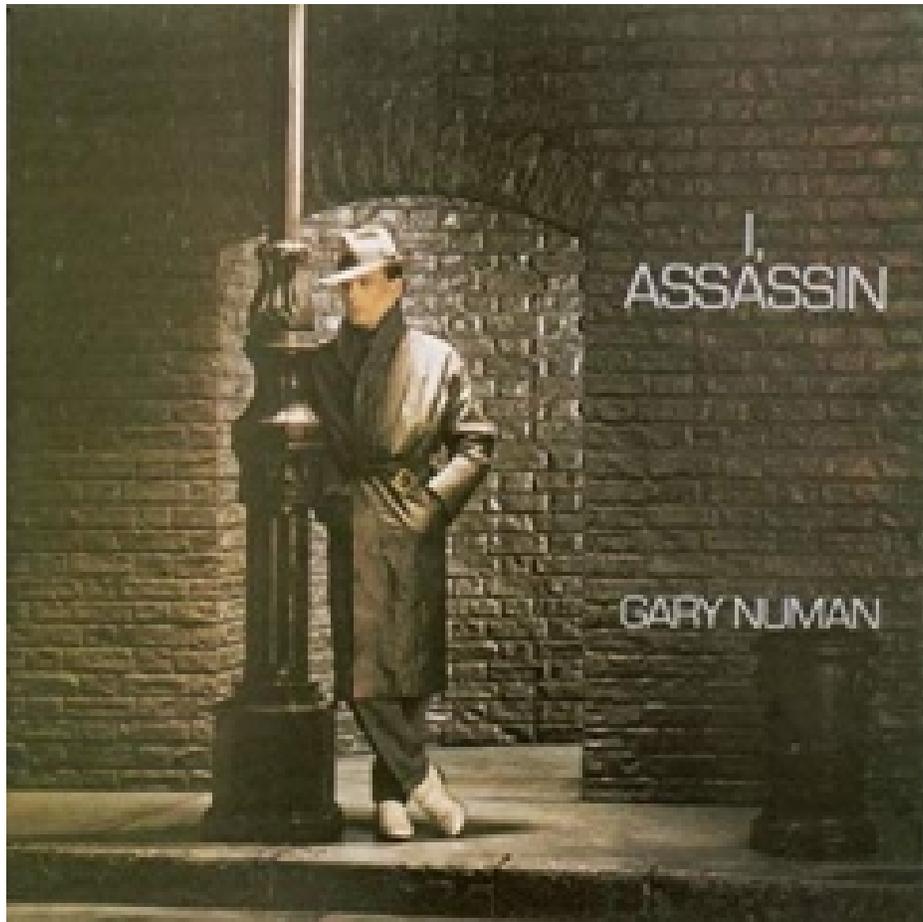


Gary Numan: *I, Assassin* (Reissue)

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Gary Numan was 24 and already over the hill when he put out *I, Assassin* in 1982. He'd just come off a "farewell tour" after which he returned to performing almost immediately. Though his first two solo albums hit number one in the UK, his delightfully avant third *Dance* stalled at number three, and *I, Assassin* hit eight. When *Warriors* from 1983 reached only 20, his label dropped him. Thus began his wilderness period, which lasted until a '90s revival amplified the gothic aspects of his sound.

I, Assassin sounds a lot like *Dance*: The drum machines are more obviously artificial than the rock-aligned real-drums of "Cars" and the Tubeway Army records, and there's always a fretless bass swimming overhead. The difference is that while *Dance's* songs sprawled to nearly 10 minutes, *I, Assassin's* clock out at six. It's ruminative but not enough so to scare off listeners.

What makes *I, Assassin* unique is its holistic approach, which is closer to Ornette Coleman's harmolodics or some of Prince's most extreme music than the bleak, hooky synth-rock on which Numan made his name. Everything sounds like it's rendered in the cheap 3-D of an early Pixar short. Pino Palladino's bass is the most noticeable sound

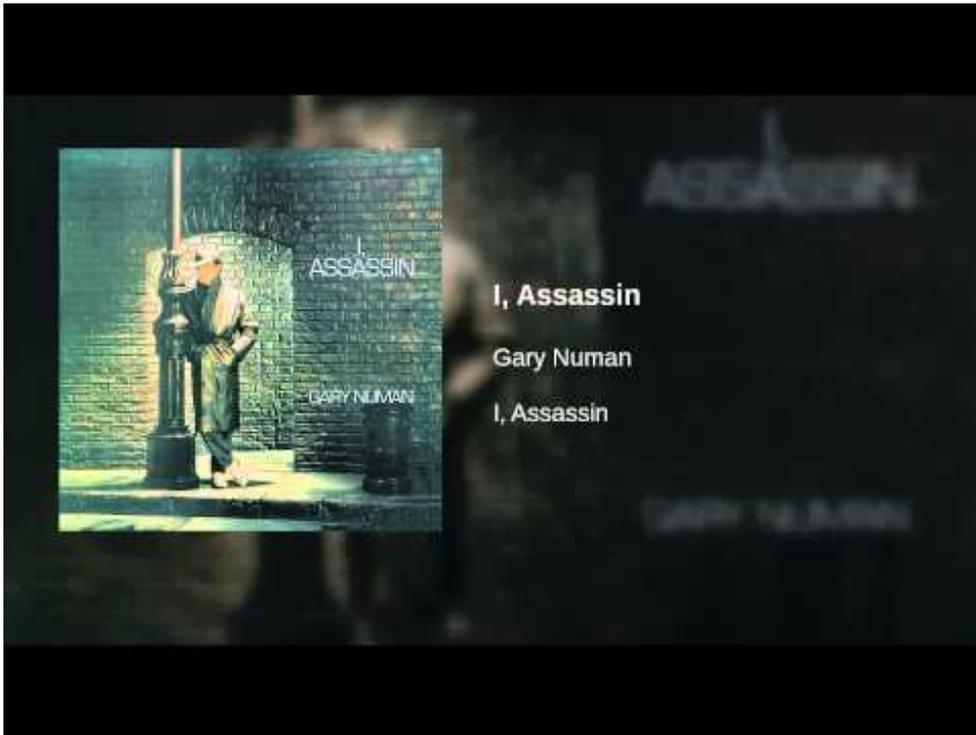
simply because it's uncommon to hear that instrument so totally dominate a pop record. But it doesn't take up that much more space than the drums, the occasional pinpricks of guitar and even Numan's voice.

Numan isn't talked about much as a singer. He should be. If he sounds like a robot, the lifeform to which he's most often compared, it's one that's just learned to feel emotions. He has a lot in common with David Byrne; like Numan, his voice is clipped, paranoid and extremely reactive to stimuli, as if he's perpetually tilting his head to hear what startled him.

There's a terrific tension between how his words seem reluctantly forced out of his mouth and how they unexpectedly slide like a machine that's too well-oiled. His high notes on "White Boys and Heroes" seem designed to hurt the ears, but when he rolls down a full octave on the chorus of the title track, it's like he's lost control of his own vocal and is dangerously skidding. For a robot, he's terrifically unpredictable, and his intentions aren't always clear, either. Do we believe him on "I, Assassin" when he claims he's not evil, just larger than life?

I, Assassin makes an impressive case for Numan as a funk instrument, which is just as well, because his lyrics have never been terribly strong. The titles of certain songs are transmuted to other songs on the record, as if everything's supposed to be interconnected; don't ask how. "White Boys and Heroes," "Music for Chameleons" and the title track all employ their titles as hooks, but in ways that suggest the names came before the songs. It's kind of cool that we can't understand most of what Numan is saying, especially given that funk has never placed much value on comprehensibility.

I, Assassin has just been reissued on vinyl, and it holds up better than most of his work, maybe because it's "'80s" in a way that emphasizes the inherent creepiness of synths and drum machines rather than earnestly using them to build the future of pop. The decadent neon lights of that decade seem to hover far above the fog in which this record lives.



<https://youtu.be/VAhvNkIQmOw>