

The breakfast room at Real World Studios resonates with the sound of belly laughter. The owner of the guffaws, David Rhodes, is wrestling with a fundamental question: why, after a full three decades as Peter Gabriel's guitarist-of-choice, has he finally got around to making his first record under his own name? Why only now? "It just felt right to do," he explains once the laughter's died down. "I was never writing songs with a purpose in mind. It was more 'What am I going to do today?' I had a small collection of songs that I'd worked on for the last two or three years, but they just got left behind when other jobs had to be done. But once I'd got them into a good enough state, I just thought 'these ten tunes are quite strong. Let's see what people think.'"

'Quite strong' is something of an understatement. The songs on *Bittersweet*, David's first solo record that's being released through the B&W Society Of Sound, reveal something of a hidden talent, someone whose clear songwriting skills fully deserve any belated limelight thrust in their direction. Up to this point David's been more than content to be the supporting artist in the shadows, a few paces back from the main attraction. As well as his lengthy tenure on the shoulder of Peter Gabriel, David's also been an in-demand session player, his fluid guitar lines adorning the records of Tim Finn, Talk Talk, Paul McCartney, T-Bone Burnett and even Roy Orbison. Then there's the sizeable soundtrack work he undertakes with musical partner Richard Evans, much of it for documentaries on the Discovery Channel and National Geographic. But *Bittersweet* is the turning of a crisp new page, a fresh chapter whose plot has yet to be written.

So why the title *Bittersweet*? Is it a theme that colours the whole record? "I guess I'm pretty miserable!" he announces, that laugh returning to suggest exactly the opposite. "One of the best things I ever saw was Francis Bacon being interviewed by Melvyn Bragg. They got very drunk and Bragg asked 'So how would you describe yourself?' Bacon, all pissed, just went: 'I suppose I'm an optimistic nihilist'. We all have dark feelings and dark times but we also have great feelings and great times. I always thought of *Bittersweet* being the last song on the record so it seemed appropriate to call the whole thing that. There's always that balance of light and dark that runs through the record. There are murky depths and things aren't always rosy. Hopefully there's enough colour in the music to offset any miserable lyrics!"

*Bittersweet* was recorded in four days at Real World, David calling on the services of tried and trusted musician friends to make flesh his vision, among them drummer Ged Lynch, bassist Charlie Jones, keyboard player Dean Brodrick and a cameo from Peter Hammill on backing vocals. Having such a dependable band around him made the step up to bandleader an easy one. "They're all solid characters, confident enough in their abilities to go 'Actually I'd like to do that again'. That makes it easy. The problem when producing a record is if you're trying to draw performances out of people and they're not certain what they can do. That can end up being a tussle." Similarly, David allowed his string arranger, Stephen Barber, fairly free rein. With Stephen living in Texas, David "didn't hear any of the arrangement before they were done. I just had to trust him – and he did some beautiful things."

"We recorded the whole thing in four days so it makes it like a snapshot. If it had been done the following week, if the weather had been different, it might not have sounded like it does. But unless you've got unlimited funds, you've got to accept that.

You can't overly dwell on anything. When you've got good musicians, let them play." Rather like the players in a well-organised football team, each musician knew their role but was also permitted to show some individual flair. Rather than be the dictatorial manager, David was merely the captain. "And it was my ball!"

The results sound far more like the product of a well-established band with David moving into the lead vocalist role seemingly effortlessly, his vocals oozing a calm control. "My own singing used to be terrible," he admits. "I think I've just relaxed more with it. I was always quite tense before." The measure of how at ease he is in his new role came at this summer's WOMAD Festival where he played his first solo gig. "It was terrifying! I was playing in a beer tent in front of a crowd of drunken people who'd been at a festival for three days and who were completely frazzled and fried. But it went ok and I now feel I can do it again. That was the main object of the exercise. I'm now brave enough to carry on!"

The live music landscape David's more familiar with are populated by somewhat more sophisticated affairs, usually tightly choreographed shows in enormo-domes as part of Peter Gabriel's touring band. After 30 years of working together – in an industry, let's not forget, defined by clashing egos and creative differences – what's the secret of their enduring relationship? "Is it because I do as I'm asked?" he jokes. "Not really. I have strong opinions and voice them when we're working. We just enjoy working together. But the process has changed – he can do a lot more of the early work on his own and with his engineer. We used to just jam for hours, just trying to get a feeling going. That was great fun. Some of my happiest times in the studio, definitely."

So how did you originally hook up with Peter all those years ago? "I was in a band called Random Hold. We weren't particularly good but we were angry and noisy. We definitely weren't punk and we weren't fashionable enough to be new wave. Peter was looking for a band to demo his third album and he came to see us at the Rock Garden in Covent Garden. The keyboard player in the band, David Ferguson who sadly died recently, came up to me backstage after the show – 'Fantastic! Peter Gabriel's here!' I just said, 'Old fart!' because I was an angry young man in my early twenties. I think Peter was in his late twenties! We ended up doing the demos and then he asked me to play on the record. Then I joined him on tour."

A life – thus far – as faithful lieutenant has nonetheless provided David with a watertight CV and tales a-plenty from the frontline of the supporting musician. These include working on Talk Talk's classic *Life's What You Make It*, supplying guitar for Paul McCartney ("All of his crew were wearing ties. It was quite peculiar"), co-producing T-Bone Burnett's record *The Talking Animals* and playing on *Letterman* alongside Robert Plant ("28 million people watching. You don't want to die on that one!"). His best anecdote revolves around the time that he was working with Burnett and ended up on a Roy Orbison record. "I was flying to LA and went to the airport to check in. 'Mr Rhodes, you do realise that this ticket is for tomorrow's flight?' Of course, I didn't. 'Let me see if I can get you on today's flight.' So I flew into LA and called T-Bone, explaining that I was already in town. 'Oh, come over. I'm doing a Roy Orbison track and need some guitar on it. I asked Ry Cooder who's working in the room next door but he says there are too many chords.'"

The ultimate compliment? "I'm not sure it was true, though. T-Bone's a good storyteller!" The room explodes again into laughter.