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FILTE

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AIR TO THE THRONE

The Smooth Ascent of France's Best Electronic Duo

by: Mark von Pfeiffer photography: Claude Gassian

PEOPLE UNDERESTIMATE THE FRENCH and one day they will pay. In my own, as of yet unfinished magnum opus, "The Great Tome of Baseless American Speculation," Air is France's greatest accomplishment of the last half-century. (Number two is Renault's plucky little two-seater Le Car.) The country has played host to an enormous array of artists and big-brain types over the years. (Although, a peculiarly low percentage of them were of actual French blood.) They have splendid, splendid wine and one of the world's greatest museums in the Louvre. In fact, if one steps back a mile or two, the French are much like the peaceful Eloi in H.G. Wells' *The Time Machine*. Pleasure is the prevailing maxim here, the bright things in life reign supreme—music, the arts, sex, good food, ahoy!

It was with all of this in mind that the celebrated electronic team of Jean-Benoit Dunckel and Nicolas Godin (collectively Air) and I scheduled our inter-

view at Shakespeare & Company, Paris' premier bookstore for the pretentious—with an option to go to the Pigalle district for hookers and hash afterwards. S&C was Hemmingway's mailing address in the '30s—a hob-knob hub for the *A Moveable Feast* crowd. Seventy years ago Fitzgerald, Papa himself, Gertrude Stein, T.S. Eliot, Ezra Pound and Ford Madox Ford sallied around hereabouts, whacked out on absinthe and their own genius. We agree to rendezvous in the section named for the French existentialist Albert Camus, which is thicker than a whale omelet. As we've never met, a secret password is chosen for identification purposes. It's to be an impromptu picnic lunch, peppered with discussion about their forthcoming *Talkie Walkie*. I'm counting on the fellas for the booze; I've brought the food—two swollen bags in one hand with McDonald's, the other Burger King. For if the French are the Eloi, we Americans are the morlocks, and I hate to disappoint.

I'm dead. I usually don't get up until three in the afternoon, but I'm hella hungry. I could eat a raw pig.

JEAN-BENOIT DUNCKEL: In France, you don't eat much in the morning and at lunch you take your complete meal, then you take a nap. We like to take two hours between noon and two.

Exquisite. So would it be permissible for me to have a glass of wine or two and then go back to work?

JBD: Absolutely. The doctor will say it is good for your health.

You grew up near Louis XVI's palace in Versailles?

JBD: It's a very strange city because it's very traditional. It has a great academic ambience to it. So when you're young, in college, there is tremendous pressure.

NICOLAS GODIN: To ride your bike around the castle grounds as a kid, and to do your homework in

the garden was magical. The garden at Versailles is one of the most beautiful places in the world.

In France, college comes before university. Did you do both or get straight into music full time?

JBD: I studied nuclear physics and mathematics at Orsay University, but was always doing something with music—some recording, playing in bars in Paris.

So you grew up together. What was your first band called, and what were you listening to?

JBD: The band was Orange. I was doing the classic



music. Playing the piano. I still play the piano, because I need to feed from it, otherwise I lose the harmony feeling. Ravel, Chopin, Beethoven.

Intriguing. You're probably in your early 30s?
JBD: I am 34.

At 34, if you could be any animal what would you be?
JBD: I would be a bird.

What kind? Predatory?
JBD: No, a sea bird. How do you call it? With a big beak?

A gull. Or, a pelican.
NG: I would be an eagle...so I could fly.

And eat pelicans. There is a track on *Talkie Walkie* that was used for the Sofia Coppola movie *Lost in Translation*, and of course you scored her first film, *The Virgin Suicides*. How is she to work with? What's your process there?

JBD: Here she described the scene to us, as the film wasn't finished. We had a piece that had been used for the ballet *Nerr des Experience* that we knew would work. It's about going out of your body—a scene where a human being travels from the spirit...when you have an orgasm, where you're crazy, when you're scared or making love.

WITH OUR MUSIC WE CAN CURE THE AUDIENCE AND OURSELVES

If, when you die, you're sent to Hell and doomed to play a concert that loops into infinity with no audience, and you had to open, who would you choose to headline?

JBD: Led Zeppelin. Because I like Jimmy Page a lot.
NG: I would refuse to open.

Do you believe in astrology?

JBD: Ah, yes. Now is an era where technology is supremely important and because of that we don't believe in God or astrology or magic, but for 10,000 years all the kings and emperors had their own astrologists. It was extensive. Why should we believe in science, which is brand new, and not in astrology which is much older?

The U.S. and France are having some differences of opinion about the Middle East. Has your American audience become prejudiced against you?

JBD: No. People are cleverer than that. The French people are not responsible for Chirac, and Americans are not responsible for "The Bush."

Are you married, or are you swinging bachelors?
JBD: We are not married.

If you were to get married and could have any number of wives, how many would you snap up?
NG: I would have a new one each year.

Who's the most attractive woman in the world?
NG: Lauren Bacall.

What are your roles in the band?
JBD: I prepare the coffee.

[Gesturing to Nicolas] He's the "man" then?
JBD: I do the washing up and answer the phone. No, we both do equal parts. It is like a bicycle with two steering wheels. That's why we are always going fast. With one person you are tired half the time. I'm more into the piano and Nicolas is the guitar and bass.

Do you get a lot of requests these days to do



AIR
Talkie Walkie
Astralwerks

92%

The Dixie duo of digital down-tempo is back in action. I have two points of clarification here: First, when I say "Dixie duo," I mean Batman and Robin. If anyone besides Vangelis or Tangerine Dream is to be credited with the genesis of this genre it is Air. Certainly they modernized it. Second, this is their best work since their soundtrack for *The Virgin Suicides*. If anyone has a problem with my postulates, I will fight you bare-breasted and drunk on mead, holding a baby in one arm in the traditional Scottish Highland manner. Air is a certified original. Bands like Lemon Jelly, Alpinestars and Zero 7 have attempted to emulate them with varying degrees of success, but it's a real ball-gonger to lis-

ten to a group that is not at all derivative of modern pop or rock. Any inspiration here is strictly classical. *Talkie Walkie* is a Korg and Moog-lovers fantasy, and although the entire LP is meditative, the beats-per-minute are ratcheted up enough on "Surfin' on a Rocket" and "Alpha Beta Gaga," (the synthesized sitar and banjo on the latter are bitchin') to leave you feeling enthusiastically subdued—dosed heavily on valium, but embalmed in espresso. It is ideal music for a space walk, and later tonight I will dictate a threatening letter to my beautiful secretary, demanding that NASA require all astronauts to comply. It would put men on Mars a hell of a lot faster. Astralwerks is indeed blessed. Let us pray.

SOME PEOPLE COME TO US AND SAY, I WANT TO ESCAPE WITH YOU, I WANT TO SLEEP IN THE BUS.

remixes?

NG: Yes, but we don't do them much anymore. The last one we did was for Bowie, because we are fans.

It pays pretty well?

NG: No, we get paid poorly. Essentially all we keep is the vocals, it's an entirely new song, but it's called a remix and you get no royalties. All the credit goes to the original artist.

What's the most bizarre thing that's happened to you on tour?

JBD: Some people come to us and they have their bags and say, "OK, I want to escape with you, I want to sleep in the bus. I want to leave my parents and I will do anything for you."

NG: I was in Hollywood and we did a show at the Mayan. At four am, I went back to my room at the Roosevelt Hotel. In the room next door they were playing our first album, *Premiers Symptomes*. Later the guy fell asleep and began to snore very loudly. I called the front desk and complained. It turned out that the room was vacant.

Was there one specific moment you had when the gong sounded in your head and you knew you could get away with making music—artistically, monetarily?

JBD: There was a moment in Greece; we were playing a night concert in front of the Acropolis. There were beautiful lights in the sky, the music and the audience were amazing. We were like people standing on top of the world.

NG: We had the wind in our hair and there was a lot of power in the mountains and a plane was flying overhead. He looked at me and said, "I'll always remember this."

What's the biggest compliment you've gotten?

JBD: "Your music is soul music." People understand that Air is not trendy music, not for style. It's something to share. With our music we can cure the audience and ourselves. Ours is not pop music. We are searching for something else. We are searching to caress...something to cure you and make you dream and make you travel. **F**