

## "Danger: Depressing": John Cale's *Music for a New Society*

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JOHN CALE'S *Music for a New Society* startled in 1982 and it startles in 2014. It was markedly at odds not only with the synthetic and formulaic pop-rock of its time but with the maverick exuberance of most of the other music on Michael Zilkha's ZE label. Kid Creole and 'Out Come The Freaks' this was not.

*Music for a New Society* falls into a category of Harrowing Interior Journey that includes Big Star's *Third*, Talk Talk's *Spirit of Eden* and Scott Walker's *Tilt*, along with albums by fellow former members of the illustrious Velvet Underground: Nico's *Desertshore*, Lou Reed's *Berlin*. Even within Cale's oeuvre of that period it sticks out like a smashed thumb, separating as it does the dark paranoia of *Honi Soit* (1981) from the marginally friendlier settings of *Caribbean Sunset* (1984). It is John Cale at his most uncomfortably unhappy, close to chemical rock-bottom and

attempting to articulate his torment in real time in a New York studio. By turns hummable and unbearable, it is a long-night-of-the-soul experiment in art-rock that's never less than captivating.

"It was intended to be a proper solo album, which was something I'd never done," Cale told me when we discussed the record in early 1983. "Initially the idea was to stick me in the studio with a piano and have me just play the songs like that. There was a purist notion of what it was supposed to be, but it flowered into something entirely different, with a lot of overdubbings. There are melodies there, but some of it even goes outside the realm of that. It's like the BBC Radiophonic workshop."

Cale had produced *Desertshore* (1970) – and Nico's equally glacial precursor *The Marble Index* (1968) – and returned to those albums as templates for the *Music for a New Society* sessions.

"Nico would come in and sing the song with her harmonium," he told me over thirty years later, "and then we'd try and separate the voice off from the harmonium as much as possible. And then I'd add more parts to it. The important thing was not to have any

of the parts relate to what happened before, so you'd have these floating independent parts that were going on during the piece. And then you'd pull out the harmonium, and you'd have this sort of miasma of whatever changes were there. So when it came to doing *Music for a New Society*, that was kind of the practice that I was used to."

Cale also admitted that *Music for a New Society* "represented the chaos that was going on in my life at that time". On other occasions he has said that his mood was "grotesque" and that the sessions were "tortuous". While some of the music is deceptively melodic – even superficially soothing in the piano-based singer-songwriter mode of *Paris 1919* (1970) – much of it is disturbing and agonising, lyrically *and* sonically.

If Cale garbs the opening song – 'Taking Your Life In Your Hands', about a homicidal mother – in soft electric guitars and keyboards, he doesn't flinch from making 'Thoughtless Kind' or the notorious 'Sanities (a.k.a. 'Sanctus', Cale's original mis-transcribed title) sound like someone in the throes of a psychotic breakdown,

complete with jarring sound effects and random drum beats that recall *Third* and prefigure *Tilt*. (And that's without even mentioning the weeping, the maniacal laughter... or the bagpipes.)

"Some of the personalities are schizophrenic," he told me.

"There's a lot of conflict in there between the person the song is written about and the voice I'm singing it in. The whole thing is hooked on the voice, which is one thing I'm really proud of – that the voice is sticking out there, that it's not hidden, because you really have to identify with the characters of those songs."

Even when there is minor relief in the ensuing 'If You Were Still Around', the song's hymnal beauty and piercing heartbreak are quickly twisted by lines such as "*I'd turn you facing the wind/Bend your spine on my knee/Chew the back of your head...*"

If the revisited '(I Keep a) Close Watch' is ear candy next to 'Sanities' – though stripped of the lush strings and horns that Cale applied to the original version on 1975's *Helen of Troy* – 'Broken

Bird' is shockingly comfortless. And then a little later comes 'Damn Life', with its central melody pinched from Beethoven's *Ode to Joy*: "You're just not worth it/You're just not worth the pain..."

It's hard to believe that ZE managed to extract a single from *Music for a New Society*. Nor is it entirely clear whether Michael Zilkha pressured Cale to chuck him the 45rpm bone that was 'Changes Made' or whether Cale offered ZE the track (complete with the Blue Oyster Cult's Allen Lanier on guitar) as a sop.

"At the end I thought, 'Well, this isn't really fair to Michael'," he says. "There had to be some kind of radio-sensitive song on this, so I did 'Changes Made' and did a video for it."

One wonders whether Cale will shoot a video for the version of 'Changes Made' on the new *Music for a New Society* – one of the more radical reworkings of the songs from the original record. Sung in a *faux*-baritone that's equal parts Nick Cave and Interpol, the new 'Changes Made' is stomping singalong electropop with

tongue firmly in cheek, or so one has to assume. (Certainly it gives a hilarious new edge to the line "*I'm a lofty man, I'm a hungry man,*" adding for good measure that "*I'm a difficult man, in the best possible way...*")

The rest of *Music for a New Society Mark II* is equally bold. Against all odds Cale has returned to these songs and transformed them into pulsing pop ('Chinese Envoy'), spacey electronica ('If You Were Still Around', 'Taking Your Life In Your Hands') and – more radically still – contemporary R&B ('Close Watch', 'Thoughtless Kind'). 'Sanctus', on the other hand, remains as scary and psychotic as it ever was.

When I asked Cale in 1983 why he'd called the album *Music for a New Society*, he said that it was meant to strike an optimistic note. "The record is so dark, you've got to have something optimistic," he said. "They should put a tag on the record saying 'Danger: Depressing', it probably would sell more!"