

BOY GEORGE Biography

It's the mid 1980s. You are Boy George, singer with Culture Club and one of the most recognizable pop personalities on the planet. But your group breaks up at the height of its fame.

Do you:

A: Fall apart emotionally and develop a drug addiction so public that at one point the tabloid newspapers predict you'll be dead within a week?

B: Go solo and have a European number one with your first single?

C: Wait until the late 1990s for the 1980s revival, then reform Culture Club with its original line-up and perform to sell-out crowds all over again?

D: Disappear back into your club music roots and undertake a 10-year climb to become one of dance music's most respected producers and DJs?

The answer of course, if you are Boy George: you do all of the above.

The life of George O'Dowd, as his birth certificate knows him, contains so much excitement, tragedy and drama that VH1's "Behind the Music" opted to feature him and Culture Club for one of its first (and most popular) episodes, while his bare-all autobiography "Take it Like A Man" has been an international bestseller.

What Americans may not know is that Boy George spends most of his time fully immersed in Europe's thriving dance music scene, as a headlining club DJ; hosting a popular radio show; writing, producing, remixing (and still singing); and compiling best-selling mix CDs.

Now, after almost a dozen European releases, his debut American DJ album arrives as part of Sire-London's thriving "Essential Mix" series, and it's going to surprise a few people who thought they knew him.

From two-step to ragga, disco to techno, progressive house to what George cheekily calls "Prada Trance," its eighteen cuts are destined to impress both for their sheer musical scope and their irrepressible rhythmic vitality.

Of course, Boy George is no stranger to night clubs and dance music. A self-confessed "vinyl obsessive," he and close friend Jeremy Healy spun records together at hip London clubs back in 1979.

Their permanent presence on that scene saw them hailed as original Blitz Kids, New Romantics who seized their moment to form groups (George with Culture Club and Jeremy with Haysi Fantayzee) and enjoy, at least in George's case, more success than imaginable.

But when the merry-go-round stopped -- and for George it crashed abruptly -- they still had the rest of their lives ahead of them. Once he emerged from the wreckage, and after he'd had a solo number one covering Bread's "Everything I Own," Boy George discovered that Healy was Djing again. And earning a living at it.

Then he heard about a club night in London that was blowing peoples' minds. As someone "always looking out for what's new," he decided to check it out in person.

The year was 1988, the venue was Heaven, the DJ was Paul Oakenfold, and the night, called Spectrum, helped spawn the birth of "acid house" -- and with it the whole current dance movement.

“You didn’t have to be dressed up, it wasn’t about being a pop star,” he recalls of Spectrum. “It was a great place to just mingle and disappear.”

And so, after years of fame fronting Culture Club, he now threw himself into the gleeful anonymity of the emerging club culture. If punk rock had sent kids out buying guitars, and the New Romantics had inspired a rush on synthesizers, then acid house made turntables the tool of cool, and George duly splurged on a pair of Technics, simply “Cos you had to have them.”

In the meantime, he carried on releasing solo singles, though to a dwindling audience. Then in 1989 he and Healy, along with London clubland friends Simon Rodgers and MC Kinky, recorded a single as the E-Zee Posse entitled “Everything Starts with an E.”

Just as Culture Club had fused reggae with pop, the E-Zee Posse merged ragga with house; released on George’s new dance imprint More Protein, “Everything Starts with an E” became a club classic. Especially rewarding for George was the fact that many people didn’t know he was part of it.

“In England, people really like to hold you in a corner,” he notes, “so if I’d told people I’d done it, it probably wouldn’t have sold at all!” He therefore persisted with the pseudonyms. His production credits were as Angela Dust.

And while the infamous Boy George stopped releasing singles, a certain Jesus Loves You started having hits, first with “After The Love” and then the enduring “Generations of Love.”

“I tried to avoid doing obvious dance records,” he recalls. “I just knew that during that period, just to survive, I had to do something that was left of center.”

With all this clubland activity, George soon found himself Djing again. At first, he confined himself to back rooms where he could play a little of everything, “like the school disco.” But he was asked so frequently to perform on main floors that he decided to take on the challenge.

“I started working on it and spending a lot of time practicing, taking my decks around with me when I went away to the studio, making tapes and just learning. But having said that, it doesn’t matter how much you practice at home and how great you are, when you play in a club it changes everything.”

George admits to being “scared” about taking on high-profile DJ bookings, partly because of what he calls “the novelty thing of Boy George playing records in a club,” but more so in awareness of potential resentment that a former pop idol would dare to reinvent himself.

“It’s a real British thing,” he observes. “Once you’ve had your go, whatever it may be, they want you to piss off, and they can’t bear it if you come back, they can’t bear it. They’d prefer to hear about you having a turn on the cabaret circuit.”

So during his inaugural period, George had to contend with jealous wanna-be DJs who felt he was doing them out of a gig (“My response was that there’s a lot of DJs making records, and they have the right to do that,”) while attempting to master the technology in a live situation.

He recalls, laughing now, the time at Manchester’s Hacienda he delivered a mix that sounded “like a drag queen falling down the stairs in a pair of Vivienne Westwood platforms!” (A pop star friend in attendance turned and laughed: “Well at least they know you’re here.”) He also remembers that when he played alongside Sasha for the first time, it was him, not the younger DJ, who was starstruck and “so frightened I almost threw up.”

Yet wherever George played, he connected with the audience. And the more he played, the more his name spread; to a new generation. Growing up after Culture Club’s reign, Boy George was first and foremost a DJ.

By the middle of the '90s, not only could he mix with the best of them, but he could draw crowds to compete with the biggest of them. London mega club Ministry of Sound hired him to compile one of their first CDs, and it promptly sold 100,000 copies.

George had clearly developed the great DJ's knack of knowing how to both program and present great music. "I really just play things I like," he says casually. "I'm always loathe to say I don't play this or that; I play what works. There are a lot of DJs who play a particular style, I don't really have any loyalty to any sound."

This much is obvious from his "Essential Mix." The first few songs, including a funky reworking of "Girl from Ipanema" by the Boogie Macs and "See You Through" by Cultural Diversions, on which George sings, introduce what he calls "the sexiest sound around," two-step.

"It's basically R&B, with a bit of ragga," he says of the genre that has swept the British charts. "I think that if anything is going to cross over in the States it's going to be that sound, because it really does incorporate a lot of that American R&B flavor."

Not that George confines himself to any one genre. There's a new version of Baby D's UK number one (and US rave classic) "Let Me Be Your Fantasy" and an appearance from his old friend Kinky Roland singing "Born Funky."

There are stop offs in Miami (with Shauna Solomon) and Italy (Tutto Matto vs. Different Gear). On a much harder tip, George and friends show up as The Colein performing the optimistic "Spreading the Light" and new British solo singer Amanda Ghost is featured with the American club smash "Filthy Mind."

The album closes out with some seriously pumping late night grooves from Bassdubs, Oscar Goldman and Wave, all a long dance floor's journey from the opening cuts.

With "Essential Mix," Boy George hopes to take full advantage of American dance fans' currently open state of mind.

"A lot of that freedom we had in the early acid house days is gone now, because the whole dance thing has become so corporate," he says of the UK scene. "And one of the really nice things about America is that America isn't really at that stage yet, so there isn't that strictness about what you can put on the records. You can really show people that your tastes are varied and wide."

He recalls handing the legendary Larry Levan a Culture Club remix at the Paradise Garage, and hearing it on the dance floor five minutes later, and he wants to keep that willingness to take a chance in his own performances. "Being in the DJ booth," he says, "is one of the few places that you have complete freedom."