



Somerville, Jimmy (b. 1961)

by Shaun Cole

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Jimmy Somerville.
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Noted for his diminutive size and amazing voice, Jimmy Somerville first shot to fame in the mid-1980s as the lead singer with the openly gay pop group of the time, Bronski Beat.

Bronski Beat's first single, "Smalltown Boy," which, along with its video, dealt with the problems of being gay in provincial Britain, was an instant success (reaching number three in the UK pop charts) and quickly established the group's reputation.

Born in Glasgow on June 22, 1961, Somerville was twenty-three when he formed Bronski Beat in 1984 as a collaboration with Steve Bronski and Larry Stenbachek. The three musicians met while they were working on a video by young gay men and lesbians entitled *Famed Youth*. It was during this project that Somerville realized that he could sing.

Bronski Beat's debut album *Age of Consent* (1984) included a pink triangle on the cover and listed the age of consent for gay sex in European countries on the inside sleeve as a means of calling attention to the disparity between British and Continental laws at that time.

Consisting of a series of songs dealing with various aspects of gay life, the album sold more than a million copies. In 1985 Bronski Beat teamed up with another gay singer, Marc Almond, to record a version of Donna Summer's "I Feel Love," which was also a hit.

After a series of disagreements over politics, Somerville left Bronski Beat in April 1985 and formed another group, The Communards, with another gay musician, Richard Coles.

The music of The Communards was also politically tinged. It featured songs dealing with issues such as gay relationships ("There's More to Love than Boy Meets Girl," 1987) and the loss of friends to AIDS ("For a Friend," 1987). Other hits of The Communards include "You Are My World" (1986), "Don't Leave Me This Way" (1986), and a cover of Gloria Gaynor's "Never Can Say Goodbye" (1987).

Always up front about his sexuality and political affiliations, Somerville made no secret of the fact that he was an active member of the Labour Party Young Socialists and the Anti-Nazi League. It was no surprise that The Communards took part in a left wing collaboration, The Red Wedge tour, which actively supported the miners' strike against the closure of coal mines in the mid-1980s.

When The Communards disbanded in 1988, Somerville spent some time in Los Angeles, where he channelled his political activities towards the fight against AIDS. He became an active member of the direct action organization ACT UP (AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power).

On his return to Britain, Somerville continued to work with ACT UP, using his celebrity status to highlight the AIDS epidemic and the plight of people with HIV. As a result of his activities with ACT UP, he was arrested in 1990.

In 1989 Somerville released his first solo album, entitled *Read My Lips*. The title referred to United States president George Herbert Bush's electoral promise not to raise taxes, which he subsequently broke. Not surprisingly, many of the songs on the album are overtly political.

Commenting on the title song for an interview published in the program for his 1990 ACT UP tour of Britain, Somerville said, "It's a song with a really potent message and it's emotional and angry at the same time. I'm really proud of it because I've done this disco anthem that has taken elements that have made dance music what it is today It's so difficult to get across politics, emotion and anger in a 4 minute pop record and I think I've managed to achieve that."

With his strong tenor voice and ringing falsetto, Somerville appeared as an Elizabethan castrato singer in Sally Potter's 1992 film adaptation of Virginia Woolf's *Orlando*.

Among Somerville's recent solo albums are *Something to Live For* (1999) and *Manage the Damage* (1999), both of them dominated by disco and dance music. "Lay Down," a track on the former album, is a paean to fellatio; while the title track of the latter album is dedicated to Matthew Shepard, the young American college student who was killed in a homophobic murder.

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About the Author

Shaun Cole is curator of Designs at the Victoria and Albert Museum. He is author of *"Don We Now Our Gay Apparel": Gay Men's Dress in the Twentieth Century* and has curated numerous exhibitions, including "Graphic Responses to AIDS" (1996), "Fashion on Paper" (1997), and "Dressing the Male" (1999), as well as two innovative "Days of Record" to document Tattooing (2000) and Black British Hairstyles and Nail Art (2001).