



APPLES IN STEREO -

a Terrascopic interview by *Jud Cost*

Getting the extremely wiggly Robert Schneider to sit still long enough to take his picture must be a nightmare for a professional photographer. Schneider's wife, Hilarie Sidney - who doubles as mother of their young son, Max, and as the drummer in Robert's band, the Apples In Stereo - confirms that her man always hits the deck running. "Every morning he sings me little wake-up songs," she says.

When I first interviewed this energetic studio whiz kid in 1997, Schneider's foot was tapping so hard under the table it made the french fries on his plate appear to be auditioning for the "Dancing Vegetables" scene in Walt Disney's *The Sorcerer's Apprentice*. The historical info that leads off the following Q&A comes from that chat - and another a year later for a piece on Neutral Milk Hotel. Both bands, along with the Olivia Tremor Control, were forged by four schoolboy pals who met in Ruston, Louisiana more than 20 years ago.

Intended as an update on Schneider's activities since we last spoke, the balance of the interview was conducted in late 2001. It's now officially out-of-date, since the new Apples album, *Velocity Of Sound*, arrived in the mail this morning. I've tried to retain Schneider's unique syntax here, but a 100 percent verbatim transcript - with all his double-clutches, 180-degree pirouettes and on-the-fly self-edits - would make this a hopelessly confusing read. When you're dealing with a musical genius you just hold on tight and go along for the ride.

PT: Robert, I think you may top Steve Wynn and Peter Buck as the most intense musician I've ever interviewed. More words per C90 than anybody.

RS:(Chuckles) No, no, I just got out of the car - but I probably don't need all the caffeine in this Coke. I don't know about intense. I usually think of myself as dweeb-like (laughs). No, no, not really. I just feel hyper. I work it

out of my system. I feel calm in my mind but my body's taking off. I'll be all right after I have a beer.

Where did you grow up?

I grew up in Capetown, South Africa, until I was six. It's really beautiful there, where the Atlantic and Indian Oceans meet. We used to go to the beach all the time. They had huge waves. My dad was born there and my mom was born in East London, then grew up in South Africa. When I was really little my parents used to love Cat Stevens. When I started listening to music I really liked the Beach Boys' *Endless Summer*. After a year in Alabama, we moved to Ruston, Louisiana when I was seven, and at about ten, in 1980, I was becoming aware of American culture.

You don't have any remnants of a South African accent.

No, because I grew up in the (U.S.) South and the accents kinda cancelled each other out (laughs).

You've known the other three original Elephant Six members - Jeff Mangum of Neutral Milk Hotel and Will Cullen Hart and Bill Doss, both of Olivia Tremor Control - for a long time.

I met Jeff in the second grade (age seven). He chased me around the playground with a (soft plastic) whiffle-ball bat. He claims he was trying to invite me to the game, but I thought he was threatening the new South African freak-kid.

How did you and Jeff finally become friends?

I remember going to a few of his birthday parties and over to his house to play a few times. In the fifth grade I took guitar lessons and, right afterwards, Jeff took drum lessons in the same room. But things really started to click between us in sixth grade when we went to a Cheap Trick concert at the Louisiana Tech basketball arena in Rustin. Jeff's mom dropped us off at The Pizza Inn, and the pizza was really hot, and we were in a real hurry to get to the show, so we dumped ice all over the pizza to cool it down. The concert was awesome! We ran into Will there - it was the first time I'd ever met him - and we all stood together up at the very front against the barricade. It was really cool because Rick Nielsen threw out a pick and it fell down on the ground between me and Will and I got it. When we went home Jeff got a tennis racquet and I had a baseball bat and we air-guitared around in his room to "Dream Police" until his mom told us to shut up.

Were you and Jeff still pals during those "difficult teenage years"?

In seventh grade Jeff had these two friends who didn't like me. One of these guys, who I thought was my friend, told me to meet him over in the woods to mess around. But he had set it up with the other guy, who was really my arch-nemesis, to beat me up. Jeff called me and warned me about it, so I didn't get my butt kicked. The next day in class he suffered social humiliation when they passed out little stickers of a rat to everybody in class - that Jeff was somehow a rat-fink.

What got the Elephant Six phenomenon off the ground when you guys all reached college age?

I don't know. It was just a few friends who liked the same stuff - underground '80s college radio stuff, '60s stuff like Pink Floyd and the Velvet Underground - and we would turn each other on. We were really interested in writing songs, and I had a four-track and I'd help those guys record stuff. I was into Cream and Hendrix when I started playing guitar in the sixth grade. We were really fascinated by rock stars like the Beatles, Sonic Youth, Syd Barrett, the Byrds, Led Zeppelin and R.E.M. And I loved Jethro Tull. It started out as a close-knit group of friends with similar goals and outlooks, but not the same. And now it's gotten to be a bigger, close-knit group of friends.



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I loved the 'Her Wallpaper Reverie' EP. I think you could put 'Strawberryfire' on Sgt. Pepper and people who'd never heard the album wouldn't know the difference.

That song was based around the chord progression from 'Fire' by the Beach Boys (from the lost Smile album). We didn't sample it, but I kinda took the groove of the song and the bass line. I tried to recreate the vibe of it without infringing copyright.

No, of course not. You can't copyright a bass line, for God's sake.

Exactly. That song was a major production. We started it on the eight-track, and then I put the track into the computer. It was massively edited, just as we were going - all sorts of little psychedelic things in the background. Then we put it back to the eight-track and put the band instruments over it. Without the synthesizer and slide-guitar sound effects it's pretty sparse: just bass, drums, electric guitar, acoustic guitar - and an organ running through a synthesizer. We did lots of tape manipulation to get it to sound all murky.

It sounds like your 'I Am The Walrus.'

That's exactly what we were trying to do. I wanted it to be about - and to sound like - a girl listening to 'Strawberry Fields Forever.' I wasn't trying to mask that at all. We tried to replicate the way the drums go "abugga-bugga-ba" at the end of 'Strawberry Fields' by putting Hilarie's bass drums through a tape delay.

Does fatherhood mean you log less studio time these days?

It's not fatherhood exactly. The trouble is, in the last year and a half I've worked so hard on everybody's records and on our records - and for so many years we were touring all the time as well - that I'm going through a bit of a pajama-wearing phase; not literally, but figuratively. I have been getting a lot of work done on my new Marbles record. I have a little studio room at home now that I've been working in just about every day. I used to put in fourteen-hour days, but now I'm trying to get done within five hours. It's good because that's how I got burned out on doing studio stuff - spending so much time holed up in there. It's not really burned out. You just run dry, but not through lack of inspiration. You just don't want to go through the effort of putting it down. So, I took like a year off (laughs).

I can't imagine you ever giving up recording permanently.

I love recording, but when I turned 30 earlier this year I finally decided that for now I'm not going to produce records of other people anymore. I love doing it but it takes so much time and energy that it started to make me need breaks. And when I wanted to work on my music I'd feel too burned out and I feel it's my duty to myself to pursue my own kind of vision. I don't want to spread myself too thin. I read recently something, maybe it was from Randy Newman, something like that to have the creativity pour out of you, you have to go stand out in the rain. Being creative is a very fulfilling thing, but it takes more out of you than anything else.

If it's a choice between your own music or recording someone else, the choice should be obvious.

You could go two different directions: you could work with everybody you want to work with and that you'd be good to work with, or you can pursue a certain one thing. You can't do both. And I really want to pursue a certain one thing right now. I just got sick of setting up microphones, untangling cables or fixing a blown transistor in a tape machine. Now I'm back to the mode where I'm recording more quickly than I have in the past and it feels really good.

'Wallpaper Reverie' seems more psychedelic than anything you've done before.

Wallpaper Reverie was what I think is cool about psychedelic records, maybe like the Dukes Of Stratosphere. We were trying to get more at the sad and druggy aspect of psychedelia rather than the loopy and sky-high aspects. We wanted to go for the post burn-out, the coming down. We didn't want it to be like the Olivias or Pink Floyd. It's not crazy psychedelic in the sense of being a trip, but psychedelic in terms of being relaxed, like Spacemen 3. The idea was to have you listen to a bunch of different singles from an era, like the White Album. This girl Ruby is kind of sad and listening to these records by different bands and the records are talking to her. And the songs are about her. I also like the disconnected little spliced-up-pieces aspect of Brian Wilson's Smile. It takes a musical theme through different settings, in a quasi-classical way, and gets scarier as the thing goes on. But it's also meant to sound cut-up and incomplete, like the Smile thing. And I wanted to do a concept album, but that seemed so obvious so I said, "Let's do a concept EP."

See, I didn't know any of that, but it works well just as a bunch of cool pop songs, too.

Well, that's really what it is. The concept is more how you're inspired as you're making it. We didn't force it in the packaging. We put kinda clues in: the song titles as you go along describe the day and it says something like, "Ruby Dreams The Day Away." We actually put a lot into the theme if you felt like being into it, but I didn't want to bludgeon you with it since it's kind of pretentious anyway to do a concept record. I don't know. Maybe it's stupid.

No, it's not. It's good to hear you explain something the average Joe - me included - wouldn't pick up on. OK, how about the next Apples album, The Discovery Of A World Inside The Moone?

I got the title from a renaissance astronomical text that I saw on TV on a science show. Moon spelled with a "e." It's not about Percival Lowe, but some older guy. Anyway, he looked up in his telescope and saw things on the moon he interpreted as being structures and canals. I saw it and thought, "That's so good it's gotta be the title for the new album." The sound of that record is kinda futuristic but it's also old-fashioned and that's kinda the way I think we are.

"Go" sounds like Brian Wilson belting out soul stuff on the Wild Honey LP.

Awesome! Thank you. Yeah, I love Brian's R&B sound. For one thing, Carl - I love it when his voice sort-of shreds. It sounds so great. And his voice has its own groove, not a Motown groove, it's not even a white groove. Boom, bah,

boom, bah. It's a weird Brian groove that's great. It's stop-starty. I love that stuff. I think Brian's R&B is just as original and holds up as well as anybody's. I read somewhere that at one point Brian wanted to send the Wild Honey master tapes to Motown and have them cut it as an R&B sound. I know how he must have felt. I'll be sitting in the studio and think, "Wow, this sounds just like .38 Special." But what would Motown have thought if they'd gotten those Wild Honey tapes, or Good Vibrations? That would have been really far-out.

Well, the Four Tops did a mighty fine version of Michael Brown's Left Banke song 'Walk Away Renee.'

Wow, they did? I've never heard that. That's so cool. But the Motown sound is so symphonic. The idea behind Moone was to put fewer instruments on it but to have every instrument sound more interesting or tripped-out. Instead of six rhythm guitars like on our earlier records there might just be one here. I wanted instruments that you could actually hear, that weren't obscured by three thousand other instruments.

I've heard you've been working recently with Andy Partridge of XTC. How did that come about?

I've been recording this Orchestra Fantastique album, the new Marbles record but it's not going to be called that. I thought that for some of it I might want to collaborate with some of my heroes. Rather than a solo record I wanted it to be a fantasy band. Maybe I could send Chris Knox something. So, I started with the hardest to get because I had some time. The first three people I thought of were Paul McCartney, Brian Wilson and Andy Partridge. I thought, wow, probably impossible, but it would really be cool if I could work with any of these people. Spinart sent Andy the record because we were on the same label in England, Cooking Vinyl. So he got the records, but they had gotten shoved under his bed. Then he found the records and he really, really liked them. He called Spinart and said he was definitely interested in collaborating, and he told Spinart to have me call him.

That must have been pretty exciting.

Are you sure this doesn't sound too egotistical? After I hang up I know I'll be thinking, "Oh, fuck! I'm the biggest blabbermouth and egotist in the world! Was the whole good time just a mirage?" Just so you know I'm not guiltlessly flinging my ego around.

No, no, this is really what I want to hear. So, tell me about calling Andy Partridge.

I was really nervous and didn't call him for three weeks. I couldn't get my nerve up and kept wondering was it worth it? Maybe Spinart was just blowing smoke up my ass, telling me he was interested. Nobody wants to have pie in their face, especially from a hero. But it was great. He was just so friendly, right off. He was real talkative. It was good that he broke the ice. Our personalities meshed very well and then we engaged in songwriting - it just happened so easily. We'd talked for an hour and then he'd ask me what I had. He turns the tap on really quickly, not one to sit around and mull over the first creation of a song.

I take it you're writing all this stuff over the phone, rather than exchanging tapes.

Exactly. I'll sit in the kitchen with the phone and play him my ideas on acoustic guitar or he'll play me his ideas. He uses two phones, one to talk and the other by his guitar - and it sounds great. One time he called me up and says, "OK, I want to write a song with two bridges and all sevenths chords." And it was a great song, such a rocker that we're going to play it in the Apples. Then I'll have song ideas I'd never been able to get anywhere with, and he'd take them off into a chorus, or he'd add some transition. In a three-hour conversation we'll usually write three songs. And we can make changes really quickly without pissing anybody off. He's a real tweaker and he goes from his gut. He'll just launch right into a melody.

Does the "unhip/retro" label ever bug you very much?

You know, I think It's good to not always be chasing what other people think is hip. You should chase what, at your purest and most naive time, you thought was the thing. It's good to just chase that for the rest of your life. As soon as you lift up your head to look around, your art is doomed.

Robert Schneider was interviewed by Jud Cost, © Ptolemaic Terrascope, 2002