

Billy Idol

Dream Into It

BY TIM SOMMER

A Pop-Punk Investigation into Stardom's Scars and Starlight

My god, people are making ALBUMS again.

Something funny happened on the way to the end of the music industry. In the scorched-earth shambles of the Streaming Vesuvius, the uppercase-A 'Artist' has re-emerged, and once again, they're making Albums! Our brilliant musical elders are creating deep, dramatic, complete, start-to-finish ALBUMS that are larger than the sum of their parts, just like in the old days.

Look at Nick Cave and Bob Dylan. Freed of the constraints of industry/radio/video expectations and well into their AARP years, these artists are creating the best work of their lives.

And goddammit, let's add Billy Idol to that list.

At age 69, Billy Idol has made the most rewarding, musically consistent, and emotionally impactful album of his entire solo career, *Dream Into It* (his ninth studio album and his first full-length record in



photo credit: David Raccuglia

over ten years, after a series of passionate and satisfying EPs).

And even though *Dream Into It* tells a story it is also, on a track to track level, a completely satisfying old school/new school pumping, rocking punk/pop odyssey, as only Billy Idol and longtime guitarist/collaborator Steve Stevens can create (with the able assistance of producer Tommy English).

The nine songs on *Dream Into It* tell the rich and deeply personal tale of Billy's voyage from young punk rock dreamer to his re-set as an MTV leather-

gloved icon; then on to all his well-publicized hits, highs, lows, overdoses, and accidents; culminating with a devastatingly honest assessment of the price of fame and the wisdom accrued by getting your act together and embracing family.

That's fifty-plus years of personal and musical history on two continents. But just because it's something akin to a "concept" album, don't think you're getting a lot of orchestras and ballads, not at all: On *Dream Into It*, Billy, Steve, and Tommy English have created

nine powerful and catchy pogo-cinematic songs, each one of which could happily fit in on a Billy Idol Greatest Hits album. For all its depth and emotional rawness, *Dream Into It* may be the most consistently rocking record of Billy's solo career.

Of course, Billy has made "big" albums before: Generation X's second album, *Valley of the Dolls* – which, in some ways, acts as a 45-year-prior prequel to *Dream Into It* – was one of the most ambitious and personal albums of the punk era; and Billy recorded a full-fledged concept album once before, 1993's vastly ahead of its time *Cyberpunk*, which not only pioneered a new way to make music, it also accurately predicted a new way to market it.)

"*Dream Into It* is definitely meant to be listened to in order," Billy says of the new album. "You don't have to, of course. I mean, people are going to pick their favorite tracks and all that. But we did deliberately make this record this way, and in this sequence. We really thought 'album', completely. We are kicking it off with "Dream Into It" and we're bookending it with "Still Dancing," and both are talking about the same thing, kind of an overview of my life. In between, we talk about where I've been, where I am and where I'm going."

Producer Tommy English: "Billy really opened up and we soon became aware that he was writing about things that either he hadn't written about before, or if he had written about them before, now the perspective was different. He naturally filled the gaps to where it became somewhat chronological, and before we knew it, there were nine songs, all of which flowed together."

The story told by *Dream Into It* is not a story of redemption; those tend to be boring and indulgent. Once upon a time William Broad became Billy Idol, and once you become Billy Idol you have very little choice but to live up to that name, especially if you're young, talented, ambitious, energetic, determined, and gorgeous. So, for the next twenty, thirty, forty years, Billy Idol, a sensitive, smart, film, book, and history buff, has been trying to figure out how Billy Idol and William Broad can get along.

Billy Idol: "We've been working on a documentary about my life, and at age 69, you start being able to look back across the landscape of your life and really see it; you've never been in this vantage point. Even when I wrote my book, I was 50-something. When we started to write the songs for the album, I dug into different aspects of my life, different time

periods -- the punk rock period, or me going solo or me going to America, and so on. It was almost like I'm making the music that goes along with the themes in documentary, but that wasn't the intention when we started writing."

The album begins with the epic title track, where Billy reflects on the dawn of a life-long love affair with music. In some ways, it is a thesis for the whole album: how dreams, a passion for his chosen art form, and sheer determination can overcome all obstacles, then and now. And in a salute to Suicide, one of rock's most original and emotionally raw bands, their "Dream Baby Dream" is sampled here (Suicide's frontman, the late Alan Vega, was a close friend of Billy).

And the records turn

Like they did when I was young

And I still don't know

If I've only just begun

On track two, the punchy "77" featuring another generational icon, Avril Lavigne, Billy's youthful hopes have exploded with the promises, volume and violence of the initial U.K. punk rock explosion, where there's joy and romance in the discovery of friends and music, but always a threat lurking.

Here come the teddy boys and the skins

I can see them walking up on the bridge

No, it's not a fair fight

it never is

But you gotta swing first

and you better not miss

On the raucous and anthemic track three, "Too Much Fun," Billy arrives in America, and it all starts going to his head and up his nose.

They said "pick your poison" so I drank every one

I've had that fatal charm ever since I was young

I'm not leaving until I say I'm done...

Half a line turned into five

I flirt with death to feel alive

Next, with "John Wayne" (a brash and gorgeous remake of a track Billy first recorded in 2008 – only on *Dream Into It* he shares the lead vocal with the

amazing Alison Mosshart,) Billy struggles with balancing his public image with his private needs; is he man or pop star?

“John Wayne’ is placed on the album where I’m starting to realize in my life that maybe me being self-destructive isn’t the best way to be; maybe being a drug addict isn’t the best idea. So, I suppose that’s the part of the album that’s the 1990s or the early 2000’s, when I was starting to come to terms with being a drug addict and addressing the idea



album artwork

that I needed to stop being one. It’s got nothing to do with ‘actual’ John Wayne. It’s more about his persona in the movies where he would barge through a door or smash things or kick out a fire, he was always punching and kicking...in a way, that’s what I was doing a lot through my life. And gradually you realize that’s not always the best way to carry on, and you’ve got to sort out these problems for real and put ‘em to bed.”

On track 5, “Wildside” – where Billy is joined on vocals by Joan Jett – Billy thinks he’s found an answer, but it’s fool’s gold: for now, the solution is resolving yourself to living fast and then living even faster, and anyone who loves him is going to have to accept that.

Did you forget who you’re with?

*You know what you signed up for now
you plead the Fifth*

By offering “Wildside” as a duet, the two protagonists in the song underline that they both may exist in the relationship with the same hesitations – and come to the same conclusion.

Dream Into It’s last four songs may be the most powerful, naked, and effective of Billy’s entire career. On “People I Love,” Billy looks back on the loved ones he has let down while pursuing the relentless, extraordinary life of Being Billy Idol.

I know I missed your birthday

and your graduation

You knew I wouldn’t make it

but you still gave me the invitation

I sent you a card saying

“I love you, congratulations.”

You’ve given me one, two, three million chances

And I keep pissing off people I love

And it hurts like hell for heaven’s sake

“The choices you make in life, being a musician; that was frightening my parents to death, especially joining a punk rock group. My dad couldn’t understand it at all,” explains Billy. “So of course, you’re gonna hurt people or frighten them, but that’s because they just love you and are worried for you. But you had to do what you had to do. You had to dream into it, you had to go out on a limb. It was as if there was something telling me to do it. And I couldn’t explain that to my parents, I couldn’t explain that to other people. And through doing what you love, you end up sometimes hurting people. And that is one of those things I have a clearer perception of now, then I had in the past. So I put it into a song.”

On track seven, the shimmering new wave/post punk banger “Gimme the Weight,” Billy entertains the notion that he can find love in a world where he takes responsibility, if the world will still accept him after all the bridges he’s burned; and on track eight, the raw “I’m Your Hero,” the album reaches its emotional peak: finally, after a life of me, me, me – even Billy’s self-immolation and self-disappointment had been seen through the eyes of “me” – he realizes there’s joy, freedom and a future in seeing himself through the eyes of people who don’t just idolize him, but need him.

Billy: “It’s really the effect of my grandchildren. I’ve got these four very young grandchildren, between the ages of two and four. And when you talk to them or hang out with them, they don’t know your backstory. They just know Granddad. They just know the person you are now. *You* know that you are the accumulation of your whole life, but *they* just know you now. And then you realize that’s the same person.”

The album’s final track, “Still Dancing,” a classic Billy Idol groove monster, sums it all up, brings it back home and leaves Idol happier and more determined than ever to carry on.

Whew.

The sound itself of *Dream Into It* really holds the album’s emotional and conceptual ambition together. It mixes modern and legacy recording techniques to create an album with the kind of warm, tube-powered sound of our classic rock, punk, and pop favorites, avoiding the over-crispy and ear-scraping treble-y highs you hear on so many contemporary recordings. “That’s something that’s Billy was very perceptive of in the mixing,” says producer Tommy English. “It was one of his main notes: do not have things sound too spiky. So we had this terrific and fascinating balance to try to determine where to push things to make them more modern, and where to have things lean a little more old school sounding, a little more classic.”

Billy even opted to record most of his vocals in a pointedly unconventional way. “Instead of putting Billy on headphones while recording vocals, Billy opted to ditch the headphones, have a speaker on in the studio, and sing into a handheld microphone like he was performing,” remembers Tommy English. “It’s kind of amazing how well it worked -- you don’t notice that the speakers are on once it’s mixed and everything. That’s the first time I’ve done that on a record that was released. But he was just so much more comfortable singing in the room than with headphones on, and it was just a lot more fun doing it that way, and it sounds great.”

In addition, Billy, Steve and Tommy very much sought a consistent “band” sound on the album, even if they didn’t utilize Billy’s road-tested and much acclaimed touring group. Tommy again: “We were definitely pushing for a more band-oriented sound, and Billy and Steve know all these players that are

able to come in and contribute on the highest level of rock musicianship, like Josh Freese [now of Foo Fighters] on drums and Chris Chaney [now playing with AC/DC] on bass. Both of those guys are as good as it gets. And Steve Stevens, of course, he’s just like a one-man army; so, putting a kind of power trio behind Billy was just awesome. And we wrote and demoed the songs in my studio, and then we recorded everything in separate sessions at Sunset Sound. That’s an old school approach: a lot of times in this modern era of music production, you’re not able to have a pre-production stage. In this case we were able to write the songs and make true demos at my studio, and then get Josh and Chaney and, of course, Steve and Billy, all together at Sunset Sound to track the songs, in more of an old school way.”

Billy Idol: “Despite the fact I’m a solo artist, I always wanted my records to have a band feel because I came out of punk rock listening to all those amazing bands in the ‘60s and ‘70s, so I really wanted to have the best of both worlds. That’s what I was looking for. The sound is the sound and feel of a band, which is what me and Steve really look for, even though it’s a Billy Idol solo record.”

And then, of course, there’s Steve Stevens, Billy’s trusted collaborator, guitarist and musical sibling for over forty years. Steve’s playing on *Dream Into It* is truly extraordinary: wildly inventive, incendiary and complex, yet fully integrated into the sound of a band and the needs of a singer. How does this guy do such magical things, yet never upstage the story?

“That comes with a security that I’m a musician, not just a guitar player,” says Steve. “I don’t have an agenda playing on a Billy Idol record.: I am interwoven into the music and that’s simply it. Whether it’s three notes or 64 notes, whatever is right for the music and the story. When young guitarists ask me, what advice do you have? I say, be aware of the story the singer is telling; you *need* to be. That’s your roadmap. That should be everything; every emotion and every sonic thing that you’re supposed to put into a song should reflect the story. And I think if there’s anything that I’ve learned as a partner with Billy, it’s help him tell the story.

“I’m really lucky,” Billy adds. “Whatever I want to do, Steve can do it. But he never tried to turn it into Steve Stevens music, and he certainly could have! He could overpower me with his musical ability,

easily. But he doesn't do that. He totally serves the album."

"At the end of the day, Billy's the boss," Steve continues. "If the guitar part doesn't kick his ass, I'm not offended by it. After 42 years. I'm not gonna take it personally if he doesn't like something. He has great, great musical instincts and he knows how to make great records. Same with Tommy English. He may be the producer and co-writer, but it's a Billy Idol record."

The end result of this emotional, rollicking, and rockin' investigation into the long and much-lived

life of a punk rock golden boy isn't just the tale of another decadent rocker; *Dream Into It* is also full of universal, empathetic truths. And it's a way for the artist to tell his family the story of his remarkable voyage from Broad to Idol, from the Old World to the New. After all, soon his grandchildren will be able to Google him, and why not let them hear it from him first?

"At the moment they're too young, but they will Google me soon!" says Billy. "They've seen me on stage, so they do know what Granddad does. But eventually they'll want to learn more, and this album covers it all. They're getting it straight from me."

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