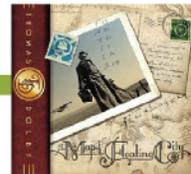


INDIE SCENE



THOMAS DOLBY

From '80s hitmaker to modern-day tech innovator, science has been good to him



CONTRARY TO THE TITLE OF HIS biggest radio hit, London native Thomas Dolby has never been blinded by science. In fact, the preoccupation with technology hinted at in synthesizer-happy 1980s classics like "She Blinded Me With Science," "Hyperactive!" and "One of Our Submarines" has allowed him to flourish well into the new millennium. After his radio hits dried up he turned his attention to establishing the tech company Beatnik, specializing in music-related software and cellphone ringtones. And now he is using the internet to take control of his musical destiny—his first album of new studio material since 1992, *A Map of the Floating City*, is accompanied by a web-based social-networking game.

Dolby first cultivated a tech-friendly image with the video for "She Blinded Me," which famously found him committed to a fictional "Home for Deranged Scientists." "I knew I couldn't compete with pinup boys like Duran Duran, Adam Ant or Sting," Dolby says. "So I invented that mad-scientist character. It wasn't much of a stretch, because I was always a geek anyway." He

soon became in demand as a keyboardist and producer for acts like Def Leppard, Foreigner, David Byrne, Roger Waters and Prefab Sprout. "I went from performing with Stevie Wonder at the Grammys to being in David Bowie's band at Live Aid within a matter of weeks," he marvels. "The opportunities were there, so I took full advantage."

Along the way he moved to California, then back to England, where he now lives in a tiny hamlet in East Anglia. His return to Britain coincided with his decision to recommit himself to making new music. Dolby's new effort finds him taking a more organic tack than the synthesized sound that branded him early on, but also shows he's as adventurous as ever. The conceptually ambitious *Floating City* is built around three imaginary geographical settings that represent the places he's resided over the past 30 years: England, the U.S. and once again, England.

Aided by several special guests like Mark Knopfler, Imogen Heap and Regina Spektor, *Floating City* is personal and reflective, tempered by an after-hours vibe and a hint of Americana. "I've always liked

that music," he says. "And having spent so much time in America, I believe I'm able to incorporate it." There are even some jazzier elements, most prominently on "Love Is a Loaded Pistol." "I felt like I was channeling Billie Holiday," he says.

Dolby recorded in an energy-efficient studio built around a 1930's lifeboat perched in his garden ("It doesn't float," he concedes), and his new music is being released without the aid of a record label. "After my last label folded, it occurred to me that I don't really need a middleman," he says. "I can record at home and upload it on my own. There's no need to share the revenues—I can do it all myself." He's aware that he faces a challenge easing back into the spotlight after being away so long. "There are lots of kids who were born after my initial records and have no idea who I am," he says. "And a lot of my old fans have lost touch and aren't aware I've returned. So I almost feel like I'm starting over. But I do think the new record is every bit as good as my early work. I'm prouder of this album than anything I've done before."

—Lee Zimmerman