

Music

Here's to the strangest sound of the summer: a soundtrack of the human body and all its functions

Sampling pioneer Matthew Herbert has recorded the sounds of a person eating, defecating and masturbating, among other things, for his new album.



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There's no beating about the bush with Matthew Herbert. When I meet him at the British Library, I start by asking him about the genesis of his new album *A Nude (The Perfect Body)*. His answer is perhaps more "big picture" than I'm expecting. "I was thinking about transgressive noises [because] I'm fed up with the billowy cushion of fascism which seems to be sinking its velvet poison all over society here and in America," he explains off the bat. "I'm always

trying to create friction.”

Such is the intellectual and political directness of the maverick electronic producer. Using sampled sounds, his music is a determined reality check: projects in recent years have seen him make music from the life cycle of a pig, a bomb being dropped over Libya and the World Trade Center collapsing.

“Music has become like crisps”

In doing so, Herbert stands apart from a musical culture which he sees as increasingly empty. “Music has become like crisps... you have an Adele flavour or a hip-hop flavour, depending on your mood, and then it’s gone, it’s a temporary experience.”

Music vs The Government

But, he says, “I’m still of the firm belief that music has the power to bring down governments. I haven’t done it yet,” he notes deadpan, “but when I was trying to record in the House of Commons, they said I couldn’t because they were worried about my ‘bringing the Commons into disrepute’. The Government’s afraid of a bit of music – but if you ask musicians now, do you think you can seriously have an impact on them, you’d find very few said yes. There’s been a wearying process of slowly milling the rough edges off music.”

“The premise of the album is that we’re all the same – it’s about listening to each other”

A Nude (The Perfect Body) certainly doesn’t lack for edge: it comprises a series of tracks based around the recordings of a person’s bodily processes, including eating, washing, defecating and masturbating. It may sound designed to shock, but Herbert says it’s really about affirming our shared humanity, in the face of those (need we name them) who would stir up divisions. “The premise is that we’re all the same – it’s about listening to each other, and if you make

the same sound as me, then maybe we've got something in common after all."

For that reason, he says, "one of the most important aspects of this record is that [the subject is] an invisible person. We don't know if they're white or black or if they've got all their limbs or how old they are." In fact, he does let on a few details: that the main subject of the album is a woman, and that he started the recording process with her in a hotel room, before giving her the equipment to record herself at home for some of the more intimate actions. At that point, the woman added an anonymous man into the mix. "I really like the idea of giving the brushes to the model so they have agency and the capacity to make decisions about their own body."



Matthew Herbert thinks that a sampled music revolution is due and is setting out his philosophy in "The Music"

Body horror or tranquil beauty?

I imagine the album will split opinion, more for its tone than its quality. I liken it to the aural equivalent of a "body horror" film, regaling Herbert with the ways I found listening to it perturbing: how on the track "is w**king", the subject's orgasm sounded to me like a whimper of distress; and how the bowel movements of "is s***ting" have the torrential flow

of diarrhoea. He confirms that I'm correct on the latter point, but says otherwise my sinister reading is at odds with his intention: "I would have failed if I was trying to do that... I feel like the body is Miles Davis and I'm the band; the body's the soloist and I'm just there to support it." Nevertheless, he's not surprised by my stray interpretation: "I sent this to a friend in America and he said it's like the Rorschach test, where one person sees an image one way, and one person another. He'd just become a new father and all he could hear was a body in decay, whereas for me [this record] is utterly tranquil."

The Nude goes live

An upcoming live performance of the record at London's Roundhouse in August, still very much in the planning stages, is an intriguing prospect. "There will be some visual perspective and it will be quite in the dark, because I don't want it to be about looking at the body – but there needs to be a presence."

"It's a really difficult thing with sex .. but we can't censor it." Is there a danger that having someone orgasm live on stage might rather distract from the project's noble artistic aims?

"It's a really difficult thing with sex," Herbert concurs. "You don't want to deny the eroticism of the moment but you don't want it to be exploitative or pornographic or voyeuristic or lecherous or misogynistic, but we can't censor it."

Integrity is something Herbert seems to think about a lot; it's a word that comes up repeatedly. Since the mid-1990s, he has mixed his sample-based projects with more conventional dance music, but the former have always been his true passion.

Dancing to faeces

Herbert is set to commit his aural philosophy to page in a new book, *The Music*, scheduled for release later this year.

It will partly be a “love poem towards sound”, in which he imagines a kaleidoscope of noises through words, and partly a manifesto for “where I think music should be going and where I think it’s gone wrong”.

He can’t understand why musicians continue to restrict themselves to playing the same old instruments when there is an infinite variety of sounds to pluck from the world around them. “You think how many people are playing guitar right now, or a drum machine with the same 12 sounds, and you think: ‘Come on, guys!’”

“The place went mad; no one knew what it was. They cheered at the breakdown where there’s the big plop.”

In the meantime, Herbert will continue to make mischief at a crossroads between the avant-garde and the mainstream. Getting people dancing to faeces, for example; he tells me that he recently tried out the “is s***ting” track at an east London club and, “The place went mad; no one knew what it was. They cheered at the breakdown where there’s the big plop. I’ve made people dance to all sorts of strange things over the years. For me, their not knowing is part of the political act.”

Herbert is also the very model of a modern major artist, straddling art forms: his work includes installations, such as a piece currently in the Wellcome Collection’s This is a Voice exhibition, and it was recently announced that he will be part of a “musical-theatre supergroup” at the National Theatre, created by Rufus Norris to develop new work. As for the issues he’d like to grapple with next, climate change is high on the agenda.

Or could even, imaginably, become the near-sole agenda for this most conviction-led of musicians. “We’re getting to the point where unless something changes soon in policy and strategy, as artists we’re going to have deal with it in pretty much every single work we do.”

‘A Nude (The Perfect Body)’ is out on 1 July