

A PARTRIDGE AND, AH, POETRY

It's been nine lean years XTC. But, as JOHN ENCARNACAO discovers, after the famine comes the feast.

The Ice Age, as Andy Partridge describes it, is over. XTC has been unfrozen with the release of *Apple Venus Volume 1*, a dazzling set of tunes that constitute the group's first new material for seven years. The instrumental settings are largely acoustic and orchestral, or hybrids of the two – “orch-ustic” as Partridge would have it. With wide-screen tracks such as *Easter Theatre* and *Greenman*, XTC really take you somewhere in four minutes. This is pop that creates other realities for those who will let them in.

The '90s has been a tumultuous time for Partridge and cohort Colin Moulding. After the release of 1992's *Nonsuch*, XTC went on strike from Virgin Records in order to challenge what they saw as a draconian contract.

“The contract was so appalling,” recalls Partridge. “It was put together by a very sharp record company and a manager of ours, and we were never going to see any money from that label. After 20 years, that was getting ridiculous.”

After a five-year stand-off, they were finally released from the contract – ironically, around the same time that sales of a two-CD singles' compile, *Fossil Fuel*, put them officially in the black. But, in another development, Partridge's other contract, of similar duration,

was also terminated. “The weird thing is,” he says, “this is gonna sound like a blues' lyric, but I woke up one morning and found myself divorced.” We both laugh, then reflect that it's not really funny. I suggest that some personal trauma was perceptible from the number of his songs on *Nonsuch* that dealt with the topic of crumbling relationships. Strangely, all that trouble was still in the future.

He hesitates before his next revelation: “This is going to sound ludicrous, I've never said this before, but let me try and say this so it doesn't sound too nutty. Um, I seem to be able to predict things that are gonna happen to me in my songs, which are written by the subconscious arm with the subconscious pencil and the subconscious piece of paper. They seem to be able to predict things that I'm going to go through.”

If major trials occur in threes, factor in the departure of Dave Gregory, the talented guitarist/keyboardist/arranger who'd been a loyal XTC soldier since 1979. With the focus on acoustic and orchestral instruments and Partridge doing the arrangements himself, Gregory apparently felt there was little left for him to do.

With all this “cack” Partridge went through, *River Of Orchids*

(from the new record) reads as a declaration of survival, though on the surface it celebrates a future in which flowers reclaim the countryside from roads. Perhaps the most telling line is: “The grass is always greener when it bursts up through concrete”.

“I was saying I seem to thrive on adversity ... if you can push through the concrete and come up, it's always gonna be sweeter, it's always gonna be stronger grass, a stronger growth.”

The studio-only duo from Swindon, England, is once again a thriving cottage industry. *Apple Venus Volume 2* should be released later this year to help ease the backlog of songs, and there's talk of an official CD series of home recordings and demos. Recently released is a four-CD box of BBC sessions *Transistor Blast* and a book, *Song Stories*, analysing every song of XTC's career. Partridge seems

faintly amused by the book, though he seems to have gained some perverse pleasure from listening to the “naked baby photos” of XTC's earliest recordings.

“It's a pop book, it's a snack,” he says indifferently. “What can you say about pop books? Enough of 'em and you'll be able to step up and reach something interesting on the top shelf.” *Apple Venus Vol 1* and *Transistor Blast* are available through *Festival*.



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