



Dan Snaith spent a year trying to make catchy music.

Music Feature

Caribou hunts for hooks

Dan Snaith ditches dreamy drone for memorable melodies

By BRYAN BORZYKOWSKI

It's a hot Sunday in September and the Rivoli patio is packed. That leaves the restaurant virtually empty, so it's impossible not to notice the guy sitting alone at a table furiously typing away on his Blackberry. He seems comfortable by himself and barely notices when I arrive.

"Dan?" I ask, just before the guy turns around and flashes an awkward smile, made a little more so by his giant, professorial-looking glasses.

This lanky, unassuming 30-something is Dan Snaith, although he's probably better known as indie-electro wizard Caribou.

After seeing Snaith sitting alone, typing on his cell like it's a laptop, I'm not the least bit surprised to learn he spent nearly a year holed up in his London, England, apartment recording hundreds of tracks, some of which would end up on his fourth record, *Andorra* (Merge).

"I didn't leave my house too much," he says, laughing as if he just realized this probably wasn't the healthiest way to live.

Locking yourself indoors for 12 months does seem kind of nuts, but geniuses are a little quirky. And Snaith is a genius.

He moved to London after growing up in Dundas, Ontario, to get his PhD in mathematics. He wrote his thesis on "overconvergent Siegel modular forms from a cohomological viewpoint," according to his thesis advisor's website.

So when Snaith reveals that he recorded 670 tracks while making Andorra, or that he spent hours seeking out and dissecting a plethora of pop songs before writing the album, I can't help but think he's most at ease when playing the part of academic.

"I enjoy teaching," he says recalling his days as a TA at the University of Toronto. "But even more, I enjoy researching, playing around with ideas and being self-absorbed."

His studious nature is precisely why his new disc is so stunning. On Andorra, Caribou tackles popular music like he's never done before, paying close attention to song structure, melodies and infectious hooks. The tunes are still heavily infused with dreamy soundscapes and electronic loops, but this is definitely a pop record.

"My idea was to have no spare second," he says. "It's really hard to do. I've never tried to write something like this, squishing my music into this really packed-in pop format."

To get a better understanding of how the three-minute song worked, he listened to Aaliyah, Animal Collective, the Zombies, the Beach Boys and many other great artists.

"People think about music very much in terms of genre," he says, falling into teaching mode. "But thinking about it in terms of compositions makes it all very much the same thing."

The music "student" clearly learned how to write a short, compact song, but he has trouble putting into words what exactly he discovered on this journey.

"I spent a whole year trying to pack melodies full of emotion and make music that's immediate with catchy melodies," he says. "But I still don't have a clue how it works."

Not that it matters. The music speaks for itself. But one thing Snaith hasn't quite mastered is the art of writing quickly. Unlike most conventional artists, he would record literally every noise he produced, forcing him to sift through 200 tracks at a time to find something that worked. He's well aware that he failed Efficiency 101, but he makes no apologies for being patient.

"I know a lot of people who just write and record," he says. "That's totally unfathomable to me. If I made 10 tracks, I wouldn't be happy with nine of them." @

The Deers

Dan Snaith can't lay claim to being the only act with a deer-related name. The Reindeer Section, a Scottish supergroup made up of members from Belle & Sebastian, Arab Strap, Snow Patrol, Astrid, Mogwai, Idlewild, Teenage Fanclub and the Vaselines (pew!) released two records in the early 00s. They could have dominated the ruminant-mammal landscape, but, well, their day jobs got in the way.