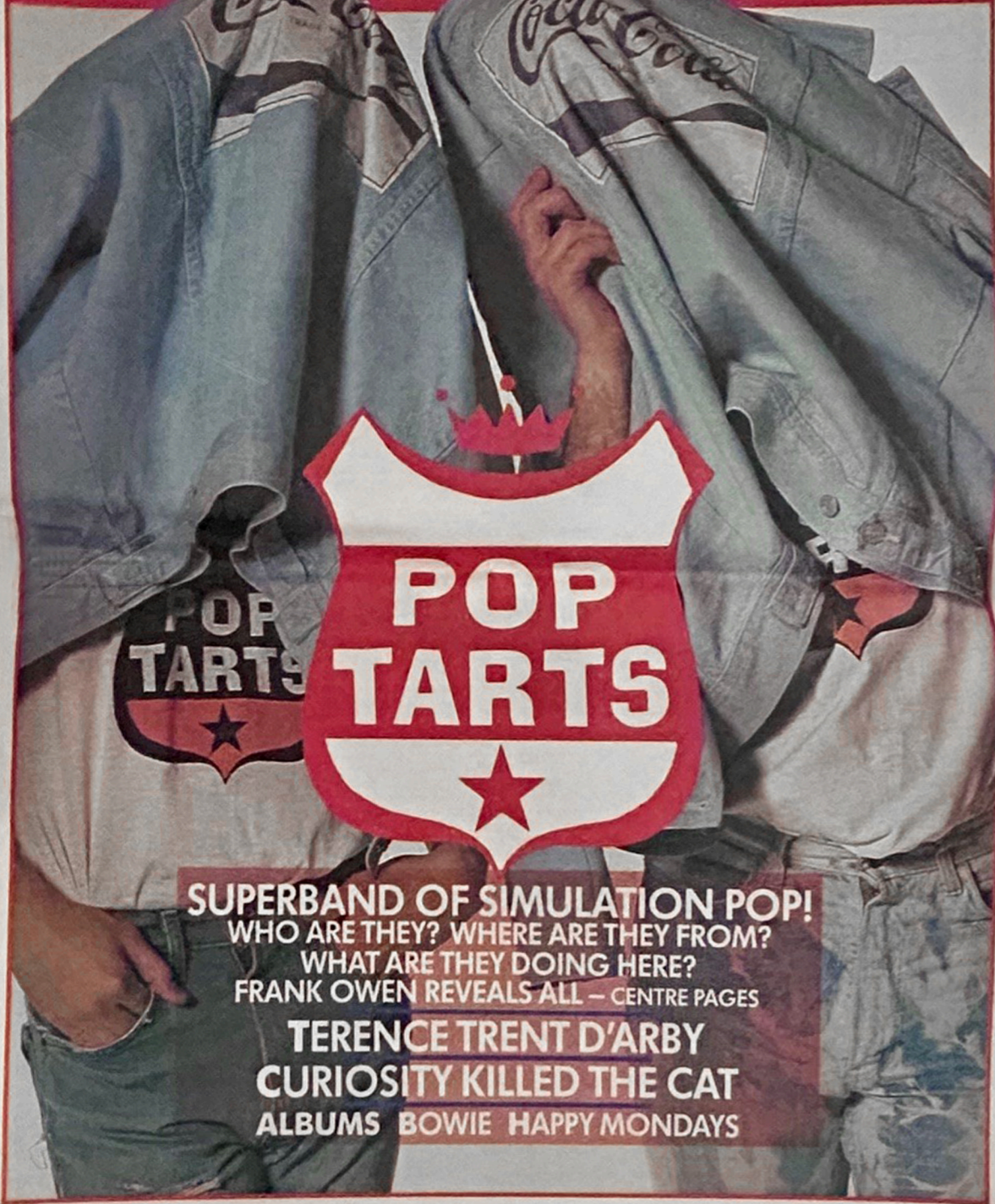


MELODY MAKER



POP TARTS

**SUPERBAND OF SIMULATION POP!
WHO ARE THEY? WHERE ARE THEY FROM?
WHAT ARE THEY DOING HERE?
FRANK OWEN REVEALS ALL — CENTRE PAGES**

**TERENCE TRENT D'ARBY
CURIOSITY KILLED THE CAT
ALBUMS BOWIE HAPPY MONDAYS**

POLES APART

FESTIVAL CARROT, DELIBERATELY NAMED TO AVOID POLITICAL SIGNIFICANCE, GATHERED TOGETHER SOME STRANGE INDIE NOMADS FROM THE WEST TO PLAY FOR THE PEOPLE OF WARSAW. SIMON REYNOLDS CROSSED THE IRON CURTAIN AND DISCOVERED THE CURSE AND LURE OF ONE-WAY TRAFFIC



Tom Dine



International Familia Radio Warsaw... and one for London, West



about the aggravations and quaintness that make Poland a mindblowing place to visit, but a dispiriting place to live. Things like queues — queues in the butchers (meat is rationed), queues for taxis. The eternity it can take to be served in a restaurant, only to find that many items are unavailable owing to shortages. I'm told how hardly anyone lives in detached houses, how it takes five years of scrimping and saving to be able to afford a car, and how the only way most people can get to work in the West for a while and bring back "hard currency".

I learn of the country's alcoholism problem (vodka is absurdly cheap), the spectre of national service that hangs over every young man's head, the political stalemate (popular discontent is exhausted), following the failure of Solidarity, but the government know it can only go so far — eg, as inflation worsens it will raise prices, there'll be strikes, it'll lower them again.

The Polish respond to these difficulties in various ways — humorous collective-depreciation, lugubrious stoicism, *manana* defeatism, gaiety. But the common response to the environment of drab containment seems to be a hunger for excitement and stimulation. Some find it in video glamour, some in dreams of America, others in Western alternative music (a kind of hypertextuality).

Festival Carrot, a unique celebration of this kind of music, is basically an attempt to make something happen, to triumph over environment.

FESTIVAL CARROT? LIBERON Petic, from avant garde outfit International Familia Radio Warszawa, was one of the people who dreamt up the idea of Festival Carrot. "We discussed the idea of an alternative festival with Nick Hobbs (singer and mainman of The Shrubbs and someone with lots of links with European bands) and with various Eastern European musicians. The initial idea was to have a series of festivals week after week in all the capitals of East Europe. But we soon realised this was impossible, it was becoming easier to get hold of Western music, to hear independent Polish bands on the radio, to play live. But cultural freedom existed before that too — there was alternative and punk music, clubs like Remont, and no one attempted to suppress these things."

Alma Art is the cultural wing of the Polish students' union, whose brief is find ways of entertaining the half-million students in the country. It runs some 40 clubs in Warsaw alone. The attraction of Festival Carrot was simply as something to do; it would also be possible to video the performances and show them in student clubs.

Everyone involved stresses the lack of an ideological aspect to the festival, even denying that there's any significance in the fact that, for the first time, Eastern and Western bands are playing together.

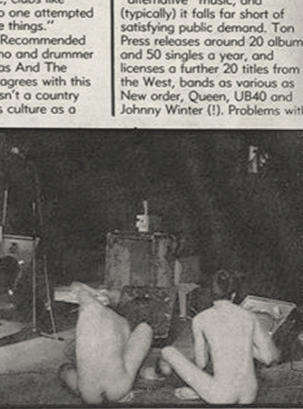
"The name 'Carrot' was especially chosen because it has no political resonance. It's a blank sign, an anti-symbol. Trouble is, people have surpassed even my expectations of their stupidity and have read all kinds of things into the word: carrot red, or carrot vitamin A

anarchy, avant garde, alternative... Fools!"

But, even if Festival Carrot isn't a gesture, doesn't the fact that it's happened in Poland now, in 1987, mean something, reflect some kind of political or cultural shift?

"Not really. Such a festival could have happened four years ago, it's just that no one thought to do it. There's been no recent opening or *glasnost* in Poland as there has been in Russia. The shift in Poland took place in the early Eighties — even as martial law was being eased, it was becoming easier to get hold of Western music, to hear independent Polish bands on the radio, to play live. But cultural freedom existed before that too — there was alternative and punk music, clubs like Remont, and no one attempted to suppress these things."

Chris Cutler, Recommended Records supreme and drummer in David Thomas And The Wooden Birds, agrees with this view: "Poland isn't a country which considers culture as a



Die Todliche Doris — This is brilliant!

manufacture (they have to get their records pressed in the USSR and covers printed in Czechoslovakia) mean that they can't profitably deal in small quantities — 50,000 is about the minimum. So a whole range of indie-type bands who might sell between 5,000 and 20,000 are not catered for. The extreme length of time it takes. Ton Press to bring out a record — six months minimum — is another factor that forces them to concentrate on established bands that sell steadily.

The result is that hipsters look to the black market. A Ton Press album costs around 600 zlotys. An original Western copy of that album bought on the black market in the six to eight months before Ton Press get it out in Poland would cost 5-8,000 zlotys. Set that against an average monthly salary of 20-25,000 zlotys and you can see the level of zealotry that animates Polish rock fans.

The other way music circulates is through a cassette-based barter economy. People buy black market LPs, tape them, sell the LP, tape-to-tape the copy and pass it on — ad infinitum. So the copy of Salt-N-Pepa's "Hot, Cool And Vicious" I gave a Russian journalist will be all over the Soviet Union within a matter of months. Bands that haven't had a record out yet also distribute their music via cassette. Walter Chelstowski, producer and independent studio owner: "You can get unknown bands, punk groups like Armia and Deserter who haven't been played on radio at all, who manage to fill venues all over the country. And the audiences will be singing the words to the songs... and that's all through hearing the music from cassettes."

Instruments also cost a fortune. A Fender Stratocaster costs around £2,500 — roughly five times the UK price. For most Eastern Europeans the choice is between having a car or having a guitar. A Yamaha DMY keyboard costs around \$1,000 — the equivalent of two years' wages. There are Czech and East German copies of Western instruments, but they're poor quality. Anyone serious will buy Western instruments on the black market.

You'd think these seemingly insurmountable odds — cost of equipment, unlikelihood of getting your music released — would deter people, crush them into apathy. If anything, it's the opposite. Compare the missionary zeal of Polish fans with the British situation, where a surfeit of choice has made us sated and blasé, where no effort is required either in acquiring pop or in making it.

Perhaps rock culture needs some sense of opposition, of barriers, if it's to thrive. In Poland, what groups and fans struggle against seems to be mainly economic circumstances and the lack of facilities, rather than authority. There is censorship to contend with — Lech Janerka's too overtly political "Constitution" was banned from the radio — but the fact that Ton Press were able to release this on Janerka's LP in the first place indicates a kind of cultural pluralism.

The three nights of Festival Carrot take place in Hala Gwardia, a large, rather decrepit sports hall in the centre of Warsaw. Wandering through the audience, I can detect no immediately apparent differences between Polish indie fans and their British counterparts — the Poles have got a pretty good grasp of the look. What is different about the event is its scale — you would never get a gathering of 3-4,000 people to see groups like David Thomas and The Shrubbs in Britain. The other differences are subtler and more sinister — the large number of policemen about, the absence of drink, the 30-foot cordoned-off moat between stage and audience.

Highlights. DIE TODLICHE DORIS were intermittently brilliant — I enjoyed their

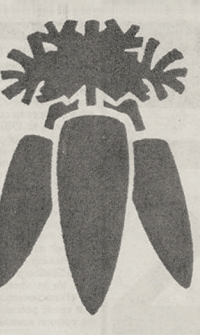
simultaneous translation "song", and the one in which the two boys cavort around in the nude. DAVID THOMAS AND THE WOODEN BIRDS rocked with a loopy kind of dynamism, and Thomas was received like a god. Pere Ubu were very big here. I particularly dug the locust-swarm keyboards. THE EX, Dutch anarchists, were an incendiary cross between Grass and Sonic Youth. INTERNATIONAL FAMILIA RADIO VARSAVA were great to look at — a stage-set like the Clangers, a performance that invites (an admittedly very lozy) comparison with The Residents — strident, abstract, utterly vacant gestures that signify nothing loudly and furiously, great suits, a giant spoon and fork that walk across the stage. "Music" that you wouldn't particularly want to take home and live with. Liberon tells me afterwards that normally they like to augment the multi-sensory overload by bombarding the audience with special Bulgarian and Rumanian perfumes.

Best of all, a real discovery, KAMPEC DOLORES — a kind of Hungarian shambling band, right down to the guitarist with little round specs and the thin girl in a frock on vocals. The basic sound is kind of Beat Happening crossed with Les Voix Mysteres des Bulgares, but luckily they don't have the unconscious rule system inhibitions of our shamblers, and switch without warning from a Velvets thrash to James Chance pig-in-abattoir saxophone weirdness. Incongruous! Their closing number is a masterpiece — a driving, exultant riff that suggests but never quite reaches U2 majesty, pierced by such dolorous, torn singing.

Low points. THE SHRUBBS, cold leftovers of Beehearts, flailing and flopping like the drown-out death throes of a fish out of water. MORTAL PRONCK — an aptly named abysmal Dutch instrumental rock group reminiscent of King Crimson. And two pitiful Soviet bands, only present, presumably, because the interesting underground bands would never get permission to leave the country. YELLOW POSTMEN were like the Lotus Eaters and elicited a peculiarly Polish response, according to my interpreter Piotr — ironically excessive applause, sarcastically dancing and even lighted matches held aloft during the ballads. TIME MACHINE, with their Young Generation-style dance troupe, provoked simple stark derision.

WHAT I heard at Festival Carrot reminded me of the modernist ferment of 1979 in Britain, that *last future of pop*. There are many reasons why East European independent music is still attached to ideas of experimentalism, where British indiepop is now mainly traditionalist or post-modern. One reason is that the cluster of nations around freeform/improvisation/breaking barriers/group democracy have a lot more resonance in a much more controlled society like Poland. Another is that Poland is probably even more saturated with bland Europop and MOR sentimentality than Britain — so it seems even more imperative to react against showbiz and tropes. The problem with the "alternative" is that so much effort goes into being *other* to conventional pop structures and responses that the result can be an excessive, at times unbearable idiosyncrasy, an onslaught of surprises and discontinuities.

Maybe I'm hostile to this kind of thing because it eludes criticism, maybe even language, it's difficult to justify (your instincts as to who's a charlatan and who's a genius). A lot of East European radical music is still thinking along the lines that Scritti Politti were in 1979 — deconstruction and demystification of pop. To



someone who's been through that phase and now appreciates that the mainstream can produce its own kind of strangeness and madness, a lot of the noises being made sound quaint and *no-déjà*.

Polish rock also seems very text-oriented — there's a didacticism which is probably highly salient in the Polish context, where certain things need to be said, but which makes me glad I don't understand the language. Walter Chelstowski: "It's very important to understand that the lyrics are not about love, but about political and social comment. You see, the people who write the lyrics are quicker and sharper than the censors, they speak between the lines. In fact, the presence of the censors has an unexpectedly beneficial side-effect, because it forces the lyricists to write better poetry. They are forced to say what they want to say through allusion and ambiguity and allegory."

PROSPECTS POP relations between West and East are pretty one way at the moment. We saturate them with our pop culture, they absorb it, sometimes imitate it. Nothing travels the other way. This applies pretty much to "alternative music" too. There are a number of East European bands who are capable of making honourable additions to Anglo-American defined genres — there's an excellent Polish hardcore band called Armia, some good goth (or as they call it — Cold Wave) groups, if you want them. And a group called Aya have made some pretty pop records, like the gorgeous yearn and swirl of "Nie Zostawie" ("The Headmaster Ritual" meets "Club Country").

What might produce a new sound is not a conscious effort to differ, or innovate, but some kind of accidental and creative failure, in the same way that The Kinks and The Rolling Stones tried to sound like Muddy Waters and, in their failing, produced something new. Maybe through struggling with something that's alien to them, something exotic fetched from afar, something they don't quite have the hang of yet, the East will produce something that's alien and exotic to us. Take a group like Kampec Dolores, a group that doesn't try too hard to be different, but is unmistakably stained by a lurid larynx...