



'I'M A NATURAL BORN BLOWER.' With a new CD due out soon, Jimmy Somerville is in fighting form over sex, music, politics and hypocritical pop stars.

Still screaming

Jimmy Somerville stands by his beat

Story by Elio Iannacci

disco never died. We have Jimmy Somerville partly to thank (or blame) for that.

Somerville nursed disco when it was on its last legs and refused to abandon the beat in its time of need. Just a few years after crates full of Donna Summer and Blondie albums were thrown into park trash cans and tragically lit aflame, Jimmy helped rejuvenate the beat. Even with Somerville's pushy opinions and fiery, in-your-face gay politics, Somerville prevailed in bringing it all back.

The end result? His dance remakes even convinced some of those disco-phobes to trade in their tacky disco sucks T-shirts for plain, white circuit tanks.

It all started with the success of the now classic hit "Smalltown Boy," where Somerville teamed up with Steve Bronski and Larry Steinbachek to form the UK's first openly gay band, Bronski Beat, in the early '80s. Their first album, *The Age Of Consent* (a direct reference to the UK's gay sex laws), soon topped the charts with quick synth hits like "Why," remakes of Donna Summer's "I Feel Love" and Gershwin's "It Ain't Necessarily So."

The "Smalltown Boy" video and the gay specified lyrics on *The Age Of Consent* spoke to two generations of homos dealing with coming out in their own small towns. For some, Jimmy was their only hero. He vowed never to disappoint them.

For the most part, Jimmy didn't disappoint. Even after leaving Bronski Beat, his own beat got better. His anthems "Run From Love" and "Don't Leave Me This Way" (with the Communards) bridged one of the first mainstream, commercial connections with disco and house music. As Somerville became the only firm gay voice in pop (a rare find during an era of music where ambiguity became trendier than Madonna's rubber

bracelets), his lyrics became much more political, as well.

Soon he used the music press to voice his own concerns on the AIDS epidemic, queer youth and bi-celebrities. Somerville even started calling on his fellow queers in pop for support during his chart reign but, as he now recalls: "None of the cowards responded."

"I used to resent all those closeted artists," says Somerville. "I was one of the first anti-ambiguity people who despised the Pet Shop Boys, George Michael, Holly Johnson and Boy George."

"They were all out of the closet way before they had a pop career. They were making conscious decisions to avoid issues and honesty. Record sales became more important than integrity to them, so, of course I regarded them as the enemy within."

He recalls how difficult it was to tour Europe with bomb threat after bomb threat ruining numerous concert dates in the '80s. While Somerville was "getting arrested for cottaging" or "putting his life on the line for his politics," George Michael was dishonestly blowing careless whispers to teen girls and Boy George was "preferring a cup of tea to sex."

"Those two have always been at each other throats with this love/hate relationship they have that is really quite funny," he says, laughing at recent feuds between Michael and George. "In the end, they are just a few bitter, old queens. If they weren't pop stars, they'd be bantering at the local bar — George O'Dowd would be the one with the bigger mouth and be the biggest bitch of the two. Really... it's so dull."

"I still have a little part of me that's cynical when it comes to them. I could understand if American evangelists would scream 'demon' at pictures of Boy George in the '80s. I would have joined them because I was so angry. I would have screamed 'burn him in hell!' too! Running around with bad

make-up and bad hair, looking like Joan Collins on drugs, I would have joined them!"

Now after six albums and almost two decades of performing, Jimmy is still screaming.

He has acquired a new record company, called Gut, a new management team and a new perspective on his music. For starters, he claims to have cut the same "old school beats" out of his newest album, *Manage The Damage*, to create what he calls "organic disco" for the future of club floors.

The album was made in his own flat with his room-mate Sally Herbert.

The response in Europe has already brought him a hit in Germany with the song "Something To Live For."

To open his brand new disc (available in Canada next month), Somerville's first single, "Lay Down," is a hands up, self-confessed "tribute to fellatio," replete with soft-porn lines like "Heaven lies/ In your thighs." It marries new-world indie-techno sounds to an old world disco-funk background.

Most importantly, the lyrics aim to educate new queers on the block on how to give it up properly. "Well if you're a beginner," he clarifies, "my advice would certainly be to never quit. If you work hard enough it won't take long before you can attain my degree of knowledge."

"I was a natural born blower — but you can learn as you go. It takes practice. The inspiration behind 'Lay Down' said I gave him his best ever."

All inspiration aside, this new Somerville album is classic Jimmy. With more beat build ups and vocal allusions to glow sticks than a ghetto rave, *Manage The Damage* manages to work down-home, new and old school disco.

The recipe is simple. *Damage* ultimately combines today's trendy electronic-flavored house formula with glamorous salutes to the diva-onic "Never Can Say Goodbye" era of yesterday.

