

THE REVOLUTION OF WEIGHTLESS MUSIC

a manifesto by
Vostok Lake

ROCK MUSIC IS DEAD. LET'S BURY IT.

Rock music was the music of the revolutionary youth of the Western countries coming out of the post-war boom and ending in the oil shocks of the mid-'70s. This is why rock music in itself - as Homer Simpson rightly said - reached perfection in 1975. Even punk - for all its conceptual "Year Zero" shock - was musically nothing that California garage bands weren't doing in the mid-60's. Everything interesting that has happened in rock music after that has either been in taking influences from other styles of music (Latin, hip-hop, Arab, reggae, etc) or by simply and grotesquely eating itself. The happening rock acts of today ever more shamefully knock off the Beatles, the Stones, early Zep, the Who, Black Sabbath, Pink Floyd, etc - or rip off bands that were



originally ripoffs of those ideas themselves. Rock'n'roll is a tyranny of fashion and of zombie ideas. The idea that the music of the youth involves electric guitars and a drumkit has led more and more cookie-cutter outfits who think they're being radical up a standardised path into COMMODITY HELL. The record industry follows the rules of the capitalist economy and increasingly rewards standardised product. Right now just about all the new rock music in the charts sounds like Blondie or the Jam with the good bits taken out, or, God help us all, dumbed-down Oasis.

I'm not saying "stop playing rock music", any more than you should stop playing jazz, or Beethoven, or tinkly acoustic-guitar folk music. But we do have to recognize that it's an ossified form which doesn't realise it's dead and is shambling along like some kind of four-chord revenant.

LET US ONCE AGAIN HAVE BANDS THAT CAN RIDE PUBLIC TRANSPORT

People forget that - after electronic musical equipment ceased to resemble a telephone exchange, and before the Stock/Aitken/Watermanised late 80's - there was a period when "synth-pop" was genuinely "punk", in the sense of simultaneously democratic and threatening. Depeche Mode took their synths to gigs on the bus, sparing themselves the expense of big clunky guitar amps and a van to drive them around in. Three old-school monophonic synths and a drum beat recorded on tape were significantly cheaper than a drum kit and a Fender knockoff, so let's knock on the head this Roddy Doyle myth that synth music was made by art-school wankers funded by rich dads. Shall we also mention that a 61-note piano style keyboard is significantly easier to learn to play a tune or a riff on than a six- or four-string guitar? Not exactly rocket science.

It was significantly crosscultural. Everyone knows how white America knocked off the music of the black South to create rock'n'roll. And urban black America in the 1980's were leaping on the new, not-human beats coming out of extremely white people in New York, London or even Dusseldorf. As Mark E Smith of the Fall said, you could go into the least reputable clubs in Detroit and all the "black guys with machine guns are listening to Gary Numan". Let's dispense with this fake egalitarianism that everything cool "comes from the street". The Bomb Crew's genuinely astonishing sample-collage beats for Public Enemy simply wouldn't have

happened without nerds in places like Darmstadt pricking around with tape loops in the 60's.

THE SOFTWARE SYNTH IS THE MOST DEMOCRATIC MUSICAL INSTRUMENT

But what about live performance? No-one particularly likes playing along to a fixed and therefore dead backing track, or even a sequencer which takes an effort to reprogram - we like to be able to control all parameters of the music as it happens. (Depeche Mode gave up and started putting 80% of their performance on tape, before surrendering to rock-music cliché in the mid 90's.) Well, urban black (and Hispanic) America were the first communities to realise what the 21st century media technologies meant for popular music. A hundred years ago, the rural African-American communities had taken the musical instruments and harmonic structures of the oppressor cultures and married them to what they had managed to preserve of their own musical traditions, in the form of blues or jazz. The same thing happened in the late 70's and early 80's - now a turntable, a mixing desk, or a sequencer could be the preferred weapon of the musician from below. These days, you'd have to include the laptop computer in that.

Monophonic synths were cheap and portable in the early 1980s. Now some synths are FREE and literally WEIGHTLESS - software synths written in open-source, that is. While the high-end audiophiles chase themselves ever further into the fetishism of the shiny Mac, at the real-world end of the scale, Ubuntu Studio is a professional-quality open-source suite available for making a computer produce pretty sounds - with its latest upgrades, to a fully professional level of capability and potential polish. However, Ben Watson has pointed out that art music performed on laptops usually ends up being some kind of dull Enya-like drone. For truly exciting music you need some kind of interface which can be operated in real time - which is why the piano-style keyboard (and to a lesser degree the foot pedal) is still the most efficient real-world device for on-the-spot electronic music making. A MIDI controller plugged into a laptop will be undoubtedly the instrument on which the music of the urban masses of the 21st century will be produced. Who knows but that new pieces of interface equipment (pedalboards, MIDI-based mixing desks, etc) won't evolve to mean that every aspect of the audio experience can be

controlled in real time, by the guys onstage or the guys offstage, without having to run through a QWERTY-keyboard or a mouse.

GROUPS WITH GUITARS ARE ON THE WAY OUT, MR EPSTEIN

Vostok Lake is part of a movement towards the complete self-sufficiency of the composer/performer via portable computing. The infotech explosion has put the possibility of creating an entire musical soundscape - even of outputting it in SURROUND SOUND! - onto every desktop computer. The next step must be to step up to the LIVE challenge - to use laptops and MIDI controllers to create intelligent, mobile "bands in boxes" that need only to be plugged into a PA or even someone's home stereo to be able to make music of infinite flexibility, sonic depth and variety, whenever, wherever. We are a left-wing and libertarian institution and we are interested in making music that is infinitely portable and transmittable, open-source, and subversive.



This is a laptop.



This is open-source music software.



This is a MIDI controller.

NOW PLAY SOME GIGS!

(Disclaimer: Vostok Lake can't afford a laptop yet so we're stuck with the cheap alternative of recording backing tracks on iPod and playing along with our hardware synths for now. We're sorry. Buy more records and that'll fix it.)

www.vostoklake.org