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MUSIC

MUSIC; Adventurous Punk Of a Troubled Past

By BARRY SINGER

FROM Poison to Beck and Moby, today's pop artists are recycling the musical schlock of the 1970's and 80's. Their fascination with kitsch, however, can make us all myopic. Unambiguously good music from those years is being overlooked.

Take the British band XTC. The release of "Coat of Many Cupboards," a four-CD boxed set from Caroline Records covering XTC's prolific early years, 1978 to 1989, is currently generating hosannas from the English music press. Here in the United States, though, it has barely been noticed, which is a shame.

XTC first appeared on the London punk scene in 1976, just as punk music was about to evolve into new wave. A quartet initially, the group had two primary songwriters, the guitarist Andy Partridge and the bassist Colin Moulding. Though each wrote his own songs, they shared a gift for catchy, three-minute pop tunes in the Lennon-McCartney tradition. It was Mr. Moulding's "Making Plans for Nigel" from XTC's third album, "Drums and Wires," that finally landed the band on the British charts in 1979. The song reached only No. 17 in England, but that was enough; XTC began touring internationally, performing in New York at CBGB alongside Talking Heads, to whom it was then compared.

Meanwhile, the band members were seeing no money from their increasing record sales and finding themselves deep in debt to their label, Virgin Records. The situation gave rise to a lawsuit, in which the band members accused XTC's manager of borrowing heavily from Virgin against the band's royalties. The suit was settled out of court, with both parties barred from discussing the terms.

It is this period of creative ferment, commercial breakthrough and economic catastrophe that the first two CD's on "Coat of Many Cupboards" document. The final discs offer up music from the years following what Mr. Partridge calls his "nervous collapse," in 1982, after which the band quit touring for good. This collapse, triggered by Mr. Partridge's paralyzing stage fright and compounded by his having just kicked a Valium addiction, became a creative turning point for both Mr. Partridge and XTC.

Over the next 10 years the band recorded six increasingly accomplished, adventurous and idiosyncratic albums. From the stiff-jointed, ska-influenced new wave of their early years, Mr. Partridge and Mr. Moulding blossomed. Mr. Partridge, in particular, produced richly textured, elegantly structured tunes that, on occasion, even became mainstream radio hits.

Challenging yet accessible, these perfectly simple pop songs, like "The Ballad of Peter Pumpkin Head" and "Dear God," wove together ingenious sonic experimentation, wordplay and chiming vocal harmonies redolent of the later Beatles and Brian Wilson's "Pet Sounds."

Listening to this music today, one wonders whether there would even be a Moby or a Beck without XTC. Absent Mr. Partridge and his band's pioneering intelligence and craftsmanship, these studio-obsessed latecomers would not sound nearly as interesting. And none of them is remotely in Mr. Partridge's class as a writer.

True to their iconoclastic form, Mr. Partridge and Mr. Moulding have deviated from the familiar greatest-hits package on "Coat of Many Cupboards." Many songs are represented not by their original album versions but by early demos, outtakes, rehearsal dubs or live recordings. The compilation is, as Mr. Partridge described it recently, "something of a Savile Row suit, but with lots of food stains."

At 48, Mr. Partridge has not stepped onstage before a concert audience in almost 20 years. This is perhaps the main reason XTC never caught on in America. Unlike Sting and the Police (who, in 1981, toured here with XTC), Mr. Partridge and his band never provided America with much of a flesh and blood presence.

Still, XTC did enjoy a small but devoted following here and in England. In 1993, though, at Mr. Partridge's instigation, the band went on strike against Virgin. "We had the world's worst record deal," Mr. Partridge recalled, seated serenely now in the garden of the tidy house in Swindon that he bought with Virgin's initial advance. "We were never going to make any money. I asked Virgin if we could go and Virgin said no."

THE strike lasted until 1997, when Virgin released XTC from its contract. "The most difficult years of my life," Mr. Partridge said. "And I wrote a ton. It's either extreme joy or extreme pain that gets you going."

The fruits of this productivity were finally released in 1999 and 2000 -- two XTC albums on the independent labelTVT: "Apple Venus," which featured a 40-piece orchestra, and "Wasp Star," subtitled "Apple Venus Volume 2," a return, in Mr. Partridge's words, to "sonorous guitar bashing." Both discs were critically acclaimed, but neither sold well.

"I realize, of course, that audiences have changed dramatically," Mr. Partridge said. "Still, it really was a kick in the groin for me."

XTC is, today, a two-man enterprise; the lead guitarist Dave Gregory, the band's last original member, fled in frustration not long ago. Caroline Records is nonetheless planning to follow up "Coat of Many Cupboards" by reissuing XTC's first 10 albums. Could this mean that the band is being rediscovered?

"Nah," said Mr. Partridge. "I think we're just going to discover as this century grinds on that the three-minute pop song was, in fact, a 20th-century art form. Why is it fading away? Computers. People don't want to put the years in, the apprenticeship, learning how to make a great chair anymore. They can just press a button and -- phhlooff! -- this inflatable piece of furniture flips up in front of them."

How would he describe his own music?

"The pop canvas," Mr. Partridge replied. "Songs that are immediate but go on forever saying a good thing. Songs with no spare flesh. Songs full of surprises that delight on first hearing but hopefully you don't tire of easily; like naïve art or toys. Though some of my music can be miserable" -- he paused -- "but delightfully miserable."

Photo: Colin Moulding, left, and Andy Partridge in 1999. They performed as XTC. (Associated Press)