

Music | Bittles' Magazine: The music column from the end of the world

The duo of **Antony Ryan** and **Robin Saville** have been releasing glacial electronica and hushed techno as **ISAN** for over 20 years now. Showing a deep understanding of ambiance and melody, their music is overflowing with both texture and emotion. Since meeting in Leicester back in 1996 the pair have worked together continuously, releasing classics such as *Beautronics*, *Plan Drawn In Pencil* and the subdued splendour of *Glass Bird Movement* from 2016. One of the top electronic acts of the last two decades, **ISAN** merge the production nous of **Autechre** with the bittersweet melodies of **Leafar Legov**. By **JOHN BITTLES**

This month they make a welcome return to the album format with the unhurried delights of their ninth LP, *Lamenting Machine*. Released on Berlin label *Morr Music* (their long-term home), the album sees Antony and Robin craft a series of aural soundscapes full of heart and soul. The result is a record which recalls the introspective IDM of artificial intelligence era *Warp* while also sounding like nothing else around.



The gentle chimes of *From A Hundred* get things started with almost six minutes of beatless pleasure. Sounding gloriously atmospheric, it brings to mind dark fairy tales whispered beside a dying fire. Next, *Memory Cascades* is spellbindingly beautiful, a gentle piano track standing out from hushed synths and clicks. From here, the yearning ambiance of *Perlon* is a **Brian Eno** style slice of melancholy, *Strix Aluco* is the

soundtrack to gazing into your loved one's eyes, while *Calliscope* builds slowly but surely to become a track which you never want to end.

With the album a firm favourite over the last few weeks, I decided to find out more about the creators of this lush electronica. In the following interview **ISAN** discuss the new album, working with *Morr Music*, the influence of the *MakeNoise 0-Coast* synth, and lots more.

So, check out the album [here](#), and let us begin.

By way of introduction, can you tell us a bit about who you are and what you do?

R (Robin) - We are **Antony Ryan** and **Robin Saville** and for the last 20+ years we've collaborated on a project to make electronic music with a fallible, human core.

Your new album *Lamenting Machine* came out on the 18th of October. For those who haven't heard it yet, what can they expect?

R - We've really been interested by ideas of overlapping rhythms and textures - we worked hard on this album to make each piece of music a landscape in its own right and for each to be a jigsaw of apparently disparate elements which work despite themselves.

A (Antony) - There are still things that catch my ear when I listen back, a new part of the moiré pattern of all the intersecting elements. So hopefully it will be a record that keeps bringing a new thing or two on each listen.

When you first started recording, did you have a specific idea of how the album would sound?

R - Not really. We don't really start albums, rather we work on music without a specific goal and discover at some point that we seem to be approaching a collection of work. I guess this time the process was triggered by the acquisition of some new equipment.

A - I think there was a moment when Robin was visiting me here in Denmark that laid the foundations of the sound. He brought his new *MakeNoise 0-Coast* semi-modular synth - it's a curious machine and we left it to play with one of my semi-modulars during the course of an evening. We would leave it running in the background, then after a few minutes one of us would go up and re-patch something and let that live with itself for a while. We didn't record a second of it! But I think it left a sonic imprint on both of us.

If you had to pick one song to sell the album, which would it be and why?

A - We have already released the first single and video with *From A Hundred ...* so maybe as a second tip I'd pick *Ichthyosaur* which motors along in a bit of a different way.

Opening track *From A Hundred* is a seductive piece of glitchy ambiance which acts as the perfect introduction to the rest of the LP. Can you talk us through how this song came into being?

R - Along with several other pieces on the album this started life as an extended jam on the *MakeNoise 0-Coast*. In a sense this and several of the other songs came together this way with a central performance around which we constructed a landscape of sounds. It's a challenging way to work but a rewarding one when it works.

Another fave is the beautifully melodic *Perlon*, which sounds like it should be played during a particularly poignant scene in a movie. Is soundtrack work something that interests you?

A - Very much so, we've done a couple in the past - but I'm very aware it needs a special set of skills... one that would be nice to develop though.

If you could compose the soundtrack to any film, real or imaginary, which would it be and why?

A - I'd like to score a nature film about a family of owls.

Songs such as *Memory Cascades* and *Calliscope* seem both mournful and playful. What's the secret to getting so much emotion into instrumental songs?

R - Being open to emotion whilst composing (that comes more easily with age) and practice!

Your debut album *Beautronics* which was originally released back in 1998 is still a firm favourite of mine. Looking back now, is there a thread or an idea which unites your releases?

R - Thank you! We've always been about the idea of humanising technology, about what happens in the state between faultless operation and total collapse. The changes in our sound over the years (such as they are) are probably dictated by technological change but our aim remains the same.

A - And, also the simple pleasure of trying to please/impress the other half of the band with a nice sounding idea!

Lamenting Machine was produced in your studios in both Denmark and the UK. How does the distance between you affect the creative process?

R - We've worked remotely for so long I wonder if we even really notice any more. I think the best aspect of it is that it allows as much thinking time between stages of composition as we need, that's probably the worst aspect too.

A - In recent years we've also re-converged on a set of instruments and tools that we both have, which blurs the lines between who has done what in a track, or what is needed to finish a track.

The album, like a lot of your music, has been released, on Berlin label *Morr Music*. How did you first hook up with them?

R - **Thomas Morr** approached us after we released a single on *Wurlitzer Jukebox*, last century. We were impressed because he was sharing a flat with **Markus Acher** from **The Notwist** and we always wanted to go to Berlin.

What's the best thing about working with the label?

R - We always felt like it was more about friendship and a shared love of music rather than a business arrangement. I can't believe that we've been together for so long now, but I guess that proves it was the right decision.

If people could learn one thing from your music, what would it be?

R - I don't think our music has a didactic element ;)

A - ... or simply that exploring the simplest patterns of notes with curious sounds can take you around the world on great adventures :)



What five albums should everybody in the world hear at least once in their life?

R - *Mars Audiac Quintet* by **Stereolab**; *Open Close Open* by **Robert Lippok**; *Water Memory* by **Emily A. Sprague**; *Another Green World* by **Brian Eno**; *Songs to Remember* by **Scritti Politti**.

A - *The Pearl* by **Harold Budd** and **Brian Eno**; *Jammy Smears* by **Ivor Cutler**; *It'll End In Tears* by **This Mortal Coil**; *Replicas* by **Tubeway Army**; *The Orb's Adventures Beyond The Ultraworld*.

What does the future hold for you both?

R - For the near future, some live shows. We recently rebuilt our live set around a hardware only setup and

we're looking forward to getting out and making some noise with it. For the further future I don't want much beyond happiness.

A - Yes, I'm also looking forward to the live shows, it feels good to have a fresh approach and to squeeze as much as possible into a limited set-up. I started doing mastering on the side about 10 years ago, it has now turned into a full-time business - so mostly I hope I can keep working on interesting new music.

[Do you have any final words for our readers?](#)

R - Just be nice, appreciate simple things, try not to make a mess.

A - Follow Robin's wise words :)

Lamenting Machine is available from the *Morr Music* [Bandcamp](#) page and all good record and download stores. Do yourself a favour and treat yourself to a copy today.

| [JOHN BITTLES](#)