

The apocalyptic post-Industrial folk of **Current 93** emerges from David Tibet's vision of an adult world bereft of happiness. In its place he has set up an underground Eden for like-minded artists, musicians and writers. Words: David Keenan. Photography: Tim Kent

I'm in Walthamstow, East London, with Current 93's David Tibet. We're talking 'puppet theology'. 'I was obsessed with Noddy,' Tibet states matter of factly. 'I took a load of acid on the top of the house where Rose McDowell [of Strawberry Switchblade] was living and I had a vision of Noddy crucified in the sky and it really impressed me... as you would expect,' he adds, laughing. 'The next day I just went mad for buying Noddy. Before I'd seen him crucified I wasn't any more interested in him than any other kid who's read Noddy as a child. I was taking such a huge amount of speed at the time that I had a massive amount of energy so I just started hovering around and would come back with bin-liners full of anything with Noddy on. Rugs, mugs, judo, didn't matter, bought it all, to the extent that I started wandering round London wearing a red Noddy hat with a bell on the end. Which was possibly not a good move to make in terms of fashion... I was very keen on Noddy.'

This is not what I expected. I'd arrived in Walthamstow this evening with a half-scrawled image in my head of Tibet as some austere and black-draped prophet of apocalypse, an image I'd built up through rabid consumption of Current 93's large back catalogue of 'nursery rhymes and eschatological imagery'. To discover that the creator of the terror-howl depths of such seminal documents as 1984's *Nature Unveiled* and *Dogs Blood Rising* is in fact as funny, amiable and charismatic as his long-term musical sparring partner and closest friend Steven Stapleton (of Nurse With Wound) shouldn't really come as a surprise.

Like Stapleton, Tibet is wary of publicity, worries about being misquoted or misunderstood, or about coming across as "too didactic". He's also fed up with London and contemplating disappearance. When I meet him he's just returned from a three week trip to the States — where Current 93 enjoy a huge and fanatical following — which he undertook to call on Tiny Tim's widow. One of the 20th century's last true troubadours, Tiny Tim was a walking encyclopaedia of popular song, from vaudeville through Broadway to Tin Pan Alley. Having released three Tiny Tim albums on his Durtro label, Tibet remains obsessed with the singer. In fact he seems constantly drawn towards misfits, outsiders and artists who pursue a unique and uncompromising vision, often at the cost of recognition and fame. As such he's quick to evangelise about Tiny. 'I miss Tiny so much,' he mourns. 'One of the most moving and profound people I've ever met. I loved him so much and I was devastated when he died. I was the last person to speak to him on the phone. He said to me, "you must weather the storm, Tibet". To me he was the greatest genius of popular song ever. It's tragic that people still perceive him as some kind of one-hit comedy turn.'

We're sitting in Tibet's study, on the first floor of an old foliage-draped semi, surrounded by his favourite paintings: Louis Wain's joyous cat sketches take up the whole of one wall, while Charles Sims's beautifully eerie ghost-like pieces hang by the window, next to a pair of Tiny Tim's shoes. Books on Christian theology, ghost stories by Vincent O'Sullivan, *Studies Of Death* by SE Stenbock — the homosexual drug addict, alcoholic late 19th century poet/writer of eerily hallucinogenic works whose posthumous work Tibet publishes through his Durtro book imprint — battle for shelf space amid religious icons, Steven Stapleton artwork and CD overflow. Two

huge, flickering candles illuminate the room as we discuss *Swastikas For Noddy*, the landmark 1986 Current 93 album that saw Tibet shed the last lingering associations with his Industrial past and marked his headlong plunge into "apocalyptic folk and menstrual minstrels". In other words, he forsook the back-masked, looped noserapscapes of his early work for more directly communicative acoustic music.

"For me," Tibet continues, "Noddy was the total epitome of innocent childhood. What would be the most unsuitable thing you could give to Noddy for a present? I felt probably swastikas. It then became *Swastikas For Noddy* on some releases because I started thinking that Noddy was — er, I was taking a lot of speed at the time — that Noddy was in fact a Gnostic icon. This was round about the same time I became interested in Punch and Judy and was seriously thinking that it might be worth... I mean, I probably wasn't well at the time mentally, but I thought it might be good to start worshipping Punch and Judy. I don't know why. Having decided that Noddy is a Gnostic deity, then it's really a small step to thinking that I might as well worship Punch and Judy. Having been obsessed by Christ for so long, and since Noddy had appeared in the sky crucified, and since Christ was God, therefore Noddy was also God, so I had a Goddy. My mind started going into other ramifications — whole puppet theology."

CHILDHOOD'S END

David Tibet was born in a converted stable ("Couldn't have been any other way," he suggests playfully) in the north of Malaysia in 1960, a place called Batu Gajah (meaning 'Stone Elephant') near Ipoh. 'I was in Malaysia for about 14 years,' he recalls. 'I loved it. My childhood in Malaysia was practically perfect and I really miss it a lot. I dream about it a

lot, it echoes in my soul always. It reverberates, and as you get older and you lie in bed and you think, the rain sounds like it's the monsoon coming. I was always interested in religion so I used to spend a lot of time in the temples, Buddhist temples, Taoist temples, Hindu temples, I remember all of it.'

His parents finally moved back to the UK in 1973 just in time for Tibet to develop a glam rock habit. 'I bought *Raw Power* by Iggy And The Stooges when it came out,' he explains. 'When I was in Malaysia I liked T Rex and Alice Cooper and then I got to like David Bowie because, like them, he wore make-up, and then I bought [Lou Reed's] *Transformer*. The New York Dolls were wearing a lot of make-up so I bought them. I used to quote like *The Sweet* as well, "Blockbuster" and "Hellraiser". Chicory Tip were hopeless, though.'

He continues: 'When I went to university in 1978 to Newcastle-Upon-Tyne I liked The Sex Pistols, bought "Anarchy In The UK", and a few years before that I'd started liking Amon Düül 2, mainly because of "Archangel's Thunderbird".'

Tibet gradually gravitated towards the then nascent Industrial scene — specifically groups like Throbbing Gristle, Whitehouse and Nurse With Wound. Such groups transformed their sense of alienation into powerful interrogations of systems of control, be they aesthetic, cultural or political. Their questioning led them down some decidedly bizarre roads, and one of the most useful side products of Industrial culture is the vast archives of esoteric and arcane knowledge its participants amassed over the years. For the young Tibet a large part of their appeal was their decidedly anti-rock 'n' roll stance. Non-musicians were beginning to create some of the most extreme (sonic and visual) examples of outsider invention, releasing it themselves in

limited edition runs complete with handmade covers. These groups had taken the DIY and democratic art ideals of punk rock and married them to an avant garde sensibility. Not unaturally, given its self-inflicted brief to expose the inner processes of the entertainment industry, Industrial imagery could be excessively bleak or ugly.

Coming to London ostensibly to study Tibetan — "I was always going on about Tibet, so people started calling me it," Tibet recalls — he became a regular at Throbbing Gristle gigs. He gradually got to know Genesis P Orridge, who asked him to join his new group Psychic TV once Throbbing Gristle decided to "terminate their mission". He played on the *Themes I* album that came free with Psychic TV's debut *Force The Hand Of Chance*, the former being a ritualistic workout on massed Tibetan thighbone trumpets. Increasingly active, Tibet also played with the percussion-heavy, proto ethnic-Ambient trance outfit 23 Skidoo. But it didn't take long for things to turn sour in Psychic TV's Temple Of Psychic Youth. "I did a tiny bit of recording on their second album, *Dreams Less Sweet*," explains Tibet, "but I didn't get on with P Orridge any longer so I left the group to concentrate on my own music. We'd already done the first Current record when I was still in PTV with John Balance [founder of Coil] and Fritz Haaman from Skidoo, the "LASHAL" 12."

Released on the LAYLAH label in 1983, "LASHAL" is a prototype of the desolate, haunted soundtracks, the "waking dreams", that would define early Current 93: ritual percussion thundering beneath walls of dark, muttering voices and distant foghorns. One fortuitous meeting, however, would change everything.

At the Equinox event I met Steve Stapleton," Tibet recalls, referring to the 1983 festival of Industrial culture held at the London Musicians' Collective. "I was introduced by Jordi Valls who had a group called Vagina Dentata Organ. When I met Stapleton we just clicked immediately. I think he's the greatest musical genius of this century and when I first met him I suddenly thought this will be my closest friend ever. I don't know why. I asked if he'd work on my first album and we started meeting quite regularly, and he also asked me down to the IPS studio in Shepherds Bush; he had every Friday block-booked, all year. He asked me to come and start recording with him there, which of course I did, and then he asked me if I'd join Nurse With Wound. The first thing I did was *Ostranene 1913* which was a re-working of a side of *Merzbid Schwet* and a side of *To The Quiet Men From A Tiny Girl*. Steven and I got on so well and we did it as *Concert as Dogs Blood Order*, doing "Maldoror Is Dead."

Although by this time Current 93 were already up and running, John Balance's reluctance to leave Psychic TV made it difficult for the group to perform as such. Instead, Tibet performed twice under the name Dogs Blood Order. "Then a friend of mine was working at the Roundhouse studio and got free time there," Tibet continues. "He was an engineer, and he said, 'Do you want to come in and do an album?' We went in and did the A-side of *Nature Unveiled* as Current. Steve came down along with John Fothergill, who was then in Nurse as well."

Nature Unveiled was a landmark release for the British underground, a free-floating assemblage of distant chorales, alien chant and sonic depth charges ascending into a buzzball of static and noise. Inspired by the uncompromising vision of the likes of Stapleton, Tibet created a unique document of all his then current obsessions. His

refusal to reference anything else happening at the time helped define Current 93's future working process. With the help of a floating group of contributors, Tibet set out to create his own hermetic soundworld, which, both musically and in its business practice, operated completely independently of the music industry. In time, he and like-minded individuals like Nurse With Wound and Coil established a worldwide network of fans, who would often be inspired to establish their own musical cells, thereby strengthening and furthering the network's reach.

As Tibet sees it, "Current's music is really, really simple. I'll begin with possibly just one sound that I like. For *Nature Unveiled*'s "Maldoror Is Dead" it was a loop of Aleister Crowley saying, "Om, Om". I had lyrics and I had, most importantly of all, an idea of the atmosphere I wanted. I described it to Steve as being like a hypnotic dream that sped up as we came to the end of it because at that time I was just so obsessed with the apocalypse, I felt things were just telescoping really quickly, it was all just spiralling quickly, quickly, which is what "Maldoror" does. I told Steve this and I played him the loop, told him the lyrics, and I said it has to have the stately slow motion of a dream when it's starting. It's often very slow, people's gestures are like shadow puppets — full of meaning, it seems, but they're not actually doing very much. It's like a shadow thrown by a candle onto the wall, it's distorted, everything is emphasised, exaggerated. By the end it becomes frantic like somebody shuffling or dealing cards. I would say all these sorts of things to Steve and he would do it, he would understand exactly what I wanted."

Stapleton became Current's vital other half and over the course of records like the strange graveyard dream of 1985's *In Menstrual Night*, they took their accidentally evolved working process to the extreme. Then they hit a creative dead end.

"I did an album, *Down*, which I was really ashamed of doing in the sense that it was just so easy to do," Tibet confesses.

"It was in the style of *Nature Unveiled*, a long 20 minute piece made up of loops, various sounds coming in, and some sort of structure. I did it so quickly, I just felt I'd become lazy, it wasn't moving me any more, it was simply-made mechanical weirdness. I felt I was moving away from the most important thing, which was

the centrality of emotion, of trying to get across what I was feeling. It had become too formulaised, I needed to return to what moved me, which was nursery rhymes and folk music. Not folk rock, just really simple unadorned melodies, maybe no choruses, just direct, a minute or two long. So *Swissies For*

Noddy marked my decision to rethink the way that I expressed the emotions that I felt about the things that were moving me."

Tibet's discovery of Shirley Collins's legendary folk recordings for Topic and Harvest, *The Power Of The True Love Knot, Love Death And The Lady* and, in particular, *Anthems In Eden*, was a major factor in his conversion. "Savage Pencil, Edwin Pouncey, once said to me, 'You should really listen to Shirley Collins'. I didn't know who she was but when I heard her I became completely obsessed, and I realised that she was able to express so much with the minimum of arrangements, not even using her own words, using words that had been sung by 100,000 people. Her direct involvement in the incredibly moving melancholy she was creating made me realise



“I started thinking that Noddy was in fact a Gnostic icon. I was taking a lot of speed at the time”

that it was possible to get that effect across without using loops."

Current 93's engineer David Kenny was also the in-house engineer for Topic Records, and was able to supply Tibet with a contact number for Collins. "I called her up and told her I worshipped her, and I'd like to put out an anthology of her recordings, and perhaps do an interview. She had no idea how influential she was." They got on so well that Tibet invited her to record with Current 93. But since she'd retired from singing she had no confidence in her voice. However, Tibet's persistence eroded her resistance and she duly recorded a talking part on the transitional *Thunder Perfect Mind* album, and went on to sing on *The Stars Are Marching Sadiy Home*.

Although superficially a world away from the themes and approaches of Current's previous material, Tibet sees an obvious link between his early music and the subsequent Collins-influenced recordings — specifically his interest in eschatological imagery. "For me, folk music was all about endings and the effect that endings have on our lives. It would be easy to overstate the point and say yes, folk music is the 'working man's apocalypse', or whatever. It's not the case at all, of course, but there was that incredible sense of beautiful melancholy. So moving and so pure, so honest and so human. That's what I really always wanted to express with Current, the importance of our humanity. If we don't have our humanity then we've got nothing, it's all that we have and yet, in that, terrible things happen. And folk expresses that and also a way of coming to terms with that, and seeing beyond it, going on: life continues."

1988's *Earth Covers Earth* took Tibet's new found passion further. The package was completed with a beautiful cover photograph of the entire Current 93 'family' (which at that point included Rose McDowell, and Tony Wakeford, then of Sol Invictus). However it wasn't until *Thunder Perfect Mind* (1991) that Tibet felt his music was finally getting across what he wanted to say.

"With *Thunder Perfect Mind* I started writing about friends of mine, about how I felt about things, and then with *Of Ruine Or Some Blazing Starre* it became a specifically autobiographical record. I think Current became a lot purer for me. It's also because I met Michael Cashmore [who also plays in his own group, Nature And Organisation] who was able, unfailingly, to enunciate musically on the guitar exactly what I wanted to say. So between Steve and him they were both able in their respective areas of expertise to come up with what I was wanting to get across. It all worked seamlessly. Since then I feel the music's become better and better and also, equally important for me, more and more simple. Something I always liked was simplicity and space, and I think Current's work has become more and more aligned to what I wanted it to be at the beginning. When I was younger the music that moved me so much was people like The Ronettes or Peggy March, early liturgical music and so on. I always felt that I wanted to make music that would move others as much as the music that I loved moved me."

That music really began to emerge with last year's genre-defying *Inmost Light* trilogy, *Where The Long Shadows Fall*, *The Stars Are Marching Sadiy Home*, and, in particular, *All The Pretty Little Horses*. With contributions from Shirley Collins and Nick Cave, who had been introduced to Tibet by a mutual friend, Geoffrey Cox-Doree, the latter album represents a devastatingly moving and sometimes surprising synthesis of Tibet's obsessions. Built round the traditional children's song of the same title, the tiny bells and spectral guitars on *Pretty Little Horses* ring out like a testament to childhood lost forever, while Tibet's heartfelt voice speaks from beneath Stapleton's collage of

doctored voices, haunted choral loops and random electronics.

"*All The Pretty Little Horses* is definitely my favourite," says Tibet. "I think I'm so interested in childhood because when I was a child was the last time I was ever happy. As we get older and we become more and more unhappy, and as we see more and more the terrible state of the world and the terrible things it does to us, and that we also do back to it, that childhood becomes more and more perfect. In itself it isn't so, but the experience of... The Japanese have this phrase, 'Mono No Aware', and the Tibetans say, 'khorba'ti'nyesdmigs', which means 'the Sadness of Things', that this life is not as it should be and we know that's the case and so we desperately try and find a time when the world was as we pictured it as a child, full of marvels, mysteries, full of wonder, full of joy and immanence. I think one of the most important things about humans and about humanity, therefore, is that we carry within us a belief in redemption, that we can redeem ourselves somehow, and I think, harking back to the

innocence of childhood, there's one way that we start to do that. For myself, when I think back to a girlfriend that I used to go out with, in 1980 or whatever, now I think about her with incredible longing and love and think how perfect it was. But of course the reality wasn't like that at all, which is why we split up. So we paint the past in a way that appeals to our sense of recovering the paradise that we've lost."

We talk of future plans, of the new Current 93 collaboration with the macabre American novelist Thomas Ligotti, whom Tibet considers to be "the greatest living writer". After stumbling across Ligotti's first short story collection, Tibet became an obsessive fan of the writer's "terrible vision" which combines gruesome HP Lovecraft-like imagery with a Kafkaesque sense of the bizarre. A working relationship grew out of the correspondence they established, resulting in the *In A Foreign Town, In A Foreign Land* project. This release consists of a beautiful cloth-bound book by Ligotti (published by Durtro) and a Current 93

disc that somewhat ironically, given its line-up of Tibet, Stapleton, Christoph Heemann and Shirley Collins, marks a slight return to the earlier space-throb pieces. All tone pulse and treated electronics, Stapleton and Heemann here provide minimal Krautrock-inspired backdrops for Tibet's and Collins's occasional interjections of text. "I think the Ligotti CD is absolutely wonderful," states Tibet unashamedly. "The next album we've started on already. It's very simple, very spacious, more of a follow on from *All The Pretty Little Horses*. Hopefully it'll be out in February/March." Also forthcoming early next year is a book of Tibet's lyrics, and a record with Steven Stapleton and Shirley Collins is promised.

It's getting late and Tibet sees me to the door. Outside, silence reigns in the moonlit street. "What permeates life completely, I believe, is The Inmost Light," Tibet concludes. "The secret glory, this is whatever you want to call it, the presence of Christ in everything. It is there and if we don't find it before we die then we're doomed. We must find it, we must, it's the only thing we're made for, to try and get even just a glimpse of the glory that lies behind everything that's hidden from us. The world seems to be disappointing and full of suffering, because we just can't see what's shining behind it all. And it's the only thing which is important. Although there is that incredible transcendence at the same time — although that is a reason for great joy and a feeling that there is something, there is more than just this — at the same time if we miss the chance to get it, that's it: we don't get second chances." □ *Current 93 releases are distributed by World Serpent*

