



## MODERN

## Games without frontiers – or: Peter Gabriel is now singing for aliens, too

Anyone interested in music will no doubt ask why Peter Gabriel of all people was commissioned by Walt Disney Studios to pen the title song for the latest Pixar animated film “Wall·E”. After all, his last great hit was “Digging in the Dirt”, which broke the charts some 16 years ago, and “Sledgehammer”, his mega-hit, was six years before that – Gabriel wrote Pop history with the song, along with the videoclip for it. In fact, you have to go back 30 years for “Solsbury Hill”, his highly moving hymn of the 1970s. The author of these lines offers you odds of ten-to-one that a few years ago Disney would probably have offered the job to sympathetic all-round hit songwriter Phil Collins rather than Gabriel, the grumpy and erratic idealist. To jog your memories: as early as 1999 Collins composed and produced the soundtrack to Disney’s “Tarzan”, and won an Oscar for his efforts. For “Brother Bear” (2003) Disney even went for the no-longer-so-young but definitely mainstream-compatible duo of Phil Collins and Tina Turner. And now, suddenly, of all people, Peter Gabriel, the man who has long since bade farewell to the Pop business and withdrawn into a World Music niche, producing musically ambitious songs in his own Real World Studios? And one can certainly ask why Gabriel, who wrote the soundtracks for both Alan Parker’s “Birdy” and Scorsese’s “The Last Temptation of Christ”, decided to accept the job.

However, it is a fact that this time Disney did not ask Collins, but Gabriel, who agreed, which is a good thing. After all, the wobbly robot is a kind of cross between E.T. and R2D2 and thus clearly defined as a lovable outsider – who furthermore is (ostensibly) the last of his kind on the Blue Planet. That is no doubt what bonds the two, the small cleaning robot and the great singer. Like Wall·E, Peter Gabriel is evidently the last or possibly the only one of his kind. As otherwise how could we explain that the remaining members of the band Genesis, after Gabriel threw in the towel in 1975, are said to have auditioned 400 (!) singers but found no one to fill the post, and in resignation chose an “internal applicant”, namely none other than drummer Phil Collins.

And the aspiration to make the world a better place is something philanthropist Peter Gabriel also shares with the little robot – which is why his title song fits the film so well. Gabriel comments on his work with score composer Thomas Newman as follows: “I’m a great fan of Tom’s work. I really liked the series ‘Six Feet Under’ and it had the best title song of all time – as I did ‘American Beauty’ and other things he has done. So we tried to write something together.” Although a joint effort, “Down to Earth” sounds like a typical Gabriel song. In fact, it has the sense of a blend of his early solo albums and the “So” phase, dressed in contemporary colors. His penetrating, slightly hoarse timbre imbues the title for the Disney production with forceful pathos, and however naïve the film’s message may sound, it is meant very seriously: “When we messed up our homeland, we set sail for the sky,” and goes on to suggest “we’re coming down to the ground, there’s no better place to go.” What Wall·E experiences during his nights and days on earth is what Gabriel seeks to prevent with his music, his political and his social activities: namely that humanity through clearly erroneous behavior will be forced to quit Spaceship Earth, having completely dirtied and sullied it, rendering it uninhabitable.

Gabriel’s small outing into the big movie world fits marvelously into his long-term musical project that came out almost in synch with the Disney film. The “Big Blue Ball” crossover project kicked off over 15 years ago with a few truly memorable and largely improvised studio sessions. Peter Gabriel brought on board Karl Wallinger from World Party and producer Stephen Hague for this mega-project. American Hague played a crucial role in the evolution of the Brit Synth Pop sound of the 1980s, and was the producer of countless hits by bands such as New Order, Pet Shop Boys, Erasure and others. The long list of the other collaborators starts with singers Sinéad O’Connor and Natacha Atlas and includes such famous World musicians as Papa Wemba, Jah Wobble and Deep Forest as well as legendary Jazz drummer Billy Cobham. The work on the Big Blue Ball “was the most pleasurable I have ever had with music,” Gabriel says, only to add (with a touch of self-irony given the extreme production period of 15 years, long even by his standards) that “after all these years it is like a good wine that has now reached the right age to be drunk.”

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Yet to a certain extent it is simply old wine in new glasses that Gabriel and Co. serve up: Some of the songs, including the flagship “Whole Thing”, seem to have fallen by the wayside some time between the 1986 megaseller “So” and the equally successful “Us” of 1992; and in general, the collective “session” songwriting in good 1970s style does not always come up trumps when catapulted along with the sound of the 1980s and the production technology of the 1990s into the 21st century. That said, one absolute highlight is the rumba-flamenco inspired number “Shadows”, sung by Papa Wemba. Gabriel himself is lead vocalist on “Burn you up, burn you down”, and there he is at his very best, even if the song is not one of the strongest in his oeuvre. “Burn you up” was originally destined to come out on Gabriel’s album “Up” in 2002 and was indeed included on the pre-release promo-CD, but did not actually premiere until 2003 as a track for the “URU – Ages Beyond Myst” computer game. Multimedia worlds are another of Gabriel’s passions – he was one of the very first Pop musicians to release his own multimedia CD ROM: “Xplora” at the beginning of the 1990s, followed in 1996 by another ambitious project, “Eve”. Since then Peter Gabriel has become one of the keen observers and collaborators of the games industry, providing it with many a new idea.

At the end of the day, what we can say is that after a career spanning a good 40 years his voice remains his greatest asset. It is still one of the most impressive in Pop history. In his Genesis days, he set the highest vocal standards, and on his first solo LPs he made such intelligent use of his striking and slightly husky falsetto that it became his unmistakable calling card. At the same time, he also wrote important hymns for a generation that sought an identity outside Punk or Synth Pop after the end of the Hippie era and before the advent of the Yuppie world. Key examples being “Solsbury Hill”, “Biko” and “Games Without Frontiers”. In 1977, with “Solsbury Hill” he (not only) bade poetic farewell to Genesis, and since then Peter Gabriel has repeatedly managed to reinvent himself – as a Pop star and as the trailblazer of World music in the 1980s, as a talent scout, label boss, and multimedia entrepreneur in the 1990s, and as a mature, if fallible figure for musical integration with the idea of the “Big Blue Ball”. And alongside his various activities in music and the media, he regularly takes the stage as a philanthropist and human rights activist. In his possibly strongest musical statement the focus was on “coming down to the ground” and now, a good 30 years later, he has definitely arrived there.

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