

A lavender avalanche...

BY ADAM BLOCK



How queer can you be and still earn a pop audience? A lavender pop avalanche through San Francisco in February again raised the question.

Ferron arrived for her first full-scale concert in six years. The singer regularly

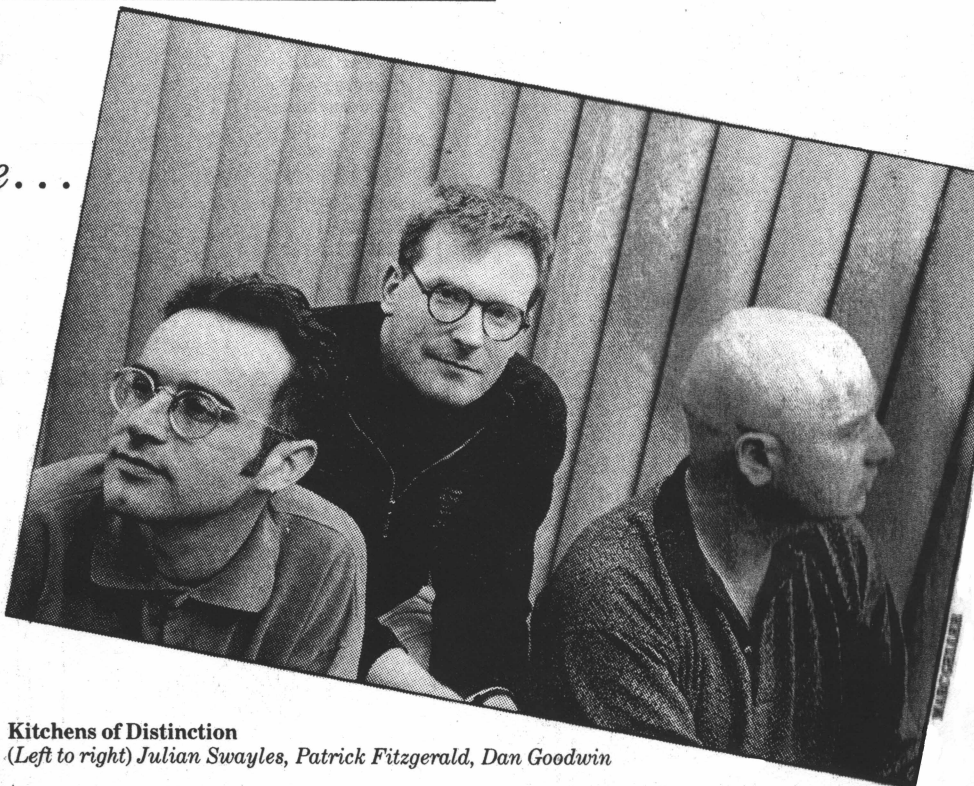
rates flattering comparisons to Joni Mitchell, Bob Dylan, and Neil Young in their prime, but this self-assured, glowingly reviewed show drew only half a house in Berkeley. What gives? After years on the women's music circuit, has her loyal lesbian following somehow kept a wider audience at bay? It is a chilling and disheartening thought.

The brilliant British trio Kitchens of Distinction arrived days later on their first American visit harboring similar concerns. After their debut LP, *Love Is Hell* (One Little Indian/U.K.), failed to find a British audience, their singer-lyricist Patrick Fitzgerald admits, "I got paranoid that my being openly gay was standing in the way of the group."

While the British pop press had focused on the issue, guitarist Julian Swayles and drummer Dan Goodwin, the heterosexual members of the band, supported Fitzgerald's decision. "I wouldn't expect Patrick, one of my mates, to be going around pretending that he's something he's not," Swayles insists, "cause I couldn't do it."

Still, the band's first American label release, *Strange Free World* (A&M), arrives with the chaste homoerotic graphics that graced their initial British releases displaced by an enormous wave. Was something being washed away here? The press kit is equally evasive.

The sound of the disc is immense and riveting, with lush layers of guitar and feedback threatening to swamp Fitzgerald's fierce and plaintive vocals. Amid this sonic glory, the standout cut, "Gorgeous Love," rises with a queer and valiant roar, "I can feel the waves of gorgeous love—and it



Kitchens of Distinction

(Left to right) Julian Swayles, Patrick Fitzgerald, Dan Goodwin

hurts to think that this is seen as wrong." It is a magnificent benediction and a timely message for queers bereft of lovers in the gulf. It's also the album's only gay lyric.

Fitzgerald rankles at a suggestion that the disc is less than forthright and explains, "The thing is that this is a band with two straight men, and I have to represent our combined view. I've done that, for instance, by changing the 'I' to 'she' in lyrics. I did that on 'He Holds Her, He Needs Her.' To me that was about a totally male experience—but it's so easy to change it. In a way, that satisfies me, and it satisfies what I imagine is an audience that I don't want to alienate. I know that's the classic closeted strategy—change the gender—but I'm doing it as an openly gay man."

The logic is a touch tortured. "Gorgeous Love" was written after Fitzgerald's lover was bashed leaving a London leather bar. It is ironic to find the singer going out of his way to accommodate the very prejudice that the song rails against so passionately.

But as their spare, stunning live set demonstrated, Kitchens are a brilliant band. And Fitzgerald is a hero—grappling with some tough calls.

Phranc made those calls early—back when she first strapped on an acoustic guitar and sang "Take Off Your Swastikas" to an audience of fellow punks. She opted to be a high-integrity, high-profile, low-overhead artist. It has been an awesome act live,

and with *Positively Phranc* (Island), she has finally done it justice on disc. Phranc called up her friends and her own finest resources for an LP rich with candor, camaraderie, guts, and humor.

On the first side of Phranc's LP, the dyke quartet Two Nice Girls craft a folk-pop groove for the tender lie "I'm Not Romantic," then rockabilly out on "64 Ford." The side includes "Hitchcock," a brilliant lament to "a girl who looked just like Kim Novak," cowritten by ex-X guitarist Dave Alvin and sung with Syd Straw. Phranc closes the side with "Tipton," tearing through tabloid titers in a poignant celebration of Billy Tipton, the female musician who spent 50 years masquerading as a man.

The second side more than keeps up the pace—first with "Dress Code," a fierce defense of individuality that admits the hurt that comes with being different. "Don't lay your dress code on me," Phranc scolds, only to confess tersely, "And you don't have to prick me—I bleed anyway."

Then comes another standout: a brilliant a cappella duet with Straw on the Beach Boys tune "Surfer Girl." The LP closes with "Outta Here," a tough, galloping lament for homo heroes Robert Mapplethorpe, Patrick Kelly, and Keith Haring, who died of AIDS.

It is terrific and telling to find someone taking these risks with such aplomb and with a major label behind her. Let us see how it plays in Peoria—or in Berkeley. ▼