

A decade ago, Patrick Fitzgerald reached two conclusions: He was gay, and he wanted a career as a pop musician. He had no idea how those two discoveries would ultimately intertwine, and he kept them to himself.

Fitzgerald was then 17 years old, living in Manchester, England, and emerging from an emotional maelstrom; his parents had just divorced, and he'd failed his entire curriculum at school. "That was a terrible and very important year for me," Fitzgerald admits today, his eyes flashing behind wire-rimmed glasses. "But once I'd made those decisions, punk music, which I'd always hated, made sense to me—the outrage of the Sex Pistols and the fury of the Buzzcocks."

Ten years later, Fitzgerald is still lit by that rage, which rips through a deceptively studious veneer in his music. As the openly gay lead singer of the British trio Kitchens of Distinction, he has made good on his teenage vows: He has a lover, and he has a band.

"My lover actually works for a record company. The weird thing is that *he* is still in the closet. He's told me that he thinks it's a bad career move for me to be 'out.' He's tried to encourage me to compromise," Fitzgerald smiles. "But I've always said, 'Look, I'm going to do it my way—the honest way. I'm not going to make enough money, but I'm going to be happy.' To which, finally, he said, 'OK, OK.'"

I recently met Fitzgerald at the ramshackle London flat he's had since college. Despite his humble surroundings, Fitzgerald is a man with recordings and reviews that tell the tale of a brilliant band fairly drenched in promise. Last year, Britain's *Music Week* dubbed Kitchens of Distinction "best new band of '89," while the *New Musical Express* ranked them "the best band in the Northern Hemisphere."

But after three EPs, one LP, and much critical praise, the group has yet to score a substantial pop following in Britain or a label deal in the United States. Fitzgerald is patient and undeterred, though. It's been a long and difficult road from Manchester, one that he has relived in his lyrics and in the pop press.

GLAMOUR AND GUILT

As we sat drinking tea from chipped mugs, I noticed a well-thumbed copy of *The City and the Pillars*, Gore Vidal's pre-Stonewall melodrama about a man who reappears after 30 years to join his school admirer for one sordid, degrading night in a cheap

by ADAM BLOCK

PATRICK FITZGERALD

The Gay Voice of a Nongay Band

hotel. I picked up the paperback.

"Wouldn't that make a great film?" Fitzgerald remarks. "I mean, it's that whole guilt thing. It glamorizes the fuck out of the whole image of the unhappy homosexual. I know it's a ridiculous concept, but it's so wonderfully trashy. It's how I feel, even though I know that politically it's crap."

Fitzgerald has earned the right to entertain such tortured fantasies. When he left home at 18 to attend medical school in London, his parents expected him to return as a straitlaced physician, following in his father's shoes. Dutifully, he did what was expected.

"I made it with a woman first," he admits with a touch of embarrassment. "It was so contrived. It was my response to the usual question 'How can you say that you're gay unless you've slept with a woman?'—which is obviously ludicrous but seemed important to me then."

It would be two more years before he was finally able to compare it to sex with a guy. But first he chose to tell his mother that he was gay. "She cried and blamed herself—still does," he says. "My dad didn't give a fuck. He just said, 'It can be a lonely life, but you can always stay here.'"

Fitzgerald's fellow students turned out to be far less friendly toward the news. "The first guy I ever slept with was another student," he recalls. "I was 20. We were drunk. I'd sort of persuaded him up to my room. It was a one-night stand, and then he went back to his girlfriend. But the people who'd been with us were massive gossips—really spread it around the school."

GOING TO HEAVEN

Although some younger gay students even-

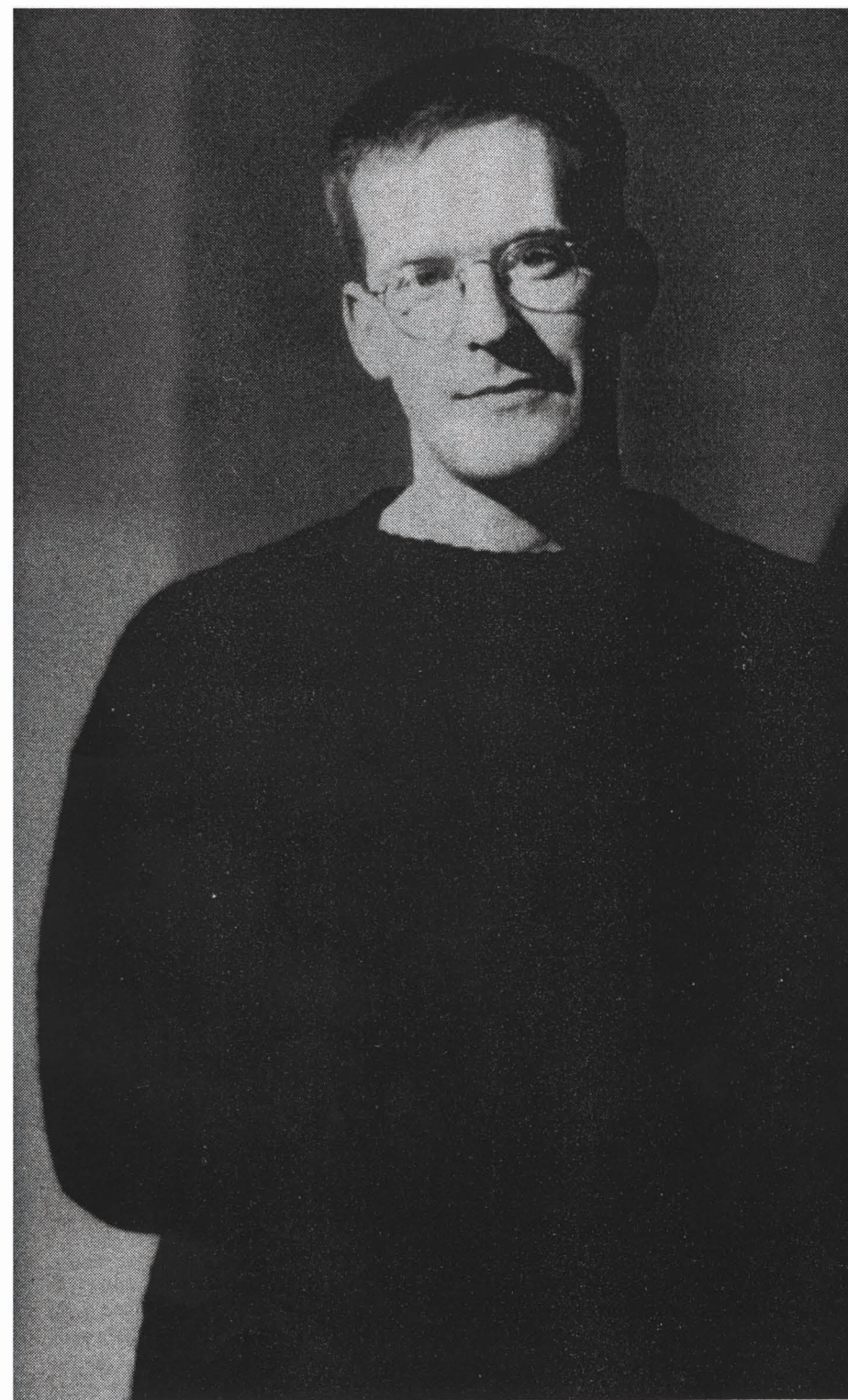
tually came to Fitzgerald for reassurance, he spent the next two years at school feeling very isolated. "I didn't discover the gay scene until 1985," he confesses. "I'd been holed up in my room, pretending I was a band called Surrogate Mothers, recording really heavy, melancholy tracks. Finally, this guy dragged me out to Heaven [a London disco] and the gay clubs."

Two years later, in 1987, Fitzgerald completed his internship and promptly quit medicine, disgusted by the intolerance and bigotry he found rampant in the profession. He began working with a guitarist, Julian (who liked Brian Eno and the Cocteau Twins), and a drummer, Dan (who preferred jazz and reggae). The trio deliberately picked the banal, unglamorous name Kitchens of Distinction and played covers of the Velvet Underground, Joy Division, and Echo and the Bunnymen while working on their own songs.

The group's aim was to produce music that was literate, vulnerable, and defiant. Their sound was delicate and a little deranged, tuneful and testy. Soon, a homemade first single earned them a contract with One Little Indian, the Sugar-cubes' British label.

In the fall of 1988, the label released the single "Prize." Fitzgerald was about to come out all over again. The song chronicled his savage response to being uncouthly asked by a friend about being a fag. The *New Musical Express* made the song their Single of the Week, and by the end of the year it made their critics' top-30 list. The band was getting noticed and gaining some notoriety.

Partly this was the packaging. The cover



have been totally supportive, Fitzgerald worries that he has brought to the group a stigma that may hurt his partners. "I think we would have done much better if I'd kept my mouth shut. I've had fans come up and say, 'My friends won't buy your records, 'cause then people will count them as gay.'"

OF MEN AND MUSIC

Fitzgerald points out that only three of the nine tracks on the group's *Love Is Hell* LP have gay lyrics. "I write about what's important in my life, and [being gay] is only part of it."

Still, Fitzgerald's gay songs seem to focus his passion. Consider "4 Men," a sexy, extravagant song about unrequited love, and the harrowing album closer, "Hammer," about sexual panic in the age of AIDS. The latter is a song that only a gay man could write. "It's another aspect of why love is hell," Fitzgerald explains. "If you love someone and you want to fuck him, sodomize him, or vice versa, it's never been seen as right. But now it's seen as downright dangerous. Does that make you socially guilty for doing those things? Surprisingly, the straight world finds these feelings and problems hard to grasp."

TRUE TO HIMSELF

Fitzgerald is hoping for a measure of pop success on his own terms. "I'll tell you one thing: I hope I never become an icon like that," he says, pointing to a flamboyant shot of Morrissey on the cover of a magazine. "I'd really like for the *music* to be the band's persona."

He can see that his homosexuality—played up in the press—has already begun to disrupt the notion that they are "just musicians." And rightfully so. The band's courageous, nonsensational collaborations are inspired and liberating. Ironically, though Kitchens of Distinction has offered to play London's Gay Pride rally for the past three years, the trio has been snubbed every time. Even though it could be a bad career move, they recently offered their services yet again for this year's annual celebration.

The band's refusal to get glamorous or macho or even try to be enigmatic—to strike a pose or feed fans' fantasies—has been as hard to market as their unwieldy name. The group's latest single, "Quick as Rainbows" (One Little Indian/U.K.) has just been released in England. Produced by Martin Hannet (Joy Division, Happy Mondays), the disc is backed with "Shiver," "Mostly Mornings," and "In a Cave." Given the star producer and ferocious live tracks (recorded in Berlin), this disc should help the band find its following. The group is too talented to go begging much longer.

illustration of "Prize" featured a neoclassical image of a statuesque male nude. Six months later the band issued the EP, *The First Time We Opened the Capsule*. On this cover, a nude male swimmer dove backward toward their name. The disc's second cut, "4 Men," featured Patrick's most vividly homoerotic lyric. The disc was once more picked as Single of the Week by the *New Musical Express*. Their first LP, *Love Is Hell*, was released a month later, with an illustration of four naked men on the cover.

The group was increasingly being referred to as "a gay band."

"We're *not* a gay band," Fitzgerald told the press at the time, "we're *one* faggot and two straights who make music. The point is social acceptance."

Today, the singer further explains, "I don't believe there is a gay sensibility in music. I believe in a gay sensibility in *life*. You can have a gay lyric, but the music is genderless."

Even though his fellow band members