

D'AGOSTINO



Can we talk? Boy George tries to keep the peace among the motley new crew of openly gay pop stars in the U.K.

## 'GENDER WARS' RAGE IN ENGLAND

BY ADAM BLOCK

England is weird. Recently the pop and gutter press have been boosting what they gleefully label "the gender-bender wars," egging on the recent crop of androgynous and gay pop stars in public bitch fights. The stories reflect a recent explosion of openly gay pop performers and that is unprecedented. Check it out.

A year ago there was **Boy George** (see *Issue 392*), disarming the planet with his cheeky, cuddly androgyny, while **Soft Cell** stood mired in their willfully seedy glamour act, and modest **Tom Robinson** (see *Issue 397*), was back on the hootenanny circuit. Since then, five acts (all marketing homosexuality as part of their work) have scaled the British charts, though they haven't been quick to embrace one another.

**Marilyn** was first off the mark. Where Boy George affects a nearly asexual camp, Marilyn countered with a haughty Dietrich vamp, but limited vocal skills, making him a media object with novelty appeal; only the Australians seemed to actually adore his first single. His latest, "You Don't Love Me" (Love), is out in England. An LP with U.S. release is promised. The press made much of supposed rivalry with former housemate Boy George: Marilyn was accused of selling old photos of the lad out of drag, but lately the two have been acting cordial.

**Frankie Goes to Hollywood** hit the press last fall, draped in leather, the two leaders openly announcing that they were lovers into the S/M scene. They made a ludicrously sleazy video to accompany their catchy first single, "Relax," which showed a fat old man, naked in a G-string, playing emperor to a team of leather boys who play at water sports with a lost young lad who stumbles into their lair. The video was banned in England, and the single (after reaching No. 1 in the U.K.) was banned by the BBC.

When Boy George criticized their video as

"cheap, disgusting and very childish," Frankie's **Paul Rutherford** told a reporter, "Boy George—the guy's an idiot if overt things freak him out. How can he say that when he's got bloody eye-makeup on." Yet the band had already decided to trade in the leather drag for Russian military gear for their second single, the anti-war rant, "Two Tribes."

Next, out of left field, came **The Smiths**—no leather or makeup, but their lead singer, **Morrissey** (who credits Oscar Wilde and James Dean as his twin inspirations), offered telling lyrics: "I lost my faith in womanhood," "please stay with your own kind / and I'll stay with mine" and "meet me at the fountain / Shove me on the piano / I'll take it slowly." The Smiths did no videos, decked themselves in no naughty drag, and have generally disdained the bitchy fray, claiming their aim is not to bend, but transcend gender. Morrissey admits that he is gay, claims that he is celibate, and calls himself a prophet for "the fourth gender," noting, "I don't know anybody who is absolutely, exclusively heterosexual." After three hit-singles, the group's LP entered the English charts at No. 2, Morrissey confessing, "For a lot of people, we're the event of the decade. We feel it would be a tragic waste not to buy our albums."

The fourth act in the sweeps, **Dead or Alive**, is fronted by **Pete Burns**. With a recent U.K. hit, the outrageous dresser performed on British TV in a jockstrap, gauntlets, and a ripped rubber T-shirt, camping like some cartoonish/disco deviant. His LP, *Sophisticated Boom Boom* (Epic), and a new single—a beat-box remake of KC & the Sunshine Band's "That's the Way (Uh-Huh, Uh-Huh) I Like It"—are just hitting these shores.

Burns, who is married, has delighted in telling the press that his favorite fantasies would be "sucking on Muhammad Ali's knob" and in savaging Boy George—playing street-tough bad boy to the charming competition. "I got a message from Boy George saying let's be friends," Burns told the *New Musical Express*. "I said fuck off, I don't speak to men in dresses..."

The latest act out the gate is **Bronski**

**Beat**, a trio of nerdy-looking lads (ages 22, 23 and 24), two of them from Scotland. They aren't arty inverters like The Smiths. They don't dress up like Boy, Marilyn, Frankie or Pete. What the members of Bronski Beat offer is the sensitive wounded voice of provincial gay youth. Lead singer **Jimi Sommerville** has a falsetto that sounds like Sylvester imitating Annie Lennox, which they set against music that sounds like tepid Soft Cell. Their debut single, "Small Town Boy" (Different Fruit/London), is a poignant tale of a misfit's escape from fag bashers and family. After only seven live gigs, the three are British pop-press cover boys.

Lead singer Sommerville complains that Marilyn and Frankie's outrages simply exploit gay sleaze for its shock value: "It's so boring, so played out. There's no creativity." He grants Boy George no marks for breaking down stereotypes, insisting, "He's just in a position where as a big star he's allowed to be eccentric."

Midst all the flying fur, Boy George recently wrote Britain's *NME* to answer his critics and propose a truce:

"We all try so hard to be individual yet we resent any other form of individualism. . . . If you think that Boy George is the acceptable face of eccentricity, go tell it to the skinhead who wanted to break my nose in the Taj Mahal Indian takeout in Edgware Road last week. Fame brings mass attention, but how many he-men who sit down to watch *Top of the Pops* on Thursday would love to stomp on our heads? I can assure you that there are plenty, and that's what we should be fighting, not each other."

Boy George can talk. He has taken his show on the road (and off the stage). None of these other worthies have even played the United States yet. Are they part of a trend that will click over here? Will they inspire a homegrown team of forthright sexual commandos? Or is this just Britain's latest titillating fad, this month's flash-in-the-pan red herring? Novelty wears thin in a hurry. Just ask the Village People.

Outrage acts with big mass appeal generally win the teen audience, the heavy-metal terrors. In explaining the appeal of heavy metal to a *San Francisco Examiner* reporter, Pam Smith, who runs San Francisco's leading heavy-metal record store, gave a solid clue to the kind of resistance a gay act would face in that scene:

"Heavy metal is a form of teenage rebellion. It's attracted the same age group of boys since the late '60s and probably always will as long as it's around. Boys at that age are basically afraid of women and have had no real sexual experience. By fantasizing dominance over women, they can play at being macho, which somehow puts to rest whatever inner fears they may have about being gay."

After heavy metal, the most adventurous of these creatures generally turn their ears to New Wave, which is where they stand to encounter this more androgynous lot, who in another way at least suggest the promise of disarming those fears of being gay.

If gay pride is successfully elbowing its way into British pop just now, it may pre-empt more than something weird, but something wonderful to boot. Stay tuned. ●