

CULTURE CLUB

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Few new wave groups were as popular as Culture Club. During the early '80s, the group racked up seven straight Top Ten hits in the U.K. and six Top Ten singles in the U.S. with their light, infectious pop-soul. Though their music was radio-ready, what brought the band stardom was Boy George, the group's charismatic, cross-dressing lead singer. George dressed in flamboyant dresses and wore heavy makeup, creating a disarmingly androgynous appearance that created a sensation on early MTV. George also had a biting wit and frequently came up with cutting quips that won Culture Club heavy media exposure in both America and Britain. Although closely aligned with the new romantics — they were both inspired by Northern soul and fashion — Culture Club had a sharper pop sense than their peers, and consequently had a broader appeal. However, their time in the spotlight was brief. Not only could they not withstand the changing fashions of MTV, but the group was fraught with personal tensions, including Boy George's drug addiction. By 1986, the group had broken up, leaving behind several singles that rank as classics of the new wave era.

The son of a boxing club manager, Boy George (b. George O'Dowd, June 14, 1961), found himself attracted to the glam rock of T. Rex and David Bowie as a teenager. During the post-punk era of the late '70s, he became a regular at London new romantic clubs. Along with his cross-dressing friends Marilyn and Martin Degville (a future member of Sigue Sigue Sputnik), George became well-known around the London underground for his extravagant sense of style, and Malcolm McLaren invited him to join an early version of Bow Wow Wow. George briefly appeared with the band as Lieutenant Lush before leaving to form In Praise of Lemmings with bassist Mikey Craig (b. February 15, 1960). Once guitarist Jon Suede joined the group, they changed their name to Sex Gang Children. Within a few months, the band met Jon Moss (b. September 11, 1957), a professional drummer who had previously played with Adam & the Ants and the Damned.

By 1981, Boy George had renamed the group Culture Club and Suede had been replaced by Roy Hay (b. August 12, 1961), a former member of Russian Bouquet. Toward the end of the year, they recorded a set of demos for EMI, but the label turned them down. Early in 1982, the band landed a contract with Virgin Records, releasing "White Boy" in the spring. Neither "White Boy" or its follow-up, "I'm Afraid of Me," made the charts but the British music and fashion press began running articles about Boy George. In the fall, Culture Club released their breakthrough single, "Do You Really Want to Hurt Me," which rocketed to the top of the charts. Shortly afterward, the band's debut, *Kissing to Be Clever*, climbed to number five on the U.K. charts and the non-LP single "Time (Clock of the Heart)" reached number three. Early in 1983, *Kissing to Be Clever* and "Do You Really Want to Hurt Me" began climbing the U.S. charts, with the single peaking at number two. "Time" reached number two in the U.S. shortly after the non-LP British single "Church of the Poison Mind," attained the same position in the U.K. "I'll Tumble 4 Ya" became a Top Ten hit in America that summer.

By the time Culture Club's second album *Colour by Numbers* was released in the fall of 1983, the band was the most popular pop/rock group in America and England. "Karma Chameleon" became a number one hit on both sides of the Atlantic, while the album reached number one in the U.K. and number two in the U.S. Throughout 1984, the group racked up hits, with "It's a Miracle" and "Miss Me Blind" reaching the Top Ten. In the fall, the group returned with its third album, *Waking Up with the House on Fire*. While "The War Song" reached number two in the U.K., the album was a disappointment in America, stalling at platinum; its predecessor went quadruple platinum.

Following a brief tour in February, Culture Club went on hiatus for 1985, with Craig, Moss, and Hay pursuing extracurricular musical projects in the interim. During the year, Boy George — who had previously denounced drugs in public — became addicted to heroin. Furthermore, his romance with Moss, which had always been rocky, began to disintegrate. All of these problems were kept hidden, but it became evident that something was wrong when Culture Club returned to action in the spring of 1986. Though their comeback single, "Move Away," became a hit in April, its accompanying album *From Luxury to Heartache* stayed on the charts for only a few months. Rumors of George's heroin addiction began to circulate, and by the summer, he announced that he was indeed addicted to the drug. In July, he was arrested by the British police for possession of cannabis. Several days later, keyboardist Michael Rudetski, who played on *From Luxury to Heartache*, was found dead of a heroin overdose in George's home. Rudetski's parents unsuccessfully tried to press wrongful death charges on Boy George.

While Boy George was battling heroin addiction, and his subsequent dependence on prescription narcotics, Culture Club broke up. George confirmed the group's disbandment in the spring of 1987, and he began a solo career later that year. While his solo career produced several dance hits in Europe, he didn't land an American hit until 1992, when his cover of Dave Berry's "The Crying Game" was featured in the Academy Award-nominated film of the same name. In 1995, George published his autobiography, *Take It Like a Man*. Culture Club reunited in 1998, issuing the two-disc set *VH1 Storytellers/Greatest Hits*.

A new album, *Don't Mind If I Do*, appeared in 1999, reaching 64 on the U.K. charts; it did not receive an American release. Culture Club next celebrated their 20th Anniversary with a 2002 concert at Royal Albert Hall, then entered an unofficial hiatus. Jon Moss and Mikey Cragg attempted to tour with a new singer called Sam Butcher, but the project was scrapped before its launch.

Culture Club reunited in 2014 for a tour and the band also began work on a new album with producer Youth. The group scheduled the release of an album called *Tribes* in 2015, but the record never materialized. Instead, the recordings provided the foundation for *Life*, the 2018 album that marked Culture Club's first new album in nearly 20 years. ~ Stephen Thomas Erlewine, Rovi