

History of Rock
Chapter 17
Glitter and Glam

The glitter movement was, in some ways, a reaction against 60's rock and its counterculture. In other ways, it an extension of that culture. Rock stars of the 60's stressed folk and psychedelic singers' pleas for humanitarian causes, glitter performers of the 70's portrayed themselves as being self-indulgent stars who reveled at being at the center of big, theatrical showplaces. Many earlier bands had included just a few players and singers, glitter shows were giant extravaganzas with more attention placed on the glittery sets than on the music and musicians. Sexual freedom had been a part of the 60's counterculture, but glitter performers stressed a new view of sexual freedom. This could be seen as another view of rock's rebellious nature. Men wearing makeup and feminine clothing was used to provoke outrage among society's polite members and, in the process, satisfied the fans. Glitter was more show than social statement, but the images shocked the same people the Beat writers had attacked in their works.

One of the first and most influential glitter stars was David Bowie. Bowie was born in 1947 as David Robert Jones. He was part of a family with emotional and psychological problems. He was a reader of the Beats' writer, Jack Kerouac, and his book *On the Road* (1957) and was impressed by the book's characters who were able to express their feelings of alienation from the conformist middle-class society that surrounded them. Jones felt penned in by his family and the freedom expressed by the Beats appealed to him. Jones began his escape from his family by playing saxophone in the band called George and the Dragons. His love for jazz gave way to R&B and by 1963, he was singing with the Hooker Brothers. This group changed their name to the King Bees and then to David Jones and the King Bees.

Jones frequented London's Mod clubs and left the King Bees to sing with Mod bands. Androgynous dress became part of the act. This was sparked by Allen Ginsberg's demands for acceptance of homosexuality. Jones developed this image and returned to it frequently during his career. When the Monkeys emerged with Davy Jones as lead singer, Jones looked for a new name. He settled on David Bowie. He chose Bowie because he wanted his music to "cut like a knife."

Bowie had great interest in theater and art and would not simply walk onto the stage and sing songs backed by a band. He wanted to create an image for himself and performances that were theatrical experiences. Kubrick's *Space Odyssey* (1968) and the interest in space at the time provided the image he was looking for. He created the image of Major Tom, an astronaut who chose to live in alienation from humanity in space rather than returning to earth.

Listen to David Bowie---Space Oddity (1969) (1:1)

He recreated that character in 1980 when Major Tom returned in *Ashes to Ashes* (The Continuing Story of Major Tom).

Listen to David Bowie---Ashes to Ashes (1:2)

In 1971, Bowie was pictured on the British cover of his album, *The Man Who Sold the World*, relaxing on a day bed wearing an elegant dress, and holding the queen of diamonds playing card in his limp-wristed hand. The album cover was banned in the United States, but that image shaped the glitz and glamour of the the style period he influenced.

Bowie experimented with many different styles of music including R&B, folk, funk and disco. He wrote the piece, *Fame* (1975), with John Lennon and Carlos Alomar.

Listen to David Bowie---Fame (1:3)

Bowie was heavily involved in theater and played the lead role in *Elephant Man* on Broadway. He did not play with a specific group of musicians. Rather, the musicians, dancers, backup singers, etc. he selected were chosen to fit the character he was portraying at the moment. The idea of music being secondary to the act itself was at the heart of glitter rock. The most important component of the genre was the grandiose production. When Bowie scaled down his performance to a more conventional performance, it was not then a glitter performance. Regardless of who the performer was, prancing around in sparkling costumes, glitter meant one thing---theater.

Like David Bowie, Reginald Kenneth Dwight (born 1947) began his career by playing rock music with a blues revival group in London. He was trained as a classical pianist and even won a scholarship to London's Royal Academy of Music, but he gave that up to join the group, Bluesology. When he began his solo career, he created his stage name by combining the names of two members from that group, Long John Baldry and Elton Dean---Elton John. He wasn't the actor Bowie was, but he fell into the glitter category with his flamboyant dress and elaborate stage performances. With his high platform shoes and sparkly eyeglasses, he made the piano rock like few had done since the days of Jerry Lee Lewis and Little Richard.

Elton John's musicianship can be heard in a wide range of songs and styles. From his sentimental ballad, *Your Song* (1970), to the pop-rock song of 1974, *Bennie and the Jets*.

Listen to Elton John---Your Song (1:4)

Listen to Elton John---Bennie and the Jets (1:5)

Elton John cannot be considered a singer/songwriter because the lyrics to almost all of his songs were written by Bernie Taupin. Elton John wrote the melodies.

The 80's were a time of highs and lows for Elton John. His marriage failed and he suffered a vocal loss that required surgery. He battled addictions to cocaine and alcohol. He vowed to overcome his problems and to use his talent to help others. So, he admitted himself to a hospital in 1990 to get rid of the drugs that plagued his system. He established the Elton John AIDS Foundation, to which he donated support money. His

career revived in the 90's and he won both a Grammy and an Oscar for his soundtrack for *The Lion King* (1994).

Though Elton John's image changed in the 90's, his image remains for those who saw him perform in the 70's. He auctioned off many of the costumes in 1988 to further distance himself from that image.

Mod clubs in London also served to help start another glitter star, Marc Bolan (Marc Field, 1948-1977). Bolan's glitter image often included the same androgynous sexuality adopted by his friend, David Bowie. Bolan led several different versions of the group, Tyrannosaurus Rex (T.Rex). The evolution of T.Rex included unusual percussion effects added to what was basically an acoustic, folk sound. Later they added four violins to their acoustic guitar. Finally, they decided that rock needed a rhythm section and added a bass player and a drummer for their 1971 hit, *Bang a Gong* (Get It On).

***Listen to T.Rex---Bang a Gong* (1:6)**

The British group, Queen, placed itself in the glitter category by virtue of the implications of its name. Members of the group were all college students when they decided to try for rock stardom. Rather than spending years in small clubs, they prepared a demo tape and an elaborate stage act before approaching a record company.

Queen's music was hard rock with heavy-metal flavored guitar lines. It also approached art rock through well-crafted arrangements and production techniques. Eventually, their stage show included a touch of the most elaborate classical music with *A Night at the Opera* (1975). *Bohemian Rhapsody*, from that album, was a mock operetta.

***Listen to Queen---Bohemian Rhapsody* (1:7)**

Bohemian Rhapsody received considerable attention and served to introduce Queen's music to younger audiences. The piece was even arranged for choir!

During the 80's, Queen ceased to be quite so glittery. Their hard-rock and classical influences gave way to rockabilly and funk, among others.

***Listen to Queen---Crazy Little Thing* (1:8)**

Because of the AIDS-related death of their singer, Freddie Mercury, Queen's 1991 album, *Innuendo*, was their last. In 1992, Queen was joined by Elton John, David Bowie, and Def Leppard for a memorial concert.

American heavy metal acts such as Kiss and Alice Cooper performed with such theatrics that they were as much glitter as heavy metal. Kiss had an act that was based more on images from horror movies than on sexuality. They wore heavy make-up, spit fake blood, breathed fire, and filled the stage with smoke and a light show, in addition to playing music. Alice Cooper (Vincent Furnier, b. 1945) sometimes wore androgynous

dress and at other times provided competition for Kiss' display of horror. Cooper included mock murders and executions by guillotine or electric chair on stage. Alice Cooper played music, but like the music of other glitter stars, it shared the spotlight with the theatrics.

Listen to Alice Cooper---School's Out for Summer (1:9)

Glam Bands of the 80's and Early 90's

Androgynous glitter-influenced hairdos and makeup made a new appearance on heavy metal stages with 80's performers such as Bon Jovi, Motley Crue, and Twisted Sister. The long hairdos and make-up were added to black leather, chains, and tattoos, giving these bands a rougher image than was generally seen on glitter performers. Song themes by the glam bands tended to be less oriented toward mini-dramas than those of the glitter groups. The theatrics were found in the stage sets and glamorous looks and costumes.

Poison had their own hairdresser with Rikki Rocket (Richard Ream, b. 1961), who was also their drummer. Poison was one of the most successful LA glam bands during the style's heyday in the late 80's. Poison's commercial success was due, in part, to their versatility. Note the differences between the following two songs, both on the same album, *Open Wide and Say...Ahh!* (1988).

Listen to Poison---Nothin' But a Good Time (1:10)

Listen to Poison---Every Rose Has Its Thorn (1:11)

Poison remained together into the mid-90's, but by that time the stage effects and theatrics of glitter and glam had begun to give way to the popularity of groups that generally avoided such glitz.