

POP MUSIC

BY ADAM BLOCK

Eddie Murphy sure stirred up some shit. Still, he is hardly the first black artist to offend gay fans. **Richard Pryor** did it back in 1976 at the No On Proposition 6 Benefit at the Hollywood Bowl, he wiggled out and told the crowd that they hadn't done shit for black people and could kiss his rich black ass.

Donna Summer enraged gay fans last year with both her suggestion that AIDS might be some divine retribution and her inspired ad lib that "it was Adam and Eve, not Adam and Steve." Then there were those calls for gay clubs to boycott **Grandmaster Flash's** rap hit, "The Message," because of its references to being "an undercover fag." (In the song's video, this line is accompanied by a showing of limp wrists.) The rub here is that these artists have all enjoyed strong gay followings. Many gays feel a special affinity for black performers and expect them to be sensitive to prejudice and supportive of gays. Of course, it is never that simple. Try to imagine the tables being turned by a gay comic with a racist rap.

Pryor's recent riff on AIDS was at least a bit more responsible than Murphy's. Pryor observed, "People be afraid of getting AIDS, think it's going to jump out and get them in the park. Well, that ain't how you get AIDS. How you get AIDS is by being fucked up the butt. You got AIDS. Don't tell me you got it off some park bench." The crack was at least partly true, and after all the clinical discussions of "passive anal penetration," his candor was refreshing.

Murphy's recent bonehead cracks about AIDS deserved to be challenged, but it is worth remembering that in that same performance Murphy offered gay renditions of Mr. T and of the two male leads in *The Honeymooners*, which were subversive and hilarious. The comedian followed with friendly and astonishing impersonations of Michael Jackson, Stevie Wonder, Elvis Presley, James Brown and Teddy Pendergrass.

I don't favor a boycott of Murphy, but I think he is right to be worried on one account: Gays may not want his body, but we're gonna watch his ass.

1984 has already racked up its fair share of cracked pop milestones. In January **Dennis Wilson**, pretty-boy drummer with the Beach Boys (and the only one who could actually surf) drowned in 10 feet of water. Ironic, sure, but no one declared it the end of an era. Musically the loss was negligible. The band delayed its opening in Tahoe for two days. **Jackie Wilson**, one of the most soulful voices in pop, bought the farm, but he had been a vegetable since entering a coma in 1975. His best work, from "Reet Petite" to "Your Love Keeps Lifting Me Higher," is collected on *The Jackie Wilson Story* (Epic), and much of it is still ripe with promise and glory. In reporting **Ethel Merman's** death no one mentioned her last (1979) release: the delightfully unlikely *Ethel Merman Disco Album* which featured "There's No Business Like Show Business"

and "Something for the Boys." Somehow I have the feeling that if it weren't for gays that album would never have been recorded. I wonder if Ethel thought that.

On Valentine's Day **Elton John** pulled a Steven Carrington and married a young German recording engineer in Australia. The newspapers reported that when the announcement reached England his incredulous friends said that there *had* to be a mistake.

After a slew of deaths, a dose of dauntless continuity: I recently went to the Stud in San Francisco to see Etta James, who, after 30 years in the business, is still flat-out one of the greatest blues/soul vocalists on the planet. That night, she sang Hank Williams and Dinah Washington, blinding renditions of her classic ballads "At Last" and "I'd Rather Go Blind," and a full-throttle strut through the tune an adoring Janis Joplin used to cover, "Tell Mama." The bitch of it for fans is that James' catalogue is a mess. The disc that does her the most justice is still *Peaches* (Chess), released in 1971, which is nearly criminal.

Between sets the DJ slipped on **Tina Turner's** "Let's Stay Together" (Capitol), Turner soaring into Chaka Khan's territory, climbing Al Green's lyrics like a panther, set against a sparse, wide-screen arrangement fashioned by **Marlin Ware** of Britain's **Heaven 17**. The soul legend had gone and teamed up with one of the limey techno-pop whiz kids for what could easily be one of the biggest hits of her career, proving that the English still have the ears for American black music. After all, it was the Rolling Stones who took Etta James out on tour with them in 1978.

The DJ followed James' set with "The Middle of the Road" from the **Pretenders** new disc, *Learning to Crawl* (Warner Bros.). After a year which saw the drug deaths of two members of her original band and the birth of her first child (by Ray Davies) **Chrissie Hynde** sang "I'm not the kind I used to be. / I've got a kid. I'm 33," with tough, controlled grandeur—the bad girl of rock growing up. This is an album about loss, hope and continuity delivered with the pleasure of insights earned. It's a vision of that unlikely beast, mature rock 'n' roll without Bob Seeger's gut full of whiskey. Fine nostalgia. It is true that the four strongest cuts were out before the LP and that a couple don't click, but it speaks boldly to rock at 30 and its denizens. Near closing at the Stud, and the DJ spins a new rap record out of the hip-hop explosion that has seen ghetto break-dancers performing for Ron and Nancy. I gazed across this gay bar at the delighted dancers and caught a snatch of the demanding lyrics: "If you're afraid to tell the truth, why, you don't even deserve freedom." The cut was "No Sell Out," (Tommy Boy), and the voice belonged to Malcolm X.

Yeah, for a minute I did think of Eddie Murphy, and of Etta James, and of a friend tatooing the floor with his left foot beside me. I felt grateful.