Fred Deakin on creating the artwork for his sci-fi rock opera The Lasters

Within the creative industries, Fred Deakin is best known as co-founder of design agency Airside – which produced work that almost defined the vector aesthetic of the 2000s – and for his work with Central Saint Martins. Outside, he's known for being one half of the band , which produced strummy chilled electronica around the same period.

His latest project draws on both his musical and visual heritage. *The Lasters* is a sci-fi rock opera created with collaborators including indie singer (and ex-Ash bassist) Charlotte Hatherley, Abi Sinclair and Steffan Huw Davies – with all sharing duties singing and playing instruments. Musically it draws a line between Lemon Jelly and *War of the Worlds*, featuring the same sauntering approach to melody and beats as the former – but with lyrics forming a narrative about a family torn apart by astronomical events.

The 19-track album is accompanied by album art designed by Fred (*see below*), which was animated for a recently secret gig for Kickstarter supporters and the music industry (and family – Fred's mum even bought a ticket). You can hear the first single .

I caught up with Fred to find out more about the project, first asking why the idea of doing a sci-fi rock opera appealed to him.

"I was looking for a mountain to climb. I've been incredibly lucky to have a reasonable amount of success in my career already. I have nothing to prove but at the same time, I'm a great believer in kind of challenging yourself and I just didn't really want to do any re-treading.

“I could have started another design studio. I could have started another dance-focused band. I could have run some more club nights. But I’ve done those and done them – and this is what emerged on my horizon. It felt like it was a challenge that I had the incentive to achieve because I’ve got a masters in English literature and I’m a big science fiction fan.”

Fred says that what he wanted to create was more a concept album – he notes that Lemon Jelly’s Lost Horizons album has been called a concept album about travel, though, he says, “not by me”. Instead, he wanted it to be an album where there was a clear narrative that’s revealed through the songs and a smattering of dialogue – though not tipping over into a full, Rocky Horror-style musical where songs hang between long segments of theatrics.

The album will be released with on vinyl as a triple gatefold with a pop-up fold in it – the dream for a vinyl obsessive like Fred. It has the aesthetic you’d expect from the Airside founder, though pushed in a different direction – as he says he has mixed feelings about the visual style he’s most associated with.

“I’m known for kind of inventing the vector style,” he says, “and 20 years on this still seems to be very much the mainstream aesthetic.

“When I see ads for estate agents in that style, it makes me sad. The problem with [the style] – like many things – is that you can do it badly very easily. When we started Airside, it was very much a reaction to the Tomato-led, grungy, dark, black, macho aesthetic that was around at the time.

“We were kind of pushing against the mainstream – but it now very much is the mainstream. If I was coming out of college now, I would probably be looking to do exactly the opposite. So the stimulus to me was to try and at least push my style a little bit further.”

Dirty vectors

Looking away from the cleanliness and shine of the digital world, Fred looked for inspiration in woodcuts and other forms of pre-computer imagery. From this came the idea of creating stained-glass-style windows using Perspex.

“I’d make my vector illustration and then – rather than pressing the button and sending off to print – I would then go and cut all the shapes out of various sorts of Perspex and then glue them all together on a light box.”

One downside compared to printing on paper is that it took Fred two weeks to create each panel. He admits that, had he known this to begin with, he may have taken a different route.

“I wouldn’t be able to get through anything in life without optimism,” he laughs, “without saying ‘oh, this will be fun’.

“And it was – but it was a lot of work. There was very much a temptation at one point just to leave these vector illustrations. But the actual finished job has an analogue flavour to it that really works.”

The artwork was animated for the gig by Cameron Gleave. Cameron was an RSA Student Design Award winner last year, for which the judging panel included myself and filmmaker Paul Wyatt. Paul has worked with Fred on a number of projects – and he's currently making a film about the creation of the album – and had kept in touch with Cameron after the awards, so was a neat fit for the project.

"I gave him all of my artwork and he took those assets and then animated them and added, I think, what needed to be added," says Fred.

Fred and Cameron are also working on an AR version of the album sleeve, which they wanted to show an early version at the gig, but the venue under Waterloo station had no phone

reception – which put paid to that on the night.

The full AR experience will be seen when The Lasters comes out on Oct 11, with more animation coming when the album tours next year.

https://www.digitalartsonline.co.uk/features/motion-graphics/fred-deakin-on-creating-artwork-for-his-sci-fi-rock-opera-lasters/