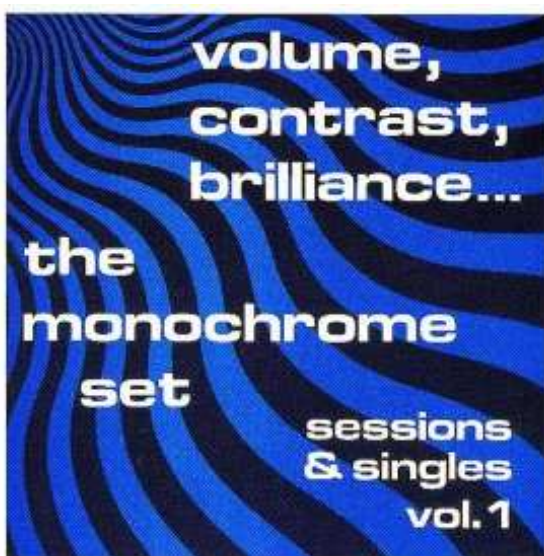


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Album Review: The Monochrome Set — Volume, Contrast, Brilliance



Note: be sure to read all the way through; there's a new Monochrome Set DVD reviewed as well.

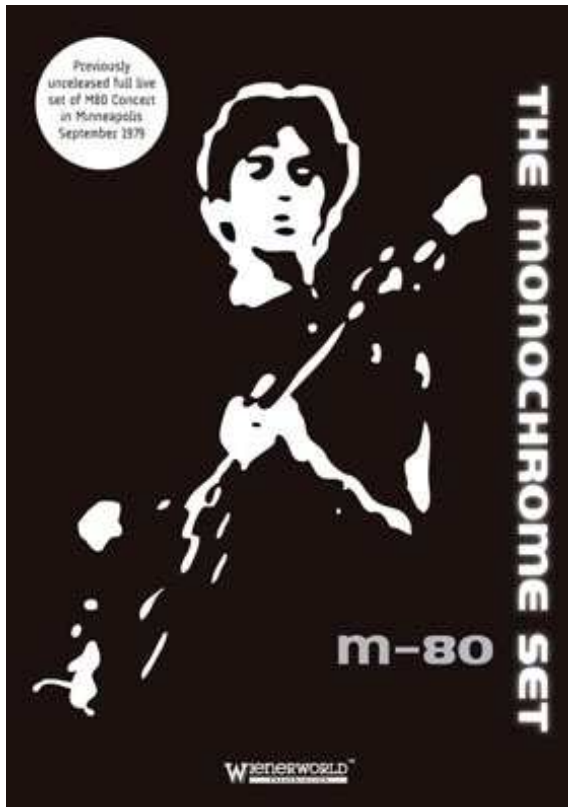
The Monochrome Set were one of those bands who never broke stateside. Though they enjoyed critical and (limited) commercial success in their native England, in the USA they were all but unknown. With a sort that seemed like a cross between early **XTC** and **The Jam** with a café society vibe, in some ways they're the musical missing link between **Paul Weller**'s first group and his **Style Council** releases.

But of course Weller had nothing to do with the Monochrome Set. Led by the one-named **Bid** (on vocals and guitar) and ably backed by the cleverly-monickered **Lester Square** on lead guitar plus drummer **J. D. Haney** and bassist **Jeremy Harrington** (the latter was replaced in 1980 by **Andrew Warren**), the band played a unique set of songs (all composed by Bid solo or with various bandmates) that remain stylistically difficult to pin down. There are hints of dub, ska, punk, new wave, no wave...you name it. And Bid's laid-back vocal style adds a romantic, devil-may-care air to all of the songs, regardless of the style in which they're played.

Volume, Contrast, Brilliance...Sessions & Singles Vol. 1 (there would never be a second volume) collected odds and ends from the group's heyday (1978 through 1981, with a few stray tracks from 1986). Originally issued in 1991 on Cherry Red, the album is now the latest in high-quality, vinyl-only releases from UK-based Optic Nerve. A splendid purple-blue vinyl LP encased in a sturdy sleeve, the reissue also includes a lovely three-color poster depicting the album's cover art.

The album bookends many of the radio tracks with brief intros and radio interviews that show the band's sense of humor (check out some of the song titles, such as "Silicon Carne"), and the fact that radio programmers often didn't know what to make of them.

Perhaps the finest track on the set – both musically and lyrically – is "The Ruling Class," from a *Do It* radio program session in 1981; here the band sound a bit like Jazz Butcher. "Viva Death Row" is oddly reminiscent of **Tav Falco's Panther Burns** at their most rickety, crossed with the danceable white funk of **Gang of Four**. Decidedly uncommercial-sounding, The Monochrome Set are nonetheless intriguing and often fun.



But wait, there's more!

That a Monochrome Set *live* visual document should even exist is a surprise; even more so that said video captures the group in one of its few American performances. Dating from early in the band's career, the newly-released *M-80* DVD shows the original lineup onstage at a "new wave" music festival in Minneapolis MN. With only about a half dozen songs in common with *Volume*, *Contrast*, *Brilliance*, this DVD includes an entire 18-song set in pretty good audio quality.

That's the good news, however. The images (which I'm pretty sure were originally shot on black-and-white video rather than film) look as if they were downloaded off of YouTube. Pixelated and blurry, the video is watchable, but not much more than that. And the band adopts a jaded attitude onstage: they play at top speed, but Bid and his mates affect a bored vibe throughout. The contrast between high-speed, off-key playing and monotone, off-key singing might have been *tres cool* in 1979, but watching it on this poor quality video, it's none too exciting. In particular, Jeremy Harrington's pulsing bass work is rendered flat here, though that may be down to the audio mix rather than his playing. Regardless, *M-80's* existence is more than justified by its rarity. Just know that you've been warned.

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