

I Am Still the Greatest Says Billy Idol

By Chris Bourke

His big grin oozing joy, Billy Idol admires the magazine. *Rip It Up*, May 1984: Billy conquers Auckland. "I've got the poster on my wall at home, I had it framed," he says. His minder demurs: "I think you look better now, younger."

PHOTO BY TIM RAINGER

At the age of 14, Johnny Angelo was a heart-throb. He had three-inch sideboards and he wore his hair swept high in a golden quiff. His smile was lopsided. And his mouth was full of the whitest teeth.

This is what he wore: scarlet silken shirts, open at the neck, and tight torero pants; white kid shoes with golden buckles; a photograph of Elvis Presley right next to his heart; a silver crucifix.

He was loved ... He was also greatly hated ... And the things that the girls so adored, the white kid shoes and the lopsided smile, these were the exact same things that the boys most abhorred.

— *I Am Still the Greatest Says Johnny Angelo*, Nik Cohn, 1967.

Smothered in junk jewellery, Billy looks like a walking pawn shop: rings, crosses, beads, chains, studs. A black velvet cape, reaching down to his cowboy boots, today without the silver barbed tips. Beneath the cape, a 50s drape jacket with, on its back, a larger-than-life colour portrait of the King, 10 years dead today.

In the stiff Regent foyer a string quartet plays selections from Vivaldi. *Absurd*. Billy pulls a face: curled lip, cheesy smile, eyes alive, eyelids up, for once. Sitting in the lounge, he's



leaning forward, enthusiastic to get started. His entourage is near the bar. American "tour consultant" ("How 'bout a beer and a cigarette?" asks Billy), local record exec, plus a delicate looking chap in glasses and Nehru jacket, carrying a large black bag: Billy's makeup man.

William Broad, ex-English and economic history student, ex-Generation X punk popstar, now Billy Idol, hard rock comic strip icon, is a gift interview. Witty, self-mocking even, he raves and fantasises, shooting off into digressions and tangents. Occasionally he loses the plot, but he re-groups, and then he's off again. When he remembers, he peppers his middle class English accent with cockney cred, droppin' his aitches, fings like that. He's aware of Billy Idol and *Billy Idol* — the former is just as entertained by the latter as the rest of us.

"It's good fun to wear silly outrageous things," he says. "I dunno, it's a bit like making your daily life entertaining to yourself, rather than get up and not be bothered about what I put on. It's exciting to just go with it."

Sun King

Love the Elvis jacket.

"Yeah, it's nice. Some friends gave it to me. I've got this same picture on the back of a priest's robe. I cut it out and put it on the back of a Greek Orthodox

priest's robe. I thought that was pretty funny — Elvis and God."

You could say Christ was a rebel too.

"Yeah, he was, a bit of one, wasn't he? I dunno — I'm projecting both sides of it — saintlihood with evilness, at the same time. But I'm not sure which way it's going half the time, either."

Neither did Elvis. Billy, who sees Elvis as "something funny, something tacky, but I love his music and stuff," was going to play the King role in a movie of *King Death*. Nik Cohn's bizarre novel traced the parabolic fame/demise curve of a grim reaper TV celebrity.

"Yeah, you see *that's* an allegorical story about Elvis. But it's not like I, ah, want to *be* Elvis: Presley or nuffin' [he gives a punk snort], it's just that you run into things that echo things all the time."

What have you been reading lately?

"Oh, a book about Vietnam — *Chickenhawk* — it's really, really good. And I've been reading a lot of books about Hollywood, like *Indecent Exposure*, *Final Cut* and a book by William Goldman about screenwriting, *Adventures in the Screen Trade* that's really fantastic."

"For a long time I couldn't get into reading, and I know it sounds bookwormish, but you can really learn a lot from books. The fact that I write lyrics and things. It's interesting to find the printed word being exciting. And things like *Adventures in the Screen Trade* are great. I like William [actually Albert] Goldman's book about Elvis as well — re-reading it over and over I think it's actually one of the most honest books about 'im."

But you don't get the feeling Goldman even likes his music.

"Naah, not really ... but 'is stuff about screenwriting is great. It's interesting in that I'd thought about trying to do something *intelligent* — heh, heh — with *King Death*."

Flaming Star

Elvis was the great example of someone achieving huge success, but not coping with it

— whereas you seem on top of it these days.

Billy chuckles. "Well I dunno about that — I'm a bit younger than Elvis was. At the moment I think getting out on the road has really helped fire up my imagination again, made me really want to *do* music — and stay alive to do it."

You'd fit in with Nik Cohn's favourite artists — Jerry Lee Lewis, P J Proby — total, exaggerated performers.

"I like things that are kinda *total*, and if that means exaggerated ... it's always exciting when people try to drag things out of themselves, to have fun on stage, the clothes you wear, or whatever. I was thinking, I bet P J Proby never planned splitting his trousers as much as they say. But it looks like it just happens."

"As long as you're following your own lines of what you want to do. It's the same with the music. If you're following your own exaggerated — but *together* in your own mind, if you know what I mean — course, then you'll actually, A: develop a style that people can recognise. B: one that you can work within, and C: one that has something good about it, cos it's committed. I know that sounds a bit wild ..."

(Follow that? It's the commitment that matters ...)

"Because it means they won't turn around and try and be something else one day. That's half the problem people have, because they can't become something else once they've been Jerry Lee Lewis."

Easy Come, Easy Go

But you seem to have a sense of humour about it, too. It reminds me of Robert Mitchum's attitude to acting: "It sure beats working."

"Yeah, well it's good to be serious about it, but who wants to walk about showing that to the world? You're enjoying what you doing because you're committed to it, but that doesn't mean you have to think about it 24 hours a day. But then it's hard to get the energy up. And that's what being here is for — it's just as much for me as to play for the *CONTINUED ON PAGE 18*



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