

Cover painting: Adi Newton — Non-Euclidean Portrait of Michael Somerset Ward, 2026

No Ordinary Raconteur · More than forty years after Clock DVA, a first album in his own name

"It's my time"

MICHAEL SOMERSET WARD

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We meet Michael Somerset Ward on the eve of his first solo album, No Ordinary Raconteur*, released by Armcomm Europe — Adi Newton's sonic laboratory within Rizosfera, the Italian publishing house working across media. We asked Michael about his remarkable past as a storyteller and craftsman of world pop, and then went deep into this unusual album, a record that rewards close and repeated listening. On to the questions.*

— WHERE IT COMES FROM —

Let us begin with the sentence you chose to carry on the record: “My music flows from the paintbox I've assembled over the years from Steel City rehearsals in abandoned Little Mester warrens to Motor City Gospel studios still echoing with the soundtrack of my youth.” It is poetic prose, existential and industrial at once, a praise of the places you grew up in — and at the same time it reads as a message to anyone who knows Sheffield: rehearsals inside the emptied workshops of the Little Mesters, a generation that in the eighties wrote a new page in the pop and alternative grammar of the whole world. Tell us about growing up in Sheffield, and about what that epigraph really means. Let your memory run back to those days.

My childhood was mostly spent living with my grandparents. They lived in a small council house on the Wybourn Estate in the east of the city. I was pretty much a loner and left to my own devices. The radio was on the whole time. My favourite songs were *Fever* by Peggy Lee and *Move Over Darling* by Doris Day.. years later I discovered the latter was produced by the great Jack Nitzsche ..no wonder I loved it! Later when I was 8 I started going to school, which I hadn’t done until then. My dad bought me a second hand Dansette record player and it came with a load of records. Among them was a single by the Coasters which featured King Curtis on the saxophone and started my love of the instrument. My mum bought me a sax on the never never, I started playing and really took every opportunity to play. My first band was a bunch of young lads of West Indian heritage. We played covers, mostly funk tunes by The Ohio Players and Kool and the Gang. At the same time I discovered jazz, which was a revelation and opened a whole new world for me. In common with a lot of my generation, including the young Adi Newton, I educated myself at Sheffield Central Library. I would say I grew up surrounded by Soul music and Tamla Motown .. the influence of which still serves me very well in the music I create.. the compact arrangements devoid of any “fat” and the brevity of solo statements. The first “real” musical unit I joined however was Clock DVA. This was the beginning of my liberation and with that came the sure knowledge that if you can imagine something .. you can also make it a reality. DVA and in particular Adi Newton did that for me. He was the first real Artist I had encountered and the effect was profound. I also ended up post DVA working in Detroit with Don Was and his collective Was (Not Was). The “Motor City gospel studio” where we recorded. It was only years later it dawned on me that the whole time on both albums we.. Don and I were working at cross

purposes. I desperately wanted to emulate the cartoon(esque) speeded up Americana of the first Was (Not Was) album. Don on the other hand wanted a hit. He terrified me on one of the first recording sessions by declaring a love of *True* by Spandau Ballet, which proved prophetic except we produced no hits. It wasn't until Alison Moyet recorded the title track of my second album that I had a hit — though it was never the record I had heard in my head.

***A**mong your early experiences one stands out above the others: Clock DVA. You were in the band for six months, from late 1981 to June 1982, between* Thirst *and* Advantage*, and a single recording survives from that time (*We Cast Tall Shadows*). Six months is nothing set against a whole life — and yet, judging by this record, they are also the hinge of everything that came after. What did you learn in those months that you are still using here? And what was that experience actually like?*

Joining Clock DVA. In 1981 I was working in a local professional covers band, the drummer in which was a fellow called David Palmer. We were both very aware of the new music that was coming out of our hometown and we were both determined to get out of the covers scene and into the "New Thing". We auditioned players with no luck and then David, who was much more of a socialite than I, received an invitation to join Clock DVA. Adi had parted company with the original band and David was his choice for drums. I have to admit I was very envious and so, on the pretext of seeing David rehearse, I started going to the new band's rehearsal sessions. I was introduced to Adi. After the rehearsal I would switch from being an observer to jamming with David and the group, hoping Adi would notice my instrumental skill. Eventually, after about 6 jams, he asked me if I would like to join and I gratefully accepted. Then as now my main instrument was the baritone sax. I also played the other saxophones and flutes but it was baritone I featured on a track we were rehearsing called *We Cast Tall Shadows*. The new Mark 2 version of Clock DVA were about to enter the studio when fate took a turn. David, unbeknownst to the rest of DVA, had been asked to join ABC, who were about to break massive. His leaving I described in my radio play *Kafka Chic*. A session drummer was hastily drafted in. I, in retrospect wrongly, felt the heart had gone out of the band with David's departure. I was wrong, because then as now the heart of the entity that is Clock DVA is Adi Newton. In this fragile state of mind I wasn't prepared to tolerate the antics of the remaining musicians and after a night in their drunken company I left the band. With a headstrong young man's sensitivity I departed. From that day to this I carried the feeling of unfinished business and a regret that I wouldn't be there to "serve the music" .. my Mantra from that day to this.

"In common with a lot of my generation, including the young Adi Newton, I educated myself at Sheffield Central Library."

No Ordinary Raconteur *is a record full of electronics, and yet the instruments you actually play on it are reeds and winds: baritone, sopranino, alto and tenor saxophone, bass clarinet, clarinet, piccolo, flute, alto flute. Why has breath remained at the centre of your music? And what can*

a saxophone do inside an electronic track that a synthesizer cannot?

That's a great question. I have always loved singing.. I'm a pretty good singer.. but I had never had that desire to be a "front man". So I think the saxophone and my other instruments are my "voice". Primarily I am a composer but I do, if possible, like to play on the music I create, and sometimes it is a woodwind. I don't and have never separated analogue instruments from electronics. For me they are all colours with which to "paint". This needs a splash of black here ... let's try a bass clarinet, ok now let's try electronics... Increasingly in recent years I have "electrified" my woodwinds and used various effects, which I feel fits really well into electronic soundscapes but still keeps the human element. A great recent example of this is my heavily treated bass clarinet on *Last Signal*, from the mini album *Dimidium Oraculi*. I have synthesisers of my own but, unlike many in my hometown, I don't worship at the Church of Synth.

"I have synthesisers of my own but, unlike many in my hometown, I don't worship at the Church of Synth."

For forty years your name has been written on other people's records. You took a demo to Don Was in New York; Floy Joy made Into the Hot *and* Weak in the Presence of Beauty*, and the title track of that second album became Alison Moyet's multi-platinum hit.* Everything Changes (But You)*, written and produced for Take That, went triple platinum. More recently, Murphy's Law and* Simulation *for Róisín Murphy. And alongside all of that, Crooked Man with DJ Parrot and the experimental work as Mzylkypop. What does it feel like, as a musician and as a writer of words, to hear your own song sung by someone else? And why does the first album under your own name arrive only now, at the far end of this whole journey as an extraordinary storyteller behind the scenes?*

I have to admit that with a very few exceptions I have been disappointed with the interpretations of my songs. The notable exceptions include a version of the first Floy Joy album *Into the Hot* sung by the great great Carol Hall of Was (Not Was). An incredible tour de force that proved to me there and then that my writing was capable of greatness.. only to be dashed when Virgin put a different voice on the record, and foolishly I capitulated — something that would be unthinkable now. The fault was mine, not the singer's. I was also very pleased with Sylwia Drwal's singing on the Mzylkypop albums. Of course on *No Ordinary Raconteur* I have the great Glenn Gregory singing *Harry's England*, which I love. Adi and Mal are singing their own melodies and words and both of these iconic performances are outstanding. As for why only now have I put out my own record in my own name. This record truly feels like my record. I was unhappy with both Floy Joy albums — not with the music, which I love, but with the records we ended up making of it. The transitional records were Mzylkypop and now, with *No Ordinary Raconteur* ... IT'S MY TIME!

— THE RECORD —

Half-Life*. Adi Newton's prose poem runs through the album in four parts — twenty-four seconds, thirty-seven, twenty-three, seventy-one — from "No time to lose" to "we abide in these". Adi's voice opens the vinyl and, in its own way, closes*

it: after it there is only a very short instrumental. Why give another artist the opening and the closing of the story in verse? Was that spine there from the beginning, or did the poem find its place once the songs already existed? And what convinced you to hand your own opening to someone else?

Another great question. I could have done it but I asked Adi to write and read and gave him the subject matter. I had been pretty comprehensive about my feelings on mortality in *The Future Is Here Today* and I wanted another angle — and I wanted a voice with real gravitas, which Adi has.

My thing has always been I want to make the very best record I can, and the idea that I have to be centre stage on everything is alien to me. I enjoy very much reading my own work, vis a vis *Rain Wolves* on the extended CD, but I also enjoy other artists' ideas and performances, and Adi has a wonderful voice sonically.. I feel that having different voices, and different instrumental voices, broadens the listening experience. It just makes the record broader and more colourful .. I play the sopranino sax but I wanted a different voice on *Dead Man's Coat*... step forward Martin Archer, who is a sopranino specialist and sounds wondrous on the track.

Delphic Response. *You describe it as "how I felt DVA could have developed — electronic, but with a beating organic heart." That is a sentence about a road not taken, and you are building it forty-four years later. What does it feel like to finally make the thing you imagined in 1982, and to have Adi sing it?*

It feels like a circle that is now complete. I left DVA under a cloud, albeit staying friendly with Adi, and although I got my own record deal with Virgin soon after and was working with my absolute favourite producer and band.. there was a nagging feeling of unfulfilled potential. I knew that Adi and I together could create some eternal music and I believe with *Delphic Response* we have — and it's just the beginning. When my fellow worker David Lewin and I created the music for *Delphic Response* it just screamed DVA at me, so I sent it to Adi and he responded immediately with great enthusiasm. When he sent me the vocal.. it was with great trepidation I pressed play... what I heard literally blew my mind.. 100% with no reservations.. WE had done it. A stone classic to me, every bit as iconic as *4 Hours*!

"WE had done it. A stone classic to me, every bit as iconic as 4 Hours!"

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4 Hours. *Not a cover but a reinterpretation, with Matthew Bourne improvising on a grand piano over the 1981 recording and Karl D'Silva treating Adi's text as beat poetry. What drove you to make a rereading as startling as this one? You have moved the song's centre of gravity altogether: out of post-punk and into a crooner's ballad, the kind played at the piano at midnight, when the last customers have already left. Karl D'Silva's voice alone would be worth the whole piece, and the pathos he brings opens something new in the best-known song of Clock DVA's early repertoire. Was that rereading already in your mind, or did it come to you after Bourne sat down at the piano and began to improvise?*

4 Hours. The germ of the idea was in my mind. My only first solid intention was to bring out the depth of Adi's lyrical vision.. the words.. the pictures they were painting.. the dream like.. nightmarish surreal quality. Matt presented me

with a number of radically different improvisations. When I heard the one heard in the piece I knew I could work with it... but then my producer head and practicality arose. I needed it to be a certain length, I didn't want to loop it and I didn't have enough, so it was literally "Matt, play it again but make it twice as long." After that it was obvious that Karl should half read, half sing it, which he did brilliantly. He was fed the original as mother's milk so the singing parts were in his DNA. After that some judicious editing and the strings, which are in fact all cellos, to give the classic emotional lift. A triumph. The original is impervious to improvement but not to re-imagining...

Dead Man's Coat. A real coat from 1985 New York, passed to you by Nick Sanderson; Don Was — your own producer in those years — asking where you got it, and being told "from a dead man". The song turns that into a mantra: I found a coat, I got a coat, I stole a coat, I wore a coat. When did you realise the anecdote was actually about mortality?

Anima comes from the latin word meaning breath, soul or life. When applied to giving life, or a spirit, to an inanimate object. I actually wrote and recorded *Dead Man's Coat* from my sick bed. Facing me, hung from my percussion stand, was the coat. An inanimate object yet infused with this incredible history. It almost feels as though a person's (owner's) imprint lives on with the object after their demise. Recently I realised unconsciously I was parodying the pirate song, "15 men on a deadman's chest.... Yo-ho-ho and a bottle of rum".

"An inanimate object yet infused with this incredible history."

Harry's England. Glenn Gregory, who was already in your radio play Kafka Chic, *sings a prophecy about the England of 2033: "The flag's been flogged to a Russian oligarch... No castles are left in this green and pleasant land." It is the most political thing on the record and also the warmest. Why entrust it to the voice of Heaven 17, and how much of it do you expect to come true?*

I wrote it with David Bowie's voice in my head and at the time of writing Glenn was working with Tony Visconti, singing Bowie's catalogue in live shows, so he was the perfect choice. I extended the Bowie homage by channeling David's alto sax style into my own. A side bar to this is, whilst still at school I wrote to David about his saxophones via a column in a very popular music paper called The *Melody Maker*. His enthusiastic and detailed answer took up the whole column! I saved the cut out for years until it vanished.

As to coming true. I think much of it has already come true.

No Ordinary Raconteur. *The title track, in homage to Scott Walker, where a woman watches the world and the line lands: "I knew her when I was no ordinary raconteur." The album takes its name from a sentence in the past tense. Who was that raconteur, and what happened to him?*

This is the story. A rare (from me) explanation. I have been going to the same barbers for decades. I was in there having my hair cut. There was also a woman cutting hair .. still attractive.. but children and relationships and the years had taken their toll.

Once in her very distant past .. the 1980's.. she had gone on a date with a young gentleman by the name of Philip Oakey, who was then riding high in the pop world with his band The Human League. My barber reminded her of the event and gently chided her ... She merely smiled and carried on cutting her customer's hair. My imagination went into overdrive. I was Philip Oakey waiting my turn when our eyes met in the mirror.... I then, in my head, begin asking her existentialist questions. Although not on my uppers (broke) I no longer have the status I did have. I knew her when I was *No Ordinary Raconteur*.

The Future Is Here Today. *"When there's less to look forward to and more to remember — the future's here today." Heard whole, the album reads as an existentialist record: one of those made at an age when you turn and look back and the past is crowded with people who are gone, and then you turn and look ahead and find your own going. Death stands at both ends, and so the future stops being in front of you and becomes the present: the time that is left is this one, now. Is that your own reading of it, or are we laying a philosophy over a song that is simply melancholy?*

Your reading is pretty close. Simply that at a certain age, a great deal of life has passed and there is an unknown but definitely smaller amount of life ahead. When I was young I never worried about the future because I had lots of time. The future was out of sight but now it is in sight ... it's here.. There is also the eternal question of what happens to us when we die? Is there a heaven? Is there a soul? Or what is there? Nothing... Life is short. When your minute's up there's no appealing. When your time is up all will be revealed — or will it?

"When I was young I never worried about the future because I had lots of time."

Señor Slippery. *Stephen Mallinder in tremendous form, a character elusive, dangerous and playful, and you underneath on wah-wah electric bass clarinet, alto flute and tenor saxophone. What does working with Mallinder bring out of you that nobody else does?*

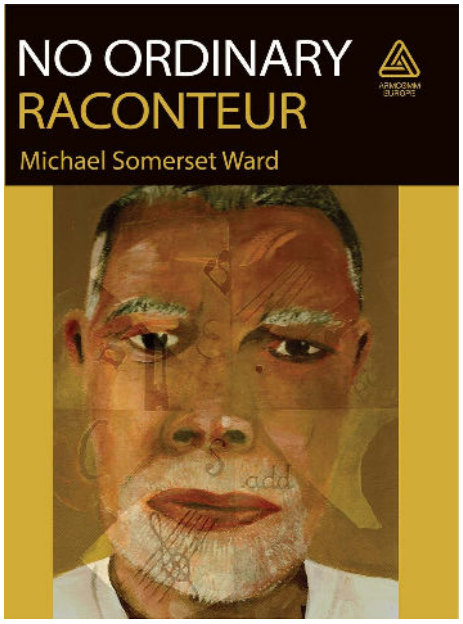
Great question. Without wishing to come over as conceited (heaven forbid) for me the question is, what do I bring out of him? It's a given that, like *Doomerati*, any piece I give to Mal has to be of the highest calibre and something that I can visualise will suit him. Remember this is a man I grew up with from age 14, but ..... hand on heart I was shocked when I heard his vocal on Slippery.. his lyrics... his singing... I have NEVER heard him sing with such passion and conviction and in such fine voice, such fine form. I would give his vocal 10/10. Did he "raise his game"? I think the combination of the music and his voice and writing created something very special, but the music came first.

Butchers of Distinction. *Sixty seconds exactly, musique concrète, deliberately cacophonous, Picasso's* Guernica *behind it — and you call it a palate cleanser. Most records end on a resolution. Why end on a shock?*

It just felt right. I had tried many different endings. I also guess, particularly in movies .. the shock ending... after all the drama.. the conclusion is here... then suddenly .. death.. real destruction .. horror obliterates the full stop and you're left speechless and bewildered.. what the hell was that?

The cover. Adi Newton painted you: Non-Euclidean Portrait of Michael Somerset Ward*, acrylic on canvas, 2026. Your face is the first thing anyone sees, and it was made by the man whose voice opens the record. What was it like to sit inside someone else's portrait of you, and what did you see in it when it was finished?*

I saw myself. My animal eyes. My features. The colours are just stunning. As soon as I saw it I loved it unconditionally.. Adi has the best sensibilities... Everyone who has seen it is knocked out.. You can't ignore it.



Michael Somerset Ward, No Ordinary Raconteur. *Cover painting by Adi Newton.*

The making. David Lewin is credited with sonic modelling and co-wrote three pieces; Dean Honer brought the synthesizers, co-wrote three more, recorded and mastered the album with you. What does "sonic modelling" actually mean in a room, and how does a song survive three pairs of hands?

David is a sorcerer. I honestly don't know how he does what he does. He doesn't always get it right BUT his successes are magnificent.. He has great musical skill .. he knows harmony inside out .. but it doesn't get in the way of his creativity.. I have often driven him to distraction .. Got him to go down a path sometimes for days only to say NO, let's go back. He complains about wasted time .. you said this .. you said that ... my answer is always the same .. "We are experimenting in the laboratory.. no time is wasted.. now we know that idea doesn't work." He still complains. The secret to any tune surviving three pairs of hands is no one's job bleeds over into another person's job. There's clear delineation plus a healthy amount of respect and trust.

Future Cartography. Adi's words come from Kafka Chic*, your radio drama on the early Sheffield industrial scene, and you called the piece "a prosaic, Ulyssean journey through the influences that shaped the iconoclast Adi Newton", haunted by Joseph Holbrooke and Bernard Herrmann. Why did Herrmann's* Taxi Driver *have to be in the final movement?*

The final big scene in *Taxi Driver*.. the hotel.. when the camera finds the bodies on the stairs, the blood up the walls .. the music is so profound .. Wagnerian but with this huge soundscape and the mixture of the atonal and advanced orchestral jazz. I really love the harmonies that Dave and I extracted from Matt Bourne's Electra-piano voicing... When I think it's just clarinet, flute and piccolo I can't quite believe it.. but that's what I play. When other musicians hear that part (the repeated motif) they always say in amazement, "What IS that?!!" And it's just 3 woodwinds playing incredible harmony.

After Adi's voyage through his influences I wanted the last movement to have that same

profundity. I created the ostinato bass motif from a bass improvisation.

Doomerati. *Written for a radio play about the KLF, then sent to Mallinder, who turned it into "the cut-up Bellman of Dystopia". Music made for one purpose and reborn for another. How often does your work arrive this way — sideways, out of a commission?*

That example may have been a first. With radio plays often the music is cheap and bad, or if it's not bad it's library music. I thought what we'd created deserved better. I often recycle my original themes. There's an instrumental on the first Floy Joy album. It's just me on baritone and Don Was on a grand piano. I love the theme so I recycled it for the first Mzylkypop album, and I intend to use it again in something I'm doing with Adi.

Rain Wolves. *Recorded live in the studio on a Sunday morning in January 2025, a quartet improvising; you say only that it came from Whitman's "Of the terrible doubt of appearances", and you refuse to explain the rest. You have spoken openly about every other piece here. Why does this one stay closed?*

It maybe was how I was feeling at the time of asking, but in general I prefer listeners to make up their own minds with my written pieces. When I started writing *Rain Wolves* it was for a specific commission for the Irish artist Gavin Friday. He read it beautifully but it remained unreleased. On a basic level it's about a believer in a higher entity.. Vlad / God .. and a non-believer dealing with an existential crisis situation. When I started writing it I had no idea where it was going. I just wanted to write about wolves, in which I've held a lifetime of interest. Then as I got into it the wolves became merely symbolic.. the ending just came to me like a gift.. The wolves could have been two soldiers (a believer and an atheist) left behind to cover a retreat, having a debate about the existence of God whilst facing an imminent attack from the pursuing enemy.

Doomerati – The Final Party Mix. *The sixteenth track, on Rizostream alone: Dean Honer takes the darkest thing on the record and turns it into a party. After everything the album has said about time running out, is that a joke, a consolation, or the last word?*

This sounds crazy but I never gave it a second thought. Never asked him. I like to think that the people I work with have integrity and so I trust them and support their self expression. I would have to ask the Deanoid. He was probably being apocalyptic.



Adi Newton & Michael Somerset Ward, Dimidium Oraculi. *Cover by Adi Newton.*

Dimidium Oraculi. *On the same day, a second record — half of the oracle — where four of these pieces come back remade, two by you and two by Adi, and where for the first time in more than forty years you both sign a whole work together. Why did* No Ordinary Raconteur *need a dark*

twin, a companion in shadow? And what does the second record know that the first one doesn't?

There is much to say for "being in the moment" rather than long consideration and evolution. How did I feel during the days — not weeks — that my side of *Dimidium Oraculi* was created? The answer is in the music we created. The performances by Matt Bourne, Adi, David Lewin and myself are much like a relay team passing the baton. The result has a muscular vitality I find inspiring, and a way forward for future creativity.

"We are experimenting in the laboratory. No time is wasted."

For my two pieces, and in particular with *Last Signal*.. it is the most contemporaneous with where my musical thinking is currently. I love the collage of pure sound and how, from within the electronic melange, the pure beauty of Matt Bourne's piano emerges, followed by Adi's prose and my treated bass clarinet. There's some pretty heavy melodic playing right there. What this record really shows is the deepening empathy and trust between Adi and myself.

And to close, back to where we began. The Sheffield of the eighties wrote something the rest of the world ended up speaking. What does the city sound like to you now, in 2026? Who is making things there, and is there still a youth in those streets with a grammar of its own — or was that something that happened once and does not come back?

I couldn't say I'm conversant with what is happening in the underground music scene in Sheffield.. Dean Honer would probably be the man to ask about that.... but in the overground, for me, it's pretty much beer and skittles.

■

"My music flows from the paintbox I've assembled over the years from Steel City rehearsals in abandoned Little Mester warrens to Motor City Gospel studios still echoing with the soundtrack of my youth."

Michael Somerset Ward — No Ordinary Raconteur
Vinyl LP ARMEUV009 · 12 tracks · 29:22
CD A5 Digifile ARMEUCD009 · 15 tracks · 50:45
Rizostream · 16 tracks

Adi Newton & Michael Somerset Ward — Dimidium Oraculi
Mini LP ARMEUV010 · 4 tracks · 27:26

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