Radio waves in the grooves


When I first became interested in electronic music, a friend gave me a copy of Karlheinz Stockhausen's Hymnen, claiming it was one of the fine works in the genre. I forced myself to listen to two hours of short-wave radio static interspersed with broadcast national anthems, but it left me puzzled and annoyed at my inability to understand what the composer was attempting to communicate.

Not long afterward, the same friend gave me a copy of Kraftwerk's Radio-Activity, promising better results. The members of Kraftwerk studied composition with Stockhausen, but were also firmly rooted in the pop tradition. Their German allusions were interspersed with the short-wave static, left me just as annoyed as my previous experience. In short, despite my vow never to take this friend at his word again, I grudgingly became a fan of Orchestral Manoeuvers in the Dark. Much to my surprise, it turned out to be a well-executed debut album about the sounds of radio. The static and blips were still there, but they were expertly mixed with OMD's usual well-crafted synthesizer.

OMD steps up the dreary pace of Architecture and Morality, and dives further into the musique concrete explorations begun on that disc. Consequently, five of the twelve songs on Dazzle Ships are somewhat abstract, ranging from the superimposed recorded messages of "Time Zones" (The synchronization tones form a chord when sounded simultaneously) to the Czechoslovakian sign-in "Radio Prague." Not all the experiments are this abstruse; the clever use of sped-up tape loops and broadcast fragments in "ABC Auto-Industry" provides amusing commentary on the ills of modern technology. No OMD album would be complete without its share of clever pop, and this is no exception. "Genetic Engineering" bounces along on a riff hammered out on a toy piano, with vocals provided by a Speak-and-Spell machine: "babylon/mad Hospital/Scissors creature/JUDGEment butcher/ENGINEER" Both "Telegraph" and "Dance With Me" exploit the same winning formula, layering a catchy melody over an insistent machine-generated rhythm, filled out by noise. Least the ballads be forgotten, OMD "Dazzle Ships" and "Of all the Things We've Made," both reminiscent of Architecture and Morality's "Man of Aran."

Dazzle Ships, while definitely not for the average pop fan, is an album that rewards every listen. It returns OMD to the vanguard of creative electropop, the genre they helped develop with their pioneering single " Electricity."

David Shaw

Modern Romans...

Modern Romans. The Call on Mercury Records.

If there has been an album in recent times that proves simplicity is the key to good rock, The Modern Romans is it. This band doesn't fool around; its music is stark and sharp-edged. Modern Romans, the Call's second release, is a concept album which the United States is compared to ancient Rome. The lyrics, sharply critical of present society, are a real asset, at times reinforcing the comparison.

The strength of Modern Romans is due to singer/songwriter/producer Michael Byrne, whose impressive emotional voice covers the range from disgust to anger to sarcasm. He has an uncommonly distinctive, well-controlled voice, at times not unlike that of the Talking Heads' David Byrne. In addition, he doesn't fall into the trap of screaming to show emotion, as do so many hard rock singers.

All of the songs have a strong, danceable beat, with melodies that are impressive in their simplicity. The fast songs are very energetic, while the several interlaced slow songs are powerful in their own right. The Call plays as a group, with no one member overshadowing the others, yet room is left for each member to solo. All of the musicians sparkle: Guitarist Tom Ferrier is original and inventive, while drummer Scott Musick and bassist Greg Freemen provide a powerful rhythmic drive. The keyboard work is provided by The Band's Garth Hudson, who also adds synthesizes and saxophone. "The Walls Came Down," the band's current hit single, provides the album's most pointed political statement. I don't think there are any Russians. And there aren't no Yanks. Just corporate criminals. Playing with tanks.

The Call does not seem like a group which will churn out hit singles with each album, rather, the album taken as a whole is impressive, it's not the type one listens to for certain songs, skipping the others. Modern Romans is full of strong emotions and pure energy, very traditional in its form, yet full of a fresh spirit that brings back the thrill rock had when it was new.

John Stein

...and ancient ones, too

Julius Caesar, by William Shakespeare, performed by the Boston Shakespeare Ensemble, directed by Gaius Cameren-Webb.

In its decision not to modernize, rewrite, or otherwise adapt an ancient Roman tragedy, the BSC has demonstrated it can perform Shakespeare almost ideally. It is due to the dynamic Henry Woroniec as Marc Antony that one can capture any of his character's depth—Antony is both a great friend to Caesar and a calculating politician-soldier.

None of the remaining main performers, however, is particularly noteworthy. Joseph Gargiulo and Carrie Reardon are reasonable as Julius Caesar and Cassius, but their acting is hardly more than competent.

The key to the play, and its major failing, is Brutus. While Brutus is supposed to be the "noblest Roman of them all," James Finnegan seems much more like an average American than a noble Roman, not only in his appearance, but also in his unfortunate tendency to lapse into what sounds very much like American slang. Worse still, the point of the play—that Brutus is the noblest of the noble — is obscured by the direction of Cameren-Webb. The same director who set Ro- men and Juliet in Northern Ireland makes a bad editing decision in the scene where Brutus must obviously act as vain and egotistical as Caesar — Act 4, scene 3, in which Brutus argues with Cassius about money. This is also the scene in which Shakespeare seems to have made a mistake: after the argument ends, Brutus reveals that his wife, Portia, is dead and then, 30 lines later, Brutus appears not to know that she is dead when the news is revealed to him by someone else.

Normally, the director will cut out one of these two bits of dialogue, and, thematically, it is best if the first one is cut. Then Brutus does not know that his wife is dead during the argument and he has no justification for his "out of character" egoism "More than the tragic irony that he is becoming like the man he assassinated— Ju-

lius Caesar, Cameron-Webb imprudently cut the second dialogue rather than the first. Even worse, he had Brutus rave and rant during the argument. The result is a Brutus acting less like a tragically noble Roman — who unburdens his own evil spirit when he kills Caesar — than an average man in a bad mood because of his wife's recent suicide.

Despite the problems with Brutus, and other smaller problems such as remarkably clean blood-stained daggers and noisy crowds that drown out the beginning of famous speeches, the performance is pass-

Julius Caesar is one of Shakespeare's most entertaining plays, and the roles of Caesar, Cassius, and Brutus are surprisingly well-suited to wooden actors, particular-

ly Brutus, who coldly decides to murder his best friend. Yet there is no real excuse for the Boston Shakespeare Company, and they will never be a good acting troupe until they can muster up a cast as good as MIT's own Shakespeare Ensemble.

Joseph Roman