

The Hunter Gets Captured by the Game

Billy Idol

In Search of Fame

PHOTO BY KERRY BROWN



I was in love with the Beatles
I was in love with the Stones
I was in love with Bobby Dylan
Because I'm in love with rock 'n' roll
 'Ready Steady Go', Generation X, 1978

There's a reminder that Auckland's summer is finally slipping away as Billy Idol shuffles his boots outside the Foundry. This is one nightclub that doesn't want its dancefloor darkened by international rock stars — not if they don't know how to dress decently.

The bouncer stands firm. No way are weirdos like this Idol guy and his guitarist getting in. The pleadings of smartly turned-out record company people are to no avail.

Someone swore that 'White Wedding' was playing on the disco inside. No shit.

"Yeah, we heard that all these guys in bands are gonna get up on stage and just have a big jam and that sounded really great, but these geezers wouldn't let us in. It's great, still not being let into clubs," Billy laughs and shakes his head.

Poor Billy never could get no respect. "Real" punks spat on poor, poppy Generation X, intimated that they were middle-class kitpunks. Galling for a man who, along with Gen X guitarist Tony James, had been in the mythical pre-punk combo London SS. But, as Billy once said himself, there wasn't a name punk band without one or two bourgeois skeletons in the cupboard. And he didn't have a university degree as some would have had you believe.

It's only morning but The Idol is in full regalia — boots, black leather trousers, a colour-splattered shirt ripped into a rag for image, a welter of neck hangings, including rosary beads and, of course, the hair. All clean.

He sips orange juice and smokes. His voice is a hoarse, occasionally slurred Cockney and he has a terrible tendency to ramble uncontrollably. He's enthusiastic but he really does talk some *absolute shit* at times.

He says he's keen to hear some local music. He returns to Australia the next day and plans on trying to see the Hoodoo Gurus and others live.

"That's what's kinda great about coming down here. More than just to sort of propagate my own filth everywhere (chuckle), to actually find out about new music. 'Cause I play music so I'm interested in music.

"Everybody in Generation X generally got the shit kicked out of them, just in terms of kicking round for two years, suing our former manager and not being able to play. We had a kind of legal lawsuit where we weren't allowed to play unless we paid him. We were doing secret gigs and stuff but an inactive group just don't make you very happy.

"Then when we eventually did do the third album, even though I thought that the music was really good, it was pretty obvious somehow that it was the end of the relationship. It was really like me and Tony James with a bunch of friends — Terry Chimes, Steve Jones... which is great, but it's not a group.

"You felt really down, man. I mean, I never wanted Generation X to break up. I ever wanted that two and a half years of sitting round doing nothing suing somebody — that was what we were trying to avoid. It left a bitter taste and I never wanted to feel that way about music.

"But I realised it was something I had to face up

to. It was *horrible* — there's horrible things in life. And I realised if I didn't keep doing it I'd be selling myself short. I had to remember my initial reasons for being in music and that was another thing I was doing by going to the States, going back to my original reasons, starting from scratch. I wanted to go somewhere else, find a new guitarist, not just depend on people I knew."

So Billy packed his bags, picked up his guitar and flew to New York. There he met up with Bill Aucoin (who had helped Gen X with management during the legal battle and took Kiss to fame and fortune) and then guitarist Steve Stevens, the first member of his new band.

"Steve's role is similar to what Tony's was in Generation X in the sense that he helps expand my ideas and I help expand his, but Tony used to write a lot of the words and I wrote the music. Now, of course, Steve helps me a lot more with the music and I write a lot of the lyrics. So it's a different relationship in terms of our roles, but yeah, he's my compadre. My assistant in crime."

There's a blue punch (purportedly vodka) and an orange one (allegedly rum) but they both taste pretty much the same. Like sugared water.

This is the big Billy Idol reception at Quays nightclub. The exclusive bit, before the public are allowed to come thronging up the stairs.

Billy and company amble out on to the dance-

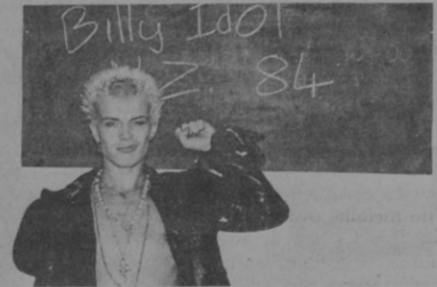
floor, there's a hush. Record company, management and artists all get a turn to say a few words in the ra-ra shop talk sales vein that we outsiders tend to find a little embarrassing. Steve Stevens looks as though he's having to concentrate to remain vertical but he's damn happy.

It's over with a whoop and soon Billy is surrounded by those eager to speak to him. It's ironic that the people who gather round the leather-clad Idol are mainly the most conservative in appearance, the unhip. V-neck jersey meets ripped T-shirt. The "industry" people mill around, waiting to be *spoken to*.

"It's taken me three years to build my group up to something that I'm proud of, that I really feel is a proper group. Now there's no Billy Idol backing group, there was never meant to be. The drummer ain't thinking, 'This is Billy Idol music', it's *his* music. I never really wanted to do a David Bowie, just be solo and not have a group. I really only called things Billy Idol 'cause I was on my own for a while. Now we've got this group it'd be nice to call it Generation X or something but now people know the name Billy Idol so we might as well keep on using it."

I was never a huge fan of the Generation X albums but I'll swear an undying attachment to at least two of their singles: the early, silly and really quite unpunk 'Ready, Steady, Go' (the Jam weren't the only punks to presage the Mod revival) and the swansong 'Dancing With Myself' (you can't lose with a couplet like "With my record collection/And a mirror reflection"). They may have been featherlite but their etching was *vivid*. Now can you tell me what 'White Wedding' and 'Rebel Yell' are about?

"I think the difference between what I'm doing now and Generation X is that Tony was writing a lot of the lyrics and we wrote a lot more music that had to do with the mass of the populace, like 'Wild Youth'. 'Rebel Yell' is as much about the masses but it's more the individual scream of frustration. I wanted to sing songs that were more personal in the sense that they were about people and individuals. That would mean the music could translate to everybody. Like people of 60 could listen to 'Rebel Yell' and say, 'Yeah, I don't want slavery, I don't sit and beg.'"



The Quays reception proceeds with photos, chat, but no real event. Billy is circulating. He walks up to a certain suave AK dread.

"Reggae!" he cries enthusiastically.

"Yes," comes the cool reply.

"Yeah, I'm really into reggae — Greg Isaacs is a good friend of mine."

"Who are you?"

"I'm Billy!"

No doubt there will be former critics of Generation X turning round and saying, "See? He's sold out and gone for the big bucks!"

"Well I just laugh at that sort of thing. If they really seriously looked into what's going on they'd probably find out I was worse off than I was with Generation X. It's taken me three years to just get people to know that I am still making music. I've deliberately gone for a thing where I don't borrow much off the record company. I want to be autonomous from them. So most of my money goes back into the band.

"People who say that sort of stuff about money, I think they've just got something against me and they're just trying to do something to upset people

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