


## THE STORIES SO FAR




Donald Crowhurst's sad exploits have been a constant source of inspiration, both as non-fiction and in fictionalised accounts,

typically with his name changed. The first feature film about him was released in 1975 and the first documentary in 1979, followed by the excellent *Deep Water* in 2006. Feature films of his story have been made in Russia and France, and the story crops up in various guises in several novels, including Jonathan Coe's *The Terrible Privacy of Maxwell Sim* (2010). In 1996, the artist Tacita Dean made two videos called *Disappearance at Sea*, and went to visit his boat in the Caribbean. The story has also been staged and turned into an opera.

► steering, fought off sharks and was existing on rainwater – though even then he was requested to delay his arrival because the lady mayoress was having her hair done. Of the remainder, Nigel Tetley, the favourite for the speed prize, pushed his boat so hard on the news of Crowhurst's fictitious gains, he sank. He hanged himself three years later. As for Crowhurst, on June 24 he began writing that he was "a cosmic being" and would "resign 'the game' of being a human".

Unlike *Deep Water*, this film didn't have input from his family. "I think they have accepted the film, though," Marsh insists. For years, they would get word of a "sighting", as if Crowhurst had faked his own death. It has added to a cult fascination with a man from a different time, when dishonour meant falling on your sword. (Today, you suspect he'd be given a pop at Strictly.)

## BOOK OFFER



*The Strange Last Voyage of Donald Crowhurst* (Hodder 2016), by the Sunday Times reporters Nicholas Tomalin and Ron Hall, was the first account of the events leading to Crowhurst's disappearance at sea. It is available to readers at £7 per copy, a 30% discount on RRP. To order, call 01235 827702, using the code STDONALD. Delivery is free

Weisz's Clare, corraling her Enid Blyton brood, spends much of the film in their picture-book cottage, staring at the GPO-issue phone, waiting for calls via Portishead. She is given a grafted-on scene in which she admonishes the press for having a "hand on the back" of her late husband, the "people's yachtsman". "It's inevitable in any adaptation of a real-life story that you will need to dramatise," Marsh says.

"He's the hero at sea, but she's the hero at home," Weisz says, "supporting him and accepting that he had bouts of mania and bouts of depression." There's a hint here of something beyond the wistful dreamer portrayed on screen. In *The Strange Last Voyage of Donald Crowhurst* (see offer, below), written in the aftermath and with full access, the Sunday Times journalists Nicholas Tomalin and Ron Hall paint Crowhurst as charming yet delusional, prone to mood swings, a man who wouldn't have passed a psychological screening, had there been one.

A lone child of the Raj, from a redundant colonial class, he was brought back by his parents on Partition to a country that clearly wasn't home. He proved something of a troublemaker, discharged by the RAF and the army before settling into family life. He's portrayed by others as a misfit in search of a role (he'd had a go at local politics), with a blinding self-belief once he thought he'd found it.

What is clear, though, is that he was no bungler. Making it as far as the Falklands, as he did, where more experienced yachtsmen failed, was an astonishing achievement. "I don't really like people being critical of him, because I feel it's unfair," Knox-Johnston says. It would have been perfectly honourable, he adds, "if he'd pulled into Cape Town and said, 'Sorry, guys, my boat won't do it. I've done the best I can, I'm heading home.' He made the wrong decision to hoodwink people. But faced with the appalling pressures he was under..."

Knox-Johnston donated his £5,000 prize to the Crowhursts. In 1994, he broke the circumnavigation record, doing it in a mere 74 days; he repeated it solo in 2007, aged 68. He's now the patron of the 50th anniversary repeat of the Golden Globe race, which will see a new field set out in July, under the same rudimentary constraints he and Crowhurst endured. "So much has changed – satellites, weather information, navigation and communications. You're sitting on a boat, you pick up the phone, you dial. If things go wrong, you press a button and everyone knows you're in trouble, which we couldn't do. The materials are different. Now you'd have the right sort of boat for the voyage, which we didn't know then.

"You want to make a comparison?" He sighs. "It's like the Wright brothers and Concorde." ■

*The Mercy* is in cinemas on Feb 9

# THEY'RE TOTALLY CRAZY... LET'S SIGN THEM

Roxy Music's 1972 debut transformed pop, thanks to a risk-taking record boss. But experimentalism can only exist if there's an establishment to fight, says *Dan Cairns*

**Y**ou can't help feeling sorry for the employee at Island Records tasked with defending Roxy Music's debut album to his doubtful superiors in the spring of 1972. Tim Clark, who these days manages Robbie Williams, was that man. Across the table from him sat Island's founder, Chris Blackwell, and the head of A&R, Muff Winwood. The former wore an impassive expression, so Clark had no idea whether his proposal that the label sign Roxy Music – who had already recorded the album and finalised the sleeve – would get the green light. The latter, Clark recalled later, actively loathed both album and band.

Pop history is littered with such stories: moments when radical sea changes in music came within seconds of being stopped in their tracks, potentially reducing some of the

great pioneers to mere footnotes. Dick Rowe of Decca's dismissal of the Beatles – "Guitar groups are on their way out, Mr Epstein" – is the most infamous. Winwood's rejection might have been another had Blackwell, the following day, not walked past Clark's office, spotted the eye-catching artwork for Roxy's album and said: "Have we signed them up yet?"

Yet Winwood was far from alone in his hostility. Much of the music press detested Roxy, and even their fans struggled with the band's retro, high-camp image and the album's utterly alien soundscapes and genre-bending songwriting. Some 46 years later, the album still sounds as if it has been transported in from another planet.

Genres collided, atonalism rubbing shoulders with prog; glam rock was subverted and reimagined by Brian Eno's



bizarre electronic flourishes. And there was Bryan Ferry's heavily stylised, vibrato-crazed croon; art-school cool co-existing with rehashed psychedelia, tinged with a sort of futuristic ennui. Music had entertained such notions before, but never at the same time and on the same album.

When the non-album track *Virginia Plain*, a mad gallop of a song that disdains the need for a chorus, was released in August that year (and went on to reach No 4), the band's appearance on *Top of the Pops*, just weeks after Bowie's similarly epochal performance of *Starman* there, was a lightning bolt. Ferry, recalling the single's success, has often stated that the band were flabbergasted by it. They had no great expectation of significant sales. The public, clearly, felt differently. So, too, did a whole host of musicians who would follow in Roxy's footsteps.

How remarkable that Roxy's first album – reissued next month on both vinyl and disc, with multiple bells and whistles – and Bowie's game-changing *The Rise and Fall of Ziggy Stardust* and the *Spiders from Mars* were released on

the same day, and how enduring is their influence. Not just musically, though we tend to like to follow that particular trail, joining the dots, pointing out similarities, debts and flagrant thefts. The process brings up names such as Radiohead, Damon Albarn, Duran Duran, Depeche Mode, Franz Ferdinand, to name just five.

The berserk chug of the Roxy track *Re-Make/Re-Model*, with a Weimar stomp propelled by Andy Mackay's squealing sax as Eno, seemingly listening to a different song, pulls demonic noises from his tape machines, is the ghost that hovers over any number of Blur songs, or the more experimental end of the R&B and hip-hop spectrum. *Ladytron*, for which Ferry asked Eno to concoct effects that sounded like a lunar landscape, is another phantom presence in so much of today's more ambitious pop writing.

Rockabilly guitar, oboe, castanets, a drumbeat like horses' hooves on the final straight – modern songwriters can chance on such unlikely combinations at the push of a button, and often do. Roxy Music elected to put



## FIVE GAME-CHANGERS

Each of these albums expanded the cultural conversation: **Dylan's *Bringing It All Back Home*** and **the Beatles' *Revolver*** revolutionised pop, the first melding breathtaking lyricism with fierce folk-rock attack, the second providing arguably the most pivotal point in the music of the 1960s. ***Ziggy*** could lay claim to a similar status in the following decade, while ***Thriller***, in giving a black musician the biggest pop album of all time, represented the ultimate payback after decades of financial exploitation. **The Spice Girls**, meanwhile, ignited young women's creativity and self-belief, at the same time as opening up a whole new – and much younger – demographic for labels to target.

**Setting up camp** Roxy Music's first LP. Bottom left, Bryan Ferry and Brian Eno

them together. The Bob (Medley), a conceptual song suite about the Second World War, complete with simulated gunfire; 2HB, Ferry's artful tribute to Humphrey Bogart; Chance Meeting's sonorous piano motif, underpinning a lyric that references *Brief Encounter*, as Mackay pulls the track under the depths; Bitters End's evocation of a past-their-best barbershop quartet, moping over their martinis in some last-chance saloon... This was art-rock, unafraid to fail, thrillingly strange, thrillingly new.

Look beyond the musical legacy, however, and the band's impact is arguably even more profound. The most important message was, and is: just do it. Don't overthink things, don't shy away from risk, don't pull up at the first fence, however daunting it seems. Don't hesitate on the threshold of experimentalism. Just do it.

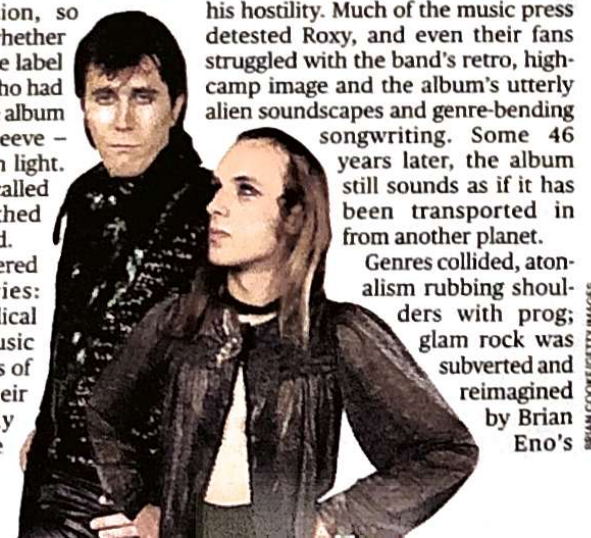
The alternative, as so much of mainstream music has demonstrated pretty much since pop began, is the slow death of the creative spirit and the prioritising of profit: singles and albums of generic, safety-first, put-together-by-committee caution – crease-free, risk-free, bloodless. Music that has had a slide rule run over it and has succumbed to the clammy clutches of commerce. If Clark had a hard time persuading Winwood back in 1972, imagine how much more difficult that conversation would be today.

With so much of current chart songwriting in thrall either to the streaming-led, tropical-house-heavy algorithm-method approach, or offensively inoffensive, school-of-Sheeran platitude, where would that Roxy album fit? Its distinctly mixed messages would presumably struggle to find a place in an environment where clarity and digestibility are prized over anything that might muddy the waters and confuse the consumers.

Albums as influential as Roxy's debut have a further legacy. The success of an avowedly experimental and bizarre work can often foster, however briefly, a willingness by major labels to take some risks.

Now, consider this: no matter how depressing it can be that such flurries don't occur more regularly, were such thinking to be the norm, would anything stand out as clearly, as gaudily, as plain disturbingly, as the first Roxy Music album? With nothing to kick against, no rules to break, would Ferry, Eno and co still exert such a hold on us today? Conformity and caution have a lot to answer for – but they also play a vital role in the making of real art. That may not be the most comfortable conclusion to draw, but it's surely true. For real art isn't just inspiration. It's war. ■

*Roxy Music* is reissued on Feb 2 on UMC



BRYAN FERRY AND BRIAN ENO