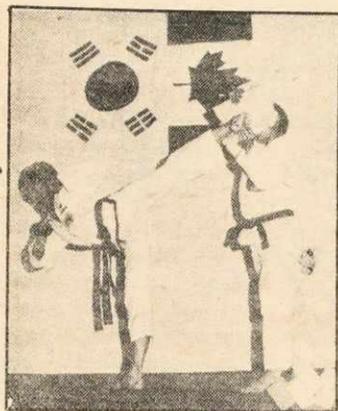


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Baxter reviews two more U.K. bands

by Gisele Marie Baxter
 Reviews: *Orchestral Manoeuvres in the Dark*, *Organization*

Japan, *Gentlemen Take Polaroids*

Here are two young bands from the U.K., each trying to make an impression in North America. The approaches are quite opposite, but both results have a significant effect.

Orchestral Manoeuvres in the Dark produce pop music. The components may be blatantly synthesized, but the effect is always accessible, and frequently danceable. *Organization* is the second album for this band from Liverpool and like the first, proves why OMITD is one of England's favourite acts.

Paul Humphreys and Andy McCluskey (assisted here by drummer Malcolm Holmes) are imaginative musicians, if

not virtuosos, and perceptive songwriters; while their vocals are not outstanding, they can attain a poignancy appropriate to the usually sad, sometimes ironic material. The musical settings are electronic-based, very technological, but Paul and Andy have a respect for more "conventional" pop music forms which provides colourful touches to the songs.

"Motion and Heart", for example, supports its sharp cabaret-romantic lyrics with a melody which recalls Paul McCartney at his best, and "Promise," an effective love song, has a mid-60s American summertime pop feeling about its verses.

However, *Organization* displays some serious ideas at work; it is never fluffy. "Statues" is especially haunting, with its wistful vocals, lovely synthesizer and percussion effects, and steady bass undercurrent. "Stanlow" is quite experimental and like the band's name, both orchestral and dark. Difficult to understand exactly, "Stanlow" has a strange beauty about it, and evokes a sense of love and loss which cuts to the soul.

The music is technological, yet technology is something to be regarded warily, as "Enola Gay" indicates with its brilliantly achieved irony—at first listening a romantic pop song, it gains a disquieting edge when you realize the Enola Gay was the airplane which dropped the A-Bomb. "Security lies at the heart of our lives/ Attaching ourselves to ourselves," the boys sing in "The Misunderstanding" and this, as much as anything defines this album. Our lives may be quite disorganized—many of the songs deal with romantic failures—but we lose our humanity in over-structuring, in a too-great dependence on technology.

Yet OMITD has its sense of humour, as the cover of "The More I See You" indicates. Humphreys and McCluskey rely more on musical possibilities than image, and it is on the merit of their recordings that they earn a place among the most vital young acts of today.

Japan is the sort of band which makes critics cringe. Self-consciously arty and even pretentious in appearance with their makeup and elegant suits and trendy hairstyles, the five young men who form this band follow none of the unwritten rules critics use as guidelines for musical integrity.

That said, I like *Gentlemen Take Polaroids*, the band's fourth record and first on the Virgin label. Japan makes disguise a form of rebellion in an often anti-individualistic world, and creates music which reflects this. The result is a beautifully-produced collection of songs which range in style, and have subtle shadings and often exotic rhythmic textures. These self-taught

musicians do not have a strong background in rock music; their influences are perhaps more reflected in the jazz and dance music which flavours this album.

The eight songs included here are intriguing, with "Taking Islands in Africa" being central to the themes presented. Throughout the album, there are images of sometimes mercenary adventures, foreign intrigue, chancy brief encounters; of a journey through the nightland, with doubts behind the perfect disguises, as reflected in the fatalistic title track (about tourist encounters) and the incisive ambiguity of "Nightporter".

Vocalist/songwriter David Sylvian, an extremely striking young man, is crucial to Japan's image and music. He sings his lyrics in an unconventional, yet hypnotic, edgy style, meshing with and winding through the instrumental structures, conveying emotion, yet never sentimentally. He may seem too young, being in his early twenties at most, for some of his lyrics, but at least he never seems world-weary.

Of the music here, "Methods of Dance" is particularly effective, with its electronic disco rhythms, powerful yet controlled drumming, and sharp bass tugs, all tightly arranged and given a slightly Brian Ferryish vocal treatment. "Nightporter", which has an evocative piano line throughout, is the album's masterpiece. An incredibly moving song, which seems to tell of an illicit romance and is probably the inspiration behind the cover photo, this track features Sylvian's best vocal—a wonderful characterization—and strongest lyrics: "I sit in my room and wait until nightlife begins/ Catching my breath, we'll both brave the weather again." The fadeout is an excellent arrangement of piano, synthesizer and oboe.

The album cover credits a makeup artist and a hairstylist, but neglects to name the band members. For the record, they are David Sylvian (guitar, keyboards), Mick Karn (bass, saxophone, oboe), Richard Barbieri (keyboards), Rob Dean (guitar) and Steve Jansen (drums).

Who knows if Japan will make rock music history? For now, I admire the audacity of this band, for developing its image and music without considering its first obligation to be critical acceptability.



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