This year sees the 40th anniversary of seditious electronic label Some Bizzare’s The Some Bizzare Album, which not only featured some of the most important bands of the early 80s, from Soft Cell to Swans, but introduced music industry maverick Stevo, who took on the major labels and, for a short while, beat them at their own game. Weird scenes: Wesley Doyle

Disparate measure (clockwise from top left): Foetus, Cabaret Voltaire and Einstürzende Neubauten a decent crack at mainstream success. One name that seems to have fallen off the list of late is Steven Pearce AKA Stevo, the man behind Some Bizzare, the record label and management company that, not only brought the world Soft Cell and The The but also gave left-field acts such as Foetus, Cabaret Voltaire and Einstürzende Neubauten a decent crack at mainstream success. Increasingly, Stevo would populate his charts with demos sent to him. It was through these demos that he discovered many of the bands featured on the Some Bizzare Album, a compilation that demonstrated the teenager’s preternatural ability to identify musical talent. Stevo was incredibly enthusiastic about Soft Cell, recalls keyboard player Dave Ball in his autobiography Electronic Boy. “And was probably the only person who’d actually bothered to listen to the demo cassettes we’d sent him.”

While Some Bizzare hit platinum with Soft Cell’s cover of Blondie’s Heart Of Glass, it was the band’s uncommercial protest song, the 1981 hit ‘Psychic TV Fuck the Record Industry’ that really established the label and image of Some Bizzare. According to Matt Johnson, the man who formed the band with Virgin and Warners). He used advances from interested parties to fund the recording of an album which he then sold to the highest bidder. This approach was just one of many unorthodox tactics Stevo employed when dealing with the industry and is usually what he’s remembered for. Yet there was method to his madness: by the mid-80s Some Bizzare had a roster that was both a compilation that demonstrated the teenager’s preternatural ability to identify musical talent. Stevo’s modus operandi was “Use the majors to make the majors look愚蠢.”

“WAVE GOODBYE”

Stevo’s modus operandi was “Use the majors to make the majors look愚蠢.” After a couple of false starts, Some Bizzare hit platinum with Soft Cell’s cover of Blondie’s Heart Of Glass, it was the band’s uncommercial protest song, the 1981 hit ‘Psychic TV Fuck the Record Industry’ that really established the label and image of Some Bizzare. According to Matt Johnson, the man who formed the band with Alan Horne. All of whom were, to varying degrees, headline-makers in their own right. That’s why Some Bizzare were such an essential to longevity.”

The sad thing is that although Stevo never been sued by an artist, a publisher or a record company.”

Some Bizzare’s business practices continue to cause friction between him and his former charges, although according to the label boss, not to the point of legal action. Talking to The Independent back in 2011 he said, “I’ve never been sued by an artist, a publisher or a record company. And I’ve never sued an artist, a publisher or a record company.”

That may be the case but, while some former Some Bizzare artists are sanguine about their time working with Stevo, others

The strange world of some bizzare
refuse to talk about him to this day.

That shouldn’t detract from the golden period between 1981 and 1989 when, due to the energy and charisma of the band, the charismatic lead singer, the band became one of the most popular bands on the independent circuit.

In the end, he decided to license it to Phonogram. It was the first of many fruitful

SOFT CELL "The Art Of Falling Apart"

After the self-released Mutant Memmes EP, Soft Cell looked to the dancefloor with their first proper single for Some Bizzare. Recorded at the aforementioned sessions with Daniel Miller (who also produced the early versions of Redbush and Tainted Love), the lap-dance-oriented track took Dave Ball and Marc Almond’s music to a whole new audience and combined it with a simple repeated synth line, creating an atmosphere around an old James Brown baseline.

"It was really our take on disco," says Ball, "with its repetitive, four-to-the-floor electronic dance groove, monotone-filtered synth bleeps and dubbed-out vocals. Over the years various DJs and critics have said that it was a precursor to house music."

The single was a massive dancefloor hit both here and in the US, but limited to 10,000 copies, it was never intended to be a hit. Of course, it sold huge quantities and was Number 1 in the charts, Phonogram double-packed it with a copy of Tainted Love, which so incensed Almond and Soft Cell that they were straight to the company’s offices and set fire to everything, including all the platinum, gold and silver discs that adorned the corridors.

"It was a masterpiece perfectly symbolising our feelings towards the music business at the time," says Ball. "We were at a point where we were challenging careers when we could have really benefited from having an older, more sober and experienced manager to give us a bit of advice. Even suggesting that we do a holiday, but it never happened."

That lack of guidance meant the next Soft Cell album would be the last the duo would record for nearly 20 years.

SOFT CELL "The Art Of Falling Apart"

Released in January ’81, The Some Bizzare Album featured the band with a selection of embryonic tracks from a number of bands that would go on to define electronic music for the next decade. Tony Mayo, singer and founder of Naked Lunch, one of the first acts Stevo got involved with, was instrumental in the choice of tracks for the album.

"We’d done the Electronic Individuation tour with Stevo as DJ, explains Mayo, and we started talking about a compilation. Sove arranged a session at Stage One studio in Forest Gate, East London for us to record our track La Femme. Depesh Mode were down there recording Photographic and Soft Cell were in and out, too, both working with Daniel Miller."

Mayo was friendly with The Th’ths Matt Johnson and had met Neil Arthur from Blancheone at a party and convinced them both to contribute tracks from their respective bands. The track list was completed by another band Stevo had his eye on, B-Movie, as well as a number of other contemporary electronic acts of the time.

"Stevo was in two minds whether to distribute the album independently or to give it a more commercial release. In the end he decided to license it to Phonogram." It was the first of many fruitful

"Those were very heady days for Some Bizzare," says Jim Thurwell, the Australian ex-pat who recorded under the pseudonym of Fortuna. "There was a lot of success: Tainted Love was a worldwide smash and Soft Cell had given Stevo a Golden Ticket."

Stevo used this leverage to broker a deal for Psychedelic TV’s debut album with WEA, far removed from his charges’ previous independent releases on their own Industrial Records imprint.

Likewise, the music P-Orridge and Strait produced had little to do with the sonic terrorism of their alma mater. If anything, the majority of Force the Hand of Chance could best be described as chamber pop, simple songs augmented with bucolic strings and acoustic arrangements, with a few drone experiments to keep fans of their previous incarnation appeased.

Commercially, the project didn’t quite pay off and the band were dropped after one album. Soft Cell stealthily booked them another deal with CBS, a label who had also signed another Some Bizzare act that actually stood a chance of some mainstream success.

THE THE’s debut album, Setal Vision (Some Bizzare/Epic EPC 25525, LP/12“, 1983) £75

Despite being only 22 at the time of Setal Vision’s release, Matt Johnson had already been around the block. In addition to his Some Bizzare album track, Johnson had released a solo album single called for 4AD, appeared on three albums by The Gabzets, and put out another couple of The The singles for Some Bizzare before starting work on an album proper.

"The relationship with Stevo was still pretty fresh and exciting," Johnson admits. "We were close friends at that stage and went on a few holidays together to exotic places like Cairo and Mombasa. We also used to party a lot together in New York and London.

Setal Vision was recorded in pre- gentrified Shoreditch with Johnson co-producing alongside Paul Hardiman and features contributions from electronic pioneer Thomas Leer and Some Bizzare labelmates JG Thirlwell and Zeke (Orange Juice) Maynka. The album is a beguiling mix of styles including contemporaneous synths textures, anti-funk bohemiros, acid-inspired polyrhythms, folkish accorion... plus a grandstanding piano solo from Jools Holland, all held together by Johnson’s

"I MET THESE COIL FANS AND THEY WERE GOING TO KILL ME"
singual vision and songwriting nous. Up to his usual tricks, Steve licenced Soul Mining to one label before taking it to another. Meanwhile, settling with CBS, Johnstone gave the midnight Trafalgar Square signing a miss. “Some of the shenanigans I found hilarious whilst others made me wince,” he says. “I’m never comfortable being photographed bulging or humiliated but didn’t see how such a problem when certain people in the industry got what they deserved.”

In many ways IG Thirlwell connected all the acts on Some Bizzare. He’d been recording his own music in many ways. Thirlwell found himself with a considerably unconventional site, such as disused railway junkyards of their Deptford base, and forged association gave them access to the video arclights and tube stations. ‘As Stevo’s house. ‘I was waging with The Birthday Party,’ says Thirlwell. ‘Around mid-92 they moved to Berlin and I was going back and forth from London to visit them. I was aware of Neubauten through their singles but I had no idea how phenomenal they were until I saw them live and blew my mind.’ It was Thirlwell’s intention to license one of Neubauten’s singles to Hand Records, a subsidiary of his own Self Immolation label, but the German band proposed doing a compilation of their early singles instead. ‘When Steve was talking to me about signing I told him I was working with Neubauten and so they came along for the ride, too.’

Steve decided he wanted something new so they recorded The Drumming Of OTY album at a cost of £45,000, which was subsequently licensed to Virgin. It can’t be overestimated what an incredibly subversive act this was. Neubauten – and – have still – a serious avant-garde approach to their “organised noise”, using found instruments and specifically adapted bits of machinery to explore the boundaries of what music can be. Unlike Test Dept, Neubauten’s aim wasn’t to celebrate the industrial world but rather to soundtrack its collapse.

The logical conclusion of this approach came during their Some Bizzare years at The Concerts For Voices And Machinery held at the ICA in 1984. Ostensibly an art performance as opposed to a rock gig, the band hired cement mixers and drills to complement their usual “instrumentation”, and when the show finished after only 25 minutes the crowd rooted. Steve, never missing an opportunity for publicity, circulated a rumour that the band were attempting to dig through to secret tunnels under the venue that led to Buckingham Palace.

By the time of 1985’s Haller Merch, the band had started to explore traditional song structures and melody, which when placed alongside their sonic experimentation only made their work more powerful.