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# DRUMMER

RICHARD CARLILE

**“A HELL OF A RIDE... THE CLOSEST PARALLEL  
IS PROBABLY DAVID BOWIE'S  
*DIAMOND DOGS* ALBUM.”**

FROM THE FOREWORD BY ALWYN W. TURNER

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# ***DRUMMER***

RICHARD CARLILE



**Carlile Originals**

## Foreword

*From Girl Gangs, Biker Boys, and Real Cool Cats: Pulp Fiction and Youth Culture, 1950 to 1980*

A future world dominated by vast discrepancies in wealth and power, and shaped by sex, drugs and rock and roll, with lashings of violence, riots and revolution, not to mention transvestites and deviant sex. It's a hell of a ride in Richard Carlile's *Drummer*. There's barely a pulp fiction button left unpressed.

And yet, this is no straightforward exploitation novel of the kind churned out by Carlile's contemporaries over at the New English Library. You notice the difference from the outset: no one else writing paperback originals in Britain in the early 1970s was likely to use the word 'mnesic' in their opening paragraph.

Carlile had left St. Andrew's University in 1969, where he had studied English literature and philosophy. Disillusioned with literary fiction, and feeling that 'things had turned bad' with the counter-culture, he threw himself into producing a lurid vision of the future that would be deliberately unliterary. Written at speed, and published exactly as written with no editorial input, *Drummer* was one of the first works to articulate the comedown from the cultural high of the 1960s.

The story is of Ariston, an erstwhile drummer eking out an existence on the rubbish dumps of 'a city without a name', who gets recruited into Satiety Incorporated, a small-time band just about to break big. When they do, it's to the accompaniment of a 'civic war' that almost brings society to its knees. Ariston, however, is removed from these wider concerns. During his starving, scavenging days, he had

resorted to eating the liquefying pulp of the city's garbage, an unidentifiable substance somewhere between Viagra and Larry Cohen's *The Stuff*, that keeps him just about alive and gives him enormous sexual staying power. Consequently he finds himself adopted as a lover by the sex-starved wife of a movie producer. And then the story starts to go weird, as Ariston descends into a world of horror, murder, sadism and biker gangs...

Actually the narrative pretty much defies rational analysis. This is an impressionistic collage of scenes and images that makes as much sense as a nightmare, and has the same lingering, haunting power.

The closest parallel is probably David Bowie's *Diamond Dogs* album from 1974, another fragmentary dystopia that documents the decline of the progressive dream. And the proto-glam of *Drummer* also prefigures the transgender fixation of glitter rock, with its depiction of the Doll People, a youth tribe comprised of boys brought up as girls so they can be sold into marriage to wealthy, decadent pederasts. When those relationships inevitably collapse, the Doll People drift into the streets, a collection of 'subtly merging heteroclitics' whose erratic, unpredictable behaviour symbolises the instability of a society that is careering out of control.

But despite its post-Altamont origins, *Drummer* isn't fixed in time, largely because Carlile had the good sense not to attempt any description of the music played by Satiety Incorporated. I first read it in the late 1970s, when punk was at its peak, and it made perfect sense then in the context of the Sex Pistols and of Derek Jarman's film *Jubilee*. It still does in a world of transglobal corporations and growing economic inequality.

Alwyn W. Turner

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IT WAS a city without a name, the capital of a country without borders or limits, a sweating, garish, seemingly endless conurbation synthesized out of an incestuous intermingling of the goodtime districts and fun ghettos of a badtime and unfunny world, so that the streets of what might have been misnamed its heart consisted almost entirely of amusement arcades, cinemas, nightclubs, stripclubs, dance halls, bars, casinos, restaurants, snack bars, hotels, cafés. ... Different parts of the city, even different parts of the same street, reminded you in a vague way of diverse places; yet the mnemonic effect depended as much on what you had been as on where you had been. Thus it was truly a cosmopolis.

For Ariston it was confusing. He had grown up among the city's noise and glare, and the streets with their gabble of signs and advertisements, their smells of hot dogs and engine fumes and their way of seeming like somewhere else, somewhere he could never quite remember, were familiar to him. He could find his way about, but he knew the city only by rote. Familiarity had quieted the fear and panic he had endured as a child, but the confusion remained, and tonight, maybe because he was so hungry and tired, the confusion was worse than ever.

No matter how the city seemed to twist and distort itself, to play tricks on him, to lay snares, he remained calm. He knew he would survive. He always had, always would. And sometimes he had done more than merely survive – had lived in luxury. Once there had been plenty of food, plenty of drink, plenty of everything, and he had lived in one of the high-priced hotels that overlooked the beach. That was when he had worked with Pete.

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Now, without Pete, he wasn't doing so well. No balconied hotel suite now, just a shack out on the rubbish dump. He had made it himself, though, and was proud of it. For the most part it was built around the remains of a huge wooden packing-case. After scouring the junk heaps for any usable length of clapboard and tin sheeting, he had hammered together quite a cozy little home for himself. As for living among rubbish, that wasn't so bad once he had grown used to it, and he had come to like the smell of the dump, the rich, moldering, autumnal smell that was like the taste of fruit cake. Big brown rats swarmed in the refuse but he was on friendly terms with them, and it was only occasionally that the wind switched from its usual direction and dragged the acrid smoke from the distant, ever-smoldering ash-pits over towards the shack. He had gradually become accustomed to everything, accepted everything, even that when he had eaten nothing for five, six days and just had to have something – anything – to appease the gnawing in his stomach, he should make use of the piles of decomposing restaurant leftovers. ... Even that he had got used to.

Where the Reeperbahn ran into the Plaza de Garibaldi was the Golden Spittoon, a bar and dance club. Ariston had been standing outside the place for about three hours now. He was sure that eventually he would see a familiar face there, and then he would maybe be able to cadge the price of a bite to eat. A sandwich and a cola were all he needed to keep him going for another day. For almost three hours he had been standing there on the sidewalk, and every now and then his eyes shifted from the faces of the passers-by and he glanced across the neon-lit square to a broad avenue that led down to the promenade and the sea. It was a time poised between late afternoon and the beginning of evening. The sun hung two-thirds down the sky, an orange sun that peered myopically through a tenuous but clinging miasma of fog and mist. Everything at a distance of more than thirty yards was subdued, anonymous, etherealized. The horizon was lost and perspective dissolved. The tide was in, and the darkening sea lay sluggish and woebegone. The sun's reflection was a narrow, gently shimmering path, and it was only by following this pathway back across the water to where it stopped that the eye could make an estimate of where the dark blue-gray sea ended and the dark gray-blue sky began. Opposing the strengthening darkness, the city's neon lamps and lights flickered and flared, stared and glared, twinkling, winking,

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and the animated illuminations – a peacock spreading its tail-feathers, a man raising and draining a tankard – jerked unconvincingly, while far away the gigantic Ferris wheel rotated dreamily.

Ariston turned his eyes back to the faces.

The faces. The corrupt, ugly, meaningless faces eager for fun. Ugly, everyone he saw was ugly. Except the doll people of course. Slim and perfect, dressed in weird but becoming fashions, they floated past him, their long-lashed doe eyes blinking dopily. They glanced neither to left nor right, seemed to see no-one and nothing. You never knew where you were with them. You could never be sure what they had in mind to do next. Their emotions were completely unstable, completely unpredictable. For no clear reason they would swing from their usual sluggish languor to screaming hysteria, and the media were always full of stories about them and their crazy ideas, their religious fads, their phases of destructiveness. Without warning cohorts of them were liable to stampede through the streets laughingly tossing home-made explosives here and there. Their sublime indifference to the effects on others of their petrol- and paraffin-bombs was equaled by the fatalistic passivity of their acceptance of the frenzy of punishment the police dealt out in return: as truncheons smashed their skulls they made esoteric and holy signs, as bullets shattered their chests and their bright life-blood spurted on to the roadway they smiled benignly.

It was quite dark now. The lights and illuminations, never turned off even at noon, came into their own, blossoming harshly, probing Ariston's weary eyes. The noise too seemed to have increased. His head throbbed, but still he stood there and watched the crowds, searching for a face he knew, someone who would help him. A hot dog and a cola. ...

It grew cold. He shivered. His eyes, his legs, ached. A face. ... Someone must come. ...

Suddenly some motorbike creeps, a gang of about thirty, came roaring out of a side street, their engines machine-gunning the night into immediate submission. Passers-by froze in their tracks or scurried for what shelter they could find. For a while the creeps amused themselves by playing cowboys, by racing along the sidewalks and chasing doll people into the middle of the square, crowding them there into a denser and denser mass by burning round them in ever-

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decreasing circles. Some cops, hating both groups equally and not caring if any of them got hurt, not considering the fracas any of their business as long as no property was damaged or okay citizen hurt, lounged in a nearby patrol car and watched.

The doll people had been expertly herded into a tight cluster. In spite of the deafening noise and the dangerous exhibitionistic antics of the motorbike creeps, they remained quiescent. Careening machines shot around them with only inches to spare: the riders drove furiously straight at them, braking and turning only at the last moment; still the doll people were serene. It lasted about five minutes, then at some signal the spinning circumference of black leather and gleaming metal neatly peeled itself off into a straight line and rocketed away, the gang vanishing as mysteriously as they had appeared, going fast, going nowhere. De-corralled, the doll people dispersed dreamily, though some stayed in the middle of the square chatting in bebies of four or five or just chewing gum and staring vacantly.

With a thrust of his shoulders Ariston pushed himself away from the glass wall of the Golden Spittoon. It was a long walk back to the dump.

An hour or so later he was there, stumbling and falling repeatedly as he made his unlit way across the piles of refuse towards his shack. He was tired, so very tired, but hunger tormented him. Before he slept he had to have something, anything. In the darkness he staggered around, then dropped to his knees. His hands felt in front of him. This was the right place, the pile he had eaten from last time. Without hesitation he pushed his arm wrist-deep into the decomposing mush and pulled out a fistful of the porridgy stuff. He lowered his face to his cupped palm, his lips parting, pushing out and curling back to form a kind of sucker as his mouth sought its nourishment.

This is the end of the preview.

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