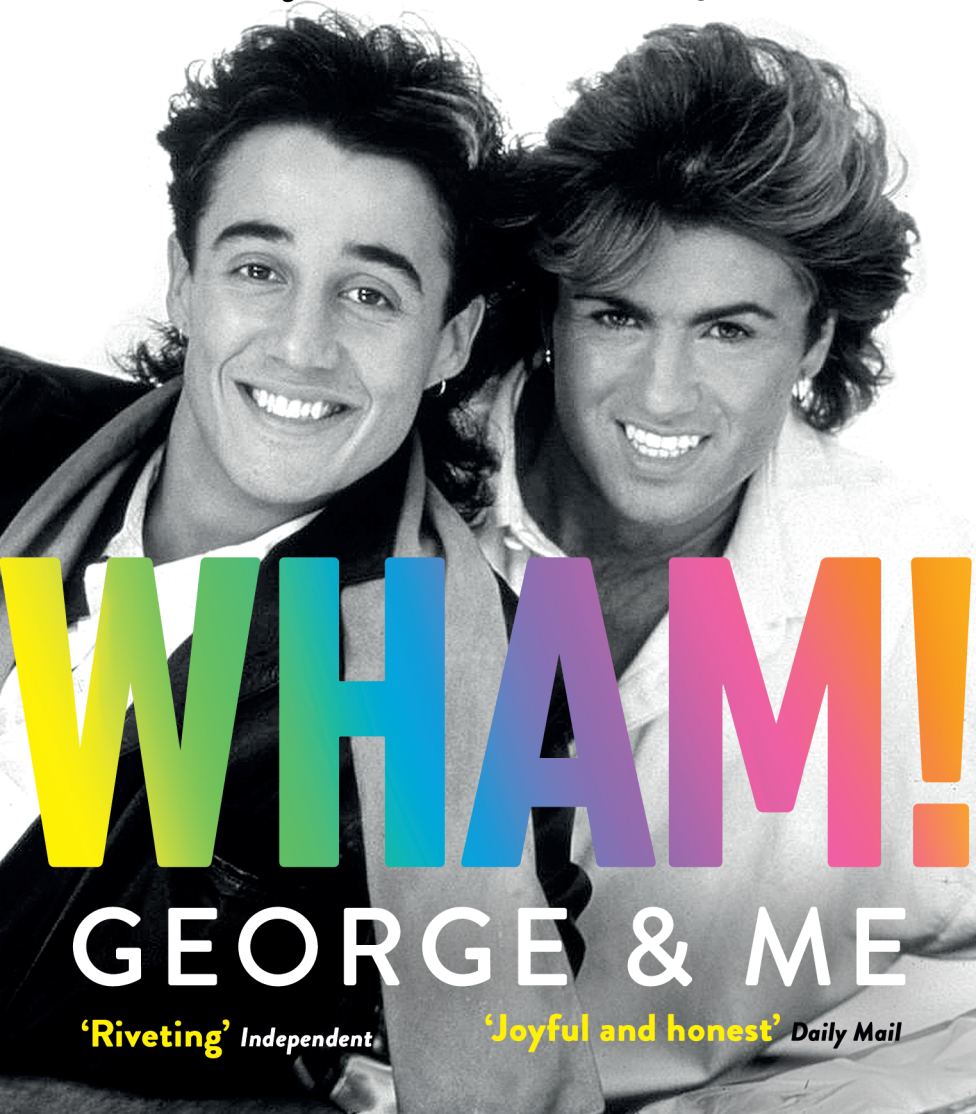
ANDREW RIDGELEY

'A fantastic book'
Chris Evans, *Virgin*

'All you could want and more!'
Emma B, *Magic Radio*



WHAM!

GEORGE & ME

'Riveting' *Independent*

'Joyful and honest' *Daily Mail*

PENGUIN BOOKS

Wham! George & Me

Andrew Ridgeley is one of the most recognisable faces of the eighties. He was one half of the phenomenal pop duo, WHAM!, one of the biggest names in the history of pop music. Born in Surrey, England, he grew up in Bushey, Hertfordshire, where he met George Michael whilst attending Bushey Meads School; they struck up an easy friendship – both having a common interest in music – before forming WHAM! The band sold multi-platinum albums and singles globally, having number 1 hits all over the world including both the UK and the US.

Andrew now pursues a variety of interests, significant amongst which is fundraising for The Dallaglio RugbyWorks charity. He splits his time between his homes in Cornwall and London.

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Wham! George & Me

ANDREW RIDGELEY



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This memoir is dedicated to the memory of my dearest friend, with whom I did the only thing I ever really wanted to do and who was the only person I ever imagined doing it with.

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Introduction
The Long Goodbye

Saturday, 28 June 1986

I waited for George.

I always waited for George. This time, I was standing backstage at Wembley Stadium, patiently listening for my cue to make my entrance and waiting – *waiting, waiting, waiting*. The sun had melted below the arena's grand old twin towers and tens of thousands of people seemed to shimmer in the faraway corners of its bowl-shaped terraces. Others were pooled into a swaying, brightly coloured tide on the football pitch below. Teenage girls waved flags and home-made banners; camera flashbulbs popped as kids, couples and groups of families and friends screamed excitedly: seventy-two thousand fans drawn together at The Final, a farewell concert for Wham!, the youthful, hopeful, effervescent pop band that George and I had always intended to burn brightly, but briefly.

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Four years on from the release of our first record in 1982, Wham! was still a big deal across radio, press and TV. Posters of me and George, pulled from the pages of *Smash Hits* and *Just Seventeen* magazine, had become the wallpaper for millions of teenage bedrooms, while showbiz columnists frothed over every snippet of Wham! news and gossip. But at the peak of our success, and after two studio albums and a portfolio of number 1 singles across the world, we were about to bid farewell to the very people drawn to those songs, those shows and those stories.

And all of them were waiting, waiting, waiting for the final show to begin.

I knew the routine backwards. George was onstage, walking towards the crowd, arms outstretched, striding along a catwalk that extended into Wembley's front rows. *This was his moment.* Dressed all in black, a blend of leather and denim, his swept-back hair offset by designer stubble, every gesture, every signal, became a call-and-response connection with the audience. George played to the crowd; they swooned. Flanked by two dancers, he moved and spun to the instrumental backdrop of 'Everything She Wants', the pulsing soundtrack to a showy, theatrical introduction. George loved performing this wry observation of married life, even though we had been young, single and unchained from responsibility at the time of its writing. He waved to fans in the farthest corners of Wembley's raucous

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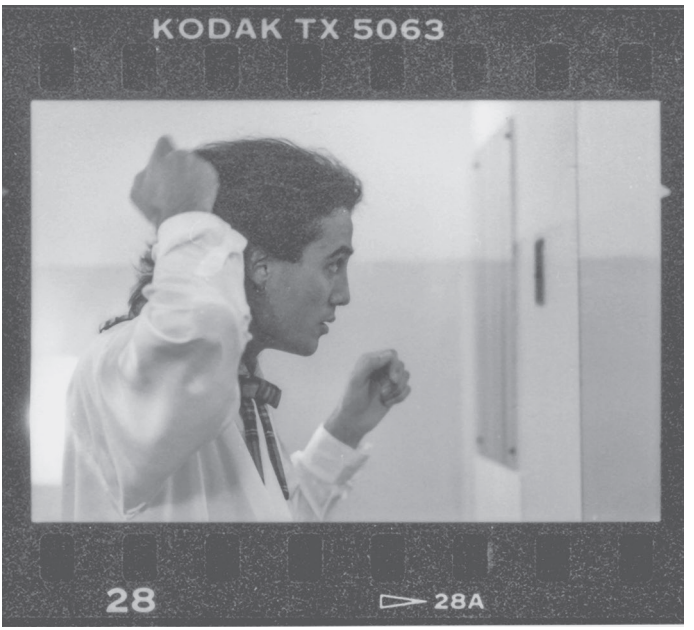
party. He turned his back on the audience, pointing seductively across the stage, the microphone yet to touch his lips. George hadn't said a word, let alone sung a note, but still everybody was hanging on his next move, a sensation I knew only too well.

Because I had spent so long waiting for George.

I'd waited for George as he endlessly readied himself for shows, teasing his hair with straighteners, sometimes for hours upon end while I recoiled at the acrid whiff of singed curls and hairspray in a ritual that appeared unnecessarily torturous. As our fame grew, George's appearance became a very serious matter. Prior to filming the video to 'Careless Whisper' in 1984, he even complained that his curly hair, an

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uncontrollable mass of wiry frizz in the humidity, made him look 'like Shirley Bassey'. George's sister, Mel – a stylist – was then flown halfway around the world, from London to Miami, where the filming was taking place, to sculpt George's hair just the way he liked it. The bill for her flight and handiwork was reported to have been more than £10,000.

But I'd also waited for George as he worked through his frequent moments of musical inspiration. In the studio – a place where he toiled with an exacting

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attention to detail – or at home, when he would suddenly disappear for hours on end after being struck by some melodic cue or vocal hook. Often it proved to be yet another spark of genius, the most memorable snapshot of this process having taken place in February 1984 as we relaxed one Sunday afternoon in his parents' living room. *The Big Match* was on the telly but George's mind was very much on something other than football.

'I've got to go,' he said, jumping off the sofa and vanishing upstairs for over an hour.

When George returned, he was grinning proudly.

'Bloody hell, Andy,' he said, 'come upstairs, you've got to hear this . . .' He was excited, aware that he had composed something special, having worked out the basic arrangement and melody of a song he was loosely calling 'Last Christmas' on a four-track tape recorder – a demo he would eventually craft into the heart-bruised ballad that later became the biggest Christmas single not to make it to number 1. *God, that statistic annoyed him.* Despite its enduring success, the failure of 'Last Christmas' to topple the charity single by Band Aid that year – a musical union comprising, among others, Bob Geldof, U2, Duran Duran, Sting, Paul Weller and George himself – would irk him terribly, although he didn't begrudge the charity their success. Throughout his life, hit singles were regarded as the only affirmation of George's songwriting prowess and not being

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regarded as the best by his audience, or peers, was one of his greatest sources of irritation. But as we sat in his bedroom that day, the same place where we'd once analysed the Top 40 chart rundown after school as teenagers, I listened to a basic track that had been recorded on his synthesiser, its instantly memorable chorus hummed over the top, and beamed. George had captured the very heartbeat of Christmas, framing its lyrics within the pain of a broken romance.

And I'd waited for George as he transformed himself from the funny but occasionally introspective teenager Georgios Panayiotou firstly into Yog – the nickname I'd given to him soon after we'd met as classmates at Bushey Meads Comprehensive – and then into George Michael, the singer-songwriter and dearest friend of my formative years and beyond. As we embarked on an intense and unpredictable journey into the limelight, our bond strengthened further. George evolved into one of the defining voices of his generation. But while he was crafting some of the eighties' biggest singles, there was the sense that he was still defining himself. His sexuality remained a secret outside of Wham!'s inner circle and a gulf opened up between the very private life he was leading as a young gay man and his position as a teen pin-up and tabloid focus. He would later go on record as saying that the gravitational pull between private man and public personality created moments that threatened

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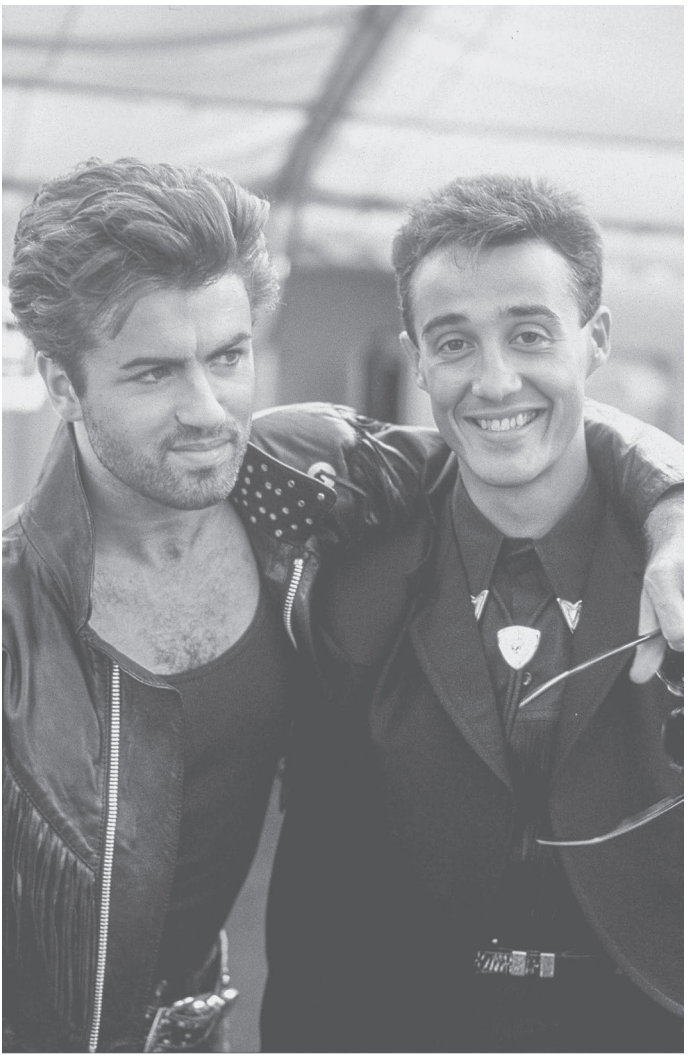
his sanity. Through all of this, I was a stable presence for George. He was my best friend and had been for years, but his personal destiny lay beyond the two of us. With Wham!'s last show at Wembley, the waiting for George was set to be over.

Likewise, with my life's ambitions achieved, it was over for me too.

I stepped down towards the catwalk, our backing singers Helen 'Pepsi' DeMacque and Shirlie Holliman alongside me. The screaming was deafening, the roar of Wembley becoming louder, much louder. As I walked towards the popping lights and surging crowd, I heard scattered voices from the front rows: shouts of 'Andrew!', or 'We love you, Wham!' But beyond that there was only white noise. I paused at the edge of the stage as the hysteria ricocheted around me. Wherever we went in the world, the reaction to our arrival onstage always struck me as extraordinary and I rarely took the fandom surrounding our music for granted, or too seriously. The screaming girls, the autograph-hunters and the paparazzi: all of it was hyper-real and strange. As a result, everything we did was played for laughs. George and I knew it was a game and we were always determined to play our part in giving our audiences the energy they loved – it was very much Wham!'s brand.

But in the weeks building up to it, The Final had been described as something of a near-religious event.

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Fans were referred to as acolytes; Wham! as icons. In the early years, our look onstage was playful, cheeky, and our shows had made headlines for our too-short shorts and cropped T-shirts, while promo videos for songs such as 'Club Tropicana' were packed with tongue-in-cheek nods to the joys of youthful hedonism. However, at Wembley we'd decided to create a more dramatic mood to match the fervour, eschewing our usually vibrant stage image for a more severe tone. George wore skinny black jeans and leather boots. A belt glittered with rhinestones and his jacket, its collar up, had been trimmed with tassels. My all-black look

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was equally striking: with the help of Pepsi and Shirlie, I shrugged off my trench coat to reveal a high-cut, fringed, matador-style jacket, complete with bootlace tie and sparkling belt. I struggled not to laugh as I slowly teased away my gloves, finger by finger, dropping them to the stage. Shirlie handed me my guitar and I pulled it over my shoulder. Showtime.

Both of us had appeared at Wembley before, so our surroundings were at least familiar. A year previously, I did backing vocals when George had sung at Live Aid, a charity gig that raised millions of pounds to help ease the famine in Ethiopia, just like Band Aid's Christmas single had done in 1984. That day had had an almost festival-like atmosphere. The Final also had a special, one-off feel to it, as tens of thousands of people flocked to London from all over the world, marking the end of a very colourful chapter in British music history.

The time for Wham! to say goodbye had arrived.

We played through the hits one last time. 'Club Tropicana', 'Bad Boys' and 'Edge of Heaven'; 'Wham Rap', 'Careless Whisper' and 'Freedom'. Stretching into the distance, the Wembley crowd looked as if they were ebbing and flowing, a huge pool of people singing and dancing together. In the build-up to our performance it was decided that we would sprinkle several surprises throughout the party, one of which was a cameo from Elton John, who joined us for a reworked

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version of his hit single 'Candle In The Wind'. The song had always emotionally resonated with the pair of us, having been a stand-out track on Elton's album *Goodbye Yellow Brick Road*, one of the records upon which our friendship was built. George was able to carry its melody beautifully, almost effortlessly, and while he considered himself a songwriter first and foremost, I always thought his greatest and most eloquent form of expression was his voice. From an early age it became his defining instrument and, as far as I was concerned, only Freddie Mercury stacked up against George as a vocalist at that time.

This wasn't the first time that George and Elton had performed together, either. At Live Aid, George had also sung 'Don't Let The Sun Go Down On Me' with Elton, and his band provided the backing track to George's towering vocal. But the relationship between George and Elton had been formed a year previously as we were recording *Make It Big* in 1984. While working at Château Miraval, a recording studio in Correns in the south of France, George and I received a call from our management company in London. Apparently, an unexpected invitation had reached their desk.

'Er, George, Andrew: Elton John has been in touch. He'd like to know if you fancied joining him for lunch?'

We were both taken aback. *Bloody hell! Lunch with Elton John?* The idea seemed surreal and we couldn't believe our luck. A few days later, and feeling a little

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nervous, we drove over to meet our host, who was immediately charming, big-hearted and very kind to both of us as we started an afternoon of drinking and eating. Both of us had heard tales of the legendary opulence of Elton's hospitality, and as two boys from Bushey, then only twenty-one years old, it was quite an intimidating experience. The wit at the table was rapid-fire; it could be acerbic too, with Elton holding court from one end of a lavish feast in the elegant surroundings of his sunny patio. But everything was done to make us feel welcome, and as the wine flowed I realised any anxiety we'd felt in advance of the gathering had been far more unsettling than the event itself. We shared stories and told jokes. The mood was so relaxed and natural that, at times, I had to remind myself of our host's enormous reputation.

Good times were such that lunch ran into evening, and our group moved on to a nearby nightclub where Elton's songwriting partner, Bernie Taupin, joined the party. By that stage, all of us were fairly well oiled. Somebody mentioned that the actress Joan Collins had moored her yacht in Saint-Tropez's harbour. Leaving the party, and fuelled by alcohol and the memories of her somewhat racy film *The Stud* – in which she'd played a nymphomaniac nightclub owner – George shouted across the water, 'Joan! Show us your knickers!' It was an uncharacteristically lowbrow outburst.

It felt entirely fitting that two years later another

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Backstage with Elton, Wembley Stadium, 28 June 1986

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Wham! party was drawing to a close with Elton alongside us for the ride. 'Young Guns (Go For It!)', our first hit, and 'Wake Me Up Before You Go-Go', George's incomparable call to the dance floor, was followed by an anarchic encore of 'I'm Your Man', with Duran Duran's Simon Le Bon joining us onstage for backing vocals. As the music faded out, the din of seventy-two thousand voices echoing around us, we enjoyed the clamour together one last time. The two of us had shared experiences that were unimaginable when we'd first left school. Ever since that day, we had been reliant upon each other.

In that regard, Wembley was both brilliant and bittersweet. Part of me was happy to escape the limelight that accompanied life in a stadium-sized pop band. I was tired of the circus that surrounded Wham! at all times. The hype and hysteria had become too much and my relationship with the national press was hostile. Saying goodbye to the tumult and the palaver that surrounded George and myself wasn't a hardship, but the knowledge that we'd not perform alongside one another as Wham! again was tinged with melancholy. We had grown up together and this sense of union had pulled us even closer to the hearts of our fans. We were an inseparably tight-knit duo – *a brotherhood*. But that friendship wasn't without its lows at times.

My best friend was really one of two people throughout our close relationship – before Wham! and after.

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The schoolboy I'd first met as a thirteen-year-old who would go on to be my best friend, the boy I'd wanted by my side during those first strides towards musical superstardom and beyond, became George Michael, the character he created to propel his career from singer in a number 1 pop duo to a solo star brimming with ambition and creative wanderlust. By the time of that final concert the second incarnation was well on its way to completion. George shot to even greater stardom when he released *Faith* in 1987. But he was beset by confusion, a consequence of his sexuality and the struggles to define the reality beneath his public image. The tension only seemed to play out more publicly later on.

Throughout Wham! and beyond, the bond between us was both real and heartfelt. The British public seemed to find our easy relationship a joyful thing during a period of British history that is now recalled as being pretty tough. We had first arrived with 'Wham Rap (Enjoy What You Do)', an antidote to the despondency of unemployment with its lyrics:

> Wham! Bam!
> I am! A man!
> Job or no job,
> You can't tell me that I'm not.

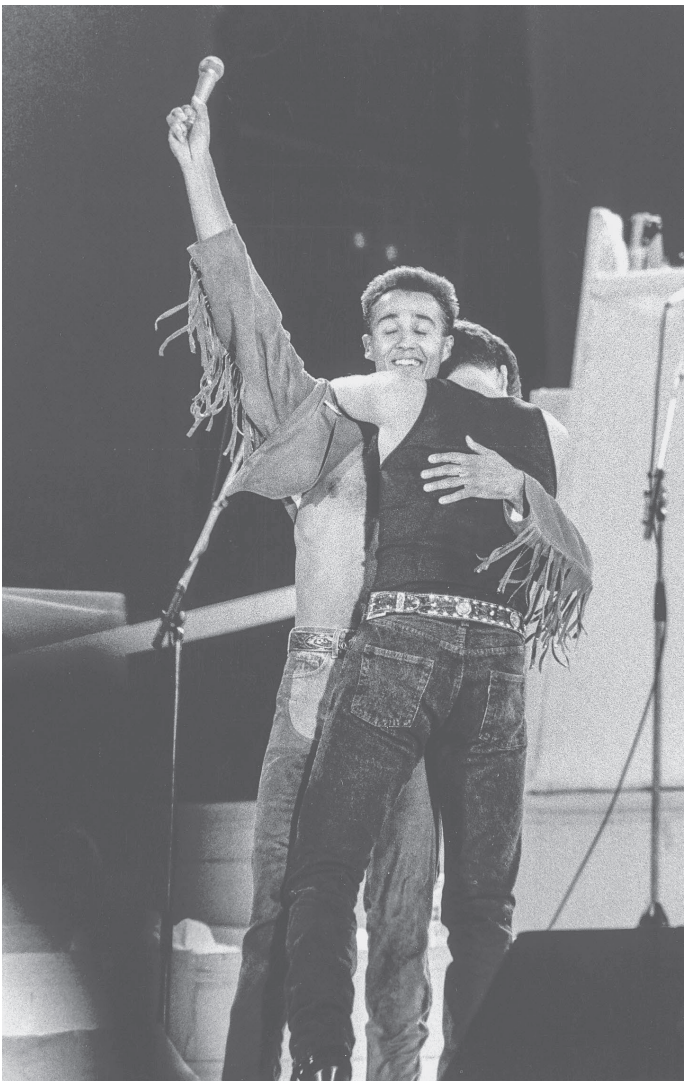
From then on, our music became a soundtrack to the country's newfound optimism and self-confidence.

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Songs such as 'Club Tropicana', 'Wake Me Up Before You Go-Go', 'Freedom' and 'I'm Your Man' embodied excitement and aspiration. Everything looked effortlessly fun for us because it *was* effortlessly fun, and that natural exuberance translated into huge commercial success. The early demos that George and I recorded in my parents' front room nudged us towards a record deal and eventually sales of over thirty million records. Our debut album *Fantastic* went to number 1 in 1983. Its follow-up, *Make It Big*, repeated the achievement on a global scale a year later. We sold out stadium shows in Britain and America, drawing fans to our music until Whamania became a global phenomenon.

Our union drew to a close in 1986, in part because Wham! was unable to outlive our youth. Continuing to distil the very essence of teenage emotion once we grew up was a pop alchemy beyond even George's prodigious songwriting talents. Meanwhile, during the first flush of success and before the release of *Fantastic*, we'd decided that Wham!'s creative reins should rest solely with George if we were to achieve the scale of success we believed was in our reach. I had long recognised his ability, and my sole ambition had been simply to be in a band and play music, so I was satisfied with just being in the studio, or onstage. The decision still smarted a little, but it was the right one: George was so clearly developing into a writer of rare ability; indeed it was the desire to realise the potential of that gift which

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drove him to become a solo artist, free of our band's constraints. Now, after four thrilling years, our time together was over.

George shouted in my ear. From within the noise and the chaos I wasn't able to catch any words. Our musicians and backing singers, most of them long-term collaborators, had left the stage to allow us our last moments together as Wham!. The Wembley crowd was swaying ever faster, singing even louder in a sea of sound and colour; banners and flags dotted the view ahead.

'*What?* Come again!' I yelled over the din, sensing that what he had to say was important.

George smiled and embraced me, resting his head upon my shoulder one last time before we took our final bows.

'I couldn't have done this without you, Andy,' he said.

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PART ONE

Young Guns

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1. Decisions, Decisions

November 1979

We were the best of friends, and two sides of the same coin. Georgios Panayiotou was a studious and shy, broccoli-haired sixteen-year-old with a muffin-top waistline and a wardrobe full of questionable outfits. I, on the other hand, was self-assured and outgoing. A bright spark, but not so clever; a smart alec mischief-maker dressed in a charity-shop mohair suit and parka jacket, swerving studies for my A-levels in a school that had bored me to tears. But the pair of us were joined at the hip through a shared love of music, *Monty Python* sketches and our juvenile humour. And then I made the decision that would change both our lives forever.

Yog, we're forming a band . . .

For the best part of two years, it had been all I'd thought about, and having spent so much time in each other's pockets at school, there was only one person I wanted to play music with: the boy set to become

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George Michael. He had great rhythm and feel, an outstanding sense of melody and he was an even better singer. During our early friendship we'd idolised the same bands and artists, a wide variety of music from favourites like Queen to new sounds from the likes of Manchester's Joy Division. By 1979, we were into ska, a very modern British take on reggae that mixed Caribbean grooves with jagged guitars. Bands such as The Specials, Madness, The Beat and Steel Pulse had captured our imaginations, not just musically but through their clothes, too. With a mod revival also under way following the release of the movie *Quadrophenia*, kids across England were suddenly dressing in sharp suits and Hush Puppies shoes. Buzz cuts were a cool choice at the hairdresser's. Luckily my life in suburban Hertfordshire was as tuned in to the scene as the kids clubbing in London or Birmingham. *Music was something I wanted to be a part of.*

'But, Andy,' said Yog when I called him after school, 'I want to, but I can't . . .'

There were some mumbled excuses about A-level pressure and the unforgiving mood of his parents, who seemed eager to protect him from any further distractions – like me. However, I wasn't about to be deterred. I'd set my heart on this course of action and I wasn't about to let Yog's concerns about his mum and dad thwart it.

'No, it's now or never,' I told him. 'We're forming a band today.'

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Yog knew I could be single minded, especially once my mind was set on something. He also understood that I wasn't actually asking him, *I was telling him*. Sensing that I wasn't about to give up, his resistance fizzled away.

'OK, Andy,' he said, taking a deep breath. 'Let's do it.'

Yog was in. Now I had something to be excited about, a goal to achieve – *a purpose*. As far as I was concerned, there was nothing we couldn't do and nobody that would stand in our way. Our friendship was invincible, and to my mind chart success awaited. I had no idea what that success would actually mean, but I could feel it. *I knew it*. What eventually took place was more spectacular than I could ever have imagined . . .

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2. The New Boy

Four years earlier

I first set eyes on Georgios Panayiotou while waiting for the first lesson of the new school year to start. Around me, the other kids of form 2A1 at Bushey Meads Comprehensive chatted excitedly. Boys bragged of snogging sessions with mysterious girls while on holiday with their parents, usually at British seaside resorts. (To go abroad in those days as a family was a financial luxury beyond most people.) Girls giggled and swooned over picture pull-outs of David Essex and Donny Osmond taken from the pages of *Jackie* magazine. Everybody seemed more fascinated by Pan's People than ever before. The dance troupe from *Top of the Pops* had been performing on the show for several years, but the Lycra-clad dancers were fast becoming the stuff of young boys' dreams and everyone had a favourite. But after six weeks of summer freedom I couldn't find my usual enthusiasm for the noisy buzz of the first day back.

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ASHFIELD JUNIOR SCHOOL, BUSHEY

Age Group 10-11 Years Class 4W

Report for Autumn Term 1973 Name ANDREW RIDGELEY

	GRADE
MATHEMATICS	B-
ENGLISH : Expression : Written	B
Oral	B+
Reading	A-
GENERAL SUBJECTS : History, Geography, Science	B-
HANDWRITING	B+
ART AND CRAFT	B
MUSIC	B
RELIGIOUS EDUCATION	B-
PHYSICAL EDUCATION	B-

Conduct Disruptive. Absences 4

NOTE: A,B,C,D,E in "Grade" column denotes that the standard of work is Very Good, Good, Average, Weak or Very Weak, in the appropriate AGE GROUP

Andrew has achieved some good results which might be even better if he applied himself more than he does. In Maths his work does not always match his capabilities. In English his written work is always interesting; he writes imaginative stories and poems. He has let himself down in General Subjects by not completing all the work to be done. The work completed has, however, been of a good standard. His Art work shows good imagination but again he doesn't always finish. He does have a PE/Games and a music (although he no longer plays his recorder). Andrew has a good speaking voice but unfortunately he uses it at the wrong times as well as the right.

Teacher R Fuchs Headmaster E. Halliwell

The next term starts on Tuesday, 8th January 1974.

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I was bored.

In fact I was often bored. To my mind, school was a drag and once I'd learned how to read and write, cruising through primary school with barely a hiccup, my participation in the British educational system was effectively at an end. Any interest in my academic career all but disappeared from that point on and I really couldn't see the relevance of lessons, which annoyed both my teachers and parents. One school report cited me as 'disruptive' and a succession of parents' evenings – and the inevitable dressing-downs in their fallout – became a chastening experience. One of the few things I enjoyed about it was playing for the school football team. But contrary to a later claim by George, I never harboured any hopes of becoming a professional footballer. I supported Manchester United and that was as far as my ambitions ever went.

And so I was placed class front, from where my teachers could keep an eye on any misdemeanours. I was twelve years old and prickly about authority. With my top button undone and school tie loosened just so, I looked every bit the sullen, difficult teen, which might have accounted for one or two teachers taking a dim view of me. I was hardly a complete delinquent, however. Although form 2A1 was considered the brightest in the year, given none of us had done well enough in our 11-plus test to go to any of Watford's grammar

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schools, it was unlikely that we were destined for careers in nuclear physics or neuroscience.

There was a sudden change in mood in the classroom. Conversations regarding Pan's People, David Essex and those awkward summer kisses were shushed when our form tutor, Mrs Parker, entered the room, trailed by a nervous-looking boy. Dressed in a pristine, box-fresh school uniform, he wore a pair of oversized steel-framed specs. His hair, which looked like a dressing-up wig, appeared to have been made from coarse man-made fibre. And the pressure of facing down a room of new classmates had clearly shaken him. As Mrs Parker welcomed the New Kid to form 2A1, he began to redden. A clumsy introduction where his name was delivered with all the finesse of an urban fox tearing open a bin liner didn't help.

'Boys and girls, this is your new classmate, Yorrioss Paneyeottoo,' she said, pronouncing his name phonetically. She looked down at the horrified face at her side for assistance, but the new boy – *whatever his name was* – had now blushed the colour of a strawberry Opal Fruit. The girls in the front row giggled; boys sniggered from the back of the class. But undeterred and keen to press ahead with her morning, Mrs Parker continued with the formalities, though any attempt to repeat the unfamiliar Mediterranean name was abandoned.

'OK, I'd like someone to take care of the new boy,'

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