

On Reflection

The newsletter
of *The APEX*

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INSIDE:

Relayer	p. 2
Canterbury	p. 3
Market Value	p. 4
Fripp/LCC	p. 4
Gentle Giant	p. 6
Adrian Belew	p. 8

"The most immoral...and dangerous thing that anyone can do in the arts is knowingly to feed back to the public its own ignorance and cheap tastes."

—Edmund Wilson

Special report:

Whither progressive rock?

by Marc S. Tucker

One of the eternal problems for the progressive music aficionado is the continual "Dearth of Abundance;" whereas other music genres enjoy an abundance of really good product coming out at all times (with the exception of classical music, which many, myself included, would lump in with progressive anyway), there is very little really meaty progressive fare at any one time. It does come out, but not in the cornucopic amounts that, say, jazz music experiences. This makes for quizzicality in the minds of consumers and appreciators.

UPSTREAM AGAINST THE MAINSTREAM

The reasons are diverse and a tad foggy, but a few are apparent right off. For example, the industry is run on an iron-clad return-on-investment mindset. That which begets, or promises to beget, the most prodigious return gets the best investment. So, proven sellers consume much of a company's available resources.

Record companies do not cultivate groups anymore (which is too bad—a group like Rush took a decade to really take off in terms of popular acceptance, but paid back on the long investment like a bat out of hell), so if your first release is not a million-seller, bye-bye blackbird. For progressives, this is a very dicey proposition. Unless you're a made-to-order progressive super-group like Asia (whom, I am sure, many would hesitate to name as true pros), the chances of being signed to a major label are quite distant.

There are always groups like Saga who, rightfully, should have inherited Yes' crown during the latter's pre-90125 absence but proved to be a poor seller despite their monster talents. A record exec looks at that, looks at the prospective unknown signee and does not have to think long on how it will reflect on him upstairs when he signs them and they do not become the progressive version of Michael Jackson.

Another factor, of course, is the audience. When you consider a hard-core prog group like Yes and their "best seller" tag, very frequently that's a relative usage. There are only just so many minds ready to appreciate this type of music. Companies know this, they project an optimistic sales target and, if the LP exceeds this, it becomes a "best seller." In reality, though, it will often have sold only 1/10th as well as the latest REO Speedwagon release, if even that well.

This contributes to the exec's bank-think. To have selling appeal, you have to approach the mass-mind acceptance. Genesis and Peter Gabriel learned this lesson. Though good, their more recent LPs are large departures from the classic "Supper's Ready" stylings. Compare how well Gabriel's *So* went over in comparison to *Passion* (his soundtrack to *The Last Temptation of Christ*) and you have a ready chart.

BATTLE OF INDEPENDENTS

To the side of all that, there are problems in dealing with independent labels/distributors. There is no really good sales

continued p.5

Relayer

BRING YES UP TO DATE

APEX members Eddie Lee and Steve Gurren have been raising the issue of the lack of an updated biography on Yes in letters to the Yes publication, *Wonderous Stories*.

Eddie noted that Dan Hedges' 1980 book is the only English biography available and that there is a Japanese book on the group that came out in 1978 by Masanori Ito, a noted Japanese journalist.

Steve has actually written to Hedges about updating the book. Hedges wrote back saying that he has thought about it but that there have been no firm commitments.

In an effort to amass evidence of definite interest in such an undertaking, Steve has copied *On Reflection* and *Yes Magazine* on his letter, in which he asks that all interested fans write to Hedges in care of his publisher to make their desire for an updated edition known.

Steve, consider *On Reflection* on the bandwagon! I urge all APEX members to write in support of continued professional reportage of progressive music and to support the drive to make Hedges' excellent book a more topical reference work.

The address is Author Mr. Daniel Hedges, c/o Harper and Row Publishing Inc., 10 E. 53rd Street, New York, NY 10022. The book's catalogue number is 0283987618. The book is called *Yes: An Authorized Biography*.

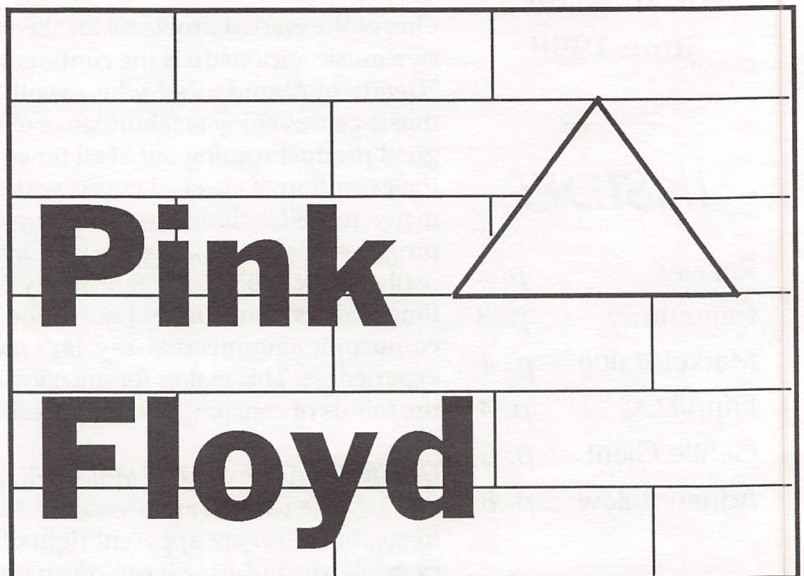
[And make sure Harper and Row also know that a newer pressing is needed.]

SOME MAD BUGGER'S WALL

Roger Waters will stage a benefit performance of Pink Floyd's *The Wall* in a most appropriate place—Berlin.

The show will be held July 21 to benefit the Memorial Fund for Disaster Relief. The set, which will be 600 feet long and 60 feet high, will be placed near the site of the Berlin Wall, from Brandenburg Gate to Potsdamer Platz.

Among the special features and effects to be employed are military aircraft, giant inflatables and puppets, a symphony orchestra, a Red Army vocal choir, and a number of special musical guests. Some very big names are expected to take part.



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Next Month:

An interview
with ex-HTM
keyboardist
Kit Watkins!

Canterbury, Kent—still fertile soil by Harald Luss

In the April issue of OR I read Greg Katona's gloss entitled "Canterbury Tales." It's nice to see that there are still survivors of good taste in today's jungle of sampled sounds. While even the hardest fanatics have had to face the fact that the good days of Canterbury are over, the last couple of months have kindled the flame with quite a lot of new activities.

First, to answer Greg's question about In Cahoots, the most recent of the Hatfield line. This band of Phil Miller's ran through many changes in the lineup and the most recent one is Phil on guitar, Pip Pyle on drums, Elton Dean on saxes, Steve Franklin on keyboards, and Fred Baker on bass replacing Hugh Hopper, who left in the spring of 1989 to be more flexible in session works (mainly with Lindsay Cooper and some Dutch bands).

Samples of Cahoots' *oeuvre* can be heard on two of Miller's albums—*Cutting Both Ways* (available on Cuneiform in the US) and *Split Seconds* (on Reckless). Since the band members are spread all over Europe, the band is doomed to appear just on special occasions, like recording sessions (so done last October) or gigging through Europe (as scheduled for May/June). Last information is that Miller has already compiled enough compositions for a new album that he hopes to have available for a fall release.

To fill the gap, may I attract your attention to the forthcoming release of National Health's three albums (all masterpieces of Canterbury rock) on CD by East Side Digital, which should be ready in June. This twin-set was digitally remastered by Dave Stewart and will have two bonus tracks, making the whole deal a must. One will be an archive piece called "Paracelsus" (once an Egg number) and the second will be an all new composition entitled "Apocalypso." So watch out for this gem.

Stewart himself has just released a brand new album called *The Big Idea* with longtime companion Barbara Gaskin. The long wait has finally paid off. Versatile, original and technically perfectly produced, it shows the optimal use of the MIDI system paired with Barbara's crispy voice. The compositions range from a cover version of Dylan's "Subterranean Homesick Blues" to wicked passing shots on present-day social alterations ("New Jerusalem"). It is distributed by Ryko in the US so it should be easy to find.

From the Soft Machine division comes the current rerelease of nearly all their albums on CD. Sadly, one of their most important albums, *Three*, still remains in the vaults, though CBS stated some months ago that they will put milestones like "Moon in June" on silver discs.

Friends of Robert Wyatt are recommended to buy either Michael Mantler's latest album, *Many Have No Speech* (ECM) or R. Sakamoto's *Beauty* (Virgin), as these are Wyatt's latest efforts apart from rereleases of his classic *Rock Bottom* and *Ruth is Stranger Than Richard* albums. Completists are also guided to the CD of the 1974 Peel Sessions now available—essential work!

Lastly, and most productively, is the Gong division. With no truly sensational releases during the '80s, one was led to believe that Dævid Allen and Company had quit the biz and vanished in the deserts of Australia. But he's back and well and living in England again.

In the first months of his return, he got a group together, consolidating various lineups of the Dævid Allen Band and the Invisible Co-Opera Company of Tibet. After rehearsing and gigging for quite a while, he now seems to have hit the point of letting us share his thoughts with loads of new releases.

First came *Owl and the Tree*, an album he shares with the Gilli Smyth/Harry Williamson Mother Gong. No more Pot Head Pixies and Flying Teapots, but quiet and almost hypnotic tunes in the tradition of his *Good Morning* or *Now is the Happiest Time of Your Life* albums. For those who recall the time of the Planet Gong trilogy, the French Mantra label has unearthed a previously unreleased Gong set from 1973 entitled *Live at Bataclan, Paris*. Excellent quality and over 70 minutes of music make the buy a good deal.

Shortly before the turn of the year, DemiMonde released *Gongmation* with new material of Dævid's latest formation featuring Didier "Bloomdido" Malherbe, among others. We're also awaiting *Australia Aquaria's She*, material he's recorded while in exile Down Under and rated almost as esoteric as his *Stroking the Tail of the Bird* album, done with Gilli and Harry and available on AMP Records.

At the end of April, there was also a sort of Gong reunion gig that happened in Nottingham. It was recorded by TV and is scheduled to be available on record as well. So save a few dimes to cope with this flood of material.

As you can see, the Canterbury scene is really active and I was just reporting on the major circle—there are similar activities going on in the jazzier spheres which I will survey the next time. Now I hope you can decide for one (or all) of the mentioned new stuff and add it to your collection. Let's join forces and give good music a chance. @



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Concert review: Robert Fripp and the LCG

by Stephen Roberts

Robert Fripp, the crown of King Crimson, and his League of Crafty Guitarists performed their acoustic wizardry at Bogart's in Cincinnati, OH, May 12, 1990.

I had seen Robert Fripp on two previous occasions. First, as part of his "small, mobile intelligent unit" tour in a record store in Louisville (it was an incredible Frippertronics concert!). Second, with the League of Gentlemen at Bogart's in Cincinnati in 1981 (opening act was Adrian Belew's GAGA). I also have the League of Crafty Guitarists *Live* CD so I knew pretty much what to expect—an evening of incredible orchestral guitar textures and virtuoso playing fronted by the amazing Mr. Fripp. But there were surprises as well, three in fact.

First, as we got to the venue

there was line of people out front that stretched the better part of a city block! I didn't expect the concert to sell out. Surprise #1.

The audience, made up mostly of working class types like myself and a good 40% female (!), was very well behaved and had a genuine love for Robert and his music. Fripp himself didn't play but about half of the time, letting his "students" take the bulk of the solos and spotlights. Robert only played one or two solos all night—surprise #2.

The third surprise was a female vocalist! During his one brief address to the audience, Fripp stated that each of his students has his or her specialty—hers was her voice. What an understatement! This woman was marvelous, singing five or six short *a capella* songs in her fantastic mezzo-

soprano voice. It was a good diversion from the almost overwhelming sound of eleven amplified acoustic guitars and shows that persons playing instruments other than plectrum guitar can benefit from the Guitar Craft seminars. I can only apologize to the woman as I cannot remember her name.

Needless to say, it was a magical evening that I will not soon forget. The audience gave the LCG a standing ovation, which brought them back for a much-deserved encore. Fripp did say during his earlier address that this lineup of the LCG is his three-year course in Guitar Craft. As they are only now eight months into the course, I think we will be seeing more this great cultural experience in the future. Bravo! ☺

The state of progressive rock, continued

avenue for progressive music outside the mainstream market. What does exist is very independent, splintered and often very unreliable, even downright unethical. You have sales organs like Wayside and Eurock, to name two of the best, but they, like the rest of the mercantile field, are the product of one or two people, have little outside distribution for their own label and act as a very limited distribution center for others.

Larger experiments in this realm have met with disaster. NMDS is the best example (and their acceptance of true progressive music was *very* limited, a curious trait for a company that prided itself on its alleged open-mindedness), so an insular attitude is in no way unwarranted. Other labels/distributors can be risky. Most anyone operating in the independent music field can relate tales of unpaid royalties, unpaid-for releases and a myriad of other situations in which trust was granted to a person or merchant requesting product, product was sent, and no monies were ever received.

There are most definitely good ethical labels and sales outlets (Multiphase and Synkronos come immediately to mind, as labels), but there are, sad to report, many more that are dangerous to deal with. This alone can lead to disgust with the field and cause otherwise potentially great musicians to drop out of the running. Despite its self-image as the musical version of holistic consciousness, the independent field is just as full of sharks as the mainstream. What does that leave, then?

Well, basically, we're back to square one: the end result of the above, and a good deal more than what has been outlined, is very little product. But let's get *really* morose and explore this a tad further before getting into the positive side.

ET TU, BRUTE?

Groups can also betray their audience's confidence in them. A very classic example is Starcastle. After three solid LPs, they released an utter disaster entitled *Real to Reel*, an attempt to slide into basic rock that not only fell on its face, but pushed that visage all the way back to the other side of its musical head. In fact, it was a more dramatic case of what Gentle Giant had also done with their attempts to enter the rock charts. Giant was saved by a vastly superior musical sense (which is not to slight Starcastle's excellent first three albums), but ultimately also dropped into musical oblivion.

Did either of these groups really *betray* their audience? Well, yes and no. They did rather disappoint a solid following and sales base, but the likelihood for their doing so is twofold: a) they may have wanted to get into other styles after having played in basically the same mode for umpteen years, and b) they probably wanted to do what everyone wants: increase their income. If progressive rock is a proven marginal profit zone and rock 'n' roll is the moneymaker, it's not hard to decide where to go next. After all, Phil Collins, one of the all-time great drummers, makes a hell of a lot more money for his solo music, which is a hell of a lot worse than his Genesis or Brand X output, and that's a tempting example for musicians looking to increase their paycheck.

Some bands don't even wait to establish themselves before they cross over. Having seen The Units when they opened for OMD at an L.A. gig, one could not wait for the LP to come out. Their stage show was a fantastic exhibition of drum and synth music, centering on the kettle drums, that was a complete surprise to many who attended the concert. The LP, when it came out, was a 180-degree turn-around of faceless pop.

REMEMBER THE FUTURE

But let's end on a positive note. If our basic purpose in exposing the ills of the industry is to hope for a better milieu for progressive music to flourish in, so that our hot and greedy aesthetic natures will not hector us into the grave (hey, it's OK; ask Ayn Rand), then we need to validate that which has the best chance of furthering that goal. It's a weird situation and one that perplexes musician, listener and merchant (often, a dealer specializing in this music is himself a proghead). There are no ready solutions but there are basic human factors that need to be observed in order to create an atmosphere in which this music, which itself aims for higher ideals, can operate to the profit of all (and profit, friends, is not an evil; only the abuse of it).

The foremost ingredient is knowledge. Know who you are dealing with. Is this impossible? No. There are, as said, places to go where a certain base of trust can be established. If you are not releasing on your own, then you need to find a label backed by the person who creates and controls it. This may involve a certain degree of patience in waiting on release until a good source is located. An established selling name is not necessarily an indication of reliability—how far would you care to trust Warner Brothers?

There is also the feasibility of forming some sort of progressive alliance. Polarity makes for easy prey, but the question of coming together and creating what is basically a corporation is not only distasteful to a lot of artists, it equally requires a lot of administrative work, and there are very few artists who do not have a huge aversion to that. Still, it is necessary. That's business and that's what music operates through.

continued p.7

New CDs: Gentle improvements, Giant value

Polygram Records has just released the first two Gentle Giant albums on CD as part of their mid-line "Sound Savers" series. I paid \$8.79 each. Seeing as how scratchy used LP versions cost more, this is the time to add some Rabelaisian splendor to your collection.

Gentle Giant (1970) is now, 20 years later, available for the first time in the US as a domestic release. *Acquiring the Taste* (1971) was released in the US some years later by Polygram, retaining the original label and cover art. Line Records in Germany, which released the first four albums on CD last summer, made an unforgivable error in the remastering of the first album (reported in *OR* 6/89 and 12/89). To this day, Line President Uwe Tessnow will not admit that an error was made, claiming instead that the CD accurately reproduces what was on the master tape. The new Polygram release shows without a fragment of a doubt that Mr. Tessnow is as full of dung as a fertilizer factory.

The Line CD was also guilty of the sin of omission. Between several of the songs were little keyboard lines and trills, only one of which survived on the Line CD. The Polygram release has every note that was on the original Vertigo album. Both discs, in fact, bear the Vertigo label as a symbol of authenticity.

The sound quality of the CDs is quite good; a bit more hiss than the Line versions but in no way an unbearable amount. The more exotic instruments come off sounding very crisp (*good* crisp not harsh, metallic crisp), like the xylophone, vibraphone, violin, recorder, and percussion. The vocal blends are clear and even, with the exception of "Alucard" from *Gentle Giant*. In that song, the vocals are electronically distorted and the digital mastering seems to address the distortions more than the primary vocals.

The booklets are generally better than the Line versions, although each lacks the lyrics that were part of the original LP packages (the Line version of *Acquiring the Taste* didn't have lyrics either). Still, they open to display the full cover art of the original gatefolds, which the Line versions fail to do. The *Acquiring the Taste* booklet includes the original photo and liner notes, both of which are missing from Line's; on the other hand, Line gives the track-by-track musicians and instruments information that Polygram lacks.

Gentle Giant opens with a soft yet growing solo organ introducing "Giant," a jazzy track that alternately rocks and swings. That is followed by the classic "Funny Ways," which goes from acoustic guitar, violin, and cello to the middle section ensemble of electric guitar, trumpet, organ, bass, and drums before coming full circle to an acoustic ending. "Alucard" (Dracula spelled backwards) is a charged song of horrific proportions, with electronic vocal distortions, manic horns, portentous fuzz guitar and full-throttle drumming. That leads to as gentle a song as Giant have ever recorded, "Isn't It Quiet and Cold?" Pizzicato violin, acoustic guitar, brushed snare drum, and a jaunty xylophone solo give it the feel of an old English music hall tune.

The album's masterpiece, "Nothing at All," is a touching tale of loneliness and loss that starts acoustic, goes into a rocking electric jam, then gives way to a drum solo that eventually becomes counterpointed by a classicalish acoustic piano part. The link between "Nothing at All" and "Why Not" was where Line's error took place, and hearing it done perfectly thanks to Polygram was like getting a good back rub. "Why Not" is an all-hell-breaks-loose rocker, save for a short, soft middle section where Kerry Minnear's lovely voice provides a welcome contrast. That leads

to the finale, "The Queen," a loose jam of "God Save the Queen."

Acquiring the Taste breaks a lot of new ground. The liner notes, which I have printed before, nevertheless bear repeating: "It is our goal to expand the frontiers of contemporary popular music at the risk of being very unpopular. We have recorded each composition with the one thought—that it should be unique, adventurous, and fascinating. It has taken every shred of our combined musical and technical knowledge to achieve this. From the outset we have abandoned all preconceived thoughts on blatant commercialism....All you need to do is sit back and acquire the taste."

"Pantagrue's Nativity" opens the album, the title character taken from the work of 16th century monk/writer François Rabelais. The interplay of Minnear's vocals on the verses and Derek Shulman's ("bare-assed and raunchy," said one journalist-fan) on the choruses complements the varied dynamics of the music. "Edge of Twilight" is a moody, quiet tune that briefly erupts into a percussion ensemble. "The House, The Street, The Room" is a moderate rocker until the searing guitar/drums intro to the middle instrumental section raises its pulse rate. Next is "Acquiring the Taste," a short but elegant moog solo by Minnear.

"The Wreck" is a solid tune, with "hey, yeh yeh, hold on" responses to each line of the verses. A few recorders add a wistful touch to this tale of seafaring tragedy. "The Moon is Down" is one of my favorite Giant songs; it's not very long, but there is a multi-tiered instrumental section that really excites my senses. "Black Cat Ways" is as slick and saucy as its subject, with a lovely string quartet section. The album closes with a rocking electric violin showcase piece called "Plain Truth."

continued next page

The state of progressive rock, continued

If there is any chance of progressive music ever becoming a potent market presence, it will have to start in the independent field. It will have to be created through a musician who has as savvy a business sense as musical, someone along the lines of a Frank Zappa. There are small examples of what can be done: the Nightcrawlers almost became "The Next Big Thing" at one point; Deyss has landed a mainstream contract via their indie releases; Iconoclasta enjoyed a CD remix/remaster and rerelease of their early LPs because of an American (David Overstreet) listener's affinity for the music and his business sense; Gandalf is releasing through Eurock now; and despite the slow collapse of many aspects of the independent field, groups like Xisle and solo acts like Carl Weingarten continue to release product.

There is that undercurrent of the basic common denominator (a love of this art form) that transcends the sometimes overwhelming real-world strangulations. Hopefully, it will transmute into some more pragmatic evolution, complete with the machinations of the adversarial mindsets, and firmly establish itself unshakably. Who ever thought heavy metal would enjoy the renaissance it now does? It was, for all intents and purposes, all but dead at one point. Only sheer force of will (belief in the music) rescued it.

THE PRICE YOU PAY

There is another reason why progressive music needs to gain a better profile and acceptance. Many of us are not fooled by this nonsense the megalithic record corporations are foisting on us in forcing the demise of the LP format via CD marketplace domination, thus successfully jacking up the price of music in an exorbitant fashion that would never have succeeded in the LP market. And all companies follow behind that.

Let's be honest (and this is going to upset this mag's advertisers)—are you happy paying \$30-\$35 for a single CD? Yes, it beats paying \$150 for the LP in the overpriced collector market; yes, it is a pristine format; yes, it satisfies a thirst that's awfully hard to take care of these days. *But are you happy paying \$30-\$35 for a single-album CD? Are you happy paying \$20?* I am not. I'm sorry, merchants, but it just isn't right. It's not all your fault, but it still isn't right. If trends like this continue, soon only the rich will be able to afford music that everyone would like to hear.

There is no heart in that. Progressive music is one of the few venues in which populist transitions are entertained, possibly promoted, and enacted. Among its diversity of concerns, it deals with honor, fairness, evolution, and those things that enrich the human spirit. The key to

its success will lie in how far it can spread its influence, how much it will be able to make people depart from destructive habits and thought.

It has been amply demonstrated that the mainstream marketplace will not brook this commercially. It does not take a lot of ponderance to realize that a good deal of that motivation comes from a covert realization that this music foments anti-monopolistic thinking and anti-devolutionary actions (this is not philosophical dithering, believe me). That is not a mega-profitable situation. Ignorance is profitable, intelligence demands fair trade; that is a serious threat to established business and society.

Until this sort of social impasse is recognized, progressive music will never go very far beyond its limited present parameters. That is not necessarily a huge political situation, it is artistic, which also concerns itself with life but on the positive side of the ledger. It's like Zen: once you take the road, you have to travel its length or you'll never see what's at the end. Right now, that road is barely a goat path. ☺

Marc S. Tucker is publisher of Camera Obscura, which covers obscure music, a reviewer for Sound Choice magazine, and a regular reader of On Reflection. He and Camera Obscura can be reached at 1508 Faymont, Manhattan Beach, CA, 90266.

Gentle Giant cont.

These are great albums at an incredible price. The cost and relative scarcity of the Line CDs have made it difficult for people interested in Giant to hear good digital versions; now you can get a great start with Polygram's new releases. ☺



John Weathers

Ray Shulman

Derek Shulman

Gary Green

Kerry Minnear

Adrian Belew's *Young Lions*

Oh Daddy, when are you gonna make another solid record?

Adrian Belew has followed up his MTV hit "Oh Daddy" with *Young Lions*, an album that could have been a feather in his cap were it not for some tracks that are at best uninteresting and at worst downright uninspired.

Three tracks are worth noting at the outset. First, a remake of "Heartbeat," from King Crimson's *Beat*. Here Belew has a chance to throw a nice solo into a basically faithful cover that retains the emotion and simplicity of the song while picking up the tempo and incorporating extra vocal parts.

Then there are two songs written or co-written by David Bowie. The first, "Pretty Pink Rose,"

is very Ferry/Roxy-ish. The song pumps along as Bowie and Belew trade off vocals. The other track, "Gunman," isn't as memorable but it's still among the best Bowie work I've heard in a while.

Also notable is the World Beat influence in tracks like "Young Lions," which features a Dutch percussion ensemble, and "Small World." I also like "I Am What I Am," a *burning* piece of music with spoken sermon by someone named The Prophet Omega.

What keeps this record from attaining the heights of artistry are tracks like "Looking for a U.F.O." (hasn't anyone learned from Yes' "Arriving U.F.O." that flying saucers make bad music?) and "Men in Helicopters," two songs that address

topical environmental concerns. An important subject, to be sure, but one that overwhelms the lame music that carries it.

The other two tracks are the least inspired—a remake of the Travelling Wilburys' "Not Alone Anymore" (why he wanted to do it I'll never understand) and "Phone Call From the Moon," which proves that sometimes you *can* judge a song by its title.

The good tracks are full of Belew's groundbreaking experiments with guitar and electronics. With a couple of exceptions, he does all the instruments and vocals himself; maybe he should delegate some of the playing and concentrate more on his choice of material. *e*

The APEX

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We know progressive music when we hear it!