

by ADAM BLOCK

Last summer, during San Francisco's gay pride weekend, it was easy to run into Two Nice Girls. You could luck into the band offering an acoustic set at A Different Light Bookstore, playing an electric session at the gay pride parade, or mixing both styles at a sold-out show at the Great American Music Hall. Each of these performances reached an unhinged climax with a sing-along to "The Queer Song," a gay rant stapled to the tune of Buddy Holly's classic "Not Fade Away."

"I've sung 'The Queer Song' with every band I've been in," says Gretchen Phillips, founder of the iconoclastic lesbian group. Phillips disarmingly drawls a bit of the lyric: "We're gonna take you to queer bars! We're gonna drive you in queer cars!"

Two Nice Girls (a quartet in spite of its name) released an LP last spring, *2 nice*

girls, that ranks as one of the most delightful debuts of the decade. The combo marries the Celtic, sisterly harmonies of the Roches to the rhythmic eccentricities of Joan Armatrading, laced throughout with a tough, Texan brand of devilish dyke humor.

Although the group—comprising Phillips, 25; Kathy "Korn" Korniloff, 29; Meg Hentges, 28; and Pam Barger, 24—is a recent arrival on the national scene, the band members actually spent a long time getting there. And therein lies some heroic and harrowing history.

In the spring of 1985, Phillips—a graduate of several punk-rock bands in Austin, Tex.—met Laurie Freelove, a gifted guitarist and visual artist. They began rehearsing as a duo and soon dubbed themselves Two Nice Girls. When the pair met Korniloff at a party, Phillips recalls, "we sparked immediately and started making

music." They didn't change the name of their band, though.

"I told them that I didn't mind being the girl who *wasn't* nice," Korniloff laughs, "although that role has seemed to rotate."

The group's first gig took place that October on the porch of Karla's, a local lesbian-owned restaurant. In addition to covers of Joni Mitchell and Lou Reed songs, the set boasted "(I Just Spent My Last \$10 on) Birth Control and Beer"—an arch lament sung in the voice of one of Phillips's former girlfriends, who dropped her for a dude. Two Nice Girls were already combining contradictory traditions: crass country, feminist-confessional, and punk-rock sounds all jammed in a boggling bouquet.

Over the next four years, the trio honed their chops in Austin—winning talent contests, critics' polls, a fervent following, and eventually a record contract.

When their album came out last spring, it was not on a feminist label but on the postpunk independent label Rough Trade. "There's no way we'd be on Olivia Records," admits Korniloff, "because there is no way we ever wanted to limit our audience to women-identified-women and their sensitive men friends. That's not to trash 'womyn's music.' They gave us a foundation; when we were growing up, women like Meg Christian and Alix Dobkin made lesbian lyrics imaginable."

"I think our music is subversive," says Phillips. "Through the soft sounds and harmonies, hear how sweetly we sing the word *whore*, and hear that little fake orgasm. It's emotionally true, and it's twisted."

"I think it's really important, as a gay artist, to speak to the hetero world," Korniloff explains, "to use pop forms to talk to them in both their language and our own. To *not* just talk to ourselves."

"I want to connect, so that when fans of our music hear some bigot saying, 'Kill the queers!' they'll realize that that person is talking about *us*—people they've come to like—and not some abstraction."

After the LP was released, the trio faced a crisis: Arranger-guitarist Freelove decided that she didn't have the stomach for touring and left the band. Phillips and Korniloff had already decided to add a drummer, so they lured Barger away from the group Child Bearing Hips.

"We knew it was her ambition to be a singing drummer—like Karen Carpenter,"

Korniloff confesses, "and we took advantage of that."

Although they despaired of filling Freelove's shoes, an ad they placed in the local alternative paper produced Hentges, who'd been in the Portland band Neo-Boys. After five trial-by-fire shows on the West Coast, it was obvious that both new recruits were in for the long haul, bringing their own personalities to the recorded material and helping to shape new songs.

Since the release of their ten-song debut disc, Two Nice Girls have added seven songs to their repertoire. These included Phillips's brilliant "The Queer Song"; her savage response to George Bush, "For the Inauguration"; and Hentges's desolate requiem for a relationship, "Threw It All Away." Other candidates for a second LP include the *faux*-disco tune "Let's Go Bonding"; an ode to a cartoon superheroine, "She-Ra: Princess of Power"; and a cover of Lucinda Williams's "Sharp Cutting Wings."

Performances since last summer—which took the band from a gay rights march on Austin to Tippitina's in New Orleans—have exposed Two Nice Girls to ever broader audiences. The group has been grateful for the response of college radio and National Public Radio, which ran an admiring profile of the band. They also hope to develop their following among gay men.

"I've seen lesbians uniting with gay men in the fight against AIDS," Korniloff notes, "but we need that unity with our gay brothers to extend beyond the health crisis. And I think our music will appeal to gay men."

"Right! As we do more and more disco," laughs Phillips. (The band already features an acoustic medley of disco classics in its set.)

Despite growing success, the group is still restless. They have talked about taking on a bass player ("a gay man, if he fits the bill") and strapping on electric guitars.

"I want to become the guitar goddess for today's 15-year-old girls," Phillips crows. "Maybe for the next album, we'll get rid of the sweet harmonies."

"Sure," Korniloff grins, "we'll put out our next LP in a black sleeve and print the band's logo inside a pink circle with a black slash across it. We can call it *No More Nice Girls!*"

Asked if they can imagine signing with a major label, Phillips answers with a healthy laugh, "Only if they treat us like the *queens* that we know we are."

Devilish dyke humor: (left to right) Meg Hentges, Kathy Korniloff, Gretchen Phillips, and Pam Barger

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The Subversive Sounds of TWO NICE GIRLS

A Punk Lesbian Quartet from Texas Does It Their Way

