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music

BUSTER POINDEXTER -- AKA DAVID JOHANSEN OF THE NEW YORK DOLLS -- ON DRAG CULTURE, COUNTRY MUSIC AND ROCK N' ROLL BURNOUT

by Mike Monteiro



Buster Poindexter AKA David Johansen

David Johansen's chameleon-like ability to entertain has earned him one of the most diverse range of audiences and fans that any musician could hope for. After bursting onto the scene as the frontman for the legendary proto-punk band the New York Dolls, he traded his leather jacket for a '50s pompadour to become Buster Poindexter and recorded calypso-tinged mega hits like 1987's "Hot Hot Hot" ("feeling hot!, hot!, hot!"). He even gave comedy a try, taking on hilarious film roles alongside Bill Murray and Hulk Hogan in *Scrooged* and *Mr. Nanny*. And it seemed Tuesday night that all of these different fanbases -- aging '70s punks, energetic '80s-era yuppies and twentysomething comedy-loving Millennials -- could be spotted at Café Carlyle at the Carlyle Hotel to catch the start of Johansen's two-week residency as Buster Poindexter.

Throughout the course of the evening, he entertained guests with withering one-liners and jokes about musicians (occasionally at the hilarious expense of his band members) in-between performing renditions of "Volare," "Piece of My Heart" and "Club A Go-Go,"

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among other classics. Ahead of his show and the release of a new album, we had the chance to catch up with Johansen about the fact that despite his appearance bouncing from Drag Queen to Lounge Lizard to Rockabilly-meets-Cabaret Singer, he hasn't changed a bit since he was a 10-year-old Staten Island kid. Read on for more about his early days as well as getting his start in the late-'60s East Village avant-garde theater scene.

The Upper East Side is a long ways away from the East Village. Does the Cafe Carlyle setting affect your performance in any way?

Yeah, not so much consciously, but I would probably tailor my performance wherever I was on any given day. When me and the guys go onstage we just kind of get a vibe and swing with that. Café Carlyle is cool because when I first started doing Buster, many years ago, I was at a place on 15th St. called Tramps. It was a bar with a showroom in the back and it would have Joe Turner doing a residency there, Big Mama Thornton, Charles Brown, and people like that. It was in my neighborhood, so it was my watering hole. I was on the road a lot in a rock 'n roll band, so I thought, "I'm gonna do a show here" because I wanted to get in on the fun. On Mondays they didn't have a show, so I started doing Buster. I was going to do it for four Mondays, and it became really popular, and, well, thank God I didn't have to get back in that van again...

You know I used to like travel from town to town sucking on a bottle of gin, it was not a life. The room [at Tramps] was about the same size as The Carlyle, and that's where I started in a sense. Believe it or not, The Carlyle actually gives me that same kind of vibe. It's cool because it's 100 people, but it gets really raucous, but it's not raucous like you're playing in an arena, it's raucous where you have a relationship with the audience as people as opposed to this amorphous, seething thing, you know what I'm saying?

That's what you like about it?

Yeah, and also one of the greatest things about it is I get on the elevator, I walk downstairs, and I walk on the stage. That's, like, REALLY great. My whole life I always fantasized, "wouldn't it be great if you had this magic box where you could push a button, and what it would do would be take you from your bed to the dressing room of the show in Cleveland" or wherever. It's the schlep that kills you -- not the performing. The schlep-factor is erased, and that frees me to breathe.

Tell me about this new residency, is it a whole new show?

Yeah! It's a whole new show, all new stuff. I'm working with great musicians who really know how to swing stuff. We go onstage and we do what we're doing right then, it's not something that is angst-inducing like "oh we gotta get this right." There is no right [way].

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Is there any connection or homage going on with this residency and the regular appearances you used to make at the Mercer Arts Center during the New York Dolls Days, or a few years later at places like C.B.G.B.?

I don't think I would make an homage to anything -- I'm not an homage kind of cat. I'm like the same guy I was when I was six-years old, I'm just doing what I do. It's like when you're going through your life, everything that you do and discover you transcend it as you're going along, but it's also included. It's not like turning the etch-a-sketch upside down, you know?

You mentioned you've been the same kid since you were six-years-old, but obviously you have these nom de guerres and reinvent yourself often, at times exponentially, and at others more low-key. Do you see the processes as reinvention, going from David Johansen to Buster Poindexter, or are you just seizing opportunities and ideas?

Buster Poindexter is just the name of the act, the band. When I started it I was only going to do it for four Mondays just to get some songs out of my system. I didn't realize this as fully as I do now, but what I was creating was a conceit that would afford me the opportunity to sing anything I want. When you're just in the pure rock situation it's very limiting as far as what you can do because people are going to come, and rightfully so, they're going to want you to sing your songs. They're going to want you to sing "Funky But Chic" or whatever. I figured at that time if I used a different name -- we used to have the ads in the *Village Voice* in those days, that'd say, "Tramps. Monday night. Buster Poindexter" -- and it didn't say anything about David Johansen, people would come out of curiosity, or word of mouth and just be able to listen to what I wanted to do, as opposed to having any preconceived expectation about what kind of music it was going to be. So it's a great thing for me because there's so much music that I love. Out of all that music there's a lot of songs that I want to sing, so Buster gives me the opportunity to do that.

And what about the Buster Poindexter character?

It's not really a character because it's really me singing these songs and between the songs I'm saying whatever comes to my mind. It's not like I say, "Ok, I'm going to put on this guy's mind now." It's more liberating in a sense than playing at a rock venue because you can say things that are more intelligent than just saying, like, "roooock and rollllll!" It rejuvenates me. When you're in a rock 'n roll band and you're playing essentially the same 20 songs, 10 or 13 of them will be the same every night, and it has a tendency to become a lot like punching a clock in a sense. Especially with the traveling and the exhaustion, it becomes like "Ok, I'm gonna turn on this rock 'n roll machine, do this, get back on the bus, go back to Oshkosh or whatever." This is a New York thing. I'm talking to New Yorkers who've read a book, and we can get together on these absurdity of

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existence

ideas.

In terms of the absurdity of existence, that reminds me of some other interesting moments in the David Johansen story like your involvement in The Ridiculous Theatre, and Charles Ludlam -- did any experiences from then influence what you're doing now with Buster Poindexter?

Yeah, absolutely. I couldn't tell you specifically what, but when I was a kid, I guess like 17-years-old, I started hanging out with Ridiculous Theatre. That was like my college. They were the greatest people, I couldn't have even imagined people that were this fantastic. So non-judgmental, and really themselves. Sometimes you think, "did I just say that, or did I just think it?" but they would say it. I was enthralled with that and was so fortunate to have met them and have been involved with them. When I was kid I would say, "oh man, that Mitch Ryder song 'Sock It To Me Baby' is a gem" and some Shangri-Las song "is a gem." As you go along in life you've accumulated hundreds of thousands of these gems that hit you. When one performs, all of those things are in play, but it's not like you're thinking about it, they just become a part of your DNA. That's pretty much what creates an artist, and The Ridiculous Theatre has a really big room up there in my head as far as that's concerned, but it's not like I'm thinking about it. It's like if a doctor does a thousand operations you're not thinking about what you were taught in school, you're thinking about the last operation.

A lot of current, mainstream acts are doing a lot of what was considered confrontational or taboo during the Ridiculous Theatre era like "glitter," drag, androgynous styles and elements that you also variously incorporated into the music and performance you created with the New York Dolls. Do you think that the mainstreaming and popularity of everything from drag culture to transgender issues has anything to do with what you were involved in back then?

I think absolutely, but in the evolution of peoples' liberation. When we started the Dolls, it was on St. Mark's Place where we met -- well, that's the short version of it. At that time in the East Village almost everyone that we knew, that we would see on the street, that we would talk to, was into some kind of liberation movement. It was the dawn of the feminist movement, it was the dawn of gay liberation, it was the dawn of the macrobiotic liberation front haha -- I mean you name it. I like to say it was a hotbed of revolution. Everyone just wanted to clear the deck and everyone could have something to say about this thing we're talking about. We just kind of [wanted to become the] BAND of that neighborhood, that's all we really intended to do. It was a great time to come out of, but all of this stuff one learns in life takes time and happens in little increments. Now [LGBT issues have] kind of become something that people talk about, and something the average person doesn't have to shy away from anymore. Where as in years gone by people would be embarrassed by it so hence the "confrontation" -- you know, "get your head out of your ass and think. Are you going to be a person or just a drone who works for the man

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for the rest of you life?"

Was your involvement in that reflective of New York City and the East Village, or do you think that you were trying to consciously charge the conversation? Were the Dolls the East Village band in the right place at the right time and simply a mirror of what was happening or do you think you were actively trying to get that message our there to alert your audience?

When we made a record and started traveling around then yes, absolutely [we were trying to get the message out]. I am lucky that all of my life, I wasn't like "oh you're gay, oh you're not gay, oh you're this, oh you're that." Everybody that I knew were just people. Now it seems it's becoming legislative, so that's kind of good? Otherwise, most people who were brought up, let's say, homophobic, or racist, how are they ever going to break out? That's just the way their brain was programmed, how are they ever going to do it? Probably the only way it's going to ever be done is to have it legislated on a mass scale, but whatever it is it's good.

You mentioned not thinking or caring whether someone was gay or not gay. Do you think these terms and identities have become more rigid than they were back in the '70s?

I guess. I think maybe people categorize things because they don't know how to think about it and they have to think about it. I've always said, "why do you want to think about it, it's not important, it doesn't really mean anything. Why is one flower a daffodil and the other is an iris? I don't know why. They're both flowers."

Does that same logic apply to the different names/personas/costumes for your act? Buster Poindexter, David Johansen, Harry Smith, the New York Dolls, do you think that the label to the costume matters? Is it always you?

Yeah, it's always me. It's really about music. Since I was kid, I was concerned with, "oh I hate this, I hate that" -- I was an OG hipster -- but you know, a lot of people spend a lot of time at a young age hating shit, but when you transcend that and you start liking stuff and not even hearing what you don't like because you don't want to spend time hating when you could be using that time to find stuff that you like, you find there's so much music on this planet! I dig music because it's one of the basic jumping off points of having an enjoyable life.

Are there any new acts and musical experiences that are inspiring you right now?

So much! They're not necessarily singing in English though -- the problem with English is lots of times you think "oh my God this could be a good song if it wasn't for these words." I like a lot of Cuban music, I like a lot of African music, and a lot of Sufi music,

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and Fado. I just went down to see Billy Joe Shaver at the City Winery. I mean that guy has *got it!* A musician who is a lifer, who never thought about anything else except bringing something beautiful to the table, and not grousing just saying "I'm gonna add to the fantastic-ness of this phantasmagoria."

How'd you get into Billy Joe Shaver?

One day, I guess in the 70s, I was visiting these people and this one guy had a record store, and he goes "you gotta check this out." And I thought, "No I don't want to listen to country music" but I put it on and thought, "This guy is a freakin' genius!"

Talk about expanding. For us New Yorkers listening to country music might be more exotic than everything else you've been talking about.

Yeah, we don't like country all that much. I like Merle Haggard, I'm into this record by Musa Dieng Kala that's really fucking good. I have a radio show on Sirius on Sundays at noon. I play all kinds of music, jazz, opera.

Oh really? Paper just started Paper Radio on Sirius. Fridays at 9am.

Oh that's good! I've been doing this one for 15 years. It really keeps me listening to music because I get to put 60 songs together every week. Sometimes you can be like "ah I just feel lousy, I just wanna be negative, nahh I don't wanna listen to any music" but with this, if I'm in that kind of mood, well I GOT to listen to music because I've got to put a show together, and you know, 5 minutes later I've forgotten how I felt. That's music.

Buster Poindexter's residency at Café Carlyle continues through October 10th. For more information and tickets to a show, go [HERE](#).