**A Glimpse of the Possibilities: an interview with Morgan Bryan**

Morgan Bryan is a musician with a long history of writing and performing his own music. He is a guitarist, vocalist and keyboard player whose primary love is composition, declaring that, on balance, he would choose video over live performance. As well as solo projects he has been involved in a number of bands: The Nurses, Colour 4D, Scare, Dum Dum Zed, Morgan Bryan and the Art, and his long term project V-Sor, X. Influences abound but underpinning his music would be a foundation of film music and post-punk alternative. An international person with a global audience he is currently working to release V-Sor, X’s next album *Reformer*.

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When I got to college in 1982, the year above were a hotbed of creativity. There were published authors, publishers, the editor of the college magazine, a session guitarist who had played for Felt and other indie bands, would-be and actual singer-songwriters, one of the guys from Half Men Half Biscuit, and Morgan Bryan – a guitar and synthesizer player who already his first single as band V-Sor, X, *Authors 2*, out on his own indie label Dox Music (1982a). Dox was part of the indie-cassette scene as was Stride, which I ran alongside the poetry press of the same name (V-Sor, X appeared on the Stride compilation C60 tape *Penumbra* in 1984). There were numerous studio quality recordings released on short tapes over the years (1982b, 1982c, 1983a, 1983b, 1984), and Morgan could often be found in the evenings in empty corridors or studios making videos to accompany his music. A trio version of the band, two synth players and Morgan on guitar and vocals, undertook a short tour, including playing at Crewe & Alsager College (now Manchester Met) where we both studied.

After completing his degree, Morgan moved to London and a new version of V-Sor, X appeared, which included a trumpeter. The band continued to record (1985) and gig and in 1989 released their first full length LP, *From the Mouth of No King*. Success continued to elude them, however, and time was called on the project. Morgan Bryan continued to work as both an ambient artist and as a singer-songwriter, but also looked after the V-Sor, X name and archive: in 2002 Genetic released some remixed archive material as the album *A Strip of Light but Still too Dark.*

Now, in 2018, comes a brand-new V-Sor, X digital single, *Elektronisch* (V-Sor, X 2018b), announced as 'from the forthcoming album *Reformer*', as well as a vinyl reissue of *Authors 2* on Peripheral Minimal (V-Sor, X 1982a/2018). I thought it was about time I caught up with Morgan again and discussed how his post-punk electronic music had changed over the years and survived so well.

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**Rupert Loydell (RL)**: *Hi Morgan, tell me about the formation of V-Sor, X. Lichfield isn't renowned as a hotbed of punk or post-punk music. At least I don't think so.*

**Morgan Bryan (MB)**: Lichfield was, and is, a very conservative small town (well, 12th smallest city in the UK). However, when I look back to the late 70s early 80s, I realise we had a lot more going for us than bands do today. There were more live venues and people would *pay* an entry fee! Everybody and their brother were in bands, so we all went out to support each other and, most of all, audiences were far more appreciative of bands doing original music (in the last 10 years I couldn’t name a single band from the area I currently live in that play only their own music).

In those days Birmingham was our access to local upcoming bands. In our early years they were the likes of Au Pairs, denizens, Dangerous Girls, Fashion, Swell Maps, Balaam and the Angel and a little-known outfit called Duran Duran. But prior to that the punk movement had been a green light for anyone who wanted to ‘have a go’ and we took that opportunity. I had been in a punk/new wave band called the Nurses when someone put me in touch with long term bass contributor Ian ‘Rolls’ Rowland and we started a band call Ambush Infancy. It was pretty experimental (mainly due to my rudimental grasp of my instrument) as we carved songs out of sounds and motifs that appealed to us.

After we parted from our female vocalist, we decide to make the band unique with a name that could only mean one thing. There were various options but V-Sor, X stood out above the rest (which turned out to be a marketing man’s nightmare and certainly not built for the internet age with a comma in the name). We were so dedicated, I remember Rolls and I rehearsing every day for two weeks straight. I was unemployed at the time but he used to get home from work and head over to my place with his bass. We were completely unfettered by any desires to be famous or successful, we just loved pushing at the edge. I guess this was our *Controversial Subject* moment (The The’s first single (1980), which I loved).

**RL**: *Your initial release,* The 13 Daydreams *(1980), shows the clear influence of Wire, who you always admired and admitted as an influence. Who else in the late 1970s were you listening to? Did punk have any influence or was it post-punk that affected you more?*

**MB**: In my previous band The Nurses we supported Wire at Top Of The World (c.1978). Sadly I got into a fight after our set and despite coming off better decided to head home and missed them play. Later I discovered the album *154*, which is still one of my favourite albums. We were quite heavily into The Stranglers, particularly *Rattus Norvegicus* (1977)*,* but also some of their later quirkier stuff, Bauhaus' *In A Flat Field* (1980), Gang of Four's *Entertainment* (1979), The Cure's *Faith* (1981), Killing Joke, Magazine, The Motors, Fischer Z, Psychedelic Furs, Tuxedomoon's *Desire* (1981), Dalek I Love You's *Compass Kumpas* (1980), Depeche Mode, B-Movie, The Fallout Club, Kan Kan, Modern Eon and many other forgotten but eclectic and unique artists.

Punk had really grabbed me (The Ruts, 999, The Vibrators, Buzzcocks, The Damned, Penetration, The Rezillos) but prior to that I had been a rock fan (Led Zeppelin, Be Bop Deluxe, Budgie, Pink Floyd, Stray). However *far* beyond all other musical movements, both before and since, post-punk offered unbelievable diversity and that set me on fire. Naively I thought that the variety introduced to music was a fresh new beginning that music had been fundamentally changed forever. Sadly, it was beaten back into line by the likes of the New Romantics and later dance music. As much as I like some output from both genres, they had a normalising effect on the music scene.

**RL**: *And what about the electronic side of things? I know you liked some of Bill Nelson's solo work, but I am assuming Ultravox! and even Gary Numan might have caught your ears at various times? Kraftwerk?*

**MB**: I have never got into Kraftwerk. I respect them hugely but found their music a little anodyne (which was probably the intention). The first electronic track I remember liking was the *Doctor Who* theme but it was probably *Popcorn* by Gershon Kingsley in 1969, that I most connected with. It has a strangely Shadows feel about it but with basic synth sounds. Later I got into Pink Floyd, David Bowie and Mike Oldfield (although not strictly electronic but they all employed synths to form their sound), Sparks (*Never Turn Your Back on Mother Earth* (1974b), *This Town Ain’t Big Enough For The Both Of Us* (1974a))*,* Be Bop Deluxe (*Electrical Language* from *Drastic Plastic* (1978)), Jean-Michel Jarre (particularly *Équinoxe* (1978)) and I loved the riff from *I Feel Love* by Donna Summer (1977). As punk arrived there were many more electronic artists to choose from, the best being John Foxx, Gary Numan (*Are Friends Electric* (as Tubeway Army, 1979)), the Human League (the very brilliant *Being Boiled* (1980)), Ultravox (who I discovered after John Foxx had left), Bill Nelson's Red Noise, Magazine, Japan's *Quiet Life* (1979), as well as Dalek I Love You and The Stranglers (punk with keyboards).

**RL**: *Initially punk seemed to reject keyboards, but very soon after the likes of early records by Simple Minds (1979), XTC (1978) and Magazine (1978) made them okay again, but also moved keyboards away from the flamboyance of musicians such as Rick Wakeman to a simpler, more direct sound. Did you pick up on that?*

**MB**: Yes, we would get a lot of grief from die hard punks for having a keyboard on stage, which really got up my nose! Think of some of the brilliant and really tough sounds that came out of Killing Joke’s first album (1980). But then, as mentioned earlier, I associate heavily with post-punk. It freed musicians such as Tuxedomoon, Eyeless In Gaza, The Cure, Flying Lizards to output however they wanted, free from the constraints of the music industry. I am glad musicians like Rick Wakeman are part of our rich musical history but I have never been keen on over flamboyant keyboards. This is where training bludgeons music. In the same way I am not too keen on opera singers – the body builders of vocal performers. When I first heard the Buzzcocks track *Moving Away From The Pulsebeat* (1978) I loved the five or six note guitar solo; the less is more approach to composition.

**RL**: *What kind of equipment were you using apart from the 8-track studio at college? Was it too early for four-track cassette recorders (TEACs)? I seem to remember there was a very early synthesizer in the studio to, one of those EMS models that Eno used to use with Roxy Music.*

**MB**: My first synth was a Yamaha CS5 mono synth, which I still have, and by the time I got into the studio at college I was using a Roland 100 System, a Roland SH101, Crumar String Synth, a Roland Juno 60 and a Soundmaster SR-88 drum machine. This was all pre-MIDI, so hours were spent trying to sync up the drum machine with the Roland 12 note sequencer, which fortuitously spawned the breaks in our early minimal synth track *Conversation With...* (<https://youtu.be/NnkgQkC5RvA>). I never used the EMS (the briefcase synth) in the studio or an EDP Wasp that would appear from time to time, slightly too scratchy for me. I did occasionally borrow a Teac 4 portastudio and recorded some tracks on that (e.g. *Mischief Again* from *A Strip Of Light But Still Too Dark*).

**RL**: *And I believe the studio technician, Howard Davidson, was a great help to you too? He not only helped engineer but acted as an adviser and a kind of producer - would that be fair?*

**MB**: Howard went on to become a very prolific TV theme writer. He is a remarkable talent and produced the V-Sor, X album *From The Mouth Of No King*. I am so grateful for his input and his mentorship. It would be great to meet up with him again someday but our paths have deviated. I think he admired our raw approach to music and I always admired his technical prowess. He was a trained musician, while I was just winging it.

**RL**: *My memory of the Crewe & Alsager (now MMU) Creative Arts degree and my time at college is just what a great place it was and what a great time to be there. Taking two subjects from dance, drama, music, visual art and creative writing, but also being allowed access to all the studio facilities whatever you were on was just fantastic, especially for someone like me who had had four years out of education. I saw much art, dance and theatre, listened to (and indeed, made) so much new music, had access to cheap photocopying and binding, and so on. Was your experience similar?*

**MB**: More than ever I now realise how lucky we were in those days. I got a full grant and in the first year could even claim housing benefit during the holidays. We were able to become fully immersed in our arts and experiment in whichever way the passion took us. My time at college allowed me to do photography, 3D visual arts, performance, graphic arts, eventually specialising in music and video. I mean, there cannot be many students who break into college at night to work because they love it some much!

Cut forward to 2018, and you have to have nerves of steel to take out a student grant for an arts course like this, which ultimately guarantees you zero job security on leaving. It was a truly remarkable time and helped me develop in confidence and pointed a way forward for my music that I will continue with till I die. On reflection I believe I was aware of how lucky I was during that course but didn’t realise that would be the last time I would have the facilities, the freedom and those opportunities without the constraints of the everyday impinging on your life.

**RL**: *How did you see those early V-Sor, X cassette tape releases? Demos, or did you feel part of the zine and tape culture that was taking place? I remember Rough Trade used to take a good number of some of the Stride releases – cassettes plus A5 booklet and/or postcards in their A5 plastic bags – at one time, and I loved all the worldwide exchanges, swops and correspondence that took place on the back of mail order sales.*

**MB**: I felt very much part of the international cassette compilation scene and it was a fantastic opportunity to get my music heard by people of a similar musical inclination. Because of this scene I still keep in touch with indie dignitaries such as Lord Litter (Berlin Radio DJ), Marc Schaffer (performer and record company) and Don Campau (Californian Radio DJ). Music promotion is so much easier now with the advent of the Internet, however it is far harder to be heard above the noise.

I do miss the paper! The photo copied fanzines, the cassette booklets, the A4 posters. I really enjoyed early versions of magazines like *i-D*, *Stride*, and *The Face* that crossed over the arts (music, visual art, fashion, film, poetry and prose). Still, I wouldn’t go back, as I love the new technology I have access to for music and video production and graphic design.

**RL**: *How did your video work fit with the music? Did anyone except a few fellow students ever get to see those?* *Were they part of your visual art practice, or more promotional items?*

**MB**: I had those early videos transferred onto DVD but the quality is extremely poor. It is one of my rainy-day projects to try and tidy up the videos for *Prey Room*, *Commercial Breakthrough* and *In* *The Dark.* However, the love of video has never left me. It is an immensely slow process but I adore putting visuals to my music, it allows another plane of creativity. Yes, they are promotional but not in the sense of ‘maybe I’ll get a deal from this’. More as an alternative to playing live in an international market. Videos also have a far longer shelf life than a one-night gig at the Bull & Gate playing to 35 people. I hope video will always remain part of the music process for me as it affords another channel for expression.

**RL**: *And how did the live music differ from the recordings? I remember the trio line-up very clearly, playing to a big student crowd, but you also played a few solo gigs, presumably with backing tapes? I caught the end of one of them at the punk pub in Stoke-on-Trent, whose name eludes me. That was a pretty rough venue...*

**MB**: The Vine Inn in Hanley! It's no longer standing but I remember it well. All the punters who refused to pay the entrance fee, because they thought we were too arty, crowding round the door that joined the two bars, trying to peer through and see what was going on. I enjoy playing live when I am on stage but there is so much work to be done to get there. If I had the backing and the audience, my performances would be heavily audio visual in nature. In my head all my instrumental tracks have really clear visuals which I try to describe in the accompanying booklets.

I don’t think I have ever played to a backing tape. Not that I have anything against it but I just found using a sequencer on stage afforded slightly more control if things went wrong. V-Sor, X has yet to go live as a solo project but with the associate members being so far flung this may have to be an option. I do prefer the camaraderie of a band when going out live. I have done many solo gigs as a singer songwriter (alternative acoustic songs) and that entails being performer, roadie, merchandising, driver and booking agent rolled into one. This leaves little opportunity to have a beer with the audience.

**RL**: *You moved to London after college. Very different to Lichfield and Cheshire, I imagine. The band worked hard on the live circuit there, and I believe the infamous Jon Fat Beast was very supportive. Why didn't V-Sor, X take off? Any ideas? I felt the trumpeter added something very distinctive to the band (I don't mean there weren't other bands around with trumpeters), and helped the pop sensibility you've always had.*

**MB**: Yes Jon Fat Beast was fabulously supportive. He was a real star in the independent music scene and will be greatly missed. He worked so hard to give so many up and coming bands a chance to shine.

I like to reference many styles of music when writing and as a result it can be hard to put V-Sor, X in a specific box. This has never been a recipe for success. Also, just after the mid-80s we were trying too hard. Instead of letting the music flow, we had our eye on commerciality. We had ambitions to become famous(ish) and it was a distraction from the music. Strangely the last iteration of V-Sor, X in the 80s, after Alex the trumpet player had left, was the most promising but few of the tracks from that period ever got recorded. Not to take away from what Alex added, he was, and still is, a great musician and performer, I just think we were all getting a bit fatigued after 10 years.

I compare this period to the work I did with Rolls and keyboard player Rob Derbyshire around 2005 and the more recent work on the new album, *Reformer*, which both feel a lot more honest and from the heart. I don’t see us storming the charts any time soon. When I think we have produced something ‘normal’, even embarrassingly commercial, it seems to be labelled ‘quirky’. So, we must embrace quirky.

**RL**: *You started to make solo albums, as Morgan Bryan (1994, 1995) which were more ambient and dreamier than V-Sor, X; one might say softer-edged. Again, were you after stardom or film work? Was it an easy step to make? What, musically, was influencing and affecting you?*

**MB**: Until your question it has never occurred to me once that I might have any acclaim from the instrumental albums but I would very much have liked them to be heard more or used in films. Saying that, some tracks were used by the BBC Education department and used in Open University documentaries.

My instrumental output is very close to my heart and there is a third album *Between The Stars And Home* which is languishing on a hard drive until I figure out where and how to release it. The album contains two tracks that I am most proud of. This music gives me a chance to become very emotional and weave together rich themes and parts. Again, this is very much a visual thing for me and I have been inspired by great film music. My influences would be John Barry, Jean-Michel and Maurice Jarre, Harold Budd, Mike Oldfield and some of Japan's B-Sides, such as *The Width of a Room* and *The Experience of Swimming* (1980).

You also don’t have to come up with any lyrics! Lyrics are hugely important to me and when they come out well they are a joy but it can become very painful to complete a track and often I am never fully satisfied I have conveyed the message effectively. Therefore, when you can channel all your energy into the music, this offers a great deal of freedom. It is a goal of mine to write a very long piece of instrumental music (in excess of 25 minutes) and I don’t just mean setting the sequencer into loop mode!

**RL**: *And whilst you are making new music, there seems to be a revival of interest in V-Sor, X, on the back of Eurobeat, Darkwave or Minimal Synth (insert term of choice here), which currently seems to have swept up a lot of bands like Attrition, who could be considered similar, or certainly initially from the same era. How did the LP releases come about?*

**MB**: Recently a number of labels have been keen to re-issue our old minimal synth tracks and it has been hard to get them to look to the present and understand that we are in a different place now. I am always fascinated to see where artists have gone with their music. Many years ago this led to Depeche Mode becoming one of my favourite acts; once they had moved on from the catchy synth pop. A good recent example is Gary Numan’s album *Savage (Songs from a Broken World)* (2017)*,* which is fabulous and cements his credentials as a pioneer of electronic music.

V-Sor, X don’t naturally fall into any of the Eurobeat, Darkwave, Minimal Synth, Industrial pop categories - there are even the odd guitar lines to be heard! I am, however, really pleased these movements are having a resurgence, as the dance scene overshadowed synth pop when we had only been given a glimpse of the possibilities. I feel we need to make room for more individual electronic acts, rather than those who are pastiche artists (virtual tribute acts), to get some personality back into electronic music. They are out there and they have followings; acts like Seabound (https://youtu.be/NGcZpIkG4KI), Promenade Cinema (https://youtu.be/FpC\_kmjAX0I), East India Youth (https://youtu.be/UcMnFLnYJuo), Blott (https://blottuk.bandcamp.com/album/things-will-never-be-the-same-3-track-single).

I did release an album of alternative acoustic songs in 2012 (*In This Moment*) which I still have a lot of time for but I really had to fight the urge to add more and more synth-based orchestration. So when I had finished promoting it I just let go and started writing synth-based songs. They seemed to pour out and it felt very much as if the spirit of V-Sor, X was driving the creativity. To the point I spoke to my old friend Rolls and managed to get him contribute some bass work (unfortunately I couldn’t get any of Rob Derbyshire’s amazing keyboard work). Around this time the label Peripheral Minimal approached me to re-release the first V-Sor,X single *Authors 2* (which is now out there) and I said sure but how about releasing some of our new material? Jason asked to hear some and said let’s go with it. This got the ball rolling even though it will probably not go out on his label in the end.

**RL**: *And were those reissues influential on 'reforming' the band? I use quote marks as the band is just you at the moment, yes? Which doesn't really count as a proper reunion! Or is there a general nostalgia for all things 1980s and post-punk at the moment? You've had that career as a solo singer-songwriter, so presumably there are plenty of songs about you could work on or adopt for V-Sor, X if required?*

**MB**: The dictionary definition of a Reformer is 'a person who makes changes to something in order to improve it'. Although I do see the album as a reunion, not only will some of the original members contribute but I feel it is like re-uniting the original ethos behind the band (that being so, I don’t spend too much energy worrying about the commerciality of the music, just let the creativity flow). I also hope to get further contributions from previous members as time goes on; this isn’t a one-off project.

The title *Reformer* is about connecting the circle. I never felt that V-Sor,X had done its time and in fact there has been a fair amount of activity over the years that never tickled the ears of those interested in the band. The band’s output had moved in a number of different directions but the path was far from being complete, we had only scratched the surface and there is still so much ground to cover. It is the right time to contribute further to the alternative electronic pop scene and explore new directions embracing new technologies.

Most of all I didn’t want V-Sor, X to become a lifeless statue sitting in a darkened corner of the dusty museum dedicated to the independent early 80s post-punk scene. This scene continues today in other forms and some of the artists from those times, and in between, are still producing some exciting material. I want to be part of that. I want to V-Sor, X to be part of the future.

**RL**: *For me,* Electronisch*, is a real return to form. Big meaty synths, catchy as hell, and a neat new video. At the risk of nostalgia, it reminds me of your track* Scref*, although the production is much better. Where is V-Sor, X off to next? What are you planning for the band? Are you the new rock'n'roll?*

**MB:** Wouldn’t it be great to be the new rock’n’roll! It is way past time we had a new movement in the music scene. As mentioned before, alternative electronic pop is in its nascent years and has so much further to go. We are probably less experimental than we used to be but I am still excited to see what new bands are coming up with. I want our albums always to contain the odd quirky track (in the spirit of the Stranglers). Ones that people go 'ooh, not sure about this one' but after a few listens it becomes one of their favourite tracks. I do mourn the death of the album as this focus the attention of bands on producing commercial tracks which don’t always stand the test of time.

As for the future I am hoping this album will create some momentum for the band allowing us to look back at this time as the beginning and not the middle or the end. With that I would also like to see the band using video much more, mainly for our virtual presence but also live. It takes a huge amount of time but the results are long lasting.

**RL**: *Good to hear from you again Morgan! Good luck with all the future music, and thanks for all those cassettes back in the day*

**MB:** No, thank you for the opportunities both then and now!

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