

POP MUSIC

REMEMBERING LIBBY, ANDY: DEATH, DECEPTION AND AWKWARD TEEN-AGE BOYS

by Adam Block

I was floating down the fetid Irrawaddy in dankest Burma, sharing American bourbon with my loyal boatmen, downshifting to No. 8 sunblock, and listening to a BBC special on the 30th anniversary of "Jailhouse Rock" when the radio announced that Liberace had died.

I wondered briefly how they could tell. The man had looked fully embalmed for the last 10 years. The obituary on Voice of America was very adult and dulcet with its innuendo: "His flamboyant performances helped pave the way for Elton John, Boy George and Michael Jackson... There were many rumors of his homosexuality... but his fans never seemed to mind." Nor his lawyers, I thought.

Once I was back in Bangkok, the coverage got more lively, particularly when Britain's *Daily Mirror* asked for a refund on a \$50,000 libel judgment that Libby had won back in 1957, over columnist William Connor's feverish celebration of

him as "a sugary mountain of jingling claptrap: a deadly, sniggering, winking, snuggling, chromium-plated, scent-impregnated, luminous, quivering, giggling, fruit-flavoured, mincing, ice-carved heap of mother love." Quite a thrilling notice, I'd say, but Libby claimed that it meant he was a homo. He denied it, and the court sent him happily to the bank. After the autopsy confirmed AIDS, *The Mirror* wrote, "He was what everyone always suspected, and what he always denied, and it has finally taken a coroner's inquest to prove it. Can we please have our money back?"

I didn't know that AIDS was considered binding proof of poofdom, but the garrulous old goats did have a point. I was most struck by the abject horror of being considered bent in British pop 20 years back, versus its implications today. Libby may have been lucky that *The Mirror* didn't have a team of crack detectives, but I wonder what kind of judgment Morrissey, for instance, could hope for if he brought a similar case today. Say \$50 in damages?

The scene in Britain as I write is delightfully confused. **Man Parrish** (who came to fame in 1978 with "Heat Stroke," the disco title-cut to a gay porno film) has joined forces with the British leather duo **Man 2 Man**, and they've bumped their way to number one in the limey pop charts with the "dirty, smutty mix" of "Male Stripper" (Bolts/UK). Some expect the same of Man Parrish's production of openly gay crooner **Paul Parker** (the

clone-next-door who last had a number one dance hit in the States five years back, with Patrick Cowley's "Right On Target") on Paul's "One Look Was Enough" (Dice), which recently topped the U.S. dance charts. It's not quite as lurid as "Male Stripper," though, which features a nude lad on the cover and a lyric that roars, "I wish I was a stripper in a gay old bar." Libby, R.I.P.

Then we find **Elton John** — who wags began calling "the Liberace of rock" the first time he donned a pair of sequined specs — acknowledging to *Musician* magazine that he and his manager John Reid lived together in "a relationship" for five years, and that he hopes to give his black drag-persona, Lady Choc-Ice, an opportunity to perform soon. While claiming that he is still happily married after three years, Elton noted, "There's nothing I hate more than people saying in the *Daily Mirror*, 'I don't like homosexuals. I'm not homosexual. I'm totally against it.' And they actually are. It's their own private affair. But don't have a go at homosexuals if you actually are one yourself."

Meanwhile, **The Communards** have been touring the U.K. as both gay and teenybop heroes. The band has taken a role in government-sponsored AIDS ads, and are watching the third single from their debut LP climb the charts. Lead singer **Jimmy Somerville** told one reporter, "I'd like to think we've done something for gays. It's hard to come out if you work in a fruit factory, but in the pop world it could have an enormous impact and still not damage you." But that conviction led to trouble when the gutter press picked up a grouse from Jimmy about **The Pet Shop Boys** and headlined: "Say You're Gay, Jimmy Tells the Pets."

Asked by *Melody Maker* about "pulling Tenent and Lowe out of the closet by their hair," Somerville answered, "Richard, and I, and **Andy Bell** of **Erasure** were trying to do something positive about AIDS, get a benefit together, and no other groups on the pop scene would join in... I'm sorry, but I've no time for regrets. When someone can be so influential, especially in the situation we're having to face now, with all the 'gay plague' propaganda, it's any queen's duty, no matter how high a level they are at, or what business they're in — if they have the power where they can influence things — to be open about their gayness."

I reckoned the Pets were lucky that it didn't take an autopsy to bring them out. I went on to read that my current fave British combo, the pithy **Smiths**, who wear their closet like a lavender silk smoking jacket, were releasing a boggling bounty of material. In the U.K.: a 14-cut LP of singles, remixes and new

tunes, *The World Won't Listen* (Rough Trade). In the U.S.: a double LP, *Louder than Bombs* (Warner Bros.), with 24 cuts — 11 duplicating *TWWL*, eight from 1984 (unreleased here) and five other new tunes with such promising titles as "Sweet and Tender Hooligans" and "You Just Haven't Earned It Yet." On the heels of such sweet promise came the news that **Andy Warhol** had bought the farm. I reckoned it was time. Zipping up my research on Thailand, the Pop Music Desk headed back to the States.

I jetted into the salutary driving rain of Seattle still thinking about Warhol and Liberace, and called up the man who had once brought the two together: performance artist **John Sex**.

In 1984, at Sex's urging, Warhol interviewed Liberace and asked Sex to join them. He recalls, "I was sitting there thinking it was like we were three buddies — joking and carrying on. The thing is they didn't think old. Andy was like a young enthusiastic pal, and even though Liberace was really old-fashioned, he was like some zany kid, always trying to be more outrageous. It was strange though, because they were from this other time. Liberace was still in the closet, and Andy always used to say he was celibate. In a way I realized they were like two companies with images to protect — and also kind of like two comedians. I think they figured they had the last laugh."

I thanked Mr. Sex and took a stroll with my dashing friend Jeff up to the Seattle Art Museum to look again at Warhol's portrait of **Elvis Presley**. It's a full-frontal, larger-than-life shot of Elvis as a gunslinger — screened in black on silver — accompanied by a matching, though vacant, silver canvas. I thought of David Bowie's 1971 song "Andy Warhol," which choruses: "Andy Warhol looks a scream/Hang him on my wall. Andy Warhol, Silver Screen/Can't tell them apart at all." And I grinned.

The **Smiths**' new single, "Shoplifters of the World Unite" (Rough Trade, U.K.), features a cover shot of a teen-age Elvis Presley, looking awkward and sensual, his greased cowlick and heavy lips looming over an impossibly small bow-tie: another homoerotic fetish from Morrissey. I spun the disk's flip-side, "Half A Person," and Morrissey crooned, "Sixteen, clumsy and shy — that's the story of my life." There were echoes of Elvis' emotional extravagance, of Liberace's irrepressible self-parody, and Warhol's delighted detachment. Morrissey captured the crushed teen each had been in his day, taking revenge. Grinning, I wished Libby and Andy, like Elvis before them, safe passage and sweet dreams. They earned them.