

STEVE HARNELL catches up with Massive Attack's Robert Del Naja at the band's Bristol studios to get the lowdown on their much-anticipated new album *Heligoland*

**M**assive Attack have never done things the easy way, and after 20 years together, they're not about to start now.

The labyrinthine story behind the making of their fifth album *Heligoland* is one of reinvention, false starts and the reconnection of two founding members.

Their last full-length studio effort, *100th Window*, was effectively a solo project for Robert "3D" Del Naja (with help from co-producer and co-writer Neil Davidge) as Grant "Daddy G" Marshall took a sabbatical citing the odd creative difference and a new arrival in the family.

But the pair reunited for the ensuing world tour and G is now fully plugged into the Massive set-up once again.

It's been seven years since the release of *100th Window*, but as D points out, they've not exactly been twiddling their thumbs in the meantime. They've mounted two world tours, released career retrospective *Collected*, curated a *Meltdown* festival as well as D and Davidge contributing to numerous film scores under their *100 Suns* alias. So how long did it actually take to complete *Heligoland*?

"It was recorded from October 2008 through to June 2009," Del Naja explains. "About nine months in total. But you've got to take into account that we dragged a few tracks from before that into the equation."

"Historically, we never take that long to make a record. The time in between is taken up with doing other stuff like touring."

"We go to every continent - we did 50 shows in Europe pre-Christmas before launching the new album. This year, we'll go to eastern Europe,

Asia, Australia and New Zealand, the States and Canada. South America, too. We're even talking about going back to the Middle East and Africa."

The new album sees Massive working with more collaborators than ever before. It's something of a dream team of acclaimed vocalists which takes in Damon Albarn, Elbow's Guy Garvey, former Mazzy Star frontwoman Hope Sandoval, TV On The Radio's Tunde Adebimpe, former Tricky muse Martina Topley-Bird and the ever-present reggae veteran Horace Andy.

"I've been banging on about making a Gothic soul album for years now but it just hasn't happened. *Heligoland* isn't it, so that idea has become very elusive," says D about the birth of the new record.

"We discarded a whole album's worth of material in 2008 after the *Meltdown* festival and decided that we needed to start all over again."

"We went to work with Damon Albarn and then Tim Goldsworthy in New York. It was a new start. All the tracks we took with us were redeveloped - new rhythms, rearranged songs, new vocals whatever..."

There's a more human and organic feel to *Heligoland* - *100th Window* was quite a tough listening experience...

"I actually think *100th Window* is quite warm and light," D counters. "You can take it in different ways. It's one of those records which you put on and it will just take you somewhere else. It's funny, we got a lot of criticism at the time, now loads of people come up to me and say 'we love *100th Window*, we think it's your best album'."

"When *Mezzanine* came out I remember reading *The Face* magazine where they called it my first punk album. They said I'd lost all the soul music sensibilities of Massive Attack and destroyed them in one moment. Protection got tons of stick after *Blue Lines*. We're not new to that sort of criticism."

"On the last album I felt like I'd become this horrific cyborg - the terrible result of a marriage between a Bristolian prostitute and a Pro Tools rig. I was the offspring, and *100th Window* was the album that I regurgitated."

"It had to be the opposite of *Mezzanine* because I was sick of it by that point - all those big loops and guitars, big statements etc. We toured

it extensively and there was the inevitable fall-out between us all. I just wanted to do something different and get into a new headspace from *Mezzanine* really."

"The criticism versus praise was 50/50 overall. It divided people, but then all of our records have done the same."

One of the new album's stand-out tracks is *Paradise Circus* (formerly known as *Harpisichord* for all those who saw the band's last tour) which features the reclusive Hope Sandoval.

"The first person who suggested we should work with Hope was Geoff Barrow a few years back. We never followed it up. Then some of the guys from [Bristol band] *Robot Club* reminded G about it. G, being an absolute muppet, had never heard Mazzy Star and only knew she'd done something with the *Chemical Brothers* - and you can quote me on that!" - he laughs.

"But he sent over a great backing track for her to work on and we went from there. We never got to meet her, it was all done long distance. But she's up for doing a show with us in London. Hopefully, that'll work out."

Hooking up with Damon Albarn must have been on the cards for a while now...

"It was fun recording in Damon's studios. He works in a completely different way to us. He's very impulsive and spontaneous. He's definitely not up for this Bristolian attitude of gazing at a snare drum for two days to get it right."



Massive Attack's Grant "Daddy G" Marshall and Robert "3D" Del Naja

"He catches the moment then

moves on to the next thing. It's a really good way of channelling energy. The problem with what we do most of the time - and G will tell you the same - is that particularly with me, I'll over-consider it, analyse and dismantle it, then finally get bored. There's a definite bit of male OCD about it all."

Were you wary about working with Martina Topley-Bird because of her strong links with Tricky's early records?

"The only thing I was worried about was failure," explains D. "I've always wanted to work with Martina."

"From the moment Tricky first played me one of his demos, I thought she was amazing. She seemed to somehow merge soul and punk together in one personality. That was perfect for where my head was coming from."

"She's a one-off. The trip-hop thing never came into it for me."

Unfortunately, there's tragedy, too, attached to *Heligoland* through the accidental death of session drummer Jerry Fuchs who played on half of the album's 10 tracks.

After attending a New York charity event to raise education funds for underprivileged Indian children on November 8 of last year, Fuchs was caught in a broken elevator. When he attempted to jump out, he fell to his death down the elevator shaft. He was just 34.

"It was awful news," says D. "We heard while we were still on tour. It was atrocious. He was the sort of person who lit up a room when they

came in. He was a really lovely, warm guy and a brilliant drummer."

The band's last major gig in the West was headlining *The Other Stage* at Glastonbury back in 2008. Among the setlist was a bunch of still unreleased songs. They've been dropped from the new album or at best radically reworked. What exactly happened?

"I think it was a case of us not having the enthusiasm to follow through and mix that stuff."

"I don't know if it's about faith or boredom or a bit of both. Whether it came from a sense of dissatisfaction or fatigue I'm not sure."

Apparently, a new EP will appear in the next few months to mop up some of the unreleased material.

"Yes, there will definitely be an EP. We've got three tracks with Mike Patton from *Faith No More* that hopefully will see the light of day. He's like the equivalent of Damon Albarn on the other side of the Atlantic. An absolute genius."

"We'll be trying to release as many different things as we can over the year - digital-only and download tracks, demos and lots of different artwork ideas for the album."

"Hopefully, by the time the album finishes its natural cycle - or gets flogged to death - however you want to look at it, it will be a very different shape than it is on February 8."

"You don't have to capture everything in one moment. It's like buying an iPhone and adding apps to

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Massive Attack on stage at Queen Square in August 2003

