INTERVIEW

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**Totally Inspired by Punk : An interview with Martin Bowes and Alan Rider.**

**Key Words**

Attrition

Stress

Coventry

zines

post-punk

darkwave

**Abstract**

*This interview contextualises the music of two bands, Stress and Attrition, their relationship to time and place (Coventry in the early 1980s), and the zines produced at the time by both interviewees. Bowes and Rider consider D.I.Y. zine and tape culture, their bands' relationship to punk, post-punk and indie labels, other contemporaneous music which was often the focus of the music press' interest in the city, as well as their current music and publishing activities.*

In 1980-81 I worked for the best part of a year at a community centre on the outskirts Coventry, and lived nearby. On some levels it was an eye-opener, as I came from London to find a battlefield where skinheads, bikers, mods and anyone who wanted a fight was in a territorial war, be that for a pub or the city centre each Saturday. Thankfully, there was an intriguing alternative music scene to engage with, something I did so for a few more years as I regularly drove up from London to visit a girlfriend.

Despite the media's focus on two-tone, there were also many other interesting bands like Eyeless in Gaza and Bron Area in orbit, and in Coventry itself two noteworthy bands, with members who also published zines. Alan Rider was in the band Stress and edited and published *Adventures in Reality*, whilst Martin Bowes made music with Attrition and put *Alternative Sounds* together. Attrition is still going strong, and is still fronted by Martin, although their electronic post-punk now tends to get called darkwave. All these bands were involved in the D.I.Y. cassette culture of the day, submitting to lo-fi tape compilations around the world as a way to self-promote and find an audience, as well as facilitating interviews and reviews in the many zines of the day.

The ongoing interest in, nostalgia for, and critical reassessment of, what has come to be called post-punk, has resulted in a lot of CD reissues (and download sites) and books, including *Tales From The Ghost* Town, a survey of Coventry zines from 1979-1985 (Rider, 2022), and *Adventures In Reality. The Complete Collection* (Rider, 2021), a massive A4 paperback which also reproduces some spin-off zines, posters and advertising material. I've still got the Attrition flexidisc (1982) which was given away with one issue in my singles box, and various interviews and articles tucked into album sleeves. To be honest ,the interviews and articles are better than the brief, opinionated reviews of now forgotten tapes or other zines, but there's an energy and openness in evidence, something I miss these days, along with the anyone-can-do-it ethos that facilitated this wave of self-publishing and bedroom tape labels. Everything seemed possible, everything *was* possible.

I've been in vague touch with Martin since then, even booking his band when I was social secretary at art college, but have only recently made contact again with Alan. I thought it would be interesting to interview them about those days, as well as how things have changed – individually, musically and in a wider context – for them. (1)

**Rupert Loydell (RL):** When I interviewed Martyn Bates of Eyeless in Gaza for *Punk & Post-Punk* (Loydell, 2014) he was not kind about the West Midlands back then or now. In fact he stated that

Culturally, the area (Nuneaton and Coventry) is a fucking backwater: it feels like nobody’s interested, that nobody understands. It felt like that then and it still feels like that today, to be honest – some things don’t change. All I can say is that within such a cultural and political climate you will always get the outsiders who are galvanised by the shit that surround them.

Did you, or do you, feel the same way? Were you 'galvanised by the shit' or were there other factors involved?

**Alan Rider (AR):** I think the environment was certainly a factor. We are all a product of our surroundings and it was a very difficult time in what was a deprived area at the time, but I don’t think we were really thinking of it like that at the time. It was what it was and we just accepted that. Making connections with the right people and the whole post punk energy and D.I.Y. ethos was the most important thing for us. I guess we were outsiders and there was certainly a level of hostility locally, but I don’t view it as negatively as Martyn Bates does. There was a lot of real creativity and innovation happening at that time.

**Martin Bowes (MB):** I’ve lived most of my life in Coventry (with time served in London and Holland in the mid/late eighties) and for me anyway, the most exciting times for music in Coventry were those late 70s/early 80s years, when I ran *Alternative Sounds* here… and in recent times when the music scene has really matured in its acceptance and exploration of experimental and new sound.

Martyn Bates was right about the past in that this area was often overlooked and was very much a punk/pop/ska/indie kind of place… and that either made you give up or spurred you to do your own thing (which we all did). It was one reason I left here, I always felt it was better to take your art and music to the world rather than be a band that were only 'famous' in Coventry…. But things have changed: we recently had the City of Culture year (2021-22) and it showcased so much that has been going on.

**RL**: What did you make of the media's focus on Two-Tone at the time? I mean it was obviously partly to do with Rock Against Racism and multiculturalism, but it also seemed to ignore some of what was actually going on in Coventry and many other places, genres such as synthesizer rock/pop, which in retrospect some of your music (and Eyeless in Gaza's) could be placed within?

**MB**: I don’t think the media would have been here at all if it wasn’t for Two-Tone and The Specials… and they were very very good! I used to get a lot of attention for *Alternative Sounds* in that 79/80 period as a result… and the BBC *Something Else* series featured a Coventry edition in 1980 which I was a part of (telling people how to make your own fanzine) (BBC, 1980). I got local heroes Gods Toys on that show, so I don’t feel the media totally ignored what was going on. And, of course, we had our own media, which helped as well.

Attrition didn’t really get going until 1981 onwards so that was the next chapter….

**AR**: I’d agree that the media focus on Two-Tone tended to drown out pretty much everything else as far as the national media was concerned (and to some extent still does), but there was a really strong local music scene at the time with some very eclectic bands like Eyeless in Gaza, Urge, Attrition, alongside more traditional punky bands and a thriving fanzine scene. We felt very much a part of that, especially having that fanzine connection ourselves. The good thing about Two-Tone was that it cut short all the racist crap that was going on at the time. I think it made a massive difference to that and stopped the National Front in its tracks in Coventry. That has to be a great thing.

**RL**: Alan, Matthew Worley's foreword to *Adventures In Reality. The Complete Collection* suggests that punk zines caused zines to evolve (Rider, 2021: 5) and that yours included 'a feeling of introspection' as well as 'glimpses into the local music scene'. (Rider, 2021: 6). He also mentions 'the hundreds of teenagers stirred to pick up scissors and glue in the wake of punk's cultural upheaval' and that your zines stand 'as testaments to youthful ingenuity'. (ibid) Did it seem like that to you at the time?

**AR**: No, of course not. That is a view in retrospect. At the time you are just focusing on producing the fanzine (I dislike the term ‘zine’ nowadays) and not thinking beyond getting that issue out. The cultural significance is added as a layer years afterwards. I would say though that I certainly spent a lot of time writing to and communicating with other fanzine writers both locally, nationally and internationally. We had a shared attitude that did result in a close link between fanzines covering very different music. *Adventures in Reality* certainly had a lot of links to the anarchist punk scene, although it was totally different in style to any of those fanzines.

**RL**: Martin, how does that compare with your experience publishing *Alternative Sounds*? Did punk cause a cultural upheaval or is that just hindsight, a tidying up of the past?

**MB**: It was totally inspired by Punk. It spoke to me at a time when I had just hit 18 and realised what a bizarre and awful world we were living in. I just knew I had to do something, to say something... I had been to art college and so I was ok with some design layout and couldn’t play an instrument (I often say I still can’t!) so I started *Alternative Sounds*.

**RL**: When I started *Stride* magazine (a poetry zine) in 1982 it was as much about having a place to publish writer friends and become part of the small press poetry scene as anything else. Was there an element of self-promotion involved in your publishing activities? Something to swop, trade and bring attention to the band?

**MB**: I didn’t start Attrition until towards the end of the *Alternative Sounds* days (I published 18 issues between 1979-81), in fact I included a small article in the last issue, so it was really my precursor to making my own music. I doubt I could have run both at the same time as I do get very involved.

**AR**: At the time I was producing *Adventures in Reality*, Stress was at an early stage so I only actually featured us in the fanzine in one small article. I was too modest I guess! I tended to promote Attrition, Religious Overdose, Eyeless in Gaza and others far more as they were both my friends and made great music. Stress did too of course, but its hard to see that yourself at the time. Being a part of a scene was certainly something that appealed to me though.

**RL**: As early as 1977, Simon Frith was challenging what would later become accepted norms about punk, stating that

Punk is neither a direct, spontaneous expression of your experience [...] nor the simple result of media manipulation. It is the result of interplay of both processes and it is that interplay we have to understand. Punk musicians, like any others, make their music with reference to not just their own individual or class experiences, but also to existing ideas about the meaning and purpose and potential of rock. Punk, in its turn, seized on by the music business and given commercial meanings and interpretations which filter back to the musicians. (Frith, 1977)

I have never associated Stress or Attrition with punk, but presumably it was part of the mix, both musically and socially, that informed your music? Frith later in the same articles declares that '[t]he politics of punk don't rest on the social backgrounds of individual performers but on the power of their music as popular culture', (ibid) which is somewhat at odd with any suggestion that bands sometimes aim for obscurity and cult status.

**AR**: Whilst the music of Stress and Attrition would never be described as ‘punk’, in many ways it was more punk than many more traditional punk bands in that it was very assuredly D.I.Y. and also very single minded in its intent to be different and challenging. Punk quickly became speeded up heavy metal, but synthesisers were a new instrument at the time and looked to the future not the past. However, if you look back to original punk bands such as Siouxsie and X Ray Spex, there was a wide range and bands like PIL that sprang from that were really ground breaking anti-rock bands. Don’t forget, Throbbing Gristle were also around in 1977. I think both Stress and Attrition drew on that anti-rock attitude.

**MB**: It was totally part of the mix. Our first 4 shows at the very end of 1980 were a noisy anarchist punk band line up of guitar, bass, drums and vocals, but we dropped the guitar for a synth and the drummer for a drum machine soon after that. One of the first tracks we recorded in the new line up made it onto volume 3 of Crass Records' *Bullshit Detector* compilation series (Various Artists, 1984a), and then later when we released our very experimental/electronic debut album, *The Attrition of Reason* in 1984 it was famously described as a 'Punk Floyd' in *Sounds*, and the band as an 'Industrial Raincoats' in the Rough Trade catalogue.

I still love those reviews for that… they knew.

**RL**: I was never very interested in punk rock that was heavy metal meets pub rock dressed up in torn clothes, and breathed a sigh of relief when bands such as XTC, Simple Minds and Magazine appeared, with synthesizers and guitar effects pedals as well as attitude. I quite liked the fact bands no longer needed drummers, too, when drum machines arrived. How did Attrition arrive at their early sound? What were your influences back then? I mean early work like *Onslaught* (1983) and *The Voice of God* (1984a) still stand up as strong, original works.

**MB**: Well, we went through that initial 'punk' line up and then started buying electronic toys. We were very influenced by bands like Cabaret Voltaire, early Human League, Magazine etc. We started listening less to punk (although that has often returned to me over the years). Interestingly Sam Rosenthal, who ran Projekt records, our old label in the USA, also started his music life running a fanzine (in Florida called *Alternative Rhythms*) and reviewed our early records like *The Voice of God* at the time. He recently posted about that record that he loved the fact that electronic music could also be 'punk', that it wasn’t all synth-pop or ambient. (We were with the label on and off between 1990 and 2008, and toured the USA a lot during that time.)

**RL**: How did you hook up with Gary Levermore at Third Mind Records? It was a pretty eclectic label, releasing albums from the likes of In The Nursery, Front Line Assembly, and Nurse With Wound. I think I'm right in saying that they received a lot of press coverage on the back of their *Rising From The Red Sand* tape compilations (Various Artists, 1982) which Attrition were included on. The blurb for the 2013 Vinyl-On-Demand reissue declares that it 'was one the most comprehensive compilations of early 80’s industrial, wave and underground music', and that 'due to the vastness of the project offers a more complete insight into the musical underground of the early-mid 80’s period.' (Anon., 2013) Did the compilation and label offer good musical company to be in?

**MB**: In the early eighties I would send demo cassettes to anyone I thought might like them: mainstream press, labels and promoters, and of course fanzines. In 1982 Gary Levermore received one; he ran his own fanzine called *Tone Death* at the time, loved the tape and reviewed it. Not long after he started his record label and we were included on both *Rising from the Red Sands* (3 times over the 5 volumes) and then the *Onslaught* tape release (Attrition, 1983). He moved onto vinyl releases in 1984 and we released 3 albums with him between then and 1986. (Attrition 1984b, 1985, 1986) It was a wonderful label to be part of and I have stayed good friends with Gary to this day.

At the same time as this Dave Henderson was writing his 'Wild Planet' column in *Sounds* and we realised there was a whole world of new music emerging… (2)

**RL**: Alan, the Profile on the band's Discogs page (Stress (2), n.d.) states that Stress 'found that the freedom to use whatever instruments necessary for a particular sound means that they need never limit themselves to a particular format.' Tell me about how you 'combine[d] electronic rhythms, sequences, keyboards with bass guitar, vocals, percussion, cut-up tapes, and a variety of acoustic instruments'. (ibid)

**AR**: In part that was out of necessity. We had very little equipment ourselves at the time, so pressed anything we found into use: xylophones, penny whistles. bowed bass, tape loops stretching across the room draped off chairs, TV excerpts, even bird song recorded out of the bedroom window! We also borrowed equipment to record. Pete Becker (Eyeless in Gaza) offered to record a few demos for us so we used some of his stuff. Attrition had some equipment we used at various times, and we pooled equipment with Attrition and the Legendary Pink Dots in a joint studio we created in London. I think we probably did far better out of that deal though. It made for interesting choices. It's amazing what you can do when you have limited choices!

**RL***:* The same piece states that your music 'fuses commercial & experimental elements with a pointed lyrical edge.' (Stress (2), n.d) Was the commercial at all important at the time? Or did you just want listeners?

**AR**: I don’t think anyone would describe us as commercial. If anything, we really should have had more of an eye on that aspect. Looking back now we made so many mistakes. We really should have gone with a bigger label but I was so determined we do it all ourselves and put everything out on Adventures in Reality that I guess I couldn’t see that. Having a label distribution deal with Rough Trade helped for sure, but we could have done so much more. Ah well.

**RL**: Both of your bands continued to release tracks on numerous vinyl and cassette compilations over the years, including *Double Vision* (Various Artists, 1983) which I put out on Stride Tapes. I remember at the time you both contributed interesting visuals to the booklet which accompanied the C60 tape, and when Attrition played a gig around the same time, Alan was with you to project images over the band as you played. How did you regard compilations, which often meant you were gifting tracks to people? (I'm not suggesting anybody made a huge profit from it!) How important was image to your bands?

**MB**: Compilations were an incredible way of getting our music across to a new audience. There were so many of them and yes in a way the tracks were 'gifted' but I have no problem with that at all. As time went on and the new music took hold to some extent some of the compilations started to do very well: *Red Sands* and Alan’s *Last Supper* (Various Artists 1984b) both stand out... Later, vinyl and CD compilations took over and started selling even more, although they have declined in popularity since the internet came along and provided the biggest compilation we could ever have imagined.

Image? It's all art, just a different part of the process.

**AR**: It was just something that everyone did. It did help spread the word, so I think it was a good thing and helped raise the profile. Those compilations rarely made any money so we didn’t actually expect to get anything back. Doing the visuals for Attrition shows was an extra aspect to what I was doing and as Attrition were not in any sense a conventional band I genuinely felt like a member of the band. I did play live with them a few times, but it was mainly doing the visuals, which at that time were integral to the live show. I even started doing visuals for the Legendary Pink Dots too on one European tour we were doing with them. That was great fun.

**RL**: Martin, you run a recording studio, The Cage, and also do production and engineering work for other bands. I'm presuming this all helps with income to live on, and that the studio facilitates recording Attrition's music? How do you feel Attrition has changed musically over the years? I'm intrigued how you've managed to reposition yourself within various genres, and to keep a lot of your music in print through reissues and compilations. It's quite an achievement to keep it going for 40 years!

**MB**: I started The Cage (www.thecagestudios.co.uk) in 1993 as I loved being in the studios we went to, and I wanted to be able to have a studio every day. (And of course most of the expenses for making the album went on recording costs so it was a very good way of diverting that money to my studio). From 1995 I set up and taught a music technology course here at the College in Coventry and when I left there in 2011 I went full time with The Cage and took on production and mastering for other bands… It seems to have worked very well!

With Attrition I have always been as interested in 'songs' as I have in ambient soundtracks/textures so have often switched between those different approaches to music. The soundtracks have been used on films and we perform them live occasionally. I was so excited when I played our horror film score *Invocation* (Attrition, 2012) in the mountains of Transylvania, in 2018! I wanted to go back and tell my 14 year old self, who had just read Bram Stoker’s *Dracula* (1897; 2003) that I would be doing that!

I am particularly proud of the 2015 album of WW1 poetry, *Millions of the Mouthless Dead* (Attrition 2015), I worked on with Anni Hogan (who had previously worked with Marc Almond and others), as the packaging featured postcards and letters my Grandad sent home from the Western front before he was wounded in 1917. The album also featured a guest vocal from Wolfgang Flur ex Kraftwerk – I can’t tell you how pleased I was about that!

It has been a lot of work to keep the music in print but it’s been worth doing. I think we've made good use of social media, Bandcamp, Spotify and the web generally to do so and to keep in touch with our audience. (www.attrition.co.uk , www.youtube.com/user/attrition , http://attritionuk.bandcamp.com/ , https://open.spotify.com/artist/5yAtVvdaWrTxW4GPC18643)

**RL**: Alan, after a couple of self released tapes, *Help Comes Too Late* (Stress, 1983) and *Restraint* (Stress, 1984), you released the vinyl album *The Big Wheel* in 1985, then a best of, *Nostalgia*, on tape in 1991 before Stress were no more. However, you went on to play in the very different Dance Naked and Stress also had some of their music reissued, and of course there's the big anthology of *Adventures In Reality* we started this interview with. How do you think your music and the music scene changed over the years? How do you look back on everything now?

**AR**: Dance Naked was certainly (and deliberately) very different from Stress, with me being the common factor. It had a similar approach though, in that we were very self-sufficient and trying to do something different from the mainstream. Although the way people release music now has changed so much, in some ways it has come full circle, as a lot of music is now self-produced. People are running their own labels and releasing things themselves; basically, it’s the same D.I.Y. ethos. The big difference is that its harder to manage all the channels as the number and range of them is so great.

Looking back is always tinged with nostalgia and you have to resist the temptation to sugar coat everything as being great, but it was fantastic to be around at quite a unique and creative time for music that isn’t going to be repeated. I feel sure though that the current political problems will spark enough in people to inspire some truly original and alternative music and sub culture. You always need to have something to kick back against.

**RL**: So let's end by looking forward, not back. What are you each working on or planning for the future? How is the world of music and zines in 2022 different to when you started making music and publishing?

**AR**: I am working on what will be a substantial and definitive book on Third Mind Records (possibly with an accompanying CD release). I have a new act, Senestra (a collaboration with the excellent Hiroshimabend from Austria), who will be releasing soundtracks for the coming apocalypse. There will be a re-issue of the Mummies and Madmen album from 1984 (3), and a full re-issue of the first two Stress albums (1983, 1984) as part of a vinyl box set on Germany’s Vinyl-On-Demand label. I will be contributing to various review websites too, and there will also be more talks and interviews on fanzines to promote both of my fanzine related books (Rider, 2021, 2022). That should keep me going for a bit!

**MB**: I’m not so involved with zines these days, apart from reading them when I come across them. The internet also took over a lot of that but it’s good to see the slight resurgence of printed zines… In fact in 2017 I resurrected *Alternative Sounds* as a zine with CD, compiling local bands past and present, initially in collaboration with the Coventry Music museum. We have done 4 issues and a 7 inch vinyl EP. (Various Artists, 2017a, 2017b, 2018, 2019, 2020)

Most of my time is spent on Attrition, and some upcoming musical side-projects, although after a long time I am finally finishing the all new Attrition album, *The Black Maria*, for early 2023 release. And after a covid-hiatus I am so pleased to be playing live again: we ended up in Tokyo at the end of 2019, and are playing and planning a lot more concerts.

**RL**: Thank you both for your time. It's good to be in touch again!

**NOTES**

(1) The introduction to this interview includes material that appeared as a review of Eyeless In Gaza's *Skeletal Framework* (2022) in *International Times* (Loydell, 2022).

(2) 'One of the most extraordinary and in-depth pieces of music journalism, the "Wild Planet” series of articles was written by Dave Henderson and published in the UK weekly music newspaper *Sounds* in May 1983 and periodically for the next 2 years.' 'Wild Planet Revisited' (Anon, n.d., *Encyclopaedia Electronica*) This website also reprints Henderson's Attrition piece under the title 'Wild Planet Revisited – Attrition'.

(3) 'Mummies and Madmen were a one-off band that formed and split the same day (24th August 1983). Mummies and Madmen was never intended to have a future. They formed for the recording of one track, a mix of throbbing drum machine, synthesiser feedback, PiL style bass and scratchy, reverb drenched, guitar that contorted, evolved and mutated over the course of 20 minutes.' (Rider, in Jacobs, 2021)

 'two side-long pieces of garbled electronics, distant planet serrated guitar churn, basement Wobble-esque bass, primitive rhythms and the kinda spoken word that wouldn't have been outta place on a record by The Fall or The Shadow Ring.' (Anon, 2017)

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