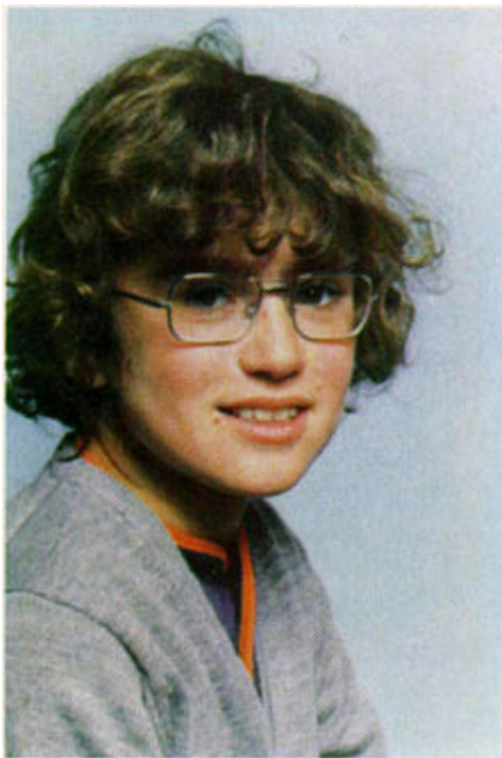


George Michael was Britain's biggest pop star of the 1980s, first with the duo Wham! and then as a solo artist. The Three Crowns played a small but significant part in his story.

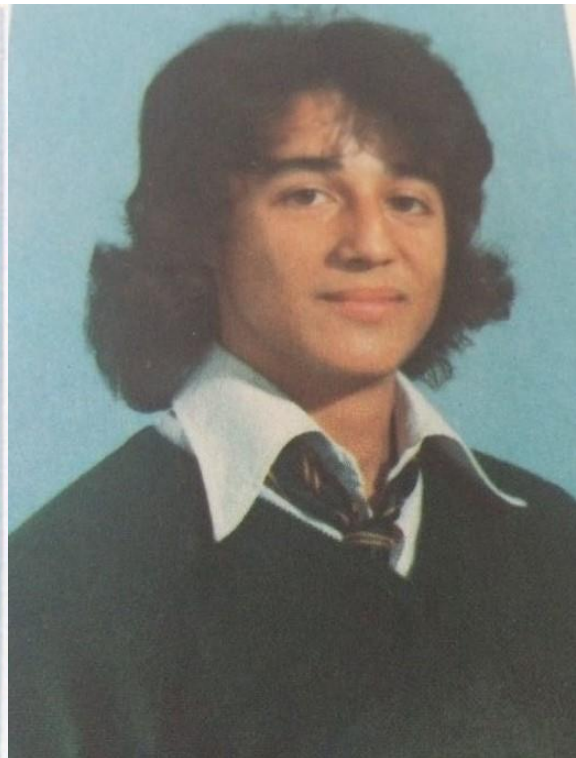
After Wham! made their initial chart breakthrough with the single Young Guns (Go for It) in 1982, George's songwriting gift brought them giant hits including Wake Me Up Before You Go-Go and Freedom, and they became leading lights of the 80s boom in British pop music, alongside Duran Duran, Culture Club and Spandau Ballet, even exporting it behind the Iron Curtain. His first solo album Faith, released in 1987, sold 25 million copies, and George sold more than 100 million albums worldwide with Wham! and under his own name.

George was born Georgios Kyriacos Panayiotou in Finchley, north London. His father, Kyriacos Panayiotou, was a Greek Cypriot restaurateur, and his mother an English dancer, Lesley Angold. In the late 1960s the family moved to Edgware, where George attended Kingsbury School, before they moved to the affluent Hertfordshire town of Radlett in the mid-1970s.

Bushey Meads Comprehensive 1974 - 1981



George – a wimp



Andy - cocksure

In September 1975 a twelve year old George showed up at Bushey Meads School keen to impress as the new boy and was introduced to Andy Ridgeley who had already been impressing for a full year. Andy recalled their meeting as follows;

“I remember at the time we were playing King of the Wall. As he was the new boy we goaded him into it. I was up there and he threw me off. I was a mite peeved about this but I forgave him. I think I made him sit next to me. I can't remember why but it just developed from there. We were friends pretty much immediately. He looked a bit of a wimp in those days actually because he had these great big glasses. Huge steel rimmed glasses and loads of curly hair. He was very, very plump and

had one eyebrow going right across. He plucks the middle of it now but it used to go across like a pair of seagull wings.”

George also remembered the results of that same spirited game,

“Andrew was the real loudmouth in the class. The minute I walked in that first day he started showing off and I got sat next to him. We talked a lot that day. I was tall for my age then and there was some kind of game in the break; you know, where you throw each other off the wall. Well, I threw him off and he hit his head. He was one of the rowdy ones in the class so that was a bit of a breakthrough for me, everyone respected me after that.”

That was an act of destiny which would forge an unbreakable friendship and an unforgettable pop partnership.

Teenage Dreams

At this point George was on the big side in height as well as weight and, with his large wire framed glasses and frizzy hair, must have seemed ungainly next to Andy who was more immediately confident and extrovert.

Like most young guns growing up the boys dreamed of stardom - pop stardom, football stardom, anything that would make them rich and famous. Of the two, it was the cocksure Andy who was the driving force behind their dream. Both had developed an early taste for music and over the next three years of their friendship it would increasingly dominate their thoughts. Their choice in music was the melodic pop of the day; in early May 1976, 12 year old George saw Elton John at Earls Court during - the Louder Than Concorde But Not As Pretty tour that was promoting the singer's Rock of the Westies album. It was one of two concerts that were to have a profound effect on him, the other being Queen at the same venue a year later, performing the last show of their A Day At The Races tour.

The first time Andy visited George's home in Oakridge Avenue, Radlett, was for his friends 13th birthday in June 1976. He remembers that George's parents barely spoke to him as much as recalls the lavish birthday tea that George's mother laid on.

However, he was soon to become a regular visitor and the pair would thrash out songs on an old acoustic guitar and drum kit of George's and record them on a cassette recorder George had received for his seventh birthday. It wasn't long before they started talking about forming a band but, influenced by his parents, George insisted they wait until after his O Levels.

Andy's sense of style was unique to say the least. He wore high waisted trousers with the right number of buttons, platypus boots and cheese cloth shirts among other fashion statements. His sartorial elegance soon began to influence George as he could be seen in and around Bushey in dungarees and was proud to say he was the first person to wear peg-top trousers to school.

Soul Boys

By now the pair's interest in music drew them toward the dance music scene which had exploded with Saturday Night Fever in 1977. Punk meant nothing to them; discos and clubs were far more attractive propositions, so they became Soul Boys and started to explore the suburban soul scene

where they could look good and burn up energy on the dance floor. Indeed in 1977 George took classmate Lesley Bywaters (Catsey Lane Bushey) to London clubs such as Cherry's and Global Village.

George was still under pressure to succeed academically and among his O Level subjects was music theory, taught by the aptly named Joy Mendelson Roth (Barley Close, Bushey) who included violin lessons as part of the course. Future Wham! backing singer Shirlie Holliman first remembers seeing George for the first time walking to music class, violin under his arm. In a 1978 end of term concert George played a drum solo he composed himself.

Their O Level year was a mere distraction from the minefield of adolescence; sex, romance, parties, booze and how to look good. During the long hot summer of 1979 there were some five or six parties between the end of school and the start of the new term with everyone getting wrecked. With the intense self-consciousness teenage belief in image being a fast-track to popularity, George bought green trousers from a shop in Kings Road. He went to a party in them and got blind drunk for the first time. Staggering all over the place, he could hardly walk and Andrew had to help him home. On the way, he fell over on some grass and got his new green trousers dirty so started sobbing that no one fancied him or even noticed his beloved new green trousers.

At another of the parties, both were drunk so George told Andy that his mum had decided she didn't really like him and didn't want him coming round anymore. Andy, who was drunker than George realised, took the revelation really badly, weeping saying George shouldn't let his mum split them up.

However, both sets of parents were anxious that their respective offspring should make solid, respectable career choices. The boys themselves were adamant it would be music or nothing. Their eagerness to both listen *and* dance to music and their interest in the charts saw their enthusiasm wane for a soul scene that was morphing into Jazz Funk. So they put away their brightly coloured peg-top trousers and, influenced by the energy of the emerging 2-Tone sound, turned to ska.

The Executive 1979 - 1981

Whilst George opted to stay on at Bushey Meads and take his A Levels in English and art, Andy decided he had had enough of the restrictions of school so enrolled in Cassio College in Watford. Before he left school, George vividly remembers Andy suggesting that they form a band and have a rehearsal at George's house the next day. He was aghast saying his mother would never allow it, but Andy persisted until George finally agreed.

The band became The Executive, a six piece ska outfit, fronted by George and Andy, Andy's brother Paul Ridgeley on drums, David Austin (aka David Mortimer) and Andrew Leaver on guitars but

nobody on bass. Eventually the brother of one of George's ex-girlfriends agreed to play bass and lend the band some equipment.



Class mate Mark Berkeley (Wayside Avenue, Bushey) remembers that George changed overnight once The Executive started. He lost weight,

had his hair cut and ditched the hideous glasses in favour of contact lenses.

The Executive played covers such as I Can't Get Used to Losing You and Beethoven's Für Elise but also original songs written by George and Andy like Rude Boy.



A living room somewhere in Bushey c 1979 – The Executive rehearse

Following months of heated rehearsals in various living rooms and St Peter's church hall up in Bushey Heath, having built up quite a buzz around school they played their first show on 5 November 1979, a misty Bonfire night, in a Bushey and Oxhey Methodist church hall. The band invited all their friends and, despite months of acrimony in rehearsal, The Executive came good on the night. Andy told Neil Tennant of Smash Hits in October 1982 that "It was absolutely brilliant. All our mates came along. Everybody was jumping about. There was such a good atmosphere."

The Executive did record a demo tape and George and Andy spent a lot of time hawking it around the A&R departments of London-based record companies. However, the people tasked with spotting talent barely got beyond the first song before deciding The Executive were too derivative to warrant any more of their time.

The Executive only lasted another 4 or 5 gigs, playing venues like The Pump House in Watford and Cassio College where they were supported by Fizz, who went on to become Imagination. Eventually The Executive come to an end as the ska revival faded away.



George, Paul, Andy and Andrew – The Executive

There are a couple of interesting postscripts to The Executive story;

Guitarist Andrew Leaver (Perry Mead, Bushey) was born on the same day as Andy and was to die of cancer at the tragically early age of 20 in December 1982. Andrew remembers him as being an exceptionally talented guitarist.

Under the Wham! logo - two young men dancing in silhouette - on their first album, *Fantastic*, George and Andy made a dedication to Andrew Leaver and another friend, Paul Atkins, who was killed in a car crash in February 1983.

George believed a demo tape got to Go Feet records and the band were quite pleased for about a fortnight, but then broke up. The demo included *Can't Get Used To Losing You*, a song that The Beat, who were signed to Go Feet, went on to cover. It was top 5 the same time as *Bad Boys*.

Soul on The Dole

On the day before he turned 18, Andy and George were in the Three Crowns when he saw a striking blonde he recognised from school. Not being short on confidence, he went up and said "Hello Shirlie" and the two started talking. Shirlie Holliman was impressed by Andy's charisma and the long plait in his hair as much as his talk about being in a band. The pair struck up a rapport that blossomed into something more than friendship. Very soon George, Andy and Shirlie became inseparable, spending their days at Watford swimming pool and at George's house listening to music and practicing dance routines.

After The Executive broke up and London's club scene had come through the torpor of Jazz Funk, George and Andy went back to the dance floor, inspired by Gap Band's *Burn Rubber on Me*. Friday nights were spent at La Beat Route and they were regulars at other clubs such as The Dirt Box, Wag and Bogarts. Indeed it was at La Beat Route where Andy came up with the "Wham! Bam! I am a man!" rap whilst out on the floor. George and Shirlie perfected their pair dancing to the sounds of D-

Train, Was Not Was and Evelyn “Champagne” King and it was La Beat Route’s Caribbean beach décor that inspired Club Tropicana.

On 20th February 1981 BBC current affairs programme Nationwide filmed a Friday Night at La Beat Route and captured George, in a fetching salmon jacket, on camera.



Brushing shoulders with the stars - George at La Beat Route 20th February 1981

George fleetingly turned his attention back to school and in the summer of 1981 passed his A Levels in English and art. Andy on the other hand didn’t bother with his exams, concentrating instead on guitar lessons.

George and Andy would predominantly go out with Shirlie and David Austin to Three Crowns as well as clubs. After leaving school and some time on the on the dole they decided to form Wham! in the snug of The Three Crowns. They took the name from Andy’s little fooling around rap and, as George put it, “there was no point in calling yourself “Wham” if you weren’t going to have an exclamation mark!”

Freed from the burden of education, they were now able to concentrate fully on music. George had invested what money he had in a ropey little PA to sing through. As the couldn’t afford instruments, they concentrated on writing songs and ended up recording a one and a half songs in Andy’s Chiltern Avenue front room. George told NME in November 1982;

"Andrew didn't get our exams because he was being a college trendy. I was a sixth-form rebel - which didn't take much", George adds. "I think we both stayed on at school so we'd have an excuse to stay at home and wouldn't have to go out to work, being lazy. We both knew that all we wanted to be was pop stars. We're both the types that should have got our A-levels with flying colours, but we were really lazy, so we didn't. We spent most of the time round at Andrew's house, mucking about on instruments and writing songs".

They needed some sort of money to fund their ambitions so George got a job as an usher at the Empire Cinema in Watford after being sacked from the stock room of the local BHS for not wearing the company shirt and tie. He would put the PA to use at night, DJ-ing in pubs around Watford. Andy on the other hand stayed home in bed, hiding from his parents and the outside world. If he hadn't done that Wham! Rap would never have happened.

In the remaining months of 1981, George and Andy kept working on their songs, particularly Wham! Rap. The next twelve months would see the realisation of everything they had dreamed of.

Young Guns Go For It

George and Andy knew they had the songs but also that they had to get them played to record company executives. So, in February 1982, they made their own demo tape. For £20 they hired a "Portastudio", complete with an engineer, for the day. They set it up in Andrew's front room and recorded Wham! Rap, Come On, Club Tropicana and about thirty seconds of Careless Whisper before Andrew's parents returned home and proceedings were cut short. But at least they had something for record companies to listen to.

After a raft of rejections a friend of Andy's, Mark Chivers (Sycamore Close, Bushey), introduced him to Mark Dean who, as luck would have it, lived literally down the road from him. Dean had already had some success in the music business with Soft Cell and ABC and was looking to set up his own record label. Even so, he needed some persuading to listen to the demo tape but after being constantly badgered by Andy in The Three Crowns, he relented. He was sufficiently impressed so held a series of meetings with George and Andy before signing Wham! to his new label, Innervision Records, in March 1982. The terms and conditions of this contract would later be the subject of much debate and a court case, but for now George and Andy were officially in the music business.

Wham! Rap was released on June 16th 1982 to unanimous good reviews among the plethora of weekly music publications. George and Andy were interviewed by both NME and Sounds and promoted the single further with a series of personal appearances at which they would dance to it in the manner they had in clubs a matter of months earlier. Radio 1 DJ Peter Powell was the first to play it on the radio but shortly afterward, it was banned by the BBC because the lyrics were encouraging young people to enjoy a life of unemployment. With the single not even cracking the Top 100, George and Andy flew out to New York to oversee an American re-mix of Wham! Rap. It made little difference and the single stalled at number 105 in the official charts.

Teen music magazine Smash Hits featured a small interview with George and Andy in their 5th August 1982 issue.

George and Andy had no choice but to start work on their next single, Young Guns (Go for It!) which was released 15th October 1982. Once again a series of personal appearances at clubs were used to promote it along with a double page interview in Smash Hits by editor, and future Pet Shop Boy, Neil Tennant. This time it worked as the single entered the Top 100 at number 73, climbing to number 48 before falling back to number 52. However, an appearance on BBC TV's kids' show Saturday Superstore was enough to see it climb to number 42, at which point fate intervened.

Following the late withdrawal of a band from Top of the Pops, Wham! were invited to perform as the highest climbers outside the Top 40. On 3rd November 1982, George, Andy, Shirlie and Dee C Lee

travelled to BBC TV Centre to record what would become an iconic performance of Young Guns (Go for It!). Broadcast to the nation the following night, presenter Mike Smith introduced Wham! as the opening act. Already well-rehearsed because of their club appearances, their performance was confident, energetic and fun. Thirty thousand copies were sold the next day as the record climbed to number 24, eventually going on to reach number 3.



Dee, Andy, Shirlie and George in late 1982



Young Guns sign their second single

Now they were feted by the music press, as interviews in The Face and Sounds were followed by an NME cover and a huge poster given away with Smash Hits.

Meanwhile back in Bushey, December saw them return to their alma mater, Bushey Meads Comprehensive, for an appearance at which George presented his old music teacher with a copy of their first single on which he wrote, "Sorry! no fiddles"



A Christmas gift for his music teacher

They spent Christmas Day with their families until Andy called for Shirlie and they in turned rolled up at George's home in Radlett with the news that Wham! had come fourth in the Smash Hits 1982

Reader Poll “Most Promising New Act” category behind Tears for Fears, Culture Club and Musical Youth.

This most exciting of years was to end on the saddest of notes. School friend and guitarist in The Executive Andrew Leaver passed away on 23rd December following his battle against cancer. His funeral was held on 31st December at West Hertfordshire Crematorium and both George and Andy attended.



Looking back on this period later, Andy would say “Getting George to be in a band when he was sixteen was one of my most important contributions” and “What made Wham! special was a lot to do with what we had as friends. George and I had something – in the band, in pictures, on stage, together – that we just don’t have apart.”

Top Of The Pops 4th November 1982 Running Order

Presenter: Mike Smith

Playlist : Chart Position in brackets : (42) Wham! – Young Guns (Go For It) (28) Diana Ross – Muscles (video) (37) Blancmange – Living On The Ceiling (30) John Cougar – Jack And Diane (video) (10) Shakin’ Stevens – I’ll Be Satisfied (video) (20) Daryl Hall & John Oates – Maneater (22) The Piranhas feat. Boring Bob Grover – Zambezi (11) Kool & The Gang – Ooh La La La (Let’s Go Dancin’) (danced to by Zoo) (1) Culture Club – Do You Really Want To Hurt Me? (24) Sharon Redd – Never Give You Up (video)

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