COLOSSAL YOUTH

by Michael Blair
and Joe Bucciero

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COLOSSAL YOUTH

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For You are Movement …

Colossal statue of a youth c.590 b.c. marble 3'05 m
Pit east of Temple of Poseidon, Sounion
Athens, National Museum

Young marble giants greeted the sailor from Cape Sounion as he entered the home stretch to Athens. Two basic intuitions of Greek art—tensed vitality and geometric structuring—are as yet disunited: the sculptor partly carves, partly maps an abstract concept of human form on to the rectangular block.

Richter, Kouroi *figs. 33–9.*[1]

In some photographs, the ancient stone faces are half-obliterated: swirls of ornamented ear lobes, geometrically braided hair, flattened foreheads, and deep eye sockets fall down the right side of the face; on the left side, the marble is cracked, giving way to unsculpted jagged rock. The colors, too, are lost to time. Ancient Greek art historian Gisela Richter estimates that these sculptures—massive marble statues depicting nude youths called *kouroi*—were once splashed with bright hues, but we can only use our imaginations today to construct a full picture: gold, brown, or black locks of hair; midnight black or sunny

blue eyes; bracelets and necklaces marked with flourishes of red. When first built, these figures stood guard over the Temple of Poseidon on the promontory of Cape Sounion, a rocky peninsula 43 miles from Athens.

The cape has a history of tragic homecomings. In *The Odyssey*, Kings Menelaus and Nestor are sailing home on their victorious voyage back from Troy when, rounding the corner of Cape Sounion, Apollo strikes down one of Menelaus's most trusted crew members. The Greek fleet lands to build a funeral pyre, but the funeral is only a harbinger of more bad things to come. The gods cast hurricanes upon the sailors and throw them back out to sea, their long-awaited homecoming delayed again. The sailors are almost there, Homer suggests, but they're still *somewhere else*. Sounion is not the Greece of wine-filled homecoming feasts: it's a cragged pile of rocks at the mercy of the weather and the gods.

Over time, as the sculptors of nearby Athens began to scale their figures down to more human proportions, the "colossal," 10-feet-tall youths who guarded the port would have appeared larger-than-life as sailors passed by, ringing around the cape toward civilization. A few hundred years after the *kouroi* had been built, artists shifted their attention to the bodies of adult gods rather than unnamed youths; their chisels carved out lifelike veins and muscles, rather than the abstract geometric braids and distended forward-driving legs of the *kouroi*. All the way out on Sounion, the "young marble giants" would eventually greet civilized Greek sailors with the remnants of a long-gone history, of a time nearly lost to memory.

In the mid-1970s, a young songwriter named Stuart Moxham picked up a copy of Richter's 1942 book *Kouroi: Archaic Greek Youths, a Study of the Development of the Kouros Type in Greek Sculpture* from the shelves of an art school library in Cardiff, Wales. Stuart, who had a wry sense of humor, was likely tickled by the book's subtitle: "archaic youth," aptly described his isolated existence in remote Cardiff, a seaport city 150 miles to the west of London. An old soul, he thought of himself as more archaic than anarchic. But he was also a hopeless romantic—something of a teenage spirit, although in his twenties—and his vague, open-ended songs of heartbreak sounded ancient and emotionally oversized compared to the terse political indictments coming from London punks. In the late 1970s, Londoners were the youths of "now," but Stuart came from Cardiff and, seemingly, from another era.

In the library, he found something. The image of the *kouroi* fit the music Stuart had begun making with his brother, Philip, and Philip's girlfriend, Alison. Their minimal setup of electric guitar, bass, vocals, and a homemade drum machine was raw and barren in a different way to that of London three-chord anarchist punk bands like the Sex Pistols. And, Stuart, Philip, and Alison's quiet, seemingly unfinished, gap-filled songs came from someplace else—it was music for those not-yet-home, for youths who tended to turn inward, and even backward, rather than onward into a raucous mosh pit. In Richter's description of those ancient statues—sculptures that announced the start of Greek civilization to historians, yet were too block-like and ancient to ever fully be a part of it—Stuart, Philip, and

Alison discovered a vocabulary to articulate their newly formed project. The band would be called "Young Marble Giants"; the name of their one major work—released as a full-length album on Rough Trade Records in 1980—*Colossal Youth*.

This link—between the band name, album title, and their origins in a book on ancient Greek sculpture—is a clue: The music can't be separated from those who make it. From the beginning, the band deliberately chose to merge the sounds of *Colossal Youth* with the coincidences and contradictions of their everyday lives. Like *kouroi*, Young Marble Giants and their songs are caught between stillness and motion—rigidly cast in stone, but posed with one foot flexed and stepping forward. Their lyrics are filled with a sense that their Cardiff home is also not quite home. And, like the half-obliterated faces of the colossal youths, their sound blends together a celebration of the mechanical, as well as that of the natural world. It's easy to point to Richter's "two basic intuitions of Greek art"—"tensed vitality and geometric structuring"—as hallmarks of the YMG sound. You can hear something like that "tensed vitality" in the muted strikes of Stuart's super-trebly Rickenbacker guitar, and "geometric structuring" in the interlocking, patterned jabs of both Philip's bass lines and the ticking beats made by the drum machine. But, as Richter notes of the *kouroi*, these two intuitions are "disunited"—they're both there, but they're also separate.

"The sculptor partly carves, partly maps an abstract concept of human form on to the rectangular block." How do we listen to this music which carves out the moment in front of us, yet also maps a time and place that remains unknown? What do all these contradictions—and the

half-formed thoughts and questions they produce—sound like? Halfway through the album, Young Marble Giants say that "*Colossal Youth* is showing the way to go." Like the *kouroi*, the album will point you home. But what of the place where they live—the place we're only meant to pass through? For the sailor on the way home, the young marble giants of *Colossal Youth* are only ever seen in relative motion: dotting the horizon, colossal for a moment, and then, as the ship moves on, fading out of view.

* * *

Young Marble Giants were born out of a Cardiff-based cover band called True Wheel (named after a 1974 Brian Eno song of the same name). Brothers Stuart and Philip Moxham played together on guitar and bass respectively, running through glam rock and proto-punk songs at local venues—at least until Stuart decided he needed a break. He took a brief sojourn to a farm outside the city, and when he came back, True Wheel had a new backup singer: Alison Statton. Alison and Philip started dating, and when Stuart approached his brother to start a new band, one in which they would write and perform their own songs instead of others', Philip and Alison "presented me with a fait accompli …" Stuart said. "It's both of us or nothing."[2] Stuart chose "both," and the newly formed YMG began rehearsing in a Cardiff storefront soon thereafter.

In 1979, the close-knit Welsh trio self-recorded and released a cassette; the next year, they contributed two songs to a compilation by local do-it-yourself post-punk label Z Block Records. It was the songs on this compilation

that caught the ear of Geoff Travis, founder of London's Rough Trade, which was at the time the global center of punk and post-punk. "[W]hen I got to track nine, I think it was," Travis recalls in Neil Taylor's Rough Trade oral history, *Document and Eyewitness*, "I just stopped in my tracks, it was so good."[3] So good, in fact, that Travis rang YMG up in Cardiff,* signed them to his label, and brought them to London. There, Travis gave the young musicians free creative reign, and the three decided to record a full-length album rather than test the waters with an EP. When Travis "asked us what *we* wanted to do," Stuart told us, "I convinced Phil and Alison, over a cup of tea around the corner, that we should put aside any concerns about spending the label's money and do our album; after all, Rough Trade was the hippest label on the planet at the time and the impact of coming out of nowhere with an LP would be the greatest we could make."[4] Their decision made, YMG promptly traveled—per Travis's suggestion—to the pastoral Foel Studio in Llanfair Caereinion, Wales, where they recorded their one and only full-length album, *Colossal Youth*.

'Coming out of nowhere,' as it were, YMG dropped the LP—quiet, sparse, personal—in February of 1980. Successful on the charts (at least by underground rock standards), *Colossal Youth* was followed by two EPs: *Final*

* Travis used a phone number that he had seen on the back cover of *Is the War Over?* The number went to a payphone down the street from Z Block's headquarters. Label co-founder Spike Williams remembers that a young boy knocked on their door after picking up Travis's call, and asked for "Mr. Z Block."

Day later that same year and 1981's instrumental *Testcard*. *Testcard* was a posthumous release, though, as YMG had broken up around the turn of 1981 following a brief and tumultuous North American tour that was conducted in a fog of what Stuart has called an "Olympian ganja intake."[5]

In the span of less than a year, the group went from unknown to celebrated outsiders in London to marginal figures in the history of post-punk, with their music and its context in some ways forgotten to time. Subsequent artists—such as Beat Happening's Calvin Johnson, Kurt Cobain, and The xx—have counted YMG as an influence, but, ever under-documented, YMG themselves remain tough to pin down. They're something of an "abstract concept," as it were, like the austere stone sculptures after which they're named.

Despite the initial success of *Colossal Youth* and the generations of fans and musicians who've bestowed genuine cult status upon the album, most histories of post-punk hardly mention YMG. Both Simon Reynolds's canonical *Rip It Up and Start Again: Postpunk 1978–1984* and Rob Young's *Rough Trade: Labels Unlimited* spend less than a page on the Cardiff trio, while some of the band's peers from London, Manchester, and other English cities receive whole chapters. Reynolds and Young speak of YMG in reverential language, and yet their analyses go no further than briefly recounting the band's origins, calling *Colossal Youth* one of the finest documents of the era, and then hurrying on to the band's early break up. Reynolds went on to write liner notes to the 2007 reissue of *Colossal Youth*; his text is an invaluable resource for those seeking to learn more about YMG. But still, why, if YMG's sole LP is so venerated and well-loved,

have music historians devoted so little time to writing about it?

One answer is that YMG and their thorny history of contradictions and coincidences simply don't fit neatly into any general recounting of the post-punk age. While they shared qualities with Cardiff peers like Reptile Ranch or British Rough Traders like The Raincoats, they were much quieter and less overtly political than nearly all their contemporaries. They wrote short, tightly composed, densely emotional songs that favored stark silences and gaps over chaotic walls of distorted noise. As soon as you feel like you've figured their music out, it writhes out of your grasp, echoing off the wall in some other way, and starts to sound like something else. And, with less than a year in the public eye, there are precious few archives of photos, demos, or artifacts for historians to pore over.

As a Welsh band in London, YMG, with their music, clothing, and attitude, stood out even in a Rough Trade world designed to look and sound different in the first place. As outsiders and introverts—as "provincial" people from the boonies of Wales—their music held up a mirror to the society around them: exposing the cultural, musical, and political contradictions of the time, while also exploring them.

"Music is more than an object of study," economist Jacques Attali writes in his influential 1977 book *Noise: The Political Economy of Music*: "It is a way of perceiving the world."[6] YMG give us a fractured, disjointed way of looking at the world, one full of contradictions and misunderstandings. They provide a framework in which the family and the rebellious spirit of youth, the chaos

of the city and the serenity of the countryside, the machine and the tree root, the personal and the political all come together and collide in continually new, fluid ways. They make music which lives right now in any given moment, music that's "Constantly Changing"—to cite the title of track five of *Colossal Youth*—rather than sitting comfortably within the confines of any genre or era of music. Without genres, histories, and other classifications to lean on, we're forced to listen with all the contingencies, subjectivities, and changes that go along with living inside ourselves and in the world. Wherever—and whenever—we are, we've no choice but to let the marble giants show us the way to go.

And to pay attention to how they look at us. We're always something different, to each other and even to ourselves. Our pasts are out to sea. *And when I see you*, they sing, *Constantly changing / Never the same as, never remaining*.