Sick of dance music

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Moved on ... Rob Dougan is associated with dance music, but his heart is in ochestral pieces. Photo: Pete Millson

Rob Dougan is a rather odd musician. He says he's not particularly interested in music, for a start. His most famous track, Clubbed to Death, is dance music that you could never dance to. He has written for both Matrix films, but doesn't seem to think much of what he did for those either. He spent six years working on his orchestral solo album, Furious Angels, which could either be an epic work of panoramic genius or a gargantuan monument to his ego, with strings - it's hard to tell. And he has just been asked to remix some Frank Sinatra tracks, even though he thinks remixes are a waste of time.

"I'm probably the worst person for the job," says Dougan, a polite Australian who lives in a loft-style pad in Bermondsey, where a wall made of glass looks out on to the Thames. "I really like the originals and I really hate the here-today-gone-tomorrow stylistic aspect of modern music. So it leaves me in a terrible situation. I've done a new version of That's Life, which I've been told is not 'modern' enough. But I don't want to ruin something that's already great."

Dougan can't stand modern technology. "I'm associated with dance music, with electronica, which makes me feel ill. I only learnt all the boring computer crap as a means to an end. Virtually all musicians these days use computers, but if you write a book on a computer, nobody calls it electronic writing; the format you use doesn't necessarily affect the outcome. And rock'n'roll is electronic music par excellence - it's based on using electricity."

The orchestral flourishes of Furious Angels suggest where Dougan's real interests lie. "Frank Sinatra said some terrible things about rock'n'roll, and I'm coming to the conclusion that he was probably right. The songs written pre-rock'n'roll, and the orchestral tradition, were pretty phenomenal. And I know it's not a fashionable attitude, but there is a musical hierarchy, and writing a song is not the same as writing a symphony. Classical music is a lot harder to do: it's richer, and it will leave you with more."

Dougan puts the Beatles at the top of the popular music hierarchy. "Whether you like them or not, you're talking about perfection in pop music. Their songs have the low elements, in that they relate to your life in a really simple way, they have fantastic use of orchestration, and they are cinematic in their scope. Bacharach songs are always described as mini-movies, but the Beatles made mini-epics. They capture your imagination powerfully, and that's rare. I don't draw a line between the Beatles and Ravel or Vaughan Williams."

There were only four records in the house when Dougan was growing up in Sydney: by Beethoven, Louis Armstrong, Cleo Laine and Ennio Morricone. "I didn't buy any records myself until I was 17, and I always loved the radio - I spent most of the time changing channels in search of a Beatles song. It was their attitude to innovation that really counted, and I see that in Björk's music, too."

Dougan's other great love is Sinatra, whom he admires for not being afraid of manly maturity. "Sinatra writes songs about ageing, which you never get songs about today. In Sinatra's time it was really cool to be 50, to be a man. You put on a hat and a suit and you keep on going until you die. Now you get 50-year-old guys in sleeveless T-shirts, going to the gym and desperately trying to fix their hair, and you think: 'Whatever happened to real men?' "

There are a few other singers who have addressed the issue of being a real man, Serge Gainsbourg, Tom Waits and Leonard Cohen among them. "I first heard Leonard Cohen when I came to England about seven years ago, so I came to his later stuff first, and the funny thing is that musically, it's a little cheesy, with a synthesiser instead of strings and a drum machine. But I was stunned by the lyrics. He has the voice of doom, and he's singing witty, apocalyptic, cynical words. As soon as he starts singing - and I find this with Sinatra - the quality of the music doesn't matter."

Dougan clearly puts sentiment before skill. "All of the singers I like are singer-actors - they play roles. Bowie does it, Sinatra does it, and Dylan does it: his songs are like a soliloquy written for stage, and they make you think you're having a conversation with an articulate man. I dread to think what would happen if Dylan started singing now. His voice is not a thing of beauty, but it's the humanity in it that touches."

Bernard Herrmann is one of Dougan's favourite musicians. "The directors he worked with - Alfred Hitchcock, Martin Scorsese on Taxi Driver - understood the huge part Herrmann's music played in their films, and they let the music breathe. That doesn't happen now. It wasn't enough to let my music for The Matrix just be played over the film; they had to throw a whole load of crashing sound effects on to it, and that was hugely disappointing. The mentality with blockbusters now is that you have to throw everything but the kitchen sink into them."

Dougan was an actor first. "I liked the idea of writing songs in the manner of Cole Porter; of sitting in your dressing gown and knocking off a few genius lyrics in between sips of brandy," he says. "I still feel that way. I know how different the world seems when I listen to Frank Sinatra, but I couldn't care less about how his drums sound. I don't really care about anything in music, apart from what it communicates and the atmosphere it creates."

This article was amended on 16 April 2010. The original made one reference to Grievous Angels. This has been corrected.

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