

## POP MUSIC

### DELICATE REVENGE FROM THE SMITHS' MEAT IS MURDER

Of last year's onslaught of gay pop acts from Britain, **The Smiths** were definitely the most subtle and self-effacing: no androgynous drag, no shocking videos, no political polemics, no U.S. tour. Instead they put out a debut LP, *The Smiths*, with a tinted photo of Joe Delassandro's naked torso on the cover. The record featured tough haunted tunes voicing the delicate revenge of the outsider. The best of them were intriguing and original, lead singer Morrissey's camp melancholy and the dangerous intelligence of his suggestive lyrics given a tough pummeling assurance by guitarist Johnny Marr's deft, sparse music. The worst were maudlin and pretentious. The album left critic Barney Hoskyns wondering if Morrissey "can transcend his own finely ironic sense of himself as Lost Boy?"

Their new LP, *Meat Is Murder* (Sire), rises to that challenge with wicked style. Morrissey's trademark vocals — part whine, drone and yodel — have toughened into an edgy assured croon, while Marr kicks brash fire through Morrissey's languor. The results are less fey and more focused. I'd rate the album the best of the year so far.

As introvert and outcast, Morrissey still etches scenes many gays can quickly recognize. The record opens with an elegant savaging of his sadistic schoolmaster. "Rusholme Ruffians" offers a sketch of secret boy-lust worthy of Bruce Weber: "This is the last night of the fair, / and the grease in the hair of a speedway operator / is all a tremulous heart requires." The declaration of dangerous desires and rough-trade fantasy in "I Want the One I Can't Have" is beyond Rechy: "A tough kid who sometimes swallowed nails. . . . He killed a policeman when he was thirteen / and somehow that really inspired me. . . . And if you ever need self-validation / just meet me in the alley by the railroad station. / It's written all over my face." Morrissey sings the lines with a tender strength that is both seductive and subversive.

to make Steven an out-and-out Auntie Tom. Suddenly he's given Luke the brush-off, opting for the "security" of his wife and child. Steven had the nerve to Luke to look for another job. Luke, who was supposed to be the "gay and proud" one, merely looked misty-eyed and relented.

But the other characters are getting wise to Steven's game-playing. When Claudia told him she wouldn't take him back, I cheered. Good old Claudia; I wanted her to show some street smarts. She's a city girl, after all, and should know how likely it is for a fag to change his old habits. What's unfortunate is that the *Dynasty* producers, Aaron Spelling, Doug Cramer and Esther and Richard Shapiro, still don't have the integrity to present a mature and self-accepting gay character

U.S. pressings of the LP include the summer single "How Soon Is Now." Here is Morrissey sounding less perverse than heroic (against shuddering psychedelic guitars), singing first, "So shut your mouth. / How can you say / That I go about things the wrong way?" then chorusing, "I am human and I need to be loved, just like everybody else does" — the last sung with such grim insistence that images of the Elephant Man spring to mind.

The album closes with the title cut, a winsomely sung waltz that manages to make the family carving up a roast sound unspeakably grisly and obscene. It is a vegetarian anthem via De Palma and the most bizarre song Morrissey has ever written. It is also merely an extreme version of the record's basic theme: The brute underside of civility and the ferocious tug of love reveal the panic, desperation and flat-out weirdness coursing behind the bland face of normalcy. With little fanfare and a sophisticated talent, The Smiths are creating space for the misfits, while welcoming the unspeakable into our shared vocabulary.

**Whoopi Goldberg**, another artist fascinated with outsiders, is sort of a soulful Lily Tomlin. The rubber-faced, dreadlocked comedienne has lately been the toast of Broadway with her solo show featuring sharp, whimsical impersonations of four misfits. The four monologues were recorded live for the LP *Whoopi Goldberg* (Geffen). For the curious, these are the goods.

Side One is given over entirely to "Fontaine," a thief and junky who pawns a set of "solid gold digital sushi forks" and jets to Amsterdam, where he visits Anne Frank's house. Side Two introduces the Valley-girl-talking "Surfer Chick," who gets knocked up and blithely attempts to abort the fetus herself; moves on to a "Crippled Woman," who dreams of being whole; and ends with a 7-year-old black girl who knows she'll be invited on *Love Boat* if only she can get blue eyes and silky blonde hair.

Goldberg's characters are proud, sly, pithy and fashioned with a contagious warmth. The routines reverberate with heart and courage well after the disc has left the turntable. Unlike the fast-fading vicious one-liners that make up the mass

of Joan Rivers' and Eddie Murphy's monologues, Goldberg's sketches are exercises in compassion and self-acceptance. I couldn't imagine her being invited to perform for Nancy Reagan and the gals, any more than I could see Morrissey playing a concert on the White House lawn.

**The Who** might have accepted that invitation in their final incarnation. Leader Pete Townshend recently admitted that the biggest mistake he'd made in his career was not breaking up the band when drummer Keith Moon died. Instead drummer Kenny Jones was brought in, and what had been arguably the world's greatest live band staged a massive flatulent "farewell tour." The agony can be relived on the two-LP set *Who's Last* (MCA), which would have been better left unpressed.

The Who may be but a memory, but look out — the **Village People**, who have been toadying around the cabaret circuit for five years, have been reunited with producer Jacques Morali. Morali once told me, "I look around to what everyone is doing for my inspiration. When I saw everyone going to the gyms, I wrote 'YMCA.'" So what is Morali's latest inspiration and insight? The single is in the can, titled "Sex Over the Phone." God bless Middle America.

On a more timely note, **Bronski Beat** drew over 1,400 people to a sold-out benefit in London for the striking miners — "The Pits and Perverts Concert." Meanwhile in the U.S., the group's debut LP *Age of Consent* (MCA) underwent a bit of unwelcome censorship. The disc's lyric sheet listed the legal ages of consent for consensual homosexual behavior internationally. After tiak from radio stations and record stores in the South and Midwest, a label spokesman announced, "Considering the past sensitivities of several record store chains, we have made a judgment decision to omit the list of homosexual age-of-consent laws from future pressings of the record." Were they afraid that all of those record buyers would apply for immigrant status to



Richard Garrin (left) and Kip Snyder brought their musical groups together and raised \$8,000 for AIDS patients in Chicago.

Spain when they learned that all homosexuality is punishable by law there, or to Poland, where the age of consent is 15?

— Adam Block