

# POP MUSIC

BY ADAM BLOCK

I spent January in Seattle and felt like I'd fallen into a musical time warp. All of the top gay dance clubs (Neighbors, the Brass Connection, the Monastery) played unrelenting old-fashioned disco: no funk, rap or hip-hop—not even MTV-certified dance hits like the Talking Heads' "Burning Down the House" or Big Country's "In a Big Country." Sylvester's *Hard Up* LP dominated playlists, and when the DJs wanted to get real radical they'd throw on catchy fluff like the Romantics' "Talking in Your Sleep" or Lionel Richie's stunning "All Night Long." The show-stopping anthem of choice was Gloria Gaynor's bombastic cover of *La Cage aux Folles*' "I Am What I Am," with its thunderous marching percussion straight out of Grace Jones' "I Need A Man"—a song which always made me think of a gay boot camp.

Of course, it's not just Seattle; a lot of DJs and patrons of the dance floor are stubborn keepers of the flame, holding the line against all manner of anarchic arrivals that threaten their diligent two-step. Their playlists also provide a bedrock of gay support crucial to certain hits. In its year-end "Dance/Disco" chart, *Billboard* named Sylvester the number-six artist, with only Michael Jackson and David Bowie outranking him as solo male vocalists. Silver Blue Records issued Gaynor's single, but after massive club response CBS signed on to distribute it as well as an upcoming LP, *I Am Gloria Gaynor*. Eartha Kitt, the gravel-voiced Cat Woman, has busted *Billboard*'s "Dance/Disco Top Ten" with, "Where Is My Man?" (Streetwise). As one new-music dance DJ confessed, "Now that's a gay cult record, and I love it for just that reason." He hadn't even heard Gaynor's record.

You'll hear Eartha in those Seattle clubs (bless them) but never Nina Hagen's "New York New York," an unhinged reinvention of rap with operatic flourishes that is topping playlists at Bay Area gay New Wave clubs. It may be that Seattle gays are just too wholesome and straightforward to need or want an unnerving eccentric like Hagen.

Don't let that keep the curious from tracking down Hagen's new LP, *Fearless* (Epic), her most accomplished and delightful to date, crafted with sly wit and full of adventure. Hagen can shift from a ferocious Grace Jones growl—spitting out "You give me a bisexual erection" on "My Sensation"—to the sweet yodeling lyricism of "The Change." The LP opens with, "New York New York" and closes with "Zorah," a wonder that commences with Hagen swathed in angelic choruses (doing her best Marlene Dietrich) before shifting into a delightfully demented techno-dub/hip-hop groove. Beyond Fassbinder.

"Karma Chameleon," by Culture Club was England's best-selling single for 1983. It is a current release in the U.S., climbing the charts right behind "Church of the Poisoned Mind" and the LP that includes both songs, *Colour by Numbers* (Epic). When I first heard "Karma," I could have sworn it was by Peter, Paul, and Mary—who really ought to add it to their set. Boy George gleefully labeled the tune "just a campfire song" and he is delightfully right. The rest

of the LP is flimsy, charming and undoubtedly destined to be radio-played to death. You could easily overlook *Labour of Love* (A&M) by UB 40, but don't do it. This disc yielded England's number-two hit for 1983; an incandescent version of Neil Diamond's "Red, Red, Wine." The LP finds this soulful, multiracial team paying tribute to their favorite reggae classics (from 1969-72), and most often making them their own. A find!

Cyndi Lauper's solo debut, *She's So Unusual* (Portrait), lives up to its title. Her voice has by turns the clarity of Emmylou Harris, the earned toughness of Marianne Faithfull, and the flirtatiousness-gone-wack of Betty Boop. Like she said—unusual, She has already scored an MTV hit with the camp and spunky "Girls Just Want To Have Fun," but the LP announces a range that also illuminates ballads ("Time After Time" and "All Through The Night") and brings fresh luster to worthy gems ("Money Changes Everything" by The Brains and Prince's "When You Were Mine").

Gay listeners may note the novel implications when Lauper sings Prince's lyrics to an ex-lover ("I know that you're going with another guy") and do a quick double take when she sings in "She Bop," "Well, I see them every night in tight blue jeans/In the pages of a Blueboy magazine." Now what sort of woman reads *Blueboy*?

It is about time to brace yourself for an unlikely pop event. Over in England some pop Svengalis have been preparing to shift gears: moving from gay as coy, as in cuddly Boy George, to gay as queer, as in the lissome, alluring male Marilyn and the two S/M gay lovers who are Frankie Goes To Hollywood. Marilyn's first single, "Calling Your Name," came out in England to lukewarm reviews and began scuttling up the Top 40. Marilyn gave an interview to the *New Musical Express* during which he asked the writer to fuck him, and the writer, Paul Morley, implied in print that he did. Morley, along with Yes and Buggles producer Trevor Horn, is a driving force behind ZTT Records, Frankie Goes' label. Their first single, "Relax," a bland piece of disco urging listeners to relax and get into backroom gay sex, has already sold a bogging 300,000 copies in the U.K. Both singles are due for U.S. release, undoubtedly with the artists in tow. I can't wait for Joan Rivers to get a crack at this lot.

For a slightly less ludicrous version of the gay scene in the U.K., you can do a good turn by sending \$12 to Gayn Records (89 Paulet Road, London SE5, England) and requesting a copy of *Coming Out—Ready or Not*, a charming LP of eleven acoustic performances by nine lesbians and gay men from a live benefit concert for London's Lesbian Line and Gay Switchboard. There are winning doses of wry wit and music hall comedy throughout and standout performances that include Mark Bunyan's arch "Is S/He One?," Carol Uszkurat's "What's It Like to Be a Dyke?," a savagely moving performance by Tom Robinson of last year's pop hit in the U.K., "War Baby," and a solid finale with his bleak anthem, "Sing if You're Glad to Be Gay." This is a record that you won't find on MTV or at any New Wave club or disco. Sometimes a fan has to reach for his checkbook.