

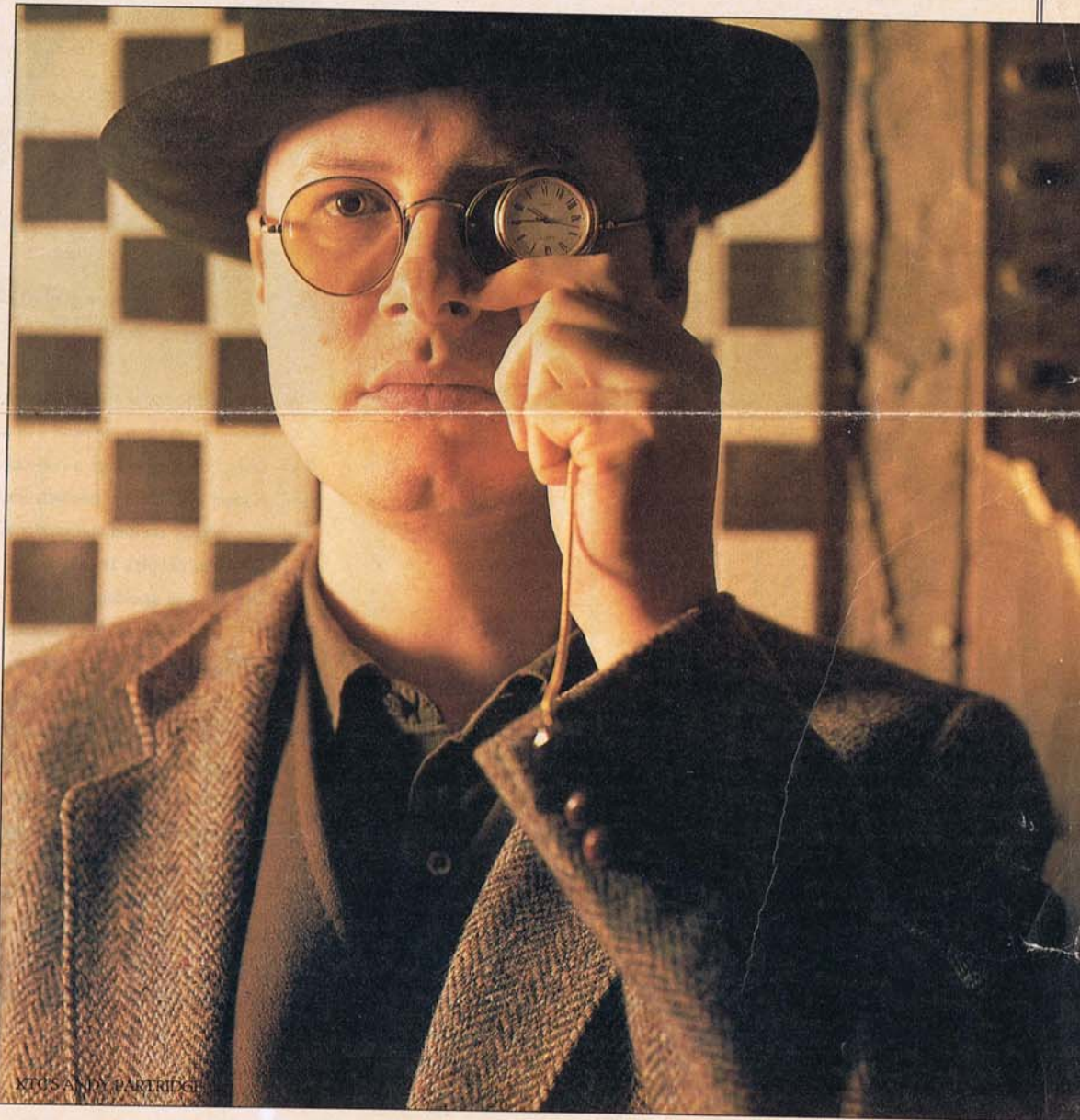
# XTC

## NINJAS OF THE MUNDANE

*Pop music's quirkiest, smartest band finds itself on the verge of actually becoming popular*

BEHIND A PAIR OF THICK WIRE-rimmed spectacles and underneath a broad-brimmed black hat, Andy Partridge is miffed. "What did I tell you?" he says peevishly, thumbing through a rock & roll reference book he's pulled off a back shelf in a used-book store in North Hollywood, California. "They don't mention us in this one, either. In fact, I think we can safely say that XTC are not mentioned in a single book in this store."

The wry, professorial-looking Partridge shrugs. "I've looked," he says, "and for every ten books, we're only mentioned in one. The rest of them jump straight from Link Wray to Neil Young or somebody. That means" — and here his voice begins to rise in a parody of righteous indignation — "that out of every hundred books, we *don't even exist* according to ninety of them." He lowers his voice back to its subdued, proper British tone. "That used to annoy me."



XTC'S ANDY PARTRIDGE

**B Y S T E V E P O N D**  
P H O T O G R A P H S B Y F R A N K O C K E N F E L S 3

Certainly, after a dozen years in which XTC has moved from an urgent, jittery rock band to the group of pop craftsmen responsible for melodic gems like 1987's *Skylarking* and the current *Oranges and Lemons*, the band deserves to be mentioned in more of rock's reference volumes: After all, these clever, postpunk tunesmiths are responsible for a sparkling catalog of hits, near hits and, most often, should-have-been hits, from "Making Plans for Nigel," "Generals and Majors," "Respectable Street" and the band's controversial breakthrough, "Dear God," to "Mayor of Simpleton" and "King for a Day," from the new LP. But singer-songwriter-guitarist Partridge, 35, and his band mates – singer-songwriter-bassist Colin Moulding, 33, and guitarist-keyboardist Dave Gregory, 36 – are hardly typical rock stars: they live quietly in the English countryside; they never tour; and they rarely make videos.

And when Partridge wanders through the used-book store, he pauses only briefly in the music section. Most of the time, he peruses the art and design shelves, looking for catchy ideas he can copy at home; the history section, in search of books on the early eighteenth century; and the war-games section, browsing for anything he doesn't already own. This last quest is tricky, because Partridge is probably the only pop star who dreams about his collection of toy soldiers.

"If you're English, you either have bad teeth, or you collect something, or you're gay," he says with a shrug. "I have two out of the three. My teeth are rotten, and I'm kind of besotted with toy soldiers."

He laughs. "Our band doesn't have any rock & roll lifestyles, I'm afraid. We're horribly mundane, aggressively mundane individuals." His eyes light up. "We're the *ninjas* of the mundane, you might say."

**I**T'S AN OVERCAST

day in Los Angeles, and the sometimes spectacular vistas you can see from the Hollywood Hills are obscured by a dense, dirty cloud. For a native, this is business as usual, but to Andy Partridge, on his way from the bookstore to his manager's hillside home, it's something different: "a liquid sea of methane, twenty-four-foot deep," covering a city "that looks like a massive building site, with a poison atmosphere, populated by liars."

Partridge delivers this assessment in his driest tone, then laughs. L.A. may be the place where XTC recorded *Oranges and Lemons* in the summer of 1988, but it's a far cry from home. That's Swindon, "a sprawling, messy kind of town" built in the spot where trains on the way to Bristol would run out of coal. "It's pretty much a bum hole," adds Colin Moulding, "but the countryside around Swindon is really beautiful."

In Swindon, Partridge and Moulding grew up in a government-housing block



XTC (FROM LEFT): DAVE GREGORY, PARTRIDGE AND COLIN MOULDING

populated, if one is to believe Partridge's tales, almost entirely by mental, physical and/or emotional defectives. He describes a dwarf hunchback who compensated for his physical deformities by being "one of the most obnoxious people you'd ever meet"; a ludicrously ugly woman who worked part time as a prostitute when her simpleton husband was out of town; a big, lumpy teenager whose voice never broke, who kept a collection of used, knotted condoms by his bedside; another kid, this one mentally impaired and stricken with intolerable acne, who'd get sexually excited and randomly hug strangers of either sex – and who'd also sneak into people's houses and sit in a corner for hours. Once, the teenage Partridge was standing in front of his mirror, painstakingly imitating *The Man From U.N.C.L.E.*'s Illya Kuryakin, when he heard a low chuckle from the corner. "He'd been there watching me, I guess, for ages," says Partridge, "and when I found that out, I *felt* as stupid as he *was*."

Partridge launched his musical career experimenting with feedback and recording songs off the radio with a reel-to-reel tape recorder he bought after winning ten pounds in a Draw One of the Monkees contest (he drew Mickey Dolenz) sponsored by *Monkees Monthly*. After high school, he and Moulding formed a local band that turned into XTC in 1977 (with keyboardist Barry Andrews, later of Shriekback, and drummer Terry Chambers). They made twisted, sometimes dissonant music – "We knew we wanted to make records, but we weren't quite sure of what," says Partridge – and slowly evolved into a more melodic and coherent pop band. Most of the attention went to Partridge, although Moulding wrote and sang a few tunes on each album and looked more the part of a pop star.

With records like *Drums and Wires* (the first to feature Dave Gregory in place of Andrews), *Black Sea* and the two-record *English Settlement*, XTC scored sporadic minor hits even as the English press pushed the band into what Moulding says was the "file under quirky" pigeonhole. The group established a solid

reputation in the United States with club tours and a stint opening for the Police, but in Los Angeles in 1982, the discomfort Partridge had always felt onstage turned into unconquerable panic.

"I guess it finally came down to the question, How many people can you mind-fuck at one time?" he says. "I wasn't capable of doing very many. And that night in L.A., I literally could not get out of bed. I was in my hotel room, and I couldn't move."

"I think we knew then that we would never tour again," says Colin Moulding. "Andy was in tears back at the hotel, and the manager was trying to badger him into going onstage. It was all pretty squalid."

Partridge retreated to Swindon, worried, he says, that he was having a breakdown. ("He'd probably deny it, but he did have a breakdown, in all honesty," says Moulding.) "I thought I couldn't handle this rock & roll nonsense," says Partridge, "and I just sat in my garden dribbling into the sound hole of my guitar, thinking, 'Oh, well, looks like I'm going to be Mr. Casualty then.' I went to psychiatrists and hypnotists, who'd get me to relive gigs. I'd be on the settee sweating profusely and shaking and all this stuff. . . . It took me at least a year to get over the shock and the physical run-down."

He wrote songs, and XTC made more records, staying off the road, off the charts and, just barely, off the dole. Chambers left the band, which now uses different session drummers. At their lowest point financially, around the time they recorded the *Skylarking* album, Moulding and Gregory asked Partridge to consider touring again; he couldn't do it.

But the record they made proved to be the breakthrough for XTC – even though the strong-willed Partridge didn't get along with producer Todd Rundgren and hated the LP after it was finished. "Andy likes to have things done his way," says Moulding. "And when they're not, the sparks start to fly. But I suppose that you could say that Andy met his match on *Skylarking*, because it was quite evident from the start that we were going to do things Todd's way."

Now Partridge says he likes the album, which contains by far the biggest hit of XTC's U.S. career in "Dear God," a song that was left off the American version of the album, hastily added by Geffen Records when it began to get airplay and hyped by protests from offended believers. Partridge is sick to death of talking about the controversy, but that didn't stop him from chastising Jimmy Swaggart – who he thinks is "one of the closest incarnations to evil" – on the new album.

Before the furor died down, XTC had its biggest audience ever in America. (In England, he says, they still "couldn't give a toss" about the band.) Making a follow-up record, Partridge had his usual troubles: First he didn't want to set up his musical equipment in his attic, because that meant he'd have to take down his war-games table. Then he tried to write songs, didn't come up with anything and decided he was all washed-up. Then, finally, he got to work, writing songs and going into the studio with his band mates, up-and-coming producer Paul Fox and Mr. Mister drummer Pat Mastelotto.

"I thought the last album hung together very well," Partridge says, "but it was rather dour in places. I wanted to swing the old pendulum the other way. But also, this album was made with a kind of optimism that had been missing for a long, long time, because it was the first album that we thought somebody was really going to listen to. Because of the success of *Skylarking*, we felt that there

was a whole crowd of people that wanted to actually listen to what we had to say. We weren't just writing letters and posting them with no address on them. This one had an address, and it felt good to do it for that reason. We knew that it was addressed, 'America, Over There, World.' And we knew that America was actually going to listen to it."

What America can hear is classic XTC: almost an hour of bracing, tuneful pop songs by Partridge and Moulding, their early quirks replaced by an exuberant melodicism and their Sixties influences proudly displayed – if not quite as proudly as on the neo-psychedelic EP and album they made under the name the Dukes of Stratospear. (The Dukes, says Moulding, "are looking pretty much as if the joke's been told, and everybody laughed and that's it.")

*Oranges and Lemons* is also more good-natured than previous efforts, much of it reading almost as the band's explanation of the world to a group of children – say, to Partridge's three-year-old daughter, Holly, and his year-old son, Harry, who've helped their dad put his music in perspective.

"What you can do with an electric guitar," he says with a laugh, "is nothing compared to what you can do with a penis. After you've created life, writing a single doesn't seem like much of an accomplishment anymore."

But that hardly means that becoming a father has taken away all of Partridge's musical ambitions. For one thing, he'd like to make money, which XTC has yet to do: Partridge doesn't own his house; before making the new album he only had 300 pounds in the bank; and Moulding says an upcoming deal with their British record label will give them "the first real cash we've ever seen," especially since for years any extra money was consumed by a recently settled lawsuit with a former manager.

Nearing the offices of Geffen Records, Partridge looks out the car window at the Beverly Hills mansions lining Sunset Boulevard. "When we started the band, we wanted to be rich and famous," he says with a laugh. "Famous. That was a requirement. I mean, what a stupid thing to want. We actually wanted fame, fortune and probably all to live in one house with a fire pole in the middle and four front doors all opening to the same house."

And what does he want now?

"I've kinda gone back through the when-we-first-started-making-records wants," he says. "I've gone back to more, I think, of what I would have wanted as a schoolkid: to be in a group as good as the Kinks, or the Beatles, or the best stuff of the Small Faces, to have the kind of strange, earthy wonder of Captain Beefheart's Magic Band."

In the meantime – until Partridge realizes his goal of writing songs "so stupidly good that they hurt to listen to" – don't expect to see XTC on the road, or in Los Angeles, or anywhere else you might find the kind of folks who *are* mentioned in the rock reference books. Instead, Partridge will be back in Swindon playing with his soldiers, making toys for his kids, reading his books and ignoring the world of pop music.

"I've got a big record collection," he says, "but lately I've been giving away armfuls of records to everybody who comes to visit. Maybe when you make music, your music gland gets satisfied making it, and you don't need to dip it in other people's."

He breaks into a wry grin. "Have you seen my music gland?" he asks. "It's the big sack of skin that hangs halfway down my back." ■