

Bachelor Party:

Gay Duo Looks for L.A. Limelight

by STUART TIMMONS

Are you ready to meet today's bachelors?

Bachelor Number One is named David Hughes. He likes music, martinis and art. Bachelor Number Two, Robert Berg, likes meditation, keyboards and being out of the monastery. But the big twist is... that Bachelor Number One likes Bachelor Number Two! So much that they make beautiful music together.

Berg and Hughes form Bachelors Anonymous, a new duo on the music scene. Both are "confirmed" bachelors who leave little in their closets—including their gay identities. But rather than working the gay/folk circuit, they tend to frequent urban nightclubs, where they creatively straddle the gap between gay music and pop music.

Many Angelenos remember Hughes from his three-year involvement with *Age of Consent*, a group that rapped out gay and progressive messages several years before that genre crossed into Top 40. Berg, the quieter of the Bachelors, served as a monk in the Los Angeles Vedanta Center for six years, a period when he also had a band that performed what he called "Know Wave" music. Hughes' and Berg's musical sensibilities merged when they met and "exchanged tapes" in (believe it or not) Catholic choir practice.

Their music, however, is anything but choirboyish. Most of their self-described "technofag" beat is insistently danceable. Musicians since childhood, the Bachelors sling technical proficiency with ease in their six-song debut cassette, *Bachelors Anonymous*. They are even more dazzling in the follow-up collection, *Looking For You*.

The choir-practice experience

does show up in the beautiful harmonies that their strong voices propel throughout their original compositions. Combining percussion and synthesizer with voice, they display an impressive audio palette. The Bachelors' sound tends to percolate, carbonate, howl and soar as it boogies.

Of all the unusual aspects of their music, the one Berg and Hughes seem proudest of is its intelligence. Berg's spiritual leanings blend with Hughes' sexual politics in songs like "Ritual Life," which compares cruising to devotion. "How can you help but bring your inner life to whatever you do?" asks Berg.

Hughes has the same feeling: "I am concerned about AIDS and Republicans and Christian fascism and lots of other problems. But I can only do what I do, which is write music."

They describe the music they write as gay love songs. "Not pie-in-the-sky love songs," Berg notes, "but songs

that make you think and interpret." With titles like "Victor the Beefcake," "The Price of Love" and "Play Safely," this music explores the earthly issues behind the lofty ideals of love, expressed with a gay vocabulary.

What's surprising is that the results aren't just flat propaganda. "Play Safely" is as much about sexual denial as it is about coming to terms with AIDS. Hughes says the title is partly a play on words "about the way so-called bisexuals like David Bowie and Elton John rip off gay culture":

Play safely or you're gonna get hurt
Play safely, nothing too overt
Play safely, you're getting in deep
Play safely, you're playing for keeps.

The weight of meaning weaves through most of the Bachelors' lyrics. In fact, the only flaw of their songs may be that on rare occasions, the stretching to make a point outweighs rhymes and rhythms. But generally this music is a luxuriously welcome change from the banality of common lyrics.

An example of the gay territory covered by the Bachelors can be heard in "Stranger's Bed," a song about anonymous sex. But this tune is not just a disco exultation or pat condemnation of it. Rather, it's an honestly ambivalent reflection, with a chorus that croons, "Please don't talk/Baby please don't talk/Don't talk to strangers."

Is there a chance that this music can cross over into the mainstream market? Hughes answers, "Why would gay people buy straight records?—which we always *have*. You can't describe people's tastes by their sexuality. Bronski Beat and The Smiths aren't popular because they are gay. They're popular because their music is good. Most of the kids who buy those records probably don't even pick up on the gay content."

ROCKY SCIENCE



"I'm so happy we are out," adds Berg. "You either like us or you don't. We don't care. We provide entertainment, not lies. The nicest compliment we've gotten so far was at a concert we did at UCLA. An ethno-musicologist told us we had freedom of expression as the unifying message of our music."

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—Robert Berg
Bachelors Anonymous

But of course they wonder if their openness will hinder their commercial chances. "Things are changing," observes Hughes, whose participation in *Age of Consent* predated the emergence of openly gay British bands. "Age of Consent got as far as the door [was approached by record

companies] but couldn't get in. Bachelors has not even found the door yet. Once we get there, I think we will have a better chance."

One of the Bachelors' more interesting aspects is their performance style, which has been called "visual music theater" by some critics and "vaudeville" by others. This dramatic effect stems largely from Hughes' contribution; he was one of the homesteaders of Los Angeles' downtown art scene—as a cofounder of Traction Gallery in the early 1980s—and he has "flip-flopped between music and art" all his life. The Bachelors also get help from their director, Zack.

Berg, Hughes and Carrah Macy—who joins in as an occasional Bachelorette—use props, preludes and the audience as part of their act. Sometimes the effect is at odds with the technical polish of their music, since some of their visuals and skits are comical counterpoints to the more sobering messages in their music. But frequently it works: One song about a journey from oppression to liberation to death by AIDS is addressed to a man lying between burning candles on a table that juts into the audience. The image is painfully perfect.

This sensibility sometimes earns

David Hughes (left) and Robert Berg: a couple of gay "bachelors" singing about love.

the group the tag of "dark." Hughes' reply is instant: "These are heavy times."

What would be the Bachelors' dream date? "We pray every night to God to send us an agent, one who will recognize our tremendous musical talent and blockbuster commercial potential," says Berg. "We'd take him to England if we could afford it."

In the meantime, they are working on a show, *LA Dolce Vita*, which will feature eight or nine songs about "modern relationships and modern angst" strung together by librettist Stephen Jerrom. *LA Dolce Vita* is planned as part of the Los Angeles Fringe Theater Festival this fall.

Bachelors Anonymous' tapes are available at L.A.'s *A Different Light* bookstore, (213) 668-0629, and at alternative record stores. They will appear in concert with *Love Machine* and other special guests in a celebration of *May Day on May 1* at *Club Lingerie*, 6507 Sunset Blvd., in Hollywood, (213) 466-8557. To contact *Bachelors Anonymous* directly, call: (818) 356-0791.