Genesis P-Orridge on destroying preconceptions

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As told to T. Cole Rachel, 2745 words.

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This year marks the 40th anniversary of the first proper Throbbing Gristle release, *The Second Annual Report*, which is often credited as the godfather of all "industrial" music and a sort of benchmark for experimental music in general. What can you say about the making of that record?

One of the things that made us excited to make that record was that we were fascinated with the stories of the "Cut Up" experiments that William Burroughs had been doing in Paris. We were thinking maybe that was a way that we could deconstruct music. I was so annoyed with music at that time. There was nothing we wanted to buy or listen to, so my approach is always if there's nothing I want, then I'll make something that I *would* want. And then you think, "What can it be?" In order to do something that seems new, you have to strip away everything that's traditional, take away all the things that give it its formula or its identity. So, for example, you get rid of the drummer because they always tend to do the same rhythms, and that locks down music into the same certain responses you've had since childhood.

You have to get everything that's normal and break it. And even then you still are at the mercy of having grown up thinking of music a particular way, and that's where the "cut ups" come in, because you can then break your own preconceptions and actually end up with new comprehensions that you would not have otherwise. At the time we actually rang up William Burroughs and said, "We want to make this musical project. What would you recommend as a cassette recorder to record on?" And he said, "A TDK something-something," which is what he'd been using in London, and so we bought that cassette recorder and put it on a table on the other side of our factory room and just started to jam. So it's basically that. The question was—how can this machine kill music? And what happens when you've done that, when you've murdered music, what's left? So that's how I see it. I still want to murder music.

Part of the mythology of your first record is that it was literally recorded on a cassette tape. It's nice knowing that something so revolutionary was actually created in such a simple way.

Yeah. All through 1975, we would meet at my house in Hackney and go to the studio space, which was a big empty room, it wasn't even a recording studio. We would build our own speakers and our own effects tables and then we would jam and record everything on this cassette player. It had a cheap condenser microphone, so it leveled everything out. Then we'd go home on Friday night and listen to what we'd done and if we liked something we'd plug it across to another cassette, and then on Saturday we would try and copy the cassette with our favorite bits. We did that every weekend for a year before we thought we were ready to try and recreate the sound in public.

What were all those initial shows like?

The first one was in the basement of an old building in Central London with very thick concrete walls. We set all our gear in one room and then closed the doors before we played, so you could only listen to it through the wall. That was the first one. It caused a lot of frustration, people were banging on the doors. *Why can't we come in and listen?* We were trying to make it be as if you were trapped in a city of the future and you were just mystified by these noises that were coming through the walls. The building itself was part of the piece.

We also played at the Architectural Association where they had a courtyard between these four buildings, so we built

a scaffolding cube with a platform and we put all of our PA speakers on the ground around it facing straight up. We go inside the cube, which we'd covered in tarp, and we had little cameras in there. Throughout the Architectural Association were these TV screens that we found that we could plug in to. So if you wanted to see us play, you had to be in the building, but then you couldn't hear anything. If you wanted to hear us play, you had to be on the roof and look down, and all you saw was a tarp wall and speakers. There was a riot. They threw toilets down at us. Smashed toilets and hurled them down!

It provided an interesting revelation, that people's desire to stay in a traditional situation of having to stand and look at the stage was a desire so ingrained that people would literally riot for the right to stare at you on stage. That's pretty weird. We had another show with mirrors in front of us, so people who wanted to listen could only see themselves. We once played behind a screen and they threw chairs at the screen, tried to push over the PA, and there was a big fight. To this day it doesn't really make sense to me that people are so addicted to seeing the making of the sound. Why does it matter? Why do you have to see it being done? But it's an addiction, and when we're breaking systems, you have to break all of them.

And after a while we just played other games. We always played first, even after we had a following Because the headliner's always played last, so we went first instead. We played this one gig where there were two thousand people, and we went on at 7:30—before the support acts—and we were out having cups of tea by 9:00 and there's still two hours of the show left. There's something really satisfying about that. But the fans knew, they worked it out, so the *real* fans would always come early, and the poseurs, as they used to be called, would come late.

Everything we do is always, "Oh, what are the preconceptions? And are there ways to break the preconceptions?" Because habits and formula and traditions, all of those ways that we feel comfortable, we wanted to do away with. We didn't want to be comfortable. We didn't feel comfortable. We felt very uneasy with the society that we were in and we didn't get any pleasure from the sonic information that we were receiving from other people, so we decided to look at that particular issue and change it.

Music was the most common medium for reaching the maximum amount of people, that was why we chose it. Not because we wanted to be musicians. To this day, I can't even play "Three Blind Mice" on an instrument. I still don't know how to tune a guitar right. Nor do we want to. So much of it had to do with random chance. Random chance is a boon to any artist. Chance should always be a part of the way you work, letting things happen that you don't expect.

In 1977, when you first released music into the world, people didn't immediately get it. What were the initial public reactions to what you were doing? And how did that influence you?

The reaction was somewhere between hate and bafflement, mainly. It was so odd, because we got these rave reviews from certain music journalist, but we couldn't find anyone in real life who liked it. We would get 30 people at a gig and be really happy. Mostly, it was "That's not music." That was the most common response. "How do you call that music? That's just noise." And I'd respond, that's what music is—noise. That's what it is. You make noises. You organize them a certain way and we don't, but it's all noises. That simple message was something that was really hard to get across.

Luckily, the journalists were so into it that they just kept writing about us and doing feature articles and saying that this new movement of industrial music was the next big thing. There was a big split in Britain between punk and what we called industrial. There was thing that was always quoted: "Learn three chords and form a band." So I wrote in and said, "Why learn *any* chords?" And that's the difference, right? Why learn any chords? As soon as you say you're learning chords, you've surrendered to tradition. We weren't trying to please anyone except ourselves, and if we were ourselves were confused by it, even better.

Somebody here was just playing "I.B.M." from *D.o.A: The Third and Final Report of Throbbing Gristle.* The sounds on that song are from a yellow plastic cassette that we found in the street near the gutter. We just picked it up and went "Oh, I wonder what's on that." It said "IBM" and it turned out that it was computer code. So we put it on our next album. Why not? Random chance. It sounded interesting. Suddenly anything and everything that can be recorded is your playground. It's no longer about chords and music and structures and keys and so on or harmony or whatever. Suddenly anything and everything that's ever been recorded could be included.

You are often credited with essentially inventing "industrial" music. What does that mean to you?

There’s an article in *NME* where they got us together with the Human League and a few of the other early people using machines and synthesizers in order to have a conversation about what industrial music actually was. I came across as really angry. I was like, “You’re all just using these sounds to make the same kinds of songs everyone was making before. Why are you just turning it back into a variation of what was done before? Can’t we let go of those structures? That’s not the way to come up with something new.”

So we despised most “industrial” music personally and just thought it was muddying the waters. It was the classic case of the commercial labels cashing in on something that it would ultimately mutate into a commercial venture. The fact that there’s still industrial music clubs and DJs and labels and bands worldwide speaks to the success of commerciality rather than the innovation of music.

It’s almost like having invented jazz or something, then years later that results in something like Kenny G. You think, “How did that come out of what we did?” It’s like that. So there’s all these different subgroups now, and they’re all valid if they’ve got reasons to exist. That’s the real question: What is the reason you’re doing it? Are you trying to tell us anything or are you just trying to make music? If you’re trying to make music, why? Is that to sell? Is that to get girls or boys or drugs or what? What’s the reason? And if it’s not about telling us something, preferably something you didn’t know before, then it’s not really worthwhile. It doesn’t mean you can always do something original, we just got lucky. It must have been in the air, you know? We were also just very stubborn.

How did your approach to making music change over time?

It changed a lot over time. To some degree we got more skilled. We could *almost* play the bass. Can’t do that now. Mainly it was better recordings. We did *20 Jazz Funk Greats* on Paul McCartney’s old 16-track that he let us borrow. We did everything on our own, but we did it through discussion. That’s how we came up with things. Discussion. Our main goal was: “Whatever we did last time, we have to do the opposite this time. We have to contradict ourselves.” That was the strategy, so that people’s expectations were, whenever possible, confounded. There’s stuff everywhere, there’s opportunity everywhere. The idea was to always change. There are stories everywhere, and you just grab them where you can.

Throbbing Gristle is considered deeply influential, but I’m sure it didn’t always feel that way. How does it feel to have your work be appreciated in the way that it is now?

It’s interesting. *Rolling Stone* never once reviewed us, but finally, this year, they credited us with one of the top 30 albums ever made. It’s nice to think that it’s appreciated. And if it can still inspire in any way, then that’s good. But it’s not something that we go and listen to now. That was 40 years ago, and god forbid that I was still interested in what I was doing 40 years ago. It would be awful to still be involved with it or attached to it in the same way. You’re supposed to move on, get new strategies, and change what you do and contradict what you did yesterday and look for new answers and new inspirations and sources and material. I don’t even necessarily feel I should have anything to do with music. Life is actually a completely open space with no expectations but the for the self. The best thing is to keep asking, “Is there anything that I feel compelled to say? And if I do, what is it? And who to? And what’s the best way to communicate?”

So yes, on that level, the old records still work to some degree, and that’s great, but they’re of no interest to me now because I’m not the same person. I wouldn’t make those now. I have to think of something new and really horrible, in order to wake people up. Because at the moment, people have become so blasé. How do you get through this miasma of complacency that’s there? How do we break through it and slap people’s faces metaphorically and say, “For fuck’s sake, wake up! The world’s collapsing around you, and all you’re worried about is whether you’ve got the right laptop. Wake up!” How can you make people listen and what’ve you got to say?

So that’s what I think about now: *what’s next?* And please do wake up, because the world needs to wake up. There is a definitely parallel between what was happening at the end of the ’70s and what is happening now, especially with the rise of all these right-wing ideas. It feels like Thatcher and Reagan again. People need to be slapped awake…but that’s not my job. My job is not to do that again. My job is to do whatever is next for me. But all of you, you’re supposed to be changing this. You really are. Because what happens in the future is a direct result of what you do and don’t do right now. You obviously think this, or you wouldn’t be here right now, in this room, listening to me

talk about it.

Stop thinking and get going, like we did all those years ago. We had no resources, we just did it. The basic stuff we had to work with we only had because it was left behind by somebody, broken. We fixed it. We might have fixed it wrong, but we made it work and that's what gave us our sound. There's always a way to do it. You don't need resources, you don't need money, you don't need publicity photos. You just need to have an idea that's strong enough, that you feel strongly enough about, that you will go against everybody else to say it or do it. Try and change the fucking world. Thank you all for coming out. Now, please go out and do something.

From a conversation with Genesis Breyer P-Orridge conducted live on stage in front of an audience at Brooklyn's Rough Trade Records, Friday November 24th, 2017

Essential Genesis Breyer P-Orridge:

Throbbing Gristle - *The Second Annual Report* (1977)

Throbbing Gristle - *D.o.A: The Third and Final Report of Throbbing Gristle* (1978)

Throbbing Gristle - *20 Jazz Funk Greats* (1979)

Psychic TV - *Allegory and Self* (1988)

THEE PSYCHICK BIBLE: Thee Apocryphal Scriptures ov Genesis Breyer P-Orridge and Thee Third Mind ov Thee Temple ov Psychick Youth (1994)

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Photo by Samantha Marble