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people. I'm here to fire myself up, as much as to come and play here for the money."

Uh huh. So what do you think rock and roll done for you?

"Well, apart from a lot of money [he chortles] ... naah, I haven't really got a lot of money. If I did, I'd spend it all. Whenever I've got it, it's always on the way out."

"But I think I've given back to rock and roll just as much as it's given me. Yeah. I've actually helped make it as well as take from it, so I think it's an equal bargain, really. But the best thing is, it's given me a life I really like — a life that's a bit crazy but I'm excited by it."

"Something I always got out of great songs is the feeling and energy — the *totalness* of it. So it's exciting to throw that back at the people. It's great when you come up with a song that you *do* like. Anyone can write a song, I could write millions of songs, but I wouldn't like them. But when you find one you *like*, that you're gonna enjoy performing, it's exciting to think you've got that ability."

'To Be a Lover,' though, is a song by Southern soul-men William Bell and Booker T. Where'd you find it?

"I first heard it on a George Faith reggae album — I originally thought it was a reggae song. So we started to search for George Faith in Jamaica, and we couldn't find him. They reckoned Lee Perry, who produced the album with 'To Be a Lover,' had killed him, or something! Anyway, it turns out it's not by George Faith at all, but Booker T Jones and William Bell. And it's funny that the Booker T version is really slow, with strings and all, so it's pretty wild that we Booker T'd it more than he did, knowarramean!"

Love & Rockets

How's your writing going for the next album?

"I think I want to make a much harder rock and roll album. It was nice writing all that romantic stuff on *Whiplash Smile*, but the next one will be more rock and roll, more experimental."

What brought out the sensitive side on *Whiplash Smile*?

"After doing *Rebel Yell* and getting through to a lot of people, I thought it was only fair to show another side to me. One that was seriously there, but in a *good* way — not where you've suddenly gone wimpy, but showing them just how

tough you think love and stuff is. It was trying to mix things up a bit more, and avoid becoming a stereotype."

Your lyrics are getting meatier, too — such as 'Don't Need a Gun.' Did you read about the English massacre this week (14 shot by a Rambo-fixated antique gun dealer)?

"Someone told me about it, yeah. That happens a lot in America, it's peculiar it happened in Britain."

Was it America that made you write that?

"Yeah, but I was thinking more of sheer violence, not so much guns. Guns are the symbol of people crushing you by violence. I was thinking more like those boots in *Battleship Potemkin*, just crushing on peoples' faces as a symbol."

"It was also about the sense of foreboding that people get about things, like the sense of foreboding that Elvis had, to kill himself in the way he did, or the sense of foreboding that the blues tells you about. I was thinking about all those things. It's surprising that you don't really want violence, but you'd love to exercise it if you had the chance. There's all that passion I wanted to be in it."

But there's a positive side to America too — that's why you're there.

"The great thing about my life is that singing songs is a pleasurable experience — I haven't had to violently force people to do anything, it's all been a matter of putting across something of my personality with my songs."

"So that's one of the meanings of the song, and that's what is fantastic about America — it's very much a proletariat kind of place. You're dealing with people who work hard every day at God knows, all sorts of things, and they're all looking for something to speak to them with some sort of personality. The mass American audience wants things to be stripped down, and one of the exciting things about America is it's stripped down. It's Boomtown, and my music fits Boomtown things."

The Fugitive

And America's where you found Steve Stevens.

"When I left Generation X it was really getting terrible for rock and roll in England. People really hated it for a while, whereas now they're getting back to it, with things like the Cult. Anyway, all I could do was go somewhere else, and the only place I felt would make sense after England was some other totally devoid-of-culture place like America! Especially New York, which is cultureless — but at the same time, culture-ful! You know it's gonna be crazy, but at least it's gonna be *wildly* crazy."

"But the main thing was I wanted to find a guitarist I could write songs with. Despite the fact I played guitar, I still didn't know how chordal structures and things like that worked. That's what was great about meeting Steve. I found someone who could interpret me musically. Because despite whatever you say about punk rock, I still have melodies and

things in my songs I want to expand upon, and someone like Steve is intensely creative and can help bring those sounds out in the music. Steve's hung in the wild times and the low times ..."

Your partner in crime.

"Yeah — the Great Song Robbery!" Billy laughs. "That's a good book I read recently — *The Great Train Robbery*. 'The Great Song Robbery' — I like that, it's quite a good title! Bit like *The Great Rock & Roll Swindle* though ..."

The Wild One

"That's another reason 'Don't Need a Gun' was great, because Julien Temple made the video, and I always loved *The Great Rock & Roll Swindle*. Our video worked out pretty good, really, because we went through the whole thing of wanting Billy-as-Marlon Brando, on a motorcycle. No, thanks! God knows, in some weird zoo in Los Angeles, with weird girls cavorting, it would have looked like, oh! The most *terrible* video going. So when we met up with Julien Temple, I found someone who wanted to do something good."

I was thinking about the boxing scene, with the humping of the stage ...

"A lot of women think about that, the humping-the-stage part. It's a purely imp-imp-*improvisational* bit, that!"

... but you live in New York now, where there's this paranoia about sex, no one's safe unless you've had the same partner for 10 years, and all that. Any qualms about those videos, with all this emphasis on safe sex?

"If I think back over the last 10 years, it'd be frightening!" Would you do an ad for condoms?

"Naah, I don't think so. I think people should think about *great* sex before *safe* sex! I mean *enjoying* it, hell! In the face of it all!" [Billy and entourage collapse with laughter]

So you haven't received any flak for the overt sexuality, in this new age.

"I think even people practising safe sex want to see something provocative. Y'know, it's a bit of a male striptease show! Let's go!"

So, all these years after *Rebel Yell*, the question is: what are you rebelling against?

"Ha! Just stupidity really, and boredom, and hatred and all the things you despise. I'm still living my own life, despite what anybody says — and enjoying it. That's one of the greatest things, just rebelling against people making your every day a drag!"

Elvis, Jerry Lee, Little Richard, P J Proby, ... the great doomed romantic showmen of our age. What would they have done without rock and roll? Billy gives the answer: with a swirl of his cape, he's off — for tonight's performance in the circus tent.

But Billy, doomed? No way. He's more in the Iggy Pop/David Johansen/Nick Cave school. A real wild child. But smart. He's been walking the tightrope for 10 years, and he knows his history: he won't fall off.

Superpop: the noise machine, the image, hype and beautiful flash of rock 'n' roll music. It has to be intelligent and simple both, it has to carry its implications lightly and it has to be fast, funny, sexy, obsessive, a bit epic.

Superpop, it's been like a continuing Western, it's had that same classic simplicity, the same power to turn cliché into myth. It's had no mind of its own. All it's ever done has been to catch currents, moods, teen obsessions, and freeze them in images. It has made giant caricatures of lust, violence, romance and revolt, and they've been the most powerful, most accurate fictions of this time.

— Awopbopaloobop Alopbamboom, Nik Cohn, 1969.

SHONA LAING

(Glad I'm) Not a Kennedy

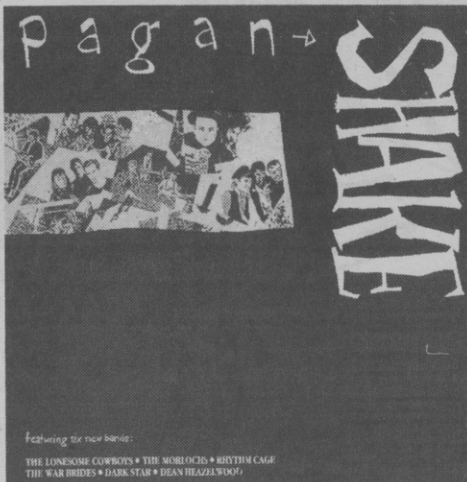


SHONA LAING

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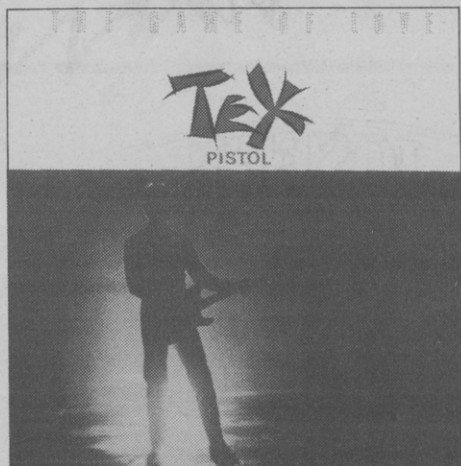


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