

ROCK A LA GIOCOSCO /GAY ROCK

Five years ago I read this curious ad in the personal column of the *Los Angeles Advocate*, the gay American tabloid. The legend read: "Liza, Shirley, Barbra, Merman, Peggy fans. Contact me for that hard to get material. H.L. Medici, 51 Clifton Ave C, Newark NJ 07104". This little gem nestled between an ad for Gay Mormon group and one in which Don Love proclaimed his interest in latex rubber baby pants, sheets, diapers and other related gear.

Surely this isn't really where it's at for the gay community? And with gay activists renewing their vigil in Gay Pride week last month, it might be worth looking at some cross currents between the music scene and the gay life style.

In the last dozen years or so Donovan was probably one of the first singers to foster a deliberate gay consciousness. His rather fey and willowy style is not really completely accounted for by the late sixties flower power. When Donovan sings to his drummer on "Song to John" from the *Open Road* album, "You're my single, lemme be your chart", it would take more than the hasty introduction of country ladies in the last few lines, to take the reverberations off that statement.

However, Donovan's pervasive feyness probably works against the gay implications of such moments. Similarly the rather pat word-games in "Get Back" and "Ob-La-De, Ob-La-De" show the Beatles were more interested in word-games than treating gay themes per se. The Rolling Stones went on their early seventies decadence kick, whether it be in the legendary "Cocksucker Blues" or the live version of "Honky Tonk Woman" with its 3rd verse about sailors. And now that Bianca has declared that she feels like a man, Jagger has really become gay by default.

Ray Davies and the Kinks were probably the group of this period who were mostly closely in line with a gay consciousness. The rather sad and wry vignettes of "Two Sisters" and "Death of Clown" are poignant

reminders that some people just don't make it in the rat race of Life. No, I'm not going to quote Thoreau and his wretched drum.

And when the Kinks came out with "Lola" in 1970, here was a song that really did treat a gay theme with a directness that was almost startling. It didn't pull its punches either:

*Well I'm not the world's most masculine man
But I know what I am and I'm glad I'm a man*

And so is Lola.

1970, and the culturally right-wing gay cliques were starting to cluster around a dying Judy Garland. Across the Atlantic, Janis Ian had included a remarkably matter-of-fact treatment of a gay theme in her song "Queen Merka and Me":

And the great stoned hash-eater, the child-less white Peter

Who walks with his boyfriend on into the spray

Saying "I love you babe", walking down towards the pavement

Enlocking, embracing as to say "I don't care"

I love him more than her.

Admittedly Janis Ian has now announced her own gayness. But in the late sixties, this



Tom Robinson Band

was probably not the greatest of the problems she had to deal with. And she didn't soil her track record with any hideous closet productions like Rod McKuen's *The Body Electric - the Erotic Words of Walt Whitman*.

The 70's moved on. Many groups flirted with images that suggested all was not straight... So one of Steppenwolf liked cross-dressing and it was said that... (whisper) one of the Kinks was... gay... and so on and so forth proving nothing. Then David Bowie, showperson supreme, picked the right time, donned a dress and announced to the world that he was gay. And

there's two record covers for proof!

However Bowie's apocalyptic visions had little place for exclusively gay themes. What can one say? He admits to being a non-aggressive dad in "Kooks", or that "Lady Stardust" is about Marc Bolan? It took Lou Reed, with all his Velvet Underground apprenticeship behind him, to write songs with fairly direct gay themes — "Walk on the Wild Side", "Vicious", "New York Telephone Conversation" and "Make up", which almost has Lou making a clarion call:

*Now we're coming out, out of our closets
Out on the streets, yea, we're coming out*

If Lou Reed was the undoubted King of New York Bizarre in his time, then his West Coast equivalent, Frank Zappa, hardly makes any use of gay themes. The only ones I can recall are Rodney Bingenheimer claiming that young homosexuals yearn for Wild Man Fischer's red underpants, and the occasion frisson in the Girls Together Outrageously's first, and only, album.

There have always been odd-shot records with gay overtones. When Smith Ballew recorded "Can't We Be Friends" in 1929 using the 'girl's words', he was starting a mildly amusing joke that would be echoed in recent years by George Melly ("Kitchen Man"), Ian Mathews ("Da doo ron ron") and Bryan Ferry ("It's My Party"). Jonathan King is relevant here but beneath discussion, let alone contempt. And Kevin Ayers missed a golden opportunity in his recent "Falling in Love Again". Did Elton John have that little influence on him?

Then there have always been gay songs with uncomfortably chauvinist overtones — like Shel Silverstein with his heart in the wrong place. Ben Gay's "Ballad of Ben Gay" on the compilation album *Dr Demento's Delights* is a grubby and not very funny instance. Then there is Leon Russell's snide attack on Little Richard in "Crystal Closet Queen" and Jimmy Webb's "Once in the Morning" from his *Letters* album — an altogether better humoured attempt. However, when he did the song with the Supremes, Webb made sure that he didn't sing the verse:

I was hanging round London trying to pick up a new line

When a man I did not know he invited me to dine

He said we can make each other happy you know we're both the same kind

And I like some of yours if you'll please take some of mine

Some amazingly realistic songs emerged

in these years. Sparks' view of boarding school passions in "Angus Desire", or "And the Boys Lazed on the Verandah" which Peter Sarstedt wrote for Fresh's first album *Out of Borstal*. And the United States of America spelt it out in upper-case in "The American Way of Love":

*Later on an indiscreet
Encounter in the men's room
While you tell yourself that a natural urge prevailed*

Disco is currently popular in the gay community — in the States the Ritchie Family come across as a sort of soft-core Labelle to their gay fans, and a few years ago the Miracles wrote their brilliant "Ain't Nobody Straight in L.A." for their *City of Angels* album. But gay rock and punk rock, or gay rock and new wave surely isn't that a little bit like Kipling's East and West.

Well, that was before Tom Robinson. The same man whose records are being banned left right and centre by Auntie NZBC (free publicity! free publicity!). Robinson's "Glad to be Gay" is a sort of anthem or cheer call for the gay community — a highly polemical song, to put it mildly. But musically the song seems a little suspect for a new wave group. Surely it is really soft - pedal - showbiz - cabaret style, just waiting for a Liza Minelli treatment a la the finale of *New York, New York*.

I think "Don't Take No for an Answer" from the Robinson E.P. is far more effective as a gay protest song. Certainly it is more oblique in its attack, but the whole song catches the atmosphere of a sad misencounter from the personal columns of *Gay News*:

*No use sticking together
I gotta get out or get off
I offered you a slice
But you tell me no dice
Because you wanted the lot.*

Such an indirect treatment is often the most effective. After all some of the most sensitive instances of minority-portrayal in songs can be found in songs which do not set out to protest for that particular minority — viz Janis Ian's "Queen Merka and Me". About three years ago Mercury released Steven Grossman's *Caravan Tonight* — gay singer, gay songs, good reviews in *Rolling Stone*, but not ultimately a very happy affair. I wonder what Tom Robinson will do in his album?

P.S. Maybe Mr Medici is still open to offers, but I refuse to furnish any reader with Don Love's address.

William Dart

FROM THE #1 NEW GROUP OF 1977: FOREIGNER

