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SANJOY Narayan

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Spin Doctor

One of the most influential DJs in the US, Nic Harcourt championed many artists on his shows long before anyone else noticed them



MUSIC MAN DJ Nic Harcourt in conversation with actress Judy Greer at a press conference in 2006

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PHOTO: REUTERS

I THINK it was sometime in 2004 when I first discovered Nic Harcourt. As usual I was scouring the Internet for new bands to sample when I came across a programme streamed from a Southern California radio station, KCRW. The programme was called *Morning Becomes Eclectic* and it was playing music by an astonishingly good band called Antibalas Afrobeat Orchestra. I got quickly engrossed in the set that was playing, an amazing blend of jazz, funk and Fela Kuti-style afrobeat. Then, after the set was over, there was a short, laid-back, yet pithy, interview with the band by the DJ who, besides appearing very knowledgeable about the music he was playing and the band, seemed a rather affable guy. No clever comments or unwarranted exuberance. He let the musicians talk about themselves a bit – Antibalas means bullet-proof in Spanish; the band was formed in 1998 in Brooklyn, New York; its members had very diverse ethnic backgrounds and so on.

It was a great show, so I went and read up on the DJ. Nic Harcourt, it transpired, was British but based in Los Angeles for several years. Often described as being one of the most influential DJs in the US, Harcourt's programmes, *Morning Becomes Eclectic* is one of them, have become famous for championing many artists long before everyone else starts raving about them. Bands and musicians as diverse as Coldplay, Moby, Damien Rice and even the irritating Alanis Morissette who built a career on the back of a song about being dumped by her boyfriend, have received early play on Harcourt's shows before going on to become big names in the music business. In many ways, Harcourt is a successor to the legendary British DJ, the late John Peel.

Yet, it isn't the musicians Harcourt discovers and who go on to make it big that excites me about his programmes. But it is the nuggets, the unknown bands, that he helps you discover. By way of the Internet, Harcourt's *Morning Becomes Eclectic* quickly became one of my guides for tasting new bands. While the programme's weekly episodes can be streamed, it also helps that the station releases podcasts and, less frequently, videos, of his shows that can be downloaded and listened to or watched at leisure. That's how I first heard Pop Levi (real name Jonathan Pop Levi).

An English musician and filmmaker, London-born Levi began his career in Liverpool, releasing singles, occasionally making low-budget films and doing odd jobs like driving a milk van to pay the bills. Harcourt showcased Levi just before his first album, *The Return to Form Black Magick Party* came out last year. Effervescent

glam-rock is how I'd describe Pop Levi's music, with a hint of psychedelia, a fair bit of raunchiness and lyrics loaded with hooks. *Sugar Assault Me Now* is a good Pop Levi song to start sampling him with. Or even the infectious up-tempo, *Pick-Me-Up Uppercut*. Levi performed both songs and more on the show with Harcourt back in late 2006 and I quickly became a fan. Then, in February 2007, as soon as it was released, I bought an mp3 version of the album. It became a fixture on my playlists for a long while.

So, a few weeks back when Harcourt did another show with Levi, I was all ears. The best part of Harcourt's shows is that he doesn't speak much himself and lets the musicians talk (perhaps there's a lesson in there for some of our breathless television interviewers, but I'd rather not digress). Levi on his second outing at *Morning Becomes Eclectic* was cockier and funnier and played tracks from his second full-length work, *Never Never Love*, which has just come out.

Harcourt's programme has introduced me to several new bands. Like DeVotchka, a four-member band from Denver, Colorado that uniquely blends unlikely musical styles – Greek, Slavic, Mariachi and even Romanian gypsy music – with hardcore US punk. Devotchka (taken from Russian) was the word used by Anthony Burgess in *The Clockwork Orange* to describe young girls. The band adopted it with the uppercase V as their name. I liked their somewhat unclassifiable kind of music the moment I heard it and later learnt that they were once a backing band for touring burlesque acts and have worked with burlesque artist and fetish model, Dita von Teese.

Thanks to Harcourt's shows, in the past four years, I have been able to add scores of new musicians to my "I Like" list, resulting in hours of bliss. But that may soon be coming to an end.

Last week, I read a despatch from KCRW that Harcourt had resigned his job as music director for the station and would be hanging up his headphones by the end of this month. He wants to spend time with his young children and work on the array of projects that he has queued up. These projects, I hope, will include occasional shows and the buzz is that he'll do a three-hour Sunday evening show every week.

Yet, you can still access the entire archives of the *Morning Becomes Eclectic* show through the links on the web version of *Download Central*, like you can all the music by artistes that I mention here. Happy downloading!

(To stream or download the music mentioned in this column, go to www.hindustantimes.com. And send feedback to downloadctrl@gmail.com)



I'D DESCRIBE POP LEVI'S MUSIC AS EFFERVESCENT GLAM-ROCK



A DIFFERENT BEAT I discovered the Antibalas Afrobeat Orchestra on Harcourt's show