

Album by album

Jim White

The Dirty Three sticksman and serial collaborator selects his key long-players

“SOME people always talk about ‘serving the song,’” muses Jim White, “which I don’t agree with. ‘Serving the song’ is usually code for not getting in the way, but a lot of time you want to make a stand, you know?”

For all his protestations, the Melbourne-born, New York-based drummer has been a crucial, dynamic part of countless excellent albums – from Cat Power, Smog and Bonnie ‘Prince’ Billy, to his own work with the mighty instrumental trio Dirty Three, alongside Mick Turner and Bad Seed Warren Ellis.

“A lot of these things were done very quickly,” White explains. “Some people like you to have the songs before, and sometimes they like you to do it on the spot. It’s always a battle playing the drums, too – generally, if it feels good, that’s the version.”

For the last few years, White’s main interest has been Xylouris White, his ferocious duo with Cretan lute player and singer George Xylouris; their third album, *Mother*, is out in January. “George is as into improvising as I am,” says the drummer. “Through playing with him I feel like I’ve learnt a lot about the nature of what might be called improvisation, which turns out to be more of a continuum of music.” **TOMPINOCK**

Toward the low sun: Jim White in 2012



With Warren Ellis (left) and Mick Turner (right) in ‘Impatient’ instrumental trio Dirty Three, 2005

VENOM P STINGER MEET MY FRIEND VENOM

NO MASTERS VOICE, 1986

White teams up with future Dirty Three guitarist Mick Turner in this squat-dwelling garage group



The first band I played in was called People With Chairs Up Their Noses, and Mick had a band, Fungus Brains, and our bands would play shows together. So that’s how I met Mick – I went round to his house to borrow a Laughing Clowns record to tape. Then Mick went to England with the Moodists and I started a band – Al [Secher-Jensen], Dugald [McKenzie] and myself, and some of the Fungus Brains guys – but then when Mick came back we made Venom P Stinger. It was a really exciting time to make a band. I had dropped out of university and someone gave me a room in this huge squat in the city. I’d have my drums set up in this huge room – you probably have four apartments now in that room that I was practising in. I’d play and make up stuff. In some ways this is one of the more intentional records [in my discography], I guess. I had this idea at the time that I wanted the drums to be really fundamental in the

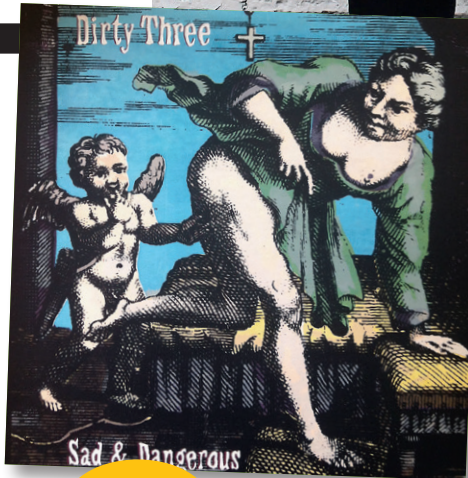
songs – like, the songs wouldn’t exist without that particular drum part. I can probably play these songs now, a lot of them are a couple of small phrases that are repeated. We recorded it in one day, we just ran through it.

DIRTY THREE SAD AND DANGEROUS

TORN & FRAYED/POON VILLAGE, 1995

Warren Ellis joins White and Turner to form this long-running, expansive instrumental trio

I came back from America with Venom P Stinger, and Warren had moved to town. We started playing in a bunch of bands together, then we formed Dirty Three with Mick, basically to play in this bar, The Baker’s Arms. There we would play some of these themes pretty long, and the sound came from that. We took a photo first of all, with our cars, then we made up some tunes, and then we went down to the bar and played every week there. It was always just the three of us – people would suggest getting a singer, though. I like this record, because it’s great to make a record when



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you’re not making a record, you know what I mean? You’re playing the songs, you’re not going, “Oh, from the 24th of April we’re making a record now...” It was just us, in a room, working out the stuff. Mick had a four-track, but one track didn’t work, so it was a three-track. Wherever Mick’s four-track was, that was Scuzz Studio, his bedroom at the time. He’d set up a couple of microphones and that was the record. There were no close mics on the drums, just the three of us playing with three microphones around the room. Warren and I at that time were playing in five or six bands together. I remember him driving up to my house one day – he’d just picked up the cassette from Mick’s house – and I remember

hearing that sound from the car. The Dirty Three grew naturally, and people reacted to it naturally. We just followed our noses. The band in general just happened, we made a band for the bar – it looks unusual [in lineup], but it wasn’t conceptual, it just happened. We put some of these recordings on a cassette [Dirty Three, 1992], and that cassette found its way to America. One day I was in a record shop and someone said, “There’s these people from America trying to find you guys, they want to release you...”

CAT POWER MOON PIX

MATADOR, 1998

White and Turner team up with Chan Marshall for this chilly, sparse exercise in restraint – recorded at the height of the Australian summer



Chan had heard Dirty Three on a jukebox. We did a show in Boston and one in New York, and then Chan had heard Dirty Three on a jukebox. We did a show in Boston and one in New York, and then Chan turned up a little later in LA and asked Mick and I to go on tour with her in Germany. So we did that, then later on we were all in Australia one summer, and she asked if we could come and record this album, at the same studio where the Venom P Stinger record was recorded. It was

called KAJ back then, but by Moon Pix it was called Sing Sing. Same room, though. I think some of the tracks Chan did in Mick’s bathroom, maybe they were demos. I remember she had that [backwards] beat sample for “American Flag”, and I played along to that. The way we worked varied song by song – for “Cross Bones Style” she had that beat, and she showed me it. “Metal Heart” she didn’t have anything for, but I’m sure we talked about it.

“I had this idea that I wanted the drums to be fundamental in the songs”

JIM WHITE

I remember, with the drum part coming in, then dropping out and coming in again, being very happy knowing when it was done. I think someone said, “Do you wanna play any more on that?” I said, “No, it’s done.” It was just the two of us, or the three of us, in the studio with an engineer. There were no windows, so you’d go in there and it was like its own little world for a couple of days. I think it was just after Christmas,

so everything was shut down. It’s a really beautiful record.

DIRTY THREE OCEAN SONGS

ANCHOR & HOPE/TOUCH & GO/BELLA UNION, 1998

The trio enlist Steve Albini for one of their finest, most natural records



Mick and I were both living in Chicago at the time, and this was done at Steve Albini’s studio there.

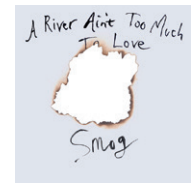
Princess Diana died while we were making it – I thought of it the other day when it was the anniversary. *Sad And Dangerous* we made when we were just finding our sound, then the next two records were done in the midst of massive touring. Then *Ocean Songs* was done with a bit more calmness, maybe we were more prepared. From a drumming point of view, I’d come up with this fluttering thing with the brushes. It was actually in response to this pedal Mick had – in those days, you couldn’t just press a button and make a loop, so it was never quite adding up. I brought that approach to my drums on the record a little bit. It was recorded live, all in the same room, with some overdubs, particularly from Warren, in the only studio they had at Electric Audio at the time. Steve’s got

amazing microphones. I’ve made a lot of records with him, and in that studio too. Dirty Three are pretty impatient in the studio, we like to get on with it, so often the engineers have to do what they’re doing on the fly, in terms of levels and stuff. “Deep Waters” is a long song, but I doubt that we did much more than a couple of versions each. Because we don’t have vocals, we can play in the same room – we don’t ever take out one of the instruments and replace it, that’s not really how it works. Years later, we did ATP and they asked us to play this album – I thought it was great.

SMOG A RIVER AIN’T TOO MUCH TO LOVE

DRAG CITY/DOMINO, 2005

The final Smog album was learnt at Bill Callahan’s house and honed on the road



The core musicians on this album were Bill, Connie [Lovatt] on bass, and me. We went to Bill’s house in Texas, where we learnt the songs and rehearsed them for a few days. I think he’d just moved there, so it was just a suburban house, and we set up in the lounge room. Then we went on a little tour before

recording; we probably did eight or 10 shows, just the three of us in a station wagon. Bill drove. We came back and went to Pedernales, a studio outside of Austin, and put them down. I think it was a really good way to do it. I had first met Bill in Melbourne, and I played on a radio session with him when the drummer wasn’t available at the last minute. And it eventually ended up on a record, [2000 EP] “Neath The Puke Tree”. I became aware of Bill’s music around the time of [1997’s] *Red Apple Falls* and [1996’s] *The Doctor Came At Dawn*. Then I was living in Chicago, and I went on tour with him a few times. I love this record – “Say Valley Maker” is probably my favourite song on it. I came up with this beat with a roll in it for “Rock Bottom Riser” – it’s part of the style I was doing at the time. I don’t think there was much discussion about this record. Bill will have these songs that are so worked out, but then he’s very happy with a first take on the drums or something. The same with [2003’s] *Supper*, too; that was done very quickly. When Bill presents a song, it’s all there, and then it was just up to Connie and I to get the bass and drums worked out. Once again, I think it happened pretty naturally. It’s beautiful to hear those songs so early – when he brings a song to you, it always feels like they’re all there. ▶



Rock solid: with improvisational collaborator George Xylouris

BONNIE 'PRINCE' BILLY THE LETTING GO

DRAG CITY/DOMINO, 2006

White heads to Iceland for one of Will Oldham's finest LPs – which also spawned the drummer's recent project, *The Double*



This was with [guitarist] Emmett Kelly, [bassist] Paul Oldham and [vocalist] Dawn McCarthy, who

is amazing on this record. We recorded in Iceland, it was done in the winter so it was really dark about 22 hours a day. I think this one has a really specific mood, and I like the drums. Sometimes I play a lot of notes, but sometimes the best thing you can do is realise that maybe it doesn't need so much. I played a little bit of piano on this album [laughs], which is funny if you would have seen it. Will's great like that – when I toured with him a couple of years after that, I sang for the first time, which was really fun. What I noticed on *The Letting Go* was what an amazing singer Will had become. He'd do different takes, adjusting his vocals, and I hadn't realised what control he had developed. When we finished the record, we went out to the countryside for a day. It's so beautiful there. Emmett and I got to know each other on this tour with Will, and we both expressed interest in this idea that we wanted to have a bar band. So I went out to Chicago in the winter, we rented this room and played the basics of rock'n'roll all day long. On the afternoon of the second or third day, this change happened, and we realised we'd discovered or invented a new rhythm, 'the double'. "Shit!" It was

no longer a bar band – if you find a new beat, what are you gonna do? You can play middle of the road with the double – you could play Air Supply songs with the double – but the way we chose [on *The Double's Dawn Of The Double* LP, 2016] is super-rocking and repetitive.

NINA NASTASIA & JIM WHITE YOU FOLLOW ME

FATCAT, 2007

A collaborative record with the New York singer-songwriter – created in a unique fashion



Nina's made a lot of records with Albini, they have a really good working relationship.

They first approached me for a record called *Run To Ruin* – we did that with Albini out in France. She always had these big bands with these beautiful arrangements, and I suggested that we do a record and I would do all the analogues of harmony and accompaniment on the drums. I came up with this approach of doing it – Nina would write the songs, and bring them to a room we'd rented, then we'd play them for the first time and record them on a little disk recorder. Then we'd record them the next day, and the next day, and the next. Nina tends to play the song the same each time, so I would improvise different

parts on the spot. Then we listened to the versions and constructed songs out of the four different takes with different drum parts. Then I learnt them as integrated parts, and we went to Albini's. The record's about 34 minutes long, and it took about that long to record once we'd got the sounds. Then we had the rest of the day off, and the next day we mixed it. I think this record is very successful on its own terms. The parts sound pretty improvised, but every note is where it's planned to be, which is not something I'd normally do. Just acoustic guitar, drums and voice... I think it's really great.

DIRTY THREE TOWARD THE LOW SUN

ANCHOR & HOPE/DRAG CITY/BELLA UNION, 2012

The trio's most recent LP, and one of their best, nearly wasn't released



We hadn't done a record for a while, so we had a go at recording and then put it aside – we didn't

know if we had it or not. Then quite some time later, I was recording with Cat Power in Malibu, and we had days where not much was happening in the studio. So I was driving around and I thought I'd revisit it, and it sounded really good. I wrote to Warren, and Mick and Warren said they had been doing that too, and we realised it was a record. The record before that was

[2005's] *Cinder*, which was very different – a lot of shorter things. I think that's a good record too, but I like *Toward The Low Sun*. I put it on last night, for this interview, and it sounded good, like it had a fresh energy and stuff. Something like "Furnace Skies" was a bit of a different strand coming into the Dirty Three. We don't have any plans for another record at the moment – everyone's very busy, everyone lives on different continents. It's different from when we were on the road all the time. But it's fine, it's a fun way to be. Let's see what happens.

XYLOURIS WHITE GOATS

OTHER MUSIC RECORDING CO, 2014

The start of a beautiful (and pretty noisy) collaboration with the Cretan lute player



We met back before Dirty Three started. Melbourne has a huge Greek community, and George is

from a family of great musicians, so he ended up living in Australia for eight years. I met him socially – when we met, George couldn't speak any English at all, and my Greek is still bad now. That's how I heard Cretan music for the first time, seeing him play. Then I heard his dad's music [*Antonis Xylouris, aka Psarantonis*], and for 20 years or more I listened to that for enjoyment, not with any thoughts of playing it. When Dirty Three started, we asked George to sit in with us, and that was very good. Then he moved back to Crete with his family, and George and his wife were always saying, "Come to Crete", so finally I went there a few years ago. We went to the studio and started playing, and that's how the band started. That was four years ago, and we've been doing it ever since. Along the way we also met [*Fugazi's*] Guy Picciotto, so *Goats* was recorded in his studio. Guy's amazing, he's like the extra member of the band. We have a band too, George, Guy and me – we play with the filmmaker Jem Cohen, who I've known for years. A lot of the Xylouris White records are really early takes – but there's one song on *Goats* that we recorded 16 times in a row, maybe more, and it was actually the last version that we used. I guess essentially George is a Cretan folk musician, and we have a number of improvisations on that record – or at least, I guess they're improvisations, because how do I know? 🍷

Xylouris White's Mother is out on January 19 on Bella Union

"On the second or third day, this change happened, and we realised we'd discovered or invented a new rhythm"