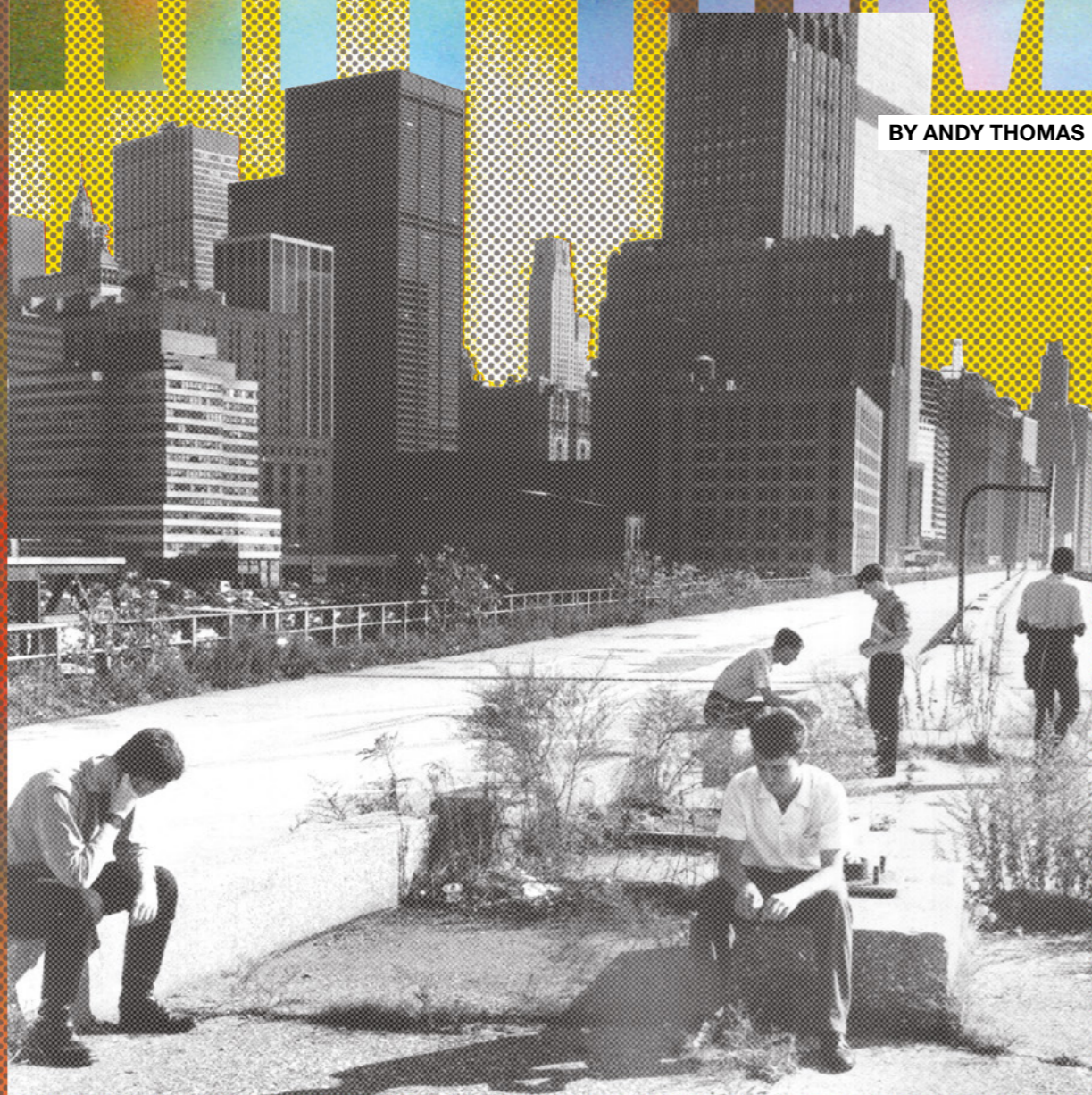


UNRULY RHYTHM

BY ANDY THOMAS



Rising from Manchester's experimental post-punk scene, **A Certain Ratio** looked to American funk imports for their initial influence, learning what and how to play as they went along, interpreting sound and feeling at their own restive pace, culminating in the 1980 single "Flight," dubbed-out by producer Martin Hannett. A trip to NYC resulted in the band's further obsession and exploration with Latin percussion and rhythms, and, ultimately, their debut LP. With continued experimentation and growth, the band released a string of iconic records, and despite breaks and breakups, ACR remain in rhythm to this day, recording new projects for Mute Records.

The grainy black-and-white silhouette of five figures building stark and hypnotic Latin rhythms fills the screen. It's 1980 and filmmaker Michael H. Shamberg has positioned his 16 mm camera lens on A Certain Ratio jamming on congas and other percussion instruments in their Hudson Street loft. The footage shifts to a darkened club where the Manchester group's austere, haunting funk is captured through the shadowy haze of Shamberg's monochrome film. The club was the hip downtown hangout Hurrah, and the loft featured in the dreamlike art film *Tribeca* had been rented for A Certain Ratio (ACR) by Factory Records founder Tony Wilson during the label's transformative trip to New York.

The group, who had debuted earlier that year with the cassette *The Graveyard and the Ballroom*, was in the city to record their second LP with producer Martin Hannett at EARS Studio in New Jersey. When not encamped in the studio creating what would become the 1981 LP *To Each*, they were discovering a downtown arts scene that was at its creative peak. "New York experienced a community-driven cultural renaissance during the early 1980s that stands as one of the most influential in its, and perhaps in any city's, history," wrote Tim Lawrence in his book *Life and Death on the New York Dance Floor 1980–1983*. His erudite tome begins in the year ACR arrived in New York as part of a Factory Records entourage that included Tony Wilson and New Order with their manager Rob Gretton.

For the five young men of ACR brought up in the industrial North of England in the 1970s, the sensory overload of New York City's cross-cultural clubs like Hurrah and Danceteria would have a profound impact. When not getting their minds

blown by Manhattan's clubs, ACR were exploring the city's Latin scene, soaking in the Cuban rumba sessions in Central Park and hanging out at jazz venues across the city. With percussion instruments purchased by Tony Wilson, the group merged this influence with the dour post-punk funk that had aligned them with groups from the United Kingdom like 23 Skidoo, the Pop Group, and Maximum Joy. The footage on *Tribeca* offers a fascinating insight into the foundations of a sound that would reach its zenith on the 1982 LP *Sextet* but would continue to evolve right through to today as the group enters its forty-fifth year.

During the creative fallout of punk in 1977, maverick Granada TV presenter Tony Wilson and his friend (and future cofounder of Factory Records) Alan Erasmus established a new live-music club at a West Indian nightspot called Russell Club amid the projects of Hulme on the outskirts of Manchester. Going by the name the Factory, it showcased punk and alternative acts from across the U.K. and beyond. "The Factory was great—because it was held in a West Indian club; the deal was they still used the reggae DJs," remembers ACR's Martin Moscrop, who had just switched from trumpet to guitar to play in a local glam punk group called Alien Tint. "So you might have someone like Iggy Pop or Pere Ubu on with this Rasta playing really heavy dub music between the bands. And there were so many amazing bands that played there."

The first four Factory nights were publicized through a now iconic poster by Peter Saville that created the template for his New Typography-inspired covers for Factory. In the crowd was an inquisitive young man by the name of Simon Topping



(above) Martin Moscrop and Simon Topping. Photo by David Corio/Redferns.

who had recently formed an avant-garde group with friend Peter Terrell. The name A Certain Ratio came from lyrics on “The True Wheel” off the 1974 LP *Taking Tiger Mountain (By Strategy)* by Brian Eno, a formative influence alongside Kraftwerk, Velvet Underground, Human League, and Wire.

Still an experimental duo, ACR appeared one night at Pips, a four-room basement venue on Fennel Street that helped shape Manchester’s music culture. “At the time, I was a regular clubber, and as well as going to Northern soul nights, I used to go to Pips, and that’s where I first saw ACR playing in the Roxy room there,” recalls ACR bassist Jeremy “Jez” Kerr, a young student at the time at Manchester Youth Theatre. “I thought they were really interesting. Then a couple of months later, I was waiting for a bus and bumped into Simon [Topping] who said they were looking for a bass player. I said, ‘I’ve got a bass,’ and he said, ‘We’ve got a gig at the Band on the Wall, do you fancy doing it?’ And that was it. We had one rehearsal and then a gig on the next night.”

The gig was part of the Manchester Musicians’ Collective, an Arts Council-funded platform for the city’s young bands who as well as performing together would meet and exchange ideas. “It was a very hippy-meets-post-punk type world, and members included Warsaw/Joy Division, the Fall, Mick Hucknall’s Frantic Elevators, and all these Manchester bands that went on to become something,” says Moscrop. On the same bill as ACR was Alien Tint whose guitarist, Martin Moscrop, was later that night approached by Topping who suggested Moscrop would fit in better with his band.

Now a four-piece, ACR played a number of times at the Band on the Wall as part of the Collective. “One of those nights, we were playing on the same bill as Joy Division, and [the band’s manager] Rob Gretton saw us and then went to Tony Wilson and said, ‘You’ve got to get this group on at the Russell Club,’” recalls Kerr. So without Tony Wilson, who would soon become ACR’s manager, even seeing or hearing the group, he booked them for a night at the Factory. “After the gig, he came to the dressing room and said, ‘Do you want to do a single for my new label?’” Kerr adds.

The 1979 Factory Records 12-inch “All Night Party” b/w “Thin Boys” was produced by Martin “Zero” Hannett at Cargo Studios on the outskirts of Manchester and mixed at Stockport’s Strawberry Studios, where Joy Division’s seminal *Unknown Pleasures* had been produced. Both Cargo and Strawberry would become the sound laboratories of the maverick producer whose studio genius for Factory Records placed him somewhere between Joe Meek and Lee “Scratch” Perry.

The sound of the EP owed much to a new piece of equipment Hannett had recently acquired while working with Joy Division. “I think I’d had a new AMS delay line for about two weeks. It was called Digital; it was heaven sent,” he told writer Jon Savage in *This Searing Light, the Sun and Everything Else*

– *Joy Division: The Oral History*. The AMS DMX 15-80 would be just one of the many effects and echo units used in creating Hannett’s production “thumbprint” and what became known as “the Manchester Sound” heard on all of the early Factory Records singles.

Fascinated with sound since he was very young, Hannett’s sonic obsession led him to talk about hearing bass drum rhythms in the machines and air conditioner units of the local factories. As part of the Invisible Girls collective with Steve Hopkins, he had created his production signature on records like John Cooper Clarke’s 1978 album *Disguise in Love* before hearing the band that he would become forever associated with. “They were different from punk,” he told Jon Savage on first hearing Joy Division. “There was lots of space in their sound.”

Searching fixedly for the sounds in his head, Martin Hannett’s studio eccentricity became the stuff of legend. “We had no idea about Martin and had no reference points about what a producer should do,” says Kerr. “I remember during the recording of ‘All Night Party’ being in the control room when he was mixing the guitars, and it was fucking hilarious. It took forever as he kept saying things like, ‘Play it faster, but slower.’ And he made them play it over and over again. I was like, ‘What the fuck?’—we didn’t understand what he was doing. We were so young and naïve. When I heard it, I thought it was all out of time, but after a couple of listens, I was like, ‘Actually, that’s great.’”

By the summer of 1979, ACR began to think about recruiting a drummer. “Initially, the type of music we were trying to create didn’t really need drums, and also in those post-punk days, everyone was trying to be different. You had to really work to stand out from the crowd, and I think being drummerless, a lot of people took notice of us,” suggests Moscrop. “But then as our musical tastes started changing toward funk and we got a lot more interested in rhythm and percussion, we really needed drums. And Donald’s drumming took our music to a totally new place.”

Donald Johnson came from a musical family with his brother Barry playing bass with Manchester soul group Sweet Sensation and his brother Derek playing bass for Factory labelmates 52nd Street. Donald began playing piano, thanks to a supportive music teacher at his school in Wythenshawe, South Manchester, before picking up his two brothers’ basses. But it was through his other elder brother Keith (original member of the first Sweet Sensation) that he was introduced to the drums. “As a kid, I used to tap out rhythms on the side of the settee with a pair of knitting needles,” he recalls. “I was a big sci-fi fan, and all those TV programs in the ‘60s, like *Thunderbirds*, *Stingray*, and *Fireball XL 5*, had great themes, so I would just tap along. I didn’t know I was drumming; it was just playing with rhythms. Then Keith one day went out and bought me a kit for one hundred pounds, just on the inference of seeing me as this

highly charged kid with loads of energy and the ability to copy and mimic music.”

Eager to learn how the music and rhythms worked, Donald studied and practiced hard. “My brother would bring me loads of records to listen to, saying, ‘Right, learn this, now this,’ and [they were] getting slightly harder all the time, so I really became a collector and purveyor of rhythms,” Johnson recalls. “As well as the records my brother was bringing home by people like James Brown; Earth, Wind & Fire; Tower of Power; Stanley Clarke; George Duke; Ohio Players; Kool and the Gang; and the Meters, there was the reggae of my parents I was hearing, so I started to learn all those off beats as well.”

Through a friendship with Mick Rossi of Wythenshawe punk band Slaughter and the Dogs, who recorded for Rabid Records, where Martin Hannett worked as in-house producer on records by the likes of John Cooper Clarke, Donald Johnson began to move in the same circles as the original Factory Records entourage.

A mutual friend on the periphery of this scene called Vinny Faal introduced Johnson to a guitarist by the name of Vini Reilly. “I remember going down to this youth club in Moss Side, and [we] jammed for eight hours from dusk to dawn, and that’s how we became friends,” says Johnson. His appearance with Reilly in the first incarnation of Factory Records’ Durutti Column brought him to the attention of Tony Wilson who had put the word out that ACR was looking for a drummer. “It was actually another drummer friend, Phil ‘Toby’ Toman [Tomanov] of the band Ludus, who told Tony, ‘I think Donald is exactly the right person,’” recalls Johnson. “Next thing, Tony came to my house and knocked on my door, and that was it.”

Working as a baggage handler at Manchester Airport but closely connected to the early Factory scene, Johnson was drawn to ACR’s unusual approach to making music. “The thing I really liked about them was that they were already playing all the rhythms where the drum part would sit, but I don’t think they knew that, because that was the norm for them without a drummer,” he says. “And that really intrigued me, so I thought the way I fit into this is to free them up and create more space.”

The years spent analyzing and mastering rhythms provided an important foundation when the drummer first sat in on a session with ACR. “From being a kid, I would store all these rhythms in my head, getting them ready to let loose. And as soon as Ratio came along, it was like, ‘Whoosh!’—it was all out there,” Donald Johnson says. His fellow band members listened in awe. “Donald would take these rhythms from everywhere, as he was really knowledgeable about the history of music, and his influence on us was massive,” says Kerr. “And that encouraged us to also start borrowing riffs from the American imports we found at Yanks record shop [specialists in U.S. cut-outs].”

Kerr recalls the first time he played alongside Johnson in what was to become the most formidable rhythm section

in post-punk: “He came to one rehearsal, and the room was booming when he played. The power was just immediate. As soon as he started to play, it was like me and him were locked straight in.”

The decision to recruit Johnson was a transformative one by the group. “The next lot of tunes we wrote like ‘Flight’ and

all love that stuff.”

These new tracks would be the bedrock of ACR’s first LP. Released in February 1980, *The Graveyard and the Ballroom* stood alongside PiL’s *Metal Box* and the Pop Group’s *Y* as a milestone in post-punk funk. “Ratio typify the approach, style, and idealism of Factory Records...their improvement over the last six months is staggering,” wrote Mick Middles in the music paper *Sounds*. Consisting of seven new demo songs recorded with Martin Hannett at Graveyard Studios in September 1979 (and seven songs from a gig at the Electric Ballroom in Camden from October that year), it was released on cassette-only in a plastic pouch designed by Peter Saville.

The track that really signaled ACR’s intentions was the 12-inch version of “Flight,” an immense slab of post-punk dub funk that still sounds like the future today. “That was the tune that changed it all for me. I remember arranging it, and because of Donald’s rhythm, I just thought, ‘This is just fucking great,’” says Kerr. For Martin Moscrop, it was the most rewarding of all their studio sessions with Hannett. “‘Flight’ to me is the best production ever, and that is Martin at his absolute high point with us.”

On the flip was “Blown Away,” a wild Brazilian *batucada* mangled through a metallic industrial echo chamber by Hannett at the peak of his powers. “I remember doing the session for ‘Blown Away’ and then coming back to the studio the next day and hearing what Martin had done,” says Kerr. “We said to him, ‘What have you done? This is amazing.’ He had almost doubled the speed. For me, that was something else.”

ACR’s increasingly rhythmic funk had its roots in the music they were hearing in the clubs of Manchester. “We’d all been going to Pips, then discovered Fever on a Wednesday night where DJ Hewan Clarke played,” recalls Moscrop. “He was great and would play all these jazz breaks, Latin and Brazilian music, and all sorts of funk and fusion, and that really inspired us.” One of the original spinners (alongside DJ Persian) at the Reno in



‘Do the Du’ all had that space that Donald created for us,” says Kerr. “It’s like that famous quote, ‘It’s not what you play; it’s what you don’t play,’ and that’s the key,” adds Johnson. “And that space we create and the echoes and all of that you hear in Ratio are all dub orientated and come from the old-school guys like Lee ‘Scratch’ Perry, King Tubby, and Augustus Pablo. We

hearing in the clubs of Manchester. “We’d all been going to Pips, then discovered Fever on a Wednesday night where DJ Hewan Clarke played,” recalls Moscrop. “He was great and would play all these jazz breaks, Latin and Brazilian music, and all sorts of funk and fusion, and that really inspired us.” One of the original spinners (alongside DJ Persian) at the Reno in



Hulme as well as Pips and the Gallery in the city centre of Manchester, Clarke is one of the unsung yet hugely pivotal DJs in Manchester's clubbing history, and was even the original DJ at the Hacienda.

In an interview with Greg Wilson (DJ at another seminal Manchester club, Legends, where ACR would often hang out), Hewan Clarke, ACR's subsequent tour DJ, recalled his introduction to the band: "Fever was a space where we could practice, and when I say 'we,' I'm talking about people like the Jazz Defektors [Manchester jazz dance crew] and all the really good dancers that came out of the end of Rafter's [home to DJ Colin Curtis and John Grant]. In the corner of the club, there was this group of white kids that we'd never seen before. Every other week or so, they'd come in. And every now and then they'd get up and come over and ask, 'What was that you were playing?' You know, when I was playing an Airto track, they'd come over and be like, 'Who was that? Who was that?' and I'd be showing them."

Digging deep for American soul and funk, the group would spend hours in Manchester's record stores. One day, Simon Topping was in the imports section of Yanks Records when he picked out a twenty-pence copy of Banbarra's 1975 single "Shack Up." "The reason we did a version of 'Shack Up' was because we listened to it and thought, well, that's easy. It's a straightforward drumbeat for Donald, the bass is simple, as is the guitar. And both me and Simon had both played trumpet at school. And so it just came together so quickly," recalls Moscrop. "We had one rehearsal and thought that it was brilliant, so took it to Tony and said, 'We've got a new tune to record.'" Produced at Graveyard Studios in May 1980, "Shack Up" was released on the Belgian subsidiary Factory Benelux in August.

It was during this era that ACR began to sport a new look that somehow matched the raw Northern funk of their sound. "When we first started, we used to wear demob suits," recalls Moscrop of the WWII-era civilian suits—often double-breasted and pin-striped—given out to discharged soldiers. "But that sort of morphed into that army shorts-and-shirts look. Wherever we toured, we would buy army gear. Then when we were playing in London at the Lyceum one time, Tony Wilson had been to the army surplus shop Lawrence Corner [near Euston Station]. We needed some clothes for that gig, because we didn't think we had the right stuff with us. So Tony took us there and we bought loads of all this army gear."

Their new "Desert Rat" look, which had echoes of their heroes Parliament-Funkadelic during their *One Nation Under a Groove* tour of 1978, became de rigueur for post-punk groups such as Teardrop Explodes. But no one sported it as strongly as ACR, who accentuated the look with the use of fake tan, disguising their Northern pallor. That sensitive skin would soon be tested when the group arrived in a sweltering New York in the late summer of 1980.

As James Nice explained in his book *Shadowplayers: The Rise and Fall of Factory Records*, "the implications of this first Atlantic crossing would prove enormous for all involved though the decision to record in the States owed almost as much to cheap studios and exchange rates as the challenge of a new frontier." Martin Moscrop recalls the culture shock of arriving in New York in 1980: "Our heads just exploded when we got there, especially when we started going to the clubs, which really were eye-opening," he says. "Coming from the U.K. where clubs at the time didn't have good sound systems or lighting. Then you went to New York and they had everything set up right. It was just on a different scale. So going to places like Hurrah and Danceteria was brilliant." It wasn't just how these clubs looked and sounded that blew them away. "The music they were playing was really eclectic," Moscrop continues. "It was this mix of post-punk, electro, hip-hop, soul, and disco all thrown in together. That was a real inspiration to us."

Mixing art, live music, alternative performance, a video lounge, and a club helmed by resident DJ Mark Kamins, Danceteria would spark an idea for Tony Wilson and Rob Gretton for their own club in Manchester that would become the Hacienda. "Danceteria was brilliant, and we spent a lot of time there," says Kerr. "We were a bit young, really, to fully appreciate what we were part of at the time. I mean, we met lots of famous people on that scene, but we were a bit too arrogant and thought we were better than everyone else."

With New Order only recently formed by the remaining members of Joy Division following the death of singer Ian Curtis, it would be ACR that would headline all the gigs on the tour. The show at Hurrah filmed by Michael Shamberg for the film *Tribeca* was reviewed by Ian Penman in the U.K.'s *New Musical Express*: "A truly unruly funk, a new form. Childish and churlish, erratic and demanding, danceable and textual... A quicksilver mix of voices, whistles and dancefloor directiveness. The young woman who sporadically trades vocals with Simon Topping is a particularly helpful addition. I was also struck more than once with the thought that Donald Johnson is the best drummer in the world."

It's an evocative description of the murky footage we see in the film shot by Shamberg who would go on to direct some of New Order's most artfully shot videos, including "True Faith" and "Blue Monday." The young singer we see on the Hurrah stage in *Tribeca* was Martha Tilson, whose voice would add a ghostly haze to the subsequent LP *To Each*. "I met her at our first gig at Hurrah," recalls Kerr. "We had been looking for a female vocalist while we were in New Jersey, because, I think, Simon was getting a bit tired of singing. So I absolutely fell in love with Tilli and found out she was in a band. So I went to one of their rehearsals, and the first note that came out of her mouth blew me away. I just thought, 'She's weird, man.' Perfect for us, completely unexpected."



(clockwise top left) 1. Late summer 1980, Factory Records founder Tony Wilson arrives at Eastern Artists Recording Studio (EARS), East Orange, New Jersey, where ACR would record *To Each*. 2. ACR arriving at EARS with producer Martin Hannett in middle. 3. Peter, Simon, and Jez tour the World Trade Center, NYC, 1980. 4. ACR roadies Tommy and Duncan, Tribeca, New York, 1980. 5. Donald and Martin loading the van. 6. Tilli and Jez, Niagara Falls, New York, 1980. All photos courtesy of Donald Johnson.

When they weren't at the clubs, they were immersing themselves in the Latin scene. "We had been listening to all of that in the clubs of Manchester, but to go to New York and being around that culture all the time, that fused into everything we did and just set us off in a new direction," says Johnson. "Then we had a chance to go to the Latin Percussion shop in East Orange," Johnson says of Martin Cohen's famed musical instrument brand, which had a shop in New Jersey, "near where we were recording," he notes. "In Manchester, we couldn't even find an LP [brand] section in a music shop."

Martin Moscrop picks up the story: "After going to the [Latin Percussion] shop, we got Tony [Wilson] to take us to their factory, and bought loads of percussion instruments. So on our first trip to New York, we had all these new instruments that we used onstage and that you see in that film *Tribeca*, learning how to play them."

Nights spent mixing with downtown's art set and weekends watching the drum circles in Central Park was countered by days stuck in the studio with an increasingly volatile Martin Hannett who was unhappy with the Eastern Artists Recording Studio (EARS) in East Orange, New Jersey. As well as being away from his usual engineer Chris Nagle, Hannett didn't have access to the studio trickery of Strawberry, in particular his beloved AMS delays and Marshall time modulators. Finally mixed back at Strawberry Studio later that autumn, *To Each*, despite towering tracks like "Winter Hill," didn't match the alien dub funk of the "Flight" 12-inch and the sinister percussion frenzy of "Blown Away" that Hannett and the group recorded prior to their New York trip. "The thing with *To Each* was, it came out too late, and we had already moved on," says Moscrop. "By the time it was released, I think we had already finished *Sextet*. People were coming to our gigs expecting to hear *To Each*, and we were playing the whole of *Sextet* instead."

The support act for ACR at one of the Hurrah gigs was three sisters from the South Bronx who went by the name ESG. With ACR finishing what was to become *To Each* three days early, ESG was offered their last three days' studio time for their debut single, subsequently released on both Factory and 99 Records. The three tracks that Hannett produced in his inimitable style, "Moody," "U.F.O.," and "You're No Good," would become ESG's signature tracks, great slabs of ominous and much-sampled funk that sound as raw and alien forty years on.

Back in Manchester, tensions between ACR and Hannett escalated to the point of no return, and they parted company early in 1981. "The thing was, we were so close to our own music that we didn't want to be told what to do," says Kerr. "It was like someone coming into your gang and telling you how to do things." Although recognizing the genius of Hannett as a producer, Donald Johnson found his studio methods stifling. "I loved his work going right back from the stuff he was doing with the Invisible Girls, but in the studio, we kind of didn't

get on, and I think one of the main reasons was that Martin was trying to make me sound and be like the other drummers he recorded [for Factory]," he says. "My sound and my talent wasn't that, and I didn't want to be a copyist and wanted to represent myself rather than me play the way that was easier for Martin and his technical innovations in the studio. So we would have these massive rows. But I also want to be defensive towards him and to say that at the time, I was very self-assured and knowing where I was going and didn't really have the tools or capability to deal with Martin in a different way."

Finally released in April of that year, the sound of *To Each* was a long way from the spacey and soaring Latin funk of numbers like "Lucinda" and "Waterline" that had become staples in their live sets at this time. Central to the new sound on *Sextet* were those haunting off-key vocals of Martha Tilson, whose voice was now brought to the fore with devastating effect.

Widely regarded as ACR's '80s masterpiece, *Sextet* mixed Latin, samba, and jazz with electro funk, dub, and no wave to become one of the most visionary releases in Factory Records' catalog. The sonic textures were the result of the group's deep absorption of the Latin music of New York now translated to the dank streets of Northern England. "I think one of the best things about A Certain Ratio is that we couldn't play our instruments and everything we aspired to do took more learning," says Moscrop. "So when we tried to play Latin music, it came out as sounding totally different."

The brightness in the sound was an effect of the group having parted with Martin Hannett, whose control in the studio had pushed the group to the edge.

"It was total freedom, and the chemistry between us all really worked on that LP," says Moscrop. "It was all very instinctive. I mean, 'Day One' is called that just because it was the tune we wrote on the first day. 'Knife Slits Water' was just a tune we invented in the studio. Before we knew it, we had a killer LP. The majority of it was just made in the studio with total freedom to do what we want."

Producing their own music was also liberating for a group that had learned much from Hannett but were now ready to move forward on their own. "We were now able to use the sonic landscapes that we were trying to find ourselves with different pieces of equipment to play around with, doing things that you weren't supposed to do," says Johnson. As well as sounding unlike any other Factory release, it also looked like no other. Featuring an abstract painting by Denis Ryan with orange, green, and blues that hinted at sea and sky, the cover of *Sextet* was as bright and ethereal as the music within.

The fertile year of 1982 that started with the group releasing the dub reggae single "Abracadubra" under the pseudonym Sir Horatio, which was then followed by the release of *Sextet*, ended with the album *I'd Like to See You Again*. With a cover shot of the

group at the Hacienda's Gay Traitor bar, the album left behind the ethereal atmosphere of *Sextet* for a more stripped back, jazz-funk-meets-electro sound. "That LP really was inspired by hearing Greg Wilson at Legend, a great club with an amazing sound system and light rig," says Kerr. "We were also going to Spin Inn Records a lot and buying all these jazz-funk, fusion, and early electro 12-inches," adds Moscrop. "Then attempting to play these records and other things like the Brit-funk records that were around, but not being quite good enough [to play them], so it came out as something else. But listening back now, I don't think we were too far off."

This pre-Hacienda era of Manchester was, until recently, somewhat overlooked in the history of U.K. club culture. "There were so many great clubs in Manchester around the time, so as well as Legend, you had Berlin with Colin Curtis and the Gallery—they were all part of our growing up," says Moscrop. "And then living in Hulme, there was the Reno, as well as all the shebeens and after-hours [clubs], so you had all this music around you all the time."

I'd Like to See You Again was the last LP to feature founders Peter Terrell and Simon Topping, with the latter forming Quando Quango with future Hacienda DJ Mike Pickering. Four years passed before ACR's next LP, *Force*, was recorded with a lineup bolstered by new members Andy Connell, pianist with Swing Out Sister (whose singer Corinne Drewery guested on vocals), and saxophonist Tony Quigley (brother of Ann Quigley, singer with Swamp Children and Kalima, the Latin-jazz ACR offshoot founded by Moscrop). The recordings veered from the slap-bass funk of "Mickey Way" and "Bootsy" (a tribute to the P-Funk bassist who was another of the group's big influences) to the Latin-percussion assault of the B-side "Si Firmi o Grido," which the group started to close all their live shows with. Then there is the track "And Then She Smiles," where ACR displayed a pop sensibility that was unthinkable in the early '80s.

It was a fusion of funk and pop that the group would fine-tune in the late '80s as the ecstatic winds of acid house swept through Manchester. ACR weren't to be left behind with Moscrop and Johnson's "Acid to Ecstasy" featured alongside pivotal Manchester acid tracks like A Guy Called Gerald's "Voodoo Ray" and T-Coy's "Cariño" on the compilation *North – The Sound of the Dance Underground*. Leaving Factory for A&M Records, ACR then recorded the euphoric pop single "The Big E" in 1989. It was swiftly followed by the LP *Good Together* (including the anthemic ecstasy pop of the title track), born from nights among the dry ice and sweaty hugs of the Hacienda. "Acid house really was like the punk scene all over again, and that was very inspirational," says Moscrop.

ACR went deeper into the new dance sounds on their subsequent LP from 1990, *acr:mcr*, recorded with singer Denise Johnson (who had appeared on the "Acid to Ecstasy" track) at

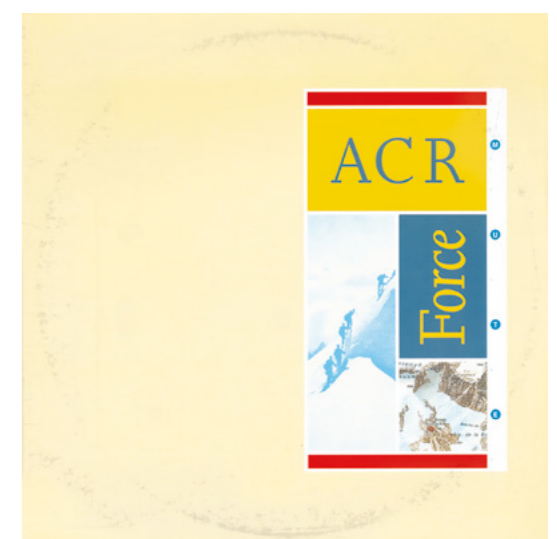
the Soundstation, the group's new studio. The pinnacle of the Chicago- and Detroit-influenced LP were "Spirit Dance" and "BTTW 90," which made full use of the racks of Roland 808s, 303s, and 101s. "That studio wasn't really set up to record live stuff, as it didn't have a separate control room, so the stuff had to be quite electronic," says Moscrop.

Two subsequent LPs in the mid-'90s were released on Rob's Records, founded by New Order's original manager, Rob Gretton. "After Rob passed away, we kind of hibernated," says Moscrop. "Then Andrew Weatherall put out the compilation *9 O'Clock Drop*"—which included their 1981 12-inch "Waterline" next to tracks by the likes of 23 Skidoo and Quando Quango—"and the whole post-punk thing started taking off again. Soul Jazz got interested, and they released the compilation *Early* and reissued our first three LPs." Following some tumultuous live shows, including one at North London's Elektrowerkz with Andrew Weatherall on the decks supporting, ACR returned with the LP *Mind Made Up*. "At the time, we weren't interested in anyone hearing it or anything—really, we just wanted to make a record again," says Moscrop.

The latest chapter in ACR's history began when Mute Records released two box sets of their work in 2018 and 2019. "We were releasing all this back catalog, which made us dig out all these old tapes of us, and that was inspiring us, actually hearing what we had done," says Moscrop. "Then Mute asked us to do a rework of a Barry Adamson tune called 'I Got Clothes,' which made us go back in the studio. And because of the success of that, other people started asking us to do reworks. After doing about eight, we thought, 'Why are we making all this top music for other people? Why don't we make it for us?' So we just started recording without telling Mute, then told them, 'We've got an album, you know?'"

Released in 2020, their first new LP for Mute, *ACR Loco*, took influences from the group's different musical phases while creating a new path towards the future. "We've always been more interested in moving on to the next thing and been too busy creating to worry about anything else," says Moscrop. "I think that was part of our trouble; we were always too far ahead, and it took people time to catch up," adds Kerr. "We've never lost that; we are always going forward."

In May 2021, the band returned with their second new release for Mute, the four-track *ACR:EPA*. The EP centered on a jam session recorded in 2020 with singer Denise Johnson, the voice of Manchester street soul group Fifth of Heaven who had been with ACR since the LP *acr:mcr*. Like *Sextet*, the album was recorded quickly and spontaneously with most tunes written in the studio. Straddling electronic jazz, post-punk, and cinematic funk, the session took place at Oxygene in Salford. The EP, sadly, was the last with Denise Johnson, who tragically passed away in July of that year. "We had just finished recording *ACR Loco* and had two days left the following weekend, so





we said, 'Why don't we just spend the two days jamming?'" recalls Moscrop. "Denise put her vocals down after, and then lockdown happened. The plan was to go back and do the vocals again, but then Denise passed away. But the stuff you hear now sounds totally finished to me. To think those vocals are just rough first takes shows what an incredible voice she had."

It was followed by *ACR:EPC*, which, like the first EP, featured the artwork of Trevor Johnson, who designed many of ACR's sleeves from "Wild Party" onwards. "The whole visual side has always been important to us and is perhaps even more so now with social media and everything," says Moscrop. The EP includes collaborations with Andrew Meecham under his Emperor Machine moniker and Chris Massey, founder of the Manchester label Sprechen. Another constant inspiration was the late Andrew Weatherall aka "The Guv'nor," to whom the group dedicate a track on this EP. "With 'The Guv'nor,' we tried to make a record that Andrew or Sean Johnston would play at their ALFOS [A Love From Outer Space] night, where they play dubby chuggers and never go above 120 bpm," says Moscrop.

The third EP of the series, *ACR:EPR*, came out just as the group prepared for their first concerts for eighteen months as lockdown restrictions eased. "Looking back [on the early days], it was a magical time, and we were very lucky going to New York and all of that. But I think what we are doing now is so much better because of our relationship as musicians and we are getting back to where we should be," suggests Kerr. "We're just doing what we have always done, and that is creating something new then moving on and just coming back to things when we need to so we can re-express or reimagine it in a different way," adds Johnson.

So as ACR enter their forty-fifth year, where do they seek inspiration? "There's still a million things we want to learn, and we're always buying new records all the time and aspiring to do something new," says Moscrop. "For example, on the new EP [*ACR:EPR*], there's a song called 'Souls in the City,' which is inspired by [Shabaka Hutchings's jazz trio] the Comet Is Coming. So we hear something new, and we want to play like that, but in the ACR way. It's no different now to what it was back then. Except we can play a bit better now. You lose something by not being so innocent, but the maturity brings another element to it. Personally, I think we are making some of the best music we've ever made. Because what it does is, it takes all our influences from forty-odd years, and we are able to transfer that inspiration into something that is totally unique." ●