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New Romantics Who Never Were:
The Untold Story of Spandau Ballet
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Spandau Ballet played their fourth gig at [the Scala Cinema], at around midnight on Friday, 7 March 1980.

On the Monday before this gig, Dagger had visited David Johnson at his *Evening Standard* office in Shoe Lane, off Fleet Street, and arranged to meet him for a chat over a beer-and-sandwich lunch the following afternoon at a pub called Ye Old Mitre near Hatton Garden. Dagger had approved of Johnson's article about Steve Strange's Thursday Blitz nights and evidently thought that here was a journalist worth cultivating. Having satisfied himself that he was not a blue jeans wearing, rockist type journalist of the old school, he told him, as Johnson reported in 'On The Line' two days later, that the sound of the band he was managing was 'white European dance music', and he invited him to the Scala Cinema to see and hear Spandau Ballet for himself.

This was even more of a masterstroke than Dagger was aware of at the time because, unknown to him, Johnson also edited the pop music page of the *Daily Star* on a freelance basis, meaning that, when he came to the Scala on the

Friday, he brought along with him the music journalist Barry Cain who wrote for the *Star* under the name 'Andy John' as well as for *Record Mirror* under his own name. A consequence of this was that, from a single meeting, Dagger would benefit from three articles about Spandau Ballet in influential media publications over the following few weeks which strongly contributed to the creation of a precious 'buzz' around the band.

Another consequence of the meeting at Ye Old Mitre was that David Johnson reported in 'On The Line' of 6 March 1980 that 'The Now Crowd will be out in force tomorrow at the Scala cinema where romance will be making a momentary comeback' and that, 'the extremely Now band is Spandau Ballet whose wing collars give them a distinctly Edwardian appearance'. Thus it was that another Spandau Ballet gig was advertised in advance to the whole of London, or at least those who read the *Evening Standard*, and Johnson even informed his readers that the cost of admittance would be £2, that there would also be films shown (including Jean Genet's controversial *Un Chant d'Amour*) and that the proceedings would commence at 11:15pm.

According to David Johnson, the Scala gig was 'a sensational evening in the sense that all the decorative children were there dressed to the hilt.' He had been told by Dagger at their meeting that it was a fast-changing scene with everyone dressed differently and weirdly but, until he saw the large crowd at the Scala, he hadn't fully appreciated quite how visually striking the Blitz-goers 'in their battalion' could be. All around him, he saw 'colourful people looking ridiculous, preposterous, wonderful, fascinating.' That in itself was a surprise; what he certainly wasn't expecting from this bunch of strange dressers was that they would produce a decent sounding band. Even Steve Dagger had told him (as Johnson reported in the *Evening Standard* of 6 March 1980) that 'our crowd is more into fashion than music.' However, as soon as Spandau Ballet began their first song, Johnson was

amazed; ‘Barry and I both turned to each other’ he recalls, ‘and said, “My God they can play!”’. As he explains:

This was a dress-up scene, it wasn’t a music scene as far as we knew; it was a showy-off scene. One went with a lot of scepticism. And then suddenly this band could play their instruments and had a lot of style. They could play their instruments. Tony Hadley had a brilliant voice and smoked as he sang. He chain smoked as he sang...and it was new, it was conspicuously new. We both knew that this was something massive and we had it to ourselves, *it was ours*. We had to get it into print as quickly as we could.

However, although Johnson and Cain were the only professional journalists in attendance at the Scala gig, they were beaten into print by one of Johnson’s colleagues at the *Evening Standard*, the newspaper’s fashion editor, Liz Smith, on 17 March 1980, despite the fact that she had never seen Spandau Ballet herself. Headlined ‘Dandies in hand-me-downs’ and accompanied by photographs of ‘this dandified crowd arriving at the Scala Cinema to hear the Spandau Ballet – and be seen’, her article was based on a report of the gig by a young student of fashion journalism called Perry Haines, a member of both the exclusive crowd at Halligan’s and the audience at the Scala Cinema, who had previously assisted Ms Smith with an article on modern fashion in December 1979 and who had already described Spandau Ballet in the low circulation fashion magazine *Viz* as ‘the most exciting sound in London’. He now told the readers of the *Evening Standard* that they were the ‘most exciting new band in town’ whose music was ‘brilliant applause for an amazing audience of 100 per cent individualists.’

Then, in a moment of pure genius, Steve Dagger frogmarched Robert Elms into the offices of the *NME* with a review of the Scala gig which Dagger had literally forced Elms to write, standing over his shoulder while he did so, offering suggestions and amendments. Quite incredibly, despite

being an unknown politics student who had walked in off the street, the *NME* published the review of the gig after Elms persuaded them that they were missing out on the hip London scene that 'everyone' was talking about; and it appeared in the *NME*'s 29 March 1980 edition. Not surprisingly, considering its provenance, it was a very positive review! Not many bands can boast that they effectively wrote their own first review in the music press. In passing, we may note that the review included reference to a lost Spandau Ballet song, never recorded, called 'Pink Room', a song about sexual bondage which may explain why it was ditched.

On 8 April, through the connection made with David Johnson, Spandau Ballet had a positive article about themselves by Barry Cain (writing as 'Andy John') published on David Johnson's pop music page in the *Daily Star*. Barry Cain had spoken to Gary Kemp following the Scala gig and his article carried a quote from Gary protesting, 'We don't want to be a rock band'. His article was sub-headed 'Ballet stay in top gear' and would certainly have pleased Steve Dagger by including the information that, so far, 'the band has refused to sign a record contract.' Immediately after this, *Record Mirror* of 12 April (on sale from 9 April) had a full page article on the band by Barry Cain (although it only contained quotes from Gary Kemp) which helpfully referred to Spandau Ballet as 'The Next Big Thing'. In the article, Tony Hadley was mistakenly, and rather amusingly, referred to as Anthony Holden, an alias he had been using to pretend to be a journalist to gain V.I.P. access to various venues.

David Johnson was again involved in an important breakthrough event for Spandau Ballet after David Thomas, a young researcher for London Weekend Television, read the 'Andy John' article about Spandau Ballet in the *Daily Star*. As LWT was, at this time, planning a documentary series on London youth culture to be called 'Twentieth Century Box', he became interested in including Spandau Ballet in one of the episodes. On the same day as the article appeared,

Thomas tracked down the pop music editor of the *Star*, David Johnson, at his *Evening Standard* office to ask if he could be put in touch with the band's management, and Johnson willingly gave him Steve Dagger's contact details. An alternative version of the genesis of Spandau's appearance on this programme has been told by the *Twentieth Century Box* producer, Janet Street-Porter, who has said that her hairdresser, Ollie O'Donnell, another member of the Halligan's audience, mentioned a wonderful unsigned band he knew to her while she was having her hair cut and it is perfectly possible that both events happened in parallel.

On 13 May 1980, the band recreated their gig at the Scala for the London Weekend Television cameras. Interestingly, considering that we have already seen that David Johnson's 'On The Line' column in the *Evening Standard* advertised Spandau's second appearance at Blitz in advance, as well as the first performance at the Scala Cinema, it did the same thing for a third time on 8 May by informing the readers of the *Standard* that, 'Next Tuesday Spandau Ballet give their W.E.D. [White European Dance] a rare airing at the Scala Cinema' so that a significant number of people in London knew about this 'secret' gig a week before it was filmed, even if most of them would not have been in the slightest bit interested.

When the resulting documentary was broadcast by LWT a couple of months later, on Sunday, 13 July, it caused a stampede from the record companies. They were now falling over themselves to find out more about the band, the members of which, at the time of the broadcast, were about to make their way back from St Tropez, where they had played an enjoyable and lucrative fortnight's residency at the Papagayo Club. In securing this residency, they had again been unknowingly assisted by David Johnson who, on 19 April, had passed on Steve Dagger's details to his friend, the agent Phil Symes, also a publicist for Chrysalis, who was responsible for the entertainment at the Papagayo and who

had needed British acts to fill slots there during the summer season.

The importance of the LWT documentary cannot be overstated because, despite all the media mentions that Dagger had brilliantly (or, as the case may be, fortuitously) conjured up until this point, there had still been no record company interest. Indeed, the only concrete achievement from all the publicity had been the St Tropez residency. The television appearance did the trick, though, and the band were able to enjoy another masterstroke by Dagger when, by pretending to book a coming-down party for a bunch of students from Oxford University, with a gentle sounding 'quintet' to provide the musical entertainment, he wangled permission for Spandau to perform on HMS Belfast, moored on the River Thames, on 26 July, echoing a notorious 1977 performance by the Sex Pistols on the Queen Elizabeth river-boat to celebrate the release of their single 'God Save the Queen'.



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