

ONLY MAKE-BELIEVE: POP PROFILES

POP MUSIC

The Grammy Awards do not celebrate the radical edge of pop music or culture. Critics' faves R.E.M., X, Prince, New Order, King Sunny Ade, U2, Malcolm McLaren, Afrika Bambaataa and Los Lobos never got a mention at the February fete, but what did was almost as surprising.

There was Michael Jackson, a model of androgynous arrested development so radical that Freud (and most of the crowd) would probably lay money that he is sweet on boys, prominently posed in a preposterous version of a nuclear family: flanked by Brooke Shields and black child actor Emmanuel Lewis.

There was begowned Boy George bantering with dish-queen Joan Rivers, who cracked, "You look like Brooke Shields on steroids." Annie Lennox of the Eurythmics performed "Sweet Dreams" in an inspired Elvis Presley drag that put Lily Tomlin's soul-singer impersonation to shame.

The show-stopping Act 1 finale to *La Cage aux Folles* was performed in full: a middle-aged drag queen refusing to play it straight, bellowing, "It's one life and there's no return and no deposit. One life: So it's time to open up your closet."

Never before have the Grammys been so shot through with the trappings and implications of homosexuality. As author Armistead Maupin guffawed, "Just astonishing: Everyone is cross-dressing, and there's not a queer in sight." We are still the invisible pop phenomenon.

The irony of all this is that often the most outlandish camp performers are not gay. If cross-dressing toys with homophobia, it is a coy flirtation. When unquestionably nongay performers dress up in versions of drag, they make cross-dressing no longer an emblem of homosexuality but a ploy adopted by heterosexuals, disarming its radical implications.

In this issue *The ADVOCATE* talks with some prime movers in androgynous pop. From England, Boy George checks in: the cuddly phenomenon, all cheeky, gay and delightful. Marilyn, Boy George's former housemate—touted as the lad who would eroticize Boy George's safe flirt—has yet to assault the United States. With one reasonable hit in England, he is weighing the liabilities and assets of being openly gay in pop music. Specimen, decked out like transvestite ghouls, pushes Billy Idol's gothic bad-boy act a step further. From Alice Cooper to Motley Crue, such dress-up outrage has been a staple of teen-rock, but the members of Specimen claim they're no heavy-metal poseurs, but self-made savages bent on bringing humor and sex back to a cool and harmless pop scene. Is that gay? Are they? Pose the same questions to heavy-metal heroes Motley Crue and consider the people and impulses behind the poses.

In 1984, all of this gender-fuck theatricality is ironically distant from current gay styles, which are increasingly crisp, conservative and flamboyant only in their restraint. Vince Aletti, openly gay rock critic, later a disco A&R man, and currently soul and dance music buyer for Tower Records in New York, provides some perspective on the role of discos and gays in the current explosion of dance music. If gays could once claim disco as their own, what could they claim today? It is a question implicit in these interviews. In an upcoming series we hope to bring you interviews with Frankie Goes to Hollywood, the British group, headed by two openly gay lovers who are into the leather scene, which has a surprise smash hit with its debut single, "Relax"; with Tom Robinson, an artist who found that being "out" was very temporarily fashionable and whose soon-to-be-released LP will follow "War Baby," a Top-10 single in the United Kingdom last year; and with other artists plunging into radio and video. If you have any suggestions, please let us know. Our culture is what we make it.

—Adam Block

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BY ADAM BLOCK

"K.C., the King of Disco, is staging a comeback," insists a recent column in the *Los Angeles Times*. Good lord, can it be? Is it time to haul out the silver whistles, the tambourines and the aml again? Well, not quite yet. K.C. wrote deathless standards like 1974's "Don't Rock the Boat" for George McRae and his own "That's the Way (Uh-Huh) I like It" and "Get Down Tonight." His latest "Give It Up," from KC Ten (MECA) is a fine Caribbean stomper and a Top 20 pop hit, but not a cherished dance-floor find.

The resurgence of disco is simply the return of some old faces amid a flood of dance music, former hit-makers coexisting with the upstarts who replaced them. Vicky Sue ("Turn the Beat Around") Robinson is charting with the crisp "Everlasting Love" (Profile), and Gloria ("Never Can Say Goodbye") Gaynor is belting the techno-polka "Strive" (Silver Blue). Giorgio Moroder, who invented Donna Summer, does effective if unconvincing work with Irene Cara on "Breakdance" (Geffen), and Jacques Morali, the mastermind behind the Village People, is trying to get current with "Street Dance" by Break Machine (Sire). The ditty combines Isaac Hayes-type chops with whistling lifted from a Spaghetti Western; it has already cracked the Top 10 in England.

Six years ago *Saturday Night Fever* brought disco out of the gay and black clubs and into the mainstream. Choking on overexposure, racist backlash and its own insular formulas, disco went down for the count. But if rock videos were the story of '83, the less-celebrated story was the boom in dance music. The surprise movie blockbusters, *Flashdance* and now *Footloose*, are the mainstream side of that story. The promotional videos for the films' title songs were better than the movies themselves.

Footloose (Columbia) is a brilliant, nervy piece of marketing. It's not just a terrific video for a terrible movie (yeah, much worse than *Flashdance*); it's also a movie written by Dean Pitchford, whose previous credits include the lyrics for "Fame" and "You Should Hear How She Talks About You." Pitchford was clever enough to write words for an LP's worth of songs for his film and follow-up record and then hire musicians to score and sing them. The record is not an unmitigated disaster, largely creditable to two tunes—Denise Williams' buoyant, seductive "Let's Hear It for the Boy" and Shalamar's taut, sexy "Dancing in the Streets." Buy them. Watch the video. Skip the LP and the movie.

It's appropriate that the two cuts that triumph over the concept are by black singers, because the less obvious side of the creative boom in dance music has gotten its pulse from the heart of the ghetto: rap and its electronic stepchild, hip-hop. The scene erupted out of street culture in New York's South Bronx, purveying a mix of rap, graffiti and break dancing. Crossover hits by Grandmaster Flash ("The Message" and "White Lines"), and Afrika Bambaataa ("Planet Rock") helped pave the way. Bam-

baataa's latest, "Renegades of Funk" (Tommy Boy)—a Marvel Comics rap rampage for black pride laid over rhythm tracks from Herbie Hancock's "Rockit"—is a bristling delight, ripe with wicked humor and demented energy.

Now that break dancers have performed at Lincoln Center, be-bop drummer Max Roach has played at a New York art loft with the New York City Breakers, and Harry Belafonte is shooting a major film on the scene, the age of innocence is over.

Wild Style (JEM) is the soundtrack to a low-budget hip-hop movie which catches the raw improvisation of the scene. It's a far cry from *Footloose*, which was never innocent. The LP is hardly a sampler of the best of the genre, just a rough, exuberant document of a turf where rhythm and boast rule.

Rap has already attracted its share of unlikely talents. Mel Brooks was hilarious on "The King," though his current follow-up, a Hitler rap titled "To Be or Not to Be" (Antilles), wears thin quickly—hardly in a class with his classic "Springtime for Hitler." Rodney Dangerfield with his "Rappin' Rodney" on Atlantic and Malcolm X ("No Sell Out" on Sugarhill) have each strutted their stuff. I only regret that they can't get them both together for a "toast-ing" rap.

The effects pioneered by rap DJ's (breaks, flashing, scratching and adding "beat-box" rhythms) have been run on nearly every recent dance hit that has a 12"-remix version. For a white-bread techno-brat's response, check out "Hyperactive" (Capitol) by Thomas Dolby. It sounds like The Police sped up to 45 r.p.m. and remixed by Grandmaster Flash, except that Dolby recreates all the DJ effects with percussion, synthesizers and digital echo. Flip the 12-inch over for "Get Out of My Mix," a boogling cataclysm with Dolby trying desperately to banish snatches of his hit, "She Blinded Me with Science," from a menagerie of special effects. His LP, *The Flat Earth*, is by contrast largely delicate and atmospheric. Perverse boy, that Dolby.

"All we need is a drummer for people who only need a beat," Sly Stone used to insist, but the techno-minimalists in Beat Box have pared it down to a rhythm machine for Art of Noise (Island), a surprise hit from the men who signed and produced Frankie Goes to Hollywood. Count on two Brits to take the rhythm out of the ghetto and present it coldly—an argument for creeping autism. Another strange minimalist wonder comes from Dominatrix on Streetwise. "The Dominatrix Sleeps Tonight" features a cool chant of "the women beat the men, the men beat the drum" to beat-box and cracking whip accompaniment.

For the most lush and lyrical arrival since the Eurythmics, try Simple Minds' new LP, *Sparkle in the Rain* (A&M), and the group's dance hits "Speed Your Love" and "Waterfall." Finally, for a gay disco novelty, track down Barbara Mason's "Another Man Is Loving Mine" (you read it right). For this one you can even crack out the aml and the tambourine.