

Too funky to duck

or a deejay
Saved My life

McLAREN MALCOLM in deep



I'd expected some half-crazed, cagey, conniving minor gangster on the other end of the telephone, so you can imagine my surprise when Malcolm McLaren turned out to be extremely friendly, unbelievably willing to talk (unstoppable in fact) and remarkably eloquent.

Unfortunately the three previous days of preparation, compiling incisive questions about my idols The New York Dolls and The Sex Pistols; probes about his Svengali-like influence over Adam Ant and Bow Wow Wow, and his manipulation of the media and record companies, went straight down the dumper.

I hardly got a chance to squeeze a word in edgeways. Right from the start he was off, manipulating the topics around to his current obsessions.

So, if you've been living in a cave for the last eight years, let me help you with a quick flip through Malcolm McLaren's back pages.

In 1972, when I was sharing floor space in a pad in the King's Road, across the street near the World's End pub was a sleazy little shop that sold motorbike jackets, studded belts and Teddy Boy clobber. The name of this sartorial paradise was Too Fast to Live, Too Young to Die' and though I didn't know it at the time, the owner was a young bloke called Malcolm McLaren.

By 1975 the shop had changed its name to Sex and carried a large range of leather G-strings, arm bracelets and erotic night attire. It was through these portals that stumbled a bunch of street dregs, attracted by McLaren's couture and his reputation as a promoter of gigs at the fashionable Biba's, as well as his short stint as manager of the famed New York Dolls.

Steve Jones, Paul Cook and Glen Matlock were in a band called The Swankers and they used to set up their gear in McLaren's shop and run through their repertoire of Small Faces' cover versions. McLaren dragged John Lydon in off the street, renamed him Johnny Rotten because of his rotten teeth, dressed him up in the same torn T-shirt and pins that he'd seen

Richard Hell wear in New York and plonked him in front of the band.

Hey presto! The Sex Pistols were formed and the music world hasn't stopped shaking yet. McLaren guarded their career like some deranged puppet master, through an obstacle course of broken recording contracts, outrageous records and a movie called *The Great Rock'n'Roll Swindle*.

Finally, the band split after a two-week tour of the US. Sued by just about everyone, pilloried by *The News of the World*, McLaren, never short of options, jacked the whole lot in and flew off to Paris to make porno movies. Malcolm McLaren is prepared to talk about this chapter because he traces his current obsession with musical anthropology and African rhythms back to these days.

"After making *The Great Rock'n'Roll Swindle*, and a giant court case, I exiled myself to Paris. As you know, Paris loves anyone the English hate, so I was adopted and was able to look at England in perspective.

"There I worked with a pornographic film company — you know the industry that makes films about nephews and nieces cavorting with uncles and aunts. Various little mistress games and guns and innuendo.

"Anyway I was supposedly given the job of music maestro. The guy who got all the music together. I would have to get all these eastern or European albums that played Mozart sonatas or whatever, because this was the way these little film industry people could avoid paying copyright. I got a bit tired of all that. I got tired of listening to classical music.

"It so happened that I was in a huge civic centre art place and in there was a big music

library. I was going through the usual stuff trying to find something heavy and I noticed on the racks close to me some very sparkling covers. Various folklore-ish albums by people from Australia. It was the pictures on the covers (because I'm a trained visual artist) that intrigued me more than anything else.

"Finally I decided to have a listen. I'm sitting there with headphones listening and I couldn't make head nor tail of it — if it was a guy chopping wood or whether he was knocking blocks together, and a guy shouting in the background.

"After a while I did find things in it that captivated me, such as the Burundi beat — those were the most accessible at the time. But over a period of time I went back over the more esoteric things and did my research and read about them with great interest.

"Well, I used these sounds for the pornographic films and it was the most exciting thing," he laughs. "The love-making, the sensuality and that sound. Suddenly I looked at that and thought that's really making my heart go beat. That's what has always made me love great rock'n'roll."

McLaren took the Burundi drum beat back to England and gave it to a clapped-out, second-rate, punk band whose lead singer, a pudgy pastiche of S & M and Iggy Pop poses, called Adam Ant, developed delusions of grandeur and promptly embarked on his own solo career.

McLaren picked up the remnants of the band, coned a 13-year-old, Annabella Lewin, who he found working behind the counter in a laundrette, and formed Bow Wow Wow.

"I took them to a major corporation (RCA) because I wanted to get the internal problems off my back and also because I wanted to do other projects.

"I mean, if anyone needed a kick up the fucking arse it was that dog shouting into the gramophone. He was an image we'd all been servile to for years. Bow Wow Wow just seemed the perfect instrument. And if I had anything to say with a group like Bow Wow Wow then that was the best play."

So the wheel comes around to the time-frame that McLaren wants to talk about. And talk he does.

McLaren's clear view of change, of the perimeters of the future owned a strong enough religious impulse to lead him inevitably to performing. Sure he'd recorded the single *You Need Hands* for the *Swindle* soundtrack, but that was nothing to the mania that gripped him for what he calls 'a whole new way of thinking and moving and making music'.

So, last year he packed an expensive tape recorder, rang up former Buggie and ABC producer Trevor Horn and they both embarked on an extensive trot around the world, recording and studying various ethnic forms of music.

"I went off in search of that magical thing," explains the excited guru. "I construed it as being something very folklore-ish and also to do with the dispossessed cultures of the world. That real, original, roots-ified music.

"In terms of rock'n'roll as we know it, that can hark back to the days of Africa and long before Jesus Christ was ever born. But then again, so can the square dance," he chuckles at the bizarre parallel.

"All of these things, I guess, seemed anti-

Christian and are what I sought to celebrate on this album, *Exploration*.

"I went to these various countries to prove the Indians were just as much rock'n'roll as the Zulus, as are the Tennessee mountain hillbillies, as are the street hustlers of the South Bronx, as are the Dominicans in the Dominican Republic."

The first release from McLaren the performer was the South Bronx 'scratch' version of the square dance song 'Buffalo Gals', recorded with two black DJs called The World Famous Supreme Team, who run a radio show on a small New York public radio station called WHBI.

McLaren was smitten by the idea for the song when he went to the Tennessee mountains and found an authentic bunch of hillbillies. He recorded them and then 'doctored' the tapes with his Supreme Team buddies, the idea being to combine the indigenous music with 'scratching', which he calls 'the latest urban folk music'.

According to McLaren, the underlying motives of 'Buffalo Gals' remain true to his long espoused theory that music must conform to the three S's — sex, style and sedition. It's certainly got sex and style, but sedition?

"Oh! It's very seditious," explains McLaren. "I wanted to change that temple of despair called the discotheque as we know it today. You know ... which these peacocks inhabit, sipping cocktails and feeling very lonely, only to repeat such a situation time and time again. With ultimately no consequence except to click their fingers and twitch their bums, with no observable meaning, to a stream of music that could only be described as endless pap."

"The fact that dance is something that could be construed as sacred, that it has much more observable meanings in it, was a challenge to me, to think that — well — that is something I could try to do and something I would love to do is to try and change all that."

"I thought that in essence the only reason for me being interested in rock'n'roll music in the first place was because of all those wonderful pagan ideals of things going bump in the night and making you wish to step out and utilise your body — to think with your hips."

"At the end of the day I thought what was as pagan and anti-Christian as white music? It was obvious to me when I looked. And the closest thing was the square dance. It's a very pagan dance. Very easy to do. People don't have to have much rhythm. But what a fabulous hip swinging up and down! It was no different from the rapper in New York or the caller in the Appalachian Mountains."

Sure enough, if you listen to the B-side of the record which contains an untampered version of 'Buffalo Gals', then you can hear the similarity between the caller hollering 'first Buffalo Gal go round the outside ... and rapping as made popular by Grandmaster Flash or Gil Scott Heron.

"The new single is the result of working in a place called Kwazulu, I suppose one of the segregated and tribal homelands in that very strange and barmy political place called South Africa — I had a fantastic time down there, except for the political climate that made me uneasy."

"I didn't do anything about changing the tunes that I recorded. I produced what I thought were

CONTINUED ON PAGE 33

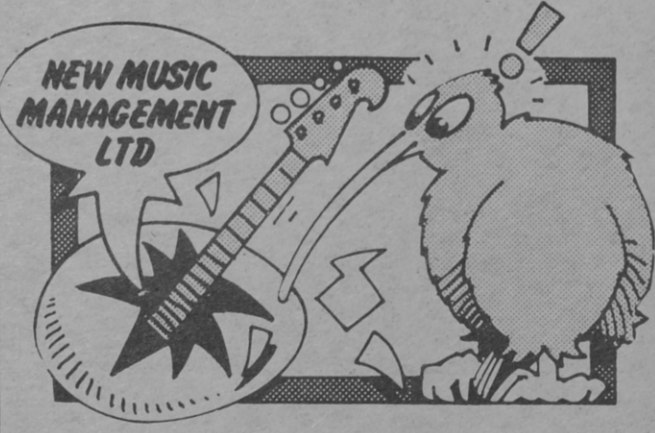


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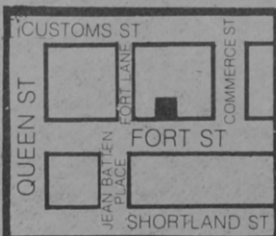
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