

Martin Hannett

The Factory Sound. Manchester. The Invisible Girls. Joy Division. Martin Zero

Words Andy Thomas Photographs courtesy of John Cooper Clarke and Chris Hewitt

ALONGSIDE JOE MEEK, Phil Spector and the other producer geniuses of the 20th century sits the lesser-venerated Martin Hannett. He passed away in 1991 aged 42, having created a sonic signature through studio innovations and original use of electronics, leaving behind a set of recordings that proved enormously influential. Although best-known for his echo-laden Factory Records productions, his contribution to Manchester's music scene goes back to the 1960s. A new documentary – *He Wasn't Just the Fifth Member of Joy Division* – by old friend Chris Hewitt, seeks to tell his real story. “I wanted to get past the stereotype that Martin was invented at the same time as Factory,” says Hewitt. “He wasn't just a product of punk – he had a wider scope.”

Born James Martin Hannett in Miles Platting, north Manchester in 1948, his obsession with sound began as a teen. “There were small electronic shops at the bottom of Oldham Road and Rochdale Road in Manchester and I'd be dispatched with incomprehensible notes to hand over in their murky depths and come back with some crucial bit of equipment,” his sister Julie told Hewitt.

He had a huge record collection and listened intently to their production on his high-end equipment. While his peers enjoyed Simon & Garfunkel's melodic pop on *Sounds of Silence*, young Martin's ears were tuned to the echo chamber used at the CBS studios where it was recorded. While studying chemistry at the University of Manchester Institute and Technology (UMIST) and inspired by the Grateful Dead's Phil Lesh, Hannett picked up the bass, his first

instrument. He played with a few groups in the late 1960s and early 1970s, the first to make a name being Spider Mike King. “I lived above a record shop in Rusholme and Martin lived around the back,” says drummer Bruce Mitchell. “Martin and Mike used to play together. I had a basement and we put egg boxes around, and [they'd] bang away down there forever.” Mitchell, as an offshoot of his band Greasy Bear, also dealt high-end equipment out of GB Audio. “Sound was more important than anything to Martin,” says Mitchell. “He would go without food and save up to buy a piece of equipment. He'd be able to get first shout on the latest gear, like the Quad 405 current-dumping amplifier – that was very exotic then, very hi-spec and Martin had to have it. He wanted to try every new thing and analyse it.”

Hannett met another important collaborator at a Soft Machine gig he was promoting in 1971. “Martin had graduated but was still working with the student social secretaries at UMIST putting on various gigs,” recalls Steve Hopkins. “He wanted cannabis for the band and a mutual friend called me in as ‘someone who might know someone who could oblige’ – which was indeed true. We got on instantly.” Through the pair's shared love of music and sonic experimentation, a musical partnership began. “Our friend flagged the fact I was a keyboardist, which got him excited and we set up a date to visit his pad and have a jam,” says Hopkins.

Hannett joined promotion collective Music Force soon after. “It was like an agency putting together all the bands on

a roster and then booking them out,” says Mitchell. “It was set up with a proper constitution but it was all quite alternative then. I was a hippy; Martin was more obscure than a hippy.” With Music Force co-conspirators Tosh Ryan and Lawrence Beadle, Hannett launched Rabid Records from a room in Cotton Lane. Both entities were vital building blocks in the musical future of the city, as critic Jon Savage explains: “Punk didn't spring out of nowhere. There was an alternative scene and structures before then. And Martin was a big part of that in Manchester.” Hannett became an in-house producer for Rabid working on the first releases by Slaughter & the Dogs and Jilted John, an early Graham Fellows incarnation. He also honed his production skills for theatre group Belt and Braces Roadshow Band, as well as on an avant-garde electronic soundtrack to science-fiction cartoon *All Sorts of Heroes*, co-written with Steve Hopkins.

His first production of note – under the moniker Martin Zero – was the Buzzcocks *Spiral Scratch* EP in January 1977. “Martin was the only person we knew in Manchester that was known as, or called themselves, a producer,” singer Howard Devoto says. But Hannett felt restricted by the sessions. “I was trying to do things and the engineer was turning them off when I looked round: ‘You don't put that kind of echo on a snare drum!’” he told Savage. “It was never finished. I'd have whipped it away and remixed it but he erased the master because he thought it such rubbish.”

The Hannett-Hopkins partnership was cemented when their collective the >



Invisible Girls provided the music for John Cooper Clarke's *Disguise in Love*. "One of Martin's big ambitions was to form a collective of talented musicians who would work together on diverse projects with different front men and women," says Hopkins. "He called us the Invisible Girls, and occasionally the Cheese Nightmares, which didn't catch on so well." The group would variously include Pete Shelley of Buzzcocks, Vini Reilly of the Durutti Column and 10cc drummer Paul Burgess. "Martin always recognised that different musicians brought different vibes and he was a keen talent-spotter. He gave musicians space to try out ideas and tended to record everything. If he was getting something that he felt was too ordinary or dull, he devised methods for getting musicians out of their comfort zone. But there was no formula; everything was very spontaneous," says Hopkins.

Disguise in Love was the first of three Clarke LPs the Invisible Girls played on, including 1980's definitive *Snap Crackle & Bop*. Behind the Salford punk poet's street musings (that reached their zenith on 'Beasley Street'), they created an innovative tapestry of sound and texture that Hopkins says was influenced by everything from the Radio 4 shipping forecast to Pierre Henry. "It was highly experimental," he says. "The sounds themselves were becoming as important, if not more, than the harmonies and melodies of before. So, goodbye organ solo and hello distorted, mangled piano.

"On 'I Don't Wanna be Nice', for instance, the effect that sounds like a crazy steel band is just a delay echo on the vocals coming through Martin's favourite device, the Marshall Time Modulator." Hannett's famous reverb was achieved by using the studio's lift shaft as an echo chamber, just as Joe Meek created his trademark reverb in a bathroom. "Martin loved echo; he'd try anything and everything," says Hopkins. "He once dragged us up a three-mile hill in Saddleworth just to record him performing a poem in an old quarry."

With much more in common with experimenters like Meek and Spector than the homogenous three-chord punk bands that would follow in the wake of the Sex Pistols and Buzzcocks, Hannett

yearned for experimental outlets for the sounds in his head. "They were different from punk," he told Jon Savage on first hearing Joy Division. "There was lots of space in their sound." His first work for the band was two tracks from *A Factory Sample*, alongside Cabaret Voltaire and the Durutti Column. Recorded at Cargo Studios in October 1978, 'Digital' and 'Glass' were, in the words of Factory biographer James Nice, "a huge leap forward for both band and producer... elevating the raw post-punk power they produced onstage towards pure sonic architecture." The sound owed a lot to a new piece of Hannett equipment: the AMS Digital Delay. It would be just one of the tools used to create his production 'thumbprint' and what became known as the Manchester Sound. He told Savage:

'HANNETT WAS WEIRD AND SCARED THE HELL OUT OF US'

"When digital effects came in at the end of the 1970s, there was a quantum leap in ambience control. You had as many flavours as you could invent. You could whack it into little attention-grabbing things, into the ambient environment."

The synthesisers that became studio staples included the Transcendent 2000, ARP Omni and ARP 2600. Hannett's experimentations with those synths can be heard on *Maverick Producer, Genius and Musician* released on Hewitt's Ozit label. He loved experimenting, pushing technology to the limit. "If instruction books said don't ever turn anything beyond this setting, the first thing he'd do was turn it beyond that setting to see what happened," says Hewitt. Helping him with the gadgets was old UMIST friend, 'electronics genius' Martin Usher – who worked closely with Joy Division and later New Order. "Two things that spring to mind were hooking up a Mini Pops drum machine to an external drive

source," he says, "and our eternal search for the compressor to make the bass sound like it was knocking on wood."

Fixated on finding the sounds in his head, Hannett's studio eccentricity is the stuff of legend. "Play faster, but slower," he told A Certain Ratio, in the studio to record 'All Night Party'. "Martin was a comical guy and frequently obscure," says Mitchell. "His sense of humour was sometimes incomprehensible." In the new documentary, late Factory Records boss Tony Wilson provides an insight into Hannett's techniques: "As well as the great soundscapes and his incredible work on that, he had this sociological work in the studio whereby he would put groups under incredible pressure, and would actually pull their brains around, sort of surrealistically, and get things out of them." Steve Hopkins recalls his partner's infamous studio riddles: "I understood his off-beam, surreal descriptions of musical styles; not every musician could tolerate that... [but] his penchant for producing chord sequences or melodies by a random number generator could be frustrating."

While Hopkins may've understood Hannett, others found him baffling at best. "Hannett was weird and scared the hell out of us. At one point he just climbed under the desk and went to sleep," OMD's Andy McCluskey says. His production of 'Electricity'/'Almost' in 1979 riled the singer: "Our version of 'Almost' was really tight and poppy, but he'd laid it back and covered it in echo. It was a pop song and he turned it into this totally lethargic ballad."

In his quest for his own sound, he is often portrayed as dismissive of other ideas. "Martin was quite secretive," says Hewitt. "He liked to experiment in the control room, so it was almost like the musicians were a less important part of the equation." Joy Division and New Order's Peter Hook later outlined to the *NME* the strain at their sessions: "In the studio, we'd sit on the left, he'd sit on the right and if we said anything like, 'I think the guitars are a bit quiet, Martin,' he'd scream, 'Oh my god! Why don't you just fuck off, you stupid retards.'"

But whatever his relationship with musicians, there's no doubting the brilliance of the music he was producing



Bernard Sumner of Joy Division and Martin Hannett at Cargo Studios, 1979

during this time, music founded on his own compulsive and boundary-pushing work ethic, an ethic that would create one of Factory's true masterpieces.

Recorded at Strawberry Studios in Stockport, the monumental first Joy Division album *Unknown Pleasures* was released in its legendary Peter Saville radio-wave sleeve in June 1979. Martin Hannett's first album for the band was loved by Tony Wilson and the press, but hated by Joy Division – except for singer Ian Curtis. "The production inflicted his dark, doomy mood over the album," said guitarist Bernard Sumner. But Jon Savage reflected the album's critical acclaim, calling it "a definitive northern-gothic statement: guilt-ridden, romantic,

claustrophobic". The band he had first seen live "were very, very loud, and hard and heavy. So *Unknown Pleasures*, when I first heard it, was quite a shock. It was very much produced with Martin as the auteur," which included using the studio elevator as an echo chamber. "I went into Strawberry when Martin was recording," explains Savage. "And I remember him putting a Leslie speaker in the lift and was recording it. And that became the start of 'Insight'. So I was aware that Martin was into effects and ambient sounds. And also the noise of the room, which is very important when you are thinking about Joy Division, because they reflected the environment they were in. That would very much have been

Martin's doing." The album's ambience also had other sources, as Savage says. "He used to smoke shed loads of dope and it was very strong. I would always get super-stoned when I was with him. And we'd drive around forgotten bits of Manchester late at night – completely fascinating, derelict parts of town." And he also looked above for inspiration. "He loved science fiction, like *Dr Who*, and he subscribed to *Omni*, which covered all things to do with aliens, space and futuristic inventions," says Hewitt.

Apart from an enduring love of echo, Hannett's distinctive drum sound also became key. "Martin wanted everything recorded separately, so we started with the bass drum – literally just the bass >



John Cooper Clarke surrounded by Rabid Records co-founders Lawrence Beadle, Tosh Ryan (front) and Martin Hannett

drum and me,” says Stephen Morris, whose almost robotic drums were both stark and soulful, “then the snare again, then the hi-hat again.” The Syndrum was also used regularly as Hannett developed his sound. Some Joy Division credit must go to Chris Nagle, whose name appears on so many Factory releases. “None of the other engineers at Strawberry were willing to work with him,” Nagle said. “On our first day, I was informed that ‘the first rule is there are no rules.’” Martin Usher was another

figure central to Hannett’s vision. “I don’t think of myself as ‘influencing’ Martin – people didn’t do that,” he says. “He had ideas, ideas expressed as needs. From my perspective, his needs were to build or customise equipment to do things he wasn’t able to do with ‘over-the-counter’ equipment – a frustrating activity, since he was never satisfied, there was always something else.”

Hannett’s second LP for Factory was *The Return of the Durutti Column*, recorded at Cargo in August 1979.

“Martin arrived with these great big black cardboard-fronted machines, synthesizers,” Wilson recalls. “For two days, he did nothing but create strange rhythm/noise tracks. Occasionally, Vini [Reilly] would strap on the guitar and play some notes onto the tracks. But it was hard to get Martin to notice as he pored over the primitive electronics.” Released in 1980 in its sandpaper sleeve, *Return* was haunting and majestic, with Reilly’s distinctive guitar arpeggios held in space by Hannett’s electronic trickery

and experimental use of drum sounds. “Martin used that digital delay not as a repeat echo delay, but to make a tiny millisecond that came so close to the drum it was impossible to hear,” says Reilly – who later brought in Bruce Mitchell to drum. “I would never have thought of that. No one else would. I don’t know how he could have possibly envisaged the final sound.” The LP has been reissued by Factory Benelux with insightful sleeve notes, including this from John Brierley: “Vini would come in to listen to playbacks and then back into the studio but he got no feedback as to whether what he was playing was good, bad or indifferent. Martin was far too engrossed in his Time Modulators and AMS Digital Units.”

Closer, recorded in March 1980 at Pink Floyd’s Britannia Row studio, was to be Joy Division’s final studio album. On 18 May, Curtis committed suicide. Its release in July saw universal acclaim but Hannett had lost a friend. “He was one of those channels for the gestalt. A lightning conductor,” he said of Curtis.

“Everyone found it hard after Ian died, and I think Martin took it very hard,” says Savage. “Nobody knew how to cope with it – this was pre-therapy days. It was a very different time.” Hannett would later call *Closer* his most ‘mysterious’ work. “The content is much more cohesive, much more accurate, much more powerful,” he said. “*Closer* is a very complicated and sophisticated piece of music,” says Savage, “much more in the European classical tradition as well as much more layered. *Unknown Pleasures* sounds like a band new to the studio, playing live, then being treated to fuck. Whereas *Closer* sounds like a group who know what they’re doing in the studio and are collaborating with the producer. It’s an amazing record.”

The glacial, epic sound of tracks like ‘Decades’ and ‘The Eternal’ was the result of the sonic alchemist making full use of his massing equipment. Stephen Morris, who described his drumming on *Closer* as ‘a disco tribal thing’, explained how Hannett and the band pushed their studio toys to the limit: “The unusual noise that I like the best is on ‘Atrocity Exhibition’. I had a Simmons SDS-V and a Synare 3, which we got out and put it through this horrible fuzz box.”

A few months after *Closer*’s release, band members played their first gig as New Order. Tony Wilson’s attention had meanwhile turned to his other favourite Factory band. A Certain Ratio’s cassette-only *The Graveyard and the Ballroom* included the austere funk of ‘Do the Du’ and ‘Flight’, two of his heaviest productions. “Martin certainly took them by the scruff of the neck,” says Savage. “I thought ‘Flight’ was the best thing he did with them. He slowed them down and got space in their sound, which, again, is important.” Hannett described the Factory Sound as having ‘a certain disorder in the treble range’ and you can certainly hear it on ‘Flight’. It was later released on a two-track EP with one of his most experimental

‘THE PRODUCTION INFLICTED HIS DARK, DOOMY MOOD OVER THE ALBUM’

Factory releases on the flip: a serious slab of mutant Latin funk, ‘Blown Away’ anticipated the band’s later explorations. Their love of Latin music would further when they joined New Order and Tony Wilson for a famous trip to New York. It was to prove a pivotal few weeks for Factory, with nights spent at clubs like Paradise Garage and the Funhouse providing inspiration for the Hacienda.

But it was a much less inspiring time for Hannett. Alongside four gigs on the east coast, he had studio time booked at EARS Studio in New Jersey. As well as producing New Order’s first single ‘Ceremony’/‘In A Lonely Place’, the plan was for Hannett to produce a whole LP for ACR. The studio didn’t meet his needs, though, and the sessions were cut short with him subsequently mixing at Strawberry. The spare studio time would be given to three teenage girls from the Bronx who Wilson had seen support ACR. Hannett’s production of the three

ESG tracks ‘Moody’, ‘UFO’ and ‘You’re No Good’ would become their signature tracks, ominous funk that sounds as raw and alien today. Lead singer Renee recalls the sessions with Hannett: “It’s funny because everyone talks about him, and I’ve seen *24 Hour Party People*, but this was not the guy I met. He was calm, he was respectful. I had no idea who he was, that he was this big important producer, because he was just a cool guy. He took me in and showed me around the mixing boards and after we’d record something he’d ask if I liked it.” The 7” EP was released on both Factory and 99 Records and New York and Manchester grew closer when the band was invited to play the Hacienda’s opening night.

Sadly, the tensions between Hannett and ACR boiled over back in England when he insisted on separating the funk drums of Donald Johnson, which were the backbone of ACR’s sound. *To Each* was Hannett’s last job for them. But one listen to the spacey inflections and heavy use of snare on ‘Gum’ and you can hear he left his mark. While they’d end up one of Factory’s most distinctive bands, ACR had initially been dismissed as Joy Division copyists, as had Factory rival Section 25. “That was a problem all the Factory bands had, in that Joy Division were so big and, of course, there was the unanimity in sound, because of Martin,” says Savage. But the Sheffield group – who later created club classic ‘Looking from a Hill Top’ – had their own austere sound that would reach a peak on one of Factory and Hannett’s most darkly atmospheric recordings. Packaged in one of Peter Saville’s exquisite sleeves, *Always Now* is a masterpiece of northern post-punk dread. Drummer Vin Cassidy explained how Hannett dragged every shred of creativity out of them: “He encouraged us to expand on what we originally thought we were going to do. And he told me the most important sound to him was the snare drum.”

Other lesser-known Factory acts Hannett would produce included Crispy Ambulance and Brussels-based post-punk act the Names, and while he was, of course, feted for creating the Factory Sound, he also worked for other labels. Produced at a number of studios across London, Magazine’s *The Correct Use of Soap* was released on Virgin in May >

1980. Hannett considered it his best technical work, and it found him at his most enigmatic. “Martin moves in his own mysterious way,” Howard Devoto told a journalist. “A lot of musicians find it hard to work with him; he doesn’t communicate well. He sits like Buddha behind the mixing desk, untouchable.”

Around the same time, he was given the chance to explore his love of echo (and guitar overload) with London synth-reggae band Basement 5. The dub version of their album *1965–1980* found Hannett exploring new sonic avenues. “It was the most difficult production, I must say, the heaviest,” he told Dutch music magazine *OOR*. “It has been the most physical album that I’ve ever done. Made me feel like I’d been carrying bricks around. Heavy work. Putting the bass lines in the right place. But it was good.” It was certainly one of Hannett’s most urgent productions, perfectly in touch with the band’s message.

While Basement 5 would slip away into cultish obscurity, another band Hannett worked with would go on to fill stadiums. U2 had been fans since *Unknown Pleasures* and he seemed the obvious choice when they were seeking a darker sound. “Martin Hannett was a genius,” Bono said. “He looked like Dr Who and was into technology. He had harmonisers and things we had never heard of.” In the end he would only produce one track – ‘11 O’Clock Tick Tock’ – before being sidelined for the more conventional Steve Lillywhite for their 1980 debut *Boy*. It was a major knock back and one can only wonder how monumental U2’s debut LP would have been with Hannett at the controls.

Another band that found Hannett too experimental were the Psychedelic Furs, who also turned to Lillywhite after Hannett produced four tracks, including ‘Susan’s Strange’. A far more successful Hannett outing was *Pauline Murray and the Invisible Girls*, which reached 25 on the album charts. This incarnation of the Invisible Girls included Vini Reilly and Buzzcocks guitarist John Maher alongside Hannett and Hopkins. It was a wonderful LP of post-punk synthpop best captured on ‘Dream Sequence 1’. In the *NME* at the time, Pauline Murray

recalled the sessions with Hannett: “He just seemed to have a knack of putting everything in the right setting. He works in a totally different way to any other producer we’ve recorded with.”

Hannett’s production of *Movement* (1981) was to be his last for New Order. “He taught us what to do very early on. We learnt the actual physics of recording from him... but in the end there was too much compromise from both sides,” Peter Hook told *The Face* in 1983. While it was dismissed as ‘terrifically dull’ by one critic, Jon Savage remains a fan. “I really like *Movement*. I can understand why the band hated it because I think Martin was getting quite difficult at that time. But I think it’s a great record and very underrated.” Meanwhile, Hannett’s

‘HE WAS WAY UP THERE AMONG THE GENIUS PRODUCERS’

production of the band’s ‘Everything’s Gone Green’ 12” would provide a clue to how New Order might have sounded with Martin as they moved more heavily into dance music. “‘Everything’s Gone Green’ was a pivotal record,” says Savage.

Released on the Factory-associated Belgian Les Disques du Crépuscule label, the Names ‘The Astronaut’ was to be his last production for Factory until the late 1980s. With Hannett separated from New Order, Durutti Column and A Certain Ratio, his relationship with Factory now became feudal when, as a shareholding director, he issued a High Court writ against the other partners. The lawsuit claimed the company had been “seriously mismanaged... without his consent or knowledge”. Tony Wilson later claimed it was Factory’s refusal to buy an expensive Fairlight synthesiser while duly ploughing money into the Hacienda that led Hannett to take the action. The case dragged on for two

years, eventually settled out of court, and would be both emotionally and financially devastating for Martin.

What followed was a decline into heroin addiction. “One significant, and serious, aspect of working with Martin is that you were dealing with a junkie,” says Usher. “This gradually reduced his capacity to work, to earn and generally manage his affairs.” His 1985 studio time with a pre-fame Stone Roses was described as ‘a disaster’ by singer Ian Brown. But another Manchester band on the cusp of something special would provide a far more rewarding outlet for Hannett. The Happy Mondays’ manager Nathan McGough explained at the time why they chose him for 1988’s genre-defining *Bummed*. “I loved Hannett’s production of *Unknown Pleasures* and *Closer*... we wanted that kind of exotic, spatial dynamic that Martin brings.” Fuelled by the regular servings of ecstasy the band plied him with, Hannett proved a perfect choice for their most psychedelic LP. He went on to produce the *Madchester Rave On* EP, its mix of dance and rock much copied by a series of bands more than eager to jump on the bandwagon. One band unfairly lumped in with what became known as the ‘baggy sound’ were Manchester’s New Fast Automatic Daffodils, whose ‘Get Better’ is one of Hannett’s lesser-known productions. But by the time he entered the studio to add a dose of psychedelic noise, he weighed 165kg after turning heavily to alcohol in a bid to stay off heroin. Martin Hannett died from heart failure in Manchester in April 1991. “He was way up there among the genius producers,” says Jon Savage. “He had a good brain, he was funny and intelligent and saw things. He had vision and it was just a real shame that he fell out with Tony Wilson and Factory.” ■

Martin Hannett: He Wasn’t Just the Fifth Member of Joy Division *is out on DVD*
ozitmorphousrecords.co.uk
 Martin Hannett – The Redemption memorial event is at *Gorilla, Manchester* on 10 April
thisisgorilla.com

