

Best of BLITZ



**In the midst of a media frenzy
after he was charged with
possession of heroin
Boy George spoke frankly
to Tim Hulse about drugs,
stardom and Fleet Street**

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FROM

LUXURY

TO

HEARTACHE

In an exclusive interview,

Boy George talks frankly

about drugs, stardom and Fleet Street.

INTERVIEWED BOY GEORGE ON SUNDAY,

August 3rd, 1986, at a house in the Surrey countryside where he'd been staying in an attempt to escape from the constant attention of Fleet Street.

The previous week George had been fined £250 after admitting possessing heroin. Three days after we met, his friend Michael Rudetski, an American musician with whom he had planned to work, was found dead of a drugs overdose at one of George's London homes. The headline of the Today newspaper asked the question: 'When will it all end?' It's a question George and the rest of the O'Dowd family have been asking themselves for weeks.

George's parents, Gerry and Dina O'Dowd, and his brother David were also at the house. Despite various press reports to the contrary, a nicer and closer family you could not wish to meet. I asked David how they were coping with the pressure. "My mum and dad have put on a very good front," he said, "but underneath they've been battered to fuck, really. It's

not as if there was one exclusive story — it ran and ran and ran and never seemed to go away. Every time I turned on the television or the radio there seemed to be something about it. I started to crack up, 'cos I couldn't handle it after a while. I just thought, 'Christ, this has gone too far...'"

Although he's still undergoing treatment, George was looking healthier than he's looked in a long time. He's put back some of the weight he lost and there's a gleam in his eye again. He seemed, well, just like the old George, rampaging round the house, shouting and screaming, bubbling. He wasn't wearing make-up and had purple goo all over his head because he was re-bleaching his hair.

The previous day, we'd spoken on the phone and

Interview by Tim Hulse.

Photographs and make-up by Paul Gobel.

► he'd agreed to an interview but said he wouldn't talk about drugs, because he was "fed up with apologising." As it turned out, George being George, once we'd started there was no subject, including drugs, that he wasn't willing to talk about, and at length. He talked about the pain of addiction; his hatred of Fleet Street; the police questioning; his disillusion with being a popstar, and more, much more. He made a couple of great jokes and once or twice looked close to tears. The interview lasted one and a quarter hours.

"I didn't really know what it was at first, I thought it was coke. I just took it. And then I just did it again and again and again and again, fucking nonstop. A nightmare."

George first snorted heroin at a Paris nightclub in March, 1985. Later the same evening, as is usually the case with first-time users, he was violently sick.

"Obviously the answer to that should be, 'Wasn't that a bad enough experience to stop you?' But one thing leads to another and you just get caught up in these things. People around me were taking it and I just started taking it, I liked the feeling. Any doctor will tell you, it's a wonderful feeling, it's very numbing, it makes you feel oblivious to everything. I mean, certainly at particular times when things were going wrong it was great. It sounds terrible to say that and it is terrible to say that, but it just numbed me and I didn't care and it was wonderful. For that time. It gives you a false sense of arrogance, it makes you feel superior, it makes you feel like you know something everybody else doesn't, so it was perfect for all those times when I was being ripped to shreds by the media and the records weren't selling. It was a perfect way to hide.

"I suppose I started taking it regularly about eight months ago. I had a really bad habit, up to four grams a week, really heavy. I wasn't going out at all, just staying in and doing it, snorting it, and getting out of my brain. Everybody was so worried about me and I just didn't care. That's the worst thing, I think, about that sort of drug, you just don't give a damn and there's so many things that can happen to you. I could have died so many times. I'm really glad that there are certain people who really do love me. I don't mean, like, 'adore' me, but genuine love. I've got certain friends who do care about me and they really kept on and on at me and if you've got somebody who's prepared to keep on at you, it's a good thing.

"When I was addicted it made me really terrified. The amount of pain I had from being addicted, that's what made me stop, really. I could tell you stories about me and Marilyn just being so ill and saying to each other, 'I never want to feel like this again, ever, ever

again.' We were on a cruise and we were in Kuala Lumpur and we ran out of gear and we just got so ill. It was hideous, because it was the most beautiful cruise and we were going to all these beautiful islands. I really didn't think I'd ever get to the stage of dependency and it was hideous when that happened. I got so scared, 'cos I'd always been so together and suddenly there I was in a situation where I just couldn't get out of bed. I mean, a lot of those stories were true, I just couldn't move, I was like an old man.

"It's ruined so many things for me, heroin, and that's why I hate it now. It's ruined work, friendships, it's just got in my way and done me so much damage, so much. And I wasted so much money. You know, out of your head doing this, doing that, flying here, flying there, being really careless. I was always really careful with my money and I was getting very careless with it – I was very generous to people, you know, so-called friends, liggers. I was taken for a ride by so many people and that's why I feel such a fool.

"There's a lot of sitting around in seedy flats. That's probably why I got caught, because I did it myself, I didn't have drug runners. That's one thing that I'm pleased about – I never used anybody to go and get drugs for me. I never had any lackeys and I never made anyone take risks for me.

"In a way, after I had my treatment I wish I just had not talked about it. I wish I hadn't apologised, I wish I hadn't discussed it, I really do. Although at the end of the day I suppose the people who I owe an explanation to are the kids – fans, I mean, that's such a corny line, 'the kids'. They're the people I had to do it for and unfortunately the only way for me to be able to do that is through garbage like Fleet Street and things like TV-am. I've had all the same old questions – 'How can someone as intelligent as you get involved with heroin?' You can't be flippant, it's such a difficult thing. I just came out looking like the poor martyr and the victim. It sounds dreadful, but I had some good times on heroin, but it's not a good drug, so I shouldn't be promoting it. So I went out and said, 'Look! I repent.' I tried so hard to get rid of that goody-goody image and now I've fallen back into that category again by going out and apologising, but there you have it. I suppose at the end of the day if I can stop a couple of young kids becoming heroin addicts, it's a good thing. I mean, if I can stop anyone from becoming a heroin addict it's a good thing.

"That's why I even denied it when it was quite obvious that it was true. I just didn't want to have that kind of effect on young kids. I felt really guilty about that, I thought, God, if it gets out it's just going to be so awful, because I might be responsible for some little kid dying or something. I do think about things like that, I really do genuinely. I'm 25, I'm an adult. A lot of people might look at me and think, well you aren't very much of an adult if you get involved with heroin, and it is a dangerous thing to do. But I am aware of my responsibilities."

"It was a complete lie. It wasn't true and there's no need for me to tell you it wasn't true if it was, because it's all out now. I could tell you what I've done until I'm blue in the face, I could name every drug and every incident, but that just wasn't true."

On June 10th, 1986, The Mirror ran a front page story in which the photographer David Levine alleged that George had a serious cocaine problem. He described a photo session at which George begged and persuaded him to get him some coke. George maintains the whole thing was a fabrication and was "set up" between Levine and a Fleet Street journalist. According to George's version of events, it was Levine who asked George to get him cocaine rather than the other way around. After being pestered, he finally agreed, although he says it is against his principles to get drugs for other people ("what I do is one thing, but I don't push to other people"). In any case, George says he never takes cocaine.

"It really doesn't agree with me. I have taken it and it makes me very paranoid, I hate it. I'm such a sort of electric person anyway, I'm like a sort of walking fuzzbox, I don't need things like that, uppers. I suppose that's why I got into heroin so much, because it's lethargic, it's the opposite of what I am really as a person.

"When the story broke loose I couldn't believe it. I've done so much to help David Levine, I can't tell you. He called my answerphone after that whole saga and sort of said, 'Hi, it's David Levine' and put the phone down. So I called him and said, 'What are you doing, calling me? What's your excuse?' He just came out with some mumbo jumbo, so I went mad. I said, 'If I ever see you, I'll kill you' and I will if I ever see him, I'll punch him straight in the face, 'cos he deserves it."

"I suppose in the back of my mind I knew the story would come out. I thought it would be somebody from my circle of friends rather than my brother, but there you go."

Throughout the rest of June speculation about George's drug taking continued. Culture Club cancelled their US tour and George appeared at the Clapham Common anti-apartheid concert and referred to himself as "Britain's favourite junkie." In the end Fleet Street got the story they were after, but from the least likely quarter. In a last-ditch effort to stop George taking heroin, his younger brother David rang

up Nick Ferrari at The Sun and handed him the whole story on a plate.

"I said I didn't want no money for it," David told me, "and they were down within fifteen minutes. I made their day, but then again they stabbed me in the back, because they wrote a really cruel article on 'The Dotty O'Dowds'. They wrote this pathetic article saying the whole family's crazy. I mean, you've been here, is there anything crazy about us?"

"You see, the trouble with Fleet Street is that they never had anything to get George on, *never*. He was too good for them. When I gave them the story, they fucking *lapped* it up. Newspapers *die* for things like that. They phoned me up and said, 'Look, are you sure you want to go through with this?' And I just said, 'I've told you all of it now. Even if I said no, you're not going to wipe it off your front page. I know where I stand, just run it.'

"The next night I couldn't get into my house, there were, like, forty people outside. I went two miles down the road to find a phone box and there were ten journalists standing outside it, it was ridiculous. George called me up and he left a really nice message on the answerphone (*laughs*). I think he called me a 'fucking cunt' twenty times and a 'bastard' about ten. I knew he didn't really mean it. He was upset – because it was made public, he could lose a lot of money, he *should* be upset about it – but your health is far more important than that.

"The thing I regret is that the whole family has just been dragged through a pile of shit, all of us. I was the one who gave this newspaper something they dreamed of and they still dragged me through the shit. I'm not saying I was naive about newspapers, I did know what they were all about. I don't even regret that I gave it to The Sun, because they're all the same. Afterwards, The Mirror said, 'You should have given it to us, we'd have done it so sympathetically.' It's bollocks. They all sensationalise everything. Honestly there was about fifteen percent of truth in the whole of it. I didn't put a time limit on George's life, I don't know anything about drugs, all I know is they're not very good for you. But this 'eight weeks to live' – they just pulled that out of the air, how much he was doing a day, all that, it was all crap. But that's newspapers for you."

"I remember opening my windows and seeing TV cameras and just bursting into tears. I went mad."

Once the story was out, the pressure was really on. George ran.

"Outside my house there was like four TV cameras, lights and *thousands* of press and I just thought, my God, what's happened? I just *freaked*. It was like a nightmare, it was really horrible. I had to climb out of

the back of the house and just *run*. I ran away and found somewhere to hide and just hid for days.

"I suppose I just thought, God, everyone's going to hate me. Because heroin is such a *dirty* drug, it's such a filthy drug. It's not like cocaine, that's quite glamorous to a lot of people. You know, it's alright for rock stars to take cocaine, everyone does it, apparently – I must be one of the few that don't – but heroin is such a bad drug and so I just thought people would hate me. But the response has been great, people have been really nice and I suppose I wasn't expecting that.

"Some of the letters I've had, they're *really* sweet, kids of seven years old saying, 'I love you, please don't kill yourself'. You just think, God almighty. I just get so shocked by it, you know, how much of an affect you have on people, it's frightening, it really is. I was in the middle of my treatment and I got this pile of letters and I just cried and cried and cried. It sounds like Lassie or something, but it was *awful*. I just thought, oh no, these people are so fucking kind, I don't fucking *deserve* people like this. One girl turned up at court with £16,000 in her bag to bail me out. I looked at her and I said, 'You're *crazy*, you *mustn't* do things like that.' "

"The police were just police. What can I say?"

On July 12th, George went of his own volition to Harrow police station, where he was questioned and charged with possessing heroin.

"They took away my braces, my belt, my shoelaces and threw me in a cell. I was halfway through my treatment and I was very ill and I just cried. I felt so guilty in that police cell. I just kept thinking, God, so many people must have had their heads kicked in in this cell, and there was I eating breakfast minus shoelaces and belt and braces, it was just such a contradiction. It was like, 'What's going on? Why am I in the cell? Why are they giving me breakfast? What are they trying to do?' I mean, that's their game – confusion. They just confuse you and then they ask you questions and try and trick you. 'So when did you see Marilyn freebasing?' And you know damn well you never said that. They try and catch you out.

"I mean, they were asking me questions about Marilyn. I just thought, what the *fuck's* this got to do with me? 'Does Marilyn take cocaine?' I said, 'I couldn't give a shit if Marilyn sticks chandeliers up his arse, don't ask *me* questions about Marilyn.' But apparently Marilyn had told them things about me that they didn't wanna *know*, they couldn't shut him up. You know, he was telling them about my sex life. But I can't hate Marilyn and I won't. Everyone I know, my mother, my closest friends, they all say to me I'm mad, but I love the guy. I really do love him and I can't hate him and I'm not going to. I mean, this is the worst thing he's ever done, I think, he was going to give evidence against me.

"I *had* to give evidence, 'cos everyone had given evidence against *me*. *Everyone*. All my good friends had spilled the beans. *None* of them wasted any time in telling everything, so there was no point in me going along lying. You see, that's the thing, I could have wasted a lot of time. I'm *not* guilty, I was never caught in possession, *ever*. Never would I be that stupid. And I *didn't* want to convict dealers. The two dealers that I used to get my gear off were busted and I did not want to give evidence against them. I just thought I was responsible, not them. It wasn't their fault I took heroin. I thought they were my friends. But one thing you learn is that no dealer is a friend. They're all scum. I mean, they went in and the first thing they did was they said the most disgusting things about me, I mean, immediately. They didn't keep their mouths shut at all. I know, I read their statements. They said I was running an international drugs ring and that my money was being used to sell drugs around the world, so it was a case of me or them.

"I could have easily said not guilty, because if they can charge people with possession when they never found me with anything, they can go to any clinic in England and pull every addict out and say, 'Right, you're charged with possession,' it's stupid."

"When my brother Kevin wasn't granted bail, the press came running out of the court, cheering, they were so happy. 'No bail! No bail!' They were like a bunch of kids, they really enjoyed it. They are vultures, there's no two ways about it."

On July 29th, George was fined £250 amid protests that the sentence was too lenient.

"For a month before my hearing I just felt obliterated, everything was just horrible. I wasn't treated like a normal person, of course not, I'm Boy George, but my family went through hell. I suppose in a way the judge was just saying, 'I'm treating you as a normal person today, I will treat you as I would treat any other heroin addict and not as if you were Boy George.'

"Fleet Street did their best to get me convicted. There's so much hypocrisy about drugs. I'm telling you, I was at a smack dealer's once and there was a guy from The Sun there. I freaked. He said, 'I'm from The Sun,' and I thought, oh no, this is a story. And he was buying smack! I mean, I won't mention his name, but the cheek they have to scorn me and yet they don't even know when one of their own reporters is doing gear.

"I'm such an optimist, I'm a *fool* in a lot of ways. When all this stuff was going on, I *kept* on opening my bloody door to Fleet Street journalists just thinking one ►

► of them has got to be nice. But *none* of them are nice, they're all fucking bastards, they really are. That sounds like I'm categorising, but I've yet to see otherwise. I mean, I've been so good to them, so hospitable, even when they've come and asked me *disgusting* questions and they've been rude about my family. That's why I was so upset with David. He was worried about me, he thought I was killing myself, fair enough. The only reason I'm annoyed with him is because it gave those bastards an opportunity to interfere with *my* family, and really at the end of the day they're all I've got – they're my people, my family and it's *personal*.

"I hate the idea of my family being involved in my work, it's a separate thing. I love my parents, I really do. They're very special, my mother especially. It was so heartrending the things she said to me, you know, she said, 'I'll die before I let you die', things like that. Even thinking about it makes me shudder. She really meant it. She kept turning up at my house, she was crying all the time and just saying, 'Please, please stop.'"

"I became the boy next door, a sort of potato print of the Queen Mother. You know, I'd just become this sort of thing. And / as a person ceased to exist. 'Boy George' was just somebody else that other people had ideas about and expectations of and I just had nothing to do with it, I went along with it."

Waiting for George to turn up, I'd watched a video compiled during the Culture Club tour of Australia a couple of years back. It was quite nostalgic. There was George being interviewed on every chat show and pop show imaginable and those same old questions kept being asked, 'Why do you wear women's clothes?' and stuff like that. George was grinning away and quite clearly loving it all. But that was the old Boy George, Boy George the Popstar. The new Boy George is something of a realist.

"I suppose I'm ruder now. There was a period when I played the role 24 hours a day and I wouldn't be rude to anyone for fear of losing a record sale. Well I got to the stage where I just thought, 'I can't stick it any more, fuck it, 43p down the drain, I don't give a damn.' It sounds like I'm being selfish and it sounds like I don't care. I do care, but I suddenly realised that I was putting a lot more effort into it than other people were. For instance, the rest of the band or even the fans.

"There was a period when I actually *believed* that certain kids belonged to me. I was so gullible, I really believed they were my little clan and that I owed them

something and that it was special and that I was more important to them than anything, and I wasn't. There was a group of about twelve girls who used to sit outside my house and I got so involved with those kids that in the end it was almost as if I was a fan of *them*, it was like a role reversal and it started to get really weird. And then they suddenly went off me and I was so upset. I thought, God, what are you doing here, you can't get that involved with people. I think then the whole realisation of the fraud of pop dawned on me. I just got disillusioned. I really *believed* it, I used to sit in writing letters to kids, I was so dedicated to being a popstar, and, I mean, I was a really good one.

"There were certain elements of the whole thing that were just totally fraud, *fake*. It was gradually dawning on me all the time and then I suddenly just got really pissed off with it and I thought, well this is it, I'm not putting up with it any more. About three months ago, when *Move Away* went into the charts, loads of fans that had deserted me turned up at the airport and I told them to fuck off. That's how upset I got. I just said, 'Get lost! Where have you been for the last year?' It sounds so petulant, a *real* star would never do something like that (*laughs*), but I just never saw myself as a real star. I've always seen myself as a person with feelings and I always show them.

"I'll never understand why a bloody good record like *God Thank You Woman* didn't get into the charts. I think it's a brilliant record and I'll fuck anybody who says it isn't, I'll fuck 'em all, I don't give a shit. And our album's really brilliant, I don't give a fuck what anybody says, I'm *adamant* about that, it's a great album. I put my *heart* into that album and I put a lot of effort into it. I think the problem really with the album was that we didn't tour. I mean, I was well into going out on tour, but obviously with my physical state we couldn't have. I was just fooling myself. 'Let's go out on tour' – smacked out of my head.

"You see, I love music and I love singing and I love playing and what happened to Culture Club is that we just stopped seeing each other on a working level. We stopped rehearsing, we stopped writing together. It all became strategy, you know, schedule, it's so ugly. And that just pissed me off and that's probably why I went off and took loads of drugs and did whatever I fucking felt like doing. It was like being in Genesis and I don't want to be in a band like that.

"There was a point in my career when everything I sang about was true. Like *Victims* was *totally* true and it was about something that was happening to me. But I just stopped doing that and I want to start doing that again, like singing my problems. That's what I'm good at – when I'm singing a song that I mean, that's when it really comes through. I think the *best* stuff has to have *some* kind of reality, even if it's only what's stuffed down Morten Harket's trousers or whatever. I mean, everybody wants to know what's down there, don't they? I do, certainly.

"I love Prince I'm a *fan* of Prince. I could never devote myself to, like, learning dance routines and getting a whole number worked out for a stage show. I do envy him, he's so good, everybody jumping at the same time, do you know what I mean? I'd love a band of show-offs, and that's the problem with Culture Club, there's one frontman – me – and three wimps. I'm sorry, it sounds like I'm being rude about them but I always say to Jon, 'Please be a star. Show off!' I want them to be in the limelight.

"You see, you have to fight for these things, you *have* to fight. That's the one thing they don't understand, the rest of my band, they don't understand that these things don't get given to you. No one else made me into Boy George, the lovable character, I did. I pushed and I shoved and stepped on a lot of people's toes and *made* myself heard and that's what you've gotta do, otherwise nobody's going to be interested in you.

"I've had some really wonderful times, some really uplifting times. Probably you'll think they're trivial, but for me they're all wonderful experiences. Like playing live, you're singing a slow song with just a piano and everything goes quiet, I get so carried away. I start thinking I'm Billie Holliday. You know, I get elated very easily. I might sound like an awkward, aggravating, stuck-up bastard, but actually at the end of the day I'm very easy to please. So there have been a lot of times in Culture Club when I've had a great time and I'm *still* having a great time, I'm still looking forward to things. There's something about my heroin addiction, maybe it was a good thing in a sense, because now that I'm out of that, I keep saying to myself, God almighty, look what I haven't done. I just think about how much I've lost from it and how much now I can gain if I stay off it and just *persist* and get on with my work."

When we'd finished, George showed me some of the thousands of letters and cards he's received. They weren't all from fans, a lot were from ordinary people who seemed really and truly concerned about him. There was even a telegram from Donny Osmond. You can laugh at me if you want, but it just struck me that if there's one popstar in the whole world who actually deserves this kind of affection, it's George O'Dowd.

We'll end with a joke.

"I've been tempted to make jokes about it all the time, but I can't be flippant. I'd love to turn round to someone from Fleet Street and say, 'Nuns have habits, so why can't I?'"

George is still George.

