10

The Emergence of Art Rock (1980)

John Rockwell

Long, flat expanses of professionalism bother me. I'd rather have a band that could explode at any time. And I think that's what people like too: soul and expression and real fire and emotion more than perfection.

—Neil Young (Kohut and Kohut 1994, 99)

The deluded notion that we're making anything but sugar is nuts. I'm not saying that sugar doesn't taste good, but it burns fast. It's not meant to last. This is not classical music.

—Gene Simmons of Kiss, 2002 (Rabin 2002, 14)

Rock is like a battery that must always go back to the blues to get recharged.

—Eric Clapton (Szatmary 2009, 188)

In "The Emergence of Art Rock" John Rockwell documents the history and musical elements of early prog (or progressive, or art) rock, and suggests that if rock music exhibits a life cycle comparable to other arts and artistic movements (youth, maturity, decay), we might broadly characterize its first two decades as follows: the '50s was a period of youthful exuberance, the '60s a time of healthy maturity, and the early '70s an era of decline and decadence. For some, prog rock was thus a terminal "cancer." Inevitably, death is followed by life, in this case the birth in the mid-70s of punk rock, which brought back the energy and excitement of the '50s. If we accept Rockwell's three-part scheme, we might then ask: Has rock experienced a similar life cycle (or cycles) since the mid '70s? If so, how might we describe that cycle?

Rockwell, who served as both classical music critic and chief pop music critic for *The New York Times*, also observes that most of the art rock bands were English, and for a good reason. In England classical music is a part of the culture of all musicians, and rockers there relate to it in ways that Americans do not. Thus, English rockers naturally adopted classical music techniques. Finally, concerning the music itself, Rockwell notes that a characteristic of art rock is abrupt transitions, from one mood, tempo or style to another.

There is a morphology, an inherent developmental cycle, to artistic movements. They begin with a rude and innocent vigor, pass into a healthy adulthood and finally decline into an overwrought, feeble old age. Something of this process can be observed in the

passage of rock & roll from the three-chord primitivism of the Fifties through the burgeoning vitality and experimentation of the Sixties to the hollow emptiness of much of the so-called progressive, or "art," rock of the Seventies.

The whole notion of art rock triggers hostility from those who define rock in terms of the early-middle stages of its development. Rock was born as a street rebellion against pretensions and hypocrisy—of Fifties society, Fifties Tin Pan Alley pop and high art in general ("Roll Over Beethoven"). Thus the very idea of art rock strikes some as a cancer to be battled without quarter, and the punk reversion to primitivism was in part a rejection of the fancier forms of progressive rock. The trouble is, once consciousness has intruded itself into the process, it's impossible to obliterate it (except maybe with drugs, and then only temporarily). And so even primitivism, self-consciously assumed, became one of the principal vehicles of art rock.

The Beatles' *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band* (1967) is often cited as the progenitor of self-conscious experimentation in rock. It was the album that dramatized rock's claim to artistic seriousness to an adult world that had previously dismissed the whole genre as blathering teen entertainment. The Beatles aspired to something really daring and new—an unabashedly eclectic, musically clever (harmonies, rhythms and, above all, arrangements) melange that could only have been created in the modern recording studio.

One inevitable implication of the whole notion of art rock, anticipated by *Sgt. Pepper*, is that it parallels, imitates or is inspired by other forms of "higher," more "serious" music. On the whole, imitative art rock has tended to emulate classical music, primarily the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century orchestral sorts. The pioneers in this enterprise were the Moody Blues, whose album *Days of Future Past* paired the group with the London Festival Orchestra. Although Moody Blues devotees seemed to think they were getting something higher toned than mere rock, they were kidding themselves: Moody Blues records were mood music, pure and regrettably not so simple. There's nothing wrong with that, of course, except for the miscategorization into something more profound.

The vast majority of the bands that pillage traditional classical music come from Britain. Why British bands feel compelled to quote the classics, however tongue-in-cheek, leads into the murky waters of class and nation analysis. In comparison with the British, Americans tend to be happy cavepeople. Most American rockers wouldn't know a Beethoven symphony if they were run down by one in the middle of a freeway. One result of such ignorance is that American art (music, painting, poetry, films, etc.) can develop untroubled by lame affectations of a cultured sensibility. In Britain the lower classes enjoy no such isolation. The class divisions and the crushing weight of high culture flourish essentially untrammeled. Rockers seem far more eager to "dignify" their work, to make it acceptable for upper-class approbation, by freighting it with trappings of classical music. Or, conversely, they are far more intent upon making classical music accessible to their audiences by bastardizing it in the rock context. Or, maybe, they feel the need to parody it to the point of ludicrousness. In all cases, they relate to it with a persistence and intensity that American groups rarely match.

The principal examples here from the Seventies are acts like the Nice; Emerson, Lake and Palmer; Deep Purple; Procol Harum; Renaissance; Yes; and Rick Wakeman. Much of what these artists did was just souped-up, oversynthesized, vaguely "progressive" rock of no particular interest or pretensions. But at one time or another all of them dealt in some form of classical pastiche. Wakeman, classically trained as a pianist at the Royal Academy, is as good an example as any. After serving time as a session pianist for the likes of David Bowie and Cat Stevens, he joined Yes, helping to lead the group into a convoluted pop mysticism. He eventually left Yes in 1974 to pursue a solo career devoted to such elaborate, portentously titled orchestral narratives as *Journey to the Centre of the Earth* and *The Myths and Legends of King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table.* These ice-skating epics had their elements of elephantine humor. But his classical excursions were dispatched with such a brutal cynicism as to be genuinely appalling.

Even when such groups weren't busily ripping off Grieg their music was operatically arty in the bad sense, through their ponderous appeal to a middle-class sensibility and their lame reliance on electronically updated nineteenth-century vaudeville stage tricks. Too often these pastiches were further burdened by the seemingly irresistible weakness certain sorts of loud, arty British bands had for science-fiction art and "poetry." Yes's album covers make the point as well as anything, but such puerile mythologizing—Tolkien for the teenyboppers—pervaded much of British pop poetry and lapsed over with insufferable affectation into much of the British electric folk-rock camp, too; think only of Jethro Tull and Cat Stevens.

Classical borrowings don't have to be limited simply to quotations, however, nor do they have to be bad by definition. The whole craze for "rock operas" of the Kinks-Who variety produced some fascinating work. Similarly, some of the fairly straightforward heavy-metal groups have colored their music with the judicious application of nonrock styles, to telling effect (the use of Eastern modes and instrumental accents in Led Zeppelin's "Kashmir," for example).

Such use of classical and other nonrock styles and formal ideas blends imperceptibly into all-purpose stylistic eclecticism—the free and often febrile switching among different styles within the same piece. Eclecticism, by now a talisman of the entire post-Modernist movement in all the arts, was more prominent in the Seventies pop world in London than anywhere else, and, at its best, it stops being lamely imitative and enters the realm of creativity.

Numerous British bands of the Seventies fell into the eclectic art-rock camp: Genesis, King Crimson, Electric Light Orchestra, Queen, Supertramp, Sparks, 10cc, Gentle Giant and Be-Bop Deluxe. There were Continental bands like Focus, and even American groups like Kansas, Styx and Boston that fit here also. Certainly there were differences between these groups, large differences, and there were many more groups that could be listed. But they all shared a commitment to unprepared, abrupt transitions from one mood to another. Sometimes the shifts were between tempos, sometimes between levels of volume, sometimes between whole styles of music. The effect in any case was violent, disruptive and nervously tense, and as such

no doubt answered the needs of the age as well as anything. At their best (or at their most commercially successful), these groups never lost sight of older rock basics, as with Queen's best work.

In a sense, Roxy Music might be considered the leader of this particular pack, especially between 1971 and 1973, when Brian Eno was a member of the band. But even from the first, and despite the strong contributions of Phil Manzanera and Andy MacKay, this was always Bryan Ferry's band, as proven by the continuity in his subsequent solo albums. Ferry's artsiness expressed itself so much as style over substance that style itself became substantive. As the ultimate self-professed lounge lizard, he managed to take pop-rock's hoariest conventions (the love song, even actual oldies on his solo albums) and coat them with witty intimations of unspeakable decadence. But the real art rocker in Roxy Music was Eno. Aside from the quality of his music, which is considerable and which he sustained into the Nineties, he is interesting from two points of view: his command of the synthesizer and his relation to others on the London and New York experimental scenes.

The synthesizer is a much-abused, much-misunderstood instrument. When played like a souped-up electric organ by people like Keith Emerson, Jon Lord (of Deep Purple) or Rick Wakeman, it can sound simply flashy and cheap. If the obligatory drum solo used to be the bane of any self-respecting rock concertgoer's life, the obligatory synthesizer solo, preferably with smoke bomb and laser obbligato, was the curse of the Seventies. If synthesizers weren't regarded as newfangled organs, they were taken literally, as something that "synthesizes," and we were subjected to Wendy Carlos's and Isao Tomita's synthesized versions of the classics.

The synthesizer is an instrument with its own characteristics, and those characteristics are just beginning to be explored by rock musicians. When played with the subtlety and discretion of a Stevie Wonder or a Garth Hudson, it can reinforce conventional textures superbly. And when somebody like Eno or Edgar Froese of Tangerine Dream gets hold of it, the synthesizer can create a whole world of its own. Eno's *Discreet Music* (1975), with its title-track first side full of soothing, hypnotic woodwindish sounds, or *No Pussyfooting* (1975) and *Evening Star* (1976), two collaborations with Robert Fripp, ex-King Crimson guitarist, or *Music for Airports* (1978), were masterly examples of genuine rock avant-gardism. Of course, they weren't really "rock" in any but the loosest sense: There was no reference back to a blues base, even in attenuated form. But they still counted as music produced by a rock sensibility aimed at a rock audience.

Eno's position within the London avant-garde, and the nature of that avant-garde, are both of interest, too. London, like New York, has a thriving avant-garde musical community that doesn't place much of a premium on formally acquired technique, thus remaining open to fresh infusions of energy from ostensible "amateurs." In London the experimentation in rock was fostered by British taxation, which forced most of the successful commercial rockers out of the country, leaving the rest to experiment relatively free from Top Forty pressures. This robbed the London scene of some potential big-name experimenters like George Harrison (see

Electronic Sound, 1969) and John Lennon (whose *Two Virgins* with Yoko Ono was another particularly appealing early art-rock entry in 1969).

Still, what was left in the forefront of experimentation was interesting enough. The mere fact that Eno had to leave Roxy Music (quite apart from the question of clashing egos with Ferry) indicates the difficulty of pursuing experimentation and commercial success at the same time. The London avant-garde scene, insofar as any outsider can tell, is marked still by a fascinating if rather private and sporadic interchange between the classical and pop worlds. In the Seventies the pop stars (Eno, guitarist Phil Manzanera of Roxy, Fripp) did rather more interesting work than those who wandered over from a classical background (David Bedford, Stomu Yamash'ta, the Japanese percussionist-turned-rocker). Michael Oldfield fits here to a certain extent, although his work—particularly after his best-selling *Tubular Bells* (1973), which did admittedly have a bland appeal as a reduction of California composer Terry Riley's ideas—was lame beyond recall.

Much of this work, from Oldfield to Eno and even Riley, is head music, and relates to a rather interesting form of avant-garde trance music, which brings us to the subject of drugs. The avant-gardism in rock of the Sixties and Seventies, for all its ultimate debts to surrealism and other vanguard movements from earlier in the century, owed its primary fealty to the proliferation of drugs in the Sixties. It would be misleading to overstress this, but just as false to repress it. Marijuana, LSD and other psychedelics, and methedrine, or speed, all had a profound effect on how music in general, and art rock in particular, was made and perceived. This is not to say that you had to be stoned to play or enjoy this music. But it does mean that the climate and stylistic preoccupations of many varieties of present-day art are built in part on perceptions analogous to the drug experience. Sometimes it takes only one trip, as with acid, to give you a whole other fix on the world.

The kind of quiescent, dappled textural shiftings that mark much of American composer La Monte Young's music (Eno was strongly influenced by Young; and John Cale, formerly of the Velvet Underground, worked closely with him) owe something to grass, at least originally: Maybe Young has never smoked in his life, but his art could have germinated only in a subculture primed for it by marijuana. And the same is true for the whole acid-rock phenomenon.

The pure acid-rockers of the Sixties—from the Byrds to the Jefferson Airplane—don't really concern us here. But Pink Floyd, originally Britain's premier acid-rockers, do. After cutting a couple of British hit singles in 1967, the group concentrated on extended compositions, often with spacey lyrical motifs. *The Dark Side of the Moon* (1973) became one of the most successful albums of the decade, a best-seller in Europe and America as well as England. Floyd turned out some of the most consistently interesting "head music" of the late Sixties and Seventies, and managed, in its various shards after its breakup, at least to re-create some of that work arrestingly thereafter. The group had a sense for line and continuity and ritualistic repetition that was quite special, and to dismiss it simply as technically limited is philistine.

In Los Angeles the drug scene helped spawn the Mothers of Invention, one of the first rock groups to emphasize mixed-media presentations, dubbed "freak-outs"

by leader Frank Zappa. Zappa, a self-professed teetotaler, was forced after the first few L.A. freakouts in 1967 to disavow the use of drugs at these affairs—naturally to no avail. The Mothers combined social satire, parody of rock & roll oldies, classical references—Zappa regularly paid homage to Edgard Varèse—and a growing taste for vaguely avant-garde jazz improvisation. It has been an influential collage of styles, affecting the work of such diverse musicians as Jean-Luc Ponty, the jazz violinist, and Paul McCartney, who once cited the Mothers' first album, *Freak Out,* as a key inspiration for *Sgt. Pepper.*

The psychedelic enthusiasms of the late Sixties, kindled by (among others) Pink Floyd and the Mothers of Invention and centered in San Francisco and in London, found their most sustained resonance in the Seventies in West Germany. Kraftwerk had the biggest commercial impact in the United States, thanks to the surprising success in 1975 of *Autobahn.* Rather more interesting was Tangerine Dream and its leader, Edgar Froese. The group's records and Froese's solo albums were impressionistic extravaganzas, full of gentle washes of electronic color. There is a parallel to Eno's work here. But Eno is a more diverse artist than Froese, and more overtly rock oriented, and in such purely experimental pieces as *Discreet Music* he shows an indebtedness to the structuralist principles of classical composers like Young, Riley (himself an offshoot of the psychedelic/meditative climate of the Bay Area in the Sixties), Steve Reich and Philip Glass. Froese, on the other hand, owes his classical inspirations to such orchestral colorists as Hungarian composer György Ligeti and the electronic music of Karlheinz Stockhausen and Iannis Xenakis. Froese's work seems less interesting than that of his models, but at least his choice of inspirations betrayed a certain sophistication.

More directly related to Eno was the band Cluster, with which Eno twice collaborated. And the artier implications of Giorgio Moroder's disco "factory" cannot be ignored here. His "I Feel Love" for Donna Summer is one of the best trance records of the Seventies, among other things—as a version performed in New York by Blondie and Fripp reaffirmed so well. And before he hit upon his disco formula, Moroder had made an overt art-rock synthesizer collage disc, influenced by the German psychedelic groups but better than his models. At the time nobody could be interested in releasing it, and since then Moroder has been too busy to bother.

The evolution of the New York art-rock scene in the late Seventies, and its subsequent spread to Los Angeles and other byways of the United States, was such an eruption of energies that it merits separate treatment. But the pattern suggested by London was brought to triumphant fruition in this country: a rejection of overcomplexity, the development of new artistic primitivism and finally a direct merger with other forms of avant-gardism, both classical and jazz—with Eno and Fripp, both of whom moved to New York, as catalysts.

This disquisition began with talk about morphologies and self-consciousness, and in some ways the aesthetic behind the New York art-rock scene of the past decade brings us full circle.

Looking at rock from a populist standpoint, one can seriously question both its aspirations to high art and the very hegemony of high art itself. Maybe the self-conscious primitives are right: Maybe art rock doesn't have to be clever complexity at all. Maybe real art is that which most clearly and directly answers the needs of its audiences. Which, in turn, means that we can prize pure rock and pure pop, from Chuck Berry on, as "art" in no way inferior to that which may entail a more highly formalized technique for its execution. Rock may be part of a far larger process in which art broadens its gestures to encompass an audience made more numerous by the permeation of social equality down into strata heretofore ignored.

There is another, more philosophical side to it. What Warhol and pop artists were trying to tell us—and what composer John Cage has been telling us all along—is that art isn't necessarily a product crafted painstakingly by some mysterious, removed artist-deity, but is whatever you the perceiver, choose to perceive artistically. A Brillo box isn't suddenly art because Warhol put a stacked bunch of them into a museum. But by putting them there he encouraged you to make your every trip to the supermarket an artistic adventure, and in so doing he exalted your life. Everybody's an artist who wants to be, which is really a more radically populist notion than encouraging scholarly studies of the blues. Roll over Beethoven, indeed, and make room for us.