

**EXCLUSIVE!**  
 Bringing Back  
 the  
**BOY**

by Tim Lyddiatt

After a tumultuous few years, is Boy George back on his trajectory to the stars again?

**W**hen Boy George is handed the phone, he is out of breath. Despite the fact that this interview had been pre and re-arranged once already at his request, he had been on his way out apparently, "it's not that I am forgetful," he says in a gravelly voice that slowly trails off, leaving the sentence unfinished. And so it was for much of the interview with one of the UK music industry's true - and, some would say - last remaining characters. It was not so much that he was evasive, he was just a bit erratic: his mind wanders and his words struggle to keep up with a mind that clearly operates at a thousand miles an hour. I liked him instantly, but wondered how much patience I would have for him were I to know him in real life.

"First off, he explains he was "headed to the studio to meet Mark Ronson" when we called."

For those readers too young to have lived through the 80s and to come to love - or hate - its music, Boy George's band, Culture Club, was one of the biggest there ever was. They were certainly the most flamboyant, were amongst the most interesting and they sold millions and millions of records. They quickly became household names, and George's extravagantly made up face, smiling beneath a big purple hat, was one of the most easily recognised and frequently seen on TV and in the papers. He was a figurehead, a spokesman even. But for what?

He wrote pop songs, but they were exciting pop songs about things that we, as children, didn't quite understand. As adults, we're still not sure what they meant exactly, but we remember the feelings that came with them. These were dark celebrations, were joyous recollections and all were infused with some kind of electric energy that the world had not seen before. Culture Club was multi-racial, was metro-sexual two decades before the phrase was coined and could be - were - loved by children and grandparents alike. Remembering that period in history, I can feel the warmth of George's smile, even down the phone line. "It was very much a generational thing; the music was of its time, but the memory of it is everything to do with where that generation was when they heard. Most of those kids are married with children now, and they revisit the music to get back a sense of that youth."

George is the first to admit that he has been around the block a few times. He will turn 50 next year, and has seen both the good and the bad of life. Last year, he served 4 months of a 15 month prison sentence, some of it in London's notorious Pentonville Prison, and the year before was indicted in New York on cocaine charges. At various times in his life he has received treatment for both heroin and cocaine addiction. "I've done it all," he says, "but it really is quite amazing what you can get over. I'm quite resilient."

He describes his time in prison as "like it never happened now." He says that he has never been one to dwell: "I'm the king of getting over things, and the whole time I was inside I was forever being told that I wouldn't remember. I wasn't sure at the time, but they were right. It really is as if it happened to someone else." He says that despite appearances, the last few years of drugs, rehab and prison "have not been too chaotic, quite the opposite. It is if I have just surrendered to whatever was happening, rather than trying to intervene."

That, he says, "was half the problem."

Our conversation swiftly moves to what's going on in his future. First off, he explains where he was headed out when we called: "to the studio to meet Mark Ronson." He says that whilst it is too soon to be talking about a new album, "I've got a new single out in March and have a UK tour lined up after that." He says that his

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"time away" was great for his material: "Pentonville Blues was a firm favourite at Leicester Square [Theatre in London where Boy George played a number of shows in December]."

Asked to define himself professionally, he says that "fundamentally I am a musician - whether that means a writer/



Boy George

performer or a DJ, it's all performance." It is arguable that ever since his 80s heyday, his next highest plaudits have come in the DJ booth. He is reported to have earned thousands for a single set, and has travelled the world with his record box. "It is the absolute freedom I love about DJing; I can pull literally anything out. All that matters is that everyone has a good time."

He explains that dance music in general "offers the most freedom for creativity. For all DJs and producers, as long as it works on the floor, we can do anything we like." It becomes apparent that this creative freedom is very important to him. "In the music industry in general, there is no freedom. I know people working today who have been in the industry for years and are not allowed

to make the music they want. They are forced to make the music they have always made because that's how they are marketed and packaged. They have no say in it at all."

At this point, when George starts going on and on about his desire for creative freedom - "I have to make sacrifices, usually financial, to make the music I want to make" - professionalism ups and leaves, and we have something of a spat. George takes umbrage to the mention of his non-appearance on Celebrity Big Brother earlier in the

year. He is still on probation, something that limits his ability to travel outside of the UK, and a judge ruled that his participation in the show would pose "a high level of risk" to the Probation Service's reputation.

When I put it to him that Celebrity Big Brother was exactly the kind of corporate entity that he was railing so vocally

against, he maintained that his participation "would have been totally different. And anyway, you would do it too if they were waving 500 grand at you." He is probably right, but it does reveal an inconsistency to Boy George that he hides well. He is a born performer, and it is not difficult to form the impression, even in such a short time, that he craves the limelight it brings. It is not so much that he is showing off - though he has described himself as one in the past - but that on stage is where he feels most vital. But he is also, it is abundantly clear, an intelligent man, filled with ideas who does not cede well to others. Is this the spark of his creative energy?

Winding the call up, he returns to contemplation of his future. "I feel like I am right at

the beginning again. It's exciting, but I'm aware that I have had to overcome some pretty serious personal problems to get there." Laughing the kind of laugh that is tinged with sadness or regret, he says, "I have to prove to the world again that I can do more than go to rehab or get arrested." As he does so, it is hard not to wonder whether this time there really might not be any way back and that his "creative freedom" might have to sustain him permanently this time.

As if reading my mind, and without missing a beat, he is laughing again, saying: "we'll see what happens in April when I get my passport back; let's see if they want me to play in Brazil or New York again." ■