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### *Bibliography*

## CHAPTER 1

### **Introduction**

After reading this book, I hope the term ‘post-rock’ gets stuck in your throat the next time you use it, even if just for a moment. Think about the semantic cluster bomb you’re about to detonate.

I expect that 90% of the readers of this book will use it to refer to the cinematic, predominantly instrumental rock music that hit a peak of popularity in the early 2000s. Mogwai, Sigur Rós, Godspeed You! Black Emperor. Bands whose explosive summits of distortion, cymbals and reverb are rendered exceptionally intense for emerging from such pronounced periods of quiet. Bands whose desire to ‘rock out’ comes tempered by the humility and subservience of orchestral performance, offsetting progressive rock’s domineering bombast with the sense that the performers are stranded, helpless, beneath the tidal wave of their own creation.

But some readers will have stumbled into post-rock at the turn of the 90s, ears still ringing from the explosion of post-punk. When English music journalist Simon Reynolds first spoke about post-rock as co-opting “rock instrumentation for non-rock purposes”, he was referring to bands like Tortoise, Pram, Trans Am, Bark

Psychosis and Main. The common attribute of these bands was not musical. It wasn't really ideological either. Rather, it was one of circumstance – an act of straddling the boundary between rock and the 'other', with one wayward foot sloshing in the waters of either techno, jazz, krautrock, dub reggae, electronica or musique concrète (or in the case of Tortoise, all of these combined). To examine this period of post-rock is to uncover the hub of rock innovation that was growing, almost in secret, underneath the trad rock revivalism of grunge and brit pop. While Soundgarden and Oasis lured the masses back toward the quintessential idea of the rock star, bands such as Labradford and Disco Inferno were quietly dismantling the rituals that governed how guitars, bass and drums could be utilised. This wasn't a music that revered rock's principles of machismo and muscle. Post-rock was about innovation and progression.

Post-rock's path of transformation, from early-90s proliferation to its post-millennial popularity peak, has been full of strange twists and splits. Not everyone was clear what Simon Reynolds meant when he referred to using "rock instrumentation for non-rock purposes". As the term 'post rock' was tentatively applied to new artists (often because they vaguely resembled an existing artist under the post-rock banner), the meaning started to mutate like a Chinese whisper. Old connotations fell away, others shuffled into their place. It's only very recently that the meaning of post-rock has begun to stabilise. But even now, it's impossible to provide a succinct description of the term without falling into web of contradiction. How can post-rock be both the sprawling atmospheres of Godspeed... and the pocket-sized jams of Battles? If post-rock is so synonymous with

instrumental music, why is it that the falsetto of Sigur Rós vocalist Jónsi is one of the most distinctive sounds in the post-rock universe?

Very few bands willingly identify with the term. Partly that's because of the above; post-rock still struggles to communicate and identify itself with conviction and clarity. But if we're to take the term at face value for a moment, it's also a strange and bold proclamation to make. *Post-rock*. Is this really the *successor* to rock music? A lot of post-rock's key players still see themselves as rock bands. When Explosions in the Sky sway and thrust into their sonic climaxes during live performances, there's a sense of visceral bodily exertion that comes straight from the heart of rock music. Yet even if post-rock was indeed the inevitable next chapter in the narrative of rock, wouldn't it be bizarre for a band to define themselves on the territory from whence they came, rather than where they find themselves currently? If it's truly the point of departure from rock music, why retain the word 'rock' within the term at all?

Despite this confusion, it is possible to carve a narrative through post-rock. This story doesn't follow the nurturing and expansion of a musical ethos; it follows the vessel of post-rock as it drifts, guided largely by speculation and guesswork, over the seas of sound. With each attempt to apply the term, new bands and connotations are brought into the fold. Often we see how post-rock has been used as a journalistic miscellaneous – a placeholder for a more specific, directed description of music. It's because of this that post-rock has often acted like a flashlight pointing into the great unknown. It's an acknowledgement that our vocabulary of music is currently

inadequate, leaving ‘post’ as the only appropriate allusion to the presence of a mysterious other.

There is an inherent tension to the term ‘post-rock’. It’s trying to escape itself, yet remains dependent on its former identity within rock. It suggests process: post-rock is an act of becoming – a state of transience and mid-mutation – where the remnants of the past still exist, malformed but recognisable, upon a surface that writhes in a state of flux. That’s why I’m starting this book with two bands that underwent profound evolutions in sound and musical perspective. In both, we can see the presence of the ‘other’ pushing up through the fabric of rock: non-rock instrumentation, a more profound dynamic range, a greater reliance on improvisation, a dramatic shift in the role of the human voice.

The two bands in question are Talk Talk from London, England and Slint from Louisville, USA. Both released their most significant records around the turn of the 90s. Both are frequently heralded as either the fathers of post-rock or the two most primary influences, and both employed very different approaches in twisting the framework within which they were founded. But most crucially, each foreshadowed the post-rock movement that would spark up in the UK and US in the wake of their demise. In 1993 Simon Reynolds coined the term ‘post-rock’ in an interview with UK band Insides. Soon, he was picking out several other bands, across both the UK and the US, who he perceived to employ a ‘post-rock’ approach. Many of these artists were expanding on the ideas

that resided, albeit in a nascent form, within the music of Talk Talk and Slint.

Seeing as this is the very first book about this subject, I've been careful to refer to *Storm Static Sleep* as a 'pathway' through post-rock. It's not the definitive story. Frankly, I'm not convinced there is one. If anyone is so enraged or inspired by this work that they feel compelled to write their own version, I'd be delighted to read it. While post-rock owes its semantic transience to the fact that it is not fully understood, it nonetheless deserves to be documented in greater detail. I don't anticipate that this book will necessarily fortify an understanding of what post-rock is. If anything, it may complicate the matter further. What I hope is that people encounter places on the post-rock pathway that they would have never found otherwise. Fans of Seefeel and Pram will follow the road – via sharp turns past Piano Magic, Mogwai and Russian Circles – into the ferocious, beautifully choreographed instrumentals of Sleepmakeswaves. Listeners to EF and Blueneck will trace the path all the way back to discover the hushed masterpieces of Bark Psychosis. And if none of those names mean anything to you, this book is set to be a journey of discovery from start to finish.

## CHAPTER 2

### **Talk Talk, .O.rang, Mark Hollis**

Let's start our story about post-rock in the heart of the New Romantic movement. Granted, we could just skip straight to Talk Talk's fourth record, *Spirit of Eden*, as their music only truly becomes relevant to the post-rock narrative from this point on. But given that the term 'post-rock' defines itself by acknowledging the place from whence it came (which wasn't exactly rock in this case, but bear with me), it makes sense to go right back to the very start. Back to when Talk Talk frontman Mark Hollis spent his time stranded in shitty interviews on children's TV shows, answering the sorts of inane questions that are specially reserved for pop stars. His responses were either blunt or mumbled, which wasn't symptomatic of Hollis being indifferent to music. Rather, he was indifferent to the press. Nobody understood Talk Talk like he did.

He hated the constant comparisons between Talk Talk and Duran Duran, an observation that was only reinforced by the fact that the two bands went on tour together in 1981. Frankly, the comparisons made a lot of sense. The similarities were numerous: copious amounts of synthesiser, a theatrically despondent vocalist, a moniker comprising a single word repeated, signed to EMI, produced by

Colin Thurston. Their 1982 debut record, *The Party's Over*, was a perfect fit for the New Romantic movement too. Hollis' quivering cries were trapped inside the whirrs of the modern age, all keyboard gloss and rigid beats, while Paul Webb's bass guitar often snaked and slapped with the same sort of revamped funk as Japan's album *Tin Drum*, released just a year before. Despite Hollis' protests against the New Romantic categorisation, his music had no better home.

The Duran Duran likeness was a favourite interview topic for the press. Hollis didn't take this kindly. In retaliation, he'd bring up influences that seemed to derive from opposite corners of the universe, perhaps in an effort to spur searches for the unexplored intricacies within Talk Talk's music. Jazz and classical were of particular interest: John Coltrane, Ornette Coleman, Dmitri Shostakovich. "What I like about Shostakovich and music like that is that total oppressiveness in the force of it and then, at other moments, that pure sort of tranquillity," he explained to *Zig Zag* in 1982. "It's between those two extremes. In the last couple of years there has been so much emphasis on image that it has become more important than the actual music. What we believe in is: let's go back to songwriting!"

Even though dynamic extremes were entirely absent from the landscape of *The Party's Over*, these mentions of a grander, more sophisticated music were prophetic. Talk Talk's transformation would take place in a gradual, career-long arc. The New Romantic gloss was already starting to recede by their second album, 1984's *It's My Life*, with organic instruments swooping in and stealing the



jobs of the machines. There was an acoustic guitar tucked beneath the verse of the title track, while the synthesiser chords started to decay more quickly, like the notes of a piano, leaving bubbles of emptiness all over the mix. Talk Talk's instruments were starting to engage in a dialogue with silence and space. Hollis wasn't yet paying homage to Coltrane's 'In A Sentimental Mood' – which he repeatedly cited as an influence for its pronounced flirtations with shadow and absence – but he was getting there.

Essentially, the world of Talk Talk was in the early stages of continental drift. Instruments were starting to operate independently from the central landmass of song. Subtle undulations between quiet and loud – well, quieter and louder at least – were beginning to take place. The shift would continue over the records to come, and gradually the relevance of those Coltrane and Shostakovich name-drops would start to push through Talk Talk's New Romantic façade. I wonder whether Hollis had the band's career trajectory mapped out in his head from the very start. Perhaps that's why he became so frustrated with the press; they were incapable of seeing each album as a component of a grander narrative work that was in the midst of materialisation. Once you start to consider *The Party's Over* as Talk Talk's own Big Bang – pushing instrumental debris in all directions, expanding the Talk Talk universe as each element drifted further and further apart – the journey from New Romantic celebrities to post-rock pioneers starts to feel like a gradual, somewhat inevitable process of evolution.

On their 1986 record *The Colour of Spring*, Talk Talk underwent their most drastic overhaul yet by banishing electronic instruments

entirely, with Hollis starting to express his strong aversion to synthetic textures. “It’s a fact that we have to use synthesisers for touring, but aside from that I absolutely hate the things,” he told *International Musician And Recording World* in 1986. “They are an economic necessity, but aside from that I think they are disgusting things. That whole point about acoustic music is that it concerns itself with feel, so it can never fail, because what music concerns itself with above everything is feel. I mean you can MIDI a fucking piano up now, but that’s all a piece of shit isn’t it? Because the moment you transfer from something mechanical to something electronic you no longer have the feel there.”

Many of the songs on *The Colour of Spring* were formed from strange, fluctuating outlines of several instruments working in co-operation with each other. None of the instruments (piano, strings, guitar, organ) played the melody whole. The essence of the song was dispersed throughout all its instruments, floating above the drums as little wisps of note passed back and forth. A shape formed through dialogue and implication, as one can identify the outline of a triangle when just the three angles are depicted, cognitively tracing invisible lines of interrelation between each corner. The melody was an insinuation, leaving the listener to plug the harmonic gaps in their own head.

Some tracks on the album were more rigid and immediate. Hollis claimed that “Life Is What You Make It” was chosen as the album’s lead single because it was the album’s shortest track, but that’s not true. “Chameleon Day” was significantly shorter, but its floating

collage of improvisation would have just alienated radio listeners. Some allege that “Life Is What You Make It” was written to appease EMI’s concerns over the lack of potential singles on the record, which is the version I’m more inclined to believe. Amidst an album that often lingered around the edges, the track was a burst of sudden impact: fierce and unambiguous, clattering through a rotary drum / piano loop that ran through the song without deviation. It’s the most muscular track in the entire Talk Talk catalogue. Thankfully for EMI the song was a top 20 hit too, although this would be the last occasion that Talk Talk would intentionally write material to appease the commercial priorities of their record label.

If EMI were nervous about *Colour of Spring*’s lack of marketability, I can only imagine their panic upon hearing 1988’s *Spirit of Eden* for the first time. The songs bobbed like buoys on a sea of improvisation. Melodies dipped under great waves of orchestral noise and stranded themselves on shores of silence. Hollis’ voice sounded more withered and pensive than ever before, quivering under the strain of carrying the album’s emotional load on his back. Schools of woodwind drowned melodies in a rabble of dissonance; choruses rose unsteadily as fluttering organs tugged at their feet. The ticking ride cymbal of “Inheritance” alluded to an imminent climax but never kept its promise, while the optimism of “Eden” shone fleetingly between the dominant shadows of self-doubt.

For many post-rock listeners, *this* is where the narrative of post-rock really started. So what was it about *Spirit of Eden* that made it so relevant, given that it emerged from the New Romantic scene and

really only skimmed past rock on its way to a more experimental approach? The answer was process. The concepts that the band worked with – increased dynamic range, longer song durations, the abolishment of a central melodic focal point, perceiving the studio as a creative tool – all worked to undermine the hallmark qualities of New Romantic music: brevity, direct melodic connection, consistently high levels of energy. This process of deconstruction could be easily apprehended by a world of rock music that, despite centring on an entirely different set of instruments, still championed the same combination of energy and presence. *Spirit of Eden* wasn't called a post-rock record at the time – the term was still five years away from its induction into the music journalism lexicon when the album came out. Post-rock's major proliferator, Simon Reynolds, doesn't consider it to be a post-rock record, even in retrospect. I see where he's coming from. It's probably more accurate to say that the album opened the door post-rock would eventually walk through.

Improvisation was central to the composition process. A large number of collaborators (violinists, clarinetists, trumpeters) were brought into the recording sessions at London's Wessex studios, and given free reign to play whatever felt spontaneously appropriate. The recordings were then chopped up and carefully dispersed across each of the songs, creating dozens of melodic microcosms that quivered upon the surface of the main compositional cosmos. After building his career by lip-syncing lyrics to death in TV promotions for previous Talk Talk records, Hollis was also beginning to voice a strong inclination toward the purity of first takes. "One of the first things I ever learned in the studio was that a spontaneously recorded demo

always sounds better than that track recorded over and over again,” he told *OOR* magazine in 1988. “The demo has a specific value. The moment you sit down to study a particular piece it loses value.”

And at last, Hollis was able to explore those dynamic extremes he so adored in the music of Coltrane and Shostakovich. Ninety-five seconds into opener “The Rainbow”, the record became so quiet that the listener could barely hear it. Only a solitary moaning cello – wandering across the back of the frame like a wounded animal – staved off absolute silence. Centrepiece “Desire” brought the album to its peak of rock, bursting into wah guitar and slippery drum syncopation, before a lead solo bucked through the middle of the track like a rabid bull. Dynamically, the record sloped down either side of this climactic summit. By the time it reached the reverential ballad of “Wealth”, which felt like the album bedding down to sleep, the fizzing energy of “Desire” was a distant memory. By this stage of Talk Talk’s career, producer Tim Friese-Greene had become Hollis’ primary creative partner, with bassist Paul Webb and drummer Lee Harris reduced to the status of creative accessories. “The dynamics are a little bit hard to take at first,” Friese-Greene admitted during a 1988 interview with *Q Magazine*. “There were times during the mixing when I thought, I’m not sure about this, but it scrapes through. Again it had to strike the right note between intensity and irritation. But we’re not being naïve about it. Some people could definitely be put off by the pace of it or the level of intensity and if people are uncomfortable with that maybe, with respect, they should listen to something else.”

EMI, who released *Spirit of Eden* on their jazz label Parlophone, did their utmost to play the commercial deadweight they were dealt. A video was released for “I Believe In You”, with Talk Talk begrudgingly cutting the track from six minutes to three. The piece no longer made any sense. The edit stalled while the track was still accumulating its momentum, oblivious to the fact that the chorus was rendered impotent when it wasn’t allowed to repeat. Hollis gently nursed an acoustic guitar that resided just out of shot (probably to conceal the fact that he wasn’t playing it). As he sung the word “spirit”, his face broke into an ambiguous half-smile. Somehow he looked both brimming with emotion and spiritually vacant, trapped in the paradox of singing one of the most beautiful melodies of his career while his record label butchered the track’s poignancy in a bid for commercial return.

Given the delicate nature of the lyricism, EMI’s edit must have felt particularly insensitive. “I’ve seen heroin for myself, on the street so young laying wasted,” sung Hollis, hushed and holding back. His solemn restraint verged on intolerable. The music was quietly pregnant with the sheer weight of the unexpressed; Hollis could have let *everything* come to the fore at this moment, turning “I Believe In You” into a wall of orchestral noise. He didn’t—he resisted. The ticking ride cymbal was something of a dynamic moderator, regulating the flow of emotion into a steady drip, catching the lunges of harmonica and feedback before they turned violent. During the chorus, a choir poured down the surrounding walls and a Hammond organ rose up through the middle like a ghost. No piece of music deserves to have the grubby, uncoordinated hands of a record label running through

it, but with “I Believe In You” it felt particularly blasphemous.

Needless to say, the civility of Talk Talk’s relationship with EMI was fast unravelling at this point. Talk Talk wanted out. EMI thought they could redirect the band back toward commercially lucrative material. With Polydor finally prising the group out of EMI’s contractual clutches – at the expense of a lengthy court battle and monstrous financial costs – two very different faces of Talk Talk emerged. The first was EMI’s unauthorised attempt to re-galvanise the band as a commercial product. The label released a best-of compilation entitled *Natural History*, followed by a remix record called *History Revisited*. The latter featured two reworkings of “Life’s What You Make It” (by BBG and The Fluke), both of which swapped Lee Harris’ formidable rhythmic backbone for feeble electronic beats. If anything, it made clear that the original was indivisible; its elements were too skilfully synchronised to survive the heavy-handed remixing of outsiders. Hollis’ main complaint was that *History Revisited* was released under Talk Talk’s name in spite of their lack of involvement. A lawsuit ensued and Talk Talk won, leading EMI to destroy all remaining copies of the record.

Meanwhile, the *real* Talk Talk pulled even further away from the solidity of rock and pop with 1991’s *Laughing Stock*, which was the final studio album to be released under their name. “Myrrhman” started with the hiss of a guitar running through a tremolo pedal: a throbbing, expectant white noise, holding the album in a state of absolute dormancy until the first chord was ready to resound. In the context of the album, this hiss could be considered as musical as the guitar chords themselves. *Laughing Stock* expanded



on *Spirit of Eden*'s free expression and inducted a greater range of non-musical devices into the frame. Silence played a huge role, and listeners' ears were equally drawn to the white of the canvas as they were to those strange, glutinous swathes of sonic paint.

The promotional cassette of *Laughing Stock* came with an hour of Hollis talking about the record. For almost a decade, interviews had consisted largely of Hollis defending the band's 'new' direction rather than describing the wonderful places it had led. Finally he could set his own conversational agenda without an external voice to steer him off-track. It made for a fantastic listen. Hollis sounded positively animated, covering topics that no journalist had the insight to address. "With this one, there's been a very conscious effort to get away from conventional songwriting," he explained. "If you take the first track up there, 'Myrrhman'; there is no part of that track that will ever repeat itself". Subtly, Hollis alluded to the conceptual nature of Talk Talk's latter music. No part *will* repeat itself. The track was one possible manifestation of a compositional premise, free to be re-recorded with entirely different results, unbound by the immortalising powers of the musical stave.

Again, Hollis spoke at length about the role of improvisation. On both *Spirit of Eden* and *Laughing Stock*, the energy of the music was generated through the friction between two contradictory perceptions of time and space. On one level was improvisation, which captured a musician in a sincere, circumstantial dialogue with real space and real time (fortified by Hollis' insistence of using actual room acoustics over post-applied reverb). Next, there was the studio as a device for displacement and collage; a



tool for re-arranging time and space to create new compositional shapes, cutting up recordings and replanting them elsewhere. The honesty of the real-time document collided with the retrospective time-space tampering of the studio. The starkest example of post-production editing was the end of “Ascension Day”, whose jangling, clattering climax was shut down abruptly by Hollis simply cutting the magnetic tape in half. There was no fade-out to carry the track gently to its conclusion. When you listen to *Laughing Stock*, you’re not placed under the illusion that you’re in the room with a band performing in real-time. You’re hearing a sculptural work, chiselled away through the application of retrospect.

The two best tracks on *Laughing Stock* were the longest of the six, reaching almost 10 minutes apiece. Lee Harris’ drums on “After The Flood” sounded like smooth pebbles skimming over a lake. Hollis introduced a beautiful feedback solo about halfway through, which howled and babbled as the melody persisted indifferently. Even such a harsh, invasive sound couldn’t hinder the music’s formidable momentum. Meanwhile, everything on “New Grass” cascaded like rainwater: the ride cymbal tick, the delicate snare drum patter, the guitar and piano alternating with each other.

Harris was the anchor for both pieces. During the hour-long *Laughing Stock* interview, Hollis talked about how Can’s 1971 album *Tago Mago* was a key influence on how the drummer situated himself on the recordings. “He just locks in and plays regardless of anything that happens around him. He never stops. He has to be faded out; he’s just his own entity. But also, that’s what so true of this album for me, as opposed to any other; that the people that

are playing within these tracks all have a different idea of what the on-beat is, what the off-beat is, what signature they're playing in ... they all work within their own little field, and at points they meet up with each other. That is maybe the most important thing about this album for me; that everyone is in their own little time zone." It was a reversal of the energy flow that usually governs how songs are written. Instead of erecting a central melody and having the instruments arrange themselves around it, the songs of *Laughing Stock* were the product of organic accident. They were the points of intersection between musicians acting of their own free will. There was no compromise on the part of the players, and no requirement to bend in accordance to an omnipotent melodic force.

That's the theory anyway. In actuality, Hollis' voice always remained at the centre. Just as earlier records offered prophetic glimmers of Talk Talk's future, his vocal was a persistent echo of the band's New Romantic history, clinging to the singer / song dynamic even as the turbulence of improvisation tried to separate them. His voice was never conventionally strong, and *Laughing Stock* saw him to use this fragility as a textural detail. What was once an imperfection could be recast as a constructive nuance. Hollis strained to reach notes on the periphery of his natural range, faltering into a music that demanded more than his body could give, collapsing into lyrical inaudibility as the sheer emotional weight of the words prohibited their very articulation.

In a section of the *Laughing Stock* tape that discussed the significance of musical honesty, Hollis talked about how Bob Dylan's *New Morning* was a crucial reference point for achieving his

vocal sound. The concept of honesty in music always sits strangely (after all, what's particularly 'honest' about the act of singing? Isn't theatre inherent to this essentially unnatural behaviour?), but the mercurial grace with which Dylan tumbled into his own lyricism is as close as anyone is likely to get. To call it effortless implies a lack of emotional investment – complacency, even – but *New Morning* sounded like a singer letting his body be subsumed by the rise and fall of the music. You hear the same in Talk Talk's last two studio works; Hollis' voice was engulfed by the momentum of the music, rolling across a landscape that undulated through upward arcs and sheer drops in volume.

A couple of other artists come to mind for their preservation of actual song – fronted by a central, melodic vocal presence – even as the music surrounding them melted into stranger shapes. Scott Walker embarked on a similar developmental arc to Hollis and Talk Talk upon his departure from The Walker Brothers, gradually shedding his orchestral pop framework to leave a voice stranded amidst an increasingly strange, harmonically ambiguous landscape. Nowadays Walker's compositions unfold like nightmares, employing abrupt transitions and sudden blasts of the bizarre: string quartets sliding upward, donkeys braying directly into the ears. Similarly, David Sylvian of Japan (a New Romantic compatriot of Talk Talk) has since taken to stranding his own voice in pure improvisation, collecting melodies from within the interchange of guitar, cello, sine wave and feedback like a walker arranging beach pebbles to spell their name.

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Hollis' next album would be as a solo artist, and both an expansion on his interest in silence and a reduction in Talk Talk's musical breadth. It also seemed like a logical progression in his pursuit of 'honesty' within sound. Instead of creating a fictitious patchwork of re-arranged improvisatory excerpts, Hollis' eponymous album was recorded using two microphones at the front of the room. "The reason I like the idea of that is you've got the whole geography of sound within which all the instruments exist, but if you listen hard enough, you can actually hear where my head's moving in position as I'm singing," Hollis told *The Wire* in 1998. "Because it does exist in a real room space."

All of the instruments were acoustic. Sound originated from the plucking of fingers or the expulsion of woodwind breaths. Any disruption of the silence was precise and almost courteous. Absence was as prominent as sound itself, shedding light on every moist clack of Hollis' opening mouth and the creaks of old wooden chairs as the players adjusted themselves. Even after consecutive listens, the record carried the vivid illusion of always manifesting in the present tense – a stark contrast to *Laughing Stock's* overlain retrospect.

Hollis' adoration for certain classical composers and jazz musicians was abundantly on show. There was a nod to Morton Feldman's handling of sound as a brittle glass object, tilted and turned with a patience usually reserved for meditation and other spiritual practices. Much like the music of Feldman, Hollis' chord choices would have felt crooked and dissonant were they not played with such declarative confidence. And then there was Hollis' adoration

for the collaborative records of jazz trumpeter Miles Davis and arranger Gil Evans – most notably, *Porgy and Bess* and *Sketches of Spain* – whose combination of fluid execution and structural assertion also ran through the heart of Hollis' work.

But while Hollis was furthering Talk Talk's fixation on musical honesty, the other members of the group were continuing to explore improvisation and collage. Lee Harris and Paul Webb adopted the pseudonym .O.rang after the breakup of Talk Talk, working out of a self-built studio in Tottenham called The Slug. Martin 'Cally' Callomon was one of many collaborative participants in the group. When I ask about his role in the band, he replies that he was probably "in there screaming and shouting and rolling on the floor, playing bits of percussion along with everybody else". .O.rang wasn't about the strict assignment of roles and responsibilities; behaviour was instead driven by what felt most appropriate for the given moment. "It's very hard to work out who's doing what, which is lovely," Callomon says. "When you have Mark singing, you know it's Mark singing. It's his voice. .O.rang didn't have so much of a focal point."

The group's 1994 debut, *Herd of Instinct*, wore this flux of identity proudly. Sounds constantly veered in and out of the frame: feedback, synthesisers, wisps of disembodied vocal (in part provided by Portishead's Beth Gibbons), guitar ... only the bass / drum vertebrae granted the pieces some sort of continuity and coherence, with Lee Harris continuing upon that same Can-influenced percussive drive that ran through the longer cuts on *Laughing Stock*. Yet unlike

those last two Talk Talk records, in which Hollis existed immune to the time-space dispersal that beset the woodwind and organs that swirled around him, *everything* in .O.rang was cast into the air. I put it to Cally that the instruments of .O.rang appeared to be suspended in space, devoid of the fixed roles that may characterise a piece of rock music (drums and vocals in the centre, guitars to the left and right). “Well that’s very true,” he says. “On-U Sound records were big with us – African Head Charge particularly. .O.rang was a direct descendent of the On-U Sound label, which was sort of dismissed as Adrian Sherwood’s British reggae folly.”

There were obvious parallels between .O.rang and African Head Charge. Both had a strong rhythmic underpinning (mid-tempo drum grooves, tip-toeing dub reggae bass) which was then dusted with a mixture of chanted refrains, synthesisers and slurred triplet delays. In the aftermath of track fade-outs, one can imagine the pieces unravelling into hour-long jams, oblivious to the durational constraints of pop music. The bass felt more like a subsonic sensation than a musical device, abandoning all concerns for melodic anchorage in favour of rattling the sound receptors of the digestive tract. Physicality and transcendence co-existed effortlessly. Listeners’ heads floated upward into a psychedelia of repetition and tape delay, while their stomachs shook with the visceral sub-harmonic rumble.

Without a doubt, the highlight of *Herd of Instinct* was “Little Brother”. Harris’ cymbals were arranged into a strange, gong-like cascade, while voices and pipes congregated around him in an

Amazonian dawn chorus. The layering was thick enough to blot out the upper frequencies, yet the jam never felt stifling. There was somehow room for seductive violin motifs to slink to the fore, and further room still for a dastardly, distorted harmonica solo around the halfway mark. Ten minutes felt astonishingly brief.

I state to Cally that .O.rang was a means of Lee Harris and Paul Webb taking back control of the music creation process, given that they were both sidelined in the latter days of Talk Talk. “It’s funny you should use the word ‘control’, as the hallmark of .O.rang was the *loss* of control,” Cally corrects. “Lee in particular was incredibly accepting and took great risks, saying ‘so-and-so is going to play this and we’re going to like whatever they do’. His choice of people on *Herd of Instinct* and the roles they played was unlike the controlling atmosphere of Tim and Mark. .O.rang was a much freer, all-inclusive setup. I came to understand that the Talk Talk setup – which I thought was a group of people making incredibly emotional music in great harmony – was completely the opposite. It was a battlefield of fractured ideas and relationships, and anything other than calm and pleasant.”

I inquire into the role of collage within .O.rang, and my question intends to reference *sonic* collage: the process of chopping up recordings and pasting them elsewhere, utilising the rewiring of space and chronology as an artistic tool. “The walls of The Slug were covered in collage,” he asserts, guiding my question toward the importance of the visual element within .O.rang. “People were encouraged, visually, to cut stuff out and place stuff together. Lee, in



his customary fashion, painted the whole place and then started to just cut anything out he could find and start assembling it onto the walls. I started to do something similar with slide projections while people were playing. I used lots of different images and started to multiply projections on the walls. There wasn't any sort of, 'look at this and respond to it', but that was definitely what was going on."

Cally talks about the masks of .O.rang. They were grotesque compounds of natural and artificial material, created and worn by several members of the band throughout the conception of *Herd of Instinct*. This alleviation of identity (and thus any inhibitions tied to it) was a very direct response to the relentless self-reflection of Talk Talk, allowing for a creative expression that wasn't tethered to the leaden weight of ego – transcending the self without the aid of hallucinogenic drugs. He's keen to point that out, too – no drugs were used in the making of .O.rang's music, and according to Cally, the presence of amphetamines would probably have "straightened out" their mercurial creative approach.

Given the democratic dispersal of creative roles, the subsuming of personal identity, the influence of dub and their meticulous arrangement of space, .O.rang probably had *more* to do with the imminent incarnation of post-rock than Talk Talk did. Yet their name is seldom mentioned in any post-rock discussion. Perhaps the music was too free-flowing and all-encompassing. Rock was just one tiny piece of their gigantic, pan-genre mosaic. In fact, the proliferation of post-rock would begin with one of .O.rang's most beloved collaborators. Graham Sutton featured prominently



throughout .O.rang's existence as a guitar player, programmer and guest remixer. His band, Bark Psychosis, landed somewhere between .O.rang's affection for dub and Talk Talk's alternation of morbid absence and vivacious presence, while pulling in the influences of experimental pop (AR Kane, Cocteau Twins) and the harsher edges of post-punk (Sonic Youth).

While Talk Talk were unknowingly heralding the arrival of post-rock in the UK, there was a band going through a similar process in the United States. The points of origin couldn't have been more disparate. Where Talk Talk drifted out of the New Romantic movement, Slint's history was rooted in punk and hardcore. Yet the *method* of transformation was ultimately very similar: unscrewing the framework of conventional music structures to introduce space and moderation into the frame. While Talk Talk had their feet dangling over one side of the post-rock chasm, Slint were poised on the precipice of the other.