Sweet Dreams. The Story of the New Romantics, Dylan Jones (2020), London: Faber, 680pp, ISBN: 9780571353439, h/bk, £20(1)

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The New Romantic movement has not received much critical attention. Whilst there are popular books on synth-pop (which sometimes extend their coverage into a wider historical overview of electronic music) and a number of adulatory biographies for fans of specific bands, little has been written about the antics or music of those who strutted their stuff at The Blitz and other clubs in the late 1970s and early 80s.

Simon Reynolds, for instance, in his otherwise comprehensive *Rip It Up and Start Again* (2005), mentions The Human League in a chapter on Sheffield, and in 'Electric Dreams: Synthpop' prefers to focus on the politicised and articulate Green from Scritti Politti, before discussing BEF and ABC. A later chapter discussing 'The Peak and Fall of New Pop' is wider in its coverage of The Associates, Altered Images, Simple Minds, Haircut 100, Orange Juice, Duran Duran, The Eurythmics, The Thompson Twins, Wham!, Culture Club, and the continuing adventures of ABC, The Human League and Scritti Politti.

One problem is, of course that much of what the New Romantics were about, as Dylan Jones makes clear in *Sweet Dreams,* was dressing-up, partying and starting magazines and club nights. This means that the music was often a soundtrack to what was going on, the subject of magazines like *The Face*, or an excuse to gather and party. The established music press at the time were in the main more interested in writing about music, and the late 1960s and 70s had been an era where listeners supposedly engaged with the pseudo-literary or fantastical lyrics of progrock extravanganzas, or boogied on down to hard rock anthems of sex and lust.

Punk of course, in the wake of pub rock, had shaken things up and Jones' book actually starts by covering punk, highlighting the brief flurry of energy and originality that happened mostly in London and Manchester before it fizzled out: the DIY nature of it all reduced to copycat bondage trousers, leather jackets and spitting, the music returning to recycled rock. So far so good but Jones and many others included here, buy into the idea of post-punk being dull, grey and serious, choosing to ignore the innovation, energy and danceability of bands such as Magazine, early Simple Minds, XTC and Gang of Four.

Whereas Reynolds book positions some pop music, including a few New Romantic bands, as part of post-punk (literally as *what came after punk* rather than a genre), Jones tries a more focussed approach. Having said that, one of the most interesting things about his book is the breadth of coverage and discussion, although this is also problematic. I'm always pleased when authors don't ring fence themes, topics or movements and look at the edges, where the most interesting things often happen; also when they give social and critical context. Jones does both, and also allows others to offer their opinions and points of view:

this is a book of carefully curated quotes from those who were there at the time interspersed with Jones' own research and opinions.

Having written off what punk became and choosing to ignore post-punk allows Jones to buy into the whole myth of 1970s social depression and nihilism that prevails to this day as the central narrative of the decade, and to present a small bunch of dressed-up partygoers in Covent Garden as the saviours of fashion and the music industry, which of course they weren't.

I'd counter that the 1970s were a fantastic time to be in London: it was cheap to live, easy to get casual work, and there was endless live music at pubs, clubs and colleges throughout the city and its suburbs. For me, the 1980s were when Thatcher & co. started stomping on society and life got harder, with people being far too busy worrying about their bank balance and what they looked like in the mirror.

Jones is pretty defensive about any accusations that the likes of Spandau Ballet adopted conservative (or heaven forbid, Conservative) views and attitudes, preferring to use that dreadful word 'entrepreneur' as a way of positioning the financial side of the magazines and music that he claims the New Romantic movement produced as survival and innovation rather than business. He doesn't deign to discuss the shallowness of judging a person by how good-looking or fashionable they are, or the problematic ethics of the fashion industry, preferring to constantly reiterate how D.I.Y. and radical all the dressing-up was, not least when read through the lens of queer theory and gay culture.

The cover of *Sweet Dreams* is confusing: four of the five photographs feature people I would not regard as a New Romantic (I'll accept Boy George by association); I'm pretty sure that I am not alone in regarding the likes of Annie Lennox from Eurythmics, Culture Club, Adam Ant and Sadé as 1980s pop stars. Intelligent pop stars in the case of Eurythmics and Sadé, but little to do with the party people who emerged from Bowie nights and small clubs like Blitz in the late 1970s (whether or not the band members hung around there). I saw Eurythmics at Keele University the week before their first hit single entered the charts and there was little visually stylish about them; Dave Stewart remains rooted in 70s rock chic to this day. The music was innovative and highly reliant on krautrock influences and what the band had learnt from Conny Plank (who produced their first album); the band basically used their new toy, a Fairlight, to disrupt and extend the pop sensibilities they had previously refined in The Tourists. On this tour aided and abetted by Blondie's Clem Burke on drums and vocalist Eddie Reader, which raises the spectre of New Wave, too... another area of music Jones and Reynolds are both inclined to ignore.

Jones is well-informed about music, however, although he sometimes seems to buy into Malcolm Mclaren's own storytelling, and gives far too much coverage to George Michael and also to Gary Numan, who many, including myself, would regard as a musical laughing stock. Numan is not alone, of course, in his recycling of David Bowie, a point which Jones consistently makes throughout this book: everyone agrees that Bowie is the godfather of New Romanticism. Bryan Ferry

appears to be the godmother, although there is a focus on his solo work and later Roxy Music rather than the more flamboyant and experimental early version of the band that involved Eno.

Elsewhere there are some hilarious quotes, such as Simon le Bon claiming that Duran Duran were an experimental band and Midge Ure going on at some length about how he single-handedly reinvented and saved Ultravox, along with a lot of po-faced seriousness from has-been or would-be pop stars who should know better by now. And there is some chin-stroking discussion of Live Aid too, an event it seems we are still not allowed to question the motivation or results of.

But this is a delightful and comprehensive whirl of a book. If it takes fashion and image and pop music more seriously than I do, gives space to too many stars and their exaggerations and claims to fame, and tries to be too inclusive under the umbrella of New Romanticism,whilst choosing to ignore bands such as Simple Minds who share much in common with Duran Duran once they became stadium-filling groups, it is a small price to pay for a wide-ranging and intelligent volume about music, culture and society.

Sweet Dreams isn't, of course, the story of the New Romantics, it's one possible story or history of music and youth culture from the mid 70s to the mid 80s, perhaps even a history of the 70s in the same way that people have said the Sixties didn't begin till the middle of that decade and carried on until 1974 or '75. If you have any interest in how Britain moved from hippy ideals to yuppie greed and Thatcherism via punk, or in synth pop, dance music and 1980s soul, then this book is for you.

REFERENCES

Reynolds, Simon (2005), *Rip it Up and Start Again. Post-punk 1978-1984*, London: Faber

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Footnote:

(1) This review includes material that first appeared in *International Times*, November 2020.

(1340 words)