

Pop Life

FLAT-TOP FANTASIES, POST-PUNK POLITICS FROM FOLKSINGER PHRANC

by Adam Block

"Nice haircut," Phranc offered as she strolled toward the local teen, slouched 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 drawled, "Fuck off, faggot."

Phranc didn't flinch or pause. Gender-confusion and knee-jerk bigotry no longer phase her. After all, she was a punk before that kid sprouted his first pubic 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 flinching.

She generally introduces herself after her first song, in a laconic tone reminiscent of Arlo Guthrie, punctuating the litany with strums on her acoustic guitar. "Hello. I'm Phranc. Just your average... All-American. Jewish. Lesbian. Folksinger."

"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

tionalists who caught her at the Philadelphia Folk Festival with Tom Paxton, the young British socialists out to hear Billy Bragg, and the Lily Tomlin-lesbians at Kate Clinton's shows.

The Clinton shows, in fact, were some of the first Phranc played to predominantly lesbian audiences. The outspoken, topical singer's debut LP, *Folksinger*, 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,

there weren't a lot of young dykes who were out there. I don't think they really took me seriously."

That's not too surprising. Phranc was a Los Angeles high school student—whose experience as a performer ranged from doing Jewish folk songs such as "Zoom Golly Golly" at her grandfather's Succoth celebration to impromptu strumming on the high school lawn—when she picked up a copy of *Lesbian Tide* at a bookstore across the street from Cantor's deli and called the number of a lesbian/feminist group. "I'd always tell Mom I was going to the library, then I'd go to the Women's Center," she laughs, "and when the meeting was over, they'd put my bike in the back of a car and drop me off a block from home." She was 16 years old.

The next year she went on a three-day retreat: The Lesbian History Exploration, with lectures and music by Judy Grahn, Alix Dobkin, Betty Dodson and Liza Cowan. There, Phranc decided to change her name. "I was born Susan and got all the 'Boy Named Sue' jokes. I hated the name. I decided that it reminded me of sliced cucumbers. Frank reminded me of baked beans. So I was going to go for Franc, with a 'c,'" she laughs. "Then I saw this slide presentation by Liza on 'What the Well-Dressed Dyke Will Wear.' It was great: all these women in 3-piece suits. They showed a slide of Liza shaving her head, and I thought, 'This is great.'"

"I went home and got a total buzz-cut, to about a quarter-inch, and just loved it. So, I went over to my friend's house to show it to her and tell her my new name. She said, 'Oh great! Stay right there. Don't move.' She came back with a blue baseball cap with the letter P on it. She put it on my head, and said, 'P-H-R-A-N-C: Phranc with a P!' And that is the story of how I got my name."

A year later, "feeling like I knew all the dykes in L.A. and searching for a new lesbian community," Phranc headed up to San Francisco. "I remember the Sex Pistols were due to play their 1976 New Year's Eve show at Winterland. Much to my surprise I was most warmly received by this house full of punks—a great group: a speed dealer, a woman into leather, another woman who did B-movies, a gay actor and me. Scott, the actor, and I used to model for the Art Institute, which was the only work we could find." After four months of glorious penury, Phranc returned to L.A. and headed right for the punk clubs. Eddie of Nervous Gender liked her looks and asked her to join the band.

"There were a lot of misfits," she recalls. "A lot of the hardcore boys were gay. I was always trying to bring the dykes and punks together, which was such a futile dream. The one time I did, Nervous

Gender played this benefit for a Women's Video Center, and they *pulled* the plug on us! I still resent that.

"Apparently, to the women's community, punk rock was the epitome of violence against women. Anyone with different colored hair or a different look was just violence against women! What always upset me so much was finding dykes and punks, these two small subcultures, and to have dykes buying this straight media garbage—for lesbians to read all this gnarly stuff about punks and *believe* it. It made me as angry as the gay community gets when the straight press prints things about them that are fucking untrue. 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 wrote the song "Take Off Your Swastikas." She began performing it solo/acoustic, "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 "Gertrude Stein." "I still do that," she notes. "It blows some of the rhymes but I like it fine."

In 1981, with overdoses and fatal accidents decimating the lives of her punk friends, she wrote "Life Lover"—"really so that I wouldn't kill myself," she laughs. She also began trying to record a solo album. After many frustrations, she decided to take a year off from performing. Phranc 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 issued were repackaged oldies and novelty discs, but they added Phranc to the roster. In the summer of '85, with little fanfare, *Folksinger* hit the stores.

Phranc's little shoestring LP could well have sunk without a trace. She was hardly the first out lesbian crooner to issue a disc, and Rhino's expertise is at firing off pop artifacts, not at launching new artists. But there were true believers in Rhino's PR office, and college radio jocks spun the disc—first as a curiosity, but then for its music.

Her riveting look and unadorned vocals intrigued people. The fact that she was a lesbian at a remove from the insular Women's Music scene, and a punk who had taken her wry acoustic declarations back to the "thrash" 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*

Face in England. There were offers to tour, and doubts about how well her music would travel.

Except for her brief sojourn in San Francisco, Phranc had hardly left L.A. since her grandparents had taken her to Europe and Israel when she was 11. That isolation showed up in her lyrics. Admiring critics in London warned that she might be "too Californian." Not many Brits were familiar with espadrilles.

Phranc doesn't let those problems thwart her. She never assumes that her audience agrees with her. She is content, like any true punk, with being a misfit. (She has seen the 1965 Bob Dylan documentary, *Don't Look Back*, 25 times, her favorite author is E. L. Konigsberg, she thinks Helen Reddy "has great shoulders" and she treasures a collection of Barbie, Ken and GI Joe dolls, complete with wardrobes.) She writes as a suspicious innocent, with a kid's eye and outrage for dishonesty and deceit. When Phranc rails at the press in a song (inspired by the Pulitzer Prize that was withdrawn from *Washington Post* reporter Janet Cooke after it was found that Cooke's story on an adolescent junkie had been fabricated), she lashes out with a school-yard epithet, "Liar, Liar pants on fire!" concluding, "Can't believe a thing you read." Her passions are personal and playful, and that *spirit* conveys a great deal.

It's a spirit that triumphs in those songs that are closest to her experience: her rambunctious ode to female athletes, "Amazons," and a celebration of both her swim team and her sexuality, "One of the Girls." But her powerful charisma only fully emerges in live performances. On the road her sly humor and delighted delivery illuminates slight songs and wins over skeptics. For example, a full house of largely trendy teens cheered her back for an unlikely three encores at a Violent Femmes show. Hüsker Dü's drummer, Grant Hart, became such a fan after they shared the bill that he took to wearing a Phranc T-shirt. That just isn't the kind of response that the young and the restless have been in the habit of according to folksingers, or to up-front lesbians.

"Hüsker Dü. I really love those guys," Phranc grinned after she'd played a string of dates with the thunderous trio. "They had me come out to sing with them on an encore. Made me want to go *electric*," she laughed. Not right away, though. In June she finished a video of "One of the Girls," reuniting her original swim team, and rerecorded the cut, adding drums and viola, for release in the United Kingdom, where Stiff records has signed her and already issued three singles off her album, each with a non-LP B-side. She did a return tour of the U.K. in June, three dates in Paris opening for The Pogues, then moved on to Holland, where, she cracks, "they put all the fingers in the dykes."

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 Womens' Music & Comedy Festival, Aug. 29-Sept. 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. Back 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 calm coming off the road. There are my moms and my kids. It's something to fall back on."

Some folks think Phranc would do well to keep up her backstroke, dismissing her as a one-shot novelty, a flavor-of-the-week for voracious trendys. The slur 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, bemused, 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.



ROCKI PEDERSEN

"A lot of the time, the audience doesn't know *what I am*," says Phranc.

28-year-old performer admits.

"That's always a great 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 Sapphic sisterhood, she hasn't contented herself with preaching to the nunnery. In the last year she has opened shows for the mohawked-hardcore who came to see the Dead Kennedys, the suburban Esprit-clad teens who turned out for the Violent Femmes, the collegiate rowdys for Hüsker Dü, the middle-aged tradi-

voice," she offers, "and Holly has great politics. She has done a hell of a lot... Look, people are always trying to get me to say something nasty," Phranc pleads. She'd 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. See, I was pretty young when Olivia was starting out, and it seemed pretty closed. There is a lot of ageism in the lesbian community, and