

## CHAPTER 7

# Synthpop: into the digital age

### An overview of the genre

In this chapter, we are adopting the term synthpop to deal with an era (around 1979–84) and style of music known by several other names. A more widely employed term in pop historiography has been ‘New Romantic’, but this is too narrowly focused on clothing and fashion, and was, as is ever the case, disowned by almost all those supposedly part of the musical ‘movement’. The term New Romantic is more usefully employed to describe the club scene, subculture and fashion associated with certain elements of early 1980s’ music in Britain. Other terms used to describe this genre included ‘futurist’ and ‘peacock punk’ (see Rimmer 2003). As well as its evident connections to early twentieth-century art and radical values, futurist carried more elitist connotations. It is certainly ironic that the Italian-in-origin futurist art movement was a reaction to the alleged sentimentalism of the original Romantics (see Lista 2001). Dave Gahan commented that Depeche Mode

were Futurists because we were involved with people who wanted to be individual. The New Romantic thing meant people all looking the same, however flamboyantly. Futurists were an extension from punk. That was our following at the time. (Quoted in Malins 2001: 24–5)

The term ‘New Pop’ was also used to describe many of the bands studied in this chapter. However, while ‘futurist’ was seen to be a kind of technological punk, ‘New Pop’ was often defined according to its opposition to more seemingly credible genres such as punk. As former *Smash Hits* journalist Dave Rimmer suggests:

The New Pop isn’t rebellious. It embraces the star system. It conflates art, business and entertainment. It cares more about sales and royalties and the strength of the dollar than anything else and . . . it isn’t the least bit guilty about it. (Rimmer 1985: 13)

The term 'new musick' (most associated with the journalist Jon Savage) was also used to describe some of the music examined below. However, whereas our term synthpop crosses the high/low cultural divide, Savage specifically developed the term 'new musick' to describe a post-punk move into experimentation, avant-gardism and a more synthetic and mythically European sound (noted as early as November 1977 – see Savage 1977).

Our term synthpop, while not 'value-free', can be employed to transcend many of the other terms' limitations. In particular, it can cover the wide terrain between groups such as Adam and the Ants, who made little use of synthesiser technology but whose post-punk style was both resolutely pop and populist, and Cabaret Voltaire, who used synthesiser technology in an avant-garde 'industrial' style (and therefore achieved high credibility and low sales). Somewhere between the two is New Order, who despite massive success with their single *Blue Monday*, never fully capitalised on their popularity, at least partly due to the esoteric business practices of their label Factory Records.

The influences of punk rock, glam rock, synthesiser technology, disco and the Germanic ambience of groups such as Can and Kraftwerk, and of David Bowie in his 'Berlin' period (1976–7), were all crucial components in the construction of synthpop. By the height of the punk era, relatively cheap synthesisers and sequencers had infiltrated the pop landscape sufficiently for them to be considered a viable alternative to more traditional instruments. Synthesiser-based music from artists as diverse as Jean-Michel Jarre, Donna Summer (LaDonna Andrea Gaines) and Kraftwerk had made inroads into the British singles charts, and groups such as The Human League and Ultravox were releasing their first work. Tubeway Army's (Gary Webb, a.k.a. Gary Numan) *Are 'Friends' Electric?* was a chart-topping UK single in 1979 and gave synthpop its first 'teen idol' (cf. Savage 1979).

The more theatrical and flamboyant side of punk encouraged a small group of London-based 'style victims' to congregate around mostly gay clubs such as Bangs, Louise's, Chaguarama's and the Global Village in the late 1970s. In 1980, scene entrepreneurs and prime movers such as Steve Strange (Steven Harrington), Rusty Egan and Robert Elms began to fashion their own 'Bowie Nights' or 'Heroes Nights' at Billy's and later the Blitz (Rimmer 1985: 30–1). This was a club-based scene based on recordings. However, by the summer of 1980 performing groups such as Spandau Ballet and Duran Duran were beginning to tour and garner publicity in the British pop and newly-formed style press (magazines such as *The Face* and *i-D* that looked as much at the newly termed 'lifestyle' as they did at its musical accompaniment).

By 1981, a host of acts connected to a synthpop sound had tasted chart success, including Depeche Mode, Visage, Orchestral Manoeuvres in the Dark, Ultravox and the 'market leaders' Spandau Ballet and Duran Duran. These were followed by the likes of Japan, Soft Cell, Culture Club, Eurythmics, and Blancmange. As with any genre, the music was diverse but was characterised by a broad set of shared values that eschewed rock playing styles, rhythms and structures, and implied 'feelings'. The rock aesthetic was replaced by synthetic textures often redolent of alienation, 'European-ness' and a robotic rigidity that was as much to do with the limitations of the new technology as any formulated artistic credo. For Savage, the sound and credo was 'the reaction to the cardboard cut-out that punk had become. Glamour replaces grubbiness' (Savage 1995).

By around 1984, many of the biggest names had moved on from synthpop and its rather rigid musical constraints. Others simply entered the commercial pop mainstream. More sophisticated instruments and techniques removed some of the amateurish 'rough edges' from the songs and sounds, and in the wider world of popular music there was something of a critical backlash against the flamboyance and self-conscious artifice of the style, which Savage named 'the New Authenticity' (Savage 1985). This can be seen in the success of performers such as Bruce Springsteen and Bryan Adams, and events such as 1985's Live Aid. Thanks to music video and dedicated channels such as MTV, the synthpop sound – a largely British phenomenon – did provide a platform for worldwide success for some acts, many of whom, paradoxically, ended up as stadium-rock successes.

For a style much vilified, synthpop gave the atrophying post-punk scene a much needed jolt. As well as popularising new instruments and production techniques, it encouraged 'non-musicians' to create in much the same manner that punk had. Gary Numan referred to himself as little more than 'an arranger of noises' (Malins 2001: 5). Its strict dancefloor beats can also be seen as a step towards the eventual partial hegemony of dance in the 1990s, although many would argue that synthpop did not eschew melody or personality to the same extent in its quest for success.

### Historical roots and antecedents

As indicated in our overview, the roots of synthpop were diverse. The initial musical impetus for synthesiser music lay in the avant-garde or neoclassical work of composers such as Walter (Wendy) Carlos, Steve Reich and the *musique concrète* of Pierre Schaeffer, or from institutions

such as the BBC. Within the popular music field, the synthesiser's exclusivity and expense excluded it from all but a handful of artists until the early 1970s. By the middle of that decade, synthesiser use was infiltrating mainstream pop. Many synthpop musicians drew upon the work of Roxy Music's Brian Eno, a truly ground-breaking conceptual artist more interested in ambience than chord progressions. The Roxy Music influence also encompassed the clothing style of lead singer Bryan Ferry. Sequencers, featuring a programmable memory that could playback, mix sounds and adjust tempo, had also made their appearance on works such as The Who's *Who's Next* and Pink Floyd's *Dark Side Of The Moon*. In particular, *On The Run*, from the latter work, can be seen as a blueprint for subsequent genres such as synthpop and techno. Drum machines and electronic drum kits had also begun to be employed in popular music, in genres as diverse as funk (Sly and the Family Stone's *There's A Riot Goin' On*), progressive rock (Kingdom Come's *Journey*), and proto-techno (Suicide's eponymous debut album and Kraftwerk's 1970s' output). The possibilities and limitations of all these new technologies at least partially determined the structure and feel of much synthpop.

In many ways, synthpop's immediate predecessor punk rock was a major influence on the genre, but only in the sense that synthpop was a reaction to, rather than a continuation of, punk rock. Punk's DIY ideology did not encompass the use of synthesising technology (a reaction against its dominance in progressive rock), preferring to believe that the roughly played and untuned guitar was the most authentic 'voice' of musical alienation. Peter York would certainly agree, suggesting that the reasoning behind New Romantic's fetishism of synthesising technology was as a reaction to the 'modern Luddism' and 'formalized primitivism' of punk rock, which was itself a reaction against 'the boring pretensions' of keyboard-based progressive rock (York 1980: 164). A further crucial difference between punk rock and synthpop was that musicians working in the latter field had little of the 'authenticist' snobbery of the rock world. Indeed, many revelled in the seemingly artificial nature of synthesisers. The Human League adopted a strict 'synthesisers only' rule in their early days to avoid 'musicians' taking control away from them (Rimmer 1985: 18).

The so-called foundations of popular music, be they jazz, blues, folk or soul, had little influence upon the synthpop genre. Instead, critically derided forms such as disco and glam rock provided much of the blueprint for synthpop, summed up as using 'modern-sounding electronic instruments to play good old-fashioned pop songs' (Rimmer 1985: 55).

With these forms, synthpop shared an interest in accessibility, dance beats and melody, filtered through the possibilities offered by new sounds and textures. A figure such as David Bowie, one of very few musicians to garner both widespread artistic credibility and commercial fame in the 1970s, was crucial to the synthpop scene, with musicians such as Gary Numan, Gary Kemp of Spandau Ballet, John Foxx (Dennis Leigh) of Ultravox and Duran Duran's Nick Rhodes (Nicholas Bates) evidently in his debt.

If Bowie was the principal British role model for synthpop, then the debt owed to Kraftwerk cannot be overlooked. From avant-garde beginnings, the group honed and minimalised their sound by the time of their commercial breakthrough with *Autobahn* in 1975. This album, along with *Trans Europe Express* and *The Man Machine*, alerted musicians to the opportunities made available by technologies that were very rudimentary by later standards. In particular, Bowie's work on *Low* and *Heroes* adds a sheen of visual appeal and accessibility to the somewhat foreboding appearance and delivery of Kraftwerk.

The final major contribution to synthpop lay in the ground-breaking Euro-disco sound popularised most effectively by Donna Summer and her producers/writers Giorgio Moroder and Pete Bellotte. By fusing 'soul diva' vocals with a backing track built upon a combination of synthetic and traditional instruments (albeit played as though by machines), this team of musicians operating in the unlikely setting of a studio in Munich achieved huge commercial and critical success with tracks such as *I Feel Love*. The rigid 4 : 4 drive of the disco beat fuelled most synthpop tracks and its huge legacy remains widespread to this day. More conventional soul/disco acts such as Chic also influenced synthpop. A track such as Duran Duran's *Careless Memories* is a classic hybrid of Euro-disco, new wave guitar pop and Bowie/Kraftwerk, topped off with the teen appeal imagery and classic song structure and melody of commercial pop.

### Social and political context

The synthpop scene occurred shortly after the transformation of punk rock into the more marketable 'new wave'. New wave still shared a common set of values with its progenitor based around aggression, authenticity and the power of rock as an agent of social change. In spring 1979, at the height of popularity for new wave, Britain returned the Conservatives to power after a five-year absence, and in doing so elected Britain's first female Prime Minister, Margaret Thatcher. The effects of the Conservative Party's shift to the right were soon seen with a marked

increase in unemployment and the development of a significant polarisation in both society and politics.

Unlike the contemporaneous movement based around a British ska revival (as epitomised by The Specials and their 2-Tone record label), synthpop chose not to deal explicitly with the continuing social issues of high unemployment, the decline of traditional industries and a burgeoning revival in right-wing politics, and instead chose flamboyance, overt commercialism and escapism as its central tenets. As such, synthpop was seen as a reaction against the perceived greyness of British culture and the visual and stylistic straightjacket of punk. The greyness of British culture was itself seen as an effect of the slow collapse of the postwar settlement. With Thatcherism's clean break from consensus politics, we therefore have what those on the right wing of British politics saw as a 'brave new world' of individualism, entrepreneurialism, consumerism and self-reliance.

The new decade saw elements of youth culture self-consciously embrace the new consumerism in order to gain success. 'Style' became a transcending signifier, aided by the shift in music journalism from the weekly 'inkies' (*New Musical Express*, *Sounds*, *Melody Maker*) to the recently established fortnightly or monthly 'glossies' (*The Face*, *i-D*, *Smash Hits*). Concepts such as design, marketing and image became central to the star-making machinery. There was nothing altogether new in this process, but they now became more overt, blatant and significant elements. After the monochrome blacks and greys of punk/new wave, synthpop was promoted by a youth media interested in people who wanted to be pop stars, such as Boy George and Adam Ant, and who 'looked good in colour: Numan . . . Toyah' (Rimmer 1985: 19).

Synthpop's focus on fashion and individualism, along with its new business-friendly approach, would have been anathema to the previous punk generation. This led certain commentators to suggest that whereas punk was oppositional, synthpop fitted neatly into the new political discourse formed by Thatcherism. This can be seen most clearly with the career of Gary Numan. Numan's career was kick-started by his parents, who invested their savings to enable him to develop a career. Numan, an avowed Conservative, also employed various members of his family to complete 'backroom' tasks (mirroring Thatcherism's 'family values') while investing the profits from his hits in a variety of different business ventures. As Numan stated in 1979, 'originally I wanted to be famous like I wanted to breathe, now I just want to be rich' (quoted in Rimmer 1985: 18–19).

In many respects, this 'artist as entrepreneur' figure was also seen in a variety of early 1980s' pop bands, including ABC, Culture Club and

Spandau Ballet. Simon Reynolds cites ABC's Martin Fry as talking of 'choice and change and value – almost just a vision of better, more exciting and efficient consumer capitalist' (Reynolds 1985). Culture Club were equally entrepreneurialist. While Boy George (George O'Dowd) appeared to be the driving force behind the band, in many respects Culture Club's mid-1980s' reign was managed by band member Jon Moss, who is described by Dave Rimmer as 'an entrepreneur in the classic free enterprise mould; someone whose talent is in organizing the talent around him to make something happen' (Rimmer 1985: 76). At the height of Culture Club's success, Moss could be seen to be acting more as an entrepreneur rather than as a musician, and once suggested that 'we're not in the music business anymore. We're in the commodities business' (Rimmer 1985: 141). However, like Thatcherism, Moss' entrepreneurial politics were accompanied by a strong moral code that became prevalent in band interviews. This mixture of entrepreneurialism flavoured with moralism can also be seen in those artists of the mid-1980s who were avowedly anti-Thatcherite. For example, The Jam and The Style Council's Paul Weller also employed family members to run his musical business, and invested profits in his own Solid Bond Studios in London's desirable Marble Arch area. (Weller eventually sold the studio once The Style Council folded – see Ingham 2000.)

As is often the case, the ideological content of New Romantic synthpop was at its most powerful when it appeared to be apolitical. If we were to narrow the synthpop genre to the music of the New Romantics, this argument is strengthened greatly. The 1980s' style theorist Peter York went as far as suggesting that the New Romantics and the New Right were effectively opposite sides of the same coin (see York and Jennings 1995). These similarities are therefore worth exploring.

#### *New Right:*

- A 'radicalism' that rejected 1970s' 'strife'
- An individualism that rejected the 'statism' of the postwar settlement
- A focus on 'individuals and their families' rather than the class politics of the previous epoch
- Monetarism rather than Keynesianism
- Entrepreneurialism
- The creation of individual wealth.

#### *New Romantics:*

- A 'futurism' that rejected the 'grey' 1970s
- An individualism that rejected the 'conformism' of punk

- A focus on apolitical hedonism as a replacement for the political commitment of punk
- Business plans rather than gestural politics
- Entrepreneurialism
- The celebration of individual wealth.

The connection between Thatcherism and the New Romantics can be seen most clearly in the music and style of Spandau Ballet. The band formed their own record label and publishing company, but not to gain 'independence' as the punks did, but as part of a long-term strategy to sign a lucrative deal with a major label. Manager Steve Dagger, whose central role in the group was to make them successful, monitored the band's progress carefully. The designs of Spandau Ballet's records were carefully constructed to form a 'corporate identity'.<sup>1</sup> Even though Gary Kemp, the songwriting force behind the band, was always keen to emphasise his working-class credentials, this merely served to emphasise the connection to Thatcherism rather than disguise it. As Stuart Hall has noted, Thatcherism was equal parts populism and authoritarianism – a heady mix designed to appeal as much to the upwardly mobile working class as to so-called 'middle England' (see Hall 1980). One of the emblematic symbols of the period, the yuppie, was much in evidence in the New Romantic scene, and was immortalised in Spandau Ballet's song *Gold*, a near hymn to the power of individual wealth, with lyrics that valorised 'the man with the suit and the pace'.

While the individualism of synthpop remained dominant in the early 1980s, there were some signs in the mid-1980s that 'protest' music was about to return, albeit in a different form. Whereas a playful postmodern irony could be seen to be at work in synthpop, the return to 'authenticity' and protest was signalled by the 'political pop' of the mid-1980s (see Redhead 1990: 12–23). Acts such as The Style Council, Madness, Tom Robinson and Billy Bragg rallied around the Labour Party and on 21 November 1985 formed Red Wedge to campaign for a Labour Party victory at the next General Election. Equally, the famous Band Aid single of Christmas 1984 and Live Aid concert of 13 July 1985 signalled a return within popular music towards overt politics (as opposed to escapism) and a progressive lyrical message. What is also notable is that the music changed along with the lyrical message. Out went the 'inauthentic' synthesisers to be replaced by guitars, often the favoured instrument of the self-consciously politically aware. Even Gary Kemp retreated from both the formal electronic experimentation of early Spandau Ballet singles and the Thatcherism of *Gold* with his performance on an acoustic guitar

at various Red Wedge concerts. Steve Redhead also cites Paddy McAloon (Prefab Sprout), Roddy Frame (Aztec Camera) and Lloyd Cole (of Lloyd Cole and the Commotions) as being part of this return to the traditional 'protest singer with guitar' format (Redhead 1990: 16).

### The musical texts

While there were some notably high-selling synthpop albums, it was in the field of single releases that synthpop had most of its success. This section will therefore be dedicated to a textual analysis of ten key synthpop singles (listed in order of release). In doing this, we hope to draw a picture of the stylistic and formal conventions of the synthpop genre.

#### TUBEWAY ARMY (1979) *ARE 'FRIENDS' ELECTRIC?*

5 : 23, released May 1979, sixteen weeks on UK chart, spending four weeks at No. 1

The first synthpop hit. Starting with a distinctive four-bar pattern, featuring a sustained synthesiser, bass, and drums emphasising the second and fourth beats of the bar, the vocals for this track begin during the ninth bar. Interestingly, there are some offbeat elements to the rhythm, which is unexpected in a 'technologist' genre that would subsequently emphasise a perfectly sequenced crotchet beat. A further aspect to note is the remarkably slow tempo of this track (94 beats per minute), which, combined with the sustained synthesiser riff, lends a dirge-like quality. Typically self-referential, the song focuses upon the lyricist's (and narrator's) alienation from his former friends now that he is a *bone fide* pop star (see Savage 1979).

#### JAPAN (1980) *GENTLEMEN TAKE POLAROIDS*

3 : 28 [single edit], released October 1980, two weeks on UK chart, reaching No. 60

The first notable aspect of Japan's first hit is the use of oriental-sounding melodies submerged beneath a keyboard-driven arpeggio. Whereas most tracks within the genre draw upon a mythically European 'technological' sound, Japan's complex layered sound also draws upon 'Eastern' sources. This is accentuated by the track's use of a saxophone between the first chorus and second verse, and the use of a guitar solo between the second and third choruses on the seven-minute-long album version of the track.

VISAGE (1980) *FADE TO GREY*

3 : 54, released November 1980, fifteen weeks on UK chart, reaching No. 8

This track starts with four bars of indistinct electronic percussion with ambient 'padded' chords before the song's trademark sustained keyboard riff begins. From here on in, while there are some structural changes (for example alteration on bars nine and ten and a key change when the lyrics start), this synthesised riff remains a prominent feature of the track from beginning to end. Lyrically the track emphasises the individualism prominent in the New Romantic scene that Visage were a part of ('one man on a lonely platform'). Like *Are 'Friends' Electric?* the track also features spoken vocals (on the second and third choruses), but the use of French vocals and a female vocalist add a feeling of European sophistication to the track. One can surmise that the track enunciates an English suburbanite's dream for a more glamorous European existence.

ORCHESTRAL MANOEUVRES IN THE DARK (1980) *ENOLA GAY*

3 : 26, released November 1980, fifteen weeks on UK chart, reaching No. 8

Like *Fade To Grey*, *Enola Gay* begins with some light electronic percussion, but perhaps to jolt the listener the melody appears approximately halfway between the first and second beats of the second bar. For the next eight bars we have a strict crotchet beat, followed by a drum roll, which sounds somewhat 'rockist' when placed immediately before the next four bars of simple synthesised melody. It is at this point that the lyrics start, thirty seconds into the track. After a four-line first verse, the distinctive synthesised melody reappears for four bars before the second verse of four lines. The melody pattern is then repeated for eight bars, but there has been a key change and instrument change, away from the relative clarity of the original melody towards a more fuzzy and distorted synthesiser sound. A chorus follows this. Unlike the first two verses, which have an AABA format (where the last syllable of the first, second and fourth lines rhyme), the chorus has an AABB structure. Following this chorus (approximately two minutes into the track), the track breaks down to the percussion for four bars alongside a second less prominent melody that has featured earlier in the track. The dominant melody returns for four bars, prior to another AABA verse, which is immediately followed by two further choruses. The track ends with the same electronic percussion loop with which it began, accompanied by a sustained chord gradually decreasing in volume.

As a commentary on the American bombing of Hiroshima in World War Two (the *Enola Gay* was the name of the B-29 Superfortress plane that dropped the atomic bomb), this track is one of the few explicitly political synthpop tracks, although the precise nature of the political message of the track is not entirely clear.

HEAVEN 17 (1981) (*WE DON'T NEED THIS*) *FASCIST GROOVE THANG*

4 : 06, released March 1981, five weeks on UK chart, reaching No. 45

The synthpop/funk crossover. This track is recorded at a much higher tempo (146 beats per minute) than seen elsewhere in synthpop, although the emphasis on two beats of the bar make the track seem slower. Like *Gentlemen Take Polaroids*, this track makes use of an arpeggio, only here it is used to provide an almost percussive sound. Unlike *Enola Gay*, the politics of this track are far more explicit, with its direct accusation that Ronald Reagan (American President in the 1980s) held fascist views. In general, this track is an attempt to provide a warning regarding the rightward shift in Western politics in the early 1980s.

SOFT CELL (1981) *TAINTED LOVE*

3 : 44, released July 1981, sixteen weeks on UK chart, spending two weeks at No. 1

Like Eurythmics and Yazoo, Soft Cell conformed to the archetypal synthpop band make-up of flamboyant vocalist and esoteric keyboard player. While *Tainted Love* was originally recorded by Motown artist Gloria Jones in 1964, the poignancy of the song's lyrical content is merely emphasised here by the fact that Soft Cell vocalist Marc Almond was an 'out' homosexual man when the duo's version was released in 1981. Like the Heaven 17 track above, the fast tempo of this track (150 beats per minute) is hidden by an emphasis on alternate beats. This can be seen at the very beginning the track, where a kick drum knocks out a rigid crotchet beat, and where a snare is used to emphasise the second and fourth beats of the bar. However, like other synthpop tracks, the defining feature of *Tainted Love* is not its tempo, rhythm or percussion, but its trademark synthesised melody. Rather than the sustained notes of *Are 'Friends' Electric?* or *Fade To Grey*, this melody consists of a simple arrangement of distinctive keyboard stabs.

DEPECHE MODE (1981) *JUST CAN'T GET ENOUGH*

3 : 36, released September 1981, ten weeks on UK chart, reaching No. 8

Again, it is the distinctive nature of the keyboard melody of this track that is at the centre of its appeal, making the track instantly recognisable. Like much synthpop, innovation within *Just Can't Get Enough* is at the level of instrumentation rather than at the level of structure which remains relatively traditional. Lyrically simplistic ('just like a rainbow, you know you set me free'), the keyboard motif is enough to allow consideration of this track as a classic of the genre.

THE HUMAN LEAGUE (1981) *DON'T YOU WANT ME*

3 : 58, released November 1981, thirteen weeks on UK chart, spending five weeks at No. 1

Like *Fade To Grey* and *Are 'Friends' Electric?* The Human League's track also employs spoken lyrics, but the narrative intrigue of the track is provided by the fact that alternate verses are spoken by two separate narrators (one male, one female). The simple device of providing two separate perspectives on a universal romantic theme, set against the backdrop of boy meets girl in a cocktail bar, certainly led to its huge success. Again, the structure of the song is resolutely traditional (verse, two choruses, second verse, chorus repeated four times and fade). Electronic beats at 118 beats per minute knock out a simple crotchet beat, while a prominent synthesised bassline provides 'groove'.

EURHYTHMICS (1983) *SWEET DREAMS (ARE MADE OF THIS)*

3 : 34, released January 1983, fourteen weeks on UK chart, reaching No. 2

Again, a strict crotchet beat provides the bedrock of this track, with hi-hats or an emphasis on alternate beats being used at certain key points in the song. Stereo panning is also used to good effect. The song contains three identical verses, with variation provided by the rhythmic and melodic backdrop (for example during the final verse the rhythm is stripped down to a kick drum providing a simple crotchet beat). While the main vocals and the repetition of the single verse and chorus fit into synthpop's technological aesthetic of repetition, the backing vocals provide a hint that certain key players in the genre (including Eurythmics) would move away from synthpop's 'Europeanness', and return to a more traditional (and some would say Americanised) 'soulful' sound.

SPANDAU BALLET (1983) *GOLD*

3 : 50, released August 1983, nine weeks on UK chart, reaching No. 2

While not really a synthpop track, the inclusion of Spandau Ballet's *Gold* in this selection emphasises how many working within and around the synthpop genre retreated from austere electronic modernism, replacing it with a more traditional 'soulful' and 'funky' sound. Or, as Dave Rimmer puts it, 'after their first couple of hits, Spandau Ballet ditched numb Euro-disco electronics, which they'd never been very good at anyway, and set about trying to make a funk record' (Rimmer 1985: 54). In many respects this shift in Spandau Ballet's sound was part of a wider 'move back to "authenticity" after the self-conscious "play" of the New Pop era' (Redhead 1990: 14). While Redhead cites the more explicitly political elements of mid-to-late 1980s' pop, this move can also be detected in certain 1983 releases. In particular, Duran Duran made use of funk percussion on *Union Of The Snake*, and even arch-technologists The Human League drew back from electronic minimalism with the use of a synthesised brass sound on (*Keep Feeling*) *Fascination*.

Whereas the dominant sound of earlier Spandau Ballet tracks such as *Muscle Bound* was a slow, heavily reverbed, crotchet beat that emphasised the second and fourth beats in the bar (not unlike Soft Cell's *Tainted Love*, but at a much slower tempo), *Gold* draws back from this percussion-led minimalism, emphasising 'real' drumming. Equally, while early tracks such as *Muscle Bound* and *Chant No. 1 (I Don't Need This Pressure On)* featured spoken vocals, chants and group-sung lyrics that follow the rhythm, *Gold* is dominated by the bombastic vocal style of Tony Hadley. Furthermore, while earlier synthpop tracks more often than not ignored politics entirely, *Gold* is a clear espousal of unadulterated Thatcherism.

### Visual aesthetic

As suggested in the introduction, the term New Romantic was used to describe a particular club scene and fashion sensibility that came to be associated with synthpop bands in the late 1970s and early 1980s. With its playful flamboyance and individualism, New Romanticism was in many ways the sartorial expression of the synthpop aesthetic. This section will therefore focus upon the individualism inherent in the clothing styles of those members of the synthpop order who could most closely be labelled 'New Romantics' (Spandau Ballet, Duran Duran and Visage).

In emphasising the role of individuality in New Romanticism (itself drawn from the growing mood of neo-Thatcherite individualism prevalent in the late 1970s and early 1980s), we are necessarily downplaying the role of the fashion industry in constructing this style. As Peter York suggests, this is not surprising, as the late 1970s saw 'a crisis in the fashion

industry . . . The fact was that style *fragmentation* followed mass youth fashion in a sophisticated economy as inexorably as the call for devolution followed total planning' (York 1980: 11). Here York is suggesting that while the clothing industry clearly made a profit from the sale of clothes to young people in the late 1970s and early 1980s, it was no longer able to dictate (or even follow) rapid changes in youth style. This was because the linear (diachronic) progress of youth fashion had been so resolutely disrupted by punk (which was, in many ways, a form of 'anti-fashion' designed to disrupt conventional notions of fashionability). Following the immediate aftermath of punk, the 'grammatical repertoire' of youth style had been so disrupted that any item of clothing could be combined with any other, and this 'mix and match' aesthetic (a feature of postmodern cultures) had eroded the traditional paradigmatic choices and syntagmatic combinations of early youth fashions.<sup>2</sup> Or, as Peter York put it, 'the old laws are clearly being mucked about with something criminal' (York 1980: 42). York goes on to suggest that

The repertoire of teen style is now pretty much open to *anyone*. Above all, the jumble sale habit, once something that one never saw below the *Time Out* middle-class waterline of bohemia, has gone down to ordinary teenagers with a vengeance, and they're picking up the strangest things and changing the meanings of what they wear. (York 1980: 42-3)

New Romantic fashion can therefore be seen as both an extension of this aesthetic (in that it 'mixed and matched' a variety of different items of clothing) and a reaction to it (whereas the 'jumble sale habit' is inherently democratic, New Romantic clothing styles were elitist).

Within the mix and match aesthetic, there were dominant themes. One of these was 'gender bending', cross-dressing and the wearing of make-up for men. We can see examples of this style in Divine (Harris Milstead), The Human League's Phil Oakey, Culture Club's Boy George, New Romantic 'face' Marilyn (Peter Robinson), Duran Duran's Nick Rhodes, Japan, and Depeche Mode's Martin Gore. While Gary Numan also wore make-up, he avoided the New Romantic tag through adherence to a much more futurist look that also incorporated a leather jacket (rarely seen on New Romantics, presumably due to its 'rockist' connotations). Other 'frilly' and occasionally effeminate clothes were also worn by Adam Ant (Stuart Goddard), Spandau Ballet, and Visage's Steve Strange. Savage suggests that this focus in cross-dressing was part of a wider cultural interest, citing the film *Tootsie*, the television comedy characters *Hinge and Bracket* and 'a transvestite Prime Minister - Mrs Thatcher is more of a man than you'll



New Romantics. Glamorous looks for the post-punk era.

ever be' (Savage 1983). In a suitable reversal of this dominant trend in male pop star fashion, Eurythmics' singer Annie Lennox wore a particularly masculine pin-stripe suit for the *Sweet Dreams (Are Made of This)* video.

Other themes were taken from clothes worn by David Bowie in the 1970s (particularly the silver futurism of 'Ziggy Stardust' and the austere clothing of his Berlin period) and Bryan Ferry. With bands such as Spandau Ballet and Adam and the Ants we also see the entire band dressing up in themed clothing. Jon Savage dubbed Spandau Ballet's use of tartan as 'Culloden chic' (Savage 1981), while early New Pop band Adam and the Ants preferred pirate clothing, which briefly became popular.

As outlandish as the clothes and make-up were the haircuts. Whereas various members of Spandau Ballet, Japan, ABC and Duran Duran opted for bleached or dyed 'wedges' or 'mulletts', others such as The Human League's Phil Oakey, A Flock of Seagulls' Mike Score, and Depeche Mode/Yazoo's Vince Clarke went to ludicrous extremes in hairstyling.

Those synthpop artists who rejected the New Romantic clothing style nonetheless adopted a coherent 'look'. In particular, suits were remarkably prevalent. Kraftwerk, Heaven 17 and Ultravox wore suits and ties on the covers of *Trans Europe Express*, *Penthouse And Pavement* and *Vienna* respectively, while various members of The Human League, Duran Duran



and Orchestral Manoeuvres in the Dark also wore suits on promotional photographs. Dave Ball, the 'straight' (both sexually and sartorially) member of Soft Cell, also wore a suit on the cover of their *Non-Stop Erotic Cabaret* album, which contrasted with Marc Almond's leather jacket. Elsewhere, Almond wore more risqué clothing (such as black leather and arm bracelets during a *Top of the Pops* television performance) that emphasised his homosexuality. Despite his statement that 'I'm not into politics or making stands' (Savage 1982), this flaunting of gay fetish wear was an important statement in 1981. Also adopting the leather fetish look were Frankie Goes To Hollywood, who, along with their producer Trevor Horn, took up the mantle of synthesised music once the original early 1980s' synthpop acts had retreated into soulful pop.

Even when synthpop band members looked 'normal', this invariably reflected their position within, or the outlook of, the band. For example, contrasting with Phil Oakey's 'gender bending' make-up and haircut (allegedly styled on Veronica Lake), The Human League vocalists Susanne Sulley and Joanne Catherall adopted a restrained and traditionally feminine 'Saturday night' image. This merely emphasised the suggestion that Sulley and Catherall were 'ordinary' teenage girls plucked from the obscurity of a Sheffield nightclub by bandleader Oakey. Thus we have another example of how there is a homology between the central meaning of clothing styles and musical texts in the synthpop genre.

### Subsequent generic developments

As previously indicated, the basic nature of musical technology in the synthpop era partially determined the music produced. Synthesisers around 1981 were usually monophonic and featured a relatively small number of pre-set sounds. Drum machines were rudimentary and often did not allow for a programmable tempo setting. When Depeche Mode first recorded in 1980 they utilised a Dr Rhythm drum machine, basic analogue synths and an analogue sequencer. There was no polyphony and, as with punk rock, whole tracks were recorded and mixed in one day (Malins 2001: 22).

When performing live, groups such as The Human League and Orchestral Manoeuvres in the Dark (later abbreviated to OMD) were reliant upon backing tracks on tape, with all the inherent limitations implied. Indeed, when producing *Dare*, The Human League had entered the information in step-time into sequencing equipment rather than recording it in the accepted sense of the word. All of these dimensions encouraged the production of strict-tempo dance-beat pop tunes with an endearingly 'naive' feel and a narrow sound palette.

During the early to mid-1980s, technology improved rapidly, encompassing digital recording and instrumentation, sampling and polyphony. Perhaps more importantly, elements such as 'feel' and all the small variations in tempo and timbre previously associated with live playing were now programmable, resulting in a more lush, less robotic feel to synth-based music. In addition, traditional instrumentation began to augment rather than be totally superseded by newer sounds (Depeche Mode, The Human League). This resulted in a number of developments. It allowed The Human League to be totally assimilated into the pop mainstream, losing the last vestiges of their earlier experimental 'austerity' in the process, as tracks such as *The Lebanon* (1984) and *Human* (1986) demonstrate. Conversely, Depeche Mode, while remaining a Top 40 chart act, managed to develop a darker-textured sound based on the richer timbral opportunities made possible by a wider range of instruments and, crucially, new sampling technology. The textural and artistic leap between their first album *Speak and Spell* (1981) and *Construction Time Again* (1983) is immense. Subsequent albums, such as 1986's *Black Celebration*, 1987's *Music For The Masses*, and 1990's *Violator*, show a continuing 'darkening' of Depeche Mode's sound in their steady progress from synthpop to electro-goth.

For other acts such as the Eurythmics, the development was more retrogressive, resulting in something of a retreat from the minimalist and unsettling Euro beats of *Love Is A Stranger* (1982) and *Sweet Dreams* (1983) to the more comforting stadium-rock sound provided by *Would I Lie To You* (1985) and *Thorn In My Side* (1986). Other acts such as Duran Duran and Spandau Ballet honed their sound to embrace the pop mainstream more fully. This involved jettisoning the electronic-led melodies and percussion of their early singles in favour of a fuller, more traditional sound that foregrounded 'real' instruments such as pianos, drum kits and guitars.

Genres sometimes far removed from synthpop were heavily influenced by its rationale and techniques. Rap, in its earliest commercial manifestations, consisted of a musical backing track often lifted *verbatim* from a disco hit, as in the case of The Sugarhill Gang's *Rapper's Delight* containing the bassline from Chic's *Good Times*. However, the influence of synthpop and Kraftwerk heavily influenced the rap subgenre known as electro, which was hugely successful in the early 1980s, and has given us such classics as Afrika Bambaataa's *Planet Rock* and *Looking For The Perfect Beat*.

British soul and funk, hitherto discounted as inferior to the American model, utilised the synthetic textures of synthpop to some success. Acts such as Linx, Imagination and Junior Giscombe took British dance music

beyond the constraints of disco-influenced dance with a more contemporary sounding mix. Indeed, dance music as a whole was affected by synths and drum machines. Compare the disco hits of Shalamar, such as *That To The Bank*, with the crossover synth/dance textures of *Disappearing Act*, and the influence is very apparent.

The dancefloor opportunities inherent within sequencer and synth technology were made use of by a variety of acts in the early 1980s. The seemingly oppositional styles of funk ('hot') and synthpop ('cold') were brought into fruitful contact by acts such as A Certain Ratio and Heaven 17. Certainly, synthpop played its part in the rehabilitation of dance music for the 'mainstream' and 'specialist' audience, following the rigid demarcations set up between genres such as punk rock and disco. Dance genres such as house and, in particular, techno were also influenced hugely by synthpop. Seminal techno producers such as Derrick May and Juan Atkins have testified to its importance. Another American innovator Kevin Saunderson went as far as to term Depeche Mode's *Get The Balance Right* 'the first ever house record' (Malins 2001: 140). More recently, the European and New York 'electroclash' scenes, including acts such as Ladytron (see Chapter 10), have fashioned a sound that returns us to elements of the synthpop template. After years of breakbeat-based rap and jungle, highly syncopated house and music that features samples of 'real' instruments, the much-vilified 'robotic, cold' rhythms and timbres of the early 1980s, have been reappraised. Even a figure such as Gary Numan, in the past treated as almost a joke by the music press in the UK, finds tribute albums, renewed success and name-checking by the likes of Moby now commonplace.

### Notes

1. This was taken to ridiculous length by Heaven 17, who appeared in publicity shots wearing bowler hats, and carrying briefcases and copies of *The Financial Times* (see Rimmer 2003: 122).
2. In his book *Système de la Mode [The Fashion System]*, Roland Barthes analyses fashion as a system analogous with language. Within such an analysis, individual items of clothing are selected from a 'paradigm' of clothes and combined 'syntagmatically' so as to produce a coherent statement concerning the wearer and his or her social status (Barthes 1985). This type of analysis is particularly applicable to the study of New Romantic fashion, as the New Romantic mode of dressing involved a higher degree of individual choice and selection than previous youth styles.

### Recommended reading

- Buckley, D. (1999) *Strange Fascination: David Bowie, the Definitive Story*. London: Virgin.
- Cunningham, M. (1999) *Good Vibrations: A History of Record Production*. London: Sanctuary.
- Flur, W. (2000) *Kraftwerk: I Was a Robot*. London: Sanctuary.
- Malins, S. (2001) *Depeche Mode: A Biography*. London: André Deutsch.
- Prendergast, M. (2000) *The Ambient Century*. London: Bloomsbury.
- Rimmer, D. (1985) *Like Punk Never Happened: Culture Club and the New Pop*. London: Faber & Faber.
- Rimmer, D. (2003) *New Romantics: The Look*. London: Omnibus Press.
- Savage, J. (1997) *Time Travel: From the Sex Pistols to Nirvana: Pop, Media and Sexuality, 1977-96*. London: Vintage.
- Tamm, E. (1989) *Brian Eno, His Music and the Vertical Color of Sound*. London: Faber & Faber.
- York, P. (1980) *Style Wars*. London: Sidgwick & Jackson.
- York, P. and Jennings, C. (1995) *Peter York's Eighties*. London: BBC Books.

### Recommended listening

#### *Antecedents*

- Bowie, D. (1977) *Low*. RCA.
- Kraftwerk (1977) *Trans Europe Express*. EMI.
- Donna Summer (1977) *I Remember Yesterday*. Casablanca.
- Ultravox (1977) *Ha!Ha!Ha!* Island.

#### *Generic texts*

- Depeche Mode (1981) *Speak And Spell*. Mute.
- Duran Duran (1981) *Duran Duran*. EMI.
- Heaven 17 (1981) *Penthouse And Pavement*. Virgin.
- The Human League (1981) *Dare*. Virgin.
- Japan (1980) *Gentlemen Take Polaroids*. Virgin.
- Orchestral Manoeuvres in the Dark (1980) *Architecture And Morality*. Virgin.
- Tubeway Army (1979) *Replicas*. Beggar's Banquet.
- Soft Cell (1981) *Non-Stop Erotic Cabaret*. Some Bizarre.
- Spandau Ballet (1981) *Journeys To Glory*. Chrysalis.
- Various Artists (1981) *Some Bizarre*. Some Bizarre.

#### *Subsequent generic developments*

- Depeche Mode (1983) *Construction Time Again*. Mute.
- Ladytron (2001) *604*. Invicta Hi-Fi.
- Various Artists (1988) *Techno! - The New Dance Sound Of Detroit*. Virgin.