Some skeezeiz from one of the local dailies was up here the other day to do a “human interest” story on the phenomenon you’re holding in your hands, and naturally our beneficent publisher hauled me into his office to answer this fish’s edition of the perennial: “Where is rock going?”

“It’s being taken over by the Germans and the machines,” I unhesitatingly answered. And this I believe to my funky soul. Everybody has been hearing about kraut-rock, and the stupnagging success of Kraftwerk’s “Auto-bahn” is more than just the latest evidence in support of the case for Teutonic raillery, more than just a record, it is an indictment. An indictment of all those who would resist the bloodless iron will and order of the ineluctable dawn of the Machine Age. Just consider:

They used to call Chuck Berry a “guitar mechanic” (at least I heard a Moody Blues fan say that once). Why? Because any idiot could play his lines. Which, as we have all known since the prehistory of punk rock, is the very beauty of them. But think: if any idiot can play them, why not eliminate such genetic mistakes altogether, punch “Johnny B. Goode” into a computer printout and let the machines do it in total passive acquiescence to the Cybernetic Inevitable? A quantum leap towards this noble goal was accomplished with the advent of a crude sonic Model T called Alvin Lee, who could not only reproduce Berry licks by the bushel, but play them at 78 rpm as well. As is well known, it was the Germans who invented methamphetamine, which of all accessible tools has brought human beings within the closest twitch of machinehood, and without methamphetamine we would never have had such high plasma marks of the counterculture as Lenny Bruce, Bob Dylan, Lou Reed and the Velvet Underground, Neal Cassady, Jack Kerouac, Allen Ginsberg’s “Howl,” Blue Cheer, Cream, and Creem, as well as all of the fine performances in Andy Warhol movies not inspired by heroin. So it can easily be seen that it was in reality the Germans who were responsible for Blonde on Blonde and On the Road; the Reich never died, it just reincarnated in American archetypes ground out by holloweyskyer jeryfingered mannikins locked into their typewriters and guitars like rhinoceroses copulating.

Of course, just as very few speedfreaks will cop to their vice, so it took a while before due credit was rendered to the factor of machinehood as a source of our finest cultural artifacts. Nowadays, everybody is jumping on the bandwagon. People used to complain about groups like the Monkees and the Archies like voters complain about “political machines,” and just recently a friend of mine recoiled in revulsion at his first exposure to Kiss, whom he termed “everything that has left me disgusted with rock ‘n’ roll nowadays—they’re automatons!”

What he failed to suss was that sometimes automatons deliver the very finest specimens of a mass-produced, disposable commodity like rock. But history will have its way, and it was only inevitable that groups like Blue Oyster Cult would come along, singing in jive-chic about dehumanization while unconsciously fulfilling their own prophecy albeit muddled by performing as nothing more than robots whose buttons were pushed by their producers. By now the machines had clattered VU meter first out of the closet for good, and we have most recently been treated to the spectacle of such fine harbingers of the larger revolution to come as Magma’s “Ork Alarm” (“The people are made of indescribable matter which to the machines is what the machines are to man . . .”) and of course Lou Reed’s Metal Machine Music, a quick-buck exploitation number assessed elsewhere in this issue.

But there is more to the Cybernetic Inevitable than this sort of methaniasis. There are, in the words of the poet, “machines of loving grace.” There is, hovering clean far from the burnt metal reek of exploded stars, the intricate balm of Kraftwerk.

Perhaps you are wondering how I can connect the amped-up hysteria of compulsive pathogens such as Bruce, Dylan and Reed with the clean, cool lines of Kraftwerk. This is simple. The Germans invented “speed” for the Americans (and the English—leave us not forget Rick Wakeman and Emerson, Lake & Palmer) to destroy themselves with, thus leaving the
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world of pop music open for ultimate conquest. A friend once asked me how I could bear to listen to Love Sculpture’s version of “Sabre Dance,” knowing that the producers had sped up the tape; I replied: “Anything a hand can do a machine can do better.” An addendum would seem to be that anything a hand can do nervously, a machine can do effortlessly. When was the last time you heard a German band go galloping off at 965 mph on the heels of oblivion? No, they realize that the ultimate power is exercised calmly, whether it’s Can with their endless rotary connections, Tangerine Dream plumbing the sargassan depths, or Kraftwerk sailing airlocked down the Autobahn.

In the beginning there was feedback: the machines speaking on their own, answering their supposed masters with shrieks of misalliance. Gradually the humans learned to control the feedback, or thought they did, and the next step was the introduction of more highly refined forms of distortion and artificial sound, in the form of the synthesizer, which the human beings sought also to control. In the music of Kraftwerk, and bands like them present and to come, we see at last the fitting culmination of this revolution, as the machines not merely overpower and play the human beings but absorb them, until the scientist and his technology, having developed a higher consciousness of its own, are one and the same.

Kraftwerk, whose name means “power plant,” have a word for this ecstatic congress: Menschmaschine, which translates as “man-machine.” I am conversing with Ralf Hutter and Florian Schneider, co-leaders of Kraftwerk, which they insist is not a band but a you-guess-it. We have just returned to their hotel from a concert, where Kraftwerk executed their Top Ten hit, “Autobahn,” as well as other galactic standards such as “Kometenmelodie” (“Comet Melody”), “Mitternacht” (“Midnight”), “Morgenspaziergang” (“Morning Walk,” complete with chirping birds on tape), and the perfect synthesized imitation of a choo-choo train which must certainly be the programmatic follow-up to “Autobahn,” to a small but rapt audience mesmerized unto somnolence. (At least half the people I took, in fact, fell asleep. But that’s all right.) Now the tapes have stopped rolling and the computers have been packed up until the next gig, and the Werk’s two percussionists, Wolfgang Flur and Karl Bartos, who play wired pads about the size of Ouija boards instead of standard acoustic drums, have been dispatched to their respective rooms, barred from the interview because their English is not so hot. (I have heard of members of bands playing on the same bills as Kraftwerk approaching these gentlemen with the words “So ya liked blowin’ all our roadies . . .”) Now Ralf and Florian are facing me, very sober in their black suits, narrow ties and close-cropped hair, quietly explaining behavior modification through technology.

“I think the synthesizer is very responsive to a person,” says Ralf, whose boyish visage is somewhat less severe than that of Florian, who looks, as a friend put it, “like he could build a computer or push a button and blow up half the world with the same amount of emotion.” “It’s referred to as cold machinery,” Ralf continues, “but as soon as you put a different person in the synthesizer, it’s very responsive to the different vibrations. I think it’s much more sensitive than a traditional instrument like a guitar.”

This may be why, just before their first American tour, Kraftwerk purged themselves of guitarist/violinist Klaus Roeder, inserting Bartos in his slot. One must, at any rate, mind one’s P’s and Q’s—I asked Hutter if a synthesizer could tell what kind of person you are and he replied: “Yes. It’s like an acoustic mirror.” I remarked that the next logical step would be for the machines to play you. He nodded: “Yes. We do this. It’s like a robot thing, when it gets up to a certain stage. It starts playing . . . it’s no longer you and I, it’s It. Not all machines have this consciousness, however. Some machines are just limited to one piece of work, but complex machines . . .”

“The whole complex we use,” continues Florian, referring to their equipment and headquarters in their native Dusseldorf, “can be regarded as one machine, even though it is divided into different pieces.” Including, of course, the human beings within. “The Menschmaschine is our acoustic concept, and Kraftwerk is power plant—if you plug in the electricity, then it starts to work. It’s feedback. You can jam with an automatic machine, sometimes just you and it alone in the studio.”

They also referred to their studio as their “laboratory,” and I wondered aloud if they didn’t encounter certain dangers in their experiments. What’s to stop the machines, I asked, from eventually taking over, or at least putting them out of work? “It’s like a car,” explained Florian. “You have the control, but it’s your decision how much you want to control it. If you let the wheel go, the car will drive somewhere, maybe off the road. We have done electronic accidents. And it is also possible to damage your mind. But this is the risk one takes. We have power. It just depends on what you do with it.”

I wondered if they could see some ramifications of what they could do with it. “Yes,” said Ralf, “it’s our music, we are manipulating the audience. That’s what it’s all about. When you play electronic music, you have the control of the imagination of the people in the room, and it can get to an extent where it’s almost physical.”
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I mentioned the theories of William Burroughs, who says that you can start a riot with two tape recorders, and asked them if they could create a sound which would cause a riot, wreck the hall, would they like to do it? “I agree with Burroughs,” said Ralf. “We would not like to do that, but we are aware of it.”

“It would be very dangerous,” cautioned Florian. “It could be like a boomerang.”

“It would be great publicity,” I nudged.

“It could be the end,” said Florian, calm, unblinking. “A person doing experimental music must be responsible for the results of the experiments. They could be very dangerous emotionally.”

I told them that I considered their music rather anti-emotional, and Florian quietly and patiently explained that “emotion” is a strange word. There is a cold emotion and other emotion, both equally valid. It’s not body emotion, it’s mental emotion. We like to ignore the audience while we play, and take all our concentration into the music. We are very much interested in source of music. The pure sound is something we would very much like to achieve.”

They have been chasing the p.s.’s tail for quite a while. Setting out to be electronic classical composers in the Stockhausen tradition, they grew up listening on the one hand to late-night broadcasts of electronic music, on the other to the American pop music imported via radio and TV—especially the Beach Boys, who were a heavy influence, as is obvious from “Autobahn,” although “we are not aiming so much for the music; it’s the psychological structure of someone like the Beach Boys.” They met at a musical academy, began in 1970 to set up their own studio, “and started working on the music, building equipment,” for the eventual rearmament of their fatherland.

“After the war,” explains Ralf, “German entertainment was destroyed. The German people were robbed of their culture, putting an American head on it. I think we are the first generation born after the war to shake this off, and know where to feel American music and where to feel ourselves. We are the first German group to record in our own language, use our electronic background, and create a Central European identity for ourselves. So you see another group like Tangerine Dream, although they are German they have an English name, so they create onstage an Anglo-American identity, which we completely deny. We want the whole world to know our background. We cannot deny we are from Germany, because the German mentality, which is more advanced, will always be part of our behavior. We create out of the German language, the mother language, which is very mechanical, we use as the basic structure of our music. Also the machines, from the industries of Germany.”

As for the machines taking over, all the better. “We use tapes, pre-recorded, and we play tapes, also in our performance. When we recorded on TV we were not allowed to play the tape as a part of the performance, because the musicians’ union felt that they would be put out of work. But I think just the opposite: with better machines, you will be able to do better work, and you will be able to spend your time and energies on a higher level.”

“We don’t need a choir,” adds Florian. “We just turn this key, and there’s the choir.”

I wondered aloud if they would like to see it get to the point of electrodes in the brain so that whatever they thought would come through a loudspeaker. “Yes,” enthused Ralf, “this would be fantastic.”

The final solution to the music problem, I suggested.

“No, not the solution. The next step.”

They then confided that they were going to spend all of the money from this tour on bigger and better equipment, that they work in their lab/studio for recreation, and that their Wernher von Braun sartorial aspect was “part of the German scientific approach.”

“When the rocket was going to the moon,” said Ralf, “I was so emotionally excited. . . . When I saw this on television, I thought it was one of the best performances I had ever seen.”

Speaking of performances, and bearing their general appearance and demeanor in mind, I asked them what sort of groups they got. “None,” snapped Florian. “There is no such thing. This is totally an invention of the media.”

All right then, what’s your opinion of American or British bands utilizing either synthesizers or Germanic/swastikan overtones? Do you feel a debt to Pink Floyd? “No. It’s vice versa. They draw from French classicism and German electronic music. And such performance as Rick Wakeman has nothing to do with our music,” stressed Ralf. “He is something else . . . distraction. It’s not electronic music, it’s circus tricks on the synthesizer. I think it is paranoid. I don’t want to put anybody down, but I cannot listen to it. I get nervous. It is traditional.”

Not surprisingly, their taste in American acts runs to those seduced (and enraged) by adrenaline: “The MC5, and the heavy metal music of Detroit. I think Iggy and the Stooges are concerned with energy, and the Velvet Underground had a heavy Germanic influence—Nico was from Cologne, close where we live. They have this German dada influence from
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the twenties and thirties. I very much like ‘European Son.’ Nico and John Cale had this Teutonic attitude about their music which I very much like. I think Lou Reed in his *Berlin* is projecting the situation of a spy film, the spy standing in the fog smoking a cigarette. I have also been told of the program ‘Hogan’s Heroes,’ though I have not seen it. We think that no matter what happens Americans cannot relate it. It’s still American popcorn chewing gum. It’s part of history. I think the Blue Oyster Cult is funny.”

They did not, however, think it was funny when I wound up the interview asking them if they would pose for pix the next morning by the Detroit freeway. “No,” said Ralf, emphatically. “We do not pose. We have our own pictures.”

Why? “Because,” flatly, “we are paranoid.”

He was just beginning to explain the ramifications of German paranoia when Florian abruptly stood up, opened the window to let the smoke out, then walked to the door and opened it, explaining with curious polite curtness that “we had also an interview with *Rolling Stone*, but it was not so long as this one. Now it is time to retire. You must excuse us.”

He ushered us into the hall, quietly swung the door shut with a muffled click, and we blinked at each other in mild shock. Still, it was somehow comforting to know that they did, apparently, sleep.

—*Creem*, September 1975

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**David Bowie: Station to Station**

It’s tough having heroes. It’s the hardest thing in the world. It’s harder than being a hero. Heroes are generally expected to produce something or other to reconfirm their mandarin-fingered clinch on the hot buns of the bitch muse, which sometimes comes closer to resembling a set of clawmarks running down and off the edge of a shale precipice. At sunset, even. And that’s no office party, kiddo.

But hero-worshippers (fans) must live with the continually confirmed dread of hero-slippage and humiliating personal compromises in your standards and plain good sense about, oh, two to three weeks after the new elpee masterwork first hits our turntables.

A very great man (I think it was the Isley Brothers) once said that the real bottom line truism re life on this planet is that it is merely a process of sequential disappointments. So there’s no reason even to romanticize your betrayals. Just paying dues, kid. I get burned, therefore I exist. No words in the history of the rock poetic genre, from Dylan to Bernie Taupin, ever said it better than Sandy Posey’s pithy catalog in “Born a Woman”: “Born to be stepped on, lied to, cheated and treated like dirt.” And are we not all in some sense women, the niggers of the world according to contemporary social commentators (I tried to get a call through to Toynbee to confirm this like a good journalist but the bastard had the nerve to fucking die in the same week, my week!)?

Yes, we are. A great many David Bowie fans felt burned, turned into veritable women (de-virilized, as Pope Paul would have it) when David released *Young Americans*. Why? Because, interestingly enough, they
slings out some cheap trough of chintz dime-store decadence, the little scads eat it up. And never the twain shall meet.

Which, actually, is in his favor. Because now, and only now, when everybody in the Western world has written him off as either a bad joke or a drug casualty, is he free to finally make a record that feels, that hurts, that might be real and not just more jokes. Because he’s kicked up such a dirt storm that everybody’s blinded anyway, they’re just waiting for the old lunatic to speed himself to death and they positively would not notice if he made a record with the depth and sensitivity of his best work for the late Velvet Underground. Now, I hope that Coney Island Baby, which as of this writing he has realigned again back into the Valentine’s Day package originally promoted, might be that record. Of course, I don’t believe it will be, or that Lou will write anything but loony toons ever again, because a few too many brain cells have took it on the lam from that organism that treated them so hatefully. But all that’s okay too, because I live for laughs, which is why I love Lou. As far as Metal Machine Music goes, I listen to it all the time, but I’ll never forget what Howard Kaylan told me Lou said to him after unsuccessfully trying to sell the layers-and-layers-of-sonic-frequencies concept (which was only a speed trip in the first place) to Flo and Eddie: “Well, anybody who gets to side four is dumber than I am.” So, slimy critter that he is, we’re right back where we started from. The joke’s on you, kid. And if I were you, I’d take advantage of it.

—Creem, February 1976

The Greatest Album Ever Made

It has been suggested that in my annual regurg report to the stockholders, published here last month, I neglected in all five thousand words to ever once mention why Metal Machine Music is a good album. So here, especially in the light of Coney Island Baby, are the reasons:

1. If you ever thought feedback was the best thing that ever happened to the guitar, well, Lou just got rid of the guitars.

2. I realize that any idiot with the equipment could have made this album, including me, you or Lou. That’s one of the main reasons I like it so much. As with the Godz and Tangerine Dream, not only does it bring you closer to the artist, but someday, god willing, I may get to do my own Metal Machine Music. It’s all folk music, anyway.

3. When you wake up in the morning with the worst hangover of your life, Metal Machine Music is the best medicine. Because when you first arise you’re probably so fucking (i.e., still drunk) that it doesn’t even really hurt yet (not like it’s going to), so you should put this album on immediately, not only to clear all the crap out of your head, but to prepare you for what’s in store the rest of the day.

4. Speaking of clearing out crap, I once had this friend who would say, “I take acid at least every two months & JUST BLOW ALL THE BAD SHIT OUTA MY BRAIN!” So I say the same thing about MMM. Except that I take it about once a day, like vitamins.

5. In his excellent liner notes, Lou asserts that he and the other speedfreaks did not start World Wars I, II, “or the Bay of Pigs, for that matter.” And he’s right. If everybody took amphetamines, all the time,
everybody would understand each other. Either that or never listen or bother with the other son of a bitch, because they’d all be too busy spending three days drawing psychedelic lines around a piece of steno paper until it’s totally black, writing eighty-page letters about meaningless occurrences to their mothers, or creating **MMM**. There would be no more wars, and peace and harmony would reign. Just imagine Gerald Ford on speed—he might manifest some glimmer of personality. Or Ronald Reagan—a blood vessel in his snapping-turtle lips would immediately burst, perhaps kidding us of that cocksucker. As is well known by now, JFK enjoyed regular injections of Meth and vitamins from happy croakers. ’Nuff said. He may not have actually accomplished anything (except the Bay of Pigs—wait a minute, Lou hasn’t been doing his homework), but he had style and a winning smile.

6. I have heard this record characterized as “anti-human” and “anti-emotional.” That it is, in a sense, since it is music made more by tape recorders, amps, speakers, microphones and ring modulators than any set of human hands and emotions. But so what? Almost all music today is anti-emotional and made by machines too. From Elton John to disco to **Sally Can’t Dance** (which Lou doesn’t realize is one of his best albums, precisely because it’s so cold) it’s computerized formula production line shit into which the human heart enters very rarely if at all. At least Lou is upfront about it, which makes him more human than the rest of those MOR dicknoses. Besides which, any record that sends listeners fleeing the room screaming for surcease of aural flagellation or, alternately, getting physical and disturbing your medications to the point of breaking the damn thing, can hardly be accused, at least in results if not original creative man-hours, of lacking emotional content.

Why do people go to see movies like **Jaws**, **The Exorcist**, or **Ilsa, She Wolf of the SS**? So they can get beaten over the head with baseball bats, have their nerves wrenched while electrodes are being stapled to their spines, and be generally brutalized at least once every fifteen minutes or so (the time between the face falling out of the bottom of the sunk boat and the guy’s bit-off leg hitting the bottom of the ocean). This is what, today, is commonly understood as entertainment, as fun, as art even! So they’ve got a lot of nerve landing on Lou for **MMM**. At least here there’s no fifteen minutes of bullshit padding between brutalizations. Anybody who got off on **The Exorcist** should like this record. It’s certainly far more moral a product.

7. Charisma. Lou’s been slipping of late, but for those who remember and understand the Myth, the Legend—i.e., he was an emblem of absolute negativism—**MMM** has more charisma than a cage full of porcupines has quills.

8. All landlords are mealymouthed bastards who would let the ruins of Pompeii fall on your four-poster before they’d lift a finger. They deserve whatever they get, and **MMM** is the all-time guaranteed lease breaker. Every tenant in America should own a copy of this album. **Forearmed!**

9. My pet land hermit crab, Spud, who sometimes goes for days at a time curled up inside his shell in a corner of the cage so you gotta check to see if he’s dead, likes **MMM** a lot. Every time I put it on, he comes out of his shell and starts crawling happily around the sand and climbing the bars. It is, in fact, the only time I ever see him get any exercise. Either that or he’s dancing.

10. I have been told that Lou’s recordings, but most specifically this item, have become a kind of secret cult among teenage mental institution inmates all across the nation. I have been told further that those adolescents who have been subjected to electroshock therapy enjoy a particular affinity for **MM**, that it reportedly “soothes their nerves,” and is ultimately a kind of anthem. If anyone out there reading this knows any more about this phenomenon, please get in touch with me immediately.

11. I played it for President Idi “Big Daddy” Amin of Uganda when he flew me and Lisa Robinson over there to interview him for upcoming cover articles in **Creem** and **Hit Parader**, and he absolutely loved it. I gave him a copy, and now by special edict he has it piped through the Muzak vents of every supermarket (all thirty-five of them) and doctor’s waiting room (all eight) in his great nation, so that the citizens there may be inspired to ever fiercer heights of patriotism for his regime and all that it stands for. He wanted to declare it the Ugandan national anthem, but I told him that I would have to check with the American teenage shock vets first, and being a wise, fair, graciously diplomatic politician, he of course immediately assented, and then, genial host that he is, whisked us off to see a live multiple snuff film done sans cameras and celluloid. “We can’t afford them,” he explained. “And besides, the next time you have a dashing conversation with Paul Simon, you can inform him that the theatre is not really dead.”

12. I think that, in this time of recession/depression and with the whole music business tightening its belt, it is truly thoughtful of Lou to cut recording costs as much as **MMM** must have, especially when you consider the stupefying self-indulgence of so many of today’s rock “masterpieces” with their overproductions so baroquely lavish it all turns to tinsel. Only James Brown, I think, approaches Lou’s achievement here in terms of sheer
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13. And why is this, of all Lou Reed albums (and the man’s songwriting profligacy is indeed astounding. “Just lock Lou in a room for an hour,” Dennis Katz told me once, “and when you let him out he’s got fifteen new songs!” The reason why he keeps on recording old Velvet Underground outtakes he wrote upwards of a decade ago is that he’s saving all of his best new stuff for 863 LPs to be released, one every two months, after he dies, assuming that he ever does. “I’m not gonna let those bloodsuckers rip me off and tarnish my memory like happened to poor Jimi,” he confided to me once over two Schaefer’s drafts at McSorley’s. “My fans will never get less than A+ quality, as my friend Bob Christgau would put it, and besides it’s quite likely that I will live forever, because me and some doctor friends I hang out with just discovered that there’s a secret, heretofore unknown ingredient in methamphetamine which retards the aging process. So theoretically if you can get and just keep shooting this stuff, you could live for the rest of human history, which is why we’re doing some resynthesizing experiments to see if we can bring this certain ingredient a little more into the foreground of the compound. I think it’s called atropine. It’s been a long time, the Indians knew about it but recognized in the face of their dog-race inferiority it would be more moral to forget about it and submit themselves to extermination by white Europeans, who were the only ones with the technological knowhow to extract the raw chemical and refine it into a form you can cook up and shoot. But anyway that’s where you got that Ponce de León business, and his only problem was the fucker, being a dumb spic, naturally had no idea how to prepare it in any potent form. So everybody concluded it was a myth and forgot about it until I came along, and potency is my middle name. So now you can let your readers in on the little secret that not only am I the toughest, baddest, most well-hung stud in show business, which actually is only because in 1971 I went to Sweden and had a transplant so now instead of a cock I got a horse doctor’s syringe, not only that but there’s a damn good chance I’m even gonna cut that punk Caglioastro at his own riffs and live forever. Of course, you never can discount unforeseen circumstances, plane crashes and the like, which is why I got these eight hundred albums in the can just in case. There’s all sorts of stuff, like one is I rewrote my own version of Rigoletto, you know that opera by Scriabin, except it’s set in this Puerto Rican leather bar where all the customers are amputated at the thigh and rolling around on these little carts on wheels. They keep trying to have punchouts, except the carts keep bumping and they can’t reach each other. So they get very frustrated. I sang all the parts myself, and I stole all the lyrics off old ‘Lucas Tanner’ dialogue, but nobody will notice the difference because I made the music salsa and it’s so fucking loud you can’t hear any of the words. But I’m not gonna put that out just yet. They’ll have to wait a while for that. What my next album is gonna be is the follow-up to Metal Machine Music, which sounds exactly the same except it’s gonna be a concept album about all this stuff I was telling you about before about aging and a five-record set in a gold embossed box with a booklet inside featuring blown-up Polaroid SX-70s of me tying off, hitting up, sterilizing my works with alcohol and then going out Christmas shopping for Andy and all the kids at Bloomingham’s and the Pleasure Chest, where the last pic is me modeling a cock ring on my horse geezer. I predict by that time the general public will have grown ears and gotten hip enough to appreciate Metal Machine Music, so this follow-up, which I’m gonna call Triumph of the Will, will be the best-selling LP of all time and those ratfucks in Chicago can suck my asshole along with that little blob Elton John who could use some speed almost as bad as Leslie West but can’t have any of mine, because as I think it was Pat Ast said in that fabulous review of Coney Island Baby in the Soho Weekly News, ‘I have seen rock’s future and its name is Lou Reed’”), a double album, you ask? Simple—the two discs are, according to Lou, symbolic of two tits (“There’s never more than two,” he explained), to signify that this is, albeit mechanized, a very sexy album designed to cut in heavily on the hot Barry White market.

14. Everybody knows that drugs come in sexes. Downs are feminine, speed is masculine. Downs make you all nice and sweet and plant and tenderized like with E-Z Bake, whereas speed makes you aggressive and visceral and forthright and a real take-charge kind of guy/gal. (Makes no difference, because all humans are the same sex, except albinos. It is the drugs that, obviously, determine the gender of the being.) So which one you take when you get up in the morning just involves whether you wanna be Donna Mills or Joe Don Baker that day. It’s totally your prerogative.

Similarly, Coney Island Baby, fine and indeed heartfelt as it is, is a downs LP. No putdown involved—Lou’s favorite old Velvet songs were always the ballads, and he’s got a right to get sweet on himself. Love is silt. Anybody who has ever taken Quaaludes and wound up loving the rest of the human race so much they ended up in bed with a human turnip knows that. The lyrics are better than any Lou-née Tunes in a while, but note that not since Transformer have so many of them been explicitly preoccupied with the, er, ah . . . “gay” scene. Which certainly can’t be said of CIB's
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immediate predecessor. Me, I like sex with vegetables, but I nurse this lingering paranoia that someday, some drunken night, I may get a radish between the sheets and discover it's homosexual. Thus I feel threatened by *Coney Island Baby*, just as I feel threatened by Valiums, Tuinals, Seconals, Quaaludes and Compoz. *Metal Machine Music*, on the contrary, reinforces my sense of myself as a man. With it I can kill, even Puerto Ricans, which is the ultimate bar mitzvah. Under my blacklight presidential campaign poster of Hunter Thompson, I bolt upright in repose, my rifle casually draped cross my lap, listening to *MMM* and dreaming of My Lai as starring Fritz the Cat. So fuck downs, avoid *Coney Island Baby* like guys who wear green on Thursdays, and keep it (your fist) up tight.

15. *MMM* is Lou's soul. If there is one thing he would like to see buried in a time capsule, this is it.

16. It sounds better on Romilar than any other record I have ever heard.

17. It is the greatest record ever made in the history of the human eardrum. Number Two: *Kiss Alive!*

—Creem, March 1976

from

**Untitled Notes on**

**Lou Reed, 1980**

Lou, I understand you wanna be "dominant." Okay, dominate me. Go ahead, beat me to a pulp, worse, rule my life, do whatever your mind conceives whatever your heart and sinews rush to... is it me that can't accept it or you? Who would you really like to kill? Not yourself, because you wouldn't have made all those albums if that was it. Other people, too many, specific people, too limited, too silly. You know your hatred is just like anybody else's. The real question is what to live for. And I can't answer it. Except another one of your records. And another chance for me to write. Art for art's sake, corny as that. And I bet Andy believes it too. Otherwise he wouldn't killed himself a long time ago.
world has changed.” And: “Produce your own dream. It’s quite possible to
do anything . . . the unknown is what it is. And to be frightened of it is
what sends everybody scurrying around chasing dreams, illusions.”

Good-bye, baby, and amen.

—Los Angeles Times, 11 December 1980

Christgau calls it “skronk.” I have always opted for the more obvious
“horrible noise.” Guitars and human voices are primary vectors, though just
about every other musical instrument has been employed over the years,

as well as smashed crockery (e.g., first Pere Ubu album, “Sentimental
Journey”), scraped garbage-can lids and bongolated oil drums (early
Stooges), not to mention phono cartridges, toothpicks, pipe cleaners, etc.
(John Cage, Variations II). You probably can’t stand it, but this stuff has
its adherents (like me) and esthetic (if you want to call it that).

Look at it this way: there are many here among us for whom the life
force is best represented by the livid twitching of one tortured nerve,
or even a full-scale anxiety attack. I do not subscribe to this point of view
100%, but I understand it, have lived it. Thus the shriek, the caterwaul,
the chainsaw gnarlnashing, the yowl and the whizz that decapitates may
be reheard by the adventurous or emotionally damaged as mellifluous bursts
of unarguable affirmation. And one could, if so inclined, take it even further
than that: in his essential book The Tuning of the World, under the
heading “Sacred Noise and Secular Silence,” composer R. Murray Schafer
reports that during the Middle Ages to which we are after all now returning
“a certain type of noise, which we may now call Sacred Noise, was not only
absent from the lists of proscribed sounds which societies from time to
time drew up, but was, in fact, quite deliberately invoked as a break from
the tedium of tranquility.” Or, as Han Shan also did once advise one of
his Zen acolytes at Kyoto in lieu of canewhipping the whelp, “If you’re
feeling uptight and truly would prefer to sail into the mystic, just chuglug
two quarts of coffee and throw on side one of the first Clash album (Eng. edition) at ten, full treble, no bass.” Any more koans you need answered, refer ’em to Wild Man Fischer.

The point of all this, of course, is that hideous racket is liberating: to “go with the flow,” as Jerry Brown put it in his book Thoughts (City Lights, 1975), is always a wiser course of action than planting oneself directly in the path of the Seventh Avenue express, itself best portrayed on record by “Sister Ray” and the first New York Dolls album. I am also firmly convinced that one reason for the popularity of rap music, like disco and punk before it, is that it’s so utterly annoying to those of us whose cup of bile it isn’t; more than once its fans have walked up to a doorless telephone booth I was occupying, set their mammoth radios down on the sidewalk five inches from my feet, and stood there smiling at me. They didn’t want to use the phone, but I find it hard to begrudge them such gleeful rudeness; how could I, after walking all over the city with my also audible cassette player emitting free jazz, Metal Machine Music, PIL’s “Theme,” Miles Davis’s “Rated X” and Iannis Xenakis’s Electro-Acoustic Music, part of which the composer described as sound paintings of the bombing of Greece? So fair is fair, even given the differences in taste.

Which also extends into questions of set and setting. Once I was eating lunch with two friends near St. Mark’s Place, and a familiar sound started coming out of the jukebox. It took me a few seconds to recognize it, but that voice was unmistakable: “Hey,” I said, “it’s Lydia and the Jerks doing ‘Orphans’!” One friend laughed: “Well folks, enjoy your meals!” But she hadn’t noticed it till I’d brought it to her attention, and in context it didn’t sound at all more yakky than the Beatles’ “Helter Skelter,” which immediately preceded it. Then of course there is the whole question of Muzak and whether digestion really is improved by the theme from Dr. Zhivago. Or whether heavy metal and punk are essentially the same sound, or disco and punk oppressively. But then, when Patti Smith reviewed Velvet Underground Live 1969 in Creem back in ’75, she said she liked it precisely because it was oppressive, with which I at least partially concur.

Everybody has their little peculiarities, as evidenced by the fact that some people actually like to listen to the radio! So perhaps I can best bear witness to my own by listing a few of the Gehennas of wretched squawl which have made me most aware that I am alive over the years:

- The Stooges, “L.A. Blues,” Fun House (Elektra): After assaulting us for half an hour with six songs including the bulleted-boar tenor sax of Steve Mackay, the Ann Arbor visionaries let the whole thing explode and melt all over itself in this arrhythmic 1970 offering, replete with igneous feedback blankets, Mackay blowing his brains out and disappearing forever, and the man called Pop mewling, snarling, sighing, and licking his paws.

- The Germs, “Forming”/“Live” (What? single): It was all downhill for Darby and Co. after this 1978 debut. They could not yet play the rather standard-issue Ramonesclone headbangings of their album, so they had to toddle along a guitar and rhythm track that sounded like Malt-o-Meal being trailed from dining room to TV set, while Darb puled burble whose chorus you could tell he had reached whenever he repeated the words “Pull my trigger / I’m bigger than . . . .”

- A Taste of DNA (American Clave EP, 1981): The lead instrument in the new, improved DNA is neither Arto Lindsay’s slamming and scrapings of the electric twelve-string guitar he never plays chords on nor his laconically imploding epiglottis. It is Tim Wright’s bass, which ain’t even bereft of melody. And Ikue Mor cuts Sunny Murray in my book. Sure wish Ayler was alive to play with these folks (don’t laugh; Ornette almost played on “Radio Ethiopia”—he played “skronk” (the word sounds like something straight from his bell) if anybody ever did.

- The Sounds of the Junkyard (Folkways): Recorded live, of course, and quite a bit more soothing than you would expect, though with titles like “Burning Out an Old Car” you know it can’t miss.

- Yoko Ono, “Don’t Worry Kyoko, Mummy’s Only Looking for a Hand in the Snow” (flip of John’s “Cold Turkey” single, and side two of Live Peace in Toronto LP, Apple, 1969–70): Interesting not only for John’s churning blues-undo-feedback guitar riff and how far ahead of her time Yoko was vocally (though dig Patty Water’s “Black Is the Color” on ESP-Disk in early sixties) but for lyrical correspondence with Lydia Lunch’s “Orphans,” featured on

- Teenage Jesus and the Jerks (Mignare EP, 1980). If, as Christgau says, “Arto is the king of skronk,” then Lydia’s slide guitar work certainly qualifies her as queen. Guys in my sixth-grade neighborhood used to entertain themselves by tying the head of a cat to one hot-rod fender and its tail to another and driving the cars apart slowly, which sounded a lot like part of this. Unless it’s for Catholic-school beatings by nuns, nostalgia doesn’t account for Lydia’s passionate “Baby Doll” wailing. If you only want to try one, make it this—nothing more deathly shrill has ever been recorded.

- Jad Fair, The Zombies of Mora-Tau (Armageddon EP, 1980): Jad is half 1/2 Japanese, and with his brother David made a 1 1/2 J. three-record set that I still haven’t been able to listen to all the way through. A previous EP containing such highlights as “School of Love” was great, but
two quarts of coffee and throw on side one of the first Clash album (Eng. edition) at ten, full treble, no bass.” Any more Koans you need answered, refer ’em to Wild Man Fischer.

The point of all this, of course, is that hideous racket is liberating: to “go with the flow,” as Jerry Brown put it in his book Thoughts (City Lights, 1975), is always a wiser course of action than planting oneself directly in the path of the Seventh Avenue express, itself best portrayed on record by “Sister Ray” and the first New York Dolls album. I am also firmly convinced that one reason for the popularity of rap music, like disco and punk before it, is that it’s so utterly annoying to those of us whose cup of bile isn’t; more than once its fans have walked up to a doorless telephone booth I was occupying, set their mammoth radios down on the sidewalk five inches from my feet, and stood there smiling at me. They didn’t want to use the phone, but I find it hard to begrudge them such gleeful rudeness; how could I, after walking all over the city with my also audible cassette player emitting free jazz, *Metal Machine Music*, PIL’s “Theme,” Miles Davis’s “Rated X” and Iannis Xenakis’s *Electro-Acoustic Music*, part of which the composer described as sound paintings of the bombing of Greece? So far is fair, even given the differences in taste.

Which also extends into questions of set and setting. Once I was eating lunch with two friends near St. Mark’s Place, and a familiar sound started coming out of the jukebox. It took me a few seconds to recognize it, but that voice was unmistakable: “Hey,” I said, “it’s Lydia and the Jerks doing ‘Orphans!’” One friend laughed: “Well folks, enjoy your meals!” But she hadn’t noticed it till I’d brought it to her attention, and in context it didn’t sound all that more yakky than the Beatles’ “Helter Skelter,” which immediately preceded it. Then of course there is the whole question of Muzak and whether digestion really is improved by the theme from Dr. Zhivago. Or whether heavy metal and punk are essentially the same sound, or disco and punk equally oppressive. But then, when Patti Smith reviewed *Velvet Underground Live 1969* in *Creem* back in ’75, she said she liked it precisely because it was oppressive, with which I at least partially concur. Everybody has their little peculiarities, as evidenced by the fact that some people actually like to listen to the radio! So perhaps I can best bear witness to my own by listing a few of the Gehennas of wretched squawl which have made me most aware that I am alive over the years:

- The Stooges, “L.A. Blues,” *Fun House* (Elektra): After assaulting us for half an hour with six songs including the bulleted-boar tenor sax of Steve Mackay, the Ann Arbor visionaries let the whole thing explode and melt all over itself in this arrhythmic 1970 offering, replete with igneous feedback blankets, Mackay blowing his brains out and disappearing forever, and the man called Pop mewing, snarling, sighing, and licking his paws.
- The Germs, “Forming” / “Live” (What? single): It was all downhill for Darby and Co. after this 1978 debut. They could not yet play the rather standard-issue Ramenoscene headbangings of their album, so they had to toddle along a guitar and rhythm track that sounded like Malt-O-Meal being trailed from dining room to TV set, while Darb puled burble whose chorus you could tell he had reached whenever he repeated the words “Pull my trigger / I’m bigger than . . . ”
- A Taste of DNA (American Clave EP, 1981): The lead instrument in the new, improved DNA is neither Arto Lindsay’s slamming and scrapings of the electric twelve-string guitar he never plays chords on nor his laconically imploding epiglottis. It is Tim Wright’s bass, which ain’t even bereft of melody. And Ikue Mori cuts Sunny Murray in my book. Sure wish Ayler was alive to play with these folks (don’t laugh; Ornette almost played on “Radio Ethiopia”)—he played “skronk” (the word sounds like something straight from his bell) if anybody ever did.
- The Sounds of the Junkyard (Folkways): Recorded live, of course, and quite a bit more soothing than you would expect, though with titles like “Burning Out an Old Car” you know it can’t miss.
- Yoko Ono, “Don’t Worry Kyoko, Mummy’s Only Looking for a Hand in the Snow” (flip of John’s “Cold Turkey” single, and side two of *Live Peace in Toronto* LP, Apple, 1969–70): Interesting not only for John’s churning blues-undo-feedback guitar riff and how far ahead of her time Yoko was vocally (though dig Patty Waters’s “Black Is the Color” on ESP-Disk in early sixties) but for lyrical correspondence with Lydia Lunch’s “Orphans,” featured on
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this might even be better for the way Jad integrates atonal air-raid guitar with sub-Jonathan Richman white-burba-infantilismus vocals that as they natter tunelessly onward actually tell little stories (“And I said, ‘Dr. Frankenstein, you must die,’ and I shot him” and you hear the gun KABLOOIE!). This may be a whole new songwriting genre, or at least one terminal of the Lou Reed “I walked to the chair / Then I sat in it” school of lyrics.

* Lou Reed: *Metal Machine Music* (RCA, 1975): Don’t see this around much any more, but it sure caused a ruckus when he sprang it on Transformer / Sally Can’t Dance. Rocky horror fans: a two-record, hour-long set of shrieking feedback run through various pieces of high-tech equipment. Sounded great in midwestern suburbs, but kinda unnecessary in NYC.

* Blue Cheer, *Vincebus Eruptum* (Philips, 1968): These guys may well have been the first true heavy metal band, but what counts here is not whether Leigh Stephens birthed that macho grunt before Mark Farner (both stole it from Hendrix) but that Stephens’s sub-sub-sub-Hendrix guitar overdubs stumbled around each other so ineptly they verged on a truly bracing atonality.

* The Mars EP* (Infidelity, 1980): With Teenage Jesus, DNA, and the Contortions, this group was featured on the watershed *No New York* LP (You mean you don’t own a copy? What are you, sick or something?). But for my money this piece of beyond-lyrics, often beyond-discernible instrumentation psychotic noise is their absolute masterpiece—despite John Cavanti, their version of Mozart’s *Don Giovanni*, which I have never been able to listen to all the way through. This is not “industrial” but human music, and so what if said humans sound like they’re in a bad way? You are too. As it grinds and griefs and grovels, you cannot deny that they certainly plow what they sow. Best cut: “Scorn.” Best rumor: Somebody dropped the original tapes, produced by Arto Lindsay, in water. And accidentally, at that.

—*Village Voice,* 30 September–6 October 1981

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**PART SIX**

**Unpublishable**

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Fragments, 1976–1982

from Notes on PIL’s *Metal Box*, 1980

from “All My Friends Are Hermits,” 1980


from Notes for Review of Peter Guralnick’s *Lost Highway*, 1980

from “The Scorn Papers,” 1981


from “Maggie May,” 1981