

SUMMER AND SMOKE

By Adam Block

'Donna Summer is *not* homophobic,' a closeted gay executive at her record company insisted recently, sounding terminally exasperated. "She's just a *dumb* [anatomical expletive deleted]."

Charming, but that wasn't exactly the kind of official response to angry complaints over the lady's public remarks that fervent fans were looking for. They had crowned the pinch-nosed diva the queen of disco back in 1975, when the amyl set *owned* that music. The lady was gay royalty.

To be fair, Donna Summer never asked to be acclaimed as heroine of the homos, and I don't recall even fanatics looking to her for political leadership or wisdom. Her Moroder/Bellotte hits ("Love to Love You, Baby," "I Feel Love," "Bad Girls" and "Hot Stuff") were divine let's-fuck anthems, set to relentless disco rhythms. Of course, gay men were pioneers at treating mindless, marathon fucking as a courageous political activity.

In 1980, after five years as a reigning voice of the disco scene, Summer began to take control of her own career. She sued her manager, left her record company, remarried and became a "born-again" Christian. In 1983, touring behind her comeback smash "She Works Hard for the Money," Summer had graduated from the gay discos to suburban arenas. She was also making small talk between numbers. Gay fans followed her to the burbs, and if the shows struck them as careful and gutless, her remarks astonished and enraged many.

There were reports of Summer reminding the crowd, "It was Adam and Eve, not Adam and Steve," a line I thought belonged to Anita Bryant. She reportedly told gays in her audience, "I'll pray for you people. I'll pray for you tonight." And, when questioned about gay rights, she is reported to have responded, "I've seen the evil homosexuality come out of you people. . . AIDS is your sin," finally closing: "Now don't get me wrong; God loves you. But not the way you are now."

Some fans were livid. An angry account appeared in the *Village Voice*. In England, D.J./producer Ian Levine banned her music from Heaven, the popular disco, and called for a total boycott in the British pop press. Summer and her management stonewalled the issue. The aforementioned gay exec proudly claims



Rachel MacLish and Miss France flex in a scene from *Pumping Iron II - The Women*, a film that poses questions more than skin deep about gender and homophobia.

that he personally "got her to drop that idiotic 'Adam and Steve' crack."

When the outspoken gay/socialist trio Bronski Beat covered Summer's "I Feel Love" on their debut LP, the issue resurfaced. My esteemed colleague John Bryant (*Male Review*) noted that once Bronski Beat were told of her remarks, they responded in disgust, "Donna Summer is dead," but continued to perform the song. The notion of gay men making the song their own didn't cut much ice with Bryant, who thundered that Summer's royalties, from Bronski's version, "go to the right-wing Christian Hate Campaign through Summer's donations and promotion." Bryant was appalled to find that D.J.'s at L.A.'s popular gay discos Probe and Studio One refused to ban her discs. His requests for an interview with Summer went unanswered.

This spring, Lorne Michaels and the other organizers of an AIDS benefit in New York reportedly contacted David Geffen to see if his record company wanted to provide an act for the show. Summer reportedly volunteered but was rejected by the organizers because of her by now infamous remarks. That rejection apparently shocked Summer out of her complacency.

Though Summer declined a request from *The Advocate* to be interviewed on the subject, Warner Bros. sent a statement from the singer to both the *Village Voice* and to our own pop music desk. Read carefully. This was not a retraction, but an apology.

"It is very difficult for me to believe this terrible misunderstanding continues. Since the very beginning of my career, I have had tremendous support and friendship from many in the gay community. It is a source of great concern to me that anything I may have said has cast me as homophobic. My medium of expression is music; all I can ask for is understanding, as I believe my true feelings have been misrepresented. As a Christian, I have nothing but love for

everyone and I recognize it is not my place to judge others. I believe with all my heart and soul that AIDS is a tragedy for all humankind. A cure must be found and all of us have to do whatever we can to help."

Summer isn't ready to celebrate homosexuality, or even condone it. The irony is that so many gays, celebrating their sexuality to her performances, *assumed* that she, too, rejoiced in it. Her music is very much the property of the people who scored their life to it. They own it as profoundly as she does. But they don't own her: not her religion, her politics nor her royalty checks.

When fans identify with music they adore, and with the artists who make it, that doesn't insure that the artist sees herself through their eyes, or—if she does—that she likes the image. Somehow I don't think Donna Summer's



Donna Summer repents: "AIDS is a tragedy for all humankind. A cure must be found."

dream was ever to be a musical standard bearer for butt-fucking, urban nightclubbers. What hurt gay fans was that she didn't seem to have developed any real respect, affection or compassion for them (at least until this belated statement was issued).

Reborn, Summer seemed to have blithely accepted the bigotry of the Christian right towards gays as gospel. If that made Summer's understanding of gays painfully shallow, it also showed how facile gay fans have been in celebrating glamour and the very *idea* of stardom. The equation is as simple as pop gets: Summer had a glossy package to sell. We were buying.

So what's love got to do with it? Isn't it a bit much to get all huffy about the contents when you were only shelling out for the package? After all, Summer's still singing about love, and you can still dance to it.

Right, and love does have *lots* to do with it, because that's where the bitterness erupted: from the breach between the sensual sexuality she once celebrated and the Christian exaltation she has replaced it with. In the worst of worlds, the first devolves to simple greedy lust, the second to self-righteous bigotry; and though curiously similar, they are inevitably at loggerheads. In the best of worlds, the two aren't at odds; both are illuminated by compassion and gratitude. Donna, and her fans, seem to have often lost sight of that.

Summer got caught in the middle of a public dialogue between gay lib and the new Christian right, between gay fans' expectations of the queen of disco and those of her fellow reborn Christians. And she handled it badly. But Donna Summer is no more a homophobe than many other more tactful artists, and no more of a dumb [anatomical expletive deleted] than many of her gay fans. Those are the unpleasant truths that the glare of disco-ecstasy Summer swept in on conveniently obscured.

Now isn't it about time she put out an album we could care about enough to consider raising the roof—or boycotting?