



Bell, Andy (b. 1964)

by Linda Rapp

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Flamboyant, openly gay Andy Bell and staid, straight Vince Clarke have been called one of the oddest couples in music, but the chemistry works for them, and they have had a long and successful career as the synth-pop band Erasure.

Andy Bell, born April 25, 1964 in Peterborough, England, moved to London at the age of nineteen. He was working as a mincer in a meat factory and playing in a band "going nowhere" when he responded to an ad placed by Clarke, a former member of Depeche Mode and Yazoo, seeking a musician to form a new band. Bell, the forty-first singer auditioned, was Clarke's choice, and Erasure was founded in 1985.

Their first album, *Wonderland* (1986), was not a success, but their second, *Circus* (1987), did somewhat better. When fans in Scandinavia embraced the single "Oh L'amour," British listeners began taking notice of the band. Erasure's third album, *The Innocents* (1988), went to the top of the album charts in the United Kingdom, as did *Wild!* (1989) and *Chorus* (1991).

Bell's singing voice contributes to Erasure's distinctive sound. Music critic Chuck Taylor praises his "rich, sultry vocals," while Glenn Gamboa calls them "sweet" and "swooning."

In addition to performing, Bell has written the lyrics for many of Erasure's songs, including "Hideaway," a coming-out song about a young man leaving home because he fears rejection by his family. Bell's lyrics advise "Don't be afraid" and offer the message that one need not hide if one feels different.

Hiding has never been Bell's style. One of the first openly gay rock musicians, he has always been candid about his sexual orientation.

Bell's performances on stage at Erasure concerts reflect his campy sense of humor. He has appeared in drag, in sequins, and in a variety of costumes from cowboy to spaceman.

Bell's positive attitude as a gay man has won Erasure many gay fans, but the group appeals to mainstream audiences as well. Michael Snyder of the *San Francisco Chronicle* described a 1990 concert at which "there were some adult male couples . . . , yet they were easily outnumbered by the jubilant jocks and tight-skirted mall rats gyrating throughout the show." Their fans come in many nationalities as well; they have played successful concert tours in Europe, North America, and Asia.

In addition to performing original numbers Erasure has occasionally covered other musicians, as on their 2003 album *Other People's Songs*. Taylor commented that with the album Erasure had "gone from hip to same-ole to retro, and now they actually sound fresh and fun."

Since the mid-1980s Bell has been in a stable relationship with Paul Hickey, who manages his business affairs. The pair now make their home in Spain. Hickey suffered a serious stroke in 2000 in Los Angeles,



Andy Bell (left) and Vince Clarke of Erasure in 1986. Photograph by Wikimedia Commons Contributor Andwhatsnext. Image appears under the GNU Free Documentation License Version 1.2 or later.

where Erasure was in concert at the time. He has since recovered and is able to join the band for some of their tour dates. On these occasions, Bell serenades him with the romantic ballad "Goodnight," which he wrote for him.

Bell does not consider himself particularly political. In 1994 he commented on his role as a high-profile gay entertainer: "My real obligation to the world is to show people that I am a happy person who happens to be gay. To me, it comes down to how you feel deep down inside. You can't change the world if you're miserable and hate yourself."

In December 2004, Bell announced that he is battling HIV. He said that he was diagnosed with the virus in June 1998, when he suffered a bout of pneumonia.

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