

THE BOY CAN'T HELP IT: ERASURE CLEANS THE SLATE

by Adam Block

When Andy Bell of Erasure leaned into the microphone, lyrics in hand, and first tore into "Who Needs Love Like That," Vince Clarke, the song's 25-year-old composer and Erasure's founder, permitted himself a rare smile. He had laid down tracks for the song, only to spend frustrating weeks auditioning 42 singers looking for someone "who had that individual character: a bit of real soul. Andy strayed in, and I knew within two minutes that I wanted him," Clarke admits.

Bell, sitting across from Clarke in their San Francisco hotel room, smiles at the compliment; 21, with blond curls falling over sensu-

suous, almost thuggish features, Bell's is a face that Cocteau could have sketched.

But did Bell tell Clarke, when offered the gig, that he was gay and had no intention of concealing it? After all, the issue had earlier barred Bell from another band.

"Yeah. Well, I told him after a little while," Bell recalls.

"You did *not*!" Clarke explodes with a laugh.

"OK, I didn't say nothing," Bell admits sheepishly. "I think Vince caught on, as I had all these boys coming round to the recording studio." He chuckles, and then they both laugh.

Andy Bell wasn't exactly sure how one goes about coming out as a pop star. "About six months after I'd begun working with Vince," he recalls, "I went to a seminar on gays in rock at the Institute of Contemporary Arts in London. Tom Robinson was on the panel, and Jimmy Somerville was scheduled but didn't show. Afterwards, I went up to Tom and asked him how he'd come out in the press. Like, do I hold a press conference and say, 'Right everybody. I'm gay and there's nothing you can do about it!' " he laughs. "Tom said, 'No, no. I just wore a badge with a pink triangle in it. The main thing is just to tell the truth.' So that's what I decided to do.

"I went to Daniel Miller at our record company, Mute, and he said, 'Don't worry about that at all. If you're going to start worrying about things like that it'll just fuck you up.' But when it came time to do the video, I wanted to base it on this WWII British cartoon character, Jane, who was always getting her clothes ripped off, exposing French lingerie — except we'd do it in space. I wouldn't have been in drag — just wearing the suspenders and bra. Well, Daniel said no. Like the people would have been too outraged.

"Then we asked to play a gay night at the club Heaven in London, and this agent was quite careful *not* to advertise in any of the gay press. So it was like just

hiring the building, when we'd meant to play the *club*. When we got to America, we had a meeting with our agents over here, and they said, 'Because of the AIDS backlash, we're purposely *not* going to be playing you in any gay clubs.' I thought that was incredibly stupid."

"I really wanted to play the Paradise Garage in New York," Clarke adds. "They said, 'You can't do that because you'll be splitting your camp of people who want to see you — and you can either have gay followers or straight followers.'

"Right. But I saw queens in the audience in Boston! We've done AIDS benefits, we'll be doing Gay Pride Week in England, and we're doing *this* interview," Bell grins gleefully.

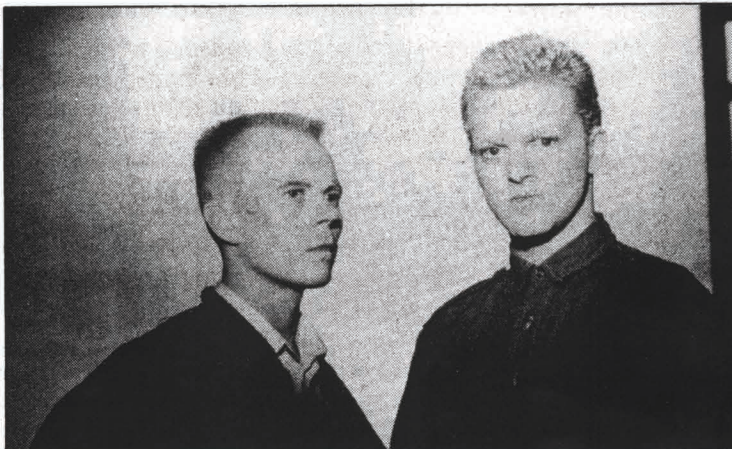
And how does Clarke, whose girlfriend will be joining him on the road, feel about charging into this maelstrom of gay politics? "I was pretty ignorant before I met Andy," he admits, "but I think that every time that we've come up against a situation where someone has said, 'No, you can't do that,' I've gotten madder about it than he has. I can't believe people can see things so black and white. So, I'm really pleased about it."

"He *loves* it," Bell winks and laughs.

Clarke's enthusiasm is crucial, because he was the one who made Erasure a band to anticipate. Back in 1981 he began penning hits such as "New Life" and "Just Can't Get Enough" for Depeche Mode's debut LP, *Speak and Spell*. In 1982 he left that band, recruited vocalist Alison Moyet — who brought a blowtorch R&B wallop to his polished techno-pop craft — and formed Yazoo, who ruled clubland with songs such as "Situation" and "Only You." When Moyet went solo, Clarke cut a single with ex-Undertones singer Feargal Sharkey, but by 1984 he was looking hard enough for a new vocalist to run the ad in *Melody Maker* that caught Andy Bell's eye.

Andy Bell

SIRE RECORDS



Clarke and Bell (right)

For Bell, the job was a godsend that became a collaboration. He had been in London for over a year, living on the dole, tiring of telling his patient parents that his big break was just up the road. With Erasure he could breathe a sigh of relief. It had been some time coming.

Bell was raised in Peterborough, a red-brick new town 80 miles north of London, the eldest of five children. "I think that other people knew I was gay before I did," he admits. "Before I was 10 they were calling me 'sissy' in school. I knew that meant that you liked to play with dolls and girl's toys, but I didn't know that it meant you liked boys. But I *did* like boys," he grins. "So they were right."

When he was 16, he made a pass at a friend who was sleeping over at his house during Easter vacation. "When I got back to school, he'd told everybody, and none of my friends would talk to me, but I was so light and flamboyant, I didn't let it bother me," Bell recalls. Being ostracized by his friends certainly didn't improve his studies. The next year he was asked by the school to leave — "just for being so lazy."

While Clarke was launching his career, 16-year-old Bell was dancing to Northern Soul at the Irish Club, unsuccessfully cruising the lobby of a notorious local hotel, and spending days at his friend Jill's flat. "She was a punk and had left school when I did. Her stepbrother was gay, and he was almost like an idol to me: the first gay person that I'd ever met. He was about 19 and wouldn't even speak to me. Actually he was quite a pretentious queen. He'd bring his boyfriends there for the night, and he'd come out in the morning and say to his boyfriend, 'Oh! You hurt me last night. . . =' things like that, which was very titillating and mysterious to me then."

Finally in 1983, when he had turned 19, Bell moved to London. "I was having this heavy relationship with this woman," he recalls. "She really loved me, and I just didn't feel the same. We were out in Ealing, so I looked up the number of the local gay group and went round. I sort of grabbed the youngest guy there, who was about 36, and went home with him for the night. It was the first night I'd been away since I began with this woman, and when I came home she was all tears and possessive; eventually I moved out."

Bell moved into a gay political collective's flat with four other guys he'd met through the young crowd in London's West End gay group. One day a call came from the National TV show, *Family Life*. They wanted to profile a gay teenager and Bell promptly agreed. "They took me out to dinner and asked if my parents would be willing to appear. I said, 'Yeah! They're really cool.' Then I went home and asked my dad, and he said, 'Nope. We're not doing it. I don't want any backlash coming down on the kids.' So that was that.

"My family has been great, though. I had my first boyfriend home with me for Christmas, and my folks even bought him presents. When we were babysitting, I'd put my arm around him, and we were sleeping together. In the morning, I heard two of my sisters outside the door, and one whispered, 'Oooh. Andy and Tom are in bed together! And I saw Andy with his arm around Tom!' And the other said, 'So? They *live* together, don't they? *You* love *your* sister, don't you,'" says Bell, expertly mimicking the assured gravity of the little girl. "That was really sweet," he smiles. "My family has never encouraged a bad or guilty attitude. I've been very lucky there, and I've never been queer-bashed."

It wasn't so easy for Tom Robinson, who had a nervous breakdown as a teen over his sexuality, or for Jimmy Somerville, who ran away from small-town homophobia — which may be the reason they are both known for ferociously gay lyrics. "It hasn't come up that much in ours," Bell admits. "It's not something I hide, but unlike Jimmy, it's not my main subject. After Jimmy got busted we wrote a song that is on the English LP, called 'Pistol.' It's about pretty policemen entrapping gays in toilets. I'm not going to pretend to be heterosexual for any video, but I don't want to talk about being gay all the time, or people will get bored. If there comes a time when people start to forget though, I'll just remind them, as I've occasionally had to do with my parents," he grins.

Back in London, Bronski Beat was an inspiration to Bell during the months before he hooked up with Clarke. He was playing with a straight bass player, mak-

ing demos, and hoping to get heard. "And here was this gay group, and suddenly they had a record on the charts. I thought it was brilliant! I didn't finally meet them until recently, well after Jimmy had split the group. We were doing this festival in Barre, this little Italian town. There were no gay bars or anything, and I was getting a bit out of touch. I just needed another gay bloke so I could say to someone, 'Cor — look at *his*-ass!' I was really looking forward to Bronski's arrival, but when they showed it was all sort of fast and furious. It seemed clear that they're just a PR exercise now, which was disappointing. I'm sure they know I'm gay, but it was all sort of record-company-friendliness, and nothing underneath."

Bell has warmer regards for Jimmy Somerville. "He introduced himself after an AIDS benefit we both did and was very sweet. Recently I ran into him, and he suggested that we do a duet with Vince producing. I feel a camaraderie with him because he's easy and open. His success has definitely made it easier for me. Some people have even accused me of jumping on the bandwagon, but I'd really like to believe that if he wasn't around I'd be doing the same thing."

When Erasure took the stage of a San Francisco club thick with Top 40-teens and a load of Vince Clarke fanatics, it became hard to imagine that Bell could play it any other way. Clarke and two young male back-up singers were wearing matching green, English public-school suits, and matching ties. Bell emerged in light cotton pants topped by strapless Frederick's of Hollywood black lace lingerie — shimmying and snarling, in delicious tribute to Rosalind Russell's performance in *Gypsy*. Bell vamped his way from masculine struts to Bea Lillie camp, occasionally lurching a hair too far in his nervous enthusiasm but always commanding the stage. The back-up singers cushioned and counterpointed his vocals, filling out the tunes and giving

him a freedom to toy with his vocals sometimes missed on record. His exuberance even infected the normally shy and taciturn Clarke, who grinned behind his keyboards, and unexpectedly shouldered a guitar. Bell turned in a savagely flirtatious version of "Pistol," and by the time he was torching the band through an encore of Abba's "Gimmee, Gimmee, Gimmee a Man After Midnight," the crowd was hooting with delight. It's a shame they couldn't have tried that show out on the Paradise Garage.

The group's first LP, *Wonderland* (Mute/Sire) hasn't broken from the pack yet. The songs have suffered from fans' memories of Yaz. Clarke has built on the same structures that he crafted there, and Alison Moyet is probably the most powerful pop vocalist in England. So it's neither surprising nor shameful that Andy Bell should have suffered in comparisons. And his forthrightness about his sexuality, arriving in the wake of the Bronskis, has struck novelty-mongers as old hat. Ironically, their management's attempts to steer the band away from gay audiences may be cheating Erasure out of the kind of loyal, influential cult following that has provided the groundwork for so many groups' eventual mass success.

Clarke and Bell, though, remain enthusiastic about their partnership, undeterred by the twin legacies they need to overcome: accomplishments and bigotry. It could be a tough shot, but Clarke seems to consider it an adventure, and Bell seems incapable of avoiding it. If they do make their mark, Bell insists it will be with his closet-doors swung wide. As he bites off the subject, Clarke seems a bit unnerved, but equally intrigued and pleased by Bell's ardor. "I have *no* sympathy for people who lie about it," Bell insists. "They're not helping themselves and they're not helping anybody else. It's sad and it's hateful. Maybe I'm naive, but I feel that if I'm honest with myself and everybody else, my life will be OK."