



Psychotropia (Terrascopia) - the Nick Nicely story

Nick Nicely's name has woven itself in and out of my life in music more perhaps than any other artist.

The period 1980/1981 when Nick's two singles were released coincided with, and in some ways precipitated, my own first faltering steps as a writer; and looking back now on what is today in its own right *the* definitive feature article on Nick Nicely, the one written by Nigel Cross for 'Bucketfull of Brains' issue 5 in 1982, one realises that it was then that the building blocks of the Terrascope were first falling into place, with Nigel (of course), Colin Hill, myself and other regular PT contributors such as Jud Cost and Fred Mills all finding our own voices in the Bucketfull at around the same time. We were writing as fast as

our fingers could tap on our typewriters because suddenly rock music was *exciting* again; to own records from the heyday of psychedelia was no longer a guilty secret - and that was in no small part thanks to Nick Nicely, or more specifically perhaps to an obscure, renegade single entitled 'Hilly Fields (1892)', a record described at the time by Paul du Noyer in the NME as *'the best psychedelic record made since the '60s - multilayered, lovingly crafted and endlessly complex - it could come straight off 'Magical Mystery Tour''*.

Nick Nicely's name back then was a shorthand for cool, a secret handshake to a world of magical music. It would open doors. Doors to private clubs, to tiny record shops which pandered for exotic tastes in psychedelia. *You*

know 'Hilly Fields'? You're obviously one of us. Come on in. Musicians would warm to you as an interviewer immediately if you managed to slip the code words "Nick Nicely" or "Hilly Fields" into the conversation. XTC's Andy Partridge is today often quoted as having said that 'Hilly Fields' was the impetus for him to kick-start the Dukes of Stratosphear!, but there were others too: I can remember having similar conversations with Robert Wyatt, Robyn Hitchcock - and even with Nick Saloman when we first met in 1985 (I was particularly impressed to learn that his Auntie Winnie, later to have an LP named after her, had actually lived near to Hilly Fields - a public park in Brockley, South London, notable for its many late Victorian houses, from whose heights one can see all across London and Kent. Even today

there's a brooding and other-worldly atmosphere about the place...)

Today rightly acknowledged as a genuine psychedelic masterpiece, 'Hilly Fields (1892)' was backed by '49 Cigars' - an oft-overlooked gem, but then almost anything would inevitably be overshadowed by the majesty of 'Hilly Fields'; as Nigel Cross mentioned in Bucketfull of Brains however, it's *"an incredible song, with a haunting melody, a wide-eyed vocal style which recalls the spectre of Syd Barret's 'See Emily Play', fragments of acid guitar like George Harrison's best from Sgt Pepper and snatches of weird dialogue a la 'I Am The Walrus' or a more evil 'Hole In My Shoe'..."*. The single had been preceded in 1980 by the independently-released 45 'DCT Dreams', a song owing more of a

debt to Kraftwerk or the quirkier aspects of Devo than to mid 1960's psychedelic pop, although the lyrics are pure 1967 acid whimsy - and the single's B-side 'Treeline' was definitely more akin to the heady extremes of 'Hilly Fields', a transpositioning of 'Revolver' era Lennon & McCartney to the 1980s right down to the dependable Maccaesque bass line and raga guitar notes, although the production smacks of contemporary 1980s technology with layers of synths replacing the orchestra. Two more songs were slated for release as a third single in 1982, until Nick "further discouraged EMI and it was dropped": 'On The Coast', a brave attempt to craft something distinctly different to 'Hilly Fields', and a catchy little ditty entitled '6B Obergine' which at one time was intended to be the B-side to 'Hilly Fields' and, intriguingly, was originally called 'GB Obergine', until Nick decided 6B was a better title after seeing a Nigel Cross typo in Bucketfull of Brains! That was pretty much it though, apart from occasional reports of Nick Nicely sightings over the course of following decade, including once in the credits on a Paul Roland record (Nick: "He called up and asked me to do some backing vocals down in Kent somewhere. Afterwards he sent me what I understood was unmixed copies of the tracks and I made a couple of mixing suggestions. Oh dear! It turned out the tracks were finished. He was upset and we never spoke again! I've done no other sessions as Nick Nicely...") and a handful of live gigs in London during the '90s, including one at a Science Fiction convention ("People in weird costumes with suction pads on their hands and feet were climbing on the walls and ceiling!")

At the tail end of 2003 the Tenth Planet label released a limited-edition LP of collected Nick Nicely material entitled 'Psychotropia'. Nick himself hasn't listened to it, claiming it to be unfinished and incomplete,

and described his impression on seeing a copy thus: "I've seen so many dazzling sleeves on psychedelic artists' releases, on Woronzow etc, and my jaw dropped when I opened the package. Hitherto, I've always overseen my covers. Gutted would describe the feeling..."

The good news however is that all the songs and more besides - including the title track, 'Psychotropia' itself, which isn't featured on the LP and about which more later - are now² available on a CD entitled 'Psychotropia' released by Sanctuary Records. 'Hilly Fields' gets pride of place for obvious reasons, with it's original 'B' side 'DCT Dreams' included as well - but it's an extended, and towards the end far trippier, version of the latter than on the original release. 'Treeline' and '49 Cigars' are also both present and correct, along with '6B Obergine' and 'On The Coast' (two versions! The second dates from 1983 and, according to Nick, "was recorded at Good Earth Studios with Chris [Take That, George Michael] Porter producing. The session was called after I was informed that I had only a couple of months left at EMI. It was not a success. Most producers at that time were utterly in thrall to what was regarded as the 'ultimate' drum sound, e.g. Bowie's 'Lets Dance', so these were stuck on the track. I got the 24 track and did some run throughs onto cassette at another studio of bits of the arrangement in '84 and its from these that the track was constructed in November '03 with new drums and bits")

Indeed, it's amongst the minutiae of the previously unheard material that some of the finest nuggets can be mined from this collection. Far from the exhibition featuring a single masterpiece propped up by a miscellany of lesser works, 'Psychotropia' is an astonishingly cohesive collection, very nearly a concept work despite having taken a quarter of a century to record.

The oldest piece on here is, fittingly perhaps, entitled '1923' (actually it dates back to 1978). Despite vague pretensions of electronic symphonia it nevertheless shows Nick had ambitions to craft the perfect psychedelic pop song from the very beginning. The pulsating, synthesised 'Beverly', elegantly mysterious 'The Other Side' and 'Remember' all date from 1983, the latter being closest both in spirit and lyric to 'DCT Dreams' (incidentally, not just 'Remember' but almost all the songs cross-reference one another, with numerous mentions of '18th of July', itself a recurring theme in 'Hilly Fields' itself, beaches, coasts and constant allusions to "tresillian skies" - Tresillion actually being a street name from close by Hilly Fields)

'Elegant Daze' sounds very much a product of it's time (1985); 'On the Beach (The Ladder Descends)' on the other hand fasts-forward to 1998 and yet somehow ties in perfectly with material that Nick recorded over a decade before. The other song dating from '98 is though a revelation: 'Everyone Knows' features that immediately distinctive Nick Nicely vocal sound, but nicely distorted and set against a backdrop of what sounds like cicadas on amphetamines - and for the first time on vinyl a glimpse of Nick Nicely the damaged acid guitar god! It's not something I would have anticipated from an artist better known for psychedelized synth-pop either - either the strikingly *avant* new recording 'Heaven's Gate' or the subliminally trippy 'Hundred Years Later' which dates from October 2003 might perhaps be a more predictable direction for him to take - but a hint can be gleaned from the end of the quite literally tripped-out closing number, 'The Doors of Perception' (a recording which dates from the '96/'97 period, about which Nick says today "if the wind's in the right direction and the lighting is soft it all seems to make sense... I don't suppose

you can make out any lyrics through the murk but they're the most pro drugs you're likely to hear!) - and in case further evidence were needed, one needs look no further than 'Psychotropia' itself: a truly majestic Nick Nicely *tour-de-force* in the tripped-out, freaked-out 'Tomorrow Never Knows' mould with every trick in the psychedelic paint-book used to full effect and a guitar break that'll have melting butterflies emerging from your speakers, fluttering over to tickle the back of your neck and becoming one with your stomach! *This* is the song that'll silence the doubters who maintained Nick Nicely never quite scaled the heights again after 'Hilly Fields', a song which captured people's hearts and minds not just because of it's multilayered "psychedelic" arrangement, not just because it has a memorable melody and unforgettable lyrics, but because of a combination of all those things.

But, enough of my opinion. Let's give the man himself the opportunity to tell the whole story his own way. Ladies and gentlemen, I give you: Nickolas Laurien *aka* Nick Nicely:

Where did it all begin for you, musically speaking, Nick?

Up until the age of 5 or 6, all I heard was classical music - quite keen on it too; there are family memories of me chanting "Mozart Mozart" louder and louder 'til they'd play it. I think the orchestral vibe on some of my songs might come from this influence. Anyway an elder brother got me into pop radio and that was that. I don't need to emphasise what a golden period the 60s were for radio and to say I was entranced borders on understatement. The 'Pirate' stations featured heavily of course. This continued until the end of the decade when either the music went downhill or my tastes changed. The Island compilation 'Nice Enough to Eat' was my entry into a more underground

world. People like Free, Tull, Spooky Tooth, Heavy Jelly, Crimson ('21st Century Schizoid Man' - what a track!). Lennon's 'Cold Turkey', which I bought, also seemed to do it for me.

So it's not classic 1960s psychedelia which was predominantly influential for you then?

The 60s are significant, of course - the great songwriting especially when combined with innovative arrangements and strange atmospheres. Just strangeness on its own was not for me though. Take the painters of the 'Fauvist' style (1900s). They were one of the links in the chain between the Impressionists and the later abstract movement. In their work there is still form, you can still see the faces, landscapes, still lifes etc; but instead of (say) a flesh

coloured face, it'd be blue or green, the trees red and all a bit fuzzy etc. What I'm getting at is, the Fauves took form and then warped it, and Nick Nicely stuff mainly has form (ie conventional songwriting) and then that is subjected to warp. The Beatles with their songwriting priorities always intact produced, for me, many of the masterworks of that abstraction influenced time. They brought, as did many others of course, their experimental, acidic influences to the studio but never forgot to write a song. Very inspiring. It was as the great bands of the mid 60s started to take their great writing into the foothills of the abstract, bringing psychedelic experimentation into the mainstream that for me was the peak. I've read somewhere someone suggesting that '66 was the coolest year in rock history. I'd roughly agree, but would

include the years either side.

I've always thought you were a bit of an underrated guitar player - who would you claim as inspirational in that department?

My first instrument was harmonica which for some reason never gets onto any Nick Nicely tracks and then a 14 quid guitar strung with what seemed like chicken wire. I've been affected by many of the greats. That incredible rushing feeling of release you can get... Several times over the years, it has looked like guitars might be on the way out before again we were all reminded of the uniquely powerful emotionality of the instrument and they returned in full force. I admire Hendrix but when he went psychedelic, for me, it was the peak. The 4 minutes of 'Voodoo Chile' never fail to leave me

stunned and it remains in my top few recordings ever made. Listening to the incredible disorientating emotional eddies of that guitar playing, I'm transported.

Just as an aside, are their any latter-day bands or musicians who similarly "transport" you?

The most inspiring stuff I've heard would likely be from Sundial, The Lazily Spun and guitar maestro Mr Saloman's Bevis Frond. I like things to get spaced out sometimes, with long wig out tracks from such as Krom Lek, though Nick Nicely's are generally shorter and more densely written.

I suppose you're thought of more as an electronic musician than a guitarist primarily?

I think the appeal of Kraftwerk



Nick Nicely band 1977: (L-R) Ian Rathbone (dmz) Rob Burns (Bass) Charlie Parsons (fake stand-in for Gary Sheldrake(Guit/Vox) and Nick.

style electronic music was as a pathway to take songs into abstraction. 60s soundscapes were/are a tried and tested way to achieve this but in the early 80s it was a fresh way to go about it, offering new freedoms. The resolutely 60s/acidic vibe of the lyrics/songs at the time seemed to blend strangely well with the 80s/60s soundscapes. I've read a recent reviewer comment that Nick Nicely had a genre all to himself with this hybrid. Certainly I didn't feel, at the time, a strong connection with my electronic contemporaries beyond the use of analogue synths. Also the naivety inherent in the best electronic music influenced the songs from this period. I think that this naivety was partly a result of the previous punk rock period which blew away the emphasis on musicianship, technique and elaborate writing. I would also hazard an opinion that the early 80s was the first period that sonic experimentation took the pop mainstream since the psychedelic 60s. It was also the last hurrah for these islands as an en masse world force (1/3rd of the US market some early 80s years)

Lyricaly the songs were most definitely not of that era though.

Lyricaly there is a historical influence. 'The past is another country' someone said [the Marxist historian Eric Hobsbawm - Ed] and Nick Nicely is always after otherness in the work. Living in the 'Brockley Conservation Area', a beautiful Victorian tract of South London leading up to the open skies of Hilly Fields, was extra inspiring. There is also a strongly self destructive lyrical edge to several post Hilly Fields tracks. In 'Beverly' for instance, a long lost love haunts the singer with the bafflement of her watery, self-induced oblivion.

What was the first band you were in?

The first band I was in was an acoustic trio with Eileen Machievska and Kirk Foster who

had enormous energy and no little talent. The decade had just changed and the 'folk boom' was still going so we played original songs in 'open Mic' slots on the same bill as people like Richard Digance, Diz Dizley and Jasper Carrott as well as many other very talented players who's names escape me... Johnny Silvo's one (I was reminded of that reading the latest Terrascope!). I still have a tape of that first live performance but don't worry, its not on the album. I was sideman in the trio doing harmonies and simple lead guitar stuff. This all took place in the home counties.

And then London beckoned?

London beckoned - and I started at a South London college, soon striking up acoustic musical alliances and usually recording the results live onto cassette. I remember performing in scratch electric bands in a local bar. Then I met one time Status Quo roadie, bass player Rob Burns, and he had ideas about setting up a Nick Nicely band. He'd met Gary Sheldrake a guitarist/singer/writer who'd played for a day or two with Ainsley Dunbar's Retaliation. Anyway we wrote and rehearsed, a lot, often in the grim basements of the squats we now lived in. Occasionally Trevor Walter would play drums, he later found fleeting chart fame with the band The Look. (He's also on the Psychotropia album drumming on '1923'). We did a few gigs as the Nick Nicely band and that would have been that...

Except the opportunity to record came about - how?

.... Except that Gary, who now worked in a bank, suggested that he could get a cheap loan and that we, for three quid a week each, could buy a home recording 4 track recorder and little desk. That was when the madness started that runs to this day. I learned the rudiments of putting sounds together. The other two guys got into other things but I never did and carried on writing

and recording slightly weird pop stuff and then, after a year or two, started to approach publishers. After a while hassling, I did get a deal but it became apparent that my work was not, however hard I tried, really that coverable. I recorded '1923' (among others) in my bedroom in Brockley at this time. In the room underneath was Tyrone [Thomas], bassist with punks Alternative TV. He was very reasonable about the live drum kit pounding through his ceiling! Quite a litmus of changing times, that big old Brockley house. When I arrived it was communal living with eating and cooking together, big sacks of brown rice and incense in the air. The punks moved in one by one and I left as they started to smash everything. Beautiful Victorian conservatory destroyed by the light of the furniture burning in the garden!

When was your first experience of a "real" recording studio?

I did some crummy demos in the publisher's little studio. Billy Bremner from Rockpile did a couple of sessions for me, also Tom McGuinness, ex Manfreds, was around. Anyway that would have been it had I not met keyboard meister Geoff Leach who'd just invested in this new analogue synth, so we recorded some entirely different stuff based around that magical instrument. I remember being called in to the publisher boss's office in 1980 to be sacked. I played him 'DCT Dreams' and credit to him, he did a 180 degree about face in the 3 minutes it played!

Combining analogue synths with psychedelic pop was certainly a novel idea, especially for then.

I've heard and read of other peoples experiences at the time and one thing that comes through is the great vibe that seemed to emanate from analogue synths then. That buzz faded within a year or two, but doing 'Treeline' and 'DCT' felt like walking on air. I've always had something of an orchestral bent and Geoff Leach's

synths sounded a bit like an abstract London Symphony Orchestra in the front room to me. Originally we were going to be a duo, but he got fed up with the endless all night (downtime) sessions and lost faith in the project so I paid him for his work in cash and carried on alone. On an 8 track machine with large arrangements like those, there was lots of 'dropping in' on the tape. If you listen to the start of the second verse on 'Treeline' you'll hear the piano repeating part starting late in the verse. That was because I had to drop the tape machine into record and then leg it as fast as I could out of the control room to the piano, I never made it on time!

You decided to self-release the two songs as a single - how did that come about?

I took the pair ('DCT'/'Treeline') round the labels. Most passed. Charisma ummed and ahhhed. Ivo Watts of 4AD invited me to a meeting. Unfortunately I took, as a pretend manager, a mate of mine and the stupid berk got carried away. 4AD instantly dumped the idea; Ivo later told me they decided to do that because they'd never have him back in the building! I shouldn't have taken him of course but there's a saying in the business, 'An artist without a manager is like a puppy off a lead'. As a lone artist selling a tape, you need a thick skin. So, I gambled and pressed up a thousand copies of 'DCT'/'Treeline'. I had them in a great pile in my bedroom in a top floor flat in Brockley. One morning I got up a bit earlier than usual and joined my flatmates in the room next door - they'd been up all night listening to records. Ten minutes later there was an almighty bang. We'd been struck by lightning and a row of chimneys had crashed through the roof into my bedroom. Through the dust and rubble, now partially open to the air, stood my pile of DCTs - untouched. Like in those pictures of St Pauls Cathedral in the blitz. The bed

was piled with bricks.

How about promoting it, that must've been difficult?

I started hassling the radio stations. It was in the days before DJs became robots with computers deciding what to play. If they liked something, they played it. They could break acts (Radio 2 is still partly like that). Nowadays it is common knowledge that Radio One, for instance, spends more time checking out a band's marketing programme (and birth certificates!) than the actual music, so this route to daytime exposure is closed for many no matter how good they are. Anyway, I think they were tickled by my artist-as-plugger role as well as by the futuristic/old fashioned track I was playing them. Commercial stations started playing it on daytime shows and Radio One let it be known that if a big label was behind it they wanted to give it a big push. That was August '80. By the time it did come out on a major label Jan '81, unfortunately, it was considered 'old product'.

'DCT Dreams' was a minor hit in Holland. [*'DCT Dreams' for a while made it into the Dutch "Tip Parade" of songs which were tipped for chart success. Intriguingly, when 'Hilly Fields' itself was released the Dutch all but ignored that, but a couple of years later Nick was invited to appear on Radio VPRO to speak about his thwarted pop career, and it was then that the unreleased third single 'On The Coast' received it's sole airing.*]

An unscrupulous businessman at my publishing company proceeded to do deals on the tracks in seven other territories, pocketing all advances and royalties without telling me. It turned out that DCT was a 'radio hit' in Europe with minor chart action in Holland. Ask any band and they'll tell you that the real income comes to the writers from radio plays. The Performing

Rights Society, who collect the money on behalf of the writers, has a rule: in order to join the Society a writer must have three commercially released copyrights. Nick Nicely only had two. So where did all this income end up? You guessed it... in the pockets of the greedy businessman. So I'd gambled and unbelievably, it'd come off, apart from the fact that practically all income generated had been stolen.

When did you start recording 'Hilly Fields'?

I was broke. There was nothing for it but to gamble again, so I sold my home studio in December 1980 and started recording 'Hilly Fields'. A lot of it was done at Alvic 16 track studio in Barons Court - you can see Al's (*half owner of Al-Vic - geddit?*) cheery mug on the sleeve of Cat Stevens' Catch Bull at Four album on which he played bass. Geoff Leach did a keyboard session or two, Ian Pearce came down for the first of many drumming stints and significantly, I'd reacquainted with a childhood friend Ricky Godlee who happened to play cello! There was a nice vibe at Alvic and Mike (Alaric) Gregovitch who worked with me in the studio was definitely on my psychedelic wavelength. Making the track however was extremely harrowing. It wouldn't complete, money ran out, etc. I have a copy of 'Hilly Fields' from March '81 (four months in) and its useless. In desperation I had to rewrite sections and start selling off household items! Necessity is the mother of invention though as they say and the operatic style of singing on the chorus, for example, was invented very late in the day, and by late April after extensive post production, it was there along with a slightly inoffensive B side, '6 B Obergine'.

Being broke there wasn't the option of self-releasing it this time I suppose?



Hilly Fields photo: Nick Farey

Right, it was back to the routine humiliations of shopping 'Hilly Fields' around to the labels. There was zero interest until I met a 'DCT' fan, Hugh, in the EMI foyer. He was now in A&R there. He was something of a maverick, signing less voguey things like Marillion, Thomas Dolby etc, and was responsible for Kraftwerk and Iron Maiden at the label while Dave Ambrose did the Duran, Kajagoo thing in the office next door. I imagine signing to a company like that sounds like a big step up with the door to Abbey Road always open and whole orchestras at my beck and call... sadly that wasn't the case. Then I did a silly thing. I thought I needed a manager so I stuck a pin in the list... and came up with people who unbeknown to me had just ripped EMI off. I never saw them in the EMI building in my 6 months with them, I'm not sure they were even allowed in there! They managed the Eurythmics as well, who I'd meet shuffling miserably down their corridors. Within months they'd have new management and be superstars.

When did you decide to change the B-side from '6B Obergine' to '49 Cigars'?

I got the feeling that the B side could be bettered so in Nov '81 - two or three days before the record was due to be cut - I took a chance and got the brilliant 'Hilly Fields' drummer Ian Pearce (who tells me

he has since recorded with Van Morrison among others) back and recorded '49 Cigars' in 2 days. Most other people do things this quickly all the time I hear, but for me its unheard of. "Intoxication" in the studio is not something I'd recommend but that session couldn't seem to go wrong. Nick from Kissing The Pink brought his guitar along, but sadly he succumbed to the intoxicants freely available and I had to play his guitar. He did manage, however to make a call to a new girlfriend which we recorded and used [*"Right Kensington tube station then..."*] To my eternal shame I refused him a session fee! How Rudi Pascal engineered on that day is still a mystery. As my life flashes before me in my final seconds on this earth, I bet Rudi and the 49 Cigars session will be included as I recall the best of times.

When did Hilly Fields come out - early 1982?

Yeah, January '82. I was unaware of any effort made to promote it. I've read articles maintaining there was a big push. Not so; there were no ads or any promotional material or effort whatsoever. Radio One were pleased to get the copy I gave them - EMI hadn't bothered! To what extent this was down to corporate desire for revege on my management or the fact there was no album to back it up and no gigs etc, I can only

speculate. Suffice to say commercially, it dropped like a stone. Its 'fame' was pure word of mouth.

There was some talk of Trevor Horn producing the follow-up?

I spent several hours in meetings and on the phone with Trevor Horn on the subject of him producing the next track. I was flattered/very intimidated at the prospect but what killed the idea I expect was that after producing 'Hilly Fields', I'd got the idea I could produce and possibly gave the impression of being a 'problem' artist (also as a side issue I was a bit worried by all his sonic cleanliness!) He did well to put his efforts in a different direction.

Whereas in actual fact nothing else has been released until now, and the only thing that was recorded were demos. Why was that?

The main problem looking back was that I wasn't able to buy another home studio so I was turning up at studios with ideas generated on my only instrument, an acoustic guitar, and then attempting to make orchestral keyboard music with unfamiliar instruments that were lying about the studio and all with the clock ticking in a high pressured day or three. I don't seem to be able to function in this kind of situation. However, the tracks from this "black" period, like 'Beverly' (Nick Nicely's Scott Walker doomfest!) and 'The Otherside' seem well written and to my ears, have power. This situation continued up until '84 when the periods of breakdown started to join up. The last yell as I went under was 'Elegant Daze' which a recent reviewer has described as the most 'normal' track on the vinyl Psychotopia album. Its not how I remember it!

It's scary how many artists I talk to who seem to have a self-destruct button that they press just when things seem, on the

outside, to be going really well. Having been there myself I can relate to it perfectly - but that doesn't help to explain why it happens!

I'm no exception - many of us have been attracted by the strange allure of self destruction. The bleak, wintry beaches of these songs were often a backdrop to an imagined walk into the sea's cold embrace. The later song 'On The Beach' (the Ladder Descends) relates to this period. I remember walking along an isolated wintry Suffolk beach. I was standing by the water when a rescue dinghy

Obviously a grim time, but not working on Nick Nicely was a help. Like when you stop banging your head against a wall. Mike Alway from eL records got in touch but I was just too fucked. I started out doing shit jobs in '86 as a reintroduction and there it would have probably stayed except a very bizarre saviour rode to the rescue... Step forward Maggie Thatcher, who successfully tattooed pound signs onto the inside of the eyelids of the nation (they're still there of course) and heated up the housing market. My Brockley hovel suddenly glittered to the landlord.



An early draft of the cover art for 'Psychotopia' - the final version featured different letting (at Nick's behest) and the unrequested addition of some miscellaneous "Victoriana", including a false moustache and a buttonhole

suddenly came up and stopped 20 yards away, turned off its engine and the man in it just stared at me. After 5 mins staring at each other, I walked back up along the beach while he watched me for half an hour or so. I asked about this with the locals and they explained that there had been several recent suicides on that coast and the rescue services were jumpy.

How long did this sort of thing go on for?

I was out for about 2 years.

I struck a good deal for my departure and hey presto after 7 years I had a home studio. I didn't want to go back to Nick Nicely, so with a partner and a different muse I began making a small living in music.

So this takes us up to - when? The end of the 1980s?

Yeah. The 90s were (after the 80s) much sunnier. One great habit I got into was doing a couple of months each winter in cheapest SouthEast Asia where I rediscovered my acoustic guitar

blues playing and have had many a jam (and some gigs) with excellent musos from all over the world. Sitar, flute, Tabla, guitar, bongo, even Digeridoo players. As a general rule when jamming with people from other cultures: Play less.

Weren't there some Nick Nicely gigs in the 1990s though?

There were! We played to several hundred foreign businessmen in a sci-fi themed corporate party in West London. Interesting show to do, it was with great lighting and effects, monsters and several Captain Kirks. 'Otherside' and 'On The Coast' went down particularly well I recall. We did several of these shows. Also one time there was a gig at London Zoo. The main problem doing live Nick Nicely shows was that to do the original tracks justice, with all their different instrumental/abstract arrangements and changing voice tones, was not really possible without serious investment in musos and hardware. When Nick Nicely tracks are recorded, suitability for live performance is never a consideration.

There's always backing tapes to fall back on?

There's been talk of bringing the album to the live stage, and tapes would obviously be necessary to get a full abstract psychedelic effect. There is a pool of good and enthusiastic musicians in Hamburg and my recent relocation there has brought a new vibe. Anyway the two informal rehearsal jams so far have been encouraging.

So where to for Nick Nicely from here?

Where it goes from here, we'll have to see... I don't get the feeling that my musical 'muscles' are starting to atrophy. It's almost a cliché that pop/rock writer/creators do their major work in their twenties. The other arts don't have this so much. This leads me

to speculate on whether I am working in the normal pop/rock field. Looking at my creative method superficially, it seems there's more in common with authors or painters - the endless lone application, reworking and concentration on all aspects of a piece. Possibly tomorrow I'll find the skills I've learned will have deserted me, but I don't expect it. Whatever happens, I expect to be recording until my nerveless fingers are finally prised from the fretboard. I can't imagine stopping.

At least Nick Nicely now has a complete "glittering back catalogue" and not just the one song to be remembered by.

More of a glittering back Post-it note really.

Nick Nicely was interviewed in April 2004 by Phil McMullen, © Ptolemaic Terrascope, 2004 - with love and thanks to Nick himself, a charming and affable fellow who made every step of the path a pleasure to follow

I don't claim to have originated the observation that it was Nick Nicely who indirectly inspired the Dukes of Statosphear - for all I know Andy Partridge was telling the story to anyone who would listen around that time - but it certainly gets mentioned early on in our interview with Andy in issue 3 of the Terrascope in 1991:

PT: What gave you the idea for doing a "psychedelic" record - I mean, there wasn't exactly a lot of that sort of thing around in 1978: the Soft Boys had been dabbling, but the first "new" psychedelic single I can recall was Nick Nicely's "Hilly Fields" in 1982...

AP: Right - when I first heard "Hilly Fields" I thought "Shit! This guy's beaten me to what I want to be doing!" - he didn't presumably do it for the same reasons that I wanted to, which was partly as a "thank you" but also because I wanted to be like all those bands I'd loved as a kid, but when he came out with that record I realised he'd pipped me to the post. It wasn't until 1984 that everything clicked into place and I was able to spend a bit of time doing my psychedelic tribute.