

GROWING UP IN PUBLIC

REELING FROM THE PRESSURES OF BECOMING A GLOBAL POP ICON, GEORGE MICHAEL BEGAN THE NINETIES IN DEFIANT MOOD AHEAD OF A ROLLERCOASTER DECADE THAT CONTAINED PROFESSIONAL HIGHS TOGETHER WITH PERSONAL LOWS...

STEVE HARNELL

As the Nineties dawned, George Michael was arguably the most important solo star on the planet, thanks to huge sales of *Faith* as well as multiple Grammy, MTV and BRIT awards.

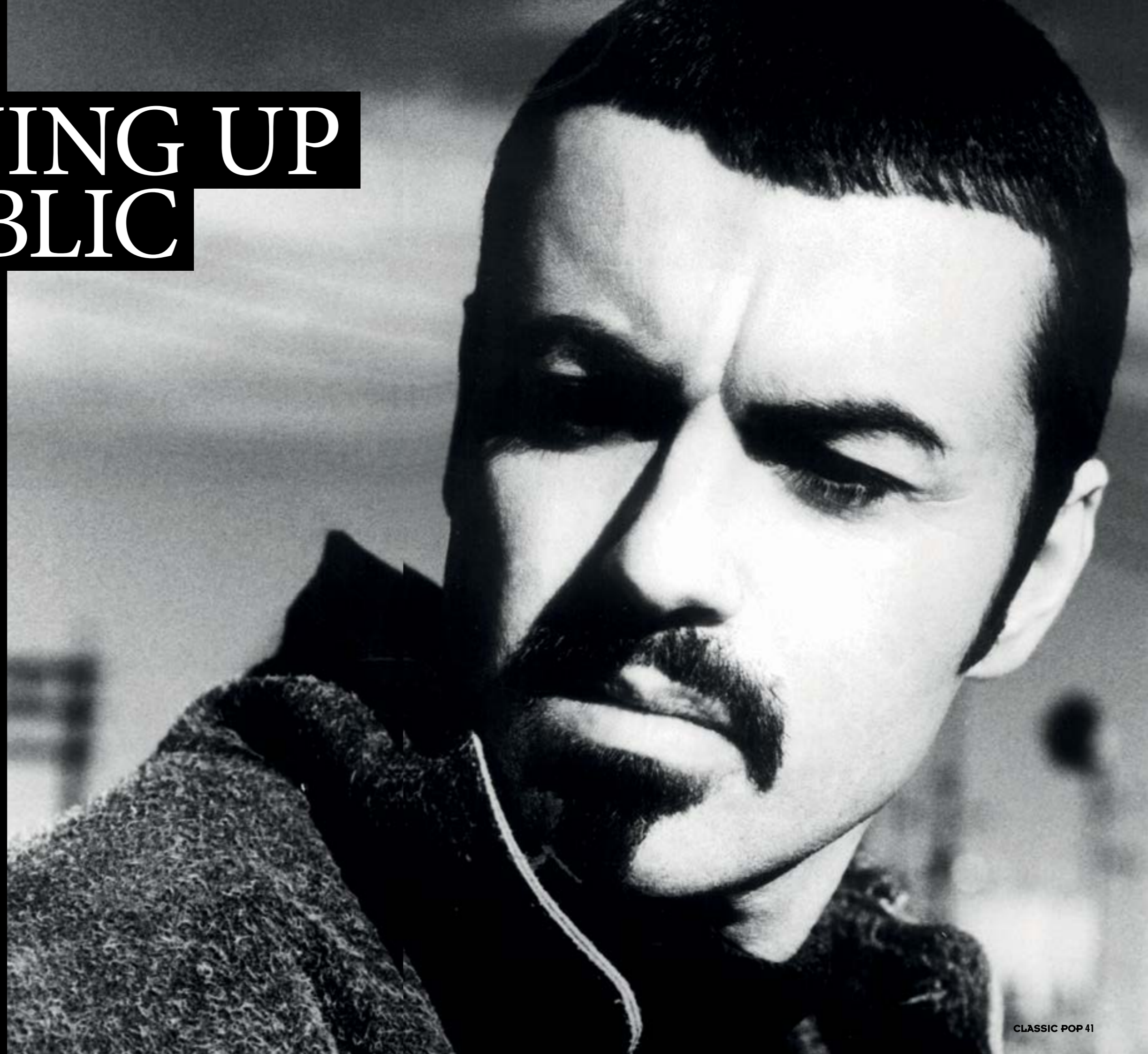
But far from revelling in the spoils of victory, George was recoiling from the pressures of being a worldwide celebrity. In the *A Different Story* TV documentary, he gave an insight into his post-*Faith* campaign mental landscape: "I was intelligent enough to know I should not be trying to catch up with Michael Jackson or Madonna, which was absolutely what I was [previously] intent on doing. I felt *that* tired and exhausted at being the centre of that much attention. I suppose the way my lack of mental balance showed itself was that I actually really began to hide away when I got home, and did almost nothing for a year but try to re-establish some idea of a real life."

Apart from suffering the wearing intensity of life in the goldfish bowl of mega pop celebrity, George felt he had been unfairly criticised for the R&B album and R&B male artist American Music Award categories he won in 1989 as part of the *Faith* campaign – gongs traditionally won by black artists. Although George had always openly exhibited his love of R&B and soul music throughout his career, the backlash against the success of his crossover appeal left him feeling isolated and under siege.

Faith's follow-up was therefore conceived in a less-than-positive state of mind by the songwriter. Dark clouds gathered, and the resultant introspective material was a clear indication of the inner turmoil that George was feeling.

Right: George Michael in 1996 in a portrait taken to promote his album *Older*, released on Virgin in the UK and DreamWorks in the US after a recording hiatus of over five years

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Elton John on stage with George; the pair resurrected their Live Aid duet of *Don't Let The Sun Go Down On Me* with a No.1 single in 1991



© Steve Rapoport/Photoshot/Getty Images



Influences: the Paul McCartney-style *Heal The Pain* single of 1991 plus 1990's *Waiting For That Day*, which gave a credit to Jagger and Richards

POP UP George provided the epic seven-minute closer, *Tonight for the Elton John* tribute album *Two Rooms* in 1991. Elton's original came from his 1976 LP, *Blue Moves*

With The Beatles' *Abbey Road* and *Revolver* on constant rotation as inspirations, *Listen...*'s mature songcraft was there for all to see, although his US record company's description of it as "George Michael's *Nebraska*" seems ridiculous now; the polished work from Michael, although equally inward-looking and often downbeat, was far more intricate and varied than the stripped-back austerity of the Bruce Springsteen album of 1982. *Praying For Time*, George's breathtaking ballad that acted as lead single for the album, was released on 13 August 1990, three weeks ahead of *Listen Without Prejudice Vol. 1*. A stark musing on social inequality, it was some distance removed from the crowdpleasing pop of *Faith*.

When the album finally arrived it won generally positive reviews, although some critics mourned the apparent loss of George's positivity and joie de vivre. The album topped the charts in the UK but stalled at No.2 in the States. Singles from the album unaccountably failed to set the world alight, with the resulting *Freedom! '90*, *Waiting For That Day*, *Heal The Pain*, *Cowboys And Angels* and *Soul Free* often merely making blink-and-you'll-miss-them entries in charts around the world.

Although the LP would go on to sell eight million copies, it was seen as a disappointment in the US where it shifted only two million – a figure dwarfed by the seven-time platinum magnitude of the seven-million copy success of *Faith*.

CHANGING THE GAME

What followed was an ugly stand-off between George and his record company, Sony. Michael believed that the only way to preserve his own sanity throughout the new album campaign would be to bow out of promotional duties altogether (he subsequently claimed his label never fully supported his new album in the US and let it wither on the vine). Meanwhile, his record company felt George's

no-show in the PR game left it impossible for them to gain any traction with the public. The finger-pointing would eventually lead to bitter legal action.

George outlined his feelings about publicity in the *Freedom* TV documentary: "I was still struggling with the idea of having that much attention. I think I recoiled from that and felt that stepping back would save me somehow from screwing up my career. I see hard-sell promotion as prostituting myself... I can't help it. Even if that's a complete fallacy, that's how I see it. I'm of that generation."

After George spoke to the *LA Times* about retreating from promotion, Frank Sinatra wrote him an open letter telling him to get over it: "Be glad that God gave you this gift and get out there and use it". "I don't think he wrote the letter!" George later revealed. "I actually believe it was the work of a publicist, not the work of a genius. Even though he's the greatest singer who ever walked the planet as far as I'm concerned, I wasn't taking any advice from Frank Sinatra!"

UNDER THE COVERS

Further adding to the obfuscation surrounding the promotion of *Listen...*, rather than promoting the album with 'traditional' live shows highlighting new tracks interspersed with some of his greatest hits, George decided to stage the Cover To Cover tour, filling the setlist predominantly with versions of songs by some of his favourite artists, leaving his own material often in the background.

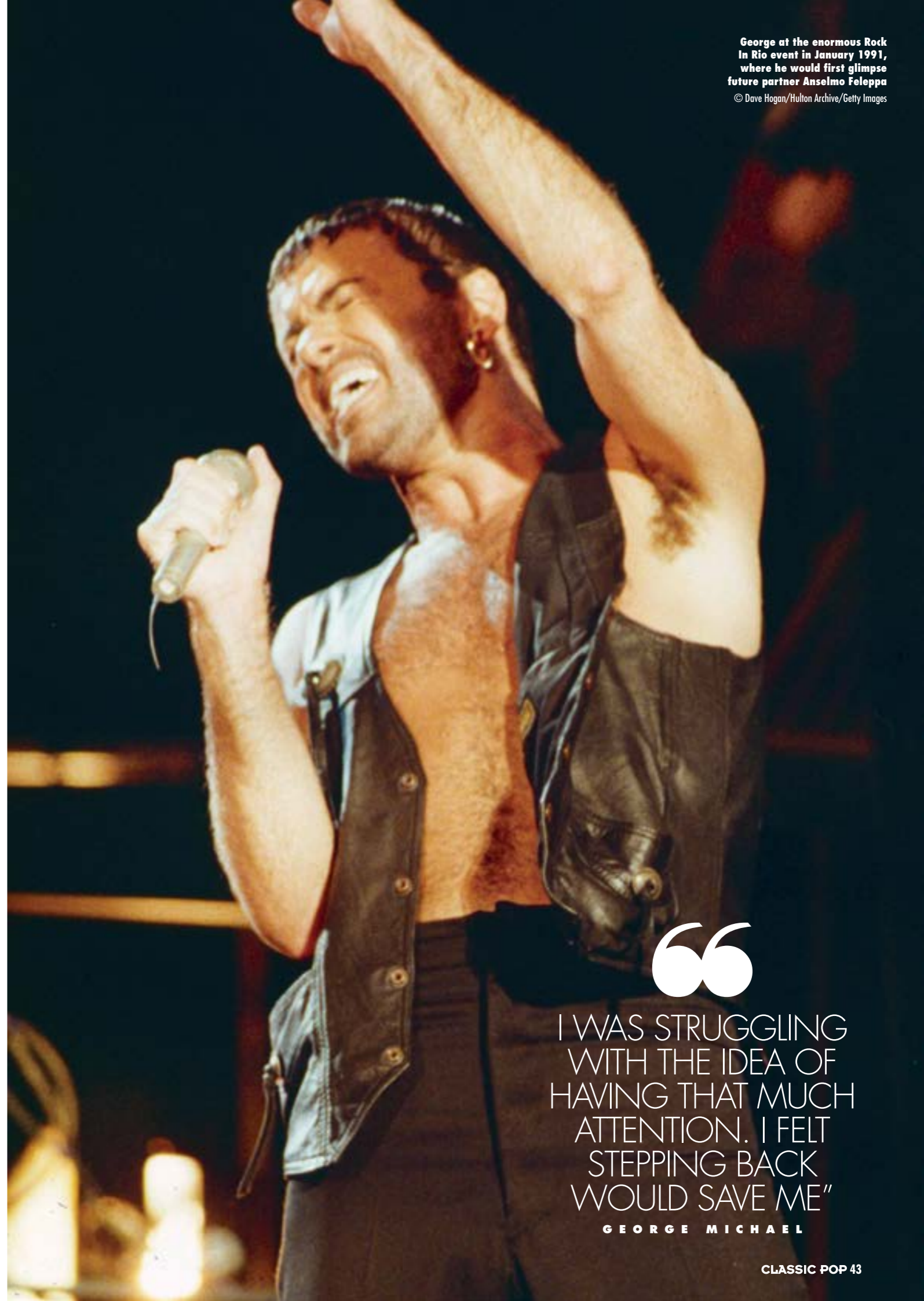
The Cover To Cover tour was George's second expedition as a solo artist and it spanned 30 shows over nine months from January to October 1991. Taking in the UK and US, Canada, Brazil and Japan, the shows paid tribute to the likes of David Bowie, Culture Club, Soul II Soul, Terence Trent D'Arby and Adamski, with only the tail-end of the setlists reverting to hits from Wham! plus cuts from *Faith* and *Listen Without Prejudice Vol. 1*. His cover of Elton John's 1974 hit *Don't Let The Sun Go Down On Me* made regular appearances; Michael first sang it with the star himself at Live Aid, and it would go on to become a much-needed hit when released as a one-off single.

On a personal level, the Cover To Cover tour would change George's life dramatically. An audience member at the Rock In Rio festival in Brazil – a temporary stop-off on the tour proper at the Maracana Stadium, which at 160,000 people would be the biggest show Michael had ever played – went on to have a huge impact on the singer over the coming years. That man was Anselmo Feleppa.

In the *Freedom* documentary, George explained: "At the front of these 160,000 people was this guy on the right-hand side of the stage [who] just fixed me with this look. He was so cute. I was so distracted by him that I stayed away from that area of the stage for a while because otherwise I thought I'd get really distracted and forget the words!"

"The moment I looked at him, I got the feeling that told me I was going to get to know him very

George at the enormous Rock In Rio event in January 1991, where he would first glimpse future partner Anselmo Feleppa
© Dave Hogan/Hulton Archive/Getty Images



I WAS STRUGGLING WITH THE IDEA OF HAVING THAT MUCH ATTENTION. I FELT STEPPING BACK WOULD SAVE ME"

GEORGE MICHAEL

HOLD ON TO MY FREEDOM

THE SONY COURT CASE



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'Panayiotou v Sony Music Entertainment' – the official name of the court case that George, under his real name of Georgios Panayiotou, instigated against his record company – would prove to be a pivotal moment in the songwriter's career and for the music industry in general... but not for the reasons he had hoped for.

Claiming he was operating under a regime of "professional slavery" and that Sony failed to properly promote *Listen...* in the US, leading to underwhelming sales, George argued that the recording contract he'd signed as a young man was grossly unfair and tied him to a life of servitude. The singer wanted the High Court to declare his contract with Sony null and void, claiming its length of 12-15 years was unreasonably long. His view was that any individual has the right to walk away from their employer if they so wish, but the record industry took away that right.

In the *Freedom* documentary, he ruefully added: "I can't think of one artist that supported me. I know of a lot of artists that sat back and waited for the result, but that's a different thing."

However, after a lengthy court case before the High Court of Justice's Chancery Division in London, Mr Justice Jonathan Parker ruled that the contract was in fact both reasonable and fair. Michael lost the court case "on every count". "I regret it to this day," he later added.

In a statement after the judge's conclusion, George told the assembled press: "Having received this judgement, I would like to reiterate the reasons why I embarked upon these proceedings. I have no right to resign. In fact, there is no such thing as resignation for an artist in the music industry. Effectively, you sign a piece of paper at the beginning of your career and you're expected to live with that decision, good or bad, for the rest of your professional life. The initial view is that we have very strong grounds for appeal."

His stated intention to take an appeal to the House of Lords was only a bluff, according to manager and friend David Austin; George may have intended taking it to the Court of Appeal in the UK, but the House of Lords or the European Court of Justice was never an option.

In the *A Different Story* documentary, George added: "The court case was a perfectly good place to put my anger [after Anselmo's death]. I used to run on the treadmill every day and play squash and do everything I could to get rid of all this anger and fear, but the best place for it was Court No. 1, really."

"I do remember being absolutely gutted, not that I had lost but [despite] the record companies being absolutely outside reasonable law, there was nothing that required them to pull their socks up in any way. There was an inevitability to the end of youth culture as we loved it, but if artists from the early Nineties [onwards] really had been masters of their own destiny, there is a possibility that *Pop Idol* wouldn't have ruined everything."

well and that he was going to be a part of my life. Anselmo was the first time I really loved someone selflessly. It was kind of immediate... everybody, with the exception of my family, was introduced to him very quickly because I felt that everything had changed. He was just very full of energy, very loving. I was happier than I'd ever been in my entire life."

SLAVE TO THE RHYTHM

If *Listen...*'s success was less than expected in the US, the album proved to be on surer footing on home soil. Certified four-times platinum, it would go on to spend 88 weeks in the UK charts. A more immediate signpost of its success came at the 1991 BRIT Awards, which saw it win British Album of the Year. George was nominated for British Male Solo Artist, but lost out to his friend Elton John.

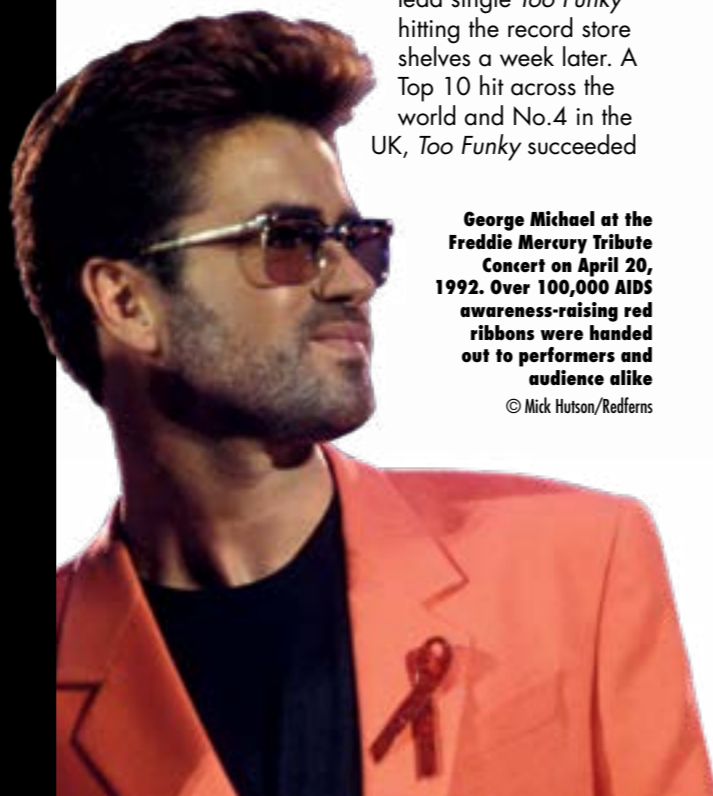
But George's ultimate dissatisfaction with the way that his record company Sony treated him in the US in particular led to an ugly parting of the ways. With the exception of Prince's own battles with his record company, this was to be the most high-profile legal case the music business had ever seen.

Not only did Michael claim that Sony under-promoted *Listen...* as a direct response to his decision not to appear on the album's cover or in promotional videos, but the singer also alleged his recording contract prevented him from managing his own image or resigning and seeking a new label deal. With a phrase later seized upon by Prince, George described his deal as "professional slavery".

Under the terms of Michael's 1990 Sony contract, he was given a £1 million advance in February 1992 to provide a follow-up to *Listen Without Prejudice Vol. 1*. This advance was returned in August of that year, with George filing a lawsuit in October. The decision to take his record bosses to the courts would be one of the most regrettable of his career.

With George knowing that the intended upbeat follow-up to *Listen...* would be permanently shelved, he made the decision to donate three of its songs – *Too Funky*, *Do You Really Want To Know* and *Happy* – to the *Red Hot + Dance* charity compilation to raise money for the battle against HIV and AIDS. The album was released on 7 July 1992, with its

lead single *Too Funky* hitting the record store shelves a week later. A Top 10 hit across the world and No.4 in the UK, *Too Funky* succeeded



George Michael at the Freddie Mercury Tribute Concert on April 20, 1992. Over 100,000 AIDS awareness-raising red ribbons were handed out to performers and audience alike

© Mick Hutson/Redferns

George and Linda Evangelista share a moment during the *Too Funky* video shoot in Paris, 1992



© Kevin Mazur/Getty Images

in keeping George in the public eye, but on his own terms – a neat move which would have no doubt infuriated his paymasters.

CRUEL WORLD

Unfortunately, George's happiness with Anselmo was short-lived. Within a month or two of meeting George he found himself suffering a flu that he couldn't get rid of, and worrying red marks appeared on his chest. The pair were in Los Angeles when Anselmo was advised to be checked out for the HIV virus. While he took the test in Brazil, George went home to his family at Christmas. "I was sat at the Christmas table not knowing whether my partner – who the people around the table did not know about – this man who I was in love with, was terminally ill."

Anselmo's test, unfortunately, proved positive; George was devastated at the news that his lover was condemned by a terminal illness in his mid-30s. Shortly afterwards, the singer was contacted by his

publicist to inform him that Freddie Mercury had died of AIDS-related pneumonia. "I was really sad that Freddie had passed away but I was crying for something else entirely – that my partner and possibly myself were both HIV positive," George added.

Five months after Mercury's premature death, a major charity concert was to be staged in his memory featuring some of the music world's biggest stars. In front of a live crowd of 72,000 and a global audience estimated at one billion, the Freddie Mercury Tribute Concert For AIDS Awareness would become one of the most significant concerts since Live Aid. After a first half which saw sets from acts including Metallica, Def Leppard and Guns N' Roses, the closing portion would see stars of the calibre of David Bowie, Elton John, Robert Plant and Roger Daltrey performing with the remaining members of Queen. Following Bowie's unexpected rendition of *The Lord's Prayer*, George blew everyone off the stage with a rousing three-song set, including 39



Three exclusive songs from the aborted *Listen...* follow-up opened *Red Hot + Dance*, with more tracks from Madonna, Seal, PM Dawn and others



The Freddie Mercury Tribute: "There's a certain note in his voice in *Somebody To Love* that was pure Freddie," said Brian May

© Kevin Mazar/WireImage

from Queen's *A Night At The Opera* album, and a duet with Lisa Stansfield on *These Are The Days Of Our Lives*. But it was a barnstorming rendition of *Somebody To Love* that will go down in history as one of the most iconic stage moments of his career.



Overwhelmed by the sadness of singing the songs of a man he'd worshipped as a child, George poured his heart and soul into his appearance. In *A Different Story* he recalled: "I'm very proud of that performance. I went out there to honour Freddie and pray for Anselmo. I just wanted to die inside. So it was so much to me, all in that one performance."

Following Anselmo's tragic death in March 1993, George released the *Five Live* EP a month later with all proceeds going to the Mercury Phoenix Trust, a charity organisation set up by the remaining members of Queen to fight HIV and AIDS worldwide. All recorded live, three of the songs – *Killer*, *Papa Was A Rollin' Stone* and *Calling You* – were taken from George's *Cover To Cover* tour, while two others, *Somebody To Love* and the Lisa Stansfield duet *These Are The Days Of Our Lives*, were culled from the Freddie Mercury tribute concert. On some iterations of the release Queen also provide a sixth track, the 1974 studio recording of *Dear Friends*. The EP was a huge success, topping the singles chart after its release in April 1993.

HEAVEN SENT

Although George's releases in 1992 and the following year raised considerable sums for charity, they masked the fact that in the wake of his loss in the courts against Sony and the death of Anselmo, he was struggling to tap into his songwriting muse. In the end, six years passed before the follow-up



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“ I WAS PROUD OF THAT PERFORMANCE. I WENT OUT THERE TO HONOUR FREDDIE AND PRAY FOR ANSELMO ”

GEORGE MICHAEL

George inviting the audience to join in during his showstopping spot at the Freddie Mercury Concert for AIDS Awareness



© George Chin / IconicPiv / WENN.com



George opened the MTV Europe Awards in Berlin in 1994 with a rousing *Freedom! '90* and closed the show with a stunning debut of the timeless *Jesus To A Child*

“ I KNEW MY AUDIENCE WOULD NOT DESERT ME IF THEY FOUND OUT I WAS GAY. I BELIEVE IN PEOPLE MORE THAN THAT ”
GEORGE MICHAEL

to *Listen...* saw the light of day. And it would be four years before George finally unveiled any new self-penned material at all, the heart-wrenching tribute to Anselmo, *Jesus To A Child*. The song was premiered in November 1994 at the inaugural MTV Europe Music Awards with a live performance in front of the Brandenburg Gate in Berlin. But it would be another two years before the track appeared on a finished studio album.

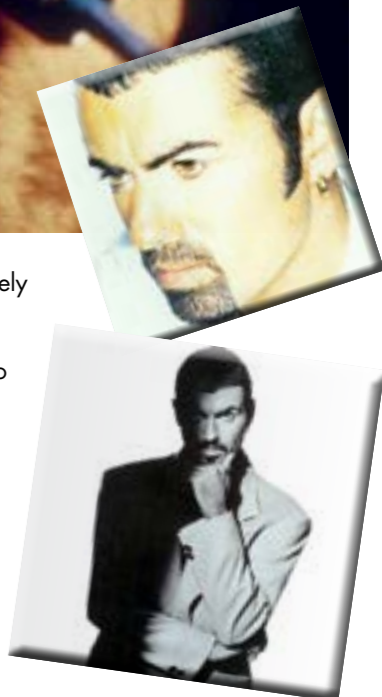
Appetite for new material from George was intense – *Jesus To A Child* entered the UK singles chart at No.1 in its opening week, a first for the singer. On the Billboard Hot 100 in the US it premiered at No.7, the highest new entry by a British artist for more than a quarter of a century.

The creation of *Jesus To A Child* proved to be a pivotal moment in George's re-emergence as a songwriter; he explained from then on it was "all systems go" as what became *Older* began to take shape over the next two years of writing and recording. After Michael's death in 2016, Dame Esther Rantzen, founder of the ChildLine charity, revealed that he had secretly donated all of *Jesus To A Child's* £50,000 royalties to them. She said: "George helped us to reach out to hundreds of thousands of children through his generosity. I met him a couple of times – he approached us, rather than us going

cap in hand to him, but it was an intensely personal gift. He didn't want it to be known or to be part of his image." She told BBC News that "he really wanted to keep his help secret, it was an intensely personal gift. It meant we could answer more children."

As George dealt with the grief of losing Anselmo, he began a relationship with art dealer Kenny Goss that was to last 15 years. But within a week of meeting Kenny, he heard that his mother had health concerns, with skin cancer of the most virulent form. It went into remission for three or four months but came back with a vengeance, and a week later she was dead. The singer later explained that he suffered depression that far exceeded usual grief, a depression that would trigger his battles with addictions throughout the remainder of his life.

Older was released on 14 May 1996 to huge acclaim and enormous sales in the UK. Although, like *Listen...* it was greeted with a rather more lukewarm reception in the States, *Older* was a massive success on home soil and in Europe. In the UK, it premiered at No.1 selling more the 280,000 copies in its



Jesus To A Child and *Fastlove* were successive UK No.1's in 1996 – George's best chart one-two since 1986



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George and Stevie Wonder perform Stevie's classic *Living For the City* at the 4th Annual VH1 Honors Show in Universal City, California in 1997



SITTING DOWN AND SAYING 'I AM GAY' TO THE DAILY MAIL WOULD HAVE BEEN HARDER THAN ALL THE FLAK I TOOK"

GEORGE MICHAEL

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first week – one of biggest debuts in British music history. With more than 1.8 million copies sold in the UK alone, it spent an astonishing 147 weeks in the Top 200, 99 of those in the Top 75. The six hit singles culled from the album over the next two years is a record that remains unsurpassed.

With George more than happy to be part of the promotional machine for the album and his new record companies, Virgin and US-based DreamWorks Records (it was the first release of the latter), he played a live show that was filmed for the MTV *Unplugged* series. It was recorded at Three Mills Studio in London on 11 October 1996, and his mother was in the audience. Tragically, it was to be the last time she would see George play live.

HUMAN NATURE

On the face of it, George was on top of the world, a second act in a career populated by numerous bumps in the road – but his private life was still dogged with depression and troubled episodes. His open relationship with Kenny Goss meant that George was still free to play the field, something that soon led him into trouble. On 7 April 1998, George was arrested for “engaging in a lewd act” in a public toilet at the Will Rogers Memorial Park in Beverley Hills. The singer had been the victim of a sting operation by

local police. Michael explained in the *A Different Corner* documentary: “There were two guys that were, I think, part of that entrapment set-up going in and out of the bathroom and something in me said ‘you shouldn’t go in there. There’s something really dodgy going on.’ But I went.”

After pleading no contest to the charge, Michael was fined \$810 and sentenced to 80 hours of community service. For many artists, this news would have broken them and ruined their career, but George took it in his stride and dealt with the fall-out in remarkably candid fashion, opening up about his sexuality and offering no excuses for his behaviour. “Would there ever have been a day when I sat down and talked with someone from the *Daily Mail* or *Mail On Sunday* and said ‘Yes, I am gay’? Would I have been able to do that? That probably would have been harder than all the flak I took!” he explained.

He totally diffused the situation with a superbly honest interview with Michael Parkinson in 1998. “To some degree, I was not in the best state of mind and it was a reckless thing to do,” he told the chatshow legend. The wide-ranging interview touched on George’s battles with depression, his realisation that he was gay rather than bisexual, and the faith he had in his audience that they would stand by him come what may. “I’ve always felt I have a very strong

POP UP A lifelong Stevie Wonder fan, George took his cover of *As* – a duet with soul superstar Mary J Blige – to No.4 in the UK singles charts in 1999



George as a Raybanned LAPD officer in the PR triumph that was the *Outside* video



sense of my audience and I knew that they would not desert me if they found out

I was gay. I believe in people more than that. If they get something rewarding from you emotionally such as music then they are tolerant of certain things – as well they should be.”

Further hammering home the remarkable PR turnaround of the incident, George went on the front foot with the *Outside* single, a double-entendre-packed paean to sex in the open air that featured a controversial video satirising his arrest. The song made No.2 in the UK singles chart and was a Top 20 entry in multiple countries around the world.

George's final release of the Nineties came just a fortnight before the end of the decade. *Songs From The Last Century* featured 10 covers including tracks by The Police and U2 side project Passengers alongside standards from the worlds of jazz, musicals and film. George explained: “I honestly wanted to stay afloat personally by having something to do which meant learning, progress, working with [producer] Phil Ramone, singing songs that would stretch my voice.”

Once again, sales were strongest at home in the UK, but the album only reached a disappointing No.157 in the US, marking time during another lengthy hiatus in recording. It would be another four years before Michael was to return with the knowingly-titled *Patience*. ■

Below: George forbade the BBC from showing his 30-minute set at the Netaid Concert For Third World Debt at Wembley in 1999 because of a microphone breakdown

© Brian Rasic/Getty Images



THE KEY RECORDINGS

TONGUE-IN-CHEEK WIT AND A GRANDSTANDING DUET: JUST TWO OF GEORGE'S BEST MOMENTS IN THE NINETIES



FREEDOM! '90

1990

Maybe this should have been the lead single from *Listen Without Prejudice Vol. 1*, rather than the more sombre *Praying For Time*. Packed with lyrical zingers about George's life in Wham! (“*What a kick, just a buddy and me*”) and newfound cynicism about the record business, this upbeat classic displays his ear for melody plus a more mature songwriting outlook. The David Fincher-directed video featuring Naomi Campbell, Linda Evangelista, Tatjana Patitz, Christy Turlington and Cindy Crawford would become one of the most iconic of the Nineties. Endlessly quotable, George's wit shines throughout when dealing with his pop star reinvention (“*When I knew which side my bread was buttered, I took the knife as well*”).



DON'T LET THE SUN GO DOWN ON ME

1991

With the *Listen Without Prejudice Vol. 1* singles failing to set the world alight, George needed a hit – and he scored a No.1 in the UK and US, among other places, with this duet with Elton John. Originally recorded by Elton in 1974 for his *Caribou* album, the pair first revived it for Live Aid in 1985, and George regularly sang it on his Cover To Cover tour in 1991. The promo video was shot over several days, with the footage captured at George's rehearsal space, an aircraft hangar in Burbank, California. As with the *Too Funky* single, proceeds from this Grammy-nominated release went to charity, this time being spread across 10 different worthy causes.



TOO FUNKY

1992

When *Listen... Vol.2* was scrapped in the wake of the legal battle with Sony, George donated this cracking floor-filler to the *Red Hot + Dance* project to raise cash for AIDS awareness. The most-played song in Europe in 1992, the single went on to sell almost 170,000 copies in the UK alone. Michael nabbed a bit from Jocelyn Brown's 1984 R&B banger *Somebody Else's Guy* as well as Anne Bancroft dialogue from *The Graduate* – and closing words courtesy of actress Annie Leake from *The Radio Ham*, a classic episode of *Hancock*, featuring hangdog comedian Tony Hancock. The high-fashion-satirising promo boasts costumes by Thierry Mugler, plus Tyra Banks and a returning Linda Evangelista.



OUTSIDE

1998

If George's arrest at the Will Rogers Memorial Park in Beverly Hills was a personal low point, he dealt with the fallout in typically brave and witty fashion. *Outside* pokes fun at the incident brilliantly with a strings-laden disco reboot packed with double-entendres. Thumbing his nose at his critics (“*I'd service the community, but I already have, you see*”), the song came with an outrageous video which deliberately pushed the buttons of the naysayers, with George turning up in uniform at a loo-turned-club. The punchline of two male officers passionately kissing caused much controversy, and George was unsuccessfully sued for ‘emotional distress’ by one of the undercover cops who arrested him.