

Love still the drug

Suave Roxy Music frontman Bryan Ferry continues to personify the smoothest mixture of bad boy and perfect gentleman, writes **Sally Browne**

WHEN I call the Carlisle Hotel in New York, I don't have to ask for a pseudonym to protect the identity of this famous star, but am put through to him directly. No tour agent or publicist comes on the line, but a soft voice, which confirms I'm speaking to Bryan Ferry.

His speaking voice gives away his age, more than his looks or his music. And at 65, the suave, sophisticated and swoon-worthy singer of such hits as *Let's Stick Together* and *Love Is the Drug* can still make a girl's heart skip.

I'm unfashionably early, but that's good, I'm told, because Ferry has a lot going on. Last night he did *The Late Show with David Letterman*, today he has radio, the next day he has a live gig.

And in less than 24 hours, he'll be on a plane to Perth, the first stop in a series of Roxy Music concerts around Australia, which gets him into Brisbane on March 1.

It's a long flight, and he has stacked up the reading list. In the Ferry library is Patti Smith's memoir *Just Kids* and a book about Lou Reed. He's just finished one on Keith Richards.

"I don't normally read (music biographies) funnily enough," he says. "It's just a coincidence that there's been a few out recently that I wanted to read. I got a few as presents actually. But I do like reading biographies anyway, but quite often 18th century or your older things. I like reading about Versailles and French history. It's quite interesting."

He recommends a book on Madame de La Tour du Pin, a lady-in-waiting to Marie Antoinette.

It's ironic that someone so protective of his own personal life would choose to read biographies of others.

After talking about himself for 30 years, Ferry is affable and open on some subjects but won't delve into others, particularly the history of his past sleeping arrangements.

Questions about Jerry Hall, whom he dated for two years before she left him for Mick Jagger, and his ex-wife Lucy Helmore, whom he was married to for more than 20 years, are avoided. And the British media have enjoyed pointing out that his current girlfriend is 36 years his junior.

One day, he says, he might attempt his own memoirs. "I hope I'll get round to doing it. It would be nice to put certain things down on paper," he says.

While relationships may be off the list, he's happy to talk about his sons, though. He has four of them and they are a source of great pride.

None has fallen too far from the tree.

Otis is a pro-hunting political activist, Isaac and Tara are heavily involved in the tour – Isaac does visuals and Tara plays percussion – and Merlin is studying English at university. Lucy Helmore is their mum.

"They're all a bit like me. It's strange. It's like four successful clones," Ferry laughs.

It's good to have some young blood on the tour and Ferry tells me that his band has an Australian connection – Jorja Chalmers, who plays second keyboard and saxophone, is from Sydney.

He's also enjoying being back on stage with the original members of Roxy Music: Phil Manzanera, Andy Mackay and Paul Thompson.

The band produced eight influential albums in the 10 years that they were recording and have a wealth of songs to draw from, including *Avalon*, *Virginia Plain*, *Jealous Guy*, *Love Is the*

Drug and *More than This*. But the tour also comes at a time when Ferry has put out his first solo album of original material since 2002.

A fantastic record, *Olympia* features more names than an A-list party, including Nile Rodgers, Dave Stewart, Scissor Sisters, Groove Armada, Flea of the Chili Peppers, Radioheads' Johnny Greenwood and Pink Floyd's Dave Gilmour.

Model Kate Moss graces the cover, the latest addition to the Bryan Ferry/Roxy Music model club.

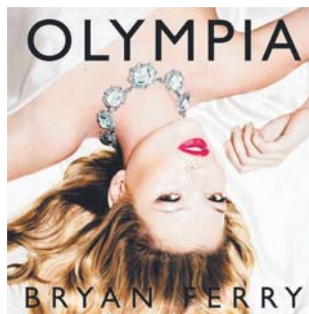
It's an esteemed position.

Since their self-titled debut in 1972, the art rock band have been known for their covers featuring glamorous women in seductive poses.

In the roll call have been Hall, who also appeared in Ferry's solo music videos for *Let's Stick Together* and *The Price of Love*, Amanda Lear, who Ferry dated before she went out with David Bowie, and Marilyn Cole, 1973's Playmate of the Year, who ended up becoming a playmate of Ferry's also.

Helmore appears on the cover of 1982's *Avalon* (although all that can be seen is her helmet) and it's that relationship that lasted the longest.

Although the record sleeves came out at a time when the feminist movement was at its



peak, Ferry remembers no adverse reaction, apart from the *Country Life* cover, which in America had to be shrink-wrapped in green plastic, he recalls with a chuckle.

To him, the images were a glamorisation or glorification of women, born of his love of cinema and an art school aesthetic. The name "Roxy" comes from a chain of cinemas, or "picture dream palaces" as they were to a young boy growing up in the bleak surrounds of post-war northern England.

So is there a Roxy Girl Club?

"I suppose there is unofficially. There haven't been any annual meetings," he laughs.

In fact, Marilyn Cole came to their show in London last year.

"She came in a fur coat and she looked like a million dollars," Ferry recalls. "It was great for the girls in the band now. They met her and they went 'Wow, you look so great!' And Kate Moss was there as well, of course."

Moss was a natural choice to inherit the role. Apart from being a family friend ("the boys all know her"), she's a big music fan and had the personality to carry it off.

"I wanted somebody with a bit of resonance

because the original *Olympia* painting by Manet had a kind of scandal at the time in the mid-19th century – it was a very strong and sexual picture. (Kate's) got a kind of history, a rock 'n' roll personality – she's a bit of a dangerous woman, a femme fatale," Ferry says.

"She really got into it. She said 'I've always wanted to be a Roxy cover girl'."

The glamorous life was a strong drawcard for the young Ferry. His father was a ploughman, who later looked after pit ponies used in coal mines. Much to his father's confusion, Ferry enrolled in art school, specialising in pottery among other things. The famous pop artist Richard Hamilton was his teacher.

"I found it very attractive because I was from very humble beginnings and it's very bleak, the north. It wasn't so glamorous, so when I went to the movies it was a special thing to see another world, several other worlds. And I went to the movies a lot.

"That was a big influence on my growing up. And when I started studying art it was a new world and a better world, so after university, four years later, I moved to London, and went there to seek my fortune as it were.

"I gravitated to music and suddenly found myself travelling the world and experiencing things firsthand. Rather than secondhand,

(Kate Moss has) got a kind of history, a rock 'n' roll personality – she's a bit of a dangerous woman, a femme fatale

through books or pictures or movies, I was living it.

"So life's just been like a wonderful adventure really, to tell you the truth. You never take things for granted if you come from that kind of poor beginnings."

And that includes, he says, coming to New York for a couple of days.

"Coming to New York this week is exciting for me still," he says. "It's great. And it's been wonderful having my solo band, most of whom are in Roxy anyway, see it with fresh eyes. They're like 'You're going to have to drag me away from here! I say 'Hey it's not so bad, we're going to go to Australia', and they say 'that's cool as well!'"

So, if there was to be a book written about him, what role would he play?

Would he describe himself as a gentleman or a bad boy?

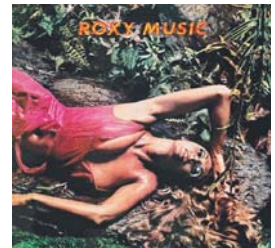
"I'd say the perfect combination of both, really," he says smoothly.

"Hopefully the best of both worlds.

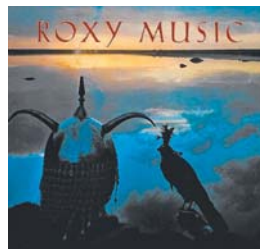
"And the bad guys are always interesting."

Roxy Music play Riverstage, Brisbane, March 1; ticketmaster.com.au 136 100.





So Roxy: (clockwise from above) Amanda Lear on For Your Pleasure (1973), Marilyn Cole on Stranded (1973), Jerry Hall on Siren (1975), and Lucy Helmore on Avalon (1982)



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