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# Intriguing Listening Exercise

Medical doctor studying Jean-Paul Sartre, ground-breaking researcher, rebel psychiatrist, leftist intellectual: even when considering his status as a media celebrity and an encounter with counter-culture in the late '60s, Glasgow-born RD LAING, hardly matches the profile of a recording artist. That's until Top 10 hit writer and psychotherapist Alan Blaikley took an interest in Laing's philosophy and Tony Stratton-Smith suggested a recording deal with Charisma, the label with the Mad Hatter logo that was home to actual mad hatters like The Liverpool Scene and The Bonzo Dog Doo Dah Band.

## EDDY BONTE undergoes treatment

**L**ife Before Death (1978) is Ronald D Laing, M.D., D.P.M., reading his poetry with musical accompaniment provided courtesy of hit composers Ken Howard and Alan Blaikley. To Laing, these poems – most of which would be included in *Sonnets* a year later – are just another form and the LP is just another medium to convey the point he had been making for nearly two decades in scientific publications (e.g. *The Divided Self*, '60), collected readings (*The Politics Of Experience*, '67), literary accounts (*The Bird Of Paradise*, '67) or logical-mathematical strings of duologues (*Knots*, '70). That point is the questioning of so-

called normality, an issue that steered the quest of searching individuals labeled "deviant" and a wide range of countercultures, new left parties, underground or overground movements called "a threat".

As early as '65, Dr Laing gained tremendous credibility by engineering change himself: he created The Philadelphia Society, an asylum that set new standards for psychiatric care and patient-staff relations, simultaneously showing his huge humanitas. In '67, Laing and his colleague David Cooper convened the Dialectics Of Liberation, one of the most

original trans-disciplinary gatherings ever – a "rebirth" of which was actually staged in early 2012. Although the classical and rigid form of the sonnet seems to contradict Laing's merciless attacks on all things accepted, *Life Before Death* makes for an intriguing listening exercise. The repetitiveness inherent to a sonnet's cadence together with Dr Laing's lilting Glaswegian intonation, brilliant phrasing and cobblestoned vocal chords produce a sheer musical effect that must have made it easier for Howard and Blaikley to invent a soundtrack that becomes such a maverick performance. As it is, they delivered

File under Easy Listening/Spoken Word/Therapy. RD Laing in the studio recording the album





part décor that deepens the relief of Laing's delivery, part melodies and rhythms to boost the various moods. The end result is unique and baffling to say the least – and at no point does it resemble a poetry recital.

If having viewed Luke Fowler's film about Laing's counter asylum The Philadelphia Society, What You See Is Where You're At (2001), you may get a sense of understanding what Laing expected from his "alienating concrete or electronic music". After all, alienation is a key concept of his philosophy. Besides, Messrs Howard and Blaikley had proved their ability to wander into more versatile territory

array of instruments. Laing's many different moods and personae are grasped quite well. That Laing questioned the very concept of "normality" – and the "normal" experiences and behaviour that are derived from it – means he also questioned the very essence of "normal" morality and "normal" values. He claims that modern man is alienated from himself, i.e., he is just fragments of his potential: "We are so much less than what we are". This alienation is achieved by outrageous violence by human beings on human beings, typically in interpersonal relationships that had formed the cornerstone of "normal" society for a long time: marriage, the couple and the family.

### "Howard and Blaikley had no reason to refrain from delivering far-out stuff for Laing's project"

by providing songs for albums like Flaming Youth's Ark 2 ('69) and '72's Private Parts by Peter Straker. Together with The Tremeloes' Chip Hawkes, Blaikley had also taken care of the soundtrack for Ugo Liberatore's May Morning ('70), an instant flop featuring Jane Birkin with the Trens performing the music. Howard and Blaikley had no reason to refrain from delivering far-out stuff for Laing's project. Quite the opposite is true. The collaboration with Laing is the result of Blaikley's professional interest in psychology, since he actually trained as a psychotherapist and ran a private practice.

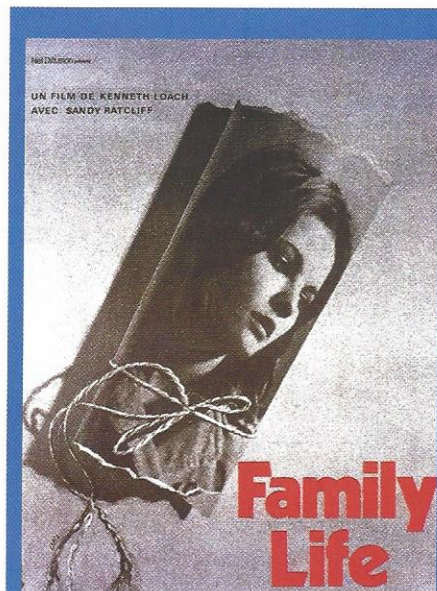
Numerous meetings at the psychiatrist's house preceded the recording sessions and we can safely assume that Howard and Blaikley had good reasons to opt for a varied collection of styles and genres executed by an equally vast

The so-called normal person is nothing but a product of repression and other types of destructive action, but he is also the one who distinguishes between normal and abnormal, sane and insane. He further argues that we are our experience and "as we experience the world, so we act". The violence "normal" people inflict on anyone dreaming of a different world or trying to materialise one, obstructs or smothers personal experience. Eventually, we are "bereft of our humanity". Some escape or drop out. As a rule, the end result is submission, apathy, cynicism, and more violence to keep "normality" intact.

So what exactly did The Bonzo Dog Doo Dah Band mean in 'We Are Normal'? What is normal? Who is normal? It's certainly something to consider. ☒



Alan Blaikley, Laing, Ken Howard, musical director Nic Rowley and engineer Stephen Lipson in the studio; the '73 album



### Family Life

Laing's contribution to counter-culture is enormous, particularly in the areas of interpersonal relationship like education, family life and sexuality. It is also vastly under-rated because theory and study were not exactly the strength of most hippies and alternativos, whereas political movements kept their fingers pointed at "the structures". If the concepts of Herbert Marcuse, Karl Marx and Jean-Paul Sartre on alienation and repression are not your cup of tea, Ken Loach's film, Family Life ('71), provides an easier but honest inroad into Laing's world. It is a pitiless account of how a perfectly healthy young girl in search of her own life and experiences in a changing society is destroyed by the violence inherent to the traditional family, haven of traditional, "normal" values. Her destructive parents do this in the name of "normality" because they want their daughter to be "sane". This violence they call love. Laing calls it repression and inhumanity.

Just like Laing did on a philosophical and psychological level, teenagers around the world questioned normality in everyday life. The generation gap is a battle between "normal" authorities (parents, teachers) and "deviant" teenagers. You may remember (and not necessarily cherish) endless reasoning and possibly shouting about dirty long hair, scandalous skirts, despicable exhibitions of love like hugging and kissing in public ("Why don't we do it in the road?"), degenerating sexuality and an assortment of dirty ways of living and behaving in this permissive society. Alternatives like communal living, new sexual relations, antiauthoritarian education and real free press met with retaliation by the self-defined "normal" people and their institutions – the family, school, the police and courts of justice leading the moral majority.