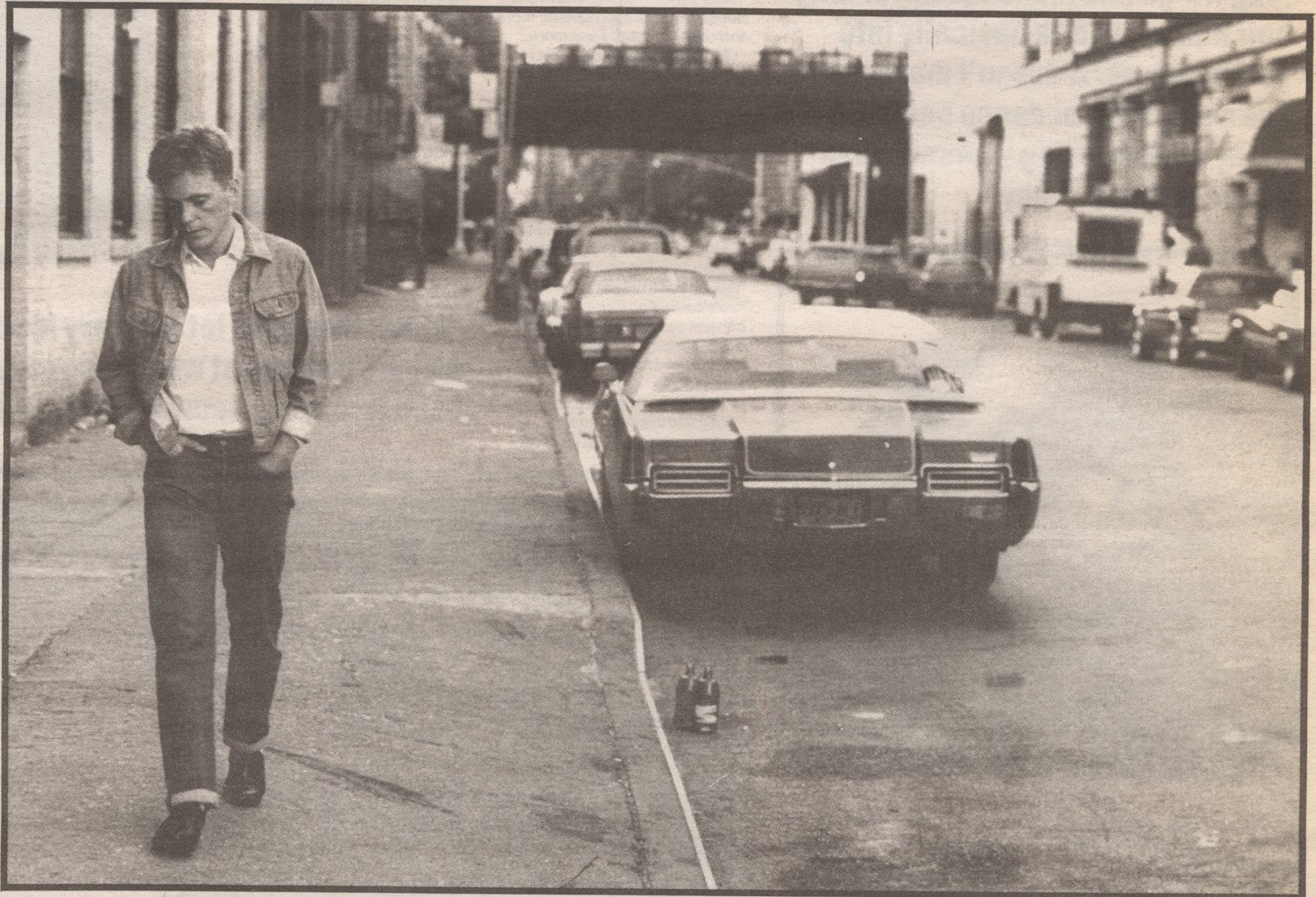


ROCK OF AGES: CLASSIC NME INTERVIEWS

THE GALL OF CONFUSION

● **Summer 1983. In England, the last vague rumblings of punk and post-punk subside to make way for glistening techno-pop. In New Jersey, the turning point tour of the world's most enigmatic band grinds to a halt. At this point in their development, NEW ORDER were both unique and symbolic of the sea changes sweeping Britpop; once (as Joy Division) the acme of indie inscrutability, now fledgling disco technicians. The diehards in overcoats were horrified. But many more were thrilled. NME's CHRIS BOHN met up with the band on the road revealed an irreverent bunch hitherto unknown to many fans. The original blurb described New Order as 'The world's leading and wilfully independent group'. Plus ça change. pictures: KEVIN CUMMINS**



Barney wanders the streets of New York alone after a hard night at the Paradise Garage

Some people try to pick up girls and get called assholes. This never happened to Pablo Picasso. Not in New York.

Visitors to The Funhouse, a Puerto Rican club on 26th Street between ten and 11, would do well to heed Jonathan Richman's advice.

Pablo's Spanish is the loving tongue here, but really it is physique that talks big with the locals.

Bohn enters through the hideously mocking grin of the giant Joker mask that forms one of its doorways, stumbles through the carny bric-a-brac, feeling like the circus geek, and tries his strength on the test-your-punch ball in the club's amusement arcade.

He gives it the best he's got, yet it barely registers wimp. Fortunately nobody's looking. So while his luck's holding he passes on the arm wrestling machine and slips back into the crowd. He is hardly less conspicuous among the Puerto Ricans, whose gleaming muscles bulge through T-shirts cut off directly below the chest and shorts slashed at the groin.

"If you're English you don't stand a chance," Simon Topping—ex of A Certain Ratio and presently in NYC studying timbales—has already informed his Mancunian colleagues in New Order. "Ask a girl to dance, they hear your accent, look you over and laugh in your face!"

Anyway, dancing in The Funhouse is largely a solitary pleasure. The most company people ask for is their own reflection in one of the hall's many mirrors. The sound system is more than enough to keep them occupied. The DJ spins fabulously disjointed funk tracks. The nuttier the breaks, the better the dancers like them, responding to each echoed rimshot with delighted jerks, throwing their heads back and squealing their heels across the floor to stuttering sequencers.

It is a matter of pride to the dancers that they stay abreast of the mercurial changes.

The Funhouse is where Planet Rocker

Arthur Baker comes to test his latest mixes. "He reckons if he can get through to these meatheads he must be on to a winner," goes the local logic. These early hours he's on to his sixth version of New Order's 'Confusion' which, when he's finally satisfied with the audience response to it, will be their next Factory US 12".

As it plays the three boys and one girl of New Order mingle with the crowd unnoticed, checking the reaction for themselves. It is enthusiastic, as indeed it should be.

'Confusion' is the result of an extraordinary collaboration bringing together the opposing temperaments represented by New Order's methodical pursuit of excellence and Baker's poltergeist spirit. Though it began as an uneasy experiment, New Order rose to the challenge of working at speeds and in conditions unknown to them.

"It's the only time we ever sat down to write," recalls bassist Peter Hook with a shudder. "And God, was it hard! Arthur Baker just stood there staring at us, sort of going, 'go on go on, write something', and we were walking around in circles thinking, 'f—ing hell, isn't it time to go home yet?' We don't normally work well under pressure."

"He'd start a drum machine off and send one of us in saying, 'have a go on that synthesiser,'" expands guitarist Bernard Albrecht, née Dicken. "See what you can come up with. So you're standing there thinking 'what the f—ing hell am I doing?' You'd do something and he'd go, 'that's alright', turn off the drum machine, start the tape rolling and say, 'right play it again'. And even though there'd be a minute's worth of mistakes in it, he'd just say, 'f— it. It's alright'."

"The one thing he doesn't like about English records, he told us, is they're too neat and clean. And I agree."

It is not out of vanity that New Order are listening to themselves in a New York club at 4.30 am. Having just played the final date of a gruelling American tour in Trenton, New Jersey a few hours earlier, they would rather be back at their hotel celebrating the fact with some sleep.

But even at this hour duty calls. They must film the video for 'Confusion' before returning to Britain, especially as Charles

Sturridge, whose previous credits include *Brideshead Revisited*, has been flown out to make it. Don't let it be said that Factory don't do things in style. (Sturridge was brought in, incidentally, on the instigation of Factory's Tony Wilson. They met at Granada TV, where Tony holds down a day job and for whom Sturridge completed *Brideshead*.)

At the point of filming, the group still weren't sure of the storyline outside the fact that a Puerto Rican dancer fitted into it somewhere.

Echoes of *Fame*? Not unless it's at New Order's price...

THE ROCK of America is riddled with bores. It has become such a commonplace activity that talking music here is about as exciting as discussing the weather. Bohn would be the last person to bring it up, but at every stopping point on his odyssey down Broadway to the Paradise Garage, where New Order are playing their NY concert, he is earholed by a weevil wiv' an anecdote.

The hotel bell-hop recalls every blow struck at a Talking Heads concert; a soda jerk gets frothy about all the new English bubblegum groups he's had the pleasure

of serving; a cab driver hands him a thesis on how Ritchie Blackmore revolutionised America.

The clubs provide some sort of refuge from all this mundanity partly because the music is too loud to talk over, but mostly because the clubs themselves are so gaudy and great, and the music they play so expertly functional and supremely anonymous that people gratefully use them—the clubs and the music—and move on. Unlike those people who've immersed themselves in the rockpool, they're not overcome with the need to talk about it all the time.

Tonight, however, is not a typical one for the Paradise Garage. Normally a gay black disco, it has been leased at great expense to New Order for the concert. Few of the regulars are evident in the audience, even though the same group is responsible for a Stateside—indeed worldwide—club hit in 'Blue Monday'.

The slyest, most perfect, driest and most sexual of dance records, 'Blue Monday' is a model of anonymous functionalism, the work of a group who assert quality above novel identity.

And you can't believe how refreshing that is until you've heard any one of a stream of British hits screaming "love me, love me, love me!" from every Anglophile store, radio station or club.

Nevertheless, despite themselves, New Order's concert draws an audience in awe of the group's name and reputation, based on the impressions they got from reading the British music press. They are at once given a lot to live up to and even more to live down...

"What people write about us is usually five miles wrong!" mutters Bernard ruefully.

"All these Americans know all the stuff, but all they do is stare," says Peter Hook at once flattered, frustrated and flabbergasted by their American experience.

"It's really weird. The first half dozen gigs before we got to New York went down pretty well—a bit too well. It was like they were just waiting for us, we didn't have to win them over or anything. We'd already won. All we had to do was play. They were all shouting 'Dreams Never End!' 'Ceremony'—just like they do in Britain. At least we've had some

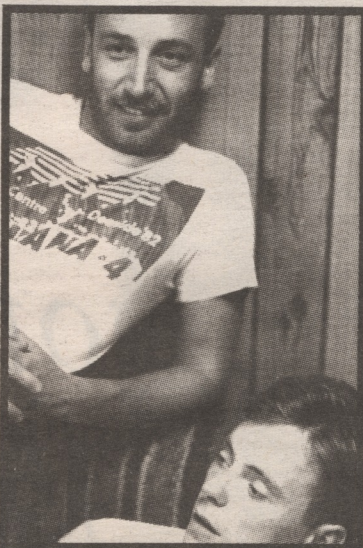
lively over the top audiences there, but here the only lively audience we've had was in Austin, Texas. Otherwise we haven't had to struggle, meaning there's no point to doing it really. Preaching to the converted isn't any fun, is it?"

That's as may be, but it doesn't take long before American audiences become slightly unsettled by what they're seeing. Brought up on the New Order mystique as fostered by the British music press, their reverence is duly shattered by the group's offhand and nonchalant stage manner, the long pauses between songs and maybe even the summery sight of Bernard Albrecht in grey shorts, looking like nothing if not a devilish choirboy. Once the music starts sinking in, it is obvious, too, that this isn't the same group who made the heavy emotional demands of their first LP 'Movement' and their early singles.

It is as if they've digested the darkness and rigour that informed those great, albeit gloomy, records and no longer feel the need to bludgeon people with their seriousness. That period still informs the present New Order, but in the interim they've become lighter, freer and extraordinarily playful; which isn't to say they're any the less affecting, just that they now touch a broader spectrum of feeling and experience.

New Order have become a truly fearless group, one that refuses to be intimidated either by their peers' trends or the desires of the audience. They will take you—if you're prepared to let yourself go—from the swollen heartbleed of 'In A Lonely Place', through the impishly turbulent 'Temptation' and slandance of 'Confusion' and on to the entirely different joyous plane of most of 'Power, Corruption And Lies'.

Within the framework of one song—such as 'Your Silent Face'—they'll couple the banal and comic with moments of true beauty. The song is hooked into a stunningly simple and subliminal sequencer pattern that serves as both rhythm and melody; it is topped with a ridiculously insipid OMD type synth tune, which would have spoilt it, had it not been rescued by Bernard's gently spiralling ocarina. The words follow a similar trajectory—one moment reflective, the next hilarious. Could you



Hooky and Barney: "Being hip is a f—ing load of shit."

THIS WEEK: NEW ORDER, 1983

imagine the old New Order so carefully drawing the listener into a tissue-thin web of sensitivity only to abruptly eject him with the kiss off lines: "The sign that leads the way/The path you cannot take/You caught me at a bad time... So why don't you piss off!"

If any song marks the lucid New Order, it is that one. Where the early records were written under the shadow of Joy Division, the songs from 'Temptation' onwards feel looser, more natural.

"Well, when we first started, I tried writing serious lyrics and I was just shit at it," remarks Bernard candidly. "So for the second LP I just wrote down whatever I felt like. I didn't really care whether the lyrics were good or bad on the second one so I was more relaxed.

"On the first one I felt so self-conscious because I was coming after Ian, who was such a great writer. I wanted the lyrics I wrote to be good. They were alright, but they were not wonderful. After I'd said, f— it, I started to enjoy writing a lot more. Ironically, the songs on the second LP mean a lot more to me. And because they're less self-conscious, they're more truthful to myself.

"With 'Your Silent Face', well we wrote that one in the studio. Because we wrote this very beautiful, emotional music, we thought to put a beautiful, very emotional vocal line over the top was a bit obvious. So we put down a quite nice vocal line and some nice lyrics, but by the end we got stuck for a couple of lines.

"Everyone was thinking of really beautiful, poetic, meaningless lyrics. Then I thought, we might as well have something dumb, idiotic, coarse and meaningless. An absolute contrast to the rest. Even roses have thorns..."

THE FOUNDATIONS of America's Rock, based on a fake bonhomie, Boy Howdy beer and cheesy McDonald's grins, are easily undermined.

The New Order way of doing things makes them quake a little, not because it's calculated to, but because their genuinely casual approach, often at odds with the highly disciplined music they're playing, constantly disrupts the mood of the night. Some interpret their laconic, uncommunicative stage demeanour as arrogance. Others think it's funny. A worldwide complaint seems to be that their sets — at around 45 minutes — are too short.

"Usually we're not contracted to play a specific time, so we come over here and

play a set which we think is long enough, but not so long that we get bored," explains Peter Hook. "But everybody seems to think it is too short, I don't know whether that's a compliment or not!

"We play 45–50 minutes because it feels right to us. We almost caused a riot in Rotterdam once. The promoter gave out notices warning that this band only plays 45 minutes, so if you don't like it don't come in!

"That we don't play encores is another big beef with people. Once, just as an experiment, we played seven numbers, went off, came back on and played three more. We played our usual ten numbers, but because everyone thought we'd done an encore they weren't bothered!"

Not everybody's so easily pleased, as Bernard recalls with a smile.

"One kid in Sheffield a couple of years back said, 'you didn't play such and such a song tonight and you only played for 45 minutes. You've shattered all my dreams. Give me my money back' — f—ing hell, I almost bottled the bastard! And he said, 'Me three other mates would like their money back as well!'

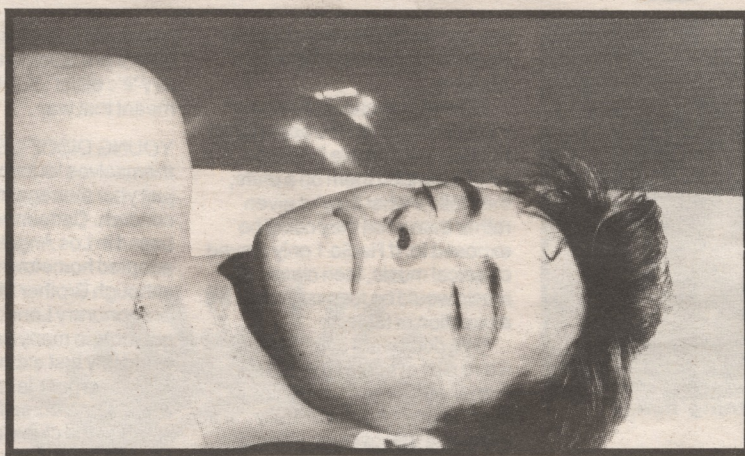
"I dunno," he expands, "we shouldn't really categorise people I suppose, but I know the type. We have the studious type with glasses and a fringe and we have the nasty little men with chips on their shoulder type who do that sort of thing. And the kind of people who have just read about you and expect you to be exactly what they've read."

"There's a lot of nutcases who buy our records I can tell ya," says drummer Stephen Morris, "who come backstage after a gig. You know: 'Why didn't your play any Joy Division songs? Why did Ian Curtis kill himself?' Some get really worked up about it."

"Or they come in and tell you, 'you're a load of rubbish, you are'," chips in synth operator and second guitarist Gillian Gilbert. "Imagine! It's like if you were in a pub and somebody said, 'you're a load of rubbish you!' You'd flippin' hit them round the ear 'ole. But you're supposed to just sit there..."

"Or go, 'oh yeah, you're right'," mocks Steve. "Soddin' hell. F—ing hell, I should give it up now."

Later Bernard tells Bohn the biggest mistake people make about them: "Thinking we're serious. Because we're serious about the music they think we take everything seriously. Like, the other night a kid came backstage after the gig and asked us to sign an LP. Hooky told him to shove it up his arse. We were only



Washington DC: Barney and Hooky (below) relax by the pool after a hard night's prankstering

joking, but because it's us he took it serious and went away hurt.

"I dunno," he sighs. "They take everything you say so seriously, as if you mean everything..."

PERHAPS BEFORE New Order depart NYC for Washington DC, we should brief the President about the group.

New Order are the phoenix who rose from the ashes of Joy Division, from Manchester, who were the last popular group from Britain to probe heart and soul with stark candour. They never attempted anything so conceited or deceitful as writing anthems for doomed youth, but the rigorous explorations of self, as personified by vocalist Ian Curtis' words, were uncannily right for the moment.

After Ian killed himself and Joy Division as such no longer existed, popular music took fright and for the large part regressed into its present state of mercantile infantilism, as if nobody wanted to take the risk of running so deep again. Thus *fun* became the dictate of the day, a pervasive cynicism gnawed away at any ideals that survived punk — to an extent a necessary stage in pop's sweet growth — and business acumen became the ruling aesthetic.

The greily unimaginative post-punk indie boom wasn't particularly encouraging to the independent cause; and because the media is only capable of operating in terms of epic sweeps, they swept out the imaginative and inspired along with the rest.

The three surviving members of Joy Division, meanwhile, auditioned a new singer but, finding no one suitable, brought in untutored musician Gillian Gilbert — Steve Morris' friend — and renamed themselves New Order.

How about an introduction to yourself, Gillian? She is, incidentally, an attractively down to earth and funny Mancunian who has the sort of accent that explains John Cooper Clarke's popularity.

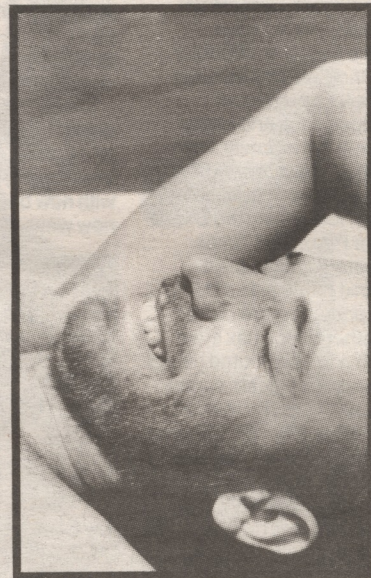
"I vaguely knew Joy Division," she whispers. "I used to rehearse next door to them in Manchester when I was in a punk group, just before their hit. I used to go and see them and then I got to know Stephen — I sat next to his sister in geography, which is a coincidence really. Ha ha! I think it was one night at Liverpool Eric's and Ian had hurt his hand on a bottle or something, so he couldn't play the guitar for one number. It wasn't a very big bit, so as I could play guitar a bit, I played that one number."

"Then, some months later, the others called me. I think they wanted someone without any knowledge of guitar whatsoever to remind them of when they started and couldn't play. I think they were also looking for somebody who didn't have any particular style, so they could work them better into the band."

"We didn't really want anybody who could play," Stephen concurs. "If we got someone who could he might not fit in with the way we write songs and stuff, so we decided the best thing to do was get someone in fresh. Gillian was the only person we knew who couldn't play. We'd seen her play before and she definitely couldn't!"

They spent a year writing and rehearsing a completely new set, retaining only two unrecorded Joy Division songs — 'Ceremony' and 'In a Lonely Place' — which they released as their first single.

Anticipating the intense media interest focused on their return, they sensibly



avoided its glare. With admirable perseverance they stuck to their own way. Being a sensitive collective beast, the media took New Order's unwillingness to co-operate personally and thus had them and Factory — the Mancunian independent they'd allied themselves to — figured as hostile, as sullen and uncommunicative.

The lack of exposure hasn't harmed them any. Through a series of infrequent international tours and the odd date at home, they've become the best selling independent group in the world, racking up club and radio hits in Australia, New Zealand, Japan, Europe and America.

That they've done it their way — that is, with a minimum of fuss and the emphasis on quality, not personality — is something they quietly cherish. Even if it has meant odd interpretations of the New Order silence.

"I just don't think the group should be at the forefront," asserts Peter with some authority. "I don't think we're that important. If we've got something to say, we say it. If we haven't got anything to say it doesn't mean we're dumb. It just means we don't fancy shouting our mouths off, or something like that. But I consider the music very important because it affects me, so I don't see why it shouldn't affect other people as well. I find it exhilarating, depressing, happy, sad or whatever. I just don't think our personalities need to be pushed."

The seeds of their mistrust of the media were sown when they were still Joy Division.

"In the very early days before 'Unknown Pleasures', the music press detested us and that was a kind of driving force to go on," says Bernard. "When 'Unknown Pleasures' came out we were suddenly wonderful. We went from being the most unpopular group in the world to the most popular. F—ing ridiculous!"

"I remember reading one live review of

a gig at the Moonlight Club. We played three nights there and got wonderful reviews from all of them, even though one night we were shit, really bad. And the review from that night said, this group was so good they made me want to piss in the face of God! And we were f—ing appalling! When I read that I just thought the whole press thing with Joy Division had gone completely over the top."

Shy and conscious of their own privacy, they stopped doing interviews three years ago. Most importantly, they didn't want to get sucked into the music industry mainstream.

Bernard: "We were worried in case once you started you would begin to do things the way everybody else does and that would have been boring. So to keep our noses clean... It's been pretty enjoyable the way we got where we are today. It's been really good the way we've done it because we've not gone through the system and I, for one, feel better for it. I don't mean because I've done things honestly. I mean, each to his own."

From the distance they've so admirably maintained from the pop maelstrom, its absurd manifestations must appear ridiculous. From the other side, the constancy of New Order and its Factory allies might be mistaken as old fashioned or slow-witted.

"I think this idea of being hip or not being hip is a f—ing load of shit," Bernard forcefully states. "It's a trap that music has got into. If you see the progress of music as a maze, well now it has arrived at a dead end. The idea of hip has stopped people expressing themselves."

"I think it's terrible because it's stopped people producing music unconsciously. They're too conscious of whether what they're doing will fit into the mould or not. Hip is making a lot of people very narrow-minded. Hip is like a chain reaction. A music paper gets very narrow-minded in its approach, the people who read it get that way and eventually it works its way into music. Then everything starts going in one direction. The music scene in England now doesn't allow for any kind of fringe to be successful."

THE ONTARIO cinema, located in one of Washington's black districts, specialises in lurid Spanish pictures. But tonight they're featuring New Order. That is, if they arrive. The group travel down by air shuttle, arriving at Dulles ("sDulles f—!" sneers Simon Topping, who is guesting with the opening act Quando Quando) Airport. Half an hour before the show is due to begin Steve Morris, Peter Hook and manager Rob Gretton are still missing. Quando Quando, also a Factory act, are sent out to appease the restless audience with their stylishly aloof and bemused funk.

It works fine, but the four songs they've brought with them don't last long. In the meantime, the three have arrived "ratarsed pissed" on melon ball cocktails. Hooky immediately falls asleep under a dressing room table and later melts into the night.

He's still playing hookey when the group, already hours late, must go on. They start without him and try to pass off Rob Gretton as the Third Man, but even from the back it is obvious that this figure in drooping tracksuit vest and shorts flailing away at the cymbals, often as not missing them, is not the right man.

Midway through the second song, Hooky shows. "Ah, the black sheep returns," mutters Bernard, while shooting Hooky a rueful glance. Hooky straps on his bass, looks out into the audience and apologises: "Hi shithheads!"

A new order: being pissed means never having to say you're sorry.



Stephen, Gillian and Barney at The Funhouse, NY, 1983, listening to Arthur Baker's 12" mix of 'Confusion'

"Because we're serious about the music people think we take everything seriously. Like, the other night a kid came backstage after the gig and asked us to sign an LP. Hooky told him to shove it up his arse. We were only joking, but because it's us he took it serious and went away hurt." — Barney