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One on 1 Profile: Musician David Johansen Is a Man of Many Identities



David Johansen is a New York Doll and a Staten Island guy. He's enjoyed a 40-year journey unlike any other musician, and with recent performances at The Town Hall and Cafe Carlyle, he's still going strong. NY1's Budd Mishkin filed the following report.

How many musicians who've played Cafe Carlyle also played East Village bars in the 1970s and the Staten Island JCC?

"I used to joke when I was a kid. I used to say, 'Staten Island's the most cosmopolitan of all the boroughs because we go to Brooklyn and New Jersey,' says musician David Johansen.

Whatever songs he's singing, be it the punk rock of the influential New York Dolls, the rhythm and blues of his alter ego, Buster Poindexter, or the old folk of another group, the Harry Smiths, David Johansen loves to perform and explore.

"Every time I kind of get a new genre or something, I let it get into my DNA. It really kind of helps me as a human being," Johansen says.

"It's kind of complex, the relationship with Buster and David Johansen. Although, I got the idea the other night to do a show, 'Buster Poindexter sings the songs of David Johansen.'"

Johansen says he's never been what he calls a "sucker for grand ambition." He mostly sings what he wants to sing, when he wants to sing it.



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"If you do something that you don't really believe in and it doesn't work, then it's like a double soul crusher," he says. "Because if you did something that you believed in and it didn't work, that's totally cool."

The Dolls enjoyed critical but not commercial success. Commercial success came as Buster Poindexter, with a calypso cover that was on the radio constantly.

"All we're doing is this song, you know what I mean? And a lot of times, we're just lip syncing it," he says. "So it gives you this kind of ambiguous relationship to the song where you appreciate the song for having opened up doors for you, and you also kind of resent it because it takes up so much of your time."

"The reason that I started to do Buster originally is to get away from the songs I had been known for, which I love, they're my children and everything, but when you sing them every night, I'm a singer. I want to sing all kinds of songs."

We may associate Johansen with the East Village because that is where he first gained prominence with New York Dolls in the '70s, but Johansen was born and bred on Staten Island and has returned there to live with his wife, Mara, in the family home.

We conducted the interview at one of his favorite spots in the borough, the Jacques Marchais Museum of Tibetan art. It was on Staten Island where Johansen first showcased the plethora of tastes that would later make him famous.

"I was always in a dance band, where we would kind of be like a blues, R&B band. We would do Wilson Pickett and Muddy Waters kind of songs, stuff like that," he says. "And then, I would be in the acoustic thing, and we would have in my neighborhood, 'Hoot Night at the JCC.'"

His parents were pretty hip. His mom enjoyed the occasional Bob Dylan lyric.

"She would say, (sings) 'Even the president of the United States has to stand naked!' That was her favorite," Johansen says. "My father used to say, 'Oh, that Freddie Mercury, that 'Bohemian Rhapsody,' man, that's a record!'"

Johansen graduated from Port Richmond High School, where he was inducted into the school's Hall of Fame.

He began his career in the late 1960s as a lead singer in the local Staten Island band The Vagabond Missionaries. From there, it was on to the East Village.

"We used to put our equipment in shopping carts, and then, we'd go up to the Cafe Wha and play on a Tuesday afternoon at 1 o'clock," Johansen says. "Nobody would be there."

Eventually, Johansen became the lead singer in a band that presaged both the punk and glam movements, the New York Dolls.



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"We used to wear pretty wild clothes when we met each other," he says. "We would see each other in the street, and we'd be like, 'I wonder who that guy is. He's got a guitar case. Oh. He plays guitar.' So it wasn't like we got together and decided we were going to put on these funny clothes. We were already wearing them."

The Dolls played loudly and dressed loudly. At an early concert in Memphis, Johansen was arrested on charges of inciting a riot by police who Johansen says had it out for him.

"I remember I was in this jail and I was dressed like Liza Minnelli, and I'm thinking, 'Oh my God,'" he says. "And this guy wakes up, and he goes, 'Oh man, David Johansen,' and I'm like, 'sh.'"

The Dolls saw themselves as street smart and tough. Once, during a disappointing recording session, they got on the Staten Island Ferry for a field trip to Clove Lakes Park, where they came upon a softball game.

"We were like, 'Hey, you want to play us?' and they were like, 'Get out of here. We don't want to play you guys. Look at those shoes.' We used to wear those shoes with the big platforms. 'Come on, let's play.' So we played and ran around the bases in those shoes, and we kicked their ass," Johansen says.

Johansen admits he liked to drink a bit in those days, but he says the lifestyle associated with the New York Dolls is not entirely accurate.

"The guys in the Dolls went off and made other bands and stuff and had this notoriety for excesses and things of that nature," he says. "A lot of that gets, in retrospect, rolled up into one big kind of New York Dolls package. Because it wasn't really that degenerate."

Johansen likes to paint in his spare time. But whether he's a Doll, or Buster or David, he's always been a performer and showman at heart.

"I played with my friends in the neighborhood, and we played in the basement of the cafeteria of the local school," he says. "I remember the first song we played, I had my eyes closed, and then I heard everybody cheering, and I thought, 'Oh, OK, this is working.' So I just kept going and I haven't really looked back since then."

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