Murder On The Dance Floor

*Control I’m Here: Adventures On The Industrial Dance Floor 1983-1990* (3CD, Cherry Red)

I've always been more of a lurker than a dancer, but I did learn what people could and would dance to when I undertook to DJ at the 'alternative discos' we had at college back in the 80s. Get the rhythm right and you could sneak Captain Beefheart's 'Zigzag Wanderer', Talking Drums' 'Courage' and all sorts of unexpected music into the indie equation. (And of course, I also learnt how to clear the room at closing time: cue Discharge's 'State Control' at full volume.)

This is kind of what this new CD set is about, the borderline area where experimental music met industrial met jackhammer rhythms that – if pushed – you could dance to. There's a whole bunch of bands I remember from back in the day (there are still some albums in my vinyl collection) but also a whole load of names new to me. Hula, SPK, Laibach and Test Department were all over the music papers at the time, and I knew Attrition from working in Coventry and put them on at university one Friday night. The likes of Severed Heads, Controlled Bleeding, Nocturnal Emissions, Die Form and Front 242 were names and music I knew from cassette compilations and zines, whilst The Sisters of Mercy and the Legendary Pink Dots were bands I found best avoided.

In between music by the above, there are offerings totally unknown to me, including some surprises. The Shamen's 'Christopher Mayhem Says' is, how shall I put it, rather melodic and poppy, a world away from demented later offerings, whilst Alien Sex Fiend are not (totally) the goths I thought they were, slotting right in here – despite their crimped hair – with shouted chants and brutal rhythms.

The one major omission, the band who are perhaps the root and cause of just about everything included on this album, are Cabaret Voltaire, who very quickly moved from rhythmic noise experiments to cut-up dancefloor grooves, often managing to keep their critical edge. However, most of the bands on this relentless anthology were never going to make it to mainstream playlists and dancefloors: 'Cocaine Sex (Turbo Lust Mix)' anyone? 'Twenty Deadly Diseases'? 'Naked, Uniformed, Dead Hot Trash Mix'? I don't think so.

We are in the land of easy outrage, upsetting the obvious targets– those who want to be offended, and in the land of indie cool, where music fans flirt with fascist images, bondage sex, chaos magick, drugs and insanity. Antonin Artuad, Charles Manson, Aleister Crowley and William Burroughs are the (anti-)heroes of the day. Laibach would build a career out of drum marches, political imagery and dodgy leather outfits (I saw a great gig in a nightclub in an old church in New York where they played for about 20 minutes live, with 20 minutes of propaganda films before and after); Genesis P-Orridge (one of the big omissions here) would eventually start his own cult and sell tapes and albums of every gig his bands ever played to the members (in limited editions, of course).

This is the sound of hard rock adapting to synthesizers and drum machines. It was this or the tongue-in-cheek paint-splattered Hells Angel pose of Zodiac Mindwarp (who was very, very funny on record and live). This is the result of provocatively named bands recording cassette albums on 4-track TEAC machines in their bedrooms in response to the likes of This Heat, Chrome, Hawkwind, Here & Now, Public Image Limited, Magazine and Spherical Objects, sampling the radio or their own heroes, folding excerpts from speeches, sermons and conversations into textures and noise, all fed through effects pedals, laid over primitive rhythms. It is the soft end of musical abstraction, noise and improvisation, an attempt to control feedback and drone, to find a way for all the pale boys at the edge of the dancefloor to deal with their physical selves, feel more aware and at home in their bodies.

It would mutate endlessly, feeding on itself through remix, sampling, homage, plagiarism and pose. Techno has some of its roots here, No Wave may have been in the mix, and eventually it gatecrashed the charts in diluted form: like rap, it lost most of its shock value and became accepted, another form of hedonistic pop. Other strands were available: the politicised Dub Sex and Bourbonese Qualk, the Hula offshoot/overlap Chakk; and there's probably a case to be made for Gang of Four's dry funk and 23 Skidoo's martial arts musical workouts to be included here, not to mention Psychic TV and a hundred others...

One of the bands on here is called Lead Into Gold, no doubt a nod to the occult secrets of alchemy. But a lot of this music is still lead, and lead*en*, not yet changed into any kind of gold, artistically or financially. It is the sound of indie rock banging its head against the wall it is leaning against at the edge of a very empty dancefloor.

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