

MUSIC REVIEW

‘Angelheaded Hipster: The Songs of Marc Bolan and T. Rex’ Review: Homage to an Oddball

Producer and tribute-album pioneer Hal Willner, who died in April, focused his final project on the British rocker, and the results are by turns perfunctory, surprising and profound.



Marc Bolan

PHOTO: GLORIA STAVERS/DANNY FIELDS


By Mark Richardson

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Producer Hal Willner essentially invented the tribute album in 1981 with the release of “Amarcord Nino Rota,” which found an array of artists tackling work by composer Nino Rota (best known for scoring “Amarcord” and “The Godfather”). In the decades to follow, Mr. Willner became the acknowledged master of the form, overseeing sets that saluted the music of Kurt Weill and Thelonious Monk, and songs from Disney films. “I love to approach subjects that I don’t know anything about,” he told Ray Padgett in one of his last interviews, for the book “I’m Your Fan: The Songs of Leonard Cohen.” “It’s a great way to learn about it, and then your audience is going to learn with you.”

Mr. Willner died of complications from Covid-19 in April at age 64, so he didn't get to see the release of his final project, the 26-song "Angelheaded Hipster: The Songs of Marc Bolan and T. Rex" (BMG), out Friday. Though the compilation was not his idea—the label approached him to produce it once it was already in motion—it bears his signature. A large cast of singers from across the rock and pop spectrum, quite a few of whom are lesser-known, offer versions of Marc Bolan's songs alongside studio bands that feature many of the same musicians from one track to the next, which makes the set feel more like a proper album than it would otherwise.

In notes he prepared for the album, Mr. Willner describes his youthful interest in early T. Rex—the British band was formed in 1967 by Bolan, who died in a car accident in 1977 at age 29—but stops short of calling himself an obsessive fan. He says that in assembling this record and researching Bolan's oeuvre, he was most impressed by the T. Rex frontman as a composer and wanted to highlight that side of him. On the album we get lush arrangements with strings, horns and woodwinds, and impressionistic textures are generally favored over the chunky guitar riffs and danceable rhythms that defined the originals.



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T. Rex

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Leaning into Bolan as a composer is a way of sidestepping his lyrics, which sound great coming out of his mouth but seem very dated when voiced by anyone else. Bolan’s words combined sci-fi and fantasy mysticism, complete with tales of wizards and magic, with the searing “awopbopalobop” sound-first energy of early rock ’n’ roll. In the U.S. a few of his biggest hits, most notably “Bang a Gong (Get It On)” from 1971’s “Electric Warrior,” got radio airplay, but he was more of a cult figure. In England, he was a massive star.



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Given the inherent difficulty of translating Bolan’s oddball songs, a surprising number on this set work beautifully. Nick Cave, without his darkly powerful band the Bad Seeds, offers a touching reading of “Cosmic Dancer,” Bolan’s meditation on birth, death and the power of music to give meaning to what happens in between. Lucinda Williams, whose own work is gritty and blues-inflected, applies her distinct phrasing to “Life’s a Gas,” and the chamber-orchestra backing lends a gorgeous dreaminess. Devendra Banhart descends from the acid-fried folk of Bolan’s earliest days, and he sings the lesser-known “Scenescof” from inside a swirling cloud of reverb. And indie rock singer-songwriter Father John Misty makes “Main Man” sound like one of his own compositions, transforming the catchy trifle into something profound.

Elsewhere, songs are elevated because of our awareness of their interpreters’ lives and careers. Marc Almond, the British singer who fronted the group Soft Cell and has had a long solo career, imbues “Teenage Dream” with extra poignancy, its lament for lost youth hitting harder when delivered by a former pop star now in his 60s. And Kesha opens the album with a spirited rendition of “Children of the Revolution” that combines the

youthful trash-culture attitude that defined her early music with her later work's spirit of empowerment.

It wouldn't be a tribute album without a few weak tracks, and "Angelheaded Hipster" has its share. Some bands play it too straight—U2's take on "Bang a Gong," featuring Elton John on piano, is inert, while Joan Jett offers a just-OK "Jeepster" in which the hard swing of the original is missed. And sometimes the artist just doesn't bring enough personality to the table—see Sean Lennon and Charlotte Kemp Muhl on "Mambo Sun," and garage rocker King Khan on his perfunctory bar-band take of "I Love to Boogie."

Still, whatever else you might say about "Angelheaded Hipster," it's not a cash-in—too many of the artists are too weird or too obscure and, as great as he was, there's nothing about the current moment that makes Marc Bolan or T. Rex particularly relevant. Mr. Willner's curatorial hand defines the record, which allows for it to serve as a fine epitaph. He was a superb listener who approached music as a fan, and here we have one last opportunity to hear it the way he did.

—Mr. Richardson is the Journal's rock and pop music critic. Follow him on Twitter @MarkRichardson.

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