

Impressions

The interview situation is not one of Howard Devoto's first loves. His retort of "who likes doing anything" when I asked him if he liked doing interviews was the negative start I feared in our chat during the band's recent two stint Auckland stopover.

Accused in the past of "enigma building" in his awkward dealings with the press, Devoto is certainly a hard man to pin down. Often wearing a smile that bordered on condescension, he always seemed reluctant to be at ease or responsive in his role as interviewee, consequently, his answers when they eventually arrived after careful consideration over his selection of words, were sluggish and disjointed. I felt uncomfortable and inadequate in my attempts at establishing even a half-way fluent inter-change with a man whose music I admire yet whose personality was becoming increasingly difficult to size-up or come to terms with.

Expressions

In the past Devoto has talked of the importance of "negative drive" in his lyric writing, but this has changed, it seems:

"It's more a matter of geology these days — watch how you're drilling. You can't work that way all the time as it's like walking backwards. So now I'm an exquisitely crafted piece of drift-wood."

Yeah, aren't we all, he was joking, perhaps.

His lyric/songwriting methods were next on the agenda:

"Well you have to watch the fit of words, the necessary convulsion that puts one thing above another, one word under another. There's no specific way in which they're written."

I brought up "Feed the Enemy", his most obscure lyric, to find out what was going on in the Devoto intellect when that was written:

"That one was written fairly quickly and it could still be written now if it hadn't been done then. People need their enemies so it's logical to provide for your foe the little graces and necessities of life."

In his songs Devoto is either being shot by both sides, exploited by his enemies or drained of light. In short he's always on the receiving end:

"I wouldn't agree with that. In "The Light Pours Out of Me" there's a kind of victory in there somewhere. I'd say there's a strong sense of identity in that song with your allotted position, this hallowed position you've been given or carved out for yourself. And perhaps that is draining, but I wouldn't say the songs were about being on the receiving end at all but even if they were then to recognise that for a start is some kind of victory. I mean, doesn't your doctor tell you that? 'Ah, I know what you've got', the diagnosis is complete so that's a little victory. But to go further than that and recognise that you got exactly what you bargained for then that's a true victory."

Magazine was perhaps the first band to

abandon the punk touch-points of being young, fast and unscientific. The band brought sophistication and musicianship to a year that was dominated by punk band-wagoners and energy as an end in itself. So the band was a first in its field:

"As much as anybody can be seen that way as among the first to do something. We cast some sort of vote. The bread on the water drifted some way or other, but as being influential goes I don't know. I certainly don't go around identifying or recognising where we've affected people. I find it very difficult to point a finger at anybody."

Depressions

Attention now moved to Magazine's second album, the much maligned *Secondhand Daylight* and the beginning of wholesale criticism for a band originally touted as a major force. The criticism must've hurt:

"Yes, but there's also a kind of funny satisfaction in that as well. You know it's going to happen somewhere along the line so why not here, there."

With the benefit of over a year's hindsight I wondered if Devoto would have changed anything on the album:

"Perhaps the production a little bit. It was too treated but we must take the responsibility as much as anyone for that. I think that's probably all."

Devoto wasn't being completely honest here as in a later conversation with new guitarist Robin Simon (ex-Ultravox) he revealed the band's reluctance to continue with much of the material from the album, one reason being that the departed McGeoch (now berthed with the hit-making Siouxsee and the Banshees) wrote many of the songs and the other being the op-

pressive nature of the album. In fact only two songs, a funk-up "Feed the Enemy" and "Permafrost", remain as live reminders of the album's existence.

But staying with the album for a while, what about "Back to Nature" written after Devoto's visit to Scotland?

"That's concerned with some kind of con that people are playing on themselves that there's some natural, wholesome, pure, real THEM somewhere inside them. I was thinking of the idea of having a natural you."

Secondhand Daylight has often been described as a "melodramatic" album yet Devoto claimed never to have heard of that term in relation to his music. But was the word "melodramatic" a realistic description of his output?

"No, not if it's denoting some kind of unrealness. But one person's melodrama is another person's housework. You're not going to get a consensus of opinion in some of these areas. I don't allot the second album a place in history but the album is still existing now and maybe it's accessible now."

Soap Impressions

Still on the subject of accessibility which Devoto rightly believes isn't always a virtue we arrive at Magazine's third album, the virtually spontaneous studio crack of *The Correct Use of Soap* produced by Martin Hannett, famous for his Joy Division work. How did they meet Hannett?

"About a year ago we recorded a couple of tracks with him, "Thank You Falettinme Be Mice Elf Agin" and "The Light Pours Out of Me", the one that's on the British single called "Upside Down", and we were very pleased with that. "Thank You" is the same one that's

on the album and so we went on to do an album."

Just after the album the band embarked on a British tour after which guitarist John McGeoch left the band and so left them in a quandry as to who was to take his place before their American-Australian-New Zealand tour. McGeoch's exit was unexpected but Robin Simon has coped easily:

"We knew of John's departure before most people but it was still a surprise as he was there right from the beginning. Robin was with Ultravox and he did their *Systems of Romance* album and he was the only guitarist we could think of that might be available or right."

Simon, judging from his Thursday night performance with Magazine, has knitted in with the band without too much jostling. But Magazine live is another story, and here it is.

Live Impressions

The Devoto stage persona is almost non-existent. Projection is on-key as he leaves his songs to speak for themselves:

"Being on stage is a concentrated time. You can't equate it with anything you might do at other times like catching the bus or whatever as several hundred people haven't gathered there to watch you catching the bus. On stage I'm telling you nothing new. You are there to perform songs and that's a particular kind of thing. Those songs are particular moments and you step into them on tour again and again. They are their own world and you can't or I wouldn't like to live a song in all my waking moments."

Live, "Motorcade" is conspicuous by its absence but Robin Simon had only three weeks to rehearse before touring so the song will be included at a later date. "Shot By Both Sides" remains and was the second encore but surely it's becoming an albatross, a sop to audience demands?

"No, no. There's no way anybody has to play a song. We volunteer to do it and we'll continue to play it as long as we feel that it's right. I don't worry about the audience, but I don't ignore them either."

Last Impressions

I would have liked more discussion on *Soap* but time and Devoto's tentative, pedantic answers prevented that. So for twenty five minutes two people talked to a tape recorder, one questioning and one answering and communication was elsewhere. But I doubt that Devoto was using the interview to continue his myth of enigma as, in the last analysis when we shook hands I thought I saw the flickerings of a man who couldn't quite relate to others, a man who used silence and procrastination as a defence mechanism and ultimately a man who, as a dejected romantic, revelled in his own world of shapes and shadows.

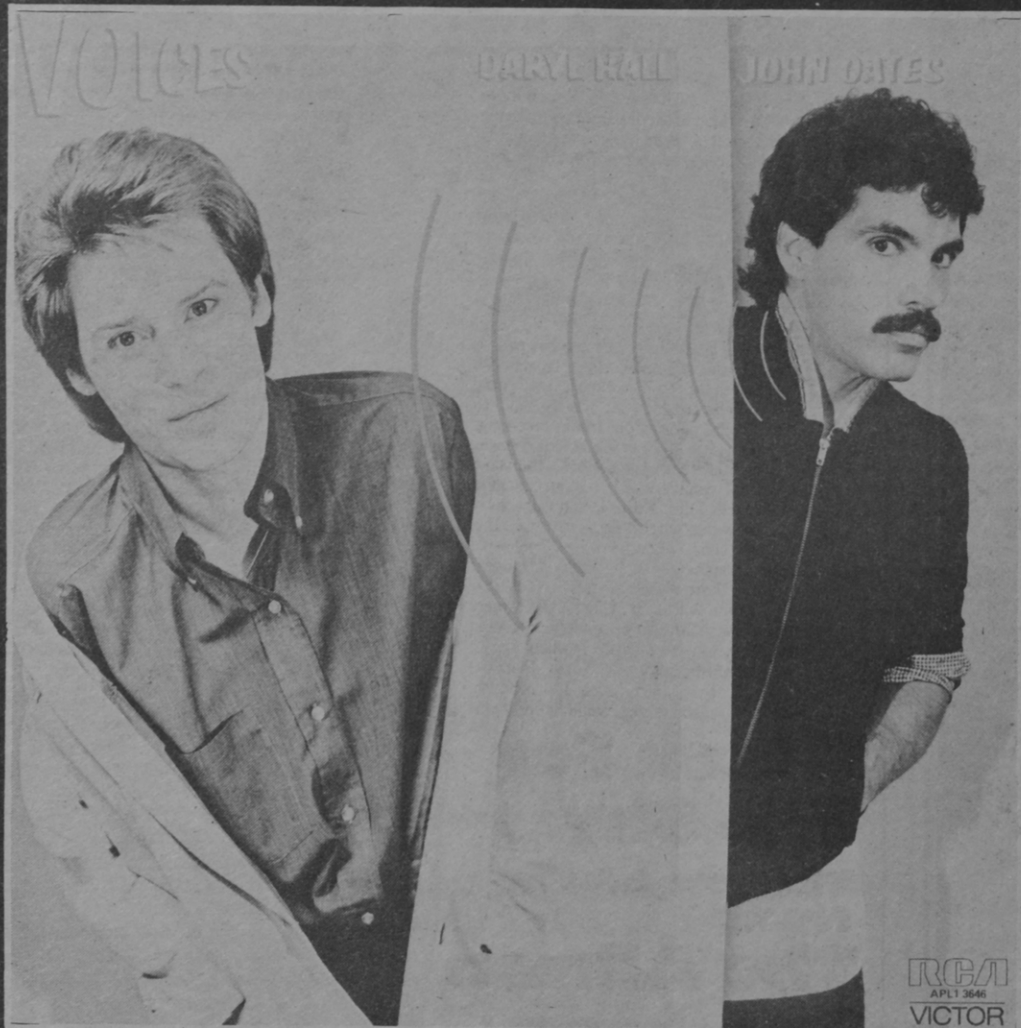
I thought I saw those things, I'm sure that's the real Howard Devoto.

George Kay

DEVOTO DEVIEWED



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