

THE SKY'S THE LIMIT

Huw Collingbourne talks to Glenn Gregory of Sheffield's electronic funsters, Heaven 17.

'Ian and Martyn are leaving Heaven 17,' Glenn Gregory tells me when I meet him, 'Which means that from now on it's going to be just me. We've already got some tours planned so I'm going to have to look for some other musicians to form a group.'

At this point I begin to feel an uncomfortable sensation of having heard something like this once before. After all, it was only just over a year ago, back in October 1980, that this very same Ian (Craig Marsh) and Martyn (Ware) split from another group just before a major tour, leaving the lead singer, a certain Philip Oakey, to try to piece together a new band to take the show on the road. Of course, we all know what happened to them. But as for Messrs. Ware and Craig Marsh – you'd think that they would have learnt to hang onto something while the going was good. So why do they seem so keen on repeating history by uprooting themselves once again from a group of their own creation?

'Well, this time it isn't really a proper split,' Glenn assures me, 'Not in the sense that they split from The Human League, at any rate. It's just that, with Ian and Martyn becoming more and more involved with other recording projects for their company, BEF (the British Electric Foundation), they haven't got the time anymore to go on tours and things. So we decided it would be better for me to take over the group myself.'

When I spoke to him, Glenn still had no idea what form the new Heaven 17 would take or exactly how many instrumentalists would be brought in to replace Ian and Martyn. One thing he was sure about, though, was that the new version H17 was going to be Big... very BIG!

'Ideally, I'd like it to be enormous,' he told me, 'a huge force of musicians spread out all over the world, all of whom can be drawn on at any time – just like the network of spies they used to have in



'The Man From UNCLE' programmes on TV. I was a member of UNCLE when I was a kid and I had a card that said "You may be called on at any time". I used to stay up late at night waiting to be called. But I never was. So now I'm going to make up for that by setting up my own organisation and letting other people wait for me to call them!'

Apart from the somewhat perverse thrill of wielding this god-like power over his far-flung 'Empire', Glenn believes that if he is able to keep changing the group's line-up, then the music which they create will remain fresh and exciting.

'People stagnate when they carry on doing exactly the same thing all the time,' Glenn says, 'And that's true not only of music, but in all walks of life.'

'You see so many people getting themselves stuck for year after year, into doing jobs that they hate. I did it myself for a while. Before joining the group I was a photographer working in advertising. I didn't enjoy it because advertising is as boring as hell. When I got the chance of joining this group I threw in my job straight away without any hesitation.'

'Within the first few months of doing that I was so short of money that I had to sell my camera to get enough cash to live on. Even today I'm earning less than I was as a photographer. But, at least, what I'm doing now is a damn sight more exciting.'

Although Glenn readily admits that his 'solidly working-class' background has strongly influenced his approach to song-writing, he does not like to be thought of as a 'political' musician.

While it is true that Heaven 17's song-lyrics do attempt to comment upon political and social issues more often than most other groups do – '(We Don't Need This) Fascist Groove Thang', 'Penthouse and Pavement', 'Play to Win', etc. – Glenn is quite insistent that the music is meant mainly for entertainment and any 'message' in the songs is incidental. He just writes about subjects which he (or Ian or Martyn) happens to be thinking about at the time.

'At the moment it seems to me an utter waste to fill out songs with all those old "in and out of love" lyrics. Though I *could* imagine us doing a song like that if I'd just been through a heavy romantic affair which had broken up.'

'But if people want to listen to the words, that is a sort of added extra, really. When we perform live, all I want is for people to enjoy themselves, *really* enjoy themselves.'

'Heaven 17 will only be performing in clubs where people can dance. I want the live show to be really entertaining. Though, because it's in clubs, we won't be able to make the show *too* lavish.'

'I mean, it would be nice to have a swimming pool on stage, full of two hundred girls, but, for the time being, I think we might have to settle for something a bit less adventurous – a couple of bed-sheets on the back wall, maybe, to project slides onto. Or then, I could go to a nightclub to look for a couple of girls to dance with us. Or has someone else done that already? You know, that group, what are they called – "The Human" something? They think of *everything*, don't they!'