

Two years ago Future Sound Of London changed the course of dance music. Now they are changing the way rock bands tour

London calling

Andrew Smith

Through May and early June this year, Future Sound Of London were on tour. But this was a different kind of tour. There were no convoys of articulated lorries; no shuffling packs of suspiciously hirsute roadies, no posses of star-struck fans waiting patiently outside stage doors. There were no stage doors.

In fact, the London electronic duo, who's acclaimed Lifeforms LP would soon surprise all but the most observant bystanders by crashing into the national charts at No 6, never left the studio. Accompanied by the veteran guitarist Robert Fripp, best known for his work with King Crimson and David Bowie, they played live for two hours, feeding the performance down one of BT's new digital telephone links to a series of radio stations, where it was broadcast, in real time, as a programme in its own right. The band's own accompanying computer generated graphics were sent simultaneously down the Internet, where the growing legion of "Net-head" pop fans could download them, doctor them, or simply sit and watch as they danced round the music.

It would be easy to view the Live From Earthbeat shows as an unusually clever publicity stunt by an unusually astute group (Future Sound's majestic Papua New Guinea single more or less changed the course of what was then called dance music a couple of years back and their new one, which features the angelic voice of Cocteau Twin Liz Fraser, could easily make a similar impact). No, the implications of what they were doing went much, much further. Garry Cobain, their darkly handsome mouthpiece who, despite his expressed contempt for celebrity, could easily slip into the front row of Take That and not look out of place, likens the present scene to that which made the Punk explosion possible over 17 years ago.

"I keep thinking I understand the ramifications of all this," he enthuses, "then I realise I'm being lazy. For instance, what we did marked the merger of phone, radio, television and mail systems. There will come a time when we can process information quicker and send it out on the Internet to whoever wants it. We'll be able to do away with record companies and with the existing distribution systems which keep them in power. We'll be able to send our whole audio-visual product straight to the consumer. At a time when the music press and some of the younger bands [the so-called New Wave of the New Wave] are trying to recreate the halcyon days of independence, we are the true indies. All this new technology is empowering people like us."

Some might consider this fighting talk, the kind of thing Sex Pistols mastermind Malcolm McLaren would once have said. Yet the brave futures mapped out by the likes of McLaren in the past have never quite turned out as expected. In the end, little has changed in the way pop culture is disseminated.

"I was drawn to the Net because it satisfied a need we had at the time. We'd become very disillusioned with our social lives, with going out to clubs and all that rigmarole. We gave that up and became a bit reclusive and I think we became stronger and, in a way, more emotional as a result. That hedonistic club universe was nothing to do with communication; it was about, maybe, a shared feeling, a very basic, brutal feeling of companionship – this tribal thing that I never personally found satisfying. I thought that if the Internet was getting people into language again, it could only be a good thing."

Bands and their fans have been quick to embrace the Net, which is really just a worldwide network of millions of interlinked personal computers, like a huge, unpoliced telephone exchange. The Sisters Of Mercy, Courtney Love, Todd Rundgren, Jane's Addiction, Sonic Youth, Belly, Lou Reed, and others all claim to cruise cyberspace

regularly. Poor Billy Idol, it is said, was hounded off the Net, so some sort of door policy clearly is in operation.

But Future Sound Of London consider the Internet to represent the very least of the recent advances. Ever since the advent of the pop video, bands have dreamed of becoming self-sufficient multi-media players. This dream was realised by only a few (Prince springs to mind), mainly because of the huge budgets required to get film and video projects started. This is changing. The startlingly life-like, simulated three-dimensional graphics which Cobain and his partner Brian Dougans devised to accompany their performances and which have now been given their own commercial release, were done at home, partly on PCs and partly using silicon graphics, the same system Spielberg used to create the special effects in Jurassic Park.

This is the crux of the matter. Electronic music is nothing new: Oskar Sala was using home-made synthesisers to embellish Hitchcock soundtracks in the fifties and this writer was recently introduced to an album, *Song Of The Second Moon, The Sonic Vibrations Of Tom Dissevelt And Kid Baltan*, which was first issued in 1962. But the tools used to make it are now universal and cheap. Animation and, to a lesser extent film, now rely on the same types of skills, expressed through the same machines, that the current generation of electronic groups use to make their music. The art and communications universe is shrinking. People like Cobain and Dougans can now fantasise about becoming not just a band, but a "broadcast system". They can also demand £150,000 from Virgin for the sleeve to *Lifeforms*, telling stunned executives that "after all, it's a piece of art".

Not that the major record companies have been completely slack in rallying to the new technology. Peter Gabriel's recent adventure into CDI (Interactive Compact Disc), invited purchasers into the singer's world, offered them the chance to witness an album's creation, even to play around with the mix of instruments. Cobain wasn't impressed.

"I thought that was so patronizing, still caught up in the same old values. It was, like, 'Come into my studio and you can see the life of a rock star, you can move the faders on my mixing desk'. I thought, I do not want to come into your studio, I'm not interested in how you made your damned record. Now, if you give me the chance to make it better, I will, and I would suggest that thousands of other people in their homes probably will as well. We can all send our versions back to Peter Gabriel and say, 'look mate, this is the way it should be'. Actually, I think that will happen. It's only a matter of time before we'll be sending rough versions of our new record over to you on the Internet and you can remix them and send them back to us." We look forward to it.