

## BOOK REVIEW

### ***SOUVENIR: LONDON, 1979-1986*, MICHAEL BRACEWELL (2021)**

London: White Rabbit, 124pp.,

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*Reviewed by Rupert Loydell, Falmouth University*

*Souvenir* reads as an elegiac prose poem set in and about what the blurb calls 'the last years prior to the rise of the digital city'. Set in large type and broken in to three sections, this brief work (allegedly edited down from a much longer version) is a dream memoir combining paeans to the likes of Soft Cell and the Virgin Megastore with brief excursions to galleries, clubs and shops in the city centre. It is strangely unfocussed and nostalgic, and all the better for that.

Surprisingly, given Bracewell's previous books such as *England Is Mine: Pop Life in Albion From Wilde to Goldie* (1997) and *Re-make/Re-model: Becoming Roxy Music* (2007), there is little music here. Punk is described in the past tense as 'harsher, sparser, thinner, poorer, brittle in its newness' (p4) and later dismissed as 'such a comparatively trivial event' (p85) in comparison to Schoenberg and Kurt Weill or modernism in general. Far more pages are given over to lists of film-makers, philosophers and writers ('Burroughs, Debord, Pasolini and Bataille' p3) and visits to the ICA café, an obscure photographic exhibition and Bloomsbury's University Bookshop. It is a peculiarly distanced and cool look at things, a world of fashion and literature students, would-be sociologists and art critics, with poetic interludes from the past. It is decidedly unreal: technicolour dreamscapes as opposed to the grey concrete poverty presided over by Thatcher.

When music is occasionally considered, Bracewell is at his best. PIL's *Metal Box* is described as 'plutonium heavy, each track a length of shorn-off girder, and cold, cold' (p32), providing a soundtrack to 1981 which consists of

repetitive-hypnotic, urgent, scything and metallic guitar, clanking like a pylon strut hit with a torque wrench; juddering fathomless bass, Jamaican inspired; squeaking and spluttering bursts of electronics. And the mad thin male voice – the voice of a self-loathing world-hating Victorian malcontent, bounced through time off a satellite in airless dark – shrieks and whines, intones, insinuates, a roar becoming a retch [...] (p33)

Elsewhere, a nameless 'she' remembers Joy Division, the narrator/author enthuses about Suburban Lawns (by an act of synchronicity their album is receiving a 2021 reissue from Cherry Red), and there are several pages devoted to Soft Cell's 'What!' and Prefab Sprout's 'Lions In My Own Garden (Exit Someone)' singles. But for Bracewell 'Pop in 1982 expresses futurism, while its digital technology is still in its infancy; pop loves the machine, but looks back to the toppermost of the poppermost.' (p13) This mention of the digital seems like hindsight to me: most of us were still making music in analogue studios or on cassette tapes with instruments layered up on Tascam Portastudios, throughout the 80s. In a similar way it feels strange to project the deconstruction of pop stardom back in time: the late 70s and 80s were surely about punk, post-punk and the notion of 'alternative music' (however quickly

that term got commodified and used by the major labels)? Most of the people I knew during the time this book covers had no interest in or knowledge of pop or chart music!

Art, fashion and clubbing are also here, along with scattershot forays into the distant past (T Rex live at Wembley Stadium, '1974, the year of *Diamond Dogs*' (p47)) and contemporary contextual asides (flyposted Fripp and Eno gig posters, dinner with William Burroughs, Kathy Acker's 'silver rings, the size of knuckledusters' (p106)), but Bracewell is more interested in '[t]he bright shops, the quickening centre...' (p26), often seen through the lens of T.S. Eliot's and Ezra Pound's poetic modernism. Bracewell's London is surprisingly centrist, with the suburbs – which one could argue are where post-punk really happened, or at least emerged from – not featuring.

A lovely description of Edward Paolozzi's mosaic murals at Tottenham Court Road tube station cinematically pans out to consider 'the flourishing electronics shops' nearby before brief comments on Martin Fry and ABC's *Lexicon of Love* album and a return to Marc Almond. (pp30-31) Bracewell ends this section by noting 'And we had all been finding our way to the station', but one might paraphrase and suggest that all we had been doing was finding our way to the station. It is the cinematic and tangential engagement that this book excels at: Bracewell has an eye for detail and a very writerly sense of narrative, history and conjecture.

This short volume feels like an erudite song by the Pet Shop Boys at their best (perhaps 'Being Boring' – one of my favourites), as it stylishly namedrops its way through a very edited, selective and – to be honest – somewhat pretentious version of London, one that is very carefully considered and somewhat knowing. Put these aside as criticism and one can enjoy the book and embrace Bracewell's own summary within the text:

We were each the city and a map of the city; with buildings and locales as events and acts and tempers – streets and districts as dialogue and characters. It felt like we walked without pause through the chapters of an autobiography, each step cumulatively writing, correcting and editing. The walked text and the written text. (pp106-107)

I try not to be too nostalgic, knowing how it clouds and confuses things, distorting memory and history within emotional responses, but for *Souvenir* I am happy to make an exception. If the briefer parts 2 and 3 here feel like afterthoughts or edited fragments in comparison to part 1, this book remains a wonderful, dreamy short excursion into the past. Mostly Michael Bracewell's past, it has to be said, but one I share in parts and can otherwise only imagine.

Rupert Loydell