

Portico Quartet Album Biography

Portico Quartet still sound like nothing you ever heard before. The Mercury nominated East London based outfit's unique brand of hypnotic minimalism has expanded to embrace new sonic territories. Drawing on the inspiration of electronica, ambient, classical and dance music as they take their strange, beautiful, cinematic, future music to exciting new vistas where the inspiration of Burial, Mount Kimbie and Flying Lotus rubs shoulders with the textures of Arve Henriksen and Bon Iver and echoes of Steve Reich and Max Richter. But all underpinned by a shared joy in collective music making as the band push their inimitable music into the future.

Their journey over the last five years has seen them rise from gritty street performances on London's Southbank to countless international shows from Berlin to Paris, London to New York and beyond. Their self-produced debut album 'Knee Deep In The North Sea' was nominated for the 2008 Mercury Music Prize (alongside Radiohead, Robert Plant and Elbow), and they subsequently signed to Peter Gabriel's Real World label. Their second album 'Isla', produced by John Leckie and recorded at Abbey Road, explored wide-angle filmic themes and textures. Now they return with their eagerly awaited self-titled third album that finds the band expanding on their trademark sound of eerie hang, ethereal sax, earthy bass and drums via an organic use of electronics and effects diving headlong into an epic, cinematic sound palette. They've done all this while integrating hang player/keyboardist Kier Vine (an old friend of Milo's from Goldsmith's University) into the line-up alongside drummer Duncan Bellamy, bassist Milo Fitzpatrick and saxophonist/keyboardist Jack Wyllie after the band's original hang player Nick Mulvey left to explore pastures new.

Expanding their sound to embrace electronics was a natural progression in an age where integrating effects, real time looping and samples is second nature to many musicians. In the process Portico Quartet maintain an authentic acoustic core sound that's magnified through skilled electronic manipulation. As saxophonist and keyboard player Jack explains; *"When we were touring the last album we were trying to find ways of going beyond the sounds of our own instruments, for me that was using effects pedals and then looping it – Duncan ended up taking a feed from my saxophone so he could affect what I was doing. Then Milo had some effects on his double bass and now Duncan has now got wholly electric drums, alongside his normal drum kit – so you've still got the warm acoustic sound of the instrument but it's being manipulated. So you get that warm acoustic feeling but you also have digital manipulation."* And for all the digital trickery behind these sounds, there's both a human being and a soulful intent behind every sound created and note played.

The genesis of the third album began when the band returned from touring 'Isla' and set up a permanent rehearsal space in Leyton, near to where they all live in Clapton, East London. The three band mates then spent about a month just looking at each other wondering who would make the first creative move. Wanting to continue making music together, the electronic side of things then became, albeit temporarily, the fourth 'ghost' element of the band. They had already begun sampling the hangs while Nick was still in the band, beginning to explore ways to morph its soft, acoustic sound into unusual new tones. And while Duncan had been primarily the band's drummer and designer to this point, now through his use of a MIDI controller and laptop to trigger and manipulate the hang samples and his own kit sounds, he became the catalyst in rewiring the band's sonic architecture, ushering in a new chapter in the Portico Quartet sound.

Taking all this into the studio in January 2011 the band already had a clear idea about how all these external elements would work to magnify the smallest details in their already finely tuned acoustic group sound. Looping various parts to make a bed of interlocking electro-acoustic noises was a means of replacing the middle ground the hang once occupied, with Duncan's hang samples and Jack adding keyboard parts as well.

Bassist Milo has always brought a wide range of dynamics to the group whether it's through a number of hugely propulsive bass lines, or his increasingly powerful bowed melodies that he layers via a loop pedal creating a keening multi-layered, one-man string section. Much of this experimentation was also happening at soundchecks on the Isla tour, yet another key part of Portico Quartet's creative DNA has been their extensive international touring, that's both allowed time for these new elements to flourish and fuelled much of the imaginative subject matter that's inspired many of their new songs. Part of this on the road research and development came via Jack and Duncan using their laptops to start exploring and composing electronic music – learning how to use software programs and their own organically created samples. This also came to further fruition when Duncan and Jack joined forces with their friend Will Ward to form new electronica trio Circle Traps, once again consolidating their increasing love of electronic music and the huge new palette of sound it afforded them musically.

Thus the groundwork for recording their new album had already been done and in spite of shifting focus away from the hang – the instrument that has been such a defining feature of their sound – what has followed reveals a band bursting with creativity and an abundance of fresh new music. Sampling the hang revealed a whole new spectrum of musical possibilities. Amplifying the soft-toned hang had always proved problematic yet in its newly sampled form the sounds take on keyboard like qualities. From fragile, spectral high notes to rumbling bass chimes Portico have revolutionised the hang once more via its sequenced and sampled use. And they can turn it up loud too.

The emergence of a heavier dance music edge to the Portico Quartet sound is a reflection of the band's current listening habits. And while Duncan, Milo and Jack have all acknowledge the importance of jazz as part of learning their instruments the music they have never seen themselves as jazz musicians or Portico Quartet as a jazz band. They simply make music they like and the music they are making now is a true reflection of their myriad influences from UK bass, ambient, electronica, contemporary classical, bass heavy hip hop a la Flying Lotus and the experimental avant garde. This is also part of a wider reflection of London itself, that Portico Quartet have absorbed via its buzzing club scene and the gritty urban music making that surrounds them.

One of the album's standout tracks is the mesmerising 'Lacker Boo' that opens with cascading droplets of melody, throbbing low notes, poignant bowed bass and an insistent bass drum that nudges the music over the line of ambient exotica into a cavernous crossroads between haunting electronica and the inner psyche of an as-yet un-filmed David Lynch movie. Duncan reveals this was an early turning point during the band's post-Isla transitional phase; *"That was a real breakthrough, we did that track in March, and that came together really quickly, it feels like a pinnacle in terms of where we've got the sound now. The twinkly loop that starts it is actually the hang on the loop station but pitched up a couple of octaves and then I pitched the*

hang down two octaves so the bass notes on that tune are the hang as well. Then Milo is bowing the bass and I was playing the bass drum and the hi hat – then Jack was playing all the samples on the keyboard – because we now looking for ways to not always have the saxophone, or the sound of the hang, but it's still in there – and that really felt like a breakthrough. Because it ticked a lot of the things we were trying to do and kind of struggling a bit to make things work, that was like wow, we're on to something here."

New boy Keir Vine brings myriad musical sensibilities to the band, a keyboardist with a classical training in composition, his previous work includes electronic, post-punk and Afrobeat projects as well as Sound Art installations and film music.. Thrown in at the deep end he joined the band towards the tail end of their time touring 'Isla', learning not just a new set of tunes but also how to play the hang. Yet with lots of support and encouragement from the rest of the band he got through this challenging period while simultaneously becoming a full fledged band member gaining insight into their working methods and becoming part of the creative process too. *"It really suited where I wanted to be at that point, it really suited what I was craving at that time, and it's been about as smooth a transition into a band as I could have wished for. It's been like joining an artist collective and a family at the same time. We're there to challenge each other and bring things out of one another and similarly we all play different roles in being the children and the parents to throw things off course and nurture in equal measures. Then the roles can swap round. Like a family there is support and trust and a lot of laughs at the core of it."*

With their new, richly layered sound Portico Quartet have, like so many other artists today, brought elements of the recording studio into the live environment, blurring the lines between band and producer. Emboldened by this process the new album is produced by the band themselves and brilliantly engineered by Greg Freeman at the Fish Market studios and Real World. Jack explains how they've mastered the art of creating such a detailed live sound; *"Because of the way we were making it by putting on the effects live, we did half of the production while we were composing it. So we knew where all the reverbs were going because we are doing that all live as well, so we knew exactly where we wanted that to go – like distortion or whatever, all the effects – almost doing our own live 'dubs' of the acoustic tracks. So when it was in the studio we knew exactly what was going on. Then it was a case of mixing everything and making sure it fitted in, and putting it down in the best way we possibly could."*

The result is an album of compelling musical journeys exploring both inner and outer spaces. Abstract, virtual, visceral, horizon-less landscapes of sound, melody and rhythm; unlike anything you've ever heard.

Mike Flynn, London, November 2011