

SPECIMEN REMAKE, REMODEL: BOWIE'S CHILDREN



COURTESY SIRE RECORDS

Not many bands could rise to prominence by opening their own once-weekly club and inviting the bloke who climbed into the queen's bedchamber to come up and perform "God Save the Queen" with a group called The Bollocks Brothers, but Specimen isn't your standard pop outfit. Sporting punk/gothic-horror drag (equal parts *Rocky Horror*, *Road Warrior* and *Dawn of the Dead*), they marry ghoulish camp to a slashing, stop-and-go musical attack, managing to be cheeky, sexy and shocking.

Like a perverse version of those Judy Garland/Mickey Rooney musicals, they hit London in 1982, setting up shop in a strip club that they christened The Bat Cave. In 1983 they moved to a notorious gay bar, and by March 1984 they were giving MTV a nationally telecast tour of the established Wednesday-night event. At the same time their music was threatening to break out of obscurity. Their debut LP, *Batastrophe* (Sire Records), showed up at #5 on the influential *Darice Music Chart* of the Western Association of Rock D.J.s.

The five-man group is a crew of mischievous troublemakers. Though much of their inspiration dates back to the glam-and-glitter era of Bowie's Ziggy Stardust, most of them were too young to participate at the time. They're making up for that now. They have countered the cool pop of Britain's Blitz scene with a ferocious, sexy assault and have leavened punk's self-serious outrages with flirtatious humor. En route they have picked up a following who occasionally manage to outdress the band, and they have welcomed younger bands and unlikely entertainments into their club.

I met with the group's songwriters,

guitarist John Klein, 23, who also does the group's graphics, and lead singer Ollie Wisdom, 25, in a San Francisco hotel room. A rubber-harness "bat costume," which a fan had brought Ollie was draped over a bed where the singer lounged in fishnet stockings, black knee-length boots and a fake-zebra leopard. Ollie patiently applied black eye liner, violet blush and layers of blue black lipstick as we talked. John smiled attentively from the facing bed, a swatch of orange hair jutting from under a Dutch Beate cap. He hadn't got into his make-up or costume yet, and described his ratty, black velvet pants as "my jet-lag attire."

Across the street, the band's entourage was draping the I-Beam with torn netting, murals of melted rubber and ripped cloth, and shards of black crepe: bringing a bit of The Bat Cave out on the road.

How gay is The Bat Cave scene?

Ollie: It's not a gay scene, but anything can go on and consequently does. It's just one of the things that are there.

How many members of Specimen would consider themselves gay?

Ollie: I don't think anyone would. I don't think anyone would consider themselves straight, though.

But you flirt with that, don't you?

Ollie: We flirt with it, but it's not directed at a gay scene. We flirt with the crowd, with people.

John: It's very hard to see an audience as half-male and half-female. It's not a ploy. A lot of bands in the last few years have been very cold and sexless, which is rather odd because they came from the Blitz scene, that era. Blitz was ultimately a fashion scene, a fate that we try to avoid.

Didn't this whole notion of camping and dressing up begin with gays?

John: I honestly never really thought about it. At The Bat Cave we have no dress policy. We get a very mixed crowd, but you can't tell someone's sexuality by looking at them. I think that is positive and has to do with subversion. Rock 'n' roll has always been very macho, which I find a bit funny. That act always seemed to grow out of a sense of inadequacy—like, what the hell has this guy got to prove? There are a lot of bands like that, and it just makes what they do, for me, absolutely meaningless.

We have mad drag shows, and the gay input is very creative. Just by coming to terms with the fact that they are gay, gays alienate themselves from society, and a lot like being loud and dressing up. There has been a lot of influence on the scene from the camp side—from the drags who come. It's accepted, but it's not really important. For us, people are important as individuals, not as gay or straight.

Your band has been very sexually ambivalent.

Ollie: Well, there is male and female in everyone.

But there is a difference between playing at being gay and actually being gay for life.

John: This is really one to think about, because it is one question that we obviously have to answer very much as individuals. I don't know how much my thoughts on gender are tied up with aesthetics. Bowie's thing certainly was. Whether or not Bowie was, or is, gay becomes almost immaterial. He was a self-confessed alter ego on-stage, and that persona was obviously an attack on gross inadequacies that he saw in society. I think that ultimately had as much importance as the question of authenticity.

Do you have gay groupies?

Yes, Christ yes.

How does it strike you when they appear?

Ollie: Strange.

John: Yeah, it is odd. We've seen more in the States, and it was the first time that it really struck me: What sort of picture does Specimen create in other people's minds?

Does it surprise you to be taken for gay?

Ollie: A lot of that is theatrical. You've got to look beneath the surface before you make any rash decisions. I don't think that it is obvious one way or the other.

John: I suppose that in an ultimately

utopian situation you transcend the need to even think like that. It reminds me of the movie *Liquid Sky*, when the heroine says, "I don't choose my friends for the shape of their genitals." I thought: spot on!

Have Soft Cell and Boy George opened things up in England? Are people more relaxed and open now about being gay in pop?

Ollie: Soft Cell paved the way for Boy George—all that make-up and gay stuff, but mums and dads were saying, "Yes, but he's a nice boy really."

John: It is still hard to judge the effect that Boy George is going to have, particularly in the States. I'll be very intrigued to see.

Glam and glitter never made it in the States when Bowie went into it. Can they now?

Ollie: Then it was far more outrageous for men to wear lipstick than it is now. So it was not on. Simple as that. People have been exposed to a lot in the last 10 years, and now they've got MTV to actually ram it down their throats. I think now it's really, really ripe.

Do you find that the outrage that you attract is a lot like homophobia?

Ollie: Yeah, we were playing at the Lyceum with the Meaties, this psycho-billy band, but really they're just a bunch of bricklayers, and we found ourselves facing these huge Cro-Magnons, sort of quiff-a-billy types, growling, "I hate fuckin' poofers." We ended up defending the stage.

Do you think it is ironic to be getting all this flak from fag-bashers when not one member of the band is gay?

John: No, because we don't credit fag-bashers with an awful lot of intelligence. Stupid people strike out at anything that they don't understand.

Ollie: We want to knock down the myths that say that you've got to be a certain way to be successful. I think that successful pop music today, on the whole, is very, very bland and inoffensive. That's one thing we aren't willing to be.

Later that night, when Specimen took the I-Beam stage, I thought of the irony of a band that says none of its members consider themselves gay, though they don't want to be considered straight, either. John had said, "We're not going to say that none of the members of this band are gay, because you don't always know, do you?" Ollie was vamping like a champion, swiveling his hips and flashing two-inch metallic-blue eyelashes, raging with the band through their signature hit, "Kiss Kiss, Bang Bang." The floor was crowded with bedecked admirers, but a fair contingent was still lurking at the bar.

"Come on over, loves," Ollie cooed. "What's the matter, are we threatening your masculinity?"

It wasn't hard to guess that he kind of hoped so.

—A.B.

"We don't credit fag-bashers with an awful lot of intelligence. Stupid people strike out at anything that they don't understand."