeous, who's complaining?

## Boards Of Canada

### *Tomorrow's Harvest*

Warp CD/DL/2xLP

It seems a long time since 2006, when we last heard from Boards Of Canada. If you try to refresh the memory by looking back through snapshots taken then, the year of the *Trans Canada Highway* EP, they have a certain distinctive quality that only widens the distance: crisp, vibrant, digital-camera clear. Not like the images of their lives people share online today, washed out and hazy, framed by vignettes and lens flare and bathed in the colour casts of any number of degraded film stocks. Behold last night's club, relived on faded Polaroids; a trip to the park painted in chilly blue tones by expired Ektachrome; your breakfast immortalised in cross-processed Velvia 50.

The irony can't be lost on Mike Sandison and Marcus Eoin. Despite the Scottish brothers' self-imposed detachment – few releases, infrequent interviews, a reluctance to reveal too much about themselves or their methods – they have been part of creating one of the most contagious cultural aesthetics of the 2000s so far. Many of its elements are now so widely adopted and overplayed as to be clichés: a half-whimsical, half-melancholic nostalgia for childhood; the celebration of obsolete esoteria such as call signs, numbers stations and educational recordings; the fading and warping of analogue film and tape.

To what extent Boards Of Canada were initiators, as opposed to perceptive amplifiers, of this tendency to look to the past, is unclear. When the pair first started manipulating sound samples to create the illusion of age, it's unlikely they anticipated that this temporal interference would end

up with a world obsessed with memorialising the present, where people barely old enough to remember CDs covet cassette releases, where Korg's MS-20 synth can be played both on a touchscreen app and on reissued hardware, and where laser cutting technology is used to cut wooden discs of Velvet Underground songs. As the title of their 1998 debut album suggests, music may have the right to children, but what happens when those offspring grow into teenagers and won't stop Instagramming pictures of themselves?

It's a relief, then, that *Tomorrow's Harvest* sees Sandison and Eoin emerge from their own long shadow, and escape becoming their own plug-in for one-click hauntology. Crackle and hiss are still in evidence, but the effect is toned down, and less suggestive of sonic patina than of the hostile climate of a world far removed from the languid, sun-dappled pools and rolling vistas suggested by 2005's *The Campfire Headphase*.

"Gemini" quickly establishes the tone, with brittle, thinned-out strings (as ever, sounds are so meticulously blurred between instrumentation and synthesis that 'strings' is a description, not an identification) which cede to a slowly pulsating growl and disjointed, juddering husks of notes, from which the first of many frostily clipped synth lines emerges. When, after three minutes of sullen kick drums and dispassionate airlock hiss, "Reach For The Dead" slowly zooms out to reveal a melody that stretches like cold vapour trails above a landscape of metallic beats, it's obvious the sweet, fleeting sadness of childhood nostalgia has been left far behind. The dread and unease of *Geogaddi* has returned, with the dust wiped away to reveal more keenly felt sadness and

regret, and the track's gradual build, then sudden ebb, only underlines the sense of loss that pervades the album.

*Tomorrow's Harvest* is the name of a US based company whose online store sells dehydrated food, water purifiers, gas masks and everything else your family might need to survive an unspecified disaster. Titing the record thus is a canny act of destabilising listener complacency (first thought: post-apocalyptic survival, how cosy! Second thought: but... what if they're right?), one that looks back to the 1970s heyday of doomsday literature, where fears of nuclear war and ecological meltdown played out in the pages of sci-fi paperbacks and self-sufficiency manuals. True to this, *Tomorrow's Harvest* takes more cues than previous releases from that decade: the swirling mists and sequencer cascades of *Phaedra*-era Tangerine Dream and John Carpenter's articulation of paranoia on the Prophet 5 come to mind. The latter is particularly evident in the repetitive, staccato melody of "White Cyclosa" – a cyclosa being a spider which constructs decoys of itself from the remains of its prey.

But there's also a hint that the brothers have had their ears to the ground in recent years, with a deeper, more geological feel to the bass on many tracks. "Jacquard Causeway" harnesses this with impressively claustrophobic results, causing a flowery, brass-like melody to buckle and distort under the weight of a monolithic one-note bassline. As with the album as a whole, the deliberate, unhurried tempos and muffled amniotic pulses are less an invitation to chilled-out reverie than a reminder of the relentless and immutable progress of time.

Perhaps imagining a post-human world,

*Tomorrow's Harvest* sees a subtle shift in the use of speech. Where previous Boards Of Canada records featured discernible phrases, delivered in the stumbling, lopsided prosody of children or the disembodied voices of authority, here words are fragmented, unintelligible and used mainly as rhythmic elements. The hiccupping syllables that punctuate "Cold Earth" add disruption and anarchy to an otherwise orderly circling refrain; a whispered "thank you" is the only clear voice among the mutterings buried between the muscular beats and quivering bass of "Sick Times".

In a way, the duo mirror Kraftwerk: while the latter used an ambiguity about progress to interrogate what it might mean to be frail and human in a future world of computers, Boards Of Canada's suggestion that memory can contain multiple pasts – some delightful, some filled with fear, some real, some shared, some belonging to others – questions how we experience now. Does it matter if, as with the replicants in *Blade Runner*, most of what you remember is a fake? If we're constantly packaging up moments for later consumption, do we even exist in the present?

Inevitably, *Tomorrow's Harvest* avoids simple answers. But as the album moves towards its conclusion, the optimistically puttering rhythms of "New Seeds" give way to "Come To Dust", whose trickling arpeggios and soaring choral pads sound ever more desperate in the face of a leaden four-note refrain and beats saturated with heavy resignation. For "Semena Mertvykh", all that remains is a low rumble and the dissipating remains of a quintessential Boards Of Canada chord sequence. Maybe we reap the future that we sow. □

**Boards Of Canada** return with a bleak vision of a post-human planet and memories cut adrift. By **Abi Bliss**



Masters of disaster: Boards Of Canada