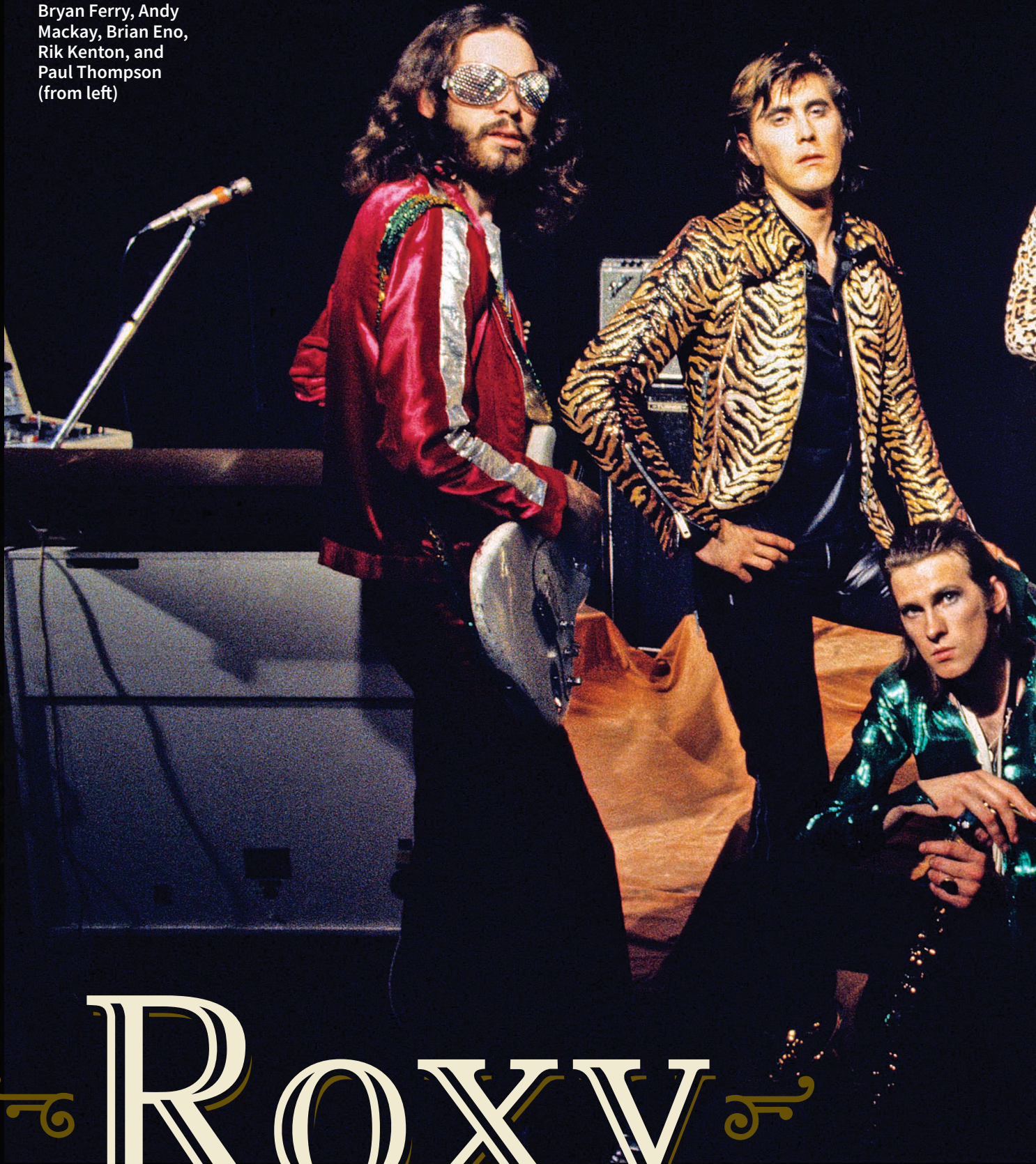


Roxy Music in 1972:
Phil Manzanera,
Bryan Ferry, Andy
Mackay, Brian Eno,
Rik Kenton, and
Paul Thompson
(from left)



Roxy Music



**THE ICONOCLASTIC
BAND'S MUSIC CHANGED
DRASTICALLY WHILE
BALANCING FINE TASTE
WITH MAVERICK STYLE**

BY JIM FARBER

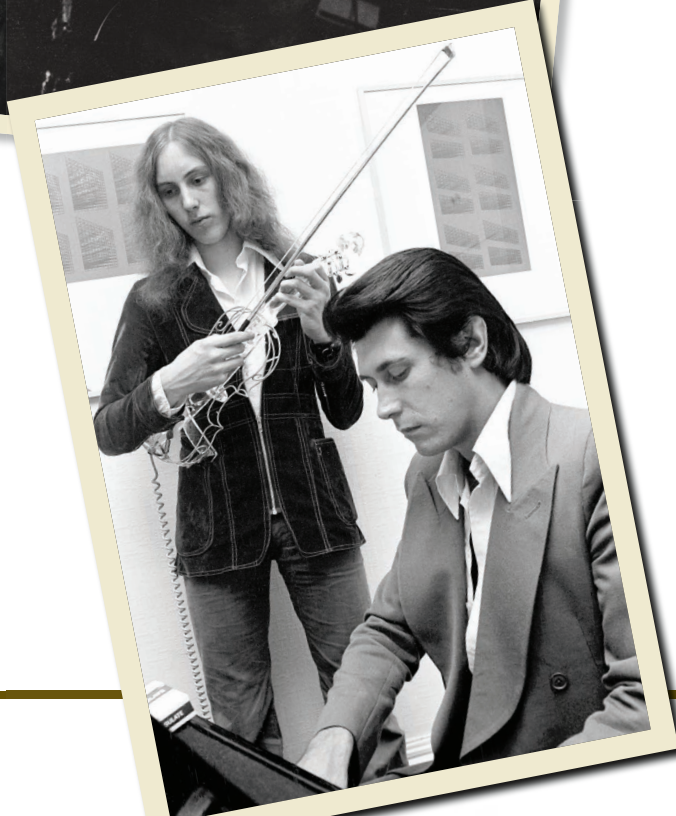
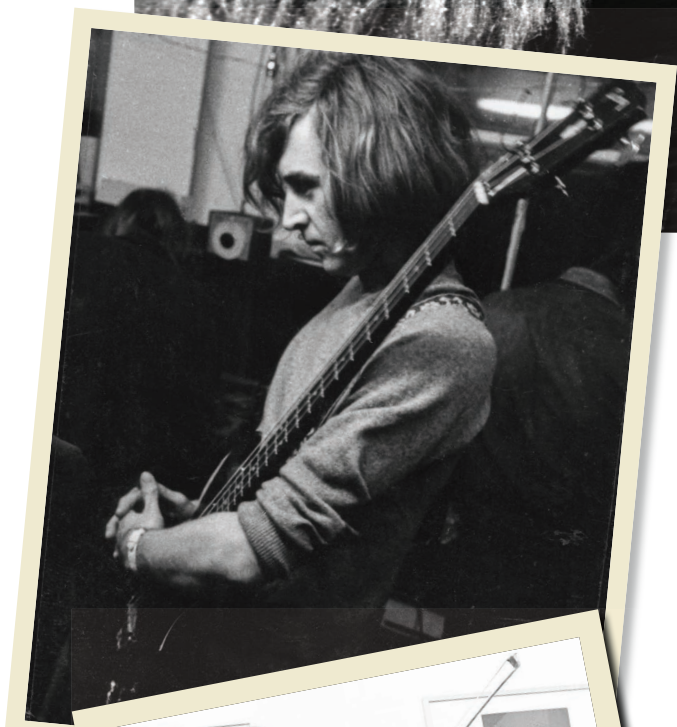
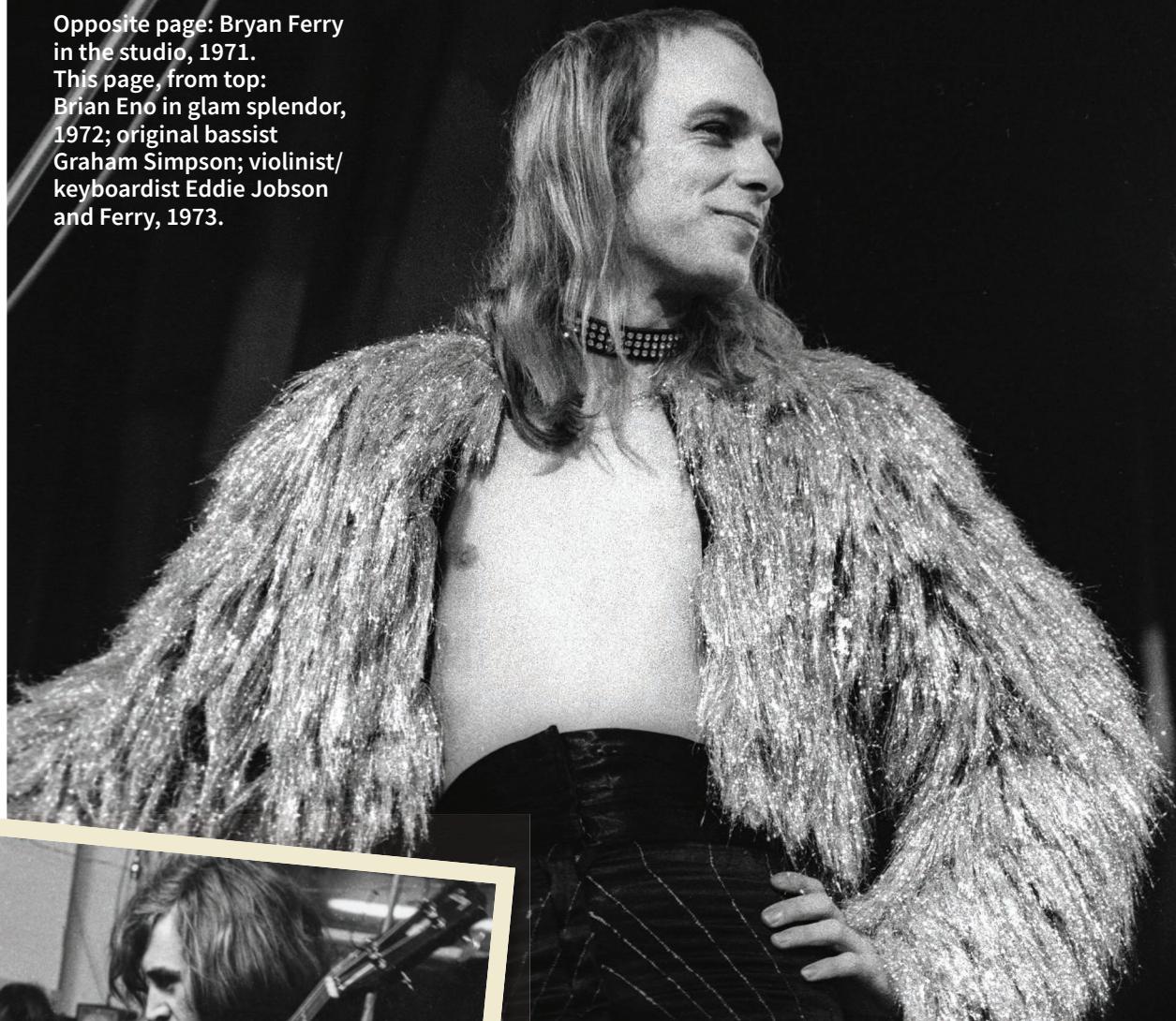
In what universe does the story of Roxy Music make sense? They began with a sound fired by cacophonous outbursts and wild affectations, only to evolve into one of the most finely controlled and heartfelt bands of all time. On the one hand, they lampooned glamour, romance, and style, while on the other epitomizing their highest expressions. And while they drew on common genres – including glam, free jazz, and art rock – they suffered none of their clichés. Oh, and somewhere along the way, they made oboe solos a thing.

Since the group formed in 1972, Roxy messed with everyone's notion of what music should sound like, as well as how a band should present itself. The songs on their first two albums often landed like punchlines, fired by guitar, synth, and sax solos as exaggerated as cartoons. It was a sonic pastiche of the most anarchic, gleeful, and sublime kind, created by a cast of inspired strays. And, amid their early ranks were two players – Bryan Ferry and Brian Eno – who would come to stand among music's most creative forces. Given the scope of the pair's talents, it's no surprise Roxy could contain them both for only two years.



Opposite page: Bryan Ferry in the studio, 1971.

This page, from top: Brian Eno in glam splendor, 1972; original bassist Graham Simpson; violinist/keyboardist Eddie Jobson and Ferry, 1973.



Luckily, the band had a deep enough talent pool to make up for any defections. In guitarist Phil Manzanera, they had both a distinct soloist and a player who could tailor his style to whatever mood a song called for. Andy Mackay proved equally adept at blasting jazz with his sax and weaving classical filigrees with his oboe, while drummer Paul Thompson manned his kit with a muscularity that could have anchored a Led Zeppelin track. Meanwhile, original bassist Graham Simpson set a pattern of elastic and potent lines that would be referenced by scores of successors. After Eno departed – first for an innovative solo career, then for a far bigger one as a producer – the band didn’t enter the fool’s game of trying to find someone similar. Instead, they hired keyboardist/electric violinist Eddie Jobson (previously with the art rockers Curved Air), who brought to the music his own strange and frantic flourishes.

It was Ferry, along with Simpson, who instigated the earliest versions of the band. Ferry, a ceramics teacher at a girls’ school, had played in a series of bands – including one with Simpson – while attending the University of Newcastle-Upon-Tyne. In early 1970, Ferry auditioned to replace singer Greg Lake in King Crimson; while band leader Robert Fripp knew Ferry wasn’t a good fit for his group, he was impressed enough to put him in touch with his management team, E.G. To flesh out a full band, Ferry and Simpson advertised for a keyboardist, only to have horn man Mackay show up. Mackay knew Eno from his school days, and while the latter could barely play the VCS3 synthesizer he owned at the time, the band hired him as a “technical advisor,” based largely on his avant-sensibility. A fast-learner, Eno eventually advanced to full membership. Guitarist Roger Bunn and drummer Dexter Lloyd rounded out



this first incarnation in late 1970. Together they chose the name Roxy, a reference to vintage movie theaters and dance halls. After discovering that an American act had already claimed the name, they added "Music" as a suffix.

Just after recording their first demo, both Lloyd and Bunn left. They were replaced by Thompson and ex-Nice guitarist David O'List, respectively. Manzanera auditioned for the lead guitar slot at that time, but initially he had to settle for the role of roadie. The early demo showed enough promise to draw attention from influential radio DJ John Peel, inspire a feature in *Melody Maker*, and even land them a session with the BBC. Then O'List quit after a fight with drummer Thompson, clearing the way for Manzanera's full hire. By the spring of 1972, the finalized Roxy were ready to record their self-titled debut, a venture entirely financed by E.G. Management and produced by King Crimson's Pete Sinfield. Only after hearing the finished product did Island Records sign them.

In the studio, London, 1972: Mackay, two members of the studio staff, Thompson, Eno, Ferry, and producer Chris Thomas (from left)



SELECTED DISCOGRAPHY



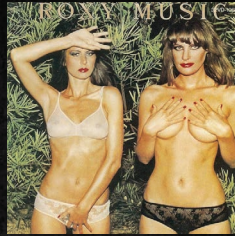
Roxy Music
1972 (Reprise)



For Your Pleasure
1973 (Warner Bros.)



Stranded
1973 (Atco)



Country Life
1974 (Atco)



Siren
1975 (Atco)



Manifesto
1979 (Atco)



Flesh + Blood
1980 (Atlantic)



Avalon
1982 (Warner Bros.)

When their debut album appeared that June, it's safe to say that no one had heard anything like it. The elements of fifties sax and rockabilly guitar may have mirrored the then-ascendant glam rock trend, but nothing else about the sound proved as fathomable. The opening track, "Re-Make/Re-Model," flung together musique concrète sound effects, an atonal piano break, a synth solo that slashed violently through the mix, and a free-jazz sax intrusion, along with a series of musical quotes from pieces as disparate as the bass line from the Beatles' "Day Tripper" and the trumpet figures from Richard Wagner's operatic piece "Ride of the Valkyries." Ferry sang the track with a vibrato so animated, it sounded like he had just stuck his finger into an electric socket. Some called the result "art rock," but does the above description sound like Procol Harum to you? From there, the album just got weirder, jerking from the country twang in "If There Is Something" to the doo-wop of "Bitters End" to the unexpected grace of "Sea Breezes." The album stood out,



too, for its suitable-for-framing cover art, a photograph by Karl Stoecker of model Kari-Ann Muller that was based on the classic Vargas girls. Equally fashionable were the images of the band inside, styled by Antony Price – who, like Stoecker, would help Roxy Music become one of the first rock bands known for haute style.

One month after the album appeared, Roxy released a single not originally included on the disc, “Virginia Plain.” Its success eased the album into the U.K. Top Ten. Better, it presaged how influential Roxy would become. The middle break in “Virginia Plain,” marked by cataclysmic synth slams, provided a key template for the sound of the Cars as well as other new-wave bands. The song also marked a personnel change. Simpson departed right before “Plain,” replaced by Rik Kenton, who would himself vanish by the time the band recorded album number two.

Titled *For Your Pleasure*, and issued nine months after the band’s debut, Roxy’s second effort opened with “Do the Strand,” a single every bit as fetching and

shocking as “Virginia Plain.” With its braying sax hook, slamming piano, and thundering bass, the song was a sly send-up of teen dance sensations, and thus, of pop culture itself. With the song “Editions of You,” the band anticipated the punch of punk, while establishing some abiding, early Roxy themes, including the disposability of love, the narcissism of romance, and the impossibility of genuine connection. Ferry amplified the theme in “In Every Dream Home a Heartache” by fetishizing a plastic love doll. To make things more unsettling, the music went bipolar, shifting midway from a chiller-theater soundtrack to a heavy metal blast that was bold enough to blow away Black Sabbath. Again, the album hit in the U.K., soaring to Number Four. (Both albums bombed in the U.S.) This time the high-glamour cover, art-directed by Ferry, featured his then-girlfriend Amanda Lear in a glossy dominatrix pose. Bonding both albums as well were the writing credits: Ferry commanded them all, though by the third album, *Stranded*, Mackay and Manzanera also contributed.

Live in Leicester,
U.K., 1973, with
John Gustafson
on bass



David Bowie and
Ferry, 1979





Jobson,
Manzanera,
Mackay,
Ferry,
Thompson,
and bassist
Sal Maida
(from left),
1973

Roxy messed with everyone's notion of what music should sound like, as well as how a band should present itself.

With Eno gone by that point, the band toned down its sound – at least to a slight degree. The third album's single, "Street Life," still found them drawing on dissonance and reveling in density, aided by Jobson's thick synths and manic electric violin. "Street Life" made the British Top Ten, while the album hit Number One. The result made Roxy a mainstream pop band at home, no matter how subversive their material or elevated their presentation. The material on *Stranded* adopted a more sophisticated air, incorporating elements of European art song and classical music, while exploring more existential themes. Simultaneously, Ferry was expanding his personal brand. One month before *Stranded*, he released his solo debut, *These Foolish Things*, a collection of covers that were delivered with a daring mix of camp and reverence.

Only on their fourth album, *Country Life*, did they finally crack the U.S. Top Forty, boosted by the flip single "The Thrill of It All." The album widened their palette even further, touching on oompah in "Bitter-Sweet," blues in "If It Takes All Night," and Elizabethan music (!) in "Triptych." For "Out of the Blue," Jobson's violin found its wildest showcase yet. The title of the album sent up the elevated British lifestyle magazine of the same name, though by then Ferry had established a chic persona that suggested an embrace of sophistication and wealth amid the winks. Often outfitted in a tuxedo, he exuded an old-fashioned movie star glamour, albeit less influenced by the suaveness of Cary Grant than the decadence of Dirk Bogarde.

Genuine fortune came to the band in 1975, when its fifth album, *Siren*, produced an international smash, "Love Is the Drug." Every sound in the song served as a hook, from Mackay's louche sax to Johnny Gus-

tafson's iconic bass line, which Nile Rodgers would later say influenced his Chic hit "Good Times." While the album featured some of Roxy Music's most assertive material, and amplified their mixed messages of Eros and ennui, they chose to disband the following year. The members continued to play on each other's solo projects, but a reformed Roxy project (minus Jobson) didn't appear until 1979, with *Manifesto*. The long break produced a dramatically different band, with smoother tunes, steadier beats, and a more earnest message. Two singles, "Angel Eyes" and "Dance Away," hit the U.K. Top Five, but some critics felt the band had lost its edge. Initial reviews were even harsher for *Flesh + Blood* the next year.

What first struck some as a sellout, however, was later viewed as a brilliant pivot. *Flesh + Blood* featured a production sheen and high-thread-count mix that made it one of the most elegant albums of its era. Miraculously, the band managed to significantly up the grace and beauty with its next, and final, studio work in 1982, *Avalon*. The album remains one of the most romantic releases of all time. With its cinematic sweep, *Avalon* is part *Wuthering Heights* and part *Last Year at Marienbad*. It's a work rapturous at the core but with a lingering air of the arch. Over their prime two decades, Roxy Music had evolved radically, yet they retained a through line by consistently balancing fine taste with maverick style. While they never recorded an official followup album, Roxy's members have fitfully recorded with one another and launched reunion tours over the years, always returning to a wealth of material designed to forever startle and thrill. Tonight, we long to see them together again on the Barclays stage as inductees in the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame.