



John Foxx

An interview with
'The Quiet Man' of
modern music

How did you go about writing and recording 'The Golden Section'?

When I come to do an album, I approach it as if it was a design project. 'Design' is a bit of a loaded word really because people tend to think of it as a very cold, unemotional process but it isn't really. If you think about it, every band designs the way they sound. They listen to all the music that's around them, incorporating the elements they like and rejecting the ones they don't.

Each of my albums has an overall design framework: each one has a basic 'feel', with each track being a variation on that feel. The difference with 'The Golden Section' is that the feel is less all-encompassing; the design concept is looser.

There's still an overall concept to the album though. What I tried to do was create my own version of pop music. I kind of imagined a jukebox in a place I'd never been to before - a country that was a sort of annex from the rest of the world. It's not necessarily a more commercial album than the others because I think my version of pop music is probably a bit odd anyway. I've simply tried to create something which is very slightly different to what is popular here. I tried to imagine a world that might have been. Something that might have existed if, say, I'd never done 'Metamatic' and The Beatles had never gone out of fashion.

You seem to have a continuing interest in music that most people find it convenient to ignore.

Yes, that's very true. One of the things that annoyed me when I first started working in music was the way most British and American musicians ignored European influences almost completely. There was absolutely no connection at all, and you could see that in the way that, say, Kraftwerk's music was almost totally ignored here at first. There were other things too like Fellini's film soundtracks, for instance. There are some beautiful melodies in those but that mode of music just didn't exist in this country at all.

Europe

When I left school I went hitch-hiking through Europe, and I was amazed at how different the local pop music was. A lot of the music on the jukeboxes was completely unlike anything I'd ever heard, because wherever you go, the local pop music is always influenced to a certain extent by traditional folk melodies and things. Actually I've pinched quite a few of my melodies from things I've found on European jukeboxes.

I'm also very interested in forms of music that have been neglected or forgotten. When I was working on 'The Golden Section' it occurred to me that everyone seemed to be using a vocabulary of American soul music, and I thought that was wrong. I'd much rather use things that are English, or at least European. I do feel English music is being a bit neglected now.

For instance, there are some things like 'Strawberry Fields Forever' which nobody has ever taken up and done anything with. I think it's one of the most original pieces of music to come out of England in recent years; as original as Kraftwerk's stuff was in Germany. It's very interesting in that it's one of the few records I can't find any precedent for. With most pieces of music, you can tell just by listening to it what sort of things have influenced the band, but I've got absolutely no idea where The Beatles got 'Strawberry Fields' from. Nobody's done anything remotely like it before or since.

In fact, there's a whole mode of working that was popular in the sixties that just isn't used nowadays. The problem is that a lot of people today just can't sing that sort of harmony vocal that The Beatles and The Yardbirds used to do, but I discovered when I was working in the studio that I could do it quite easily. 'Annexe' (from the 'Your Dress' double single) is quite an important track because it was really the first experiment with that sort of sixties sound. I

refined that feel gradually and that was how 'The Golden Section' began to take shape.

How long have you been using this 'design' approach?

I've always used it.

When I was at Art School I decided to design a band, because I felt most other bands were really archaic in their approach, and so I designed Ultravox. It's interesting that they're still adhering to the same basic design concept. They make a very conscious decision to reject the elements of music that are of no interest to them; they haven't really changed the mould they're working in.

'Endlessly'

I am beginning to turn away from the design thing, though. When I recorded 'Endlessly' for the first time, I did the whole thing in about two hours. It felt great at the time because I realised I'd rediscovered the art of doing things spontaneously. In the end of course I re-recorded it with a more modern feel to it, and it was the second version that ended up on the album, but it did teach me that it's possible to take the design process too far.

The same sort of thing happened with 'Your Dress'. I'd tried to record it a couple of times before but it just hadn't worked out. Then when I was working on 'The Golden Section' I recorded four songs in about eight days, and one of them was 'Your Dress'. I did all the vocals in two hours, with no retakes, and it sounded great. I realised that the reason it hadn't worked out before was that I'd been trying to construct things too much, instead of just leaving it to feel.

Moving back to an earlier period in your work, what caused the big change between your first two albums, 'Metamatic' and 'The Garden'?

When I did 'Metamatic', that was the only time I've consciously designed music in a very cold-edged way. It was a sort of reaction to the Ultravox days. I decided I didn't want anything more to do with rock 'n' roll; I just wanted it to be me and a few machines. At the time I was throwing almost everything away, so much so that I almost threw myself away in the process.

Electronics

I wanted 'Metamatic' to be the first all-electronic album, because I knew it would be. It was strange at the time because that sort of technology had been around for ages



but nobody in England had really taken it up, although Kraftwerk had been doing it in Germany for years, of course. I must admit they were light years ahead of me. As soon as I heard their music I knew instinctively that was what I wanted to do. I suppose it was a bit like when The Rolling Stones first heard Chuck Berry.

You've got to remember that 'Metamatic' isn't really a very high technology album. It was only the fact that I'd rejected acoustic instruments that set it apart from what everyone else was doing. Kraftwerk weren't really all that high-tech either, for that matter. Like me they were only using very basic synths and they only recorded on 8-track. The difference between them and me was that they had access to people who could take the instruments apart and modify them to suit their needs.

I remember at the time thinking that popular music was bound to go in that direction, bands using no acoustic instruments at all, and in the end of course it did. The only trouble was that by the time that sort of music had reached its zenith, I was already fed up with it. When I looked back on 'Metamatic', I was horrified. I thought 'it sounds like it was made by a bunch of robots'. It was really quite scary, because when you make an album, in a sense you become what you make. I suppose I was a bit like that for about six months — very cold and detached.

So I suppose 'The Garden' was a reaction to 'Metamatic' in the same way that 'Metamatic' was a reaction to Ultravox. I wanted to get back to a more natural sort of sound, so 'The Garden' turned out to be a much more humanistic, more pastoral album.

You mentioned pieces of music having precedents, but there are a few things on 'The Garden' which don't seem to have any precedent at all. 'Pater Noster' springs to mind.

Yes, that was interesting because at the time I was listening to Orff's 'Carmina Burana' and I was really struck by the sheer dynamics of it. I thought I'd love to do something with that sort of power myself, but at the time it seemed much too ambitious. Then one day I was messing about in the studio when I discovered this method of producing enormous choral sounds electronically. I was just using a cheap Roland vocoder and a couple of tape recorders, and I was amazed at the power of sound I could get. So I used it on 'Pater Noster' and on the album's title-track.

I was brought up a catholic, and I suppose I just absorbed the sounds of a church instinctively. It's not a religious thing at all. I think it's perfectly possible to be an atheist and still be impressed by the power of religious music.

But it did confuse people when I did 'Pater Noster', because a lot of people thought, 'Aha! John Foxx has suddenly become a catholic', which wasn't the case at all. All I'd done was use a particular form of music which I've always considered very beautiful. It was just another experiment using a particular mode of music.

Is everything you do an experiment?

In a sense, yes. I think you've got to be open to all different sorts of music. I never want to ignore any form of music. If I feel for something I'll try to incorporate it in what I do. So every time I hear something that I think is interesting or beautiful, I incorporate it in a new experiment.

Do you long for greater chart success?

Well, obviously it would be nice to sell more records, for lots of reasons. For instance, if I had a couple of big hits, I might earn enough money to make a movie, which is one of the things I'd really like to do. Also I

suppose it would be nice to get so many people to hear my music. On the other hand, I don't think I really need any of the other things rock stars seem to buy. I don't particularly want a castle in Spain or a hovercraft or anything.

Problems

The other thing to bear in mind is that there are problems with being so mainstream. People expect you to move very much in a straight line, for obvious reasons. I think one of the reasons why I don't reach that many sales is that I don't move in straight lines. You see, I get bored with things very quickly. 'Metamatic' was only ever intended to be one album because I knew I'd get bored with that sort of concept. In fact Ultravox as a band was only supposed to last one album, but it continued and became more interesting so I stuck with it until I got sick of it.

I think my music works well at its own level. At the moment it's great because I can do more or less what I want. There isn't really any pressure to conform to any particular set of rules. One of the things I like about the situation at the moment is that there are people who like my music all over the world. I get letters from Honolulu and Switzerland and Japan, and I think in a way that's nicer than selling a million in England and not being heard anywhere else at all.

Film Soundtracks

You did the soundtrack for Antonioni's 'Identification Of A Woman'. How did that come about?

I just got a call one day asking me if I'd like to do it, so I went to Italy and saw tiny fragments of the film with no dialogue. I remember going to this enormous cinema to see them. It was a bit like the ABC in Leicester Square except it only had three seats in it — right at the back. It took me about half an hour to walk from one end of it to the other. Anyway it looked quite interesting so I came back to Britain, recorded a few things and sent it off.

I must say the film wasn't all that important to me, it was just a good excuse to record a few things, and any excuse to record is fine by me. Also it was nice to go to Italy again and have a wander around. I like Italy a lot and go there as often as I can.

In the end I think Antonioni threw most of what I'd written away. The only things of mine that ended up on the finished film were a few atmospheres and things. But I'd certainly do that sort of thing again if I had the chance because it was very enjoyable. It gave me the chance to carry through one or two things I was working on at the time. When I get given something to do I don't go out of my way to create something specifically for a particular job, I just carry on with what I was doing beforehand.

You've also done quite a bit of writing. How important is that to you?

Well, it's something I like doing a lot. I've been writing a book — 'The Quiet Man' — for some time, and in fact I finished it quite a while ago and was going to put it out, but since then I've had some more ideas for it. I'm going to take my time over it because I'd rather get it absolutely right rather than rush it in a mad attempt to get it out. I will put it out eventually: it might be ten years from now, it might be six months, depending on when I think it's properly finished. I've published odd bits of it here and there. For instance there's an excerpt from it in 'Touch', the cassette magazine.

'Church' is a part of it too, isn't it?

Yes, that's right. 'Church' is more of a

novel thing than anything else. It's a bit like taking lots of pictures and then picking one and some of the things in the book have been taken with the first camera of The Beatles era ones I took myself.

There was one picture that had a man — part of it was overexposed and the other part was clear — I thought it looked great so I took one photo of each and put one on top of the other. And that's the front cover of 'Church'.

In a way it was that picture which gave me the idea for that particular piece of music, and to an extent I think it inspired me to write some of the music on 'The Garden'. I find what happens when my work is in a book, thing I do has an effect on everything else. I'm never really conscious of the way it works, but it's a continuous process that adds a sort of random element to the signing thing.

Instrumentals

Getting back to your music, have you ever been tempted to do any longer, instrumental pieces?

Oh yes. In fact I've got a whole album's worth of that sort of thing stored away on various master tapes. I try to avoid things that are too long because I think there's a danger of becoming too self-indulgent. I prefer to keep things shorter and more economical if I can, so that they're always just songs without vocals.

'Glimmer' (the B-side of 'No one Drying') was one of the first instrumental things I did. I'd been listening to a lot of Philip Glass, a lot of this systems music, but I found it rather boring to listen to, so I tried to make it more lyrical. That struck me as being something nobody else seemed interested in doing, and originally 'Glimmer' was going to be the first in a whole series of things, but unfortunately I never actually got round to doing them.

It was interesting because subsequently Philip Glass did become more lyrical himself, though I'm sure he never listened to anything I was doing. If you listen to 'Glassworks', that's probably the first thing he did



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that's got more than one tune in it. It's the first thing of his that hasn't made me want to go to sleep.

Actually I'm very much hoping I'll be able to put out an album of instrumentals at some stage. Again, I've released snippets of it to people like 'Touch', and it's still of interest to me even though some of the stuff is maybe three or four years old.

What instruments did you use on 'The Golden Section'?

All sorts of things. I've used an Emulator and a Fairlight. I hire instruments like that because it just isn't worth my while to buy them. The technology is changing so quickly you can easily find yourself with a £10,000 instrument that's almost completely useless.

I do buy smaller instruments though. I've got a Juno 60 which I think is wonderful. It's so flexible for the money it's almost ridiculous. It's got a very pure sound and you can get some great stereo effects on it too. It's the main keyboard I use at home now.

I've also been using a Jupiter 8, the Prophet, a couple of Moogs, and various different drum-machines – old Linns, new Linns, the TR-808. I do like Roland things because they're very practical, and they're also very cheap for what they can do.

The Japanese are very, very strong in the marketplace. They see the need for a particular product and they're able to fulfill that need very quickly. I've always tried to buy English things where possible (I've got an English AMEK desk at my studio), but I've found that if something goes wrong with

home products, there's often no way of fixing it yourself, and that's all down to bad design really. Obviously I've had problems with Japanese stuff too, but they tend to be easier to remedy. I think it's just that the Japanese seem to take design and marketing much more seriously than we do. They're better at backup, too.

The Garden

Why do you think your studio – The Garden – has proved so popular with other bands?

Well, I think part of the reason is that it was designed by a musician for musicians. For instance, the control room is very large, because it's meant for playing in as well as just sitting in. It means that if you're doing something like keyboard overdubs, you don't have to go into the main studio area to do them. Also, everything's light and airy because I don't like all this brown carpet that people put down everywhere, I think it's claustrophobic. A lot of people like the acoustics, too: they were done by Andy Munro of Turnkey. I think he must be one of the best acousticians in the country now.

The thing about The Garden is that it isn't full of lots of exotic equipment – it's really quite a basic set-up. What there is is of very high quality; usually the best available, in fact.

Back To Basics

How are you approaching playing live for the first time since Ultravox?

In a very basic way. I think playing live can be a very magical thing. It's really a unique thing that I don't ever want to lose or forget. A good gig is like a celebration, although in a sense it's just a case of people celebrating themselves rather than each other; the

audience and the band...

I'm not going to be using any tapes or videos or anything on stage because I want it to be a completely live thing rather than just a show. I want to retain as much feel as possible, which is off in a way because I was trying to eliminate feel for years. I'm just rediscovering things like guitars and playing live again and it's great. I feel like a kid again.

Around the time of 'Metamatic' I did feel the need to go out and play live, but there were just too many technical problems at that time. For instance, there were no reliable sequencers, no rhythm machines with separate outputs, no programmable synths... it would have been almost impossible to do it without using lots of other people, and I didn't want that then.

Now I've got a band of four people who are very good – very professional. They're just people I feel comfortable with. One of them is Robin Simon who played guitar on 'The Garden' and 'Systems Of Romance'. We'll be playing mostly music from the last two albums. There won't be any material from 'Metamatic' because as far as I'm concerned that's a past era now. We will be doing one or two of the things I wrote on 'Systems Of Romance' though.

In the future I'd like to do more and more touring, not just in this country but in Europe and Japan and maybe even the States. That market is beginning to open up more and more now. Also I'd like us to play in some more interesting venues. For this current tour we're sticking very much to established halls but later on I'd like to do some gigs in churches and things.

As for my music, I'm not really too sure where that's going to go. You'll just have to wait and see.

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