

WIRE

Since their formation in London in 1976, the four members of Wire have maintained and advanced a musical project which treats the creative potential of a rock band as a fluid, amorphous medium. As removed from self-conscious intellectualism as they are from the inherent conservatism of much rock music, Wire employ their unique, endlessly restless and risk-taking creativity to question every aspect of songwriting, recording and performance. They delight and disturb in equal measure, troubleshooting the circuitry of perfect pop, or patrolling the limits of focused experimentalism. In terms of working together as Wire, the group's members disbanded in 1980, reformed in 1985, disbanded in 1992 and reformed for the second time in 2000. Such sabbaticals from their career as Wire have served to sharpen the group's edge and focus, updating the tactics with which they pursue this shared project.

Wire came to prominence through the cultural revolution of punk in the UK, the effects of which were felt throughout the latter half of the 1970s. Immediately fluent in the language of contrariness and paradox, Wire's very name was both industrial and poetic, blank and eerie. As evidenced by their two tracks on the compilation released in August 1977, *The Roxy London WC2 Jan–Apr 77* (the brooding *Lowdown* and the instantly iconic, neurasthenic mini-drama *12XU*) the group made a musical virtue of tension and a lyrical strength of ambiguity.

More than any other group from that period, Wire embraced the purpose of punk as a minting of otherness and newness—as a response to the notion of modernity itself reaching critical mass. From a seamless fusion of contradictions (fast and slow, funny and menacing, soft and loud, gentle and angry, clever and dumb) the group created a singularity of sound and attitude which was utterly distinctive, precision channelled as though to concentrate its energy through highly sophisticated modes of constriction.

This proactive use of constriction could be said to begin with the group's stripped-down instrumentation: two guitars, vocal and drums, as though the mechanics of Wire's engine were race-tuned to reach the sheer speed required by many of the songs. Musically and lyrically, repetition, abbreviation, tempo and acceleration have become a constant in Wire's career-long processes of self-reinvention. 'Monophonic and monorhythmic'- to quote their own description of their epic track, *Drill* released in 1986.

With regard to performance, Wire exchanged the traditional heroicism of live rock for the rhetoric of incitement, while remaining irresistibly entertaining. Two specific performances, within their usual run of concerts, defined the group's determination to maintain newness by confounding audience expectations. The concert known and recorded as *Document and Eyewitness* took place at the Electric Ballroom, Camden Town on 29th February 1980. While a significant fraction of the capacity audience was made up of drunk skinheads baying for Wire speed hits such as *12XU*, the group delivered a set of fragmented performance pieces, including masked people wearing paper headdresses, the hitting of a gas cooker with hammers, and the frequent appearance of a track-suited compere whose banter with the crowd ranged from jovial to threatening. These interventions were punctuated by teasing, recognisable fragments of Wire's better known music, the result being a gradually increasing tension between audience and performers which, at that time in such a venue, was genuinely dangerous.

A previous performance at the Jeanetta Cochrane Theatre, Southampton Row, had included a chorus of anonymous guitarists and an on-stage action painting. Afterwards, the performance continued acoustically in the foyer and eventually morphed into discourse with the audience. Both concerts, vitally, brought the ethos of an art happening such as Gustav Metzger's *Symposium of Auto-Destructive Art*, from July 1961 (which included the making of a painting with hydrochloric acid on nylon) to a primarily non art-specialist audience of music fans.

Such risk-taking and creative self-scrutiny was continued by Wire's performance, *flag:burning*, held at the Barbican Centre, London in June 2003. Created in collaboration with the artists Jake and Dinos Chapman, and the designer ES Devlin, '*flag:burning*' was entirely within Wire's mission to renew their creativity and their identity through disruption, disturbance and explorations of other media. The first half of the concert presented a performance of Wire's debut album, the legendary *Pink Flag* (first released in November 1977), played in its entirety. The second—aiming to 'erase' this celebration of *Pink Flag*'s iconic status—was a performance of Wire's then new release, '*send*'.

Pink Flag had defined Wire as a group so taut that their slightest inflection—the pulse of a guitar line, the pared-down percussion of bass drum, snare and hi-hat, the range of Colin Newman's vocal from football terrace shout to jaunty, barrow-boy absurdism—achieved an amplification little short of monolithic. *flag:burning* confronted the right of such a monolith to even exist—thus summarising the group's career-long triumph as musicians and performers who have turned enquiry into an art-form, balancing intensity and ambiguity, and never allowing either to fall.

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