

Sound collector

AUDIO REVIEW

ISSUE #4 FEATURING:

Wanna Buy A Bridge • Kapotte Muziek • Robert Wyatt • Sparks • St. John Green • "Beat Girl" soundtrack • Smokey Robinson • Wings Glenn Branca • Lee Perry • Style Council • Revolting Cocks • The Sundays • GTOs • Jethro Tull • "Phantom of the Paradise" • Jelly Roll Morton by Alan Lomax • Ethiopiques 14 • Gene Pitney • Elvis Costello • Wire • Jaap Blonk • Built To Spill • Robyn Hitchcock • Tim Hecker • Maurice Ravel • Jerry Garcia • Best of King Gospel • Zbigniew Karkowski • All Girl Summer Fun Band • Jandek • Pal Joey • John Wiggins • Surface of Eceyon • Foghat • Luna Park • Red Red Meat • Chantal Goya • Tony Williams • Michael Hurley
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Revolting Cocks

Big Sexy Land

TVT
1986

By Seth Price

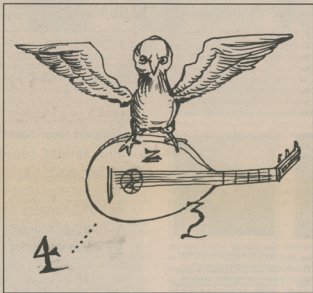
You'll feel like a conservative in the old sense, an adherent to the old ways, someone who, surveying today's landscape of sleek, silvery automobiles, wonders what happened to boxy, angular cars in primary colors, cars that look like a kid's drawing of a car, rather than like a cell phone. That's how it feels to return to the real "electro" beats, the ones skulking around the retro campfire, tarred with a fascist brush, reliant on a 1-2 beat, Euro, plus in the closet. "Industrial Synth," "Electronic Body Music," "Charcoal Beat," "Torture Tech": still the hardest of the '80s. Not as obtuse as hardcore, less insidious than "alternative," yet obstinate and dumb, so dumb you still can't get it down. When confronted with recent neo-electro, remember Bataille's pronouncement on Dada: "not stupid enough."

We're really talking about 1983 to 1990. First-wave '70s Industrial has never left the HiFis of downtown, and anyway has been thoroughly recouped by high culture: Throbbing Gristle gets slobbery art-magazine tributes, while Einstürzende Neubauten (definitive remastered back-catalogue reissued and handsomely packaged etc.) looks increasingly magisterial, like punk Xenakis. These bands were artsy to begin with, all concept refracted through attitude. Their trail was blazed by composers and academics, from Luigi Russolo and Pierre Schaeffer to Tod Dockstader and David Tudor. When "serious" musicians adopted expensive synths, the kids grabbed the tapes, and by the early '80s, tapes were the poor man's machine music. Then unfolds the cassette decade, and with it a new vocabulary: cassette-corder, auto-reverse, hi-speed dubbing, beat-cut, chrome, Dolby B, C, HX-Pro, and DBX.

Industrial Synth was born in 1983, the son of the MIDI sequencer. Kraftwerk pioneered its use, but sequencer really boomed in that brief window between '70s tape manipulation and '90s software capitalism. A moment of pattern programming, MIDI-slaves, -ins, -outs, and -throughs, metronomic digital chatter riding chains of boxes, studios like a kid's drawing of a traffic jam.

Where did this come from? A world system of Reaganite American might; opposed to it, a founding Communist international; the rise of PCs and CDs; the stirring of desktop publishing and music production; the spread of cable TV, purified water, and hyper-packaged foods like Capri-Sun, Fruit-Roll-Ups, Yoplait, and Pringles; the appearance of cell phones, the boom in modems and data-transfer: what did this all mean? The question may seem so vast that it

although he swims in anti-intellectual waters, so publicly he totes books on Manson, Satanism, criminal pathology, and Nazis, in keeping with the deadpan morbidity inherited from '70s Industrial. But, remember, he's into the appearance of morbidity. He should be looking at the Decadents, Beardsley, Huysmans, Rimbaud. Nature is of interest only when it's ailing. An attitude channeled into the genre's most endearing trait: unapologetic badness.



Seth Price

leads to despair. Disco, synth-pop, new wave, punk? Perhaps Industrial Synth stole from each, but it was really *sui generis*, and probably unrepeatable. Which is a good thing for most people, since "Industrial" is usually understood to be goths trying too hard to be hard. Goths, a bit less effort if you wish to be punks. (But the narcissism of minor differences is why punk is boring: it's really like garage, and new wave, and everything else, but with different fashion. "Fuck a hippie but be a punk"? Who cares, they're the same.)

Maybe because it was so goth and performative, the scene seemed totally gay, despite an apparent paucity of actual queers at the boards. Front Line Assembly, 1989, The Roxy: a crowd all in black, with half-shaved/half-long hair, topknots, and dyed fringes, combat-boots, nods to bondage, fey boys in eyeliner. A mawkish, unglamorous bunch, possessing little of the kamikaze fashion sense of the punks (but more style than a sea of hardcore lunks). A sullen kid, reading *Semiotext(e)* or *Re/Search*, maybe *Society of the Spectacle*,

Stuttering vocal samples, snatches of horror soundtracks, machine clanks that subtly connote "industry." (A literal music; see bands called *Manufacture*, *Chem-Lab*, *Klinik*, etc.) The singer's voice was industrial-synthesized into incoherence, as with *Skenny Puppy*, who stole this, not to mention their entire initial sound, from late Cabaret Voltaire: rasping screeches, a teary rage beyond expression, form and content joining to condemn society: *look what you've reduced us to!*

"Can't say yes, you can't say no/You're living in a fascist world ... Freedom is a luxury of self-induced hostility." ("Digital Tension Dementia" by Front Line Assembly). Apparently what we're reduced to is crappy doggerel. But that has its uses. Punk got too smart for its own good, eventually even juxtaposed with Dada and Situationism by Greil Marcus (true, but ... zzzzzzzzz). Of course, mentioning Bataille is comparable. Industrial Synth had a more hard-edged, if equally simplistic, critique, while keeping things vague enough that kids wouldn't shun it as a

"protest music." Not that it was radical. In form, it was the Neanderthal branch, watching with furrowed brow while *Homo Sapiens* dreamed up all kinds of tools. It was committed to the song, even as electronic music's cutting edge drifted free of rote structures, jettisoning verse-chorus-verse, singers, albums, and bands proper. For Industrial fans, hedonistic House culture wasn't dark enough. And maybe too black. After all, while Punk stripped rock's blues roots to a crude gesture, Industrial Synth was—the band Code Industry excepted—almost teutonically white. Lack of anything resembling "soul" was a virtue. This inclination, plus the music's martial rigidity and its obvious fascination with social control, invited accusations of fascism, Nazism, and a general flirtation with state tyranny. But art can't be fascist. And band names like Die Warzau and Nitzer Ebb were about as authentic as Haagen Dazs and Fruzen Gladje.

Can they be serious? Are they embarrassed? A paradox. Unquestionably a dance music, but one whose genes mutated, whose lumbering beats had more in common with Black Sabbath than with disco. An aggressive music, but an aggression sublimated with cold electronics, a fury directed inward, curdling into self-loathing and frustration. No trace of punk's defiant sneer. Those bands that strayed in that direction, like Ministry, basically left the fold, and good riddance, do your guitar therapy if you must, take your "axes" to Lollapalooza, work it all out for the fresh. In the '90s the genre dissipated into a thin gas and diffused through the standard pop syntax, a phenomenon for which we can blame Trent Reznor. Reznor emerged from the same Chicago scene as Ministry, and other great bands on Wax Trax!, whose mail order catalogue was my '80s lifeline. I even dragged my son on a pilgrimage to the label's shop, in Chicago. Rolling through Amish country, rolling up the windows against the stink of Gary, Indiana, our soundtrack was the new Revolting Cocks tape, the one with the cover mimicking 1926 avant-garde magazine *Das Neue Frankfurt*, the swooping banner "Adolf Loox" refashioned as *Big Sexy Land*. Mostly filler, but groaning under massive, bludgeoning tracks like "Union Carbide" and "TV Mind." That car, the landscape, the era: the Industrial sound, which is to say teen melancholia, the rust belt, post-industrial depression, and the sound of industrious 1980s Moderns, getting stupid in the studio. □