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PHOTOGRAPH BY DAVIES AND STARR

THESE has been a year in which the case for rock's past — the Summer of Love, Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band — has captured interest in its present. How do you feel about the rallies growing for the good old days?

If anything exemplifies Sixties pop, particularly '67 through '69, it was its strong connection with the roots of spiritual theology and the language that rang with it — the idea that pop music was about spiritual uplift, human potential, solidarity, unification. And that is very difficult to recreate. When you look back at the flower-power era, it all looks daft. I feel particularly cynical, because I thought it was daft at the time. I didn't like Haight-Ashbury. I didn't like Abbie Hoffman. I didn't like Timothy Leary, and I didn't like Woodstock.

I've been fighting all my life to make people realize that the superficial qualities of rock and pop are not the parameters through which you should judge the product of that generation. The music was less important than the musicians. The musicians were less important than the audience. The audience was less important than the infrastructure that was created around a generation. And ultimately, the activists were less important than the overall underlying mood of reaction that music became a symbol for.

The music wasn't responsible for it. What's wrong with looking at something like Sgt. Pepper as a symbol for such a time is that it avoids confronting the real

truth — that Sgt. Pepper was possible as a product of the time only because people were so inordinately open-minded, so conscious of being in pursuit of innocence that they were willing to take a chance with anybody. They would back any horse, except the horse of violence. They were conscious of the fact that naïveté and innocence had a purpose.

Compared with the *spiritualists* in popular music between the rise of Elvis Presley in the mid-Fifties and the breakup of the Beatles in 1970, rock seems to be changing and evolving at a much slower pace now. How does that look for the music's future?

I don't expect change necessarily. I recently learned to a new record by a band that I hold in high regard — and I found myself thinking, "Hey, I don't think this sounds any different from what they've done in the past or from what the Liverpool bands were doing in 1960." Then I checked myself: "Hold on a minute, you shouldn't be expecting Beatlesque innovation from everybody," that game everybody's playing at the moment. Prince has just made his White Album. What comes next? *Alley Road* and then obscurity?

If you go back to the early days, to that period between Presley and Sgt. Pepper, where songwriting and recording techniques, integrating political ideas into pop, all came together, what you're looking at is something that wasn't necessarily new. The course had already been struck in the Thirties, Forties and Fifties. What was important about pop then was that it established that change in itself leads you to a new starting point. It might have been incredibly fast, but I think it was incredibly slow. It took from Elvis to Sgt. Pepper — a good ten years — to convince not just Woody Woodrow Miller [a British musicologist] that pop music was worthy of consideration, but the public. This music grows as an organic case, a rate that is governed by the way broadcasting is structured, the way the marketing is structured, but most of all, it grows at the rate the public wants it to grow. And if they want Who

never saw the bloody laser beams. It was something to give to the audience. The first time you see a laserwork laser — they're common as fuck now — it is a wonderful experience. But it was very much to do with the fact that the audiencians were getting bigger.

As the man who wrote, "Hope I die before I get old," how did you feel being dismissed by British poets in the late Seventies as a boring old fat?

What's terrible is when people like Billy Idol and the Sex Pistols say they were only acting at the time. I find it incomprehensible. "Oh, well, we didn't really mean it when we spit all over you down the Roxy. We didn't hate you. We were just doing it; you know what managers are like." No, I don't know what managers are like, because when I smashed guitars, I fucking well meant it.

Did punk energize you as a writer, as a rocker?

"Disengage" is the wrong word. It freed me. It allowed me to be myself. It dignified me, in a way, to be cast to one side.

I felt very uneasy with the way the Who were inevitably on the road to mega-stardom. I believed that the punk

their most apocalyptic vision. They can bring a unique view to the world.

But they'd better watch out. I have told Bono a couple of times. You can't think you can control the way people respond to you. People are falling in love with U2. And you can't control love. Love doesn't listen to Bono's intelligence or to what Bono has discovered in John Lee Hooker or in reading the French impressionist poets. They look at the band, and they love the fact that they're a great band.

How has the business of rock & roll music changed in the past twenty years? It seems like pin-striped lawyers and accountants have all but replaced flamboyant entrepreneurs like Phil Spector, Andrew Loog Oldham and the Who's costanager Kit Lambert.

There is a quick condemnation you can make. You can just say it's all crap. The important thing is that every now and then a unique musical event happens. But most of it is utter garbage. The machinery behind it is financially, spiritually and morally corrupt. And I don't think there is any point in standing on a soapbox trying to get the music industry to honor the music itself. In the end, it becomes futile.

The importance of people like Kit Lambert is what he said to me from day one. He went even further. He said all great art was crap. And I've now found that out. We read that Mozart was doing commissions on motifs, numbered motifs, and selling his copyrights. "Oh, the bloody prince of Denmark wants another piece of music, and I'm so busy. Give him fifteen of number twenty-two, six of number four, nine of number fifty-eight. . . ." It was very much like computer music. And, of course, Bach was a mathematician. And those have all been elevated to some kind of artistic gods.

Kit used to be extraordinarily funny on the subject. He said, "You've got to be prescientious, you've got to go for gold, you've got to be over the top." So as a kind of agnostic in the music business, he was wonderful, because instead of devaluing the whole thing, he was actually making it more real.

The problem now is when you go to a meeting and someone in a bored breath, with reverent tones, says what a great artist Madonna is, and you suddenly think, "Hold on a minute, don't you realize what Madonna really is?" Madonna is a very clever woman,

There's no question that she's talented and has got charisma, that she took the pop industry as the found it.

Those people — Kit, Andrew, Spector — were very important. Not to enable us to rise above the crap, but they told us whether we were or not. A few entrepreneurial individuals with a true show-business sense would not be out of place right now — a George Balanchine, a Diaghilev, a Kit Lambert. They're all so decent, these characters today. Even Nile Rodgers is safe. Nile Rodgers works with a band in the studio, but he doesn't do what Kit Lambert did with the Who. He doesn't make them his family for the rest of his life, and make the audience part of the family.

In the first "Rolling Stone" interview you ever did, you signed off with a quote: "Rock & roll is one of the many keys to a very complex life. Don't get fucked up with all the many keys. Groove to rock & roll, and you'll find one of the best keys of all." Do you still believe that is true?

I do think it's true, but only in terms of what I then meant rock & roll was. At the time, rock & roll to me was another word for "life." What I was saying was it doesn't matter what you do or how you do it. But the way we do it in this thing called rock & roll is we do it with great determination and enthusiasm. What I was experiencing in rock then was a great introduction to what might have been a cloistered and isolated, protected view of life, but one that I wouldn't have swapped for all the world. If I went back to that age, knowing what I would go through in the next twenty years, I'd probably say the same thing again.

Elvis, Chuck Berry, Charlie Parker — they were the people at the head of my class. I knew they had all made terrible mistakes. But the sum of the whole thing seemed that they had set off on the right road and that literally what rock was like at the time was being given a key. You went in, you named the key and you found yourself in a place where nothing was decided, nothing was arrived at.

I still feel I hold that key. I am one of those characters who, like a teenager, sits at home with a guitar in front of a full-length mirror, and I do it. And I can do it now just as well as I did it then. And it gives me just as much pleasure as it did then. I'd come forward a few years and maybe chuck the key away — once you're in, you're in — but I'd never chuck the mirror away.

INTERVIEW BY

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