

## A man for this season

*An album that deals so explicitly with gay concerns is a miracle — a holiday ought to be declared in celebration*

B Y D R . T A N T A L U S

The release of a strong, politically motivated pop album that speaks to the soul of the gay community is such a rarity that a holiday ought to be declared for the occasion. It's as if Christmas, the Fourth of July and Gay Pride Day were all wrapped up together. Therefore it is with real pleasure that The Doctor is able to report that Michael Callen's first album, *Purple Heart*, is one of the best gay pop records to be released in many years.

The emphasis Callen places on the issue of AIDS in America make this recording unique,

## Music

even within the "gay music" genre. But that description, however accurate, is ultimately misleading because *Purple Heart* is a fine album regardless of the sexual orientation of its creator.

To place this album in context one must be aware that its release coincides with the sixth anniversary of Callen's AIDS diagnosis. Since that time his resume reads as Florence Nightingale's might.

In testimony before Congress in 1983, Callen said that 80 percent of the persons diagnosed at the same time as himself had already died.

When gay leaders in New York were advising gay men to have "fewer" sexual encounters, Callen published "We Know Who We Are," an article which sought to stamp out unsafe sex. He has been the subject of documentaries and has appeared on numerous talk shows which publicize his efforts to get the message across. Those in need of further information may wish to consult Randy Shilts's epic *And the Band Played On*.

The activism that propels Callen has not been left out of *Purple Heart*. In the anthemic "Living in Wartime," Callen urges action against the "conspiracy of silence" that the gay community faces in the age of AIDS. As the music soars, Callen urges his audience to consider that as more people continue to die, "This is war!" It may sound trite on paper, but on record the song provides the album's emotional and chilling climax.

Callen's activism is not directed solely toward the country's political system. In "How to Have Sex," he tweaks the nose of the gay community by suggesting that the "Politically Correct Safe Sex and Thought Police" have become overzealous. As he approaches the idea of sex in the age of AIDS, he poses the questions that many have been asking:

Can't it be like it used to be?  
Can't it be like the fantasy?  
How to have sex in an epidemic  
Without being caught up in polemic.

Here, Callen emphatically rejects celibacy as a solution to this problem.

Another solution is posed in "Take It Easy," in which Callen suggests that:

Asexual partnering enthralls me  
I live with a roommate  
of a sort of a similar sex  
We try to avoid any kind of contact between us  
Except little performances strictly for the public.

In this context, even Callen's version of Elton John's "Talking Old Soldiers" takes on new meaning:

Well, do they know what it's like  
to have a graveyard for a friend?  
'Cause that's where they are, boy  
All of them . . .

Regardless of the politics of *Purple Heart*, it don't mean a thing if it ain't got that swing.

Fortunately for us, this is a musically sound and compelling album, divided into a fast (top) side and a slow (bottom) side. From the Doctor's operating table the fast side is more interesting, but listeners interested in the singer-songwriter mode of performance may come to a different conclusion.

In addition to "Living in Wartime," "How to Have Sex" and the decadently jazzy "Take It Easy," the top side features a campy version of Neil Sedaka's "Where the Boys Are," in which Callen holds a note for approximately 20 seconds.

The bottom side contains the Elton John standard, the elegant "Love Don't Need a Reason," cowritten with Peter Allen and Marsha Mollamet, and a David Lasley tune, "Small Town Change." An overdubbed and a cappella version of "Home" is also included, plus two original compositions, "Nobody's Fool" and "On the Other Side."

Callen runs the gamut of musical styles, from pop to rock to jazz. In albums of this type, one style usually predominates and becomes the performer's strong point while other songs suffer by comparison. But *Purple Heart* maintains a fairly consistent quality throughout.

If this description leaves one feeling that the album may be "worthwhile" and therefore dull, the Doctor would be guilty of the grossest malpractice. It would be impossible here to provide you with the warmth, cleverness and general good humor that pervades this album. Callen does not present himself as a victim, but as a man, and while some songs are intended to have a great deal of emotional impact the result is not all doom and gloom.

An album that deals so explicitly with gay concerns is a miracle. The fact that the album is also good is another. Thank you, Michael. Thank you very much.

*Are you still performing regularly?*

No. Actually most of the performances I've been doing in the last several years have been AIDS benefits. I've sung at the walkathons in Los Angeles, San Francisco and New York. I've sung in Boston. I just got back from singing in New Orleans at an AIDS conference down there. My lover is urging me very strongly to do a mini-tour to support the release of the album. But I actually haven't done a whole evening's worth of performing in five or six years.

*You formed your band Lowlife after getting your AIDS diagnosis. What led you to do that?*

My original diagnosis, which took six months, was cryptosporidium (a disease formerly found only in sheep). As fate would have it, I was involved in some of the first T-Cell research done in late 1981. So I knew early — before I had my official diagnosis — that I was sick.

In 1981, I had what eventually became known as ARC, although the term didn't exist then. AIDS didn't exist then; it was still called GRID.

I went through a pretty serious depression. At the time, everybody said the word on the street was that a mysterious disease was killing people. I had led the fast-lane lifestyle that was the profile of people with AIDS. I was having these symptoms: night sweats, fevers, weight loss.

After I was in this depression for six weeks I just snapped out of it. I decided whatever time I had left to live, whether it was six weeks, six months, six years or sixty, I wanted to do what I needed to do — which was to make queer music. So I placed an ad in the *Native* seeking lesbian and gay musicians. I got a drummer and a lover out of it. That same week I was hospitalized, and that's when they diagnosed it as cryptosporidium.

*Purple Heart is so gay. I was really elated to find a record that spoke to me as a gay person.*

Like most artists, I don't want to reduce my record to one sentence. I like it to be as complex as the listener would like to make it. But I set out to celebrate being gay, even in the age of AIDS. The humor is intentional. Humor is what is going to get us through AIDS. Humor is what has kept us sane throughout our political life. We are pretty young politically, as an organized movement. I wanted something that celebrated our diversity, something that had some of the good times, some of the bad times.

I don't like it being referred to as an AIDS album. Obviously, AIDS is dealt with on the album. Dealing with AIDS is part of being gay in 1988. It's certainly not all about AIDS. When someone says this is an AIDS album it sounds depressing. I hope it's more than that.

*What's next on your agenda?*

I'm editing the second volume of *Surviving and Thriving with AIDS*. I edited the first

volume. I was the original editor of *People With AIDS Newline* for two years and then turned it over to Max Nevar who died last week and so I have also resumed my editorship. So I have my hands full.

I'm on the board of the People With AIDS Coalition, the board of Community Research Initiative, I'm on the New York State AIDS Advisory Council, the board of People With AIDS Health Group. AIDS, AIDS, AIDS, AIDS, AIDS.

*Purple Heart* may be ordered by sending \$10 directly to Significant Other Records, PO Box 1545, Canal Street Station, New York, NY 10013.

**Clarification:** In the the June issue of *Just Out*, Sinead O'Connor was described as a "gay rocker." One of the Doctor's surgical assistants spotted Sinead, her baby and her apparent boyfriend on the train from Seattle to Portland. *Just Out* and the Doctor regret the confusion. •

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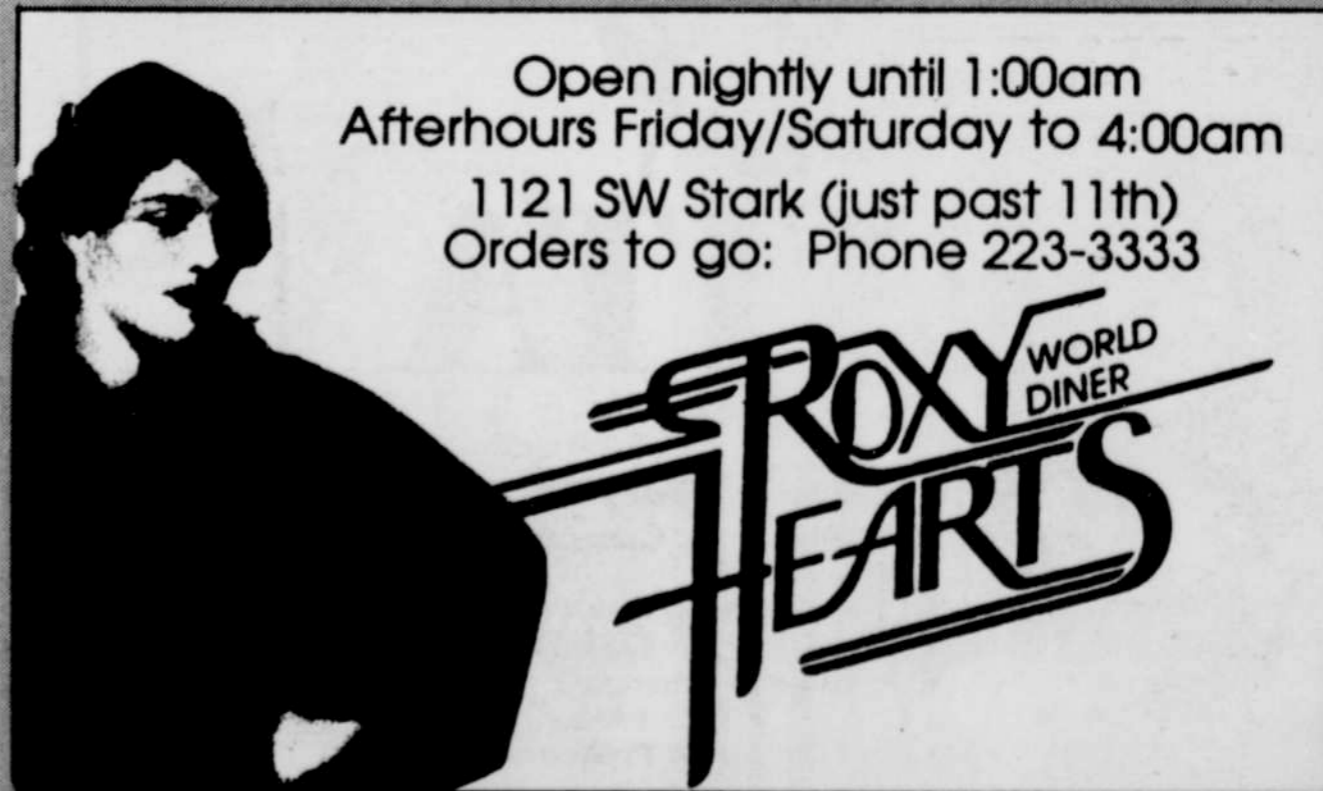
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