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New documentary explores Brian Eno's visionary rock

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By Jay Lustig/The Star-Ledger

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Getty Images

A rare photo of Brian Eno singing onstage.

By 1977, **Brian Eno** had not yet put his sonic imprint on some of the most important albums of the 1980s (U2's "The Joshua Tree" and "The Unforgettable Fire," and Talking Heads' "Remain in Light"; he produced or co-produced all three).

He had not yet worked with Devo and Coldplay, or teamed with Talking Heads frontman David Byrne for their groundbreaking experiment with "found" vocals, "My Life in the Bush of Ghosts." The new age music movement, which he is sometimes credited with (or blamed for) starting, had not picked up steam yet.

Yet Eno, who is now 63, produced a mountain of great work from 1971 to 1977; more than three decades later, his music from those years still sounds audaciously forward-looking. Watch the new DVD documentary "**Brian Eno — 1971-1977: The Man Who Fell to Earth**" (\$19.95, Sexy Intellectual/Chrome Dreams) — more than 2½ hours devoted to just those years — and you'll have no doubt: Brian Eno expanded the boundaries of rock 'n' roll as few people have, before or since.

The DVD was made without his cooperation, so it's mostly left to music journalists and Eno's former collaborators to explain what he was all about. But it's still a documentary that fills a big hole. Many of rock's great stories have been told so many times they've lost their charm, but Eno in the '70s has been severely underdocumented until now.

ROCK ANTIHERO

The DVD starts with Eno's brief tenure in the band Roxy Music. For most of his career, he has shown little interest in the trappings of rock stardom and celebrityhood. But when he was in Roxy Music, he dressed



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to shock, with glittering, futuristic outfits, lipstick and eyeliner, and lots of feathers. He partied hard and courted the press, making outrageous statements and provocatively labeling himself a "nonmusician." (This was at the height of the progressive-rock era, when musicians were all striving to outdazzle each other with their virtuosity.)

The cover of the DVD, "Brian Eno 1971-1977: The Man Who Fell to Earth."

Eno had "a gleeful contempt for craft," music critic Simon Reynolds says in the documentary.

Onstage, he played simple synthesizer parts and mixed the music, but still managed to draw much of the crowd's attention away from the band's actual frontman, Bryan Ferry.

"When Roxy Music first emerged, I think, what made them stand out was the way that the music was treated," says Eno's friend and collaborator Lloyd Watson in the documentary. "Other people were playing synthesizers, but they were just playing them as the instrument itself. He was molding, and remolding, and texturing, and layering."



Getty Images

Brian Eno, in a photo used in the packaging of the "Brian Eno 1971-1977: The Man Who Fell to Earth" DVD.

The documentary then jumps to footage of the young, long-haired Eno, wearing a leopard-skin shirt and gold-colored gloves, onstage with Roxy Music, twiddling knobs.

"He wasn't a musician — I mean, he could play a little bit of guitar — but his forte was taking it all and molding it and making it into Roxy Music," continues Watson.

Inevitably, tension between him and Ferry, the frontman he was constantly threatening to overshadow, forced him to leave Roxy Music. So he became a solo artist, but also formed alliances with similarly inventive musicians, including guitarist Robert Fripp (who had already had major success on his own with prog-rock group King Crimson). "(No Pussyfooting)," their first collection of gorgeous instrumentals — juxtaposing Eno's richly textured tape loops with Fripp's melodic but unpredictable guitar solos, came out in late 1973.

FLYING SOLO

The "Man Who Fell to Earth" DVD subtitle (borrowed from the 1976 David Bowie movie) makes sense not so much because of Eno's Roxy Music-era spaceman look, but because throughout his career, he has seemed, even more than Bowie himself, to exist in a world of his own.

A few months after "(No Pussyfooting)" came out, Eno released his first solo collection of songs, "Here Come the Warm Jets," proving not only that he could sing and write actual songs, but that he could stay avant-garde while doing so.

Some tracks were filled with absurdities and non sequiturs; others were more straightforward. He sang in a clear but deadpan style — a bit of a sour sneer crept into the vocals at times, though his melodies could be rapturously beautiful. Sonically, each song existed in a world of its own, from the feverishly urgent rhythms of "Blank Frank" (which anticipated industrial-rock) to the grinding gloom of "Driving Me Backwards" and the grandiose, cinematic orchestration of "On Some Faraway Beach."

Three more excellent song albums followed. On "Another Green World" (1975) and "Before and After Science" (1977), though, the songs shared space with atmospheric instrumentals.

"By the time of 'Before and After Science' ... he is moving off into the ether, where he has remained ever since," says critic Robert Christgau, in the documentary.

"Ether" is taking it too far. As a producer, Eno has contributed to some commercial blockbusters. But his own albums have mostly been in an ambient, instrumental vein (the early ones came out on his own pointedly named label Obscure Records, which also put out music by other experimental composers).

LOW PROFILE

Eno made one attempt to perform his songs on tour, hiring a British club band called the Winkies to back him in 1974. But the tour came to an end after five shows, with Eno being hospitalized for a collapsed lung.

He never tried to mount a tour like that again. He also lost his rock-star look, cutting off his long hair and ditching the glam clothes.

By 1977, Eno had formed his most notable association to date, working with Bowie ("Low" and "Heroes," both released in '77, and "Lodger," from '79, sounded, in many ways, like Eno albums). But he could pass for an unassuming college professor, and he pretty much stopped giving interviews and maintaining any kind of a public profile.

When I was in college in the early '80s, it wasn't like everyone who was interested in rock music knew about Eno. But I can't recall anyone ever hearing those four song albums and not becoming a fan. I imagine it's still very much the same way.

He hasn't been inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame; it's one of the institution's most egregious omissions. But he has won seven Grammys, for his work with U2 and Coldplay, and last year, the band MGMT added to his immortality by including a song called "Brian Eno" on their "Congratulations" album.

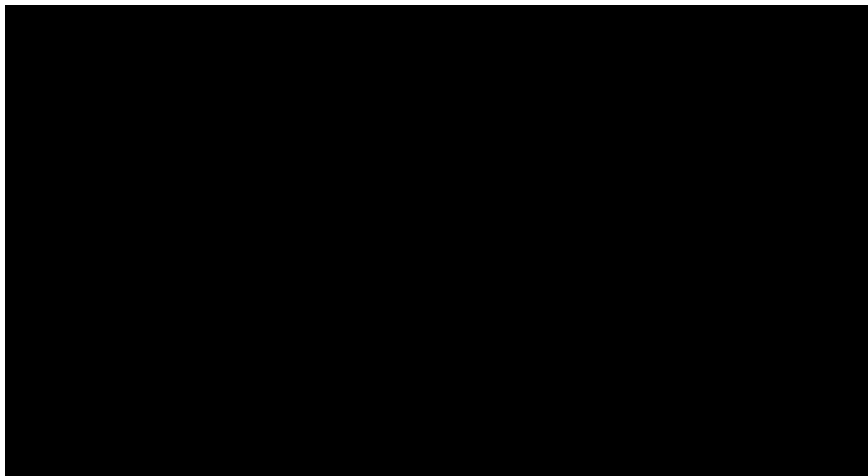
"I can tell that he's kind of smiling, but what does he know? We're always one step behind him, he's Brian Eno," sang Andrew VanWyngarden.

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Getty Images

Brian Eno, in a photo used in the packaging of the "Brian Eno 1971-1977: The Man Who Fell to Earth" DVD.



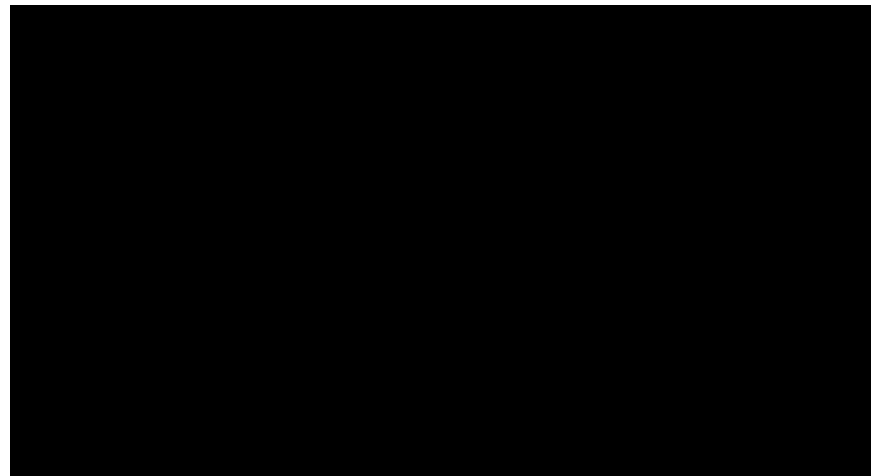
A SELECTED BRIAN ENO DISCOGRAPHY

AS BAND MEMBER:

- "Roxy Music," Roxy Music (1972)
- "For Your Pleasure," Roxy Music (1973)

SOLO ALBUMS:

- "Here Come the Warm Jets" (1974)
- "Taking Tiger Mountain (By Strategy)" (1974)
- "Another Green World" (1975), pictured
- "Discreet Music" (1975)
- "Before and After Science" (1977)
- "Ambient 1: Music for Airports" (1978)
- "Music for Films" (1978)
- "Nerve Net" (1992)
- "Another Day on Earth" (2005)
- Collaborative albums:
 - "(No Pussyfooting)," with Robert Fripp (1973)
 - "June 1, 1974," with Kevin Ayers, John Cale and Nico (1974)
 - "Evening Star," with Robert Fripp (1975)
 - "My Life in the Bush of Ghosts," with David Byrne (1981)
 - "Wrong Way Up," with John Cale (1990)
 - "Everything That Happens Will Happen Today," with David Byrne (2008)
- Production and/or instrumental work:
 - "The Lamb Lies Down on Broadway," Genesis (1974)
 - "Fear," John Cale (1974)
 - "Low," David Bowie (1977)
 - "Heroes," David Bowie (1977)
 - "Ultravox!," Ultravox (1977)
 - "More Songs About Buildings and Food," Talking Heads (1978)
 - "Q: Are We Not Men? A: We Are Devo!," Devo (1978)
 - "Fear of Music," Talking Heads (1979)
 - "Lodger," David Bowie (1979)
 - "Remain in Light," Talking Heads (1980)
 - "The Unforgettable Fire," U2 (1984)
 - "The Joshua Tree," U2 (1987)
 - "Achtung Baby," U2 (1991)
 - "When I Was a Boy," Jane Siberry (1993)
 - "Zooropa," U2 (1993)
 - "All That You Can't Leave Behind," U2 (2000)
 - "How to Dismantle an Atomic Bomb," U2 (2004)
 - "Surprise," Paul Simon (2006)
 - "Viva la Vida or Death and All His Friends," Coldplay (2008)
 - "No Line on the Horizon," U2 (2009)



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