



Boy George (George O'Dowd) (b. 1961)

by Tina Gianoulis

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Boy George is, like many middle-aged queers, a survivor. And, like many pop icons, one of the main trials he has had to survive is his own fame.

The Boy George persona, which came to international attention with the success of the band Culture Club in the early 1980s, threatened to overshadow completely Boy George the performer. However, George's talent, resilience, and genuine affability have seen him through his band's breakup, his own drug addiction, an unexpected solo comeback, and a 1998 reunion with Culture Club. Retaining his sense of style and eclecticism throughout, George has proved he is not merely a stage persona, but also a real original and a gay pioneer.

Born in Bexleyheath, a cheerless section of South London, on June 14, 1961, George Alan O'Dowd was the third of six children born to working class Irish parents. His father, a builder and boxing coach, and his mother, who worked in a nursing home, had little attention to spare to give emotional support to their children, especially little George, who showed signs of being "different" from a very early age.

He often showed up at church in outlandish hats and platform shoes. Indeed, the eccentric clothes he wore to school got him assigned to a class for incorrigibles. He soon dropped out and began to seek kindred spirits.

Perhaps tellingly, the first live concert Boy George attended featured gender-bender David Bowie. Flamboyantly dressed and wildly made up, George and his friends were regulars at hip London clubs, where George frequently attracted the attention of photographers. The photos in turn attracted the attention of band manager Malcolm McLaren (Sex Pistols) and bassist Mikey Craig, who approached George about forming a band. Soon, George was fronting Culture Club (named for the cultural mix of its members, Jamaican Craig on bass, the Irish George on vocals, the Jewish Jon Moss on drums, and the English Roy Hay on keyboards).

Culture Club's pop-reggae-soul fusion made its first two albums *Kissing to be Clever* (1982) and *Colour by Numbers* (1983) into major hits. George's rich, soulful voice anchored the band, but it was his appearance, in braids and dresses or ornate geisha drag, with elaborate makeup that often took hours to apply, that made Culture Club notorious.

While fans loved the rebellious kitsch of George's effeminate look, homophobia led to such reactions as that of a Detroit radio station that distributed blindfolds at a concert so that listeners would not have to look at the offending "she-male."

George took the criticism in stride, although he downplayed his gayness in the early years, saying he had experimented with all kinds of sex. In fact, the early years of Culture Club were intensified by a relationship between George and bisexual drummer Jon Moss.



Boy George performing in London in 2001.
Photograph by Jessica Hansson.
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Success, however, took its toll, and soon George was using a variety of drugs and, finally, became addicted to heroin. After a string of hits, including the singles "Do You Really Want to Hurt Me" (1982) and "Karma Chameleon" (1983), Culture Club broke up in 1986. George managed to quit heroin, and in 1987 he made his solo debut with the album *Sold*.

Since then, Boy George has remained in the peripheral vision of the public eye. A true music lover, he no longer seeks the kind of publicity that overwhelmed him in the 1980s, but neither does he accept the has-been status of "former icon." After another popularity surge in the mid-1990s, when he sang the title song from the 1995 film *The Crying Game*, he reunited with Culture Club for the 1998 "Big Rewind Tour."

His most recent passion is DJ-ing, for which he has become newly famous in England, specializing in unlikely mixes of genres and artists with hip and campy results. Spinning discs gives George a chance to step back from the spotlight while keeping both hands on the music he loves.

He also scored a success in a musical centered on the 1980s performance artist and fashion designer Leigh Bowery, *Taboo*, for which he both wrote the score and also appeared as himself. The show's 2003 transition from London, where it was received warmly, to New York, where it was produced by Rosie O'Donnell, was not easy, bedeviled as it was by rumors of artistic disagreements between management and cast members. Despite mostly negative reviews, *Taboo* ran 100 performances before closing on February 8, 2004.

[Most recently, Boy George has been in the news for run-ins with the law. In 2006, he was sentenced to community service after police found cocaine at his New York City apartment, where they had been summoned because of a false report the entertainer made about a burglary.

In 2008, George was charged in London with imprisoning a male escort in his London apartment. He was subsequently convicted of restraining the escort with handcuffs to a wall hook. George's attorney claimed that the singer "was not himself when addled by the habitual and relatively long-lasting using of illegal drugs." In January 2009, Boy George was sentenced to 15 months in prison for the offense.]

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About the Author

Tina Gianoulis is an essayist and free-lance writer who has contributed to a number of encyclopedias and anthologies, as well as to journals such as *Sinister Wisdom*.