



Throbbing Gristle in their heyday: Peter 'Sleazy' Christopherson, Chris Carter, Cosey Fanni Tutti and Genesis P-Orridge

Naughty but nice

Influential noise-makers Throbbing Gristle have been condemned as fascist. But, as they release a 24-CD box set, Richard Wolfson finds them surprising

Imagine a group who could combine the satanic charisma of Marilyn Manson, the personal detritus of Tracey Emin, the cut-up texts of William Burroughs, and the noise-making potential of a Volkswagen factory. Throw in a brilliant capacity for subversive self-promotion and the ability to transform a rock gig into something that veered between a Sufi ritual and a parody of a fascist rally, and you might just begin to approach the contradictory, ambiguous, confrontational and unbelievably influential phenomenon that was Throbbing Gristle.

Between 1975, when they formed, and their break-up in 1981, they managed to attract extraordinary condemnation. Fascists, pornographers, satanists, incompetents – all these accusations have been thrown at them. In 1975, Tory MP Nicholas Fairbairn dubbed them “wreckers of civilisation” as a media frenzy broke out over *Prostitution*, their art show at the ICA. Questions were asked in the House.

In the early Nineties another media row broke out over ex-Throbbing Gristle vocalist Genesis P-Orridge. While he was overseas, Scotland Yard raided his premises and confiscated what was deemed to be highly unsavoury video material. (In fact, it was an experiment in editing commissioned by Channel 4.) P-Orridge was politely advised not to return to the UK.

It is now that I must declare a personal interest, for P-Orridge (real name Neil Megson), was a schoolfriend of my older brother, Paul. Indeed, Paul was a member of

P-Orridge's first organisation, the self-styled Knights of the Pentecostal Flame. Its single act, in June 1968, was to distribute words on small pieces of paper to bemused passers-by at the shopping centre in Solihull, a leafy suburb of Birmingham. I was in short trousers at the time, but I can just remember a rather gentle figure who wrote poetry and spoke with a distinctive nasal Manchester accent. Could this really be the anti-Christ demonised by the popular press?

Since 1999 P-Orridge has been able to enter the UK again, and this has opened the way for him and the other three members of Throbbing Gristle – Cosy Fanni Tutti, Chris Carter and Peter Christopherson – to come together to organise the re-release of their monumental recording *24 Hours of TG*.

It's a box-set of 24 live concerts, which will be released by Mute on Monday as a kind of alternative Christmas event. It documents the group in full flow: they are captured hurling noise, tape loops, caterwauling electric guitar and screaming synths at stunned audiences. It was the opposite of rock and roll – P-Orridge was wont to shout “We hate you!” at the audience, rather than the more normal “We love you.”

“We were truly independent,” says P-Orridge when I meet the group in a London hotel. “We weren't looking secretly for a record contract; we weren't hoping to be on *Top of the Pops*; we weren't looking for the rock-and-roll lifestyle of silver lamé trousers and groupies or whatever. We just wanted to see what would happen if we threw out the rule books.”

That meant immersing

themselves in the darker areas of human behaviour, with songs about viruses, burn victims, poison gas and mass murderers. You were never quite sure whether they were exposing our innate voyeuristic tendencies or gratuitously wallowing in degradation. It was a fine line on which all their work was meticulously balanced.

Throbbing Gristle gigs could be hazardous affairs. At the Architectural Association, the group were hidden by a tarpaulin: you could either see them, on TV monitors around the venue, but not hear them, or you could lean down from the roof or the balconies in the hall and hear them, but not see them.

P-Orridge remembers: “There was a riot! People were throwing broken toilets down on us.”



Genesis P-Orridge in one of his many guises

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“We wanted to see what would happen if we threw out the rule books”

The discomfort engendered by TG live did not enamour them to the era's most famous rebels, the punks, and at different times gigs were disrupted by the Slits, the Raincoats and Generation X. P-Orridge was particularly disappointed by the punks: “The great irony was that the punks were more conservative and narrow-minded and musically bigoted than anyone else. And they saw what we were doing as sacrilege to rock and roll.”

Skinheads were another possible source of danger. Cosy remembers a gig where skinheads stormed the stage: “We all sat down and put our feet on the table, and said OK then you do it! And they just shouted down the mike for a bit and said, OK, you can go back now. And they were fine afterwards, they helped us pack the van up.”

The group designed their own noise-making gadgets, such as the notorious Gristleizer effects units, and also experimented with more unconventional uses of sound. Carter says: “We had some troublesome anti-social neighbours, so we got hold of these incredibly powerful speakers, pizo horns, that give out very high frequencies that you can't really hear. Dogs can hear them, but humans just feel it. We put them on the back wall, pointed them in the right direction, and just ran out and left them on all day.” The neighbours soon moved out, believing the place to be haunted.

The group eventually broke up, partly because Cosy (real name Christine Newby), P-Orridge's long-term girlfriend, started a relationship with Carter. After TG, they all embarked successfully on