



Duran Duran:
Vocalist Simon Le Bon,
guitarist Andy Taylor,
bassist John Taylor,
keyboardist Nick
Rhodes, and drummer
Roger Taylor
(clockwise from
top left), 1982

DURAN DURAN

FOR FORTY-PLUS YEARS, THE WIDELY BELOVED BAND HAS COMMITTED TO MAKING POP MUSIC AN ART FORM.

BY ANNIE ZALESKI

In December 1980, the U.K. periodical *Sounds* ran the first significant profile feature on Duran Duran, who were then honing their live show as the opening act for theatrical synth-rock futurist Hazel O'Connor. As with many young bands, their self-assurance occasionally teetered on the edge of hyperbole. The article's splashy headline, "We want to be the band to dance to when the Bomb drops," is a cheeky direct quote from vocalist Simon Le Bon, although bassist John Taylor was completely earnest when describing the vision for Duran Duran's music. As Taylor said, "The whole point of the band was that we wanted the disco rhythm with the power of early punk, to try and create a lot of atmosphere as well, muddle it all into one and see what comes out."

From a practical standpoint, Taylor immediately admitted, this approach wasn't the easiest to replicate live. *Sounds* also observed that disco and rock were seemingly at odds, commenting that combining the two styles was "a little contradictory," although guitarist Andy Taylor quickly refuted the idea that this was somehow a negative. "It is contradictory, but if it works, how can it really be so?" he said.

It wouldn't be the last time in their career that Duran Duran challenged themselves by subverting the status quo – or, for that matter, the only time they proved skeptics wrong. As it turns out, the band knew exactly what it was doing by pairing taut dance grooves with raucous guitars and synthesizer experiments. A formula that might have seemed chaotic on paper worked beautifully in the studio and onstage: During the first half of the 1980s, Duran Duran were one of the biggest bands on

the planet, a dazzling phenomenon exuding lithe confidence via a red-hot live presence, a poised visual aesthetic, and a string of singular hits. Among the leaders of the new British Invasion, they dragged rock and pop out of the sleepy late-seventies doldrums, leveraging elaborate music videos and MTV to connect with fans.

Duran Duran learned from the best. Growing up in Birmingham, a teenaged John Taylor was bowled over by glam melodrama: the spectacle of Roxy Music's colorful August 1972 *Top of the Pops* appearance and David Bowie LPs like *The Rise and Fall of Ziggy Stardust and the Spiders From Mars*. A few years later, Taylor's mind was similarly blown by the Sex Pistols' punk earthquake "Anarchy in the U.K.," a single he blasted from his bedroom at neighbor-bothering volumes, and the sleek disco sounds of Chic wafting from Birmingham's wine bars.

Taylor found a kindred spirit in his childhood friend Nick Rhodes, a fellow Bowie fanatic who shared his affinity for record collecting, going to concerts, and starting a band. In 1978, the pair saw the Human League open for Siouxsie and the Banshees in Birmingham; the former's multi-synthesizer attack inspired Rhodes to obtain a primitive early keyboard, the Wasp, that would prove integral to his musical development. That same year Rhodes and Taylor cofounded Duran Duran, taking the band's name from Durand-Durand, the name of a nefarious scientist in the 1968 Jane Fonda film *Barbarella*. The fledgling group started gigging in 1979 but only found steady rhythmic footing after recruiting drummer Roger Taylor. (No relation to John.) A low-key Brummie with a genteel personality and nerves of steel, Taylor shared his bandmates' interest in Chic, Roxy Music, and David Bowie.

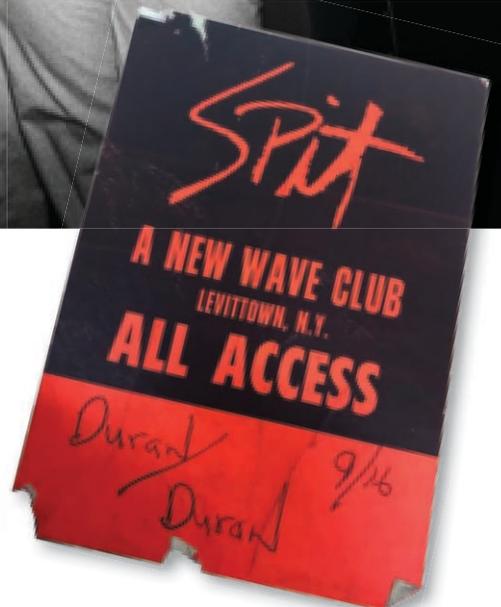


By early 1980, Duran Duran were still trying to settle into a permanent lineup. Luckily, a classified ad brought them a formidable new member in Andy Taylor, a Cullercoats, Northumberland-raised guitarist who had already been on tour, playing gigs in pubs and on U.S. army bases in Germany. (He also wasn't related to John or Roger.) Along with an affection for Bowie and Roxy Music, Taylor brought blues-influenced hard rock into the Duran Duran fold – particularly AC/DC, but also guitar icons such as Keith Richards and Gary Moore. His extensive experience and musical background added a creative backbone and deeper sonic dimensions to Duran Duran. Rhodes “would do [Brian] Eno, and I would do Jeff Beck or Jimmy Page,” Taylor told me in 2020. “I’d do the guitar bit, and he’d do the weird bit. And then somewhere in the middle, we found a way to get the musicality right.”

The last piece of the Duran Duran puzzle was Simon Le Bon, a drama student who arrived at his band tryout wearing loud printed trousers. Crucially, he also possessed a well-worn notebook filled with surreal words and lyrics, a rakish punk troubadour emulating one of his idols, the Doors’ Jim Morrison. With Le Bon joining the band, “the poetry had arrived,” John Taylor wrote in his memoir, *In the Pleasure Groove*.

Now a quintet, Duran Duran settled in at the Rum Runner, the Birmingham club overseen by their managers, where they practiced, worked, and gigged. Rhodes

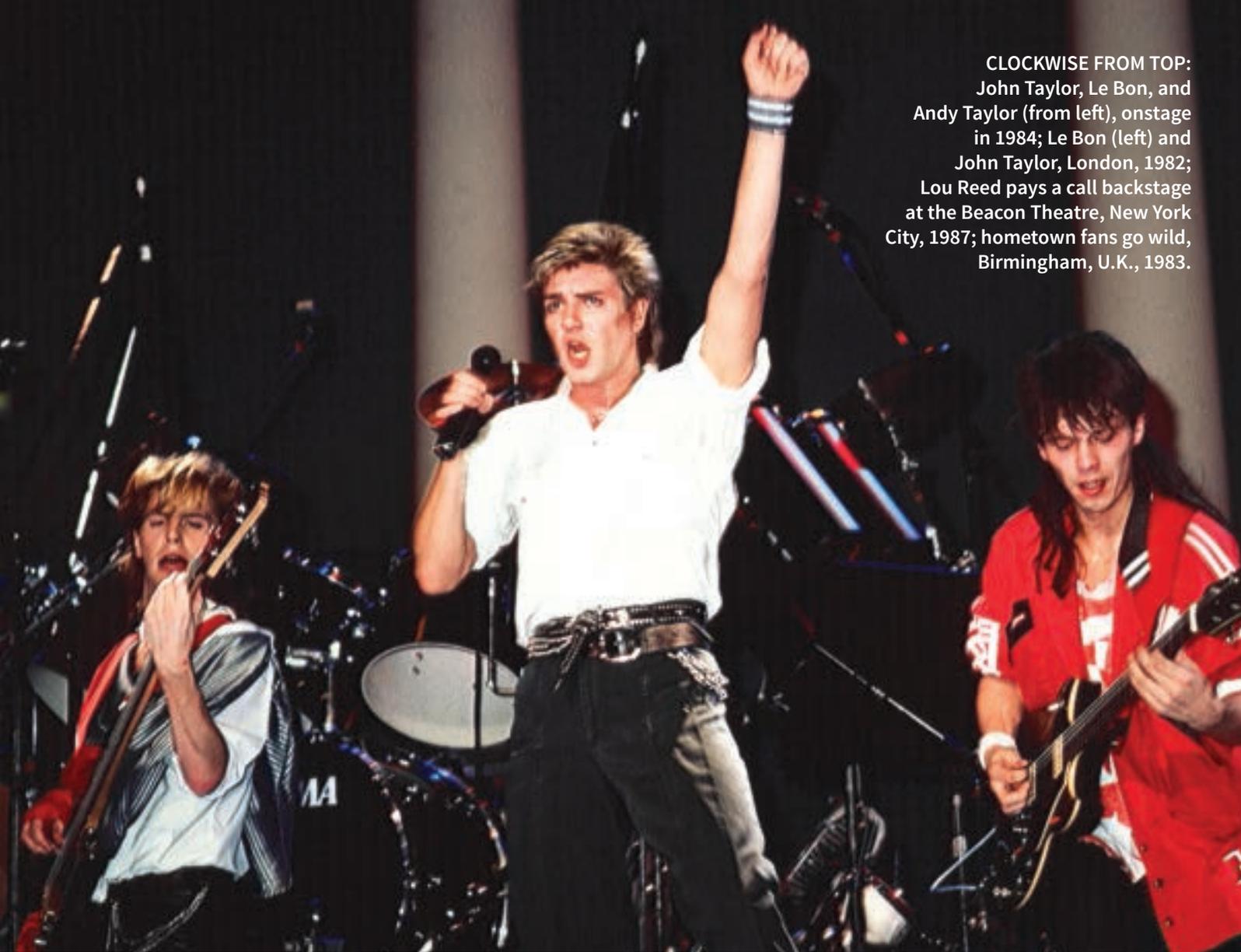
FROM TOP:
Creem magazine photo shoot during their first U.S. tour, Detroit, 1981; a coveted backstage pass from their first U.S. show, 1981.



also DJed there, spinning cutting-edge synth pop, disco, postpunk, and electro hits. Two of his DJ set staples – Roxy Music and art-punks Japan – especially inspired Duran Duran’s earliest work, although the band had no interest in directly emulating its idols. “Everybody knew that you had to have your own identity,” Rhodes told me in 2020. “You wouldn’t dream of just copying someone else, or having a style that was so similar to the next band down the street.”

That ethos also drove the New Romantics, the flashy and flamboyant early-eighties U.K. movement into which Duran Duran were lumped. However, the band was ambivalent about the association, preferring to let its 1981 self-titled debut album spawn a cultural revolution. Their first single, “Planet Earth,” was a futuristic post-disco commandment for modern living. Later in the year, the saucy club hit “Girls on Film” established Duran Duran’s longed-for dance-floor cred.

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP:
John Taylor, Le Bon, and
Andy Taylor (from left), onstage
in 1984; Le Bon (left) and
John Taylor, London, 1982;
Lou Reed pays a call backstage
at the Beacon Theatre, New York
City, 1987; hometown fans go wild,
Birmingham, U.K., 1983.





Nick Rhodes, Simon Le Bon, Andy Taylor, Roger Taylor, and John Taylor (clockwise from top left), c. 1984

On its sophomore album in 1982, *Rio*, the band came into its own. The LP delivered intrigue and playfulness: the breezy title track and its decade-defining sax solo; a gorgeous ballad emphasizing the sweet side of a one-night stand, “Save a Prayer”; and the gothic fantasia “The Chauffeur.” Bigger still was the buoyant Top Forty seduction “Hungry Like the Wolf,” a glammy rock song glazed with bubbly synths that became Duran Duran’s breakthrough U.S. hit. “When I hear things like ‘Hungry Like the Wolf,’ it doesn’t sound like anybody else,” Roger Taylor told me in 2020. “When I hear that coming on the radio, it can only be Duran Duran.”

Despite their burgeoning pop crossover success, Duran Duran didn’t tackle pop lyrics in a conventional way. Their secret weapon was the lexicon of Le Bon. Inspired by not just Morrison but also Joy Division’s Ian Curtis, the

SELECTED DISCOGRAPHY



Duran Duran
1981 (Harvest/Capitol)



Rio
1982 (Harvest/Capitol)



Seven and the Ragged Tiger
1983 (Capitol)



Notorious
1986 (Capitol)



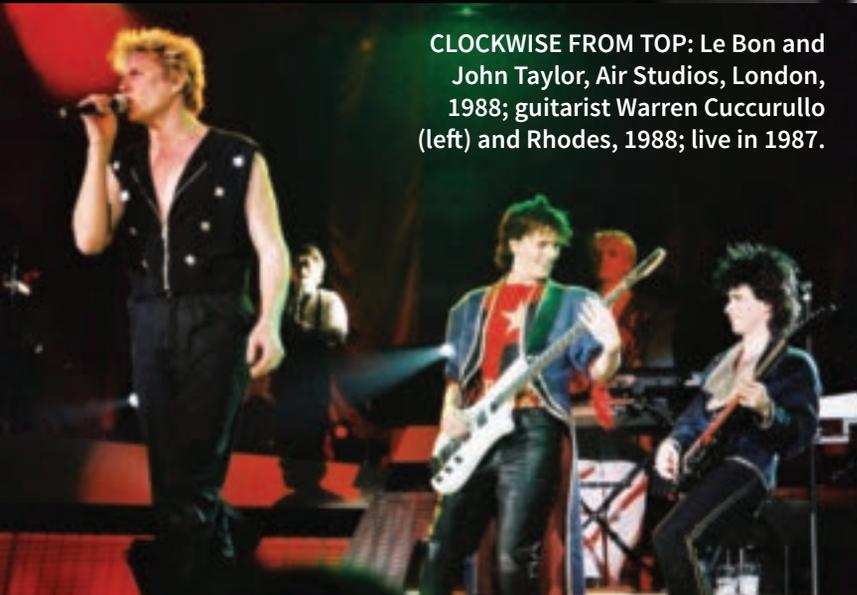
Duran Duran (aka The Wedding Album)
1993 (Capitol)



Future Past
2021 (Tape Modern/BMG)



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: Le Bon and John Taylor, Air Studios, London, 1988; guitarist Warren Cuccurullo (left) and Rhodes, 1988; live in 1987.



frontman was a crooner and a confidant, sharing visceral (if cryptic) imagery and phrases. “That’s the beauty of a lot of Duran Duran music – you’re not quite sure what it is,” Le Bon told me in April 2022. “And it leaves it open for people to project their own feelings onto the music.”

In the eighties, that ambiguity made Duran Duran particularly appealing to teenagers. The band validated the often confusing experience of adolescence with empathy. For all the group’s musical confidence, its lyrics could be brooding and vulnerable, weighed down by darkness, uncertainty, and mystery. “I heard you making patterns rhyme,” Le Bon told one character, while elsewhere he described being pushed to the edge as “dancing on the valentine.” Yet he also had a way with quips – “You’re about as easy as a nuclear war” is a perfect knife-twist – and brought uncommon sophistication

to *Rio*’s “Last Chance on the Stairway”: “Funny it’s just like a scene out of Voltaire / Twisting out of sight.” Even if you weren’t quite sure what Duran Duran’s songs meant, you felt compelled to listen repeatedly, in the hopes that one more spin would crack their moody code.

Duran Duran paired this introspection with extroverted rhythms. From its very early days, the band intuitively understood how powerful it could be when its sonic subversion collided with the dance floor. A good groove was a unifying force, creating a space where everybody could let loose and be whoever they wanted to be. The band hand-crafted extended dance remixes called *Night Versions*, tailor-made for post-midnight debauchery and the pulsating ecstasy of a packed club.

In subsequent years, as dance music changed, Duran Duran’s music evolved in tandem, with the percolating

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coolness of “Union of the Snake” (1984) and the thundering single “The Wild Boys” (1984) giving way to the soft-glow R&B shimmy “Skin Trade” (1987) and soul-funk explosion “All She Wants Is” (1988). Duran Duran also collaborated with their heroes: Chic’s Nile Rodgers remixed “The Reflex” into a funk sizzle and co-produced *Notorious* in 1986, while the snappy James Bond theme “A View to a Kill” was co-produced by Rodgers’ Chic bandmate Bernard Edwards.

After the Beatlemania-like hubbub around them receded in the mid-1980s, Duran Duran kept pushing forward, evolving with contemporary trends to explore booming funk rock, luxurious sophisti-pop, bustling club music, and alternative rock. Live, the band also pushed itself into more serious, grown-up territory. Duran Duran had always appreciated classic R&B – in 1981, they did a spirited live version of the Isley Brothers’ “Tell Me It’s Just a Rumor Baby.” But in 1987 they toured with a horn section and backing singers, a perfect excuse to weave a cover of Sly and the Family Stone’s “Dance to the Music” into sets. Not every musical gambit worked, but it was never wise to consider

Duran Duran down for the count. Perseverance was as central to their success as ambition.

That trait came in handy when Roger and Andy Taylor departed the band circa *Notorious*. The band recruited veteran guitarist Warren Cuccurullo, a Brooklyn-raised hard rocker who cut his teeth playing with Frank Zappa and then the synth-rock act Missing Persons. His pop sensibilities and iconoclastic spirit meshed well with Duran Duran’s outlook and music. Live, Cuccurullo was a dynamic presence, his jagged guitar snarls and squalls providing just the right amount of swagger; in the studio, his guitars punctuated the lacquered production on *Big Thing* (1988) and added keening grit to the deeply underrated midtempo ballad “Serious” (1990).

Cuccurullo also arranged the mournful guitars swirling through Duran Duran’s 1993 mega-hit “Ordinary World.” In many ways, the power ballad has eclipsed the band’s eighties work in terms of influence. Le Bon wrote the song for a dear friend who had passed away; in contrast with his enigmatic earlier writing, the lyrics here are heartbreakingly direct: “I turned on the lights, the TV, and the radio / Still I can’t escape the ghost of you.”



The success of “Ordinary World” – and the trip-hop-influenced followup single, “Come Undone” – signaled a second act for the band. No longer were they an eighties band trapped in New Wave amber. To a new generation of fans, they were fresh and relevant.

During the nineties, it became clear that punk’s disdain for nostalgia and Bowie’s penchant for change were also embedded in Duran Duran’s DNA, as the band embraced chameleonic rebellion. To follow up its “Ordinary World”-aided comeback, the group released an eclectic covers album, *Thank You*, in 1995, followed by the synth-glam electronic mood piece *Medazzaland* in 1997. Both Andy Taylor and Roger Taylor rejoined Duran Duran for a celebrated reunion tour and album during the first half of the 2000s, and after Andy departed once again, the band kept metamorphosing: collaborating with Justin Timberlake and Timbaland on *Red Carpet Massacre* in 2007, nodding to its own eighties sounds on *All You Need Is Now* in 2011, and dabbling in modern keyboard excursions on *Paper Gods* in 2015.

You can’t fully discuss the band’s global impact without mentioning Duran Duran’s fans. Proudly nicknamed

Duranies, these loyalists propelled the group to the top of this year’s Rock & Roll Hall of Fame fan vote. Their support was a tangible way to say thanks to the band for forty-plus years of musical joy and solace, the band’s commitment to making pop music an art form, and the unwavering reciprocal gratitude. “We’ve always been a people’s band,” John Taylor told me in May 2022. “We were never overlauded by the institutions.” It’s a curious position for a band to occupy, being extremely successful while also somehow being underdogs. But this juxtaposition gave Duran Duran an advantage: After a certain point, they weren’t beholden to expectations. All they needed to do was please themselves.

Weeks after learning of their Hall of Fame induction, Duran Duran set off on a lengthy tour in support of their 2021 album, *Future Past*. The LP is classic Duran Duran, boasting collaborations with disco legend Giorgio Moroder, glimmering synth-rock singles, and meditative ballads. Sonically, *Future Past* could feel like the band coming full circle back to its roots. However, that descriptor implies Duran Duran are closing a chapter, and nothing could be further from the truth. For Duran Duran, the future remains an exciting, wide-open place.