

Injecting soul into a new machine

By Paul McGrath

Each year one pop song emerges that reflects the summer. Just as (*I Can't Get No*) *Satisfaction* summons up the heat of 1965, *Don't You Want Me?* has proven the perfect pop item for portable radios and sidewalk speakers in the summer of 1982. What is different about the song by England's The Human League is that it is entirely electronic in nature. A decade after the synthesizer started to creep into pop music arrangements—first as novelty, then with increasingly serious application—The Human League is the first electronic band, operating without standard guitars and drums, to occupy the revered top spot in the *Billboard* singles chart. The group has become

the most successful of a cluster of mostly British bands—including Soft Cell, *Orchestral Manoeuvres in the Dark*, Duran Duran and ABC—that has distilled the '80s sound most commonly called "electropop" down from the rarefied art school level to the funkier milieu of the jukebox.

That success has been the payoff of four years of hard work for the sextet but it is also testimony to strong advances made recently in the musical hardware department. Keyboard units that can produce a seemingly endless array of sounds from drumbeats to barking dogs are now available for about \$5,000, a price that a novice rock 'n' roller can afford. It is no wonder, then, that dozens of groups are similarly outfitting themselves, waiting to take over The Human League's top spot. Gord Osland, a Winnipeg drummer toying with a new drum synthesizer and a new electronic band, Zdenka, enthuses: "It's 'Here come the '80s,' all the way, now. These machines aren't going to go away, and we have to shift with the times. I'm still a little scared by the whole thing."

Many people may be afraid of what they still hear as basically antihuman sounds, but in enclaves across the country young musicians with no allegiance



The band TBA: electropop is cerebral but it also appeals to the muscles

to older electric instruments are trying out the keyboards and opening up to a new world of sound. They are capitalizing on all the work done since the watershed Wendy (née Walter) Carlos recording *Switched On Bach* in 1969; such artists as Stevie Wonder, Brian Eno and Vangelis gradually integrated synthesizers into the musical mainstream in the '70s. Most important is the fact that they are discovering that a solid electronic bass-and-drum combination can still make people dance.

The dancing may be the bottom line of the electropop breakthrough. Of all the recent six-month fads in pop music, the new brand of electronic rock has concentrated most on a pulse suitable for moving feet. Such hits as Soft Cell's *Tainted Love* (which also made the *Billboard* Top Ten), Spandau Ballet's *Chant No. 1* and Pete Shelley's *Homosapien* had to make an initial impact in dance clubs before radio programmers would take a chance on the futuristic sound. Punk and new wave are not primarily commodities for dancing; the electropop whizzes succeed by mixing the monotone simplicity of punk with the rhythms of disco. It is cerebral, but it also appeals to the muscles.

Producer John Punter, who has worked with electronic pioneers Roxy

Music and Japan, says the faddism in the current electropop will die. "A couple of years ago, when punk was it, any kid who could spit on somebody else and whack at a guitar called himself a punk. Now they're all into electronics. The story is the same with every fad. Those people with substance, with real creativity, will hang on, and those without it will drop away."

Punter's hope is that The Spoons, from Burlington, Ont., will be one of the survivors. He is now producing the group's second album, in a Toronto studio, to capitalize on the success of its heavily synthesized single *Nova Heart*. It is the only Canadian group of this type hooked up with a major recording company, A&M.

The relative newness of most of the electronic bands makes Vancouver's 'e' and Toronto's TBA seem old by comparison. Both predate the 1981-'82 explosion; TBA's leading light, Glenn Schellenberg, is now one of the patriarchs of the scene. Since TBA started nearly three years ago, the ranks have swelled, most recently in Toronto, with the arrival of the Dave Howard Singers—one man, many keyboards, a tape loop and wistful ditties such as *I Am a Bunny*—and a curious synthesizer duet known as Bobby and Synthia. Schellenberg has been around long enough to shift his priorities to include a guitar. A bit of a heretic, he has always used a drummer: "I am almost opposed to synthetic drums," he says. "I really hate that robot feeling to them."

But the listless monotones that characterized earlier synthesizer bands, such as Gary Numan's *Tubeway Army* and Ultravox, may have lost their novelty. "I've always thought it was simply a matter of time before these sounds crept into mainstream," says John Mills-Cockell, formerly of *Syrinx* and the doyen of the synthesizer in Canada. "With The Human League, people are getting back to melody. It's something that the early electronic stuff managed to avoid. It's a relief." ☺