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The New York Dolls' David Johansen on Revisiting His Alter Ego, Buster Poindexter, for Halloween

by Rachel Tashjian



When word got out that legendary cabaret club Cafe Carlyle was bringing downtown rock legend David Johansen uptown for Halloween, tongues were wagging. When did the Upper East Side staple get so edgy? Johansen is known for fronting the snarling, cross-dressing glam band the New York Dolls. But tomorrow night he will appear onstage as his martini-swigging, tuxedo-clad alter ego Buster Poindexter. We spoke to Johansen about his set selection for the night, his memories of past Carlyle shows, and why he invented Buster in the first place. Highlights from our chat:

***VF Daily:* You've been doing Buster Poindexter since the 80s, but he still seems like such a departure from your persona. How did you develop him?**

David Johansen: What happened is that years ago, I was playing in a rock band and I was listening to a lot of what I call pre-Hays Code rock 'n' roll, what I call jump blues. I used to hang around in a saloon on 15th street called Tramps, where they had a lot of great acts like

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Big Joe Turner and Big Mama Thornton, who [did] residencies there. I had been itchin' to sing some of these jump-blues songs, so I booked the place for four Mondays to do a little cabaret, and that's how I started doing Buster. It gave me an opportunity to sing songs that I wanted to sing but couldn't normally, because if I go out as David Johansen, I have a certain kind of repertoire that people expect, whereas this, I get a chance to sing whatever I want to sing. I just started telling some jokes every once in a while to keep the thing rollicking. That's all there is to it.

You're known for paying deference to your favorite musicians and songs through covers, lyrics, and costume. And the Café Carlyle is something of a hallowed jazz and cabaret ground: George Feyer, Bobby Short, and Elaine Stritch all had historic residencies there, among many others. Will the Carlyle's past play any role in Thursday's performance?

You know how [Rufus Wainwright does the Judy Garland live at Carnegie Hall concert?](#) If I did Blossom Dearie—that'd be *awesome*. I'll think about that. I don't know if I'd do it in the cutesy voice, though. I'd do it a little more basso profundo.

Do you frequent the Carlyle?

I like to go see exotic acts, but I'll go to the Carlyle once in a while. Because you know what? We are human beings, and we are social animals, and we like to be with our own species on occasion.

Does it feel like you're revisiting this character?

It's not that I put thought into that. It's just like, Here's a gang of songs I wanna sing. So I'll sing them as Buster Poindexter and I'll come up with stuff to say as I go along. And that's really all there is to it.

You just choose from songs you're currently listening to?

Yeah, you know. Like there's a song called "Down in Mexico," by the Coasters. So I heard this song and I thought, "Oh, I want to sing this song." Then I thought, "Where am I going to sing it?" So, O.K., I'll do Buster. Then I built a bunch of other songs around it, because as long as I'm going to go out there, I might as well do 15 songs or maybe 20 songs. So we picked "I Shot Mr. Lee," by the Bobbettes, and stuff like that. Now there is one song I used to sing back at Tramps called "Stay as Sick as You Are" that we're singing.

What is it about that song?

It's an old song from the beatnik days from a record called *Songs of Couch and Consultation*, by a singer named Katie Lee. I think she had been a folk singer, but then she made this record with this jazz cat, and he wrote all these songs about psychoanalysis. So I always dug that

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record. I want to sing more songs from that—maybe I'll do that instead of Blossom Dearie. There's another song called "I Can't Get Adjusted to the You Who Got Adjusted to Me."

What is it about a song that makes you say, "I really want to sing that"?

It's like a painting: sometimes you look at a painting and you go, "Eh, it's pretty good." But sometimes you see one that smacks you in the face and says, "Come here, boy." And you've got to stand in front of it and understand. Songs are like that, too.

And you can understand it better if you sing it?

I don't understand anything. But the song is telling me, "If you sing me, after an amount of time passes by, you will become enlightened by my wisdom and it will accentuate your existence." That's just the way it goes.

Do you feel more comfortable singing as Buster than as David?

I can't say I do. But no more or no less. I do a show with Brian Coonan [the guitarist and bandleader for Buster Poindexter], and it's essentially a David Johansen acoustic show, and that's very relaxing. I'm just sitting in a chair or a stool, preferably one with a back, holding forth. But I also like playing with a rock-'n'-roll band—that's relaxing too, because then you have this arsenal with you, and there's something fun about that. I don't know how I feel about Poindexter. I don't know where it stands in the relaxation department. Since I've started doing it again, I've only done it, like, 15 or 20 times, so there's nothing rote about it. I'm having to try to stay conscious through the whole thing.

Is your goal as a performer to feel as relaxed as possible?

Yeah. Kinda like Perry Como: Mr. Relaxation. [*Laughs.*]

It should be a pretty relaxing way to spend Halloween.

I thought it'd be nice to do it on a holiday, and I didn't want to wait till Valentine's Day. Halloween, that's a beautiful night.

A performance at the Café is pretty intimate.

I'm definitely going to wear sunglasses. And do the whole thing with my eyes closed if I have to. Nah—I haven't really thought about it [the intimacy of the venue]. I'll probably feel kind of like Louis Prima, you know? I'll start clapping my hands, stomping my feet, and everybody will be singing. It'll be great. They go wild in there—this will be nothing new for them.

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