

'Stardom? It's a waste

Prefab Sprout's Paddy McAloon on why he prefers his own company. By Graeme Thomson

Pop music loves its troubled geniuses: Brian Wilson, Syd Barrett, Preston from the Ordinary Boys. In light of recent evidence, we may have to add another name to that list. Prefab Sprout's Paddy McAloon has always marched to the beat of his own drum (or, more accurately, twirled to the tinkle of his own triangle), but more than ever these days he resembles a true eccentric. He's certainly got the look down pat. In the days when he was singing smart, sophisticated, rather unfashionable pop songs like *When Love Breaks Down* and *The King of Rock 'N' Roll on Top of the Pops*, McAloon was a whippet-thin dandy. Nowadays he looks like a cross between Charles Darwin and Jerry Garcia, "pottering around" his home town of Consett in the north-east of England, writing scores of songs and letting us hear almost none of them.

Since 1990 there have been just two Prefab Sprout albums – *Andromeda Heights* in 1997 and *The Gunman and Other Tales* in 2001. The band hasn't toured since 2000. Always regarded by McAloon as the "umbrella term I wanted to slap on any work I did," any concrete notion of the group has long since dissolved.

The other members – his brother Martin, co-vocalist Wendy Smith and drummer Neil Conti – may have drifted away to full-time jobs, but McAloon has



not been idle, and nor has he been battling writer's block. Far from it: during his absences he has written and partially recorded a dizzying array of weird, wonderful and as yet unreleased pet projects, from *Beyond the Veil*, a concept album about Michael Jackson, to *Zero Attention Span*, a relatively recent suite of songs turning their pitying gaze on broken

Britain. Sample titles include *Davina* and *Uncool Ringtone*.

This is merely the tip of the iceberg. There are "boxes and boxes of things," admits McAloon in his lilting Geordie accent. "It haunts me. It's not that I'm anally retentive and can't let go, it's that a commitment to make any one of these projects means that I'm looking at at a least a year of my life, and I find that difficult to come to terms with as I get older."

"It's also to do with how much pleasure you can squeeze out of the day, and usually for me that involves writing the new stuff rather than recording an old one."

It is, therefore, entirely apt that the new Prefab Sprout record is 17 years old. Recorded in demo form by McAloon in 1992 as "a very detailed blueprint", *Let's Change the World with Music* was intended to become the follow-up to their 1990 album *Jordan: The Comeback*, until it met with some resistance from his record company, Sony. "We had this meeting and it seemed to me that no-one had really listened very closely to it," says McAloon. There was also a question mark hanging over the subject matter. Spirituality has been a recurring motif in the

songs of this former Catholic seminary boy, and this time he was "interested in rhythmic music with gospel and religious themes, but the God word scares people. I think I came a cropper with that." Nowadays he characterises his own beliefs as "an 'agmystic': a cross between an agnostic and a mystic."

Chastened by Sony's lack of enthusiasm, he abandoned *Let's Change the World with Music* and instead wrote an entire concept album based around one of its tracks, *Earth: The Story So Far*. Before he knew it he had a suitcase full of songs and a year-and-a-half had

elapsed. "They were trying to stop a man from making a 16-track record and I was turning it into a 40-track record," he sighs.

For a while he busied himself with simpler pleasures, writing songs for Jimmy Nail and Cher and composing the theme tune to ITV's *Where The Heart Is*, until towards the end of the 1990s his health began to decline. First he suffered a detached retina, a degenerative congenital disorder that almost caused him to go blind (three operations later his sight is – "touch wood" – just about okay), and then in 2006 he was struck down by "major tinnitus and a blockage" in his right ear.

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