

THE WILDE WEST

A HOLLYWOOD TALE

COIFFEUR OF THE AESTHETE

A cartoon in "Puck," January 25, 1882.



The right comb is even in front— or what it is in front— or least it is but not quite— or the the Christian (?) is a shaver— but perhaps the best thing would be to shave it all and sell it as a hair museum fancy.

IN THE MID-1880S OSCAR WILDE DISCOVERED PUNK ROCK IN THE ROCKY MOUNTAINS. IN THE MID-1980S, PUNK'S "INVENTOR" MALCOLM MCLAREN UNCOVERED THIS EXTRAORDINARY FACT IN AN ANTIQUE BOOK-STORE. THIS IS THE BIZARRE TALE OF HOW HE NEARLY TURNED THE STORY INTO A HOLLYWOOD MUSICAL.

TEXT MALCOLM MCLAREN

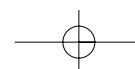
It was 1984, I was in LA promoting a recent album, a mix of R&B and opera including the classic aria, "Madam Butterfly". The album's title was *Fans*. I got a call with an invitation to lunch at a famous Hollywood film studio. Passing through the large gates, I felt unquestionably important. I arrived at the commissary and in a private room, sat down to lunch at a long table with a number of guests, in particular, a very well-known film director. Everyone appeared as busy as hell and although it was a pleasant enough lunch, no one talked to me. By the end, as I got up to leave, I wondered what I was doing there. Then the Director rushed towards my end of the table, apologised for not speaking earlier and asked me, "What if I asked you to make that album again?" I didn't understand. "Make it again?" "Yes, record it all over again." Why would I want to do this? I just made it. He said, "No, you don't understand. I don't have a lot of time but I was just wondering if you could make the album, *Fans*, again... for me." Was this a Hollywood trick question? Thinking on my feet, I quickly explained, "Please don't get me wrong. But you must first understand how I make music. For instance, I don't play any instrument. I simply draw a map of feelings, a title, a picture or two, a visual map on the wall of a recording studio and then communicate it all to a team of musicians. I'm like a movie director making a movie without a camera." "I know that," he said. "That is why I would like you to make it again so I can see how you do that... How would you like to work for us?" Now? I thought. "Get yourself an agent. See you next week." I was given an office, an assistant and a title: development executive for musical projects.

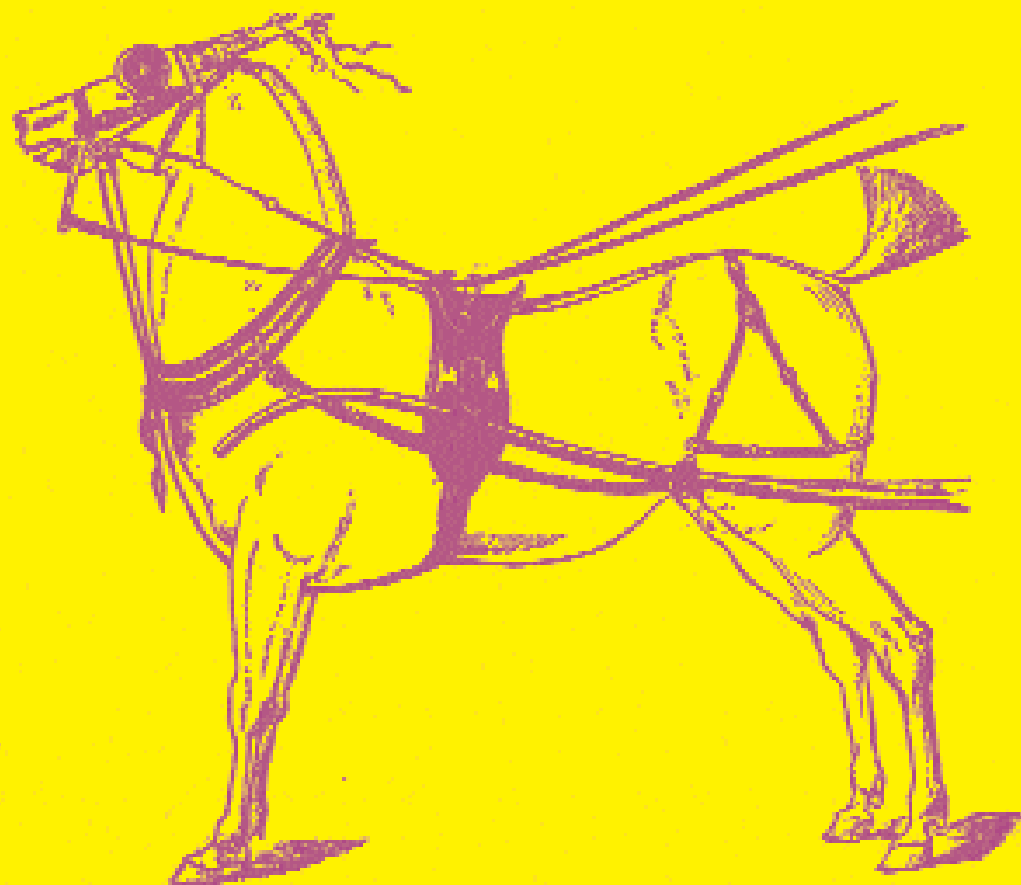
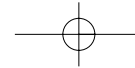
Weeks went by. I watched *Lawrence of Arabia* 30 times, *The Red Shoes* 20 times, got myself a house in the Hollywood Hills, a car, and even a girlfriend. I was then summoned to the studio president's office. She told me the Director was attending



"WILDE ON US"

"Something to 'Live Up' to in America." Thomas Nast in "Harper's Bazaar," June 10, 1882, celebrates Oscar Wilde's tributes to the Western miners as the "only well-dressed men I have seen in America."





“FASHION”

Illustration of the barbarities forced upon carriage horses by fashionable swells. From “Horse and Man,” by Reverend J. G. Wood, Lippincott, 1886.

a major event that evening and it was important that I be there. But more importantly, please come to the dinner with an idea for a musical film set in the Wild West. “I don’t know anything about the Wild West!” I exclaimed. I had read about Billy the Kid and watched John Wayne on the telly, but that’s it. “You’ll find something Malcolm. I have every confidence in you. Just make sure you’re Downtown at 8pm.” I wondered how on earth could I research. Where are the bookstores? A friend calmed me down and suggested an antiquarian bookshop in the suburban desert over the hill from Burbank.

An hour later, I was scanning the bookshelves. I immediately was drawn to a title – *Oscar Wilde’s Travels in America*: a collection of gossip, anecdotes and newspaper clippings of Oscar Wilde’s lecture tour of America in 1882 that started in New York. I turned the pages until I suddenly stopped when Oscar arrived at Denver Colorado.

Here, Oscar received by way of a telegraph (a recent invention) an invitation to open an opera house somewhere south of the Rockies. His minders, shocked, instantly railed him, “Mr Wilde, please, women are shot everyday in places like that. This is the Badlands. Lawless! You may not get out alive. Don’t, whatever you do, consider such an invitation again.” I was intrigued...

Oscar was bored and adored the thought of escaping from Colorado to meet some real, bad cowboys. Giving his roadies the slip, that night, he boarded a train to Leadville. I turned the pages fast.

There was no one to greet him in Leadville. Snow was on the ground. Shivering, he crossed the deserted square, and entered the local saloon. He needed a doctor but got instead a bottle of quack medicine. He glugged it down as the bar man hurried him out the door. Pointing across the street, he said, “Over yonder, everybody’s waitin’ for you, Mr Wilde.”

He found his way around the back of the newly built opera house, met the Robber Baron himself – the man responsible for supposedly bringing this sign of civilisation to the town – and stepped on to the stage. He gazed over the congregation, excited at what he saw: the best dressed guys since Beau Brummel hit the planet. Cowboys in ten-gallon hats, red kerchiefs, thigh-high

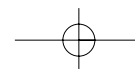


HIGHWAY ROBBERY

“A recent robbery by road agents near Leadville. Searching a commercial traveler for valuables.” “Frank Leslie’s Illustrated Newspaper,” November 11, 1888.

leather boots, were drinking and swaggering in the aisles. This was a goldmining town filled with tough guys. Oscar began lecturing them on the life and times of the Renaissance aesthete and goldsmith Benevenuto Cellini. He told them how they should make beautiful objects out of the gold and silver they found. Perhaps for their wives. He continued to enthuse as he looked at his groupies in the front row wearing top hats decorated with labels cut from fruit crates. Certain drunken cowboys interrupted, “Well, where is this guy, Cellini?” Wilde tried to quiet the crowd down. “My dear man, Mr Cellini is dead.” “Well” said another cowboy, “who shot him?” Shots rang out from the crowd. Plaster started to fall from the ceiling as the opera house turned into utter chaos. Two burly cowboys charged down the aisle, grabbed Oscar and forced him to come on a tour of what they called their “Parisian District”. That night, Oscar, a true Irishman, drank the cowboys under the table. Then, alone at the dead of night, at the end of the street, he fell into the ubiquitous bar with no name. Here, in this cigar filled atmosphere, he was trapped by a sound so cacophonous it scared him for a second. Venturing further in and peering through the smoke, he saw what he thought was a polyethnic creature. A young girl of no more than 18, half Irish, quarter black, quarter Indian, standing on top of a bar stool yelling at the crowd. A negro sat cross-legged on the floor below her, banging a metal plate. Behind the bar was a man cranking the proud invention of the day: the modern phonograph. This combination of sound – a waltz, a beat and Red Indian yelps was something Oscar Wilde wanted to take back to the Old Country. I turned the pages as quickly as possible to get to the end, only to discover that Oscar had failed and all he had in his possession on his return to London a year later was a Davy Crockett hat and a tomahawk.

At the Royal Academy, he lectured on the supreme and effective beauty of the tomahawk, which he thought should replace the English army’s sabre. Those in attendance thought the man was completely barmy. However, always the ladies’ man, the next season brought those fashionable women out to the balls wearing miniature tomahawks as accessories around their waists.





PORTRAITS OF A LECTURER

Portraits of Wilde drawn during his opening lecture in New York.
 "Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper," January 21, 1882.

I closed the book, looked no further and decided this was it. I sped back to LA.

The event turned out to be an Aids charity hosted by Giorgio Armani. I found my table with the Director and his wife, alongside Martin Scorsese, laughing Bob Dylan, Oliver Stone, Willem Dafoe and his wife, Elizabeth Compton. But there was no seat for me. I squeezed myself between Martin Scorsese and the Director. Leaning forward on the table and pretending I was sitting, I hoped a waiter would notice and get me a seat. But sadly, no one did. The Director was already prodding me. "So, Malcolm, what do you have? What's the idea?" Scorsese moved closer, his cigar smoke stinging my eyes as he listened attentively. All looked eagerly at me save for laughing Bob. "This is the idea. Oscar Wilde discovers rock'n'roll whilst on a lecture tour of America in 1882. He discovers it in the form of a polyethnic girl in a bar in the Badlands. He tries to take it back to the Old Country but fails. It actually took another 75 years for rock'n'roll to happen."

"Damn!" Marty said. "Oscar Wilde discovers rock'n'roll? Shit, that's a great idea!"

Arriving at the studio next morning, huddled in the President's office questions went whizzing around the room. "It's so great! How do we get started? How are we going to do this? What's the music going to sound like? We need a writer."

In the afternoon came the message: we found you a writer! The enthusiasm was immense. "He's in New York. He's written a play. It's called *M Butterfly*. It's a hit. It's amazing! He's a Chinese American." I was getting a little lost. But hey, what did I know? And then, without any further hesitation, the President issued the order, "You're on the next flight to New York. Everything's been taken care of. Just bring that writer back to LA. Tomorrow. We really believe in this, Malcolm." I boarded a flight to New York. My girlfriend, who lived there, was famous and this, for the first time, came in handy. She got me backstage. The play involved the life of a transvestite spy in China. I didn't know what this had to do with Oscar Wilde, but that wasn't the purpose of my visit. When I met the playwright he said, "I wrote my play listening to your album, *Fans*, listening to 'Madam Butterfly'. I wanted to use that music but the record company refused." "Wow!" I said, "That's amazing. But would you come to Hollywood with me. I have a brilliant idea and the studio would like you to meet this very important director." The rest was easy. The agents came in, and back in Hollywood, contracts were signed and I was issued the next command. "Take David, (the playwright), to London. He needs to walk around. Soak it all up. Show him where Oscar Wilde lived. Show him your favourite places. Show him Wilde's London." I tried to explain that it didn't exist anymore. But no one listened.

In London I walked the walk – in Chelsea where Wilde lived with his wife, to the Café Royale, where Wilde dined, now a tourist trap. Then to the rooms above Kettners, in Soho, where Wilde held private parties – now a Pizza Express. Finally I took him to Cleveland street where the notorious male brothels stood, where Wilde met Bosie – now shabby apartments to rent.

We drank beer in Soho's finest pubs and, a little bored, I returned to my room early, leaving David lapping up the London scene. The next day, there was no David. No sign of him. Had he gone off on his own? I wondered. Had he become a flâneur and disappeared into the bowels of London? Hollywood called regularly at 5pm. "How's it going? We want to speak to David. Tell him to call us." I promised I would. No sign of David that night or the next night and I began to lie a little. I finally admitted he'd disappeared – but maybe he was fired up and doing stuff elsewhere. The studio didn't see it that way. They became hysterical: "Call the police!" You've got to be joking, I thought. They weren't. I'd lost the writer and I was responsible. Hell, the man was old enough to take care of himself! I didn't know what to do so I went back to the pub I'd left him in and asked around. No one knew anything but I did find out, eventually, he'd left that night with a girl, the barmaid. But they had no phone number. The following morning, I got a call from David. "I'm in Cardiff, Wales. I'm thinking of getting married." I jumped in, "Look, whatever you do, don't do it until I get there." But David was committed. He wouldn't leave Cardiff. He said he'd write the screenplay from Wales. I returned to LA.

I started recording the music while everyone waited for the script. I studied Strauss's waltzes, music hall literature and tapes I brought back from London. The demos were immediately put on the studio's answering service. If it worked on the people calling in, kept deliberately on hold, then it would be a really cool project.

The much anticipated screenplay arrived. I'd finished the album by then. I'd discovered a dance in Harlem invented by black transvestites. They called it "Vogueing". It was a combination of poses stripped out of fashion magazines – models imitating life in freeze frame, a more glamorous version of body popping and hip hop dancing – something Oscar Wilde could have discovered. I was close to a 19th century rock'n'roll musical score.

Meanwhile, the Director had broken up with his wife and I was suddenly back in the President's office. "Malcolm don't get us wrong," they said, "We love the idea, the concept. The script needs a little work and we're checking out directors. We're thinking of Bernardo Bertolucci. Do you know him? We love this idea, but market research – you know we do this – says there's a problem. Frankly, America will never accept an English homosexual discovering rock'n'roll. But what if, we change his name from Oscar to Billy Wild? And he wouldn't need to come from England. He could be American." I didn't understand. Who the hell was Billy Wild? "Malcolm, you'll get used to it. It's great. It's our idea." I felt lost. I needed to meet the Director.

The following week, there was no news. But I was now breaking up with my girlfriend. Hollywood does that to you. And again, I was driving to another general meeting. I was disturbed. I still didn't know who Billy Wild was. I was losing myself – my sense of speech... perhaps natural in a town where words are less significant than images. Maybe this was a moment. I needed to return to the Old Country myself. I expressly asked for a meeting with the Director. "I really don't understand much about anything anymore", I explained, "but I am beginning to miss Europe and I'd like to go home." "But what if," he said, "but what if you get another idea? Let me pay you something," he said smiling. I promised he would be the first to hear of another idea. The studio boss wrote the cheque and I left with no more than a toothbrush for London and Paris. The album, though, was released. It was called *Waltz Darling*.