

INTERVIEW



THE COMEBACK ICON

*In an exclusive interview,
Boy George takes it and
dishes it out
like a man*

▼
by C. Jay Wilson Jr.

Whether you're a dedicated fan impervious to the scandal that surrounded the pop figure, or one of his detractors who believes his zenith of fame lasted far too long, it is almost impossible not to have an opinion about Boy George. Boy George may not be everyone's favorite pin-up boy, but no one can deny the indelible mark that he left upon '80s pop culture. When he burst onto the pop scene in 1982 as the flamboyant frontman of Culture Club, he challenged stifled sensibilities and a largely homophobic music industry. However, he kept the press and public at a distance with an aura of sexual ambivalence, both flaunting his sexuality and at times steering clear of the controversy altogether.

There is no question about Boy George now, as he is indeed out in full force on his new album, *Cheapness and Beauty*, and in the pages of his recently published tell-all autobiography, *Take It Like a Man*. While he was in Portland recently to promote his book, I had a chance to meet with Mr. Boy George as he revealed some of his thoughts on Michael Jackson, O.J. Simpson and the state of pop music in the 1990s.

Do you find it exhausting to live up to the celebrity surrounding the persona of "Boy George"?

Sometimes people treat you with too much awe. They forget that you're just like them. There are some people who are turned on by what they see as power. Celebrity to a lot of people is power, and at the peak of my success with Culture Club I did feel that people were just screaming at an idea rather than a person. And of course there were people who really did relate to me, and there were a lot of young gay kids—there were a lot of girls who recognized a certain vulnerability and they recognized themselves, in some ways, in me. But for the large part with all hysteria like that, it's very vacant. It's what you do when you're a teenager...you scream at famous people. But having said that, there are people who really do understand what you're about, they un-

derstand what you're saying, and that's a whole different story.

Are you more a gay icon in the 1990s?

Well that's a strange thought because on the one hand I am seen as a gay "spokesman," but there are 15 million homosexuals in this country and if they were all buying my records then I would believe that I was a gay icon, and I don't think it's just gay people who buy my records. There are a lot of gay people who buy my records but equally, there are a lot of gay people who are turned off by what I do. You see, we're not a species. There are conservative homosexuals, there are drag queens and disco dollies, there are so many different types of homosexuals. We all don't like the same things, unfortunately. Because on the one hand we complain about not being visible, and then when a gay artist is making a statement, we ignore it as a community and I think that is kind of a strange irony. And so when people ask me if I'm a gay icon, I'm like, check Madonna, check Kylie Minogue. I really wish that I did have more support.

Do you receive a lot of criticism from other gay recording artists?

It's just one of those things about us as a community that we seem to often be very derogatory about our own kind. I'm always hearing gay artists slagging me off—Holly Johnson, Jimmy Somerville, across the board—and it's like, stop pissing in your own handbag guys, for fuck's sake. It really annoys me, and I used to do it, absolutely, I used to do it, and I do see it as a sign of complete immaturity. It's one thing to have a joke, it's good to have a joke, but sometimes it crosses the line where it's boring—just bitching for the sake of it and it's more to do with insecurity than anything else.

Society makes us insecure from an early age, because we are basically abandoned by society, we are abandoned by religious organizations, and condemned by most, so we're used to that. It's part of our makeup: rejection, disappointment, alienation. So it's something we're comfortable with. Even though sometimes we realize it's not beneficial. Somehow or other, it's in our blood. And that is the thing we need to challenge. We need to know when it is appropriate and when it isn't—I'm not saying we need to live in a politically correct, humanist world, but at some point, we need to come together as a community and be strong.

So do you embrace an idealized future with the conceivable possibility of working to build a "community"?

I think one of the problems is that we are so varied, but we have a common interest and we have common issues and the problem is that there is so much animosity within the gay community—lesbians don't hang out with queers, there are professional homosexuals who hate drag queens...and if we can't within our own community be more tolerant, what chance do we stand in the real world. So I think that we are the problem. What we need to do is look at the shit that's going on in our own backyard instead of focusing on the world, because it's almost like we are constantly asking permission to be who we are. We need to change. I know that as I've gotten older and become more confident with my sexuality, and it is much harder being a public figure because you are dealing with mass opinion and association to something that is basically very personal. So I no longer feel the need to ask for people's permission to be who I am. People who say "I can't come out because of work or because of my parents" are basically saying I am ashamed of what I am. That kind of life is no life.

So you've become much stronger in your approach to your own sexuality.

It's something that I talk about a lot. It's dinner conversation. You know wherever you go, whether you're with straight people or with gay people, it's something that seems to come up all the time. I'm either talking about sex, or I'm talking about being gay or politics or O.J. Simpson or something.

O.J.? Oh, my! We'll talk about that later.

It's a big move to take responsibility for your life. It's a challenge and society doesn't really encourage any of us to do that regardless of what we are sexually. My experience of school is that you're being conditioned for the real world, and the real world is about conforming. It's about not having too much personality, not having too much spirit. And that's why I always suffered at school, because I always was very needy, very sensitive and very loud, and that's been an ongoing problem in my life, really. [Laughs.] But at the same time it's forced me to deal with certain issues in my life. Because as a kid, I wasn't one of those kids who could hide what I was. I was very feminine, I was very girly and people pointed it out to me every day. From the age of six, people were calling me "girl" and giving me girls' names, calling me "poof," so I was aware of it from an early age, as a lot of us are actually, from before we understand what it all means.

As you have existed under a cloud of perpetual scrutiny from journalists, have you become more immune to their presence?

Well they're not there to help me. They're not there to carry my message. That's why I wrote this book, because I feel the media generally treats homosexuality or drug addiction or any other serious issue very irresponsibly. And part of the reason for writing this book is to do it in a responsible way: to tell the truth.

When you go on TV, it's like, "talk about your heroin addiction in three sentences and make it funny," and it isn't funny, I can't do that. The media is constantly searching for a sound bite and my life isn't a sound bite. Life is so much more complex than that. I find it frustrating a lot of the time. I can be very funny, but it's not all I do. I get frustrated playing the comedian, playing the kind of humanless freak for other people's benefit. But with this album and this book I am dealing with contentious issues, and people just want to treat it all like a joke. It's always got to be humorous, and sometimes it just isn't humorous.

Do you feel as if you are taking yourself—in relation to your music and the messages therein—more seriously now as a solo artist?

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