

# WESTERN EYES: A Conversation Between Robert Poss & Nicolas Collins

**COLLINS:** Why the name Western Eyes?

**POSS:** The name was taken from a Joseph Conrad novel about espionage; it's sort of an admission of our cultural orientation.

**C:** It's unusual for an independent band to do an LP as their first record. They usually test the waters with a single or an EP. Why did you decide to record an 11-song record?

**P:** Bands generally tend to limit their first record to their two or four slickest or most novel songs—whatever they think will get them the most immediate bit of media attention. The members of Western Eyes had released (in other bands) a few singles and EPs. This time around we had a lot of what we thought was strong material, and I felt that it was important that we avoid the game of trying to tempt people with a few catchy songs. We wanted to put our cards on the table and make a wider range of material available right from the start.



Bill Jacobson

**C:** You have recorded in 4, 8, 16, and 24 track in your previous efforts. Why did you choose 8 track this time? Was it a step backwards?

**P:** We had to make a choice. Since we've always operated on what I call a "broken shoe-string" budget, we could have recorded a single in a decent 24-track studio or an entire album on 8 track. We opted for the album. Beyond that, there was something appealing about the limitations of 8 track. So much depends on the performance—"fixing it in the mix" becomes an impossibility in many cases—and the cheapness of the format forces creativity. If I had sufficient backing from a label, I would probably opt for 16 or 24, if only because the quality of the equipment is vastly superior, and results in a "bigger" sounding record. We like to joke about the fact that we recorded an entire album on the amount of money David Bowie's band spent on take-out Peking Duck while they recorded "Let's Dance" at the Power Station.

**C:** Since you had a clear idea of what your music is about and had recorded in the past, why didn't you produce the record yourself? And why did you get someone who had almost no experience in rock and roll record production instead of any one of a host of more experienced producers working in the 8 and 16 track formats?

**P:** Producing yourself is fine, and it can work. But we wanted to avoid the egotism that comes into play when you try to make production decisions about your own efforts that you know & understand intimately. We wanted someone to take a fresh look at our material and see what they could do with it. We wanted to be surprised. We chose you for several reasons: based on discussions the two of us had and work that I had done with you on your own music [Nicolas Collins/Ron Kuivila: *Going Out With Slow Smoke*, Lovely Music VR1701], it was clear that you understood Western Eyes' stuff and had a very unorthodox approach to music and technology. You also understood our political stance. Since you're not a rock and roll producer, we thought you'd come up with something a bit different—and that's precisely what we were after.

**C:** You wanted to push the production to an extreme and not fall into the "middle-of-the-road" syndrome. When I first heard your music, my reaction was that it was firmly entrenched in rock and roll song format, but what set it apart from other bands with a similar sense of history was your lyrics—the level of sophistication and political awareness. How do you resolve your personal ideology in terms of writing lyrics, the nature of the musical forms you use, and the definition of Western Eyes as a band? In other words, what is Western Eyes' political stance?

**P:** There are a number of political bands getting attention these days. People talk about the Clash on the one hand and, more recently, Red Rockers, the Alarm, and even U2. And of course there's Gang of Four, V-Effect, and the Au Pairs—all bands that either have or had a political axe to grind or music having specific political content. We see ourselves as social critics. We're not propagandists; it's a little ludicrous for a group of white, basically middle-class, American males to posture themselves as revolutionaries while trying to get their stuff played on the radio. What we try to do is wed political responsibility with a rock and roll sensibility. We don't write songs about "cars and girls" even though it's a staple of male-dominated rock and roll. There are many more interesting ways to write about sexual relationships than saying there's someone that you sexually desire. I think bands like Red Rockers, the Alarm, and the more recent Clash stuff are a little naive and self-important. One of my favorite parts of Burchill and Parsons' *The Boy Looked at Johnny* is where they joke about Joe Strummer—who is a diplomat's son—taking "de-elocution lessons" in order to preach to the masses

more effectively. I admire much of what the Clash have done and they were incredibly inspiring when I heard them in '78, but they sometimes mistake cultural imperialism—ripping off the music and culture of others for commercial benefits—with a heartfelt affinity with Third World musical forms. That's the big joke with the new white British soul. Americans are listening to white English bands imitating white American bands who imitate black American bands—and thinking that it's something honest, innovative, or sincere. I loved the Jam, but Paul Weller doing Booker T and the M.G.'s or the Ramsey Lewis Trio is beyond me. It just doesn't ring true.

**C:** You mentioned the Alarm and U2.

**P:** Yes. They are quite good at what they do. But they are so self-consciously trying to write teen anthems. Anthemic rock can get pompous very easily. You have to keep it streamlined to keep it effective. I don't sit down and try to write teen anthems; maybe I should. When I think about it, Gang of Four, Au Pairs, and X-Ray Spex are/were more genuinely political than some of the other bands I've mentioned. They present human and economic relations with much more complexity and intelligence. Some of Poly Styrene's lyrics were phenomenal. Some of what I've been hearing and seeing today is grandiose—politics dressed up in such fashionable gear; it makes me a bit suspicious.

**C:** How do you reconcile your political stance with the basic, raw, rock and roll aspects of your music?

**P:** I don't see any contradiction. I've always found a certain type of loud, distorted music to be very exciting. But it's not good if the music is great and you are walking down the street humming some hardcore song to yourself and you are mouthing sexist, racist, or fascist lyrics. I've always wanted to make rock and roll that has lyrics as interesting, quirky, or powerful as the music. Not that all of Western Eyes' stuff is political or in any way didactic. Some of our songs are very, very personal; some have clear messages while others are quite obscure.

**C:** How would you describe what Western Eyes sounds like?

**P:** Well, on record and live we are committed to a rather unembellished down-to-earth sound. As much thought as we've put into some of our lyrics, I like them to fight against the sound of, say, a Les Paul Junior through a Marshall amp. We are basically in the same musical camp as some of the bands that I've mentioned except for our odd use of harmonica and a few other things. I've been playing in bands since I was 12, but I am a staunch opponent of technocratic musicianship; so I've cast off all vestiges of flashy guitar playing. If I can make a point using one note instead



of 26, I'll always use the one. This keeps the music emotional and unpretentious. When Big Country goes into their twin guitar rave-ups, I can only think of a dinosaur band like the Allman Brothers—and I cringe.

**C:** You have some questions about the production of the *Western Eyes* record?

**P:** What was it like for you, who are known primarily as a composer of electronic music, to produce a rock and roll record?

**C:** As a composer, I've built all my work around either inventing instruments of electronic systems, microcomputers, etc., or writing works specifically for other performers. Because I'm normally not an instrumentalist, I've always liked to fall into the role of performing the work of others. I've enjoyed performing the music of Christian Wolff and John Cage where you have to add a level of performer composition. The performer plays a very important role in something like Cage's *Cartidge Music*, but you're still performing a Cage piece, not improvising your own—no matter how much effort or thought you put into it. I also like the behind-the-scenes work. That's why I've done engineering production work for composers like David Tudor and Alvin Lucier. The *Western Eyes* project was a kind of performance. While trying to remain true to the material, I was able to put it through another level of interpretation. We all were willing to forego technical perfection in exchange for capturing a certain kind of feeling in performance. These were very active mixes; I was not simply the custodian of your music, shepherding it through the various stages of recording and mixing. I took a more active role in rearranging the songs in the mix.

**P:** The record has a raw sound, but it sounds very intentional. Is that a contradiction?

**C:** No, I don't think so. It has more to do with dealing with the material as a found object instead of dealing with the tape as something that I as a producer was supposed to transform into a hit record. There was an element of "anti-mixing" on the project—of not trying to fit things together or bring about a conventional, customary rock and roll mix. Some of the songs are very straightforward. In others, I violated all kinds of conventional wisdom and brought certain things out in the mix simply because I liked them.

**P:** The record was recorded in some New York eight-track studios, but was ultimately mixed in your apartment. How did that come about?

**C:** One of the reasons I originally encouraged the band to record on eight-track was because I thought that I could rent the necessary equipment and mix in my own home studio. As it turned out, when it came time to mix, I bought my own eight-track (a Tascam 38) and built, bought, or rented additional equipment.



**P:** What are the advantages of working at home?

**C:** It's easier to experiment, break rules, and push things to an extreme. I've found that in most studios there is always an engineer looking over your shoulder trying to smooth things out with compression, sweeten it with reverb, or make the e.q. less harsh. There's a pervasive conservatism in these studios, and it's hard to fight it sometimes. Since I had equipment that I had built, I knew working alone would allow me to push things in any direction I wanted.

**P:** The back cover photo for the record shows your home studio. There are some pretty odd things there. Could you explain a little about some of the techniques you used on songs like "All Too Real" and "New Grub Street?"

**C:** Perhaps the oddest thing I used on this record was an extremely crude automated mixdown system that I designed and built for some of my own music. It was incredibly cheap—a \$550 Paice mixing board which I rewired, a \$200 Commodore computer, some circuitry I threw together and some software that I wrote. The system can look at the signals flowing through any strip on the mixer and turn off and on any strip according to conditions that are set in the computer. For example, if strip 1 exceeds a certain level, turn on strip 6 and turn off strips 9 and 10, etc. So what happens is that one track gates itself or triggers other sounds or roughly synchronizes other tracks. So on "All Too Real" and "New Grub Street," for instance, I used this system to cut up some of the music, reinforce certain attacks, and give a kind of exploded view of the music and the mixing process. I also used \$5 reverbs—the kind of thing you find in bins on Canal Street [lower Manhattan's street of unusual bargains]—along with an Electro Harmonix 16 second digital delay for looping, and various digital and analog delays. I was able to expand the dynamic range and bring in extraneous material.

**P:** What is going on in the background of "Television Rules"?

**C:** On "Television Rules," I used the 16 second delay to simulate a growing level of chatter in the background by capturing and storing bits of the lead vocal in the loop. You end up with a growing bit of gibberish in the background, a kind of chorus of vocal fragments that I thought was more appropriate and less cliched, given the subject of the song, than simply recording the sound of someone changing channels on a TV. I use the looped fragments as additional music, not as sound effects.

**P:** The production approach that you've taken seems to vary from song to song.

**C:** The production is geared to the music and ideology of each particular song. So some of the songs are mixed in a very straight manner, in classic rock and roll style, or close to it. In other songs, an extreme approach was conceptually and musically appropriate, so I buried the vocals, kept the guitar solo undermixed (since the song was not about taking guitar solos) and severely gated the drums. There is a set of subsidiary reasons why I did each of these things; that's the art of it. Part of it has to do with frustrating certain expectations people have about what a rock and roll song should sound like.

**P:** You mentioned the use of cheap technology.

**C:** Yes. I have almost none of the standard studio paraphernalia like compressors, harmonizers, plate reverbs, or limiters. The way the band uses harmonica relates to this question of cheap technology. The harmonica is one of the cheapest, most simple instruments you could imagine, but the way it is used on parts of the record, it sounds like a synthesizer, which is one of the most expensive and most complicated instruments. It's much more fun to make a harmonica sound like a synthesizer than to make a synthesizer sound like a harmonica. And the sound you end up with is much more interesting.

**P:** One of the paradoxes of making an extreme-sounding tape is that the mastering and pressing process tends to smooth it out a bit.

**C:** Yeah. We just received the first reference disc from Masterdisc today; it sounds good, but things aren't quite as extreme-sounding as I would like. I'm going to have them try and remaster it. I'd hate to have this record end up sounding too smooth.

**WESTERN EYES, PO BOX 3483, NYC 10163.**