

POP MUSIC

HIDDEN MESSAGES

By Adam Block

As I write, the #1 pop single in the country is a little ditty called "Money for Nothing," by **Dire Straits**. If you have only heard it on the radio, you have probably missed the second verse, which runs:

See the little faggot with the earring
and the makeup.

Yeah buddy, that's his own hair.
That little faggot's got his own jet
airplane.

That little faggot is a millionaire.

The singer, **Mark Knopfler**, is impersonating some blue-collar workers he heard savaging the musicians they were watching on MTV. In the song's video, that scenario is clear, but casual listeners could be forgiven for hearing the lyrics as Knopfler's own indictment of the painted posers on music videos.

The editor of *Gay News* in England attacked the song. Knopfler, stung, protested that "the same thing happened with 'Short People.' Some people didn't see it was attacking stupid bigotry." Knopfler expressed astonishment that his intentions could be misread, but he did cut the verse from the radio version. Further, he drops it in performance. Might be a touch disconcerting to have yahoos cheering the epithet live.

The verse remains on the video, and I'm not convinced that the slur comes off as the object of satire. Is Knopfler's intent to put down the laborers, busting their butts for a fraction of what the video stars make? Is he attacking MTV for making hard-working artists look like fashion objects? Or is he voicing the bitterness and homophobia that many folks feel towards the likes of Boy George?

Knopfler has said that the LP the song is on "explores ideas about brotherhood, machismo and soldiering. These issues are worth addressing because there's such a potential for evil and destruction in all of us." Here, here, but homos are still easy targets, and I'll wager that if the epithet were "nigger," instead of "faggot," it wouldn't have made the video, or even the LP.

The whole issue of the ways that blacks and gays, as outsiders, have defined themselves through popular music invites some interesting speculations from critic **Grover Sales** in his essay, "Why is Jazz NOT Gay Music?" from the newsletter *Jazzletter*. In his lengthy, thoughtful piece, Sales asks why the jazz scene, so tolerant of deviance, boasts almost no openly gay artists — aside from a few "larger than life" female vocalists — and apparently few gay fans. These are

fascinating questions that unfortunately lead Sales to some rather myopic and malodorous theories.

Sales suggests that "Jazz is screwing music... (and that) guilt and inhibitions may have prevented covert gays (I thought we were talking about the overt ones) from enjoying their bodies, and their bodies' most potent musical stimulant." Huh? And what was disco, pray tell? Not body music?

Sales seems to suggest that one's taste might determine sexuality, that a career



Misread verse: Dire Straits' Mark Knopfler

in dance might have turned lads gay. He notes that "they might have veered into what used to be called deviance because their love of music and dance put them beyond the pale of go-getting America." So what happened to Dave Kopay and Leonard Matlovitch?

This backwards logic reaches a crescendo when Sales rejects the notion that the jazz scene is simply more welcoming and validating to heteros. No, it seems there is something in the music that gays can't appreciate. "The jazz fan goes for women," Sales claims, "not in imitation of his idols but in response to a heterosexual emotional structure that attracts both players and listeners as an expression in sound of male assertion." Unlike Bruce Springsteen or Prince, I suppose.

Sales goes on to claim that the death of the Broadway musical was caused by a dominant gay sensibility that the 90% hetero audience is no longer buying. Then why was *La Cage aux Folles* a smash and the Beach Boys musical a disaster?

Sales is not dead wrong in his essay, and he raises many intriguing questions, but his implicit argument — that jazz is simply too virile for gays — reflects narrow stereotypes that I had hoped were history. He asks for reactions to his essay, and interested readers — certainly any jazz fans — are encouraged to offer it. (For a copy of his essay, send \$1 and SASE

to: *Jazzletter*, P.O. Box 240, Ojai, CA 93023.)

In passing, Sales notes that he wasn't able to find any gay country artists either. Well, he certainly shouldn't have much trouble finding gay country music fans, or even gay C&W bars where men in full cowboy drag do ferocious rounds of the Texas Two-Step. I checked out a jam-packed specimen in Dallas last year during the Republican convention.

My friend Danny once confessed that seeing **Willie Nelson** had convinced him that he could nurture a jones for a man over 50. Well, Mr. Prolific, who would probably sing with Tiny Tim if asked, has a new LP out, aptly titled *Half Nelson* (CBS), and it's all duets. The good news is that they are mostly terrific. Standouts include pairings with **Merle Haggard**, **George Jones**, **Ray Charles**, **Neil Young**, **Lacy J. Dalton**, and a stunning, post-humous coupling with **Hank Williams**. Even the dead aren't safe.

The **Roches** are very much alive, and with *Another World* (Warner Bros.), the three sisters have come up with their most consistently satisfying album to date. Modern, straightforward production spotlights their assured tawny harmonies on such lustrous numbers as "Love Radiates Around" and the quirky, self-deprecating "Face Down at Folk City." One standout is a cover of the **Fleetwoods**' 1959 chart-topper "Come Softly to Me" — as delicate and thrilling as a snowstorm in a paperweight — impeccably cast by girl-group producer Richard Gottehrer.

Fans of **The Smiths** will want to keep an eye and ear out. Those grand masters of gay angst have a new EP single, "The Boy with the Thorn in His Side," backed with an R&B number, "Rubber Ring," and the plangent croon "Asleep." Keeping up his tradition of gay iconography, **Morrissey** has decorated the sleeve with a Cecil Beaton shot of the young Truman Capote, jumping languorously for joy. It's currently out as an import on Rough Trade, but Sire should have a domestic release shortly. Between this, plus a just out new **Stevie Wonder** disc, *In Square Circle* (Motown), his first real LP in five years, and **Joni Mitchell**'s latest, produced by **Thomas Dolby**, due by mid-October, there's plenty of cause to visit your local record store.

The wire services have a story on a musical AIDS telethon being planned for next March in Los Angeles. I wonder if we can expect an appearance by **Dire Straits**, or any jazz acts? I vote for **Sun Ra!** **Donna Summer** is probably a sure bet. Reliable scuttlebutt has it that **Paul Jabara** has written a song for Donna, with all proceeds to go to AIDS research. Summer's partisans and critics are hoping for an early release. Godspeed.