



Adrian Hicks (left) and Nick Moorbath outside The Venue in Cowley Road in 1995 – the club was later to become better known as The Zodiac

Nick Moorbath was the beating heart at the centre of Oxford's flourishing music scene from 1984 to 2007. If you want proof, go and see *Anyone Can Play Guitar*, an independent film about the Oxford music scene during that very productive period.

He is also the man behind the legendary Radiohead homecoming concert, staged at South Parks in 2001.

Nick was born in Oxford in 1965, and his parents moved to Kennington when he was two. He was educated at the village primary school and Matthew Arnold Comprehensive and, after passing his A-Levels, his parents, Dr Stephen Moorbath (emeritus Professor of Geology in the Department of Earth Sciences at Oxford) and mum Pauline rather expected that their son would follow in his father's footsteps by going to university and becoming a geologist.

But, aged 18, Nicholas had different ideas. He moved into a shared house in Bicester and sold secondhand cars.

"I thought it great fun in the summer, but for some reason my enthusiasm cooled in the winter, so I took a job with Aldens (the specialist catering butchers) as a van driver," he recalls. "I saved £200 to buy my first guitar, a 1979 Fender Stratocaster Sunburst.

"I had classical piano lessons at school and like classical music, but I wanted to play rock music. I taught myself to play guitar – and when an American friend taught me the blues scale on the piano, I was transported to rock heaven."

Meanwhile 19-year-old Nick was moving up in the world of deliveries.

"A fishmongers asked me to be their sales rep and van driver. It was exciting, at first, driving to Billingsgate in the small hours. But when I was offered a post as sales rep with VJG Foods in Cassington, I was off – especially as a company car came with the job."

Between his full-time job and guitar and keyboard practice, Nick often worked in the evening in Jericho's Radcliffe Arms, which where he had his next breakthrough, thanks to the pub's landlords, Bob and Anne Moore.

"They encouraged me to get up on the stage and, a year later, I was working and playing with great artists.

"Steve Young, who had written songs for The Eagles, took me on as accompanying pianist and I had my first experience of playing to audiences of 400 at venues like The Half Moon in Putney."

In the meantime, the day job had changed again. Nick had formed the Market Place Catering Company with chef David Gomm.

"British Nuclear Fuels in Wantage had a canteen and, as long as we catered for their employees, they had no objection to us using their equipment to cook for pubs as well," Nick explained.

The company went from strength-to-strength, but music was taking up more of Nick's time.

"My heart was in music, but I did not want to let Dave down. We resolved the situation amicably – I sold Dave my shares in the company and used the proceeds to buy my first synthesiser.

"I threw my lot in with a band called Frank Fish and the Fins. Frank had a Dutch girlfriend and lots of Dutch contacts – so my first

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Nick Moorbath at the controls of his Trident 80B mixing desk

Photograph: Jessica Mann

A man and his music

Sylvia Vetta talks to Oxford musician and club owner Nick Moorbath



Nick plays the Fender Stratocaster guitar he purchased when he was 14

Photograph: Jessica Mann

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European tour began in Sconhooven in the Netherlands.”

Musicians, like actors, can find themselves resting in between tours, but Nick was not into lazing around. He worked with a company which planted trees – and discovered that he was good at that too.

“I always preferred to work rather than sign on the dole – so I helped plant 70,000 trees by motorways and on Salisbury Plain.” Nick said.

His enterprising spirit led to his next venture – in 1989 he rented an old apple barn at Gees Farm, Cumnor, and turned it into a rehearsal studio which he called The Cold Room.

Little-known bands Radiohead and Supergrass were among his first customers.

Nick said: “I enjoyed listening in and two voices made my hair stand on end, and have stood out for me ever since – Radiohead’s Thom Yorke and Lee from a band called Wonderland.”

Nick’s entrepreneurial spirit lead him to take a job as sound engineer at the Old Fire Station. He admits he was a novice.

“I learned on the job and soon was freelancing as sound engineer at the Venue club in Cowley Road.”

Here he met resident sound engineer Adrian Hicks and together the duo formed a new business called Lighthouse Concert Promotions, to bring bands to The Venue.

Nick and Adrian had the building, but very little capital. By this time Oxford bands Radiohead, Ride and Supergrass were all doing well and they came to the rescue

At the same time Nick was playing piano with The Iron Clowns and The Slammers.

“It was all happening!” he said.

In business, things rarely go smoothly and those early years at The Venue threw up many problems.

“We fell out with the people who had the lease on the building. We were making them a lot of money, but we had a vision for the venue – a vision one of the leasees did not share.

“He owed us lots of money and we discovered that he owed the landlord money too. We decided to leave, taking all our equipment with us. We relocated to The Elm Tree pub (also on the Cowley Road).

“I was seeing, for the first time, an example of how not to run a business. Without us, their company stopped trading – and the landlord invited us to take the lease.”

Nick and Adrian had the building, but very little capital.

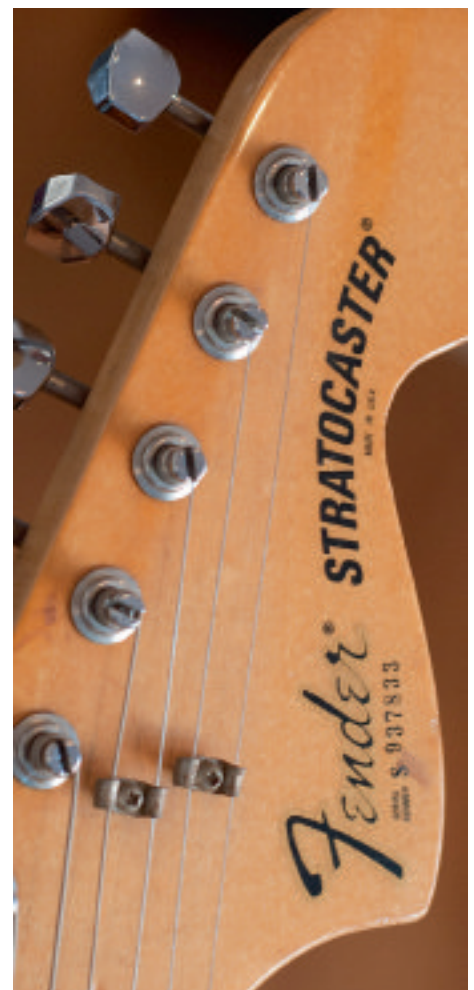
By this time Oxford bands Radiohead, Ride and

Supergrass were all doing well and they came to the financial rescue. Dave Newton, manager of Ride, and Tim Greaves, Radiohead’s tour manager, also invested in the business.

The club reopened as The Zodiac in 1995 and, under Nick’s directorship, expanded and developed into Oxford’s principal music venue. That would be enough for most people, but Nick still wanted to make music.

In 1994, in the Cold Room, he had started playing as session keyboard player for Ride.

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"That job catapulted me on to a larger stage. Just before we reopened the Zodiac, I found myself playing with Ride at Glastonbury in front of an audience of 30,000! After that we toured the world."

Meanwhile, back at The Zodiac . . .

"Adrian and I were good promoters, but managing a bar was not our forté," Nick said. "Despite being busy, we were not managing the money well. But we learned quickly and, as soon as we made profits, we ploughed them back into the building."

"The year 1997 was huge in my life – it saw the birth of my daughter Mae. And not long after that, the demise of Ride and the birth of a new band, Hurricane No1. I was a new dad, director of The Zodiac and performed in 130 concerts that year," said Nick

It all sounded pretty exhausting.

"At least I had someone else running the Cold Room before selling it," he added.

The Millennium was approaching and, unsurprisingly, Nick became involved in OOMF – Oxford's Own Millennium Festival, along with Tish Francis from the Oxford Playhouse.

Nick said: "More than 20,000 people enjoyed the OOMF celebration in South Parks, with a choir and cast of 200 and music written by Oxford composer Nick Bicat."

"This event gave me the idea for the Radiohead concert in South Parks – and also the chance to discuss the idea with the police and Oxford City Council, who were all very supportive."

"Around 47,000 people packed into South Parks for the Radiohead gig and we raised lots of money for charity," Nick said.

"Shortly after this I set up A&N Concerts with music promotor Alan Day, in order to organise and promote concerts at venues away from The Zodiac – including Reading, Swindon and London."

"It was around this time I met Laila. She also had a daughter (Erin) and our relationship grew and grew – we married in 2009."

"In the meantime, we had expanded into the pool club at the back of the Zodiac. Business was going well, but my role was becoming more regimented. I yearned to be creative again. That was why, in 2007, we sold the club and it was renamed the Carling Academy Oxford."

At the time, some people accused Nick of selling out to the big guys, but he believes that he ensured the venue would continue as a centre for live music and guaranteed the jobs of all those working there.

What followed the sale of The Zodiac was not exactly a quiet life. Nick's next enterprise was TCT Music, again with Alan Day, and they promoted more than 500 concerts in two years.

Nick said: "Alan moved on to a great job in London and I finally got back to being more creative. I became involved in production work with Craker Media, a company that manages and develops new young British talent."

"The artists we support include MAPSongs, Paul Ewing, Shivi, Tankus the Henge, and FRANKO. Chris Craker owns a massive studio in Thailand called Karmasound studios, where I have worked."

"We have also been working with Thai promoters Rock N' Rolla and the Silverlake Festival and have promoted groups like Fatboy Slim, Deep Purple, Incubus, DJ Shadow and Anthrax over the last couple of years."



"When Laila and I married in May 2009, it was the obvious place for our honeymoon – even though I must be the only man to take his wife on a working honeymoon. still, we stayed in the same hotel as Deep Purple."

We had not talked much about Nicholas's desert island choices apart from his first guitar.

Nick's latest venture is Evolution Recording Studios in Osney Mead where he has a top-of-the-range Trident mixing desk.

As her looked longingly at this piece of technology I explained that if he wanted to take it to the island he would need solar panels to power it.

"If I took a book it would have to be *The Hobbit*. I was not a great reader at school. When I listened to the recording of *The Hobbit*, narrated by Nicol Williamson, it made me want to read the book. It stimulated my imagination – and imagination is important to me."

"But," he said pointing to his sound recording equipment "so is all of this."

"When Laila became pregnant, it was obvious to us, that I would have to move my recording equipment out of our home in Temple Cowley. We needed the space for our baby daughter Celeste, who was born in April last year."

"Fortunately, another business I am a director of, called We Got Tickets – an online booking agency – needed to find new accommodation as a lease was coming to an end. We decided to buy the property in Osney and have one floor for We Got Tickets and the

other for a top-of-the-range recording studio –hence the Trident 80B!"

"If I can't take the Trident to the island, what about my MacBook? It is amazing what you can do on such a small computer and it would not need a lot of solar power. If electricity isn't possible then maybe I should take my piano."

To have a lot of fun can I take a museum? I love Keith Harding's Mechanical Music Museum at Northeach, near Cherltenham. Just seeing how everything has developed and miniaturised would be fascinating. "

Nick clicked on his MacBook to bring up a painting. "Now I am a family man I could take a painting called *The Family* which I saw at the National Gallery in Dublin. It is by Louis le Brocquy and, although it is disturbing, there is also something loving about it. It is a striking image and it moved me."

But as Nick can only have one thing, will it be the book, the painting, his piano, the guitar, the Trident or his MacBook?

"I think it has to be the MacBook Pro. Even without the Internet – as long as I have my Logic software – I can write, produce and record music anywhere," Nick smiled.

■ *Anyone Can Play Guitar* is being screened at ther Kennington Village Centre on Friday, May 11, 7.30 for 8pm. Proceeds go to the Friends of Kennington Library. For more information visit the website: www.sylviaavetta.co.uk
To learn more about Evolution Recording Studio visit the website: www.evolutionstudios.co.uk