

A COSMIC DOG



The **Planet Dog** label grew out of a tight-knit scene that started off at a tiny club in 1985 and swelled into an event that could sell out big venues. Mixing space-rock, electronic dance and dub, its influence still reverberates.

Andy Fyfe bones up on its story

The moment when Michael Dog knew that the fun days of running a hippie club were over is very clear in his memory. He was being held by two thugs while their ringleader was beating the shit out of him.

"Next thing, I hear is, 'Who's got the knife? I'm going to stab him,'" recalls the mild-mannered promoter 25 years later, sitting in the sunny living room of his seaview bungalow on the outskirts of Brighton.

Luckily for Dog (surprisingly, not his real name), co-founder of Club Dog, Megadog and, later, Planet Dog records, none of Mr Villain's stooges had remembered to bring the weapon, so they left with promises to come back and gut him. All over a spilled pint.

"A woman who worked for us had brushed past this guy and he told her to apologise. She wouldn't – and why should she? Eventually we had to smuggle her out of the venue under a sheet while someone distracted him. When he realised she was gone, he decided I should get it instead."

It says a lot about the Club Dog ethos that such people were in their club at all, but that open door policy was part of what made it and it's much larger successor, Megadog, a staple of London Friday nights for over 15 years across three different venues.

Club Dog started 30 years ago in 1985 when Michael and his friend Bob Dog spotted the need for a less-strict night within London's tightly controlled and often snooty club scene. Turned away from one-too-many

rare groove and even early acid house clubs because they didn't have the right shoes or hair, in time-honoured tradition they set out to create a place that they might actually be allowed into.

"I met Bob through free festivals, when he was the sound engineer for a psychedelic band called Treatment," Michael says. "We both hit on the idea of trying to create a festival environment indoors. The first few went really well, so we decided to just carry on doing it."

Finding a permanent home in a Wood Green trade union hall, the pair set about recreating the traditional Stonehenge traveller festival every week. The annual gathering at Stonehenge had come to a juddering and violent halt in 1985 as the traveller convoy



Cosmic stage sets at Megadog.
Inset: a nascent Orbital gracing the stage

heading to the festival clashed with riot police in the infamous Battle Of The Bean Field.

"In 1984 there were 50,000 people at Stonehenge for a month, with stages and cafés and everything else you want at a festival. That was the inspiration – how can we recreate that madness in a venue? It just worked somehow."

What set Club Dog apart was a conscious policy of inclusivity, something not lost on one young attendee, and future Megadog headliner, Orbital's Paul Hartnoll.

"I'd gone along to see local Sevenoaks heroes The Dream Clinic playing with Spacemen 3," Hartnoll recalls. "This was pre-acid house, when nightclubs and discos were violent and scary, and Club Dog was outside all of that. It was a psychedelic club, lots of good decoration and an amazing atmosphere, the kind of place where you felt absolutely, totally safe, like I imagine the UFO Club was in the 60s. An alternative atmosphere, you felt you were outside the violent disco."

Alternative seems too mild a word for Club Dog. It was a place where new age met rock met acid house met reggae met cabaret met squat culture met cult film night met art installation. Added to this, Michael had previously dabbled with alternative comedy.

"I'd heard of alternative comedy, but never actually seen it. Turns out that my idea of what was alternative wasn't quite the same as just putting on some new comedians. This was more like variety clubs on acid, and we incorporated that into Club Dog as well."

Hence, on any given night between the space-rock prog of The Ullulators and The Rhythmites' roots reggae, someone might be doing a routine with squeaky hammers, trailing a family of toy ducks on wheels around the floor, or hanging from the ceiling wielding dangerous DIY tools.

"That was a guy called Ivan Inversion.

Somehow he strung himself from the ceiling and had loads of strobe lights going off, then pulled out a drill and drilled into his stomach. Blood and guts spurted out – all over the audience sat around stoned on the floor.

"Though we thought it could be a safe place to drop acid, we did like to provide the whole gamut of the acid experience," Michael laughs. "It was just ketchup and stuff, but it looked pretty spectacular at the time."

Club Dog truly looked and felt like nothing else, and that was before considering the music, which, like the door policy, was largely open house. Though space-rock was the musical staple, the side order of global groove was intriguing.

"I think that's what made people keep coming back, because they just didn't know what they were going to get every week. We didn't really know, because we pretty much put on anyone who contacted us who didn't sound completely mainstream."

By now Club Dog was a business, with Michael, Bob and the people who helped them drawing a salary. The gear, all bought and paid for, was stored in a truck at the Stoke Newington squat that housed their office.

Club Dog operated at Wood Green for two years before the venue became untenable. According to Michael, if there was a fight it was often instigated by someone at the venue itself, who would throw pint glasses across the crowd at people. Eventually a new venue was required. "We found the Sir George Robey in Finsbury Park, and it was perfect," Michael says. "They were largely frozen out of the gig circuit by another organisation who demanded exclusivity from their acts, so the Robey was left putting on punk and ska all-nighters. So when we came along and said 'We run this incredibly successful night, your venue's perfect,' they jumped at the chance."

A five-year partnership began that saw Club Dog flourish. Space rockers Ozric Tentacles, The Ullulators, *Melody Maker* cover stars Back To The Planet, Transglobal Underground, St Austell commune collective Webcore and others regularly drew venue-busting 600-capacity crowds, far more than the Robey's legendarily pond-like toilets could cope with.

Success, however, bred its own problems. The audience was slowly changing from squatters, new agers, older hippies and the hardcore "brew crew" (a fiercely disruptive element who Michael and Bob simply priced out of the audience by raising the entrance fee from £3 to £4). Curious indie kids were starting to show up along with a less-welcome criminal element.

"We had no problem with villains coming into the club – everyone was welcome and we weren't discriminatory, that was a fundamental part of what we did. But these local villains were just unpleasant people. Unfortunately certain sorts of people aren't content with just *being* somewhere, they've got to throw weight around and draw attention to themselves."

One incident saw the miscreants, evicted by bouncers, return as the crew were packing up, forcing their way in and going about smashing up the bar and anyone in it. Michael and Bob ended up in A&E, both with head wounds from broken bottles.

"We were sitting there laughing, saying 'Why are we *doing* this?' It had been a proper pub brawl with sticks and bats. Luckily the guys who ran the venue were from Northern Ireland and were able to deal with violence as a way of life, but we were just hippies."

Bob had had enough, and quit the organisation, but Michael continued to run it on his own at the Robey until the knife incident. Something had to change before

someone was seriously, if not fatally, hurt.

Club Dog finally stopped in 1992, replaced by its much bigger offspring Megadog. If Club Dog was barely corralled lunacy and chaos, Megadog at The Rocket on Holloway Road was unbridled bacchanalia, where loved-up skinheads embraced saucer-eyed hippies and rubber-necking culture tourists.

"We tried a one-off night at the Electric Ballroom in Camden and everyone liked the extra space, but The Rocket just seemed perfect. Two spaces – like we'd always had so we have the bands in one room and the weirder shit off to the side –

"It was a proper brawl with sticks and bats. But we were just hippies"

and around 1,000 capacity."

Everything now stepped up a gear.

"Our first night was Jah Wobble And The Invaders Of The Heart. It sold out and we made a packet because he was in the charts with Sinéad O'Connor and Visions Of You, but the second event, we lost our shirts off our back. It was the first time we'd thought, 'Oh, it doesn't always work then!'" he chuckles.

Megadog – now monthly rather than weekly – was a game-changer. Its smaller predecessor had been moving away from traditional bands as electronic music became more important to both Michael and the audience. All-electronic acts like Banco De Gaia started drawing their own crowd, and the DJs – Michael included – slowly replaced world music and dub reggae with acid house, the spacier end of techno and

eventually trance. The bands kicked up a level too: from Ozric Tentacles to Eat Static, Dub Syndicate, Renegade Soundwave, Orbital, Underworld, Fluke, Autechre, 808 State and even superstar DJ Carl Cox in the late 90s.

"Suddenly we were dealing with band management and agents – you know, the actual music industry. And we had journalists ringing us up asking to get on the guest list. So we had to get a guest list!"

The club, once on the weird-beard fringes, had become an incubator for a whole new breed of musician. The next step was a logical one: start a label.

It's easy to dismiss Planet Dog Records as a niche imprint, a big noise in the small, insular trance world. But within its catalogue is a surprising amount of innovative music and lost treasures.

Dismissed as "crusty rave" at the time by the dance cognoscenti and music press – the same people who rang up each month to get on the Megadog guest list – the trance that was Planet Dog's stock-in-trade differed little from its cooler, more urban techno sibling. But rather than being made by hipsters in sleek metropolitan clubs, it was made by people who lived in Somerset barns or market towns, carrying lysergic bliss at its heart. And, in some instances, a possibly terminal infatuation with didgeridoos and sci-fi.

The tone was set from the beginning by BARK 001, Eat Static's debut album

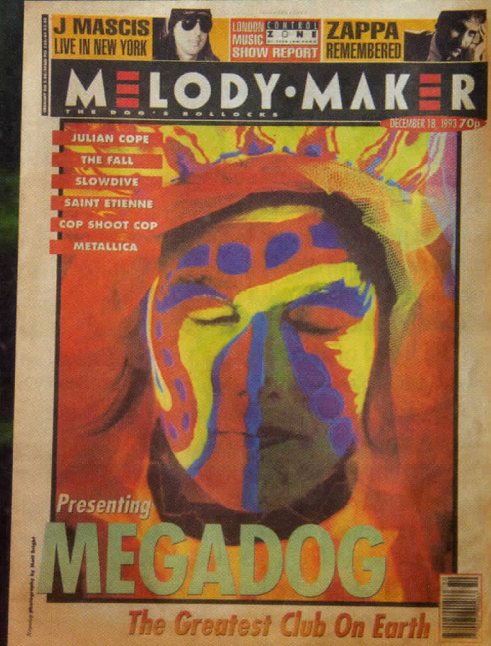
Abduction. Originally the drummer and synth player for Ozric Tentacles, Merv Pepler and Joie Hinton struck out on their own as an early synth-only Club Dog regular called Wooden Baby, but by 1990 they'd become Eat Static. It was, Pepler claimed at the time, a "chance to get away from all the mad timings of Ozric Tentacles, get the synths out and be as stupid as we could be".

It paid off, and *Abduction* is still Planet Dog's biggest-selling single-artist release. Eat Static, still operating with just Pepler – Hinton left in 2008 – fast became leaders of the trance scene, their Roger Dean-like stage sets with spaceships crashing into giant mushrooms as integral as the propulsive beats and blips.

It was BARK 002, however, the first *Feed Your Head* compilation, that truly put the label on the map. Veering from weed-soaked, conspiracy theorists Astralasia's opening psychonaut take on world music, to early Drum Club track Furry Meadows, through Banco De Gaia, the unlikely sounding Knights Of The Occasional Table, System 7, and a final nod to Club Dog's space-rock roots by closing with The Ullulators, *Feed Your Head* was, as stated on the sleeve, "A 74-minute journey through sound, featuring pieces of music created to reach the brain cells that some others just cannot reach."

"As a DJ I was really surprised that no one had compiled an album of dance music that was put together like a DJ set," Michael explains. "So I got these tracks together and wrote little pieces of music that linked them myself."

It's easy to dismiss how radical an idea this was. In the DJ and club-driven dance world, the single was king and aside from Moby, Orbital and at the other end of the



Mutty memrobelia from Megadog's heyday

spectrum, The Prodigy, "proper" albums were a rarity before 1993.

"A lot of us came from a rock background," says Toby Marks, aka Banco De Gaia, whose debut LP *Maya* was released in early 1994 (BARKCD 003). "Where a lot of people came to acid house through clubbing and disco and were only thinking in terms of the 12", we were thinking with a rock and jazz mentality, where singles are just to promote an album. You know, it took Leftfield until 1995 to record *Leftism*."

Three more *Feed Your Head* instalments were produced before the label finally folded in 2000, but along the way came other themed compilations such as *Planet Dub* (featuring the Adrian Sherwood-produced Revolutionary Dub Warriors), *Tranced Out And Dreaming* and even a Peel Session through Strange Fruit called *Peel Your Head*.

Banco De Gaia (see sidebar) and Liverpool analogue synth monkeys Timeshard followed Eat Static, but it was possibly the last two acts signed to the label that promised most for Planet Dog's future.

By the time Children Of The Bong's debut *Sirius Sounds* came along in 1995, childhood friends Rob Henry and Daniel Goganian had been making music since they were 17. Still just in their 20s, *Sirius Sounds* was possibly Planet Dog's best chance of joining the mainstream dance world, the duo's sound adding a psychedelic edge to the nascent Big Beat scene that was then bubbling up in Brighton, while their live shows were full of an energy that still echoes in duos like Fuck Buttons and The 2 Bears.

In spite of a run-in with Walmart over their name, Children Of The Bong even sold well in the US, but the pressures of living and working together for so long took their toll and the duo split soon after a US tour. Another half-finished album was

completed by Goganian, but according to Michael, its circumstances flatlined the fun of *Sirius Sounds* and it was rejected by the American distributors.

Planet Dog's final signing, Future Loop Foundation, the drum'n'bass project of then-27-year-old Mark Barrott, again saw the label ahead of the curve, releasing his debut *Time And Bass* within weeks of the genre's defining album, Goldie's *Timeless*. Where one album was hailed as a future masterwork, however, the other was shunned in the music press and clubs.

"Drum'n'bass was a closed shop," Michael explains. "Planet Dog wasn't part of the clique and Mark's album suffered for it. When [influential London D'n'B DJ] Wilbur Wilberforce played Future Loop on his radio show, he was threatened with boycotts and worse by the genre's self-appointed guardians. Here was a white kid from Sheffield playing 'their' music, and they just didn't like it."

By now other cracks were starting to appear around Planet Dog. Ultimate, the indie label that licensed and distributed Planet Dog in the UK (and was in turn affiliated to major label A&M) was under severe financial pressure. Warning signs had been evident for some time but Dog failed to pick up the scent.

"Artists who contributed to the compilations were ringing up Ultimate asking for the advance they were promised and being given the runaround," he says. "These were just ordinary guys who were owed £100 and couldn't even get that out of them."

Ultimate eventually went to the wall in 1999, taking the Planet Dog catalogue with it into receivership. A five-year legal battle followed as Michael attempted to wrest control of one of the few profitable

parts of Ultimate back. "It was just me against a bank of corporate lawyers who were insisting that I should take what was a fairly poor settlement. It was five years of hassle until it finally came to court, and the case lasted about 10 minutes before the judge simply handed everything back to me with a few harsh words for the other side."

Those years cost Dog his relationship with his partner and nearly even his son, but he refuses to directly point fingers, preferring to recall the "lovely people" among those who worked for Ultimate, and any mention of "sharks" is brief.

However, the fall out with his acts was devastating. "I stayed friends with Mark Barrott and co-wrote his next album," Micahel says. "But things with Eat Static were very bad for a while,

"5,000 people going nuts for the whole night!"

although we patched it up and we're good mates now."

The relationship with Toby Marks, however, has remained strained at best. Having already come to the end of his contract with Planet Dog when he delivered the more downbeat *Big Men Cry* in 1997, he was on the verge of ending the relationship anyway.

"I'd put a band together to play those dates and couldn't even get the money from Ultimate to pay for the session musicians," recalls Marks. "It was obvious where the fault lay and in most respects I'm sure the Planet Dog people were helpless in the situation, but I still have no idea how much money I lost and it wasn't exactly a fond farewell with hugs and kisses."

A brief Planet Dog liaison with the tiny Sheffield label Liquid saw two final compilations, *Feed Your Head IV* and *Summer Night Sessions*. However, the legal wrangling had soured the industry for Dog, and he all but walked away from it until a call came from the Manchester Academy earlier this year, asking him to revive Megadog for a special one-off show.

Back in 1993, Megadog had been asked to provide the production for the groundbreaking Midi Circus, the UK's first all-electronic tour. Revolving around a central cast of Orbital, Aphex Twin and Drum Club, with an occasional supporting cast of Transglobal Underground, Dreadzone, Spooky, System 7, Psychick Warriors Ov Gaia and Underworld, the "techno Lollapalooza" barrelled around Britain for nine dates. One of the masterminds behind it, Lol Hammond of ▶



Drum Club, told *NME* at the time that he hoped it would change the country's musical map.

"You can't sweep this under the carpet, it's too big, too important," he proselytised to the music paper. "It's gonna be bananas, geezer, bananas!"

Such optimism didn't quite carry the tour through less than successful nights in Nottingham and Cardiff, but by the final night's London date at Brixton Academy, with all the affiliated acts together for the one and only time, it was a runaway, if characteristically chaotic success.

"Totally sold out, 5,000 people going nuts for the whole night," recalls Michael.

More importantly, the tour would be the first time that Megadog would take over the Manchester Academy, which would become their kennel away from

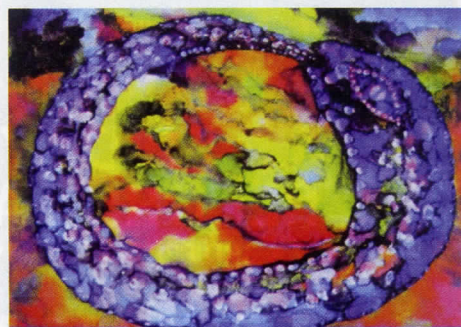
home, alternating every fortnight with the monthly Rocket shows.

"We did over 30 nights in Manchester, and when they were looking at celebrating their 25th anniversary by revisiting some of their landmark gigs, they rang and asked if I would put on a 30th anniversary Megadog."

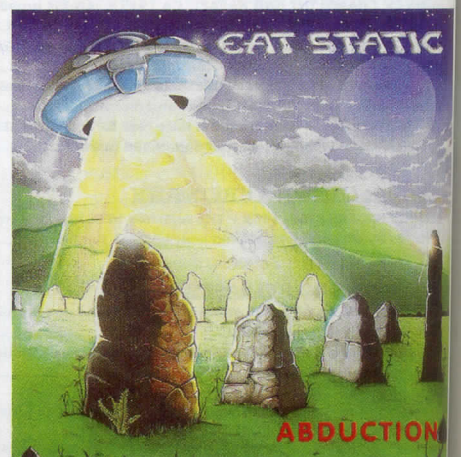
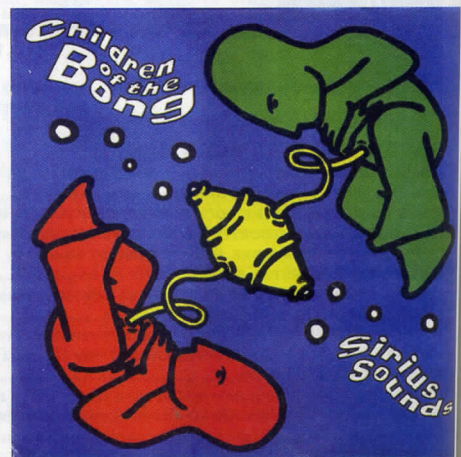
So, for possibly one last time, Michael reassembled a core Megadog line-up – Dreadzone, Eat Static and System 7 – for one last blast off into space on 21 November, even if the interest took him by surprise.

"People have some extremely fond memories of Megadog and Club Dog, including at least two couples I know who were married off the back of meeting there," he says proudly. "There's been a Bring Back Megadog Facebook page for

the last six years, and we've been trying and make it as traditional a Megadog experience as possible. Except," he adds with a rueful smile, "tickets just couldn't be £4 this time." **RD**



TIMESHARD
ZERO (OUROROBOS)



PLANET DOG SELECTED DISCOGRAPHY

EAT STATIC

93 BARK 002 TR
93 BARK 002
94 BARK 003
95 BARK 009
96 Mammoth MR 0116
97 BARK 024 CD
97 BARK 024 CDX
97 BARK030 CD
97 BARK030 CDX
97 BARK033 CD
97 BARK033 CDX
93 BARKCD 001
94 BARKCD 005
94 BARK 001 VO
97 BARKCD 029
98 BARKCD 034
09 BARKCD 037

Gulf Breeze (Sasha remixes) 12"£3
Lost In Time CD single£5
T Survivors one-sided 12"£4
EPSYLON CD EP£6
Dionysiac 12", US£5
Hybrid CD single£3
Hybrid Remixed CD single£3
Interceptor CD single£3
Interceptor remixes£2
Contact£4
Contact remixes£4
ABDUCTION£8
IMPLANT£8
INTRUSION video album£30
SCIENCE OF THE GODS LP/3LP£8/£25
B-WORLD CD album£8
REVISITATION CD album£9

BANCO DE GAIA

93 BARK 001 CDS
94 BARK 004 CDS
95 BARK 010 CDS
95 BARK 017 CDS
97 MR 0178-0
97 MRPR 1001-2
94 BARKCD 0030
95 BARKCD 011 S
96 BARKCD 021
97 BARKCD 025

Desert Wind CD single£3
HELIOPOLIS: THE CITY OF THE SUN REMIXES CD EP£3
Last Train To Lhasa CD single£4
Kincajou CD single£3
Drunk As A Monk (Rabbit In The Moon remix) US 12"£5
Drunk As A Monk US radio promo CD£6
MAYA£10
LAST TRAIN TO LHASA CD album£16
LIVE AT GLASTONBURY CD album£6
BIG MEN CRY CD album£5

CHILDREN OF THE BONG

96 Mammoth MR0141-0
95 BARKCD012

Interface Reality (The US Remixes) 12"£5
SIRIUS SOUNDS CD album£9

TIMESHARD

95 BARK 008 CDS 0
94 BARKCD 004
96 BARKCD 0180

Zero (Ouroboros)CD single£5
CRYSTAL OSCILLATIONS CD album£10
HUNAB KU CD album£8

FUTURE LOOP FOUNDATION

96 BARK 019 T
97 BARK 026 T
97 BARK 032 T
98 BARK 035 CD
96 BARKCD 020
98 BARKCD 0350

Discovery 12" single£2
Sonic Drift 12" single£2
Karma 2x12"£8
Conditions For Living CD single£4
TIME AND BASS CD album£8
CONDITIONS FOR LIVING CD album£8

COMPILATIONS

93 BARKCD 002
94 BARKCD 006
94 BARKCD 007
95 no cat no

FEED YOUR HEAD CD£7
QUADRUPED CD£13
FEED YOUR HEAD 2 CD£5
TRANSMISSIONS FROM THE PLANET DOG (UK version)
CD promo£7
TRANSMISSIONS FROM THE PLANET DOG (US version)
CD promo£2
PEEL YOUR HEAD CD£3
PLANET DUB CD£20
FEED YOUR HEAD 3 CD£9
TRANCED OUT AND DREAMING CD£8
VOYAGE TO PLANET DOG CD£3
BEYOND PLANET DUB CD£4

95 Mammoth MR0113-2

95 Strange Fruit SFRCD 129
96 BARKCD 015
96 BARKCD 022
97 BARKCD 023
97 BARKCD 027
98 BARKCD 031