

Jacqués Rocks

BY CHRISTOPHER MUTHER

Local drag bar sparks a queer-rock renaissance

In one corner, a half-dozen big-hair drag queens in tight, bright minidresses puff at their cigarettes, gossiping. A distinguished, 50ish-looking man and his companion, a dead ringer for Dustin Hoffman in *Tootsie* drag, watch them from the bar. Nearby, a table of frat boy/sorority girl types pass around a pitcher of beer.

Put together, they make an unlikely crew of clubgoers. But Jacques, the Bay Village drag bar, has brought these disparate groups under one roof with its burgeoning rock scene. What began a year ago as an effort to open up the club to more than lip-synching queens and drag pageants has galvanized lesbian and gay bands throughout Greater Boston and provided them with a place to play music — and develop a following.

On Sunday and Monday nights, bands play upstairs on a small, glittering stage. Friday and Saturday, they play downstairs in a room — with its orange walls and faux flagstone — that could double as a suburban basement. The bands, mostly gay with a few straight rockers mixed in, have brought a whole new clientele to the bar, says Jacques manager Kristin Turilli. Yet surprisingly, there has been little, if any, friction between clubbers attending the rock shows and regular patrons.

Cabaret singer Rick Berlin anchored Jacques's move into music. An established musician who headed a number of bands throughout the 1970s and '80s, Berlin was a natural choice to kick off this queer-rock renaissance. For over a year, he's performed every Monday night at the club.

"There are so many chances for someone to get bashed, and it never happens," says Berlin. "Jacques is like CBGB (the legendary New York club that spawned the US punk scene). You're not supposed to have this in there, and that's the way it is in the coolest places."

During a recent performance, Berlin's audience was about half gay, half straight. Sitting alone on stage behind his keyboard, he became a man of multiple personalities as he switched from a hardened homeless man on "The King of Kenmore Square" to a college

Jacques is a good place for it."

Berlin boosted Jacques's credibility as a rock club last year when he staged a \$2500 fundraiser for AIDS Action Committee called "Drags, Dicks and Dykes," held the night before AAC's pledge walk. Jacques was packed with nearly 500 people who had come to see a dozen bands downstairs and performance-art shows upstairs.

Besides Berlin, the bands at Jacques range from gay grungers to pop cover artists — as well as a few that defy categorization. One such group, which has already been booked for this year's Drags, Dicks and Dykes benefit (scheduled for June 1), is the Women of Sodom. With a parental advisory on the front of their new CD *Boots*, and an over-21 warning on their World-Wide Web page (<http://cvb.drawbridge.com/pk/pkindex.html>), the Women of Sodom are likely to raise a few eyebrows, even at Jacques.

"Penthouse wanted to do a story on us, but they turned us down," says singer Cynthia von Buhler, who performs under the stage name Ilsa von Bulow. "They thought we were too extreme. I have a message on my answering machine with a woman saying, 'This is Debbie from Penthouse magazine, and the editor thinks you're too extreme.' We're thinking of using it in a song."

No subject or sexual act is taboo for the loose collection of singers, musicians, dancers, and slaves that make up the Women of Sodom. A typical show features the women in black vinyl and leather S&M gear kissing and fondling one another; occasionally they slap each other and pull each other's hair. The men in the band are used as slaves and playthings — Sodom's male guitarist dresses like a maid. The highlight of the show comes when the women circle one of the slaves, who is tied to a table, and give him an enema to "The Doctor Song."

"A lot of our songs have some feminist ideas we're trying to get across," says von Buhler. "We may be a little different from other feminists, but we definitely are feminists. We're all bisexual, and the subject matter of our show is very pro-gay."

The Sodom sound is best described as horny ambient music. A light trance of techno beats over moaning, insults, and commands. Their best songs, such as "Nightmare on Dyke Street," tease listeners with lyrics like "She pets my pussy/I pet her pussy/He wants me to suck it/He don't deserve it." But sex is not the only inspiration for the band's music. On "Manwich," the band turns a quote from *Adweek* magazine about strong women into a song — and "Valentine for Jesus" is a new take on Oscar Wilde's play *Salome*.

"There's no one on this side of the market right now. We've cornered [it]," says dancer Jessica Athas, who performs with the band under the name Valid. "It pushes everybody's buttons when they watch it, because it's not geared for any one particular group . . . We have men who come to the show who want to see really beautiful men because they're basically naked during the show. We have women who come because they like to see the way we interact with each other. And there are men who come because they like to see a woman in control."

The band has played at the Limelight, in New York City, and von Buhler says there has been interest in the group from a major record label. Around Boston, their shows have become popular draws. But even if the big time beckons, band members say they have no plans to tone down their show or their music. They certainly don't regret missing their chance to pose in *Penthouse*.

"Penthouse is gross anyway," von Buhler says. "We do sexual things, but it's not like we spread our legs and show our vaginas. We like to think of ourselves as classy."

Space Pussy, which has played at Jacques a number of times, is a home-grown representative of the national trend toward gender bending by mainstream mega-rockers. After all, if a band like the Red Hot Chili Peppers can don dresses and kiss each other during shows, what's the big deal about a male-to-female pre-op transsexual playing drums for gay rockers who do grunge?

"When we're playing straight clubs, people don't know what to think about the whole drag aspect," says drummer Rikki Bates, a bisexual transsexual who was born a male but has been living as a female for the past six years. "But they love it. There's a real cross-pollination. Our gay fans go to the straight shows, so we're bringing this gay crowd to the straight clubs and the straight people are finding it's cool to co-mingle."

Christopher Muther is a frequent contributor to *One in Ten*.

PHOTOS BY JOEL BENJAMIN



WOMEN OF SODOM

frat boy on "I Like Straight Guys."

"When I play at Jacques," Berlin says, "the crowd is so mixed that people take away different things from my songs. I'm not writing glad-to-be-gay songs. It's more like not-glad-to-be-gay songs. It's not often about me — it's about stuff I encounter in other people's lives. It's often about marginal experience, and that's why

Beyond the whole gender-bending aspect of their show, Space Pussy, a collection of gay, lesbian, and straight musicians, have taken it upon themselves to spread the gospel of garage rock.

"Gay people need to be forced to rock and roll," says Space Pussy lead singer Ryan Landry. "I think part of the problem is that (gays are) so conditioned with dance music they don't know they can dance to rock as well. The other part is that gay guys got beat up by guys who liked rock and roll. That's really why they hate it. It represents something they were oppressed by."

"The initial reaction we've had in gay clubs is that the city queens become disoriented because we're not meshing with the house-music beat, and they take off," adds Bates. "The other half of the crowd sticks around and really likes it."

Chelsea on Fire, another rock band that regularly plays Jacques, approach their music from a jarring alternative perspective. On a recent Saturday night in the band's Boylston Street rehearsal space, lead singer Josey Packard pressed her face up against the microphone and let loose with a beautiful wail over her tense guitar: both her voice and her close-cropped hair brought the better days of Sinéad O'Connor to mind.

During their rehearsal, Amy, the bass player who doesn't use her last name because she thinks it's cumbersome, looked a bit like a thug in a knit cap as she plunked away, eyes straight ahead. Adam Simha, the hip, straight drummer who stands a good foot taller than Packard, bobbed his head with the beat.

Unlike many of the gay bands in Boston, the women in Chelsea on Fire don't write songs about their sexual orientation. Although Amy and Packard are lesbian, they say their band is about rock music, not sexuality.

"If we had put this band together three or four years ago, I think it would have been an issue," Amy says. "I've moved away from that as the main focus of my life. There are lots of things going on with me now, but mainly music."

The band's music is filled with aggressive, sexually spiked lyrics framed by harsh guitars that unexpectedly lash out and then subside. Although their music doesn't take on gay issues directly, many of their songs use interchangeable gender pronouns, swapping *he* and *she*, or simply omitting

gender altogether. Their self-titled, self-released new album features eight songs the band members wrote during their first year together. Since its release, Chelsea on Fire have doubled their playlist.

Their shows typically attract an odd mix



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of friends of the band, local punks looking for good music, gay men, lesbians, and rowdy — sometimes drunken — college frat types who have a hard time sussing out whether or not Amy and Packard are male or female before they start playing.

"It's very gratifying that all kinds of people like our music," Simha says. "I think we've made some serious cross-cultural connections in our audience because everyone comes to our shows."

For those whose tastes run more toward pop, watch for when Q Set is playing Jacques. Made up of five musicians who play only cover versions of songs written or popularized by lesbian and gay musicians, Q Set is on the opposite end of the spectrum from bands like Space Pussy and Chelsea on Fire. And fans of the now-in-hibernation Adult Children of Heterosexuals — an over-the-top collection of musicians, backup singers, and go-go dancers — will be pleased to know that almost every band member is an ACOH alum.

"Right now we've got a repertoire of 30 songs," says band member Will McMillan. "We do everything from the Pet Shop Boys to Cole Porter to k.d. lang. We think it's time to reclaim these songs. A lot of people don't realize Lorenz Hart (half of the famous songwriting duo Rodgers and Hart) was gay. So part of it is educational too."

Beyond that, McMillan has experienced firsthand the new era of harmony between the drag queens who have traditionally made up the bulk of Jacques's clientele and the new crop of rockers. "Sometimes I like to wear women's clothing when I perform," he says. "I have an ugly wig and some Esprit clothes a 13-year-old girl discarded because she thought they were too boring. [But] when Q Set played upstairs at Jacques on New Year's Eve, one of the queens loaned me her evening gown and helped me with my make-up because she wanted to make sure I looked glamorous when we played." □

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Amy, Adam, and Josey of CHELSEA ON FIRE