

OUR IMAGE IN ROCK

By Tommi Avicoli

For years now, gays have been portrayed in rock music, often I've discovered, without our knowledge. Many of these portrayals have been, surprisingly, positive. Most people, for instance, do not know that Janis Ian in 1967 recorded a pro-gay song — "Queen Merka And Me" — which contained a verse about two male lovers in a park. Or that an unknown singer named Judi Pulver in 1973 released an album — "Pulver Rising" — (MGM) with a lesbian song entitled, "Part Time Women":

**"I'm just one of a million/
Or more, who needs a lady/
Who don't try to own the man"**

Part of the problem has always been that major record companies don't push gay or gay-related music. Steven Grossman's openly gay lp — "Caravan Tonight" (Mercury) — failed to gain the widespread recognition it deserved. True the record company wasn't totally at fault here; the gay community also failed to support Grossman's effort.

Olivia Records — a national women's recording company — has released many important feminist and lesbian songs by artists, some of whom are beginning to gain some airplay on the "straight" radio stations. Anthony Louis, a Philadelphia-based gay folk-singer, released "Fantasy" last year; it even appeared on jukeboxes in some of the gay bars in the city. However, Mr. Louis' record and gay performers in general have still not yet gained the widespread support of the gay community. The greater number of non-movement gays don't care if there ever is a distinctly "gay" music. And surely one can argue the merits of having an exclusively "gay" music.

But the image of gays in rock music needs to be examined; if only to make us aware of what was and is being written about us. Rock music — as an institution, and as a piece of contemporary culture — must not be taken lightly. Its influence on our mores has increased over the years. It's no longer the voice of a few so-called malcon-

cents. It's a million dollar industry with all of the pull that goes along with possessing money, a large captive audience, and performers whose god-like statures endow them with invitations to the White House, and the power to influence politics (i.e., Dylan's campaign for the release of Hurricane Carter). When, and if, gay issues are included in the myriad causes promoted by rock musicians, then the public's consciousness will finally have a chance to absorb gay liberation the way it absorbed hippiedom many years ago.

Before the Beatles invaded America with their inane invitation to "hold your hand," folk music had laid a trail of strong protest against the imperialistic and inhumane values of the rulers of this country. Songwriters like Bob Dylan, Joan Baez, and Peter, Paul and Mary were the voice of a generation dissatisfied with the conditions of the world. It is said that Dylan expressed the passion of a whole generation when he wrote "Blowing in the Wind." Yet Donovan, another young folksinger, expressed more to the point the feelings of a lot of gay males when he wrote and sang "To Try For The Sun," probably the first (and one of the most beautiful) male/male love songs ever written:

**"We huddled in the derelict building
And when he thought I was asleep
He lay his poor coat 'round my
shoulders
And huddled there beside me in a
heap."**

There is not another reference to gays in rock music until around 1967 when a daring young performer (only fifteen at the time!) recorded "Society's Child," a record which was not only banned in parts of the country but, because it was about an interracial couple, disc jockeys in the South were beat up for playing it. The performer was, of course, Janis Ian. In her song "Queen Merka and Me," she described two men who walk through the park holding hands and declaring quite boldly: "Our love is not wrong."

About a year later, Neil Young —

along with the Buffalo Springfield — recorded "I Am A Child" which even to many straight rock critics had homosexual overtones. Of course to many others the song was about the relationship of a father and son. Yet the homosexual theme is there whether it's father/son incest or male/male lover.

"Lola" by the Kinks was released just before the onslaught of that period of rock I shall unflatteringly dub the "Bisexual Chic." The Kinks were from the beginning of their career a symbol of youth's rejection of the establishment's values. They were always more political than the other rock groups. They sang of the triteness of overly-romanticized heterosexual relationships, and the absurd shallow value system of the "well-respected" men, while the Beatles were still in their adolescent love stage. The Kinks never suffered from acne, that's for sure. They were unacceptable for Bandstand, and despised the British government even before Lennon did his anti-government number in 1969. So it was no wonder the Kinks created "Lola," an outrageous transvestite who confuses the hell out of a straight man in a bar:

**"I can't understand why she walks
like a woman
but talks like a man oh my Lola"**

This is definitely not your typical teeny-bopper unrequited love song, epitomized by the early exploits of such bubble-gummers as Donny Osmond. Instead, it is ultimately a song about the sexual politics of being a man (or a non-man).

The persona in the song is perplexed because Lola does not fit into either a strict male or female role. He concludes: "I'm glad I'm a man (I thank thee Lord that I was not born a woman, as the prayer goes) and so is Lola." Now is Lola glad that he is a man, or that "she" "herself" is a man?

Around this same time, the Who released their now famous rock opera, Tommy, which contains a song about Uncle Ernie, who with the aid of a lot

of booze and in the absence of Tommy's parents, performs a sexual act upon the boy. Tommy's reaction is neither positive nor negative. For him it's just another experience in the vast deaf, dumb, and blind abyss in which he lives. However, the image of Uncle Ernie is another re-enforcement of the old "child molester" myth. Too many straights already have the notion that gay men are child molesters.

With the coming of the 1970s, we have an increase in the number of gay images both in rock music and in the appearance of rock stars. People like David Bowie, Alice Cooper, Marc Bolan and others donned various degrees of drag to violate the mediocre image of rock, and to elevate their stage acts to theatre performances. Along with the drag came the safe pronouncements of bisexuality. For the men at least bisexuality quickly gained a new status. The women, like Joan Baez and Janis Ian, were met with hostility when they came out. But the boys were allowed their diversions, as "boys will be boys."

I guess David Bowie started the "Bisexual Chic" phase of rock music with his "Ziggy Stardust" lp (RCA) — a concept piece about 1) the rise and fall of a bisexual rock star, and 2) the disintegration of our overly technocratic and inhumane society (a theme more fully developed in "Diamond Dogs," an album that is stark and intense).

The songs on "Ziggy" do not present a very positive view of homosexuality; rather they treat it as a symptom of Ziggy's decadence (and the chic crowd loved decadence!):

**"And lady stardust sang his songs
Of darkness and disgrace" (emphasis
my own)**

Ziggy is ultimately murdered on stage by his fans because "With god-given ass/ he took it all too far." Obviously what he took too far was his homosexuality.

In his stage show, Bowie, in the finest tradition of Alice Cooper and the New York Dolls (later exploiters of the drag rock phenomena), would go down on his lead guitarist, Mick Ronson, in a mock blow-job. Ronson would shove his guitar near Bowie's ass while the latter was lying on the floor



Janet Bode.

View from the Bisexual Closet

View From Another Closet by Janet Bode. New York, 1976. \$8.95.

A Review by Carol Greene

As a bisexual woman, I was delighted to hear that finally a booklength study of bisexuality in women was coming out. Despite the vast library of gay and women's liberation literature that has been published in the last ten years, no one had printed a serious study of bisexuality in non-scientific, nonsensationalistic, journalistic prose. Janet Bode's *View From the Closet*, based on interviews with bisexual women, promised to answer many of the questions I had as a bisexual woman trying to maintain my identity in a lesbian world.

Maintaining a bisexual identity is difficult, really difficult. I found that straight men tended to regard the bisexual woman as nothing more than a kinky number; the favorite male fantasy of joining or watching two women in bed is such a strong one that hardly a heterosexual pornographic movie is made without some lesbianism

in it. Whatever some men think of a woman, once they know she is bisexual, she may be seen only as a means to fulfilling fantasies. To other men, the idea that a woman may prefer another woman to them is so damaging to their ego that they will refuse to take the relationship seriously, if only to keep from being hurt. I haven't seen yet that men have liberated themselves enough to deal with the bisexual woman. For the few who have, I have great respect. I wish I knew one.

However, I find also that the lesbian world does not deal well with bisexual women. To the lesbian, the bisexual woman is a copout, afraid to reveal her true lesbian identity and lose her heterosexual privilege. As a group they will condemn the bisexual woman — one friend of mine was driven from her collective because the women could not deal with her male friends. It is a cliché that a bisexual woman will always leave a woman for a man; indeed she is only with a woman until the right man comes along or until she comes out. Yet I have found in conversations with lesbians that many, even

on his stomach, still singing. These antics gained him the title "Queen of Rock" in some circles.

In "Cracked Actor," a song on the "Aladin Sane" lp (RCA), Bowie expresses nothing less than contempt for an elderly gay actor who resorts to paying hustlers along Sunset and Vine in Hollywood. For someone who has made his reputation by exploiting gay sex acts on stage, he has very little good to say about homosexuality in his lyrics. Yet the homosexual communities in both Europe and America looked upon Bowie as some sort of idol, the androgynous and liberated man.

Similarly, Lou Reed, a protege of Bowie's, was elevated to the position of a cult figure — especially with the release of his "Transformer" lp (RCA). Three gay songs were featured on this endeavor, packaged as sensationistically as Bowie and others of his school of hype had packaged other "Bisexual Chic" products. "Walk on the Wild Side," the hit single from the album, was at one and the same time, an invitation to take a walk on the gay side of life, and a portrait of three of Andy Warhol's transvestite superstars — Holly Woodlawn, Jackie Curtis, and Candy Darling. As a statement on sexual politics it said nothing; as a "gay" song it was, to use a popular Bette Midler line, "the pits." About the only good thing about the song was the sax solo towards the end.

The other two gay songs on the album — "Makeup" (about a transvestite getting into drag) and "Good-night Ladies" (about closing time in a gay bar, ho hum) are boring, trite, and fail to inspire the kind of gay pride Reed asserts quite unenthusiastically in the chorus of "Makeup":

"Now we're coming out/
Out of our closets/
Into the streets"

Jobriath, a latecomer to the glitter scene, released two lps which presented some decent gay imagery. "I'm A Man," from the first album, is a cute commentary on sex roles, while the naughty "Blow Away" on the second is somewhat coy in its praise of cock-sucking. ("It's very gay to blow away.")

Mott the Hoople, an English group

with moderate success in the sixties, really cashed in on the "Bisexual Chic" trend of the seventies with a Bowie song called "All the Young Dudes." The song included a verse about Marc who "dresses like a queen/ but he can kick like a mule."

Yet despite all of these images, gays were no more respectable in rock than they were in the early sixties. The rock industry has failed to provide a market for good positive gay material; and likewise for gay artists.

In the realm of folk music, some extremely innovative and sensitive material emerged in the seventies. Laura Nyro, whose music rose to fame in the hands of groups like the Fifth Dimension, recorded "Emmie," easily identifiable as a song with heavy lesbian overtones:

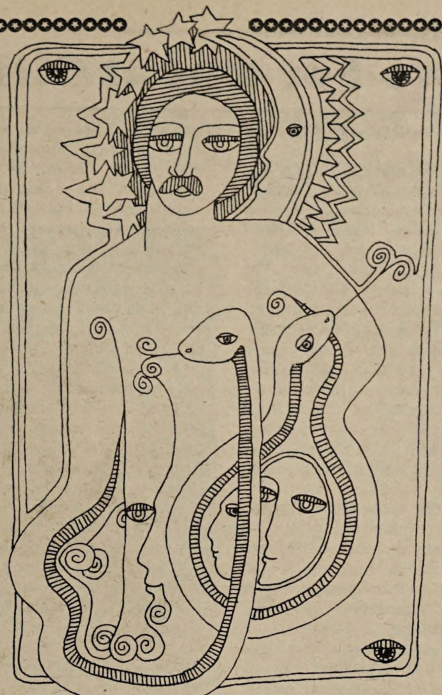
"Emily/you're the natural snow...
move me/oh sway me...
You were my friend and I loved you."

Dory Previn — rising to fame after her husband, Andre, ran off with Mia Farrow (her first big song was about that episode: "Beware of Young Girls") has more references to gays in her songs than any other non-gay performer. Her first lp "On My Way To Where" (Mediarts) contained "Michael, Michael," about a hippie-type gay man who "pushes acid" and "makes it best with men."

Ms. Previn's characters are often bizarre; yet her vision of the universe is through the eyes of an absurdist. In the finest tradition of Genet she presents Esther who lusts after Jesus; and the midget who wishes she were black.

An ardent feminist, she extols the virtues of androgyny and comments on political issues in some of the most delightfully satirical styles on record. In "Midget's Lament," she sums up the way people stereotype: "I mean y'seen one midget, y'seen 'em all, oh yeah, midget, oh yeah *small*," she sings. One could substitute any minority for midgets and the equation fits. In the song Ms. Previn reminds us "there are skinny midgets, fat midgets, gay midgets, etc."

Of course there are many, many more gay images; to do them all justice would take too much space. A closer examination of gay images would include the questionable "Ballad of the



Sad Young Men" by Roberta Flack, or the much debated "Just Like A Woman," the Dylan song a lot of gays claim is about a transvestite.

Then, there are the more recent examples, such as the lesbian songs of Patti Smith, a somewhat androgynous woman who has often dissociated herself from the gay and feminist movements.

So what do we make of all this? Though there have been both positive and negative treatments of homosexuals in rock, the overall picture is still not very pleasant. There is lots more consciousness-raising to be done. And even the positive material presents some problems; for instance, while "Lola" is a brilliant commentary, it also plays into the hands of those homophobes who believe that all gay men are transvestites. And while Janis Ian's "Queen Merka and Me" is strong and militant, it is also part of an lp ("For All The Seasons of Your Mind" — Verve) which is out of print!

Bowie, however, has sold millions of copies of his dreary images of gays.

Bowie was once asked by a London gay group to write a gay pride song. He refused. Why? Is it still that risky to be openly associated with gays? It certainly hasn't hurt Bette Midler's career any. But then she isn't gay.

Rock music — like the subculture that spawned it — is in dire need of consciousness-raising. We need more gay rock stars coming out, as Elton John did, but not just in print. And not just as safe bisexuals. We need positive gay role models for young gays to look up to; and songs like "I'm Gay" (from "Let My People Come") — songs which assert what we already know, that homosexuality is not decadent or degrading. We need also more gays to support people like Meg Christian and Steven Grossman; and others who are recording positive gay music. Without our support these people may as well be singing in the middle of the Sahara Desert.

half, were presently engaging in heterosexual relationships. Usually, the lesbians that were not sleeping with men, never did. One woman who is a virgin to men loved and desired a particular man, but the sex never happened. Another lesbian celebrated her 25th birthday by jumping in the sack with a window-washer who caught her in the nude. She didn't want to pass the quarter-century mark without experiencing a man. One "heavy-duty" leather dyke spent an entire evening complaining to me that gay men made passes at her. She felt that they should not have called themselves gay if they were going to express a heterosexual interest. Perhaps she expected them to wear green triangles. In any case, a week later she was considering sleeping with her male taxi driver.

The stories do go on. A favorite of mine is the for-money-only excuse. One of my "I love to take their money" friends went aboard a ship in harbor and cavorted with all twenty crew members in one night. That's true money-love. Then there's true "woman love." "I don't get involved with bisexual women," a friend told me recently. "I have made my commitment to women." I asked her if she had any straight friends and she said yes. As the wine flowed and the evening wore on I also found out that she had men friends, some of them

sexual partners. Apparently only bisexual women were excluded from her universe (as not really women?). All of these women would identify themselves as lesbians, and they do prefer women as friends and sexual partners. I would not deny that they should call themselves anything but lesbians. However, I do believe that they have not come to grips with their feelings about men. And perhaps this is why they are so hard on the woman who identifies herself as bisexual; she has taken a stand and admitted that men can be important to her.

Having tried to be an upfront bisexual in both the gay and non-gay worlds, I looked to Bode's book to help me to deal with some of the problems outlined above. It totally failed me. The book reads like a defense of bisexuality rather than a study of it.

Bode does her homework and has picked women from all different backgrounds — single, married, older, younger, varying in education and ethnic origin, working class to professional, mainly straight to mainly gay — but somehow they all come out sounding like the most well-adjusted people on earth. According to Bode they have found a strength in their bisexual identity that surpasses the faith of a Louise Day Hicks in hers and a Jill Johnston in hers. The few fears and oppressions experienced, all felt were

well worth the particular pleasure of being able to relate completely to both sexes.

A typical passage: "Gretchen captured many women's thoughts when she said, 'I don't think I've lost anything that really matters... No one can pigeonhole or restrict me the way they could if I were gay or straight, but I resent society pressuring me to hide a side of me that's so important and worthwhile. Bisexuality is a positive, enlightened force.'"

Basically that is the message repeated throughout the book by all the women interviewed. Society is definitely the villain in this multiple soap opera-straight society and gay society. The women do express feelings that they experience gay oppression when with a woman because parents may disapprove or because they can't hold hands in public. A few mention that lesbians complain about their choice of dress. One woman felt that she had to hide her heterosexual relationships from her women's rap group. But none of them talk about how bisexuality affects their relationships with lovers and spouses. In Bode's book, husbands are reasonable, female lovers never worry, male lovers do not interfere in lesbian relationships. I wish I could fade into that world.

I believe that Bode wanted her book to give hope and cheer to women

exploring their bisexuality, and, therefore, she concentrated on the positive aspects. The only personal problem that the interviews seemed to have was finding women to sleep with, since men were more readily available. Many complained that it took a long time to get to know a woman before one could move into a sexual relationship with her. I began to wonder if these women were really concerned with relating to both sexes as people or as sex objects. All described themselves as independent; their fantasies rarely include another person. (I want to be a graphic designer; I want a house in the country). In fact, the lesbian side of me would say that they tended to sound like straight men more interested in a "good time" than close relationships.

I feel that the book is of value only to the straight feminist who is exploring her feelings toward women and considering adding a sexual component to them. There is no real information for the lesbian who is exploring her feelings about men, nor is there much support for the bisexual whose identity is causing her problems in her personal relationships.

Of course, Bode's book is the first; we can't expect it to cover everything. It is amazing that it took 15 years of women's liberation before even one book on bisexuality was written. We will probably have to wait another 15 until men tell their stories.