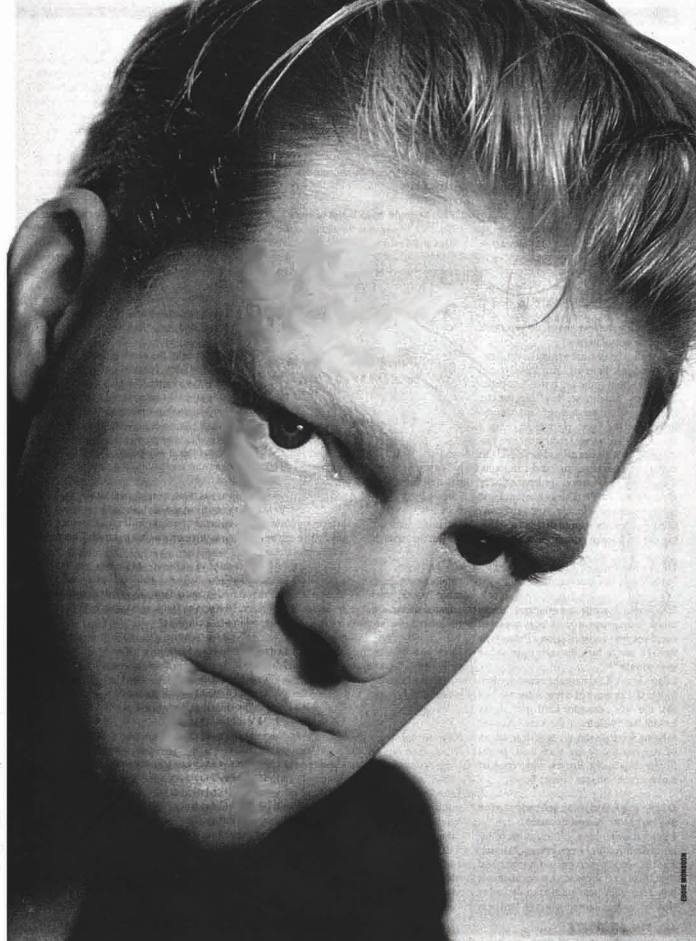


ANDY BELL

Britain's Brazen, Soaring Gay Star

by ADAM BLOCK



Onstage at the Fillmore in San Francisco, Andy Bell was a sight to behold—a revelation to some. Behind him stood a pair of black backup singers in high-cut cocktail dresses. To his left, Vince Clarke stood behind the keyboards, dressed in a schoolboy's shorts and cap and looking like an underclassman at the Oscar Wilde Boys' Academy. But the spotlight and all eyes were on Bell.

Decked out in a sequined black body stocking, long matching gloves, and horizontally striped tights that plunged into black combat boots, each adorned with a shimmering corrugated shin guard, Erasure's 23-year-old lead singer looked like The Road Warrior doing Marlene Dietrich.

Drenched with sweat and insouciance, Bell threw back his head and crooned the first line of "Qué Será Será." Then, turning sideways, lifting one thigh, and affecting an exaggerated Cockney accent, he cooed, "Mother, when I grow up, will I have lips that glisten and are always full?"

"Yes, my darling."
"And, Mother, when I grow up, can I be a homosexual?"
"Yes, dear, of course."
Dropping his voice and his leg, Bell grinned to his audience, "All it needs is 'A Little Respect.'"

The crowd let out a roar of astonishment mixed with cries of delight as the group thundered into the dance anthem from its current hit LP, *The Innocents* (Mute/Sire). Voice soaring, Bell moved like a young James Cagney, storming through Madonna's choreography and bending gender, both street-boy tough and showgirl savvy. The dude was a one-man Stonewall riot.

In the crowd, a pert suburban girl turned to her buffed boyfriend and said, "I guess he really *is* gay." The boy just nodded, smiling slack-jawed at the spectacle.

Their surprise was understandable. While Andy Bell is the most brazenly disarming, boldly queer pop star on the charts—both in concert and in conversation—his lyrics have never telegraphed the fact. With Erasure's growing success, though, Bell has been challenging his fans' preconceptions and winning them over. And after every show, just as with the one at the Fillmore, the edict that says, "You can be openly gay or a pop star but not both," becomes a little bit fainter.

This past fall, on the tail end of a sold-out American tour, the night after that stunning show, Bell and I met to talk about sex, pop, and politics in the wake of growing fame. Dressed in jeans and a bleeding Elvis T-shirt, Bell was as frank as he was soft-spoken. I began our talk by telling him about the girl's reaction.

When did you decide to turn "A Little Respect" into a celebration of gay pride?

The song has always been about that to me, but I wrote it so that it's not blatant. When I first showed Vince the lyric, he said, "No. That's so *boring*. 'Give a little respect to me' is not a hook." And I said, "Yes, it *is*." He told me that he has come to see what the song means only from my stage act, so that girl wasn't alone.

Have you had problems with the outrageousness of the show? When we supported Duran Duran last year, I was told that they were very worried when they heard what our act was like. There was talk that Vince and I are too close; since it's a "gay act"—since I'm so flamboyant—they assume that Vince and I are lovers. We heard they wanted to slap a PG rating on it. I guess they were afraid we were going to offend the parents.

It seems that people go from assuming that you're both straight to deciding that you are lovers. Right. For the record, we don't fuck.

In fact, you live with a boyfriend, and Vince lives with a girlfriend. [Laughs] That's how it stands, anyhow.

Have you ever wanted to write and sing a gay love song? I've never felt I *had* to. Frankly, the writing that we do is not very thought-out. Sometimes I wish it were. Those kinds of thoughts are very personal, and I think I'd have to be a solo artist to do that.

Would Vince object to a gay lyric? Well, the last song on this LP, "Hey Little Wise Man," could have been a love song to a boy, but that was changed around because Vince didn't like it. Mind, he doesn't say that *that* is what he objected to, but . . .

When you write love songs, do you think about an actual person? Not at all. The Erasure writing is completely. . . just ink [laughs]. You know, I feel strongly about some gay lyrics, like Bronski Beat's "Smalltown Boy," but for me, [the inspiration] was seeing Marc Almond on *Top of the Pops*. He was *so* camp. I thought, *What nerve!* I remember him taking these dark glasses off and having all this mascara and eyeliner on, and I thought, *That is just so amazing—in front of all of these people, on TV.* Things like that I find more intense and affecting. And I still don't think I've done that enough. I'm still coming out [by] doing our music.

Do you like Prince? Yeah, 'cause he's blatant.

He's blatantly erotic and salacious. You're tough, outrageous, and androgynous, but could you see yourself singing a Prince lyric like "I'd like to fuck the taste right out of your mouth"? I don't know if I'd have the *spunk* to do it [laughs]. I'm more of a romantic, really. I like the '40s smoochy stuff and slushy ballads like "Walking in the Rain." As a kid at home, I used to sing along with an album of country music my mum had, [with] Skeeter Davis, Jim Reeves, and a track of Anita Bryant singing "Paper Roses."

Do you think that being bold and explicit has hurt Marc Almond's career? I think it could have. I think some of his lyrics throttled his career. I mean, "Mother Fist" is *not* going to get radio play. And then there were those sordid stories about him. I remember reading in a Sunday paper that he had collapsed onstage and was

rushed to the hospital, and they pumped his stomach and got a pint of semen out of him.

C'mon. No. I believe they printed that.

A semen OD? Well, that's one of the reasons that I really respect him.

That he could drink a pint of come? No, that he can just do what the *fuck* he likes and doesn't give a toss what anybody thinks about it. I've never said more than hello to him. I'm sure he thinks I'm such a tame queen. It's embarrassing to him.

"I could go out and join the Congress for Homosexual Equality and say, 'This is what I stand for.' But I've chosen to remain the son of so-and-so, who also happens to be a queen."

You once told me that you asked Tom Robinson, before the first Erasure LP came out, how you might indicate that you were gay without seeming to exploit it, and he said that he had simply worn a pink triangle. That's something you haven't done. Well, that's really political. . . .

The triangle emblem is saying, "The worst thing that you want to do to a queer you might as well do to me. Start here!" Yeah! And I think that's what I'm frightened of—that they will! I do feel closeted in some ways. There are times when I get caught off-guard and lose my nerve. I remember when I was quite young, under 10, going to Docksport School. I played with girls, flirted with boys, and even had tough boys to look after me. But I always had boys who pushed me about, and I used to walk miles out of my way going home—

petrified. I stood up to it once or twice, which makes me say now that I can handle it. Fact is, I'm thinking, *Please don't let it happen again.* And if it does happen now, it hurts just as much. And it's just as scary.

So how do you deal with it? I think, so far, in the right way. I could go out and join the Congress for Homosexual Equality and say, "This is what I stand for." But I've chosen to remain the son of so-and-so, who also happens to be a queen. That's how I want my parents to see it, and hopefully that's how other families will perceive it. Maybe some people will see it as a misfortune, but I just think of it as a fact of life.

Have you had any other popsters come up to you and say, "I've been through this too"? Only Jimmy Somerville, who took me aside and said, "You're the one carrying the flag at the moment," which I thought was really good. I've always felt that, of all the contemporary queens, even though I'm the person who is not really shouting about it, I'm gonna have the most effect on everyday people. I've always believed that, and I still do.

Do you think it may be a bad idea, as a rock performer, to have been as forthright as you have? I think that is part of the rock ethic: Be androgynous, but be ambiguous. I've been told to keep an enigma about myself. And I often wonder, *Are you giving away too much by telling people all these things?* Because, once people know, they may lose interest in you.

I remember running into the Pet Shop Boys and talking with them, asking them things about being a queen, and Neil Tennant said that he thought the reason that Erasure hadn't made it in America yet was because of my being out.

Where did you run into them? It was at a gay club in Munich. We were both in town for a TV show. I hitched a ride back in their limo, and they were joking about the gay pop establishment in Britain, casting it as a private girls' school. They had Elton John as headmistress, Freddy Mercury as head girl, and all of us—Jimmy, me, them, Boy George, etc.—as the pupils.

Sounds like they've loosened up about the subject a bit. Well, I *hope* they have. Perhaps they're

realizing that you don't have to be as up-tight as they have been, that you can say things and no one is going to lock you away for it.

Do you see Boy George? Funny, he was in Munich for the same TV show. I didn't know him, though I'd sent around flowers during his troubles. The two of us went to a gay club one night there. George was quite camp, powdering his nose and saying that people didn't recognize him without his makeup. The bar was very cloney—prim, proper, and tired, and George was complaining that they were "a load of tacky queens."

Do you get many groupies? More and more. There are always pretty boys hanging about, but I haven't got the nerve to be blatant. And going round to clubs now, it's much harder to know why people are coming up to you. One of my reasons for wanting to become a celebrity is that I want to be liked—*truly*. And it works. But I'm liable to wonder now, *Why do people like me? Is it for the right reasons?* I have [my lover] Paul, and he is sort of like an anchor for me while I'm always bobbing around.

Do you get gay fan mail? Not so much. I got one from this gay kid. He was living at home. His best friend, who was straight, had died of AIDS, and this kid had been visiting him in the hospital. Well, the kid was young, and his older brother kept calling it "GAIDS" just to annoy and torment him. The family knows he is gay, and his dad had told him, "I wish you weren't born." The kid wrote that he felt like either killing them all or [killing] himself.

Reading that was so heavy. I don't usually write back, but that time I sent a card saying, "Your brother is a twat. Don't listen to him."

You've played at London's gay pride march and done a number of benefits to fight AIDS and Clause 28. Yeah, Vince has been terrific at that—very supportive. I also did a couple against Clause 28 on my own. There was one at this drag pub that I did with Jimmy Somerville. Bananarama was supposed to come, along with Sinead [O'Connor] and Boy George, but Jimmy and I were the only acts who showed. There were all these dykes there for Bananarama, so I persuaded Jimmy that he and the owner and I should do their act in drag.

The curtain went up, and if the dykes hadn't realized it was us, I think we would have been lynched. We were horrendous. I had on a gold rubber dress and Judy Garland heels. Jimmy looked like E.T. in a beehive.

The most amazing benefit I did was up in Manchester, against Clause 28. They staged the biggest march there since the war. I went up with Jimmy, who'd brought along two girls from The Communards.

They did some Communards numbers. Then he and I did a duet of "Give Him a Great Big Kiss." We did that to a tape. I sang "Can't Help Falling in Love" on my own. We were supposed to duet on "I Will Survive," but we hadn't rehearsed, and as soon as the tape came on, Jimmy came shrieking forward with one arm raised, and I more or less stumbled off into the shadows.

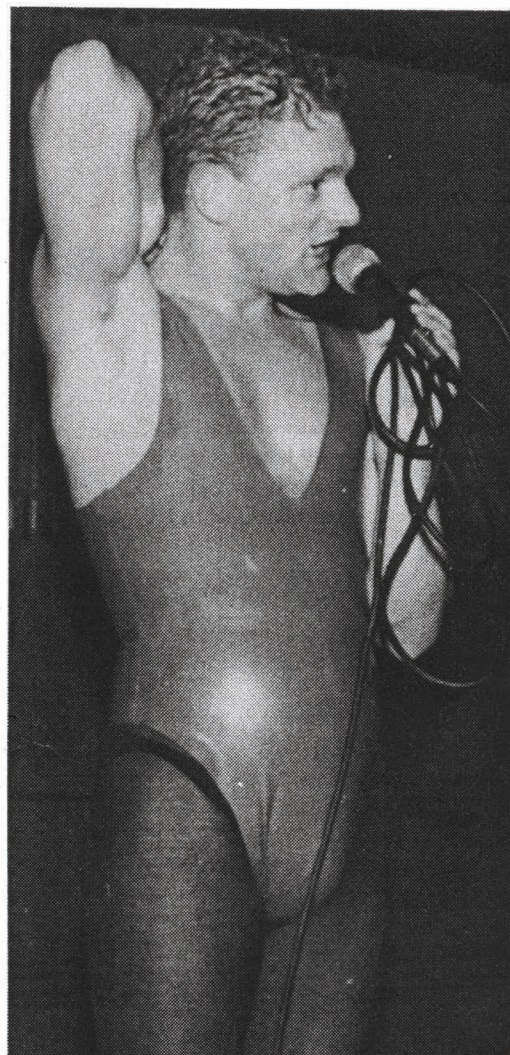
I remember one brilliant moment at the show. A disabled lesbian hoisted herself up to the table and explained that once these local council funds were cut for groups like black dykes. . . well, it's hard enough for them to find lovers anyway without having a little resource like that abolished. Moments like that brought me to tears.

We were in the middle of recording the album, and this was in the midst of all those ugly storms of antigay propaganda. I really needed my batteries recharged, and that event did it.

Do you see yourself getting more radical or personal on the next Erasure LP? I'm a pop writer, and I know what people like, but I don't feel that we have to be as safe as we have become. To remain interested personally, I've *got* to explore stuff for myself and put that into songs. Right now, that's something we're not doing.

Will that lead you away from Erasure? Well, I'd like to do those things with Vince, if he is prepared to, like, come along [smiles].

. . .
In November, Erasure headlined a sold-out show for 30,000 fans in London that was filmed for broadcast. This month they'll release a four-song holiday EP. Andy Bell's star is still ascending. And he hasn't passed along Somerville's fag flag yet. Give the lad a listen. Through blizzards of bigotry he is still gallantly flaming.



Bell asking for "A Little Respect" on the Fillmore stage