

# POP MUSIC

## HIGHLIGHTS AND LOWLIFES: CHAOTIC, CHALLENGING YEAR FOR GAYS IN POP MUSIC

by Adam Block

**P**oor **Boy George** might like to have this year to do over. He split up with his boyfriend, drummer **Joey Moss**, took to nightclubbing on three continents with **Miss Behavior**, Marilyn, and cut **Culture Club's** first unmitigated bomb: *From Luxury To Heartache*. With the gutter press smelling blood, bobbies busted two of his houses and a gaggle of friends on heroin charges. George had already checked into a detox program but they charged him retroactively. He was fined \$600 and vowed to stay clean. A week later, a New York drummer and musical collaborator turned up dead, of an OD, at George's London digs. George was away, but the drummer's family slapped him with a multi-million dollar suit. The master of overexposure finally made himself very scarce. Here's hoping he'll get the good luck he's certainly due by now.

Goodhearted **Tom Robinson**, who has called George "incredibly courageous" and who took his *own* plummet from stardom seven years back, released an anticocaine rap song, "Ain't Nothing Like the Real Thing," and mounted a series of warmly received cabaret concerts for loyal fans in the U.K.

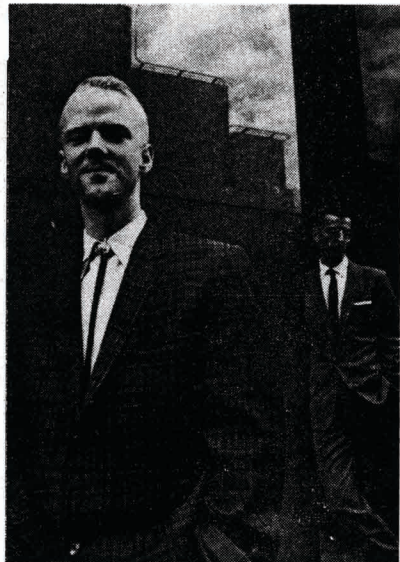
**Frankie Goes to Hollywood** returned from a year as tax-exiles, jettisoned their naughty erotic roar for the rather vacuous thunder of *Liverpool*, an LP that got banned nowhere and failed to penetrate even the British top 10.

Ex-Soft Cell vocalist **Mark Almond** came up with his best work in years: an EP, *Ruby Red* (Virgin/UK), which did get banned. On the fey cabaret, "I'm Sick of You Tasting of Somebody Else," he croons, "Tenement strong, and your guy's well hung; a big gold chain and a silver tongue," as the chorus pleads suggestively, "It's so hard, / So goddamned hard." Still acid-tongued, Almond said of his collaborator on last year's cover of "I Feel Love": "Jimmy Somerville thinks I should do more for the gay community, and he's right. . . I should strangle him! That's the best thing anyone could do for them!"

### And Then There Were Two

As Bronski Beat's drummer **Larry Steinbachek** explained the rift:

I remember when Jimmy was arrested in the park and he came round the next morning and said, "That's it, I'm gonna



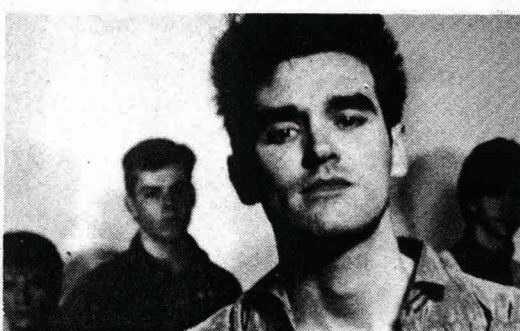
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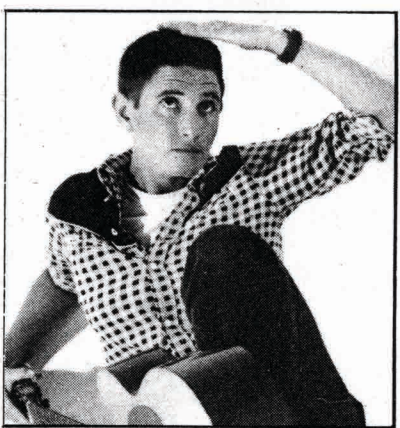
HELANE SEIDMAN



EPIC



EPIC



RHINO

DENNIS OSBORNE



A shifting pop scene (clockwise from top left): Jimmy Somerville and Richard Coles joined forces as The Communards; lesbian folksinger Alix Dobkin rethought notions of separatism; Boy George was busted; Morrissey and The Smiths toured to worshipful crowds; The Impotent Sea Snakes had a rejoinder for rock's would-be censors; and flat-topped lesbian singer Phranc went over the top.

be dead political from now on," and me and Steve just looked at each other. . . like whaaaat? I mean just because people want to fuck like bunny rabbits in the park at midnight doesn't make you political.

Scratch one great gay pop hope? Larry and Steve kept the name, recruited John Jon to sing and came up with *Truthdare Doubledare*. **Bronski Beat** was still gay, but not very startling or obstreperous about it, and scored modestly with the catchy, if formulaic, dance cut "Hit That Perfect Beat Boy."

**Jimmy Somerville** joined forces with **Richard Coles** and spent a year playing benefits, before the two released a rickety, affecting debut: *Communards*. Their inspired cover of "Don't Leave Me This Way" leapt to the top of the British pop charts, then scaled the dance charts in the United States — Jimmy's falsetto soaring past issues of gender.

### Making a List. And Checking It Twice.

The Parents Music Resource Center (PMRC) set out to toilet-train rock. The

Washington wives demanded stickers with "X" ratings on LPs with sexually explicit lyrics, including "incest, homosexuality, bestiality and necrophilia"—a roster that may have inspired the **Impotent Sea Snakes'** purposeful affront, "I Caught AIDS From a Dead Man." PMRC President Pam Howar quoted Socrates as having called for the banning of music that was "too sensual, luxurious or effeminate." That sounds more like Tchaikovsky than the Snakes!

The Snakes offered a rabid rejoinder with the anthemic "Circle Jerk" and its populist chorus, "Whores cost money, but friends are free!"

Meanwhile, out West, **Jello Biafra**, lead singer with the **Dead Kennedys**, was confronted with the teeth behind this idiocy. He was arrested after a mother in Sylmar, Calif., complained that her 14-year-old daughter had brought home the band's new album, *Frankenchrist* (Alternative Tentacles), which included a poster of H. L. Geiger's painting "Penis Landscape"—featuring a forest of phalli and orifices. With Biafra nearing penury and headed for court, the celebrated San Francisco band (who had hung in for eight years) broke up.

### Strange Bedfellows

"He sent me 26 roses when it was my birthday — and I sent him 48 naked sailors": **Morrissey**, of **The Smiths**, when asked about his reported chaste romance with **Pete Burns**, lead singer with **Dead or Alive**.

**The Smiths** (whom my friend Memphis Mark aptly describes as "the boys from the film *Another Country* grown up") bowed in with a sumptuous LP, *The Queen Is Dead* (Sire) and toured to worshipful crowds, introducing the song "Ask," which they released as a year-end single. Swoon to Morrissey's plea: "If there's something you'd like to try — ask me. I won't say no. How could I? Nature is a language. Can't you read?" Fey, for days. Long live the queen.

The Smiths had forwarded an edict that they wouldn't talk with the gay press in the United States, but they asked **Phranc**, everyone's favorite flat-top lesbian folksinger, onto their U.S. tour — which probably counts for more. She spent the year winning over legions, also opening for the **Dead Kennedys**, **Violent Femmes**, **Husker Dü** and for **Billy Bragg** in the U.K. At year's end, she was signed to 415 Records (distributed by CBS), with plans for members of **X** and **Husker Dü** to lend a hand on her anxiously awaited second LP.

Phranc deserted the post-punk crowds for two major women's music festivals, but she didn't make the second annual Redwood Records do — which already

had a full roster — offering seven of the label's own acts. The festival led with newer artists: **Hunter Davis**, **Deuce** and **Teresa Trull** (whose debut LP, *A Step Away*, has proved the fastest seller in the label's history). Founder **Holly Near**, legend **Ronnie Gilbert** and the incomparable **Ferron** headlined.

### A Welcome Return

"That's not screaming! It's soaring!": **Sylvester**, to his producer, 1984. The male queen of disco divas has been struggling, often thanklessly, in the four years since producer **Patrick Cowley** (who penned Syl's hit "Do You Wanna Funk?") died of AIDS. Release this summer of a scorching cover of "Living for the City" presaged the announcement that Warner Bros. would provide Syl's first major-label support in seven years. Forgive the silly hetero lyric on the first single. God knows *who* that was intended to fool. The rest of the LP, *Mutual Attraction* (with a cover shot of two Syls, in shameless finery, giving one another sultry attitude), doesn't try. It . . . soars.

### New Faces

Live, **Erasure** is drop-dead astonishing. Reclusive synth-whiz **Vince Clarke**, who invented Depeche Mode and Yaz, found a magnificent foil in aggressively gay, 21-year-old singer **Andy Bell**. Tunes like "Who Needs Love Like This" and "L'Amour" became dance-club staples, and those who bought the 12-inch got Bell singing a ferocious cover of Abba's "Gimmee, Gimmee, Gimmee (A Man After Midnight)" that hints at the fine mischief this lot still promise to deliver.

A delectable hunk who lifts lyrics from Genet, sports a pierced nipple and studded leather loincloth and stalks the stage preaching lust and safe-sex while showering crowds with complimentary condoms? Meet **Adam Sherburne**, lead singer with the San Francisco trio **Until December**, who matched disco rhythms to a hard rock attack on last summer's debut single, "We Are the Boys," and stepped out gamely on their debut LP, *Until December* (415/CBS). Though some scoff at the Rocky Horror Libertarians, when the band's van flipped (hospitalizing one member), Sherburne crawled from the wreckage to appear the next night, bruised and bandaged, singing to tapes, for a benefit against LaRouche's AIDS initiative. *That's* what friends are for.

And finally — the most electrifying band in the world explain their name and their mission:

"We want to be phalluses ramming in the butthole of pop. We already are, even if we're smalltime at the moment" — Gibby Haines, **The Butthole Surfers**