In my early teens, a formative reference book was the Illustrated NME Encyclopedia of Rock\textsuperscript{1}, a jumping-off point for the discovery of all manner of bands. Ian Helliwell’s Tape Leaders strongly reminded me of that tome. His work is academic in neither tone nor content, but it is well researched, rich in content and seductive. It may serve as a useful springboard from which scholars – or the intrigued ‘lay listener’ – can dive into the unsuspectedly deep and murky end of early British electronic music.

The ‘Illustrated’ aspect is relevant here. Helliwell’s book is lavishly visual, as one might expect from an author who, in addition to being a composer and instrument-builder, is also a film-maker. Tape Leaders is adorned with many photos of composers and their home studios as well as copious reproductions from period electronics and recording magazines, lending a Scarfolk-like\textsuperscript{2} ambience to the enterprise. The 217-page landscape-format hardback, with its accompanying 15-track CD, represents over six years of intrepid work. Many of the primary materials and equipment discussed here have been lost or discarded so Helliwell’s project is as much archeology as cultural history.

Helliwell sets out his stall in his Readers’ Guide and Introduction, concisely and cogently arguing for a reassessment and reappraisal of the more obscure figures and groups he covers, casting them as the dark matter of British electronic music: mostly invisible, yet surprisingly numerous and obliquely influential. Criteria for inclusion are stated at the outset: ‘British-based composers who created experimental work with electronics and magnetic tape’ before 1971. By ‘experimental work’ he means ‘elements such as dissonance, tape manipulation, sound collage, electronic tone generation and machine-made timbres’, but he excludes ‘jobbing composers who […] occasionally incorporated electronic textures into otherwise conventional compositions’. This might explain the absence of Barry Gray but it’s strange that he does include people such as Alan Ridout and Geoffrey Wright – who each seem to have produced just one piece of electronic/tape music – while excluding Jonathan Harvey, whose first tape piece dates from 1970. It’s understandable, however, that some arbitrary decisions may have been necessary with liminal cases. Helliwell’s ‘wholly subjective’ ratings system for the compendium’s entries is self-parodic yet helpful, with scores for ‘Commitment Factor’, ‘Obscurity Quotient’ and ‘EM recording availability’.

The main body of Tape Leaders has five sections. The first, ‘Electronic Music Composers A-Z’, occupies more than half of the book and its 89 biographical entries include well-known figures such as Tristram Cary, Delia Derbyshire and Daphne Oram. These are, however, outnumbered by the unexpected (e.g. William Burroughs), the lesser-known (George Newson), and the downright obscure (Michael Dress).

\textsuperscript{1} Nick Logan and Bob Wolffinden (eds.), The Illustrated New Musical Express Encyclopedia of Rock (London: Littlehampton Book Services, 1976).

\textsuperscript{2} See Richard Littler’s work at http://scarfolk.blogspot.co.nz
Hugh Davies’s *International Electronic Music Catalog* included many of these characters, of course. Helliwell acknowledges this crucial survey as a motivating influence; by adding flesh to its bones, he brings its composers to life.

Helliwell’s overall tone is ‘unashamedly positive and enthusiastic’ although he does, for example, reserve some barbs for Brian Eno, and harbours doubts about the development costs of the Oramics machine. Generally the entries are intriguing and entertaining but perhaps due to constraints of space, Helliwell’s discussion of the composers’ work and aesthetics tends to be rather perfunctory. One strand of activity he emphasises is the work done by the likes of Roy Cooper, Brian Dennis and – later – Richard Orton to bring the creative potential of electronics and the tape recorder into schools; would that a similarly non-prescriptive approach to electronic music were common in schools today.

The book’s second section, ‘Experimental Amateurs’ is, perhaps, the most original and revelatory. By the mid-1960s, widespread ownership of tape machines in Britain had led to the establishment of dozens of amateur tape recording clubs throughout the country. This constituency intersected with the flourishing DIY electronic constructor scene, and was supported and mediated through a wide range of popular hobbyist magazines. Helliwell focuses on the subset of those communities that experimented using tape and home-brewed electronics as creative tools, and plausibly casts it as an overlooked subculture producing a futuristic suburban post-war folk music. A long bow to draw, perhaps, yet for Helliwell our understanding of British electronic music history has been impoverished by the failure to study and appreciate this grassroots movement, regardless of the aesthetic qualities of these amateurs’ work. It’s not entirely preposterous to view these ‘experimental amateurs’ as pipe-and-slippers precursors of Punk’s DIY aesthetic – ‘here’s three chords, now form a band’, with Fred Judd’s 1961 book *Electronic Music and Musique Concrète* as a ‘how-to’ manifesto and the electronic hobbyist infrastructure leading directly to, say, Chris Watson’s early home-made synths in Cabaret Voltaire, and Chris Carter’s ‘Gristleizer’ in Throbbing Gristle.

While a few female composers feature in the ‘A-Z’ section – Derbyshire and Oram, Janet Beat, Ann(e)a Lockwood, Thea Musgrave and Margaret Lucy Wilkins – no women appear in the ‘Experimental Amateur’ section. One wonders whether the amateur tape scene really was the exclusive preserve of ‘blokes in sheds’, but it seems unlikely that, had Helliwell discovered any female amateurs in his research, he would have excluded them. Some of those pottering in the allotments of home-grown *musique concrète* saw their work as more than just the audio equivalent of growing a prize marrow and not all of Helliwell’s ‘experimental amateurs’ went wholly unrecognized, even at the time. Stuart Wynn Jones worked in both direct animation (as practised by Len Lye and Norman McLaren) and electronic sound – often in combination, and one of his films was recognised in competition at the 1958 Brussels World’s Fair by a selection panel including Man Ray, Varèse and McLaren himself. Nominally an amateur working with extremely limited equipment, Wynn Jones thus

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4 Excerpts of Cooper’s mid-sixties work with students from Adwick Comprehensive School, near Doncaster, were released on Daphne Oram: *Oramics Pogus PD21* (2007).
attained a standard that was recognized by luminaries in the field; his work deserves deeper investigation.

Helliwell’s ‘Electronic Music Groups’ section briefly covers live-electronics outfits like Intermodulation, and Gentle Fire and includes more obscure ones like Half Landing and Quiet Pavement Ensemble, all part of the era’s still-underdocumented milieu of mixed-media collectives\(^5\). Two sections are devoted to organisations of crucial importance to British electronic music: EMS, and The BBC Radiophonic Workshop. The synthesisers made by EMS, and people associated with the company or with Peter Zinovieff’s studio, appear on almost every page in the book, and Helliwell provides a concise and accurate overview. The Workshop, meanwhile, receives a more cursory essay. By Helliwell’s standards positively mainstream, its history is well documented\(^6\) and its activities have tended to overshadow those of contemporary toilers in the field. Indeed, one of Helliwell’s stated aims is to dispel the ‘misguided impression that little electronic composition was going on, and what there was appeared to be concentrated around the BBCRW’. Most composers in his A-Z ‘had no connection with the celebrated BBC department and many worked independently in self-built studios’; he also makes the point that many of those studios were in operation long before British universities finally established their own electronic music studios and courses in the late 1960s.

None of Helliwell’s discoveries is likely to displace Kontakte from the electronic music canons but that’s not his intention. He may be challenging and critiquing a canon, but he’s not trying to replace it with a different one, or even propose an ‘alternative history of electronic music’. Rather, he’s trying to enrich and broaden what’s already been documented and discussed, and to remind us of the breadth of creative endeavour in Britain between the 1950s and 1970s. His admirable graft in rescuing these marginal figures from oblivion deepens our understanding of the wider socio-cultural landscape of British music in this period. As such, Helliwell also helps us to better locate, appreciate and critique those more familiar musical landmarks and their critical nimbi.
