

now seething with jealousy. He challenged RM to put up his dukes, then, after seeing Kitten tooling around in it, smashed up Meyer's Mercedes.

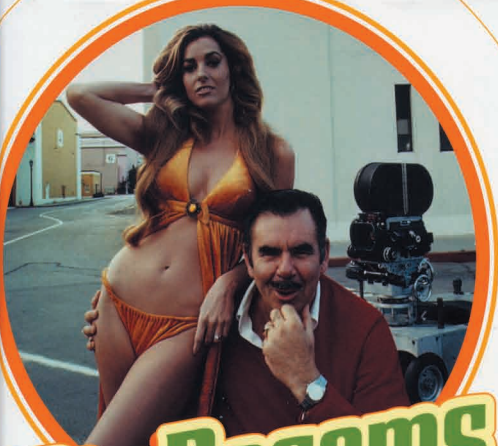
The drama was "wearing me out," Kitten confessed. "I was breaking out in hives." Finally I said, 'Look at me—I look worn out! I'd go, 'Russ, ya gotta let me go home and sleep.' He'd go, 'Makeup concealer!' " One of the girls would slather on the pancake to hide the bags under Natividad's eyes, then it was on with the show. But Russ Meyer would take a bizarre and frustrating detour before putting *Beneath* to bed.

\$\$\$

Russ Meyer and the Sex Pistols. It had more potential than Godzilla versus Megalon. Were there any two forces more arrogant, provocative, and obnoxious? In 1977, the Pistols were the essence of thumbing your nose, and Meyer had made a career out of it. The mastermind pimping this idea was of course Malcolm McLaren, the oft-reviled Svengali behind the band. The Sex Pistols were causing a big ruckus in England, and Warners was intent on breaking them in the States.

McLaren thought a feature film would be just the ticket for the Pistols, and he'd already considered Peter Cook, Stephen Frears, and Ken Loach for the director's chair. Now he set his sights on Meyer, admiringly declaring him to be "the epitome of American fascism." So McLaren flew to Los Angeles to meet King Leer. Wisely, Meyer brought along a young friend who could decode and deflect the hip Englishman: Rene Daalder, a young Dutch filmmaker and screenwriter active in the Los Angeles punk scene. Daalder and McLaren hit it off immediately.

"Malcolm McLaren was this very intellectual art school product—serious Marxist leanings, informed by the Situationists," said Daalder. And then there was Russ—unpretentious, commiserating, frequently farting Russ. RM would begrudgingly admit that "McLaren was sincere. He really was a zealot, he had fire in his eyes," but the two clashed immediately, with Meyer soon



# Big Bosoms

The Biography of Russ Meyer,  
King of the Sex Film

# and Square Jaws

Jimmy McDonough

Author of the *New York Times* bestseller *Shakey*

fobbing McLaren off on Daalder, who put the agent provocateur up for a month in Los Angeles. "I don't know if either of them understood how far apart they were," said Daalder, adding that although RM's house was mere minutes away, the vibes between them were such that "it was almost impossible to have Malcolm go there on his own."

Daalder and McLaren banged out a treatment for the Pistols movie with the working title *Anarchy in the U.K.* Meyer perused the work, which, according to Daalder, centered on the grim, grimy "actual story of the Sex Pistols," and threw it right into the nearest trash can. Reality? That was for dummies! Meyer hated the treatment "because it was depressing," according to Daalder. "Depressing—that's the last thing that a Russ Meyer can ever be. But a Sex Pistols movie *has* to be depressing."

RM immediately set out to undermine McLaren's plans. There was no way Meyer could make some downer cinema verité band hagiography. So RM got Ebert on the horn—he'd whip up something fast and remember to put in the tits. McLaren had to get it through his Situationist skull that he'd hired Russell Albion Meyer and, as Daalder put it, "Z-Man and Martin Bormann were going to march right through *whatever* it was gonna be." In June 1977, Roger Ebert installed himself at the Sunset Marquis Hotel and, with a great deal of input from McLaren—who gave Meyer and Ebert a crash course in punk rock and Pistols, thrashed out a script with the unforgettable title *Who Killed Bambi?*

M.J.,\* a rich, decadent rock star, gets his kicks being chauffeured through the countryside, lazily searching for some deer to shoot. He has his driver dump his latest kill in front of some poor family's home, a little girl opens the door, sees the bloody carcass, and exclaims, "Mummy, they've killed Bambi!" M.J. then tries to corrupt the Sex Pistols, as does their head-game manager P. T. Proby, with such distractions as a mad rapist, a sexy Scotland Yard operative named O, and an arcade game that pokes fun at Scientology's fabled E-Meter along the way. The little girl returns at

\* Intended as a swipe at Mick Jagger; in some versions of the script, it's B.J.

film's end, avenging Bambi by way of a .357 magnum blasting a fat hole in M.J.'s celebrity face. *Bambi* was to be, Ebert later wrote, "a statement of anarchic revolt against the rock millionaires, and the whole British establishment." Meyer, who was going to appear as an on-camera narrator, described the picture as "a combination of *A Hard Day's Night* and *Beyond the Valley of the Dolls*."

With the script somewhat complete, the entourage set out for London. Meyer and McLaren weren't exactly becoming bosom buddies. On the flight over, "Russ insisted on sitting on the aisle because McLaren had his bondage pants on," said Ebert. "Russ said, 'If we get in a crash, you're gonna get those goddamn straps twisted around the chair and we'll all die.'" The chaos that seemed endemic to McLaren was beginning to chafe RM, and in the absence of a signed contract, he demanded to be put up in style and paid weekly in cash.

In England came the inevitable summit meeting of Meyer, Ebert, McLaren, and the Sex Pistols. It was a surreal collection of egos. As Ebert later wrote, both he and Meyer were "a little nonplussed, I think, to hear Johnny Rotten explain that he liked *Beyond the Valley of the Dolls* because it was so true to life."

Pistols band members Paul Cook and Steve Jones got on with Meyer. Jones had no clue who RM was before a copy of *Faster, Pussycat! Kill! Kill!* won him over ("I love the bird in it, she was fuckin' awesome," he said of Tura Satana). Jones was also impressed by Meyer's chutzpah. "He was a Hollywood guy, American, dressed kinda loud. I thought he was great."

Not surprisingly, Rotten plus Meyer made for a toxic cocktail. "If I had a tape recording of any one night in my life, it would be the night Johnny Rotten, Russ Meyer, and I went out to dinner," said Ebert. "We went to Beauchamp Place, behind Harrod's. And at one point Rotten was being obstreperous. And Russ said, 'Listen, you little shit—we won the Battle of Britain for you. And we can come over here and beat you, too.'"

"What Russ didn't take into account was that America didn't fight in the Battle of Britain and that John Lydon was Irish, not British. But this didn't register with Johnny Rotten, either, because he was impressed. At this point—when he was supposed to be the

bad boy of Britain—here was a guy who called him a little shit and said he would knock his block off. I think Rotten liked that.”

Not according to JR, who later maintained that he completely lost interest in the project on the spot. “After I met Russ Meyer, this dirty old man, I felt really shabby about the whole thing,” he wrote in his autobiography. “I didn’t want to know from there on. . . . I hated Russ Meyer from the first second I saw him—an overbearing, senile old git.”

Meyer, happily exhibiting his anti-Irish prejudice, complained that all Rotten did was pick at his scalp, his nose, and the green film on his teeth. Worst of all, little Johnny was vociferously anti-American. “He was proud of his bomb-throwing countrymen, the IRA,” said a disgusted RM, who maintained that if the IRA requested Rotten “to throw a bomb, he’d probably run the other way.”\* Still, Meyer admitted, “Rotten definitely had charisma.”

Sid Vicious had his own problems with Meyer. At McLaren’s behest, Ebert had written a scene in which the doomed bass player has sex with his mother (Meyer had already cast Marianne Faithfull for the role) and then shares heroin with her. At this, Vicious drew the line: “Well, I don’t mind balling her, but shooting up—forget it!” Meyer later made the preposterous claim that had the movie happened, Vicious would “still be alive.” Roger Ebert reported that at the time of *Bambi*, McLaren had Sid on a weekly retainer that translated into about \$14 in U.S. funds. “He had nothing to eat,” said Ebert, who recalled that Meyer, driving Vicious (in some tellings it’s Rotten) home one night, bought him a much-needed dinner: “two six-packs of beer and a big can of pork and beans.”

Rene Daalder saw the Pistols and RM as a case of two angry worlds colliding. Meyer was Mr. Can-Do, always ready to go-go-go. “Every morning the phone would ring at 5:30 a.m., a military wake-up call. If Russ heard in your voice that you were still somewhat sleepy, he would find it disgusting.” The Pistols, on the other

\* Meyer once boasted in an interview he got threatening calls from the National Front due to working with the Pistols. No one present who I interviewed remembers this.

hand, “were not at all about energy. Sick every morning, incapable of moving a limb, totally lethargic British guys.”

By this point in the game Rotten and Vicious totally despised McLaren, and *Who Killed Bambi?* became emblematic of his scheming megalomania. Now the Pistols had been relegated to performing monkeys in a Russ Meyer film. Rotten, particularly annoyed he’d been consigned to play a sex fiend, was determined to wear a garish hippie outfit for the role to thwart what he surely regarded as a Hollywood version of punk. According to director Julien Temple, who picked up the pieces after Meyer left (and decades later put together the one great Pistols visual document, *The Filth and the Fury*), it was during the *Bambi* debacle that McLaren really lost control of the band. “The group broke up largely because of that film,” he said.

Still, the project staggered along. McLaren drove Meyer around London, amused by the director’s determination to avoid showing a single red double-decker bus in the film, and his fascination with arcane British street signs, “names like Wopping, Batterssea, Bayswater, names that conjured up sexual connotations.” Ebert polished off another round on the script and flew home. Sets were built near Heathrow, and Meyer summoned Fred Owens and Jim Ryan to join him in London.

In mid-October 1977, Meyer shot the opening scene, where M.J. kills the deer that’s dumped on the little girl’s doorstep. With *Blacksnake*’s David Prowse as the chauffeur, all went well. “They’d already seen the dailies of the stuff they’d shot and had put a work print together of the first scene,” said Jim Ryan. When Steve Jones saw the footage, “I didn’t really know what to make of it, ‘cause I didn’t even bother reading the script.” He admits he was still looking forward to “the birds with big tits.”

Three days into the shoot it became apparent that they were already out of money. McLaren had never finalized a deal. “Reams of contracts were prepared, document upon document for producing and financing of the film,” Sandy Liebersohn, then of 20th Century Fox, told Craig Bromberg. “And Malcolm was continually changing his mind.” With increasing chaos surrounding the project, Fox’s stockholders were getting cold feet—particularly one of

its more famous board members. "We just happened to meet the Fox guys who axed us in an elevator in Portugal," recalled Jim Ryan. "They said, 'Well, this is off the record—[stockholder] Princess Grace said, 'We don't want another X picture from Meyer.' " Yes, none other than Grace Kelly hammered the final nail in *Bambi's* coffin.

Would *Who Killed Bambi?* have made a great film? Who knows. "What a tragedy! It could've been a screamer!" insisted RM, who found Ebert's script to be cinematic gold. Steve Jones thought Meyer was clueless when it came to the band's music, complaining that as far as RM was concerned, "we were the Monkees." "It was totally doomed," said Rene Daalder. "It could never have happened, really." Meyer's best pictures may approximate the energy of rock, but he had little interest in the actual stuff, and one of the world's most exciting bands might've been squandered in the process. "Almost without exception, motion pictures are a very unfortunate match with rock and roll," maintained Daalder. "Ultimately you're going to pervert or corrupt the spirit. It just can't be done."

### \$ \$ \$

*Who Killed Bambi?* collapsed in a tangle of lawsuits from both sides. Even director Julien Temple was dragged into the fray in 1980, during a promotional tour for *Rock 'n' Roll Swindle*, the film that finally resulted in the aftermath of the Meyer debacle. He told reporter Todd McCarthy that Meyer had "personally shot a deer with a pistol" while filming *Bambi*. RM, furious that someone would accuse him of such a stunt, took Temple to court for libel, extracting a printed public apology from him in the pages of *Screen International*. "He loved to sue people," said Kitten Natividad.

Meyer was devastated by the sudden demise of *Bambi*. He'd thought this would be his ticket back into the big leagues, and at age fifty-five, Meyer no doubt realized the opportunity wasn't going to present itself again. "That experience drove me to not make more films for quite a time. It's depressing to have a project collapse like that. I traveled to New Zealand and Switzerland just to get away from it."