

## A CLARION CALL FROM ENGLAND'S COMMUNARDS: SYL'S NEW "ATTRACTION"

by Adam Block

In February 1985, on the eve of a projected debut United States tour opening for Madonna, **Jimmy Somerville**, lead singer with **Bronski Beat**, was arrested at a urinal in London's Hyde Park for offenses against the public morals.

COURTESY MCA



Renegade love songs from The Communards' Jimmy Somerville, Richard Coles.

Seems he had offered his throat to an undercover policeman. The 21 year old with the soaring falsetto who Boy George insisted "looks like a potato" knew that the arrest would make the news. After all, he was already feeling more than a little beleaguered by his band's fast-burgeoning fame and success. Unlike almost any other pop star, though, he didn't worry that the news would devastate his English fans. The group had talked freely about being "gay street trash" before they ever cut a tune.

The trio had met as friends and performed as a hoot, but their first single, "Smalltown Boy" (an autobiographical tale of a gay youth fleeing homophobia for the tolerance of the big city), became a Hi-NRG disco fave on both sides of the Atlantic. Afterwards, Somerville continued to insist that they do benefits for striking miners and play the gay cabaret circuit where they had gotten their start. He was deeply suspicious of the pop marketing machine, and adamant about

his commitments to socialism and gay rights. He was becoming an unwilling pop star, and the prospect of the impending U.S. tour petrified him. After the arrest, he refused to go. The other two accused him of being afraid to succeed. In May 1985, a year after the release of "Smalltown Boy," Somerville gave up any claim to the name Bronski Beat and left the band. Some thought that would be the end: lively talent stillborn.

Instead, the remaining Bronskis recruited a new singer, toned down the politics and (this summer) released the group's second LP, *Truthdare Doubledare* (MCA), which spawned the catchy discostaple "Hit That Perfect Beat Boy." They had become orderly pros, only incidentally gay, and a little boring in the bargain.

Following the split, stubborn Somerville did a one-off disco-duet with Marc Almond (complete with a mega-Liza-&-Judy video) on "I Feel Love." Then he joined forces with pianist Richard Coles — bespectacled, classically trained and gay. They dubbed themselves The Communards, after a renegade band of 19th-Century French socialists. The two spent a year and a half writing and playing; they went out on the Red Wedge Tour for Britain's Labor Party. They showed up at an AIDS benefit in New York, generating terrific word-of-mouth. Reasons to be cheerful. Finally, with their first single bounding up to the top of the English charts, they released their debut LP, *Communards* (MCA), here in time for Halloween.

After the long wait, the two lads (with Sarah Jane Morris providing some additional vocals) bowed in with an LP that boasts an endearingly homemade quality while the second Bronski LP stuck to formulas. *Communards* has the feel of a couple of friends batting ideas around. There are trademark Hi-NRG cuts, like the UK chart-topping cover of Thelma Houston's "Don't Leave Me This Way" and the gay love song "Disenchanted" ("Hey there boy/the prejudice and ignorance we can overcome... I'll be everything you need"), but also the Kurt Weill-chamber music ballad "Reprise," the torchy cabaret cover of Billie Holiday's "Lover Man" and the Euro-jazz gaylib plaint "Forbidden Fruit," which Jimmy sings like a castrati doing Sade.

"So Cold the Night" is a Middle-Eastern hora, with Somerville crooning — with a snake-charmer's insistence — to the boy whose window faces his: "Night after night your fingers caressing/the skin that is so far you slowly undress/Soon we will be together." This lasciviously romantic fantasy is delivered with delicious extravagance — tough, perverse and consciously hilarious — because Somerville really means it.

I'd be hard-pressed to find a more brazenly ebullient boy/boy love song in pop than The Communards' "You Are My World." Somerville is the choir boy who came to worship at the disco and never really got up off his knees again. He's inspired by those amyl-era classics featuring disco-divas drunk on lavish sentiments. It was inevitably women who were allowed such extravagant flights, and gay men who formed their most loyal, adoring audiences.

Ironically, by singing falsetto, Somerville disarms most of the visceral shock that his lyrics seem destined to deliver. If his keening doesn't mimic women, it nearly detaches itself from gender. It is almost as if he has been hounded into this high range — soaring out of the fag bashers' reach.

That sound can be breathtaking, but also grating; it is a constriction that Somerville strives to exploit. One thing it accomplishes is to attract listeners who would probably go into shock if they heard Don Johnson or Bob Seeger singing these lyrics. Ultimately, fans attracted to Somerville's high pummeling wail may discover, to their surprise, what he is singing about. He still refuses to worry that that might hurt his career. It hasn't yet, and on both counts he is a homo to be grateful for.

Somerville would probably be the first to acknowledge his debt to **Sylvester**, and coincidentally the godfather of male disco divas has his first major-label release in five years just out. The single, "Someone Like You," precedes his *Mutual Attraction* LP (Warner Bros.). It finds Syl in his glory, wailing over a gussied-up gospel riff that never sets a hook. The weird part is the lyrics. Syl has always sung his stuff gender neutral, and was livid six years back when he claimed, "Fantasy records wanted to turn me into Teddy Pendergrass." Well, this one is all about "loving you is a fantasy come true, girl." It's a dumb betrayal of Syl's fans and career to saddle him with these lyrics. He sounds great and deserves better. Whenever I hear the cut, I keep expecting he'll bellow, "Oh! Girlfriend!"

**Aretha** (Arista) finds another great voice facing off against weak material. **Ms. Franklin's** follow-up to the glib glory of *Freeway of Love* (Arista) is damned frustrating. Her voice can still strip paint or fry chicken, but listen to her glossolalia overwhelming the rickety "Rock a Lot," and her over-the-top gospel displacing Yip Harburg's 1946 mantle-ornament "Look to the Rainbow." And that boneless arrangement of "Jumpin' Jack Flash"? Oh — girlfriend!

For better bets try: **No. 10 Uppingham** (CBS), **B.A.D.**: Agit-pop with wit, heart and rhythm, as Joe Strummer comes back to lend former Clash-mate Mick Jones a hand. **Get Close** (Sire), **The Pretenders**: Chrissie Hynde in love isn't as startling, ascerbic or sly. But we're talking a tough, canny contentment that I wouldn't begrudge her, or you. **Shockadelica** (A&M), **Jesse Johnson**: Prince's former lead guitarist matches his old boss, and turns some tricks of his own with a minimum of psychosis.

Finally, you might as well cart home one of those five-LP box sets, **Bruce Springsteen Live** (CBS). I'm not saying you have to listen to it. Just display it prominently so that you don't get inundated with the suckers at Christmas. Then you can send it to Jimmy Somerville. Maybe it'll help him over his fear of touring.