

# Alen's Italo Disco Universe

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presents:

# *Bobby O*

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This is part of the book «[Introspective](#)» (7 chapters) by Michael Cowton. It was published in 1991. Here are chapters which are related to [High Energy](#) producer [Bobby Orlando](#) (Bobby O). Addition is article from «[The Face](#)» magazine about Bobby O.

## Contents

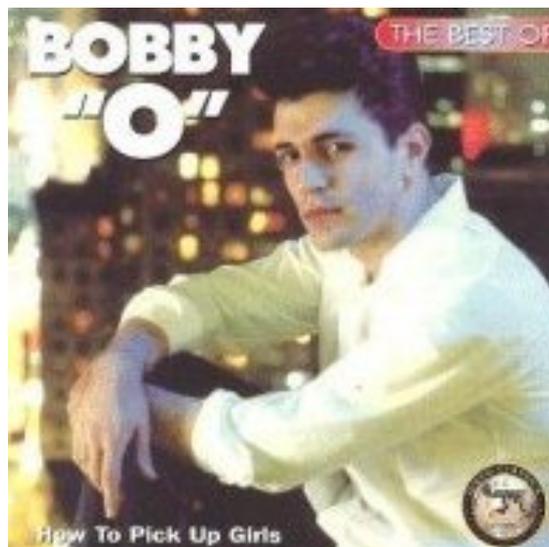
1. Can You Hear the Dawn Break?	1
2. A Lowe Profile	12
<a href="#">3. The Bobby O Story (3)</a>	<a href="#">18</a>
<a href="#">4. Carrot Cake and a Recording Deal (10)</a>	<a href="#">25</a>
<a href="#">5. What's in a Name? (17)</a>	<a href="#">32</a>
<a href="#">6. The Million Dollar Man? (24)</a>	<a href="#">39</a>
<a href="#">7. Let's Make Lots of Money (32)</a>	<a href="#">47</a>
<a href="#">8. New Opportunities (36)</a>	<a href="#">51</a>
9. Rudest Men in Rock	55
10. Paninaro Poseurs	62
11. They've Got it Taped	68
12. The King and Us	72
13. The Springfield Connection	82
14. Actually... It's Brilliant	87
15. It Couldn't Happen Here	92
16. Season of Bad Will	105
17. Rumours and Liza Minnelli	117
18. A Life on the Open Road	125
19. The Piglets of the Eighties	147
<a href="#">20. Memories are Made of This (39)</a>	<a href="#">154</a>
21. Here We Go Round Again	159
Epilogue	163
Notes and Sources	175
Discography	188
<a href="#">Summary (43)</a>	

addition: [Kimberly Leston – Bobby Orlando - The story of O \(44\)](#)  
(article from «The Face» magazine)

## 3. The Bobby O Story

[[Contents](#)]

In 1983, Neil Tennant landed an assignment with *Smash Hits* to travel to New York to review The Police live in concert and to interview superstar Sting, who had also attended St Cuthbert's School. "He's three years older than me, so I can't really remember him too well at school, although I have an old sports team photo and there on the end, looking rather more fashion conscious than the rest, is one Gordon Sunnier, before he became Sting," recalls Neil. "When I met him (in 1983), he had an old school friend with him and the three of us were in the bar at Shea Stadium reminiscing about school. If anything, he seemed to hate it even more than I did."



As far as Neil, the journalist-cum-musician was concerned, the trip to America provided a golden opportunity to create contacts. He was well versed in the work of New York based, hi-NRG disco producer Bobby Orlando, and he was one of Neil's prime targets.

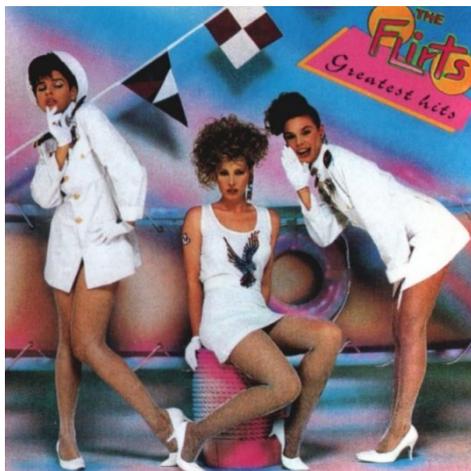
Bobby Orlando had by this time built up a very extensive background in hi-NRG, dance oriented music. Well on his way as a recognized producer, he had had a lot of disco type hits which had done well in the American music industry magazine, *Billboard*, and sold well through Europe; he had received three gold records by the time the female impersonator Divine, was to use his production expertise in 1980. Divine was already an accomplished artist and had been in numerous cult movies. Running a small but successful record company, Bobby saw the opportunity of working with Divine as yet another opportunity to boost his growing reputation. Viewing a partnership with Divine as a cute little gimmick, he agreed to take on the artist, at the time thinking it was going to be like a disco Amanda Lear, who was huge in Europe. The reaction from the public was immediate and tremendous, with big hits following. Despite this new found success, Bobby's relationship with Divine was not as it might have been, with little warmth emanating between the two, although it was to prove a useful working relationship.



**Mark Bauman, Divine and (young) Bobby O**

Divine's manager, Bernard Jay, was different again and he and Bobby got on far better together. According to Bobby, the success of Divine's whole musical career can be attributed to Jay, being Divine's right hand man, best friend and manager. Says

Bobby, "My own relationship with Bernard Jay had its stormy moments over the years, but it was also very good, so because of that relationship the Divine thing worked out well." Bobby was responsible for producing all of Divine's hits up until the time the singer signed to Pete Waterman, of Stock Aitken & Waterman fame, who subsequently has had monster hits with artists like Jason Donovan and Kylie Minogue. Not long after signing, Divine's health began a downward spiral that ended with his death two years ago. Bobby Orlando's company, Nunzio Brocheno Productions, was also producing the Flirts, Lisa Lisa and the Cult Jam, and Full Force, as well as ancillary artists like Man to Man, who became big cult disco artists in England. The company's off shoot, Bobcat Records, was responsible for the release of a wealth of material in the early Eighties. At the company's peak, hundreds of records were released a year, selling 3000 to 4000 copies each, mostly hi-NRG disco destined for the underground market.



**The Flirts**



**Man to Man**

That was the style so loved by the Pet Shop Boys, and Neil in particular. The music catered to a certain core audience, no matter what the label put out. The company was the forerunner at the time in this particular musical style and as a result had cornered the market. As the market was later to change, so too Nunzio Brocheno Productions and Bobcat Records moved into other areas. A child of the mid to late Seventies, Bobby Orlando would be one of the thousands of budding musicians who would practise playing guitar

for hours on end in their bedrooms. Closet guitarists copying lick after lick off the records of their heroes. "If you were a guitar player you had to play guitar and therefore you had to practise. You had to be good. You had to really want it. You couldn't fake it... there were no samplers in those days," says Bobby. Then sampling came along. Although he feels that new computer technology took away true musicality, Bobby's company saw the potential immediately and was one of the first to introduce it to vinyl. "Now any kid from the ghetto or the suburbs can go out and buy a sampler for five hundred dollars, a drum machine for three hundred dollars and he can make great records, whereas in the Seventies and early to mid-Eighties, if you wanted to make a record you had to be somewhat musically adept. So anybody in the world, your sister, my brother, could go and make a record today just by sampling. Unlike the past, there are no special skills required to make records any more, and this will ultimately hurt, not help, the music industry. I'm not putting down sampling, it has its place, but what you see now is that people are not sampling, they are literally lifting things - entire sections of records. I've got kids who walk into my office with records they have made at home that sound so good I'm amazed, but when we were making records before sampling, it would take hours to get that drum sound. Nowadays you press the button and you've got it. I really started losing interest at that point, and consequently from a business point of view, thank God I did, because everybody was losing their arse.

Nobody but the majors is making money in the record business any more. Nowadays you have artists who sell ten million records or they sell nothing. When we were coming up, I would say to a group, "Oh, this is great, you've sold 75,000 albums". That was like a caught up now in this whole idea of stardom, or whatever you want to call it. The kids coming up today, there is no reason for them to learn how to play because they are not going to sit in their room and play for hours until they learn how to play like we did. They don't have the discipline. There's no reason for them to sit in a studio for hours on end trying to get a particular sound, when they can just press a button. I'm not saying there is anything wrong

with that technology, it is just that everybody's record sounds like the next guy's record. Nothing sounds unique any more. What's worse is that nobody seems to care. "One good thing about some of these rap records that I am hearing now, though, is that while they have the sampler, there is a lot of live bass in there again, like the old James Brown, Joe Tex stuff, which I think is great. It's the bass that makes the hit." Bobby Orlando, the man with his finger on the pulse of everything that was hi-NRG disco, believes there is nothing outstanding today, whereas there was during the disco era. Donna Summer's «Love to Love You Baby», with its sequential rhythms and hard, cold, Kraftwerk type mechanical playing style, in itself so very Germanic, is a classic example of the type of song that Bobby will wax lyrical about. "Nowadays, every record you hear sounds like that with sweetening on top of it, and as a result you have the likes of Jimmy Somerville, Erasure and Depeche Mode all sounding the same. Nowadays you have three or four different styles of music and everything within those styles sounds the same. Nothing is standing out any more," says Bobby.

"Apart from the poseurs who stand on stage, press a computer button and do little else, the only style where people do still play is heavy metal, and you have to like heavy metal, which I hate! It's cult music today. Heavy metal artists are incredibly irresponsible with some of the things they do and say on their records. Not that artists are supposed to be the caretakers of the world, but at the same time anybody who listens to heavy metal is probably going to be a young, rebellious kind of a kid, and heavy metal artists should never forget this. I remember when I was a kid and I would listen to Alice Cooper. If Alice Cooper said go hang yourself I probably would have gone and hanged myself because you become so intrigued with rock heroes. The pop artists aren't like that any more, which is probably why we have a sense of frustration. They are no longer heroes of the youth, but traitors of the youth." He perceives the idols of today, like New Kids on the Block, as being like modern day Bay City Rollers. Even the latter, he says, retained a certain charm. "They actually played instruments, whereas the former merely dance. A contemporary version of what

has always been around, but a little more syrupy. If you listen to the Bay City Rollers' albums now, it's great pop music. At the time you probably thought a lot differently. If there was a group who was playing that kind of stuff today, we would consider them geniuses. Maybe in ten years' time we will listen to New Kids on the Block and say, what creative stuff. Who the hell knows where it is going to go?" A musician first and foremost, Bobby can't understand an artist not playing, like he can't understand a producer who can't play. But at the end of the day you do what sells. That's the record business. "Too many so-called producers just sit around the studio reading the paper, drinking coffee and yesing the artist to death," he notes.

"Do you think these new generation of kids are going to buy MC Hammer records in ten years? No. Maybe I would buy a Jeff Beck album for ever and ever because I just love the way he plays because I play, and I understand how much practice it takes to play the way Beck does. Kids today. What are they going to say? "I love the way he presses the sampler!" It's going to get much worse, too, before it gets better. You are going to see these guys are going to go on stage with tapes only, which is fine if you are going to a discotheque. Who cares? But when these guys are playing Madison Square Garden with tapes, it's crazy."

"As a semi-professional musician, I distinctly remember the emergence of samplers, and group vans - ours included - driving around with Musicians' Union stickers declaring «Keep Music Live». Many musicians, like Bobby O, were disturbed by what they perceived as replacement musicians - drum machines for drummers, high tech keyboards in place of rhythm and bass guitarists. The general public is not concerned with machines replacing instruments - they neither know nor care whether samplers or studio musicians have been employed as part of today's music genre. In fact, the huge advances in keyboard technology have been beneficial to many musicians, like the Pet Shop Boys, enhancing their music and taking them from their initial limited scope to a full studio production. This technology allows

lyrical and musical talent to exist where shortcomings in playing an actual instrument would normally have prevented it. Groups like the German based Tangerine Dream are past masters at breaking new frontiers in digital techniques. They have helped lead the way for the Pet Shop Boys and MC Hammers of this world to bring studio sounds to the general public. It has been argued that such studio based mastery takes away from the live element by being too clinical, too perfectionist in its notation. Musicians make mistakes; machines don't. Punch in the notes and you get a perfect refrain, but crowds like to see the slick mastery of their guitar, bass and drum heroes.

For outfits like Soft Cell, the Pet Shop Boys, and MC Hammer, this was never the issue. Digital advancement helped to bring otherwise closet bound, frustrated talents into the open. They weren't deliberately out to «replace» those who had mastered their chosen instruments; they were merely capitalizing on progress. And no one can really blame - or criticize - them for that."



**Pet Shop Boys**

## 4. Carrot Cake and a Recording Deal

[\[Contents\]](#)

**Neil** Tennant had been a big fan of Bobby O's hi-NRG disco records and, alongside Chris, had accumulated a large collection of the many records he had produced. While at *Smash Hits*, Neil would claim back on his expenses the money he paid out for imports, which at that time cost around £5 each. Mind you, it was hard to keep up with the prolific release schedule of Bobcat Records. When he travelled to New York on his Sting assignment, by chance - or as fate would have it - Bobby O's office was at 1776 Broadway, the same office as a company called FBI Booking Agency, which happened to be the agency of the Police. Neil came to interview Sting in the building on 19 August 1983 - two years to the day since the duo had their first meeting in the King's Road - and while there asked for an interview with his producer hero.

"I thought, well if I've got to go and see the Police play, I'm also going to have lunch with Bobby O," said Neil. Neil described himself as a writer for a British pop magazine, and he and Orlando hit it off immediately. At the Applejack Diner - a hamburger joint on Broadway which was to become one of their favourite hangouts - over a cheeseburger and carrot cake, which Bobby O paid for, musical ideologies passed back and forth, and Bobby recalls: "I saw him, I liked him, we spoke."

It was towards the end of their conversation, and almost as an afterthought, that Neil mentioned that he also wrote songs. Bobby does not recall hearing any of Neil's tapes at this juncture, but as far as he was concerned it didn't matter. The accent and the

fact that Neil looked right was enough to sway the balance in his favour. "I said: You have a British accent, that's good enough. I'll sign you. We'll make a record," recalls Bobby. Despite the fact that Bobby had heard none of Neil's material, he said it did not matter. "I told him to go and get his partner; I would fly them to New York and we would cut a record." Neil was obviously thrilled. "Meeting Bobby O was an even bigger thrill than meeting Sting," admitted Neil later. "I have admired his production techniques - with people like the transvestite singer Divine, as well as on his own records - for a long time."

Upon Neil's return to London, the *Smash Hits* team were delighted at his good fortune. Bobby O followed up their meeting with a telex to confirm that the flights to New York would be arranged, which they subsequently were, and a couple of weeks later Neil returned to New York with Chris Lowe in tow. Sessions were held at Unique Studios, *Sugar Hill* (the *Sugar Hill Gang* studio in New Jersey), and at Bobby's own place, to make the perfect Bobby O New York disco record. They recorded «West End Girls», «Opportunities (Let's Make Lots of Money)» and «One More Chance». Ironically, the first two songs recorded were the same ones released by EMI after the Boys' break with Bobby O.

It was, in fact, Bobby who played most of the instruments live in the studio. "Chris was not really a very good keyboard player," says Bobby. An accomplished musician himself, Bobby wanted to lay out the material quickly, so he took the reins. "I played everything on «West End Girls», including the jazz riffs at the end. Chris played one chord and the bass line. The choir sound we resampled off other records we had done." The B-side of the single was «One More Chance». Says Neil, "We learned a lot. Bobby works fantastically quickly - within an hour and a half we had recorded the basic tracks for three songs. He (Bobby O) has a very low boredom threshold, so he works fast to keep the excitement going." It was immediately apparent that the trio hit it off well, and soon became close friends. The Boys stayed for about a week at an apartment Bobby was keeping at 56th Street, while he himself

stayed up in Westchester County. "What really compelled me to record them, believe it or not, was this certain gut feeling I had," says Bobby. "Neil had that look of enthusiasm in his face, and enthusiasm is everything. If you have that, you are going to win. I knew he was hungry and wanted to have a record, and that's more important than talent. And as it turned out they were talented too, which just made it that much nicer."

"A lot of the stuff you listen to of the Pet Shop Boys, and material by other artists that our company was putting out at that time, is the same sound. But the Bobcat Records sound of that period was very definable, very electronic, very high-tech, melodic and European." By the time Bobby met Neil, he already had ten gold records, all from Europe, so the company was well and truly established in that musical vein. Of his first impressions of Neil, Bobby recalls, somewhat tongue-in-cheek. "I liked him instantly. What's not to like? The guy is coming in telling me that he has bought every record I ever made". I said, "Gee, I must have made about one hundred bucks off you in royalties already." He was pleasant, excited, nervous, all the things that make a person nice. You almost feel humbled by such people.



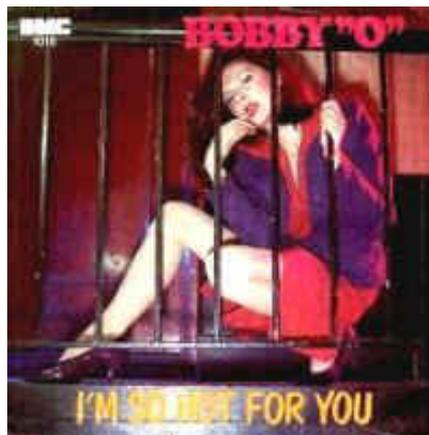
**Bobby O**

“When I met Chris, he came in and was like this kind of goofy kid who walked through the door. In America we have a cartoon called «Mr Peabody and Sherman», it was a very big cartoon when I was a kid growing up. Mr Peabody was this little dog and Sherman a little boy; Peabody was Sherman’s dog, but Peabody was the boss, Sherman was the sidekick. Peabody used to have glasses and he was this little character - brilliant, intelligent, an intellect. Sherman was this goofy little kid who hung around the dog. It would always turn out at the end of the cartoon that Sherman, although he appeared to be goofy, was always the wise kid, and Peabody would always, ultimately be rescued by Sherman. Mr Peabody and Sherman looked and acted exactly like the Pet Shop Boys! Mr Peabody was Neil, Sherman was Chris. It was like the joke of the office, «Here’s Mr Peabody and Sherman».”

There was no contract on the Boys’ first trip to New York, all having been done in good faith. Instead, an agreement was prepared for their second visit. Basically, Bobby said he would record them and see how it turned out. It was very loose. Although it was done so quickly, everything fell into place as it went along. With the recording out of the way, presentation was next on the list. How was Bobby going to sell the two Englishmen to the American market? Bobby did not perceive it as a problem. “I thought they looked great,” he says. They were telling me that they wanted to have a Duran Duran look. I disagreed.

I said, “This whole pretty boy glamour thing is nice; it works, but in your case I think, instead of trying to buck it, I think you should look staid, you should look like guilty Catholics. That would be the perfect look. Look intellectual, and look guilty. The world will relate, because the world is guilty. Leave your glasses on. The cuteness will come through if it is packaged right. The last thing it should look like is an attempt to look like pretty boys. It just wasn’t going to happen. It was better for it to look like what it was so that they would almost be more respected as higher thinkers.” Neil gave Bobby the impression of being intellectual, but at the same time very hip - that he knew what was happening. At that time, of

course, Bobby was very fashion conscious, very clean cut. "I never looked at them in the sense other than that I felt that they had a particular look that would benefit them if they adhered to that look. I advised them continually to always be as radical as they could be in whatever they say publicly, always put the big guys down." This proved somewhat ironic; despite the Boys' proclamations about not wanting to be on a major label, ultimately they sought one. Every artist must dream of being on a major label at some point. "Any childhood fantasy you have of being the young upstart at an independent label quickly goes away when you finally get some success." Having said that, Bobby O was thrilled with the way the production of West End Girls' turned out. The idea was for it to be a rap record done in a British accent.

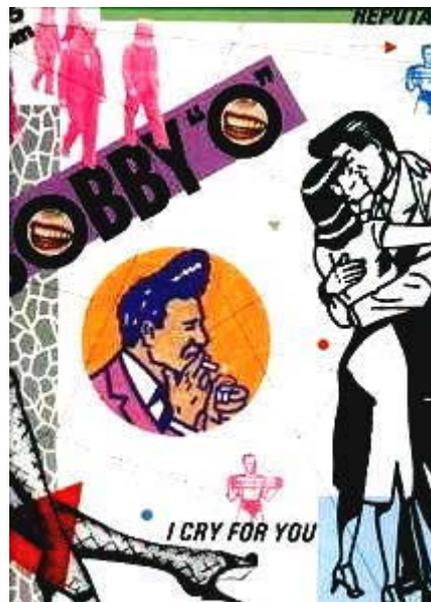


The gimmicky Britishness was something that Bobby could play on. Before releasing and promoting the single on his own label, Bobby played it around for some of the majors. Every one turned it down, including EMI America who turned it down cold, saying that Neil sounded like Al Stewart. At this point, Bobby had become extremely fanatical about breaking the Pet Shop Boys. The more people turned the single down, the more he was convinced it was going to be huge. "If the majors hated it, then it had to be good," he noted. Although being basically disco, Bobby did not want to promote it as such, but as underground New Wave, as «new music», which at the time meant nothing. As part of the promotion campaign, the company ran a free colour television giveaway. The question was, could anyone guess the name of the

singer of the Pet Shop Boys? Sure enough, somebody in California won a free colour television. The record was released in April 1984 on Bobcat, who also licensed it to Epic Records in the UK in a one off deal. Bobby had been dealing through Gordon Charlton and his secretary Lorraine Trent at the company, both strong supporters of the Boys. Out eight weeks in America, it was doing well, picking up a nice buzz, particularly in the clubs in Los Angeles and San Francisco, when suddenly the whole campaign exploded. Bobby had gone overboard on promotion and it worked far better than expected. The record began to catch on and orders started pouring into Bobcat Records. Interviews with Neil and Chris were being demanded by punk type magazines - and the big break was just around the corner.

«West End Girls», after receiving plenty of air and club play, was getting itself an underground core audience. WLIR, a new music station in New York at the time, since renamed WDRE, played it continuously. The record grew big the old-fashioned way, starting with a small audience and building up a large one. It was brewing all the time. And it was decision time for Neil and Chris. Their careers were on the line. Neil, though, had some qualms: "It was a risk leaving a successful magazine for music, but it was something I always wanted to do." Neil would lie awake at night thinking he must be mad leaving his secure job for something as fickle as being a pop star. Deep down he knew he was doing the right thing, and later admitted: "I don't miss it. I liked meeting people but I didn't enjoy the writing. The only thing I miss is the free records. I used to get thousands of review copies." Nearing the end of his five year architecture course, with his finals around the corner, Chris was anxious as he considered his future, "My mum always told me I had to finish my exams, but if the song's a hit, I don't know if I'll make use of my training." The London based paper, the *Evening Standard*, reported on 4th April 1984: "A new duo, who go under the particularly silly name of the Pet Shop Boys, are waiting with baited breath to find out if their debut single is a success." The single went on to sell exceptionally well in France and Belgium: it had a far greater impact on the radio listeners of

America's West Coast, but failed to move the British chart buying public. Despite this obvious disappointment on home territory, it was enough to move the Boys to push ahead with another single. High on their American success, Neil and Chris returned to New York to record more material; in fact, enough for three albums. According to Bobby, the material got better and better. Bobby would start playing, and Neil would begin to sing. Chris would join in, and the atmosphere created was reminiscent of a garage band. It all simply came together. Neil says that at the time, despite their good fortune, they were quite happy to become a popular underground dance duo. Television, promotions and the package were not in sight or in mind, despite their first ever stage appearance at the Fridge in Brixton, London, in October 1984, when they sang and played over tapes. Making a record with Bobby O was their one and only goal. They wanted to be part of the Bobby O story.



## 5. What's in a Name

[\[Contents\]](#)

**T**here has been much talk over the years of where the name for the duo originated - and its gay connotations. According to the Boys, the name cropped up just prior to them recording with Bobby O. Chris had a flat in Ealing at the time, and he was acquainted with three boys who worked in a pet shop. The trio were already in a group, but it was nameless. Neil and Chris suggested they call themselves the Pet Shop Boys... "We thought it sounded like an English rap group." The Boys then ruminated over their own name, throwing ideas back and forth both in Britain and America, and finally latching on to their original idea for their friends. They have admitted since that they have been embarrassed by it, thinking it sounded silly and even camp.

But there were other problems, eagerly picked up on by the media. It was rumoured that «Pet Shop Boys» were gay American men who put hamsters (or gerbils) up their bottoms - for pleasure. Neil and Chris were obviously horrified when this was revealed to them after the release of «West End Girls». They even considered changing their name, but decided against it. Bobby Orlando does not personally recall the Boys having chosen a name for themselves by the time they first arrived in New York. He says: "I had an artist called the Beat Box Boys, with a song called «Einstein», an underground number which sold around 100,000 copies. The Boys and I were talking about a potential name. I said whatever it is, let's use a name like Beat Box Boys. I said, "Why don't you call yourselves the Altar Boys?", because I was focussing in on this staid Catholic image. They didn't like that and in retrospect I don't

blame them. We were throwing names back and forth and the name Pet Shop Boys came up. [This was a name Neil and Chris had previously decided on. The rough mixes of the first day's recording carry the label Pet Shop Boys.] It didn't have any particular meaning. They certainly never told me that it was something based upon a friend who had a pet shop. Chris had said something once that there was some kind of meaning to the name Pet Shop Boys. Some kind of a culture, but I said it sounded fine to me. The name came around on the day we signed the contract. I said I could always change it later if they changed their minds. There had been numerous phone conversations with Neil after the first batch of sessions where we were throwing names around like crazy."

Bobby said he had also heard the rumour about the gay subculture activities in New York, but no one had ever substantiated it, and the Boys' behaviour refuted it. On the Boys' second trip back to New York, they travelled with [Kimberley Leston](#) from *Smash Hits*, who later moved to «The Face» magazine, and they stayed in a wonderful rented townhouse on the west side of New York. *Smash Hits* was setting up a magazine in the States called *Star Hits*, and Neil and Kimberley travelled to New York to ensure that the operation got rolling. Bobby, Neil and Chris would often eat out at different restaurants and, at that time, as Bobby is the first to admit, he could not resist a pretty face. On one occasion a gorgeous girl walked into a diner and Bobby said to her: "Do you know who these guys are?" He then pointed to Neil and said he was the lead singer with Duran Duran. The girl freaked out, saying she had all their records, and the Boys played it up to perfection. Although they would get a kick out of Bobby's spontaneity and play acting, he found them particularly shy people, and certainly not as outgoing in the company of strangers.

They usually ate in the Applejack Diner, where Bobby knew the Greek owners well. Even before the Boys had a record out Bobby would insist that Neil and Chris should eat free there because they were the biggest group in England. The Greek owners of Cafe 57, an upmarket restaurant, would fall for the same Bobby

patter, rolling out the red carpet whenever the Boys were in town. "Neil and Chris were as clean as whistles. They would stay at the apartment and they were spotlessly clean. They were not like typical rock star animals in any way. There were a lot of big artists at that time that wanted me to produce them, and I turned every one down, mainly because I didn't think I could make enough money doing it. I thought: if I produce a group on my own label, I make a dollar; if I produce a group for another label, I make twenty cents. I burn out a piece of my talent and my own artists can say, "Why didn't you produce that for me?" So I always shied away from that, and I think Neil got a kick out of it because he used to think it was being kind of arrogant, which he liked.

I think that leads into the way they are today - when you say aloof. As well they should be. I think it is funny when artists take themselves seriously. When they talk about their lyrics as if they were the Bible. What is it? It's not some great song. It's got a catchy melody, you're going to make a few bucks and you're going to go home. What's the big deal? But some people take their work so seriously. That's another thing I liked about the Pet Shop Boys and one of the reasons why I liked working with them - they knew all along that really it's all bullshit. It's just a question of, "We're going to have some fun, we'll make some money, and the more you can soak out of it, great." There was a certain charm to that. I think that they're right. It's almost the Malcolm MacLaren (who managed the Sex Pistols) thing. Grab the money and run. With some people I find that to be an exciting concept because it is bullshit anarchy; it doesn't mean anything. It's not like overthrowing the country or anything. It caters to a certain ilk of society. It's a revolutionary think."

A phoney banana republic' plans were drawn up for the release of the duo's first album when Bobby heard through the grapevine that the Boys wanted to switch to a major label. Bobby had been busily negotiating with CBS Records for the debut album. "They said all the songs were weird. They wanted me to give them the real disco *cha-cha* record that I had become pseudo-famous

for,” says Bobby. “I said I thought they were wrong. At the same time the guys from Dead or Alive wanted me to produce them and I’d said no, for two reasons. One was because I was working with Neil and Chris, and I didn’t want there to be any kind of conflict - because Dead or Alive was on CBS, and I didn’t want a situation where I would drop one for the other, so I really protected my relationship with Neil and Chris by doing that. Also, I felt that the kid who was singing with Dead or Alive was in the vein of Divine, so I said forget it. As it turned out, Pete Waterman produced the single instead of me. Ironically, at that very same time Divine left Bobcat and went to work for Waterman also.”



**Dead Or Alive**

Having tasted success with «West End Girls», the Boys were obviously thinking big. They wanted to join the pop jamboree. Something was afoot, of that Bobby had no doubt, but there was no hint of their inner feelings the last time he saw them; he was busy planning their next moves. The Boys had been happy to be guided by his knowledge, by his professionalism, even to the extent

that they allowed him to choose their first single. The Boys had wanted to release «Opportunities» first, but Bobby did not think it as good a record as «West End Girls». Ironically, when the Boys later signed with Parlophone Records - a subsidiary of the giant EMI Records - in England, they contacted Bobby and told him that «Opportunities» was being released as their first single. He told them it was a mistake. He said they should re-release «West End Girls», as there was a whole bubble that had been created, which was still there to be taken advantage of. The Boys thought Bobby was wrong, and «Opportunities» was released. It bombed. West End Girls' followed, and it was a smash hit.

«Opportunities» was borne of an original idea by Chris, who also came up with the title. Neil apparently wrote the words in about fifteen minutes. The song is anti-rock and anti-the-industry and its people. Although it sets out to destroy the credibility of the rock-pop music world, it was done as pure satire - a wind up that was based on no one in particular, certainly not the Boys themselves. As far as Bobby was aware, whilst on promotional tours of clubs and television stations through Europe, Neil and Chris had commented to various licensees that they would not be working with Bobby O any longer. The recipients of this news were clearly puzzled, as they had received no directive from New York to this effect. Bobby received a phone call from his licensee in Belgium, who had been awaiting the arrival of a batch of the Pet Shop Boys' debut album. Fobbing the rumour off with the reply that the Boys were no doubt just tired, Bobby immediately knew that there was going to be trouble. But he kept his cool and dealt with it in a professional manner. When he eventually spoke with Neil, the latter reluctantly agreed that it was true, that they had a commitment from EMI.

Bobby recalls, "They came to me and basically they wanted to go with EMI, so I said we had two problems. One, I did not want to go with EMI, and two, I wanted to keep them on my own label." This was a golden opportunity for Bobby to build on the foundations of Bobcat. That is why he had taken all the chances.

Neil then mentioned the name of Tom Watkins, a manager in England. Tom Watkins, like Chris Lowe, had designs on becoming an architect. Not having the necessary qualifications, he moved into interior design, before his thoughts turned to music. His earliest encounters were with the university circuit, where he organized package deals which included DJs and groups. It was during this time that he first came across Neil Tennant, who was engaged with *Marvel Comics*. Watkins had an idea to promote one of his bands, called Giggles, by using comic book imagery, and contacted the *Marvel* offices, where he negotiated with Neil.

The latter watched Giggles - who later worked with Sheena Easton - perform on several occasions, but at that time he was more into punk than pop music. With several friends, Watkins formed XL Design, a company involved in record sleeve design and concert posters. XL Design did work for various major artists, and was to design the sleeve for the Pet Shop Boys' Epic Records single, «West End Girls». Watkins had also switched his interests to management, forming an off shoot of XL Design called Massive Management. After hearing a demo tape of the Boys' songs, which included «It's a Sin», «Opportunities» and «West End Girls», he agreed to take them on to his books. It was not a smooth beginning. From the outset it was obvious that Neil and Chris were their own men. They knew precisely what they wanted from the deal, and arguments occurred over the contract with Massive. Twelve months later the contract was renegotiated after XL Design went bankrupt and Watkins bought out the management company. There were also ongoing rows over the Boys' image. Watkins had firm ideas about glamour. The Boys had firmer ideas about maintaining their bored personas. They won. If they had capitulated, we may well have had two Bros look-alikes on our screens. "It became apparent that they just did not want to be on our label any more," says Bobby. "I was very disappointed, obviously, but I felt the better part of valour is to just do what is appropriate and do what is best for myself and the company as well. They wound up on EMI, which is tremendously ironic because EMI had turned the artists down a year earlier." Bobby then fought

hard with EMI. "I thought they were just a big company; they reminded me of a guy who had turned a girl down earlier, then when the girl has an affair with another guy, suddenly the first guy wants to have the girl back." Following the success of «West End Girls» on Bobcat Records, Arista and Geffen Records had also shown interest in the Pet Shop Boys, Geffen also having previously turned them down. "Someone had been talking to EMI - whether it was the Boys or Tom Watkins, I don't know - because all of a sudden, why were they interested, just by hearing the record?" Apparently CBS only developed an interest in the song after discovering at a business lunch that somebody from EMI wanted it.



**Pet Shop Boys**

## 6. The Million Dollar Man?

[\[Contents\]](#)

**Neil** Tennant later commented that he felt the Pet Shop Boys needed a manager because it had grown obvious that, despite how much they wanted to keep hold of the reins, they could not possibly do everything themselves. They needed to bring in a manager to sort out a major record deal on their behalf. He had presumed that Tom Watkins would deal directly with Bobby O on this issue, but Watkins obviously had other ideas up his sleeve. Apparently, too many rights were already tied up across in New York.

Bobby O had certainly got the rough end of the wedge. Having successfully launched the Boys with their first single, he was already well on the way to negotiating a deal with a major label when the Boys broke the news that they were signing with EMI. As a result, an arrangement was worked out between EMI and Orlando which did not prevent the Pet Shop Boys from recording. He says there was no problem with the Boys at that time. They remained on friendly terms. "I knew that they would wind up using all the stuff that I had recorded anyway. They had to because it was great stuff." Their first three hits were all songs that Bobby O had recorded.

As far as Bobby was concerned, from a business point of view he was still involved with Neil and Chris, and began corresponding with EMI to this effect. Moreover, he was really concerned about them. He honestly wanted them to have that success. In a sense he stands by that today. He says, "I told the magazine *Billboard* in an interview at the time that if the Pet Shop Boys go along the path that I advise them to go on, they would be as big as the Beatles.

Which was, of course, an overstatement, but I was trying to say that they would be huge. I never lost interest in them. At the time that I started working with them I had lost interest in my other projects. I was a successful businessman and I really felt this incredible creative impulse, something that I was longing to recapture in a sense by working with them, because it was not the traditional *cha-cha* disco stuff that I had been doing.

I felt like I was working with real people as opposed to these fictitious names and characters that we would continue to make up. What had happened, however, was that because they lived in England and I lived in New York, during the times that they were not in New York, our only mode of conversation was by telephone. So there were times when they would call the office and I was out of town, so when I came back I would call them, but that was maybe ten days later, so maybe they would take that to mean that I had lost interest in them." Neil and Chris stated that they had grown frustrated and felt that they had themselves an unworkable relationship with Bobby O. Neil claimed that when they first started recording, it was in a 24-track studio, but later this switched to an 8-track in his office, and they felt they were regressing. Bobby O, he claimed, was not only eccentric but was also saving money, and they began to doubt whether he still had any faith in them. Says Bobby, "I don't see how Neil could have made that comment, only because when we were together we spent literally twenty-four hours a day together. We would eat breakfast, lunch and dinner together, we would hang out together, we would go walking down Broadway and shopping together. We talked about life, women, politics. You name it, we talked about it. These activities are all-important in production, even though it does not involve recording. It is assimilating the personalities."

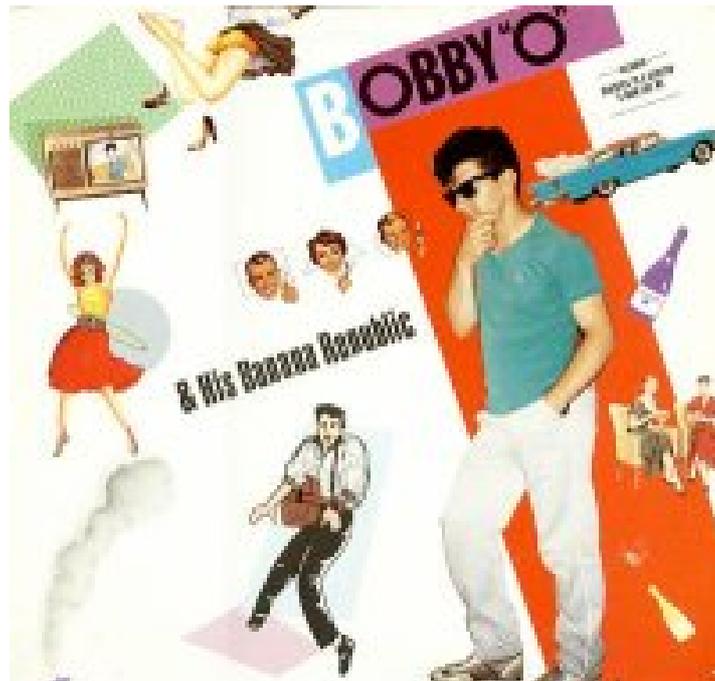
Prior to the split, Bobby had got into a phase where he had become obsessed with the idea of minimalism. "At this point sampling was becoming commonplace and I said, "Why not do something that is raw, at its roots?" In fact, there was one track I had done with them that was like David Edmunds crawling from the

wreckage kind of a thing, but they hated guitars. I said to them that instead of doing these 24-track songs, everything separated on each track, let's try to create a new thing of using minimalism. I wanted to record directly into 2-track, everything live. What are they doing today? Everybody is recording directly off the computer into the Dat machine. So we were recording certain tracks on the 8-track setup that we had in our office; but this was not a track recording like making a demo at home, this was a professional studio environment with the latest technology. Some of the greatest things we did were as a result of that. I really wanted to get to this thing where it was drums, bass, keyboard, voice, that's it. Almost like House music is today: minimal. I wanted to try a new approach. From Neil's point of view, maybe he viewed it that way, but I spent a lot of money. Remember, I'm an independent businessman; I'm not CBS and we had spent what I consider to be a decent amount of money. People don't spend money, let alone their time, if they don't believe in something."

Neil told journalist Chris Heath, author of *Pet Shop Boys, Literally*, that everyone thought they should give up Bobby O. Neil claimed that they did not receive money from him, or for the original version of «West End Girls». Bobby O's settlement included all the royalties from the Bobcat version of «West End Girls», plus those of «One More Chance» and «Pet Shop Boys», the two other tracks he owns. Bobby also negotiated an override royalty on each of the Boys' first three albums, with a ceiling of one million dollars. He had in fact earned this sum by midway through the life of *Actually*, paid to him by EMI.

Bobby was also involved in the writing of the two songs, «One More Chance» and «Two Divided by Zero», for which he is credited as co-author and earns fifty per cent of the writing royalties. Neil does admit that the producer warranted the money, as he had taken a chance with the Boys, where others may have decided otherwise. When I mentioned the figure of a million dollars, Bobby O commented: "I was a successful businessman long before I met Neil and Chris. Neil said he never thought he would be successful,

and for this reason they agreed to the terms of the deal, never actually believing it would pay off. But I always believed they would be successful and I always expected to receive what we had agreed to. I guess I believed in their success more than they did. There was this period of time where Neil obviously got into this thing where he felt angered, or frustrated.



After they left us, in some of the early interviews they really praised me in all respects. If they were going to pay me off it would have been a lot more than a million bucks!" Following the split, the trio remained on good terms. Every time the Boys were in New York, they would see Bobby at his office, take in lunch, talk, and meet some of the new artists on his books. Acrimony did come later, around 1987 or 1988, although Bobby says he does not know the reason. I understand the acrimony during this time was created because of the Boys' claim that they had not - and to this day still have not - received all master tapes that were due to them under the settlements previously made with Bobby O. He says he never harboured any bad vibes about them. He actually received one call from Neil around 1986, but he says it was not the same Neil he'd once known. He was very cold. Bobby told him he sounded different.

"I had been incredibly successful as a businessman and as a producer before meeting them. I had remained so at that point, and it was only in 1987 and 1988 when I decided I'd just had enough for the time being; I wanted to get a breather. And it did get bad at some point. Frankly, I never really figured out why.

The last time I spoke to them was when their new album «Introspective» came out and I'd basically told them during that conversation that I didn't like the album, that I thought it didn't live up to their true talents. I thought they were taking the wrong direction. They said they would have thought I would like the new album. I said, "I like what you guys are doing but I think the guys who produce you do mediocre work." They have not been properly produced since the last good production someone did with them, which was «Love Comes Quickly». Everything after that has been garbage. «You Are Always on My Mind» was also a good production. Outside of that it sounds so rinky-dinky. They should produce themselves. "I could almost understand why they chose to produce Liza Minnelli, because she has this Bette Midler attraction about her. I could see them producing Cher, for instance. There just seems to be something particular about these diva-type ladies. I think that at some point they got frustrated, or maybe they just started getting too rich... When I let them go to EMI I really sensed that they wanted to go. I don't think you can really legislate people's behaviour. If you are with a woman, and she wants to go, you can kick and scream as much as you want to, but she is going to go anyway. So, at that point, I thought, I like them, let them go. They are going to be huge and they will remember me and then it will work out fine."

If you read some of the articles when they first went to EMI after «West End Girls» was a hit, there was nothing but praise for Bobby O. Then I read a few articles many years after that where it's like they never said those things. One of the reasons why, in 1987, I decided that I was going to start phasing out of the music business a little bit and take some time to do these other endeavours was because I really became incredibly disturbed over

the ingratitude of many of our artists and people that we worked with. I still have this link to my creative past, that you tend to thrive on the gratitude and appreciation of those you work with. I think everyone needs to feel appreciated. So even if you want to use the argument "Who cares what they say as long as you get paid?" that's true to an extent, but to another extent it's like, "Why shouldn't I just do it for myself? Why should I let them be a part of it?"

So there comes a time when appreciation is really important. And I certainly have never got that, I don't think, from any artist that I have ever worked with. And I don't think it is just me. At the end of the day, the artists all believe, once they become successful, that somehow they can do it themselves, and it's, "What did you really do for me?" Out of all the artists I have worked with, only one has been with me for twelve years, and that's Screaming Tony Baxter. We had one hit, "Get up off that Thing" in England, which went to Number 14 in 1984." The hardest part of breaking a record is not having the hit, it's having that ground-swell, that grass-roots backing. "What we did for the Pet Shop Boys was we rallied that grass-roots network but we never invaded," said Bobby Orlando.

"I really could have been a total arsehole about it but I wasn't. I thought: better off, I have got the thing going. Even if I am not going to be EMI, if we let this thing delay too long, people will forget about it. It's there, it has happened already." Bobby admits that he tends to get a bit radical sometimes, and felt particularly disturbed by some of the people that were working with Neil and Chris. He thought the Boys were poorly advised, advised in a way that was not true to what the existing situation was. Whatever frustration they were feeling, whoever was advising them at the time, had portrayed his company as just a bunch of little guys. He says there was a good propaganda campaign levelled against the company. "We were not a small company in the respect that we could not afford to record the artist. We were a *sizeable* small company, so it wasn't as if we had to worry about having our phone turned off the next month. I think that that also added to

the paranoia that the two guys'd had." When the whole charade was over, Bobby thought to himself that even when you do it right, and have played by all the rules, moral and otherwise, people break. He could not have done more for any artist than he did for the Pet Shop Boys; he could not have put more of himself into it. To him, none of it made sense; yet, at the same time he looked at his business. He was comfortable and happy, he was moving into other areas, so now was the time to make a big plus, as music had been changing at that time, too. He had wanted to remain friends with the Boys, to see their success through. He had enjoyed dealing with Neil, who to him had always been the duo's spokesperson, although, as Bobby says, Chris was no "shy little goofball. That's a smart kid."

"Chris appears to be the kind of guy that nothing bothers him - everything is wonderful. It's a great thing to have. He's the kind of guy, I suspect, that if everything went wrong for them, would say, "What the hell", whereas Neil would be the kind of guy who would probably dwell upon it forever and build it up out of proportion in his mind. That's not to say that Neil was not intelligent - he is, and is also a serious kid, although he has got a good sense of humour." Bobby never saw Neil as being manipulative. If he was, he says, he was very good at it. He always saw him as being someone trying to create an incredible facade.

"It takes a long time to get through to him. When you do, he is really a very sensitive, decent guy. He assimilates, which is a very good quality to have." The reason the three met in the first place was because Bobby O had swayed them musically and he says: "One of the only things I missed in not working with Neil and Chris after we had split up wasn't *working* with them, it was just *being* with them, because we did have a lot of fun together. Every topic of life you could think about we had talked about and we had different opinions in many of those instances. I think their whole Bobcat Records experience influenced them greatly. I think we took their virginity from them. When you make love to a girl for the first time, and she has never been made love to before, you have got

## Bobby Orlando - Pet Shop Boys

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her heart forever. Whether she hates you or not, she will always love you. She will remember you forever. But then you grow up. It doesn't mean you want to marry them. It just means you will remember them. They will never forget me, nor I them; that's for sure! It was a good relationship."



**Pet Shop Boys**

## 7. Let's Make Lots of Money

[\[Contents\]](#)

**Chris** was the classic vinyl junkie, according to Bobby Orlando, whose company charged over the odds for records. The underground disco 12-inch units would cost around eight dollars each. "We never even gave you a long version. -Three minutes, they'll buy it- was the company motto," he says. One of the reasons that the company was so successful was because it was the only game in town. When all the majors rediscovered dance music, they began to reintroduce 12-inch singles, by which time Bobcat had a strong hold in the market place. Ironically, the company never had the same success in the States as it had achieved in Europe. It was always only the underground market on home territory. There was always something about us in America, where the public at large, whether as a result of our music, distribution, or it was just a vibe about what we did, we were never able to break here the way we did in Europe," says Bobby.

"Similarly, the Pet Shop Boys are big in America, they sell a lot of records, but they are not popular to the extent they are in Europe, where they are much more known as figures, as individuals, as artists, as stars. In America I don't think people know who they are other than they know the name and they know the songs. Generally it's because an American audience is not as sophisticated as a European one. An American audience tends to go for what is obvious, like Michael Jackson, who gets up there and dances around. He's not a subliminal star; the Europeans are often attracted to such stars. Marc Bolan of T. Rex was huge in Europe. In America he wasn't an obvious star like Paula Abdul who dances around and does soft drink commercials. American stardom is

almost like the kind of thing that might be uncool in parts of Europe.” Bobby is talking here about traditional European pop stars. And from an American perspective, the Pet Shop Boys are not obvious enough. Americans seem to prefer artists who are more overt, or even radical, not politically or musically, but just in their performance, their voice, their mannerisms. Former bands like the Bay City Rollers are a classic example of the European way, as, oddly enough, were Sparks. “There are three thousand miles of America between New York and California, and in that three thousand miles there are a lot of cows, sheep and farmers, and to them Lynyrd Skynyrd is what it is all about,” says Bobby. “They don’t want to know about prissy boys from England.”

“America is not the fashion capital of the world like New York is. You go fifty miles outside of New York and you are in a different world. People tend to think of America as being this ultra-hip place, it’s not. America is stodgy, mostly unhip and filled with farmers. I know Neil and Chris viewed America as this tremendous place, once they became familiar with the country as opposed to New York. I remember Chris saying in 1988 he was looking to move to Los Angeles, California, which is kind of New York-ish - it’s hip, it’s modern. But you never hear anyone say, “I want to move to Arkansas!” Neil had talked of moving to New York at one point. When I first met them, they had no intention of taking the piss out of the music industry. During the course of our working together I always encouraged them to believe that that was exactly what they should do. And I based that on my own knowledge that the music industry doesn’t want you. They have rejected you.

If people reject you, do you want to kiss their arse or do you want to piss on them? The lengths the Boys go towards being political remain on a personal level: while they are, their songs are not. What’s political about «Opportunities (Let’s Make Lots of Money)»? I think it’s more about the question of wanting to make as much money as possible, like anybody else. It’s pretty straightforward. It’s a business proposition. As a producer I would be involved with anybody with whom I felt I could make money,

and do something that would be creative. If I did do it again with the Pet Shop Boys, it would have to be under the same terms and conditions as I did it before, which would basically be that I would have to have total control of what took place in the studio, and I certainly wouldn't be making the kind of records they are making now. So if the direction that they want to go in is what they have been making, I would never work with them again because I think what they are making is garbage. If I ever recorded them again I would not use a single synthesizer or sampler on the production. I would record their voices in a series of different, live, natural surroundings - with animals groaning in the background, airplanes taking off and landing in the background, cab drivers honking their horns, and such. Then I would convert the «natural sounds» to beats and rhythms and mix them with Neil and Chris's voices. The result would be a cross between Iggy Pop and Billy Idol with a British flavour. If the Boys let me produce them in this manner, then I would record them again. Otherwise, I would never again work with them in the studio."

"If they wanted to make another record like an «It's a Sin», or «You Are Always on My Mind», then I think I am uniquely qualified to make those kind of records. If I had to have any kind of a relationship with the Pet Shop Boys today it would be a managerial relationship. I would tell them exactly what they should be doing. I would tell them exactly why they should stop doing what they are doing. I would do that in a sense of getting them to make themselves a little more accessible to world markets. When «It's a Sin» came out they could have used that as an advantage to preach whatever gospel they wanted to preach."

"Them producing Dusty Springfield was a gain to Dusty Springfield. Not to Neil and Chris. Let's face it, she's a great artist, a great singer, and she only made the record because Neil and Chris said «We'll produce you». They had the name, so they did her a tremendous service by producing her. And I can imagine the reason Neil and Chris produced her is because they had this youthful affinity towards her, probably the same that they had towards me

when they first met me... what compelled them to come and search me out. Likewise, Liza Minnelli. That was more personal pleasure that they derived out of doing that than anything else, because it did not benefit them more than it benefited Dusty or Liza."



**Pet Shop Boys and Dusty Springfield**

## 8. New Opportunities

[\[Contents\]](#)

**Having** signed a five year management deal with Tom Watkins of Massive Management on 31 October 1984, Neil and Chris had to wait several months before their big break occurred in March 1985, when they organized a worldwide deal with Parlophone Records, who successfully fought off interest from several other major labels in order to sign them. Neil left his position at *Smash Hits* on 5 April 1985. As a parting gift, the management presented him with a mock cover, displaying the headline: «*Why I Quit SMASH HITS TO Be a Teen Sensation*». The next issue predicted that "in a matter of weeks Neil's pop duo, the Pet Shop Boys, will be down the dumper and he'll come crawling back on bended knees, ha ha ha."

With the security of a contract firmly under their belts, the Boys headed straight for the studio to record the single «Opportunities (Let's Make Lots of Money)» (back with «In the Night»). As a prepublicity gimmick, pictures began appearing in the Press, despite the fact that there was no product to speak of on the shelves. It was a clever ploy, and kept the general public bemused. That was until 1 July, when the single saw the light of day. It came in 7-inch and two different 12-inch versions. The first 12-inch was produced by Nicholas Froome and J.J. Jeczalik (producer for the Art of Noise). The second was produced by Ron Dean Miller of Nuance, and edited by the Latin Rascals, whom the Boys had met whilst in New York with Bobby O. Like «West End Girls», it received plenty of airplay - including the Boys appearance on the TV show «Poparound» - but failed to reach the nationally compiled Top

Seventy-five, peaking at Number 116. Despite the poor sales response, the single helped fuel the Boys' reputation. While promoting it around the club circuit in London, it dawned on Neil and Chris that «West End Girls» was still a dance floor favourite - as Bobby O had intimated. As a result, and much against the wishes of both their record company and Massive Management, the song was rerecorded, this time under the production expertise of Stephen Hague, and taking about a week in the studio. It was subsequently released on 28 October, taking three months to break through into the Top Ten, where it went on to become the first Number One of 1986, holding the top spot for two weeks. It sold around 750,000 copies in the UK alone. West End Girls' eventually topped the charts in America, Canada, Finland, Hong Kong, Ireland, Israel, New Zealand and Norway, selling 1.5 million copies. It entered the Top Five of thirteen further countries. The association with producer Stephen Hague was firmly established. Neil commented at the time: "People endlessly ask us what it's like having a Number One. But what it feels like is vaguely nothing. It feels like having a cup of tea."

It had proved to be a case of better the second time round in England, as one of Neil's former colleagues was to write that the incorporation of street sounds created "an atmosphere of danceteria sleaze that's almost sinister". «West End Girls» was not the first song to be given a successful second lease of life. The same thing happened with A-Ha's «Take on Me». It reached Number One only after a third national campaign by the group's record company. The same thing was to happen to Belouis Some, who first released his dance track «Imagination» in 1985. It sold well in Europe and went to Number Two in Italy, but peaked at Number 47 in Britain. EMI re-released it and up it soared. "I'm on the first rung of the ladder now and the world is open to me," he reported. The world's oyster was definitely more open to the Pet Shop Boys. Neil's local newspaper, the *Evening Chronicle*, reported, "A new Geordie talent has taken the nation by storm - with a Number One smash hit record! «West End Girls», the first record release of new band the Pet Shop Boys, has reached the top spot in

Britain's pop charts - and Gosforth-born Neil Tennant is reeling from the success. Now they are working hard recording their first album - due to be released in March - and Neil and partner Chris Lowe have barely had time to celebrate their Number One wonder... Now the Pet Shop Boys, already receiving sackfuls of fan mail, are all set to become the pop star heart throbs of 1986." Neil said, "The song was released in April 1984, but it did absolutely nothing in Britain. But we had great faith in the song. And when we signed with our new record company we decided to put out an entirely new version. Luckily for us this time round it worked." A spokesperson for Parlophone Records said, "They were thrilled and amazed when they learned that «West End Girls» had got to the top of the charts. We all thought it had peaked when it got to Number Four at Christmas, so this is wonderful news. I think Chris and Neil took time off to drink a little champagne, but they are working flat out in the recording studio."



Even flat out, Neil had time to make the following modest comment, "It's a brilliant song, if I say so myself. It's completely original and doesn't sound like anything else. Everybody seems to like it, from DJs to mums and dads, so it must have something. I've sung it a hundred times and I'm not bored with it yet!" The video of the single, for BBC-TV's «Top of the Pops», was definitely a landmark in its stiltedness - especially to the Boys. Chris was seen hitting the keys on his board with only one finger, and Neil stood rooted to the spot wearing a drape coat. According to the Boys, they were merely repeating their performance in Belgium, when they thought at the time they were doing a radio interview, but instead they also had to perform. Chris merely played the bass line, which only required one finger anyway, and it accidentally translated into something that he felt was well suited to the actual mood of the song, it stuck. It was also an image that was to stick with the Press and public - sometimes in their throats.

## 20. Memories Are Made of This

[\[Contents\]](#)

**“There** is no payback time,” stresses Bobby Orlando. “I have done well with the Pet Shop Boys. There were a few things that they had written that always clarified my position. The only comment I always felt and the only frustration I ever had throughout my whole relationship with them was the fact that they ended up on EMI, which I always found to be incredible because they had passed on the group. If they had wound up on any other label it probably would not have been as frustrating.”

“I felt very paternal about Neil and Chris. I felt compelled to protect them - to look after them and guide them. To protect them from the cruel and evil music business and the demons that are employed by that business. In a sense, I wanted to protect them from the cruel and evil world. But I discovered that they really did not want or need my protection. Somehow we perceive as frail and breakable the things we care so much about when in reality these things are quite strong and unbreakable. We always end up losing the things we strive to keep yet we can never rid ourselves of the things which we try to abandon. That’s why people are never really happy and most certainly never fully content, regardless of their station in life. Bobby has received many offers - including one from a film company in Germany - to buy out his entire master catalogue, which is extensive, with Divine, the Flirts, the Pet Shop Boys, and Lisa Lisa. Frankly, he doesn’t need the money. Right now the catalogue is his link to the music business. It would be at least a year before he would sell them off to another company. Whether he becomes involved in the music business in a year is going to

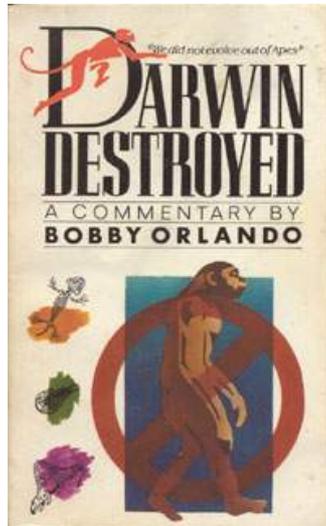
depend largely upon what kind of artists are out there. If what's out there today is going to be out there in a year, then that's it for him; there is nothing out there that is attractive to him. What attracts Bobby Orlando are several Pet Shop Boys songs he retained that were very important because he recognized them as great tracks. (When the duo settled with Bobby Orlando, they relinquished all further royalties on his versions.) Of course, the Pet Shop Boys can rerecord any of the material in Bobby's care, but, more importantly, they cannot restrain him from putting material out. The reason he hasn't put new material out in the past year and a half is because he has been waiting for them to come out with their new album first. He says, "Right now, to be honest, if I put out these numbers I don't know whether it would mean anything. They have to rebuild or restructure something. And then, of course, I am going to try to profit from it as best I can. By taking time off, I don't know if what they did was smart or stupid. I think it was stupid."

They also had another song called «To Speak Is a Sin», also recorded by Bobby Orlando. It is one that he gave them back and one which, he says, they should release. "I wish I still had it," he says. "Another they have which is fabulous is called «Pet Shop Boys» (the song that the *Smash Hits* team in London were most impressed by). It has never been released because I own it. I didn't release it because it didn't feature enough of them. It is a twenty-eight-minute piece, like a concerto, with all classical piano. It is unusual and very abstract. Some parts are disco, others break-dancing, with different rhythms and patterns, yet it is one continual flow of music." Bobby has fond memories of his time with the Boys, and is upset when he thinks about the problems that arose when they finally left Bobcat. "I did what I had to do legally, and it was a matter of three days, not a year. There was no lawsuit. It was quick and done. They had these lawyers who were telling them the contract was bullshit, so I had to attack the lawyers." He says it is sad the way Neil and Chris interpreted events. "I called them to tell them I didn't like their last album but I did that as a friend and as a producer. They could do much better. There were one or two good songs on it, but they are capable of making records like «It's a

Sin»." The hip-hop dance world that they were initially exposed to thought they were wonderful. Radio was also attracted to them. They were taken up really quickly, at a time when Bobby himself was peaking as a producer, and he had done some of the best stuff of his career at that point. "Prior to making a penny with the Pet Shop Boys, obviously it had cost me a lot of money," he says. "Chris Lowe and Neil Tennant are exactly fifty/fifty input into that duo. Neil could not be the Pet Shop Boys without Chris, and vice versa. The only reason Neil might be a little more in the driver's seat is because he is the singer and the voice is more identifiable than a keyboard player - particularly one who doesn't play! Even if Chris just plonked a chord or two, it was the way he played the chord. And he played it differently. He would play an A-minor chord differently to the next person. We would do it the correct way, he would do it the incorrect way and his way would sound better.

He didn't care at all about me playing. He thought it was funny. Now if they are smart they will make Bobby O sounding records. I'm not saying that from an egotistical point of view. They will make the kind of records that made them successful. If they are foolish they will keep making «Domino Dancing» type stupid records that make no sense for them to do. Any success they have as a result of those records, should be used to make an important statement. They should not release another record unless they have somebody listen to it after it is completed, to review it. They need someone, whether it is myself or someone like myself who really knows what they are doing. They should heed the advice I gave them then and they should heed it today. It is more true today than it was then. You have to focus on whatever you want to do in your life. From 1980 to 1987 I had one goal and one goal only - to be the McDonalds of the record business. I wanted to release more records, like they release hamburgers, than anybody could have. I didn't care if they sold or if they didn't sell. I wanted to be a part of the Bobby O story and when 1987 came and I had finally reached that goal and my company released over one thousand records I said, «That's it. No more»." By then Bobby had sold off a good part of his company. He wrote a book that he had been

working on for three years called *Darwin Destroyed*, which refutes the theory of evolution. The book was a key turning point in what Bobby wanted to do with his own life.



He sent the Boys a copy of the book. They never responded. "At that time the book was my tunnel vision, and then I was going to decide what I wanted to do for the Nineties. Now (1990) I am really one year away from making the final thrust into what I am going to do with my life," he says. Prior to entering the music industry, Bobby had attended prelaw school. Now back with his studies, he plans on taking the Bar exam in summer 1991. He is also a registered lobbyist. "If there is going to be any kind of continuance in the music industry for me, it's going to be in such a way that it cleanses the industry. Right now it's run essentially like a large mafia. It's like a big conspiracy, with a unit of power brokers that rule the industry. I think I could best do that in a legal capacity or in my lobbyist capacity. The Pet Shop Boys for me wasn't just another record ultimately. Maybe at that point I was trying to cleanse the system and I was using them as the mop and they didn't want to be the mop. The Pet Shop Boys were my rainmaker and the fact that that rainmaker didn't happen to me was really perhaps God's way of saying, "That is just not the environment that I want you to be in". Consequently, I have never got excited about another artist I worked with after that." Bobby O has neither produced nor released a new record in two years.

## Summary

[[Contents](#)]

**The** book itself is mainly about the **Pet Shop Boys** (not authorized by the Pet Shop Boys), but it contains sections which are made up from a **Bobby Orlando interview**. Bobby talks at length about his relationship with the Pet Shop Boys and how it developed over time. He also shares his views he had at that time (1990) on the music industry and the impact of sampling and new technology.

"**Introspective**" is out of print, maybe you can find a used copy at a bookshop network site like [www.abebooks.com](http://www.abebooks.com).



## Kimberly Leaston Bobby Orlando - The story of O

(«The Face» magazine, 1987)

[\[Contents\]](#)

**Since** the early eighties the small American label, O Records, has had vast commercial success with its superlative blending of New York Disco and Euro pop. With Hi-Energy on the verge of a second coming, its egocentric owner remains the self-styled master of classic techno trash. I am still the greatest, says Bobby Orlando.

**1976 - MIDTOWN MANHATTEN.** A man and a boy are walking Broadway. The man - slacks, silky, neck, leather coat. Bets are taken and the kid drops to the floor does push-ups on one finger without breaking a sweat, without even taking out his gum. He flexes his stocky Italian boots little as they leave. Small time amateur boxer, easy money. But the son of a schoolteacher from middle class New York suburb of Westchester doesn't want to be a boxer forever. He wouldn't like his pretty face spoiled, of course, but at 18 years old Bobby Orlando has already turned down a scholarship to a classical music school and can blow away Johnny Thunders, guitarist with his favourite group of three years earlier, The New York Dolls. He's been in a couple of teenage glitter rock bands and he doesn't listen to Alice Cooper any more. Now disco is his obsession and he wants to make records.

Three years later, his third attempt at production is a dance chart hit. He writes the now-definitive Hi-Energy anthem «Desire» for a girl he met in a restaurant. Taken with the pushy little guy who'd rather go without a watch until he can afford a Rolex, the

young Roni Griffith signs the 50/50 contract written on a napkin, has an affair with the producer and a massive European success with the song.



Ronni Griffith

In 1980 he pays off the loan shark who “financed” the session and sets up his own label at a time when classic Seventies disco was considered laid to rest with Chic’s «Good Times» but before the all-synthesized techno beat of Hi-Energy hit the peak it was to reach in 1983. With an enormous catalogue of releases launched by **The Flirts** «**Passion**» and **Divine**’s «**Native Love**» and working



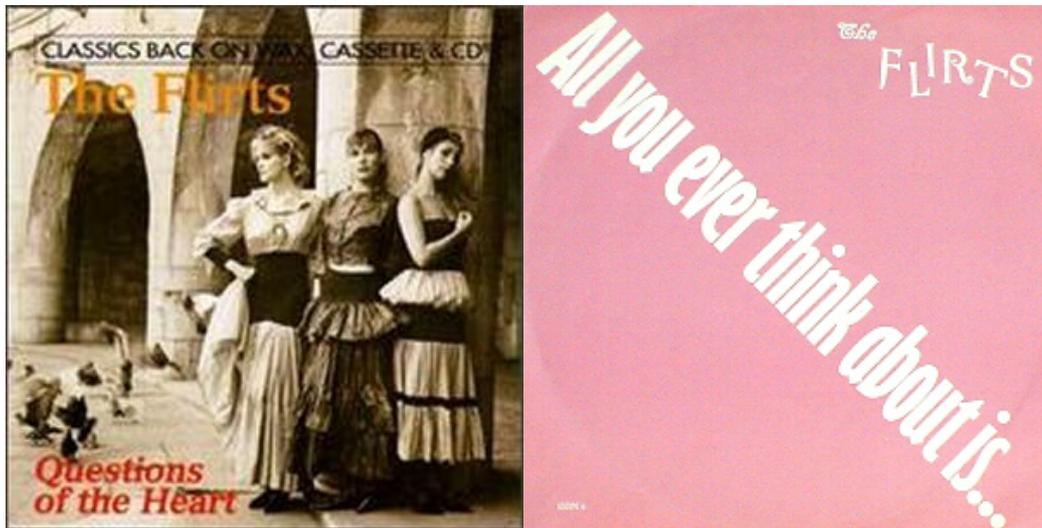
alongside mixers who have come up through the network of New York clubs - John «Jellybean» Benitez, Kiss FM's Shep Pettibone - O Records has had 17 gold and five platinum smashes in America and Europe in its seven years. «Shoot your shot», the B-side of Divine's second single «Jungle Jezebel», went gold so quickly in the Benelux countries that it was re-released as an A side within a month. For a small record company with a low profile, that's a high profile of hit records.

**THE SUITE OF ROOMS** - reception, O Office and musty box of a studio - isn't much bigger than the bar where Bobby O, as he is known, made his first fistful of dollars, overlooking the same stretch of Broadway. The lights and the milky grey brick and the steam from the subway and the Chinese fast food shop fill the eleventh floor with the seamy aroma that turns all of New York into a permanent mini-cab office. Boom, boom, hup hup hup: Farley Funkin' Keith is mixing in the musty box. Bobby O still wants to make records. This year he's planning on 30 a month. Boxing is kind of like records, he says "In that they are both sleazy businesses. In boxing you deal with sleazy characters but they have a certain charm to them. Most people in the record business aren't as charming, so going from one to the other was a relatively simple thing for me. The only difference is that with records you take the aggression you would normally use beating the hell out of a guy by punching beats. It's the same punch, the same drive." Calling his lawyer on the car phone while sparring with the Westchester city bound traffic in a red mercedes is fun. It's a good start to the drama of the day. Dramas that are a mixture of resoration comedy and lurid Vegas camp. The rake arrives at the cabaret early in jeans and a laundered sweatshirt, Tex Avery quiff perfect. He just finalised the deal on the penthouse down the street. Let's face it, real estate is all that counts. "I failed as a hippy because I was too much of a capitalist." Says Bobby O, swivelling in his chair to view the mirrored building that is now partly his. "I mean I had a chequebook, no hippy ever had a chequebook, so I was a total failure. But glitter rock, oh I was a real glitter boy. I had very long hair - you just wouldn't believe. I was very pretty, exceedingly like

real very pretty. And with glitter rock you didn't have to take drugs and it was OK to be a capitalist. I mean platform shoes are expensive, right?" He didn't have the balls to wear make-up but the romance with the high champ has yet to end. New York Dolls, Divine, same difference. The fast talking, intensively macho exhibitionist is also a voyeur. A homophobe who once pulled out of buying an apartment after discovering that the previous owner was gay, he has built a career on making music for a predominantly gay audience.

Bobby O's history of working relationships reads like a Bel Air alimony lawyer's casebook. One of his most successful associations ended understandably abruptly when he claimed he could «cure» the artist of his homosexuality, but men continue to be mesmerized by the electric vitality of this irresistible, impossible character. Women, too, are oddly tantalized by a man fixes his dark eyes to theirs over dinner, tells them just how he likes to make love, and what a great lover he is, and then kisses them goodnight on the cheek only to call at midnight to ask if they are naked. The technical skill involved in such heavyweight flirting requires not only a core of pure narcissism but an ability to use the power of sexuality without feeling the surge of any real lust. His most enduring partnership has been with The Flirts, a sort female Menudo, the three girl line-up changes with almost every release and on the new, their second album, «**Questions Of The Heart**» - a deliciously crass concoction of Euro pop, Janet Jackson and Sixties girl groups - they're looking, frankly, a little old. The models won't mind if they're dropped; the group exists only as an LP sleeve. Apart from a brace of session singers, Bobby O is The Flirts. Songs about sex, not lust. Sex on the phone, sex on the mind, everything but the real kind. The single , «**All You Ever Think About Is (Sex)**» is classic Bobby O in mood, coquettishly provocative record with the pressing problem of an over ardent admirer, but essentially anti-sex combination of the two elements that overloaded his imagination. "I love sex, don't you?" he says, quoting from his lyrics "Young virgins become restless nymphomaniacs, virtue become vice". It's natural, isn't it?"

In 1983 he releases «I'm In Love With A Married Man». "A lot of people fall in love with a married men, so what do they do? It's a problem. My concern is that even if you manage, in an earthly sense, to break up the marriage all you've really succeeded in doing is to dig a deeper hole into hell. The punishment may not come from here; it could be on the other side of grave. You know what I'm saying?" This is not someone however who lists God discreetly amongst the records sleeve credits.



At O records, discretion is a sin second only to losing a lawsuit. "I regard each record I make as worthless and useless just like anybody else's" says Bobby O with some venom. "Anybody who thinks that their music is something special is worshipping a false doctrine. There is nothing that any artist can say that is really of any importance because anything other than God's word is laced with the evil and has to be regarded as sin tainted." There's nothing more serious than showbiz, but this is a new twist to the script. Four years ago Bobby O was going about his business with only himself to answer to. Even though he claims to have been "heavily into the Bible", from which he quotes at length, the potential greatness of a partnership with God had yet to occur to him. Lunch at the Applejack Diner was a simple affair involving omelettes and conversation as down to earth as is possible for someone whose feet have never made actual contact with the ground. At the self-consciously upmarket Cafe 57, however, where every waitress has

an Equity card and the mink coats are so new they're still twitching, Bobby O speaks of little but the Lord. Sometimes being born once just isn't enough. "I'm a sinner and a scumbag. I know it," he confesses. "But that's where salvation comes in. My real citizenship is in heaven, I'm just an ambassador right now. The Bible clearly states "be fruitful and multiply and replenish the earth" and that's what I do, I'm being fruitful, I'm multiplying - I put out more records than anybody in the world, there's nobody puts out more records than me. If a producer has the ability to put out that many records and he doesn't then he is disobeying God's command."

Like a Where Eagles Dare of the music industry, Bobby O plays out his boy's own battle with monolithic major record companies cast as the bad guys who pay the price in heaven. "If you're going to win a war you have to hit with a lot of bullets," runs the logic. "For me making records is a weapon. Sometimes the bullets connect and sometimes they don't. My goal is to pummel CBS and others like them, not having a huge hit records but having a lot of bullets out there. The only difference is that they have Michael Jackson and I have The Flirts." The fact that «Questions Of The Heart» is released through Epic is due, according to him, to a contract signed in the rushes of his youth. But humouring the enemy is one way to win a war and when O records relinquished the Pet Shop Boys to EMI in 1985 he struck a points deal on their subsequent releases that has made him a millionaire.

When Bobby O says he would rather put out 200 records that sell 5000 copies each than one record that sells a million he speaks the gospel truth. And considering the amount of small labels either bankrupted or forced into deals with large companies because of the distribution pressures of a major hit record, there is undoubted method to his madness. By continuing to have steady flow of minor successes in American and European dance charts with acts barely known outside the area, like the Boyd Brothers or Nancy Dean, Bobby O will surely achieve his ambition of becoming the Ronald McDonald of the music industry. "You know," he says with typical zeal. "Over a billion served."

**IT'S GETTING LATE.** Bobby O is ready for the drive to the suburbs. Maybe he'll look in at his new penthouse, maybe he'll stop by the row of brownstones he's having converted to apartments. Paul Mineo, one of his country's countless cousins of Sal and the hustler of Bobby O's boxing days, is still here. Last night he slept on the couch in the O office, now he's sitting at the small table set aside for him eating burger and fries. One thing Bobby O learnt when he was a fighter. Never mix protein and starch.

