

ROCK OUT

GAYS IN POP MUSIC: CRACKS IN THE CODE OF SILENCE

by ADAM BLOCK

Liberace earned two television bios this fall. Both detailed his traumatic liaisons with women, complete with close-ups of tongue-on-tongue passions; neither showed him locking lips with his boyfriends. We saw the verbal seduction of two boys—one venal and the other virtuous—but one sordid secret was not revealed on prime-time TV: the fact that men kiss men.

Liberace created a closet so ornate and ostentatious that the package ultimately trivialized the contents. He went to his grave still checking the locks and slamming dead bolts on the sucker. It took a court-ordered autopsy to determine that he had died of AIDS.

Society checks itself out in the mirror of culture. In the pop arena, gays have been schooled to appear in intense camouflage lest—like vampires—they cast no reflection at all. Society doesn't want to see a sodomite when it peers in the pop looking glass. While heterosexual pop stars are encouraged to celebrate their sex lives and their lovers, queers are cautioned, "Folks just don't want to know."

It takes courage for an artist to challenge this code of silence. Lots of queens are still standing on the sidelines, insisting that to come out in pop constitutes career harakiri, all but wishing disaster on those tough enough to risk it. A "fall" by one of those forthright heroes serves to encourage and recommend the cowardice of these closet cases.

Thankfully, some artists are stubborn and savage enough to face down those fears. The conversations that follow took place in this context: artists and journalists talking about those taboos and what it means to defy them—while running risks in the process.

Lately, the stakes have gotten higher. In the face of the growing stigma of AIDS, Great Britain added legislative insult to injury this year by passing Clause 28, which bars local governments from "promoting" homosexuality. The draconian decree in-

spired some artists to take a stand, while others ran for cover.

Andy Bell quaked and rose to the occasion. Four years ago, at 19, Bell beat out 40 hopefuls auditioning to sing with the 24-year-old legendary synth songwriter Vince Clarke (founder of Depeche Mode, Yaz, and The Associates). Bell told Clarke from the start that he was gay and wouldn't hide the fact. His heterosexual partner became an ardent ally as the two played gay benefits while scoring top ten hits in the United Kingdom with dance anthems like "Oh, l'Amour" and "It Doesn't Have to Be." This year, Erasure's third LP, *The Innocents*, thundered to the top of the U.S. dance charts and crossed over to capture fervent young fans from America's suburbs. Many, seduced by Bell's choirboy-soul slut vocals and Clarke's propulsive pop, were shocked by the duo's sexually subversive stage shows.

Our interview finds the celebrated singer on a rare day off, near the end of a sold-out American tour, talking about the delights and doubts that have come with his career so far.

British writer Kris Kirk, author of *Men in Frocks*, tracked down Boy George across the Atlantic and brought back George's boldest interview to date. The singer's very public fall from cuddly grace began with a drug bust in July 1986 and climaxed last year with a heroin bust and the OD of a good friend in George's private home. After going through a detox program and releasing an unfocused solo LP, George pumped out an unexpected disc, the nervy rap 12-inch "Stop Clause 28," which, unfortunately, spelled no record sales.

George is struggling to restart an endangered career, and Virgin Records in the States is nervous. Against the star's will, the company cut the agit-rap cut from the U.S. LP and sent him back to the studio to cut some "dance hits" with an American pro, hoping to add an upbeat anthem or two to what George has described as "a very serious album." Virgin wants to have it out

in mid January.

There are rumors that George is being urged to curb his recent candor about being a queer. Whether such advice will be taken remains to be seen, but it's hard to imagine the singer going back into a closet that this interview seems to blow to smithereens. It may be equally hard for some folks to imagine George topping the charts again. Not me, though; I'm a believer.

Mark Spainhower introduces Diamanda Galas, whose unparalleled and unnerving performances have made her the reigning diva of the avant-garde. Galas has no intention of confining herself to her fervent cult that packs inner-city punk clubs in the States and opera houses in Europe and Australia. A self-styled guerrilla fighter in the war against AIDS, Galas plans to wake up every hamlet and burg on the planet. Galas's performances have the force of nature and ritual, poetry and pathology.

Deborah Frost tracked down Adele Bertei, a legendary figure and voice on the early punk scene in Detroit, New York, and London. The last I'd heard of Bertei were reports of a lesbian wedding (to Lesley Woods of The Au Pairs) and the couple's subsequent emigration to Morocco to live as nomads. Bertei's recent reemergence with a lustrous, adult LP was a delightful shock.

Finally, Brandon Judell penetrates the hallowed halls of *Rolling Stone* magazine to talk with staff writer Anthony DeCurtis about how the pop press does and doesn't deal with homosexuality and closeted artists. Are gays conspicuous by their absence in the pop press? Can that change? DeCurtis grapples with the issues and points out the significant role that readers and lawyers can play in the equation.

I wish that Liberace had been able to stick around and take some inspiration from our subjects. His capacity for shameless exhibitionism and candor seemed to desert him when it came to celebrating his homosexuality. He made himself a martyr by treating gayness as an affliction—and acknowledgment of it as slander.

Between the lines of these interviews, the questions reverberate: Can a queer pop star afford to own up? Can pop music, as a mirror, finally reflect gay and lesbian talents simply as people, not pariahs? And can it treat their couplings as adventures, not embarrassments?

These questions are answered in collaborations between artists and their audiences. When neither group is willing to reject the other for being queer, the code of silence will grow insubstantial and crumble. Imagine. Liberace would get to kiss his boyfriend!