

XTC – THE BIG EXPRESS

I'm writing this with the imagined context of a music blog or a music-based section of a bigger website (like Vice's Noisy). Something aimed specifically at music lovers rather than casual listeners. I am writing in the present day, imagining the album (released in 1984) has been reissued and thus I'm reviewing it with a fresh perspective. The music press has long since forgotten about this record, and to an extent this band and their relevance. With the internet and a 20-40 sort of demographic in mind, I've used what I feel is the appropriate language – not overly informal but unafraid to be a little indulgent in both the language I use and some references I make. I would imagine many readers of the blog may not be familiar with XTC's music, and especially not this album as it's one of the less talked about records they did, so I have endeavoured to give a useful background to the band, their roots and their musical style. I've mentioned some of their major UK hit singles as this would help readers familiarise themselves with the band, if they were reading just out of curiosity. My aim would be for people to go out and listen to the album for themselves after reading it, or to start some sort of strong discussion about the band in the comments section.



In 1972, bookish sci-fi enthusiast Andy Partridge met quiet milkman's assistant Colin Moulding in a music shop in their native Swindon. Both young songwriters with no experience, Moulding was an avid bass player influenced by Free's Andy Fraser and Partridge first picked up a guitar because of the Monkees. Recruiting drummer Terry Chambers and keyboardist Barry Andrews, they formed XTC in 1976. Their energetic live shows won over the likes of John Peel, who gave them a session on his BBC radio show causing a label bidding war. Settling for Virgin Records, XTC released their first two LPs, 'White Music' and 'Go 2', in 1978. Their early sound was characterised by Andrews' threatening funfair organ and Partridge and Moulding's giddy vocals. Feeling overpowered, Andrews quit the band in January 1979. Rather than finding another keyboardist, the band recruited local guitar wunderkid Dave Gregory for their third album. 'Drums & Wires' is the moment XTC went full colour, as reflected by the exuberant album cover. Critics felt the songs of Partridge and the less prolific Moulding show new proficiency. The clash between Partridge's skittish guitar interjections and Gregory's more refined playing cemented it – XTC had found their sound. 'Drums & Wires' and its perturbing hit single "Making Plans For Nigel" put XTC on the map. The broad 'Rs' in their accents made sure that place on the map was underneath the word 'SWINDON'.

The next albums 'Black Sea' and 'English Settlement' developed XTC's angular, guitar-attack sound heralding hits such as 'Generals and Majors' 'Sgt. Rock' and 'Senses Working Overtime'. On their biggest tour yet in 1982, Partridge had an on-stage mental breakdown during the first song of the set. In his own words "I had a huge panic attack. The room started spinning and I was overwhelmed with fear." His then-wife had thrown away his Valium, which he'd become addicted to since being prescribed it as a teenager. He suffered from memory loss, limb seizures, extreme anxiety and stage fright. It was decided that XTC would become a studio-only band from that point on, and Partridge went home to recover and write new songs. Feeling redundant, drummer Terry Chambers left – a significant blow for the band. The result, 'Mummer', is an autumnal album with a largely acoustic sound. Despite strong reviews, it failed to ignite the charts. Determined, the band went to Bath's Crescent Studios with classical musician David Lord to make their next record, hoping Lord could be their George Martin.

"The Big Express" opens, like many of XTC's albums, dramatically. We are greeted by a hard-panned jolting guitar sequence. This is "Wake Up", one of only two songs written by Colin Moulding for the album. It describes the daily grind, a subject the band returned to throughout this album and indeed their career. What makes it special is David Lord's production, turning Moulding's kitchen-sink rocker into an ambitious cast-of-thousands romp. It's already obvious that this album will be harder-edged and more explosive than its predecessor. Second track "All You Pretty Girls" sounds like a hit, and indeed Virgin had an expensive music video made in the hopes that it would be a much-needed new hit for the band. Alas, this sea-shanty failed to float to the surface of the pop charts but it's hard to see why. It's irresistibly catchy though perhaps too lightweight to satisfy the expectations of some of the band's audience. "Shake You Donkey Up" is the strangest song on the record. It sounds a little bit like 1982's unforgettable anal-sex-themed bop "John Wayne is Big

Leggy” by Haysi Fantazee. It’s considerably better but unlikely to convert anyone not enamoured with the frills of Partridge’s writing. The fourth track of the album, ‘Seagulls Screaming Kiss Her Kiss Her’, is a highlight of the album and arguably a highlight of Andy Partridge’s songwriting career. Written on the band’s Mellotron, the lyrics convey a less-than-glamorous seaside scene: “it’s raining on the beach” “the sea is warship grey” and “the waves look painted on”. With this backdrop, Andy creates a mini-drama about a boy’s hesitance to show his feelings for a girl. Pressure seeps from all corners of the elaborate set, somewhat surreally. The sea “whispers ‘Fool!’ then slides away”, the seagulls are screaming “Kiss her! Kiss her!” and a mystery voice (the boy’s brain?) advises that “He who hesitates is lost”. This pressure culminates in the girl telling him “I like your coat.” and this compliment is enough for the boy to be happy for days. The lyrics are less a story and more a snapshot. Hefty staccato chords and an insistent beat help create a winner that’s as catchy and relatable as it is oddball. Two more standouts from Partridge follow – “This World Over” is a gloomy song imagining the world after nuclear war which manages to avoid sounding knee-jerk and dated unlike many others from the era. “Will you smile like any mother as you bathe your brand new twins? Will you sing about the missiles as you dry odd-numbered limbs?” is the stand-out line, delivered affectingly rather than comically. “The Everyday Story of Smalltown” is an ode to Swindon and the people who live there, something that would’ve been unthinkable for the band just a few years before. It resembles XTC’s answer to ‘Penny Lane’. Again, it’s peppered with brilliant images; “Shiny grey black snake of bikes” “If it’s all the same to you, Mrs. Progress, think i’ll drink my Oxo up and get away”. I feel this song is the heart of the album – the abrasive sound of the record reflects the industrial nature of Swindon, a small settlement which grew tremendously to become the large town it is today due to the Bristol – London railway line passing through it, the titular ‘Big Express’.



“I Bought Myself A Liarbird” initially seems like most serene song on the album, a much-needed respite from the huge production and boisterous instrumentation on other songs, but it’s a scathing comment on the band’s swindling former manager, Ian Reid. Any lyrical cynicism is extinguished by the melodically-fluent accompaniment. This is in great contrast to the next song “Reign of Blows” – an anti-violence song arranged as violently as possible. A cacophony of distorted vocals, Stones-like riffing and screeching violins, it’s a main offender for the album’s raucous reputation. “You’re The Wish You Are I Had” revisits the surreal infatuation theme from “Seagulls...” for an upside-down cake of a pop song, and “I Remember The Sun” is one of Moulding’s finest moments, a jazz-tinged lament about the time he spent at Penhill Dumps, muddy escarpments around the estate he lived in as a child. For the final track, “Train Running Low On Soul Coal”, we’re back in cacophonous mode. Partridge wrote the song about his worry that he was running out of inspiration, using ‘coal’ as a metaphor for his muse. Beginning with an impressive emulation of a train leaving, this is a it binds the major themes of the album together, the three “...on”s – Infatuation, Disillusion and Swindon. The song slowly grinds to a glorious halt, again emulating a train, ending the album that began with robotic off-beat guitars. I feel ‘The Big Express’ is a bit of a concept album (a dirty word in 1984), a clattering masterpiece displaying a band working in miniature lyrically but using large brush strokes musically – a rare phenomenon. Her next studio album, “Skylarking” would become the critic’s favourite, but there’s plenty of steam in this record. It deserves a wide reappraisal. Reviewing the “This World Over” single in a guest column in Smash Hits magazine in 1984, a 25 year old Morrissey proclaimed “XTC have stepped back from music industry machinations and are making better records”. It’s difficult to disagree.

SOURCES USED FOR RESEARCH

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