

XTC IN GERMANY

"PARTRIDGE HAS bought a fort."

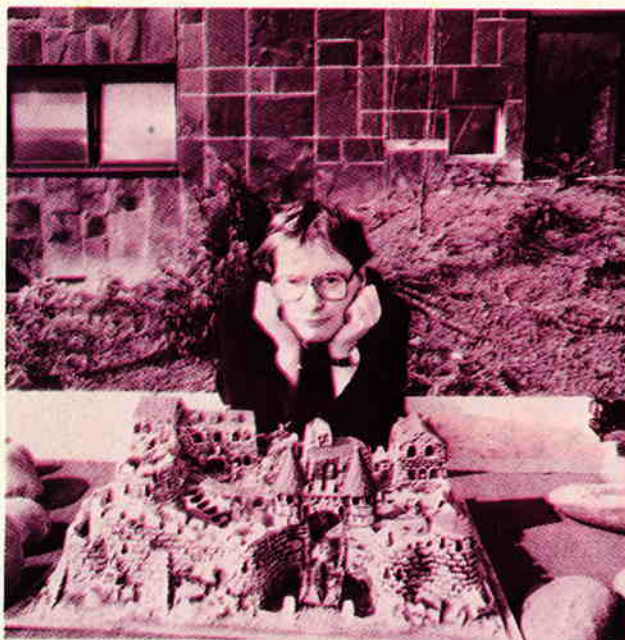
The well-rounded Wiltshire tones of XTC drummer Terry Chambers relay the news of his colleague's shopping expedition with the customary mixture of affectionate amusement and uncomprehending bemusement. The fort, incidentally, is of the moulded plastic variety rather than stone and cement; the latest manifestation of Andy's rediscovery of the joys of toy soldiers.

"I bought two scaling ladders so little men can climb the walls," he says happily, "a catapult so I can fling rocks at it, two shields for archers to hide behind — shields on wheels: sounds like a medieval mobile armoureders! — and a selection of Prince Valiant looking characters to populate the castle."

We're in Munich on the second day of XTC's brief German jaunt, the warm-up stages of their latest assault on the world's collective consciousness. The tour got off to a flying start in Berlin the previous night — a good beginning marred only by the unfortunate Chambers being fined for dodgy driving on the journey to Munich. The fact that Terry was only a front seat passenger didn't seem to bother the East German police, who insisted on relieving the aggrieved drummer of 20 marks regardless.

A fine start all round, you might say.

Tonight's gig — the Alabamahalle — is a weird one and no mistake. In contrast to the rest of elegant Munich, it's what looks like an old army barracks, badly shot up and then left virtually untouched since the war. Now it's been bought up by the city council for renovation as a kind of youth centre complete with gig hall and rehearsal and recording facilities. (If only



(OR IT'S THE FORT THAT COUNTS)

BY IAN CRANNA

British town councils were so enlightened!) But it's not just the bullet holes and barbed wire that make it so odd. As Andy points out, the place is covered with posters for bands of whom nothing has been heard since. I mean, whatever did happen to The United Balls Band or Satin Whale?

Despite XTC's not having played in Germany for three years, the gig is a sell-out and the band reward the faithful with another fine set — a mixture of established favourites and a strong selection from their excellent new double album "English Settlement".

Something almost magical has happened to XTC between

"Sergeant Rock" and this new album, transforming them from perennially hopeful outsiders to accomplished, confident front-runners. As with Squeeze — another fine but image-less band — in this time of absent trends and dumb poses, people have suddenly latched onto the fact that XTC make very good music; music with power and depth as well as the accepted cleverness and humour.

"Aah," observes Chambers with satisfaction as the band arrive back at the hotel from a record company-funded meal in the early hours of the morning, "just time to cruise into that bar for a quick nightcap and that's it."

"You don't want a nightcap," chides Partridge. "You'll have a small sea of lager, that's what you'll have."

"Where is tomorrow night's gig?" asks Terry, choosing to ignore this. "The Wartburg?"

"The Wartburg in Wiesbaden," confirms patient tour manager Frank.

"Is Wiesbaden in the mountains?" asks photographer Eric hopefully.

"I'm sorry mate," says Chambers, departing for the bar, "you're not getting us on skis."

Andy Partridge is not one of the world's snappier early morning risers. Resembling a cross between a newly born puppy and a gale-damaged haystack, he's too late for breakfast yet again.

But Wiesbaden is five hours drive away and deadlines have to be met. With Terry, perfectionist/guitarist Dave Gregory (already locked into Elvis Costello's "Trust" on his Walkman) and even the sleepy-headed Colin Moulding already aboard, the band's genial genius is bundled in and we set off through what he instantly dubs "der knee-schlappende country — der leather wearing und der shaving brush in der hat country."

With an imagination that he himself aptly describes as "an explosion in a surrealist supermarket", Andy Partridge is an observant individual who clearly relishes all the openings for fun that language has to offer.

"They do have a nice selection of trees in Germany," he muses.

You approve of Germany then, Andy?

"I like Germany actually," he decides. "I think we're pretty close to the Germans in character, except they're more hard working than the English and more together as well.

Except they do eat a lot of awful



TALES FROM
THE DARK
CONTINENT
The dark continent and its people
PLAIN TALES FROM THE REAL
CHARLES ALLEN

food — it's all meat and chopped up veggie stodge, so that's maybe why they're not so together at winning things."

The problem of eating abroad — already complicated by language difficulties — isn't made any easier by the fact that Andy doesn't eat meat or tomatoes.

"It's very difficult on tour," says Andy, muttering darkly about worst-crazy Germans and tomato-overkill Italians. "Already I'm suffering from egg-poisoning since we've been in Germany. They're the only thing on the menu I can point to that hasn't got flesh in it."

"Last time we were in Italy I was introduced to a plate of squid portions on black ink-stained rice. It was called 'fruits of the sea'. It was disgusting actually. Hardly fruits of the sea — more like industrial outlet at the end of the Thames."

"A lot of the time," adds Terry (a man who likes his food and drink), "is spent in search of a decent meal, one square meal per day."

"Yeah," agrees Andy. "Searching for a laundry and searching for a meal are real basics."

"Chinese restaurants are sought after because they give a pretty good selection and you more less know what's coming to you. But the trouble is I've had food poisoning after a couple of Chinese restaurants — staggering around in waiting rooms of Indian doctors in northern Canada — the doctor telling me (assumes Indian accent): 'Oh yes don't worry I have treated The Beatles when I had surgery in Liverpool.'"

"Meanwhile I was busy decorating his carpet tiles."

"Look at that soil," announces Terry, "it's black!"

Well out into the German countryside now, we almost run into the back of a convoy of army vehicles proceeding slowly up the autobahn. Andy looks thoughtful.

"I'm trying to work out what that odd device is that they're towing," he muses. "A device that determines the sex of sheep from 25 miles away?"

"Have you noticed," asks Terry, "that the colour of the soil has changed dramatically? That was your agricultural correspondent from the back."

"It's gone a kind of Montgomery's pullover now, as opposed to the Black Knight's underpants," decides Andy.

Talking of matters military, tell us about these soldiers of yours, Andy.

"I've got quite a few now," he enthuses. "Nothing really expensive — just plastic ones and metal ones that I like the look of. I've got some European plastic ones, some English metal ones, some that I've made. I cast them up occasionally — get in

the kitchen and make a mess of the stove with graphite powder and tin alloy. Der little old watchmaker Andy!

"I used to be more interested in war-gaming but now I'm just interested in the actual uniform — the colours, just like little tiny statuettes. I'm more interested in the little figures than what you do with them."

This passion for the military seems a little odd from such a peaceable person who makes "Melt The Guns" a feature of both the new album and stage show.

"I don't like weapons," Andy says. "I hate weapons. But I like the idea of toys and little figurines. They needn't even be in military stance — cowboys and indians, civilians, people mowing the lawn — as long as they're like little statuettes."

"Nice looking church," he adds of a passing beautifully painted, onion-domed kirk. "Looks like a very early Russian rocket!"

"This looks like wolf country," ventures Terry.

"What, as in ski instructors?" asks Andy. "They're always called Wolf."

"I just find guns disgusting things," he continues, reverting to the earlier topic. "It's like a disease. Once you get them, other people have to get them. It is a disease. It seems they condone the spread of it in America in particular. I find America a very frightening place."

"I just hope that when they're

applauding it ("Melt The Guns") and singing along, they go away and think about it. I feel a bit in — not in a preaching position but in a position where if we have any judgements and things that might possibly make the world better, it's quite nice to be on stage and get them over to people."

Having fun, but with a conscience.

"Black soil," comes the voice of Terry from the back.

"The soil correspondent says it's all looking black," announces Andy. "Actually it's a sort of brown-black now, kind of sensible scout's shoes."

"There's a little ramp right in the middle of that field," he continues. "Just a little ramp. I suppose if the ploughing is getting really frantic you can do a few long-distance ploughing leaps, like waterskiing jumps."

And so on to Wiesbaden, with the Partridge brain ranging freely over subjects as diverse as collecting bubblegum cards of obscure Russian helicopters ("for lifting up the Kremlin and dusting underneath") to childhood escapades like locking his mum in a cupboard ("the milkman had to come and break her free") to plans for projects and private daydreams like orchestrating the alphabet and inventing the music and culture for a civilisation that never existed ("I just fancied playing

God.")

The gig in Wiesbaden is indeed called The Wartburg and is located by spotting the giant articulated truck with all the band's gear which has travelled on ahead. The vehicle contains the new stage backdrop — a giant jigsaw of screens built to the Partridge specifications of "logs, rope, canvassy-looking bits, prehistoric looking" and featuring the white horse logo from the album sleeve. The road crew have already re-christened it "Dobbin".

The show in Wiesbaden is another sell-out and another fine performance, marred only by some bonehead American military serviceman throwing abuse at Andy and punches in the crowd. Obviously the message of "Melt The Guns" is lost on them and the band are visibly upset.

"Bloody Americans," fumes Colin.

"I don't know how that's going to go in the States," says Andy. "I'm probably going to get shot on the next tour."

Another gig over and another meal secured. Another late night and another missed breakfast for Andy as the party readies itself for an even longer drive, this time into Italy.

"The more I see of the world," he announces, "the more I appreciate England."

"I just want to get home and play with my fort."



XTC: (left to right) Colin Moulding, Andy Partridge, Steve Gregory and Terry Chambers.