



Still follow the leader?

*In 2021 I wrote a memoir, **My No1 Life**, about my life-long relationship with the pop charts, based on a project in which I listened to every UK No1 single in chronological order. This chapter, based around Gary Glitter's *Leader Of The Gang (I Am!)* examines whether it's still okay to like art if you subsequently discover the mind that created them was evil...*

LEADER OF THE GANG (I AM!) – Gary Glitter

August 14, 1973

Four weeks at No1

How did we not know? He always looked scary, right from the beginning. Sure, every other act in 1973 was just as feverishly silver and spangly. When glam hit its peak that year, the charts were full of sparkly, stompy, crashy bashy songs that had the kids jumping up and down and their parents reaching not for the TV volume control, but the brightness one too.

But while glam's undisputed kings Slade sang with a cheery, let's-just-have-a-party grin on their faces, and The Sweet pouted coquettishly yet always with a twinkle in their heavily mascaraed eyes, Glitter just always looked sinister, aggressive. He snarled. He was loud, uncompromising, in your face, leering at the camera, proudly posturing that he was the man

who put the bang in gang. Even in his best light, he always seemed to me, even as a child, faintly ludicrous. Liver Birds creator Carla Lane described him at the time as looking like “an upside down, hairy, singing Christmas tree”. At the age of seven, did I want a mirrored top hat like Noddy Holder’s? You betcha. Did I want to be in Gary Glitter’s gang? No, I most certainly did not.

But enough people did, to propel three of his singles – I’m The Leader Of The Gang (I Am!), I Love You Love Me Love and Always Yours – to the top of the charts. He sold 20 million records in the UK and was legitimised further over subsequent years by guest appearances on, among other things, Desert Island Discs, where he asked the show’s host Roy Plomley for a luxury item of a blow-up doll and a puncture repair kit.

He also appeared on Jim’ll Fix It, to which a nervous young singer had written in asking for help with her confidence to sing. She didn’t request anyone specific, but in a chilling alignment of the stars, Jimmy Savile’s production team sent Gary Glitter. On meeting the young woman, he kissed her and said to the camera: “Best part of the job!” Then, as he followed her into a recording studio, turned and winked “cheekily” down the lens. How did we not know?



I hesitated to play Glitter’s singles on my No1 journey. I knew they were coming and fought an inner battle, scared because I knew in doing so I’d be giving him money (which actually turned out to be only about 0.04p per play), and also because I feared that increasing his number of streaming plays might unleash some algorithm that promoted him to a wider audience. I was worried I, too, might be legitimising him. Indeed, writing about him here might be doing that too. But I did it, and I’m writing this, because there were things I wanted to say.

Here are the facts away from the music: Gary Glitter, who was born Paul Gadd in 1944, was jailed for four months in Britain in 1997 for downloading 4,000 items of child pornography.

After his release he moved to Cuba, then Cambodia and Thailand before ending up in Vietnam, where in 2006 he was jailed for three years – later reduced to two years nine months – for committing obscene acts with two girls aged 10 and 11. Following his eventual release and deportation back to London, in 2015 he was charged and subsequently convicted of attempted rape, four counts of indecent assault and having sex with a girl under the age of 13. He was sentenced to 16 years in prison, where he remains to this day.

So where does that leave the music? Glitter's legacy to the charts, if you call it that, is his three No1 singles, 23 other hits and, in the early 1970s in particular, an enormous popularity. As I said, he was never one of my favourites but I do distinctly remember the opening motorbike roar on I'm The Leader Of The Gang (I Am!) booming out over the tinny speakers at my primary school Christmas disco, and the hall floor suddenly filled in anticipation by 60 seven-year-old kids, especially the girls, drawn to the music as if to the Pied Piper and chanting along: "Come on, come on! Come on, come on!" Millions of people, including millions of children, loved his songs – and the whole Glittery package in which they were wrapped.

This is despite them being pretty terrible songs, musically and lyrically. I'm The Leader Of The Gang (I Am!), which was Glitter's first chart-topper, was written by its performer and his producer Mike Leander. The latter's previous credited work had included being sound engineer on The Beatles' She's Leaving Home and arranger of the Rolling Stones' As Tears Go By, but he now found himself responsible for a No1 hit that, like the two that followed, sounds very much like he and Glitter made it up in the studio as they went along. Legend has it that's exactly what they did do, reputedly playing all the instruments themselves and shouting things like "hey" and "come on" over a very basic guitar and heavy drum combination that came to be known as the "Glitter stomp".

Now here's the thing. Let me tell you the thing. In the intervening 50 years, the music hasn't changed. If Glitter has always had this evil in him, he hasn't changed either, since he recorded those songs. And nor, fundamentally, have we. Only our knowledge of him has. So the question is, *if you liked one of his songs back then, are you allowed to like it still now?*

Put another way, can you appreciate art (arguably low art in this case, but art nonetheless) on its own terms, or do you have to judge it in the context of its creator's psyche? Does a beautiful painting, a wonderful film or a life-changing book suddenly stop being so because years later you become aware of the darkness of the mind from where it came? And does it depend on how dark that mind is and how evil that creator's acts?

Consider: Numerous musicians have broken the law and we happily overlook it. We don't shun Paul McCartney because he spent 10 days in jail in Japan 40 years ago for importing seven ounces – about the weight of a small hamster – of marijuana. Of course we don't, and in terms of moral rectitude, Macca's crime is so



clearly a gazillion miles away from Glitter's that it seems obscene to put them in the same universe, never mind the same sentence. Plus, if we banned any tune by any artist who had ever used illegal mind-altering substances, we'd have next to nothing to listen to at all.

On the other hand... every illegal drug use, however small, personal and insignificant, helps feed a global narcotics trade that tortures and kills millions of people a year. Yet we are happy to overlook our musical heroes' contribution to this, not least because it has helped them make some of the greatest records of all time.

Even so, it seems reasonable that we don't devalue McCartney's worth as an artist because he has smoked the occasional spliff, and equally reasonable that we seek to erase Glitter because he has committed unspeakable acts against children. The problem is, our acceptance of other musicians is not as clear cut as that.



You won't, for instance, find any radio stations playing Rolf Harris's No1 hit Two Little Boys because of his convictions of sexual assault including of girls under 16. Quite right too, we might say. Yet Chuck Berry was convicted of having sex with a 14-year-old girl and Jerry Lee Lewis married his 13-year-old cousin, but both remain rock'n'roll heroes whose records we still play. (Ironically the one Chuck Berry record you don't hear these days is his only No1, My-Ding-A-Ling, which isn't universally shunned because of his paedophilia but because it is total crap.) In 2005, Tupac Shakur achieved a posthumous No1 with Ghetto Gospel, propelled to the top of the charts by grieving fans just a year after he was convicted of sexual assault. James Brown was a thief who assaulted a police officer. And Jim Gordon, who formed Derek And The Dominos with Eric Clapton and co-wrote Layla, has been in a secure unit since 1984 for attacking his mother with a hammer and stabbing her to death. Do we

prevent him coining in millions of pounds in royalties by banning his greatest hit? No we do not. Nor do we, say, stop playing Imagine or You've Lost That Lovin' Feeling just because they were produced by Phil Spector.

(This isn't just a pop music anomaly either. Beethoven was an impossible, spiteful and malicious man who regularly threw ceramic plates at his housekeeper's head. Yet his boisterous, beautiful and uplifting Rondo E Capriccio, which was apparently written while he was in the foulest of tempers, is blithely nicknamed Rage Over A Lost Penny. The world seems wantonly determined to overlook the perpetual terrorised state of his



domestic staff and indulge him (“oh Ludwig, what are you like?”) as an eccentric genius rather than, say, a mad malevolent bastard.)

I don’t know what the answer is, whether it’s right or wrong to devalue someone’s artistic contribution on the basis of what they have done in their personal life. To quote another glam rock chart-topper, Glitter “is more evil than anyone here ever thought” – but he is part of this story because he had three No1 singles and there was a time much of the nation loved him. No modern day perspective or knowledge can change that. We just have to live with it. Come on.