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**Why Marc Bolan was 'the perfect pop star',  
by Elton John, U2 and more**

The T Rex singer captivated generations with his strutting music and hyper-sexual charisma. As a tribute album is released, stars explain why he is glam's greatest icon

by [Alexis Petridis](#)

'I drive a Rolls-Royce / 'Cos it's good for my voice' ... Marc Bolan in 1973. Photograph: Roger Bamber/Rex/Shutterstock

Fri 4 Sep 2020 01.00 EDT



2,258 905

**I**n early 1971, a nine-year-old called David Evans was sitting at home in the suburbs of Dublin watching Top of the Pops. He was already a Beatles fan, but, by his own admission, he was completely unprepared for what was about to happen on screen.

“It was kind of challenging,” says Evans - better known as U2’s guitarist the Edge - of T Rex’s celebrated appearance performing Hot Love, frontman Marc Bolan sporting glitter under his eyes, the ground-zero moment for glam rock. “[Marc Bolan was magical, but also sexually heightened](#) and androgynous, with this glitter and makeup. It’s funny, the go-go dancers of the era were the legendary Pan’s People - he was way more intriguing sexually than they were. I’d never seen anything like it: ‘What the hell is this? Real lads are not into this kind of stuff - this is clearly music for girls.’ But when I picked up a guitar a year later, Hot Love was the first song I learned to play.”

Forty-nine years later, U2 have released a cover of Hot Love’s follow-up, Get It on. It features Bolan’s friend Elton John as guest pianist - a role he also played when T Rex [performed Get It on on 1971’s Christmas Top of the Pops](#) - and was recorded at the behest of the renowned music producer [Hal Willner](#).

The last project Willner worked on before his coronavirus-related death in April was assembling Angelheaded Hipster, a Bolan tribute album that brings together an array of artists, from Nick Cave and Father John Misty to Peaches and Kesha, by way of Todd

Rundgren, Marc Almond and Perry Farrell; its special-guest list manages to include both Donald Fagen of Steely Dan and Jim Thirlwell of Foetus.



'Hardly ever talked about as a composer' ... Bolan with T Rex at the Sundown, Edmonton, London in December 1972. Photograph: Michael Putland/Getty Images

Willner assembled the album because he felt Bolan was an overlooked figure: he noted that he “was hardly ever talked about as a composer”, the conversation more often turning to “how David Bowie took his essence and Bolan was in his shadow”. That is

certainly true in the US, where Get It on was T Rex's solitary hit, but the degree of enthusiasm the artists involved have for Bolan's work is enough to startle even a diehard T Rex obsessive like me.

Kesha was born a decade after Bolan's death in 1977 in a car crash and first heard T Rex in the early 00s. "I just remember thinking, whatever this music was, it was the soundtrack of my soul: it really helped me unleash things inside me. I feel like I was raised by T Rex, because I didn't have a dad, so male figures in my life were the ones I'd read about or listen to."



'I feel like I was raised by T Rex' ... Kesha. Photograph: Dana Trippe

What continues to attract musicians to an artist whose imperial phase lasted barely two years? The music, obviously: the golden run of singles that begins with 1970's Ride a White Swan and ends with 1973's 20th Century Boy; the insouciant, sexually charged brilliance of the albums Electric Warrior and The Slider. The image: what the Edge calls "that transgressional thing of challenging stereotypes and being this ambiguous creature ... that really did create a new kind of space". The sense that, while other artists ultimately sold more records or had longer careers, it is hard to think of anyone who has been better at actually *being a pop star* than Bolan, with his self-mythologising lyrics - "I drive a Rolls-Royce / 'Cos it's good for my voice" - his interviews filled with wild claims and outrageously entertaining lies, his looks, his charisma.

“He was the perfect pop star,” says John. “His songs were great, his records rocked, he had attitude, he had performing skills, he looked fabulous, he dressed the part. At a time when I was still becoming Elton John, he was a great role model. I thought: ‘This guy doesn’t give a fuck, he’s just being who he is and he’s loving every single minute of it.’ And that had a great effect on me.”



'Maybe he could be running a cult in Fiji' ... Devendra Banhart. Photograph: Ernesto Notarantonio/lpa/Rex/Shutterstock

For another of the album’s contributors, the singer-songwriter Devendra Banhart, part of Bolan’s appeal is “the idea of switching up your style without any real concern, because he was really going for it”. By the time of his first minor flush of fame in the late 60s, the former Marc Feld had already been a teenage mod who appeared in *Town* magazine, boasting about how many ties he owned, and a Dylan-inspired folkie called Toby Tyler, before becoming Marc Bolan, the author of two Donovan-esque flop solo singles and the guitarist and second vocalist in the Who-esque troublemakers John’s Children.

aggressive walls of sound in order to sing about Mordor, but Marc is just singing about this wild, fantastical, Tolkienish world with nothing but the exoticness of his character.

“And then there’s the rock’n’roll thing, songs about cars, celebrating the interior of his Mustang Ford: ‘It’s all put together with alligator leather.’ It isn’t really psychedelic, it’s a very particular thing.”

Team spirit ... with Mickey Finn, who joined Bolan's band in its Tyrannosaurus Rex guise, in 1971. Photograph: Araldo di Crollalanza/Rex

Over four albums, and with the help of [the producer Tony Visconti](#), Tyrannosaurus Rex's sound expanded, Bolan gradually cranking up his electric guitar. You can hear vague intimations of what was going to happen - on the 1969 single King of the Rumbling Spires and on A Beard of Stars, the first album Bolan recorded with the percussionist Mickey Finn replacing Peregrin-Took - but clearly no one expected Ride a White Swan, the first release under the snappier name T Rex: sharper, more streamlined, more poppy, every instrument drenched in the kind of slapback echo found on old rock'n'roll records. The lyrics still sounded hippyish, but if any record can claim to have announced the arrival of the 70s, it is Ride a White Swan. "I heard John Peel play it and I thought: 'This is amazing,'" says John. "It sounded like something that had come down from a spaceship; it was so out-there."

## // Out in the ordinary world, he managed to cast a spell over all of us The Edge

It eventually reached No 2. Bolan expanded T Rex's lineup, bringing in the drummer Bill Legend and the bassist Steve Currie, and overhauled his image at the behest of his manager's wife, Chelita Secunda - out with the hippy cloaks, in with girls' clothes, satin and makeup ("He wore makeup during the day," remembers John, "which I'd never seen a man do before - I thought that was so cool"). He played on his looks, amped up the sexuality in his music - "I'm gonna SUCK you," he howled on Jeepster - and that was that for the next two years: four No 1 singles, three No 1 albums, a film directed by Ringo Starr, hysteria the press called T Rextasy. There was far more depth to his songs than he was given credit for at the time - as Banhart points out, between "the flashiness, the smart lines, the cool boasts", there was a curious darkness in his lyrics: "All schools are strange", "I danced myself into the tomb", "It's a shame I'm like me". Perhaps people couldn't hear over the screaming.

"It felt like he actually cast a spell," says the Edge. "I've no doubt every aspect of how he presented himself was just an outpouring of his understanding that things could be magical, things could be heightened. Out in the ordinary world, he managed to cast a spell over all of us."

And then it went wrong. His grip on the songwriting he had honed to a kind of minimalist perfection on 1972's Metal Guru - a single that sounds like one long chorus - faltered. Bolan was rattled by his failure to break the US. "I think he was just too androgynous for a lot of folks here," suggests Joan Jett, another Angelheaded Hipster contributor,

'An understanding that things could be magical' ... U2's the Edge. Photograph: Chris Graythen/Getty Images

who says Bolan was her first teenage crush. “Radio just went for the safer stuff. I know from being in the Runaways how everyone treated us, so I just know they would have had issues with a Marc Bolan type of guy.”

Then came Tyrannosaurus Rex, an acoustic duo featuring Bolan and the percussionist Steve Peregrin-Took, but with the former evidently calling all the shots. Perhaps noting that Bolan was less committed to flower power idealism than he was to becoming famous, some areas of London's hippie counterculture regarded him with a jaundiced eye ("He was a cocky little shit," complains one underground luminary in Jonathon Green's definitive oral history of the era, *Days in the Life*), but the music Tyrannosaurus Rex made was frequently extraordinary. For an acoustic duo with a penchant for whimsy, they seldom sounded laid back: their songs charge along chaotically, fuelled by riffs and an energy closer to early rock'n'roll than folk.

### Nick Cave - Cosmic Dancer (Official Video)



Watch Nick Cave sing T Rex's Cosmic Dancer for the new tribute album *Angelheaded Hipster: The Songs of Marc Bolan & T Rex*

"I just thought: 'Where the fuck has this come from?'" remembers John. "I suppose it was a little like the Incredible String Band, but they were folkies - Marc Bolan was something different. He was sitting there in a cloak covered in stars, writing songs that sounded like Chuck Berry, very simple songs. *What?*"

Banhart says: "The first time I heard Tyrannosaurus Rex, I thought: 'I am home. I'm just in love. These are the best lyrics, this is the most fun energy, this is what real punk is to me. The nakedness of it. Led Zeppelin can hide behind these bombastic, heavy,

Bolan with his partner Gloria Jones, a former Motown staff writer. Photograph: Estate of Keith Morris/Redferns

He was smart enough to call time on glam with 1974's elegiac single Teenage Dream and sharp enough to spot that the next thing might be a kind of rock/soul hybrid some time before his longstanding frenemy David Bowie decamped to Philadelphia. But having had the right idea, he couldn't quite make it work. Bowie's Young Americans sounded like an effortless reinvention. For all the bona fides of his new partner Gloria Jones - a former staff writer at Motown - Bolan's brand of plastic soul often felt like hard going, overstuffed with ideas. The other members of T Rex left, one by one, leaving him to front a band of session musicians. Tony Visconti baled out after 1974's poorly received Zinc Alloy and the Hidden Riders of Tomorrow, claiming Bolan would no longer listen to anyone but yes-men. Occasionally, something sparked, as on 1975's brilliant Think Zinc, but the album it came from, Bolan's Zip Gun, failed to chart.

Still, a prevailing wind started blowing in his favour once more. He had a couple of strong hits, New York City and I Love to Boogie, curbed the excesses that had left him looking bloated and finally nailed the soul-inspired sound on his great 1976 album Futuristic Dragon. Moreover, the emerging punk scene was staffed by people who had grown up in front of Top of the Pops at the height of T Rextasy and taken notes: three chords, distorted guitars, killer singles, be outrageous. Under punk's scorched-earth policy, vast tranches of rock's past were dismissed: T Rex were not.

“There was incredible discipline in T Rex’s work,” says the Edge. “Electric Warrior is full of what I would call rock’n’roll 45s, which is such a rare thing: using rock and blues and guitar, but not losing sight of making great, accessible songs that have hooks and ideas and groove. They were an amazing band from that point of view, and that’s the thing that I think a lot of rock lost sight of, progressive rock and whatever - whatever it was, it was not sexy music. I think the T Rex discipline is what gave them the chance to survive.”

The admiration was mutual. Most established artists mocked or dismissed punk, or simply looked on with detached bemusement. Bolan, however, jumped in feet first: it seemed to activate the wild enthusiasm that John remembers: “He was always encouraging, never belittling; being with him was like having a hundred B12 injections at once.”

Happy family ... Bolan and the Ramones in London, 1976. Photograph: Richard Young/Rex

Bolan was in the audience for the Ramones’ first UK gig. He took the Damned on tour with him and peppered his kids’ TV show, Marc, with appearances by punk bands. You could say the fact that he was now presenting a kids’ TV show was evidence of how far his star had fallen, but Bolan was pretty magnificent on it, mercilessly hamming it up for the cameras. “This is a new group called Generation X. They have a lead singer

called Billy Idol who's supposed to be as pretty as me," he murmurs, effeteely sniffing a flower. "We'll see."

A week after recording that link, Bolan was dead, aged 29. The premature death of an artist inevitably conjures a lot of what-ifs. It is tempting to wonder what might have happened had Bolan lived to see the glitter-obsessed denizens of the Blitz club and the synth era; to hear the Smiths rewriting Metal Guru as Panic or Get It on recast as Oasis's Cigarettes and Alcohol; or to enjoy British glam finally gaining US commercial success by proxy thanks to heavy metal: Guns N' Roses' Slash stole his image from Bolan's Slider-era top hat and curls look; Def Leppard's Joe Elliott claimed that Pour Some Sugar on Me was an attempt to mimic T Rex's lyrics.

And it is tempting to wonder what Bolan might have made of another pre-eminent musical genius who clearly listened to T Rex, which Prince made explicit when he released his 1991 Bolan homage, Cream. "When I met Prince, I thought he was like Marc: ethereal, very androgynous," says John. "If you look at the two of them, they're very similar, the way they posed. I can imagine Prince singing Telegram Sam, I can imagine Marc singing Raspberry Beret."



Glitter and curls:  
Marc Bolan and the  
birth of glam rock  
style

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The truth is that he would have probably taken it all as his due - whatever his flaws, being crippled by modesty wasn't among them - just as he would have taken Angelheaded Hipster and the praise from younger artists. "His attitude has really informed the way I look at my life," says Kesha. "When I don't know what to do, like how to feel or how to behave, I think of people like Marc Bolan and all of a sudden it becomes more fun."

"What would he be doing if he were alive today?" muses Banhart. "He could be what Elon Musk is. Or he could maybe be running a cult in Fiji, with him

as the head of his own New Light of Dawn, the head of the Bolarian cult. Maybe he's the person that they'd hire to do the prequel to Game of Thrones. 'George RR Martin, he's taking too long - get Bolan on the phone.'"

Those sound like precisely the kind of wild claims Bolan would have made for himself. Banhart laughs. "That's it. But he was one of those one-of-a-kind people, where you go: 'Yeah, sure, all right. No one else can get away with that. But you can.'"

*Angelheaded Hipster: The Songs of Marc Bolan & T Rex is out now on BMG*

## Marc Bolan's deep cuts, chosen by Alexis Petridis

This playlist largely avoids T Rex's biggest hits, incredible as they are, in favour of taking a slightly more serpentine path through Bolan's oeuvre. We open with The Wizard, the solo debut single that began Bolan's myth-building - he claimed he had studied sorcery under the titular sorcerer in France; his manager, [Simon Napier-Bell](#), unapologetically suggested that Bolan had just met a man who did conjuring tricks in a Paris nightclub. Then there are the fantastic, wild, freakbeat singles Bolan wrote for John's Children that underlined the impossibility of him ever functioning merely as a band's backing singer: his voice looms out of the mix, overpowering everything else, a bizarre, quavering bleat he had apparently designed to draw as much attention to himself as possible.



## Marc Bolan's deep cuts

Gui 0:00 Music



- 1 The Wizard  
Marc Bolan 1:47
- 2 Desdemona  
John's Children 2:24
- 3 Midsummer Night's Scene  
John's Children 2:34
- 4 Hot Rod Mama - Mono Version  
T. Rex 3:10
- 5 Scenescof - Mono Version  
T. Rex 1:40
- 6 Debora  
T. Rex 3:09

Listen to Alex Petridis's Marc Bolan playlist Spotify

The playlist picks its way along Tyrannosaurus Rex's path from hippy oddity to proto-glam. You can hear intimations of what was going to happen next on Mustang Ford's conflation of cars and sex, and in the sound of King of the Rumbling Spires, By the Light of a Magical Moon and Elemental Child. And it takes in Banhart's favourite Bolan lyric: Scenescof's distinctly punk "I don't need anyone to dictate all my fun". Here are 30 reasons to - as the man himself was fond of saying - keep a little Marc in your heart.

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