

Phranc deserves to be known for more than just her haircut — the hippest flattop in pop. She deserves to be known for more than her sexuality — as the first openly lesbian singer-songwriter on a major label. But she also deserves to be known for more than her two LPs: *Folksinger* (Rhino), from 1985, and *I Enjoy Being a Girl* (Island), from 1989. It's not that those LPs don't have their charms, but neither one really does her justice.

I've heard Phranc casually dismissed as a "novelty act" or a "soapbox lesbian" — both conceits that her live shows explode. I've seen her open shows for Hüsker Du and the Smiths, bringing crowds who had never heard of her to their feet. But *that* was four years ago.

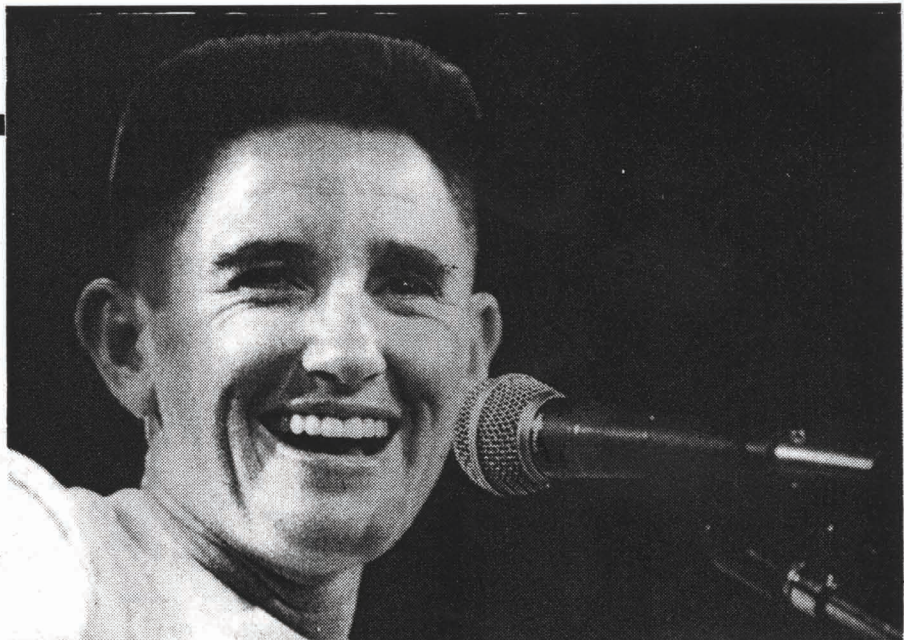
After canceling a gig last year because of the earthquake, Phranc *finally* pulled back into San Francisco, and she did not disappoint. Taking the stage at Slim's in her regulation white T-shirt, Levi's, and black combat boots, she looked brilliant, sort of like the grown-up tomboy daughter of Bea Arthur and Tom Cruise. She opened with "Folksinger," her song about the slew of closeted gals with guitars who've scaled the charts since she last hit town. Her voice was warm; her gaze, cocked skeptically.

Phranc's unnerving androgyny (expressed with easy confidence) and her fervent opinions (couched in sly, laconic wit) make her a fascinating performer. She creates nearly a camp-fire intimacy, personalizing with her radical and whimsical flights. On record, you don't have that eye contact, and her show-and-tell and sing-alongs suffer.

Live, she can connect, even with some of her rather unlikely material: a serious ballad about the boy eaten by bears at the Brooklyn Zoo (which takes the bears' side), an ode to her dead parakeet, a Public Service plea not to park in handicapped spaces, a tune about Pope Paul's comic book, and a buoyant slam against mud wrestling. She admitted to me that two dyke punks took exception to *that* song when she appeared in Santa Cruz, Calif.

"They were hard-core — shaved heads, leather, dresses, boots. Standing right by the stage, they screamed, 'We love female mud wrestling!'" Phranc laughed. "It threw my timing off, but that was good! I like it — keeps me on my toes."

Phranc is quick on her feet, and during the course of a set, her particular vision emerges through illuminating performances of her recorded catalog. On disc, "Toy Time" sounds like a squirrely satire on compulsive consumption; it grates.



MARC GELLER

Phranc Talk

The Dreams and Desires of an All-American Jewish Lesbian Folksinger

Heard live, it's a soulful salute to the pleasures of play from an unembarrassed collector of G.I. Joe dolls.

On disc, Phranc's cover of "I Enjoy Being a Girl" sounds like a cute idea that somehow went wrong. Live, done a cappella, it's a sultry, subversive surprise. As she stalks the stage, Phranc's hair, clothes, and wry confidence all refute the lyrics' blind celebration of traditional feminine values. When she puts her hands on her hips and belts out, "I'm strictly a female female!" it is the delighted boast of someone who has given those words new meaning; it is a loving revenge on the dress code that made her youth so miserable.

It's a triumph that the audience shares, and Phranc pauses to reward their cheers by tossing out handfuls of promotional tampo-ns. When she asked, "OK, who really needs one?" the boys were screaming louder than the girls. Try that on your stereo.

Phranc played a generous 18-song set, singing chill attacks on racism and Nazi punks, salacious celebrations of female athletes, and a touching tribute to her two senile grandmothers. The crowd remained standing — rapt, then roused — for the entire 1½-hour set. Afterward, they bought every T-shirt she'd brought along.

The next day, sporting a baseball cap from the Cubby Hole, New York's notorious lesbian club, Phranc answered some pointed questions. For one, will we have to wait four *more* years for another album and tour? She swears that she'll have a new album out by this summer or fall, on the

Island label, though she hasn't finished any of the songs yet.

I noticed that she sings only one "love song," and that's a lament over a girl who didn't appreciate Phranc's bunk beds. "You have to be in love to write love songs, I'm afraid," she shrugged. Will some able-bodied sister please step in?

I asked her about the sing-a-long tune that has long closed her concerts — a song written in response to a number of ODS among her friends during punk's heyday. The song runs, "Recently, friends have been departing/Permanently/But not me/'Cause I'm a life-lover, that's me!"

In the age of AIDS, I asked, don't those lyrics imply that our friends who've died simply didn't love life enough — sort of a Louise Hay sentiment? "Oh, God, no," Phranc replied. "That's not what I mean. That they're to blame? God, I've never thought of it that way. Great! Now, every time I sing it, *that's* what I'll think of. Thanks a lot," she laughed.

Finally, I asked her if there were any musicians that she'd like to work with on her next record. "Well, I'd really like to do a tune with the gals," she admitted. "Exene, Syd Straw, Michelle [Shocked], Two Nice Girls. It's not that we're such close friends, but I've felt very comfortable with them."

Here's hoping that Phranc gets her album cut pronto and can get back out on the road. I'm already waiting, and I intend to be fearless about bringing my skeptical friends along.

—Adam Block