Thomas Dolby

Mad scientists, hip-hop hits, The Wall and the Nokia signature tone. Once described as steampunk’s Iggy Pop, this boffin-like new waver is certainly out there with his paens to eco warriors and the golden age of radio. But now we ask the big question: how prog is Thomas Dolby? Words: Paul Lester

I remember seeing She Blinded Me With Science, the song Thomas Dolby did with Magnus Pyke — who in the early 80s was the definitive TV ‘mad scientist’ white-haired boffin — on telly when I was about 10,” recalls Steve Jefferis of Warm Digits, those north-eastern purveyors of kosmische electronica and technoid prog. “It was like the Open University had suddenly opened a portal onto the stage of Top Of The Pops, and now seems like a great example of the plain weirdness that passed for mainstream pop when we were kids. It was as if the BBC Radiophonic Workshop had suddenly got the funk, or Cabaret Voltaire had gone slapstick. That faintly comedic element certainly helped it burrow into our brains at that impressionable age, and made things like a very ahead-of-its-time version of steampunk.”

Having performed onstage with Roger Waters and collaborated with numerous musicians who have skirted the outer limits of prog, such as Andy Partridge, David Bowie and Peter Gabriel, it’s not that weird to find Thomas Dolby in these pages. As Andy Partridge, Trevor Horn and Kate Bush owned one...and now looks like a very ahead-of-its-time version of steampunk.”

Dolby is referring to the Renaissance polymath’s mechanical rhythm prototype. “Eno performed similar feats but he never compromised his instrumental work, which has been so influential over the years.”

Like Eno — and Gabriel and, for that matter, Todd Rundgren — Dolby is virtually synonymous with eclecticism and electronic experimentation, with gadgetry and whizzkiddery.

“Peter Gabriel is one of the few people in the world I would happily change places with,” he admits. “He’s a wonderful writer and singer. He’s always been single-minded, making albums under his own steam despite pressure from the business to churn out product more often. And he’s always been fashionable without being a slave to fashion — all admirable qualities. Plus, we share an excitement for new technology and the possibilities they open up.”

He cites as an example his acquisition of a Fairlight, that early digital sampling synthesizer, back when, he estimates, only Gabriel, Trevor Horn and Kate Bush owned one. It cost about a third of the price of the flat in Hammersmith, West London, that he bought the same year. “By modern standards it would be worth about a million and a half quid,” he says with a shudder.

Still, you can’t put a price on innovation, a feeling he shares with Rundgren, who he met a few times in the early 90s during a lengthy hiatus from the music business, when he chose to ride the dotcom wave as, among other things, the head of a company designing ringtones for mobile phones.

“We brushed up a few times in the cyber-tech years when Silicon Valley was starting to get artsy,” he recalls. “Both Todd and myself were pioneering in the area of multimedia and CD-ROMs so we followed parallel courses.”

[Image: 1982's debut The Golden Age Of Wireless and Jeff, Dolby as The Teacher in Roger waters' 1990 version of The Wall.]

Aliens Ate My Buick made me realise that taking yourself too seriously is ridiculous. Simon Godfrey
Sonic explorer: Dolby’s songs take in everything from prog rock to pop, electrofunk and hip-hop, marking him out as a genuinely progressive artist.
You didn’t care how many records
Westminster School, where he became
The son of an eminent professor of
classical Greek art and archeology
added. “When I was growing up, my
radio. You just pored over their double
gatefold sleeves for hours. People like
Captain Beefheart and Dan Hicks were
precious. In a way, it would have spoilt
it if they’d gone into the charts.”
Dolby wasn’t born with the surname
of the famous noise-reduction
laboratory. Before he acquired the
nickname that would help afford him
a reputation as a computer-pop geek,
he was known as Thomas Robertson.

He was soon trying out these
techniques himself after he became
keyboardist to copy techniques from
Keith Emersons, Rick Wakemans
and Joe Zawinuls weren’t really what
interested me. For a start, I never had
the patience and discipline to practise
scales; I was much more interested in
texture, in simple melodic lines, not
pyrotechnics. I liked Chick Corea’s
solo synth work: he was the first
keyboardist to copy techniques from
guitarists and horn players.”

Dolby has always considered
himself an outsider. Despite his hit
singles and the fame they brought
him in the mid-80s — he would hang
out with Michael Jackson (Dolby
originally wrote “Hypersonic!” with
Jacko in mind) and performed at Live
Aid with Bowie — Dolby feels as
though he has been “on the margins
for most of my life”. The one time he
felt truly at the centre of things was
during punk.

“I was working in a fruit and veg
shop and was living in a bedsit,” he
remembers, somewhat contradicting
the idea of him as the scion of
wealth and privilege, the middle-
class electro-boffin scorned by the
NME. “I had spiky, dyed hair and
torn trousers and would go to see
The Clash or The Sex Pistols.”

If he was energised by punk, it was
seeing Gary Numan that encouraged
him to try his hand as a solo
electronicist, and hearing Kraftwerk
and The Human League that made
him realise electronics could be used
to create succinct, melodic songs. But
it was the prog bands that opened
his eyes to the possibilities of the
recording studio.

“They were the first to sit in
multitrack studios with time on their
hands, record company money and an
endless supply of psychedelic drugs,”
he chuckles. “They were the first to
say that a rock band doesn’t have to
sound like a rock band; that you can
create worlds within worlds and use
the studio as a place to dream — and
have the headache later on of how to
play it live!”

Between 1980, when he played
his first solo gig, and the release of
his debut album The Golden Age Of
Wireless in 1982, Dolby had played
keyboards with Bruce Woolley And
The Camera Club, toured with and
written a hit single for new-wave kook
Lene Lovich, written Magic’s Wand,
and added synth parts to albums by
Thompson Twins, Robyn Hitchcock
and Foreigner. That iconic opening
keyboard figure to Waiting For A Girl
Like You? That was Dolby.

By the mid-80s, he was the Zelig
of pop: producing Prefab Sprout’s
Steve McQueen, and working with his
heroes Joni Mitchell, George Clinton
and Bowie. He was also releasing
albums that earned him acclaim in
the States but saw him denigrated at
home, hence his move to LA in 1986.

“MTV made me a very recognisable
figure over there,” he explains. “They
were like, ‘How do we get aboard the
Thomas Dolby bandwagon? Whereas I found the UK very hostile. They didn’t like me because I was clever, white and middle class. Not surprisingly, I moved to where I was wanted.

The American press were less suspicious of Dolby’s eclecticism. His debut album has long been regarded as a synthpop classic, while 1984’s The Flat Earth managed to combine prog keyboards with electrofunk to superb effect. He describes 1988’s Aliens Ate My Buick as “a postcard home, like, ‘Hey, mum, I’m having a great time, as a synthpop classic, while 1984’s The Flat Earth managed to combine prog keyboards with electrofunk to superb effect. He describes 1988’s Aliens Ate My Buick as “a postcard home, like, ‘Hey, mum, I’m having a great time, this album well. “Aliens Ate My Buick was a game changer for me. It made me realise that taking yourself too seriously – especially in prog – is ridiculous,” he says. “Dolby also taught me two of the most important lessons of my life. First: never be afraid to cross the divide between genres if it makes the music better, and second: enjoy your hair while it’s there.”

The new decade began with an invitation to appear as ‘The Teacher in Roger Waters’ production of The Wall in Berlin. “It was an amazing honour because I’d loved Pink Floyd since my early teens and had no idea he [Waters] would have been aware of me,” he says, even though he found The Wall “a dreary piece of music, except for Comfortably Numb”.

Following his production of Prefab’s 1990 epic Jordan: The Comeback and the release of his fourth solo album, Astronauts & Heretics – his “most searching album” – in 1992, Dolby sensed it was time for something completely different. So he headed for Silicon Valley where he spent 12 years living in “a dotcom bubble”. It was, he says, with some relief that he returned to music in the mid-90s.

He also came back to live in England. It was a move that informed his fifth album, 2011’s A Map Of The Floating City, a tripartite concept album with themes ranging from his transgender daughter (now son) to the imminent ecological apocalypse. The album was accompanied by a web-based social networking game designed with the assistance of JJ Abrams.

And now there’s the Invisible Lighthouse tour of Britain’s old cinemas, designed to focus awareness on the Suffolk lighthouse whose beam Dolby used to watch as a child and which was switched off in June. The gigs will feature Dolby behind his computer-ware, backed by a video he made of the lighthouse, of the “eerie, flat landscape” of East Anglia, and of the unexplained UFO sightings in nearby Rendlesham.

“I’ve always liked a challenge,” says Dolby. “It forces me to dig deep and not do something formulaic.” Pondering his position as the occasional pop star with the experimental impulse, he adds: “I’m not really a party animal. I’m basically an introvert with a very thin streak of exhibitionism. I can get up there and show off onstage, but afterwards I go back into my shell.”

The Invisible Lighthouse Tour runs throughout September and October. See www.thomasdolby.com/tour.