



Pop tops: (above, left to right) politics from Bronski Beat; pluck from Romanovsky & Phillips; and puckers from David Bowie, Mick Jagger. A revamped Boy George (below left) with Joan Rivers and his pal Marilyn at last spring's "Comic Relief" benefit. Flat-topped lesbian folksinger Phranc (below).



POP MUSIC

POP MUSIC IN 1985: SETTING THE STAGE FOR FIGHT AGAINST AIDS

By Adam Block

"In 1985, did AIDS really hit pop music?" my editor asks.

"Well," I say, "there wasn't a Rock Hudson; no mega-star junkie or beloved bisexual was publicly diagnosed. Depends on what you mean by really hit."

Then my friend Suzy, in the midst of a chat, asks, "Have there been any pop songs written about AIDS?"

"Actually," I reply, "I just got the debut album by Mick Jones' new group—the guy who used to play guitar with the Clash—and it has a song: maybe the first."

A year ago, I realize, I wasn't hearing these kinds of questions. We were still talking about outrage and androgyny. But in 1985 the fey and flamboyant took a back seat to red-blooded hetro-heroics. It was the year of The Boss, not of Boy, or Prince. It was also the year of Live Aid and Farm Aid; the year pop got charitable in a big way. It was the year that cooperating with apartheid—and attempts to rate controversial records—stirred angry responses.

It may also have been the year that sets the stage for pop to take up the fight against AIDS and, with luck, boot homophobia in the teeth. A quick survey may spotlight the promise, and the need.

What Happened to the Limeys?

Frankie Goes to Hollywood hightailed it to tax shelters in the south of France after their American blitz fizzled. Critics who'd written them off as The Village People of the '80s smiled sweetly when their gay/salacious video for "Relax" was replaced by a high-tech hetro effort—all to no avail. More is promised.

The Svengalis at ZTT Records, who marketed FGTH, rebounded late but strong with a Grace Jones concept disc that included Jean-Paul Goudé's account of becoming obsessed with Grace when he saw her "performing to these gay bobbysoxers; looking like a man, singing about wanting a man—fascinating." Alors!

Boy George broke up with his boyfriend, Culture Club drummer Joey Moss, dressed as a "man" for GQ, and hung out in New York with "girlfriend" Marilyn, admitting to an interviewer that he'd fancy a fling with Matt Dillon. Culture Club lay down an LP in Paris with gay singer/songwriter David Lasley on backing vocals; release and tour dates are promised by early '86.

Shortly before a scheduled U.S. tour, to open for Madonna, Bronski Beat's lead singer Jimi Sommerville quit the band. The winning gay/socialist potato-head had been busted for public indecency with another man, but that wasn't his reason for quitting. At 21, he said, he wasn't ready to be an overnight interna-

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tional "pop star." The band released a video featuring Jimi with Marc Almond doing their Judy and Liza number on "I Feel Love." After pressing a final single, the remaining Bronski's brought in another gay vocalist, promising to carry on, with their name and honesty intact.

Sommerville hooked up with Richard Coles to form Communards. Their first single, "You Are My World"—a gay love song—is dedicated to the Gays The Word bookstore defendants. At a recent benefit for the Gay Sweatshop theater group, Sommerville reportedly wowed the crowd, torching out on "Lover Man."

Tom Robinson was at the same event, performing material from a new album that he has recorded. Dropped by Geffen Records, he is currently label shopping.

Marc Almond (formerly with Soft Cell) got on a roll with a new, queer-as-ever LP, *Letters to Johnny*, charting in the U.K., while he toured with his new band, The Willing Sinners.

Independents

Defying rumors, The Smiths stuck with their independent label Rough Trade, in England. They followed a brilliant LP with a single that featured a Cecil Beaton portrait of a leaping Truman Capote on the cover. Some suggested that the A side, "The Boy with the Thorn in His Side," was directed at Jimi Sommerville. Morrissey, the self-proclaimed gay/celebrity lead singer, kept the British press entertained with a public exchange of flowers and love notes with the hulking/androgynous hetro-queen, Pete Burns. The dalliance was praised as a model for safe-sex. Meanwhile, Burns' band, Dead or Alive, proved that disco refuses to die, with his nonindy hit "You Turn Me Around."

Heroic upfront gays put out their own records in the U.S. Stalwart Charlie Murphy in Seattle put out a folk-wave dance EP. Martin & Biello in San Francisco bowed to the pleas of fans and issued an EP from their musical *XPOSED*, featuring the dance/satire "Clones in Love." New York's Man 2 Man covered "Walk Like a Man," and Romanovsky & Phillips gamely entered the fray with a collection of gay love songs and ballads on their LP, *I Thought You'd Be Taller!*

Olivia Records tried to score a disco/crossover with an Alicia Bridges disc on their new Second Wave label and no one got rich. Cris Williamson came through, though, with *Prairie Fire*, followed up by a Christmas album, *Snow Angel*.

Redwood Records put out 10 discs, including a new Holly Near solo, *Watch-out*, a reissue of Ferron's out-of-print *Testimony*, and the Harp LP, featuring Near, Arlo Guthrie, Pete Seeger and Ronnie Gilbert. The label celebrated its 13th year with a seven-hour concert in Berke-

ley that drew 7,000 people. Next year they hope to take that show to New York.

The freshest voice in women's music came way out of left field. Phranc, with her LP *Folksinger*, is an L.A. native: an expunk, Jewish lesbian. Her debut came out on Rhino Records, noted for novelty and oldies discs. Phranc is neither. Her wit, vision and assurance put her up there with such celebrated newcomers as Suzanne Vega—we're talking folk music's answer to the early Rita Mae Brown.

Flashbacks and Homophobia

In a fitting matchup, David Bowie and Mick Jagger, rock's most successful aging cock-teasers, teamed up to sing (for Live Aid) and shoot a video duet of "Dancing in the Streets." Both have pooh-poohed their flirtations with faggotry as youthful foolishness and career strategies, discarded when they got tired. Lovely watching the slick roués bumping fannies.

Marvin Gaye wouldn't have been caught dead doing a video like that, and his exaggerated fear of being thought gay (yeah, he actually added the e to his name) probably cost him his sanity and his life. The steep toll homophobia took is the chilling subtext of David Ritz's intimate biography, *Divided Soul*.

Despite singer Mark Knopfler's fatuous defense, "Money for Nothing" by Dire Straits ranked as a slimy piece of queer-bashing. The #1 hit single made the phrase "See that little faggot" part of the pop vocabulary. Doubters should check out the man's earlier ditty, "Les Boys," and consider what the response would have been if faggot had been replaced by nigger.

In another telling event, when the PMRC, aka the Washington Wives, sent the recording industry their suggestions for a labeling procedure to protect America's young from filth and perversion, we weren't forgotten. Where did homosexuality rate? Right there in the category reserved for bestiality, rape and murder. That is obscene.

Joni Mitchell responded to this brand of idiocy in song on her new album. Reading TV evangelists with "Tax Free," she sang:

"You get witch hunts and wars when church and state hold hands. Fuck it! Tonight I'm going dancing with the drag queens and punks. Big beat, deliver me from this sanctimonious skunk."

Donna Summer tried to dig her way out from under the fallout she earned by passing on some of her reborn homilies to gay fans, condemning the sin of homosexuality, and even suggesting that AIDS might be just desserts. After stonewalling for a year, her office issued a statement. She didn't take those remarks back, but said: She hadn't meant to hurt, it was not her place to judge, and that AIDS is a human tragedy we all must fight together. Paul Jabara had reportedly written a song for her with the proceeds to go to fight AIDS. Many still skeptical fans hoped for its early release.

Money for Something

Dionne Warwick didn't wait around. She recorded the Bachrach/Bayer Sager song "That's What Friends Are For" with Elton John, Gladys Knight and Stevie Wonder, and issued the single with a guarantee that "all profits would go to the American Foundation For AIDS Research."

The release was welcome, particularly after the sorry case that had hit the papers last summer. Marty Blecman, president of Megatone Records, had issued a dance medley by his late partner Patrick Cowley, after Cowley died of AIDS, with all profits earmarked for the Gay Men's Health Crisis. It was the first AIDS-benefit record, but only after being taken to court, where he pleaded accounting errors, did Blecman send the full promised profits to the charity.

In England, the group Coil (featuring Psychic TV member Peter Christopher and his lover) issued a dirge-like remake of "Tainted Love" with profits promised to a British AIDS charity. Christopher's accompanying video was praised as brilliant and harrowing, but was rarely seen in the United States.

Mick Jones' band, Big Audio Dynamite, issued the AIDS-inspired "Stone Thames"—an unnerving jig that tips its hat to Tom Robinson's ill-fated gay-benefit single (cowritten with Elton John), with the chorus-concluding couplet, "Masculine natural nowadays can offend; never gonna fall in love again."

Hopefully that band will be there should an inspired if daunting project—to bring rock into the fight against AIDS—materializes. Activist/scenemaker Jim Fouratt has been working with producer Bruce Kellerman and journalist Jim Feldman in New York, and with club maven Phillip Scallon and A&R man Colin Bell in London, to mount two massive benefit shows, simultaneously in both cities, around next Valentine's Day. They already have commitments from acts ranging from Sade to Husker Du. The prospect is boggling. But that is exactly the way I'd like to see AIDS really hit pop music. △