



Talking heads and hearts: David Hughes, Thea Other, John Callahan

## L.A. RAPPIN' WITH AGE OF CONSENT

BY SAMIR HACHEM

**A** couple of white guys and a white chick, sitting around talkin'. The guys are gay; the chick isn't. Nights, you can catch them at a local stage, rappin'. That's what they do, you see; they rap to funk music. They shake and twist and scream and shout, about sexual liberation, about oppression, double standards, the nuclear arms race and the missionary position. Age of Consent is what they call themselves, and they're used to telling it like it is.

John Callahan, David Hughes and Thea Other are Age of Consent, the new Los Angeles rap group that's been taking the local nightclub scene by storm. The thing about them is that they don't care—or rather, that they do care. A lot. They care about the dignity of gay men and women, about their struggle and their rights, their history and future. What is of absolutely no concern to them, however, is that they shock people wherever they go. They simply don't care that they're white, and from the West Coast and "mere" entertainers: They go ahead and sing a black genre of music with the frenzied energy usually associated with the East; and they do it to confront homophobia, injustice and other killers. Age of Consent defies conventions.

For a long time there was nothing but disco music for gays. "It was sung by black women and put together by an industry of straight white men, and it catered to gay listeners," Callahan points out. "Most people in the music world are closeted, and I don't think it's necessary. People like Elton John sing about women to make money. People like Mick Jagger, Gary Neuman, Bowie, Prince, they rip off the image and personality of a queen, but they refuse to attribute their sensuality to an honest sexuality, whether gay or bisexual." He finds it ironic that only heterosexual performers (e.g., Pete Townsend) have so far dared to address the real issues of sexual ambivalence and denial in mainstream music. Other considers women's gay music (such as Holly Near's) "soft and melodic pop. We wanted to do something with an edge to it."

Rap, it is said, was originated by black disc jockeys who used to talk between disco songs, persuading club patrons to get up and dance. With funk rhythms to back them, they began to rhyme their

talking, and thus a new form of music was born. In the last year alone, artists as varied as Deborah Harry and Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five have been responsible for reviving and revolutionizing the old genre, not to mention making it more accessible. "Traditionally, white people have always ripped off black music," Hughes admits. "What we're trying to do is expand this kind of music. As a minority group ourselves, we're using it to say some things." Some of these things have included parodying the clone and the leather looks and lifestyles ("Schizo Rap"), a warning against homophobia ("Fight Back") and a chronicle of the gay movement since Stonewall ("Gay History Rap"). That last one recently caused minor controversy. Age of Consent was disinvited by a women's group from entertaining at an upcoming rally opposing the family protection act. The reason? A passage in "Gay History Rap" deals with man-boy love.

"One of the things we stand for most strongly is that everyone should have a choice," Hughes explains. "We're against sexual labels. Sex isn't that rigid. Roles aren't limited. It's all more fluid and complex." Callahan recalls being attracted to men when he was 15. "I had to seek those older men because I wanted to be sexually active. According to most states' laws, these men would be imprisoned for 20 years. I don't know what it is about 18 that makes it a magical consenting age." Other offers: "Women always tend to assume that transgenerational sex includes exploitation and abuse." What the lesbian position ignores, Callahan is quick to point out, "is the reality that sex can be a substitute for love and caring, repressed. Children are supposed to be pure, and sex is impure! It's all due to the Lolita and Brooke Shields image, the movies."

Age of Consent's biggest problem, however, hasn't been the controversy they've provoked ("They're amazed we have the balls to say it"). Their problem is the lack of competition to inspire and push them forward. No one in the Los Angeles music scene right now is quite as aggressively militant or ambitious as they are. They promise to continue exploring contemporary subjects and sensibilities (the gay man's nongay woman friend, among them). And they're hopeful. "Once progress is made," Callahan announces, "it's difficult to unmake it." ●