



ROCK DREAMER

guy peelaert talks to steve demorest

Guy Peellaert is a shy but engaging Belgian artist who has a monster hit in the 1974-75 holiday season, a book of his paintings called *Rock Dreams*. Laced with a semi-poetic text composed by English rock writer Nik Cohen, the collection of atmospheric renderings of twenty years' worth of pop music idols became a smash in Europe early in 1974, and now it's crossed the Atlantic with a hefty print order from Popular Library of 400,000 copies.

Wearing a sandy colored crew-neck sweater over his jeans, the bearded artist drank white wine, smoked Gitanes, and seemed very Gallic among the glistening hardwoods and plush English decor of the Algonquin Hotel's lobby.

Peellaert apologized for his English, which is servicable, and spoke willingly but unsurely. Despite his affability, he doesn't seem to get much of a kick out of publicizing his efforts in a major American metropolis. He would rather be home doing real work.

SD: Could you quickly run over your artistic background?

GP: Yes. I was a very bad student, so fortunately they sent me to the academy where everything started. But I left that very quickly too because everything was so boring. Then I made theater sets, then a few years in advertising. Then I left that and made comic strips . . .

SD: When was that?

GP: Uhh, '66. At that time I made a comic strip that became a little bit successful in Paris, so I came to Paris.

SD: A comic strip in the newspapers?

GP: The first one was a complete book and then, I don't know if you know this kind of magazine, it's called *Hara-Kiri*? It's very vulgar.

SD: Were the cartoons sexy or political?

GP: Both. It was the first of the radical magazines in France. It was a monthly, the violent story of a girl.

SD: Like Octobriana?

GP: It was more sexy than Octobriana. Then after about five strips I was bored, so I went to make theater sets with a new theater in Germany. Then I wanted to make a film.

SD: About what?

GP: The story of a girl from 14, but unfortunately after six months of fighting against producers . . . I was going to be the director. In Germany I had directed dramatically on television quite successfully so I thought it was going to be easier. I think producers are like nice girls—if they are coming, it's OK; if they are not coming, you do your thing in your corner. I don't want to spend anymore time trying to convince people.

SD: How did you get involved with Nik Cohen?

GP: At the time I was trying to make this film, I'd seen in Amsterdam the book Nik wrote called *A Wop Bop A Lula* which I liked, so I asked Nik if he wanted to make the dialogue for the film. Then after six months I didn't know what to make, so I said 'I'd like to make a book about dreams about rock and roll,' so we started together. Fortunately I had a friend who's a publisher and he asked me



The dreamer in Manhattan.

'What's your next project?' So I said 'Until the time I make the film, I'm going to make a quick book.' At the time, I expected about six months' work, and it took three years.

SD: Did you know much about rock and roll yourself?

GP: No, I must say, Nik is the specialist and I'm the dreamer I was always involved with rock and roll music, but as a fan not a specialist. It was quite a nice marriage.

SD: Did you both chose who you were going to do?

GP: Yes, that was the start of everything. We made a list of people we wanted to talk about.

SD: And he would tell you the history of everyone?

GP: Yes, because Nik knows a lot of—what's that—"noise behind the curtains"?

SD: Yeah, gossip.

GP: Gossips.

SD: I like the one with Jerry Lee Lewis and the 14 year-old bride.

GP: Yes, we were trying to make a book with rock and roll as background, but also with, uhh, everybody's life in the background. And it was a nice time for me to close the book after 20 years of rock and roll music. I would like to think about something different now.

SD: What's the first one you did?

GP: Elton John. It was coming in the chapter about bubble-gum, but we had problems with time and space. Elton John is not, of course, bubble-gum, but he was in that form. At the end of the book I was beginning to be a bit schizophrenic after three years, and finally the publisher said "No, Guy, it's finished. I'm going to be ruined if you don't finish this book."

SD: How many do you have left over that you didn't get to put in?

GP: Oh, about 10.

SD: How long does it take to do one?

GP: It's about four or five days' preparation and around a week for painting. First it's the layout of the mood and then I take Polaroids from attitudes and then steal backgrounds here and

there. Then I put everything together on the same scale cutting the photos and making a kind of collage and laying it out flat and painting it like old movie posters.

SD: You would use old movie stills, right?

GP: I'm an old fan of American movies, so in a way I put in all the situations I saw on screen in the last 20 years.

SD: A friend of mine has a book of movie stills and recognized some scenes you'd taken from Richard Jaeckel movies. Are you a fan of his?

GP: Yes, of course.

SD: Do you like those movies a lot? We call them Grade-B I think.

GP: How do you call? Oh yes, that was the B serial. About 10 years ago, yes.

SD: Did you ever see one called "Wicked Woman," with Beverly Michaels and Richard Egan?

GP: No. At that time he was the prototype of a certain clean American.

SD: Well, in this one he was a little naughty. What's your workshop like?

GP: Oh, it's a kind of little Manhattan in Paris. It's an awful place called Montparnasse, but I like it.

SD: Is it a large room with a lot of light?

GP: No, it's like a rabbit box.

SD: Was David Bowie the first rock personality to discover you?

GP: No, no, it was Mick Jagger, because we have a common friend in Europe, and he saw the proofs through this friend before it was published.

SD: Were you going to do the Rolling Stones album jacket for *It's Only Rock And Roll* then before you decided to do the Bowie *Diamond Dogs* one?

GP: No, Bowie's very quick on the ball. I had to go to London and I was contacted by him and I didn't know it was for a record sleeve. I don't want to spend my life doing record sleeves. He was very clever. He invited me up to breakfast and then suddenly said 'Oh, Guy, I have an appointment for a studio session, would you like to come with me?' So I did, and then he suddenly asked what I was doing now.

SD: What gave you the idea for the cover of the Stones album?

GP: They invited me to do it during the tour in Europe. They originally wanted to have the sleeve for a "Live" album. So, because the main part of the tour was in Germany, I was thinking about scenery there, the old fascist stairs.

SD: Is there a certain place that has stairs like that?

GP: All over Germany.

SD: Did you get the Stones to pose like that?

GP: No, they just sent me a few contacts with the faces.

SD: If you were going to put a self-portrait of Guy in the *Rock Dreams* book, how would you do yourself?

GP: I don't know, maybe as Jerry Lee Lewis, the second picture.

SD: Who's your favorite rock musicians?

GP: I think it's Jerry Lee Lewis because he's funny, dramatic, a mixture of a lot of things.

SD: How many of the stars in the book have you met? Did you meet Jerry Lee Lewis?

GP: No, no, no, the Americans I don't know. I met Donovan because we also had projects for a film with him in '65.

SD: Has anybody objected to your taste? Like painting Stevie Wonder begging outside the theater, or Keith and Mick dancing on the coffin?

GP: Yes, but I think rock is partly tasteless, so why not put it in? Stevie Wonder is the way white people saw black people—so happy to give a dime to a poor black man.

SD: Have you gotten any comments from the subjects in the book besides Mick?

GP: Yes, Tina Turner hated it, but I'm not sure for which picture. John Lennon just bought one of the Beatles when they started in the Star Club.

SD: The one of him standing in the doorway?

GP: Yes. He must be very nostalgic about it.

SD: Yes, a friend of mine has a Beatles lunchbox and says John's trying to find one like it.

GP: He's another person I would like to know before leaving rock and roll.

SD: How did you like the exhibition of your paintings in Soho?

GP: Oh, you know, I was like an automaton. You put a dime in and I shake hands and say 'hello'.

SD: Do you not socialize much in France?

GP: No, I stay alone. It's the best way to see people.

SD: What kind of people do you get along with, artists?

GP: No, I think artists are very boring because they are always talking about what they are doing.

SD: When you leave here you're going back to Paris?

GP: Yes, I found a marvelous place outside Paris. I think I'm going to start again on comic strips. After doing this sophisticated technique, it's good to jump inside more direct drawings.

SD: Do you like putting out books more than working for periodicals?

GP: Yes. I'm a very slow worker and I prefer getting inside a mood and not just making a drawing.



50's King Elvis, holding court. 60's King Dylan, alone in his time.

