

David Hiestand
MUS 262
Brian Ward

Underworld

Formed in 1980 as the Screen Gemz and going through several different forms and names, Underworld has established itself as an unstoppable force. As of 2017, for almost forty years, they've been a force in music and a draw. Shortly after and with collaborations with the early electronic pioneers like Brian Eno and their early producer Rupert Hyne, they progressed from a rockabilly-influenced Punk sound to New Romanticism, as Freur. This (ufozzo) early televised performance is unique in that it features Stuart Kelling on lead vocals singing in Welsh. Not only was he not the lead singer in the two early incarnations of the band, but all official releases had them singing in English. Additionally, this is their most New Romantic image-wise performance to be found. They continued with moderate gender-bending throughout the latter Freur days, but their visuals became less like a circus and more of a masculine drag/hip combination. Additionally, their performances would be less 'performed' and more musically oriented, dropping the interpretive dance and posing for prancing and riffing. Kelling would eventually be supplanted altogether by Hyde in his roles.

Then taking on their third name, Underworld, they became more of a New Wave Synth-Rock band with a heavy reggae influence. As time passed, they lost members and became more focused on their synth sounds as well as samples, becoming pioneers in the techno/electronic scene while maintaining Hyde's funky guitar lines, stream-of-consciousness vocals, and leading the way with post-African tribal rhythms and western money and production. Their first single as Underworld is

Underneath The Radar, an angsty radio-friendly tune despite it being subcultural anti-pop in its lyrical content and production. It follows in the tradition of punk with its anti-mainstream message. This (paulmeard) early performance at the Roxy in Hollywood highlights their underground legend status even before this first release because of the earlier incarnations of the band. The performance is electrifying as well as electric musically because of their confidence as established underground sweethearts and their finely-honed live sound techniques and style.

They broke through to the mainstream with their track Born Slippy.NUXX., featured on the Trainspotting soundtrack (Bigscreensatellite). This song and others, like Dirty Epic, made it onto various sampler albums and remix tracks in their most mainstream middle period. As the name implies, this track was heavy on guitar, an unusual feature for electronic music at the time. Their sound at this point was often one defined by heavy rhythmic drums and a heavy use of unique synth sounds. Vocals were often spoken word and ‘found’ vocals from various sources. Hyde’s guitar work and post-romantic vocals, along with Smith’s unusually aggressive compositions made them stand out among the new ‘dj’ culture artists.

As of 2017, they’re still a major draw for festivals and their own concerts, and the now duo continues to record. The KCRW live session with them features a number of newer tracks as well as fan favourites from their middle period (Pabivo_Evejak). Always Loved a Film, and Scribble follow a lower energy verse higher chorus pop format. The more recent album these songs come from, Barking, was something of a return to form for the band. The tracks are still generally EDM with a focus on synthesisers, but there is more of a world-music element to their tracks, i.e. the Spanish guitar breakdown on Scribble, and pop chorus-verse structure. Bird 1 follows in their tradition of colourful psychedelic lyrics and layering as a

compositional focus. The alliteration and assonance is so complementary of the lyrical message that its effectiveness as a musical tool is easily missed. The music in Bird 1 even feels as though it slows down with the swishing wings of the fly being watched by the protagonist of the tune, following his lyrical guidance of synesthesia paired with imagery. Lines like "he remembered where he was" make use of Caesura, another of his many poetic tools.

Behind the success of both a solo album and a collaboration with legendary producer and member of Roxy Music, Brian Eno, Karl Hyde has shown no signs of slowing down. Further, Rick Smith's compositions and production techniques have aged well and continue to push boundaries even in a consolidated electro-pop modern media soundscape. They'll continue to draw huge audiences whom they'll satisfy for the foreseeable future. Together, the duo is Underworld, and not only are they still great, they're better than ever.

Works Cited

Bigscreensatellite. "Underworld, a Complete Band History." *Band History*, web.archive.org/web/20080527164317/http://www.bigscreensatellite.co.uk/history.htm.

Pabivo_Evejak. "Underworld @ KCRW 2011 [Live Session]." *YouTube*, YouTube, 24 Mar. 2016, www.youtube.com/watch?v=XmJNSO42KSE.

paulmeard. "Underneath The Radar - Live @ The Roxy L.A. 06-06-88." *YouTube*, YouTube, 26 July 2014, www.youtube.com/watch?v=Mz5nZ8IFy2s.

ufozzo. "Freur Doot Doot." *YouTube*, YouTube, 30 Apr. 2007,