In 1979, Oxfordshire schoolboys Ben Norland, Gerard Greenway and John Peacock formed experimental DIY trio **Cultural Amnesia**. They revisit the excitement of the early 80s "cassette culture" scene, 47 years on

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"Gerard and I were in the same registration group each morning, so we saw each other all the time," says Ben Norland. "Our friendship began with a lot of imaginative play, at an age when most of our peers were turning away from that sort of thing. In the end, I think that developed into our ability to write lyrics together."

In 1976, at Lord Williams's School, set in the sleepy Oxfordshire town of Thame, Ben and his new friend Gerard Greenway forged a friendship based on traditional pre-teen activities – essentially, messing around and making a splendid racket.

"We were making up silly songs and also drawing a comic book," recalls Gerard. "And when my father gave me a shoebox cassette player for my 12th birthday, we started a noisemaking project called Fest. Our instruments were pots and pans, kitchen utensils and a piano – the property of Ben's mother.

"We recorded a long spoken word and noise piece called 'Atomnoise', a post-nuclear war scenario. The refrain was, 'Bring out your dead!'. Then we started a 'radio station', going into the street in white lab coats with our shoebox recorders, buttonholing passers-by with absurdist interviews on such urgent topics as the pros and cons of buttons and zips."

By 1979, the duo had graduated to Lord Williams's Upper School and had befriended John Peacock, a fellow 14-year-old with an impressive collection of King Crimson LPs.

"I met Ben in English," remembers John. "And I quickly realised he was someone I had a lot in common with. He was enthusiastic about doing stuff – whether that be music or writing or making pictures or anything, really. I'd never met anyone like him before."

In 1980, the trio formed Cultural Amnesia with the express intention of "exploring raw sound with whatever came to hand", as Ben puts it.

"The first recording with the three of us was a comic song called 'Araldite'," recalls Gerard. "Concerning the glue – I played piano, John played guitar and Ben sang and used a beanbag frog as a maraca. So, there you have it – glued together for life!"

The trio's activity caught the attention of an older friend at the school. Geoffrey Rushton was founder of the DIY music fanzine Stabmental, and he quickly appointed himself as the band's manager, suggesting that their burgeoning recordings might find a home on the underground "cassette culture" scene.

"Geoff was entirely responsible for introducing us to the scene," states Gerard. "He was a constant source of encouragement."

With their sonic arsenal now augmented by a Korg MS-10 synthesiser, the trio set about recording their debut album, 'Video Rideo'. Thrillingly inventive, it deftly mixes literary influences with manipulated sounds. The first track, 'Laughter In The Next Room', features the recording debut of Gerard's metal detector, while 'Dead Men Don't Talk' sets TS Eliot quotes to nagging staccato keyboards. 'Yellowsong', meanwhile, includes a guest violin contribution from Geoffrey Rushton.

"The recording was done in the front room of the thatched cottage where I lived," remembers Ben. "With a Bontempi organ, clay ocarinas, melodicas, a kazoo, a shortwave radio, live TV, a Stylophone, John's Woolworths guitar and the piano, prepared – a la John Cage – with objects slipped between the strings to change its sound."

"We were recording a track called 'The Conflagration'," chips in John, "while a woman waited patiently at the front door to collect a book about a mouse from Ben's mother [Ben is the son of illustrator Helen Craig, of 'Angelina Ballerina' fame]. I don't think she commented on the noise at all,



LEFT TO RIGHT: JOHN PEACOCK, BEN NORLAND, GERARD GREENWAY, 1983

but if you listen to that track, you can actually hear the hammers of the piano disintegrating and falling to the ground."

Through contacts established by Geoffrey Rushton, the album was released by cassette label Conventional Tapes in June 1981, throwing the band into a network of similarly DIY outfits.

"We printed my home address on the cassette liner," says Ben. "And I received quite a bit of mail, including releases from other bands. The music we were sent was strongly experimental, and the packaging had a home-made, Dadaist feel. I remember one cassette – 'Hitler's Trousers After The Blast' by Adventures Of Twizzle – came packaged in a box that also housed a jigsaw."

Two more Cultural Amnesia albums followed in 1983, but both 'Sinclair's Luck' and 'The Uncle Of The Boot' were regarded by all concerned as work-in-progress samplers, precursors to a brace of ambitious concept albums – 'The Undertow Of Evening' and 'Obscenity'.

"'The Undertow Of Evening' was to be a suite of melancholy songs that loosely revolved around Michael, a mysterious character who appeared in many of our lyrics," explains Ben. "Whereas 'Obscenity' was more industrial – a set of pieces largely concerned with our teenage attitudes to sex."

Sadly, both albums went ultimately unfinished.

"We'd been rather coy about our age for fear of being dismissed," admits Gerard. "But the truth is that Cultural Amnesia ceased activity in the spring of 1983 because we had to revise for our A-levels. It's not very rock 'n' roll."

Geoffrey Rushton, however, *was* immersing himself in the world of rock 'n' roll. Renaming himself John Balance, he had become the frontman of the legendarily experimental outfit Coil. Yet, despite his continued encouragement, the band went their separate ways.

A decade later, the itch to reunite was already being felt.

"I remember meeting up with Ben and Gerard occasionally, but we didn't do any music, which I always felt was a shame," explains John. "I missed the intense creativity of Cultural Amnesia – it was difficult to find anywhere else."

"In 1998, we finally got together for a single day's recording," continues Gerard. "Despite the length of the break and the fact that we were standing around John's Mac rather than Ben's Tascam 4-track, it wasn't difficult to get back into the swing."

'This Is Not Your Shape', released in 2011, became their first full album of new material in almost 30 years, and a flurry of further collections have included both archival treasures and freshly forged songs. In 2025, 'Did You Hear The Music' – released by the Aberdeen-based tape imprint Ice Cream For Crow – found the trio at a new peak, effortlessly combining pristine synthpop with experimental mischief.

"I think 'Did You Hear The Music' is a strong collection," says Gerard. "Varied, but there's a sense of unity. We'd really like to thank Gav from the label for taking us on."

"We have probably enough material for one more archival release of our early 1980s tracks," adds Ben. "And two or three more albums of post-2000 material. I'm hopeful somebody might be interested..."

And all three agree on the influence of their unwavering early champion and guide – the late Geoffrey Rushton, aka John Balance.

"We couldn't have wished for a more able or better-connected mentor-cum-manager-cum-publicist," says Gerard, smiling. "Such as it is, we owe our career to Geoffrey Rushton. He laid the foundation."

'Did You Hear The Music' is out now on Ice Cream For Crow