

# THE *Virgin* FILE



David Cunningham, Flying Lizards.

## FLYING LIZARDS

Few would have believed that an old Motown number, sung totally deadpan, with only a meagre backing of fragmented piano and assorted percussion, would be hit material.

The nucleus of The Flying Lizards is David Cunningham, who was an art student at Maidstone College in Kent when he started to experiment with music, his interest fostered by the work of such avant garde specialists as Cage, Riley and Reich. His first product was a self-marketed LP called *Grey Scale*, which taught him plenty about making records, and formed the basis for what was to come.

"I was playing knives and forks and things simply because I thought 'Well who needs instruments'," says Cunningham.

The man has certainly not actively pursued success, having chosen the name Flying Lizards because it seemed least likely to succeed. Undaunted by any pretensions of commerciality, Cunningham took an old fave, "Summertime Blues", recorded the incredibly basic backing track in the converted slaughterhouse that serves as his studio, and recruited Deborah, an old college friend, to do the vocals.

The snare drum that provides what little rhythm the song has was recorded in a large concrete room, which acted as a giant echo chamber. Julian Marshall laid down the piano track straight from the sheet music with just a metronome for company. The rest of the noise is just various trash that was lying around at the time, including pieces of defunct tape recorders and ashtrays. Then came Deborah's vocals, which lack the innate cynicism of the original.

"Deborah did it quite honestly," says Cunningham. "I mean she actually wanted some money because she was terribly overdrawn at the time she made the record and she was getting letters from the bank."

The *Flying Lizards* album follows the same minimal approach, but covers a broad scope of ideas. The range of instruments is kept to a minimum, being mainly guitars and percussion, with occasional injections of bass, piano and organ. Dub effects are used widely, as are echo and reverb, to create illusions of space in what is really a very simple format. It's an intriguing sound, and probably the first time experimental music has reached a mass audience.

The musicians used to make up The Flying Lizards vary as much as the sound. Cunningham recruits them according to his needs.

"If you've got all those people, then you can play any kind of music at all," he says. "You can try things out more, you can be more flexible."

## SPARKS

Ron and Russell Mael were too freaky for their native California (at least they were in '74). So they upped stakes and headed for Britain, where a fresher musical climate prevailed, allowing them a free rein for their many talents.

Their two first albums recorded on home ground, first as Halfnelson and later as Sparks, received decidedly mixed critical reaction. But the Maels were young then, and Britain gave them the incentive they'd needed.

Their first hit, "This Town Ain't Big Enough For Both Of Us", was a most unlikely number one in Britain, which was struck dumb by Ron's middle-class accountant looks and Russell's strangled falsetto vocals. Actually, at that time, Split Enz had already ploughed similar territory. There's a moral there somewhere.

The follow-up, "Amateur Hour", was even better. A loopy, frantic rocker with a nagging hookline and witty lyrics which annoyed as much as it delighted. The first British album, *Kimono My House*, was well received by critics as a breath of fresh air in what was a very stolid pop scene of the time.

But backlashes seem to strike everyone, and critics began to feel the Maels were showing their limitations. Because the next album, *Propaganda*, wasn't quite as immediate as its predecessor, Sparks were cast into the pile of also-rans. After another year of struggling against indifference, they returned home to contemplate their future.

They found it in ace German disco producer Giorgio Moroder. A seemingly strange partnership, but he gave Sparks a new direction. His Teutonic stamp was all over their comeback hit "Number One In Heaven", giving their sound a less eclectic and more commercial air, without sacrificing their individuality.

Their new album, *Terminal Jive*, was recorded in Germany, eschewing guitars for the Moroder synthesised sound. But there's no computerised sterility in the sound of Sparks. Ron has developed into a unique keyboard virtuoso and Russell's zany vocals fit admirably into Moroder's wall of electronics.

Sparks have come back from the void, dancing a demented two-step. Try it.

## JOHN FOXX

Those who would write off John Foxx as a Gary Numan clone had better think again. How do you clone a clone, anyway? In fact, Numan lists Foxx's work with Ultravox as one of his key influences.

Foxx comes from Chorley in Lancashire, and moved to London in 1974. Like many "experimental" musicians, he's an ex-art school student and started out fooling around with tape recorders.

"I was at art college when I first got intrigued by sound," he recalls. "I mean, I should say that I simply entered art school because first there was absolutely nothing I could imagine myself doing if I left school, but second, I was academically pretty useless. So I saw art school as the only viable solution for staving off another couple of years before walking out into the cruel world."

His interests and the circles he moved in led to a meeting with Eno, who later produced several tracks that ended up on the first Ultravox album. The band was assembled from applicants to an ad placed in *Melody Maker*.

Ultravox recorded three albums of varying quality, and were victims of bad timing as much as anything else, since they arrived at the time of the punk boom, when synthesisers were looked upon with contempt. But under it all, the strength of some of the material was well evident, especially on tracks like "Hiroshima Mon Amour" and "The Man Who Dies Every Day".

Foxx quit the band last year, feeling he could work better on his own. He signed to Virgin, and has now produced his first solo album, *Metamatic*. Foxx, thankfully, is freer of pretension than many of his ilk, and his melodies are strong and catchy, the synthesiser being the vehicle for the tune, rather than the other way round.

"I no longer have any desire to be a machine," says Foxx. "Now I want to make dancing music."

## HUMAN LEAGUE

In an age where machines are controlling men, the Human League epitomise the idiom of Modern Mechanical Music.

In music, all boundaries are self-imposed, and the Human League do not recognise any boundaries. They've so far taken electronic music to its farthest limits in terms of popular appeal, and are continuing to extend those limits all the time.

The Human League are four young men from Sheffield, a stark industrial city in the British Midlands. In the past couple of years it has become Britain's equivalent to Akron, Ohio, being in the forefront of experimental music, setting new horizons.

The Human League's sound is entirely synthesised, with all rhythm and percussion being provided electronically. Taped sound also plays a major part in their performances, to the stage where they can go and sit in the audience while the machines continue on their own. Truly State Of The Art.

Martin Ware, Phil Oakley and Ian Overcoat occupy the stage, while fourth member Adrian Wright sits in the wings, at the controls. He not only works many of the tape effects, but also provides a startling array of back projections which divert the audience throughout the performance. The men at the heart of it often play a secondary role.

But the Human League are by no means

STORY

Virgin Records and RTC ... two big little companies, still in their youth, which have given some of their bigger brothers a lesson or two in marketing. The secret to their success lies in their willingness to go with the times, sometimes ahead of them, to search out new ideas and not let their strategies be dictated by the rigid confines of Top 40 philosophy.

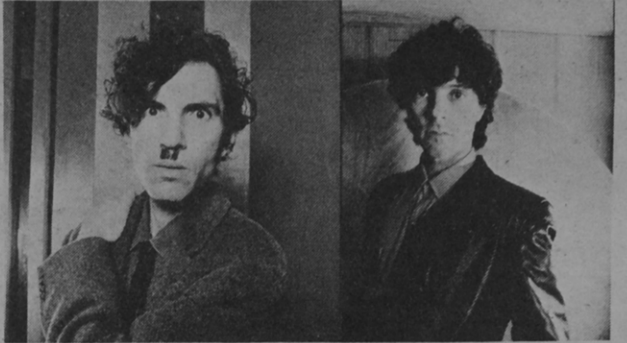
Virgin started back in 1971, with a record shop in London's Oxford St, offering records at cut prices. So successful was the venture that five more shops were opened in the same year. There are now 19 Virgin record stores throughout Britain, and last year, Virgin opened its first megastore, a music supermarket which justified its two million-dollar investment by reaping \$40,000 on its first day of trading.

Also in 1971, Virgin acquired a beautiful 16th century manor house near Oxford, and converted the squash courts into one of the best recording studios in Europe, with 24-track facilities, computerised mixing and quad sound. Manor Farm studios were born, and have been used by top recording acts from all over the world. Later, two 24-track mobile studios were built, and are in heavy demand for live work and for musicians who want to record at home.

The Virgin record label was the next logical



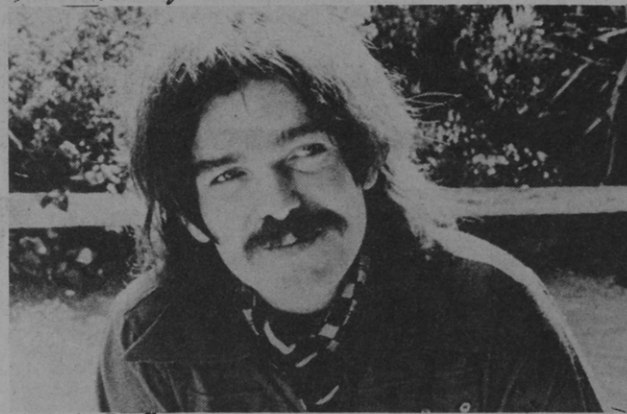
John Foxx



Sparks



Human League



Captain Beefheart



Shooting Star

development. It was launched in 1973, its first release being Mike Oldfield's phenomenally successful *Tubular Bells*. It gave recording opportunities to avant garde acts like Tangerine Dream, Henry Cow and Gong. It was the only label brave enough to take on the Sex Pistols. Today its stable includes XTC, Magazine, The Motors and Public Image Limited. In 1976, Virgin picked up on the expanding interest in reggae and established Front Line Records, devoted to reggae acts.

The Townhouse studios are another Virgin project, providing recording facilities in the London area for musicians who don't want to go out into the country to work.

In 1978, Virgin acquired the Metropole Cinema in London and set about converting it to a live venue. The Venue seats 600 people, has its own two hundred thousand-dollar PA system, and has become one of London's premier concert settings.

Late last year, Virgin went into the publishing business. Virgin Books Ltd will this year start producing a variety of material on music and musicians, and related subjects.

Perhaps Virgin's most ambitious project to date is Necker Island, one of the British Virgin Islands group in the Caribbean. The company has bought this 100-acre island, and has built

electronic snobs. They've never heard of Phillip Glass or Steve Reich, and pronounce Stockhausen "a load of garbage." Their music is for the body as well as the mind. In addition, Oakley and Ware have strong, distinctive voices, adding essential warmth and character to an often-cold musical dialect.

One album has already surfaced here on Virgin, and another is on the way. The Human League are constantly exploring new fields, and you don't have to be a PhD to enjoy them.

## CPT BEHAT

Don Van Vliet, better known as Captain Beefheart, is the great musical eccentric. Little is known about the man prior to his emergence in California in 1965. Thought to be somewhere in his 40's, he is an enigma whose erratic career has been frequently beset by personal and emotional upheavals and complex business hassles.

The Captain and his Magic Band were first recorded live in 1965, but the LP, *Mirror Man*, was not released until 1971. A quixotic mixture of blues, free jazz and hard rock, it is still regarded as a major and often misunderstood work.

Frank Zappa became interested in Beefheart in 1966, but the first recording sessions were abortive, largely due to personality clashes. Even today, the two have an intense love-hate relationship. Zappa still claims Beefheart has little or no sense of melody or timing, but like many of Zappa's views, that can be taken with a grain of salt. The fact that Beefheart rates a mention in Joachim Berendt's prestigious *Jazz Book* for his sax playing shows how highly he is regarded.

He signed with Buddah in 1967 and produced *Safe As Milk*, a strong collection of original songs based on rural blues and featuring Ry Cooder on slide guitar. By the time it was released, Beefheart was off in other directions.

He split with Buddah and recorded his follow-up, *Strictly Personal*, on the Sunset label, showing a stronger trend towards free improvisation. Switching to Zappa's Straight Records in 1969, Beefheart recorded two classic albums, *Trout Mask Replica* and *Lick My Decals Off, Baby*. Both works stunned with their virtuosity and unorthodoxy, symptoms of the man's personal nightmares.

Switching again, to Reprise, Beefheart produced *The Spotlight Kid*, a return to the blues, depressed and schizophrenic. But as his moods frequently changed, so did his music, and the next release, *Clear Spot*, was a much happier effort.

His signing with Virgin in 1974 led to numerous American contractual difficulties, with Reprise claiming prior distribution rights. The less-than-satisfactory *Unconditionally Guaranteed* was released during this time, but not until last year were all problems resolved. Virgin finally gaining worldwide rights.

The Captain's new work *Shiny Beast (Bat Chain Puller)* is actually a re-recorded version of slightly earlier material, previously marketed by another company with a slightly different title. (Another earlier work, *Bluejeans and Moonbeams*, is best forgotten). *Shiny Beast* is a superb return to form, with Beefheart's primitive, animal voice snarling with a newfound virility.

His ever-changing Magic Band is largely new this time, with the exception of drummer Robert Williams, and marimba player Art Tripp.

Captain Beefheart is truly worthy of the "years ahead of his time" label, and while he may never be more than a cult figure, those in the know to this infuriating, wondrous man can feel privileged.

## SHOOTING STAR

Shooting Star may be all-American boys, but one listen to the debut album on Virgin shows their influences lie well and truly over the Atlantic.

They hail from Kansas, heart of the mid-western boogie wasteland. But don't let their origins put you off. This young six-piece produces crisp, melodic music with tons of drive and soaring harmonies, just begging for radio play. They manage to adroitly dodge the metallic histrionics of so many of their compatriots, and are better for it.

Their album was appropriately produced in London by Gus Dudgeon and is the most popular new album on American FM station playlists, according to *Cashbox*.

two recording studios and three villages on it. A better working environment you couldn't imagine.

In this country, Virgin is distributed by RTC, and a very happy arrangement it is too. Set up in 1977, RTC is wholly New Zealand owned and operated. It has increased its share of the NZ record market by 600 percent since its inception, acquiring distribution rights for such labels as Logo, Acrobat, Criminal, Rockburgh and now Graduate.

Virgin is so pleased with RTC, it has renewed the distribution contract for what looks like an indefinite period.

RTC also distributes mid-price and budget-price records, and has a thriving TV promotional division as well. The company has two scouts in England, constantly on the lookout for new labels to promote.

"We choose material according to what we think the New Zealand public will accept," says RTC managing director Brian Pitts. "We try to anticipate trends, insofar as we're able to."

"We're still a small company, in terms of what the major companies are doing — our share of the market isn't quite in double figures — but we're trying to be a little bit different in what we do."