

JOY DIVISION INTERVIEW
BOB DICKINSON FOR NEW MANCHESTER REVIEW
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Bob Dickinson: Whereabouts and when did you first start up?

Ian Curtis: Two years ago. We started rehearsing in Salford, originally. It was quite a while before we got a drummer.

Stephen Morris: Well, several drummers.

IC: We went through a few during the first six or seven gigs we played, in between May 1977 when we played with Buzzcocks til about July. We had a couple of drummers. I think it was August that year that Steve joined, and we settled on the line-up that we've got now. That's when we really got started getting going really, we were feeling our way, really, none of us had ever played in a group before.

SM: We were just playing round here, in Manchester. The only one out of Manchester was that Penetration thing...

BD: Why did you want to start a band in the first place?

IC: Hard to say, really.

SM: But it was the time, the Pistols and everything, everybody was starting bands.

Peter Hook: Self-expression.

SM: Yeah. It was all part of the thing of the New Wave that the Pistols started, loads of bands spouting up, doing records by themselves. So that's how we started out just as a result of that.

IC: Like you say, self expression, saying what you wanted to say.

SM: It probably would have occurred later than that, but that was the impetus for doing it.

What sort of stuff were you listening to then?

IC: Lots of different things. We're all different. I think every one of us is.

PH: We still are.

IC: I still listen to Roxy. Personally, I don't find myself listening to a lot of the new groups. I think that goes with most of us.

Rob Gretton: I listen to all the new groups and I tell them how they compare.

IC: Barney's taste is more towards mine.

PH: I'd say they like virtually anything.

IC: I have listened to a lot of different kinds of music, cos I used to work in a record shop. Rare Records. I found at that time, this was about four or five years ago, I felt so bombarded that everything sounded rubbish in the end, but certain things stood out, and those certain things I started listening to I tended to divorce myself away from other things. I tended to pick things out which I really liked and not really move away from those. We're all different really, aren't we?

SM: When you listen to loads of music like that: I tell you one time I sat down and started playing someone's record collection, end to end, for about a week, this was a while ago and the only two items that stood out then were Highway 61 by Bob Dylan, and the other one was the first Hapshash and the Coloured Coat album.

PH: What's that?

SM: The first Hapshash and the Coloured Coat album, on red vinyl.

PH: Don't know that. (Laughs) What's the name of the group?

SM: Hapshash and the Coloured Coat. I'm not going to go on here with the history of Hapshash and the Coloured Coat for you. It was really weird music, not unlike that Pop Group thing, that stood out from the mish mash.

PH: Did it stand out because it was good or bad?

SM: No it stood out because it was red vinyl.

PH: You started off listening to a lot of jazz.

IC: Velvet Underground, stuff like that.

SM: You play all these records, and it just gets like a drone, but you put something like that on, and you'll listen to it, whether you like it or not, because it's something different. It grabs your attention.

IC: If I like a certain record, if someone is saying something, then I'll listen to all their records, whether their music is good or not. If there's any contradictions, I don't wanna know. I'll sort out myself what I think is right, and I'll listen to that and I'm not bothered about whether the music or anything is good about it. I know it's wrong really, but that's the way it is (laughs).

BD: So, how much is your varied attitudes to music is reflected in what you play?

IC: I think there's some things are bound to be reflected really. I think with us all the way we play, everything is done pretty individually anyway, the way the song's written and everything, everyone is bound to put a bit of something in.

SM: It's very subconscious though.

IC: It must be because I can see bits of things, but not as a whole. I see bits when I'm doing something, and I think that sounds like something. When it's a whole, when the song's finished, nothing grabs me at all. It's hard to say, but there must be something there.

SM: You do it without thinking, really. If you've listened to something and been impressed by it, at a later date when you come to do something it creeps out in another form, very slightly.

IC: The only thing that we do tend to pick up on is more the techniques and things. If you hear a particular drum sound on an LP, you think, that's a really good drum sound. It would fit in well with one of our songs, that would sound really good on that. Things like that, certain treatments of songs, the way the instruments are arranged. I think that's about all really.

BD: How much do you think your musical aims have altered in the last two years?

IC: In the first few months, we were just finding our way. Our musical aim was to just play, to just to get on a stage and play. After a few months of doing that, we started realising that that wasn't enough. There had to be something else, than just blindly going on, and going off. Then we started thinking seriously about what we were doing, and what we were aiming for. It altered when Steve joined.

PH: Got more jazz riffs.

SM: Initially, you're playing because of the buzz of getting up on a stage, and playing is something you've never done before. Then afterwards, you think, ahh you're playing music. What can you do with the music? I think it's along those lines, it's improving with the music. Initially, it's there and you're playing and it's good because you're playing but then you start thinking about what you're actually playing and you can improve it, change it. It was quite over a period of time, songs that were more melodic, and certainly slower - it seemed that after doing the songs that were on the first EP, people thought that was weird because slow. They thought that was weird because everybody was playing really fast stuff and if you came on and played something slow, slightly different, people wondered, why aren't they playing fast? Because it was taken for granted.

IC: We decided to play what we wanted to play, rather than thinking that's how we've got to play. We didn't really think when we first started, we didn't say of we wanted to be a carbon copy of the Sex Pistols, but that was the style. Our style was biased towards that, but we did it without thinking: if it had been in the 60s we might have played r'n'b, sort of thing because that was the music of the time. But after a few months, when we'd learned to play, we decided we'd play what we want.

BD: Recently in the press you've been categorised as "underground". When a journalist says that, he's giving his readership a choice, you have certain types of music you can choose from, here is another category you can choose from, press that button - how do you feel about that?

IC : It's like I say. I don't like it.

SM: It's sticking labels on things. It's funny though, the week before that, we were saying going on in the car, where have all the underground bands gone? There aren't any underground bands anymore, because like every band used to be underground. You don't get that now. The next thing you know, slap! another label.

That's a good label, haven't used that for a bit. Poinggg! This lot are "underground". You might as well Country and Western.

RG: I think he's right to an extent, though. He did use the word "underground", and now he's developed that a lot since then. He was just saying that he felt that all the bands that started out as the "New Wave" starting out to change everything and signed up. Mind you he did include Siouxsie and the Banshees in his "underground", and I would have thought they were "overground".

IC: and Public Image...

(Hooky starts pinging the ashtray: pings throughout)

RG: What he was saying about Public Image though, were fucking the record company about in such a way, maybe that's why the Banshees, they recognised that they still had control. What he was saying was that there were bands who weren't getting big write ups and getting record company interest who he felt were worthy, who were gigging and attracting an audience, without. I think it was just about the bands who were gigging and did have an audience, which wasn't necessarily recognised by the New Manchester Review or whatever. That's what he was saying and by saying that, his whole argument is out of the window, they're no longer underground he's bringing them overground. He's trying to build them up into another new movement which can then be knocked down.

IC: It strikes me as being like a very elitist thing. I remember when I first started buying records at about fifteen, then you'd get all these kids with dead long hair, all the underground and like Pink Floyd and all weird obscure groups, and if you didn't have long hair or a satin jacket with moonbeams on, you couldn't be into the underground music.

SM: It's the same reasoning that the people who smoke more dope were listening to West Coast. Unless it came from California it was no good.

RG: I think people are like that anyway. Music's all about snobbery. That's what that article in Melody Maker was about two weeks ago that I told you to read which none of you read. It was about Disco, I thought that was one of the best articles I'd ever read. It didn't look like it was an interesting article, but it was saying that people need to be told what to like, need to be told, right. A lot of people now - if they're told this is the hip thing to like, they'll like the opposite. They need people like Paul Morley either to follow or to go against.

IC: The thing is that when we first started, bar Buzzcocks and Slaughter and the Drones, the three first groups, we were the next group to get going. No-one had ever have us as part of anything then, we were never part of any Manchester movement, so I don't see why I should like being a part of anything now. I'd rather be away from it. I'd have felt more a part of something then with all the groups suddenly coming up and playing, but everyone ignored us.

SM: They were all one clique, and we were on the outside.

IC: I'd rather not be termed part of any other movement now. It seems pointless to me.

SM: It limits your growth. If you call something an underground band, and everybody thinks you're an underground band, it's an underground band forever, and you've got a hard job changing that. Say should you decide to play music that was more commercial, you're limited in what people think you are.

RG: It makes it easier for journalists to draw people into groups.

IC: People have called us Heavy Metal haven't they? Don't care though.

RG: They can call you Heavy Metal, as long as you don't start believing what they're saying is true. I think what Paul Morley said was quite valid, he was just saying that this was going on, but by saying that, maybe it destroys whatever underground there was by saying that. I suppose it's a journalist's decision. You see, hey, there's something underground happening here, and you want to tell everybody - that's what happened to New Wave, Punk groups, innit? Once journalists hooked onto it, it was built up and then destroyed. Or was it destroyed? You don't know which is the best way to do it, if it was ignored, or it had just died off.

SM: The music press certainly made a big mess of that when they tried to come up with "Power pop". They invented a category, and hoped bands would fall in line. Nobody wanted to know. What's this?

IC: That's another point against things like that, when you start labelling underground things, you get other groups changing and going oh, this is the new thing. We'll go weird. Coming on with synthesizers and god knows what (laughter). Groups do that don't they? When the new wave started you had a lot of cabaret groups jumping in.

RG: The whole business is run, as a business, on trends. The press pick up on trends, the punters pick up on trends, the bands pick up on trends. There wouldn't be any music otherwise, it would always be the same. I'm not saying there are such things as trends, but people like to believe there are. Fashions, trends, the whole life is are built around them, whether they're artificial or real.

BD: So if your music audience is as - I wouldn't say gullible, but they can turn either way towards you - what's your attitude towards them? Are you happy with an audience that could change its mind about you at any time?

IC: It's their choice, really, isn't it? We're determined to go our way. If people don't like it, that's fair enough. It's testing them really. It could come off, or couldn't. Whatever you play, it depends on how you do it. Certainly we've played to very bad audiences, and good audiences, with the same material.

SM: The worst reaction is no reaction at all. It's been said before, but a bad reaction is something: it shows that people are listening to you, you're getting across to them. If they're throwing bottles at you, there must be something there that they don't like, so they must have listened. If they just stare blankly at you, that's really disheartening, in a way. You could be playing anything, and they still stare blankly at you.

IC: We prefer to go our own way, we're not going to do anything just for the sake of it. We'll just play what we consider is good, and hope that people will take it as that. If they don't, there will always be some other people who will possibly like it.

SM: But all the while you've got the satisfaction of you creating something that you consider is good and that you enjoy playing and listening. If people don't like it, well you've enjoyed it. Most people enjoy it.

BD: How do you think going your own way, and not caring about whatever's going on elsewhere, how much could that amount to putting a shell around you? Is it secretive?

IC: I don't think so. When I say we're going our own way, we're not saying we want to be really obscure. It's just developing in a certain style, I think, it does seem to be accessible to people.

SM: You can't isolate yourself from what's going on, you'd be very naive to believe you can be on your own totally, and that nothing else will influence you in any way. You've got to, in being aware of them, you can decide what's good and what's bad.

IC: We're never going to force people. You get some groups that will say, this is what we're saying, and this is the only way, and this is right. I don't think you can do that. You've got to give people a choice, let them make their own minds up. We're certainly not going to try and force anything or the other way, just being carefree about it. We hope the ideas that we're presenting and the way we present it people can grasp hold of them if they want to.

SM: We believe that what we are playing is good or valid or whatever.

(Peter Hook pings the ashtray)

PH: What do you mean by secretive? In what way do you mean secretive?

BD: Just a shell. I get the feeling that there is a shell around you sometimes that I can't penetrate somehow...or maybe I'm reacting to how other people think of you.

RG: If you're taking so much notice of what other people think of you, you'll never gonna get anything done. People have always had a very low opinion of the band anyway, so it doesn't really matter. Do you mean other people, being the audience, or other people being the Manchester music scene?

BD: I don't mean the Manchester music scene.

RG: In what way secretive? Apart from the fact that Ian sometimes turns his back on the audience?

BD: Well, I went to see you play a couple of weeks ago at the Russell Club, it was just after that NME piece came out. So there was a proportion of people there who were coming to see the band because they'd just read about you.

PH: Or they'd come to see Cabaret Voltaire.

BD: And then there was another lot of people who I'd say would be dedicated fans from a long time back. They do exist! And then there's a proportion of the audience that were just there because that's where they go every Friday night, or whatever.

They all stood at the back, and they were all drinking and talking and taking no notice. At the front, the people who came to see you because they'd read about you, or because they liked you, and the fans, they were all in the front, and there was a bit of a vacuum in the middle. What I noticed is that nobody wanted to look at each other, and there seemed to be a bit of an underlying conflict in the audience. A three-way conflict.

(Pause)

RG: You think that the band contributed to this conflict?

BD: Yeah what I'm trying to suggest is that maybe that's an effect that you're trying to create.

PH: How would you create something like that?

BD: By doing what you do. I'm not criticising it, I think it's good, but I'm wondering if you're doing that, and how.

PH: I'd just like to know how we create it.

RG: Alienating the audience? For what I would say - and I'm not in the band, I'm in the audience - I'd say is that they just play regardless of the audience. That's what I was saying before, if you take any notice the audience - well you do notice the audience but they're not noticing them that much, they're just playing for themselves. For instance, that's why Ian doesn't speak much, because that's contrived. I think that bands that go and say, evening all, evening, how are you, all right, OK, wall-ey! and all that, that's the contrived part. They just go on and play.

IC: I think you could be right, to some extent. Some of the stuff we do is testing the audience. Testing the reactions. A lot of people don't know how to take it, like you say, they just don't know how to react. No-one's told them how to react.

BG: Perhaps it's just not alienation, indifference. They might all just be nodding off.

IC: I don't know. You can tell what the audience is like. You can tell if it is totally indifferent, you can feel the indifference.