

KEY  
PEOPLE

## TIM BLAKE



**Tim Blake takes time out from rehearsing for Hawkwind's forthcoming UK tour to tell Steven Rosen about his involvement with the band in the '70s and '80s and his recent reunion with the 'space rockers', culminating in the new album *Blood of the Earth***

**T**HOUGH *Blood of the Earth* is Hawkwind's first studio album in about five years, the English kings of space rock have released a virtual library of music since their inception back in 1969. This includes 25 normal recordings, 11 live albums, a vast nebula of archive albums and over a dozen videos. These interplanetary warlords don't mess around. Under the guidance of visionary and interstellar captain Dave Brock, Hawkwind have managed to battle their way through ever-changing musical tides including psychedelia, prog, punk, pop, metal and rave.

Keyboardist Tim Blake wasn't there at the beginning as a full-

fledged member but he did open the doors for Hawkwind while maintaining a sound company and allowing a then unknown band to use his equipment. Blake had previously been part of Gong, the French band of psychedelic air pirates and had recorded the Radio Gnome Trilogy, a series of three records that diehard Daevid Allen fans see as the band's touchstone. Blake left Gong to pursue a solo career under the moniker Crystal Machine and recorded half-a-dozen records, notably the debut self-titled album and the follow-up, *Blake's New Jerusalem*.

So Blake wasn't a novice when he finally became a Hawkwind member and first appeared on their

*Live Seventy Nine* album in 1980 and the subsequent studio album, *Levitation*, several months later. He left the band shortly thereafter for personal reasons but Blake has now returned to the HW fold and brought his arsenal of sounds with him. "Virtual lead guitar" is how he describes his unique approach to synths and electronics, a technique Dave Brock suggested he try out on the band's 2004 live recording, *Spaced Out in London*.

Indeed on a song like *Wraith* from the *Blood of the Earth* album, you'd be hard challenged to distinguish between Brock's own screaming guitar and Blake's banks of virtual synthesizers spitting out simulated six-string riffs and runs.

Here, Tim Blake talks about rejoining Hawkwind for their new album and how in some ways, he never really left.

**When Hawkwind entered the studio to record *Blood of the Earth*, did you think about how much the music around you had changed? When you listen to the radio today it's so different than it was even four years ago when the band released *Take Me to Your Future*. Did you think about minimizing the instrumental sections or making the songs more structured in any way? Did you go in with a different headspace or did you just do what Hawkwind normally does?**

Well actually I think it's more like the second case. Everything has changed and nothing has changed at all. The way we make our music has evolved; the tools we make it on have changed and evolved with time. But the attitude probably hasn't. I haven't made every record Dave's [Brock] made over the past 40-odd years but we've made a few together and I don't think the attitude is very different; the actual way we go about things is.

**Your first studio recording with Hawkwind was on the *Levitation* album back in 1980. Is there any connecting tissue between that album and *Blood of the Earth*?**

I think there is. There are different bits; it's got the earth. There's the part of Dave's composition and it's definitely a different Dave 40 years ago or 30 years ago but it's still Dave isn't it? I find continuity in most of the things I do actually. I can find attitudes in something I was doing when you phoned to some of the things that one was doing in the '70s. I've been looking today at some music that's been started and it needs me to add a little thing or two of my own and I keep saying, "Wow, doesn't that sound familiar." But it's not; it's completely different but there's this common vibe. The music obviously evolves with the equipment and music is such a vast field that over 40 years there could be different parts of music that one would like to explore. But it's still the same music made by some of the same people. When you've got someone like Richard [Chadwick] who is such an integrated drummer into what Dave

does, it's no different than the drummers we had in the past.

*Levitation* was one of the first records made on digital; digital tape it was. Now we're recording on digital with computers and things and that has what it has. And it's part of the way my role as a synthesizer player has evolved over the years. One's advanced a lot with computing and I've been using it since *Levitation* in one form or another. But when I find myself playing music with Dave we're in the same place as we've always been.

**You were in the middle of your solo career when you actually joined Hawkwind 30 years ago. How did that happen?**

I was right at the height of it [solo career] actually but my stay wasn't very long because things in my personal life were making it difficult. But I really enjoyed that moment.



**Why did you leave Hawkwind so quickly?**

When the band and I split, I was having a personal crisis at home and hadn't told my friends about it. They probably thought it wasn't so bad so they left me behind one day. As I considered my priorities were elsewhere, I just went home to France. Of course these misunderstandings had bad consequences: money lost, equipment hassles and lawyers. I remember Dave introducing me to a mate of his at the Porchester Hall 40th Birthday party. "Here's one of my oldest friends, Tim. In fact we're such old friends that we've done everything together including going to court." You see what's really good about my relationship with Dave and Hawkwind is that whatever happens we've managed to preserve our friendship.

**What brought you back to Hawkwind?**

I got the call for the Hawkestra thing for the *Yule Ritual* album [live recording from 2001] and basically that pulled me back on board.

**In a perfect world would you rather have remained a solo artist pursuing your Crystal Machine projects or become part of a band such as Hawkwind?**

I've always enjoyed doing both. What's interesting with my relationship with Hawkwind, and that goes right back to the '79 tour and *Levitation*, is there we are rehearsing Hawkwind songs then they'd suddenly turn around and say, "Hey, you play that song of yours and then we'll play *Lighthouse* [signature track from Blake's second solo album, *Blake's New Jerusalem*] with you." And I thought, *Lighthouse* played by a group, well, that's weird. It wasn't weird at all; it was just very clear of what I was thinking of doing but I wouldn't have been capable of making such a suggestion. That's because Dave knows my music very well and much more than he'd admit probably.

**Hawkwind had been together for almost ten years by the time you joined and they'd already recorded nine albums. Did you know their history and the evolution of their music?**

Oh, my friend, yes. I opened the door for Hawkwind. I have a past with my solo music and you must know I had a past with the group Gong. I found myself as an apprentice engineer in post-production. I was looking after the sound in a management company and I was particularly looking after Simon House's amazing group called High Tide. I was building a sound system and experimenting because it was a bit avant garde at the time. We were using a mixer to mix the volumes of this very strange guitar that Tony Hill had and Simon House's amazing violin. I was preparing a High Tide gig, setting my sound up, and these guys came to see me and said "Hey, man, we're forming a group. Can we come and play?" They came along but didn't have much equipment at all so they played on High Tide's equipment and on my sound system. They did the support for the night, the



opening act, and I hadn't told the management about this and they were kind of, "Well, who are these guys? What's going on?" And that's how Hawkwind was born. So we do go back a long time since the first gig.

**But you didn't join the band at that point.**

I was jamming a lot with Hawkwind in the beginning but it seemed to be my musical expression was gonna be somewhere else. I went off to France as an engineer and the next thing I knew I was playing synthesizer a lot.

**Did you run into Hawkwind again in the '70s before you became a member?**

Dave and I had a very strong presence at festivals; we love festivals. I remember somewhere in the middle of the '70s we met up together on Stonehenge and we did a concert, "Tim Blake and Hawkwind". We'd done a few of

those and they were amazing. We'd both done Glastonbury Festival at the end of the '70s; we both headlined it actually. Playing with Hawkwind at that time was a completely logical thing to do. I'd come back from a world tour of *New Jerusalem*; we'd been to Japan, Holland, Germany, Spain, and England. That's when I'd done Glastonbury in '79 and I closed the festival as Crystal Machine.

I finished off playing my version of *Spirit of the Age* [track from Hawkwind's *Quark, Strangeness and Charm* album from 1977] and of course they heard this. The next thing I discovered we were staying in the same hotel and I spent the night with Dave and Kris [Brock's wife and band manager]. Usually after a gig, the first thing they do is rush to their slippers and go to bed. We spent the whole night in the bar and Dave and I just got talking music.

**You ended up performing on the *Live Seventy Nine* album, which was actually released prior to the *Levitation* record.**

In the summer of '79, I went out to Rockfield to rehearse for the 10th anniversary tour. Dave's original plan was to run as a four-piece but I wasn't altogether ready for that and suggested we call Huw Loyd-Langton back for a tour of duty. Of course there was rather a lot of business going on in the offices, and the tour went on with me doing a solo spot in the middle of the set, with my colleague Patrice Warrener lighting the lasers up for the rest of the show. I would play *New Jerusalem*, then start *Lighthouse* and that was the cue for the band to get back in there. I think the recording was made in St. Albans and knew nothing of it until the record was released about nine months before *Levitation*.

**You had a lot of success as a solo artist.**

It was great doing what I did but it was a lot of work because I had to look after the whole thing. sound and lights, personally. It was my expressive tool, Crystal Machine. I remember saying to myself, "If a

band with a manager phoned me up now, I would go and play with 'em just for the holiday." And literally the moment I said that the phone rang and it was Hawkwind on the phone.

**However, before joining Hawkwind you spent several years in Gong and recorded the Radio Gnome Trilogy series of records.**

For me there's no trilogy in Gong. There was the *Flying Teapot* and that's a thing by itself. And then you get *Angel's Egg* which was an incredible record because it was recorded in our house on a mobile studio. And then you get *You* which is somewhat more suave. After that we were kind of becoming two different bands and I found myself on the outside and I had to go.

**You pursued your solo career at this point.**

I continued to do music as a solo artist and though I wasn't too keen at first, I got back into it. In 2006, I was playing with Jean-Phillipe Rykiel again which is a great joy in one's life because it was very keyboardy.

**How does a Hawkwind track actually get built?**

Well, there are three kinds of ways. As we're talking computing, you can come in with a very good creative idea. That's the case with *Inner Visions* where it's come off my computer onto the band computer and we've looked at as an ensemble. To make it even more Hawkwind-y on the record, Dave's mixed *Inner Visions* and not me. I would have done a few things different but I got my jollies out of it because I played most of it. But on songs like *Wraith* and *Sentinel* they've been really created by sessions of group composition where we've been playing, improvising, kicking it and saying, "Oh, now that's a nice chord. What if we did that there?" Whereas *Seahawks* and *Blood of the Earth* came out of Dave's noodlings with the computer, *Wraith* started as an excuse to kick out the jams; the approach is forcibly totally different. When these kind of things are coming on you'll find people noting down words and Dibs [bass player] in particular and the next thing you know we have a sketch of a song.

Now we've been very lucky on those songs because we've been playing them on stage before we've recorded them and that always helps. And then you have things, kind of made spontaneously, that result in something. It's looked at a bit and then it's finished and we go onto something else.

**You talk about *Wraith* being a group composition but it is fuelled by Dave Brock's guitar.**

You like the guitar solo on *Wraith* do you?

**You're going to tell me the guitar solo is a keyboard solo?**

Of course, it is my friend; that's the AX.



**Did you specifically want to create a technique and style that emulated the electric guitar?**

Look at my guitar friends throughout my career: there's Dave Brock, Steve Hillage, and Christian Boule. They all turned round, stopped playing guitar, and tried to become synthesizer players. So someone's got to do the job for them haven't they?

**Can you talk about some of the gear you're using with Hawkwind?**

The AX and the theremin are my two instruments. As a virtual lead guitarist, I use Roland AX-Synths and principally the AX-7 controller and I have this fitted with a Kenton Midi-Stream wireless MIDI connection and it works great. I use the Minimonsa:Melohman from GForce among my sound modules. Look at a photo of me with Crystal Machine in the '70s and I'm stuck behind all this stuff and here I'm able to run about with a wireless

keyboard; it's a paradise. We have Jason Stuart in the band whose handling the keyboards proper if you know what I mean. I never really thought I was a keyboard player: I was a synthesizer player; I was an electronics man. I've been reading reviews of *Blood of the Earth* and it's so funny because when I'm actually letting rip on my keyboard, everyone thinks it's a guitar.

**That's an intriguing concept that you think of yourself as a synth player and not a keyboard player.**

Well in my opinion not so incredible. My first synth had no keyboard. I was playing electronics, oscillators, echoes, and tape loops. This is where I was coming from then: sequencing. And of course the first keyboards were synths so they led me to the piano and not vice versa.

**How do you approach the theremin with Hawkwind?**

The theremin seems to have always had its place in Hawkwind's music only we didn't know it and used audio generators. But the theremin is a marvelous thing to have in a Hawkwind setup. I've been slowly removing all the keyboards from my setup and replacing them with virtual. So obviously I've got a pretty solid computer setup where I'm actually creating most of my sounds. This is doubled with a passive sequencer system on the same computer so that I can come in with bits of sequences that I've done. Anything I'm doing in sequencing is being run by Ableton Live: I'm running it as a slave onstage to a master clock and in the studio I'm running it as a slave to the main studio computer that's recording us. Between the wireless AX, the theremin, the virtual EMS synthesizer called the XILS, and the Mac, that's what I'm on.

**Now that you've completed *Blood of the Earth* and Hawkwind continues on in their legacy, how do you feel?**

We're already into something else. I've been transferring files with Dave because I live in another country. This particular version of the band is gonna be very productive in the next two or three years.

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