

POP MUSIC

GAY IMAGES IN POP: COLLISIONS IN THE TUNNEL OF LOVE

by ADAM BLOCK

"So what do you homos call yourselves back in Kansas?"

"Aw, same as they do in Hollywood: Bisexuals."

—Overheard conversation, 1985

"We just didn't feel that bisexuality is fashionable any longer."

—Producer of the film *Less than Zero*, explaining the elimination of the book's gay elements, 1987

"Woman Claims Rape — Demands Singer Bowie Take AIDS Test."

—Headline, *San Francisco Chronicle*, 1987

This was a year to start calling the bluffs of those who have played it coy, from Boy George to Gary Hart to Ziggy Stardust. The press saw to that. And it was the year that bisexuality was devastated as a safe refuge for sexual sophisticates and pop music's male prick teases. The plague saw to that. Yet by its lethal light the visibility of gays in pop music grew unmistakably. Coy flirtations with gay lib (from glitter through disco and to the gender-bender brigade) began to give way. Gays weren't always embraced, but we got a lot harder to ignore or romanticize.

Boy George's fall from grace was painful, but in its wake his plain talk was — from a pop star — unprecedented and inspiring. Check his explanation of his band's demise: "I was having an affair with [Culture Club drummer] John Moss. In the beginning it was the most marvelous thing — but suddenly, things changed. It's the Abba syndrome, isn't it? How do you love someone who bangs drums out of time deliberately to annoy you onstage?" That was pop discretion, circa 1987.

Unfortunately, George plummeted quickly from domestic bliss into drug abuse that left the cuddly champion of androgyny looking like a ravaged cautionary tale for budding deviants. By late fall he had taken up Buddhism and announced wistfully that he had given up sex — for now — but not his career.

Various other limey gay-glam invaders from 1985 were in disarray by '87, with Limahl out of sight, Frankie Goes to Hollywood disbanding, and Marilyn now notorious only as the bitch queen who led Boy George astray and then ratted on him to the law.

Happily there was another cadre of British pop pervers who had a more encouraging year. Bronski Beat lay low composing new work, but no one quit, OD'ed, or decided he wasn't queer. The Communards defied skeptics and scaled the charts as glamless gay socialists. Their crossover success had Jimmy Somerville's partner Richard Coles marveling, "All of a sudden we've got screaming teenagers at our concerts throwing bras onstage." I read those

as gestures of feminist solidarity, though some insist the girls were bent on converting the lads. Finally, Erasure lead singer Andy Bell emerged as a gay hero, strutting shamelessly and with savvy up the U.K. charts and across the States. The band's LP *Circus* brought pathos, pride, and passion back onto the dance floor.

Meanwhile, some gay pop pioneers hung in despite tough times. Sylvester was an inspiration. He put out his first LP on Warner Bros., a strong effort that stalled in the charts. Then, on the eve of his 40th birthday, his lover died of AIDS. Syl didn't hide his grief but continued undaunted, looking smashing and ready to record again.

Groundbreaker Tom Robinson (the first successful gay rocker, who bowed in 1977) chronicled his longtime lover's marriage in a bitter, astonishing tune on a sadly neglected LP, *Still Loving You*, that never found an American distributor. Ditto for unrepentant technofag Marc Almond, formerly of Soft Cell, with the cabaret *sauvage* of his LP *Mother Fist*. Robinson issued a live disc and staged a bittersweet reunion of his original band on the tenth anniversary of their topping the British charts with a song about a hitchhiker's gay seduction, "2-4-6-8 Motorway."

Elton John got caught in the gutter press's feeding frenzy over Boy George and was subjected to appalling accounts of ancient trysts with sturdy "rent boys." Despite the slagging, both George and Elton showed up for Britain's April Fools' Day AIDS benefit along with George Michael, The Communards, Holly Johnson, Bananarama, Womack & Womack, Herbie Hancock, and Tom Robinson, all joining forces for a finale of "Stand By Me."

Pop newsmakers: (Left row, top to bottom) Megahunk Nick John, progressive sounds from The Communards, Morrissey of The Smiths. (Right row, top to bottom) Sellout shows for AIDS from Madonna, gutter grumblings about Elton John, the cast of the *Ten Percent Revue* march to Washington. (Facing page, top to bottom) Leather-clad comic Lynn Lavner, Erasure's Andy Bell and Vince Clarke, a sequined Liberace, George Michael and Boy George at a British AIDS benefit, folksinger Elliot Pilshaw.

AIDS was our horror, our ogre, and our shadow — and also the most unforgiving ticket out of the closet. The show-biz closet is a mind-boggling invention designed to be sufficiently elaborate, flamboyant, and preposterous to derail any threatening inquiries. No one disarmed his detractors with more determination than Liberace. His closet was a masterful, cumbersome creation. When he died of AIDS, his courtiers originally attributed his death to a watermelon diet — a measure of the homophobia that ruled his life.

The plague hasn't made it any easier for pop stars to come out, compounding perceived threats to mass popularity. For some, though, AIDS elevated the deception to an unacceptable obscenity. Hotheaded Jimmy Somerville got so worked up talking to a reporter about The Pet Shop Boys' refusal to play an AIDS benefit that he denounced them as closeted cowards.

The situation wasn't much better in the States, where the American Foundation for AIDS Research's long-promised massive pop fund-raiser remained stalled. But a few determined women came through: Patti LaBelle (twice); Madonna, with a sellout at Madison Square Garden; and Cyndi Lauper, with a show in Paris, where she introduced the song "Blue Boy," all royalties of which she promised to AIDS charities.

A slew of local bands in hard-hit cities continued to carry the weight.

The success of The Communards and Erasure and Boy George's candor hardly signaled an end to homophobia in pop. The smash debut LP of the year came from the homophobic beer 'n' barf metal rappers, The Beastie Boys, who had hoped to name their LP *Don't Be a Faggot*. After Michael Jackson got a manly cleft carved in his chin, rap genius Ray of Run DMC admitted with unconscious (?) homophobia, "I thought Michael Jackson would be a faggot. But he wasn't at all. He was cool, a cool person."

Comedian Sam Kinison became the punk comic of choice on the yuppie circuit, a human slag heap spewing bile at women and fags alike. Luther Vandross really ought to be ashamed, not so much for threatening to sue an English magazine for suggesting that his precipitous weight loss was caused by AIDS but for insisting that the "implications" about his "life-style" were what he found unspeakably reprehensible. Luther, give me a break.

The women's music scene in '87 seemed to be taking just such a break, with Redwood mostly resting on its catalog while stalwarts at Olivia girded for their upcoming 15th anniversary. Sue Brown at the estimable Ladyslipper Distributors claimed, "We don't need lesbian lyrics to have women's music anymore." Jimmy Somerville has yet to make that concession in an attempt to cross over, but Holly Near dropped all political slogans and kept affection genderless on her latest album, *Don't Hold Back*. Cris Williamson's holiday release, *Wolf Moon*, arrived too late to check. As a critic of that scene's smug, ghettoized insularity, I should be pleased, but what I've heard sounds less risky and debilitatingly derivative.

A welcome addition to the scene was leather-clad Lyn Lavner with her rapier cabaret and techno-lesbian Sue Fink, who deftly rides her drum machine on tunes like "Boys Are Thugs." And I'm anxiously looking forward to discs from the hard-rock leather lesbians in Witch and Ibis, promising some alternatives I'd judge long overdue. Ditto for flattop iconoclast Phranc's follow-up to her LP *Folksinger* and some fresh discs from Ferron and Alix Dobkin.

The new year may finally bring a slew of independent releases by gay men. Romanovsky and Phillips — the couple who function as the Howard Cruse of cabaret — are due for a new disc, as is Charlie Murphy — the male Holly Near. With luck, PWA Michael Callen's startling and seductive debut LP will surface in January. Keep an eye out for L.A.'s Soft-Cell-inflected duo Bachelors Anonymous, featuring David Hughes, a founding member of L.A.'s lamented gay rap team Age of Consent. A thunderous gay rocker will be on the scene with the release of the debut disc by San Francisco's Sister Double Happiness, which may just be the best queer band in the land. Aficionados will keep an eye out for another EP by the unhinged Anglo boy-queen Princess Tinymeat. Traditionalists await the latest from Robert John, Megatone's 21-year-old disco hunk, who knows how to strip down for a cover.

In November the news came that gay celibate Morrissey had joined forces with atmospheric guitarist Vini Reilly of Durutti Column and an unknown named Steven Street in the wake of the demise of The Smiths. A rabid gay following is already anticipating with baited breath Morrissey's next project. Word also arrived that The Communards would have a new LP here in January, with the promise of their first American tour to follow. Can an enormously ordinary-looking, openly queer band make it in this country? And defy the fears that thwart homegrown models? I'm not taking bets; I'm just pleased the notion is thinkable.

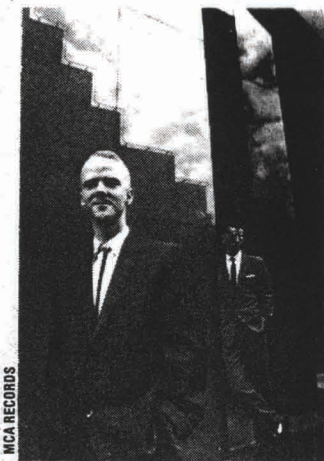
The fact that a singer is gay is no guarantee that he'll communicate most powerfully to other homos. Consider Johnny Mathis. Likewise, gay friends this past year were devoted to the driving dementia of the Butthole Surfers, the carnal and cautionary Prince, the anthemic investigations of U2, and even the bowlegged country of George Strait. The fact is that each of those artists has moved me as powerfully as have any of the aforementioned fellow deviants. In turn, I'm looking for them to knock the socks off some heteros.

See, I still like to see us around, common as dirt, radiant as neon, unafraid and self-explanatory but with our creations acknowledged and our affections respected. Repressed fears and desires fuel pop culture, which in turn lets us see and talk back to ourselves. But when I start to hear that our sexuality — the constellation of our desires and deepest attachments — is "unfashionable," like last year's trendy sport or novel pharmaceutical, it's time to declare our claims on that culture. We are artists, not artifacts, and must refuse to collaborate with bigotry and must refuse to pretend that we are disposable, invisible, or shameful.

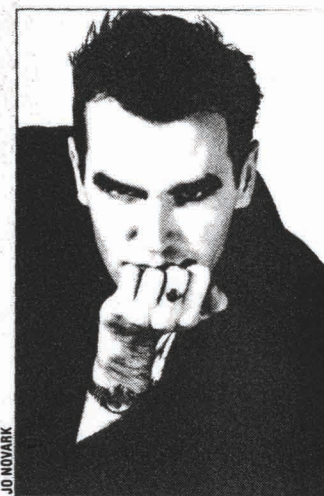
All the rock artists (from Jagger to Bowie to Prince) who have suggested they might be gay — pretending to dismiss the taboo and wagging their buns in the air until the girls screamed and the boys got nervous — did homos a favor, awakening and validating forbidden desires. They deserve our gratitude, but they also owe us something: the right to dismantle the fear and sanctify the desire that they exploited. It was a cultural loan that they did well with, but they returned it to us with its currency devalued.

Now the tables are set for us to call our own bluffs: to polish the pop mirror and bask brazenly in the reflection. Melting masks call for vital vinyl. And who the hell else is going to cut it? Let the bad tunes roll.

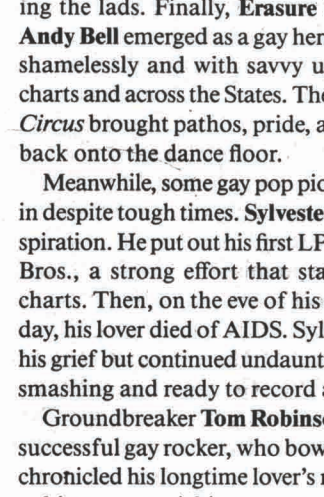
MEGATONE RECORDS



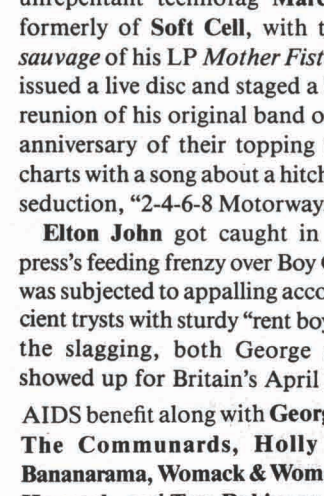
MCA RECORDS



JO NOVARK



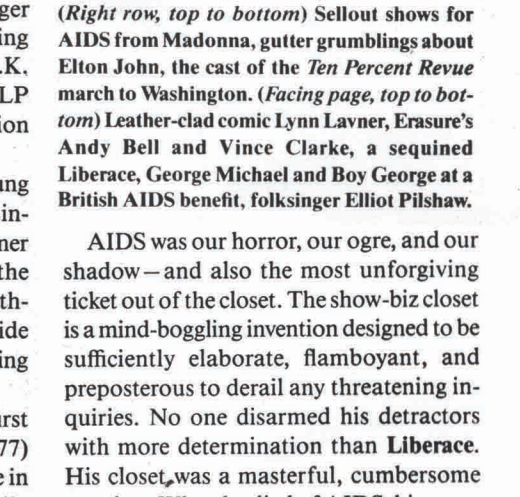
PATSY LYNCH



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