

How to Make Music in an Epidemic:  
Hearing AIDS, 1981-1996

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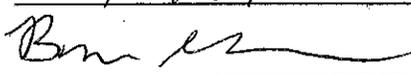
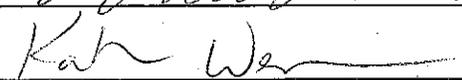
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May 2014

For the ones who aren't here...

AIDS does not exist apart from the practices that conceptualize it, represent it, and respond to it. We know AIDS only in and through those practices. This assertion does not contest the existence of viruses, antibodies, infections, or transmission routes. Least of all does it contest the reality of illness, suffering, and death. What it *does* contest is the notion that there is an underlying reality of AIDS, on which are constructed the representations, or the culture, or the politics of AIDS. If we recognize that AIDS exists only in and through these constructions, then the hope is that we can also recognize the imperative to know them, analyze them, and wrest control of them.

Douglas Crimp, "AIDS: Cultural Analysis/Cultural Activism"

In this world, there's a kind of painful progress. Longing for what we've left behind and dreaming ahead.

Tony Kushner, *Angels in America*

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There's an African proverb that says "it takes a village to raise a child." In many ways, a dissertation is a great deal like a child, and my own dissertation is the bouncing baby of a global village. I could not have done this without the guidance, support, and encouragement of so many...

First, my parents, Linda and Anthony Jones, have been unwavering in their support of every step in my musical and academic journey. When I announced that I wanted to be a doctor in elementary school, they probably had in mind a white coat and a stethoscope. And while I'm not going to see patients in the ER anytime soon, this project represents the achievement of a lifelong dream. It would have been impossible without their love, support, and more than a few telephone or Skype sessions during which they talked me down off a ledge with the kind of straight talk that only your parents can give you. It's been a long journey from Jasper to UVA, especially for a first-generation college student. But you've been with me every step of the way, and I love you both.

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In the Fall of 2011, I was finishing doctoral coursework in the Critical and Comparative Studies in Music program at The University of Virginia. As the final project

for Fred Maus' seminar on music and sexuality, I began to formulate the ideas that eventually became this dissertation. While researching popular music responses to the AIDS epidemic, I kept running across a name: Michael Callen. Though his name was usually buried in a footnote, included in a list of AIDS activists, or glossed over as another musician with AIDS, the name stuck. So, I did what any researcher and Internet junkie would do; I turned to Wikipedia and YouTube. Voila! Callen had a brief Wiki page that outlined his life, activism, and music.

At the time, there was precious little footage of Callen online, but a couple of YouTube uploads caught my eye. One, a segment from a television interview, seemed especially promising. So, I wrote the YouTube user who uploaded the video to ask if he had the entire segment. User Bettebyte wrote back several weeks later asking for more information and offered to help with the project. We exchanged private email addresses, and he identified himself as Richard Dworkin.

In the interim between our correspondences, I ordered Callen's CDs from Amazon. When the package arrived, I noticed that all were produced by and featured the drumming of Richard Dworkin. When I played *Purple Heart* (1988), I experienced the first of many fortuitous moments that have punctuated my research about Callen. Dworkin was not only Callen's drummer and producer; he was also Callen's lover and the subject of a song, "Me & Dickie D."

Over the past two years, Richard has been an invaluable resource to this project, and quite literally, it would not exist without his generosity. He has regularly opened his home and his personal archives of tapes, photographs, home videos, and other archival sources to me. And in the process, we've talked art, politics, and music, eaten our fair

share of Thai takeout and Pepperidge Farm Cookies, watched home movies, seen a few plays, and sung the Laura Nyro songbook while I played a jangly bar piano near Grand Central Station. And most importantly, we have become genuine friends. Richard first met Michael Callen in 1982, and over the next decade, they, along with friends, physicians, and fellow musicians, worked to produce some of the best gay music of the era and to literally change our understanding of the AIDS epidemic.

Around the same time that I started to correspond with Richard, I had the good fortune to meet queer performance artist Tim Miller while he was visiting UVA. During the course of a scenic drive from Charlottesville to Dulles International Airport, Tim regaled me with stories about Michael Callen, whom he met when he first moved to New York City. They remained close friends until the end of Callen's life. Tim has generously shared photographs, letters, and hilarious stories that gave me an idea of his dear friend's magnetic personality. Tim's a busy bee, but thanks to Facebook, we keep in touch and informed about one another's comings and goings. His encouragement and support of my project have been invaluable, as have been his genuine friendship and his passionate politics.

The fortunate collision with these two remarkable gay men set me on the path to this project, and I cannot find adequate words to express my thanks, gratitude, admiration, and love for you two.

I would also like to thank Jon Arterton, Jim Bredeson, John Bucchino, Barry Callen, Aurelio Font, Holly Near, and Tom Wilson Weinberg, for their willingness to share their work, stories, thoughts, and memories. And the University of Virginia Society

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## Abstract

In 2011, AIDS turned thirty. In three decades, millions of men, women, and children around the world have lost their lives to the ravages of the disease. But the story of AIDS is more than a body count. The epidemic has ushered in new vocabularies in law, politics, science, and medicine and created new areas of expertise. It has engendered new identities: the person living with AIDS, the person who is HIV-positive, and the person who is HIV-negative. The health crisis invigorated forms of social and political activism and led to novel rituals for living, being sick, being healthy, and dying. AIDS also generated new expressive modalities in media, visual, and performing arts.

*How to Make Music in an Epidemic: Hearing AIDS, 1981-1996* participates in the construction of the history of AIDS in the arts by looking at a virtually untold story: musical engagements with and responses to HIV/AIDS. I limit the scope of this project to the music I know and love best: English-language popular song and music video. The study is further limited to works written, produced, or released during the first fifteen years of the US AIDS epidemic, that is, from 1981-1996. As other scholars have noted, the introduction of effective treatments in the late-1990s signaled a shift not only in the medical realities but also the discursive construction of the epidemic.

Working in virtually every genre and style, songwriters, composers, performers, and music video directors used their art to craft narratives and ideologies about AIDS, to inspire forms of activism, to memorialize the dead, and to educate listeners. To make sense of this varied musical terrain in Part One, I outline five categories of songs about AIDS: songs by people with AIDS, songs about personal relationships, songs about social

changes, pedagogical or didactic songs, and extant songs given a new meaning in the context of the epidemic.

Song lyrics are important repositories of meaning, particular for songs about AIDS. Accordingly, I provide close readings of many examples in addition to analysis of their musical content and associated music videos. The focus on lyrics invites comparison of works from radically different genres and reveals common representational strategies, most notably a tendency for such songs to avoid mentioning HIV/AIDS directly. This project also listens to what audiences, fans, and artists themselves had to say about works that address AIDS. Using an interdisciplinary framework that draws from music studies, feminist theory, queer theory, trauma studies, and media studies, I further contextualize these songs within broader traditions of music and arts activism in the age of AIDS.

In Part Two, I offer the first musical biography of singer, songwriter, author, and AIDS activist Michael Callen (1955-1993). Callen lived through an extraordinary moment in gay history. He moved from the Midwest to the East Coast at the moment that Gay Liberation dovetailed with the start of the AIDS epidemic. Callen's keen mind, sharp wit, and commitment to social justice for gay men, lesbians, people of color, and people with AIDS took him to the forefront of national AIDS politics. At the same time, his work as a musician occurred within a predominately gay niche, which allowed him a degree of expressive freedom unavailable to many of the mainstream artists in Part One. Callen's songs, albums, and performances document the experiences of his generation. Using previously unavailable archival materials, new interviews with friends and family, and analysis of his commercially available recordings as a solo artist and with The

Flirtations, I provide a portrait of the ways this activist, songwriter, and performer made music in an epidemic.

## Chapter One: Introduction to Part I

My first memory of the AIDS epidemic is textual: the June 1987 cover of *Reader's Digest*. Although I was nine years old and doubtless had no clue what AIDS actually meant, that cover remained vivid in my mind. Written in bold red block letters, the word "AIDS" hovered above an artist's rendering of Christine McAuliffe (1948-1986), the high school science teacher who perished along with six other crewmembers when the space shuttle *Challenger* exploded just after takeoff on 28 January 1986. Looking at this cover after almost thirty years, I am struck by the accuracy of my childhood memory.



Figure 1.1, *Reader's Digest* June 1987

That magazine cover told me a story about AIDS. Although I didn't know what AIDS was, the fiery red block letters screamed "Danger! Watch Out! Stop!" The full headline reads, "AIDS: The Plague That Knows No Boundaries," and it tops a column of other headlines, including a story about "The Bugging of Our Moscow Embassy," and another bearing McAuliffe's epigram, "I Touch the Future." The cover utilizes bold primary colors and stark white. The red "AIDS" headline has its twin in a ruddy hue along the bottom edge while McAuliffe's blue NASA uniform matches the gradations of blue that suggest a sky at twilight. It's as though AIDS fell from the heavens among the wreckage of the *Challenger*, took root, and flourished. At ground level, AIDS seems as pervasive as the oxygen molecules that surround and sustain us.

It is remarkable that a conservative publication like *Reader's Digest* labeled AIDS the "plague that knows no boundaries" in 1987. The accompanying article details the spread of HIV/AIDS throughout Africa, where the demographics of the epidemic differ markedly from the US. There, HIV/AIDS has been largely a heterosexual health issue whereas in the US, HIV/AIDS has been constructed predominantly as a health problem for gay men. Since the start of the epidemic, HIV/AIDS has been defined by boundaries, along a shifting border between straight/gay, white/black, affluent/poor, and first world/third world. The first term in each pair represents the "general population," once thought to be safe from AIDS; the second, "risk groups," whose lifestyles or circumstances were seen (often by the leaders of the "general population") as particularly vulnerable to—if not deserving of—infection, sickness, and death.

This sense of boundlessness was built into the very name of the illness, for AIDS (the term was coined in 1982) is not a discreet condition like cancer or hypertension but a *syndrome*.<sup>1</sup> It is a constellation of medical conditions. In the US, an AIDS diagnosis can only be made in the presence of some combination of the twenty-nine opportunistic infections associated with the systematic breakdown of the immune system by the human immunodeficiency virus (HIV). In other parts of the world, doctors and scientists make an AIDS diagnosis based on different criteria and opportunistic infections.<sup>2</sup> More recently, the medical and scientific community has focused less on risk *groups* than on risky *behaviors*. This shift makes us all simultaneously part of the general population *and* a risk group. Finally, there has been a profound shift in thinking about HIV/AIDS as an inevitable death sentence; now, it is considered a chronic medical condition, at least in the West. Maybe *Reader's Digest* was right; AIDS knows no boundaries.

If HIV/AIDS really is an epidemic without borders, how do we make sense of it? How do we understand and discuss the biomedical, political, legal, and cultural impact of this global pandemic? Part of the answer to these questions can be found in the discursive structures used to describe and represent AIDS. These include medical, scientific, and

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<sup>1</sup> Discussions of the meaning of "syndrome" in discourses about the epidemic include Jeffrey Week's "Post-Modern AIDS" in Boffin and Gupta's *Ecstatic Antibodies: Resisting the AIDS Mythology* (Rivers Oram Press, 1990). Weeks writes, "AIDS is a pre-eminently modern phenomenon, the 'disease' of the last part of the twentieth century. But it is also a remarkably historicized phenomenon, shadowed by histories that frame and shape responses to it and burden people with HIV and AIDS with a freight from the past they should not have to bear" (133). Other works invested in the intersection of ideas about modernity/postmodernity and HIV/AIDS include Bryan Walpert's "AIDS and the Postmodern Subject: Joan Retallack's AID/I/SAPPEARANCE," *Poetics Today* 27/4 (2006): 693-710 and L.O. Kallings, "The First Postmodern Pandemic: Twenty-Five Years of AIDS," *The Journal of Internal Medicine* 263/3 (2008): 218-243.

<sup>2</sup> Research shows that the signs of HIV infection and the particular OIs characteristics of AIDS differ along demographic lines. The first diagnostics for AIDS were based on the physical symptoms and medical histories of gay men. Activists soon called for diversity in research that included the particular health concerns of minorities and women. The AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power (ACT UP) had a women's caucus, for instance, that voiced the need for the inclusion of women in drug trials.

legal languages as well as the photographic and moving images and other socio-cultural texts that frame and domesticate AIDS—the borders we place around it.

That my first awareness of HIV/AIDS came through a textual representation is hardly coincidental. For as Douglas Crimp (1987) wrote, “AIDS does not exist apart from the practices that conceptualize it, represent it, and respond to it. We know AIDS only in and through those practices.”<sup>3</sup> To be clear, AIDS is a very real biomedical catastrophe, a global pandemic that has claimed millions of lives over the past three decades. Doctors, nurses, and healthcare workers have searched for effective therapies while providing palliative care to the sick. Volunteers continue to donate their time to buddy programs, meal deliveries, and other essential services for people with AIDS (PWAs).<sup>4</sup> AIDS is also a political epidemic, bound to global, national, and local governments which must craft interventions to save lives and curb the rate of new infections. At the same time, AIDS is a human rights issue that involves discrimination lawsuits and other forms of litigation to prevent prejudice against impacted communities. And AIDS is an economic phenomenon. Pharmaceutical companies profit from the sale of the drugs that save lives

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<sup>3</sup> Douglas Crimp, “AIDS: Cultural Analysis/Cultural Activism,” *October* 43 (1987), reprinted in Crimp, *Melancholia and Moralism: Essays on AIDS and Queer Politics* (MIT Press, 2002), 27-47. Crimp’s full assertion is that “AIDS does not exist apart from the practices that conceptualize it, represent it, and respond to it. We know AIDS only in and through those practices. This assertion does not contest the existence of viruses, antibodies, infections, or transmission routes. What it *does* contest is the notion that there is an underlying reality of AIDS, upon which are constructed the representations, or the culture, or the politics of AIDS. If we recognize that AIDS exists only in and through these constructions, then hopefully we can also recognize the imperative to know them, analyze them, and wrest control of them,” (22).

<sup>4</sup> The term “people with AIDS” was adopted by the AIDS community after the 1983 Lesbian and Gay Sexual Health Conference in Denver, CO. A contingent of gay men with AIDS drafted The Denver Principles, a manifesto for the AIDS community that, among other things, claimed the right to participation in decisions regarding HIV/AIDS research, testing, and funding; rights to live and die with dignity; rights to pleasure, including sex and love; and they refuted the then-popular term “AIDS victim” in favor of the more affirmative “people with AIDS” (PWA) or “people living with AIDS” (PLWA).

around the globe, even as many people living with HIV/AIDS—especially the poor and people in developing nations—cannot afford treatments.<sup>5</sup>

Yet most of us have come to know HIV/AIDS, at least in part, through representations: pamphlets, brochures, news reports, magazine articles, photographs, artworks like the AIDS quilt, film, television, literature, theater, and music. Paula Treichler (1999) coined the phrase an “epidemic of signification” to describe the corpus of representations of AIDS.<sup>6</sup> Because people have been “stigmatized (and destroyed) as much by the ‘idea’ of AIDS as by its reality,” Sander Gilman (1988) argued that analysis of the representational practices that coexist with the medical epidemic was crucial to understanding the epidemic.<sup>7</sup> The study of representations of AIDS is crucial to understanding the epidemic because ideas about AIDS circulate through culture in the discourses of science, politics, media, and art.

### **Representing an Epidemic**

The “official” textual representation of HIV/AIDS can be precisely dated.<sup>8</sup> In 1981, Dr. Lawrence Mass published an article entitled “Disease Rumors Largely Unfounded” in *The New York Native*.<sup>9</sup> In this piece, Mass attempted to calm concerns among gay men in New York City, where rumors of a deadly new “gay plague” or “gay

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<sup>5</sup> When AZT, the first drug found to be effective in people with AIDS, appeared on the market, it was also the most expensive drug ever manufactured. It cost an estimated \$10,000 annually, and most insurance companies would not cover the cost of the medicine.

<sup>6</sup> Paula Treichler, *How to Have Theory in an Epidemic: Cultural Chronicles of AIDS* (Duke U Press, 1999).

<sup>7</sup> Gilman (1988), 88.

<sup>8</sup> However, the “unofficial” record probably began much earlier, when people began to talk about this mysterious new illness with one another or wrote letters to friends or diary entries in which they described the earliest cases.

<sup>9</sup> Lawrence Mass, “Disease Rumors Largely Unfounded,” *The New York Native* 18-31 May 1981. *The New York Native* was a gay newspaper with a wide circulation within the city. It was published bi-weekly from 1980 to 1997.

cancer” had begun to circulate as increasing numbers of gay men complained of mysterious rashes, sores, fevers, and fatigue. Others experienced night sweats, extreme weight loss, debilitating and bloody diarrhea, and exotic infections. Perplexed doctors watched helplessly as healthy young men fell ill, wasted away, and died. Blood tests detected abnormalities amongst these patients. Many had virtually no functional immune system, but no one knew why.

Initially, the condition was given the name Gay-Related Immune Deficiency (GRID) because it was thought to impact only gay men. For Simon Watney (1987), GRID forged a link between homosexuality and illness that “returned us to a pre-modern vision of the body, according to which heresy and sin are held to be scored in the features of their voluntary subjects by punitive and admonitory manifestations of disease.”<sup>10</sup> According to Susan Sontag (1978), “any disease that is treated as a mystery and acutely enough feared will be felt to be morally, if not literally, contagious.”<sup>11</sup> This connection reaffirmed the convictions of conservative leaders like Jesse Helms and Jerry Falwell, who believed that homosexuality—which had only been removed from the American Psychological Association’s list of mental illnesses in 1973—was a moral sickness with grave physical and spiritual consequences.

About a month after Mass’ article appeared, the Center for Disease Control and Prevention’s (CDC) *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report* (MMWR) identified five cases of *Pneumocystis carinii* pneumonia (PCP), a pneumatic infection that a normal immune system fights off with ease. All five patients were identified as “active

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<sup>10</sup> Simon Watney, “The Spectacle of AIDS,” *October* 43 (1987), reprinted in *Practices of Freedom: Selected Writings on HIV/AIDS* (Duke U Press, 1994), 46-59.

<sup>11</sup> Susan Sontag, *Illness as Metaphor and AIDS and Its Metaphors* (Picador, 2001). These books were initially published separately in 1978 and 1988 respectively.

homosexuals,” and “two of them died.”<sup>12</sup> In the following months, *MMWR* reported cases of Kaposi’s sarcoma (KS), a rare form of cancer, among nineteen “previously healthy homosexual male residents of Los Angeles” and another twenty-six cases of KS in New York City.<sup>13</sup> KS typically appeared in older men of Mediterranean descent, and its characteristic purple skin lesions were rarely a serious medical issue. Yet among these young gay men, KS proved aggressive and deadly. *The New York Times* ran an article about these inexplicable deaths in 1981, but the story was buried in the interior of the 3 July edition.<sup>14</sup>

By 1983, confirmation of cases of GRID outside the gay community among hemophiliacs, infants, IV drug users, and women prompted the CDC to rename the illness Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome (AIDS). However, this did little to alleviate homophobia in discourses about AIDS. The death of film star Rock Hudson in 1985 heightened awareness of AIDS in the US. Although Hudson was gay, he remained closeted in public life. Thus, his death created a double scandal and a double outing as a gay man and a PWA. But even Rock Hudson’s death could not end AIDS phobia. People with AIDS lost their jobs, their homes, and their medical insurance. Gay bars and bathhouses closed. The US Congress seriously entertained the idea of putting people with AIDS into quarantine camps.<sup>15</sup> In some cases, healthcare professionals even violated their Hippocratic oaths by refusing to treat people with AIDS. The US was in a state of AIDS

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<sup>12</sup> “Pneumocystis Pneumonia—Los Angeles,” *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report*, 5 June 1981.

<sup>13</sup> “A Cluster of Kaposi’s Sarcoma and Pneumocystis carinii Pneumonia among Homosexual Male Residents of Los Angeles and Orange Counties, California,” *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report* 18 June 1981, and “Kaposi’s sarcoma and Pneumocystis among Gay Men—New York and California,” *MMWR* 4 July 1982.

<sup>14</sup> Lawrence Altman, “Rare Cancer Seen in 41 Homosexuals,” *The New York Times* 3 July 1981.

<sup>15</sup> This suggestion was not without precedent in the US. In the early-20<sup>th</sup> century, Mary Mallon, or “Typhoid Mary,” was arrested and placed in quarantine camps in New York City for more than thirty years. See Judith Walzer Leavitt, *Typhoid Mary: Captive to the Public’s Health* (Beacon Press, 1996).

panic. However, President Ronald Reagan would not utter the word “AIDS” in public until 31 May 1986.<sup>16</sup> By that time, more than twenty thousand Americans had died of AIDS.

### **HIV/AIDS in the Arts**

The AIDS epidemic ushered in new forms of knowledge in science, medicine, and law; it generated new vocabularies for political activism, healthcare, and politics. The health crisis also ushered in new identities: the person with AIDS, the person who is HIV-negative. It generated new forms of self-expression in addition to rituals for mourning, dying, and remembering. AIDS engendered new forms of being sick and being well. It elicited new anxieties about disease and contagion while reactivating discourses of homophobia, racism, xenophobia, and class bias. And it gave artists a new topic for contemplation, creation, and artistic exploration.

In the late-1980s, Crimp (1988) criticized AIDS photography and photographers for their tendency to portray PWAs as socially isolated, frail, and helpless.<sup>17</sup> At the same time, people living with AIDS (PLWAs) were constructed as dangerous to public health and the general population. These sorts of images, he argued, fueled homophobia and fears about AIDS. Watney (1987) used the term *the spectacle of AIDS* to summarize the “regime of massively over-determined images” that has been “carefully and elaborately stage-managed” to furnish “the general public with further dramatic evidence of what

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<sup>16</sup> This is a slight correction. Most sources list Reagan’s speech on 2 April 1987 as the first time he mentioned AIDS in public.

<sup>17</sup> Douglas Crimp, “Portraits of People with AIDS,” reprinted in *Moralism and Melancholia* (2002): 83-108.

‘we’ already ‘know’ concerning AIDS.’<sup>18</sup> On one hand, the spectacle of AIDS consisted of sensational imagery: scans by electron microscopes, computer graphics, and other technological ways of looking at AIDS that turned it into something not unlike a sci-fi movie monster. On the other, “we witness the ‘AIDS victim,’ usually hospitalized and physically debilitated.”<sup>19</sup> The AIDS victim is simultaneously pathetic and terrifying.

Sander Gilman (1988) historicized images of AIDS within a longer tradition of representations of sexual illnesses and disease.<sup>20</sup> From syphilis in sixteenth-century woodcuts to WWII-era VD prevention campaigns by the US military, sexually transmitted infections (STIs) were often portrayed as women and less often as foreigners. The discovery of antibiotics that could cure many common STIs coincided with changing socio-sexual mores (notably, the feminist healthcare movement, the pill, and contraception). As a result, representations of STIs were unmoored from their gendered post. For almost two decades, faith in medicine’s ability to cure diseases like syphilis soared, and there was genuine optimism about the real possibility of sexual freedom. This sentiment partially fueled the Gay Liberation movement of the 1970s. The movement toward sexual liberation seemed to come to a grinding halt when AIDS first appeared among gay men. Already socially vilified and feminized in the US, gay men became the new “icons of disease” for AIDS.<sup>21</sup>

As a result, much of the earliest art about AIDS emphasized the experiences of gay men with the disease. The earliest movies about AIDS dealt with gay protagonists.

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<sup>18</sup> Simon Watney, “The Spectacle of AIDS,” *October* 43 (1987), reprinted in *Practices of Freedom: Selected Writings on HIV/AIDS* (Duke U Press, 1994), 46-59.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>20</sup> Sander Gilman, *Disease and Representation: Images of Illness from Madness to AIDS* (Cornell U Press, 1988).

<sup>21</sup> Gilman (1988).

Although many of these films featured gay characters, Treichler (1999) found that these characters were often stripped of their gay identities, friends, and worlds in lieu of narratives of reconciliation with their heterosexual families. However, as Douglas Crimp (1987) pithily noted, “going home to die [was] often a last resort, when insurance has run out or disability benefits won’t cover the rent.”<sup>22</sup> Treichler’s analysis covers films that were made-for-TV like NBC’s *An Early Frost* (1985) and ABC’s *Our Sons* (1990). Hollywood and independent films like *Parting Glances* (1986), *Longtime Companion* (1990), and *Philadelphia* (1993) featured openly gay characters whose gay lives are not excised from the plot. However, Robert McRuer (2002) found that even in 1997, publicity for an AIDS film like HBO’s *In the Gloaming* emphasized the triumphant directorial debut of Christopher Reeve (who had recently been paralyzed in a horseback riding accident) over the actual AIDS-related content of the film.<sup>23</sup> Although Treichler credited these films for providing up-to-date medical information about contagion and treatment, she concluded that they failed to tell “the stories that could have been told, should have been told, about gay men in the epidemic.”<sup>24</sup>

Theatrical works about HIV/AIDS that featured gay characters sought to portray the both lives of gay men living through the crisis and the socio-political atrocities of the epidemic. For instance, Larry Kramer’s *The Normal Heart* (1985) focused on the lives of a group of gay men who founded an AIDS services organization. The play included a deathbed wedding between Ned Weeks and his lover, who is dying of AIDS, and a gut-wrenching account of a hospital that refused to process the remains of a young man who

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<sup>22</sup> Douglas Crimp, “Portraits of People with AIDS,” in *Cultural Studies*, ed. Lawrence Grossberg, Cary Nelson, and Paula Treichler. New York: Routledge, 1992, reprinted in Crimp (2006), 83-108.

<sup>23</sup> Robert McRuer, “Critical Investments: AIDS, Christopher Reeve, and Queer/Disability Studies,” *The Journal of Medical Humanities* 23/3-4 (2002): 221-237.

<sup>24</sup> Treichler (1999), 203.

died of AIDS.<sup>25</sup> In order to bury their son, the man's parents had to pay a nurse to dump their son's body in a black plastic garbage bag with the hospital trash. They collected his remains from the dumpster. A letter from Kramer handed out as audience members left the production testified that, "everything in this play happened."<sup>26</sup> Terrance McNally's *The Lisbon Traviata* (1988) does not directly mention AIDS, but the epidemic haunts the periphery of its characters' lives as Stephen worries about his lover's infidelity while discussing a rare Maria Callas recording with his opera queen friend, Mendy.<sup>27</sup>

By the 1990s, films and dramatic works about AIDS featured non-gay characters, people of color, and women; this shift reflected both the spread of the epidemic and the growing awareness that HIV/AIDS was not just a gay problem. *Boys on the Side* (1995) is a road trip movie about a trio of women (played by Whoopi Goldberg, Mary Louise Parker, and Drew Barrymore) making a cross-country journey. Robin (Parker) eventually reveals that she contracted HIV after a one-night stand, and her death from AIDS is one of the film's major plot points. Harmony Korine and Larry Clark's *Kids* (1995) is notable for its portrayal of sexually active teenagers in New York City. One of the kids, Telly (Leo Fitzpatrick), is HIV-positive, though he does not know it. He seduces young (and in some cases underage) virgin girls and engages in unsafe sex with all of them. Jennie (Chloe Sevigny) discovers she is HIV-positive and spends much of the movie trying to break the news to Telly. More recent movies like Nelson George's *Life Support* (starring

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<sup>25</sup> Kramer's play is a thinly veiled autobiography of his experiences with Gay Men's Health Crisis in the early-1980s. The play has been made into a miniseries by HBO and will premiere in May of 2014. In a poignant coincidence, Kramer was hospitalized for complications from a liver transplant in 2013. He married his partner, William David Webster, in the intensive care unit.

<sup>26</sup> I attended the 2011 revival of *The Normal Heart* in New York City and received a copy of this letter from an usher as I left the theater.

<sup>27</sup> David Román (1998) offers a camp reading of McNally's play in *Act of Intervention*, see chapter 3, "It's My Party and I'll Die if I Want To! AIDS Performance and the Circulation of Camp in the Late 1980s and Early 1990s."

Queen Latifah, 2007) and Lee Daniel's *Precious: Based on the Novel Push by Sapphire* (2007) chronicle the experiences of black women living with AIDS.<sup>28</sup> *Precious* is remarkable because its title character endures a life in Harlem in the 1980s of physical and sexual abuse, incest that leads to HIV infection and two pregnancies, and extreme poverty. Still, she joins an alternative high school, befriends a group of women and a teacher who provide her with an alternative family as she breaks from her past to start a new and uncertain future on her own.

Tony Kushner's *Angels in America* (1992) placed AIDS at the center of the lives of its sprawling cast. *Angels* also blends fiction and reality by using Roy Cohn (1927-1986)—the notorious conservative and closeted gay lawyer who died of AIDS-related cancer—as a foil to the fictional characters. Cohn dies a miserable and lonely death, presumably as cosmic justification for his long history of despicable actions including his part in McCarthy's red scare hearings in the 1950s and the execution of Ethel Rosenberg, whose ghost haunts Cohn as he slips into dementia. By contrast, Pryor Walter, who is abandoned by his longtime lover and visited by an angel, survives into the 1990s and resolves to fight and to live. As a result of Pryor's experiences, the lives of those around him are transformed for the better, and at the play's end, he is part of a family that includes his best friend, his former lover, and the mother of his exes' new lover. Kushner offers a new vision of family, kinship, and friendship in the age of AIDS.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> According to Cathy Cohen, an epidemic of "junkie pneumonia" in the 1970s was later revealed to be the same PCP detected in gay men, and posthumous analysis of blood and tissue samples found HIV in many of these patients. See Cohen, *The Boundaries of Blackness: AIDS and the Breakdown of Black Politics* (U of Chicago Press, 1999). *Push* was first published in 1996.

<sup>29</sup> The theater community was hit especially hard by the AIDS epidemic, as many Broadway composers, choreographers, producers, actors, and dancers fell ill and died. As a result, the theatrical community in New York organized to fight the epidemic. Equity Fights AIDS was founded in 1987 to raise money for The Actor's Fund AIDS Initiative, and in 1988, Broadway Cares began to raise money for AIDS service organizations around the nation. The groups joined to form a non-profit in 1992 under the moniker

By the end of the 1980s, HIV/AIDS emerged as a theme in fictional novels, memoirs, and autobiographical writing. Lisa Garmire (1996) offers a comprehensive annotated bibliography of American novels that deal with HIV/AIDS between 1982 and 1993, roughly the same period as the musical examples I will discuss.<sup>30</sup> Garmire organizes AIDS novels into five distinct categories. In *primary AIDS novels*, “the experience of living with AIDS lies at the center of the narrative,” whereas in *secondary AIDS novels*, HIV/AIDS is often used as a “subsidiary plot or as a simple plot device (typically as a convenient ‘closure’ mechanism).”<sup>31</sup> *Science fiction and intrigue novels* emphasize “aspects of the paranoia surrounding the AIDS epidemic” through “futuristic stories or by focusing on the intrigue involved in medical research on AIDS.”<sup>32</sup> In *murder and thriller AIDS novels*, HIV/AIDS is used as plot device, and finally, *young adult AIDS novels* are typically written by women “for a young audience and serve to teach moral lessons about AIDS.”<sup>33</sup>

Memoirs and documentary films have been important expressive forms for people impacted by AIDS. Paul Monett’s autobiographical books *Borrowed Time: An AIDS Memoir* (1988) and *Afterlife* (1990) recount the deaths of two of the author’s partners to AIDS and their devastating emotional aftereffects.<sup>34</sup> Elizabeth Cox, the wife of New York City musician Keith Avedon, published *Thanksgiving: An AIDS Journal* (1991) after

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Broadway Cares/Equity Fights AIDS. To date, BCEFA has awarded more than \$144, 803, 213.00 in grants through its Actors Fund and both national and international grants. For more information, see [http://www.broadwaycares.org/history\\_of\\_bcefa](http://www.broadwaycares.org/history_of_bcefa).

<sup>30</sup> Lisa Garmire, “Resisting the Apocalypse: Telling Time in American Novels about AIDS, 1982-1992,” PhD dissertation, University of California, Santa Barbara, 1996.

<http://www.oocities.org/lisagarmire/AnnotatedBiblio.htm> accessed 13 March 2014.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Paul Monett, *Borrowed Time: An AIDS Memoir* (Harcourt Brace, 1988) and *Afterlife* (Crown Publishers, 1990).

Avedon's death.<sup>35</sup> Similarly, Jan Zita Grover (1997) and Amy Hoffman (1997) offer painful accounts of their experiences as caregivers for friends with AIDS.<sup>36</sup> These books preserve the first-hand experiences of men and women living with AIDS and those involved in the fight against the epidemic. Ann Cvetkovitch (2003) interviewed women who were part of ACT UP/Austin in her work on lesbian cultures and trauma.<sup>37</sup>

Documentary films sought to capture the lived experiences of people with AIDS and to critique socio-political aspects of the response to the epidemic. Stuart Marshall's *Bright Eyes* (1984), one of the earliest such films, sought to counter negative representations of AIDS through imaginative and parodic vignettes. Marlon Riggs' *Tongues Untied* (1989) and *Non, Je Ne Regrette Rien* (1992) explored issues of sexuality and HIV/AIDS within the African American gay male community, challenged the culture of the open secret of homosexuality among black Americans, and critiqued social and economic issues pertinent to the lives of black gay men with AIDS. Tom Joslin's *Silver Lake Life: The View From Here* (1993) followed the last year in the lives of Joslin and his partner, Mark Massi, both of whom died in 1990. Daryl Wein's *Sex Positive* (2008) concerned the life and activism of Richard Berkowitz, a former gay hustler turned activist who co-authored one of the earliest safe sex booklets with his doctor, Joseph Sonnabend, and another patient, Michael Callen (1955-1993). David Weissman's *We Were Here* (2011) offered a perspective on AIDS from gay men, healthcare workers, and others living with AIDS in San Francisco. David France's *How to Survive a Plague* (2013) and

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<sup>35</sup> Elizabeth Cox, *Thanksgiving: An AIDS Journal* (Harper Collins, 1991).

<sup>36</sup> Jan Zita Grover, *North Enough: AIDS and Other Clear Cuts* (Graywolf Press, 1997) and Amy Hoffman, *Hospital Time* (Duke U Press, 1997).

<sup>37</sup> Ann Cvetkovich, *An Archive of Feelings: Trauma, Sexuality, and Lesbian Public Cultures* (Duke U Press, 2003). See especially Chapter Five, "AIDS Activists and Public Feeling: Documenting ACT UP's Lesbians."

Jim Hubbard's *United in Anger* (2013) focus on the history of the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power (ACT UP). *Deepsouth* (2012) chronicles the lives of people with AIDS living in the rural south.

Poets, too, used their experiences of AIDS to create works that address the epidemic. Poetry functioned as a site where voices not present in mainstream film, television, and other media could articulate and explore their experiences. For example, Tory Dent (1958-2005) used poetry to explore her experiences as a woman living with HIV in *HIV, Mon Amour* (1999). Gay African American poet Essex Hemphill (1957-1995) offered critiques of US culture that openly addressed racism, homophobia, and AIDS. In the age of AIDS, according to Sean Singer (2001), "poetry serve[d] as a corrective to the cynicism, the hackneyed speech, and the dead language of politics because it constantly refreshe[d] and engage[d] language so that it demand[ed] to be heard and considered."<sup>38</sup>

Perhaps the most famous example of an artistic response to HIV/AIDS is the NAMES Project AIDS Quilt, a massive piece comprised of individual panels that memorialize an individual who died of HIV/AIDS. San Franciscan Cleve Jones conceived The Quilt in 1985. According to Marita Sturken (1997), it "stands as, and invites, testimonials of and to specific individuals and attempts to create a community of shared loss."<sup>39</sup> The Quilt "calls upon the conscience of the nation" by humanizing people with HIV/AIDS. Each square is roughly the size of an adult human gravestones and "the tactile, foldable quality of the cloth, the uniqueness of each panel, and the variation that

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<sup>38</sup> Sean Singer, "Blood Positive: Recovering Poetry from the AIDS Crisis," *The Los Angeles Review of Books*, 19 September 2012.

<sup>39</sup> Marita Sturken, *Tangled Memories: The Vietnam War, the AIDS Epidemic, and the Politics of Remembering* (UCLA Press, 1997): 184-185.

speaks of the different hands that created it.”<sup>40</sup> The panels range from simple and understated to ornate. Some display a knack for artistry by incorporating items that were meaningful to the individual for whom the panel was made. No attempt is made by The NAMES Project to dictate or edit panels created by families and loved ones, which are then sewn together into large sections for public display. There are panels for iconic figures like Liberace (1919-1987) and Rock Hudson (1925-1985), activists including Vito Russo (1946-1990) and Ryan White (1971-1990), and there are even two panels for Roy Cohn (1927-1986). Today, there are more than 48,000 individual commemorative panels, and the entire quilt can no longer be displayed in a single location.<sup>41</sup>

Songs about HIV/AIDS were motivated by similar goals and reasons. Some memorialize the dead while others serve as a call for activist intervention. Still others document or observe the lives and experiences of living through the AIDS epidemic. In the following section, I propose one schematic for thinking about musical responses to HIV/AIDS.

### **Hearing AIDS: Musical Responses**

Musicians, composers, and performers played an important role in crafting artistic responses to HIV/AIDS, and it is to their works that I now turn. Music about AIDS has received less scholarly and critical attention than other expressive media. In one of the only musicological studies of works about HIV/AIDS, Paul Attinello (2006) posited that musical responses to the epidemic appeared at a slower pace than did other artistic

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> See <http://www.aidsquilt.org> for more information.

engagement with AIDS.<sup>42</sup> However, my research found that musicians began to produce, record, and release AIDS-themed works in the early-1980s at a rate of one to three songs per year. There was an explosion of AIDS songs around 1988, and as Attinello noted, production of AIDS-themed musical works slowed by the end of the 1990s.

Gay men's choruses have been instrumental in creating new works about AIDS through commissions and performances. Among the first musical responses to HIV/AIDS was Craig Carnahan's *I Loved You*, a 1983 work for men's chorus with a text by Pushkin that memorializes the loss of loved ones. A short list of men's chorus works includes John-Michael Albert's *Dennis Dunwoody* (1987), Kristopher Jon Anthony's *When We No Longer Touch: A Cycle of Songs for Survival* (1991), Peter Lake Bellinger's *Triptych* (1993), and Bill Bowersock's *We Have Been Here* (1994). Other choral or vocal works that use mixed choruses include Donald William Edick's *AIDS Requiem* (1989) and Richard Link's *Here* (1995).<sup>43</sup>

John Corigliano's Symphony No. 1 (1990), the three volumes of *The AIDS Quilt Songbook* (1994-1996), Pauline Oliveros' "Epigrams in the Time of AIDS" (1994), and Chris DeBlasio's "All the Way Through Evening—Five Nocturnes for Baritone and Piano," (1996) represent some of the classical and operatic responses to AIDS.<sup>44</sup>

Composers of musical theater have also responded to HIV/AIDS. Jonathan Larson's *Rent* (1996) is probably the most famous, but Matthew McQueen and Karl

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<sup>42</sup> Paul Attinello, "Fever/Fragile/Fatigue: Music, AIDS, Present, and..." in *Sounding Off: Theorizing Disability in Music*, ed. Neil Lerner and Joseph Straus (Routledge, 2006), 13-22.

<sup>43</sup> A more complete list of choral works about AIDS can be found on The Estate Project website.

<sup>44</sup> See Keith Ward, "Musical Responses to HIV and AIDS" in *Perspectives on American Music Since 1950*, edited by James R. Heintze. New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1999. 321-351. Matthew Tift, "Musical AIDS: Music, Musicians, and the Cultural Construction of HIV/AIDS in the United States" (Phd diss, The University of Wisconsin, 2007). John Clayton Seeholtz, "An Introduction to the AIDS Quilt Songbook and Its Uncollected Works" (PhD diss., The U of North Texas, 2009).

Brown produced the first AIDS musical, *The AIDS Show*, in 1984.<sup>45</sup> Others include Chicago's AIDS Educational Theater/HealthWorks Theater's *The Wizard of AIDS: Aware Individuals Deserving Survival* (1987), James Lapine and William Finn's *Falsettoland* (1990), Janet Hood's *Elegies for Angels, Punks, and Raging Queens* (1990), James Mellon's *An Unfinished Song* (1991), Cindy O'Connor and Larry Johnson's *All That He Was* (1993), Jonathan Greyson's *Zero Patience* (1993), Stephen Dolginoff's *Most Men Are* (1995), Scott Miller's vampire musical *In the Blood* (1995), and *AIDS! The Musical* (1995).<sup>46</sup>

The works of Diamanda Galás represent one of the most sustained musical engagements with the AIDS epidemic. Her extraordinary vocal technique, pianistic skills, and avant-garde/postmodern composition techniques combine with striking visual and technological elements in *The Masque of the Red Death* (1989), *Plague Mass* (1991), and *Vena Cava* (1993). Galás lost her brother to AIDS in 1986, although in interviews she resists the facile sentimentality that suggests a one-to-one link between her AIDS-themed works and her personal loss. As Galás explained,

In 1986, my brother was diagnosed with AIDS. It is bizarre that I was working on this two years before...Unfortunately, people tend to want to sentimentalize the work, to see it as a reaction to my brother's illness. This is seen as sufficient explanation. It is also used by idiots and misogynists as a deprecation of the work.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> The Estate Project for Artists with AIDS has an invaluable database of HIV/AIDS songs and composers in addition to information about writers, dancers, and other artists. See <http://www.artistswithaids.org>

<sup>46</sup> See <http://www.queermusicheritage.us/gaymus.html> for a comprehensive list of gay musicals, including those about AIDS. Accessed 12 December 2012.

<sup>47</sup> Interview with Thomas Avena (1994) quoted in Susan Leonardi and Rebecca Pope, "Diamanda Galas: Callas with an Attitude," *The Diva's Mouth: Body, Voice, and Prima Donna Politics* (Routledge, 1996), 232.

Doubtless, Galás has a personal connection to AIDS through the death of her brother and other friends, but as Susan McClary (1990) wrote, she “enacts the rage of the [operatic] madwoman for purposes of portraying genuine atrocities.”<sup>48</sup>

Galás links her performance style to the Greek tradition of laments and dirges known as *moirologia*, which are performed by women who often “pull their hair, beat their breasts, and rend their clothing as they sing, cry, and wail.”<sup>49</sup> In many Greek death traditions, according to Schwarz (1997), women “communicate with the not-yet-wholly dead” as they sing during the exhumation and examination the decomposition of corpses.<sup>50</sup> Their physical and vocal proximity to the bodies of the dead links women to “the danger that can arise if the corpse only partially decomposes. The dead can return to the realm of the living as a revenant and haunt the living.”<sup>51</sup> As a result of this potential danger, women’s roles in death rituals has been limited by various laws and prohibitions, resulting in an “ancient antagonism that pits the voice[s] of women against the law of the state.”<sup>52</sup>

Galás resists the suppression of women’s mourning by manipulating her own voice with extended techniques and technological interventions, creating pastiches of original and extant texts, and incorporating her own body into the spectacle of performance. Galás confronts audiences with what Schwarz describes as the abjection and sublimity of the PWA in order to “recoup desire and beauty for the HIV-infected

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<sup>48</sup> Susan McClary, *Feminine Endings: Music, Gender, and Sexuality* (U of Minnesota Press, 1990), 110.

<sup>49</sup> Leonardi and Pope, *The Diva’s Mouth* (1996), 231.

<sup>50</sup> David Schwarz, *Listening Subjects: Music, Psychoanalysis, Culture* (Duke U Press, 1997), 135. Schwarz describes three phases of death (separation, liminal, incorporation) during which the corpse is buried, left to decompose, then exhumed. “If the bones are clean and white, they are brought to the village ossuary, and the grave is destroyed. If decomposition is not complete, they are reburied, and exhumation is repeated at a later date. During each of these phases, women sing laments and tend the grave, ensuring a successful transition of the body and soul of the deceased from life to death,” (135).

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 135.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 136.

body, the very body that dominant culture has argued should renounce its desire and has figured as having been, though illness, punished for its desire.”<sup>53</sup> Other avant-garde works about AIDS include Laurie Anderson’s “Love Among the Sailors” (*Bright Red*, 1994), which uses an extended nautical metaphor to eulogize gay men who died of AIDS. Patti Smith memorialized her friend, photographer Robert Mapplethorpe (1946-1989), in *The Coral Sea* (2008). Noise band Prurient released a sonic *History of AIDS* in 2008.

The earliest pop music about HIV/AIDS was produced by gay artists. Lesbian comedian Lynn Lavner’s “Such Fine Young Men” provided a moving tribute to friends who died of AIDS. The song was released on her album *Something Different* (1983). Michael Callen’s song “Living in Wartime” (1985) was used as the entrance and exit music for the original production of Larry Kramer’s *The Normal Heart*. Over the next decade, Pet Shop Boys released several songs about AIDS including “It Couldn’t Happen Here” (1987), “Your Funny Uncle” (1988), “Being boring” (1990), “Dreaming of the Queen” (1991), and “Discoteca” (1996). By 1987, mainstream popular artists were releasing songs about AIDS. The roster of English-language popular music artists who recorded AIDS-themed works gradually expanded to queer, straight, black, white, male, female, independent, and mainstream artists in genres from country to hip-hop.

Many of these songs illustrate a peculiar representational strategy that distinguishes musical responses to AIDS from those in visual art, theater, film and literature: they don’t actually name the disease. In “Sign o’ the Times” (1987), Prince described a man “who died of a big disease with a little name” whose “girlfriend came across a needle, and soon she did the same.” Likewise, Joni Mitchell’s “Sex Kills” (1994) notes that “the gas leaks, and the oil spills, and sex sells everything, and sex kills,” but

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<sup>53</sup> Leonardi and Pope (1996), 230.

the song never says exactly how sex manages to kill. In both cases, listeners must decode these allusions to HIV/AIDS. In the first case, it's difficult to imagine another deadly disease, spread through dirty needles, in the context of the late-1980s. In the second, Mitchell's assertion that "sex kills" reflects one way of characterizing sexual activity in the age of AIDS.

While these two examples are relatively straightforward, other artists are even less clear. Often, listeners must make these connections for themselves. Using knowledge of an artist's biography, sexuality, or political inclinations and their own insider knowledge as members of communities impacted by the epidemic, listeners and fans tease out these meanings from song lyrics, music video images, or other sources. As Fred Maus (2011) notes in his study of songs by Pet Shop Boys, lyrics may be evasive or ambivalent and require a kind of insider knowledge to be understood as about HIV/AIDS.<sup>54</sup>

"Connotation and *double-entendre* have perpetuated an atmosphere of secrecy, shame, and social control around homosexuality," he writes, "even while they also provide a style of public communication for gay men themselves."<sup>55</sup> Pop songs can function within both the specific context of songs about AIDS while also circulating through broader areas of popular culture as non-specific songs about loss or mourning. Thus, they might be thought of as double-voiced utterances about AIDS.<sup>56</sup> In keeping with their ironic

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<sup>54</sup> Fred Maus, "Glamor and Evasion: The Fabulous Ambivalence of the Pet Shop Boys," *Popular Music* 20/3 (2001): 379-393 and "Identity, Time, and Narrative in Three Songs about AIDS by the Pet Shop Boys," in *Music and Narrative since 1900*, ed. Michael L. Klein and Nicholas Reyland (Indiana U Press, 2013), 254-271.

<sup>55</sup> Maus (2011), 383. For Maus, the ambivalence of PSB is not limited to their songs about HIV/AIDS. Rather, he finds that ambivalence functions as pervasive musical and lyrical strategy in their songs about gender and sexuality in their music more generally.

<sup>56</sup> The double-voiced utterance has been theorized by Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (*The Signifying Monkey*, 1988) in relation to patterns and practices of African-American speech. Gates uses the term Signifyin(g) to mean the "trope of tropes" or talk about talk characteristic of the way African Americans communicate. David

style, PSB deploy intricate, oblique, and evasive poetic language to allude to HIV/AIDS, and these ambiguities are enacted in the music that accompanies these lyrics. PSB address a group of gay men that includes singer Neil Tennant. This allows them to play with language in order to say things about gay life and AIDS that gay listeners may identify immediately but which may elude straight listeners.

By contrast, Paul Attinello (2006) identifies a kind of ambivalence toward AIDS in music by some stars.<sup>57</sup> He notes that heterosexual stars like James Taylor, whose “Never Die Young” (1988) seems to be about gay men dying of AIDS, position themselves in an awkward relationship to PWAs. While the song urges listeners to “hold them up” (they, of course, are gay men with AIDS) even as they “rise from among us like a big balloon...to another land beneath another sky.” Attinello interprets these lyrics as a suggestion of a straight fantasy in which gay PWAs end up in a separate (but equal?) heaven.

My own analysis of the lyrics to more than 200 songs about AIDS confirms that the ubiquity of this tendency to speak indirectly about the epidemic; it spans genres, artists, and decades. *Most* songs about AIDS rely on vague allusions to premature death, generalized descriptions of the physiological symptoms of the disease, or stereotypical images of loss, separation, or danger. For instance, Janet Jackson’s “Together Again,” from her phenomenally successful album, *The Velvet Rope* (1997), was written for a friend who died of AIDS. However, the lyrics make no mention of the disease. They rely instead on vague ideas about a posthumous reunion in the afterlife. Jackson has spoken

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Brackett has used the notion of the double-voiced utterance in his analysis of James Brown’s “Superbad” in *Interpreting Popular Music* (1995).

<sup>57</sup> Paul Attinello, “Closeness and Distance: Songs About AIDS,” in *Queering the Pitch*, ed. Sheila Whiteley and Jennifer Rycenga (Routledge, 2006): 221-231.

openly about the song's meaning since it was released; she dedicated the song to her friend and to other people impacted by AIDS in the album's liner notes. Furthermore, she donated proceeds from the sale of the single to AIDS charities and continues to perform it as the closing number in her live shows.

Still, these songs illustrate musicians' puzzling reluctance to name HIV/AIDS directly. It certainly wasn't the case that popular music could not handle serious topics because popular song has long served as a vehicle for dealing with important issues. In the twentieth century, for instance, musicians voiced concerns for the labor movement, African American civil rights, women's issues, Ethiopian famine, and war. For most artists—particularly mainstream/major label artists—HIV/AIDS remained the plague that dare not speak (or sing) its name. Perhaps in major label popular music, it was not possible to openly address HIV/AIDS due to homophobia. Openly gay artists were a rarity throughout the 1980s and 1990s, and stars with HIV/AIDS, whether gay or straight, were hesitant to announce their status in a climate of AIDS panic fueled by anti-gay sentiment.

For artists unencumbered by the demands of a major label, it may have been easier to deal with issues of AIDS and sexuality. This is especially true for gay and lesbian musicians, whose audiences included other gay people and gay people living with AIDS. These sorts of structural differences inform my project in ways that I will detail below.

In other parts of the globe, HIV/AIDS looked and sounded very different. Political turmoil, urbanization, and changes in economic conditions were largely responsible for creating the specific conditions of AIDS in Africa, the Caribbean, South

America, and Central America. Throughout sub-Saharan Africa, for instance, the epidemic was (and continues to be) largely a heterosexual one. Accordingly, the artistic responses to the epidemic differ from those in the US.

Ethnomusicologists have looked at HIV/AIDS within the context of socio-political responses to HIV/AIDS throughout Africa. Michelle Kisliuk (2008), Louise Meintjes (2004), Kathleen Van Buren (2010), and Gregory Barz (2006) situate music and dance within broader cultural contexts that include economic, religious/spiritual practices, socio-economic conditions, poverty, violence, political struggles, and cultural challenges and changes ushered in by AIDS.<sup>58</sup> In the relatively new field of medical ethnomusicology, scholars strive to maintain a spirit of what Benjamin Koen (2005) calls “borderless discourse and collaboration” between researchers and their host communities through the use of “collaborative, integrative methods for field and lab research...to explore the roles of music and sound phenomena and related praxes in any culture and clinical context of health and healing.”<sup>59</sup> Much of the work on HIV/AIDS conducted by medical ethnomusicologists occurs in music cultures outside the US and seeks to understand the ways in which local music/dance/theater practices and indigenous medicine combine to more effectively combat the spread of HIV.

Barz (2006) demonstrates how Ugandan officials effectively harnessed music and dance as a component of national HIV/AIDS awareness and education campaigns throughout the 1990s and successfully reduced infection rates, which had been as high as

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<sup>58</sup> Michelle Kisliuk, “The Intersection of Evangelism, AIDS, and Mama Wata in Popular Music in Centrafrique,” in *Sacred Waters: Arts for Mami Wata and other Divinities in Africa and the Diaspora*, ed. Henry John Drewal (Indiana U Press, 2008), 413-420; Louise Meintjes, “Shoot the Sergeant, Shatter the Mountain: The Production of Masculinity in Zulu Ngoma Song and Dance in Post-Apartheid South Africa,” *Ethnomusicology Forum* 13/2 (2004): 173-201; Kathleen Van Buren, “Applied Ethnomusicology and HIV/AIDS: Responsibility, Ability, and Action,” *Ethnomusicology* 54/2 (2010): 202-223.

<sup>59</sup> Benjamin D. Koen, “Medical Ethnomusicology in the Pamir Mountains: Music and Prayer in Healing,” *Ethnomusicology* 49/2 (2005): 287-311.

thirty percent of the population. Current estimates are about five percent. Throughout Africa, AIDS is constructed as a pressing *social* concern that is enacted in various cultural manifestations. As a social problem, AIDS impacts the lives of Ugandan women who must spend time caring for the ill in addition to perhaps being ill themselves, which means less time spent working in agricultural labor, a primary source of subsistence for rural families, and thus a general decline in the resources available for individual families. Orphaned children are another tragic result of the AIDS pandemic, as the very old and very young are often left to fend for themselves as the generation between them has been eradicated by disease. Such stories are common in ethnomusicological accounts of African AIDS and the arts. *The Culture of AIDS in Africa: Hope and Healing Through Music and the Arts* (2012) provides a useful sourcebook for thinking about HIV/AIDS in African contexts.<sup>60</sup> The authors in the collection strike a balance between historical perspectives, individual case studies, community ethnographies, sociological analysis, and templates for successful HIV/AIDS intervention efforts.

### **Sound and Aesthetics: Critical Generosity**

Given both the vastness of artistic responses to AIDS and that the analysis of HIV/AIDS is an emergent focus within music studies, there is no single definitive or comprehensive study. As a result, I limit my discussion of songs about HIV/AIDS to English-language popular music and music video written or released between 1981 and 1996. I have chosen to stop in the late-1990s because these years mark an important change in the US AIDS epidemic. In 1996, the first effective treatments became available

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<sup>60</sup> *The Culture of AIDS in Africa: Hope and Healing through Music and the Arts*, ed. Gregory Barz and Judah Cohen (Oxford, 2012).

to people with HIV in the form of anti-retroviral drugs and combination therapies, also known as “drug cocktails.” In response, PWAs began to live longer and healthier lives with fewer complications from opportunistic infections. These changes prompted neoconservative gay columnist Andrew Sullivan to declare the end of AIDS that same year.<sup>61</sup> Sullivan’s optimism was geocentric, classist, and racist, to say the least, and although the lives of affluent, white gay men who had been the face of AIDS for much of the previous fifteen years changed dramatically, the social and economic consequences of HIV infection among minorities and the poor remained much the same as they were before 1996. Furthermore, outside the US, AIDS remained pandemic, particularly in parts of Africa. Still, as Attinello (2006) noted, the introduction of effective treatments did impact the production of cultural and artistic responses to HIV/AIDS in the western world. Since 1996 and the introduction of effective retroviral treatments in the west, “the sense that [AIDS] might be the end of the world...has receded from the public imagination, as have the atomic bomb scenarios of the Cold War.”<sup>62</sup> Consequently, artistic responses to HIV/AIDS changed and have steadily declined.

I have chosen to write about popular music and music video responses to AIDS for several reasons. First, this is the music that I love and know best, as a pianist, singer, and guitarist as well as in my capacity as a music scholar. Second, popular music responses to HIV/AIDS occurred simultaneously with other forms of AIDS arts activism. Popular music about AIDS circulates more broadly in culture than other musical responses to AIDS. Recordings are cheaper than concert tickets and can be listened to many times. They can also be easily copied, disseminated, and shared. Third, more

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<sup>61</sup> Andrew Sullivan, “When Plagues End,” *The New York Times* 10 November 1996.

<sup>62</sup> Attinello, Paul. “Closeness and Distance: Songs about AIDS,” in *Queering the Popular Pitch*, ed. Sheila Whiteley and Jennifer Rycenga. (Routledge, 2006): 221-231.

people listen to popular music genres than other musical forms. As a result, the ideas about HIV/AIDS in popular music genres have the potential to reach a wider audience and have a greater impact more quickly than those expressed in a symphony or stage work that takes longer to produce. Socio-political and public health messages in vernacular language popular song are also easily accessible to listeners.

However, popular music also has its limitations as a medium for discussing HIV/AIDS. My analysis of AIDS songs gives primacy to messages contained in the lyrics, and many avid fans of popular music—not to mention its detractors—pay little or no attention to the words. Throughout, I am guided by my own belief in the importance of words in popular song. While the mere fact that these songs have words isn't all that interesting in and of itself, I do believe that the lyrics to songs about AIDS have a special significance. They invite a different kind of listening, one that pays as much attention to the use of language, metaphor, and the message as to the medium, that is, the specific musical choices that serve as a vehicle for its expression. Songs about AIDS participate in the construction of ideas and ideologies about people with AIDS, the politics of the epidemic, and interventions to curb its spread. They articulate strategies of resistance for impacted communities, and in some cases, they even speak of the violent prejudices and phobias that we as a culture continue to feel about this global health catastrophe. As noted, most mainstream musicians operate under label constraints, and at the end of the day, a record company can refuse to record or release any song. Few of the songs discussed in this project were actually released as singles which means that they may not have been heard very widely. And given the tendency to speak of HIV/AIDS in

metaphorical language, many listeners may never have realized that a particular song was about AIDS in the first place.

My analytical sensibilities are informed by Douglas Crimp (1987), who maintains that art about AIDS need not meet traditional criteria for “good” art that transcends its historical context.<sup>63</sup> “We do not need to transcend the epidemic,” he wrote, “we need to end it.”<sup>64</sup> Indeed, most art and music about AIDS arose from the messy context of an epidemic that was killing young people in the prime of their lives. Consequently, much AIDS art and music had a sense of incredible urgency and immediacy that has faded (at least in North America and Western Europe) since the introduction of highly active antiretroviral therapy (HAART).<sup>65</sup>

David Román (1998) prefers to view AIDS art from a perspective he calls “critical generosity.”<sup>66</sup> Critical generosity “looks beyond conventional forms of analysis” in order to find ways to “honor the potential inherent in all AIDS performance to help us more effectively understand AIDS” and understands that “criticism can be much more than simply a procedure of critique or a means for qualitative analysis. Criticism can also be a cooperative endeavor and collaborative engagement with a larger social mission.”<sup>67</sup> However, it is “never about conceding to the artist’s intentions or authority.”<sup>68</sup> Being critically generous does not mean turning off aesthetic evaluations. It instead puts pressure on the critic “to differentiate between his or her activity—which is placing

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<sup>63</sup> Douglas Crimp, “AIDS: Cultural Analysis/Cultural Activism,” in Crimp (2002): 22.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

<sup>65</sup> Attinello (2006) makes a similar point in his discussion of songs about AIDS.

<sup>66</sup> Román (1998): xxviii.

<sup>67</sup> Román (1998): xxvi-vii.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid., xvii.

performance in its larger cultural, theoretical, and ideological contexts—and the creative activity of the performer.”<sup>69</sup>

My analyses of the musical examples considered here are firmly grounded in the sort of AIDS criticism called for by Crimp and Román. Some of the songs meet my own aesthetic criteria for “good” music, while others do not. Some exemplify the aesthetic values of their moment of production but have not aged well, as the constantly shifting aesthetic sensibilities of pop have evolved over the past three decades. In short, I like some of these songs quite a bit *as songs* while I like others less as musical recordings than as creative representations of or responses to HIV/AIDS. I find some of them to be downright terrible, and others offensive, insensitive, or insulting. I have tried to balance this project by including all kinds of songs, regardless of my personal likes or dislikes in order to maximize the complexity of this collection, in any case hopelessly incomplete, of songs about HIV/AIDS.

To make sense of the vast and varied musical terrain, I have adopted a thematic (rather than a chronological) approach. In the first two chapters, I outline five types of song about AIDS: songs by PWAs, songs about personal relationships, songs about social changes, didactic or pedagogical songs, and extant songs that were given new meaning in the context of AIDS. This method has a few benefits. First, it allows me to indulge in my favorite pastime: analyzing lyrics. Second, the focus on lyrics places radically different artists, genres, styles, and listeners side-by-side across time. Thematic concerns and representational choices reappear in multiple genres and styles. These five categories exist alone and in combination, and they are porous enough to allow existing formulations about AIDS and song to circulate among the various types of AIDS songs.

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<sup>69</sup> Ibid., xvii.

Finally, my categories encompass the wildly divergent political positions about HIV/AIDS articulated in music about the epidemic. My intention here is not to produce a definitive typology of AIDS songs; nor is it to comment on the artistic merit or failure of individual songs. Rather, I offer a survey of the myriad ways that mainstream and independent artists responded to a public health emergency within the context of a larger arts-based AIDS activism.

### **Songs by PWAs and PLWAs**

Some HIV-positive musicians and musicians with AIDS like Michael Callen (1955-1993), Gil Scott Heron (1949-2011), and Jimbeau Hinson (b. 1952) have created works that address various aspects of the epidemic. Others like Jerry Herman (b. 1931), Arthur Russell (1951-1992), Tom Fogerty (1941-1990) and Eazy-E (1963-1995), made no mention of their own experiences. Likewise, a number of important musical works about AIDS come from HIV-negative musicians, composers, and performers. It can be personally meaningful for an artist with HIV/AIDS to write or perform a song about the epidemic, particularly for fans who are PLWAs and their loved ones. However, I have found that serostatus plays no fixed role in the creative decisions of musical artists. Furthermore, the emphasis on a singer or songwriter's HIV-status as a determining factor in making a song about AIDS has the unfortunate effect of also making songs that were written or composed before the AIDS epidemic or before the artist's diagnosis "about" the epidemic.

For instance, Jerry Herman was diagnosed HIV-positive in 1984, decades after many of his most famous songs were written. While it might be possible to reinterpret

such songs in light of the songwriter's serostatus or within the context of the epidemic, HIV/AIDS could not have played a role in its composition. Similarly, Queen front man Freddie Mercury (1946-1991) was diagnosed with HIV in the 1980s, but he chose to make his condition public only hours before he died. This makes it tempting to interpret songs like "The Show Must Go On" and "Those Were the Days of Our Lives" as autobiographical commentaries on Mercury's health. However, there is only anecdotal evidence that this was the case, and looking at the arc of Mercury's songwriting reveals similar lyrical ideas in earlier material, including "Bohemian Rhapsody" (1975) and "Who Wants to Live Forever" (1986).

### **Songs about Personal Relationships and HIV/AIDS**

The AIDS epidemic profoundly impacts many types of personal relationships. A diagnosis changes an individual's identity, and the decision to reveal or conceal that diagnosis can alter the dynamics of intimate relationships. During the period under consideration, an HIV or AIDS diagnosis typically meant a lifespan of about eighteen months—the numbers were lower for minorities and women—and this proximity to death could be terrifying and also exhilarating. The physical and cognitive decline of a PWA required a transformation. Friends and loved ones became caregivers; formerly healthy individuals became patients. Death led to mourning, and some survivors of the era recall feeling traumatized, almost to the point of numbness, by the sheer number of dead friends. PLWAs and their loved ones experience shame, fear, confusion, frustration, anger, and stigma, and these emotions emerge in songs about AIDS. As Paul Attinello (2006) noted, many such songs focus on "fear, mourning, or existential crises around the

idea of death.”<sup>70</sup> Some of the songs mourn the loss of friends, loved ones, and whole communities to the epidemic. However, this category of AIDS song includes songs about living with HIV/AIDS, the experiences of being ill, and songs about the trauma of living through the epidemic.

### **Songs about Social Changes and HIV/AIDS**

Another type of AIDS song deals with social and political changes ushered in by the epidemic. These songs fit within the tradition of American protest music, a corpus of songs that not only includes works by familiar figures like Woody Guthrie and Bob Dylan but also encompasses the use of gospel and blues-based music in conjunction with the Civil Rights movement. Songs about social changes and the AIDS epidemic come from virtually every genre, making it difficult to generalize about their musical content. However, these songs do tend to emphasize particular themes in their lyrics. One group that includes Prince’s “Sign o the Times” (1987), Billy Joel’s “We Didn’t Start the Fire” (1989), Joni Mitchell’s “Sex Kills” (1994), and TLC’s “Waterfalls” (1994) places the epidemic within the context of an otherwise sick period of late modernity, listing AIDS alongside violence, drug use, capitalism, and environmental degradation as a symptom of the systematic decline of global society at the close of the twentieth century. Others voice dissent about policies, practices, and beliefs about the epidemic.

A number of works by hip-hop artists articulate conspiracy theories about HIV/AIDS. Some of these responses to HIV/AIDS stem from still raw memories of the infamous Tuskegee Syphilis Experiment, in which African American men in Alabama were unknowingly given placebo treatments for syphilis so that researchers could study

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<sup>70</sup> Paul Attinello, “Fever, fragile, fatigue...” 16.

the effects of the disease in human subjects. Although the study began in the 1940s, it became a national scandal in 1972 when Peter Buxtun, a San Francisco-based public health investigator, broke the story to Jean Heller at *The Washington Star*.<sup>71</sup> The Tuskegee Syphilis experiment left an indelible mark on African Americans' perception of white medical authority, and it shaped some reactions to the AIDS epidemic.<sup>72</sup>

In the late-1980s and early-1990s, some high profile African Americans died of AIDS, and others announced that they were HIV-positive. *ABC World News Tonight* anchor Max Robinson died in 1988, and innovative choreographer Alvin Ailey died the following year.<sup>73</sup> Basketball superstar Magic Johnson announced his retirement from professional basketball in 1991 after testing positive for HIV. Just as Rock Hudson's death from AIDS in 1985 shocked the white heterosexual community out of complacency about the epidemic, Johnson's decision to go public about his serostatus gave HIV/AIDS a famous and heterosexual face among African Americans. Tennis star Arthur Ashe (1943-1993) contracted HIV from a blood transfusion in the early 1980s. After announcing that he had AIDS in 1992, Ashe founded the Arthur Ashe Foundation for the Defeat of AIDS and the Arthur Ashe Institute for Urban Health. Singer Sharon Redd, who was one of Bette Midler's Harlettes in the mid-1970s and later recorded several disco hits, died of AIDS-related pneumonia in 1992. Rapper Eazy-E (1963-1995)

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<sup>71</sup> In an episode of the PBS news program *Frontline* entitled "Endgame: AIDS and Black America," (2012) a number of interviewees, including a middle-aged African American woman who contracted HIV from her husband, framed their comments about HIV/AIDS in terms of the Tuskegee Experiment.

<sup>72</sup> Ice Cube's "I Wanna Kill Sam" (1991), Public Enemy's "Race Against Time," (1994), and The Conscious Daughters' "All Caught Up" (1996) all portray HIV as a biological weapon used by the US government to decimate African American communities.

<sup>73</sup> See Philip Brian Harper's "Eloquence and Epitaph: Black Nationalism and the Homophobic Impulse in Reaction to the Death of Max Robinson," *Social Text* 28 (1991): 68-86 and Harper's *Private Affairs: Critical Ventures in the Culture of Social Relations* (NYU Press, 1999) for more about Robinson.

announced that he had AIDS in a press release about a month before his death on 26 March 1995.

Such high-profile announcements drew attention to the impact of the epidemic on blacks, particularly in urban areas where injection drug use contributed to its spread among young black men who then passed it on to their female sexual partners. Numerous hip-hop artists including 2 Live Crew, Wu Tang Clan, Ice Cube, and Biz Markee contributed original works to *America is Dying Slowly* (1996). Produced by The Red Hot Organization, a New York City non-profit dedicated to “fight AIDS with pop culture,” the album (with title words beginning with A-I-D-S) raised awareness of the dangers of the AIDS epidemic in African American communities.<sup>74</sup> The album was heavily criticized upon its release for its total exclusion of women performers and the excessively misogynistic lyrics of several of its songs, the most egregious of which is Sadat X, Fat Joe, and Diamond D’s “Stay Away from the Nasty Hoes.” Journalist Nicky Baxter (1996) derided the album for its “phallogocentrism” which “disfigures the albums’ point of view” and portrays women as “the bearers of viral fruit.”<sup>75</sup> Rapper Biz Markie managed to combine misogyny, homophobia, and AIDS panic in a single track in his “A Thing Called Kim” (1989).

However, other artists wrote about the impact of HIV/AIDS on different communities. Mary Gauthier’s “Goddamn HIV” (1997), for instance, describes the loss of one man’s vibrant gay community as his friends died of this mysterious new disease. Alex Chilton’s “No Sex” (1983) deals with changes in the sexual culture of the US as HIV/AIDS spread among both gay and straight communities. In the chorus, he mourns

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<sup>74</sup> Matthew Tift (2009) offers an historical overview of this album and comments on several of its tracks.

<sup>75</sup> Nicky Baxter, “Hip-Hop Superstars Collaborate with a Purpose on *America is Dying Slowly*,” *Metro* 12 September 1996. <http://www.metroactive.com/papers/metro/09.12.96/rap-9637.html> accessed 28 May 2013

the loss of casual sex, but in the verses, he specifically mentions a number of ways that HIV can be transmitted including sex and drug use. Thus, the song overlaps with the next category—

### **Songs with a Public Health Message**

Another group of HIV/AIDS songs take on a decidedly didactic role, that is, they actively teach listeners factual and life-saving information about the epidemic. Some promoted ideas about abstinence. Jermaine Stewart's "We Don't Have to Take Our Clothes Off" (1986) offered a number of alternatives to casual sex, including dancing, partying, and just having drinks together, though the song never mentions HIV/AIDS directly. Gwen Guthrie's "Can't Love You Tonight" take a more abrupt approach. In the chorus, she sings, "Can't love you tonight...I don't want no AIDS or herpes." Other songs promote safer sex. Boogie Down Productions' "Jimmy" (1988), B-Art's "Use the Rubber" (1988), and Biz Markie's "No Rubber, No Backstage Pass" specifically encourage men to use condoms. Michael Callen's "How to Have Sex in an Epidemic" was targeted at his specifically gay audience and uses campy humor to make an important point about changes in sexual behavior for gay listeners. And women like Millie Jackson and Salt-n-Pepa recorded songs that empowered women (specifically women of color) to educate themselves about safe sex, to purchase condoms, to insist that their male partners *use* those condoms, and to seek medical care for testing and, if necessary, treatment to prolong their lives and preserve their health. These songs fit into the paradigm of "advice" songs, a sub-genre of the girl group repertoire that has been updated for the age of AIDS. Finally, a few artists recorded songs about AIDS that were directed toward

children. These examples teach values like compassion, empathy, friendship, and love while also offering age-appropriate advice in simple, clear, and easy-to-understand language that will help keep kids—whether or not they have HIV—safe.

### **Extant Songs Given New Meaning in the Context of HIV/AIDS**

A final category includes new songs that have been invested with new significance within the context of the AIDS epidemic. These songs come from a variety of genres and styles including rock, country, pop, R&B, and jazz. Their connection to HIV/AIDS may be associative, such as when a friend or loved one with AIDS listed the song as a personal favorite, or they might have been used as part of a memorial service, vigil, or protest. Some songs become “about” AIDS after they appear on the soundtrack of an AIDS-themed film.

David Román (1998) has discussed the role of performance in funereal, mourning, and memorial services in the age of AIDS, though his work focuses primarily on performance art rather than music. In the fall of 2012, I moved to New York City to conduct archival research at the New York Public Library and the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Community Center Archives. I also had the opportunity to interview a number of gay men who lived through the AIDS crisis. Many of these men mentioned Bette Midler’s “Friends” (1972) as an important song “about” AIDS. In the early-1970s, Midler performed at The Continental Baths in New York and established herself as a gay icon through her powerful, emotional, and theatrical performances of songs from the 1940s, new works by Tom Waits, Joni Mitchell, Laura Nyro, and others,

and her over-the-top stage persona. “Friends” appeared on her debut album, *The Divine Miss M*. The song’s lyrics extoll the virtues and the importance of friends:

And I am all alone  
 There is no one here beside me,  
 And my problems have all gone.  
 There is no one to deride me,  
 But you gotta have friends!  
 The feeling’s oh so strong.  
 You’ve got to have friends  
 To make that day last long.

This song resonated with gay men in particular, many of whom migrated to New York, San Francisco, and other urban areas in order to establish what Simon LaVay (1995) calls a *City of Friends*.<sup>76</sup>

In the wake of the AIDS epidemic, the second verse assumed a new and mournful resonance for gay men:

I had some friends, but they’re gone.  
 Something came and took them away.  
 And from the dusk till the dawn,  
 Here’s where I will stay.

At the same time, the final line was interpreted as a statement of power, a determination to stand and fight the epidemic. These lines occur twice in the song. Midler first sings them with restraint, as if the pain of this separation is difficult to bear. Nonetheless, she is confident that new friends will come (“standing at the end of the road, waiting for my new friends to come”). The second time, Midler loses her resolve and delivers the lines with a desperate, hysterical intensity. Her voice is multi-tracked to create a dissonant

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<sup>76</sup> Simon LaVay, *City of Friends: A Portrait of Gay and Lesbian America* (MIT Press, 1995). Kath Weston has also described the importance of urban migration in the lives of LGBT Americans in “Get Thee to a Big City: Sexual Imaginary and the Great Gay Migration,” *GLQ: A Journal of Gay and Lesbian Studies* 2/3 (1995): 253-257.

chorus of “friends,” whose worries and anxieties build into a cacophonous din that finds release in a collective sing-along of the titular refrain, “but you’ve got to have friends” that fades out as the song ends.

Other songs are connected to HIV/AIDS through their inclusion in a high-profile event such as a fundraiser or benefit compilation album. For instance, “That’s What Friends Are For” was originally written by Burt Bacharach and Carole Bayer Sager for the soundtrack to a romantic comedy film in 1982 and was sung by Rod Stewart. In 1985, Dionne Warwick recorded it for the American Foundation for AIDS Research (AmFar) as a fundraiser. Similarly, The Red Hot Organization, a New York City AIDS non-profit, has released twenty-two compilations of music by diverse artists from around the world.<sup>77</sup> Proceeds from album sales are divided between numerous AIDS services organizations around the globe. Several Red Hot release contain contemporary cover versions of extant works by Cole Porter, George Gershwin, and Noël Coward. Others focus on songs by many songwriters in a single genre like alternative, country, or hip-hop. A third type of compilation focuses on works from specific countries or regions from the Americas and Africa. Both genre study and regional compilation albums tend to mix extant songs that pre-date HIV/AIDS and new music written specifically for the project. For instance, *Red Hot + Country* (1994) contains only one new song, “Willie Short,” a meditation on dying from AIDS, among the other sixteen covers of classic songs like James Taylor’s “Fire and Rain,” Patsy Cline’s “Crazy,” and Bob Dylan’s “Forever Young.” By contrast, all the songs on the hip-hop album *America is Dying Slowly* (1996) are new songs, and *No Alternative* (1993) balances covers and new compositions.

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<sup>77</sup> See Appendix I for a full discography for Red Hot.

No doubt, countless examples of such songs exist, as people with AIDS and AIDS activists reinterpreted songs to fit their emotional, psychological, and political needs. Music therapist Colin Lee (1996) provides a glimpse of the way that improvisational music based in the classical tradition assumed a palliative role in the life of “Francis,” a gifted amateur pianist and person with AIDS who turned to music therapy as his physical and mental health deteriorated.<sup>78</sup> In my own experiences as a music therapy student at The University of Georgia in 2005, I witnessed first-hand the way that songwriting helped a group of men with HIV/AIDS cope with issues related to their diagnosis, treatment, and health. Using Paul Simon’s “El Condor Pasa (If I Could),” my clients used Simon’s lyrics, “I’d rather be \_\_\_\_\_ than \_\_\_\_\_ if I could” as an opportunity to explore their own feelings about living with AIDS. Each man filled in the blanks with his own words, and we compiled the lyrics into a new song. After performing the song as a group, the men in the group reflected on the moment they received their HIV/AIDS diagnosis and shared stories about sickness but also about the joy, happiness, and pleasures they found in their lives as people with AIDS. Music—both this exercise and songs they listened to privately—helped many of these men find solace and dignity and helped them to express their feelings to friends, family, and to themselves.

Finally, extant protest songs like “We Shall Overcome,” “They Are Falling All Around Me,” and “Blowin’ in the Wind” have been used, at various times, in conjunction with forms of AIDS activism. Although many such songs were composed and circulated in response to other civil rights movements and protests, they freely move through our

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<sup>78</sup> Colin Lee, *Music at the Edge: The Music Therapy Experiences of a Person with AIDS* (Routledge, 1996).

culture as signifiers of resistance and solidarity whose meaning exceeds their initial context.<sup>79</sup>

Most of the musical responses to HIV/AIDS have been sympathetic to the loss and devastation that the epidemic brought to impacted communities. However, sympathy is not the only response to the epidemic. Some songs trivialize that suffering. For instance, Tiny Tim's "Santa Claus has got the AIDS This Year," (recorded in the early-1980s and released in 1994) uses the novelty Christmas carol genre to make light of the very real experiences of illness. Other songs perpetuate homophobic and AIDS-phobic ideologies. Examples include Method of Destruction's "A.I.D.S. (Anal-Inflicted Death Sentence)" (1987), and Black Nasty's album *AIDS Can't Stop Me* (2002).

Part II offers an extended case study of the life and works of a musician who performed and composed in the styles of contemporary U.S. popular music, but whose career took place outside the mainstream popular music industry. Michael Callen (1955-1993) lived through the worst years of the US epidemic, and his tireless work as an activist, author, singer, and songwriter was instrumental in changing the way we think about HIV/AIDS. Although Callen's music remained virtually unknown outside of gay communities, he worked in near total artistic freedom. He could say and sing virtually anything he wanted, and as illustrated by the massive archive he left behind, that is precisely what he did. After moving to New York City in 1977, Callen performed in piano bars and cabarets in the city, often using his songs to articulate the experiences of gay men in his generation, and his own AIDS diagnosis in 1982 inspired works that appeared on his two solo records as well as the two albums he recorded with openly gay

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<sup>79</sup> For more, see Rob Rosenthal and Richard Flacks, *Playing for Change: Music and Musicians in the Service of Social Movements* (Paradigm Publishers, 2012).

and politically outspoken a cappella group The Flirtations. Working essentially in a gay niche, Callen and The Flirts foregrounded AIDS and AIDS politics in their songs and performances in ways that more commercial artists could not.

Callen spoke on behalf of people with AIDS on television, radio, and at conferences around the world. He wrote hundreds of articles and speeches about the science of AIDS and was an architect of the AIDS Self-Empowerment Movement, whose participants sought rights to life, death, and dignity for people living with the disease. Callen co-authored an influential book entitled *How to Have Sex in an Epidemic* (1983), a work that is credited with helping popularize the concept of safe sex. Using previously unavailable archival documents, home videos, unreleased recordings, printed books and speeches, commercially available recordings and films, and new interviews with Callen's friends and family, I present a musical biography of this important AIDS activist.

## Chapter Two: Popular Song, Personal Experience, and HIV/AIDS

This chapter examines two main types of songs about HIV/AIDS: songs about personal experiences of the epidemic and pedagogical or didactic songs with public health education messages. Throughout, I will reference the works of musicians working in the commercial popular music industry. Accordingly, their works about AIDS were aimed at fairly large potential audiences, though the size of this audiences does vary somewhat between iconic stars like Madonna or George Michael and less familiar, newer artists including Rufus Wainwright and Mary Gauthier.

Songs about personal experiences include musical expressions of illness, dying, and bereavement as well as remembrance and memorial. Musical memorials, from Requiem masses to commemorative concerts, are a common way to grapple with the feelings of loss. George Michael's "Jesus to a Child" (1996) and Madonna's "In This Life" (1993) use the idioms of pop music to craft moving tributes to specific individuals who died of AIDS. Both songs address these individuals directly as a conversation between the singers and the phantoms of their loved ones. At the same time, each songwriter steps outside his or her own grief to articulate more general sentiments of loss.

A group of three songs utilize a common image: the deathbed scene. Elton John's "The Last Song" (1991) and Paula Cole's "Hush, Hush, Hush," (1997) family and loved ones gather around a dying PWA in hopes of reconciliation or to encourage the sick individual to release their suffering. In Reba McEntire's "She Thinks His Name Was John" (1994), a dying PWA finds herself alone with just the memory of a man whose name she cannot recall and her profound feelings of regret over her decisions.

Songs about living with AIDS focus on the experiences of PWAs. In “Everyday Boy” (1995), Joan Armatrading reflects on an encounter with a young man with AIDS whose courage and bravery in the face of bigotry, homophobia, and an unsupportive family were inspiring. His is a tale that resonates with the growing AIDS Self-Empowerment Movement of the 1980s and 1990s in which PWAs claimed rights to dignity, self-expression, pleasure, life, and death. By contrast, Mary Gauthier’s “Goddamn HIV” (1997) is an archetypal first-person account of one gay man’s life in the frightening and confusing early years of the epidemic. Together, they reflect twin sides of the experience of living with AIDS: a brave public face and private inner world of confusion and fear.

Another subcategory of songs about personal experiences of AIDS focuses on the traumatic effects of living through the AIDS epidemic. Tori Amos’ “Not the Red Baron” (1996) and Rufus Wainwright’s “Barcelona” (1998) articulate different manifestations of post-traumatic stress disorder. In Amos’ song, AIDS produces a profound emotional disconnect, an absolutely flat affective response to the horrific scenes of death and destruction witnessed by the singer. By contrast, Wainwright’s protagonist dreams of escape to a world without pain, loss, or death. Ultimately, he cannot leave. There is no escape from the magnitude of the epidemic, and the singer resigns himself to whatever fate remains in his home city.

In the last section, I turn to pedagogical or didactic songs about AIDS aimed at two specific communities. First, I look at examples of songs addressed to children. Peter, Paul, and Mary’s “Home is Where the Heart Is” (1995) encourages children to embrace many different expressions of love and family, including friendship and empathy for a

gay couple with AIDS. Peter Alsop's "Gotta Lotta Living to Do" (1990) likewise tells children that they can be friends with PWAs and offers simple, age-appropriate, and medically sound advice for being a friend to someone with HIV/AIDS.

Finally, a number of didactic songs have been written specifically for African-American women. In this section, I suggest that Millie Jackson's "Love is a Dangerous Game/Sho Nuff Danjus" (1989) and Salt-n-Pepa's "Let's Talk About Sex" (1990) offer an updated version of the girl group "advice" song. These songs offer concrete advice for African American women listeners to protect themselves from HIV infection while still maintaining a fulfilling and pleasurable sex life and to seek out testing and treatment options in order to protect their own health as well as that of their partners.

## Memorials

Simon Watney begins his book *Policing Desire* (1987) with an account of a funeral for a friend who died of AIDS.

<sup>1</sup> "Bruno's funeral took place in an ancient Norman church on the outskirts of London," Watney wrote,

No mention was made of AIDS...The irony of the difference between the suffocating life of the suburbs where we found ourselves, and the knowledge of the world in which Bruno ha actually lived, as a magnificently affirmative and life-enhancing gay man, was all but unbearable.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Simon Watney, *Policing Desire: Pornography, AIDS, and the Media* (U of Minnesota, 1997).

<sup>2</sup> Watney (1997), 7.

Watney's anecdote suggests that gay men's mourning was frequently impeded by what Douglas Crimp (1989) described as "a social opprobrium."<sup>3</sup> For Crimp, the straight family's sense of shame engendered "a defense, a need to preserve [the gay world] intact against the contempt in which it is commonly held."<sup>4</sup> Such occurrences were common during the US AIDS crisis, and "there is an all but inevitable connection between the memories and hopes associated with our lost friends and the daily attacks on our consciousness."<sup>5</sup> Crimp goes on to describe the savagery with which the straight, AIDS-phobic world interfered with queer bereavement. "The violence we encounter is relentless [and] because this violence also desecrates the memory of our dead, we rise in anger to vindicate them. For many of us, mourning *becomes* militancy."<sup>6</sup>

Sometimes, queer families held alternative memorial services that were full of joy and celebration of queer life. According to David Román (1998), "AIDS memorial services [in the early-1980s] emerged as an increasingly common social ritual" that might involve any combination of speakers, readings, gay choirs, drag performances, dance, home movies, professionally produced videos, and even stand-up comedy in addition to political content, civil disobedience, or direct action protest.<sup>7</sup> These types of performances

intervene[d] in the statistical abstraction of AIDS...The numbers have names, and the names had lives [that were] rich in experience, personal intent, and whim; in dynamic concepts of self-identity, faith, and desire; in pleasures, quirks, and codes, and in love, fantasy, and dreams.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Douglas Crimp, "Mourning and Militancy," *October* 51 (1989), reprinted in *Melancholia and Moralism: Essays on AIDS and Queer Politics* (MIT Press, 2002): 129-149. See pp. 135-137.

<sup>4</sup> Crimp (2002), 136.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 137.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 136-137.

<sup>7</sup> David Román *Acts of Intervention: Performance, Gay Culture, and AIDS* (Indiana U Press, 1998), esp. see pp. 22-28.

<sup>8</sup> Román (1998), 26.

And perhaps most importantly, AIDS memorials “provided us with the space necessary to attempt to re-perform the bonds of kinship that enable the possibility of community.”<sup>9</sup>

Music was often an essential component of mourning. Lawrence Kramer (2001) posits that memorials strive to “forestall the obliteration of personal identity” by establishing a permanent marker that announces, “I was here.”<sup>10</sup> For Alexander Stein (2004), composing, performing, or listening to music serves as one important way to work through experiences of the trauma of loss.<sup>11</sup> Because music is a “compromise formation,” it provides a means for the “symbolic transformation of...overwhelming affect [into] an auditory [form].”<sup>12</sup> Drawing primarily from works of western art music, Stein offers a short list of common musical characteristics found in musical expressions of mourning and memorialization. Such music typically exhibits some combination of the following features:

1. Reverentially hushed tones
2. Steady, restrained, measured tempi
3. Uncomplicated and stable metric structures
4. Straightforward thematic motives
5. Mimetic figures that imitate crying, sighing, and other sad affective gestures
6. Suspended and/or delayed harmonic resolutions
7. Minor chords
8. The music may also be celebratory<sup>13</sup>

Phillip Tagg (2004) offers a more sophisticated and cross-cultural analysis of musical representations of anguish.<sup>14</sup> Tagg finds that certain tonal features signal

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 26.

<sup>10</sup> Lawrence Kramer, “Chopin at the Funeral: Episodes in the History of Modern Death,” *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 51/1 (2001): 114.

<sup>11</sup> Alexander Stein, “Music, Mourning, and Consolation,” *Journal of the American Psychoanalytic Association* 52/3 (2004): 783-811.

<sup>12</sup> Stein (2004), 788.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 793.

<sup>14</sup> Phil Tagg, “Musical Meaning, Classical and Popular: The Case of Anguish,” (2004).

anguished emotions in listeners, and he locates these musical features in works from Western art music, rock, pop, film music, television, and advertising. In addition to slow tempi and minor keys which are associated with numerous types of “sad” music, Tagg identifies minor “add 9” sonorities, half-diminished chords, “a tortuous tune,” taut or grating timbre, strained vocal or instrumental register, and irregular patterns of accentuation as musical markers of *anguish*.<sup>15</sup> Some combination of these “anguished” traits can be heard in every example below. I will show that many of these musical characteristics hold true for HIV/AIDS memorials in popular music, too. First, I look to biographical details from George Michael’s life to bolster my interpretation of “Jesus to a Child” (1996), a memorial song written to Michael’s lover who died of AIDS-related complications in 1993. Then, I turn to broader inter-textual musical connections in my discussion of Madonna’s “In This Life” (1993).

### **“Jesus to a Child” (1996)**

George Michael first achieved fame in the 1980s as part of Wham! After three successful albums, Michael and band mate Andrew Ridgley called it quits in 1986. Although he released a pair of singles under his own name (“Careless Whisper” in 1984 and “A Different Corner” in 1986), Michael officially inaugurated his solo career with *Faith* (1987). Other albums followed: *Listen Without Prejudice: Volume One* (1990), *Older* (1996), *Songs from the Last Century* (1999), *Patience* (2004), and *Symphonica* (2014). Michael has not been a particularly prolific artist, but each new release is carefully crafted and exquisite. He continues to release singles as free, downloadable Mp3s through his website.

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<sup>15</sup> Tagg “Musical Meaning” (2004), 5.

Although he garnered critical and popular acclaim for his music, Michael has also been a controversial public figure and, consequently, a tabloid darling. Rumors concerning his homosexuality began to circulate in the British press when he was a dreamy teen idol in Wham! Around 1987, Michael began to accept his identity as a gay man, first by admitting it to himself then gradually to a close inner circle of confidants. Publically, he often appeared with glamorous or high-profile women, but friends and collaborators later described Michael's sexuality as an open secret in the industry.<sup>16</sup> In 1998, George Michael was arrested for "engaging in a lewd act" in a Beverly Hills public toilet and subsequently came out as a gay man. In 2006, he was arrested for engaging in public sex in London's Hampstead Heath. Michael addressed these arrests in interviews and in music. For instance, he turned his 1998 arrest into "Outside," a musical celebration of "deviant" sex. The accompanying music video satirizes his arrest by transforming a seedy public bathroom into a dazzling disco with disco-ball urinals and kissing cops.<sup>17</sup>

Michael's life has also been punctuated with tragedies. In 1991, his boyfriend, Brazilian designer Anselmo Feleppa, tested positive for HIV-antibodies. In November of that year, Michael's friend, Queen singer Freddie Mercury, died of AIDS-related complications. In 1993, Feleppa suffered an AIDS-related brain hemorrhage and died soon thereafter. The combination of these losses sent the singer into a deep depression that was worsened when his mother died of cancer in 1997. This string of deaths sparked a depressive cycle that impacted every aspect of the singer's life.

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<sup>16</sup> Michael's sexuality is discussed in part of a televised BBC Biography of the singer, *Biography: George Michael* (2003).

<sup>17</sup> The arresting officer in Michael's case sued the singer after the "Outside" video aired. Marcelo Rodríguez claimed to have experienced emotional distress as a result of the incident and video. The case was dismissed then appealed, and a second court ruled that Rodríguez was ineligible for compensation.

George Michael first became active in AIDS fundraising in 1993 when he contributed three tracks to *Red Hot + Dance*, a benefit compilation produced by The Red Hot Organization. He debuted “Jesus to a Child,” a new song written as a loving memorial to Feleppa, at the 1994 European MTV Music Awards in Berlin. His performance began with a dedication to Feleppa, a practice he continues into the present day. Two years later, the song appeared on the album *Older*, which bore a dedication to Feleppa in the liner notes. The first of six singles released from *Older*, “Jesus to a Child” reached number one on the UK Singles Chart and peaked at 7 on the US *Billboard Hot 100*. It remains a fan favorite in his live performances to the present day.

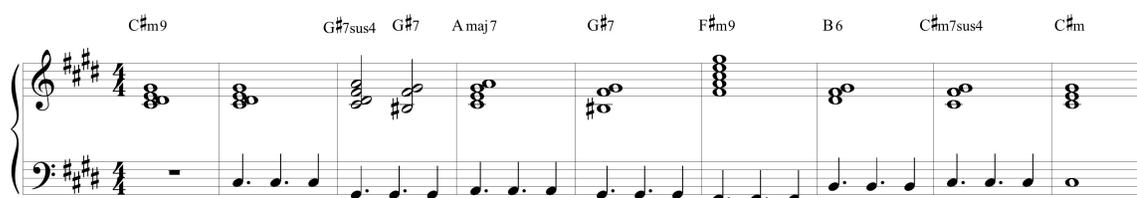


Figure 2.1, “Jesus to a Child” harmonies.

“Jesus to a Child” is a sexy and sensual song. *Billboard* magazine described it as “sultry” upon its release in 1996.<sup>18</sup> Its gently syncopated bass line, bass drum rhythm [1...&3...&|1...], rolling eighth notes on the congas, steady eighth-note pulse on the high hat, and rim shot accents reference Brazilian *bossa nova*. The decision to use Brazilian music also conjures the spirit of Feleppa. Synth strings fill out the arrangement with sighing, close-voiced chords. The song contains numerous “add 9” chords of the sort that Tagg (2004) described as musical representations of anguish (Figure 2.1). And although the melody itself is not particularly “tortuous” (by which Tagg means that it emphasizes

<sup>18</sup> *Billboard* 25 May 1996.

melodic dissonance), certain elements of Michael's vocal performance signify a grieving or anguished emotion. He sings with a breathy timbre, strains to reach higher pitches, and slides downward between melodic notes. Finally, his voice, drenched in postproduction echo, seldom rises above a whisper.

The dreamy and sensuous atmosphere created by the musical track frames the lyrics as a sort of spiritual encounter between a speaker and a dead lover. In the first verse, the singer remembers the kindness in his lover's eyes and looks up to see a specter smiling at him "like Jesus to a child." In the second, the kindness in his lover's eyes is matched by the sadness in his own as the singer receives a benediction from his lover's last breath. In the pre-chorus, Michael rhetorically asks, "and what have I learned from all this pain?" He answers himself by extolling the bliss of kisses, caresses, and memories that have become a permanent part of him. As the song comes to its conclusion, he resolves to sing the words his lover can no longer say and to "make the love we would have made...for every single memory has become a part of me. You will always be...my love."

Nothing in the song directly alludes to Michael's sexuality, his relationship with Feleppa, or HIV/AIDS. This silence echoed in the singer's real life. Although he was one of the most famous artists in the world, Michael was not out to his family, and his family had no idea that his lover was dying of AIDS. In fact, Michael came out only after Feleppa's death and only spoke publicly about his sexual relationship with Feleppa after he came out in 1998.<sup>19</sup> (The dedications in live performances said nothing specific about the nature of Michael's relation to Feleppa.) This lyrical ambivalence leaves "Jesus to a Child" open to a variety of different interpretations.

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<sup>19</sup> *Biography: George Michael* BBC (2003).

In 1996, *Q Magazine*'s Paul DuNoyer described the song as "an open requiem to a dead *friend*" with a melody "so subdued you either find the restraint to be beguiling or insipid."<sup>20</sup> DuNoyer goes on to say that "it's reportedly about Michael's real-life *pal* Anselmo Feleppa, a young Brazilian man who died in 1993, and it has a fine sincerity about it that elevates it above the maudlin and the prurient."<sup>21</sup> Jon Pareles of *The New York Times* wrote that "for most of *Older*, Michael sinks into a voluptuous solicitude where jazzy horns or hovering synthetic strings only decorate his self-absorption."<sup>22</sup> While it seems that DuNoyer was sufficiently well-informed to know the full name of Michael's *lover*, he does not suggest that "Jesus to a Child" is a requiem for gay man who died of AIDS. To gay listeners, however, Michael's use of the term *lover* in a song that mourns the loss of a romantic partner doubtlessly signaled both a gay subject position and the devastating loss of loved ones to the AIDS epidemic. At the same time, its ambiguous text has enabled others to use the song as a part of their mourning process for friends, family members, and loved ones.

### **"In This Life" (1992)**

1992 was a big year for Madonna. She simultaneously released her first book, her fifth album, and her tenth film.<sup>23</sup> All three explored sex and sexuality, and each elicited controversy. Although known for her provocative lyrics, music videos, and performances, Madonna was banned from entering the Vatican in 1992-1993, and her works from this period were censored in several countries. Like many of Madonna's cinematic projects,

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<sup>20</sup> Paul DuNoyer, "Review of *Older*" *Q Magazine* June 1996. Emphasis added.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.* Emphasis added

<sup>22</sup> John Pareles "George Michael: *Older*" *The New York Times* 26 May 1996. Emphasis added.

<sup>23</sup> See Madonna, *Sex* (Ediciones B, 1993), *Erotica* (Warner Records, 1993), and *Body of Evidence* (director, Uli Edel, 1993).

*Body of Evidence* was a box office failure, and critical responses to *Sex* were divided. However, *Erotica* was generally well received. *Erotica* rose to number two on the *Billboard* charts in the US and made it to number one in many other countries. *Rolling Stone* critic Arion Berger lauded the album as a “post-AIDS album about romance [that] doesn’t so much evoke sex as provide a fetishistic abstraction of it.”<sup>24</sup> For Berger, Madonna effectively adopted a cold, detached perspective from which she plays out “fantasies with astringent aloofness...[and] critique[s] commercial representations of sex that, by definition, should not be mistaken for the real thing.”<sup>25</sup> As a clinical “tool rather than a [sexual] experience,” the album probes themes of eroticism (the title track; her cover of the Peggy Lee classic, “Fever,” “Deeper and Deeper,” “Where Life Begins,” “Did you Do It,” and “Secret Garden”), the difficulties of love/romance (“Bad Girl,” “Bye Bye Baby,”), and social inequalities (“Why’s It So Hard”). The album also contains one AIDS memorial song, “In this Life.” Not released as a single, the song has become an important part of Madonna’s live shows. During *The Girlie Show Tour* (1993), she introduced the song with a brief monologue:

This next song I wrote about two very dear friends of mine who died of AIDS. And although you don’t know my friends, I’m sure each and every one of you tonight know someone or will know someone who is suffering from AIDS, the greatest tragedy of the twentieth century. For those of you who know what I am talking about, don’t give up.<sup>26</sup>

The audience responds to these remarks with thunderous applause as Madonna sings the song at center stage, illuminated only by a spotlight. Near the end of the performance, a single dancer appears dressed as Pierrot, the “sad clown” character in *Commedia*

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<sup>24</sup> Arion Berger, “*Erotica* Album Review,” *Rolling Stone* 26 November 1992.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>26</sup> Madonna, *The Girlie Show: Live Down Under* (Sire Studios, 1993).

*dell'Arte*. Madonna's typical stage shows feature elaborate sets, lighting effects, costumes, and background dancers executing difficult choreography. This moment of stillness is intimate and poignant.

Before I turn my attention to a close reading of "In this Life," I want to contextualize HIV/AIDS as a topic in Madonna's career. Madonna moved to New York City in 1977 and lived in the East Village, which first emerged as an important scene for art and music in the 1950s and 1960s. The area was home to a number of galleries and clubs like Bill Graham's Filmore East (which closed in 1971).<sup>27</sup> This gritty corner of the city was also the location of a number of homeless shelters along The Bowery and was considered a dangerous neighborhood before its gentrification in the 1990s. The East Village was also home to the St. Mark's Bathhouse, a gay bathhouse that closed during the AIDS panic of the 1980s. Madonna was working as a dancer and singer in the early-1980s when the first cases of immune deficiency among gay men were reported. As she told Gus Van Sant in 2010,

After going to New York and being a dancer when the whole AIDS epidemic started and nobody knew what it was. And then suddenly, all these beautiful men around me, people who I loved so dearly, were dying-just one after the next. It was just such a crazy time.<sup>28</sup>

Madonna lived with Martin Burgoyne, an artist and Studio 54 bartender who became the singer's best friend. He designed the cover art for the release of "Burning Up" in 1983 and managed her first tour. When Burgoyne told Madonna he had AIDS, she

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<sup>27</sup> Though the culture of art and music predated this particular announcement, it is interesting to note that Jesse McKinley of *The New York Times* asked "When did the East Village Become the East Village and Stop Being Part of the Lower East Side" on 5 June 1967.

<sup>28</sup> Gus Van Sant, "Madonna," *Interview Magazine* 8 March 2010.

paid his medical bills and rented an apartment for him near St. Vincent's hospital.<sup>29</sup>  
Burgoyne died in 1986.<sup>30</sup>

During her 1987 "Who's That Girl" world tour, Madonna made HIV/AIDS a central conceit of her stage show. For performances of "Papa Don't Preach," the singer projected scenes from John Perry III's animated film, *The Nightmare*.<sup>31</sup> At the end of the song, the words "Safe Sex" (Figure 2.2) filled the enormous backdrop.<sup>32</sup> "Papa Don't Preach" is a song about pre-marital sex and pregnancy, and while the safe sex message could be interpreted as an amplification of that theme, the particular discourse of "safe" sex grew out of the gay community's response to AIDS. By the end of the 1980s, the language of safe sex was part of AIDS education campaigns around the world.

On 13 July 1987, Madonna performed an HIV/AIDS benefit at New York's Madison Square Garden. Tickets were one hundred dollars each, and proceeds went to various AIDS research and services organizations.<sup>33</sup> In 1988, she appeared in a public service announcement for Musicians for Life, an HIV/AIDS awareness organization.<sup>34</sup> Madonna's commitment to safe sex education continued with the release of *Like a Prayer* in 1989. The album insert contained a leaflet (Figure 2.3) with safe sex guidelines and a warning about the dangers of HIV/AIDS.

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<sup>29</sup> Madonna's brother, Christopher Ciccone, recalls some of the details around Burgoyne in his book, *Life with My Sister Madonna* (Simon Spotlight Entertainment, 2008).

<sup>30</sup> In January 2014, Burgoyne's family auctioned off a massive collection of their son's belongings, including original artwork by Andy Warhol and photographs of Madonna along with other items. <http://www.examiner.com/article/tampa-bay-couple-to-auction-rare-madonna-and-burgoyne-80s-memorabilia> Accessed 19 February 2014.

<sup>31</sup> According to Perry, the film deals with "America's genocidal tendencies toward the Indians and other Third World People." See Patrick Goldstein, "Out on the Town," *The Los Angeles Times* 26 July 1987.

<sup>32</sup> Several videos of "Papa Don't Preach" from this tour can be found on <http://www.youtube.com>.

<sup>33</sup> See John Pareles, "POP: Madonna Benefit for AIDS at the Garden," *The New York Times* 15 July 1987.

<sup>34</sup> [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wNEGT\\_ZEyAA](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wNEGT_ZEyAA) accessed 25 April 2013.

HIV/AIDS touched Madonna's life again on 27 October 1990 when her beloved dance teacher, Christopher Flynn, died of AIDS-related complications. She studied with Flynn at The Rochester School of Ballet and remembered him as “the first man—the first human being—who made me feel good about myself and special.”<sup>35</sup> Flynn also encouraged Madonna to leave Michigan for Manhattan in 1977 in order to pursue a professional dance career. In 1991, the tabloid rumor mill exploded with speculation that Madonna herself was HIV-positive, claims she denounced as insensitive to the loss of loved ones to the epidemic.<sup>36</sup>



Figure 2.2, Madonna, 1987.

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<sup>35</sup> Gus Van Sant (2010).

<sup>36</sup> See David Brown, Dave DiMartino, Tina Jordan, and Gregg Kildy, “Truth or Scare?” *Entertainment Weekly* 20 December 1991.

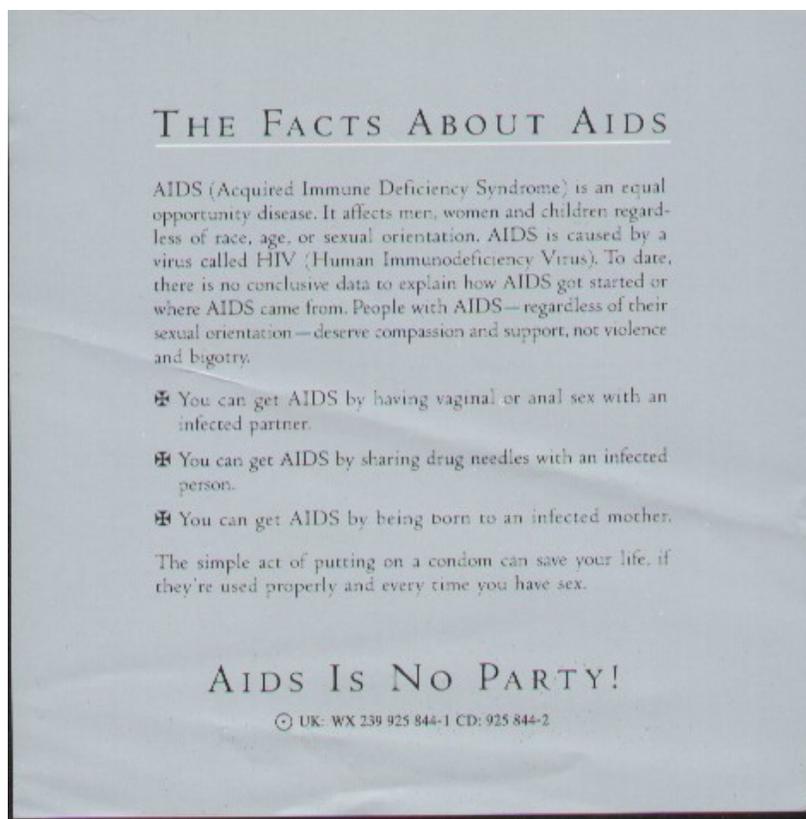


Figure 2.3, *Like a Prayer* insert (1989).

Although Madonna advocated for HIV/AIDS awareness and fundraising throughout the 1980s, she did not release a song about the impact of AIDS on her life until 1993. “In this Life” is a deeply personal song that *Billboard Magazine* described as “an enthralling AIDS-conscious song.”<sup>37</sup> The lyrics describe two men who have died. The first was a young friend who died at age twenty-three; the second, an older father figure who, “taught [her] to respect [her]self” and that it “shouldn’t matter who you choose to love.” To fans familiar with Madonna’s biography, these character sketches strongly suggest Burgoyne, who died at age twenty-three, and Flynn, the first gay man the singer knew.

<sup>37</sup> *Billboard Magazine* 24 October 1992.

Madonna's relationship with her own father, Silvio Cicconi, has been troubled and at times tortuous. After his wife died of breast cancer in 1963, Cicconi married his housekeeper, Joan Gustafson. His second marriage resulted in tensions among family members, especially with his eldest daughter, Madonna. Until his death in 1990, Flynn remained a father-of-choice for the singer, the first member of an extended family of choice she would build around her. In a more general sense, however, these are also archetypes of men lost to AIDS, yet nothing in the lyrics directly mentions that these men died of AIDS. Rather, as in "Jesus to a Child," the lyrics are carefully coded. To straight listeners, these deaths might simply indicate the loss of any cherished friend or father figure.

In the bridge, she concludes, "ignorance is not bliss." At this moment, the song turns from mourning toward the politics of HIV/AIDS. In 1993, the US AIDS epidemic was at its apex, and in this context, Madonna's play on the adage "ignorance is bliss," harkens to her previous efforts to inform her listeners about the realities and dangers of AIDS. In the third verse, mourning turns to militancy. Madonna poses a series of emotionally charged questions to her listeners. "Have you ever watched your best friend die? Have you ever watched a grown man cry? Why do we have to pretend?" She concludes, "Some day, I pray it will end. I hope it's in this life time."<sup>38</sup>

Musically, "In this Life" is built around two excerpts taken from George Gershwin's *Prelude for Piano* No. 2 in C-sharp Minor (1926). Program notes and journalism from the 1930s describe the second prelude as "full of feeling" and nocturne-

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<sup>38</sup> Madonna, "In This Life," *Erotica* (1992).

like.<sup>39</sup> In “George Gershwin’s Second Prelude,” a 1982 short story by Charles Baxter, Madam Gutowski—a stern piano teacher—tells her pupil, Sarah, that Gershwin’s Second Prelude “teaches tenderness from the first bar. You Americans have such trouble learning tenderness.”<sup>40</sup> Madonna uses two samples from the “tender” prelude to frame a message of compassion for PWAs. A synth-string C-sharp drone sounds below a serpentine synth-string line based on the left hand of the excerpt below while a piano intones the right hand motive (Figure 2.4).



Figure 2.4, Gershwin *Prelude II*  
(excerpt from printed score)

Although Madonna is capable of expressive singing, her voice remains speech-like and disaffected in the verses. The constricted vocal line hovers around C-sharp and B, which enhances her flat affect, suggesting sadness or even post-traumatic numbness. In the chorus, she sings with full voice and leaps into a higher vocal range. The switch from speech-like intonation to full singing signals a change in address. In the verses, she seems to be talking to herself about her dead friends. By contrast, the sung choruses are addressed to these friends. Using the power of her singing voice, Madonna transcends the

<sup>39</sup> For more on this, see Robert Wyatt, “The Seven Jazz Preludes of George Gershwin: A Historical Narrative,” *American Music* 7/1 (1989): 68-85.

<sup>40</sup> Charles Baxter, “George Gershwin’s Second Prelude,” *The New England Review* 4/4 (1982): 576-589.

boundaries of physical death to communicate directly to her friends who have died. She returns to speech-like intonation to ask questions directly to the listener as the song comes to its quiet close.

### **The Deathbed Scene**

Another group of musical representations of HIV/AIDS emphasizes death and dying through a specific narrative trope: the deathbed scene. Certain musical genres—opera in particular—are replete with such images of death and dying.<sup>41</sup> But such representations are also found in popular music. Below, I discuss the specific strategies used in each song to portray the PWA as she or he approaches death.

The deathbed serves as an important site of revelation, reconciliation, and release. Whether through a last minute confession or a redemptive turn toward spirituality, we imbue the dying with special powers: benediction, insight, or prophetic last words. The deathbed is also a ritual site for religious ceremonies or mourning practices. The deathbed serves as the central motif in three songs about HIV/AIDS: Elton John's "The Last Song" (1992), Paula Cole's "Hush, Hush, Hush," (1997), and Reba McEntire's "She Thinks His Name Was John," (1994).

All three specifically place the PWA in bed in the moments just before death, and all three songs are sentimental ballads that utilize piano-heavy arrangements, strings, slow tempos, suspended chords, and descending motives, and "falling" harmonic motion. Lyrically, the three songs represent three distinct narrative strategies: reconciliation, release, and regret. These three strategies are paired respectively with the politics of the closet, benediction, and blame. "The Last Song" and "Hush, Hush, Hush" engage the

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<sup>41</sup> See Linda and Michael Hutcheon, *Opera: The Art of Dying* (Harvard U Press, 2002).

listener by casting them in specific roles through changes in voice and verb tense, while “She Thinks His Name Was John” narrates a third person story to the listener.

Deathbed narratives frequently involve a reconciliation or reconnection between two people who have been involved in a lengthy disagreement. In the case of young gay men with HIV/AIDS in the 1980s and 1990s, advanced HIV/AIDS disease often necessitated a return to the nuclear/biological family and resulted in a double outing as both gay and a person with HIV/AIDS. Paula Treichler (1996) and Robert McRuer (2002) identify this sort of narrative in a number of AIDS-themed films like *An Early Frost* (1985), *Our Sons* (1990), and *In the Gloaming* (1997).<sup>42</sup> In each film, a young gay man who is dying of AIDS reconnects and reconciles with his biological family. However, in order to do so, these young gay protagonists must relinquish their gayness, their vibrant and supportive social-sexual worlds that involved friends, lovers, co-workers, and others in an urban milieu.<sup>43</sup>

### **Reconciliation**

“The Last Song” was written by longtime collaborators Bernie Taupin and Elton John and appeared on *The One* (1992), a mellow pop/soul record that held the number two spot in the UK for three consecutive weeks and reached number eight on the US *Billboard* charts. The record yielded four hits, including “The Last Song,” “Simple Life,” “The One,” and “Runway Train.” Aptly the final song on the album, “The Last Song” was released as a single, proceeds from which were split between six charities: AIDS

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<sup>42</sup> Paula Treichler, *How to Have Theory in an Epidemic: Cultural Chronicles of AIDS* (Duke U Press, 1999); Robert McRuer “Critical Investments: AIDS, Christopher Reeve, and Queer/Disability Studies,” *Journal of Medical Humanities* 23/3,4 (2002): 221-237.

<sup>43</sup> Kath Weston calls such social units “families of choice” in her groundbreaking, *Families We Choose: Lesbians, Gays, Kinship* (Columbia U Press, 1997).

Project Los Angeles, Gay Men's Health Crisis, Project Open Hand/Atlanta, The Pediatric AIDS Foundation, and the Ryan White Children's Fund at James Whitcomb Riley Hospital for Children.<sup>44</sup> A music video directed by Gus Van Sant accompanied the song's release and aired on MTV and VH1. This was Elton John's second HIV/AIDS fundraising single. His first was "That's What Friends Are For," and he released another entitled "Red" in 1995. John has donated all proceeds from the sale of his singles to AIDS charities since 1993.<sup>45</sup>

"The Last Song" depicts a scene of reconciliation between a young gay man dying of AIDS and his father. The performance of resolution, according to David Román (1998), "allows members of a community to take stock of an event momentarily."<sup>46</sup> The narrative unfolds over a three-day period, indicated by the use of temporal adverbs yesterday, today, and tomorrow in the first three phrases of text. This compressed time frame increases the emotional urgency of the situation. Unlike the reconciliation scenes described by Treichler and McRuer, in this case the father comes to visit his dying son, who is surprised to find he "misjudged love between a father and his son." The son's proximity to death fills him with the grace to offer his father benediction.

The song further dramatizes the situation by casting the listener in the role of father. In the first line, the speaker addresses us directly, "yesterday, *you* came to lift me up," and later with an imperative, "tomorrow, [you] leave the window open" so that, ostensibly, his soul can fly out after he dies. By placing listeners in the position of parent,

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<sup>44</sup> Press Release, "Elton John and MCA Records Announce a Donation of Profits from "The Last Song" to Six Charities. Accessed 15 November 2012.  
<http://www.thefreelibrary.com/ELTON+JOHN+AND+MCA+RECORDS+ANNOUNCE+A+DONATION+OF+PROFITS+FROM+%27THE...-a012623524>

<sup>45</sup> Adam Block, *The Daily Telegraph* 10 November 1991.

<sup>46</sup> David Román (1998), 217.

lyricist Bernie Taupin tugs at their heartstrings and encourages sympathy with both the father with whose implicit fears or anxieties listeners may directly identify and through whose loss we experience the trauma of losing our own child.

Like the memorial songs described above, “The Last Song” utilizes solemn musical gestures to indicate sadness, death, and dying. The stately tempo and block chords in the piano cradle a melody which gradually slips downward like the life leeching out of this terminally ill young man. The supporting harmonies slide down from tonic through several predominant chords before a V7 chord leads us back to start of the same downward spiral. Similarly, in the chorus, tensions mount between the descending “lament” bass line and the upward leap to the downbeat of each bar. However, the gravity of the bass line, and of the son’s condition, pulls everything downward toward his imminent death.

The image shows a musical score for a song. It consists of two staves: a voice staff and a piano staff. The time signature is 4/4. The voice staff has the following lyrics: "Yesterday, you came to lift me up as light as straw and brittle as a bird. \_\_\_ Today \_". The piano staff has four measures of music. The first measure has a C major 7 chord (CM7) in the right hand and a C note in the left hand. The second measure has an A minor 7 chord (a7) in the right hand and an A note in the left hand. The third measure has an F major 7 chord (FM7) in the right hand and an F note in the left hand. The fourth measure has a C major 7 chord (CM7) in the right hand and a C note in the left hand.

— I weigh less than a shadow on the wall just one more whisper of a voice unheard.

d7 a7 G G/F

Figure 2.5, Verse Melody and Harmony  
(transcription by the author)

'Cause I never thought I'd lose. I only thought I'd win. I never dreamed I'd feel this fire beneath my skin. I can't believe love me. I never thought you'd come. I guess I misjudged love between a father and his son.

C G/B a e/G

F C a7 C/G F/G C/G G C

Figure 2.6 (transcription by author)

In the third and fourth verses, father and son reach catharsis as “things [they] never said come together.” Hidden truths are revealed, and they “touch upon things that were never spoken.” While these hidden truths could refer to any secret that the son kept from his father, the historical and discursive contexts for “The Last Song” strongly suggest a particular hiding place for truths: the closet.

Arguably the defining metaphor or image in contemporary discussions of (homo)sexuality, the closet is a common metaphor in coming out narratives for gay people and people with HIV/AIDS.<sup>47</sup> Despite the fact that this song was publicized as a story about a young gay man dying of HIV/AIDS, neither HIV/AIDS nor the protagonist’s sexuality are ever directly mentioned. Rather, the song utilizes a series of coded references not unlike those Maus (2013) identified in songs about AIDS by the Pet Shop Boys.<sup>48</sup>

In the first verse, the young man describes himself as “light as straw,” “brittle as a bird,” and lighter than “a shadow on the wall.” In the chorus, he remembers feelings of youthful bravado and invincibility that have been destroyed by this “fire beneath [his] skin.” Fire is a common poetic emblem of intense feeling, passion, love, and anger. It is also purifying and cleansing. The fire beneath his skin immolates father and son, cleansing their relationship. At the same time, the fire may also refer to pain. HIV/AIDS is marked by night sweats, fevers, abdominal cramps, headaches, and other painful neurological symptoms. So, the same “fire” that burns clear the relationship between father and son also destroys the son in the process.

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<sup>47</sup> See Eve K. Sedgwick, *The Epistemology of the Closet* (U of California Press, 2d edition: 2008).

<sup>48</sup> Fred Maus, “Identity, Time, and Narrative in Three Songs about AIDS by the Pet Shop Boys,” in *Music and Narrative Since 1900*, eds. Michael L. Klein and Nicholas Reyland (Indiana U Press, 2013): 254-271.

Gus Van Sant's music video clarifies some of the "unspoken" aspects of the story by amplify the story of the text. The video begins by juxtaposing grainy home videos of a child, presumably the dying young man, with somewhat cliché "heavenly" images of clear blue skies and white clouds. A dove—the symbol of peace and promise—glides gently across the screen as Elton John appears, dressed in white and playing a white piano against an ethereal backdrop. As Paul Attinello (2006) notes, John's performance is carefully constructed to ensure that he is not perceived as the protagonist.<sup>49</sup> Rather, he serves as omniscient observer/storyteller, ventriloquizing rather than singing *as* the person with AIDS.

Still in work clothes and carrying a hardhat, middle-aged man trepidatiously enters a hospital room. In spite of the hospital setting, the monitors, and the IV drips, little attempt is made to mark the actor with specific signs of any illness and certainly not the various AIDS-related opportunistic infections like Kaposi's sarcoma or wasting syndrome that ravaged the bodies of people with AIDS. Makeup and lighting effects enhance the young actor's handsomeness. His muscular body, perfectly coiffed hair, and healthy complexion seem to glow.

Although the song itself omits any evidence of the young man's life outside his hospital room, this music video fills in these details. As John sings, "the hidden truth no longer haunting me," the camera pans the room, lingering for a moment on a photograph of two young men embracing on a pier. This shot lasts less than five seconds, but viewers catch a glimpse of the fullness and vibrancy of the young man's life. Different viewers can interpret the short clip in several ways. To gay audiences, the image of two men

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<sup>49</sup> Paul Attinello, "Closeness and Distance: Songs about AIDS," in *Queering the Popular Pitch*, eds. Sheila Whiteley and Jennifer Rycenga (Routledge, 2006): 221-234.

embracing in a music video for a song about AIDS might read as a photograph of a gay couple, close gay friends, or a sexual acquaintance. To straight viewers, the same image could be of brothers, other relatives, or close friends. Its ambiguity is part of its strength and appeal. I believe this is a photograph of two lovers or sexual partners, and since someone else had to take the picture of the pair, they must have also had friends who supported them. These gay friends never appear in the video, which could mean that they have already died, or that the young man has returned to his biological family to die himself.

At the close of the final chorus, the young man lifts himself from his nest of pillows and embraces his father. This pieta dissolves back into the vintage home video of the young boy in cowboy attire turning to face the camera. We have come full circle, and father and son have reconciled the differences that kept them apart. By listening to his speech, we receive the son's benediction: "I can't believe you love me. I never thought you'd come. I guess I misjudged love between a father and his son." With this young man's death and martyrdom, the sins of various fathers—from biological parents to politicians—are forgiven as he draws his final breath.

## **Release**

Singer-songwriter Paula Cole studied jazz at Berkeley College of Music before touring as a backup singer with Peter Gabriel in the early-1990s. Intrigued by her voice and songwriting, Gabriel advocated on Cole's behalf and helped secure her recording contract with Imago Records in 1994. Her first album, *Harbinger*, was recorded that year, and after Imago went out of business, Cole signed with Warner Bros. Records. The

company re-released her debut in 1995 as Cole went to work on a follow-up. *This Fire* (1996) launched Cole into the mainstream with the singles, “Where Have All the Cowboys Gone,” and “I Don’t Wanna Wait,” which was used as the theme song for the television series *Dawson’s Creek*. “Hush, Hush, Hush” appears on the same album but was never officially released as a single.

“Hush, Hush, Hush” depicts a deathbed scene. The protagonist is a twenty-year-old man whose father sits by his side to offer what solace he can and to urge his son to “go in peace.” The song features Cole’s voice with sparse piano accompaniment (Figure 1.7). An eerie, sighing clarinet figure recurs throughout the song. The song’s gentle compound meter and lilting rhythms suggest a cradlesong or lullaby. The song falls into four large sections, two verses each followed by a refrain (A), a bridge that utilizes a truncated version of the refrain (B), and a coda (C). Each A section consists of two melodic phrases (a) and (b), repeated two and three times respectively. The B section contains four iterations of a new phrase (c) and a truncated version of the refrain (b’). C is a set of instrumental improvisations based on a series of M7 chords (see Figure 1.8).

Lyrically, “Hush, Hush, Hush” is ambiguous. In a 2013 concert review, Jason LeRoy wrote that he had no idea that the song was about AIDS despite having listened to Cole’s music for almost twenty years.<sup>50</sup> Similarly, I had no idea that it was a song about AIDS when I first heard it. I assumed that it was a generic song about the death of a young person, perhaps someone Cole herself knew, or maybe even a purely fictitious account. However, critics noted that the song had a connection to the AIDS epidemic as early as 1996. For example, Robin Rauzi of *The Los Angeles Times* noted that “some [of

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<sup>50</sup> <http://www.thebinge.us/concert-review-paula-cole-at-yoshis-san-francisco-5913/>

Cole's songs] are drawn from her own experience, but others aren't, like "Hush, Hush, Hush," about the reckoning between a father and a son as the latter is dying of AIDS."<sup>51</sup>

In 2006, Herbie Hancock and Annie Lennox recorded the song for Hancock's *Possibilities*.<sup>52</sup> During the recording session, Hancock and Lennox puzzled over the song's oblique text. In order to clarify some questions, Hancock proposes a teleconference with Cole. On the phone, the songwriter reveals that the song was composed in response to the death of a close, gay friend, and that its lyrics are intentionally "complicated." Cole admitted that she wanted to write a memorial for her friend but wondered, "how do you do it in a way that isn't morose or banal?"<sup>53</sup>

It follows that the protagonist is a young gay man, and the comforting presence of the father is unique given the number of gay men whose families rejected them because of either their sexuality or their AIDS diagnosis. The "cruel joke" turns out to be the twist of fate that places gay and lesbian people in a heterocentric and homophobic world, where the process of coming out is difficult. It is further complicated for this young man because in the age of AIDS, "you step; you stumble; you die."

Each large formal section coincides with a change in perspective or voice. In A, Cole sings as a third-person narrator who describes the protagonist's "long white arms losing strength and form." In contrast to dominant images of PWAs described by Crimp and others, this young PWA receives support from the biological family. In the second A

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<sup>51</sup> Robin Rauzi, "Up and Coming Singer Knows the Score," *The Los Angeles Times* 1 August 1996.

<sup>52</sup> <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wX5Awfzvl4> accessed 9 December 2013.

<sup>53</sup> In an interview with *Chicago Pride*, Cole said "I was living in San Francisco and had just graduated college. I was friends with a man named Steven who got sick all of a sudden from AIDS and was just gone from us. I didn't know what to do. That's how I express my feelings with writing songs. There is some poetic licensing in the song because the man has been estranged from his father by being gay and coming out. It is only when he is dying that the father comes back but at least they are loving and reunited at the end. The father figure is portrayed by Peter Gabriel in the song."

<http://chicago.gopride.com/news/interview.cfm/articleid/212500> Accessed 19 February 2014.

section, the dying PWA speaks directly to an errant lover who played a “cruel joke” on by “waiting so long to show the one you wanted *wasn't* a girl.”

In the B section, Cole casts the listener in the role of the PWA. Guest artist Peter Gabriel sings the words of the father, spinning a fairy tale in which his child lives again as Henry VIII and “may be given a chance.” The key changes from d-minor to G-major and the music swells into a triumphant processional with drum rolls, expansive string figures, a more active piano accompaniment, and a heavy dose of reverb. Abruptly, the triumphant music drops out at 2:30. Agitated string tremolos suggest the shivers of a sudden fever and the father’s frustrated inability to help his son. The father’s close-miked voice penetrates the haze of reverb, illness, sleep, and dream, as he offers a comforting, “hush, hush, hush.”

Ethereal strings, distorted guitar effects, percussion, and a modulation from G to A parallel the PWA’s death and ascent into the heavens in the wordless coda. Spacey improvisations on guitar and piano suggest something astral or spiritual and the release of suffering. The song avoids moralizing, reconciliation narratives, and the assignation of blame. Rather, it emphasizes the moment of death and the end of suffering that death brings to the terminally ill.

Figure 2.7, “Hush Hush Hush” piano  
(excerpt from printed sheet music)

A	A	B	C
aaaabb		ccccb'	

Figure 2.8, “Hush Hush Hush” Form

## Regret

After almost a decade of moderately successful albums, Reba McEntire made a name for herself as a big-voiced country-pop diva in the late-1980s with her breakthrough album, *My Kind of Country* (1984) and a string of successful follow-ups including *Whoever's in New England* (1986), *Reba* (1988), and *It's Your Call* (1992). Like Loretta Lynn, Tammy Wynette, and Dolly Parton, McEntire songs often tackle women's issues like cheating husbands, the difficulties of balancing work and motherhood, and struggles for educational and financial independence. For instance, “Whoever's in New England” chronicled the story of a dutiful wife who stands by her man in spite of his ongoing affair with a female business associate in Boston “Is There

Life Out There” (1992), dealt with the stresses and joys of a working class wife and mother who decides to go to college. McEntire also dabbled in Southern Gothic with her cover of “Fancy” (1990), Bobbi Gentry’s 1970 rags-to-riches story of a white trash girl whose mother “turns her out” at fifteen, and “The Night the Lights Went Out in Georgia” (1991), a musical whodunit set in the dark Georgia woods and originally recorded by Vicki Lawrence in 1971. Music videos were central to McEntire’s success, and many of these singles had innovative videos that helped usher in a new era of professional quality videos of Country Music Television (CMT).<sup>54</sup>

“She Thinks His Name Was John” is an HIV/AIDS allegory that works on two levels. First, it is a cautionary tale about the dangers of unsafe sex for young women in the age of AIDS. Second, and more perniciously, it is another entry in the pantheon of musical morality tales about the “undoing” of women for transgressive behaviors. Songwriter Sandy Knox composed the song after the AIDS-related death of her brother.<sup>55</sup> “My brother was 29 years old when he died,” Knox said, “and I put myself in his position...I wrote from the standpoint of all the things he would be missing—having a child, getting married, all of those things.”<sup>56</sup> Reba McEntire heard a demo of the song in 1994 and decided to record it for her upcoming album, *Read My Mind* (1994).

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<sup>54</sup> There is very little literature on country music videos. For more on the development of the country music video, see Mark Fenster, “Genre and Form: The Development of the Country Music Video” in *Sound and Vision: The Music Video Reader*, edited by Frith, Goodwin, and Grossberg (Routledge, 2d edition 2000): 109-128. Jada Watson and Lori Burns offer a compelling analysis of a Dixie Chicks video in “Resisting Exile and Asserting Musical Voice: the Dixie Chicks are ‘Not Ready to Make Nice,’” *Popular Music* 29/3 (2010): 325-350.

<sup>55</sup> Knox’s brother received a blood transfusion while undergoing treatment for testicular cancer in 1979 and was infected with blood that contained HIV, though at the time no one knew HIV existed. For more information, see Edward Morris, “Ten years Later, ‘John’ Remains country’s Prime Comment on AIDS,” *CMT News* 30 November 2004.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*

To date, “She Thinks His Name was John” remains one of the only mainstream country music responses to the AIDS epidemic.<sup>57</sup> As such, it is an important musical milestone for the genre and for McEntire. The song was not initially planned for release as a single. However, when some country music radio stations began to play it in their rotations, Scott Borchetta (a promotions representative for MCA) fought for its release.<sup>58</sup> It reached number fifteen on the *Billboard* country charts, and although the song made record executives and some conservative members of the Nashville community uneasy, McEntire and Knox reported that fan responses were overwhelmingly positive. According to Knox, “It’s the one song that’s gotten more press and that people remember... They remember where they were the first time they heard it and how it affected them.”<sup>59</sup> When McEntire sang on the song on *The Phil Donahue Show* in 1994, the host asked her about recording it. McEntire responded with the sort of candor that has endeared her to fans since the start of her career. “It needed to be said,” she explained, “It needed to be out to the public... I’ve always been the kind of person, if I find a song and the message is good, well-written, and not preachy... If it could help in some shape, form, or fashion, I’ll sing it.”<sup>60</sup>

“She Thinks His Name Was John” is a sentimental ballad that uses familiar musical idioms to convey wistfulness, melancholy, and regret. Quiet strings drenched with reverb play a hushed chord beneath a gently descending piano arpeggio in C-major. In spite of the major harmonies, this brief motive economically establishes the sort of

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<sup>57</sup> In 1994, The Red Hot Organization released *Red, Hot, Country*, a compilation of songs by country music icons. However, only one song on the album, Mary Chapin-Carpenter’s “Willie Short,” is actually *about* HIV/AIDS.

<sup>58</sup> Morris, “Ten Years Later” (2004).

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>60</sup> Reba McEntire on *The Phil Donahue Show* 1994 (date unknown).

affect common in songs about lost loves, heartbreak, breakups, and other emotional losses. The sparse arrangement opens a contemplative space that is soon filled by McEntire's rich voice. The vocal melody utilizes gently tugging half steps between 7 and 1, falling figures, and a restricted melodic range to signify sadness. McEntire amplifies the yearning quality of these melodic figures with exaggerated vocal slides from  $\hat{7}$  to  $\hat{1}$  and  $\hat{2}$  to  $\hat{1}$ , occasional vocal cracks, and by singing slightly behind the beat.

The melody has an obsessive quality and paces the hallways of a tonic triad over the repetitive I-vi-IV-V harmony. The song's strophic form adds another layer of endless repetition that reinforces the obsessive titular refrain. In each verse, the melodic tug takes on a slightly different significance. In the first, it signals a general maudlin kind of memory, as she recalls her past lovers. In the second, it generates sexual tension as she meets the broad-shouldered, blue-eyed, black-haired John. In the third, it evokes both the regretful sighs of her friends and her own struggle for the breath needed to repeat his name one last time.

The first verse describes the unnamed young woman's personality. She is fastidious because she can "account for all of the men in her past." She knows "where they are now; who they married; how many kids they have," although she is apparently still single and childless. She even keeps in touch with some of these men. The verb "account" is a very strange choice, as it often appears in criminal contexts. Suspects are asked to account for their actions or whereabouts or to provide an alibi to clear their names. That she is able to account for "*all* of the men in her past" shows that there have been several. Further, having a "past" is rarely seen as a positive attribute by heteronormative society, particularly for a woman, and the use of "John," which is both a

common generic man's name but also a synonym for a prostitute's customer, reinforces the negative implications of her past. By highlighting her obsessive tracking of the men in her life, "She Thinks His Name Was John" portrays its protagonist as stereotypically sentimental woman with a past, that is a number of sexual partners, who has kept good records of these men. However, the refrain tells us, "there was one she can't put her finger on...who never leaves her thoughts, and she thinks his name was John." At first, it appears to be a typical ballad about "the one that got away."

The second verse fills in more details, noting that the pair met by chance at "a party a few years back." Caught up in his charm and good looks, and perhaps a bit tipsy from too much wine, "she let his smile just sweep her away" even though, in her heart, she knew that it was wrong to do so. They left the party, then she "left his bed at dawn." Still, even on the morning after, she cannot remember his name, though she thinks it was John. So far, then, this song seems to be about the dangers of drinking and letting an intoxicating stranger take advantage of your emotions.

The third verse completes this morality tale.

Now, each day is one day that's left in her life.  
 She won't know love, having a marriage, or sing lullabies.  
 She lays all alone and cries herself to sleep  
 cause she let a stranger kill her hopes and her dreams.  
 And all her friends say, "What a pity. What a loss."  
 And in the end, when she was barely hanging on,  
 all she could say was she thinks his name was John.

The use of alcohol or other drugs during sexual activity decreases inhibitions, and the likelihood of having unsafe sex goes up. The arithmetic is fairly standard: drugs/alcohol + unsafe sex = AIDS. And this is how she let "a stranger kill her hopes and her dreams." In this verse, we learn that she had friends, but they have abandoned her.

“She lays all alone and cries herself to sleep” as they say “what a pity; what a loss.”

Finally, each verse takes the listener through the temporal narrative of her experience. In the first verse, the young woman has already met John and reminisces about the affair. The second verse is a flashback to their meeting, and the third occurs in the present tense, an eternal “now” of heterocentric morality where women who transgress must suffer.

This story is all too familiar. In her seminal book, *Opera, or the Undoing of Women*, Catherine Clément (1979) unearths a history of such stories spanning from Mozart to Richard Strauss. According to Clément’s central thesis, women are routinely subject to various forms of capital punishment for transgressive behaviors in these musical works. Although Clément’s emphasis is on the operatic stage in Western Europe, this trope is not limited to the world of opera. Numerous horror movies and television crime dramas are replete with plots in which a woman (often a prostitute, a pregnant teen, or a girl who simply engages in sexual activity) dies shortly after committing a sexual act. The Bible advocates stoning unmarried women who have sex (Deuteronomy 22:21), and in the twenty-first century, real life “honor killings” have made national news headlines.<sup>61</sup> The power of these examples lies in their ability to perpetuate the notion that bad things happen to bad, that is morally flawed, people.

This young woman’s undoing comes in the form of a one-night stand with a man whose “background, family, and friends” she does not know. By casting the person who gave her HIV as a stranger, the song also reinforces sexist ideas about women, mobility, and sociality. It clearly marks strangers—strange men, in particular—as a danger to be

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<sup>61</sup> Honor killings involve the murder of a family member who brings shame on the family, for example, if a female family member has sex outside of marriage or a male family member who is homosexual. These types of murders are stereotyped as a component of fundamentalist Islam, but human rights advocates confirm that they occur across cultures and religious practices around the world.

avoided, perhaps by not going to drunken parties in the first place. Certain musical features reflect this undoing. Susan McClary (1990) notes that “the tonic is rather boring by itself, and that lingering on the sixth degree can create a delicious tension.”<sup>62</sup> An errant sixth scale degree in the final verse (over the words “all she could *say*”) establishes such a tension by breaking out of the tonic triad in which the melody has been trapped. It also anticipates a later deceptive cadence (at 3:33) on the name “John.” Each previous iteration of his name occurred with an authentic cadence and an accompanying 7-1 vocal slide. So, the move to the submediant chord (vi) is particularly unsettling because it directs the expected cadential resolution to a sad minor chord that functions like a question mark: Was his name really John? In a final repetition of the refrain, McEntire truncates the final note on his name. This brief gesture casts a lingering doubt over his identity, and more importantly, the young woman’s moral character.

McEntire was a pioneer in the development of the country music video. Many of her videos from the 1980s and early-1990s emphasize strong female characters who defy the odds and achieve success (“Is There Life Out There”) or freedom (“Fancy”). Her videos often detailed the lives and experiences of these women, and McEntire herself played the lead character, laying the foundation for her successful acting career. The videos incorporate spoken dialogue and dramatic scenarios taken from the song’s lyrics but often relegate the musical track to the background. “She Thinks His Name Was John” did not achieve the success of other songs, rising to number fifteen on the US country charts upon its release. Rather than produce a dramatic video, McEntire’s record label MCA opted to air her live performance of the song from the 1994 Country Music Association awards ceremony on Country Music Television (CMT) after the initial

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<sup>62</sup> Susan McClary, *Feminine Endings* (U of Minnesota Press, 1990),

broadcast. Country music videos tend to be narrative and stick closely to the story in the song. Perhaps CMT and country music audience were unprepared for a music video about AIDS in 1994.

However, the staging, costuming, and camera work suggest that MCA intended this performance to function as a separate music video. It combines what Railton and Watson (2011) have described as “narrative” music video techniques with those of a “staged performance.”<sup>63</sup> The stage has been set with a couch, desk, and other furniture to suggest a young woman’s apartment. Dressed in a fabulous sequined gown, McEntire opens a scrapbook, looks through the bureau, and arranges the chenille throw that has been draped over a Victorian style sofa. As in Elton John’s “The Last Song,” this performance has been staged to make it clear that McEntire is not the young woman in the song but an omniscient narrator.

Like many folk ballads and country songs, “She Thinks His Name Was John” trades in archetypes. The young woman is unnamed; in fact, she is almost completely unmarked. We know nothing of her age, appearance, or even where she lived. Thus, she can be every woman, and the story of her undoing is a tale for all women. “John” appears in silhouette during the second verse, which only contributes to his mystique. In fact, the song seems willfully uninterested in John’s real identity or his health. It is unclear from either the song or this performance whether he is living or dead or if he has infected the young woman (or other women) knowingly. His role in her fall from grace goes unquestioned, further emphasizing that it is women who suffer the moral stain of pre- or extra-marital sex.

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<sup>63</sup> Diane Railton and Paul Watson, *Music Video and the Politics of Representation* (Edinburgh U Press, 2011), 47

These three examples illustrate one lens—the deathbed—through which songwriters viewed HIV/AIDS. The first images of HIV/AIDS in the media and arts displayed a marked fatalism. Indeed, the dominant portrayal of AIDS was a trajectory from infection to sickness and inevitably death. Roger Hallas (2009), echoing Douglas Crimp, notes that “the recurrent image of emaciated gay men in hospital beds that circulated in the press during the first decade of AIDS”; such images reinforced societal phobias and prejudices more than they “persuaded readers [and viewers] to demand a greater political and medical response.”<sup>64</sup> In spite of the fact that dominant constructions of HIV/AIDS emphasized death/dying and that there were few effective treatments and no cure, other artists countered these morbid preoccupations.

### **Songs about Living with AIDS**

In a 9 May 1988 speech entitled “Why We Fight,” AIDS activist and queer film historian Vito Russo (1946-1990) said, “In the last three years, since I was diagnosed, my family thinks two things about my situation: 1) they think I am going to die, and 2) they think that my government is doing absolutely everything in its power to stop that. And they are wrong on both counts.” Later, he continued, “

If I’m dying from anything, I’m dying from homophobia...racism...indifference and red tape...from Jesse Helms [and] the President of the United States. And especially...I’m dying from the sensationalism of newspapers and magazines and television shows, which are interested in me, as a human-interest story, only as long as I’m willing to be a helpless victim.<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> Roger Hallas, *Reframing Bodies: Bearing Witness, AIDS, and the Queer Moving Image* (Duke U Press, 2009): 12.

<sup>65</sup> Vito Russo, “Why We Fight,” 9 May 1988, delivered at an ACT UP demonstration in Albany, NY.

According to Hallas (2009), “the discourse of survival, of living with AIDS, must be perpetually reconstituted under the encroaching shadow of dying from AIDS.”<sup>66</sup> This tension is a defining characteristic of AIDS (auto)biography and testimony which “affirm the reality” of the epidemic.<sup>67</sup> Documentary films, the ACT UP Oral History Project, biographies, memoirs, photography, and other art forms have been used precisely to affirm these realities. Alexandra Jhuasz (1995) rightly claims that the AIDS community was the first social movement to harness the power of newly available home recording technologies to self-consciously document its movements and actions.<sup>68</sup>

Musicians responding to HIV/AIDS have utilized extant genres like lament or the protest song to express feelings of bereavement and indignation. However, as Paul Attinello (2006) has noted, the realities of living with HIV/AIDS seldom find their way into musical expression.<sup>69</sup> However, there are a few examples of songs that deal with exactly these topics. Below, I will discuss one such song, Joan Armatrading’s “Everyday Boy” (1995) and Mary Gauthier’s “Goddamn HIV” (1997).

### **“Everyday Boy” (1995)**

British singer-songwriter Joan Armatrading is best known for a successful string of albums including *Joan Armatrading* (1976) and *Show Some Emotion* (1977), *Me Myself I* (1980), *Walk Under Ladders* (1981), and *The Key* (1983). Among her best-known compositions are “Love and Affection,” “Willow,” “Show Some Emotion,” and

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<sup>66</sup> Hallas, *Reframing Bodies* (2009): 118.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

<sup>68</sup> Alexandra Jhuasz, *AIDS TV: Identity, Community, and Alternative Press* (Duke U Press, 1995), see “The Camcorder Revolution,” p. 42.

<sup>69</sup> Paul Attinello, “Fever, Fragile, Fatigue...” in *Sounding Off: Theorizing Disability in Music*, eds. Neil Lerner and Joseph Straus (Routledge, 2006), 13-22.

“Drop the Pilot.” While Armatrading is notoriously private about her off-stage life, she is an icon among gay and lesbian listeners, who feel that Armatrading’s aversion to gender-specific pronouns might indicate that she was lesbian herself.<sup>70</sup> Of her songwriting style, Armatrading says, “My songs aren’t about me at all. They’re always about love, the pain and anguish of it. But I’ve always written through observation...If the songs were about me, I’d be so embarrassed I don’t think I’d be able to walk out the front door.”<sup>71</sup>

Though primarily known as a composer of love songs, Armatrading occasionally turns to topical issues in more recent works. For example, “If Women Ruled the World” (*Square the Circle*, 1992) considers the possibilities of a feminist idyll, and “In These Times” (*Lover’s Speak*, 2003) offers a beautiful, if fairly generic, benediction in times of hardship. Among Armatrading’s few topical songs, she offers one example of a song about living with HIV/AIDS.

Inspired by a chance meeting between Armatrading and a young man with AIDS, “Everyday Boy” (*What’s Inside*, 1995) offers a portrait of one young man’s strength in the face of a debilitating and stigmatized illness.<sup>72</sup> The lyrics reveal Armatrading’s penchant for close observation. She notes several subtle gestures as the young man “looks in the mirror, adjusts [his] hair, and leaves the room.” Armatrading tackles the stigma associated with HIV/AIDS by accenting the courage, zest for life, self-respect compassion, and strength which sustain him through periods of familial and social scorn.

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<sup>70</sup> Armatrading herself has not spoken about her sexuality in public. However, in April 2011, she and partner Maggie Butler were married in a civil ceremony. <http://www.shetnews.co.uk/news/3793-joan-armatrading-to-tie-the-knot-in-shetland> accessed 20 April 2013.

<sup>71</sup> “Up Close and Very Personal,” 9 March 2003, <http://www.scotsman.com/lifestyle/music/news-and-features/up-close-and-very-personal-1-1382846> accessed 20 April 2013.

<sup>72</sup> When I saw Armatrading in concert at the Atlanta Botanical Garden on 4 June 2003, she introduced the song by telling the audience a brief story about meeting the young man who inspired the song. At least one journalist was aware of the connection to HIV/AIDS in 1995. See Steve Morse, “Armatrading Still Writes from the Soul,” *The Boston Globe* 30 October 1995.

While “some fade with guilt and the shame,” this young man tells his story with “no tears for [himself],” “no blame for the mother who curses [his] name” or scorn for a society that claims “it’s God’s revenge.” Armatrading humanizes him in the titular refrain, “just an everyday boy, doing everyday things.” The musical arrangement swells with triumph. Marimba arpeggios, Armatrading’s rhythmic guitar strumming simple chords (I, IV, V in F-major), and a string quartet sway in a gentle 6/8 lilt. Occasional thunderous chords on the piano and power chord on the electric guitar punctuate this texture. The repetitious harmonies and the insistent eighth-note movement in the marimba and strings generate tension that drives the song to its cathartic conclusion, as Armatrading repeats the phrase, “just an everyday boy.”

“Everyday Boy” is a cleverly coded song. Like many works about AIDS, its lyrics refer to HIV/AIDS without actually naming it. To certain listeners, gay men for instance, phrases like “it’s God’s revenge,” “you’re surrounded by fear,” and “no blame for the mother who curses your name” resonate with cultural attitudes about both homosexuality and AIDS. At the same time, listeners with no direct experience of HIV/AIDS could interpret the lyrics differently. The music video that accompanied the release of the song uses this interpretative flexibility by superimposing a story about a young boy with a physical disability onto the song.<sup>73</sup> In the video, a boy wearing large braces on both of his legs watches other children participate in competitive swimming. As the song builds to its climactic orchestral conclusion, the young boy dives into the pool, and with every stroke and kick, pieces of his braces fall away. This narrative could be literal, as therapeutic physical activities like swimming often help alleviate mobility disorders by building

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<sup>73</sup> This video has been intermittently available on both YouTube and on Armatrading’s own website. As of 4 February 2014, however, it is unavailable on either site.

muscle strength, but the video is also metaphorical. The braces that constrain this young man could correspond to the social constraints felt by any repressed minority, including gay men, lesbians, and people with AIDS, as well as people with impaired mobility.

Again, this illustrates the difficulty artists and video directors faced in representing AIDS in music videos.

### **“Goddamn H.I.V.” (1997)**

Lesbian folk singer/songwriter Mary Gauthier released her debut album, *Dixie Kitchen*, in 1997, at the age of 36, after a lifetime of troubles. She ran away from home as a teenager, battled both drug and alcohol addiction, and struggled to understand her emerging sexual identity. She studied philosophy at Louisiana State University but dropped out during her senior year. Thereafter, she moved to Boston, went to culinary school, and opened Dixie Kitchen, a Cajun restaurant, which she managed for eleven years. Gauthier began writing songs at age 35, sold her share of the restaurant to finance her sophomore album, and has since earned the admiration of iconic songwriters including Bob Dylan and Tom Waits. Blake Sheldon, Tim McGraw, Jimmy Buffet, and others have recorded her songs and Gauthier’s own albums have garnered critical praise. She has a devoted fan base and continues to tour small clubs, folk, and country festivals throughout the country. Gauthier released her seventh album, *Live at Blue Rock*, in 2012.

Living in Boston during the 1980s and 1990s, Gauthier witnessed the AIDS epidemic first hand as it ravaged that city’s gay community. She turned these observations into “Goddamn HIV,” a moving song included on her debut record. The song is unusual in its direct reference to HIV/AIDS in the title and refrain and its

forthright depiction of the experiences of a gay man living with AIDS. Gauthier displays an acute sensitivity to the debates about representations of PWAs throughout this song.

“My name is Michael Joe Alexandre,” he tells us in the opening line, “I been a queer since the day I was born.” Throughout the song, Alexandre continues to speak for himself and to articulate the particular impact of both his sexuality and AIDS in his own life. He tells us that he is in his thirties and has been long separated from his biological family because of their contempt and scorn for his sexual identity. In the second verse, he describes a vibrant urban queer world with “downtown bars where it always is night” populated by “boys with their tight leather on.” However, something—a sickness—has “blown through [his] world like a wind-driven flame, leaving ashes and memories, heartache, and pain.” Consequently, Alexandre’s queer social world is gone. Like many gay men in the 1980s, all his friends have died of AIDS. In the refrain, Alexandre expresses his confusion, anger, and pain. “I don’t know what all of this means...and I don’t know what’s happening to me.” However, he does not describe what (if anything) is physically wrong with him or fixate on his own death. Rather, Alexandre mourns the loss of a family of choice and a social world to “goddamn HIV.”

Although Gauthier’s star text and songs are weighted with expectations of authenticity, “Goddamn HIV” is a decidedly theatrical piece. She constructs a theatrical persona and casts herself *en travesti* for the part. Unlike “The Last Song” or “She Thinks His Name Was John,” in which specific elements distance singer and protagonist, “Goddamn HIV” deliberately blurs these boundaries. Gauthier effectively becomes Alexandre when she performs, and certain musical and extra-musical elements encourage listeners to interpret her performance as sincere/authentic.

This is, in part, due to the musical arrangement. Sparse acoustic instrumentation, especially the guitar or piano, and close miking are hallmarks of the “confessional” singer-songwriter genre. Gauthier’s use of a fairly simple harmonies (I-IV-V, vi, and V/V in Db-major) and the undulating fingerpicked guitar accompaniment imbue her performance with an aura of authenticity.<sup>74</sup> Her Cajun twang, the raspy timbre of her singing voice, and the audible strain at the upper and lower limits of her range of her voice make this relatively easy to hear as an impersonation of a gay man.

The melody encompasses a rather wide range from Db3 to Gb4. Gauthier traverses this territory with wide descending gestures then fills in these spaces with stepwise figures on key words and phrases. Descending motives have long been associated with sad affects. Gauthier brackets the devastation of loss and frustrations of being ill by using vocal extremes: pitches so low in her register that she must almost speak them and tones that sit comfortably enough to be sung full voice. She dips down to Db3 each time she utters the V of “HIV,” metaphorically placing HIV at the root of her sorrows. By contrast, when she describes the loss of friends and community, she reaches all the way up to Gb4. The placement of these words at each end of her range registers as sadness at one end and resentment/anger at the other.

“Goddamn HIV” is frank and not especially sentimental, and in the end, Alexandre’s fate—whether he lives or succumbs to an opportunistic infection—remains unknown.

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<sup>74</sup> Aaron Fox, *Real Country: Music and Language in Working Class Culture* (Duke U Press, 2007).

## AIDS as a Traumatic Experience

According to the American Psychological Association's *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (DSM IV)*, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is characterized by feelings of guilt, avoidant behaviors, impaired affect modulation, dissociative symptoms, feelings of depression, shame, despair, and hopelessness, paranoia, obsessive-compulsive behaviors, and the feeling that one has been damaged by the experience.<sup>75</sup> Laura Brown (2008) offers further insight into particular manifestations of trauma and accounts for the ways in which traumas may arise in (sub)culturally specific ways not addressed in *DSM-IV*.<sup>76</sup> Developing this "cultural competence" requires that we "think broadly as to what might constitute a trauma for [a] particular person...rather than having a fixed list of possible traumatic events that are simple to perceive."<sup>77</sup> Brown outlines four categories of trauma. First, she considers as traumatic those events that shatter the assumptions of a particular group's worldview. Second, there are those that result from betrayals of trust. Third, there also exist "insidious" traumas that result from the accumulation of daily racism, sexism, ableism, and homophobia and finally, a category of "traumas with special meaning," that includes rape and hate crimes.

While Brown's model of trauma is largely focused on individuals, other trauma theorists, like Jeffrey Alexander (2004), articulate theories of collective or cultural

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<sup>75</sup> American Psychological Association *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, 4<sup>th</sup> edition (2000).

<sup>76</sup> Laura Brown, "Diversifying the Definition of Trauma," *Cultural Competence in Trauma Therapy: Beyond the Flashback* (American Psychological Association, 2008). *DSM-V* (2013) introduced several changes to the definition of PTSD. First, PTSD is now classified in a chapter on Trauma and Stress or Related Disorders. *DSM-IV* listed PTSD as an anxiety disorder. Second, there are specific changes in PTSD criteria. Specifically, "language stipulating an individual's response to the event—intense fear, helplessness, or horror, according to *DSM-IV*—has been deleted because that criterion proved to have no utility in predicting the onset of PTSD." *DSM-V* pays attention to behavioral symptoms in four categories: re-experiencing, avoidance, negative cognitions and mood, and arousal. For more about the *DSM-V*, see <http://www.dsm5.org> and the APA's PTSD factsheet, <http://www.dsm5.org/Documents/PTSD%20Fact%20Sheet.pdf>.

<sup>77</sup> Brown (2008), 98.

trauma. “Cultural trauma occurs when members of a collectivity feel they have been subjected to a horrendous event that leaves indelible marks upon their group consciousness.”<sup>78</sup> Understanding collective/cultural traumas can result in collective healing through “social responsibility and political action.”<sup>79</sup> The ongoing AIDS epidemic constitutes both an individual and a collective trauma for members of affected communities.

I hear evidence of the trauma of HIV/AIDS on gay communities in two musical examples from the late-1990s. In the first, openly gay singer/songwriter Rufus Wainwright explores private fears about the spread of HIV/AIDS among gay men and imagines an escape to Barcelona. Wainwright’s first-person account evidences behaviors that fit the *DSM-IV* criteria for PTSD and metonymically stands in for the feelings of large numbers of gay men impacted by AIDS. In the second example, Tori Amos portrays HIV/AIDS as a losing battle in an ongoing war and uses a dense web of coded references to gay culture, especially that of the pre-Stonewall era. Both “Barcelona” (1998) and “Not the Red Baron” (1996) deploy poetic and evocative lyrics and specific musical techniques that I interpret as evidence of a traumatized response to the AIDS epidemic.

### **“Barcelona” (1998)**

The son of iconic songwriters Loudon Wainwright III (1946) and Kate McGarrigle (1946-2010), Rufus Wainwright began his musical career at an early age by appearing on stage with his famous parents. At age 14, Wainwright was nominated for a

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<sup>78</sup> Jeffrey Alexander, Ron Eyerman, Bernhard Giesen, Neil J. Smelser, and Pitor Sztompka, *Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity* (U of California Press, 2004): 1.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*

Canadian Genie Award for Best Original Song for “I’m a-Runnin’,” which appeared in the film *Tommy Tricker and the Stamp Traveller* (1989). Wainwright released his eponymous debut album in 1998 to critical acclaim, garnering comparison to his parents, Cole Porter, Randy Newman, and Joni Mitchell. The twelve tracks on *Rufus Wainwright* reference genres as disparate as Tin Pan Alley, 1970s singer/songwriters, and Italian opera. Wainwright’s musical style has been described as excessive, ornamented, and baroque. This is, in part, because he favors intricate and elaborate orchestral and rock arrangements. His music is also unapologetically campy. Van Dyke Parks contributed lush and quirky orchestrations to complement Wainwright’s virtuosic piano playing and impeccable singing. Several members of the Wainwright family as well as the singer’s own famous friends made cameos on the album. Throughout the record, Wainwright meditates on various types of love: parent-child rivalries (“Beauty Mark”), friendship and prep school snobbery (“Matinee Idol,” and “Millbrook”), diva worship (“Damned Ladies”), and the ups and downs of gay love (“Foolish Love,” “Danny Boy,” “April Fools,” “In My Arms,” “Baby,” and “Imaginary Love”). Unlike many earlier popular musicians such as Elton John or Joan Armatrading, Rufus Wainwright has been openly gay during his entire career. Thus, his works address experiences of gay love and life. However, Wainwright’s openness about his own sexuality does not mean that his song about AIDS is immune to the same aversion that characterizes other songs about the epidemic. He, too, employs metaphorical language and veiled references to AIDS that readers must work to decipher.

Among the filigree and curlicues on *Rufus Wainwright*, “Barcelona” stands out because of its musical simplicity. The song begins with a short, gently syncopated guitar

riff (Figure 2.9). This brief figure rises and falls back onto itself like waves lapping the shore. Although the underlying harmonies are major, the static motion, the heavy use of echo and reverb and the languid tempo imbue this riff with melancholy.

The song begins with a poetic description of the summer world of gay as a “vicious circus” held in place by shadows. Shadows portend death, and the singer experiences “a chill in his apartment’s coolest place,” as one such shadow moves across him. In spite of the summer weather, the singing of beautiful “village larks cannot be heard cause all the crows got panderers.” Birds of various sorts have been used as metaphors for gay men, and here, “village” is both quaintly rustic and probably a literal reference to New York’s West Village.<sup>80</sup> Nonetheless, the singer cannot take flight for he is trapped like a caged bird behind heavy velvet drapes. He is also paralyzed by fear of sickness. He sings, I “don’t want my rings to fall off my fingers,” a poignant description of wasting syndrome, one of the hallmark physical symptoms of advanced AIDS. In the final verse, Wainwright abandons the elevated and poetic language as he “makes sure [he] has all his papers” and lays out his summer wardrobe. The turn away from poetics suggests acquiescence to reality and the realization that dreams of escape are ultimately just that: fantasy.

The dreamy musical arrangement gradually amplifies the lyrics. First, the guitar riff establishes a primary action: methodically packing a suitcase. When Wainwright begins to sing, his vocal melody uses the pitch and rhythm of the guitar, and the two

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<sup>80</sup> In “Franz Schubert and the Peacocks of Benvenuto Cellini” *19<sup>th</sup>-Century Music* 12/2 (1989), Maynard Solomon describes the use of bird imagery among Schubert’s social circle as a code for various types of men. George E. Haggerty offers an overview of avian terms used as references to gay men in volume 2 of his *Gay Histories and Cultures: An Encyclopedia* (Routledge, 1999). “The association of homosexuality with birds is common in Spanish and Latin American cultures, in which homosexual men are frequently referred to as birds—*pajaros* or *pajaritos*, *pato*, and *aves*.” (333). In Europe and North America, such imagery reached a particular fabulous pinnacle in the musical, *La Cage aux Folles/ The Birdcage*.

musical lines move in and out of synch with one another over a hushed cello line. The three voices echo and overlap one another. Close miking creates a sense of compressed space like the stifling atmosphere behind the velvet curtains of his apartment. In the second verse, strings and winds enter in a higher register. Their gradual descent closes in on the musical space and signals decay or death. The sky itself seems to be falling in slow motion, and the overlapping voice, guitar, and cello begin to feel a bit too close for comfort.



Figure 2.9, Barcelona Intro and First phrase, “The summer sun set a vicious circus when shadows held the world in place” (transcription by author)

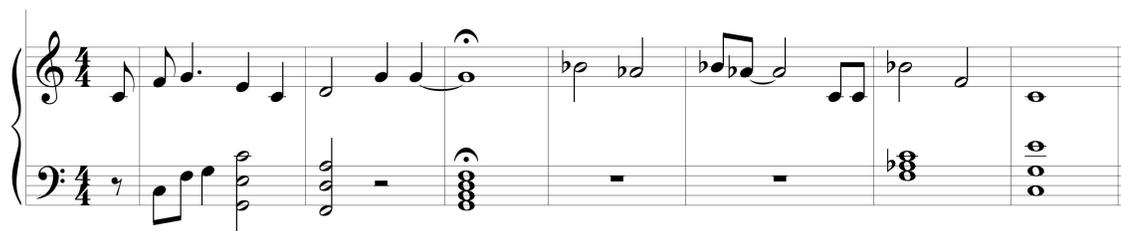


Figure 2.10, “The Mirror I find hard to face cause I feel it’s a long way down” bridge (transcription by author)

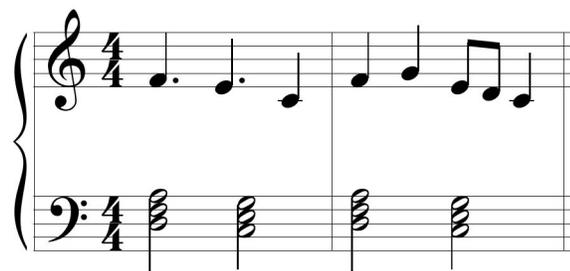


Figure 2.11, “Fuggi regale fantasima” refrain from “Barcelona”  
(transcription by author)

Things seem to move in slow motion, and even this movement comes to a halt with a half cadence on G (V in the key of C) as the singer confronts his reflection in a mirror. Chromatic pitches (lowered 6 and 7 borrowed from the parallel minor) accompany the lines “cause I feel it’s a long way down,” and a slowly spiraling flute melody mirrors the sense of vertigo that often accompanies looking down from a great height. An expansive middle section follows in which the singer elaborates his escapist fantasies and the futile belief that “crazy me, don’t think there’s pain in Barcelona.” Throughout, harmonies tend toward a mixture of major and minor modes that evoke an idea of musical Spanishness: raised and lowered scale degrees 6 and 7, descending melodic figures, *portamenti*, predominantly stepwise melodic motion, and a distinctive bolero rhythm played on castanets.

This song represents aspects of trauma as outlined in the *DSM-IV*. Throughout, Wainwright’s affect is flat and disengaged, and the melody contains mostly stepwise motion. The shift in vocal register between the verses and the bridge signals an intensified desire to flee, but his emotions fail to modulate beyond this “flight” response

to trauma (“gotta get away from here”). The lyrics offer clues to the singer’s emotional state as he articulates an inability to move (“can’t escape these velvet drapes”), a fear of dying of AIDS (“don’t want my rings to fall off my fingers”), and an inability to confront reality (“the mirror I find hard to face”). Furthermore, the opening image (“the summer sun set a vicious circus”) evokes the gay milieu of Fire Island, South Beach, Provincetown, and other gay beaches—summer havens, sites of sexual contact and exploration, and also communities impacted by HIV/AIDS. However, this vicious world (criticized by some for its superficiality, classism, and racism) is held in place by shadows—a prescient omen of death echoed in his use of a line from Verdi’s *Macbeth* (1896) as a refrain in each verse: “Fuggi regal fantasima!”<sup>81</sup>

Overwhelmed by fears of death and sickness, Wainwright turns to opera to express his desire to flee. The connection between opera, illness, and death here is far from happenstance. The musical stage is home to many representations of illness and death from *La Bohème* (1896) to *Rent* (1996). Numerous scholars of opera have commented on the genre’s distinctive preoccupation with death and dying, from Clément’s classic study of the “undoing of women” to Linda and Michael Hutcheonses’ more recent studies of opera, disease, and death.<sup>82</sup> Writing as the North American AIDS crisis was at its peak, the Hutcheonses contend that “an emotionally powerful art form like opera can tell us much about” cultural values including connections between disease and morality.<sup>83</sup> Both biomedical discourse and the “social, psychological, and cultural dimensions” of illness accompanied the arrival of AIDS. In his study of theatrical

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<sup>81</sup> “Flee, regal phantom!”

<sup>82</sup> Catherine Clement, *Opera, or the Undoing of Women*; Linda and Michael Hutcheon, *Opera: Desire, Disease, Death* (U of Nebraska Press, 1996) and *Opera: The Art of Dying* (Harvard U Press, 2004).

<sup>83</sup> Hutcheon and Hutcheon (1996): 2.

representations of HIV/AIDS, David Román (1998) finds another instance of gay men turning to opera to avoid the realities of AIDS in Terrence McNally's *The Lisbon Traviata* (1989).<sup>84</sup>

In Verdi's opera, Macbeth utters the words, "fuggi regal fantasima" in Act III when the spirit of Banco—a rival for the Scottish throne whom Macbeth has murdered—appears in a vision confirming a prophecy that states that Banco's descendants will rule the country. While Wainwright's identification with Macbeth may be slightly pretentious, he is the son of rock royalty, a gay man who came of age during the 1990s, and a self-professed opera queen with a particular passion for the grandiose styles of Italians like Verdi and Puccini.<sup>85</sup> Wainwright utters words in a foreign tongue to express his emotions, but something is amiss. In Verdi's setting, this phrase is accompanied by angular and dramatic music in the orchestra and a heroic tenor part. Macbeth seems to shout at this phantom, as if by sheer will and vocal prowess, he will banish the spirit and its omen of doom. By contrast, Wainwright's address to the specter of AIDS sags under the weight of his velvet drapes, rings, and a cumbersome suitcase.

As "Barcelona" ends, the opening guitar riff returns, and Wainwright offers a final impotent admonition, "fuggi regal fantasima."<sup>86</sup> Try as he might, however, Wainwright cannot evade HIV/AIDS or the ghosts of dead princes. Escape, it seems, is futile.

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<sup>84</sup> David Román, *Acts of Intervention* (1998), especially pages 89-95. The Hutcheonses also mention this play and its allusions to AIDS in *Opera: Desire, Disease, Death*.

<sup>85</sup> Kevin Schwandt writes about Wainwright as an opera queen in "Oh What a World: Queer Masculinities, The Musical Construction of a Reparative Cultural Historiography, and the Music of Rufus Wainwright," (PhD diss., the University of Minnesota, 2010).

<sup>86</sup> Wainwright's love of opera is part of his star text, and it is one of the themes of his songwriting more generally. On the same album, he includes "Damned Ladies," a song in which he intones his over-identification with opera heroines. Kevin Schwandt's dissertation includes an excellent discussion of Wainwright-as-Opera Queen.

### **“Not the Red Baron” (1996)**

Tori Amos was born in North Carolina, the daughter of a Methodist minister. Amos is a keyboard virtuoso and plays piano, harpsichord, Fender Rhodes, harmonium, and synthesizers on her albums and in live performances. She was accepted into the prestigious Peabody Preparatory program at the age of five, though by the artists' own account, her proclivity for improvisation, composition, and popular music led the faculty to revoke her scholarship six years later. By age thirteen, she was performing in gay piano bars in the DC area under the supervision of her father. In 1984, Amos relocated to Los Angeles to pursue her musical career, eventually forming a synth-metal band called Y Kant Tori Read whose sole album was a commercial and critical flop. She starred in a Kellogg cereal commercial and recorded the song “Distant Storm” for the martial arts film *China O'Brien* (1990).

Still under contract for five albums with Atlantic Records, Amos composed the songs for her solo debut, *Little Earthquakes* (1992). That album established Amos as a distinctive songwriter and a compelling performer by highlighting her virtuosic piano playing and idiosyncratic singing style. In 1994, Amos released her follow-up record, *Under the Pink*, to critical acclaim. Two years later, *Boys for Pele* consolidated Amos' status as an icon of 1990s alternative music. This album represents the apotheosis of Amos' style in the 1990s.

Stylistically, Amos' music features piano/keyboard-heavy arrangements, startling rhythmic and harmonic shifts. Her unique singing style which makes use of sighs, cries, gasps, abrupt shifts in register, changes in timbre, varying types of vibrato, and vocables. Her distinctive performance techniques extend to the way she positions herself between

multiple keyboard instruments on stage, often straddling a piano bench to maximize her ability to reach each instrument and to support her torso while singing.<sup>87</sup> Bonnie Gordon (2004) describes Amos' performance style:

She straddles the piano chair and twists her body to face the audience. By sitting at the piano with her legs wide open to direct not only her voice but her genitals at the audience, she violates the protocols of basic girlieness that demands closed legs. At the same time, this arresting style works against the classical tradition in which she received her first training.<sup>88</sup>

Amos characterizes her performances as “making love to the audience,” and adds that she feels a “responsibility to give all of her being” every time she sits before an audience.

Amos is also an acclaimed lyricist. Her song texts consist of dense, gnarled, and oblique images that seem to spring from the stream of her consciousness, though Amos describes herself as a “ruthless” editor when it comes to perfecting her lyrics.<sup>89</sup> She tackles a range of topics in her song including romantic and familial relationships, spirituality, the difficulties of being a woman in a sexist culture, domestic violence, and the trauma of her own real-life sexual assault. “All my songs, whether it’s ‘Pretty Good Year’ or ‘Yes, Anastasia,’” Amos said in 1994, “are about the healing process.”<sup>90</sup>

While on tour to support *Little Earthquakes*, Amos began writing the songs for her third record, “not because I didn’t have anything better to do [on tour] but because of

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<sup>87</sup> Amos speaks extensively about this physicality of her performance style in many interviews. Also see Bethany J. Smith, “Pianosexual: Fascinations of Tori Amos’s Sexualized Virtuosity in Performance,” in *Proceedings of the First International Conference of Students of Systematic Musicology* (2008): 84-91. Nick Salvato, “Cringe Criticism: On Embarrassment and Tori Amos,” *Critical Inquiry* 39/5 (2013): 676-702, esp. pages

<sup>88</sup> Bonnie Gordon, “Tori Amos’ Inner Voices,” in *Women’s Voices across Musical Worlds*, ed. Bernstein (Northeastern U Press: 2008): 187-207.

<sup>89</sup> Bill DeMain, “The Inner World of Tori Amos,” *Performing Songwriter* March 1994.

<sup>90</sup> DeMain (1994).

what was going on in my personal life.”<sup>91</sup> She has described this as an intensely dark and painful period, and the resulting album reflects those brooding sentiments. *Boys for Pele*, begins with “Horses,” a song in which “the horses have come to take us back, to descend, to find the dark side... what’s hidden,” and ends with “Twinkle,” in which Amos encounters a woman (perhaps the titular “Professional Widow” of an earlier song) hiding out in an abbey after killing a man. Other songs like “Blood Roses,” “Father Lucifer,” “Way Down,” “In the Springtime of his Voodoo,” and “Putting the Damage On” develop the album’s macabre themes with images of blood, violence, destruction, magic, and loneliness.

Pele is a Hawaiian goddess of fire, lightening, wind, and volcanoes who is also renowned for her creative powers and her profound love. Volcanic eruptions on the islands were believed to represent her longing for her true love. Pele also has a fickle and sinister side, for she sometimes kills her lovers. The album title evokes images of ritual sacrifice.

Representations of Pele often depict her wearing simple skirt and cloth draped to cover her breasts. In other images, she is naked from the waist up. Her hair is often made of fire or adorned with flames. Amos channels something of the spirit of Pele on the album cover (Figure 2.12). She reclines in a rocker on the porch a dilapidated cabin, mud-smearred and dressed in ragged clothing with a shotgun over her lap; her fiery red hair is tousled. A snake wraps its body around the leg of her rocking chair, and a dead chicken hangs from the porch railing. She looks as if she’s just returned from a hunt and menacingly stares into the camera, daring onlookers to take one step closer.

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<sup>91</sup> Tori Amos, *Billboard* 13 January 1996.



Figure 2.12, *Boys for Pele* cover art, 1996.

In what follows, I turn my attention to “Not the Red Baron,” a song Amos described as the album’s “moment of compassion for all the men.”<sup>92</sup> I believe that this song is specifically about compassion for gay men who were dying of AIDS and the traumatic responses that those deaths triggered.

As with most other songs about AIDS, nothing about “Not the Red Baron” directly refers to gay men or AIDS. The lyrics consist of a complex knot of pop cultural references, which I will untangle below, but first I want to jump to the song’s last line. “Many there know some girls with red ribbons, the prettiest red ribbons.” This line contains what Paul Attinello (2006) considers the key to an AIDS interpretation of the

<sup>92</sup> Sandra A. Garcia, “A Bottle of Red: Tori the Woman Who Would Be King,” *B-Side Magazine* May/June 1996. <http://www.yessaid.com/interviews/96-05B-Side.html> Accessed 14 August 2013.

song.<sup>93</sup> In 1991, red ribbons were adopted as the international symbol of AIDS awareness by Visual AIDS, a New York-based artist group. Across the early-1990s, the symbol became ubiquitous on the lapels of celebrities at awards shows, in gay pride parades, and AIDS activism. The color red will prove to be an important connective sinew for the chain of seemingly disjointed images in the lyrics.

The lyric also stood out to fans on the now-defunct listserv *Really Deep Thoughts*. For user “Violet,” the song described the “mothers and daughters and girlfriends and sisters [of gay men with AIDS], who after their deaths began wearing the red ribbons symbolic of the awareness of, and sorrow over AIDS.”<sup>94</sup> Similarly, “Greensleeves the Giddy Moundbuilder” thought “that perhaps \_perhaps\_ this [sic] song might be about AIDS. Maybe I am putting too much meaning into the closing line about red ribbons, but it kind of makes sense, doesn’t it?”<sup>95</sup>

“Not the Red Baron” begins with hushed voices speaking over the static of a pilot’s radio. Amos asks, “What language?” After an indecipherable reply, she says, “No...Dutch.”<sup>96</sup> Amos and her partner cannot agree on what language they are trying to translate, so it comes as a surprise when, a few lines later, she sings, “I think I got the message figured...another pilot down.” But this cryptic message only leads to more questions: who are these pilots? Why are they going down in flames? Who are they fighting?

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<sup>93</sup> Paul Attinello, “Closeness and Distance: Songs about AIDS,” in *Queering the Popular Pitch*, eds. Sheila Whiteley and Jennifer Rycenga (Routledge, 2006): 227.

<sup>94</sup> *Really Deep Thoughts* 9 March 1996.

<sup>95</sup> *Really Deep Thoughts* 27 April 1996.

<sup>96</sup> The voices are actually sound engineers talking during the recording session, but Amos kept their chatter on the final track. This recording was the first time the engineers heard the song, and it was the only take.

Amos recites a series of negative statements, describing who the pilots are *not*. They're not the Red Baron, Charlie Brown, or his wonderful dog; nor are they Judy G, that is Judy Garland, or "Jean with the hollow heart," a clever pun on the name of another starlet, Jean Harlow. From this pile of negatives and references to two gay icons, Paul Attinello (2006) extrapolates that Amos is singing "about gay men, and they have AIDS...The message is one of detached, undramatic empathy with men who are not only not threatening—because, being gay, they cannot be cast in the rapist roles common in Amos' early songs—but dying."<sup>97</sup> I agree with Attinello's basic point. "Not the Red Baron" expresses empathy with gay men dying of AIDS and does so through an oblique series of images and references that may be lost on listeners who are not familiar with gay culture.

Although the key to the song comes in the punch line image of red ribbons, the preceding lyrics prepare this image quite carefully. The color red appear several times in the verses. The Red Baron, devils, flames, and hearts are all red, and Judy G's name conjures those iconic ruby slippers. The song's title refers to The Royal Guardsmen's 1966 novelty song, "Snoopy vs. the Red Baron" and the follow-ups, "The Return of the Red Baron" (1966) and "Snoopy's Christmas," (1967). In these campy 60s pop-rock songs, Snoopy and the Red Baron engage in an endless aerial battle. However, Amos' "Not the Red Baron" is hardly a "comic situation with a final frame that shows a doghouse covered with bullet holes but safely returned to earth."<sup>98</sup> Rather, The Celluloid Closet—to borrow the title of Vito Russo's groundbreaking book on gay images in Hollywood cinema—is doing down in flames, and taking with it Snoopy, the Red Baron,

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<sup>97</sup> Paul Attinello, "Closeness and Distance: Songs about AIDS," (2006):. 225-227.

<sup>98</sup> Attinello (2006), 226.

and the silver screen upon which Judy G, Jean Harlow, and “every pointed heel” of the chorus.

A second reoccurring image—pilots crashing and the implicit red flames of an explosion—may obliquely refer to the militant forms of activism characteristic of the 1990s because the people who are dying are represented as being engaged in conflict. These gay men are not just dying; they are pilots going down in flames because they are under attack.

Finally, the reference to Judy G (and the implicit ruby slippers) is not accidental. Nor is it the only Judy Garland reference in Amos’ songs. In an earlier song about death, “Happy Phantom,” from *Little Earthquakes*, “Judy Garland takes Buddha by the hand” in a humorous parody of the type of choreography found in Garland’s films with stars like Mickey Rooney.<sup>99</sup> Judy Garland died 22 June 1969, and a memorial service was held for her in New York on 27 June 1969. In the early morning hours of 28 June 1969, police raided the Stonewall Inn, a New York City gay bar. Whereas in the past, most patrons went quietly with the police when arrested, that night, things did not go according to plan. First, drag queens resisted arrest. As fury spread through the crowd, a full-scale riot ensued that is now considered the starting point of the U.S. Gay Liberation movement of the 1970s. Tensions between gay people and the government were already mounting across the 1960s. Thousands of gay men flocked to the city for Garland’s memorial service, and as anyone who has been to a funeral can attest, emotions run high during periods of grief. So, the frustrations over frequent police raids at gay bars and the death of

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<sup>99</sup> Attinello claims that “the dead star is used as a referent for a melancholy narcissism, where the person grieving is more interested in displaying his or her emotions than in really grieving—a stance Amos will not allow herself without an ironic, negating distance,” (227). I see this from a slightly different perspective.

a major gay icon probably fanned the flames of the New York gay community. Flames erupted on to 28 June 1969, and many of the men who were part of the Stonewall Riots would later find themselves at the center of the AIDS epidemic.

Musically, Amos wraps this gnarl of pop culture references in the garb of nineteenth-century romanticism. Attinello likens the piano accompaniment to “a trope of piano writing familiar since Chopin,” and I agree that Amos’ playing here is Chopinesque.<sup>100</sup> I would add that the choice of minor key, the relentlessly plodding parallel fifths in the left hand, and the general contour and rhythm of the right hand evoke Chopin in a very specific way. The accompaniment evokes the sound of the *Marche funèbre: Lento* from the Piano Sonata No. 2 in B-flat minor, op. 35. This piece has been used in conjunction with many famous funerals, including Chopin’s own as well as that of US President John F. Kennedy. It has also appeared in films, television shows, and cartoons as a clichéd musical signifier of death.<sup>101</sup>



Figure 2.13, Chopin Funeral March

<sup>100</sup> Ibid., 226.

<sup>101</sup> Lawrence Kramer, “Chopin at the Funeral: Episodes in the History of Modern Death,” *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 54/1 (2001): 97-125.

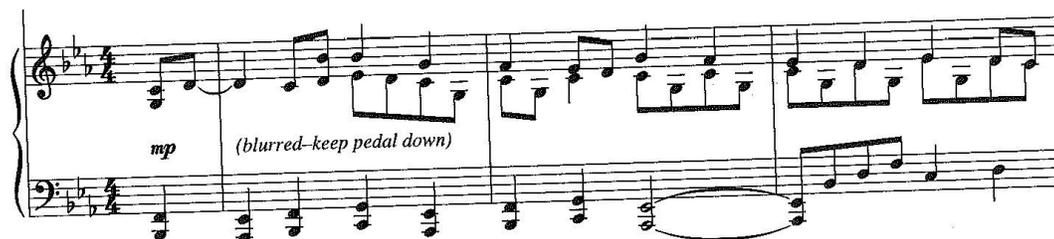


Figure 2.14, Tori Amos, “Not the Red Baron.”  
(excerpt from printed sheet music)

Perhaps the most striking aspect of “Not the Red Baron” is Amos’ vocal performance. Like Laura Nyro and Kate Bush, two singer/songwriters to whom she is frequently compared, Amos has a powerfully expressive singing voice. Idiosyncratic phrasing, surprising accents on odd syllables, and a variety of timbre effects including growls, grunts, moans, shrieks, and gasps characterize her singing. Her vocal style has been described as hyper-sexualized and ecstatic, and in interviews, Amos describes performing in terms of a psychic or spiritual experience in which she channels the energy of spirits who communicate through the songs. Another track from *Boys for Pele*, “Professional Widow,” perhaps best exemplifies an extreme version of her ecstatic singing. “Not the Red Baron” is startling because it contains so few of Amos’ characteristic vocal inflections. Close miking enables listeners to hear each inhalation of breath and even the sound of hammers hitting strings in the piano. It’s an uncomfortably intimate performance. Amos sings in a flat, disaffected voice that suggests a traumatized subject. Overwhelmed by the sheer magnitude of deaths, Amos responds with detachment.

Over the plodding accompaniment, her singing seems almost stream-of-consciousness. The musical phrases are highly irregular and although the song falls into three verses with snippets of recurring melodic material, the performance is spontaneous. As Mark Hawley, one of the engineers for *Boys for Pele*, revealed, “No demos were done for any of the songs. Basically, two or three songs [including “Not the Red Baron”] were written as you hear them there. The first time she ever played them, and the first time we ever heard them was the performance that you hear [on the record].”<sup>102</sup>

The song refers to the culture of camp, though it is not itself campy. In his study of performance art about AIDS, Román (1998) found that camp was deployed in a number of AIDS plays or performances as a distancing device. For instance, in Terrence McNally’s *The Lisbon Traviata* (1989), two gay men communicate in a complex web of diva references characteristic of opera or theater queens. The play hardly mentions AIDS at all, but the epidemic “informs the reality of its protagonists as a shadow that threatens to intercede at any moment.”<sup>103</sup> Likewise, AIDS emerges as a “structuring absence” in “Not the Red Baron,” as Amos strips away layers of campy reference, leaving only a phantom imprint of one of the most famous funeral marches in western music and a tear-stained image of girls with “the prettiest red ribbons.”

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<sup>102</sup> Blair Jackson, “Tori Amos: In the Studio and On the Road,” *Mix Magazine* November 1996. <http://www.yessaid.com/interviews/96-11Mix.html> Accessed 16 August 2013.

<sup>103</sup> Román (1998), 90.

### **Pedagogical/Didactic Songs: Talking about AIDS**

In her study of girl group songs, Jacquelyn Warwick (2007) identifies a subcategory of “advice” songs.<sup>104</sup> Advice songs are explicitly addressed to women and “offer counsel and wisdom based on personal experiences” while also celebrating female solidarity “as the girls share their knowledge and suggest strategies for negotiating the world around them.”<sup>105</sup> According to Warwick, 1960s advice songs “center around boys and how to behave with them, encouraging girls to be patient...the overarching concern is with preserving one’s respectability and reputation as a ‘good’ girl.”<sup>106</sup>

Warwick’s study concerns girl groups in the 1960s. By the 1980s, the conditions of young womanhood had changed dramatically as a result of the feminist movement, achievements in African American Civil Rights, and the gains of minority feminisms. Women now had access to contraceptives, birth control, and legalized abortion, and sexual mores had shifted to allow women a greater degree over their sexuality, including the right to have sex. However, disparities in economics and education often prohibited access to accurate information about sex and sexuality. Advice songs evolved in tandem with cultural ideas about women’s sexuality, and by the end of the 1980s, AIDS was at the top of the list of concerns for minority women in the US. As a result, the advice song transformed. Its content reflected the issues that were important to modern women.

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<sup>104</sup> Jacquelyn Warwick, *Girl Groups, Girl Culture: Popular Music and Identity in the 1960s* (Routledge, 2007). See especially Chapter 11.

<sup>105</sup> Warwick, *Girl Groups* (2007), 164.

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid.*

### “Sho Nuff Danjus” (1989)

Millie Jackson’s career began when she took the microphone at an amateur night in Harlem in 1964. She won the singing contest that night and soon signed with MGM Records; she left MGM for Spring Records in 1970. Her 1972 eponymous debut contained a few hits, “A Child of God,” “My Man, A Sweet Man,” and “Ask Me What You Want.” However, Jackson’s career stalled until the release of *Caught Up* (1974), a concept album about a love triangle between a married man, his wife, and his girlfriend. With that record, the gritty-voiced soul singer found her niche by inserting lengthy, spoken “rap” sections into her songs. Essentially spoken monologues delivered over a musical riff, these raps served as a platform for Jackson to address her audience directly about topics like cheating lovers, deadbeat husbands, and changing gender roles. Her mix of raunchy humor, straight talk, and street slang, became a signature of live performances and recordings.<sup>107</sup> On stage and on record, Jackson embodies Marcyliena Morgan’s (2008) trenchant description of women who “devour and set to rhyme the black women’s history, social life, and dreams of being treated with respect in America.”<sup>108</sup>

“Love is a Dangerous Game” was written for Jackson after songwriters Billy Ocean and Jonathan Butler met the singer in New York City, and it first appeared on Jackson’s album *An Imitation of Love* (1986). The lyrics caution against the dangers inherent in playing the game of love: cheating lovers, heartache, and pain. Set to a

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<sup>107</sup> By 1979, Jackson’s stage persona was well known enough that she could parody it. In the spoken introduction to “Phuck U Symphony,” the singer teases the audience by saying that she and The Pointer Sisters could sing the exact same song, but her fans wouldn’t buy the Jackson recording unless she filled it with cursing and vulgarity.

<sup>108</sup> Marcyliena H. Morgan, *The Real Hip-hop: Battling for Knowledge, Power, and Respect in the LA Underground*, (Duke U Press, 2009), 13.

smooth groove with a slick but sparse arrangement for guitar, bass, keyboards, and percussion, the song rose to the top ten on the *Billboard* R&B charts.

A live version of the song appears on Jackson's *Back to the Shit* (1989). During the mid-1980s, Jackson released a number of "serious" albums, and these sold poorly. The title of *Back to the Shit* boldly proclaimed that the old Jackson was back with a lengthy rap titled "Sho Nuf Dajnus" that follows "Love is a Dangerous Game." Rapping with the women in her audience, Jackson proclaims a return to her usual shit-talking ways and commiserates with the women over shared experiences of lousy lovers. By trash talking men (who are doubtless present in the audience), Jackson opens up a space in which she and her female fans can gossip and dish the dirt. She masterfully steers the conversation through a variety of sexual woes and worries to the very serious topic of HIV/AIDS. She acknowledges women's right to a fulfilling and safe sex life and also notes that abstinence and monogamy are just as illusory for women as they are for men. "Over the years," she reminds the audience, "I know I've told you bitches when to fuck, how to fuck, who to fuck, how long to fuck, and everything." Still, she admits, "I'm scared to fuck nowadays." Nonetheless, she says still needs to have sex and will "take a little head."

Jackson recognizes the need for sex and sexual pleasure in the lives of African American women, and she uses her larger-than-life stage persona to turn the stereotypical figures of the Jezebel, the Bitch, and the Ho into critical positions. Using humor and hyperbole, Jackson embraces sex and teaches other black women to do the same. At the same time, she offers a critical intervention in the fight against AIDS, which was epidemic among minority women in the US by the end of the 1980s. "Do you realize the

Surgeon General says that the only way not to get AIDS is not to fuck?” she asks her audience. “Well FUCK THAT! I gotta fuck once a year...sorry.” Although she recognizes the ridiculousness and futility of an abstinence-only approach to sexuality, Jackson concedes to follow the Surgeon General’s second suggestion to use condoms because “this shit is dangerous.” However, she translates the official discourse of prophylaxis into the language of her fans. “Fuck a condom,” she insists, “use rubbers! Good Year, steel belted radials!” Furthermore, she insists that women in her audience to purchase their own condoms and contraceptives and to learn how to put them on their male partners. Hilariously parodying sexologist Dr. Ruth Westheimer, Jackson demonstrates the proper technique for women to put a condom on a man. Finally, Jackson shatters myths about women as the sole carriers of disease by insisting that men can and *will* give a woman HIV. “If he’s got one [a penis],” she declares, “it’s dangerous... There’s no such thing as a little AIDS...unless it’s welfare!”

Jackson’s performance succeeds because she parodies the hypersexual black woman in order to reveal that the stereotype was a cultural fiction all along. By reinventing a racist caricature as a public health tool, Jackson offers an alternative notion to misperceptions of black female sexuality *and* the politics of respectability that silence discussions about sex. And music is the medium through which she delivers her empowering and sex-positive message. In the course of this rap, Jackson offers crucial and life-saving advice for the women in her audience. First, she insists on a healthy relationship and discussion of sex by women about their needs and desires (a trope that runs through her entire career). Second, she identifies two safer sex options: oral sex and the use of condoms. Finally, she empowers the women in her audience to control their

own sexual lives, buy condoms, learn how to use them, and insist their partners use them properly. In the age of AIDS, love may indeed be a dangerous game, but if they educate themselves and talk openly about sex, Jackson believes that women may find a way to play to win.

### **“Let’s Talk About Sex” (1990)**

According to Tricia Rose (1994), hip-hop “attempts to negotiate the experiences of marginalization, brutality, truncated opportunity, and oppression” within minority communities.<sup>109</sup> Although Adams and Fuller (2006) agree that “the genre has been used as a medium for expressing a variety of ideas, feelings, and emotions,” by the end of the 1980s, they argue that misogyny became the default setting in the lyrics of most hip-hop by male artists.<sup>110</sup> In an earlier article, Rose (1990) contends that the degree of sexism in hip-hop has been overstated and exaggerated by the media, but it is demonstrably true that references to bitches, hoes, and other derogatory terms for women became increasingly prominent as gangsta rap rose in popularity at the end of the 1980s.<sup>111</sup> At the exact same time, a cadre of women working in hip-hop used the genre as a platform to discuss issues like “racism, black politics, Afrocentrism and nationalism to homelessness, physical abuse of women and children, drug addiction, teen pregnancy, and AIDS.”<sup>112</sup>

During the late 1980s and early 1990s, a number of hip-hop artists began to incorporate elements of African nationalism and Afrocentric ideas as part of their visual

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<sup>109</sup> Tricia Rose, *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America* (Wesleyan U Press, 1994), 21.

<sup>110</sup> Terri M. Adams and Douglas B. Fuller, “The Words Have Changed but the Ideology Remains the Same: Misogynistic Lyrics in Rap Music,” *Journal of Black Studies* 36/6 (2006), 939.

<sup>111</sup> Tricia Rose, “Never Trust a Big Butt and a Smile,” *Camera Obscura* 2/23 (1990): 108-131.

<sup>112</sup> Rose (1994), 122.

and lyrical public personae. At the same time, many important women in hip-hop gained national and international attention as major players in the music and politics of hip-hop. On the cover of *All Hail the Queen* (1989), for instance, Queen Latifah appeared in a traditional African head wrap and military-inspired pants suit next to a silhouette of the African continent. That album contained “Ladies First,” Latifah’s anthem to African women’s empowerment. The music video showed Latifah in a war room overlooking a map of Africa and contained a montage of important black women like Sojourner Truth and Harriet Tubman as well as contemporary black feminists figures like Angela Davis. Throughout the decade, MC Lyte, Neneh Cherry, and Queen Latifa “promot[ed] self-reliance and challenge[d] the depictions of women” with songs like “Ladies First” (1988) and “It’s a Shame (My Sister)” (1990), “I Go On,” (1993), and “U.N.I.T.Y.” (1993).<sup>113</sup>

African-American women, and by extension many women in hip-hop, are often lumped together according to a handful of stereotypes. Broad categories like fly girl, ghetto bitches, soul sistahs, and queens tend to highlight certain similarities among female artists, frequently based on their style of sartorial presentation. Fly girls and ghetto bitches tend to dress sexy while soul sistahs and queens don traditional African items like head wraps or traditional prints. Grouping women according to their manner of dress or physical self-presentation always runs the risk of erasing complexities and complications. Of particular interest to me are the ways in which these categories might help organize and understand the lyrics of songs written and/or performed by women in these categories. As a way of unpacking one such stereotype, I turn my attention to two groups that are often described as Fly Girls and whose names are almost always spoken in the same breath in discussions of women in hip-hop: Salt-n-Pepa and TLC.

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<sup>113</sup> Rose (1994), 117.

Salt-n-Pepa formed in New York City in the early-1980s when Cheryl James (Salt) and Sandra Denton (Pepa) recorded “The Showstopper,” a single produced by Hurby Azor in 1985.<sup>114</sup> “The Showstopper” was an “answer rap” written as an answer song to Doug E. Fresh’s “The Show.”<sup>115</sup> The record received significant airplay and secured the duo, along with new member Deidra “DJ Spinderella” Roper, a record contract with Next Plateau Records. They released their breakthrough single, “Push It,” on the record *Hot, Cool, & Vicious* in 1986. Before they disbanded in 2002, Salt-n-Pepa released five studio albums and won several awards including the Grammy for Best Rap Performance in 1995 for the single, “None of Your Business.”

Salt-n-Pepa embody the fly girl image described by Rose (1990) and Keyes (2002). They are confident, sexy, and in control when they perform. In 1993, they released the song “None of Your Business,” in which they explicitly address their rights to dress and behave in whatever ways they like. “If I want to take a guy home with me tonight,” they sing, “it’s none of your business. And you shouldn’t even get into who I’m giving skins to. So don’t try to change my mind. I’ll tell you one more time. It’s none of your business.” On the same album, *Very Necessary*, they recorded two other songs that specifically address women’s sexual empowerment. On “Shoop,” Salt-n-Pepa reverse the objectifying eye; they take a playful look at men’s bodies and sing about them using the kinds of stereotypical lines a construction worker might say to a beautiful woman on the

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<sup>114</sup> For more information about the band, see their website <http://saltnpepa.net/>

<sup>115</sup> Answer Songs (or Answer Records) are fairly common in popular music. Woodie Guthrie’s “This Land is Your Land,” for instance, is an answer to Erving Berlin’s “God Bless America.” Likewise, in the 1960s, Leslie Gore recorded “It’s My Party, and I’ll Cry if I Want To” (1963) then released “It’s Judy’s Turn to Cry” that same year as a follow-up. Neil Sedaka’s “Oh Carol” was written about his friend and fellow New Yorker Carole King (nee Carol Klein), and she wrote “Oh Neil” in response. Similarly, Lynyrd Skynyrd’s “Sweet Home Alabama” is a response to Neil Young’s “Southern Man.”

street. On “Whadda Man,” they are joined by R&B quartet En Vogue as they “take a minute or two to give much respect to” the men in their lives.

In “None of Your Business,” Pepa uses a harder vocal quality and an aggressive rapping style as she confronts those who gossip, spread rumors, and engage in other disrespectful behaviors. “Whadda Man,” features a softer rapping style and smoother vocal production, and they sing with En Vogue in the chorus. I highlight these differing vocal qualities because they illustrate different forms of musical black femininity that correspond to different types of lyric content. In songs with a stronger feminist message like “None of Your Business,” the women of the group use a more aggressive vocal style that, like Mille Jackson’s parody of the mad black woman, amplifies the meaning of the song. On a love song like “Whadda Man,” they sing in a more conventional R&B style that matches the content of that song’s lyrics.

In 1990, Salt-n-Pepa released *Blacks’ Magic*, an album with both Afrocentric and feminist elements. In the cover image, the Salt, Pepa, and Spinderella read from a massive storybook called *Blacks’ Magic*. They appear in bold color and are surrounded by the black-and-white images of African-American musicians like Billy Holiday, Louis Armstrong, and Jimmy Hendrix. The artwork suggests that the women in the group are the musical and cultural heirs of the traditions of jazz and blues and that hip-hop is the next step in an Afro-musical genealogy. *Blacks’ Magic* contained one of the group’s most successful singles, “Let’s Talk About Sex.”

Like Jackson’s “Sho Nuf Danjus” rap, “Let’s Talk About Sex” initiates a conversation about sex among listeners. Whereas Jackson’s persona is over the top, pointedly raunchy, and aggressive, Salt-n-Pepa and Spinderella utilize less aggressive

tactics. “Let’s Talk About Sex” is a playful invitation that toes the careful line between kowtowing to the politics of respectability and a Jackson-like disregard for politesse.

Like many advice songs, it begins with spoken interjections, in this instance, a shout-out by Salt, “Spinderella cut it up one time!” In response, the DJ spins an exuberant groove that features a funky bass line and a danceable beat. Over this beat, they rap and sing about “sex baby...about all the good things and the bad things that may be.” Like Jackson, they speak candidly about the polysemy of sexual experience and “tell it how it is and how it could be; how it was, and of course, how it should be.” Though they encourage people who are uncomfortable with the subject to “pick the needle up, press pause, or turn the radio off,” the song’s infectious groove and the group’s exuberant performance make the song difficult to ignore. In the bridge, they invite their female listeners to join in a celebratory call-and-response of the titular refrain. Men are excluded from the conversation as “the subject matter and perspectives presented [in the lyrics] challenge dominant notions of sexuality” by creating opportunities “exuberant communities of women” to sing along in live performances or with their records, tapes, or CDs of the song.<sup>116</sup>

The second verse expresses something of a contradiction by denouncing a gold digger/prostitute who uses “everything she got [including sex] to get whatever she don’t got,” from jewelry and dinner dates to money. The figure of the prostitute raises contradictory feelings among feminists who, on one hand, support the sexual liberation of all women and, on the other, those who feel that prostitution is inherently patriarchal or oppressive. Black women, as noted earlier, are often considered the embodiment of an out of control sexual energy by dominant (that is, white) culture, and at the same time,

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<sup>116</sup> Rose (1990), 114.

they are expected to uphold the notions of respectability that have been used to buttress progressive black social movements since the nineteenth century. But this sort of contradiction can be a productive tension because it allows women to consider the contradictory social forces under which they operate. Salt-n-Pepa's musical output exemplifies this tension. In "Push It" (1985) and "Shoop" (1993), they express explicit sexual desires by turning the aggressive and objectifying language of patriarchy on men. By contrast, in "Whadda Man" (1993), they praise the men in their lives for providing love, faithfulness, respect, and good sex, and in "None of Your Business" (1993), the group celebrates individual rights to sexual choice, freedom, and privacy.

There are three versions of the song "Let's Talk About Sex," and there are also three different music videos. I will discuss the videos below. First, I will discuss the differences in two versions of the audio track. While researching this study, I have been unable to determine which version of the song was recorded first. The version that I remember seeing and hearing on MTV and the radio in the 1990s had just two verses, described above. More recently, I discovered another version with a slightly different, musically sparse mix, an additional third verse, and a longer spoken introduction. The music videos for these two versions of the track are identical except for the longer intro and third verse. This suggests that the sparse/longer version was made first, and then the second fuller and truncated version was mixed later.

In second version of the song, Salt begins with a more lengthy spoken interjection in which she expresses reservations about singing the song. "I don't think we should talk about this," she says with hesitation, "People might misunderstand what we are trying to say." Like the backup singers in traditional advice songs, Spinderella and Pepa encourage

her by saying, “It’s a part of life.” The third verse describes a couple that hastily decided to have sex but “forgot the condom.” Although the young woman convinces herself to have unprotected sex because she is on birth control, she later discovers “sores [that] start to puff and spore,” suggesting that she contracted herpes from the encounter. This is consistent with the heterosexual herpes scare that began in the 1980s.

The music video begins as a young boy, shot from below, drops a book called *Talk Sex* down a deep and narrow passageway that looks like a mineshaft or well. Immediately after, shots of Salt, Pepa, and Spinderella dancing, talking, and singing together alternate with scenes of young, heterosexual black and Latino couples hanging out in an urban park and singing along with a recording of the song which is played on a large boom box.

Throughout the video, the three women appear as a group and individually, staring directly into the camera and singing the refrain, “let’s talk about sex.” While the subject is potentially very serious, they laugh, grin, and smile into the camera. They also parody the stereotypical behavior of male construction workers by dressing in hardhats and flannel shirts and ogling the butts of several passing men. Salt uses the microphone in a DJ booth to broadcast her sex-positive message across the airwaves, and groups of young men and women are shown listening to boom boxes while hanging out, making out, and dancing.

Implicit in my argument is that “Let’s Talk About Sex” is a song about HIV/AIDS. However, as in many songs about AIDS, nothing in the lyrics actually addresses the epidemic directly. Rather, HIV/AIDS is an implicit subject in the suggestion to have a talk about sex in the 1990s, particularly as statistics indicated an

increasing number of minority women who tested HIV-positive. AIDS makes a brief appearance in both versions of music video in the form of a model skeleton whose mouth is covered with yellow police tape with the word “censor” in black letters and a large circular button that says “AIDS.” [Figure 2.16]

Salt-n-Pepa made a more direct statement about HIV/AIDS in a third version of the song. They re-recorded “Let’s Talk About Sex” as an HIV/AIDS public service announcement called “Let’s Talk About AIDS.” This version contains new lyrics that specifically address HIV/AIDS transmission, treatment, and testing, and the video engages with AIDS activism. Each stanza contains specific information about how HIV can be transmitted (sex, dirty needles, mother-to-infant), encourages safe sex and condom use, and dispels many myths and rumors that claim kissing, touching, toilet seats, public phones, and mosquito bites contribute to the spread of HIV. The band encourages listeners to get tested early and to pursue treatment early “if you come up HIV positive or have AIDS.” In the brief coda, Pepa notes that “if everybody stop cheating and messing around and just stay with one person,” then they could lower the risk of contracting HIV.



Figure 2.15 Screenshot from “Let’s Talk About Sex” video

The video casts HIV/AIDS as a broadly American issue (rather than just a problem for gay men, minorities, or women) by literally framing many of its scenes with the American flag and intercutting shots of the band with images of men and women of a variety of ages, races, and subculture types (punk, hip hop, rock, preps, etc.) and cameos by other famous musicians like Kid and Play, MC Lyte, and Monie Love. All members of the diverse audience wear white t-shirts, jeans, and black sunglasses, which resembles the unofficial uniform of a black t-shirt and jeans sometimes worn by ACT UP

demonstrators. The slogan “Act Now” appears on the screen frequently, encouraging viewers to both get tested but also to participate in the fight against HIV/AIDS.

### **“Waterfalls” (1994)**

In 1994, all-female hip-hop trio released a song about HIV/AIDS. From the moment they formed in Atlanta in the late-1980s, Tionne “T-Boz” Watkins, Lisa “Left Eye” Lopes (1971-2002), and Rozonda “Chilli” Thomas (an acronym of their nicknames give the group its name) foregrounded women’s empowerment as part of their public persona and music. Cheryl Keyes (2002) groups TLC with other women in hip-hop who embody the “fly girl” image.<sup>117</sup> Fly girls could wear sexy clothing and dance provocatively, but importantly, they also asserted their thoughts and opinions. TLC insisted on candid discussions about sex and sexuality among women and promoted women’s sexual empowerment in part by wearing condoms attached to their clothes in public appearances, performances, and music videos accompanying their debut album, *Ooooooohhh..On the TLC Tip* (1991). Songs like “Ain’t Too Proud to Beg” made it clear that the band could express women’s sexual desires in straightforward language, while “What About Your Friends” encouraged women to work with rather than against one another in building relationships that may outlast romance and sex. Their sophomore album, *CrazySexyCool* (1994) engendered a more sophisticated and sexy image for the band.

Many of the songs on *CrazySexyCool* emphasized sex and sensuality. For instance, “Creep” is about sex outside the confines of a relationship and behind a lover’s back, and “Diggin’ on You” is a straightforward expression of carnal desire. However,

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<sup>117</sup> Cheryl Keyes, *Rap Music and Street Consciousness* (U of Chicago press, 2002).

“Waterfalls” dealt with social issues that plagued urban minority communities: poverty, drugs, gang violence, pressures on the family, and HIV/AIDS. In the first verse, a single mother worries about her teenage son who works as a drug runner. The second verse focuses on Little Precious whose “natural obsession for temptation” ends when “three little letters [that] took him to his final resting place.” Left Eye’s rap break in the bridge summarizes all these problems and points to faith as one solution to these problems. The chorus cautions listeners to avoid chasing waterfalls, a metaphor for living in the dangerous fast lane, and implores them instead to stick to placid rivers and lakes.

Discussions about HIV/AIDS among African Americans in the 1980s and 1990s were burdened by homophobia and a general distrust of white medical and political authorities. Even as infection rates and deaths among black Americans (and black women, in particular) rose, the perception of AIDS as a “gay” disease and anti-gay sentiments among some black communities made frank discussion of the epidemic a tricky issue. By situating AIDS among other problems facing urban black communities, TLC diffused some of these tensions.

In his analysis of “Waterfalls,” Matthew Tift (2007) emphasizes a descending hexachord that he associates with a long tradition of musical representations of mourning.<sup>118</sup> While present in the music, this particular feature privileges a particular set of music theory skills based in Western art music rather than popular music more generally or hip hop in particular. Many pop music fans can easily hear the tugging half step melodic figures associated with sadness or identify the downward bass line characteristic of laments from Purcell to Prince. However, the ability to recognize a

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<sup>118</sup> Matthew Tift, *Musical AIDS: Music, Musicians, and the Cultural Construction of HIV/AIDS in the United States* PhD Dissertation University of Wisconsin-Madison (2007).

descending hexachord is an inherently more difficult task for listeners who are not trained in western music theory. Rather, lyrics, vocal performance, instrumental arrangement, production, the band's star text, and music video imagery seem more relevant for the analysis of a song like "Waterfalls."

In any given music video example, at least three discourses converge: the musical track, the song's lyrics, and the video's images. To this list, we could also add the performer or group's star text, biographical details of the performers' lives, and the implications of their major genre affiliation(s). Here, I am primarily interested in the relationship between visual images and lyrics. According to Andrew Goodwin (1994), music videos must communicate with an efficient and economical set of visual symbols due to the brevity of most music video clips.<sup>119</sup> In their recent monograph, Railton and Watson (2011) expand Goodwin's notion of an efficient visual economy in music video to establish three possible relationships between the lyrics, music, and visuals. Videos may complement the lyrics, add new layers of meaning to a song not found in the lyrics, or they may contradict the lyrics. Music videos impact "not only the pleasure we can get from any given song but also on the meanings we can attach to it and by extension how we understand and can analyze it."<sup>120</sup>

The "Waterfalls" video begins with a rapid descent from heaven or outer space. The camera zooms past airplanes and through brilliant white clouds to an urban street in an area like Harlem or the South Bronx in New York City. The exact location is less important than the visual clues that establish "the hood" as the site of the vignette's

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<sup>119</sup> Andrew Goodwin, *Dancing in the Distraction Factory: Music Television and Popular Culture* (U of Minnesota Press, 1992).

<sup>120</sup> Diane Railton and Paul Watson, *Music Video and the Politics of Representation* (Edinburgh U Press, 2011): 8.

action. In such urban places, a young black man's chances of survival and success are slim. Like many poor urban minority youth, he cannot find a job, and so "he makes the money the best way he knows how, another body laying cold in the gutter," or by working as a hit man. His "lonely," that is single, mother worries because he "just can't seem to keep himself out of trouble." The window through which she helplessly watches as he leaves in spite of her protests represents her hopelessness and inability to reach her son. The video adds a new layer of meaning to these lyrics by portraying the young man not as a hit man but as a drug runner who is shot during a botched drug deal. At the end of the video, the despondent mother walks home with a bag of groceries, unable to see her son's ghost reach out for her embrace.

In the second verse, Little Precious has a "natural obsession for temptation," and an array of women "give him loving that his body can handle." Like Magic Johnson, Little Precious contracts HIV from sex with a woman. While heterosexual transmission is definitely an issue, female-to-male transmission is statistically much less likely than male-to-female. Interestingly, Little Precious is cast as young white man, and his muscular physique and good looks make him an alluring ladies' man. He enters a bedroom where an anonymous (also white) woman reclines on a bed and adjusts her thigh-high stockings. They kiss passionately as the vixen slips an unopened condom from his hand. They enjoy a post-coital smoke seconds later. In the condensed symbolic world of music video, the cut from kiss to smoke and the brief shot of the unopened condom lead viewers to conclude that the couple had unprotected sex.

Precious leaves the bed to gaze at himself in the mirror and immediately notices a purple splotch on his right cheek. This splotch is the "purple kiss of death," a hallmark

sign of Kaposi's sarcoma, a cancer that disfigured and killed many people with AIDS. As he shakes his head in disbelief in the mirror, the camera cuts to the woman who covers half of her face with a magazine and closes her eyes knowingly. The implication here is clear: she has knowingly given him HIV. Little Precious "takes a look in the mirror and doesn't recognize his own face" and finds that "his health is fading. And though he doesn't know why, we do: H-I-V of S-E-X. Three little letters that, before 1996, spelled D-E-A-T-H.

There is a productive tension between the lyrics and the images on screen. Although the lyrics of the second verse implicate Little Precious in his own demise, the video portrays Precious as a passive and perhaps unwilling victim of a diseased woman's sexual appetite. This femme fatale's voracious sexual appetites threaten the health of many men, a point made explicit through a striking visual. A double picture frame on her dresser includes a static self-portrait of the woman. In the opposite frame, the image cycles through several dozen men in a matter of seconds. The video not only ignores the statistical unlikelihood of female to male HIV transmission but also reactivates stereotyped ideas about woman as vessels of disease. Like WWII ad campaigns that warned soldiers to avoid easy women and good time girls, this video sends a very clear message: men, you better watch out! Women will give you AIDS. This misogynistic moral seems totally at odds with TLC's reputation for female empowerment.<sup>121</sup>

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<sup>121</sup> More recently, rapper Lil Wayne made HIV/AIDS a central theme in the music video for his song "How to Love," (2011). The lyrics describe a young woman whose life is beset by hardships from birth and characterized by "a lot of moments that didn't last forever." The song lyrics make bland pronouncements about a young woman who never learned how to love but never mention HIV/AIDS. The accompanying music video, written by Wayne, portrays her life as beset by hardships. Her mother and father argue frequently, and after her biological father goes to jail, one of her mother's boyfriends rapes her while her mother lies in a drunken stupor on the sofa. Consequently, the young woman begins to act out in ways that lead to her downfall. Sex and drugs eventually lead to a career as a stripper and prostitute. In a climactic scene, the young woman waits for a doctor to reveal her HIV antibody test results. "Your test came back

These examples make it clear that HIV/AIDS was on the minds of some African American women performers in the early-1990s. Using musical performance, lyrics, clothing and accessories, and music videos, these artists sought to deliver important messages about HIV/AIDS to their listeners in an era when poor, urban minority women were arguably the least likely constituency to receive accurate information about AIDS, to get tested, or to receive adequate healthcare if they were HIV-positive.<sup>122</sup> These songs, therefore, represent an important intervention by hip-hop feminist musicians in the fight against HIV/AIDS.

Hip-hop feminists were not the only members of the hip-hop community who addressed HIV/AIDS in their music. Another group of rappers sang about HIV/AIDS in bleaker terms. Groups like 2 Live Crew, N.W.A., and The Conscious Daughters and solo artists like Ice Cube placed HIV/AIDS in a longer narrative of black oppression. Specifically, many of these songs circulate conspiracy theories about HIV/AIDS including the idea that AIDS was an invention of the US government intended to control or eradicate black populations.

While such conspiracy theories may seem far-fetched today, it is important to place them within the broader discourse of African Americans' experiences with the

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positive...for HIV," he tells her, while the nurse pats her shoulder and offers a cold, "We're so sorry." Inexplicably, the doctor and nurse leave the room. The young woman flees the doctor's office in tears. Contracting HIV here becomes the inevitable outcome of a lifetime of decisions that stem directly from this young woman's inability to love herself.

The video then enacts a reversal of fortunes and offers an alternative scenario in which this young woman, surrounded by the love of a supportive family, makes all the "right" decisions, graduates from high school, learns to be a hairdresser, and ends up in the same doctor's office with her mother. The doctor and nurse celebrate the news that the young woman is pregnant, and she is rewarded for good behavior with a successful career and family. By ending with this "good girl" scenario, Lil Wayne, who wrote the video, and director Chris Robinson fall victim to a fatalism that is pervasive in songs about HIV/AIDS. Furthermore, they fail to critically address the broader socio-political and economic issues that shape the choices the young protagonist makes. Instead, they propose a fairly simplistic binary through which they ultimately reinforce the fallacy that "good" people will not contract HIV/AIDS.

<sup>122</sup> For more, see Evelyn Hammonds, "Missing Persons: Black Women and AIDS," in *Words of Fire: An Anthology of Black Feminist Thought*, ed. Beverly Guy-Sheftall (The New Press, 1995).

institutions of public health in the US. Before 1986, no one knew with certainty what caused AIDS, and theories about causation and transmission flourished. Among these was Dr. Joseph Sonnabend's multi-factorial theory, which will be discussed at length in the following chapter. A second alternative theory about HIV/AIDS posits that AIDS was a biological weapon, created by the US government, and released into the population. As recently 2008, prominent public figures, including Reverend Jeremiah Wright, expressed support for conspiracy theories that suggest that the US government invented AIDS in order to eradicate gay men and African Americans. Among the earliest published evidence of this theory is Jakob Segal's "AIDS: USA Home-Made Evil," (1986), a pamphlet that claims that scientists at Fort Detrick, MD manufactured the virus using human t-lymphotropic virus (HTLV-1) and Visna, a virus that effects sheep. This version of the AIDS origin myth is particularly common among some African American groups whose distrust of the mainstream (that is, white) medical-scientific establishment stemmed from the exposure of the Tuskegee Study.

Bogart and Thorbourn (2005) found that such conspiracy theories were endorsed by a high percentage of respondents to a national telephone survey about attitudes toward HIV/AIDS among black Americans. Conspiracy beliefs ranged from the belief that doctors actually put HIV into the lubricant used in condoms (and subsequently to a reluctance to use condoms) to endorsement of the military biological weapon theory. Many of their respondents mentioned the Tuskegee study in the same breath as their conspiracy beliefs about HIV/AIDS. By the 1990s, Tuskegee and skepticism toward the US government's responses to AIDS emerged in the form of a conspiracy theory about the development of HIV as a biological weapon. This conspiracy theory appears in

several rap songs from the 90s including Ice Cube's "I Wanna Kill Sam" (1991), Gang Starr's "Conspiracy" (1992), Public Enemy's "Race Against Time" (1994), and The Conscious Daughters' "All Caught Up" (1996).

### **Using Music to Talk About AIDS with Children**

Two final examples provide age-appropriate discussions of the epidemic for young children. Peter Alsop's "Gotta Lotta Living to Do" and Sally Fingeretti's "Home is Where the Heart Is" provide insight into the effects of HIV/AIDS upon children with friends, relatives, and neighbors who are living with HIV/AIDS. Both songs use folk music's storytelling quality, mostly acoustic, guitar-based instrumentation, singable choruses, and plainspoken language.

"Gotta Lotta Living to Do" begins with a young son asking his father what he knows about AIDS. With a gentle tone and fatherly reassurance, Alsop answers "sure," and begins to sing about a friend with AIDS who is "just like me and you." By drawing attention to similarities between his son and his friend, Alsop fosters empathy and discourages fear, shame, and blame. The young listener can play with, share with, hug, and love his friend just like any other. At the same time, he acknowledges the important realities of HIV/AIDS in the rough-and-tumble world of the playground. If the friend gets injured, "we'll patch him up 'cause AIDS won't let his blood cells fight" but "don't touch his blood." Alsop even addresses the reality of sadness, death, and loss by normalizing death as something we all experience, regardless of our HIV status.

Nonetheless, in the 1980s, a friend with AIDS was decidedly *not* "just like me and you." As noted, fear and stigma led to extreme reactions against people with AIDS.

Healthcare professionals frequently refused to enter the rooms of patients with AIDS, opting instead to leave their food trays or other essentials outside the door for the patient or a loved one to retrieve. People with AIDS lost their jobs, homes, and social support networks and were subject to dehumanizing social, legal, and physical violence and discrimination. By emphasizing values like love, loyalty, and friendship, Alsop—a child psychologists and songwriter—offers an antidote to this climate of fear that surrounded people with AIDS during this time. Furthermore, his decision to tailor his message to children demystified and normalized HIV/AIDS as a part of the social world rather than a terrifying and fatal plague.<sup>123</sup>

Sally Fingerett’s “Home is Where the Heart Is” takes a more circular route as a little girl takes in the surprising diversity of her suburban neighborhood. Fingerett’s four albums with Four Bitchin’ Babes and Mary Travers’ work with Peter, Paul, & Mary and as a solo artist tackle issues of racism, sexism, the environment, nuclear power, disability discrimination, and homophobia. Both women are also mothers who have spoken publically about their desire to raise children who believe in justice and equality for all and embrace all forms of diversity. Consequently, “Home” is not *just* a song about HIV/AIDS.

Rather, the song offers a critique of narrow definitions of family. In the first stanza, a young daughter notices a nice man named Martin on the corner who “shares his home with his friend Mark. They’re not brothers. They’re not cousins.” In the second verse, she sees Deb and Tricia “with their tools and ladders and room additions.” When she asks her mother about these two couples, the mother lovingly takes her hand and tells

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<sup>123</sup> A number of films from the late-1980s and early-1990s emphasized similar values and dramatized the struggles of children with HIV/AIDS and their families. See *The Ryan White Story* (ABC, 1989), *And Then There Was One* (1994), and *The Cure* (1995).

her that, “home is where the heart is, no matter how the heart lives.” By the end of the song, Martin is alone, heartbroken, and “knows that fate will soon be coming.” Without naming AIDS, “Home” implies that Mark has died of the syndrome, and that Martin is also ill. Rather than allow him to face his lover’s and his own death alone, the little girl and her mother embrace Martin, provide him companionship, and expand the boundaries of their family unit to include him.

### Chapter Three: Fighting AIDS Through Popular Culture

This chapter deals with extant songs that have been given new meaning in the context of HIV/AIDS. Specific pieces of music assumed new significance because they were beloved by individuals who died of AIDS. Other songs became songs “about” AIDS when they were used at memorial services of PWAs, AIDS political rallies, or vigils. Some songs became songs “about” AIDS because they appeared on the soundtrack of films about AIDS.<sup>1</sup> The potential for this category, then, is vast. Therefore, I limit my discussion to examples in which existing songs were used in conjunction with fundraising projects for AIDS charities.

The response to AIDS from city, state, and federal governments was uneven. In New York City, Mayor Ed Koch (1924-2013) largely ignored the growing health crisis and gay community leaders’ requests for meetings to discuss a citywide response to AIDS. According to filmmaker David France (2013), “Koch stood silent through years of headlines, obituaries, and deaths. He refused meetings with community members...Administratively, he created interdepartmental committees and appointed liaisons, but he gave them neither power nor resources to do anything real.”<sup>2</sup> By contrast,

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<sup>1</sup> A number of the men with whom I spoke recalled the powerful scene in Jonathan Demme’s *Philadelphia* (1993) in which Andy, Tom Hanks’ character who is dying of AIDS, guides his lawyer (Denzel Washington) through Maria Callas’ performance of “La mamma morta” from Umberto Giordano’s *Andrea Chénier* (1896).

<sup>2</sup> David France, “Ed Koch and the AIDS Crisis: His Greatest Failure,” *New York Magazine* 1 February 2013. According to France, there were more than 800 dead in 1984, yet the city had only spent only \$24,000 on AIDS. For a more detailed account of New York City’s official response to AIDS, see Larry Kramer’s *Reports from the Holocaust* (1989). Kramer was one of Koch’s most outspoken critics, and the author detailed his interactions with the Koch government in a number of articles he published in *The New York Native* and *The Village Voice* during this period. Susan Chambré’s *Fighting for Our Lives* (2006) is an in-depth history of the response to AIDS by gay communities in New York. Also see Sandra Panem’s *The AIDS Bureaucracy: Why Society Failed to Meet the AIDS Crisis and How We Might Improve Our Response* (1988) for a side-by-side comparison of New York and San Francisco’s responses to AIDS.

San Francisco mayor Diane Feinstein allocated \$187,000 to investigate reports of “gay cancer” before the term AIDS had been coined by the CDC. Feinstein’s AIDS budget for San Francisco was larger than that of the federal government.<sup>3</sup> The nation’s first hospital ward for people with AIDS was organized at San Francisco General in 1983, and other volunteer organizations.

The federal response to HIV/AIDS during Reagan’s presidency has been the subject of intense scrutiny. In June 1983, Reagan’s Secretary of Health and Human Services, Margaret Heckler, declared that AIDS was the administration’s “number-one health priority.” Heckler praised “the excellent work done by gay networks around the nation” to spread information about the illness.<sup>4</sup> President Reagan first mentioned HIV/AIDS in public at a press conference in September 1985, noting that “there’s no question about the seriousness of this and the need to find an answer.”<sup>5</sup> The administration allocated funds for HIV/AIDS research, but this money was distributed slowly, and scientists working at the NIH and other government research centers received priority funding. This decision was criticized by people with AIDS because it seemed to limit the potential of researchers working more closely with PWAs in their communities and effectively barred PWAs from participating and sharing their own expertise about AIDS. Further, Congress was controlled by Moral Majority leaders like Jesse Helms, whose conservative agendas successfully prohibited the use of federal monies for AIDS-related projects, understood as “promoting” gay sex. In 1988, Helms stated that “there is

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<sup>3</sup> Bill Stall, “California Elections/Governor,” *The Los Angeles Times* 7 September 1990.

<sup>4</sup> Heckler’s initial praise of the gay community has been overlooked by the scandal that erupted over the discovery of the HIV virus in 1984 and the stridently optimistic, and sadly still untrue, claim that a vaccine for HIV would be soon discovered.

<sup>5</sup> It is often mistakenly reported that Reagan first mentioned AIDS two years later, in 1987. See Dale Carpenter “Reagan and AIDS: A Reassessment,” *The Bay Area Reporter* 24 June 2004.

not one single case of AIDS in this country that cannot be traced in origin to sodomy.”<sup>6</sup>

Helms led Congressional resistance to funding AIDS research and services, including the Ryan White Care Act of 1990.<sup>7</sup>

In response to the indifference of the government at the federal, state, and city levels, affected communities, particularly gay men in New York, Los Angeles, and San Francisco, identified a number of areas of need. First, it was necessary to organize essential healthcare services for the sick. Second, they built a system of support services that included buddy systems, housing assistance, meal delivery services, and support/therapy groups. Third, activists protested political and governmental agencies. The government’s failure to meet the needs of people with AIDS inspired the grassroots networks that eventually led to the formation of New York’s Gay Men’s Health Crisis, the AIDS outreach branch of the San Francisco SHANTI Project, and other AIDS organizations around the nation. These healthcare, outreach, and activists responses to HIV/AIDS shared a common need: money. Thus, a fourth response to HIV/AIDS was fundraising.

The first AIDS fundraiser occurred on 11 August 1981 at the Manhattan apartment of author Larry Kramer.<sup>8</sup> Donations solicited from the eighty gay men who attended this meeting totaled \$6,635.00, and this money helped found Gay Men’s Health

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<sup>6</sup> States New Service, 17 May 1988.

<sup>7</sup> It must be noted that Helms later admitted that he was wrong about AIDS. In his memoir, *Here’s Where I Stand*, Helms wrote, “It had been my feeling that AIDS was a disease largely spread by reckless and voluntary sex and drug-abusing behavior, and that it would probably be confined to those in high-risk populations. I was wrong.” This is not an apology for Helms’ egregious behavior or his racist and homophobic attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors.

<sup>8</sup> At this point in history, AIDS was called “gay plague,” “gay cancer,” then GRID (gay-related immune deficiency). Between 80 and 100 gay men attended this first meeting and laid the groundwork for what would become GMHC. A 17 May 1982 letter from Nathan Fain to Larry Kramer (which is now housed in the Larry Kramer folder in the Randy Shilts Collection at the San Francisco Public Library Historical Center) confirms Kramer’s own recollections of the evening, which can be found in *Reports from the Holocaust: The Making of an AIDS Activist* (St. Martin’s Press, 1998)

Crisis (GMHC).<sup>9</sup> On 6 September, Kramer published in *The New York Native* an appeal for charitable contributions to Dr. Alvin Friedman-Kien's KS research project; he proceeded to solicit other donations on Fire Island that Labor Day weekend. His efforts netted an unimpressive \$769.35, much to the chagrin of Kramer and the board of GMHC. Later donations made up for the less than stellar weekend. By December, GMHC had raised \$11,806.55. The money helped establish a crisis helpline and supported the publication of a monthly newsletter.

As the number of sick and dead rose, so did the recognition that something was amiss among gay men in New York. Soon, other AIDS services organizations and research foundations appeared. These included Gay Men with AIDS, the People with AIDS Coalition, New York, The Community Research Initiative, and the American Foundation for AIDS Research (AmFar). Funds for all of these groups were raised through benefit galas, auctions, and ticket sales to events like the GMHC's star-studded Rodeo and Circus events at Madison Square Garden.

Musical events and recordings had already been used as an efficient and effective way to raise money for other causes. Throughout the 1970s, The Concert for Bangladesh (1971), Amchitka (1971), and Bob Dylan's Rolling Thunder Revue (1975) generated huge sums for social, political, and environmental causes. In the 1980s, musicians and artists responded to global crises like the famine in Ethiopia, South African Apartheid, and the impact of economic downfall on American family farms with their art. Sales of albums and singles like "Do They Know It's Christmas" (1984), "We Are the World," (1985) and tickets to concert events such as LiveAid (1985), FarmAid (1985), and Conspiracy of Hope (1986) raised millions of dollars for charitable causes. A

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<sup>9</sup> Larry Kramer, *Reports from the Holocaust: The Making of an AIDS Activist* (1998): 13.

constellation of such events in or around 1985 led Reebee Garofalo (1992) to designate that year as the birthdate for the phenomenon he christened “charity rock.”<sup>10</sup> The goals of a charity rock event are to agitate the public into action, to provide a space for arts activism, to increase awareness about a socio-political problem, and most importantly, to raise money.

For Neil Ullestad (1991), charity rock events “obscure the very real conflicts and suffering inflicted upon the world” in a spectacle of mostly Western world celebrities, while George Yúdice (1992) similarly complains that celebrity performers account for a tiny yet ridiculously affluent percentage of the globe’s wealthiest populations.<sup>11</sup> Garofalo also questions the long-term efficacy of fundraising as activism by accenting crucial differences “between charity and change, dependence and self-determination, quick fixes and longer-term developments.”<sup>12</sup> While donating money, purchasing a ticket, or buying an album give consumers the feeling that they are doing something to solve a problem, “simply generating huge sums of money [does not necessarily] solve problems which are fundamentally political.”<sup>13</sup> Furthermore, managing vast sums of money requires expertise and a massive coordination of resources to navigate the legal and financial channels through which the money must flow. And even when these conduits are established, the money does not necessarily alleviate the local problem(s). For instance, the famine in Ethiopia resulted as much from political forces as from drought. Airdrops of food and supplies were frequently confiscated by government officials or rebel groups and never made it into the bellies of starving men, women, and children.

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<sup>10</sup> Reebee Garofalo, *Rockin’ the Boat: Mass Music and Mass Movements* (South End Press, 1992).

<sup>11</sup> Neil Ullestad, “Diverse Rock Rebellion Subvert Mass Media Hegemony” in Garofalo (1992): 37-55; George Yúdice, “We Are Not the World,” *Social Text* 31/32 (1992): 202-216.

<sup>12</sup> Garofalo (1992), 28.

<sup>13</sup> Garofalo, 30.

The first specifically musical fundraiser for AIDS involved an extant song whose meaning changed in the context of HIV/AIDS. In 1985, UK band Coil covered “Tainted Love.” Originally, the song had been sung by Gloria Jones in 1964 before synth-pop band Soft Cell re-recorded it in 1981. John Balance (1962-2004) and Peter Christopherson (1955-2010) formed their experimental duo Coil in 1982. They paired with The Terrence Higgins Trust, a UK AIDS charity, for the benefit single which also included two other Coil songs, “Aqua Regis” and “Panic.” All three songs (a longer version of “Aqua Regis” and a different arrangement of “Panic”) appeared on Coil’s *Scatology* (1984). All proceeds from the single went to the Terrence Higgins Trust.<sup>14</sup>

Gloria Jones’ and Soft Cell’s versions of “Tainted Love” are bouncy dance-pop arrangements built around a bluesy, minor-tinged riff (Figure 2.1) that draw, respectively, on 1960s soul and 1980s New Wave conventions.<sup>15</sup> The lyrics describe a lover whose cheating ways have “tainted” a relationship with the singer, who once “ran to” their beloved but can now only “run from...this tainted love you’re giving.”



Figure 3.1, “Tainted Love” bass riff

Coil transformed the song into a funeral dirge by slowing the tempo dramatically, and paring the musical arrangement down to the riff (played by eerie synth tubular bells), clangorous synth orchestral and electric guitar hits, and a ghostly choir singing “oohs”

<sup>14</sup> To date, I have been unable to find specific sales figures for the single.

<sup>15</sup> Figure 1 is in C-minor, the key of Jones’ original. Soft Cell’s cover is in G-minor, and Coil’s is in A-minor.

and “ahhs.” John Balance’s vocal performance is evocative and beautiful. He speaks, sings, moans, and cries through the lyrics, emphasizing the devastation and anguish of this spoiled affair.

Peter Christopherson’s music video for the single transforms this story of “tainted love” into a stark and timely tale about the impact of AIDS. The central narrative of the video is a young man’s death, presumably from AIDS-related complications. He appears early in the video, being wheeled into the hospital room where he remains throughout the clip. He is shown in bed, hooked up to breathing machines and various IV bags, and eventually, his empty room is cleaned by a nurse, signaling his death. Interspersed among these scenes are various artsy and metaphorical images. Religious icons, woodcarvings of demons, and paintings of the Sacred Heart flash in time with the orchestra hits. Soft Cell singer Marc Almond makes a brief cameo in the video as the Grim Reaper. Dressed in punk biker gear, he enters the hospital room with a sinister grin on his face, takes the sick man’s food from his tray and eats it, then exits. As he leaves, the camera pans to the heart monitor, which shows a flat line.

Throughout the video, Balance drizzles a tabletop with honey, trapping dozens of flies in the sticky fluid, perhaps an allusion to the adage, “you catch more flies with honey”; perhaps the flies are gay men who have been lured by sweet seductions into the trap of AIDS. The video ends with Balance placing flowers on a tombstone and the sound of flies buzzing. The young man in the video turns out to have likely been his lover, and the “tainted love” he gave, in Walter Hughes (1994) words, “seemed to be passing into literalism.”<sup>16</sup>

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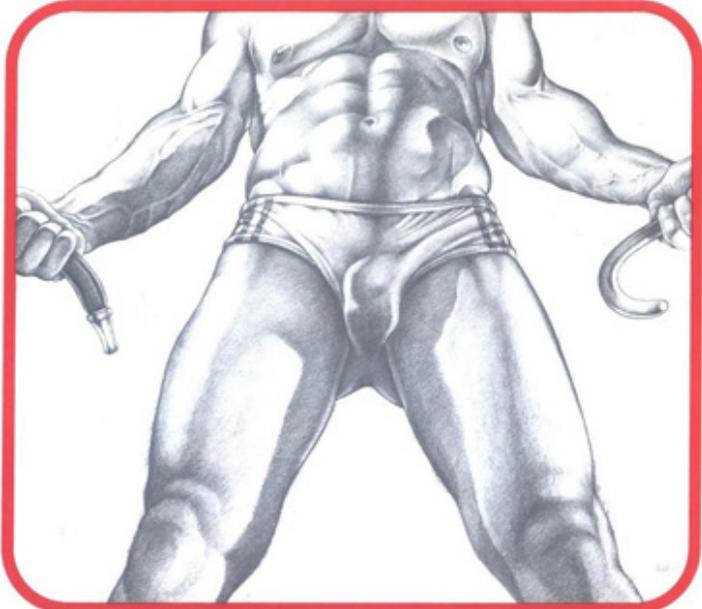
<sup>16</sup> Walter Hughes, “In the Empire of the Beat,” in *Microphone Fiends: Youth Music & Youth Culture*, Ross and Rose eds, (Routledge, 1994). “The representation of both desire and the beat as things that enter our

One of the first US AIDS fundraisers that specifically utilized music was “Showers,” a benefit dance at Paradise Garage, the popular and historically significant New York City gay nightclub from 1976 to 1987. The dance took place on 2 April 1982 (Figure 2). Tickets to the dance were sold at twenty dollars each, and the event raised \$52,000.00.<sup>17</sup> Similar local or smaller-scale events happened in cities around the country, and by the middle of the decade, larger HIV/AIDS fundraising concerts began to appear. Madonna performed a concert for AmFar at Madison Square Garden in July 1987, and musicians including The Grateful Dead and Tracy Chapman gathered in San Francisco for the Concert Against AIDS in 1989. Rock group Queen has staged an annual benefit concert for the Freddie Mercury Phoenix Trust since the lead singer lost his battle to AIDS in 1991, and in 1996, Broadway icon Bernadette Peters performed a concert benefit for GMHC. While live events have raised millions of dollars for AIDS research and charities, the impact of these one-time events was limited. The sale of studio and concert recordings provided HIV/AIDS organizations the benefit of product that could be sold for profit over longer periods of time.

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bodies from outside and take control of them had already given rise to a frequent metaphor of disease; but now the ‘night fever,’ the ‘boogie fever,’ the ‘tainted love,’ and the ‘love hangover’ seemed to be passing into literalism,” (154).

<sup>17</sup> These figures appear in Dudley Clendinen and Adam Nagourney, *Out for Good: The Struggle to Build a Gay Rights Movement in America* (Simon & Schuster, 1999), 468.



**THE GAY MEN'S HEALTH CRISIS'**  
PRESENTS  
**SHOWERS**  
A BENEFIT TO AID GAY MEN WITH KAPOSI'S SARCOMA AND OTHER  
GAY RELATED IMMUNODEFICIENCIES

paradise garage    thursday april 8, 1982    84 king street    9pm to 3am

surprise guests  
the new york city gay men's chorus appearing  
at 11pm  
visual entertainment

refreshments  
door prizes—a week for two at big ruby's guest  
house in key west florida  
and other prizes

ticket locations. (tickets go on sale march 1, 1982)

<small>west side</small> rough rider 420 columbus avenue (at 80th street)	<small>midtown</small> uncle charlie's south 581 third avenue (at 38th street)	<small>village</small> greetings 35 christopher street  new york man 13 christopher street	<small>cheese</small> new york jock 214 tenth avenue (at 23rd street)	<small>east side</small> greetings 742 madison avenue (at 64th street)
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(tickets at above locations or through the mail are \$20.00, at the door \$25.00, additional contribution can be made at the door)

THE GAY MEN'S HEALTH CRISIS' — AN AIDS-RELATED BENEFIT ORGANIZATION  
© 1982 THE GAY MEN'S HEALTH CRISIS' — AN AIDS-RELATED BENEFIT ORGANIZATION

Figure 3.2, Showers Poster, 1982.

Coile's "Tainted Love" was one of the earliest fundraising singles, and "That's What Friends Are For" followed later that year. The 1990s saw a number of compilation albums including *Feeding the Flame: Songs by Men to End AIDS* (1990), *For our Children* (1991), *Heartkeys: The AIDS Memorial Album* (1995), *And Trouble Came: Musical Responses to AIDS* (1996), *Mystique: Benefit for AIDS* (1999). These albums contain a mixture of existing songs and new material. For instance, songwriters John Bucchino and Peter Alsop contributed new works about AIDS to *Feeding the Flame* while folk music icon Pete Seger recorded his 1969 Civil Rights anthem "Quite Early Morning" and the English ballad "Hills of Glenshee" for the project. While these albums often represent the work of record label or group of musicians, other organizations like San Francisco radio station KKSF 103.7, Broadway Cares/Equity Fights AIDS, and The Red Hot Organization produce annual or regular albums to benefit AIDS. KKSF 103.7 has produced eighteen "AIDS Relief Sampler" albums since 1991. These albums feature popular works by jazz artists like Kenny G, Al Jarreau, and Kyle Eastwood. Broadway Cares/Equity Fights AIDS has sold bundles of original cast recordings for both Off-Broadway and Broadway musicals each year as part of their ongoing fundraising effort.

In what follows, I will focus on a two musical fundraisers from the 1980s and 1990s. First, I discuss "That's What Friends Are For," which was released as the first fundraiser for AmFar in 1985. Recorded by a quartet of legendary musicians, this song raised millions of dollars and also offered a startlingly simple yet revolutionary intervention in the AIDS crisis: friendship. Then, I turn my attention to *Red Hot + Blue*, a 1990 compilation album and cable television special produced by Red Hot. Using the songs of Cole Porter and the medium of music videos, *RHB* transforms Porter's songs

into mini AIDS vignettes that tackle a number of issues like stigma, activism, diagnosis, mourning, and caregiver burnout.

### **Friendship as a Revolutionary Act**

In the 1980s, people with AIDS constituted a class of untouchables for many Americans, especially those with little or no direct experience of the epidemic. Fearful of contagion because routes of transmission were only being discovered, hospital workers, nurses, employers, landlords, biological families, and in some cases even the lovers of people with AIDS abandoned the sick. Such failures to be a friend to PWAs extended to other groups affected by the epidemic. Teenager Ryan White (1971-1990) was banned from attending school in his Indiana hometown and successfully sued the school district in a high profile AIDS discrimination case. In Arcadia, Florida, neighbors burned the home of Louise and Clifford Ray after a federal court ruled that their three HIV-positive hemophiliac children had the right to attend school in the city in 1987.

In this climate of hostility and indifference to the suffering and injustices heaped upon people living with HIV/AIDS, a simple act of friendship—a look or a touch—could be a radical political statement. The AIDS-related death of American film icon Rock Hudson on 2 October 1985 created an opportunity for broader discussions about the impact of AIDS on America. The effects of Hudson's death could be felt almost immediately. Hudson's friend Elizabeth Taylor (1932-2011) had been actively working with AIDS Project Los Angeles since January 1985 to organize a fundraising gala, but his death galvanized her efforts. Taylor became the first high-profile celebrity AIDS advocate. A month after Hudson's death, Tammy Faye Baker (1942-2007) made

television history when she interviewed Metropolitan Community Church pastor Steve Pieters, who had “full-blown” AIDS, on *Praise the Lord*, her Trinity Broadcast Network, bringing HIV/AIDS into the homes of her primarily evangelical/fundamentalist Christian viewers.

Friendship is a vague concept in North American culture. English suffers from a paucity of terms to describe the spectrum of intimate relationships that fall the generic category of “friendship.”<sup>18</sup> Our heterocentric culture prioritizes the romantic-sexual relationships that form nuclear family units. Yet for gay men and women, friendship has long been a central organizing principle for alternative social-sexual networks. George Chauncey (1994) found evidence of gay friendship networks beginning in late-nineteenth-century New York.<sup>19</sup> Adrienne Rich (1980) proposed a spectrum of relationships between women—the “lesbian continuum”—that encompasses myriad possibilities including biological kin, political affiliations, and romantic-sexual relationships. In “Friendship as a Way of Life” (1981), Foucault sketched the socio-political ramifications for gay men’s friendships. For Foucault, the intermingling of the erotic and the platonic in gay men’s friendships provided one escape route from binary logic of heterosexual relationships.

For Peter Nardi (1999) gay friendships offer comfort, familiarity, and solidarity through the shared experience of having “grown up with a stigmatized identity and [having] experienced—despite other significant differences—at least some similar forms

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<sup>18</sup> For more on this subject, see Lillian Rubin’s *Just Friends: The Role of Friendship in Our Lives* (Harper-Perennial, 1985).

<sup>19</sup> George Chauncey, *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Making of the Gay Male World, 1890-1940*. (Basic Books, 1994).

of personal and social marginalization.”<sup>20</sup> He finds that many gay men consider their “rich network of friends like a family, how sex has been a dimension of their earlier friendships with some of their friends, and how, for some, their friends mean more and last longer than do their romantic relationships.”<sup>21</sup> Gay friendships are celebrated in works of fiction, movies, television, and even in the cultural artifacts that gay men reappropriate from mainstream culture, for instance the celebration of friendship in television shows like *The Golden Girls* and *Designing Women*.

For singer Dionne Warwick, the deaths of close friends were particularly painful. “You have to be granite to want to help people with AIDS,” she told *The Washington Post* in 1988, “because the devastation is so painful to see. I was so hurt to see my friends die with such agony.” So, she gathered three of her musical friends: soul legend Gladys Knight, Motown wunderkind Stevie Wonder, and singer-songwriter Elton John. Working under the name Dionne & Friends, the quartet reworked Burt Bacharach and Carole Bayer Sager’s sentimental ballad, “That’s What Friends Are For,” a song that was first recorded by Rod Stewart for a 1982 romantic comedy, *Night Shift*. The single and an accompanying music video were released in 1985 as the first fundraiser for AmFar. In twenty-eight years, sales of the single have raised more than three million dollars.

The lyrics of “That’s What Friends Are For” are nondescript, sentimental, and rather bland, which is probably due to their original context as the love theme for a romantic comedy. In the age of AIDS, however, these forgettable lyrics resounded with a new significance. Friends, lovers, and gay brothers were dying in increasing numbers. To put this in perspective, Kramer published his essay, “1,112 and Counting,” in March of

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<sup>20</sup> Peter Nardi, *Gay Men’s Friendships: Invincible Communities* (U of Chicago Press, 1999): 3.

<sup>21</sup> Nardi, *Gay Men’s Friendships* (1999), 1.

1983.<sup>22</sup> The title refers to the number of cases of AIDS in the US at the time. In January of 1983, just three months earlier, there were just 41. By 1985, there were approximately 4,000 cases of AIDS in New York City and roughly 2,000 AIDS-related deaths. The sense of pending loss and permanent separation made “That’s What Friends Are For” a fitting anthem for AIDS awareness.

In their performance of “That’s What Friends Are For,” Dionne & Friends stage a conversation between several friends, one of whom is HIV-positive and is probably dying of AIDS-related illness. It is unclear if the PWA is one of the speakers or a listener, a confusion that is delightfully compounded by the presence of four different singers. Each singer represents a different constituency impacted by the epidemic: women of color (Warwick and Knight), minority men (Wonder), and gay men (John). This plurality of speakers resonates with Hallas’ (2009) assertion that queer AIDS media utilize multiple talking heads to create a polyphonic response to HIV/AIDS that includes medical experts, political authorities, AIDS activists, and people living with AIDS.<sup>23</sup>

The lyrics begin with the conjunction “and” which Bacharach sets to an eighth-note anacrusis. Starting on a metrically and grammatically weak beat gives the impression that the text picks up in the middle of a conversation. At the conclusion of the song, Warwick’s vocal improvisations over a long fade out suggest that we are only hearing a segment of a longer dialogue. The specific relationships in the song are difficult to discern. The use of first-person throughout suggests that the speakers addresses a sick or dying friend, and this rhetorical strategy puts the listener in the position of the PWA.

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<sup>22</sup> Larry Kramer, “1,112 and Counting,” *The New York Native* 59 March 12-27 1982, reprinted in *Reports from the Holocaust*, 33-51.

<sup>23</sup> Roger Hallas, *Reframing Bodies* (Duke U Press, 2009).

The musical score is in 4/4 time and consists of two staves. The right hand (treble clef) plays a melodic line with eighth and sixteenth notes, while the left hand (bass clef) provides a simple harmonic accompaniment with quarter notes. Chord symbols are placed above the right-hand staff: Eb9, Bb, Ab, g7, c7, Ab, Bb7, and Eb. The key signature has two flats (Bb and Eb).

Figure 3.3, “Friends” introduction  
(Transcription by author)

The second verse is more straightforward because the lyrics are consistently directed to a listener who is leaving or dying. The speaker admits that “you came and opened me, and now there’s so much more I see.” For gay listeners, this lyric might suggest the experience of being closeted, moving into a gay milieu, and making gay friends who help you navigate your way from the closet to being out. Coming out effects a radical change on the way most gay people see the world. Often the individual who facilitates this transition into queer worlds holds a cherished position in the life or memory of each of us. Alternately, “came and opened me” is a delightfully suggestive phrase that could indicate the “opening” of the rectum in anal sex.

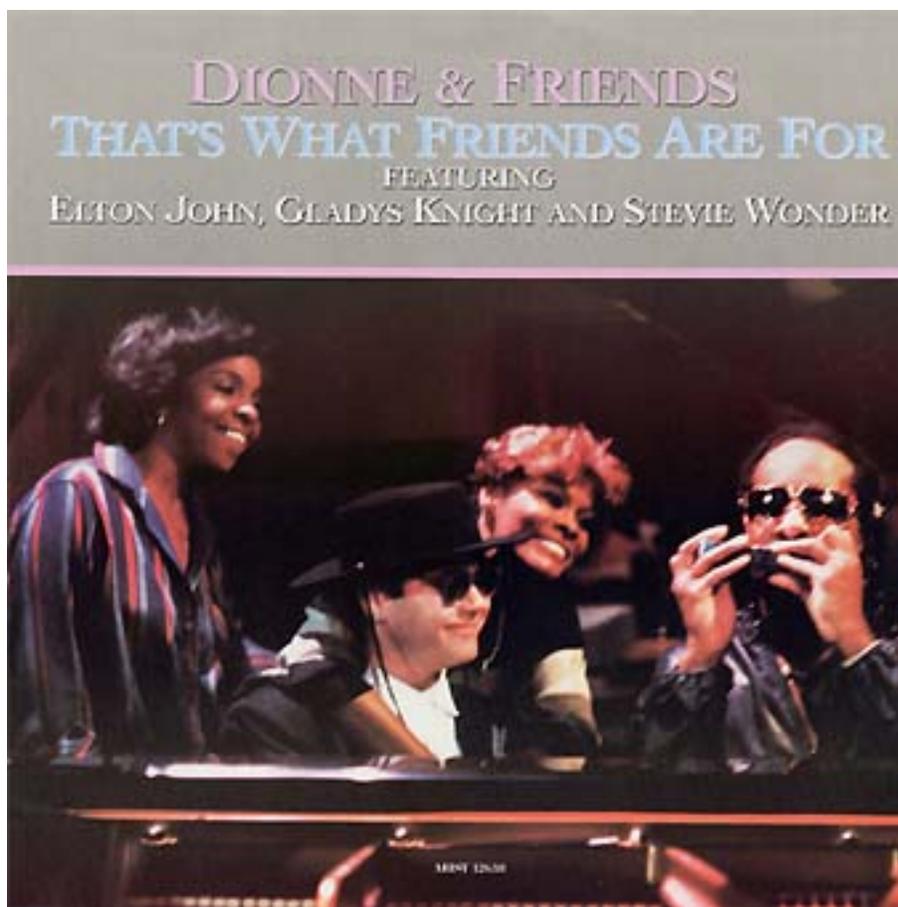


Figure 3.4, “That’s What Friends Are For” (1985)

Bacharach sets the tentative lyrics in each verse to a gently syncopated melody whose long, arching contour subtly reinforces the emotional transformation described in the text. The melody traverses a large musical space over the course of a single bar; for instance, it spans a seventh from the downbeat of the first and second bars of verse 1. Bacharach smoothens the jarring effect of these dissonant intervals in two ways. First, the outer notes of these intervals are always chord tones in the supporting harmonies. Second, he fills the gap between the outer pitches with scalar motion and consonant skips that move in primarily one direction. So, in the first bar, the melodic minor seventh from Bb up to Ab is filled with short ascending/descending figures and small leaps. This rapid

ascent is followed by a gradual descent over four bars. The composite effect, then, is smooth, measured, and balanced. Frequent melodic suspensions over chains of seventh chords and chromatic chords like III7, iv7, and bVI7 provide a characteristically rich harmonic palette. And although this piece does not exhibit Bacharach's signature additive meters and irregular groupings of eighth-note pulses in simple and compound meters, he inserts a one-bar hiccup of 2/4 to connect the first two stanzas of text.

Figure 3.5, “Friends” verse melody

The chorus utilizes a descending bass line characteristic of laments (Figure 2.6), and the harmonies derive from the bass movement. The upward gestures in the melodic line gently tug against the downward movement in the bass, first with a short repeated motive, then with longer melodic arcs. The final melodic interval, an exposed descending minor seventh, reverses the melodic motion described in bars 1 and 2 above, without the connecting scalar material.

The image shows a musical score for the 'Friends' Chorus. It consists of a grand staff with a treble clef and a bass clef. The key signature is two flats (B-flat and E-flat), and the time signature is 4/4. The melody is written in the treble clef, and the bass line is in the bass clef. Above the staff, a series of chords are indicated: Eb9, Bb, Ab, g7, c7, Ab, Bb7, Eb9, Bb, Db6, C7sus, Abm6, and Bb7. The melody features a mix of eighth and sixteenth notes, with some rests and a final whole note. The bass line consists of a simple harmonic accompaniment of quarter notes.

Figure 3.6, “Friends” Chorus  
(Transcription by author)

Bass, percussion, and a soaring string arrangement supplement the small ensemble consisting of vocals by all four musicians, piano (played by John), and harmonica (played by Wonder). Warwick delivers a relatively straightforward and unadorned statement of the melody in the first verse and chorus. Subsequent iterations of the verses and chorus by Wonder, John, and Knight become increasingly ornamented in ways that highlight each singer’s signature vocal style. Wonder includes quick turns and trills in his bright, nasal tenor while John uses guttural growls, shouts, and swoops. Knight infuses her solo chorus with a throaty gospel energy. The quartet joins in a brief moment of four-part harmony on the final lines, “I’ll be on your side forever more.” As the song ends, Wonder’s harmonica motive, which opened the song, returns while Warwick and John trade short snippets of improvised melody based on the titular refrain.

### **Red Hot +**

Working as a professor and entertainment lawyer in New York City in the 1980s, John Carlin witnessed the devastation of AIDS first-hand. “People I used to see on the street—whose studios I visited and considered leaders of my generation—were suddenly

gone forever,” he wrote in 2006.<sup>24</sup> In an effort to help, Carlin and his firm organized a fundraiser for HIV/AIDS, “then [the firm] never gave away the money.”<sup>25</sup> Frustrated, Carlin devised his own HIV/AIDS fundraiser, a tribute to American composer Cole Porter by various opera singers he knew. However, this idea started to strike him as absurd because “American popular songs weren’t classical music. Porter wrote...for the greatest popular performers of his day.” With the help of a colleague in his law firm, Carlin founded The Red Hot Organization, a non-profit dedicated to “fight AIDS through pop culture.” Using his industry connections, Red Hot assembled an array of contemporary pop and rock singers including David Byrne, k.d. lang, U2, and Annie Lennox to record Porter’s songs for the reconceived project. He then paired each singer and song with an innovative director to produce an original music video.<sup>26</sup>

The result was *Red, Hot + Blue* (1990), the non-profit’s first fundraising compilation. Red Hot has since produced twenty compilation albums and numerous live and online musical events around the world. *RHB* first aired as a special on HBO and included twenty performances and their accompanying music videos in addition to a number of short public service announcement segments by actors Richard Gere, John Malkovich, and designer Jean-Paul Gaultier. The program also featured artworks by Keith Haring, David Wojnarowicz, and Gran Fury. The soundtrack album, a VHS tape of the special, and an array of related Red Hot merchandise (including clothes designed by Gaultier) were available for purchase. All proceeds went to various HIV/AIDS charities, service organizations, and research institutions. In 2006, Red Hot re-released the

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<sup>24</sup> John Carlin, *Red Hot + Blue* liner notes (2006).

<sup>25</sup> Christopher John Farley, “Music: Beautifully Blurred,” *Time Magazine* 30 August 1999.

<sup>26</sup> A complete list of songs, performers, and directors can be found in Appendix X and a complete discography for Red Hot can be found in Appendix X<sub>2</sub>.

soundtrack album and a DVD of the music videos as a double-disc set. My analyses of songs and videos refer to the 2006 version of *Red Hot + Blue*.

Image Removed

Figure 3.7, Gaultier designs for Red Hot merchandise.  
(New York University Falles Special Collections Library)

Although Porter's music is decidedly *not* rock, I include *Red, Hot + Blue* in the category of charity rock for two reasons. The first is practical. Although Garofalo describes Live Aid, Farm Aid, and other mega events from the 1980s as *rock* events, the actual roster of musicians and genres represented at such events encompassed rock, folk, pop, jazz, and country and myriad subgenres. *RHB* includes rap, rock, punk, pop, jazz, and even world beat. Boundaries are delightfully crossed, blurred, or ignored on the musical tracks. The videos, too, display an eclecticism, ranging across performance videos, traditional narratives, and edgier avant-garde/postmodern techniques as well as some videos directly inspired by AIDS activism. The second reason is ideological. Iconic events that paved the way for charity rock, including the 1968 Monterey International Pop Festival and the 1969 Woodstock Music and Arts Festival, were motivated by a rock

ethos based in the conviction that music can effect social change. Band Aid, Live Aid, Farm Aid, and Red Hot rely on this same ethos to generate revenue through ticket and merchandise sales in order to accomplish their practical goals.<sup>27</sup>

*Red Hot + Blue* differs from other charity rock events because it is “not an ephemeral live event, but a lasting work of art—a multimedia album that would update [the various ‘songbook’ projects by artists like Ella Fitzgerald and Frank Sinatra] and raise money and awareness in the fight against AIDS.”<sup>28</sup> As with “That’s What Friends Are For,” sales of the project continue to generate revenue for charitable organizations. Carlin and the other directors of Red Hot still say that they are “the only company in the world that wants to go out of business.”<sup>29</sup> Until scientists discover a cure, Red Hot will continue to produce compilation albums, organize public performance, and use music in the fight against AIDS.<sup>30</sup>

### **Cole Porter, AIDS Activist?**

Cole Porter’s songs draw on conventions of jazz, Tin Pan Alley, and Broadway. They incorporate campy, clever lyrics that trade in double-entendre, novel alliterative or rhyming chains, and a gossipy style characteristic of a flamboyant gay identity often seen

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<sup>27</sup> For more on the types of music video, see Chapter 4 of Kaplan’s *Rocking Around the Clock* (Methuen, 1987) and Chapter 2 of Railton and Watson’s *Music Video and the Politics of Representation* (U of Edinburgh Press, 2011). Kaplan is especially preoccupied with the postmodern aspects of music video in general and MTV in particular, though her ideas have been heavily critiqued by Goodwin (1992) as well as by Railton and Watson. Nonetheless, her five-part taxonomy of music videos remains relevant to those produced up to 1993. Railton and Watson produce a four-part scheme in which they update some of the ideas found in Kaplan and Goodwin but, as with all taxonomies, it cannot contain even all of the examples they explore in other chapters of the text. For instance, Pink’s “Stupid Girls,” which they analyze in the first chapter, does not easily fit into any of their four types.

<sup>28</sup> Carlin (2006).

<sup>29</sup> Interestingly, other charity rock events like LiveAid and FarmAid have recently appeared in anniversary DVD sets.

<sup>30</sup> Red Hot’s most recent compilation album are *Dark was the Night* (2009), a two-disc set of indie rock songs by performers like Iron & Wine, The National, Dirty Projectors, and Grizzly Bear, and *Red Hot + Rio 2* (2011), a tribute to Tropicália, a musical style popular in Brazil in the 1960s.

in 1930s Broadway and film musicals.<sup>31</sup> The roster of artists who performed and recorded Porter's music is diverse and includes Judy Garland, Ella Fitzgerald, Elvis Presley, James Brown, Dolly Parton, Barbra Streisand, Chanticleer, and Jessye Norman.

Porter's life, lyrics, and music illuminate an important era in the history of gay identity in the US. Wilfred Sheed (2008) offers the following description of Porter:

Fortunately in [Porter's] own day, the general public didn't know a homosexual from the Father of the Bride, and he was able to hide his gay self inside an even gayer persona and wrap it all up in an acceptable marriage and pass the whole thing off as a facsimile of Cary Grant.<sup>32</sup>

This ability to play with surfaces, to "pass," was essential in an era when gay men and lesbians were legally prohibited from gathering in public places, subjected to police raids, and could be sequestered in mental institutions, hospitals, and prisons against their will.<sup>33</sup>

Katherine Bergeron's 1995 essay on *Red Hot + Blue* covers some of the same material as my discussion, but with a different focus.<sup>34</sup> For Bergeron, the album sheds light on the changes between Porter's sensibility and anything that would be idiomatic in present-day popular music. In part, this is because Porter's playful treatment of homosexuality, and of most other things, is at odds with present-day pop's emphasis on direct, heartfelt disclosure. But also, as Bergeron notes, Porter's ironic ambivalence about romance is less accessible to us when sex and romance are at odds with a deadly

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<sup>31</sup> Vito Russo's classic *The Celluloid Closet* (Harper & Row, 1987) lays the foundation for thinking about the history of media representations of homosexuality that includes film musicals. Others like D. A. Miller's *Place for Us: Essay on the Broadway Musical* (Harvard U Press, 1998), John Clum's uneven *Something for the Boys: Musical Theater and Gay Culture* (St. Martin's Press, 2001), and Stacy Ellen Wolf's *A Problem Like Maria: Gender and Sexuality in the American Musical* (U of Michigan Press, 2002) explore the specific relationships between homosexuality and stage/screen musicals.

<sup>32</sup> Wilfred Sheed, *The House that George Built: With a Little Help From Irving, Cole, and a Crew of about Fifty* (Random House, 2008): 143.

<sup>33</sup> For more, see George Chauncey, *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Making of the Gay Male World* (Basic Books, 1995).

<sup>34</sup> Katherine Bergeron, "Uncovering Cole," *Repercussions* 4/2 (1995): 10-29.

epidemic. Given her emphasis, Bergeron is not particularly concerned with the goals of the *Red Hot + Blue* songs and videos as activist interventions or representations of life in the time of AIDS, and it is these issues that concern me most.

Ethan Mordden's review of the compilation appeared in *The New Yorker* in 1991.<sup>35</sup> Mordden is preoccupied with the distinction between the craft of composing for the Broadway stage and the vitality and adaptability that has allowed rock to dominate popular music since the 1950s. "Rock isn't even a specific form of music now," he wrote, "Rock is virtually all current, non-Broadway music."<sup>36</sup> Like Bergeron, Mordden evaluates *Red Hot + Blue* not as an artifact of AIDS activism but as an opportunity for "today's musicians to come to terms with [Porter's] music."<sup>37</sup>

My analysis of *Red Hot + Blue* begins with David Byrne's interpretation of "Don't Fence Me In," which opens the collection. Acting as performer and director, Byrne takes a postmodern delight in mixing musical styles as well as sexual, racial, and gendered identities through a combination of striking visual effects. Next, I turn my attention to Adelle Lutz and Sandy McLeod's video for "Too Darn Hot," as performed by British pop duo Erasure. This video activates a popular AIDS activist fantasy of media takeover. Finally, videos by Jimmy Somerville, k. d. lang, and Annie Lennox form a trio that depicts three distinct stages in the experience of AIDS in the 1980s and early-1990s: diagnosis, sickness, and death. Steve McLean's video for Somerville's rendition of this classic Porter song asks viewers to consider a single question: what will save us now that sex won't? Percy Adlon pairs lang's glorious performance of "So in Love" with a heartbreaking video about caregiver burnout. Ed Cachman's touching tribute to Derek

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<sup>35</sup> Ethan Mordden, "Critic at Large: Rock and Cole," *The New Yorker* 28 October 1991.

<sup>36</sup> Mordden (1991), 102.

<sup>37</sup> Mordden (1991), 104.

Jarman brings the collection to a conclusion with Lennox's touching reading of "Ev'ry Time We Say Goodbye."

### **The Face(s) of AIDS: Don't Fence Me In**

*Red Hot + Blue* commences with Cole Porter's "Don't Fence Me In," a cowboy song that the composer attempted to have withdrawn from his catalogue. Musically, the song is something of a throwaway for Porter. Its major key, I-IV-V harmonies, straight rhythms, and melodic profile are utterly bland. The lyrics are full of Americana: big sky, open vistas, independence, the boundless possibilities of westward expansion, and manifest destiny. Of course, manifest destiny required, among other things, the enslavement of African Americans and the dislocation of indigenous groups of Native Americans as European settlers and later generations of white Americans took over the North American continent. So, the borderless landscape of the song was dotted with Indian reservations, slave-supported plantations, religious persecution and conversion, and the destruction of non-European cultures. In other words, American freedom relied very much on putting certain kinds of people in fences, if not in chains.

Originally composed for the unproduced 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox film *Adios, Argentina* (1934), the song eventually appeared in *Hollywood Canteen* (1943). The movie follows the antics of two servicemen on sick leave during a weekend at the real Hollywood Canteen, a real-life Los Angeles nightclub that catered to military personnel from 1942-1945.

There is something uncomfortable about Rogers' performance of "Don't Fence Me In," and for me it begins with the voice. Dressed in cowboy regalia, Rogers rides in

like a dream of the Wild West. His down-home drawl and cowboy plainness endear him to onlookers as he politely introduces himself and his famous horse, Trigger. His speech is full of “y’alls” and “howdys,” but when he joins the band and begins to sing, all traces of the cowboy accent vanish. Instead, he croons with impeccable diction, an open throat, controlled vibrato, and a sweet timbre. The string band trots along, playing a square four-beat pulse with zero trace of that lilt or swing we expect from a cowboy’s song. During the brief instrumental break, a solo fiddle takes over the melodic line, and things begin to swing. Only, the rhythmical exactitude of the gesture—two equal eighth notes performed precisely as a quarter note + eighth note triplet—comes off as stiff or even anxious. When Rogers resumes his singing, the triplets disappear, and we’re back to the cowboy crooner.

My discomfort stems from the performance’s hyper-stylization. Everything in it seems so inauthentic: Rogers’ shift from cowboy to crooner and back; the squareness of the music; the controlled vocal production. For a song whose lyrics celebrate a world without borders, everything in this performance seems decidedly fenced in.

The song appears again briefly in a reprise by The Andrews Sisters, who add that trademark three-part harmonies, swing vocal embellishments, and scat-like vocables. Again, though, the performance undermines the message. In 1944, The Andrews Sisters recorded another version of “Don’t Fence Me In” with crooner Bing Crosby. Lulled by breezy chromatic interjections, the trio alternates verses with Crosby, creating a tension between the Sisters’ tight harmonies and the crooner’s *rubato* warbling. Echoes of the cowboy fantasy sound in this recording, too, particularly in the clip-cop woodblock and orchestra’s easy lilting rhythm. I detail these performances because aspects of each will figure into David Byrne’s recording of the song and the accompanying music video.

Byrne subverts the song's celebration of a particularly US ideology by incorporating a variety of multi-cultural musical idioms including rock, pop, zydeco, folk, and Brazilian drumming. US culture has been described using a variety of metaphors: the melting pot, the ethnic stew, and the salad bowl/tossed salad. In Byrne's reimagining of the song, I hear the aural equivalent of the "tossed salad." Distinct elements retain their individual sonic flavor, but the whole adds up to something greater than its individual ingredients. In Byrne's musical kitchen, Porter's song becomes a celebration of plurality and diversity.

Three main categories of sound signal specific national or ethnic groups as well as musical practices that have shaped American popular music. Perhaps more than any single instrument, the electric guitar symbolizes rock and its complicated history of raced musical practices from the hands of African-American bluesmen in the early-twentieth century to the mostly white guitar gods of the 1970s.<sup>38</sup> Through jazz, punk, and metal, the guitar epitomizes phallic masculinity in American music. Although Byrne plays guitar on the song, he does so without virtuosic solos or riffs so that the instrument lacks the prominence it assumes in other genres.<sup>39</sup> Less macho instruments like accordion and fiddle assume the solo roles in this arrangement and signify working class music like country, folk, and zydeco and their associated white, Cajun, and working class

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<sup>38</sup> For more on the complex history of the guitar in US music, race, and gender, see Steve Waksman's *Instruments of Desire: The Electric Guitar and the Shaping of Musical Experience* (Harvard U Press, 1999).

<sup>39</sup> Generally speaking, Byrne is not part of the phallic cult of guitar gods. His persona is somewhat nerdy and decidedly artsy. In his review of *Stop Making Sense* (1985), a documentary concert film by Jonathan Demme, Thomas Doherty offered this description of Byrne: "sunken eyes, skin wrapped tight around cadaverous skull, lanky physique, and law student élan, he is an unlikely rock god, a fragile, ascetic figure who also has something of the serial killer about him. Merely by slicking back his hair or donning a pair of black-framed glasses, he can look more alien than Ziggy Stardust. Byrne's trademark body language—ostrich-like head movements, herky-jerky shoulders, free-floating limbs, and pliable visage—seems to defy the laws of gravity and anatomy with the same disdain." See "Stop Making Sense," *Film Quarterly* 38/4 (1985): 12-16.

populations. The intricate polyrhythms of a Brazilian percussion ensemble (tambourim, timbao, repinique, surdo, caixa, and whistle) energize the track while also flattening out any trace of swing in the arrangement. The presence of these instruments sonically interpolates African Americans and Latinos into Byrne's aural portrait of America.

As Crimp (1992) noted, people with AIDS were frequently portrayed as gay men who were isolated, emaciated, and frightened in photography and news coverage in the 1980s and 1990s.<sup>40</sup> However, the realities of AIDS were far more complex. Gay men were among the first groups impacted by the epidemic, but as Cathy Cohen (1994) demonstrated, AIDS was the cause of the deaths of many African American and minority injection drug users in the 1970s in an epidemic of so-called Junkie Pneumonia. So, the sonic inclusion of blacks and Latinos in Byrne's arrangement may represent an effort to complicate our picture of who is effected by HIV/AIDS.

The music video redraws the borders of AIDS in America to include people of many ages, races, and genders. Appearing throughout in tight close-ups, they stare and speak directly into the camera, and by doing so, bear witness to what Hallas (2009) calls "the simultaneously individual and collective trauma of AIDS."<sup>41</sup>

"Don't Fence Me In" redeploys and reframes the notion of talking head. Conventionally, "talking heads" are news anchors, medical experts, scientists, and politicians who appear in settings that telegraph their professional training to viewers through the use of prominently displayed graduate diplomas, offices filled with authoritative books, and appropriately professional clothing like lab coats or suits. "The talking head has become a foundational practice in documentary films that bear witness

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<sup>40</sup> Douglas Crimp, "Portraits of People with AIDS," reprinted in Crimp (2002), 83-108.

<sup>41</sup> Roger Hallas, *Reframing Bodies: AIDS, Bearing Witness, and the Queer Moving Image* (Duke U Press, 2009): 3.

to historical trauma or systematic oppression.”<sup>42</sup> By multiplying the number of subjects, dressing everyone in the same black t-shirt, placing all the subjects in the same white studio space, and allowing multiple voices into the conversation both figuratively (through the various sonic elements) and literally (via the collective chant of the titular refrain), the video complicates the notion of the talking head.<sup>43</sup>

Byrne further undermines the authority of a singular talking head (including his own) by destroying the coherence of individual faces. Horizontal and vertical splices reassemble these faces into hybrid figures; faces are quartered and recombined into playfully grotesque composites as individuality, the coherent self, and subjectivity dissolve. In the midst of these changing faces, Roy Rogers and the Andrews Sisters appear in short clips from *Hollywood Canteen*. Order and identity are restored as the video ends with a slow panning shot of the entire chorus. However, this recovered coherence is short-lived. As the camera retreats, the black t-shirts make it difficult to distinguish individual bodies, and faces gradually become less and less distinct. In the closing shot, the mass of faces and t-shirts resembles a drop of blood on a microscope slide, and the chorus becomes the human immunodeficiency virus itself, delivering a warning, “don’t fence me in!”

### **Imagining Activism: Too Darn Hot**

AIDS activists produced educational, political, and artistic videos that crisscrossed the country as they were mailed between communities and to media outlets.

AIDS activist videos aired in meetings, at demonstrations, in theaters, and in museum

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<sup>42</sup> Hallas (2009): 39.

<sup>43</sup> Hallas (2009): 52. Multiplying the number of talking heads is one way Hallas identifies that AIDS activist videos decentered authority.

exhibits. For Hallas (2009), such videos functioned as sites for the playful enactment of activist fantasies, and these playgrounds inspired real life actions. For instance, Wave 3, an ACT UP affinity group who produced theatrical events and films, created *Rockville is Burning* in 1989.

The film takes its name from the Maryland home to the National Institutes for Health (NIH). NIH laboratories are responsible for much of the government –funded research on AIDS therapies. The film title also references a New York City drag ball that also gave Jenny Livingston’s landmark 1990 documentary, *Paris is Burning*, its name. In *Rockville is Burning*, a group of militant activists hijack a national news network in order to disseminate accurate information about HIV/AIDS to the US public. The film is satirical and often funny, yet it also seethes with the righteous indignation of a community who felt misrepresented by the mainstream media.

Fantasies of a media takeover circulated throughout AIDS activist groups in the 1980s.<sup>44</sup> On 23 January 1991, the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power attempted to make this fantasy a reality by staging The Day of Desperation. The plan was to hijack the big four New York City news outlets: ABC, CBS, NBC, and PBS. Groups of activists spent weeks casing studios, creating fake identification badges, and mapping routes in and out of the buildings that would allow them to avoid security. The painted banners emblazoned with activist slogans, which they planned to unfurl on national news.

John Weir, an ACT UP member whose father was NBC’s director of broadcast and communication at the time, helped organize the demonstration. In a 2010 interview for *The Act Up Oral History Project*, Weir spoke with author and activist Sarah

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<sup>44</sup> See Alexandra Jhuasz, *AIDS TV* (1995)

Schulman about *The Day of Desperation*.<sup>45</sup> “The genius of ACT UP,” he said, “was how careful people were to plan this stuff.” When all the preparations were made, teams made their way to the various studios and

We just ran out, chanting, “Fight AIDS not Arabs!” and trying to unfold the banner at the same time. And I knew it was like predetermined somehow, I thought I know how to get in front of the camera. And I just looked for the monitor, the red light on top of the camera...And it didn’t matter what I said, really. Because, I thought, I’m going to going fucking get on that fucking news show, in front of that camera, one way or the other! And then, of course, all the technicians jumped on us, immediately.<sup>46</sup>

Only Weir’s group successfully interrupted the news that night. As the unshakable Dan Rather began the *CBS Evening News*, Weir appeared briefly on camera before the network cut to commercial. After a brief break, Rather offered viewers an apology “for the rude people who interrupted the program” and continued with the broadcast.

For their contribution to *Red Hot + Blue*, Adelle Lutz (who was married to David Byrne at the time) and Sandy McLeod chose to engage with the fantasy of an activist media takeover using synth-pop duo Erasure’s performance of “Too Darn Hot.”

Formed in 1985 by singer Andy Bell and multi-instrumentalist Vince Clarke (Depeche Mode, Yazoo, The Assembly), Erasure rose to international prominence in the mid-to-late 1980s with singles like “Sometimes (1987), “A Little Respect” (1988), and their critically acclaimed album, *The Innocents* (1988). That album included one of their biggest hits, “Chains of Love.”

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<sup>45</sup> John Weir and Sarah Schulman, “ACT UP Oral History Project Interview,” 24 June 2010. For more, see The ACT UP Oral History Project website, <http://www.actuporalhistory.org/interviews/images/weir.pdf>

<sup>46</sup> Weir and Schulman (2010).

Throughout their career, Bell and Clarke have maintained a purposefully apolitical stance and insisted that their music is for pleasure and dancing. Thus, they form an interesting counterpoint to their fellow Brits, Pet Shop Boys, whose erudite and ironic music has been dissected by critics and scholars. By contrast, critics have mostly dismissed Erasure. Richard Smith's 1994 editorial about the group epitomizes such criticism.<sup>47</sup> "The only thing that's interesting about Andy Bell," he wrote, "is that he's so uninteresting. He's a huge star. In terms of record sales, he's the biggest unequivocally out gay pop star we've ever produced, and yet the man's a complete void."<sup>48</sup> Bell and Clarke seem untouched by such criticisms. Their comments in the liner notes for the 2009 re-release of *The Innocents* basically support this caricature. Clarke describes the technical aspects of their records, and Bell admits to a nearly complete ignorance concerning the technical details of their music and of politics.

However, other aspects of their public personae belie this apolitical posturing. For instance, Bell has been openly gay since the 1980s. In 1986, Bell told *Melody Maker* that he had no plans to hide his sexuality, adding that he would not "portray a heterosexual in videos, and we're consciously doing lyrics that could apply to either sex." As a point of contrast, Neil Tennant of Pet Shop Boys only came out in 1994. Furthermore, Bell tested positive for HIV in 1998 and publically revealed his HIV-positive status in 2004. His openness about both his sexual identity and HIV status remain rarities in the music industry. Their resistance to political discourses does not mean, however, that their music and videos do not participate in the public construction of ideas about gender, sexuality, and AIDS.

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<sup>47</sup> Richard Smith, "Being Boring: Erasure," *Seduced and Abandoned: Essays on Gay Men and Popular Music* (Cassel Press, 1995).

<sup>48</sup> Smith (1995), 32.

Pleasure—whether specifically sexual, dancing, or in other forms—has been central to gay politics since the 1970s. As creators of dance music, Erasure continually draws attention to such visceral pleasures and sensations. Walter Hughes (1994) has linked gay dance music to a bodily regime or discipline that gay men use to pound out their subjectivity.<sup>49</sup> For Fiona Buckland (2002), “the gap between what we desire and what we can achieve is defined only by our imagination and is bridged by our ambition to move.”<sup>50</sup> She “explores the role of club culture, movement, and memory in the construction of queer history. Queer lifeworlds are fashioned in the spaces outside or adjacent to state, church, media, and private institutions, frequently through “embodied action” and *movement*.<sup>51</sup> The processes that constitute queer lifeworlds represent “a conscious, active way of fashioning the self and environment.”<sup>52</sup> Erasure’s music functions in this economy of the self and is, therefore, politically engaged no matter how much the members of the band argue otherwise.

“Too Darn Hot” first appeared in Porter’s *Kiss Me, Kate* (1948), a backstage musical that follows the lives of a group of Shakespearean actors in the mist of a production of *The Taming of the Shrew*. Their on- and offstage lives move in and out of sync, and Porter uses specific musical styles and genres to distinguish the between the real lives of characters in the film and their fiction lives on the stage. In the stage show, “Too Darn Hot” occurs at the top of Act II and it sung by Paul, the assistant to leading man, Fred. Using Porter’s trademark cheeky double-entendre, the lyrics list a number of

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<sup>49</sup> Walter Hughes, “In the Empire of the Beat,” in *Microphone Fiends: Youth Music and Youth Culture*, eds. Ross and Rose (Routledge, 1994): 147-157.

<sup>50</sup> Buckland, 3.

<sup>51</sup> Buckland, 3.

<sup>52</sup> Buckland, 19.

pleasurable activities which the literal heat and sweltering temperatures discourage, but the subtext is clear: it's too darn hot for sex!

The sexual climate of the 1980s was heating up as HIV/AIDS spread through various communities, and Lutz and McLeod's video use a number of striking visual images to convey this message. They establish three distinct social zones based around then-current notions of risk groups and the general population. Vintage footage of Americans engaged in leisure activities like sunbathing, swimming in the backyard pool, and playing in the yard signify the "general population," those for whom life could appear to continue along its usual course for the first ten years of AIDS in America. A related set of images created for the video shows a particular family engaged in activities including eating dinner, watching television, and going to a school dance. Finally, footage of actual AIDS activist demonstrations brings real life activism and people living with HIV/AIDS into the diegesis.

As the first synth chord sizzles, the screen dissolves from searing white to grainy footage of a crowded beach. A chorus of disembodied voices comments on the spectacularly high temperatures amid hisses, cracks, and pops that signify a crackling analog radio transmission. Sunbathers stretch along the shore, and kids leap into a backyard pool. The mixture of black-and-white and grainy color film hearkens back to the "innocence" of America, especially the 1950s and early 1960s. That innocence is amplified by the smiling faces of white, heterosexual, nuclear families beamed back at us across history, blissfully unaware of any pending crisis.

The shot cuts to a vintage cartoon of a New York City broadcasting tower atop a skyscraper. Inside a television newsroom, anchorman Andy Bell adjusts his tie and

fidgets with his pen before the broadcast begins. “Most often male,” Hallas writes, news anchors play a “sovereign role in the discursive construction of the news [and] keep us from going adrift on a stormy sea of significations.”<sup>53</sup> They create a sense of familiarity and regularity through a form of direct address, speaking directly into the camera, and cultivating a friendly persona that viewers come to trust. At the same time, they also appear god-like in their capacity to summon “heterogeneous elements of the program: on-site correspondents, interviews, and news footage” with a single word or glance.<sup>54</sup> News anchors further serve as bridges between private and public spheres, and their unshakable and amiable presence assures viewers that things remain in their rightful places (that is, they remain in the world outside the home).

Dressed in an unassuming khaki suit with a short-cropped, neat hairstyle, Bell epitomizes the nonthreatening and tidily reassuring news correspondent. A brief shot of him anxiously tapping his red pen on the news desk even humanizes him a bit. Viewers would not typically see this kind of antsy off-camera behavior, and the effect is charming. The bland blue set behind him evokes the proper professional positioning of a news authority in ways that rhyme with Hallas’ discussion of talking heads, as described above. Yet something is amiss.

Bell’s khaki suit has been accessorized with a camouflage tie and pocket square. These camouflage accents subtly transform Bell’s bland tan suit into a kind of military uniform. An “impossible” 360-degree spinning close-up shot of Bell’s face paired with a high-pitched scream belies the realism of a newscast and further suggests that the nightly news will not proceed as scheduled. This “impossible” shot, common in fictional genres

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<sup>53</sup> Hallas, 80.

<sup>54</sup> Hallas, 80.

of film and music video, establishes a fantasy zone in which Erasure plays out the dream of HIV/AIDS activists taking over the nightly news.

Throughout the broadcast, Bell repeats the words of “It’s too darn hot” as if they are breaking news. He summons Vince Clarke in various capacities as weatherman and on-the-spot reporter. Clarke delivers a global forecast in which nations impacted by HIV/AIDS appear engulfed in bright red flames, then speaks into a microphone on a busy urban street, interviewing passersby who repeat the phrase “It’s too darn hot.” Archival footage of AIDS rallies and protests fill the screen, and a latex-sheathed hand appears before the camera as a subtle reminder of the fear and paranoia police exhibited in true stories recounted in videos like Stuart Marshall’s *Bright Eyes* (1985). At HIV/AIDS protests, police regularly donned rubber gloves and other protective gear, including hazmat suits, for fear of contagion, and TV sound technicians refused to pin a microphone onto a man with AIDS who was scheduled to appear on a popular television program.

In “Too Darn Hot,” footage of AIDS activists in the 1980s shows men and women occupying the street in powerful protest of institutions like the National Institutes of Health, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, and the White House. So while nuclear families lounge at the beach or poolside, AIDS activists take to the street in acts of civil disobedience, theatrical protest, and in some cases illegal acts of opposition. The protesters carry banners and signs, wear t-shirts emblazoned with “Silence = Death” and the pink triangle, and chant in unison, though we cannot hear them in the music video.

In another sequence, a suburban family eats dinner in front of the TV, watching the evening news. However, everyone in the room—including the family dog—wears a red blindfold, symbolizing America’s blindness to issues surrounding HIV/AIDS. While they are literally and figuratively blind to the news, this family’s ears remain uncovered; therefore, they can *hear* the truth about HIV/AIDS even if they cannot *see* it.

This detail is important because it places the video within long discourse about the primacy of sight over sound. In *A Voice and Nothing More*, Mladen Dolar (2006) offers a story about Greek pedagogue Pythagoras.<sup>55</sup> As part of an initiation ritual, novice pupils were taught by the master from behind a screen. Neither Pythagoras nor his students could see one another, just like the contestants and judges on *The Voice*. Their interactions were completely based on a model of vocal interaction as the primary site of knowledge. Sight follows later, and perhaps only for a select few. Adriana Cavarero (2005), on the other hand, insists that western thought privileges the *visual* over the aural despite the fact that the voice is “always unique and recognizable as such—cannot be disguised.”<sup>56</sup> Cavarero’s main insight, that the voice conveys uniqueness, is intriguing as is her insistence on a necessary metaphysics of presence: the voice says, “I am here,” and “you are there.” The soul of Cavarero’s philosophy of vocal presence is loquacious. However, her relentless emphasis on uniqueness ignores ways in which the voice can in fact be masked and ways in which technological developments, like broadcast media and recording, expand the “intersubjective acoustic space” the voice inhabits.

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<sup>55</sup> Mladen Dolar, *A Voice and Nothing More* (MIT Press, 2006).

<sup>56</sup> Adriana Cavarero, *For More Than One Voice: Toward a Philosophy of Vocal Expression*, trans. Paul Kottman (Stanford University Press, 2005), 24. Also see 38-95. This theme recurs throughout Cavarero’s text, but it is given its broadest outline on these pages. She historicizes what she calls the “devocalization of logos,” beginning with Plato who, she tells us, was instrumental in effecting a shift in thinking about the location of the voice within the body and a parallel shift in the location of thought. As Cavarero writes, pre-classical Greeks considered the voice a component of respiration, but Plato forced the voice to migrate from the chest with its messy, noisy lungs, throat, and glottis, to the silent space of the head

On the musical track, Bell disguises himself vocally. Typically an exuberant and expressive singer, he subdues his voice throughout most of “Too Darn Hot,” singing in a lower baritone register without many of the gospel and pop embellishments that characterize much of his singing style. Bell delivers an especially soulful vocal improvisation at the climax of the song, and in response to this change in singing style, the family removes their blindfolds. When Bell removes his vocal costume, the family is freed to hear the truth. This enables them to see safe sex messages, slogans, and scientific information about safe behaviors (kissing, hugging, swimming together) as the imperative “Get Fired Up” flashes in red across their TV screen. In this activist fantasy, then, Erasure’s efforts succeed through the power of Bell’s singing, and the video ends, it seems, with the nuclear family taking to the streets to participate in AIDS activism.

### **Diagnosis: From This Moment On**

Like Andy Bell, Somerville has been open about his sexuality since the start of his musical career. As a founding member of Bronski Beat, he released “Small Town Boy” (1984), a song about the difficulties of being gay in a small, rural town. As a solo artist and member of both Bronski Beat (1983-1985) and The Communards (1985-1988), he has released a number of AIDS-themed songs, including “For a Friend,” a touching memorial to a friend who died of AIDS, the activist anthem “Read My Lips” (1990), and “Something to Live For” (1997).

Porter’s “From This Moment On” was written for but ultimately dropped from the 1950 musical *Out of this World* but eventually appeared in the 1953 film adaptation of

*Kiss Me, Kate*. The lyrics describe the bewildering first moments of new romance: gray skies vanish; blue songs fall silent; and the world brims with promise. In the film, a swing orchestra replete with horns, winds, strings, and percussion plays “From this Moment On.” The actors sing through the lyrics once before the orchestra takes over with a series of variations achieved mostly through inserting a series of stock Broadway elements: heavenly harp, a bit of stop-time derived from minstrelsy for a tap-like sequence, and self-consciously “jazzy” moments for Bob Fosse’s choreographic film debut. Jimmy Somerville transforms Porter’s tune about the promise of new love into an electronic dance-pop meditation on the realities of living with HIV/AIDS.

“From this Moment On” begins with a voice over asking, “What urge will save us now that sex won’t?” The musical arrangement is sparse, consisting primarily of bass, synths, and vocals. Synth-harpsichord, a delicate sheen of synth chords, and heavy use of echo and reverb in processing the vocals establish a dreamy and reflective quality while the fussy bass line creates an underlying sense of anxiety. Unlike the strident musical theater singers in *Kiss Me, Kate* who surround one another physically and sonically in their paean to new love, Somerville sings in isolation, caressed only by the gentle reverberations of his own voice. Lines like “no more blue songs” grow heavy with irony, and the titular refrain sighs with resignation. Similarly, the description of touches, caresses, and goodnight kisses becomes *memento mori* of things lost as the PWA reconsiders his relationship to physical intimacy in an era when people were quite literally afraid to touch them.

Steve McLean’s video centers on just this loss of physical intimacy. A young gay man has recently received a positive HIV-antibody test result and mourns the life he must

now leave behind in order to face his new life, a new identity, and likely his own mortality. McLean utilizes a truncated symbolic vocabulary to delineate the moment when a gay man receives a positive HIV-antibody test result. Four primary images recur: a mixture of color and black-and-white footage of a man displaying clichéd signs of emotional distress; black and white shots of an interracial couple dancing; black and white shots of Somerville singing; and brief color images of Jesus' crucifixion.

Like Byrne's "Don't Fence Me In," this video exhibits a preoccupation with faces, particularly with eyes. Frequent close-ups register the grief and anguish in this man's face as he cries, covers his face with his hands, and morosely lays his head on a table. This body language suggests the sadness, despair, and depression, emotions familiar to the newly diagnosed. Numerous memoirs and recollections by gay men in the 1980s and early-1990s describe similar feelings, and countless stories circulate of men completely abandoned by their biological families, first because of their sexuality and then because of AIDS.

A second group of images consists of two men dancing. Paired with the dance music soundtrack and shot in black and white, these images signal a different time and place than the color images of the man just described. They could be in the past, ghosts of the life the despondent young man feels he must abandon. They dance, sweat, and embrace in ways that contradict then-contemporary fears of contagion through bodily fluids like perspiration and saliva that we now know do not act as vectors of transmission of the HIV virus.

The final images are performance footage of Somerville and images of a crucified Jesus-figure. E. Ann Kaplan (1987) notes that performance footage of varying sorts, from

packed arenas to more intimate rooms, has been part of music video since the early 1980s.<sup>57</sup> Railton and Watson (2011) also describe the use of “staged performances” in music videos by which they mean performances that occur only in the context of the video world.<sup>58</sup> Somerville sings and moves against a stark black background, obscuring any sense of place or time. As such, he performs in a register distinct from that of the two dancers and the solitary man. He acts as a sort of omniscient narrator, singing the music that choreographs their gestures and perhaps plays in the background as the young man works through his grief. A few brief shots of a Christ-like figure in crucifixion regalia connote martyrdom and salvation. Like Christ, gay men are dying for the sins of others—in this case, the reluctance of government officials and the greed (symbolized by money falling from the sky) of drug companies and others who seek to profit off the epidemic. What urge will save us now that sex won’t, the video asks? McLean’s video suggests that our commitment to remember and memorialize the dead, care for the sick, and demand money for treatment and research will ultimately save us from the AIDS epidemic from this moment on. In the video’s final moment, a hundred dollar bill lands beside the young man’s hands as a message flashes across it in bold black letters: Find a Cure.

### **Caring and Burning Out: So In Love**

The second stage of representation in this trinity of videos involves representations of caregivers for PWAs, in particular women, and the role of burnout in caring for people with AIDS. According to Yi-Chuan Cheng (2005), caregiver burnout is

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<sup>57</sup> E. Ann Kaplan, *Rockin’ Around the Clock: Music Television, Performance, and Consumer Culture* (Methuen Books, 1987).

<sup>58</sup> Diane Railton and Paul Watson, *Music Video and the Politics of Representation* (U of Edinburgh Press, 2011).

a “complex, multifaceted concept that affects aspects of caregivers’ well-being, the quality of care, and the cost of human services.”<sup>59</sup> Caregivers include doctors, nurses, specialists, volunteers, hospice workers, friends, and family, and their risk of emotional and physical exhaustion was first recognized as a distinct healthcare issue in the 1970s. Symptoms of burnout resemble depression and other psycho-emotional problems: depression, sadness, the blues, changes in sleeping patterns, social isolation, loss of appetite, and loss of interest in normal activities/interests.

A 1995 study of gay men caring for a lover or partner with AIDS found that “the current political and financial realities make it unlikely that the statutory or voluntary services available in the [medical] community will be able to meet the demands of all those with HIV in need of support.”<sup>60</sup> Rather, this support frequently comes from “informal support networks of those who are ill. Thus, HIV affects not only those with the disease but *also those close to them*.”<sup>61</sup> This group includes partners, lovers, friends, parents, siblings, and children. Lovers caring for a PWA reported “high levels of intrusive and avoidant thoughts about AIDS...and AIDS-specific psychological distress.” Although research suggests that a disproportionately high number of gay men were initially impacted by the US AIDS epidemic, Susan Chambré (2006) and Ann Cvetkovitch (2003) emphasize the role of straight women and lesbians throughout the 1980s and 1990s.<sup>62</sup> Cvetkovitch contends that women’s participation in AIDS-related organizations in myriad capacities included the role of caregiver and that this role was a

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<sup>59</sup> Yi-Chuan Cheng, *Caregiver Burnout: A Critical Review of the Literature*, PhD Diss California School of Professional Psychology at Alliant International University, 2005.

<sup>60</sup> G. Irving and R. Bor, “Psychological Distress Among Gay Men Supporting a Lover or Partner with AIDS: A Pilot Study,” *AIDS Care* 2/7 (1995).

<sup>61</sup> Irving and Bor, emphasis added.

<sup>62</sup> Susan Chambré, *Fighting for Our Lives: New York’s AIDS Community and the Politics of Disease* (Rutgers U Press, 2006) and Ann Cvetkovitch, *An Archive of Feelings: Trauma, Sexuality, and Lesbian Public Cultures* (Duke U Press, 2003).

crucial bonding point for lesbians and gay men following the second wave feminist movement of the previous decade.

In this video, lang portrays a caregiver for someone who is probably female given the presence of so many washed and unwashed women's undergarments. This is remarkable given that HIV/AIDS was seen (and in many instances continues to be seen) as a disease of gay men. It remains true to this day that lesbian women represent one of the communities least impacted (in terms of number of cases) by HIV/AIDS. However, the courage, strength, and commitment of women who participated in AIDS care and activism in the 1980s and 1990s remain an untold part of the story.

Both the song and the music video utilize an efficient symbolic vocabulary to indicate these symptoms through vocal affect, instrumentation/arrangement, lighting and color effects, mise-en-scène, camera work/editing, and specific acting choices. Musically, lang's performance of "So in Love" succinctly communicates sensuality and intimacy but also fatigue and trauma. The Latin jazz arrangement with guitars, piano, percussion, accordion, and a gentle habanera figure signals a particular type of sensuality and the undulations of sexual activity. Such sounds mark dissident sexual figures from *Carmen* to Shakira, and the use of Latin jazz in films, television, commercials, and other pop music to signal sensuality and sex supports this interpretation.<sup>63</sup> Lang's close-miked voice speaks as if intimately close to a lover's ear and wraps each phrase in a languid legato that glides across the rhythmic accompaniment of the ensemble. She builds phrases through sweeping changes in dynamics and the use of scoops, bends, and cracks until the gloriously climactic "I'm yours till I die" in which the ecstasy of sex and the finality of

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<sup>63</sup> See Susan Thomas, *Cuban Zarzuela: Performing Race and Gender on Havana's Lyric Stage* (U of Illinois Press, 2008), and Frances Negrón-Mutanier's *Boricua Pop* (NYU Press, 2004), for instance.

death (from AIDS) collide. Yet these highly charged moments occur less frequently than does a monotone delivery of the verses, which results in part from the specific pitch content but is also accented by lang's languid delivery.

Visually, the video utilizes particular colors and camera angles/edits rather than a linear narrative to relay its story. In visual art, color serves as an important vector for the communication of plot, scene, and character. Specific colors carry particular meanings that are, of course, historically and culturally contingent. Michael Baxandall illustrates this through his discussion of the use of particular colors in fifteenth-century Italian art.<sup>64</sup> For instance, a particular shade of blue made of lapis lazuli, which was quite expensive to make, appears in religious art as the color of Mary's robe. The effect is to both enhance Mary's role in the biblical story and to simultaneously reflect the wealth of a patron who commissioned the specific fresco or mural. Contracts between patrons and artists specify the exact chemical proportions of the shade of blue to be used as well as the minimum surface area of the painting to which this hue would be applied.

Similarly, Patti Bellatoni (2005) posits that "colors elicit physical and emotional responses in audiences" through the meanings and responses attributed to various colors.<sup>65</sup> Variations in context, gender, race, sexuality, class, and even the specific hue ensure that the meaning of a particular color is never fixed. Different uses of red, for instance, may mean lust, anger, or even shame, while various greens signal health, wealth, sickness, or corruption.

"So in Love" is cast in a sickly green hue as light floods the room from outside.

Lang is thoroughly saturated with the pallor of illness, and her body language and lack of

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<sup>64</sup> Michael Baxandall, *Painting and Experience in Fifteenth-Century Italy* (Oxford U Press, 1988).

<sup>65</sup> Patti Bellatoni, *If It's Purple, Someone's Gonna Die: The Power of Color in Visual Storytelling* (Focal Hill Press, 2005).

affect suggest that she is fatigued, worried, and weary. Other colors blend into an unremarkable background except for a few startling accents in yellow and blue: rubber kitchen gloves, a jar of Comet abrasive cleaning powder, the lid on a bottle of bleach, a wooden chair, and drops of water. Yellow, according to Bellatoni, may act as a cautionary color, and the yellow items in this video all carry signs of caution and prevention. Rubber gloves keep hands safe from dangerous fluids, chemicals, and substances; Comet and bleach scour and disinfect surfaces, dishes, and clothing. Pulling on the garish yellow gloves constitutes one of the video's major dramatic events, and in context, they represent both fears of contagion (of HIV or of transmitting a germ to an immune deficient person). Thus, these banal gloves symbolize the social barriers between sick and healthy, and they also represent a shift in identity. Lang becomes a caregiver when she pulls them on, and they remain on her hands until she makes her dramatic direct address to the camera, discussed below.

A blue wooden chair in the shower indicates that someone in the house needs assistance getting in or out of the bath because of a mobility impairment or other medical condition. The next time viewers see the shower, the wooden chair has vanished, and in its place is a hospital-style shower chair to suggest both the passage of time and the progression of illness. Brilliant blue beads of water drip from the showerhead as tears fall from close-up shots of lang's eyes. Dead leaves litter the kitchen floor, suggesting not that lang is a poor housekeeper but that the home is dead. Wilted flowers rot in a vase on the counter, and a bedpan lies carelessly atop a pile of junk on a countertop. These icons of illness and death imbue the video with a desolate and lonely feeling characteristic of burnout.

The video begins with an invitation to enter as characteristically androgynous k.d. lang raises a white plastic window blind and opens a squeaky screen door to reveal a narrow laundry room. Although we are invited to enter, the camera holds us in our place and voyeuristically follows lang from room to room in a single, unbroken shot. The shot establishes two distinct realms, public and private, and lang goes about her work in the private/domestic sphere, indifferent to our gaze. Throughout the video, lang is socially isolated. No one calls or stops by; no friends bring dinner or help with the chores. Lost in thought, she pulls clothes from the washer, folds some towels, loads the drier, and stirs a massive pot of undergarments that are boiling (to disinfect them?) on the stove. Such diminished social functioning and isolation, according to Irving and Bor, foster caregiver burnout.

lang breaks her monotonous routine twice. First, she presses her face into a freshly laundered ladies slip as the words “the thought that you might care” drift around her. Soon thereafter, she stops putting laundry into the drier, leans against the wall, and turns her head to the ceiling. These two small gestures signify deep emotions: love and exhaustion. Other images allude to the sensual relationship between lang and the off-screen person with AIDS. As she sings of the delirium of love, the camera slowly pans up an intravenous drip. In music videos and in movies, such shots frequently occur in conjunction with images of women’s bodies and indicate an objectifying male spectator position. The IV bag acts as a metonym for the PWA, as does a heart rate/breathing monitor that flashes on screen for a moment. While lang’s androgynous appearance could signal some kind of male identification, I believe most viewers would recognize her as

k.d. lang, a famous butch lesbian. So, the perspective of this lingering camera is resolutely romantic, female, and probably lesbian.

The climax of the video occurs with a return to the opening material and the video's only full-facial close-ups. By avoiding direct address to the camera throughout, lang builds emotional tension. As she rhapsodically sings "I'm yours till I die" in an as-yet unused higher and more powerful register, she locks eyes with the camera for a moment as a radiant yellow-orange light banishes the sickly green hue from the scene. The words blossom in her signature slow vibrato before the brief moment ends. She closes her eyes, delivers the final line "so in love with you am I," and reclines with her head against the wall. The camera returns to its familiar long-shot position, and the scene fades to black.

### **Elegy: Ev'ry Time We Say Goodbye**

Cole Porter penned "Ev'ry Time We Say Goodbye" for *Seven Lively Arts* (1944), a musical revue produced and directed by Billy Rose. Writing for *The New York Times* after opening night, Lewis Nichols describes the play as a "gigantic, sprawling spectacle...big and rambling, and sometimes top-heavy [but ultimately] right in the groove, like Benny Goodman, who is a part of it."<sup>66</sup> Though he generally praises the work as "good," Nichols sharply criticizes Porter's music as "definitely not his best," but the author does single out "Every Time We Say Goodbye" as the most memorable tune in the revue. The song became an American Songbook standard and has been recorded by artists as diverse as Ella Fitzgerald and Simply Red, to name just two.

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<sup>66</sup> <http://www.nytimes.com/books/98/11/29/specials/porter-seven.html> accessed 6 March 2012.

Structurally, the song consists of two sixteen-bar sections that map onto an ABAB form with a repeat of the titular phrase at the conclusion of each B section. The lyrics pivot on a set of dichotomous emotions detailing the pains of separation and the joys elicited by the presence of a beloved. Porter grafts these lyrics onto a tentative melodic line that tiptoes through tiny intervals only to fall back on itself in resignation. He exploits common western musical tropes associated with depressive affect including rising and falling half steps (associated with weeping and sadness), constrained melodic movement, lingering on one pitch, a slow tempo, and minor mode harmonies frequently associated with depressive affects. Poignant chromaticism on phrases like “I die,” “wonder why,” and “think so little of me,” as well as the literal “change from major to minor” in the last line emphasize the singer’s deflated emotions. The slow melodic climb across the first twelve bars of each section outlines a stable tonic triad only to be thwarted by the heavily chromatic descent in the final four bars which ends on a half-cadence, leaving lyrics open as the gods allow the beloved to go.

Combined with numerous chromatic and extended chords in the accompaniment, the net emotive effect of “Ev’ry Time We Say Good Bye” is one of doubt, insecurity, and sadness. Each sixteen-bar section consists of four-bar periods answered by a longer, eight-bar antecedent phrase. In resignation to the cruel intentions of the “gods above me who must be in the know,” the accompanying harmonic sequence repeatedly loses its grip on the elusive and hopeful major forms of both the tonic and dominant. All this chromaticism renders things a bit ambivalent which is consonant with the content of the lyrics and lends the song an air of wistful sadness.

John Carlin initially approached queer director Derek Jarman (1942-1994) to collaborate with Annie Lennox for the video of “Every Time We Say Goodbye.” Unfortunately, Jarman’s health took a serious decline in 1989/1990, and the director was unable to participate in the project. In his place, Ed Lachman worked with Lennox to create a moving tribute to Jarman for *Red Hot + Blue*. I can only speculate that Lennox and others felt Jarman might not survive the medical crisis that prevented his participation in the project; the video, which incorporates childhood home movies of Jarman and his sister, reads like a posthumous tribute, although Jarman lived until 1994. Dressed in angelic white, Lennox stands before a white projection screen upon which the home movies play, blurring the distinction between the singer, the screen images, and the song. In this way, the video creates a pastiche of past and present, artist and art, identified as a hallmark of Jarman’s directorial style.

Annie Lennox later recorded a version of “Every Time We Say Goodbye” for use in a climactic scene in Jarman’s *Edward II* (1991), an imaginative adaptation of Christopher Marlowe’s tale of the reign of the English king. Jarman emphasizes the romantic and sexual relationship between the King and Piers Gaveston and makes overt references to contemporary gay rights issues. In this sense, Jarman’s work fits within other postmodern adaptations of classic or canonical works that utilize contemporary settings, costumes, and themes including Peter Sellars’ Mozart trilogy (1989). As Edward signs papers to banish Gaveston from the kingdom, Lennox (inexplicably) appears on screen, watching the two men dance, speak softly, and kiss. The use of “Every Time We Say Goodbye” heightens the emotional tension between the men as if to say that they have had to part many times. Yet this is their final parting, and the use of music

underscores both the drama of the moment and its finality as emotions and spoken words give way to expression in song.

## **Conclusion**

In this chapter I explored extant songs that are given a new meaning in the context of AIDS. I have broadened the notion of charity rock as articulated by Garofalo and others in ways that reveal a diversity of subjects, styles, genres, and representational strategies utilized to frame HIV/AIDS. “That’s What Friends Are For” and *Red Hot + Blue* are but two examples of music’s role in raising funds, awareness, and activism in the age of AIDS. While the face of AIDS and of AIDS activism has changed significantly since the late-1990s, these examples illustrate examples of mainstream musical activism in the period when “Silence = Death.” By singing about HIV/AIDS and people with AIDS and through deploying a variety of visual representational strategies, these songs shaped dominant constructions of the AIDS epidemic in pop music and music video in the US.

## Chapter Four: Introduction to Part II

By 1994, I was as out as a gay teenager living in rural North Georgia could be, and though I hadn't yet come out to my family, I managed to live my openly gay life with little more harassment than some verbal taunts. I distinctly recall a country boy, football player named Alan who, by virtue of alphabetical locker assignments, always occupied the locker directly above mine. Between classes, he would mutter beneath his breath, "Matt Jones is a faggot." One day, I just stood up, looked him in the face, and said, "Yes, I am." And that was that.

I was lucky enough to have supportive teachers and friends who shielded me from homophobia, religious condemnation, and other forms of anti-gay violence in Jasper. I was also somewhat insulated from the realities of the AIDS epidemic. I was too young and lived too far away from a major urban area to experience its impact directly. However, in eighth grade sex education, homophobia and AIDS reared their ugly heads.

After the requisite parental permission forms were signed and returned, teachers divided the eighth grade class into two large groups by sex. Although I managed to avoid blatant attacks by boys my age, I was mortified at the prospect of spending a few days sequestered with my male peers to discuss sex. First, we were herded into the school cafeteria for a gruesome slideshow: penises warped, wrecked, and mutilated by late-stage syphilis; fleshy labia blossoming with herpes blisters; bodily orifices oozing colorful discharge; the gaunt faces of AIDS. The message was clear: sex kill.<sup>1</sup> Second, we looked at diagrams of the male reproductive system, learned that hair would soon begin to sprout

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<sup>1</sup> Ironically and unknown to me, Joni Mitchell released a song called "Sex Kills" on her 1994 album, *Turbulent Indigo*.

in our most private places, and laughed at the thought of our voices cracking as vocal folds thickened and elongated.

On the third day, a Health Department representative corralled us into a classroom for a frank, no holds barred Q&A. Although her name long ago slipped into the dustbin of memory, her dark brown hair, severely parted down the middle, and her humorless demeanor remain as fresh and familiar as if I'd seen her this morning. Red-faced teenage boys giggled through an anxious litany: *What's normal dick size? How many times a day can you jack off? Will I go blind if I do it too much? Who's got the biggest tits on record? Is it perverted to watch pornos?* I sat, paralyzed, in the front row and fixed my eyes on the blackboard as the inevitable came from the back of the room: *What about faggots?*

The boy actually pronounced the word “feggits,” and the air around me went feral with clangorous laughter and hissing protestations. *Ewww! That's so gross! Disgusting! I'm going to barf!* I trained my eyes on the front of the room, taking slow and deep breaths until my face ached from the strain of not crying. Blinking back tears, I made a mental inventory of all the major scales and fingered the bouncing, imitative lines of Bach's F-major two-part invention on my thighs. As the ruckus faded, the Health Department representative cleared her throat, sighed heavily, and spoke solemnly. “Boys,” she intoned in her thick mountain drawl, “*please* do not *choose* to be gay. You *will* be miserable. You *will* get the AIDS. And you *will* die.”

She delivered these final three words *marcato*, and the vehemence and disgust in her voice stunned my classmates into an awkward silence. I didn't move, but I could feel the weight of their collective stares on my neck. With a few words, this representative of official medicine, science, and community seared the stigmata of shame, fear, and

difference into my psyche, forging a link between homosexuality and death. Thus, I was launched into an awareness of my own sexuality and the AIDS epidemic. Time has proven that the Pickens County Health Department was wrong. In spite of gross misinformation laced with homophobia, I did not contract HIV or develop AIDS, and at the moment, I seem to be fully alive. Although, I do have three faded, crescent-shaped scars on my right thigh, phantom reminders of digging my fingernails into my flesh in order to keep from crying.

I tell this story to illustrate that what we know or learn about HIV/AIDS is contingent on a number of factors: the era in which we live, the place we call home, the cultural climate toward discussions about sex and sexuality, class, race, and religion among them. In 1994, I learned that AIDS = Death. Later, I left home and went to college where I met other gay young men who, like me, had received partial and inaccurate information about HIV/AIDS and virtually none about their sexuality. So, we did what gay men have always done. We cobbled together information from other men, books, pamphlets, pornography, websites, community organizations, and healthcare professionals who were not homophobic. We shared information about our sexuality, including safe sex and issues related to HIV/AIDS. I even volunteered for several years with the Atlanta AIDS Walk. Those painful memories gradually receded.

Memory is messy business, especially when it comes to the memory or history of modern sexuality. In a recent book on queer memory, Castiglia and Reed (2011) wrote that

Gay culture has been privy to a particularly intense version of unremembering since the onset in the early 1980s of the AIDS epidemic...AIDS became an occasion for a powerful concentration of cultural forces that made (and continue to

make) the syndrome an agent of amnesia, wiping out memories not only of everything that came before but of the remarkably vibrant and imaginative ways that gay communities responded to the catastrophe of illness and death and sought to memorialize our losses.<sup>2</sup>

To a young gay person who never witnessed the deaths of entire communities and families of friends, the experiences of the first decades of the AIDS epidemic are as remote as those of WWII or Vietnam. Few people read about the war against AIDS in textbooks or history courses, and much of an older generation that could pass down queer wisdom and experience died during the AIDS epidemic. Many of those who survived found themselves at a second crisis after the arrival of HAART therapies in 1996 as they had to reinvent themselves once more. And a significant number of survivors simply wanted to put the past behind them because it was just too painful.

HIV/AIDS became real to me in the spring of 2000, when I was a junior in college. One afternoon, I received a phone call from a woman named Molly, a friend of my first boyfriend, Chris. I met Chris in high school. He was the senior trombone section leader in marching band, and I adored him from the moment we were introduced during summer band camp my freshman year. We became fast friends, and he eventually came out to me. We dated for about a year, until my parents discovered our relationship and demanded that I end it. He moved to Atlanta, and I finished high school. When I left for college, Chris and I completely lost touch.

On the phone, Molly was terse. She said, “Chris is dead. He wanted me to get in touch with you before he passed, but I couldn’t find you. I’m sorry. His funeral is this weekend.” I drove home to Jasper for his funeral and was surprised at the silence. In the

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<sup>2</sup> Christopher Castiglia and Christopher Reed, *If Memory Serves: Gay Men, AIDS, and the Promise of the Queer Past* (U of Minnesota Press, 2011). Kindle edition.

south, funerals, while somber, are also social events. People talk, laugh, eat, and reminisce about their loved one. But Chris' family was eerily quiet. I approached the casket and looked at his body. His skin had a greyish hue, and his face seemed to have sunken in or wasted away. When I heard whispers of "pneumonia," I understood. Chris had died of AIDS.

I do not know the details of Chris' life after we broke up. There were rumors that he met his partner while cruising in a bookstore, that he'd become a prostitute in Florida, and that his diagnosis came too late for effective medical intervention. These are unsubstantiated rumors, and I have no ability to verify or deny them. But his death made AIDS real for me.

Since Chris died, I've struggled to understand how someone who meant so much to me as a musician, romantic partner, and friend slipped from my life without my knowledge. And I've searched for a way to honor his memory while contributing something to the story of AIDS. In 2011, my search ended. While taking Fred Maus' graduate seminar in music and sexuality, I discovered the music of singer, songwriter, author, and AIDS activist Michael Callen (1955-1993).

To date, there's been little written about either Callen's life or his music.<sup>3</sup> Part II tells Callen's story through a combination of close listening to commercially available recordings, his published writings, musical analysis, newly-conducted interviews with Callen's friends and family, and previously unavailable archival documents, home videos, and unreleased recordings. While living in New York City during the fall of 2012, I also had the opportunity to conduct both formal and informal interviews with gay

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<sup>3</sup> Martin Duberman's forthcoming *Hold Tight Gently: Michael Callen, Essex Hemphill, and the Battlefield of AIDS* (The New Press) will be released in March of 2014.

men who lived through the first fifteen years of AIDS in the city and other musicians who participated in musical responses to the epidemic. Their stories contribute to the final section of this project. In chronicling musical representations of the AIDS epidemic, I have utilized a combination of methods that includes traditional textual analysis, the tools of music theory and musicology, ethnography, self-reflection, mainstream and queer journalism, and the vast and open-ended archive of YouTube.

Callen's extraordinary life provides a counterpoint to the story of mainstream musicians discussed in Part I. An independent artist working primarily in New York City, Callen was freed from the constraints of the commercial music industry. His work openly addressed issues of gay history, sexuality, and AIDS. As a solo artist and a member of The Flirtations, Callen sang openly and proudly about his experiences as a gay man with AIDS in the 1980s. Although his music reached fewer listeners than the works of artists who were backed by a major label, Callen did not see this as a constraint or a negative aspect of his career. From the time he moved to New York City in the late-1970s, he committed himself to make gay music for gay men, inspired by the women of Olivia Records and the Women's Music movement.

Callen worked with a number of renowned musicians, including Grammy award-winning songwriter Marsha Malamet and iconic performer Peter Allen. He also studied with influential vocal coach Keith Davis and collaborated with composer Keith Avedon. Callen toured the country as a performer, singing his beautiful AIDS-themed ballads "Love Don't Need a Reason" and "The Healing Power of Love" at AIDS Walks, on television, and at political rallies. His final public appearance at the 1993 Gay and Lesbian March on Washington was aired on CNN. As an author and spokesperson for

people with AIDS, Callen traveled the world to deliver literally hundreds of speeches. He also published dozens of articles about AIDS and three books, and he starred in two feature films. His is a forgotten story of heroism in the age of AIDS.

### **Portrait of the Artist**

Music was an integral part of Michael Callen's life before and after his AIDS diagnosis. Raised in a musical household, he sang in church and school choir, studied violin, taught himself to play the piano, and was initially accepted into Boston University on a music scholarship. When he left Boston University in 1977, after changing his major to English, Callen moved to New York City with the intention of becoming a successful singer/songwriter. Callen used music to express his personal experiences as a gay man and to articulate his political opinions.

Callen's eclectic musical tastes were shaped, in part, by his family. His mother was a self-taught multi-instrumentalist and singer whose Pentecostal roots mixed with popular songs of the day, folk music, and children's music. She passed her musical talent to her three children. The family's record collection contained an interesting mixture of Broadway soundtracks, folk music, and even some non-Western recordings as well as Callen's favorite singers, Julie Andrews and Barbra Streisand. As an adult, his tastes gravitated toward singer-songwriters like Elton John, women's music artists including Cris Williamson and Holly Near, doo-wop, Motown, and R&B, the politically-oriented music of Sweet Honey in the Rock, and gay and lesbian singer/songwriters or performers. And his roster of big-voiced divas expanded to include others like Bette Midler.

He was a competent pianist capable of executing a number of styles at the instrument. Most often, his accompaniment style consisted of textural variations on a repeating chord sequence. For instance, in “Nobody’s Fool,” a song Callen wrote in the 1970s, the opening piano figure consists primarily of steady block chords in D-major. As the song progresses, his accompaniment changes to reflect emotional shifts in the lyrics. Callen abandons block chords for arpeggiated figures and travels into the higher treble end of the instrument. One of his most intriguing piano compositions is the accompaniment for “On the Other Side.” The song appeared on his debut solo record, *Purple Heart*, in 1988. The lyrics (co-written with his friend Robert “Bobby” Butler) describe a chance encounter between two men on a subway platform in New York City. The speaker scrutinizes every gesture made by a man on the opposite platform and waits for a sign or signal that he may be interested in a liaison. The man hops on his train and leaves the dejected speaker “stranded here on the other side.” Callen captures the burning passion and yearning for physical contact in the undulating rhythm of the accompaniment (see Figure 4.1). Added seconds in the right hand add a bittersweet dissonance, and Callen’s use of the pedal blurs the harmony like faces in a passing subway car.

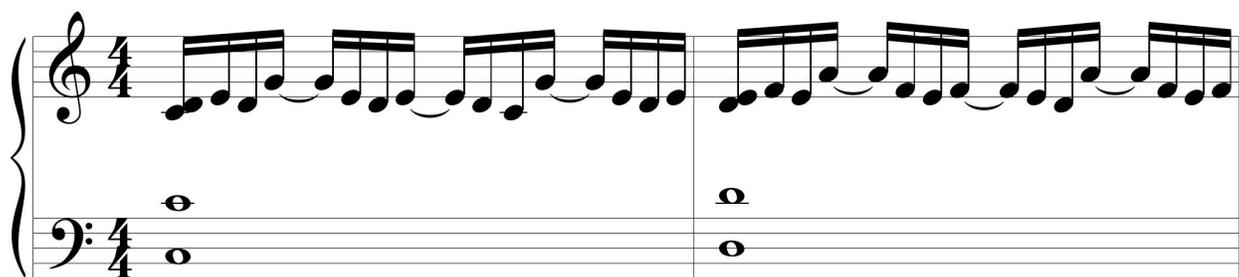


Figure 4.1 “On the Other Side” introduction<sup>4</sup>

<sup>4</sup> All transcriptions of Callen’s songs are by the author unless otherwise indicated.

Over the course of his performing and recording career, Callen exhibited a stylistic eclecticism that I refer to as “stylistic promiscuity.” Much of his music in the 1970s was of a piece with the singer/songwriter and women’s music genres with sparse instrumentation, poetic or confessional lyrics, and earnest vocals. In the 1980s, he began to use synthesizers and sequencers which gave some of his songs a New Wave pop or rock sound and also borrowed a little from the “downtown” scene in New York City. His band, Lowlife, mixed rock-and-roll and contemporary rock with a decidedly queer flair. With The Flirtations, he sang barbershop standards, classics from musical theater and Tin Pan Alley, doo-wop, 60s pop, and works by contemporary songwriters like Peter Gabriel and Fred Small. His first solo record consists of cabaret songs Callen performed in his solo sets at SNAFU and other New York City piano bars, songs recorded with Lowlife, and a few covers of works by songwriters he admired. The posthumous *Legacy* project contains a similar mixture of originals and covers with an even broader range of styles that encompasses reggae, cabaret, rock, pop, folk, and operetta.

As a songwriter, Callen placed the utmost importance on the declamation of text. In a home video from the early-1980s, he tells his friend Elliot, who holds the video camera, that his music is meant to be listened to “wearing headphones and with a lyric sheet.”<sup>5</sup> Though he was capable of economical lyric writing (“Street Singer” and “Me and Dickie D”), Callen favors dense and wordy texts, especially in the verses, as evident in songs like “Living in Wartime,” “The Healing Power of Love,” and “A Love Worth Fighting For.” The resulting melodies are occasionally fussy, but the tension created by

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<sup>5</sup> Undated home video of Michael Callen at his Jones Street apartment in NYC from Richard Dworkin’s personal archive.

the sheer density of syllables usually finds release in a lyrical and melodic chorus. His lyrics also often deal with explicitly gay themes and subjects. After he moved to New York City to pursue music in the late-1970s, Callen endeavored to make gay music for gay listeners even if it cost him commercial viability and economic success.<sup>6</sup>

His wordy texts often led to expansive song forms with complex and irregular phrase structures. Larger formal sections frequently feature three or more unique and contrasting musical phrases. “Nobody’s Fool” comprises three large sections (A, B, C) that each contain between three and five phrases of irregular length. A more extreme example is “The Healing Power of Love,” which Callen co-wrote with Marsha Malamet. The songwriters crafted a large-scale Verse-Refrain form. The nine-bar verse is rhythmically free, and its lyrics establish a reflective mood in which the singer expresses a heartfelt desire to live life to its fullest. Steady eighth notes played by the keyboard in bars 8 and 9 set a relaxed ballad tempo for the refrain. Formally, the refrain is an AABA structure, though it far exceeds the traditional thirty-two bars. Each A section follows a similar formal plan: a verse, pre-chorus, refrain, and a one-bar transition/retransition. Below, I outline the first A section and the bridge to establish a sense of Callen’s generous approach to form. Numbers in parentheses indicate the number of measures in each section. The verses in A break down into smaller groups of phrases; B consists of two eight bar phrases.

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<sup>6</sup> Callen made remarks similar to this in a variety of interviews throughout his life. In an unpublished interview with David Schmidt (1987), Callen says “In our culture, the experiences of an estimated twenty-one million Americans is [sic] never alluded to. We are made invisible in this culture. And I guess I got tired of waiting around for somebody else to take the step of singing their own truth, being courageous and saying, “This is my experience,” and putting it out there. And if you can related to it, great. If you can’t, that’s ok, too. Because I felt that time, in my own case, might be limited. I wanted to be the person who was willing to sing his own truth, and I want to leave the world a better place.” See David Schmidt, “Michael Callen, Singer and Songwriter: Interview by Dr. David Schmidt,” 12 November 1987 in the Callen Archive at the New York City Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Community Center Archive, New York City, NY.

A	Verse (12) a,b,c	Pre-Chorus (8) a,b	Refrain (4) a	Retrans (1)
B	a (8)	b (8)*		

\*Initiates a “truck driver” modulation into the return of A

Figure 4.2, “Healing Power of Love” form

One of the most striking features of Callen’s music is his singing voice. As a child, he was a soprano singer in church and school choirs. As he matured, his voice deepened, but unlike many male singers, Callen retained the flexibility and power of his soprano/falsetto register into adulthood. The lower end of his vocal register is warm and resonant, and he could easily sing the baritone register (F#2 to A4). Callen’s middle tenor register (C3 to C5) had a bright, slightly nasal quality, and he could muster extremely high volume and vocal power (belting) in this range. His falsetto or soprano range could reach up to F#5 or sometimes even G5. The timbre of this part of Callen’s voice could be (intentionally) shrill and bright or mellower/covered depending on the context or the textual demands of the song.

In the fall of 2012, I met Richard Dworkin, Callen’s surviving partner. Over the next two years, Richard became an invaluable source of information and graciously shared his memories, home movies, unreleased recordings, photographs, and his home as I worked on this project. I interviewed him at his West Village apartment in September of that year. Over Thai food and cookies, Dworkin remembered that Callen could sing extraordinarily high in private and often wrote songs that required use of the extremes of

his range.<sup>7</sup> However, when he performed alone in public, nerves got the best of him, and he sometimes failed to nail his falsetto notes. When he sang with The Flirtations, he felt less exposed on stage and could relax enough to sing in his falsetto register with ease and confidence.<sup>8</sup>

Callen seldom used growls, swoops, or other vocal special effects in his baritone or tenor register, but when he sang soprano, he utilized every vocal trick in the popular repertoire. This is especially true of his recording with The Flirtations, where the a cappella format invited vocal ingenuity to make an arrangement interesting or to mimic particular aspects of the recorded song upon which a particular arrangement was based. Duchan (2007) described the relationship between a cappella groups' desire to emulate a particular recording and the necessity of originality or inventiveness.<sup>9</sup> I will return to a discussion of the implications of Duchan's work on the musical style of The Flirtations in Chapter 5.

Now, I'd like to turn my attention to Callen's remarkable falsetto. Falsetto singing is common in a number of singing traditions from European choral music dating back to the Middle Ages to contemporary African-American gospel. In each musical context, falsetto means differently. According to Laura E. DeMarco (2002), "the word 'falsetto' has been used in many ways in Western music history [but] has always implied a feigned, unnatural tone."<sup>10</sup> Consequently, the term "has been used descriptively as a pejorative; for example, a tenor who finesses his high notes with head tones when those tones should be full-bodied is disparaged as singing in falsetto; or a bass or baritone comes out with a

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<sup>7</sup> Richard Dworkin, interview with the author, September 2012.

<sup>8</sup> Richard Dworkin, interview with the author, 24 September 2012.

<sup>9</sup> Joshua Duchan, "Collegiate A Cappella: Emulation and Originality," *American Music* 25/4 (2007).

<sup>10</sup> Laura E. DeMarco, "The Fact of the Castrato and the Myth of the Countertenor," *The Musical Quarterly* 86/1 (2002): 175.

high, effeminate, disembodied tone for comic effect.”<sup>11</sup> DeMarco’s comments come from the world of opera and classical singing in which a certain type of heroic tenor (or earlier, castrato) voice is the gold standard of vocal prowess. In other traditions, different approaches to falsetto singing result in new meanings.

In his cross-cultural study of falsetto speaking and singing, Brian Stross (2013) found that the use of falsetto “can signal a variety of individual, mostly expressive or pragmatic, meanings in specific interaction settings.”<sup>12</sup> These might include displays of respect, excitement, the construction and/or mocking of gay identity, the emulation or ridicule of femininity, attention seeking, and communication with the divine.<sup>13</sup>

Callen’s early songs like “Street Singer” and “Nobody’s Fool” feature his rich tenor range and reserved falsetto for special effect, especially to emphasize important words. For instance, “Street Singer” is a meditation on the price of fame. Callen passes a man on the sidewalk “playing for quarters with an open guitar case, such a peaceful look on your face,” and wonders, “How did I ever fall from such grace, street singer?”<sup>14</sup> Most of the song hovers in a comfortable baritone part of his voice between B2 and C4. However, in the final verse, he makes a dramatic octave leap from A3 to A4 in the middle of the phrase, “like the kind I left behind.” The vocal high point occurs on the pronoun “I” and comes out as an anguished cry as the singer mourns the loss of his

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<sup>11</sup> DeMarco (2002): 175.

<sup>12</sup> Brian Stross, “Falsetto Voice and Observational Logic: Motivated Meanings,” *Language in Society* 42 (2013): 142.

<sup>13</sup> Stross outlines nine categories: 1. Respect/submissiveness/deference; 2. Respect/threat reduction/nonthreatening communication/mutual humbling; 3. Emotional arousal/excitement/involvement; 4. Imitation/emulation/accommodation/quotation; 5. Imitation/mockery; 6. Calling attention to speaker/salience/boasting; 7. Distance communication between interlocutors; 8. Concealing identity/disguise; 9. Concealing location.

<sup>14</sup> Michael Callen, “Street Singer,” unreleased recording from the *Legacy* sessions from Richard Dworkin’s personal archive. The song was written in the late-1970s or early-1980s but not recorded in a studio until 1993. A number of archival videos and audio recordings of Callen’s shows at various piano bars in Manhattan include this song in his set lists.

musical, social, and spiritual freedom in a world full of “checks to write, deadlines to make, crowds to fight, feelings to fake, [and] pills to take to help you find a little peace of mind.”<sup>15</sup>

In “Nobody’s Fool,” Callen manipulated his vocal timbre and falsetto in two distinct ways that coincide with Stross’ categories. The autobiographical song stages a telephone conversation between Callen, his mother, and his father.<sup>16</sup> Following an argument, father and son have become estranged, and the song begins with a vocal imitation of Callen’s mother, Barbara, as she pleads for her son to “talk to your daddy.” Callen sings with a controlled, quiet intensity and whispered or breathy timbre that imitates the inflections of concern in his mother’s voice. Although the vocal range is similar to that of “Street Singer” (emphasizing the comfortable baritone D3-D4), it sounds higher because of his diction, timbre, and volume. Near the end of the song, Callen again uses his piercing falsetto to underscore a dramatic point. Although the highest note (D5) is within his tenor range, Callen switches to falsetto to reach D5, again, in the phrase, “I want to be your fool.” As in “Street Singer,” the melodic highpoint coincides with the word “I.”

In a 2012 interview, Richard Dworkin reflected on Callen’s singing style.<sup>17</sup> “Singing falsetto freed him from judging himself constantly because, for him, it was effortless. There was this element where he was projecting. It wasn’t his full voice, so he didn’t have as much self invested in it somehow, and it was so easy for him.”<sup>18</sup> Callen’s use of falsetto in these earliest songs, however, suggests that he strongly identified with

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<sup>15</sup> Callen, “Street Singer.”

<sup>16</sup> In this 1987 interview with Schmidt, Callen highlights the specific context in which this song was composed. I return to a discussion of the song later in this chapter.

<sup>17</sup> Richard Dworkin, Interview with the author, digital recording, New York, NY, 24 September 2012.

<sup>18</sup> Dworkin, interview with the author, 24 September 2012.

that part of his voice, evidenced by the occurrence of the highest falsetto notes on first-person pronouns and moments of self-revelation in the narrative of his song texts. In this way, perhaps, Callen forged a link with his gay identity, especially in “Nobody’s Fool,” and his falsetto/soprano voice.

Callen also participated in ensemble singing. When he first moved to New York, he was a member of the Gay Men’s Chorus, where he befriended tenor Aurelio Font. In 1987, Font and Callen auditioned for spots in a newly formed gay a cappella group, The Flirtations. They became the group’s two lead tenors, and Callen supplied soprano descants in arrangements in which he did not sing lead. The Flirtations performed a number of doo-wop, Motown, and classic R&B songs as part of their stage shows and on their records, and these African American musical traditions offer a final context for thinking about the male falsetto voice. In gospel, R&B, and other vernacular styles, the male falsetto voice often functions as the lead vocalist. For instance, in Frankie & the Teenagers “Why Do Fools Fall in Love,” which The Flirts covered numerous times, thirteen-year-old Frankie Lymon’s soprano voice represents the anguish of teen romance. Similarly, Smokey Robinson’s smooth tenor voice crooned romantic love songs like “Ooh Baby, Baby” and “Track of My Tears” in the 1960s and “Being with You” in the 1980s. In gospel, stratospheric tenor singing is a sign of intense spirituality and a connection with the divine. In other words, in spite of the pejorative implications of the “false” voice, it also connotes sincerity, earnestness, and real feelings of love and faith as well as expressions of anguish or pain.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Tony Cummings writes about tenor singers with high falsetto ranges in “Roots, Forerunners, and Originators,” in *The Soul Book*, eds. Ian Hoare, Tony Cummings, Clive Anderson, and Simon Frith (Dell Publishing, 1976). So, too, do John Michael Runowicz in *Forever Doo-Wop: Race, Nostalgia, and Vocal*

Camp is an attribute that many listeners might identify in Callen's singing and performance styles. For Keith Harvey (2002) citation is central to camp aesthetics and performances.<sup>20</sup> Citation is the act of making reference to a source. In instances of camp, these sources may be the varied and various aspects of culture, from opera heroines and Hollywood starlets to lines from works of literature, theater, or film, or even behaviors, gestures, modes of dress, or other utterances. All of Harvey's citations are literary or theatrical. However, his ideas of camp translate into music, and the music of Michael Callen, and allow a deeper consideration of the ways in which camp was one possible response to HIV/AIDS.

### *Citing Cultural Artifacts*

Harvey describes three types of citation that are relevant to camp. First, he writes, "the citation of artifacts is realized either through direct or adapted quotes, or through reference and allusion. This type...is the most obvious and least complex of the three."<sup>21</sup> Michael Callen was an aficionado of gay culture and popular culture more generally. In his everyday speech, letters, and songs, he referred to other gay and camp things. For instance, his love of big-voiced divas made its way into the acknowledgments for his first solo album. On that album, he also included an excessive, over-the-top, and downright campy cover of the Connie Francis song "Where the Boys Are," that he recorded with Lowlife, the gay and lesbian rock-and-roll band he fronted in the early-1980s. As part of Lowlife's shows, Callen would sometimes indulge in campy behavior by twirling a baton

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*Harmony* (U of Mass Press, 2010) and Philip Groia in *They All Sang on the Corner: A Second Look at New York City's Rhythm and Blues Vocal Groups* (Phillie Dee Enterprises, 1982).

<sup>20</sup> Keith Harvey, "Camp Talk and Citationality: A Queer Take on 'Authentic' and 'Represented' Utterance," *Journal of Pragmatics* 34 (2002): 1145-1165.

<sup>21</sup> Harvey, "Camp Talk," (2002): 1150.

and yodeling on stage. “Where the Boys Are” contains a cultural citation and a challenge. A lifelong devotee of *La Streisand*, Callen vowed to break his favorite diva’s record for the longest belted note on a recording. As the song comes to a close (2:32-2:55 on the CD recording), he belts an E4 on the word “for,” holding it for a staggering twenty-three seconds! The reference to Streisand continued in 1993, when he appeared in Jonathan Greyson’s farcical movie-musical, *Zero Patience*. As Zero (a fictionalized version of Gaetan Dugas) peers into a microscope to examine his own HIV-infected blood sample, a figure floats into view. Obscured by a parasol, it is soon revealed to be Callen in Streisand drag portraying Miss HIV. He delivers a falsetto performance of the main theme of the musical, “Scheherazade.”<sup>22</sup>



Figure 4.3 Screenshot from *Zero Patience*

<sup>22</sup> For more on *Zero Patience*, see Wendy Gay Pearson and Susan Knabe, *Zero Patience: A Queer Film Classic* (Arsenal Pulp Press, 2012).

*Citing the Medium*

The second type of camp citation involves what Harvey calls “lexical play,” that is the citation of the medium of language itself.<sup>23</sup> This might involve the insertion of foreign terms into everyday speech for dramatic effect. For instance, French phrases like *raison d’être*, *joie de vivre*, or that certain *je ne sais quoi* add an amount of theatrical spice that their English translations (“reason for being,” “joy of/in living,” or “I don’t know what”) lack. Other instances of lexical play include creative turns of phrase such as referring to the 1969 Stonewall Riots as “the hairpin drop heard around the world.”<sup>24</sup> It may also involve “speaking” italics or putting an unexpected or ironic emphasis on the meaning of a term or intentionally putting stress or accent on the wrong syllable of word. “Camp emphasis might indeed be misplaced in terms of standard distribution patterns,” Harvey writes, “but that does not necessarily imply that the speaker got it wrong. On the contrary...to get the stress right would run the risk of the utterance being taken as transparently ‘meaningful.’”<sup>25</sup>

Callen’s friends and family recall that he loved to play with words. Richard Dworkin told me that he would often recite lists of rhyming words, taking a particular delight in assonance or consonance as the words tripped off his tongue. Callen also loved to affect different accents and would, for example, adopt an English pronunciation for the word “schedule.”<sup>26</sup> Tim Miller laughed lovingly about his dear friend’s “four octave

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<sup>23</sup> Harvey (2002): 1152.

<sup>24</sup> Hairpin drop is a gay slang term for dropping hints about one’s sexual orientation. Putting one’s hair up means playing it straight while letting one’s hair down suggests being openly gay or being in the safe company of other gay people. This phrase was the title of an article by Dick Leitsch, “The Hairpin Drop Heard Round the world,” *The Mattachine Society of New York Newsletter* July 1969, 21-13.

<sup>25</sup> Harvey (2002): 1154.

<sup>26</sup> Dworkin, interview with the author, 2012.

melisma on the word loathsome.”<sup>27</sup> When singing, he used this mode of camp expression. First, he often exaggerated the extremes of his vocal range, from resonant baritone to reedy falsetto, in the same song. He also toyed with the pronunciation or syllables of certain words. Many of his performances with The Flirtations illustrate both of these techniques. In “The Boy From New York City,” Callen used a falsetto screech to suggest sexual excitement and to accent important changes to the text like “condom,” “birthday suit,” and “safe sex whiz.” In his virtuosic performance of Bernstein’s “Glitter and Be Gay,” he feigns a vaguely regal, upper crust, and pseudo-European accent as he sings. But Callen’s expressions of humor were not limited to singing. On both of his solo albums, he uses the terms “tops” and “bottoms” to refer to the two sides of *Purple Heart* and the two discs of *Legacy*. He also named his publishing company Tops & Bottoms Music.

### *Citing Femininity*

The final category of citationality involves “an examination of certain stylistic and pragmatic devices of utterance which can broadly be distinguished into two types: those that signal femininity as effusive and barely in control of the self and its expressivity” and those that are “off-hand, indirect, and subtly bitchy.”<sup>28</sup>

Callen excelled at this mode of camp delivery in his stage banter, especially with The Flirtations. Within the group, he was known as Mother, the Queen, or the Diva, and though he played the role of ingénue, he often assumed a loving, nurturing, and caregiving role for the other four men. At the same time, they could also be absolutely

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<sup>27</sup> Miller and I shared a car ride to Washington, D.C. in 2011, and he shared a number of personal memories about his friendship with Callen.

<sup>28</sup> Harvey (2002): 1155.

cutting with one another. In backstage footage before a performance in Indiana, Aurelio Font asks Cliff Townsend, “when was the last time you told Michael Callen that you love him?” Townsend replies, “I tell him all the time,” to which Callen responds, “No you do not!” And Townsend laughs as he says, “I love you, whore.” During a live show in Vancouver, Callen expressed his shock at a memorial plaque hanging in the men’s room and said to the audience, “I hope someone names a tea room after me!” In the background, Aurelio Font laughs, “Oh my god, you’re so tacky!” as the audience giggles with them. He frequently punctuated his banter with long, exaggerated falsetto cries, sighs, moans, and giggles, and he queened it up to get a laugh out of the audience by wearing heels on stage, waving an oriental fan, or feigning a swoon during a love song.

While camp was part of Callen’s musical expression, especially with *The Flirts*, his solo music is marked by a decided earnestness. His lyrics offer sincere and touching portraits of gay life and HIV/AIDS, and his stylistic and generic choices often have more in common with the tradition of singer/songwriters like Joni Mitchell or the Women’s Music movement than with the music typically associated with gay men—namely disco. None of Callen’s recorded output bears any trace of disco influence. His songs stem from the same piano bar tradition that fostered the careers of Melissa Manchester and Barry Manilow: sentimental lyrics set to lush ballads whose arching melodies span a wide vocal register, giving him the opportunity to maximize the dramatic potential of a performance. Many of the songs on *Purple Heart* are intimate performances with just piano and voice, and Richard Dworkin recalled that these were all captured directly to a two-track recorder in order to accent Callen’s ability to sing and accompany himself expressively.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Interview with the author, 24 September 2012.

In spite of his regal and queenly persona, Callen was actually somewhat shy and suffered from what he called “classic gay low self-esteem.”<sup>30</sup> To make matters worse, he also hated performing live, especially performing alone. He toured with Lowlife and The Flirtations but did very little to promote his solo record after it was recorded. He saw both *Purple Heart* and *Legacy* as archival documents of his compositions and performances that would endure after his death rather than as vehicles for his own celebrity.

### **Redefine the Family**

In 1993, Michael Callen recorded a reggae song called “Redefine the Family” for his final solo record. The lyrics describe a hilarious encounter between Callen and a census taker whose limited definition of an American family sets the song’s central drama into motion. As the flabbergasted government agent listens, Callen describes his family:

My lover’s name is Richard/ His lover’s name is Pat/ We’re  
one big happy family/ is there a box for that? / We live here  
with Pam and Lynn/ They’re lesbians and lovers/ Together,  
we’re raising three great kids/ Gertrude and her two  
brothers/ We’ll define our own family.<sup>31</sup>

With lyric economy and wit, Callen articulated what Kath Weston (1991) described as a “family of choice.”<sup>32</sup> According to Weston, families of choice are a distinctly queer alternative to the biological family, and they frequently form as a consequence of the biological family’s refusal to accept a gay, lesbian, or transgender child. Families of choice may include current and former lovers, friends, biological and adopted children,

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<sup>30</sup> Michael Callen and Jeffrey Escoffier, “Interview: My Rise from Complete Obscurity,” in *In My Time: Essays on AIDS, Politics, and Science* (Unpublished, 1993).

<sup>31</sup> Michael Callen, “Redefine the Family,” from *Legacy* (1996).

<sup>32</sup> Kath Weston, *Families We Choose: Lesbians, Gays, Kinship* (Columbia U Press, 1991).

and even sometimes biological relatives. Roles in a family of choice may parallel those of the traditional family, or members may forge entirely new familial roles and relationships.

Michael Callen had several families. Biologically, he was the middle son of Barbara and Clifford Callen and had two siblings, an older brother Barry (1954) and a younger sister, Linda (1958). Second, he was the matriarch of a loving queer family of choice that included his lover of more than ten years, Richard Dworkin and his dear and queer friend, performance artist Tim Miller. As an activist, Callen was part of a vibrant family of men and women engaged in the struggle against government indifference and social stigma. This family included Richard Berkowitz and Dr. Joseph Sonnabend. Musically, Callen's family included Pamela Brandt and Janet Cleary (members of *Lowlife*); Aurelio Font, Cliff Townsend, Jon Arterton, T.J. Meyers (1960-1990), and Jimmy Rutland (members of *The Flirtations*), women's music icons Cris Williamson and Holly Near, songwriter Marsha Malamet and numerous other musicians with whom he collaborated, co-wrote, performed, and recorded. The boundaries between these different families were necessarily porous. For instance, Callen's lover was also the drummer and/or producer on almost all of his recordings.

During the past two years, I had numerous conversations, email exchanges, and telephone calls with many of these men and women. They shared their stories, memories, and love of Callen and introduced me to other members of his many families. Most of the men and women I interviewed met Michael Callen as an adult, and few had much information about his formative years in Ohio. Occasionally, Callen spoke about his childhood in interviews, and the Michael Callen archive at New York's Gay, Lesbian,

and Bisexual Community Center contains two decades worth of letters to and from various Callen family members. One of the last interviews I conducted was with Michael Callen's brother, Barry. We spoke in the fall of 2013, and over the course of two hours, he provided a detailed history of the Callen family and of Michael Callen's childhood and adolescence.

### **Barry Callen: September 2013**

Barry Callen is driving across Michigan on a sunny autumn afternoon in September 2013. After several weeks of playing email tag, he and I have finally coordinated our schedules to talk on the phone about his brother. Although this is one of the last in a series of research interviews, speaking with Michael Callen's brother makes me nervous. Most of my interviews have involved me asking a series of prepared questions about a specific aspect of Callen's life or work, which led to a number of delightful detours and rambling conversations with respondents. This time, I've decided to forego the formality of a script. Instead, I just hit record on an iPhone app that allows me to record the conversation, and Barry talks candidly about his relationship with his brother, who he refers to as "the most important person in my life" several times during the next two hours.

I initially contacted Barry Callen in the spring of 2013 after receiving his email address from Michael Callen's surviving partner, Richard Dworkin. Dutifully naïve, I sent him an email in which I briefly introduced myself, described my project, and requested an interview. He replied saying that he would like to help but was quite busy at

the time. So, I waited. By the end of the summer, my grad student anxiety kicked into overdrive, and I wrote again. The tone of his response initially caught me by surprise:

Hi Matthew,

I want to help you out, but I don't know you. Mike certainly has an amazing and dramatic and tragic and inspiring story...but my family and I have been burned more than once by journalists and activists and video documentarians who sought to paint us as mean, cartoony, white trash Christian, squeaky, straight, homophobic, southern bigots who made Mike suffer needlessly. Some of the cruelty directed our way during Mike's illness and death is still a painful memory.<sup>33</sup>

He then asked if there were people who could vouch for both my credentials and my intentions. I was surprised—almost affronted—after most of the men and women I spoke with excitedly shared their stories without reserve. However, all of these people were gay men, lesbian women, feminists, former AIDS activists, and musicians with whom Callen worked, that is, they were members of his family of choice. Biological family members are different. As a gay man from the south whose own family has an uneasy relationship with the topic of homosexuality, I should have known better than to charge in with my intrusive questions about an obviously painful, difficult, and private part of the Callen family's life.

At the same time, Barry Callen's candor seemed familiar. Over the past two years, I spent a great deal of time reading Michael Callen's writings, listening to his songs, and scrutinizing letters, articles, and interviews that I found in the archives of New York City's Lesbian, Gay, and Transgender Community Center. After reflecting on this email, I came to see that my initial interpretation of its tone was wrong. Barry Callen was not

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<sup>33</sup> Barry Callen, personal email with the author, 24 August 2013.

trying to be a jerk. He was being a good son and brother by looking out for his family and protecting his brother's legacy.

Furthermore, I had overlooked something crucial. I was not just writing about an interesting historical subject. In researching Michael Callen's life and music, I was telling a story about a midwestern family and their gay son who died of the most stigmatized disease in recent history. I was also telling one tale about gay life in New York City. But Callen's story is more than just an AIDS tragedy. It is also about the shifting dynamics of the American family during the 1970s.

## Chapter Five: Innocence Dying

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Figure 5.1, Michael Callen

### Small Town Change: 1955-1973

Michael Callen was born on 11 April 1955 at the Catholic hospital in Batesville, Indiana, fifty miles north of Rising Sun, the small town of about 2,500 people situated along the Ohio River on the southeast side of the state where his parents, Clifford and Barbara Callen, and his maternal grandparents lived. His older brother, Barry, described Rising Sun as “the kind of town where farmers go to die.”<sup>1</sup> In 1960, Clifford and Barbara Callen moved their three children (Barry, Michael, and Linda) to Hamilton, Ohio, an industrial suburb of about 60,000 people, just north of Cincinnati. Hamilton was derogatorily nicknamed “Hamiltucky” because “one out of three residents had migrated north from Kentucky to work in the auto plants. The joke was that they settled in Hamilton because their cars broke down on the way to Detroit!”<sup>2</sup>

Clifford Callen’s ancestors were part of that Kentucky-Ohio migration, and Mr. Callen worked at the General Motors plant in Hamilton. “A real lover of reading [who]

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<sup>1</sup> Barry Callen, interview with the author, digital recording, Charlottesville, VA, 21 September 2013.

<sup>2</sup> Barry Callen, personal correspondence with the author, 17 September 2013.

was very much into intellectual discourse,” he eventually completed his college degree by taking night classes.<sup>3</sup> Mr. Callen also encouraged his three children to expand their horizons through education. At one point in the 1970s, Clifford, Barbara, Barry, Michael, and Linda Callen were all enrolled as college students at the same time. That everyone in his family was a first generation college student was a point of pride for Mr. Callen and remains one for his eldest son.

Barbara Callen’s parents, Chet and Wilma Walker, were gospel musicians who performed throughout southern Indiana. Their marriage caused a minor scandal because Mr. Walker’s Native American heritage made him “something next door to a negro” to whites in the area.<sup>4</sup> Although Indiana overturned its segregation laws in 1877, social divides between black and white communities and racist attitudes persisted in spite of the law. The Walkers performed a repertoire of traditional hymns and original religious songs at both black and white churches. Mr. Walker accompanied their singing with his ukulele. Barbara Walker inherited considerable musical abilities from her parents. Although she never learned to read musical notation, she played piano, organ, xylophone, accordion, and Autoharp; she also sang and composed religious songs and children’s music. She could also yodel, a talent her youngest son, Michael, would inherit. After she married, Barbara Callen went back to college and eventually taught special education. Barry noted that his mother used music and song as tools to facilitate her students’ educational experiences.

The Callen family’s interest in education and the arts made them peculiar among the residents of Hamilton, but they also stood out for another reason: their political

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<sup>3</sup> Interview with the author, 21 September 2013.

<sup>4</sup> Barry Callen, interview with the author 21 September 2013.

beliefs. They were Democrats, and politics was an important subject among the family. Barry Callen described Hamilton as “very right wing,” and Michael Callen said that his liberal Democrat father “took a lot of shit for his politics [in the sea] of redneck Republicans.”<sup>5</sup> As adolescents, the Callen brothers canvassed the neighborhood during election years, and Michael engaged in passionate political discussions with his father. The two men held similar beliefs, and Mr. Callen stated in a 1990 interview that he often felt “Mike and I are the only democrats left!”<sup>6</sup> Although less politically outspoken than her husband, Barbara Callen instilled in all three of her children a conviction to “stand up for what they believed was right.”<sup>7</sup> These experiences would eventually guide Michael Callen to the forefront of national AIDS politics.

Like most of the citizens of Hamilton, the Callens were working class, and they often struggled to make ends meet. As kids, the Callen brothers devised a clever ploy to make pocket money. They created an organization called Twin Brook International, named after their subdivision community, and they recruited neighborhood children to join. Twin Brook published a newspaper, which they sold door to door in the neighborhood. They also had a museum, which of course charged an entrance fee, and the club produced plays and charged admission. One summer, Twin Brook devised an ingenious plot. Nearby, construction crews were building a new subdivision, and the boys figured that the workmen would be hungry and thirsty after working long hours in the sun. They filled a wagon with popcorn and Kool-Aid, which they sold by the bag and by

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<sup>5</sup> Interview with Barry Callen September 2013 and Michael Callen and Jeffrey Escoffier, “My Rise from Complete Obscurity,” *In My Time: Essays on Sex, Science, and AIDS by Michael Callen* (unpublished), Jeffrey Escoffier, editor, 1993. I received a copy of this unpublished manuscript from Richard Dworkin.

<sup>6</sup> This interview was part of a documentary project that never came to fruition. Richard Dworkin provided me with copies of the interviews.

<sup>7</sup> Escoffier (1993).

the glass. Little did the workmen know that the popcorn they purchased from these thoughtful children had been super salted in order to make them more thirsty, and the refreshing Kool-Aid was saturated with sugar to make it tastier. “We were little hustlers,” Barry Callen laughed, “and we were always hustling for money.”<sup>8</sup>

In spite of the added financial hardship, the Callens provided their children with the means to pursue music and the arts. Their home was filled with musical instruments. Barry learned guitar, while Michael studied violin, sang in choir, and taught himself piano. Linda also learned the guitar and sang. Mrs. Callen had a Hammond organ and was a member of The Hammond Organ Club of Hamilton, Ohio. The family also owned a piano, which was painted pink because it was their mother’s favorite color.<sup>9</sup> After putting the children to bed, Mrs. Callen would play piano or organ and sing for an hour each night. Family music making was a regularly activity. Barry Callen recalled that family reunions, holidays, and other such gatherings typically involved “a big southern feast and singing lots of hymns and that kind of stuff.”<sup>10</sup> In spite of the fact that he was “extremely talented from an early age,” Michael Callen often “refused to participate in any music with [his] family.”<sup>11</sup> Barry Callen believes that his rationalist brother’s lack of interest stemmed from his disdain for the ideologies represented by hymns and other religious songs that formed the bulk of their repertoire.

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<sup>8</sup> Barry Callen (2013).

<sup>9</sup> Barry Callen (2013).

<sup>10</sup> Interview with the author, 21 September 2013.

<sup>11</sup> Barry Callen, 21 Sept 2013.



Figure 5.2, Screenshot from a Callen family home movie. Neighborhood kids participating in a Twin Brook International Street Parade. Michael Callen (center) twirling a baton and Barry Callen (left) dressed as a soldier

Eventually, the Callen family purchased a stereo so that they could further indulge in their eclectic musical tastes. The family record collection contained “lots of folky, lefty stuff” like Peter, Paul, & Mary, original Broadway soundtrack albums, classical music, pop music, and even a record of Zulu drumming and chanting.<sup>12</sup> Scattered among the discs were a few records by Julie Andrews and Barbra Streisand. When I spoke with Barry Callen, he lovingly recalled his brother’s infatuation with Streisand. From the first grade, “he wanted to *be* her. He would *perform* her. He would play [Streisand’s songs]

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<sup>12</sup> Barry Callen (2013)

over and over, act them out, be *beyond* campy.”<sup>13</sup> Although the kids of Hamilton, Ohio “didn’t know what a diva was,” they knew that Michael Callen “wanted the spotlight [and] the majority of the attention.”<sup>14</sup>

Callen was also especially fond of another diva: Granny Clampett, the acerbic matriarch of the Clampett family in *The Beverly Hillbillies*. In second grade, he insisted on being Granny Clampett in a Twin Brook theatrical production. Dressed up in stockings, a dress, and a hat, Callen threw himself into the part with gusto. His brother remembered that he “liked being that character even when he wasn’t in the play...He kinda wanted to be her, too.”<sup>15</sup> These diva aspirations and infatuations made Callen different from other boys in Hamilton where sports and athletics were the norm. Still, as kids, Barry Callen recalled that he and his siblings were quite popular. They made friends easily, participated in church and community activities. Linda was elected homecoming queen by her senior class, and Michael frequently participated in musical theater productions.

Although close to his brother and never without playmates or friends, Michael Callen experienced feelings of isolation and estrangement in his family and in the Hamilton community. He knew that something about him was different, though he did not know what. His effeminacy and penchant for dressing up in women’s clothing was odd but endearing, and his parents believed that he would grow out of it with time.<sup>16</sup>

Neither of the Callen brothers recalled anyone using the word “homosexual” to describe Michael’s behavior as a child. However, Barry described an incident that, in

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<sup>13</sup> Barry Callen (2013)

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Schmidt (1987).

retrospect, suggests that the family was aware that something was different about their middle child. When the boys were 11 and 10 respectively, their maternal grandparents convinced Barbara Callen to bring her sons to a church service in Rising Sun. “Our idea of church was very middle class,” Barry said, “show up in a suit and tie; sing; listen; stand up; sit down; shake hands; goodbye. No feathers ruffled.” However, Chet and Wilma Walker were evangelical Pentecostals whose church services took place in a private home that had been converted into a house of worship. “They’d torn out the interior and replaced it with pews, a lectern, and a big cross on the wall behind it.”

Dressed in their Brooks Brothers suits, the Callen boys rode with their mother to Rising Sun and were shocked when their grandfather walked them into the church where there was a woman minister. She began the sermon in a “screechy hillbilly accent,” and as the service progressed, people got the spirit and started to speak in tongues, testify, and leap around the church. Their grandfather, who had a wooden leg, got down on his good knee and began to pray, “Dear Lord, save these young boys from the Great Whore of Babylon in Hamilton! From vice and evil ways!” As their grandfather prayed, the minister called for the congregation to cast Satan out of the young boys’ souls by laying on of hands. Soon, the boys were surrounded by what Barry Callen described as twenty or thirty “old, diseased, poor, scary-looking” worshipers who scrambled to make physical and spiritual contact.

After the service, Mrs. Callen picked up her two sons and drove them back to Hamilton. Barry believes that “she knew what had happened.” In retrospect, he also feels that the adults in their family had begun to realize that Michael was gay and wanted to intervene. “They wanted to pray the gay out of him, and they threw me in just to make

sure his gay hadn't rubbed off on me." Clifford Callen confirmed Barry's suspicion in a 1990 interview when he said that he realized Michael was probably gay by the time his son was in sixth grade.

While effeminacy was acceptable in a young boy, such external markers of gender difference were received with less enthusiasm as Callen matured into a teenager. Although he tried to ignore his growing physical attraction to men, Callen found it increasingly difficult. He tried to play it straight because he felt "tremendous pressure to date" girls.<sup>17</sup> However, physical intimacy with women made him squeamish. So powerful was his revulsion to all things heterosexual, Callen endured the awkwardness of a goodnight kiss with a young woman by silently counting the seconds until she pulled away. Ironically, his deviance from Hamilton's normal mode of masculinity may have made him more attractive to some women. His brother recalled that "three of the most beautiful girls in our high school came to the house regularly because they wanted to date him and fuck him."<sup>18</sup> Once, a group of teenage girls chased him around the house "while trying to pull down his pajamas and bite him on the ass, pull him down, and kiss him," Barry laughed, adding, "God! It wasn't fair!"<sup>19</sup>

During a game of canasta with three girlfriends, he first heard the word "homosexual." When the oldest girl "narrowed [her] eyes, pointed at [him], and declared with great authority, 'if you don't stop acting like a girl, you're gonna turn into a *homosexual*,'" Callen "broke out into a cold sweat."<sup>20</sup> Although he did not know the precise meaning of the word, the palpable revulsion in his friend's voice indicated "a

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<sup>17</sup> Schmidt (1987).

<sup>18</sup> Barry Callen (2013).

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Michael Callen, *Surviving AIDS* (New York: HarperPerennial, 1990): 2.

homosexual must be *the* most horrible thing anyone could ever be—so horrible that no one had ever spoken of it in my presence.”<sup>21</sup>

Image Removed

Figure 5.3, Michael Callen

Callen grew up in an era when homosexuality was considered a mental illness and a sign of moral depravity. Representations of gay life were virtually nonexistent in mainstream media, and as a result, he believed he might be the only person with same-sex desires. Desperate for information, Callen turned to books and gathered what he could from the outdated tomes in the Hamilton Public Library. In an old psychology textbook, Callen found homosexuality listed alongside murder, pedophilia, and kleptomania, and he read that gay men often “lurk around public restrooms and seduce little children.”<sup>22</sup> A clandestine copy of Dr. David Ruben’s *Everything You Always Wanted to Know About Sex but Were Afraid to Ask* (1969) reinforced the notion of gay men as “pathetic psychopaths who hung out in public restrooms writing lurid notes to each other on toilet paper.”<sup>23</sup>

Kath Weston (1995) identifies this turn to textual representations of homosexuality as “tracking the gay imaginary” and notes that it is a common stage in

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<sup>21</sup> Callen (1990): 2.

<sup>22</sup> Schmidt (1987).

<sup>23</sup> Callen (1990): 3. Ruben’s book was instrumental in shifting attitudes about sex in the US. Nonetheless, it was also a product of its time and reflects certain prejudices, especially toward gay people. It has been revised many times, most recently in 2002, to reflect further shifts in our cultural understanding of sex and sexuality.

coming out narratives.<sup>24</sup> Other modes of discovery for gay youth might include movies, news reports, radio shows, and even church sermons, but the content and availability of these varied greatly across the country and over time. “Isolation [is] the customary starting point in the process of claiming a lesbian or gay identity,” and like most gay adolescents, Callen felt utterly alone.<sup>25</sup>

Although he was popular, Callen was also subject to bullying from his male peers at Taft High School. “Everybody was calling me ‘faggot’ and ‘sissy’ and being mean and taunting me and stuff.”<sup>26</sup> He loathed gym class because they “had to play baseball and other butch things [he] hated.”<sup>27</sup> The “dreadful, dreadful sports field” proved to be another source of anxiety for Callen, whose lack of interest in sports made him an oddity among the young men.<sup>28</sup> “I was the sissy you hear about,” and he recalled in 1987 that playing sports with his male peers was a “frightening, embarrassing situation.”<sup>29</sup> The locker room elicited paralyzing anxiety. Fearful that a single glance might betray his growing sexual attraction to men or that he might get an erection in the showers, Callen often “lollygagged about” in an attempt to be the last one in the shower.<sup>30</sup> Tragically, his attempts at invisibility only made him more conspicuous. Boys would flick him with wet towels, chide him, and call him names, and he recalled that on more than one occasion, boys would “circle around and piss on me.”<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Kath Weston, “Get Thee to a Big City,” *GLQ* 2/3 (1995): 253-278, see especially 257-58.

<sup>25</sup> Weston (1995): 256.

<sup>26</sup> Callen (1993).

<sup>27</sup> Callen (1993).

<sup>28</sup> Michael Callen, *Why Am I Gay* HBO (1993).

<sup>29</sup> Schmidt (1987).

<sup>30</sup> Callen (1993).

<sup>31</sup> Callen (1993). Barry Callen (2013) told me that these boys were members of the local Methodist Youth Fellowship and that his brother had actually given him the names of the offenders before his death in 1993. The scars of such brutalities remain tender for the Callen family as well as for Michael Callen’s queer friends and family outside of the Midwest.

The abuse Callen experienced was not limited to his classmates. Both Barry Callen and Richard Dworkin recounted an incident in which the high school choir teacher pressured Michael Callen to engage in some kind of sexual activity. When Callen refused the advances of the older man, the teacher responded punitively by withholding solos and pressuring the young man to keep the incident a secret.<sup>32</sup> As a result, Callen tried to commit suicide by overdosing on aspirin.

When he graduated high school in 1973, Callen had no knowledge or awareness of the existence of a growing gay political movement in the US. He had never travelled outside a fifty-mile radius of Hamilton. He made the decision to attend Boston University on a music scholarship in the fall of 1973. The move east and the distance from his family presented Callen with an opportunity to reconstruct himself “from the shambles of what was left” after eighteen years in Ohio.<sup>33</sup>

Image Removed

Figure 5.4, Michael Callen

### **Boston University: 1973-1977**

Callen moved into a music dormitory on Bay State Road on the Boston University campus in the fall of 1973. Almost immediately, he sought out gay men in the only places he knew that he might find them: men’s restrooms around the city. He had his “first conscious sexual experience with another man in a filthy public toilet” his freshman

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<sup>32</sup> The teacher, Sam Shie, was eventually fired after he was arrested for alleged misconduct in a public restroom. The story divided Hamilton and is recounted in the last chapter of Peter Davis’ *Hometown: A Portrait of an American Community* (Simon & Schuster, 1982).

<sup>33</sup> Schmidt (1987).

year.<sup>34</sup> Callen continued to cruise bathrooms, or tearooms as they were called, for the next year and a half. One day a man actually scrawled one of those “lurid notes” on a piece of toilet paper and passed it to him beneath the stall divider. The note asked whether Callen had recently visited a gay bathhouse in the area. Naively, Callen replied, “What is a bathhouse?” The man took Callen outside and “explained that there were places that gay men went which were sort of a quasi-gymnasium/health club where there were cubicles and stuff.”<sup>35</sup>

Callen became a regular on the Boston bathhouse circuit for the next year or so. During another post-coital conversation, one of his bathhouse partners asked if he ever went to gay bars or discotheques. Callen, who was allergic to alcohol, admitted that he had no idea there were gay bars. For him, bars were places where “truckers hung out and drank cheap beer.”<sup>36</sup> However, he soon found his way to a Boston gay bar and gained entrée into the world of gay politics. Years later, Callen characterized his journey from the bathroom stall to the political front as “coming out backwards.”<sup>37</sup>

The 1975-1976 academic year was a season of dynamic change for Callen. He left the Boston University School of Music because he felt constrained by the program’s emphasis on classical music.<sup>38</sup> He declared a new major in English and Creative Writing

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<sup>34</sup> Schmidt (1987).

<sup>35</sup> Schmidt (1987). Bathhouses played a central role in the formation of gay community in urban areas across the US. In New York City, The Continental Baths at the Ansonia (Broadway between 73<sup>rd</sup> and 74<sup>th</sup>) were famous not only as places to meet men but also for excellent entertainment. One of Callen’s favorite divas, The Divine Miss M Bette Midler, started singing at The Continental in the early 1970s with Barry Manilow accompanying her on the piano. Other artists played “the tubs,” including Melba Moore, Nell Carter, the Pointer Sisters, Melissa Manchester, Peter Allen, and Cab Calloway. For more on the history of gay bathhouses, see *The Journal of Homosexuality* 44 3/4 (2003) “Public Health Policy and Gay Bathhouses.”

<sup>36</sup> Schmidt (1987).

<sup>37</sup> Escoffier (1993).

<sup>38</sup> Schmidt (1987).

and even signed up for a poetry class with Anne Sexton.<sup>39</sup> That year, Callen also made contact with the university's gay community. He spotted an ad in *The Boston Phoenix* announcing a gay and lesbian student picnic, and “[his] jaw dropped...the notion that you could be out in college and use college facilities” was a revelation.<sup>40</sup> The gay student group picnic was scheduled to take place at the commons by the Charles River, literally across the street from his dorm. On the afternoon of the gathering, Callen “circled around until somebody named Marty Algaze came over and said, ‘I think you’re looking for us.’”<sup>41</sup>

Within three months, Callen was president of the organization. He rose quickly through the ranks not because he had great political aspirations but “because nobody else was stupid enough to do it.”<sup>42</sup> However, Callen’s stint as a gay leader ended almost as soon as it began. As he told Escoffier in 1993,

My first meeting as president, the lesbians came specifically so they could walk out. And I got very badly burned early. Politics is who steps up to bat. People would sign up for committees...and not show up and never call back, and I’d end up doing everything.<sup>43</sup>

By the end of the semester, Callen began to feel that “gay politics attracted egomaniacs and people that really needed therapy, people that were working out their deep problems in public.” These frustrations led him to abandon the gay student group and left him with the impression that “gay politics was like a smelly fart.”<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Sexton committed suicide on 4 October 1974, thus Callen never had the opportunity to take her poetry seminar.

<sup>40</sup> Escoffier (1993).

<sup>41</sup> Escoffier (1993).

<sup>42</sup> Escoffier (1993).

<sup>43</sup> Escoffier (1993).

<sup>44</sup> Escoffier (1993).

Although he temporarily stepped out of gay politics, Callen possessed an extraordinarily political sense of himself. He attributed this to his democratic parents. He also credited his politicization to his initial exposure to feminist theory in college. He cultivated an interest in gay literature, theater, visual art, dance, and music. “If it had anything remotely gay about it, [he] would buy it or see it.”<sup>45</sup> His explorations of gay life and art led to an epiphany: “the horrible things mainstream society was saying about us—things [Callen] had internalized—were not true.”<sup>46</sup>

Emboldened by the promise of gay liberation, Callen “came out with a vengeance,” and in the process, he “did battle with everyone, especially [his] family.”<sup>47</sup> Later, he described himself as “bitter, abrasive, rigid, and impatient” with anyone who did not support the goals of the Gay Liberation movement at this point in his life. He first came out to his older brother during a phone conversation.<sup>48</sup> At first, Barry said, “So, you’re happy?” and assumed the phone call was one of his brother’s odd jokes. As Barry told me in 2013, “I was a Christian [at the time]. I was praying for god to take my strong sexual drive away! But he called me on a Saturday night and said, ‘Barry, I have something to tell you...I am gay.’” The older Callen brother balked at the suggestion and hung up to think about this revelation. The next time they spoke, Barry admitted that he could not believe that his brother engaged in sexual activities with other men “because there’s nothing in a man you can have sex with.”

Callen seized the opportunity to describe gay sex in excruciating detail and scandalize his older brother in the process. “Let me explain it to you so you can

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<sup>45</sup> Escoffier (1993).

<sup>46</sup> Callen (1990), 3.

<sup>47</sup> Callen (1990), 3.

<sup>48</sup> Schmidt (1987).

understand,” he began, “sometimes I put my dick in their ass and their mouth and vice-versa.”<sup>49</sup> Barry’s initial reaction was disgust, then shock. Although his brother was “capital G-A-Y, dressing like Granny Clampett, singing like Streisand,” Barry was completely caught by surprise. “I knew he was *weird* but didn’t know he was gay!” Later that evening, Barry had an epiphany. “I remember thinking ‘that’s unnatural sex,’ but then my second thought was ‘what do you know about natural sex? You’re a virgin!’” He called his brother and told him, “I don’t care if it’s natural or not. I love [you] and always will.” His older brother’s support gave Callen the courage to tell his mother and sister. Barbara Callen responded with less enthusiasm, pleading with her son that “whatever you do, do not tell your father.”<sup>50</sup> In a sitcom-worthy twist, Clifford Callen responded to the news by saying, “whatever you do, do not tell your mother!”

This comic episode aside, Callen’s decision to come out strained his relationship with his father, and he often spoke about these family dynamics in interviews. Clifford Callen preferred intellectual conversation to emotional exchanges, which he handled clumsily. Rather than communicate with his son directly, Mr. Callen would “basically pick [his sons’] brains for information.”<sup>51</sup> Each son could talk about what was happening in his brother’s life but not about the events in his own life. Clifford Callen was unwavering in his disapproval of what he considered was his son’s *chosen* lifestyle. He also prohibited any discussion about homosexuality, claiming to get “physically nauseated when forced to *consider* the subject, much less talk about it.”<sup>52</sup> By Michael

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<sup>49</sup> Barry Callen, interview with the author, (2013).

<sup>50</sup> Schmidt (1987).

<sup>51</sup> Schmidt (1987)

<sup>52</sup> Schmidt (1987).

Callen's own account, this period was "very ugly," and the two did not speak for almost two years "because it was simply too painful."<sup>53</sup>

In spite of their differences, Barbara and Clifford Callen maintained a lively written correspondence with their sons. They exchanged impassioned letters in which they expressed their feelings about themselves and each other. A common theme in their letters was the love they felt toward all the members of the family. Surprisingly, they also articulated their opinions about homosexuality. They span a lengthy period, from the late-1970s to the early-1990s and offer a glimpse into the often-private thoughts of one American family dealing with homosexuality in the late-twentieth century.

### **Where the Boys Are: New York City, 1977-1982**

Throughout the mid-twentieth century, gay men and lesbians flocked to major urban areas on both coasts, notably New York and San Francisco. Gay enclaves like the East Village and Castro flourished with gay businesses, bars, coffee houses, newspapers, magazines, art, and music.<sup>54</sup> After graduating from Boston University in 1977, Callen joined the great gay migration to New York City.<sup>55</sup> He moved into an apartment on Christopher Street and found a day job as a legal secretary. Living in NYC posed particular difficulties for a naïve Midwestern boy. Money was tight, and during his first month in the city, Callen lost his job after he pierced his ear, was "fagbashed," had a fire in his apartment, and awoke one night to find a rat crawling across him.<sup>56</sup> Nonetheless,

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<sup>53</sup> Schmidt (1987).

<sup>54</sup> For more on queer migration, see Chauncey (1995) and Weston (1994) as well as Retter, Bouthillette, and Ingram, *Queers in Space: Communities, Public Places, Sites of Resistance* (Bay Press, 1997) and Alexis Annes and Meredith Redlin, "Coming Out and Coming Back: Rural Gay Migration and the City," *Journal of Rural Studies* 28/1 (2012): 56-68.

<sup>55</sup> Kath Weston uses the term "Great Gay Migration" in "Get Thee to a Big City," *GLQ* 2/3 (1995). See especially 257-258.

<sup>56</sup> Escoffier (1993).

Callen made New York his home and remained in Manhattan for the next fifteen years. At night, he started to write original songs, which he performed in cabarets and piano bars like SNAFU (676 Sixth Ave at 21<sup>st</sup> Street) and Duplex (61 Christopher Street).

Stylistically, Callen's music from the late-1970s and early-1980s resembled that of fellow New Yorkers Melissa Manchester and Barry Manilow, both of whom worked with one of Callen's favorite divas, the Divine Miss M herself, Bette Midler. His songs were primarily piano-based ballads with expansive melodies that allowed Callen to show off his flexible soprano range to great dramatic effect.

Callen's compositional process, according to Dworkin, typically occurred at the piano. He would play a series of chords and try out lyrics until the two came together with melody. Then, he would finesse the piece into a final form. While queer issues continued to inform his lyrics, Callen also began to incorporate AIDS politics and activism into his songs. Working with a band and incorporating new synthesizer and sequencer equipment engendered a new phase in Callen's musical style. His vocals became stronger and more declamatory, relying less on beautiful melodic arcs than on declamation of a wordy political text. Multi-tracking enabled him to build dense layers of harmony using his own vocals while digital looping freed him from the keyboard. Finally, synthesizers offered an elaborate expressive palette that included various synth effects, organs, alarms, and other atmospheric sounds.

Throughout his career, Callen tends toward sprawling and expansive song forms and frequently wordy texts. He was an intuitive, if not technically proficient, pianist who effectively exploited a variety of accompaniment textures to complement the sentiment of his song texts. On slower ballads, he leaned toward dense chords with frequent added

fourths, sixths, and ninths or rolling arpeggiated figures. A 1982 article for *The New York City News* described Callen as a “fresh, commercial gay vocalist who’s just beginning to get in front of microphones.”<sup>57</sup> The author raved about Callen’s “flawless, torchy versions” of pop ballads and the “sophisticated sheen” of his original songs. Although at this point Callen’s set list was ballad-heavy, the article assured readers that the singer had “the panache to pull off something more closely resembling an out-and-out rocker...[He] will probably show us that and much more.”

Lyrically, Callen’s original songs celebrated gay love, described events in gay history, or explored other gay themes and topics. He resolved early in his songwriting career to write and sing for gay audiences, and his songs exhibit a boldness in terms of their subject matter that was probably influenced by his admiration for women’s music figures like Cris Williamson and Holly Near, both of whom would become close friends in a few years. There were also other gay male singer-songwriters who were dealing with gay topics, including Steve Grossman (1951-1991), whose *Caravan Tonight* (1974) was hailed by *Rolling Stone* as “one of the most auspicious singer-songwriter debuts” of the decade. Similarly, Michael Cohen released three gay-themed albums in the early-1970s including *What Did You Expect...Songs About the Experiences of Being Gay* (1973). However, both Grossman and Cohen were closer to the folk and jazz experiments of Joni Mitchell, Cat Stevens, and James Taylor than the more overtly sentimental pop style of Callen’s songs from this period.

One notable exception is “Street Singer.” Although Dworkin and Callen recorded the song with guitar accompaniment for the *Legacy* album, Callen always performed it at

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<sup>57</sup> David Sloan, “A New Vocalist for the Rest of Us,” *The New York City News* 11/23 1 December 1981.

the piano in his live shows.<sup>58</sup> The song, especially the piano versions preserved on archival cassettes and home videos, owes more than a small debt to Joni Mitchell's "For Free," from her 1970 album, *Ladies of the Canyon*. Both songs reflect on the price of fame at arguably premature points in each singer's career. Callen is lost in the hustle of city life. Still, he pauses to listen and imagines himself singing with the performer. Callen's description of the sound they make is evocatively paradoxical. He adds a "sweet, silent harmony" to the song, perhaps indicative of the brief flash of nostalgia for a musical road he had taken. In the process receives a musical benediction from the street performer, whose worry-free existence (while probably a hopeful fantasy) reminds Callen of his own musical aspirations.

Another early song, "Innocence Dying," which Callen co-wrote with his friend Bobby Butler, deals with real events from New York City gay history. On 25 May 1977, a fire at the Everard Baths killed nine patrons. The lyrics describe a young gay man's journey "out of the south and into the bars" of New York City. Although he has escaped the brutalities of small town life, the protagonist continues to carry "the scars of a redneck father who never bothered to love him." In the city, the inexperienced young man struggles to survive and ends up "giving head in some stranger's bed, just hoping he'll buy you breakfast." Using money he earned hustling, the young protagonist checks into a "gay prison cell at the Everard Baths" on that fateful night. The ballad ends with a surprising twist: a new character enters, as the narrator uses first-person pronouns for the first time, revealing that he was the stranger who did not take the time to buy the kid breakfast. Sacrificed on the altar of gay sex, this young lamb becomes a metonym for a

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<sup>58</sup> In a 1982 show at SNAFU, Callen played piano and singer-songwriter Grant King joined him on guitar.

whole community's "Innocence Dying" and a startlingly prescient image of things to come.<sup>59</sup>

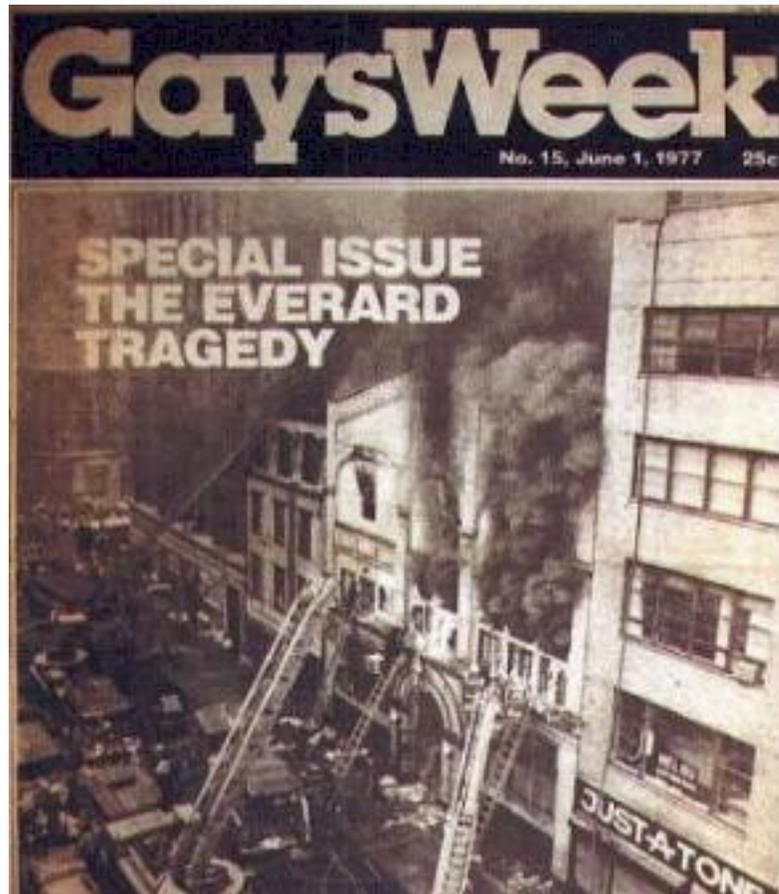


Figure 5.5, *GaysWeek* 1977 Everard Baths Fire, NYC.

In addition to his solo performances at piano bars in the city, Callen also put together one of his first musical groups with some of his gay friends. Mike & the Headsets was a short-lived a cappella group whose repertoire consisted of girl group

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<sup>59</sup> In October 1993, Callen received a letter from George Harvey that included photographs of a young man named Robert Alexander Richards, who was apparently one of the unidentified fatalities of the Everard Fire. Thanks to Richard Dworkin for sharing this letter with me. Harvey told Callen that he had discovered information about the identity of one of the victims of the Everard fire. Callen requested photographs of the young man, which Harvey shared with him.

covers and arrangements of songs by Elton John and others. They performed in Central Park for a Gay Pride event and made a few other appearances around the city before they disbanded. He daydreamed of starting a new band that would be a sort of gay and lesbian version of The Mamas and Papas.



Figure 5.6, Mike and the Headsets in Central Park, date unknown

Living in New York provided Callen with the psychic, emotional, and social resources to build a new identity as a completely out gay man. With the help of a psychotherapist, Callen sought to overcome his own internalized homophobia, to be assertive, present-focused, and clear about his needs and wants. The opening salvo in his 7 November 1979 letter to his parents belies Callen’s sense of insecurity. He begins, “There’s a New York saying that goes, ‘therapy hasn’t been successful until you can tell your parents to go fuck themselves.’”<sup>60</sup> He quickly adds an important caveat. “Therapy

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<sup>60</sup> Michael Callen, New York, to Clifford and Barbra Callen, 7 November 1979. Original typed copy, New York City Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Community Center Archive, New York.

hasn't been successful until you can tell your parents that you love them or to go fuck themselves."<sup>61</sup>

An important part of his therapeutic journey was to confront his parents about a number of issues, including their ability to communicate openly as a family and their continuing reluctance to accept his sexuality. He also admitted his own private worries: that he was untalented, unattractive, and unintelligent. Over the course of several eloquent and impassioned pages, Callen condemned his family's tendency to "hint for love [and] wait around hoping someone will sense we are deep in the need—to be touched, to be reassured, to be talked to, brought up, brought down."<sup>62</sup> He also expressed concern over the ways in which the members of the Callen family communicate. "It's not the *frequency* of calling that disturbs me," he wrote, "but the *content* of our conversations—or should I say the lack of content."<sup>63</sup>

As the letter closed, Callen turned to the subject of his sexuality. Addressing his father directly, he encouraged Mr. Callen to consider that he may be embarrassed about having a gay son. By owning up to their feelings of shame and frustration, Callen believed that he and his father could work toward a better relationship "together, out of mutual love."<sup>64</sup> Clifford Callen responded with a letter of his own few days later.

Although his son characterized family relationships as guarded or emotionally distant, Mr. Callen's reply exhibits a remarkably similar bluntness and candor. He credited his son for not "subscribing to [a] simplistic point of view" when it came to his psychoanalysis because most therapeutic practice suffered from an "absolute

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<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

bankruptcy.”<sup>65</sup> Almost bitterly, he added, “If your therapist is telling you that you are not being assertive enough, he reads you differently than I do or ever have.”<sup>66</sup> Mr. Callen went on to argue that all relationships, including familial ones, operate most successfully when they proceed from “reasonably defined parameters within the basic tenets of each person’s philosophy.”

Lest there be any confusion, he outlined his personal philosophy about homosexuality. Mr. Callen first worried that his son was “becoming” gay as early as junior high but felt “powerless to stop it.” This combination of feelings led to anxiety, anger, hurt, and “the most difficult and lastingly damaging” emotion: disappointment. He also asserted his conviction that his son “consciously and freely chose [the homosexual] lifestyle with the full realization and knowledge that the relationships of family and most friends would be adversely affected.” And he blamed his son for resorting to “some subterfuge at times” in order to disguise his sexuality.

Similar epistolary exchanges continued for many years as each man struggled with his complex feelings. Mr. Callen openly expressed his desire to avoid the subject of homosexuality completely, suggesting that they find common ground in non-controversial and non-confrontational topics: entertainment, travel, family, shared past experiences, and future plans. His son would not relent and flatly refused to accept such censorship. “I cannot isolate my gayness,” he insisted, “I do not do so at work. I do not do so with my present and vital relationships, and I cannot and will not revert to hiding an

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<sup>65</sup> Clifford Callen, Hamilton, Letter to Michael Callen, 13 November 1979. Original typed copy, NYC LGBT Community Center Archive, New York.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid.

aspect of my being of which I am very proud and which is one of the primary sources of pleasure in my life.”<sup>67</sup>

In another letter, Callen appealed to his father’s intellectual and political side by offering a brief history of the 1969 Stonewall riots. He hoped that this display of community pride might vanquish his father’s outdated and negative stereotypes about gay men. He pointed to sociological, psychological, and medical research on the “causes” of homosexuality. Finally, he offered an eloquent and heartfelt appeal to his father’s basic emotions *as a father*:

I know this is hard for you, and my true source of sadness is that two who so obviously love each other must be locked in this life-and-death-like struggle towards freedom to express that love. Society and socialization are standing between us—a civil war between father and son. I have fought alone for so long...and now, war weary, I am watching your suffering intensify...Just let me say that the healthy love (both self and between two people) that can be found in a society cleared of homophobia is well worth the effort. The givens are that I am homosexual and you are heterosexual. We must build love from that basic difference. Just remember, all we are talking about here is love.<sup>68</sup>

Homosexuality was both “very abstract and very foreign” to Clifford and Barbara Callen, and their image of gay identity was based largely on the same misconceptions Callen read about in the Hamilton Public Library as an adolescent.<sup>69</sup> In later interviews, Callen displayed an acute sensitivity to his parents’ mixed emotions about his sexuality. In many ways, this reveals his increasingly complex sense of his socio-sexual identity as a gay

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<sup>67</sup> Michael Callen, New York, Letter to Clifford Callen, 17 November 1979. Original typed copy, NYC LGBT Community Center Archive, New York.

<sup>68</sup> Michael Callen, Letter 17 December 1979

<sup>69</sup> Clifford Callen, Letter to Michael Callen, 13 November 1979.

man. Coming out “upset their plans for me. It meant that they wouldn’t have grandchildren. It meant they didn’t know what it would mean.”<sup>70</sup>

Two things stand out in these letters. First, father and son were equally stubborn. Clifford Callen’s resolve to avoid his son’s sexuality met its match in his son’s insistence on its manifestation in every aspect of his daily life. Second, Clifford and Michael Callen loved each other very much. Their mutual love fueled a lively exchange of ideas about the nature of masculinity, sexuality, and family for two decades. Although Clifford Callen said he wanted no contact with the gay aspects of his son’s gay life, these letters demonstrate that he was at least willing to communicate his feelings frequently in written form.

Verbal conversation was a different experience for the Callen men during this time. Callen remembered that “there were also these long-distance phone conversations where all the players tried not to talk about what was really going on, and it became an art. My father would ask me about my job; he would ask me about the weather; he would ask me about my brother.”<sup>71</sup> Yet neither man could directly address the rift between them. This pattern repeated itself in conversations between Mr. Callen and his other son, Barry. Callen processed his family dysfunction in a song.

Written sometime in the late-1970s, the song “Nobody’s Fool” stages one such phone conversation between Callen and his parents. The song provides a musical snapshot of Callen’s perception of family dynamics and the crisis faced by increasing numbers of American families as larger numbers of gay men and women came out during the 1970s. During a live performance at SNAFU in September 1982 (only the second

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<sup>70</sup> Schmidt (1987).

<sup>71</sup> Schmidt (1987).

time he sang the piece in public), Callen described “Nobody’s Fool” as “an epic” song.<sup>72</sup> This probably has to do with both the formal dimensions of the song as well as the drama of its subject matter. Each of its three irregular sections corresponds to a different speaker, he explained, the son’s mother, the narrator’s father, “who sings for the bulk of the song, and then after a brief musical interlude, the narrator speaks.”<sup>73</sup>

In A, the mother pleads for her son to communicate with his father, assuring him that “he misses you...in his own way.” Although she acknowledges that childhood was “rough” for her two sons, Mother insists that her husband is “just old now and set in his ways.” As such, he may be incapable of the kind of psychic change her son requires. She worries that her husband, like many middle-aged men, has lost his sense of purpose within the family and may “be just counting the days.”

Section	Speaker	Phrase Form	Number of Measures
A	Mother	a a' b c	4 + 5 +4 + 6 (19)
B	Father	a a' b c d	4+5+4+6_4 (23)
C	Narrator	d d' coda	4+4+11 (19)

Figure 5.7, Nobody’s Fool Form

Melodically, both A and B share three melodic “parent” phrases, labeled a, b, and c in the chart above. The corresponding lyrics in each verse link the husband and wife emotionally. The father sings variants of these phrases as he explores the emotional

<sup>72</sup> Richard Dworkin provided archival videos of this and other performances.

<sup>73</sup> Michael Callen, live performance audience banter, recorded at SNAFU in September 1982. In the fall of 2013, I digitized a number of cassette tapes of Callen’s live performances, including this one, from Richard Dworkin’s private collection.

terrain that separates him from his son. He also sings a fourth phrase, labeled d, that Mrs. Callen does not. The associated lyrics describe the difficulties one of his sons had with a foreman, and they are the basis of the melodic material and accompaniment in the third section, C, in which the narrator finally sings as himself. Passed down musically to his sons like a Y chromosome, this phrase renders the family resemblance between father and son in musical sounds.

The majority of musical and lyrical space in “Nobody’s Fool” focuses on the narrator’s father. The lyrics of the A section establish him as the song’s focal point. Likewise, the C section hinges on the son’s ability to distance himself from the negative example of his father’s stoicism. The lengthy B section subdivides into five segments that form a musical palindrome. This cyclical journey corresponds to Mr. Callen’s emotional stubbornness and resistance to change.

The song begins with a brief, plaintive piano figure in D-major whose gently arching contours and steady rhythm function like a great, steadying inhalation of breath. [Figure X] The recurring figure functions as a brief respite from the discomfort each speaker feels as they talk around the underlying causes of their family’s distress. Abbreviated and elongated forms of the figure connect each stanza, and Callen introduces changes in texture, rhythm, and articulation in the accompaniment to underscore the shifting psycho-emotional state of each speaker. By recycling musical material and introducing subtle changes in the accompaniment and vocal timbre, Callen creates a sonic equivalent of both physical and psychic family resemblances, effectively unifying the song and the three speakers.

D9 D D6      G      D      D9 D D6      G      A

Piano

Figure 5.8, “Nobody’s Fool” piano intro  
(transcription by author)

Callen changes his vocal style and timbre to characterize this mother, father, and son. In the first stanza, he sings quietly with measured precision. The careful pitch placement and clear diction suggest that the mother has carefully considered her words, and yet there is a whispered intensity in her opening plea that reveals just how difficult this situation is for her. Although “talk to your daddy” is an injunction or a command, Callen’s tone wavers slightly, and that small gesture suggests the mother’s own internal struggle to keep her emotions under control as she serves as the go-between for her husband and son. By contrast, the vocal style Callen uses to represent the father is messier. He slides between pitches, sings through throaty r and nasal n consonants, and utilizes extreme dynamic contrasts. These different singing styles perhaps juxtapose degrees of emotional turmoil and turbulence. The father’s erratic music also suggests that he is out of touch or uncomfortable with the expression of his own feelings. At times, Callen breaks into pure speech when the father figure becomes emotionally inarticulate. In other moments, there are flashes of vocal clarity and focus and the singing style more

closely resembles that heard throughout the first verse. However, these fleeting moments are lost amid the general tumult of the father's feelings.

Each line of text in B corresponds to specific images in the A section. For instance, his gruff, "Hello? Son?" parallels the mother's injunction for her son and her husband to communicate in the first verse. Although he presumably knew his wife was talking to their son on the phone, the father intones the word "son" with an upward inflection. Transforming a familiar salutation ("Hello, son!") into a question ("Hello? Son?") further accents the rift between them. The mother acknowledges her sons' childhood difficulties, and she voices concern about their father's stubbornness and depression. For his part, the father bluntly declares, "Hell, I'm just old and getting older."

Callen uses grammar to distance the father emotionally from the rest of the family in other ways. Throughout this section, all of the possessive pronouns are second person. Emphatically, he refers to his wife as *your* mom, their children as *her* boys, and his other son as *your* brother. Thus, the father carefully writes himself out of the parental syntax. He seems most comfortable when discussing the weather. However, the father gets caught up in the emotional swell of a story about a fight between his older son and a foreman at work and inadvertently reveals his true feelings. "Your mother says I'm too hard on everyone, but I ain't nobody's fool." Rather than risk being duped by anyone, he espouses a decidedly defensive philosophy: "do unto others before they do unto you. That's my Golden Rule." As a bittersweet coda, he adds, "I'll let you go...anything you need, just let me know." This moment of self-disclosure is short-lived, and the father abruptly changes the subject. Noting that cost of an expensive long-distance phone call,

he says goodbye. The sting of this moment lingers as the texture of the piano accompaniment changes, and the narrator speaks as himself for the first time.

In the C section, Callen assumes the perspective of the narrator. “Some may say that I’m just my father’s son, that I am cold and distant and hard on everyone,” he sings. However, he would rather lead a different emotional life, and he resolves to break the chain that stretches “father to son, now son to lover.” Rather than “judge and begrudge” his lover, Callen resolves to allow himself to be the fool that his father cannot. Vocally, he preserves the throaty r and n consonants that characterized the father’s voice in the B section. Likewise, the piano accompaniment is based on that of section III of B in the chart above, the same music that accompanied the father to his most emotionally honest moment. In his moment of catharsis, Callen resolves to be his lover’s fool and allow himself to be loved and quite possibly hurt rather than live his life with his father’s stoicism.

Although the characters in this song are archetypal, the song stems directly from Callen’s personal experience. The song “just sort of organically seem[ed] to well up,” he said in 1987. Callen and his brother would “call each other and take some solace making fun of conversations [with their father].”<sup>74</sup> Gradually, he cobbled these humorous vignettes into one of his most effective songs. In earlier versions, some of the lyrics were different, most notably, Callen actually wrote himself out of the song by naming the gay son Bob. In the B section, the father answers the phone by saying, “Hello? Bob? How’s the job.” In the recorded version that appeared on *Purple Heart* in 1988, Callen cut this facile rhyme and in doing so emphasized his own role in the family drama.

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<sup>74</sup> Schmidt (1987).

## So Many Men, So Little Time

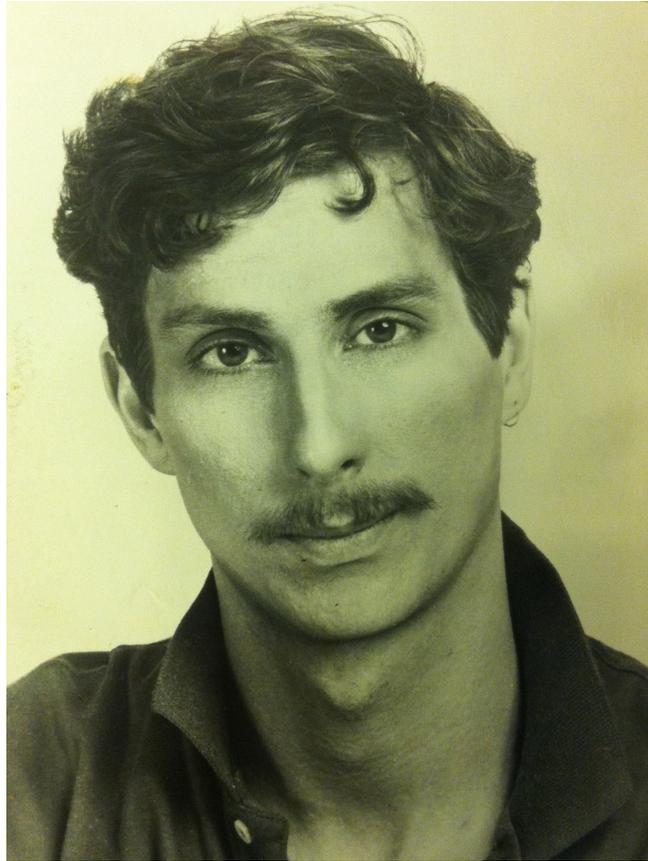


Figure 5.9, Michael Callen headshot, 1982-1983  
Michael Callen Archive at NYC LGBT Community Center

Although Callen did write some songs and play occasional gigs, he was the first to admit that his musical efforts were half-hearted. His real passion was sex, *lots* of sex. And if New York City in the late-1970s was *the* proverbial candy store, Michael Callen was the kid with an insatiable sweet tooth. Although Callen had a few serious relationships, including one with a police officer and another with a psychologist, he was a self-described sex radical. As Callen recalled in 1993, “I read *Dancer from the Dance*, I

read Ed White, and somewhere along the way, I picked up the political theory of promiscuity, and it was a little self-validating.”<sup>75</sup> Gay sex was considered a revolutionary act, and if some sex was a little resistant, more sex was *more* resistant. Prominent gay public figures like Edmund White even urged gay men to wear their sexually transmitted infections “like red badges of courage” won in the fight against sex-negativity.<sup>76</sup> If gay liberation was a battle, Callen saw himself as a frontline soldier. Under the sway of radical sexual politics, Callen believed that, “every time [he] got the clap, [he] was striking a blow for the sexual revolution!”<sup>77</sup>

By age 27, he could count more than three thousand different sexual partners, a figure he arrived at by means of simple arithmetic. In a 1982 essay called “The Luck Factor,” he explained the calculation:

I am 27 years old. I have been having gay sex in tearooms, bathhouses, bookstores, backrooms, and movie houses since I came out at 17. I estimate, conservatively, that I have had sex with over 3,000 different partners. I arrived at this figure by taking a long, hard look at the patterns of my sexual activity. I estimated that I went to the baths at least once a week, sometimes twice, and that each time I went in I had a minimum of 4 partners and a maximum of...well, let's just use 4. And let's not count this last year because I have stopped promiscuity entirely. So, that's 9 years of active promiscuity. 52 weeks in a year, times 4 people a week, is 208 different partners a year. Times 9 years is 1,872. And that's just the baths.<sup>78</sup>

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<sup>75</sup> Escoffier (1993).

<sup>76</sup> Callen recalls this lecture in his book *Surviving AIDS*, p. 4. In a 1993 interview with Jeffrey Escoffier, Callen recalls that White made these remarks during a course called “From Gay Ghetto to Gay Community.” See Escoffier, 7.

<sup>77</sup> Callen (1990): 4.

<sup>78</sup> Michael Callen, “The Luck Factor,” 1982, unpublished essay in Escoffier (1993). CDC figures from the same period suggested that gay men had an average of 1,160 partners, which Callen calls an underestimate. Callen reiterates a similar sexual inventor in numerous articles, speeches, and interviews across the next decade, and his friends and former lovers lovingly confirm his status as the biggest of bottoms.

He added another thousand he picked up in the Christopher Street Bookstore, other gay bookstores, the Mineshaft, assorted backrooms, orgies, playhouses, theaters, and sex clubs around the city. He concludes that three thousand is probably a conservative estimate but one that is probably typical of many men on the urban gay circuit. Though these figures seem startling in the present, Callen was part of the gay sexual revolution of the 1970s. A popular t-shirt worn by gay men at the time efficiently captured the ideology with a simple slogan: so many men, so little time.

Every conflict leads to casualties, though, and like many men of his generation, Callen's sexual warfare left him with a litany of battle scars. Callen first contracted gonorrhea around 1975, and by 1980 his list of sexually transmitted infections included hepatitis A, hepatitis B, hepatitis non-A/non-B, herpes simplex types I and II, venereal warts, amebiasis (including giardia lamblia, entamoeba histolytica), shigella flexneri, salmonella, syphilis, gonorrhea, nonspecific urethritis, chlamydia, cytomegalovirus (CMV), Epstein-Barr Virus (EBV), mononucleosis, and anal fistulas in addition to inexplicable fevers, night sweats, dramatic weight loss, and debilitating diarrhea.<sup>79</sup> As the new decade began, Callen was in poor health, and he was not alone.

Rumors of a new and deadly disease began to spread among gay men around the country. On 18 May 1981, *The New York Native* first mentioned this mysterious new illness, and on 5 June 1981, the Center for Disease Control's *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report*, reported cases of *Pneumocystis pneumonia* among "young men, all active homosexuals" in Los Angeles.<sup>80</sup> The following month, *MMWR* continued:

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<sup>79</sup> Callen provides similar lists in a few different publications, including the introductory chapter of *Surviving AIDS*, "The Luck Factor," and the 1993 interview with Jeffery Escoffier.

<sup>80</sup> Centers for Disease Control *MMWR* 5 June 1981, "*Pneumocystis Pneumonia---Los Angeles.*"

During the past 30 months, Kaposi's sarcoma, an uncommonly reported malignancy in the United States, has been diagnosed in 26 homosexual men (20 in New York City; 6 in California). Eight of these patients died within 24 months.<sup>81</sup>

The men who were getting sick were young, gay, and sexually active with a history of repeated sexually transmitted diseases, a profile that perfectly described Callen's lifestyle and experiences. Later, he explained, "there was never any question in my mind that I would get GRID."<sup>82</sup> From the winter of 1981, Callen was sick constantly. Medical tests revealed nothing, and his puzzled physicians could barely control the bloody and sometimes debilitating diarrhea.

In the midst of the growing confusion, anxiety, and illness, Callen formed a rock band. For several months, he had been running an ad in *The Native* in search of musicians. Bassist Pamela Brant (of the 1970s all-female rock band The Deadly Nightshade) replied to Callen's ad. When the two met to discuss the venture, they hit it off and continued searching for other musicians.<sup>83</sup>

### **Lowlife and Dickie D**

Drummer Richard Dworkin also saw the ad and left several messages for Callen to no avail. After several failed attempts, Dworkin took a gig playing drums on a cross-country train trip. He was out riding the rails for about two weeks before he returned to

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<sup>81</sup> CDC *MMWR* 4 July 1981, "Kaposi's sarcoma and Pneumocystis among Gay Men—New York City and California."

<sup>82</sup> Callen (1990): 1. Gay-Related Immune Deficiency or GRID was one of the first terms used to describe what would become known as Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome or AIDS when it was re-christened in July of that year.

<sup>83</sup> There is an excellent interview with Brandt on the Queer Music Heritage website. ADDRESS DATE. Webmaster J D Doyle also recently uploaded a Michael Callen episode in which he provides an overview of Callen's musical career along with interviews from a number of musicians who worked with Callen including Cris Williamson, Holly Near, John Bucchino, Brant, and Dworkin.

New York. He made one final call about the ad and finally got Callen on the phone. On 14 June 1982, the two met at Callen's 29 Jones Street studio apartment. Dworkin recalled that the apartment contained virtually "no furniture...a carpet, two maybe more director's chairs, an upright piano, a Yamaha PA mixer, a mic stand, a microphone, must've had a couple of speakers...Maybe a pillow or two."<sup>84</sup> Brandt joined, and the trio ordered Chinese food and sat on the floor of the apartment talking about music late into the evening. "At some point," Dworkin continued,

Pam went home, and Mike and I hung out some more...The first night I met him, he said, 'have you heard about this thing,' meaning GRID...It was still so new. I don't know if I'd had a serious discussion about GRID with anyone at that point. I think it's hard for anyone to understand how vague things were from this vantage point...like a fool, I stayed over...I wasn't thinking Mike and I were doing anything novel for me in terms of disease."<sup>85</sup>

Callen remembered that "when [Richard] made a pass at me, I pushed him away and said 'you're not understanding. I have GRID, and I do. I'm sick!'"<sup>86</sup>

The next morning, the couple woke early so that Callen could go to his day job as a legal secretary. While his new lover showered, Dworkin made an obligatory pass through Callen's record collection. Spotting Al Jarreau's live album, *Look to the Rainbow* (1977), he put it on the turntable and selected "Could You Believe," a beautiful ballad with Jarreau's expressive vocals accompanied by Fender Rhodes piano. Accustomed to living in a loft in an abandoned building downtown, Dworkin cranked the volume to full blast, filling the apartment with Jarreau's flexible tenor. An exasperated Callen leapt from the bathroom, shouting, "what are you doing? What are you doing??!!" For Dworkin,

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<sup>84</sup> Richard Dworkin, interview with the author, digital copy. New York, February 2012.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid.

<sup>86</sup> Schmidt (1987).

“Could You Believe” had a queer subtext lodged somewhere between Jarreau’s vocal performance and the lines, “I spent the night with David; he taught me what to say. I was looking for a smooth stone when I heard him pray.” And, as he told me, “somehow Mike just made me feel that way.”

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Figure 5.10, Richard Dworkin in the studio, 1985

Callen captured the exuberance of new love in a musical paean to his lover. “Me & Dickie D” is a rollicking rock-and-roll tune built around a bluesy chord progression and a boogie-woogie piano hook. The title is a pun of the Janis Joplin/Kris Kristofferson song “Me and Bobby McGee” (1971), and “Dickie D” refers to Dworkin. The lyrics describe him as a jive talking, Motown-loving, dancing machine who “goes bump bump” and “hump hump hump...like a kangaroo” and “spins, dips, shakes” it all night on the dance floor. The song was recorded with a band that included pianist Jonathan Hardy, guitarist Richard Lloyd, bassist Pamela Brandt, saxophone arrangements by John Hagen, and Dickie D himself on drums.

On the day of their sessions, the original pianist never showed up for the gig. Dworkin believes this may have been motivated by a reluctance to play on such an explicitly gay song. While watching the clock (and the cost) of the studio, Dworkin frantically placed calls to musician friends until they located Jonathan Hardy, who showed up and did a “phenomenal job” with the song. “Me and Dickie D” was eventually

released on Callen's debut solo record, *Purple Heart* (1988). Dworkin also produced the recording, an experience he described as “absolutely mortifying. Imagine having to play on, produce, and edit a song about YOURSELF!”<sup>87</sup>

Vocally, Callen took his cues from rock-and-roll icons like Little Richard and Buddy Holly, growling, stuttering, and scating his way through the tune with an infectious energy. He leaps from chest voice to his piercing soprano while Dworkin provides an occasional bass countermelody. A campy, feel-good queer love song, “Me & Dickie D” provided an answer to Sloan's critique of Callen's ballad-heavy set lists, proving that he could both croon and rock.

Callen's poor health caught up with him. About a week after meeting Dworkin, he was admitted to the hospital. Although doctors had been unable to determine the cause of his mysterious illness for much of the past year, this time they discovered the culprit. “With the satisfaction of Miss Marple,” his nurse announced, “Well, it's GRID all right. You have cryptosporidiosis. Before GRID, we didn't think [this strain of crypto] infected humans. It's a disease previously found only in livestock. I'm afraid there is no known treatment...All we can do is try to keep you hydrated and see what happens. Your body will either handle it or...it won't.”<sup>88</sup> When the CDC revised its terminology and defined acquired immune deficiency syndrome on 24 September 1982, Michael Callen, then just twenty-seven years old, became one of the first men in the US to receive an AIDS diagnosis.

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<sup>87</sup> Richard Dworkin, interview with the author, February 2012.

<sup>88</sup> Callen, *Surviving AIDS*, 2.

For Callen, the worst part of being sick was that he felt like “factory seconds or damaged merchandise.”<sup>89</sup> He moved to New York City with hopes of finding a lover, but so far, his search had been fruitless. Upon his GRID diagnosis, Callen almost threw in the towel. “I didn’t have a lover,” he thought, “and I am going to die without a lover.”<sup>90</sup> However, Dworkin continued to visit him in the hospital despite warnings from friends and Callen’s own protests. “Some people thought it was amazing or strange or weird that I continued to see him,” Dworkin recalls, and even “Mike kept trying to push me away.” By telling him how terrible various aspects of his personality could be, Dworkin believed that Callen “was kind of warning me of all the horrible things about him besides that he had this new killer disease and wouldn’t last that long.” Dworkin dismissed these protestations, saying, “Love’s a crazy thing.” Callen would later misremember this line as, “Love don’t need a reason.”<sup>91</sup>

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Figure 5.11, Dworkin and Callen

### **Lowlife**

After Callen recovered from his bout with crypto, he, Dworkin, Pamela Brandt, and Janet Clearly officially formed Lowlife. The band gained a reputation around New York for playing old-school rock-and-roll with a decidedly campy panache. Their repertoire consisted of originals by each band member and covers of classic rock and pop tunes like Connie Francis’ “Where the Boys Are.” Lowlife toured the east coast from

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<sup>89</sup> Schmidt (1987).

<sup>90</sup> Schmidt (1987).

<sup>91</sup> Schmidt (1987).

New York to Florida for three years, playing gay clubs, venues, and events to favorable reviews. Over the next three years, the band received critical praise. Kate Walter of *The Advocate* notes that they band never lost sight of “their gay roots or the political ramifications of their song selections.”<sup>92</sup>

Although Lowlife never released an album, the band did raise 5,000 dollars to record several demos at Philip Glass’s Living Room Studio in 1985. These session captured their hilarious rendition of “Where the Boys Are,” two of Pamela Brandt’s tunes, and two of Callen’s songs, “No, No” and “Living in Wartime.”<sup>93</sup> These songs offer a glimpse of Callen performing and writing in camp and activist modes.

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<sup>92</sup> Kate Walter, “Rock ’N’ Roll Lowlife with a Gay Conscience,” *The Advocate* 16 October 1984.

<sup>93</sup> Dworkin remembered that the sessions went smoothly, in part, because they had already recorded demos of most of the songs at home in which they worked out the arrangements. However, he also recalls one unexpected snafu. Producer Don Christianson had never before recorded drums, and in the first mix, the drums were either overwhelming or inaudible. Thus, Dworkin had to record the drums tracks again for several songs, working beat by beat with the master tapes.



Figure 5.12, *Lowlife*  
 NYC LGBT Community Center Archive  
 Top: Pamela Brandt, Jan Cleary  
 Bottom: Richard Dworkin, Michael Callen

The Connie Francis song “Where the Boys Are” was initially used as the title song for a 1960 coming-of-age film about four college women who venture to Fort Lauderdale during spring break.<sup>94</sup> The song is a classic example of early-1960s pop sentimentality. A soaring melody arcs over a delicately tinkling triplet shuffle played by the piano and sighing steel guitars. The text describes a young woman’s melancholy yearning to find that special someone who waits for her. The lyrics fit neatly within the

<sup>94</sup> The film’s opening sequence describes the town as a “small corner of heaven” that becomes “a sizeable chunk of bedlam” for two weeks every summer as “boys come to soak up the sun and a few carloads of beer. And the girls come simply because this is *Where the Boys Are*.” One young woman becomes the victim of a sexual assault, and the film ends with her recovering in hospital. Interestingly and perhaps not surprisingly, publicity materials for the film do not mention the sexual violence subplot. The film’s trailer highlights fun, fun, and college hijinks.

emotional boundaries of pop from the time, which Paul Friedlander (1996) notes were filled with “clean teen infatuation.”<sup>95</sup> Yet Francis’ vocal performance swells with sexual desire. She milks every ounce of feeling from the text with glorious crescendi, ample use of her slow vibrato, and carefully placed vocal breaks, sighs, and slides.

On one hand, Callen’s performance of “Where the Boys Are” can be heard as a campy cover of a classic song by a big-voiced singer who became a gay icon and advocate for People with AIDS. Pamela Brandt remembered that he “would camp it up like crazy when he sang it, of course, and sing really high, much higher than Connie Francis ever sang!”<sup>96</sup> Callen’s campy sense of humor permeates every level of the song, from the bombast of the opening V7 chord with a synth-trumpet trill that lasts just a bit too long to the “truck driver” modulation from C to D in the final A [2:03] and his vocal inflection of the lyrics. As a gay man living in New York in the early-1980s, Callen certainly knew where the boys were, and throughout the performance, he delivers lines with a knowing wink. “Boys walking down some street” become other gay men out cruising, and when Callen sings, “I’ll climb right up on his steeple,” it seems unlikely that he has in mind any conventional *religious* experience. Throughout, Callen uses his flexible soprano voice as a substitute for the sighing steel guitar figures heard in the original recording. However, in translation, they become the cries of sexual ecstasy rather than plaintive sighs.

Callen’s performance captures the sense of wide-eyed innocence, excitement, and possibility that he probably felt upon arrival in New York City in the late-1970s. New York, after all, was at the center of the gay universe for a young queer with musical

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<sup>95</sup> Paul Friedlander, *Rock and Roll: A Social History* (Westview Press, 1996), quoted in Inglis p. 40.

<sup>96</sup> Pamela Brandt, interview with J. D. Doyle, *Queer Music Heritage* May 2013.  
<http://www.queermusicheritage.us/may2013s.html>

aspirations. It was also home to one of the largest gay populations in the world, making it literally “where the boys are.” Yet by the time Callen recorded this tune in 1985, he had been living with full-blown AIDS for longer than an AIDS diagnosis had existed. He was initially diagnosed with GRID in early-1982 after having been sick for more than a year before. After his diagnosis, he completely stopped promiscuity in an effort to restart his ailing immune system. Ironically, AIDS galvanized Michael Callen. In a 1987, he explained that, “coming to terms with my illness actually occurred in the year prior to my official diagnosis.”<sup>97</sup> Confronting his own mortality at age 27 gave him a sense of purpose and focus. “From December 1981 when I had the first sort of blood test confirmation that my immune system was in shambles,” he said, “I went into a very deep depression...then for some reason, I came out of it.”<sup>98</sup> Callen resolved that “with whatever time I have left, I wanted to do what I had set out to do, which was to make queer music.”<sup>99</sup> He devoted the rest of his career to queer music and AIDS activism. By 1985, the AIDS epidemic had entered its first devastating phase in New York City, and storm clouds gathered off the coast of Manhattan.<sup>100</sup>

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Figure 5.13, *Low Life*, Michael Callen twirls baton and yodels

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<sup>97</sup> Schmidt (1987).

<sup>98</sup> Schmidt (1987). This quote is from an untitled and partial transcription of an interview given at a public speech, presumably as part of an AIDS conference. As yet, I have been unable to confirm the precise location, date, and event. Several pages are missing from the transcript, which can be found in the Callen archive at the NYC LGBT Community Center Archive.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid.

<sup>100</sup> While I do not know whether Callen was conscious of the plot of *Where the Boys Are*, I highlight the parallels between the dangers of sex for the film’s group of young women in Fort Lauderdale and gay men in New York City as a possible interpretive link.

## Living in War Time

From the earliest days of the epidemic, the AIDS community appropriated the language of warfare and militancy, a cluster of metaphors that have long been deployed in describing efforts to eradicate scourges from poverty to drug use.<sup>101</sup> As early as 1982, novelist, playwright, and activist Larry Kramer called for “an all-out research assault” against AIDS.<sup>102</sup> In his galvanizing “1,112 and Counting” (1983), Kramer insisted that no less was at stake than gay men’s “continued existence upon the face of the earth... Unless we fight for our lives, we shall die.”<sup>103</sup> Throughout his career as an AIDS activist, Kramer drew direct parallels between the Holocaust and the AIDS crisis, strengthening the symbolic connections between war and the epidemic. The title of his 1989 anthology, *Reports from the Holocaust*, casts Kramer in the role of war correspondent and survivor, writing to his readers from the trenches. Similarly, novelist Andrew Holleran published *Ground Zero* (1988), a collection of essays written for the gay magazine *Christopher Street* between 1980 and 1987. He chose the title “because it felt like AIDS had exploded in New York like a bomb.” In many of these essays, Holleran likened New York City to a war zone.

In 1988, queer film historian and AIDS activist Vito Russo likened living with AIDS to “a war which is happening only for those people who happen to be in the trenches. Every time a shell explodes, you look around and discover that you’ve lost

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<sup>101</sup> A few examples from twentieth-century US history: Following a series of incrementally more serious polio outbreaks, scientists in the US declared a war on the epidemic until a vaccine was discovered by Dr. Jonas Salk in 1952. On 16 March 1964, President Johnson declared a “war on poverty” in his Congressional *Proposal for a Nationwide War on the Sources of Poverty*. Similarly, President and First Lady Reagan declared a war on drugs in October of 1982.

<sup>102</sup> Larry Kramer, “Where Are We Now?” *Gay Men’s Health Crisis Newsletter* 2, February 1983, reprinted in Kramer, *Reports from the Holocaust: The Making of an AIDS Activist* (St. Martin’s Press, 1989).

<sup>103</sup> Larry Kramer, “1,112 and Counting,” *New York Native* 59 (14-27 March 1983), reprinted in *Reports from the Holocaust* (1989).



The song commences with an angular four-bar riff played on a synth organ over a wailing air raid siren, two familiar ways of signifying intensity, danger, and warfare.

[Figure 5.14] A murky, b minor-tinged harmonic cycle churns beneath Callen's frustrated cries in the first verse. The chorus begins in f-sharp minor harmony but works its way to a triumphant B major through a series of rising melodic figures and harmonies. The second verse uses the same melodic material as the opening section over a new chord progression in the parallel major. An extended vamp based on the "Air Raid" riff supports a shredded guitar solo. Repetitions of the chorus lead to an extended coda that ends on a triumphant major chord. In western music, the journey from minor to major often suggests victory, redemption, benediction, or a happy ending. Here, the tonal trajectory of the piece parallels Callen's optimism that the war against AIDS would be over soon.

Intro riff (3x)

V<sub>1</sub>:

b \_ \_ \_ | A/b \_ \_ \_ | b \_ \_ \_ | b/A \_ \_ | b \_ \_ \_ | F# \_ \_ \_ | A \_ \_ \_ | b \_ \_ \_

Chorus:

f# \_ \_ | D \_ \_ \_ | E \_ \_ \_ | E \_ \_ \_ | (3x)

G \_ \_ | G \_ \_ \_ | A \_ \_ \_ | A \_ \_ \_ | B<sup>M7</sup> \_ \_ \_ | B<sup>M7</sup> \_ \_ \_ | A \_ \_ \_ | A \_ \_ \_ | B<sup>M7</sup> \_ \_ \_ | B<sup>M7</sup>

V<sub>2</sub>:

B \_ \_ \_ | A/B \_ \_ | G<sup>M7</sup> \_ \_ \_ | A/B \_ \_ \_ | (3x)

G \_ \_ \_ | G \_ \_ \_ | NC: says it's | G \_ A \_ b |

Interlude

b \_ \_ \_ | A/b \_ \_ \_ | b \_ \_ \_ | A/b \_ \_ \_ | (4x)

Intro riff

Repeat V<sub>1</sub> and Chorus and Intro riff

Figure 5.16, “Wartime” harmonies

Amid the swirl of synthetic and metallic sounds, Callen’s voice sounds poignantly human. At odds with the rest of the musical surface, his voice invites sympathetic identification with the AIDS community. In an influential article about AIDS photography and mainstream media representations of people with AIDS, Douglas Crimp (1992) wrote that “what we see first and foremost is a reiteration of what we have already been told or shown about people with AIDS: that they are ravaged, disfigured, and debilitated by the syndrome, that they are generally alone, desperate, but resigned to their ‘inevitable’ deaths.” “Living in Wartime” resists this portrait of the solitary PWA by

utilizing a chorus of voices singing in counterpoint in the refrain. A gnarl of Callen's multi-tracked voices sings a collective "We" in the chorus in order to give lie to the "conspiracy of silence," and shatter the myth of the solitary suffering of PWAs. The AIDS community is represented as "united in anger to end AIDS."<sup>106</sup> That the song was used as exit music in the original production of Larry Kramer's *The Normal Heart* (1985), a brutal examination of the realities of AIDS in the early 1980s, stands as testament to zeitgeist articulated in Callen's music.

At the same time, the monotonous and mechanical music of "Wartime" suggests alienation and cold indifference. The flat melodic contour, repetitions of single pitches in the chorus melody, and contrapuntal texture do not invite communal participation through singing along like other protest songs might. Rather, "Wartime" seems to say, "you can't sing along with me, so get off your ass and DO SOMETHING. Join the fight. Fight AIDS." Richard Dworkin summarized it more pointedly in a 2012 interview when he told me, "Maybe it was too late for an anthem anyway."

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<sup>106</sup> It is not my intention here to suggest that anger is the only or the most important response to HIV/AIDS, but for gay men in New York City—Callen's home community—anger was certainly one option, evidenced by Larry Kramer and ACT UP to name just two examples.

## Chapter Six: Glitter and Be Gay

I realize that some people could look at my life and say, “He died of AIDS. Isn’t that tragic?” I can honestly say that even having aids, being gay is the greatest gift I was given. I wouldn’t change it for the world.

Michael Callen, 1993

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### Dr. Sonnabend, I Presume...

Just before his death in 1993, Michael Callen described his “rise from complete obscurity” to the forefront of national AIDS politics, a journey that began with a “serendipitous and accidental” meeting with Dr. Joseph Sonnabend.<sup>2</sup>

Born in South Africa in 1933, Sonnabend studied medicine in Johannesburg and Edinburg before embarking on a promising career as a medical researcher at London’s National Institute for Medical Research. In the early 1970s, Sonnabend relocated to New York City where he became an Associate Professor of Medicine at Mount Sinai Hospital. In 1978, Sonnabend opened a private practice on West 12<sup>th</sup> Street in Greenwich Village and moonlighted at the New York City Health Department and the Bureau of Venereal Disease Control. He also volunteered at a VD screening clinic, the Gay Men’s Health Project in Sheridan Square.<sup>3</sup>

Gay men’s health was a new field in modern medicine, and few doctors were willing to work with such a stigmatized population. However, gay men—especially those in urban areas—had particular health concerns that required specialized knowledge and treatment. Stigma concerning homosexuality made it difficult, for instance, for many gay

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<sup>1</sup> Deb Wasser, *Legacy* (1993).

<sup>2</sup> Jeffrey Escoffier, Don’t show Escoffier as author if he is just the editor “My Rise from Complete Obscurity: An Interview with Michael Callen,” in *In My Time: Essays on Sex, Science, and AIDS* by Michael Callen, edited by Jeffrey Escoffier. Unpublished manuscript, 1993

<sup>3</sup> Sean Strub, “The Good Doctor,” *POZ Magazine* July 1998.

men to discuss their sexual activity or issues of sexual health with a straight doctor or in a traditional family clinic. Inspired by the strides achieved by the feminist healthcare movement in the 1960s and 1970s, a group of doctors in New York City worked to change the climate of healthcare for gay men.

Dr. Sonnabend's office was notorious among gay men in New York City. Sean Strub, an AIDS activist, founding editor of *POZ* magazine, and one of Sonnabend's patients, described the doctor's clientele as "the most promiscuous gay men in the city" in the 1970s. He added that many men received their healthcare elsewhere in order to avoid the stigma of "being linked with those Village clones."<sup>4</sup> The urban gay lifestyle of the 1970s led to epidemic rates of STD infection among gay men. Syphilis, gonorrhea, syphilis, and hepatitis were especially common. Sonnabend described the STD infection rates among his clients as "simply staggering."<sup>5</sup>

Sonnabend's office was notorious in other ways. Strub described it as "everything most people believe competent medical treatment isn't." Packed into a small apartment and littered with old magazines, posters, and "furniture that wasn't worthy of a low-rent garage sale," the office did not inspire confidence. The disorder extended to the doctor's schedule. Patients often waited for long periods, and as Strub remembered, they would "sometimes rearrange the order of seeing based on [their] collective assessment of who needed to see him first or who had other appointments to get to."

Michael Callen stumbled into Sonnabend's Sheridan Square office with a severe case of hepatitis in 1981. Jaundiced, fatigued, and generally ill, Callen "hadn't any idea of who [Sonnabend] was and what his credentials were. He was just the first warm body

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<sup>4</sup> Strub (1998).

<sup>5</sup> Strub, (1998).

that I found.”<sup>6</sup> Callen was also less than impressed with the shabby décor, the erratic scheduling, and the doctor’s gruff demeanor. He joked to friends that they should bring a copy of *War and Peace* to the doctor’s office “because you might finish it in the waiting room before you get seen!”<sup>7</sup>

Unbeknownst to most of his patients, Sonnabend was one of a small group of doctors who had recently begun to suspect something amiss among their gay patients, many of whom evidenced the same night sweats, diarrhea, and fatigue that plagued Callen. Sonnabend’s first encounter with AIDS occurred in June of 1981. A patient came to him with parasites and anemia. Following an examination of the patient’s stomach, the doctor found purple lesions, and a biopsy confirmed that they were Kaposi’s sarcoma. This particular form of cancer was known to affect older men, particular men of Mediterranean descent, but was virtually unheard of in young people. Later, he realized that he had also seen cases of *Pneumocystis pneumonia*—an infection common in drug users and transplant recipients—in gay patients in the 1970s but failed to connect the infection to an underlying immune malfunction.

In a pioneering move, Sonnabend sent blood samples from twenty of his patients (including Callen) to the University of Nebraska, then the only lab in the country with the technology to perform a CD4 T-Cell Count.<sup>8</sup> The results were troubling. Patients whose lifestyles fit the “fast lane” urban gay pattern, that is, high numbers of different sexual partners, drug use, and frequent STD infections, exhibited abnormally low levels of T cells in their blood. By contrast, those in the “slow lane” had healthy immune systems.

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<sup>6</sup> Escoffier (1993).

<sup>7</sup> Escoffier, (1993).

<sup>8</sup> CD4 “helper” cells are white blood cells that are essential to healthy immune functioning. CD4 cells detect infection and alert CD8 “killer” cells to attack and destroy the foreign agent.

Callen's blood sample indicated serious immune dysfunction. At first, Sonnabend "gave this whole song and dance" about the results, trying to calm Callen by reminding him that doctors were unsure what the irregularities might mean in terms of a diagnosis. Finally, Sonnabend told his patient, "You have no immune system left," but he could not tell him why.<sup>9</sup> "We do not know what is causing this," he told him, "but it seems to be associated with a specific subset of gay men [whose] lifestyles involve multiple sexual partners, a history of many [STDs], drug use, and generally abusing the body."<sup>10</sup> He advised "major life changes," and as a result Callen "became totally celibate...stopped sex completely, started eating better, exploring holistic approaches, meditation, [and] stress reduction," and also started seeing a therapist.<sup>11</sup>

### **The Promiscuity Debates**

Callen's own life experiences in New York in the 1970s testify to the centrality of sex to urban gay male identity during the decade. Numerous gay writers rhapsodize about the 1970s as a utopic moment in gay history. Having successfully embraced an affirmative gay identity and achieved important civil rights victories, gay men allowed their culture to flourish, and this culture included lots of sex. According to Edmund White (1983), "gay men are bought up...to be straight, they seek other men through what feels very much like a compulsion, though they enter the [gay] ghetto by choice, yet once they make that choice, it reshapes their lives, their bodies, certainly their wardrobes."<sup>12</sup> It

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<sup>9</sup> Escoffier (1993).

<sup>10</sup> Schmidt (1987).

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Edmund White, "Sexual Culture," originally published in *Vanity Fair* (1983); reprinted in *The Burning Library: Essays by Edmund White*, edited by David Bergman (Alfred Knopf, 1994): 157-158. In another essay, "Paradise Found" *Mother Jones* (1983), also reprinted in *The Burning Library*, White describes a number of permutations of gay relationships, ranging from platonic friends to open marriages and including

also reshaped their attitudes toward sex because for so long “the right to have sex, even to look for it, has been so stringently denied to gays...that the drive toward sexual freedom remains a bright, throbbing banner in the fierce winds whipping over the ghetto.”<sup>13</sup>

However, as White, Foucault, and others have pointed out, gay sexual culture has “paradoxically increased the importance of friendship.”<sup>14</sup>

While copious amounts of sex had been a defining trait of gay subcultures, particularly in urban areas, throughout most of the twentieth century, the AIDS crisis ushered in existential debates about the centrality of sex to gay male identity. Suddenly, the ecstatic sexual liberation of the 1970s seemed to end. Still, in the early-1980s, no one knew how AIDS was spread. In these early years between the first cases of the disease and the discovery of its viral agent, some members of the gay community fiercely defended their hard-won right to life-affirming sexual activity while others advocated for a dramatic change in the socio-sexual culture of urban gay life.

Promiscuity was the buzzword of the day, and the ensuing promiscuity debates clustered around two poles. At one extreme, some gay men encouraged the community to temper its sexual activities until more information about the health crisis was discovered. At the other, men argued in favor of promiscuity as a defining characteristic of

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his own socio-sexual-intellectual relationships with three other men (all of whom were friends) during the whole of 1982. Of the various sources of sex, friendship, love, and intimacy between gay men, White writes, “the truth is that American gay men today are like banyan trees, which with their elaborate root systems can draw sustenance from an acre of ground, as opposed to the simple taproots of marriage, deep but narrow.” (145) In other moments in these essays, White is critical of the commercialization of gay sexual desire among gay men and the negative impact of “rampant and ubiquitous consumerism” not only on “gay spending habits but also [on] attitudes toward sexuality: gays rate each other quantitatively according to age, physical dimensions and income; and all too many gays consume and dispose of each other, as through the very act of possession brought about instant obsolescence.” (148).

<sup>13</sup> White, “Sexual Culture” (1994): 166.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid, 166.

contemporary gay life and a potential tool in the fight against AIDS. In New York, these debates played out in the pages of *The New York Native*.

Larry Kramer published a series of appeals for donations of money to research projects devoted to KS and PCP.<sup>15</sup> With time, his voice grew more militant and critical, and as a result, Kramer was attacked in the gay press. Robert Chesley (a former friend and admirer of Kramer's work) wrote, "Read anything by Kramer closely...I think you'll find the subtext is always: the wages of gay sin are death."<sup>16</sup>

Kramer responded with "The First Defense" in which he argued that he was "not interested in sin [but] in the difficulties people have in loving each other."<sup>17</sup> He encouraged gay men to use their collective political power:

If every homosexual in New York had voted against Edward Koch, he would not be mayor of New York. How long must it take for this fact to sink in? I beg everyone to think of the power this should entitle us to. Isn't this a far more important issue to deal with than all these petty jealousies and political irrelevancies I read about week after week in our gay press?

And isn't it far more important to try to deal with the fact that more than 180 of us are suffering from potentially lethal cancers and our entire community is doing so little to help them and ourselves? What is this dream world we inhabit? Why is our community so impotent and lethargic? Is everything *too* good for us? Do we need Dunkirks before we can organize and fight back? Until then, can we only hurt each other?

I am not glorying in death. I am overwhelmed by it. The death of my friends. The death of whatever community there is here in New York. The death of any visible love.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Kramer's writings from the period have been anthologized in *Reports from the Holocaust: The Making of an AIDS Activist* (St. Martin's Press, 1989).

<sup>16</sup> Robert Chesley, letter to the editor, *The New York Native* 22 1981.

<sup>17</sup> Larry Kramer, "The First Defense," *The New York Native* 27 1982.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

Debates raged over the closure of gay bathhouses, porn theaters, and sex clubs. And many members of the gay community heard the death knell of their culture in these arguments.

By 1987, the human immunodeficiency virus had been discovered and identified as the likely cause of AIDS. Around the same time, Randy Shilts published his best-selling book, *And the Band Played On*, an in-depth review of the history of AIDS in America.<sup>19</sup> Shilts' book was largely praised by the mainstream (that is, heterosexual) media for its accurate account of the spread of HIV/AIDS, but some members of the gay community interpreted it differently. Douglas Crimp argued that Shilts' book and Kramer's play, *The Normal Heart* (1985), "share a curious contradiction: they blame the lack of response to the epidemic on the misrepresentation of AIDS as a gay disease even as they themselves treat AIDS almost exclusively as a gay problem. Both display indifference to other groups drastically affected by the epidemic."<sup>20</sup> Crimp also summarized the other extreme in the promiscuity debates:

Our promiscuity taught us many things, not only about the pleasures of sex, but about the great multiplicity of those pleasures. It is that psychic preparation, that experimentation, that conscious work on our own sexualities that has allowed many of us to change our sexual behaviors very quickly and very dramatically. It is for this reason that Shilts' and Kramer's attitudes about the formulation of gay politics on the basis of our sexuality is so perversely distorted, why they insist that our promiscuity will destroy us when in fact *it is our promiscuity that will save us*.

Gay male promiscuity should be seen as a positive model of how sexual pleasures might be pursued by and granted to

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<sup>19</sup> Randy Shilts, *And the Band Played On: Politics, People, and the AIDS Epidemic* (St. Martin's Press, 1987).

<sup>20</sup> Douglas Crimp, "How to Have Promiscuity in an Epidemic," *October* 47 (1987), reprinted in Crimp *Melancholia and Moralism: Essays and AIDS and Queer Politics* (MIT Press, 2006): 59.

everyone if those pleasures were not confined within the narrow limits of institutionalized sexuality.<sup>21</sup>

In 1982, Michael Callen entered the promiscuity debates with the publication of “We Know Who We Are: Two Gay Men Declare War on Promiscuity,” an article he co-authored with Richard Berkowitz and Joseph Sonnabend.<sup>22</sup>

### **How to have Sex in an Epidemic**

During one of his lengthy visits to Sonnabend’s clinic, Callen found himself waiting more than forty-five minutes in an examination room, literally with his pants down. Impatient, he dressed and started snooping around the office and eventually spied a document in a typewriter. Callen quickly read the doctor’s notes about the hazards of gay promiscuity and the possible connection between repeated exposure to STDs and the baffling cases of immune deficiency. An ecstatic Callen greeted Sonnabend when the doctor finally returned. After recovering from “the complete Jekyll and Mr. Hyde change in our relationship,” Sonnabend conceded to publish the paper. Callen claimed to know the editorial staff at several gay papers and assured the doctor he could get the work into print. Sonnabend introduced Callen to another patient, Richard Berkowitz.<sup>23</sup> Soon, the trio set to work on an article.

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<sup>21</sup> Crimp (2006): 64-65.

<sup>22</sup> Michael Callen, Richard Berkowitz, and Joseph Sonnabend, “We Know Who We Are: Two Gay Men Declare War on Promiscuity,” *The New York Native* 8-21 November 1982, reprinted in *In My Time: Essays on AIDS, Politics, and Science by Michael Callen*, ed. Jeffrey Escoffier (Unpublished, 1993).

<sup>23</sup> Berkowitz (b.1955) was born in New Jersey and moved to New York around the same time that Callen arrived in the city.<sup>23</sup> As a student at Rutgers University, Berkowitz successfully organized the school’s first gay rights protest in response to an anti-gay effigy displayed on the lawn of Delta Kappa Epsilon. In New York, he became involved in gay sexual/political culture and even earned his living as an S/M hustler. A patient of Sonnabend’s, Berkowitz was diagnosed as immune deficient in 1984.

“Those of us who have lived a life of excessive promiscuity on the urban gay circuit of bathhouses, backrooms, balconies, sex clubs, meat racks, and tearooms,” they began, “we know who we are.”<sup>24</sup> They proceed to indict the entire urban gay community for its complacency and its addiction to the narcotic of promiscuity. Over the previous ten or fifteen years, “the commercialization of promiscuity and the explosion of establishments such as bathhouses, bookstores, and backrooms is unique in western history,” and gay men’s participation in this sex culture “has led to the creation of an increasingly disease-polluted pool of sexual partners.” And constant exposure to these common STDs (including chlamydia, gonorrhea, cytomegalovirus, and herpes) “has very likely led to the epidemic of AIDS.”

“We Know Who We Are” contained more than a condemnation of urban gay sex culture. Callen and Berkowitz challenged gay men to end the epidemic by “changing the ways in which we have sex.”<sup>25</sup> However, they concluded that it was “more important to let people die in pursuit of their own happiness than to limit personal freedom by regulating risk.” To conclude, they asked their readers to consider a scenario: “if going to the Baths is a game of Russian roulette, then the *advice* must be to *throw the gun away* not merely to play less often.”<sup>26</sup> AIDS was hardly a game because “people are dying—very real, horrible, and unnecessary deaths.”<sup>27</sup>

The editors of *The Native* included a brief introduction to this special issue in which they stated their commitment to presenting many different opinions about the epidemic. “Confusing? Contradictory? Of course. But then so is much of the discussion

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<sup>24</sup> Michael Callen, Richard Berkowitz, and Richard Dworkin, “We Know Who We Are: Two Gay Men Declare War on Promiscuity,” *The New York Native* 8-21 November 1982.

<sup>25</sup> Michael Callen and Richard Berkowitz, “We Know Who We Are.”

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, emphasis added.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*

surrounding the present health crisis... The implications of the epidemic for public health in this country are too great to worry about causing a little bit of controversy.” The same issue of *The Native* contained an article by Peter Seitzman (“Good Luck, Bad Luck: The Role of Chance in Contracting AIDS”) in which the author speculated that Hepatitis B, which was also rampant among gay men at the time, was the likely cause of AIDS. Other op-ed pieces by Joseph Sonnabend (“Promiscuity is Bad for Your Health”) and Charles Jurrist (“In Defense of Promiscuity”) appeared over the following months.

In spite of *The Native’s* efforts to present balanced opinions, tensions mounted and tempers flared in response to “We Know Who We Are,” and dissenting responses flooded *The Native’s* mailbox. Some readers recoiled at the suggestion that promiscuity—one of the hallmarks of gay liberation—might play a role in the health crisis. Others felt betrayed because two self-identified participants on the circuit dared to expose some of the potentially embarrassing or unseemly facts of urban gay culture. Although they carefully framed their argument within the rhetoric of personal choice and responsibility, Callen and Berkowitz were accused of the gravest of all gay sins: sex negativity.

The discovery of a potential viral agent in 1983 turned the tide against Callen, Berkowitz, and Sonnabend. *The Native*, like most media outlets, supported the “single-virus” theory, and dissenting views like Sonnabend’s multi-factorial theory were dismissed as quackery. Consequently, *The Native* refused to publish rebuttals by Callen and Berkowitz.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> According to Deborah Gould, “*The New York Native* was the only lesbian and gay paper in New York City during the early years of AIDS. As a source, it presents some problems. It is useful for exploring early lesbian and gay understandings of the epidemic because, unlike any other lesbian/gay paper, it provided consistent coverage from the very first reports. Because of its persistent coverage, and in light of

Unable to get their words in print, Callen and Berkowitz devised a plan. First, they created New York City's first safe sex poster. Entitled "A Warning to Gay Men with AIDS," the poster was distributed to bathhouses, gay bars, businesses, and other establishments. It called for gay men "to begin to share with others like ourselves our personal experiences in getting treatment." They also sent copies of the poster to *The Native* and other gay periodicals. *The Native* refused to print it, according to Berkowitz, because it was "too controversial."<sup>29</sup> Callen and Berkowitz bought ad space using \$240.00 of their own money to publish the ad as a paid advertisement in the magazine. Interestingly, other gay magazines like San Francisco's *Bay Area Reporter* printed the ad for free.

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'mainstream media silence,' *The Native* becomes the newspaper where lesbians and gay men around the country got most of their information about AIDS in the early years; it is also one of the important places where lesbians and gay men in New York and elsewhere discussed central issues about AIDS.

"By 1985, however, the *Native's* credibility had fallen significantly. Much of the reporting reads like a polemic designed to advance specific theories of the causation of AIDS while demoting others. James Kinsella writes that publisher and editor Charles Ortleb 'grew frantic' as the deaths among his friends mounted. The cover of the August 24 1987 issue prompted a complete loss of credibility; showing a picture of a jumping dolphin, the headline connected mysterious deaths of dolphins to AIDS and warned people to stay out of the oceans. Two gay men who were living in New York at the time have independently told me that the issue put the nail in the *Native's* coffin."

See Deborah Gould, *Moving Politics: Emotions and ACT UP's Fight Against AIDS* (U of Chicago Press, 2009): 446-447.

<sup>29</sup> Berkowitz has compiled images of this poster and most of his AIDS writing on his website. <http://www.richardberkowitz.com> accessed 14 January 2014.

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Figure 6.1, receipt for “Warning to Gay Men”  
Michael Callen Archive, NYC LBGT Community Center Archive

The debates surrounding HIV/AIDS, promiscuity, and urban gay culture played out in broadcast media as well. In 1983, queer historian and activist Vito Russo (1946-1990) hosted a public access program called *Our Time*, which dealt with LGBT news, politics, and entertainment.<sup>30</sup> During a segment called “Point/Counterpoint,” Russo invited arts

<sup>30</sup> *Our Time* ran for thirteen episodes on WNYC. Jeffrey Schwarz, the director of the documentary *Vito* (2012) has recently launched new project to raise funds to bring *Our Time* to the Internet.

critic Charles Jurrist (1945-1991) and Michael Callen to offer brief opinions on the current sex debates and AIDS. Jurrist opined:

I know about this disease, and I know it may strike me tomorrow. I am scared...but I won't give up the physical expression of intimacy...We won't start out with a health quiz, nor will we limit our lovemaking to certain acts. I refuse to treat my partner as a sick person or to present myself as one. That's the trip [conservatives] have tried to lay on us...To act otherwise, to give up sexual communication out of the fear of physical illness and death is really to embrace another kind of death, the death of wholeness, the death of the spirit, the death of the self.<sup>31</sup>

Callen responded, "The political issues raised by promiscuity are important, but what civil rights do dead men have? Promiscuity is a vague word [that] describes the historically unique phenomenon" of urban gay male sex cultures of the late twentieth century. Callen's sexual ethic was "radical in its simplicity." In the age of AIDS, gay men should "learn to talk to one another...and to listen. Our challenge is to figure out how to have gay, life-affirming sex, satisfy our emotional needs, and stay alive. Hard questions for hard times, but whatever happened to our great gay imagination?"<sup>32</sup>

Next, Callen and Berkowitz compiled their unpublished responses to criticisms of their article into a booklet. Using Callen's tax refund, they self-published 5,000 copies of *How to have Sex in an Epidemic: One Approach* in May of 1983.<sup>33</sup> The basic premise was to avoid the exchange of infectious bodily fluids including semen, feces, and urine. Strategies to interrupt fluid exchange ranged from mutual masturbation to using condoms

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<sup>31</sup> Charles Jurrist, *Our Time*, 1983. Richard Dworkin has uploaded this segment to his YouTube channel in three parts. See <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PgZh7Kk8cnI> <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-ltMm3bMnMY> and <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zVIE7Vk4Ivg> accessed 14 January 2014.

<sup>32</sup> Michael Callen, *Our Time*, 1983.

<sup>33</sup> Michael Callen, Richard Berkowitz, and Joseph Sonnabend, *How to Have Sex in an Epidemic: One Approach* (New York, Tower Press, 1983).

for anal and oral sex. Although the viral cause of AIDS would be discovered only later, in 1984, the safe sex suggestions presented in this booklet became central to AIDS prevention efforts and have become a common part of sex education and sexual practice today.<sup>34</sup>

The book outlined Sonnabend's multi-factorial theory and covered an array of social, sexual, and political topics. It also detailed the risks of every sex act two (or more) gay men could perform together, a list that includes fucking, getting fucked, kissing, rimming, watersports, using sex toys, taking drugs during sex, S/M, fisting, going to the baths, frequenting prostitutes, and using personal ads to find sexual partners. The language is often wry and funny. This aspect is evident from the two epigrams that introduce the book. The first, a quote from Susan Sontag's *Illness as Metaphor*, established a serious, intellectual approach to the issue of language and sex, while the second campily played with the words of the Burt Bacharach/ Hal David song, "I'll Never Fall in Love Again." Indeed, as the AIDS epidemic worsened, it became frighteningly literal that you could "kiss a guy and get enough germs to catch pneumonia." The authors conclude with a brief meditation on the importance of love between men:

The goal of gay male liberation must be to find ways in which love becomes possible despite continuing and often overwhelming pressure to compete and adopt adversary relationships with other men.

It has certainly become easier to fuck each other, but has it become any easier to love each other?<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> *How to Have Sex in an Epidemic* is often credited as the first safe sex pamphlet. However, the San Francisco Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence published *Play Fair!*, a pamphlet advocating safe sex, in 1982 and produced a second brochure, "Can We Talk...?" around the same time in 1983. Callen always acknowledged these important predecessors in interviews.

<sup>35</sup> Callen and Berkowitz (1983), 38-39.

*How to Have Sex in an Epidemic* was a resounding success. The Callen archive contains dozens of letters from gay men around the country who praise the book. Others included checks for more copies that could be distributed at gay men's health clinics, support groups, and other organizations. Authors Edmund White and Dennis Altman praised the authors for their ability to avoid the hysterics and histrionics of AIDS panic to provide sane, sensible, and practical advice. In spite of this success, Callen was disheartened and hurt by the attacks launched against him by members of the gay community and in the pages of the gay press. He felt "like the Prometheus of the gay movement. I brought fire back to my community, the ability to have sex and not die as a result, and my reward was to be strapped to a rock and have a vulture eat my liver!"<sup>36</sup>

Callen also turned *How to Have Sex in an Epidemic* into a musical project by composing a song that served as a commercial jingle for the booklet. In the song, Callen recounts a young man's thwarted attempts to find sexual release in the age of AIDS. In the first verse, the protagonist cruises a "long and lean mean sex machine packed in tight 501 jeans" in hopes of taking him home for the night. However, his dream lover scolds him by saying, "Where you been boy? Ain't you heard the news? I don't kiss. I just reminisce and keep it in my pants." After striking out at the bar, he finds himself home alone in the second verse. Getting cozy with himself, the young man is "laid back, relax, Betamax playing those **grunt grunt** *Boys in the Sand*."<sup>37</sup> This time, though, his satisfaction is curtailed by the intrusion of the "politically-correct safe-sex and thought police." Sex negative attitudes have apparently permeated the young man's psyche to

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<sup>36</sup> Escoffier (1993).

<sup>37</sup> Wakefield Poole's *Boys in the Sand* (1971) is a classic gay pornographic film starring Casey Donovan (1943-1987), who died of AIDS at the age of 43.

such an extent that he cannot even enjoy a vintage, pre-condom pornographic film in the privacy of his own home.

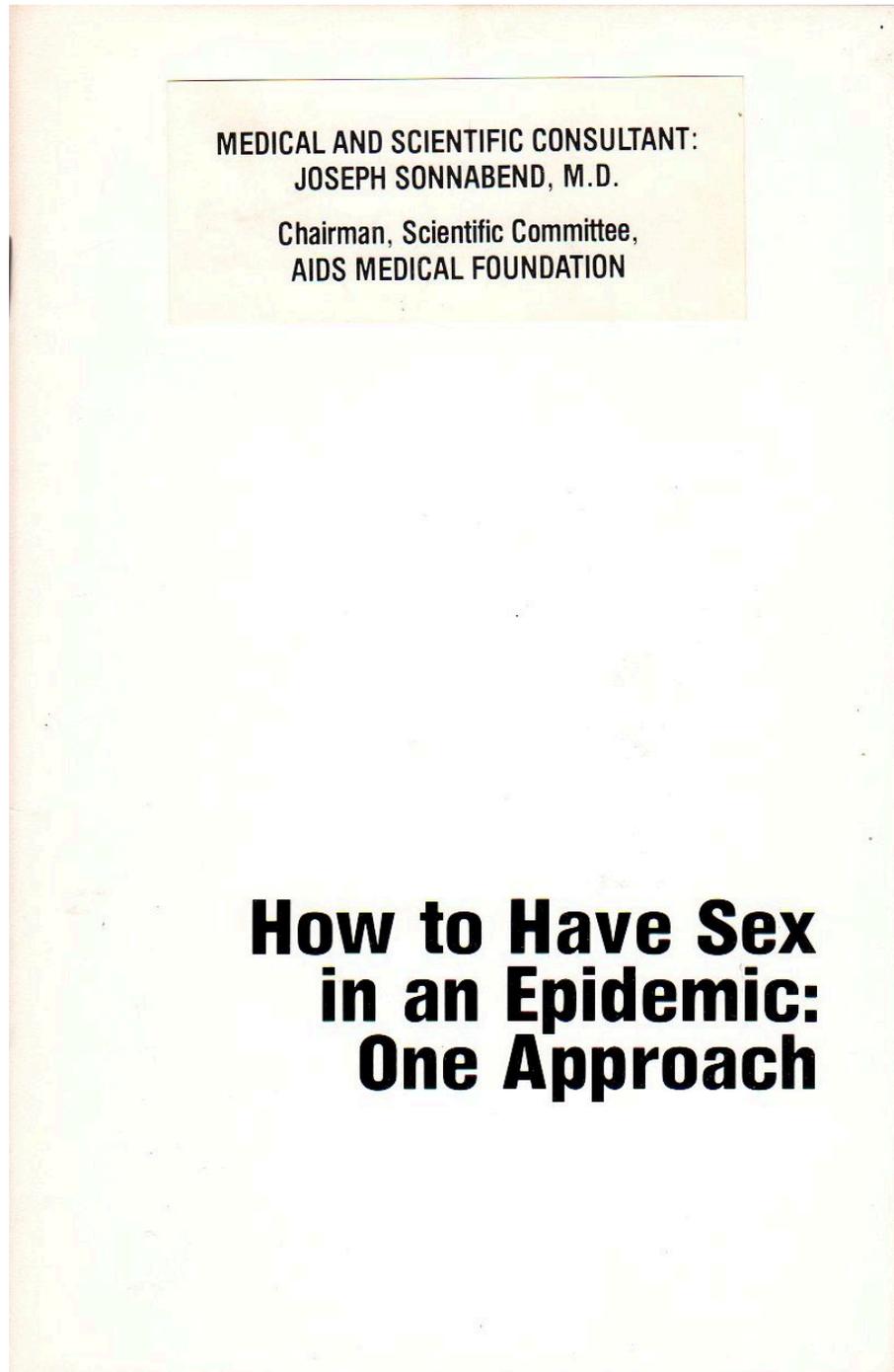


Figure 6.2, *How to Have Sex in an Epidemic* (1983).

In the bridge, the young man despairs over the shifting nature of sex and danger. “I’m going crazy...Where we’re leading, my friends, can you tell me? Who can say when what is safe and what is not changes day by day.” In the final verse, he expresses nostalgia for the 1970s because “things were simpler then. So many men, so little time. Ahh, I remember when...” However, all is not gloom and doom, and the song offers a solution. In one of Callen’s most inspired lines, he advises gay men to “use a rubber/find a lover/in time you will discover/it’s ok to get laid.”

Like “Living in Wartime,” “How to Have Sex” uses the sounds of 80s synth pop. However, in this case, Callen blends these sounds with the retro sounds of 60s rock, New Wave, disco, and soul. The resulting *mélange* flits across styles and decades with a postmodern wink and a hair toss. The opening drum roll sets a bouncy bass line into motion, outlining minor-seventh chords with a cheeky b7-6 wobble every two bars. Offbeat synth accents sparkle like glints from a mirror ball as Callen begins this tale of sexual frustration.

Vocally, Callen incorporates dramatic leaps, grunts, and a multi-tracked choir of gospel-influenced background vocals. He plays up the contrast between melodically active verses and the flat contour of the chanted titular refrain. Callen also manages an ingenious rhyme between “epidemic” and “polemic” that would have satisfied Cole Porter. The glissando up the word “fantasy” recasts an air raid siren heard in “Wartime” as a campy cry of anguish. Other moments of text painting include the organ tremolo that accompanies the words “aching, shaking” in the second verse and the bugle call that signals a successful and safe orgasm in the song’s orgiastic coda.

Camping up a safe sex message by creating a theme song or jingle for the pamphlet was a clever marketing and musical decision. By transforming the title of the booklet into a mantra set to an insistent beat, Callen used music to pound the title of his safe sex booklet into listeners' ears in hopes that hearing it would save lives. Using vernacular language and campy humor, Callen showed that sex can still be funny and pleasurable, and that re-learning how to have sex in an epidemic did not have to be a morose affair.

### **The Denver Principles**

In June of 1983, Callen and Berkowitz traveled to Denver, Colorado for the second annual National AIDS Forum. There, they met other "AIDS victims" from around the country.<sup>38</sup> "Once we were in the same room," Callen recalled, "we discovered that we had similar complaints: no one was listening to us or taking us seriously."<sup>39</sup> Together, Callen and Bobbi Campbell (a San Francisco nurse, Sister of Perpetual Indulgence, and one of the first gay men on the West coast diagnosed with Kaposi's Sarcoma) drafted *The Denver Principles*, "the founding manifesto of the People with AIDS Self-Empowerment Movement."<sup>40</sup> At the end of the conference, the authors stormed the stage and read the document aloud as a protest "against the powerful forces that were trying to dehumanize us."<sup>41</sup>

*The Denver Principles* introduced the term "People with AIDS" as an alternative to pejorative and phobic labels like "AIDS victim" and popularized the idea of "*living*

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<sup>38</sup> A *Time* magazine article from 23 September 1985 called "The New Untouchables" describes the panic that ensued from fears about AIDS in the "general population."

<sup>39</sup> Callen, *Surviving AIDS*, 8.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*

with HIV/AIDS.” The Principles also demanded that scientific, medical, and governmental agencies that deal with HIV/AIDS include PWAs “at every level of decision-making and specifically [allow them to] serve on the boards of directors of provider organizations.” The Principles asserted PWAs’ rights to love, life, death, and dignity. Today, the document continues to serve as the mission statement for numerous HIV/AIDS organization throughout the world.

Callen returned from Denver with renewed vigor. He founded or co-founded several AIDS Self-Empowerment groups including Gay Men with AIDS (1982) and People with AIDS—New York (1983). PWA-NY dissolved in 1983 after disputes with GMHC, and Callen co-founded the People with AIDS Coalition (PWAC) in 1984. Membership in the organization swelled, and circulation of their monthly *Newsline* newsletter peaked at around 14,000. Until 1987, Callen served as the editor and a regular columnist for the *Newsline*, “a 48-page monthly newsletter containing some of the best writing of, for, and by PWAs.”<sup>42</sup> He was also a member of the National Association of People with AIDS, the Community Research Initiative (CRI, which he co-founded with Dr. Sonnabend), and the New York State AIDS Institute. AIDS and AIDS activism became the central focus of Callen’s life, eclipsing even his musical endeavors as he and other PWAs fought for their lives. Reflecting on Callen’s activist work in 2012, Richard Dworkin said, “If I could go back in time and tell [him] one thing, it’d be to forget the multi-factorial stuff - HIV is the cause of AIDS - and get him to write more music.”<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Michael Callen and Dan Turner, “A History of the AIDS Self-Empowerment Movement,” *Lesbian and Gay Health Education Foundation* Program Booklet (1988), 288-295, contained in Escoffier *In My Time* (Unpublished, 1993).

<sup>43</sup> Interview with the author, 21 Sept 2012.



Figure 6.3, Denver Delegation, 1983

NYC LGBT Community Center Archive

Standing: (L-R) Dan Turner, Bobby Reynolds, Bill Burke, Matthew Sarner

Seated: (L-R) Tom Nasrallah, Bob Cecchi, Phil Lanzaratta (rear), Bobbi Campbell, Richard Berkowitz, Artie Felson (shirtless), Michael Callen

## **THE DENVER PRINCIPLES**

Statement from the advisory committee of the People with AIDS

We condemn attempts to label us as "victims," a term which implies defeat, and we are only occasionally "patients," a term which implies passivity, helplessness, and dependence upon the care of others. We are "People With AIDS."

### **RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ALL PEOPLE**

1. Support us in our struggle against those who would fire us from our jobs, evict us from our homes, refuse to touch us or separate us from our loved ones, our community or our peers, since available evidence does not support the view that AIDS can be spread by casual, social contact.
2. Not scapegoat people with AIDS, blame us for the epidemic or generalize about our lifestyles.

### **RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PEOPLE WITH AIDS**

1. Form caucuses to choose their own representatives, to deal with the media, to choose their own agenda and to plan their own strategies.
2. Be involved at every level of decision-making and specifically serve on the boards of directors of provider organizations.
3. Be included in all AIDS forums with equal credibility as other participants, to share their own experiences and knowledge.
4. Substitute low-risk sexual behaviors for those which could endanger themselves or their partners; we feel people with AIDS have an ethical responsibility to inform their potential sexual partners of their health status.

### **RIGHTS OF PEOPLE WITH AIDS**

1. To as full and satisfying sexual and emotional lives as anyone else.
2. To quality medical treatment and quality social service provision without discrimination of any form including sexual orientation, gender, diagnosis, economic status or race.
3. To full explanations of all medical procedures and risks, to choose or refuse their treatment modalities, to refuse to participate in research without jeopardizing their treatment and to make informed decisions about their lives.
4. To privacy, to confidentiality of medical records, to human respect and to choose who their significant others are.
5. To die--and to LIVE--in dignity.

Figure 6.4, *The Denver Principles*

Callen's dual and often overlapping roles as an AIDS activist and an openly gay singer/songwriter with AIDS also provoked the indignation of some members of the gay community. He was accused of crass opportunism, criticized for his "irrational" beliefs about the cause of AIDS, and even accused of pretending to have AIDS in order to promote his singing career. In an unsigned letter to Callen, one disgruntled man expressed his disgust "at the way [Callen was] using the health crisis to promote your singing career" instead of using his position to lobby or fundraise for people with AIDS who cannot afford their expensive treatments. "We need medicine, not another pop star!" The tirade concludes with an angry command for Callen to "STOP embarrassing us all with your bad music and shameless self-promotion."<sup>44</sup>

While it was true that some people with AIDS including Callen, Berkowitz, and Bobbi Campbell appeared on television, at public events, and in print media, this was hardly glamorous or aggrandizing self-promotion. With no anti-discrimination laws to protect them, PWAs risked losing their jobs and homes if their illness was discovered. AIDS panic and phobia also meant many PWAs lost connection with their lovers, friends, or families. Early activists put themselves at great personal and professional risk by coming out as people with AIDS even as they worked to counter negative stereotypes about people with AIDS.<sup>45</sup> Reflecting on this period almost a decade later, Callen remarked that, "those of us crazy enough to publicly identify as having the most stigmatized disease of the century agreed that it felt strange to be treated like

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<sup>44</sup> J. Williams letter to Michael Callen, undated. Callen archive NYC LGBT Community Center Library.

<sup>45</sup> See Sander Gilman, *Disease and Representation* (1988) and Crimp *Portraits of People with AIDS* in Crimp (2002). Stuart Marshall's film *Bright Eyes* (1984) explores the problematic ways in which AIDS appears in mainstream media by linking images of AIDS with other troubling scenes from science including nineteenth-century medical texts and Nazi genocide and eugenics. Sander Gilman and Douglas Crimp also offer thoughtful critiques of the representations of illness in general and HIV/AIDS in particular in their work from this time.

‘celebrities.’”<sup>46</sup> Only in America, he quipped, “would it be necessary to make a career out of being sick in order to compel a more humane and appropriate government response.”<sup>47</sup>



Figure 6.5, being sworn in for testimony  
 NYC LGBT Community Center Archive  
 (L-R) Michael Callen, Richard Lyon, Anthony Ferrera

The negative criticism probably stemmed from people with AIDS who felt invisible, frightened, abused, isolated, and abandoned. It perhaps reflected a mixture of ambivalence, jealousy, deeply ingrained impulses toward secrecy, and shame felt by PWAs toward Callen, who was among the few gay men willing to be open about their illness during this era. At the same time, Callen did enjoy a degree of fame and notoriety for both his activist work and his music. Throughout the early-1980s, he appeared on

<sup>46</sup> Callen, *Surviving AIDS* (1990), 8.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*

national television programs like *Nightline*, *20/20*, *The Phil Donahue Show*, *Geraldo*, and most of the major networks. He was also asked to sing at AIDS rallies, gay pride events, and other events. In addition to public appearances, he also served on the New York State AIDS Advisory Council, an organization whose mission was to help shape HIV/AIDS policy. And in August of 1983, Callen along with Roger Lyon of San Francisco and Anthony Ferrara of Washington D.C. testified before a Congressional subcommittee on behalf of people with AIDS.

### **Love Don't Need a Reason**

When Michael Callen was hospitalized with a bout of crypto in 1982, Richard Dworkin remained vigilant in spite of the protests of both friends and his new lover. Getting involved with a man who had just been diagnosed with the most highly stigmatized disease of the twentieth century hardly seemed like the making of a long-term relationship. The new couple's forecast was made grimmer by Callen's poor health. Still, Dworkin reassured him he would stay.

After recovering from his illness, Callen continued to perform with Low Life and as a solo act in piano bars around New York City. At Reno Sweeny's in Greenwich Village, he met fellow songwriter, Marsha Malamet. Though the two were socially acquainted, they had never worked together. However, a phone call from Larry Kramer would soon set into motion a series of events that would forge a musical and personal bond between the two songwriters that endures more than two decades after Callen's death. According to Malamet, they bumped into one another on Broadway one afternoon in the fall of 1984. Callen informed her that he had received a call from author Larry

Kramer requesting that Callen compose a song for his play, *The Normal Heart* and wondered if Malamet would like to collaborate on the project.<sup>48</sup>

Image Removed

Figure 6.6, Peter Allen introducing “Love Don’t Need a Reason” at AIDS Walk, 1986.

Malamet agreed on the condition that she could bring another musician on board. She and Australian songwriter Peter Allen (1944-1992) were already working on a project, but Malamet was certain Allen would co-write with them.<sup>49</sup> Allen agreed, and the trio met at Allen’s Manhattan apartment. Malamet described the collaborative process of writing the song:

Peter and I are both composers, and we both play piano. So, we’re at his house, and of course I defer to Mr. Allen. There was no way I was going to sit at the piano and just sit there and have Peter throw out a note or two. It was Peter Allen! So, he sat and Michael threw out lyrics...and then, as the premier gentleman he [was], he got up and said, ‘Ok Marsha, you take over.’ I sat at the piano and started noodling...It was really collaboration. [Allen] did, I would say, sixty-five or seventy percent of the music, and the rest was me. And her collaborated with Michael, but it was mostly Michael. That was how we wrote it, and it came very quickly.<sup>50</sup>

<sup>48</sup> Kramer’s play debuted at The Public Theater in April of 1985 and was revived in 2011 on Broadway. The revival received a Tony Award for Best Revival of a Play as well as two awards for Best Featured Actor (John Benjamin Hickey) and Actress (Ellen Barkin). Barbra Streisand purchased the film rights to the play in the 1980s but the project never materialized. Finally, a TV miniseries directed by Ryan Murphy is set to premiere in 2014.

<sup>49</sup> Australian-born Peter Allen began his career as one half of The Allen Brothers with his musical partner Chris Bell. Judy Garland discovered Allen while touring, and she facilitated his musical debut in the US. He married Garland’s daughter, Liza Minnelli, in 1967; they divorced in 1974. Allen co-wrote a number of successful songs including Olivia Newton-John’s “I Honestly Love You” (1974) and Melissa Manchester’s “Don’t Cry Out Loud,” which he co-wrote with Carole Bayer Sager in 1978. He released a number of successful solo albums, including *Bi-Coastal* (1980) and the theme song to the 1981 Dudley Moore film *Arthur*. Allen died of AIDS related illness in 1992.

<sup>50</sup> Marsha Malamet, interview with J. D. Doyle for *Queer Music Heritage*, May 2013. Transcript available at <http://www.queermusicheritage.us/may2013s.html>.

Over a pot of tea, the duo hashed out the melody and lyrics to the verses and chorus. Later, Peter Allen added a bridge and smoothed out some of the lyrics for the final version of the song.

While the song was not selected for *The Normal Heart* (that honor went to Callen's "Living in Wartime," which played as theatergoers left the performance), "Love Don't Need a Reason" endures as Callen's best known and most frequently recorded song. All three songwriters recorded their own versions of the ballad as did Broadway legend Barbara Cook, women's music icon Holly Near, songwriter Fred Small, and numerous gay men's choruses around the world. The song was also adopted as the official theme of the first AIDS Walk in New York City in 1986, when it was performed by Peter Allen. Callen's recording of the song appeared on his debut solo album, *Purple Heart* (1988).

The verse lyrics encourage values like being true to yourself, rejecting societal mandates, and embracing compromise, all for the benefit of an enduring love between two people. The chorus offers the rationale that "love don't need a reason/ love don't always rhyme/ and love is all we have for now/ what we don't have is time." The tone of these lyrics is similar to "That's What Friends Are For," Burt Bacharach and Carole Bayer Sager's ballad that was recorded by Dionne Warwick, Gladys Knight, Stevie Wonder, and Elton John in 1985. However, "Love Don't Need a Reason" acknowledges that time is running out for someone with AIDS; thus, its sentiments are buttressed by urgency and a kind of desperation in the face of death.

Unlike "That's What Friends are For," this song contains specific allusions to the particular experiences of gay men and lesbians. In the first, the singer cautions that "if

your heart always did what a normal heart would do...then you might just miss the one who's standing there." The words "a normal heart" are a direct reference to Kramer's play about gay men and AIDS, but it also juxtaposes the notion of a "normal," that is a straight, love and a gay or lesbian one. Second, the notion of "playing a part instead of being who you really are" resonates with the politics of the closet and the psychological and emotional significance of coming out. Third, Callen's own journey from the Midwest to New York City stands as evidence of the importance of rejecting "the madness that we're taught" for gay men and lesbians who inherit and internalize homophobic ideologies from the surrounding culture. Finally, given that Callen was already openly living with HIV/AIDS (and Allen, too, would die of AIDS-related illnesses in a few years), the idea that the singer is running out of time had a real resonance with gay listeners, whose lives were also impacted by the epidemic.

The verse melody mirrors the sense of restraint, anxiety, or self-consciousness in the lyrics by using quicker rhythmic values (mostly eighth and sixteenth-note subdivisions of the pulse), inserting emphatic silences between short phrases of text, lingering on a single pitch (scale degree 5), moving mostly by step, and staying within the confines of a perfect fifth between 1 and 5. The emphatic leap up on "why, why me..." signals a vocal shift from a speech-like declaration of the text to open-throat singing. The chorus melody soars across steady quarter note rhythms and longer, descending lines. In the bridge, Callen's piano playing becomes more agitated as chromatic harmonies intrude in order to facilitate a "truck driver" modulation (up one whole step from the original key) for the final iteration of the chorus. This type of key change heightens the emotional affect in any number of pop ballads, though it has

become something of a cliché. For instance, Barry Manilow provided a ridiculous example of the seemingly endless upward modulation in the live performance of “Daybreak” captured on *Barry Manilow Live!* (1977). In Callen’s recording of “Love Don’t Need a Reason,” the modulation from E-major to F# sharp major poignantly underscores the meaning of the lyrics.

“Love Don’t Need a Reason” became Callen’s signature song, and he performed it at conferences, rallies, and on television throughout the rest of his life, often with Malamet at the piano. In 1993, he performed a moving rendition at the Gay and Lesbian March on Washington as part of his final concert performance. The song endures as a powerful musical statement about the devastation of HIV/AIDS. In 1998, it was featured in *The Boy from Oz*, a musical about the life of Peter Allen starring Hugh Jackman.

### **Purple Heart**

By 1987, Callen had been living with AIDS for five years, two years longer than medical research suggested that he would have under the best circumstances. Although he was active as a performer, author, and activist, Callen worried that he might die without leaving a record of his songs. So, he and Dworkin began to work out a plan to make a record.

According to Dworkin, Callen’s classic gay low self-esteem often prevented him from moving forward, and he made excuses not to record. As mentioned earlier, Callen was a huge fan of Barbra Streisand and compared his music to that of his favorite diva, often despairing that he could never make a record unless it had a huge budget for a full orchestra. Convinced that his lover could create an intimate yet still powerful album,

Dworkin played him *Nina Simone & Piano!* (1969), an album that features exactly what its title advertises: ten tracks performed by Simone by herself at the piano. At first, Simone's purposefully out-of-tune singing grated on Callen's nerves, but Dworkin encouraged him to keep listening. With time, he discovered that the singer's powerful and dramatic interpretations moved him as much as Streisand and endeavored to create works of equal power and beauty on his album.<sup>51</sup> Callen was overwhelmed by the raw power of Simone's voice accompanied only by her piano playing and resolved to make a similar record.

The couple ran into a number of obstacles. First, Callen didn't have a record contract, which led to a second problem; they would have to pay for studio time out of pocket. Although friends and fellow musicians repeatedly assured Callen that his sound was "commercial" enough to land a record contract, his commitment to singing gay music was a third considerable barrier. The situation was further complicated by his status as a person with AIDS. According to Dworkin, Callen "really felt there was no way that anyone would put out his record...between the combination of the subject matter, him having AIDS, and him having a life expectancy shorter than the current issue of *Vogue*."<sup>52</sup> Every label they approached, including Holly Near's own Redwood Records, rejected the project.<sup>53</sup>

Dworkin came up with an ingenious solution. He bought a copy of *Mix Magazine*'s Northeast directory, a listing of studios, engineers, and other recording professionals. Thumbing through the directory, Dworkin searched for familiar names or

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<sup>51</sup> Richard Dworkin, interview with the author, 24 September 2012.

<sup>52</sup> Richard Dworkin, interview with the author 24 September 2012.

<sup>53</sup> Near and Callen became close friends, but Redwood specialized in women's music and declined to sponsor the project. Interview with Richard Dworkin, 23 September 2012.

friends of friends who might have access to a studio. Eventually, he found a listing for Classic Sound, the home studio of jazz pianist Fred Hersch.<sup>54</sup> The previous year, while playing drums for a swing band at The Monster (80 Grove Street, NYC), Dworkin met Hersch, who was making a name for himself as an innovative pianist at Bradley's, an important cabaret on University Place. Dworkin contacted Hersch, who offered the couple his studio and an engineer (Denise McGrath) for the astoundingly affordable price of twenty-five dollars an hour. Dworkin estimated that they made the record, which included three of the tracks recorded with Low Life in 1985, for around five thousand dollars. They released it on their own Significant Other Records. Unencumbered by the demands of a major label, Callen and Dworkin could indulge their queerest fantasies on the record, and this sensibility permeates the project from the song choices to the disc itself.

The title *Purple Heart* refers to a military honor given for wounds or death sustained in battle. Callen's decision to name the album after this particular emblem has four consequences. First, he identifies the AIDS crisis as a war, a theme emphasized on the third track "Living in Wartime." Second, Callen self-identifies as a veteran in this war and a recipient of the Purple Heart, a point he drives home on the album with a moving cover of Elton John's "Talking Old Soldiers." Third, those who died of AIDS, participated in AIDS activism, and purchased his album are also designated war heroes. Finally, a specific shade of purple—lavender—is associated with gay culture and identity.

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<sup>54</sup> Hersch tested positive for HIV in 1986 and began his coming out process. He revealed his HIV status in the early 1990s. *The New York Times* ran a profile of Hersch in 2010 [http://www.nytimes.com/2010/01/31/magazine/31Hersch-t.html?pagewanted=all&\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2010/01/31/magazine/31Hersch-t.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0) and Hersch completed a new, AIDS-themed work, *My Coma Dreams*, after waking from an AIDS-related coma in 2008.

In spite of its association with military ideas and images, the cover design has a sentimental quality. Its weathered gold edges suggest some precious keepsake from a distant past, a beloved and frequently touched memento of a cherished one, thus it alludes to a time when the war against AIDS is just a memory. By standing in in for the bodies of PWAs who constituted an often literally “untouchable” class, this frequently-touched purple heart subtly undermines the fears of contagion that kept friends, lovers, families, and even healthcare professionals from touching PWAs. Callen experienced this fear first-hand during his frequent hospitalizations. Nurses at New York City’s St. Vincent’s hospital refused to enter his room to bring him food, opting instead to leave his tray outside the door for him to retrieve.

Upon its release in 1988, *Purple Heart* was hailed as an important record by the queer press. *The Bay Area Reporter* described it as “a virtually flawless debut” and “the best new album by a gay male performer.” *The Advocate* endorsed it as “the most remarkable gay independent release of the past decade.” *The Los Angeles Dispatch* called *Purple Heart* a “startling, sophisticated offering.” Dworkin estimates that the record sold around 10,000 copies, a respectable figure for an essentially DIY project. Dworkin believes the record failed to meet its sales potential for two reasons. First, Callen did virtually no promotional performances because he loathed performing in public, and second, by 1988 his involvement in other modes of activism distracted him from music as much as it informed his material.

Callen also described *Purple Heart* as a “celebration of being gay.” Part of this celebration is Callen’s wry sense of humor, which infuses the project and even the disc itself. In the liner notes, he thanks his queer musical influences: Elton John, Bette Midler,

and Barbra Streisand. In lieu of numeric side designations, he calls one side “Tops” and the other “Bottoms.” The Tops side contains all the rhythmically active and up-tempo songs while the ballads and cabaret songs appear on the Bottom. The two sides of the album form a narrative arc that begins with a young gay man’s arrival in New York City, “Where the Boys Are.” Along the way, he meets a lover (“Me & Dickie D”), contemplates family relationships and gender (“Nobody’s Fool”), and participates in AIDS activism (“Living in Wartime”).<sup>55</sup> The album comes to a quiet close with two ballads.

The first of these two ballads is a cover of Elton John’s “Talkin’ Old Soldiers.” Callen transforms the song into a tribute to Dr. Sonnabend. Its image of two exhausted veterans reinforces the war veteran theme of Callen’s AIDS activism. The tale of two seasoned war vets, the speaker and “Old Man Joe,” meeting in an empty bar takes on an eerie significance in the context of AIDS. Callen sings of a once lively bar filled with the laughter of young men and the clinking of glasses of beer and the starker present where his only friends are the ghosts of his friends and their graves. By 1988, Callen had grown weary of the fight against AIDS. After making appearances around the world as an expert in HIV/AIDS and long-term survival, editing the People with AIDS Coalition New York *Newsline* newsletter, and dealing with toil his own schedule took on his health, Callen started to contemplate his retirement.

“I’d Like to Be (Home),” the final song on *Purple Heart* is an austere meditation on love. Using his own multi-tracked vocals, Callen transforms Bill Russell and Donald Melrose’s song into a homophonic chorale. As the closing track, “Home” brings the

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<sup>55</sup> David Nahmod, “Heart to Heart: Singer/Activist Michael Callen Talks About Politics, AIDS, and Music as Warfare,” article in an unknown magazine, 1988.

story of *Purple Heart*'s young gay protagonist to a rather different place than it began. The album's opener, "Where the Boys Are" is an exercise in camp excess as Callen sings of the thrill and promise of life in the city. By contrast, it closes with an earnest declaration of domesticity: "I'd like to be your home."

In spite of its overtly queer narrative, Callen worried that gay men would not buy his record. "It is a source of frustration for me that gays do not support gay men's music in the same way as lesbians support women's music," he said. Although there were some openly gay male singer/songwriters like Steven Grossman (1951-1991) and Michael Cohen Still, most gay men—including Callen's—were typically fans of female divas in opera, musical theater, soul, and disco.<sup>56</sup> Still, he remained hopeful that *Purple Heart* would reach its intended audience and intervene in the political struggles of the gay male community. "Music is a political act," he stated in 1988, "It makes people smile and relax and think. And it helps—temporarily—to put the war [against AIDS] aside."<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> David Halperin discusses gay men's relationships to gay music in *How to Be Gay* (Harvard U Press, 2012). Grossman died of AIDS-related complications in 1991. He released his debut, *Caravan Tonight* (1974), an album that marked the first release by an openly gay male artists on a major label. Little is known about Cohen's life. He released three albums in the 1970s: *Mike Cohen* (1972), *What Did You Expect...Songs about the Experiences of Being Gay* (1973), and *Some of Us Had to Live* (1976). For more information about Cohen, see Cindy Boucher, "Newly Imagined Audiences: Folkways' Gay and Lesbian Records," *Journal of Popular Music Studies* 20 (2008): 129-149.

<sup>57</sup> Nahmod (1988).

### One of Us: The Fabulous Flirtations

One of us has had the same lover for eight years  
 One of us is from a family in which the gays outnumber the  
 straights  
 One of us was in the closet until he was 37  
 One of us took his boyfriend to his high school prom  
 One of us coached high school wrestling  
 One of us wants to carry a child to term  
 One of us helped start Hispanos Unidos Gays y Lesbianas  
 One of us has never seen a porno film  
 One of us was an MP in the US Army  
 One of us was entrapped, arrested, handcuffed, and beaten  
 by the police  
 One of us has smuggled AIDS drugs into the country  
 One of us has been arrested for civil disobedience  
 One of us was fag-bashed with a two-by-four  
 And two of us have AIDS<sup>58</sup>

The Flirtations were an all-male, openly gay a cappella group whose music and activism engaged feminism, minority rights, LGBT rights, and AIDS. Initially formed in 1987-1988, they were active until 1996. During that time, the group recorded three albums: *The Flirtations* (1990), *Live: Out on the Road* (1994), and *Three* (1996). The Flirts also appeared in the feature film *Philadelphia* (1993), and they sang *The Phil Donahue Show*, and *Good Morning America* while maintaining a tour schedule that took them around the nation and abroad.

The group's commitment to diversity politics also manifested in the makeup of the group, which included white, Latino, and African American members, as well as in their musical selections, a mélange of doo-wop classics like "Why Do Fools Fall in Love" and "I'll Be Loving You Forever," barbershop standards including "Lida Rose" from *The Music Man*, and American sentimental songs such as "My Buddy." They also regularly performed Spanish-language songs like the Puerto Rican folk song "¿Dónde

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<sup>58</sup> "One of Us" from *The Flirtations* (1990).

Está Dolores?” and songs by Sweet Honey in the Rock. The Flirtations arranged new works by lesbian, gay, and minority songwriters a part of their performances and records. For instance, they recorded Cris Williamson’s “Shooting Star” and Labi Siffre’s “Something Inside So Strong” for their first album. They also sang arrangements of Michael Callen’s songs. Fred Small’s lullaby “Everything Possible” became their signature song, and the group ended every concert with powerful back-to-back performances of that song and “Something Inside So Strong.”

They also performed the spoken word piece “One of Us.” Written by the group, “One of Us” contained of a series of biographical revelations about each of the men. However, each phrase begins with “One of Us...” in order to obfuscate the specific identity of the man to whom each line applies. In doing so, the band encouraged both solidarity among the group itself and among members of the audience. “One of Us” evolved during each performance and as The Flirts’ relationships with one another deepened. Some of the biographical bits were humorous while others were heartfelt or even painful. The version printed at the beginning of this section comes from the liner notes of their debut album. On their live second album, lines like “One of us was a high school cross country champion, and one of us was a high school cross dresser” gets a laugh from the audience. At the same time, when they say that “one of us was fagbashed with a two-by-four,” or “one of us ran away from home at the age of fourteen,” the silence in the auditorium is palpable.

The group first formed as a sextet with Jon Arterton (baritone), Michael Callen (soprano), Aurelio Font (tenor), Cal Grogan (baritone), T.J. Meyers (tenor), and Elliot Pilshaw (baritone). After Grogan and Pilshaw left the group, they reformed as a quintet

with bass Clifford Townsend. In 1990, original member T. J. Meyers died of complications to AIDS, and Jimmy Rutland joined. In the early 1990s, Callen's health made touring increasingly difficult. Consequently, the group toured as a quartet and occasionally used replacement singers like Bill McKinley. The stress of Callen's illness and death, personality and political conflicts, and the pressures of touring together for years eventually splintered the group. Arterton and Rutland formed a trio version of The Flirtations with lesbian singer Suede in the mid-1990s. They recorded one album together before disbanding in 1996.

Throughout their career and in the face of devastating losses, The Flirtations performed an irresistible blend of campy humor, earnest political beliefs, a sincere commitment to diversity, and the glorious sound of a cappella singing. Billing themselves "the world's first openly gay, doo-wop singing a cappella group," they became one of the most beloved queer musical acts of the era.

### **The Queer Politics of A Cappella**

Unaccompanied vocal music seems like an unlikely vehicle for a group of politically savvy gay men. Historically, the template for protest music in the US has been the lone figure of the troubadour whose acoustic guitar provides a simple accompaniment for expressive singing and earnest lyrics that cover a range of topical issues. Woody Guthrie, Bob Dylan, Joan Baez, and Judy Collins epitomize this folk figure, and their music fueled the development of women's music in the 1970s. However, gay men have largely been associated with disco and its more contemporary dancing sisters. Often performed by African American diva singers including Gloria Gaynor or Thelma

Houston, disco moved gay men on the dance floor but was not perceived as necessarily political music.<sup>59</sup>

At the same time, gay and lesbian choruses began to appear in the late-1970s. The first gay men's chorus in the US was founded by Jon Reed Sims in San Francisco in 1978 and held its first public performance at the memorial service for Harvey Milk.<sup>60</sup> By 1986, the Gay and Lesbian Association of Choruses (GALA) "included thirty-eight choruses located in most of the country's larger cities and a surprising number of smaller ones."<sup>61</sup> Generally speaking, gay communities have "extremely positive" feelings about gay choruses.<sup>62</sup> The reasons for these feelings are myriad, but Attinello speculates that since "the choruses do not have an economic base for existence," they may provide "places to rest from the financial rat race and small havens from the constantly proliferating traps" of gay consumer culture including "the cost of gym memberships, sophisticated home furnishings, commercial entertainment, drinks, drugs, and adult toys," which are "virtually mandatory" in gay culture.<sup>63</sup>

Gay choruses were among the first musical groups employed in the artistic response to HIV/AIDS. In fact, the San Francisco Gay Men's Chorus commissioned David Conte's *Invocation and Dance* (1986), one of the earliest musical works dedicated

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<sup>59</sup> Walter Hughes' "In the Empire of the Beat" (1994) and Tim Lawrence's *Love Saves the Day: A History of American Dance Culture, 1970-1979* (2004) are exceptional in that they link dance music to larger political questions about sexuality, race, and urban space. Judith Halberstam and Judith Peraino write about disco diva Sylvester's powerful falsetto in terms of gender dissidence.

<sup>60</sup> Paul Attinello, "Towards a Sociology of the Gay Choruses," in *Queering the Pitch: The New Gay and Lesbian Musicology*, edited by Philip Brett, Elizabeth Wood, and Gary C. Thomas (Routledge, 1994; second edition, Routledge, 2006): 315-348.

<sup>61</sup> Attinello (2006): 315.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid, 323.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid, 323.

to people with AIDS. Other early AIDS-related works for gay choruses included Craig Carnahan's "I Loved You" (1983) and "No Prayers, or Bells" (1988).<sup>64</sup>

The 1980s was a period intense of cultural conflict. Debates about women's rights culminated in what are colloquially known as the "sex wars." African American and minority rights movements shifted their focus to issues of poverty and crime in the lives of urban denizens, and minority women began to focus on their double disenfranchisement. At the same time, the rise of the religious right, the conservative administrations of President Ronald Reagan and British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, and a general increase in consumer culture signaled a sea change from the idealism of the 1960s and 1970s. Tensions mounted in all areas of cultural and political life, from controversies surrounding works of art produced with grant money from the National Endowment for the Arts to the Cold War.

Music also reflected these social changes. Genres like metal and punk used clangorous guitars and screaming vocals to sonify the frustrations of dissident and disenfranchised subcultures. Other artists used the sounds of synthesizers, a hallmark of New Wave and other styles, as an ironic commentary on the growth of corporate greed, materialism, and the "me" decade.

By the time The Flirtations formed in 1987, *Billboard's Hot 100* was dominated by the big-voiced balladry of Whitney Houston, the decidedly rockabilly retro of George Michael's "Faith," and rock power ballads by Heart and Whitesnake. However, in New York City, an a cappella revival was underway. New York groups like The Manhattan Transfer (founded in 1972) and Rockapella (1986) and others including Toronto's The

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<sup>64</sup> For more information, see The Estate Project for Artists with AIDS website, <http://www.artistswithaids.org> accessed 14 January 2014.

Nylons (1979), Huntsville's Take 6 (1980), and San Francisco's The Bobs (1982) reintroduced the close vocal harmonies of swing, doo-wop, and gospel into mainstream pop. Spike Lee captured this resurgence in his PBS documentary, *Spike Lee & Co., Do It A Cappella* (1990). Established artists like Billy Joel and Bobby McFerrin turned the sounds and techniques of a cappella into huge hits with "The Longest Time" (1983) and "Don't Worry Be Happy" (1988). The music of Ladysmith Black Mambazo found its way into mainstream American popular culture through albums like Paul Simon's *Graceland* (1986) and the growth of interest in what was called world music.

For Gage Averill (2010), close-harmony a cappella singing represents an "attempt to recover a lost structure of feeling," or a distinctly contemporary nostalgia for the supposed innocence of American life before "industrialization, urbanization, World War I, and the rise of electronic media."<sup>65</sup> Barbershop provided respite from the socio-political and economic changes that threatened the very definition of American identity, a "national imaginary formed in the crucible of conflicts over class, race, gender, and ethnicity."<sup>66</sup> Other scholars identify a similar politics of nostalgia in different styles of a cappella singing. John Michael Runowicz (2010) hears doo-wop singing as "the sonic embodiment of the experiences of social repression, cultural ascendance, and aspirations for a future fueled by postwar American optimism."<sup>67</sup> Finally, Stuart Goosman (2004) highlights an essential connection or "flow" between the musical activities of small-group harmony singing and the social conditions in which this activity occurs.<sup>68</sup> Flow

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<sup>65</sup> Gage Averill, *Four Parts, No Waiting: A Social History of Barbershop Singing* (Oxford U Press, 2010): 4.

<sup>66</sup> Averill (2010): 8.

<sup>67</sup> John Michael Runowicz, *Forever Doo-Wop: Race, Nostalgia, and Vocal Harmony* (U of Massachusetts Press, 2010): 5.

<sup>68</sup> Stuart Goosman, *Group Harmony: The Black Urban Roots of Rhythm & Blues* (U of Pennsylvania Press, 2005).

connects individuals across a shared past and builds community and continuity “from past to present to future as one generation builds on the last.”<sup>69</sup>

Although these authors discuss the politics of particular unaccompanied vocal practices, the actual music they describe is not necessarily *political* music. That is, the topics or subjects addressed in the lyrics of these varied repertoires might involve romance (always heterosexual, usually young), leisure activities (like singing or dancing), nostalgia (for home or idyllic places), spirituality (particularly Protestant Christianity), and sentimentality (for friendship or family). Thus, the performance of specific songs in particular historical context imbues them with political significance or urgency. At the same time, the sound of unaccompanied harmony singing has a distinctly nostalgic quality. According to Merriam-Webster, nostalgia is a “state of being homesick” or “a wistful or excessively sentimental yearning for return to or of some past period or irrecoverable condition.” Both Averill and Runowicz argue that the lyrics, costumes, and vocal practices of a cappella singing conjure a deep longing for a mythic America of Main Streets, community picnics, and hometowns.

The Flirtations activated many of these same nostalgic triggers when they performed in several ways. The sound of their unaccompanied singing voices evoked the general “pastness” of a cappella and the music of their generation’s formative years. Most of the members of the group and their audiences were children of the 1950s and grew up in the 1960s. The music of their generation’s formative years influenced their choice of repertoire, which included Broadway show tunes, barbershop standards, doo-wop classics, 1960s girl group hits, and contemporary songs recast in a cappella arrangements. In the face of devastating loss of AIDS, the nostalgic sound of the past doubtlessly

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<sup>69</sup> Goosman, *Group Harmony* (2005): 2.

functioned as a palliative salve for these psychic and social wounds. The Flirts also allowed audiences to reimagine their queer pasts by performing songs like “My Boyfriend’s Back,” “Johnny Angel,” and “To Know Him is to Love Him” as openly gay men.<sup>70</sup>

The Flirtations staged an intimate musical community, a family of friends or family of choice, with whom their audiences could immediately identify. Each man had a specific role within the family, as Michael Callen explained in “Redesigning the Family,” an essay included in the liner notes to the group’s second album, *The Flirtations: Live Out on the Road* (1992). Callen likens The Flirts to the family unit in a 1950s sitcom. “The role of father-knows-best is played by [Jon Arterton],” while Aurelio Font, Jimmy Rutland, and Cliff Townsend star as the three mischievous brothers. Meanwhile, Callen starred as “Mommy, a.k.a. ‘The Diva,’” whose duties include “declar[ing] when we’re in need of a lint-cleaning session, how we’ll proceed, and when we’ve had enough.” Callen also played the role of peacekeeper “when the children fight, or when a coup is being secretly plotted against Daddy.” Being part of any family is never easy, but each man “in his own way, is trying to get the experiment right,” in spite of “differences in race and class, language and culture, philosophical and emotional temperaments.”

Intimacy was also part of their vocal performances, as their voices rubbed against one another in close harmony. Archival video of their performances indicates that their singing was thrilling to audiences, and, according to Richard Dworkin, their singing “fit

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<sup>70</sup> Their performances differ fundamentally from other gay vocal traditions, including drag shows. In drag, the emphasis is on theatrical performance of a particular diva, or in more recent manifestations lip-synching a favorite diva’s song. In many (but not all) forms of gay male drag, the point is to pass as a woman. The Flirtations performed these pop music classics as gay men.

the zeitgeist really well.”<sup>71</sup> The moment they began performing in public, people loved them. “It was astounding,” Dworkin recalled, “because it was gay. There was something really exciting about it, and people got it immediately—its place and time. People were like ‘Whoa! That’s really cool.’”<sup>72</sup>

Gay liberation, feminism, and AIDS activism shaped the politics of The Flirtations. According to Jon Arterton, lyrics drove the group’s repertoire choices. In an a cappella ensemble words “pop out at you” because they aren’t “hidden behind guitar, bass, and drums.”<sup>73</sup> Each song needed to resonate with every member of the group, and they adopted a democratic attitude toward song selection. The Flirtations would not sing songs that made individual members feel uncomfortable.

### **Flirt Dirt: The Early Years**

Gay singer-songwriter Elliot Pilshaw initially made a name for himself in the Los Angeles area after he came out in the early-1980s.<sup>74</sup> In 1982, Pilshaw released his first record, *Bending the Rules*, a collaboration with Lorin Sklamberg that included a mixture of originals and covers of songs by Donovan, Holly Near, and others. Shortly thereafter, Pilshaw relocated to Boston, where he met composer Tom Wilson Weinberg. Weinberg was then at work on a collection of songs that would become *Ten Percent Revue* (1985), named after the estimated ten percent of the American population who self-identified as gay or lesbian. The work addresses a number of LGBT issues, including the impact of HIV/AIDS on the queer community.

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<sup>71</sup> Interview with the author, 23 September 2012.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid.

<sup>73</sup> Jon Arterton, Interview with the author, Charlottesville, VA, digital copy, 5 April 2013.

<sup>74</sup> See <http://www.queermusicheritage.us/jul2008s.html>

Pilshaw auditioned and won a role in the *Revue*, and during the national tour, he befriended fellow cast member, Jon Arterton. A 1963 alum of The University of North Carolina's music program, Arterton had a degree in vocal performance and completed a Master's in choral conducting at The New England Conservatory in 1969. In a 2013 interview, he told me that he caught the "theater bug" after graduate school and finished a degree in acting at Smith College in 1975.<sup>75</sup> He moved to New York in 1976 and worked as a singer/actor in a number of theatrical productions and musicals, including one night on Broadway in *The Utter Glory of Morrissey Hall* (1979). He became active in queer music after coming out in 1982 at age 36.

After *Ten Percent Revue* closed, Pilshaw and Arterton returned to Brooklyn. Over coffee one morning in 1987, they came up with the idea to "start some kind of gay men's political singing group that would go sing at ACT UP rallies and gay pride events and other types of political rallies and things to just kind of lend support and inspiration."<sup>76</sup> An a cappella format was attractive for several reasons. First, Arterton had been in a cappella groups in college and loved the musical and communal experience of singing with other men. As a trained singer and arranger, he could also create original arrangements for the group. Second, both Arterton and Pilshaw were inspired by the power of vocal groups like Sweet Honey in the Rock. Finally, the group would be easily portable because it would require minimal equipment and would therefore also be less expensive. They placed an ad for singers in the *Native*, hung fliers around the West Village, and started auditions in the winter of 1987-1988.

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<sup>75</sup> Jon Arterton, interview with the author, 5 April 2013.

<sup>76</sup> Elliot Pilshaw, interview with JD Doyle "Queer Music Heritage," on KPFT July 2008. <http://www.queermusicheritage.us/jul2008s.html> Accessed 26 November 2012.



Figure 6.7 Newspaper article about *Ten Percent Revue*  
 NYC LGBT Community Center Archive  
 Jon Arterton far left; Elliot Pilshaw far right.

When Richard Dworkin spotted the ad in the New York LGBT Center, he thought that an all-gay a cappella group would be the ideal musical environment for his boyfriend now that Lowlife had disbanded. He encouraged Callen to go to the audition. Callen had flirted with an a cappella format in Mike & the Headsets, a short-lived queer group he formed in the early-1980s with his friends Bobby Butler and Joel Jason, and he had been a member of New York City's Gay Men's Chorus.<sup>77</sup> After some consideration, Callen—the consummate diva—decided to audition. He arrived at the audition and proclaimed, “I don’t need to audition! Here’s my CD.” He presented Arterton and Pilshaw with a copy of *Purple Heart*, and the three men chatted for a while. To their surprise, Callen and

<sup>77</sup> Mike & the Headsets performed in Central Park during a gay pride event in the early 1980s. Richard Dworkin has some footage of this event and a rehearsal tape from around 1981.

Arterton discovered that they had both been arrested at the Second Annual Gay and Lesbian March on Washington on 11 October 1987.<sup>78</sup> Tenor Aurelio Font, who knew Callen from the New York City Gay Men’s Chorus, also joined the group along with Cal Grogan and T. J. Meyers.

Billing themselves as “the world’s first openly-gay, politically-correct doo-wop singing a cappella group,”<sup>79</sup> the boys in the band began to rehearse. They “knew right away that [the] aim was to be political and have that edge to what [they] were doing.”<sup>80</sup> So, their first performances were at AIDS demonstrations in New York City. Arterton recalled that at one such performance at Columbia University. As the group started to sing, some protesters responded with angry cries: “people are dying! STOP SINGING!”



Figure 6.8, The Flirtations, original sextet  
Cal Grogan, Elliot Pilshaw, Jon Arterton, Michael Callen,  
T. J. Myers, Aurelio Font

<sup>78</sup> Arterton, interview with the author, 5 April 2013.

<sup>79</sup> The Flirtations used this phrase to describe their particular mix of music and politics on stage, in publicity materials, and in the press.

<sup>80</sup> Arterton (2013).

Precious little recorded footage of the original sextet exists. However, Richard Dworkin has assembled a digital archive of the materials he collected during the group's first few months together. One of the earliest videos comes from an ACT UP rally in the winter of 1987.<sup>81</sup> Huddled around microphones, the six flirtations deliver an energetic rendition of The Angels' 1963 girl-group classic, "My Boyfriend's Back."

"My Boyfriend's Back" balances what Joshua Duchan (2007) calls *emulation* (the desire to sound like a specific recording) and *originality*.<sup>82</sup> A cappella groups emulate certain aspects of existing recordings of popular songs in order to create an arrangement that resembles a famous or well-known performance. Through what Duchan calls transcribing, the arranger listens carefully to an original recording and writes down exactly what is heard using musical notation. Then, through a process he calls "transanging," arrangers translate instrumental parts into vocal sounds without making substantial changes in melodic, harmonic, stylistic aspects of the original. The Flirts emulate certain aspects of the original recording of "My Boyfriend's Back." Although they lower the key from The Angels' original E-flat major to D-major, they maintain the original lyrics, melodic structure, spoken introduction, call-and-response between soloists and background singers, and backbeat handclaps. Arterton transangs the original recording's brass section into vocal parts sung by Grogan and Callen.

However, they also make the song their own in several ways. Duchan calls this process "true arranging." First, they are six openly gay men performing a girl group song. By reversing the gender of the singers and maintaining the titular reference to *boyfriend*,

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<sup>81</sup> This video can be seen on Dworkin's YouTube channel: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1xE5I5hSSWM> accessed 12 December 2013.

<sup>82</sup> Joshua S. Duchan, "Collegiate A Cappella: Emulation and Originality," *American Music* 25/4 (2007): 477-506.

The Flirts transform the song into a tale of gay romance in which the struggle to overcome gossip, the pressure to cheat on your lover, and other negative behaviors take on a new meaning for gay listeners in the age of AIDS. Second, they split the lead vocal between two singers (Meyers and Font), and their playfully competitive interactions mimic a feud between two men over the same lover. Cal Grogan and Elliot Pilshaw provide the foundational bass parts, and Callen's piercing falsetto soars above the texture. Jon Arterton's bari-tenor voice weaves in and out of the texture to complete the harmonies. Third, they make specific musical changes to create an original performance. The original recording ends with a long fade out, but for a live performance, this kind of ending is difficult to replicate. The Flirts ends with a bell chord, in this instance a ringing D M7.<sup>83</sup> Callen adds an idiomatic falsetto melisma using this pattern of scale degrees  $\hat{5} - \hat{5} - \hat{3} - \hat{2} - \hat{3}$ .

Within the year, two members of the original lineup left the group. Vocally, the group felt that Grogan was weak enough to warrant asking him to quit, and Pilshaw decided to stay in New York rather than tour because he had a new boyfriend and job. Later, he asked if could return to the group, but his request was denied. Arterton admitted that these departures created "some ill will." Another issue was the vocal balance. Pilshaw, Arterton, and Grogan were all baritones, and although they could sing in a lower register, their voices lacked the depth of a true bass. Consequently, the group sought a real bass to complete their sound.

Indiana native Cliff Townsend had been active as a church singer and participated in college ensembles while a student at Indiana University. In New York, he made a

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<sup>83</sup> This term comes from Gage Averill's *Four Parts, No Waiting*. A bell chord is an a common barbershop arranging technique in which "four voices enter in succession to create a chord, each voice ringing in like a bell." (205)

living as a singer in a variety of different groups and styles. As an African American, he made the group more racially diverse, and Arterton commented that he “reminded [the group] that not everyone is a politically savvy, upscale New Yorker.”<sup>84</sup> For instance, sensitivity to lyric content and song choice “was something that didn’t matter so much” to Townsend, “and his perspective kept things balanced and real.”<sup>85</sup> Townsend sang lead on some songs, including his own sex positive arrangement of “Johnny Angel,” in which he altered the lines “I just sit and wait because I’d rather concentrate on Johnny Angel,” to “I just sit and wait because I’d rather masturbate on Johnny Angel.” Townsend also collaborated with Callen on a safe sex arrangement of “Boy from New York City.”

The Flirts were an instant hit with gay audiences. Their blend of nostalgia, campy wit, and vocal talent made them a regular presence at gay pride events, AIDS rallies, and on tour, they played to packed audiences in theaters around the country.<sup>86</sup> In 1989, they entered the studio to make their first record, an eponymous collection of standards, folk songs, and new compositions.

Sadly, founding member T J Meyers passed away in August of 1990. Meyers had been the group’s principle choreographer, designed their trademark logo, and put together costumes and other visual elements of their stage show. Like many gay men during this period, Meyers refused to be tested for HIV. As Dworkin recalls, Meyers fell ill and died in a relatively short time.<sup>87</sup> His death was a difficult blow to the musical family.

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<sup>84</sup> Interview with the author, 5 April 2013.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid.

<sup>86</sup> Touring schedules from 1989 to 1991 are available in the Callen archive at the New York City LGB Community Center. These documents indicate that the Flirts toured several months out of the year in venues on both coasts and in Canada.

<sup>87</sup> Interview with the Author, 12 September 2012.

With a new album to promote, the group had to find a replacement while mourning the loss of their dear friend. Georgia native Tenor Jimmy Rutland auditioned and became the newest member of the group in 1990. Rutland was ideal for a gay a cappella group in many ways. He was, according to Dworkin, “young, cute, had a good voice, and worked well within the group’s dynamic.”<sup>88</sup> He quickly became like a younger brother to the other Flirtations, who supported and nurtured him, as he had to perform and promote an album on which he did not actually sing.

In 1991, the group performed at The Vancouver East Cultural Centre, and this concert was recorded for their second album, *The Flirtations: Live Out on the Road*. Arterton co-produced the record with Steve Rathe, and released it on their own Flirts Records label in 1992. The album consists of a number of songs from *The Flirtations* as well as other doo-wop, barbershop, folk, rock, and pop songs. As a live recording, this album captured not only their exceptional singing but also their hilarious stage banter. For example, after they sing “Mister Sandman,” Callen expressed the confusion he experienced in the Cultural Centre’s men’s room.

I visited the restroom over here. It’s not what you think. I’m standing at the urinal, and there’s a plaque. And it says, “This facility is dedicated to the memory of someone...” Is that a Canadian custom? I would *love* to have a tearoom named after me! The Michael Callen Memorial Tearoom: Do This in Remembrance of Me.<sup>89</sup>

The audience responds with hysterical laughter, and Aurelio Font lovingly adds, “You’re so tacky!” Similarly, after they sing “Mister Sandman,” the group asks “self-identified straight people” in the audience to raise their hands. Font assures straight people that the group tries to embrace diversity in all its forms, including “the homosexually

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<sup>88</sup> Interview with the author, 24 September 2013.

<sup>89</sup> Michael Callen, audience banter on *The Flirtations: Live Out on the Road* (1992).

challenged,” cleverly inverting the politically correct jargon of the time. With mock surprise, Arterton adds, “Isn’t it amazing how they blend in with everyone else?” And once again, the audience responds with applause and laughter.

They also queered songs by changing the lyrics to reflect a particular political topic like AIDS. At the 1991 New York City Gay Pride celebration, they transformed The Ad Libs “The Boy from New York City” (1965) into a safe sex anthem.<sup>90</sup> This arrangement of “Boy from New York City,” like “My Boyfriend’s Back,” relies on the balance of emulation and originality. In the original 1965 recording, singer Mary Ann Thomas describes a “kinda tall...really fine” boy who she dreams will eventually sweep her off her feet. As she raves about her potential suitors attributes and outlines her plan to win his affections, the Ad Libs outline a 12-bar blues progression in G-flat using doo-wop vocables over a band that consists of drums, bass, guitar, and horns. The song reached Number 8 on the *Billboard Hot 100* that year and has since become part of the golden oldies canon of classic rock-and-roll and doo-wop. In 1981, doo-wop group The Manhattan Transfer achieved their first Top 10 single with a remake of the song on their album *Mecca for Moderns*.

The Flirts recast this iconic tune into a campy safe sex message using new lyrics by Michael Callen and an original vocal arrangement by Cliff Townsend.<sup>91</sup> Callen sings the lead in his soaring soprano while Cliff Townsend’s bass voice mimics the plucked strings of an upright bass and the other Flirts sing, “Ooh wah ooh wah come on, kitty. Tell us about the boy from New York City” in three-part harmony. In his arrangement,

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<sup>90</sup> Footage of this performance is available on Richard Dworkin’s (aka Bettebyte) YouTube channel.

<sup>91</sup> A photocopy of the commercially printed score used as the basis of their arrangement can be found among the Michael Callen papers at NYC’s LGBT Community Center Archive alongside numerous original arrangements of other tunes done by members of The Flirts. Callen’s lyrics appear in the Appendix.

Townsend utilizes traditional doo-wop elements including vocables, finger snaps, bass interjections on keywords like “why” and “yeah,” and vocal slides.

New lyrics tell the story of Callen and Dworkin’s relationship and how they made safe sex part of their lives. Callen’s lists all the excellent qualities of “The Boy From New York City.”<sup>92</sup> Not only is he “cute in his birthday suit,” sweet, and funny, but he also practices safe sex. “Every time he puts that condom on,” Callen sings, “he makes me feel so fi-i-i-i-ine.” As the song concludes, Callen tells the audience, “I really hate safe sex, but you *have* to do it!” Their safe sex jingle that ends with a brief interpolation of the opening motive of Kander and Ebb’s “New York, New York.” Callen sings, “Start spreading the news.” The group answers with a barbershop style “pyramid” Bb<sup>Maj 7</sup> ringing chord on the words “safe sex,” and a collective shout, “do it!”<sup>93</sup>

This example illustrates The Flirtations in what might be considered a high camp mode, and indeed, humor was an important tool in their political arsenal. Humor brought their audiences together and provided a therapeutic laugh at the realities of homophobia, sexism, racism, and AIDS phobia. However, the group also performed more “serious” material. Fred Small’s “Everything Possible” and Labi Siffre’s “Something Inside So Strong” closed almost every live show, providing what Arterton called a “one-two political punch.”<sup>94</sup>

Singer-songwriter Fred Small released his first album, *Love’s Gonna Carry Us*, in 1981. In 1981, he released *No Limit*, which contained “Everything Possible,” a lullaby

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<sup>92</sup> The Flirts made their personal lives part of the public personae. The liner notes to their second album, *The Flirtations Live: Out on the Road* (1992) contain cheeky personal information about each of the singers and the motivations for particular song choices. At their 1991 performance for NYC Gay Pride, Callen identifies Dworkin as the “boy from New York,” even though he’s actually from Chicago. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DO7lnX9ih9U> Accessed 26 November 2012.

<sup>93</sup> Averill defines a pyramid as “an arranging technique that builds on a low pitch, adding higher voices until a four-part chord is achieved.” See *Four Parts, No Waiting* p. 161 and 208.

<sup>94</sup> Interview with the author, 5 April 2013.

that celebrates and embraces difference. The lyrics encourage children to “be anybody that you want to be” and to “love whomever you will.” The song explains that “some women love women, and some men love men; some have children, and some never do.” It encourages children to be strong in the face of bullying, taunting, or teasing because “the only measure of your words and your deeds will be the love you leave behind when you’re gone.”

Jon Arterton arranged “Everything Possible” for the group, and the austere part writing reveals both his training in choral music and the ensemble’s emphasis on text.<sup>95</sup> Written in an expansive AABCA form, the arrangement juxtaposes flowing contrapuntal sections with moments of homo- and monophonic texture, specific a cappella techniques, and subtle text painting. The arrangement begins with a long solo by Callen sung in a relaxed and flexible style with much rubato (0:00-0:37 on the recording). Callen abandons his use of rubato to prepare for the group’s entrance. The B section (1:41) begins with a bass solo for Townsend accompanied by block chord harmonies from the other voices. Shorter solos are distributed among the entire group throughout the piece, often harmonized using open “oo” and “ah” syllables.

The C section (2:33) is marked by a bold homophonic texture that gradually dissolves into a “blossom” effect.<sup>96</sup> Arterton utilizes a “blossom” effect three times in this arrangement. Each instance coincides with words that describe literal or figurative/emotional growth. The first “blossom” appears in mm. 39-40 “grow in your

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<sup>95</sup> My comments come from a comparison of Michael Callen’s personal copy of the arrangement, which can be found in the NYC LGBT Community Center Archive, and the recorded version from *The Flirtations* (1990). According to Arterton’s online autobiography, he has a master’s in Choral Conducting from The New England Conservatory of Music and has twice been a Tanglewood Vocal Fellow at the Berkshire Music Festival.

<sup>96</sup> Gage Averill (2010), “A blossom in an arranging technique by which four voices begin in unison and expand to a four-part chord in contrary motion,” p. 205.

own space in time” and 55-56, “they will give their best to you.” Beginning with the anacrusis to measure 45 (“you can dream all day, never reaching the end” 2:17 on the recording), Arterton staggers entrances to reflect the “dreamy” sentiment of the lyrics. The final A section (3:00) begins in quiet unison then gradually reintroduces textures encountered earlier in the arrangement before ending with a brief coda. The piece ends with a brief but poignant solo by Meyers on the words “Oh the love you leave behind when you’re gone,” (4:02). The other Flirts respond with hushed chromatic harmonies that gently fall to the tonic chord. Meyers sings a sweetly dissonant major second above the G harmony whose piquant sound perhaps signifies the cherished memory of departed loved ones.

The image shows a musical score for five voices: Soprano, Alto, Tenor, Baritone, and Bass. The score is in 4/4 time with a key signature of one sharp (F#). The Soprano part begins with a whole rest followed by a half note G4, a quarter note A4, and a quarter note B4. The Alto part begins with a whole rest followed by a quarter note G4, a quarter note A4, a quarter note B4, a quarter note C5, a quarter note B4, a quarter note A4, and a half note G4. The Tenor part begins with a quarter note G4, a quarter note A4, a quarter note B4, and a whole rest. The Baritone part begins with a whole rest followed by a half note G3, a quarter note A3, a quarter note B3, and a quarter note C4. The Bass part begins with a quarter note G3, a quarter note A3, a quarter note B3, and a quarter note C4. The Alto part features two triplets: one over the notes G4, A4, B4 and another over the notes C5, B4, A4.

Figure 6.9, “Everything Possible” blossom figure mm. 39-40  
(From Callen’s personal rehearsal copy of Arterton’s arrangement)

The image displays a musical score for the vocal parts of the song "Everything" during the "blossom" section, measures 67-68. The score is arranged in five staves, labeled S (Soprano), A (Alto), T (Tenor), B (Bass), and B (Bass). The key signature is one sharp (F#), and the time signature is 4/4. The Soprano part (S) begins with a quarter note G4, followed by quarter notes A4, B4, and C5, then a quarter note B4, and a quarter note A4, ending with a quarter rest. The Alto part (A) begins with a quarter note G3, followed by quarter notes A3, B3, and C4, then a quarter note B3, and a quarter note A3, ending with a quarter rest. The Tenor part (T) begins with a quarter note G3, followed by quarter notes A3, B3, and C4, then a quarter note B3, and a quarter note A3, ending with a quarter rest. The Bass part (B) begins with a quarter note G2, followed by quarter notes A2, B2, and C3, then a quarter note B2, and a quarter note A2, ending with a quarter rest. The second Bass part (B) begins with a quarter note G2, followed by quarter notes A2, B2, and C3, then a quarter note B2, and a quarter note A2, ending with a quarter rest. The score is written in a standard musical notation style with a treble clef for the vocal parts and a bass clef for the bass line.

Figure 6.10, "Everything" blossom mm. 67-68.  
(From Callen's personal rehearsal copy of Arterton's arrangement)

The image shows a musical score for the song "Everything Possible" from measures 72 to the end. It consists of five staves: Soprano (S), Alto (A), Tenor (T), and two Basses (B). The key signature is one sharp (F#) and the time signature is 4/4. The Soprano part begins with a whole rest, followed by a quarter note G4, a quarter note A4, a quarter note B4, and a quarter note C5 with a fermata. The Alto part begins with a whole rest, followed by a quarter note G4, a quarter note A4, a quarter note B4, and a quarter note C5 with a fermata. The Tenor part begins with a whole rest, followed by a quarter note G4, a quarter note A4, a quarter note B4, and a quarter note C5 with a fermata. The first Bass part begins with a whole rest, followed by a quarter note G4, a quarter note A4, a quarter note B4, and a quarter note C5 with a fermata. The second Bass part begins with a whole rest, followed by a quarter note G4, a quarter note A4, a quarter note B4, and a quarter note C5 with a fermata.

Figure 6.11 “Everything Possible,” mm. 72-end.  
(From Callen’s personal rehearsal copy of Arterton’s arrangement)

The significance of “Everything Possible” to The Flirts and their audiences is perhaps best illustrated by the fact that they closed almost all of their live shows with the song, and they recorded it on all three of their albums. On their second album, *Live Out on the Road*, Callen introduces the song by saying, “We’re going to sing a lullaby. Try to imagine how different you might be and how different the world might be if more parents would sing lullabies like this to their children.”

“Something Inside So Strong” was written by British singer/songwriter Labi Siffre in response to South African apartheid in 1987. The lyrics use images of prisons, barriers, walls, and fences as metaphors for the experiences of injustice and oppression and also as literal references to the barriers that divided South Africa into black and

white. In the chorus, the singer reminds their oppressor that there's "something inside so strong. I know that I can make it though you're doing me wrong. You thought that my pride was gone, but there's something inside so strong." Although written in response to racial conditions in South Africa, the song soon became an anthem for oppressed people around the world. Artists as diverse as Kenny Rogers (1989) and Odetta (2008) have covered the song, and it has been used in commercials, television programs, and films.

The song perfectly articulated the political experiences of gay men and lesbians in the US who, before AIDS, were subject to discriminatory laws and medical practices as well as moral, ethical, and religious prejudice. Its message of inner strength in the face of crushing social pressures and restraints resonated with communities who had to go through the often-painful process of coming out into a homophobic and hostile world. Arterton's arrangement transforms the song into an affirmation of LGBTQ existence and other oppressed groups. It quickly became an audience favorite. In performance videos and on live recordings, audiences clap and sing along during the triumphant final choruses. Like "Everything Possible," this song appeared on every Flirtations album and was a staple of their live concerts.

Another feature of their public appearances, particularly when they sang on university campuses, was to meet with LGBT groups for a frank discussion about sex, sexuality, AIDS, and politics.<sup>97</sup> These discussion groups began with affirmative conversations about coming out experiences. One such conversation was filmed at The University of Delaware, and the group of men includes The Flirtations and a number of university students who speak candidly about coming out, depression, suicide attempts,

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<sup>97</sup> Jon Arterton, interview with the author 5 April 2013. Dworkin and I also discussed this in September 2012.

and the struggle to assert a gay identity in the face of societal pressures to play it straight.<sup>98</sup> In my conversations with both Jon Arterton and Aurelio Font, these meetings stood out as important parts of their political activism. After the formal discussion, the students and the group would often go out to dinner, and Arterton recalled that Callen loved to scandalize undergraduates by talking about his sexual exploits.

However, these conversations went beyond hilarious stories about the heyday of gay life before AIDS. In meeting with young people, The Flirtations passed on the invisible history of queer America. The death of TJ Meyers and Callen's own struggles with AIDS represented a larger historical problem for gay men. While the generation of gay men who migrated to urban areas in the 1970s often made contact with older men who passed down queer history and culture, AIDS literally wiped out those same men who might pass this information to the next generation. By taking the time to meet, greet, and talk with young gay people, The Flirtations hoped to provide links to the gay past for young people.

### **Farewell to Smarm**

By the end of 1991, Callen's health was in decline, and his illness had taken a toll on the group. As KS lesions spread throughout both of his lungs and his legs, singing, activism, and travel became increasingly difficult. Fatigue and weakness plagued him to such a degree that he announced his official retirement from AIDS activism in a speech entitled "Farewell to Smarm."<sup>99</sup>

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<sup>98</sup> Erik Lewis filmed this discussion as part of a documentary about The Flirtations. The project was never finished, but Richard Dworkin provided me with rough copies of the footage.

<sup>99</sup> Callen, "Farewell to Smarm" (1991), reprinted in Escoffier (1993).

Documentary footage of *The Flirtations* on tour shows Callen in a hotel room unpacking an entire suitcase of medical supplies as he candidly describes “life on the road in the age of AIDS.”<sup>100</sup> As he prepares to give himself an infusion, Callen surveys his barrage of drugs and says, “This is such a part of my life. You lose sight of the fact that most people are not doing this. To most people this is outrageous, and it is...but it is what I have to do to stay alive.” Cameras were rolling in the dressing room after a concert in Indiana. Callen’s parents came to the show and spoke with him backstage. He informs them of his most recent medical update. X-rays showed masses in his lungs, which doctors suspected were KS. “They aren’t fooling me,” he jokes as his mother intently listens and his father looks on. For Callen, the most effective strategy to deal with AIDS was “pretending that I don’t have it. I sometimes feel that the people closest to me have been duped by the success of my strategy.”<sup>101</sup>

The other members of the group rallied to support him. Jimmy Rutland often helped carry Callen’s bags, and Jon Arterton helped iron and prep Callen’s clothes, costumes, and props for each performance. Increasingly, he needed time off from touring but worried that his absences would create undue hardship on the group or convince them that he was not a necessary or vital member of the group. However, as his health declined, *The Flirtations*, who formed a corporation to handle their financial lives, agreed that he remain on salary with the group in spite of a dramatic decrease in the number of performances. For many of these shows, the group appeared as a quartet, and they occasionally brought in guest singers like Tom McKinley and lesbian icon Suede.<sup>102</sup>

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<sup>100</sup> These home videos were provided to me from the personal archive of Richard Dworkin. Callen was interviewed in a hotel room before a performance at The Madame Walker Theatre in Indianapolis.

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>102</sup> Jon Arterton, interview with the author 5 April 2013.

However, his health problems and other personality conflicts among the group began to exert pressure on The Flirtations.

They met in Provincetown, MA for group therapy sessions in order to process their relationships and the impact of Callen's impending death. After four or five sessions, they met with a videographer to document their progress.<sup>103</sup> In the video, Arterton admits that they needed a supportive environment to say "those dark and dirty things that we feel about each other" and then discuss the consequences of those emotions. In the process, they rediscovered the love and admiration they have for one another. Rutland admits that there are "major issues" that they have yet to process and his personal unwillingness to "acknowledge that Michael is not going to be with us as much as he used to." For Rutland, the loss of Callen's nurturing influence and personality was a challenge to the group's future, and he added, "I'm pissed off that this is happening."<sup>104</sup> Townsend grew confrontational as the conversation continues. "We agreed to give [Callen] the permission to stay home and rest, but the first chance he had to travel," Callen joined the group. "What do you want," he asked, "to stay at home or travel with us?" He also expressed his belief that Callen needed the group and derived a great deal of strength from the group just as they took strength from his presence. Arterton summarized their feelings about Callen's impending death when he added that, "the thought of going on without Michael is terrifying to all of us."<sup>105</sup>

In 1992, Callen said goodbye to New York City and relocated to Los Angeles. Soon thereafter, he officially retired from The Flirtations. In a "family" letter dated 11 January 1993, he lamented that, "the hardest thing for me has been dealing with the

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<sup>103</sup> Richard Dworkin provided a personal copy of this video.

<sup>104</sup> Ibid.

<sup>105</sup> Ibid.

possibility that my touring days are over. No, I should say PROBABILITY...I think the expectation should be that you'll be doing a lot of four part gigs."<sup>106</sup> With KS lesions covering three quarters of his lungs and new lesions forming on his heart, Callen had to undergo chemotherapy every two weeks.<sup>107</sup> However, he described his reaction to the likelihood of his death with characteristic humor. "I'd rather my heart burst," he wrote, "than that I drown slowly in my own blood. See? I can put a good spin on anything!"<sup>108</sup> He also penned a heartfelt goodbye to his fans, thanking them for their love and support.

That April, The Flirtations were asked to perform at the historic Gay and Lesbian March on Washington, a concert that they saw as a fitting tribute to this particular stretch of the group's career and a testament to Callen's legacy. As a finale, he also performed a moving rendition of "Love Don't Need a Reason" which was broadcast on CNN and other networks that covered the march.

Without Callen's motherly influence, tensions grew among the members of this queer musical family, and by the time Michael Callen died in 1993, the group was in crisis. Infighting eventually led Font and Townsend to leave the group, and as noted above, Arterton, Rutland, and Suede performed as a trio until 1996. Shortly thereafter, they disbanded. In the years since the breakup of The Flirtations, each of the members has continued his life in music. Arterton now lives in Provincetown, MA where he conducts two choirs and performs with his husband, James Mack. In 2011, they released an album, *Legally Married and the Sky Didn't Fall*. Aurelio Font now lives in San Francisco with his partner, and Cliff Townsend still makes his living as a singer based in

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<sup>106</sup> Michael Callen, letter to The Flirtations, Los Angeles, 11 January 1993. Original typed copy, NYC LGBT Community Center, New York.

<sup>107</sup> Ibid.

<sup>108</sup> Ibid.

New York City. Jimmy Rutland returned to Columbus, GA and is now the program and education director at RiverCenter.<sup>109</sup>

### **One More Lullaby<sup>110</sup>**

For Callen, retirement was never going to be a period of rest and convalescence. Keenly aware that he was “running out of gas,” he set to work on a final project, a two-disc recording of many of the songs he wrote over the course of his life and a number of beloved songs by his friends and favorite artists including John Bucchino, Cris Williamson, and Sweet Honey and the Rock.<sup>111</sup> As with *Purple Heart*, the project was essentially a self-funded DIY record. Callen wrote to friends, fans, and family members for money to fund recording sessions at New York’s Sear Sound and Looking Glass Studios, Los Angeles’ Trax Recording, and San Francisco’s Hyde Street Studios.<sup>112</sup> In a flurry of creativity between January and September of 1993, he recorded dozens of vocal tracks to which arrangements could be added later.

Friends and fellow musicians turned out in number for the project. Women’s music icons Holly Near and Cris Williamson and Callen’s songwriter partner Marsha Malamet contributed backing vocals on a number of songs, and John Bucchino and jazz pianist Fred Hersch provided accompaniment at the keyboard. Callen also struck musical gold when legendary backup singers Diana Grasselli, Arnold McCuller, and David

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<sup>109</sup> I reached out to Rutland but did not hear back from him. This information is current as of the fall of 2013, according to the RiverCenter website.

<sup>110</sup> This is the title of a song included on *Legacy* that was written by Marsha Malamet and Dennis Green.

<sup>111</sup> Michael Callen, letter to The Flirtations, Los Angeles, 11 January 1993. Original, NYC LGBT Community Center, NY.

<sup>112</sup> Copies of these letters and responses to many can be found in the NYC LGBT Community Center Archive.

Lasley joined the growing musical family. The Flirtations appear on the album's final track, and once again, Richard Dworkin took the helm as producer.

In many ways, *Legacy* continues the queer experiment Callen began on *Purple Heart*. The record celebrates and affirms gay life and is infused with humor, wit, and camp as well as sincere statements of political sensibilities, nostalgia, and affection. Callen named one disc "top" and "bottom" respectively, expanding the tradition he established on his debut album on which he used those names for the record's two sides. Each disc contains a mixture of originals and covers. Callen wrote eight of the "top" disc's fifteen songs and two songs out of the "bottom" thirteen. Generally, the two discs replicate the top and bottom moods of the two sides of *Purple Heart*. The bottom disc, which comes first in the collection, contains mostly slower ballads and contemplative songs like Bernice Johnson Reagan's Civil Rights anthem "They Are Falling All Around Me," Cris Williamson's beautiful "Mother, Mother," and John Bucchion's "Do Not Turn Away," alongside Callen's "Street of Dreams" and "The Healing Power of Love," which he co-wrote with Malamet. The top disc consists of up tempo songs such as Tom Judson's campy "Two Men Dance the Tango," Callen's reggae-influenced "Redefine the Family" and another AIDS protest song, "We've Had Enough," which originally appeared in the documentary film *Testing the Limits* (1987).

There were also a number of Callen's compositions from the *Legacy* sessions that did not make it onto the collection, but Richard Dworkin made copies of these available during my research. These include Callen's gospel-influenced "Name Names," the beautiful ballad "Till," the winsome "Street Singer," "Innocence Dying," and a jazzy torch song called "All Over."

While making this album was a labor of love for the singer/songwriter, the process also offered an occasion for miscommunication and hurt feelings between members of The Flirtations. In a letter from July 1993, Callen expresses his regret over a disastrous recording session in New York City in which emotions and tempers flared. The Flirtations left the session feeling under appreciated and accused Callen of purposely leaving them out of the project and denigrating their musical abilities. He explained,

I have always tried not to be Diana Ross, as in Diana Ross *and* the Supremes...So, as I thought about how to use my friends on the album, I decided from the outset that I didn't want to put a "Flirts cut" on MY album. Flirts cuts should go on Flirts albums. I thought I'd hit on an elegant compromise: "Sometimes Not Often Enough." [...] Like so many pop tunes, it expressed a profound truth bordering on cliché but movingly. So, it's definitely NOT a throw-away for me.<sup>113</sup>

Callen continued to praise the men of the group as musicians and heap upon them all the affection and love that he felt for them as friends and brothers.

At the same time, he also expressed his own conflicted and tender emotions about the possibility of a third Flirtations album. While the band could not decide if it was time to make new arrangements and book studio time, Callen put it plainly. "Hey, I'm dying! Do you want me represented on your third album or not? If you do, then let's make it happen." Sadly, The Flirtations did not record another record before Callen's death.

Although "Sometimes, Not Often Enough" is the final song on the album, I begin my discussion of *Legacy* with it because it encapsulates the spirit of the project. Felice Mancini, daughter of conductor and composer Henry Mancini, wrote the words. The short, sentimental text encourages listeners to "reflect upon the good things...those we love...people who mean so much" and to remember to tell your friends and family "just

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<sup>113</sup> Michael Callen, letter to The Flirtations, 6 July 1993.

how much [you] love them.” Clifford Townsend and Callen collaborated on the arrangement, which featured Joe Ruddick on piano, an aesthetic decision made by Callen in order to further distinguish the recording from a “Flirts” track. Surrounded by an ethereal halo of “oos” and “ahhs,” Callen sings tenderly in his falsetto voice. The tender song’s gossamer edges waft into silence as the track comes to a quiet close.

The “top” disc opens with another meditation on love, and indeed, love is the connecting theme throughout the entire disc. “A Love Worth Fighting For” was another collaboration between Callen and Marsha Malamet. The expansive ballad encourages values like friendship, faithfulness, and steadfastness as guarantees that love can change the world. Between these two songs, Callen sings of all sorts of love, from the necessity of redrawing the boundaries of a family (“Redefine the Family”), the lusty impulses of a late night rendezvous (“Better in the Moonlight”) to the fleeting intimacy between passing strangers (“6:30 Sunday Morning”). Even Callen’s activist songs “Now,” “We’ve Had Enough,” and “No, No” proceed from the love he felt for gay men and lesbians and people living with AIDS.<sup>114</sup> Throughout, there are moments of humor like Callen’s duet with Tom Judson on the latter’s “Two Men Dance the Tango,” and high camp in Callen’s virtuosic falsetto performance of Bernstein’s “Glitter and Be Gay” from Leonard Bernstein’s *Candide*.

By contrast, the “bottom” disc is more mournful. Many of its songs emphasize themes of loss and separation, and it is difficult not to interpret these songs as Callen’s existential meditation on his own impending death. There is also a marked spirituality in these performances. Callen publically identified as an atheist, but he often spoke of

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<sup>114</sup> “We’ve Had Enough” was composed for *Testing the Limits* (1988), a documentary film about AIDS activism.

singing in spiritual and mystical terms. His mother told documentarian Erick Lewis that she refused to believe that her son was actually an atheist and expressed her belief, based on private conversations with Callen over his entire life, that he felt pressured to disidentify with religion. However, she believed that her son privately retained some kind of spirituality.<sup>115</sup>

The “bottom” disc begins with Sweet Honey and the Rock’s “They Are Falling All Around Me,” a memorial to the loss of activists and leaders in the African American Civil Rights movement. Callen’s performance transforms the song into a moving commentary on the loss of friends, activists, and leaders in the AIDS activist movement, and as on the “top” disc, it ends with a song with a similar theme, Steve Sandburg’s “Sacred.” It also contains another Callen and Malamet collaboration, “The Healing Power of Love,” a song they wrote as an anthem to HIV/AIDS activism that was performed at numerous benefits, rallies, and conferences around the world.

Two of the most moving performances on the disc are covers of songs by other songwriters. Michael Callen’s cover of Cris Williamson’s “Mother, Mother” is a piano ballad that dramatizes a parent-child relationship through its lyrics and familiar musical tropes including an intimate ensemble of voice, piano, bass, quiet synth-string chords, and background vocals; descending lament lines in the bass and voice; and an earnest vocal style that insists that the singer is the speaker of the lyrics.

Originally released on Williamson’s *Country Blessed* (1989), an album of country and folk tunes by Williamson and Teresa Trull, “Mother, Mother” revels in the sort of earnestness characteristic of Women’s Music. Heart-wrenching vocal slides, contrasts

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<sup>115</sup> These interviews were part of a documentary project about The Flirtations that never materialized. Richard Dworkin provided me with copies of the interviews from his personal archive.

between throaty exasperation and full-voiced robustness, and other vocal affectations find support in Williamson's densely voiced piano accompaniment which makes use of many suspended and "slash" chords. The lyrics express intense yearning for an absent, possibly deceased, maternal figure.

Although the song is not about HIV/AIDS, Michael Callen translates it into a quasi-autobiographical story about a young gay man with AIDS. So powerful was Mike's public persona as an openly gay man with AIDS, his lover and widow Richard Dworkin told me in an interview in 2012, that Mike was always perceived as singing about himself and his own experiences.<sup>116</sup> Further, the intimate arrangement for small band and voice signals the singer-songwriter tradition that encompasses Williamson, Carole King, Elton John, and numerous others. This stylistic association accents the link between the singing subject, Michael Callen, and the biographical truth of the lyrics. As a highly public PWA in the 1980s and 1990s, Callen adds authenticity to this performance, though it may also metonymically stand in for the experiences of other PWAs who identify with his music. By 1993, Callen's body was gaunt and frail, and by his own account, his lungs were filled with KS lesions, making breathing and speaking, not to mention singing, difficult. Thus, Williamson's plaintive cries for her mother to return (from the dead or to the scene of the singer's childhood), "come into my room at night, and hold me in your arms," become the literal cries of a young queer man dying of AIDS.

John Bucchino's "Do Not Turn Away" was written in response to an experience his mother had at an AIDS support group.<sup>117</sup> In a 2009 interview with JD Doyle, Bucchino explained

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<sup>116</sup> Richard Dworkin, interview with the author 28 February 2012.

<sup>117</sup> My thanks to John Bucchino for providing me with a copy of the score for "Do Not Turn Away."

Well, my brother was dying [of AIDS]...and my mom had gone to an AIDS support group with his partner, and after this meeting she called me in tears. She said there was this beautiful eighteen year old boy who got up and told the group that when he came out to his parents and told them that he had AIDS, they kicked him out of the house and wouldn't have anything to do with them. It just broke her heart; she couldn't imagine how parents could do that to a child. And that's what prompted me to write the song.<sup>118</sup>

Bucchino, who gained initial critical acclaim as on the New York Cabaret circuit, has written hundreds of songs, done arrangements for numerous albums, written a musical, and been a long-time collaborator with Holly Near. He described Callen as “one of the realest people I ever met...an extraordinary human being, really powerful, really charismatic, and passionate and committed to gay rights and AIDS education...God, what an extraordinary fellow.”<sup>119</sup>

The lyrics to “Do Not Turn Away” beseech parents who might turn their backs on queer children or family members with AIDS to instead offer love and support. “Death is looming; hope is frail,” the lyrics suggest, “Do not turn away.” Bucchino and Callen recorded a gorgeous and intimate performance of the piece with just piano and Callen's vocals.

Given Callen's own difficult relationship with his parents, it is difficult to avoid an interpretation of these songs that relies on this knowledge. Indeed, all of the songs on *Legacy* had personal significance to Callen. Together with “Redefine the Family,” these two examples provide a succinct statement of Callen's beliefs about the importance of

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<sup>118</sup> John Bucchino and JD Doyle, “An Interview with John Bucchino,” <http://www.queermusicheritage.us/apr2009s.html> Accessed 18 December 2013.

<sup>119</sup> Ibid.

families (of choice and biologically determined) to queer people and his conviction that the love that binds individuals is, indeed, a healing power.

### **Glitter, and Be Gay**

Leonard Bernstein's "Glitter and Be Gay" ranks among the most technically difficult and theatrically demanding coloratura arias in the Western tradition. Cunegonde sings it in the composer's 1956 English-language operetta based on Voltaire's *Candide*. In the original 1956 production, Cunegonde (Barbara Cook) sings "Glitter and Be Gay" in Act I/scene 3. Cunegonde has lost Candide, her true love, and has been brought to the house of a French Marquis and a Sultan who host a party to introduce her to Paris society as their "niece...as one calls such women this year."<sup>120</sup> In truth, she is their *demimondaine*.<sup>121</sup> As she bejewels herself to attend the soiree, Cunegonde cries. "My heart is broken, and yet I am forced to glitter, forced to be gay." The original stage directions indicated, "when Cunegonde finishes she is so covered with jewels, she can hardly be seen. The Old Lady enters...and immediately begins to rip off the jewels," telling Cunegonde that "only married women can afford to look like whores."

"Glitter and Be Gay" alternates between two moods. The first, a slow minor waltz, features a chromatic motive that Knapp (2006) describes as a "melodramatic

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<sup>120</sup> The history of *Candide* is complex. Lillian Hellman's original libretto was highly satirical and ultimately abandoned in later productions. Hellman refused permission for her libretto to be used in subsequent revivals of *Candide*. Hugh Wheeler wrote a new book for the show in the early-1970s, and Bernstein contributed to a "final" version in 1989, working with Wheeler (who died that year) and John Mauceri, director of the Scottish Opera. The Royal National Theater in the UK created a final version in 1999, with a new book by John Caird. Raymond Knapp offers a synopsis of the show's history in *The American Musical and the Performance of Personal Identity* (Princeton U Press, 2006): 314-331

<sup>121</sup> In the 1973 version, she has been sold to Don Issachar, "a tremendously rich Jew in Lisbon" and is shared by Issachar and the Grand Inquisitor. "The Jew had her Mondays, Tuesdays, and the Sabbath, while the Grand Inquisitor took his pleasure for the rest of the week. There was a certain friction as to who possessed her on the night between Saturday and Sunday—but let that pass. They were both very generous to her and the natural ebullience of youth soon restored her equanimity."

shawmlike figure” that represents “Cunegonde’s misery within the harem atmosphere of the Sultan.”<sup>122</sup> The second “shifts to the major mode [and quicker tempo] for a fairly typical ‘laughing song.’”<sup>123</sup> Vocally, Cunegonde “seems continually to try to pull away from the opening C-minor melodic phrase, only to be pulled back repeatedly, as one who cannot escape her unfortunate situation.”<sup>124</sup> Bernstein scores this tension between circumstance and desire differently in the “laughing” section by “requiring the singer to pull apart into a close canon with the oboe after an initial unison presentation” of the melody.<sup>125</sup> For Knapp, the alternation between these dramatic moods occurs on a tonal level as well, not only in the contrast between parallel major and minor modes but also in the dramatic shift to flat-six in the second “laughing section.” This shift from I to bVI in measure 56 signifies the promise of Cunegonde’s “escape to a better place through its sudden transport to a fresh and exotic-sounding remote key.”<sup>126</sup> Cunegonde does escape (in both versions of the play) and reunites with Candide in the finale.

“Glitter and Be Gay” is a musical parody of the bombastic and ornate arias that were a staple of nineteenth-century opera. Thematically, it resembles to Marguerite’s aria, “Ah! Je ris de me voir,” the “Jewel Song” from Gounod’s *Faust* (1859). In Act 3, Marguerite finds a box of jewels on her doorstep. She sings the aria as she adorns herself with the gems and laughs at the transformation they engender. “Marguerite, est-ce toi?...Non! Ce n’est plus toi...c’est la fille dun roi.” [Marguerite, is that you? No, it is not you. It is the daughter of a king.]

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<sup>122</sup> Knapp (2006), 326.

<sup>123</sup> Ibid, 326.

<sup>124</sup> Ibid, 326.

<sup>125</sup> Ibid.

<sup>126</sup> Ibid.

The aria also bears some similarities to Violetta's "Sempre Libera" from Verdi's *La Traviata* (1853). Like Cunegonde, Violetta is a Paris courtesan, though she seems to have chosen this path unlike the diva of Bernstein's heroine. In Act 1, Alfredo, who fell in love with Violetta while she was bedridden with consumption, courts her. Their amorous dramas propel the drama forward. In her famous aria, Violetta contemplates the contrast between her life of frivolity and the possibility of love with Alfredo. However, she determines to live for the pursuit of pleasure in the aria "Sempre Libera." Bernstein may have also derived the tonal plan of "Glitter and Be Gay" from the Verdi's aria. Both begin in C-major and juxtapose that key with Ab-major. Melodically, both contain a similar "laughing" motive, which Bernstein seems to have borrowed directly from Verdi, though he transposed it from 6/8 to 4/4.

*La Traviata* is an opera about love and disease. Specifically, it is an opera about tuberculosis, or consumption as it was called in the nineteenth century. Arthur Groos (1995) noted "consumption appears to have reached epidemic proportions with the industrial revolution and the rapid urbanization of Europe in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries."<sup>127</sup> Characterized by "a rapid pulse, hot skin, sweating at night, and especially paleness with red cheeks" as well as "shortness of breath or flying pains in the chest, shoulders, and back [and] coughing," consumption became something of an obsession for artists, writers, and other creative types in large part because of a peculiar characteristic of the last phase of the disease. As Groos explains, this "commonly observed false hope of recovery [was] called *spes phtisica*" in which the patient experience a near total "absence...of all sense of the nature and gravity of the malady

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<sup>127</sup> Arthur Groos, "T.B. Sheets: Love and Disease in *La Traviata*," *Cambridge Opera Journal* 7/3 (1995): 233-260.

from which they suffer and [a] singular buoyance of spirits [that renders] them hopeful of recovery up till even the very end.”<sup>128</sup>

Little was known about the actual cause and spread of consumption for much of the nineteenth century.<sup>129</sup> Consequently, discussions of consumption “devoted more attention to predisposing hereditary, environmental, and moral factors...than to the possibility of infection.”<sup>130</sup> Lifestyle factors also played a part in speculation about the spread of the disease because of “widespread suspicion that [it] could originate in an irregular or bohemian lifestyle, deviations from moral and physical health in which sex and alcohol figure prominently.”<sup>131</sup> Thus, a connection between consumption and morality was forged in the crucible of nineteenth century morality.

Of course, this was not unique to tuberculosis. As Gilman (1988) has shown, human beings display a remarkable and consistent tendency to blame diseases on faults or failing in moral character.<sup>132</sup> Leprosy, mental illness, and even cancer have been linked to morality in various eras. In the twentieth century, the development of antibiotic and other drugs offered a cure for most infectious diseases. The apparent eradication of VD in the middle of the century left a repertoire of moralistic representations without an object.

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<sup>128</sup> Groos (1995): 238, quoting an 1885 edition of *Encyclopedia Britannica*.

<sup>129</sup> In 1882, Robert Koch discovered the tubercle bacillus, the pathogen responsible for causing the illness. Koch is also notable for establishing Koch’s Postulates which formed the basis of the modern study of contagious diseases Koch’s Postulates state: 1. That the infectious organism must always be present in every case of the disease; 2. The organism must be isolated from a host containing the disease and grown in pure culture; 3. Samples of the organism taken from pure culture must cause the same disease in inoculated into a healthy, susceptible animal in the laboratory; 4. The organism must be isolated from the inoculated animal and must be identified as the same original organism first isolated from the originally diseased host. Koch’s postulates do not always hold for every infectious agent, and this is a cause for debate among those who believe that HIV does not cause AIDS. For more, see John Cohen, “Fulfilling Koch’s Postulates,” *Science* 266/9 (1994): 1647.

<sup>130</sup> Groos (1995), 239.

<sup>131</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>132</sup> Sander Gilman, *Disease and Representation* (Cornell U Press, 1988).

Then AIDS appeared among gay men, racial minorities, drug users, and the poor and the links between moral failure and disease were given new life.

This has musical repercussions for the operatic tradition that links “Sempre Libera” to “Glitter and Be Gay.” For Wayne Koestenbaum (1993), “the phobic logic that frames AIDS today and framed TB and syphilis yesterday locks Violetta in a jam. By living for pleasure, she commits suicide. Coloratura will kill her, but it thrills us.”<sup>133</sup> In Terrance McNally’s *The Lisbon Traviata*, two gay friends thrill over the sound of Maria Callas’ “Sempre Libera.” According to Román (1998), they “find refuge [from AIDS] in opera, either in the heroines of the plot or in the tragic lives of the women who sing them.”<sup>134</sup> However, the opera and the voice of the diva “undoes the gay men who identify with either” because “identification can lead only to alienation, marginalization.”<sup>135</sup>

I would argue, contra Román in his critique of McNally’s play, that Michael Callen’s performance of “Glitter and Be Gay” stages an alternative to the characterization of “contemporary gay identity as a tragic spectacle of love and loss.”<sup>136</sup> Callen’s transforms the song into a gay injunction and an articulation of a political and philosophical approach to gay life that refuses shame and stigma.

As in McNally’s play and many cultural artifacts of gay history, there are certainly camp elements of Callen’s performance that have very little to do with HIV/AIDS and more to do with a tradition of gay male performance and identification with divas of musical theater, opera, and popular music. In her “Notes on Camp,” Susan

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<sup>133</sup> Wayne Koestenbaum, *The Queen’s Throat: Opera, Homosexuality, and the Mystery of Desire* (Vintage Books, 1993): 205.

<sup>134</sup> David Román, *Acts of Intervention: Performance, Gay Culture, and AIDS* (U of Indiana Press, 1998): 93.

<sup>135</sup> Román (1998), 93.

<sup>136</sup> *Ibid.*, 95.

Sontag (1968) described camp “a vision of the world in terms of style...the love of the exaggerated, the ‘off,’ of things-being-what-they-are-not.”<sup>137</sup> Callen’s performance definitely conjures the specter of what it is not. First, the orchestra is not a “real” one. Its synthesized orchestral strings, oboe, and harpsichord sound more like the soundtrack to a cartoon adaptation or a karaoke track than a “serious” performance. The harpsichord, in particular, is not present in Bernstein’s score, and its clinking sound gives the arrangement both a hint of silliness and a sense of nostalgia. In some senses, the harpsichord is an antiquated instrument, primarily used in music through the end of the Baroque era. Its use gradually declined with the development of other keyboard instruments, including the modern piano. The harpsichord has also been used in a variety of more recent popular culture contexts to indicate, among other things, eeriness in the soundtracks of horror movies and pompousness in cartoons and satires. The instrument was even a fixture of some popular music of the 1960s. Judy Collins’ recording of Joni Mitchell’s “Both Sides Now” features a twinkling harpsichord line, and The Doors employ the instrument on many of their songs, including “Hello, I Love You.” The “old-fashioned, out-of-date, démodé” sound of the synth harpsichord on Callen’s “Glitter and Be Gay,” then, blurs the line between the supposed cultural high of art music and the lows of popular culture and delights in the space between them.<sup>138</sup>

Second, Callen is not Barbara Cook or any of the other women who have sung the aria. He is a male soprano with an extraordinary falsetto range, but he is still the “wrong” gender for this aria (although he did once lip sync it in full drag at Night of a Thousand

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<sup>137</sup> Susan Sontag, “Notes on Camp,” reprinted in Cleto (1999), 53-66. Sontag’s essay is highly problematic, not least for her assertion that camp is “depoliticized... or at least apolitical.” However, her description of camp as a delight in artifice and exaggeration remains relevant to the present discussion.

<sup>138</sup> Sontag “Camp,” see Note 31.

Gowns, an AIDS benefit in New York City).<sup>139</sup> This does not mean that all cross gender performances are automatically camp, but male falsetto voices have been associated with freakishness, androgyny, and homosexuality. They elicit anxieties about gender and the terrifying figure of the castrato. At the same time, high men's voices are also associated with sincerity, intimacy, romance, as evidenced by the sound of ballad singers like Smokey Robinson or any number of boy bands.<sup>140</sup>

However, in spite of these camp elements, the performance is remarkable and sincere. In its original key, "Glitter and Be Gay" contains a staggering number of high Cs, Dbs, and Ebs, and there are complicated running passages that require extreme vocal flexibility and a precise ear to execute effectively. At the same time, the song is a satire and demands that the singer use his/her body and facial expressions to get laughs out of the audience. Although Callen lowers the key a perfect fourth, perhaps to accommodate the limitations on his singing due to advanced pulmonary KS, he manages to make an extraordinarily difficult musical feat sound effortless and hit a soprano high Bb. "Glitter and Be Gay" illustrates Callen's sense of humor and also the unbridled joy he experienced in singing. As he said in a 1993 documentary, "the spirit descends when I sing. I could be sick with a fever and not know whether any sound is going to come out. But when the music starts, it just fills my body with passion and love, and I am able to reach down into what's left of my lungs and my heart and my soul and out it comes. And

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<sup>139</sup> Photographs of Callen at the event can be found in the liner notes to *Legacy*.

<sup>140</sup> The recent anthology *Oh Boy! Masculinities and Popular Music* (Routledge, 2007) contains a number of essays that relate certain types of male vocality with intimacy, gender/sexuality, and issues of the closet. See Shana Goldin-Perschbacher's "Not with You But of You: 'Unbearable Intimacy' and Jeff Buckley's Transgendered Vocality" and Mark Butler's "Some of Us Can Only Live in Songs of Love and Trouble: Voice, Gender/Gender, and Sexuality in the Music of Stephin Merritt."

as soon as I'm done singing, I sort of collapse. But I am singing more joyously than I have at any point in my life because the clock is really ticking for me."<sup>141</sup>

The aria's constantly shifting moods of the song also correspond to Callen's own different personae. By his own admission, he was often serious and could be abrasive in personal and political matters, yet he is remembered as much for his gaiety and a tendency to revel. However, Richard Dworkin points out that unlike Cunegonde, Callen's wardrobe was hardly "expensive as the devil" and he seldom drank. "There was nothing hip about him," Dworkin laughed, "He had no fashion sense whatsoever. He didn't really care about clothes. He didn't like drugs. He didn't like to go to nightclubs. He didn't like to dance. He didn't like to drink."<sup>142</sup>

Far from just a camp spectacle, Callen's performance assumes a poignant significance in the context of AIDS. As with his covers of Elton John's "Talkin' Old Soldiers" and "Goodbye," Williamson's "Mother, Mother," and Johnson's "They Are Falling All Around Me," it is difficult not to interpret the lyrics of "Glitter and Be Gay" against the facts of his own sexuality and illness. Near the end of his life, Callen was weary from ten years as a controversial and highly public figure in AIDS politics.<sup>143</sup> Throughout his career, he resisted being an AIDS poster boy, but this was inevitable in some respects. Thus, the song's injunction to "glitter and be gay, that's the part I play" becomes a commentary on Callen's on "bitter, bitter circumstance."

These bitter circumstances involved public attacks on Callen's character and even, as already mentioned, accusations that he was pretending to have AIDS in order to

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<sup>141</sup> Deb Wasser, *Legacy* (1993). Richard Dworkin provided me with a copy of Wasser's short documentary film about Callen's life, music, and activism.

<sup>142</sup> Interview with the author, 24 September 2012.

<sup>143</sup> Escoffier (1993).

advance his singing career.<sup>144</sup> In a sense, the spoken words in measure 84-99 could function as a response to these criticisms. “Can they [jewels, riches, or even Callen’s fame] compensate for my fallen state, purchased as they were at such an awful cost? Bracelets...lavalieres...Can they dry my tears? Can they blind my eyes to shame? Can the brightest brooch shield me from reproach? Can the purest diamond purify my name?” Callen himself would seem to offer a resounding “no.” Callen refused the shame with which homo- and AIDS-phobic society tried to shackle him. He lived openly, proudly, and defiantly as a gay man with AIDS from the moment of his diagnosis in 1982.

On more than one occasion, he noted that it was a peculiarly American phenomenon to have to become famous for being sick in order to get a compassionate response to AIDS.<sup>145</sup> After “nine brutal, soul-sucking years of AIDS activism” Callen attempted to sort out the meaning of his role in AIDS activism, “Did I do any good at all, or are the San Francisco critics, who, I’m told, regularly burn me in effigy, essentially correct in their charge that I’ve merely contributed to the confusion?”<sup>146</sup> He did not that it was productive for AIDS activists “to criticize each other in the mainstream press,” regardless of their divergent opinions on scientific and political issues.<sup>147</sup> “Divide and conquer is the oldest strategy of our REAL enemies,” he concluded, “and it’s a sad but true fact that most arguments with a PWA are settled by time; wait long enough and most of us will die.”<sup>148</sup>

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<sup>144</sup> Schmidt (1987).

<sup>145</sup> Callen made this comment in response to questions about his role in the PWA Self-Empowerment Movement with Schmidt in 1987.

<sup>146</sup> Michael Callen, “Farewell to Smarm: A Speech Delivered 25 April 1991.” A note attached to the copy of the speech in New York’s LGBT Community Center Archive indicates that it was to be published in the *Yale Journal of Law and Liberation*, though I have yet to locate a citation indicating that this publication happened.

<sup>147</sup> Ibid.

<sup>148</sup> Ibid.

Finally, “Glitter and Be Gay” sounds like an epitaph from a man whose life, music, and activism were based in his absolute love of being gay. Throughout his life, Callen acknowledge that in spite of all the personal pain, stress on his family, attacks on his beliefs, and the physical discomforts and damages of living with AIDS, being gay was “the greatest gift.” “Enough of being basely tearful,” he commands, encouraging future generations of gay men to find joy in their identity and love among their gay brothers and sisters. The titular refrain becomes an injunction, a set of instructions, and the key to a way of life. Glitter and be gay, indeed.

### **Legacy**

In 1990, Callen wrote that “according to the best estimate, of the 1,049 American diagnosed with AIDS during 1982, twenty-five are still alive. I am one of the lucky ones.”<sup>149</sup> Callen had been living with full-blown AIDS, that is with almost no immune system, for a decade. Although he suffered numerous hospitalizations and the daily inconveniences of fatigue, fevers, and other symptoms of AIDS, he survived and, indeed, thrived in spite of doctors’ grim prognoses. When reporters asked his secret to longevity, Callen often replied, “Luck, Classic Coke, and the love of a good man!”<sup>150</sup> He also believed in the power of a positive attitude and the strength of the human will over illness. “The common thread that has run through my AIDS activism,” he said, “has been a passionate belief that hopelessness kills.”<sup>151</sup> He was a medical marvel in an age when the average lifespan for a person with AIDS was less than three years.

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<sup>149</sup> Callen, *Surviving AIDS* (1990), 1.

<sup>150</sup> Victor F. Zonana, “Portrait of Courage: Michael Callen Fights for Life, and the Means to Defeat AIDS,” *The Los Angeles Times* 28 February 1989.

<sup>151</sup> Callen (1990): 10.

Callen was fortunate to have Joseph Sonnabend as his primary care physician because Sonnabend steered his patients away from AZT, then the only effective therapy for AIDS but one whose toxicity was such that it is now believed to have killed more people with AIDS than it kept alive. Sonnabend encouraged prophylactic approaches to prevent the infections like PCP pneumonia that killed many people with AIDS.<sup>152</sup>

Another important aspect of Callen's survival was making contact with other PWAs, especially those who, like him, were "long-term survivors." Their existence offered hope and the possibility of effective treatments or cures for HIV/AIDS. In 1988-89, Callen began to interview other long-term survivors for a new book project. The resulting manuscript "presents the collected wisdom of dozens of survivors" in an effort to "understand the mystery of long-term survival."<sup>153</sup> *Surviving AIDS* (1990) compiles these interviews into a single volume that functions as a survival testimonial or act of bearing witness to the horrors, atrocities, and experiences of the AIDS epidemic. Individual chapters contain single life narratives of men with AIDS who meditate on their survival and also detail their health, fitness, diet and drug regimes. Callen hoped that by offering a compendium of these stories, other PWAs would find both inspiration and practical advice to help them survive.

His long-term survival made Michael Callen a wonder in an era when HIV/AIDS was largely seen as a death sentence. While most prognoses gave PWAs about two years to live after their diagnosis, Callen defied the odds. He survived and thrived with AIDS for more than a decade. Although he was frequently ill and almost died numerous times,

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<sup>152</sup> Callen, "AIDS and Passive Genocide: 30,534 Unnecessary Deaths from PCP Due to a Scandalous Failure to Prophylax," speech delivered to the FDA on 1 May 1989 and printed in *AIDS Forum* 2/1 (1989): 13-16 and included in Escoffier (unpublished, 1993).

<sup>153</sup> Callen (1990): 11.

he would miraculously recover then throw himself back into the fray. Callen's life was evidence of his own conviction that "not everyone dies from AIDS. The uncritical repetition of the myth that every person with AIDS dies denies the reality of—but perhaps more important, the possibility of—our survival."<sup>154</sup> This myth was perpetuated by "a press too lazy to seek out evidence to the contrary" and a distinct bias in the medical literature about PWAs "because only the sickest patients" get papers written about them.<sup>155</sup>

In a more serious moment, Callen attributed his survival and that of other long-term survivors to three qualities: healthy skepticism, hope, and good, old-fashioned grit. First, Callen believed that skepticism toward the established and official wisdom about AIDS should lead patients to educate themselves about mainstream and alternative treatment options. His refusal to accept the status quo, or what he often described as "the tired old boilerplate that AIDS is 100% fatal," led Callen to explore alternative therapies, to co-author one of the first safe sex instruction books, to co-found the PWA Self-Empowerment Movement, and to establish the Community Research Initiative in New York City. Second, hope held out the promise that a more effective treatment or a cure might be just around the corner and allowed PWAs to imagine a life beyond the day-to-day miseries of sickness, hospital visits, and the shame and stigma associated with having AIDS. Finally, Callen found that the one quality that linked all long-term survivors was grit. "These people are fighters," he wrote, "opinionated, incredibly knowledgeable about

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<sup>154</sup> Michael Callen, "Not Everyone Dies from AIDS," *The Village Voice* 33/18 (1988): 31-34, reprinted in Callen (1993).

<sup>155</sup> *Ibid.*

AIDS, stubborn, and passionately committed to living. They work hard to stay alive, and they are all involved in the politics of AIDS.”<sup>156</sup>

Finally, Callen wrote that he met Dworkin “at the absolute lowest moment of my life” and explained that, “the worst part about being diagnosed [with AIDS] was believing that I would die without ever having known the love of another man...I don’t think it’s mere coincidence that I’ve survived as long as our relationship has lasted.”<sup>157</sup>

Dworkin always felt uncomfortable with statements of this sort because they implied that if Callen died, it was because his lover didn’t love him enough or that if they split up, it might kill Callen.<sup>158</sup>

Activism and music kept Callen going. In an interview with documentarian Deb Wasser (1992), Callen described AIDS as “the card that was dealt to me” and went on to explain

that people react to catastrophe in two ways. They either collapse and let the force of events take them with it, or they perceive the catastrophe and begin to fight.<sup>159</sup>

Part of his fight was to bring other people with AIDS together because “knowing of the existence of at least one more long-term survivor was crucial to their own ability to maintain their own belief that they could surviving in the face of relentless gloom and doom.”<sup>160</sup>

So, too, did his music keep him going. In addition to the sessions for his second solo album, he and The Flirtations appeared in Jonathan Demme’s *Philadelphia* (1993),

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<sup>156</sup> Ibid.

<sup>157</sup> Ibid.

<sup>158</sup> Interview with the author, September 2012.

<sup>159</sup> Deb Wasser, *Legacy* (1993). This is a short biographical film about Callen. Thanks to Richard Dworkin for providing access to the film

<sup>160</sup> Ibid.

singing their queer rendition of “Mr. Sandman” at a party held in the apartment of Andy (Tom Hanks) and Miguel (Antonio Banderas). Sadly, their contribution was not included on the film’s soundtrack, and Callen was unable to see the finished film.<sup>161</sup> Callen also made a cameo as Miss HIV in Jonathan Greyson’s *Zero Patience* (1993) that same year, singing a glorious version of the song “Scheherazade” dressed in drag in homage to his favorite diva, Barbra Streisand.<sup>162</sup>

However, Callen’s health had begun to seriously deteriorate. Barry Callen believed that because his brother was “the AIDS Poster Child...no doctor wanted him to die on their watch.”<sup>163</sup> Consequently, he was taking over seventy pills a day. “His skin was orange. He looked like a Buchenwald survivor. He was in true agony, but he couldn’t die.”<sup>164</sup> Kaposi’s sarcoma lesions on his lungs and heart belabored his breathing while KS in his right leg led to serious swelling, infection, and constant discomfort. Trapped, Callen even asked his brother to help him end his suffering. After some thought, Barry agreed to help his brother die, but fate intervened, sparing him the agony of that decision.

Michael Callen died of complications from pulmonary KS on 27 December 1993 at age thirty-eight at Midway Hospital in Los Angeles.<sup>165</sup> Memorial services were held in Los Angeles, New York, and Hamilton, Ohio. Loved ones remember Callen as a passionate man whose politics informed nearly every aspect of life, a gourmet chef capable of making amazing dinners while balancing a schedule that, as he often joked, “would kill a *healthy* person,” and a gifted musician. In my research for this project,

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<sup>161</sup> The film was released on 23 December 1993, just four days before Callen’s death.

<sup>162</sup> A recent book by Susan Knabe and Wendy Gay Pearson explores the history of the film and offers analytical insight into its content. See *Zero Patience: A Queer Film Classic* (Arsenal Pulp Press, 2012).

<sup>163</sup> Barry Callen, interview with the author, September 2013.

<sup>164</sup> Ibid.

<sup>165</sup> Several obituaries appeared in newspapers across the country.

<http://www.nytimes.com/1993/12/29/obituaries/michael-callen-singer-and-expert-on-coping-with-aids-dies-at-38.html> Accessed 21 December 2013.

every discussion of Callen’s life and music eventually worked its way around to his personality: magnetic, energetic, witty, intelligent, hilarious, passionate, and loving.

Richard Dworkin recalled the way Callen affected a British accent on the word “schedule” and that he luxuriated in the shape—almost the taste—of words as he spoke. He also told me about Callen’s culinary flair. A master in the kitchen, Callen was always experimenting with new cuisines, recipes, and flavors. He even created a dish he called “Dickie’s Fish” especially for his lover. Performance artist and friend Tim Miller remembered Callen’s regal queenliness and the way he would utter a word like “loathsome,” extending it across several octaves with an exaggerated long o vowel.<sup>166</sup>

Singer/songwriter and activist Holly Near described late night, long-distance telephone calls from the road. Near the end of his life, she would tell him stories, gossip, or and just sing to him until he drifted to sleep. Near told me a story that encapsulated her admiration for Callen’s bravery. His right leg and foot were covered with KS lesions, often swollen, and painful. One day, the two met for lunch in Hollywood, and in spite of his disfigured leg, Callen proudly and defiantly wore shorts so that he could be comfortable and enjoy the sunny weather. People gawked at his condition, but Callen lived his life as an activist and “was ready to walk anyone through a consciousness raising on the spot!”<sup>167</sup>

In 1996, Richard Dworkin released *Legacy*, the double-disc collection culled from the forty-eight songs Callen recorded in 1993. The album celebrates the life, activism, and music of Michael Callen. Its liner notes contain photographs from all stages of the singer’s life and numerous reflections on the many facets of Callen’s personality: AIDS

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<sup>166</sup> Conversation with the author, 2012.

<sup>167</sup> Holly Near, personal correspondence with the author, 30 October 2012.

activist, singer/songwriter, lover, and friend. Michael Callen's legacy lives on in the ways that he transformed the culture of sex for everyone through the introduction and popularization of safe sex, in the immense archive of interviews, speeches, and articles he left behind, in the music he wrote and recorded, and in the memories of those whose lives he touched. He lives on in name at New York's Callen-Lorde Community Health Center, a non-profit that offers HIV/AIDS, mental health, and other medical services in the city.

As we mark the third decade of the AIDS epidemic, a number of new documentaries, films, books, and museum exhibits commemorate the work of activists, artists, and others involved in the fight against AIDS. A few of these recent projects deal with Michael Callen. In March 2014, Martin Duberman will release *Hold Tight Gently: Michael Callen, Essex Hemphill, and the Battlefield of AIDS*, a dual biography of Callen and poet/activist Essex Hemphill. And playwright Jim Bredeson is at work on a stage show about Callen's life. *Even for One Night* uses five actors who speak and sing Callen's own words and music "to tell the story of the post-Stonewall generation of gay men and how their lives were redefined by the AIDS epidemic."

When I started this project, I had no idea that my own life had been so shaped by Michael Callen, and at the risk of sounding overblown, I can say that I am not sure I would be alive, well, and writing this document had it not been for his tireless efforts to change the way that everyone—gay, lesbian, bisexual, and straight—thought about and practiced sex. Callen's musical legacy is as impressive as his contributions to the political culture of AIDS. Through his solo albums and work with the Flirtations, Callen showed us how to make music in an epidemic.

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## Appendices

### Appendix I: Red Hot Organization

#### Releases

*Red Hot + Blue* (CD, VHS 1990)

*Red Hot + Dance* (1992)

*No Alternative* (CD, VHS 1993)

*Red Hot + Bothered* (1993)

*Red Hot + Country* (1994)

*Red Hot + Cool: Stolen Moments* (CD, VHS 1994)

*Red Hot on Impulse* (1994)

*Offbeat: A Red Hot Soundtrip* (1996)

*America Is Dying Slowly* (1996)

*Red Hot + Rio* (1996)

*Nova Bossa: Red Hot on Verve* (1996)

*Red Hot + Latin: Silencio = Muerte* (1997)

*Red Hot + Lisbon: Onda Sonora* (1998)

*Red Hot + Rhapsody* (1998)

*By George (& Ira): Red Hot on*

*Gershwin* (1998)

*Twentieth-Century Blues: The Songs of*

*Noel Coward* (1998)

*Optic Nerve* (multi-media DVD, 1999)

*Red Hot + Indigo* (2000)

*Red Hot + Riot: The Music and Spirit of*

*Fela Kuti* (2002)

*Dark was the Night* (2009)

*Red Hot + Rio 2* (2011)

*Red Hot + Fela* (2013)

**Appendix II: Michael Callen discography, filmography, select bibliography**

<i>Purple Heart</i>	Significant Other Records	1988
<i>Legacy</i>	Significant Other Records	1996
<i>The Flirtations</i>	Significant Other Records	1990
<i>Live out on the Road</i>	Flirts Records	1992
<i>Zero Patience</i>	Jonathan Greyson, dir.	1993
<i>Philadelphia</i>	Jonathan Demme, dir.	1993
<i>How to Have Sex in an Epidemic: One Approach</i> With Richard Berkowitz and Joseph Sonnabend And Richard Dworkin		1983
<i>The Denver Principles</i> With members of Denver Delegation		1983
<i>Surviving and Thriving with AIDS</i>	People with AIDS Coalition	1987
<i>Surviving AIDS</i>	Harper-Collins	1990
<i>In My Time: Essays on Sex, Science, and AIDS</i>	Unpublished	1993

**Appendix III: Significant Other Records Non-Callen Releases**

Keith Christopher (1957-1998)	<i>Naked Truth</i>	1998
David Downing	<i>Last Night Last Call</i>	1998
Steven Grossman (1951-1991)	<i>Something in the Moonlight</i>	2011