

CLASSIC  
ALBUM  
OLDER

WORKING THROUGH THE GRIEF OF LOSING HIS PARTNER, GEORGE EMERGES FROM A SELF-IMPOSED PERIOD OF SONGWRITING SILENCE WITH A POIGNANT MASTERPIECE LACED WITH HOPE...

STEVE HARNELL

It took George Michael more than half a decade to release the follow-up to *Listen Without Prejudice Vol. 1*, but spurred on by personal tragedy and a dogged defiance, he created his finest work – the expansive third solo album *Older*.

George himself sees the record as his most artistically accomplished, and, in his homeland, it became the most commercially successful of his career – a record-breaking six singles reached the Top 3 across a two-year span.

*Older* was released on 14 May 1996, three days after the Knebworth feeding frenzy that saw Oasis sell 250,000 tickets in the blink of an eye. Britpop was at its peak, but George was in no mood to hang on to the coattails of this Anglocentric revisionist movement. Typically, he stuck to his guns, and *Older's* reference points remained his trademark touchstones of soul, R&B and pop, only this time often given a jazzier twist.

Although Michael deftly weaved in synthesised electronic touches to the up-tempo tracks and the stripped-back minimalism of *It Doesn't Really Matter*, the overall ambience of *Older* is of a more organic

record, featuring splashes of brass and occasional string arrangements. One of the major musical inspirations – *Older* is dedicated to him in the liner notes – is Brazilian composer Antonio Carlos Jobim, credited with bringing bossa nova to the masses and the man behind the iconic hit *The Girl From Ipanema*.

Even more fundamental to the genesis of the eventual record thematically is George's late partner Anselmo Feleppa, who died

in 1993. *Jesus To A Child*, the almost unbearably poignant ballad that opens the album, served as the first of many tributes to Anselmo on *Older*. Within a week of writing it, George was singing it in front of the Brandenburg Gate at the MTV Europe Music Awards in November 1994. "I wrote the best, most healing piece of music. It was all systems go from that moment on," Michael revealed.

In the *Freedom* documentary the singer added: "The whole

experience of losing Anselmo, the period of grief, roughly two years where I didn't write a note of music [came before] the absolute knowledge that the next album I was going to write would be about grief and recovery. *Older* is my greatest moment.

"I sat at a keyboard and played a very simple string part, stream of consciousness rubbish comes out of my head, then I sang 'like Jesus to a child' and I thought 'Oh my God, that's him [Anselmo] and me'. I was so excited that I finally had been able to put my feelings about Anselmo into words."

Returning to Sarm West Studios where he cut *Listen Without Prejudice Vol. 1*, this time George had Jon Douglas on board to share production duties on three tracks. Douglas had a background in soul and R&B, having already worked with Eternal, Gabrielle and Pauline Henry (he'd later be behind hits for Louise Redknapp and team up with Sugababes, Kylie and All Saints, alongside further collaborations with George). Douglas first met the singer in 1995 while producing Lisa Moorish's cover of the Wham! classic *I'm Your Man*. Michael provided backing vocals on

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TRACKLISTING

SIDE A

- Jesus To A Child
- Fastlove
- Older
- Spinning The Wheel
- It Doesn't Really Matter

SIDE B

- The Strangest Thing
- To Be Forgiven
- Move On
- Star People
- You Have Been Loved
- Free

THE PLAYERS

RELEASED

14 May 1996

LABEL

Virgin/Dreamworks/Aegean

PRODUCED BY

George Michael and Jon Douglas

ENGINEERS

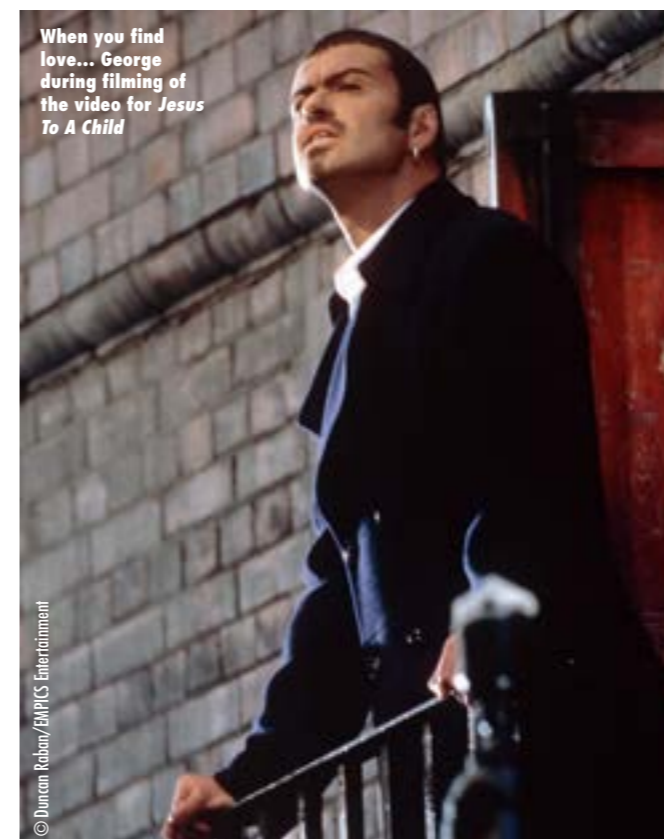
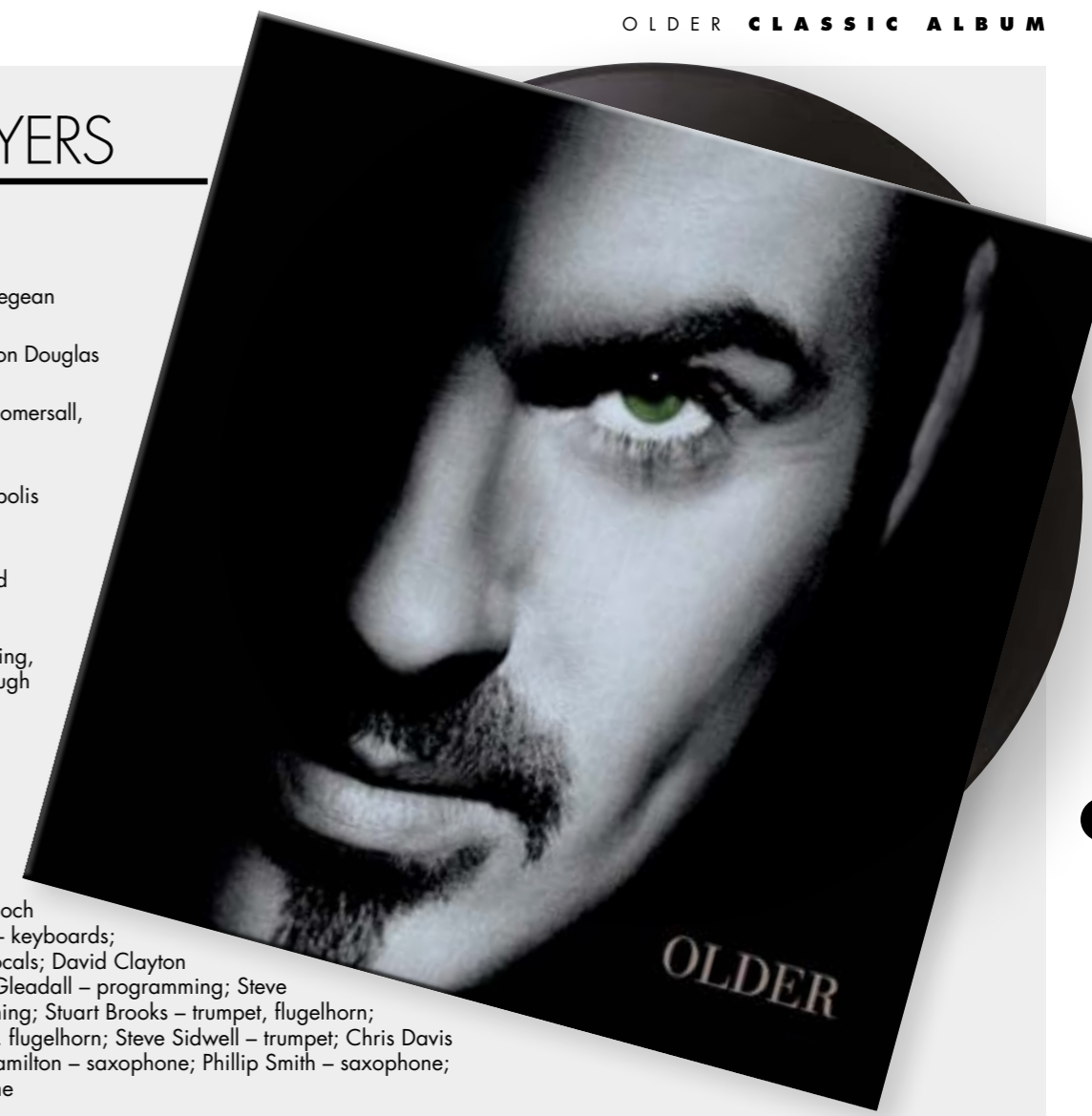
Charlie Brocco, Paul Gomersall, Chris Porter, Ren Swan

RECORDED AT

Sarm West and Metropolis Studios, London

PERSONNEL

George Michael – lead vocals, bass guitar, keyboards, drums, percussion, programming, arranger, producer; Hugh Burns – guitar; Danny Jacob – guitar; Alan Ross – guitar; John Themis – guitar; David Austin – keyboards; Chris Cameron – keyboards, strings; David Clews – keyboards; Nick Murdoch – piano; Jon Douglas – keyboards; Jo Bryant – backing vocals; David Clayton – programming; Pete Gleadall – programming; Steve McNichol – programming; Stuart Brooks – trumpet, flugelhorn; John Thirkell – trumpet, flugelhorn; Steve Sidwell – trumpet; Chris Davis – saxophone; Andy Hamilton – saxophone; Phillip Smith – saxophone; Fayyaz Virji – trombone



When you find love... George during filming of the video for *Jesus To A Child*

© Duncan Rabony/Entertainment

the sessions and the pair immediately hit it off. Themes of grief, recovery and mortality are threaded throughout *Older's* 11 tracks. The finely-honed collection came together slowly, with Michael spending three years working on the new material.

It's arguably the most diverse LP of his career. After the elegant opening ballad comes the upbeat, dancefloor-friendly *Fastlove*, which explores the theme of using promiscuous sex as escapism. Meanwhile, *Spinning The Wheel* flips the theme of promiscuity to warn of its danger in an era where the spectre of HIV and AIDS remained a major concern.

"For anyone who had a clue about symbolism, I was coming out," George later explained. "*Fastlove* makes me laugh because it's all about cruising and covering my pain, blunting out that

pain with fast love, simple as that. There's not one track that's not about Anselmo or the risk of AIDS [for example, *Spinning The Wheel*]."

For a six-month period while he was recording *Older*, George felt in reasonable spirits but then discovered that his mother had been diagnosed with cancer. She died of the disease in February 1997. Indeed, as George worked through his grief for Anselmo and worry about the health of his mother, the tone of the LP veered between searing insights into loss and devastation and a defiant sense of hope. The bare-bones *It Doesn't Really Matter* – just a beatbox, simple keyboard and a few piano flourishes – leaves George's vocal space to breathe on a song that seems measured and philosophical about a relationship that's now in the past.



# THE BIG PICTURE

## THE VIDEOS

### JESUS TO A CHILD

DIRECTOR: HOWARD GREENHALGH

George's devastating tribute to his late partner, Anselmo Feleppa, is packed full of imagery of grief and loss. Allusions to solitude abound in the promo, and the pain in his eyes is clear for all to see. Although this introspective ballad was an unorthodox lead single for *Older*, its importance in Michael's back catalogue cannot be overstated. A No.1 in the UK, it set the success of its parent album in motion.

[youtu.be/zNBj4EV\\_hAo](https://youtu.be/zNBj4EV_hAo)



### FASTLOVE

DIRECTOR: VAUGHAN ARNELL & ANTHEA BENTON

A sinisterly-lit George holds court in a speaker-packed chair with a remote in hand as he flips through countless exotically-garbed virtual reality-style sex partners, both male and female. The 'Fony' legend written on the side of his headphones is a knowing nod to his major label contract dispute. The rainstorm sequence sees George reinstate his trademark Wham! clap, looking cool amid the downpour.

[youtu.be/SHAQIFq6TFg](https://youtu.be/SHAQIFq6TFg)



### SPINNING THE WHEEL

DIRECTOR: VAUGHAN ARNELL & ANTHEA BENTON

Like *Fastlove*, this quintessential Nineties vid was helmed by Vaughan Arnell and Anthea Benton. Ditching *Fastlove's* futurism, *Spinning The Wheel* opts for moody black and white, making full use of the song's jazzy inspiration – we could almost be in a pre-war Harlem nightclub. Perched behind a keyboard, George is on finger-snapping form for this subtle warning against unprotected sex.

[youtu.be/qSoMTkn\\_Qfg](https://youtu.be/qSoMTkn_Qfg)



### OLDER

DIRECTOR: ANDY MORAHAN

With regular videographer Andy Morahan back behind the lens, this was a stately affair set in dusty, sun-drenched countryside.

Featuring George shot in focus against blurry backgrounds, a sense of dislocation seeps through the screen. A Top 3 for the 7" in the UK cemented *Older's* position as his most commercially successful album and string of singles of his career on home soil.

[youtu.be/04-9Gv0FMLg](https://youtu.be/04-9Gv0FMLg)



Performing *Star People* at the MTV Europe Music Awards at Alexandra Palace, 1996

© Richard Young/REX/Shutterstock

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But the songwriter's torture is never too far from the surface. The world music vibe of *The Strangest Thing* inhabits a track shot through with pain where "time has been twisting the knife". George's heart-on-the-sleeve lyric adds: "Take my hand; Lead me to some peaceful land that I cannot find inside my head". The wistful Burt Bacharach and Antonio Carlos Jobim-influenced *To Be Forgiven* is similarly pained ("Save me from myself").

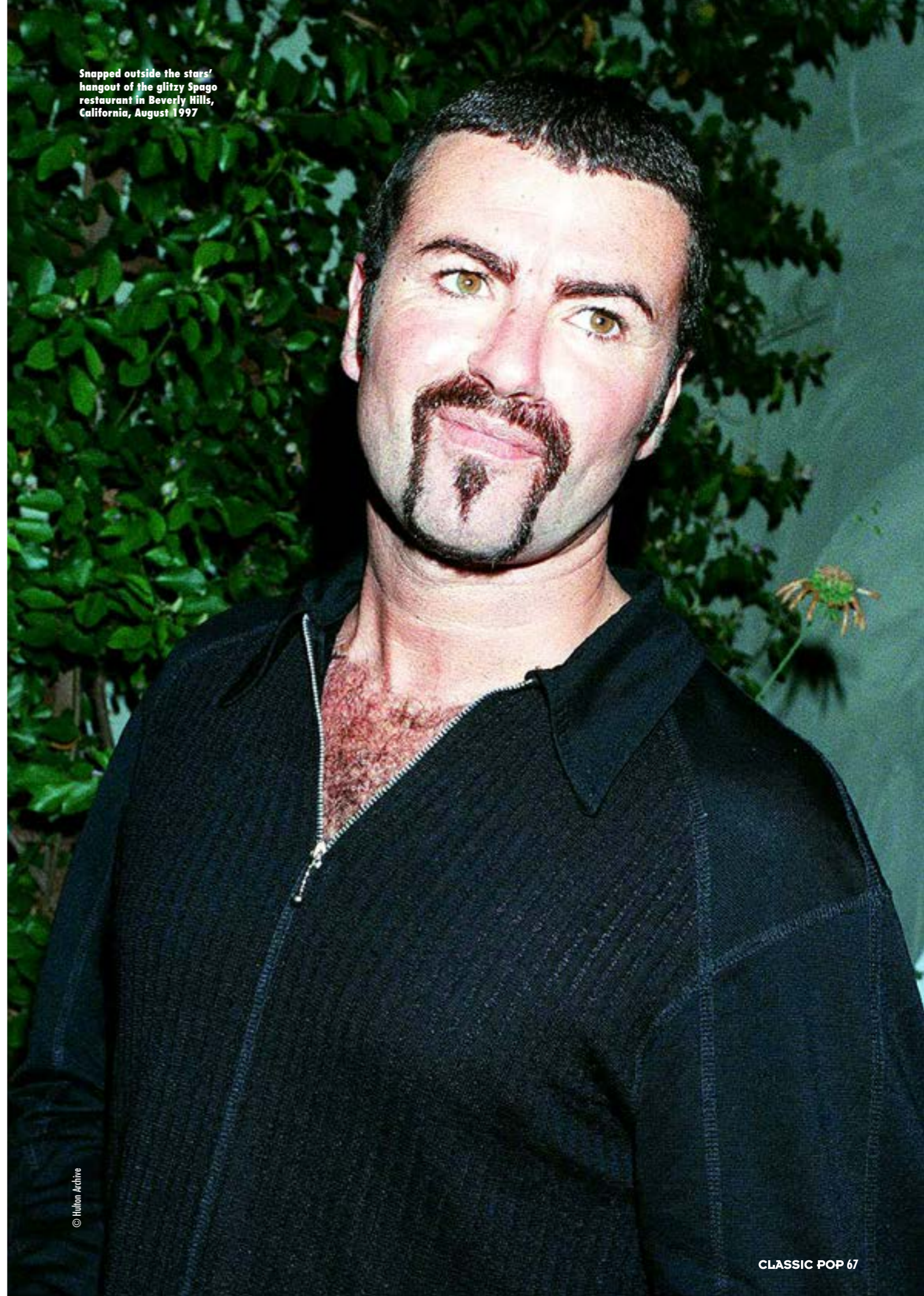
But *Older's* story can't be summarised as one-note wallowing in self-pity – Michael's a far more rounded songwriter than that. *Move On* is a wonderful anthem of hope, with deft supper club atmospherics added to underpin the track's jazzy arrangement. Self-aware it may be, but this is no simplistic self-help manual. Michael's nuanced lyrics would provide a balm for many people suffering grief for the years that have followed.

There's spirit, too, in the confrontational *Star People*, where George distances himself from the showbiz pack, musing that their desperate search for fame and approbation comes from a need to fill the hole of an unhappy childhood.

The heart-breaking *You Have Been Loved* – once again written as a tribute to Anselmo – is a desolate ballad of loss and a return to the idea of an unloving God touched upon in the previous album's *Praying For Time*. An ode to humanism in a cruel world, its tone is measured – a songwriter at last at peace with the traumas that have befallen him.

*Free*, the sweeping cinematic instrumental with nods to trip-hop that closes the album, draws the curtain on an emotional epic. "Feels good... to be free", George whispers quietly at the end. His art had brought him to a place of peace... at least for the time being. ■

Snapped outside the stars' hangout of the glitzy Spago restaurant in Beverly Hills, California, August 1997



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