



# Fuel for thought

It took 18 years for XTC to reap profit from its record deal with Virgin. This time around, Andy Partridge wants a ticket out of Swindon

**T**HE final straw for XTC's Andy Partridge came in 1992. *Nonsuch*, a lush and ambitious XTC album that also offered a few possible hit singles (*The Disappointed*, *Dear Madam Barnum*) had, in Partridge's mind, been left on the starting blocks to wither by record label Virgin just weeks after its release.

It was the last insult one of the truly influential singers and songwriters of the past 15 years was prepared to wear.

Says Partridge: "I told Virgin, 'Unless you make our deal better or release us, we're not going to make any more music for you'. They wouldn't do either, so I said: 'OK brothers, down tools'. We've spent the past four years on strike."

"I was very upset that we spent 18 years on the label before we went into profit. We had such an appalling deal. They made, on conservative estimate, about £30 million out of us and we're still stuck in Swindon."

A few weeks before this interview Partridge and band members Colin Moulding and Dave Gregory were finally freed from Virgin Records to pursue other record deals.

"We've got about 10 offers, some very good profit-sharing deals," says Partridge. "Strangely enough, the worst thing we've been offered is from the new Virgin label V2. They offered a crappy, old rock'n'roll rip-off deal - sign on the back of the cigarette packet - despite all the nonsense they were saying about making all the other companies jealous."

Partridge is on the line ostensibly to talk about *Fossil Fuel*, XTC's final release for Virgin. Unlike previous compilations (*Waxworks*, *The Compact XTC*), *Fossil Fuel* includes every single the band has released since 1977, encompassing earlier, spikier pop songs such as *Science Friction*, *Are You Receiving Me?* through to hits like *Generals And Majors*, *Senses Working Overtime* and *Dear God* and later material such as *The Ballad Of Peter Pumpkinhead* and *The Disappointed*.

It provides a clear picture of XTC's evolution from naive teenagers to master writers and arrangers and also of Partridge's growth into one of pop's most distinctive vocalists.

"On the earlier records it was me panicking at being in the limelight and grasping for a style that ended up a cross

between Buddy Holly and a wounded seal," he laughs. "After the first three albums I started to relax a little."

Over the past two years Partridge has experienced three months of deafness (middle-ear infection), the end of his marriage and career heartache. Yet his cheer on the phone douses notions that he's depressed.

"I've been turned upside down totally but, hey, it's good. The hammer comes down on the metal and it makes good, sharp songs."

Around 40 or so of them, according to Partridge, who is just itching to see how they sound recorded. With XTC's almost legendary reputation for run-ins with producers, one wonders how the band will tip-toe through the minefield this time around.

"I'm not difficult," Partridge argues. "Just particular. I just want the baby to be born correctly; I wanted help from producers, not hindrance."

"We have been near to perfect producers. Ironically, probably the most perfect producer was Todd Rundgren, but he is the one I got on with the least. Unfortunately he's from Uranus or something and he doesn't know how to get on with other human beings."

Partridge lives in Swindon, west of London, where he grew up. And it is not, he wants to make clear, by choice.

"I must have done something really



**WORKING OVERTIME:** After a dispute with Virgin, XTC's been "on strike" for four years.

terrible in a past life because I find myself still stuck here," he says. "It's not so much how many miles west, as how many light years culturally and mentally it is from London. I'm stuck in a rather nice little house ... I've not yet managed to get my ship out of the terrible black hole that is Swindon."

■ *Fossil Fuel* is out now on Virgin.

## CD romp by Peter Holmes



### HORSE STORIES

#### Dirty Three (Big Cat/Shock)

A RUSTY gate swings in the breeze. The family preacher comforts mother and daughter. A man on the land, gripped by hopelessness, takes his life. Close your eyes, listen to *Horse Stories*, and let the Dirty Three take you to the outback. A violin, a guitar and some percussion is all this threesome uses to paint some of the most melancholy and chaotic soundscapes you'll ever hear. Occasionally indulgent, which is to be expected from a band creating its own boundaries. 7/10

### CHIM CHIM'S BADASS REVENGE

#### Fishbone (Rowdy/BMG)

FISHBONE has always demanded a lot of its listeners. In return the band has remained high on integrity and low on chart-topping desires. But let's face it, these lads, who created a funk/metal blueprint years ago (later embraced by the likes of Living Colour, Scatterbrain and Faith No More), make it as difficult as possible. Jammed with warped horns, Cameo-style vocals, trippy reggae beats, rubbery grooves and metal riffs, *Chim Chim's* falls to



break new ground. The production is generally flat while many of the songs are simply half-baked ideas stretched out to four minutes. 5/10

### PUNCH IN THE FACE

#### Frenzal Rhomb (Shagpile/Shock)

FRENZAL Rhomb likes to write a song and then, with ears pinned back, engulf the tune in rapid-fire drummings, taking equal parts from the Ramones and punk. The result is fast, dumb and perfect for 18-year-old boys wanting to get drunk to their first band at the Annadale Hotel. As for the rest of us ... 5/10

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