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'Heaven 17 Live at Scala' Gives Us Those Chilly-Cum-Funky Electronic Tunes

By **Terrence Butcher** 14 April 2011

After being ejected from soon-to-conquer the world band the Human League in 1981, Martyn Ware was hopping mad, according to British journalist Simon Reynolds, in *Rip It Up and Start Again*, his seminal tome on the UK's fertile postpunk scene of the late '70s/early '80s. Seething from insult and injury, he *definitely* had something to prove.

What next? In the typical DIY spirit of that place and time, he and fellow Human League alumnus Ian Craig Marsh decided to form a production outfit with the florid and vaguely industrial name, British Electric Foundation, or B.E.F., as they came to be called. They would go on to help orchestrate Tina Turner's blockbuster comeback, producing some tracks on *Private Dancer*, but that was years down the road.

Their debut concoction was a synthpop trio – Ware, Marsh, and mate Glen Gregory on lead vocals – Heaven 17, an appellation borrowed from a fictional band in Anthony Burgess' corrosively satirical *A Clockwork Orange*; let's face it, Kubrick's hellacious film adaptation was an unwitting aesthetic influence on the revolutionary punk scene that exploded like a neutron bomb on late '70s London. Heaven 17's chilly-cum-funky electronic tunes found an enthusiastic audience among young and trendy Britons, and like most Top 40-charting groups of the time, they made their obligatory guest spots on prime-time perennial *Top of The Pops*, Britain's premiere showcase for rising pop talents of the time, an era when MTV was still in diapers.

Like the inventive, genre-defying American duo Steely Dan, Heaven 17 was (and is) primarily a studio act, and they avoided live performances until 1997, by which time they and most of their contemporaries had vanished from the pages of *Melody Maker*, supplanted by rave culture, "Madchester", and Cool Britannia. They've soldiered on, however, and perhaps discovered that



Heaven 17

Heaven 17 - Live at Scala, London (WienerWorld / MVD; US DVD: 11 Feb 2011)

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they enjoy the giddy audience interactions only available in a live setting, and in 2005, performed before a packed house at the Scala in London. I daresay that for most in attendance, it was a memorable evening.

The Scala, which I've never set foot in, is a decidedly intimate setting, with no room for antic rave gyrations. If anything, its size evokes the television soundstages of *Top of The Pops* or *The Old Grey Whistle Test*, and the very close vicinity of the fans demands that one put on a good show, lest displeased aficionados yank you from the microphone.

The hall is bathed in an enveloping blue light, a sufficiently high-tech affectation, I suppose, then lead singer Gregory appears, clad in a cream-colored suit, the full-bodied blond tresses we recall now virtually a memory, though the same could be said for the spectators, many of whom are folks of a certain age, and probably were riding the Tube to Carnaby Street back in the day to purchase Heaven 17 discs.

The opening number is "Are You Ready?", enhanced by a brace of hearty female backup vocalists, a common feature of early '80s English pop, if one wanted to evince a soulful sound. Indeed, an inevitable backlash arose, as some rebellious cranks deemed it crass commerciality. At any rate, the song is inarguably redolent of rave-friendly Eurodisco, and Gregory's stentorian British nasality completes the package.

Following is the provocatively titled "Geisha Boys & Temple Girls", enlivened by the heartfelt shouts of their only Afro-British backup singer. The calming, mid-tempo "Come Live With Me" is next, and it's among their high-charting UK singles from their '80s heyday.

Things sizzle a bit when "(We Don't Need This) Fascist Groove Thing", a strident political rant inspired by America's election of Ronald Reagan to the White House. The exclamatory rap of the tunes' gospel-tinged chorus reverberates against the walls with a vengeance. I always imagined that tough political stances were antithetical to Heaven 17, but I guess I wasn't paying attention. On the same tip, "Crushed By the Wheels of Industry" adopts a similar rhetorical bent as "Groove Thing", but keeps its feet firmly planted on the dance floor.

I must concede that I longed to hear "Let Me Go". MTV put this burbling, hummable ditty on the US map a generation ago, on the eve of the Second British Invasion. Its electro-beat rhythm section is less compelling live, but the ominous keyboard whine lends some much needed drama.

The Scala concert betrays the image of Heaven 17 as an icy, synth-driven outfit. Tellingly, their biggest UK hit, "Temptation", comes off as a joyous, celebratory romp, drawing the band even closer to gospel stylings than the aforementioned "Groove Thing", especially in the dramatic overture that leads us in. This shouldn't surprise any fans of '80s British pop, as many of that era's most successful acts borrowed liberally from African-American genres, without which rock would never have coalesced. Just ask the Glimmer Twins or Rod Stewart.

"Temptation" was likely my own introduction to the group; I first heard the tune on the syndicated radio show "Rock Over London" during the winter of 1983, when it sat pretty at #2 on *Music Week's* Top 40 Singles sheet. Still, it gained them no traction on my side of the pond, where Heaven 17 never transcended cult status, and were embraced primarily by listeners of New York's WLIR and Los Angeles' KROQ, both outlets pioneers of a new wave "Rock of the '80s" format. I suspect that more of my countrymen know New Order's song of that same title from Danny Boyle's anarchic, spirited *Trainspotting*.

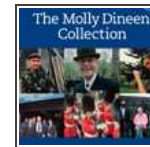
Extras here aren't copious, but they amount to a fairly comprehensive backstage pass. *Après gig*, Ware and Gregory – in a cord driving cap, looking like a country squire weekending in the Cotswolds – mingle congenially with gushing fans, signing autographs and fielding interview queries. Gregory seems elated, admitting that he and his partners "were very ill-prepared for this".

A much lengthier treat is "At the Studio", where we're ushered into the band's decidedly cozy recording space, in which they recorded the lion's share of their oeuvre. No larger than the average master bedroom, it effectively de-mystifies the 'glamorous' process of creating professional albums. Like many of their contemporaries, Heaven 17 rose to fame amidst the rapidly-shifting charts and "bloody well do it yourself" ethos, factors that fashioned the vibrant British postpunk universe and foreshadowed today's Internet-driven accessibility to polished tech-geek craftsmanship, and the overnight renown that may result.

"At the Studio" is basically an extended Q&A session with Gregory and Ware, the duo (Marsh had since departed) answering written questions that were previously submitted by eager fans. Intentionally or not, the discussion takes on an elegiac tone, as their struggles to cope with a radically changed pop culture environment are slowly revealed.

Ware, now resembling a grayer, heavier Rupert Graves, talks jovially about meeting an obsessive fan who eventually wore out his welcome, and it seems a unfair irony that Heaven 17 no longer have major label support, making a tour economically unfeasible. That may be academic, however, as he claims to have little time to devote to such projects anyhow. He does propose a three-act

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junket with fellow Sheffields ABC and the Human League, which eventually became 2008's "Steel City" tour.

All three bands arose from the detritus of gritty, post-industrial Sheffield, ambitious, hungry lads who dreamt of international superstardom, recording sessions on balmy Caribbean isles, and Armani-clad parties on Ibiza, via the escape valve music could provide. Now, they must settle for being nostalgia acts for Generation X, enjoying a sliver of past glories in a way that their hometown perhaps never will.

Ware also expresses regret at losing the opportunity to produce the Arctic Monkeys, England's hot group *du jour*, and a keystone of the so-called 'rock revival', enabled by the now-faded Cool Britannia scene. On the upside, Ware is planning a new B.E.F. enterprise, likely to be recorded in Heaven 17's office-like studio, as many public ones are in bankruptcy.

In the early '80s, it was possible for Great Britain's postpunkers—the New Romantics, Rude Boys, and their ilk—to imagine themselves the center of the universe. Said universe has undergone a seismic shift since those halcyon, neon-glow days, and the members of Heaven 17 seem resigned to leading diverse professional lives which may *not* include another Heaven 17 release.

Rating: 

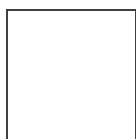
Terrence Butcher is a freelance writer who loves books, cinema, music, and theater. He holds a B.A. in Creative Writing(Antioch University), and an M.A. in Film Studies/Screenwriting from Hollins University. He critiques DVDs for PopMatters.com, and has discussed graphic novel characters for CC2K. His first feature-length screenplay was recently completed, and he has a special fondness for pre-1977 New Hollywood, British kitchen sink dramas, mockumentaries, "B" horror flicks, and documentaries on cinema history. Terrence resides in a leafy, historic town in Southern California, worked on the 2010 Vampire Film Festival, and is a founding member of Pasadena FilmWorks.

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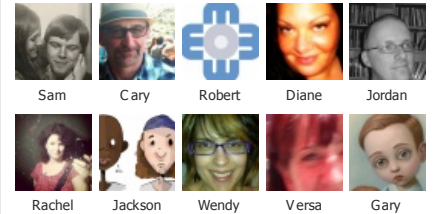
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them to the Human League or similar synthpop conglomerates, it seems far more appropriate to consider Heaven 17 as an unlikely companion to Gang of Four.

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