

Northern Rock

TotalMusic attends a winter term at the Preston School Of Industry and gets the low-down from head boy Spiral Stairs on friends old and new, keeping things simple and fear and loathing in the US.

To the uninitiated, the post-Pavement solo project of taciturn US lo-fi musician and songwriter Spiral Stairs (Scott Kannberg to his nearest and dearest) may sound more like a northern middle-management mill training course than a popular music beat combo, but then his previous – and much-missed – outfit always did have something of an Anglo-centric vibe going on. After all, even the band's moniker favoured the UK-centric Pavement over their own native 'sidewalk'; moreover, Scott's love of bands like Echo And The Bunnymen and The Fall is still a source of fond memory: "I first heard them working in a record store. Being around 18-19, my young ears were starved for new music and these bands satisfied that. I think I liked the simplicity of the records. Lots of one- note solos, but still melodic." But let's start, as Julie Andrews tells us, at the very beginning, which is indeed a very fine place to start.

Forming Pavement with Steve Malkmus back in 1989 and renaming himself Spiral Stairs, Kannberg spent the following eleven years and five albums touring around the world before Pavement unceremoniously sunk into the asphalt in the summer of 2000 and he retreated home to concentrate on his label Amazing Grease Records, releasing music by Oranger, Carlos, Sunless Day, Cole Marquis, Aaron Nudelman, and the Moore Brothers. Discovering a four-track of songs originally slated for Pavement's final album *Terror Twilight*, he refocused on creating his own music, prompting him to dig out his trusty Tascam, grab a passing drum machine and get taping.

Even the most cursory of listens to the woefully overlooked results of this intense bout of songwriting, *All This Sounds Gas*, or indeed his latest effort, *Monsoon*, reveals a body of work which is as willfully out of touch with the latest record company sales figures, chart trends or high gloss production values as it's possible to be without actually recording direct to acetate after having been stranded alone on a desert island for the last 20 years (possibly using one of those birds with long pointy beaks that you used to see on *The Flintstones* to record with). The under-produced feel to much of the music actively avoids swamping what are already good ideas with too much studio gloss (much like Badly Drawn Boy's deranged but magnificent debut album). Scott, however, feels it's far more straightforward than that.

"I like the feel of the demo," he insists. "A few songs on *Monsoon* are actually the demos with a few extras thrown in. I can't stand it when a record gets over-produced, it just loses all the feel and emotion. I genuinely feel that a lot of the best ideas are the ones that are your first."

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So does he never worry that the rough and ready nature of the music will see him left off the playlists of many radio stations?

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All This Sounds Gas

Those of you – and you are in good company as the album sold nothing like as many copies as it deserved to – that failed to pick up on *All This Sounds Gas* when it was released in 2001 (a fine collection of resolutely upbeat if seriously under-produced little gems in the lo-fi Velvets meet Smog vein) missed a little gem which sounded unlike anything else around at the time. It was also something of an emotional release for the newly- motivated multi-instrumentalist songwriter.

"Yes, definitely. I had over thirty songs, but most of them were unfinished. I never really wanted to or had the chance to get to work on them before 2000, but when I did, it all flowed out."

Was there any sort of conscious effort on his part to make the album sound unlike his previous outfit?

"No, not really. It was hard not to [sound like Pavement], I guess. I did, however, consciously try to incorporate other sounds and instruments into the songs that I would've never had the chance to do in Pavement, things like horns, and I was given time to experiment with different sounds, which was great."

Having removed his finger from the post-Pavey songwriting dyke, Scott then promptly plugged it up again, taking time to both tour and up sticks, ensuring that ATSG was but a distant memory when follow-up album *Monsoon* finally made an appearance.

"I can't really write while I tour," he admits, "although I actually wrote 'Caught In The Rain' on the road, plus my wife and I moved up to Seattle and it took a while to feel comfortable in the new house. Also, this time around I did everything by myself with the recordings, so it took some time to really get things right."

Bobbing Your Head

Repeat listens to the new PSOL album *Monsoon* actually reveal a great deal of depth and beauty to what, on initial listens at least, sounds like a collection of pretty simple songs. Previously, rather splendidly, referred to as "a hum-under-your-breath and tap-your-toes while bobbing-your-head-incessantly-to-the-music sort of sound," the new album is certainly no great departure on that score musically, although the slide guitar and pedal steel certainly adds a country element to the proceedings. Lyrically, however, Scott admits that this is far more personal and political album than its predecessor.

"With what's been going on in the world, and especially here in the States, I began to realise that the emotion in the songs was beginning to reflect these events," he concedes. "For example, the songs 'Escalation



Breeds Escalation' and 'Line It Up' address the ridiculous war in Iraq and its consequences. The world seems a pretty depressed place to me, especially after 9/11, and I have to admit I was feeling much the same when I wrote material for this album."

Old tourmates Wilco also pop up on alt-country belter 'Get Your Crayons Out', a collaboration that Scott freely admits changed the song's direction.

"Touring with Wilco definitely freed me up a little in my approach to songwriting and playing live. Those guys definitely have fun on the road and having them on 'Get Your Crayons Out' turned it into another song entirely, much less structured. It sounds cool and the mandolin by Scott [McCaughy from the Minus 5] is lovely."

So has any of this radically changed the way he works?

"Not really. It still takes me quite a while to write songs. I've become more confident, though. I recorded this record on ProTools and on a Mac G4. I used a really nice Audio Technica microphone for vocals and guitars, and we only used two mics for the drums – one room and one kick. A lot of the bass, pedal steel and keys were recorded direct. I used a Fender Tele Deluxe for most guitar parts, and I also used a Fender Jazzmaster for some tracks. A Hotcake guitar pedal got used a lot for solos and I mixed everything through beautiful Neve gear at Orbit Audio."

The Past Is A Foreign Country

Although it's now ancient history and Scott is obviously happily ploughing his own furrow, there's no doubting that Pavement was a hugely influential band for numerous indie outfits on both sides of the Atlantic. Therefore, it would be remiss of us to pass up the opportunity to ask the band's other main player for his take on what seemed to be a strangely anti-climactic end to proceedings in 2000. Scott is, however, still reluctant to go into any great detail.

"At the time it was a little weird for me, too, the way it ended. In retrospect, I'm sad it ended the way it did, but I'm glad it ended. We couldn't keep working the way we were."

Are you are still in contact with the other guys? "I still hear from the others. Some more than others."

And finally, the question on many a Pavement fans' lips – "any chance of a reconciliation?" – draws a suitably equivocal response.

"I'm not sure about working together again. We'll see."

Probably best not to hold your breath, then. But given both Kannberg and Malkmus's excellent solo output over the last few years, perhaps we shouldn't be too keen to hanker after the past and instead look to the present, a period where ex-members of Pavement deliver quirky, intelligent, lo-fi sets that sit happily alongside their illustrious past glories.

