



Photo: Bart Peitman 2008

Band. Man. Concept. Theorist. Modernist. Sole creator of this year's best album according to the Vibrations panel. All of these things apply to Plastic Fuzz. Rob Paul Chapman meets the human enigma with the 100 song album.

Plastic Fuzz has been responsible for more quality music over the last 12 months than any other artist in the area, probably the country, and possibly the world.

This is an objective statement, and in the highly subjective world of music criticism, objective statements are hard to come by. The reason that we're able to draw this absolutist conclusion is because Plastic Fuzz has produced an album of 100 quality songs (independently verified), ergo, unless anyone else has produced more quality songs over a year, then objectively Plastic Fuzz has produced more quality music in the last 12 months than anyone else.

However, Vibrations did not get involved in music journalism to be objective. Vibrations exists to exude wildly over-excited hyperbole at the first sniff of something it believes to be special. So let the squarely subjective begin:

And we offer you, as a kick-off, that Dots by Plastic Fuzz is the best album produced by a Leeds artist in the last year. Whilst by no means unanimous to be fair, on points and democratic ordering, Dots came top of our list. It bewitched (the majority) of our panel with its stunning inventiveness, scope, scale, originality and straight-forward craftsmanship.

To get some housekeeping out the way, Plastic Fuzz is not a band. It is a person. A person who wrote, recorded, played and sang every note of Dots in his bedroom on his own, with the exception of a couple of guest spoken-word voices here and there. So, it is not a band of people. To use Mark Shahid's own word, and one that he refers to on a regular basis throughout our hour together, it is "a concept".

Those who stumble across the website to peruse the other band members who are reportedly Shahid's brothers and sisters (despite their suspiciously pale complexion given the surname) should be aware that (the real) Shahid is leading you up the garden path.

"I think people are a bit confused about the concept of Plastic Fuzz, the 6 members and all that" he admits "There are pictures of random people on the website. But if you're stupid enough to put your pictures on Myspace,

you're stupid enough to be in my band!" he chuckles, though you expect only half in jest.

"But it was hard to keep the gimmick up as I'd keep getting asked when the rest of the band were going to turn up and I had to explain that I was just a weirdo who didn't have a band!"

Weirdo might be a bit strong, but Shahid is certainly eccentric, if endearingly so. He is charming and speaks in a clipped accent and prone to occasional nervous laughter. However he is utterly certain about what he is doing and trying to achieve.

"I am project orientated" he reveals. "Plastic Fuzz is a project. I didn't want it to be just Mark Shahid: songwriter. I wanted it to be a project so that I could do other things as well. I'd quite like to do the music to a film, and if I did that would be Mark Shahid, it wouldn't be Plastic Fuzz."

"There are a lot of tangents, especially in a 100 song album. I knew I couldn't just do a load of electronic stuff. I can't do 100 electronic tracks. That would just be boring. So I had to think, OK I can use a drum machine here, but then I have to cut that out."

Vibrations wonders whether some people struggle to get past the fact that the album is 100 songs. Would that perhaps put some people off?

"People have asked why I don't put together a 12-song playlist to send out for review. But that would defeat the whole point! he confirms. "I actually thought it would get more attention because of the 100 track thing than it has, but people don't seem to actually care as much as I thought they would about that."

"I'm glad I did it, because it was a project that I knew I had to finish" he continues. "I couldn't just say 'oh well, I'm 12 songs short...' By 89 it had started to get painful. 11 more songs that I had to write. It got horrible at that point."

"One of the hardest parts was lyric writing" he recalls. "I had a notepad next to my bed and I'd write down whatever came to me in dreams – a psychologist would have a field day!"

He is drawn to abstract story-telling, dropping into specific moments in time of his characters' lives, a device that he claims to have been inspired to use through his love of Ivor Cutler.

"You get images in your head" he explains. "About people's arguments for example, and you just drop in, tell a two minute story, and then fuck off!"

The album is divided into 4 colour-coordinated discs that lean towards different moods, all with exactly 25 songs on each, where the songs arc throughout each disc, purely on the length of the song titles – none of which feature in the lyrics it should be noted – with the short titles at the top and tail of the disc and the long titles in the middle. A strange way to order an album perhaps, and not necessarily one designed to make the record flow.

"I didn't think that people would listen to it chronologically, so it's designed that way" he admits. "The structure of the album is purely down to the length of the song title. I thought this is going to be impossible to order, it can't be like a 12 song album, so I'm going to have to think of a stupid way to structure this thing"

"When I buy an album, I put it into my iTunes and play it on random" he reveals. "I'm sure the artist would kill me if they knew I was doing that, but I've noticed that's what most people seem to do. I never expected people to play it from 1 – 25 and then change disc"

Vibrations expresses surprise at this and states that surely all albums are meant to be listened to in the order that the artist has designed?

"And that's what you're supposed to do" he agrees "but what would you say if you knew 90% of people didn't do that? You'd be heartbroken! I'm not the kind of person that listens to an album 1 – 12, I haven't done that since cassettes! Even then, I used to make cassettes for people, but I used to edit them. I would cut out whole sections of songs I didn't like!"

Vibrations suggests that Shahid should not be allowed near Audacity unattended.

"I know!" he laughs. "I remember doing it with the Beta Band. One of the songs