

The Future is in the Flesh

Article by Clinton Walker - Roadrunner, 1979

As the echoes of the punk rock explosion fade into eternity a number of post-punk musical movements have emerged. One of the prominent of these is the electronic rock movement which rather than trying to incorporate the synthesiser into a conventional rock format is trying to create its own musical format.

In this special report, Clinton Walker traces the development of electronic rock from its beginnings with the likes of Eno, Kraftwerk and the Residents through to the present rash of synthesiser bands in the U.K., the U.S.A. and, yes folks, Australia. In fact, the little publicised Australian electronic music movement is one of the liveliest in the world. Could **THIS** be the future of rock'n'roll? Plug yourself in, open your memory banks and let's find out, eh?

I suppose Brian James really thought he'd hit the nail on the head when he formed the quasi-psychedelic outfit, Tanz Der Youth, after splitting The Damned. Clearly he had interpreted rock'n'roll's development as moving in a circle and, accepting the punk wave as parallel to Beatlemania and the surrounding Pop Explosion of the early '60s, obviously the next step (after the Death of Punk) was going to be some kind of movement that equally paralleled the psychedelia that bloomed in the later 60s.

This hypothesis James put into practice (via Tanz Der Youth). Apart from the fact that any rock'n'roll so calculated simply could not (artistically) succeed. James had erred somewhat. The circle he saw rock'n'roll moving in is actually more like a spiral, and to merely regenerate psychedelia in the late 70s is to disregard the fact that it is actually the late 70s, not the late 60s. The original Jefferson Airplane wouldn't feel terribly at home in this day and age; and neither were Tanz Der Youth. Certainly, punk would be superseded (eventually), but it wasn't going to be by kaftans, acid and "trans-magic" (as James described Tanz Der Youth).

To quote myself, if I may, I said in a review of Kraftwerk's 'Man Machine' album some nine months ago, "...with the making of 'Low', he (David Bowie) started something that became bigger than anyone might have anticipated – so called 'New Musick', to use a term that has admittedly, and thankfully, disappeared."

'New Musick' was not a movement as such – It was simply a convenient tag under which the press lumped artists who had all of a sudden come into favour as a result of the post-punk vacuum. Being entirely a creation of those other than the artists themselves, the roll call after the event, as it were, consequently included artists of diverse and often unrelated ideals. The 'coldwave' roster ranged from Bowie himself, and Iggy, to Brian Eno, to Siouxsie and the Banshees, to Pere Ubu and Devo, to Throbbing Gristle, the Residents and Kraftwerk."

Whatever 'New Musick' actually was can't easily be defined, because it was too-much like a package without any contents.

Nevertheless, the rock'n'roll aesthetes had decided that, after the Death of Punk, –it was time to 'progress' (which, of course, was selling punk short). And to be 'progressive' meant to be not only expressionist, as punk was considered to be, but also heading towards some kind of abstraction. Most of the critics who embraced, indeed conceived 'New Musick', were the ones who had also championed punk. And when punk was in its embryonic stages they were quick to say that before it the 70s had produced nothing, and that punk was the first real (British) movement since the demise of 60s greats like the Beatles and the Stones and the Who.

They didn't seem to realise that many of these 'New Musickians' were working in 1976, if not a long time beforehand. (At the same time, these critics overlooked the significance of disco, as an alternative movement to punk. In a typically snotty fashion, disco was considered to be production line music – when, of course, it was some of the most innovative, intelligent and danceable music being made. And still is!) Until about 1973 anything that might have earned the dubious distinction of being dubbed 'New Musick' was almost undoubtedly a sham in 'technoflash' guise.

It took someone like Eno, who had been working in such a direction with Roxy Music up until 1972, to afford 'New Musick' validity. Eno actually realised how and why to use electronics 'correctly' in a rock'n'roll context. Rather than simply as a

virtual substitute for other, more conventional forms of rock'n'roll instrumentation, he approached electronics as a whole new 'device'. Such an approach made for innovative results.

Eno's only real contemporaries were the like of Kraftwerk (if only because they were totally electronic), and other scattered, more minor, luminaries. Kraftwerk's achievements weren't necessarily anything more (or less) than Eno's, or say, Giorgio Moroder's, but their delightful sound and 'attack' was well-nigh irresistible.

In actual fact another Germany group, Cluster, were probably closer to realising the truer employment of electronics with an album like "Zuckerzeit", but they faltered too often. (Of course, all this talk inevitably leads the subject of Kraut-rock, which I'd wanted to avoid. Not because it's something I'm scared or ignorant of, but because I grant it little validity. Even the much revered Can leave me largely unimpressed. Most Kraut-rock is nothing better than pretentious artiness, like the 'technoflashers'. However, Kraut-rock is a term that makes identification easy, so it's used widely and irresponsibly.)

The Residents bore no relation to any of this 'New Musick' (apart from their all-too-crucial relationship with all music), but their inclusion here is probably best justified by the fact that they were purely studio 'musicians', using only the devices available at hand in the studio. The Residents were originals. They took existing musical forms, pulled them apart, and put them back together again. Not just logically dissecting sounds and ideas, but shredding them, ripping music apart across its axis, rather than in line with it, and allowing the arbitrary pieces to become their own, new order (Calling this akin to the montage - rule of chance - technique originally conceived by the Dadaists in the 1920's - would be pompously intellectual, but the parallels are there and undeniable). The effect is unsettling and unnerving, 'scarey' if you will, and if nothing else it affords a new perspective.

"Third Reich and Roll" (perhaps the Residents' creative peak and their definitive work, equalled only by "Satisfaction" and "The Beatles Play the Residents" / "The Residents Play The Beatles") is a nightmare vision of the 60's where everything (that was once) hallowed is mangled and kicked about like Mussolini's corpse. The Residents aren't something simple, or

something to be taken lightly. They forced anyone aware of them into an inescapable corner by putting into blatant practice the subversive workings of the pop industry. The Residents predict the Death of Rock'n'Roll.

The difference between them and the lesser precursors of "New Musick" only illustrates the meaninglessness of the term. If the Residents made the most 'daring' "New Musick", then Eno probably made the most accessible and undoubtedly the most commercially successful "New Musick". A lot of his work, like 'Taking Tiger Mountain (By Strategy)' and 'Here Come The Warm Jets', was straight rock'n'roll – all he did was fill the spaces differently. And that, in itself, was quite an achievement.

But to my mind, Eno's records always lacked a certain emotional intensity, however well-crafted they might have been. Eno's music is, evocative – it merely points towards something human. Bowie stepped in and gave it that element. 'Low' was as much Eno's creation as it was Bowie's, but Bowie gave the music the kiss of life that Eno alone had always lacked. Perhaps it was indeed some sort of coming-of-age. 'Low' was released in late 1976, when it was unanimously misunderstood and consequently dismissed. It wasn't until 1978 that it became "New Musick" – the Next Big Thing. "New Musick" superseded punk briefly, but only until a coherent, new movement had time to consolidate itself.

That has now happened and it seems that any group utilising a synthesiser, calling itself something like Moderne Musick Machines, obsessed by technology and industry, or something, if not morbid, at least esoteric and ultimately just plain dull enough to make it seem like Art, is a potential Next Big Thing. The English electronic groups have taken "New Musick" literally. They've armed themselves with synthesisers; they've put their heads down and they don't smile. They practise to be intellectuals and pretend to be in touch with the real world (which, of course, is actually their own science-fiction fantasy). All of this might be bearable if the movement was producing creative and / or interesting results. But it's not.

One New Musical Express writer – one who doesn't seem to share many of his colleagues' opinions – described it rather unceremoniously as "the various buzzing, bleeping and farting ELP's in post-punk clothing who seem to be trying to, err, progress."

Brian James' reincarnated psychedelia was off the mark, because it was an almost purely aesthetic decision, but there was more than an element of irony in it. This new wave-length seems to bear the same relationship to punk that psychedelia bore to the Pop Explosion it superseded – it considers itself sophisticated, intelligent and inherently superior, in that it's so much more serious. Unfortunately these new English groups are unaware of their own naivety. Little do they realise that very soon their own hysterical, rhetorical babblings will seem as ridiculous as, say, the liner notes on 13th Floor Elevators' albums do now. Too many of these groups, and there is a long list of them – Human League, Normal, M (who've just hit it big with "Pop Muzik", after their humble beginnings in this field), Thomas Leer, Robert Rental, Clokckdva, Metabolist, Cabaret Voltaire – have done nothing but translate ordinary rock'n'roll ideas into electronic terms.

As I've said, in praise of Pere Ubu's 'Dub Housing', "To be truly progressive requires a change in approach to the core of the music...rather than working around the edges and colouring sound with facile embellishments". The influence's upon these groups are apparent – Kraftwerk, maybe Bowie and Eno, the Residents, and their countrymen and mentors. Throbbing Gristle, who lend their support and encouragement to newer groups. Unlike the Residents, who consciously take aim and shoot to kill. Throbbing Gristle make themselves the target, and provoke an attack. Even their more 'musical' forays are taunting. They have no form other than what is necessary or inevitable at the moment.

Throbbing Gristle, and their spiritual leader. Genesis P. Orridge (name by deed-poll), and his whatever-you-want-to-call-her (I wouldn't dare suggest 'girlfriend'), Cosey Fanni Tutti, test their audiences' tolerance. While they might easily be dismissed as cheap sensationalists, they're irrefutably provocative. It's said that a Throbbing Gristle performance can actually make you physically ill, and it was sickness and depression that set in after a performance that apparently prompted Genesis P. Orridge's recent suicide attempt. Throbbing Gristle have made themselves unignorable, if only because they dare be totally extreme. They're interesting as a phenomenon rather than as a 'group'. But as yet, none of the newer groups have had as much effect as Throbbing Gristle.

David Bowie's patronage of the Human League means little except that maybe his taste and judgement are lapsing again (considering the mistake he made with Devo). Their single, 'Electronically Yours' (on the Fast label) is pretentious, verbose, shallow and uninventive. Similarly, the Normal's 'Warm Leatherette', while maybe a success in its own right, is basically little more than a Kraftwerk clone. Only Cabaret Voltaire have made a record deserving of any attention – an EP on Rough Trade – and then only because of its evident potential. It's probable that given time and money Cabaret Voltaire might fully develop their ideas. Otherwise, the English electronic music movement presents little threat to the course of English rock'n'roll, which is presently dominated by the burnt out older guard punk wave (Buzzcocks, Magazine, the Ex Pistols, the Clash, and the Banshees) who've settled into safe Stardom.

No such similar movement seems to have reared its (ugly) head in America (even though she was home to the earliest pioneer electronic rock'n'roll group, the Silver Apples, who were active in New York around the same time as the Velvet Underground, the Godz and the Fugs; and then, just last year, the two-man group, Suicide): but if we're to believe everything we're told, there is an "avant-garde" in America, and it's represented by the album, 'No New York'. Produced by Eno himself, it showcases four New York groups – the Contortions, Teenage Jesus and the Jerks, Mars and DNA. These groups share a basically common approach – it's savagely simple. Songs are built around repetitive rhythm section lines, grating guitars and screeching vocals. But it's nothing new. It's got nothing on Yoko Ono's 'wilder' stuff, let alone some of the excellent disco around at the moment.

The whole 'No New York' project reeks of pretension – it's uninventive, unfeeling, empty and ultimately just plain boring. If there is an electronic music movement in America, like the one in England, it's not easily sighted; but in Australia there's a very definite undercurrent that's very visible if you care to look.

In Melbourne, Whirlywird have just released their debut EP and begun gigging, → ↑ → continue their commercial onslaught with the release of the first of a series of three EP's, the Primitive Calculators are at least gigging, and David Chesworth plans to release his album, '50 Synthesiser Greats', this month (which is another story altogether). In Sydney, Voigt/465 continue regular gigging after the release of their debut single

some time ago, and SPK have just released their debut EP; and in Adelaide Terminal Twist have just released their first EP.

Although any connection between any of these groups is tenuous to say the least, it may indeed exist simply because the groups themselves feel a common bond. Voight/465 illustrate this point. Although they're unlike any of these other Australian groups, they've aligned themselves with them all the same (having done gigs with SPK in Sydney, and → ↑ → in Melbourne). The only description I can make of Voight is to compare them with Pere Ubu – like them they work with fairly conventional instrumentation (still including one synthesiser), in a unique way – shifting and disorientating rhythms and sounds; aggressive and yet at the same time sympathetic. Voight have no fear about their experimentation; I can only hope they won't become over-indulgent or totally inaccessible. Their first single, 'State'/'A Secret West', is still selling well; hopefully their next one, probably 'Red Lock On See Steal' (a standout of their set) coupled with 'Voices of Drama', will do better. (If in fact it ever sees release; as it appears now that the group will break up).

Another extraordinary case in this argument belongs to → ↑ →. Probably the only reason for their inclusion here is their instrumentation – two synthesisers, a drum machine, and guitar and saxophone. Otherwise, they bear little relation to any of these Australian groups, or any group for that matter. → ↑ → examine the structure of music. They're interested in exposing the various devices employed by musicians in the pursuit of 'expression', a process which they maintain a disbelief in. → ↑ → deal in demystification. It's like this – if the Residents have torn down (pop) music and left only the rubble, → ↑ → have stripped it bare and left the framework standing. It's clinical, and analytical, but still quite fascinating.

→ ↑ → work in other areas as well – multi-media happenings, film, theatre, printmaking – but it's their music (usually performed by only four of their many members, although their female – feminist – group appears occasionally) that attracts the most attention. Their first EP, 'Venetian Rendezvous', has just sold out, although it's been reprinted, and two more, 'Minimal Music' and 'Nice Noise', remain to be released. → ↑ → may have no contemporaries elsewhere in the world, and Voight/465 only groups like Pere Ubu, but there are

groups in Australia who could very easily slot into movements already existing in England and America.

The first time the Primitive Calculators played they were just like punk plus a synthesiser, but since then they've developed considerably. Their synthesised drums have been replaced by a drum machine (and player!), and the remaining bass/guitar/synthesiser combination has become more cohesive and adventurous. They've obviously done their required listening, but it's worked to their advantage rather than detriment – a lot of their material is not dissimilar to the 'No New York' style, but it's made palatable by a sincerity and lack of pretension. Although they're limited by their own technical capabilities, they still manage to produce interesting results. (Included in their set is a version of 'The Beat Goes On', which makes Eric Gradman's look as pointless as it really is.)

Ultimately though, all the Primitive Calculators need is time; hopefully their abilities will eventually meet their ambitions. Similar again are SPK, but it's easy to totally dismiss them after hearing their EP, 'No More'/'Contact'/'Germanic'. It's music that conforms to the angry, politico-radical image (SPK stands for Socialist Patience Collective), and even the best of it sounds like a pale imitation of 'No New York' anyway. Whirlywirld, however, are closer to the English school of electronic music. On first hearing, the hostile (and probably ignorant) critic might simply dismiss them as a group with a Peter Hammil impersonator singing, a guitarist who's stolen his licks from Robert Fripp and Michael Karoli, plus obligatory electronic droning, squawking and thumping, but their potential should not be overlooked, Whirlywirld have absorbed their influences – and still feel them – as they move towards a unique style. Whirlywirld's repertoire exploits any and every musical device, however esoteric, to an end that works because they've expanded, upon such a starting point.

All this they put into their own terms – exploring the still largely unexplored possibilities electronics offer. Quite simply, Whirlywirld are, as they say, "new and exciting" – unlike anything I've heard in rock'n'roll. Their reluctance to gig has been mainly due to their insistence upon perfection (not to mention more than a touch of paranoia), and however stunningly impressive their debut EP, 'Window To The World'/'Moto'/'Signals' is, the more fully developed Whirlywirld-of-now render it almost redundant.

They've already recorded another song, 'Eyebrows Still Shaved', for one side of a possible single in collaboration with Two Way Garden, and will soon be recording two more, probably 'Sleazo Inputs' and 'Mr Sin', for their second single.

The success of Whirleywird's debut gig at the Crystal Ballroom proves that there is an interest in this kind of music (even in this country). It follows then that given the right kind of exposure it could indeed succeed on a mass scale. But of course, the Australian industry won't allow this to happen. It resisted home-grown punk, and finally defeated it, and I can't see why it won't do the same to this music.

Like punk, its music on the fringe, music that breaks the rules, and that seems to be reason enough to want to squash it. The Australian underground – if there is such- an animal (perhaps I should just say 'alternative' scene, or more to the point, 'Carlton' scene) – doesn't want it either. Their darlings are pale imitators like Eric Gradman's Man and Machine and Paul Kelly's Dots (who, just incidentally, are beaten at their own game by a bunch of upstarts called the Wrecked Jets, so watch out). The truly creative face of Australian music over the past couple of years has belonged to groups like the Saints, the Boys Next Door, Crime and the City Solution, Two Way Garden and the Young Charlatans, whose success was only ever on what might be called an "underground to the underground" level, and it was such a situation that eventually destroyed them all, in some way or another.

I can see the same fate befalling Whirlywird, → ↑ →, Voight/465 and the Primitive Calculators, even though, as before, they may be the equal to anything here, or anywhere else. That electronic music has reached the stage by now that it necessitates an examination like this is only a good thing. Electronic (rock) music is a valid form that's just waiting for its day to come. So much remains unexplored, and untapped. The opportunity exists because many of the pioneers, like Kraftwerk, seem to be near exhaustion, but nobody's taking it. The English groups aren't; nor are any Americans (as far as I can see). If anything, some of the best electronic music is being made right under our noses, here in Australia. Whirlywird must be one of the best electronic groups in the world – there being few better than them in England, and them being one of the few fully electronic groups outside that country. It's not surprising then that electronic music hasn't made the inroads into the English

scene the way punk did at an equally early stage of its development. There really is no reason it should've risen above the cult status it presently 'enjoys'. Of course, this isn't to say that electronic music is the only alternative. There are groups in England, like Public Image and the Pop Group, and those in America, like Pere Ubu, who are working with traditional instrumentation, while trying to push beyond traditional limitations.

They're making challenging music that is surely the rightful Future of Rock'n'Roll (at this point in time). Electronic music is yet to fully realise its potential, but when it does it'll be a force to reckon with. Meanwhile, just don't be fooled by the Human League, and their ilk. And as for Brian James, and Tanz Der Youth, well, they've broken up. — CLINTON WALKER