



SYMPATHY FOR THE DEVIL

WORDS MATT MUELLER

JUNKIE.
SATANIST.
MURDERER.
MUSIC PRODUCER
JOE MEEK WAS
NEVER GOING
TO BE THE KIND
OF BOY YOU'D
TAKE HOME TO
MEET MOTHER.
SO WHY IS A NEW
FILM TRYING
TO RESURRECT
HIS RADDLED
REPUTATION?

ON FEBRUARY 3RD 1967, eight years to the day after Buddy Holly's death, music producer Joe Meek's body was wheeled on a gurney out of his rented London studio at 304 Holloway Road. The corpse of Violet Shenton followed. Meek had beckoned his long-suffering landlady (who used to bang on the ceiling with a broom and had no idea what she was letting herself in for when she rented the flat above her leather shop to Meek) to his studio, shot her in the back when she turned to leave after a row about the rent, then reloaded the gun and blown off his own head.

Meek's career, like his grasp on reality in those last days, had been on the slide. Before things began to go horribly wrong, he'd stormed the British pop charts with some of the most bizarre singles ever recorded and been hailed as a sonic pioneer. But since that freezing February morning, the grisly murder-suicide and stories of his deviancy and debauchery have cast an impenetrable pall over Meek's legacy. Now, thanks to a raft of new fans, the troubled producer might just be about to make a remarkable post-mortem comeback.

The man most responsible for pushing Meek back into the spotlight is Nick Moran. Yes, *that* Nick Moran. Since *Lock, Stock And Two Smoking Barrels* came and went, the one-time poster boy for geezer chic has found credibility by co-writing



MEEK'S GENIUS SPRANG from a knack for fiddling with knobs. A radar technician in the RAF, he DJ-ed at barn dances and other functions, spinning that era's brand of dance music – doo-wop tracks – on early sound systems he built himself. Although he couldn't read or write music and was essentially tone deaf, Meek did have an extraordinary sense of rhythm and applied his technical wizardry to developing experimental techniques that were to bring about a sea-change in sonic tradition. "His legacy is amazing when you think how far ahead of his time he was," says Moran. "He was the first independent record producer to build his own studio and explore the idea of home recording. I don't think Joe could genuinely differentiate between a good song and

a bad song. But with his strong, tight sense of rhythm, what he was doing is the basics of all dance music today."

Speeding things up, pitch-shifting, modifying compression and equalisation systems, creating echo and a raft of other layered "special effects and silly noises"... Meek did it all. He would record trumpeters in the stairwell, singers in the toilet and string sections in the kitchen. He'd get people thumping on the floor and capture the sound with a microphone wrapped in cotton. He took the 60-foot spring from an industrial heater and strung it around the roof of the building to create reverb. He dropped a toilet chain in a rusty bucket to manufacture an edgy percussive din. From the spooky exoticism of *Lullaby* by Kenny Graham & His Satellites, to John Leyton's fatalistically odd *Johnny Remember Me*, the singles that emanated from Meek's chaotic studio universe were always weird and often brilliant.

"It's all about tenacity with Joe," Moran explains. "It's his *lack* of talent that makes him so talented; it's the fact that he couldn't play any instruments. He compensated for that and for his piss-poor education by trying to be more prolific." Meek presided over recording sessions like a musical mad scientist, with cables criss-crossing the studio and compressors and tape machines threatening to overheat.

Chas Hodges, who played bass on *Johnny Remember Me*, recalls hearing a girl singing during the recording but never knew where she was. And *Telstar*, by The Tornados, the first British No. 1 single in the US, mashed together harps, choirs, orchestras and the pre-electronic Clavoline keyboard into a futuristic fantasia. They're period pieces without a doubt – but influential ones.

AT FIRST HATED by the music establishment for his unorthodox sound and style, Meek came to be grudgingly admired. He wasn't interested in returning the favour. Phil Spector once called to tell him how much he loved his music – Meek shouted down the phone that Spector had stolen his secrets and slammed the receiver down so hard it cracked. Meek shunned overtures from The Beatles, The Rolling Stones and a teenaged David Bowie. He ordered one band who fell under his spell, The Moontreckers, to sack their lead singer, Rod Stewart. "I spoke to Rod about it. Joe said to him, 'You look fucking awful, you're ugly, you're short, you sound terrible – fuck off,'" laughs Moran. As for The Moontreckers *sans* Rod, they released an unhinged, séance-inspired single, *Night Of The Vampire*, which the BBC banned for being "unsuitable for people of a nervous disposition".

"It's the sort of bile you have coming from the wrong background, especially in a class-structured society in the 50s – I think that's the reason he pushed it so far," continues Moran. "It's all about things being beyond your reach and not being accepted. If Joe had ever been accepted, I think that would have neutered him."

WITH MEEK LIVING, breathing and working in the same room, he lost his connection to the outside world and became a paranoid recluse, aided and abetted by drug use – he popped amphetamine-laced diet pills like candy and had several bad LSD trips. "I think the pills started because of vanity – he was a thickset farmhand who wanted to look like Nureyev; he wanted to be thin and beautiful." Always difficult to work with, Meek got worse and worse, his behaviour occasionally bordering on the psychotic. He once stuck a shotgun in a session drummer's face (reputed to be Fleetwood Mac founder Mick Fleetwood) and barked, "Play it properly or I'll blow your fucking head off."

If he rejected musical overtures from the likes of EMI, he regularly made sexual overtures to the assembly line of young musicians who tramped into his domain – many of whom would go on to become legends in their own right. Tom Jones confided in Moran that when he went to Meek for an early recording session, the producer, as he was wont to do, sent Jones' band away and asked the Welsh belter to "come upstairs". "It ended up as a fight," says Moran. "They had a proper punch-up. So that was the end of that."

Meek was always falling in love with younger and prettier men, and always unable to move on when his overtures were rebuffed. He was obsessed with bleach-blond prodigy Heinz Burt, The Tornados' German bass player (who was present on the day of his death; it was his shotgun that Joe fired). The pair lived together and Moran thinks they had an affair. "Heinz wasn't gay but according to what we found

out from other band members, Heinz did what he had to do. I've made my decisions from my research and I've stuck them in the film."

HEAVILY INTO THE occult, Meek held séances to communicate with dead heroes like Buddy Holly, wandered graveyards at night with a portable tape recorder searching for voices (he once claimed to have recorded cats speaking English), and indulged in a fantasy world, illustrating the pixies, ghouls and goblins that danced through his mind. *I Hear A New World*, his 1960 concept album about man's first encounter with alien life-forms, is laced with strange creature noises (*The Entry Of The Globbotts*, he wrote on the sleeve notes, is "the sound of happy, jolly little beings. As they parade before us, you can almost see their cheeky blue faces"). Being heavily into fantasy was a way to avoid dealing with reality. "It really fucked him up because it stopped him talking to people," says Moran.

BY THE MID-60S, the hits had faded and the Holloway Road studio was a Siberian outpost on the post-Beatles musical map. Fuelled by his paranoia, desperation and even rumoured gangland threats, Meek's pill-popping descent was as swift as his work rate was astonishing – he released over 300 records between 1956 and 1967. By the time that fateful day in February arrived, Meek had the switch flicked to self-destruct. "He was always hankering back to the successful times and not appreciating the here and now," says Moran. "Like for me. It's not 1999, it's not the *Lock, Stock* days of being the 'It Boy'. By the end, he was no longer Mighty Joe Meek, writer and recorder of the biggest-selling record ever – he was just some guy in a flat who couldn't pay the rent."

Starring Con O'Neill as Meek (nominated for an Olivier for his stage performance), alongside Ralf Little, James Corden and the film's lone A-lister, Kevin Spacey as Meek's benefactor Major Banks, *Telstar* will have its world premiere at the London Film Festival. Duffy has done a re-recording of The Crying Shames' *Please Stay* (which she performed at Glastonbury this summer), one of Meek's last singles, and Moran is attempting to lure other bands – including the Arctic Monkeys – to do covers of his material for the soundtrack. "There's another wave of contemporary musicians – from Carl Barat to Franz Ferdinand – that are into the Meek sound," says Moran. "The fact that Joe Meek is overlooked is gonna change – it's not going to stay that way for long."

THE LONDON FILM FESTIVAL HOSTS THE WORLD PREMIERE OF *TELSTAR* ON OCTOBER 25. BFI.ORG.UK/LFF



old poof used to live there and took loads of speed and worshipped the devil and wrote all these songs and then killed himself."

And with that random introduction, Moran was hooked. He and friend James Hicks have spent much of the last decade piecing together Meek's life, mainly by talking to people who were there at the time. "We were introduced to his writing partner of four years by his best friend, then suddenly we got a real fast track into it," recalls Moran, who says the ease with which he gained access to Meek's inner circle fuelled his interest. People poured out of the woodwork, and Moran even convinced Meek's in-house band The Tornados, who recorded *Telstar* (still the biggest-selling instrumental single of all

PHOTOGRAPHERS CLIVE BURBLEY (B&W) & DAVID PETERS (COLOUR)

