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# STEREO-TYPE

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**FREE**

## PORTISHEAD



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# PORTISHEAD

## Defenders Of The Faith

After *Dummy*, we were kind of lost in the wilderness," Portishead member Geoff Barrow says of the interim between then and now, after the release of their genre-defining debut and their most recent follow-up, *Portishead*. "It was that whole point of 'What do we do now? Where do we go?' Then we really realized that we had to look deeper inside ourselves, rather than changing styles."

Few groups in this day and age confront this sort of problem, but since its very inception, Portishead has never operated like many bands before it. Formed in 1990, the creative nexus of the group has centered around singer Beth Gibbons, DJ/programmer Barrow, guitarist Adrian Utley and main engineer David MacDonald. Yet Portishead's music does not suggest so much the creations of a modern-day rock group as they do compositions of a core group of musicians for whom the entire span of 20th century down-tempo music is their touchstone. Not surprisingly, when *Dummy* was released, the media concentrated on only Geoff and Beth as the main figures behind Portishead, ignoring Dave and Adrian's contributions. "It was always the four of us. Adrian co-wrote everything on *Dummy* and co-wrote everything on here. And I've been working with Dave for six years," Geoff relates. "So it was more of a perception of what we gave to the press rather than it being anything different."

Setting forward to work on the current album, *Portishead* were set on taking more control over the sounds being created in the past. Both David and Geoff note with pride that only two samples from other sources—a snippet from a Ken Thorne soundtrack, *Inspector Clouseau*, and a loop from rap group the Pharcyde—were used on the entire album. The rest were originally composed by Portishead. "It was difficult the way we were working this time, because we were all just using our own samples," says MacDonald of this procedure. "And we had to put in hours and hours of work creating our own samples, and we went through hell and back, because you never see a tune completely finished. And this went on for twelve/thirteen months."

Portishead have already been receiving much criticism for the finished product ever since the release of "Cowboys" earlier this summer. Much of it revolves around the group's reticence to move on from their trademark sound. Barrow and MacDonald both stress that this choice comes from a desire to maintain Portishead's integrity in a dance music world dominated by ever-shifting musical trends. MacDonald, in particular, mentions his admiration for "that old 70's ethic where people used to make albums, good albums, and then you would get the next album, and it would be a continuation of the last one. You're not going off into streams like everyone does today, [where] somebody makes an album one month and the next album has to have a drum and bass tune, even though they're from another area of music. I don't think it's honest. I just hear cash registers ringing when people do that." (Incidentally, Portishead are one of a growing number of drum and bass's critics in popular music.)

Listening to the album, most will notice that the tracks are much rougher than on previous efforts as well, proving that in this day and age, neo-lounge music can borrow from the abrasion of punk and hip-hop as well as from the lessons of yesteryear. This was proved most vividly earlier this summer when Portishead played a sold-out preview concert showcasing the new album at New York's Roseland Ballroom. For this performance, the entire group, which included a 30-piece orchestra, performed on the floor of the club with the audience sitting around them. The entire performance was filmed and recorded, but despite the myriad of

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cameras and tech people running around, the endeavor was surprisingly intimate, reflecting the influence of punk and techno in eliminating the fourth wall that separates artists from their audiences. Dave says of the performance, "The idea was to sort of introduce the press and everyone to the new album. But in an honest fashion, in an honest fashion. Because we just used white lights, and everyone was on the dancefloor amongst everyone else, instead of having the full, glitzy lights and everybody going on, we made it sort of, 'Hi! Right, we're back!' sort of thing."

What becomes obvious talking to the individual members of Portishead is that as critical as they may be of most modern music, their obsession with creative integrity stems from the time-honored hip-hop/dance credo of "keeping it real." Expressing profound appreciation for compliments on Portishead's music recently made in the press by Cypress Hill's DJ Muggs, Barrow explains, "If we wanna make a hip-hop beat, then it's [going to] be a real hip-hop beat. We don't get a CD that's on the front of a magazine about samplers that says '5000 Funky Hip-Hop Breaks.' We're purely about making something that holds integrity within whatever area it's in... We haven't followed fashion and style and trends because we were never into that. We're more into making the music we make and that's it." Granted such choices will not endear one to more fickle music listeners, but Portishead understands this fully, hoping for nothing more than to continue with a creative process that they see as an end in itself. "The only thing that matters is to sell enough records to make sure that we can make the next one," MacDonald concludes. "It's not like selling vast amounts or anything. It's just kind of break even."