

AN UNPRECEDENTED EXPLOSION OF GAY SIGHTS AND SOUNDS

by ADAM BLOCK

It was the year rock turned 30. In 1954, a 19-year-old Elvis Presley first recorded "That's Alright Mama." Fifteen years later the Woodstock music festival arrived on the heels of the Stonewall Riots: the apex of pop counterculture crossing paths with the opening volley of gay liberation. There is a wicked irony in those anniversaries; the pop heroes of the '60s are now largely dead or irrelevant, and the drag queens who attacked the police at the Stonewall would seem quaint and embarrassing to today's gay urban professionals. In 1984, the intolerant New Right gained a strangle hold on the Republican Party Platform, while the courts upheld laws against gay immigration and gays in the military. In England, the Thatcher government busted a gay bookstore, confiscating its inventory. Meanwhile, AIDS shattered gay lib's irrelevant celebrations of untrammelled, unashamed sex.

In the face of this grim dread, gay images exploded in pop music; drag was everywhere. But it seemed about as scary or honest as *La Cage aux Folles*; those images had been defanged, absorbed into the mainstream as eccentric, harmless entertainment. This unprecedented visibility seemed to have more to do with titillation than revelation—to be inspired more by catchy fashion than shared pas-

sion. The group Specimen in their punked-up *Rocky Horror* rags and Motley Crüe in their Conan leather drag looked far more *queer* than an openly gay artist like singer David Lasley.

What couldn't be trivialized is the very real streak of fear and intolerance riding shotgun with the show biz. As Boy George wrote to his fellow gender-benders in the midst of bitch-fights egged on by the British pop press, "Fame may bring mass attention, but how many thug he-men who sit down to watch *Top of the Pops* would love to stamp on our heads? I can assure you there are plenty, and that's what we should be fighting, not each other." Gays still confront public panic. In 1984, they collided often and colorfully.

The Grammys: Michael Jackson sat between Brooke Shields and child actor Emmanuel Lewis, mounting a bizarre charade of a nuclear family. Eurythmics' Annie Lennox performed in Elvis Presley drag. The cast of *La Cage aux Folles* were there for a braying rendition of "I Am What I Am." When Culture Club were picked as Best New Artist, Boy George mugged, "Thank you America. You've got taste, style, and you know a good drag

queen when you see one." George, of course, stopped well short of thanking his lover.

Bronski Beat: This willfully unglamorous young trio, fronted by Jimi Somerville—who sounds like Sylvester doing an Annie Lennox imitation—scaled the English charts with their tale of a young gay leaving home, "Smalltown Boy," and followed up with the anti-fag-bashing song "Why." Their first LP, *Age of Consent* (Forbidden Fruit/UK), sports a pink triangle on the back cover and features a remake of Donna Summer's "I Feel Love" and the unambiguous "Need a Man Blues." The inner sleeve lists the age of consent for consensual homosexual acts in every country in Europe, followed by the phone number of London's gay legal hotline. Bronski promise to be the most successful militant gay group in the history of pop. And—a big plus—you can dance to it.

Lowlife ranks as the year's most courageously unlikely gay group. The New York quartet features two gay men (one with AIDS) and two lesbians. The *ADVOCATE* called them "New York's only gay rock 'n' roll band featuring gender equality." (And Bronski Beat think they're politically correct.) Lowlife's first record is still pending.

Tom Robinson: The man who made headlines with his savage anthem "Sing If You're Glad to Be Gay" back in '78, headlined with Bronski Beat this fall at a sold-out benefit for London's Gay Switchboard. His songs have turned from polemics to the personal, and his new LP *Hope and Glory* (Geffen), ranks as the finest of his career. It features his Top Ten British hit from '83, "War Baby"; the haunting collaboration with Peter Gabriel, "Atmospherics"; and a cover of what Robinson calls "the greatest gay love song ever written," Steely Dan's "Ricki Don't Lose That Number."

Elton John labeled himself a "bisexual" back in '78 and proved his point this year—to the astonishment of many—when he married his female recording engineer. In 1981, he released an overtly gay video of a schoolboy romance to accompany "Elton's Song" (with a lyric by Tom Robinson) from his LP *The Fox*. Two days before Halloween this year, he astonished the audience at Madison Square Garden by appearing in Tina Turner drag. He's still kicking.

David Lasley: The blue-eyed soul singer with a shimmering falsetto and a taste for Laura Nyro should have won the male Ricki Lee Jones award for last year's landmark, openly gay LP *Missin' Twenty Grand*. This year's follow-up, *Raindance* (EMI-America), featured the brazen rap "Don't Smile at Me, I Already Know" (a hit in Europe) and the wicked club hit "Where Does the Boy Hang Out." Gays need to discover this man.

Bill Folk, author of the zombielike "gay anthem" entitled "We Are Here and We're Not Going Away," performed at the rally following the Gay Rights March at the Democratic Convention in San Francisco. A photographer shooting the crowd from high overhead remarked, "I couldn't get a good shot of them all. As soon as he began to play, people started leaving in droves."

The Smiths' lead singer, Morrissey, announced that he is gay, insists that he is celibate, and cites Oscar Wilde, James Dean and Sandi Shaw as his main inspirations. The band are cult heroes in their native England. A string of hits have charted there, almost all featuring gay icons on the sleeve. For their LP, *The Smiths* (Sire), the icon was a shirtless Joe Dallesandro. Semi-acoustic propulsive music and Morrissey's deadpan, quavering vocals illuminate such lyrics as "Nature played a trick on me. I lost my faith in womanhood" and "Meet me by

the fountain. Shove me on the piano. I'll take it slowly." Tell us about it.

Frankie Goes to Hollywood: Before Frankie's first single came out, a British writer labeled them "a Liverpool post-punk S&M cabaret act," hardly a recipe for pop success. Now, one year later, their two singles—the salacious "Relax" (banned by the BBC) and the antiwar follow-up "Two Tribes"—boast sales of 10 million copies. They have sold more records, more quickly, than any group since the Beatles. Singer Paul Rutherford told one reporter that their management's strategy was "to be like the Sex Pistols—all the outrage, the controversy, but this time with the sex." With the release of a debut double LP, they have embarked on a U.S. tour. But group



leaders Rutherford and Holly Johnson have traded in their rubber posing straps and leather codpieces for designer suits, and, as *United Press International* put it, "hardly anybody nowadays mentions the homosexuality of Holly and Paul." Their record, *Welcome to the Pleasure Dome* (Island), is a triumph in both its music and its merchandising—slick and outlandish. Among those Holly thanks on the inner sleeve are The Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence. Frankie is the kind of group Jerry Falwell might invent if he wanted one to condemn.

Sylvester celebrated his 15th year in show business with a multimedia extravaganza at San Francisco's Castro Theatre.

He lent a hand to the Boys Town Gang (reverted by London's gay dance scene)—as did the Weather Girls, Two Tons of Fun, Jeanie Tracy and a host of others—for the group's disco-throwback spectacular *A Cast of Thousands* (Fantasy). Late in the fall he bowed in with a new hairdo and a dance single, "Rock the Box" (Megatone), with an LP to follow. Syl stares down hip-hop and settles for scratch-ridden techno-pop.

Ferron, the Vancouver-based folk singer, emerged as the most potent voice to date in the women's music movement. Her LP, *Shadows on a Dime* (Redwood) presents, wry, stirring visions with a roughhewn grace that recalls the brilliant early work of John Prine. Live, she puts the record to shame.

Bruce Springsteen, who planted his handsome ass in front of an American flag for the cover of his *Born in the U.S.A.* LP, shocked crowds to their feet midway through his four-hour shows. As he finished "Thunder Road" he would dive to his knees—sliding the length of the stage to the side of his massive black bass player, Clarence Clemons. Springsteen would look up pleadingly, and Clemons would bend down—the two men locking lips for 15 seconds. Rock 'n' roll always sounded like it burst out of a soul-shattering midnight rendezvous between a black field hand and a white juvenile delinquent. In one spectacular, liberating gesture, Springsteen enacted those implications. Give the man my "Come on Back to de Raft, Huck Honey" Award.

Little Richard, rock's original mad queen, was slapping on the makeup, screaming and caressing himself, before Boy George or Prince were born. The man and others tell frank tales in the current biography *Little Richard: The Quasar of Rock*, which offers such wonders as the original, uncensored lyric

to "Tutti Frutti" ("Tutti Frutti, good booty/If it don't fit, don't force it/You can grease it, make it easy..."), which makes "Relax" sound tame. Still, Richard remains more liberating than liberated. He claims, "Homosexuality is contagious. It is *not* something you're born with." If so, Richard caught it early, as he did the anarchic revelation of rock 'n' roll.

Michael Jackson's representatives called an unprecedented press conference at the star's insistence to announce that: 1) he has never had any surgery on his eyes or cheekbones; 2) he has never taken female hormones and 3) he eventually intends to get married and raise a family. To Michael: a "Laudable Intentions" Award.

Freddy Mercury, lead singer with Queen, looked very much at home in housewife drag but, responding to reports that he had come out, said: "If I tried that on, people would start yawning. 'Here's Freddy saying that he's gay because it is very trendy.' " Tell it to Michael, Freddy.

Eddie Murphy endeared himself to gay audiences with his marvelously unfunny routines about being "afraid of faggots" and not wanting his girlfriends to hang out with them because a little goodbye kiss could get AIDS on their lip and bring it home to him. Asked to apologize, Murphy refused, noting that there are a lot more people out there who are not gays than are, and *they* like those jokes. To Murphy, our "Jackass of the Year" Award.

Boy George takes the "Man of the Year" Award. He has been tough, witty, brazen and endearing: true to himself and his fans. Culture Club's recent video for "War Song" closes with George in a stunning black gown leading hundreds of children dressed in skeleton costumes through a London slum. The images present a devastating plea for peace, compassion and tolerance—not just saying it but showing it. That couldn't be more timely.

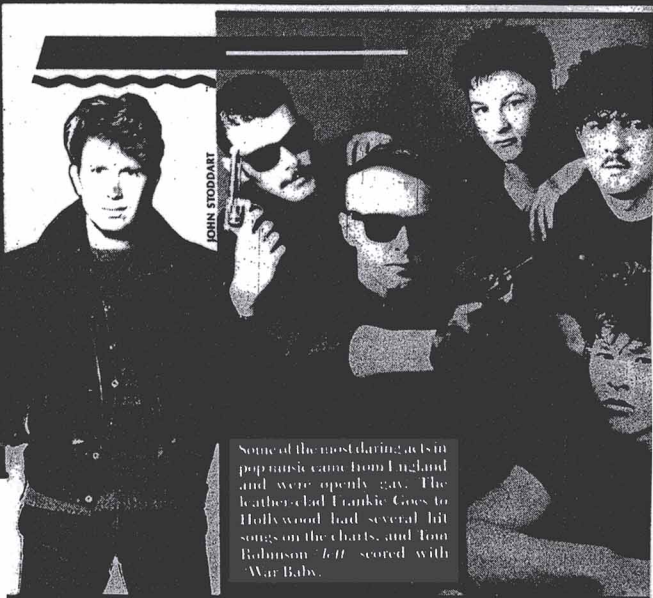
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Gender lines were crossed by such major stars as Elton John, Annie Lennox and Queen's Freddie Mercury (left). David Lasley (right), one of the year's brightest new talents.

Androgyny was a dominant pop theme this year. Here, Boy George takes a spot of tea with Grammy Awards cohost Joan Rivers.



Some of the most daring acts in pop music came from England and were openly gay. The leather-clad Frankie Goes to Hollywood had several hit songs on the charts, and Tom Robinson's LP scored with "War Baby."



Other top British groups with a gay message include The Smiths and the politically aware trio Bronski Beat (below).

Canadian folk singer Ferron (above) was the most potent voice in the women's music movement.