

On the Record

A COUPLE OF BAD-BOY RENAISSANCE MEN FROM WILDLY DIFFERENT GENERATIONS—DEEJAY-TURNED-PRODUCER AND GRAMMY WINNER **MARK RONSON** AND PUNK AVATAR AND STYLE SVENGALI **MALCOLM McLAREN**—ARE NOT AS DIFFERENT AS YOU MAY THINK. FOR ONE, THEY ARE MAD AS HELL AND THEY'RE NOT GOING TO TAKE IT ANYMORE. BUT THEY SURE ARE FUNNY, TOO, AND DEAD-ON ABOUT THE STATE OF MUSIC, THE RECORD BUSINESS, AND THE LACK OF RADIO PLAY FOR NEW BANDS THAT MATTER IN THE STATES. HEAR THEM BICKER. IT'S A DELIGHT. **By Nick Haramis**

Today's music is sold by the yard," says Malcolm McLaren, exhaling deliberately as he scans the gold and platinum mounted Lily Allen records that threaten to suffocate the congested waiting room in Mark Ronson's SoHo-based Allido Records studio.

McLaren is here to meet with Ronson, who, a few nights later, will go on to win two Grammy Awards, and later still, a BRIT Award for his chart-topping debut album *Version*. "Finding someone like Mark—finding authenticity—is like trying to find a ruby in a field of tin." McLaren checks his watch with flourish.

Ronson is late, his phone apparently inoperable, and McLaren doesn't give the impression of a man one wants to keep waiting. After all, this is the same fellow who dated Lauren Hutton and fathered a child with punk princess Vivienne Westwood. This is the man who once tried to sabotage Queen Elizabeth II's Silver Jubilee by encouraging the Sex Pistols to perform "God Save the Queen" from the Thames. This is the man who, when *Vogue* underlings would venture into his London clothing shop, screamed, "For God's sake, get *out* of here! Just the *smell* of you!"

On this particular afternoon, the 62-year-old legend is genial and calm. His Larry Fine poof of red hair has been replaced by the overall look of a gentleman comfortable with his age and stature. As we wait, opposite one another on leather banquettes, he admits that it was friend Julie Taymor who convinced him to take a gamble on a stage musical with Disney's Buena Vista. He discusses with self-deprecating honesty the fear he felt when showing his artwork for the first time at a collective show in Chelsea. "I've always been interested in naïve '60s-era sex films," he explains of the passion that currently eats into most of his spare time. "This project I'm now working on is about showing people just about to have sex, before they do—the simple art of foreplay." His multimedia works will be unveiled at this June's Art Basel in Switzerland. And one of the pieces will be splayed across Times Square in collaboration with MTV. He seems nervous and excited. He's also getting a touch impatient.

The whole *raison d'être* for this conversation is to chronicle a passing of the torch, from one producer-turned-artist to another. Problem is, there's no one to pass to. Hanging thick in the air is the understanding, the obvious irony, that old and new are nothing alike. Or so we thought.

They finally meet, and here's what they had to say to each other.

MARK RONSON: What's the worst thing you've ever done to a hotel room?

MALCOLM McLAREN: I was never that into wrecking hotel rooms. I don't know whether they were worth wrecking in the first place.

MR: When I throw something on the floor, I'll wait until no one's looking and then put it back—like a pillow on the couch. I don't know where that comes from. Did you have a privileged upbringing? I sure did.

MM: I was a war baby. My grandparents raised me. It was very similar to the way Eric Clapton was brought up. Nobody lived beyond what they needed to survive. That was the nature of that world, and I guess that's when pop culture started to surface. It came out of America and it began to spread into London through radio, the jukebox, and the delivery of music by merchant seamen. All of those things changed me radically, because they brought around a sense of liberation—real sexual liberation—and the belief that everything was possible, that your life could change.

MR: But with that liberty must have come a lot of uncertainty?

MM: I was throwing caution to the wind, entering a new culture that wasn't about necessity, but complete desire. We wanted everything and we wanted it now. It was a real moment.

MR: There have been some huge milestones in music since then—punk and hip-hop, for example—but I have a theory that all great music was written between 1965 and 1972. I think that's why I go back to those eras, why people really



LO-FI: McLaren and Ronson at Ronson's Allido Records studio, New York.

PHOTO BY PAUL COSTELLO

“The wonderful thing about the Amy Winehouse record—and don’t take this as a derogatory remark—is that it has the sound of the amateur in it... I’d say punk was the glorification of the amateur.” —MALCOLM McLAREN

love Amy Winehouse. She reminds people of that time. And it’s not just some retro Lenny Kravitz thing. She conjures the feeling of that era. What was the first rock outfit you put together?

MM: A blue lamé suit. I must have been nine years old. I remember I’d have to cross the road really fast because of the Teddy Boys, who walked in groups and would stretch across the entire pavement while I made a beeline to the other side of the street. I remember their long, mean, hungry, desperate look. It was very similar to the look of Elvis Presley, before he went into the army and got sugarcoated as this good-looking all-American boy with rouge cheeks. He used to have much more of that outlaw spirit that we all found so seductive. But in the ‘60s, his look became terribly suburban and healthy-looking.

MR: I think part of the reason why people still buy records in England is that, like Elvis, music adopted from other cultures excites them. You go into a shop in London today and there’s still some manic guy behind the counter, ripping 12-inch records off the wall.

MM: There are shops like that here in New York.

MR: But they’re mostly selling old Zombies albums. America, with its terrible radio—and TV being what it is—has literally eradicated any remaining enthusiasm for contemporary pop music. There’s no way to get people into the record shop here. *The Sun* in London—which I guess is equivalent to the *New York Post*—actually writes about the Arctic Monkeys. Can you imagine if you picked up “Page Six” and read something about Franz Ferdinand? You’d spit your Corn Flakes out. All you hear about now is Mischa Barton and Paris Hilton. But I digress. Tell me about working with the World Famous Supreme Team in 1982.

MM: That all happened because I walked down 126th Street. I was staying at a hotel on 57th Street, and I decided to go for a walk in Harlem. There was this humongous African-American guy walking toward me, ambling left to right on the pavement, and he had on this bright yellow T-shirt that had “Never Mind the Bollocks” on it. And I thought, Fuck, what’s a big black dude doing wearing a Sex Pistols T-shirt? So I decided to point out to him, stopping him in his tracks, that I had something to do with it. He asked me to go to a party with him that night. I said, Who should I ask for when I arrive? And he said, “My name’s Afrika Bambaataa.” I thought, Wow, what a fucking name. That night, I arrived in a complete wasteland of debris. I could see in the distance a load of black bobbing heads coming toward me.

MR: It sounds like you’re describing the south of France.

MM: Bambaataa was standing in the back, and I decided to let everyone know in this crowd—a crowd I felt very estranged from—that this guy was my friend. I went to the record company the next day and told them that this guy was going to change music in America. They thought I was completely crazy. One year later, I came back to New York and there he was, being played on the streets. Shortly after that, I met a group who called themselves the World Famous Supreme Team. I made a record with

them called *Buffalo Gals Back to Skool*. It was really the beginning of me entering the world as an artist rather than a manager.

MR: For me, I was playing guitar in a band and I fell completely in love with hip-hop, and said, Fuck this, I’d rather deejay. I remember my stepdad [Mick Jones, formerly of the Clash] saying, “Well, this deejay thing is interesting, but when are you going to go back to playing guitar in a band?” Early on, I was spinning at these little bars in the East Village. It was a mix of drug dealers, a few pretty girls, and people wanting to dance. They were predominantly black clubs. All of a sudden, though, they were getting bigger, and I was drawing people like Puffy and Biggie and Jay-Z. It felt cool to have a proper uptown crowd meeting the skateboard kids and artists.

MM: I’ve always liked the idea of people making music from other people’s music. Managing the Sex Pistols, they rifled every riff from ABBA to Rod Stewart to the Beatles. Everybody wants to be involved in the process. They want to roll up their sleeves, get their hands dirty. They want to sweat a bit. They do want to dig into the ruins, if you like. I think that’s why live performances become so incredibly exciting.

MR: I’ve been on tour for the past seven months, which is weird, because I haven’t picked up a guitar and gone onstage since I was 16 years old. When creating a record, the turntable lets you play all the instruments, but onstage, things come to life.

MM: The wonderful thing about the Amy Winehouse record—and don’t take this as a derogatory remark—is that it has the sound of the amateur in it. It’s the mistakes you hear on records and in concert that you ultimately covet. They bring life into the actual experience of listening to music. And I hear that on your records a lot, actually.

MR: That’s probably because I was drunk when I was playing it.

MM: That’s kind of what punk tried to do too, in a different way. Punk was an attack upon the process, the corporatization of music. That’s what we hated. I’d say punk was the glorification of the amateur. It was about giving people the right to make their own mistakes.

MR: America now believes that its audience wants to listen to, you know, contest winners. Years ago, Q-Tip from A Tribe Called Quest and I were trying to think of a name for this weekly party, and the only thing we could think of was *Authentic Shit*, which plays on *Expensive Shit* [an album by Afro-beat pioneer Fela Kuti]. But it also meant that whatever you heard at the party—if it was rock or rap or whatever—was authentic.

MM: And that’s exactly why the globalization of the music industry failed so miserably. It’s probably why the CD was ultimately thrown to the wind. The CD was such an extremely horrible, inauthentic invention, one that removed vinyl from the industry as much as possible because studio heads hated artists having control over the manufacturing of their own material. When CDs were first invented, they were protected like a guarded secret. No one was supposed to know how these things were made. I remember those very words by the president, I think his name was something Davis, Clive Davis [Chairman and CEO of the RCA Music Group]. “No one shall ever know,” he said. Fuck, how wrong was that asshole?