

# Pop Panic

## Finding Out the Real Homo Heroes

The only excuse for the Grammy ceremonies, the only thing that keeps them from going catatonic, are those moments when a madman like **Jerry Lee Lewis**, a queen like **Boy George**, or a mad queen like **Little Richard** runs amok. This year's show was inexcusable.

The closest thing to a radical twist in the marathon was the twin victories of outsiders **k. d. lang** and **Lyle Lovett** in the Country Vocalist category. Lovett has trimmed his *Eraserhead* tresses, but he is still a misanthropic oddball. And lang, with her wicked new boy-cut, marks the closest thing to gender fuck that mainstream country music has ever known. In her silver-embroidered dress coat, she looked butcher than Randy Travis and hotter than Dwight Yoakam.

Lang called her award "a piece of land where I intend to plant my seeds of hybrid country; and *this* land is fertile!" Very Barbara Stanwyck. It was the queerest moment all night.

You *knew* this show was a lame one when rap (spawned by the black, urban underclass) finally scored airtime and the winner was tuxedo-clad **Young M.C.** Introduced as having "a college degree in economics," he droned through a litany of thanks to an endless list of white management and record-company personnel. Public Enemy's **Flavor Flav**, decked out in a mammoth gray top hat, vivid green Batman shades, and a silver-headed cane, rushed up to congratulate the buttoned-down dork. And *that* was the closest to a camp, or spontaneous, moment all night.

Former fabulous troublemakers **Bette Midler** and **Lou Reed** were there looking as dapper and dull as account executives. This Grammy show was mired in a gay-free zone—casting a vibe out of *The Stepford Wives*. It's the kind of sick chill I get watching graduates of the womyn's music circuit dancing around questions about their sexuality. The power of that Stepford-zombie pop panic toward queers is insidious and

far-reaching. Just check out **Cris Williamson's** recent troubles.

Williamson, the ground-breaking lesbian singer-songwriter (whose debut LP, *The Changer and the Changed*, remains the top seller in Olivia's catalog), was interviewed for last September's *Hot Wire* magazine. Asked if she hadn't "been forced out as a lesbian," Williamson replied, "No one knows if I am or not . . . I think some women are definitely lesbian, and that's their religion—that's what changed them, and that's what moved them. It is not what has moved me most in my life."

It was enough to make any queer cringe. Williamson felt our shudder and wrote in the magazine's January issue, "I never meant to deny being a lesbian . . . Truthfully, I was surprised at my own response. . . . It was a puzzle to me, after 15 years of singing to lesbians, defending lesbians, and being a lesbian, that I found myself answering so defensively. I can only say that I have learned a great deal from the experience." She added, "I am a lesbian, and I remain proud."

It's a telling incident. Folks will tell you that it's easier for women to come out; that if an artist is on an independent label, playing to a supportive community, she'll be insulated from such self-doubt. Fact is, it still takes some courage.

The Austin quartet **Two Nice Girls** shares that gutsiness on its ebullient new EP (complete with rambunctious liner notes that don't shirk the *I* word). *Like a Version* (Rough Trade) is due this April with a bluegrass medley of **Donna Summer's** "I Feel Love" and **Bad Company's** "Feel Like Makin' Love"; a cover of the rockabilly rarity "Bang, Bang" (originally done by **Janis Martin**, who was once wishfully billed as "the female Elvis"); **Sonic Youth's** "Cotton Crown"; the theme song from the '60s cartoon *Speed Racer*; and a stunning cover of the **Carpenters'** "Top of the World" by Two Nice Girls' secret threat, drummer Pam Barger. All five cuts feature the group's new lineup, with only the glorious lament "I

Spent My Last \$10 (on Birth Control and Beer)" reprised from their debut disc.

Meanwhile, **Laurie Freelo**, a former member of the original trio, has resurfaced in Austin, leading the new combo **Fifty Words for Snow** with a five-song debut cassette that is nothing short of astonishing. Her work is haunted, wry, and riveting. We're talking one scary folksinger. The standout selection, "Valentine Heart," comes on like a wicked hybrid of early Patti Smith and lang. Though Freelo is ably accompanied by as many as six musicians, she is majestic in a nearly a cappella cover of **Tim Buckley's** "Song to a Siren." It's a rich brew. (For a copy, send \$10 to Freelo, P.O. Box 12782, Austin, TX 78711.)

This spring also promises releases from some homo heroes. Polygram Records will be issuing a 12-inch single of **Jimmy Somerville's** artful cover of the **Sylvester** classic "Mighty Real"—with a video featuring boys in space suits (safe sex?) targeted at MTV. The LP *Read My Lips* (Polygram) is due in early April.

**Morrissey** was out at Death Valley last month shooting a video for his upcoming single, "November Spawned a Monster" (Sire). Plans call for an LP to follow, gathering the singles released since his solo debut disc. There is *no* Smiths reunion currently in the works. In a remarkably uninformative radio interview in Los Angeles, the Mozzer assured one anxious fan that he is still celibate and congratulated them all on their intelligence and good taste. *Quel* card.

**Marc Almond** has been in the studio, promising a new LP this summer. **Sister Double Happiness**, featuring big, bold fag Gary Floyd, is cutting a demo for Warner Bros. Records. Wonder what they'll make of his country blues "Ain't It a Shame," with the safe-sex lyrics "Sweat drippin' down/off your blond mustache/But your kicks aren't safe/You leave it to fate/You're a dangerous machine." Wonder if GLAAD is going to accuse him of stereotyping? Before they release any new LP, look for the group to headline next October's Castro Street Fair—in Sylvester's old slot.

It's guys like Floyd, Almond, Somerville, and Erasure's Andy Bell and gals like Two Nice Girls, Freelo, Phranc, and—glad to say—Williamson who stand as singing shock troops in that war against pop invisibility. Theirs are the faces and voices I want to find on the Grammys: while Michael Jackson—with Chastity Bono on his arm—gazes uncomprehending from the balcony. Yeah, we can dream.

—Adam Block