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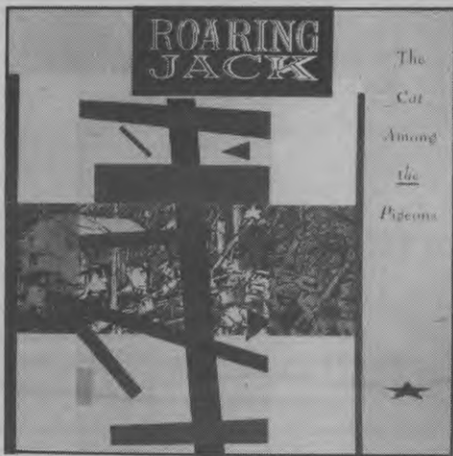
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# Kicking The Can

## David Bowie's Tin Machine



Tin Machine (L-R) David Bowie,  
Tony Sales, Hunt Sales, Reeves Gabrels.

Tin Machine are a bunch of old dudes insisting that they are doing something new. But, ironically, they're harking back to earlier days; the days of *Lust For Life*, when Hunt and Tony Sales were playing drums and bass for an Ig that was lighting the fire rather than fanning the embers. Tony Sales says he likes Sonic Youth, but Sonic Youth would probably say they liked Tony Sales, because he was that guy who played bass for Iggy on *Lust For Life*. Yeah, those were the days, weren't they?

Both the Tin Machine press kit and its members take pains to emphasise the group concept. Tin Machine is a group. Its members are equal. It is an ongoing project. "He's just Dave to us," says Tony. But one quarter of Tin Machine is David Bowie and this, really, is what is attracting all the attention. After bombing out with the retro-theatre of the Glass Spider tour, Bowie has swapped his red shoes for a Robert Palmer banking suit and a "group". But is it really a group? I'm on the phone to Tony Sales, the bassist. But I don't want to talk to him, really. I want to talk to David. I mean if someone's going to talk the talk then you might as well hear it from someone prestigious. All through the Sales interview I cannot help but feel that Tin Machine is really David Bowie hiring three people to do his press for him.

Certainly, Tin Machine is a thin excuse for an album. Bowie has done some crazy things in his time but even he would not hang his reputation on this one; it's abrasive and ugly and defiantly stupid, but so is the Aotea Centre and I'm not queueing up for that.

The central ethos of the Tin Machine, we are told, is its rawness, its improvisation. "We went into the studio and wrote and recorded 35 songs in nine weeks. And since then we've been writing more," Sales says. But the nagging footnote to all this improvisation is that it's so planned. What could be a more credible signpost for an aging Bowie than to team up with those good old boys from *Lust For Life*? Again, Sales insists that the alliance is a natural one.

"Bowie's really digging it a lot, he's having a real good time," Sales says. "He's never been in a band, he's always been the focal point. He doesn't do everything he wants to do in the band, either — he's got three other guys who are gonna bust his chops."

Bowie first got together with the Sales brothers when he was playing keyboards for Iggy on the 1977 *Lust For Life* tour.

"For soundchecks we used to come up with riffs and different ideas for songs, but we never took them any further. But we were all aware that we liked the same music and shared the same influences. Last year I ran into David at a party on the

Glass Spider Tour and he told me of this guitar player he'd found, said that he'd like to get a band together."

The guitarist was Reeves Gabrels, and his trademark caterwauling free-form guitar runs for the length of the Tin Machine album. The wildness might make for startling singles but over a whole album it starts to sound flat and formulaic; Sales and Sales lay down a basic beat, Reeves slaps on his guitar and Bowie's voice is left to carry the tune and the message. And if the tune (and indeed the shape of the song) get lost in the machine, the message never will.

The messages are heavy. "I can't read shit," Bowie blurts on side one and the Tin Machine manifesto is certainly one designed to impress a blank generation. On 'Crack City' the once thin white duke sings "piss on the icon monsters / whose guitars bequeath you pain ... corrupt with shaky visions ... don't grab that scabby hand." On 'I Can't Read': "I can't read and I can't write down ... I just cough, catch the chase / switch the channel, watch the police car." On 'Video Crime': "blood on video — video crime!" Heavy stuff indeed — Metallica morality.

To back it up the band pose in grey suits with blank looks on a blank background: here come the hit men, kids, with their heavy-heavy monster sound. Bowie is playing calculatedly dumb on this album yet promoting it as the bounteous fruits of spontaneity. Will it spoil the party to point that out?

But Tin Machine are doing ... quite well. People like the album. They really really like it. Or so Tony Sales tells me. And Tony Sales is a nice guy. He sounds like a nice guy.

The interview takes place on the day of the big Sugar Ray fight. Tony likes Sugar Ray. "He's fast. He really does move. But if he fights Tyson, maybe ... (laughs)"

Are you pleased with the album?  
"I love it. I'm really having a lot of fun with this, this is great."

And is it a one-off project?

"No, it's ongoing, for as long as it works. We're all very committed to it. We're all very excited about the reception of the album. We just made music that we wanted to hear — I guess other people want to hear it too."

What are people liking about it?  
"People are liking the rawness of it, and the honesty of it, the directness, the uncompromising-ness of it."

Why is that suddenly so important?  
"The state of where we all live is getting that way, you know?"

Do you mean that the music's getting dishonest, or the lifestyle?

"All of it. The music is a reflection of what we see happening in our lives, and we're going through the same world as everyone else, you know — pretty insane."

Your world must be a lot more sane than it was when you were playing with Iggy Pop.

"Well, I personally am more sane, yeah. But I've been knocked around another 12 years. In that time I had a band together called Chequered Past, with Steve Jones from the Pistols and Clem Burke from Blondie; I've done a movie with Rick Springfield; I've done a little bit of acting, and I did about half a dozen commercials in the States for Budweiser and Polaroid, acting in them. I've been working with a lot of people, though not so many in a band situation."

That's a pretty show-business 12 years.

"Within that 12 years as well, I was involved in a very severe car accident that left me in a coma. I don't know what the rock and roll lifestyle is. I know what it used to be, but I'm just a guy that likes to wake up in the morning now."

"The state of rock n' roll is getting smarter because a lot of people have died. I don't want to be a statistic. As far as I'm concerned I'm a musician, I like to play music; I'm also a father and a friend and lover, and I can't be any of those if I'm dead. So I don't take part in any of the gratuitous sickness that's so prevalent."

"Now, with the epidemics of drug addiction and Aids, it ain't no fun anymore. Reality has hit home for this guy."

The lyrics on the album are certainly violent. Is that a deliberate stance?

"I dunno about a deliberate stance; it's just a reflection of our own experience of what's going on. We were recording half the album in Switzerland and then we went down to Nassau to do some things down there. While we were in Nassau the studio broke down and we would go back to the hotel and there'd be guys selling crack in the lobby. There's a heavy alcohol and drug problem there, which is everywhere in the world now. It's just an epidemic. It's pretty self-explanatory."

It seems ironic that someone who played with Iggy Pop and David Bowie, who went through a very glamorous drug phase, is now singing anti-drug songs.

"It's not singing "anti-drugs songs" in the 60s sense of the word. We're singing reality songs in the "now" sense of the word. This person spent time in a coma and then in a wheelchair as a result of alcohol and drugs, so I personally know what dangers are involved. It's not out of fear, *per se*, it's just that it's time to grow up. I don't care who you are, you've gotta grow up. If you're gonna grow up to be responsible for your own life then you're really gonna have a good time. Mom and dad ain't coming home, y'know?"

What's it like growing up in the rock n' roll world now; what's it like looking at music from your older perspective?

"One of the reasons that the four of us put this album together in the first place is that we weren't hearing any music that we liked, we weren't

hearing anything that was getting us off. Either it was the electronic pacification, or it was emulation going down of bands that people died in — just a cartoon of past experiences. There aren't the bands out there. There's Sonic Youth, and bands like them that are taking a step into the unknown, and that's what rock n' roll is for me."

Don't you think "rock" is banging round in circles — that what we're seeing is mere revivalism?

"I don't think there are too many innovators. There's a lot of money to be made and a lot of people are going for that money. We happen to be a garage band with a budget so we can give it away, and that's what we want to do. We're old enough to know that all that other stuff doesn't work. And I guess some people out there like that because the album's doing real well."

So we will hear more from Tin Machine?

"There are plans for another album, and there are plans to do live shows as well — fairly small shows."

How small can the shows get for a band that has David Bowie in it?

"Well, he's just David to us. We're gonna play the places a new band would play."

You mentioned Sonic Youth — would they be playing support?

"I don't know about that. We'd like everybody to stand in their own light. We can't actually be worried about supporting others right now — we've got to support ourselves. It really comes down to the fact that we're a garage band with a budget. We're just real happy to be making the kind of music that we like listening to. If we could help someone out, we would — I mean we've all been there, we've all paid those same dues."

The young bands around now seem a lot less depressed about their generation than you are.

"Well, they must be high! (laughs) They weren't fortunate enough to see the people they imitate. They imitate the records made by these people; I am grateful that I got to see the guys that were really doing it. Christ, we know that a lot of them have died — untimely deaths."

Iggy's Pop must have been on a few death lists, surely.

"Yeah, I guess so."

Has the fact that he came back so strongly with the last album inspired you all?

"All of us are certainly very happy for him, so in that respect it inspired us. Iggy's true to what he does. That's what rock and roll is. I mean, I can't see another Little Richard around. But Iggy is right there, and so is David. I'm a fan of David's as well, and I'm flattered that I get to work with him. But we're not playing any David Bowie songs — we're playing Tin Machine songs."

The crunch may come when Tin Machine take to the road. How will Bowie fans react when their hero refuses to play any of his old numbers? Then, by increments, will more and more Bowie numbers creep onto the bill?

Then again, it's possible that Bowie has sold himself to a whole new generation of fans, just as he did with *Let's Dance* — kids that have never heard *Lodger* or *Low* or *Aladdin Sane*. Kids who think the Laughing Gnome is Pete Waterman. Kids who can't remember Bowie inspiring a whole generation of glam hangers-on before dipping into his army-surplus Berlin depressive days, teaming up with Eno, saying that Britain really needed a fascist leader. Would the people who bought *Let's Dance* remember Bowie in drag? Surely not. But boys keep swinging.

In fact, doing this interview on the day of the Sugar Ray fight provides an easy metaphor. I can't believe (I tell Sales) that Sugar Ray has been fighting so long — he's such a pretty looking guy, almost feminine. There isn't a mark on him. He's still light and fast and better than ten out of ten. But as the fight went on to prove, he's slipping. Now, who does Sugar Ray remind you of?

Boys keep swinging.

CHAD TAYLOR