



## Finding '70s Gold in Todd Haynes' "Velvet Goldmine"

By Adam Quest



The star of writer/director Todd Haynes' recently released film, **"Velvet Goldmine"** is undoubtedly the makeup man, with the costume designer a close second. The shell of this hallucinatory story of the glam rock era evokes more tedium than delirium, although there are sublime stretches when Haynes' disciplined yet over-the-top pastiche of early '70s sonic and visual accouterments is truly intoxicating.

The film begins with a brief period piece that locates the origins of glam in the birth of Oscar Wilde—certainly the chief theorist and patron saint of artifice and its aesthetic spawns: extravagance and flamboyance. The young Wilde, when asked in school what he wants to be when he grows up, answers, "A pop idol." It's an ingenious prologue, hinting that the next two hours of finery will be the embellishment and essence of a grand cinematic statement.

In Citizen Kane-like fashion, the film chronicles the rise and fall of Bowie equivalent Brian Slade (the shamelessly pretty Jonathan Rhys Meyers), and his relationship with Iggy Pop surrogate Curt Wild (a brilliant and hilarious Ian McEwan). The period and its heroes are seen through the eyes of an investigative reporter, Arthur Stuart (Christian Bale), working backwards from a doleful perch in bleak, even vaguely apocalyptic 1984.

Stuart's assignment is to find out what became of Slade after a stunt in which he fakes his own onstage assassination—rendered in characteristic drama-queen style with Slade, resplendent in feathered appendage, being shot in the stomach as the wafting plumage from a feather machine (cousin to the smoke machine) covers his gaping, cherry-red wound. It's one of the more voluptuous, dazzlingly colorful scenes in a film drenched with same.



Despite its sheer visual density, especially the exhaustive depiction of Slade's constantly mutating personae, **"Velvet Goldmine"** is a music film like no other. Essentially a rock musical—often straying into the rococo turf of rock opera that subsumed the entire English glam scene—"Velvet Goldmine's" soundtrack is just about perfect. Using a mixture of original and cover versions of glam-era anthems—especially from Eno and Roxy Music—the music keeps vigorous pace with the visual onslaught.

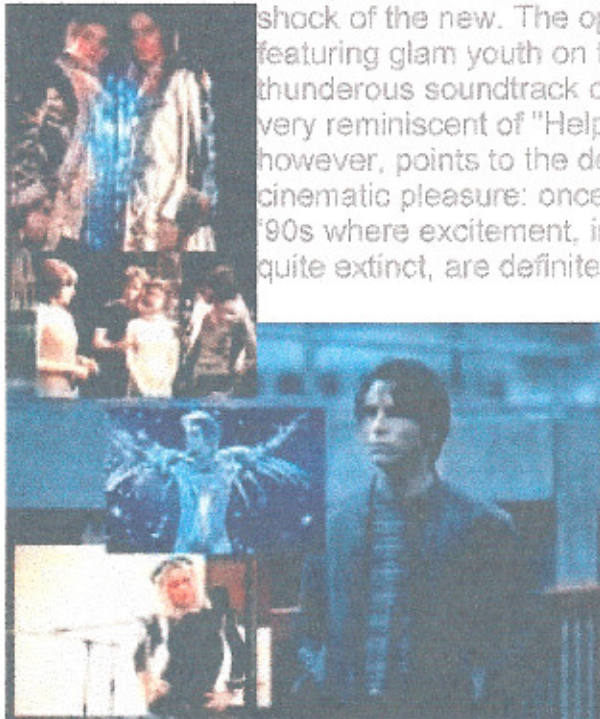


Slade, as the ultimate glamour figure, is the film's locus of charisma, sensuality, and mystery. He is the narrative peg upon which the story—along with lots of feather boas and chartreuse lizard-skin-patterned leather—hangs. Slade is an archetype of androgyny and licentiousness whose early days unfold in the strange territory between the earnest experimentation of the '60s and the synthetic pleasuredome of the '70s.

**"Velvet Goldmine"** proffers a revisionist view of the '70s that may go a long way toward rescuing that decade from the ongoing mockery and trivialisation—e.g., the Brady Bunch revival, assorted kitsch fixations (polyester redux), etc.—that threatens to turn it into a cultural wasteland and ongoing embarrassment to the politically and culturally hegemonic baby boomers (whose guilt at their own atrophied idealism may be behind the whole discrediting of the '70s).

Glam rock and the attendant upheaval in gender identity and sexual conventions proves the '70s was more than an elaborate ploy for marketing TV-themed lunchboxes. **"Velvet Goldmine"** celebrates the era and acknowledges, without being the slightest bit didactic or even discursive, how radical the glam milieu really was.

More than making a concrete case for the '70s' contribution to social change, the film also depicts a time brimming with excitement and the shock of the new. The opening of the film proper (after the prologue)—featuring glam youth on the run through the English streets, set to the thunderous soundtrack of Eno's "Needles in the Camel's Eye" and very reminiscent of "Help"—induces a palpable exhilaration. This, however, points to the depressingly transient, escapist nature of cinematic pleasure: once you leave the theater, you're back in the '90s where excitement, innovation, and sexual abandon, while not quite extinct, are definitely harder to come by.



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