Post-Poptastic People

*Ghosts: Journeys to Post-Pop*, Matthew Restall (Sonicbond)

What you may ask is post-pop? A good question and one that, having read this new book, I still can't answer. Pop music is simply an abbreviation for popular music, and as I am sure we all know, that changes and mutates, waiting for the shock of the new (e.g. punk) to subside and finding ways to dilute and commodify it. (In punk's case into new wave and/or power-pop.)

More useful is Restall's subtitle, 'How David Sylvian, Mark Hollis and Kate Bush reinvented pop music', although – as I've said above – pop constantly reinvents itself to accommodate anything it can sell. Think about the breadth (I hesitate to say depth) of the charts over the last 40 or 50 years and it's clear that it includes MOR, AOR, poodle rock, synthrock, heavy metal, folk, jazz, soundtracks and theme tunes, disco, new wave, punk, r'n'b (both kinds), rock'n'roll, anthems, xmas songs, comedy routines, eurotrash and much more.

So, are Sylvian's and Bush's solo music post-pop or just new music that is different from the music they made before? Are Talk Talk's final two albums, with their fragile arrangements of blues, improvisations and skeletal lyrics, let alone Hollis' one solo album, pop in any way? In Bush' case, yes, they have sold millions and she can now be seen as an early user of the Fairlight synthesizer and adopter of world music. Sylvian's work is more a cult affair these days, with a dedicated fanbase who have learnt to accept and negotiate its twists and turns, its visits into music assembled from improvisation, its religious devotions, its seemingly confessional emotional turmoil, its excursions from twisted pop into hymns of praise to his current guru, installation art and poetry books.

With Talk Talk and Hollis it's less clear. The band and Hollis have become a critical success and cult icons, but it's hard to know how many albums have actually been sold. The record labels involved were aghast at Talk Talk's *Spirit of Eden* and *Laughing Stock* albums, and Hollis' solo album seemed like a footnote to it all before he left the music business.

What Restall does well is chart these artists' musical development, but he is desperate to cling onto his phrase post-pop, to make use of Mark Fisher's over-used Hauntology theory, and to adopt Eno's word 'scenius', a vague term that seems to mean an acknowledgement of communal knowledge, ideas and experience rather than the notion of individual genius. Fair enough but it doesn't change the fact that scenius is a clunky word that has yet to enter common usage.

Despite the scenius label, Restall is still prone to reading lyrics as autobiographical. He regards Sylvian as miserable, perhaps depressed, and usually unhappy rather than simply accepting the music – which very much depends upon a number of musicians, albeit in response to Sylvian, who is also responsible for the final edit – as melancholy. A similar approach is brought to bear on Bush and Hollis, sometimes with bizarre references introduced. So, having told us that Sylvian was engaged in light drug use of cocaine when making his earlier solo albums, it is contrasted with a quote by idiot Noel Gallagher about 'five men in a studio on coke, not giving a fuck', to make clear what Sylvian *wasn't* doing! Without much reason, The Smiths and their fascist-leaning vocalist Morrisey are also invoked, as well as George Michael and Wham! [Michael could have been used as another example of someone moving away from pop to more interesting music, music that would both help change pop and become pop.]

Anyway, Restall documents the later (and in Hollis' case, final) music of his chosen subjects, sometimes weaving the story between other narratives in passing – for example, Scott Walker and John Foxx – and usually, if not always, giving his main characters the benefit of the doubt: Sylvian's relentless disregard for his bandmates, friends and collaborators is written off as perfectionism or ambition; his demands for higher royalties and more composition credits is never greed or power grabbing.

Isn't it the music that matters? And isn't it still possible to sell music without necessarily flaunting or featuring yourself as the centre of attention? Bush, of course, turned her concerts into theatre, although she was still on stage; Sylvian's music has focussed on the sound, the composition process, the production and players, not to mention album remixes, for many years now. Neither, however, have completely detached themselves from their past. Butt why would they?

'Ghosts' has been revisited and rearranged (perhaps deconstructed might be a better term) several times by Sylvian, not least on a couple of his rare tours; Bush's run at Eventim Apollo (née Hammersmith Odeon) included a number of greatest hits alongside her recent and more obscure material. Both have issued a fair amount of albums and compilations, but at their own pace.

Hollis, of course, didn't perform live, either with or as Talk Talk for those last two albums, or to support the surprise release of his solo album in 1998, 7 years after *Laughing* *Stock*. He simply retired, wanting to be out of the spotlight and with his family. Perhaps he had done enough, perhaps he had nothing to say, perhaps he realised how corrupt, ridiculous and demeaning the pop world was.

Restall prefers to play with the notion of silence, public silence at least, although this is of course contradicted by the fact the music is still out there, being played and listened to, not to mention talked and written about. He notes that silence is impossible to achieve but suggests that both Sylvian and Hollis (unlike Bush who manages to become public when it suits her or there is an album to promote) aspired to it. Hollis, of course, has been silenced by his death, but Sylvian, declares Restall, is 'condemned to exist in a perpetual state of approaching silence'.

I'm not so sure. This is a somewhat pretentious conclusion to an intriguing book about three in many ways pretentious artists. Aren't there some critical questions to be asked? About just exactly how long it takes to make an album and whether (over)production simply sucks the life out of music? About the process of endless jamming for months on end before somehow weaving all this into a 'final' version? Does that perhaps not simply evidences a lack of vision or detail for the music or song? And why does no-one ever ask Sylvian about the contradiction of arranging improvised music into song form that he then composes a melody over? Or why he doesn't improvise too?

It can't just be me that tires of preciousness and a sense of desperate control which some musicians have? The great things about good songs is that they go wild and turn up in unexpected places, with new arrangements, sung by those you'd least expect to be singing them. I love most of the music by Sylvian, Bush and Hollis (though please don't make me listen to the first three Talk Talk albums, or the first two and fourth by Japan) but there's something odd about them and their music that encourages the kind of cultdom that facilitates books like this. Pop music is constantly being reinvented, and yes these three artists – along with many others – certainly reinvented their own music, but I can't see it as post-pop, just where they have chosen to go musically, exploring and experimenting, combining influences and interests without prioritising commercial success.

Rupert Loydell [1250 words]