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Riot in Steel City

Armed only with wooden synthesisers and globs of hair gel, Sheffield's pop pioneers sparked a musical revolution. Dave Simpson hears how it all happened from members of the Human League, Heaven 17 and ABC

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Sheffield's electronic titans ... members of the Human League, Heaven 17 and ABC.
Photograph: Christopher Thomond

It's late 1979 and the Human League are pioneering Britain's synthesiser pop revolution. The previous week, at a gig at the Nashville Rooms in London, David Bowie had bounded into their dressing room to proclaim them "the future of rock'n'roll", a comment picked up by NME. However, that doesn't count for much by the time the tour reaches the band's hometown, Sheffield. In the middle of the gig, singer Philip Oakey is pouring his heart and soul into a futuristic, electronic version of the Walker Brothers' 'You've Lost That Lovin' Feeling', when an unfamiliar figure joins him on stage.

"This bloke came up and tapped Philip on the shoulder," remembers Martyn Ware, who played synthesiser for the Human League before leaving to co-found Heaven 17. "He said, 'Excuse me. Can you get off now? We've got a beer race on.'"

Oakey winces at the memory. "I was very angry and everyone was trying to calm me down," he sighs, in his famous deadpan baritone. "I was going, 'This is wrong! Let me finish the song!'"

"What people forget is that the other band who Bowie said were the future of rock'n'roll were Legend," deadpans Oakey, remembering a metal band who "had an album cover bearing vinyl shoes and must have seemed very modern".

Legend didn't become legends, but the music made by the Human League, Heaven 17 and fellow Sheffield electronic soulsters ABC - a triumvirate now touring together for the first time - has become pivotal to the way pop sounds today. Originally, their ambition was to destroy rock music altogether: "We hated anything that wasn't modernist," says ABC's Martin Fry. "It was like Cavaliers and Roundheads. Total warfare!" Instead, their work from the late 70s

and early 80s resonates across modern pop, from Ladytron to Warp Records, from Xenomania to hip-hop.

These days, a meeting with Sheffield's electronic titans is peppered with camaraderie and self-deprecating northern banter. That wasn't the case back when the Human League's *Don't You Want Me* sold 1m copies and the bands were jostling for pop supremacy. At that point, the Human League were so paranoid about being copied that they wouldn't give anybody tapes of what they were doing.

History records Cabaret Voltaire as Sheffield's first electronic group, but they weren't the first Steel City act to use a synthesiser. That honour goes to an early-1970s band called Musical Vomit. Featuring computer operators Martyn Ware and Ian Craig Marsh (who would later found the Human League), Heaven 17 singer Glenn Gregory and actor Ian Reddington (Coronation Street's hapless drummer, Vernon), they were unlikely pioneers. "It was like *A Clockwork Orange* crossed with Alice Cooper," says Gregory. "There was vomit from the stage and 'legs' being chopped off." As for the synth, it was wooden. "It had a joystick, which we loved because it was very Brian Eno," sniggers Ware. "But it only made two noises."

The curious thing about Sheffield is that, unlike in Britain's other major cities - especially Manchester - its hip crowd didn't embrace punk. The most creative musicians in the city were exploring the possibilities of electronic music.

"Sheffield was a hard place," recalls Gregory. "Everyone else was into heavy rock. It didn't accept punk other than as a trigger for innovation." Oakey - who says he hadn't heard of Cabaret Voltaire until he joined the Human League - recalls Kraftwerk's appearance at Sheffield University in 1976 as being "as seismic as the Sex Pistols. Everybody loved it."

Crucially, the Human League didn't copy Kraftwerk's dry, robotic music; they added emotion and humanity to create what Ware describes as "synthetic soul". In an early interview, Oakey declared their ambition was to become "an international version of Abba".

Aligning oneself against rock meant looking different, too. Ware remembers meeting his fellow synth player Adrian Wright, who was wearing "white jeans, a green jacket and silver platform boots". But when the band went out to the Crazy Daisy nightclub, their attire was even more unusual. One night, Marsh turned up wearing chains and a baked bean tin as a bracelet. "This guy looked at him and said, 'What the fuck's that?'" remembers Ware (soberly dressed these days). "The guy took [the beans tin] off, threw it on the floor and stamped on it, saying, 'Now what are you gonna do?'" Ware considers Marsh's reply - "Open another one" - worthy of the subsequent beating. That fate somehow eluded Oakey, despite his famous lopsided haircut, although singer Susan Sulley does remember one audience member trying to set fire to his trousers.

But there was a point to even the most outlandish fashion statements. Oakey's magnificent barnet - which led to him being called "Phil Funnywig" by NME - got the Human League's music noticed. "I always wanted a distinctive hairstyle, like Bowie or Marc Bolan," says the 53-year-old. "I copied it from a girl on the bus."

ABC's Martin Fry - a Mancunian Roxy glam rocker turned Sheffield-based electronic kid - remembers the "shock" of first encountering the Human League. "The reaction from the audience was uneasy: 'Where's the drummer?!' This was

before hip-hop, and that sort of shock isn't around now."

Record labels didn't know what to make of the Sheffield scene, but the Human League were given a chance by Virgin, which was still flush with money from the success of Mike Oldfield's *Tubular Bells*. The groups felt as if they were taking on the entire musical establishment. Their nemesis was the Musician's Union, which saw synthesisers and drum machines as a threat to the livelihood of thousands of percussionists. It started a "Keep Music Live" campaign, to which the Human League responded with an on-stage skull and the slogan "Keep Music Dead".

There were other problems. Early synthesisers were problematic, and although musicians first picked them up in part out of laziness - "We didn't want to spend months with the Duane Eddy songbook, learning to play guitar," admits Oakey - they found themselves programming their equipment for months. (At one point the Human League took photographs of the machines' settings so they could get the same effects the following week.)

Nevertheless, the Sheffield sound was extraordinarily influential even then. Oakey insists that *Orchestral Manoeuvres in the Dark* copied the Human League's stage equipment, although he concedes that their debut, *Electricity*, was a "brilliant single". Others were catching up, too, and synth music started to generate hits, while the first two Human League albums - 1979's *Reproduction* and 1980's *Travelogue* - barely troubled the charts. When Gary Numan hit No 1 with *Are 'Friends' Electric?*, Oakey was mortified.

Something had to give, and the Human League broke into two, with Ware and Marsh leaving to pursue new projects.

Even today, the members find it awkward to discuss what exactly precipitated their acrimonious split. Oakey suggests he and Ware were simply too forceful as characters to be in the same band. Ware suspects that their manager, Bob Last, had spotted Oakey's potential as a "pop star with massive earning potential" and engineered him away from arty stuff.

Ware and Marsh set up the *British Electric Foundation* - a "futuristic production concept" whose most lasting legacy was to relaunch Tina Turner - before bringing in Gregory to become *Heaven 17*. Oakey, meanwhile, was drowning his sorrows at the *Crazy Daisy*, where he spotted two teenage girls dancing and asked them to join the band for a gig in Doncaster.

At first, the new members didn't seem to be adding much. "We just hummed along and did some dancing," says Sulley. "And occasionally got so drunk we fell off stage," adds Joanne Catherall. In Germany, they faced burning union flags and cans pelted by people who "expected a band of boys". However, when the new-look Human League released their 1981 masterpiece, *Dare*, the pair became part of electronic pop history - glamorous girls-next-door who paved the way for everyone from the Spice Girls to *Girls Aloud*. "But we were never stylised," says Sulley. "We did look like we'd walked out of Sheffield. It gave hope to people, because if we could do it, anyone could."

In the 80s, the Sheffield sound went overground. As the Human League's *Don't You Want Me* squared up to *Heaven 17's (We Don't Need This) Fascist Groove Thang* and *Temptation*, ABC released their masterwork, 1982's *The Lexicon of Love*, which blended electronics, orchestrated soul and a gold lamé jacket. For Oakey, it was a vindication of what he had been trying to achieve for years.

"People who had laughed in our faces three years earlier were suddenly saying,

'Your records are great,'" he remembers. "And things like, 'It doesn't matter if it's a synthesiser, it sounds like a bass.'"

Suddenly, even rock bands were using synthesisers, while there were, ironically, howls of outrage when the Human League played guitars for their 1984 single *The Lebanon*. "We shouldn't have done it," says Oakey. Sulley is more circumspect: "We wanted something different."

Today, the records made in Sheffield in the late 1970s and 80s are in the rare position of being loved by housewives, electronic boffins and hip-hop purists alike, and still sound ultramodern. The battlegrounds on which the Steel City contingent fought for pop's future - the Limit Club and Crazy Daisy - have long been demolished, but the stance of their patrons remains unwavering.

"I still hate rock music," says Oakey, defiantly. "I think it's adolescent, easy, power-chord nonsense."

Meanwhile, a blue plaque at Sheffield University honours the site of the Human League's first gig. Appropriately, it has become a computer department.

- The Steel City tour begins at Glasgow Academy on November 30.

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