Oh Boy!

Boy George on AIDS and pop music's incessant homophobia

October 1, 1994 By James Baggett

Boy George, the gender-bending queen of '80s pop music, has been bubbling back up into the public consciousness over the past year. His rendition of the title track from 1993's gender-bending film The Crying Game became his first American hit in almost 10 years and earned him a Grammy nomination. The song also propelled sales of At Worst... the Best of Boy George and Culture Club, this year's anthology of Boy's biggest hits from both sides of the Atlantic. A devoted follower of Hare Krishna and an avid champion of Turning Point (a six-day group workshop on self-esteem), George has put his well-publicized heroin problem behind him and is currently finishing up an autobiography called Take It Like a Man, which will be published later this year.

I catch up with George as he prepares to tape an interview at City Stages, right around the corner from the Spike, the famous gay leather bar in New York City's Chelsea neighborhood. Sporting a red suit and beret -- and a button he made out of a five-pound note during his teens -- the 33-year-old George Alan O'Dowd has agreed to talk frankly about AIDS, homophobia and the music industry. Before Boy and I go our separate ways, he removed the SILENCE = DEATH button from my backpack, pins it on his lapel and insists he will wear it onstage later that evening at Radio City Music Hall. He also accepts a stack of palm cards for an ACT UP demonstration. "Don't worry," he snickers, "I'll pass these out backstage tonight." And I believe him.

POZ: What made you decide to start writing music about AIDS?

Boy George: The first time I mentioned AIDS in a song was about three years ago for a song called "Generations of Love." I really wanted to put the word "AIDS" in the song because I felt that it was something that was really being avoided. People didn't want to talk about it. The point I was making was that we don't need a big sensation, we just need to have open discussions -- and we need people to be honest. I suppose the point was [to promote] AIDS caring, you know. "You can't catch AIDS from caring" was on one of our tour T-shirts at the time 'cause it seemed that people were just really embarrassed about discussing it. I think that it's important to have these things out in the open. Even people that I know who have died from AIDS, like my friend Stevie, never told anybody until they were hospitalized. It was funny because I remember when we went to see him I was like, "Oh, girl, everyone knew anyway." He was running around for like seven years doing this whole number and everybody knew!

POZ: I hear you recently wrote a song for Stevie.

Boy George: The song is called “Elle l’adore.” It’s French. It means “She loves it.” It’s really about when Stevie was dying, being in the hospital with his family and his friends -- really about the two different sides of Stevie, if you like: How his parents saw him and how we saw him. It was hard to imagine him as he used to be. It was really just my experience of Stevie’s death. I’ve known other people who have died, but I suppose Stevie was someone I knew the longest. We weren’t like really, really close friends, but we’d known each other for 15 years. I worked with him. He was a photographer and make-up artist -- a very good one, too. All my memories of him are very camp and very funny. I don’t know if you ever saw the cover from “The War Song”: It was me with a sort of soldier’s cap on. We were in Australia and I hadn’t seen Stevie since I was 17. Culture Club was huge in Australia -- it was like the Beatles [first coming to America] when we went there. And I remembered my manager said, “Oh, there’s some guy here who wants to meet you.” And it was like, “Ahhhh! What are you doing here?” At that time in my career I was really hemmed in. I really wasn’t going out of the hotel room. So doing this photo session with Stevie was fantastic. He painted my face for days and put this hat on me and he was up this ladder and he was saying, “Okay, girl, a tear for the kamikaze pilot who died in your honor.” That was what it was like working with him.

POZ: So the song is basically a tribute to your friend’s struggle with AIDS and dying?

Boy George: It started off with, I suppose, my own feelings about what his mother must have been going through. And it’s also [about] that thing of when parents talk about their gay child. My mother always used to call me her “sensitive boy.” I was theatrical. It was like, “Sensitive boy, good with his hands / Nobody mentions the unmentionable, but everybody understands.” Meaning nobody wants to mention death or the gay thing or the AIDS thing. It’s like a fear. And then I tied it in with what all the activists say: “Silence equals death, this is what they say / But the anger and the tears do not take the pain away.” So, at the end of the day, yes, I think there are times to be angry. I don’t think this is the time to sit on your ass and do nothing. But just because you’re protesting and screaming it doesn’t necessarily mean that you’re feeling. You can get lost in that. You know, you can get lost in the screaming and the shouting and actually not feel fuck-all.

POZ: Which could be a conscious decision for people.

Boy George: Behind AIDS I think there’s a lot of guilt. I think that with gay people, because we’re persecuted to a certain degree all our lives, we’re made to feel as though we don’t belong. There’s a real loneliness there as well. It’s such a big picture it’s difficult to put into any particular words. There’s this need to be satiated -- particularly with Stevie, because he became very spiritual at the end of his life, to the point where he was like a different person. It was amazing. He went out to swim with dolphins. He did all these things he’d never done before that he’d always wanted to do. It was just amazing to see that transformation.

POZ: Are you concerned about your own HIV status?

Boy George: I think for me -- I was never very promiscuous anyway. Since I was at school I've had relationships with people for like five and six years. My last relationship was with [drummer] Jon Moss of Culture Club and that was for seven years. Prior to Culture Club, I suppose I was quite promiscuous in my own way. I used to have sex in toilets and pick up people in the street, all that kind of thing -- but not enough. Do you know what I mean? It was like... it was always with straight boys. It was always with boys who said they were straight. You know, inexperienced. I never really got into the heavy gay scene anyway. I never really frequented hard-core gay clubs. I never went to cruising areas. I suppose I was really scared of that. I've never been that confident that I would ever go into a bathhouse. I've probably though about it quite a lot! [He laughs] I was sort of saved from that by my own insecurities. Do you know what I'm saying? I really couldn't do that, not because I wouldn't love doing it, it was just my fear of people seeing me naked. And again, I've always sort of been in relationships. I'm probably more promiscuous in my head than I am physically. But as soon as I heard about AIDS I was careful, right from the beginning before anyone I knew died. I took it very seriously. I realized it was a big thing.

POZ: How do you think the music industry has responded to the AIDS crisis?

Boy George: I think that most people in the business live in fear of a massive drop in album sales. I know that when I came out officially -- I've always said that if anyone ever thought I was straight they must need glasses -- but when I finally came out and said, "Yes, I do sleep with men and I'm gay," yeah, I lost record sales. There's no question -- big, big time. And I think a lot of people, even if they are supportive, are scared of what it might do to business. But I think that will change. I think there already is a change happening, particularly since The Crying Game and Philadelphia and Mrs. Doubtfire, which, of course, are cliches in their own ways. I think it's much tougher for women because we live in such a misogynistic world and men don't like the idea of lesbians. I think, all strength to k.d. lang -- really, because it's a big move to make. I've always believed, certainly over the past eight years, at least, that I have to live my life being who I am. You know, secrets kill. They really do -- just ask Michael Jackson. If you go around hiding your true self, then you create a monster and that monster is far more destructive than anything you can imagine.

POZ: So, are you saying the music industry is inherently homophobic?

Boy George: The music industry is not supportive. You see, the music industry relies on the public. And a lot of the public are homophobic. I think in a way you create your own fear. At the root of it, I suppose, there's shame. Self-denial. There are those who I call "proper homosexuals," who are sort of quiet, respectable, not too camp. Everything's done secretly. You often hear people like that talking about drag queens in a scathing way. I remember someone saying [about drag queens], "If it wasn't for them, we could be accepted." It's a stupid argument. And I kind of see drag queens as the suffragettes of the gay community anyway. I think the root of that problem really is various people saying, "I am ashamed of who I am, and I don't want anyone to remind me of who I am." Cause I can remember when I first came out of the closet, I hated camp men. I had this friend and he said to me, "The only reason you hate them is because you're exactly like them and you're scared." At the time I was 17 and I was the campiest queen. It was true. It was my own fear. I turned into the worst kind of cliche you can possibly imagine.

POZ: Do you think anything positive has come out of the AIDS crisis?

Boy George: Gosh, you know, I suppose I'm really optimistic and I believe in the goodness of human beings -- even though I'm constantly having my illusions shattered. I believe that out there there are a lot of good people and a lot of caring people. One of the positive things about AIDS is that it's really, really solidified the gay community. You see it much more in America because Americans are more political animals anyway. When I came back here to do The Crying Game, you know, I was doing a lot of interviews with gay magazines and meeting a lot of gay writers. It was really heartening to see the motivation. My manager and I had lunch with several people and both of us were, like, "Wow, it's so much more focused here." People are fighting and I think that's important. In England it's hard to get people motivated. Although recently I was at the House of Commons for the age of consent debate and that was pretty amazing. I turned up there at 7:00 and by 10:00 there were like thousands of people there. I don't know why, but it makes you feel safe. I just think one of the most important things is that we are human beings, we're not just gay. I try to speak as a human being, whether it's about gay issues or black issues or lesbian issues. To me, there's no difference. And until we realize that, nothing's going to change.

POZ: How do you help your friends who are living with AIDS and HIV?

Boy George: It's a very difficult question because human beings are very individual and I know various people who are HIV positive and each of their reactions is totally different. Some people go out and get loaded every night and drink themselves into a stupor. They think, "Fuck it, I'm gonna go out with a bang." Other people get really spiritual and get into a whole health trip. It really depends on your emotional state. I think reaching out is a big step. There is a tendency for some people to say, "I don't want to burden anybody, I just want to do this on my own." But you have to reach out and try and find people who support you. And obviously in reaching out you're going to meet some people who aren't going to want to deal with it, because when you deal with [another person's] death you deal with your own mortality. Some people cannot deal with it. You have to try and understand that it's not because they don't care about you.

POZ: What would you say to someone who thinks they're not at risk for AIDS?

Boy George: I want to tell teenagers who don't think they're at risk to wise up. You hear stories about people who go out every night fucking. Then you hear about one kid who comes in from the suburbs for one night in the big city, and it's the first time he's had sex and he gets AIDS. There are no guarantees. I can't believe anybody doesn't take precautions and doesn't protect themselves. When I hear people saying, "Oh, I don't use condoms," I am appalled. I find it so hard to believe that people have that kind of an attitude. I think religion provides some essential guidelines but I think that your body is your responsibility. Your life is your responsibility. Look to the church for some things, but when it comes to your own life and your own body -- which is the temple of your soul -- you are responsible for that.

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