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# Pure Imagination in 'Brian Eno: 1971-1977: The Man Who Fell to Earth'

By **Stuart Henderson** *6 June 2011*  
PopMatters Features Editor

In the early 70s, when Brian Eno was known (if, indeed he was known at all) as the glammed out synthesizer artist in the emerging British band Roxy Music, few could have guessed that he would become one of the most significant musicians of the decade. His early appearances with the band suggested a kind of theatrical presence, perhaps even a bit of an affectation. He even once proclaimed himself to be the band's "non-musician", which was a bit of an affirmation of these types of readings.

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Of course, for those of us who were listening to the complex textures Eno was bringing to Bryan Ferry and Phil Manzanera's respectively singular and dynamic approaches on those first two records (1972's *Roxy Music* and 1973's *For Your Pleasure*), it was clear his presence was crucial. But ego-tripping and all the attendant pressures of burgeoning fame, hectic touring schedules, and artistic differences (rock writer clichés, perhaps, but these are always perfectly relevant issues) conspired to find Eno leaving the band in 1973, and striking out as a solo artist, producer, and (eventually) legendarily influential pioneer in electronic music.

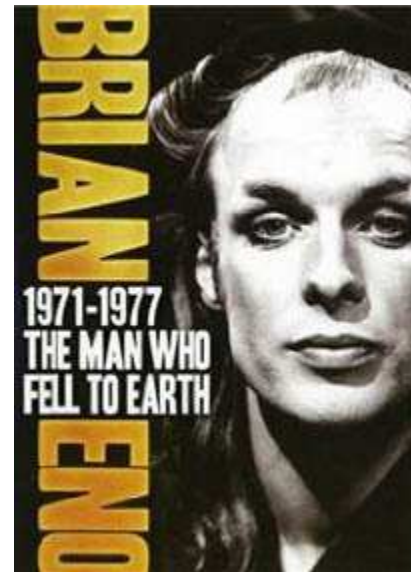
This documentary, which emphasizes precisely this period from the rise of *Roxy Music* through Eno's early solo career and toward his late '70s status as studio wizard and revered sonic innovator, leaves little doubt as to Eno's broad significance. Providing an overview of the string of extraordinary (but then little-heard) records *Here Come the Warm Jets* (1973), *Taking Tiger Mountain (By Strategy)* (1974), *Another Green World* and *Discreet Music* (both 1975) and *Before and After Science* (1977) and following Eno through his astoundingly successful collaborations with David Bowie (including those on his career highlight record *Low* (1977)), Talking Heads, Devo, and others, this doc provides a look at one of the most exciting figures in rock music at his creative peak. So, how is it that it is so painfully dull and free of insight?

We can begin to answer this question just by looking at the cover of the DVD. Prominently alerting us to the fact that this film is neither endorsed by or in any way associated with Eno himself, this reverent doc suffers from a crippling lack of access. There are no interviews with Eno, of course, but also no Bowie, no Brian Ferry, no David Byrne, no Robert Fripp (he of the Eno-directed guitar work on Bowie's unstoppable song "Heroes"). Indeed, there are interviews with artists who'd worked with Eno, but they are almost all of them strangers to this reviewer – Hans-Joachim Rodelius or Lloyd Watson, anyone? – and thus their authority feels suspect.

In the absence of any obvious choices (such as, maybe, anyone from *Roxy Music*!), the film relies instead on a raft of rock critics who spend a lot of time imagining stuff about what might have been going on in Eno's "alien" head. It all begins to feel a bit exploitative, and not a little boring. I mean, anyone can imagine what's going on in his head. The reason a film like this is worth watching is if it provides actual insight into that head!

Or, perhaps put more plainly: let's say someone is compiling an unauthorized biography about you. How many of your closest friends and relatives and collaborators will get involved even though they know you don't want them to? Who among your former colleagues and acquaintances *will* say yes to talking behind your back? Will those people provide worthy insight into your artistry, your character, your life?

There can be no doubt that Eno is a towering figure in music history. Though largely unknown in the '70s to anyone outside of a small subculture of music fanatic, liner note obsessives, and fellow musicians, Eno's sway over glam, ambient music, the punk scene, electronica, New Wave, and just about any band that gets tagged with the "indie" label today, is amazing. The most rewarding thing about sitting through this extraordinarily long film – at 2 ½ hours it is at least an hour too long given the lack of access to any more relevant interviewees – is that it offers a stirring opportunity to revisit



### Brian Eno: 1971-1977: The Man Who Fell To Earth

Director: n/a

Cast: Robert Christgau, Hans-Joachim Rodelius, Lloyd Watson

(US DVD: 17 May 2011)

some of the most seminal music from a fascinatingly transitional period in pop music. Too bad that the filmmakers (there is no director credit, strangely) forged ahead without support rather than working toward a fuller picture of their subject.

**Rating:** 

**Extras rating:** 



Stuart Henderson is a culture critic and historian. He is the author of *Making the Scene: Yorkville and Hip Toronto in the 1960s* (University of Toronto Press, 2011). All of this is fun, but he'd rather be camping. Twitter: @henderstu

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**Timh Gabriele**

I haven't seen the film in question, but it seems like you are reviewing the film you wanted to see rather than the one in question. While parts of this film may be suspect, you can't fault the filmmakers for not scoring high profile interviews with hard-to-get interview subjects like Eno and Bowie. There's plenty of information out there on what goes on in Eno's head, particularly writings by Eno himself, who became one of the first examples of "rock star as music critic" in his various guises as theoretician, curator, producer, songwriter, and experimenter. Which makes it all the more silly to suggest music critics, such as yourself, would have no insight into Eno's music, which- even without the corpus of writing available- is already loaded with locuses of analysis. Perhaps the next best thing to Eno himself would be authors of rigorous and accomplished studies of the man and his work like Robert Sheppard and Geeta Dayal, who both appear in the film. Again, I have yet to see the film, so maybe this really is an empty 2 1/2 hours, but the basis of your attack seems suspect, particularly given the subject matter. And to reiterate the statement below, Roedelius really should be familiar to anybody who knows the Eno canon. Not only were they collaborators, but they influenced each other and myriad forward-thinking musics in the process.

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The authority of Hans-Joachim Rodelius is in no way "suspect". He was a member of the German groups Cluster and Harmonia, both of which Eno was enormously fond of--so much so that he collaborated with Rodelius on several occasions (see: Eno & Cluster, Harmonia & Eno, Eno Moebius Rodelius) and Rodelius appeared on Eno's Before and After Science. Like Eno, Cluster, Harmonia and Rodelius himself (solo) were pioneers in the development of ambient and electronic music.



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Hi, and thanks for the comments. I agree that Rodelius/Cluster are significant, but still, this was hardly Eno's defining musical relationship. I'm guessing that what most fans want to hear more about w/r/t Eno's work in the 1970s isn't his collaboration with Cluster. (Also, the "suspect" line isn't a reference to his musical authority, but rather his motivation for appearing in a film that Eno has expressly disavowed.) Anyway, you may still disagree with this review after you see the film, of course, but let's wait 'till then?

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**TMS13**

Just because you hadn't heard of Rodelius before seeing this film (as you've admitted in the review) doesn't mean his musical relationship with Eno was important. If you listen to works like Cluster's *Zuckerzeit* and Harmonia's *Musik von Harmonia*, you'll find that those groups were mining very similar territory as Eno's defining album *Another Green World* (1975), except a year earlier (1974). Eno has even been quoted as calling Harmonia "the world's most important rock group." Although most Eno fans may not have heard of Rodelius and his various collaboration does not make his influence any left significant.

As far as the movie is concerned, I haven't seen it yet so I can't speak of it specifically, but from what I've heard Roedelius is a very friendly guy who will gladly talk to anyone interested in his music--journalist or fan alike. If he had any motive for appearing in the film, he was probably just happy to speak to anyone with knowledge and awareness of his legacy.

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Well put.

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