



"Anyone can do what we do. We do it because we're normal people, we're not super-gifted. It's within anybody's grasp, whether you play well or not. We didn't start off as amazing players, we had to learn to be OK. We're OK now, mainly because we kept at it, and we had something we wanted to do". Speaking is Andy Partridge of XTC. Onstage, one of yer better class of lunatics, in private, rather shy. A bit of a Nigel, really. So who is Nigel?

"He is an average young person, living in England. He's an example. He's not anyone specific, he's just an example of a young person who is guided rather unwillingly by his parents into something he doesn't want to do. It's a sort of person, a class of youngster".

Surprise Change

XTC surprised everyone last year, including themselves, when they produced *Drums And Wires*. The transformation from the jerky, quirky, clockwork approach of the first two albums was miraculous. A major part of this transformation was the departure of keyboards player Barry Andrews. Partridge sees him as a square peg in a round hole.

"With his departure, his personality in the music went, his pressure on a quarter of the music went, and in came different attitudes, a different instrument (ie: Dave Gregory).

"Between the time *Go 2* was written and *Drums And Wires* was written, there was a lot of change, but specifically the personalities. For us that was a great change, when you have something that you consider stable, and all of a sudden there's a big upheaval, it obviously changes you."

Andrews' songs were recorded for *Go 2*, but in the cold light of day they just didn't measure up with what Partridge and Colin Moulding had written. Two Andrews' songs were included on *Go 2* for the sake of democracy.

Slumbertime

The interview is interrupted at this stage by the entrance of an ardent fan, proudly bearing a patchwork bedspread, sewn up by his girlfriend to match the cover of *Drums And Wires*. The band is tickled pink, and the spread is duly autographed with a felt tip pen. Partridge asks for a set of *Black Sea* oven mitts when he returns.

But back to Barry Andrews:

"There were a lot of outtakes from *Go 2* which never made the album. He was upset by this, and it hastened his departure.

"When Dave was brought in, it wasn't because of the instrument he played, it was because we knew him, and knew he'd fit in easily with the group first and foremost."

Partridge is much happier now playing the older material with the newer band. He feels the old songs sound better with the new arrangements, in fact, the way they should have sounded in the first place.

"They were written on a guitar, and Barry always used to play his piano like a guitar. He'd play it with a very cheap pickup, through a tiny guitar amplifier. So it was very natural, when he left, to get another guitar player, really.

"Dave tends toward R&B and jazz, a very rhythmical sort of feel. I'm a very lazy guitarist, actually. I tend to go for simple chords, but I like rhythm playing as well, so the sound we've got is kind of weaving in and out of rhythms."

The Art of Discord

The Partridge style of guitar conforms to no orthodox structures, in fact he's made discord an art. He's been quoted as saying: "When you hit a bum note, play several more, and everyone will think it's intentional." He laughingly admits to the quote, while pointing out that everything XTC does on stage is intentional.

"I think discords are just as useful as chords. We use them as much as we use sweet-sounding chords, we use disharmony as well as harmony. Everybody was always shy of using what they call 'bum chords'. We use them without feeling guilty, and I think we've conquered it by playing these sorts of things guilt free."

Partridge's vocals have a similar idiosyncratic style, displaying his fondness for the mouth music peculiar to jazz and reggae. He claims to model himself on Malcolm Mooney, one-time vocalist for Can, and one of the great non-singers of all time.

"I'm enjoying using melodies now, it's something I'm learning to do, and I'm enjoying it while I'm learning it. Not having any voice at all, I'm more interested in percussive-type singing."

Black Times

The conversation turns to *Black Sea*, the title of which reflects the band's feelings when they came off the road after an exhausting American tour, had virtually nothing written, and felt under pressure after the success of *Drums And Wires*, which had surprised even them. The "Black" period was a time of what Partridge calls "musical constipation", which took them some effort to get over. They wrote as they recorded, and the results delighted everyone.

"I was much more pleased with *Black Sea*

than I was with *Drums And Wires*. I feel much more at home with it. I took ages to get used to *Drums And Wires*, though probably I'll get fed up with *Black Sea* more quickly.

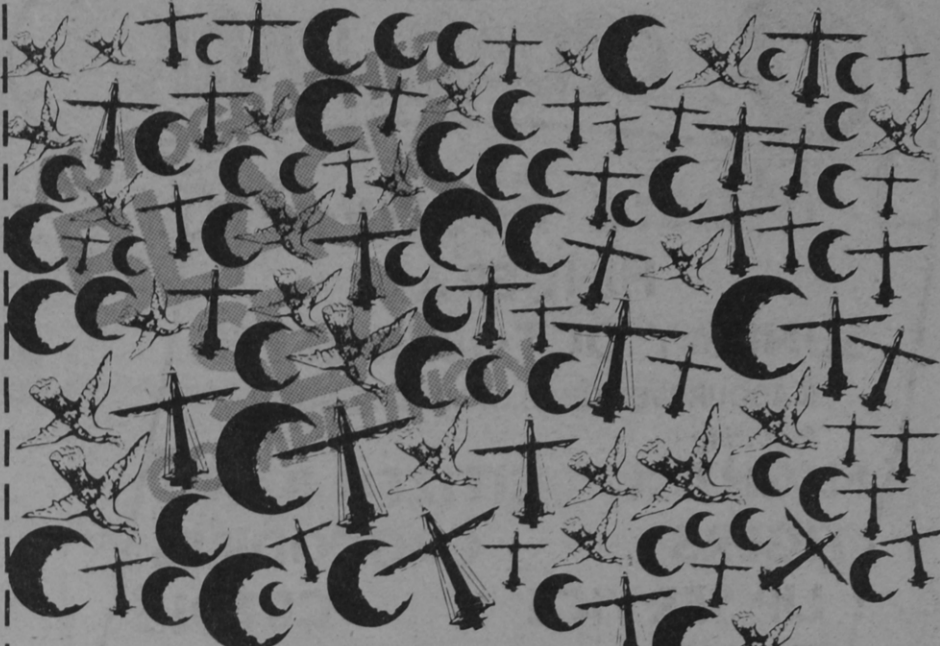
"It had a very pessimistic tinge to it because of the problems we had at the time, but I think we're over that now, and some of the later tracks on the album show a more optimistic streak."

The Concerts



XTC and the Logan Campbell Centre did not make an entirely happy combination. Taking the seats out downstairs is a smart move, but it leaves large blank areas, which reflect the sound and make for uncomfortable listening. The balance, which was atrocious during Flight X7's set, was never quite rectified, and Partridge's vocals were largely unintelligible throughout.

XTC's stage act is much better suited to smaller venues, and the following night, they left Mainstreet gasping for breath. The sound this time was perfect, and you could fully appreciate Partridge's bizarre scat-dub singing.

The stage transforms Partridge into a bug-eyed, cavern-mouthed monster, lurching around, spilling out his ragged guitar phrases like broken glass. To his right, the lean and sensitive-looking Gregory fills out the sound



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with terse, abrasive solos and choppy chords, as well as the occasional embellishments on synthesiser.

Moulding and Chambers lay down a relentless, surging backbeat on "Towers Of London" and "Making Plans For Nigel", and handle the seemingly-murderous tempo changes of "Mechanic Dancing" effortlessly. There can't be many more dependable or creative rhythm sections around.

The disjointed sound of the Barry Andrews days has been replaced by a confident, muscular approach, and the old numbers have

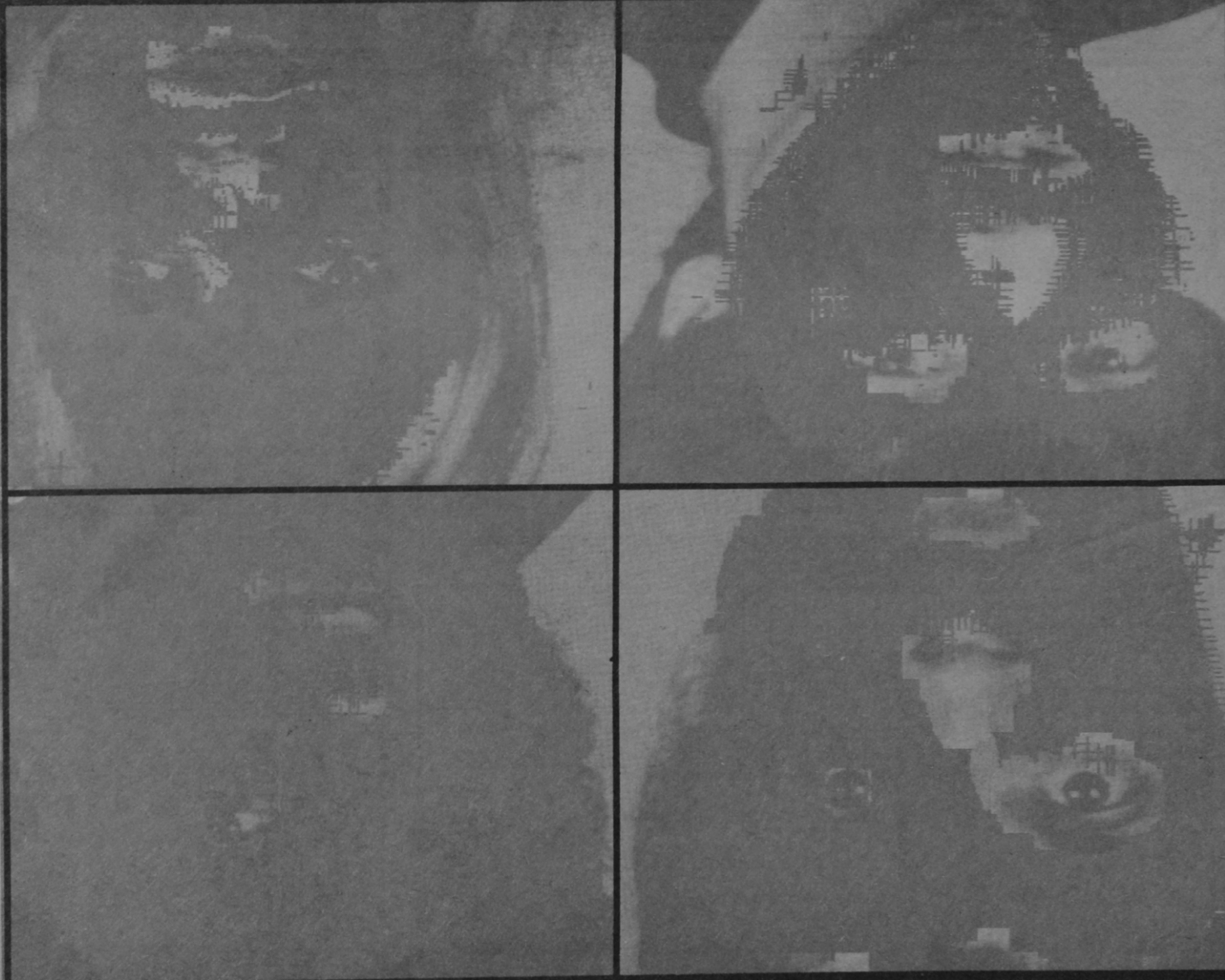
realised their true potential. This is especially so in the case of "Battery Bridges", slowed down and with a growling synthesiser underneath. Coupled with a venetian blind lighting effect washed in blue, it's an aural and visual spectacular.

Mainstreeters received the added treat of "Dance Band", which hasn't been performed in over a year. "Are You Receiving Me" and "Statue of Liberty" followed, and the floor was smothered with happy feet, hands and heads.

Thank you Nigel. Whoever you are.

Duncan Campbell

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