

Epiphanies

Before the MTV crackdown, Cabaret Voltaire's videos killed the radio stars, and their tape cut-ups opened the way forward for other non-musicians. By Peter Rehberg



TV eyeeful: Richard H Kirk in *Doublevision Presents Cabaret Voltaire*

It was autumn 1982. As part of my school work experience I was helping out in a land surveyors' office in St Albans – a suburban commuter town north of London. One drizzly morning, one of the older chaps working there was bemoaning his ownership of a certain record. Possibly the worst thing he'd ever heard, he complained. It sounded like someone chucking a kitchen sink down the stairs. The more he ranted about it, the more I became intrigued. I quizzed him relentlessly, until he said he'd give it to me. Next day I was the proud owner of *Red Mecca* by Cabaret Voltaire.

At the time they were a trio consisting of Richard H Kirk, Stephen Mallinder and Chris Watson. Far from being the worst thing ever, *Red Mecca* was one of the group's finest albums of its Rough Trade period. Recorded in May 1981, it was full of dark electronic trickery over treated rhythms ("Split Second Feeling", "Landslide"), with Watson's excellent organ playing giving it a slightly melancholy edge (as on "A Thousand Ways"). Like *Johnny YesNo*, their soundtrack to the Pete Care film of the same name, this was a brilliant proto-Acid nightmare music. All in all, *Red Mecca* provided extreme relief from the avalanche of New Romantic (or whatever it was called) waffle filling the charts back then, in which fashion victims peddled fancy notions of unreal aspirational lifestyles. Snatched from TV newscasts, Cabaret Voltaire's use of cut-up tapes knitted tightly over electronic beats and barked conspiratorial lyrics, which peeled back the tacky early 80s wallpaper to reveal the command and control structures beneath.

My attraction to them lay in the apparent lack of real musicianship. I had by that time developed a 'rock is dead' attitude (this started to edge away once Swans rolled into town a few years later). Punk sounded good on paper, but the results were more or less a badly played version of something that had already existed before.

I was keen on experiencing something new (badly played or otherwise), and acts like CV offered this by shedding the standard bass/guitar/drums set-up and bringing electronic experimentation into the equation, as well as adding non-musical elements such as tapes. They were by no means the first or only group to use them, and by this time they had

already existed for nearly ten years, but they were the ones that grabbed my imagination.

This led me to conclude that the mainstream tastes of my contemporaries were far removed from what I was interested in, and I went on a quest to find more. In the early 80s, record shopping was not easy in St Albans. If finding the information was relatively simple, via John Peel's BBC radio shows or the *NME*, sourcing the actual product was another thing altogether. The local Our Price was useless, and the only independent store was about to close – but not before I managed to purchase some of the few interesting records in its selection: a dog-eared copy of the Cabaret Voltaire single "Seconds Too Late", a handful of Throbbing Gristle bootlegs, and, amazingly, Einstürzende Neubauten's double 7" *Kalte Sterne*.

By 1983, Cabaret Voltaire were signed to Virgin via Stevo's label Some Bizzare. There was a 12" produced by disco legend John Luongo, a shiny new album entitled *Crackdown*, and a sprinkling of live dates. On 20 August, they rolled into the City Hall in St Albans. It's safe to say that nothing as remotely experimental as Cabaret Voltaire had ever played there. A weekly programme of bad Heavy Metal and new wave no hopers was hitherto all the place had to offer, so I made my way there with great excitement. Of course, the turnout was low, with just a few oddballs from the local art school and several carloads of freaks on a day trip up from London.

Their show that night was a runthrough of the new album plus new tracks such as "The Dream Ticket" and "Product Patrol". A fine set, but it was the support act that got my attention. Apart from an unannounced, sparsely mutant set by Clint Ruin (aka Foetus) and Marc Almond, there was the curiously titled Cabaret Voltaire Video Show. The early 80s was full of people getting into video games and tackling this newfound technology, praising its liberating power. The label Doublevision, run by Cabs manager Paul Smith, created an outlet for video works by CTI (Chris & Cosey), Throbbing Gristle, 23 Skidoo, Cabaret Voltaire, film maker Pete Care and audio by The Hafler Trio, Lydia Lunch and Chakk, to name a few. The cover of *Crackdown* featured Kirk and Mallinder, now reduced to a duo, lugging some new video gear with the word 'portable' splashed across the recorder, despite it being excess baggage size.

Initial copies contained a bonus 12" featuring four outstanding tracks from the newly released VHS tape, *Doublevision Presents Cabaret Voltaire*. This could just as well have been called *A Young Person's Guide To...*, as it included all the 'hits' from the Rough Trade period, interspersed with TV images of riots, religious rituals, footage of trips to Japan and general group activity.

At this gig, the video show support slot was essentially a presentation of the Doublevision catalogue, plus other curiosities, most of which turned up on the excellent VHS tape compilation *TV Wipeout*. An eclectic mix, where avant garde films by Chel White and Steve Binnion sat alongside a bilingual interview with David Bowie, some financial advice from Yello's Dieter Meier, The Fall's manager having a row with Factory boss Tony Wilson, and classic videos by Psychic TV, Test Dept, Renaldo & The Loaf and The Cabs. As well as one hour of blank tape to record whatever you wanted (of course, you could also record over the whole lot and have *three* hours of blank tape), extending the DIY aesthetic to video and television. In those days there was nothing like YouTube to instantly satisfy random curiosities. Such compilations and presentations were the only place to find an alternative to mainstream programming. For a brief period it seemed possible for independent companies to make their own television. Not that it lasted, as both industry and consumers opted for the blandness of the corporate MTV model. Although Cabaret Voltaire live in this period were not as pulverising as, say, Swans, or as genuinely anarchic as Neubauten, their shows carried a wealth of information for future use.

By 1985, the video presentations had been dropped, the visuals now serving as a backdrop to The Cabs' audio programme, which was drifting more towards the mainstream before they finally found true recognition as pioneers in the upcoming Ambient House scene. Paul Smith, meanwhile, was setting up a new imprint called Blast First as an outlet for New York group Sonic Youth, whom he brought over to headline a showcase gig at the ICA which also featured Boyd Rice & Frank Tovey, but that's another story... □ *Kindertotenlieder by KTL (aka Peter Rehberg & Stephen O'Malley) is out now on Editions Mego*