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## **Hexicon – a biography by Robert Rotifer**

Cast your mind back four or five years ago: Britain is bogged down in a senseless war, but life goes on as usual, thanks less to the population's indomitable pluck than to their sheer indifference. It's hard to imagine it now, but that's what life was like back then, inside a bunker somewhere on a hill in Kent.

Except that nothing's really changed since then, the grandly named “The Bunker on the Hill” was actually just a garage behind a row of houses, and the armoury within confined to an assortment of guitars, amps, clapped-out keyboards, a drum kit, an 8-track tape machine and whatever else Paul Rains and Mike Collins could use to turn the sound of two guitarist/songwriters into that of Brian Wilson's Wrecking Crew with home county vowels via a mind-bending intake of tea and biscuits.

Sometimes their friend Sam from across the road would pop round to play them inspirational albums by Jim O'Rourke and Sufjan Stevens adding to an already growing fascination with the Beach Boys. “I remember getting Surf's Up / Sunflower that year and obsessing over it,” says Paul, “I really liked the intrigue of the lost album and I started hunting down bootlegs of Smile.” At the same time, they felt drawn to bands like the Pastels, music “the attention to texture ends being more interesting than a lot of conventional guitar pop.. and the wonkiness. We wanted to combine that with an almost CSNY level of perfection.”

From the start, contradiction has been part of the idea. As Mike and Paul honed skills on various instruments, Paul discovered the lapsteel, Mike learned to drum and they started to work out the whole arrangements to their songs. “We wanted to take the orchestral elements of bands like the Beach Boys and stick that together with the raw energy of Yo La Tengo and Pavement... I don't know whether we achieved that, but looking back I think that's what we started trying to do”.

Which sort of brings us back neatly to the bunker spirit. Mike had retreated to the parental garage a few years previous when his parents got annoyed with his domestic guitar abuse. “The emphasis was on me having a place to hide away as much as having a place for music.”

Meanwhile Paul was at Art College in North Wales looking for like-minded people to form a band with and finding none. Mike played in a duo with Carey Lander, now of Camera Obscura fame, before hooking up with Paul who had been suggested by a common acquaintance as a possible musical soulmate. “We found we had quite a lot in common. We were both songwriters but neither of us proper singers. We both played a couple of different instruments and would swap round. When we started writing our music was harmonically a bit more complicated. We liked discordancy, our songs weren't that poppy at all.” “Afterwards when we were going through all our old 4-track cassettes we realised we'd gone through this process of elimination,” adds Mike, “we had a proggy phase, a slowcore phase, a ‘wanting to be more rocking’ kind of phase, and one by one we eliminated all those avenues until we arrived at a point where we found that you could do interesting things with simplicity, just using C and F.” Which, as arcs of musical development go, is exactly the right way round.

Having found their mojo, they called it Hexicon, playing gigs and mixing with the rest of the mostly Maidstone-based musical and artistic collective widely unknown as The Mentalist Association. “It was cross-pollination, and even if a band had just one idea for a song, it was still a band.” All the required conditions for the formation of a DIY pop scene were already in place (a surplus of boredom, mainly). “Nothing ever happened in Maidstone,” and the artistically curious congregated for Mentalist goings-on at a place called the Union Bar, before it eventually closed down, first turning into a lap-dance club, then into a video games emporium, becoming another part of the great conspiracy of nothing ever happening.

Enter Thomas Allard, a classically trained, mad-haired eccentric horn-player and cycling enthusiast, once again at the recommendation of a former school friend. “Tom's got one of those whirring musical brains, where everything is a possibility of notes. With Allard adding magisterial horn parts and vocal harmonies, percussion, various bleeps and noises, songs like “Something Strange Beneath the Stars” or “Follow the Herd” took on a new spaced-out sonic quality that went far beyond the singer-songwriter aesthetics of their early days.

Ready to record their first album, Hexicon teamed up with Greg Webster, another fellow Mentalist Association musician. Paul had helped out with Webster's project Sonaura, so it seemed only too logical to record in his studio, and eventually Greg became one half of Hexicon's “rotating drummer tag team”, the other half being Andy Grieve, one of the band's first followers from their gigs at London's Electro-Acoustic Club.

Last to join was bass player Giles Barrett, brother of Duncan (Esiotrot / Tigercats), after being introduced to the band by Paul's brother and Esiotrot guitarist, Matthew. Giles had run a studio as a sound engineer with Mike above a mosque in Whitechapel. When the lease expired they joined up with Simon Trought's nearby Soup Studio as well as the scene

of bands around it, starting work on a second album before the first one's even out and ending up moonlighting as the backing band for 'Allo Darlin'.

As a live act, Hexicon have turned from a delicate acoustic affair into the unlikeliest of party bands. Excitingly, their debut album “The Blossom Sighs”, catches them right in the middle of this transformation, sounding at once rich and transparent, stark and baroque, and always utterly beautiful.

The single release, “Something Strange Beneath The Stars”, has a typically nimble, incredibly catchy melody that takes little more than a minute to climb skywards by means of a gorgeous lilting horn line, while the lyrics suggest that all might not be as sunny as it may seem: “Our days are numbered / There are shady nights among us / If I make it out alive will you escape with me? / The skies are falling in on you and me.” “We like the sort of pop melodies that give you an immediate sugar rush,” says Mike, “but when you peel back the wrapping there's more than just candy there. It rejoices in being bleak and pop at the same time”

While “Something Strange...” has been a fans' favourite for years, the B side “Still Here” showcases the lower ranges of Mike Collins' voice with just a hint of huskiness in his pure and unaffected tone on top of a luscious soul/country ballad backing. It all sounds incredibly mature in all the right ways. And so it should, on the back of all these hours and days they spent in the bunker, looking for that elusive ideal of wonky perfection.

