



Paddy McAloon: tonight, Matthew, I'm going to be Karl Marx in the 1967 musical *Half A Sixpence*.

The Missals From Brussels

In 1992 Prefab Sprout were planning a concept album about God and music. Is the world finally ready to hear the demos?

PREFAB SPROUT Let's Change The World With Music KITCHENWARE/SONY



By Paul Du Noyer

CRAP BAND NAMES: SHOULD there be an amnesty? I think not. Whatever the merits of Paddy McAloon's wistfully melodic combo, "Prefab Sprout" is simply wrong – as wrong, say, as The Style Council or Spandau Ballet. As wrong, even, as Bill Nelson's Red Noise (which, on the page, always looks like "Bill Nelson's Red Nose"). Much as we might enjoy McAloon, who has made sporadic but always very likeable records since the band's 1984 debut *Swoon*, the nagging problem was that they were called Prefab Sprout. Or is it shallow to be bothered?

I suppose so. But Paddy McAloon has weightier questions on his mind. What is life, he ponders on one song here: "Is our time on earth the

soundcheck or the show?" Soul-searching is recurrent in the Sprout catalogue, ever since the Graham Greene whiskey priest of *Swoon*'s first track, *Don't Sing*.

This album's title does look a little ambitious: *Let's Change The World With Music*. One of its tracks sounds loftier still – it's called *Earth: The Story So Far*, which even that arch-progger Rick Wakeman might have balked at. All the tracks here date from 1992 and are home demos that McAloon made for an unreleased Prefabs set. By the time he'd recorded enough for a 30-track concept album, he decided the whole mad project had got out of hand and shelved it.

For whatever reason, Paddy has deemed the time now right to release a portion of that lost

archive, and everyone who ever loved Prefab Sprout should, I think, be grateful. Beset by illness a while back, McAloon made a gorgeously ethereal record called *I Trawl The Megahertz*, but these songs are much more orthodox. You get the familiar, whispered warmth of his singing voice and the ornate craftsmanship of his songwriting. Incredibly, for demos made by one man toiling in his kitchen studio, the tracks have all the polish of Chic or Quincy Jones, both of whom he cites as reference points. Which is aiming high for music made in a kitchen in County Durham.

Let's Change The World With Music, in fact, aims higher than the world itself. These are songs of praise, visions of music as divinity – *Let There Be Music*, says God on track 1; *I Love Music*, states Paddy in track 3, a jaunty lounge jazz number; *Music Is A Princess*, he reveals in track 5; while track 9 celebrates *Sweet Gospel Music*. The classical chaps Mozart and Pierre Boulez make cameo appearances in his typically brainy lyrics. Above all there is God, from whom, McAloon suggests, all music ultimately springs.

Here he echoes an earlier mystic, Hildegard von Bingen. A 12th-century German composer, her idea was that music is the sound the angels make in heaven. It's their translation of the sublime silence of God. Before the fall of Man, Adam could hear the angels sing, but we can't – it's like something we dreamt last night but can't quite recall. Earthly music is our best attempt to recapture that half-forgotten perfection. Pagan variants of this notion – the music of the spheres, the cosmic harmony – have been around for thousands of years. And now it's popped up again, in Paddy McAloon's kitchen.

Tracks like *God Watch Over You* and *Angel Of Love* affirm the religious bedrock of the album, as does *Earth: The Story So Far* ("There was a baby in a stable, some say it was the Lord"). One reason the original project was abandoned, says Paddy, was his record company's mistrust of such unfashionable subject matter. Yet he's an inclusive kind of fellow: the outstanding track is *Ride*, a galloping electro-funk affair that imagines unsung saints, ordinary folks, "riding home to Jesus, heads held high"; in their righteous company are the unbelievers and the uncertain, and all who've lived their lives in kindness.

"A lost masterpiece," says the publicity for this album; "the Holy Grail" for dedicated Sprout-heads. Let's say at least that *Let's Change The World With Music* is full of joyful tunes and strange stylistic quirks to keep any listener interested. We're at a point in history when the music industry is on its knees because it cannot convince consumers that music has a price. We all believe it has a value, but we can't agree a price. Paddy McAloon

is arguing, most passionately, that music is neither cheap nor expensive, but somewhere outside of human calculations entirely. ■

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