

When Cultures and Crotches Collide

Acid House, Little Richard, and the Summer's Strangest Single

The bass is so powerful, it actually flakes the mouse out of my hair. Acid House has come to Seattle—about a year after the music exploded in London. What is encouraging about the local versions of these trance-dance events is that they seem to be mixing crowds—drawing gay folk to otherwise straight clubs (Celebrity, Vogue) and heteros to a gay haunt (The Brass Connection). Even if it isn't the most inspired music-fashion movement ever to lumber across the Atlantic, it's always good to find gay and straight nonconformists sharing common ground.

Meanwhile, over at Bumbershoot (a massive four-day arts fair that counts in Seattle as mainstream entertainment), gay culture is almost unavoidable. Some unsuspecting tourists encountered *Stages*, the Alice B. Theatre's riveting sampler of scenes culled from decades of gay plays, revues, and news briefs. Some chanced upon gay poet **James Broughton** on film and reading in the flesh. Others found gay singer-songwriter **Charlie Murphy's** band, **Rumors of the Big Wave**, playing to a packed house at Club X. Others wandered into that video piece on people with AIDS or met **Barbara Wilson** selling books from her press, including her own superb lesbian detective series, which is set in Seattle.

The queerest show I saw at Bumbershoot wasn't local or even contemporary. Its material dates back to the late '50s, when you would have to look with care and circumspection to find even a gay bar in the city. The massive Coliseum was packed for a rock-and-roll legend, **Little Richard**.

Richard hasn't cut an LP in ten years and has devoted most of that time to Jesus. But from the moment he hit the stage—dressed in black crepe, a silver cape, and a pound and a half of makeup—and was hoisted atop his piano's lid to strut around like some pro wrestler from Planet Claire, it was obvious that he still expects to be treated like royalty. If Elvis was the original king of rock and roll, Richard was its queen, and lately he shows no signs of abdicating.

"I'm gonna scream like a white woman!" Richard yelled. "Ooowee!" Then he raised his brow, dropped his wrist, snapped, "Shut up!" and unleashed a laugh that sounded like Tallulah Bankhead on helium. The audience gazed at him as if he were an apparition—which is what he is.

Richard's show was a monomaniacal ad-lib by a winded wonder. After a credible romp through "Long Tall Sally," he veered into a giddy medley, offering snatches of **Fats Domino's** "Blueberry Hill," **Elvis's** "Hound Dog," **Jerry Lee Lewis's** "Whole Lotta Shakin'," and even **Aretha's** "Chain of Fools"—singing, "For five long years/I thought you were my man!" Even Sylvester never touched that one.

Richard finished his set like Liberace playing to Sea World residents, pacing the piano top for 15 minutes while the band vamped; awkwardly stripping off his bracelets, dangling them endlessly before the crowd, then lobbing them, like herring over the dolphin pool, into the multitude.

What is fabulous about Little Richard is that no matter how often he has rejected his homosexuality and his rock and roll for Jesus, he remains an irreducible queen, and that queeniness is an essential element in everything astonishing and liberating that he has brought to our music and culture. Before Little Richard, no black man had ever "screamed like a white woman" across the American airwaves. No one who looked and moved like that had ever flamed so brightly before the nation's eyes and ears.

Richard's arrival on the scene was explosive. His entire career at Specialty Records lasted less than a year. (He cut most of his hits in one burning session—but the shock waves are still going out.) Specialty will release all those classic sides, along with alternate takes, in three-CD and five-LP box sets before Christmas.

While waiting for them, watch out for some more recent events. **Dead or Alive's** new video for the single "Come Home with Me, Baby" has been banned by the BBC, reportedly for its homoerotic content and frank sexuality. The song "I Don't Want to Be Your Boyfriend" has come under similar attack. One British critic dubbed the LP, entitled *Nude* (Epic), "an open celebration of a promiscuous gay life-style."

Lead singer **Pete Burns** told one journalist, "I really don't think that I should shoulder any particular moral responsibility. I mean, if I say, 'Stick a condom on it, baby,' they still won't play it on the radio because you can't say 'condom.' So what can you do?"

Gay singer **Paul Lekakis** ("Boom, Boom,

Boom") has a hilariously suggestive new 12-inch out, penned by **Tommy Page**, called "You Blow Me—Away." **Depeche Mode** attacks the dance floor with a new single, "Personal Jesus." **Erasure** previews its upcoming LP, *Wild* (Sire), with the single "Drama." **Jimmy Somerville** is still at work on his first solo LP, but he'll turn up sooner as a guest vocalist (along with **Al Green** and **Martin Fry**) on producer-mix master **Arthur Baker's** LP *Arthur Baker and the Backbeat Disciples*.

You may have missed one of the strangest and most fascinating singles of the year, a duet between **Van Morrison** and **Cliff Richard**, titled "Whenever God Shines His Light," from Morrison's last LP, *Avalon* (Polygram).

There is some history behind this collaboration: When Morrison was an awkward runt growing up in Dublin, Richard—the teddy-bear-tender teen pin-up on every girl's wall—must have looked like a god to him. Dubbed the "English Elvis," he was dogged by rumors of homosexuality and became a born-again Christian at about the time that the **Beatles** stole the pop charts out from under him. Richard became a "family entertainer," continuing to enjoy a successful career in England.

Morrison is blessed with the best R&B pipes in British pop, and he grew up to produce a string of peerless albums, inventing a blend of R&B and Celtic soul. But in the last decade, his stubborn mysticism and growing paranoia took a tedious toll on his music and fans.

Avalon is Morrison's best disc in a decade. Sure, it still has the unlistenable ("Orangefield"), but it also has the astonishing ("I'd Love to Write Another Song"). The wild card is the duet: Morrison growling with animal grace around the pellucid choirboy lines of the former teen throb. The conjunction sounds almost erotic, but it's also like an act of vengeance: Morrison's feral wolf rubbing up against the formless castrato. Vocally, Morrison towers ferociously over the superstar of his youth—though ultimately both are redeemed in the song by God's ineffable grace. The strange thing is, you can hear that—the lion lying down with the lamb. It's a story worth hearing.

—Adam Block