

# music

## this week's essential reading

{ 'War dogs'  
by Aleksandar  
Hemon, Slate

Sarajevo-born writer fondly remembers his family's Irish setter, Mek, who survived the Bosnian war despite scrapes with army trucks and trigger-happy drunk soldiers }

### playlist

Four more bands who followed in the footsteps of Throbbing Gristle's machine-like noise

#### Cabaret Voltaire

The Voice of America (1980)

In the early 80s, Sheffield was the hub of the UK's electronic music scene, with Cabaret Voltaire, as well as Human League, Heaven 17 and Moloko, emerging from the city's grim industrial wastes. All of these bands' stripped-down, minimalist sound owes a huge debt to the sonic experimentation of TG.



#### New Order

Movement (1981)

Although they'd been hinting at an electro/rock hybrid with Closer, the final album under their previous guise of Joy Division, it wasn't fully realised until they'd reinvented themselves as New Order. The rattling drum machine, dark waves of synthesizers and grim lyrical content was pure Throbbing Gristle.



#### Nine Inch Nails

Pretty Hate Machine (1989)

These days Trent Reznor is a sought-after film soundtrack composer, bagging himself an Oscar for his score for Facebook flick The Social Network. Back in 1989 he was more into pummeling eardrums with his band NIN, who combined heavy-metal guitar riffs with the deafening din of a pneumatic drill.



#### Marilyn Manson

The Golden Age of Grotesque (2003)

While TG's grotesque onstage theatrics and quasi-Nazi and serial-killer imagery may have attracted media attention, their record sales barely registered. Brian Warner, aka Marilyn Manson, however, mimicked TG's antics and converted this into a string of platinum-selling albums.



# The wreckers of civilisation

As their back catalogue is reissued, Andy Battaglia looks at the taboo-smashing English band Throbbing Gristle. Formed as a sort of tense standoff between art and music, the gruesome post-punk outfit have proven to be as seminal as they were notorious

It says a lot about the elasticity of pop music that it can comfortably accommodate a hit song called *Hamburger Lady*. Not a novelty song about a happy or campy character fashioned after a sandwich but, rather, a grim, grisly, in all ways grotesque screed about a hospitalised woman who has been burnt so badly that she makes her carers ill.



DOA: The Third and Final Report of Throbbing Gristle  
Industrial Records

It's not the kind of subject matter that is often addressed in song, but then, neither was anything else taken up by the band known as Throbbing Gristle. Formed as a sort of tense standoff between art and music in England in the 1970s, Throbbing Gristle were as notorious as a band could be. They aspired toward extremes of antagonism, lighting out against all manner of convention and staging transgressive performances that prompted a prominent London politician to decry them as "wreckers of civilisation". Such is the stuff from which enduring musical legend is made.

from the ether. At work are just a few spare synthesised sounds and a voice, smeared in digital filth, reading back a real-life account of a doctor's letter about a patient whose face has been marred beyond recognition. It's barely musical, suggestively perplexing and completely disquieting – a classic tripartite Throbbing Gristle effect.

But now, on the occasion of a valuable reissue campaign more than three decades later, historical notoriety matters less than another aspect of the project more closely at hand: each of the five primary Throbbing Gristle records that remain. *Hamburger Lady* was by no means a "hit" in terms of chart placement, but its reverberations can still be felt, even now. It serves as a centrepiece on *DOA: The Third and Final Report of Throbbing Gristle*, an album from 1978. Stretched over four minutes that seem to last much longer, the song is slow and creepy, a haunting transmission

*DOA* is the second of the five albums reissued (it was neither really "third" nor "final" in the band's catalogue, appropriate to what would come to be nonsensical tradition). First of the lot is 1977's *The Second Annual Report*, which exhibits Throbbing Gristle as an enterprising upstart heavily in thrall to noise. The setting for *Slug Bait* is a dirty bed mused by all manner of electronic grinding and grating, with vocalist Genesis P-Orridge moaning a spoken fantasy about the murder of a family. Named after the poison gas used in concentration camps during the Holocaust, the single *Zyklon*

*B Zombie*, compiled on a bonus disc (each of the reissues comes with an extra disc of singles or live material), layers ghostly murmurs over what sounds like a guitar buried deep beneath a cesspool.

It's sickening, but also mesmerising. It was also an antidote to the contemporary punk music that was supposed to be the true terror of the era. Indeed, it's shocking how much more dangerous and deranged Throbbing Gristle sound now when compared with bands such as the Sex Pistols, The Clash, The Damned – all those classic punk bands whose frame of reference, however unhinged, was still recognisable as rock 'n' roll.

In that way, Throbbing Gristle classifies as a paragon of the offshoot strain known as "post-punk". But even then, their work resists communion with that or anything else – except, perhaps, for the bands they later influenced. Part of the wowing effect of listening to Throbbing Gristle anew is accounting for all the styles and sounds they seeded. Industrial music, nervy new-wave, techno, noise, horrorcore rap – each can trace its roots to Throbbing Gristle in its diseased DNA.

The group's formula favoured jarring variation and clashing changes in tone. But there are sounds of something more pop-minded, or at least more approachable, on the second album, *DOA*, in a track called *AB/7A* that glides over arpeggiated rhythms from an electronic synthesizer and a drum machine. It's messy and mechanically raw, but only a little bit. You might



From left, Chris Carter, Cosey Fanni Tutti, Peter "Sleazy" Christopherson and Genesis P-Orridge of Throbbing Gristle. Michael Ochs Archives / Getty Images

even dance to it, if not otherwise frozen with fear.

By 1979's wryly titled *20 Jazz Funk Greats*, Throbbing Gristle hit on the most fully realised and resilient aspects of their sound. It's

comparatively cleaner and much closer to sane, though it's in such a context that the group proved both artful and abstract. Stretches of songs play like ambient movie music, evocative of scenes it might

be better not to imagine, while others march by in tight formalistic groupings of rhythm and melody. *Hot on the Heels of Love* is full of irresistible sci-fi scintillation, dark in its shadings but bright in

its almost aching submission to an appealing form of synthesised disco. *Persuasion*, following right after, returns to a distended spell of slow, plodding death-speak – lest the mood grow too jubilant.

The whole set of reissues – also including the live-studio set *Heaven Earth and Greatest Hits*, both from 1980 – heaves with a breathless, panting energy for invention. It also goes a long way toward reminding the latter-day listener of just how inciting and incendiary music can stand to be.

It's easy to forget these days, with tales of past radicalism so omnipresent as to seem blasé, that sound retains a genuine ability to unsettle and unseat. But it does, regardless of how dismissive we might deign to be. Looking at best-album lists from the past year, one can sense a yearning for that unsettling aspect – for viscerality, even danger. Conspicuous inclusions cross the lines of genre. Liturgy's yowling rock dirge *Aesthetica* broke out beyond the borders of black-metal. *Goblin*, by Odd Future mastermind Tyler the Creator, signalled a creeping strain of hip-hop toward the dark and the macabre. Prurient's *Bermuda Drain* found a hitherto uncharted middle-ground between guttural noise and gleaming electronic music.

Examples abound and all of them suggest something still alive within the unnerving sound summoned by Throbbing Gristle in their prime. Historical distance does nothing to numb the effect of hearing Genesis P-Orridge spew spittled poetics into a microphone while the rest of the band – Chris Carter, Cosey Fanni Tutti and Peter "Sleazy" Christopherson – build up rickety structures of texture and noise designed to degenerate. There is a lot of power still in musical ruin, and a lot left to build from ruins whose foundations remain sound.

Andy Battaglia is a New York-based writer whose work appears in *The Wall Street Journal*, *The Wire*, *Bookforum* and more.