



Bertrand Burgalat, Index Magazine

Paul Oswell: *You're recording your new album at home?*

Bertrand Burgalat: Yes. I try to go as far as I can at home. It's OK. Unless you want to bring in a brass section. Then it's the neighbours. But the bigger problem is the noise of their cars in the mic. To avoid external noise. But they're not complaining so far, my neighbours.

How far into the recording are you?

I'm far. I know where I'm going. I've got good energy. I've got a kind of picture of the album. It's more now deciding when to go to the studio, and stick myself for a month with musicians, or do it myself, knowing it will be more clumsy. But it's a positive thing, that kind of problem. I can record someone else as an engineer, but for me, it's always hard playing and recording myself at the same time. You need a lot of concentration. If I'm not completely focussed it can be dangerous! I could erase tracks! I get distracted. Paris is a city that takes a lot of energy.

You play most of the instruments yourself, and obviously produce yourself. Do you ever get anyone's opinion on a work in progress?

For (Burgalat's debut album) *The Sssound of Mmmusic*, I had too much need of approval. Most of the album was recorded in 1995, but I had no-one to release it. It took five years,

and in that time everyone was giving me their opinion. They were not aware of the harm it can do, just casually saying “Oh, that clarinet solo is too long!” But then again it’s half dangerous not to listen anyone at all. My albums now, I don’t want to listen to too many people, because I know myself.

You don’t play any to your friends?

If I say to friends, “What is your opinion?”, they can be five friends with the best taste and you play them all five songs, and they all have different opinions. So you always have people saying “This is the song I love”, and it’s exactly the one that the others will hate. You have to follow your instincts. I’m trying to avoid wondering what people will think, or you become completely polluted. It’s not always conscious, but you can end up altering your music and it’s very dangerous.

Is it more exhausting than producing someone else?

I’ve done so many...not risky projects, but projects which take up more energy than even doing your own album. You’re building a relationship with the artist and it just takes so much energy. Most of my own albums are much more clumsy. I spend less time on the arrangement, because I have no-one to get the approval of.

You can waste a lot of time actually working against a band in a studio, which you don’t have with your own work, I suppose.

When you start out, it’s very hard with you and the artists. But the more you do, the less you have this frustration. Now when I produce and I hear the music, I’m not trying to turn it into my own album. I’m trying more to be like the listener. I just think of what I would like to listen to.

This is the proverbial “difficult second album” for you as an artist.

My new album? I’m doing it like I was quitting music! I’m also so tired of spending all this energy. OK! My aim is to do an album that is good enough so that when I finish it, I can quit music! I know I won’t do it, but the more I sell, the more I will stop music! You have to buy my records, otherwise I will just carry on making music! You want me to stop? Buy my records!

Were you always more interested in the production side of music?

I think so. In the beginning, I could not imagine myself singing and so the production side was somewhere that had a lot of possibilities.

Can you remember your very first professional production job?

Yes, it was with (East European art rock band) Laibach. I learned so much, and when I look back, I was so inexperienced. It was very interesting. We were from very different backgrounds, and they weren’t really musicians, but they had this external, more conceptual vision of music, more like Brian Eno. When I hear music, I like it or I don’t, but they would

say it was interesting for this or that reason. We would listen to what they had just played. Then they would talk about it in Slovenian, and all I could make out would be words like “Heidegger...Freud...Robocop...”

Sounds like an interesting introduction.

But it taught me to have freedom and that there are no real rules. They were just so open. And when I came started to look for work, everyone seemed to be just looking to copy someone else. It was like some kind of bad trip.

Did your label Tricatel come about because you were looking more for this kind of artist?

When I started the label, I did it because the record companies were not interested in the people I was interested in. So I said, OK! Let's do it! But independent labels always have a kind of flagship band bringing in the money, and it funds all the more difficult things. Like, Mute have Depeche Mode or Factory with New Order. We've never had our Depeche Mode, we've just always been made up completely of...if we equate with Mute...Diamanda Galas. It's very difficult when you have nothing driving your finances.

At least then the label has a more egalitarian feel to it.

I'm very proud we have done all these records without any of them really charting. But all of them have achieved something, and that's already a victory for us. But the fact that's it's only going to be a specialised, more discerning audience makes it sometimes difficult for us.

Would you enjoy mainstream top 10 success, though?

Of course! I'd love that! Lots of the music I like has been really commercial. We would love a top ten and believe me we would know what to do with the money. I wouldn't be spending it on coke. A lot of people have helped us, and to have a success, then we would be so happy to show them that they were right to help us. That would be nice.

It was almost 20 years from when you started to produce and beginning to perform as an artist in your own right. That's a long time building up your own confidence!

Yeah, it took me time! I would have loved for someone 20 years ago to say, “I love your music. Trust me. I'll deal with everything.” But it didn't happen. So I had to take charge of myself, and I'm not good at that. I have to push myself. But having huge success as an artist would not make me any happier. I've been with someone very famous (the French actress Valerie Lemerrier) and I saw bad sides of it. It does bad things.

So you want success but without the fame?

Yes. But when I want to define success, for me, it's someone like Robert Wyatt (founding member of Soft Machine and elder statesman of alternative music). Not Robbie Williams. I understand Robbie Williams, but Robert Wyatt has true success, because he has succeeded in expressing what he had in mind. He's always done the music he wanted to

do. He never got huge, but he is understood and he has influenced people. To me, that is a successful career.

He's even had some chart success, but he never seemed to compromise.

I think there are two kinds of musician. Those who listened to the White Album growing up and those who listened to Soft Machine Volume 2. And if you listened to Soft Machine Volume 2, it doesn't tend to make you a hitmaker. Maybe I should finally listen to the White Album!

But now you've at least overcome your fears about performing live?

I was very shy at the beginning. My first time on stage, I was very shaky, but as I did more, there was less stress. Especially touring foreign countries, because you can think, "OK, the concert is fucked, but there's no-one here from my local area!" Having a wonderful band like (Tricatel artists) AS Dragon also helped. But I'm still quite shy. I cannot dance in public. Musically, I have absolutely no stress now. But I'm a...

Reluctant frontman?

Yeah. I'm still not sure if I should just do a farewell tour. I'll go on touring if I don't sell records! Modern concerts, though – they have all this false electricity. If you're playing in front of 40,000 drunk bikers supporting Iggy Pop as AS Dragon did, then the electricity is real. But now it seems anyone who sweats a bit and has a ponytail can tour stadiums and be big. And I'm not much like that!

You're often referred to as 'the French Phil Spector .' How do you feel about that comparison?

That's scary. But I love it because it means that Phil Spector is like the American Bertrand Burgalat! I'm not sure he'd appreciate that! I think the difference is that he produced songs to get into the charts. Whereas I have a great talent to do things that never chart! If I ever hear a demo, and think "This is SO bad, it will NEVER sell", you can be sure it's going to go platinum. And every time I think "This is a definite hit", it never sells anything.

Would you ever produce someone very mainstream? What if someone like Shania Twain approached you?

Oh sure. I think it's good to get a nice credit like that, to go beyond what you would do for your normal audience. It's a nice challenge. Nothing pleases me more than hearing mainstream music that is produced well. When I heard the first Britney Spears single, I thought it was so well written. I thought, "Well, that deserves to sell." Since then, I've been a bit disappointed with her.

How would you deal with a huge ego? Just do the job and let it wash over you?

The hard thing with the production work I do is that I've never been paid enough not to care about it. Sometimes you'll get big producers who charge a lot. Some up and coming artists

will call them and offer them a lot of money – the guy's not going to fight against them. He'll do whatever they want.

Do you think you could get comfortable doing international mainstream pop, though?

Well, sometimes I think you can give me anyone and they will sell 15,000 records maximum. You want to get rid of Madonna? Give her to me! (laughs) Her next album would be a disaster and the world would be better! I am the man who can make it happen! I can bring down anyone!

Do you have Pop Idol in France?

We have Star Academy.

It seems like you can come from nowhere these days and be the most famous pop star in the country for about 6 months until the next one comes along.

You know, it took me 20 years to get even where I am. I'll be ready for that when I'm 80! I'm still at the level of the first week. I just hate that forced way of singing. They take people with some personality but who are not great vocal technicians, and make them sound like this! It's not good. That guy from the Red Hot Chili Peppers has never been in tune in his life! He's always half a tone high! And he couldn't be a pop idol?

You've worked with a very eclectic group of people over the years. One of the strangest collaborations was with the author Michel Houellebecq. How did that come about?

In 1995, he'd just released his first novel (*Whatever*) and a mutual friend suggested we do something together. I'd just read the novel and I loved it. We recorded an album of my music to his poetry, and then his second novel (*Atomised*) was huge, and suddenly he could tour the country and the world like a pop star! The first concerts in France were fantastic.

You actually took the album out on the road?!

Yes, but at the end it was painful because he suddenly had all this pop star baggage! You know, Michel had everything to lose by touring like that. Risk wise, he might as well have entered a motocross competition. He even went to rock festivals. But it's wonderful poetry. He's a great poet.

What do you mean by "pop star baggage"?

Well, I mean he was more dangerous and eccentric than anyone I've ever met. And I've toured with junkies. With him, you never know what he was going to do. He was touring with his wife, and she was recruiting groupies every night for him. He would ask her, "So, what's the groupie situation for tonight?" And in the end, we had enough. He was forgetting to come to gigs. It must have been the blend of prozac and white wine.

We've been hearing for a long time now that the music industry is in crisis. Is that something you see first hand as the owner of a label?

In France for years, everyone has been saying things were fantastic, and so now the backlash is even greater. It's total panic! In a way, I like it, because when you sell very few records like us, you cannot sell many fewer! We're used to it. The ones who will suffer the most are the ones who have bad habits and who spend lots of money.

Is it true that you once toured as a member of Air?

It's...not untrue. I was touring the US with Air, playing support with the singer April March. Their bass player had to leave the tour, and they wanted to cancel the remaining dates. But I said, "Why stop in the middle? Maybe I can play!" and they said, "Well, Bertrand, you know it's very difficult music." And I said, "Yeah, right!" So I started to practice with the drummer, and it was fine. You know, sometimes I go to concerts and I think, "I could play that!", so this was perfect because it was like being on stage but at the same time being in the audience. They would go on stage all in white, and I would go on in my normal suit. The audience all thought I was an impostor!

Air thank you personally on the sleeve notes to Moon Safari. Do you think you influenced them?

Air were very good friends. But it was frustrating. I recorded my first album and it took five years to come out. During that time, Air released Moon Safari and then when mine came out, people said "You sound just like Air!" And I said "No! They sound just like ME!". Of course, I sold one percent of what they sold. My ambition with the next album is to sell two percent of what Air sell. Increase my share bit by bit!

Do you still have lots of ambition to get bigger as an artist?

Sometimes I think my dream would be to escape from music completely, because it makes me sad to struggle all the time. I would do anything. If I changed, I would change completely. But I would rather stop making music than stop the label. I won't do any music without the label. I can't wait around for people to trust me as an artist and shit like that. Maybe I'll carry on. Maybe I'll just try and do this one great album and then find another way of life.

You've also done a fair amount of soundtrack work, and your first film, Les Nuits Fauves was pretty controversial, wasn't it?

Yes, I arranged the soundtrack for that film. The director was dying of AIDS. When I saw the end result, I didn't like the movie at all, but I thought, well, at least no-one will go and see it, and no-one would notice me. And then, of course, it was huge! Probably the biggest selling thing I've ever been associated with, and the one I'm most ashamed of!

It must be hard with soundtracks, because you have no control over the film side of things.

I get asked to do a fair amount of soundtracks, and I don't want to seem picky, but if I don't like the film, I'll pull out. Like I said, I'm not paid enough not to care.

You've also courted commercial attention from companies, such as Yves Saint Laurent.

I don't do enough of this work. It's not that I like it so much, but it's something that helps keep us independent. But you can't rely on it. We need to find other ways of making money. Maybe I'll open a dry cleaners. Put the money into the label. We need to find SOMETHING, you know.

Tricatel were famous for holding amazing parties. Did they help raise any money?

Yeah, we ran them in places like bowling alleys and old swimming pools. But we're not used to success. They went really well, and so we stopped (laughs).

You must have friends from all over the country. You seemed to move around a lot growing up.

Yes. It's great when you're on tour because you can always say "I went to school in this town". People think it's a joke. But it's true.

Do you consider yourself a Parisian now?

Well, there's a big fight between the provinces and Paris. They think Parisians have a wonderful life, but it's not true. It's hard to live well in Paris. But there's an envy. So most bands touring the provinces, especially the ones from Paris, will say "I had a grandmother from this region". No-one wants to admit being Parisian any more. But Paris is the most provincial town in France because this is where people from the provinces come to live! But people always have to get their bad energy out some way.

You seem to have a great fondness for the provinces, though. You took your tour to some pretty out of the way places.

People in the provinces are much more passionate. They know more about everything that's going on with music. They're hungrier. Parisians will swallow anything. They'll even swallow The Strokes (laughs).

Your strongest early influence was the band Kraftwerk.

Yes! I can remember the day. 28th February 1976. They were such a big influence.

A kind of reclusive influence, though. Especially now. It seems if you want to meet them you have to go down to their local bike shop.

I think that when you do something so big, it's normal to go a bit mad. You start thinking just about bicycles. When you've done something so strong, it's hard to go forward. That's the best thing about being an outsider like me sometimes, the feeling that you can always do

better. When you've done Trans Europe Express, where do you go? You go and ride your bike.

Have you ever met or worked with them?

No. I could probably arrange it. But I'm shy. What could I say to them? They spend their entire lives having people tell them how much of an influence they were. It's not news to them. It's funny, though. At the end of our tour, Michel Houellebecq was so out of it. One day he said, "I want to do a duet with Kraftwerk." And I told him, "Well, good luck. Michael Jackson and David Bowie have both tried and failed!"

Have you worked with any of your heroes?

Well, now I'm working with Robert Wyatt. I've got answering machine messages saved of Robert Wyatt singing my songs! It's so weird for me. I'm talking to Robert, you know, just asking casually what he's doing! That's mad to me, and I could never have imagined it. When I'm not happy with my work, I think about it and realise how lucky I am. I'm stressed out, and thinking "Fuck!", and then I realise I've got a message from Robert Wyatt on my answering machine. You would have told me that twenty years ago...!

Do you consider yourself to be a musical elitist?

I don't think so. There's a social thing going on there that I don't like. What I love about music is that it has no link with social background. And sometime the best records are the cheapest to make and the worst are the most expensive. If I am elitist, it's an elitism outside of any social context. People with money can have really bad taste. There's no link at all. Look at Prince Charles. It's very reassuring that he likes Status Quo! It's moving. And how can a guy who likes Status Quo be bisexual? There's no question!

Would you say that the artists on Tricatel conform to a very French sound?

For someone who isn't French, Tricatel might look very French as a label, but I'm really trying to get away from that. I don't want to get into French cliché. I'm trying to be as free as I can in my choices. I also don't to be signing French versions of other bands. I don't want to sell AS Dragon as the French Strokes, I want to sell them as AS Dragon! But the structure of the industry makes it hard. I think the way things are going, there will be a lot more cooperation between people who are doing the same kind of thing in different countries.

Bungalow records in Germany strike me as having a similar aesthetic.

Yes, and they've been really nice to me. They even did a compilation of my work (*The Genius of Bertrand Burgalat*). One of the nicest parts of making music is the chance to meet people that you like. Sometimes you meet people that make great music, but from a human point of view, they're not the kind of people that you can get along with. To me, the two together are important.

The most impressive thing I read about you was that you were the last chance for French pop to become great again.

Well...that's bad news for French pop!