



ULTRAVOX

The Story

Warren Cann interviewed by Jonas Wårstad

The following is the result of a series of interviews I conducted with Warren Cann via email over the course of several months. Questions have been removed for the sake of narrative flow.

—Jonas Wårstad

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1974

Tiger Lily

I answered a “drummer wanted” advertisement in *Melody Maker* and sent a very cheeky reply containing a lot of attitude; I had previously had nothing but bad experiences with this forum and had decided that being modest wouldn’t get me anywhere! I forgot about it until some weeks later when I ultimately got a phone call from Dennis Leigh (later aka John Foxx). We met and he played me a few of his songs on acoustic guitar. I liked the songs and I liked his lyrics. It seemed promising so I agreed to meet the others.

We became a band when I joined which was in May-ish, 1974. Until then, there was only Dennis, Stevie Shears, and Chris Allen (later aka Christopher St. John, then Chris Cross). They hadn’t done any gigs, just the occasional rehearsal in one of the halls at the Royal College of Art where they were storing their equipment. I went there to see them, set up my drums, and we played for awhile. I think they were impressed that I suggested we actually start work on one of their songs, rather than just jamming. John’s enthusiasm and Chris’ bass playing caught my initial interest and I thought I’d stay for a while and see what, if anything, would happen. After a few weeks of rehearsals it became apparent to me that there was definitely something there worth pursuing.

As a fledgling band with no resources other than our enthusiasm, we were very lucky in one respect—we had a place to rehearse that was conveniently located, available to us most evenings, and free! A friend of Dennis’, named Ronnie (I don’t remember his last name, but he was from Scotland), ran a business refurbishing store display manikins, and he very kindly didn’t mind if we went in after working hours and used the place to rehearse in. It was called “Modreno” (how apt) and was in a business “yard” near Kings Cross station. We could make noise without disturbing anyone and it only took five minutes to walk to the trains (we’d have to stop each evening in time for us all to catch the last tube home—none of us was wealthy enough to run a car, otherwise we’d have been at it all night!).

It was quite a scene; us in the midst of all of these bits and pieces of nude female bodies, some with wigs, some bald, some upright, and many just stacked here and there like stray firewood. It was such a sight we had some of our first photos taken there.

We always told our friend that we'd reimburse him "when we made some headway." When we signed our first record contract we were all very pleased to be able to do just that. I cannot stress how important it was for us to be able to rehearse and write songs undisturbed for three, four, or five nights a week. It gave us our start and we were grateful.

Our very first gig of any kind was in Chorley, Lancs. We needed a warm-up/ice-breaker of some description just before our first official gig which was at the London Marquee supporting the "Heavy Metal Kids" (week of Aug. 24, 1974). Dennis had a home-town connection, arranged a gig in a local youth club's hall, and a week or so before the Marquee date we drove up there for our first public appearance.

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We didn't know that [Billy] could also play a piano... 'You can?! Why didn't you say so!?'

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Our second "proper" gig was shortly afterwards, also at the Marquee, supporting Chris Spedding's band, "Sharks."

We did these gigs as a four-piece. Billy Currie was not yet in the band—he didn't join until some months (Oct./Nov.?) later. As a result of these first gigs, we realised that we had a rather more ambitious sound in mind than a single guitar/bass/drums outfit could put out. We started looking for another member and eventually found Bill.

He initially just played the violin in a few songs. We didn't know that he could also play a piano... "You can?! Why didn't you say so!?" Shortly after we found out, we did that "Ain't Misbehavin'" thing so as to get the money for Bill to buy a Crummar electric piano (it did the trick at the time, but what a piece of junk that was!). The whole band used to go through Stevie's Selmer guitar amp.

1975

March

The only Tiger Lily single “Ain’t Misbehavin”

I don’t know the exact date it was released, but there was an interview in *Melody Maker* dated March 1, 1975 (page 24), where writer Karl Dallas talks about the film and talks to Dennis Leigh. Two weeks later, there was a review in *Melody Maker* (dated March 15, 1975, page 14) of the single. It was tipped as being one of the weeks “HITS” (as opposed to being rated a “MISS”—we didn’t have many reviews like that!).

As this was the first published review we ever had, I shall quote it in its entirety for you:

TIGER LILY : Ain’t Misbehavin’ (Gull) One of those Temperence Seven-type things that crop up from time to time. The Fats Waller classic deserves more respectful treatment and doesn’t lend itself easily to such juvenile behavior, but fact is it’s a compulsive song and this becomes more interesting with the addition of a fiddle and a more beaty approach as the song progresses. With the current interest in the film. I have a sneaking suspicion this might stand a chance. Hit.

The line-up was; Dennis Leigh [vocals], Stevie Shears [guitar], Warren Cann [drums], Christopher St. John [bass], Billy Currie [piano, violin].

We had a tentative some-time manager, a friend of mine named John Marshall, who seemed to be the only person about at the time who expressed any faith in us whatsoever, and we were content to let him drum up any interest or work that he could. Through his contacts, he discovered the film and talked someone into letting us do something for the soundtrack.

When he told us that it was a movie about “blues greats and vintage porn,” it sounded cool enough. We wouldn’t have agreed to do it if it was some really boring, straight film. We were surprised, however, when he told us that we’d be covering a Fats Waller song, rather than us just doing our own material.

The “plus” side to this was that the studio time would be paid for, a record release (though just a one-off) would happen, and (best of all from our point of view) we’d actually be getting paid some cash for it. That consideration overcame our reservations about recording a song that wasn’t our own so we said we’d do it. It was only a few hundred pounds but we knew just what we were going to do with the money—buy Billy an electric piano so he wouldn’t have to stand around during the majority of our repertoire when he wasn’t playing violin.

We worked on our version at Modreno’s. It didn’t take too long to come up with an arrangement that we were satisfied with, then we worked on polishing up our arrangement of the B-side (“Monkey Jive”). We were much more excited at the prospect of recording one of our own songs and seeing it on a record!

I think we recorded it at the famous Olympic Studios. I remember walking in and feeling like I was treading in the hallowed halls where so much great music had been recorded.

I have never seen the movie so I don’t know how or where in the film the single is used, or even if it’s used in the movie at all! George Melly also recorded the song at that time and I have a suspicion that his was the version that was ultimately used. Still, they paid for it. I’d be surprised if they hadn’t used it in the movie somewhere.

1976

Early October “The Wild, the Beautiful and the Damned”

The album was from a series called “Front Runners.” Its title is “Rock & Reggae & Derek & Clive”. I checked the information from its advertisement in *Melody Maker* the week of October 2, 1976. The record contained a track each from Island Record’s artists and was available as a special offer sampler, in conjunction with *Melody Maker* music newspaper, for 65 pence. The other artists on it were: Robert Palmer, Bunny Wailer, Max Romeo, “the Upsetters,” “Burning Spear,” “Justin Hines & the Dominos,” Peter Cook & Dudley Moore, Sandy Denny, and “Eddie & The Hot Rods.”

Our “spot” on the sleeve was indicated not by a photo of the band or a photo of our upcoming album sleeve, but by a large Question Mark, because we hadn’t given them a band name to use. We were still dithering over what we would choose as our penultimate name. We had been going through various phases ever since we’d formed and “Tiger Lily” had long been dropped. So had, “The Zips,” “Fire of London,” and “London Soundtrack”—we were even called the “The Damned” for a week or two until we discovered another band had beaten us to it! We knew that whatever we told them would be the name we would be branded with forever, and we wanted to be sure we were happy with our choice of new name. They had to get the record out and couldn’t wait for us to make up our minds, hence the “?” for us beside “The Wild, the Beautiful, and the Damned.” I’ve got a copy of this record somewhere back in England.

I will quote the text of the advertisement here, verbatim...

‘Rock & Roll & Derek & Clive’ is the title of this week’s album in the MM’s fabulous 65p Front Runners records offer. This is week three of the unprecedented collectors’ item project that bring readers thousands of albums of the top names in pop - LPs which cannot be bought in the shops. Island Records have compiled a unique album starring tracks by top names from their all-star roster. They include: Bunny Wailer, Max Romeo, Upsetters, Burning Spear, Justin Hines & The Dominoes, Peter Cook & Dudley Moore, Sandy Denny, Robert Palmer, and Eddie And The Hot Rods.

The section on us, read:

Name Unknown: 'The Wild, the Beautiful, and the Damned'. The first time the band have been heard on record. They are a brand-new British group whose debut album, from which this track has been taken, is currently being produced by Brian Eno. The band is as yet unnamed.

See...there they go, doing it again! Or, for the first time—depending how you look at it. *We* produced the record, gave Steve Lillywhite and Brian Eno credit as co-producers, and all they ever say is “produced by Eno.” It makes me angry because it is no more accurate than it is true. The record company had a “name” involved with the record, so that’s what they pushed in order to boost it’s interest and sales.

“The Wild, The Beautiful and the Damned” was one of the very first songs we wrote. Because we weren’t doing gigs (we didn’t want to play live until we were able to do it *our* way, and were determined to not get caught up in “pub rock,” which we

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hated—we later modified our stance slightly and played in some pubs—we were just too curious to see how our stuff would go down in front of an audience), we wrote scores and scores of songs during our Modreno phase. We’d write a song, try to perfect it, then move on to another song, then we’d go back and dissect the previous song and either make it better or salvage it’s best elements and proceed to incorporate them into the newer song, leaving the shell behind. It was great experience at the art and craft of song writing. “The Wild, The Beautiful and the Damned” came together after a week or two of constant experimenting with it’s essential elements. But once we felt we had it, that was basically it and it never changed after that. We felt that the song represented at the time, as much as any one song could, what we were all about. And we always knew it would be a “must choice” when it came time to record an album.

Brian Eno was a very interesting gentleman and a great character. Our experience of working with him was quite enlightening and a pleasureable experiment. I do not regret it and I’m sure the others would agree. But it was absolutely *not* what we had actually envisaged. We had been under the impression, due to Brian’s image from Roxy, that he was a real “technical-type” who had all sorts of tricks up his sleeve regarding the studio and in the realm of production technique. We were hungry to learn how to push the boundaries of the studio environment and we thought that he

would be just the man to show us how to go beyond the conventional guitar/piano/ bass/drums approach that was so prevalent at the time. We wanted to pick his brains. What we discovered was that Brian was—at that time—actually quite naïve in the area of technical expertise. It was not his forté. In the first days in the studio together (Brian came in after we'd already recorded the bulk of the material), I remember looking at his Mini-Moog synthesizer. It was the first one I'd ever gotten my hands on and he had all these little pieces of tape stuck by the keys with the names of the notes written on them, plus little pictures stuck on adjacent to some of the control knobs. I



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pointed to a cute picture of a sheep and asked, “What’s that mean?” He replied, “Well, I don’t know what that knob does but, when I turn it, it makes the sound ‘wooly,’ so the picture of the sheep (sheep...wool...get it?) reminds me...” I was quite taken aback. I didn’t know what to say to that! I think I just nodded and said, “Umm... good idea!” From that moment on, I had a very strong suspicion that Brian was not the technical master we’d had in mind!

Eno was far more of a conceptualist—an ideas man. He was quite bold about not giving a damn about what the final result sounded like. He was only interested in the process (which is great for learning, and fine if your musical future doesn’t hinge on public, rather than private, reaction to the “final result”). While we immediately acknowledged the importance of “the journey” as opposed to “the destination,” in our case we were more pragmatic—the “final result,” which would be released for people’s listening pleasure, mattered very much to us! We agreed that it was very cool to do all sorts of unusual things via the recording process, but it still had to end up sounding good. There wouldn’t be a second album for us to make if the first one was less than we were capable of, and all we might say was, “But it was a gas to make!”

We had our most productive and interesting times together when the tape wasn’t rolling; when we would just sit round in the control room and talk about music and art. We appeared to be very much on a similar wave-length as each other, but he was far more articulate in his expression of the turmoil of emotions an artist has to contend with. He seemed to have thought matters through much further than us, whereas we were still trying to put all the pieces together. We loved listening to him and I believe that it was, overall, a very good idea. He only worked on three of four songs at the most, and we didn’t use any of his mixes (we thought it polite not to mention it).

To be fair, his name *did* help bring about some attention that might not otherwise have been paid to us concerning that first album, but it had never been our intention to do that.

It's just very irritating when critics later stated, regarding particular songs, "The hand of Eno is stamped all over this track, blah-blah-blah...." When, in fact, the song was written and performed with no participation by Brian at all. Lazy journalism strikes again.

1977

February 4

The first Ultravox! single “Dangerous Rhythm”/“My Sex”

The Feb. 26th, 1977 *Sounds* review said...

Debut Single & Eno Production of the Week. Dangerous Rhythm (Island). They might be rather like a younger early days Roxy Music but, oh my, what a good model to copy. And their very youth bestows upon them a direct brashness missing in the recent Roxy. Rich emetic bass, precise Ringo drums, synthesiser cascades and Eno’s hand in the production make this the best and most confident debut single since ‘Anarchy’.

Here is the *Record Mirror* March 12, 1977 singles review...

Dangerous Rhythm (Island WIP 6375) Cosmic reggae, if that’s possible. Heavier than lead bass and ice-cold vocals. Very weird and wonderful. ** (four stars)**

The *New Musical Express* said...

By far their most memorable number, a reggae abstraction, mesmeric, simple, and subliminal, with Ferried vocals.

It appears they don’t hate us quite yet. I wonder what it was we said later on...?! “Dangerous Rhythm” was a fun song and enjoyable to play live. I believe it was one of the songs on the demo tape which first got Island Records’ attention. I remember the first time we recorded it; it was a demo which we did with Steve Lillywhite at the old Phonogram Studios just down from Marble Arch. He had been working there, alternating between engineering Status Quo one day and Rolf Harris the next. I had met Steve after being introduced by a mutual friend. He only looked about fifteen! He used to bring us in on the weekends and we’d “borrow” the studio to try out some of our songs. We’d just do whatever we wanted—we learned a lot about the recording process doing that.

The studio was full of fantastic equipment; wonderful old analogue gear with huge dials and levers that looked like they belonged on a car transmission. People would pay a fortune for it all now. Their reverberation effects, rather than being digital, were generated via huge steel and “gold” plates hidden in a chamber deep beneath the building. It was the smoothest and greatest reverb I’ve ever heard, then or since. We experimented a lot and did our best to learn how to use it all. The tape machines were in an adjacent room to the control room and the main mixing board. In those days, there were no remote controls for operating the 24-track tape machines—you had to have someone sit there and manually run the machine as instructions were shouted out to “Stop!...Record!...Fast Forward!...Rewind!” etc. We used to take turns being the “tape-op.”

Phonogram Studios had a good atmosphere and we decided to go back to it to record our second album, “Ha! Ha! Ha!” We had a real attitude at the time of “fuck everyone!” and were keen to record it with just us and Steve. It felt very satisfying to return as a proper, paying client—no more looking over our shoulders! One day, as I was going into the studio, I saw the gorgeous actress who starred in a lot of the early sixties “Carry On” movies, Fenella Fielding, coming down the steps. She lived in a penthouse flat above the studio somewhere. She looked extremely glamorous wearing a long black plastic coat and a huge droopy-brimmed black hat. I stepped aside and held the gate open for her. She purred, “Mmmm! Thank you, dear boy...” in her inimitable husky voice. I’d have driven her anywhere she wanted to go, if I’d had a car....

Our environment and life style was our subject matter—almost everything on the first album is about what it was like to be living in London at that time: “Wide Boys,” “Sat’day Night,” “The Wild, the Beautiful, and the Damned,” “I Want To Be a Machine,” in particular.

••••• February 25 The first Ultravox! LP “ULTRAVOX”

The version of “Sat’day Night in the City of the Dead” that went on the first album was the second version we cut. The first version is essentially identical except that it’s shorter by about 40 seconds or so. We were keen on it being a single but were told by the record company that at 2 min. 10 seconds-ish it was far too short to be a single! It would interfere with the DJ’s playlist times (all revolving around that 3 min. 20 sec. average) and throw them out of sync with a minute of dead space or something. Whether it was true or not, I don’t know (and who’s to say?—in those days, there was a lot of weird stuff to contend with!). But—rather than try to edit something together—we just recorded it again and made it longer by putting in another verse or chorus or something. Perhaps it added around 20-30 seconds.

"Lonely Hunter," "Life at Rainbow's End," "I Want To Be a Machine" (another of our earliest songs) and "Dangerous Rhythm" were all written and performed "live" long before we had our Island Records contract. They were, in fact, many of the songs which we performed at the private "showcase" gig we did on Island Records' own premises (their conference room, I believe) which helped us secure our deal. They'd liked the demos we gave them but wanted to see us play. We didn't have a gig lined up so they said, "...OK, bring your equipment here and play." That sort of thing doesn't happen much any more.

"Slipaway" was a more recent song, as was "Wide Boys" and "Sat'day Night." We had either written them recently or were in the process of writing them as we got our contract. Since we were told we'd be signed, we went into their basement recording studio at Island Records, Hammersmith, and started recording the album before we'd even seen the contract. I recall that eventually we interrupted a session one day to go upstairs and do the contractual business. "My Sex" came about while we were in the studio.

We had the studio from noon to midnight, then the Rolling Stones had it from midnight till noon. They were listening to their "live" tapes to vet which tracks would be "possibles" for inclusion on a live album. One day we walked in and Keith Richard was soundly asleep in the control room chair. We tried to wake him but he was really



“I thought, ‘Fantastic! Keith’s foot is tapping to my snare drum!!’ After about a half an hour, he suddenly woke up...”

out of it. We didn't know what to do—we wanted to work, but we didn't want to disturb him, and we certainly weren't about to kick his chair and shout "Wake up!!!" Finally we decided to just start working around him. As the tape was rolling, I could see his foot tapping to the music. I thought, "Fantastic! Keith's foot is tapping to *my* snare drum!!" After about half an hour, he suddenly woke up. He sat bolt upright, looked around for a second, said "Ahh...sorry..." grabbed his bottle of Jack Daniels and was out the door.

We recorded two other songs which were not included on the final release: "City Doesn't Care" and "Car Crash Flashback." They were both two new songs but they didn't make the cut because we felt we'd moved on from the feel of the two tracks—they weren't as relevant as the final choices. By the way, throughout the band's history we never made a habit of recording lots of extra material so this sort of thing didn't happen often. We'd work on material until we were happy with it and it was either ready to release, or it was erased.

One further thing regarding the “Ultravox!” album. There is an interesting story regarding our name which has never really seen the light of day. As regards to the Island sampler having to put a Question Mark on the sleeve, instead of our name, it’s been explained that it was because at that late date we hadn’t finalised amongst ourselves what name we would use. We knew that “this was it, we’ll be stuck with it,” and wanted to make a good choice. Obviously, our choice appears to have been a good one and I’ve personally always liked the name. What isn’t known is what happened shortly after that....

There was a collective sigh of relief from Island when we told them we’d finalised upon a name. Still, while we were working away in Island’s basement studio, the suits upstairs always kept calling down for further information for the record sleeve (i.e., our names).

Chris decided to have some fun and elected to call himself “Chris Cross,” while Bill and Stevie stayed with their real names. I was undecided as yet. During one of our sessions, the phone rang and Dennis picked it up. I heard him say to the caller, “I haven’t quite decided yet, I’m thinking about perhaps using ‘Johnny Vox’ or maybe ‘John Vox:....’” I could hardly believe my ears. The second I heard that I thought, “Argghhh!! If he does that, we’ll forever be known as his backing band.” I was very upset about it and knew that my personal pride in the band and our collective morale was on very thin ice (shades of things to come...). I had to think fast. I called over to him and said, “Tell them I’m thinking about using ‘Warren Ultra:..!’”

Only when it was clear that Dennis had opted for “Foxy” did I state I’d use my real name. I think you get the picture. Ha! Ha! Ha! (pun intended)

••••• May 28

The second Ultravox! single “Young Savage”

While not specifically about us personally, “Young Savage” was quite autobiographical; it was our take on the maelstrom we were in the centre of. It was one of my favourite songs and, though I usually always have various criticisms and reservations about any of our recorded works, both the “studio” and “live” versions of that song are just about spot on. Play it loud! Then turn it up some more....

I don’t recall much about the recording of “Young Savage” but I remember us having a lot of fun playing it. That song was like a big Harley—you’d get on it and kick it and rev it up until you were going like hell. There were times during playing “Young Savage”—especially during some of the Marquee gigs where we had the place crammed to where the Fire Marshals would have fits—that due to all the people, heat, and smoke, that I wished I’d had an oxygen mask to take hits off of. Those gigs were so intense and we were so wound up that when we came off, the backstage dressing room looked like the boiler room of a torpedoed ship. Even the metal fittings on all our equipment became pitted and rusting.

This was also approximately during the peak of the audience-gobbing-spit-onto-bands phase. Whenever we swung into “Young Savage,” the ever present hail of gob turned into a torrent. It’s insane to look back and know that this disgusting practise was actually supposed to represent praise!

There was an occasion when I noticed, as I played away, that there was one bugger in the audience down at the front who was not spitting away willy-nilly with abandon in the heat of the moment, he was calmly and calculatedly targeting Chris Cross. He’d repeatedly hit him in the face, then work up his ammunition for another salvo. Poor Chris was so into playing and singing (rocket scientists will acknowledge that you have to open your mouth wide to sing... *ugh!!!*) that he was oblivious to it. I couldn’t very well go over and sort him out as I didn’t want to stop the song, so I let fly with a drumstick and caught the moron straight in the face with it. Stunned, he looked at me as I gave him the evil eye. He got the message and disappeared into the crowd. I don’t think I told Chris about it until some considerable time after!



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...I didn’t want to stop the song, so I let fly with a drumstick and caught the moron straight in the face with it.

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Regarding ‘Slipaway’ (Live at The Rainbow)—the B-side. When we formed the band, we were sick of the bloated virtuoso musicianship and forty minute songs many of the big “respected” groups had made their stock-in-trade. We worked exclusively on short songs with structures influenced by classic ‘50s & ‘60s pop. We were trying to achieve a twisted but seamless alchemy between melodies reminiscent of the high drama of Roy Orbison, the rawness and aggression of the Stones or The Velvets, and lyrics beyond Bowie or Bolan. As we worked through that phase, we began to develop past the “two and half minute/three minute single with a four bar solo” (8 bars max!) to more intricate and extended arrangements of five minutes or so. “I Want To Be A Machine” and “Slipaway” were among the first of these.

Naturally, this coincided with the time everyone else seemed to belatedly discover the joys of the short succinct pop song and we got slammed for not playing material that consisted of a verse and three choruses!

The Rainbow Theatre in North London had been a long established rock venue, lots of very famous bands played there, and when we were told we’d be playing the Rainbow (albeit as support for Island’s “Eddie & The Hot Rods”) we felt like we’d really arrived. This would be the biggest gig we’d ever played.

Someone, somewhere, had ordained that the gig would be recorded. It was still a time when mobile recording technology was the purview of heavy-duty money and influence. I was very impressed to hear that the Rolling Stone's "mobile" studio was to be used. We'd never even seen one before, let alone been recorded by one.

We were at the gig early in the afternoon, we were keen to look around and take all of this grand experience in! It was also vital to be available to jump in at a moment's notice to take our soundcheck—we wanted to be at our very best. We ended up sitting around all day for hours and hours as the mobile's engineers fiddled and fluffed about setting everything up. I lived only a relatively short distance from the Rainbow and had been constantly assured that we'd have several hours to kill after our soundcheck, before the gig, so I hadn't brought my stage clothes.

Time dragged on...and on...and on...but still no soundcheck. Finally, it was obvious we weren't going to get one. Typical. At this point, I still had plenty of time to drive home and get my things so I said I would be "back in an hour." I picked up my clothes but—guess what?? Halfway back to the Rainbow, the petrol pump on my old banger of a car died and I was stranded! Desperate to get back to the theatre, I tried hitching a ride as I walked but no one would pick me up. And there were no taxis to be seen. Not good. Not good at all!

By the time I got back to the gig I was frantic and well late. We'd been due to go on about half an hour earlier and when I tore into the backstage area I could hear the audience was very restless. The rest of the band were standing by their gear going

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Halfway back to the Rainbow, the petrol pump on my old banger of a car died and I was stranded!

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crazy as I literally ran up to my kit and ripped off my jacket as the curtain began to rise. The stamping and chanting crowd was *ready!!!* But they were ready for Eddie, not us! It's the fate of every support band.

Between my mad dash to try and get back to the theatre in time, and the rest of the band's worry, anxiety, and anger, we were so viced up and full of adrenaline when the curtain opened that we hit the first song like a downhill runaway train.

It was quite a show and probably one of our best gigs till then.

The whole of our set was recorded; while it's remotely feasible that some of the first numbers may have been unusable due to the engineers still getting the balances together (a common occurrence), I'm fairly certain it was alright from the very start. I recall us only bothering to do a "rough mix" of the songs for listening purposes which

somehow, ultimately, ended up being the mix(s) which were used. I think we never did any “proper” mixes of the Rainbow gig. It’s probably better that way.

I have a cassette dated 19/2/77 from that session in the studio. The songs are: Life At Rainbows End/Came Back Here To Meet You/Wide Boys/Sat’day Night/Lonely Hunter/Modern Love/Dangerous Rhythm/Slipaway/TV Orphans/The Riff/ The Wild, The Beautiful, and The Damned.

It’s a fun tape, perhaps one day the songs will be released in their entirety.

••••• October 14 The second Ultravox! LP “HA! HA! HA!”

“Ha! Ha! Ha!” marked our first real experimenting with fully electronic instruments via the incorporation of synthesizers and a drum machine.

Now that we had a recording contract and had access to modest amounts of money we, naturally, updated our equipment. The instrument/equipment technology of the time was still very basic: guitars, amps, acoustic drums, basic electric pianos and organs. Certainly no MIDI! Mini-Moogs were a very rare and exotic beastie. While our guitars, amps, and drums were pretty much standard stuff, there really wasn’t much we desired that was readily available. We certainly weren’t about to go buy a Mellotron, although if we could have afforded it (and the support infrastructure to go along with it) we just might have been mad enough.

Chris had bought our very first synth, an EMS “Synthi.” It was a strange contraption contained in a briefcase with the “keyboard” being a flat plate on the inside of the lid! It was weird and wonderful but highly temperamental and very unstable. It had to warm up for about an hour and, even then, would never hold it’s tuning. About all it was ever used for was sound effects which didn’t require being in tune.

Bill invested in a more professional electric violin set-up to replace the old banger with a crude pick-up stuck under the bridge that he’d been using previously. The Crumar electric piano we’d bought with the “Ain’t Misbehavin’” money had long since died a death, but I can’t exactly remember what he replaced it with. It was some kind of electric piano that also had some “string” (note the quotation marks) settings on it which we used quite a lot. The real jewel was a new ARP Odyssey Mk. 1 synth. While pretty much useless for accompaniment, it ultimately proved to be an incredibly expressive source of solo sounds which we used on many songs to come.

We often were heavily criticised for using a synthesizer at gigs (perhaps as yet it wasn’t so obvious on the recordings). Considering our approach to using one, this totally baffled us. How could anyone be so stick-in-the-mud? The ARP was capable of the wildest most outrageous sounds we’d ever heard—real “pin-your-skull-against-the-back-wall” and “blow-your-brain-cells-out-through-the-fresh-holes-in-your-eardrums” type of noises. How could anyone think that was effete and arty? So we’d just play louder to help them figure it out.

Late in the writing and recording of “Ha! Ha! Ha!” I bought my first drum machine, a Roland TR-77. This was approximately two feet wide by four inches high by a foot deep, covered in a walnut wood veneer (wow!), and sporting a control fascia covered in multiple sets of different coloured push-buttons for the rhythm presets. A small chrome bar on it’s top left corner served as the Start/Stop switch (it wasn’t a “mechanical” switch as such, it initiated Stop/Start after it sensed being earthed by being touched—tricky). There was a horizontal fader for volume, one for tempo, and one for balance (introduced more percussion elements—i.e., maraccas or hi-hats, thinning to just bass drum and snare). At the rear of the unit, there was a power cord

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What we loved about it was the mesmerizing effect of the absolutely constant ‘perfect’ rhythm/tempo.

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and a single output jack. The front panel presets were labelled for such rhythms as Waltz, Mambo, Rhumba, Cha-Cha, Bossa-Nova. It was designed to augment a pianist or organist in, say, a small restaurant or lounge. I’m sure a lot of ship’s orchestras used them. It was entirely unprogrammable. Pretty damn basic but state-of-the-art in 1977!

What we loved about it was the mesmerizing effect of the absolutely constant “perfect” rhythm/tempo. It never faltered, it just continued to hypnotically pump out the rhythm. It fascinated me.

I soon discovered that if I held in the preset buttons, two or three or more at a time (though I’d quickly run out of fingers), I could get multiple rhythms which were more usable than the straight individual presets. By popping the buttons in and out like station surfing on an old car radio, and by constantly fiddling with the balance control to fade between kick+snare to percussion, I could get some interesting stuff going. To mutate the sound, I ran the output through some guitar FX boxes like phase, flange, and distortion. Of course, there were no separate outputs for bass drum/snare/hi-hats/etc. If you applied flange, you flanged everything whether you liked it or not. I plugged the whole thing into an old H & H transistor guitar amp we had that was “spare” and kept it all at my left side as I sat at my drum kit.

The tempo control was impossibly touchy; a millimeter too much one way or the other and the tempo was *way* off it’s desired speed. Far too coarse. And that bloody Start/Stop bar! You only had to accidentally graze it with the lightest of touches and it would stop in the middle of the song—and it happened a lot. I’d then have to carefully (and quickly!) time my touch so as to get it going again in time with the band. If I got it wrong we’d all be in a total mess with the beat.

The very first song we recorded with it was “Hiroshima Mon Amour.” We’d previously done a “demo” of “Hiroshima Mon Amour” in a rocker type of arrangement but it presented an ideal opportunity to try out the drum machine, so it was rearranged for the TR-77. We were in Phonogram studios and C.C. (his initials only coincidentally the same as Chris Cross’), a sax playing friend of Bill and Eddie Maelove, was invited down to blow over the track “to see what would happen...” Normally, we never wanted anything on our records that we hadn’t actually played ourselves but this time we were prepared to make an exception if it sounded good. The backing track was played to C.C. a few times in the control room for him to listen to, then he went into the studio and did two takes. We chose the first take.

The TR-77 was a doorway into a whole new world for us. As we got more into it, it was also used on “Quiet Man” and in our “live” set for “He’s A Liquid,” and “Touch and Go.”

ROckwrok: I don’t recall much about the recording of this song but I can tell you that I “borrowed” the drum beat from a rather unlikely source—it’s the same rhythm as “Let’s Twist Again” by Chubby Checker! Just goes to show how important context can be.

We were very excited to hear this played on the BBC, not only because it was one of our songs but because they apparently hadn’t noticed the naughty lyric. It was very amusing to hear Aunty Beeb playing a song which screamed “Fuck like a dog...” in the chorus. Either there were subversive elements looking after us, or they were asleep. You decide.

Regarding the unusual spelling of “ROckwrok.” It was spelled that way simply because that’s how John Foxx wrote out the song information for the sleeve, he wanted it spelled in that particular fashion. I can only presume he thought it looked better that way.

The Frozen Ones: The ending “fade” on this song reflected something we’d often do. When recording the “backing track,” after having repeated the chorus a few times, of a song we knew we’d “fade out,” we’d begin to just let rip until we were going crazy and not stop in the studio until either one of us made a colossal mistake or we got tired or fell about laughing. Or all three. Sometimes the greatest bits of the song were unuseable because they’d occurred two minutes after the song had “ended.”

Fear in the Western World: The feedback section at the end of this song was almost an entity unto itself; we had about five minutes of it and came close to giving it a title and putting it on the album “as is.” Why didn’t we? As much fun and anarchic as that would’ve been, we realised that much of the public might not think so after a few listens (we thought it got *better* with each listen) and, mainly, we thought it too self-indulgent of us to take up a whole song’s space on an album with such an extreme piece. Unlike the critics, whom we were only too happy to piss off, the people who bought our records paid for them out of their own pockets. Still, it was always extended “live” to the pain threshold and beyond!

Distant Smile: The feedback provided a great segue into “A Distant Smile,” like tumbling through chaos into a lake of serenity. We did some recording trickery on the

piano to provide the ambient pad floating in the background. We loved experimenting with textures to provide interesting vantages to view the carnage from.

The Man Who Dies Every Day: Bill's synth was being incorporated into the sound more and more, this is one of the songs that really pointed to where we wanted to go in the future (and we knew it). The bass line is interesting in that it could so obviously be a synth bass line. It has all the hallmarks of one, yet it was still being played on bass guitar.

Artificial Life: I always think of this song as being heavily synth-based although, oddly, it's not; besides the string/piano sounds and the manic violin at the end, it's mostly guitar. But it is definitely catalysed by the synth. The more we got into it, the more enthusiastic and excited by the possibilities we were. It was like a cranked up electric guitar, only orders of magnitude more awesome and complex. To us, the public still seemed to equate synthesizers with "electronic" music, i.e. beeps and robot squawks. We thought music like this might begin to change that.

While I'm Still Alive: While not without it's charms, this is probably the weakest song on the album and, to my mind, represented the last of where we'd been. How apt that it's followed by "Hiroshima Mon Amour," which represented where we were going.

As far as our eliminating the exclamation mark is concerned, after "Ultravox!" and "Ha! Ha! Ha!" we'd had rather enough of exclamation marks. Besides, while fun in the beginning, it was becoming more hassle to keep it than lose it, so we just dropped it.

Regarding the free single "Modern Love (live)" with initial copies of "Ha! Ha! Ha!" "Modern Love" was from the Rainbow Theatre gig. While we liked it, we'd never have put it on an album so it was chosen to go on the free single. "Quirks" was a song we'd written which was, as they say, short and sweet. We were very fond of it. After the "Sat'Day Night" song's too-short-and-awkward-to-place episode during the recording of "Ultravox!" we weren't particularly inclined to deliberately lengthen a song if it's duration had suggested itself naturally. So we left it alone. It was a natural for a B-side.

1978

Live EP “Retro EP”

The Man Who Dies Every Day & My Sex—live at the Huddersfield Poly: I can’t recall anything specific about the recording of those two tracks, we did a lot of Polytechnic gigs and that was...one of them.

The Wild, the Beautiful and the Damned—live at The Rainbow, London: I covered this one in earlier comments.

Young Savage—live at The Marquee, London: This is my all-time-favourite live recording of ours and perfectly captures the energy of those Marquee gigs. It’s a shame the whole EP wasn’t from the Marquee. There must be more of that stuff buried in Island’s vaults somewhere. It should be released—warts and all!

••••• **Guitarist Steve Shears leaves Ultravox**

By the time we’d mostly finished the touring for “Ha! Ha! Ha!” and began casting our thoughts towards the next album, we knew it was time for changes to be made. While a loyal and dependable band-mate, Steve Shears’ style of guitar playing had for some time become an increasingly limiting factor in how we arranged the songs and it appeared that the only solution was a parting of ways.

While younger than us and relatively inexperienced, Robin Simon was invited to join and the difference was invigorating. He had an accomplished and fluid style which I think is immediately apparent on our first recorded work with him, “Systems of Romance.” As I recall, he had ten days to learn our songs and then immediately found himself in Holland with us doing a tour. In at the deep end.

••••• August 4

Fourth single “Slow Motion”/“Dislocation”

“Slow Motion” was an extremely satisfying song to write and play live. For me, it was just one of those songs where everything seems to just fit together perfectly to form an entity greater than the sum of it’s parts. In it’s time it perfectly represented our amalgamation of rock & synthesizer, many of the ideas and aspirations we had for our music gelled in that song and we were very excited about it.

“Dislocation” was the one song which was not written or sketched out prior to entering the studio, it came about as a last minute accidental by-product of our work on “Just for a Moment.” The bass drum of “Just for a Moment” is not an acoustic drum or drum machine at all, it’s originally a sound from Bill’s ARP synth. During our messing about with lots of FX and heavily treating variations of that particular sound, we stumbled across the insistent repeating figure that forms the core of “Dislocation.” It was such an inspirational sound we knew we had to do something with it so the song was written entirely around it.

There was just one hitch, though. We’d discovered the sound while the 2-inch multi-track tape for “Just for a Moment” was actually running. It was elements of that track which were being fed back in upon themselves to shape and trigger the sound. And we weren’t able to tell just exactly how it was happening. It was all routed through the studio desk through such a labyrinth of effects—each in extremely sensitive balance to each other—that we couldn’t figure out how to get the sound any other way! We were stuck. We had this great sound and we couldn’t be sure of ever getting it again. After carefully examining our options we thought we might, with time and patience, perhaps be able to get something quite similar to it but we didn’t think we’d ever be able to get that exact sound and it was that exact sound we wanted! What the hell could we do?

Our eventual solution was very unconventional. We put two songs on the same piece of tape.

How was this possible? Well, as “Just for a Moment” was still incomplete, there were enough as yet blank spaces on the tape in various locations for this to be feasible. Extremely tricky, but feasible. While we were fortunate in that there were a few of the 24 tracks still blank from top to tail, most tracks already had something recorded on portions of themselves so we were limited to using these noncontiguous sectors. Weaving the whole thing together was a real feat of juggling and mixing it all would have been near impossible without the asset of Conny’s SSL computer-assisted mixing desk (one of the first). More than a little brain damage went down but we managed it and were thrilled with the final result. Had we not just then come to the end of our studio time, we would have continued experimenting in that vein.

The reason we liked to release stuff on clear, translucent, or coloured vinyl went far beyond merely having a cool looking record (although it's indisputable that they indeed looked great) or satiating the "collectors." Like many artists at the time, we wanted to release our music on the highest quality vinyl commercially available. After all, the medium with which our music was brought into people's lives was merely a sharp needle bouncing along as it rode the ripples and waves of a groove dug into a slab of plasticky stuff. (When you stop and think about it—it's an incredibly crude process! I never ceased to wonder that it ever worked as well as it did.)

There were many technical aspects of record production that were beyond our sphere of influence: where the records were pressed, how many shifts were being run, vinyl stock being used, how long each record stayed in it's mold, etc. We would be present at the "Mastering" session but then the finished masters would go off to the pressing plant. In time, we would be sent a "white label test pressing" to listen to and if it sounded alright and didn't skip, we'd pass it and that was it. On occasion, when we requested a second or third "test pressing" to listen to, often as not it sounded just like the first one!

Consider this: in the U.K., for example, there were only ever a finite amount of record pressing plants at any given time (naturally), and these were responsible for pressing everyone's records—not just ours! At times of peak demand, each one would be scrambling, working flat out to meet all their commitments. This happened often.

There was no consensus among record companies as to when they would release records; generally they just did their own thing. True, the sales and marketing departments would attempt to avoid any obvious potential clashes but, generally,



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once a release date was set and planned around, that was it. There was tremendous pressure brought to bear by all quarters to meet that date. If, say, it subsequently transpired that Bruce Springsteen had a mega-smash album about to come out during that very same period, you could guarantee that his record company would bring every ounce of their considerable power and influence to bear to ensure that every single pressing plant they could get their hands on would be busy 24 hours a day producing Bruce's record so as to maximise initial sales. Factor in another mega-smash

hit by another artist or two and the problem was compounded by orders of magnitude. Under such circumstances, our record (and a lot of other peoples') would just have to get pressed whenever and wherever it could.

And that meant that it was likely that each one of our records might get popped out of its mold a few seconds earlier than was usual. Shaving a second or two off each record, multiplied by tens of thousand of records, amounts to a significant period of time to aid the plant in juggling its obligations. And each not-as-stable-as-it-could-be record would be just that much more prone to warping or skipping.

Plus, the vinyl was never all that great. If you look closely at the label on a mid/late '60s record, you might see the tiny printed remark "Dyna-Flex." Dyna-flex vinyl was introduced as a great progressive leap forward from the thick, brittle and fragile vinyl of before; you know you're holding a record made of it if you can bend it into a "U" shape. Well, perhaps a "(" shape. It didn't sound as good, but you could bend it! And that, overall, meant fewer damaged returns to the companies. Hmm....

While the inner machinations of the pressing plants were beyond reach, it nevertheless seemed like the moment an artist or group had garnered enough success and attendant leverage to attempt to do so, would try to get their records released on what was known as "virgin vinyl" (i.e., vinyl stock not contaminated by the ink, paper, glue, etc. cocktail of previous/returned melted-down stock). This was virtually an impossible quest and became somewhat of a Holy Grail to many people.

When, in turn, we made our own inquiries regarding its use, we were most adamantly told that it was strictly for issuance to the classical music labels. Period. "Pop" music was shit out of luck. It was a snob thing! One day it occurred to us, "Hang on a second.... Black vinyl doesn't start out that way—it's dyed black to cover up its origins. So, if we use clear vinyl (if it's been mixed with anything else it wouldn't be clear...duh!)—presto—it's 'virgin' vinyl!!!!"

Hence, where possible (usually limited editions of 12-inch singles), we released on clear or tinted vinyl. I like to believe it really made some degree of difference to the listening quality of the records.

••••• September 11 Third LP "Systems of Romance"

"Systems of Romance" was a pivotal album for us. Our first album was our opportunity to record the best of the songs that we'd written since we'd first formed the band, the second was progress for us and heavily laced with attitude and adrenaline, but this new record gave us the feeling that we were really beginning to carve out a niche for ourselves that was well and truly ours and ours alone. We knew that we were really on the verge of something—what, exactly, we weren't sure but the feeling was intoxicating. We were so pleased with the album we'd never have dreamed that the next year Island would subsequently drop us from the label!

Our experiences from playing all over Europe, plus our serious disenchantment with London and the U.K. in general, were the factors largely responsible for us deciding to work with Conny Plank in his own studio near Köln (the little village of Neunkirchen, to be exact). We wanted a new environment and our touring spectrum proved to be the strongest indicator of where we thought our horizons and inspirations lay.

When we met Conny and discussed working together, we were impressed with his attitude towards the shaping and sculpture of sound. He was unconventional yet very down to earth. There were occasional hiccups due to language shortcomings on both our parts but, after working together for only a short time, it became apparent we were on the same wavelength—really out there, but not painfully arty-farty, if you like.

Fundamental recording techniques concerning the basics—drums, bass, guitar, keyboards—were for the most part fairly standard, but we experimented heavily with treating everything. I'd had interesting results putting drums through the usual reverb/echo/phase/flange-type effects, and so decided to try distortion—not something considered to be a plus for drums. We found that, in small amounts, it hardened up the sound and gave the drums a real edge. One of Conny's electronics people modified a guitar distortion unit so it was optimal for drums, and we ran quite a few tracks through it.

By the time we'd reached the point where working with Conny on the new album was imminent, we'd long since coalesced our playing with Robin. While still raw and spiky, his guitar style was mobile and technically more inspiring. He'd integrated into the band very well and was able to bring many new textures to the arrangements.

I Can't Stay Long: I always liked this song. It had this huge great feel and was very satisfying to play "live." Had we stayed together for a few more years, we might, at some point no doubt, have decided to revisit a song or two from the first three albums as a surprise inclusion in our live set. "I Can't Stay Long" would've had my vote. I'm sure we would've more than done it justice the second time round.

When You Walk Through Me: I pinched the drum rhythm for this (oops, I mean...this idea is a "tribute") song from the Beatles' "Tomorrow Never Knows." I always thought it was so obvious but no one ever asked me about it. Now you know.

Quiet Men: This was another song which we knew had that "special something" about it. Obviously, you try to make every song an outstanding one but even with the best will in the world, it never happens.

Just for a Moment/Dislocation: Contrary to what you might think, there is no drum machine on "Dislocation" or "Just For A Moment." The sounds were obtained from ingenious and painstaking maltreatment of Bill's ARP synth and the studio 24-track tape machine.

We adjusted the synth to make an almighty percussive *THUNK!* (it was really a fantastic sound—but so violent we had to tone it down a little to get it onto tape!), and I stood there and keyed the synth manually, in tempo, for about four-plus minutes as we recorded the sound. Then we fed the recorded Track #1 through the desk, filtering and equalising the hell out of it until we eliminated almost all of the

bottom end from it. We fed that through more EQ, making the sound as sharp as we could and recorded or “bounced” that sound to another track. As we did this, I selectively punched a button on the desk controlling the “send -to-tape” of the signal—as I punched the button off and on, it cut off the beats we didn’t want, thus ending up with a “snare” sound on the second and fourth beat of each bar on Track #2. Alternatively, sometimes I would “edit” out the unwanted beats via quickly sliding one of the faders up and down.

By running the original Track #1 through a delay unit plus more filters, compressors, and a noise gate (or two) before bouncing it to Track #3, I could have something which would rhythmically function as a “high-hat” sound. As everything was a direct derivative of Track #1, they were all in time and sync with one another. Using this method we could build up and assemble a variety of rhythms. A tedious process, but it worked and sounded unique.

We’d done the majority of our usual extensive preparation for recording back in London, but we were finding that it was inspirational to leave deliberate gaps in the songs—free-form areas in the songs that we would fill in once we were in the studio



...we were finding that it was inspirational to leave deliberate gaps in the songs—free-form areas in the songs that we would fill in once we were in the studio environment.



environment. We were firmly in the first stages of becoming truly comfortable with this when we recorded “Systems.” Due largely to our experiences here, with future records we’d nail the bare bones of the song. It’d have a solid and cohesive structure, but enough vague areas floating around to leave room for further expression; space to experiment and expand upon the basic idea once we had the facilities of a studio to play with.

As it was our third album, we were now also becoming familiar with the feeling of knowing we’d have to top ourselves with each subsequent release and it occasionally began to weigh upon us. Still, we were so proud of this record when we’d finished it, we all felt we’d done our absolute best work to date.

In retrospect, I think it’s plain that (with perhaps the borderline exceptions of “I Can’t Stay Long” and “When You Walk Through Me”) the songs “Someone Else’s Clothes,” “Blue Light,” “Some of Them,” and “Maximum Acceleration” were the final remnants of a skin we were in the process of shedding. “Slow Motion,” “Quiet Men,” “Just For A Moment,” and “Dislocation” were plainly indicative of where we were heading.

1979

January 1
Ultravox dumped by Island

Upon the release of “Systems of Romance” we commenced touring. We’d made what we felt was definitely our best album and the response from audiences seemed to bear that out, which was very reassuring. We traveled all over the U.K. and Europe and played a lot of good shows. Just as things began winding down from that series of tours and we began thinking about the next album, to our great surprise, Island Records choose that time to drop us. I think it was New Year’s Day ’78/79. They told us that was it—finis. It seemed to make no sense.

I can’t say I know why with any degree of exactitude or conviction, except that we certainly weren’t pumping out chart topping hits. Still, our actual sales seemed to be making progress and we felt we were just on the verge of success. Perhaps they just decided they’d had enough of us and weren’t prepared to put any more money and effort into it all.

While initially believing in the band, they’d never really known just what to do with us (we had to respect them for saying, “We don’t quite know what you’re doing, but we like it!”). Our initial “promise” had deteriorated into a bad relationship with the music press who didn’t know what to make of us either—especially as we’d didn’t fit into their rabid obsession with “Punk” (no matter that we did our fair share to define it in the first place). The various labels they’d tagged us with stuck tenaciously until they came up with some new ones later on.

Our lack of proper management had certainly hampered our career. But we’d managed to get ourselves signed to a major record company and make three albums without having our own business manager! Quite a feat. In the early days, we didn’t have enough clout to get big-time management and, once we’d been signed, we were too paranoid and mistrustful of anyone to make the plunge. It always seemed like we were far too busy with writing or recording or playing to seriously investigate getting a manager. Plus, to be fair, most of the time we thought we knew better and could do it ourselves. Depending on how you look at it, we were either incredibly ballsy and forward thinking or very stupid and misguided. Both, I think.

For the longest time, many of our affairs were by default more or less “managed” by the Director of Island Records, Richard Griffiths. Spot the conflict of interest.

••••• February First US tour starts

While disappointed and bewildered at being dropped by our label just as we were beginning to break through in the U.K, we thought that perhaps it was the best thing for us. To leave the label for a fresh start somewhere else might be just the sort of jog we needed to make it the next rung up the ladder. Ultimately, we decided that our next move should be to tour in America. We were keen to go. We wanted to see how our music would be received and thought that if things went well it would help us in our quest for a new label.

Island Records had believed that we could achieve nothing in America and would never get on the radio. Chris Blackwell had given us tapes of American radio which was nothing but disco and explained why he thought we’d never get airplay there. We didn’t share his opinion that no one was interested and were determined to go, with label help or otherwise.

We connected with Miles Copeland and organised a “Club Tour” of the U.S. at minimum expense. “Squeeze” had just completed a tour there with no big-money help from the record company to provide tour support, and this mold-breaking effort was our inspiration. Bear in mind that, in 1979, this completely flew against all conventional music biz rules and wisdom. To tour the States you absolutely needed to have lots of financial backing from your record company and positively must be promoting a new record. It just wasn’t possible otherwise. We did it with neither.

In February, 1979, we flew over on the cheapest seats available from Laker Airlines (remember them?), with a bare-bones set of equipment paid for as “excess baggage.”

We took no lighting or P.A. equipment—it would’ve been far too expensive to hire and transport around. We elected to use whatever was available in the clubs we were to play in. Besides my usual kit, I was still using the Roland TR-77 drum machine through some guitar pedals and an H&H 100-watt guitar amp. As for us, we drove ourselves (literally) from gig to gig in either a hired van or an estate car, which is called a “station wagon” in the U.S. Our live set was:

Man Who Dies Every Day

Slipaway

Slow Motion

Hiroshima Mon Amour

Touch & Go

Artificial Life

Just For A Moment

My Sex

He’s A Liquid

Quiet Men

Radio Beach

I Can’t Stay Long

Someone Else’s Clothes

Blue Light

ROckwrock

Basically a selection comprised of material from the latest album, "Systems of Romance," and a few songs from both "Ha! Ha! Ha!" and "Ultravox!" The new songs included were ones we'd been working on prior to the trip, "Touch & Go," "He's A Liquid," and "Radio Beach" (strange, I can recall nothing about this song).

We started off on the east coast. When playing in New York, I got out of the taxi in front of the "Hurrahs" club and immediately stepped onto the white lines the police use to distinguish the position of a body at a crime scene. I could still discern what looked like traces of blood. Thinking this might not be too unusual an occurrence in New York City, I didn't pay any more attention to it until I started seeing them all over the place. I thought, "This place is more violent than I imagined!" I found out later that it was the work of an artist who was painting them all over the city.

We occasionally had support acts who were determined by the management of the club. At "Hurrahs," an interesting guy who professed to be a great fan of the band supported us with his one-man show. He wore bandages and sunglasses like the "Invisible Man," he was called "Nash The Slash." There was one show in the mid-west where we "shared" the bill with "The Police" due to the Copeland connection.

Working our way from east to west, we ended up in San Francisco at the "Old Waldorf" in March prior to travelling down to Los Angeles and Orange County where we would do our last shows before returning to the U.K. They proved to be our last gigs in more ways than one.

The environment of "the road" is infamous even to people who haven't experienced it. It's tough and extremely demanding on people's nerves. Our relationship in the band with John Foxx had never been great and had been steadily unraveling for a long time, but this tested it to the limit. It was obvious to us that it wasn't a matter of "if" something was going to give, but "when."

It all came to a head in San Francisco. We got into a huge row after the show and that was it. We'd had our fill of each other and decided that when we got back to London, John was going his way and we would go ours. As you can imagine, the atmosphere on the remainder of the tour was decidedly strained.

••••• April Midge Ure joins Ultravox

Upon our return, things indeed looked grim. We'd been dropped by our label, needed a lead singer, and had no money to speak of. But we were determined to keep the band alive—we'd stick it out and prove ourselves. Soon a fresh set-back developed. Robin Simon had chosen to stay over in New York for a little while and, during a call to find out when he was returning, he told me he'd decided to leave the band and remain in the U.S. The attractions of New York were more appealing than his prospects with us in London. I was shocked and did my best to convince him to stay, but his mind was firmly made up. With Robin out of the band, the odds had become stacked against us even more.

It became clear that the ideal solution for us was to find a lead guitarist who was also a singer. This had the benefit of ensuring that the singer could relate to us on an additional level as an instrumentalist—something which we'd found lacking and uncomfortable before. We were determined to avoid the lead-singer-from-another-planet syndrome. Bill had been spending time with Rusty Egan ("Rich Kids") and, through Rusty, was introduced to Midge Ure. They were writing some songs together in what ultimately became "Visage." Rusty encouraged Bill to approach Midge about joining Ultravox. He thought it would be a great match.

Bill subsequently introduced Midge to Chris and myself. Other than the usual musical issues, my main concern was that Midge might have no sense of humour and wasn't a fun guy. He had to: a) have a sense of humour, and b) like to drink, carouse, carry-on, etc. This anxiety was quickly dispelled after an hour or two in a pub. As he's

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...it quickly became evident that Rusty [Egan] was right— [Midge] truly was an excellent guitarist.

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somewhat small of stature, I tested him with every "short" joke I knew ("Do you buy furniture from 'Airfix?'"), and he could have a laugh about it. Plus he wasn't shy to get in his share of rounds, and seemed like a straight enough chap at the time.

We had some rehearsals together and it quickly became evident that Rusty was right—he truly was an excellent guitarist (and outside of Ultravox, prior/during/since, I've played with some great people)—something usually overlooked in assessments of him. And he could sing, as opposed to shout-with-attitude. With no reservations, we resolved that we'd found the right person to complete the new line-up of the band and Midge was in. We'd decided to go for it, and all was more or less hunky-dory for quite awhile.

One of the most refreshing aspects of our new band was that we all accredited ourselves as writers. We were adamant there was to be no more arguing over who was or wasn't responsible for what. In this healthy and equitable climate, ideas passed far more freely from one to another, then on again to another, and so forth. We would all make suggestions towards each other's contributions, so much so, in fact, that the only possible financial arrangement regarding the writing was to split everything equally. It was a very sensible arrangement, but a rarity amongst bands. It ensured that whatever else we might argue over in future days, it would never be over money. It proved to be true for the life span of the group.

••••• Summer

Ultravox goes solo for a while

In the interim period of trying to make our next move, we had to support ourselves. This led to an interesting series of temporary gigs. Bill played with Gary Numan, Chris did some shows with guitarist James Honeyman-Scott (the "Pretenders") and singer Barry Masters ("Eddie & the Hot Rods"), while Midge did U.S. and Japanese tours with "Thin Lizzy" (filling in for guitarist Gary Moore), and I played with "Zaine Griff."

Zaine was a very talented singer and his band was great fun. We did a few gigs to prepare for playing the Marquee Club, August 24, 1979, and the Reading Festival on August 26. It was through the Zaine Griff band that I met Hans Zimmer who was playing synths. Hans and I hit it off and immediately became good friends. I ended up involved in one of his projects and thus soon found myself on "Top of The Pops" playing drums to "Video Killed The Radio Star" by "The Buggles." At one point, we were in the curious position of all being in the charts in other bands!

Here's a story from my "A Funny Thing Happened On The Way To The Gig" memories from my time in Zaine's band. We were in our dressing room at Reading and, just prior to us going on stage, Hans came rushing up to me. He was totally panicked and I asked him what was wrong. He gasped, "The tape data isn't working! I can't get it to load!" Technology was primitive then—every time you turned your synths off all of the sounds and settings were instantly lost. You needed to record the data onto a cassette tape and then have to load it all back in again after turning the power on. He'd been backstage trying to load the sound/sequence data into the



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I ended up involved in one of [Hans Zimmer's] projects, and found myself on 'Top of The Pops' playing drums to 'Video Killed the Radio Star....'

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synths' memories via a little boom-box and it wasn't working. If we couldn't load in the appropriate data we couldn't use his synths, and we wouldn't be able to play the majority of the songs in our set. This was Very Bad News. Our big gig was looking like it might be our big disaster.

I ran backstage with him and took a look. Hans was completely white and I'm sure my pallor wasn't far behind. I had a quick look, then said, "Ah, I think I see the problem..." I reached down and flicked the boom-box switch from "Radio" to "Tape." "...that ought to do it." Little things... little things. They're the ones that get you.

We never did any more gigs with Zaine's band but we helped him work on his next album. Ultravox was still in the process of regrouping so I had the spare time. This time around we were determined to have proper representation and began looking for a manager. We approached Thin Lizzy's management team of Chris Morrison and Chris O'Donnell, and they were impressed with the fact that we'd managed to do an American tour with no record company tour support, no "new" album, and still turned a modest profit. Their interest wasn't like they immediately wanted to manage us and said, "Sign here...," but more a matter of agreeing to try and help us out. As our involvement deepened, one thing led to another and, gradually, they were effectively managing us. Much later on, I think it was after the release of "Vienna" at the very least, we actually got around to formalising the agreement. Our success was preceeding us but we now had established and respected professional management.

••••• Autumn

The new album starts taking shape

We started writing and rehearsing, all the while trying to keep this news reasonably quiet, as Midge still had some lingering legal problems to sort out due to his past involvements. This was frustrating as I wanted to let people know the band wasn't dead but, for fairly obvious reasons, we thought it wiser if we kept a low profile to help him resolve the situation. Nothing can throw a spanner in the works quite like old business "partners" who smell money.

We worked on songs that became the bulk of the first album, "Vienna," though the title track was yet to be written. We wrote "Astradyne," "New Europeans," "Mr. X." during this period, certainly, though I'm a little hazy as to just when we wrote "Private Lives," "Passing Strangers," and "All Stood Still." Those may have been written then, or during our next writing sessions which took place after we'd returned from America.

The music was, to us, a continuation of the things that we were interested in and what we wanted to hear. It reflected a stylistic change because Midge's singing was very different from John Foxx's, plus Midge was the best guitarist we'd ever had. Still, we kept following the areas of sound that excited us. The chemistry within the band was now very different, but it enabled Bill, Chris, and myself to enjoy ourselves much more.

While our first writing sessions were certainly exciting and generally very productive, not everything we worked on during this period gelled. There was one instrumental piece that Midge had brought in which we played about with for some time—it was great fun to play (the riff rather reminded me of the Glitter Band, of whom I was a huge fan)—but for some reason it never really came together for us and we dropped it from our works-in-progress repertoire. Midge reprised the idea years later with Phil Lynott and it became "Yellow Pearl."

At this stage of the band's life, I was contributing to the lyric writing and wrote the bulk of the lyrics to "Sleepwalk," "Mr. X," "Private Lives," "All Stood Still," and "New Europeans." I'd always wanted to try my hand at it, and it helped take a some of the initial pressure off of Midge. Once Midge had completely settled in, I withdrew and left him to it. I'd also decided that I probably wasn't very good at it—certainly not as good as I'd like to be.

••••• December Second US tour starts

As a band, we all had a lot of baggage to contend with during those early days and thought that, if we were to have a chance, we needed to be able to stretch our wings without being prematurely subjected to the magnifying glass of the British music press. With this in mind, we set up a second American tour, much along the lines of the first one—minimum equipment, play clubs, expenses pared to the bone.

Before we left for America, we played four U.K. "secret" gigs (in November, starting at Eric's in Liverpool). This was to get a bit of a buzz going and show that the band hadn't totally disappeared, plus we didn't want to go to the U.S. having never been on stage with each other before. I remember we played at the Nottingham "Boat House" and at the Liverpool "Eric's." The other two venues I forget. The set was a mixture of mostly our new songs and a select few of the old ones (i.e., "Slow Motion.")

We chose not to eliminate all previous songs from our set for two reasons—one practical and one principled. We, as yet, hadn't written enough new material to play a wholly new set, and we weren't about to turn our backs upon our own heritage. There was, of course, some shouting from elements of the audience for John Foxx but Midge weathered the storm and we all had an exciting time.

The American tour gave us a chance to gel as a band and was a great start. It was wild. We did something like 29 gigs in 32 days. There was one marathon drive we did non-stop from Lawrence, Kansas to New Orleans. Upon arriving, we crawled out of the car, cleaned ourselves up, and immediately set off to explore Bourbon Street. We finished up with a series of gigs in Los Angeles at the "Whisky A-Go-Go." The shows were extended due to demand, so we ended up doing about seven shows there and set some kind of record for the place.

••••• Vienna The recording process

Upon our return (from the second US tour), we started looking for a label. To aid this, we made our London debut and did a one-off gig at the "Electric Ballroom" on February 1, 1980. Chrysalis Records was courting us

and became interested enough to give us some studio time in order to do demos. We went into the studio with Conny Plank as engineer and decided not to do the usual thing of recording three songs to “demo” status. We would use the allotted studio time to concentrate on doing one song well and hand them a “master.” We recorded “Sleepwalk” and Chrysalis offered us a contract.

Our choice of again working with Conny Plank as engineer/co-producer was unanimous. We all felt that our experience with him during “Systems” was a good one and that the relationship should be expanded. From the very first days of the band, we’d been committed to mastering recording techniques—not just to become adept at capturing our ideas, but to expand upon them and use the studio itself as an extension of the creative process. Conny was the man who had the combined aesthetic zeal and technical ability to help us achieve this.

We went back into writing/rehearsals and came up with “Passing Strangers,” “Western Promise,” and “Vienna.” Our method of writing was a simple one: we would jam about with our collective ideas and throw things back and forth until something sparked. We’d take the idea, work on it, and polish into a song structure. At this point it would still be in instrumental form—we would generally let the mood of the piece dictate the direction of the lyrics.

For the most part, I’d have a cassette machine running all the time. It’s the only way to achieve any objectivity. In the midst of actually playing something you can’t listen to it with the same degree of acuity as you can when you’re listening to it back. It helped us tailor and craft the music. Or, sometimes an idea which we thought was

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...we would jam about with our collective ideas and throw things back and forth until something sparked.

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merely “...OK...” would present an entirely new perspective later on. Which isn’t at all surprising, if you play every permutation of an idea for three or four hours over and over again while you explore its possibilities. You can get dulled and immune to it’s appeal. When you listen to it fresh the next day, you can more truthfully gauge it’s potential.

While it was prudent to do our “demos” for Chrysalis with Conny in London, it was always our intention to work in his studio in Germany. For reasons unclear to me now, but probably due to budget, we did the actual laying down of tracks for the first album in London at RAK Studios (one of the highlights of which was owner, Mickie Most, making us a curry one day for lunch), and put all of the tracks down in ten

days. The songs were all “tight” from our touring, and the newest songs were well prepared from our writing/rehearsals.

While we were now using more synthesizers, as on our earlier albums we were still using “reasonably” straightforward bass/drums/guitar recording techniques. Keyboards were recorded both D.I.’d (direct into the desk) and mic’d (loud amps!). Recording FX were pretty much the usual tape and digital FX (though digital FX units were in their relative infancy then), flanging, reverb, delay, chorus, etc. We liked to use backwards reverbs (reverb applied normally but with the tape turned over and running past the heads backwards—when the tape is turned the right way round, the reverb appears “before” the source sound), and were also fond of backwards guitars and vocals. Sometimes we weren’t content with “throwing in the kitchen sink.” We threw in every sink we could find.

From “Day One” of Tiger Lily, and throughout all of the John Foxx era band, I played Ludwig drums augmented with Zildjian cymbals. The electronic elements of my gear just grew and grew. I used some guitar FX pedals to run my drum machines through (phase, flange, distortion, echo) from time to time (i.e., “Mr. X”). Every once in awhile I would also run my acoustic drum kit through a distortion box to toughen up the sound. There wasn’t much we wouldn’t put through a guitar FX pedal just to see what it would sound like. We generally preferred to do this at source, rather than afterwards via the desk. There was a great deal of EQ used on the drum machine parts.

Multi-track recording is an additive process; every layer you put down dictates the shape and attributes of every layer and element to come. Therefore it’s far easier in the long run to get it “right” then and there instead of saying, “We’ll fix that in the mix.” While some people prefer to record everything “dry” (without any FX or with FX on a separate channel), when we recorded something with reverb or delay we generally tended put that effect to tape rather than fiddle with the reverb later on. No matter how simple the type of FX is (“Oh, that’s an easy one...we can get that again, no problem.”), you never do seem to get it exactly the same again, and the ripples from that change affect everything else.

Billy was running his ARP synth through an Electro-Harmonix “Electric Mistress” distortion box, and (I think) an MXR flanger. He used the studio’s piano and “live” preferred a Yamaha electric piano because, at the time, it was the nearest thing to a real piano (strings and a weighted keyboard). Besides his Elka String Machine, which was used a lot on our earlier records, I think we used two Yamaha CS-20 or CS-40 (one of each?) string synths on this first album. We had a CS-80 for awhile, too. It was fantastic but they are very rare today and seriously difficult to maintain. And expensive.

Bill also ran his violin through a lot of effects pedals, mainly from Electro-Harmonix. He also had a Roland “Space-Echo” tape delay unit. The violin was amplified via a “Barcus-Berry” pick-up attached to the bridge. Later, he acquired an electric violin which had the capacity to level buildings with a single blast.

Midge primarily used his Yamaha SG-2000 guitar through his Vox AC-30 amp and Chris used a Yamaha bass (his Gibson EB-O hadn't been used for ages) through whatever was handy. Of course, Chris also used a Mini-Moog for a lot of the bass parts.

Basically, we used what was available (and/or what we could afford) at the time. The only real one-of-a kind stuff we used was the sequencing stuff I designed and had our tech build. This was used to trigger the Mini-Moog from my drum machines which were also heavily altered. Remember, this was all before the luxury of MIDI. The

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...I'd always viewed drum machines as synths in their own right—synths that were focused upon one aspect: percussion.
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custom equipment features are no longer relevant, as any drum machine nowadays has all of the features (and many more)! I had to improvise and can, naturally, trigger/clock any synth you connect it to.

I'm a self-taught musician and have never had any formal training. I just listened to records and attempted to copy those who I admired and/or the stuff that I thought sounded cool. My favourite drummers were all classic players from the great days of British rock & pop such as Charlie Watts, Ringo Starr, Keith Moon, John Bonham, Kenny Jones. I'd always been captivated by technology—when it started to encroach upon the world of music I was totally into it. I started out a conventional player, but found electronics insanely fascinating.

Any instrument or piece of equipment has a personality which is equally dependent upon its flaws as it is upon its assets, and never more so than where synths are concerned. The equipment we used had lots of good points, as far as the state of technology allowed at the time, but it all had flaws and quirks that used to drive us crazy. And, ironically, many of the flaws are what contributed to the character of the overall sound.

From the very start, I'd always viewed drum machines as synths in their own right—synths that were focused upon one aspect: percussion. At some point before recording "Vienna," I'd acquired Roland's newest drum machine offering, the infamous CR-78. It was almost cube shaped, approximately 12" x 10" x 10". It was still in that awful walnut veneer covered box, and still offered push-button pre-sets for Fox Trots, Sambas, and Tangos. The tempo was set by turning a knob, but was still horrendously touchy. If you even looked at it the tempo changed. The sounds were still analog representations. It wasn't all that much better, but it did sport a radical new facility: by

tapping on a little round rubber pad which you plugged in, you could program your own rhythm into one of four memories. Happening!

Unless you were incredibly patient and fastidious with your finger tapping, the programmed rhythms were often quite shaky as there was absolutely no quantisation or “auto-correct” facility, so it was best not to get too ambitious. It also had a nasty habit of losing the contents of it’s memory at the slightest provocation.

Once, during a Hammersmith Odeon concert, we had reached the highly charged peak of the set and were in the middle of “Vienna.” Bill had just started his violin solo and the CR-78 choose that moment to just go totally berserk. It started pouring out about six different rhythms simultaneously and all at double or triple tempo. I was aghast and froze. All I could do was just stare at the thing in horror. It certainly shook up the rest of the band. Though it was probably only for a fraction of a second, it seemed like forever. They bravely carried on as best they could while this thing threw a complete fit.

At times like this your mind goes into overdrive. I snapped out of it and ran over all of the possible causes for it to go crazy. After checking all the options and deciding that this time it was just simply out of my control, I did the only thing I could think of to do which might actually have any result under the circumstances—I punched it as hard as I could. Very technical. Nothing positive happened so I turned it off and finished the song on my drums.

Many creative and technical frustrations regarding the TR-77 and CR-78 led me into modifying them, and our adventures in techno-land really began. Fortunately, I knew enough to be able to guide someone who really knew their electronics. Engineers of the time were au fait with the technical aspects, but notoriously lost when it came to actual creative applications.

We started with the number one pain in the neck, the tempo control. That proved reasonably simple to desensitise. A second potentiometer was wired into the circuit to give me a “fine tune” override. The original tempo control would get me to the rough tempo and the second would allow me to zero in. But you can’t fiddle around like this “live.” You need to be able to start the song “cold” at exactly the right speed without speeding up and slowing down until you get it right. We connected a cheap electrician’s multi-meter sporting an LED display into the tempo circuit and set it to measure the DC voltage. I got the tempos correct during rehearsals and made a note of the measurements for each song. Though this was a totally arbitrary number as far as beats per minute were concerned, the important thing was it was repeatable. If “Mr. X” was, say, 11.42 volts, then all I had to do “live” was set it so the volt-meter read 11.42 v, and the song would start at pretty much the right speed. We gaffa taped the meter to the top of the drum machine—not an elegant solution overall, but it worked.

After looking at the circuit boards of these drum machines, I discovered that the analog circuits which made up the sounds (no samples stored in memory chips on this stuff) had little ceramic “trim” potentiometers. What they were actually for I have no idea but, by tweaking them, I could change the sounds slightly for the better. The bass drum, for example, might sound moderately like a thump through the low

amplification of a guitar amp or through a studio monitor, but through the microscope of multi-thousands of watts of amplification afforded through a big PA at a gig, it would sound like a gigantic beach ball going “Boiiiiing!” I was able to harden the bass drum and snare (something I was always trying to find ways of doing with these “soft” sounds).

One of people I’d turned to for assistance was the “in-house” repairs engineer at Roland’s London facility. He was intrigued with my usage of the machine and was keen to help. It was far more fun than fixing broken electric pianos. It seems this did not go down too well with the powers-that-be and the chief executive at Roland, Fred Mund, ordered him to have nothing further to do with me—I was wasting their time. Unless my equipment was actually broken, I was persona non grata. As the equipment was so modified by this time, I think the view was that it was “outside of their warrantee,” permanently “broken down,” and no longer their problem!

As we had a huge hit with “Vienna” featuring Roland’s CR-78, I feel that was a very mean and short-sighted decision. I quickly found another electronics boffin to collaborate with, Pete Wood, and we carried on experimenting and tinkering with my ideas.

One unforeseen development led to an interesting solution. I had people coming up to me after gigs asking me what the hell I had been doing during some of the songs—the songs where I was running the machines. From their point of view, they’d seen me stop playing the drums, casually leaning over to my left and, apparently, doing nothing. One person even asked me if I’d been reading a book! I was astonished but, in these early days, people didn’t necessarily immediately connect the sounds with what I was doing.

This would never do, so I decided to implement a little showmanship.

I got rid of the wooden cases that housed the TR-77 and CR-78, replacing them with clear perspex cases, and had a series of different coloured LEDs (light emitting diodes) wired up inside so they would wink and flash in time with various components of the selected rhythm being played. Absolutely useless, but very impressive looking on a darkened stage. Now it would be obvious I was actually doing something. It certainly worked, as I was now regaled with questions about “the drum machines.”

One of the aspects of the Mini-Moog that fascinated us was its ability to pump out a stream of steady eighth-notes. By keying different notes, a bass line was produced with the unwavering perfect tempo of the machine. Like the drum machines, this rock solid tempo had a hypnotic element to it that mesmerised. It was the source of “Sleepwalk,” “New Europeans,” and “All Stood Still.” For the time being, I had to play acoustic drums to it as there was no way of us syncing it to my drum machines. But that was no problem—we were enthralled with the sound as it was.

We adapted the LED tempo read-out idea to also fit a display to Chris’ Moog. He was able to have more predictable control over the tempo of the pulses. Eventually, we found a way of connecting the drum machine to the Moog so that the pulsing bass line would be in sync with the drum machine. Even when I was playing my drums

and we'd muted the drum machine, we could start a song with the bass line at the right tempo, for example, "All Stood Still." This saved us a lot of flaffing about at the beginning of a song while Chris tried to tame the tempo to the correct speed.

There was only so many things you could do with a constant stream of eighth notes, even with Chris partially keying in notes, so I came up with a primitive "sequencer" in order to introduce some syncopation into the bass lines. It had a series of toggle switches on it that I could trip in a pre-determined series (i.e., On/On/On/Off/On/On/Off/On). this gave us the bass line for things like "Rage In Eden." It was crude but it worked.

Prior to this I had gotten a hold of Dave Simmons' very first product, It was called the "Clap Trap." I remember meeting him in the back of his record store, or whatever it was, and getting this new gadget. It was a little black box that would emulate the sound of hand-claps. You could plug a mic into it and have the source-signal, a snare drum for example, trigger the "claps," or plug in a non-latching foot-switch and do it yourself manually. I think it's controls were "threshold" or "gate," for use with an external trigger, and "pitch" and "thickness" for the timbre and number of claps. I used a foot switch, mainly, and was thus able to add another component to some of the rhythms played. It was also relatively easy to connect it to one of the drum machines to "clock" it's tempo. This was done on "Passionate Reply."

There was one time in Boston when it went sick and, figuring that we stood at least a fair chance of having it mended by a synth-type guy, we took it to the local Moog service technician. He said, "What the #%@! is that?"

I also used Simmons' next development, the SDS-III. It was a unit which would allow you to connect up to four pads and make "electronic" drum sounds. Still firmly analog, but if you set the controls just right, it made quite a strong noise. This is the sound heard at the intro of "All Stood Still."

We were pushing the very limits of technology at the time, albeit without a big budget (that came later). It's just that we were determined to play live what we had created, rather than tone it down to a technically safer approximation, which we felt was short-changing both ourselves and the audience. The major drawback being, of course, that this stuff wasn't all that reliable within the secure confines of a studio where one had the luxury of working outside of the boundaries of real-time. We were using it live onstage with all its attendant hazards.

It got to where all our stuff interconnected together and we were up to our ankles in leads on stage. From temperamental equipment which wasn't very stable in nice safe warm studios (let alone being bounced all over the country in trucks, in wildly fluctuating temperature extremes), to ignorant house electricians abruptly shutting down the main power in the venue and scrambling the gear's primitive memories, to cassettes that wouldn't load their "memory" data properly and "Techs" that didn't know what the hell to make of our stuff... Argghhhh! It's no wonder we were slammed by some quarters for no sense of fun or humour onstage. We were too worried it would all blow up in our faces at any moment, while we kept madly concentrating on keeping it under control.

It didn't get much better later on, either. We just had more incredibly expensive items of evermore complicated equipment to screw up. Only at the very end of the band did all this start to come together in a more reliable way. Even so, I remember that when we played "Live Aid," three of the four songs in our set required things being triggered and all we could think of was, "Pleeeeeease don't let anything break!"

The recording of the "Vienna" album allowed us to put to use everything that we'd learned so far. The mixing sessions at Conny's studio took us about two weeks, there was a good atmosphere and work went very smoothly.

1980

June 6
Three Into One

Of course, after we'd signed to Chrysalis we weren't surprised in the least to see Island Records try to cash in by releasing a compilation of our older material. We'd been dumped by Island and not treated very well (let's put it this way—some time later there was an out-of-court settlement with Island Publishing). Once we'd heard of the imminent release of a compilation, we had an idea to exact a small but satisfying degree of reprisal.

Chris Cross and I used to pay visits to the Art Department at Island and talk to the designer responsible for the sleeve. Feigning interest in their treatment of the sleeve, we'd encourage all of his worst ideas. When he told us he had this idea of taking a photo of his girlfriend "lit up by some car headlamps, wearing a sort of costume..." we said, "Brilliant! That's the one!!" (Ha! Ha! Ha!) Were we successful? That sleeve speaks for itself.

••••• June 16 First single for Chrysalis: "Sleepwalk"

For info on "Sleepwalk," see track listing below.

The B-side to "Sleepwalk" was a track called "Waiting." I can't remember where we recorded it, but somehow I don't think it was during the RAK sessions. We knew it was never a competitor for inclusion on the album, but thought it made a fine B-side.

••••• July 11 LP “Vienna” released

Astradyne: The ticking sound which introduces the track is from the CR-78 (it was called “Metal Beat”). I played along to it. We were always fond of instrumentals but, inexplicably, gradually drifted away from them in later days. The title was a combination of Latin, from the Royal Air Force’s motto “Per Adua Ad Astra” (“Through Adversity to the Stars”), and an aerospace company called Rocketdyne, whose name I liked the sound of.

New Europeans: This is the only instance I can think of where we had a title before we had any music (or lyrics). We always wrote the music first and then lyrically followed on from there.

This song can be credited with catalysing our popularity in Japan and was initially used as the music for a television whiskey commercial. In Japanese adverts the music is credited in fine print in a corner of the screen—a fine concept. The interest it generated led to it being released as a single which went gold. The ceremony at the record company where we were presented with our gold records was very formal. We were led into an antechamber to be introduced to the head of the label. He was very old and very dignified, even though he looked as if he’d keel over at any minute, and didn’t appear to have a clue as to who we were. They took it very seriously (to my delight) and it was a memorable moment.

Private Lives: My original title for this song was “Hollywoodammerung” (OK, no one’s perfect). It was soon changed to “Private Lives.”

Passing Strangers: The recording of this song went smooth enough. I don’t remember anything in particular about the session itself. We wanted to release “Vienna” as the second single, but managed to get talked out of it somehow (never again!). So this became our second single and our first music video. We worked with director Russell Mulcahy and found the entire process fascinating. It was a great learning experience, but like everything else, from artwork to posters, packaging, and merchandising, we took an immediate interest in it and quickly realised that we’d better exercise a great deal more control over the process and/or make the videos ourselves if we wanted the next one to be better.

Sleepwalk: “Sleepwalk” was our introduction to Chrysalis Records and our very first recording with Midge. Conny Plank came over to engineer and we took about three days on it. Rather than do the usual “three songs” demo tape, we thought, “Bugger it...,” and opted to use our studio time to record one song to “finished” status. The gamble worked and we clinched our deal with the label. Later, when we took the album tapes to Conny’s studio to mix everything, we decided to mix it again purely for the sake of integration with the sound we were achieving with the other tracks. There’s virtually no difference between the “original” (unreleased) version and the album version except that the LP version is perhaps less “poppy” (the 7-inch mix was same as the album mix). From my own standpoint, I personally was especially proud

of this song being our first single, as I had written the lyrics. We never made a video for this song. It was all too early for Chrysalis.

Mr. X: If anyone is wondering who this song is about, I can at least tell them that it's certainly not about John Foxx, or Bowie, or any number of other candidates I've been asked about. While I believe I once explained the true origins of this song on a radio show in the U.K., I've since taken to keeping quiet about it. As time went by, it's become much more fun to never tell anyone who it is about. When asked, I've always answered truthfully, but it's not the sort of thing that can be deciphered, which is exactly the point of the song.

I'm occasionally addressed with questions about the lineage of the last songs written in the John Foxx era, "He's A Liquid" and "Touch & Go," and if there's any relationship between them and "Mr. X." No, none at all. Personally, I see no similarities—but that's just me. Of course, there's the denominator of having arranged and played both songs. We played "Touch & Go" as well as "He's A Liquid" on that first



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As time went by, it's become much more fun to never tell anyone who [Mr. X] is about.

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1979 tour of America but, obviously, never recorded them—we'd split at the end of the tour. Any credit whatsoever for our involvement in those two songs was conspicuously absent on "Metamatic."

Did we consider recording either of them at this time? Most emphatically, *no*. That was the absolute *last* thing we would've ever done! Waaaay beyond last, in fact. We were so glad to be out of that situation we were not in the least inclined to dispute the lack of any attributed writing credits (surprise, surprise), and just got on with our lives in a far happier relationship.

Western Promise: We decided to record the drum tracks for "Western Promise" in the reception area of the building, as the surroundings were all glass and polished marble—excellent for a "hard" drum sound. So as not to completely disrupt the staff, we had to move the microphones and drums in at night to do the recording. The only drawback to this was the front doors of the studio were by no means soundproof, and the quiet residential area of St. Johns Wood was not going to take too kindly to me bashing away. The first time we attempted it, the neighbours called the police and, upon their arrival, they requested we cease and desist.

It was sounding so good we decided to not let this get in our way, so we attempted it again the next evening. This time, we set everything up and were as ready as could be before I actually started playing. I knew I had to get a good "take"

before the police came banging on the door, so there was no time to lose. Sometime before the neighbours got fed up and reported us and the response time it took for the police to arrive, I got a good take and we had what we wanted.

Recording a song like this, with its sequenced pattern running throughout, was akin to creating a rod for our own backs, and created problems for us later on. The pattern wasn't as all pervasive as a bass line which was neigh impossible to not hear live. It was easily overpowered by other instrumentation, and if I lost track of it—even for a moment—it was damn difficult to figure out where I'd gone wrong and get back into sync in the proper place. It led to us having to come up with extensive self-monitoring solutions for us all in the live environment.

Vienna: The song came together very quickly. I had a drum machine/synth pad (CR-78 and "Synare" pads) pattern in mind that I'd wanted to do something with and played that. To paraphrase myself, I said something like, "What about this, then?" and began the "Vienna" rhythm. We started playing something to it and then had the thought of using a chorus idea that we had laying around, which we'd previously worked on, but had no verse for. It all clicked in a few hours, and we ironed out the rough spots the next day. Except for finessing the middle "solo" section of the song, once we were in the studio, that was basically it. A hit a day keeps the dole away.

We knew it was the musical high point of the album and made it the title track. It was the song that best represented what we were trying to do. We were determined that it would be our third single and fought with Chrysalis over it. Naturally, they thought it was far too long at six minutes, too weird for a Top 30 chart hit, and too depressing and too slow. Other than that, they liked it. Bill was the only one who agreed with them. While he thought it was a brilliant LP track, he just couldn't see it as a single. Naturally, this provided a source of great amusement within the band for years to come.

We weren't big fans of including lyric sheets in our records. We thought it was more interesting to listen for yourself rather than have it laid out for you, but many of the labels for the non-English speaking territories liked to include them, and we had no objection. When we read the Japanese lyric sheet for "Vienna" we were in hysterics. Someone, somewhere, had obviously been delegated to sit down and transcribe the lyrics. We may safely assume that their first language was not English, as one of the lines in the song "Vienna" made mention of going out for a takeaway meal.

All Stood Still: This is an excellent example of a song that we wouldn't have written but for the Mini-Moog. Well, perhaps it would've been written, but it wouldn't have sounded anything like what we recorded. Playing that bass line on guitar would've been a headache.

Songs like "All Stood Still" brings up an interesting aspect of playing live. As the "time-keeper" of the band, it was always my job to set the tempo when we played, and maintain it for the duration of the song. While playing along to a synth had one obvious benefit—the tempo wasn't about to wildly drift around—there were other complications. It's one thing to collectively determine the "ideal" tempo for a song when in the solitude and objectivity of the rehearsal studio, it's quite another when you're on stage in front of a lot of excited people. Their energy rubs off. You get out

there and you're already vibed up for the show, it's very easy to launch into a song whose tempo was predetermined and unsusceptible to outside influence and suddenly go, "Arghhh...this is too slow!"

The phenomenon of bands playing their material live much faster than it was recorded is apparent to anyone who's been to a concert. I'm not saying it's good or bad, just that it's something the band has to come to terms with and make decisions about as to what is acceptable excitement and what is improper for the "feel" of the material. Push a song too far from the envelope it was written in and you lose more than you gain.

We got used to it and adapted, somewhat like a pilot learning to believe his instruments when his senses were telling him something else. After a bit of experimenting, we gradually managed to get comfortable working with the predetermined tempos we'd set when we were rational, instead of succumbing to the red mist of a gig. We became confident with it and came to depend on it as a further aspect of control during a performance. We spent a great deal of effort devising the running order of our songs so that the set had an arc.

There were no unreleased tracks from the "Vienna" sessions. We went in with our material well prepared and that's what we came out with. As happy as we'd been with "Systems," we were even happier with "Vienna" on a multitude of levels.

We'd been through a lot to get there.

●●●● • October 15 Passing Strangers released

During our stay with the label, the choice of which material to release as singles was almost always ours alone. After the "Passing Strangers" episode, we quickly learned to be firm about our decisions, and Chrysalis (while occasionally making strong suggestions) went along with it. We always thought we knew better and, for the most part, I think we were right.

The B-side on the 7-inch was a live recording of a song called "Face to Face." It was never recorded as a studio cut. It had seemed promising but just never came together properly. At one point Billy was very keen about the prospect of playing guitar in a few numbers. We found it difficult to share in his enthusiasm but didn't really have the heart to discourage him. He acquired a pearl white Yamaha SG-100 and his live debut was on that song. After some time, when the song hadn't exactly developed to our liking (through no fault of Bill's), we dropped it from our set. I rather fancied that guitar, however, and after unsuccessfully attempting to pry it from him, found one just like it years later in the Midlands. For me, a happy ending.

The B-side on the 12-inch was a live recording of "Kings Lead Hat" which was also never recorded as a studio cut. We weren't inclined to cover other artists' songs, but for a time this was just a bit of fun which we played only on encores. There were a few U.K. shows where we played an impromptu version of Gary Glitter's "Rock & Roll" during the encore. I wish we'd recorded and released that!

1981

January 15
Vienna released as a single

Vienna video: After the baptism by fire of our first video, “Passing Strangers,” we assumed much more responsibility for this one (many more ideas were ours, and we absolutely re-edited the first cut we saw of the assembled video). We were learning fast. We knew what we wanted to see and how we wanted to do it. Chrysalis weren’t very thrilled with the release of the single in the first place. It was the usual old stuff, “It’s too long for a single (i.e., not 3 min. 20 sec.), it’s too slow...too weird, etc.” We dug in and pushed and pushed for it’s release until we got our way.

We’d wanted to make a video for it from the very first moment, but Chrysalis balked and wouldn’t give us the money. This was, remember, in the days when the Record Company would pay for the video—not the band! We thought, “To hell with them. We’ll do it ourselves.”

We went ahead and did it with our own money. It may come as a surprise to know that approximately half of it was shot on locations in central London, mainly at Covent Garden and also in the old Kilburn Gaumont Theatre in North London (sadly, now a Bingo hall). The embassy party scene was in some house we’d rented in town. Can’t remember where, but I do remember that it took the crew a long time to set up the lights to prepare for filming. So long that we all got impatient with waiting and dipped into the many cases of wine we’d laid on for refreshment after the shoot. By the time the crew was ready to film, we were all well partying for real.

The other half was in Vienna. We did it on the cheap. There was just us and Nick, our trusty camera man. We took an early morning flight to Vienna, ran round like loonies in and out of taxis as we filmed, and soon discovered that, due to it being the winter off-season, many of the splendid places we’d been counting upon filming were either shut for redecorating or covered with webs of scaffolding. “What do you mean it’s ‘closed for repairs’?!” We finished up in the cemetery for the shots with the statue which had been used for the single’s cover (a gentleman who made pianos for the rich

and famous of his time, I believe), did the sunset shot, and then dashed back to London to start editing.

After a week or so prior to the record's release, we started to get phone calls from the record company regarding the video we were making. Once it was released, and with each week's growing success in the charts, the record company became more and more frantic. Finally, they were going absolutely crazy trying to get us to finish it so they could give it to "Top Of The Pops." They were positively begging us for it. Which, I'm sure you'll understand, was very gratifying for us after the indifference and negativity they'd initially shown.

They gladly paid for it, too. For those who are curious, it cost us in the region of six or seven thousand pounds. Sorry, it didn't cost a lot of money. But the video "industry" wasn't quite so greedy then.

Vienna single: "Vienna" was in the singles charts for fourteen weeks. It hung at the number two position for longer than I care to remember, being kept from the number one position primarily due to the re-release of a John Lennon song after his recent death. It was incredibly frustrating. Then, during that last week, we heard from an industry insider that John's record had finally slipped. We thought, "At last, we have a chance!" And, out of bloody nowhere, comes one-hit wonder Joe bloody Dolce.

Months later, we were in Australia touring when we were told that we'd won the "Best British Single of the Year" award for "Vienna." We were very proud of that, and it went some considerable way towards making up for never having gotten to Number One.

Passionate Reply: The B-side of the 7-inch, "Passionate Reply" was a promising song. Perhaps it needed some "living with" before we would've considered it finished. As it was, we thought it made a good B-side. It was recorded while on tour in America. We were in Florida when we were informed that we needed another track for a B-side, so we booked time in a Miami studio, "Criterion." I recall looking at a studio wall covered with gold records by the "Bee-Gees," who had recorded many of their disco hits there. We used a studio engineer and did it in a day (perhaps two, but I can't remember exactly, and our schedule would not have tended to allow the luxury of much time off).

Herr X: During the mixing of the album, I had the idea to do another version of "Mr. X" in German. I thought it would be fun, make a great B-side or extra 12-inch track, and not take too much time away from our mixing schedule. The others agreed. My German had been progressing very well, but this was beyond me, so I asked Conny's wife, Krista, to help me with the translation. Conny double-checked it. He thought it was faithful to the English version, so one afternoon I went into the studio and did "Herr X" (with Conny as pronunciation coach to keep me on track).

It was the only time we did a song in another language, and I like to think of it as a tribute to the support our German fans had always shown us. The mix between it and the English-speaking version is identical. It was only the vocal track that was changed. If you listen carefully to either of them (we didn't quite make it loud enough), you can hear the snaps of a reflex camera shutter at one point. It was released as the B-side of the 12-inch "Vienna" single.

••••• May 26

“All Stood Still” released as a single

The 7-inch of this song was an edit from the album version and was not remixed. When writing and arranging songs, we always catered to the length the song wanted to be, not what radio might want it to be. Once the song was recorded, if it was deemed a single, then we'd consider editing it if it was too long. Usually this was never an issue with us as long as we were the ones who decided what was trimmed. When we edited, we snipped to reduce running time, not to alter the shape of the song. We knew most people were aware that singles weren't necessarily the album version.

Someone once remarked to me that they'd heard of a video for “All Stood Still.” I doubt it, because we never made a video for this song. If someone really has seen one, I can only imagine that perhaps a zealous foreign record label/telly company somewheres compiled some clips and put it to the song. We certainly didn't do it.

The B-side of the 7-inch was “Alles Klar.” The title was inspired by having spent so much time in Germany and our efforts at wrestling with the language. “Klar” and “Alles klar”—meaning, “Yes...sure...I get it...!”—was such a frequent answer to our babble that we soon took to using it ourselves as a “one-response-fits-all” joke. The rhythmic exhalation of breath heard at the beginning of the track runs all the way

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When we edited, we snipped to reduce running time, not to alter the shape of the song. We knew most people were aware that singles weren't necessarily the album version.

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through it. Nowadays, you'd do it five or six times, sample it, and make a loop to repeat as long as necessary. I stood in front of a mic and did it the hard way for five minutes. By the end of the song I nearly hyperventilated.

“All Stood Still” was our first 12-inch version. It seems incredibly tame when compared with what the 12-inch form evolved into later on but this was early days. The B-side of the 12-inch was printed as “Keep Torque-ing.” The title is later printed as “Keep Talking” which is the correct and original title. The B-side wasn't exactly a misprint—more like a private band joke that got a little out of control, or a complete misunderstanding of a hand-written title on a tape box label. Perhaps both. It was never meant to appear on the record.

"Keep Talking" wasn't even a demo, it was a jam that we'd recorded during rehearsals on my little Pro Walkman. It was completely spontaneous, and we later discovered that there were a few sounds in there that we had absolutely no idea of how to get again. In particular a strange synth noise that seemed to sound vaguely like someone speaking. After briefly trying to decipher the important elements of the music and write a piece around it, we decided it had charm as a "captured moment" and that it'd be fun if we put the thing out just exactly as it was as—warts and all—as a glimpse into how we worked on our music. We transferred the cassette to multi-track tape and cleaned up the recording as best we could technically. That was it!

The title came about when one of us was on the telephone talking to Chrysalis in London. They wanted to know what the title was going to be and were being very persistent about it. The trouble was we hadn't really decided upon one. While we



The advent of 12-inch singles coincided nicely with our attitudes concerning B-sides.



were stalling with them on the line someone, who was very busy at the time, gestured to the person on the phone and said, "...uh...just keep talking...keep talking..." Midge or Chris (can't remember which) then said suddenly, "...that's it! 'Keep Talking!' That's the title..."

We were happy with the title. It fit perfectly with the aforementioned "talking" sound on that track. A fine case of serendipity.

The advent of 12-inch singles coincided nicely with our attitudes concerning B-sides. We were music fans long before we were musicians and had many fond memories of favourite singles that always had some interesting and obscure little gems tucked away on the B-side; fascinating stuff which never appeared on the album and often was even cooler than the A-side—even if it wasn't as obviously "commercial." Now that we were making records of our own, we could continue this ourselves. Rather than using them for "throw-away" material, we thought that B-sides were a grand tradition; a situation where there were no boundaries and we could do anything we felt like; an opportunity to do an oddity that might not necessarily "fit" on an album.

At first, every time we went into the studio to do some B-sides/extra tracks, we would start with a piece of music that we'd been working on but hadn't finished. That would be our starting point. It might be a piece we were still uncertain of, or a song which we hadn't managed to find the heart of. Sometimes you feel you have all the

elements of the song right in your hands—it's all there if you could just find the one piece that's the key to the puzzle. You know that it wants to work, you just haven't found the clue yet.

When you find it, everything slides into place and the song becomes more than the sum of its parts. Sometimes you try scores of different ideas and none of them appears to catalyse the song into the entity you have in mind. You're left with some music which isn't bad, but you feel you have a song that just teeters upon working—an ideal candidate for a B-side.

You can't codify the creative process. Often as not we'd discover a song was turning into an A-side which deserved to be on an album. Which was great—we had another song. But were back at square one with no track for a B-side.

After this happened many times, we decided the best way to record extra tracks would be to go into the studio with nothing prepared at all, and to just write something then and there. There was an element of risk to this but that made it all the more attractive. It was an ideal way to relax musically without the heaviness of posterity and career breathing down our necks, yet still offer a challenge. We often discovered ways of recording and approaches to writing that we later incorporated into material which went on albums, so it seemed a win-win situation. We were later to take this philosophy to it's zenith with the recording of "Rage In Eden."



To be continued...

