

Times They Are A Changin'

Most XTC-ellent! After a three-year Bill and Ted-styled sojourn in history, pop's eccentric gurus have returned with a new LP, *Nonsuch*. Singer Andy Partridge waxes lyrical

Swindon, the home of XTC, is cold, wet and in Wiltshire. Andy Partridge and his colleagues Colin Moulding and Dave Gregory stroll blithely through a large park, reminiscing. "They used to have bands on over there," says Colin, pointing what looks like a tiny replica of the Hollywood Bowl.

"There used to be carp in here," says Dave, indicating a foul pond full of leaves.

We assemble by the lavatories for photos. Andy crouches atop a plinth, Dave and Colin beside him. Suddenly a very old man appears. "This reminds me of when I was young," says the veteran, unconvincingly. "Course, it was all different here then..."

We adjourn to Andy's house for tea and sandwiches, to listen to another old bloke go on at great length. Andy Partridge—40 this year—moves one of his home-made games out of the way, evicts his son Harry from the room and talks about debt. XTC are back, after three years away, with *Nonsuch*, a double album which continues the weird, jangly rock lineage of *Skylarking* and *Oranges And Lemons*, running the pop gamut from the striding 'The Disappointed' to the frankly odd 'Rook'. Hit singles elude them, but America likes them a lot. So do lawyers.

"We were involved in a long litigation with an ex-manager," chortles Andy in his mile-wide Wiltshire accent. "And *Oranges And Lemons* cost a lot to make: five months in LA... we're now getting into debt with this one—I think the debt's down to £400,000! But at least we own ourselves again now."

The same can't be said for XTC's record company. Virgin Records now sits in the pocket of the very corporate Thorn EMI, the people who gave us Morrissey and

missile guidance systems. Andy laughs drily.

"That's a real joke... Terry Chambers, our old drummer, used to work for Thorn, and he used their facilities to print all our posters. He used to say: 'Ah, Thorn'll get you in the end!' And now they bloody have... I got a phone call from Virgin saying: 'Does Andy mind?' I do actually; you know, I'm not just goods and chattels to be passed on."

Andy beams. "I have no concept of what's going to happen in the future. It's kind of exciting. I mean, it's what—1992? When you were at school, you'd think that, by now, you'd be going to school on the moon using a jetpack. And it's still really scummy out there: old decaying houses, kids going round high on window cleaner... Things are not really as Dan Dare as we thought they would be."

The future used to be a major XTC concern. Partridge and Moulding wrote songs like 'Mekkanik Dancing' and 'Science Friction', acting like a post-modern New Wave band heading for the 21st Century. Now, however, their sleeves feature Iron Age white horses, Tudor palaces, steam engines and all the paraphernalia of history.

"We just turned into The Strawbs somewhere along the line. I'm trying to work back to Stone Age Britain!" roars Partridge, enthusiastically.

Sobering up and waving his arms, he declares: "When we started, because of youthful arrogance and because we didn't know how to write songs, it was easy to string together buzzwords that gave you this sense of 'I'm eating up the future and I'm shitting out the past; out of my way, I'm just a mass of transistors exploding in your face'. It was the clean, exciting violence of the future all done in Rumbelows' catalogue prose."

"Then you learn to write songs—and it's: 'My goodness! I can actually say something... and you start looking at other song-writers who inspired you in the past.' XTC became a great weird pop group, all jangling guitars, strange Beatles-in-Hell tunes like 'Making Plans For Nigel' and 'Towers Of London', nutter folk pop like 'Senses Working Overtime' and 'Love On A Farmboy's Wages' and,

ultimately, a mature, self-contained pop music that provides the world with songs like 'Mayor Of Simpleton' (from *Oranges And Lemons*) and 'The Disappointed'. XTC's world is a drummer-less, non-touring, Swindon-based thing that owes little to the 1990s and a lot to rock's rich tapestry. They are the Beach Boys from Jupiter with history degrees.

"I don't know why I do all this old-fashioned stuff," says Andy. "It's just more apt to my mind than skateboards. I'm genuinely interested in history, as you can see from the bookshelves. Seven shelves of military history books. I can't think of any other reason."

Andy ponders a moment as we look at the rows of books depicting soldiers and war. "It's probably easier for me to be real masked behind something unreal," he says, slowly. "I can't stand up naked and be real, but I can be real behind some sort of mask—I can get naked behind a smokescreen."

Hence the medieval costumes for albums, the songs about being farm boys and such projects as the psychedelic 'group' The Dukes Of Stratosphere. But even Andy himself is puzzled by this military business. Why is his attic full of toy soldiers? Why does he have all this stuff about war and death? He is presumably not into killing people.

"No, I can't think of anything worse than killing," nods Andy. "Um... it's the colour and gamesmanship, it's the... I'm not gonna say it's the uniforms! It's the whips, the boots, the stirrups." Realisation hits him like a smart bomb. "It's the uniforms, dammit!" he shouts. "Just the colourful,



Andy Partridge—flying the flag for bonkers pop

toy-like... I'm more interested in it when it's toy-like. The unreal thing of it all. The biggest military incident of my life was as a kid, watching some *Tales From Europe*-type thing on TV. There was a battle, all these grenadiers in tall hats and tail coats, and they had a giant cannon, this massive thing two or three stories high, and they fired it and it went 'pop'. And that really impressed me! Ha ha!"

Andy Partridge is, in many ways, the classic kid loner. He displays many total train-spotter characteristics (toy soldiers, toy trains) and confesses to not liking people much *en masse*.

"Who was it who said 'hell is other people'? That was spot on," he announces. "Because most people don't live up to my expectations. I find animals much more comforting..." Andy waves at his dog and his cat. "We used to have rabbits but they ate through the cables on the video recorder. The video rental man didn't believe us."

Is that why he chooses not to live in London? Because of the people, that is, not the rabbits...

"I actually get a headache when I go to London," moans the singer. "It's a blinding monoxide filth storm, really unattractive. Not that I like this town; it's just I'm here and this town is slightly less ugly."

Where would Mr Partridge like to live? "I dunno, Disneyland..." he sighs, in a frighteningly accurate Michael Jackson voice. "No, I'd hate to live in Disneyland. I heard there was a murder there. Perfectly American thing to do; if you're gonna murder someone you might as well do it in Disneyland. Beat them to death with a giant stick of candyfloss."

Regaining his faculties, the XTC frontman struggles back to the question. "Umm, my ideal house would look like a stack of children's playing bricks, and would be pretty much away from other people," he confesses. "I'm not terribly social, although I do occasionally talk to

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XTC as New Wave nutters



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strangers down the pub. Am I gibbering?"

Not at all; we continue. XTC are perceived as living in the past and going on about how it was better when we had steam trains...

"And rickets!," shouts Andy.
Is this true?

"What, wasn't it better when we had steam trains? No, not at all," he says, firmly. "But people are awfully blinded by the idea that new is good: 'Oh yes, something new... that's much better than that old thing, chuck it away! I dunno. I've got this idea that anything new should be put on hold for at least ten years, just to see if it's any good or not. Put all the news on hold for ten months, see if it was worth printing..."

"I don't think any time in history is better than another," announces Andy, in an attempt to delay the arrival of the Mad Police. "They've all got their various spectres, be it AIDS or dancing fever. It's all the old pendulum effect. I'd say that things are no better or worse than they have ever been, ever since someone thought up the word civilisation."

So how do XTC fit into the scheme of things then?

"I don't think we ever did," muses Andy. "We may have fitted in for one or two days in 1977; I think we invented our own scheme and you either like it or you lump it. Most people in England don't like it, and I don't know why: probably because the English have been conditioned to eat things up very quickly. All very instantaneous. Other nations take the time to chew things over."

He ponders the edible nature of life. "We used to play a game—what bands are like bands you liked as a kid? You know, Happy Mondays are like Dave, Dozy, Beaky, Mick and Tich. Well, we couldn't think of a single band who were remotely like we are. We always came up with a big blank!

"The thing is, we're getting older and crustier... and we're getting better. I hope that we get more and more crusty, insular and selfish. Musically, I've become extremely selfish, and I don't feel I have to please anyone else. I mean, it doesn't extend to other areas... I'm not going to start axeing people to death in an attempt to get to the front of supermarket queues, but on the musical side I have to be pleased, otherwise it's pointless."

XTC are The Scaffold of the '90s, readers. Age cannot wither them, nor custom stale their infinite weirdness.

"We've got this great conspiracy to be as wonderful as we can," muses Andy. "We've gone from a rock'n'roll gang idea to being some kind of bombing Bolsheviks."

History repeats itself: XTC are pop—and they're coming to get you. **VOX**

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