

# Wham, Bam, Thank You Glam

## Sweet vs. Slade on Record and Film

by Mark Morris

In the early to mid 1970s, all the young dudes across England were given a one-way ticket to a destination where musical idols were adorned with eye shadow and lip gloss, gravity-defying stack-heeled boots and strange garments that bore something of a resemblance to those worn in old science fiction movies.

The movement was called Glam Rock and it was a distinctly alternative route away from the self-reflective, denim-clad troubadours and boogie rockers filling up the musical roadways at the time. While the movement's fashions radically changed the accepted norms of sexual ambiguity and androgyny for males in and out of the entertainment industry, the music that accompanied the scene was almost wholly indebted to rock's earliest beginnings. It was fast, fun and energetic and, perhaps most importantly, provided a means of escape where the performer and listener could suddenly become "someone else". While the style polarized many fixtures of the entertainment industry at the time, some were more accepting of the change and incorporated some of its elements into their own acts.

John Lennon said it best when he affectionately quipped "Glam is just rock n' roll with lipstick."

To be sure, the names most frequently associated with the 1970s musical phenomenon known as Glam Rock, or Glitter Rock, are those of David Bowie, Marc Bolan and Bryan Ferry. Surely, what propelled those names to the heights of rock royalty was that they were largely responsible for starting the movement in the first place but also that they were able to extend their recognition from their original starting points and successes in England to varying levels of worldwide fame.

Most importantly, they were extremely original, talented and influential voices with an image and physical presence to match their musical abilities.

Yet there are many other names that have gone forgotten in that particular musical form's history. While Bowie and Bolan were immediately hailed as the kings of Glam, other groups at the time managed to make a distinct impact within the kingdom while never attempting to make any claims to the crown (or in this case, tiara).

Perhaps no two bands of that era were more appreciated in their homeland and less recognized by American music listeners (then and now) than the groups **Slade** and **Sweet**. With the domestic release of two separate DVDs

and a CD collection, perhaps those bands will finally start getting the recognition that eluded them during their lifetimes.

The careers of Slade and Sweet had many coincidental parallels that, in a sense, pitted the two groups against one another in direct competition for the love of the fans, for chart success and to reach new heights of outrageous fashion.

Both Slade and Sweet started their careers in the late 1960s and were experienced performers by the time they finally reached their individual high levels of success in the early '70s. Both groups truncated their original names for greater impact (Sweet originally called itself Sweetshop while Slade had originally saddled itself with the unwieldy moniker Ambrose Slade). Each group was comprised by four unique characters who helped create a greater whole and added to the wide appeal and approachability of the group's image. Both bands were controlled by teams of managers and songwriters at the start of their careers before obtaining success with their own self-penned material and production.

Most importantly, both groups also created some outstanding music that deserves to be explored and rediscovered by new generations.

By the time Slade first tasted chart success in the early '70s, the group had struggled to make a name for itself for half a decade. After starting its career as The N' Betweens (and studying under the tutelage of the notorious music industry hipster/svengali Kim Fowley) the group underwent a series of stylistic and musical changes before stumbling upon a final recipe for success that was as attributable to the group's fashion choices and image as it was to the band's outstanding music. Lead singer and guitarist Noddy Holder sported a pair of gigantic mutton-chop sideburns, plaid trousers and a mirrored pilgrim's hat that contradicted every notion a front man was supposed to possess. Lead guitarist Dave Hill presented himself in alien fashions which prefigured Bowie's Ziggy Stardust alter ego by several months and a simply bizarre haircut that has never been rivaled since (a blend of bowl cut, fringe and mullet all rolled into one). Slade's rhythm section of drummer Don Powell and bassist Jim Lea looked as rough, weathered and worn as the thunderous sound that emanated from their instruments and seemed at odds with their constricting satin jackets and leotards. In all, the very look of the band gave the simultaneous impression of both flamboyant rock stardom and

comedic-charged camp.

As arresting as Slade's physical appearance was, it paled in comparison to the group's music. The combination of Holder's wailing, banshee-like vocals (I've often thought of it as akin to the screaming of a schoolgirl with a head cold), anthemic sing-along choruses and the unrelenting stomping rhythms of the band's songs finally proved a unique and startling sound at the time. The group's celebratory songs also stood out from the rest of the pack by employing creative use of the English language. By spelling out the names of their songs in a Cockney phonetic (ala "Look Wot You Dun" and "Gudbuy T'Jane") the group seemed to indicate that the material was too immediate and boisterous to be contained by anything as mundane as proper grammar or spelling. Slade would go on to reach remarkable levels of chart success over the years 1971-1974, racking up 17 Top 20 UK hits during their time.

Much of this material (such as "Cum on Feel the Noize" and "Mama Weer All Crazee Now") will be familiar to music listeners, thanks in part to the number of groups who have covered and made hits out of the material (namely Quiet Riot, The Runaways and Oasis). Yet despite the group's string of hits in England and influence on other groups, the band's material has never had an official release here in the States. This injustice has finally been remedied in the form of *Get Yer Boots On: The Best of Slade* (Shout! Factory). Containing 16 of the group's greatest hits, the collection is a marvel for those who have never heard the group and for fans seeking the proper reissue treatment of these long-ignored hitmakers.

Also helping to unveil the mystery of this British phenomenon is the DVD release of the band's 1975 cinematic debut *Flame* (Shout! Factory).

Many groups at the height of their careers will attempt to press their luck with a jump to the big screen. While concerts films and "behind the scenes" narratives are the safest bets, productions where musicians tempt the hands of fate by acting are a risky business. Remarkably, *Flame* combined both facets and managed to pull them off convincingly. First off, the members of Slade portray a fic-





tional group named Flame (so there's no real acting stretch there) a small-town band of working-class nobility who are thrust into the big time by the scheming hands of big business. The film follows the group's heady rise to fame and eventual disillusionment and exploitation. What is striking about the film is the bleak and sordid look at rock stardom taken by the narrative. Rather than the cheery approach depicted in films like *The Beatles' A Hard Day's Night*, *Flame* views the world of the music industry as a huge furnace which consumes lives and talents with unwavering ferocity. The cinematography is appropriately dark and murky for such a perspective, and the film possesses a stark quality that's far removed from the usual rockploitation fare (although it does contain some great musical moments). Performances from British character actors Johnny Shannon (who portrays a merciless, mafioso-style manager and agent) and from more celebrated thespians including Tom Conti, (in one of his first cinematic roles as an equally conniving but more respectable manager and businessman) all add to film's the appeal and believability.

Sadly, the public didn't see it that way. Perhaps anticipating a film that mirrored the good-time feel of the band's music and onstage image, *Flame* was not the energetic experience the public was hoping to witness and Slade's subsequent singles and releases starting disappearing from the charts.

However, *Flame* isn't all doom and gloom (any film with the toothsome visage of Slade guitarist Dave Hill bouncing around couldn't be anyway). There are some sweetly comedic moments throughout the film, particularly from Noddy Holder, which stick with the viewer as much as the film's somber resolution.

Speaking of comedic moments, the DVD contains a bonus hour-length interview with Holder that's quite a hoot (here's a fun drinking game for all you kids: take a shot everytime Holder uses the word "actually". They'll be rushing you to the hospital after the first 15 minutes).

The Sweet enjoyed much of the same success found by their imagined rivals, Slade. Less distinctly English sounding than Slade, Sweet also managed a greater level chart placement over here in the States. Yet even with the old chart placement here and there, the band's influence has gone largely ignored in recent years

Sweet's sound was an amalgam of bubblegum pop, proto metal and glitzy glam. Controlled by the powerhouse songwriting team of Nicky Chinn and Mike Chapman, the band's songs were ready-made for radio and possessed contagious choruses, piercingly high harmonies and well-crafted maximum guitar riffage. The band's hit-songs (like "Hellraiser" "Fox on the Run" and "Ballroom Blitz") ruled the British charts during the early-1970s.

Like Slade, the band's success was due as much to their image and fashions as the records they made. Comprised of vocalist Brian Connolly, bassist Steve Priest, guitarist Andy Scott and drummer Mick Tucker, Sweet took levels of glam-era campiness to even further heights

than their rivals. More conventionally good-looking than the odd-looking bunch that formed Slade, images of Sweet were destined to adorn the walls of young English girls even if the band had never recorded a note.

Yet the group's history was also one of a long, uphill battle with the record industry, and their discovery of elusive chart success came only after several years of disappointment, struggle and hard work.

Once the group had climbed their way to the top of the charts, the members of Sweet were naturally anxious to try their own hands at controlling their destiny... and that's when the trouble started.

A new DVD about the band, *Sweet - Glitz, Blitz and Hitz* (Music Video

Distributors/CREEM Magazine), chronicles the group's history through a series of interviews with Scott, Chinn and producer/manager Phil Wainman and uses promo films and television appearances to help understand the attraction to Sweet's visual and sonic hit machine. The DVD doesn't have much in the way of extras, but the content of the 90-minute program will tell you everything you need to know about the history and lasting legacy of this incredible group.

On disc, the band has fared better than Slade ever did with a series of "Greatest Hits" packages ably telling the band's musical story. But the smart money would be invested into picking up a copy of 1974's *Desolation Boulevard*. This U.S. compilation culled together the band's hits into one convincing package and included songs from both the Chapman/Chinn songwriting team and the band's self-penned originals into one must-have recording.





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