



# Joan Jett & the Blackhearts

BY JAAN UHELZKI

*As leader of her hard-rockin' band, Jett has influenced countless young women to pick up guitars – and play loud.*

IF YOU HAD TO SIT DOWN AND IMAGINE THE IDEAL female rocker, what would she look like? Tight leather pants, lots of mascara, black (definitely not blond) hair, and she would have to play guitar like Chuck Berry's long-lost daughter. She wouldn't look like Madonna or Taylor Swift. Maybe she would look something like Ronnie Spector, a little formidable and dangerous, definitely – androgynous, for sure. In fact, if you close your eyes and think about it, she would be the spitting image of Joan Jett. 🍷 Jett has always brought danger, defiance, and fierceness to rock & roll. Along with the Blackhearts – Jamaican slang for *loner* – she has never been afraid to explore her own vulnerabilities or her darker sides, or to speak her mind. It wouldn't be going too far to call Joan Jett the last American rock star, pursuing her considerable craft for the right reason: a devotion to the true spirit of the music. She doesn't just love rock & roll; she honors it. 🍷 Whether she's performing in a blue burka for U.S. troops in Afghanistan, working for PETA, or honoring the slain Seattle singer Mia Zapata by recording a live album with Zapata's band the Gits – and donating the proceeds to help fund the investigation of Zapata's murder – her motivation is consistent. Over the years, she's acted as spiritual advisor to Ian MacKaye, Paul Westerberg, and Peaches. She's been called the Godmother of Punk, the original Riot Grrrl, and the Queen of Noise (after the second Runaways album, *Queens of Noise*). At 21, she produced *GI*, the first and only Germs album; she was



The Runaways, 1975; Joan Jett at far right

"adopted" by Mötörhead's Lemmy Kilmister, who gave her some stage attire (then took it back); she was insulted by Rush and Molly Hatchet; and she gave Sid Vicious the black belt she'd worn in the Runaways, which he wore until the end.

If Joan Jett didn't exist, people have said, we'd have to invent her. But the important thing is that no one had to. She invented herself.

**L**ONG BEFORE THE BLACK LEATHER, THE SEDITIOUS black shag, the dark eye makeup, and low-slung guitar insouciance that became an iconic image firmly fixed as the critical link between glitter and punk, Joan Jett was Joan Larkin, an intense teenager sitting in her West Covina, California, bedroom, teaching herself guitar. The uprooted 14-year-old, a transplant from suburban Maryland, had big dreams. They were set to a soundtrack of records she heard at Rodney Bingenheimer's English Disco on the Sunset Strip: 45s by T. Rex, the Sweet, Suzi Quatro, the New York Dolls, and

David Bowie. She sat in her room playing along with the records she loved until she understood why they spoke to her. She was trying to unlock their musical language – first to speak to herself, and then to others. In even the most calculated piece of glitter dross, she could locate the beat of a genuine rock & roll heart. Years later, after she enjoyed hits with songs she'd written *and* songs she covered, it would become obvious that the genuine heartbeat she'd been hearing from the beginning was her own.

Unlike many of Rodney's patrons, she never got entangled in the sensational goings-on at the Continental Hyatt House or became a Led Zep hanger-on. "I wanted to *be* a rock star, not wait around a hotel for some rock star," she said in 2002.

Thus, it was probably more akin to field research than fan worship the day she camped out in the lobby of the Hyatt House to catch a glimpse of Suzi Quatro in March 1975. For twelve hours, she sat there. Never moving. Never asking for an autograph, just staring when Quatro walked by. "What's with the girl who

keeps looking at me, and looks just like me?" Quatro asked her then—publicist/tour manager, Toby Mamis.

Jett was still there at eleven that night, and it was clear she had no plans to abandon her post. So Mamis explained that Quatro had gone to bed. "I can't go home," Jett replied resolutely. "The last bus back already left, and I told my mom I was staying with a friend. I'll be okay here." Touched, Mamis let the teen and her friend, an unemployed waiter, sleep on the floor of his hotel room. Did she ever get to meet her idol? Not for years. But Mamis was to play a pivotal role in her life.

One month after that night, Jett met Kim Fowley – Hollywood fixture, producer, and impresario – at Rodney's and told him she wanted to put together an all-girl band. It was as if the warm winds of destiny were blowing down Sunset Boulevard that spring; two other similarly minded girls, songwriter Kari Krome and drummer Sandy West, had gotten in touch with Fowley independently.

Fowley gave Jett West's number, and Jett took four buses to Huntington Beach to meet her. Almost immediately, they started auditioning girls to fill out the lineup, hiring bassist Micki Steele (later replaced by Jackie Fox, and still later a Bangle), guitarist Lita Ford, and singer Cherie Currie. Fowley would conduct his infamous "heckler drills" – he and others yelling and throwing things to "toughen up" the girls for the stage.

Beginning in 1975, the Runaways released four albums and one live set, toured Europe, toured with the Ramones, and opened for both Tom Petty and Cheap Trick. But despite the peak moments, they were not taken nearly as seriously as they should have been, noticed more for the novelty of five toothsome teenagers rather than the musicians they were.

They never sold many albums in the U.S., but they were akin to the Beatles in Japan. Young girls would chase them down the street with hairbrushes, trying to get the Runaways to give them strands of their lacquered hair.

When the Runaways broke up on New Year's Eve in 1978, Jett saw it as only a minor impediment. She engaged the services of Mamis, who had comanaged the last incarnation of the Runaways, as her de facto manager. Jett and Mamis traveled to London and enlisted former Sex Pistols Paul Cook and Steve Jones to produce and play on a demo for her. They recorded three songs, one of which was a number by British glam group the Arrows called "I Love Rock 'n Roll" that Jett had heard on British TV and never forgotten. The three tracks, boasting a certain laddish charm, were eventually released on the 1993 compilation album *Flashback*.

Jett returned to Los Angeles to write songs for a movie based on the Runaways' lives. But when she stalled trying to come up with eight songs in six days, Mamis asked Kenny Laguna, a songwriter/producer/musician friend who'd worked with the likes of Tommy James and the Shondells, to work with Jett. At first, Laguna balked, but he changed his mind when his wife, Meryl, insisted that Jett had a certain something.

"She was beautiful, and her voice reminded me of Darlene Love," remembers Laguna. "She could let her hair down, and she didn't mind sweating. I remember telling her I was going to get her a record deal. I had no idea how hard it was to get a deal for a woman with a guitar. An Atlantic Records exec said, 'Joan should stop hiding behind the guitar and get out there and rock like Benatar.'"

Within three days, the two were in the studio recording songs they'd written. Six months later, Laguna had taken over her management, and the Lagunas and their infant daughter, Carianne, relocated to

## SELECTED DISCOGRAPHY



**JOAN JETT**  
Blackheart/MCA 1980;  
(re-released as Bad  
Reputation 1981)



**I LOVE ROCK 'N ROLL**  
Blackheart/  
Boardwalk/MCA 1981



**ALBUM**  
Blackheart/  
Boardwalk/MCA 1983



**SINNER**  
Blackheart 2006

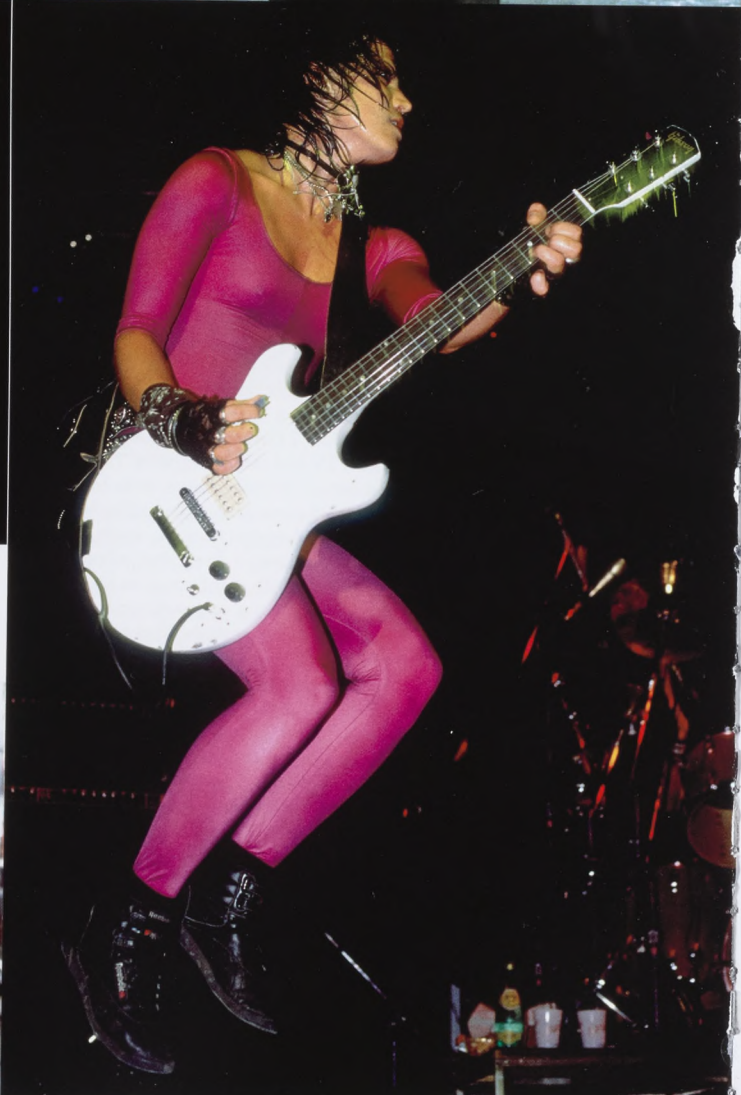
Jett just a few years later in Detroit





**CLOCKWISE FROM  
TOP LEFT**

Jett with the Blackhearts on an MTV soundstage, 1983 (from left): bassist Gary Ryan, drummer Lee Crystal, and guitarist Ricky Byrd. Jett levitates at Poplar Creek Music Theater, in Elgin, Illinois, 1987. In the role of Patty Rasnick with her costar Michael J. Fox as her brother Joe in the 1986 rock & roll film *Light of Day*. Flashing her beautiful smile, 1987.



London, where Jett's first album was recorded. The self-titled solo debut, recorded before Jett formed the Blackhearts, was released by Ariola Records in Europe in May 1980, but no American label was interested. Undaunted, Laguna and Jett decided to form Blackheart Records and release it themselves, making Jett one of the first women to own her own label. Never mind that in the beginning they were selling copies of the record out of the trunk of Laguna's Cadillac. (Some twenty years later, Carianne Brinkman would run Blackheart Records and manage Jett, modernizing business operations and creating artwork previously handled by her mother, Meryl Laguna.)

The demand for the LP grew, overwhelming the ability of Blackheart Records to keep up with the orders. Neil Bogart took a chance on Jett, rereleasing her album on his new Boardwalk Records in 1981. He renamed it *Bad Reputation*, after what would become Jett's second-most-famous song, thanks to a second life as the theme for the TV series *Freaks and Geeks*.

**T**HE NEXT ORDER OF BUSINESS WAS TO FIND some actual Blackhearts. An ad in the *L.A. Weekly* simply stated: "Joan Jett wants three good men. Show-offs need not apply." She set up in S.I.R.'s rehearsal studio and began auditions, with X's John Doe at her side supplying bass and acting as arbiter to help with the selections. At the end of two days, they'd hired bassist Gary Ryan, who had recently been sleeping on Doe's couch and whose girlfriend was Lorna Doom from the Germs; guitarist Eric Ambel (who was replaced by Ricky Byrd during the recording of Jett's second album, *I Love Rock 'n Roll*); and drummer Lee Crystal. Touring

almost relentlessly, Jett and the Blackhearts recorded the tracks for *I Love Rock 'n Roll* between dates. Among the songs was a secret weapon.

Laguna rerecorded the title track at the Who's Rampart Studios. It leaped off the vinyl, crackling with menace, danger, and the kind of hard bop that only the former Shondell could bring to it. The record would catapult to the top of the *Billboard* charts, where it stayed for seven weeks, becoming a jukebox/bar-band/karaoke classic.

Following her signature hit up the charts was "Crimson and Clover," a shimmering psychedelic take on the Tommy James hit, featuring Ambel on guitar. Jett's live shows kept pace, as she prowled around the stage in a tank top and Converse sneakers, dripping sweat and brutal confidence. She was never worried when the rock zeitgeist shifted from punk to hair metal to grunge to Britpop and back. She kept on playing her stripped-down rock & roll, with its combustible choruses, trashy glam flourishes, and hard-driving rhythms. The only thing she changed was her trademark shag haircut, in 2001, when she was thumbing through a magazine, saw Nikki Sixx, and thought it was her. But the shag was back after a couple of years.

Over time, she's become an icon as well as a feminist symbol, though she's never made an issue of gender. She's inspired countless girls to form bands. "I've always taken that aspect of my life as serious as a heart attack. If anyone ever said anything against girls playing rock & roll, I was ready to go to war," she has explained.

"It's nice that people say I'm the Godmother of Punk. I just say I'm a rock & roller. And how I want to be remembered? As one of the first women to really play hard rock & roll." 🍷

Jett hanging out at CBGB



# Glam Bam Thank You Ma'am

BY ROBERT BURKE WARREN

In the early 1970s, T. Rex and David Bowie inspired U.K. rock & rollers to embrace androgyny and glitter, with inductees Lou Reed and Joan Jett among those heeding the call in the States.

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ROM ITS INCEPTION IN THE FIFTIES, rock & roll embraced elements of glam: Elvis sported eyeliner, Little Richard loved his pancake makeup, and Jerry Lee Lewis' girlish hair drove audiences wild. But "glam rock," with its wholehearted embrace of theatrical cosmetics, outlandish costumes, glitter smudges, towering heels on men, and blatant, cross-dressing androgyny, did not fully flower until the early seventies. Earthy hippie fashion was out, and Western pop culture was embracing science fiction, post-modern decadence, and, in the face of the first televised war, escapism. Originally U.K.-based, glam radiated to the U.S., influencing a variety of rockers both musically and visually. In its heyday, radios and hi-fi stereos from London to L.A. pumped out dozens of catchy, bubblegummy melodies with chanting choruses, chunky power chords,

David Bowie, 1974







and primitive rhythms. As bands graduated to theaters and arenas – or dreamed of doing so – musicians upped the ante on their looks, so even the folks in the nosebleed seats could see them.

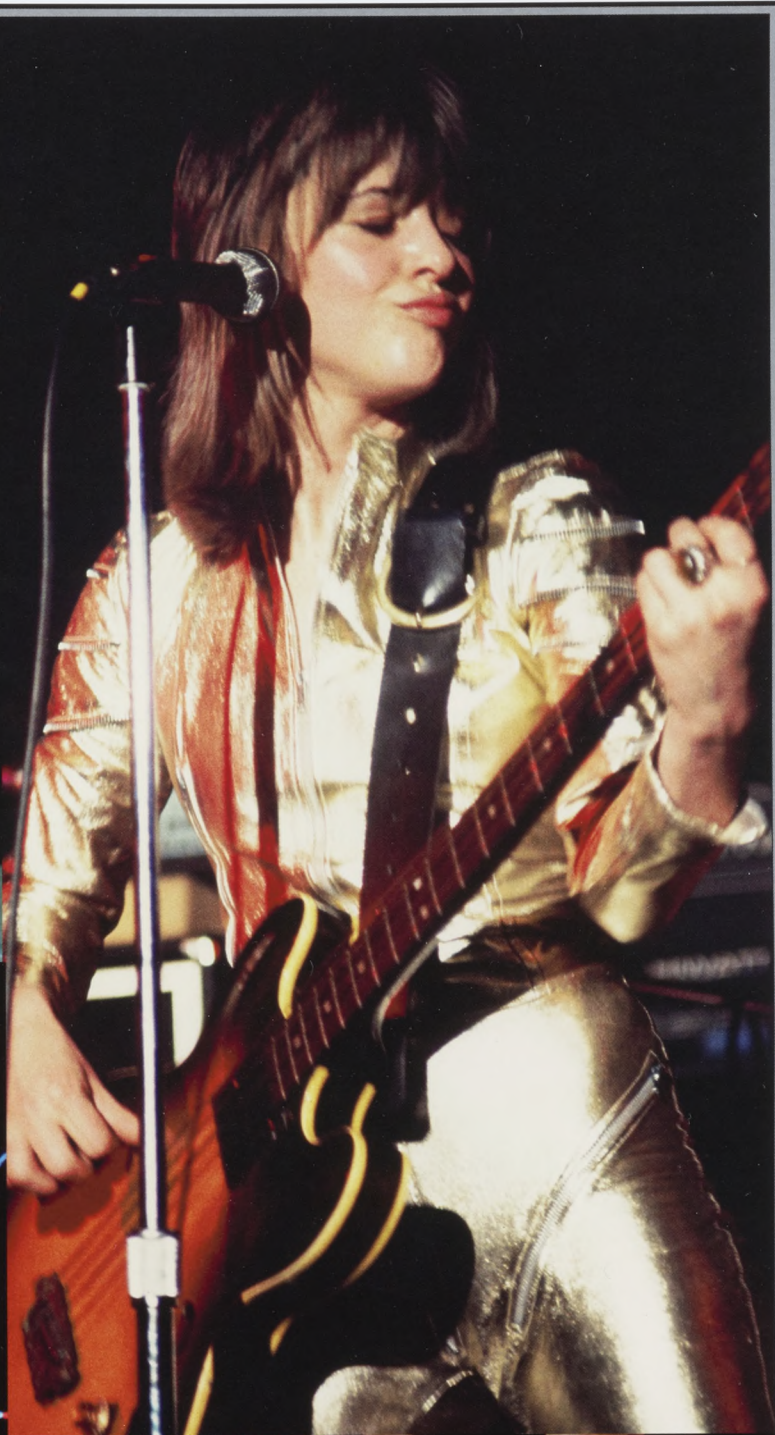
Glam had been swishing toward the spotlight for a few years. Mick Jagger had appeared in a dress onstage in Hyde Park, London, in 1969, and David Bowie wore a fetching gown on the cover of his 1970 LP, *The Man Who Sold the World*. But the official beginning of glam-as-we-know-it was T. Rex's career-defining 1971 performance of Number One hit "Get It On (Bang a Gong)" on *Top of the Pops*. In the dressing room prior to the show, guitarist and leader Marc Bolan enhanced his shiny outfit by applying glitter to his cheekbones. He hit the stage shimmering with a fey glow while simultaneously channeling the alpha-male sex strut of Chuck Berry. This set off a trend among U.K. bands, who not only wore glitter – thus glam's interchangeable moniker *glitter rock* – they started proclaiming they were "glam," appearing in ever-higher-stacked heels, feather boas, furs, silks, and other traditionally female accoutrements, while still singing about all things hetero. The juxtaposition made for the most brazenly sexual rock to date. Prime glam movers like Slade, Mott the Hoople, Bowie, the Sweet, and America's own Jobriath left dressing rooms smelling like Aqua Net, their makeup cases, mascara, fake eyelashes, eyeliners, and lipsticks scattered among the drug paraphernalia and liquor.

Bassist-vocalist and American expat Suzi Quatro, under the watchful eye of her producer Mickie Most, went in the opposite direction of her male peers, downplaying traditionally feminine looks by zipping herself into a tight leather jumpsuit. Yet

Quatro, ironically, was the first to bring real female energy to glam's center stage, performing the hell out of tunes like "Can the Can" and "48 Crash," songs hewing to the big-chorus/big-beat template of the time. On the other side of the world, in California, young Joan Marie Larkin, a.k.a. Joan Jett, a frequent underage partyer at L.A.'s premier glam club, Rodney Bingenheimer's English Disco, was paying close attention to those Quatro singles. As a teen, she would form all-girl proto-punk glam-rock band the Runaways, brazenly borrowing Quatro's style, favoring tight jumpsuits and a shag 'do, while the Runaways' lead singer, Cherie Currie, aped her glitter idol, David Bowie.

**I**N 1972, DAVID BOWIE'S *THE RISE AND FALL OF Ziggy Stardust and the Spiders From Mars* became glam's beachhead. The cover featured a tinted photo of Bowie as Ziggy, clad in a snug green jumpsuit, sporting bright blond hair and big space-alien boots. When he and the Spiders From Mars took the show on the road, he switched to a crimson mullet, heavily lined eyes and kabuki-inspired costumes, offset by lead guitarist Mick Ronson's blond shag, tight, glittery suits, and platforms.

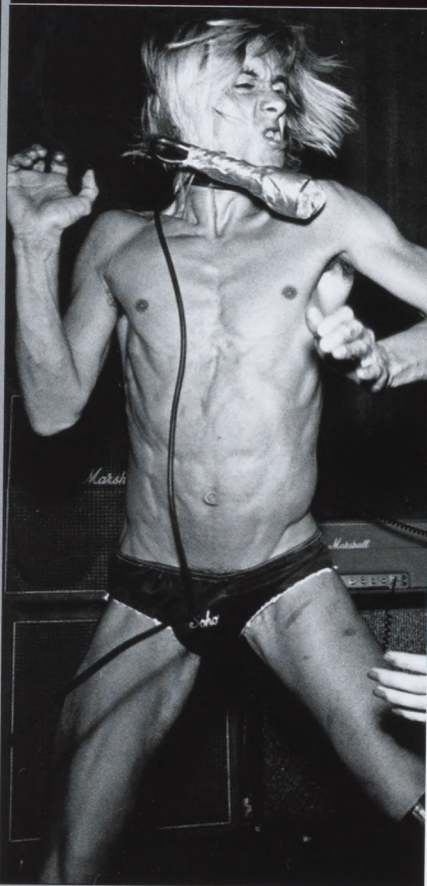
The Spiders From Mars, however, like many rockers, were leery of glam, at least at the start. As David Bowie told *Rolling Stone*: "What was quite hard was dragging the rest of the band into wanting to [dress glam]. That was the major problem. It was like: 'Jesus, you lot – let's not be [just] another rock band, for chrissakes.' But they caught on to it as soon as they found that they could pull more girls." With help from his now fully on-board band, Bowie



**CLOCKWISE  
FROM FAR LEFT**  
T. Rex maestro  
Marc Bolan;  
British rockers  
the Sweet;  
Jobriath, the  
no-hit wonder,  
in his signature  
bodysuit;  
America's first  
glam sweetheart  
Suzi Quatro;  
top-charting  
band Slade; and  
2015 inductee  
Joan Jett, with  
Cherie Currie, at  
the height of the  
Runaways.



**CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT**  
Lou Reed, 1973; ground zero for the glam explosion in the U.S.: Rodney Bingenheimer's English Disco on Sunset Boulevard, Los Angeles, 1974; New York Dolls, 1973; and Iggy Pop, 1973.



would at last achieve superstar status.

As the Ziggy persona spun further outward, Bowie and Ronson brought glam stardust to their friend and long-standing influence, Lou Reed, whose "I'm Waiting for the Man" they'd covered on the *Ziggy* tour. Reed had recently departed his seminal band, the Velvet Underground, and owed his record company a second solo album. Bowie and Ronson flew Reed to London's Trident Studios and coproduced *Transformer*, now known as Reed's "glam" album, and his commercial high water mark.

Bowie and Ronson encouraged Reed to write about his pansexual days in Warhol's factory, and the duo provided very Ziggy-esque rock (much of it played by Ronson) as accompaniment. Reed grabbed the glam torch and ran with it, even writing a song entitled "Make Up," which goes into deep detail about cosmetics and dresses, then proclaims, "We're coming out of our closets!"

The trio branched out on *Transformer*'s centerpiece, "Walk on the Wild Side." Bowie and Ronson deviated from glam trappings and swathed Lou's literate, sung-spoken, Warhol Factory-inspired lyrics in laid-back, jazzy atmospherics like stand-up bass, brushed drums, and R&B backup singers. Despite bald references to oral sex, drag queens, drugs, and prostitution, "Walk on the Wild Side" became perhaps the unluckiest hit single ever.

For the *Transformer* LP cover and subsequent live performances, Reed fashioned his own nocturnal New York version of glam: black fingernails, leather with bondage overtones, and thick eyeliner. Despite eminent rock scribe of the day Nick Tosches deriding the album's "homo stuff," *Transformer* made Reed an international star.

Fellow Bowie friend and influence Iggy Pop, a keen student of rock & roll outrage, grabbed some glam in the early seventies, too. Although this was a musically fallow period for the Ig, photos of him from the glam days are unforgettable: hair bleached bright surfer blond, godlike physique poured into a pair of skintight silver hip-huggers, Maybelline accentuating his haunted eyes and his rapacious mouth. Thus outfitted, Iggy became a drug-addled fixture at Rodney Bingenheimer's, where, legend has it, he stared stupefied at his reflection and bedded many, many young women.

**M**EANWHILE, ON THE EAST COAST, THE New York Dolls' trashy hooker version of glam would prove quite influential. Despite selling few records in their 1971-77 lifespan, the campy, big-haired quintet, clad in women's underwear, thigh-high boots, and sloppily applied makeup, inspired two very influential forces: costumed rockers Kiss and London impresario Malcolm McLaren.

In the early seventies, fellow New Yorkers Kiss shared stages with the Dolls, copying their cross-dressing style, but, according to drummer Peter Criss: "We were just too husky to wear women's clothes and makeup . . . we looked more like drag queens." In one of the more genius moves in rock history, Kiss invested in professional theatrical grease-

paint, and, a la Ziggy, each became a sharply defined, comic-book-esque character, ascending to stadiums while the New York Dolls imploded in the gutter, as glam seemed to, for a few years. But glam never fully went away.


Malcolm McLaren, who began as a clothing store entrepreneur, briefly managed the Dolls before they finally broke up in 1977, and took note of the band's visual shock effect. Back in London, he applied what he'd learned to his next clients, the Sex Pistols. While not glam per se, under McLaren's tutelage the Pistols contrived a similarly theatrical and confrontational style, initially sporting loud, artfully distressed duds designed by Vivienne Westwood and sold in Westwood and McLaren's King's Road shop, SEX.


**I**NSPIRED BY THE SENSATIONAL VISUAL ASPECTS of punk, but also in thrall to Bowie, who was at his artistic peak for the entire decade, glam reemerged in binary form in early-eighties England: the New Romantic and goth movements - again, largely U.K. phenomena. Bands like Duran Duran, Spandau Ballet, and Adam and the Ants were the former, employing lipstick, mascara, blush, and loud, wide-shouldered suits; meanwhile, Siouxsie and the Banshees, Bauhaus, the Cure, Sisters of Mercy, and their ilk

went the route of the latter, with whiteface, raccoon eyes, and vampiric attire. Though their fans would have been appalled, these goths and New Romantics could easily have swapped tips at the Boots cosmetic counter (and probably did so) all while discussing their spiritual father, Bowie. Yet, heading into the nineties, these styles would make only a few inroads into the U.S., sonically through bands like the Dandy Warhols and Brian Jonestown Massacre, and visually through the occasional thick eye makeup and frequent Day-Glo hair color of Berkeley, California punk upstarts Green Day.

The years from the mid-eighties to early nineties saw the reign of so-called hair metal - largely a U.S. West Coast thing. Bands like Mötley Crüe, Poison, and Warrant slathered themselves with makeup both tribal and glamorous, teased their hair ever higher, paraded stages in scarves, fringed crop-tops, and headbands, played ear-splitting, chart-topping rock & roll, and worried parents sick.

Nirvana, of course, brought that final glam era to a shuddering halt, but Kurt Cobain himself, once he could afford it, undertook some glam affectations, *vis a vis* a boa, eyeliner, and occasional full drag. Although he became the reluctant standard-bearer for grunge, Cobain was the most glummy of the great unwashed rock stars of the nineties, twisting gender norms in look and song with perverse glee.

Post-Internet cultural fragmentation shows us that no one genre will dominate again, and with the increasing mainstream acceptance of cross-dressing and LGBT lifestyles, glam may have, at long last, lost much of its power to shock. Depending on your perspective, this development could be either good or bad. Or, in the glam tradition, it could be both. 

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## Lou Reed fashioned his own nocturnal New York version of glam.

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