

Mike Oldfield

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One of the UK's most successful instrumentalists, Mike Oldfield is now embarking on a pioneering attempt to combine music and virtual reality.

Photos: Richard Ecclestone



Mark Wherry

When *Sound On Sound* last interviewed Mike Oldfield, back in February 1995, he was discussing the concept of interactive albums, and had just released *The Songs Of Distant Earth*, one of the first commercial music CDs with enhanced CD-ROM content. Back then, the interactivity was fairly limited and the graphics were presented in a *Myst*-inspired slide-show format for Macs running QuickTime 2. However, it showed a way forward for interactive music in a virtual world, with Mike claiming at the time that "the future belongs to multimedia".



However, after *The Songs Of Distant Earth*, Mike's subsequent album, *Voyager*, left interactivity and electronics behind for arrangements of traditional Celtic standards and some original compositions in a similar style. "The boss of Warner UK at the time was Rob Dickins, a really good man who got involved in things, and he suggested doing a Celtic album. I thought, 'Well, that's quite natural for me,' because I'm half-Irish and I love Celtic music."

After *Voyager* came *Tubular Bells III*, the third instalment of Mike's best-known composition; *Guitars*, an album where all the sounds used originated from the guitar; and *The Millennium Bell*, a musical journey through the last millennium. It's only with Mike's most recent album, *Tres Lunas*, that he's returned to the ideas he'd been working on after *The Songs Of Distant Earth*.

"I spent just over a year from 1994 to 1995 working out how the virtual reality software should work, and although we had a working version, it only worked on a big Silicon Graphics machine that was more like a fridge! The project was basically put on hard disks and stored until modern PCs caught up."

The Game

After seeing in the new millennium with a concert in Berlin where he performed *The Millennium Bell* and a few old favourites, Mike turned his attention back to the virtual reality project. *Music VR*, as it became known, is a bit like a flight simulator, allowing you to explore a virtual world featuring 3D graphics rendered in real time, with a music soundtrack that responds to what the user is doing. I asked Mike about his approach to the project.

"First of all we had to start with the models, and there are masses of models in the whole thing that had to be designed and built — some of them animate, and some of them you can control yourself. I made some of the simple things, like the piano and the snowball — that wasn't very difficult! We downloaded a few of the models from the Internet, and some came from libraries we bought."

Once all the visual design work had been done, Mike needed software to both assemble his ideas and present a run-time version to the user. "I designed what I wanted the construction software to do on paper, what functions I'd need to actually make the interactive world come together. First of all, we had to have a 3D graphics engine, which you can't really buy — you can buy games development software, but that can cost hundreds of thousands of pounds."

In the end, Mike and his team developed all the software themselves. Within their custom editing software, every element is defined as a zone, and you can control the behaviour of every zone and the way it interacts with the user to an extremely detailed level. But perhaps the most interesting aspect is the number of ways in which music and sound can be integrated into the zones. "This zone plays sounds depending on how many rings you've got," explains Mike, referring to the fact there's a game aspect to the virtual world that requires you to collect 'all the rings'.

"You can make the volume dependent on your speed, and how it fades or crossfades with the last track that was playing. There's lots of music in the game that's not on the album, although writing music for the game and album requires completely different ways of working. For the game, the music has to be in small loopable bits, for example."

The Album

After finishing the game, Mike encountered the same problems in attracting commercial interest that he had had 30 years ago with *Tubular Bells*. "I contacted games companies and they didn't like it, thinking that nobody would be interested in it because it wasn't competitive or violent. So I thought 'The only way I'm going to get this out into the world is to make it part of an album package.' Once I had the album, I tried Virgin who were kind of interested, but the Spanish loved the idea and have been doing a great job with it. I gave them the finished album to choose a single from and within two weeks I'd got about seven remixes!"

Given the scepticism that often surrounds remixing, I wondered if Mike found it strange to hear the remixes of his music when they come back. "Since the Spanish have been doing it, I've loved it! Quite often in the past I've given a track to a remixer and it's come back with nothing of the original on it. They've just used the remix as an excuse to make some money and only give it the title — it doesn't have one single bit of the right melody! But the last lot are pretty good."

One of Mike's trademarks is his ability to write a well-crafted melody, and *Tres Lunas* certainly doesn't disappoint in this respect. However, with the album being marketed as 'Mike Oldfield's chill-out album', the thematic approach is noticeably simpler than in previous albums. "For the melodies on a chill-out album, ideally you just want a three-note melody and one chord, and everything's based around the feel of it because in the environments where people listen to that, they just want an ambience. The Café Del Mar in Ibiza was a nice place to go, although not in the middle of the season because it gets invaded by British yobboes — but in the early spring it was lovely. On the beach, you see the sun going down while listening to music." So it's best to keep the melodies deliberately simple for a chill-out album? "Yes."

A good example of Mike's approach to writing simple yet effective melodies can be heard on 'Misty', the opening track. "That evolved out of something that happened when I picked up the guitar two years ago — it just had the right sound and I had to quickly record it somewhere. I know it's only three notes, but it's the way that they're played: the sound and feel of them. So that was going to be a guitar tune, but it was too much for a chill-out album when I played it on the guitar and I wanted something small. I went through one of my Roland synths and found a little whistly, pingy sound with the right echo, and it just seemed to work perfectly. That's my favourite track actually."



This outboard rack houses a TC Electronic M5000 effects unit, Eventide DSP4000 Ultra-Harmonizer, Lexicon 300 effects, Yamaha SPX1000 effects and FMC2 digital format converter, and TC Finalizer 96K mastering processor.

Tubular Bells Revisited

At the time I visited Mike, he was busy working on his latest project: a rerecording of the original *Tubular Bells* album, which will be released next year to coincide with the 30th anniversary of his breakthrough release. I wondered if it was something Mike had always wanted to mark the occasion by doing.

"Yes, I've actually wanted to do it for ages, and there are sound business reasons for doing it as well. The original *Tubular Bells* was for Virgin Records: I signed a contract when I was 19 and got a measly royalty rate for it, I still do, and it's still my best-selling album. I wasn't even allowed to rerecord it until a couple of years ago, but now the original contract has run out I'm free to do it."

So what's it like revisiting something you did 30 years ago? "It's great! I don't have to think about anything! I can just concentrate on making it sound as good as I can. The way I'm working is that I've got the original

16 tracks in a folder in *Logic Audio* so I can instantly refer to what I played 30 years ago.

"I'm being fairly faithful: it's the same instruments, the same tunes and the same arrangements. The idea is that it's a remake, not a remaster or a part two, but sometimes I'll change a few notes here and there to make it more elegant. It's lifting the original version up, a bit like getting an old Rolls Royce that's rusting in the garage and putting it together, painting it up nicely and chroming it or whatever. It's the least stressful project I've had for ages!"

Since recording technology has changed considerably in the last 30 years, I wondered how the recording the same music with today's technology compares with his original approach. "It's basically the same, aside from using different machines to record it. There's still the double-speed things I do, but instead of a tape machine we use Pro Tools, which can record at half speed now. But the biggest thing is to have the automation on the mixer. With *Tubular Bells* we had three or four people moving knobs to prearranged chinagraphed positions." However, in addition to the new technology, Mike's also complementing his setup with "two little bits" from the original Manor desk used 30 years ago.

With all the interest in surround sound at the moment, I was interested to find out whether the new *Tubular Bells* would be remixed in surround; but as I mentioned the quad mix of the original, Mike interjected: "That was rubbish! It was hard enough to mix it in stereo with the technology at the time, let alone trying to do it in quad. In the end, all they did was put a delay on the rear speakers and moved joysticks around — it wasn't even real quad, it was this special encoding quad. I did have a Quadraphonic studio just after that, around *Hergest Ridge* time, and I used to work in Quadraphonic.

"I'm not even very impressed with THX sound and surround sound and all that — it doesn't really do much for me. I think it's psychological because as animals we're always focused to the front, and if something is behind you, you instantly turn, it's sort of danger awareness. It's disturbing to have music from behind because you always want to turn around and face it."

So will he be doing a 5.1 mix of the new *Tubular Bells*? "I'll let somebody else do that! It probably will be released in 5.1 and we've got the facilities to do that."

Return To The Origin

Tres Lunas is Mike Oldfield's 21st studio album, and seems to contain more references to his extensive back catalogue than most. 'Return To The Origin', for example, features a sound world very reminiscent of *Tubular Bells I* and *II*, while 'Tres Lunas' features short phrases of the infamous *Tubular Bells* opening ostinato and quotes from 'Dark Star' on *Tubular Bells II*. However, Mike himself denies a conscious effort. "I don't do that intentionally. When I'm working, I sit there and think 'I want that sound,' and so I delve into my library of sounds — I don't think 'Well, now I'm going to refer to something I did a long time ago.'"

On the subject of sound sources, I was interested to know what Mike's current favourites were. "I sort of build and find new things for every project, and the latest thing is the virtual synths in the Mac. Some of them are a bit of a pain to use, but the sounds are lovely." One of his virtual instruments of choice at the moment is Emagic's *EXS24* — "there's a very good library with that" — and aside from the *Logic* instruments, Mike also has some Native Instruments products like the *B4* virtual Hammond.

Another feature of *Tres Lunas* is the saxophone sound that Mike triggers via guitar, which is featured on tracks such as 'Misty'. "It's nothing new really, it's a MIDI guitar triggering a saxophone. These days, the guitar-to-MIDI converters are much faster than before, so you can play in real time with no time lag, using a saxophone or whatever you want."

So does Mike now use a guitar-to-MIDI converter instead of keyboard for most parts? "No, only occasionally. When I want something to sound more natural, I'll use the guitar, and I won't quantise it. Some of the saxophone I did on keyboard, some on guitar, and some with editing. It's a mixture of everything — I'm not a purist who has to do it in one way, I often use three or four techniques to do something on the same track."

Compared to *The Songs Of Distant Earth*, where Mike first experimented with looping, the drum loops on *Tres*



The well-appointed live room, with grand piano (left) and Mike's guitar rig (right). The control room, pictured at the start of the article, is based around a Neve Capricorn console.

Lunas seem noticeably more aggressive. "Drum looping is an art in itself and I'm very lazy at it — I hate going through CDs of drum loops. But I was lucky enough to bump into a couple of programmers in southern Germany and I asked them to do all the loops; they worked in their own studio and sent things back and forth as MP3 files. I'd send them a very simple version of the loop with the track and, after two or three days, their version of it would come back, then I'd edit it and sometimes ask them to make changes. The amount of effects they'd put on something just like a snare drum is amazing, and they'd even plug in guitar effects boxes — it's an art in its own."

With Mike's self-confessed enthusiasm for virtual instruments, I asked him if he uses many effects plug-ins himself. "I've just discovered them, but there's so many different ways to work now: I can use the mixer, I can use the plug-ins in the Mac. Ben, my engineer, brought all these plug-ins with him, but where do you start? You don't have time to go and try them all out! You have to rely on someone saying 'Well, that's a good one.'"

Is it conceivable, then, that there are too many possibilities for musicians these days? "You can't say there's too many possibilities. I would think for somebody starting out, first of all, you don't need to be much of a musician any more to make very respectable-sounding tracks. With applications like *Rebirth*, you can make whole tracks using just this piece of software, and you can also download other people's work and modify it."

Logic & Merlin

Having previously used C-Lab's *Notator* on an Atari for sequencing duties, and a Fairlight before that, Mike's been using Emagic's *Logic* on a Mac since the time of *The Songs Of Distant Earth*, and even offered his own suggestions to Emagic in those early days. "They contacted me to ask what should be improved, so I told them what I thought was wrong and they gradually implemented all those suggestions. I think in the early days you couldn't pack audio into folders, and you couldn't loop audio."

These days, the Mac in Mike's studio runs *Logic Audio Platinum 4.8* on a plasma screen, which has literally become the centrepiece of the studio. "The system I've got now is fine, although it's out of date already because it's a couple of years old. But I'm going to leave it now as I've heard that Apple have bought Emagic, so it's not worth upgrading until we see what they're going to do. I'm happy with the software and machine I've got; it works well enough, so I'll leave it for a couple of years."

Despite being a long-term *Logic* user, Mike admits that he finds doing everything in *Logic* a little "fiddly", and uses a Fairlight Merlin as his main studio multitrack recorder. "I start things off and record everything into audio in *Logic*. Quite often I'll have bits of audio and bits of MIDI all running at the same time, but I hate that, because with rerecording *Tubular Bells* [see box], there's probably about 30 or 40 different sections. I like to say 'I'll work on that, and now I'll work on that.' So every time anything's nearly finished it gets printed onto the Merlin."

"I've still got the Neve Capricorn and instantly I can say 'Let's work on that section,' roll to the right part on the Merlin, bring up the desk and it's all identical in a few seconds. If we left things running live in MIDI, it would be impossible to reproduce that: you have to be able to load up all the samples and try to pick all the right effects — I always print effects as well — but the Merlin is tremendous, you can instantly get back to the previous state of anything."

Given that Mike spent so long working with tape-based multitrack recorders, I wondered if this was part of the reason he liked the Merlin so much. "Well, it's a better system. Not the Merlin in itself, but the whole of the way I work. It's incredible to be working on a big complicated mix and be able to change one guitar note in a couple of minutes. The other thing is that the Merlin interfaces perfectly with the desk automation. I like to have a whole bank of faders because I play the mixer like a great big instrument — I can't do it all with one mouse, although the new *Logic Control* looks fabulous. The Neve has these locate buttons and I can press these and instantly go to any part of the whole album: the automation comes into life, and you get a great big display — it's heaven!"

The End Of Music?

Mike Oldfield has always been something of a pioneer, from the success of *Tubular Bells*, working with music and video on *The Windchimes*, to combining music and virtual reality in *Tres Lunas*. "It's not because I want to pioneer. It's because I get an idea for doing something and find out how to do it. You should see my notebooks on *Songs Of Distant Earth*, or *Tres Lunas*! I just love it! I've got an inquiring mind and the pleasure I get from the whole process is great."

So is Mike impressed with the way technology has progressed? "Yes, but it's still bits and pieces all over the place. The virtual synths are fantastic, but you can't have more than about five of them going at once before it uses up all the



Mike's outboard also includes some rackmounted desk EQ modules (top), Belgaman Electronics C102ED3 compressor, UREI 1178 and 1176LN and Valley People Gain Brain dynamics processors.

processing power. And the sampler [EXS24] doesn't have any effects on it, so you've got to use plug-in effects. It's like we're still at the beginning, but it will be lovely in 10 years time, and I think Apple having Emagic is a very good thing, because you'll have a real system in a couple of years. Hopefully, maybe, I won't need the Merlin by then.

"I kind of feel that the whole music scene has come to the end of its development — it's sort of gone into a feedback loop, with people doing the same things and recycling the same pieces of music. This is why I've tried to branch out into virtual reality and music with *Music VR*, so that's my effort — let's see what other people do. If *Music VR* inspires any one else to try experimenting with different things, it's been worthwhile."

Tres Lunas is out now as a double CD (with the album and a demo version of the game). You can authorise the demo from Mike's web site at www.mikeoldfield.com and, if you have a fast enough connection, download the game and demo without needing to purchase the album. **SOS**

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