*To the Outside of Everything: A story of Post-Punk 1977-1981* (Cherry Red)

*Reviewed by Rupert Loydell, Falmouth University*

This recent box set offers the listener five CDs of glorious post-punk, punk-funk, indie mayhem. And I pile up the genres deliberately, as post-punk seems a term that generates far more problems than it solves. Neil Taylor’s introductory essay to this beautifully packaged box set notes that 'the problem is a less a question of what to include, but what, if anything, do you leave out?' To be fair to Taylor, however, he makes a fair stab at an exhaustive selection, offering the listener a broad-ranging and far from generic collection that functions for the listener as both a concise introduction and a primer for new discoveries.

Its starts with a triple whammy of Ultravox! (when they still had John Foxx and an exclamation mark), Magazine, then Wire, and continues with a mix of material from bands I've never heard of, like 'O' Level and The Tights, and classics from Punishment of Luxury, Fischer-Z, pre-mainstream Fashion, The Teardrop Explodes and The Raincoats. What's not to like? The hits and should-have-been hits just keep coming. Here is punk absorbing dub and funk music, here are the arch and arty Flying Lizards deconstructing 'Summertime Blues', here are The Fall in full-blooded roar, here is the early synthpop music of The Normal, Thomas Leer and (heaven forbid! – except it's quite good) Tubeway Army.

And this exquisite and informative array of musical talent continues throughout the box set, which is accompanied by a groovily-designed and informative 48 page booklet. Here are PiL, Echo & The Bunnymen and Joy Division, names we all know. Here is the indie version of the Thompson Twins before they became the pop abomination everyone loathes and after the huge ramshackle ensemble they started out as. Here are the twee Mo-dettes, the crash'n'burn of The Membranes, the hectoring political funk of The Pop Group, more mainstream indie pop from the likes of the The Fire Engines and Blancmange, as well as a few tracks I never want to hear again (Spider King, The Skodas and New Asia take a bow).

But this is a compilation, right? So there's always going to be a cry of 'wrong choice' or 'where are X or Y?', as well as 'why on earth did you choose them?' My wrong choice would include the Eyeless in Gaza track, which is obscure even by Eyeless standards. And I know I'm in a minority, but I wouldn't bother including New Order on anything – give me The Pet Shop Boys any day; once Joy Division were over, I lost interest. I'm also at a loss to why Mass are here instead of Rema-Rema or The Wolfgang Press, since they are both more interesting versions of the same band. But I suspect we're into issues of licensing, back catalogues, and permissions, not to mention taste.

Or perhaps we're back with that slippery question of what exactly is post-punk? For me this is the point where punk grinds itself to a halt and absorbs new keyboards and other technologies, and grapples with other musical genres, pop, feminism, politics, artiness and fun. punk. It's where punk gets interesting but can't remain under the punk banner. Anarcho-punk would of course continue to thrash three chords and chant slogans, Crass and associated bands would brilliantly explore political themes over unlistenable noise (but wrap it all in provocative and intriguing graphics), and Psychic TV and Nurse with Wound would spawn a hundred occult explorers of collaged and found sound. But post-punk shaped all these influences into songs, vibrant sonic outings you could often dance to as well as nod wisely along with in your bedsit.

What's interesting is how the term post-punk can act as an umbrella for such a wide range of music and still serve a function. It might be difficult to draw specific links between some of the tracks here, say Blancmange, The Danse Society and TV21, but often this is because of what they went on to become, rather than the music presented here. So Blancmange's quirky pop, The Danse Society's spectacular gloomy 12" 'The Is No Shame in Death' and TV21's disappearance are irrelevant to this four year snapshot. Some of this music became mainstream, some indie rock, some bands broke up, others mutated, sold out (whatever that means) or carried on making music in their bedrooms away from any media spotlights. Some became legends in their own lifetimes, creating self-mythologising bullshit, one even spawned a comedian (take a bow Mr Higson) – which in retrospect seems entirely obvious from the lyrics to 'I Don't Want to Live with Monkeys' (included here) and 'Conspiracy' (not included here but their masterpiece nonetheless. [And who did steal their bongos?]).

What brings all this music together, contextualises it even? It's the sense of *song* and the possibilities it offered when deconstructed and reinvented in the light of the non or un-musician and DIY possibilities punk had offered. It is this that underpins this box set and holds it all in place. This anthology pretty much stays away from what became 'new wave', and leaves the thrash alone, to give us the best selection of mainstream and alternative post-punk music now commercially available, and a brilliantly designed and informative set of sleeve notes – in itself, a rare occurrence. This music isn't outside of everything, it's actually the core of music, where everything got melted together and exploded into the future.

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