

PORTRAIT

Bryan Ferry

The great melancholic on pop's Olympus

The man was a style icon of the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s. Influential *Harper's* columnist Peter York once said that Ferry was so cool that he ought to be hanging in the Tate Gallery. The most recent addition to the *Hear the World* ambassadors, now more than 40 in number, Ferry adorns the cover of this issue of the magazine.

Almost exactly four decades after Roxy Music was founded, one of the most influential British pop groups of all time, Bryan Ferry is still pretty damn cool – even though, at 65, he is now the father of four grown-up sons and heads a family music business. Along with superstars ranging from David Gilmour, Nile Rodgers and Dave Stewart to Flea, the bass player with the Red Hot Chili Peppers, the Ferry offspring were also involved in their father's album *Olympia*, his first album since *Frantic* of 2002, which consists mainly of songs that he has penned himself.

However, the real sensation is the fact that, with Andy Mackay, Phil Manzanera and Brian Eno, Ferry has been able to assemble in one studio the key band members from the early days of Roxy Music for this sumptuous production. After all, almost four decades ago they played a fundamental part in shaping the glam rock era and were hailed by legendary Rolling Stone author Lester Bangs as a “triumph of the artificial” (which was meant as a compliment). A few years later, Roxy Music paved the way for the New Romantic movement of the early 1980s. Without Bryan Ferry, it is possible that David Sylvian of Japan would never have dared to embark on a singing career and bands such as Duran Duran, The Human League and Spandau Ballet would not have known what to wear.

However, *Olympia* is not only a real place in the London borough of Kensington, but also the title of Eduard Manet's masterly nude painting dating from 1863, showing a rich and beautiful courtesan. Olympia's melancholy gaze appears to reveal that she is not really pleased with the splendid bunch of flowers brought to her by a servant girl. But who is Bryan Ferry's *Olympia*? This time, the cover model is Kate Moss, the visual successor to beauties such as Amanda Lear and Jerry Hall, who were shown on the Roxy Music albums *For Your Pleasure* and *Siren*.

Not only have unabashed, mainly British interviewers repeatedly asked Ferry about his relationships with beautiful and glamorous women, but he himself has often said that women have been one of his lifelong preoccupations and a central object of his artistic desire. Yet recently, Ferry's tunes and lyrics appear to have mellowed somewhat. Whereas in his album *Frantic* he sang about Marilyn Monroe as the *Goddess of Love*, he now sings about *Heartache by Numbers*. Incidentally, the latter track is one of the best songs on the new album. The drifting mid-tempo groove is solidly underpinned by Flea's filigree bass, on guitar we have David A. Stewart (ex-Eurythmics), who was also one of the co-composers and, last but not least, Jake Shears and BabyDaddy of the Scissor Sisters supplying the electronic background. Surprisingly, nonetheless, the song does not sound particularly modern. Instead, it is reminiscent of the best years of the “old” Roxy Music. Another track, *Shameless*, is much closer to the dance floor in the way it is constructed, a casual groove track with exactly 120 beats per minute devised by Groove Armada's Andy Cocup and Tom Findlay for their childhood idol.



Photo: Bryan Adams

THE GROOVE FLOWS SLOWLY ALONG LIKE A GREAT DARK RIVER...

One very special highlight is Ferry's version of *Song to the Siren* by Tim Buckley. Admittedly, Ferry's voice cannot compete with that of Elizabeth Frazer, who delivered the best-known cover version of this touching number in 1984, but in this instance the grand master of melancholy is completely in his element both in terms of subject matter and music. The groove flows slowly along like a great dark river, whilst above it floats a cello wielded by Anthony Pleeth, synthesizer sounds supplied by Brian Eno, and guitar riffs laid down by as many as three grandmasters of their art, David Gilmour, Phil Manzanera and Jonny Greenwood (Radiohead). *BF Bass (Ode To Olympia)* demonstrates that, even after reaching a pensionable age, Bryan Ferry has not forgotten how to rock. With Eno on keyboards, the glamour of the early Roxy Music years shines through, if, admittedly, somewhat worldly-wise and a little over the top. The rest of the total of ten tracks meander along, unable to make up their minds whether to stick to what they know or try something new. One ballad-like song, *Me Oh My*, does, however, deserve a special mention. Here, *Olympia* proves to be just as thoughtful as in Manet's portrait. The diva has removed her powder and her burlesque make-up to leave a fragile and vulnerable impression.

No doubt, as an official Roxy Music album *Olympia* would have been at once a sensation and a huge disappointment. The group's own boots, after Roxy Music albums such as *For Your Pleasure*, *Country Life* and *Avalon*, are just too big to fill, as big as the dissent between eternal dandy Bryan Ferry and sound artist Brian Eno. When, in 2005, guitarist Phil Manzanera announced a RM reunion album on his website, this gave rise to lively discussions in the United Kingdom, discussions repeatedly fired by confirmations on one hand and denials on the other. It was not until 2009 that Ferry put an end to the media debate by suddenly announcing, without further ado, that this still incomplete work would be a solo album.

The fact that four former members of Roxy Music were playing on *Olympia* continued to encourage fans to hope that there would be a "proper" and lasting reunion of this legendary art/pop band. Yet Ferry's remarks on such rumors are limited to a laconic "I couldn't be bothered to do anything like that." Of all people, the king of melancholy in British pop music seems to have an aversion to nostalgic moods. At any rate, he has stressed on several occasions that the people he met up with in the studio all those years later were only "colleagues" and not "friends".

Whatever the case, before the release of their "almost comeback" album, these colleagues played a number of large concerts together and have announced a UK tour for the beginning of 2011, booking arenas with capacities of up to 25,000 spectators. It is already fairly certain that Eno will not be with them on stage, but, by playing their forgotten hits – from *Virginia Plain* to *Love is the Drug*, *Dance Away* and *More Than This* – Ferry, Manzanera and Mackay are sure to send more than just one delicious shiver down the spines of their fans.

Christian Arndt