

## Soul providers

From dynamic pop and dance tracks to sumptuous film and TV scores, the **Urban Soul Orchestra** supply the strings that move and groove...

Feature by  
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**Having cut a resonant swathe through London's session scene for two decades, the Urban Soul Orchestra (USO) are a string ensemble with a difference. Their fusion of classical sensibilities with contemporary grooves has kept the USO busy as a top choice for pop/dance producers and film composers alike, both for recording and live gigs. Throw in excellent string arrangements, visual flair and a funky vibe, and the USO have a musical recipe for long-term success.**

This versatile collective features a large cast of players and a repertoire tailored for high-end special events. Behind the USO's achievements are long hours of work, savvy management and clever marketing.



Stephen Hussey:  
the USO's violinist,  
arranger and  
conductor

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*The Musician* spoke with violinist, arranger and conductor Stephen Hussey, the driving force behind the USO, about the origins, energy, track record and dreams of this unique string orchestra.

### Why did you form the USO?

I really wanted to work doing pop sessions in the 1990s and we set up the orchestra to provide top quality session musicians. We did a lot of live gigs and TV promo work but because I've always been interested in dance music, I wanted to create an orchestra of string players who had the right feel and could groove well. I was looking for musicians who were classically trained — because you need that training to have the basics — but who could build on that training, and also had a genuine love of other genres of music.

It was also very much about picking up and enjoying good work that was around at the time — Take That first time round, the Spice Girls and dance producers such as Full Intention. There was a sound that I really wanted to get from strings and bring to pop productions, and so we set up the orchestra to further the range in the pop work.

### How and why did the USO develop its unique approach to the traditional orchestral line-up — marrying strings with beats and basslines, mixing genres?

It was a natural progression from the arranging work I was doing for sessions and also music I was listening to. I grew up listening to the greats — Stevie Wonder, Bob Marley, The Beatles, soul, Motown, jazz — and took in what I heard from some of the great arrangers, like Claus Ogerman, Paul Riser, Nelson Riddle, Burt Bacharach and Quincy Jones. They inspired me in the



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The USO: excellent arrangements, visual flair and a funky vibe

way they used strings — the harmonies, voicings, melody and countermelody, riffs and hooks. I was doing a lot of arranging for pop and dance tracks in the 1990s, and I learnt that the arranging style that worked at the time was punchy, strong, rhythmic — big fat hooks, riffs, flamboyant runs.

At the same time, I was being asked to arrange for quartet gigs. I learnt how to include all the elements of pop music into a string quartet. You have to make sure the bass line grooves right on the cello and the other rhythmic and harmonic elements are represented in the inner parts — the first violin is mainly going to play the main vocal line. I decided we also needed a rhythm section to get any kind of authentic feel. So we started working with percussionists and bass players — Karlos Edwards, Andy Waterworth, Davide Pasqualini, Jonathan Giles Moss, Angela Cuevas. More recently we've been working with DJs like The Jinks, Dan Lywood and Jose Carretas.

#### Which projects have best represented the USO's feel?

One of the best working relationships that I most enjoyed was with a band called D'Influence. We worked on four of their albums over 10 years, as well as other acts, including Shola Ama. Another project I really loved was Nightmares On Wax's

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*Les Nuits*, a track which was used on many chill-out compilations. It became quite a trademark piece for us.

#### Is USO made up of regular players? Are they on freelance or full-time contracts?

Everyone is on a freelance basis, even me! For corporate and events work, we have a core group of 25–30 musicians who all know the music. We share that work as equally as we can within the core. →

## Collaboration planet

### The USO's relationship with Nitin Sawhney.

'Nitin and I have worked together for 11 years. I got a call from studio technician and friend, Tony Economides, who was working with Nitin on his *Prophecy* album.

'They needed someone to help Nitin print the string scores, so I helped with the copying work and it was decided I'd conduct that session for *Prophecy* with the English Chamber Orchestra.

'We clicked musically. Nitin is an amazingly talented and versatile musician and composer. His career was building and he'd bring me in on projects that used

orchestras — he'd write the music, I'd score-edit and do additional orchestration. Nitin's an excellent orchestrator and does all the important stuff himself, but I help out on the "fleshing out" — voicings, etc.

'Recently, we've collaborated on a series of BBC documentaries, *Human Planet*, which was amazing. I've got a show with Nitin next month in Singapore doing *A Throw Of Dice*, a silent film he scored. We're swapping roles — it's quite mad. The promoter wanted him to conduct, so I'm playing piano. I'm very lucky to work with him.'

We do different types of jobs — studio work, corporate work, quartet work and live performances — meaning that we can use different people outside the core.

**You arrange strings and conduct. How does this affect directing the USO?**

Well, it used to be very difficult having so many different roles. At times I would think I was doing everything nearly well enough but not quite, because I was manager, arranger, fixer, section leader, player — I just really felt I couldn't do everything as well as I wanted to. So I don't manage the Urban Soul Orchestra anymore. We're very lucky to have Natasha Beckman, who manages the orchestra. She came from the Auckland Festival and she's been working with us for two years. She's transformed the way the orchestra works — she's taken everything to a new level. I honestly believe that good or bad management can really make or break a group.

**Has the USO undertaken any education or community-based projects?**

The London Community Gospel Choir invited us to perform with them in a series of Christmas concerts in Holland, Denmark and also in Westminster. I love gospel music and the way the harmonies work. I'd written the string arrangements for the USO, which we read from parts, but the choir had the most amazing, complex vocal arrangements all internalised — they don't use [written] music. It was amazing.

In 2009/10, we did a great project — People In Your Neighbourhood, a British Council initiative to showcase artists in Auckland, New Zealand. They gave us the amazing opportunity to write, record and perform new music with many New Zealand-based Asian, Maori and Pacific artists, including rappers, singers and dancers.

**Has the USO felt the current recession?**

In the same way that I've found it necessary to have a range of activities that I can do as a musician — for example, violin playing, conducting, arranging, orchestrating — it's the same for the orchestra. We've found it necessary to have a portfolio of activities that the USO can undertake. Whereas we started off doing pop sessions, we've built on that by adding in private and corporate events work. A lot of our clients really love the fact that we're the string section that has worked with so many artists. Having a wide selection of services has worked for us and has meant that we're not reliant on funding.

**Have you ever used the MU's services?**

Yes, I use them a lot — I think they're really

Hussey wants the USO to 'start creating a body of work that's our own music'



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important. I always check regarding rates to make sure we're paying musicians the right amount. We have a couple of clients that didn't pay — not very many — but the MU successfully retrieved money for us, so that was very good.

I think it's really good the way the MU responded to this recession. They're renegotiating the BPI agreements and PACT [Producers Alliance for Cinema and Television] rates to ensure that UK musicians stay competitive in a difficult market, particularly when there's so much competition from places like Prague and eastern Europe, and it's going to get worse as the east opens up further. I have a lot of respect for the MU. I genuinely read *The Musician* because I think it's an important way to keep abreast of developments within the industry. I don't think there's any other single source that is as informative, certainly not to me.

**How do you see the USO moving forward?**

The first thing that I want to do is an album. Whereas over the last 20 years we've been providing a service to people in sessions and gigs, and often looking to other people to give us work, I think it's very important to start creating a body of work that's our own. So the next important step is the creative process of collaborating with musicians and writers on a collection of great songs with good singers but still with that dance music edge. ■■■■

## USO's track record

The Urban Soul Orchestra have worked with many high-profile music names. Here is a short list of some of the artists and events to have benefited from their talents:

- **Recordings:** Shola Ama, Peter Andre, Cast, Destiny's Child, Alesha Dixon, D'Influence, Mick Jagger, Get Cape Wear Cape Fly, Groove Armada, Jamelia, The Jinks, Keane, Leona Lewis, Nightmares On Wax, Octave One, Cliff Richard, Nitin Sawhney, The Script, Heather Small, X-Press 2 feat David Byrne
- **Live work:** BBC Proms, BBC Electric Proms, Il Divo, Nate James and the London Community Gospel Choir, Keane, WOMAD (People In Your Neighbourhood project)
- **TV/video promos for:** Eternal, Gabrielle, Annie Lennox, the Lightning Seeds, Kylie Minogue, the Spice Girls, Take That

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