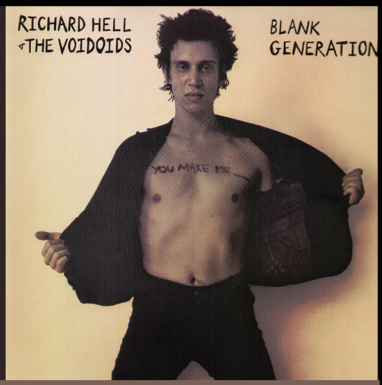
33 1/3



BLANK GENERATION

by Pete Astor

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BLANK GENERATION

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Track Listing

Side One

1. 'Love Comes in Spurts' 1:59
2. 'Liars Beware' 2:45
3. 'New Pleasure' 1:55
4. 'Betrayal Takes Two' 3:33
5. 'Down at the Rock and Roll Club' 3:37
6. 'Who Says?' 2:03

Side Two

1. 'Blank Generation' 2:39
2. 'Walking on the Water' 2:11
3. 'The Plan' 3:53
4. 'Another World' 8:03

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Preface

Richard Hell was the one for me. He embodied exactly the right mixture of nihilism and ego that a 16-year-old needed. And he looked right. Like all the best rock and roll, here was someone – as we would all find out in the passage of time – who remained mired in the emotional onslaught that adolescence brings. And had no intention of doing anything other than continuing to wallow in its endless contradictions and rail against it with poise, poetry and an elegant sneer. Just another permanent adolescent, staring down the world. This was glamorous, elegant and damaged and signposted a universe of possibilities and I wanted in. It was love at first sight. It's hard to say exactly when the love affair started, because before you're really ready, so many things have to be in place …

I'm coming down Wilmington Road on my bike. Under my arm is a copy of Iggy and the Stooges' *Raw Power*. Nigel Lynn has just lent it to me. He was the older boy who used to play tennis ball cricket with us on the recreation ground. I still remember the summer's day when we were playing and he came past with some girls and his new Bowie cut; just like Ziggy, even down to the carrot orange colour. Like so many Bowie-ites,

he'd stepped beyond what you were meant to look like in suburbia. Also, he'd quietly been one of the hardest kids at school, so there was no way anyone would *dare* to say anything about his hair or his clothes anyway. He was fully-fledged weird and that put him apart also: if the hard kids couldn't figure you out then they usually left you alone. Now he'd left school as early as he could and had a job, had money and a Bonneville 650.

He looked like a biker and his music tastes had got deeper and weirder. I'd visit him occasionally, never wanting to bother him too long but desperate for leads as to what was good. It was 1974, and my world was changing and I knew Nigel Lynn and his record collection was full of ways out of my particular corner of suburban nowhere. In his room he'd built thin shelves along all the walls where he would display his favourite albums, cover out – a whole wall of Bowie: *Diamond Dogs*, *Ziggy*, *Aladdin Sane*, *Pin Ups*. Plus, on other walls, this month's favourites: Van Der Graaf Generator and Peter Hammill solo, *Chameleon in the Shadow of Night*. T. Rex, Cockney Rebel and some new American discoveries: the MC5, the *Nuggets* compilation and, of course, The Stooges.

Once he'd actually lent me *Raw Power*, produced and endorsed by Bowie himself, I was on my way. As well as being deeply flattered, I was fluttering with excitement at the thought of getting this home and playing it: that person on the cover completely out-Bowie-d Bowie in his 'is-it-a-man-or-is-it-a-woman?' weirdness. He looked like something come down to earth from a science fiction novel. *Other*, and more other even than Bowie, this one had a real grain of something like authenticity, with all

the tales of sleaze and harm, living a mythic life in an imagined America.

My listening – and reading – expanded exponentially from there. This was the kind of thing that I needed: people who lived beyond the confines of suburbia, who said 'fuck you' to all the suffocating stuff around.

When Patti Smith's *Horses* arrived a year later, I can still remember playing it to a bunch of older kids, who were then the only band at my school.[1]

'This is IT!' I enthused as 'Land' went by. They harrumphed and shrugged and said they couldn't really see what all the fuss was about. Already, I was a believer in the mix of art, punk and poetry as manifested on that record.

Through the intervening years I'd grown up, passionately cynical, drawn to the literary, disengaged type that could speak for my obsessions and angers. I'd been primed by Kerouac, Rimbaud, Dostoyevsky – all the usual suspects – as well as by a large dose of the kind of fervent, post-countercultural belief in the power of music propounded by the likes of Nick Kent, Ian MacDonald and Charles Shaar Murray in the *New Musical Express* (*NME*) in the mid-1970s. I'd read about a scene happening far away from the dour United Kingdom of that time. Here at last was a music where the artist's intelligence and vision manifested itself not in any specious adherence to mere musical technique or lyrical pomposity but in a belief in art, style and expression. CBGB's and its world as brought to me by the *NME* writers of the mid-seventies seemed to me to be the perfect image of bohemia. It was an old idea, but one set to seduce yet another suburban teenager: impassioned, bored and desperate to escape.

Vision

And sometimes it just comes together, sound making meaning. Track one, side two: it starts on the left with Ivan Julian's guitar intro, playing a variation on the chords that will follow. At 22, he's finally achieved what he'd set out to do – he was on an album, playing guitar, having arrived via his work with soul workhorses The Foundations, touring round England and Europe, aged 20, learning rock and roll from a hundred badly paid shows, where the original frontman of the band would sometimes turn up armed with a knife, demanding money and another chance to sing.[2] The guitar part itself is loosely based on The Who's 'The Seeker', Julian's fandom and knowledge owned, adapted and passed forward in new ways and places.[3] Then, appropriately, in the centre of the stereo picture, Richard Hell's bass comes in, punctuating the guitar chords with single hits, each note fretted and gripped hard, so that the pitch is slightly sharpened, played with life-or-death seriousness, each stab as though it were one of Pete Townshend's finest power chords. Finally, on the right, Robert Quine's guitar enters, playing lead lines with a casual violence; scion of a wealthy mid-west industrialist's family, spending his

twenties training as a lawyer to try to please them, apparently too old and bald now for punk rock, here he is at home, bringing together years of immersion in the primal rock and roll and jazz that he loved. In between Quine's guitar lines, Julian's chording, and Hell's bass runs, Marc Bell enters on drums, stoking the rhythms prefiguring the riff that's about to start. At 24, Bell had already been drumming professionally for almost a decade, playing on his first album at 16, leading to the assurance, precision and certainty of his drumming. As Quine's lead line ends in a delicate swell of feedback; as Bell's snare hits become a sleazy hit hat beat and a hanging note spins up from Hell's bass, a machine gun snare introduces the great dumb riff to 'Blank Generation'.

Derived from Bob McFadden and Dor's 1959 novelty hit, '(I Belong to the) Beat Generation', songwriter Hell utilizes his kitsch source material to complement his own absurdist take on a generational anthem. While songwriter Rod McKuen used the perennial descending chord pattern from innumerable hit 1950s songs ('Hit the Road Jack' being the example often cited by Hell and the band) as the appropriately crass way to satirize an 'alternative' culture, Hell owns both the trivial nature of the novelty record, while at the same time reconnecting it to a culturally lost generation he saw emerging in the 1970s. The tone and content of the words he sings express this perfectly:

> I was sayin' let me out of here before I was even born
> it's such a gamble when you get a face
> it's fascinatin' to observe what the mirror does
> but when I dine it's for the wall that I set a place.

It's at once funny and tragic. Hell's voice is a Dylan-derived whine, delivering a poetically razor-sharp articulation of the hopeless absurdity of what he saw.

By now the Voidoids have settled into the riff, going round it four times for each verse, Quine and Julian's Stratocasters played through overdriven Fender Champ amplifiers in the huge recording room at New York's Plaza Sound Studio. The guitar tone is exactly right: sharp, single-coil Fenders, at the point of breaking up but maintaining a glassy, trebly bite. The guitars play the chords in a loose unison, remaining panned to either side, maintaining the Voidoids' stage set-up, giving the listener the feel of a live band playing the song there and then. Hell is at the centre, Quine to the right, Julian to the left, Bell, on the drums, behind.

Next the chorus enters, flagging the lyric meaning in the initial, visceral rush of listening, signposting what the song is saying: 'I belong to the blank generation'. McFadden and Dor's chorus is lifted almost wholesale, but its very corniness is now used to frame Hell's vision of a now *blank* generation; like the Pop artists' use of 1950s and 1960s ephemera, Hell imbues trash culture with new, more profound meanings. And to put the pop icing on the cake, the second repeat of 'I belong to the blank generation' has a glorious gap where the word 'blank' should be, so we can imagine a ghost audience can all join in singing the chorus in a dystopian dream episode of *American Bandstand*.

Then, post-chorus, Robert Quine plays a brief solo, the first of two in the song: it lasts a mere six seconds but feels like the beginning of Quine's release from half a lifetime of frustration and unrealized dreams. The