

The Death of New Wave

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My paper today deals with the death of the new wave rock genre. The conventional understanding is that new wave as a historical period, runs from sometime in the late-1970s to sometime in the mid-1980s. Plenty has been written about new wave's late 1970s birth. The familiar story is that the music rose side by side with punk, acting as its more sophisticated and commercially accessible doppelganger. New wave achieved critical and commercial prominence through such bands as Blondie and the Talking Heads, while punk went in an opposite direction into the underground fringes of hardcore. Little has been written, however, about how or why the new wave should meet its end in the mid-1980s. It seems to be simply accepted that this is where the boundary is drawn. My goal in this paper is to do some historical digging and theorizing, and try to provide a more nuanced portrait and understanding of new wave's demise.

The paper is divided into two parts. In the first half I will explore the question of new wave's death as it relates to common perceptions about the death of rock music periods, styles and movements in general. In the second half of the paper, I will suggest that while new wave's death is often attributed to factors that lie outside the movement itself, a more profitable way of addressing the movement's death will be to examine new wave from the inside. Specifically I will look at how established new wave bands gravitated towards musical practices and conventions that changed new wave's very sound and style. This is a viewpoint that frames new wave's death as the decay or mutation of a once prominent

stylistic language.

Part of the problem in locating new wave's death is that the new wave itself has always been an unstable genre category, encompassing everything from the power pop of The Knack and the avant-garde theatrics of Devo to the MTV pop style of Duran Duran and Culture Club. It is for this reason that the label is often referred to as a wide umbrella category, or less charitably as being so broad as to be virtually meaningless. It is also for this reason that I will suggest that new wave suffered not one death, but *multiple* deaths over the course of its short history.

Ironically, the very first of new wave's deaths actually occurred *before* the arrival of the genre as we know it today. It is often forgotten that the explosion of British punk in 1976, with groups like the Sex Pistols, Damned and Clash, was referred to in the music press as the "new wave." Throughout 1976 and 1977 punk and new wave were essentially synonymous. By late 1977, however, there were rumblings within the rock press that punk and new wave were dying—that its vitality had been spent. The prevailing reason offered was that the music and fashion had been absorbed by the major labels and turned into a sensationalized popular culture commodity. To drive this point home, *Trouser Press's* October 1977 "New Wave R.I.P." cover article included snap shots of department store mannequins adorned in punk tee shirts and chains.¹ This movement from the underground into the dominant culture is what British sociologist Dick Hebdige famously referred to as punk's death by "incorporation" in his 1979 study *Subculture: the Meaning of Style*, and it has for many years remained one of

punk's most intractable myths—that the music's survival is predicated on an anti-commercial stance.²

While some lamented punk's death via commercialization, in the U.S. the music was viewed as D.O.A. ironically because after the colossal failure of the Sex Pistols' tour, American major labels deemed punk to be a virtually *unmarketable* style, one whose aura of violence and sloppy incompetence was of an extremely limited appeal. In place of punk, Seymour Stein of Sire records campaigned for the more neutral marketing label of new wave. And by late 1978 new wave had taken a firm hold behind the success of Elvis Costello, Blondie, Talking Heads, The Police and The Cars, all of whom radio programmers found could easily intermingle with such Album Oriented Rock staples as Foreigner, Journey and Boston. In the end, punk's death gave birth to a “new” new wave. As Kevin Dettmar points out in his book *Is Rock Dead?*, declarations of rock's death have nearly always been accompanied by a birth.³ The decay and rot of one style essentially necessitates the arrival of a fresh beginning. And punk and new wave's relationship is no exception.

This second manifestation of the new wave—the “new” new wave of 1978—did indeed manage to succeed where punk had failed, as new wave artists made serious inroads into both the Top 40 and album charts. But rumors of new wave's death would once again begin to circulate in 1980 and 1981. As with disco before it, many of these fatalistic proclamations captured the tensions over a musical style that to borrow Raymond Williams' terminology had once been emergent but was now seamlessly interwoven with the dominant culture.⁴ The new wave

equivalent of disco's monumental crossover hit, *Saturday Night Fever*, was the 1979 release of Los Angeles power poppers' The Knack's debut single, "My Sharona," which proved to be year's best selling song. In the wake of The Knack's success, the major labels staged a massive new wave signing frenzy. Where the white Travolta disco suit and choreographed dance competitions had served to reduce disco to a fad, The Knack's post-Beatles image spawned a legion of copycat "skinny tie" new wave bands. In a 1980 interview with *Trouser Press* magazine, Will Birch of British power poppers The Records reflected on how the Knack's success had changed the Los Angeles music scene:

We had a few days off in LA and went clubbing 'round. Every bar we went into we saw bands with three guitars and drums, three minute songs, Beatle haircuts, the whole bit, doin' pop. Most of 'em were appalling. They were all good musicians—the drummers were always great—but it was almost as if they were all session musicians who couldn't get gigs, telling the bands, 'I'll get the haircut but I keep my Octa-plus drumkit.' So you get these older guys with dyed hair and huge drum kits doing these flashy licks, hoping some record company will discover 'em as 'their' pop group. You can look good and have the hype, but it's down to the song. Most of 'em don't have 'em, and they'll fall by the wayside.⁵

As Birch describes it in this quote, new wave had become an affectation. And it was not just desperate session players who were delving into this new pop music *lingua franca*. New wave became a style that attracted wandering pastiche rockers and poppers like Billy Joel [*Glass Houses*], Linda Rondstadt [*Mad Love*] and Robert Palmer [*Clues*] to its flame, all of whom released new wave styled albums in 1980. New wave, in the words of the Ramones, had become "middle-of-the-road new wave."⁶ Linda Rondstadt would unsurprisingly soon leave new wave behind, as would Billy Joel and Robert Palmer. And as the slew of "skinny tie" bands failed to produce a hit to match "My Sharona," and The Knack's

second album died on the vine as well, announcements that radio programmers were dropping new wave shows from their stations began to appear in *Billboard* magazine.⁷ As with disco, new wave had died a double death, one attributed to selling out and becoming a fad, and another ironically from its inability to gain a secure commercial foothold.

Throughout 1981 and 1982 and into 1983 as the new wave label began to occur with less and less frequency in the rock press, a host of “new” labels, all of which were more or less derivative of the new wave, began to appear. First there were the New Romantics, a British movement which included style savvy groups like Spandau Ballet and Duran Duran. Then there was the New Pop—again in England—which was ushered in with groups like the Human League, Thompson Twins and Culture Club. Then there was the New Music, a catch-all phrase that seemed to be applied rather indiscriminately in the U.S. to virtually any new Top 40 white pop artist beginning in 1982 and 1983. Whether it was the New Romantics, New Pop or New Music, however, all three labels shared some common themes. The majority of the artists were British, the majority of them relied heavily on synthesizer technology, and most significantly, their fortunes in the U.S. were intimately bound with the distribution of promotional videos on MTV, which had begun broadcasting in August of 1981.

By 1984 and 1985, forceful pronouncements of the death of this third and final new wave began to appear with some frequency. These pronouncements came from various quarters, but in most every case they took the form of a dialectical critique that reinforced many of rock’s most entrenched values. A very young 22-

year old Simon Reynolds addressed many of the main issues in his *Monitor* fanzine, specifically in an article entitled “What’s Missing: the State of Pop in 1985.”⁸ Part of the problem, he claimed was that the New Pop or New Music’s main stars—artists like Paul Young, Annie Lennox and Howard Jones—were too “adult” and proper. As an antidote, he proposed The Smiths as a band who were much more in touch with the awkward Romanticism of youthful adolescence.

Likewise, as Reynolds saw it, the New Pop had become so consumed with style that it had adopted a veneer of sophistication and leisure that neutered any overt political bent. Here again, the emergence of the dressed down Smiths—in shirts and jeans—and their affiliation with the Rough Trade indie label, suggested an alternative point of view. In the end as Reynolds depicted it, the dominant theme in New Pop’s death was a familiar one in rock narratives: the New Pop was choking on its own artifice, and its death would be hastened by a new authenticity, a return to rock’s roots, much as punk had offered ten years earlier.

This theme of artifice vs. authenticity played out in many ways, none more symbolically perhaps than the positioning of guitar based genres, such as British Indie Pop (in the vein of The Smiths) and American college rock and roots rock (such as REM and the Del Fuegos), as saviors, as genres that were self-consciously devoid of the New Pop’s slick synthesizer arrangements. As Morrissey had made clear in a 1983 interview with *Sounds* magazine: “there was nothing more repellent than the synthesizer.”⁹

Oppositions such as these: guitars vs. synthesizers, denim vs. dye jobs, majors vs. indies, youth vs. middle age are the convenient shorthand of critics

and journalists, those writers whose job it is to kill off entrenched styles and unearth new movements in their place. While I do not deny the usefulness of such narrative devices in perpetuating the notion of rock as a cyclical history, at the same time I fear that they tend to overshadow actual changes in musical practice that often occur *within* genres; stylistic developments that in a sense can figuratively kill off a genre because it has gravitated towards a different musical aesthetic, a place that barely resembles its point of origin.

Simply put, in considering this third and final case of new wave's death, I find the demonizing of synthesizers to be too facile an explanation. Rather, I would argue that a comparison of new wave's synth pop wing between the early and mid 1980s reveals profound differences in the way that the music was being written and conceived. I would like to examine the music of one group in particular, Orchestral Manoeuvres in the Dark (OMD from here on out), who was active during both the early and mid 1980s, to provide a comparison of what changes had taken place. Specifically, I want to look at two of their best known songs, 1980's "Enola Gay" and 1986's "If You Leave," side by side.

As a song that mixes accessibility with a subversive tint, "Enola Gay" embodies many of the aspects that attracted fans and critics to the early new wave movement. It is based around a familiar chord progression of I vi IV V, that brings to mind a whole era of 1950s doo wop standards like "Blue Moon." And it features a very tonal, arpeggiated melodic synthesizer line as its main hook. At the same time, its subject matter is rather deceptively dark. The "Enola Gay" that vocalist Andy McCluskey sings of is the plane that dropped the bomb known as

“Little Boy” on Hiroshima at 8:15AM on August 6, 1945. No doubt, the memories of this infamous moment obviously still bore a distinct relevancy in the ongoing Cold War climate that pervaded the early 1980s. What has always intrigued me most about this song, however, is the very first synthesizer line that we hear: a repetitive keyboard ostinato that runs throughout all the verses. The pitches of this ostinato mildly clash with the main progression’s I vi IV V chords, creating a variety of harmonic dissonances and extensions of 6ths, 7ths and 9ths. It would seem that the melodic dissonance in this case serves to amplify the implied menace and sorrow in the lyrics.

The mechanical repetition and stark timbral quality of this ostinato synthesizer line is typical of much early synth pop. In this particular context it also serves to subtly underscore the inexorable drive and purpose behind the Enola Gay’s deadly mission. Interpretation aside, what interests me most here, is **how** the synthesizer is being used—specifically as a minimalist, layered pattern within a heavily stratified textural arrangement. As Charles Kronengold has pointed out in a recent article, this type of stratification is common in much early new wave, as it was a musical practice that grew out of the genre’s influence from and exchange with disco and dance music production practices.¹⁰ In disco, layering was a convention borne out of necessity, as the music was exclusively studio based and crafted out of its component parts rather than as an original whole. As Kronengold argues, new wave bands used layering for a number of practical reasons as well: as a means of integrating performers with varying musical skill levels, as a way of working with drum machine beats, and as a way to assemble

and foreground a variety of timbral hooks. Regardless of their motives, the layering process allowed for the creation of odd disjunctions as we hear in “Enola Gay,” and such moments became an important part of early synth pop and new wave’s musical aesthetic.

On the surface, OMD’s “If You Leave,” from 1986 sounds like the work of a completely different band. But there are actually some similarities between this song and “Enola Gay.” The most obvious is that OMD once more returns to the I vi IV V doo wop progression, which occurs with slight variations throughout the verse sections. Less obviously, the band is also still interested in exploring elements of tension and dissonance in their pop songs. In this case, however, they achieve it not vertically through layering, but rather horizontally through a series of abrupt, unprepared harmonic modulations that create a sense of motion and longing that perfectly match the song’s lyrics of restlessness and romantic yearning. The first verse and chorus oscillates between the distant key areas of F Major and D Major, while the second verse oscillates between the similarly distant G Major and E Major.

Both “If You Leave” and “Enola Gay” reveal a band with an interest in balancing melodic accessibility and harmonic tension. What is noticeably different is the *manner* by which they achieve this tension in each of the songs. In the early 80s new wave dance aesthetic, much of the tension resulted from the ways in which musicians played layers off of one another, using repeated patterns in ways that often highlighted clashes. By the mid-1980s, however, such minimalist musical practices had largely vanished as musicians began to employ

new digital synthesizer technology in ways that mimicked more traditional rock and pop musical arrangements. The synthesizers of “If You Leave” rely not on insistent patterns and repetition, but instead are clearly meant to suggest the swells and crescendos of an orchestral string arrangement. In “Enola Gay” the synthesizer is meant to sound like a synthesizer; In “If You Leave” it is meant to conjure other instruments as well.

The contrast that I have pointed out between these two songs is a microcosm of a larger stylistic shift that by the mid-1980s had completely altered the sound of new wave synth pop. Synthesizers were now increasingly used to imitate not just string backings, but horn hits and choruses, stingers and any number of conventional arranging clichés that had been in the bag of rock and pop tricks since the 1960s and 1970s. On top of this, the very sound of the music had changed as well. Where early synth pop had opted for obviously synthesized drum programming and thin, trebly synthesized melodies, the sound of the mid 1980s new wave had followed suit with the rest of the mainstream rock world and opted for a thick, compressed production, especially in the drums.

In closing, my point in pursuing this musicological detour is to argue that the death of a genre need not always be rooted in some antagonistic changing of the guard, or a dramatic clash between artifice and authenticity. Sometimes genres die, or more accurately, recede simply because they bear a scant resemblance to what they once were. In the case of new wave, the influx of digital synthesizer technology created a new realm of songwriting and production possibilities that significantly changed the genre’s overall sound. As mainstream rock and pop

music in general embraced these new synthesizer sounds and production techniques, the mid-1980s veered towards a homogeneity of style. The result was a sonic sameness that helped obscure many of the differences that had once separated various genres from one another. One could argue that new wave (or New Pop or New Music) was swept into this whirlpool, never to return.

¹ Ira Robbins, "The New Wave Washes Out," *Trouser Press* October 1977, 22.

² Dick Hebdige, *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* (London: Methuen, 1979); see in particular "Two Forms of Incorporation," 92-99.

³ Kevin Dettmar, *Is Rock Dead?* (New York: Routledge, 2006).

⁴ Raymond Williams, "Dominant, Residual, and Emergent," in *Marxism and Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), 121-27.

⁵ Jim Green, "Changing Records," *Trouser Press* March 1980, 26.

⁶ Scott Isler, "The Short and Long of The Ramones," *Trouser Press* May 1980, 17.

⁷ Ed Harrison, "AOR Cuts New Wave Shows," *Billboard* 26 September 1981, 1+.

⁸ Simon Reynolds, "What's Missing? The State of Pop in 1985," in *Bring the Noise: 20 Years of Writing About Hip Rock and Hip Hop* (London: Faber and Faber, 2007), 1-8.

⁹ Quoted in Bill Black, "The Smiths: Keep Young and Beautiful," *Sounds* 19 November, 1983. Accessed 27 May, 2009 via *Rock's Back Pages* <http://www.rocksbackpages.com/article.html?ArticleID=6282>

¹⁰ Charles Kronengold, "Exchange Theories in Disco, New Wave, and Album-Oriented Rock," *Criticism* 50, no. 1 (Winter 2008): 43-82.