





england's dreaming

Now living by the sea, **Coil** tap the tidal flows and lunar tugs shaping England's occult history for their visionary nocturnal music. Words: Ian Penman. Photography: Dean Belcher



John Balance by the Bristol Channel, 2000

The great angel Uriel appeared to 16th century English mystic John Dee as he knelt in prayer in a leafy glade; a similar apparition visited Coil's John Balance one night in what he calls his "disco revelation". . . "There was this really hardcore Acid House club — it was after hours, it was about four or six in the morning, and by then people were just completely out of it. I went there with Marc Almond and we'd taken ecstasy and acid and in the midst of it all, *literally* an angel appeared on the dancefloor with this huge great lectern and this huge Biblical burning book and showed me all these things. . . and I thought oh *no*, I'm supposed to be *grooving* in this nightclub and I'm having this apocalyptic revelation. . ."

The inconvenient astral guest is memorialised in "Tiny Golden Books", the second track on the second volume of Coil's *Musick To Play In The Dark*. Personally, I have no trouble with a dancefloor as the venue for epiphanies — fearsome or otherwise. Angels with a yen for the night life? This is Coil, after all.

Of late, Coil — Balance and longterm partner Peter Christopherson, plus a moveable *communitas* of accomplices — have moved away from London's dead disco centre out to the wild tidal periphery, and their new music is awash with traces of the Wessex slopes where they've made their home. Sky and silence for alms, in place of their old penitent's diet of speed and crash and cock and burn. As Balance records on the meditative "Paranoid Inlay": "*Dear Diary: What do I need to give up? Crystalline ladders. . . shiny things. . . mirror balls.*" Coil have left the CCTV Necropolis, whistled away to the water's edge: looking at the big sky, listening to the stone tapes, aching for tidal action. Looking for the midnight sun, the gold within. It's been a year now since Balance and Christopherson relocated, and the move is marked (either side) by a positive apocalypse of new Coil sides: four *Solstice/Equinox* EPs, two volumes of *Musick To Play In The Dark*, the hypnotic *Astral Disaster*, plus live work with the resuscitated Time Machines project. A liminal moment, then, between old ways and new conditions. Coil light up this grey zone, and invite us in. This is Coil, after dark.

John Balance was 21 in 1983, when Coil began (as a solo performance in collaboration with the group Zos Kia, as commemorated on the *Transparent CD*).

It is now a record of his life entire: a workbook of his curiosities; a polytonal account of his and Christopherson's life together; and a chronicle of wider trajectories, taking in outrider sex, magickal practice and musical experiment.

It begins with hymned shit — an anti-Oedipal cruise through Pasolini's outskirts, De Sade's 'sudden abyss', open air fucks, tanned brown skin and cathedrals in flames; moves into a jitter of cathartic MDMA sensuality — Balance and Christopherson as an E'd up Verlaine and Rimbaud roiling through London's arches, cellars and parks; and then splits off into a thousand golden threads — invocations, pseudonyms and call signs; successive creations of a perpetual Mutation, some disappearing into others, vicissitudes of a matter that 'merely changes form'. (This whole history covered with supernatural economy by David Keenan in *The Wire* 175.)

If you had a mind to, you might map the moves Coil made (and, more crucially, didn't) in order to secure the autonomy they own today. In their total embrace of 'alternative' ways and means — an *electrical resistance* both practical and metaphysical — they represent everything that a certain post-punk moment promised but never delivered. Will and palette in place of back talk and retreat. The combination of Balance's occult intuition and Christopherson's acoustic intelligence (a doubtless facile split) makes for music of ravishing physicality and sometimes unnerving gentleness. Coil stripmime Tradition, to carve out new traditions. This is mined music. This is Coil, in two minds.

The tide is a distant memory and the sky slate when I arrive to talk to Balance in the West Country pile which trebles as hearth, HQ and studio for Coil. Christopherson (fondly called 'Sleazy' by all) is on a different West Coast today, fugitive in Los Angeles, wearing his video director's hat: a lucrative sideline that paradoxically ensures Coil aren't in hock to corporate pop's Capital. *By working the soil, you cultivate the sky*: a balance bought with hard barter. (Tell me that making a video for Henry Rollins in Calcutta isn't working hard for your money.)

It takes two sides to make a Balance. . . and while he refuses to disown the vampyric John of 'old', the Balance before us is one whose most treasured estate is the silence of their new home and garden. This sturdy sanctuary sits on a veritable nest edge of a cliff,

a mare's nest halfway between beach and branch, hanging in the air, abutting a wood of oaks: a real threshold house. Balance has come to revere the "parliament of birds" (as he calls them) who ring the trees, strut and chatter, keeping bouncer vigil on itinerants. "It's like gang warfare — the crows at the back have their territory and their business and keep the seagulls away. . . ." Inside, the expected titles by Burroughs and catalogues of alt.culture nestle alongside *Silva: The Tree In Britain* and Julian Cope's *The Modern Antiquarian*. Coil's chakras may remain partly in the gutter, but Balance's heart is shivering naked in the branches, on the beach, in the lowering dawn. This is a liminal him.

"It's always preoccupied me," Balance is speaking about Coil's new 'lunar' aspect, "but I've only just started taking stock of it."

In each beginning is also an end, and maybe there isn't a total break between Coils old and new. Rather, a *circular or spiral course*: a perpetual timebend that curves in past itself, to touch older points again with energies anew. Their 'new' sound may be more balm than drang — music with cloud in its eyes — but as Balance says, "you can detect it on *Scatology* [1984]", even if it's become more overt in the last three years.

"The overall Coil symbol was the black sun," he says, "and we've deliberately decided to go from solar to lunar aspect. We just decided to become completely open to whatever happens: make more reflective music. It seems a logical step. . . moon music."

That is, if a step into the mystic can ever be 'logical'. But there are tangible differences between then and now. He mentions his and Christopherson's early connections to Throbbing Gristle and Psychic TV, which some found offputting; and admits that much of the 'Industrial' era aesthetic had a pointedly masculine cast, "very much to do with symbols and playing around with them". Every symbol is an invocation, as Yeats wrote, and lately — deep breath, eyes shut — the mood is more of a *letting go, falling backward into the waves*. All this watery action is too amorphous to demarcate. It had already begun in London, under the river.

"When we lived in Chiswick," recalls Balance, "we were just one street away from the Thames. Because we lived down by the Thames and we'd take the dogs down there every day, we realised how tidal it was — an incredibly tidal river — and we just became obsessed by the ebb and flow of the river and how it changes."

This 'ebb and flow' is also historical: Coil's Thames is not a Mandelson-pimped millennial Bride, neutralised by the Dome's ersatz 'enlightenment'; but a dark corridor telescoping back in time, lapping against John Dee's hem, out, in again, onto Iain Sinclair's much travelled soles. A Thames of older labours and commerce: an alchemical scar, a Lambeth Nile, a scrying vein. Water as a pit for suicides or a balm for baptisms. An ear into the aether, whose turbid lure speaks to troubled salts in our own liquid self.

Coil's last London breath was *Astral Disaster*: "recorded in two days at Samhain 1998, in the Ancient Borough of Southwark". Samhain is the Celtic word for what we now call Halloween — a time when the threshold between the human and supernatural worlds is thought to be wide open. This is reflective music: sidereal waves throwing undulatory light against brick and metal. A feeling of 'sound washed ashore'.

Coil are equally at home in lyric text and synthesized texture, closing the gap that still often separates vox and electronica — a gap which in itself seems (glibly?) to symbolise an extant split between materialism and the spirit. The songs on the two volumes of *Musick To Play In The Dark* are by turns rapt, troubling, and strangely sincere. Positively uncanny (especially "Broccoli", which quietly crackles with what could be other-side code or hearthside flames), chillingly beautiful ("Batwings: A Liminal Hymn"), and surprisingly reminiscent of another coastal dweller: Robert Wyatt. ("Yes," says Balance, deflecting the compliment. "*Rock Bottom* being perhaps the most lunar album ever made.")

Coil's hermetic soul music exists on a different plane from more formalist electronica. (More wand and cup than click and cut.) All Coil's 'channels' are open. . . to catch night time whispers and departed ghost boys, etherised minds adrift between last breath and imminent shapeshift. This is music to play in place of drugs: the Escher-sketch shiver of

"Ether"; the aquamarine De Quincey drift of "MU-UR"; the vertical take off of *Time Machines*; the disembodied (s)cry of *Musick*. . . 2. Volume 1 of the latter was the first thing they did in the new 'in-house' studio. Has the relocation seeped into their work?

"Very much so," confirms Balance. "We were looking for a house to move to for about a year and we just wanted to be by the sea. This place was the last place we looked at — the very last house. We just saw the sea and we thought: that's it." He gestures through the window to 180 degrees of sea-sky: a Rothko mural for free. "You can see the sun rise and set, you can see the moon come right around, you can see it all."

Is their music played in the dark?

"We used to. . . but that was the old drugs and stimulants keeping you up." He laughs ruefully. "Now we get up really early: I prefer to work in the morning." It may come as a shock to their more Gothically inclined fans, but these nocturnal drug-soaked songs are mostly recorded in the bright and early morn on a diet of nettle tea and organic produce. Which is not meant to make their 'darkness' sound vaguely risible: if anything, the achievement is more impressive, and a more complex matter. As though Coil now carry the appropriate molecules within, to be accessed or censored at will. . .

"We'd decided that we were making 'moon music' and we said: OK, let's not be scared of exploring things that we've denied in our music before. Because the 80s was all metal bashing and sampled chaos and everyone tied up in leather" — a beady laugh — "and all that urban decay stuff. I thought: we've done that, been there."

"It sounds like a huge thing to do," he continues, "but I want to make sacred music, music that heals. And that can be very noisy violent music still — our music had a lot of anger in it and still does: it's not that we've become wishy washy — but I'm not interested in alleviating juvenile angst." Which has its place — but you move on, grow, shift priorities. "Have your wounds grown wings?" A new mouthpiece: the great star mother, in whom one must seek reabsorption. It's like *Performance* [a sly quote from which kicked off "Further Back And Faster" on 1991's *Love's Secret Domain*], where we start with the hard-armoured ultra-masculine 'I', and go through the mystic sound barrier to reach the chimerical union at the end.

"I love Nic Roeg and Donald Cammell's work. *Performance* has an occult resonant power that goes far beyond its rock 'n' roll status. Beautiful. *Eureka*,



again, that's a lost film — when that appears on DVD I'll be a very, very happy man. If we were a film I'd like to be *Eureka*." We could be happy, just sitting here all day valorising our Roeg: a King across the waters. *Performance* and *Eureka* make us complicit in their magickal intent: truly alchemical work. Phase shift, planet shift. We happily spin the connections: Nic Roeg—Colin Wilson; Stones—Kenneth Anger; Donald Cammell—godchild of Aleister Crowley (Cammell Snr was a close friend and biographer of the Magus). Coil take their place in this 'marginal' tradition of Anglo Saxon mavericks, one foot in this world and a third eye on the other. Aetherial work, by earthy people. This is continuity.

There is a Coil 'family' stone too — David Tibet (Current 93), Steven Stapleton (Nurse With Wound), Rose and Drew McDowall; Autechre and former Coil member Stephen Thrower's Cyclobe; current recruits Thighpaulsandra and Simon Norris — involved in music, artwork, the betwixt and between of ideas and enthusiasms. Cultivating the voices of an older cusp: John Dee, Austin Osman Spare, Aleister Crowley, Jack Parsons. Sometimes the two streams meet, as with film maker/magus Kenneth Anger, who started as a reference point (a star in the firmament) and became a friend. "Making movies is casting spells," according to Anger — a definition you might profitably apply to Coil's music making. They are supposed to work with Anger on two soundtrack pieces — "one a version of a Crowley gnostic mass; also, a short film about Crowley: *A Man They'd Like To Hang*" — but this may be a recipe for astral deferral, given that both parties have a reputation for announcing works that fail to materialise.

"I do wish he'd finish some things," says Balance fondly. "He does have this problem of not being able to finish works." Coil likewise have often left a perplexed fanbase

scratching its collective head, as myriad projects hang in the air like frozen hallucinations, neither fully here nor yet consigned to oblivion. *Backwards* — their New Orleans album, for Trent Reznor's label — is one such. "Six years old now," sighs Balance distractedly, and it's still imminent... or stillborn? There's an air of evasiveness when I press him further on its status. (It doesn't sound as if he enjoyed his Bayou stay, but I could be wrong.) Anyway, on the bright side, things do seem to have gotten indecently better of late...

"Oh yeah, absolutely... thank you for noticing!" he chuckles. "It's true: I drive Peter mad 'cause I set up these tensions by announcing projects, and I have absolutely every intention of finishing them... It may well be 20 years down the line, but nearly all the titles I have in these little books get used in the lyrics and I do recycle them."

Let's admit this much: there is still a vast amount we do not know about the interaction between place — musical pattern — and psyche. There are new theories that cast stone circles and shamanic caves as gigantic amplifiers and intimate microphones, responsive to certain skeins of percussion and deliberately 'cast' to resonate certain crucial frequencies. Sunspots provoke radio fadeout and interference. Magnetic storms sussurate in our singing ringing skull. Aether is an undulation that transmits radio waves. Balance mentions how the occultist Austin Spare used to make and repair radio kits, and how he'd paint magickal symbols on the speaker baffles, "because they were then empowered, and the transmission would be a magickal transmission".

Coil are Can fans from way back, and like perhaps only Can before them their music is tied to specific stripes of seasonal itch, structural weather, REM pulse. This logic of cyclical spell and seasonal surgery reaches an apogee on the four *Solstice/Equinox* EPs, improvised out of chaos and piercingly beautiful: sinistral, sulphurous, serpentine, sandy: its own compound. Time signatures and stringed sighs that seem immemorially English, tapping into something behind Englishness: haunted by *older voices*. Coil's pastoral Song is moored in deceptively simple, gloriously inventive settings of vox. Even when the music shivers with distant echoes of Pauline Oliveros or Stockhausen, it sounds as pastoral as the hangman's daughter. Edgily hymnal, harshly heimlich: folk memory dredged by modern ploughs, harvest air cut by synth scythes.

Balance says he's no aficionado of folk music per se, but admits to a love of The Watsons and late matriarch Lal Waterson in particular: "The one that Rose [McDowall] covered as part of the series, "Christmas Now Is Drawing Near", I originally heard as a version by Lal Waterson solo. Every time I hear it I cry, it's so pure and emotional, emotive and lunar... *moon music*. She's another manifestation of the Goddess."

On *Musick*... 2, the spiderweb echoes are of other liminal Brits — Robert Wyatt, John Cale, Peter Hammill, John Martyn, Nick Drake — as well as a separate input of Popol Vuh, Cluster, Tangerine Dream. Where Coil used to dare to offend, now they dare something a little different: they dare to be sincere. Obviously there are crucial differences along a spine alignment of personality, history and intent: where Wyatt *et al* began in a time when 'singer/songwriter' was the dominant paradigm, Coil inhabit a changed and differently charged landscape: post-punk, post-Thatcher, post-Apple Mac, post-(?) AIDS. This is moon music, but it's also a mourning chorus. Music that makes you feel significantly less alone, even as it cuts a lonely path.

The 'Englishness' I keep hearing: is there some specific thing you're doing to trigger this strong feeling of familiarity?

"Well, we also feel that when we do it." He laughs a crafty craftsman's laugh. (Musicians would rather not let non-musicians in on studio lore — especially how happenstance things often are.) "But obviously we feel it strongly: we feel... *strongly vague*. What happens is we start doing this music and then someone'll go, 'Oh, this sounds like so and so' — 'Oh really?', and then I'll listen to it — and honestly until a few years ago I hardly heard any Stockhausen or John Cage or Parmegiani. So now it's like I'm just checking

that it's OK to be where we are. It really is instinctive, instinctual, we deliberately keep a lot out... With age, you narrow things down to a choice: between what you truly revere, and... silence? "I think that our location and our age are what influence our music the most and, as you can hear," he gestures around his sacred ground, "*silence*. The silence in my back garden is the thing I value the most in my life at the moment."

It's also a renegotiation of being British, isn't it? A rediscovery that there is (or was) a better country than the one we thought we knew and execrated when younger? "Oh yeah, absolutely. I don't think I'm gonna fly abroad any more. I love Thailand, say, but I want to see what is here. What we are. *Feel no shame*. Because the 80s brought shame to be British somehow. And all the British now — in a hangover from the 80s — they're all evacuating: they will only *be* themselves abroad, which seems really strange. There's so much here to be discovered, rediscovered, uncovered, made use of, employed... reconnected."

"*The Bird-Mother restores the bones to their places and the candidate wakes as from a deep sleep*" — Mircea Eliade

He cites Julian Cope as occupying a similar mindset, supplying the same murmuring wisdom: applying certain arcane tangents. When Balance talks of "magick" (Crowley: "The Science and Art of causing Change to occur in conformity with Will") he's on sure ground. If Coil were more archly/laxly rock 'n' roll, then I would doubtless be

received in some bescarfed den, black candles burning, tattoos on show: all the surface paraphernalia. Such diletantism probably explains why rock's would-be diabolists have so often come to grief — why they usually emerge hurt and chastened by the experience. Stubborn ego clings on to contaminate the Work, which fails to progress any further than dark-knight affectation.

I've met dodgy second hand 'spirit' dealers before: ex-bruiseurs, ex-drinkers, autodidacts who slip the protective caul one day and start hearing the car alarm's secret code, humourless, unyielding in their interpretation of 'the facts' (as they always call them). Balance isn't like that, although in print it's hard to register the flicker of italic and rejoinder that animates his conversation. To begin with, he isn't a 'convert' — this astral pulse has been inside him since adolescence when, aged 12, he started having visions and visitations, strange birds whose whisper was of love. (Reference in here both Max Ernst's 'Lop Lop', and poet Mircea Eliade's Bird-of-Prey Mother, "which is like a great bird with an iron beak, hooked claws and a long tail".) The young Balance also hooked up with authors and artists who promised a world where he might slough off the inherited

English shell game and join other proud deviants out on the wing.

"I honestly don't know *how* it came about," he says in reponse to my enquiry about the origin of his interest in magick, "but I've got letters from my schoolmaster when I was aged 11 saying, 'Geoffrey was becoming again obsessed with the occult and could he desist from astral projecting into other people's heads! They tried to throw me out: the teacher came up to me and said, 'If I could get you out for subversive behaviour I would', and walked away again. He knew we were up to stuff but didn't know what it was. When we were 12 me and my friend were being taught genuine occult practices — ie astral projection — by this teacher from another school; and this one boy in particular got us into real trouble because he suggested that there was something homosexual going on between the teacher and us and got him kicked out..."

"And that alone made me think, well, this is obviously important stuff — I'm going to learn as much about it as I can. I remember writing to 'King of the Witches' Alex Sanders — I must have seen an advert in *Prediction* or something — and I wrote asking to join his coven when I was, like, 12. He wrote me a letter back saying, 'We're very happy to have you in the coven but when you're 18...'"

An isolated, dreamy, fractured youth: it's often found in biogs of the psychically rich and naturally strange. But it's still the exception (in my experience) for someone to



When we was mad: Balance and Peter Christopherson, mid-90s

come early to this stuff, rather than turn to it later on, a ladder out of the wreckage after some sort of (b)reached limit.

"I did have my crisis. I think it was my rebellion against the RAF and my father and my stepfather in particular, because it was so completely opposite to him: he was the most empirical, Empire establishing, 'British Raj in India everything for the Queen'. . . I wasn't allowed posters, none of that, no expression at all. So the moment I discovered there were people out there like Max Ernst, Kurt Schwitters, Hans Belmer, who were doing instinctual, magickal painting and music and films, and I learnt that there was a subculture, I just immediately associated with it. William Burroughs — if there was one person like William Burroughs out there doing that, being openly *deviant*, it just kept me going, 'cause I really did have a suicidal teenage rage. . ."

Teenage Lightning + Time Machines = Love's Secret Domain.

"And I took drugs; the only drugs I took back then when I was 11 or so were magic mushrooms. Until about 18 I didn't drink, I didn't do speed, I didn't do coke, any of the other things — that came later. I'd do magic mushrooms → I'd take huge amounts of magic mushrooms and that was my. . . teaching. But I had no context: it wasn't like I was taking it with bikers or taking it with other druggies — I was taking it because I felt it was the right thing to do. It's almost. . . *when you're looking for them they tell you where to come*. They do teach you, I believe that." He smiles as he says it. "I was brought up by mushrooms!"

“ I was desperate for the Baader-Meinhof group to blow my bloody Dad up and disrupt the nauseating regimentation of my life ”

After his mushroom initiation, Balance began an investigation of altered states, which at first was a due illumination. . . until he started to down substances like his death depended on it, and his ship started to list. What began as immersion threatened to drown out everything. A couple of years back, Balance was surfing alcoholism proper, knew it and drew back. Measures were taken, measures were refused. He stopped short of the *total Alcoholics Anonymous* trip, unable to commit to a complete and Christian 'abstinence'; unwilling to disown an ethics of excess, to denounce all the darkened routes that lead to gnostic insight. As Balance says on the revealing "Paranoid Inlay" (an ambivalent meditation on ambivalence): *"Serenity is a problem/When you get this close to heaven."* ('Serenity' is a key word in rehab programmes.) Although life now is mostly fruit tea and tempered biases, there is still the occasional headfuck moment: just to maintain an unhealthy Balance.

"The most banal definition of [addiction] is that it's to do with boredom: I actually think it's more complex and more profound than that." We're in a similar grey zone here — and I float my theory that when drink and drugs become 'a problem', the real problem is often with Time: our uneasy or unconfirmed place in it. Balance agrees that with age (and a measure of luck), a certain natural temperance often takes and the body rights itself without any outside help. Today, Coil achieve the same transcendent

results via 'natural' means. Breakfast with the Sea Priestess. Chaos magick and calm recollection. Wave machine music.

"The Mothership & The Fatherland" (on *Astral Disaster*) is partly an invocation of one of Balance's unlikelier icons: Kate Bush. "She's so hidden," he comments in hushed tones, "she's one of the aspects of the Goddess." I have no problems with this: I worship at this altar too. Under the English rose is a Reichian volcano; behind the Q awards another Roeg-ish maverick. The little Laura Ashley lamb of public perception uncoils in the crucible of the studio into Other, more fearful aspects. Do Coil likewise feel such vertigo in the studio?

"An old quote I use — 'We make the studio sacred and then we blaspheme it'. And we do — I genuinely believe that." Their studio time isn't hamstrung by record company timelock and the knowall pro tools who invariably come with it. "It's very important we don't let people in, hanging round playing pool, stuff that goes on in a lot of studios. None of that." What he does do is dream. "While we're working I'll go and have a lie down and when I wake up again we'll start the music over. I have to dream it first. I can lucid dream — it happens quite a lot."

"The Mothership & The Fatherland" proceeds from a Cope-ious interest Balance has taken in the syncretic music — the Prog gnosis — of 1970s Germany and what

he terms its "cosmic connection [and] cosmic couriers". A synchronicity also touching on Sun Ra's ringed mythos and Funkadelic's staged ufology: "It's obviously to do with LSD and their drug intake. The Mothership and the Fatherland — it's

the mother *and* the father, taking in both those aspects." This is the Germany of Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow*: a post-war 'Zone' where spiritualism and science cross; where Werner Von Braun talks about the afterlife and rocket scientist Jack Parsons digs a hole in Mojave skies with his quantum tantra. A strange graph glimmers under received history, mixing divergent strands: pharmaceuticals, heavy industry and electronic drone: Krautrockabbala.

"Guns and drugs and electrical music, yes. . ." Balance pauses. "It's strange: I'd never realised but I have more of a claim to these ideas I'm thinking, because I was brought up in Germany. I didn't hear any Krautrock, but I was aware of it. I was on RAF camps at the time of the Baader-Meinhof group. . . I was desperate for them to blow my bloody Dad up and disrupt the nauseating regimentation that surrounded my life. I was well up for it!"

Balance had an Army upbringing: its incessant shuttle the very opposite of a settled English upbringing (symbol: the sturdy Oak). "It's an odd childhood," he agrees. "You have friends all around you that you grow up with. . . but you keep changing schools, leaving every few years. It's horrible. I feel like suing them. I really feel quite bitter about it. I went to nine schools before I was 11 and then got put into a boarding school — which was my saving grace because I got some stability. But before, it was terrible:

