



# William Orbit Interviews

**William Orbit "Strange Alchemy" - Mondo 2000, June 1996**

**Article by Mark Katzman**

**Photographs by Steve Double**

Delicate ambient bleeps, whizzings and thrashings adorn his silky space-grooves. For music so pellucid, its creator remains calculatedly opaque. He may indeed be one of England's best-kept secrets. Until now, that is.

## **SOUND & OPPOSITION**

Call the music of **William Orbit** what you will: techno-experimental-ambient-groove-dance-instrumental, or quite simply transmissions from the far, far beyond- the fact is,

**Orbit's** music remains deeply enigmatic

Here he is known primarily for his remixes of the likes of **Peter Gabriel**, **Prince** and **Madonna**. His own substantial body of work, recorded under several guises, is largely unknown outside of Europe.

The esoteric enneagram symbol is the logo for his U.K.-based **N-Gram** label. Whirling around this cryptic image are notions of inner octaves, inner shocks, along with the knowledge that the transmission of sound is attuned to planetary influences, all ideas of G.I. Gurdjieff.

**Orbit** has landed in America in a big way, with three **N-Gram** albums released early this year by Discovery Records in Santa Monica: **Torch Song's Toward The Unknown Region**, **Strange Cargo- Hinterland**, and **Spirit**, by cellist/singer/songwriter **Caroline Lavelle**, which he produced. **Orbit** can kiss his import status good-bye.

His work with **Torch Song** (which also includes **Laurie Mayer** and **Rico Conning**) goes back to the early 80's with their dance hit, **Prepare To Energize**. This period was the beginning of Orbit's Guerilla Studios and **N-Gram** label. **Toward The Unknown Region** is their fourth album: a masterpiece of lushness and hypnotic mystery.

The **Strange Cargo** series is **Orbit's** solo vehicle. **Hinterland** is the fourth record in an astonishing series of musical experiments. Various tracks from the series were used as part of the soundtrack for the Pacino/DeNiro film **Heat**.

**Caroline Lavell's** debut album, **Spirit**, is a musical idyll of Celtic ambience, **Lavelle's** breathtaking voice, and cello, all bearing **Orbit's** unmistakable studio wizardry.

"My life is sound," **Orbit** told me, which says it all.

**MONDO 2000:** How's the new record coming along?

**William Orbit:** *Radical departure, actually. Something new. I'm surprised by what's coming out of the speakers these days.*

**M2:** Are you starting to incorporate live musicians to mix things up a bit?

**Orbit:** *It's pretty live. Right now, if you'd caught an earful of what's going on, it was a smooth moment in the track we're cutting. But in fact, the whole album is really wild, really wild. I'd love to tell you something about the singer I'm working with. I guarantee you, you've never seen anything like this person. Seriously. You'll be wanting to beat a path to her door. She's got a couple of tricks up her sleeve that are completely unique. I'm telling you, you have not seen anybody doing this.*

**M2:** This is torture. What's her name?

**Orbit:** *[laughs] Absolutely not. You won't have heard of her. You might have heard of her in the festival scene in the U.K., part of the hard-core, Spiral Tribe people that get out there at Stonehenge. But, I'll tell you something. I can now sit back and not have to worry. There's nothing more I can say. I seem so boring in comparison with her that I can relax while the limelight shifts to her and be where I want to be, in my little hole. [laughs]*

**M2:** I've been listening to **Spirit**, the album you produced for **Caroline Lavelle**. Was that an entirely



different challenge?

**Orbit:** *It was. Though the challenges sometimes are really mundane. Some of the biggest challenges have to do with crafting and technical things, which seem to get in the way of the ideas. The ideas may take five minutes. Framing them takes hours. That's where the challenges lie. And they don't need to be told. They're not important. What's important is the sound. I wouldn't want to do the same album again. Technically, what I'm doing now is so diametrically opposed to that, it's almost as if I'd got as far away as possible as a matter of design. Once I've finished an album I really don't think about it anymore. Well, maybe three years go by and I do. All musicians say it, individual actors say it, writers say it, everybody says it: I'm doing my best thing now. But I am doing my best thing now.*

**M2:** Is the new one part of your **Strange Cargo** series?

**Orbit:** *Don't know what I'm going to call it. I'm on to something more...I've had more fun making this album than I've ever had. It's a very quick experience. I haven't spent long on it. And I think it's also got a commercial edge to it, by luck and chance.*

**M2:** Are you working in a more "low-tech" format this time out?

**Orbit:** *I'm reveling in low-tech. There's no equalization, no effects, no echo, no reverberation. I'm not spending time going off with the devices. I'm playing the guitar. A lot of valves. I'm plugging into a Marshall, maybe linking to a second Marshall, then into a Fender. Lots of speakers. Everything starts to distort, starts to glow and incandesce. It's all in the intensity of the playing. I'm marveling at what's happening. And I'm working with some fantastic musicians as well, but I'm not going to talk about them until the thing is more down the line.*



### **VEGETABLES FIRST**

**M2:** Do you have any new California health-food tips from your recent stay?

**Orbit:** *I'm always on the look-out. I spent a lot of time at Mrs. Gooch's, my favorite store. Love it, love it. I don't have any shares in it, but I ought to. [laughs] I will give you a tip, while we're at it, as it's worked for me. This thing about not mixing protein of all kinds with starches I used to think was a rather fanciful idea, but actually I've tried it since last June, and it's made a radical difference. I have a lot more energy. The month I first started doing it my vision improved to such an extent, I was amazed. I was seeing things with greater clarity and intensity.*

**M2:** What about blue-green algae?

**Orbit:** *It may be important, but first things first, especially fresh vegetables. Get those right first, and then have a look*

*at more advanced things.*

### **FRYING MOLECULES OF SOUND**

**M2:** How was your experience hosting your **Radio Odyssey** at **KCRW** in Los Angeles? Could you mix anything you wanted?

**Orbit:** *Anything, anything. It was electric. One of the best things I ever did.*

**M2:** Did you put the Beach Boys through a fuzz box?

**Orbit:** [laughs] *How did you know that?*

**M2:** [laughs] I have my sources.

**Orbit:** *I did actually put a lot of things through a fuzz box. I put a lot of things through a lot of things. A whole matrix of stuff whizzing around. Until the whole thing was just molecules of sound just frying in there. Really exciting. I'm not sure whether people got the show. It was me experimenting. And Chris Douridas, who manages the station, kindly indulged me for half an hour a week, late at night. I gave much thought to the listeners, I have to say it. It was a wonderful experience because I made up a lot of it as I went along in the studio, with no thought of copyrights or protocol.*

**M2:** You'll do it again, certainly.

**Orbit:** *Without a doubt. I'll finish this album off, then I'll get straight back and do some radio, I think.*

**M2:** You didn't put on any live shows in Los Angeles as initially promoted.

**Orbit:** *No. Got near to it.*

**M2:** Will you still give the live thing a go in the States?

**Orbit:** *I'd love it. Somebody needs to just come up with the right venue, the right fee, so I can pay for the show, and I'll be there.*

### **FROZEN**

**M2:** The title of **Torch Song's Toward The Unknown Region** comes from a poem from that great American spirit/bard Walt Whitman. He says there aren't any maps nor guides there, "all waits undream'd." Exploring the unknown





isn't an easy thing, is it?

**Orbit:** *It's the hardest route to travel. There are no footsteps, and you don't necessarily have any bearings. And you can flounder on this route.*

**M2:** What are the first sounds that you remember?

**Orbit:** *My life is sound yet I don't have many sound memories. It's so dysphasic at the moment. It tends to get that way when one gets really tired and stressed but exhilarated at the same time. It's funny, I don't trip anymore, but that mixing and slight confusion, not necessarily a full confusion, but I do know that I'm not hearing and seeing a smell. I know I'm not. But nevertheless, there's this kind of a thing that maybe I am. It's a déjà vu. And I get this kind of dysphasic, mixing up things a lot, especially when it goes out past the light of reality into memory.*

**M2:** Will you ever be able to put out a record of what you call your "ugly and violent" sounds?

**Orbit:** *I'm going to remember what you just said. I'm going to freeze that question because that's what's coming up now. I have a problem of dealing with the anger in my life. It tends not to appear in the records. I often cop out at the last minute, actually. And I do see a lot of angry music, a lot of angry artists, and I've never been able to express it in the records. I find that I take it out at the last minute. And the radio show was a really good thing because there was not time for any kind of changing stuff. It comes out. There's no time to shampoo it. It's there.*

**M2:** Your guitar track on "**Gringatcho Demento**" is totally kick-ass.

**Orbit:** [laughs] *I've been playing a lot of guitar live lately.*

**M2:** Isn't that a great way to get it out, as they say?

**Orbit:** *Are you sure you haven't been down in Crouch End listening in through the walls?*  
[laughs]

### **WOE TO CATEGORIES- ALL IS ONE**

**M2:** I've seen you shelved in rock, new age, soul, dance, adult contemporary. And, to my great chagrin, your name is sometimes lumped together in the States with that easiest-of-listening-duo Yanni and Kenny G. Your many guises are responsible for complete category breakdown.

**Orbit:** *Another storm. No one understands me. They don't know what to do. If I were going to be really cynical about all this, I'd sit down with a marketing person and say "How are we going to market me" and all that shit. However, I do know one thing. One project, one focus, one energy, is the way I'm going this year. And I don't want to dissipate the whole thing in lots of projects. There were too many projects last year and one of them didn't get released.*

**M2:** I assume you're referring to **Pieces in a Modern Style**. Will it ever be released?

**Orbit:** *I think by the time that the publishers get around to okaying it, somebody else will have had the same idea.*

**M2:** It's frustrating, knowing that it exists and I can't get my hands on it.

**Orbit:** *It's a pretty mellow record. Twentieth century classics, with the **Orbit** interpretation.*

**M2:** That's what I'm so curious about.

**Orbit:** *How can I say this? You just put your finger on it when you spoke about the violent and ugly side. It's like a movie. I want people to have poignant moments along with the moments that are fearsome, frightening, and brutal. And the dynamic of the two is what I'm interested in now. Like if I were making a movie, I wouldn't make it just one mood all the way through- who would? You play games with the audience and the dynamic. But now I'm on to this much more aggressive situation and it's frustrating to talk about things from the last year, as I'm just immersed in this whole new side. I would recommend listening to **Strange Cargo III**. I'm very proud of that record. I wouldn't say that you should go mad to find the **Strange Cargo** film though.*

### **BANGING IN SPACE**

**M2:** Do you ever imagine California as another **Guerilla** recording base?

**Orbit:** *I like California, but London's happening at the moment. There's a certain thing, I can't explain it- there's a really good energy here. And we're part of that. You'll see it in the next album. There's an alternative Brit-pop here. But in a way it's the same energy. I'll make the record here, then I'll hang loose in L.A. I want to produce a band next. I'm going to tour this summer in the U.K. and Europe.*

**M2:** What material might you perform?

**Orbit:** *Well, I'm thinking about open air music. Which tracks work in open air, big space. I've got a very loyal audience in this country and we've done some tremendous gigs. Fucking brilliant, actually.*

**M2:** Were any of the shows recorded?

**Orbit:** *Yeah. One of the last ones, but we were too loud. We burned a hole in that one. There was bad leveling, cracking up. I'll definitely tape some of the shows this summer. They're hard. It's banging, the gigs, not subtle. The subtleties will stay on the CD.*

### **VAST, UNEXPLAINED THINGS**

**M2:** You've adopted the 9-pointed enneagram symbol proposed by the mysterious G.I. Gurdjieff for your **N-Gram** label. He refers to it in Ouspensky's *In Search of the Miraculous* as "the fundamental hieroglyph of a universal language which has as many different meanings as there are levels of men." He also says that the enneagram is "perpetual motion."

**Orbit:** *That's not the only way to interpret it. That's his interpretation, of course. I feel a little differently about it than when I first stumbled across the whole **N-Gram/enneagram** thing. It's like an ornament on a teaching, for me. It's too easy. All these different writings and all of these thoughts that have such beauty and elegance and to put something like an enneagram- I mean, it's a great logo, but I do think that maybe it's a little bit fanciful to say that the nodes and the lines all have a representation. Would that we could just draw a device, a motif, and somehow explain away these vast, unexplainable things. But I just don't feel like it's that simple. Maybe it was presumptuous of me to borrow that as an icon.*

### **THE BIG QUESTION**

**M2:** Here's my big question: Are you still ready to "swear allegiance to the flag," as you once said, and move to the States?

**Orbit:** [long pause] *Yes, I think I would. I would never do anything that didn't allow me to come to England. I spend so little time visiting England and appreciating its country that I would probably enjoy it more as a tourist. I love America. It's a wonderful country. It has its faults and flaws, but I'm fascinated by the country.*

### **BOOKS & EXOTICA**

**M2:** What's your favorite book?

**Orbit:** *The Sailor Who Fell from Grace with the Sea, by Yukio Mishima. Anything by Paul Bowles. I just bought The Glass Bead Game, which I have to find time to read. But Mishima is my favorite writer. I love books.*

**M2:** Any sojourns planned once the record's wrapped up?

**Orbit:** *It'll be time for some exotic traveling. Time to get out and move around. I might go to South America or Kathmandu- I don't know really. My parents, both over seventy, are visiting Tibet. They're telling me about these places and I'm thinking, "Now what the hell am I doing stuck in Crouch End?"*

