

PERFECT MISTAKE

His shoegaze tracks sound flawless, but Ulrich Schnauss lives for little defects

Sixty to 80 individual tracks comprise each song on Ulrich Schnauss' new album, and during a year's worth of early morning hours, the German producer found himself waking to mix his richly textured third album. Splendid, shoegaze-inspired electronic music is at the forefront of *Goodbye* (Domino, 2007), but it wouldn't be the same without Schnauss' melodies, which he crafted on his piano before transferring them to the studio in his native home in the city of Kiel. Schnauss traces the notable differences between *Goodbye* and the lovely sonics of one of his earlier LPs, *A Strangely Isolated Place* (Domino, 2003), to a shift in songwriting, a shift in software and a lot of mistakes.

"I don't really like software synths," says Schnauss, who most often uses Oberheim OB-8, Sequential Circuits Prophet VS and Octave Voyetra 8 vintage synths. "Software synths are lacking a lot of the depth that hardware synths have, and I'd miss a lot of the

mistakes. If you hit a note twice or three times on vintage analog gear, it's never going to sound the same again. You can look at the waveform in editing software and see that there are little mistakes and different things happening all the time. The software synths are without mistakes. They're a lot more machinelike in that respect, but that's not what I'm trying to do."

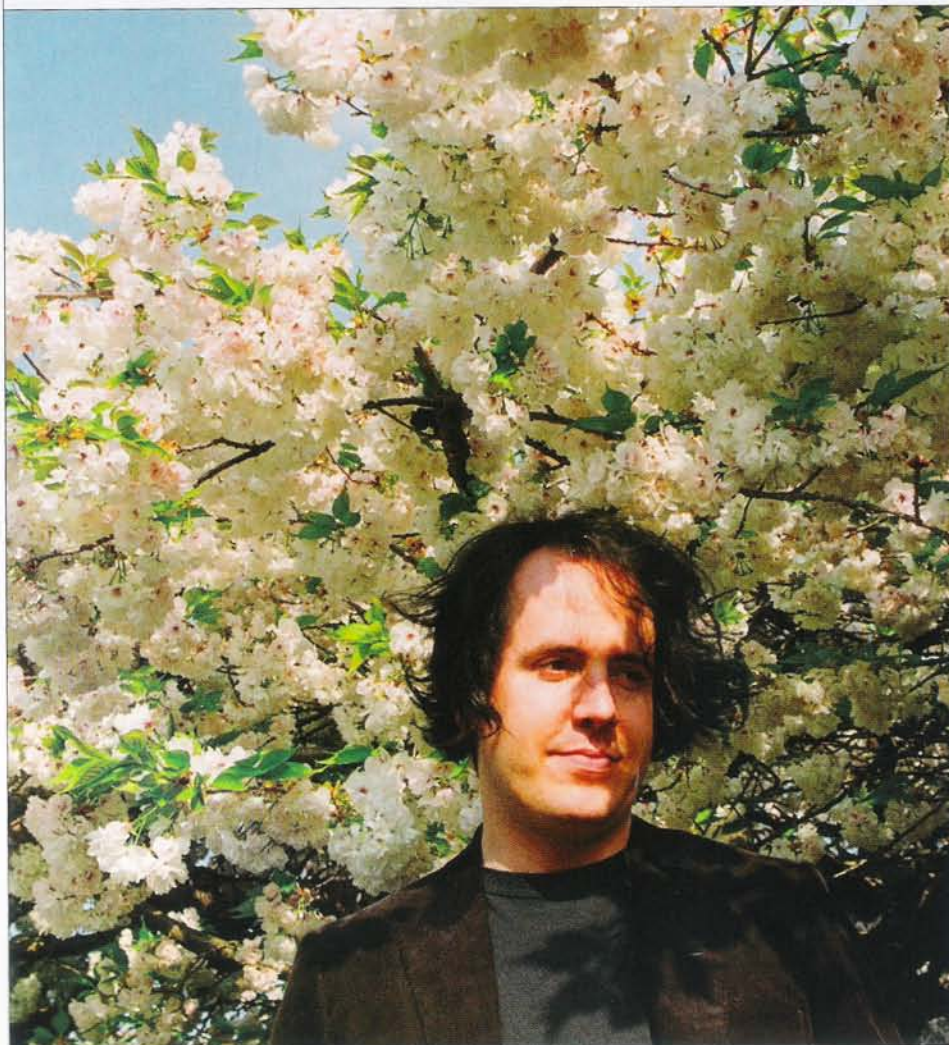
It is most interesting that Schnauss' seemingly flawless work benefits from mistakes. *Goodbye*'s "Here Today, Gone Tomorrow" rumbles with floor-ready techno energy. A disconnected loop of jittery bleeps is panned hard-right during the song's instrumental interludes, while Schnauss' longtime collaborator, Judith Beck, lends her agreeable vocals to the heavily coded verses. Carefully mended melodies soar near and far on "Here Today..." mimicking guitar lead interplay over the entry's beat rolls.

"All the drum programming is done on the E-mu E4 hardware sampler," Schnauss says. "I prefer that a lot to software samplers. It creates a lot of mistakes that sound great. If you pitch down the sound one octave on the software sampler, it will probably still sound a lot like the source material. If you do that on the

hardware sampler, soon it's going to start fucking up the source material; it just adds weird noises on top because of the production. I find that very useful for creating percussive and rhythmic sounds."

Since finishing *A Strangely Isolated Place*, Schnauss' platform now includes Apple Logic, occasionally Pro Tools, Cycling '74 Pluggo and Native Instruments Reaktor. Although there are tracks on *Goodbye* that bear *Isolated Place*'s dancefloor watermark, the new album's considerable weight offers more of a different-colored, out-of-body experience than its predecessors (also hear *Far Away Trains Passing By* [Domino, 2005]) did, in an atmosphere that *Isolated Place*—in all its generous beauty—doesn't quite harbor.

Outside of "For Good," the distinctive closer penned by Beck, *Goodbye*'s opaque sound owes to synthesizers. Even the searing riffs that counter Beck's verses on "Stars" are driven by keys, not strings. "For Good" moves solemnly from guitar to synths, with the former having been processed by Native Instruments Guitar Rig. The strings chime, and the sound of the chords just hangs there as if she and Schnauss were performing in an empty farmhouse. Beck's vocal trails



JASON EVANS

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beneath the track's more pronounced elements, and in mixing the monumental amount of recorded material, Schnauss treated the vocals as though they were just part of the larger whole.

"If you mix a record that is more basic when it comes to the number of tracks, you would just try to make every individual element as present as possible, balancing everything so that you can actively hear everything," Schnauss says. "With *Goodbye*, I tried to approach it the opposite way. I wanted to try to layer the individual tracks so that they would merge into one big sound. Do you know how a church organ works? You're pulling the registers, and you add more and more sounds, but it always becomes one sound. Although you add a lot more elements, the human ear can't really separate them. That's what I wanted to try when I mixed this record. There are a lot of elements that you can't hear actively, but if I take them away, you would definitely recognize that something is different, or that something is missing. It took a long time." 