

FOR A WHOLE decade now we have been putting up with the loud and aggressive artistic pretensions of pop music and mainly — and especially if we did not want to seem too outre — we have sat quietly and more or less agreed that Yes, pop music—I mean, look at the goddam poetry of Eleanor Rigby for Christ's sake and how about the Who: wow!—is just the most exciting art form to come down the pipe since, ah, something or other.

It would be difficult here to give any sort of rundown of the claims which have been made for pop music. No grand claims, no high praise, has been too much. The Beatles were the greatest thing since Schubert, whoever the hell he was. The rock opera Tommy is "the greatest artistic achievement of the twentieth century," says Ken Russell. Just dare criticise the Pink Floyd in a newspaper and you'll get a telegram—not a letter—from Tony Palmer asking who the hell you are and "what words or phrases have you contributed to the English language?" I can think of many that the Pink Floyd have.

Time magazine puts Joni Mitchell on its cover and well, OK, ~~but then inside~~ it goes on and on falling all over her as if she were . . . what? A great artist! That's it. They actually write about her as if she was great like a singing Sappho or something. Something you have never see the like of before anyway. And, if you switch on a radio like I did the other night and you hear people disoussing and reading poetry you will hear someone read from, say, the Wasteland, and then read out some lines from Joni Mitchell in a hushed voice of reverence. ~~Finally,~~ this particular night on this particular radio programme there was a girl on it who said, "I'm terribly sorry but I somehow more or less just cannot take seriously a line of poetry that says 'Baby, I can't make it with you socially.'" There was one of those explosive little silences. A deadly hush. You just do not criticise hot music like that. You just do not dare question it.

Stanley Reynolds

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I mean, what are you some kind of a school teacher or something?

Of course pop music is just fine. I can even cry when Don McLean sings Starry, Starry Night, and I love to dance and it is a lot of fun a rockin' and a reelin' Barbara Ann, ain't it. Patti Labelle, Sarah Dash, and Nona Hendry in those aluminium suits singing Lady Marmalade:

He met Marmalade down in old New Orleans

Struttin' her stuff on the street

She say "Hello, hey Joe, you wanna give it a go

And Getcha Getcha Ya Ya da da mama.

Getcha getcha ya ya here

Mocha chocolata ya ya

Creole Lady Marmalade.

She say—she say

'Voulez vous coucher avec moi ce soir ?

Voulez vous coucher avec moi.?"

Stevie Wonder singing:

Bum, Bum,

Bum Bum di ti bum bum

Bum Bum di ti bum

Bum bum di ti bum

Please smile for me

Bum.

Well, all right. OK. Frank Zappa singing Zomby Woof:

Didja ever wake up in the mornin'

With a ZOMBYWOOF behind your eyes

I envy ZOMBYWOOF

I'm that creature all the ladies been Talkin' about.

Zappa is satire. He's my favourite. Has any TV critic done anything like Zappa has done in a handful of lines in I'm the Slime.

I am gross and perverted

I'm obscene 'n' deranged

I have existed for years

But very little has changed

I am the tool of the Government

And industry too

For I am destined to rule

And regulate you

I may be vile and pernicious

But you can't look away

I make you think I'm delicious

With the stuff that I say.

I am the best you can get

Have you guessed me yet?

I am the slime oozin' out

From your TV set

You will obey me while I read you

And eat the garbage that I

feed you

Until the day that we don't need

you

Don't go for help . . . no one will

heed you

Your mind is totally controlled

It has been stuffed into my mould

And you will do as you are told

Until the rights to you are sold.

All very well and good. People who like this sort of stuff are going to like this sort of stuff. But it is not allowed to end there. This is not just music to dance to, sing to, listen to. No. This is the GREATEST EVER 'n' that's the zambywog. Remember Ken Russell said Tommy is the greatest artistic masterpiece of the twentieth century and words were failing him, he was practising English understatement for God's sake.

The point of this is very simple. Here we have the greatest art form ever" OK? No mess. But what does it do with itself? Here we have all these absolute geniuses, capable of writing the world's greatest masterpieces of song and dance and what are they writing about? By and large they are confined to their baby and their baby leaving them. Electronic variations on moon and June and croon.

But where are the rock poets of Vietnam? Here we have this most important and significant event and it is happening right alongside the rock pop explosion but where are the rock poets? The song poets, singing of it for us? We could use them. I don't want to knock the rock. This is a cry from . . . a tortured soul; a soul in torment.

Of course the novel has let us down over Vietnam. And the epic poem and everything, else. So why not the rock poets? But the novel doesn't have the pretensions that the song poets have right now. The novel is dead and it knows it. The novel is always telling us how dead it is. The novel has rolled over, put its face to the wall, bowed out in favour of the New Journalism. It is pop, rock, soul, that is alive and well and having its day right now. Don't look to old and outmoded forms like the novel and the goddam epic poem to hymn you the tragedy of Indo-China look to today's art form, look to the song poets, the rock poets. Listen, this is the music of the generation that actually got killed there in Indo-China. But what have the song poets and pop to say? Pop is mum, it has nothing to say about Vietnam. But what the hell, that deaf, dumb, and blind kid sure plays a mean pinball.

