

DISH, DRAG, AND THE INVISIBLE GRAMMYS

Divine Intervention Needed at Awards Show

by ADAM BLOCK

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They blew it again: The Grammys really should have hired Divine to host. Granted, his musical career peaked with his novelty disco debut, "Native Love," on which he sounded like an ostrich, but successful singers are in oversupply at the awards show.

The truth is that Divine, in his club dates—as a trashy, Tallulah-like devil-woman diya—only ignited when he *quit* singing. Then, twitching in his terrifying drag, he would dole out the deepest of dish and apocalyptic attitude. Just picture him side by side with Randy Travis or Michael Jackson... Heaven can wait.

Instead the show opted for Billy Crystal with his neo-Jackie Mason shtick. The awards returned to New York City, where the producers made *one* courageous choice: eliminating the video clips, which had paralyzed last year's proceedings.

This year's show wasn't littered with gender benders, like the wiggly wonder in '86, nor did a tune devoted to the war against AIDS cop Song of the Year, as "That's What Friends Are For" did last year, but there were still lots of highlights for homos.

The opening spotlighted gay fave Whitney Houston, who looked anorexic enough to play the mocha Karen Carpenter, in a horrific outfit that seemed to have been stolen off a bowling alley bimbo: an eyesore of a yellow blouse and black stretch pants and pumps, accessorized with a license plate-sized belt buckle of a butterfly in rhinestones—drag worthy of John Waters.

Mayor Koch (looking like Mr. Magoo) was seated next to Cyndi Lauper, who carried herself like the secret and stunning self-image shared by a bevy of fag hags and bag ladies (and I mean those terms in a nice way). Camp couple of the night.

Moussed Michael Damian, an unlikely icon to inspire the I.V. drug set, mouthed a public service spot on AIDS: "Sharing needles is like sharing death." Catchy.

Ex-homo Lou Reed embarked on a stark reprise of "Take a Walk on the Wild Side," honoring hustlers and drag desperadoes in the midst of a mad-for-Manhattan medley.

Michael Jackson—assured, alien, and awesome—mounted "The Man in the Mir-



Little Richard: putting show in perspective

ror." But as he ripped through a throttled, shimmering succession of variations on the line "You've got to make that change," the song began to sound like an impassioned endorsement of planet-wide plastic surgery.

Horowitz took the classical music prize while I struggled to recall whether it had been he or Rubinstein who once remarked, "There are only three kinds of pianists: Jewish, gay, and bad."

Randy Travis won with "Forever and Ever" (and George Strait for "All My Xs Live in Texas"), while I couldn't help hoping that one night they might stroll into the Rawhide II in San Francisco and catch the gay cowboy couples, lesbian lovers, drag queens, and desk-bound desperadoes dancing with passion and precision to their hits. If only the lads knew.

Pepsi premiered its new four-part "adventure ad" featuring bad boy Michael. He plays James Bond Jackson—Double-O Miss Thing—and is pursued by a rapacious pack of reporters who seem to have cornered the wily faun at the end of each episode. He escapes with an athletic, high-tech stunt that introduces each successive calamitous chase. The maniacally macho action in each sequence evidences Pepsi's panic at the possibility that they have purchased a sexually ambiguous spokesperson to push their products; the ads do more to demonstrate that Michael is macho than

they do to sell soda.

Little Richard was running amok, putting the show in perspective. Buster Poindexter sustained a glazed smile below his spit-shined pompadour while Richard railed, "Best new artist is *me!* You'all ain't never given me nothing!" When Buster tried to interrupt, Richard squealed, "Shut up! I am a black, Georgian Jew and the *architect* of rock and roll"—beaming his brazen, bitchy boast to the crowd, which answered with a delighted ovation.

Whatever he does with his sexuality these days, Richard was and remains the true incomparable Queen of Rock and Roll, a delighted deviate unimpressed by propriety and compelled to cut loose. At the 1988 Grammys, Richard expressed, even embodied, the anarchic, seductive soul of rock and roll—as a cataclysm of threat, invitation, celebration, and outrage. I'm sure Richard adored Divine, just as scores of homos at home rejoiced at the show-stealing testimony of a queen on a tear. Queer culture took a bow.

You can forget the rest of the show. OK, it is swell that U2 won two statues (including Album of the Year) and thanked "college radio stations" for their support. Still, the defeat of the Irish insurgent's tune "With or Without You" as Song of the Year by the soporific "Somewhere Out There" was explicable only to those who knew that the pros who penned it (Mann and Weil) had never won before; it was politics and sentiment overruling aesthetic merit and logic. Only two of *my* Top 10 albums and singles copped honors, but that's not bad from the aging Academy conservatives, who regulars may recall gave The Beatles only two awards during the entire time the group was together.

I'd like to think Divine could have led the Grammys out of the Dark Ages—he certainly had the knack for making the invisible, even the unmentionable, his property to parade—slipping into shared secrets like luxurious lingerie and strutting them around with disarming alacrity. The Grammys will be back, but I am afraid that with Divine's cruel demise, we will not soon see his like again. Somehow I suspect he knew that. And it gives those who follow in his wake a lot to live up to. The Grammys can't help but post results.