

THE SAME MUSIC WITH DIFFERENT EARS NOW / Brandan Kearney

It would be simple enough to present Glorious Din's music as exemplary of a certain style, a certain sound, a certain time and place. What's more interesting are the aspects of the band that go against the grain of their era and can't easily be assimilated into some nostalgic notion of 1980s postpunk.

If you cared about Glorious Din in their heyday, your biggest frustration was likely to be the widespread dismissal of the band as a Joy Division knockoff. In those days, it was less obvious that the pleasure of making snap judgments about music often outweighs the pleasure of listening closely, so the obstinacy of this accusation was puzzling.

Musically, the charge is hard to sustain. Much of the guitar playing on Unknown Pleasures sounds like a deep-frozen version of the Stooges — a sort of stiff-fingered, enervated post-protopunk. By contrast, Jay Paget's guitar tends to be sparse, warm and fluid, largely foregoing standard-issue rock chords in favor of minimalist surf-exotica ostinati.

Doug Heeschen, one of the most inventive bassists in an era that wisely recognized the bass as a lead instrument, seldom echoes Peter Hook's relatively rigid style. If you insist on forcing him into the shoes of a well-known contemporary, Jah Wobble or even Barry Adamson would probably provide a better fit. But you'd still be overlooking the rhythmic and melodic peculiarities that make him exceptional (a few of which, to be fair, he inherited from Glorious Din's original bassist, Matt Hall).

Further, Pete Herstedt's drumming has much more in common with 1960s garage rock — the tightly controlled primitivism of Maureen Tucker or Rick Andridge, for example — than it does with the clinical death-disco sound of Glorious Din's peers in Manchester and elsewhere.

More to the point, Joy Division's music is fundamentally Western, ranging from the elementary punk chording of "Shadowplay" and "Interzone" to the O-level romanticism of "The Eternal." By contrast, a tropical exoticism snakes through Glorious Din songs like "Insects," "Cello Tape" and "1651 Map," the musical and cultural overtones of which drift from the Sahel to the Persian Gulf to the Indian subcontinent.

The closest similarity you'll find is the production on Leading Stolen Horses, which is certainly of its time. But even there, the resemblance is superficial. You won't hear videogame sound effects on these songs, or a cold wash of reverb seeping into every empty space, or drums processed to the point where they're indistinguishable from machinery. Glorious Din is human music, and the recordings reflect this. The album sounds very much like the band did live: tight, precise, unadorned, interlocked but fully individuated.

Ultimately, though, the distinction is psychological. Joy Division's music was concerned mainly with interior states. In that claustrophobic, J.G. Ballard-besotted era, they reminded me of nothing so much as Ballard's story "Manhole 69," in which the world of sleep-deprived lab subjects dwindles to the infinitely narrow circumference of their own consciousness. Glorious Din's outlook is different precisely because it looks outward: The world is not closed as it seems.

Always more phenomenological than existential, Glorious Din songs tend to be in a folk-reportorial mode where great struggles are hinted at in simple gestures and juxtapositions. Instead of cataloging the lurid cruelties of some techno-sadist atrocity exhibition, Eric Cope closely watches everyday life: cats, ants, trains, burnt weeds, shiploads of goats, jars of water put out for beggars, a hundred bags of factory salt.

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Like all true melancholics, but quite unlike depressives, Eric was concerned with salvaging and redeeming fleeting impressions and images. As R.H. Blyth said of haiku, the result is “a temporary enlightenment, in which we see into the life of things.” It’s this empathic interest in everyday moments – in piecing together a bright mosaic from the world’s fragments – that separates Glorious Din from bands with seemingly similar styles.

Almost uniquely among songwriters in his ostensible genre, Eric had no interest in the Pathetic Fallacy, no interest in the Geography of Hell, no interest in portraying the world as worse than it is for the sake of a cheap thrill. Like Simone Weil, he is careful to say “I am suffering” rather than “this landscape is ugly.” The bystanders in his songs are not assassins or jailers or martyrs or hooded figures from the abyss. Instead, they are ordinary people minding their own business: sweeping streets, spinning cotton, watching trains, soaking beans. In this, he reminds me a lot of Tove Jansson, whose unruffled and deromanticized attentiveness to the world as given Eric instantly recognized when I gave him one of her books.

This attentiveness is Eric’s *métier* – perhaps due to his very wide travel at a very young age, from the jungles of Sri Lanka to the great cities and dismal backwaters of Europe, America and the Arabian Peninsula – so it’s no surprise that the album’s least convincing moments are the most commonplace in their evocation of mere despair. Still, even in the basically doomstruck “Cello Tape,” the world and the people struggling to live in it are never confused with unhappy consciousness: The world can be home; people are good, but we’re lost.

In a subculture transfixed by the military-industrial sublime, by Manson and Jonestown, by information war and the panopticon – a milieu in which self-pity seemed to be the imagination’s only escape from dehumanization – Eric somehow managed to be “in love with everyone,” to reject neither joy nor misery, to remain at home in the world without complacency or idiot optimism. This worldview was as bracing and believable as it is hard to fake, and it comes through clearly on Leading Stolen Horses. Somewhat incongruously, the record also transmits a strong sense of the band’s almost martial severity (this was, after all, an age when even dedicated anti-fascists wanted to meet Oswald Mosley’s tailor). What doesn’t come through is their onstage unpredictability: the sudden mood swings, the exuberance and sense of humor, the ability to release tension as well as to build it, the willingness to cast out the self and vanish into the song. Above all, what’s missing is the visceral power of one of the era’s most forceful rhythm sections, as sturdy and relentless as a tank. But again, given the pitfalls of the recording process, it’s a reasonably faithful document of the band’s live sound, especially on “Cello Tape” and “Insects.”

You’d think that Closely Watched Trains – with its commitment to a mutant ethno-folk style, its austere use of acoustic instruments and its near-total lack of guitar effects – would’ve ended the comparisons to Joy Division. Or to anyone else, for that matter, since songs like “1651 Map” and “Empty Milk Bar” and “Narrow Streets” really belong to their own genre. But of course, a good deal of music criticism boils down to the defensive affirmation of what the critic (and by extension, everyone who counts) already knows. And for many critics, the initial flash of this aesthetic short circuit produced an afterimage that never faded.

All these years later, Closely Watched Trains sounds compelling and self-assured, so it’s hard to recall just how disturbing it was to listeners who knew these songs well. The basic problem was that Eric had grown tired of drums and electric guitars. Obsessed with folk music in general and with Nick Drake in particular, his goal was to create a quiet, stylistically seamless album along the lines of Five Leaves Left. Whatever you think of that ambition, attempting to realize it singlehandedly did a fair amount of violence to crucial elements of the band’s sound, as well as to their relationships. The drums are the main casualty; their distant sound works nicely on newer songs like “1651 Map,” but on old tracks like “Sirens at

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Night” the unbalanced mix has the paradoxical effect of calling more attention to the drums. (This is not to imply that a different approach would’ve worked better, however. At this stage, some form of auditory conflict was probably inevitable.)

It’s also clear that Jay’s growing confidence and sophistication as a songwriter and vocalist was becoming difficult to confine within the conceptual boundaries of *Glorious Din*. Although they never seemed incongruous live, Jay’s songs sit uneasily on this album — almost diametrically opposed to Eric’s growing asceticism but pulled as far as they’ll go in that direction for the sake of a sonic uniformity that never quite materializes. Not every song can tolerate this treatment, which is why some of Jay’s strongest work from this era is missing from *Closely Watched Trains*. (Like Eric, Jay is a careful observer of everything human; his writing in songs like “Ancient Mr. Enemy” about lives lost to the AIDS epidemic is wrenching and perfectly unsentimental. Jay, Doug and Pete developed these songs fully as Harry’s Picket Fence, whose full-length 1987 album sadly remains unreleased.)

Although Eric’s demand for an ever-deeper commitment to a private vision was obviously not sustainable, this is not the sole or even the primary reason for the band’s breakup in 1986. It’s more likely that as the individual members became more conscious of their power, and more comfortable with it, their goals naturally diverged.

By the time *Closely Watched Trains* was recorded, everyone was busy with outside projects: Eric had formed a series of shambling, stripped-down folk projects — Beetle Leg, Dog Food, Wednesday Morning 3 A.M.—that focused even more minutely on trains, cats, windows and open-air markets. Jay was playing a variety of instruments with at least three absurdly disparate bands. And Pete and Doug were paying tribute to their garage-rock icons as the Koel Brothers and (with Mike Saunders) the Electric Koels. In short, *Glorious Din* was no longer able to accommodate the width and breadth of its members’ interests. This seemed like a disaster at the time, but it could more sensibly be viewed as a sign of the band’s success at nurturing its members’ talents, boosting their confidence and clarifying their priorities.

The band meant a lot to me, personally and professionally, and the last thing I want to do is be pedantic about definitions. But a simple sense of justice makes me insist that this was not “death rock,” as we mockingly called the genre back then. That wasn’t the band’s intent, and that’s not what their songs felt or sounded like. *Glorious Din* was, just as Eric had always claimed, an odd sort of “industrial folk” music, beautifully constructed and played, drawing on global experiences and influences and expressing a wider and wiser view of the world than many of us had at that time. Far from jumping on some already overcrowded bandwagon, they expanded and improved on a sickly — or at least hypochondriacal — genre while charting a variety of ingenious courses beyond it (none of which involved the use of sequencers).

When I first heard *Glorious Din* I was a teenager in serious emotional peril, and the music and words seemed to come from a point of stability — a point on the other side of some acknowledged but not impassable darkness. What it told me, at the risk of repeating myself, is that the world can be home, the world is not closed as it seems, the words we speak will leave a mark.

This was an important and perhaps even daring thing to say when and where they said it. And it still is news.

Carry it to the world.