

Morrissey undercuts sweet lyrics with an air of menace.

BY ADAM BLOCK



Talk about cult heroes. Morrissey's latest LP, *Kill Uncle* (Sire), isn't even charted on Billboard's Hot 200, but initial ticket sales for his current tour of the United States matched records set by Madonna and New Kids on the Block.

The six years since his last stateside visit with the Smiths have left fans rabid.

Undoubtedly buoyed by that response, pop's prince of misery looked the picture of boyish delight during a recent appearance in San Francisco. He also mounted a show so casually queer, it made the extravaganza by the Pet Shop Boys look like a labored study in subterfuge. Queer pride, queer shame, high camp, and mordant wit all wryly collided onstage.

Morrissey picked Phranc, the forthright lesbian folksinger, to open for him on the entire tour. Her gay pride is as willfully plainspoken as his is fey and oblique. Morrissey adores the notion of queers as glorious outsiders. Phranc wants something more, demanding respect and equality from society. The two form a complementary study in contrasting strategies. A high point of Phranc's winning set is "Dress Code," a savage, poignant attack on Jesse Helms and the block wardens of conformity.

Morrissey treasures his distance and difference from a society he considers appalling. He doesn't expect acceptance, even in the afterlife. It's a notion he celebrates in his extravagant lullaby "There Is a Place in Hell for Me and My Friends." Undoubtedly, Morrissey counts both Phranc and Klaus Nomi in his band of friends.

Nomi was a mad male diva who died of complications from AIDS nearly ten years ago, but a half hour after Phranc's set, it's Nomi's voice, singing a campy, demented aria, that announces that Morrissey has taken the stage. The crowd erupts as the singer appears—dressed in black boots and

Levi's, white T-shirt, and collarless black cotton jacket—backed by an unknown young rockabilly quartet (complete with Sun Studios-style reverb and a stand-up bass). His guitarist takes the high notes, leaving Morrissey free to play it tough and languorous. And he does.

The tour T-shirt features an infamous shot of the singer shirtless and flashing a shaved armpit over the logo MOTORCYCLE AU PAIR BOY. The phrase captures his act: equal parts wannabe outlaw tough and wannabe slatternly servant girl.

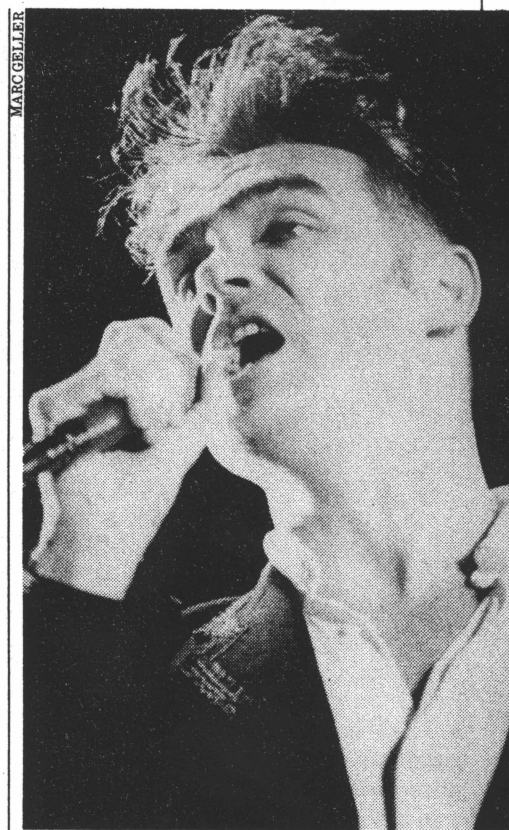
What is most striking is his playful sense of self-assurance. He undercuts sweet lyrics with an air of menace, bends tough lines with a touch of camp. Draped languidly over a stage monitor, he yodels the upbeat song "Sing Your Life" like a swooning Edwardian aesthete. His cover of the New York Dolls' 20-year-old put-down "Trash" is equally divine. Poising one foot on the monitor, he extends an arm and grandly declares, "You're trash!" Then his wrist falls limp. Later, on "Mute Witness," he whips the mike cord like a giddy cowhand.

During a one-hour, 17-song set, he never once dips into the Smiths' catalog—the songs that made his reputation. But if any fans mind, you can't tell. Bouquets and single spears of gladioli pelt the stage. Shirtless hunks surface above a sea of heads and hands twisting gleefully near the stage until the last number, "Disappointed."

Morrissey croons, "Don't talk to me about people who are 'nice,' 'cause I've spent my whole life in ruins because of people who were nice!" Behind him looms a massive image of Dame Edith Sitwell. She looks sexless and weirdly androgynous, like a man-tis with a migraine.

There is something delightfully sweet about all these subversions of gender, Phranc's matter-of-fact expressions of gay pride, and Morrissey's barbed, ironic cartoons of gay anger and shame. These collisions of queer images are disarmingly casual.

Fresh-faced boys pull on Sitwell and Phranc T-shirts. A girl dresses in a MOTORCYCLE AU PAIR BOY T-shirt. Sweet sexual subversion has come to the suburbs. Morrissey, the cult hero, is still taking pop to places it rarely ventures—and his fans with



Singer Morrissey
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him. It's a pleasure and a promising sight to see both enjoying it.

JUSTIFY MY VIDEO

Jimmy Somerville is the most politically aggressive homo in pop, so it's intriguing to see what use he has made of video across his career—particularly since few of his clips, if any, have aired in the United States. *Jimmy Somerville: The Video Collection 1984/1990* (PMV) delivers the goods. It provides a frustrating overview of a frustrating career.

Out of 17 clips, four deliver big-time, homoerotic to camp: "Smalltown Boy," "I Feel Love," "Disenchanted," and the unlikely cover of Abba's "Dancing Boy."

Engaging, occasionally baffling attempts to wed politics to fantasy on Sylvester's "Mighty Real" and Somerville's ACT UP anthem "Read My Lips" pose more questions than they answer. The package, like the artist, is unique; his failures are as instructive as his triumphs.