

INTERVIEW

ERASUREHEAD

Andy Bell talks about Cowboy, Erasure's popularity stateside and giving Andrew Lloyd Webber a run for his money

by Jeffrey L. Newman

As one half of the pop-synth duo Erasure, Andy Bell has camped, vamped and dragged through the halls of pop music for 12 years, refusing to deny his sexual identity out of fear of a commercial backlash. With the exception of Jimmy Somerville and a handful of lesser-known pop singers (pre-k.d. lang and Melissa Etheridge), the ever-flamboyant Bell played the role of gay pop star nearly solo, and quite well.

Music

"I couldn't do anything else, really," says the 33-year-old singer. "I never felt comfortable trying to pretend that I wasn't something that I was. I've never believed in covering myself with anything. It was never even a consideration, really. I'm not a very good liar. So when people asked—which they did right from the beginning—I told them. They'd ask if I had a girlfriend and I'd say, 'No, a boyfriend.' I never thought twice about it."

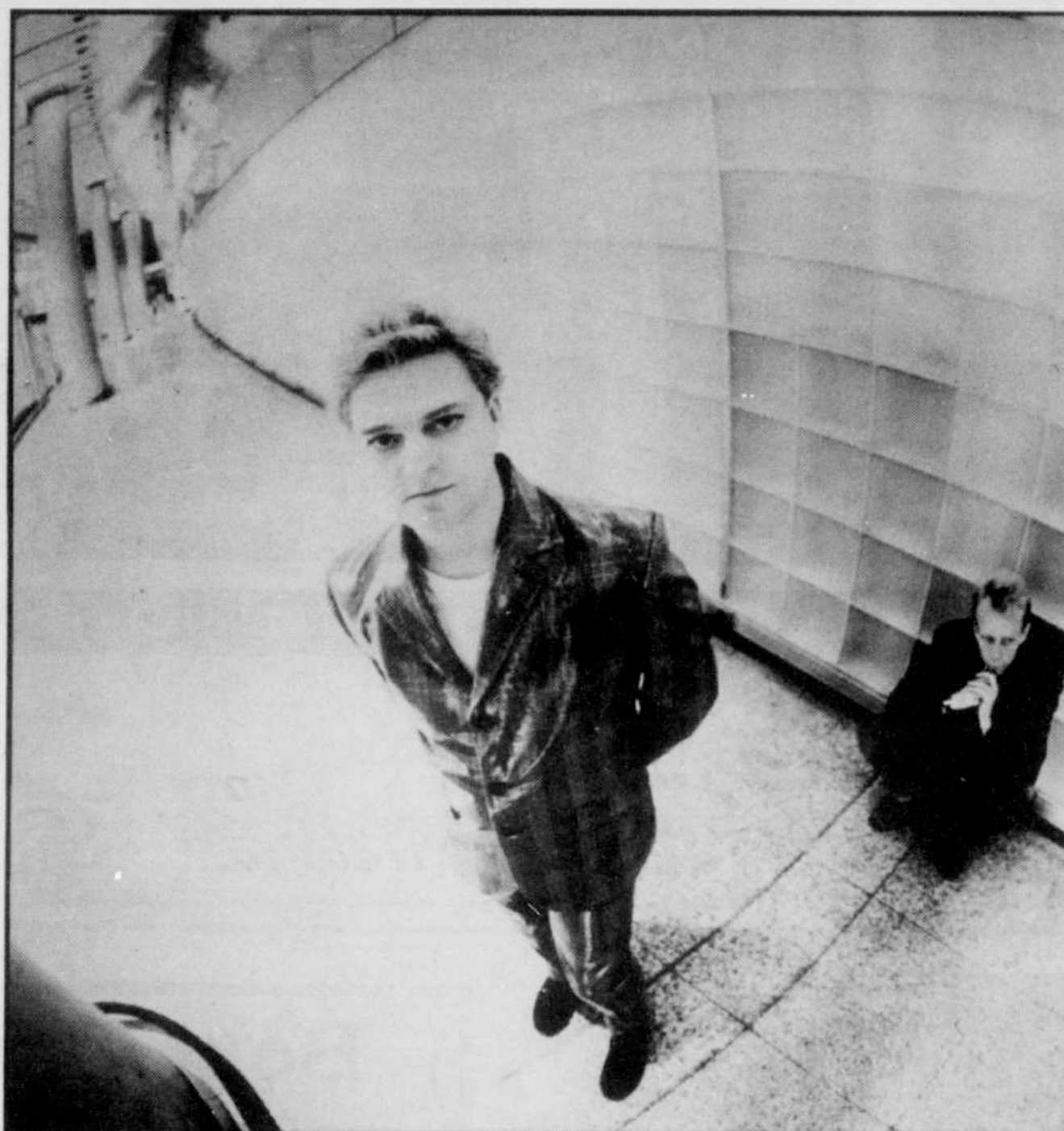
Bell and music partner Vince Clarke, who is not gay, are back on the music scene after a two-year absence with their 10th album and a new record label. Released on Madonna's Maverick Records, *Cowboy* is a rich, upbeat collection of pop confections, featuring the boys' trademark electro-pop sound and infectious dance grooves. Recorded in Spain and London, it also includes a Blondie cover ("Rapture"), a Burt Bacharach song ("Magic Moments") and features background vocals by the London Community Gospel Choir.

"In some ways I think this album is better than anything we've done before. I think our song writing improves all the time," says Bell, who has been known to don fishnet stockings and drag, wear outrageous costumes and camp it up full scale during the group's theatrical concerts. "Our craft is something like making chairs with your hands. We get better at it all the time. After the experience of our last album [which wasn't well received], we just wrote as many songs as we could. Vince just had fun, really. I think this album has a sound that people describe as being like our old stuff."

Born in Peterborough, England, Bell had his first fling with a boy at 16. At 19, he moved to London and came out as an adult.

"I wrote my parents a letter and told them I was gay," he recalls. "They were OK with it. The first boyfriend I had, we went home for a Christmas visit and we slept in the same bed. Today, they're brilliant. It makes it easier, I think, because the job I have is so theatrical."

In 1985, barely 21, he saw an ad in a British music rag for a singer, posted by Clarke, who had already earned notoriety and several top records as founder of Depeche Mode and Yazoo, a.k.a. Yaz (with Allison Moyet). Clarke hired Bell and the



Andy Bell and Vince Clarke (crouching)

duo named themselves Erasure. The band released its debut, *Wonderland*, in 1986, but neither the album nor the first two singles managed to catch fire.

In 1987 Erasure came out with a second recording, *The Circus*. With the release of the single "Sometimes," fire caught. The song soared to No. 2 in the United Kingdom and made Erasure one of the top pop music acts of that year.

A year later, Erasure scored its most impressive chart action to date with the release of *The Innocents*, which spawned Top-40 hits such as "Ship of Fools," "Chains of Love" and "A Little Respect." While Bell and Clarke followed that

album with several more, including *Wild, Chorus, Abba-esque* (a four-song EP of Abba covers), *I Say I Say I Say* and *Erasure*, the duo is far from its heyday of the million-plus seller *The Innocents*. Erasure is still creating melodic tunes and enjoying brisk sales of its new release, but its popularity has waned.

"It's quite strange. The new album is doing all right in Europe, better than the last one, but it's not selling nearly as well as *The Innocents* or *Wild*," Bell notes. "We've had a run there for 10 years. We've sort of been through the cycle of British pop. They get quite bored with you after a while. They get tired of hearing you all the time. It's

mainly radio that gets bored with you. And if you don't get radio play, people don't realize that you have something new out. That has become our problem there. Our saving grace has been coming here to the U.S. The response has been really good."

Despite being one of the first openly gay popsters, Bell, who lives in London with his lover of 12 years, has stayed clear of the political fray. He doesn't see himself as a political activist and would much rather play a gay pride festival than march in one.

"I like going and mingling around. I'm not really good at vocalizing or shouting," he says. "I've never really been into it. I don't believe in getting up on a soapbox and being loud. I'd rather act and be on stage than be a political activist. I prefer to just act normal and steer clear of trouble."

While not having lost anyone intimately close to him to AIDS, Bell is far from removed from the epidemic. Several past boyfriends have died from the disease, and four years ago his lover had four friends die, one after the other. He also knows dozens of others who are living with HIV.

"Once you've had a spate of four people dying in a row, it becomes so surreal," he says. "It really makes you think about what it must have been like to live during a big war and have loads of people killed at once. But I think it's been good in terms of bringing issues to the forefront that otherwise wouldn't be out there for the general audience. It helped us be strong and pull together. It gave us a political voice. People suddenly were reading about [AIDS] and about the courage of how we [the gay community] dealt with the whole thing. It's given us a lot of respect."

As for the future, don't expect Bell and Clarke to part company anytime soon, despite the persistent rumor that they are near breaking up. "We'll be together for a while," Bell says. "People have been saying that for years. Just because we've been together for so long, they assume we're going to go our separate ways. They've been waiting for us to split up for 11 years. But we've never even considered it. It's not going to happen."

In fact, if Bell has his way, once its current tour is over and it is done promoting its new opus, the duo will sit down and write the ultimate Broadway musical.

"I'd like to write a really big, fabulous musical. Not like the ones that are being made today, but a really high-tech, modern one," he says. "I don't want to rehash what's already been done. I don't want it to be like Andrew Lloyd Webber. I want it to be really modern, full of memorable and catchy tunes. It would be quite futuristic, more like *Hair* than *Phantom of the Opera*. And of course, it would have lots of drag queens and lots of camp."

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