

MODERN

Working hero – Electro songwriter and DJ Moby on his life for music

The career of Richard Melville Hall, alias MOBY, started with a bang. In the early '90s he captured the hearts of club-goers, not to mention the charts, with his rhythmic dance track "Go" in something of a surprise attack. This was the heyday of the techno movement and with his minimalist, euphoric hits "Go" and "Feeling So Real" Moby emerged as one of its spearheads. After the dance album "Everything Is Wrong" he initially followed on with a radical renunciation of techno beats in the form of a punk album entitled "Animal Rights". Then came a collection of film music, "I Like to Score", featuring his brutal adaptation of the famous James Bond theme from the Pierce Brosnan era. Subsequently the grand nephew twice removed of novelist Herman Melville (from whose novel "Moby Dick" he borrowed his stage name) began to tap into new parallel worlds of pop music.

Blues, of course

For the album "Play" (1999), Moby devoted himself to an earthy mix of gospel and spiritual music sampled from archives, modeled with semi-electronic and semi-acoustic arrangements into atmospheric, melancholic pop songs. In spite of considerable skepticism and a great deal of sarcasm on the part of the critics, "Play" became a multi-million seller and its creator a star. Today he still remembers the difficulties he had bringing the work – a blend of high artistry and banal reality – to a positive end: "It was hard to complete the album at all because I was trying to mix it at home on very cheap equipment. In the end it turned out OK, but the sound was and remains pretty low-fi." And this was good, because with the handmade sound and great songs such as "Why does my Heart feel so Bad?", "Porcelain", "Honey" and "Natural Blues" he succeeded in reconciling electronic dance music with the deep roots of

blues and gospel, combining these in a new, exciting hybrid. The fact that today Moby's music displays slightly less stylistic amplitude than in the '90s does not mean it is slipping into the mainstream. Rather, with "Play" he really defined a sound that was undeniably his, and which he continued to refine on the albums "18" and "Hotel".

Moby still has at least two contrary musical styles of expression – the ballad and the impulsive dance beat – at times the two come together in a song or even superimpose one another. A beautiful example of this is "Slipping Away". The duet with French-Canadian Mylène Farmer made it to the top of the French charts. The whole thing was a bit of a coincidence as Moby recalls, "Mylène is a friend of mine and it was her idea to record the song in French." What was much more difficult was finding a singer for the disco rock song "New York, New York". "I wrote the song and instantly thought that Debbie Harry would be perfect. I pursued her for months. Tried to get her to my studio to work on it, and in the end she finally agreed." His perseverance paid off, the "Blondie" singer really does seem to be the perfect choice, someone who has been part of the New York music and culture scene from the late '70s through to the present. Both songs are among the highlights on the recently released best-of album "Go – The Very Best of Moby".

"Nothing makes me happier than working"

The artist himself sees no great inconsistencies in his work so far – a mixture of punk, techno, ambient and blues. "I started making music when I was nine. In those days I was learning classical guitar and harmonics so that I could play in punk and reggae bands. I even played jazz for a while. I always liked dance music but it is just one of

Photography: Bryan Adams



many genres which inspire me..." More important for Moby than the genre is the creative work as such. The self-proclaimed workaholic says, "Nothing makes me happier than work. I try to relax by reading and playing sport, but usually I end up back in the studio working on new music" – that's if he doesn't happen to be cruising around the Internet on the lookout for obscure music or updating his public diary at www.moby.com. The passionate workaholic never really winds down. I enjoy peace at most "when I am asleep." There's always the danger that an obsessed studio techie, live performer and passionate music fan who is permanently exposed to acoustic stimuli might suffer damage to his hearing. But with good sense and a touch of luck Moby claims to have "almost perfect hearing after 30 years as a musician in punk bands and as a DJ." He considers this "proof of the usefulness of hearing protection", even if this only consisted at times of "stuffing ears with tissues when visiting clubs."

The self-confessed Christian and practicing vegan is not only present in the media on account of his music but also because of his decent social and political stance on a

variety of themes. At the beginning of the U.S. presidential campaign HEAR THE WORLD asked Moby what he would change in his first days as President. "I would cancel unnecessary subsidies for business and agriculture and offer tax breaks to companies who have the potential to bring about something positive. I would decree a moratorium on animal testing and a law which forbade sportsman to be paid more than teachers." Don't bother looking for tongue-in-cheek undertones here, Moby means everything he says and does. He also gives serious thought to how he can minimize the ecological consequences of his US tours. In his private life in New York and as a passionate walker he does without a car and indeed most things which could be environmentally unsound or unhealthy. But as he has no intention of running for President the questions remains: What would have become of Richard Melville Hall had he not enjoyed such musical success. "Ideally I would have become an architect or a city planner but then perhaps I would have turned out as an unemployed record shop worker."

Christian Arndt



Subscription

Why not subscribe to HEAR THE WORLD – The Magazine for Hearing Culture at www.hear-the-world.com. Annual subscriptions cost EUR 29, CHF 47 or USD 39 including postage and packaging. HEAR THE WORLD appears four times a year.

Every subscription serves a good purpose. The net proceeds is made available to the *Hear the World Foundation*, which supports products devoted to people with hearing difficulties. To find out more about the activities of the *Hear the World Foundation* please visit www.hear-the-world.com.

