



For Your Pleasure

Bryan Ferry from Roxy to Dylan and back again

by Johanna Lenander/photography Alex Cayley

Bryan Ferry is eating a sandwich in a cramped location van under the Brooklyn Bridge. But even in this dingy environment, he exudes a certain elegance. The 62-year old rock legend, crooner, sex symbol and style icon is in fine fiddle. He's hardly changed from his days as "The Sultan of Suave," a dandy who donned white tuxedos, dated supermodels and sang "Love is the Drug" during Roxy Music's mid-70s heyday. But in spite of his enduring allure, it's difficult to put Ferry's then and now together. The soft-spoken, pensive man facing me has none of the glossy rock god's swagger. It's not only because of his subdued manner. He just doesn't appear to have that kind of ego.

Most profiles of Bryan Ferry mention his reserved demeanor and reluctance to talk about personal matters. That's all true. Although he's polite and friendly, without necessarily being warm, he's clearly not a celebrity intent on charming the media. Strangely enough, I had reason to be grateful for this. Ten minutes before our rendezvous, the cap on my front tooth fell off, exposing the jagged remnant of a chopper I damaged as a child. The conversation that followed resembled a meeting of two autistic adults, each mumbling while staring off into space. I like to think that this may actually have helped establish a quiet and trusting atmosphere.

Ferry has a tendency to answer the unasked questions. Direct inquiries about personal matters, especially those that include the question, "why?" tend to elicit a blank "I don't know." Then, after a protracted silence, an answer might slowly emerge, perhaps not with the information one expects, but insightful nonetheless.

Ferry has reason to be cautious. He has just suffered a bout of bad press, when comments he

made about the work of Third Reich filmmaker Leni Riefenstahl and architect Albert Speer were interpreted as pro-Nazi. The day before we met, he posted a distraught statement on his web site, explaining that his words had been misrepresented and that he found the incident deeply disturbing.

During our interview, he's on high alert as soon as I mention the word "style." "Art is dangerous," he says with a shudder, explaining that discussing art is what got him into trouble recently. To his relief, my lack of confidence, due to the missing front tooth, makes me reluctant to push the subject.

Bryan Ferry is promoting *Dylanesque*, his latest album of Bob Dylan covers. Although he's famous for his interpretations of other artists' songs (from The Rolling Stones to Cole Porter), this is the first time he has devoted an entire album to one musician. Ferry's affinity for Dylan goes way back. 34 years ago, he included a version of "A Hard Rain's Gonna Fall" on *These Foolish Things*, his first solo album.

Ferry became obsessed with music at age 10 when his older sister took him to see Bill Haley. "It was amazing," he recalls, "So colorful. It was like one of those Forrest Gump moments, a pivotal moment in life."

Ferry's 2007 Dylan is quite different than his take on Bob back in 1973. "Hard Rain" has a boppy glam rock beat and coolly detached vocals, while the tracks on *Dylanesque* are fueled by a restrained melancholy layered with the romantic sound that has become Ferry's signature. Like an experienced leading man, he delivers the lyrics crisply, with a rich undercurrent of emotion. "For some reason, the earthiness of his songs suit me," says Ferry. "And the poetry certainly suits me. I like singing beautiful words. You can probably hear it in my voice."

Ferry says the project came about while he was working on the new Roxy Music album, the band's first since 1983, which won't be released for at least another year.

"I write so slowly, so it's very frustrating for the band," he says. "And while we did some work together and it was very nice, I didn't really have any lyrics and I wanted to get something out, so I did this project. I had it about in my mind for a very long time, and I had some unfinished Dylan songs in the can, such as 'All Along the Watchtower.' It was only a sketch, but bones were there, and I liked what the bones sounded like."

Throughout his career, Ferry has systematically gone back and forth between writing his own music and performing covers. "It kind of means I have two careers running in parallel," he says. "But they have overlapped here and there." Do the two feed off each other? "I think so. It's a nice break for me, to get away from my writing and the band, although I use some of the band [for the solo projects]," he says. "It has probably kept the band alive, because it's a bit weird to work with the same people all your life. It's also been very educational for me to sing songs from different genres and expand my repertoire and my range. It has made me a more complete singer."

The relatively quick process of recording covers also serves as a kind of therapy for writer's block. "I could never write fast enough to keep up with my need as a singer for new material," he confesses.

Watching Ferry in front of the camera is fascinating. He pulls his whole body together and projects an inner intensity that gives him an aura of mystery and glamour. Obviously, he's perfected this persona over time. Originally from a small town outside Newcastle in the north of England, Ferry escaped his blue-collar roots through art school. Although he claims no responsibility for the quote, "I was an orchid raised on a coal tip," (which, along with "Sultan of Suave" is a frequently printed cliché,) Ferry fashioned himself into a sleek young sophisticate with the help of good clothes, beautiful women and generally refined tastes. "Things happen without you designing them," he says, when asked about his status as a style icon. "You sort of fall into some kind of flow." That flow included designers Anthony Price and Wendy Dagworthy, whom Ferry credits for Roxy Music's look. He also says that he loved going to Hollywood movies as a young boy. He especially admired elegant leading men such as Humphrey Bogart, Cary Grant and Gary Cooper. The influence is pretty obvious.

But Ferry is also passionate about his humble upbringing. He talks tenderly about his father, a man who loved nature and worked with horses, who courted his mother for ten years because they couldn't afford to get married. "We were very poor," he says. "Poor like when you don't have a car or a telephone or a fridge. But it was a dignified poor. I was brought up great. Me and my sisters all went to college; our parents just wanted us to get on and have different lives, which we did. Especially me." Ferry became obsessed with music at age 10, when his older sister took him to see Bill Haley. "It was amazing," he recalls. "So colorful. It was like one of those Forrest Gump moments, a pivotal moment in life." He started going to jazz concerts and collecting records he had read about while delivering newspapers. "Buying a record was kind of a big commitment. You had to go to the store and ask for the record and then look at it and ask them to play it and then you would listen to it. And think 'Oh I love it, but God, can I afford it?' It was the week's money that you'd earned. I still have the first EP that I bought. It was Charlie Parker."

Ferry seems to almost regret that his own sons haven't had to work as hard for their cultural formation. "Music is not as important anymore, or I suspect that it isn't," he says. "My children love music, they have really good taste and they have so much, they have Dylan's whole catalogue on their iPods. There's too much of it, it's too easy."

He also acknowledges that the music industry has been completely transformed since the explosively creative 60s and 70s. "The music business is very different now, it's quite cold. It's all sort of corporate, cut and dry, marketed and la di dah. That's why I enjoy being on tour. It's me and the audience and nobody gets in the way of that." Ferry expresses admiration for some contemporary artists, however, especially the Canadian indie band Arcade Fire. "The boy in Arcade Fire is really good, got a bit of character. You don't really find that many character singers. It's a good band," he says.

Bryan Ferry's musical relationships have been unusually long-term. Besides performing and recording with Roxy Music for over 35 years, he is still working with producer Brian Eno, who was part of the band in the beginning. As a solo artist he has played with the same back up musicians for many years. "I've got a fantastic band," he effuses. "They're all different ages, different types, it's a weird band, because they have such a wide taste, they're all specialized in different fields."

So what is it like working with the same people decade after decade? It's the kind of direct question Ferry prefers to ignore, but he gives it his best shot, summing up some of the complexities in his personality in the process. "I was always a bit of an outsider, but I do like the companionship when it's there," he says. "But I also have to get away from it. So I've had the best of both worlds really. I've been very fortunate. So far."



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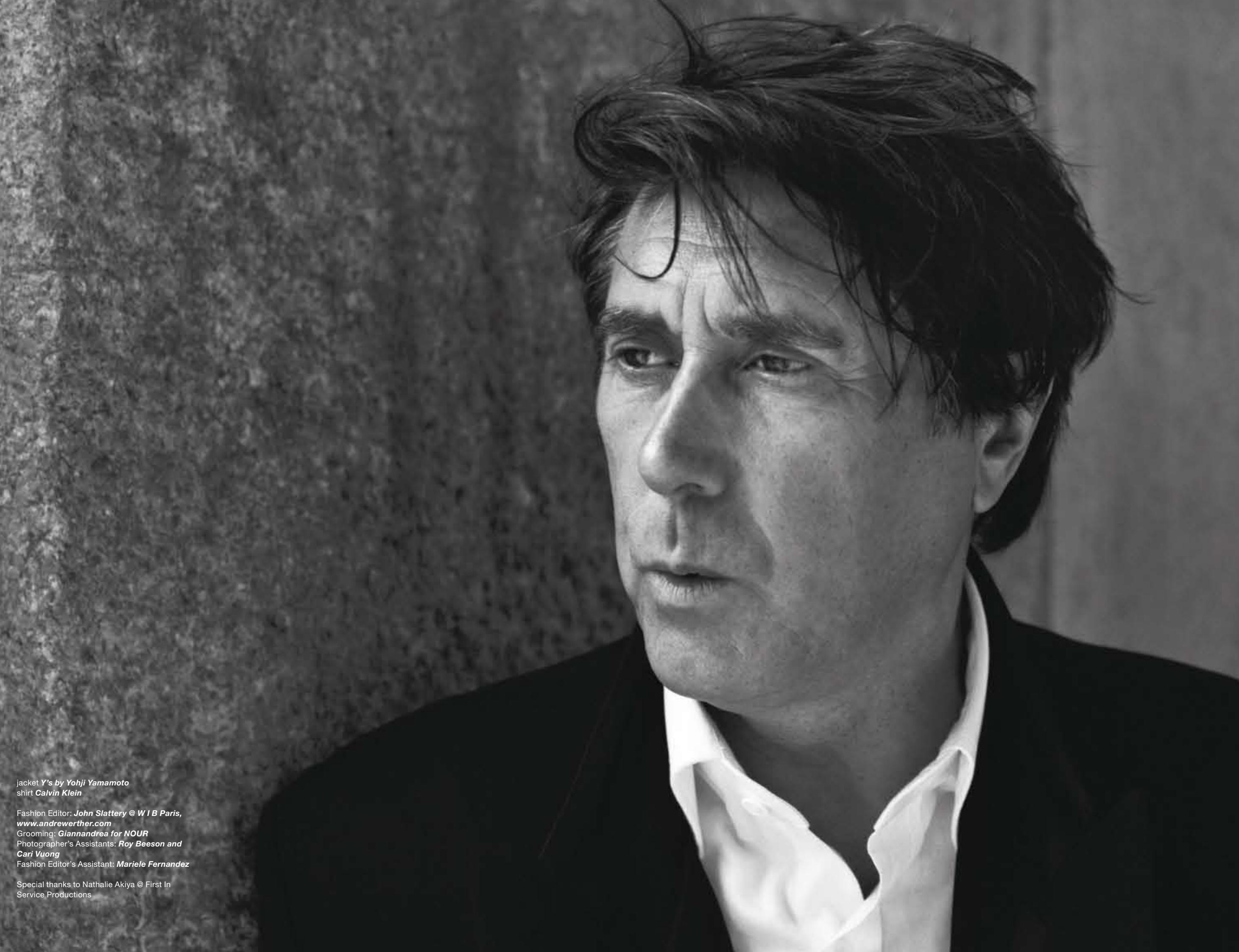
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