



# Sandy Pearlman a wizard, a true star

and the lead singer was probably the best I'd seen in my whole life.

ZZ: Is that his natural voice?

SP: Yes, nobody believes it but that is his natural voice. But we had to work very hard on the Pavlov's Dog record; we had a lot to do with the arrangements and stuff like that, whereas the Dictators were ready to roll, they just walked in and did it. Of all the records we've made, the Dictators' record went the most easily. I literally do not recall having made the record, it was only fun. The only thing I can remember is that Handsome Dick kept doing impressions of Lou Brock, who is a baseball player, the most valuable player in the National League; so he would give us impressions of Lou Brock sliding into second while we were recording. That's all I can remember, except him getting drunk and waking up in phonebooths.

ZZ: How come Pavlov's Dog's album has been out on Columbia and ABC?

SP: Because they were signed to ABC on a deal that was ludicrous. They had 24 royalty points when the average new group has 13 or 14, they had an advance which totalled \$750,000 for five records, and there was no way the record company could make any money on it; they would have had to

have a platinum record to make money. So the organisation of ABC changed, and the first thing they did was make the group feel very uncomfortable, they indicated that they wanted them to leave. So I offered the group to Columbia originally and the head of A&R gave me a reply saying everybody in the company wanted to sign them. Subsequently they fired the head of A&R, and Columbia had been offered the group at one half the ABC deal. They finally went to Columbia for a deal halfway between. The original deal made with ABC was probably one of the biggest deals ever made by a new group.

ZZ: Do they work 'live'?

SP: Yes, they might also come over here next summer; they played a lot of dates last year. They fired their drummer and their violin player in the recent past and Bill Bruford is drumming on the new record right now. This record is just amazing, they play much better than they did on the last record for various reasons.

ZZ: I thought the standard of musicianship on the first album was pretty high.

SP: Yes, but we had to work very hard to make them sound that good.

Now we can work on making the record

sound good. There are certain choices you have when you make a record; if the group has certain capabilities, then you've got to sacrifice certain aspects of the record's potential if the group is limited in any way.

ZZ: Do you find now that you've made a name for yourselves as producers that you get people pestering you for your services?

SP: Yes, in the last year and a half Murray and I have turned down Aerosmith. We could have made GET YOUR WINGS - we should have made it just as a business decision, but it was Murray's decision. And we turned down the Tubes, which again was Murray's decision.

ZZ: Do you regret that?

SP: It gets me sick every time I hear the record. I regret it so much.

ZZ: Because you think you could have done the record that much better?

SP: I think the Tubes are very good, and I also think I could have made a better record, but that's not to take anything away from the Tubes. I think it would have been better with us because our forte is extracting and maximising material. With Pavlov's Dog we did that, and we also made



them play better than they thought they could. Bill Bruford helped them a lot, I'd really no idea he was that good a drummer. There was no leeway in Yes, you were rehearsed to the point of abstraction and there was very little spontaneity allowed to him. And in King Crimson he had no material except for the old material - the new stuff was nothing particular. With Pavlov's Dog he had excellent material to work with, and he wasn't rehearsed too much, in fact he refused to rehearse. I was pretty shocked by the playing he did for them.

ZZ: You obviously play a large creative role in the projects that you're involved with. Are you a frustrated musician, would you rather be in a performing situation?

SP: Sure, definitely. I got interested in rock'n'roll fairly late, I used to be interested in classical music, rock'n'roll was a joke to me. Then 1964 arrived and I looked at it in political terms, as some sort of revolution in consciousness, and I got swept up in the whole thing. To me the Rolling Stones and the Byrds were the quintessence, and then there was another generation. But I always wanted to be a writer, and I did that. Then I wanted to be a poet, and I did that. I'd love to be a lead guitarist, but I'm not.

ZZ: How great is your involvement with the Oyster Cult and what they're doing?

SP: I wrote a lot of the early lyrics, about 60% of them. I produce the records with Murray Krugman, and I prepare the material with the band, but it's not like Ted Templeman with the Doobie Brothers. In 1968/69 there were all these people, Stony Brook was like Berkeley, and all these really brilliant people were hanging out there. Some had emigrated there, some live there like Buck Dharma. Allen was working for a film company in New York and he was brought out there by a guy called John Wiesensthal who taught Jackson Browne to both surf and play guitar, and he was introduced to the guys in the band. It was just that I had an idea for a band, and for a name, Soft White Underbelly, and I said 'I think you're great, and I think we could fuse our interests here!'

ZZ: I've never seen an explanation of the origins of the name Blue Oyster Cult.

SP: Probably because I've never offered one.

ZZ: Why... do you consider it too mundane? Does it have anything to do with the Pearl (man)/Oyster connection as Meltzer suggested, or is it from Oyster Bay? (A Long Island community a few miles from Stony Brook University).

SP: No, neither. The thing is... the story behind it is so ridiculous, you know, not at all consistent with the aura of the band. I don't know whether this is the right time....

ZZ: Oh come on... I'm sure our readers would be interested - we won't make a big thing of it.

SP: Well, okay. Here's how it was. You know all those previous names we used (The Cows, the Stalk Forrest Group, the Soft White Underbelly), well we weren't really happy with any of them, for various reasons... like The Soft White Underbelly was too vulnerable, and Stalk Forrest conjured up inappropriate images. Anyway, Richard Meltzer and I were in his apartment on Perry Street in Greenwich Village one evening, playing The Doors' 'Waiting

For The Sun' for the 83,000th time (it's the only record he's ever kept - he sold the rest), discussing the situation, trying to find some alternatives, but achieving nothing except a state of advanced inebriation. Richard is a very strange guy - as you'll know if you've ever read any of his stuff - drinks like a fish... but he's something of an expert on a wide variety of subjects ranging from boxing to beer. Now, at this particular time, he wouldn't drink canned beer, because someone in the industry had told him that the tin reacted with the brew and impaired the true flavour... so we were drinking this bottled stuff which he got from his local delicatessen on the corner of Hudson and Perry. Oh look, this is an absurd story... are you sure you want to go on?

ZZ: Yeah... it's just getting interesting.

SP: Well, we were sitting there drinking this stuff, which is called Cully Stout... it's this sickly black flat beer - a sort of poor man's version of your Mackeson, I guess. Anyway, we were getting steadily boinked out of our brains, and Meltzer's glazed eyes had become rivetted to the bottle in his hand - to the extent that I thought he'd lost consciousness... then he suddenly jumped up yelling "Trolleybus Cue". I thought 'Jesus, he's gone bananas - he's got the DTs already!', you know, 'Quick, nurse, the screens!... but he explained it was an anagram of Cully Stout Beer - he'd been staring at the label and shuffling the letters around in his head! A typical Meltzer brain exercise! So, in our drunken delirium, we wasted the next hour or so doing hundreds of permutations of Cully Stout Beer - coming up with all sorts of nonsense like Stout Belly Cure and, what was another... Trycolute Blues - and finally I came up with the words Blue Oyster Cult! There was something about the evening and the situation which told me that the words would fit the bill perfectly... we'd call the band Blue Oyster Cult!

ZZ: What an amazing story!

SP: Isn't it bizarre? Actually, having told you about it, I'd prefer that you didn't print it... it does tend to distract from the mysterious of the band.

ZZ: Oh, come on... Zigzag is a sort of British continuation of Crawdaddy (when it was good, in the mid Sixties) - our readers would be fascinated by that story.

SP: Well, I guess the cat had to come out of the bag sooner or later. Look, I'll tell you what... you can have this for the Zigzag Archives if it's any use to you; I've been carrying it around for years and it's getting all crumpled up. (Produces carefully preserved beer label from his wallet - reproduced herewith - and we crack up in hysterical laughter). Come on, let's get back to more serious things... questions... questions...

ZZ: Did you originally start out hoping to see the band that you, in a way, had formed, doing what you would have hoped to do had you been a performer?

SP: More so now. What they do, a lot of what they do, is what I imagine I would do if I were a performer. If I had a band it would probably be more sinister, even darker than this is, there would probably be no humour in it, but that's just where I'm at, so even the lyrics I do for them are not exactly what I would do were I on my own. I can't expect people to totally subscribe to my interests - I'd be most interested in a band called Azrael. Did you ever see a movie called 'The Phantom Of The Paradise'? The 45 minutes in the middle are beyond imagination, they are the absolute realisation of a certain image you have of rock'n'roll being dark and evil and sinister.

ZZ: So do you feel you're compromising what you'd like to do with what's expected?

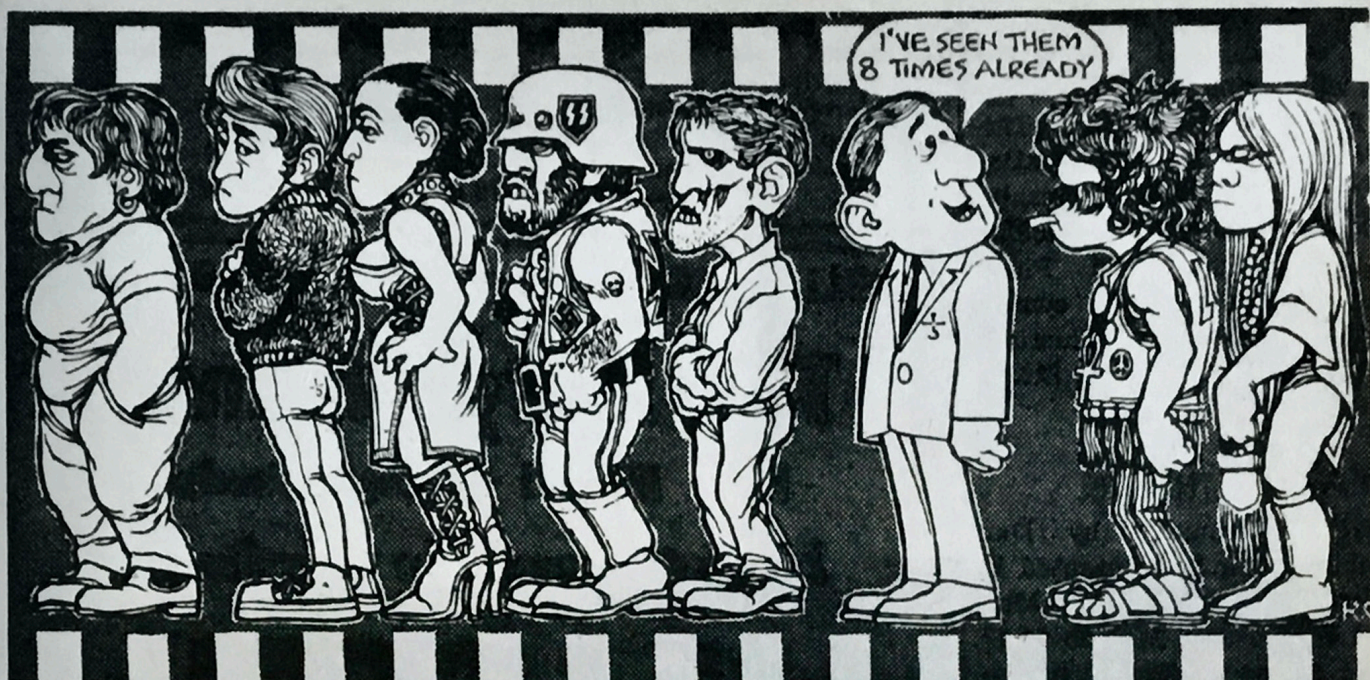
SP: Well it was impossible to make a living as a rock writer, and it's very difficult to make a living as a poet... the best poet I know is Patti Smith and she couldn't make a living, and she's really a far greater poet than the academic poets. Most of those people have to work, get a Gugenheim grant here, teach at a University there, which seem like thoroughly disagreeable things to do, so I make a living as a rock'n'roll producer and manager, which is not a disagreeable way to make a living. Very many times you feel yourself slipping away into a 30s Hollywood script, which is a fine thing to do. I don't mean sex, women and dope or anything like that, I just mean you're sitting there and you've got this whole romantic creative atmosphere with your machines and your retainers, and it's a wonderful thing that anyone who has the opportunity should experience. It's not completely fulfilling, but I imagine I could make enough money doing this so I could stop for awhile and do something else, that's my plan. I was going to be a university professor, I had a Woodrow Wilson scholarship, which ten people a year get in the United States, it's one of the highest academic honours you can get, but I got into this because it seemed romantic. I've been lucky. I'm doing something I like, and I can make a lot of money. It's wonderful that I can come over here and travel around Europe.

ZZ: Is coming over here something that particularly interests you, because it seems that the Cult are a lot closer to European culture than your average American band?

SP: The Cult, following the way things are going, could be the biggest American band ever in Europe. England is No. 3 in the scale of popularity for foreign countries... they're more popular in Japan and France. They're not popular in Germany, because the company over







there has done nothing.

ZZ: Is that because they're reluctant?

SP: No, they're just stupid. To have something good and not do anything with it is a sign of stupidity in my opinion. It's just like they had Bruce Springsteen, and for a long time they didn't make him happen, then they did. When you have a company as powerful as Columbia Records, to make something happen is almost a decision, as they did with Springsteen and Aerosmith, and as they've just done with the Cult. It's a conscious decision to set all the wheels in motion. If they have something that's plausible they can make it happen. They couldn't make the Wombles happen, because the Wombles are implausible for the United States.

ZZ: Why do you think that most of the English Top Twenty bands over the last few years have died horrible deaths in America?

SP: Because they're parochial, they're not universal, that's what's wrong with them. A band like Slade is some kind of parody on English football culture.

ZZ: But they're living out their fantasy, just as Bruce Springsteen is living out his.

SP: But his is a New York street fantasy. . . . I turn on the TV over here and all I see are old American movies. It's possible you could take a poll over here and James Dean would be voted one of the five most popular film actors of all time. Somebody at Columbia said to me 'we've got our Rolling Stones, that's Aerosmith, and we've got our James Dean, that's Bruce Springsteen'. It's universal, because the hustler, in the good sense of the word, the jive artist, the smart-ass kid is a universal quality, but football culture isn't. It's very hard to romanticise buffoonery, and Slade is buffoonery. Bruce Springsteen isn't, Aerosmith isn't. Aerosmith is sexuality, that's what Steven Tyler is, he's Mick Jagger. He's nothing more than that, the Rolling Stones were much greater. Keith Richard and the dead one were evil, they knew what evil was all about, all they had to do was stand onstage and smile in a certain way, and you knew they knew what the score was. Why should buffoonery be

exploitable in universal culture, it's just a parochial aberration. That's why Bruce Springsteen can make it everywhere, he can walk out in the streets of Paris and they'll know he's a hero. More so than in London in fact. He's the French Romantic Rebel. The Blue Oyster Cult are the French Intellectual Rebels, they have a very long history of that, that's why they went so far so fast in France, they are quintessentially French. They'll make it here because they're musicians; they'll make it in France because they're rebels.

ZZ: Do you think so? They'd struck me as different from the mass of American bands because they don't project a street outlaw image.

SP: No, but they project another one, a more intellectual image which is very popular in France, a country which is more self-consciously intellectual than most. When they play in Germany they'll be popular because they're violent. There's something there for everybody. They'll be Deep Purple in Germany, they'll be Melville in France, and they'll be the Byrds here, and they're all those things in America because the kids have picked up on them as a composite. They won't in France, because they don't understand the language or the tradition of rock'n'roll as well, but they understand romantic rebellion very well. 'Cities On Flame', funny as it is, is very serious. I just said I would use less humour, it would be very stark if I was writing for myself, which I will.

ZZ: You envisage an actual Sandy Pearlman record?

SP: Oh yes. I think I'll use the Dictators, who are an amazing band. There are two new members - a bass player who is almost as good as John Wetton, Adny Shernoff plays keyboards now, and a new drummer. They always had two great guitarists, so now they have four good musicians, which is enough for anything.

ZZ: I'm surprised you say the Dictators, because the impression their album gives is very light-hearted and satirical.

SP: Right now they're the heaviest band I've ever seen. Before they didn't have this bass player and a

drummer who's in the top percent of English style drummers. The next record's going to be a lot different, and they're a great recording band. Ross the Boss is a maniac, and when he goes out there it's like he's shooting bolts of fire, which you can't get from the record.

ZZ: Why was that ill-fitting version of 'I Got You Babe' put on the record?

SP: It was a joke, but they're no longer a joke. They picked one road, which was a failure, it got virtually no airplay, but a terrific amount of critical success, and they were dropped by the record company. Murray and I have a much greater influence this time around, and they're going about it as an attempt to attack the audience and succeed as a 'live' killer rock band, which they can do. I think though that their record was the most perfect that Murray and I have ever made. We took a certain aesthetic viewpoint, most of it coming from the band, some of it from us. . . . for example the cover was our idea, and we executed it perfectly.

ZZ: Was it a very calculated record?

SP: No, it's a perfect expression of a certain consciousness - teenage American consciousness in 1973, when sopor taking reached its apex, and the main concerns in life were taking sopors, getting your father's car for the weekend, and getting laid.

ZZ: Knowing some of the band were writers, I'd thought maybe. . . .

SP: Yes, but did you ever read what they wrote? That was what they wrote about, this is not Jon Landau or me. I like Herman Melville, but they wouldn't know him if he rode over them on Moby Dick. As an expression of where teenage America was at in 1973 it was perfect; I think it's a very great record. There are things lacking on it though. I think rock'n'roll has a heart of darkness, and there's very little darkness on that record, the new stuff has a lot more. That record is about life, not bigger than life, and I think records should be bigger than life, that's why I like the Blue Oyster Cult so much. You can be a sopor hound much easier than you can be Alexander The Great; you can get drunk a lot easier than you can move the destiny of hearts, minds and the world.

Paul Kendall.



