

Ben Howard

In March 2022, Ben Howard was sat in his garden when he found himself unable to think clearly, form sentences or speak for almost an hour. A month later, after the same thing happened again, the Ivor Novello Award-winning singer-songwriter learned he'd suffered two TIAs (transient ischemic attacks - known as mini-strokes). "It was out of the blue," says the 35 year-old. "It was a confusing me."

That June, after a month of inconclusive hospital tests Howard and his band returned to Le Manoir de Léon recording studio in south-west France, where they'd previously worked on his acclaimed third album 'Noonday Dream'.

"We went in and put down ten songs in ten days, then spent the rest of the year tinkering with them". The record was produced by Bullion, known for his work on Westerman's 'Your Hero Is Not Dead' and Orlando Weeks 'Hop Up'. Howard says, "We worked through the heatwave, the air conditioning broke, after what had happened I was so tired in the afternoons that I slept a lot. We just played solidly and slept, they was no time for retrospection".

The result is 'Is It', a lush, sonically splintered album which captures Howard working through those moments of seismic shift. "I found it impossible not to dwell on the absurdity of it, that with one tiny clot, one can lose all faculties. It really ate into the wiring of the record".

The songs range from the peaceful quotidian Days of Lantana, to cut up samples and driven beats of Walking Backwards, the former's pitched and warped Linda Thompson chorus reminiscent of Malcolm McLaren's 'Madame Butterfly'.

Moonraker, a song about climbing in the Guadarrama mountains touches on the meditative, while in the cyclical Richmond Avenue Howard talks of shared childhood moments with his father.

There are colourful, life-field production choices throughout- a staple of Bullion - but with a twist

"We really bonded over records in the studio" he says. "Nathan has an incredible ear and catalogue of sampled beats and rhythms which quickly became the bedrock... There were contributing factors also. Our mainstay drummer Kyle lives in Seale and as we made the record on the fly we just leaned into drum-machine world, and really rely almost all of that side of things up to Nathan."

"We also did a session at Real World Studios and put most of the record through an echoplex".

That session featured additional instrumentation from Raven Bush (violin, viola) and Mick McGoldrick (flute, Eileen pipes) as well as Howard's mainstay band of Mickey Smith (Bass, guitars, percussion) R.D. Thomas (synths, keys, harmonium) and Nat Wason (guitars).

"It's actually mostly a guitar record, but there are some nice additions. We bought an old harmonium at the beginning of the trip which made its way onto most tracks. I was very much stuck in stunted delay and synth led guitar patterns. Mick McGoldrick came in to play on Richmond Ave and straight away played Liam O'Flynn lines from the Mark Knopfler record 'Cal' which is a long favourite of mine and a big connection to my Dad who had it on tape. That was a beautiful moment, perhaps one of my favourite moments in the studio ever."

"It was a refreshing way to record, unweighted by the past"

The change is evident on 'Is It' - an album which represents a further creative evolution from an artist known for never repeating himself throughout his already-storied career.

"I was so aware of the overwhelming information coming from everything, almost like my brain couldn't filter what was happening and had to start again. So we just pushed forward, lyrically it seems obvious to me in parts, It's about singing there wondering what the hell is going on."

Yet with each listen it feels like more than that. A characteristically onion-layered record which rankles like a series of questions, or a series of vignettes throughout Howard's life, perhaps best distilled in the whirling chorus on 'Spirit'.

'What's mine anyway?

My feelings seem to be arranged. What's mine anyway?

Spirit? Is it?

'Is It' stands quite starkly on its own, buoyed by the circumstances of its creation. "Just to be playing music in the studio felt like a real privilege and a luxury," says Howard. "It was probably the best studio session we've ever had."