

Early '80s: It was the heat of the moment



By IAN WILLIAMS

In the beginning, there was disco. When I think of my early childhood, nervously clutching a soggy Fresca at the roller rink, wearing polyester bellbottoms and a tight T-shirt with the words "CB Fantasy" swooshed across the top, I hear "Boogie Oogie Oogie," "Le Freak" and "A Fifth of Beethoven."

On the wall next to the snack bar was that smiling poster of Farrah Fawcett with her breast peeking sneakily out of her red swimsuit. My friends were swapping fold-out pictures of Erik Estrada and Jimmie Walker from *Dynasty* magazine, checking their mood rings, and debating whether Han Solo or Luke was cooler.

Yet all this time, I felt like all the music, these styles, and these damn pants and leisure suits I was being forced to wear by a third grade that had no tolerance for fashion deviations — I felt like none of it was part of me. And even now, as we are daily force-fed '70s nostalgia from folks with cynical senses of humor, I feel more and more removed from this Dark Age and begin to reminisce more and more about that wonderful era that emerged just after, a time of creativity, innocence and rebirth — of course, I'm talking about the glorious Early '80s.

Now, the early '80s are not to be confused with the '80s in general — all that talk of greed and sushi and espresso makers makes me violently ill and doesn't say a word about how much fun it was to be in junior high and high school right around then. All I can remember about this prosperous period of "waste and excess" is that I always had enough to play a fifteenth game of *Defender* and I got to see *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom* more than a few times. No, before all the baby boomers started slicking their hair back and buying German cars, there existed a little Lost Era that only a few people have called their own.

Thank God For The Knack — So when did the early '80s begin? Like any good decade generalization, it didn't even happen during its own decade. I like to think that my life began anew in the summer of 1979. After suffering through years of flaccid, milquetoast white boy disco AM radio hits, *The Knack* came out with "My Sharona," a

song that shot through the charts like a buzzsaw through butter, and it lodged itself at Number One for six weeks. After that song, a disco piece never dominated the top 5 again, and it set the stage for everything else to come.

The next summer I bought my first album ever with my own money — Billy Joel's "Glass Houses." As I sat there mesmerized, drooling with headphones on, I realized that going through puberty might not be so bad after all, and I quickly filled my head with "Another One Bites the Dust," "Another Brick in the Wall" and of course, my guilty pleasure, the exquisite soundtrack from "Xanadu."

And suddenly, without any warning, there seemed to be so damn much to do! The malls around town opened up, and as long as there was a willing big brother involved (usually with cash changing hands), we could go there and hang out at the Specialty Cookie places and Record Bar until our allowances ran out. At every laundromat and 7-11 there was Pac-Man, Galaga, Phoenix, Space Invaders, Centipede and Asteroids — and if that wasn't enough, we could go home, get on the Atari and play *Combat* until our eye-

lids began to flutter dryly in the early morning darkness.

38 Channels in Stereo — Then, something I couldn't believe happened. Not only did we now have more than 30 channels on TV, (some of which showin' movies with naked people!) but there was this new music channel that showed nothing but musical videos all day and all night long! While all of our elders were trying cocaine and amphetamines, us kids were having a much better time immersed in the swirl of Total Video Input; bombarded by everything from music to movies to aliens on the screen, we walked around dazed with half-miles blankly hanging on our faces.

In 1982, Jonathan Demme spent a semester in an average Los Angeles high school and wrote the screenplay for *Fast Times at Ridgemont High*, arguably the first great motion picture about our idiot generation. The men all donned Members Only jackets, filled their rooms with posters of punk bands that lent meaning to their acne-induced angst, and said stuff like "Put on the second side of Led Zep IV ... works every time."

Of course, these guys were all still

older than me, but at last I was beginning to feel as though someone, somewhere, was relating, listening to quirky Brit bands and feeling a tad disenfranchised.

Soon thereafter, Frank Zappa released "Valley Girl," and the whole nation had a good laugh at our expense. Yet, in retaliation, we all seemed to gleefully accept our role as somewhat less than clueful. Friends of mine imitated Moon Unit Zappa in the song, and seemed proud of the fact that it was pretty much how they talked anyway.

Ah, but the music ... All eras are defined by their music, y'know, and the early '80s saw the Top 40 go through a creative growth spurt that hadn't been experienced since the mid to late '60s.

When it first started, MTV had nothing to play except bands from England, where music videos had already become an accepted art form. So I sat glued to the TV, being introduced to these groups whose songs were as different as they were conventional-shattering.

The Police played twice an hour. The English Beat, Madness and The

Specials. Dexy's Midnight Runners asked Eileen to Come On, Boy George asked if you Really Wanted to Hurt Him, and Duran Duran and Men at Work sang about "Rio" and the land "Down Under," respectively.

No matter what your disposition, there was music for you in the early '80s. It was one of those wonderful times in history when bands were primarily defined by their coiffures on album jackets. Bands that sprung primarily from the punk elements of the late '70s got that skinny, pissed-off spiked yet confused hair, short in the back and faintly anti-establishment (see Fig. 1-a). Examples include The Vapors, early Cars, early Police, and The Replacements.

Other bands discovered all that their Casio organ could offer, and developed those richly synth-pop glamour boy groups with swooped-up natural law-defying hairstyles that would have been embarrassing were it not for the inventiveness of their songs (see Fig. 1-b). Of course, these include Duran Duran, Thompson Twins, the non-Boy George element of Culture Club, Kajagoogoo and A Flock of Seagulls. And some combined both looks, leading all of us to pick our favorite member of Missing Persons, The Fixx and Berlin.

The most beautiful aspect of the era, however, was its natural rompy cheesiness, and in that way it was a time of real innocence and naivete. When else in history could "Who Can it Be Now" have hit Number One? What kind of crowd would buy "The Safety Dance" en masse? The bright falsetto of A-ha's "Take On Me"? Breakdancing? Thin leather ties with a piano keyboard on them?

Then Things Turned Sour — Some bands just got better as time went on (The Replacements' "Let it Be" and The Police's "Synchronicity" renewed my faith in some higher order), and they escaped the early '80s wiser and with more of a command of the craft. But, of course, most everyone else started to suck with such tenacity that the trips to the mall record store began to get sickening. Recall "Wild Boys" by Duran Duran, or "Two Tribes" by Frankie Goes to Hollywood or anyone's third album for that matter, and you'll see what I mean.

In 1984, MTV began to make money for the first time, and the commercials started getting longer. I think they started to realize how much money they could make if they started being the



The Romantics: What they liked about you was the secrets that you keep ... when you're talking in your sleep

phenomenon itself, and soon everything on the screen started to smell sort of disinfected. I began to feel a little used.

The same year, Americans sort of took back rock'n'roll with the mega neutron blasts of Madonna, Prince, Springsteen and Michael Jackson, but in a bland and calculated way that only Americans can. By 1985, I stopped buying popular albums, and all that shit about yuppies, Cuisinarts, Saabs, stock markets and especially "that sumbitch Reagan" began to make life

miserable for minorities, women, homosexuals, artists and FM radio listeners. The Top 40 entered an Age of Blandness that lasted clear until R.E.M. and Nirvana posted Number One albums just last year. In retrospect, I consider "West End Girls" by the Pet Shop Boys (March 1986) the last great early '80s song, in its unabashed use of keyboards, dopey British patter and cool drum machines. After that, everyone started listening to Mr. Mister.

And now ... People seem to be so intent on bringing back the '70s, especially folks in our generation, who were too young to even Hustle. Even I couldn't drive myself to see *Saturday Night Fever*, and I still can't remember the damn words to "Play That Funky Music."

But we all know what song has a "vegemite sandwich" in it. We all remember what the snare drum was filled with in J. Geils' video for "Centerfold." We all understand that pressing "hyperspace" in Asteroids is almost always a rotten idea. And we can all sing the harmonies to "Save a Prayer," "Mickey" and "Wrapped Around Your Finger." So, if we're living in a time that is so cynical and rotten that we have to turn to the '70s for fun and answers, we're looking back too far. Let's throw other people's nostalgia back to the dinosaurs that brought them, and look after our own — the beautiful, goofy, quirky and intelligent beat of our junior high. Try to find a copy of "She Blinded Me With Science" today. I guarantee you'll feel better.



Daryl Hall and John Oates: They had private eyes watching you ... they saw your every move ...

Three great early '80s albums or, three great albums that I bought back then and I still listen to



Naked Eyes - Naked Eyes

Of course you remember their exquisite Burt Bacharach/Hal David cover "Always Something There to Remind Me," and perhaps "Promises, Promises," but this whole album is balls-to-the-wall synthesizer heaven at its best.

Full of poignant Brit boy lyrics and submarine noises that act as backbeats, this album is what would have happened if John and Paul were transported into a modern-day Music Loft in 1965.



Tears For Fears - The Hurting

Tears For Fears - The Hurting

I guess you could go the easy route and buy the Greatest Hits collection in stores now, but we all know that Greatest Hits albums are just corporate rape of an artists catalog, now don't we? Plus, you'd miss out on all those cool songs in between, those angst-ridden synth tunes based on — of all things — Janovian Primal Scream therapy.

No way!



Lexicon of Love - ABC

I even liked their newer stuff, like "Be Near Me," but this album has the classics "Look of Love" and of course, one of the finest songs of the era, "Poison Arrow." Daffily overproduced by Trevor Horn, this album is way more fun than most of us deserve. It also qualified for the Best Lyric of 1982:

If you gave me a pound for the moments I missed
And I got dancing lessons for all the lips
I shoulda kissed,
I'd be a millionaire ...
I'd be a Fred Astaire ...

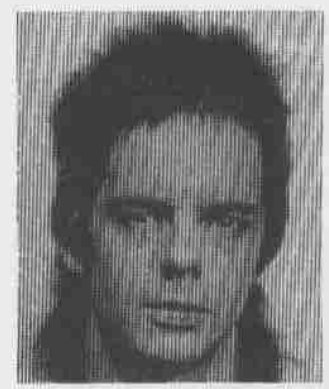


Fig. 1-a: David Fenton of the Vapors



Fig. 1-b: John Taylor of D2

Early '80s stuff is hard to find

All those songs on the tip of your tongue? Having trouble remembering the lyrics to Kajagoogoo's "Too Shy"? Want to learn to hate Falco all over again? Then you had best get yourself a copy of Ian and Layton's infamous 3-Alarm Omnibus Early '80s Deluxe Mix Tape, over 100 minutes of your favorite songs from the Forgotten Era. Dexy's Midnight Runners? Haircut 100? '99 Luftballons? "Der Komissar"? We got 'em. For the price of a decent tape, we'll make you a copy of all these favorites, from the hits to the obscure. Send name and phone number to the DTH, Student Union, C.B. 5210, Box 49, Campus Mail, (or call Ian at 967-6462) and we'll get one to you.