

ORCHESTRAL MANOEUVRES IN THE DARK

BY KEN SCRUDATO

Despite being born into the choking, mechanized wasteland that was early '80s urban England (when Dear Old Blighty had, sadly, become Dear Old Blighted), Liverpool's nascent synthesizer avant-gardists *Orchestral Manoeuvres in the Dark*—essentially the duo of singer-bassist Andy McCluskey and electronics whiz Paul Humphreys—veritably rejected the gray-coated misery-peddling of many of their northern peers. Rather, they faced down the reality of a ruined Britain by celebrating what remained of the noble idealism of 20th-century Modernism.

As McCluskey recalls, "When you are surrounded by the utter decay that most of the northern cities in the U.K. were exhibiting in the late '70s and the early '80s, it's understandable that working-class kids who had some sort of intellect and some sort of utopian dream would be looking for something better."

And indeed, with their futuro-primitive machines, neoteric techno-speak lyrics ("Machines are living, too"), fearless sense of experimentation (the industrial "ABC Auto Industry"), Suprematist cover art and pristine, gleaming melodies, OMD posited a possible new ideal for living through musical innovation. Glittering synthpop singles like "Electricity" and "Telegraph" neatly and exuberantly conveyed the bemusing *weltanschauung* of contemporary existence, while also taking sneering potshots at God and America. Their third and fourth albums, *Architecture & Morality* and *Dazzle Ships*, are rightly regarded as masterpieces.

Most ironically, it was the proliferation of technology that eventually led OMD to churn out ever-more slickly produced and increasingly commercially successful singles and albums. It all peaked with the massive international chart topper "If You Leave" unapologetically soundtracking the prom scene in John Hughes' culturally influential teen drama *Pretty in Pink*. Alas, there was nowhere to go from there.

But as happens, the culture looped back around and, at the dawn of the new millennium, the hipsterati were suddenly name-checking them again. With effusive laudations from the likes of Ladytron, LCD Soundsystem, and The xx, the context for an OMD renaissance was well set.

Band reformations can be dreadful things, especially when an artist had been initially birthed by a distinct social or cultural atmosphere. But fortunately, McCluskey and Humphreys are remarkably self-aware—clever enough to have given their first new release together since 1986 the title *History of Modern*. It's an acknowledgment of the reality that while scores of trendy new bands are nodding to them stylistically, the Modernistic philosophical notions that drove their early output have mostly died off in the new age of irony and apoliticism.

"When we were young," remembers McCluskey, "we were naïve and idealistic. We actually saw ourselves as some of the last Modernists of the 20th century, carrying on from what had started with Cubism, Constructivism and Futurism. Synthpop was possibly the last modern art movement.

"Now we're constantly being told that we're living in the postmodern era, whatever that means," he continues. "Perhaps it's the rejection of the kind of idealism of the various forms of modernism that were



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influencing art, music, theatre, architecture and design?"

Indeed, *History of Modern* opens not with glorifications of industry and technology, but with a caustic swipe ("New Babies: New Toys") at manufactured pop bands. Yet the title track, in two suites, finds McCluskey characteristically pondering the chronological expanse of the universe. What is most striking is the resemblance to OMD's earliest work, matching not only the melodic heights but also stripping back the production to the luminous minimalism that characterized those recordings.

However, despite detours into eerie *nouveau* soul ("Sometimes," with a vividly haunting vocal by Liverpool singer Jennifer John) and what might be deemed post-techno chamber music ("New Holy Ground"), *History of Modern* is ultimately a shimmering 21st-century pop record. And, most importantly, it exhibits all the excitement of a new band unaffected by the vagaries of success and fame.

"We looked at our history," McCluskey enthuses, "and realized that our first four albums, with their stripped down simplicity, were our strongest and most stylistically unique. After all, loads of overdubs and fancy production technology are really just about polishing a piece of shit. So we decided to go back to that simplicity. A few people have said to me that I sound like a young man singing. And Paul and I feel very much like we're kids again."

Stay tuned for further manoeuvres. **F**

Andy McCluskey picks 3 OMD songs you should already own



"Electricity" from *Organisation* (1980)

The first real song we wrote—we were 16 years old. To hold a copy of it in our hands when it became our first single on Factory Records in 1979 was incredible.



"Enola Gay" from *Organisation* (1980)

Always been a contentious song for the pop sensibility matched against the dark lyric about the plane that dropped the atom bomb on Hiroshima. My only defense is that singing about the event was not as sick as actually dropping the bomb in a plane named after your mother.



"Apollo XI" from *Sugar Tax* (1991)

Still my favorite sample-based song that we ever did. We changed the sound of the band whilst still retaining "intellectual" content. Also reminds me of being 10 years old and the excitement of the first moon landing.