

# HEARING MICE: WIRING DEPT MAGAZINE AND ITS DISCONTENTS /

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I think it was in late 1984 that Eric Cope first floated the idea of putting out a “magazine,” as we kids called them back then. Later, he came by to interview me about my barely existing band, The World of Pooh, which also featured James Dillon and our “spiritual leader” David Katz.

We talked for a bit in my tiny kitchen. Very soon after, I received copies of the first issue of Wiring Dept. God only knows what I’d said in my interview; I’m sure it was stilted and dumb. But that didn’t matter, it turned out, because Eric had written a sort of prose-poem that made us sound like stevedores on the Mississippi circa 1930. It’s a good example of the magazine’s portrayal of its alleged scene as a sort of idealized artistic labor movement out of Federal Project Number One, with individual artists simply reflecting moments of actual life skyward like a series of puddles on a factory-lined street.

All that was sheer idealism, of course. Wiring Dept. was, in its way, as committed to seizing what Kiss Me Deadly’s Velda Wakeman called “The Great Whatsit” as Maximum Rock ‘n’ Roll was. But it was as if MRR had been edited by Carl Sandburg instead of you-know-who.

A wavering procession of Great Whatsits aside, the magazine’s basic stance seemed to be that music and performance should flow, naturally or unnaturally, from the lives of people who couldn’t help it. It didn’t much matter whether this necessity stemmed from an entirely anomalous vision and drive (like Carliner, or Gregg Turkington’s early projects), or from weaponized musical and social incompetence (like so many of the rest of us). It’s an arbitrary basis for aesthetic judgment, granted — but what isn’t?

In one of Eric’s reviews, he dismissed a then-recent synthpop LP by saying something like “on this record, you won’t hear mice scurrying across the subway tracks as a train approaches.” He went on to say that music lacking this connection to material life and to this space for its disorder “stiffens and causes great misery.”

It’s as good a summation of Wiring Dept.’s stance as you’ll find. Was he being too rigid and judgmental, or had he expressed a basic truth in a characteristically beautiful way? My sources say yes.

With his partner Mary Downs, Eric managed every aspect of production and distribution while also maintaining an impersonal visual identity and editorial tone that seemed to exist wholly apart from much of the actual content. Beyond my basic role as a two-fingered typist and half-awake copy editor, I wrote occasional reviews in return for records I could sell to buy groceries. More prolific reviewers included Grux of Carliner under names like “Rosanguine” and (brilliantly) “Bonnie Banks”; Pete Herstedt from Glorious Din; and Eric himself, whose pseudonymous thoughts on new — and sometimes imaginary — releases took up much of the remaining space.

Dave Katz was certainly the star contributor; his interviews and reviews are some of the era’s best in terms of in-depth knowledge and attention to detail. (In fact, it was his review of Lee Perry’s Battle of Armagideon (Millionaire Liquidator) that led Perry to choose Dave as his official biographer.)

Despite the magazine’s stern aesthetic sensibility, there was little editorial pressure and rarely any line

to toe; I can only remember a couple of cases where my reviews went under the knife, in both cases because I'd said pointlessly cruel things about people with whom Eric had a positive relationship. I pulled one of those reviews entirely to avoid compromising my "vision," and I allowed Eric to make the other one a little more palatable. I was grumpy about both edits at the time, but in retrospect of course he was 100% right, and he should've been a lot harder on me than he was.

Which is not to imply that he wasn't willing to be hard on people. After years of interviewing bands, Eric couldn't help but recognize that many of them were full of shit, full of themselves, or both. And after years of politely biting his tongue, he started bringing that recognition to his interviews, directly challenging the notion that the posturings of these clumsily yoked-together mammals – drifting past us all like slipshod floats in an endless rube-town parade – amounted to ... well, anything.

At one point, he asked Lydia Lunch if she ever felt overwhelmed with love for people in general. Spoiler alert: She didn't. But it was a good question, especially in those days when the spare empathy of our Best and Brightest was mostly reserved for carceral-state Keane Kids like Charles Manson. As I see it, this line of questioning was not so much about finding out how Lydia (or whoever) felt about homo sapiens; it was more about probing the depth of a given performer's commitment to the superficiality of a given shtick, and teasing out any ability they might have to spontaneously express anything beyond what we'd been taught to expect from them.

Wiring Dept was not always easy on advertisers, either. Eric and Mary wanted each of the magazine's six issues to have a particular identity and mood, and if a label's ad clashed with that mood, it didn't run and the money was refunded. For all the pride people took in being anticommercial back then, this dismissive attitude toward consumer marketing made at least a couple of snubbed advertisers angry enough to threaten violence. If memory serves, the final issue had no ads at all.

As Eric grew more skeptical about The Presentation of Self among the era's artists, he also started reflecting on the nuts and bolts of the process by which a kid from Sri Lanka becomes obsessed with Bob Dylan, Iggy Pop, the Velvet Underground and so forth. He began to feel that perhaps this wasn't a special delivery of Universal Truth from the Realm of Forms so much as a quasicolonial imposition that entailed devaluing his own history – and that of people of color generally – in order to genuflect before a whited-out version of Black culture.

That was a hard fact to face, both about music he nonetheless loved and about the basic contradictions of his own life and consciousness up to that point. ("When you oppress people for hundreds of years, you end up with a fucked-up crazy person like me!" he told me at the time.)

As Eric dug into the long history of resistance to white cultural hegemony and into specific radical movements in the Bay Area, this quite naturally became part of Wiring Dept's focus. I've been told that some readers didn't love having to flip past images of Huey Newton to catch up with Sonic Youth and similarly nonthreatening avatars of iron-on radical chic. Which is a shame, I guess? Still, it made for an interesting tension; calling attention to the difference between the political rectitude that potentially lands you in jail or the morgue, and the ironic distance from political rectitude that potentially lands you a contract with, say, Touch & Go, was even more unwelcome in those days than it is now.

Politics aside, it simply wasn't clear what the magazine was supposed to affirm by 1988; I don't recall anyone involved having much enthusiasm for most indie or underground acts of that era. Executives at Elektra and RCA may've foisted Eric's musical heroes off on him in his teens, but that was far preferable to being deluged with promo packs for late-80s "left of the dial" luminaries. You can recognize the mu-

**Glorious Din**

sic scene as a scam or an imposition while acknowledging that some scams and impositions demand a lot less suspension of disbelief and deliver a lot more satisfaction.

In particular, Eric noticed that as the literal danger of being a “punk” (or anything visually adjacent) had receded — that threat kids of our generation and older had faced of getting beaten down by some random pack of oafs who suspected we didn’t own any Lynyrd Skynyrd albums — it had been replaced with comfortable, self-satisfied, well-fed reactionaries playing with icons of violence and dehumanization like some fully accessorized doll set: Charlie and Sadie as Ken and Barbie. And musically, we were expected to proceed from Minimal Man to Jon Spencer, or from Crucifix to Helmet, or from Flipper to the Jesus Lizard, and think we’d gotten a fair deal; we were expected to see the ascendancy of bands like Halo of Flies as evidence of punk’s vitality rather than as terminal proof of its exhaustion as a musical and cultural force — or, in our very darkest moments, as a horrible fucking mistake.

But whatever one thinks of the quality of that era’s top-rated Boy Bands, Eric felt — reasonably! — that any former conviction or excitement or danger or defiance or abjection or resistance or authenticity or basic sonic appeal connected with “punk” or “postpunk” was dead as vaudeville, and that the international hip hop underground had taken up most of the slack. Hence his and Mary’s subsequent launch of Murder Dog magazine, which semi-instantly outstripped Wiring Dept in its global circulation and influence, relegating their earlier magazine to a slightly puzzling footnote in the annals of rap journalism.

In the end, as we know, hip hop was no more The Great Whatsit than punk or postpunk or “industrial folk” was. But so what? It’s an honest mistake — a noble one, even! And the lived illusions of that era will always be preferable to today’s virtual ones. As movements and eras are mummified for a sentimental posterity by content-farm bots; as former counterculture “heroes” embarrass themselves and us with their hophead yen for online clout; as the AI fantasies of generations of Lost Boys are fulfilled not by making computers as smart as people but by making people as brainless as computers; and as the former grace and loveliness of bonding individually over a hard-won experience of music is replaced by the emetic concept of “curating” it for a population of dopamine-poisoned dyshedonists trapped in the largest and worst social experiment of all time, we have to get suicidally close to the train tracks to hear any mice at all.

Times have changed, I mean to say. And Wiring Dept was never really in step with its own time, let alone anyone else’s. It’s one of those ancient, flawed, incidental labors of love representing a willingly marginal way of life that has officially been stamped “Do Not Resuscitate.” That doesn’t make it some kind of holy relic, though. It’s ephemera, which means it can safely be ignored. In fact, like a lot of human documents these days, it’s arguably better off resting in obscurity than getting liquidated in the eternal digital fire sale of the curatorial class.

That way there’s still hope, at least.