

## 'Listen to me, don't listen to me'



*Fàshiön Music*, Fàshiön Music (2CD, Easy Action)

'Fashion is merely an opinion. And I've got a lot of opinions.'  
– Kanye West

'Fashion is a reflection of the time.'  
– Anna Wintour

Most people remember the band Fashiøn, if they remember them at all, as a sensual electronic pop band who flirted with New Romanticism and achieved several hit singles. They were photogenic, highly stylised and made innovative use of synthesizers, sequencers, vocoder and electronic drums alongside their funky bass and guitar lines. They worked hard to translate their studio sound to the live arena, and issued radical remixes, deconstructed and extended 12-inch versions, expensive videos, and a cassette album of further remixes, before changing their lead singer and fading away into obscurity after a final, disappointing, album, although there was an expansive 4CD box set for completists, *The Height of Fashiøn*, issued in 2021.

Much as I'm happy to confess a liking for that later stuff, which rivals Duran Duran and Japan in its over-the-top popstasticness, it's the earlier incarnation of the band that is more worthy of note. Fàshiön Music formed as a trio in Birmingham back in 1978, emerging from punk and post-punk but also including a mix of reggae, synthesizers and angular funk in their politicised songs. The critic Robert Christgau, reviewing their first album *Pröduct Perfect*, called the singing 'clever and impassioned' and noted that 'the punkish, futuristic reggae-synthesizer fusion [was] catchy and always apt.' And, as was the nature of things back in the day, lists the '[o]rder of topics on first side: consumerism, imperialism, racism, sociopathy,

"rock culture," apathy (right-wing), apathy (left-wing).'

In a recent *Pennyblackmusic* interview, lead singer and guitarist Luke mentions a 'burning desire to get the fuck out of Birmingham and see what the rest of the world looked like.' So Mulligán, Dik and Lûke (Oh how they loved their umlauts, circumflexes and accents!) worked hard (and sometimes struggled, pre MIDI) to play their music live wherever they could. They supported The Police, U2, Duran Duran, John Cooper Clarke and the B52's back in the day, opened for Patti Smith at CBGBs as their first gig in America, and got a distribution deal with IRS and A&M for the album they had issued on their own label.



Luke Sky/Skyscraper/Skywalker/James, who wrote the sleeve notes, describes it as a 'headlong flight up the stairway to nowhere that is the quest for fame', as he looks back. He left the band in June 1980, saying that he had 'realised I was more interested in being a musician than I was in being a fame junkie', although his activities over the last few years – including a self-published book, *Stairway to Nowhere* (Brummie Git Press, 2010) and a (mostly solo) album with the same title in 2009 and using the name Fashion, along with high internet presence, mostly consisting of soundbites, provocations and a personal version of the band's history – appear to evidence both a degree of resentment at having missed out on the band's later achievements and an element of cashing-in.

However, we do seem to have him to thank for this marvellous compilation, which contains nine original singles tracks, two lots of demo recordings, and a live concert from RAF Brize Norton, all previously unearthed and released digitally by Luke on Bandcamp. Surprisingly – and rather disappointingly – *Pröduct Perfect* isn't included, although that is also available online.

What we have got, however, is great stuff, although it's much more new wave than the mix of 'punk, techno, and reggae' Luke Sky writes about in his hyperbolic sleeve notes. (I mean, techno just wasn't a genre back then... and I don't think the band's 'outrageous' dress sense 'paved the way for the New Romantic look' either!) In fact, Fàshiön Music, with their loping

backbeats, stylized vocals and layered up instruments, sound like a rawer version of the Police early on, or perhaps the marvellous Fischer Z. There's a dash of Roxy Music in there too, which is always a good thing.

The singles tracks are pleasingly rough and ready, the 1980 demos clearly more polished studio versions featuring work in progress after the release of their first album, whilst the earlier 1978 demos which close CD1 (out of chronological sequence) are very much more basic recordings. CD2's undated live concert is clean bootleg quality and highlights how both Fàshiön Music and Fashiøn later benefitted from studio production. That aside, it's great to hear a couple of long tracks which segue songs together along with innovative use of the primitive monophonic WASP synthesizer. (Check out the live Youtube clip below.)

This original incarnation of Fàshiön definitely deserve to be immortalised and remembered, and this strikingly packaged double album goes some way to achieving that. They not only laid the foundations for the later more successful incarnation of the band, but also evidence an original, politicised, and at times aggressive melting-pot of experiment, attitude and musical influences. In that same 2022 interview, Luke says 'We really did feel we were doing something different', and he's right. They were and – better late than never – now we can all catch up with and hear that something.

Rupert Loydell

Fàshiön: Citinites

EMBED <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tNRLhmKQ1I8>

Fàshiön: Pröduct Perfect live on *Look! Hear!*, 1979

EMBED <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MZdzbKnE8ZE>

(879 words)