

Sweet Strangling Music

For a band playing music so undeniably inspired by American traditions, it's ironic that about the only major audience the Stranglers haven't tapped into in their nine years together is the North American one. They've won a strong following in Europe, Australasia and Japan, but America hasn't really been interested — until now ...

Initial reaction to the *Aural Sculpture* album was strong enough to persuade guitarist/vocalist Hugh Cornwell and bassist Jean Jacques Burnel to interrupt their European touring schedule to fly to North America just to state their case to the entertainment media; a body just as likely to be met with physical or verbal abuse as patient explanations from the Men In Black. It seems the self-confessed lepers of rock are leaving that role behind and making a concerted effort to break the chokehold of apathy North America has previously applied.

As Cornwell admits: "This record is happening more everywhere else in the world than England, which is an odd situation for us. We're on Top 10 charts for dance clubs and college radio in the US and we've never

had that before." I last confronted this Surrey Strangler two years ago, when it appeared as if the moody melodicism of the *Feline* album and songs like 'Golden Brown', 'Midnight Summer Dream' and 'European Female' would finally persuade North Americans to lay back and submit to a gentle garrotting. Sure, they attracted reasonable crowds in some centres and plenty of positive press, but the cat barely scratched the charts.

"The record company said they had a problem reconciling the name with the type of music it was, so its launch potential was lost," explains Cornwell in jargon that would sit better on an Epic executive.

"*Feline* was a transitional album, making people ready for something different and *Aural Sculpture* is not a shock to them now."

Any pressure to adopt a less threatening moniker?

"Yeah, it was suggested, but we just laughed!" chuckles Cornwell in a faint malevolent manner.

The survival of the Stranglers for 10 years can in part be attributed to a continuing subtle refinement of their sound. *Aural Sculpture's* innovations include a new emphasis on horns, a soul feel light years away from the psychedelic punk roar of

their early material and the use of a producer one wouldn't have immediately considered logical for the band, Laurie Latham (the man behind Paul Young's *No Parlez* hit).

"We were working towards a stage where we'd use a producer again. Since we split with Martin Rushent we'd just worked with an engineer and produced and mixed ourselves, apart from having Tony Visconti mix a couple of albums.

"We felt several of the songs could do with a black/soul feel, so we were originally thinking of black names. A lot of people weren't available and Epic suggested Laurie Latham. It turned out he had been a fan of ours for years and had always wanted to work with us," explains Hugh. "He was so enthusiastic we thought he had to be given a chance and it worked out great."

The Stranglers' first choice as producer?

"I rang up Marvin Gaye just before his fateful death and his manager said 'I can't even get him to work on his own stuff, let alone anyone else's. You must be kidding.'"

"Yeah, it would have been a bizarre collaboration. One of the songs, *Laughing*, is about Marvin Gaye." (Sample lyrics: "Lead poisoning from your Dad to me just didn't seem fair.")

And the horns?

"The songs just seemed to demand brass. There was room for that question and answer thing: first the vocals, then the quick responses of the horns. For our tour, we started doing those brass parts on the keyboards and it just didn't sound authentic, so we went for the real thing.

"We found these young boys from the West Country. They rehearsed and fitted in like clockwork, so we decided to use them on some of the old songs as well. Now I couldn't face playing 'Peaches' without the brass part, it would be lacklustre. The old numbers are given a new dimension and it goes down really well with the diehard fans."

Despite a two year break in performance in Britain, the Stranglers' recent tour there was apparently a major success: "The first 200 people in the front were the crazy fanat-



Dave Greenfield, Hugh Cornwell, Jet Black, J.J. Burnel.

ics, but behind was a complete cross-section. There's a lot more women in the audience now (early Stranglers had a heavy misogynistic rap) and the crowd seems a few years older."

The horny bent of *Aural Sculpture* reflects the Stranglers' rejection of most contemporary pop: "I got so sick of the cold wave music. All those synthesisers and computers, and the song gets lost in the sequencers and the crash of a disco drum. There seemed to be no emotion left, so I went back to the 40s'

brass-laced R&B music and got inspired by that. We've always drawn from different sources."

There is no title track on *Aural Sculpture*. It appeared in *Feline* as the band's manifesto, separating the Stranglers from the so-called "harlots and charlatans" of modern music. Cornwell sees developments over the last two years as further justification for his group's grandiose claims.

"Now more people are standing up and saying 'I don't want to be involved in this,' and that adds cre-

dence to what we're doing. We have never found it hard to stand out. We have been popular at times, but never fashionable. Now new bands are being termed Stranglers-like. It's a great accolade when you're used as a yardstick; it means you must have achieved some sort of style."

As they're a group with a clear sense of their own history — and perhaps an inflated idea of its importance — it comes as no surprise to learn that the Stranglers have authorised long-time follower Chris Twomey to write a biography. Given the band's oft-sordid past can we expect a juicy journal?

"It is quite accurate. He interviewed over 500 people for the project over three or four years. Other people told him things they'd never have said to us. We gave it to our lawyer and he spotted about 30 cases of possible libel. It was nothing people said about us, just slagging matches between others!"

The literary bent of the Stranglers is given an outlet in *Strangled*, a most impressive magazine that keeps their fans informed of the group's activities and interests, while Cornwell compares their aural offerings to those of a writer.

"What makes work interesting is the degree to which it reflects a place or an emotion. Like journalism, it is a reflection of what is around. It is looking through a key-hole at life and writing it down."

The Stranglers have certainly never looked at the armpit of life through rose-coloured glasses, but Hugh Cornwell rejects the accusation that their world view is always as black as their stage apparel.

"No, it is not all doom and destruction. Songs like 'Mad Hatter' and 'Under the Name of Spain' are very up. It is quite a bleak world around, but it is also very funny. There's a lot of humour in the world and they way we live."

"In a perfect utopian society, there'd be nothing to write about!"

Kerry Doole

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