

The Pope of Rock and Roll

by Con Chapman

Pope Leo XIII endorsed a cocaine-based drink, "Vin Mariani," and at the age of 90 sat in on a session with Alessandro Moreschi that produced a recording still available on CD, "The Last Castrato, Complete Vatican Recordings."

Ron Powers, Mark

Twain: A Life



As the first rays of the morning--actually, the *afternoon* sun--came pouring in the windows of the Vatican, I threw my arm over my eyes to block them out. My head was pounding--dammit, I went to bed with my mitre on *again!*

I took off my pointy hat--it would be a century before Gene Simmons would come up with an equally-compelling costume for a rock musician--and slowly propped myself up on one elbow to survey the scene. The usual mess; bed full of groupies, empty quart bottles of *Vin Mariani*, the cocaine-based drink that makes Coca-Cola taste like Sprite, the refreshing but totally unhip lemon-lime soft drink.



Mitre-riffic

"Alfredo!" I yelled to my valet.

"Yes your holiness!" the beadle said with a properly obsequious tone as he scurried in.

"Get these groupies outta here!" I snapped.

"Yes your holiness. C'mon boys--time to go!" The little ones rubbed their eyes--they were so cute last night when they rushed the stage, holding out their Pope & Castrati t-shirts for autographs!

"But . . . I thought you said I was special," one of them said, a lump in his throat and tears welling up in his eyes.



"You learned a valuable lesson, my son," I said to him.

"What's that?"

"Of the big lies of our time, none is bigger than 'Sure I'll respect you in the morning.' Now grab one of those autographed publicity photos and skedaddle!"

The boy reluctantly complied, and I turned to God's work--laying down the final track of "The Last Castrato," the album I was producing for Alessandro Moreschi.

"Whadda ya think, Alfredo," I said. "Something soulful? folksy? House? Emo?"



Castrati-maker: "This is going to hurt you more than it hurts me."

"I think if the Vicar of Christ on Earth were to sing a duet with a guy who has no balls, a rock anthem--it would go platinum in a heartbeat."

"Like *Love Lift Us Up Where We Belong?*"



"Right--you take the Joe Cocker part, he takes the Jennifer Warnes part."

It was just crazy enough that it might produce the hit single the album needed to become a best-selling chart-topper. "I think you're onto something," I said. "Get Mr. Nutless in here--pronto!"

He rounded up Moreschi--the guy was trying to snort a bottle of *Vin Mariani*, fer Christ sake--and we set up shop in my state-of-the-art recording studio in the basement of St. Peters.

"Everybody's doin' duets," I told Moreschi. "Willie Nelson and Julio Iglesias practically live on them. So you and I are gonna cash in on the trend."

"I am an artist," Moreschi sniffed. "I do not sing a song just to have Celine Dion on my album!"



"Go ahead--nail me to the cross!"

"We aren't talking a Canadian lounge act--I'm the Keeper of the Keys to the Church."

"I don't need your keys--I do not want to play basketball on weekends."

"Figuratively, you fishstick. Here's the chart--you start off, I come in after four measures."

We worked that sucker to death, let me tell you, but finally we nailed it. It was as beautiful, in its own way, as Michelangelo's *Pieta*, or D'Angelo's *Lady*, to take just two instances of religiously-inspired art that our schmalzy song had surpassed.



D'Angelo, Michelangelo--what's the difference?

The only question, of course, was who was going to get top billing. Would it be me--his Popeness, with special guest star Alessandro Moreschi, or vice versa. I broached the subject as delicately as I could.

"So--that was great," I said. "I'll be sure you get top billing--your own gold 'Guest Star' sticker on the cover."

"*Guest star?*" he asked, incredulous. "I'm the last of the *castrati*, the guys who created the music you Leos-come-lately only imitate."

"Yes, but I am the heart and soul of the Church."

"Heart and soul--big deal. I gave up two body parts more valuable than them."

