

Print Run

New music books

Earnest amateurs or an art school provocation taken too far, **The Portsmouth Sinfonia** found success – and camaraderie – by embracing ineptitude. By **Abi Bliss**



John Farley with members of The Portsmouth Sinfonia outside Royal Albert Hall, London, 1974

The World's Worst: A Guide To The Portsmouth Sinfonia

Christopher M Reeves & Aaron Walker (Editors)

Sobercove Press Pbk 232 pp

One day in 1974, members of two acts representing the bright hopes of British pop disembarked the plane at Los Angeles International Airport, hoping to make an impression at the CBS Records corporate convention. Of those two, the wise money was on The Wombles.

Queuing behind songwriter and chief Womble Mike Batt and his wife Elizabeth as customs officers frisked their alter egos' furry suits for nonexistent drugs was Robin Mortimore, nominal leader of The Portsmouth Sinfonia. The young and distinctive orchestra's debut album had recently been a modest success for British independent label Transatlantic. But the music on *Portsmouth Sinfonia Plays The Popular Classics* stood apart from that of labelmates

such as Pentangle and Gerry Rafferty, or even the composers released through Transatlantic's UK distribution of Nonesuch.

As Mortimore wrote in the notes for the record's Australian rerelease: "Some pieces were just uniquely beautiful, as unaccustomed fingers struggled for notes, tempos varied considerably, and the conductor failed to begin or end a piece. Then maybe the next piece would be hilarious, as the orchestra attempted the majesty of Beethoven's *Fifth Symphony*. Then a piece might be so unrecognisable that the audience was left bewildered." The LP sank in the US; *Rolling Stone* magazine gave it a one-star review, then awarded it Comedy Album Of The Year.

The advent of the internet has revived Portsmouth Sinfonia's function as a musical punchline: an uncredited YouTube clip of its endearingly bathetic take on *Also Sprach Zarathustra* titled "2001 A Space



Superpowered Wavejumper warriors from *The Book Of Drexciya Vol 1*

The Drexciya Empire Presents The Book Of Drexciya Vol 1

Abdul Qadim Haqq, Dai Sato, Leo Rodrigues, Alan Oldman, Hector Rubilar, Leonardo Gondim, Daniel Oliveira & Milton Estevam

Tresor Hbk 76 pp

Inspired by comic books, Greek mythology and the Six Million Dollar Man, the paintings of Abdul Qadim Haqq reimaged Reagan era Detroit as a failed future state inhabited by armour-clad cyborgs – a sadly apt metaphor for the former Motor City. An encounter with producer Derrick May at the Centre for Creative Studies in 1989 led Haqq to design record covers for local techno labels like Transmat and Metroplex. By 1997, he was regularly

creating art for Underground Resistance, turning the ideas of 'Mad' Mike Banks and Drexciya's James Stinson into visual concepts. On the cover of *Interstellar Fugitives*, he represents Drexciya as an aquatic lifeform – a virus-like spore.

Stinson's studio was two blocks from Haqq's house, so he would visit and discuss Drexciya's black aquafuturist mythology, expand the cryptic messages scratched in the run-out grooves of their records, the arcane future-histories drip-fed in sleeve-note installments by the Unknown Writer. The pair would brainstorm, riff on bubble metropolises, squid-shaped underwater cruisers and aqua wormholes, Haqq translating Stinson's visions into the artwork for

Doug Smith (Farley); Leonardo Gondim/Jorge Cortes/Hector Rubilar

Odyssey Fail" has over 1.1 million views. Yet for its enthusiastic but often technically inept players, the joke was incidental. Conversely, framing the Sinfonia purely as an experimental music ensemble by virtue of its origins at Portsmouth College of Art and its many notable alumni – including Gavin Bryars, Michael Nyman, Steve Beresford, Simon Fisher Turner and Brian Eno – fails to capture the whole picture.

Expanded from the editors' 2015 zine *Classical Muddy*, *The World's Worst* wisely avoids such single-string interpretations. A marvellously polyphonic and fittingly dissonant tribute, it places contemporary sleeve notes, press cuttings and ephemera alongside accounts from some of those who picked up unfamiliar instruments, deciphered notation and tried their best to make, in the words of their marketing material, "rare and beautiful music".

The orchestra's formation came at a time when competing theories fuelled a revolution in British art schools, with teacher-student hierarchies challenged and fine art cast aside in favour of conceptual and multidisciplinary work. The 13 students who banded together with visiting lecturer in experimental music Gavin Bryars in May 1970 were already well versed in concepts of process, indeterminacy and anti-elitism from movements such as systems art and Fluxus, not to mention the prizing of failure by Cornelius Cardew, a regular visitor to Portsmouth.

Making their debut with Rossini's *William Tell Overture* at the college's Festival Of Light Entertainment, the Sinfonia then conquered Beethoven's *Fifth*, Greig's *In The Hall Of The Mountain King* and other hummable staples of amateur orchestra repertoire. Conductor John Farley excelled in the role thanks to his chiselled looks and flowing dark locks, emphatic gestures and complete lack of musical knowledge. Bryars left his post (although a continuing association saw Portsmouth Sinfonia share the programme with the premiere of *The Sinking Of The Titanic* in 1972) and was replaced by Cardew's Scratch Orchestra comrades Michael Parsons and John Tilbury. A 7" of *William Tell* was pressed to

promote the degree show; a baffled letter from the pressing plant reproduced here is a highlight.

Although Suzette Worden doesn't recall her fellow Portsmouth Sinfonia clarinettist Brian Eno attending many concerts overall, his membership from 1972–74 provided other benefits, from promotional oomph to studio time. The orchestra supported Roxy Music for Eno's last gig with the group; its string section sawed away on *Taking Tiger Mountain (By Strategy)*'s "Put A Straw Under Baby". There's disagreement here over the Sinfonia's founding principles, especially the oft-quoted rule that experienced musicians could only join if they switched to a new instrument. Yet all chime in harmony with Eno's embrace of creative accidents. Any such mistakes had to arise genuinely – fluffing your cue for laughs was severely frowned upon.

If Eno's association bestowed extra kudos, arch marketer Martin Lewis, then Transatlantic's 20 year old Special Projects Manager, engineered a more dramatic shift of context. Having successfully repackaged medieval folksters Gryphon as an acoustic prog outfit, he relished the challenge of broadening Portsmouth Sinfonia's audience, lining up humorous photo calls, mainstream TV slots and concerts in esteemed venues. Taking a twin-prong approach to taglines, official promotions trumpeted the "rare and beautiful music"; tabloids were lured by the promise of "the world's worst orchestra".

His strategy worked: by May 1974 the Sinfonia sold enough tickets for a respectable crowd at London's Royal Albert Hall. A few audience members – perhaps expecting renditions more akin to the venue's annual Proms – walked out, but those remaining were invited to join the choir for Handel's *Hallelujah Chorus*. Although many Portsmouth Sinfonia fans clearly appreciated the bum notes more than the democratisation of the canon, the orchestra avoided the role of parodists, winning over listeners with the same anarchic humour that Mortimore recalls led more serious avant garde critics to dismiss it as "frivolous". That said, an authentic audience voice is one notable absence from this otherwise comprehensive history.

The Albert Hall concert was the zenith: afterwards, the orchestra fell largely dormant until the end of the decade, when a smaller membership regrouped to record *20 Classic Rock Classics*, crafting mutated Muzak from "God Only Knows", "Apache" and "Uptown Top Ranking". Finally, 1981's disco handclaps-assisted medley "Classical Muddy" provided a fittingly shambolic coda.

The standard joke about Portsmouth Sinfonia goes that they had to stop because they were starting to become good. In reality, momentum was drained by the usual issues facing large amateur organisations of coordinating scattered members and competing demands upon time. And without addressing it directly, *The World's Worst* leaves plenty of space to ponder just how far Portsmouth Sinfonia really did differ from the myriad other hobbyists scraping and squeaking away in village halls minus the benefit of reading lists or well connected friends. Yet maybe the comparison should run the other way, with all such music making given greater credit than it receives for enriching the lives – and even occasionally the ears – of players and listeners alike. □



John Farley (right) with Brian Eno, 1973

Drexciya's 1999 album *Neptune's Lair*.

Sadly, Stinson died in 2002, but the techno mythos he co-created has grown Kraken-like into a vast, many tentacled beast. *The Book Of Drexciya* is its latest incarnation: a graphic novel crowdfunded on Indiegogo with Haqq as its visual custodian and the support of Gerald Donald, the surviving half of Drexciya. Half of the funds raised go to Stinson's family.

Set in 1553, the book's opening section tells how pregnant African women were callously thrown overboard from slave ships during the Middle Passage, their babies saved and nurtured by Atlantean sorceresses called the Sisters of the Abyss. Mentored by Dr

Blowfish – a cross between George Clinton's Funkenstein and Triton, the aquatic Inhuman dreamt up by Jack Kirby, co-creator of superhero The Black Panther – these water-breathing children grow up to become the warriors of an underwater super-civilisation called Drexciya.

Brazilian artist Milton Estevam turns in tight, post-Jim Lee line work, rendered in vivid subaquatic greens, blues and purples by colour artist Vinicius Townsend. In later chapters illustrated by Leonardo Gondim and Hector Rubilar, the young mutants liberate slave ships and face off against giant sea snakes. Transformed by the Black Wave of Lardossa into superpowered

Wavejumpers, the Drexciyans battle their belligerent arch enemies, the blue-skinned Darthouven Fish Men. On the surface, it's fun comic book fare, but dive deeper and *The Book Of Drexciya* becomes a work of breathtakingly bold optimism, a centuries-spanning tale of self-empowerment and hope. Atrocity and enslavement are transformed into liberty, agency and community. When one of the Sisters of the Abyss cries out, exhorting a black baby to "Resist! Live!", the story acquires more layers of tragic significance here in the era of #BlackLivesMatter and #ICantBreathe.

Black history is constantly erased or rewritten, and science fiction almost always privileges a white dystopia over a

black utopia. In order to survive, tales of black agency are forced to mutate, find new ways to be retold. They camouflage themselves as comic books and album cover art, become syncretic, use postcolonial currents to disperse their message down through the generations, replicate virally like Abdul Haqq's unnamed aquatic spore.

Drexciya is an idea, an act of radical deterritorialisation that re-engages black culture with the notion of futurity. It has removed itself from dry land – away from geophysical centres of white power – and resited itself in the immaterial, deep in the collective imagination of the Black Atlantic. Kek-W