

T. Rex, Baby.

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A love song to the immortal Marc Bolan, and critical guide to the new T. Rex reissues

Marc Bolan was a glam-rock god. A thunderbolt master, a 'lectronic savior, a gold galactic raver. A choogling boogie-man, a bubblegum busker, a star-stung songster who delivered tight, blistering pop masterpieces like "Bang a Gong (Get It On)," "Hot Love" and "20th Century Boy" in an era lousy with 12-minute songs by denim-wearing, shoes-optional bands like Zeppelin, ELP, Yes and, I don't know, Uriah Heep or something.

U2's Bono once said he decided to be a rock star after seeing Bolan, covered in sprayed-on fake sweat and glitter, come out on a British pop TV show with his band T. Rex and lip-synch "Solid Gold Easy Action." Now, whether or not you like U2 is beside the point, which is this: Marc Bolan makes you feel rock & roll. You want to put on eyeliner and your tightest pants and your bitchiest jacket and go struttin' up the block, and when the girls start their whistling, you just wave and go into your two-step and hustle on down to the Mexican bakery where they sell Quaaludes under the counter.

Marc Bolan was the type of rock star they simply don't churn out anymore: a guy who's gonna bust out young, savage and handsome, looking like something you ain't never seen. He's gonna yawp and dance and blast endlessly durable, instantly memorable tunes from his guitar while wearing lots of makeup and inspired/ridiculous clothes and platform shoes up to here. He's gonna make some faultless albums, cause mass hysteria, spark a mini-revolution in rock, get all drunk on drink, drugs and ego, make some pretty lousy albums, bloat up real good on booze and bacon and chicken, slowly start to look like Sigourney Weaver, then kinda get it together again, threaten a full return to form, host a children's TV show, then die in a car crash two weeks before he would've turned 30.

For those of us who were too young or not born enough or simply too American to experience T. Rex on the first go-round, getting our hands on the music has historically been pretty frustrating. Loads of cheap and shameful compilations on countless bargain labels you've never heard of have made the T. Rex catalog blurry and elusive. The last couple years, however, have brought a happy change with the gradual domestic re-release of the T. Rex albums in proper, semi-deluxe editions: lyrics, decent liner notes, lots of bonus tracks and, in most cases, a bonus disc of alternate takes. (All the reissues covered here are on Rhino Records, except for T. Rex, which is an import on A&M/Universal.) Rhino has also produced a singles set (The T. Rex Wax Co. Singles A's and B's 1972-77, a most hot buy for new fans) and a demos collection (Work in Progress, needless to almost everyone but nutjobs).

Here, then, is a little breakdown of the Groover's oeuvre, if you will. Buckle up, put a black cat on your shoulder, wear a tall hat like the druids in the old days, and grow your hair long, baby, can't go wrong.

It's T. Rex, people!

Rating the Rex

"You've got the universe reclining in your hair."

"You're a cool motivator."

"Everything is sweet babe, then everything is the pits."

"My wig's all pooped."

"I'm just a vampire for your love, and I'm gonna suck."

T. REX (1970)

Okay, so this is the first T. Rex record, and it's got a lot of the Tolkienesque acoustic-'n'-bongos, let's-talk-about-elves-with-my-goat-bleat vocals that made T. Rex forerunner Tyrannosaurus Rex's albums worth only a passing once-over or perhaps a sad, lingering smile. That said, T. Rex's got splashes of the electric boogaloo and flash songwriting that were

soon to thrill starry-eyed kids for real. I mean, he's still riding his zebra with a "pterodactyl beak hat" on his brow and all that kind of business, and oh sure, he's gonna spend nearly nine minutes wailing about "The Wizard," but the rock-to-come is evidenced on songs like "Jewel" and "Beltane Walk." He nails it with "Ride a White Swan," his first U.K. hit, included here as a bonus track, a relentlessly infectious clap-along that triggered his move into the optimistic future of glam stardom.

ELECTRIC WARRIOR (1971) This album is effin' rad. You can just tell by the cover. I remember as a kid looking at my dad's old records and finding this one and just sitting on the floor and holding it and thinking ". . . wow." A man-god with his ax and amp, glowing gold and magical against a stark black void — the image fills one with rock & roll desire. And the music inside, too, seems to have that same halo radiating around it. From the seductive, loitering groove of opener "Mambo Sun" to the mind-losing freakout of closer "Rip Off," there is something magic, something special about Electric Warrior. There's a cockiness to the proceedings, a boastful, joyful strut that marries '50s boogie and futuristic woogie on classics like "Bang a Gong" and "Jeepster." Yet Bolan's signature descending guitar lines, duke-of-earl chord progressions, wistful lyrics and breathy, vampiric vocals create an emotional explosion of beautiful, gentle melancholia. It somehow embodies rock & roll as a romantic concept. Plus, it totally rocks. Bonus tracks include "Hot Love," "Raw Ramp" and other essential sides.

THE SLIDER (1972) Though more acoustic and less immediate than Electric Warrior, The Slider is every bit its equal, arguably its superior. Its lumbering boogaloo, mixed with lush strings and overdubs, creates a hauntingly unique masterpiece that seems almost unrehearsed and overproduced at the same time. The lyrics combine glam-slam, juvenile-jivin', futuristic-speedway poetry with a confessional nakedness that is staggeringly human and real. ("As a child I laughed a lot, yes I did. Now it seems I cry a lot, tell the truth: Don't you?") You haven't felt so put on and told the truth at the same time since you asked your girlfriend about her sexual history — though the effect is thrilling rather than disturbing. The Slider is Bolan and glam rock itself at its most beautiful, sad, swaggering, sexual, funny, hooky and utterly bitchin', with sensational rockers like "Metal Guru" and "Telegram Sam." Great cover, too. Got a big hat on.

TANX (1973)
Sacriligious resequencing:

Tanx is where most fans think the T. Rex thing starts to lose its luster, and maybe they're right, but quite possibly they are completely wrong. Yes, the record's a bit too carefully produced and it's not the unstoppable hit parade the previous two albums were, but, hey, check it out. Unlike Electric Warrior and The Slider — both of which benefited from the inclusion of singles like "Bang a Gong" and "Metal Guru" — none of the singles released around Tanx were actually put on the album. (Which is like releasing Nevermind without "Smells Like Teen Spirit." Maybe you were supposed to buy the singles and the album, who knows?) If the singles had been included on the original, my guess is that Tanx would now be considered genius. It's clear in hindsight, anyway: If you've got "20th Century Boy," whose scorching opening is among the most exciting 19 seconds in rock history, you make that the first track on your new album.

Since all the Tanx-era singles are included here as bonus tracks, I suggest a little sacriligious rock revisionism: Program your CD player to make Tanx the classic record it should've been. Add the singles and B-sides you want, filter out the dross (like "Shock Rock" and "Country Honey") and leave the great ones (like "Electric Slim and the Factory Hen" and "Highway Knees"). This is a fantastic and meaningful way to spend a day or three eating tater tots and ignoring phone calls from loved ones. Or just use my personal sequence: 19-4-1-2-7-20-16-9-10-11-12-13-14. You can't tell me that's not a better record — and I didn't even use "Solid Gold Easy Action," and I could've.

ZINC ALLOY AND THE HIDDEN RIDERS OF TOMORROW (1974) Okay, things do in fact start to get quite grim here for T. Rex, as the uninspired, Bowie-copying title may suggest. There are still some great lyrics and decent tunes, like "Teenage Dream" and "Explosive Mouth," but little seems special on Zinc Alloy. As a rule, the songs are boring; the rock is toothless. Yeah the record pretty much blows — it's probably T. Rex's worst. On the plus side, the reissue's bonus tracks include the awesome singles "Truck On (Tyke)" and "The Groover," the latter of which was, perhaps, the last truly great moment for a truly great band.

BOLAN'S ZIP GUN (1975) Supposedly recorded during the goriest days of Bolan's L.A. booze-bag cocaine freakout, Bolan's Zip Gun starts out all right with a couple of handclap poppers ("Light of Love" and "Solid Baby") and then quickly deteriorates into a cheap mess of tired-sounding corn mush. At times, the rinky-dink production sounds like an oldies karaoke CD from the 99¢ store, and only "Think Zinc" gives you a punch of that aliveness and struttery that was once T. Rex's trademark. Still, some of the lyrics are great: "Fleeting angel girl I need your mouth, locked around me like a burning house" sounds stunning even in the middle of a so-so song. (Those aren't the official lyrics, but it's totally what he says on the record.) This is the period when Bolan begins to resemble Sigourney Weaver.

FUTURISTIC DRAGON (1976) A dark-horse favorite among T. Rexers, Futuristic Dragon is a post-peak high. Though he doesn't quite rescale the heights of his glory years, Bolan does experience a pretty substantial creative rebirth here, and it's about bloody time. The songs are almost all catchy and great — tunes like "Chrome Sitar" and "Dreamy Lady" stand among the best of his career — and there's a welcome sense of energy and glamour in the recordings. "New York City," a hooky, bouncy, boogying affair, is an album highlight, the only lyrics of which are "Did you ever see a woman coming out of New York City with a frog in her hand? I did, don't you know, and don't it show?" repeated over and over again.

DANDY IN THE UNDERWORLD (1977) This is a pretty darned good record, too — and it might've been great if it'd been recorded in a more organic, early T. Rex style. However, Bolan's own sterile, late-'70s production puts the but in his boogie, so we'll have to be content with the weird quiet pleasures of the often autobiographical Dandy, the last T. Rex album. The tunes are still rife with fun Bolanisms like "Hey little girl, you move so fine, all I want to do is melt your mind" (from "Crimson Moon") and "You damaged the soul of my suit" ("The Soul of My Suit"), but largely, the album has the confessional feel of a once-reigning superstar putting his life and career in perspective, as on "Jason B. Sad," which is not that good of a song, but it's got cool words:

Jason B. Sad was a lonely lad

His head was a bed for everyone

His clothes were his life but his heart was a knife

Inscribed on it was, "Rock & Roll is Cruel."