



T. Rex in 1971,  
London: Steve  
Currie, Bill Legend,  
Marc Bolan, and  
Mickey Finn  
(from left).

# T. Rex

THE INNOVATIVE BAND GAVE BIRTH TO GLAM,  
WHILE ITS LEGACY CONTINUES TO REVERBERATE  
AMONG A DIVERSE RANGE OF ARTISTS.

By ROB BOWMAN

In early 1971, T. Rex exploded like a supernova across the British Isles, creating a wave of hysteria that had not been seen in Great Britain since the early days of Beatlemania. In quick succession, “Ride a White Swan,” “Hot Love,” “Get It On,” and “Jeepster” stormed the British charts, all but the latter reaching Number One. To promote “Hot Love,” the group’s lead singer, songwriter, and guitarist, Marc Bolan, appeared on the British TV show *Top of the Pops*, silver glitter dabbed under his eyes. At that moment, glam was effectively born, changing notions of authenticity in the world of rock forever. Through mid-1973, T. Rex would place ten back-to-back singles in the U.K. Top Ten, reportedly selling fourteen million singles in 1972 alone.

For those two halcyon years Britain fell under the spell of what was quickly dubbed T. Rextasy. It would not be long before David Bowie and Roxy Music, as well as lesser lights such as Slade, the Sweet, and Gary Glitter, were performing in velvet, spandex, and Lurex. With glam rock hitting the mainstream, glitter and androgyny ruled the day.

Bolan, born Mark Feld on September 30, 1947, grew up in a working-class London East End home; he decided by his teenage years that he was destined to be a superstar. Confident in the extreme, yet unable to fit into school or the workaday world, Feld whiled

away his time listening to 1950s American rock & roll, with Eddie Cochran and Chuck Berry particular favorites. He also devoured poetry by Wordsworth, William Blake, and Rimbaud – of whom Bolan would later state, “When I first read him, I felt like my feet were on fire.”

By 1964, Feld had discovered the poetic qualities of Bob Dylan’s early writing, and soon became intoxicated by Dylan’s increasing use of surrealism. The budding singer-songwriter was also extremely fashion-conscious, appearing at age 15 in a 1962 issue of the British magazine *Town* as one of three featured Mod faces. After signing to Decca in 1965 for a two-single deal, he adopted a new name: He changed “Mark” to the more continental “Marc” and morphed “Feld” into Bolan. Biographer Mark Paytress suggested the new surname was a consolidation of Bob Dylan – Bo [b Dy] lan.

Neither Decca single received much attention. Nor did Bolan’s late 1966 Parlophone single, “Hippy Gumbo.” After a brief detour from March to June 1967 as chief songwriter, guitarist, and background vocalist for the rather dada-esque John’s Children, Bolan completely reinvented his music and his image: At a Ravi Shankar concert, he was inspired by the master sitarist’s performance style of sitting cross-legged on a carpet surrounded by burning in-



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT:  
Portrait of 18-year-old Bolan on the occasion  
of his debut album, *The Wizard*, London,  
1965; Bolan in the grass, 1971; on tour in  
U.S. with wife June Child, 1971;  
Bolan and Finn meet the press, Tokyo, 1972;  
read all about it: Birmingham, 1972.





**Bolan, Finn, Legend, and Currie (from left), 1972**

cense sticks, tabla drums the only accompaniment. With Shankar as his model, Bolan returned to playing acoustic guitar, hooking up with percussionist Steve Peregrine Took. Taking on the moniker Tyrannosaurus Rex, the duo debuted June 29, 1968, as part of the first free concert ever held in Hyde Park. Sharing the bill were Pink Floyd, Jethro Tull, and Roy Harper.

During his Tyrannosaurus Rex phase, Bolan developed an extremely mannered vocal style, which made his lyrics incomprehensible. He would later say that this new mode of singing was inspired by listening to Billy Eckstine 45s played at 78 rpm. The first two Tyrannosaurus Rex albums, *My People Were Fair and Had Sky in Their Hair ... But Now They're Content to Wear Stars in Their Brows* and *Prophets, Seers and Sages: The Angels of the Ages*, were issued in the summer and fall of 1968, respectively. Both featured songs with unique and enigmatic lyrics: Bolan focused on the sonic properties of the words, rhyming for the sheer joy of it, and concocted phrases however it suited him. His “tone poems” referenced bits and pieces of classical mythology as well as *Lord of the Rings* and *The Chronicles of Narnia*.

Following a third album, *Unicorn* (1969), and a short U.S. tour, Steve Took was replaced by Mickey Finn. In cahoots with his new partner, Bolan began simplifying his song structures, focusing on increasingly memorable hooks on electric guitar while gradually crafting lyrics that were easier to grasp. With *A Beard of Stars* (1970), the first album to include Finn, Bolan began the shift from psyc-

delic, Tolkien-infused underground folkie to strutting rock star.

In October 1970, “Ride a White Swan” became the first single released under the shortened moniker T. Rex. An eponymously titled album followed in December, featuring Bolan, Finn, and string arrangements courtesy of producer Tony Visconti. Howard Kaylan and Mark Volman, formerly of the Turtles and the Mothers of Invention, were on background vocals, and would remain an essential component of most of T. Rex’s subsequent hits.

While “Ride a White Swan” was propelled by hand claps and tambourine, the group’s followup single in February 1971, “Hot Love,” debuted a new rhythm section consisting of bassist Steve Currie and drummer Bill Legend. “Hot Love” was driven by an irresistibly catchy melody, replete with a singalong coda. The lyric hook – “uh huh huh” – alluded to Elvis Presley’s “All Shook Up,” while the break referenced both “Heartbreak Hotel” and Fats Domino’s “Ain’t That a Shame.” Once again, producer Tony Visconti crafted a subtle but essential string arrangement. The result was pure radio ear candy, and “Hot Love” shot straight to Number One.

The T. Rex formula was perfected with the release of “Get It On” in July 1971. With Legend’s help in formulating the song’s groove, Bolan devised a rhythm guitar hook that owed a significant debt to Chuck Berry. Volman and Kaylan crafted vocal parts that merged effortlessly with Bolan’s own double-tracked vocal and multiple guitar lines. In the outro, Bolan cheekily





quoted the lyrics from Chuck Berry's "Little Queenie." Retitled "Bang a Gong (Get It On)" in North America, the single would be T. Rex's only Top Ten hit stateside. In the U.K. it was the group's third Number One.

"Bang a Gong (Get It On)" and "Jeepster," another British hit, were all included on *Electric Warrior*, out in September 1971. In the U.K. the album shot straight to the top of the charts and was the biggest selling LP of the year. In the U.S. it peaked at Number 32. T. Rex's British success continued apace in 1972. Both singles from *The Slider*, "Telegram Sam" and "Metal Guru," displayed an ever-increasing debt to Phil Spector's Wall of Sound, shooting up the British charts. The album peaked at Number Four in the U.K., settling for Number Seventeen in the U.S.

Amid hysteria surrounding him, Bolan became fast friends with Ringo Starr. With the Beatles having broken up, Ringo decided to produce and direct a documentary on T. Rex. Entitled *Born to Boogie*, the majority of the film's footage stems from a March 1972 gig by the band at Wembley Empire Pool. Also included was a studio session with T. Rex, augmented by Ringo playing a second drum kit while Elton John hammered away on piano.

Later that year, Bolan opted to add soul, funk, and gospel influences onto the basic T. Rex sound. To aid in this new direction, Motown songwriter Gloria Jones and Pat Hall came on board as background vocalists. The result - *Tanx*, released in March 1973 - reached Number Four in the U.K., stalling at Number 102 on the U.S. charts and signaling the end of T. Rex's brief flirtation with stardom in the States.

**LEFT: T. Rex onstage at the Sundown, London, 1972. BELOW: Bolan celebrates the film *Born to Boogie* with Elton John and Ringo Starr.**



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## MORRISSEY

Curiously, no singles were pulled from *Tanx*. Instead T. Rex released four non-LP singles immediately before and after the album's release: "Children of the Revolution," "Solid Gold Easy Action," "20th Century Boy," and "The Groover" – all Top Five hits in the U.K. that failed to chart in North America. The latter single, released in June 1973, proved to be T. Rex's last Top Ten entry in England. Seemingly as fast as it had started, as if someone flicked a switch, T. Rextasy was over. Legend left the group in November 1973, while Finn departed in February 1975; Currie finally decided he had had enough in August 1976.









Seven months later, in March 1977, backed by an entirely new lineup, Bolan released one final T. Rex album, *Dandy in the Underworld*. A comeback of sorts, the album managed to reach Number 26 on the U.K. charts. Excited by the advent of punk, Bolan went on the road to promote the LP, choosing upstarts the Damned as his opening act. In June he started writing a monthly music column for *Record Mirror*, and in August and September he hosted a six-week television series simply called *Marc*. Fittingly enough, the final show, taped in early September 1977, featured Bolan's longtime friend David Bowie appearing as a special guest. Sadly, not long after, on September 16, Bolan tragically died in a car accident. He was 29.

Although T. Rex fell out of fashion for a few years, its influence never truly diminished. During his lifetime, Bolan served as the subject of the lyrics for Elton John's "Teenage Idol," David Bowie referenced T. Rex in the lyrics of "All the Young Dudes," and during the Ziggy Stardust Tour Bowie performed "Lady Stardust" with an image of Bolan appearing on the large screen behind him. After Bolan's death, the Who cited T. Rex in "You Better You Bet," while the Ramones name-checked him in "Do You Remember Rock and Roll Radio." Morrissey, Johnny Marr, Joan Jett, Bono, the Edge, and members of Cheap Trick have all routinely cited Bolan as an influence, while a myriad of artists, including Blondie, Ministry, Guns N' Roses, the Melvins, Power Station, Siouxsie and the Banshees, Bauhaus, Def Leppard, Girlschool, the Replacements, and Teenage Fanclub, among them, have all covered T. Rex hits.

In 2016 Morrissey told *Classic Rock*, "Marc was the first pop artist who seemed to be telling us that the future was more important than the past. Nothing dates those songs." Finally, Marc Bolan and T. Rex take their rightful place in the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame.

### Selected DISCOGRAPHY

AS TYRANNOSAURUS REX

 <p><b>My People Were Fair and Had Sky in Their Hair... But Now They're Content to Wear Stars on Their Brows</b> 1968 (A&amp;M)</p>	 <p><b>A Beard of Stars</b> 1970 (Blue Thumb)</p>
AS T. REX	
 <p><b>T. Rex</b> 1970 (Reprise)</p>	 <p><b>Electric Warrior</b> 1971 (Reprise)</p>
 <p><b>The Slider</b> 1972 (Reprise)</p>	 <p><b>Tanx</b> 1973 (Reprise)</p>
 <p><b>Dandy in the Underworld</b> 1977 (EMI UK)</p>	 <p><b>20th Century Boy: The Ultimate Collection</b> 2002 (Hip-O)</p>

Onstage at the Apollo,  
Glasgow, Scotland, 1974

