

Q&A



PETER GABRIEL

Injecting new blood into familiar songs with his biggest band ever

PETER GABRIEL HAS BEEN EXPLORING rhythm for practically his entire life. He played drums in rock bands as a teen, before his legendary stint as lead singer for English progressive-rock band Genesis. Since his departure from that group, he has relentlessly incorporated rhythms from around the world and from the cutting edge of technology into his solo music—be it the electronic percussion of “Games Without Frontiers,” the Stax groove of “Sledgehammer” or the African percussion patterns of “In Your Eyes.” So it’s jarring to hear Gabriel’s instantly recognizable voice backed only by a 46-piece orchestra on his *New Blood* CD, live DVD and Blu-ray (the latter available in a 3D version). “Stripping away the rhythm

section leaves a song to swim on its own,” Gabriel observes. “It’s like taking away the swimming aids. In a way, the rhythm section is a flotation device.”

Gabriel has learned to swim without it quite nicely, thank you. His 2010 album of covers, *Scratch My Back*, was his first experiment singing against a full orchestra. *New Blood* finds Gabriel and arranger John Metcalfe extending the symphonic settings to his own material, including songs from his self-titled 1977 solo debut through his most recent set of original material, 2002’s *Up*. In addition to his newfound musical interests, in recent years Gabriel has turned much of his attention to his interest in developing new technology, his charity work—in particular on

behalf of human-rights groups—and to raising his two preteen sons (he also has two adult daughters). We spoke with Gabriel, 61, from his home in London.

How did you adapt your use of rhythm for an orchestral setting?

I started as a drummer, and grooves are still one of the things that really turn me on. On some of these numbers it was quite hard to get the orchestra to sit in a groove. “Digging in the Dirt,” for example, we nearly abandoned because it didn’t seem to be happening, and then we found a way through. For “Rhythm of the Heat,” I asked John if he could try to take the rhythmic patterns of the African drum group at the end of the song and put them on

the orchestral instruments. So we retained some of the energy, drive and interwoven patterns of the rhythm, but transformed them into these other sounds. That is my favorite moment on the album. So there were some difficulties that we had with the rhythmic element.

Did you sing differently?

You milk different things out of the songs. Like “San Jacinto,” “Washing of the Water”—those felt different in this format. There’s a lot of silence in the way we arrange these, so you feel very exposed. You’re very conscious that both the melodies and words are really being heard. People get the weight of each syllable. When you’ve got a rock band steaming away, the vocalist is sometimes just an accompanying color—the core of the energy is in the rhythm section and guitars. Here the orchestra, even though it’s a much bigger instrument, is supporting what’s going on in words and melody.

Do you think of it as one instrument?

In some ways. It’s a pretty amazing instrument, mind you, but it is a whole. Part of what the conductor [Ben Foster] does is stick it all together. He provides the skin that houses this large creature.

How did you go about developing the new arrangements?

John and I talked through composers we liked, and found references for some of the songs. For example, for “Intruder”: We’re both big Alfred Hitchcock fans, so Bernard Herrmann’s name came up. As the arrangements were done, they would often go two or three times between John and me. John is a good player himself, so he can make demos with orchestral synths and samplers. He gives pretty good demo. (laughs) We’d start playing around with those and batting them over the net between us. That was a fun process. We didn’t have quite as much time to do that with my own material, which explains why those arrangements are less radical [than the covers] in some places—although “Rhythm of the Heat” and “Intruder” are more on the radical end of things.

Do your fans behave differently with the orchestra present?

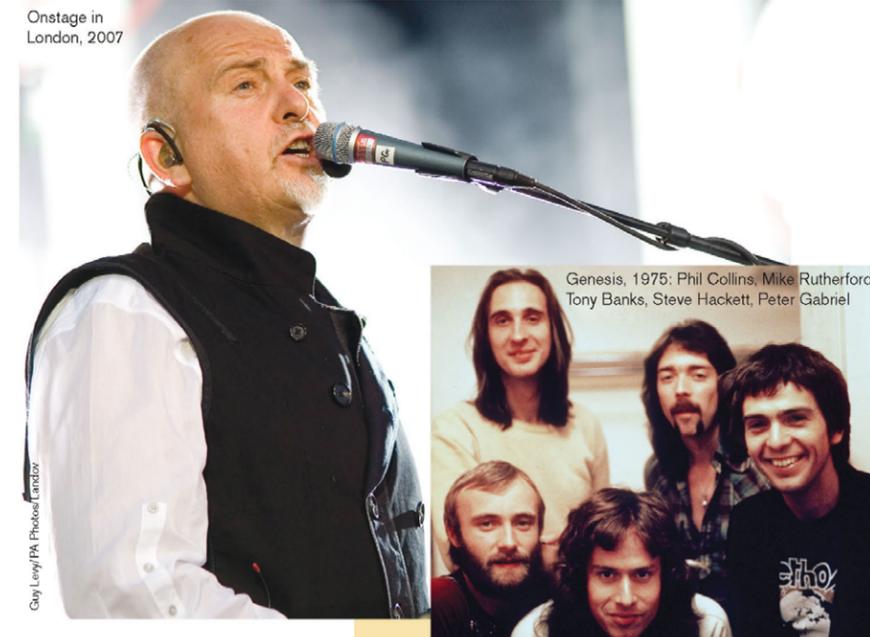
If they come they’re probably going to like it—that was our experience. Not all of them come. But people who were at the gigs were incredibly enthusiastic, and I think they got it. You could see that some—what I would call the “Gabriel-lite” fans, who like “In Your Eyes,” “Sledgehammer” and “Solsbury Hill”

and that’s about it—may not be interested, because it was quite a difficult and demanding evening. On the other hand, we had people who have disliked everything I’ve ever done in my career but who liked these two orchestral records. (laughs) So you win some, you lose some. And for that reason I didn’t feel obliged to do “Sledgehammer.” I felt like I could leave out “Big Time,” “Games” or “Shock the Monkey” and still have something that was interesting. I try to make it work for everyone, and then hope that they will have a way into the music.

After all this time, are you self-conscious about being filmed?

I’m certainly conscious of that at the beginning with all the cameras around, but once I get going I find that I’m thinking about the job at hand. I tried wearing a camera rig at one point, which was pretty heavy,

Onstage in London, 2007



Inset: Armando Gallo

and that was clearly something I was very aware of. But we only did that in the soundcheck.

Why shoot in 3D?

We were born with two ears, so stereo—or multitrack, if you like—is a natural state. The fact that we have two eyes would suggest that 3D is the norm, because that’s how we see most things in life. Wearing 3D glasses is still a little uncomfortable for the viewer, but I think eventually they’ll find good ways of improving that—they’re beginning to already.

What are you working on, tech-wise?

At the moment we’re working on an app store for things that could be useful for people in difficult situations around the world. On the tech side there’s a thing called Gabble, which is a text-to-video-clip and animation converter—a new visual language. It’s been a lot of fun trying to design that. I enjoy brainstorming stuff around that. There are always projects you’d like to see through.

How about a new album?

I have got a lot of stuff in the can. It’s not finished, and I’m always slow at finishing stuff up and doing lyrics. I still love writing and can’t wait to get back in there in January and fire it up again. But I have small kids again, so I don’t want to spend weekends and a lot of time in the studio. It’s much more like a normal working day. Yet I still have two other main activities, which are technology and

‘I still love writing. I don’t feel the muse

has deserted me!’

benefit projects—so the amount of physical hours that I put into music are inevitably reduced. But I don’t feel the muse has deserted me. It’s just that I always wanted an interesting life, and now I have one.

—Chris Neal



‘There’s a lot of silence in orchestral arrangements, so you feel very exposed!’