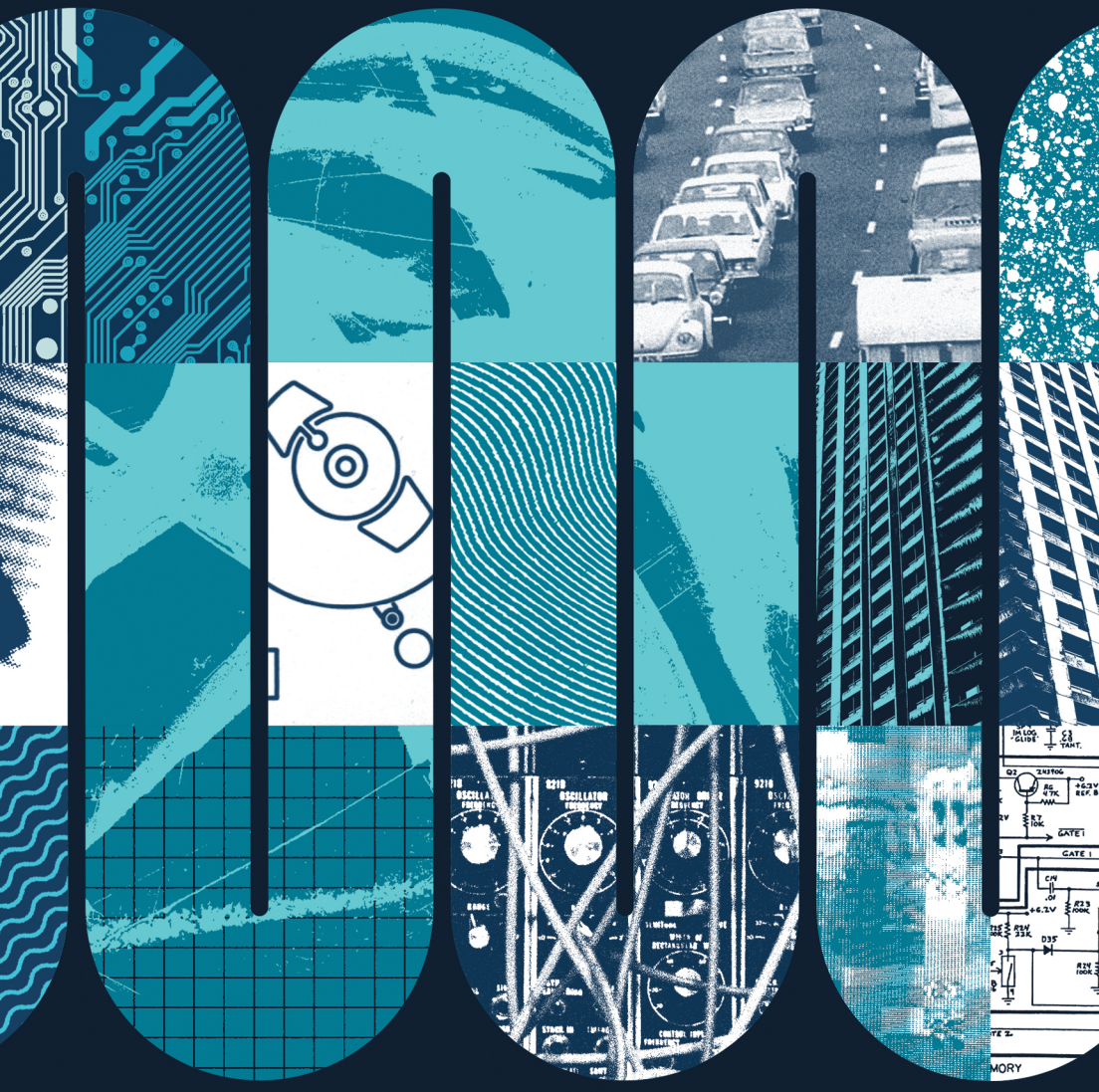
DARK WAVES

The Synthesizer and the Dystopian Sound of Britain (1977-80)



NEIL O'CONNOR

DARK WAVES

POPULAR MUSICS MATTER: SOCIAL, POLITICAL AND CULTURAL INTERVENTIONS

Series Editors: *Eoin Devereux, Aileen Dillane and Martin J. Power*

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Dark Waves: The Synthesizer and the Dystopian Sound of Britain (1977-80), Neil O'Connor

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FOREWORD

I stepped into the seventh decade of the twentieth century on a day of personal significance—the first of January 1970, my fifteenth birthday. An age that suggests the ensuing trauma of adulthood, but with the optimism and uncertainty of youth still ringing loudly through me. In a wider world, it was also the dawn of a decade that similarly carried both the residual disruption of the previous years, matched with not-unreasonable expectations. The horrors of the Vietnam War, widespread civil unrest, and shifting geopolitical tectonic plates were frequently masked by the promise of new technologies and Technicolor media, all driven by the boom of movement and voracious consumerism. It was a decade of first-world acceleration and the resulting disorder of global entropy. The year itself was largely uneventful, but the seventies and the early years of the eighties proved to be a period of unpredictable change. A time in which future dreams were made corporeal against the backdrop of economic, social, and technological transformation, and importantly, a time captured most vividly through the exploding spectacle of popular culture.

The period marked a wider sense of growing up, of post-war reality that had been put on hold by a sixties naïve euphoria reluctant to address its systemic complexities. On a national level, the pressures played out in a dysfunctional political landscape, struck by inertia in dealing with a sclerotic, largely nineteenth-century industrial infrastructure, shaped by class, race, and regional divisions. Successive governments neglected the reality of post-war migration and merely inflamed racial tensions whilst the notion of a growing moneyed, urbane, service industry was at odds with a fractious working class.

The cutting adrift of the industrial North did not start with the current neo-Tory, levelling up, red-wall political zeitgeist. I grew up in

Sheffield, the frontline of this very real divide. The People's Republic of South Yorkshire. A city built on the monoculture of steel, buttressed by the coalfields of the surrounding areas. An area of general classlessness, in the sense that everyone readily identified as 'working class,' but also one that, after the disruption of war, blind to changing global economics, saw its future through a vision of a potential shiny future. 'Sheffield: City of the Future' boldly sold itself to the world. A booming youth who saw a new world of television, music, and life-changing technology. The darkness illuminated by the bright lights of the actually-realised space age. This clash between emotions and reality encapsulated both personal experiences and the events in the real world. We saw this flashing, push-button destiny alongside rubbish-strewn streets, power cuts, and industrial action.

The perception that electronic music, this emergent form slowly encroaching the growing music world during the second half of the seventies, was driven by an avalanche of Japanese technology burying a new generation of musicians and tech-savvy artists is pervasive. Our perception of the future began with this idea of ergonomic, click-switch functionality. Picking up from the sci-fi dreams of earlier cinema and television, music was the future's wet dream. But in truth, outside the wealthy players—ELP, Tangerine Dream, and similar 'progressives'—this more embryonic period was built upon a much more prosaic repurposing of our post-war tech world. It was, for youth like us, moneyless and involved simple electronics, home-built tools, primitive VCOs, filters, fuzz boxes made from Practical Electronics' circuit designs, decommissioned military tape recorders, and ad hoc tape delays.

The dream was not Korg or Yamaha, but the British-built EMS machines, which augmented their complex synthesisers with toylike touch-sensitive keys. Electronic music was emerging from lab coat experimentalism, and musique concrete, in our case, of Cabaret Voltaire, in a tiny loft in Sheffield, but touched by the glamorous, from-another-planet affectations of David Bowie and Eno's Roxy Music. The future of music was one of hot-styled 'make and make do', built from shortwave radio magazines, charity shop guitars, Woolworth's makeup counter, and army surplus chic.

The everyday DIY reality was not a barrier, merely an inconvenience, and on the whole, a creative prompt. As a generation born of TV and the beginnings of cheap travel, we were opened up to speculative worlds and exotic possibilities. We were overrun by imagination. In truth, the vacuum that money's absence afforded was filled up with exploration of the massive unknown; busy, enquiring, restless minds. We were youthful in a very evocative time and a very media-saturated space. The opportunities to dig

and question were like air: We sucked it in, used it, and blew it out. Our access to everything in front of us was unique. McLuhan's communicated and connected global village enabled us. It offered autodidactic opportunities unavailable to previous generations; information at this moment, before it became monetised data, was plentiful, empowering, and motivating. What we didn't know didn't scare us, but it provoked us. Technology provided both agency and facility. It filled the sky with images and sounds we could play with, new worlds, like minds, speculative pathways out of a drab reality. It provided the means by which we could express their meaning for us, and it suggested how we could play them. It was all accessible; it was all culture; it was all popular. Pop was grain, texture, noise, and colour. Colour was pop.

As the decade rolled on, music became increasingly rendered by these shiny new machines. Synthesisers augmented guitars and drums. Joy Division, the perfect barometer, in their final moments, drifted into a rich new sound, paving the way for the New Order to follow. In the case of acts like the Human League, Gary Numan, and Depeche Mode, traditional instruments were replaced altogether, synthesisers creating familiar but ersatz, and novel, sounds. Others saw a different application of these technologies, their potential to divert the power latent within the system. As punk, at its most fundamental, had tapped into an important resistance, a need to challenge the accepted order, we and others saw the need to completely ditch the form and content to truly disrupt. We ourselves, but Throbbing Gristle in particular, felt it necessary to push the raw energy of the sounds, images, and words into new shapes rather than emulate pop and rock's conventional forms. It was simply not enough to apply faux instrument sounds in the belief you were creating something new; only real change could be achieved by subverting the technology. Discard, or hack the manual; a new counterculture that, by distorting any intended use, and simply overreaching, saw it was possible to transform things, to give us new eyes and ears.

Electricity comes from other planets, Lou Reed told us. We merged the power sounds of the city into the new electronic palette. To a constant backdrop of arc furnaces, incessant factory drones, interjected by the metallic pop and crash of steel, we imagined the noises of the new. Mutating industrial power into technologically rendered sounds, until now, unheard. Music from another planet. The key element that enabled this sonic alchemy was 'the studio.' Until this point, recording, as part of the making and selling operation, was in the grip of a corporate music industry: formalised, regulated, expensive, and largely divorced from the creative part of the process.

Emerging electronic music shattered this component of the industry cartel; it took ownership of how and where music could be made, feeding into a burgeoning, hungry, independent label culture. Rough Trade, Factory, Fast, Industrial, Mute, all began to break the corporate monopoly, all provided opportunities for the new artists to be heard. New voices, new sounds. The importance of this lies in how the studio, no longer just a means to capture performance as a 'record' to be marketed and sold, or an indulgent artist's playroom, rather became an instrument in its own right. Affordable, accessible, a space to play, a home of experimentation, and a tool of creation. For myself, as Cabaret Voltaire, this building of our own 'sound factory,' a kind of low-budget hybrid of Andy Warhol's loft space and Kraftwerk's Kling Klang, offered self-sufficiency and became intrinsic to the whole making and releasing of music, away from prying ears. For electronic and post-punk artists of the time, independence gave control, the ability to choose where, when, and how they functioned. This domestication of recording, helped by more new, readily available technology, preempted the growth of late-century musicmaking. The autonomy of the process began here; it was the twinkle in the eye of a million bedroom studios that today lie at the heart of contemporary music. Artists controlled the electricity.

Nothing is new; nothing is lost. We built on the old to create the new. The traditions of montage and 'objets trouvés,' Duchamp's 'ready mades,' provided an effective process of building the reality of the world around us into the work. Breaking our world apart and putting it back together in new shapes. The cutup techniques of William Burroughs and Brion Gysin, the collages John Heartfield and Kurt Schwitters, were applied to television samples, recording of political radio, underground film grabs, newspaper clippings, and images.

The medium varied, but the medium was, indeed, the message. Tools in the shape of tape recorders and Super-8 film allowed us to capture this newly saturated world, to bend and reshape it to our own style. The subsequent technologies of video recording and audio sampling would enable immediate, quick-fire responses—our Western Works studio had the TV set to record twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. Old techniques, new applications.

For myself, the merging of the industrial sounds of the city and the future came increasingly through the vector of rhythm. The shape of the responses came from our long-standing connection to the beat. Seeped in soul, funk, and ska as young kids, we would push on with the Cabs during the eighties through our teenage affection to the sounds of the night. But

it required technology to articulate this new rhythm age. Freed from the dependence upon cumbersome drum kits, and the chaos of rogue drummers, we now had drum machines, arpeggiators, and sequencers, our mechanisms of change. CV (control voltage)-gate, and MIDI (musical instrument digital interface) means by which these machines could connect to each other became more widely used, enabling them to tightly synchronise, to talk and dance with each other, driven by rhythm. The *New York Times* writer Jon Pareles made the point that it was the century of rhythm—the tempo of industry, the beat of technology, the pulse of the city. The repetition of rhythm, its hypnotic hold, all reinforced by the revived 12-inch format. The 12-inch became the default for club releases, extending the duration of tracks, opening them up to freestyle dubbed-out mixes. These were records that could push the low-end frequencies, through supercharged, often handcrafted sound systems. The politics of change was taking place in the darker subliminal spaces; the body became the locus, waiting for the soon-to-come ecstatic release.

Time is sequential, but fluid; we structure our own ideas in order to help us make sense of how things happen and why. Decades offer convenient points of transition, but in truth, things are much more complex and compound. This late-century period was without question a time of significant change, of uncertainty and premillennial shift and drift. Perhaps the real decade of sound happened in reaction to the periods in flux preceding them: 1976–1988. A less arbitrary, more considered epoch, in which popular culture, driven by technology, and generational, youthful, energy reshaped our lives in response. The upheavals of the early to mid-1970s, and the mid-1980s, both periods of conflict: war, strikes, and social unrest, which in turn saw riposte through the emergence of punk, post-punk, and the later explosive club cultures of house and techno. All spikes in the system. Electronic music, and the technologies it used, both catalysed and configured these changes. It is not a formula or a neat linear trajectory, but an acknowledgment of change, of action and reaction: a dialectic and a sonic synthesis. A volatile but notable and authentic period for music in which uncertainty, hope, and blind faith made everything alive and possible.

Stephen Mallinder
(Cabaret Voltaire)
2022

INTRODUCTION

Britain during the 1970s was a country and culture in flux, and the threat of nuclear war, mass unemployment, and strikes made it a particularly gloomy period. This was mediated through the media via disquieting TV theme music and supernatural shows, such as *Children of the Stones*. The modern world was on its way as giant concrete tower blocks paved the way toward a new decade. Further to this:

> There were few distractions; television closed down early, video was yet to arrive, computer games were crude, food was functional. LPs and singles were expensive and thus treasured, as were books. Britain has not yet made the shift from a largely literary culture to the overwhelmingly visual one of today (Lay 2007, 54).

The use of the synthesizer has spurred many fundamental shifts in the mechanisms of musicmaking and within this, a growing number of electronic acts were using the synthesizer to soundtrack-changing times. Along with the popularisation of the non-musician and the musical aesthetics established by both the Punk (ca. 1974–1980) and Post-Punk (ca. 1978–1984) movements, the synthesizer led to new and innovative effects, ideas, and processes. In parallel, some acts used such approaches in musicmaking in 1970s Britain to reflect the social and political climate at the time. Many of these acts would go on to influence the more commercial sound of synthesised popular music during the 1980s, which, in turn, shaped the sound of mainstream electronic music today.

Dark Waves examines the role of the synthesizer and electronics in shaping the dark and dystopian sound of electronic music in 1970s Britain, presenting a collected musicological analysis of the acts Cabaret Voltaire,

Throbbing Gristle, the Normal, Fad Gadget, the Human League, Gary Numan, and Visage, and it considers the background, influences, and technological approaches to each work. Further to this, an analysis of a seminal work of each act is presented, exploring and considering the production, track by track.

Part 1, 'Background Noise,' attempts to contextualise the social and cultural landscape of Britain in the mid- to late 1970s. Chapter 1, 'Dystopian Sentimentalities,' explores the idea of dystopianism and presents a number of early literary works within the field while at the same time considers both the cultural and technological factors that affected the development of the acts presented. Chapter 2, 'Political, Economic, and Social Influences,' is concerned with government structure and major policies during this period, detailing how major urban areas were going under a transformative change as tower blocks and urban areas were decentralising communities. This, coupled with oil shortages, strikes, and the threat of nuclear war saw Britain lose its grasp and direction, which, in turn, allowed for subcultural divisions such as Punk, to appear.

Chapter 3, 'Technology and Aesthetical Frameworks,' considers the popularisation of the synthesizer and uses a number of approaches, including technological determinism and cybernetics, in an attempt to address how technology influences both human action and thought. Many of these approaches are based on the historical observation that technologies are often released without thought given toward their impact. Further to this, it again examines the synthesizer in its development of new approaches and aesthetics. The synthesizer, which was once only in the hands of the few (primarily progressive rock bands) soon became available with the advent of Japanese synthesizers. Through this, musicians, and indeed non-musicians, could now generate the sounds of the future, broadly contextualising how musicians were using the synthesizer as a conduit for nonconformity and musical subversion.

Part 2, 'Outsider Electronics,' discusses how many of the acts documented in this publication were influenced by seminal art movements, and in this, would go on to inform their aesthetics and sound. Chapter 4, 'Cabaret Voltaire: Dadaism Up North,' examines the seminal act whose work consisted primarily through the experimentation with DIY electronics and tape machines, as well as Dada-influenced performances. Finding an audience during the Post-Punk era, Cabaret Voltaire integrated their experimental sensibilities and were the most innovative and influential electronic groups of their era. This chapter focuses on the band's approach and the impact of their album *Mix Up* (1979).

Chapter 5, 'Throbbing Gristle: Music from the Death Factory,' examines the acts' evolution from the experimental performance art group COUM Transmissions to a musical act. This chapter examines the band's diverse range of influences: transgressive and confrontational aesthetics as well as sound manipulation (noise; pre-recorded tape-based samples), influenced by the work of William S. Burroughs and Brion Gysin. Their seminal album, *20 Jazz Funk Greats* (1979), is presented for discussion.

Science fiction and electronic music have always shared thematic ideals, and Chapter 6, 'The Normal: The Car Crash Set,' documents Daniel Miller's *The Normal*, an act majorly influenced by the works of J.G. Ballard, in particular *Crash* (1973). The release of *T.V.O.D./Warm Leatherette* in 1978 and the Mute Records in 1979, a label that would go on to shape the electronic sound of the 1980s and beyond, positioned Miller as a key figure of influence.

A number of the acts included for discussion would not go on to gain the same levels of respect and recognition for their music, as Chapter 7, 'Fad Gadget: Mechanised Curiosity,' documents. The work and life of Frank Tovey (1956–2002) and Fad Gadget represent an act that would change and morph (musically) with the times. Although his early work was largely ignored at the time, Tovey's contribution would go on to inform the sound of Post-Punk and industrial music in both Europe and the United States, through his album *Fireside Favourites* (1980).

Part 3, 'Crossing the Mainstream,' examines acts that crossed over into the popular consciousness and zeitgeist. Chapter 8, 'The Human League: Electronically Yours,' documents the act's earlier days, when they were an experimental act, until a split saw members go their separate ways, resulting in Heaven 17 and a much more commercially orientated Human League Mark II. Technologically, the act was ground-breaking, and this is discussed via their album *Reproduction* (1979).

During 1977–1980, some artists were accused of being pastiche, and their music and contributions became mocked (particularly by the press). Chapter 9, 'Gary Numan: Subhuman in Suburbia,' documents Numan's rise to fame and his not-only-mainstream appeal but his commercial crossover. His work, particularly with the Mini-Moog synthesizer, would feature heavily in the work that is reviewed, *The Pleasure Principle* (1979).

As the synthesised musical landscape became more and more commercialised, the dominance of fashion and style would play a major factor in the success for many acts of the 1980s. Chapter 10, 'Visage: The New Guard,' documents the group and is discussed in relation to its collaborative effect. Essentially a studio group, the New Guard was fronted by Steve Strange

and musically directed by Midge Ure, who would go on to have even more success fronting Ultravox. Their album *Visage* (1980) is presented here as a document for changing times, breaking the dystopian for something to help with an optimistic viewpoint at the cusp of a new decade.

Chapter 11, 'Conclusion: Influence and Afterword,' analyses how these acts worked against the backdrop of the feelings of social alienation that many of the movement's key participants and fans were experiencing at the time. These acts were making music during the Punk movement, and while they were both concerned with rewriting musical norms, they, in many ways, created an alternative world viewpoint, one that dealt with themes of isolation and despair, mediated with sounds that seemed to have come from another planet. The chapter also examines the influence of the acts discussed, highlighting how dystopian pop crept (subconsciously and consciously) into the mainstream and the UK Charts via acts like Depeche Mode and Duran Duran during the mid- to late 1980s.

The legacy of the acts presented in the book is evident across all forms of popular electronic musicmaking today. However, academically, as no such collection exists, *Dark Waves* aims to shed further light on this monumental and influential movement and moment of both technological and cultural significance.

I

BACKGROUND NOISE

1

DYSTOPIAN SENTIMENTALITIES

Dystopia is the creation of other worlds, imagined far in the future, and it can be defined by an array of terms, primarily related to societal issues, including notions of repression of independent thought maintained by government, corporate, bureaucratic, or technological control. Within this was the controller and the protagonist; the former is responsible for the surveillance and uniformity of the latter. With such levels of oppression, questions of oppression and untrust give way to the formation of its associated mindset. Before dystopia, utopia, or an ideal set of conditions, often set with impossible ideals. Often it was in this mindset of writers that such worlds were born. Indeed, its Greek translation suitably places it as οὐ ('not') and τόπος ('place'). This chapter examines the above while considering topics such as 'psychogeography' and cultural issues.

The onset of the global COVID pandemic has seen a rise in popularity of dystopian fiction, and indeed, television, with series like Charlie Brooker's *Black Mirror*, *The Hunger Games*, and the adaptation of Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* captivating us with extreme levels of pessimism. While these shows may relate to our lived experiences in some light, they no doubt raise levels of both cultural and social anxiety and of the notion of how people with power can manipulate the population through fear, oppression, and impoverishment, is critical in understanding the concept of the 'dystopian machine.'

Dystopian sentimentalities first appeared within key works of fiction, including *Mundus Alter ET Idem (The World Different and the Same)* by Joseph Hall, first published in 1596. It paints a roundly negative critique of society at the time. It documents a messenger, Mercurius Brittanicus, on a voyage to Terra Australis Incognita (now Antarctica). On his arrival, Mercurius discovers a world where the norms of society are exaggerated,

ultimately revealing its faults. Mercurius questions man's weakness and his appetite for vices. A deep feeling of cynicism fills his soul on departure from this new world.

The book points its finger toward the ambitious and the free-spirited, and its publication is said to have heavily influenced Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*, published in 1726. H.G. Wells ended the Victorian era with the publication in 1899 of *When the Sleeper Awakes*, revised and republished in 1910 as *The Sleeper Awakes*. The story, in which a dream becomes reality, sees the protagonist awake in 2100 to a world ruthlessly governed by a harsh dictatorship. Two key dystopian themes are born within *When the Sleeper Awakes*—the use of technology as a tool of manipulation and the advent of the subterranean. More importantly, the book helped set a thematic path toward a number of seminal British works that explore with the dystopian mindset: *Nineteen Eighty-Four* by George Orwell and *Brave New World* by Aldous Huxley.

The role of society and technology is beautifully played out in E.M. Forster's short story *The Machine Stops*, first published in 1909. The story tells of a population that lives in small pods buried within vast catacombs underneath sprawling cities. All is controlled and provided for by 'The Machine,' including the provision of food, shelter, and more importantly, communication. In this world, technology provides and submits to your every need:

> Then she generated the light, and the sight of her room, flooded with radiance and studded with electric buttons, revived her. There were buttons and switches everywhere—buttons to call for food for music, for clothing. There was the hot-bath button, by pressure of which a basin of (imitation) marble rose out of the floor, filled to the brim with a warm deodorised liquid. There was the cold-bath button. There was the button that produced literature. And there were of course the buttons by which she communicated with her friends. The room, though it contained nothing, was in touch with all that she cared for in the world. (Forster 1909, 130)

Forster predicted that technology would become central to the human condition. He pointed out that our race needed it for survival, while at the same time, he cautioned on its overreliance. These publications provide a basis and insight into the misuse of power and technology, and the implications of technology are clear, and indeed, more vivid today than ever before, through the use and misuse of technology.