

Queer Artists in Popular Music
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Abstract

In spite of the growing visibility of gays, lesbians, and bisexuals in many aspects of society, queer interests have, at least upon first glance, remained largely absent in the world of popular music, despite the plethora of queer musicians throughout the years. This paper examines their music to determine what strategies queer artists have used to represent gender and sexuality in their music. A review of existing literature indicates numerous tactics queer artists have employed, but no overarching study has been conducted previously, thus no overarching conclusions have been drawn. I examined the music of eight queer musicians both male and female who recorded between 1963 and 2008 to see what strategies they used and what patterns emerged. I found that three main patterns of queering emerged in these artists' works: musical queering, discussions of queer sexuality, and presentations of non-normative gender identities. Further, patterns across time indicate that, as queer sexuality becomes more accepted in society, queer artists more explicitly discuss their own sexualities in their music.

Introduction

Sexuality and music often go hand in hand. Without straining, most people today could easily think of popular songs dealing with issues of sex and romance. Songs regarding these issues with respect to same-gender relationships, however, are much more difficult to find. Even Katy Perry's recent hit "I Kissed a Girl" heterosexualizes her flirtation with queer sexuality, as she wonders how her boyfriend will react to her escapades. In spite of the growing visibility of gays, lesbians, and bisexuals in many aspects of society, queer interests have, at least upon first glance, remained largely absent in the world of popular music, despite the plethora of queer musicians throughout the years. In this study, I attempted to answer the question "How are sexuality and gender represented in the art of queer musicians?" Further, I attempted to determine patterns of how queer artists' representations of their sexualities have changed over time. As this paper will show, queer musicians utilize a combination of musical and lyrical strategies to create sexual and gender identities. Further, patterns across time indicate that, as queer sexuality becomes more accepted in society, queer artists more explicitly discuss their own sexualities.

Literature review

Necessity of this study

Queer activist Tommi Avicoli wrote about the importance of studying queers in popular music. Such a study is necessary, he wrote, "if only to make us aware of what was and is being written about us" (1978:183). Formerly an outlet merely for the disenfranchised, Avicoli wrote about rock music's increasing influence in society, citing the size of its audience, the larger-than-life personalities of the performers, and the fact that it is a multimillion-dollar industry. "When and if gay issues are included in the myriad

causes promoted by rock musicians,” he asserts, “then the public’s consciousness will finally have a chance to absorb gay liberation the way it absorbed hippiedom many years ago” (1978:183). Musicologist Stan Hawkins agrees. “Since the 1950s,” he wrote, “the connections between pop music and art-based institutions have defined the marketplace” (2006:280).

Gender and sexual orientation

Edward Stein is a law professor in New York City. In his book *The Mismeasure of Desire: The Science, Theory, and Ethics of Sexual Orientation*, Stein discusses the meanings of gender at great length. “‘Gender,’” he writes, refers to “the roles, characteristics, and stereotypes associated with members of a particular sex” (Stein 1999: 31). In other words, gender refers to masculinity and femininity. Gender, he argues, is socially constructed, and traditional gender roles differ between societies. Stein also discusses relationships between gender and sexual orientation. “Various people have argued that, in most cultures of Western Europe and North America, lesbians are not women.... This might be extended to an argument that gay men are not men” (1999: 34). Though he does not explicitly condone or condemn this argument, it does suggest an interesting connection between gender and sexual orientation.

Gender, sexuality, and patriarchy in popular music

Historically, rock and pop music have been closely associated with gender and sexuality. Musicologist Sara Cohen asserts that patterns relating to the appropriate behavior of men as men and women as women are prevalent throughout the genres; she also claims that men and women are represented as “sexual beings who have feelings and identities related to bodily pleasures and desires” (2001:226). The exact manners in which these

things are represented have been discussed by numerous writers. Avicoli discusses rock music as a site for affirming traditional masculinity. “Cock rock,” a term born out of the feminist movement, came about in the late 1960s with the invention of acid rock. Avicoli describes the supposed “tell it like it is” mentality that went along with this genre as a reinforcement of demeaning heterosexual male fantasies. Depictions of women went from the pretty girl next door of the early ’60s to the wild, castrating bitch. In acid rock and cock rock, claims Avicoli, “men [are] free to glorify the oversexed (but totally servile) female” (1978:189). Avicoli mentions the song “Bitch” by the Rolling Stones as a prime example of this (“Yeah when you call my name/I salivate like a Pavlov dog/Yeah when you lay me out/My heart is bumpin’ louder than a big bass drum” [Rolling Stones 2005]), as well as Elton John’s “All the Girls Love Alice” (“And who could you call your friends down in Soho/One or two middle-aged dykes in a go-go/And what do you expect from a sixteen year old yo-yo” [John 1996]). This machismo largely dominates the rock music scene.

Another theorist who wrote about gender and sexuality in popular music was Judith Halberstam. A well known queer feminist, Halberstam cites the musical transition in the 1950s from blues to rock ’n’ roll as a form of patriarchy. She describes the Elvis Presley cover of Big Mama Thornton’s classic blues tune “Hound Dog” as a transition “from a searing critique of white patriarchy to a celebration of white manhood” (2006: 186). Despite being the song’s primary author, Thornton never received any royalties from the sales of Presley’s record. “[I]n histories of rock and roll,” writes Halberstam, “Big Mama Thornton, like many blues women before her, is cast as a passive instrument: her voice, her rhythm, her moves are all interpreted as effects of the music handed to her by white authors

rather than as the origins of a genre, a gender, or a mode of expressive embodiment” (2006: 185).

Constructions of sexuality in popular music

Using Big Mama Thornton’s 1953 recording of “Hound Dog” as an example, Halberstam discusses how the singer constructed her butch identity through “her mode of dress, her affect, her phrasing, and her bluesy performance” (2006:185). According to Halberstam, masculine, butch personas were common amongst early female blues singers (2006:183), and Thornton was no exception. She wore men’s suits and shirts, and her deep singing voice emanated her masculinity. Even her nickname, “Big Mama,” was a way of “re-coding [her] non-femininity.... The unmooring of parental labels from the function of parenting itself and the tethering of these terms to sexual roles implies that the domestic has been queered” (2006:187). In “Hound Dog,” Thornton even becomes the male lover at whom the song is directed, at one point howling like the hound dog. In fact, Halberstam posits that perhaps there is a connection between female masculinity and the genre of blues itself.

In addition to her analysis of Big Mama Thornton, Halberstam discusses the formation of queer identity by disco singer Sylvester. Sylvester, she argued, was able to create his role as a diva via the genre of disco. Using “his flamboyant stage performances, his overt femininity, his close bond with his female back up singers, and his extraordinary falsetto,” Sylvester creates a stage persona that is undeniably queer. Discussing his 1977 live cover of Patti LaBelle’s “You Are My Friend,” Halberstam argues that using nothing but his vocal range, Sylvester creates not only his own queer identity, but a new history of black femininity. Sylvester’s own quavering falsetto falling in between back up singer

Izora Armstead's booming bass growl and back up singer Martha Wash's towering range implies a fluidity of gender and an interconnectedness and shared history between "black sissies and their diva icons" (2006:191). Describing Sylvester's falsetto, Halberstam writes that "the throat opens up, almost vaginally, and the queer disco diva revels in his femininity rather than keeping it phobically at bay" (2006:193).

Popular musicologist Sheila Whiteley wrote an article discussing identity creation as it relates to Freddie Mercury, the lead singer of Queen, and one of the artists examined for this paper. Though his performances were considered merely theatrical camp (i.e. over the top and outlandish) by many of his fans at the time, Whiteley argues that Mercury's songs relate largely to his personal life and his emerging identity as a gay man (2007:22). Though he kept his personal life very private (largely, Whiteley suspects, because of widespread anti-queer sentiment), his performances did have many queer elements to them. Many of his early songs imply sexual ambiguity with titles such as "My Fairy King" and "The Fairy Feller's Masterstroke." Furthermore, Whiteley makes an argument similar to the one that Halberstam makes in relation to Sylvester. Mercury's use of falsetto, she says, adds to the feeling of sexual uncertainty (2007:23).

Whiteley discusses Mercury's performances more in depth by examining two of Queen's most popular early singles: "Killer Queen" (which she described as "the gay anthem for the winter of 1974" [2007:23]) and "Bohemian Rhapsody." Though my analyses of these works will be discussed later in this paper, Whiteley's analyses will be discussed briefly as well, as they further highlight earlier theorists' methods of discussing queer musical identity. Though "Killer Queen" is a song that is, taken at face value, about a high-class prostitute, Mercury's vocal delivery (including, among other things, his use of

falsetto) “suggest[s] both campness and an affirmation of gay aesthetics” (2007:23).

Whiteley also cites the mentions of “Moët & Chandon” and “caviar,” both very popular in upper-class camp queer society, as dragging the song’s protagonist “into association with Mercury’s Queen-like [i.e. queer] persona” (2007:23-24). In “Bohemian Rhapsody,” Whiteley points to the warm vocal quality with which Freddie sings the line “Mama, just killed a man” and the accompanying piano arpeggios as the creation of intimacy. “It is both confessional and affirmative of the nurturant and life-giving force of the feminine and the need for absolution” (2007:24). Also of particular interest is her discussion of a small section of the operatic part of the piece. The interplay of the lower voices and the “phallic” drum backbeat with the higher voices represent interaction between the masculine and feminine. Furthermore, the higher voices plea for release (“Will you let me go”) while the lower voices refuse (“We will not let you go”) (2007:25). Whiteley further identifies queer elements in Queen’s *A Day at the Races* album (particularly the song “Somebody to Love”), the hit singles “We Are the Champions” and “Crazy Little Thing Called Love,” and the music video for the song “I Want to Break Free.”

Queer theory and musical form

Edward Stein writes at length about queer theory. Though it emerged out of the discipline of lesbian and gay studies, queer theory is more radical than this field. According to Stein, “[Q]ueer theory attempts to ‘queer’ [traditional academic] disciplines, that is, to change them by weeding out deep heterosexist biases within them.... What makes queer theory *queer* is...that it questions assumptions that are steeped, often subtly, in heterosexist biases” (1999: 11). Here Stein defines “queering” as working to undermine established hegemonies.

Women's Studies professor Jennifer Rycenga applies queer theory to musical analysis, discussing how musical form itself can act as a queering influence on music. Traditional musical forms, she argues, "operate as hegemonies. The authority of the form reaches widely, but is upheld through an already negotiated consent rather than by overt policing" (2006:235-236). Rycenga argues that reproduction and predictability are expected and act as constraints upon music. When these values are overcome, musical form can take on a more sensuous quality. This "[o]pposition to the normative and breaking down false naturalisms," she says, "are constituent hallmarks of queering" (2006:236). She discusses these principles in relation to several albums, among them, Yes's *Tales from Topographic Oceans*. On *Topographic Oceans*, says Rycenga, the band "maintain[s] traditional structural markers (such as distinct sections, strategies of transitions...) without ever rigidifying form into a definitive template" (2006:237). Because of this, the album was almost universally panned by critics upon its release in 1973. This derision, claims Rycenga, is indicative of the concept of queering. Critics viewed this music's unconventional form as "not merely different, but *too* different. The resulting condemnation implies that they have deviated too far from the norm..." (2006:241). On this album, writes Rycenga, "excess queers the form" (2006:245). Just as queer theory queers academic disciplines by undermining hegemonic heterosexism, Yes queers music genres by undermining hegemonic definitions of musical form. Clearly an artist need not be queer to engage in this form of queering, however when done by queer artists, the breaking down of hegemonies takes on further significance.

Similar to arguments made by Rycenga, Stan Hawkins argues that the composition of music itself can signify queerness, which is "inextricably linked to the technical and

stylistic properties of sound...” (2006:282). He discusses queering in relation to one of the groups examined for this paper, Scissor Sisters. Describing the group as extremely camp, Hawkins asserts that the Sisters create and maintain very fluid gender identities. “Overall,” he writes, “their fluidity of gender display is articulated by them pandering to a queer gaze that is encoded as much by their sound as their visual spectacle” (2006:283). The Sisters’ ability to perform any style of music while still remaining camp is the key to their musical queerness (Hawkins, 2006:288).

Summary

The existing literature shows the close connection between gender, sexuality, and popular music. Authors like Halberstam and Whiteley examine how artists use their lyrics and performances to create gender and sexual identities. Stan Hawkins discusses how artists use musicality to create gender and sexual identities, while Jennifer Rycenga highlights the similarities between hegemonic musical forms and hegemonic heterosexism. While all of these theorists provide useful tools for examining artists’ music, none has utilized them on a wide scale. While it is interesting to know how one or two specific artists construct their identities, we can draw no generalizable conclusions from this research. Questions regarding how these representations have changed over time remain unanswered. This study will provide more insight into these issues.

Methodology

When determining which queer artists to include in this study, there were several issues that I kept in mind. First, in order to determine how representations of queer sexuality in popular music have changed, it was very important that the artists I investigated represented as large a span of time as possible. Consequently, the recordings I

studied were made over a span of more than forty years, the earliest in 1963 and the latest in 2008. It was also very important that the artists represented a large number of genres within the category of popular music. This goal was also achieved; the study included early 1960s pop, disco, hard rock, folk, avant-garde music, and many other genres. Finally, it was important to ensure that both male and female artists were represented in the sample. Four of the artists I studied were male, three were female, and one group contained both male and female members. (Additionally, the Velvet Underground had a female drummer.) The following are the artists that were included in the study, the albums that were analyzed, and the years of the recordings found on each:

- Lesley Gore: *It's My Party: The Mercury Anthology* (1963-1969).
- Lou Reed: *The Velvet Underground and Nico* (Velvet Underground album) (1967); *Transformer* (1972), *Ecstasy* (2000).
- Queen: *Queen* (1973), *Innuendo* (1991), *Greatest Hits/Classic Queen* (1973-1991).
- Village People: *The Best of Village People* (1977-1980).
- R.E.M.: *Murmur* (1983), *Accelerate* (2008), *In Time: The Best of R.E.M. 1988-2003*, *And I Feel Fine... the Best of the I.R.S. Years 1982-1987*.
- Indigo Girls: *Indigo Girls* (1989), *Despite Our Differences* (2006), *Retrospective* (1987-2000).
- Melissa Etheridge: *Melissa Etheridge* (1988), *The Awakening* (2007), *Greatest Hits: The Road Less Traveled* (1988-2005).
- Scissor Sisters: *Scissor Sisters* (2004), *Ta-Dah* (2006).

In order to get as full an understanding of each artist as possible, I selected each artist's first album, last (or most recent) album, and a "greatest hits" package. Because of these

selections, I heard all the artists at the beginning of their careers, the end of their careers (or if still recording, how they sound now), and at their most commercially successful. The exceptions were Lesley Gore, the Village People, and Lou Reed. When Lesley Gore's career began in the early 1960s, pop music singles sold much better than full length albums did, and many artists did not release albums. The collection I examined contains all but one of her singles released in the 1960s. The Village People were very popular during the height of disco in the late 1970s; however, their popularity has waned since. As a result, I was unable to locate any of their original albums. The compilation I examined contains sixteen songs, and since none of their original albums ever contained more than nine songs (most contained five), I decided that this collection would be sufficient. I was unable to obtain a greatest hits package for Lou Reed, but the album *Transformer* is widely considered his definitive release, and it adequately sufficed.

This study consisted of content analysis. I listened to each of these albums with the lyrics to the songs in front of me. As I listened, I attempted to determine what type of sexualities or gender roles, if any, were constructed by the artists on each song. Afterwards, I examined my data to determine what patterns emerged.

Results/analysis

The first artist I listened to was Lesley Gore. Gore became famous as a teenager when her first single, "It's My Party," hit number one in the United States in 1963, shortly after her seventeenth birthday. She came out as a lesbian in a 2005 interview on *AfterEllen.com* (Swartz 2005). The vast majority of Gore's songs sound like straightforward early-1960s pop music. Similarly, their themes almost exclusively revolve

around teenage romance. The identities Gore creates in her songs are for the most part very traditional feminine roles.

On her breakthrough hit, Gore sings “It’s my party, and I’ll cry if I want to” (1996). It does not take long for her to tell the listener that the reason she is crying is because her boyfriend, Johnny, has left the party with Judy, presumably another party guest. Clearly Gore takes on a heterosexual persona in this song, but in fact, there is even more at play here. The lyrics make it clear that not only does she love Johnny, but in fact her identity and happiness is inextricably linked to her relationship to him: “’Til Johnny’s dancing with me, I’ve got no reason to smile” (Gore 1996).

Gore’s very next single, “Judy’s Turn to Cry,” hit number five in the United States later in 1963 (Whitburn 2004) and was a sequel to “It’s My Party.” Similar themes pervade this song as its predecessor, though there is an interesting element to this song that was not present in the first. When the singer sees Judy and Johnny kissing at a party, she kisses another boy. After this, she sings, “Johnny jumped up and he hit him/Cuz he still loved me, that’s why” (1996). Not only are heterosexual identities present throughout this song as well, but through the singer’s admiration of Johnny’s aggression, she reaffirms violence as a desirable trait indicative of masculinity, a theme also found in “That’s The Way Boys Are.”

A startling number of Gore’s songs contain similar themes to these. “Just Let Me Cry,” “She’s a Fool,” “After He Takes Me Home,” and numerous others all relate happiness and Gore’s very identity to her relationships with boys.

One of the songs on this collection, “If That’s the Way You Want It,” not only constructs her identity as inextricable from her relationship; it also affirms the structure of

female subservience. “I have no choice at all,” sings Gore, “With you I’ve got to stay” (1996). With this line Gore makes it clear that she has no agency; she is controlled by her boy. Furthermore, the singer gives her boy permission to use her as he pleases: “You tell me that you aren’t ready to settle down with one/You want to keep me on a string while you’re having fun/If that’s the way you want it, so be it, my love” (Gore 1996). The songs “Maybe I Know,” “I Just Don’t Know If I Can,” “What Am I Gonna Do With You,” “Brink of Disaster,” and “That’s The Way Boys Are” contain similar themes. In “I Won’t Love You Anymore (Sorry),” the singer finally does find the strength to break up with her cheating boyfriend, yet she apologizes to him for doing so.

One of the most deceiving song titles on this collection is “Sometimes I Wish I Were a Boy.” Though the title implies possible genderplay and a queering of traditional gender roles, this is not in fact what happens. Rather than just making her genderqueering declaration, the singer first extols the virtues of being female: “Oh, I’m a girl and it’s wonderful/It fills my heart with joy/But sometimes, yes sometimes/I wish I were a boy” (Gore 1996). We subsequently learn the cause of this wish: “I’ve been standing by the jukebox/Hoping he’d ask me to dance/How I wish I could run to him and hug him/But a girl mustn’t make an advance” (Gore 1996). Though this song’s title implies the possibility of gender confusion, its lyrics make clear that the singer is painfully certain of her gender and all the societal requirements that follow from it.

While the vast majority of the songs on this collection uphold traditional gender roles and heteronormativity, there are several songs in which Gore asserts her independence. “You Don’t Own Me” is one of her most famous songs, reaching number two in the United States in early 1964. In this song, the singer tells her boyfriend that he

must treat her with respect. With the line “I’m not just one of your many toys,” (Gore 1996) the singer asserts her personhood. She also directly condemns female objectification in the line “And please, when I go out with you/Don’t put me on display” (Gore 1996). “You Don’t Own Me” has a far more haunting melody than the songs discussed previously and is written in 6/8 time rather than the standard 4/4. The song “Don’t Call Me, I’ll Call You” has similar themes and likewise has a haunting melody. While a slightly haunting melody might not qualify as queering the genre of pop music as Rycenga described it, we can certainly see how the slightly dangerous melody lines up with the subversive (for the time) themes of these songs.

Lou Reed is another queer artist who recorded beginning in the 1960s. With his band, the Velvet Underground, Reed both lyrically and musically pushed countless boundaries in the music scene of the mid-1960s. Unlike Gore, however, the Velvets would not become widely known or critically praised until a number of years after their breakup in the early 1970s. Their very first album, *The Velvet Underground and Nico*, was financed by Andy Warhol, who also designed the cover art.

On this album, the Velvets undertake several kinds of queering, and they do so both musically and lyrically. One recurring theme throughout this album is heroin use. The song “Run Run Run” describes numerous characters desperately trying to get a heroin fix. One of these, Marguerita Passion, is a transvestite. This clearly qualifies as queering the genre of popular music, as drug use was not openly discussed on popular records in 1967; it further includes a character whose personal identity could be described as queer. Additionally, the song is very progressive musically for the time. Rather than sung, Reed’s vocals are half chanted, half yelled over extremely loud music. The guitar solo in the

middle contains massive amounts of feedback and has a jarring, abrasive sound. This song contains elements that would not become popular until years later; in this way, it queers the genre of popular music. “I’m Waiting for the Man” contains similar musical and lyrical themes

Perhaps the biggest example of musical queering on this record is the song “Heroin,” an ode to one of Reed’s favorite pastimes at the time. Lyrically, this song is even more direct than those discussed above: “When I put a spike into my vein/And I’ll tell ya, things aren’t quite the same” (Velvet Underground 1996). Another line in the song of significance is: “Cuz when the blood begins to flow/When it shoots up the dropper’s neck/When I’m closing in on death/And you can’t help me now, you guys/And all you sweet girls with all your sweet talk/You can all go take a walk” (Velvet Underground 1996). Here, the singer blatantly rejects heterosexuality for more heroin. His identity is constructed completely by his drug use: “Heroin, it’s my wife and it’s my life” (Velvet Underground 1996). Furthermore, “Heroin” gives us another opportunity to utilize Rycenga’s concept of queering through the song’s form. Written around two chords, the backing music consists of a viola playing one note throughout the entire song, leaving the listener on edge. The rhythm guitar plays frantically as the singer’s heroin trip gets more intense and then slows down and relaxes as the singer comes down. A single bass drum acts as the singer’s heartbeat throughout the trip. Indeed, the music is not melodic or tuneful; rather it is merely a part of the singer’s heroin trip. This is exactly like Rycenga’s discussion of the Yes album; the band has distinct sections and transitions while not rigidifying the song’s form definitively.

Two more songs on this album similarly queer traditional musical structures. The music of “The Black Angel’s Death Song” has little to no direction, as the viola screeches up and down accompanied by rhythm guitar. Though the album’s closer, “European Son,” starts out sounding like a classic mid-1960s rock ’n’ roll song, it evolves (or devolves) into an improvisation session, with every member of the band improvising at the same time. Not only does the band queer musical form on these songs, they basically eliminate it all together.

Two other songs on this album warrant discussion in relation to musical queering. “There She Goes Again” sounds like a simple pop song, but it discusses a woman, probably a prostitute, who has been abused; in the end, she is able to break free. Empowered women in pop songs of the 1960s were few and far between (See discussion of Lesley Gore above). The fact that the woman is a prostitute was a further stretch.

One song on this album explicitly discusses queer sexuality. “Venus in Furs” is an ode to a dominatrix: “Shiny, shiny, shiny boots of leather/Whiplash girlchild in the dark” (Velvet Underground 1996). Other lyrics describe her treatment of her sexual partners: “Tongue of thongs, the belt that does await you/Strike, dear mistress, and cure his heart” (Velvet Underground 1996). Near the end of the song, Reed temporarily becomes our heroine, commanding “Taste the whip, in love not given lightly/Taste the whip, now plead for me” (Velvet Underground 1996). While the lyrics blatantly depict queer sexuality, the music finishes the story of the dominatrix and her trick. Rather than any definable movement, the music hums hauntingly, screeching throughout the song. The viola drones through the verses on a single pitch, while the bass, guitar, and drums blend into a single abrasive noise in the background. At the end, the guitar strums one chord repeatedly in no

particular rhythm. Indeed, this song comes together musically and lyrically to perfectly tell the story of queer, BDSM sexuality.

After leaving the Velvet Underground in 1970, Reed embarked on a solo career that has lasted for almost forty years. His most well known work, 1972's *Transformer* has some very queer elements to it. Songs such as "Vicious" and "Andy's Chest" contain some very playful lines, and one song, "I'm So Free," contains the line "I do what I want and I want what I see" (Reed 2002), which hints at themes of queer decadence. Other songs get a bit more explicit.

Reed's biggest hit in the United States, "Walk on the Wild Side," was originally released on this album. Hitting the top twenty in the spring of 1973, the song is an ode to the transgendered prostitutes of New York City. The very first verse discloses this without mixing words: "Holly came from Miami FLA/Hitch-hiked her way across the USA/Plucked her eyebrows on the way/Shaved her legs and then he was a she." In the last line of the verse, Holly attempts to pick up a trick: "She said, hey babe, take a walk on the wild side." The second verse gets even more explicit, as Reed tells us about another prostitute, Candy, who "never lost her head/Even when she was given head" (2002). That such a blatant depiction of queer lifestyle would earn Lou Reed his most popular song is a bit surprising, indeed.

In the song "Make Up," Reed again depicts transgendered women: "Rouge and coloring, incense and ice/Perfume and kisses, oh it's all so nice/You're a slick little girl, you're a slick little girl/Now we're coming out, out of our closets" (2002). The plodding tuba pattern that punctuates these lines further adds to the queer atmosphere. Similarly, the album's closer, "Good Night Ladies," consists only of tuba, drums, and piano; the song

sounds very camp, which raises the question of whether Reed is singing once again to transgendered women.

By his 2000 album *Ecstasy*, the queerness of Reed's music and lyrics has tapered off significantly. Songs such as "Paranoia Key of E," "Tatters," and others depict the singer as part of heterosexual relationships, while "Mad" reinforces traditional gender roles. Some songs, however, do depict queer identities. "Ecstasy" and "Modern Dance" contain queer elements, while in "Turning Time Around," the singer denies marriage while putting forth a definition of love that could indeed be described as queer: "What do you call love/Well I don't call it family and I don't call it lust/And as we all know marriage isn't a must/And I suppose in the end, it's a matter of trust/If I had to I'd call love time" (Reed 2000). In the song "White Prism," the woman sexually dominates the narrator. The main character in "Rock Minuet" enjoys extremely violent queer sex: "In the gay bars in the back of the bar/He consummated hatred on a cold sawdust floor," and later "They had tied someone up and sewn up their eyes/And he got so excited he came on his thighs" (Reed 2000). Finally, in "Like a Possum," the queerest song on the album, Reed discusses very queer, kinky sexual acts for more than eighteen minutes over a very abrasive background. A distorted guitar plays throughout, occasionally punctuated by drums and bass. This song is both lyrically and musically very queer.

Freddie Mercury was a queer artist best known as the lead singer of Queen, one of the most popular rock bands in the world during their heyday. After the release of their first album, *Queen*, in 1973, Queen continued to record immensely successful records until Mercury's death from AIDS in late 1991.

Though Mercury would become known for his camp, flamboyant style, both musically and in his performances, Queen's first album contains fewer elements that would be considered queer than would be found in his later work. Several songs explicitly reinforce traditional, heterosexist gender roles. One song on this album, "My Fairy King," does stand out as queer. Even its title implies, as Whiteley discussed above, a sexual ambiguity. Mercury's use of falsetto in this song creates a queer aesthetic, while the fairy king himself represents queerness. The singer's worship of the fairy king and the statement that "My fairy king can do right and nothing wrong" (Queen 1991b) implies that the queer identity is an idyllic place of refuge, until the sanctuary of this ideal land is breached: "Ah, then came man to savage in the night/...To bring about the ruin to the promised land" (Queen 1991b). Thus, patriarchy destroys the feeling of sanctuary, and the singer is left feeling naked and exposed: "...someone has drained the color from my wings/Broken my fairy circle ring/And shamed the king in all his pride/...Mother Mercury Mercury/Look what they've done to me/I cannot run I cannot hide" (Queen 1991b).

Queen's final album was 1991's *Innuendo*. Written with the knowledge of Mercury's impending death, the album contains powerful statements about the nature of life and death. Though the album does seem intensely personal, queer themes are not discussed.

Although several of the songs on the companion collections *Greatest Hits* and *Classic Queen* would fall into the category of "cock rock," many others do contain queer elements. "We Are the Champions," a top five hit in the United States in 1977, is essentially a rallying cry to queers. "I Want to Break Free" is a blatant cry for freedom to love, while "Somebody to Love" details Mercury's struggle to find love while coming to

terms with his queer identity. “Bicycle Race” and “Play the Game” contain melodies that are delightfully camp, while Mercury’s use of falsetto in the David Bowie collaboration “Under Pressure” provides certain lyrics with a queer connotation.

Several songs warrant a more in depth discussion. “Killer Queen” is extremely camp musically, while lines such as “She keeps Moët & Chandon/In her pretty cabinet” (Queen 1992b) are references to upper class gay male culture. “Don’t Stop Me Now” is another song on this compilation with extremely camp music. Throughout, Mercury boasts of superhuman sexual feats: “I am a sex machine ready to reload/Like an atom bomb about to/Oh oh oh oh oh explode” (Queen 1992b). Additionally, an element of genderplay is present in the lyrics, as Mercury first sings “I wanna make a supersonic man out of you,” then later changes the line to “I wanna make a supersonic woman of you” (Queen 1992b).

“Good Old Fashioned Lover Boy” is another song with extremely camp music, but its queerness goes deeper than that. Throughout the song, Mercury trades words with the adoring back up singers. Singing in a lower vocal register than Mercury does, the back up singers’ question “ooh lover boy/What’re you doin’ tonight, hey boy” takes on obvious queer connotations, as does their subsequent query “Hey boy where do you get it from” (Queen 1992b), where “it” refers to the lover boy’s passion and charisma. With all of these elements combining, “Good Old Fashioned Lover Boy” is without a doubt one of the queerest songs in Queen’s catalogue.

As queer as “Lover Boy” is, it does not even hold a candle to “Bohemian Rhapsody.” One of Queen’s most famous songs, “Rhapsody” hit number nine in the United States upon its initial release in early 1976, then re-charted at number two when it was re-released in the spring of 1992. The song was written by Mercury as he was first coming to

terms with his homosexuality, and, though no explicit references exist, it is clear that this theme pervades the entire song. The opening lines “Mama, just killed a man/ Put a gun against his head/ Pulled my trigger, now he’s dead/ Mama, life had just begun/ But now I’ve gone and thrown it all away” suggest that he has left his old identity behind (killing this identity) for a completely new one. His soaring falsetto on the lines “I’ve got to go/ Gotta leave you all behind” creates a very fluid queer masculinity. The later part of this song finds Mercury lamenting the marginalization to which his queer identity condemns him: “So you think you can stone me and spit in my eye” (Queen 1992a). Furthermore, much like Rycenga’s description of the queer elements of the Yes album, “Bohemian Rhapsody” contains markers of structure, while jumping in style from pop to opera to hard rock then back to pop. Lyrically and musically, “Bohemian Rhapsody” is a prime example of intricate queer identity construction by magnificent performers.

One genre of music that is closely tied to the queer community and gay men in particular is disco, and no group represents this more than the Village People. Named after Greenwich Village, a predominantly gay neighborhood in New York, the personas of the group members (construction worker, leatherman, sailor, Indian, cowboy, and cop) were specifically created to represent common characters in gay men’s fantasies (Pearlman 2008). They had a string of disco hits in the late 1970s.

The songs of the Village People all sound relatively similar, musically. Lyrically, many contain subtle (and sometimes not so subtle) hints at queer life, but none is clearer than the 1977 song “Village People.” This song’s lyrics fairly explicitly support the movement for gay rights: “Village People/ Your fight is mine/ Village People/ Let’s fight for the right/ Village People/ Your freedom’s in sight.” Clearly, the term “Village People” is a

reference to the queer community living in Greenwich Village. At one point in the song, the group even sings that “it’s time for liberation, yeah” (Village People 1994).

While their other songs may not be quite so explicit, it is clear when examining them today that many of their songs contain references to gay sex. “Y.M.C.A.,” for example, contains the lines “They have everything for young men to enjoy/You can hang out with all the boys” (Village People 1994). While this was presumably viewed as an ode to male bonding when the single hit number two in early 1979, it is clear from a modern perspective that bonding is not entirely the point. “Macho Man,” another hit for the band, is an ode to the male body, with numerous references to gay male fashion.

“In the Navy,” the group’s final US hit, is once again a thinly veiled ode to gay sex. In this song, the group encourages listeners to enlist for some of the extra perks: “In the Navy, come on and join your fellow man.” The line “Don’t you hesitate, there is no need to wait/They’re signing up new seamen fast” (Village People 1994) contains a double entendre that is anything but subtle.

One of the group’s first singles, “San Francisco (You’ve Got Me),” is an ode to gay life in a city well known for being gay friendly. Lyrically, this song describes the sexual freedom to be found in SF and contains references to gay male fashion. Two other songs on this collection celebrate famous gay vacation spots: “Key West” and “Fire Island,” the latter of which warns against going in the bushes for fear that “someone might grab ya/... someone might stab ya (Village People 1994).

R.E.M. is an alternative rock band from Athens, Georgia. Since their first album, *Murmur*, was released in 1983, the group has had a string of hits, both on pop music radio

and on rock radio. The band's lead singer, Michael Stipe, described himself as a queer artist for the first time in a 2001 interview with *Time* magazine (Farley 2001).

Many of R.E.M.'s songs are hard to pinpoint in terms of what the lyrics are actually about. Consequently, it is difficult to find lyrics that refer to queer sexuality or gender identity. One song on *Murmur*, "9-9," does address conformity: "Steady repetition is a compulsion mutually reinforced./Now what does that mean?/Is there a just contradiction?" (R.E.M. 1990). While Stipe does appear to condemn conformity, there is nothing in this or any other song on the record to suggest queer identity.

In 2008, R.E.M. released their fourteenth album, *Accelerate*. Again, no song directly addresses issues of sexuality or gender identity, but the album's first hit single, "Supernatural Superserious," does address issues of identity crisis: "At the summer camp where you volunteered/No one saw your face, no one saw your fear/If that apparition had just appeared/Took you up and away/From this base and sheer/Humiliation/Of your teenage station" (R.E.M. 2008). While no explicit mention is made of sexual identity, the experiences Stipe sings about in this line are absolutely consistent with the experiences of many queer teenagers.

R.E.M.'s most popular songs have been compiled recently on two best of collections. *And I Feel Fine... The Best of the I.R.S. Years 1982-1987* was released in 2006, and *In Time: The Best of R.E.M. 1988-2003* in 2003. Though several songs might be interpreted as being about romantic relationships, only a handful of songs address them directly. Of these, only 1987's "The One I Love" briefly alludes to the singer's partner being female, though the line "she's comin' down on her own, now" is mixed into the background so softly that it is almost imperceptible. In 2003's "Animal," Stipe sings

several lines about sex and romance (“Spin me, win me, lift me, kiss me./... Touch me now/You take my hand/You trust me now/You understand” [R.E.M. 2003]), but there is no indication that he is singing to a man or a woman.

Indigo Girls are a female folk duo who gained widespread recognition with their major label debut, *Indigo Girls*, and the album’s hit single “Closer to Fine” in 1989. Frequent performers at the Lilith Fair, rumors that the Girls were lesbians surrounded them until they finally made explicit reference to their queer identities on 1997’s *Shaming of the Sun* record. Though their self-titled album has no explicit references to queer identity, several songs hint at queer themes. “Kid Fears” could easily be about the singer coming to terms with her sexuality (“You had a hiding place./Secret staircase, running low,/But they all know, now you’re inside” [Indigo Girls 1989]). In the song “Center Stage,” the singer mentions “Numbness from a scepter’s wound” (Indigo Girls 1989). This line could easily be employing phallic imagery, the scepter, as a rejection of patriarchy and sexual relations with men.

Their most recent studio album, 2006’s *Despite Our Differences*, is far more overt in its references to the women’s sexualities. “I Believe In Love” explicitly reveals that the female singer is singing this love song to a woman, while “Rock and Roll Heaven’s Gate,” performed with pop singer P!nk, defines the singers as “three political queers” (Indigo Girls 2006). In addition to several other queer references, “Pendulum Swinger” lays out the singers’ radical feminist convictions, a belief system often closely associated with the lesbian community. Furthermore, “Three County Highway” contains an element of genderplay, as the lead singer seems to adopt a male persona.

The *Retrospective* collection spans the Girls' career from their independently released 1987 album *Strange Fire* through two new songs recorded specifically for this collection in 2000. Though songs like "Strange Fire" (1987), "Reunion" (1994), and "Power of Two" (1994) have subtle messages of equality and identity creation, no explicit queer references are made until 1997's "Shame On You," in which the singer laments that "The beautiful ladies walk right by/You know I never know what to say" (Indigo Girls 2000). "Trouble" (1999) finds the Girls explicitly arguing for queer rights: "And when the clergy take a vote oh the gays will pay again/Yeah cuz there's more than one kind of criminal white collar." They also acknowledge their own queer identities, longing for the time when "a girl can get a wife" (Indigo Girls 2000). The Girls' lyrics are more explicitly queer than any of the other artists examined thus far.

Melissa Etheridge is a rock and roll singer and songwriter. Her self-titled debut album was released in 1988, but she found mainstream success with 1993's *Yes I Am*. Etheridge came out in 1993 at a gay celebration of Bill Clinton's first inauguration (Castro 1994). Consequently, her first album contains few if any references to her queer identity. Several songs address romantic and sexual relationships, but no indication is given as to the gender of the singer's partners, and one break up song hints that the singer's ex-partner was a man. One song, "Precious Pain," does contain lines that hint at the struggle of being in the closet: "Precious pain/Empty and cold but it keeps me alive/I gave it my soul so that I could survive/Keeping me safe in these chains/Precious pain" (Etheridge 1990). While this is certainly one valid interpretation of the song's meaning, "Precious Pain" is a break up song, so it is also very possible that the singer is simply lamenting a difficult relationship.

Etheridge's most recent studio album, 2007's *The Awakening*, is a very personal record. Claiming it to be her life story, Etheridge wrote the album after her self-proclaimed "awakening" during her chemotherapy treatment for breast cancer. Etheridge makes no effort to hide her sexual identity on this record, as she thanks her wife in the liner notes. Similarly, many of the songs contain strong homosexual connotations and explicit references to homosexuality. In "An Unexpected Rain," Etheridge sings of a long-ago sexual encounter with a woman: "Good night ladies/Good night/I'm gonna leave you now" (Etheridge 2007). "Threesome" is an ode to monogamy in which it is clear she is singing to a woman. In "I've Loved You Before," Etheridge frames her current love with respect to same-sex experiences throughout history: "Were we lovers in an army/Marching all for Rome/Side by side in battle/Did we bravely leave our home?" She also discusses historical oppression of homosexuals: "Did we hide in the dark ages/from a vengeful god above/...An accidental touch/Did we ever take the chance/I know I've loved you before" (Etheridge 2007). Etheridge takes on the issue of homophobia in religion in the song "The Kingdom of Heaven," making explicit reference to the actions of the Westboro Baptist Church.

In 2005, Etheridge released her first best of collection, *Greatest Hits: The Road Less Traveled*. In addition to several new recordings, this collection spans her career from 1988 through 2005. While many songs on this collection discuss romantic relationships, none of them explicitly mention homosexuality, though "Ain't It Heavy," "I Want to Come Over," and "Lucky" do hint that the singer's partner might be a woman. The most obvious recognition that Etheridge is not heterosexual comes in her phenomenal cover of Janis Joplin's "Piece of My Heart" when she changes the line "Didn't I make you feel like you

were the only man” to “...you were the only one.” Clearly, Etheridge does not shy away from discussing her sexual identity in her music or in her life. Her most popular songs, however, are veiled at best in their admissions of homosexuality.

The Scissor Sisters’ first record was released in 2004. Immediately embraced by the queer community, the Sisters’ music is inherently queer. Most of the songs on their first album, *Scissor Sisters*, sound as if they were made for gay club play, while the use of falsetto on their cover of Pink Floyd’s “Comfortably Numb” unquestionably links the singer to queerness. The album contains instances of genderplay in several songs, including “Filthy/Gorgeous,” when the male singer says “I’m a classy honey kissy huggy lovey dovey ghetto princess” [Scissor Sisters 2004]).

The song “Take Your Mama” is sung in a queering falsetto, while the song’s lyrics deal with the protagonist’s struggle to come to terms with his own queer identity and the singer suggesting that they “take your mama out all night/Yeah we’ll show her what it’s all about” (Scissor Sisters 2004) to help her accept her son’s identity. “Tits On the Radio” is a song involving male prostitutes, while “Music Is the Victim” briefly discusses queer life in San Francisco. This song also mentions the use of crystal meth in gay clubs, a theme which is reprised on the album’s heartbreaking closer “Return to Oz,” whose title itself is a nod to queer icon Judy Garland.

The Sisters’ second album, 2006’s *Ta-Dah*, picks up where their first album left off. In addition to the clubby feel of many of the tracks, several songs find the Sisters paying musical homage to earlier queer icons. “Lights” is extremely reminiscent of David Bowie’s album *Young Americans*, while “Kiss You Off” sounds like a 1980s Madonna tune. Again, singer Jake Shears uses his masterful falsetto to create queer identity on songs like “I Don’t

Feel Like Dancin’,” “Ooh,” “Everybody Wants the Same Thing,” and “Paul McCartney,” while the playful harmonies of “Intermission” mix with the music’s camp feeling to create a very queer piece. Elements of genderplay are once again present throughout. “She’s My Man” finds the lead singer celebrating his girlfriend’s masculinity (“She’s my man/And we got all the balls we need” [Scissor Sisters 2006]). On “Lights,” the singer makes explicit reference to his own queer sex acts: “I ain’t got nothing but your seed on my face/You’ll put them babies to waste without your finger in the pie” (Scissor Sisters 2006). “Ooh” features a lampooning of upper-class queer culture in a similar vein to “Killer Queen,” while the camp music of “I Can’t Decide” immediately queers this song. As discussed by Stan Hawkins, the Scissor Sisters use both music and lyrics to create queer identity and gender fluidity in their music.

Conclusion

Upon examining the music of these artists, three main patterns of queering emerged: musical queering, discussions of queer sexuality, and non-normative gender identities. Only a few of the artists utilized all three of these methods. Musical queering was utilized by Lou Reed (both as a member of the Velvet Underground and as a solo artist) in the way that Rycenga described; Reed frequently undermined the hegemony of traditional musical forms, using sounds and lyrics that were nowhere to be found in popular music of the day. Musical queering was present in many of Queen’s songs through extremely campy music. The Scissor Sisters also used campy music and frequently harkened back to styles popularized by other queer icons.

Discussions of queer sexuality were present in the music of Lou Reed throughout his career. The Scissor Sisters make frequent explicit reference to their own and others’

homosexual lifestyles. The Village People do not explicitly discuss homosexuality, but their thinly veiled double entendres and references to hypermasculinity make their queer identities evident. Though Queen and R.E.M. make possible, subtle references to queer identity, neither of these artists are as explicit as those previously mentioned. It is interesting to note that both of the female artists still recording today, Melissa Etheridge and the Indigo Girls, explicitly discuss their queer identities.

Non-normative gender identities were frequently discussed in the music of Lou Reed. Queen engaged in some genderplay, as did the Scissor Sisters. Though Lesley Gore's songs almost always uphold traditional gender roles, she does take on the persona of an empowered woman in "You Don't Own Me," flouting the gender roles present in almost all popular music of the day.

When examining the music of these artists together, some interesting patterns emerge. First of all, very few queer elements appear in any of the songs before 1967, and those from '67 received little but derision upon their initial release. The early 1960s songs of Lesley Gore often explicitly reinforced heteronormativity and traditional gender roles. The only one that does not, "You Don't Own Me," simply finds the singer asserting her independence as a woman. Such a song would not be considered queer if it were released today. The first of the songs with queer elements to gain any sort of popularity was Reed's 1973 hit "Walk on the Wild Side." Though this song does explicitly discuss non-normative gender identities and queer sex acts, there are two things about it that are important to note. First of all, the queer identities expressed in this song are not associated with the singer himself but rather with the characters about whom he is singing. It is unclear if the song would have become as popular if the singer himself had identified as queer. The second

interesting piece is that many radio stations do not play the whole song, editing out the verse about “given head.” As exciting as it is that an explicitly queer song gained popularity in 1973, we must bear in mind the progress that still had to be made.

Even flamboyant Freddie Mercury kept queer themes to a minimum on Queen’s first album. By 1974, the release and popularity of “Killer Queen” show another queer song gaining recognition in the US charts. Though Queen would go on to have several other hits with queer themes, queer identity on these tracks was created almost exclusively through the music, with no explicit lyrical reference to queer identity. As Whiteley speculated, Mercury’s fans at the time probably considered these singles to be camp theatrics. Even “We Are the Champions” was adopted not as a queer anthem, but rather as a celebration of masculinity through its use as a sports anthem. The group’s singles that did provide more obvious lyrical clues to Mercury’s identity did not chart significantly in this country.

Similar themes can be found in the hits of the Village People, whose popularity coincided with the peak of Queen’s US successes. While the People’s three biggest hits have a very musically queer feel in retrospect, their lyrics contain at most double entendres that could easily be ignored by heterosexual listeners. Their more queer themed songs (“San Francisco,” “Key West,” “Fire Island”) failed to achieve similar success. R.E.M. also provides hints at Michael Stipe’s queer sexuality that are subtle at best. Though a few of their songs have possible, subtle references to queer lifestyles, these were not amongst the band’s most popular.

As is clear, queer themes in popular music were subtle at best throughout the 1970s and ’80s. This can likely be explained by Whiteley’s assertion that “the current climate was unforgiving of outed homosexuals and lesbians alike” (2007:23). It was not until the late

1990s that popular music artists achieved success with explicitly queer songs. Indigo Girls' "Shame on You" was a hit on rock radio in 1997, and still receives airplay today. Though it was not a successful single, the fact that an immensely popular artist like P!nk recorded "Rock and Roll Heaven's Gate" with Indigo Girls and explicitly referred to herself as queer is quite telling of how societal acceptance of queer lifestyles has grown. (This was not career suicide either, as P!nk had a number one single as recently as 2008.) Melissa Etheridge similarly discusses her sexuality openly on some of her songs, though her biggest hits remain ambiguous. Scissor Sisters take explicitly queer music even farther than Etheridge or the Indigo Girls do. Though they are nowhere near as popular in the United States as they are in Britain, the Sisters have had several dance hits in this country and have toured successfully here as well.

Though there is by no means an overwhelming representation of queer artists and queer music that is popular today, these patterns indicate that as acceptance of queer culture has grown in society, the openness of queer artists and their willingness to publicly identify as queer has increased as well. This might well indicate that, as our society grows more and more accepting of queer lifestyles, we will see an increase in the number of queer musicians who publicly embrace their sexuality and include it in their music.

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