Revenge of the synth people

Strangers in the Night, Baumann on Portrait Records.

Sweet Dreams are Made of This, Eurythmics on RCA Records.

You and Me Both, Yaz on Sire Records.

You Gotta Say Yes to Another Excess, Yaz on Elektra Records.

The requisite technology may be American and Japanese, but the electropop genre has retained the sole province of the British. They do not control the monopoly on electronic creativity; instead, the British bands have tried their hand at instant success, grabbing a keyboard the way American youths reached for an electric guitar. It was Eno who said, "Anyone with a guitar can make rock 'n' roll," but the United Kingdom cannot claim a similar antecedent for its recent boom in plugget-in pop. Unlike the American rock system and its near-mandatory slog through the dues-paying circuit, British pop is a history of one-hit wonders where few bands survive the sophomore slump. Electropop in particular suffers a miserable failure rate. Does anyone remember Lori and the Leprechauns? Their debut albums can be jubilant affairs, introductions to unproven talent that may one day define—or redefine—a genre. Breakup albums, on the other hand, are frequently studies in no-holds-barred, wretched excess; rarely are they poignant last looks at bands forced apart for nonsensical reasons.

Peter Baumann is considered a grand old man of the synthesizer by virtue of his membership in Tangente Dream, the pioneering German trance/ synth ensemble. At the height of the group's success, Baumann was bitten by the Eurodisco bug, and departed to pursue a solo career. His first album, Repeat, Repeat, a major success on the Continent, made a small dent in the New York disco charts—enough of a dent to make him relocate there to build a recording studio and assemble a new band.

Strangers in the Night, Baumann's latest offering, shows him still in the sway of Teutonic precision. This is a carefully crafted record with not a note out of place, but it fails not only to swing, but also to rock. From the title cut—a cover that could prompt Of Blue Eyes to pick up a pair of shades—to the closing "Welcome," the music bounces and clicks under icy-cold, dispassionate vocals, not unlike Dave without the hunter.

Some of these songs—especially "Cash" and "Merry Man"—would positively sparkle in the hands of certifiable crazies like Devo; in Baumann's hands they merely trite.

One might expect electropop from the nation that gave us cuckoo clocks and yodels. Even the most hardened listener will concede that the Eurhythmics may well make an acceptable debut at Eric's. Certainly jubilant: The phenomenal success of "Sweet Dreams" and "Love

London's Yello and Germany's Baumann. Even the most cursory listening supports the initial thesis: Britania may no longer rule the waves, but she most certainly controls the currents.

His half-spoken, half-sung vocals conjure a cross between David Niven and Vincent Price — the basso profondo narrative accompanying bad horror flicks—ultimately trivial, but unignorable.

Every clever idea Blank can muster, from crazed jungle rhythms in "Saliy Mayoumba" to big-band brashness in "Swing," is crushed by Meier's irritating wit. This record supports the time-worn adage: "Beware conceptual artists bearing controls." Debut albums can be jubilant affairs, introductions to unproven talent that may one day define—or redefine—a genre. Breakup albums, on the other hand, are frequently studies in no-holds-barred, wretched excess; rarely are they poignant last looks at bands forced apart for nonsensical reasons.

Yar's debut Upstairs at Eric's was certainly jubilant: The phenomenal success of "Situation" and "Don't Go" had many critics touting Yaz as electropop's great white hope. Synth wizard Vince Clarke (formerly with Depeche Mode) and singer Allison "Alf" Moyet, had hit upon a winning combination of dance, genre, and diversity of vocal effects: happy, melodic, regretful, and the basso profondo. Like Moyet, Lennox draws her vocal inspiration from soul singers, a debt she acknowledges with a cover of the Isaac Hayes/David Porter classic "Wrap It Up." Stewart's treatment of this song turns a soul swinger into a scarifying stomp.

Elsewhere, Stewart displays his willingness to experiment, boldly going where no synth has gone before, providing the wash of buzzing bass that propels, "I Could Give You a Mirror," adding "trumpets" to "The Walk" and "This is the House" and "Fanz" to "I've Got an Angel.

Lennox compliments Stewart's invocations with a diverse range of vocal effects: A sooty purr in "Jennifer," a rudimentary Spanish lesson in "This is the House," and a wicked snarl in "Somebody Told Me." All demonstrate directions she can take with her extraordinary voice.

Sweeo Electropop subtly subverts the listener, grabbing immediately with the title track—nearly impossible to forget—later ensnaring with the intricacies of "The Walk" and "Love is a Stranger." Were this a just world, each song from this incomparable debut would be a number one hit. Even the most hardened listener will concede that the Eurythmics may well make good electropop's sweet dreams.

David Shaw