

"I think I'm more notorious for the things I've said than for being a singer," says Jimmy Somerville, smiling through the burr of his Scottish brogue. "I'm probably Europe's most notorious homosexual, more so than Boy George or Quentin Crisp. I've *never* been anything but up-front about it, and that has put me in a vulnerable position, because of the bizarre way that being that honest affects people."

The diminutive 28-year-old singer with the soaring falsetto has been the most uncompromising queer in pop music ever since he emerged in 1984 as the lead singer of Bronski Beat. The unglamorous gay socialist trio printed the age of consent for homosexual behavior around the world on the inner sleeve of their LP and broke nearly every rule, including the one that insists that openly gay performers cannot achieve pop success. Within a year, Bronski Beat had scored massive dance hits with "Small-town Boy" and "Why?" and charted an unlikely cover of George Gershwin's "It Ain't Necessarily So."

From the start, Somerville had traded insults in the pop press with his more coy fellow flamers: Boy George, Frankie Goes to Hollywood, and Marilyn. George retorted by saying that Somerville "looked like a potato." And shortly after recording a cover of Donna Summer's "I Feel Love" with Marc Almond, Somerville and Almond were swapping swipes. "Jimmy wants me to do something for the gay community?" Almond asked. "I should strangle him."

Early in 1985, as Bronski Beat was slated to tour America as Madonna's opening act, Somerville was hauled before a magistrate on charges of "gross indecency." (It *wasn't* for his stage act.) Somerville suddenly canceled the tour, quit the band, and was nowhere to be found.

When he resurfaced some months later as one half of the Communards, with new partner Richard Coles, Somerville still hadn't tempered his tongue. Britain's newly enacted antigay Clause 28 only intensified the singer's candid views, which included "outing" the Pet Shop Boys and Morrissey.

In early 1988, after two Communards albums (and scoring dance hits with covers of Thelma Houston's "Don't Leave Me This Way" and Gloria Gaynor's "Never Can Say Good-bye") Somerville folded his second band. He also canceled another American tour—this time to go backpacking through Cuba, Central America, and Mexico with a boyfriend.

A year later, during a visit to London, I

by ADAM BLOCK

JIMMY SOMERVILLE

The Bad Boy of Pop Music Acts Up

found Somerville once again before the magistrates and in the headlines. This time, he and a group of AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power (ACT UP) activists were charged with disrupting the Australian embassy in a protest over the country's HIV immigration policy. Somerville was also remixing his first solo LP.

"It's really hectic and funny," he explained to me. "I spent the morning taping pissy intros for Radio One, and later I'm dashing to meet with the designers of some renegade ACT UP posters. I'm trying to juggle my activism and my pop career."

Last month, the singer was briefly in the United States to promote the domestic release of his new album, *Read My Lips* (London). Somerville told me he was now considering moving to the Bay Area. "For six months anyway," he said, "to try to see how the original gay ghetto has dealt with the AIDS crisis." But first, he has to complete an ACT UP benefit tour in Europe this spring (shows in Glasgow, Manchester, Liverpool, Nottingham, London, and Paris). And he's agreed to do another ACT UP benefit in New York City this summer.

I asked him if he would consider other performances here. "I think I'd just want to do some benefits," he replied with a disarming grin. "I'd like to bring tapes, pick up a couple of musicians, and rehearse ten or 12 songs."

If Somerville is only slightly less difficult to catch in concert these days, that's part of what has branded his career as unique. He has consistently put his life-style and his political interests ahead of commercial concerns. Which is why his stories often prove as surprising as his music. During our

conversation in April, Somerville and I talked about his rocky career and rock-solid convictions—and how he's kept both alive.

On the eve of Bronski Beat's first American tour, you refused to come. What were you convicted of? What really happened?

I was arrested for sucking someone's dick! [Laughs] What happened was, there were two policemen in the park, really huddled up close, like they were having sex, but they were really waiting for someone else to have sex so that they could pounce. They still train pretty policemen to do it.

That wasn't what stopped the tour, though. It made a convenient excuse. I think I would have gone *insane* touring arenas, opening for Madonna. That's not singing. That's not making music; that's making money. It would've meant destroying myself. As much as I'm committed to what I believe in, I'm not gonna wreck myself in the process.

Did that conviction in court drive you out of the parks?

No. It's still my favorite type of cruising. It's much more fun.

What has kept you from doing a small tour of America, then?

Just that I'm so lazy. I don't like sleeping in hotels for months on end.

But couldn't you do a little promo, a few shows, and visit places you'd like to see?

I've thought that I'd like to go to Boston and, oh...Houston, where all those hot gay cowboys hang out! It's really awful

But as for the others, I just think it's their *duty* to present something that allows young people—and even grown people who are having problems with their sexuality—to realize, *Oh, I'm not alone*. And for people to see that there is nothing wrong with it. *That's* what I think people are being denied.

Let's talk about the new album.

Well, the title cut, "Read My Lips," was inspired by seeing that phrase on American ACT UP posters—logos and stuff. The song is a mad kind of disco anthem that deals with the complacency surrounding AIDS. I want people to find the power and energy to start fighting back—'cause I'm just fed up with seeing people dying, and all we do is cry.

Grief is really important, but I think we have to start getting really angry instead of just showing that grief. The lyric is "Read my lips/Enough is enough!" It's really blatant.

The first single we've released here is a cover of Sylvester's "(You Make Me Feel) Mighty Real." It's quite a different version. It's really acoustic, with lots of horns and piano. It's more of a celebration, because I want to celebrate Sylvester's life in doing his song. And it's really important that people know who Sylvester was and where that song came from.

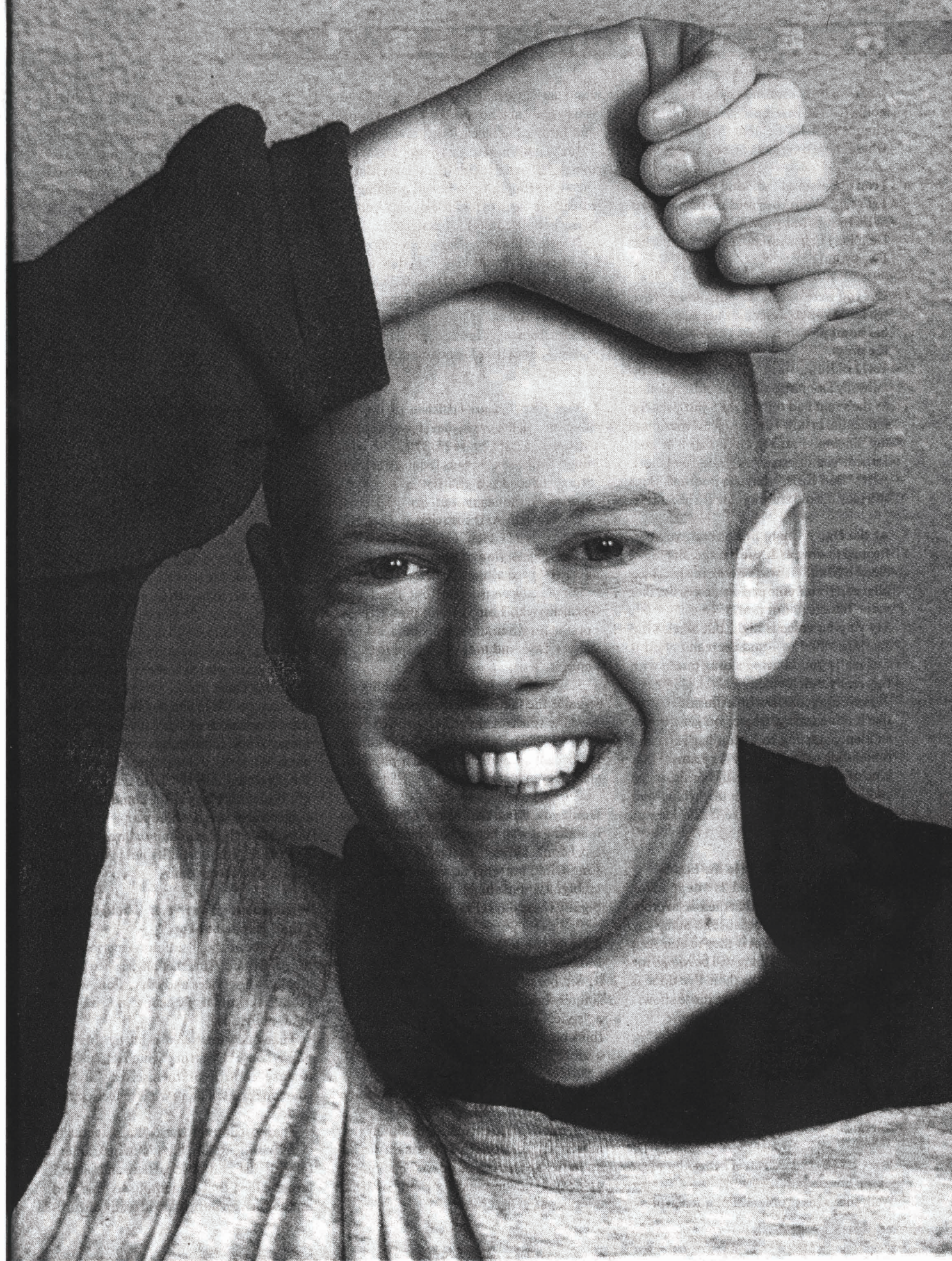
I want people to find out about the political connotations of disco. It's *not* just trash music. Whole communities evolved through disco. When disco clubs started, that's when the gay community started to build. As they got bigger and bigger, the community got bigger and bigger. As more people met in the same place, the community started to grow. Disco is very important. It's not just a trivial, trashy, throwaway thing.

What about "You Never Thought This Could Happen to You"?

That's about the insidious Americanization of Britain. Thatcher has slashed social and health services and education, which I think is criminal, yet people in Britain remain oblivious.

That one's answered a bit by this real happy song, "Control," which tells people to take control of themselves—not let someone else tell them what to feel, think, or do.

The most unusual track, "Rain," actually deals with acid rain, but it's an instrumental with just a bit of vocal here and there. I find the idea that something so pure and fine as rain can burn and kill really disturb-



GENE BAGNATO

NEW MUSIC

[Laughs], but *that's* the kind of thing that's going to motivate me to go someplace: the chance that I'd be able to go into a bar where there'd be gay cowboys.

I can understand that kind of motivation. Let's talk about your musical inspirations. Who influenced you?

Definitely Donna Summer. She was it when I was young.

But you were one of the outspoken artists who said you'd "never play her again" after her homophobic remarks were reported in the press.

Yes, I did. But I lied. I just *couldn't* throw away my Donna Summer records. As much as she's said bad things, she's just been too influential in how I approach my music and my singing. Frankly, as far as I'm concerned, she doesn't really *exist* anymore. After "Bad Girls," that was it for me. But I still play the old stuff. I think it's like magic.

At the Daisy Chain in London, you performed in drag as Jessie Savage, singing "I Need a Man." It was one of the most exhilarating, anarchic performances I've ever seen. Tell me about that.

My singing voice is high, but when I did Jessie, I sang low—and deep and mad! It was really good having a drag queen with this really butch voice.

I love drag for the whole illusion. I don't like it done trashy, where you get a queen suddenly starting to lift up her skirt and pretending to finger-fuck her fanny—that kind of crap. I think it's really boring. In the end, I think that's quite disturbing and misogynistic. What I like is the idea of creating an illusion.

Will we get to see Jessie in the States?

No, she's gone, I'm afraid. It was good for me personally to show that there is no problem to doing [drag], because so many gay men have this fear that if they're ever seen in a dress, then everything will be *ruined* for them! I don't see it like that. I've done it now. It was a great laugh at those shows, but it doesn't appeal to me anymore.

You've caught a lot of flak for attacking closeted gay pop stars by name. Have your ideas about doing that changed at all?

No. If anything, I've become more intolerant.

Boy George accused you of being a "professional homosexual."

Well, that's his problem. I'm not a profes-

sional homosexual; I'm just someone who is very open and honest about what I think, and I think [being closeted] is really bad.

It's OK for him to go on *now* about gay things, 'cause he's made his millions. But all the way through, when he was building his career, he kept extremely quiet. And so many people could have benefited.

It's the same with the Pet Shop Boys. A lot of people could benefit if they would simply say, "Gay is good. Be gay; be proud." There's too much happening at the moment—too many heavy things—to get excuses from privileged people. I feel quite strongly about this. I'm adamant and quite militant.

Subsequent to your criticism of the Pet Shop Boys in the press, they signed a public petition against Clause 28. They also contributed all the proceeds from a libel suit directly to an AIDS charity.

Yeah, well, I'm sorry, but writing checks doesn't buy off your conscience. That's all I think they're doing. I think you have to present a life-style and an image that stand up as accepted alongside heterosexuality. People always scream that I'm really flaunting who I am. I think that is really outrageous when straight people are doing it every day. And *they* don't have to think about it.

So I'm the only one who's making an issue of the fact that sometimes we don't have the space or the room—or we're not allowed—to be what we actually want to be, because we often face such physical, verbal, even legal abuse.

Don't you think that Marc Almond was flaunting it well before you were?

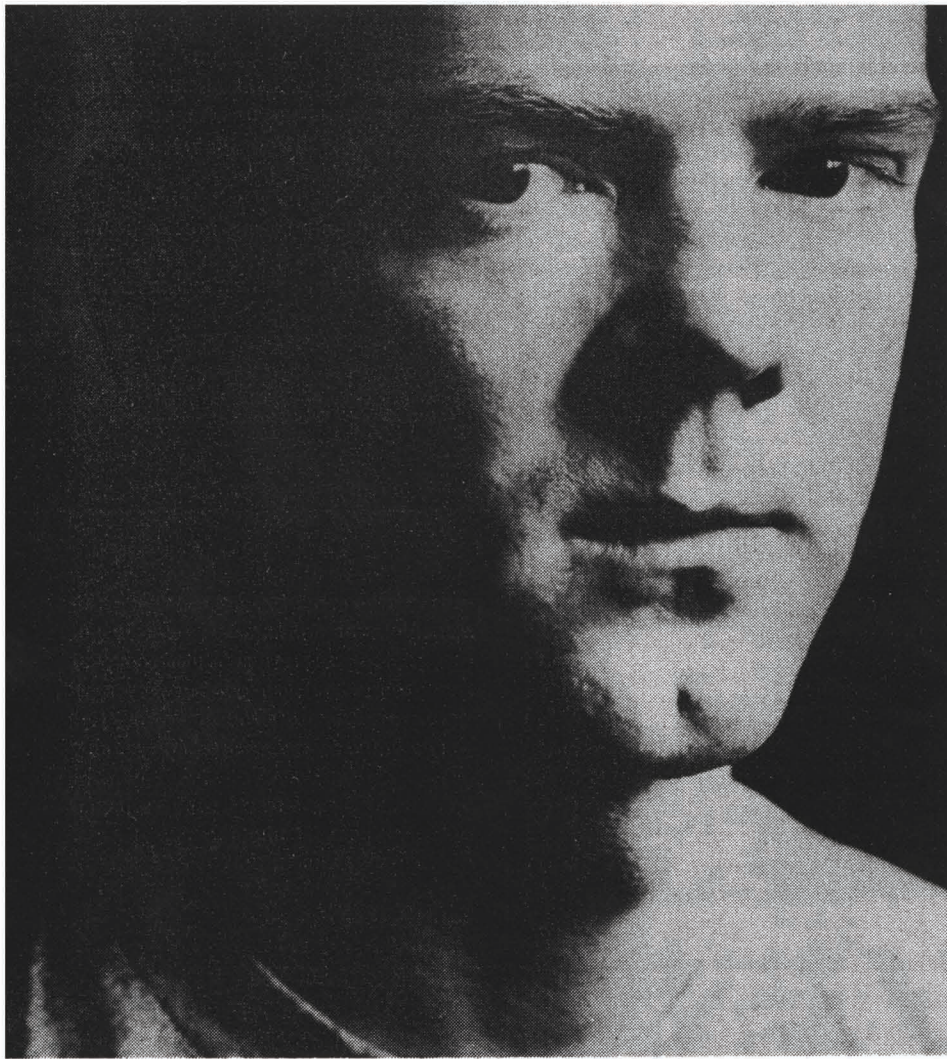
No, I don't. He's still my favorite singer and songwriter, but what he was flaunting was ambiguity, and there's no room for ambiguity these days. I'm sorry.

How do you feel about Morrissey?

Morrissey may be an intellectual, he may be a poet, but he's useless. I think he writes absolutely brilliant lyrics, but it's very much a "style." I think his voice is dreadful. I think his music's dire. And I think he is *such* a snob. Really useless.

What about Andy Bell? He's certainly forthright in interviews.

Yeah, out of all of them he is definitely the most open. It's not in his personality to be militant like me, but he doesn't backtrack or deny. And he makes a point of it in interviews.



me personally. I think it stops you from expanding your mind. I think that it's really important to meet people, and if that is how you meet them sometimes...well, I don't think you should stop or suppress it.

Do you have a favorite porno star?

Ah—I'm such a fan of Jeff Stryker.

Would you like to make it with him?

There is something so unreal about him. That's why I like him. I really do. I would just *love* to have sex with Jeff Stryker, 'cause I think it would be so wild. At the same time, I know that it wouldn't be wild. You always get the impression that he holds back. So I would really like to make him go wild.

I do actually think he's quite sexy. Everyone screams when I tell them that, because they think he is so plastic. But I think he's fab!

As a matter of fact, when I did that version of "I Need a Man" as Jessie Savage, I lifted all these bits of Jeff Stryker talking porn—"I wanna feel my cock hit the back of your throat!" and "You want my dick up your ass, boy?"—and mixed them into the backup track.

You've been very active in the London chapter of ACT UP, but no one else in pop has joined in on ACT UP demos. Do you feel isolated?

I feel *totally* isolated. But at the same time, I don't care, because I have all of my friends. The people I've met in ACT UP have given me the strength and motivation that I need.

Have you met other supportive allies through pop music?

No. The only person I know is Andy Bell, and I don't see much of him. I think he is a bit of a workaholic.

Two years ago you told me you were ready to give up singing. What are your ambitions and feelings now?

I've decided that I really want to work toward becoming an accomplished songwriter. I'd love to be able to write a song for someone else—a really brilliant voice like Lisa Stansfield or the Canadian Mary Margaret O'Hara or even for an unknown—and to have it receive a really great reception.

I think I'm going to keep on singing and recording. There's still no one else who really does what I do—I'm still the only gay pop star who *politicizes* it. After opening up my mouth for all these years, I think that I've actually managed to influence certain people and certain things. I don't think this is any time to quit.

ing. That track's one of my favorites, because it's so atmospheric.

The rest of the songs deal with a personal relationship that came to an end. It's the first time I've ever written about one, but this was the most important I've had in my life so far. They are strange songs for me to sing. I'm not used to being so personal.

The track "Heaven Here on Earth" reflects the beginning of the relationship. "Perfect Day" is about spending one day with him. Then the end is dealt with in "My Heart Is in Your Hands" and "Don't Know What to Do."

How did your boyfriend respond to those songs?

Well, he hasn't heard them, because we broke off. That's why the last of those is a plea to remain friends. He's the one I went to Central America with, and we were together round the clock for 2½ months. We were so honest and open with each other and really got on so well.

Do you think that your being a celebrity took a toll on the relationship back in England?

Yes. [Fame] makes it very hard to share your

own private world, especially with people always calling out to me. It was that plus the fact that I'm not a monogamous person. I'm not into monogamy, whereas Simon wanted a monogamous relationship. So that caused real friction.

How do you deal with promiscuity and concerns about safe sex? Do you think they are at odds?

Well, I totally *promote* promiscuity. I would never condemn it, because I think it's important. Not everyone is promiscuous, but for the people who are, it's an important part of life. To suppress that urge is almost like suppressing your sexual preference, which I think is really dangerous. The thing I'd say is to be as promiscuous as you want; just be safe.

Some people argue that gay people, in their promiscuity, say to the world that they are not capable of responsible, committed relationships. Do you buy that?

That depends on what you mean by a responsible relationship. I think that relationships—be they platonic or sexual, intense or not—are based on many things. The whole idea of monogamy is wrong for

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