

ENTERTAINMENT

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Cruise
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COVER story

TROUBADORS FOR THE PRICE OF FUN The Naked Truth about Romanovsky and Phillips

FRESH FRUIT RECORDS ARTISTS
RON ROMANOVSKY AND PAUL PHILLIPS
COVER PHOTO: IRENE YOUNG

In some utopian society of the future, gay men's music won't have to be a separate category. At the moment, however, it's a growth industry and Ron Romanovsky and Paul Phillips are among its pioneers.

There are three ways to get to know these singer-songwriters. Whether you talk to them or listen to their music, in concert or on record, you'll get a fairly consistent picture of two gay men who love each other and share a political commitment which they express through their songs.

I made their acquaintance a third way, the road least traveled by:

I don't remember many of the people I met in bathhouses. (Of course some of you don't remember bathhouses, but that's another story.) I've forgotten dozens (okay, hundreds) of men I had sex with in those pleasure palaces of a bygone era, but one case of coitus interruptus has stayed with me as an example of the nice, nonorgasmic things that could happen at the baths.

It was a Monday night at San Francisco's Bulldog Baths in 1982, shortly before I became health-conscious and stopped going there. I was into some heavy foreplay with an adorable young couple when I noticed that one of them was showing far less enthusiasm than his lover and myself. It turned out that it was Ron's first time at the baths and he wasn't quite ready for it, so we stopped what we were doing.

Instead of dashing off to find someone more willing I played big brother for a few minutes, comforting and cuddling and telling them they were right to put their relationship first. It was a touching encounter in every sense.

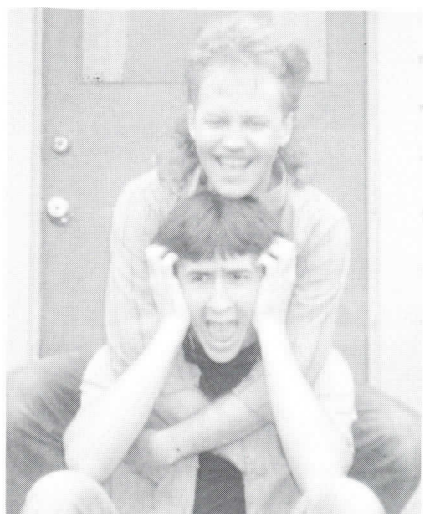
Now I've heard stories of what some entertainers will do to get in the papers (where are they?), but I was surprised to get a call four years later from the two young men who hadn't given their all that night but still wanted me to write about them. In the years between I had, without realizing who they were, been aware of their growing popularity as openly gay entertainers; they released two albums and appeared in over 50 cities around the country.

Our second meeting was strictly business. Oh, I'm sure they were lusting after me and



PHOTO: STEVE WARREN

COVER STORY



regretted having passed up their golden opportunity, but they hid it well as they pretended to be interested only in hyping their latest album, *Trouble in Paradise*, and an upcoming concert.

Ron Romanovsky has dark hair and a personality to match. He writes most of the songs, while sunny blond Paul Phillips sometimes assists on the melodies or by "send[ing] him back to the drawing board." Paul says his one solo composition in their repertoire, the ballad "To Myself" (included on the *Trouble* album), was written years ago "after my first really big heart throb"; but it's a perfect description of my last major relationship.

Gay Everymen?

That's why Romanovsky and Phillips are so popular. Almost everyone can relate to their lyrics, and their pastiche music, in a variety of styles, is highly accessible. "We're not coming from a place that we're a gay Everyman," Paul says, "but we've discovered a commonality. Relationships are universal. That's why even heterosexuals relate to our music, once they've gotten over the 'gay thing'."

When Ron writes from his own experience he is sometimes surprised to find out how many share it. The unrecorded "Pee Shy" is a case in point. "After I wrote it I was afraid to show it to Paul, but now it's one of our most requested numbers."

Even if his fears are groundless they inhibit and frustrate Ron. "I sometimes feel resentful,"

he laments, "that I can't write really personal songs." What could be more personal than "Womb Envy" or "He Wasn't Talking to Me"? "Outfield Blues" isn't an anthem for the Gay Games, but it expresses perfectly the hell we nonathletes went through when we had to do sports as children.

Some of the funny songs such as "The Prince Charming Tango," "Cat and Mouse" and "What Kind of Self-Respecting Faggot Am I?" are no less intimate for laughing at our foibles. "Wimp" is totally autobiographical in how I deal with life," Ron says of yet another example.

"Homophobia" and "Living in the Nuclear Age" are upfront political tunes, the sort Ron envisioned doing when he began performing. "When I was 18, just starting to come out and write folk songs, I wanted to be the Bob Dylan or the Phil Ochs of the gay movement."

Even the songs that don't have a humorous edge become lighter in the context of a Romanovsky and Phillips concert. I mean, how seriously can you take guys in *those* clothes? Paul's halfway to drag and Ron gets looser all the time. I'm not sure whether Madonna wears their hand-me-downs or vice versa, but there must be some common threads.

Likewise, by emphasizing their mutuality with the audience, they create a sense of community, even if none existed before. Paul's "Patty Patter" routine between songs warms the crowd further and keeps everyone smiling, besides giving Ron ample time to tune his guitar...and piano ...and even a symphony orchestra, one instrument at a time.

Cherchez les Femmes

Before they became lovers in the summer of 1981 and singing partners six months later, both men had been heavily influenced by the women's movement in general and women's music in particular. "I came out from reading feminist literature, from *The Female Eunuch* to *Lesbian Nation*," Paul says. "I think because I'm an effeminate man I've suffered a lot of the same oppression women have, even within the gay male community.

"We have a love-hate relationship with women's music...love from understanding the politics behind it and hate because it's disheartening to find it going further into the closet...Women come up to us when we perform and say, 'You use the word lesbian more than Cris Williamson does.'"

LOVE'S STORY

Ron cites Holly Near as an early inspiration of his career. "She was using 'the L word' a lot at the time. I realized I was afraid of performing because I was gay, so maybe I wouldn't be so afraid if I performed for gay audiences.

"Women's [record] labels were created," he explains, "not just to give women their own material but to give them access to the industry, which was dominated by men."

Romanovsky and Phillips couldn't pass the physical at Olivia or Redwood, so they started their own label, Fresh Fruit Records, with album FF101, *I Thought You'd Be Taller*. That's just one aspect of their groundbreaking work in gay entertainment which may ultimately have more impact than their music.

After 3½ years of national tours they're beginning to know what they're doing, to develop a circuit of clubs and responsible concert producers. "Anybody we would hire to do our booking," Paul says, "we know ten times more than they do." They've played clubs and colleges, churches and theaters, conferences and rallies, bars and benefits in 31 states.

They're not looking for other acts — handling themselves is a full-time job — but they're happy to advise other entertainers. As Paul puts it, "We're big on the idea of networking with other performers and sharing contacts."

Under pressure to come up with a song about AIDS, R & P introduced "Living with AIDS" to a standing ovation at a sold-out San Francisco concert last July. By a coincidence Paul calls "mystical," the man who inspired the song died in his sleep the next morning. At last report "Living with AIDS" was "under construction again" and may not be sung on the current tour.

Homosexual Healing

Meanwhile Paul says their songs are designed to raise the self-esteem of gay audiences. "That will help them deal with (AIDS), even if we don't sing about it specifically. Women's music is real healing, and that's what I want to do with my music."

The song "Trouble in Paradise" is about a relationship that needs healing. It was originally written about a friend of Ron's but didn't really come together until Ron and Paul broke up temporarily in the summer of 1985. "There were all these rumors about us," Ron says, "so I rewrote it to capitalize on them."

Although Paul moved out during the split they continued performing together. "The act has kept us together at times," Paul says, "but the relationship has kept the act together at times too." The *Trouble in Paradise* album was recorded shortly after they got back together, which is why they don't sing as many duets as on *I Thought You'd Be Taller*. This factor makes me prefer the old record despite equally good songs, fuller instrumentation and Teresa Trull's fine production on the new one.

After five years (mostly) together in San Francisco, Ron and Paul have relocated in Sante Fe, a city Ron felt especially drawn to.

For the time being, Fresh Fruit Records remains headquartered in San Francisco (mailing address: 2269 Market St., #301, S.F., CA 94114).

Romanovsky and Phillips complement each other off stage as well as on. Paul says he used to hate to be alone — "I could never be quiet" — but Ron has taught him how. On the other hand, "Ron could never stand crowds. He still doesn't like them, but at least he can function in them."

He'd better be able to, because the crowds at their performances show no sign of abating, whether in sophisticated urban centers where they're just another gay act or in smaller cities and isolated campuses where they may be the only openly gay entertainers to appear all year.

Ron Romanovsky and Paul Phillips have an open relationship, sharing their love with everyone who sees and hears them perform.

— Steve Warren

Romanovsky & Phillips will be performing at The Ark in Ann Arbor on Tuesday, May 5. The performance is a benefit for Wellness Networks/Huron Valley (the local AIDS organization) sponsored by the Ann Arbor chapter of Integrity. (313) 994-5377.

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