

## Electronic Music and Psychedelics: An Interview with Simon Posford of Shpongle

By David Jay Brown



Simon Posford

Simon Posford is an acclaimed British electronic musician and producer whose music spans many genres from psychedelic trance (psytrance), to rock, to electronica.

Posford's first studio album, *Twisted*, was released in 1995 under the artist name "Hallucinogen." *Twisted* is considered one of the most influential albums in the genre of psytrance, and Posford's connection with psychedelics was evident from the title of the very first track—"LSD," which, to this day, remains the defining sound of a form of electronic music that originated during the late 1980s in Goa, India, called "Goa trance."

In 1996, Posford and Australian musician Raja Ram created one of the most popular electronica music projects of all time—Shpongle. Arguably, not since The Grateful Dead has a brand of popular music been so positively associated with psychedelics as Shpongle. Psychedelics have played a huge role in the creation, performance, and experience of Shpongle's music, which is extremely popular among members of the electronic music community.

Posford is generally responsible for coordinating the synthesizers, studio work, and live instrumentation, while Raja contributes broad musical concepts and flute arrangements. Shpongle's unique style combines Eastern ethnic instruments, flute riffs and vocals, with contemporary Western synthesizer-based electronic music, hyper-dimensional sound effects, sound clips from television shows, and spoken words. Truly genre-defying, Shpongle contains elements of jazz, classical, dub and glitch, among others.

Shpongle performs live with different musicians, dancers, and other performers, while Posford masterfully controls an electronic sound board, alchemically mixing and remixing the music, engineering, tweaking, and orchestrating the highly textured, multilayered music that emerges. Shpongle's studio albums include *Are You Shpongled?* (1998), *Tales of the Inexpressible* (2001), *Nothing Lasts...But Nothing Is Lost* (2005), and *Ineffable Mysteries from Shpongleland* (2009). Posford also frequently tours as Hallucinogen.

I interviewed Simon on July 26, 2011. Since Simon's music has served as the soundtrack for numerous important personal experiences, this was a special interview for me. It was great fun to—as Simon put it—"intellectualize the abstract" and "muse over the ineffable" together. There's

a delightful eloquence to the way that Simon expresses himself, and a vibrant sense of creativity continually comes through his words. We spoke about how his psychedelic journeys have affected his creativity and his experience with music.

**David:** *In general, how would you describe your creative process with Shpongle?*

**Simon:** Raj will turn up, sometimes with a load of samples or recordings. One time he went to Brazil and recorded some stuff there. Otherwise, he'll record stuff off of TV shows, some spoken words, or bamboo forests creaking in the wind...something like that. So that might spawn an idea for a track.

Raj is a very visual person, and he's a fabulous painter, so he might come up with a visual image that, in time, I'll translate into music. Over the years he's come up with some inspiring imagery, such as a lake shimmering in the sky. Our most recent one was about CERN, the Large Hadron Collider in Switzerland, and about the idea of particles colliding at high velocities, neutrinos, protons, and neutrons smashing into each other, creating black holes explosions and new universes. Stuff like that.

So we'll have a visual image. Then, when I can finally get him to shut up, Raj will sit on the sofa

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and do a thousand drawings into his notebook, while I'll sit at the computer and get about translating our images into sound. I generally do the programming, playing, and production because Raj can't work the computer or any of the equipment, but he's the inspiration and the muse, and will play flute or jabber strange vocals into the mic.



Image: Carly Marthis, MusicMarauders.com

We start with just a blank canvas, an empty computer screen, and just add more and more sounds—either until it's time to go home, I'm sick of having him in my house, or he's sick of sitting on my sofa listening to me torture him with various obnoxious instruments. Then we stop, and later we mix it. Then we give it the acid test. He'll take some LSD and put the headphones on when I'm ready to mix. Then I'll play it to him at high volume, and—judging by the state of his eyeballs and his face afterwards—I'll know whether we've got a good one or not. *(laughter)*

**David:** *I love it! This leads right into my next question, which is: How have psychedelics influenced your experience with music, and how has it affected your creativity and your performance?*

**Simon:** I would say massively, and on a profound level. In fact, so fundamentally that I didn't even really like the type of music that I now create before I took psychedelics. I liked bands and music with singers and stuff. I never got into Kraftwerk, or Depeche Mode, or any of the well-known electronic bands that my friends would listen to. Then, once I took psychedelics, I really went off that for awhile, and only wanted to hear the alien, otherworldly, futuristic sounds of electronic music, and it's what inspired me to start making the music that I'm doing now. In a way, it's foundational to what I'm doing because it pushed me down this path.

Also, it changed my appreciation of music

in general. I think that listening to music in an altered state of consciousness can either magnify the music or it can really leave you cold. Hopefully, it will enrich the experience, and, hence we have what we call "psychedelic music," which is designed to do so. I think that electronic music can certainly enhance a psychedelic experience. I probably shouldn't mention the artist, but there's a particularly commercial band that sold a lot of records in the 80s and early 90s, and I made the terrible mistake of listening to their music while trying to have a psychedelic experience in my parent's house when I was a teenager. I put on this CD, and truly heard it for the bland, pot-bellied, corporate, insipid, vapid nastiness that it was.

So our only concerns now are, what do we need to do to make this sort of kaleidoscopic music that really expands the brain, in the same way that, I think, psychedelics do?

**David:** *I think that's really important. One of the reasons that I love your music so much is because I feel really vulnerable when I'm on psychedelics, and it seems just so vital to have the properly supportive music. I was listening to some of your music recently, and was thinking that some of it reminded me a bit of Pink Floyd, one of my favorite bands in high school. They developed sophisticated acoustic techniques for beautifully heightening consciousness with their music, but much of it feels so sad to me, like I'm floating all alone in outer space, haunted by loss of cosmic proportions. You seem to have*

*developed similarly layered acoustic techniques for heightening consciousness with your music, but much of it has an upbeat, joyful exuberance.*

**Simon:** What's amazing about Pink Floyd is that they managed to capture it with lyrics as well, which I find quite hard to do—because lyrics often distract me from the exact feeling that you were describing. This is why

I never got, for example, The Grateful Dead, or some of the jam bands over here that were touted as so psychedelic. The Grateful Dead weren't as big here in England, but they certainly weren't around me and my friends when I was growing up. So when I finally did have an experience with them, and then someone told me, "oh, that's The Grateful Dead," man, I was disappointed. To me it was just blues-folk music. I just didn't get it...apparently it sounded best from the car park, which I could understand!

**David:** *There's such a rich tapestry of acoustic variation, and so many dimensions to your music, that it really comes close to capturing the multidimensional state of consciousness that can happen during a psychedelic experience. I'm sure that's why so many people love it.*

**Simon:** You know the old cliché about gazing at your shoelace for ten hours when you take psychedelics? I always like to have a similar experience with music, where I really get into each and every guitar note. Each note will be analyzed, effected, and tweaked out, with layer upon layer of instrumentation...tambourines turned into liquid drops of nectar, vocals converted to voices of the cosmos.

**David:** *Right, and there's such an incredible sense of time dilation with psychedelics. Everything seems to slow down, and there's a lot more going on in each moment, so you can analyze every detail more easily.*

Normally, it all just flies by so much more quickly.

**Simon:** Yeah, I guess that's why it takes me so long to make an album. I like to spend a lot of time on each track. I think that you should be able to listen to a good track many times, and hear something new in it each time. It should be composed so that you hear something new in it if you listen to it on headphones, or on a good sound system or in the car, alone or with friends. It's got to keep you interested and tickle the brain cells as long as possible.

**David:** How have psychedelics affected your audience, and your interaction with your audience?

**Simon:** I don't know if I can really speak for my audience, because the psychedelic experience is a very personal journey. But I would say that quite a large percentage of our audience appears to have certainly had that experience, and I think that it provides a way to relate. Our music creates a common thread and instant bond of alliance to other people who have had a psychedelic

experience, in the same way that, say, traveling might.

I think that I get on better with people if they've done psychedelics and traveled, because it opens your mind up in a way that is unequivocal. It makes one adept at relating and interacting in a playful intangible broad-minded way, that perhaps you don't have with people that maybe haven't had those experiences.

**David:** I think that's there's something very similar about traveling and using psychedelics, because they both help you to become more culturally transcendent. They allow one to dissolve and transcend the boundaries of culture, and most people don't even know that culture creates limitations until they are free of them.

**Simon:** Yeah, so it does mean that then there is a bond with the crowd, and my interaction with them. I only really make music that I want to hear myself. Because I want to hear that tricked out, tweaked out, psychedelic, trippy sound, I hope that many other people will want to hear that as well,

and that my personal taste isn't so weird that no one else will like it.

**David:** You're definitely tapping into something that's really hitting a chord with a lot of people.

**Simon:** A lot more people might have done psychedelics than, perhaps, we might imagine. It's also a lot less taboo just to talk about it now than it used to be.

**David:** Is there anything that we haven't spoken about that you would like to add?

**Simon:** Yes, I'd like to think a little bit more about psychedelics and art, generally...

The more I think about it, the more I realize psychedelics have probably had a huge impact on art and artists. When will it start to affect our governments and politicians? That's what I'd like to know! •

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