From Street-Life to Cruising in the Park: Queers & the Dancefloor (1978-1988)

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Abstract:

It is only in recent decades that appraisal of pop music has gained footing in academic musicology studies. Intersections of pop and queer sexualities have since been well documented. However, this paper argues that comprehensive analysis of the role and impact on queer audiences, of the dance floor, and its musical soundtrack, has remained relatively uncharted. The paper commences in 1978, a point by which disco had saturated the lexicon of mainstream North American and European pop cultures (Echols, 2010). Outlining its trajectory, and the subsequent backlash provoked by its perceived challenges to heteronormativity, the paper questions the notion of the reputed 'death of disco'. Here, the genre of Hi–Nrg is introduced and explored, as proof of disco's musical evolution, and for its pioneering embodiment of" [...] gay life on the dancefloor" (Jones & Kantonen, 1999, p.145). The significant role pop music can play in relation to individual identity formation LGBTI/queer constructions (Dhoest, Herreman& Wasserbauer, 2015) is then considered. Its proven dexterity, as a fostering agent with the capacity to imbue a sense of mutual connectivity among audiences (Gill, 1995; Siegel, 2001), is also explored. Leading to further analysis, of the importance and role of 'safe spaces' to queer audiences, and in offering examples of lyrical, pop artifacts from the period, the paper builds a

picture of the dance floor's transnational function, as vital space for queer audiences.

Keywords: Queer Theory, Intermediality, Popular Music

This paper analyses a unique period when pop music began, for the first time, to reflect the lives of its loyal queer audience explicitly. Various contexts concerning the representation of queer sexualities in popular music are offered for exploration before the lyrics to popular songs are explored to illustrate this development. Crucial to framing the investigation of these songs are concepts related to two distinct areas: Intermediality and Queer theory. Intermediality has been defined as a framework that "[...] allows us to gain insight into the hybrid character of art forms: their intertwinement with each other, but also the everyday, science, philosophy, and societal engagement" (van de Ven, 2018). Wolf elaborates on the relationship between literature and music, noting that they " [...] occupy a sub-field within the area of intermedial relations'' (2009, p.134). The second framework, Queer theory, is built upon the concepts put forward by Michel Foucault and developed by Judith Butler and others. Rejecting the former implicit importance placed on binary sexual identities and the assimilationist gay politics of the era (Jagose, 1997), the author describes Queer theory as "[...] analytical models which dramatise incoherencies in the allegedly stable relations between chromosomal sex, gender, and sexual desire" (*ibid*, p.3). Motschenbacher & Stegu (2013) confirm the commonality of "[…] analyses of language data informed by the insights of queer theory" (p.521), such as this paper.

Pop music, particularly dance music, has always been linked to LGBTI/queer communities. Pop has been shown to affect queer

audiences individually and collectively. Despite this, scholars such as Bullock (2017; 2022) and Doggett (2016) have shown that, for the first thirty years of its birth as a form in the early 1950s, most efforts to address queer sexualities explicitly were subject to censorship, by both the record industry and also by artists themselves. The ten years under review in this paper were ground-breaking, representing a milestone where pop explicitly addressed queer themes at a time when its queer audiences were now "hungry for gay role models"' (Kantonen & Jones, 1999, p.45). Despite the breakthrough, the era remains relatively under-reported by both pop and rock music critics & scholars and queer commentators.

A long-standing snobbery about pop music may be held at least partly accountable for the former two categories. See the work of McLeod (2001) and Warwick (2013), who have both exposed the gendered perceptions of pop, revealing an implication that pop is traditionally seen as feminine, disposable and of little use. In the case of the latter, the 1980s posed a considerable threat, from the 'family values' campaigns of the likes of President Reagan, to the emergence of AIDS and its devastating effect on queer communities. The material covered in this paper originates from the US and the UK, where such issues understandably diverted the attention of sexuality-focused researchers from these countries as they did globally, a fact acknowledged by Keeps (1992) and addressed by this paper.

By 1978, disco had become an omnipresent force firmly embedded in popular culture. The genre's roots have been traced to North America's black & Latino queer clubs. Its reputation for affording women and queer spaces has been well established, alongside its role in de-segregating black and white audiences (Dyer, 1979; Echols, 2010). North American group, The Village People, were one of the many emerging acts to embody this new disco sound. Formed having answered an advertisement placed by French producer Jacques Morali, which read, *"Macho types Wanted, must have a moustache",* the reference which reflects his original vision of a

“gay vocal troupe” (Aston, 2016, p.291), primarily designed to occupy a gay audience.

Each member of The Village People adopted a look straight out of gay pornography, emphasising their roots and queer affiliation (Kirk, 1999). The intended target market quickly recognised these overtly gay sartorial reference points – the traffic cop, the leather clone, and the construction worker. In addition, the group's catalogue included songs such as San Francisco (You've Got Me) and Go West seemed to pay homage to the burgeoning urban environments where LGBT communities were beginning to take shape. Even their moniker was interpreted as a nod to New York's Greenwich Village, an area long recognised as a hub for the emerging gay community (Loughrey, 1988). On top of this, their songs commonly contained lyrics containing homo-erotic content. While the band had already had some mainstream crossover success, 1978’s YMCA would become a worldwide hit, a song which remains a staple today and is one of fewer than 40 songs to have sold 10 million plus physical copies (*The Telegraph*, 2001). Its lyrics told a tongue-in-cheek tale, which endorsed the YMCA (Young Men’s Christian Association) as a meeting place and the song was widely read by queers, especially gay men, as referencing the past time of cruising. However, despite the "[...] open secret" (Buckland, 2012, p. 69), the majority of their newly discovered mainstream audience did not know that such images and lyrics rife with references to same-sex relationships had queer beginnings (Midgely, 2014). As Napier-Bell would observe of the band’s success with YMCA:

> Without a clue of what the song was about, the whole of America was copying. Every small-town club, every bar, every church hall, could be heard thumping out a mini-version of the decadence that had once been only found at the Sanctuary in New York...(as) gays around the world laughed at America’s blindness” (2001, p. 216).

Often dismissed as crass, and despite having long since fallen out of favour with the gay community due to enduring but unsuccessful efforts to distance themselves from anything remotely homosexual, The Village People remain an essential milestone in queer representations in popular music. Echols notes their place in history as "the first gay-to-straight crossover group" (2010, p.138). Their success provided a first indication of how aesthetically and sonically, explicitly queer imagery and themes could exist and thrive outside the sub-culture from which they were derived. Crucially, while read as clearly queer by such audiences, such prompts often went unnoticed by heterosexual listeners. This strategy would be similarly employed by many major acts in the 1980s, as they walked the tightrope between offering queer-imbued performativity or lyrics while falling short of declaring themselves as so. As such, coded queer messages in pop would be highly prevalent throughout the decade.

Such was disco's cultural dominance; a backlash would ensue, eventually resulting in the infamous 'disco demolition' nights held across the US. These events, where rock fans were invited to bring disco records to be burnt, have since been widely acknowledged as a reaction to the inclusivity of disco and have since been vilified by scholars for their homophobic and racist undertones (Dahl, Hoekstra & Natkin, 2016; Robb, 2020). However, as Smith notes of the period, "[...] the gays hadn't stopped dancing yet" (*in* Kirk, 1999, p.11). This was illustrated by the development of a new genre derived from disco roots, which would become even more readily and explicitly associated with queer communities. If ever there was 'gay music' (a concept still robustly debated by scholars), then this was it.

The origins of the genre of Hi-Nrg can be incontestably attributed to Patrick Cowley and Bobby Orlando (Kirk, 1999; Waterman, 2000). Both men's influence and championing of the genre are irrefutable. As disco continued to impinge on mass culture, they would harness new technologies to adapt and re-work aspects of the genre's core stylistic trademarks. Increasing the tempo of the music

produced, these and other embellishments would define Hi-Nrg as a stand-alone genre. Patrick Cowley identified as gay, while Bobby Orlando's role in the genre's development is perhaps more surprising, given a reportedly overtly hostile attitude toward homosexuality. Described by poet Dennis Cooper as "[…] a hyper-macho, incredibly cocky, rampantly homophobic ex-boxer who made gay disco*"*(2020), Orlando cuts a distinctive character, authoring a book on creationism and reputedly offering to 'cure' his artists of their homosexuality. This apparent inconsistency, however, has no impact on his status as a form innovator.

Hi-Nrg songs were frequently sexually suggestive lyrically and commonly imbued with the overt glorification of the male body. Various social concepts and constructs relating to the urban queer experience of urban, gay America, itself proliferating as 'gay ghettos' sprang up in cities across the country (Bell & Binnie, 2004), were commonly referenced in song titles and lyrics. In titles such as Bring on the Men; I Need A Man; Megatron Man; Thank God For Men; Male Stripper, the repeated espousal of desire for and veneration of the male body is a predominant theme. That some scholars have already attributed this to be part of the genre's allure to a queer audience (Buckland, 2012, p.68) is hardly surprising. One of the few queer scholars writing about queer matters and pop music in the 1980s, English journalist Kris Kirk would note, "The phenomenal rise of the gay disco has brought in its train a new type of dance music, which, like it or not, is now regarded as ours – the ubiquitous Hi-Nrg" (1999, p.123). For final confirmation of the genre's origins and affiliation, Walters confirms, "This is gay ghetto music with no other goal than to pump up the drama, sexual innuendo and beats per minute" (1996, p. 72).

Patrick Cowley's track Menergy (Blecman & Cowley, 1981) perfectly illustrates how emerging queer linguistics were used to accompany thumping Hi-Nrg beats and is the first example proffered. The sound epitomised early 1980s gay San Francisco, its lyrics unabashed. The 'boys' featured in the song, busy 'checkin' you out', are engaged in 'cruising', a concept acknowledged as a definitively

queer cultural practice (Stacey, 2004; Espinoza, 2019). Referencing the 'back-room' vividly locates a geographical sphere for the lyric, the argot term having been adopted to describe the sex-on-premises bars of the emerging gay metropolitan centres of the United States (Martin, 1987). The bar itself, along with the street and the bedroom, feature as further locations in the song's lyrics, all serving as places where the possibility of sex can be navigated, negotiated or had. This is graphically confirmed by Cowley's 'boys/guys', who 'shoot off' in each verse's unique setting. The phrase, used by gay men as a vernacular description of ejaculation, reveals the explicitly queer resonance of Cowley's formative take on the genre.

Cowley would be an early casualty of the encroaching AIDS epidemic, and his death in November 1982 would unfortunately mean he would not witness Hi-Nrg's ascendancy into the mainstream. As for Menergy, a further enhancement of its queer credibility would come when it was covered and re-released with Cowley's vocals replaced by gay disco star and former protégé Sylvester in 1984. The success of both versions ensured its continued predominance on gay dance floors for a sizable part of the decade. Menergy's lascivious lyrics became a typical staple of the genre. While often cyclical and repetitive, nonetheless, they illustrate the raunchy, queer sexual assertiveness that is at the heart of many Hi-Nrg lyrics, amplifying its queer associations. For most of the decade, it was the omnipresent sound danced to in queer clubs, providing a triumphantly queer synth pop soundtrack.

Of the many junctures of queer sexuality and pop music which would manifest in the 1980s, the pop incarnations of Scottish singer Jimmy Sommerville command particular attention and form the second example. Bronski Beat, the band through which the public was first introduced to the Glaswegian singer, represented an actual first in pop music. While Bowie had ushered in his revolution in the 1970s, his declaration of queerness was later retracted. Elsewhere in the 1980s, of course, Boy George and the incongruous group of artists who would come to be known as 'the gender benders' would represent a significant visual affront to the heteronor-

mativity of pop. However, George was also at first reticent about any declaration of queerness. Sommerville was different. Unashamedly gay, while singing about explicitly gay themes (Bullock, 2017), his staunch politicism was forthright. Detailed projections and declarations of homosexuality would ensure his emblematic status as a new breed of 'out and proud' pop star. In addition to the insolence of singing about same-sex love, the band's lyrical themes often addressed the lives of queer audiences more broadly, writing on issues including homophobia and HIV/AIDS.

Bronski Beat's single and worldwide chart hit, Smalltown Boy (Bronski, Sommerville & Steinbach, 1984), addressed homosexuality with an explicitness rarely seen in pop. Even by the 1980s, few mainstream chart acts would assert anything other than a heterosexual identity. Still unaccustomed to seeing such a perspicuous reflection of their lives in the form, the sustained cultural significance of the song among LGBTI audiences has been well established (Maconie, 2014, p.272). The song's lyrics concerned a young gay man, rejected and left with no choice but to escape parochial heteronormativity. Halberstam's 'metronormativity' theory is exemplified by Sommerville's lyrics and the song's accompanying video, according to Kelaita (2021). Scholars have pointed to the term's frequent appearance in gay autobiography narratives (Maddison, 2002), described as "[...] the story of migration from "country" to "town" [...] within which the subject moves to a place of tolerance after enduring life in a place of suspicion, persecution, and secrecy" (p.37). Kelaita also notes that Somerville's "[…] actual destination is incidental since it is clear he is symbolically headed towards the queer city" (*ibid*, p.8). It is here in the queer geographies of the city that Bronski Beat were confidently mapped, with no need for subtlety or the commonly coded messages of same-sex desire frequent in pop. This changed everything. While Sommerville would remain lead-singer of Bronski Beat for scarcely more than a year, it was not to matter, as ensuing musical contributions made through his successive band, The Communards, and later a solo career, would prove equally as explicit (Coles, 2014). In particular, Small-

town Boy would shine a light on an important but heretofore invisible section of pop's audience and irrevocably change the representation of gay men in pop music.

Conclusion.

There is no doubt about it; queer love pop, and research exists to prove it. LGBT consumers are significantly more likely to have purchased pop music or attended a live concert in the previous year than their straight equivalents, with 92% of LGBT people considering themselves 'pop music fans' (GLAAD, 2017). As mentioned at the beginning of this paper, pop's function in aiding identity formation has been well established. Scholars such as Niebuhr (2007) have noted its specific role in helping queer people assert their identities. Furthermore, in the collective sense, pop music's proven dexterity as a fostering agent with the capacity to imbue a sense of mutual connectivity among audiences is both long and reputable (Gill, 1995; Schäfer *et al.*, 2015; Siegel, 2001). Aspects of this realm have also been explored with a specifically queer lens. Writing on the role of music in contributing to queer cultures and spaces, Coleman (2002) captures pop music's vital functioning in the sensory development of 'safe spaces', such as those frequented by queers seeking refuge from the overt hostilities of the decade. Gill (1995) notes that "Dancing, dance music & places where people dance have been central to the lives of queers since queers were first invented" (p. 134). Indeed, so acute is the connection and awareness of the affinity that scholars have gone as far as developing hypotheses which suggest a queer sensibility inherent in the form of pop itself (Himes, 2015).

Today, terms such as 'gay anthems' and 'gay icons' have entered the popular linguistic vocabulary. Many of the artists who fill the dance floors of today routinely identify as LGBTQI or being non-binary or fluid in relation to their gender identity, reflecting the general eschewal of traditional labels of sexual identity politics chronicled by sexuality scholars. However, there is little doubt that

there is a debt to be paid to the pioneering artists of the 1980s for their opening of such pathways. From the beginning of the end of disco's reign to a period of another inevitable but temporary backlash in the late 1980s, pop spoke to its queer constituents for the first time, loudly and proudly. Queer audiences could explicitly hear their sexualities and lives being sung about, which had never happened before.

In conclusion, we can return to Gill, who describes the period as a time when

> "Enough brazenly queer performers had stated their sexuality, in fact, insisted on it being known, to suggest that a successful career in pop and retaining one's personal dignity and integrity as a self-identified queer were not mutually exclusive" (Gill, 1995, p. 173).

The author sums up the significant queer cultural legacy of the period. Pop music had changed irrevocably in relation to its once-censored queer affiliations. Once out of the closet, there was no going back.

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