

POP MUSIC

ROCK GOSPEL ACCORDING TO CHAIRMAN MARSH; ELVIS' FEMALE TROUBLE

By Adam Block

In May 1985, a year after he'd begun publishing his populist/gadfly newsletter *Rock & Roll Confidential*, noted music writer **Dave Marsh** was fired from his staff position on *Record* magazine by publisher Jann Wenner. Marsh had written a column in *Record* that called on Michael Jackson to live up to his responsibility to his audience. Calling artists and the industry to task subsequently became a regular feature of *RRC*.

The *First Rock & Roll Confidential Report: Inside the Real World of Rock & Roll* (Pantheon, paperback, \$10.95) anthologizes and expands on the first issues of Marsh's newsletter, penned by the self-appointed conscience of rock along with four coeditors and 19 contributing writers, all committed to the notion that the music has meaning and power. That makes for some fascinating reading.

By Marsh's credo, "rock & roll exposed all manner of previously hidden night life... weirdos and wildmen who weren't supposed to exist in America.... In 'normal' America blacks, Southerners, poor people, Latins without suavity, homosexuals, raving Pentecostals — children of all ages — were supposed to shut up and take it.... Rock & roll was produced by people who refused to shut up and disappear.... By making the invisible at least momentarily visible, rock counts. By focusing attention on the facts of disgruntlement and disadvantage... rock makes a difference." (Polite applause.)

The book celebrates rock music as a living force through essays on the industry, radio, presidential and local politics, stars, genres, MTV, corporate sponsorship, and copious discussions of popular music and populist politics. One telling critique slams **Olivia Records'** "antimale drivell.... [that] appeals to only a handful of social hermits," while defending **Madonna** as "more radical than Cyndi Lauper. She argues that girls not only want to have fun, but that girls — like everybody else — want to *have*." *RRC's* passion is for music that doesn't "avoid the turbulent waters of the mainstream, where all societal problems are solved." Of course those "solutions" often originate far from the mainstream, which makes for some fairly convoluted arguments.

Essays that reclaim the contributions of gospel, country, Latin rock or rap, and point the listener towards old and new



Jessica Lange as Patsy Cline; a taboo-breaking Elvis Presley

grooves, are terrific, as are the hundreds of pithy reviews of records, books and films. The industry exposés are often astute and fascinating. When the cadre start announcing that this is the "RRC Era" though, I get visions of five-year plans and wonder in which issue they plan to declare Comrade Marsh's moral infallibility. And I notice that gay issues get disturbingly scant attention — at least partly because of Marsh's nearly Anglophobic boosting of American acts.

Frankie Goes to Hollywood is dismissed (with some justice) for "selling gay sex as a bargain" in the face of Britain's desperate labor crisis. The same certainly can't be said of **Bronski Beat**, yet they get mentioned only in gay critic Vince Aletti's list of essential 12" discs. The recommendation for **Culture Club's** *Colour by Numbers* reads, "Forget what he looks like. The guy sings with heart — and that's a rare commodity in these times." OK guys, I'll keep my eyes shut till he stops dressing like a weirdo.

You'll find no mention of **Tom Robinson** or **David Lasley** here, and despite extensive discussions of racism and sexism, hardly a nod to the subject of homophobia in rock. Have we too effectively entered the mainstream to be considered disgruntled outsiders, or are we too scary to stand a chance at commercial success without self-parody or deceit? Stay tuned.

Any homo who identifies with powerful female vocalists and loves white-trash

bitch fights has a treat in store with *Sweet Dreams*, director Karel Reisz's new film on singer **Patsy Cline**, which stars Jessica Lange. The dialogue is so wicked that I swear they could have cast Divine as Patsy, Edith Massey in Ann Wedgeworth's role as her mother, and Tab Hunter in Ed Harris' part as her husband, and let John Waters direct, without changing a word of the script.

All of Cline's songs are dubbed directly from her original recordings, which was a wise decision, because although Lange turns in a stunning performance, Cline's vocals are awesome: tough and poignant, skeptical and sexy — unparalleled in country music. The film, which follows her career only from 1959 to her early death in 1963, features most of her classics, which are available on a *Greatest Hits* LP from MCA. A just-released LP, *Patsy Cline: Today, Tomorrow, Forever* (MCA), of recordings from 1955 to '59, confirms that Patsy found her audience when she deserved it. This film ought to introduce a new one to her.

If your vision of **Gladys Presley**, like mine, has been the ambulatory sack of cellulite moaning like a seal with hemorrhoids that Shelly Winters portrayed in the TV movie *Elvis*, Elaine Dundy's new biography, *Elvis and Gladys* (Dutton, hardcover, \$18.95), may go a long way towards making sense of what Dundy calls "Elvis' most important relationship." Dundy has written a "herstory," tracing back Gladys' side of the family and doing justice to Elvis' female relatives. Though the research outstrips the writing, there is much that is fresh here, from the news that Elvis' maternal grandmother was Jewish, to an astonishing and well-documented discussion of an ornate plot, allegedly hatched by Elvis' manager, Col. Parker. This scheme allowed him to degrade and control Elvis for the duration of his career, justifying Gladys' mounting dread and explaining the physical deterioration that came with her son's explosive success.

If that is the bizarre part, Dundy's explanation of Elvis' power is equally fascinating. After suggesting that like certain singers (Judy Garland, Edith Piaf) Elvis' singing evokes a religious experience, she notes, "What upset grown-ups of both sexes about Elvis' performance was that he had broken the greatest taboo of all. He used his body as rhythmically and erotically and seductively as a woman. It was not only repulsive and offensive — it was nauseating — the word used most. It was an attack on male dignity."

"The kids, however, not yet grown into the stereotypes of gender, saw in him an exhilarating physical freedom."

Take a memo on *that* to Boy George and Dave Marsh.