

# The Scene

## Heroes of synth-pop

## No reservations? No problem for a great Mother's Day fête

Cindy Greenberg



I have no complaints about the Vineguy now that we've gotten the wine rules ironed out (see last week's column). And I'm not just saying that because next Sunday, May 8th is Mother's Day.

In reality, the Vineguy is quite thoughtful and remembers all the important dates in our family without prompting. He hasn't missed a birthday, anniversary or Mother's Day yet. To the best of my knowledge, he doesn't even use an 'important date' reminder service (his assistant would let me know about that) and the software that he uses to organize his "wine closet" doesn't have a birthday reminder function (I've checked). So to make the rest of you vineguys look as attentive as THE Vineguy, I offer a little history and some suggestions for you to make Mother's Day special for the vinegal in your life.

According to my research, the idea of paying tribute to mothers has actually been going on for some time now and appears to have its origin related to pagan rituals as is often the case with holidays celebrated today. Early Egyptians honored Nut (goddess of the sky), the Greeks honored Rhea (daughter of Gaea), the Roman's honored Cybele (mother of the gods). In the U.S., Anna Jarvis is credited with initiating a Mother's Day-like event in the early 1900's. Eventually, the U.S. Congress passed a joint resolution in 1914 that was signed by President Wilson to make it an official "Day."

By now you've realized that the day is quickly approaching, you don't have reservations anywhere and a panic attack is brewing. What's a Vineguy to do to avoid being given a painful and lonely timeout in the guest room or doghouse?

When in a stressful, dire situation, start by taking your own pulse first (there is some reassurance in that rhythm isn't there?) That was one of the two most important things I learned in medical school. The other is the biochemical basis of hangover prevention but that's another story.

What's important is that this is your chance to be creative and romantic (you did court her at some point, remember?). Relax. Reservations are not a must-have item. Call a favorite restaurant that you frequent regularly and order carryout. If you fancy yourself handy in the kitchen (cooking in this case), whip up her preferred meal of choice and have the kids help out with the preparation. Or pick up food (that goes with wine) from one of the several grocery stores in the area that have an extensive prepared foods section (Whole Foods, Balducci's, Wegman's, Dean and DeLuca).

Plate the food on your own dinnerware at home. Add some flowers (gardenias and stargazer lilies are particularly fragrant), candles (unscented), a tablecloth and napkins to make it special. Voila!

Whew. That was close. What's next? Gift, what gift? Here comes that panic attack again. Quick, take a pulse check. Comforting rhythm still present? Good. Now take a deep breath. May I suggest a liquid gift?

Does mom like riddles? The 2003 Caymus Conundrum, California (\$22) is a

puzzling blend of Chardonnay, Semillon, Muscat, Viognier and Sauvignon Blanc sourced from various vineyards throughout California. Aromas of honeysuckle, peaches and apricot are as intriguing as the light yet complex mouth-filling flavors of melon, pear and creamy vanilla. The rich finish ends with citrus notes and perfect acidity. This wine is as complex as mom herself.

How about a bottle of liquid candy for mom? A favorite aperitif of mine is the 2002 Graacher Himmelreich Spatlese by JJ Prum (\$26). This German Riesling from the Mosel region is just the right amount of "sweet" (just like mom). The soil in the Mosel is comprised of pure slate, which drains very well and has the added benefit of imparting a signature "slatiness" to the wine. This wine happens to be a little racy (oh my) with notes of ripe granny smith-apple fruitiness that manages to be at once fresh and exuberant (like most moms).

Did you forget flowers? Try replacing that floral bouquet with the 2002 Andreen-Gale Chardonnay by Flowers Vineyards, Sonoma, California (\$45). What better wine to have on Mother's Day than a wine named for mothers. Vineyard owners Joan and Walt Flowers named the steep vineyard in honor of their own moms. Part of the vineyard grows grapes that produce sophisticated wines with class and finesse (Andreen) while another parcel is rugged and tough that grows grapes that thrive under stress (Gale). The combination of the two produces a well-balanced Chardonnay with aromas of buttered toast and fresh apples. Flavors of green apples and passion fruit combine in a creamy texture that finishes nicely with hints of toasty oak. Best of all, this Flowers doesn't need a vase. Just a couple of glasses.

And if it is jewelry you are looking for, the 2000 Silver Oak, Alexander Valley, California (\$60) is a diamond in the rough. With notes of cassis and dark fruit on the nose, the easy-to-drink wine offers a nice balance of blackberries, ripe plums and black figs. The smooth finish will long be savored after the bottle is gone. And so will your thoughtfulness.

Fast forward to Mother's Day. You are one cool, attentive Vineguy. No need to check your pulse today because you planned in advance. So let mom sleep in peace (that means no arguments or loud TV) while you make up a tray with her favorite breakfast items, such as fresh fruit, a flaky, warm croissant, coffee and a crisp glass of champagne (try a Non-Vintage Mumm's or a Perrier Jouet).

Don't forget to place the newspaper and fresh flowers on the tray. While she's noshing on breakfast, draw a warm bath and let her soak while you and the kids wrap the liquid presents.

Let's check the score so far. Vineguy 1. Guest room 0. Mom, glowing with memories of her wonderful day ... priceless.

No need to thank me. Just send me an e-mail at vinegal@vineguy.com so I can show it to "him."

ERASURE, from Page A9

No matter what instruments he uses, Erasure doesn't seem to have lost any of its fan base since being synth-pop pioneers in the '80s and notching hits like "Chains of Love" and "A Little Respect" on American charts. Releasing its newest album, "Nightbird," earlier this year, the duo has sold out most of its current tour — including shows Monday and Tuesday at the 9:30 Club — even though when Clarke and Bell returned to the U.S. two years ago after a long hiatus, Clarke was admittedly dubious initially about the potential tour's success.

"I didn't imagine people would still be interested in us," he says. "And it was a real pleasant surprise to see people turn up at the concerts. I never take it for granted. I've come to realize we have this fantastic following."

And it's not just the old standbys from the 1980s either. Clarke's music has been turning up a lot in pop-culture circles, with "A Little Respect" getting some respect in the recent film "D.E.B.S." and "Only You," a hit from his year and a half with Moyet in Yaz, appearing in the Colin Farrell movie "A Home at the End of the World" and the finale of BBC's "The Office."

Then there are the bands of today — like Elkland, the American group opening for Erasure on the current tour — who make no apologies for taking pages out of a book Clarke and Bell wrote 20 years ago.

### Caught up in the moment

While this kind of effect on people is satisfying for Clarke, 44, and makes him feel good about his career, he says, it never occurred to him that he was influencing anything because he was so caught up in the music.

"When you're doing it, you're there at the moment and we never really planned through anything past the next week," explains Clarke, who resides in New York but commutes back to England often to visit family and work with Bell. "It's always about the next show that you're doing or the next record that you're writing and forever hopefully moving forward. That's still the way now, really. I'm really enjoying playing this new record on tour and I'm very proud of it, but at the same time, definitely 75 percent of my head is now on to fixing the next record. I can't wait to start writing again. I can't tell you."

"Nightbird" is Erasure's first album of original material since 1997, and continued to prove that no one can craft a synth-pop love song like gregarious Bell and the more stoic Clarke, who come together to write songs every two years. The record was a follow-up to 2003's "Other



Before Erasure, Vince Clarke, right, was the original vocalist of Depeche Mode before Dave Gahan and also teamed up with British singer Alison Moyet in the pop duo Yaz.

People's Songs," a covers album that featured "You've Lost That Lovin' Feeling," "Can't Help Falling in Love," Peter Gabriel's "Solsbury Hill" and the Buggles' "Video Killed the Radio Star."

"When we did the cover songs album, that was a break from writing and I actually think it did us a lot of good because, although I enjoyed making that record and it was a lot of fun, it made me realize how much real satisfaction you can get from doing your own stuff," Clarke says, "It was interesting to examine the way that other people arrange their songs and the kind of sounds that they were using and really take apart these songs that we were fans of, and then apply that knowledge to the songwriting that we did for this new album. We possibly got into a state prior to the cover songs album of getting a bit lazy or not really pushing the envelope as much as we could have."

In order to develop melodies to their zenith and avoid being too formulaic in the songwriting, Clarke and Bell worked with another programmer, Jon Collyer, who came from a more rhythmic background with his use of percussion sounds,

and also used newer technology to their advantage.

"The problem I have with it is that there are too many choices," he says. "So what we tend to do is when we record a record, we set ourselves little rules and laws and we try to limit ourselves in a way, or use a synthesizer in a more interesting way — not just go for a preset sound. That's really what it's down to. It is quite easy to go back to the sounds that you know work. That's always a danger, and it's something I'm always aware of."

### Erasure unplugged

What may surprise some is that even with all the electronic goings-on in Erasure songs, every one is written acoustically first, either on a guitar or piano, and then the synthesizing is added later. Certain songs like "A Little Respect" kept a lot of that acoustic sound. Last year, the group took several tunes from previous albums and recorded them with a live band, bringing them back to how the songs were conceived in the first place in demo form.

"I love synthesizers — for me, it's just an excuse to mess about in a studio and make new sounds. But when

we write a song, it kind of gets the seal of approval when it's a song that we can actually perform on an acoustic instrument — just that," Clarke says.

"I like that [acoustic] sound, but I am a synth man. I am [a] two-fingers, analog synth kid."

Clarke first got into synthesizers when he was 19, when he helped form the original lineup of Depeche Mode in 1980. When the band started, it was just one bass player, an electric guitarist and a drum box, he says, but then they and a host of other musicians were taken aback by Orchestral Manoeuvres in the Dark's single "Electricity," which was heavy on both pop hooks and electronic trickery.

"We assumed, like I'm sure a lot of young bands do, that because we couldn't afford really good equipment, we'd never sound really good," Clarke says with a laugh. "Then with synthesizers, it was like a whole noise box, a whole myriad of sounds that you could make and just plug into the PA without having to buy a Marshall stack. So that really intrigued me."

At the same time, though, even with all the sounds to

choose from, Clarke never overdid it with the synths.

"In the early days of Depeche, there were only three synthesizers and that was it, three monophonic synthesizers, so we really couldn't make a huge sound anyway. I've always been interested in the melody anyway, and if you've got enough there to support the melody, then that's all you need."

### Honing his skills

Clarke left Depeche Mode after the release of the band's first album, 1981's "Speak and Spell," and formed Yaz with Moyet. Two albums later, Clarke moved on again and partnered with Feargal Sharkey (as the Assembly) and Paul Quinn before finding Bell after placing an ad for a singer in a British music magazine.

Instead of utilizing different techniques for different musicians, Clarke simply focused on developing his own ideas and skills.

"I wouldn't say that I understand them now, but I didn't really understand synthesizers then," he admits. "Going into the studio and working with a keyboard, it's like you just press lots of buttons and see what came out. There's something very, very exciting about that, and I still have that same vibe for recording."

"For me, entering the studio is like being surrounded by toys. I don't necessarily know exactly what I'm doing. I might have an idea like, 'Oh yeah, I'd really like a brass sound in this section of the song,'" but by the time I've messed about, it doesn't sound anything like a brass sound but it's something interesting. I like the unpredictability of synthesizers."

He can have all the synthesizers in the world — and at one time when he was into collecting them, it seemed that he did — but Clarke realizes that the main reason Erasure is still an influential group 20 years after forming is Bell's and his deep understanding of and respect for one another.

"When you write a song, you kind of have to bear your soul a little bit, so you have to be with somebody you trust implicitly," Clarke says. "Now, that trust is there totally."

And when it comes to understanding a synthesizer or understanding Bell, working with his partner comes easier.

"Synthesizers still baffle me sometimes," Clarke says with a chuckle. "It depends on how big the manual is."

Erasure appears with Elkland on Monday and Tuesday at the 9:30 Club, 815 V St. NW, Washington. Doors open at 7:30 p.m. Call 202-393-0930 or visit www.930.com for details.

For more information on Erasure, visit the band's Web site at www.erasureinfo.com.

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## Plan, but be flexible along the way

TRIP, from Page A9

cross-country trip from Boston to Lake Tahoe, Calif. We learned a lot along the way about this country, its landscape, and how to make the most of the classic American road trip.

Whether you're going for a long weekend or a long summer, here are some ideas to help you plan

### Before you go

Map out your route — but make sure to leave enough time to linger at spots that hold your interest and be flexible enough to ditch a place that isn't what you'd hoped. That means you need to spread out the times you are committed to being at a particular place, whether it's because of a reservation at a full-to-capacity campground, a nonrefundable deposit, or an aunt who's counting on seeing you.

Get the car checked out by a good mechanic, and be sure you have roadside assistance through your insurance or with a membership in AAA.

Pack light, bringing something for every kind of weather — but not necessarily four things for every kind of weather. Know that your car will fill up with souvenirs, newspapers and food scraps, so leave some room.

### Money matters

There's not much you can do



Paul Brodsky looks over a map of the United States, highlighting the route he and Laura Meckler took driving across the country during the summer of 2004.

about high gasoline prices, but there are other ways to save money. Hotel bills quickly add up. We spent many nights in the guest rooms of friends and family (it's the perfect time to reacquaint yourself with that old high school buddy). We also camped, stayed in an occasional hostel (there are more than 120 in the United

States, with no age requirements), and sometimes pulled into an inexpensive motel.

Save money on food by skipping restaurants and even fast food and investing in a cooler for the back seat. Fill it up at local grocery stores every few days. A block of ice runs \$1.50 and will last long enough to keep a

quart of milk cold for a couple days.

Also, beware of just how fattening convenience store food is. After staring at aisles of cupcakes, candy bars and potato chips, you start to think that the pretzel-and-cheddar-cheese Combos are a healthy choice. They aren't. An apple or block of cheese from a real grocery store will leave you healthier, and maybe happier.

### Stay off the interstates

The interstate highway system can take you just about anywhere in a hurry but what fun is that? We tried to balance our interest in covering a lot of territory with appreciating the ride. The interstates were built to bypass small town America, whereas the old U.S. and state highways run right through them.

It was off Highway 2 in northern Minnesota where we happened upon the museum dedicated to hometown girl Judy Garland. In Hitchcock, S.D., we saw what today's one-horse town looks like — a bar filled with farmers taking lunch, a friendly post office and a dusty road serving as Main Street. And alongside Mono Lake in California, we ate gourmet meals at a gas station. Ask anyone around, and they'll tell you the best food is in the Whoa Nelly Deli, located in the local Mobil station.

2002

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