



ABOVE From another planet... "We are congenitally weird," says Skeltys (at left).

editor who'd gone on to set up the murmur label for Sony, was in the audience. "The next thing we knew we were in negotiations," says Kate.

Murmur is best known as the home of silverchair and Something For Kate, and as such would appear an unlikely home for B(if)tek. But far from being put off by its rock credentials, Kate and Nicole were attracted by the label's integrity and reputation for creative freedom. They signed, and went to work on *2020*.

2020 takes the B(if)tek sound and aesthetic, so roughly-hewn yet strangely attractive on *Sub-Vocal Theme Park*, to the next level. The lo-fi aspect is less pronounced, yet it retains the dark undercurrent that permeates all the band's work. "Some people will hear it as the love-child of Kraftwerk and Giorgio Moroder who's grown up watching reality TV, French new wave cinema and taking too much acid," laughs Nicole. "But it's

our baby; it's electronica with our personalities."

Despite the fears of some fans that signing to murmur would dilute B(if)tek's special qualities, there is no evidence of that. "We're really protective of what we are and what we do and we only work with people we like, and that applies to John O'Donnell too," Kate asserts. "We chose to work with John because he understood and respected that. We are what we are and we're not going to turn into the Prodigy or the Chemical Brothers. We have our own sound and the only way for us to keep enjoying music is to protect it. We don't compromise that."

"We physically couldn't do it," adds Nicole. "We are congenitally weird."

"We can't write unweird music," laughs Kate. "It's got something to do with the way our brains are wired. We certainly can't write hits on demand, or even imagine being able to do that."

A "less is more" aesthetic is also crucial to *2020*, inspired by the minimalist traditions of Detroit and German techno. "Mostly it's

deliberately minimal, controlled, underspacious," Nicole explains. "It means the sound has to work very hard." About half the tracks are instrumental, while others are dialogue or vocal snippets from the girls, images rather than narrative.

"What we like is the chance for people to create their own meaning and their own context around it," says Kate. "As far as we're concerned that's what the best lyrics do. Often I can leave lyrics ... so for us it's all about boiling down to those little gems and ditching the extraneous stuff to get to the absolute core. Another example of that 'less is more' aesthetic. To do that takes real discipline."

The exception is the album's only cover version and the current single, an otherwise untaken Cliff Richard's 1981 hit "Wired for Sound" featuring vocals from Julee Cruise, *Twin Peaks* fame. Far from being a sly piece of 21st-century irony, Kate and Nicole see it as a "devotional song" that perfectly sums up their attitude to sound technology.

"It's a fantastic song and that whole fetishisation of sound, it's just so us," says Kate. "And to work with Julee Cruise, who we think of as an absolute goddess, was just a dream project. All the tracks on the album, that was by far the most work. We over-scored it and then had to strip it right back, condense it to its essence and then weird it out. We're just so happy with it, our baby... In a way, we don't care if no one gets it. It's both innocent and warped at the same time, which is also what we liked about working with Julee. She has that same aesthetic: innocent but warped. And she realised it too, which is why she kept saying, 'I get you, I totally get you guys'."

Interestingly, Julee had no idea who Cliff Richard was. "We had to explain the whole Cliff Richard phenomenon, and the more we explained, the more excited she got at the possibilities of doing something that was both reverential and subversive at the same time. It was fantastic for us to work with such a magic singer who is also our strangely oscillating wavelength."

Whether B(if)tek is too "congenitally weird" for mainstream tastes remains to be seen. Whatever happens, Kate and Nicole are justifiably proud of *2020*. They've taken a complex view of the world that's full of juxtapositions – retro-futurism, the notion of high and low culture, humour and serious intent – and condensed it into 70 minutes of music that's both alluring and challenging and constitutes their own twisted take on 21st-century pop.

"This album was recorded over the last two years and represents our experiences, our music obsessions and our exhilarations as well as our darker moments over that period," Kate concludes. "Fans tell us that our strength as a band is our energy and our commitment to developing a unique sound that can't be easily categorised. That's something that is very important to us, and while we play with genres, we don't treat them respectfully. We take them out of their boxes, toy with them, and return them utterly warped. Bad kiddies!" **STUART HITCHING!**