

John Denver from Outer Space turned my son into a Terrorist!

It's a sunny weekday lunchtime in a mid-size mid-west town called Headlineville, USA.

Nigel Normal, a student at the local highschool is, save for his three pet axolotls and unusually bad acne, one of those thoroughly unremarkable people. No-one harms him. He means no-one harm. But not today. Today Nigel is a youth possessed. A beast has taken up residence in his mind. And such a beast. Seven-headed, multi-armed, big, black and slimy with hideous bug eyes and bleeding drips of burning oil. This beast is Rock'n'Roll.

The beast has got Nigel under its calloused hook-nailed thumb. He will do as it dictates. To the headmasters office it leads him. To the sweat-caked throat of the hapless principal it presses a revolver.

The beast wants Nigel to spread the poison.

A tape is pressed into the trembling hands of the hostage. An order. "Play it," croaks Nigel in dark tones far removed from his customary adolescent squeak, gesturing toward the PA tape deck. But curiosity has overcome terror in the racing mind of the teacher. He wants to know.

Now. What evil, devil-worshipping lot of irresponsible Heavy Metal louts have driven him so. What long-haired collection of guitar-wanking blood-spitting fire-breathing... XTC? XTC?

"Well, it wasn't a revolver, it was a knife. Which he proceeded to... I think it was the principal's secretary, she was in control of the school PA system, and he whipped the knife out on her, and, you know... play this!"

Andy Partridge, in slightly bewildered tones down the line from Swindon, on how XTC's *Dear God* did, in real life, turn one confused young chap into an urban terrorist. An interesting effect, Andy...

"Obviously not enough of an effect. He should have taken a few hand grenades in with the whole album... 'Play the whole back catalogue! I've got a tank outside'... Erm, I don't know, Americans are prone to doing things like that I suppose. But then other races do other things equally as daft. I feel kind of sorry for this kid, because he had something on his mind, and he could say it, and I suppose our record could. Except it's a very daft record to pick to say anything, 'cos the whole record is a very confused, paradoxical thing. Much like religion itself."

So what is your view of religion, after all the fuss?

"It's totally essential because humans have to believe in something, they're not responsible enough for themselves to believe in themselves. They've been taught that that's evil. But they usually have to believe in something, whether it's UFOs, or ghosts, or... they have to have a dollop of magic to believe in Religion, is... I mean, there are no Gods, it's just the human desire for them that is wonderful."

XTC's peculiarly bent pop has been with us now for over a decade and somewhere in the region of a dozen albums. Andy Partridge, the songwriter behind such obtuse, twisted masterpieces as *Making Plans For Nigel*, *Senses Working Overtime*, *No Thugs In Our House* and many others, is like his songs in that he's funny, he's got interesting ideas about a vast amount of things, an acute talent for scathing observation and a neat line in self-deprecation. The new album, the appropriately sweet and sour *Oranges And*

XTC Interview by Andrew Mueller

Andy Partridge (Right) and XTC



Lemons, is all that. It starts with a dizzyingly happy song called *The Garden Of Earthly Delights*.

Are you, Andy Partridge, the eternal optimist?

"Oh, absolutely. Abrasively optimistic. I'd have you retching with optimism overkill within an hour. I think the earth has got a lot of fantastic things to offer, and life has got a lot of wonderful things to offer. It's just that people seem to click onto the idea that those things are out there. There are just wonderful things out there and they can't get those into their heads. They think it's all down to 'Yeah, brilliant rental video', or 'Really strong lager I've discovered'..."

Strange that you should pick the Garden as a metaphor for all that's wonderful amidst all the environmental hype...

"Yeah... that's purely a coincidence. In fact, I've written several songs with the same title, *Garden Of Earthly Delights* and they've been scrapped; they've not been so good. And it's a wonderful title. Wonderful enough for Heironymous Bosch (Dutch painter 1450-1516, known for his macabre allegorical representations of biblical subjects and who says pop writing isn't educational), so it's wonderful enough for me. The whole thing is the song is welcoming new people to the world."

Your own children particularly?

"Yeah, I suppose so. I didn't think about it at the time, but in retrospect I suppose it's got to be. I was very reluctant to write them into songs, because you know, people have kids and they write them into songs, and the songs turn up so bloody mushy, don't they..."

And you end up sounding like Paul McCartney, yes...

"Oh, it's wretched, it's just big-eyed, wide-eyed, crying, chocolate-box cover lake-view stick-on fablon... oh, it's horrendous."

While we're dabbling in the realm of all that is horrendous, there's another song called *President Kill Again*. Don't like politicians much, do you?

"Well, what a breed. Politicians. Would you vote for a politician?"

Try not to. Just encourages them.

"Exactly. There is no such thing as an honest successful politician. There's honest failed politicians..."

And so much for our eternal optimist. But there's the single from the album, one of Partridge's finest, which is saying several

mouthfuls. *The Mayor Of Simpleton*. Nice song. A politician I'd vote for. A humble, nice song, even.

"I'm just one of those repulsively humble, nice people. Sickening, really. I left school at 15, I never wanted to be bothered to go through the system of exam results and bits of paper. I didn't want to go through that mill, I think the idea of having a piece of paper with the worth of your intelligence, a coupon of your intelligence... it's pretty repulsive."

Mayor Of Simpleton is a triumph of love over reality, much like XTC's alter-egos The Dukes Of Stratosphere, whose reason for being was to allow Partridge and Co. to become their obvious heroes (however briefly) with an EP (*25 O'Clock*) and an LP (*Psonic Psunspot*) of perfect sixties pastiches, from the hysterical Sgt Pepper romp *You're A Good Man Albert Brown* to the Hollies' pop of *Vanishing Girl*. The reign of The Dukes was a very short and very, very colourful one.

Will they ever record again?

"I doubt it. We've killed them off. Horribly!"

Swine! How, exactly?

"A really sickening cooking accident, involving a waterfall of scolding hot barley sugar and a whisk."

Finding Partridge's latent homicidal tendencies somewhat disturbing, your correspondent steers the talk around to your more trad-rock interview bit, none of which I'll bore you with here. Suffice to say that I think XTC's *Skylarking*, The Dukes' LP and the new one are a fairly natural progression, while Andy doesn't, seeing in *Oranges & Lemons* an edge more reminiscent of *The Big Express*. Thrillsville, what? Back to the silly stuff.

Why is it the new LP's done four hundred thousand copies in America?

"I've no idea. I really don't know. What's even more concerning is that we've only sold three thousand in Australia."

Well. Fair go. There's two hundred and sixty million of them, and substantially less of us.

"How does that work out? What's your maths like?"

A bit ropey, since he asks, but some quick scratching of pens and adding and dividing and subtracting the number you first thought of on both sides of the globe reveals that Americans, per capita, buy more XTC albums. So there you go.

"Also," offers Andy, "One person in thirty in Sweden has a copy, and I don't know why. Perhaps the off-licenses are shut."

International success story that you've become, will the band ever tour again?

"I don't know, I used to say no, definitely, but we've just completed three weeks live radio touring in the states, playing at radio stations with acoustic guitars, which was a bit kinky. Because it sounded nothing like us, it was like The Queen's Own Massed Donovans... Attack Of The John Denvers From Venus... That was weird, because we ended up doing a big thing in a studio in Toronto, in front of an audience that was broadcast via satellite to 26 stations across Canada. So I don't know. I know that my state of mind is more open now, and not so petrified of the human race."

Andy goes on to explain at great length that humans worry him, but you know where you are with animals, except cats, which he hates anyway and thinks should be boiled. He thinks he'd quite like to write a book one day.

"But non-fiction. Fiction annoys me. Real life is so much more phenomenally wonderful."

Non-fiction about what?

"Shoe manufacture in Tasmania between 1933 and 1935, I don't know..."

Interesting choice, Andy. Most would say that the renaissance in Taswegian cobbling was more around '38-'39...

"Oh no, I think there was more a raw, punk, angry young footwear vibe..."

This is getting silly. I'm off to threaten the editor with a chainsaw and demand *Dear God* on the office turntable...

"Yeah, do it! Go and demand they play *The Deadwood Stage*, by Doris Day!"

Er... Don't think I've got one on me...

"You see, they don't break into their headmasters office and demand they play *Please Mister Custer*, by Charlie Drake, they don't ever go for the really surreal hostage situations, they always have such a desperate realism..."

So where does that leave us? We're both totally hysterical by this stage, suggesting new and increasingly bizarre high school terrorist incidents at each other (the best one involves a Legendary Stardust Cowboy B-side, a clown suit and a machine-gun umbrella) and I've decided that even if Andy Partridge, the world's most lovable lunatic, has turned into a Brit Pop Ozzie Osbourne, the real world is still only for those who deserve it.

Welcome to the garden of earthly delights. Leave your sense at the gate.