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Music, Without Labels

Androgyny is back—
if gender-bending musician
Kelly Mantle has anything
to say about it

BY KEN KNOX

"I WAS BORN ON JULY 9 IN OKLAHOMA CITY, Oklahoma, on a day filled with lightning and thunder, but no rain," Kelly Mantle proclaims. The statement is an appropriately sardonic one—perfect for an artist whose career is built upon a foundation of contradictions.

A gender-bending musician given to applying liberal amounts of makeup and wearing women's clothing, Mantle represents a new movement of glam rockers who are tossing out conventional ideals of gender conformity in favor of individual self-expression. Following in the footsteps of David Bowie, Iggy Pop, Adam Ant, and Boy George, these sexually ambiguous musicians are part of a new "MySpace generation" of anti-conformists, who inspire



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→ MUSIC WITHOUT LABELS CONTINUED

young fans to stay true to their hearts through Internet social-networking services and Web sites.

"The gay community has gotten really conservative," Mantle declares. "The older generation of guys in their late 30s and 40s is obsessed with being 'straight-acting.' But I think some of that is changing with the younger generation coming up. There's this whole new culture of kids on MySpace who are embracing homosexuality and bisexuality. I have guys e-mailing me all the time saying they're so glad that I call myself bisexual and that I understand bisexuality. I think they're embracing all that lies in between, and that's exciting to see."

According to Mantle, the timing couldn't be better. "I want to make a change now more than ever," he says. "I'm wanting to shake my fist in the air and revolt against this idea that there's something wrong with being gay or bisexual or glamorous, that there's something wrong with being different than the person sitting next to you."

It was that passion for individuality that inspired Mantle to lift himself out of an extended lethargic period and re-enter the recording studio after a two-year absence to lay down the tracks to his third CD, *Satellite Baby*, a glittery confection of '80s-inspired dance tracks meant to lift the spirits and promote a truly contemporary notion of diversity. "I was really depressed because of the current administration and all this shit going on with gay marriage, and I just became so complacent," he recalls. "And that's when I set out to make this record."

A believer in the importance of movement as a healing power, Mantle recruited producer Steven Phillips (Macy Gray, Kool Moe Dee) to help him craft a dance record intended to inspire. Using the music of his youth as a starting point, Mantle composed a brand new batch of tunes to be retrofitted with the sounds of the '80s—a period that, Mantle says, helped him to come to terms with his own individuality. "All those artists were so unique in their looks, in their music, in what they had to say and what they stood for," Mantle says. "There was this embracement of freakdom, especially in the music industry, where you were expected to be a little more unique. And so, to me, their music is just timeless."

Recording the new record allowed Mantle—a successful actor who counts a recurring role on *NYPD Blue* and memorable guest shots on *Nip/Tuck*, *Judging Amy*, *Cold Case*, and, most recently, *CSI* as part of his résumé—to re-embrace his inner freak. "Making *Satellite Baby* helped me get back to my roots. I'd been trying to be someone that I wasn't, until I finally [said], 'No, I will not be complacent! I will not be normal, because I'm not!'"

Citing the emergence of such similarly inclined



artists as the Scissor Sisters and England's Mika, Mantle says, "I can't help but feel that the gay community is on the brink of an exciting revolution of progression and change," he adds. "And I hope that my music and my entertainment can help fuel this revolution and add to the soundtrack of our celebration!"

One look at his recent résumé confirms that he's already on his way. Having just finished shooting the pilot for John Stewart's Comedy Central show *Three Strikes*, Mantle is next set to star in the indie film *He's My Girl*, a semi-autobiographical flick based on his song "Johnny," about his love affair with a rock superstar. (No, he won't say who it was.) And, he says, he's in talks with a major record label to bring his unique vision to the masses.

Pointing to the emergence of Sony's gay music division, Music with a Twist (which recently signed The Gossip), as an example of the changing times, Mantle predicts that gay and lesbian musicians will soon become fixtures in the mainstream. "It's already happening, and I think it's really exciting," he enthuses triumphantly. "I think we've all been suffocated for so long that a volcano of glitter is about to erupt. The Bush administration is on its way out, honey, and the town is going to be painted pink, so get used to it!"

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Kelly Mantle will perform at his record release party, *Dance the Paint Away*, at 10 p.m. on Fri., Jan. 19, at the Gig (7302 Melrose Ave.). For more information, check out www.kellymantle.com.