

Musical Doom



Images of nuclear angst in recent music

By ADRIAN IWACHIW

It's no secret that the future of the human race is uncertain. Project forward some 10 or 20 years and the possibilities seem bleak: to many, nuclear annihilation and an Orwellian computerized totalitarian nightmare are equally imaginable.

In the popular music of the last two decades, beneath the surface veneer of the hit parade, there has often been a darker undercurrent that seemed to reflect these fears, or at least was more in touch with hardcore reality. After the Beatles and the Rolling Stones swept the Western world, a psychedelic afterwave began to emanate out of the centres of the 1960s youth culture. In its Californian guise this was the flowery organic love-vibes of Jefferson Airplane and the Grateful Dead and the sex/death-obsessed romanticism of Jim Morrison's Doors. In its grim and street-wise New York version it was menacing and uncompromising urban realism of the Velvet Underground.

The punk/new wave upsurge of the late 1970s also carried with it a shadowy, psychedelic rear end. On the one hand there was the "pessimist wave" and "Gothic" rock of Public Image Ltd., Joy Division, the Cure, Psychedelic Furs, Killing Joke and others. (Many of these are still around, and, at any rate, their legacy continues in local bands like Kinetic Ideals, Breeding Ground, and Sturm Group.) Then there were the hardcore punks: Black Flag, DOA, and hundreds more (see Penelope Spheeris' film *The Decline of Western Civilization*), from California to Birmingham. Some of them, like L.A.'s Flipper, moved off into some pretty warped and psychedelic territories themselves.

Finally, there was/is the "cold wave," which emerged a few years after the initial punk outbreak. This included groups like Throbbing Gristle, Cabaret Voltaire, This Heat, Pseudo Code, Etat Brut, Test Dept., Tuxedomoon and the artists on England's United Dairies and Come Organization labels.

The music of these groups, generally dominated by electronics, tends to portray a dark and rather sinister post-industrial wasteland. Throbbing Gristle epitomizes this approach: their live performances are high-energy sonic, psychic and emotional events; their intent is to have a real impact on the audience, unlike most music which is geared to entertain and be passively consumed. Throbbing Gristle's music is mostly electronic, though it also makes unconventional use of guitar and bass, of taped recordings, environmental sounds and the like. The success of their albums, released independently on their own Industrial Records label showed others that it was

possible to survive financially without sacrificing musical integrity.

Throbbing Gristle's term "Industrial Music" came to be identified with groups from all over Western Europe and (to a lesser degree) North America. Closely related is the kind of extreme power electronics and primitivistic pounding practiced by Hunting Lodge, Whitehouse, and SPK. The works of Italian composer Maurizio Bianchi are devastating sonic assaults of industrial chaos while Belgium's Etat Brut chronicle World War III with their aggressive walls of sound.

This music finds its artistic inspiration in the experiments of earlier European pioneers, like the hypnotic electroacoustic soundscapes of Germany's Konrad Schnitzler and Kluster (later Cluster, collaborators with Brian Eno) and the more rock-oriented experimentalism of Faust.

Here is a short list of picks for the best and most important or representative albums from the interrelated genres of "death rock," "industrial music," "cold wave."

- **JOY DIVISION:** *Closer* (Factory, 1980)—For some fans, one of the few bands that *meant* anything in recent years, Joy Division left us with two studio albums, together with the double live studio post-mortem release *Still* and several singles. Their name is taken from a division of Nazi army prostitutes. Ian Curtis, whose suicide in 1981 brought their doom-laden visions to a logical conclusion, sings here in a strangely disembodied, calculatingly off-key voice. His oblique lyrics reek of alienation and a failed and desperate search for communion, while the stark bass and drum rhythms and distorted guitar overlays provide a solid underpinning, enhanced by Martin Hannett's crystalline production. Side two (the sides aren't numbered, but it *feels* like it should be side two) is a classic example of the death-rock genre—somber, unrelenting, moody, obsessive, from the driving, subtle propulsion of "Heart and Soul" and "Twenty Four Hours" to the elegiac death march "The Eternal" and the haunting "Decades." This last song brings to mind the dance of Death scene at the end of Ingmar Bergman's *Seventh Seal*.

- **THE CURE:** *Faith* (A&M, 1981)—Another classic of death-rock, this remains the Cure's most satisfying and religious album. The pleading vocals of Robert Smith are supported by the hypnotic bass and drum interplay, and are embellished with plenty of reverb and effects. The obsessive, brooding nature of this music is reflected in the song titles—"The Holy Hour,"

"Doubt," "The Funeral Party." A painful and haunting sense of gloom and resignation pervades the album. "Nothing left but faith," sings Smith. Wisely the object of faith is left a mystery.

- **THROBBING GRISTLE:** *Second Annual Report*, *DOA: The Third and Final Report*, *Heathen Earth* (Industrial, 1977, 1978, 1980)—Throbbing Gristle released an enormous output before their dissolution (into Psychic TV and Chris & Cosey), including several live albums, a box-set of 24 live cassettes, another box-set of five of their official releases and various written communiqués regarding their objectives. *Second Annual Report* is actually their first album; on it they deliver an industrial soundscape of hovering electronic drones and noise-fields, sliding guitar and taped voices. Several widely-varying versions of "Slug Bait" and "Maggot Death" make up Side One; intense experiments in the surreal. *D.O.A.* is a more subdued and varied collection, while *Heathen Earth* is a typically harsh and energetic live performance.

- **NOCTURNAL EMISSIONS:** *Fruiting Body* (Sterile Records, 1981)—A British group. Nocturnal Emissions are obviously influenced by the Gristle. Their sound is dense and harsh, yet not lacking in subtlety. Electronics, percussion, voice, tapes and radio effects communicate a bleak and nightmarish vision. The album is, unfortunately, hard to find. Real scary stuff.

- **MNEMONISTS:** *Horde* (Dys, 1981)—The Mnemonists are a group multi-media artists from Fort Collins, Colorado. Their albums come with sets of black and white graphic prints, and are electroacoustic excursions exploring the state of industrial society—chaos, anxiety, emotional vacuity, subconscious despair. *Horde* is an album of sophisticated, dense and subtle music, closer to avant-garde composers like Penderecki and Xenakis (and, at times, to free-jazz) than to anything resembling punk rock.

So what does all this stuff mean, anyway? Is it just "ugly," gloomy music for fried minds, or something more? Perhaps it is a confrontation with our contemporary situation, with our collapsing-from-the-inside industrial society, and with the psychic demands inflicted by our social systems. Perhaps the mystical brooding obsession with death and doom in groups like Joy Division and The Cure points to our need to explore our own nuclear fears.

Perhaps these bands are trying to shock us out of our slumber. And for that they deserve to be heard.

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