

33 1/3



20 JAZZ FUNK
GREATS
by Drew Daniel





20 Jazz Funk Greats

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20 Jazz Funk Greats



Drew Daniel



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Preface

This is the story of a band that could not make up its mind. They made an album about seduction, suicide, boredom, magic, Australia, stripping, rhetoric, plants, disco, Muzak, pornography, calligraphy, dactylomancy, politics, their dog, repetition and underwear. To put it mildly, *20 Jazz Funk Greats* sits askew within a series of books dedicated to classic albums: it doesn't add up in a stylistically coherent manner, it didn't sell particularly well when it was released, nor is it widely regarded by fans as the "best" album by Throbbing Gristle, nor did Throbbing Gristle produce work that musicologists and academics can roll easily around their tongue. Though they have proved to be juicy subjects for sensationalism, Throbbing Gristle's actual musical output resists analysis. In some sense, Throbbing Gristle (hereafter interchangeably referred to as TG) are difficult to write about because of their oblique, even hostile, relationship to music qua music. Rather than improving upon, or mutating, a pre-existing genre (think of the technically savvy, culturally pred-

atory stance of the Rolling Stones toward rhythm & blues) TG's mythos rests on the claim that they are the founding creators of an entirely new genre, "industrial music." It's a rare distinction to be the initiators of a tradition unto itself, and the tenacious hold of the term in record store bins and online newsgroups attests to its enduring success as a meme, despite its claustrophobic circularity: TG play "industrial music." What's that? Stuff that sounds like TG. To kick the tires: the rise over the past two decades of an internationally oriented reissue market and the increasingly accessible twentieth-century archive of avant-garde, electronic and improvisatory musicmaking has made the claim that TG's work is *sui generis* less and less tenable.

To an audience of contemporary *NME* readers who had only closely followed pop, rock and punk, the sounds of early Throbbing Gristle records were unearthly, entirely unexpected, withering comets of strangeness. To a present-day generation of casually eclectic listeners readily familiar with AMM and Stockhausen and Cluster, nursed on filesharing and mp3 weblogs that make one-off disco obscurities, kraut rock, musique concrète and extreme noise available to anyone with some free hard-drive space, Throbbing Gristle now feel like a particularly bewitching pop-experimental hybrid, but undeniably part of a larger canon. Yet even if it is easier today to locate TG's activity within a broader context of musicmaking, the peculiar impact and endurance of their work is hard to explain, and defining the place of *20 Jazz Funk Greats* within TG's own catalogue is harder still. *20 Jazz Funk Greats* is the sound of Throbbing Gristle no longer trying to sound like Throbbing Gristle, the sound of people burning off the associative trappings of tabloid scandal and unwanted

acceptance, the sound of people changing their minds. Widely misunderstood as their “pop album,” it’s too perverted, willful and crude to effortlessly pass as “real music,” but too mercurial and sparkly to lie still within the chilly ghetto graveyard of industrial stereotypes. I hope to count the ways I love it, rather than to tame its creepy spell.

Anyone writing a book-length study of Throbbing Gristle in the wake of Simon Ford’s masterful *Wreckers of Civilization* is placed in an enviable position. The definitive big picture of the life and times of Genesis P. Orridge, Chris Carter, Cosey Fanny Tutti and Peter “Sleazy” Christopherson as artists and individuals negotiating the shifts from late-sixties freak culture to early-eighties post-punk has been painted, freeing up those in Ford’s wake to illuminate the records themselves. Internationally recognized artists catapulted by the tabloid scandal of their 1976 “Prostitution” exhibition at the ICA into national prominence as lightning rods for public revulsion, the Coum Transmissions-into-Throbbing Gristle crossfade literally embodies the title of Simon Frith and Howard Horne’s landmark sociological music text *Art into Pop*, and Ford’s account strategically balances the early years of extreme actionist body art and transgressive performances by Coum Transmissions with the birth, flowering and death of Throbbing Gristle in thorough detail. The reader interested in late-seventies Britain will encounter an even more prodigious embarrassment of riches than the literate TG fan, for this time and place has been the subject of a great deal of recent documentary reportage and cultural analysis, from Julien Temple’s film *The Filth and the Fury* (2000) to Simon Reynolds’s encyclopedic *Rip It Up and Start Again: Postpunk 1978–1984* (2005). Because these macrohistories and

biographical narratives have already been tackled at length in other texts, I have decided to concentrate rather myopically upon *20 Jazz Funk Greats* itself as a self-contained object, an independent artifact so rich in implication that my own text will focus as strictly as possible upon its nuances, internal relationships and effects. That said, the *hortus conclusus* of *20 Jazz Funk Greats* encrypts a wealth of interconnections drawn from a bewilderingly wide territory: English history and psychogeography, international cinema, polymorphous sexual practices (both within and beyond legality), avant-garde literature and poetics, a global *mélange* of musical traditions, DIY electronics and homegrown techno-gadgetry, London countercultural gossip and occult and magical lore. I've tried to capture as many of these links and networks as I can in the space provided, but inevitably, sometimes the artwork flits butterfly-like through the hermeneutic net.

Thanks are in order. First, I wish to thank David Barker for his willingness to take a chance on an unlikely candidate for inclusion in this series. Casting a cold eye on punk's apotheosis and famously declaring that "rock and roll is for arse lickers" (a totally rock and roll thing to say), Throbbing Gristle themselves adopted an alternately arch and antagonistic stance toward the kind of mainstream musical culture that promulgates the very idea of "classic albums." That said, beneath their cranky disdain for the complacency of the culture industry, TG were nonetheless passionate music fans themselves. Indeed, Chris Carter's devotion to ABBA bordered upon an obsession, and Gen confided to me in an unguarded moment that he had read the 33 1/3 book about Pink Floyd. As an album about, among other things, the historical fate of albums of popular music as cynically marketed

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commodities rather than High Art, it makes a certain perverse sense that *20 Jazz Funk Greats* should suffer the indignity of being critically enshrined. This series remodels the canon as an expression of individual advocacy rather than some pseudo-objective index of timeless musical values, treating records as occasions for argument rather than as fixed stars in a privileged constellation, and I contribute to it in that spirit.

This book exists because of the encouragement given and examples set by a range of people, including a number of 33 1/3 authors whose entries in the series kept standards intimidatingly high. I am also grateful to a number of individuals who helped in various ways: Jon Savage, David Tibet, Val Denham, Naut Humon, Jean-Pierre Turmel, Eric Weisbard, Vickie Bennett, Ethan Port, Simon Norris, Kim Norris, Joseph Ghosn, Stephen Thrower, Jon Leidecker, Erika Clowes, Don Bolles, Matt Sussman, Jay Lesser, Tavia Nyong'o and the creators of the blog 20 Jazz Funk Greats. Most of all, I am grateful to the members of Throbbing Gristle for speaking with me and making their archives, images and memories available. They proved to be very friendly indeed.

When a fan has the opportunity to interview people who he has idolized since adolescence, critical distance risks dissolving into a puddle of enthusiasm. Gushing piffle about Throbbing Gristle, anyone? Since TG recorded themselves and did not retain the services of external engineers or producers, I am more or less entirely reliant upon their collective memories about the immediate circumstances surrounding the creation of *20 Jazz Funk Greats*. Since this occasionally requires needling and corroboration in order to establish technically specific accounts of what was plugged into what

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almost thirty years ago, some particulars have inevitably gone missing, and some of what is “remembered” may be inaccurate. As scheduling permitted, I have attempted to separate my subjects and interrogate them about each other’s remarks, and I have attempted to double-check with other members when something seemed implausible. I interviewed Chris and Cosey in person at their home in King’s Lynn, spoke with Sleazy over a Skype line to Bangkok, and talked to Gen over the phone in Manhattan, followed by an NYU conference and drunken dinner party together in New York. All parties were generous with their time, and answered my pestering follow-up emails, supplying images and corrections as needed. In the interest of flow I have tended to present their separate comments in the chronological order in which each interview occurred; as each song is discussed, the reader will usually encounter first Chris and Cosey’s remarks, then Sleazy’s and then Gen’s. I have not sought to strenuously “debunk” anything that multiple band members have confidently asserted, and have tried to give each member free rein to tell their version of events, despite the attendant dangers. This may strike the more skeptical reader as credulous folly, but I have found that Richard Cammell’s fawning description of his friend Aleister Crowley conforms closely to my own personal experience of Genesis P. Orridge in conversation: “It is certain that he had dramatised himself from his earliest years, that he had deliberately created his own daemonic legend; but so certain was he of his daemonic, his elemental origin, so sincere was he in his claim to seerdom, to the prophetic character, that his personality remained absolutely natural and unaffected” (Cammell, p. 6). That said, the members of TG have copped to deliberately misleading the public with

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partial self-revelations in the past (such as in Chris Carter's admission that the published schematics for his custom-built "Gristle-izer" contained inaccurate voltages inserted into the plans with the express purpose of throwing people off the scent and sabotaging any attempts to copy his design). Take TG's statements at face value and you may get burned. With this caveat in mind, proceed at your own risk.

This book is dedicated to Martin Schmidt: may our mission never be terminated.

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I Don't Give a Cat's Whiskers

When we are young we are a jungle of complications. We simplify as we get older.

Graham Greene, *The Quiet American*

I was sixteen. Visiting my aunt in Montreal, I left the tony Westmount hills where she practiced as a psychoanalyst and took the subway to a grittier neighborhood in search of punk rock records. At the time, I was head over heels about the Misfits, and soon hit paydirt with a copy of *Paranoia You Can Dance To*, a hardcore compilation on the Weird System label from Germany with a rare live version of the Misfits tune "Attitude." Not as good as finding an original vinyl seven-inch on the Plan 9 label—I actually had vivid dreams about finding and purchasing a copy of their coveted *Cough/Cool* single—but exciting nevertheless. Clutching my prize and flipping through the alphabetized dividers in the punk sec-

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tion in search of the Toy Dolls, I came to a stop at a band I had never heard of.

Throbbing Gristle.

The mockery and menace in the name appealed to me, and I thought I'd take a chance on an unknown quantity. Operating on the assumption (often all too true in the case of punk rock) that first albums are best albums, I hunted for the Throbbing Gristle record with the earliest recording date. Assuming that the store just didn't have their first record, I settled instead for something called *The Second Annual Report of Throbbing Gristle Recorded During the Year Ending September 3rd 1977*. It came in a clinical white sleeve, with a smudged sticker on the back that made baffling references to "research and development" and "greater capital expenditure" under the heading MUSIC FROM THE DEATH FACTORY. Back at Aunt Marilyn's house, I went into the living room, put on headphones (she was napping) and silently rocked out to the Misfits' sweaty punk rock sing-along. Then I put on Throbbing Gristle and my head split open. Locked on at high volume in my little prison of sound, I was utterly confounded by what I heard. This was not a punk rock record; this was not a rock record; this wasn't even music. At the time, I thought that a steady diet of Die Kreuzen and Corrosion of Conformity had inured me to extreme audio, but by the end of side one, the piercing synthetic shrieks, ferociously over-driven fuzz bass and visceral low-end throb (sorry, but there is no other word for it) captured on "Slug Bait" and "Maggot Death" had given me a truly punishing headache. I never made it to side two that day. I had finally found art strong enough to cause me physical pain, and I loved it.

One year later . . .

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After my first exposure to the *Second Annual Report*, I was a devotee of Throbbing Gristle, studiously absorbing the history of the band and the network of industrial music and experimental noise radiating outward from it: reading issues of *Search and Destroy* and *RE/Search* magazine for interviews with the band, and tracking down any industrial music I could find in the record shops of Louisville, Kentucky, in the mid-eighties (haphazard). The *RE/Search Industrial Culture Handbook* was the required text, and came complete with syllabi in the form of the extensive “reference” sections appended to its interviews with Throbbing Gristle and assorted pals: Cabaret Voltaire, Non, S.P.K. and Z’ev, the abject performance artist Johanna Went and the French art/theory fanzine *Sordide Sentimentale*. In the case of TG, a complete inventory of the contents of Genesis’s personal library was included. Following these copious leads, I dutifully feasted on the laundry list of subcultural touchstones that seemed to come with the territory of industrial fandom, a kind of anti-Parnassus in which Charles Manson, John Wayne Gacy and Jim Jones rub shoulders with Aleister Crowley, William S. Burroughs and the Comte de Lautreamont. Even bracketing the inherent awkwardness involved in asserting one’s individuality through such twice-removed snobbery (admiration for the favorite writers of one’s favorite bands), I can’t honestly say whether my love of Throbbing Gristle triggered me to pursue the morbid and the extreme, or whether my own sulky temperament simply found an imaginary consolation in the violent scenarios and verité audio contained in TG’s work.

To some extent, the bloodlust-at-a-safe-remove of industrial geekdom just rode piggyback with the macho aggression and intensity that punk rock had already prepared me to enjoy

in controlled bursts, but there was a distinction too: compared with the squeaky kiddie pogoing of the Toy Dolls, Throbbing Gristle were colder, more refined. Industrial culture had to be sought out through deliberate research and slow archival accumulation, consumed on record and in print at a scholarly remove, while punk rock and hardcore were living, breathing scenes, entirely within reach in Louisville, Kentucky, at the time. Punk rock was something I actively participated in and strongly identified with. Punk as I saw it—and, occasionally, made it—could be vital and intense, but it could also be sloppy and laughable. Most of all, punk was fun.

According to the puritanical logic of my teenage extremist self, this was a problem. Fed up with punk's boneheaded silliness (i.e., the Dickies), I wound up embracing industrial music and noise culture because their fearless pursuit of the ugly and unpleasant seemed to successfully embody nihilism rather than pay inconsistent lip service to it. "No Fun" was a song of complaint from the Stooges, and when the Sex Pistols covered it they ramped up the obnoxiousness and disdain, but they still, essentially, sounded like people in search of fun who were energetically bitching when it didn't arrive. The clammy, weedy, thin, unpleasant sounds of Throbbing Gristle's needling high-end and the dull ache inspired by their relentless low-end throb weren't the sounds of petty gripes about "no fun," they literally *were* no fun: after my first encounters with TG, I felt exhausted and oppressed, as if I'd inhaled anti-matter. It was a bummer to listen to, but you somehow felt stronger afterward because you could take it. Perversely, in a logic that perhaps only anorexics and straight-edgers can relate to, I desired it because it was *anti-pleasure*. In the wake of this encounter, punk rock and hardcore came off as essentially just