

The popular music industry is in a state of transformation — the colossal, impenetrable control machine is becoming an exchange medium linking various industrial human beings. However, the transformation should be occurring more quickly than today's tentative moves indicate it will.

RECORDING REALITY



THE IMAGE THAT THE SUBJECT WANTED TO RECORD AND DISTRIBUTE WAS SEVERELY DISTORTED BY (A) UNSYMPATHETIC TECHNICIANS MORE INTERESTED IN HAVING FUN WITH THEIR EQUIPMENT THAN IN BEING OF ASSISTANCE TO THE SUBJECT AND (B) THE SUBJECT'S OWN LACK OF COMPOSURE WHICH CAUSED HIM TO LASH OUT AT THE TECHNICIANS AND THE PROCESS ITSELF.

At the top of the eighties, more people than ever produce, release or distribute (some, all three) their own music. This is partly a result of a very welcome reaction against the rich, professional musicians who long ago froze themselves into institutions (perhaps that word is too charitable. Robert Fripp uses 'dinosaurs' in the context of his own personal propaganda). There is also a long overdue realization that it doesn't take a great deal of instrumental virtuosity to make interesting sounds. In fact, virtuosity is actually something of a handicap. After all, music could be defined as the assemble/insert editing of sounds, or the juxtaposition of different sound elements (except in the case of music with completely ambient inten-

tions). It has long been obvious that anyone with a sense of design can make music.

The big record labels, however, still record, release and distribute music marketed for the passive listener. The passive listener is a holdover from the late sixties hippie era. That era was a dangerous one. Industry propaganda informed listeners that popular music of the day was more than entertainment; it was "meaningful" and "significant". The potheads and liberal arts students sat around on cushions, wholeheartedly swallowing the quasi-radicalisms of such artists as Bob Dylan or John Lennon, spending time mindlessly repeating the almighty words of these artists and their ilk. The trouble was, listeners just repeated the "messages" over and over, rather than committing themselves to "the revolution". The hippie movement advocated passivity and was therefore totally apolitical. Control drugs and phony religion were the order of the day. Simultaneously the record industry catered to and manufactured this passivity.

FM radio developed in the late sixties. Their intention was to play what was verboten on AM: the songs about drugs, or graphic sex, or "the revolution". FM radio format was and still is hip easy listening; FM DJ's were collectively "laid back" compared with the barker approach of their AM counterparts. The music numbed the listener. Because Dylan and Lennon, etc. were supposedly philosophical and literary geniuses, because Hendrix, Beck, etc. were supposedly guitarists of unattainable virtuosity, the listeners remained on their cushions and worshipped the star system. This star system still dominates the FM radio band. (It doesn't dominate the AM band so much; if your record doesn't cut the mustard on a car radio, forget it. "Legitimate connections" are still necessary for the privilege of programming.)

The star system began breaking down, or at least diversifying, with the disco boom of the early seventies. Disco music was blatantly manufactured for the dance market, so disco records were rated on the basis of danceability, rather than the rock-hero formula of: "well, I mean this is the new Stones album so it's got to be good although I haven't gotten into it yet, personally". The Disco era was one of pure pop. The single was the record; if you bought the album, you were an idiot. This recalls the golden years of Tamla Motown, the single being the strongest thing on an album cram-

O V E R L O A D

PATERSON

med with obvious filler. Disco provided anonymity. David Bowie used it to win an audience who had either barely heard of him, or were put off by his bizarre reputation. Nile Rodgers and Bernard Edwards (of CHIC) hid behind disco's faceless surface to gradually emerge as the all-purpose producers they are today.

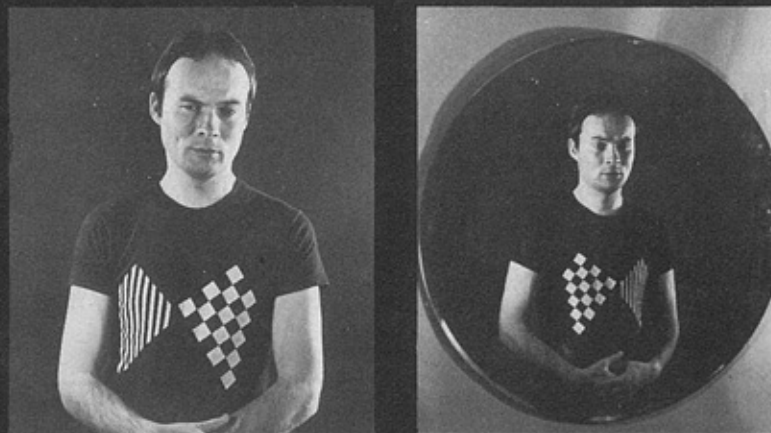
At the same time, disco was considered impersonal and inaccessible to a large group of passive listeners. They hadn't yet realized that the sounds of Giorgio Moroder or Kraftwerk become accessible once one takes the initiative to rent some of the technology. These passive listeners wanted something accessible, accessible meaning obvious. Therefore punk. Technically, anybody could be a punk. Punk was anti-technological, anti-intellectual, immediate, disposable (like disco), and full of energy. Punk was the same three chords done to death by the Stones, the Who, etc. prior to the hippie movement. In some cases, the bands didn't know any better. In some cases, they damn well did. But the fact that anybody could be a punk was all too true. To be content playing one fascistic wall of sound using three or four legal chords requires either a suspension of will or a total lack of imagination. Punk was accessible because it was live. The recording process was primitive compared to FM mellotron rock and disco. It's no wonder that the Musicians' Union hates disco — it labels the journeyman professional musician redundant. Punk reacted against the disco-technocratic producer, reviving the archaic notion of the band — a band being a cluster of people who submerge their individual identities into the illusory image of a whole. By nature, a band is either a band in name only, with one member or manager firmly entrenched as dictator, or a differing group of individuals so fragmented that an external manager or producer is required to create some illusion of order.

Brian Eno was and still is important in that he broke down barriers between the professional musician and the audience/listener. Eno simultaneously popularizes the minimalist-trance-electronic music of Steve Reich, Philip Glass, Terry Riley and others, and uses the "non-musician" propaganda of the Warhol-produced early Velvet Underground. Eno, both in his own solo recordings, and in his work with early Roxy Music, Robert Fripp, David Bowie, The Talking Heads, and others,

stated that interesting music was a result of sound manipulation rather than virtuosity. Anybody who could apply imagination to sound processing could technically produce a record.

The question became: how does the technology become available to people who should be mak-

RECORDING IDEAL:



THE IMAGE THAT THE SUBJECT WANTED TO RECORD AND DISTRIBUTE WAS SYMPATHETICALLY PRODUCED BY (A) TECHNICIANS WHO REALIZED THAT THEIR JOB WAS TO CAPTURE THE IMAGE ITSELF AND THEN SUBTLY ADD TO IT AND (B) THE SUBJECT'S CONFIDENT COMPOSURE WHICH MADE IT EASY TO COMMUNICATE WITH THE TECHNICIANS AND ENJOY THE PROCESS.

ing records? Renting a standard recording studio for one day costs at least five times the amount of a minimal weekly working wage. Technicians, generally speaking, do not want young upstarts experimenting with their equipment. And the big record labels with their big bucks are more than reluctant to take a chance on any product outside the tried and true successfully marketed formulae. They aim their product at the passive listener, and let the Muzak Company handle functional sounds. Popular music is functional sound. Trademark clichés of different styles dictate listener response. In England, a 'heavy metal' revival is well underway as an industrial defense against the rise of independently produced, released and distributed

music. The mod revival failed because the form, like punk rock, was too limited. The ska movement was only a temporary fashion fad, it's two-beat rhythm wasn't as danceable as Jamaican reggae or black American funk. In England it's time for the heavy metal revival. At its worst, heavy metal combines redundant macho-jock virtuosity with the pseudo-profundity of old FM hippie rock. At its least offensive, it uses the same high energy approach of punk except for the cliched guitar solos. As Ralph Alfonso observed in IMPULSE (Fall, 1979), the heavy metal freak "probably voted Labour 'cause Maggie Thatcher is a woman and you know what they're good for". England's heavy metal revival, and North America's FM hippie hangover are keeping the passive listener audience in impotent sedation.

Today, more music is being released which is not directed toward the passive listener, but rather toward occasions, following precedents set in the middle and late seventies by Eno, Fripp and the German ensemble Kraftwerk. Music can be used in the same way that nine-to-five working environments use the product of the Muzak Company: music for phone calls; music for typing; music for sex; music for sleeping. Sounds which lie comfortably in the background yet encourage

thinking. Architectural music. Music that prods listeners to actively find content for themselves. Music which to one person suggests a video or cinematic image, to another might suggest a verbal text. The more active the listening audience becomes, the more likely they'll want to release their own music, to exchange information with one another, to reject the idea of working in a band.

A band is an institution that deserves to be at the mercy of bigger, more powerful institutions. When two or more people agree to collaborate on a project, they supposedly agree to devote considerable time and energy toward the project. When two or more people agree to form a band they form a unit that is considered to have a collective philosophy, a collective image, and a collective ensemble sound. An agreement to form a band is an agreement to undergo a strained existence, an agreement to compromise individual ideas to a collective whole. There still is such a thing as a collectively-oriented band which *doesn't* have an identity super-imposed on it by an outside force such as a manager or record label (Pere Ubu is an example that comes to mind, but then they don't seem too concerned with the media outside their own music). If an individual has a well developed concept for a particular product and is perfectly

capable of executing the concept his/herself, why waste money hiring other people to create the illusion of a band? It makes sense that jazz musicians play together; jazz music for the most part is collectively improvised. But why should somebody with a pop concept have to bother repeating the product long after the product is defined on vinyl? Why should somebody have to dictate to others exactly what to do with regards to recording? The concept of a band as collaborative individuals in the studio at the same time, hanging out together, touring together, making promotional videotapes together, and doing whatever else bands are assumed to do is dated, nothing more than sixties nostalgia. The most aggressively multi-media band of them all, Devo, have their visuals firmly controlled by two of the five people who pose for the photographs, and a personal art/media director.

The best promotional tapes are definitely the work of one person plus necessary technicians (David Cunningham, a.k.a. The Flying Lizards). The promotional videotape, unlike a lot of the music, contains no food for thought, no information, except the effects of the technologies themselves. The choice of costumes or disguises performers come up with can shed some light on the lyrical content of the music, but those who programme promo-

exile
Vintage clothing... presenting
classics to creepy chic
for the fashion subconscious...
exile

monday to saturday 11:00am to 6:00pm
39 Baldwin Street

L'ENTRECÔTE

Restaurant 531-4615

581 Markham st. Toronto

tional videotapes aren't interested in content; they're interested in increasing their ratings. Since the tapes are supposed to be promotional, their job is to wow the passive viewer/listener into running out and buying the product. Promotional video tapes are record industry psychedelic light shows passed off as ultramodern because of the technology they utilize. Promotional videotapes are control fodder designed for passive viewer/listeners accustomed to staying at home on Friday nights and watching Don Kirschner's Rock Concert.

Neither the promotional videotape nor the videodisc will replace the vinyl phonograph record — videotapes and videodiscs are economically inaccessible to most people. Over the last five years record sales have dropped steadily as prices escalate. Because a videodisc requires more time and money to manufacture than a phonodisc, (not to mention the cost of the accompanying hardware) it is highly unlikely that the videodisc will be less expensive than the phonodisc; indeed, the phonodisc itself is being questioned. As the listener, out of economic necessity, becomes increasingly selective about what he or she buys, performers are coming to realize that one good idea at a time is better than an album's length of

half-developed ones. The best thing about the disco and punk boom was the 45 r.p.m. single, a reaction against the phoney anti-commercialism of the FM hippie holocaust. More people are agreeing to collaborate on singles, avoiding the trap of signing papers which require the collaboration extend beyond the point of inspiration. Due to inflationary record prices, people will stop buying albums which don't measure up to the quality of the single. Albums, because of their length, will need either amazing variety (almost like compilation albums) or they'll have to function ambiently.

The trend toward single releases could be furthered by releasing one side at a time (economic reasons may make this necessary). Once the B side has been eliminated, it will be possible to abandon the use of vinyl and use plastic in the manner of a National Geographic record (after all, what is a record but an aural travelogue of sorts?). Granted, plastic tends to wear more quickly than vinyl, but then again, how many times does a listener have to hear a piece of music before reacting to it with something of his/her own? If preservation becomes a concern, tape it. Tape recorders and stereos run about parallel in retail price, and considering the quantity of music that can fit on a cassette, decent cassettes are cheaper than phonograph records.

Besides, with a tape recorder one can do his or her own programming.

Artists could release their plastic singles simultaneously with visual and written information. Throbbing Gristle sent out a newsletter to those who have replied to their releases on Industrial Records: a "regular newsletter in which they try to make their audience aware of the band's references and sources ... I.R.'s (Industrial Records') interest is not only archival but to stimulate others to experiment." (Clive Robertson, FUSE, Dec. 1980).

If an artist has something to say to as many people as possible, shouldn't they be using the mass media, TV, radio, and vinyl? If you feel you can inject propaganda into the minds of disco regulars by using repeated headline lyrics, if you feel you can disguise your lyrical content so it fits in with reactionary radio programming and still be understood by the average listener, and more importantly, if you feel that by using the technology which passive listeners have soaked up for years you can somehow convert them to an active state of existence, go ahead and try it. Good luck, because you'll certainly need it. And if you want to get rich, do the world a favour and don't pretend to have any content.

MAC ADAMS "THE CARPET"
February 7 - 28, 1981

Opening: Saturday, Feb. 7, 12 to 5 pm
Artist will be present



A SPACE, 299 Queen Street West,
5th floor, Toronto M5V 1Z9 (416) 595-0790

YYZ

JAN. 5 - 17
JANICE GURNEY, DRAWINGS & PAINTINGS
JAN. 19 - 31
PETER BOWYER, STEEL CONSTRUCTIONS
FEB. 2 - 14
DAVID BUCHAN, PHOTO INSTALLATION
FEB. 16 - 28
GORD VOISEY, PAINTINGS
MARCH 2 - 14
SHERRIL MASS, CONSTRUCTED SCULPTURE
MARCH 16 - 28
DYAN MARIE, SCULPTURE / INSTALLATION
MARCH 30 - APRIL 11
SUSAN MACKAY, VIDEO / INSTALLATION

567 Queen St. W., Toronto, Canada 868-6380