

## Flash for fantasy? – Or how to survive 33 years of punk

“So let’s sink another drink, ‘cause it’ll give me time to think.” (“Dancing with myself”)

He was one of the very first superstars of the MTV era. As a young “Englishman in New York”, Billy Idol thrashed punk all the way into the pop charts. Although most of the critics loathed the “peroxide punk”, the world (or rather the predominantly female part of it, between the ages of 15 and 30 on both sides of the Atlantic) could not get enough of him. Following a string of hits such as “White wedding”, “Rebel yell” and “Flesh for fantasy”, by the late 1980s Billy Idol was making more headlines with his unconventional social behavior than with his music, and in the early 1990s the high-flyer came crashing back down to earth. He only just survived. After a lengthy pause and a few false starts, the “Energizer”, as he calls himself, has been back on the scene for a number of years now – a peroxide blond, 53-year-old punk who can still rock as if there was no tomorrow.

Born on November 30, 1955 as William Michael Albert Broad in Stanmore, Middlesex, a few miles north of London, Billy Idol was as good as predestined for a career as a punk. When the Sex Pistols declared “Anarchy in the UK” with their first single, philosophy student Billy Idol was just celebrating turning 21. Like Siouxsie Sioux and Steve Severin – who were soon to become “Siouxsie and the Banshees” – Idol was a member of the so-called “Bromley contingent”, a notorious group of Sex Pistol fans who not only caught the eye with their unconventional behavior but contributed by no small means to the media frenzy around the band. In no time at all, the Pistols proved that really anyone could make music successfully. That same year Billy Idol joined the band Chelsea as a guitarist, a band which was to form the seedbed of British punk (pop). As well as the subsequent Clash-founder Mick Jones, Bryan James (later The Damned) also played with Chelsea, as did Tony James, who was to have a number of chart successes in the late 1980s with Sigue Sigue Sputnik. However, before long Billy and Tony left their Chelsea bandmates to found “Generation X”, supported by Bob Andrews (guitar) and John Towe (drums). Billy soon stopped playing guitar to focus on singing and his energetic stage show.

It is probably too late now to find out who actually first invented that raised upper lip – Idol himself or his mate Sid Vicious, who climbed the ranks from Sex Pistols fan to member of the band in 1977. In any case, the slanted sneer became Idol’s trademark, together with the clenched fist raised in rebellion. Although numerous critics labeled Generation X’s debut album “disappointing”, the single “Your generation” made it into the UK Top 40 and “King rocker” even reached number 11 in the British singles charts in 1979. With the band changing members as often as fashion fanatics change coats, the band split up in 1981 and Billy Idol launched a solo career in the USA. The rest is pop history.

### Pop idol and media rebel

As a small boy William had spent a couple of years on Long Island with his family. He returned there to take the world’s largest music market by storm. He talked about his childhood years in the USA with famous talk show host David Letterman. Idol’s key memories were of Gene Vincent’s rock ‘n’ roll and “really big cars”. The punk pop star said that his family probably headed Stateside in search of “the American dream”. When Letterman then asked whether they had found it, he replied coolly, “Well, they went back to England.” That was not to happen to him though, as his was a far worse fate. Incidentally, one Billy was to share with his childhood idol Gene Vincent. For he almost lost a leg in a terrible motorcycle accident. The accident happened in 1990 and was the first major warning shot for Idol, but of course he did not know that at the time of the Letterman interview. 25 years and an almost lethal overdose of rock ‘n’ roll further down the road, Idol gave another TV interview. He seemed pensive and more mature, but the old gleam in his eye was still there when he talked about his music and the “energy” he still wanted to instill in people.

Flashback to 1984: The young man who was just conquering the US charts with “Rebel yell” seems rather uncertain and a bit dazed despite his martial outfit consisting of leather, chains and dangling crosses. He does not try to hide his lack of focus; on the contrary, he feels flattered that New York drug dealers recognize him on the street and name their stuff after his songs. Letterman counters with a smug smile: “You must be a very proud man.” However, the 25-year-old narcissist, who even while speaking strokes his bare chest and smiles askance into the camera, does not seem to notice Letterman’s biting irony, and it is a good thing too. Imperviousness to irony is an excellent precondition for his career in the USA, where unlike in Great Britain in the 1980s, pop music did not really need the academic trimmings or clever lyrics.

Photo: Bryan Adams



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While the Europeans, both continental and island-based, indulged in postmodern synthpop, Billy Idol was one of the first superstars of the MTV era to fuse a decidedly mainstream-compatible pop 'n' roll sound with the look and feel of punk. It proved to be a clever move to work, on the one hand, with the talented guitarist Steve Stevens and, on the other, with Keith Forsey, an experienced dance producer (and former partner of Giorgio Moroder). After all, the visuals and attitude were at least as important as the songs. Which does not mean to say that Idol's songs from the early and mid-1980s are no good. They are just very "American", which earned him the resentment specifically of European critics. Nonetheless, for a few years Idol did not put a foot wrong. After his self-named album of 1982, everyone was talking about Billy and with "Rebel yell" (1984) he was at the peak of his fame. The album and singles sold in the millions and Idol filled the stadiums in the USA. However, the success went to his head and despite veritable hits like "To be a lover" and "Sweet sixteen", his third album "Whiplash smile" (1987) did not live up to the high expectations. His alter ego Steve Stevens stopped working with him. Although the album "Charmed life" (recorded without Stevens) is considered one of his best, it was short in hits and from then on things went downhill for Idol. The motorcycle accident was followed by an overdose and a few musical flops – including the 1993 album "Cyberpunk".

"Cyberpunk" is, like all previous Idol albums in fact, influenced by the vision "of combining dance music and rock 'n' roll with technology", as Idol explained in an interview with Dr. Timothy Leary. Yet this time it really was way ahead of its time, perhaps also because of the massive pharmaceutical inputs during its production. Idol made much of the music on a Macintosh computer and some of the albums come with a floppy disk containing a screen-saver. Although the (in)famous LSD champion Dr. Leary seemed to be taken with Idol, critics gave an even more crushing judgment than for his earlier works and called "Cyberpunk" a "catastrophic concept album" (Rough guide to rock). And this time the public rejected it too.

Rehab was followed by difficult years, but in 1998 the world's attention was once again drawn to the peroxide punk thanks to "The wedding singer". He played a short cameo (naturally as Billy Idol) and "White wedding" was chosen as the theme song of this charming comedy with Drew Barrymore and Adam Sandler in the main roles. Steve Stevens returned and they rerecorded a number of Idol hits together for the music channel VH1. The result of this session, namely the album "Storytellers", hit no. 14 in the German charts. Idol then released a "Best of" album in 2001 and a completely new album in 2005, called "Devil's Playground", with which he also toured. It was not a great hit, but his fans loved him again – 115 customer reviews on Amazon.com and 64 in Germany, most of them with a full five stars, are proof enough. Naturally, this was followed by another "Best of" album. This time it is entitled "Idolize yourself" (2008) and also contains two new songs. One of them, "John Wayne", is a really good, bow-legged cowboy of a song which nurtured respect among his critics and gave his friends the sure feeling that the good guy always wins in the end.

The fact that the now not-so-blond Billy Idol, after falling deep into the clutches of heroin addiction, after two near-death experiences and the same number of failed comeback attempts, can go on tour again today as a 53-year-old father of two can probably only be seen as his American dream. A dream he has lived through, or rather "survived". In early summer 2008, Idol played, back with guitarist Steve Stevens as in the old days, selected dates in the USA and Europe and now has at least two generations of fans wrapped around his finger. He still lives for those moments like the one that evening in Chicago he talked about in the Letterman show: Billy Idol stepped onto the balcony of his dressing room to further fire up his fans, who were going wild outside. He just "happened" to be stark naked. Scandal! He would probably do it again. But this time, sober.

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