

# AngelHeaded Hipster: The Songs of Marc Bolan & T.Rex – album review

By [Tim Cooper](#) - September 4, 2020



## The Songs Of Marc Bolan & T. Rex

AngelHeaded Hipster

**BMG**

Out now (all formats)

**The late Hal Wilner's final work is an all-star tribute to Marc Bolan and T. Rex, including Nick Cave, U2, Elton John, Todd Rundgren, Joan Jett and two Lennon brothers. It's a mixed bag, says Tim Cooper, but a fitting tribute to a genius.**



Tribute albums always flatter to deceive. Especially when you love the tributee. There's the initial excitement at seeing all those big names tackling your favourite songs. Then there's the fascination of

seeing edgy artists bring their own sensibilities to the music you love. And, at worst, the risk of heartbreaking disappointment when you hear a song you love being murdered.

Marc Bolan was my idol from 1970-75. I was his perfect demographic: aged 12-15, on the cusp of adolescence, discovering pop music for the first time as it emerged from the Beatles era, all satin and tat, glitter and make-up, lipstick and platform boots. And that was just the boys.

Bolan was the first, and don't let anyone try and tell you any different. He rode along in 1970 on his white swan, hinting at what was to come, more of a cygnet than a fully fledged water bird. Then, at the beginning of 1971 he emerged, fully feathered and face painted in his bright new plumage, with Hot Love. And that was that. Glam was born.

Bolan was not just a phenomenon. No one sounded like T.Rex. No one sang like Marc. No one *looked* like Marc, funkng without a care; no square with his corkscrew hair. So how do you celebrate such an idiosyncratic performer 50 years on from his heyday (and 43 years on from his tragically early death, in that car crash)?

If you're Hal Wilner, the American producer who specialises in lavish tribute affairs – he's done everyone from Mingus and Monk to Disney and Weill, even the Marquis de Sade – you invite a who's who of your famous friends to sing a song each, hire another who's who of top-class musicians so famous that they don't mind not getting a song of their own, and overlay the whole thing with massive orchestrations.

Here he has collected another impressive cast drawn from the worlds of music, theatre and the art world and put them together in the studio with a backing band of musicians as diverse as Donald Fagen, Van Dyke Parks, Marc Ribot, Budgie from the Banshees, Bill Frisell, Pete Thomas from the Attractions and more. Wilner is, first and foremost, a Bolan fan, and it shows. He remembers first hearing Tyrannosaurus Rex and thinking the records were "very beautiful, soothing and slightly creepy". Decades later he decided to put this tribute together "to show Bolan as a composer with our typical cast of artists from different worlds that one rarely sees in the same place"

So what's it like? Well, pretty much what you might expect: some great, some not-so-great, a few you rather wish hadn't been done at all. It's always like that with tribute albums. But the best bits make it all worthwhile. As ever with these things, the more successful efforts are those where the artist brings their own personality to the song, while staying faithful to the essence of Bolan. The least successful are those that play it straight – no one needs a Bolan tribute act (there's already T. Rex for that) and simply copy the original.

The plain truth is that no one can imitate Bolan. He was unique. A one-off. Never mind the fact that his voice is almost impossible to imitate (even if anyone wanted to try – which would be a bad idea). At least unless you're Davendra Banhart, whose quavery voice sounded exactly like Bolan when we first heard him in the early 2000s but which, mysteriously, no longer does on his otherwise successful take on the Scenesof, one of those early Tyrannosaurus Rex tunes that surely inspired his own similar brand of freak-folk.

And here's the thing: the covers work best when the originals are less familiar. Which may explain why a couple of the big hits (Hot Love, Telegram Sam) are missing altogether from this double album. No one needs Joan Jett trundling through a perfunctory Jeepster, a song that cries out to be reinterpreted as the blues upon which it was based – Bolan borrowed freely from Chuck Berry and Howling Wolf on those hits and it would be fun to hear a modern-day bluesman take the songs back to their roots. But no, it's just formulaic LA rawk. Even so, it's better than U2's blokey trudge through Get It On, which is surely there primarily for marketing purposes.

But let's not dwell on the negatives. Kesha has the right idea on the opening *Children Of The Revolution*, transforming it into a soulful affair with saxophones squealing, a contrast to the oh-so-familiar chunky guitar riff of the original: different enough to hold the attention (all the more so when you know you've got MC5's Wayne Kramer on guitar and Bolan's son Rolan Bolan on backing vocals).

The interpretations are varied, as becomes clear quite rapidly. Before long a pattern emerges: the female artists are best at reimagining these tunes. Perhaps because Bolan himself was such an androgynous performer; in contrast to the laddishness of the Glam rockers who followed him – Sweet, Slade, Mud, Glitter – Bolan brought femininity to his music. Even when he was overtly sexual (“I want to SUCK you!”) he didn't sound gender specific: he was so pretty that everyone fancied him, even if they couldn't admit it.

Beth Orton's interpretation of *Hippy Gumbo* also takes it to another place, with a bar room piano and an air of impending chaos, with horror-movie scrapes and rattles in the background and some nicely distorted guitar from Marc Ribot. It's one of the more successful numbers; as is Guatemalan Gaby Moreno, the self-styled “Spanglish folk-soul” singer coming close to Bolan's own tremulous vibrato on a sensitive bossa nova-influenced *Beltane Walk* featuring Bill Frisell, Van Dyke Parks and Attractions drummer Pete Thomas.

Meanwhile, Peaches deconstructs a short, sharp *Solid Gold Easy Action* in the style of Prince – with his androgynous glamour, perhaps the closest parallel to Bolan in the pop firmament. Less successful, sadly, is Lucinda Williams drawling sleepily through a funereal *Life's A Gas*, punctuated by a pleasingly grungy guitar solo from Ribot, or possibly Bill Frisell: both are credited, and both are part of the house band assembled by Wilner, who recorded several songs on the same day in the same studio, lending the affair rather more continuity than is often the case on these pick'n'mix affairs.

As for the rest, the clear highlight is Nick Cave's impassioned *Cosmic Dancer*, plangent strings enhancing the deep melancholia he has brought to his own work since family tragedy changed him for ever. A shout-out, too, to Marc Almond, never knowingly underblown, for his extravagantly orchestrated, verging-on-overwrought, kitscher-than-your-kitchen take on the already overwrought *Teenage Dream*.

The decadent nightclub mood is continued by Helga Davis, a New York performance artist, whose *Organ Blues* features an ominous drum beat and swirls of bass clarinet, and Todd Rundgren who, with the help of Donald Fagen on piano, converts *Planet Queen* into a slice of sci-fi cabaret. Speaking of which, Metric front woman Emily Haines sprinkles fairy dust on *Ballrooms Of Mars* to close Side 1 of this double album; her ghostly vocals seeping through the weirdness of a lavishly orchestrated arrangement. It's really quite special.

Festival favourite King Khan offers a boisterous romp through *I Love To Boogie* which lives up to its title, if nothing else, and invests Bolan's final hit (from 1976, a year before his death) with rather more life than Bolan's own pallid effort. The big-name collaboration between U2 and Elton John on *Get It On* (irritatingly listed under its American title of *Bang A Gong*) is predictably terrible: despite selling more records than everyone else on the record between them – and then some – they sound like some bunch of middle-aged men at their local pub's karaoke night. Not only is it uninspired, it's the one thing Bolan never was – blokey.

Other misfires – and thankfully they are fewer than the successes – include actor-director-playwright John Cameron Mitchell interpreting *Diamond Meadows* in a style somewhere between MOR and musical theatre, despite the novelty of Showgirls actress Gina Gershon on Jew's harp. Father John Misty falls into the copycat trap by doing an entirely forgettable *Main Man*, despite the legendary Van Dyke Parks on piano, while the German singer Nena, last heard of 36 years ago singing *99 Red*

Balloons, sadly adds nothing of note to Metal Guru though, to be fair, it is practically perfect in its original form and would probably have been best left alone.

It all ends with a hauntingly effective medley of Ride A White Swan and She Was Born To Be My Unicorn, sung virtually a capella by an angelic Maria McKee and gravelly Gavin Friday, duetting from what sounds like beyond the grave. Which is as fitting a finale as one could hope for to a record that reflects Wilner's overarching ambition (and celebrity connections – it's hard to imagine many people said no to taking part), and will be remembered, despite the odd misstep, as a fitting memorial to the life and work of the producer – and the man to whom he's paying tribute.

**All words by Tim Cooper. You can find more of Tim's writing on Louder Than War at his author's [archive](#). He is also on Twitter as [@TimCooperES](#).**

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### **AngelHeaded Hipster: The Songs Of Marc Bolan and T. Rex**

#### **Disc 1**

- 1. Children Of The Revolution – Kesha**
- 2. Cosmic Dancer – Nick Cave**
- 3. Jeepster – Joan Jett**
- 4. Scenescof – Devendra Banhart**
- 5. Life's A Gas – Lucinda Williams**
- 6. Solid Gold, Easy Action – Peaches**
- 7. Dawn Storm – BØRNS**
- 8. Hippy Gumbo – Beth Orton**
- 9. I Love To Boogie – King Khan**
- 10. Beltane Walk – Gaby Moreno**
- 11. Bang A Gong (Get It On) – U2 feat. Elton John**
- 12. Diamond Meadows – John Cameron Mitchell**
- 13. Ballrooms Of Mars – Emily Haines**

#### **Disc 2**

- 1. Main Man – Father John Misty**
- 2. Rock On – Perry Farrell**
- 3. The Street and Babe Shadow – Elysian Fields**
- 4. The Leopards – Gavin Friday**
- 5. Metal Guru – Nena**
- 6. Teenage Dream – Marc Almond**
- 7. Organ Blues – Helga Davis**
- 8. Planet Queen – Todd Rundgren**
- 9. Great Horse – Jessie Harris**
- 10. Mambo Sun – Sean Ono Lennon and Charlotte Kemp Muhl**
- 11. Pilgrim's Tale – Victoria Williams with Julian Lennon**
- 12. Bang A Gong (Get It On) Reprise – David Johansen**
- 13. She Was Born To Be My Unicorn / Ride A White Swan – Maria McKee & Gavin Friday**

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Tim Cooper