

Robyn Hitchcock

The Man Who Reinvented Himself

by Brad Bradberry

"I think the great songs that anyone writes are fundamentally dealing with feelings," said an introspective Robyn Hitchcock a few years back. "It's like you can say, 'What do your songs mean?' Well, they don't mean anything. Like, what does an elephant mean? An elephant doesn't mean anything, it's just there. An elephant is the result of conditions that have created the elephant. My songs are the same thing."

Born March 3, 1952, in London, England, the young Hitchcock wasn't immediately drawn to music, as one might suspect. An admitted "late developer," he was impressed by Bob Dylan's "Like A Rolling Stone" in his early teens. A few years down the road he explored simultaneously the works of William Shakespeare and Captain Beefheart. And then, of course, there was always the Beatles, especially John Lennon, to fill his head with a wide assortment of musical ideas and off-center images. Ditto for Pink Floyd's Syd Barrett.

Hitchcock's early musical explorations were as a folk troubadour, making the local coffeehouse scene with acoustic guitar in hand, sometimes busking (street singing). This solo folkie act merged into a short-lived recording act, Maureen and the Meatpackers. Based on Hitchcock's cabaret act at the time, it was a strange combination of disparate musical styles: a jazz drummer, two female singers, a guitarist named Hank, a bassist named "The Tide of Filth" and, of course, Mr. Hitchcock. The only song ever mentioned from these sessions is "The Unpleasant Stain." This group's still unreleased album was recorded at Spaceward Studios in 1976.

1976-77 was a busy time for the still-developing Hitchcock. Various other musical projects and groups included B.B. Blackberry and the Swelterettes, the Chosen Few (not the same band that became the Flamin' Groovies), the Worst Fears and Dennis and the Experts. The latter of these merged into what became the Soft Boys.

As do most great groups, the Soft Boys had a concept. A decade later, Hitchcock would boil it down to a basic yet bizarre formula: "to cross *Abbey Road* with *Trout Mask Replica*." Beatles meet Beefheart.

The first official Soft Boys sessions were recorded in March 1977. The group at that time consisted of drummer Morris Windsor, bassist Andy Metcalfe, guitarist Alan Davies and Hitchcock as chief singer-songwriter-guitarist. Everyone sang, giving the group a wide palate from which to paint its eccentric vocal arrangements.

Shortly, a seven-inch EP was released on

Raw Records. Although known as the *Give It To The Soft Boys* EP, that particular title song does not appear (in 1984 Delorean Records released a six-track 12-inch, *Wading Through A Ventilator*, that does include this elusive track; *Raw Cuts* is the CD equivalent, released in 1989). The three tracks in question—"Wading Through A Ventilator," "The Face Of Death" and "Hear My Brane" (sic)—are visceral, punchy and erratic. Tinges of psychedelia are interwoven with shreds of Beefheart, the Who, and layered counterpoint harmonies. The cover art was green and white: a woman's arm with a "Raw Records" tattoo wrapped around a bare breast. But this was the first and last Soft Boys record on that label.

"Usually, none of the artists saw any money [on Raw Records]. The guy who put it out is a great small-time crook. He never ripped off enough for anybody to actually have his arms broken. He owes us four or five grand right now," a still bitter Hitchcock said in the summer of 1991.

The 45 sleeve actually read, "available from CBS Records." Hitchcock laughs at this. "Yeah, but it really wasn't distributed by CBS. He just put that on there to make it look like they were posh." Regardless of royalties paid or not paid, *Give It To The Soft Boys* was well received by the few rabid fans who took the time to take the Sex Pistols off their record players for a spell. It could be argued that this record was the start of the "psychedelic revival" in the U.K. though "the Softs" didn't get into the heavy stuff for another year or two. It was an exhilarating time for the band, as well as a frustrating one, as the Soft Boys weren't considered "punk" enough by some to get the airplay and gigs they deserved.

"We couldn't unlearn our craft and suddenly pretend that we know only one chord," Hitchcock recalls. "We were interested in three-part harmonies and all the rest."

Following a change in personnel (Davies exited, replaced by guitarist Kimberly Rew and harmonica player Jim Melton), the now infamous "Radar Sessions" came about. Unfortunately, only one single, "(I Want To Be An) Anglepoise Lamp" b/w "Fatman's Son," ever saw the light of day. The songs, many of which would appear in different versions on the subsequent *A Can Of Bees* and *Invisible Hits*, were strong, showing Hitchcock to be an increasingly melodic tunesmith with a penchant for vivid, surreal lyrics. Harp player Jim Melton was often featured and Rew's cutting second guitar meshed with Hitch's like hand-in-glove.

Radar was unimpressed anyway. There was over an album's worth of original mate-

rial recorded but either the production (dense, to say the least) or the performances (cutting edge, but hardly pop or punk) failed to suit those in control. Frustrated by Radar's unwillingness to release more than the single, the band left the label without a fuss. The bootleg album *The Day They Ate Brick* (the working title for *A Can Of Bees*) includes most of the tracks from these sessions.

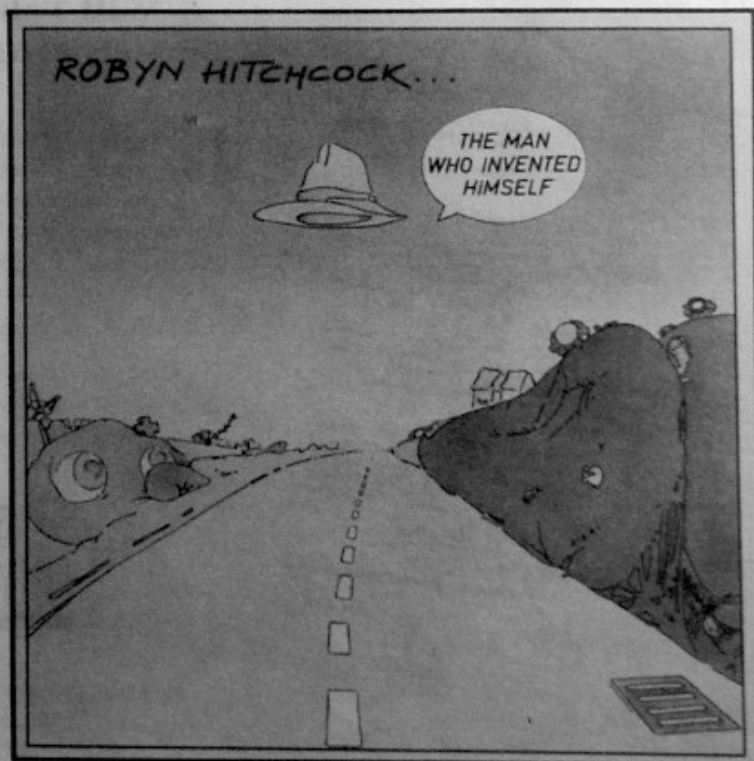
"Well, *A Can Of Bees* was just what it was," declares Hitchcock. His burgeoning obsession with insects and crustacea was rearing its ugly head (soon to be followed by fish, reptiles and amphibians). On this debut album he also throws in a pig, a rat and (John Lennon's) "Cold Turkey" for good measure. "That music is like a load of insects inside a jar just humming, trying to get out. A load of insects that have been drinking paraffin or something pretty lethal and they're all trying to get out. Insects that are on fire because they've been soaked in brandy."

Having felt like they'd been "soaked in brandy" by Radar, Hitchcock and company created their own label, Two Crabs. Using the same lineup from the Radar sessions (Melton is utilized less and less, becoming an "irregular member" until he leaves the

fold entirely), *A Can Of Bees* sums up the Soft Boys' erratic career to date: a well recorded and arranged 11-song set ranging from early material ("Give It To The Soft Boys," "Wading Through A Ventilator"), Radar sessions material ("Human Music," "The Pigworker," "Sandra's Having Her Brain Out"), new material ("Leppo And The Jooves," "Do The Chisel," "The Rat's Prayer," "School Dinner Blues"), and a powerful take on "Cold Turkey."

Of course, Hitchcock was never completely pleased with this album and reissued it in two subsequent versions, slightly altered. Though every song is not a masterpiece, the tracks burst with raw, manic energy while flirting heavily with Captain Beefheart-style art-rock. "Human Music" (compared by *Bucketfull Of Brains'* Nigel Cross to the Beatles' "Here, There And Everywhere") shows Hitchcock the writer in an entirely new light, writing a tender yet acerbic love ballad with a striking melody. "Leppo And The Jooves," a rhythmic tune driven by two Beefheartian-styled guitars, would be the only song, however, to remain in Hitchcock's live sets for years to come.

The artwork on *A Can Of Bees* is stunning. It was Hitchcock's first foray into sleeve design and it's a doozy. It takes its title liter-



fashion) found the reclusive songwriter entering a period of heightened personal awareness. One could even make the comparison between Brian Wilson's *Pet Sounds* and *Trains*, in that Hitchcock had never been this consistently melancholy or openly revealing, albeit indirectly. Musically, however, it is the musical opposite (inverse) of *Pet Sounds*: entirely acoustic with Robyn, playing piano and acoustic guitar, the sole musician save for one saxophone and one bass part.

"*Trains* dealt with things I'd been thinking about for 10 or 12 years. I was in a complete bubble when I wrote that. It could have been some sort of beetle or grasshopper or dead fungus writing that stuff. There was no motion, it was very still. And I felt totally detached from the world when I did it. I really felt that there was *me*, and the rest of the world was a billion miles away. It's good to listen to, probably, when you're in that state."

The cover, designed by Hitchcock, displays a black and white photo of an elderly man crouching on a shopping cart looking plaintively off into the bay from a long, lonely pier. Inside includes Hitch's "12 Comix," a psycho-sexual-God-mortality cartoon rambling that amuses in a non-linear manner. Also included is an untitled 12-stanza prose, ripe with surrealism, sex and pumpkins. The most memorable songs from the album are "Uncorrected Personality Traits" (a three-part acappella harmony ditty about childhood-generated sexual perversions ala Freud), "Cathedral" (a moody dirge of great beauty), "Sometimes I Wish I Was A Pretty Girl" ("It's based on Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho*—I'm imagining that I'm the girl in the shower who's being stabbed by a man who thinks he's his mother") and the title track (a reflective, yet wistful ballad).

Fegmania, released the next year, was the *de facto* Soft Boys reunion. Now dubbed "the Egyptians," the original rhythm section of bassist Andy Metcalfe and drummer Morris Windsor were augmented by keyboardist Roger Jackson. Whether Jackson was ever an official member is a bit vague, as he exited the group shortly thereafter, but reappears, seemingly as a member, on the live *Gotta Let This Hen Out* and on *Element Of Light* "It was like trying to graft a chestnut branch onto an oak tree ... it didn't work in the end"). This new album of melodically accessible pop tunes also marked Hitchcock's first foray into the American market. Slash Records took it on as a one-off deal. A tour with R.E.M. also buoyed his status Stateside.

Though not as creatively inspired as *Trains*, Hitchcock reached new heights in the recording studio. The songs bubbled with accessible hooks, hummable melodies, right-on harmonies and well-placed psych flourishes. Lyrically he was all over the map, from the insect-laden imagery of "Insect Mother" and "The Fly," to the more Freudian sexology of "The Man With The Lightbulb Head," to a stark, "Train-like" ballad ("Glass"). For pure pop there was "Strawberry Mind," "Another Bubble" and "Heaven." The latter was thematically akin to Cat Stevens' "Moonshadow" minus the pretense, plus Hitch's cynical world view ("you've got arms/and you've got legs/and you've got heaven").

"I think it's bloody good. It's better recorded than *Underwater Moonlight*," Hitchcock proclaimed upon the release of the album, and then added, "But we're going to be on Slash and we're not being aimed horribly at the charts." Charts or no charts, *Fegmania* took Robyn Hitchcock to new heights both critically and saleswise. It made many alternative music (and a few mainstream) critics' Top 10 list that year. The cult of Hitchcock was alive and growing.

The follow-up, *Gotta Let This Hen Out*, was a "greatest hits live" affair. Released with a companion video (both the album and video were U.K.-only releases, the band having parted ways with Slash), it covered material from *A Can Of Bees* up to *Fegmania*. The cover was an original painting by Hitchcock: a surreal sea-airscape with swimming-flying fish, ducks and chickens. Done in muted blue and gold oils, it is a visually beautiful, stimulating work.

Element Of Light, the true follow-up to *Fegmania*, found the Egyptians on a new label in the U.S. Relativity really got behind this album, which in retrospect seems to be perhaps the band's quietest. There were some rockers here for sure: "Somewhere Apart" (a Lennon-styled rocker) and the single, "If You Were A Priest." But the overall feel of the album was airy and sedate with Metcalfe's mellifluous bass playing leading the arrangements. The manic, psychedelic guitar stylings of previous efforts were less prominent.

Lyricaly, Hitchcock was still as eccentric as ever. "Lady Waters & The Hooded One" was about the bubonic plague. "Ten, Woody And Junior" about homosexuality. One of the most successful tracks (and admittedly one of the artists' favorites) was "Airscape." It was in effect the title track ("And in the element of light/the sun reflected from the waves") and opened with a trippy backwards guitar and had a melodic pop feel to it, like much of *Fegmania*. Ironically, one of Hitchcock's rockin'est, hook-heavy tunes, "Tell Me About Your Drugs" (drugs in the case being anything addictive: religion, sex, booze, narcotics, etc.) was relegated to the "If You Were A Priest" import 12-inch and as a bonus track on the CD (also import-only). *Element Of Light* has elements of greatness but someone forgot to stir the musical pot correctly.

"I get totally different reactions to that record from everybody," Hitchcock admitted a year after the album's release. "I think there's a certain amount of disappointment. I think what it lacks is any excitement, it's not a physically exciting record. It's not a funny record. People either expect you to be a humorist or not. You know, 'I've paid my 10 dollars and he's not making me laugh,' or 'Wow, there's only one song about fish on it.'"

Shortly after the release of *Element Of Light* came *Invisible Hitchcock*. Released in slightly different versions in the U.S. and the U.K., it was an odds and ends collection of 14 rare tracks: B-sides, outtakes, alternate mixes and previously unreleased material. This sublimely eclectic set appeared to be nearly as popular with the alternative set as *Element Of Light*. It was much more fun, to be sure.

"What I like about this album is that it's making absolutely no attempt to fit in with

anything. None of this stuff was done with the idea that it would ever be used."

After a brief yet profitable run with Relativity (which would go on to re-release much of Hitchcock's post-Soft Boys back catalog), the band signed a major label contract Stateside. A&M Records was making a move into the alternative market and Robyn Hitchcock seemed too cool to pass up.

"They're marketing me as *me*, actually," announced Hitchcock while on an interview tour for his A&M debut, *Globe Of Frogs*, in the summer of 1988. "When I went to the first meeting I said, 'Look, I don't want to be the new Psychedelic Furs or the last Charles Manson's little English cousin, or whatever. This is it, I am "Me The First," maybe "The Last," but certainly the first of this particular kind.'"

Globe Of Frogs, sporting another surreal Hitchcock cover (fish swimming in the sky of what seems to be another planet, with men in spacesuits observing them) was immediately different from *Element Of Light*. The Egyptians (augmented occasionally by R.E.M.'s Pete Buck and Squeeze's Glenn Tilbrook) never sounded better. But, except for the two singles and maybe a pair of mid-tempo rockers, *Globe Of Frogs* was as impenetrable as ever, often veering into a dense art-rock mode (the lead track, "Tropical Flesh Mandala," smacks of Captain Beefheart on the verses).

"Balloon Man," perhaps the most innocuous track Hitchcock had written in recent years with its clipped skiffle beat and cartoon nightmare lyrics) surprised everyone and became a huge alternative hit. "Flesh Number One (Beatle Dennis)" was, like its title, very mid-period Beatles, with great harmony-spiked hooks and a Byrdsy, jangly guitar (via Pete Buck).

"Luminous Rose" (a dirge) and "The Shapes Between Us Turn Into Animals" were as inaccessible as the Soft Boys could

ever imagine on first listen. But, like every track here, it seemed to make more sense, at least musically, upon repeated listenings. Unfortunately, A&M, in its infinite wisdom, decided to keep the album to 10 tracks (all formats, 36 minutes) so it could hawk a rather worthless CD3 of "Balloon Man," which included an alternate version and an abysmal non-album track, "The Ghost Ship," which appeared to be a satire of Syd Barrett's often monotonous rambling style.

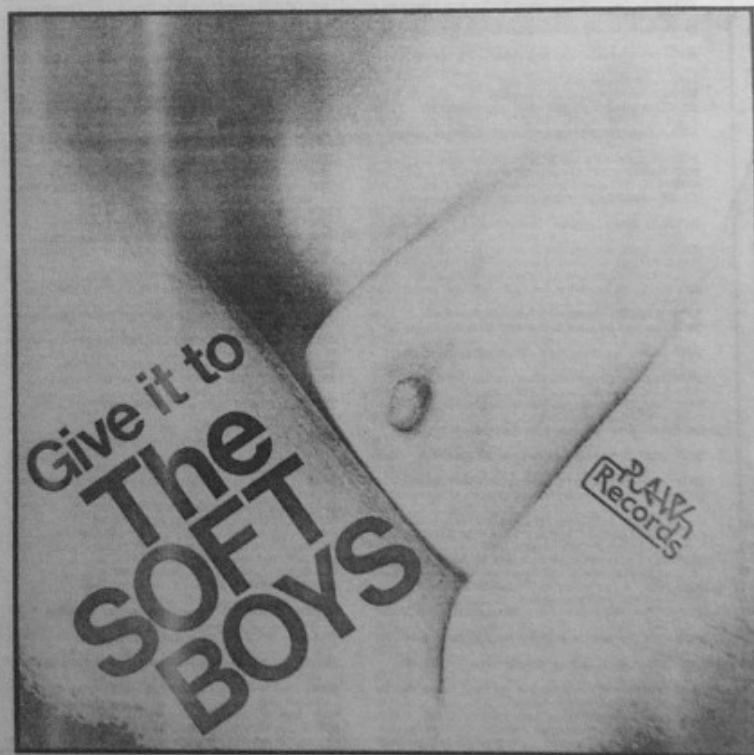
Globe Of Frogs makes no conscious effort to draw in a mainstream audience as one would expect with a major label debut. If anything, it seemed like an effort was made to distance the band from the college-radio-ready alternative rock of the day. "Balloon Man" was an uncalculated surprise for sure.

Describing Robyn Hitchcock as the perfect example of the hesitant (potential) rock star seemed to make sense, especially in light of *Globe Of Frogs*. "All I insist is that it's done on my own terms, but I am not trying to avoid success. Nor am I interested in perpetuating my own myth as to how I do what I do, to draw attention to Robyn Hitchcock."

Queen Elvis, released the next year, seemed on casual listen to be more immediate in a pop-rock vein. Produced exclusively by the Egyptians (old pal Pat Collier had produced every Hitchcock album since *Underwater Moonlight*, excepting *Groovy Decay/Decay*; he co-produced *Globe Of Frogs* with the Egyptians), when dissected for lyrical content the album finds a deeply troubled Hitchcock.

"I do think, however, that the next album is going to be a lot more grim, a lot more gritty, somewhat somber and perhaps even a bit unpleasant," he predicted while touring behind *Globe*.

Please see ROBYN page 130



ally from artwork depicting a fleshy human hand pouring out a can of bees. The colors are cartoon-basic: orange, blue, yellow, green, black. This Hitchcock painting is perhaps the least surreal of all his album cover art, somehow evoking the music inside more tangibly.

Though not released until 1983, *Invisible Hits* was the chronological follow-up to *A Can Of Bees*. The group at the time was in a transitional period, as charter member Andy Metcalfe left before the album was completed. Recorded between the fall of 1978 and early summer of 1979, it was an album done in piecemeal fashion. Hitchcock was getting increasingly pop-oriented in his overall songwriting approach: hooks, choruses, linear melody lines. There were some great tunes on this album: the Stonies "Rock 'N' Roll Toilet," the Freudian-pop of "When I Was A Kid," and the lusty "Let Me Put It Next To You" are standouts. But it feels less like an album than a somewhat random collection of bizarre songs strung together.

"*Invisible Hits* is literally the link between *A Can Of Bees* and *Underwater Moonlight*," Hitchcock explains. "The original Soft Boys was designed to be experimental, and I was getting more interested in just writing songs, experimental or not. The original Soft Boys was more like pieces of music with words over them rather than songs. So on here you've got some very straight stuff like 'He's A Reptile,' which I think is a good pop song, but it's completely incompatible with, say, 'The Asking Tree' or 'When I Was A Kid,' which are more experimental pieces. I don't know if it's an album or not. It would have been bootlegged anyway so we put it out. I don't listen to it."

Now on Armageddon Records, the Soft Boys were down to four members as part-time member Jim Melton was permanently absent and Matthew Seligman had replaced

Andy Metcalfe on bass halfway through the recording of *Invisible Hits*. The band pondered which musical road to travel. The results were striking.

Underwater Moonlight, released in 1980, is considered to be the band's, if not Hitchcock's, crowning glory. This 10-track album of blistering, hook-laden modern psychedelia found Hitchcock in rare form, combining lucid yet dreamy imagery with powerful hooks, soaring melodies and a punk-like fury. The harmony singing in itself was astounding. Augmented on a few tracks by violin and sitar, the production was top-notch. And of course the demented cover design of two well-dressed mannequins relaxing near the tidepools at low tide complemented the music perfectly.

"With the departure of Andy, the consensus among the rest of us was to straight-forward the music, to produce something not so dense or frantic. It also spelled the end of the Soft Boys, really, because now it was simply a group playing my songs, whatever they might be. Beforehand, there had been an unspoken but implicit agreement that whatever we touched we would turn upside down—like nailing a bed to a ceiling, or burying a television alive."

The lead track (and single), "I Wanna Destroy You," combined the power of the early Who with Byrdian harmonies and a decidedly psych edge. "The Queen Of Eyes" jingle-jangled like McGuinn and company a good two years before R.E.M. hit wax and received credit (Pete Buck of R.E.M. always rightly bestowed credit for reviving the jangly guitar sound to Hitchcock.)

"Insanely Jealous" hits Lou Reed territory firmly, and Reed himself would repay the compliment on *New Sensations* a few years later with his own "Endlessly Jealous." Songs such as "Positive Vibrations," "Kingdom Love" and "Tonight" make a good argument for also giving the Soft Boys and

their iconoclastic leader credit for jump-starting the "New Psychedelia" movement that swept England in the early '80s.

"Actually, I was extremely messed up at the time [sessions for *Underwater Moonlight*] and we were all in a bad state. Things were going so badly for us and being in the Soft Boys was like finding that you'd been in the S.S. on May 15, 1945, bad move. I wrote 'The Queen Of Eyes' and it came out quite poppy. It was amazing how we managed to make a tuneful record; I don't know how it manages to sound so chirpy."

Not long after the release of *Underwater Moonlight*, the Soft Boys split up. There was friction between Hitchcock and second guitarist Kimberly Rew. "We grabbed Kimberly in a moment of greed," recalled Hitchcock. "But he wasn't the right buy for it. It all got too top-heavy, a guitar crash, basically." Not to feel sorry for Rew, however, as his destiny would hook him up with Kansas-born Katrina Leskanich and they'd hit the charts with "Walking On Sunshine" (#9 in *Billboard*) in 1985 as Katrina and the Waves.

Right around the time of the breakup, Armageddon released an "odds and ends" album consisting of two loosely-assembled EPs: *Two Halves For Price Of One*. Side one was four in-studio originals and a Byrds cover ("The Bells Of Rhymney") and went under the subtitle "Only The Stonies Remain" (a song title also). Side two, known as "Lope At The Hive," mixed originals and cover tunes (the most notable being Pink Floyd's "Astronomy Domine"). Hitchcock was admittedly somewhat mercenary in making these tracks available for release.

"That was an idea thrown together to try and make some money out of tapes that already had been paid for. I don't think I ever saw a penny from it. I thought it was a terrible cover and a lousy record. But the Soft Boys were over and I was really quite brutal about it. It was kind of like kicking the corpse of a dog. As far as I was concerned, the Soft Boys had failed, so if there was any chance of making any money out of it, I was quite happy. I don't feel very sentimental about it.

"I think the Soft Boys were sort of the Velvet Underground of their day, going in the opposite direction of everyone else at the time. In England, when the Soft Boys get going there were punks and then there were the dismals and then there was the two-tone squad and then there were the smoothies. It was literally like trying to get a car out of a junction onto the main road. Every time you want to come out, something else gets in the way. And there just wasn't an opening."

In early 1993, Rykodisc will release a 39-track, double CD Soft Boys anthology (as yet untitled). It will include tracks from each of the three studio albums as well as rare live tracks, demos and "pre-Radar" material. The cover art is a Hitchcock original.

Hitchcock worked quickly. *Black Snake Diamond Role*, his debut solo album, followed *Two Halves*, opening to critical acclaim among the alternative-minded crowd. Using nine backing musicians in various combinations, he was able to capture a full band-like sound with layered, finely wrought arrangements. Thomas Dolby, Psychedelic Furs drummer Vince Ely and recent Soft Boys (including Rew) all helped

out. These 10 tracks showed a wide range of songwriting styles. From the bombast of "Brenda's Iron Sledge" to the Barrett-like "Acid Bird" to a Lenonesque "Love," this new set was complex in a way the artist had only hinted at in the past.

"It was fun to make because I didn't have to use the same people on every track," he quips. "This little company Armageddon said, 'Yes, you can make a solo album.' And they gave me enough money to make it. It's done in a whole bunch of different studios... it's got the whole works on it. The previous records we had always performed what we did live in the studio and that was it. This time I could do things like have an acoustic guitar and no lead. In fact, we did do stuff like that, stuff we do to this day [as the Egyptians]. I think they're also a good crop of songs, and they're the first time developed as a songwriter."

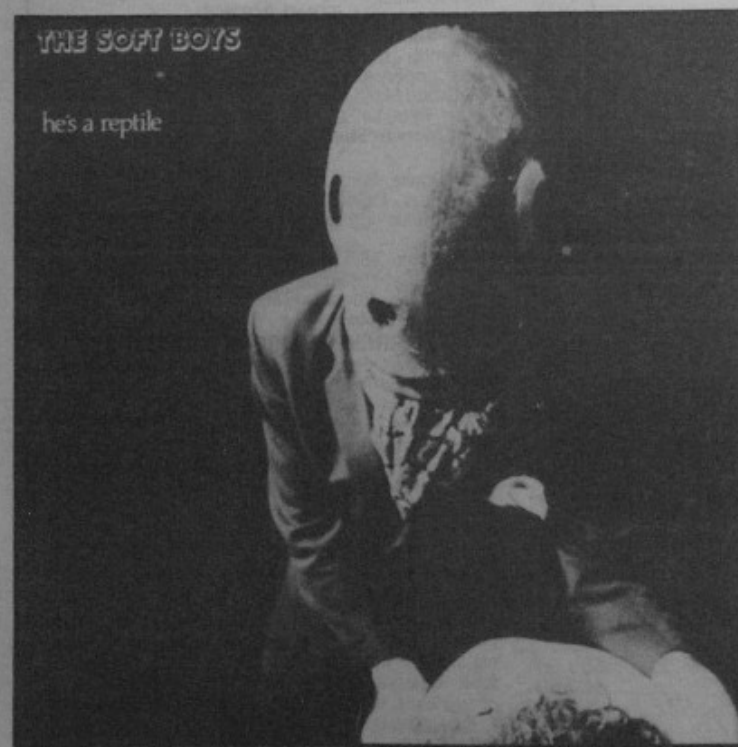
Next up, *Groovy Decay* (1982) found Hitchcock working with renowned producer Steve Hillage. Using a small backing group that he'd never worked with before, the results were mixed. So mixed, in fact, that Hitchcock reworked the album and re-released it under the title *Groovy Decay* a few years later. In comparison to its predecessor, it was a disappointment, but there were a few really choice numbers among the casualties: "Fifty Two Stations," "Cars She Used To Drive" and "St. Petersburg." Attempts at funky dance grooves were either marginally successful ("Night Ride To Trinidad") or painfully monotonous ("Grooving On An Inner Plane").

"Steve Hillage just got into his sort of 1980s Kings Row suits and was trying to be anything but psychedelic," recalls Hitchcock. "He was into club mixes and all that sort of stuff. I was really lost and getting lost in those days. I was really drunk all the time and I was particularly unhappy. We had to record at night and it was just so slow, it was like walking through congealing toffee. And Steve Hillage's idea of pace was very different from mine. I like to work fast. We used the best Hillage tracks and those that were produced by Matthew [Seligman, who produced what amounted to pre-Hillage demos] which at least carry his original ideas [referring to the reworked *Decay*]."

Following the disappointment of *Groovy Decay*, Hitchcock retreated from the business. "I dropped out of music completely for a couple of years. I wrote some articles for a magazine, I worked with Captain Sensible [the ex-Damned bassist, as a part-time lyricist], and I did odd jobs and things like that," he recalls.

But during this "down period," two other things were going on: Hitchcock continued to write a ton of new material and he also had a meeting of the minds with the old Soft Boys. They were to re-form (with Metcalfe coming back to the fold) as soon as their leader was ready. But first he needed to do a true solo album; the first two had been his material but the arrangements had been largely collaborative.

I Often Dream Of Trains is considered by many to be Hitchcock's finest moment as a solo artist, perhaps his finest ever. These 12 new songs (with the instrumental "Nocturne" serving as musical bookends, opening and closing the album in cinematic



ROBYN from page 62

How right he was. But *Queen Elvis* is an odd combination of lush, fleshed-out arrangements (strings, horns and layered vocal treatments on some tracks; "The Veins Of The Queen" combines a verse similar to Chad and Jeremy's "Summer Song" with "Penny Lane"-styled horns) with basic rock (the single, "Madonna Of The Wasps," and "Superman" which evoked Ray Davies). Lyrically he approached madness like never before ("If I was man enough I'd come on your stump" from "Wax Doll" was a scary line to swallow even for the Hitchcock faithful). He proved once again that he was capable of great beauty in the stark ballad "One Long Pair Of Eyes." If anything, *Queen Elvis* was a prime example of musical schizophrenia.

"I think it gets harder and harder to write words in language that means anything in rock," says a frustrated Hitchcock. "I mean, rock music has narrowed so that all that's really possible to communicate is 'I love you' or 'I don't love you.'" The album cover shows the artist clawing some message into the window of a darkened phone booth, a visual image apropos of *Queen Elvis's* musical content.

Eye, an acoustic solo outing, was as much an emotional respite as it was a reaction against the "write-record-tour-promote" merry-go-round Hitchcock had found himself captive on the past few years. Largely modeled after *I Often Dream Of Trains* (right down to the artwork with its gold leaf hand lettering on dark green), Hitchcock wrote

and recorded 14 new songs (18 on CD) while staying in San Francisco for an extended vacation. A few tracks had already been in his unused back catalog for awhile, but they fit in easily with the newer songs.

"Queen Elvis" (a track which didn't make *Queen Elvis* proper in two versions on CD) was a cynical ballad. "Clean Steve" follows a typically bizarre Hitchcock character through a song structure vaguely based on Ray Charles's "What'd I Say." "Rainy Twilight Coast" is a moody ballad held together by some wonderful acoustic guitar. "Beautiful Girl" was a hooky pop ditty.

Among the curiosities: Hitchcock mentions a cast of "real" characters to go along with his fictionalized ones (Kimberly Rew being the most obvious). A mention on the back cover of Carl Douglas's "Kung Fu Fighting" implies that it is among the tracks included. It's not; it's on *Alvin Lives*, a compilation to benefit the effort to repeal Margaret Thatcher's "Poll Tax" in England.

Around this time, Hitchcock got together with the Egyptians, Glenn Tilbrook (Squeeze), Billy Bragg and R.E.M.'s Pete Buck, Mike Mills and Peter Dinklage for a few casual "pick-up" gigs. Billed as Nigel and the Crosses in homage to fanzine writer Nigel Cross (who had been an early chronicler of Hitchcock's career in the British zine *Bucketfull Of Brains*), they play mostly covers and an occasional Soft Boys tune, releasing a single (see discography). Also around this time, bassist Andy Metcalfe joined

Please see ROBYN page 133

ROBYN from page 130

Squeeze on tour as a keyboardist, waiting for Hitchcock's return.

Released on the American indie Twin Tone (distributed by A&M, which wanted to wait for a "proper band album" to promote), *Eye* was stronger song-for-song than the band's two previous efforts, though it lacked the unity of *Trains* or a potential radio hit.

"On *Eye* I didn't want to have to please anyone but myself. The downside of that is that you have to make the decisions by yourself, which is much harder. *Trains* is a much cleverer record than *Eye*; *Eye* isn't a very clever record, but it is more emotional. It's a bit more confrontational. *Eye*, although it's sort of isolated in a way, is a much more damaged record."

Perspex Island was easily the most accessible, easy-to-absorb album of Hitchcock's entire career. A change in producers found the band working with Paul Fox, well known for his work on XTC's breakthrough, *Oranges And Lemons*. Another change, of a more personal nature, found Robyn Hitchcock revitalized as a songwriter. He met and fell in love with Cynthia Hunt. Ironically, during his stay in San Francisco he was briefly involved with another woman named Cynthia. "Same name, wrong woman, at least I was on the right track," Hitchcock quipped when pressed about his personal life, which he has always preferred to keep as private as possible.

On casual listen, the songs on *Perspex Island* are uplifting in a buoyant, occasionally joyous manner. The first single, "So You

Think You're In Love" (which featured Cynthia and Robyn pictured in silhouette on the cover), is Robyn giving himself some advice in love. "Ultra Unbelievable Love" is about the quest for love. "If You Go Away" finds Hitchcock begging his lover not to leave: "I don't believe in anything but you/I don't believe in anything out there/I don't believe in anything at all/it's corporation time."

At least the romantically enamored Hitchcock had the good sense not to see the world through rose-colored glasses, as a healthy swipe at the music industry parallels the self-analysis of another key track; "Ride" advised self-acceptance ("But if you don't love yourself/what's the use of someone else loving you?").

Musically, the album held over the band's familiar jangly/psych guitar sound often anchored by Metcalfe's melodic bass. With Pete Buck sitting in on guitar on eight of the album's 11 tracks (often with Hitchcock on acoustic guitar), the sound was full and band-like. Buck's bandmate, R.E.M. vocalist Michael Stipe, guested on backing vocals on a track as well ("She Doesn't Exist"; "Dark Green Energy," a 12-inch and CD single track, found Stipe even more prominent). The cover art was Hitchcock's artwork once again, an abstract figure with subliminal fish-like images.

"I think the difference is that the songs are a lot less outraged at being human this time," he reflects when asked to compare his latest album to previous efforts. "A lot of my

Please see ROBYN page 144

ROBYN DISCOGRAPHY from page 145

Relativity (US)	88561-8082	1 Often Dream Of Trains	1986
Glass Fish (UK)	MOIST 2	Invisible Hitchcock	1986
Relativity/Glass Fish (US)	88561 8089	Invisible Hitchcock (slightly different tracks)	1986
Twin Tone (US)	TTR 89175-1	Eye	1990
Glass Fish (UK)	?	Eye	1990

Albums: Bootlegs

United (Greece)	MT 13029	The Man Who Invented Himself	1985
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Flexi-discs

Armageddon	SPURT 1	It's A Mystic Trip/Grooving On An Inner Plane (freebie w/"Invented Himself" 45)	1986
Albion (UK)	ALB 110	52 Stations (w/other artists; give-away with <i>Groovy Decay</i> album)	1981

Bucketfull of Brains (UK)	BOB 14	Happy The Golden Prince (fanzine give-away)	1986
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Midnight Music/Plataforma/DING 12F		Heaven (give-away w/Spanish magazine <i>Ruta 66</i>)	1987
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Ruta 66 (Spain)			
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The Bob (US)	No. 30/real .008	Surgery (US fanzine give-away)	1987
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Bucketfull of Brains (UK)	BOB 17	Flesh No. 1 (with Pete Buck) (fanzine give-away)	1988
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The Bob (US)	No. 42	A Day In The Life (fanzine give-away)	1992
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Compact Discs			
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Aftermath (UK)	AFT CD 1	Black Snake Diamond Role	1987
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Line/Albion (Germ)	A L C D 9,00008	Groovy Decay	1987
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Midnight Music (UK)	CHIME 00.19 CD	Groovy Decoy	1986
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Midnight Music (UK)	CHIME 00.05 CD	1 Often Dream Of Trains (19 tracks)	1986
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Glass Fish (UK)	MOIST 2 CD	Invisible Hitchcock (18 tracks)	1986
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Glass Fish (UK)	MOIST 8 CD	Eye	1990
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Twin Tone (US)	TTR 89175-2	Eye	1990
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A&M (US)	31454 8000 2	Love Death (promo-only)	1992
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Compact Discs (Singles, EPs)			
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A&M (US)	CSIG 000052	Balloon Man + 2 (non-LP) (3-inch in gatefold sleeve)	1988
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A&M (US)	75021 2374 2	Balloon Man + 2 (reissue of above as 5-inch)	1991
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A&M (US)	CD 17773	Madonna Of The Wasps (promo)	1989
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A&M (US)	CD 177718	Madonna Of The Wasps (promo) + 2 (non-LP)	1989
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A&M (US)	75021 2392 2	So You Think You're In Love + 2 (non-LP)	1991
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Go! Discs	GODCD 65	So You Think You're In Love + 2 (non-LP, one different from above in thin-line jewel box)	1991
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A&M (US)	75021 7268 2	So You Think You're In Love (promo)	1991
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A&M (US)	75021 7273 2	Ultra Unbelievable Love (promo) + 1	1991
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A&M (US)	75021 7297 2	Oceanside (promo)	1991
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Nigel and The Crosses (Egyptians plus Glenn Tilbrook, Pete Buck and friends)			
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Bucketfull of Brains (UK)	BOB .28	Foxy Lady/The Queen Of Eyes (both live) (fanzine give-away 45)	1990
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Hitchcock solo on compilations			
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A&M (US)	CD 18047	Birdshead live track on promo sampler CD: <i>Pave The Earth</i>	1990
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Blue Plate (US)	BPM-002CD	Arms Of Love live track on CD: <i>The Best Of Mountain Stage Vol. Two</i>	1991
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Hope Springs (UK)	HOPE 1	Let There Be More Darkness on LP: <i>Don't Let The Hope Close Down</i>	1984
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Midnight Music (UK)	CLANG 4	Kung Fu Fighting on LP/CD: <i>Alvin Lives</i>	1990
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Hitchcock/Egyptians on compilations			
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Midnight Music (UK)	CHIME 00.17L	Egyptian Cream live track on LP: <i>Between Today & Tomorrow</i>	1986
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7-inch Singles and EPs: Bootlegs			
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Black Snake (US)	NR 17038	Live! November 1986 (four cover tunes, green vinyl)	1987
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STRUCK (UK)	02	More Songs Above Churches And Fish (tracks taped from <i>Element Of Light</i> and <i>Trains</i> CDs)	1987
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12-inch EPs			
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Midnight Music (UK)	DONG 12	Heaven + 2 (non-LP)	1985
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Relativity (US)	88561-8076	Heaven/Listening To The Higsons (promo)	1985
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Midnight Music (UK)	DONG 17	Brenda's Iron Sledge + 2	1985
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Relativity (US)	88561-8074	Exploding In Silence (six-tracks live; picture disc)	1986
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Relativity (US)	88561-8074-DJ	Exploding In Silence (promo: black vinyl)	1986
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Glass Fish (UK)	OOZE IT	If You Were A Priest + 3	1987
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Relativity (US)	88561-8130-8	If You Were A Priest/Somewhere Apart (promo)	1987
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A&M (US)	SP-17530	Balloon Man + 2 (non-LP) (green vinyl promo)	1988
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A&M (US)	SP-17537	Balloon Man (double A-side promo)	1988
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A&M (US)	SP-17549	Flesh Number One/Legalized Murder (non-LP) (blue vinyl promo)	1988
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A&M (US)	SP-17697	Madonna Of The Wasps + 2 (non-LP) (purple vinyl promo)	1989
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A&M (US)	SP-17765	Interview w/Diedre O'Donoghue (promo interview 12-inch)	1989
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A&M (US)	75021 7271 1	So You Think You're In Love/Watch Your Intelligence (non-LP) (promo)	1991
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Go! Discs (UK)	GODX 65	So You Think You're In Love + 2 (non-LP)	1991
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A&M (US)	75021 72771	Dark Green Energy + 2 (one non-LP) (promo)	1991
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A&M (US)	75021-73001	Oceanside + 2 (two Van Morrison covers) (promo)	1991
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Albums			
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Midnight Music (UK)	CHIME 00.08	Fegmania!	1985
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Slash (US)	1-25316	Fegmania!	1985
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Plane (German)	88425	Fegmania! (one track different)	1985
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Midnight Music (UK)	CHIME 00.15		
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Relativity (US)	88561-8056	Gotta Let This Hen Out!	1985
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Glass Fish (UK)	MOIST 3	Gotta Let This Hen Out!	1985
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Relativity (US)	88561-8130	Element Of Light	1986
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Relativity (US)	88561-8130	Element Of Light	1986
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A&M (US)	SP-5182	Globe Of Frogs	1988
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A&M (US)	SP-5241	Queen Elvis	1989
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A&M (US)	75021 5368	Perspex Island	1991
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Albums: Bootlegs

Blue Lake (US)	RH85-1	A Soft Boy No More (live 1985)	1988
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Feg You (US)	FEG 3-28-86	The Hooded One (live 1986)	1988
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Compact Discs (full-length)			
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Midnight Music (UK)	CHIME 00.08	CD	1986
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Midnight Music (UK)	CHIME 00.15	CD	1986
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Glass Fish (UK)	MOIST 3 CD	Gotta Let This Hen Out!	1986
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A&M (US)	CD 5182-DX	Element Of Light	1986
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A&M (US)	2746	Globe Of Frogs	1988
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A&M (US)	CD 5241	Queen Elvis	1989
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A&M (US)	75021-5368-2	Perspex Island	1991
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Compact Discs (Singles, EPs)			
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A&M (US)	CSIG 000052	Balloon Man + 2 (non-LP) (3-inch in gatefold sleeve)	1988
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A&M (US)	75021 2374 2	Balloon Man + 2 (reissue of above as 5-inch)	1991
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A&M (US)	CD 17773	Madonna Of The Wasps (promo)	1989
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A&M (US)	CD 177718	Madonna Of The Wasps (promo) + 2 (non-LP)	1989
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A&M (US)	75021 2392 2	So You Think You're In Love + 2 (non-LP)	1991
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Go! Discs	GODCD 65	So You Think You're In Love + 2 (non-LP, one different from above in thin-line jewel box)	1991
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A&M (US)	75021 7268 2	So You Think You're In Love (promo)	1991
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A&M (US)	75021 7273 2	Ultra Unbelievable Love (promo) + 1	1991
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A&M (US)	75021 7297 2	Oceanside (promo)	1991
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Nigel and The Crosses (Egyptians plus Glenn Tilbrook, Pete Buck and friends)			
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Bucketfull of Brains (UK)	BOB .28	Foxy Lady/The Queen Of Eyes (both live) (fanzine give-away 45)	1990
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Hitchcock solo on compilations			
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A&M (US)	CD 18047	Birdshead live track on promo sampler CD: <i>Pave The Earth</i>	1990
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Blue Plate (US)	BPM-002CD	Arms Of Love live track on CD: <i>The Best Of Mountain Stage Vol. Two</i>	1991
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Hope Springs (UK)	HOPE 1	Let There Be More Darkness on LP: <i>Don't Let The Hope Close Down</i>	1984
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Midnight Music (UK)	CLANG 4	Kung Fu Fighting on LP/CD: <i>Alvin Lives</i>	1990
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Hitchcock/Egyptians on compilations			
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Midnight Music (UK)	CHIME 00.17L	Egyptian Cream live track on LP: <i>Between Today & Tomorrow</i>	1986
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Please see ROBYN DISCOGRAPHY page 150



Midnight Music (UK)	CHIME 00.02	Invisible Hits	1989
Glass Fish (UK)	MOIST 4	Live At The Portland Arms	1987
Albums: Bootlegs			
Polorad (UK)	121045	The Day They Ate Brick	1986
Flexi-discs			
Bucketfull of Brains (UK)	BOB 17	Deck of Cards (second track on fanzine give-away paired with "Flesh No. 1") Hitchcock-Buck)	1988
Compact Discs			
Overground (UK)	OVER 05	Raw Cuts	1989
Two Crabs (FR)	CLAW 1001 CD	A Can Of Bees	1990
Rykodisc (US)	RCD 20231	A Can Of Bees	1992
Glass Fish (FR)	MOIST 1 CD	Underwater Moonlight	1990
Rykodisc (US)	RCD 20232	Underwater Moonlight	1992
Glass Fish (FR)	MOIST 7 CD	Invisible Hits	1990
Rykodisc (US)	RCD 20233	Invisible Hits	1992
Robyn Hitchcock Solo			
7-inch Singles and EPs			
Armageddon (UK)AS 008		The Man Who Invented Himself/Dancing On God's Thumb (originally issued with flexi-disc; see separate listing)	1981
Albion (UK)	ION 1031	America + 2	1982
Midnight Music (UK)	DING 2	Eaten By Her Own Dinner + 2	1982
12-inch EPs			
Albion (UK)	12 ION 1036	Nightride To Trinidad + 2	1982
Midnight Music (UK)	DONG 8	The Bell Of Rhymney + 3	1984
Plane (Germ)	88426	The Bells Of Rhymney (one track different) + 3	1984
Midnight Music (UK)	DONG 2	Eaten By Her Own Dinner + 4	1986
Albums			
Armageddon (UK)ARM 4		Black Snake Diamond Role	1981
Aftermath (UK)	AFT 1	Black Snake Diamond Role	1985
Base (Italy)	BASE GI LP 54	Black Snake Diamond Role	1987
Relativity/Glass			
Fish (US)	88561-8088	Black Snake Diamond Role (all above same tracks)	1987
Albion (UK)	ALB 110	Groovy Decay	1982
Line (Germ)	A L L P 4.00008J	Groovy Decay	1985
Midnight Music (Holland)	CHIME 00.19	Groovy Decoy (Decoy reworked by RH)	1985
Relativity (US)	88561-8083	Groovy Decoy	1987
Midnight Music (UK)			
	CHIME 00.055	I Often Dream Of Trains	1984

Please see **ROBYN DISCOGRAPHY** page 148

ROBYN from page 143

earlier stuff was autobiographical, much more than people thought. I was squirming to avoid human form at times. Because it seemed so dull, so insulting, or because I was frightened of basic human emotions." In a quote from the album's press kit he sums it all up: "My songs used to be curses. Now they're prayers."

Thanks to these writers and publications for certain quotes and reference material:
1. Hitchcock and Related complete discog-

raphy—Carolyn Hamilton circa 1989 (self-published)

- David Fricke, *Rolling Stone*, 1987
- Bill Holdship, *Creem*, circa 1985
- Nigel Cross and John Storey, *Bucketfull Of Brains*, 1985
- Jim DeRogatis, *The Bob*, 1987
- Pat Grandjean, *The Bob*, 1992
- Jack Rabid, *The Big Takeover*, 1992
- Ralph Traitor, *Sounds*, 1988
- Deborah Frost, *Spin*, 1988
- Alan diPerna, *Creem*, 1991
- Paul Wagner, *Santa Cruz Sentinel*, 1988
- Rick Gersohn and Laura Swanson, *A&M Records*

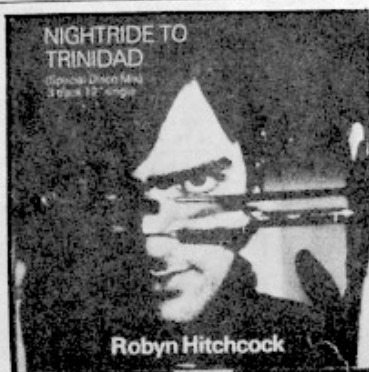
Robyn Hitchcock and Related Discography

by Brad Bradberry

w/The Soft Boys

7-inch Singles and EPs

label/country	record #	title	year
Raw (UK)	RAW 5	Give It To The Soft Boys (3 tracks)	1977
Radax (UK)	ADA 8	I Want To Be An Anglepoise Lamp/Fatman's Son	1978
Armageddon (UK)AS 005		I Wanna Destroy You/T'm An Old Pervert (disco version)	1980
Armageddon (UK)AEP 002		Near The Soft Boys (three tracks)	1980
Armageddon (UK)AS 029		Only The Stones Remain/The Asking Tree	1981
Bucketfull of Brains (UK)	BOB 1	Love Poisoning/When I Was A Kid (fanzine give-away)	1981
Midnight Music (UK)	DING 4	He's A Reptile/Song No. 4	1983
Overground (UK)	Over 04	The Face Of Death (mix 11)/The Yodelling Hoover (reissue, colored vinyl/yellow or white)	1989



7-inch Singles and EPs: Bootlegs

Black Snake (US)	NR 16806-1	Give It To The Soft Boys + 3 (live/studio 78-79, red vinyl)	?
Black Snake (US)	NR 17037	Like A Real Smoothie + 3 (Underwater Moonlight outtakes, blue vinyl)	1987
Crabs Moon (UK)	Crust 1	Return Of The Sacred Crab + 3 (A Can Of Bees tracks)	?

12-inch EPs

DeLorean (UK)	SOFT ONE	Wading Through A Ventilator (6-track mini album recorded 1977)	1984
DeLorean (UK)	Soft 1P	Wading Through A Ventilator (picture disc version of above)	1986
Overground (UK)	OVER 10	Raw Cuts (reissue of above)	1989

Albums

Two Crabs (UK)	CLAW 1001	A Can Of Bees (back cover: white)	1979
Aura (UK)	AUL-709	A Can Of Bees (slightly different tracks)	1981
Two Crabs	CLAW 1001	A Can Of Bees (slightly different from both above; back cover: flesh colored)	1984
Armageddon (UK)ARM 1		Underwater Moonlight (mannequins on rocky beach cover)	1980
Base (Italy)	ARM 1	Underwater Moonlight (alternate version on one track)	1981
Roof (Germany)	133 026	Underwater Moonlight (original + 2/b&w cover)	1981
Living Cream (UK)	MOIST 1	Underwater Moonlight (same as Base Records/with Hitchcock original pastel artwork cover)	1986
Armageddon (UK)BYE 1		Two Halves For The Price Of One	1981

Please see **ROBYN DISCOGRAPHY** page 145