

Best of BLITZ



**Tim Hulse met Billy Idol
(and also Billy's mum
Mrs Broad) in New York**

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BILLY IDOL was born William Broad in Stanmore, Middlesex, on November 30th, 1955. At eighteen, he went to Sussex University, where he lasted one year of an English course. At twenty, he was part of the 'Bromley Contingent' who were the shock troops of what was later seen as the Punk Rock Explosion. He formed Generation X with Tony James and in 1978 their first album was released. At the bottom of the list of credits on the back of the sleeve it said 'NO SESSION

MUSICIANS'. On the front of the sleeve was a photograph by Gered Mankowitz which proved that Generation X were by far the prettiest punks around. They had a few hit singles, they appeared on Top Of The Pops, the backlash quickly followed. Generation X became Gen X. By the time they reached the third album it was obvious that the cause was lost. Billy Idol set out for New York. He got himself signed up to the same management company that handles Kiss and began a solo career. Through a combination

of backbreaking tours and a realisation of the power of MTV, he got himself back in the race. His second solo album, *Rebel Yell*, is now double platinum. As he told me himself, Billy Idol is big in America, big in Germany, big in Italy, big in Australia, New Zealand, Canada, Hong Kong, in fact big just about everywhere apart from Britain. In September he's coming over personally to show us where we've been going wrong. The NME boys are probably sharpening the knives at this very minute . . .



Sweet WILLIAM

● Interview by Tim Hulse ● Photographs by Richard Croft

"Look, Billy," I said. "I wrote my questions on an aeroplane sick bag."

"That's appropriate," he said, and laughed. "I write songs on things like that."

That's appropriate, I thought, and smiled.

We did the pictures first. Billy was really wired and it was hard to get him to stay still. It was practically impossible to make him stop talking. He speaks with a gruff London accent and he was slurring his words quite a lot. Like I said, he was really wired. Sometimes he was talking to us, but most of the time he was just talking. He was ranting. It was hugely entertaining. Later, during the interview, he began perspiring heavily, although the room was quite cool and the rain was pouring down outside. He couldn't stay still in his seat. He'd put his feet on the table in front of him, then take them down again, keep changing position on the sofa. When I listened to the tape afterwards it was full of clunks and jangles as he writhed around.

"Everyone's got such a false idea about America. And New York's not even America anyway, Jesus Christ, it's Brixton or something. I love London and I love New York and they're the only two places I'll ever live. I won't live in London because of the police. The SPG. You walk down the street and they're on you like a ton of bricks. I got off the bus once and they stopped me. They searched me. You're ten times more likely to get clap in England than you are in America. We went on tour here for nine and a half months and I didn't get it once. You go on tour in England for ten days and you get it twice. I'm not an ex-patriot, 'cos I was never a patriot. I can't wait to play there. Even if it's Liverpool Eric's, the old beer and sick, I'm coming to play there. I don't give a shit. I'll get up at the old Hope & Anchor. I did before, I'll do it again. It's my cousin's wedding on Saturday and they've got a band, so I'll get up and sing *White Wedding*. I got up with the Holiday Inn band at Asbury, New Jersey. I don't give a fuck. Come to the show, folks. You don't need that much money. Come

and see a rock'n'roll outfit. You haven't seen a rock'n'roll outfit. Well, U2 say they are. They are, actually, I suppose. They say they are, that's what I like, thank God they're not frightened to say it. I *did* drop my pants in a restaurant. These girls were saying something, so I said, 'OK, here you are, come on!' Then this guy came up and he reckoned I stood there saying, 'I'm a bigshot, I'm from England.' I mean, come on. If you're from England, you just say, 'I'm English'. You don't bother with the 'bigshot', do you? English people are like that. They say, 'I'm from England.' Anybody who's English would know that I couldn't have said that. The Americans probably wouldn't know."

Billy calls his music rock'n'roll. A more exact description would be 'Eighties Disco Rock'. He has valuable allies in the shape of guitarist Steve Stevens and more especially producer Keith Forsey, who is the Trevor Horn of the USA. Maybe the comparison is appropriate – when you think about it, the dividing line between Billy Idol and Frankie Goes To Hollywood is a lot thinner than most people would like to believe. The Frankies have a better dress sense. Billy is the winner in the rebellion stakes.

Do you take your image seriously?

"No, I take my personality and person seriously. Image? I take *myself* seriously. My image is other people's perception of me. It's not mine. I don't think of an image."

But you have one. What is the image of Billy Idol?

"He's fun and he means it."

How do you stop Billy Idol sneering when he's having his picture taken? This was the question that had vexed Richard Croft during the flight to New York. I'd shown him all the pictures I had and Billy was looking 'mean' in every one. When Billy walked into the room, exactly two hours and forty minutes late, he was . . . sneering. As soon as he'd sat down in front of the camera, there it was again. That and a clenched fist. Eventually we got him to smile a couple of times. He thought it was a great joke and

said something about "Duran Duran pictures". We told him he had a nice smile. He said he thought the sneer "looks good". Later, he asked Richard to take a picture of him with his mother, and he got her to clench her fist just like him. "Rebel Yell. That's the one, isn't it, dear?" she said.

What would you do if people tried to put pressure on you to change your image?

"I'd say fuck off, spray my hair doubly spiky and do my sneer even more. I have fun while I do things. It's *fun*, rock'n'roll! Half of these other people are in show business. I think showbusiness is very boring. It's not a joke at all. What's exciting, really, about Ronnie Corbett? What *really* is fucking exciting about that *twat* on Breakfast TV, that Scottish queen or whatever he is, I mean, God, he drives me up the wall. That's showbusiness, it's boring. Rock'n'roll's exciting. What can you say? At least I say something. At least I don't just *whimper*. I don't give a shit about posing. Posing? Fuck that. I don't pose. I'm like this naturally. I'm like this and I don't care. I don't have to do anything for anybody. It's me."

Do you mean you're a natural poser?

"No. I'm naturally *me!*"

His heroes are either predictable or dumb – Brando, Dean, Stamp, Morrison, Wagner, Liszt, Burton "and Jesus Christ, he was pretty good. He was a bit of a laugh, a bit of a revolutionary. Judas was a bit wild, too, wasn't he?" Above all the rest, there's Elvis.

"I'd *love* to end up like Elvis. Of course. To be the king of rock'n'roll? Fantastic. I think people love having a stereotype and saying how awful, poor old Elvis and no one quite likes to think that the real reason he ended up like he did was the lack of people who really cared about this nice guy. How the fuck can he help it if he gets fat? I'm *proud* of Elvis Presley, I'm proud that the bastard bothered to keep singing when he had to take all those drugs to deal with some of the scum people around him who ▶



were just parasites. Imagine the guy standing there looking at thirty to fifty people he's keeping alive who are all looking at him thinking 'You've gotta keep working to pay us.'

Billy's mother is a very well-spoken and utterly charming lady. She calls Billy William, or Will, and talks about Billy Idol as if he were someone totally different. Of course he is. The only magazine she reads is the Sunday Telegraph supplement "and Rolling Stone when Billy Idol's on the cover." She told us she lives in Bromley, Kent. "The Bromley Contingent," she said, and laughed. Billy is intensely fond of her and tends to act like a little boy in her presence. His mother was only over in New York for a week. I told Billy I hoped he'd tidied his flat. "Oh no, of course not, I made it extra dirty. I'll have to get her to go round there . . ."

"Here's some pictures of me in magazines. Look."

"Oh, that's a great picture, that one."

"Do you like that, mum?"

"It's great, isn't it? It's lovely."

In the flesh, Billy doesn't look anything like Kim Wilde. His face is a lot thinner and a lot more drawn than most of his pictures would have you believe. There's not a trace of pink or brown in his complexion. He still dresses very much The Punk, all in black with God knows how many belts, buckles and rings. And he doesn't so much walk as stalk — head bent forward, arms held out slightly from the sides completely immobile, fists clenched. Look at any self-respecting punk and he'll have that same stalk.

"I've got a punk rock attitude. Punk rock was never a style of music, it was an attitude. I always thought it was being yourself, doing exactly what you wanted, whenever you wanted, for the right reasons, making music *you* want, *you* like, and you only do the music under your own terms, for your own reasons, and it's gotta be *your* music, it's gotta be *your* ideas, it's gotta be *your* inspiration, you can't be doing it for money, you've gotta be doing everything because you like it. And that's what the punk rock attitude is — you've gotta be really willing to tell the truth and tell people to get screwed."

Billy was never a football hooligan. When he was seven he used to send Spurs pictures to his cousin Dave in exchange for pictures of The Beatles. He used to think Jimmy Greaves was fantastic and remembers Eusebio, George Best and Bobby Charlton. He reckons football stopped being exciting after England won the World Cup in 1966. "Now you just see a lot of haircuts."

"I don't really like sport. I don't watch sport. I like Kung Fu, which is a mind, body and spirit sport. It's a defence sport, it's a way of defending yourself against the morons."

Do you often have to do that?

"Well everybody does, I think."

Billy Idol is twenty-nine.

Do you think you'll reach an age when you'll have to pack all this in?

"I'll carry on singing and playing the guitar."

In the same way?

"Yeah. Yeah. Rock'n'roll's for ever. I don't know why these people say you *can't* do it for ever. I think that's silly. They're talking about it like it's a thing at school."

Isn't it connected with youth?

"No. What about old men of sixty singing the blues?"

But they're not dressing up and jumping around on stage.

"No, but James Brown does."

He doesn't look too good doing it, though.

"He's not bad. I don't know what you expect. People get old. Personally I really admire those people continuing. I'm gonna do it just to fuck 'em, you know?"

Do you ever worry about losing your looks?

". . . No. I'm sorry."

I don't believe you.

"Well, I've been doing this for fuck knows how many years. I gave up eating meat when I was eighteen and Gene October said to me, 'In ten years' time you'll look shit.' It's ten years later."

What if you suddenly started to go bald?

"I'd get a good wig."

A spiky one?

"Yeah, a really good one! But I'm *not* going bald, that's the point. Why worry about that shit? I've been dyeing my hair for years — why should I worry about it?"

Would you like to have children?

"Yeah. I already could have had two. One would be ten years old and the other would be about five, I think. Yeah, I'd like to have kids one day. I've just gotta work now so I can be with them. I don't want to be the sort of dad where the mother's always saying, 'Wait till your father comes home', 'cos in my case it'd be about six months before I come home. They'd have good fun, I think, with me. I mean, fancy me being a dad, eh? What a laugh. I'd be saying, 'Ere, do you want a joint or something?' or 'Ere, listen to this record. 'Ere, there's a good TV programme at 11-30, you can stay up to watch that!'"

Your kids might have real problems trying to rebel. They'd probably start wearing suits just to annoy you.

"Yeah!"

Would you get married?

"No. Only to legitimize the kids."

Are you romantic?

"Yeah, *very* romantic. I love women. I always talk to women. I'm Sagittarian. I like giving women nice things."

Do you buy flowers?

"Yeah, I've started doing that sort of stuff, I've learnt that's a good one, you know? They love flowers. Flowers get you fucking everywhere. Women are very complicated, I realise. You've gotta remember they're women."

Do you prefer women to men?

"Oh yeah."

As people, I mean.

"I like both men and women. I'm definitely a man's man, but I love women."

Do you think you're a bit of a lad?

"Oh, definitely. Well I've put myself in a good position to be one."

Some of you (Lots of you? All of you?) may be thinking that Billy Idol is a jerk. Well if that's the case, I feel I must tell you that he thinks you're jerks too. I don't think Billy Idol is a jerk, well not a complete jerk at any rate. I'd like to think that he has some idea of self-parody about what he does. Certainly he's worked hard to get where he is today and for that alone he believes he deserves a little respect. He's probably right. And he loves his mother, so he can't be all bad.

Can he?