





DELUSIONS OF GRANDEUR TERRY MATTHEW APRIL 25, 2015

It's a rare and dangerous sensation to cup an atomic bomb in your hands.

That's what you have here, whether you're seeing the cover of Delusions of Grandeur for the first time in your life or the first time in twenty years. Atom Bomb at Bikini Atoll is the name of the photograph blasting through the orange, yellow and blue gradients. It's become one of the most appropriate cover images ever selected. What other metaphor could capture the destructive and creative forces of the music on Delusions of Grandeur and the effect it had on American rave culture and electronic dance music in the mid-1990s?



Unlike most "re-discovered" records from the past, however, there's nothing precious or delicate about Delusions of Grandeur. It's not a piece of paleolithic pottery, a lost painting that requires a team of experts in moon suits operating in temperature-controlled environments to restore. You'd be better off calling the bomb squad: Delusions is still a force to be reckoned with, like unexploded ordnance from a war only the old, the mad and the scholarly remember.

This record wasn't miraculously preserved from the ravages of time. It outlasted them. Neglect, bad relationships and the rest of the fallout after the second great flowering of American dance music couldn't break down its resilient steel shell, and had this 20th anniversary occasion passed without notice,

Delusions of Grandeur would still be somewhere below our feet, beneath the street level, softly ticking...

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People love a good story, and this - the story of Delusions of Grandeur - is still one of the best. There's something so quintessentially American about it (even for the ones involved who aren't, or weren't always, American). It's about young people deliberately crafting a new identity, throwing themselves into the maelstrom with more enthusiasm than expertise. Along the way, they did somehow find themselves, in something like a family, in something like a community, and between there and here created something truly beautiful in spite of their youth and clumsiness.



Delusions of Grandeur was Hardkiss' greatest creation (other than, perhaps, Hardkiss itself). Individually and as collaborators, the members of Hardkiss have made many other great records, including some that have yet to really find the proper appreciation. But after the EPs, the bootlegs, the remixes, the white labels and even some of their DJ sets (which were every bit as inventive as the original tracks), we're still coming back to this one. At the time, I can tell you, Delusions inspired a lot of warm feelings, even a strange sense of pride and accomplishment among those who had nothing to do with getting the record released. It was a feeling of having collectively broken through - as if the work put in by thousands of American DJs, producers, ravers, sound engineers, designers, dancers, promoters, dealers, pilgrims, purists and travelers - as if the invoice for all of their expenses and busted



parties and arrests and thefts and financial disasters had been paid in full.

Everyone felt like they had a part in it - including the thousands drawn into the culture and the music for the first time because of Delusions.

I started writing this piece around that time, in my head, after I bought a copy of Delusions of Grandeur that's been handled so much the jewel case is almost opaque. I started writing it, on paper, in March 2014, when I sat with Gavin and Robbie Hardkiss, one after another, for something like four or five hours worth of interviews. The point of that story: Hardkiss was back, with what was their first output in more than a decade, a fantastic album (the first since Delusions of Grandeur) called 1991.

A vital but silent presence in those interviews was the third Hardkiss, Scott. Those interviews took place almost a year to the day after Scott Hardkiss had passed away from a cerebral aneurism in New York, on March 25, 2013.

Scott was aware of the sessions Robbie and Gavin were holding out in California for what became 1991. He had agreed to remix one of the tracks which had been written especially for him - "a love letter," his wife Stephanie called it. As in our interview, Scott was an unseen presence you could feel between the grooves of 1991. I'd like to think that this piece preserves something of the voice and the presence of Scott Hardkiss too.

Hardkiss was more than Scott. But then it was more than Gavin and Robbie too. It was Jon Williams, Wade Randolph

Hampton, Niven Bonar, and not least of all Rabbit In The Moon and DJ Three and Ultraviolet Catastrophe, who all had a lot to do directly with the music you hear on Delusions of Grandeur.

In a broad sense, the Hardkiss story has always been about relationships. It was about building a family from the very beginning. From Day One.

"Our very first move as Hardkiss," Robbie Hardkiss told me, "was to go to parties with cards that had our number on it, the tree of hearts logo and a line that read: We're Starting a Family, and We're Looking for Brothers and Sisters. Just like that. We'd look for cool, nice, friendly people and introduce ourselves.

"We were thinking in those terms. We wanted to make music and we would have liked to be successful musicians, but we were thinking much bigger than that."

#### THE HARDKISS CREATION MYTH

If there was a beginning to "Hardkiss" - the record label, the DJ collective, the family - it began in Potomac, Maryland, when Scott Hardkiss (then Scott Friedel) held out a can of beans to Robbie Hardkiss (then Rob Cameron) and, in lieu of an introduction, proclaimed a single word.

"Garbanzos!" Robbie remembers him shouting. "Garbanzos!"

"I was in a circle of my friends on the patio when Scott comes up, walks into the center of the circle



holding a can of garbanzo beans and began shouting, 'Garbanzos!' That was his introduction. Those were the first words he said to me. I think he went into my buddy Dylan's kitchen and rumaged through the cabinets until he found his icebreaker to get in."

Robbie laughed telling this story, and I laughed too, though I didn't really get it. But it fits, somehow, that the beginning of the Hardkiss mythos - the Hardkiss creation story - would read like a farce. The first two Hardkiss brothers bonded over beans, but also a love of Prince and his music. It's much more "rock star" to emphasize the love of Prince, of course. But it's much more "Hardkiss" to give the two - the love of Prince and the beans - equal weight and measure.

They were still in high school then, and this was not San Francisco (none of the Hardkiss brothers are actually from San Francisco or anywhere near it) but a suburb of Washington, DC. Scott and Robbie were dreaming about how to sneak into clubs, not how to play them. They weren't joining hippie free love caravans, but taking long train rides up the East Coast and slowly, methodically forging the birthdate on their drivers' licenses to pass to the bouncers at clubs in New York.

"We got close right at the end of high school," Robbie remembers, "and that summer between senior year and college. Since I was considering NYU, we could tell our parents that we were going to visit NYU and Scott was going to visit Connecticut College. Instead we wandered around Greenwich Village. We were using Chartpak Letraset rub-off letters to put new numbers over our real driver's licenses.

"I remember being really careful, looking around, thinking we were going to get in trouble. Like we'd step off the train in New York City and the cops would be waiting to arrest us for suspicion of altering our IDs. We were such naive little boys!" Forged IDs in hand, Robbie and Scott dressed up "in what we thought were our cool, clubby clothes. And we went to Palladium and we went to the Limelight. At the Limelight, I'll never forget waiting behind the velvet ropes to get in. We were just two dorky kids from the suburbs in trenchcoats."

...

Scott and Robbie went to high school together; Scott and Gavin Hardkiss (then Gavin Bieber) went to college together. They met at Penn while Robbie was attending school in New York.

"We pretty much all met each other through music when we were teenagers," Gavin says. "None of us were actually musicians. We just had a love for music and albums and going out to shows and hearing DJs and dancing."

Scott showed up at college one day with turntables. "I didn't know he had them, but I think he was into breakdancing when he was in high school," Gavin says. "And the turntable became our instrument of choice."

"They'd been turned on by the rave scene and the music," Robbie remembers. He sometimes visited Scott in Philadelphia and stayed in his sister's dorm at the all-girls' Moore College of Art. "They had been throwing these little parties in Philly and went to some of the



Storm Raves in New York. Gavin had met me but I didn't know Gavin for real until they drove out to San Francisco in 1991 after they graduated."

#### THE MAGICAL SOUND OF THE SAN FRANCISCO UNDERGROUND

Robbie was the first to pull up stakes for San Francisco, to "seek his fortune", Gavin says. Gavin and Scott followed, to "earn their fortune", Robbie says. It was the summer of 1991, and for young kids following the (then) common path of heading out to California for a career in music, they seemed to be unusually focused on something nobody has really ever been able to define.



In 1994, Gavin told URB magazine that "it's hard for people to understand just what Hardkiss is. Yesterday we were trying to explain it to someone and I just caught myself thinking that if I was in their shoes I wouldn't understand what the fuck we were talking about."<sup>1</sup>

Twenty years later, Gavin doesn't find it any easier. "I've learned to not question the way that other people define [Hardkiss]," he says. "Like just this weekend, people were talking about 'my band.' I didn't want to correct them, y'know? What am I going to tell them, it's not a band? In their mind, Hardkiss is a band.

"To my parents Hardkiss is a record label. You know, it's a business. To some people Hardkiss is a fucking cult. I even though that, I'm sure, in the throes of it. Like, 'Just what is this that we're doing? Is this



how Charlie Manson started? What are we doing here? We kind of all live together and none of us work and we all have a spiritual connection to a sound that we haven't created yet!"

...

"Scott and I had the feeling, because of what we were doing on the East Coast, that things were going to explode with the rave scene or electronic music or House Music and this new culture," Gavin says. "We picked up to move to San Francisco because Robbie lived there, and we thought it'd be cool to bring him in to this passion, this vision, this idea we had. The idea might have been slightly different for Scott than for me. I fancied myself as a Chris Blackwell-type of guy. A Richard Branson. I wanted to start a record label and put out music. Scott wanted to DJ."



Thick with what the moneyed like to call "atmosphere" and with the nascent high tech industry in its backyard, San Francisco seemed to be the epicenter of everything interesting happening in the world in 1991. Hardkiss weren't the only ones looking for something in the Bay Area. Contemporaneous articles about the rave scene in San Francisco note how just about everyone seems to be from somewhere else. It started at the top with the Wicked crew - Jenö, Garth, Markie Mark and Alan McQueen, refugees from Thatcherite England. From the free parties and mobile sound systems of the UK, they lit the fuse to the rave scene in the Bay Area with Full Moon parties, free events that were legendary across America even then and the memory of which still resonates in the electronic music scene 25 years later.





But beyond music, dance and raves, San Francisco was the locus of a thriving alternative media scene, shot through with the left-wing militancy of a Jello Biafra or a Huey P. Newton. The nation was reeling from a major recession, the inner cities in decay from the fall-out of the '70s and 11 years of unrelenting Reaganomics. San Francisco seemed to be in constant rebuttal, both directly political and intensely personal.



And to someone from the Midwest who could only read about it, San Francisco appeared to be in the spasms of another dreamy, idealistic, neo-psychedelic renaissance. A town that the industry had written off in the last days of disco was coming back to life to the pulse of electronic music, powered by names like Hardkiss and Wicked but also DJ Dan & the Funky Tekno Tribe, the Gathering and Dubtribe. For the second time in 25 years, outsiders, artists and eccentrics began flowing into the Bay Area, drawn to this cultural citadel.

Gavin remembers the town when he first arrived. "It was a hot mess of post-Industrial, post-post-post-disco, and then there was this English influx of squatter and DIY culture. It was kind of happenin' in its own way. It was kickin' off. There were parties every weekend and actually every day of the week."

"You could just kind of wrap yourself in the blanket of this culture for days and weeks and months on end. And just be in the love of it."

"When I moved to SF in '89," Robbie says, "it was such a rocker town. If you wanted to go to a dance club,



it was more industrial, like Nitzer Ebb. The very first raves in San Francisco - I think anyway - were called Mr Floppy's Flophouse. Mr Floppy's was kind of like acid house, but still had punk bands. It was this weird mix of rock and dance and big wild parties in that building. There'd be weird art installations in one room, weird trippy ambient music in another room, a punk band in still another room and then DJs, surrounded with the smiley face, the black light, the whole nine yards."



"If there's something good happening, there's always going to be a lot of people in the world who vibe with it," Gavin says. "People find ways to get involved. They want to participate. They want to be a part of something bigger than themselves. That can happen really quickly. 'Hey I'm a journalist! Hey I'm starting a zine! Hey I'm a promoter!' When a week before you were none of those things."

"It was a magical time in San Francisco," Robbie said. "We were going to these outdoor parties, stepping out and creating our own lives after college. We truly believed we were creating our own family - not just us three, but extending to girlfriends, wives, close friends. It was a magic burst, and you can't repeat it... It's like the first time you take Ecstasy, or the first time you fall in love - it never feels like that again."<sup>2</sup>

## THE TREE OF HEARTS

The Hardkiss strategy created in Philadelphia and unpacked on a blanket in San Francisco was familiar - forward-thinking, even, in this era of a "brand-driven" music industry. Hardkiss would throw parties. Hardkiss would also DJ at them. The Hardkiss parties would make some money to pay for studio time. The studio time would result in Hardkiss recordings, and the recordings would be released on the Hardkiss label. Next step: world domination.

And it almost worked, until ravenomics kicked in. "We put \$10,000 on a credit card for one party," Robbie says. "It had 808 State and Jenö, maybe Thomas too, but 808 State was the big headliner."

"We lost our space on the day of the event when they figured out it was one of those 'raves.' We scrambled and managed to pull the party off, but it was a horrible deal. We were proud to make it happen but we ate it. I actually think Gavin ate it on that credit card, personally."

"Scott and I actually broke with Gavin on the party front at that point," he adds, "because Gavin still wanted to throw larger parties. Scott and I wanted to do some weird little deep things. We started throwing a Thursday night weekly called 'Deep Faith.' Gavin was still doing parties, like the one he did at an airport hanger that we played at. We'd play at his parties but we broke as far as promoting them."

Without the bigger events to fund the label, Hardkiss found an investor for their first record in the founder of a UK label called Fabulous. Robbie remembers him as "kind of a hippie traveller going here and there - just a world traveller leading this interesting life. Nobody really knew his story. He happened to visit San Francisco in those very early days when we were going to Full Moon parties and throwing our events. We met him out on a dance floor somewhere. And he gave us money to put a record out. Such a beautiful little rave experience, that was."

That record was The Magical Sound of the San Francisco Underground. It's a peculiar introduction of Hardkiss, though probably a fitting one. The enduring Hardkiss logo is introduced in "Joy," the stand-out track produced under the alias "Tree of Hearts." While American dance music producers were already engaging in the musical cannibalism of sampling existing dance records for newer ones, "Joy" shows the early Hardkiss fondness for mining their source material from unusual quarries.

"We were just rave kids," Robbie says. "I was just learning how to put two records together. Scott had a little more experience but not much, really."

"Out of nowhere, we called up [Markus Shihadeh at JAM Studio] and went over to his house with some records to sample - The Smiths, the Beatles - and \$1500 to throw at it. That guy never came back asking for anything but he's responsible for that first Hardkiss record. The Smith's samples, with the gangly guitar - that part was Scott for sure."



It wasn't a very auspicious start, but this first stab in the dark would spark a supernova of creativity for Hardkiss over the next three years.

## JOINING THE ENDS

Among the most important people to crash into the scene at that time was Wade Randolph Hampton - a legendary figure in the American rave scene. Initially meeting through Wade's roommate in Los Angeles (still another crucial participant in future events, Jon Williams), Gavin dragged Wade up to San Francisco to celebrate the latter's birthday. They stopped at a house everyone seemed to be living in.

"It reminded me of the Grateful Dead, that house," Wade says. "It was a family. I was at that age when people don't throw birthday parties for you anymore, and you're on your own if you want to celebrate. But here were a bunch of people that really seemed to care about me as a person."

"Everyone was edgy, brilliant, and really happy. There was a mixture of girls and guys and a lot of couples too, which I found interesting. The scene in Los Angeles and some other places was starting to get burned out, but here it felt fresh and new. There was nothing like that first summer."

Scott, Robbie and Wade moved into what would become known as the 'Hardkiss House.' "Everybody nurtured their own projects and had their own sounds. Gavin's was in '3 Nudes in a Purple Garden,' Scott's was in 'Raincry' and Robbie's was in the Little Wing tracks. I thought they developed a unified sound with Acid Funk, though that came later."

"Musically we were as interested in what was coming out of Belgium and London as what was happening in San Francisco," Gavin says. "In fact I'd say I was more interested. I wasn't really as connected to the people who were making music in San Francisco, though keep in mind that there were probably only like a half dozen of us. Now you could probably find someone on every block making digital music. But back then it was quite pricey. The scene was a ton of ravers, a bunch of DJs and just a few music makers. And probably two labels."

The sound on Hardkiss records was often hyped by media (and Hardkiss - see the title of their first record on Fabulous, mentioned above) as the "new sound" of San Francisco. The reality was a bit different. "When we started putting out records, I think it was recognized as sonically what was 'happening' in San Francisco. It wasn't," Gavin says. "We were doing our own thing, and you may have heard a song or two, if that, at a San Francisco event. But that sound travelled, it was on vinyl and it went to DJs in other cities and around the world and people reacted fondly to it. And that opened doors for us to travel outside of San Francisco and play music."

## POPULAR DELUSIONS

The story of Hardkiss' greatest release - the one people still passionately refer to and the one you're holding in your hand - was a little bit Tony Wilson and little bit of a caper comedy. Listen up: this is how the legendary Delusions of Grandeur was born.

"We knew we had to put out a few records, and not just one," Gavin says. "When it was time to start a label, we needed \$15,000 for the cost of manufacturing and inventory and all of that shit."

Having exhausted the \$1500 from Fabulous to make Magical Sound, Hardkiss needed to solicit more investors. Venture capital for the label (in the part of the world where the very notion of "venture capital" was created) came from a source they call "the Irish drug dealers."

"Where else would we go?" Gavin asks. "You couldn't go to a bank for it. We didn't know anyone with a 'job'. We went straight to the guys with the pockets!"

These investors were a bit more indulgent toward the artistic process than a banker would be, but still wanted a return on their investment. "We knew we could get out three or four records on the money that we borrowed," Gavin says, "and then at that point it was like, 'How far can we extend this line of credit? Another year, maybe?' Beyond a year, I don't know if we could have got away with it."

Following several successful EPs, labels were actively pursuing Hardkiss. From this came the idea to take their best records and put them together on a single release. It would be album-length, but not really an album in the classic sense. And while there would be vinyl, they wanted it on "one cohesive format," Gavin says, "which at the time was the CD."

"We always had designs on having albums," Robbie adds. "We were crazy CD collectors still, buying vinyl for DJing but collecting CDs as music fans. That was our way. We wanted to be in Tower Records, as simple as that. We wanted regular people to get our music too."

"I honestly can't remember why we called it Delusions of Grandeur, but it was appropriate!" Gavin laughs. "Robbie and Scott were globetrotting. My visa had lapsed, though, and I could not leave the country because I wouldn't be allowed back in. So I was manning the fort."

They had made a deal with Caroline - then the top distributor of independent records. Wade Randolph Hampton (managing and credited on the jacket of Delusions of Grandeur as handling bookings for the "Rent-a-Hardkiss" service) remembers it took "a long time" to get everyone in agreement on the deal with Caroline. In fact, everything Hardkiss put out seemed to take forever to make it to the street.

"Hardkiss could never keep up with demand," Robbie says. "We were dying between records because the process took so long. We were committed to putting out records with impact, with a beautiful cover that stood out. They did stand out, there was always a high demand and

they would sell out. It made us look like we were really successful, because we could never keep up with demand. And we were really successful in marketing ourselves, although I don't think we were ever thinking in those terms. We were earning our living on the road as DJs, but the record label investor really didn't have any stake in my DJ career."

And then there was the technical challenge of sequencing the tracks together, from the vantage point of a small, independent, cash-strapped label in the mid-1990s. "We had talked about what tracks we liked best for a two CD set," Gavin says. "We were using 30 second samplers, so to find a way to put together a 74 minute mix of pre-existing music was an interesting challenge. Eventually, I found somebody who had this super-arcanic digital way of doing it with a hard drive that had an LED screen. It wasn't even really a computer. It must have been a digital four track or something. I put the sequence together in his kitchen."

Portfolio investments from ecstasy sellers and kitchen table techno novelties: of course that's how Delusions of Grandeur was made. The tale of the tracks themselves, however, is another story, which began with the next great milestone in the Hardkiss chronology.

## OUT OF BODY EXPERIENCE

It seems too easy - everything does when you're looking back 20 years later and from the other side of the mountain - but it all seemed to come together when the

connection with Rabbit In The Moon was made. It's hard to imagine RITM without the Hardkiss association; it's even harder to imagine any other song leading off Delusions of Grandeur than the one not credited to a Hardkiss.

It began at a conference in New York, where David Christophere of Rabbit In The Moon and Christopher Milo (aka DJ Three) were shopping around white labels of their remixes of the epic "Out of Body Experience," called "Phases of an Out of Body Experience."

"The global DJ scene had just started to try and connect with each other," Christophere later wrote. "It was actually in the lobby of our hotel, and I was going around, passing out these white labels of 'Phases.'

"All of a sudden the three of them just appeared. I gave them the white label and they said, 'You're Rabbit in the Moon?' And I said, 'You're Hardkiss?'

"It's like when the chocolate accidentally runs into the peanut butter. Something delicious was about to happen..."<sup>3</sup>

"Throughout that week I was astonished to see the most important labels of the day - Harthouse, R&S, Plus 8 to name a few - maneuvering for the record," Milo recalled. "And then there was Scott Hardkiss... Credit to David and DJ Monk of Rabbit In The Moon for their resolve to take a leap of faith with Scott Hardkiss over these globally established labels."<sup>4</sup>

Both the Original version (which became Delusions of Grandeur's opening track) and Milo's "Burning Spear"

remix - Track #6 - remind me of what Tommie Sunshine once said about the seminal "Acid Tracks": You don't listen to this. You may not even just dance to it. You process it. It gets under your skin, seizes control of you and more than anything else I've ever seen, it makes people move in the most unusual ways.

This was, after all, a time when artists in electronic music could say that their music was intended to elevate the listener into a higher state of consciousness - and they were being completely earnest about it. The effect of "Out of Body Experience" inspired breakdowns on dance floors was astonishing. Afterward, you felt like you needed a moment to pull your head together again, to regain your composure like a Victorian terrorized by exposure to some sort of psychological pornography.

It was an "indelible impression" Hardkiss and Rabbit In The Moon made on each other, Christopher Milo says. "We seemed destined to collide with each other. And we did."

## THE GOD WITHIN

"Raincry" was likely the first real Hardkiss triumph on record and did a lot to define what was already coming to be known as the "West Coast Sound" in dance music. Jenö from Wicked is often credited as the first to really press that breakbeat sound - in his case, breakbeat mixed with the squelchy echoes of Acid House from the UK Summer of Love.

"Raincry" on the other hand is breakbeat mixed with Scott Hardkiss - the indie dance, eclectic pop and ambient sounds that gave him such a rich palette to work with. Though it owes much to Future Sound of London's 1991 smash "Papua New Guinea," there are too many moments here that are just pure, unadulterated Scott Hardkiss.

Later, Hardkiss reached out again to a kindred soul with a touch for the rave anthem - David Christophere. His operatic remix of "The Phoenix," Scott's follow up to "Raincry," was inspired by really strong pot and a near hallucinatory viewing of Pink Floyd's concert film Live In Pompeii. "If you listen to my intro of 'The Phoenix,'" he later wrote, with "the explosion in the middle, and back to the more subtle end... I really did try to emulate the Pompeii concert. I could visualize the camera pulling back at the end. It would almost be interesting to take footage of the Pink Floyd concert and cut it to 'The Phoenix.' The birds in my remix emulated the feeling of being [outdoors], plus the phoenix usually is represented by a bird or flight..."

"The Phoenix" also became notable for a time when Hardkiss' predilection for eccentric sampling bit them in the ass. Scott's original version contained a sample of the guitar from Electric Light Orchestra's "Fire On High" which Hardkiss couldn't get clearance for. At the 11th hour, the group had to scramble to replace it with something "organic."

## HAWKE

Scott's dramatic flair and Rabbit In The Moon's virtuosity dominate the first disc of Delusions; the second opens with Gavin Hardkiss' signature tune from that era, released under the name of "Hawke."

"Hawke is a fake band that I started in '91," he would later say.<sup>5</sup> "3 Nudes In A Purple Garden" was a name that Gavin thought up for a painting he never painted. It became almost a prototype of a strange genre - something like the "first song on every mixtape made from 1993 to 1997," you could say. It's the perfect opener for the most challenging, eclectic selections from Delusions of Grandeur, too. "3 Nudes" has a spacey sense of invocation, but totally without the self-consciousness of so many other electronic music cosmonauts. It's a kind of cosmic onramp, the "Invitation to the Voyage" - the gateway beyond which the true adventure begins.

"3 Nudes" was mixed "from a skeleton track I had made with an Emax 2 sampler and not much else," Gavin remembers. It was at "Ultraviolet Studios," home of Jeff Taylor and Jon Drukman of Ultraviolet Catastrophe - "the only people we knew in the scene with a studio in their garage."

Hardkiss needed a B-Side for "3 Nudes." "Pacific Coast Highway #1" was "equal parts Jon Drukman, Jeff Taylor and myself," Gavin remembers. "I was more like a director in their studio. 'Why don't we use this break and that arpeggiator?' 'How about we take this piano line and turn it backwards?' Jon Drukman had some serious music chops and Jeff had great sonic engineering skills. And it just seamlessly came together in a matter of hours."

As "3 Nudes" drew you in, the phenomenal remix by Scott Hardkiss lifted you up and set you down softly. Simon Reynolds called "3 Nudes (Having Sax on Acid)" the label's "all-time shimmerfunk classic."<sup>6</sup> In a strange way, it fit the CD experience - a listening audience, not for DJs - better than any other track, even though it was made (like all the others) before Delusions was conceived. The refrain - slightly sad and nostalgic, which are two words that hardly ever appear in relation to dance music - hovers there for a moment when the rest of the music drops out, backed only by a harmonizing synth that slowly evaporates.

## LITTLE WING

Little Wing - the alias of the third Hardkiss, Robbie - was Delusions of Grandeur's heart. It was aspirational, unflinchingly sincere, and evoked an array of emotions that were more calm, more quiet, more reflective. It was, in other words, the polar opposite of Scott Hardkiss' anthems and Rabbit In The Moon's eight minute symphonies - even though they had more in common than you'd think.

The Little Wing material was "so out of left field at the time that we weren't certain how it fit in," Gavin remembers, "but we did it anyway. [But] I was talking with David Christophere last week and realized we were all using pretty much the same equipment back then. The Roland JD 800 that he used in 'Out of Body Experience' and one we used in all the Little Wing tracks bookend the Delusions listening experience. Without knowing, these songs sound like they were made in the same studio."



The name came from where you think it came from. "I was kind of obsessed with the Jimi Hendrix song 'Little Wing' for awhile," Robbie says. "I used to go see this guitar player and singer in this little bar in the Lower Haight called Tropical Haight. He played mostly funk covers, and would play the hell out of 'Little Wing.' Those guitar solos soar. It was kind of aspirational. 'If I could just make music like that, well...'"

"Thing (One)" is quite literally the first "thing" Robbie ever produced, in the sense of leading the production. "I had no studio gear yet," he remembers, "and this was before the Ultraviolet Catastrophe connection. We looked in the back of BAM (Bay Area Music) Magazine to find studio time to rent, and went to check out the studio of a guy named Marcus Shihadeh. His studio was in the basement of his dad's house in a residential neighborhood in the outskirts of San Francisco. When we walked into the studio, there was a big poster of Prince above his gear. A fellow Prince fanatic? We were sold!"

Robbie describes the Little Wing sound as "trying to combine the Prince/funk side of things with the melancholy melodies of The Cure. Along with our love of Prince, we were all really into The Cure, The Smiths, Galaxy 500, My Bloody Valentine and a lot of British shoegazer music."

Robbie found the perfect vessel for this fusion of alt rock and melodic dance music in "Mercy, Mercy" - a song driven by the kind of emotions that made the Little Wing material so different from the vast majority of electronic music being made in 1993.

"Gavin and I were working on this song at the apartment I shared with my girlfriend - my first real love. She was out with a friend. At one point Gav and I walked down to the corner store to get some beer, where I saw my girlfriend kissing the guy she was with. They were clearly really into each other. It was like a knife to the gut... and the name 'Mercy, Mercy' was born."

Closing out Delusions of Grandeur was probably the best known Little Wing track from the album, "Diazepam Jam." I remember being square enough that I had to look up - it must have been AltaVista or some other search engine, for this act of googling predated Google - what exactly Diazepam was. "Back in those days we were up all night all the time," Robbie says. "Diazepam was my favorite way to soften the landing at the end of the party. You can buy it over the counter in Mexico, and someone at an Asian grocery store in the Mission got the great idea to bring it in from Mexico and sell it for like \$10 a pill in the back. You'd walk to the back of the store and ask for 'Ida' or someone like that. A little old lady would come out and ask how many. We'd all pitch in and send one of us in to buy a strip of 20 pills or so."

"I just remember how free we were in the studio," Robbie adds. "I wasn't concerned with making something that worked on a dance floor. We went off in whatever direction we were feeling. Gav was engineering that song and had a big hand in it."

## THE LONG-AWAITED DELUSIONS OF GRANDEUR

When it was finally released, Hardkiss had no right to expect much from this odd mixed CD/vinyl compilation/album. By all rights it should have been a crashing failure. For one thing, Delusions of Grandeur arrived on the market after so many delays, you might have thought its full title was actually The Long-Awaited Delusions of Grandeur, which is how it was usually referenced in the dance music press.

Secondly, little of the material was especially fresh to Hardkiss' committed fanbase. The original tracks had been appearing since 1993 (an eternity in dance music, which has always lived on the cutting edge), and none were made specifically for Delusions of Grandeur.

Third, conventional thinking was that dance music was for DJs. The average person had no interest in hearing eight minute tracks with 60 seconds of drums at the beginning and the end.

But the reason Hardkiss' failure should have been swift and pitiless was simply the oddness of Delusions of Grandeur. It wasn't exactly a greatest hits record (it would have been a bit cheeky to release one after a mere four years). It wasn't exactly a DJ mix. It wasn't exactly a label sampler (though this description came closest). To that Tower Records shopper drawn in by the cover, it wasn't even clear who made it. "Hardkiss" seemed to be the artist but this wasn't true either.

Had Delusions of Grandeur found its way into a major label's portfolio, the A&R man would have urged them to cut a few of the songs, cut down the length of the rest and insert a few exclusives - and for Christ's sake, put some vocals on it...

Despite all this - or, in the way these things happen, it was probably because of all this - Delusions of Grandeur became one of the most influential dance music records of the era. You don't have to go far to find people who loved it then and love it more now, even if they're a DJ or artist known for a radically different style than what you hear on Delusions. For those who participated in American rave culture before the scene fractured into a billion genres, there's a massive affinity for this record. Years later, writers would call it tribal, trance, progressive and sometimes all three, retrofitting the names of genres that were only loosely-defined at the time and not yet the exclusionary devices they've become. Delusions of Grandeur will stubbornly refuse all attempts at classification - an American oddity to the very end.

And Caroline did get Delusions into Tower Records and the other chain stores that dominated the record industry in 1995. Across America, kids finally had easy access to a record that not only offered an authentic representation of the music which was really heard at raves, but also served as a friendly introduction to hook their friends on the new music and the new scene. The arrangement of the songs and even the sequencing of them had enough in common with alternative music that getting someone who liked Jane's Addiction into Hardkiss was a soft sell. You didn't need to know a thing about DJ culture,

beatmatching or the history of Chicago or Detroit or Berlin to get Hardkiss. The distribution deal explains Delusions' reach, but the nature of Delusions itself explains its wide breadth, and why so many people who otherwise have little in common share the same passion for it.

"Coming from a House background and first hearing Hardkiss felt like an alien landed," legendary Chicago DJ and promoter Davey Dave Mason says. "I was real shocked they were Americans, honestly, because nobody in the US was making music like this."

The album "became a '90s benchmark for all of us," Christopher Milo, aka DJ Three, remembers. "It became the cornerstone of Rabbit In The Moon's story. It helped cement the Hardkiss legacy. And it remains so close to my heart, as it includes the first remix I ever produced."

"It had the same effect that Disclosure did," Wade Randolph Hampton says. "It gave kids something to splinter off from. It showed them what could be done."

Twenty years later, Delusions of Grandeur doesn't sound "contemporary or even "ahead of its time." Though it owes much to what came before and passed on much to those that came after, it's a unique specimen - a stubborn artifact that doesn't have a home in the geological strata.

## TWENTY YEARS OF GRANDEUR

The story of any good album is more than the story of the songs. It's the story of the people who made it, and moreover the story of the most important people in those people's lives.

Hardkiss is a legal entity today, and a creative partnership of Robbie and Gavin Hardkiss. It wasn't always this way. It's not clear to social scientists why some families stick together and others drift apart - or why they're able to bounce back and reconcile and jump back into it, as Gavin and Robbie (both living in the Bay Area again) did with their album 1991.

But before that, as the '90s crashed and after being inseparable for a decade, the three Hardkiss brothers scattered to three of the four cardinal points on the American map - Scott in New York, Robbie in Austin and Gavin hanging back in the Bay Area. Scott and Gavin were "a bit estranged," Gavin says today. But he and Robbie remained in touch, "not super-frequent but enough to stay in each other's lives."

When Hardkiss went defunct, Delusions of Grandeur fell out of print, though not out of circulation. Gavin calls it the "most stolen album in history," and many of the Amazon reviews for used copies of Delusions are

filled with plaintive despair over CDs that were borrowed but never returned. The price of original copies rose to extortionate levels (oddly, the utilitarian cockroaches of physical media - bootleggers - never seem to have touched Delusions of Grandeur. Maybe they didn't understand it either.)

It was a peculiar situation, also caused in part to Delusions' status as what we might call one of the last albums of the pre-Internet era. It was a popular record that didn't just predate Napster, the iPod and probably even the mp3 (the first player of the new file format was released in September 1995), but even the widespread adoption of the Internet itself. In 1995, when Delusions was released, just 14% of American adults reported using the Internet daily. The threshold crossed 50% in 2000 (when Hardkiss was drifting apart); in 2014, the number is flipped on its head at 87%.<sup>7</sup> Every time you saw the cover shot of Atom Bomb at Bikini Atoll, it was a photograph or scan of someone's own copy. A legit digital download was never for sale.

The creators didn't disown Delusions of Grandeur. It was never suppressed for legal reasons. It just faded away - as stubbornly resistant to the elements and the storms raging around it as ever.

With Hardkiss back together, we can expect many new recordings, possibly more albums, perhaps live shows of the new and classic Hardkiss material as time and people's interests permit. The story, certainly, isn't finished. And, as a side benefit, we get another dance

with this handsome, eccentric collection - of one of the great albums of the 1990s, it has to be said, as improbable and strange as it all seems.

On the jacket of Delusions is a short quotation: "I made absolutely sure that none of us would ever return to normality again." It's attributed only to "m.m." This is another "Scott thing" - Scott was always finding slogans and phrases like that to put on records and propaganda. Gavin believed "m.m." may have referred to Malcolm McLaren, the manager of the Sex Pistols, but the only references one finds to those words today point back at Hardkiss and Delusions of Grandeur. And they fit. Not just to Hardkiss, but to all of us; and if they didn't fit then they certainly do now. They made absolutely sure that none of us would ever return to normality again. We really never did.

1. URB #36, June 1994
2. Simon Reynolds, Generation Ecstasy, p. 154.
3. All David Christophere quotes are from a Facebook note dated August 6, 2011 and titled "Hardkiss... God Within... The Phoenix (Rabbit In The Moon's River and Rain Mix)."
4. "Chemical Brothers, Mr. C, Jonah Sharp, Rabbit In The Moon, and more honor Scott Hardkiss," by Ken Taylor, Beatport.com, March 28, 2013.
5. "Gavin Hardkiss Exclusive," [acidted.wordpress.com](http://acidted.wordpress.com), January 12, 2011.
6. Reynolds, p. 154.
7. "Internet Usage Over Time," Pew Research Center, 2014.

