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Reviews

## **Angelheaded Hipster: The Songs of Marc Boland & T. Rex**

**Various Marc Burrows , October 6th, 2020 08:47**

A tribute album, lovingly assembled by Hal Wilner, proves a patchy affair enlivened by highlights from Nick Cave and Kesha, finds Marc Burrows

Is Marc Bolan an underrated songwriter, or an overrated one? In the popular imagination, one of pop's most perfect pixies is frozen forever in his imperial phase, the unassailable prince of British chart pop, shifting 7" singles in quantities unimaginable even a decade later. The run of T. Rex singles that began with 1971's 'Ride A White Swan' and ended two years later with '20th Century Boy' is one of the most perfect ever achieved. There is no dud, no filler, no cash-ins. It's 100%, 24-carat solid gold easy action. But for some, that's all Bolan ever was: the tiny, glitter-cheeked glam hero beloved of school girls and teenyboppers, banging out nine superb singles and two classic albums, *Electric Warrior* and *The Slider*, before settling into a slow descent in which he repeated rather than reinvented himself before dying relatively young and thus transcending into undeserved myth. Bolan, some argue, was about as important to the 70s as Take That were to the 90s: a cultural phenomena with some catchy bops, sure, but not a songwriter to be especially revered.

Then there are those that look further back to Bolan's mystic hippy phase, sat cross-legged with his acoustic guitar as the incense-clouded children of the revolution soaked up his mystical pronouncements and musical fairy stories. True believers note the strange and beautiful work he produced dating back to his 1965 solo debut 'The Wizard'. Here, they argue, is definitive proof of Bolan's genius – that his commercial decline came at the end of a decade of sustained quality and gradual evolution, the missing link between Syd Barrett and The Sweet. David Bowie, Bolan's closest contemporary, stop-started through the late 60s, Bolan *flowed* through them. Mercurial Marc, ascending from his position sat cross-legged on the floor to take his place on the glitter thrown.

*Angelheaded Hipster*, a title borrowed from Ginsberg's 'Howl' – awkward and wordy enough to be worthy of Bolan himself – attempts to settle the debate. A Bolan tribute album is a fine idea: his hits are surely bulletproof, and his canon contains enough

breadth to lend itself to interpretation. The album was assembled over several years as a labour of love by producer Hal Wilner, though Wilner himself wouldn't live to see it released: he contracted COVID-19 in April of this year and died the day after his 64th birthday. Wilner's assembled cast is a perfect tribute to both producer and artist – chart names and rock royalty (U2, Joan Jett, Kesha), credible creatives (Nick Cave, Beth Orton, Devendra Banhart) and queercore oddballs oldish (Perry Farrell, Gavin Friday, Marc Almond) and newish (Peaches, Father John Misty, BØRNS). Theoretically there's enough variety here to take Bolan's songs in the many and varied directions they deserve. The results, however, are mixed enough to ensure that debates about Bolan's place in the canon of greatness will continue.

For starters, those "bulletproof" hits aren't, as it turns out, that indestructible once you remove Bolan's charismatic spark. U2 and Elton John's hoary-old take on 'Get It On' manages to remove all the camp and deftness that made the song work. Without Bolan it feels as unsexy and insubstantial as an inflated condom. Joan Jett makes a decent fist of 'Jeepster', though her rock n' roll chops come at the cost of Bolan's lightness of touch. The original has a what-the-butler-saw wink ("I'm gonna SUCK YA!") that Jett hasn't got a handle on. It becomes bar-room rock. Kesha's 'Children of the Revolution' probably comes off best of the glam-era singles, brassy and full-sounding with a good approximation of the Bolan bleat, and throwing in some sexy, blood-curdling screams. There's some thrillingly messy guitar from The MC5's Wayne Kramer, and genetically satisfying back-up vocals from Bolan's son, Roland. It makes for a strong opener.

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The most interesting moments here all happen when the glitter-rock roadmap is abandoned. Devendra Banhart is an inspired choice to cover 'Scenescof', a lightweight fairytale about a buzz-kill villain taken from a play Bolan wrote in the mid sixties. The version that appears on Tyrannosaurus Rex's debut album, *My People Were Fair And Had Sky In Their Hair... But Now They're Content To Wear Stars On Their Brows*, is slight and charming, with just a hint of melancholy lurking beneath the surface. Banhart makes it warmer and weirder, slowing the pace and imbuing it with a dreamy, hushed quality. Metric's Emily Haines deconstructs *The Sliders'* 'Ballrooms of Mars' and rescues it for an avant-garde orchestra, segueing into 'Mars, Bringer of War' from Holst's *Planets* suite, and merging that into the coda from Bowie's 'Life On Mars'. It manages to be both dramatic and rather fun. Gavin Friday, who presumably discovered T. Rex at the same time as his old school-mates in U2, departs from the soul-meets-beat-poetry vibes of 'The Leopards Featuring Gardenia and the Mighty Slug' while sacrificing none of its storytelling weirdness. Again, it's a perfect match of material and musician.

There's a few moments here that fall into the realm of the genuinely special. Only Nick Cave manages to render a Bolan track faithfully and still cast his own spell, delivering a stunning version of 'Cosmic Dancer' in a pleasant tenor that, compared to Cave's usual slamming-of-a-tomb-door-baritone, sounds practically helium-voiced. It's a lovely thing. The choice of John Cameron Mitchell feels important – Mitchell wrote and starred in the pansexual, transgender glam-influenced musical *Hedwig and the Angry Inch*, and his gentle, end-of-the-cabaret reading of 'Diamond Meadows' is a lovely nod to Bolan's own fluid sexuality ("let's do it like we're friends, let's do it".) Similarly Father John Misty's 'Main Man' finds a tenderness and a yearning in a lyric that Bolan himself masked with flippancy.

The album closes with the reappearance of Gavin Friday, this time paired with the dextrous voice of Maria McKee on 'She Was Born To Be My Unicorn', here slowed to something mesmerising and sumptuous before flowing from floaty hippy folk, just as Bolan himself did, into 'Ride A White Swan', the song that sent his career into the stratosphere. It provides a lovely capstone for a record that, while never definitively

addressing the question of Marc's genius, does, like his career, feel like a worthwhile journey.