

MICHAEL ANDREWS

BIOGRAPHY

Moving discreetly between miscellaneous musical collaborations, production work, ongoing band projects and solo albums – not to mention a parallel career of repute scoring vividly unconventional Hollywood (and Hollyweird) film soundtracks – Michael Andrews is a byword for quietly unorthodox musical excellence. His is a name which hovers tantalizingly in the margins of fame – it could be a household one by now, should the self-deprecating Californian polymath care about such matters. Instead he prefers behind-the-scenes industry to the questionable rewards of celebrity and remains a beguilingly modest, thoughtful but playful character, refreshingly devoid of stereotypical LA entertainment world vanities. Indeed, Andrews admits that he's never happier than when squirreling away in his Glendale studio-cum-laboratory, Elgonix Labs, recently rebuilt from the ground up – with vintage gear of course – diligently fashioning some of the most magical, touching, intriguing and audacious music being produced anywhere.

If Michael Andrews name does ring a bell, then chances are it's in connection with director Richard Kelly's bizarre, bewitching 2001 feature film debut *Donnie Darko*. The sizeable cult success owed much to Michael Andrews' memorable score. Andrews also produced, arranged and performed 'Mad World', the stunning, minimalist remake of the 1982 Tears For Fears single which so poignantly graced the film, going on to become a massive international hit single for Andrews and vocalist Gary Jules, his long time friend and intermittent collaborator.

But anyone who thinks that 'Mad World' and *Donnie Darko* are the sum total of Michael Andrews' achievements to date should be quickly disabused of the notion. His ever-burgeoning soundtrack oeuvre finds a composer refusing to rest on his laurels, ever eager to learn about the craft of writing and recording – lessons that are increasingly deployed across an equally impressive cache of non-cinematic records and collaborative projects. *"When I began the Donnie Darko score, which was the first thing I'd done completely on my own, there were moments when I was thinking 'how the hell am I going to do this,'" Andrews reveals. "But there have been moments like that throughout my life. I'm always putting myself in situations where I think I'm not able to do it and, well, I just do it..."*

And by 'just doing it' Andrews has found himself ranging across genres and sound palettes, embracing everything from synthesizers and circuit-bending noise collages to intimate folk reveries and symphonic orchestral works – all of it united by a judicious, less-is-more compositional signature. Thus, he brings spare, haiku-like qualities to film music while simultaneously allowing an acute sensitivity to atmosphere and texture to inform his song-writing and production work. *"Film music has definitely expanded my musical vocabulary. The thing that it really taught me is that if you're going to add only two or three things you have to be careful with what those things are."*

He may, by his own admission, still be learning, but Michael Andrews' musicality goes back to his upbringing in suburban San Diego. *"My mum was a music teacher. There are eight kids in my family; a few of my brothers play guitar, my sisters played piano and stuff. It wasn't like we sat around singing songs together, but there were always instruments lying around the house. I wasn't some sort of musical Brainiac or anything. I just hung out, surfed a lot and did the normal stuff Californian kids do, including starting a band."*

That band was the Origin, which came together while Andrews was a seventeen-year-old high school student. The band rehearsed in suburban San Diego garages with Andrews calling the shots, mostly because he was the oldest and, *"they were the only kids who'd let me tell them what to do!"* Influenced by moody English indie rock benchmarks like The Smiths and Echo & The Bunnymen, leavened with a soupçon of acoustic Neil Young, the Origin went on to record two albums for wholly owned Virgin subsidiary Hut. The band's debut was the first release for the label that would eventually bring the world David Gray, The Verve and Placebo. Andrews now finds now his initial recording venture, *"difficult to stomach, if I'm being honest. At best it was a folkier version of The Smiths, at worst, over-earnest indie music by kids who thought they were way more profound than they actually were."*

The Origin had their share of personnel problems – Gary Jules was in and out of the line-up intermittently – and after a 1992 relocation to San Francisco, the band slowly dissolved with Andrews eventually returning to San Diego to lick his wounds. *"I moved back home to restructure,"* he recalls. *"I was kind of disillusioned with the record business and just wanted to play guitar. Major record labels can be somewhat taxing on the psyche."*

Part of Andrews' rehabilitation got him hooked up with one Andreas Stevens, aka local turntable jockey and acid jazz freak DJ Greyboy, whose 'Freestylin'' single had been an early '90s underground hit (beloved of Gilles Peterson, amongst others). The pair started collaborating on music very much in the soul-jazz vein and launched a 'jam band'. The Greyboy Allstars feature Andrews on guitar (under the stage moniker Elgin Park, sourced from a pair of long discarded childhood nicknames) and fellow musicians Robert Walter, Zak Najor, Karl Denson and Chris Stillwell. The band exists, and prospers, to this day, with Andrews interrupting his busy schedule to go out on the road (and onto the sea with the regular 'Jam Cruise' jaunts that steam out of Fort Lauderdale, FL) to play red-hot acid jazz sets for the sheer fun of it. GBA are one of the top touring acts in the US and have released three albums with the fourth due in Spring 2007.

In 1998, already edging toward the multi-tasking lifestyle that would be the hallmark of his next decade, Andrews formed another band, Elgin Park, with GBA's keyboardist Robert Walter plus grade school buddies Eric Hinojosa, John Krylow and Matt Lynott. *"The Elgin Park thing was me having fun with songs again. It was half high-energy music, half like a solo project. As with most bands, everyone has to think it's cool or else all the energy goes away. It didn't last that long."*

It lasted long enough, however, for Andy Factor's Everloving label to release one album of bouncy, vibrant indie pop, wrapped in an eye-catching Geoff McFetridge designed sleeve, in 2000. Meanwhile, the self-style West Coast Groove of GBA was gaining attention, not least from TV and film director/screenwriter Jake Kasdan, who commissioned the band to soundtrack his first feature film, *Zero Effect*. This led to Andrews scoring the cult NBC TV series Kasdan was involved with, *Freaks & Geeks*. Stumbling into the world of film scoring proved revelatory for Andrews. *"I was like, 'oh yes, this is for me.' It's everything I like about making music, just sitting in a hole, writing and recording."*

While Andrews' nascent soundtrack career ticked over, he continued to broaden his area of operation. As long ago as his post-Origin stint in San Francisco, Andrews had been cutting demos with his old friend Gary Jules. Together the pair worked on Andrews' rudimentary four-track, making recordings that helped land Jules a deal with A&M. It turned out to be a less-than-satisfactory arrangement for the increasingly frustrated Jules, and when the pair reunited in San Diego in 2000, Andrews strove to revive his friend's by now waning musical appetite.

"We made a record on this little 12-track recorder I had. It cost like \$20 for every 20 minutes of music. Gary had gotten very disillusioned with the industry after his deal ended. We sort of rekindled his interest in music. I was also doing Elgin Park, Greyboy Allstars and the Freaks & Geeks TV show at the same time – so things were kind of busy..." The album, *Trading Snakeoil For Wolftickets*, (re-pressed and augmented by 'Mad World'), would later become a sizeable hit record for Jules.

The frenetic pitch was ratcheted up a notch soon after the Jules sessions when Andrews received a call from another debutante film director, Richard Kelly, who presciently identified in Andrews the potential to write a suitably unorthodox soundtrack for the idiosyncratic movie he was about to shoot. *"I met with Michael and I just knew right away that he was really, really talented and that he could come up with a really original score,"* Kelly recounts.

The film was *Donnie Darko*, which would present a new set of challenges for Andrews, not least Kelly's insistence on the score containing no guitar – Andrews' instrument of choice. With typical sang-froid, Andrews began exploring alternative compositional means. *"I had never really written on the piano before but it got me into the whole atonal collage thing and I ended up really liking and really valuing that whole side of music, which was pretty liberating. The film was pretty low budget so my portion of the money was thin. I couldn't hire anyone: it was just me. I played everything. I was listening to Japanese classical/electronic composer Isao Tomita, I was very much into that. Of course, I'm no Tomita. All the same, it was about using synthesizers to make emotional music, which is what I tried to do. The whole process taught me so much."*

The *Donnie Darko* soundtrack would be largely instrumental, though Andrews wanted to include one signature song – a minimal reworking of Tears For Fears'

'Mad World.' He had Gary Jules sing it, as the song had been cherished by the pair way back during the early days of the Origin. Going on to global success as a single two years after its exposure in the film (it was the UK Christmas Number One in 2003) 'Mad World' has become both totem and an albatross for Andrews. "It started with a very simple idea that's become very complicated over the last six years. It's a little bit of an irritation, even though in many ways it's a blessing. Thank God I didn't sing it. It's something I would never have been able to escape."

Andrews drew some customary lessons from the episode. "One thing I got from the whole 'Mad World' experience is that people react to things you don't always think they're going to react to. When Gary and I finished that track we thought it was something special, but it was just another of those things where you make something that you like and think, 'that's another thing I like that ten other people are going to like.'"

The success of *Donnie Darko* (the original score album went on to sell over 100,000 copies alone after Everloving picked it up) meant Andrews could augment his own, arcane instrument-packed recording nerve centre - the self styled Elgonix Labs - in Glendale, LA, and begin a number of new projects. One of these was a production job for (latter-day Raconteur) Brendan Benson - specifically his 2002 EP *Metarie*. The pair had worked together before, in the mid-'90s when Benson and Andrews had become close friends while working on Benson's long-gestating debut album *One Mississippi*. Andrews would continue as a confidant for Benson right up to Benson's 2002 album *Lapalco*.

More session and production work ensued. Following his work with Benson, Andrews produced Metric's 2003 debut *Old World Underground, Where Are You Now?* He also contributed heavily to a number of DJ Greyboy records as well as co-writing and producing Inara George's lovely *All Rise* album, recorded entirely at Elgonix Labs.

Meanwhile Andrews' parallel film career was showing no signs of abating, with his scores to Jake Kasdan's *Orange County* (which reunited some of the protagonists from *Freaks & Geeks*), the French film *Cypher* (2002), Canadian feature *Nothing* (2003) and Michael Parness' *My Suicidal Sweetheart (Max And Grace)* (2004), keeping his profile as a composer high. In 2005 Andrews scored Miranda July's multi-award winning *Me and You and Everyone We Know* - another idiosyncratic cine-gem, for which Andrews' music, essayed with a miniaturist's attention to detail, was the perfect accompaniment. "Some of the cues on that film were like, two tracks - really minimal," Andrews recalls. "It was a case of what's the least I can possibly do to get the emotion right?" The soundtrack, again released on Everloving and on V2 in the UK and Europe proved to be another healthy seller.

This burst of film music activity culminated in Andrews' first full, orchestral score for Paul Feig's 2006 Christmas airport romp *Unaccompanied Minors*. Working with the orchestra on a Hollywood back-lot proved an exciting experience for a man more used to tinkering away in his own hermetic studio fiefdom. "I look at it like this; I'm

going to make music my whole life. I can't just sit around and indulge myself on my own trip – how am I ever going to learn that way? I just want to keep expanding. And there are always things you pick up. On Unaccompanied Minors there were certain things I learned about woodwind arrangements for example; maybe I'll be able to apply those to one of my own things in the future."

Also in late 2005 Andrews starting recording tracks for what would become *Hand On String*, his first bona fide solo album, released in the US the following summer on his own Elgin Park Recordings label, and due for release in Europe in early 2007, via PIAS/Wall Of Sound.

A reaction to the elaborate, time-consuming and multi-authored realm of film composition, *Hand On String* is a pared down, intimate collection of songs. *"I wanted my record to be simpler than the film stuff,"* Andrews reveals. *"I try to make things that sound original to me. Film music has definitely expanded my musical vocabulary. I've learned that if I'm only going to have two or three things on this track – because I'm a firm believer in minimalism – I need to establish how it's going to change the perspective, the emotion... The smallest addition can make a huge difference."*

Influenced by the languorous, highly textured sound of Milton Nascimento's 1975 album *Clube da Esquina* (*"it's the Brazilian Pet Sounds!"*), the majority of *Hand On String*'s 12 tracks began with Andrews playing unadorned guitar and singing, later adding a range of sympathetic hues, mostly sourced from Andrews' own ingenious electronic devices – with no track taking more than two days to complete. *"I really wanted sounds on there that were unidentifiable. Apart from the guitars it's nearly all stuff I made – samples of me humming into little Casio keyboards that are circuit bent and stuff like that. I like to try and steer clear of instrumental clichés, for my own conscience at least. I can sleep at night knowing I didn't open up my Mellotron plug-in."*

To remove himself further from the cine maelstrom, Andrews spent the latter half of 2006 playing gigs to support his record, aided by a nimble band featuring Gus Seyffert, Joey Waronker, Amir Yaghmai, Joe Kennedy, Mike Green and John Wood. He also found time for some more GBA outings, including a memorable 2006/07 New Year's Eve bash at Washington, DC's 9:30 Club.

As for the future, Andrews is currently busy on a forthcoming Jake Kasdan and Judd Apatow production, *Walk Hard: The Dewey Cox Story* – a parody of recent biopics such as *Walk The Line* and *Ray* – tells the colourful life story of a fictional twentieth century entertainer called Dewey Cox, played by John C Reilly, who is singing all his own songs. Writing with the likes of veteran composer/arranger Van Dyke Parks, Andrews' job is to create a faux recording oeuvre that skips across time and musical genres – a playful eclecticism he clearly relishes. *"It's fun just to be able to hop around decades. Are there a few obvious homages? Yes. Only yesterday I was indulging in quite an homage with Van Dyke Parks. We've been writing a song together for the movie. Let's just say it spans the Brian Wilson catalogue..."*

In addition, a new Greyboy Allstars album (with DJ Greyboy himself back in the producer's chair) looks set for an early 2007 release and a "very *minimalist*" Inara George record, made with just the singer, Andrews and some Van Dyke Parks arrangements, is being finished up as we speak. Andrews is keen to get back to work on an EP with The Living Sisters (Inara George plus LA chanteuses Becky Stark (Lavender Diamond) and Eleni Mandell), which promises chaste three part vocal harmonies and "*something completely irreverent*" from Andrews. He is also making rough sketches for a second Michael Andrews solo album that will be, "*something a little more ambient and atonal with homemade instruments – like this double autoharp I've just had made that has all these incredibly, resounding sympathetic strings.*"

Michael Andrews' vigorous appetite for music making clearly shows no sign of diminishing in the immediate future, and he remains delightfully grounded about his station. "*I'm very lucky to be doing what I'm doing, so I try not to take anything for granted. I know I'll always make music – it's fun, I love it!*"

Long may he stay in love...

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