

**Ed O’Brien** never planned to make a solo record. As a guitarist with Radiohead, who over almost three decades and nine albums have established themselves as one of the most innovative and influential musical forces of our time, he thought his artistic side had its outlet and was happy to spend any downtime from Radiohead with his family. Plus, he wondered, would it really be necessary? “Thom, Jonny and Phillip are making music,” he says, “and I’m like, ‘The last thing the world needs is a shit album by me.’”

But suddenly a switch was flicked and the songs came pouring out of him. That creative surge resulted in ***Earth***, an album of rediscovery and adventure by O’Brien under the moniker **EOB** that deftly veers from moments of delicate folk to euphoric house, its songs seamlessly pinned together by unswerving melodic hooks and candid lyricism. A spirit of collaboration runs through it, from the production team of Flood, Catherine Marks, Alan Moulder and Adam ‘Cecil’ Bartlett to the extraordinary musicians O’Brien assembled to help bring these tracks to life; bassist Nathan East, drummers Omar Hakim and Glenn Kotche, and The Invisible’s multi-instrumentalist leader David Okumu. Portishead’s Adrian Utley appears on two tracks, “Shangri-La” and “Sail On,” whilst Laura Marling duets with O’Brien on stirring closer “Cloak of The Night.”

But every group of collaborators needs a leader, and *Earth* is all O’Brien’s vision. “I wanted to make a record from the heart,” he says. “I wanted to make something direct. I wanted to talk about love, your family in the immediate and the wider sense, where we are on the planet, the bigger picture, life and death. I wanted to make a big hearted, warm and colorful album… something hopeful and full of love.”

The working title for the record was *The Pale Blue Dot*, after the emotive text by Carl Sagan that accompanies a photograph taken by the *Voyager 2* spacecraft of the planet from six billion kilometers away. Sagan’s words resonated, providing a perspective for the chaos of our times. These words combined with the emotion and spirit running through the prose of Walt Whitman’s seminal “Leaves of Grass” inspired the spirit of the music that was emerging.

It all started in Brazil. That was where *Earth* came to life. Ed and his family moved out to the Brazilian countryside at the end of 2012. After setting up a home studio and dabbling with the idea of making an electronic record, a listen to Primal Scream’s landmark *Screamadelica* was O’Brien’s eureka moment. “I thought, this is it… I want my music to have that joy, that light, the depth and breadth of that album… elements of dance, soul, ambient… Uplifting in parts.” He immediately picked up an acoustic guitar and started writing, the new direction further influenced by a trip to Rio Carnival. “Carnival was another eureka moment… an extraordinary explosion of rhythm, melody, dance, light and joy… I felt there was a thread right through *Screamadelica*, rave and carnival.”

The O’Briens returned home in summer 2013 and Ed hunkered down in a remote cottage in the shadow of the Cambrian Mountains in Wales to begin writing songs. As the material for the album was taking shape, Flood offered his services as producer having heard some of the demos. “I had my man, my producer… He’s probably my favorite producer. The breadth of the stuff he’s done, from Depeche Mode, PJ Harvey, U2, Foals… he’s a sonic maestro.”

They rented a big house in Wales and over three weeks, in the Autumn of 2017, O’Brien and his house band – East, Hakim and Okumu – got down the bones of the record. A year of tinkering and re-working followed at Assault & Battery Studios in Willesden, London. “The house band was so good for some stuff – like “Olympik”, that eight-minute song, is take four, us playing live in the hall – but other stuff needed a different approach. Any record that I’ve been involved with, that’s been of any merit, is always a journey.”

You can hear that on the resulting album. *Earth* is a record with dirt on its tires. Opener “Shangri-La” ushers you into O’Brien’s hopeful worldview, swaying between syncopated beats and twisted rock. It was written four years ago, four days after Glastonbury, still on a high. “I’m no happier than when I’m in Shangri-La at Glastonbury, three in the morning, hanging with the tribe.” “Brasil,” meanwhile, opens up *Earth*’s sonic palette, a track that sounds expansive and minimal at the same time. “It’s about endings and beginnings, being in a dark place and emerging into the light.” A track that morphs from a tender opening into a heightened-state rhythmical banger, it’s the key to the whole record. “It’s the heart of it, it’s got carnival… melancholy and joy.”

Trying to be direct with his vocals and words was essential for O’Brien. He knew everything else would flow from it. The rolling grooves of “Deep Days” is about family and community bonds. “It was the hardest song to deliver because it’s a song of devotion, a song from the heart.” The dreamy, displaced strums of “Long Time Coming” is a song about loneliness. “Olympik” is another track injected with the spirit of an early morning rave at Shangri-La whilst “Mass” is an intimate, slowly blossoming epic that was inspired by the NASA film *Hubble* which happened to feature his friend, the astronaut Michael Massimo. “When you hear Mike talking about space and looking down upon the earth, it’s magical, beautiful…. poetic.”

“Banksters” disrupts the cosmic peace, a glam-rock-style rage against the economics of our time, and the stark, plucked acoustics of “Sail On” is an affecting tribute to Ed’s cousin who died during the album’s production. It finds hope in the idea that death might not be the end. “Maybe this is just a holding pattern? Our spirit… our soul lives on.” It features guitar from Adrian Utley, who also features on “Shangri-La.” “He’s a wonderful, big-hearted soul and beautiful guitarist.” The closing “Cloak of The Night” is a raw, nowhere-to-hide ballad with a duet between O’Brien and Laura Marling at its center. “It’s such a privilege be able to sing with a singer like Laura… she is such a wonderful artist… The song is about a couple simply holding on in the middle of a storm, which could be their relationship, it could be what’s going on in the world… or it could literally be a storm.”

And then, following five years of writing and recording scheduled during any possible break from the making and touring of Radiohead’s *A Moon Shaped Pool*, *Earth* was finally completed. “I see this as part of a bigger story…. A trilogy perhaps…I’ve really just started.” It has been a long, necessary process, and O’Brien has emerged a different person. “You have to keep moving and finding the things that inspire you and that resonate… there’s a music that I’m chasing… this feels like the right start.” Earth marks a new beginning for Ed O’Brien. From here, he can go anywhere.

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