FLAT-TOP FANTASIES, POSTPUNK POLITICS FROM FOLKSONG PHRANC
by Adam Block

Nic E Haircut, Phranc offered as she strolled toward the local teen, blushed at the entrance to the Austin disco. His killer flat-top matched hers, though his was dyed ash-white. The boy glanced up towards the source of the compliment, past her combat boots, Levi’s, black leather jacket over a black T-shirt, and drabbled, “Fucked off, fugger.” Phranc, non-flinch or pause. Gender-confusion and knee-jerk bigotry never phase her. After all, she was a punk before that kid sprouted his first public hair. She has looked pretty much the same for more than a decade. Now, however, she’s getting paid for it. It is not just her provocative looks, but also a debut LP earning international airplay, that has put Phranc in the public eye. Both have provided her with unique opportunities, and she relishes them. Phranc is resolved to enlighten those she entertains, and vice versa. Without thinking

She generally introduces herself after her first song, in a laconic tone reminiscent of Arto Guthrie, punctuating the litany of the lyrics with the occasional guitar. “Hello. I’m Phranc. Just your average All-American Jewish Lesbian. Folk-singer.” “I always tell the audience, because a lot of the time, when I come out, some of those people don’t know what I am,” the

informationalists who caught her at the Philadelphia Folk Festival with Tom Paxton, the young Israeli socialists out to hear Billy Bragg, and the Lilo Tomlin-lesbians at Kate Clinton’s shows. The Clinton shows, in fact, were some of the first Phranc played to predominately lesbian audiences. The outspoken, topical singer’s debut LP, Folk-singer, came out on Rhino, not Olivia. She had built her following in Los Angeles punk clubs, not on the Women’s Music circuit. And her record has been getting most of its American airplay on college radio shows where Holly Near and Chris Williamson never rate a spin.

So what does Phranc think of Williamson and Near? “I like Chris.

26-year-old performer admits “That’s always a good ice-breaker” she adds, smiling, “because there’s a lot of tension, particularly with a largely straight crowd, and that shows them that I have a sense of humor, which I think is a big relief to them. And, it’s fun to say ‘lesbian’ to those people.” Phranc has been saying it to a lot of folks lately. Unlike many singers in the Sapphire sisterhood, she hasn’t contended herself with preaching to the unconverted. In the last year she has opened shows for the mohawk-hardcore who came to see the Debutantes. For example, half of the Epitrall-teenagers who turned out for the Violent Femmes, the college radio-djs for Hüsker Dü, the middle-aged trad-

voice” she offers, “and Holly has great police. She has done a hell of a lot. Look, people are always trying to get me to say something nasty.” Phranc pleads. She’s rather talk about buying all of Alix Dobkin’s records—“she’s a really outspoken lesbian.” After a pause, Phranc admits, “Frankly, I miss hearing the word lesbian in what’s called Women’s Music. I think they beat around the bush a lot.” Part of it may be generational. Holly Near has talked about how powerfully she was inspired by Ronnie Gilbert. “Right,” Phranc grins, “and for me that was Patti Smith. She was pretty young when Olivia was starting out, and it seemed pretty closed. There is a lot of ageism in the lesbian community, and

Face in England. There were offers to tour, and doubts about how well her music would travel. Except for a brief sojourn in San Francisco, Phranc had hardly left L.A. since her grandparents had taken her to Europe and Israel when she was nine. She had just never been small-town little culture, and to have dykes buying this straight media garbage—for lesbians to read, hardly stuff about punks and believe it. I made it as angry as the gay community gets when the straight press prints about us. I’m not sure what the future is going to hold. The media sensationalized all the worst aspects of punk and helped turn one subculture against the other.” By 1980, Phranc was getting frustrated with some of the more boneheaded elements in the punk scene; she tore up the song “Take Off Your Swastikas” She began performing it solofa, in part, because I wanted people to hear the words: “She filled out her set with covers of the Velvet Underground and of Jonathan Richman’s ‘Pablo Picasso’, which she changed to ‘Gentle Stein’ “I still do that,” she notes. “It blows some of the rhymes but I like it fine.” In 1978, with overdubbing and fat accidents decimating the lives of her punk friends, she wrote “Life Lover”—really so that I wouldn’t kill myself. She also began trying to record a solo album. After many frustrations, she decided to take a year off from performing. Devoted herself to competitive swimming, and giving swimming lessons; getting healthy and solvent. In 1984 she took $1,500 she had saved and went into Tokyo Studios with Ethan James and Craig Lee. She hauled the tapes that emerged over to Rhino Records and promised to handle the cover art for an LP. All the label had previously been rejected were packaged oddities and novelty discs, but they added Phranc to the roster. In the summer of ’85, with little fanfare, Folk-singer hit the stores.

Phranc’s little shoestring LP could well have sunk without a trace. She was hardly a hot-shot, lesbian crooner to issue a disc, and Rhino’s expertise is at firing off pop artifacts, not launching new artists. But there were true believers in Rhin’s PR office, and college radio picks up the disc—first as a curiosity, but then for its music. Her riveting look and unadorned vocals intrigued the people. The fact that she was a lesbian at a remove from the in-

women’s Music scene, and a punk who had taken her wry acoustic declara-
tions back to the “thorns” fans, set her apart. People who heard Phranc, or saw a photo, remembered. Gradually, she began getting national press: from the Los Angeles Times to Interview to The

Her schedule calls for a possible set of United States dates opening for The Smiths— in July and running through the first week in August. She’ll make her first appearance at the Michigan Women’s Music Festival Aug. 7-10. Then she has a 10-day tour of Japan penciled in, followed by the West Coast Women’s Music & Comedy Festival, Aug. 29-Sep. 1 in Yosemite. She has another tour of the U.K. planned, with Billy Bragg, for September. By October she hopes to be back in L.A. in the studio. And back to the swimming classes that she has continued to teach between touring. “That’s my other career,” she explains. “It keeps me coming out of the road. There are my kids and my mom. It’s something to fall back on.”

Some folks think Phranc would do well to keep up her backstairs, dismissing her as a one-shot novelty, a flavor-of-the-week for voracious trendy. The slug

might not bother the woman who unabashedly names Alan Sherman as her hero. Phranc is used to being mistaken for something she’s not, and to being underestimated. And though the novelty of a brazen, bemed, young lesbian may wear off, I wouldn’t count on Phranc leaving the planet anytime soon. She gives the impression that there are enough people around the globe she’d like to introduce herself to last a lifetime, and that’s an inviting prospect. I’m even looking forward to her going electric.