

# The Why girls like boys like George GENDER BENDERS

By LINDA MCKAY

**SUNDAY MIRROR SPECIAL REPORT**

THEY are shocking. They are outrageous. They call themselves the Gender Benders—the latest youth cult to follow in the high-heeled footsteps of bizarre pop idols Boy George and Marilyn.

Gender Bender boys are mad about make-up and adore dressing up. And the girls love it. Amazingly, they find it tremendously sexy.

These days, far from simply dressing up in the privacy of their own homes, the Gender Benders are

coming out of the wardrobe. They wear their high camp clothes in the street, to the local pub and even shopping in the supermarket.

But WHY do they choose to wear women's clothes and make-up? What do their wives, girl friends and parents think? Why do they put up with the abuse in pubs and streets?

The Sunday Mirror has made an in-depth investigation of the crazy new cult, which will become part of the fashion history of the Eighties.

THE Gender Benders are easy to spot. These days you can see them on suburban streets from Penzance to Penrith.

More and more parents are discovering their children turning to astonishing new fashions that make even Boy George look butch.

And it can be a terrible shock to suspect that your son is bi-sexual or gay.

But our research shows that most Gender Benders are anything but gay. In fact, most of their blood is as red as their lipstick.

They make-up and dress up entirely out of a sense of fashion. And the girls find it a turn-on and sexually attractive.

Often enough it's the wives and girl friends who teach the Gender Benders the best techniques with powder and paint.

But what are these men trying to say? To find out we searched the whole of Britain for the Gender Benders and their controversial views proved extraordinarily revealing.

In the Midlands we found happily-married John Raven. That's him in the lipgloss and eye make-up in the picture on the opposite page.

By day 27-year-old John works as a labourer for British Rail. But when he takes his wife Sharon out for the evening the chances are he'll be wearing her make-up, women's shoes and ribbons in his plaited hair.

John, of Sutton Coldfield, West Midlands, said: "I simply like to look different and have a horror of looking like everyone else. "I'm not a poof and I'm not bi-sexual—although I



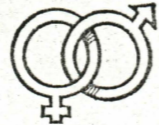
Peter Alexander—"I don't resemble Boy George at all. I'm more like Rita Hayworth." Picture: NIGEL CAIRNS

and she doesn't—I don't care what people think."

Peter Alexander is a handsome young man, whose appearance during the day wouldn't rate a shocked stare. But when he goes out in the evening 22-year-old Peter transforms himself into a staggeringly attractive "girl".

The make-up is flawless, hair groomed to perfection and he even dons black leather skirt and stiletto shoes.

Peter, unemployed, from Wood Green, North London, said: "I just like to be attractive to a lot of people."



Macho type

"I wouldn't describe myself as gay. I have many friends of either sex. Women definitely think this look is sexy.

"They don't feel they have to play a role if a man is wearing make-up the way they have to when confronted with a macho type man. It definitely turns on the girls."

Peter writes songs, sings, and is hoping to make a record using the name "Amber".

He said: "I don't resemble Boy George or Marilyn in the slightest. I'm more like Rita Hayworth."

"Most people dressing up today want to look like their pop star idols. I'm doing it because I enjoy it."

"One of Peter's girl friends, freelance writer Barbara Shores, said: "I think Peter looks absolutely amazing when he has all his make-up and everything on. I prefer men with make-up on. It makes them look tremendously sexy."

American-born Barbara,

My wife thinks I look terrible without make-up

29, who lives in Brixton, South-West London, first switched on to male make-up after seeing Tim Curry in the role of Frank N. Furter in the outrageous Rocky Horror Show play.

For the part he wore stockings and suspenders and was made-up as a woman.

Barbara said: "I think that was the first time I realised how sexy a man could look in make-up. He looked sensational. I was a bit surprised to find it so attractive but now it's become fashionable. I only really go out with men who do wear make-up."

"I think men like Peter appreciate women more and female characteristics."

Former printer Graham Vee wouldn't dream of going out without his make-up. He spends about £5 a week on new cosmetics and tends to favour red lipstick,



John and Sharon Raven—"What' a nice girl like her doing with a freak like me?" Picture: BRIAN RANDLE

blue eye shadow and lots of foundation and blusher.



Girl friends

Graham, of Norman Road, Leeds, said:

"I dress like this all the time—not just for going out at night."

"Whenever I go out I face back-stabs and snides usually from gangs of lads. I

can't go into a pub without getting into a fight so I don't bother any more.

"I see nothing wrong with dressing and making up like this. I believe this look is here to stay."

Graham, 20, even designs and runs up his own clothes. He admits to being bi-sexual but says: "I do have a couple of girl friends and other friends but nothing steady. Frankly, at the moment I am pretty bored with sex."

The crazy Gender Bender cult has even reached as far afield as Belfast. Clothes

designer Ivor Morrow decided to adopt the Boy George look about six months ago.

He said: "It was the Culture Club music which attracted me first—the dress style came second."

"Belfast is still full of punks and skinheads so this look is a rarity."

"The style is comfortable, colourful and casual. And I didn't mind the funny remarks my friends made at first."

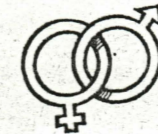
Ivor, 22, from the suburb of Rathcoole, designs all the outfits himself and his

20-year-old girl friend Vianney makes them up.

Ivor said: "It's a good arrangement. My girl friend is a big fan of Boy George herself. In fact she encouraged me to copy him."

Simon McGarth, now 19, has been wearing make-up since he was 15.

It takes him an average of two hours to achieve his amazing look. His blond hair is spiked up into an eight-inch high Mohican style. Matt foundation, three colours of carefully shaded eye-shadow, eye liner and deep crimson lipstick complete the effect.



Trend-setters

He wears a pair of fishnet tights cunningly converted into full-length gloves, a black satin top from Miss Selfridge boutique and black leather jeans. The whole lot topped off by a pair of Bet Lynch-style dangly earrings.

Simon, an apprentice at an electronic engineering firm, who lives in North Manchester said: "I think make-up makes me look better. It gives me the chance to shape my face and improve it."

"I'd wear it all the time if I could but obviously I can't. For a start, you run the risk of being beaten up by the macho types."

"And of course I've been warned about my appearance at work. I have to flatten my hair down when I go in and wear no make-up."

"I think anyone who judges me just on appearance is very narrow-minded."

What do trend-setters Boy George and Marilyn think of the way the Gender Benders have followed their elaborate fashions—and have even taken the cross-dressing a daring step further?

Biond Marilyn—who favours lots of glitter and sequins—admits he is flattered by the copycats.

He told me: "I feel quite complimented that people copy me but ultimately I hope they develop their own style."

"While keeping parts of my image that suit their



Boy George—flattered by his bizarre army of imitators



LES DAWSON

'I'd never go out in the street looking like that.'



RONNIE BARKER

'I hate drag now. I just feel it's faintly obscene.'

personality I think everyone has their own style. They just need to develop it."

Boy George is also flattered by the army of imitators he has spawned.

"The amazing thing," he said, "is that when I first went round the record companies nobody wanted to know me because they said I was too weird."

"But now they all seem to be desperate to find somebody who looks a bit like me in any way at all. I suppose it's flattering—but sometimes it can be a bit annoying."

George also understands why women are sexually attracted to Gender Benders.

He said: "It sounds an

awful thing to say, but for a girl to have sex with someone like me isn't such a problem. I am not masculine. I don't want to be. You can be a lot more attractive with your mind than with your body."

It is, of course, an old tradition of stage and TV in Britain for male entertainers to dress in drag.

Apart from the best-known female impersonator, Danny La Rue, many comics don women's clothes some of the time.

Les Dawson's Hilda Ogden-style outfits are loved by millions. Said Les: "It's just part of the entertainment business to me. I'd never go out in the street looking like that."

"But I think the Boy George styles look great on the kids. More power to their elbow."

But comedian Ronnie Barker recently ditched dressing up as a woman in the Two Ronnies TV series he shares with comedian Ronnie Corbett.

He said: "I've grown to hate seeing myself playing a woman. It makes me ill and my wife Joy feels sick."

"I hate drag now. I don't know why—I just feel that it's faintly obscene. But that's just because of my straight background."

When the Sunday Mirror set out to investigate the Gender Bender cult there was just one place our reporters drew a blank—Scotland.

In Glasgow, Eddie Tobin, general manager of several discos, told us: "This is a heavy industrial city and it produces men. They drink and smoke heavily and are prone to a punch-up—especially with female look-alikes."

"They wouldn't admire a Boy George copy. They would think he was a poof."

Ironic, really, in an area where males have been wearing colourful skirts for years. Only the macho-men of Scotland call them kilts.

NEXT SUNDAY: The great escape from sex