

Deee-Liteful Threesome

New Music Trio Comes Up From the Radical Drag Underground

BY ADAM BLOCK

The gay dance club scene that once spawned Donna Summer, Grace Jones, and Madonna has lately launched the most scintillating new combo of the '90s: Deee-Lite.

This unlikely multinational trio boasts a de-gorgeous debut single, "What Is Love?" (backed with "Groove Is in the Heart"), which recently soared to the top of both the British and American dance charts. That triumph coincided with the trio's unpaid appearance last month at New York's dragfest Wigstock—a treat for the gay elite who first nurtured the group.

Deee-Lite coalesced in the midst of Manhattan's radical drag underground—a hotbed of tolerance and creativity. In 1985, DJ Dmitry, a Soviet expatriate and classically trained pianist, was playing guitar for the short-lived band Shazork!, fronted by drag celebs Lady Bunny and Sister Dimension. American-born go-go dancer and singer Kirby Kier was making the group's outrageous sci-fi silver-lamé costumes.

Two years later Dmitry and Kier were performing together when Towa Twowa, a recent arrival from Tokyo, slipped the two a tape. The technowhiz funk fan "helped us overcome our fear of technology," Kier admits. Still struggling with his English, Towa Twowa became the group's third member, and Deee-Lite began de-grooving.

The group fashioned its music out of an infectious collision of soul, funk, disco, and house—a layered, shifting quilt that marries Sade's cool soul to the wacky camp of the B-52s against the trance beats of acid house.

"We've all been very influenced by the gay scene," Kier admits. "I learned everything that I know about show biz from drag queens," she laughs.

Asked if any members of Deee-Lite are

gay or bisexual, Dmitry responds, "I don't think it's anyone's business. I don't think that it's important or that anyone should care." Could these be three raging heteros, petrified of being found out? That would be refreshing.

Deee-Lite's openly gay posse is enormous—from their manager, former *Billboard* music columnist Bill Coleman, to Taboo, the downtown drag legend who does their calligraphy. Kier sees working with gay artists as a way to "promote social awareness and fight bigotry."

The band hired Michael Economy, editor of the gay 'zine *Pansy Beat*, to do a comic-strip portrait of the group for their new disc, *World Clique* (Elektra). They cast Wigstock luminaries Taboo, Glamamour, and Miss Guy in their first video. And they hope to collaborate soon with the French gay photographers Pierre and Giles.

Deee-Lite arrives in the midst of the AIDS crisis, and to the group's credit, there is an appropriate echo of dread seeping into their effervescent mix. "We knew Keith Haring, Ethyl Eichelberger, and so many great people," says Kier. "We've lost so many, but that has helped propel us toward the positive. We've done benefits for AIDS groups and for homeless PWAs. We're not escapists. We're very aware of the horrors and problems out there."

"And we escape," Dmitry adds, "into hope."

The band has plans for a one-hour stage show and a video of their second single, "Power of Love." The single is due out in mid November. This month they'll be on a ten-city tour of the United States, followed by five weeks in Europe. The group hopes to be back in Manhattan by Dec. 8 to play the Gay Men's Health Crisis AIDS danceathon.

Deee-Lite's commitment to fighting AIDS is only one measure of how much their gay fans are appreciated. They're certainly the only act on a major label to take out ads in underground gay 'zines like

Fertile LaToyah Jackson. But their ultimate aim is to inoculate the mainstream with tolerance, irreverence, and delight.

"We really want to play fully integrated clubs," Dmitry notes, "gay, straight, black, and white—[to help] lose the distinctions."

"It just seems that the coolest clubs always have a lot of gay people in them," Kier grins. "I don't think we're really camp, though," she muses. "Not in that sense of being an in-joke. We want to be universal and inclusive."

"That's why we called our album *World Clique*—to celebrate the ultimate anti-clique: the whole world. That's who *we* want to play with."



Three on a party
Deee-Lite "learned everything from drag queens."