

Queer as They Want to Be

Voice Farm's Pop Nonconformists Confront Sex, Success, and the Closet

BY ADAM BLOCK

"I was talking to a friend last night about how we should present ourselves to the press," says Voice Farm's Myke Reilly. "And he said, 'Maybe you guys should be really out there and militant—like gay representatives.'"

"And I said, 'Yeah. Maybe. And maybe not.' That just might totally ruin my career, and I'd be back to making jingles and designing downtown stores, like I was last year," the synth player ruefully smiles.

Reilly's caution is understandable. He and vocalist Charly Brown have been working together as Voice Farm for a decade. Guitarist Ken Weller, the trio's "token hetero," has been on board for five years. With the recent major-label release of their LP *Bigger Cooler Weirder* (Morgan Creek) and an hour-long concert video in the can, band members can smell their shot at the main chance, and it's a little unnerving.

The signs are there: *Billboard* called the new disc "funkier than EMF, cooler than Jesus Jones," ranking Voice Farm over two of last year's hottest British combos. And on Feb. 11, the album's catchy pop single, "Seeing Is Believing," is being launched at Top 40 radio stations across the country.

In a rave review of its live show, the *Los Angeles Times* dubbed Voice Farm, "San Francisco's answer to the B-52s and Deee-Lite." When the members of a renegade camera crew who'd worked together on *Terminator 2* caught the band's gender-bent, Vegas-on-acid show, they were sufficiently wowed to offer to film the show for peanuts. The video is being released this month, and, later this year, the band is planning to take its wiggly, subversive show on an international tour.

It's been a long haul for the band mem-

bers to reach the brink of success, and they don't want to blow it with risky remarks. They've seen passionate praise and powerful promises fizzle before.

In 1982, Brown and Reilly released *The World We Live In* (Optional), a poignant, vivid disc of sparse technopop. The record's cover was a cool shock. It features the duo in Jockey shorts on an industrial rooftop, Reilly staring defiantly at the camera as Brown sheepishly wipes his mouth.

With only a tape and no live act, Voice Farm was signed by A&M Records in 1984 but was dropped the next year without releasing an album. "Sting, Bryan Adams, and Amy Grant were on the way up," comments Brown. "We were on the way out."

Late in 1987, cult label Ralph Records released the album *Voice Farm* and a 12-inch dance mix of "Super EQ Team," which became a club hit just as the band lucked into the opening slot on Depeche Mode's first American tour. By then the group's live show featured the radical dance troupe Oblong Rhonda, as it does to this day. Voice Farm's chill rhythms and quirky theatrics played Madison Square Garden and brought thousands of strangers to their feet.

"After that we thought *something* would happen," says Brown. "Instead, it kicked off our dark night of the soul."

"I got depressed," Reilly continues. "For a year or two I felt like there was this invisible wall that we couldn't penetrate. The record companies would tell us that we were 'good but too eclectic.' We weren't rap, heavy metal, or easy listening. We weren't 'formatable,' they said," Reilly shrugs.

"Luckily, we found work cutting ad jingles for SuperCuts, Marriott's Great America, and Rainier beer," continues Reilly. "That's what kept us solvent. Finally, Wally Brill, who had originally signed us to A&M, returned from work in England and agreed to manage us.

"On our own, we cut this CD, *Bigger*

Cooler Weirder, putting it out in 1989. Brill took it down to Morgan Creek Records, which was then just starting. Their premise was artists, not formats," Reilly smiles, "and in December of 1990 we became their first signing."

The band rerecorded the CD, adding two numbers from the Ralph Records disc and two strong new cuts. "It's a greatest-hits package," Weller notes, "aiming our strongest, most heartfelt songs at a mass audience."

Like its live shows, which climax with male and female dancers decked in matching Jockey shorts and Maidenform bras humping chastely, Voice Farm's songs celebrate nonconformity. Yet there are no gay-specific lyrics on the disc.

"Well, I think it's that I want to appeal to the girl in the front row as much as to the guy next to her," Brown suggests. "I don't write love songs to women, but that might not be apparent to the listener. It's really important not to leave anyone out."

"I wrote the song 'Stand By' to a fan, an army boy who'd begun to write me from Panama," he explains. "That's a queer song." It's a song about exposure, promising, "At a certain point, I'll tell you all! And I did," Brown laughs. "We exchanged nasty nude photos and wrote each other pornographic poems. Eventually, it evolved into a physical relationship. So the song was prophetic. I just wrote it before things got that juicy."

Reviewing his credentials as a gay radical, Brown brightens. "Hey, I took a boy to my high school prom in Portland, Ore., in the '70s," he says. "But I never related to the Castro district in this town [San Francisco]," he admits. "I always wanted to be a beatnik artist—someone outside society in that literary tradition that included weird people and gay people. But I never wanted to be a *gay* artist."

"I always wanted to be a freethinking artist," Reilly agrees, "but gay?" The musician

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Voice Farm members (left to right) Myke Reilly, Charly Brown, and Ken Weller

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winces and says, "As much of gay society disgusts me as hetero society. There are as many creepy, clony, Republican, preppy, uptight, materialistic homos struggling to conform as straight ones. It's repulsive, and it shouldn't be," he laughs. "Just being a minority should push people toward the edge."

"I've been impressed by ACT UP [AIDS

Coalition to Unleash Power] and Queer Nation," Brown continues, "but I don't know if I'd want to be like that. I'd like to let some people know I'm queer, but not people who might hurt me."

"Or not buy our records," Reilly interrupts with a sardonic aside. He glances around Voice Farm's homemade recording studio and then confides, "Look, we're trying to in-

filtrate the mass media. It is possible that being gay and gay-identified as a group might keep us off of contemporary hits radio or MTV, and those things are more important right now than being a spokesman.

"I don't want to be in the closet," agrees Reilly, "but I do want to be in a position from which I can do the most good." ▼