

Guitar superstars - one steps down, the other steps out

by Kenneth Newman

Two solo records were released at the beginning of this summer, both by guitarists from superstar bands and both under the omnipresent shadow of Brian Eno.

It was with mixed feelings that I looked forward to hearing the latest from Phil Manzanera, best known for his work with Roxy Music but also responsible for two of the best rock and roll records ever made, **Diamond Head** and **801 Live**. As with Roxy Music, Manzanera's music is occasionally of uneven quality; his first few solo outings were excellent but the last few have been deteriorating. **Listen Now** and **K-Scope** weren't so much bad as limp and boring. Like Roxy, it seemed not that he had sold out but that he had run out of ideas. But when I heard that his new album was completely solo, with only one other musician on only one cut, I thought, well, maybe this will give him the space to explore and come back with something new. Unfortunately, it's nothing really new; fortunately, it's not all that bad, either.

The crucial thing to remember about Manzanera's guitar playing is that it doesn't rely so much on technique and style as it does on method. His method is empirical, hence primitive; he finds the sounds and moods he wants through experimentation and then puts the results into his music in a very controlled fashion. When it works it works well and has the advantage of sparing listeners the noodling of which most other rock guitarists are guilty. Manzanera's autobiographical liner notes promise us that, "PRIMITIVE GUITARS sets

out to expose all the methods I have tried over the past dozen or so years, and to put them into a personal chronological context: childhood in South America, youth in London, experience with Roxy Music, collaborations with other musicians, and so on." Perhaps this is too tall an order because the album never quite reaches the heights of previous efforts (granted, those heights are pretty high) nor does it work as nostalgia for the die-hard Manzanera fan. The album should be met on its own ground with a fresh ear.

Roxy fans, especially recent converts, will find the album quite different from what they might expect. There are no vocals and it is definitely a guitarist's album. But it's great decadent dance music, perfect for dancing at 3:30 in the morning after a long night if you still have the energy. Hipsters will dance while sophisticates will listen to the odd background noises (all made by guitar and subtly introduced to the mix by Manzanera's own production) and try to figure out how they were made.

The album definitely does have a chronological order, starting with Latin-tinged melodies, continuing through late sixties/early seventies rock posturing on to the more recent sophisticated decadence. But there is a continuity throughout in the omnipresent, unfortunately electronic, dance beats reminiscent of (and perhaps influenced by) a style that was popular in New York a year and a half ago which consisted of laying down a heavy, almost disco, dance beat and playing odd noises on top of it (cf. Massacre, Material, and Eno/

Byrne.) Manzanera's aversion to self-indulgence is a relief in this respect, making the record worth listening to a lot more than once. It's the kind of record which, I imagine, will grow on you: it works as dance music and it works as background music. Leave it to tech-freaks and guitar players to explore the mix for esoterica - it's there if they want it. I particularly liked the two non-dance cuts: the mostly acoustic, dreamily Latin, "Bogotá" and the pleasant sojourn into yet another green world called "Europe 80-1" which rounds out the album with a peaceful and serene ending that would be particularly welcome if you followed my advice and put the record on at 3:30 in the morning, very loud, and danced to it on natural adrenalin. Extra added attractions are the interlude between tracks six and seven where Eno sings, "We will be teenagers casing the teenagers' scene", and finds it very funny, and the interlude between tracks two and three where Brian Ferry admits that his singing and piano playing are dreadful.

Unlike **Primitive Guitars**, where Eno's presence is felt only incidentally, **The Catherine Wheel** shows a David Byrne unready to step out from under his mentor's protective wing. Eno gets co-writing credit on one cut and plays on three others and, though Byrne is the producer on all cuts, I get the distinct impression that the big cheese was hovering at Byrne's shoulder the whole time. Which is not to say the album is bad; on the contrary, it's quite good and it's good because of Eno's collaboration and the influence he's had on Byrne. As with Bowie, Eno has opened up horizons for Byrne that one would never have imagined, given the direction of the first three Talking Heads albums.

However, good as it is, and this could be why the record is so enticing, **The Catherine Wheel** is a confusing record. The music was composed for a dance production of the same name choreographed by Twyla Tharp which premiered on Broadway a year ago (the complete score, which I haven't heard, is only available on the cassette version and runs to 73 minutes). The music certainly doesn't sound like any traditional or modern dance music I have ever heard and my mind has been sorely bogged in trying to imagine what the choreography would be like. Byrne's photographs of the sets, which look like Francis Picabia's paintings brought to life, and the production numbers frozen in motion, while fascinating and beautiful, provide no clue. The music, taken as a whole, doesn't show the coherence and unity of purpose one would expect of music for a dance production. Though the lyrics are often excellent, they do not relate to one another nor do they relate in any way to the story of the wheel on which St. Catherine was to be martyred by her faith. Rather, the album sounds like an anthology of different directions that Eno has taken Byrne in the last two years.

Several songs sound like they could have been outtakes from other records. The funky "His Wife Refused", the galloping, poly-rhythmic "Big Business" and the catchy epic, "What a Day That Was", all sound like they were

taken from the **Remain in Light** sessions. The lyrics cover the same ground of the earlier album: "His Wife Refused" is, like the Talking Heads' single of last year "Once in a Lifetime", concerned with the banality and endlessness of middle class life:

Take a look - these people are savages!
Take a look - at their misfortune

Well the bride - bride and the groom
Run in a circle around their house

("His Wife Refused")

"The Red House", with its eastern holy man's voice electronically garbled and warped and "Eggs in a Briar Patch", with its repentant born-again radio redneck, both sound as if they belong on Eno/Byrne's **My Life (In the Bush of Ghosts)**. "Two Soldiers" sounds like the beginning of an early Eno tune, "Miss Shapiro" (which, incidentally, first appeared on Phil Manzanera records), while the short and pretty "Light Bath" would be right at home on Eno's **Another Green World**. "Poison", with its "coloured girl" vocals by Dolette McDonald, sounds extremely reminiscent of Yarborough and Peoples' single of two years back, "Don't Stop the Music".

Conspicuous in their originality are the percussion and echoplex fantasy, "Cloud Chamber", and "My Big Hands (Fall Through the Cracks)". "Hands" is singularly unique in that Byrne is not singing in his usual you-either-love-it-or-you-hate-it neurotic-young-man/psycho-killer (whew!) vocal stylings but, oddly enough, in something approaching the sound of a normal human voice. It's got a heavy, eminently danceable beat and great lyrics about clumsiness and guilt:

And it ain't my fault,
Some things are sticking out.
My big hands
Keep my big hands to myself.
It would make a great single so,
of course, don't expect to hear it on the radio.

All this adds up to an album of great variety and consistent quality. The appeal is broad: Eno freaks will buy it and love it (they'll buy anything with Eno on it, anyway), and people who liked the last two Talking Heads records will definitely like this one. People who are looking for funky dance music, of which this record is full, might be better off taking the three-song 12 dance-mix EP of songs from this album for starters - you don't have to like "new wave", or whatever it's called these days, to like the EP. As for inquisitive critics, I think Byrne left his own message for those looking for cohesion and meaning:

Of I don't understand
Oh it's not just a sound
I got a big blue Plymouth
It doesn't matter at all.
[Big Blue Plymouth (Eyes Wide Open)]

(Thanks to Lenny Leblanc for providing the records.)

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Sweet memories of Gigi

by Wendy Coomber

Gigi. It's been ten years or so since I last saw that movie but the songs are still on my lips - "Gigi, ya da da dum, da da da..." or "Thank heaven for leetle girls..." It made Maurice Chevalier's career.

Made 24 years ago, Gigi is still one of those fondly remembered paragons of the "silver screen", winner of nine Oscars and one of the best of the musical era produced. Vincent Minnelli directed, with the same naive joyfulness he instilled in *An American in Paris* and many others. In *Gigi* he works once again with Leslie Caron who was but a pretty young ballet dancer when he met her seven years before in "American". Louis Jordan, who plays Gigi's (Caron) baffled and

annoyed suitor, was also a fledgling to American cinema at the time of the movie. Rounding off the cast are veterans Maurice Chevalier and Hermoine Gingold who are played off against each other as two old flames who meet after many years to be on hand for Gigi's "debut" into the world of Paris social life.

The film will be shown at Wormwoods in the NFB theatre on Barrington Street, September 10-12 (Sat. Sept. 11 - 7:00, 9:30 and Sun. Sept. 12 - 2:00, 7:00, and 9:30). Admission to Wormwoods is usually \$2.50 per person.

Even though the old musicals seem to have fallen from favour within the last decade, *Gigi* remains a favourite for any age. Sentimental, yes; escapism, yes; but ah, I remember it well. And so will you.