

DAVID LASLEY

WHITE HOT SOUL



By ADAM BLOCK

In 1982 a little-known album, *Missin' Twenty Grand* (EMI), cropped up on the year's Top 10 lists of critics for *Rolling Stone*, the *New York Times* and the *Village Voice*. It was the first solo album for a 34-year-old blond with a velvet falsetto and songcraft reminiscent of early Laura Nyro. David Lasley was also, incidentally, a gay man, whose gay sensibility informed his art.

Lasley's resumé was already fairly astonishing. He'd sung back-up for Chic, Cher, Bette Midler, Carly Simon, Bonnie Raitt and James Taylor (to name a few). He'd earned writing credits on songs by Bonnie Raitt ("Got You on My Mind"), Crystal Gayle ("The Blue Side"), Patti LaBelle ("I Don't Go Shopping," "Come What May"), Chaka Khan ("Roll Me Through the Rushes") and Boz Scaggs ("JoJo").

Missin' Twenty Grand reinvented the Detroit of Lasley's teenage years when he, his younger sister and a neighborhood girl began performing girl group hits at the *Twenty Grand*, a major club club. (He earned his stripes as a sexual and racial outsider before he even knew he was one.)

Publicity and promotion for that album, *Missin' Twenty Grand*, were dismal. Despite the rave reviews, it never found its audience. Last year Lasley released *Raindance* (EMI), with its outstepping rap "Don't Smile at Me, I Already Know," and a floor-filling dance hit "Where Do the Boys Hang Out," which sounded right at home next to Bronski Beat's "Why." Unfortunately, there were no videos; Lasley remains one of the most heard, least known, figures in pop.

In some quarters, 1985 arrived to Lasley's rendition of "Teamwork," a cut on the *Body Rock* soundtrack, and work on the upcoming Weather Girls' LP. He is currently label-shopping, discussing the possibilities of a gospel LP ("It's about time someone made it clear that Donna Summer and Jimmy Swaggert don't have

a corner on God, that gay people can sing gospel") and of another solo album, perhaps with Rickie Lee Jones producing.

What was it like when you were 16, living at home but already a successful performer?

I was very much alone. I would stay upstairs in my house and just sing to Dionne Warwick records, and Darlene Love, and just not deal. I think the only thing that got me through the pain of my life, because it was so unbearable, was the music. It kept me from going and jumping through a window.

Then I fell in love with a man in seventh grade; he was in the eighth grade. That's when I really knew what I was. It was scary, very frightening. You have many crushes, but I would say that's pretty young to have an obsessional love for someone.

What happened?
I just saw this person [laughing], fell in love and never quite got over it. I think he knew it. It was a very silent kind of love. I had boyfriends; it was very big in the

'60s to sleep overnight at a boy's house and jerk off together. That was like the whole thing: shoot your wad. But that first love I have held for 25 years. I found the person, actually, 15 years later. I went home one year, after my dad had died, went to the phone book and called, and said something like, "Whatever happened to us?" We both knew. It's like that song "Oh" on my album; I say that there is a time when you see somebody, and they look at you, and you look at them, and the traffic stops inside you—you know what I'm saying? That's what I call love.

The problem with my friend was that he was married and had two kids from one marriage; and three from the next, but even that—you know—that doesn't say anything about someone's feelings—

And you still love him?
Do I love him? Oh yeah, God, of course—he's the person I dedicated my record to, who is basically like a lover—but [laughing] he can't be my lover right now—

How does his family feel about this?
I'm just a part of the family, Uncle Dave, you know, which is a bitch. It kicks my ass. It hurts me. I have to check myself, which is not easy, but I find from the way my life is—creatively, traveling and working—it kind of fits in.

You graduated from high school in 1966. What happened between then and 1970, when you joined the cast of *Hair*?

It was a strange period. I guess out of fear and ignorance, playing these clubs, I was drinking a lot of whiskey. [Offstage, I was painfully shy.] We used to have gigs with Iggy Pop, Bob Seeger, all these guys who went on and did really well. But in '68 my sister quit, so I stopped. I took a job in a hospital.

Were you aware of the Stonewall riots in 1969?

Frankly, my main memories are of being really into Laura Nyro. I was really obsessed over *Eli* and the *13th Confession* and *New York Tendeberry* and not listening to much of anything else—being real frozen [laughing] and not having any friends; unrequited love and being really broke.

There was also typical starting-out shit—getting ripped off; selling 40 songs for \$150 to some shark publisher. I've written a couple of things that, if I had the money, I'd be a multimillionaire, but if I ever told somebody that I wrote part of that song, they'd say I was crazy, and if it were the *wrong* person, they'd want to chop my head off.

What took you to New York?
I went there in 1973 to do a show called *Dude* that Jerome Ragini had also written. The critics chopped us to bits, but I remember it, it was a really good show. It was way ahead of its time. We worked in mud and rags, wearing only jockstraps—talk about being naked! It was a good learning experience.

When did you start to think of yourself as a songwriter?

About 1974, around the time that I put together the group Rosie. We made a record in '75 with Gena Raven, who was fabulous. Dave Marsh wrote in the book *Rolling Stone Record Review* that Rosie's LP sounded like "Manhattan Transfer for the tone-deaf." I think it's very untrue.

I later found out that that album was like Rickie Lee Jones' greatest inspiration. She met me in the parking lot at Schwabs and started singing "The Words Don't Matter" and said, "Man, every day before I went to do *Chuck E.'s in Love* I'd listen to it all in the morning and all at night."

And then I looked at some of her images and I saw it. But you tend to think that when your records don't sell, that people don't hear them. Which—well, all of my record collection is made up of people who didn't sell—so I shouldn't have thought that.

We did two albums. I don't like the first one as much because I sang in my low voice. On the second, all of the music and some of the words are mine. It was produced by Charlie Calello, who had done *Eli* and the *13th Confession*. He got me shitloads of work, and I began working with Arif Mardin on Ringo Starr, Bette Midler...

Were you star-struck?
Definitely, almost every time. When I

met James Taylor in 1976 I most died. I was in New York alone then—broke: White Trash Again! James called and asked us to try out for the tour. I worked with him for six years. It took me three-and-a-half to relax around him.

Working with James still left time for plenty more studio "back-up"?

I call it black-up. People usually assume you're not as good when a lot of times you may be *better* than the "star." When they call you in to rescue them, you learn to make that hook work. You find all those lines—say in "Native New Yorker"—that sold that record. You know, all that [singing in falsetto] "Twenty-five, thirty-five! Hello baby!"—things that were nowhere *near* the song; not written, just stuff you think up. Sometimes there is so much that you make up. You know, I'm probably a lot more soulful, in the true *gut* sense, than anyone has heard me sing on my solo records. Some of my finest performances are on the step-out leads on those disco records. By the summer of '78 I could hear my background singing on 13 songs that all made the Top Five: "We Are Family," "Freak Out," "He's the Greatest Dancer," "Everybody Dance," "Native New Yorker," "Take Me Home" by Cher, "New York Groove" by Ace Frehley and "Keep Your Body Working" by Kleer. And there were *no* royalties from these. I got \$220 to do the whole *Chic* album. People were urging me to go solo, to get out.

Looking back on that stuff, I think it's a hell of a lot more soulful than what's going on today—where I find that the grooves are soulful, but I don't think the singers are. Everyone is ripping off these Motown grooves, and nobody is singing any serious R&B.

In 1979 you moved to L.A.

I walked out on my big New York relationship. He was falling more in love with another guy and I just couldn't handle it. Going to L.A. was an escape. But I'd also met a publisher out here.

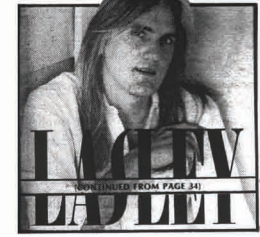
I was a workaholic and I got very lucky. Within a year's time I had writing credits on tunes cut by Maxine Nightingale, Boz Scaggs, Rita Coolidge, Patti LaBelle and Crystal Gayle that were written with Allee Willis, Boz and Peter Allen.

And then you worked on your first solo album, *Missin' Twenty Grand*. Were you expecting its release to be a major event?

No, and that's probably why I'm relatively sane and happy. I *never* expect major success, which is probably why it hasn't arrived [laughing].

Actually, I was depressed when the record was on the charts. It scared the hell out of me, because that album was my lifelong obsession, and the week that it actually came out I didn't have enough money to buy a *Billboard*. I actually went and ripped one off from the newsstand—which is so typical of my life.

You can read the review. I have it taped right up here: "With a string of background singing credits longer than Luther Vandross," David Lasley is certainly the new blue-eyed soul phenomenon, and his single, "If I Had My Wish



Tonight, is the crossover sleeper of the year." I got on the phone and called my sister and mother. I was crying I was so freaked out; it was just like a dream.

But the record was a commercial bomb. Was that depressing?

The rest of '82 and '83 was one of the worst periods of my life [laughing]. I met the producer Don Was. I flew to Detroit, which was a *giant* step backwards and very depressing. The studio there is in the ghetto and brought back a lot of memories. We suffered through that album, *Raindance*, going for a more pop, less R&B sound, because that was so dangerous—too black for album-oriented radio. On the first album they kept saying, "We need an AOR record." Well, by the time I made my second there wasn't any AOR, it was MTV. So, then the record came out and they said, "Boom! There's no video." It was really bizarre.

I don't think *Raindance* is the better album—maybe it's more contemporary.

Do gay people write differently?

I don't think they do. The reason I've tried to write so honestly in my music is that I have a real problem with men or women hiding their sexuality because they think it is going to ruin their career.

But in pop, it's supposed to be commercial suicide—

Well, that's the thing. Look, people *side* it. It is not hip to be gay. And it is not hip to be white and sing black—sing soul songs. Look at Hall and Oates—I mean there are like 10 soulful white guys in the whole world. I'm talking about *serious*—there is something about white acts who come almost from the woman's side, who listen to women and girl singers—and often those are gonna be gay singers. And it ain't hip to be gay.

Somehow when you're singing about it in a song, I guess you can be a little more honest—I guess—although people read into my first album a little bit more than I thought was fair.

I don't think people think about whether I'm gay or whether I'm straight—people in the business, or people in general—because I don't think who you fuck should determine how you look.

Your album *Missin' Twenty Grand* included many openly gay lyrics—

Well, I try to take a kind of middleline. I have a real problem with Holly Near. It's almost like "born-again." My words are very in-between. Obviously, some songs are blatant, like: Two boys walk along And I think they look like brothers,

My friend turns to me and says, "I wonder if they're lovers." One's a little older. He looks a lot like me. I wonder why it takes so long For everyone to see That there's a sign up in my window.

But "Treat Willie Good," everyone took that as a gay song, and I didn't set out deliberately to write it that way. "I'll have him, I will-ee, I'll be his friend until he comes back to you." I didn't mean, "have him sexually." I really didn't. It just sang so well. Rickie Lee sang that song live, and it suddenly became a woman's song. You know, it is *genderless* in a certain way, but if you're very clever with your words, it can have a certain meaning for all people, which is what I've tried to do.

See, for me music is music. Love is love. Sex is sex. Touring is touring. The songs you write, the background you sing, that's what people hear on the radio. You know, if *Boy George* sang high, it's safe to say that he wouldn't be a hit. First, *Boy George* sold his *sound*, safely. "Do You Really Want to Hurt Me" was a gigantic hit before anyone knew he was a drag queen. I dunno, it seems so much easier now, somehow. I feel straight, compared with *Boy George*.

How do you feel about the recent explosion of openly gay artists—Boy George, Marilyn, The Smiths, Frankie Goes to Hollywood, Bronski Beat?

It's very interesting. Ultimately, I think it's very healthy, but it is very odd that—if it's true that—I'm just thinking about my childhood—I being drawn to straighter, more masculine men—just imagining if I were 9 years old and having a lot of trouble with my feelings, in general, how would I look at *Boy George*? I find, though, when watching his videos, a very loving feeling about him—and he seems very at peace and free.

It is a very lonely life being a performer. I get phone calls from people on the road all the time. "Just sang for 25,000 people—another sell-out, now I'm home, miserable, eating dinner alone" and very unhappy. The road is a very lonely place. Show business is very lonely. I never found it especially *smashing*, being on the road, and I've been there almost all my life.

But you haven't done any livesupport for your records?

No. Because videos got so big. These days the record companies don't care if you perform. They want to sell the video. They think it is silly to perform. They can't support your band. They can't send you out, and you won't sell any tickets. And I've done that opening act bit. It is so horrendous. It's awful. I can't do it till I have an enormous hit.

It's a Catch-22. On the road you could show your range. Might you tour?

Definitely. I thought of doing small clubs, but I hate them. If they're drinking, smoking right close—I freak out, and I find that they're craving; they're not that into my music. I have a fear of it—playing that close. It is very frustrating. I am very difficult, and I think it is up to me.