

Sonny Rollins.

Indeed, Bryant has worked with all of the big names and has been relied on by them as a backbone for their improvisations, yet he has never quite achieved their fame.

However, during a conversation in New York City, Bryant seemed far from affronted that he was not a

cordings of John Lewis, Django Rollins' *Saint Thomas*, Kenny Dorham's *Blue Bossa* and Benny Golson's *Whisper Not*, all of which have been part of Bryant's enormous repertoire for years.

But for six years during the early '80s Bryant did not record at all.

"I didn't feel right about it for a

At the Jazz Club he is expected to play quite a few numbers each night as a soloist.

"I like the challenge of working as a soloist even though on solos you have to work a little harder and fill in more than usual."

Certainly when you listen to Bryant's recordings you hear him

reminiscent of the genius Art Tatum or even Errol Garner. That is why he can be sometimes just a little scary. That is why it will be a fascinating week in Hongkong.

● Ray Bryant performs at the Jazz Club from Monday to Saturday.

Ticket information on 845-8477.

7 (2) 1992 - The Love Album: Carter the Unstoppable Sex Machine.
8 (7) Diva: Annie Lennox.
9 (6) Greatest Hits: ZZ Top.
10 (-) This Thing Called Love: Alexander O'Neal.

□ Charts supplied by Commercial Radio 2, AM Alive, Billboard and Melody Maker. Last week's positions in brackets.

Pop's perfectionists deserve a wider audience

By BRENT ANDERSON

BESPECTACLED XTC frontman Andy Partridge hardly fits the image of a cutting edge musician. Like the other two members of XTC, Partridge is pushing 40 and he readily admits he is "shaped too much like Robert Morley to go flinging myself about in videos".

Behind his placid "I live in a quiet town and often wear cardigans" exterior, however, lies the heart of the best band you have heard little or nothing about.

What Rush is to hard rock, XTC is to pop music - utterly perfectionist and obscenely proficient at what it does. For 15 years and 10 albums, the band has taken a mesh of unmistakable influences and created a wonderfully idiosyncratic sound.

Each album, including the band's new release, *Nonsuch*, is distinct in theme and tone. But through all of them run snatches of the Beach Boys' peerless harmonies, Elvis Costello's wit and lyrical dexterity and the Beatles' craftsmanship and melodic midas touch.

The core line-up of guitarist/vocalist Partridge, bassist Colin Moulding and guitarist Dave Gregory has never changed. Par-



Andy Partridge: subtle.

tridge would have everyone believe this helps confirm they are a bunch of "alarmingly straight" musicians, but the trio's non-conformist music proves the opposite.

While many bands spend their careers chasing trendy sounds that change as often as the tides, XTC has always seemed oblivious to the shifting sands around it. The band formed alongside Britain's notorious punk originators in 1977. But about the only thing it had in common aside from the dodgy fashion sense was the bent of XTC's name and the band's clattering guitars.

Since then, XTC has continually defied categorisation, content to creatively thrive as its own musical oasis.

Despite the success of its mentors, the band has remained on the fringe of commercial acceptance. Only occasionally has its record sales caused a stir, and of a handful of singles to hit the UK charts, only *Senses Working Overtime*, from 1982's *English Settlement*, and *The Mayor of Simpleton*, from 1989's *Oranges and Lemons*, cracked the top 10.

Part of XTC's inability, or lack of desire, to expand its notoriety stems from an unwillingness to go through the promotional motions. The band abandoned touring in 1982 after Partridge, who suffers an unpredictable case of stage fright, came close to a nervous breakdown. Interviews and press coverage usually only follow an album release. The band members' groupies are their wives, and their royalties go more to household repairs than junkets to the Riviera. Perhaps as a result, XTC's primary audience remains long-time faithful and listeners to independent label bands and "alternative" radio.

Ironically, its music often

slams headlong against the latter's favourite flavours, which currently run to funk beats, rap and anything that sounds like Nirvana. Unlike most bands in this loosely defined genre, XTC does not come right out and feed indie fans' hunger for energetic rage and abandon.

Instead of brute force, Partridge favours a more subtle approach. Not that it dilutes the eloquent power of his songs. While Partridge often strays toward optimistic wonderment and simple pleasures in his lyrics, he can vent his spleen with vicious political diatribes and insightful social commentary in the best tradition of Dylan. The indignation is unmistakable, but drenched as these songs are in catchy guitar hooks or airy strings and horns, listeners can find themselves humming a tune whose lyrics gleefully rip government to shreds.

It is strong stuff from a man who appears more at home behind a librarian's desk than a mixing board. Partridge blames a brain that "is like an exotic dog which needs walking occasionally". He unleashes it every other year or so, and *Nonsuch* is the result of its most recent outing.

Equal to its predecessors in mu-

sical and lyrical variety, *Nonsuch* polishes some of XTC's noisier tendencies. Like *Oranges and Lemons*, the band layers its intricate melodies and song structures with jazzy, orchestral flourishes and lighthearted psychedelia.

Though it sounds like a mix that could be derided as pompous pop, XTC strips away any insularity and stuffiness through the sheer beauty of its arrangements and the sweetness of Partridge's vocals, especially on songs like *My Bird Performs* and *Wrapped in Grey*. *Holly Up On Poppy* is a joyful ode to Partridge's daughter that would have turned out saccharine soaked in less able hands, while big drumming and punchy guitars shake up the clever *The Smartest Monkeys* and the sad dismay of *Books Are Burning*.

Nonsuch is a multi-dimensional feast that shows XTC at its most adept and affecting. The album will get a big push this summer as the band graces the stage for the first time since 1982 in a special concert for MTV. But for no good reason, XTC will probably remain too unassuming for a new breed of college-aged rockers and too inaccessible for thirtysomethings who refuse to look beyond Kenny G and "classic rock".