

ABSTRACT

Title of Dissertation: QUEERING THE TEXTURES OF ROCK AND
ROLL HISTORY

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My dissertation provides an alternative history to traditional rock histories by exploring how the experiences of several key gay, lesbian and bisexual musicians expose the restrictive sexual and gender economies of the rock era music industry. Industrial discrimination has led many queer performers to downplay their sexualities and simulate conformist gender behavior. Rock historians have consistently overlooked hierarchies of sexuality and gender which necessitates a corrective history. My study begins by challenging historical views of rock music as socially progressive and illuminating how the rock industry failed to correct pre-rock industry racial biases, which are evident in the economic exploitation of early African-American rock performers and the scarcity of African-Americans at the executive levels of rock production and distribution. Premature historical celebrations of racial progress have

severely limited critical attention to more invisible forms of sexual and gender discrimination in the industry including homophobia and sexism.

I also challenge the dominant historical argument of canonical rock histories that rock music's corporate expansion fundamentally tainted the rock's aesthetic quality and social importance during periods when the commercial and creative influence of queer and/or female performers and audiences gained centrality. Rock has maintained its vitality as more diverse performers and sensibilities have informed its cultural scope. My study describes the contributions of several queer performers to rock era music and illustrates how they have resisted sexual and gender invisibility through discernible strategies signifying sexual and/or gender differences. I employ gay and lesbian studies, queer theory, Christopher Nealon's theory of pre-Stonewall gay and lesbian culture and Marlon Ross' notion of the gay and lesbian crossover dynamic to trace the complex relationships between queer strategies of negotiation and the development of self-consciously queer identified community based in post-WWII era social and political movements. Overall, this dissertation uses an interdisciplinary approach, including an analysis of canonical rock histories, supplemental histories of American popular music, queer social histories and popular press materials to address historic absences.

QUEERING THE TEXTURES OF ROCK AND ROLL HISTORY

by

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Introduction

On June 26, 2003 I visited the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame and Museum in Cleveland, Ohio. Within the stunning I. M. Pei designed waterfront building there is an odd tension between its functioning as a museum, aiming to capture compelling stories of one of the most influential cultural industries of the twentieth century. . . . and suburban shopping mall-cum-tourist spectacle replete with grey bubble floors, floating oversized objects and a museum store where one could purchase CDs and museum magnets. Like rock 'n' roll itself the museum seemed caught in an attempt to convey heart, soul and guts but in forms that were palatable to ensure broad appeal and maximum profitability. These aims were not unusual but compromised the range of stories it could tell about the people and activities that shaped rock 'n' roll.

The first official activity my fellow attendees and I experienced was a little film called Mystery Train, intended to show how rock 'n' roll was a synthesis of indigenous forms of American music—country blues, hillbilly music, and spirituals--and a liberator for the cultural underclass. Throughout the film segments were divided by footage of moving trains, presumably a metaphor for progress. The first segment showed still images of poor rural whites and blacks mixed with images cotton fields, chain gangs, and segregation era signs, and people dancing and playing music. The film progressed showing footage of country and bluesmen Hank Williams, Bob Wills & the Playboys, Jimmie Rodgers, Leadbelly, Big Bill Broonzy, Woody Guthrie, etc. The next segment continued and we saw swing era images of Louis Armstrong, the Savoy, the Cotton Club, Count Basie, people swing dancing with Louis Jordan singing. The concluding segment introduced us to rock 'n' roll via footage of Sun Records, footage of Elvis

Presley, color pastiches of teens dancing, Buddy Holly footage interspersed with rebel imagery of Marlon Brando from the Wild One, followed by rapid fire clips Chuck Berry, Little Richard, Jerry Lee Lewis, Fats Domino, Bill Haley, Bo Diddley, Eddie Cochran, Roy Orbison, Ray Charles, Carl Perkins, the Everly Brothers, Gene Vincent and Jackie Wilson.

Near the beginning of the film the narrator stated, “Imagine there was a time in America without rock ‘n’ roll . . .” Then viewers saw stock 50s footage of white people buying products, with Doris Day’s “Que Sera Sera” playing in the background, followed by images of Dean Martin, an excerpt of Perry Como’s “Hot Diggity (Dog Ziggity Boom),” a clip from TV’s Hit Parade spliced with people sitting at home and concluding with a white child being put to bed followed by the segments I’ve described. The film was slick and amusing in its suggestion that rock ‘n’ roll literally saved America from the cultural evils of Perry Como but ultimately I found the film naïve, off-putting and disingenuous. From this film you’d never know how Elvis Presley, the “King of Rock ‘n’ Roll” idolized Dean Martin.¹ Nor would you imagine the “Queen of Soul”—Aretha Franklin--admired Doris Day enough to mention her in her autobiography.² Never mind Liberace’s impact on America’s biggest 70s rock star Elton John. More importantly one might think rock ‘n’ roll was the quintessential ticket for the liberation of the social and economic underclass. Guitars and dancing closed the

¹ See p. 69, 123 in Miller, James. Flowers in the Dustbin: The Rise of Rock and Roll: 1947-1977. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1999.

² “Rosemary Clooney was cool and so was Doris Day. I always thought Doris was underrated as a vocalist,” p. 89-90 in Franklin, Aretha with David Ritz. Aretha: From These Roots. New York: Villard, 1999.

cultural gaps between the races and classes as opposed to say, increased access to education, progressive political movements, pivotal judicial decisions and legislative reform throughout the mid-to-late twentieth century. These details were a lot less interesting when you had more obvious enemies (Day, Como, Martin) and heroes (Williams, Presley, Berry, etc.)

Perhaps the film's most unintended piece of truth was its absence of women from the rock 'n' roll canon of influences and performers—a constant trend in rock histories. Black blueswomen Memphis Minnie and Big Mama Thornton were notably absent from the country and blues segments, as were swing era influences like Billie Holiday and Dinah Washington. Further, it was unfathomable that a rock 'n' roll film would exclude Ruth Brown, who sold so many records for independent label Atlantic that it was nicknamed “The House that Ruth Built,” not to mention Etta James or Tina Turner.

Less obvious but also disturbingly absent from the film were two influential pre-rock 50s pop musicians, Liberace and Johnnie Ray. Perhaps their role as “pop” musicians defied the portrait of rebellion the film sought. After all people often perceive “pop” as less dangerous or representative of the underclass “folk” culture rock historians attempt to align rock with, though rock has much in common with pre-rock pop. Further, Ray and Liberace's reputations as eccentric bisexual and gay men may not have lent themselves to superficial film clips. Liberace may come across as an easy punchline but he was pivotal in teaching pop musicians how to fully utilize television to sell their personae, centralized the piano as a pop music instrument, and, as his career developed, he made spectacle, wit, and glamour fundamental part to modern popular

music performance. Alongside musical contributions Liberace constantly battled the burgeoning 50s tabloid press which attempted to “out” him because he was too successful and accepted for such a “colorful,” “eccentric” bachelor. His resistance to gender conformity, which resulted in Liberace successfully suing two publications in two successful libel suits, illustrated the gender economy of 50s popular culture and its ongoing presence in the music industry throughout the rock era.

Gender behavior is relevant to my discussion of rock ‘n’ roll because it is a dynamic area shaped by popular culture, in which notions of masculinity, femininity and androgyny are constantly generated, adapted, rejected, revised, and retrieved. A wide range of political, social and cultural developments mold the gender economy. I define the gender economy as historically mediated notions of gender normativity. Gender normative textures of speech, dress, movement, etc. accumulate and underlay the construction of a type of visual and behavioral hegemony. Queer textures are queer specifically because queer people often diverge from the norms of their respective eras.

There is an implicit relationship between normative ideas of gender behavior (gender economy) and modes of sexual behavior. The constructed, historically mediated nature of gender propriety and normalcy correlates to standardized notions of “normal,” “natural,” and “healthy” sexual expression. Essentially gender normative people engage in sexually normal behavior and vice versa. Popular culture is a central source for influencing perceptions of what behaviors and relationships constitute normal sexuality because it constantly reproduces images and creates consistent portraits of what sex, love, romance and intimacy look like. In the context of this study, heterosexual acts or those between people of different sexes, define the cultural sense of sexual normalcy.

The nature of such acts and the structure of these acts have steadily shifted, especially since the integration of television.

For example on 1950s and 1960s TV, marriage or courting, between a man and a woman, was the presumed context for normal adult sexuality and it was generally expressed in light touching and kissing. However sexual intercourse was never shown between non-married partners or even implied as most married couples were shown sleeping in separate beds. By the 1970s sexual foreplay, premarital sex, married couples sharing a bed, and out-of-wedlock pregnancies became more common. Heterosexuality was still at the center of TV's sexual economy even when its expression changed. Similar parallels were evident in other popular media including film and images of popular music. One of the results of the heterosexual economy of post-WWII popular culture was the invisibility of bisexuality and homosexuality, or the stigmatizing of these sexualities through mendacious or narrow portrayals. In post WWII popular music sexual deviance were signified by non-normative gender behavior, which raised suspicions about the sexuality of many performers as my study details.

The 50s gender, and related sexual, economy, which I describe in detail in Chapter Four, directly shaped cultural responses to Johnnie Ray. Ray was the first white pop singer to incorporate blues mannerisms in his singing and live performances and achieve mainstream commercial success with white and black audiences. Ray developed his musical persona in racially mixed "black and tan" clubs and was popular with black and white audiences, evident by his 1951 hit "Cry" which topped the pop

and rhythm and blues (R&B) charts.³ Ray merged crooning with cues from R&B singing, and bridged the gap between Frank Sinatra-style crooning and Elvis Presley-style rock and roll. However, he has always had a tenuous place in rock history perhaps because of the gap between his fey persona and emotive demeanor and the hypermasculine rock 'n' roll ideal historians sometimes project onto male rockers as sexual liberators. Like Liberace, Ray was also a victim of tabloid scandals as a result of his "eccentric" persona. Interestingly, Presley covered "Cry" early in his career and many of the criticisms Ray received as a corruptor of youth and an affront to good taste foretold much early criticism of rock 'n' roll.

These instances of sex and gender inequality belie the usual tales of rock 'n' roll as cultural triumph. They complicate the history of popular music by illustrating how the imperative for gender conformity is an ongoing component of the music industry rock n' roll did not erase or significantly challenge. Rock 'n' roll histories construct a gender hierarchy where women and queer people as secondary and marginal to its mainstream. But my analysis takes a closer look and reveals rock 'n' roll was not the simple race and class liberator traditional histories purport. Those with non-normative sexualities complicate whatever symbolic and material gains the rock 'n' roll era provided for some. Such performers may have had commercial hits but they often veiled their innermost desires and politics to remain marketable. *In spite* of the broader

³ Ray's 1951 rendition of "Cry" was the only song by a white singer to top the pop and R&B charts between 1946 and 1956. See p. 81 in Whitburn, Joel. Top Rhythm & Blues Records 1949-1971. Menomonee Falls, Wisconsin: Record Research, 1973. For discussion of Ray's racial crossover see p. 181 in Starr, Larry and Christopher Waterman. American Popular Music: From Minstrelsy to MTV. New York: Oxford University Press, 2003.

cultural demand for conformity governing the music industry, several generations of queer musicians have achieved success in the rock 'n' roll' music industry through shrewd negotiations of external pressure and internal needs for identity. Their struggles indicate a broader pattern of cultural marginalization that popular culture industries reflect and contribute to through their wide circulation and cultural influence.

Problematizing Rock History

Rock histories define rock 'n' roll as a signpost of U. S. social history. According to such histories the most consistent effects of rock 'n' roll on American culture include a broader integration of African-American performers in the cultural mainstream, a cultural synthesis of musical genres and the cultural sensibilities, and a newfound awareness of teenage subjectivity. One of the defining aspects of rock 'n' roll's growth from the teen dance music of the 1950s into 60s rock was the proliferation of songwriters and performers who integrated the political zeitgeist into their song lyrics and public personae. The anti-racist politics of the Civil Rights Movement and the anti-war movement were among the most prominent political themes of progressive 60s rock. The 1960s showcased rock's potential as a vital art form that not only symbolized a broadening cultural sensibility but also directly promoted such ideals to its youth-oriented audience. The growth of rock 'n' roll into a serious form spawned a host of rock subcultures and publications dedicated to covering rock music and culture, such as Rolling Stone Magazine. As rock culture has gained cultural momentum, a bevy of books covering rock's historic role on the 20th century continuum of America popular music and its sociological value has emerged since the 1970s, including Charlie

Gillett's The Sound of the City: The Rise of Rock and Roll and Greil Marcus' Mystery Train: Images of America in Rock 'n' Roll Music.⁴ These books, alongside TV documentaries and the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame and Museum, have officially declared rock 'n' roll as one the most significant cultural and social developments of the century.

Despite the argument that rock 'n' roll increased the participatory role of ethnic minorities and young people in popular culture, one of the glaring absences in coverage of rock history is the virtual absence of how norms of sexuality and gender affected many performers of the rock era. Most histories acknowledge racism, and usually at least comment on gender bias as social problems, but the role of homophobia and gender conformity in national culture and the music industry, and its impact on rock era musicians, is absent. Aside from the mention of Little Richard's flamboyant, sexually ambiguous image in the 1950s and the communal origins of disco among gay men, the experiences of gay and lesbian musicians, such as how industry expectations affect their public images and intersections of gay liberation and lesbian feminism in their music, are invisible. The key to uncovering these hidden histories is demonstrating how homophobia and gender conformity are structural realities that affect the ability of sex and gender non-conformists to fully participate as citizens within popular culture and the public sphere. My dissertation argues that the gender economies of popular culture reflect a central regulatory aspect of American culture discernible in popular music. I

⁴ First published in 1970, I reference the Second Edition, Gillett, Charlie. The Sound of the City: The Rise of Rock and Roll. 2nd ed. New York: Da Capo Press, 1996. First published in 1974 I use the Fourth Edition, Marcus, Greil. Mystery Train: Images of America in Rock 'n' Roll Music. 4th rev. ed. New York: Plume, 1997.

address the gender economy in rock by interrogating consistent narrative themes in rock histories and drawing from theories of gender, sexuality, and marginality to critique and reframe rock's history.

The alternative history my study offers performs defines rock and roll against the dominant historical narratives, which champion the genre as a marker of social progress which declines when corporate expansion and feminized or softened elements, synonymous with "pop" are incorporated into the genre. My study questions the presumed break between pre-rock pop and rock by suggesting a greater level of continuity, regarding corporate interests in capitalizing on musical trends and musical roots. I also challenge the historical presumption that rock fundamentally altered American views of minority identities. First, I demonstrate how the corporate power structure of the music industry is not racially progressive and how the separation between "white" and "black" music remained intact during rock's history. Second, I argue that given the deeply limited racial progress of rock, it is significant that rock historians often skirt the notion of progress to describe rock era sexual and gender oppression in popular culture and rarely critique this aspect in-depth. Thus, my study serves to recover a hidden history of sexual and gender oppression by detailing the ambivalent mix of commercial acceptance and the downplaying or erasure of sex and gender non-conformity which characterizes the experiences of bisexual, gay and lesbian musicians.

Though my study notes how bisexual, gay and lesbian performers were integral to rock and pivotal to some of its major artistic developments, I focus on how the experiences of such musicians throughout the rock era reflect regressive ideas about

what types of sex and gender expression warrant historical discussion and analysis. It is telling that many bisexual, gay or lesbian musicians are virtually excluded from most histories because they are deemed irrelevant “pop” performers, their sexualities are downplayed or invisible even when relevant to their art and public images, and/or those who represent queer politics are rarely accorded the significance and attention of other politically-oriented rock era performers. By focusing on the relevance of queer historic developments to rock’s formation and key musicians my study seeks to stimulate new conversations about how sexual and gender non-conformity shapes our historic understanding of bisexual, gay and lesbian popular music performers and reflects a broader tension for queer public participation and citizenship.

Several research questions compelled my study’s goal of authoring an alternative history to traditional rock and roll histories including the following:

- What trends, performers and themes have dominated historical rock and roll literature?
- What is the nature of the sexual and gender economy in rock and roll histories?
- How have rock and roll histories acknowledged, resisted and naturalized assumptions about sexual and gender normalcy?
- If we rewrite rock history to include major communal formations and political developments in queer culture, how do the story of rock and roll, and our understanding of post-WWII American popular culture change?
- What do biographical discussions of key queer musicians reveal about the way sexual strangers who work as queer musicians negotiate social and industrial pressures for sexual and gender conformity?

Theoretical Frameworks

Rock Histories

From its mid-50s commercial origins in the United States to its present status as a major international commercial, artistic and cultural phenomenon, rock 'n' roll has steadily acquired the status of art. Magazines devoted to rock, such as Rolling Stone, Creem, Cheetah and Crawdaddy, which merged in the late 1960s, were the first attempts to create a sustained analysis of rock music, its performers and related cultural influence.⁵ Such magazines established music critics as gatekeepers of rock as an art form warranting serious attention.

The earliest attempts to capture rock's historical development and impact emerged in the 1970s and were primarily written by rock critics. A body of books devoted to rock 'n' roll's history is at the core of my analysis. Charlie Gillett's The Sound of the City was the earliest and most definitive accounts of the rock era when it was originally published in 1971. Since its publication, several historical surveys have emerged and expanded the discourse to include developments from the late 70s through the present. Each of these histories comprises the canon of rock 'n' roll history. Books focusing primarily on rock 'n' roll, rather than general surveys of popular music (Clarke, Chapple and Garofalo)⁶ or rhythm and blues/R&B (Nelson, Neale, Ward)⁷ are

⁵ For an overview of the rock press's development see p. 155-8 in Chapple, Steve and Reebee Garofalo. Rock 'N' Roll is Here to Pay: The History and Politics of the Music Industry. Chicago: Nelson-Hall, 1977.

⁶ Clarke, Donald. The Rise and Fall of Popular Music. London: Viking, 1995. and Chapple and Garofalo, 1977, are broader surveys of the music industry than the rock focused histories.

the books I engage with to assess the role of queer musicians in rock 'n' roll's history. In 1986 Rolling Stone published their version of the genre's history with Rock of Ages,⁸ which was superseded in 1992 by the Rolling Stone Illustrated History of Rock.⁹ Given the magazine's pivotal role as America's most popular rock-oriented magazine, both histories are part of the canon. The Illustrated History is more definitive in its focus on trends and individual performers. I utilize the Rock of Ages but primarily draw from the Illustrated History. Robert Palmer's Rock & Roll: An Unruly History¹⁰ the accompanying book to the 1995 PBS series Rock 'n Roll, is also relevant because it is a broad survey of the transition of rock 'n' roll through hip-hop and alternative/modern rock. The book also formed the basis of the trends and performers the popular documentary covered. Rebee Garofalo's Rockin' Out: Popular Music in the USA and David Szatmary's Rockin' in Time: A Social History of Rock-and-Roll,¹¹ are the most

⁷ See Ward, Brian. Just My Soul Responding: Rhythm and Blues, Black Consciousness, and Race Relations. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998; George, Nelson. The Death of Rhythm & Blues. New York: Plume, 1988; and Neal, Mark Anthony. What the Music Said: Black Popular Music and Black Public Culture. New York: Routledge, 1999.

⁸ Ward, Ed, Geoffrey Stokes, Ken Tucker, eds. Rock of Ages: The Rolling Stone History of Rock & Roll. Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Rolling Stone Press/Prentice-Hall. Inc, 1986.

⁹ DeCurtis, Anthony and James Henke with Holly George-Warren, eds. Rolling Stone Illustrated History of Rock & Roll. New York: Random House, 1992.

¹⁰ Palmer, Robert. Rock & Roll: An Unruly History. New York: Harmony Books, 1995.

¹¹ Garofalo, Reebec. Rockin' Out: Popular Music in the USA. Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1997 and Szatmary, David. Rockin' in Time: A Social History of Rock-and-Roll. 3rd ed. Upper Saddle River, New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1996.

overtly academic books here, defining rock 'n' roll's role as social history. Both are frequently used in college courses and printed in multiple editions. Finally, the most recent addition to the rock history canon is rock critic and scholar James Miller's Flowers in the Dustbin: The Rise of Rock and Roll: 1947-1977¹² which covers rock's genesis and development from 1947 through 1977. Miller uses specific incidents to trace broader trends in rock and ends his survey with the rise of punk music and Elvis Presley's death in 1977.

One of the trends linking these histories is a broad perception that by the 1970s rock 'n' roll lost some of rebellious energy, blazing originality and soul as it became more commercial. By the late 1970s the music industry was reaching unprecedented revenues as a result of consolidation. The bulk of the music industry's market share was divided among a select group of music divisions owned by multinational corporations for whom music was only one component of their portfolio, which often included other media such as film companies, TV networks and book publishers. The independent companies which inspired the mainstreaming of R&B music, which inspired rock 'n' roll, were rapidly disappearing, either unable to compete were being absorbed by larger companies. Larger companies were funding safer, more mainstream musicians whose sound was generally less innovative or forceful than the 50s rock 'n' roll and 60s rock, easier to package and sometimes cheaper to produce. These industrial shifts led to the birth of "soft rock," "corporate rock" and other variants of rock that critics and historians viewed as a dilution of rock's grittier sounds and socially subversive image. Many histories also argue that alongside softened variations of rock came genres

¹² Miller, 1999.

primarily defined by style and hype, such as glam and disco, which were musically formulaic and a sign of the 1970s' descent into decadence, excess and artifice. The perception of rock dying pervades many of the histories and partially explains why for example Miller willfully ends his primary discussion with the end of the 1970s. For the sake of focus and scope my discussion covers rock 'n' roll's roots roughly from the post-WWII era through the late 1970s when funk, glam, punk and disco emerged as commercial genres.

McLeod pinpoints a fundamental ideological problem of rock criticism and history which reflects the urgent need for new approaches to discussing rock history:

. . . this ideology of rock criticism that shapes the critical reception of contemporary artists and helps to write the history of rock has functioned to exclude the voices of many kinds of pop artists and audiences. Whether they be sexual exhibitions or cultural displays, there are certain types of expression that are not deemed to be acceptable or legitimate by many rock critics and the communities they represent. Artists . . . whose most visible fans are eight to thirteen year-old girls, are regularly dismissed. Dance-oriented music made by and for gay males, but which often makes its way to the mainstream, is typically ignored as well. This has had the effect, at least within the communities that rock critics represent, of closing off certain possibilities for expression.¹³

¹³ See p.52 in McLeod, Kembrew. "'*1/2': A critique of rock criticism in North America." Popular Music (2001) Volume 20, No. 1, 47-60.

McLeod's argument recognizes that many rock critics double as historians and their cultural biases (racial, gender, age) shape what performers and stories are included in rock's history. What is fascinating about the quotation is McLeod's covert recognition of the discernible niche markets that have emerged that center on identity. It is almost "common sense" that certain music genres are "for" 13-year old teenage girls or gay males. It is significant that in an era when the celebration and preservation of rock is gaining momentum more explicit lines are drawn around the target audiences for genres.

Where McLeod refers to contemporary music genres and audiences, I am exploring music created by gay, lesbian and bisexual musicians in the pre-niche era, the 1950s-1970s, when most musicians simply aimed for the biggest market with less self-conscious regard for demographics. Though the appearance of a "gay music market" may seem "progressive," such categorizing limits the types of artists who can "represent" gayness in the eyes of mass media. Niche marketing often restricts gay, lesbian, bisexual and gender deviant musicians' access to mainstream promotion, and has yet to result in an "out" crossover musician with an openly queer identity, and radio, video, TV, and press support. It is telling that figures such as Elton John and Dusty Springfield came out *after* their commercial peaks.

In contrast, the history of rock I discuss demonstrates how queer musicians were able to crossover with suggestive, rather than explicitly marked images, and how the music industry, which underwent immense structural changes during the post-WWII era, provided the means for their mainstream access. Liberace may have been "closeted" his whole life and Elton John during his commercial peak, but one cannot

simply read their closeted existences as barriers to their commercial success or sad symbols of the times. Many people perceived them to be gay, and their campy, sentimental images did not hinder their overall appeal, which was vast. This offers a very different story of what constitutes “progress,” especially today when no gay or lesbian singer of the present is likely to ever reach Liberace and Elton John’s broad appeal because the proverbial category, a rigid version of queerness, is prematurely out of the bag and has been contained. The burgeoning awareness of gay and lesbian markets in the 1980s, the onset of gay and lesbian “chic” in the 1990s and ongoing developments in niche marketing have reduced sex and gender deviance to a trend and lifestyle with discernible traits as exclusive in their definition of what/who defines deviance as they are inclusive. Thus, “difference” is not an impetus for exploration or understanding; rather it becomes a familiar commodity which appears normalized but is secondary in every structural and perceptive dimension. To assess the historical arc, which has found gay, lesbian and bisexual musicians more free to be open about their sexuality but also more limited in the possibility to reach audiences beyond niches, I base my argument in the historical and theoretical work of gay and lesbian studies and queer theory.

Gay and Lesbian Studies

The emergence of gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender (GLBT) people as a discernible minority group with distinct political and cultural concerns is an ongoing struggle begun in the early immediate post-WWII era which continues in contemporary

political and cultural landscape.¹⁴ For the sake of clarity, it is important to note that most of these histories focus on gay men and lesbians, with cursory attention to trans-people and bisexuals. Because the performers I study are gay, lesbian and bisexual, all non-normative sexual identities I refer to them and the communities who share their sexual orientation as “queer.” Though trans- people fit under the queer rubric and experience homophobic and genderphobic discrimination, their gender struggles are related but ultimately distinct from the issues my dissertation addresses. I use the terms gay and lesbian when referring to specific male and female experiences where appropriate.

¹⁴ D’Emilio, John. Sexual Politics, Sexual Communities: The Making of a Homosexual Minority in the United States 1940-1970. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998. D’Emilio focuses on queer political organizing from the post-WWII period through gay liberation which illustrates the earliest roots of queer activism and historic parallels between the eras. D’Emilio discusses mid-’40s urban queer groups, 31-3; the formation and activities of the Mattachine Society, 59-91, the Daughters of Bilitis, 101-5, homophile organizing, 109-24; increasing urban militancy, with an emphasis on New York, San Francisco, Washington D. C. and Philadelphia, 150-214; and concludes with a discussion of gay liberation’s growth from the New Left, 227-39; Loughery, John. The Other Side of Silence: Men’s Lives and Gay Identities: A Twentieth Century History. New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1998. Loughery discusses the following post-WWII political formations including the following: the Mattachine Society, the Daughters of Bilitis, the ONE institute and the publication of ONE, 218-38; ‘60s homophile organizing, gay liberation, ‘70s activism, 303-55; struggles for ‘70s anti-discrimination legislation, including the Anita Bryant protests, 371-88 and AIDS activism, 419-36; McGarry, Molly and Fred Wasserman, eds. Becoming Visible: An Illustrated History of Lesbian and Gay Life in Twentieth Century America. New York: The Penguin Group, 1998. The authors trace queer political organizing from the end of WWII including homophile groups, gay liberation, lesbian feminism, AIDS activism and queer politics, 140-252; Faderman, Lilian. Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers: A History of Lesbian Life in Twentieth Century America. New York: Columbia University Press, 1991. Faderman addresses important developments in lesbian organizing starting with ‘40s lesbian bar culture and symbolized by Lisa Ben publishing Vice Versa, 129. She discusses the following developments: Daughters of Bilitis formation and activity, 148-50, ‘50s tensions between assimilation and differentiation, splits in age, 180-87, lesbian participation in homophile, liberation and lesbian feminist cultures, 189-244, tensions between cultural feminists and sexual radicals, 247-70.

The notion of queer people as a group poised to resist institutional discrimination, is not confined to public policy, but extends to higher education. Since the 1970s colleges and universities have incorporated multicultural and cultural diversity curriculum initiatives to expand students' understanding of America's complex history and the richness of its heterogeneity.¹⁵ Thus identity-based programs such as African-American Studies and Women's Studies emerged from activist scholars. Gay and Lesbian Studies, either as autonomous programs or a concentration area within Feminist, Women's and/or Gender Studies departments or programs have also emerged as an important pillar of multicultural studies, primarily in academia among scholars in the arts and humanities and social sciences.

City College of San Francisco established the first gay and lesbian studies department at an American Institution of higher education in 1988.¹⁶ The department emerged after a college wide diversity course requirement was initiated and developed curricula by collaborating with traditional disciplines and adopting pre-existing courses.¹⁷ Certainly gay and lesbian themed courses existed prior to formal departments,¹⁸ and in the mid-1980s Yale University established a lesbian and gay

¹⁵ See p. 1 in Minton, Henry. "The Emergence of Gay and Lesbian Studies." Gay and Lesbian Studies. Ed. Henry L. Minton. Binghamton, New York: The Haworth Press, 1992. 1-6.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ See p. 113-6 in Collins. Jack. "Matters of Fact: Establishing a Gay and Lesbian Studies Department." Gay and Lesbian Studies. Ed. Henry L. Minton. Binghamton, New York: The Haworth Press, 1992. 109-23.

¹⁸ See p. xv, "It will be sufficient merely to point out that what now looks like work in lesbian/gay studies has been going on for well over two decades, and that its pace and intensity have quickened enormously in the last dozen years," from Abelow, Henry, Michèle Aina Barale, and David M. Halperin. "Introduction." The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader. Eds. Henry Abelow, Michèle Aina Barale, and David M. Halperin, New York: Routledge, 1993. xv-xvii.

studies center and launched a conference series on lesbian, bisexual and gay issues.¹⁹ However the establishment of a department was symbolically and materially significant for providing a potential blueprint for other programs. Currently there are numerous programs and research centers devoted to research on the lives of queer people. Queer-oriented bookstores and bookstore sections are littered with works in this idiom covering visual art, politics, mass media, history, and psychology.

It would be impossible to provide a central definition of the field because the sexual identities themselves are complex and as Abelove, etc. notes subject, practitioners, methods or themes do not exclusively define the diverse field, though it does tend to exist in the arts and humanities and social sciences.²⁰ Still several writers have attempted to define the general objectives of the field. The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader, an early anthology, defines the field as one which “. . . focuses intense scrutiny on the cultural production, dissemination and vicissitudes of sexual meanings” by establishing the analytical centrality of sex and sexuality within many different fields of inquiry; expressing and advancing the interests of lesbians, bisexuals, and gay men and contributing culturally and intellectually to the contemporary lesbian/gay movement.” Though critics and scholars sometimes erect an ideological gulf between gay/lesbian studies and queer theory, the anthology’s editors note the field is an “oppositional design” concerned with the “social struggle for sexual liberation/personal

¹⁹ Minton, 1.

²⁰ See Abelove, Barale, Halperin, xv and p. 10 in Escoffier, Jeffrey. “Generations and Paradigms: Mainstreams in Lesbian and gay Studies.” Gay and Lesbian Studies. Ed. Henry L. Minton. Binghamton, New York: The Haworth Press, 1992. 7-26. See p. 1 of Corber, Robert J. and Stephen Valocchi, eds. Queer Studies: An Interdisciplinary Reader, Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2003. The Introduction notes how Queer Studies has, “transformed the study of gender and sexuality in both the humanities and the social sciences.”

freedom/dignity/equality/human rights of lesbians, bisexuals and gay men” and “informed by resistance to homophobia and heterosexism.”²¹

As a diverse field dedicated to the exploration of gays and lesbians in multiple disciplines the field has generated pivotal works which expand our understanding of American history. My dissertation draws from several histories that trace the increased visibility of queer people and the medical, legal, political and cultural battles such communities continue to resist.²² Gay and lesbian studies often discuss the presence of queer characters, themes and subjectivities in film, literature, TV and theatre. But music is an under-theorized area within most broad surveys of queer American History. Among the histories I use, McGarry and Wasserman note urban disco communities and the women’s music as GLBT social phenomena, and Faderman discusses women’s music in the context of lesbian feminism.²³ Otherwise one must turn to sections in cultural anthologies such as Lavender Culture²⁴ or books broadly surveying queer performers (Hadleigh) or interpret songs (Studer) for discussions of post-WWII queer

²¹ Abelove, etc., xvi.

²² See note 14 for D’Emilio, Loughery, McGarry and Wasserman and Faderman citation information.

²³ McGarry and Wasserman discuss disco, 95-7 and women’s music, 194. Faderman discusses women’s music, 220-4.

²⁴ Aviccolli discusses the ‘70s androgyny trend and surveys several discernibly gay/lesbian/androgynous songs and performers, 182-9. Shapiro discusses the women’s music business, 195-200 in Aviccolli, Tommi. “Images of Gays in Rock Music.” Lavender Culture. Eds. Karla Jay and Allen Young. New York: New York University Press, 1994. 182-94 and Shapiro, Lynne. “The Growing Business Behind Women’s Music.” in Lavender Culture. Eds. Karla Jay and Allen Young. New York: New York University Press, 1994. 195-200

popular musicians.²⁵ Ultimately, however, this is the first book-length study which connects GLBT history with rock history and post-WWII cultural history.

Gay and lesbian studies is valuable in acknowledging the pervasive influence of queer people in American culture and the shifts in consciousness which fostered increased visibility. These findings are essential to my understanding of post-WWII queer lives. However, the historical emphasis on the presence and contributions of queer people does not always result in sustained critical interrogations of the United States' sexual and gender economies. Historians, seeking to document events and identify key figures often treat homophobia and sexism as anomalous when evidence would suggest their deep roots in American consciousness and behavior. The larger issues of citizenship, specifically what are the parameters of equal citizenship and what behaviors and identities are permissible, sometimes go unexamined in historic work. As Shane Phelan has noted, "Citizenship is about participation in the social and political life of a political community, and as such is not confined to a list of legal protections and inclusions. It is just as much about political and cultural visibility. 'Visibility,' of course, is not one thing, nor is it necessarily and always good. Assertions that visibility is essential to gay and lesbian citizenship, like arguments about the visibility of blacks and other minorities, introduce further questions: Who among these diverse groups is to be visible? Is all visibility good?"²⁶ The questions of who comprises queer communities, what political possibilities exist for them, how scholars can discuss queer

²⁵ Hadleigh, Boze. Sing Out!: Gays and Lesbians in the Music World. New York: Barricade Books Inc., 1997. and Studer, Wayne. Rock on the Wild Side: Gay Male Images in Popular Music of the Rock Era. San Francisco: Leyland Publications, 1994.

²⁶ See p. 3 in Phelan, Shane. Sexual Strangers: Gays, Lesbians and Dilemmas of Citizenship. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2001.

culture without relying on narrow typologies and how the field can extend beyond the academy and maintain its intellectual integrity are challenges for the field.

Gay and lesbian studies is central to my study, but like any field it has limitations necessitating the use of other theories alongside it to address larger issues of normalcy, deviance and cultural participation I aim to address. Unlike conservative critics who suggest gay and lesbian studies lacks educational value, scholarly legitimacy and is political propaganda, I believe the field is necessary and important.²⁷ There are several limitations I discuss in my Conclusion which suggest there are intellectual questions the field could begin to raise or develop more thoroughly. Such limitations have influenced my choice to draw from gay and lesbian studies, particularly historical overviews of 20th century queer American life, and the field of queer theory. Both are oppositional by design, but queer theory raises several unique and compelling questions about relationships between normalcy and sexuality. For example, it is more attentive to the ways bisexuality and trans- identities challenge heterosexual/homosexual binaries and notions of gender normative behavior.

Queer Theory

Queer theory's relevance to my historical analysis is its questioning of what constitutes the very norms I am defining queer people and behavior against. My dissertation is as much about the economies of normalcy, especially the gender

²⁷ Examples which summarize some of the controversies include the following: Bull, Chris. "Theoretical Battles" *The Advocate*. 29 September 1998. 44, 47. Bull quotes Ward Connerly and Harold Bloom's criticisms of gay studies. In Nussbaum, Martha. "The Softness of Reason." *The New Republic*. 13 and 20 1992 July. 26-7, 30, 32, 34-5, she defends the field and addresses the charges of many conservative critics including Dinesh D' Souza.

economy, of the eras I cover as it is about the ability of musicians to negotiate such expectations. Penn distinguishes queer theory from gay and lesbian studies by noting how, “Instead of aiming to find homosexuality in history, the notion of ‘queer’ asks that we examine the construction of the normal and, in the process, map the deviant.”²⁸ Penn posits queer as an analytical tool “. . . that allows us to re-read personal experiences and cultural prescriptions and proscriptions through a lens focused on how the normal gets constructed and maintained.”²⁹ By rejecting “. . . a minoritizing logic of toleration or simple political interest-representation in favor of a more thorough resistance to regimes of the normal” and “pointing out a wide field of normalization, rather than simple intolerance, as the site of violence,”³⁰ the paradigm enables scholars to assess homophobia and heterosexism not as unusual social and political tendencies about as fundamental structures of a culture which moralizes, idealizes and enforces normalcy as the cornerstone of national virtue.

Queer theory, as a distinct academic milieu, grew directly from developments in feminist scholarship, and is spiritually indebted to the pioneering work of Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida and post-structural theory. Most historians of queer theory acknowledge Teresa de Lauretis as the earliest user of the term queer to describe her scholarship.³¹ She proposed the term as a way of rethinking gay and lesbian identity:

²⁸ See p. 34 in Penn, Donna. “Queer: Theorizing Politics and History.” Radical History Review. 62 (Spring 1995). 24-42.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ See p. xxvi in Michael Warner. “Introduction.” Fear of a Queer Planet: Queer Politics and Social Theory. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993. vii-xxxi.

³¹ See p. 5 for a discussion of Queer Theory’s feminist roots and p. 20-5 for a discussion of its post-structural roots in Turner, William B. A Genealogy of Queer Theory. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2000. Beemyn and Eliason acknowledge de

. . . based on the speculative premise that homosexuality is no longer to be seen simply as marginal with regard to a dominant, stable form of sexuality (heterosexuality) against which it would be defined either by opposition or by homology. In other words, it is no longer to be seen either as merely transgressive or deviant vis-à-vis a proper, natural sexuality . . . according to the older pathological model, or as just another, optional ‘lifestyle,’ according to the model of contemporary North American pluralism Thus, rather than marking the limits of the social space by designating a place at the edge of culture, gay sexuality in its specific female and male cultural (or subcultural) forms acts as an agency of social process whose mode of functioning is both interactive and yet resistant, both participatory and yet distinct, claiming at once equality and difference.³²

de Lauretis’ formulation along with the work of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and Judith Butler set the pace for a diverse field of inquiry too vast to neatly summarize. But there

Lauretis noting, “One of the earliest uses of the term ‘queer theory’ was in a special issue of differences, edited by Teresa de Lauretis, which was entitled ‘Queer Theory: Lesbian and Gay Sexualities.’” See p. 163 in Beemyn, Brett and Mickey Eliason, eds. Queer Studies: A Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Anthology. New York and London: New York University Press, 1996. Corber and Valocchi note queer theory “. . . is deeply indebted to the modes of feminist analysis developed by women’s studies scholars in the 1980s,” see p. 6, and also note how Foucault’s definition of power as a the result of discursive gestures is also central to the development of queer theory, see p. 10-12.

³² de Lauretis, Teresa. “Queer Theory: Lesbian and Gay Sexualities, An Introduction.” Differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies 3 (Summer 1991): iii-xviii.

are useful and recognizable characteristics of the field I will emphasize to indicate how I use and understand the field.

Jagose, who wrote a wide-ranging introduction to queer theory's origins, usage and controversies provided a useful definition of the term itself noting, "Broadly speaking, queer describes those gestures or analytical models which dramatise incoherencies in the allegedly stable relations between chromosomal sex, gender and sexual desire. Resisting that model of stability-which claims heterosexuality as its origin, when it is more properly its effect-queer focuses on mismatches between sex, gender, and desire."³³ Her definition, which synthesizes many essential strands of queer scholarship isolated the term as one which challenged the artificiality of stable categories, which are more fluid than stable given their vulnerable to changes in social conditions. It also revealed the way traditional fields of study are often constructed with heteronormative biases limiting their ability to capture experience beyond a narrow conception of what is central or normal.

For example, the nature of history writing, as practiced in many of the rock histories I survey, is to focus on the broadest trends as representative of the larger industrial culture and society. Such an approach assumes popularity as a neutral value rather than a circumstance fostered by repackaged reproductions of the familiar. This is particularly true of rock 'n' roll which maintained racial and sexual hierarchies in its marketing and promotion practices despite the revolutionary rhetoric historians attach to it. Even when such histories choose to focus on subcultures, they tend to emphasize

³³ See p. 3. in Jagose, Annamarie. Queer Theory: An Introduction. New York: New York University Press, 1996.

gender and sexually normative performance cultures which offer an antidote to the “softness” of pop such as punk, early hip-hop and punk’s successor, modern rock.

Jagose’s definition ties directly to Turner’s discussion of some of Queer Theory’s most consistent objectives. The list below is not exhaustive or attempting to be definitive but succinctly illustrates a generally consistent set of themes relevant to my use of queer theory, including the following:

- 1) Queer theorists challenge assumptions of scholarly objectivity which somehow renders humanists and social scientists able to transcend human bias. “Rather than assuming identities grounded in rational, dispassionate reflection as the basis for scholarship and politics, queer theorists wish to ask how we produce such identities.”³⁴
- 2) Queer theorists are focused on discourse and textual analysis because the creation and circulation of language structures our understanding of identity, behavior and what constitutes norms and common sense notions, and how such hierarchies are generated. Turner notes the liminality of the field in its quest to liberate consciousness beyond accepted categories and perceptions when he states that “. . . queer theorists have not arrived at a scheme for what should replace existing modes. Instead they seem to agree that the present project should consist primarily of elaborating the problems with

³⁴ “Queer theorists suspect, however, that the scholarly ideal of dispassionate reflection, with reason as one’s only guide, entails a refusal to recognize the multiple ways in which cultural and psychological factors influence what we think and write. Turner, 5; “Queer theory begins with a suspicion: that the predominant modes of intellectual and political activity in western culture during the late twentieth century do not serve the needs and interests of queers and that perhaps that cannot be made to do so. Queer theory is oppositional.” Turner, 9-10.

existing intellectual and political modes, especially by studying how those modes function, while leaving open as possible the question of what should replace them.”³⁵

Many critics have described the field’s emphasis on language as ineffectual, apolitical and elitist. For example, Sullivan argues, “Of course for liberationists, language is already a form of control; the political use of it is merely the exchange of one form of control for another—it is a power grab. But the truth is that although language is susceptible to control and manipulation, it must also serve the complex needs of countless complicated individuals and must therefore reflect the results of a million choices and a myriad moments of human choice and interaction. Language that seeks to control by forcing meanings onto such a society will ultimately fail to work.”³⁶

In response to such criticism Turner justifies the critical focus of queer theory when he notes, “Such criticism, often more simplistic than the work it aims at, overlooks the basic point that language itself is real and material, and it overlooks the important ways in which identity functions like a language . . . both produce an infinite, yet infinitely intelligible, array of outcomes. The intelligibility of each depends on the accumulation of meaning through repetition. Identity categories and nouns convey meaning according to a structure of binary oppositions, with one term of any pair

³⁵ See Turner, 9-10.

³⁶ See p. 8 in Sullivan, Andrew. Virtually Normal: An Argument About Homosexuality. New York: Vintage Books, 1996. Jagose discusses Sherri Paris, Jeffrey Escoffier’s critiques of queer theory as elitist, inaccessible, and insular, 110-11; Bawer quotes Wayne Dynes’ belief that the term is elite, on p. x in Bawer, Bruce, ed. “Introduction.” Beyond Queer: Challenging Gay Left Orthodoxy. New York: The Free Press, 1996.

; Kirsch laments the supposed replacement of “class” as a unit of analysis with “discourse” which reveals a strong Marxist orientation, a narrow perception of language as antithetical to “politics,” and the presumption that the modern academy has somehow failed social movements because it fosters the generation of ideas rather than serving as a political advocacy organization. 4, 8, 9, 17, 30-1.

valued more highly than the other . . . Finally, while identity results from individuals' interactions with the 'real' world, we have access to that world only through language."³⁷

3) "Queer theorists typically wish to investigate the historical and cultural underpinnings of nouns such as 'woman,' 'homosexual,' 'gay,' and 'lesbian' in order to examine what sorts of generalizations and assumptions enable the referential functions, and determine the meanings, of those terms."³⁸ Turner's point alludes to an issue I mention earlier, which is the complexity of terms society employs to classify and "understand" human behavior. Such categorizations can be useful for organizing and are not likely the direct result of conspiracies to harm. But such terms have a binarizing logic Sedgwick intricately describes in Epistemology of the Closet that results in genuine consequences under the guise of rationality.³⁹ Classifying people as discernible types sometimes serves as a rationalization for hierarchies because such terms are often informed by biases and assumptions which define certain groups inferior to and thus less worthy of consideration than others.

The homosexual/heterosexual and gay/straight binaries that American society has employed throughout the 20th century are imbued with vernacular assumptions about morality, public health, mental health, and social value, among other things, which have fueled overt intellectual, political, and religious persecution toward queer gender and sexual actors. Such discrimination does not instantly render gay, lesbian, and homosexual, obsolete, but continues to inspire inquiries as to how they are used,

³⁷ See Turner, 32-3.

³⁸ See Turner, 33.

³⁹ Sedgwick, Eve Kosofsky. Epistemology of the Closet. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990.

who uses them and how their meanings change. An awareness of what behaviors signify gender and sexual deviance in a particular era is essential to understanding how individuals form their subjectivities and negotiate their behavior in relation to norms of the time. For example the transition of lesbians from virtual invisibility in the popular press of the 1950s and 1960s, (most 60s popular press stories I cite focus almost exclusively on male homosexuality) to the press infatuation with “lesbian chic” in the 1990s illustrates how the meaning and social utility of the term changes. Whereas lesbians of the 50s and 60s were as secondary and invisible as straight women of the same eras, during the 1990s the popular press codified lesbianism as a trendy, femme lifestyle, packaged it as a form of male sexual titillation, and in the process dissociated it from lesbian-feminist politics, downplayed lesbians of color and obscured “butch” lesbianism. The easy commodification of queer identities speaks to the cultural moment in a way that challenges any attempts to define terms as stable and transhistorical. Thus, throughout my discussion I ground my discussions of gender and sexual behavior in the gender economies of the eras because they reveal how representations of identity categories vary based on chronology, politics, race, gender etc. The shifting meanings of queerness can be gleaned through the historical explorations I engage with. Queer theory continues to be a controversial field not only from reactionary conservatives but also people within or close to the field. There are several important questions queer theory must address in order to remain useful and effective. I discuss its limitations for the study of popular culture and politics in the Conclusion.

My dissertation draws from gay/lesbian studies and queer theory approaches but I do not rigidly cohere to either. I critique the hegemonic correlation of popular music

and cultural revolution with expressions of heterosexual experience and consciousness, an assumption most rock histories perpetually construct. Any attempt to discuss queer lives necessitates recovering the often obscured or invisible history of queer Americans. Thus, I explore select historical expressions of queer gender and sexual identity from the post-WWII period through the end of the 20th century. The descriptive focus of gay/lesbian studies continues to yield tangible examples of queer experience illustrating queer presence and the intra-community differences defining American queerness. Queer theory's larger focus on the central role of sexuality and gender in the ways normalcy is defined, and how history and experience are discussed is crucial for expanding our thinking about cultural values and the potential for full participation as citizens.

Augmenting Gay and Lesbian Studies and Queer Theory

Having established why this is a work of queer theory with relevance to gay/lesbian studies, I explore two ways to expand upon both fields' ideological focus. Christopher Nealon's notion of the "proto-historical" and Marlon Ross' notion of a "crossover dynamic" in queer communities inform my historicization of queer musicians and the cultural critique my analysis offers. Both methods transcend normal disciplinary boundaries by mixing literary critique and historical analysis. Further both challenge the notion of a central politic that can address the needs of all or most people of a particular identity.

In Foundlings: Lesbian and Gay Historical Emotion Before Stonewall

Christopher Nealon's literary analysis of queer literature suggests the possibility of a

pre-Liberationist queer consciousness, that enable readings of queer culture along the “fault lines” rather than an explicitly progressive or liberationist grain.⁴⁰ Beginning with the notion of the “proto-historical” Nealon recognizes the historical worth of the fragmentary, islanded or anecdotal utterance.⁴¹ Rooted in New Historicism, he posits the anecdote as offering the possibility of homosexuality as pre-historical and legitimately historical.⁴² His unique approach examines pre-Liberationist culture without simply reducing its modes as the gestures of an antiquated “closet” culture. Nealon uses Hart Crane poems, Willa Cather literature, ‘50s physique magazines and lesbian pulp novels to sketch “the interstices of the perpetual becoming-historical” of queer sexuality.⁴³ Nealon avoids the “from pathology to politics” model gay/lesbian studies sometimes employs to describe a queer progression from individual inverts to individual liberal subjects. Instead he posits his literary examples as sketches for the movements of a sexuality that is open to a hopeful earliness *in* history not before it. He defines this earliness as available to people other than the young and official participants in the political movements that began to form in the late 40s/early 50s.⁴⁴

The possibilities for bonding and connection existed in cultural forms pre-dating formal political organizing which negates attempts to confine pre-Stonewall/Liberation culture to the paradigm of the “closet.” Subtle forms of queer culture shaped individuals and held the possibility to connect individuals through

⁴⁰ See p. 22-3 in Nealon, Christopher. Foundlings: Lesbian and Gay Historical Emotion Before Stonewall Durham: Duke University Press, 2001.

⁴¹ See Nealon, 19.

⁴² See Nealon, 20.

⁴³ See Nealon, 139.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

mutual taste culture. Bonding, especially among the marginal, fosters points-of-connection that generate cultural and political organizing.

It is commonsensical to frame pre-Liberation gays, such as Liberace as embarrassing “pre-Stonewall” gays who *had* to hide their sexuality behind “closeted” behavior. For example Liberace could be easily dismissed as “camp” or Mathis as asexual. But such a condescending perception would overlook the tools of pre-political survival and the compliance of their audiences in an informal contract of qualified acceptance. Their identities cannot be easily understood using identity politics or liberationist thought. They are not reducible to “the closet” because their very public negotiations of gender/sexuality shrewdly resisted gender and performance norms in surprisingly liberated ways for the popular culture of their era.

Taking a cue from Nealon my research does not privilege Stonewall or the 70s formation of Liberationist organizing as an inherent “progression” from post-WWII queer culture because both exist on a continuum. Queer people from both periods had complex challenges to negotiate for the sake of industrial and personal survival. Further, it is difficult to prove that either subtle or overt approaches more clearly benefited queer people. Fortunately, queer politics is too complex to be reduced to such simplistic tensions. From Nealon’s argument it is clear that cultural and social bonds directly connected queer individuals (i.e. spatially, socially, emotionally), enabled them to define themselves in relation to queer heritage and constantly generate cultural traditions.

The 50s and 60s queer musicians I discuss represent complex negotiations of geography, race, ethnicity, gender, and sexuality whose experiences unhinge the closet

doors of the pre-Liberation “pathology” era. However, these musicians still operate in relationship to a culture centered on the structure of feeling of normalcy in numerous areas including sexual and gender expression. As Heather K. Love noted in her critical re-reading of The Well of Loneliness:

We need a genealogy of queer affect that embraces the negative, shameful, and difficult feelings central to queer existence. We have been used to thinking of such affect as waste, the inevitable by-product of our historical tough luck. But as long as homophobia structures our public and private lives, and books like The Well continue to be so eerily familiar, we cannot do without an analysis of the intimate effects of homophobia . . . Celebration gets us only so far, for pride itself can be toxic when it is sealed off from the shame that has nurtured it.⁴⁵

As I noted earlier, queer musicians’ struggles are not single-stranded or simply expressions of repressed sexuality. Further, many post-Stonewall era queer musicians embody the “becoming-historical” model, in relation to queer listeners, through subtly and persuasively communicating queer experiences in ways that more overt and seemingly “uncloseted” expressions do (or could) not. The “pathology to progress” notion tends to operate on an assumption that time = progress, (i.e. things are only getting better) Yet the ongoing presence of musicians operating in the subtle “becoming-historical” realm suggests that such an equation is faulty precisely because

⁴⁵ See p. 515 in Love, Heather K. “‘Spoiled Identity’: Stephen Gordon’s Loneliness and the Difficulties of Queer History.” GLQ. 7: 4, (2001). 487-519.

political trends of liberalism and conservatism are cyclical and do not represent ultimate paradigm shifts.

Marlon Ross' notion of a "crossover dynamic" among queer people also informs my approach because it is an anti-essentialist argument which recognizes how queer sexuality operates in concert with other parts of personal identity. Ross makes two compelling arguments. First, he argues that queers represent every imaginable cultural group and bring this traditional cultural orientation with them when they enter into queer culture. Second, Ross notes how for many queers, queer cultural affiliation is often secondary (always succeeding acculturation in some other racial, ethnic, religious group) and invisible. His notion recognizes queer complexity and suggests a wide range of nuances inform the way queer people negotiate and express their identities. The "crossover dynamic" enables us to acknowledge the potential value of queer visibility/contributory, and/or overtly resistant representative strategies. But it recognizes that such approaches do not exhaust the possibilities of what strategies comprise progressive representations of queer cultural history and opens up the possibility to consider how such strategies can operate on a continuum. Because queer communities resist essentialism there is no uniform or ideal vision of what defines justice and progress to queer historic images, which provides room for a vast range of representations.⁴⁶

Queer theorists sometimes posit radical notions of behavior and identity, such as cross-dressing, as examples of social critique. For example Warner describes the

⁴⁶ See p. 502 in Ross, Marlon. "Some Glances at the Black Fag: Race, Same-Sex Desire, and Cultural Belonging." *African-American Literary Theory: A Reader*. Ed. Winston Napier, New York: New York University Press. 2000. 498-522.

intimacy and ethics of queer lives as a “special kind of sociability that holds queer culture together.” Notably he views “dignity in shame” as a queer culture bond that rejects the notion of sex as an indignity. As interesting and articulate as these notions are his articulation of a central ethic of, “Get over yourself. Put a wig on before you judge. And the corollary is that you stand to learn most from people you think are beneath you,” cannot satisfy the political concerns of many queers of color for whom aspiration from the bottom are a historical reality for social and economic underclasses.⁴⁷ For example, among queers of color and post-colonial queer men, the concept of a self-conscious, “out” queer identity operates differently from the late 60s America “coming out” paradigm. Scholarship on Chicano and Filipino queer men has addressed issues of cultural relativity and sexual identity.⁴⁸ Among African-American queers, their explicitly racialized sexuality has never been “normal.” The notion of public sex and gender subversion as a radical affront to what Warner’s terms “bourgeois propriety” may amplify the queer critique of sexual non-conformity for queers who are part of the dominant race and economically secure.⁴⁹ But such a formulation does not account for a broad racial struggle to present notions of African-American intimacy and sexuality that counter colonially-constructed sexual pathologies.⁵⁰

⁴⁷ See p. 35-6 in Warner, Michael. The Trouble With Normal: Sex, Politics and the Ethics of Queer Life. New York: The Free Press, 1999.

⁴⁸ See for example Almaguer, Tomás. “Chicano Men: A Cartography of Homosexual Identity and Behavior.” The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader. Eds. Henry Abelove, Michèle Aina Barale, and David M. Halperin, New York: Routledge, 1993. 255-73. and Manalansan IV, Martin F. “Searching for Community: Filipino Gay Men in New York City.” Asian American Sexualities: Dimensions of the Gay & Lesbian Experience. Ed. Russell Leong. New York and London: Routledge, 51-64.

⁴⁹ See Warner, The Trouble With Normal, 36.

⁵⁰ For discussions of African-American identity and sexual respectability in the context of queer ness see the following: Harper, Phillip Brian. “Eloquence and Epitaph: Black

In my discussion of African-American performers Johnny Mathis and Little Richard I note the complex strategies they employed to gain commercial favor. Both had to carefully negotiate their queer sexuality and the “racial threat” presented by black men singing songs about love and sex to white audiences in the 1950s. Mathis projected an earnest, asexual approach to singing and self-presentation whereas Little Richard took a more exaggerated approach which deflected attention from both “differences.” Both approaches required these performers to negotiate sexual *and* racial closets fostered by historic prejudices. Their strategies reflect historic realities and are queer in the tense relationships with “normalcy” they reveal.

As women Dusty Springfield and Laura Nyro contended with an industry unaccustomed to women asserting creative control, tendencies which inspired Springfield’s reputation as “difficult” and critical hostility toward Nyro’s integration of her politics into her music. As a British citizen Springfield, who moved to Los Angeles after coming out as bisexual to the English press, had to adjust to American attitudes toward sexuality and gender, which may have kept her more closeted than her initial press statement originally indicated. British singers David Bowie and Elton John may have also felt more comfortable toying with gender conventions and coming out as bisexuals in the 70s because of a more accepting relationship toward “camp” and

Nationalism and the Homophobic Impulse in Responses to the Death of Max Robinson.” Ed. Michael Warner. *Fear of a Queer Planet: Queer Politics and Social Theory*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993. 239-63; Thomas, Kendall. “‘Ain’t Nothin’ Like the Real Thing’: Black Masculinity, Gay Sexuality, and the Jargon of Authenticity.” in *The House that Race Built*. Ed. Wahneema Lubiano. New York: Vintage Books, 1998. 116-35; Williams, Rhonda. “Living at the Crossroads: Explorations in Race, Nationality, Sexuality and Gender.” in *The House that Race Built*. Ed. Wahneema Lubiano. New York: Vintage Books, 1998. 136-56.

artifice in performance 70s British culture than America.⁵¹ Such differences in race, gender, and nationality limit the ability of one strategy as an overarching model of what activities constitute progress. Thus there is no “ideal” queer performer whose negotiation of commercial pressures for gender conformity and personal need for a fulfilling sexual identity can provide a universal model for all queer performers. The link these performers share is resistance, in covert and overt forms, to narrow ideas of sexual and gender appropriate behavior. Cultural struggles against gender and sexual conformity, in concert with sexism, racism, economic biases, etc. embody the larger tyranny of cultural norms or standards that affect the shape of cultural participation.

Unlike Asian-American Studies, Gay and lesbian Studies and queer theory are not nation-based fields. Nor are queers generally “marked” by discernible phenotypical features. However, queers represent a wide cross-section of experiences. Their experiences must be understood in the context of an increasing decentralization that has eroded any semblance of a uniform political objective, if there ever was one, beyond a general struggle against oppression, which is interchangeable with the complexities of seeking “justice.”

Significance within American Studies

The intellectual interest in defining and understanding the nature of American

⁵¹ In reference to the cultural context of Springfield’s sexuality her biographers Valentine and Wickham note, “Brought up in a homophobic world in which to be camp was forgivable but to be gay was a crime . . .” p. 167 in Valentine, Penny and Vicki Wickham. Dancing With Demons: The Authorized Biography of Dusty Springfield. New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2000. Though they are referring to Springfield’s self-image this is applicable to the “campy” images of Bowie and John.

experience and consciousness fundamentally defines American Studies.⁵² The field has chiefly focused on the analysis of literary texts as its mode of analysis and just as the definition of what qualifies as texts worthy of study continues to expand toward popular culture (as opposed to an early emphasis on “high culture”) and the field has expanded its definition of what constitutes American experience. One of the key components Gene Wise's description of the “Coming Apart” stage of American Studies is the discipline's widening of boundaries to acknowledge cultural pluralism. In this stage, anthropological definitions of culture, the role of social structures undergirding artistic and intellectual expression and a reflexive temper of scholars emerged as traits of the discipline. A pluralistic approach, a rediscovery of the particular in American culture, an emphasis on proportion rather than an essence in cultural experience, and a comparative cross-cultural approach chronicling the shift from agrarian to industrialization are additional trends defining this period.⁵³ These characteristics operated in tension with American Studies' foundational approach rooted in the myth-symbol school, by acknowledging the complex, decentralized nature of American identity as opposed to an idealized homogeneity. Further, as a result of increased social

⁵² American Studies pioneer Henry Nash Smith defined the field as one concerned with “the study of American Culture, past and present, as a whole” and “the way in which subjective experience is organized,” 1. See Smith, Henry Nash. “Can ‘American Studies’ Develop A Method?” Locating American Studies: The Evolution of a Discipline. Ed. Lucy Maddox. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999. 1-12. The essay originally appeared in American Quarterly, No. 2, Pt. 2 (Summer 1957).

⁵³ See p. 204-5 in Wise, Gene. “‘Paradigm Dramas’ in American Studies: A Cultural and Institutional History of the Movement.” Locating American Studies: The Evolution of a Discipline. Ed. Lucy Maddox. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999. 166-210. Wise’s article originally appeared in American Quarterly 31, No. 3 (1979).

visibility of “minority” movements on the 1960s, early 1970s American Studies scholars began advocating for the expansion of American Studies to include a myriad of studies Wise lists in “Paradigm Dramas” including “. . . black studies, popular culture studies, folklore, women's studies . . . among others.”⁵⁴ In total Wise lists 12 “sub-groups” to be studied and LGBT (or what probably would have been seen as “gay studies”) is not actually listed but implied among the “others.” This seems less a semantic issue than a representative example of how the study of LGBT people is still a marginally practiced in a supposedly more multicultural discipline of American Studies.

“Race, class and gender” is still more common as a mantra in academic discourse than sexuality (or sex or ability, for that matter). It is unclear whether sexuality is subsumed under all three categories or simply deemed less significant in defining identity. Regardless, American Studies scholars have approached the opening up of American Studies to LGBT populations in a very limited fashion. In 1992 T. V. Reed noted how “. . . a rethinking and rewriting of ethnicity, race, gender, sexuality and other modalities of 'difference' has profoundly deepened the challenge to monolithic conceptions of Americanness This rethinking has at the same time profoundly reshaped theories and methods of study.”⁵⁵ In essence the “Coming Apart” stage has fueled a new conception of “American” culture. But, Reed is careful not to overstate the impact of subcultural oriented scholarship noting, “These works should be read as at once substantive contributions to *their fields* [my emphasis], and as critiques of the inadequate theorization of gender, race and other sources of difference in traditional AS

⁵⁴ See Wise, 186.

⁵⁵ See p. 19 in Reed, T. V. “Theory & Method in American Studies: An Annotated Bibliography.” *American Studies International*. 3 (1992): 4-33.

work (as well as in humanities and social science scholarship generally).”⁵⁶ Reed's observation has continued relevance for how differences, specifically in this case GLBT Americans, are studied in American Studies. The absence of writings about GLBT identity in American Studies has only gained serious attention as a weak spot in American Studies over the last two decades as American Studies' scholars have adapted the work of scholars like Michel Foucault and Judith Butler to compensate for the lack of American Studies scholarship on queer identity. The use of scholars outside of American Studies is not unusual for an interdisciplinary field, but is a glaring tendency in a discipline where issues of “difference” are gaining relevance and stature. The “Coming Apart” stage of American studies we are currently practicing, where narrow notions of American identity are shifting has not successfully “come together” in terms of bringing together various strands to move into the next paradigm. American Studies is still in the fledgling stages of actually incorporating “difference” itself rather than adapting it from other fields.

The core issue of my dissertation is to explore how notions of sex and gender normative behavior are a fundamental structure informing how we conceive national history and experience, the persons and behaviors comprising our history and the dissemination of such information. If popular culture is a central source of cultural knowledge, which American Studies fundamentally posits, there is an urgent need to illuminate factors affecting access to participation in popular culture. Popular culture, produced and released via mass media to broad audiences, is not a benign meritocracy. Rather it depends on the circulation of images, behaviors and themes most likely to

⁵⁶ Ibid.

resonate with broad audiences. Ideology is integral to the production and circulation of certain images and behaviors over others. In the post-WWII era popular culture subtly and effectively established normalcy and conformity as cultural ideals and moral virtues. Through the popular press, advertising, film and the burgeoning medium of TV, mass media developed portraits of gender propriety that normalized gender roles and positioned heterosexual experience as quintessential components of American identity. Alternative views of gender behavior and sexual experience were either absent or explicitly defined as deviant, immoral and corrupt. The gender economy of mass media, culture industries created by citizens themselves, reflected the broader American ideas about gender. Given the tandem relationship between the broad gender economy and popular culture, it is unsurprising that significant political, legal and medical developments had to broadly transform the broader cultural consciousness before it was conceivable that queer people could articulate identities, assert their equality as citizens, pride in their identities and argue their lives warranted balanced and portrayals in popular culture.

Two key American political developments, the New Left of the 1960s and the neo-conservatism of the 1980s, anchored the fields of study which immediately preceded the formal creation of women's, gender, and gay and lesbian studies departments and the emergence of queer theory, respectively. Both developments are symbolic of broader trends in contemporary American life. First, a generation of queer individuals who came of age during the post-WWII gender economy, and were inspired by the New Left, many of whom experienced American culture as sex and gender

outsiders, were key initiators of the intellectual study of queer people as a relevant and vital component of American history and experience. As Jeffrey Escoffier notes:

The generation of lesbians and gay men galvanized by Stonewall had already witnessed five tumultuous years of intense political activity that fundamentally challenged American values-black civil rights, the student anti-war movement, the women's movement, and the emergence of the counterculture. The cultural atmosphere was ringing with the ideas of Black Power, sexual revolution and liberation.

[. . .] The search for authenticity underlay the impulse that led gay and lesbian scholars to track down the history of homosexuals. The political significance of black history, the new leftist idea of 'history from the bottom up,' and the feminist motto 'the personal is the political' provided the basis for a new approach to the social history.⁵⁷

Escoffier lists the works of Jonathan Ned Katz, Esther Newton, John D' Emilio, Karla Jay, Lilian Faderman, John De Cecco, James Saslow and Martin Duberman as representing the 1969-1976 "Search for Authenticity" paradigm. The importance of their work, which influenced and co-exists with work in social constructionism, lesbian-feminism, studies of racial and sexual intersections and cultural studies, is that it signaled the first sustained interrogation of what figures and experiences defined American social and cultural history, along the axes of sexuality and gender. By studying neglected areas of experience they revealed not only the hidden histories of

⁵⁷ See Escoffier, 11, 14.

sex and gender deviant lives for “deviants” but established sexuality and gender as central areas of *public cultural experience* relevant to any thorough understanding of individuals’ and groups’ relationship to American culture and history. By “outing” these areas as dimensions of experience beyond individual stigma or private sexual acts they initiated the intellectual inquiry of sexual minority experience in English, History, etc. American Studies began to address in the ‘70s but not necessarily integrate.

The pervasive influence of neo-conservatism in the 1980s resulted in a renewed political and cultural emphasis on normalcy as a virtue linking the majority of Americans. A central marker of the conservative political shift is the circulation of language and rhetoric which courts public support through emotional appeals by defining America as a nation rooted in “traditional values,” “family values,” “moral values” and other political abstractions alluding to conservative interpretations of Judeo-Christian religious traditions. That religious figures are often at the forefront of such movements is indicative of blatant attempts to shape public policy by the tenets of interpretations of religious doctrine. Such political tactics which reify the notion of a cultural mainstream as desirable and dismisses challengers to such notions as subgroups with covert “agendas,” who want “special rights” and “status” accorded to them.⁵⁸

The neo-conservative shift mirrored the increasingly apparent limits of identity politics and inspired a transition in feminist, gay and lesbian studies and literary studies, among other disciplines, toward a broader questioning of how heteronormativity and rigid gender roles structure understandings of history and experience as mediated by the

⁵⁸ For example in Duggan, Lisa. “Queering the State.” *Social Text* 39 (Summer 1994):1-14, Duggan discusses the onslaught of anti-gay initiatives in the early 1990s and attempts to trivialize queer people as a narrow special interest.

humanities and social sciences. Shaped by post-structuralist and postmodern thought, these intellectual endeavors, evident in the work of Teresa de Lauretis, Lisa Duggan, Michael Warner, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, and Judith Butler culminated in the field of “queer theory” which I discuss in-depth elsewhere in this Introduction. Where the Stonewall generation used individual experiences of exclusion as the impetus for inquiring about the country’s gay and lesbian heritage, the new generation questioned the roles of hierarchy and normalcy in shaping cultural knowledge. By questioning the issue of inclusion and the disciplinary practices defining consciousness beyond who gets included they further illuminated how hierarchies regulate vernacular assumptions of inclusion as progress that multiculturalism and identity politics relied upon.

Gay and lesbian studies and queer theory reveal fundamental patterns in American intellectual practices that replicate broader cultural prejudices against those outside of sex and gender norms. Both intellectual developments should be more integrated in the work of American Studies scholarship. By pinpointing how gender economies are created, the cultural reliance on a hierarchy of behaviors and the way such hierarchies affect everyone, we can understand the pervasiveness of “norms” and parameters defining what behaviors and experiences dominate public perceptions. Thus gay and lesbian studies and queer theory directly contribute to a richer understanding of how American culture, history and experience are formed and experienced.

Project Statement and Organization

My dissertation argues that if rock ‘n’ roll is a cultural marker of post-WWII social changes, as rock historians assert, its history must be expanded to include the

experiences of queer musicians. Since the early 1950s queer Americans have established themselves as a legitimate cultural minority group with distinct political and social concerns relevant to the study of popular culture. The alternative history of the rock era I offer illuminates the diverse negotiations of gender conformity and “the closet” characterizing queer people seeking to participate as equal citizens in mainstream American culture. By identifying the musicians I study as “queer” I am not suggesting that they themselves identify with the term. Rather I am referring to behaviors and images, which constituted normalcy and deviance in popular culture during these performers’ careers.

The dissertation is nine chapters, including an introduction and conclusion, divided into two sections. Part I “queers” rock ‘n’ roll history by offering an alternative to the events and characters canonical histories typically feature. Chapter One summarizes rock’ n’ roll history from the mid-1940s through the late 1970s drawn from a cross-section of canonical rock ‘n’ roll histories. I explore the most common historical threads and cultural themes the histories outline. The perception of rock music’s stylistic changes as an emblem of social changes is a dominant theme most histories espouse. For the sake of context I briefly describe the early twentieth century pre-rock music industry and explore how rock ‘n’ roll developed in the mid 1950s from important 1940s developments. Historians attribute numerous factors, including the founding of Broadcast Music International (BMI), major record labels’ neglect of specialty markets, the growth of independent radio stations and various technological changes to the rise of rock ‘n’ roll. I also trace their discussion of rock ‘n’ roll’s shift from the 1955-59 “golden age” to its decline from 1959-63 during the “teen pop” era. In

the early 1960s, the folk-rock movement, British Invasion, Motown, soul music and acid-rock reinvigorated the genre and demonstrated its potential as “art.” By the 1970s many historians argue rock became too market driven and produced numerous genres--soft rock, country rock, glam and disco--which belied the genre’s distinction from “pop” music and lacked its original rebellious spirit. Just as many rock histories end their explorations with the 1970s, I end my synthesis with punk and disco, the last two major commercial genres to emerge at the end of the decade and genres some historians interpret as implosions of the genre.

Chapters Two and Three offer alternative understandings of rock ‘n’ roll. Chapter Two retraces rock ‘n’ roll’s development from the decline of big bands through the death of the “golden age” of rock ‘n’ roll and the genre’s development as a rebellious urban phenomenon. I challenge historically assumed divisions between pop and rock music, the racial and sexual liberation rock ‘n’ roll supposedly proffered and focus on the influx of queer spaces which transformed the post-WWII urban landscape. I describe how the historical de-emphasis on pop is a gendered perception that rock ushered in a more masculinized version of music superior to and more authentic than the feminine sentimentality critics attribute to pre-rock. I also discuss the limited financial and executive power of blacks at independent records labels and in promotional industries, such as radio. I conclude the chapter by discussing central role of queer subcultural formations in post-WWII American urban centers in influencing various rock performers and subgenres, focusing specifically on New York and San Francisco subcultures.

Chapter Three explores the perceived “decline” of rock ‘n’ roll from the teen pop era through the mid-70s era of soft rock, punk, glam and disco. I focus on how rock’s “death” is historically defined by the “softening” of rock in the early 1960s via an increased presence of female performers and more visible female audiences. Death is symbolized in the 70s by more adult-oriented popular music in the early 70s and more decadent genres in the mid to late 70s such as glam and disco. The connections between 60s and 70s contemporary music and pre-rock pop music threatened attempts to define masculine expression as the heart of rock’s vitality. I question rock historians’ consistent denigration of musical and cultural aspects of genres which suggest a pre-rock pop sensibility, such as feminine sensibilities, lush textures and emotional introspection. I discuss these themes by exploring the teen pop era and the supposed death of authentic rhythm and blues in the 1970s. I also contrast critical discussions of acid rock and punk with historic perceptions toward soft rock, glam rock and disco. A critical investment in rock as a roughhewn musical and cultural phenomenon which reflects male heterosexual sensibilities colors the tone of critics and historians who tend to mark rock’s decline as it expands to tastes beyond their narrow vision of the performers and sensibilities representing rock.

Part II explores the specific experiences of a group of musicians who began their recording careers between the 1950s-1970s. I have organized Part II chronologically to mirror cultural and industrial developments discussed in Chapter Three. However, I have written against a narrative of linear progress where conditions for queer people simply improved with time. A range of complex possibilities preceded the liberation era and various limitations and confinements have surfaced in the post liberation era. Each

section details how these musicians' experiences are emblematic of important historical currents related to gender identity, rock historians tend to downplay or ignore. I anchor the musician's experiences in the context of a conglomerated music industry and the transition of queer politics from an ethnic, assimilation model to a more pride-oriented, liberationist approach. I focus on the strategies musicians employ in the pre and post gay-Liberation eras to negotiate cultural expectations of gender propriety, commercial pressures for gender conformity and their personal need for self-understanding.

Chapter Four chronicles how 50s era musicians Liberace and Johnny Mathis negotiated the virile 50s male gender economy by creating explicitly non-threatening personas to avoid public scrutiny. I begin by establishing discernible changes in the gender economy in the post-WWII era which stigmatized effeminacy, softness and non-conformity among men as signs of weakness indicating vulnerability to corruption. I also trace the origins of one of the clearest indicators of the new gender economy, the 50s scandal sheets, forerunners to modern tabloids, prominently featured headlines and cover stories on public figures that did not conform to gender norms. I examine the impact of the 50s gender economy in my interpretation of the personae of Liberace and Johnny Mathis. Liberace crafted a virtually asexual image, equal parts escapist glamour and emotional accessibility, intended to downplay his sex and gender differences but he still garnered press attention. By analyzing reviews of Liberace's TV shows, concert appearances, several scandal sheet stories and two libel suits in which he sought to defend his image, the struggle for control and dignity emerges as a particular challenge characterizing 50s queer life. Using interviews, reviews and biographical materials I reveal how Mathis projected a sexually ambiguous image which quelled the sexual and

racial threats his identities represented. I argue that his emergence in the mid-1950s coincides with the stigma attached to rock 'n' roll as African-American music and musicians with a corrupting influence on whites and the development of the civil rights movement which was deeply rooted in images of African-American respectability. Mathis' balancing of racial and sexual taboos reveals significant intersections of deviant racial and sexual identity.

Chapter Five examines how Johnnie Ray, Esquerita, and Little Richard resisted gender conformity by presenting exaggerated images which initially overshadowed their sexual differences. Ray was a bisexual white singer who integrated the influence of R&B into his singing years before rock 'n' roll. Immensely popular in the early 1950s he was an unusually emotive performer whose fervor countered the cool of 50s male crooners. To balance his intense style, his management concocted a traditional image, including a staged marriage. However, during his initial popularity music reviewers questioned his sincerity and scandal sheets began to question his sexuality. Such perceptions damaged his image and contributed to his career decline. I examine biographical material, concert reviews, promotional materials and tabloid stories to explore his initial commercial success and gradual decline.

Little Richard was an early rock 'n' roll innovator who intentionally performed in an exaggerated style to deflect attention away from his flamboyant image and the racial dangers associated with black singers in mainstream popular culture. I contrast him with Esquerita, an obscure influence on Little Richard who lacked Little Richard's commercial ingenuity. After a few years of success Little Richard left rock 'n' roll to pursue marriage and enter the Adventist ministry. He returned to rock music only to

find himself marginalized in the genre he pioneered. His biography and a series of interviews comprise my analysis of him. Echoes of these performers' approaches resurfaced in the images of flamboyant 70s rock singers who used exaggeration as a commercial strategy.

In Chapter Six I discuss Dusty Springfield and Laura Nyro's careers which overlap the British Invasion and the rise of singer-songwriters in rock and the homophile-to-liberationist transition and lesbian-feminism in gay and lesbian politics. Both women overtly defied music industry norms by striving for artistic autonomy and crafting images which challenged industry perceptions of sexuality and gender behavior. Springfield defied expectations of British female singers by participating in the creative control of her records, and acquired a "difficult" reputation. As she expanded her initial stylistic range toward R&B and more mature material she experienced commercial indifference. In 1970 Springfield "came out" as bisexual in the British press and after moving to the United States she struggled to establish a personal identity outside of music. After struggling with her sexuality, experiencing abusive relationships, substance abuse problems and career setbacks she gradually regained stature in the recording industry. Through an analysis of a mix of her direct comments to the press and various interpretations of her career, her defiance of gender expectations and negotiation of sexuality emerge as central themes affecting her career and personal life.

In the midst of lesbian-feminism and gay liberation Nyro developed her feminist consciousness, cultivated her queer sexuality and added a more political dimension to her music and image. Laura Nyro's career as a songwriter and recording artist peaked in

the late 1960s and led her to several retreats from the pressure of the recording industry in the 1970s and 1980s. Though her sales declined and many music critics questioned her shift to more political music she was steadfast in her integration of women-identified consciousness in her music. Like Springfield she eschewed industry convention--writing her own songs, often producing her own records and publicly battling for control of her song publishing. She subtly incorporated lesbian-feminism into popular music more than any singer of her time, which reflected the New Left's influence in shaping her consciousness and art. I use reviews, biographical material and press interviews to assess her musical career as a performer and the integration of her identity and politics evident in her work.

Chapter Seven explores the liberation era "coming out" among performers in the 1970s. I focus on three individuals and a collective movement which exemplified the possibilities for queer musicians in the 1970s. Singer/songwriter Steven Grossman was one of the first openly gay male singers and the first to overtly integrate his liberationist politics in his music. Though well-reviewed his music was too bold and serious, which limited his commercial success, despite recording for a major record label. In contrast David Bowie, one of the pioneers of glam rock, initially used androgyny and sexual ambiguity as a commercial strategy. By divorcing sex and gender from politics, glam rockers such as Bowie garnered considerable press attention and a solid fan base before they abandoned their ambiguous personas for more conventional image. Their use of queerness as commercial titillation built from the images of Liberace and Little Richard, but was used with a newfound savvy and sophistication beyond their 50s predecessors. Elton John initially appeared as a demure English singer-songwriter but as he gained

popularity, loosened up his image overtly incorporating camp and artifice into his performances and becoming increasingly open about his queer sexuality. After achieving immense commercial success in the early 70s he came out as bisexual in the mid-1970s. In the early 80s, British tabloids attempted to scandalize John using his sexuality to cast John as a participant in illegal activities including drug taking and solicitation. Like Liberace's libel trial John retaliated and forced the British press to retreat from exploiting queer sexuality. Utilizing reviews, profiles and biographical information I assess the diverse strategies these three men used to present queerness and the ramifications of their approaches.

Where Grossman courted the mainstream with openly gay music, Bowie exploited the exotic appeal of sexual ambiguity and John came out after he achieved financial and career stability, lesbian-feminists created the "women's music" genre to affirm their cultural and political identities apart from the mainstream. In the early 1970s a group of women musicians and associates formed an alternative culture including a series of concerts festivals, independent record labels and an independent distribution network. Margie Adam, Holly Near, Alix Dobkin, Cris Williamson and Meg Christian are among the "women's music" pioneers whose performance and albums reflected a lesbian-feminist aesthetic. I discuss the reasons behind the culture's development, notably broad and music industry-specific sexism and homophobia, and New Left political movements' impact. Contemporarily the "women's music" industry exists in many forms and its practitioners and historians often note how it has provided a springboard for many performers who have crossed over to the mainstream. Some of its critics view it as too separatist and dogmatic for some performers. After exploring

the genre's history and development, including contemporary controversies, I question why the "women's music" industry has scant coverage in rock histories and whether alternative industries are the ultimate choice for queer musicians operating in an increasingly fragmented music market.

Building from the questions my analysis raises about post-WWII society and the music industry I conclude the study by discussing the increased commodification of queer identity in America since the 1980s. I discuss the resultant boom in niche marketing and argue there are dangers of marketing practices which aim for inclusion but ultimately restrict access to mainstream channels to those who strictly conform to cultural norms. There are important parallels in questions regarding the shift of queer identity from absolute stigma to marketing tool and the recent questioning of equality-oriented identity politics as a liberatory strategy for queer people.

Sources & Methods

First, I perform a historical analysis of the post-WWII music industry through synthesizing common historical threads seven canonical rock histories outline. My revised history demonstrates how gender and sexuality biases are fundamental to the ideological dividing line between pop and rock. The division obscures the immense influence of pre-rock pop on rock music and denigrates the "softer" cultural sensibilities historians attribute to the pop genre. Second, I ground my discussion of gay and lesbian experiences from the 1950s through the present using seminal works from gay and lesbian studies. I primarily draw from the works of D' Emilio, Faderman, McGarry and Wasserman and Loughery. Third, I draw from recent strands of queer theory and theories of marginality to illuminate my discussion of the 50 years of cultural shifts

musicians experience as gay and lesbians, along with racial, ethnic, gender and commercial identities. Queer theory, which grew out of developments in post-structural and feminist scholarship, challenges simplistic assumptions about social identity by showing how language structures our cultural sense of understanding and identity. I refine queer theory's aims using Nealon and Ross' theories of identity.

A variety of primary and secondary sources inform my arguments. In Part I, which outlines the traditional history of rock and offers an alternative history, I rely on canonical rock histories for the overview. An eclectic mixture of jazz, pop and rhythm and blues (R&B) histories, newspaper and magazine articles, academic journal articles, the previously noted gay and lesbian histories and several histories of urban gay and lesbian history shape my revised history. Part II focuses the specific experiences of eight queer musicians, Liberace, Johnny Mathis, Johnnie Ray, Little Richard, Dusty Springfield, Laura Nyro, Elton John and Holly Near, who began their recording careers between the 1950s-1970s. Each section details how their experiences are emblematic of important historical currents related to their queer cultural identities rock historians downplay or ignore. In addition to Nealon and Ross' theories, autobiographies, authorized biographies and unauthorized biographies are central sources of information. To assess how critics perceive the musicians and how the public experienced the performers through mass media I rely on newspaper and magazine stories including interviews, tabloid stories, concert and recording reviews, and obituaries. I also use consumer album buying guides and books featuring sales and airplay data to describe the commercial achievements and artistic profiles of several musicians.

Finally, throughout the dissertation I describe shifts in political, legislative, scientific and industrial areas affecting the quality of life for gays and lesbians in terms of cultural and political setbacks and direct advances. Many of these items draw from gay and lesbian histories and books and anthologies covering the business aspects of rock 'n' roll. I also note the diverse approaches gays and lesbians have taken to assert their rights as citizens including the homophile groups of the 1950s and 1960s and the gay liberation and lesbian feminist movements. Rather than defining one generation or political paradigm over another I note the cultural foundation 50s performers established, the libratory possibilities which emerged during the liberation era and the ongoing tyranny of the closet in public life. Queer performers of the 50s were incredibly deft in their public images, though some endured longer than others. As a result of the liberation era "coming out" ethos and a more consolidated music industry, 60s and 70s era gay and lesbian performers began stepping out of the closet cautiously in the 1970s but without the same level of fear which haunted 50s era performers born a generation earlier. These transitions indicate the continuous stronghold of gender conformity and how changes in politics and industry can expand possibilities for personal authenticity and broader cultural participation.

Limitations

It is crucial to the integrity my arguments in this study that I acknowledge their limitations, which I have chosen in an effort to focus and manage the scope of my project. The primary texts my analysis addresses are canonical histories with an explicit interest in rock 'n' roll music. As a result of this focus I have argued that such books

tend to posit rock as a form of cultural liberation especially in terms of mainstreaming African-American performers and culture. Histories focused on R&B music, including works by Nelson George, Brian Ward, and Marc Anthony Neal, and those aimed at covering a broader spectrum of popular music such as Starr and Waterman tend not to make such arguments. These authors, and other cultural critics, such as Stanley Crouch and Martha Bayles, have raised questions about rock music as a throwback to blackface minstrelsy rife with economic and cultural exploitation more extensively than rock historians who tend to frame rock as a form of social progress, despite competing laments about rock's artistic decline.⁵⁹ While these subjects are not my primary focus my study takes an intersectional approach that addresses some of these issues, including links between rock and minstrelsy, and critical/historical tendencies to essentialize what constitutes "authentic" black expression. These issues of appropriation and exploitation remain germane subjects for the analysis of rock era music.

Because my study was primarily written in response to canonical histories of rock 'n' roll I have chosen to mirror their general structure and focus on biographical and commercial aspects of musicians' careers. I have also focused on critical responses to their work and relevant social and industrial trends. Though there is great potential for musicological approaches to my topic this was not a musicological study and did not involve the analysis of musical structures or song lyrics. Scholars have often used both

⁵⁹ Brian Ward discusses these issues throughout Just My Soul Responding but gives an extended, comprehensive discussion on p. 232-52; Bayles discusses how perceptions of black primitivism play out in rock era music see p. 134-8, 183, 195-6, 234, 252, 311, 350, 368 in Bayles, Martha. Hole in Our Soul: The Loss of Beauty & Meaning in American Popular Music. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1996; George discusses this throughout, particularly p. 61-4; Neal p. 92-9; See p. 8-9, 180 in Crouch, Stanley. The All-American Skin Game, or, The Decoy of Race: The Long and the Short of It, 1990-1994. New York: Pantheon Books, 1995.

as tools for analyzing popular music but I have taken a more cultural and historical interpretative approach because many of musicians I discuss are interpreters rather than songwriters. Though I have referenced a few songs signifying a relevant sexual and gender consciousness in my discussions of Laura Nyro and Dusty Springfield, I do not quote actual lyrics. Acquiring copyright permissions for published sheet music is a very rigorous process that often results in monetary costs exceeding the practical financial limits of an academic researcher.

My analysis covers musicians who emerged commercially between the 1950s and the 1970s. This period includes the commercial emergence of rock 'n' roll and overlaps the development of homophile and liberationist social movements, which offered an unprecedented era of self-conscious identity and publicity. By focusing on this era my study makes particular arguments about possibilities fostered by increased queer visibility. However my study does not claim this period as the beginning of queer musicians in the popular music industry. Indeed several musicology scholars have explored sexual deviance among 19th century musicians and music including Philip Brett, Suzanne G. Cusick, and Susan McClary.⁶⁰ The evidence of pre-political queer sexuality among classic blues singers and early jazz-era performers including Bessie Smith, Ma Rainey, Ethel Waters, Alberta Hunter and performer Gladys Bentley is also a cultural phenomenon Angela Davis, John Gill, and McGarry and Wasserman have previously discussed.⁶¹

⁶⁰ See Brett and Cusick essays in Brett, Philip, Elizabeth Wood, and Gary C. Thomas, eds. Queering The Pitch: The New Gay and Lesbian Musicology. New York: Routledge, 1993. Also see McClary, Susan. Feminine Endings: Music, Gender, and Sexuality. Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 1991.

⁶¹ See p. 68-70 in McGarry and Wasserman; For a book-length discussion see Davis,

Though my study covered performers from the immediate pre-rock 50s through the period pre-disco 70s there were several performers I excluded who duplicated the experiences of other musicians I discussed or who fell outside of my immediate critical interests. For example openly gay glam-rocker Jobriath had a limited commercial presence and influence in glam rock making him less significant than other glam performers and cabaret/pop singer-songwriter Peter Allen's commercial peak occurred beyond the bounds of my general timeframe. Both however remain fascinating critical subjects. Queer and/or sexually ambiguous/androgynous musicians whose recording careers began during or after the disco era were also outside the chronological scope of this work though future research may include some of these performers. It is important to note the emergence of "out" musicians during the disco era including disco/soul singer Sylvester, punk performer Tom Robinson, and actor/drag performer Divine. The late 70s and early 1980s heralded a new era of visually androgynous and sexually ambiguous performers such as Prince, Michael Jackson, Annie Lennox, Luther Vandross and Tracy Chapman who were not necessarily queer-identified but inspired many questions regarding their sexual orientation. British performers of the new wave synthesizer-pop era including Boy George, Marc Almond, Vince Bell, Jimmy Somerville, were also "out" gay-identified performers of the era.

In the late 80s onward numerous performers from a wide spectrum of genres publicly identified as gay, lesbian or bisexual including Phranc, Janis Ian, Ronnie Gilbert of The Weavers, k. d. lang, Melissa Etheridge, Me'shell N'degeocello, Neil Tennant and Christopher Lowe of Pet Shop Boys, George Michael and Rufus

Angela Y. Blues Legacies and Black Feminism: Getrude "Ma" Rainey, Bessie Smith and Billie Holiday. New York: Pantheon Books, 1998.

Wainwright. These are just performers who have recorded for major record labels and secured national distribution, or national press attention. There were a large number list of “out” performers who recorded on independent record labels and were primarily cult performers with regional popularity on the cabaret, folk, dance and/or college circuits including performers as disparate as folk musician Toshi Reagon and pop/R&B singer Ari Gold.

The diverse approaches to queer popular representation over the mid-to-late 20th century, the impact of industrial and social developments’ on cultural production and the overarching issues of citizenship are the central concerns of the study. Throughout my study I have outlined major industrial and aesthetic trends such as corporate consolidation and the commercial and artistic impact of the LP/album format. Theories of mass industrial commodification, particularly those of the Frankfurt School and its critics, centered on issues of industrial production and audience consumption/reception are broadly relevant to my study.⁶² However questions of how production shaped audience responses to the performers I discuss exceeds the scope of this study. The study assumes readers have a general familiarity and understanding of the production and distribution of mass culture products. It also operates from the perspective that critical debates regarding the impact of mass culture on public ideology are a vast critical area which requires a wide scale analysis of the intricacies of production in multiple industries and an assessment of audience utility before such topics could even

⁶² For a solid overview of such issues see p. 104-14 in Storey, John. An Introduction to Cultural Theory & Popular Culture. 2nd ed. Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 1998.

begin to move toward resolution. My study complicate rock's past and encourages additional questions for future research.

Chapter One: As Read In Books--The Story of Rock 'n' Roll, Rock and the Rest

The story of rock 'n' roll, as told by music critics and historians, is the great modernist fable of the late 20th century. It's the story of the individual vs. society, art vs. commerce, the poor and neglected vs. the rich and privileged. Rock's narrative revolves around these broad tensions among such esteemed entities as Tin Pan Alley songwriters, rock 'n' roll singers, ASCAP, BMI, major record label executives, scrappy independent label founders, middle/upper class America, and rural, Southern Whites and Blacks Americans. There are rock 'n' roll movies (i.e. American Graffiti, Grease) and songs celebrating rock 'n' roll (i.e. "American Pie," "Drift Away") But only enterprising rock critics and historians, not filmmakers or songwriters, capture and distill rock 'n' roll, in all its drama and transcendence in that most engaging, convenient and digestible form, the history book.

According to rock histories, rock 'n' roll was about the triumph of authentic, regionally based culture over inauthentic, equalizing national culture. Rock 'n' roll transformed American industry and culture by placing Black culture and Southern rural white culture at the center of the music industry. Through the rise of urban independent labels, the influence of regional DJs, and the commercial emergence of R&B and rockabilly, rock 'n' roll emerged. More of a cultural force than a musical genre, rock 'n' roll validated the expressive culture of the stigmatized and inspired a generation of young people to question accepted racial, sexual and class notions.

Prior to rock, with the exception of jazz, most Tin Pan Alley pop was sentimental and melodramatic music.⁶³ The development of the hit parade (on radio and

⁶³ Gillett, 5.

eventually TV) and top 40 radio formats which focused on repetition, dictated an even more narrow style of pop songwriting that extended Tin Pan Alley's blandness, only in less sophisticated and more gimmicky forms.⁶⁴ Rock 'n' roll ushered in a more working-class music that was dangerous, threatening, sexual and disruptive. Elvis Presley, and to a lesser extent Chuck Berry, Little Richard, Bill Haley and Jerry Lee Lewis embodied America's worst fears. Notably, they were white and black men whose R&B, gospel and country fusions were enticing young white teenagers to spend money and rebel against their parents, including teenage girls. In the 1960s rock 'n' roll shifted to "rock," a more sophisticated, self-conscious "art" form where it became music for listening as opposed to just dancing, but maintained its critical edge.⁶⁵ The first and second British Invasion, emergence of protest/folk-rock, garage rock, punk precursors and psychedelic rock, established rock as an "art" form with immense cultural depth and political power beyond the airwaves and record charts. Popular music's rhythms, tone and content reportedly echoed the tumult of the Civil Rights, Black Power and anti-Vietnam protest movements

However, by the late 60s rock's audience and musicians began to betray rock's ideals. During this period, major record labels' rabid appropriation of rock subcultures at the Monterey Pop Festival and Woodstock, Hell's Angels' violence toward audience members at the Altamont Rock Festival and the drug overdoses that took the lives of promising young musicians signaled a revolution turning inward. By the early 70s, when America experienced a "cooling" rock music became "corporate" through the

⁶⁴ Palmer, 16; Miller 55-6; Ward, Ed, "Swinging Into Peacetime." Rock of Ages. 33]

⁶⁵ Miller on The Beatles, 192, 205, 230; Miller on Bob Dylan 222-3; Garofalo, 248-257; Gillett, 402 is perhaps most critical of rock's aspirations to "art."

rapid consolidation of record labels by international conglomerates and a shift.⁶⁶ The revolution rock 'n' roll began among youth that matured in the 1960s rock era faded in the 1970s. Excessively sentimental, romantic music (i.e. The Carpenters) and/or more earnest introspective music forms (i.e. Carole King) owing more to Tin Pan Alley than R&B and rockabilly, sanitized rock and eroded its cultural threat.

The mid-70s emergence of new genres such as glam rock and disco shifted the industry away from dues-paying musicians who gradually developed audiences, toward an era of promotion-over-talent and the proliferation of one-hit wonders rather than enduring musicians. Art rock, country-rock, and album-oriented rock (AOR) were scarcely more authentic to genuine rock fans. Soul music mostly declined from its gritty and insistent origins to impersonal, heavily produced "soft" soul genres (i.e. Philly Soul). A few glimmers of hope emerged in old-fashioned rocker Bruce Springsteen, funk, reggae's American emergence, and the mid-to-late 70s punk movements especially those in London and New York. Such events at least suggested some continuity with pre-70s rock music, but Elvis' death in 1977 symbolized the end of a glorious era of united, progressive youth culture. In its place came corporate excess embodying the nihilism, cynicism and vapidness of the 1970s.

⁶⁶ For example, the February 22, 1971 issue of Time wrote a special section on the aftermath of the '60s called "The Cooling of America." "Out of Tune and Lost in the Counterculture" focused on the fragmentation and decline of the '60s youth counterculture noting, ". . . the counterculture, the world's first (and probably last) socio-political movement to grow out of the force of electrically amplified music has reached a grudging, melancholy truce with the straight world it set out to save. Surrounded, ensnared by a modern industrialized economic system, the movement has become fragmented, confused." Tyler, Timothy. "Out of Tune and Lost in the Counterculture." Time 22 February 1971. 15-6.

The following chapter synthesizes the major thematic strands of American popular music rock histories of rock 'n' roll typically chronicle. I have drawn my evidence from the most respected or representative comprehensive histories of rock 'n' roll including the following: The Sound of the City, The Rolling Stone Illustrated History of Rock & Roll, Rock & Roll: An Unruly History, Rockin' in Time, Rockin' Out, and Flowers in the Dustbin. All of these publications are in-print and available for purchase; Sound of the City, Rockin' in Time and Rockin' Out have been released in multiple editions. As I noted in the introduction I have chosen to primarily draw from Rolling Stone's Illustrated History reference Rock-of-Ages (1986) for supplementary material the 1992 collection did not include.

Each history focused on rock 'n' roll, as opposed to R&B or pop music histories, and addressed the evolution of pre-rock music, rock 'n' roll's development in the '50s and offered some discussion of the 1970s. Following this pattern, my overview begins with a discussion of the pre-rock popular music industry for context. From there my discussion chiefly focuses on rock 'n' roll's growth from the mid-'50s through what some historians and critics have marked as its death in the 1970s. I end my discussion with overviews of mid-70s genres including funk, disco, glam rock and punk. Punk, which many historians and critics read as an antidote to rock's impending death, represented an ideological bookend for rock 'n' roll in contrast to the ennui of soft rock and more elaborate hedonism of disco, glam, etc.

Pre-Rock Pop

Tin Pan Alley publishers/songwriters, six national record labels and overlapping Broadway and Hollywood affiliations comprised a music industry “establishment” that excluded Blacks and rural, Southern white personnel and culture.⁶⁷ Though Tin Pan Alley regularly borrowed from blues and jazz song craft, its elite group of classically trained musicians wrote for white, middle-class audiences.⁶⁸ During the era popular music business transitioned from publishers who profited from sheet music to national recording labels who generated income from radio broadcasts and recording, and eventually jukeboxes. Tin Pan Alley songwriters and publishers formed The American Society of Composers, Authors and Publishers (ASCAP) to secure royalties from the broadcast and recording revolution.⁶⁹ ASCAP dominated the music industry copyrights including most of the music swing bands play on national radio networks broadcasts.⁷⁰ Tin Pan Alley also aligned itself with Broadway and the film industry writing film and theatre musicals.⁷¹ Amidst Tin Pan Alley’s dominance, record labels explored the commercial potential of the niche genres, hillbilly music and race records. However, mainstream pop was the industry’s primary focus. ASCAP capitalized on this fact by demanding higher royalty rates that inspired rebellion from radio broadcasters who briefly banned ASCAP music and formed Broadcast Music International (BMI).

BMI was a pivotal, liberating entity that included ethnic songwriters from country and blues genres, among others.⁷² BMI’s formation during the ASCAP ban

⁶⁷ Gillett, 18.

⁶⁸ Garofalo, 43.

⁶⁹ Gillett, 5; Garofalo, 31; Ward, Ed, “All-American Music.” Rock of Ages. 22.

⁷⁰ Garofalo notes that between 1914-39 ASCAP monopolizes virtually all copyrighted music, 32.

⁷¹ Garofalo, 38-9.

⁷² Gillett, 5; Ward, Ed, “All-American Music.” Rock of Ages. 31.

finally provided songwriters, many of whom were independent label owners, an opportunity to get radio airplay and profit from their music making. BMI's formation, along with various shifts in recording technology, including cheaper-to-produce 33 and 45 rpm records,⁷³ fostered the growth of an independent music industry boom of urban record labels, most located in Los Angeles and New York. The independent labels championed R&B and country music by producing and releasing sides which independent radio stations exposed to audiences eager for something new.

Audience was a key factor in the ability of independent labels to mainstream black and hillbilly music. Conveniently, WWII fostered unification among diverse soldiers from different regions resulting in increased culture sharing and appreciation. Rock historians usually define the World War II era as a pivotal period of cultural synthesis because men of different races and regions reportedly converged and engaged in a heightened form of culture sharing that translated into more open musical sensibilities. According to Ed Ward, "This war drew people together in a way that the previous World War hadn't . . . Hillbillies and New York Jews fought side by side, as did blacks from the city and country. The way Americans thought about each other would never be the same again, and the sound the land made was taking on a newer and more direct tone. It was as if people were raising their curtains and seeing their neighbors for the first time. After the war, they would invite them over. Or they would come over to visit anyway."⁷⁴ Garofalo asserted the cross-cultural nature of the War meant soldiers "heard musical styles that had not yet achieved mainstream popularity in

⁷³ Ward, Ed. "Music of the New World." Rock of Ages. 47.

⁷⁴ Ward, Ed. "Swinging Into Peacetime." Rock of Ages. 32.

the North. In this way, blues and country music received unprecedented exposure.”⁷⁵

Echoing Ward and Garofalo, Jim Miller argued that the musical exposure between racial groups dictated a greater level of cross-cultural appreciation.⁷⁶

Critics usually interpreted such cross-cultural exposure as appreciation and an indicator that cultural barriers were dwindling. Such logic established the mass public response to the musical forms that eventually spawned rock ‘n’ roll. The period opened up soldiers to regional music and swept the nation as soldiers reintegrated into society. By the end of WWII, independent labels had already formed, but the death of big bands, shellac shortage, creation of 45s and growth of independent radio stations enabled an independent label boom. With all of these elements in place independent labels could finally compete with the major labels. Major labels who saw the commercial potential of R&B, formerly “race records” but now listed as R&B on Billboard’s charts,⁷⁷ and country music, formerly hillbilly, capitalized by releasing white covers of R&B and country songs by white pop singers. Still, major labels were unable to quell the industrial and cultural revolution the independent labels had begun.

By the mid 1950s, with teenagers established as a palpable consumer group, the independent labels and majors had a clear audience to target and geared themselves toward the teenage market.⁷⁸ DJs played a major role in fostering the teen connection with what eventually became known as rock ‘n’ roll. Perhaps the most influential national DJ was Cleveland’s Alan Freed whose R&B show “The Moondog Show”

⁷⁵ Garofalo, 65.

⁷⁶ Miller, 32.

⁷⁷ Several writers note the R&B chart shift, see Gillett, 121; Miller, 44.

⁷⁸ For discussions of teenagers as a new consumer group see Ward, Ed. “Teenage Nation.” Rock of Ages. 65-6; Gillett, 15.

exposed R&B to many listeners and in 1952 launched an R&B tour package. In 1954 Freed shrewdly renamed his R&B show as “Alan Freed’s Rock and Roll Party” and a year later threw a New York dance party which featured black musicians and attracted a half white audience. Industry observers took note, which furthered interest in teenage pop.⁷⁹

Rock ‘n’ Roll’s Golden Age, 1955-9

Around the time of Freed’s party, a chain of overlapping occurrences pointed the way toward rock ‘n’ roll as the next American music phenomenon. First, numerous musicians on independent labels, including Fats Domino on Imperial, Chuck Berry on Chess and Little Richard on Specialty had national hits singing and playing in the raucous style increasingly referred to as “rock ‘n’ roll.” Second, the themes of rebellion and fears of juvenile delinquency also emerged in response to rebellious film imagery aimed at teens, most notably the infamous student rebellion in 1955’s Blackboard Jungle where students rejected a teacher’s jazz 78s in favor of pop music.⁸⁰ Bill Haley’s Decca single, “(We’re Gonna) Rock Around the Clock,” played in the opening and closing credits and reigned atop the “Best Sellers” list for eight weeks and began rock ‘n’ roll’s commercial impact on the singles chart.⁸¹ Third, after years of regional success in the South, Sun Records sold Elvis Presley’s recording contract to RCA Victor. To promote his new single “Heartbreak Hotel” Presley performed on TV, tours and garnered enough radio airplay to steadily generate record sales. “Heartbreak”

⁷⁹ Miller, 58-61; Morthland, John. “The Rise of Top Forty AM.” Rolling Stone Illustrated History of Rock & Roll. 102; Gillett 13-4.

⁸⁰ Miller, 88-9; Gillett 16-7.

⁸¹ Miller, 91-92.

reached number one for eight weeks and began his reign as either the most overt popularizer of the new “rock ‘n’ roll” or simply, the “King of Rock ‘n’ Roll.” As a white man who sang and moved with an unusual command of country, as well as gospel and blues feeling, he embodied the possibilities for transcendence from cultural barriers the pre-rock era held sacred.

The two dominant rock ‘n’ roll styles were the raucous piano and electric guitar approaches by pianists Fats Domino and Little Richard and guitarist/songwriter Chuck Berry and the rockabilly style Elvis, Roy Orbison and Carl Perkins exhibit. One of the key signs of cultural progress these styles represented was the fusion of country, blues and R&B elements. Though Berry was a black performer, “Maybellene” his first hit, was based on the country fiddle tune “Ida Red.”⁸² Presley was unique in his fusion of genres and appeal to country and R&B audiences because he was one of the few whites who could draw from all of these and resonated with Blacks and Whites. Jim Miller commented on the symbolism of these cross-cultural musical fusions noting:

. . . despite their disparate backgrounds, Berry and Presley were speaking the same musical language. Rock and roll was still less than a year old; but the new genre had already produced a telling convergence of vernacular idioms, a blend of country and blues styles, raising the prospect of a new musical fusion—and a collective leap into the unknown, ‘without apparent regard for racial difference.’⁸³

⁸² Ibid, 103.

⁸³ Ibid, 107.

The mid-50s commercial rock ‘n’ roll boom completely altered the music business. Rock ‘n’ roll placed youth taste at the center of the music industry, ushered in Black and rural music styles as mainstream music and established a group of independent industry outsiders as important tastemakers. From ~1955-1959 rock ‘n’ roll was in its “Golden Age,” a time when authentic, genuinely challenging music dominated the airwaves and singles market. The clearest sign of rock ‘n’ roll’s cultural impact were the reactions of white organizations, notably the White Citizens Council of Birmingham, Alabama who objected to the vulgarity, sexuality and race mixing the new music encouraged.⁸⁴ ASCAP songwriters jealous of BMI’s increasing copyright success request radio bans for vulgar songs and singers.⁸⁵ ASCAP later introduced a Senate bill to ban broadcasters from owning BMI stock. ASCAP’s most effective protest was it’s prompt for the Legislative Oversight Subcommittee of the House Committee on Interstate and Foreign Commerce to investigate the practice of payola.⁸⁶ Further, singers outraged by or feeling displaced by the proliferation of rock ‘n’ roll singers go on public record expressing their disdain for rock ‘n’ roll.⁸⁷ All of these objections marked rock ‘n’ roll’s liberation of popular music from the exclusionary music “establishment” of the pre-rock industry.

Schlock Rock Era, 1959-63

Sadly, just as rock ‘n’ roll is revolutionizing America by challenging established beliefs and opening new cultural doors it reached its nadir. First, several major rock ‘n’

⁸⁴ Szatmary, 22.

⁸⁵ Gillett, 18 notes that ASCAP banned Johnnie Ray’s “Such A Night” in 1954.

⁸⁶ Garofalo, 173.

⁸⁷ Garofalo quotes Frank Sinatra’s objections to rock ‘n’ roll, 172; Szatmary 23-4.

roll idols died, abandoned rock 'n' roll or tarnished its image. In 1957 Little Richard quit rock 'n' roll and joined the Seventh-Day Adventist Church en route to becoming a minister. That same year Jerry Lee Lewis, 22, who scored a #1 hit with "Great Balls of Fire", married his 13 year old third cousin permanently shrouded his career in scandal.⁸⁸ In 1958, Elvis entered the Army for a two-year term. In 1959 Chuck Berry was imprisoned for violating the Mann Act and had to serve two years in prison. Then in February of 1959 Buddy Holly and Ritchie Valens died in a plane crash.⁸⁹

Second, major record labels and exploitative independent labels run by "establishment" personnel, seized upon rock 'n' roll to exploit it for commercial gain. They also corrupted rock 'n' roll's artistic base by plucking performers with marginal musical talent, including film and TV personalities, to record youth pop disguised as rock 'n' roll material. Finally, a new breed of all-purpose professional rock 'n' roll songwriters, including the Brill Building group of songwriters (Neil Sedaka, Carole King, Barry Mann, Cynthia Weil, etc.) emerged, mirroring the New York-centered Tin Pan Alley establishment of the pre-rock era. According to Robert Palmer:

The music industry establishment of corporate record labels and Tin Pan Alley publishing interests, relegated to the sidelines by the mid-fifties explosion of independent labels and independent talent, rushed into the vacuum left by imploding careers and tragedy with a safer, sanitized, pop-rock sounds and a brace of manufactured teen idols.⁹⁰

⁸⁸ Szatmary 53.

⁸⁹ Szatmary, 54; Palmer, 32-3 and Miller, 169 discusses each of these events.

⁹⁰ Palmer, 33.

Reebee Garofalo defined this shift away from, rock 'n' roll as the "schlock rock" era in which ". . . singers, songwriters, and producers with no particular feel for the music's roots or subtleties could still turn out commercially viable approximations."⁹¹ Gillett lamented rock 'n' roll's vulnerability to artistic and commercial exploitation. He noted how rock 'n' roll gradually lost its distinctiveness, including ". . . strong regional accents; self-composed songs; simple open musical arrangements, featuring a small number of instruments with an improvised solo by saxophone, guitar or piano, worked out spontaneously in the studio" when outside producers attempted to appropriate rock 'n' roll.⁹² Despite a seemingly promising explosion of record labels from 1958-1963, the new companies simply capitalized on a trend rather than sincerely investing in the exposure of R&B music. According to Gillett, "Among the most successful new companies were several formed by businessmen who shared the contemptuous attitude of some major labels A&R men towards rock 'n' roll, whose producers had no background experience of the music from which rock 'n' roll drew and who simply handed it as a product like any previous form of popular music."⁹³

The third nail in rock 'n' roll's coffin was the influence of Dick Clark and his Philadelphia-based American Bandstand program. Clark was a young and ambitious fellow with a business and advertising background who landed a job as a radio DJ. In 1956 Clark began hosting the local Philadelphia show, "Bandstand," featuring teenagers dancing to current records. Clark later convinced major advertisers to sponsor the show which became a national hit airing daily and featured teenagers dancing to current

⁹¹ Garofalo, 160.

⁹² Gillett, 40-1.

⁹³ Ibid, 67.

records. American Bandstand launched numerous dance crazes and exposed performers to a broad national audience. In addition to showcasing national performers the show popularized local Clark-groomed Philadelphians including Fabian, Frankie Avalon, Bobby Rydell, Chubby Checker, for whom Clark had a financial stake. To ensure the show's mainstream appeal he enforced a dress code and banned subversive behaviors (gum chewing, smoking) and suggestive dancing. Bandstand's popularity, coupled with Clark's clean cut image tamed rock 'n' roll and made it safe it for white middle-class teens and adults. In many ways, Clark was central to rock 'n' roll's decline from the embodiment of rebellion to a generic popular form.⁹⁴ By the early 60s rock 'n' roll became "rock" and was little more than commercial "pop" stars, in the form of teen idols and girl groups among others, marketed as rock 'n' roll. According to Gillett:

The abolition of the apostrophes was significant-the term looked more respectable, but sounded the same. Perfect.

Upon a younger generation than that which had discovered and insisted on the original rock 'n' roll was palmed off a softer substitute which carried nearly the same name.⁹⁵

Symbolically Elvis' return from military service, which culminated in appearing on TV with previously hostile, anti-rock crooner Frank Sinatra and his recording sentimental pop ballads suggested the rock 'n' roll dream was over.

Surf Music

⁹⁴ Szatmary 55-9; Miller 144-50; Garofalo, 165-7; Gillett, 207-8.

⁹⁵ Gillett, 168.

During rock ‘n’ roll’s decline and appropriation from 1959-63 one of the last gasps of “authentic” teen music emerged from California. Abundant natural resources, a healthy economy and steady population growth solidified California’s mythic status as a land of pleasure and dream fulfillment in the post-World War II era. Surf music, which emerged in the pre-Beatles 60s “. . . reflected and promoted the myth of the California wonderland.”⁹⁶ The distinct American regional style began as instrumental music played at beach parties but develops into a musical celebration of the youth-driven southern California surfing culture phenomenon.⁹⁷ Dick Dale and the Del-Tones, led by surfer/guitarist Dick Dale, pioneers the surf music style characterized by “fast, twangy and metallic” guitar playing influenced by Middle-Eastern melodies, Spanish chording and Chuck Berry mixed with lyrics celebrating surfer slang and activities.⁹⁸ Though surf music achieved local popularity and surf singles occasionally reached the national charts, the Beach Boys and Jan & Dean nationalized surf music.

Surf music’s defining group was the Beach Boys, comprised of the Wilson brothers Brian, Denis and Carl, their cousin Mike Love and neighbor Al Jardine. The group, (which had numerous names before an independent label crowned them the Beach Boys) formed in 1961 and instantly scored hit singles on local radio stations.⁹⁹ The group signed with Capitol Records in 1963 and reached a national audience by shrewdly mixing an tight, sophisticated vocal harmonies, a streamlined version of surf music guitar and songs about girls, surfing, hot rods and California living which

⁹⁶ Szatmary, 69-70.

⁹⁷ Gillett, 326.

⁹⁸ Palmer, 41, describes The Deltones’ music; Gillett discusses aspects of the genre, 326.

⁹⁹ Miller, Jim. “The Beach Boys.” Rolling Stone Illustrated History of Rock & Roll. 192; Szatmary, 73.

elevated “the sport [surfing] and its cultural trappings to a metaphor for the American Dream.”¹⁰⁰ After a series of hit singles the group’s musical leader Brian, who idolized girl group producer Phil Spector’s epic “wall-of-sound” production style and conveyed a more introspective and introverted persona, focused on more elaborate arranging and studio production. The resulting shift, affected by Wilson’s use of psychedelic drugs, yielded a series of lush, expensively produced singles such as “Good Vibrations”¹⁰¹ and explicit attempts at creating “art” albums including 1966’s Pet Sounds, historically regarded as a classic but less commercially successful than previous albums. While working on what was to be the ultimate rock album Smile, the Beatles’ released Sgt. Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band which overshadowed Wilson’s efforts and inspired his breakdown and withdrawal from the Beach Boys. Smiley Smile, a hastily assembled compilation comprised of several tracks intended for Smile combined with other material surfaces but was not a major commercial success and signaled the artistic decline of the Beach Boys and the fading surf music genre.¹⁰²

The only other surf music group to achieve a period of sustained commercial success was Jan & Dean. In 1962 Jan & Dean (Jan Berry and Dean Torrence) an established teen pop vocal duo, switched to surf music. The duo signed with major label Liberty in 1962 and through its mix of black vocal group-style singing, surf music textures and hedonistic lyrics achieved broad commercial success. After they became popular surf music teen idols and produced numerous hit singles including “Surf City”

¹⁰⁰ Garofalo, 177; Palmer, 41; Miller, Rolling Stone Illustrated History of Rock & Roll, 192; Szatmary, 73; Gillett, 337-8.

¹⁰¹ Gillett, 329; Garofalo, 179.

¹⁰² Garofalo, 179; Miller, Rolling Stone Illustrated History of Rock & Roll, 194-6; Gillett, 329.

and “Dead Man’s Curve,” the group ended when Jan was injured in an automobile accident.¹⁰³ The commercial decline of both groups effectively marked the end of the surf music phenomenon, but briefly and significantly buttressed rock ‘n’ roll’s shift into the 1960s toward a more sophisticated definition of rock.

The Art and Soul Era, 1964-9

Rock was on the verge of dying until a reenergized folk music movement aligned itself with progressive causes and British musicians inspired by ‘50s rock ‘n’ roll, R&B and pre-rock blues, saved rock from further commercial exploitation. Both the 60s folk movement and the British Invasion inspired rock ‘n’ roll’s transition from teen age dance music and “makeout” music to serious music with important intellectual, political and artistic contributions or “rock.” Bob Dylan and the Beatles exemplified the shift toward music for listening and thinking rather than dancing and romancing.¹⁰⁴

1960s youth politics further framed rock as “art” when organized cultural and political challenges to traditional values and politics replaced “rebellion” as the center of rock aesthetics.¹⁰⁵ In the mid-60s, astute college students enacted a cultural revolution through various forms of cultural and political protest ranging from experimental drug use to political demonstrations. Young people, increasingly skeptical toward middle-class American values embraced “acid rock,” idealistic drug fueled music that celebrated love, peace, sex and spirituality integral to the hippie vision of utopia. However, in the late 60s youth resistance to the Vietnam War catalyzed a shift

¹⁰³ Gillett, 327; Szatmary, 74-5.

¹⁰⁴ Palmer, 110.

¹⁰⁵ Garofalo, 212.

from peaceful psychedelic sounds to a renewed interest in grittier electric guitar based blues- rock alongside more overtly political folk and rock music.

Black music increasingly separated from rock into crossover pop and gritty soul styles. The early to mid-60s Civil Rights Era integrationist politics redefined national consciousness and inspired cultural conditions fostering the development and broad reception of Motown. Late 60s Black political shift toward “militancy” enabled Southern soul to attract black audiences and crossover to white audiences who were increasingly open to racial equality and engaging with black culture.

1960s rock and soul embodied the profound politicization of national culture and represent the peak of rock’s ability to document change and liberate consciousness. The decade’s promise stifled when popular media and the record industry exploited burgeoning youth trends and drained them of their vitality. The combination of corporate co-optation, violent confrontations at the December 1969 Altamont Speedway concert and the deaths of rock and soul icons Redding, Hendrix, Morrison and Joplin effectively marked the end of an era.

Beatlemania

Prosperous art school dropout Brian Epstein became The Beatles manager after he witnessed a dynamic concert performance in 1961. The Beatles stood apart from many of the British Big Beat bands because of their energy, craftiness and sense of humor. After Decca declined to sign the band, Parlophone Records producer George Martin, saw them live, got them signed, helped them develop their songwriting and produced their records. By January 1963, they had their first U. K. Number One Hit and

were on their way to an unprecedented commercial and artistic rein. The Beatles directly credited their rock ‘n’ roll influences and signaled something new because they had absorbed and refined the rock ‘n’ roll they grew up with to a new level of sophistication.¹⁰⁶ According to Jim Miller their furious energy, dedication to the craft of popular songwriting and determination to create rock as a type of art distinguished them from other bands of their time.¹⁰⁷ The Beatles also exhibited a refreshing wit, earthiness and irreverence.¹⁰⁸ The self-contained band’s combination of craft and persona promised a fresh new paradigm in popular music and culture.¹⁰⁹ The band established themselves as hit makers through popular singles and albums that had a cross-cultural appeal to men and women, young and old, Blacks and Whites. The Rolling Stone Album Guide defined the band as “the final, great consensus in popular music-not linking them is as perverse as not liking the sun.”¹¹⁰ After establishing their commercial presence the Beatles transitioned from a true pop/rock band to “artists” who used the album medium to bridge the gap between high and low culture through elaborate studio wizardry and elusive lyrical content. A legendary meeting with Bob Dylan¹¹¹ inspired the band to write grittier, more political and autobiographical lyrics. Their immense popularity, which reduced many concerts to spectacle rather than musical performances, inspired them to retire from live concert performing to concentrate on studio

¹⁰⁶ Gillett, 263.

¹⁰⁷ Miller, 192.

¹⁰⁸ Gillett, 264-5.

¹⁰⁹ Miller, 205.

¹¹⁰ See Paul Evans’ description of The Beatles on p. 43, DeCurtis, Anthony and James Henke with Holly George-Warren, eds. Rolling Stone Album Guide. New York: Random House, 1992.

¹¹¹ Miller, 227-8; Palmer 101.

production. The resulting shifts culminated in four seminal albums Rubber Soul, Revolver, Sergeant Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band, and Abbey Road whose combination of music, artwork, lyrics and texture prompted the notion of rock albums as "art" not just hodgepodge collections of singles.¹¹² Several late 60s trends, particularly psychedelic rock, influenced the sounds and tone of these albums which emphasized longer, experimental songs over three minute songs tailored for single release.¹¹³

In the wake of the Beatles a host of British singers and bands, comprising the British Invasion, arrived and altered the look and sound of rock 'n' roll especially from 1964-6. The Invasion continued rock 'n' roll's shift toward "rock." Post-Beatles British groups emerged from various parts of the United Kingdom including Liverpool-based bands The Searchers, Gerry and the Pacemakers, Billy J. Kramer and the Dakotas,¹¹⁴ Ireland's the Them which Van Morrison later left to go solo,¹¹⁵ Manchester's Herman's Hermits and Freddie and the Dreamers.¹¹⁶ Of all the post-Beatle British Invasion bands, The Rolling Stones, explicitly crafted as the rebellious counterpart to the middle-class targeted Beatles, had the greatest commercial and artistic impact.¹¹⁷ Gillett illustrated how the Brits steadily gained commercial footing in a chart which outlined the shift in

¹¹² Garofalo, 248-9; Miller 230-discusses Rubber Soul; Miller 260 discusses Sgt. Pepper as an important artistic moment; John Rockwell cites Sgt. Pepper as a "progenitor of self-conscious experimentation in rock," in "The Emergence of Rock." Rolling Stone Illustrated History of Rock & Roll, 492-3; Sgt. Pepper and the Beatles shift is not universally embraced; Palmer sees Sgt. Pepper as a timepiece, 167; Gillett believes the Beatles became stylized and too willing to experiment, 266; But the Beatles's "art" album period is nonetheless a cornerstone of several rock histories.

¹¹³ Palmer, 167-8.

¹¹⁴ Szatmary, 114-5; Garofalo 203.

¹¹⁵ Garofalo 203.

¹¹⁶ Szatmary 115, Garofalo, 204.

¹¹⁷ Szatmary 120 and Garofalo, 207-8 discusses Oldham's image crafting.

the pop singles market from one British-produced top 10 single in 1963 to 32 in 1964, 36 in 1965. Though these numbers began to decrease in 1967, when American companies began to option British records, to the 20s, they indicated an American-dominated industry being steadily challenged by outsiders and the sudden rise of British records.¹¹⁸

Bob Dylan

Robert Zimmerman was a University of Minnesota bohemian who renamed and redefined himself as “Bob Dylan” a Woody Guthrie-style folk singer. In 1961 Dylan dropped out and moved to the folk-music friendly Greenwich Village to absorb the culture and take in the budding cultural scene of hipsters, bohemians and artists. From 1961-4 Dylan released four acoustic albums on Columbia, which showcased his ragged voice and literate political writing style that established him as a leading voice of the folk music scene. After a series of successful English performances Dylan’s writing became more personal and cynical in tone, his singing became more ragged and unintelligible, and the music more loosely structured. Dylan’s concerts also became quasi-religious in the way audiences had to listen closely to discern lyrics and absorb his unorthodox style. When Dylan “went electric” on one side of 1965’s Bringing It All Back Home he essentially distanced himself from the delicate emotions and acoustic purity folk audiences expected, and solidified his style as a form of rock, which crossed him over to a broader audience. Dylan’s unconventional voice, artful, elusive and

¹¹⁸ Gillett, 283-4.

rambling lyrics, and unpredictable persona altered the possibilities of rock songwriting, performing, attitude and music making.

Dylan influenced such established performers as The Beatles and a legion of intimate folk-rock singer-songwriters such as “next Dylan” candidates John Prine and Bruce Springsteen. He also influenced a folk-rock boom of “thinking musicians” such as the Byrds who merged the Beatles and Dylan into a prototypical folk-rock sound.¹¹⁹ Folk rock also existed in the non-political, sunny optimism of the Lovin’ Spoonful and the Mama and Papas.¹²⁰ Beyond influencing other rock performers Dylan’s music elevated rock to “art” status because he demonstrated how rock could be as complex, unpredictable, challenging and experimental as “high” art. He was central to rock’s transition to a medium for listening and analyzing rather than a forum for leisure and fan worship.

In the wake of the Beatles and Bob Dylan rock musicians took greater license to move beyond rock conventions in pursuit of “art.” For example, the Who’s 1969 rock opera Tommy and the rock and classical fusion of such “art” rock groups as The Moody Blues, Emerson, Lake & Palmer, and Yes, were examples of rock musicians who saw the potential for contemporary music to be infused with sophisticated narrative and musical values that transcend the limited range of the 45 rpm rock ‘n’ roll single. The emergence of late 60s rock magazines committed to covering the counterculture and asserting a mass art aesthetic distinguishing commercial pop recordings from artistic recordings further solidified rock’s status as “art.”

¹¹⁹ Garofalo, 210-1.

¹²⁰ Ibid, 212.

Motown and Soul Music

In the early to mid 60s black popular music was increasingly splintering from rock 'n' roll. The dominant forms of black music were the teenage-oriented Motown sound, a careful hybrid of gospel, R&B and pop song craft aimed at "crossing over" Blacks to White audiences and Southern "soul" music, a style mixing gospel music's intensity with secular content. East coast-based black girl groups, such as the Shirelles and pop/soul singers, such as Dionne Warwick also emerged though they were less explicitly identifiable with the Motown and the Southern soul sound.

If the onslaught of black-influenced music expanded cultural tolerance for diversity in the mid-to-late '50s, the increasing commercial success of black performers in the 60s solidified these cultural gains. Interestingly in 1963, prior to Motown's mega success with the Supremes, R&B music crossed over to the point that the black or R&B chart disappeared and there was just one pop chart.¹²¹

When enterprising Detroit-based jazz aficionado, producer, songwriter and businessman Berry Gordy founded Motown Records in 1960, he did not just create a major commercial force. He also created an institute that embodied the nation's shifting consciousness. Motown's founding after *Brown vs. Board of Education* and entrance into commercial dominance during important 1964 Civil Rights congressional reforms such as the Civil Rights Act, the ratification of the 24th Amendment, Economic Opportunity Act, Criminal Justice Act and Food Stamp Acts were a symbolically rich moment in rock music history. Szatmary summarized Motown as ". . . a music empire that exemplified the peaceful integration advocated by King and reflected the progress

¹²¹ Gillett, 233 and Garofalo, 207 note that between 1964-1966 Billboard discontinued its R&B charts discontinued.

of the civil rights movement.”¹²² Gordy’s vision of Motown as “the sound of young America”¹²³ embodied an integrationist dream of cultural and political unity that “represents an apparent realization of the American Dream, given extra romance because the hero was black.”¹²⁴

Gordy’s “heroic” aim stemmed from his childhood love of music and adult business savvy. After years of working as an independent producer, songwriter, publishing firm owner and observer of music trends¹²⁵ Gordy realized that he could capitalize on the nation’s affinity for R&B music by forming his own record label. His earliest records for Mary Wells, the Marvelettes and Contours were formulaic, made in derivative boy group and girl group styles.¹²⁶ But gradually Gordy composed a unique sound and aesthetic by matching singers with raw talent with commercial-minded in-house songwriter/producers and putting them through a grooming/finishing school.¹²⁷ The result was a distinctly slick, gospel-influenced, danceable sound with appeal to black and white teenagers and stylish, polished, poised performers with non-threatening images, a professional demeanor and refined stagecraft. Gordy couched his aesthetic in a family-oriented image which included the inclusion of his relatives on the Motown staff and the image of Motown as a tight knit “family” of multiple generations of talented, diligent, ambitious blacks.¹²⁸ Motown’s most commercial acts such as the Supremes and the Temptations regularly topped the pop charts and had a national and

¹²² Szatmary 129.

¹²³ Miller, 278.

¹²⁴ Gillett, 210.

¹²⁵ Gillett, 210-1; Szatmary, 130-1.

¹²⁶ Gillett, 211, Szatmary, 130-1.

¹²⁷ Miller, 280-1.

¹²⁸ Gillett, 213.

international commercial appeal. Between 1964-71, which spans Beatlemania, Psychedelic Rock, and the Singer-Songwriter era as well as the Kennedy assassinations, Martin Luther King and Malcolm X's assassinations and Vietnam, Motown had 27 number one hits.¹²⁹ Motown's ability to produce popular hits during this period was significant because as Szatmary notes, Motown's 1964 commercial flowering, which continued well into the early 70s, "reflected and furthered the integration of African-Americans into white America." Through almost a decade of turmoil the Motown beat played on opening diverse audiences up to black music and culture, fulfilling Gordy's hope of "people of different races and religions, working together harmoniously for a common goal."¹³⁰

Soul music emerged from the merging of the sacred and secular evident in the 50s singing style of Clyde McPhatter, Jerry Butler and Sam Cooke who sang diverse material in gospel trained voices. Sam Cooke was the most commercially successful performer of his era. Cooke left a gospel music career with the Soul Stirrers to pursue commercial success in popular music. His commercial success and smooth but emotional style influenced future soul pioneers Ray Charles, Otis Redding and Aretha Franklin. Gillett argued that from 1955-60 the era of gospel voiced singers reigned, then around 1961-3 this approach became more systematic.¹³¹ In 1962 the Memphis sound defined Southern soul music when the Stax and Volt subsidiary began making records through a distribution deal with Atlantic Records.

¹²⁹ Bronson, Fred. Billboard Book of Number One Hits, Revised and Updated 4th Edition. 4th ed. New York: Billboard Books, 1997.

¹³⁰ Szatmary, 133.

¹³¹ Gillett, 226-32.

If Gordy's slick, formulaic teen sound embodied the integrationist strand of the Southern Civil Rights strand of black politics, Southern soul music perpetuated the grit and force of Black pride and nationalism. As Garafalo noted, "As themes of black pride and black self-determination gradually supplanted the call for integration, Motown's hegemony over black pop was successfully challenged by a resurgence of closer-to-the roots, hard-driving rhythm and blues recorded in the Memphis-Muscle Shoals region of the South."¹³² More than a musical style, soul was a virtual political movement that "reflected the militant search for an African-American identity."¹³³ One could listen to soul records to understand the passion and fervor of Black Power era which served as a historical map of the era's political and emotional consciousness. Some of soul's key exemplars Wilson Pickett, James Brown, Otis Redding, Ray Charles and Aretha Franklin were vocal soldiers who ignited America's soul through vocal and rhythmic insistence.

The key to Southern soul music's acceptance was a more open political climate among musicians and the public. Commenting on the interracial musical environment at Stax/Volt Palmer noted how, "The combination of black, church-nurtured voices and white session players was a concrete embodiment of the rising aspirations and integrationist fervor of the times . . ."¹³⁴ Garofalo attributed Southern soul music's commercial success in the pop market to the fact that "black pride had created a cultural space in which unrefined R&B could find mainstream acceptance on its own terms."¹³⁵ Palmer defined soul as "a peculiarly good-hearted and optimistic sort of music, and it is

¹³² Garofalo, 213.

¹³³ Szatmary, 163.

¹³⁴ Palmer, 95.

¹³⁵ Garofalo, 214.

no accident that its popularity was limited to the early and middle Sixties, a time when awakening black pride went hand in hand with civil rights activism and racial progress seemed more real than illusory.”¹³⁶ Geoffrey Stokes cited soul music as a continuation of a sound but noted that “if the integrationist spirit had not been so widespread in the land (especially on those college campuses that had supplied so many recruits for the Southern ‘freedom summers’ of 1964 and 1965), the developments that became soul might have continued to be shunted aside by the British, occurring only on the traditional race labels, measured only on the R&B charts.” He tempered this however with the suggestion that “the changing social condition was a necessary but not sufficient condition; the commercial triumph of soul required intelligent and well-timed marketing from R&B labels like Atlantic.”¹³⁷

Rock historians viewed specific physical musical qualities of soul music as exemplars of the new consciousness with “the coarse grain” of Wilson Pickett’s voice and characteristics such as “the rhythmic insistence” signifying “the forcefulness of the new black militancy.”¹³⁸ Garofalo viewed James Brown as a musical ambassador because, “In taking every instrument to the limit of its rhythmic capabilities, Brown carried the Africanization of popular music to its logical extreme. It was a musical statement that strongly echoed the cultural nationalism that was developing as part of the new militancy in the African American community.”¹³⁹

Many songs also directly addressed struggles against oppression in lyrics and some inadvertently took on an anthemic quality. There were explicit examples such as

¹³⁶ Guralnick, Peter. “Soul.” Rolling Stone Illustrated History of Rock & Roll. 260-1.

¹³⁷ Stokes, Geoffrey. “Red Clay vs. Sequins.” Rock of Ages. 291.

¹³⁸ Garofalo, 215.

¹³⁹ *Ibid*, 217.

“A Change is Gonna Come” (Sam Cooke) and Curtis Mayfield’s “People Get Ready” and “We’re A Winner.” Other songs written in a romantic vein took on political tones via the spirit of the era. For example, Garofalo noted how Aretha Franklin’s interpretation of “Respect” instantly “transformed from a demand for conjugal rights into a soaring cry for freedom.”¹⁴⁰ Southern soul music’s most exemplary singers included Pickett, Brown, Franklin and Otis Redding, Joe Tex, Percy Sledge, Percy Sledge who had differing levels of commercial success, but brought Southern soul music to the mainstream. Outside of the south, Chicago-based singers, including those with singing group experience such as Jerry Butler and Curtis Mayfield, had moderate commercial success with a smooth but recognizably soulful sound. Soul music continued Black music’s aesthetic maturity and mirror the evolution of 60s Black consciousness.

Acid Rock, the Blues Revival, and the End of Idealism

The early-to-mid 1960s was a period of musical and cultural parallels in which The British Invasion and revitalized Folk Movement and Motown, and Soul Music further mainstream youth-oriented music and black influenced music respectively. Rock ‘n’ roll’s transition into a more serious music ushered in the term “rock” as an artistic and cultural distinction separating new music from “pop.” The British and American rock press formed and cultivated these distinctions. Gillett noted how the British rock press distinguished rock from pop by defining pop music and musicians as planned records contrived by business-minded managers and producers. But rock was the artistic expression of musicians who wrote their own songs, played their instruments and

¹⁴⁰ Ibid, 215.

sounded similar live and on records.¹⁴¹ The American rock press which grew largely out of the alternative music scenes in California (Rolling Stone), Boston (Crawdaddy!) and New York (Cheetah) focused on rock as a countercultural lifestyle and ideology. Gillett noted how the American press led by the San Francisco-based Rolling Stone defined the best rock musicians “as visionaries with a spiritual purity that could permanently alter art, politics and society.”¹⁴² The rock press’ distinction between rock and pop also ushered in a structured discourse centered on rock as art with communal roots versus pop as rootless commercial product.¹⁴³ These conversations became the hallmark of rock journalism which also became a useful promotional tool in the music industry through advertising and reviews. As the rock press developed its voice, a second British Invasion emerged, psychedelic inflected rock dominated, soul music began to lose commercial momentum and the rock festival era had a quick birth and symbolic death ending the decade in tumult.

Acid Rock and the Blues Revival

In the mid to late 60s San Francisco and New York’s Greenwich Village became epicenters for avant-garde artists and a burgeoning youth counterculture.¹⁴⁴ In both areas “Beat” writers, especially Allen Ginsberg and Jack Kerouac, inspired by Eastern religion, jazz culture, Leftist politics and drug experimentation, exposed America’s underbelly and suggest alternatives to the traditional pursuit of middle-class social

¹⁴¹ Gillett, 275.

¹⁴² Ibid, 350.

¹⁴³ Garofalo, 246-9.

¹⁴⁴ For discussions of the San Francisco scene see Gillett 350-1 and Garofalo, 318; Szatmary discusses San Francisco and New York as Beat Culture hangout, 142.

status in their writings.¹⁴⁵ Their work promised subversive potential that inspired many young people, especially middle-class white college students, to re-imagine their lives. The integration of psychedelic drugs, especially lysergic acid diethylamide (LSD) or “acid” into the San Francisco scene certainly boosted the re-imagining process. Timothy Leary, inspired by Aldous Huxley’s novel detailing his experiences with mescaline The Door of Perception, and novelist Ken Kesey were the chief advocates of LSD as a form of chemical enlightenment.¹⁴⁶ To put this hypothesis in action Kesey and a group of his friends called the Merry Pranksters organized an “Acid Test” in late 1965, offering LSD to young people exiting a San Jose Rolling Stones concert. The concertgoers were ushered into a house, with film and sound equipment setup to capture the experience and a live band and various visual elements to stimulate their imaginations while they tried acid-laced punch known as the Kool-Aid Acid Test.¹⁴⁷ The “test” was the impetus for LSD’s role as a staple of the counterculture “hippie” scene which also became synonymous with the “acid rock” sound. Playing at the acid test house was a laidback folk-rock band called the Grateful Dead, one of many up and coming bands in the Haight-Asbury area of San Francisco which also included the Jefferson Airplane, Big Brother and Holding Company and Quicksilver Messenger Service. These bands became the soundtrack to the counterculture scene which took shape through a combination of music and ideology in various forums including public music festivals, the counterculture press, and FM radio stations.

¹⁴⁵ Szatmary, 140-1; Gillett, 350-1.

¹⁴⁶ Miller, 236, Szatmary, 147.

¹⁴⁷ Miller 236-40, Szatmary 144.

The clearest sign of the size and commercial potential of hippie culture was the January 1967 Human Be-In which included a Ginsberg reading, and showcased San Francisco “acid rock” bands including the Grateful Dead, Jefferson Airplane, and the Quicksilver Messenger Service.¹⁴⁸ For many of these performers playing was as much a social act as it was a performance because they had faith in the hippie ideology. Hippies were anti-materialist, advocated communal living, rejected sexual taboos, (i.e. pro-“free sex” without love, pro-nudity), sought spiritual transcendence and differentiated themselves wearing long hair and displaying hippie gear purchased at local shops.¹⁴⁹ Drugs, especially LSD and marijuana were hippie staples and rock songs from within and outside of the hippie scene began to incorporate hippie ethos with direct and covert drug references that inspired a rash of scrutiny and controversy.¹⁵⁰

The counterculture press arose to chronicle community happenings, and a rash of music-oriented counterculture publications emerge including Rolling Stone.¹⁵¹ By 1967 an estimated 50,000 hippies lived in Haight-Ashbury.¹⁵² Acid rock received a major commercial boost when the Monterey Pop Festival, the first major rock festival, attracted over 50, 000 attendees including many major record labels anxious to capitalize on acid rock and hippie culture.¹⁵³ The festival was meticulously organized, featured professional lighting and sophisticated amplification, and A&R men from

¹⁴⁸ Garofalo, 222; Gillett, 353; Miller 261.

¹⁴⁹ Szatmary 146, 150-1; Garofalo 229.

¹⁵⁰ Garofalo 217; Palmer discusses the Byrds’ “8 Miles High” (1966) as the first “psychedelic” rock hit, The Beatles’ “Tomorrow Never Knows” as an example of seminal psychedelic hit, and notes how the psychedelic era spawned the industry shift from singles to open-ended explorations of album-length, 165-7.

¹⁵¹ Gillett, 350.

¹⁵² Szatmary, 145.

¹⁵³ Garofalo, 222-3; Miller 261.

record labels aggressively signed the festival's most dynamic acts, which by most accounts were led by Janis Joplin and Jimi Hendrix's histrionic vocal and guitar playing respectively. The festival, which filmmaker D. A. Pennebaker documented led to major label signings including Columbia Records signing Electric Flag, Moby Grape, Big Brother & Holding Company featuring Joplin; Warner Bros snatching up Jimi Hendrix; Capitol signing blues revivalist Steve Miller and acid rockers Quicksilver Messenger Service and Mercury adding Mother Earth and Sir Douglas Quintet to their rosters.¹⁵⁴ These groups, which continued the "art" tradition of Dylan and the psychedelic era Beatles made album-oriented music for listening rather than dance-oriented singles and benefited from the free form FM format whose earliest pioneers included San Francisco's KMPX and rival station KSAN. Szatmary noted FM radio's role in spreading acid rock to the national charts and Gillett noted how these stations "reframe radio and shift from album cuts to singles, demanding more substantive bands."¹⁵⁵

A supportive press, the signing of acid rockers to major labels and the increasing acid rock presence should have revolutionized popular culture. But many historians viewed Monterey's commercial boost as a mixed blessing. Despite the subversive, anti-materialist stance of hippies Miller viewed the festival as "less a utopia than a musician's business opportunity" that "marks rock 'n' roll as mature showbiz form (i.e. professional lighting, sophisticated amplification, touring indulgences)"¹⁵⁶ Gillett lamented that none of the San Francisco bands fulfilled their promise.¹⁵⁷ Finally

¹⁵⁴ Gillett 353-4.

¹⁵⁵ Szatmary, 158; Gillett, 352.

¹⁵⁶ Miller, 264, 269.

¹⁵⁷ Gillett, 357.

numerous rock historians noted how corporate co-optation and press overexposure inspired many hippies to begin turning away from hippiedom.¹⁵⁸

The hippie “flower power” mood also shifted as the result of the U. S. presence in Vietnam. One of the prime issues that defined 60s youth was outrage among college students who organized protests (marching at government buildings, occupying buildings) against the Vietnam War.¹⁵⁹ According to Szatmary, “As the decade came to a close, the hopeful mood of psychedelia changed to a somber resolve and then a dark depression. During the late sixties, young rock and rollers listened to desperate, loud blues that reflected the times.”¹⁶⁰ Indeed overlapping the hippie revolution and anti-Vietnam activism were the British and U. S. guitar blues revival, styles that spawned heavy metal, and two decade ending 60s rock festivals. Among the youth subcultures to develop during this transition was the Abbie Hoffman and Jerry Rubin-led “Yippie” party a more militant variant of hippie culture and leftist politics that self-consciously defined itself as a form of cultural revolution.¹⁶¹ Many historians viewed a split between the hippie ethos of individual consciousness raising and more militant political action.¹⁶²

The British blues revival or Second British Invasion, ushered in several male groups of electric guitarists infatuated by American blues guitarists who strove for virtuosity.¹⁶³ The British rockers, who were an extension of the grittier sounds the Rolling Stones and The Animals brought during the first British Invasion, fused blues

¹⁵⁸ Szatmary, 159-60.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid, 172-7.

¹⁶⁰ Ibid, 172.

¹⁶¹ Ibid, 173.

¹⁶² Garofalo, 230.

¹⁶³ Palmer, 114.

with rock instrumentation to create a raucous sound comprised of howling vocals, improvised guitar solos and virtuosic playing.¹⁶⁴ A commitment to lengthy album cuts also linked the style to the rock as “art” ethos, making such albums adept for the new free form FM radio format. The defining British electric blues group was the blues-rock trio Cream, led by Eric Clapton, whose winning mix of blues “authenticity” and commercial appeal made them popular album sellers and inspired a rash of British imitators including the Jeff Beck and Spencer Davis Group.¹⁶⁵ Incidentally the Second British Invasion developed at a time when British rockers and the rock press solidified mythological differences between pop and rock music. The rock press defined pop as a purely commercial, artless form dependent on mere radio hit singles and comprised of rote performers who were likely to be contrived rather than musicians who “paid dues.”¹⁶⁶ Music writers on both sides of the Atlantic shared the pop/rock binary ideology, a belief that wedged a gap between musical forms *and* perceptions of cultural location. Rock was not only a musical genre but a radical, subversive lifestyle whereas pop represented mindless conformity to traditional values. The 60s youth culture’s embrace of British Blues was as much a cultural gesture as it is a musical one among youth who, “Radicalized to a large extent by the war in Vietnam and the establishment of the first lottery drawing to draft men into the armed forces since 1942, the militant American youths became interested in a hard edged rock.”¹⁶⁷

¹⁶⁴ Ibid, 124.

¹⁶⁵ Garofalo, 220-1.

¹⁶⁶ Gillett, 375-7.

¹⁶⁷ Szatmary, 177.

The British blues revival later spawned “heavy metal” a sound marked by a “heavy” sound with slower, more ominous tempos and a reduction of blues phrases¹⁶⁸ and “reflecting the militant mood of the times.”¹⁶⁹ Led Zeppelin and Black Sabbath were benchmark heavy metal groups for musical and visual reasons. Though they debuted as 60s rock was losing its commercial and cultural momentum, they represented some important shifts to come in the music industry. For example Gillett described Led Zeppelin’s intensely virtuosic concert style as an exemplar of how, “What had once been a communal music now came dangerously close to being a tool of authoritarian control.”¹⁷⁰ Szatmary describes Black Sabbath and their music as embodying “destructive tendencies and the anti-war sentiment of the era.”¹⁷¹

Among American musicians a renewed interest in the blues and roots music began in the mid 60s and continued into the late 60s alongside acid rock and the British blues revival. As early as 1963 Paul Butterfield band organized in Chicago followed by the New York based Blues Project and Canned Heat in Los Angeles.¹⁷² Other U.S. blues groups which emerged in the wake of late 60s trends included the Steve Miller Band, Johnny Winter, ZZ Top, and the Allman Brothers.¹⁷³ Though many historians associated Jimi Hendrix and the Experience and Big Brother and Holding Company with the “acid rock” scene, some also included Hendrix who first achieved commercial success in England as part of the Second Invasion and included Big Brother & Holding Company/Janis Joplin among U. S. blues revival groups. These historical practices

¹⁶⁸ Palmer, 124.

¹⁶⁹ Szatmary, 184.

¹⁷⁰ Gillett, 387.

¹⁷¹ Szatmary, 184-5.

¹⁷² Garofalo 220.

¹⁷³ Garofalo, 221; Szatmary, 185-8.

indicated the diversity and complexity of late 60s rock to the degree that genre boundaries blurred together as youth culture political and cultural uprising bound the rock music of this period together. A few rockers on the edge of the youth culture began to self-consciously eschew psychedelia and returned to America's blues and folk "roots" including the Americana sounds of The Band, The Grateful Dead's Workingman's Dead & American Beauty, The Byrds' "Sweetheart of the Rodeo" and Dylan's John Wesley Harding.¹⁷⁴

Woodstock, Altamont and Rock 'n' Roll Death, 1969-1979

The ability of a new generation of rock 'n' roll fans to redefine rock music as "art" realized the artistic and cultural potential rock 'n' roll only hinted at. Rock's status as socially relevant popular art coupled with the crossover success of Motown and Southern soul music represented a changing nation captured by its youth music. The parallel relationship between 60s social progress and 60s musical developments flowered in the 60s ultimate rock music festival, Woodstock. On August 17, 1969 on Max Yasgur's 600-acre farm in Bethel New York, the penultimate cultural and political summit of late 60s youth culture, the Woodstock Music and Art Festival, was held. Attracting somewhere between 250,000-400,000 people¹⁷⁵ Woodstock "symbolized unity of purpose among the swelling ranks of youth who opposed the war in Vietnam and hoped to assert their won power" and "reflected the anti-authoritarian attitude of late-sixties youth."¹⁷⁶ More than a cultural event, Woodstock was a veritable political

¹⁷⁴ Palmer, 171.

¹⁷⁵ 400,000 according to Palmer, 172 and Szatmary, 188; 250,000 according to Gillett, 403; Garofalo estimates 350-400, 000, 231.

¹⁷⁶ Szatmary, 188.

rally where music became a political rallying cry against Vietnam and American cultural injustice. The festival featured a wide array of performers including Richie Havens, The Band, Creedence Clearwater Revival, Santana, Jimi Hendrix and the Electric Sky Church, Melanie, Sly and the Family Stone, the Who, Joe Cocker and a rash of acid rock bands.¹⁷⁷ Garofalo defined it as “the counterculture’s finest hour” and that despite some mishaps “a spirit of cooperation infused the entire event” and ultimately “The symbolism of Woodstock was overpowering, and its music was compelling.”¹⁷⁸ Perhaps the festival’s most legendary and enduring performance is Hendrix’s screaming interpretation of “The Star Spangled Banner” whose replication of bombs bursting in air inspires many interpretations that he subverted the anthem and turned it into a poignant antiwar song.¹⁷⁹

Woodstock brought people together and, like Monterey, brought many fledgling acts invaluable exposure and lucrative major record label contracts. For example Santana landed a Columbia contract¹⁸⁰ and many artists became “first division” superstars via such mass exposure including Joplin, Hendrix, the Who, Cocker and Crosby, Stills & Nash.¹⁸¹ An undercurrent of cynicism informed many historical accounts of Woodstock in rock histories which lamented its latent commercialism. For example Gillett believed such massive tours foreshadowed the advent a stadium rock, major label groups who tour the country but in a perfunctory way that, “eliminates the

¹⁷⁷ Szatmary 188-9; Gillett 403-4; Garofalo 231-5.

¹⁷⁸ Garofalo, 232.

¹⁷⁹ Szatmary, 189; Garofalo, 233.

¹⁸⁰ Garofalo, 232.

¹⁸¹ Gillett, 404; Garofalo, 234-5.

elements of ‘spiritualness’ that made the late sixties potentially attractive.”¹⁸² Tellingly, many historians grouped Woodstock together with the ill-fated Altamont free concert held on December 6, 1969 at the Altamont Speedway located outside of San Francisco. Garofalo entitles a chapter subsection as “Woodstock and Altamont: Reaching the Heights, Taking the Fall.”¹⁸³ Szatmary labeled his section “Woodstock and the End of An Era.”¹⁸⁴ Gillett referred to Woodstock as “one of those ‘milestone’ events which occasionally occur to make it simpler for chroniclers to define the beginnings and ends of eras.”¹⁸⁵

Indeed the concert marked “the end” of “the 60s” to many critics and musicians because it explicitly combined everything the counterculture was against—including racism, violence, exploitation, indifference—all summed up by the actions of several parties. The concert was intended as a climax for the Rolling Stones’ 1969 U. S. tour. After several logistical changes the concert was booked at Altamont Speedway a smaller venue than the Woodstock farm that attracted over 300, 000 fans into a cramped space. On the suggestion of the Grateful Dead, one of several acts that played the concert, biker group Hell’s Angels were hired to do security for \$500 worth of beer. Armed and easily provoked, the Angels harassed and brutalized concertgoers, and most shockingly stabbed and clubbed an 18-year old black student named Meredith Hunter to death, one of four murders at the concert. As the Angels fought with audience members the Rolling Stones continue singing “Sympathy for the Devil” and segued into “Under

¹⁸² Gillett, 404.

¹⁸³ Garofalo, 231.

¹⁸⁴ Szatmary, 188.

¹⁸⁵ Gillett, 404.

My Thumb” as Hunter was being murdered.¹⁸⁶ The events at Altamont “dashed the sense of power that Woodstock had engendered”¹⁸⁷ and the Rolling Stones’ performance of “Sympathy for the Devil” was an inadvertent requiem, a paradoxical lament, for a cultural experiment gone sour.¹⁸⁸ The Kent State murders were a post-Woodstock, post-Altamont benchmark that denoted the further chipping away at the counterculture spirit destroying “any remaining feeling of militant power that existed among sixties youth after Altamont.”¹⁸⁹ The death knell to 60s rock came in the literal forms of the deaths of Jimi Hendrix, Al Wilson of Canned Heat, Janis Joplin and Jim Morrison from September 1970-July 1971.¹⁹⁰ By the 1970s rock the musical genre, but also the art, culture and politics attached, was essentially dead *en route* to blatant commercialism and a “softer” aesthetic.

1970s: Ennui, Excess and Endings

By the early 1970s the record industry was feasting off the commercial fortunes it had secured from the immense audience responses to such 60s genres as folk-rock, acid rock, blues rock, Motown and Southern soul. Structural shifts in the industry including the free form radio format, the music press and most significantly rapid corporate consolidation all suggested an industry poised for further expansion.

Between 1973-7 rock went “corporate,” meaning seven major record companies, CBS, Capitol-EMI, MCA, Polygram, RCA, A&M, and Warner Communications

¹⁸⁶ Miller, 276-7; Garofalo, 235-7; Szatmary, 189-90.

¹⁸⁷ Szatmary 189.

¹⁸⁸ Garofalo, 277.

¹⁸⁹ Szatmary, 190; Garofalo, 237.

¹⁹⁰ Szatmary, 191; Miller on Morrison’s death, 286-293; Miller cites Morrison, Hendrix and Joplin’s deaths on 297; Garofalo cites Hendrix, Joplin and Morrison deaths.

controlled ~ 50-52% of all record and tape sales. Of these, CBS and Warner-Elektra/Asylum-Atlantic sold ~ 38-40 % of total industry product.¹⁹¹ This consolidation also included vertical integration meaning record companies, increasingly under the corporate umbrella of electronics manufacturers, benefited from tie-ins that boost sales such as CBS Records' ties to CBS' ownership of Columbia Record and Tape Club.¹⁹² By definition the narrowing industry began niche marketing to maximize profits and aimed for safer acts, which diminished the ability of subversive and challenging music/musicians to gain corporate support.¹⁹³

Indeed in the early 70s the music industry was a two billion dollar industry that became a four billion industry by decades' end.¹⁹⁴ Numerous post-60 genres with broad appeal including singer/songwriter pop, "soft" rock, "soft" soul, country-rock, stadium rock captured the public's taste and generated immense profits for record companies. But many historians viewed the consequence of this industrial victory as the quelling of the political and revolutionary spirit of the mid to late 60s.

The 1970s was mostly a disappointing decade of betrayal among many rock historians, who viewed the decade as rock's death. Gillett's ended the Sound of the City, which covered rock through 1971, with a chapter entitled "Goodnight America." He argued that rock 'n' roll became too pretentious for its own good when it self

¹⁹¹ Szatmary, 219, Garofalo, 242.

¹⁹² Garofalo, 242.

¹⁹³ Though most histories which discuss consolidation primarily frame it as a feature of rock in the late '60s and 70s, U. K company Electric and Musical Industries (EMI) music division's 1955 purchase of Capitol Records was arguably the first sign of rock 'n' roll as an international business. In Chapter Four I discuss impact of consolidation on musicians from the singer-songwriter era on, particularly queer musicians because consolidation yielded unexpected benefits for several musicians.

¹⁹⁴ Ibid, 301.

consciously “matured” by becoming merely a career in entertainment for contemporary performers and aspired to become art.¹⁹⁵ He also lamented the co-optation and erasure of independent labels, the industry’s overly meticulous production values, and a new generation of singer/songwriters who “provided a reassurance that after all and the fuss about freedom and revolution, what the world loved to sing was a love song.”¹⁹⁶ Jim Miller marked the late 70s as rock’s virtual death by commenting on the music industry’s, including mass media and record companies, the self-promoting perpetuation of a self-important rock mythology that turned performers, such as Bruce Springsteen, into fetishized commodities. He cited the brief but influential reign of punk performers the Sex Pistols and Elvis Presley’s death as key events that deflated the notion of rock as a unifier among a youth culture which believed that the music “could inform a powerful collective force for social change.”¹⁹⁷ By the late 70s and early ’80s popular music was a market-driven industry rooted in fragmentation and niche marketing rather than an eclectic, collective music with potential for a broad commercial and cultural impact.¹⁹⁸

Szatmary, Garofalo, and Palmer wrote about rock era developments beyond the 1970s though all characterized the 70s as a time when something was lost. For Szatmary, the 70s was a mixture of retreat into ennui and excess reflecting dying political militancy and signifying the decade’s characteristic indulgence. Thus in the 1970s “rock became soft, serious and introspective” and “an apolitical, intensely

¹⁹⁵ Gillett, 402; “These singers were the final ‘maturity’ of rock ‘n’ roll . . .” 411.

¹⁹⁶ Ibid, 408-9.

¹⁹⁷ Miller, 335.

¹⁹⁸ Ibid, 350.

personal experience”¹⁹⁹ and/or gaudy and excessive, symbolized by Elton John, David Bowie, funk, and disco.²⁰⁰ Garofalo viewed the 1970s with less cynicism when he noted, “Society was not radically transformed in the manner the New Left wanted but neither did conservatives reestablish the cultural and political hegemony that they had enjoyed in the early 1950s.”²⁰¹ He noted female performers gained a more prominent place in the industry²⁰² and some challenges to notions of masculinity and femininity in heavy metal.²⁰³ But overall, he conceded that “As the country’s leadership shifted from the lackluster and conservative Gerald Ford to the pleasant but largely ineffectual Jimmy Carter, it seemed to many that the rock ‘n’ roll rebellion that had begun in the 1950s was on the verge of being tamed. Popular music was becoming centrist, corporate, safe.”²⁰⁴ Palmer also framed the 70s as a period of excess and artifice where in the post-Woodstock era, bands became too popular for small venues and concert halls/stadiums became the new place for rock, which symbolized its growing excess.²⁰⁵ In response to the industry’s excess he welcomed the mid 70s emergence of punk music because, “It was time for somebody with guts to reassert the primacy of feel and heart over technique and spectacle.”²⁰⁶

Singer/Songwriters

¹⁹⁹ Szatmary, 191, 193.

²⁰⁰ Ibid, 210-7.

²⁰¹ Garofalo, 239.

²⁰² Ibid, 269.

²⁰³ Ibid, 292.

²⁰⁴ Ibid, 301.

²⁰⁵ Palmer, 262.

²⁰⁶ Ibid, 263.

The first group of performers to mark the 70s growing conservatism was the singer/songwriter “movement.” In the The Rolling Stone Illustrated History of Rock & Roll, Stephen Holden referred to this phenomenon as:

. . . a moment in the early Seventies when the future of rock & roll seemed to belong to a corps of introspective performers whose ascendancy coincided with what a Time magazine story labeled ‘the cooling of America.’ Most were white middle-class baby boomers with some liberal education who had grown up with rock & roll, became caught up in the Sixties folk-music boom and tentatively subscribed to the rock counterculture’s utopian-revolutionary agenda.²⁰⁷

Szatmary characterized the style as “a plaintive, confessional style that had its roots in sixties folk” but was “less country-based” and reflected “The disintegration of the American family coupled with the decline of political activism . . .” thus a lyrical focus on “the loneliness of the single adult.”²⁰⁸ Garofalo described the genre’s songs as “intensely personal” and “an attempt to apply lyric poetry to semiautobiographical themes.”²⁰⁹ The movement’s most often discussed performers included James Taylor, Carole King, Carly Simon, and Joni Mitchell.²¹⁰ Many of these performers’ careers began in the late 1960s but the 70s was their commercial peak. The genre which also included Paul Simon, Cat Stevens, Jim Croce, Harry Chapin, Gordon Lightfoot, Seals & Croft, and America, led Garofalo to question whether, “this turning inward signaled a

²⁰⁷ Holden, Stephen. “The Evolution of the Singer-Songwriter.” Rolling Stone Illustrated History of Rock & Roll. 480.

²⁰⁸ Szatmary, 202.

²⁰⁹ Garofalo, 264.

²¹⁰ Szatmary, 203-4; Garofalo, 265-9; Holden, Rolling Stone Illustrated History of Rock & Roll. 480-9; Gillett, 407-11.

retreat from-or was it a reevaluation of?-the politics of the 1960s.”²¹¹ He praised the genre for enabling women to sing in their own voices and encouraging male performers to try on new personas but noted lapses in to mousiness, masochism and cliché.

Garofalo distinguished performers labeled as the “next Dylan” from the usual singer-songwriter group including David Bromberg, Loudon Wainwright III, John Prine, Leonard Cohen, Tom Waits, Randy Newman and Bruce Springsteen.²¹² He grouped Springsteen with Van Morrison and John Lennon’s solo work because it added rock intensity to the introspection.²¹³ Overall the lingering feel of the new, softer folk was a diluted, regressive and mostly apolitical variant of 60s folk and protest rock.

Soft Soul

The conservatism that swept the nation extended to 70s Black music which softened and deadened the political symbolism of Motown and Southern soul in favor of slicker, more romantic music. Palmer marked the Southern soul era’s decline by Martin Luther King’s assassination which disrupted white and black harmony in Memphis recording culture.²¹⁴ The mid-70s bankruptcy of Stax, followed by Booker T & MGs break-up, and last-gasp Southern soul hope Al Green’s shift from secular to sacred music effectively ended the Southern soul music era.²¹⁵ Motown’s 60s commercial reign declined in a series of breakups and defections by neglected acts including Gladys Knight and the Pips and The Spinners, popular acts Diana Ross and The Supremes, and writing-production team Holland-Dozier-Holland. In the early 70s

²¹¹ Garofalo, 264.

²¹² Ibid, 270-71.

²¹³ Ibid, 272.

²¹⁴ Palmer, 96.

²¹⁵ Ibid, 97.

Motown's most significant new act was bubblegum soul group the Jackson Five and several veteran acts, especially The Temptations, Marvin Gaye and Steve Wonder adapted to the shifting political and culture scene and embraced the LP format.²¹⁶

Early 70s black music got a boost from popular Black-oriented movies and accompanying soundtrack tie-ins including Superfly, Shaft and Trouble Man.²¹⁷

However, the more conservative ethos of the 70s ushered in an aesthetic and cultural space for more album-oriented acts with a softer sound. The sound that best exemplified the more relaxed environment was the Philadelphia soul sound, pioneered by writer/producers Thom Bell, Kenny Gamble and Leon Huff. After years of writing and producing success in the mid-to- late 60s, Gamble and Huff formed Philadelphia International Records, an independent label distributed and promoted by CBS Records.²¹⁸ Lush orchestrations, a streamlined rhythmic pulse, and an emphasis on dance grooves characterized the “Philly Soul” sound of popular singles and album groups including Harold Melvin and the Blue Notes, the Stylistics, the Spinners, Mother Father Sister Brother (MFSB) and The Sound of Philadelphia (TSOP).²¹⁹ Other soft-soul acts that emerged in the 70s included the Chi-Lites, Isley Brothers, Roberta Flack, and Barry White. Some critics viewed the soft-soul sound with suspicion including Jim Miller who remarked on how the Philly Soul records' defining characteristic was their “urbane glossiness” and how the sound's popularity opened up a “flourishing band of

²¹⁶ Garofalo, 261-2.

²¹⁷ Palmer, 254-5; Garofalo, 258.

²¹⁸ Garofalo, 259; Miller, Jim. “The Sound of Philadelphia.” Rolling Stone Illustrated History of Rock & Roll. 517.

²¹⁹ Garofalo, 259-60, Miller, Rolling Stone Illustrated History of Rock & Roll. 517-8.

slick-minded producers.”²²⁰ Rock critic Greil Marcus saw early 70s Black music as stylized schlock characterized by producer-driven poetic efficiency.²²¹ Garofalo, notes how political content crept into some of the Philly Soul songs but noted that Gamble and Huff songs, “infused the market with romantic ballads and stylish dance music more than they rejuvenated the Civil Rights movement with a message of black liberation” and that “by the early 1970s a good deal of rhythm and blues music seemed to have lost its edge. Almost everywhere, black popular music seemed less feisty than it had been . . . it no longer had the insistence of Southern soul.”²²² The slick, groove-driven Philly sound eventually fed into the musical basis for disco music.

Country-Rock and Southern Boogie

A close kin to the singer-songwriter style emerged in the “country-rock” genres. As several historians pointed out, at the end of the 1960s numerous musicians including Bob Dylan, the Byrds, the Grateful Dead and The Band, turned away from acid rock and other late 60s trends, and released albums with an explicit “roots” feel drawn from blues, country and folk. These albums inspired many pop/rock performers to incorporate elements of country into their writing and singing. Szatmary defined the contexts for these albums as musicians who, “Confronted by the harsh, complicated realities of an unwanted war in Vietnam and events at Kent State, some folk rockers began to move toward a country music that extolled simple living and rural traditions.”²²³

²²⁰ Miller, 518.

²²¹ Marcus, *Mystery Train*, 87.

²²² Garofalo, 259, 263.

²²³ Szatmary, 199.

Bob Dylan led the charge recording John Wesley Harding (1968) and Nashville Skyline (1969), which he recorded in Nashville.²²⁴ Soon after, pop/rock musicians, including Buffy Sainte-Marie and the Nitty Gritty Dirty Band, also began making records in Nashville and utilized Nashville based “authentic” country musicians.²²⁵ On the West Coast several musicians cultivated a slick hybrid of country and rock took shape in the music of the Flying Burrito Brothers, Poco, Souther, Hillman and Furay, and Loggins & Messina. Three of the most commercially successful variants of the style included solo singer Linda Ronstadt who mixed “sensitive ballads” (largely written by 70s singer/songwriters) with “smooth renditions” of country and rockabilly classics,²²⁶ The Eagles whom Garofalo described as “unsettling” in their corporate slickness and hedonist image,²²⁷ and singer/songwriter Jackson Browne whom Szatmary described as abandoning “social protest for personal, country-flavored folk.”²²⁸

The late 60s/early 70s rock and country fusion opened commercial doors for pop-oriented pop-country acts such as John Denver and Glen Campbell. Country musicians such as “outlaws” Willie Nelson and Waylon Jennings made commercial and cultural inroads among rock fans. Finally, a group of Southern-based boogie bands overlapped with the “country-rock” genre’s emergence. Signature boogie bands included Allman Brothers, Marshall Tucker Band, Lynyrd Skynyrd, the Charlie Daniels Band, and Molly Hatchet. Such bands drew from blues, rock and country and espoused an earthy, playful, and even crude image, offsetting some of the pretension and

²²⁴ Szatmary 198; Garofalo, 278.

²²⁵ Garofalo, 278.

²²⁶ Szatmary, 199.

²²⁷ Garofalo, 280-81; Szatmary discusses the Eagles on 199-201.

²²⁸ Szatmary, 201.

slickness of L. A. based country rock.²²⁹ The overall impression of the country-rock fusion was a shift from sincere, authentic feeling efforts to reconnect rock with its musical roots in the late 60s to more calculated attempts to smooth out country to broaden its commercial appeal in the 70s with few exceptions. Like singer/songwriter music 60s edge diminished under the weight of commercial polish and faded militancy.

Heavy Metal

Where 70s singer-songwriter folk, “soft” soul and country rock essentially diluted the musical (and political) edge of 60s music, other genres moved in the opposite direction and replaced substance with spectacle, reflecting the ethos of the 70s as “the era of excess.”²³⁰ Szatmary viewed the blunted political drive among youth, yuppie materialism and ennui, greater drug usage, and freewheeling sex as symptoms of a selfish, apolitical generation betraying itself through indulgence, hedonism and immorality.²³¹ For Szatmary Heavy Metal, an outgrowth of the late 60s acid rock and blues revival scenes, grew more spectacular in the 70s and exemplified the new excess. Garofalo described the 70s with a less pernicious reading than Szatmary but defined Heavy Metal as an absolute rejection of the peace and love ethos.²³² Szatmary viewed British glam rocker David Bowie, who gained mass U. S. attention in 1972 in the persona of Ziggy Stardust, as the key to the spectacle defining 70s heavy metal acts.²³³ Bowie’s visual androgyny and spectacle-driven performing style inspired (whether

²²⁹ Garofalo, 282.

²³⁰ Szatmary, 207 titles Chapter 12 as “The Era of Excess.”

²³¹ Szatmary, 207-8.

²³² Garofalo, 286.

²³³ Szatmary, 210.

directly or indirectly) the look of Lou Reed, Iggy Pop, The New York Dolls, Mott the Hopples, Kiss, Alice Cooper, and Queen.²³⁴ For him, “A theatrical, glittery, sometimes androgynous heavy metal, exemplified by David Bowie, epitomized seventies rock-and-roll excess.”²³⁵ British band Queen led by flamboyant singer Freddie Mercury garnered a considerable amount of Szatmary’s attention who viewed Mercury’s androgynous image (“dresses, tights, and black nail polish”) and the band’s “excessive” live shows (“staging that featured smoke bombs, flash pots, and androgynous costumes”) as a reflection of “the escapist, extravagant ‘me’ generation.”²³⁶

Garofalo defined heavy metal in a broader sense than Szatmary. He cited late 60s bands Led Zeppelin, Black Sabbath and Deep Purple as key Heavy Metal bands.²³⁷ But he also noted that heavy metal had a broad stylistic palette that borrowed from classical and southern boogie and included numerous groups straddling genre lines such as Boston-based blues-oriented bands Aerosmith and J. Geils Band.²³⁸ Numerous heavy metal acts emerged in the mid-70s including Rush (Canada), Judas Priest (Britain), Ted Nugent, Van Halen, Grand Funk Railroad (U. S.) which indicated the genre’s growing commercial presence. Garofalo noted the sociological elements that characterized heavy metal including critical disdain for its sexist lyrics and its appeal to young white males, both facts which inspired the nickname of “cock rock” for heavy metal. Heavy metal also inspired conservative criticism that certain groups (Judas Priest, Black Sabbath,

²³⁴ Szatmary, 212-3.

²³⁵ Szatmary, 210.

²³⁶ Szatmary, 214.

²³⁷ Garofalo, 287-9.

²³⁸ Garofalo, 286.

AC/DC, etc.) glorified the occult.²³⁹ Unlike Szatmary, Garofalo invested visual androgyny with a social function rather than defining it as a symbol of excess. Garofalo noted that many heavy metal acts posed “a perverse challenge to the security of fixed gender roles” via the use of makeup and androgyny among acts such as Alice Cooper and Kiss.²⁴⁰ Interestingly Palmer noted that Alice Cooper shifts his image from androgyny to horror-based imagery to avoid queer associations.²⁴¹

Lester Bangs argued that as Heavy Metal’s commercial prominence faded its late 60s intensity diluted into a 70s “middle-of-the road respectable,” style at the hands of “faceless corporate bands with interchangeable one-word monikers like Triumph, Toto, Foreigner, Journey, etc. . . .”²⁴² Garofalo viewed similar groups, including Styx, Supertramp and REO Speedwagon, Foghat less as an outgrowth of heavy metal than a reflection of the “tamed” and “centrist, corporate, safe” attitude which pervaded the 70s such that “any second-rate rock group could be assured of radio play, full stadiums and platinum record sales.”²⁴³ Once again, a vital popular became diluted and corporatized over time.

Punk Predecessors and Punk Rock

In response to the growing “corporate” feel of rock, numerous “punk” musicians arose in the mid-1970s with the broad aim to disrupt mainstream music and culture through diverse approaches. Though punk is primarily associated with mid-to-late 70s

²³⁹ Garofalo, 290-1.

²⁴⁰ Garofalo, 293-4.

²⁴¹ Palmer, 185.

²⁴² See Bangs, Lester. “Heavy Metal.” The Rolling Stone Illustrated History of Rock & Roll. 462.

²⁴³ Garofalo, 303.

acts The Ramones and the Sex Pistols, some historians trace its origins as far back as 50s rockabilly,²⁴⁴ though most agree that 60s “garage rock” was its clearest predecessor in spirit. Regardless of its exact origins its symbolism was unmistakable though debated among some historians.

According to Szatmary:

Opposed to the excessive corporate rock of the mid-1970s, they created a minimalistic, angry music that threatened their materialistic baby-boom elders. In 1977, a new generation had arisen to lay claim to a rebellious rock and roll heritage.²⁴⁵

Punk, though beginning to disintegrate by 1978, shattered the monopoly of corporate rock.²⁴⁶

Robert Palmer wrote:

Rock, it seems was having an identity crisis.

It was time for somebody with guts to reassert the primacy of feel and heart over technique and spectacle.²⁴⁷

Reebee Garofalo wrote:

It was punk’s political possibilities, real or imagined, that captured the attention of rock critics who had cut their teeth on the political

²⁴⁴ Palmer, 262.

²⁴⁵ Szatmary, 222.

²⁴⁶ Ibid, 238.

²⁴⁷ Palmer, 263.

movements of the 1960s. Never has so much been written by so many about so little.²⁴⁸

Almost all rock histories cited the raw sounding, New York-based Andy Warhol-managed band the Velvet Underground, whose album debuted in 1967, as commercially obscure but artistically the most influential band, especially among punk musicians.²⁴⁹ The band had “deliberately primitive musical accompaniment”²⁵⁰ and was intent to keep things rough and disruptive.²⁵¹ Miller defined the Velvet Underground as a new form of rock ‘n’ roll that became the most influential since the Beatles because of a dark style and minimalism that shaped future performers including Bowie and 80s punk bands such as Sonic Youth, etc.²⁵² Some historians distinguished their debut album as a prophetic, timeless classic.²⁵³ Other late 60s performers historians cited as influential punk predecessors included Michigan-based bands Iggy Pop and the Stooges and MC5.²⁵⁴

The Velvet Underground inspired a rash of solo performers and bands who sought to offer an alternative to mainstream pop and rock, including David Bowie who fused several traditions including punk and heavy metal music with visual spectacle into a new style during his “glam” phase. Bowie was a key glam and punk influence, whose chameleon-like style was influenced by mimes, Beat poets, Bob Dylan, Oscar Wilde,

²⁴⁸ Garofalo, 305.

²⁴⁹ Miller, 249.

²⁵⁰ Gillett, 309.

²⁵¹ Palmer, 179.

²⁵² Miller, 249.

²⁵³ See Fricke, David. “The Velvet Underground.” The Rolling Stone Illustrated History of Rock & Roll. 351.

²⁵⁴ Palmer, 262.

bohemianism, Andy Warhol's pop avant-gardism, and defined by pastiche and artifice.²⁵⁵ After floundering as a mod and then a folkie performer Bowie shifted toward a post-modern aesthetic. In drawing from multiple musical, visual, literary and theater traditions he became an innovator by "redefining stardom as a series of impersonations, he broadened the uses of which it can be put, as communicative too and receptor-transmitter of cultural trends."²⁵⁶

To complement his androgynous persona he declared his bisexuality, which Tom Carson described as "The canniest bit of self-promotion in his career . . ." to increase press intrigue, a move that garnered the attention of the British gay press.²⁵⁷ But, despite the attention Bowie garnered during his 1972-4 bisexual, androgynous "phase" on his records Hunky Dory, and The Rise and Fall of Ziggy Stardust and the Spiders From Mars and the appearances supporting them, he made little commercial impact and took on science fiction and soul music inspired personas.²⁵⁸ Miller viewed Bowie's cool commercial reception to U. S. as an indicator of fragmented rock subcultures where, ". . . the global youth culture created by the Beatles, and ratified at the Monterey Pop Festival, was already beginning to fall apart, fragmenting into different youth subcultures defined by different styles of revolt, and different varieties of rock and roll." For him Bowie ushered in era of hype as something to celebrate.²⁵⁹

²⁵⁵ Garofalo, 295 describes Bowie's influences, as do Palmer, 186, Miller 299-301 and Carson, Tom. "David Bowie." The Rolling Stone Illustrated History of Rock & Roll. 534.

²⁵⁶ Carson, The Rolling Stone Illustrated History of Rock & Roll. 533-4.

²⁵⁷ Miller, 298; Garofalo, 295-6.

²⁵⁸ Carson, 534-5; Garofalo, 297.

²⁵⁹ Miller, 301, 303.

As Bowie gained British and U. S. exposure, the New York Dolls a group of androgynous rockers who grew out of the Mercer Art Center “underground” scene developed a cult following. New York soon became a hub for punk musicians who flocked to “underground” clubs Max’s Kansas City Club and Country Bluegrass and Blues (CBGB’s) to play their music and develop their acts. Patti Smith/Patti Smith Group, Television, The Ramones, Blondie and Talking Heads were some of the underground groups who emerged and eventually landed major record label contracts. Throughout the U. S. alternative performers ranging from Boston folk-rock group Jonathan Richman and the Modern Lovers to Cleveland’s Pere Ubu to Los Angeles’ X offered alternatives to the “corporate” sound of 1970s mainstream music.

Across the Atlantic, Britain’s punk scene grew out of numerous scenes including London’s “pub” rock scene and Manchester’s underground scene. 1970s punk emerged when Britain was experiencing major economic recession in the early 70s, and unemployment among British youth was cresting.²⁶⁰ The most notorious and infamous British punk band was the Sex Pistols a group organized by entrepreneur Malcolm McLaren, fronted by Johnny Rotten (nee Lydon) and Sid Vicious and ignored by most American record buyers. The group’ amateurish playing, confrontational style and crude sensibilities outraged many Brits but garnered them a following and a succession of record contracts, before the group imploded on its U. S. tour in January 1978.²⁶¹ The Sex Pistols inspired numerous bands including the Clash, The Damned, Siouxsie and the Banshees and Generation X.²⁶² Though the Sex Pistols were chiefly based in

²⁶⁰ Szatmary, 227.

²⁶¹ Miller, 334.

²⁶² Szatmary, 230.

spectacle, some bands including the Clash and the Tom Robinson Band aimed to integrate leftist politics into punk and did so through political songs and participation in Rock Against Racism (RAR), a series of concerts opposed to growing British political conservatism.

Both American and British punk scenes had limited commercial appeal. Most punk bands never evolved from the underground and even the groups signed to major labels released several albums before achieving mainstream commercial success or succeeded in an outside country before appealing to domestic audiences. Historians usually defined the second generation of punk performers as “new wave” performers who were less shocking, more musically skilled and commercially packaged than first generation punks. The “new wave” category encompassed numerous acts including more commercial incarnations of Blondie and the Talking Heads, the acerbic and eclectic Brits Elvis Costello and Joe Jackson, The Pretenders, a British rock band fronted by Ohioan Chrissie Hynde, the Police and slick American bands the Cars and the Knack. Though these acts varied in degree of critical respect, historians typically cited them as groups who extended traces of punk into mainstream music.

Funk and Disco

Rock histories varied wildly in their treatments of mid-to-late 70s rock. As I previously noted, Gillett viewed the early 70s as the virtual “death” of rock and the revolution it promised. The Sound of the City was originally written in 1970 and has been reprinted and updated in 1983 and 1996 so there were multiple references to post-1971 genres and performers for posterity. For example, Gillett mentioned Bruce

Springsteen²⁶³ and funk/disco band K. C. and the Sunshine Band's growth from the Miami music scene.²⁶⁴ However, even in the revised editions he did not devote significant discussion to punk, glam, funk, disco or other genres that arose after the singer-songwriter boom. Jim Miller, whose book focused on benchmark moments more than it aimed to be comprehensive *per se*, ended his discussion with Elvis' death in 1977. Miller discussed late-70s through mid-90s music industry trends toward fragmentation and the celebration of nihilism, but did not discuss heavy metal, funk, or disco in-depth. Palmer devoted whole chapters to funk and punk music but disco did not warrant such coverage in his rock history. He did make a few comments toward disco in his discussion of Philly Soul and the cyclical nature of pop. Szatmary addressed disco as a chapter section and Garofalo divided a chapter between punk and disco. In The Rolling Stone Illustrated History John Rockwell briefly discussed disco in a chapter on 70s New York music scene and Tom Smucker wrote a chapter on disco that addressed its history and highlighting some of its key single recordings.

If historians have not quite achieved consensus on disco's role in rock history or the integrity of some 1970s rock genres, the historians who addressed disco were basically agreed that its musical roots are closely tied to Philly Soul and funk. Before "disco" became a self-conscious, fully realized commercial genre numerous R&B recordings from exclusively or predominantly black bands and mostly black solo performers were the dominant records deejays (D.J. s) played in late 60s/early 70s urban discotheques. These discotheques or discos, housed black, Latino and/or gay male

²⁶³ Gillett, 320, 409.

²⁶⁴ Ibid, 244.

dance scenes, groups who initially comprised the “disco” scene. In order to explore the scene it is important to address how the music of these scenes mutated into disco.

Funk

If, as Palmer notes, Philly Soul was “the original source of the particular dance grooves popularized, and repeated *ad nauseam*, during the era of ‘Disco Fever,’”²⁶⁵ and the “polished sound associated with Philadelphia” characterized disco’s eventual upscale status²⁶⁶ “funk” also contributed to disco’s visual and aural character even if tangentially. Palmer traced the origins of the term “funk” in black vernacular speech and its possible African roots. More importantly he described its common use among black and/or jazz musicians as a way to describe a particularly satisfying backbeat. In the 70s the term became synonymous with a genre. James Brown, who ushered in the harder rhythms and raucous performing affect of post-64 soul music, was the undisputed pioneer of funk.²⁶⁷

Palmer defined such Brown songs as 1965’s “Papa’s Got A Brand New Bag” and 1967’s “Cold Sweat” as seminal funk or proto-funk records. Their key innovations included the dominance of one-chord vamps, more percussive bass guitar, and repetitive guitar patterns that all gelled into a minimalist, rhythmically propulsive sound.²⁶⁸ At the end of the 1960s Sly and the Family Stone married funk and rock together in an innovative and commercially successful sound that lasted through the early 70s before

²⁶⁵ Palmer, 256.

²⁶⁶ Garofalo, 335-6.

²⁶⁷ Gillett, 234.

²⁶⁸ Palmer, 242-5.

funk and disco's formal commercial ascent.²⁶⁹ Building from Brown's innovations Sly further foregrounded the bass and incorporated elements of traditional pop such as chants and hooks.²⁷⁰

In the early 70s George Clinton added a more pronounced rock influence and an extroverted visual style to funk in forming Parliament-Funkadelic. Parliament's elaborate stage show especially on its Mothership Connection tour, which included a flying saucer, combined with Clinton's glam-rock derived leather spacesuits, gogglelike sunglasses, and jewel-studded boots and platform shoes.²⁷¹ Clinton advocated, "messages of self-determination and resistance to the political and cultural status quo" via his prophesy "Free your mind and your ass will follow." Palmer defined hard funk as inherently radical because, "it transformed a music that had *emphasized* the groove and the message into a music that was *all* groove and message."²⁷² Szatmary described Clinton's style as a symptom of the 70s because he took "Sly's funk rock into the extravagant mid-seventies."²⁷³ This was an interesting contrast to Garofalo's reading of Brown's late 60s funk as a musical statement echoing budding cultural nationalism.²⁷⁴

Other 70s era funk groups included the Ohio Players, Kool and the Gang, Tower of Power and Average White Band whose songs preceded the "disco" phenomenon but featured some of its prototypical elements.²⁷⁵ Perhaps the most commercially successful funk band with the greatest overlap with disco was Earth, Wind and Fire who had a

²⁶⁹ Garofalo, 234.

²⁷⁰ Palmer, 245-6.

²⁷¹ Szatmary 216; Palmer, 252.

²⁷² Palmer, 253-4.

²⁷³ Szatmary, 215.

²⁷⁴ Garofalo, 217.

²⁷⁵ Ibid, 335-6.

slicker, and more spiritual sound than other funk bands and consistently produced pop, soul and disco-era hits.²⁷⁶

Disco

Disco was a musical, cultural and commercial trend that dominated late seventies popular music and popular culture perhaps to a greater degree than any other trend of the decade. It also inspired strongly divided opinions among historians. Some viewed it as socially significant because of its underground roots in minority cultures and the independent economy it enacted in an increasingly consolidated industry.²⁷⁷

Tom Smucker suggested that “no pop music scene has been as directly or openly shaped by gay taste before.”²⁷⁸ Further historians cited the innovation of the 12-inch single as an important technological contribution to music integral to the development of hip-hop.²⁷⁹

Other historians viewed disco as musically simplistic, culturally elite, and a symbol of 70s excess, even while they acknowledged disco’s gay sociology. Szatmary noted that disco clubs “provided a focal point for gay liberation,” a political shift he mapped by citing the 1969 Stonewall Riots, the formation of the Gay Liberation Front, Gay Activists Alliance, and late 60s radical gay publications.²⁸⁰ However, Szatmary ultimately described disco as a, “simplified version of funk” that “epitomized seventies

²⁷⁶ Palmer, 253 addresses their more palatable appeal to black radio in contrast to Parliament; Garofalo describes Earth, Wind and Fire on 336-7.

²⁷⁷ Garofalo, 341-3.

²⁷⁸ Smucker, Tom. “Disco.” The Rolling Stone Illustrated History of Rock & Roll. 570.

²⁷⁹, Smucker, 564; Garofalo, 343.

²⁸⁰ Szatmary, 217, 208.

excess.”²⁸¹ Though Szatmary briefly addressed gay *politics*, he also defined gay male *sexuality* as a symptom of 70s excess. Szatmary grouped what he viewed as a highly sexualized gay male culture, based on numerous “studies,” as a part of a broader culture increasingly leaning toward drug use, freewheeling sex (singles industries, wife swapping, free sex clubs), and inward driven activities such as EST seminars and primal scream therapy. According to Szatmary, “As with heterosexual population, many gays became absorbed by their own search for pleasure.”²⁸²

Some of the aspects historians tended to agree on were disco’s underground roots, disco highlights audience as much as music, disco as a singles medium, Eurodisco’s impact of American disco’s less R&B inflected sound, the mainstreaming of disco via Saturday Night Fever, and the elite lifestyles that eventually became synonymous with disco. Both Garofalo and Szatmary noted disco’s earliest roots in Black, Latino and gay urban clubs.²⁸³ Based on Garofalo’s descriptions these clubs typically consisted of disc jockeys (D. J. s) that played records rather than hiring live performers. The records D. J. s typically spun were old soul records blended together in an uninterrupted stretch of sound. Indeed early 70s black dance music was the cornerstone of the early disco sound before it became a commercial category. Numerous disco songs including 1973’s “Soul Makossa,” 1974’s “Rock the Boat” and 1975’s “The Hustle” became hits on the national charts and suggested the return of dance-oriented music to rock.²⁸⁴ Despite a few crossover hits, disco was largely an underground phenomenon among minorities with limited radio support. As a result DJs

²⁸¹ Ibid, 216.

²⁸² Ibid, 208-9.

²⁸³ Garofalo, 334; Szatmary, 217.

²⁸⁴ Garofalo, 339; Smucker, 562.

became taste-makers who met at records pools to exchange records and created trends and hit records in the club scene.²⁸⁵

Two distinct aspects of disco that separated from 70s rock were the increased role of the audience and its status as a singles medium. Because discos centered on recorded sound, audiences become the “act” or the performers in disco.²⁸⁶ Szatmary read disco’s appeal as a sign of how, “By the mid-1970s, disco began to appeal to self-obsessed baby boomers who yearned for center stage.” This emphasis eventually grew into the elaborately decorated discotheques, glittery fashion, and overtly sexual dances Szatmary read as disco culture elements that, “embodied the narcissistic extravagance of the mid- and late seventies.”²⁸⁷ The shift away from rock’s communal art ethos was also reflected in disco’s emphasis on singles rather than albums. It was noteworthy that Smucker tracked disco’s history chiefly by examining some of its key singles recording rather than *albums* (the ultimate rock art form) and Garofalo viewed funk artists such as Parliament as an alternative to disco because it was more conceptual and album-oriented.²⁸⁸

One of the other shifts disco represented was a shift in dance music, often viewed as a province of R&B and soul music, away from R&B to more repetitive and stylized form. Garofalo entitled his disco section as “Disco: Rhythm without the Blues” and part of his “evidence” for this title was the influx of Eurodisco producers who wrote and produced a sound Szatmary described as, “the antiseptic, rock-steady, electronic

²⁸⁵ Garofalo, 341.

²⁸⁶ Smucker, 562, Szatmary, 217.

²⁸⁷ Szatmary, 217.

²⁸⁸ Smucker, 567-70; Garofalo, 339, 343.

beat” of European synthesizer groups.²⁸⁹ Smucker defined the Eurodisco technique as the following, “Rather than lengthening conventional pop songs with gimmicks, Eurodisco structured long compositions to fill entire album sides with music that ebbed and flowed in one beat driven but melodically varied cut, aping the work of the DJ in the club.”²⁹⁰

As disco singles gradually charted and the style coalesced into an identifiable sound, the commercial success of 1978’s Saturday Night Fever film and soundtrack finally crossed disco over from an underground scene to a mainstream phenomenon. RSO record label head Robert Stigwood was an established progenitor of the crossover media strategy who succeeded with Jesus Christ Superstar and the film version of the Who’s Tommy. Stigwood capitalized on the growing urban dance culture and the increasingly dance-oriented sound of the mid-70s Bee Gees when he commissioning them to dominate the soundtrack for a dance-oriented film on New York’s dance scene, Saturday Night Fever. The film’s portrait of the disco scene’s “unintimidating and nonelitist underpinnings,” “while conveniently ignoring its gay sources” combined with the soundtrack’s uncanny mix of pop and soul inflected disco was hugely profitable for the filmmakers, music-makers and investors. Per Garofalo, “After Saturday Night Fever, it became impossible to ignore disco.”²⁹¹ Smucker noted that, “Radio stations didn’t just add some disco, they went all disco. Record companies competed to hire disco insiders and disco artists, and created entire disco departments overnight.”²⁹²

Predictably “discomania” swept the music industry and spawned the building of new

²⁸⁹ Garofalo, 343; Szatmary, 216.

²⁹⁰ Smucker, 564.

²⁹¹ Garofalo, 345-6.

²⁹² Smucker, 565.

discos, drew celebrities anxious to capitalize on the trend in venues such as Studio 54, and inspired mainstream artists as different as Cher, Dolly Parton, and the Rolling Stones to “jump on disco bandwagon.”²⁹³ By March 1979 there were over 200 disco stations, and disco recordings began to dominate the record charts and industry awards, and generated disco industry revenues between \$4-8 billion.²⁹⁴ Many viewed disco as over saturating the market which according to Szatmary was a \$5-billion industry “mirror for the excesses of the rock generation.”²⁹⁵

Though the Bee Gees made disco “respectable” for white and heterosexual audiences it also inspired a backlash. Many rock fans associated disco with a chic, elitist way of living counter to rock’s working-class appeal. Garofalo notes numerous press critiques of disco culture as a kind of new affluent-chic defined by narcissism, superficiality, excess and effete snobbery.²⁹⁶ Many rock fans also viewed it as a symptom that ethnic minorities, women, gays and the overlaps among these identities were taking over mainstream popular music. Historians typically viewed the anti-disco “Chicago Disco Demolition Night” rally held at Comiskey Park in July 1979 during a White Sox doubleheader as the defining moment of white male rock fans’ disdain for disco. During the rally the audience chanted “disco sucks” as disco records were burned and crushed; the audience eventually stormed the field and the game was canceled.²⁹⁷ Another consequence of the disco backlash was the separation of black music from rock, a move album-oriented rock (AOR) stations fostered by the programming the

²⁹³ Szatmary, 218; Garofalo, 346.

²⁹⁴ Garofalo, 346.

²⁹⁵ Szatmary, 218.

²⁹⁶ Garofalo, 347.

²⁹⁷ Garofalo, 348; Smucker, 570.

format based on demographic research heavily biased against black performers, who rock audiences associated with disco. Black musicians also felt the pinch when disco became so heavily associated with black music that many felt alienated from industry pressures to conform and lose potential sales and exposure as radio formats shift to accommodate the growing racial divide.²⁹⁸ Finally music critics, especially the rock press, largely dismissed disco as trendy ephemera.²⁹⁹ Perhaps critical biases against disco were the primary reason Palmer only referenced disco in a dismissive, off-hand way and why Miller and Gillett essentially ignored the genre.

At the end of the 1970s the music industry, “had penetrated nearly every world market to amass excessive profits in an excessive age.”³⁰⁰ However, by 1979 industry revenues were decreasing and the industry experienced a recession it did not recover from until 1983.³⁰¹ Many historians believed the 1981 debut of Music Television (MTV) and the subsequent mega-records and careers it launched catalyzed the music industry.

For many critics however, rock essentially died in the 1970s. Jim Miller lamented that since Elvis Presley’s death, “the world of rock and roll has become ever more fragmented” because of advertising-based radio formats that separate audiences based on demographic data (race age, etc.) The result of this fragmentation was the death of the ideals he and many of his peers originally gleaned from rock and roll. According to Miller, “Given how deeply divided the current pop scene is, it seems highly unlikely that nay future rock and roll star, however popular, will have the kind of

²⁹⁸ Garofalo, 348.

²⁹⁹ Smucker, 570; Garofalo, 304.

³⁰⁰ Szatmary, 220.

³⁰¹ Garofalo, 354.

broad cultural and social impact that Elvis had in the Fifties, or the Beatles had in the Sixties.” Despite the immense sales of MTV-driven albums, notably Michael Jackson’s bestseller Thriller, he noted that such efforts gain “cultural significance” through marketing and sales rather than artistry or genuine impact.³⁰² Palmer, Szatmary and the The Rolling Stone Illustrated History did address rock’s history past the 1970s. However, their historical scope of rock was noticeably narrower and more consistent than their 50s-70s coverage, partially as result of time but possibly imagination. These histories’ emphasis on post 1980 music focused on new trends and/or performers who seemed to affirm rock’s origins including post-punk “no wave” and “alternative” music, MTV pop (including Thriller-era Michael Jackson, Prince and Madonna), “political rock” (including U2, Sting, Peter Gabriel, Paul Simon and Bruce Springsteen) and hip-hop.

³⁰² Miller, 350-2.

Chapter Two: Outing Rock History's Racial and Sexual Closets

Chronicling rock 'n' roll's historic development is always a selective practice defined by tough choices. However, as Chapter One demonstrated certain key performers, events and industrial shifts characterized most rock hagiographies. This chapter revisits rock 'n' roll's historic roots from the decline of big band era through the late 50s and tells a different story about rock 'n' roll. I question rock's status as cultural progress and tell a richer story about rock 'n' roll's roots.

First, I argue that rock 'n, roll is a continuation of pre-rock business practices which, in the short term, provided symbolic victories— such as the recognition of teenagers as a taste culture, the mainstreaming of urban music and heightened visibility of black performers. But in the long-term it maintained a racial and gender hierarchy in the production, management and distribution of popular music.

Second, rock 'n' roll did not erase the influence or relevance of “pop” music in the rock era. Despite the myth of pop Armageddon in 1956, most evidence suggests there was no explicit break but a gradual transition in popular music which placed rock 'n' roll on a continuum with other genres rather than displacing its influences. The first part of the chapter largely focused on race to illustrate the extent of historic distortion that has defined rock 'n' roll as a form of racial liberation. I argue that such a seemingly obvious conclusion stems from the equation of the increased visibility of racialized bodies, a measure marked by racially marked record charts, with an opening up of social attitudes toward ethnic minorities. In comparison the music industry's sexual and gender discrimination are less visible and more difficult to assess illustrating one of the

pitfalls of rock history, its tendency to overlook less obvious industry trends and practices.

Third, rock ‘n’ roll’s role as a cultural development from the urban centers of post-WWII America must be understood in the context of the post-WWII urban city which became a haven for the development of contemporary urban queer life. Indeed, during the era of suburban real estate developments (e. g. Levittown) and the “white flight” of white families from cities, the presence of racial, ethnic and *sexual* minorities in cities was fundamental to perceptions of cities as dangerous and immoral. The influence of queer literary and political cultures on rock ‘n’ roll and rock’s development is fundamental to its urban roots and perceptions of rock as rebellion.

Challenging the Big Band Myth

One of the historical assertions warranting more nuances is the oft-repeated discussion of the “death” of the big band era and the consequent rise of crooners and solo singers. Rock and jazz historians both characterized the breakup of numerous big bands and their declining radio presence as markers of big bands’ commercial obsolescence.³⁰³ While this was generally accurate, few histories addressed the continuation of big bands even with a diminished commercial market. The fact that big bands were no longer major players in the commercial mainstream did not entirely eliminate the *audience* for swing music nor did it erase their *influence*, through recordings and concerts, on numerous listeners. What seemed like a minor point in the

³⁰³ For a discussion of the decline of big bands and rise of crooner era see the following: Miller, *Flowers in the Dustbin*, 29; Gillett, 5; Garofalo 71-3; See p. 187 in Friedwald, Will. *Jazz Singing: America’s Greatest Voices From Bessie Smith to Bebo and Beyond*. New York: Da Capo Press, 1996; Starr and Waterman, 157-9.

context of rock is important because even when rock dominated the commercial mainstream in the 1950s, it co-existed alongside other musical traditions including popular swing/jazz-oriented musicians such as Frank Sinatra and Ella Fitzgerald as well as left-field classical-pop hybrids such as Liberace.

A deeper look into the commercial decline of big-bands reveals several notable big bands which broke-up, re-formed and continued into the rock era. Woody Herman broke up his band in 1946 and formed the Second Herd from 1947-9 and the Third Herd in Spring 1950.³⁰⁴ Herman continued working as a bandleader of big bands and small combos for the remainder of his career. In the mid-40s Duke Ellington was commissioned to write a series of band-oriented musical works including the 1947's Liberian Suite and 1948's The Tattooed Bride. Though according to jazz historian Ted Gioia, many considered the early 50s an artistic lowpoint for Ellington, his profile as a pianist, bandleader and jazz personality intensified in the 50s and a "ghost" band still exists today.³⁰⁵ Count Basie's Orchestra declined commercially but reformed in 1952 as a series of "New Testament Band"s , which Basie lead until his death in 1984 and which also continues as a "ghost" band.³⁰⁶ Numerous "big bands" formed after the big band era's decline including such notables as Sun Ra's band, formed in the mid-50s, the Thad Jones-Mel Lewis Orchestra which existed from the mid-60s through the late-70s and the Toshiko Akiyoshi-Lew Tabackin Big Band (1973-82).³⁰⁷

³⁰⁴ Clarke, 294; See p. 261-6 in Gioia, Ted. The History of Jazz. New York: Oxford University Press, 1997.

³⁰⁵ Clarke, 294; Gioia, 194-5.

³⁰⁶ Clarke, 295; Gioia, 194.

³⁰⁷ Gioia, 272-5.

It is likely that these bands attracted and inspired a wide range of listeners. Yet rock histories erected a sharp boundary that conveniently erased big bands and by default swing music with no recognition that a taste culture may have existed for pre-rock swing music. How do we account for listeners born in the 20s who entered adulthood as the big band era declined, making them too young for nostalgia, but willing to engage with the music even when it lost commercial momentum? One of the key performers who linked pre-rock crooning and pre-rock R&B singing was Johnnie Ray, a white blues-influenced singer from Oregon younger than former big band singer Sinatra but older than rock 'n' roller Elvis Presley. Ray, whom biographer Johnny Whiteside and numerous album guides referred to as an important influence on rock 'n' roll, recorded several Basie-associated songs, including "How Long, How Come Blues," "Sent For You Yesterday" and "Everyday I Have the Blues" on his 1957 LP The Big Beat and recorded "The Lonely Ones" with the Duke Ellington Orchestra in 1958. There was nothing inherently radical about his recordings except few pop, jazz, rock or R&B singers of Ray's generation were recording big band material or recording with big-bands in the mid-to-late 50s making him somewhat of an oddball among his peers. Ray was a thoroughly modern performer in the 1950s who was an influence and contemporary of 50s rock 'n' roll performers, thus some of his recording choices suggested a progressive, though likely un-self conscious aim to modernize old chestnuts and adapt elements of the big band sensibility. Ray embodied a reverence and forward thinking many rock histories overlook in a haste to erase big band music and posit rock 'n' roll as a radical break (whether characterized negatively or positively). Thus rock histories framed Ray as another 50s pop crooner with a bit of R&B influence and he is

lumped together with Rosemary Clooney and Tony Bennett as virtual music enemies to rock 'n' roll with little consideration of the range of their recordings.³⁰⁸ Rock histories have wasted the opportunity to examine the liminal space these “crooners” occupied in terms of their ability to make pre-rock music relevant in the immediate pre-rock period and beyond by synthesizing old and newer material without relying on nostalgia.

ASCAP and BMI-Profits by any means necessary

Rock 'n' roll histories frequently attributed part of rock 'n' roll's rise to the establishment and ascent of BMI. BMI welcomed a wider range of songwriters than the exclusionary ASCAP and during the 40s radio ban of ASCAP, BMI gained ground securing airplay for its writers. In many histories the tensions between the two organizations posits BMI as a moral victor over ASCAP. Where ASCAP denied membership to country and blues oriented writers BMI welcomed such writers with open arms. A closer look at the formation and execution of song publishing reveals how the financial motivation behind song publishing taints the morality historians attached to BMI and negatively impacted many writers in rock 'n' roll's early days.

Song publishing and radio play are the most effective ways to gauge the music industry's shift from Tin Pan Alley to blues and country-influenced music. Tin Pan Alley songwriters/publishers did not initially embrace phonograph technology or the recording industry because these entities threatened the profits songwriters/publishers

³⁰⁸ Gillett, 6-7; Garofalo mentions Ray's potential as an R&B influenced pop performer but suggests Columbia's recalcitrance to push him in an R&B direction because of the 1954 ban of Ray's version of “Such A Night,” 153; Miller speculates Ray is a possible model for Elvis in the eyes of Sam Phillips and his secretary Marion Keisker as white singer whose emotive sound appeals to black audiences, 72; Palmer, Robert. “Rock Begins.” The Rolling Stone Illustrated History of Rock & Roll notes Ray was a white pop singer who crossed over to the R&B charts, 12.

reaped from sheet music. In 1914 Tin Pan Alley songwriters and publishers formed ASCAP as a way to collect revenue from broadcasting and records. Only 6 of ASCAP's 170 charter members were Black, indicating the racial exclusiveness of the publishing industry.³⁰⁹ Garofalo argued that from 1914 to 1939 ASCAP had a virtual monopoly on all copyrighted music, which Tin Pan Alley writers and publishers initially achieved through connections with vaudeville, Broadway and, by the late 20s, the Hollywood film industry. By 1937 Hollywood associated movie houses shared 65% of ASCAP's publishing dividends.³¹⁰

During the 1920s major record companies, competing with Tin Pan Alley, looked toward the untapped commercial potential of "race records" and "hillbilly" music. Tin Pan Alley based music's commercial dominance naturalized it as American popular music and relegated other music forms as peripheral specialty genres with limited appeal. Thus "race records" and "hillbilly" labels became the music industry's common parlance for blues and folk/country styles companies perceived to appeal exclusively to Blacks and to rural Whites.

Mamie Smith's 1920 recording of "Crazy Blues" was the first known blues recording³¹¹ Smith's recording sold well enough to inspire Okeh records to send talent scouts south to seek out other blues performers, a trend other record companies duplicated. A similar pattern developed in the wake of several successful hillbilly records. The records, including 1922 's "Sallie Gooden" and "The Arkansas Traveler"

³⁰⁹ Garofalo, 31.

³¹⁰ Ibid, 32, 38-9.

³¹¹ Ward, Ed. "All-American Music." Rock of Ages. 24; Garofalo, 47; See p. 15 in Sanjek, Russell and David Sanjek. American Popular Music Business in the 20th Century. New York: Oxford University Press, 1991.

fiddlers A. C. “Eck” Robertson and Henry Gilliland recorded for New York-based Victor Records, and Fiddlin’ John Carson’s “The Little Old Log Cabin in the Lane” and “The Old Hen Cackled and the Rooster’s Going to Grow” on Okeh were among the first known “hillbilly” records.³¹² Ed Ward argued that the recording industry preserved and destroyed the genres’ regional specificity because as records circulate nationally, the possibility for cross-fertilization increased, which erased purity but inspired new stylistic hybrids mixing blues and hillbilly styles.³¹³

The 1940 launch of Broadcast Music Incorporated (BMI) and the 1942 American Federation of Musicians (AFM) ban weakened Tin Pan Alley and ASCAP’s industry dominance. They also inadvertently created an opportunity for non-Tin Pan Alley musicians and writers to enter the music industry and created an alternate industry through independent radio stations and small independent record labels. On October 13, 1939 the National Alliance of Broadcasters (NAB) launched (BMI) to handle the interests of non-ASCAP writers and performers.³¹⁴ According to Gillett BMI represented “previously ignored writers and publishers (hillbilly, race, ethnic and foreign)”³¹⁵ and Shapiro states BMI gave “a boost to musicians working in the idioms of country and western and rhythm & blues, genres that had largely been ignored by ASCAP.”³¹⁶

³¹² Ward, 24; Garofalo, 51.

³¹³ Ward, 25.

³¹⁴ See p. 6 in Shapiro, Nat. Popular Music: An Annotated Index of American Popular Songs: Volume 2, 1940-1949. New York: Adrian Press, 1965; Others report BMI’s formation as 1940 including, Ward, 31; Starr and Waterman, 144-5; Gillett reports the date as 1941, 5.

³¹⁵ Gillett, 5.

³¹⁶ Starr and Waterman, 144.

While it is true that BMI opened up professional songwriting and royalty possibilities for non-ASCAP writer Nat Shapiro's assertion that "BMI sought out and acquired its support from the 'have not' publishers and writers in the grassroots areas" was technically true but gave excessive romantic credence to BMI.³¹⁷ BMI emerged in response to ASCAP's demands greater royalty fees from broadcasters not an altruistic desire to help Blacks or rural whites. BMI's inadvertent role in exposing certain songwriters was incidental given that, "BMI was not expected to survive for long"³¹⁸ because it "was originally envisioned as a throw-away bargaining tool."³¹⁹ For approximately ten months in 1941 no radio stations broadcast ASCAP music and public domain music, classical music, 19th century popular songs etc. become big band and radio staples. A federally initiated criminal antitrust action forced ASCAP to a consent decree that resolved ASCAP and NAB tensions. Meanwhile, BMI steadily accrued copyrights from publishers to develop its catalog.

Non-Tin Pan Alley musicians also indirectly benefited from the August 2, 1942, AFM strike against recording companies. AFM president James Petrillo initially lobbied the Roosevelt administration to ban records from radio stations, which aired live big band performances, because he believed records would soon displace live musicians. Petrillo failed to affect the radio record ban and instead demanded record companies stop producing records for broadcast on radio and in jukeboxes since musicians, along with record companies, did not receive royalties from records. Failing once again, Petrillo banned union musicians from participating on recordings for over a

³¹⁷ Shapiro, 6.

³¹⁸ Starr and Waterman, 144.

³¹⁹ Garofalo, 68.

year.³²⁰ In 1943 Decca and Capitol Records worked out an agreement with the AFM with Columbia and Victor complying to offer record royalties in 1944.³²¹ As BMI developed its arsenal of copyrights a rash of independent record labels emerged. For example Nick Tosches notes that during the AFM ban Savoy records (Newark, New Jersey), Excelsior (Los Angeles), and Beacon Records (New York) formed.³²² Though upstart companies were not much of a commercial threat to major labels and were driven by what would sell rather than some clear aesthetic or cultural commitment they reiterated the hubris of racism, classism, and neglect. As jazz critic Will Friedwald noted the ASCAP and AFM battles were about “one greedy organization against another, doomed to fail because they could not conceive of how music they never bothered with could possibly prove a threat to them,” not artistic protection.³²³ By the early 1950s, radio stations moved toward exclusively programming records which, combined with BMI’s formation and the Petrillo ban, further weakened Tin Pan Alley and ASCAP’s dominance over the publishing and broadcasting industries. However, BMI’s presence did not diminish ASCAP’s profitability as dramatically as rock histories suggest.

Whatever gains in exposure BMI provided “outsider” musicians there was evidence to demonstrate how BMI-era song publishing remained a corrupt industry infamously shortchanging many black songwriters. “Ghostwriting,” a practice preceding BMI’s rise was when songwriters, arrangers, record executives, etc. offered

³²⁰ Garofalo, 70; Starr and Waterman, 145; Ward, 31-2.

³²¹ Garofalo, 70; Starr and Waterman, 145.

³²² See p. 4 in Tosches, Nick. Unsung Heroes: The Birth of Rock ‘n’ Roll in the Wild Years Before Elvis. New York: Da Capo, 1999.

³²³ Friedwald, 186.

to promote songs and/or performers in exchange for sharing songwriting credit without necessarily making any musical contribution. For example, music historians were infamously suspicious of the numerous songs attributed to Duke Ellington and his promoter/manager Irving Mills who was not known to be a musician or lyricist.³²⁴ Such practices shortchanged songwriters of their full publishing credits and maintained a power hierarchy between those who wrote and performed, and administrative personnel.

Ward noted how Elvis Presley's manager Colonel Tom Parker required composer Otis Blackwell to share songwriting credits with Presley to, "generate additional publishing royalties" of which Parker would surely profit from as Presley's manager. Ward also noted how indie label owner Syd Nathan's Lois Publishing company paid songwriter Henry Glover, "one cent-half the statutory rate-per recorded side in the early 1950s."³²⁵ Miller noted how Chess Records co-founder Leonard Chess, a business partner of D. J. Alan Freed, assigned Freed one third of the songwriting credits and royalties for Chuck Berry's song "Maybellene" for Freed to promote the song.³²⁶ Though Glover eventually negotiated a better publishing deal in the mid 50s and Berry received sole ownership in 1986, the fact that these writers had to sacrifice their profits for promotion reflected the difficulty for "outsider" and "grassroots" writers/performers to secure fair financial compensation and publicity working with the burgeoning rock 'n' roll industry personnel of BMI-affiliated publishers, whose financial beneficiaries often included D. J. s, managers and record executives. ASCAP may have initially excluded blues and country songwriters, but BMI publishers only

³²⁴ Gioia, 123; Gillett acknowledged this practice in the intro to the revised The Sound of the City, xiv-xv, though he does not explore the issue in the book's contents.

³²⁵ Brian Ward, Just My Soul Responding, 45- 6.

³²⁶ Miller, 106.

admitted certain writers with a promotional penalty. The black and white rural songwriters BMI supposedly championed often forced them into a kind of indentured servitude limiting perceptions of BMI as progressive.

Indie Labels

BMI's developing catalog and the commercial decline (not death) of the big band era, diminished ASCAP and Tin Pan Alley's monopolies and indirectly fostered the growth of independent labels. Four other factors that fostered the budding independent music scene included the major label response to the shellac shortage, the introduction of magnetic tape technology in the recording industry, the development of 45 rpm records and the rise of independent radio. The rise of thousands of independent labels from the early 1940s through the mid -1950s challenged major label dominance and catalyzed the rock 'n' roll groundswell. However, the rise of independent labels must be understood as a business venture not as an inherently benevolent attempt to liberate or champion "roots" music or disenfranchised populations. Nick Tosches effectively summarized this when he noted, "These small independent companies-mongrel labels, they were called within the industry-were the breeding grounds of rock 'n' roll. None of them had any real ethnic or esthetic identity. They all released whatever they thought might sell . . . These companies' catalogues were merely and exaggerated reflection of what was going on generally."³²⁷

During the 1940s the Pacific blockade limited the availability of Shellac, the chief ingredient of 78s and the more expensive alternative Vinylite. As a result major

³²⁷ Tosches, 5.

record companies focused their creative resources toward genres with clear popular appeal, thus neglecting specialty markets including, blues and country, which independent labels seized upon.³²⁸ Though major labels MGM and Mercury featured country (Hank Williams) and country-flavored pop singers (Frankie Laine)³²⁹, independent labels focused on non-pop genres and are fertile grounds for musical hybridization between country and R&B.

The introduction of magnetic tape, which Germany and Japan developed in the 1930s³³⁰ lowered the cost of record production and replaced more expensive disc recording. According to Simon Frith, “. . . the cost of recording fell dramatically” making it easier to produce records cheaply. Further tape was a more flexible recording technology which enabled producers to edit, splice and overdub, which was much less cumbersome than discs which required whole performances to be repeated in order to correct “mistakes.”³³¹ Both of these factors made the recording industry more accessible to independent producers and labels.

The development of 45 rpm records also fostered the entrance of independent record labels. In the late 40s the “battle of the speeds” occurred between CBS, which pioneered the 33 1/3 rpm long playing (LP) form in 1948 and RCA which developed the 45 rpm record in 1949.³³² CBS marketed the LP as a technology for serious music (i.e. classical) that eventually extended to popular performers such as Frank Sinatra.

³²⁸ Garofalo, 74; Miller, 32.

³²⁹ Garofalo, 74-5.

³³⁰ Starr and Waterman, 155.

³³¹ See p. 64-5 in Frith, Simon. “The Industrialization of Popular Music,” in Popular Music and Communication. James Lull, ed. Newbury Park: Sage Publications, 1987. 53-77.; Garofalo, 82-3.

³³² Starr and Waterman, 155.

Meanwhile 45s became the standard format for “pop” singles replacing 78s and attracting jukebox manufacturers.³³³ The 45 rpm appealed to independent labels because it was cheap to manufacture, easy to ship and durable, unlike shellac-based 78s. The independent labels capitalized on the single format to introduce specialty music, (not “serious” enough for LPs) to the mainstream.³³⁴

Gillett argued that, “with rock ‘n’ roll, major corporations with every financial advantage were out-maneuvered by independent companies and labels who brought a new breed of artist into the pop mainstream . . . The corporations took more than ten years to recover their positions, through artists with similar autonomy and styles.”³³⁵ Such a pronouncement suggested a significant redefinition not only of how the music industry functioned but who gained control. Yet, the music industry’s racial and gender hierarchy, which favored male executives, disc jockeys and managers usually with white racial backgrounds remained intact despite a few successful black and/or female-owned labels. Tosches and Garofalo were among the few rock historians and critics who acknowledged the complexities of the indie vs. major binary as a complex issue to be understood in terms of business acumen rather than political gain. As Garofalo noted, “Record companies, whether majors or independents, frequently act in self-contradictory ways that are as likely to involve idiosyncratic choices and dumb luck as carefully crafter business plans or scientific market analyses.”³³⁶ Timing was central to understanding the rise of independent record labels as distributors of R&B music. Ward created a chart illustrating the considerable amount of R&B distributed by the majors in

³³³ Garofalo, 83-84; Frith, 64; Ward, Ed, Rock of Ages, 46-7.

³³⁴ Garofalo, 99.

³³⁵ Gillett, xviii.

³³⁶ Garofalo, 156.

the pre-rock 'n' roll era. His chart illustrated the majors possessed some awareness of the black music consumer market. He observed that independent labels were at the frontline of distributing R&B less because of concerns about racial progress than capitalizing on a consumer market. Referring to the majors he noted how, "it never occurred to any of those companies that-the odd maverick hit notwithstanding-they could consistently sell anything resembling R&B to more than a tiny feeling, fleeting, and economically inconsequential audience of whites."³³⁷

Some of the key issues to consider in understanding the inner workings of indie labels are that despite claims of "progress" women and blacks had limited power and access to independent labels, which mirrored a general industrial trend of the era which rock 'n' roll did not fundamentally challenge. Further, not all independent labels secured national distribution or possessed the resources to endure beyond a few hits. Finally, independent labels often exploited musicians by denying them proper royalties for their recordings.

Ward noted that despite outsider rhetoric historians applied to indies, men run most labels with precious few women thus a gender hierarchy remained intact. Further most indie labels owners had previous industry experience in retail, nightclubs, journalism, broadcasting, and songwriting, so indie labels are more the culmination of ambitious, fledgling businessmen rather than an arbitrary or open playing field for the curious.³³⁸ Race was also an important factor in understanding the impact of indie labels in providing economic power to the social, political and economic underclass. Ward noted that of the over 2000 indie labels, as much as 600 had involvement in R&B

³³⁷ Brian Ward, 27.

³³⁸ Ibid, 21-22.

but few were black owned and only Class, Dootone, Fortune, Peacock and Vee Jay are black-owned labels with national distribution and durable operations.³³⁹ The racial gap in promotion and publishing power was matched by a gender gap. Further Ward argued that it was important to distinguish between nationally distributed labels such as Atlantic, Chess, Imperial and King and local-based labels.³⁴⁰

Perhaps the most glaring aspect of the indie label revolution was the willingness of such companies to profit from performers without paying royalties commensurate with their recording services. For example, Atlantic Records owed most of its early hits to Ruth Brown whose records inspired “the house that Ruth built” as a sobriquet for the label. Yet despite her commercial fortunes, in 1983 Brown sued Atlantic, and in 1988 won money in back royalties as a result of an inadequate recording contract.³⁴¹ Brown’s lawsuit reflected a trend lawyer Howard Begle uncovered as a phenomenon in record companies’ dealings with R&B artists from the late 1940s through the mid-sixties³⁴² that many R&B veterans were “routinely deprived of proper payment by their record companies.” Begle found that in the 1940s and 1950s, “most had contracts which paid royalties at a meager rate of between 1 and 4 per cent of the retail price of recordings sold, or else provided one-off payments of around \$200 in return for performances which sometimes made millions of dollars.”³⁴³ Indeed, in 1988 Atlantic began

³³⁹ Ibid, 22.

³⁴⁰ Ibid, 23.

³⁴¹ Barol, Bill. “One for the Soul Survivors” Newsweek 7 November 1988. 123; Garofalo, 81-2; Brian Ward, 48.

³⁴² See p. 56 in Deffaa, Chip. Blue Rhythms: Six Lives in Rhythm and Blues. Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1996.

³⁴³ Brian Ward, 48.

recalculating royalties for at least 29 R&B performers with substandard contracts.³⁴⁴

Ward noted that such exploitative practices were not exclusively applied to black musicians and noted that Begle found many independent labels had no or inadequate provisions established to reward artists for reissues of their original recordings.³⁴⁵

However, the fact that most indie-labels featured R&B musicians who were likely to be black since R&B was simply another name for “Negro” music the racial problematics of exploitative contracts contradicted any sweeping coronations of indies as altering music industry practices. Additionally since many indie-label executives entered into the recording industry with experience there had to be some awareness among executives of the potential lucrativeness of recordings as their clearly was in publishing. As indie-label executives matured within the industry in the late 50s and 60s there were few reasons, beyond greed ineptitude or death, to prevent them from revisiting their original contracts and voluntarily compensating the musicians or surviving families of core musicians who fueled their labels’ development.

Indie Radio

By the 1940s radio stations were the premier outlets for song exposure and the rise of independent radio stations, coupled with BMI’s development, propelled R&B, country and eventually rock ‘n’ roll into the mainstream. The restructuring of American radio fostered the growth of independent radio stations that programmed inexpensive copyrights and reasserted the potential for specialty markets to reach the mainstream,

³⁴⁴ Harrington, Richard, “Atlantic’s Bow to the Blues Heritage; Label is Recalculating Past Royalty Payments.” Washington Post 12 May 1988. D1.

³⁴⁵ Brian Ward, 461.

which had occurred with 20s hillbilly and blues records. Because rock histories primarily focused on R&B as the dominant influence on rock 'n' roll, here I explore the failure of independent radio to offer blacks significant opportunities to fully integrate into the music industry distribution structure. The growing presence of Black disc jockeys and black records on independent radio stations was not matched by significant numbers of black station owners or program managers in the 40s and 50s. One could argue that the lack of cultural diversity in ownership and management at the outset of R&B radio still reverberates given the limited number of black, or ethnic minority, managed and owned stations contemporarily.³⁴⁶

The 45 rpm single technology independent labels used to record specialty music found the perfect channel for distribution at independent labels sanctioned by the government.³⁴⁷ Major shifts in the broadcast industry provided a space for specialty music to be heard and appreciated. According to Garofalo, the Federal Communications Committee (FCC) began to, “clear away the backlog of applications for radio licenses that had been put on hold during World War II” which lead to “the creation of a series of poorly capitalized independent radio stations that were desperate for inexpensive programming.”³⁴⁸ Independent radio stations fostered the increasing mainstream presence of country music and R&B. Nelson George traced the development of late 40s

³⁴⁶ Though country music’s influence is apparent in rock era genres such as rockabilly and enjoys interpretations from singers associated with numerous genres including pop, rock, and R&B singers country’s relationship to the development of rock occurs cyclically rather than continually. For example Gillett notes how by the 1960s, “. . . country music virtually isolated itself from the world of pop” and “The major labels each had Nashville offices with A&R chiefs looking after the country artist rosters, and little attempt was made to push even the biggest country stars onto pop radio,” 359.

³⁴⁷ Garofalo, 99.

³⁴⁸ Ibid, 98.

and early 50s black-oriented radios function in spreading R&B music to black consumers and as an important source of community information and identity.³⁴⁹ Brian Ward attributed the growth of black-oriented radio to the late 40s decline of network radio, the rapid growth of TV, which lured the traditional white adult radio audience and an expanded and increasingly concentrated black consumer market. He also noted that by the 1950s radios were accessible to the majority of the American population, including 90% of Blacks, meaning R&B programming and the flair of radio DJs had a direct audience.³⁵⁰

The flipside of the burgeoning R&B radio boom was that, “few of the station owners, managers, or even technical staffs, were black.” Ward noted that by 1960 there were only four black owned stations, WEUP-Birmingham, WCHB-Inkster, KPRS-Kansas City, WERD-Atlanta, and at most 14 in 1970.³⁵¹ Such a lack of progress suggested the ongoing economic and social gaps between blacks and whites well into the 1970s in terms of access to economic resources and the availability of opportunities. Another important shift in radio, independent and mainstream, was how pre-British Invasion rock ‘n’ roll era radio programming from 1955-63 increased pop radio access for black singers and created greater competition for them at “black” radio. Gillett illustrated this phenomenon on a chart that illustrated the dramatic rise of white singers who produced top ten hits in the “Negro” market. At the commercial beginning of rock in 1955 whites comprised three of the 64 top ten hits at black radio or approximately four percent. In 1958 whites recorded 45 of 86 or ~ 52% of the top ten black radio hits.

³⁴⁹ George, 40-56.

³⁵⁰ Brian Ward, 30-1.

³⁵¹ Brian Ward, 30.

This percentage declined significantly fluctuating from 28% to 29% to 9% to 16% to 26% from 1959-1963, this was incidentally the “schlock rock era.” White teen pop idols were a lot less likely to have received airplay on black radio stations which partially explained the decline. For comparison black singers who generated top ten hits at “pop” or “white” radio was nine of 51 or ~18% in 1955 and 16 of 77 or ~21% in 1958. Black top ten “pop” hits peaked in the Motown era reaching between ~31%-35% from 1961-3.³⁵² The playing of white records on “black” stations was largely the result of white singers recording in what could broadly be termed “black-oriented” styles during the era and crossing over to “black” radio stations, which must be understood as chiefly white-run businesses.

Radio clearly fostered the growth of independent labels singles and by definition the specialty genres, particularly R&B, that spawned rock ‘n’ roll. Indeed from 1955-9 the number of independent singles to reaching the top ten nearly doubled from 1955 to 1957 and from 1957 to 1959 a greater number of independent records comprised the years’ top ten hits than major label singles.³⁵³ Yet, such gains must be qualified because the social identity of those who owned independent record labels and owned and managed radio stations were only negligibly different than the dominant race and gender hierarchy in pop music prior to rock ‘n’ roll. Whereas historians frequently engaged in the indie vs. major binary, defined rock ‘n’ roll as a form of racialized cultural revolution, and championed rhythmic youth music over sentimental or ephemeral pre-rock pop, they failed to illuminate how the lack of diversity in ownership and management continually kept ethnic minorities and women outside of channels for

³⁵² Gillett, 160.

³⁵³ Ibid, 492.

capital accumulation and executive power. In this respect rock 'n' roll was only marginally more progressive or accessible than the pre-rock industry.

Race has served as a visual marker and a form of organization, which allowed historians to easily denote the increased presence of racially marked people in media, forms, including record charts and music-related TV appearances. The tangibility of race made it fairly easy for historians to argue for racial progress in the most literal sense. However, at issue in the music industry was not only presence and visibility but issues of economic power and artistic autonomy. Race has served as the most seemingly obvious area of progress in rock era popular music. But as my discussion has demonstrated a closer look reveals a troubled history of inequity at the highest levels of profit and musical production. If an aspect as visible as race has generated facile readings of progress, it is less surprising that historians have subordinated discussions of sexuality and gender identity and behavior in rock era music.

Rock historians have consistently remained in the closet about the way assumptions about sexuality and gender informed what images and expressions are palatable and allowable in the production and distribution of popular music. I am unsure if this stems from the fact that most rock historians are heterosexually-identified, gender normative men who may be unaware of their own naturalized biases about gender. More likely, it reflects a broader cultural ethos which propelled men to the forefront of history to exclusion of women, relegated to supplementary status and a naturalized view that queer lives were fundamentally tangential and invisible in discussions of the people and experiences constituting relevant public history. However, if rock and roll was an original American art form it is important that its history accurately portrayed the

diverse constituencies that generated its cultural role not merely for the sake of inclusion, but accuracy. By re-examining the development of rock as an urban 50s form and the simultaneous development of 50s and 60s pre-Stonewall era gay and lesbian politics one can understand rock in the context of an increasingly queered America. Further, my discussion here provides a context for the queer cultural and political developments which preceded and accompanied the rise of the queer performers I discuss in Part II.

Rock & Roll in the (Queer) Urban City

Rock histories usually focused on rock ‘n’ roll as an urban cultural phenomenon that largely stemmed from major U. S. metropolitan cities such as New York, Los Angeles, San Francisco, Chicago, among others. The United Kingdom (U. K.), especially London and Jamaica also figured heavily into geographies relevant to rock’s development. Such historical emphasis reflected national shifts such as the rural migration of Blacks North ward and the influx of ambitious musicians to geographic pillars of mass media especially New York and Los Angeles.

Urban settings were recurring sites in rock histories. They were the sites of music-loving white youngsters being turned on to black music through radio DJs and R&B stores³⁵⁴ of doo-wop groups harmonizing on street corners waiting to be

³⁵⁴ Garofalo, 1997, discusses an anecdotal example of white consumers of black records on p. 89; For discussions of D. J. Alan Freed’s influence see Szatmary, 20; Morthland, “The Rise of Top Forty AM.” Rolling Stone Illustrated History of Rock & Roll. 103; Gillett 13-4, 21; Garofalo, 90.

discovered;³⁵⁵ of enterprising music lovers founding independent record labels;³⁵⁶ of burgeoning performers turning audiences on to the possibility of a rhythmically driven, hybrid form of popular music that would become rock ‘n’ roll.

In this section I argue that rock historians’ emphasis on post-WWII racial history, to the exclusion of other significant post-WWII cultural shifts, distorted rock histories’ attempts to convey rock era American social history. Rock histories consistently defined rock as an urban cultural phenomenon which by association imbued rock with a rebellious cachet linked to urban racial migration. Such historical tendencies overlooked post-WWII queer migration to major urban cities which was vital to understanding the cultural environment characterizing major urban centers perhaps especially in New York and San Francisco. There is a bevy of urban scholarship tracing post-WWII urban queer migration, and convincing proof of queer influences in urban rock ‘n’ roll, that rock histories failed to acknowledge. This section aims to provide a fuller portrait of post-WWII urban cities by synthesizing urban historical research illustrating the formation of queer urban communities in post-WWII America. For the sake of brevity and pertinence, I focus on New York and San Francisco, both consistent sites in the development and maturation of urban queer life and rock ‘n’ roll.

Rock as urban sound

³⁵⁵ See 75-79, 114-20 in Miller. Also see Szatmary, p. 62-67; DeCurtis, 94, 99-100; Garofalo, 126; Gillett, 31, 33-34, 155, 157, 160-3.

³⁵⁶ Szatmary, 10, 14, 167; Garofalo, 78, 81-2, 108-10; Gillett 10, 69-77, 85-90, 100-7, 114-8, 310.

According to rock historians Gillett and Garofalo urbanity was fundamental to rock ‘n’ roll’s (and later rock’s) sound. Gillett noted that, “. . . during the mid-fifties, in virtually every urban civilization in the world, adolescents staked out their freedom in the cities, inspired and reassured by the rock and roll beat. Rock and roll was perhaps the first form of popular culture to celebrate without reservation characteristics of city life that had been among the most criticized. In rock and roll, the strident, repetitive sounds of city life were, in effect, reproduced as melody and rhythm.”³⁵⁷ Twenty-six years later Garofalo argued a similar point noting, “The music that became rock ‘n’ roll issued from city centers in just about every region in the country . . . The one thing that can be said with certainty is that rock ‘n’ roll was an urban sound.”³⁵⁸

The historical focus on rock ‘n’ roll’s urban roots was less a benign designation than a device for historians and critics to posit rock ‘n’ roll as a cultural counterpoint to a presumed conservative white suburban mentality synonymous with 50s suburbia and “white flight” from cities. Palmer invoked the dichotomy when he said of pre-rock 50s pop that, “Mainstream pop music was somnolent and squeaky-clean, despite the occasional watered-down pop-boogie hit. Perry Como crooned for suburban snoozers in his V-necked sweaters . . .”³⁵⁹ Other historians further employed the urban versus suburban binary to distinguish pre-rock pop and rock ‘n’ roll by defining rock as an ideology as well as a commercial music genre.

Garofalo noted how rock ‘n’ roll evoked a generational divide, presumably among whites, by luring white teens with the “danger” synonymous with cities. “As

³⁵⁷ Gillett, xviii.

³⁵⁸ Garofalo, 101.

³⁵⁹ See p. 16 in Palmer.

millions of adults left the intensity of urban life in the 1950s for the new and expansive sprawl called suburbia, rock ‘n’ roll pulled their offspring back to the sounds of the city. While postwar youth may have found the new sound exciting and engaging, adults found it threatening . . .”³⁶⁰ He built his argument by contrasting cities and suburbs, positing suburbs as spaces of plentitude and urban areas as empty and discarded, “Throughout the 1950s, the growth of suburbia had been rivaled only by the frenzy of activity euphemistically called ‘urban renewal.’ Charges that suburbia could be culturally bankrupt and emotionally deadening and that urban renewal was often little more than neighborhood removal were dismissed as the price of progress.”³⁶¹

The contrast rock histories established capitalized on historical notions of cities as dangerous, rebellious spaces and the suburbs as the epitome of white cultural conservatism. If rural American culture, represented by hillbilly music, folk and country blues traditions, provides rock ‘n’ roll with its “roots,” the urban landscape fed and fueled its danger. Perceptions of cities and certain city neighborhoods as sites of danger pervaded historical characterizations of American cities. Alongside ethnocentric and racist disdain toward Eastern European immigrants and, particularly after the Great Migration and white flight, African Americans, the presence of sex workers and sexual deviants in major urban cities and/or urban neighborhoods stigmatized cities for many urban dwellers and among non-urban dwellers as well.³⁶²

While it was narratively convenient to define the city as a Mecca for growing racial awareness and cultural integration via music (which I question elsewhere in this

³⁶⁰ Garofalo, 15.

³⁶¹ Ibid, 183.

³⁶² Chauncey, George. Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Making of the Gay Male World, 1890-1940. New York: Basic Books, 1995.

study), the steadily increasing presence of queer people to urban American cities fundamental to a thorough understanding of the cultural scenes which grew out of San Francisco, Los Angeles, and New York, among other urban centers, in the 1950s through the present. I do not seek to pit racial versus sexual migration because these categories overlap as all people are raced and sexed. Nor do I argue that the information available on migration is identical in form and availability or in methods for measuring migratory patterns. Rather I aim to introduce queerness into our cultural understanding of rock as urban and expand the understanding of elements shaping rock's sound and ideology.

Rock Reflects City Changes

Two of the broad themes rock histories reiterated, with differing levels of explicitness, was how the migration of African-Americans from the South to Northern and Western cities fostered the development of rock 'n' roll and the city's function as a space for post-WWII young people to culturally define themselves. Historians typically addressed African-American migration by linking estimated demographic data with the musical production of an urban area. In contrast historians broadly alluded to the city as a place young people either migrated to from afar or drifted toward to find community and develop their talents.

Historians often attributed the rise of independent record labels in the 1940s and 1950s to the mass migration of African-Americans who sought better lives.³⁶³ Gillett noted how the numerous independent labels which emerged during the migration, “. . .

³⁶³ Garofalo, 65, notes the number of blacks who move to work in defense plants.

were all founded between 1940 and 1950, a decade in which as many Negroes (one and a quarter million) left the South as had done so in the previous thirty years.”³⁶⁴

For example, several historians cited the influx of African-Americans to Chicago, particularly musicians such as Muddy Waters, Howlin’ Wolf, and Chuck Berry who recorded for independent label Chess Records, as integral to the changing faces of the city and inevitably the emergence of the Chicago blues and R&B sound.³⁶⁵ Szatmary attempted to account for the number of Delta black musicians, such as Muddy Waters, who travel to Chicago by defining them as participants of the general urban migration. “From 1940 to 1950, 214,000 southern African-Americans arrived in Chicago, an increase of 77 percent in just one decade. About half the migrants came from the Mississippi Delta region, which stretched 200 miles from Memphis to Vicksburg.”³⁶⁶

The migration of African-Americans to cities also inspired shifts in radio programming and the recognition of African-American consumption patterns. According to Garofalo, “Unlike country music, the blues, as a rule, had been excluded from radio in earlier years, but the exodus of more than 1 million African Americans from the South during World War II helped to loosen these restrictive programming policies. Wartime prosperity made these newly emigrated African Americans an

³⁶⁴ Gillett, 10.

³⁶⁵ For a discussions of Chess Records’ sound see Gillett, 30-1; Discussion of Chess recording black Southern migrants *Waters, Williamson, Little Walter, Elmore James*, see Gillett, 148-50; *Muddy Waters*, see DeCurtis, 17, Palmer p. 30, Szatmary 6; *Howlin’ Wolf*, See Szatmary, 9; *Chuck Berry*, see Palmer, 28, Miller, 105-8, Szatmary, 18, Garofalo, 112-3.

³⁶⁶ Szatmary, 6.

identifiable consumer group.”³⁶⁷ He also tied the migration to record companies’ growing attention to specialty markets which was central to R&B and rock ‘n’ roll’s gradual commercial prominence.³⁶⁸

Alongside the increasing African-American populations in urban cities, rock historians linked cities with the emergence of young people as a consumer demographic and the development of youth-oriented folk music and counterculture scenes. Historians frequently referenced a national shift toward youth consumerism as a key post-WWII trend. While this was generally accurate, historians tended to broadly refer to “youth” as a monolith, overlooking the diversity of income, geography, ethnicity and sexuality to name a few key categories. Thus, when Garofalo stated, “. . . the emergence of the music as a genre coincided with the beginnings of youth culture as a phenomenon. Due to the convergence of a number of a number of a social forces in the 1950s, including postwar affluence and a demographic shift in the population toward youth, teenagers became an identifiable consumer group and one that possessed an ample amount of disposable income” one must consider the range of identities that the broad move toward youth may have excluded or denied.³⁶⁹ Garofalo was likely referring to white youth, in terms of the income and mobility implied by the statement, though sexuality and gender differences are unclear. Such a tendency to generalize among rock historians often generated broad portraits of urban scenes lacking in nuance.

For example, in the early 1960s Greenwich Village functioned as a significant performance space for many fledgling folk singers, notably Bob Dylan and Joan Baez.

³⁶⁷ Garofalo, 66.

³⁶⁸ Ibid, 73.

³⁶⁹ Ibid, 4.

When Gillett noted how, “The New York record industry never did come to terms with the folk club movement which sprouted up and briefly bloomed in Greenwich Village, a district which the New York media regarded as a seedy neighborhood for down-and-out buskers and out-of-town tourists,”³⁷⁰ he never isolated whom comprised the area’s reputation as “seedy.” Similarly when Szatmary recalled the anti-establishment values Beat poet Allen Ginsberg espoused as part of the Village and San Francisco North Beach scenes, Szatmary noted his critiques of racism, capitalism and militarism. But regarding Ginsberg’s literary challenges to hegemonic sexuality and gender important parts of his oeuvre were absent.³⁷¹ Such generalizing portrayed these urban spaces as “outsider” scenes but was inarticulate in illustrating what made these scenes subversive and threatening. Fortunately, gay and lesbian scholarship on American history, urban history and queer space provide substantive evidence and arguments regarding queer migration. These migrations were most pertinent to the 60s Beat-inspired New York Village folk scene and late 60s hippie culture.

The Queer Urban Missing Link

Kenney³⁷² and Almgren³⁷³ both noted the absence of gay/lesbian experience from traditional urban theory, history and planning, with rare exceptions. A series of

³⁷⁰ Gillett, 304.

³⁷¹ Szatmary, 140-1.

³⁷² See p. 120 Kenney, Moira. “Remember Stonewall Was a Riot: Understanding Gay and Lesbian Experience in the City.” Making the Invisible Visible: A Multicultural Planning History. Ed. Leonie Sandercock. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998. 120-32.

³⁷³ See p. 45 in Almgren, Hans. “Community with/out pro-pink-uity.” The Margins of the City: Gay men’s urban lives. Ed. Stephen Whittle. Aldershot, Hants England: Arena, 1994. 45-63.

anthologies and books on queer spaces continue to emerge and reverse the dearth of research on gay/lesbian spaces. The newness of much of the emerging queer space research preceded the publication of older rock histories. However, because many rock histories were well into second and third editions (Garofalo, Gillett, Szatmary) there were ample opportunities for rock historians to update their books and acknowledge the increasingly visible gay and lesbian populations visible in post-WWII America especially urban pockets synonymous with rock culture. Though there are many ways to understand space, understanding the geographic migration of many gays and lesbians to urban areas is essential to understanding how gay and lesbian people emerged as members of discernible communities. The queers who populated major urban cities were a significant part of the character of American cities and perceptions of specific neighborhoods that overlapped and directly influenced the music, politics and style of notable rock performers.

The Queer Post-WWII City

Gay historians have consistently characterized gays and lesbians as virtually synonymous with urbanity. Historian D’Emilio focused primarily on gay urban subcultural developments throughout Sexual Politics, Sexual Communities³⁷⁴ Paul Hindle noted, “It is clear . . . that gay communities are overwhelmingly urban, and the size of a gay community is largely determined by the size of an urban area.”³⁷⁵ Further, in this section I discuss the longstanding 20th and 21st century synonymy of New

³⁷⁴ D’Emilio particularly emphasizes gay urban space at very beginning of Chapter Two in. Sexual politics, Sexual communities.

³⁷⁵ See p. 8 Hindle, Paul. “Gay communities and gay space in the city.” The Margins of the City: Gay men’s urban lives. Ed. Stephen Whittle. Aldershot, Hants, England: Arena, 1994. 7-25.

York's Greenwich Village and San Francisco, especially North Beach and the Castro District, with gay and lesbian living. McGarry and Wasserman noted how the city fostered queer living, "The city, yesterday as today, offered freedom from small-town states and the possibility for single men and women to live outside the strictures of family. The openness and anonymity, as well as the employment opportunities offered in the city, has created an environment in which same-sex communities thrive."³⁷⁶

While recognizing the way urban spaces foster the development of gay and lesbian communities, the urban associations sometimes painted gay and lesbian lives in overly broad strokes along a "metronormative" axis³⁷⁷ that many queer scholars are challenging by exploring Southern, rural and suburban-dwelling gays and lesbians. America's diverse queer spaces are too fragmentary to be neatly confined to a few key urban areas. Still, despite these reservations, the urban planning and social science research on queer spaces offers rich portraits of how gays and lesbians created communities and articulated identities within the urban spaces that add considerable depth to perceptions of the changing post-WWII American city.

The Queer City "Threat"

Rock historians were accurate in their discussion of perceptions of cities as dangerous and threatening as a result of prejudicial dominant culture attitudes toward

³⁷⁶ McGarry and Wasserman, 59-60.

³⁷⁷ Judith Halberstam defines the term as one which can "... map the normalizing power of one particular gay/lesbian narrative centered upon 'coming out' and involving some form of 'migration' either from a rural space to an urban space or from heterosexual life in the city to queer life in the city." See p. 163 in "The Brandon Teena Archive." *Queer Studies: An Interdisciplinary Reader*. Eds. Robert J. Corber and Stephen Valocchi. Malden, Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishing, 2003. 159-69.

black people occupying American cities. Sexuality also played a key role, alongside race and ethnicity, with perceptions of cities. John Loughery described the impact of suburban growth as a resurgence in perceptions of cities as dwelling places for ethnics, unmarried, criminals, beatniks and queers.³⁷⁸ He noted:

The suburban thrust of American life after the war represented a turning against not only cities themselves, transformed by the black migration for the rural South and urban decay, but a turning against the *idea* of the city, as a place of stimulation, unpredictability, and robustly conflicting values. The safer, more uniform, and more knowable the suburbs seemed the darker and more unnatural the city became. And in the minds of many Americans, urban life came to mean several not unrelated things: it meant black, it meant Hispanic, it meant unmarried, it meant crime-ridden, it meant beatnik, it meant queer.³⁷⁹

Queer historians consistently cited the post-WWII period, especially the 1960s as a time when queer people began to move to cities and attain visibility. For example, McGarry and Wasserman noted that as the gay liberation movement developed in the late 1960s, “No reliable statistics quantified the number of people who migrated to these burgeoning enclaves, but the development of new communities was clearly a national phenomenon.”³⁸⁰ Though commonsense perceptions of certain neighborhoods as gay and lesbian oriented surely persisted in major cities and publicity for homosexual scandal were examples of public discourse surrounding homosexuality, the 1960s is a

³⁷⁸ Loughery, 167.

³⁷⁹ Ibid.

³⁸⁰ McGarry and Wasserman, 85

central period where the popular press and medical community presented homosexuality as a “social problem” of interest to the general public.³⁸¹ A group of 1960s mainstream national press articles on homosexuality are useful sources for understanding how the pervasive notion that cities were becoming synonymous as dwelling spaces for homosexuals developed.

A 1962 New York Times front page cover story on the more overt presence of homosexuality in New York described big cities as places where gays, “find escape from legal and social harassment in their smaller home communities, where their deviancy can be hidden only at the price of self-denial”³⁸² Two years later Life magazine published a sprawling exposé covering homosexual male social worlds, and gay related legal, religious and psychological issues. The article opened noting how, “. . . large cities offer established homosexual societies to join, plenty of opportunity to meet other homosexuals on the streets, in bars or at parties in private homes, and, for those who seek it, complete anonymity.” It went on to note the numerous job opportunities in stereotypically gay fields (interior decorating, fashion design, dance and theater, etc.) available in cities and cites San Francisco as the “gay capital.”³⁸³ A 1966 Time magazine editorial mirrored the earlier Times’ story by clumsily attempting to “define” gay culture by exploring types of gay bars and citing “gay capitals” in this case Los Angeles and San Francisco.³⁸⁴ A 1967 New York Times Magazine story

³⁸¹ Faderman makes a similar point about the media’s fascination toward homosexuality as “sick or subversive,” p. 160 in Faderman.

³⁸² See Doty, Robert C. “Growth of Overt Homosexuality in City Provokes Wide Concern.” New York Times. 17 December 1962: 1, 33.

³⁸³ See p. 68 in Welch, Paul. “The ‘Gay’ World Takes to the City Streets.” Life 26 June 1964. 68-73.

³⁸⁴ See p. 40 in “The Homosexual in America.” Editorial. Time 21 January 1966: 40-1.

focused on gays as a minority beginning to demand rights and noted how, “every metropolitan area has a string of gay bars where homosexuals gather to make contacts” citing Kansas City, Los Angeles, San Francisco, New York and Chicago.³⁸⁵

Though such articles focused so narrowly on the city, one might think there were no queer networks in suburban or rural areas, they were all of a piece in working to convince readers that cities are gay refuges.³⁸⁶ The gay communities these articles highlighted were chiefly white male spaces, not a reflection of the whole spectrum of people comprising gay communities. As Almgren notes, there was no reliable method for measuring a neighborhood’s queerness, no such thing as a representative gay/lesbian sample and most importantly no way to define community without addressing the “dynamics of diversity and unity.” However, the availability of information on even a limited segment of the population confirmed the presence of queer culture making.

In their efforts to provide a broad portrait of the rock era, historians skimmed over details that may have further illuminated the changing nature of the country. Greenwich Village and North Beach were important sites for understanding the relationship of gay presence and influence to American cities. By at least the 1960s it was virtually commonsense that urban areas, especially New York, San Francisco and Los Angeles were spaces with large populations of gay people and gay communities, a notion the mainstream press was integral to establishing.

³⁸⁵ See p. 44 in Schott, Webster. “Civil Rights and the Homosexual: A 4-Million Minority Asks for Equal Rights.” New York Times Magazine. 12 November 1967: 44-72.

³⁸⁶ The disturbing absence of attention to lesbians in these stories reflects many things including a cultural indifference toward women, cultural inequalities limiting female access to space, more subtly coded or less visible lesbian networks. Schott wrote a three-column, 1/3 page sidebar regarding lesbianism “In Lesbos”, p. 49 but rarely referenced women in his article.

Greenwich Village

“The guys that night were so beautiful . . . They’d lost that wounded look that fags all had ten years ago,”--Allen Ginsberg referring to the Stonewall Riots³⁸⁷

The June 1969 Stonewall Riots at Greenwich Village’s Stonewall Inn were synonymous among many historians as the impetus for late 60s and early 70s queer liberation movements. The Riots received limited and mostly belated press coverage at the time³⁸⁸ but broad surveys of American history regularly cited the riots as a pivotal 60s event. Among the six major rock histories I surveyed, only Szatmary cited the event and attempted to address its cultural impact for gay and lesbian visibility. Addressing Stonewall and the cultural context from which it stemmed, notably an era of gay migration and community-building subject to police surveillance and entrapment, is central to understanding the overt presence of queer people in 1950s and 60s Greenwich Village.

In the 1960s Greenwich Village’s coffee house scene was host to young, progressive, politically-minded folk musicians. The Village’s reputation as a progressive space for young artists, stemmed from the neighborhood’s reputation as a haven for bohemians. Rock histories tend to broadly acknowledge the Village as a “hip” space for youngsters, for example pointing out the way subversive Beat artists influenced rockers, but rarely probed the neighborhood’s longstanding bohemian population and the area’s synonymity with queer culture. The Village was also a

³⁸⁷ See p. 76 in “Policing the Third Sex.” *Newsweek* 27 October 1969: 76, 81.

³⁸⁸ Loughery, 315-9; McGarry and Wasserman, 12

benchmark in popular press reports as one of the nation's premier refuges for queer people, especially men. 1960s press accounts rightfully addressed queer migration to New York, and particularly the Village, but numerous historians, notably Chauncey, Faderman and McGarry and Wasserman noted the strong queer presence in the Village well before Stonewall. Each highlighted the Village's role as a notable 20th century queer historical space for different reasons. For example Faderman cited it as refuge for white, non-lesbians seeking community in the 20s³⁸⁹ and Chauncey cited queer migration and activity as integral to the neighborhood's overall character.³⁹⁰

New York's status as a queer refuge has a long history dating back at least to the 1880s.³⁹¹ In the 1920s a bohemian element, largely comprised of artists' communities redefined Greenwich Village from a depressed to a neighborhood notable for tolerating unconventional people and culture.³⁹² Around the same time bohemians invaded the Village the availability of affordable and often furnished rooms and apartments for unmarried people also attracted singles to the Village.³⁹³ The influx of singles to the Village, along with the building of affordable services such as cafeterias fostered the emergence of female and male enclaves, such as lesbian-inclusive 1920s personality clubs, such as the Heterodoxy³⁹⁴ and the Village's 1930s "Cafeteria Society Downtown." An outgrowth of the broadly accommodating, housing and social spaces was queer-organized balls³⁹⁵ and the inclusion of gay and lesbian activities in the

³⁸⁹ Faderman, 82.

³⁹⁰ Chauncey, 244.

³⁹¹ Ibid, 135.

³⁹² McGarry and Wasserman, 63; Chauncey, 227-8; Faderman, 83

³⁹³ McGarry and Wasserman, 63; Chauncey, 136, 229.

³⁹⁴ Faderman, 83; McGarry and Wasserman, 55-7.

³⁹⁵ Chauncey, 237.

Village press.³⁹⁶ The overlap between queerness and bohemia became palpable in the writings of numerous overtly queer “beat” writers, such as Allen Ginsberg and William Burroughs. Broadly speaking the Beats were white writers, often with middle class pedigree, whose writings and performances served as vehicles of cultural dissent toward cold war era middle-class values. In the mid-1950s the “beat” scene centered in San Francisco’s North Beach (which I also address in this section) but gained national notoriety and influenced artists in multiple genres. In the late 1950s/early 1960s, as the North Beach scene met with increasing surveillance and harassment, the Village offered an alternate forum for Beat writers to create and perform. The Beat presence in the Village, which overlapped the 60s folk scene, inspired many younger listeners weaned on rock ‘n’ roll the opportunity to integrate Beat ideology and style into their music. When rock historians referred to the Village music scene and the Beat disciples who flocked there such as Bob Dylan³⁹⁷ and the Fugs³⁹⁸ the influence of queer experience on the “beat” aesthetic was essential to understanding the underlying rebellion and subversion rock performers adapted from the Beats.

The Village’s early 20th century reputation as a queer enclave did not ensure internal equality or freedom from harassment. Indeed Faderman noted how some male artists in the 1920s and 30s were intrigued by lesbianism but viewed lesbians as a threat because of their sexual independence from men.³⁹⁹ The Village’s reputation also incurred the attention of police who began cracking down on queer social spaces, which was part of a wave of activity in New York on the part of moral and social reform

³⁹⁶ Ibid, 244.

³⁹⁷ DeCurtis, 300.

³⁹⁸ Szatmary, 142.

³⁹⁹ Faderman, 86-87.

committees who began targeting homosexuality as a significant New York social problem.⁴⁰⁰ However, these elements did not deter the solidification of Greenwich Village as a prominent queer space.

A sign of the battles to be fought by gays and lesbians throughout the late 20th century can be gleaned when one considers the headlines and tone of coverage of 1960s mainstream articles on urban, mostly gay male culture. The framing of homosexuality as a social problem lingered well past the 1930s, evident when Ernest Havemann concluded a multi-part Life story, “Homosexuality in America” with, “Many optimistic students of our society believe that we may some day eliminate poverty, slums and even the common cold—but *the problem of homosexuality* seems to be more akin to death and taxes.”⁴⁰¹ Similarly, Robert C. Doty’s New York Times’ front page story is titled “Growth of Overt Homosexuality in City Provokes Wide Concern.”⁴⁰² The notion of homosexuality as a type of problem-causing disease reflected a recurring pattern reform committees initiated, notably the monitoring and closing of queer social spaces well through the 1960s. For example the police shut down numerous New York gay bars in a rash of closings in 1959.⁴⁰³ Such practices littered Doty’s cover story that noted the elaborate signals clubs employed to notify patrons of police presence and thousands of arrests via undercover police entrapping prostitutes and their customers.⁴⁰⁴

The Doty cover story on the more overt presence of homosexuality in New York noted Greenwich Village, among other spaces, as hangouts for, “those who are

⁴⁰⁰ Chauncey, 141-2, 145-6, 239.

⁴⁰¹ Ibid.

⁴⁰² Doty, 1, 33.

⁴⁰³ McGarry and Wasserman, 78-9.

⁴⁰⁴ Doty, 33.

universally regarded as the dregs of the invert world-the male prostitutes-the painted grossly effeminate ‘queens’ and those who prey on them.”⁴⁰⁵ Such a hostile and paranoid story in a leading U. S. publication which focused on homosexuality and homosexual populations as a growing threat indicated the conservatism of the era and exemplified the way an underground subculture became so discernible it was impossible to ignore. This kind of detail was notably absent from rock histories which preferred to describe Greenwich Village as a general youth hangout of artists but downplay Greenwich Village’s longstanding space as a haven for queer culture, which preceded the 60s but was obviously solidified by mainstream press coverage.

In New York, the official wide scale harassment of gay communities did not palpably decrease until months after the Stonewall Riots, when New York police officially abandoned entrapment techniques. According to a October 27, 1969 Newsweek story, published four months after Stonewall, homosexual arrests decreased from 800 in 1965 to less than 80 by October 1969.⁴⁰⁶ The subversive reputation Greenwich Village held in rock history must be understood in part as an outgrowth of decades of queer dwellings and cultural expression that culminate in a new libratory consciousness, also evident in other gay urban enclaves, and riots signifying collective action against decades of sanctioned harassment. Understanding the Village’s queer-related evolution reveals a more nuanced story about rock and exposes an important development in American urban history.

San Francisco

⁴⁰⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁰⁶ “Policing the Third Sex.”

Rock historians universally associated San Francisco with the late 60s acid-rock/psychedelic rock culture. Further, histories typically noted the Beat influence on the hippie movement's freedom aesthetic. However, though the 1960s popular press consistently declared San Francisco as a "gay capital,"⁴⁰⁷ and urban histories continued to document the development of gay communities San Francisco's development from a mid-19th century Gold Rush town⁴⁰⁸ to a symbolic queer Mecca for many queers was not a feature of most rock histories. In glossing over the town's queer history rock historians overlooked the way a pre-rock queer bohemia carved a cultural space for the 60s hippie scene to emerge. They also failed to link the way queerness, particularly as expressed in Beat culture, and the emergence of San Francisco as a gay enclave in the 60s shaped the principles which provided a base for the hippie cultures which spawned Acid Rock.

Prior to WWII the seeds of a bohemian and homosexual communal culture were evident in San Francisco. Les Wright noted that during San Francisco's Gilded Age (1880-1906), "The city established a literary and journalistic bohemian culture, including the likes of Samuel Clemens" perhaps in response to the developing middle class culture that develops in the prosperous and resource-laden port city.⁴⁰⁹ During the period a homosexual subculture developed on the Barbary Coast, an area where bohemians, "rubbed shoulders with the stage performers, prostitutes and saloon patrons

⁴⁰⁷ "Policing," p. 81; Welch, 68.

⁴⁰⁸ See p. 165-6 in Wright, Les. "San Francisco." Queer Sites: Gay urban histories since 1600. Ed. David Higgs. London: Routledge, 1999. 164-189.

⁴⁰⁹ *Ibid*, 167.

of high and low station.”⁴¹⁰ The passing and upholding of the Red Light Abatement Act in 1914 and 1917 coupled with Prohibition in 1919 devastated Coast businesses, including saloons casinos and prostitutes, and the “sexual deviant” became a new criminal class.⁴¹¹ Following the Gilded Age the Market Street area became a hub for gay men as a result of many factors including the building of public facilities, and more convenient transportation.⁴¹²

In the 1930s the end of Prohibition enabled people to drink and, by association, congregate publicly which fostered a burgeoning community of gay-inclusive businesses, residential enclaves and social spaces on the Barbary Coast/North Beach area, Union Square, Market Street, Polk and Van Ness Street and the Nob Hill/Pacific Heights areas.⁴¹³ As many historians noted, the end of WWI and the Great Depression inspired a general atmosphere in which social critics begin questioning the feminizing of American culture, in response to 20s Jazz Age of female laborers, freer female sexuality and the integration of queer humor and style in public performances.⁴¹⁴ Everything from the 30s Hollywood film code ban on “sexual perversion” to the banning of pansy shows and fairy humor from vaudeville shows to the use of homosexuality as part of political smear campaigns systematically stigmatize homosexuality.⁴¹⁵ Thus a more underground culture of gay networks and private gathering accompanied the budding, fragmented gay communities in San Francisco.⁴¹⁶

⁴¹⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹¹ Ibid, 169.

⁴¹² Ibid

⁴¹³ Wright, 172.

⁴¹⁴ Loughery, 41-4.

⁴¹⁵ Ibid, 58-64.

⁴¹⁶ Wright, 172.

Perhaps the most effective form of stigmatization was the equating of Nazi-ism with moral degeneracy and sexual perversion, an assertion bolstered by psychological research equating homosexuality with neurosis and sexual aggression.⁴¹⁷

However, WWII fostered the emergence of self-consciously gay communities. Many urban spaces became havens for WWII soldiers to mingle with gay civilians and explore their sexuality.⁴¹⁸ Loughery cited San Francisco bars Finnochio's, the Black Cat and Li-Po's as key sites, among many in urban cities that foster such interactions.⁴¹⁹ In the 1950s, amidst a culture increasingly hostile to queer people in the form of police harassment and Eisenhower's Executive Order 10450 which banned homosexuals from government jobs, numerous individuals and organizations argued that homosexuals comprised a minority worthy of protection.⁴²⁰

The two most prominent and documented organizations which attempted to gain recognition of gays and lesbians as minority groups and secure equality were the West Coast-based homophile groups the Mattachine Society and the Daughters of Bilitis. The emergence of both groups reflected the solidification of self-consciously gay and lesbian identified communities in West Coast urban cities Los Angeles and San Francisco. Though both groups had small memberships and rarely received national coverage they spawned branches in major cities and engage in "public activities" such

⁴¹⁷ Loughery, 106-11.

⁴¹⁸ Faderman, 126-7. It is important to note that segregation limited cross-racial socializing among gays. For a discussion of racial segregation and queer communities see p. 282-5 Morgan, Tracy D. "Pages of Whiteness: Race, Physique Magazines, and the Emergence of Public Gay Culture." Queer Studies: A Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Anthology. Eds. Brett Bemy and Mickey Eliason. New York: New York University Press, 1996. 280-97.

⁴¹⁹ Loughery, 150.

⁴²⁰ For discussions of Executive Order 10450 see Loughery, 205-8 and Faderman, 143-4; Faderman discusses more explicit military crackdowns on lesbianism, p. 150-1

as publishing and conventions. As early as 1948 Los Angeles-based communist-identified Harry Hay began brainstorming the political potential of gay organizing and after a series of informal discussion groups the Mattachine Society formed in Los Angeles in 1951.⁴²¹ Four years later in San Francisco lesbian couple Del Martin and Phyllis Lyon formed the Daughters of Bilitis.⁴²² In 1957 the Mattachine Society actually relocated its headquarters to San Francisco.

Overlapping the founding of these organizations was 1950s suburban flight from urban San Francisco as Italian immigrants left the North Beach and Irish immigrants left Eureka Valley leading to urban decay or economic depression. Suburban flight was a key factor in developing San Francisco's gay and lesbian identity. As Kenney noted, "In the 1950s these neighborhoods served an important role in creating safe havens. As they were located on the edge of the cities, in abandoned areas downtown, they were easily ignored in the larger context of urban renewal efforts."⁴²³ The queer presence in North Beach was integral to the development of Beat culture. Gay author Allen Ginsberg was one of the most frequently cited Beat influences on rock and roll songwriters yet few histories noted how the queerness of his poem "Howl" was central to his notoriety. Ginsberg's October 1955 reading of "Howl" whose, "description of gay male sexuality as joyous, delightful, and indeed holy turned contemporary stereotypes of homosexuality upside down" at the Six Gallery was a pivotal event in the San Francisco literary and cultural renaissance that included gay writers Robert Duncan,

⁴²¹ D' Emilio, 59-62; Loughery, 219-21.

⁴²² Faderman, 148-9.

⁴²³ Kenney, 131

Jack Spicer, and Robin Blaser.⁴²⁴ In 1957, the San Francisco police department arrested City Lights bookstore owner (and poet) Lawrence Ferlinghetti for selling Howl and Other Poems on the grounds of obscenity. Ferlinghetti triumphed during the trial, “Howl” became a bestseller and the national press declared San Francisco the home of the Beat generation conflating the literary renaissance, the Beats and often homosexuality.

Nan Boyd has explored the relationship between the Beats and queer San Francisco and drawn a more nuanced conclusion than many previous queer historians. In her oral history of queer San Francisco Boyd noted:

Homosexuality existed as part of Beat iconography only when same-sex representations renounced popular myths of emotional dependence and gender transgression. Much of Jack Kerouac’s and Allan Ginsberg’s writings, for example embrace the power of men together and laced homoerotic representations with riotous masculinity. Beat writers asserted a reinterpretation of male sexuality that ran counter to the homophobia of cold war America, but their celebration of masculinity remained too narrow and distinct from the more flamboyant and effeminate homosexualities ruminating in San Francisco’s sexual underworld for it to have contributed to a broad-based refiguring of queer culture or community.

Still, as John D’ Emilio argues, Beat culture legitimized some homosexual life choices. The publication of Ginsberg’s Howl and its subsequent censorship trials cemented a connection between Beat cultural iconography and

⁴²⁴ D’ Emilio, 180-1

homosexual practice. And as Beats found themselves increasingly in the public eye they often brought homosexuality with them.⁴²⁵

Boyd also acknowledged Howl's symbolic importance noting, "Howl projects the exuberant goodness of uncensored sexuality, and the connection between homosexuality and San Francisco's Beat poets pressed itself into the popular imagination despite the sometimes glaring differences between Beat and queer cultures."⁴²⁶ North Beach's synonymity with homosexuality and subversive bohemianism predictably inspired explicit campaigns to clean the area up via police harassment, California's Alcohol Beverage Control Department ceasing liquor licenses for suspected Beat hangouts and the departure and resettling of many Beat writers to other areas including the Haight a central space for the hippie movement's development.⁴²⁷

The late 50s and early 60s were arguably the central era in which political gestures and cultural events covered by the San Franciscan and national press defined San Francisco in the minds of many Americans as the so-called "gay capital" of the nation. In the 1959 San Francisco mayoral race candidate Russell Wolden used the city's budding reputation as a homosexual refuge to accuse the current mayor George Christopher and police Chief Thomas Cahill of being soft on homosexuals and tarnishing its reputation. The citizenry re-elected Christopher whose re-election strategy included an overt campaign against gay bars. Months after the election the local press

⁴²⁵ See p. 124 in Boyd, Nan. Wide Open Town: A History of Queer San Francisco to 1965. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003.

⁴²⁶ Ibid.

⁴²⁷ D' Emilio, 179.

covered the “gayola” scandal of policemen extorting gay bars who wanted to maintain their liquor licenses and the state Supreme Court demanded proof of illegal activity to justify liquor license revocations. Such embarrassing publicity, yielded limited justice toward the gay community, and actually resulted in more explicit crackdowns on gay bar culture. These internal perceptions made, “the topic of homosexuality an almost daily staple in the city’s diet of news, while intensifying a sense of grievance within the gay subculture.”⁴²⁸ Local press coverage of homosexuality fostered greater public interest on the subject as a social phenomenon and likely forecasts and supports the numerous national articles in the 60s that cite the city as the country’s “gay capital.”

The distance between 50s homophile groups and the gay bar scenes coupled with muted responses to late 50s/early 60s bar crackdowns inspired a wave of activism in San Francisco centered on bar culture patrons. The activist groups that formed included the League for Civil Education (LCE) founded in 1961, the Tavern Guild founded in 1962 and the Society for Individual Rights (SIR) formed in 1964.⁴²⁹ These groups, coupled with the 50s homophile groups which began to fade in the 60s and 70s, exemplified gay and lesbian civil rights consciousness and self-determination growing out of American cities. The emergence of self-organized, self-conscious political groups organized around sexuality and gender comprised an important part of WWII American activist history similar in spirit to that of the Civil Rights movement for racial equality which rock histories invoke as a sign of a changing America. The late 50s/early 60s fostered a burgeoning openness and visibility for gays and lesbians in the 1960s that poured over into so-called “mainstream culture” most evidently the 1960s hippie

⁴²⁸ Ibid, 184.

⁴²⁹ Ibid, 188-91.

movement. The hippie movement overlapped late 60s shifts of gays to the South of Market areas and the Castro which Irish working-class families began to abandon.⁴³⁰

Over a decade after his reading of “Howl” and its status as a controversy-fueled bestseller Allen Ginsberg presided over the 1967 Human Be-In at Golden Gate Park, one of the defining moments of the hippie movement. Wright argued, “By the late 60s queers were a presence among the new hippie movement, the bohemian reinvention of the beats, combined with, at least on the surface, a rejection of the post-war values of materialism, rejection of official authorities, embracing of social differences of all kinds in a utopian vision of peace, love and harmony.”⁴³¹ Wright’s assertion suggested the Beats mapped out a path for a younger generation to follow in terms of critiquing cultural and social attitudes and structures through art. The Haight-Ashbury rock scene developed amidst gay migration to this area. As Loughery noted, “Waves of young men had arrived in Haight-Ashbury circa 1967-1970, some of whom knew they were gay at the time and were eager to make a new life away from their hometowns and some of whom discovered their different interests only after settling.”⁴³² The overlap of late 60s gay migration to the area and the area’s shift as a hippie community was short-lived and queers, especially men, deliberately form establish residency and businesses in the transitioning Eureka Valley, known today as the Castro district.⁴³³ Ginsberg’s shift from Beat icon to hippie forefather was symbolically important for the values hippies espouse and the gay migration of young men Haight-Ashbury offered a space for understanding

⁴³⁰ Hindle, 16.

⁴³¹ Wright, 178.

⁴³² Loughery, 390-1.

⁴³³ Loughery, 391; Wright, 178; Hindle, 16.

how queer youth were integral to the wave of student protests synonymous with 60s activism.

Rock histories regularly cited urban student protests of Vietnam and racial inequality. But gay/lesbian centered student activism and joint anti-war and queer political movements also characterized the 60s revolutionary politics characteristic of the youth movements. As gay and lesbian politics shifted from homophile politics to youth-led liberation politics, (mirroring the shift from Civil Rights in the South to Black Power in the North and on the West Coast) queer activism became more visible. Many historians argued that broad-based politics were fundamental to liberation politics. The New York-based Gay Liberation Front's (GLF) first statement defined the group as "a revolutionary group of homosexual men and women formed with the realization that complete sexual liberation for all people cannot come about unless existing social institutions are abolished."⁴³⁴ Such a broad ideology did not always prevail in the various GLF branches' activism but was a traceable value. Suran noted how many Gay Liberation organizations explicitly defined themselves as anti-war and more broadly anti-military. For example one critique declared, "Homosexuality itself is antiwar, antiestablishment, and anti-imperialist from an objective political perspective."⁴³⁵ Anti-Vietnam sentiment explicitly fuels San Francisco Gay Liberationists who, ". . . planned parties, rallies, and conferences to coincide with major antiwar mobilizations; at antiwar

⁴³⁴ McGarry and Wasserman, 163; Loughery, 324

⁴³⁵ See p. 472 in Suran, Justin. "Coming Out Against the War: Antimilitarism and the Politicization of Homosexuality in the Era of Vietnam." American Quarterly 53 (September 2001): 452-488.

rallies Gay Liberation groups circulated flyers and petitions, made speeches, and sought alliances with other segments of the Movement.”⁴³⁶

Queer students initiated numerous liberation-oriented organizations on college campuses. In 1967 Columbia University’s student homophile league (SHL) was the first known public queer student group and inspired groups at Cornell, NYU, and Stanford.⁴³⁷ Gay Liberation Front groups also developed on numerous college campuses⁴³⁸ including active chapters at the University of California Berkeley and San Francisco State.⁴³⁹ Such protestant organizations were consistent with pre-Liberation 60s gay marches⁴⁴⁰ and protests which occurred alongside the Civil Rights Movement and throughout Black Power and anti-war efforts of the late 60s.⁴⁴¹

Conclusion

If rock was fundamentally a sound that reflected the changing nature of post-WWII American cities our understandings of cities have room to expand. The African-American migration to cities informed perceptions of cities as spaces for historically disenfranchised populations seeking opportunities for community building. This image provided rock with an undeniable “outsider” cachet. Similar parallels were evident in the influx of gay and lesbian populations to cities to foster communities and identities. The absence of queer lives from rock histories functioning as social histories is a gap

⁴³⁶ Ibid, p. 471.

⁴³⁷ D’ Emilio, 209-10; Faderman, 193.

⁴³⁸ Loughery, 325.

⁴³⁹ Suran, 467.

⁴⁴⁰ For example Loughery discusses 1965 protests at the United Nations (U.N.) and the White House on p. 270.

⁴⁴¹ Loughery discusses 1968-70 protests on 305-19.

this section highlights and corrects. Through exploring and synthesizing established urban and social history scholarship on queer migration and directly analyzing 60s national press trends, it is clear that queer people are integral to a nuanced portrait of post-WWII urban life.

Chapter Three: Betrayed Authenticities from Schlock Rock to Disco

One can connect the historical dots of rock 'n' roll history by tracing its series of creative bursts and dismaying artistic failures. Reading rock histories one begins to wonder is rock ultimately about death? Is it a series of promiscuous promises for liberation quelled by a culture unable to sustain and fulfill them? Is rock dying as a result of an indifferent public and a corrupt industry betraying potential rhythmic and cultural revolutions? Such questions surface from histories which tend to paint rock in the bleakest of colors.

Rock histories purported to chronicle rock in all its artistic glories and ideological challenges to mid-to-late 20th century mainstream popular culture. Such an approach did not preclude historians from addressing the genre's failures and disappointments but too often rock historians presented rock 'n' roll as a pure artistic form which faltered when corrupt industry forces exploited the genre and its performers. The sense of lamentation which constantly crept into these histories suggested rock was as ephemeral, trend-driven and corruptible as the pre-rock music and industry practices rock supposedly challenges. Despite the celebratory tone which typically permeated historical discussions of rock's highlights—the 1955-8 Golden Age, Elvis Presley, Beatlemania, Bob Dylan, Acid Rock and punk, rock histories were cynical in anchoring rock's evolution and devolution by a few select performers and events. I define this sense of inevitable failure as the death thesis of rock histories.

The mainstreaming of rock culture and the softening or feminization of rock culture were the consistent strains in rock historians' pronouncements of death. Both

were rooted in nostalgia for a moment when a masculine expressive roots-oriented culture, with insistent rhythms and unromantic sentiments, and supposedly untainted by commercialism offered an alternative to the perceived softness, femininity, romance and triviality of pre-rock pop culture. As McLeod noted in his discussion of rock criticism, “there are certain types of expression that are not deemed to be acceptable or legitimate by many rock critics and the communities they represent . . . This has had the effect, at least within the communities that rock critics represent, of closing off certain possibilities for expression.”⁴⁴² McLeod’s argument is relevant to rock histories because rock music critics were their primary authors and inevitably reflect critics’ perceptions of what performers and developments are most relevant. It is reasonable to expect rock historians to make judicious choices about the scope of their arguments. Historians can’t cover everything and everybody; however it is all too apparent from my survey of histories that rock histories tended to slight genres outside of interest to a narrowly perceived male audience taste. Such commercial considerations were not too surprising given that white teenage males are the primary target audience of rock publications.⁴⁴³ However, any attempt at a comprehensive history must acknowledge rock’s broad range of performers and diverse audiences the genre appealed to.

Death and decline proclamations typically surfaced when exciting trends emerged, often from marginal subcultures and reached mainstream channels of production, distribution and promotion. The trend often inspired fledgling performers and broadened rock’s scope, only to be “diluted” when industry practitioners found

⁴⁴² See p. 52, McLeod, Popular Music.

⁴⁴³ See p. 17, in Draper, Robert. Rolling Stone Magazine: The Uncensored History. Draper describes the magazine’s target audience as white teenage males.

performers who could mimic a trend's most superficial elements and successfully marketed the performer as the "real" thing. For example, many histories critiqued major record label attempts to capitalize on the late 40s/early 50s emergence of R&B by having white pop singers cover R&B hits.⁴⁴⁴ An additional aspect of the dilution alongside capitalist exploitation was when subcultural expression went "pop" via a softening or feminizing. For example, when Elvis transitioned from rockabilly and R&B singing to polished pop ballads many critics read this softening of Elvis as a concession to mainstream tastes and a dilution of the masculine vitality his earliest music possessed.

In this chapter I explore the death thesis by discussing four types of death trends rock histories commonly discussed, the death of rock 'n' roll, the death of soul music, the death of acid rock and the death of roots music. I conclude by offering an alternative argument that many of the trends which supposedly killed rock positively impacted the ability of queer musicians to survive the music industry. Each section outlines what historians and critics defined as a betrayal of a presumed authenticity, they have constructed. Such notions of authenticity defined rock and roll, R&B, and variations of rock such as acid rock and country rock, in terms of an original, pure form perverted by industry infiltration resulting in a dilution of the form. Rock music and historians are thus always chasing the tale of a lost vitality. I argue that this has resulted in a limited view of the possibilities for rock era to expand its sound, content and tone. As a result of the lost vitality historians denigrated or excluded softer, more mainstream variations of rock such as teen pop and soft rock and soul, such as Philly Soul and disco.

⁴⁴⁴ Garofalo, 154-7; Szatmary 24-6.

Ironically, the genre which supposedly returned rock and roll to its roots, punk, discarded the range of musical influences which originally shaped rock and roll in favor of a more narrow, reactionary form that was ultimately commodified.

I also challenge some of the simplistic arguments about the role of commodification in rock by exploring how it opened up many possibilities in rock music. The focus on commodification as the downfall of musical purity is a particularly flawed assumption inflecting the “death” thesis because it overlooked the fact that rock and roll was a fundamentally commercial form, as was all popular music. It also failed to acknowledge how commodification elevated rock and roll from a cult genre to an international phenomenon. In the context of my study I am particularly interested in how commodification expanded the range of performers in rock to include more women, which provided a niche for female subjectivities in rock. I also note how several industrial shifts, including rock and roll’s aesthetic of self-contained singer-songwriters, musicians and producers, increased the business sophistication and profit potential of performers. In a related shift, rock’s transition from a singles to album-oriented medium enabled many queer musicians to secure the clout and economic freedom to publicly acknowledge their queer identities and progressive politics without inherently fearing the end of their careers, a marked contrast to pre-rock and rock until the late 1960s. Commodification is a complex process that requires a nuanced discussion of its diverse impact for individuals and groups because it does not always simply represent a zero-sum game of exploitation, but a fragmented set of limitations and advantages.

The Death of Rock and Roll

If rock and roll was necessary to revitalize popular music then it's paradoxical to condemn its mainstreaming. Yet this is precisely what historians and critics did when they declared the genre as dying or dead. Rock and roll, like jazz country, and blues was a genre that simply experienced what most American genres experience, a transition from an underground phenomenon to one made accessible to a wide range of audiences. Though critics often condemned record labels for diluting rock and roll they rarely critiqued the role systems of distribution, such as radio and TV shows, played in reshaping what sounds and images were palatable to broader audiences. The core historical argument was that rock and roll declined when it became commodified beyond independent labels to major labels and when it expanded to include a wider range of tastes, specifically those geared toward female and teen audiences. The logic behind rock and roll's death implied that it should be a cult genre, an exclusive genre reserved for male performers and a self-identified rebellious (male) audience. Ironically, if rock and roll hadn't received major labeled distribution it would have remained a local or regional phenomenon. I explore the emergence of schlock rock and the impact of consolidation to address the preceding issues of dilution and commercialism.

The Tarnished Age

One of the most commonly circulated beliefs was that rock 'n' roll first lost its soul when pivotal rock musicians including Presley, Chuck Berry, Little Richard and Buddy Holly among others, lost their momentum as a result of everything from military service to incarceration to death. For example Garofalo stated, "much of the work to contain rock 'n' roll had ceased to be necessary, as a number of the most prominent

rock ‘n’ roll pioneers had already been neutralized in one way or another.”⁴⁴⁵ Palmer framed the era’s decline more explicitly noting, “By the end of the fifties, attrition of various sorts seemed to be *robbing* rock and roll of its biggest stars as well as its more under recognized talents.”⁴⁴⁶ These readings privileged rock musicians as self-conscious artists engaged in a musical and ideological war against pre-rock pop music and culture. Such readings presupposed a concentrated, organized social maneuver, which belied the disparate ways these musicians entered into the music industry. The argument suggested a shared aesthetic among rock ‘n’ roll’s pioneering musicians which overlooked important nuances in their careers. For example, Chuck Berry settled for rock ‘n’ roll because by his own admission he couldn’t make it as a jazz, blues or pop guitarist.⁴⁴⁷ Martha Bayles discussed Berry’s deliberate pursuit of rock ‘n’ roll as a business decision rather than an artistic or political one. Her discussion does not erode the possibility of Berry as a pivotal cultural force but adds a note of complexity to the traditional rock ‘n’ roll “revolution” thesis.⁴⁴⁸ Further, the music industry was not likely to welcome a black performer singing the hillbilly music he loved.⁴⁴⁹ Many of these musicians willfully abandoned rock ‘n’ roll and were not passive victims of a corporate conspiracy to steal rock ‘n’ roll.

Traditional historical readings have also assumed an explicit disconnect exists between these musicians and the implied slick, commercial, inauthentic and feminine

⁴⁴⁵ Garofalo, 174.

⁴⁴⁶ Palmer, 32; emphasis added.

⁴⁴⁷ Herbst, Peter. The Rolling Stone Interviews 1967-1980: The Classic Oral History of Rock and Roll. New York: St. Martin’s/Rolling Stone Press, 1981. 228.

⁴⁴⁸ Bayles, 150-1.

⁴⁴⁹ Miller, 105 describes Leonard Chess’ disbelief that a black musician could write an authentic country/hillbilly tune and encouraged Berry to give his version of “Ida May” a bigger beat, thus the rock ‘n’ roll classic “Maybellene” was born.

music preceding rock ‘n’ roll. Soul and vitality became synonymous with hard rhythms, overt eroticism and masculine expression. Rock histories usually argued that as rock ‘n’ roll gained commercial momentum reaching broad audiences it shifted from a regional, roots-music based urban rebellion to an accessible, safe, neutralized, benign national entertainment form. From the tone of much rock historical literature there was a feeling that as rock grew in popularity some essential secret leaked out and sapped the genre of its power. In referring to the onset of the Brill Building era Szatmary lamented rock’s decline into respectability when he noted, “From 1958 to 1963, in the absence of Presley and other rock pioneers, two businessmen reshaped rock-and-roll and made it respectable.”⁴⁵⁰ He was referring to Don Kirshner and Dick Clark.⁴⁵¹ Commenting on Elvis’ 1958 Presley post-draft recordings Garofalo noted, “he had become family entertainment, if not worse.”⁴⁵² Miller’s interpretation was that Presley’s shift toward “pop” symbolized a compromise that belied the aesthetic and generational divide rock ‘n’ roll originally represented. According to Miller, “. . . one might well wonder what, if anything, distinguished Presley’s new music from old-fashioned pop” and “In 1960, an honest answer might have been: very little.”⁴⁵³ Such antagonism toward supposed rock ‘n’ roll concessions to “mainstream” audiences seemed incongruent with what the musicians themselves sought—which was economic stability through mainstream exposure. Rock historians seemed more invested in preserving early rock ‘n’ roll as a cultish, rebellious imperative rather than confronting rock ‘n’ roll musicians’ motives, which could have included a desire to create art, but surely included a desire to make a

⁴⁵⁰ Szatmary, 52-3.

⁴⁵¹ Szatmary, 55-6 on Clark; 61-6 on Kirshner.

⁴⁵² Garofalo, 174.

⁴⁵³ Miller, 173.

living from music. Art and commerce are not contradictions, yet rock ‘n’ roll musicians seemed more intent on generating hits and profiting than staking an artistic claim. This was certainly true at least until the 60s when rock musicians became more self-conscious about creating “Art.”

Elvis’ supposed descent into “pop” via sentimental pop balladry and more formulaic material was a constant in rock histories fixated on Presley the rockabilly rebel and authentic white R&B singer. After Presley returned from the military he recorded more ballad-oriented material and acted in a series of execrable films aimed at capitalizing on his name and image. Gillett read his newfound soundtrack recordings as an abandonment of Presley’s roots. Referring to the custom written Leiber and Stoller film songs Presley popularized he noted, “. . .they allowed Presley to indulge his tendency to exaggerate the importance of his feelings and began his decline towards melodramatic popular songs, a decline that became ‘official’ when he recorded ‘It’s Now or Never’ in a pseudo-operatic style in 1960.”⁴⁵⁴ Melodrama then became coded as a negative, inauthentic behavior for rock ‘n’ rollers who went “pop.” Gillett continued noting, “The decline was in some ways the inevitable result of being uprooted from the culture that had produced his original style and of living in the limbo of Hollywood, Germany (during his army stint), and soft hotel rooms in between.”⁴⁵⁵ Gillett’s coded language suggested that Presley went “soft” via Europeanization and a move away from Southern virtue and masculine emotional authenticity to apparently “soft” Hollywood glamour and glitz. Also notable was the word “inevitable” which implied that growth and change among vital musicians was in danger of softening with time and exposure. It

⁴⁵⁴ Gillett, 55.

⁴⁵⁵ Ibid, 55.

is common knowledge that crooners such as Perry Como, Mario Lanza, and Dean Martin were important influences on Presley alongside R&B, country, and gospel.⁴⁵⁶ Thus it was not unsurprising that Presley recorded “sentimental” pop ballads alongside more “roots” material. But historians constantly lamented Presley’s pop-oriented performances and overlooked the “pop” aspect of his musical roots. Discussing Presley’s signing from Sun Records to major label RCA Garofalo recognized but barely accepted this fact stating, “This situation encouraged Presley to *indulge the pop tendencies* that had always been part of his musical aesthetic.”⁴⁵⁷ Garofalo and Miller detected an extraordinary amount of exuberance and vitality in some of Presley’s ballad performances but these felt like attempts to say Presley “salvaged” the pop material he sang by injecting a tinge of soul.⁴⁵⁸

At the heart of such cautious praise was an assumption that pop songs were synonymous with the sentimental and melodramatic, thus these characteristics existed outside of rock ‘n’ roll, and that pop songs must be redeemed by performers who can bring a hardness or rhythmic edge synonymous with “roots” music. Historians constantly made “pop” a dirty word by suggesting that sentimentality, melodrama and formula weren’t as much a part of rock ‘n’ roll and roots genres, such as country, as they were in pop. Yet singing is such a fundamentally emotive practice, and recording and concert performing are such repetitive and ritualistic practices that separating exaggeration, whether dramatic, emotive or camp seems oblivious and disingenuous.

⁴⁵⁶ See references to Presley and Dean Martin in the following: Guralnick, Peter. Last Train to Memphis: The Rise of Elvis Presley. Boston: Little Brown and Company, 1994. 132-3; Garofalo, 138; Miller 69.

⁴⁵⁷ Garofalo, 138; emphasis added.

⁴⁵⁸ Garofalo, 138; Miller, 173.

Many historians who have labored to separate rock 'n' roll from pop wielded feminized emotions as key separating factors. Yet such expressions—the dramatic, maudlin, over-the-top--were integral for supplying popular music with its accessibility and heart, otherwise country, jazz, gospel, R&B, pop etc. would have deterred audiences via sterility. Rock 'n' roll, which followed the lead of performers such as Johnnie Ray, provided an unprecedented space of emotional freedom which often allowed performers to transcend the gendered bounds of musical expression. The historical emphasis on Presley as a macho rock diplomat who ushered in rockabilly, white R&B, etc. overlooked the vulnerability his performances and songs signified. For example lesbian feminist identified scholar Sue Wise and gay writer/scholar John Gill have both challenged the narrowly macho version of Presley heterosexual male rock historians privileged.⁴⁵⁹ Further, Little Richard's intense falsettos, Buddy Holly's hiccups, etc. also suggested a feminine sentimentality and emotiveness more integral to rock aesthetics than the macho version of rock 'n' roll histories have suggested.

If the death of the Golden Age occurred as a result of pioneering rock 'n' rollers "abandoning" rock or perishing, which Presley's descent symbolized, the emergence of Brill Building pop and teen idols sealed the fate of rock 'n' roll as a diluted, respectable, mainstream commercial genre. In rock histories the emergence of so-called "schlock rock" was interesting because of historical perceptions of it as a conspiracy to kill rock and attempts to argue that formula, commercialism and exploitation were separate from rock 'n' roll. When Gillett argued that, "Among the most successful new companies

⁴⁵⁹ See p. 85-6 in Gill, John. Queer Noises: Male and Female Homosexuality in Twentieth Century Music. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995; Wise, Sue. "Sexing Elvis," in On the Record: Rock, Pop and the Written Word. Eds. Simon Frith and Andrew Goodwin. New York: Pantheon Books, 1990. 390-98.

were several formed by businessmen who shared the contemptuous attitude of some major label A&R men towards rock ‘n’ roll, whose producers had no background experience of the music from which rock ‘n’ roll drew and who simply handed it as a product like any previous form of popular music,”⁴⁶⁰ he overlooked several notable realities. First, as I noted in Chapter Two, record labels were more accurately understood as economic ventures aimed at capitalizing on trends than aesthetic beacons committed to particular genres. Gillett later acknowledged his oversimplification in the 1996 revised edition of Sound of the City in the Introduction, though the perspective of the book remained.⁴⁶¹ Thus it was simplistic to lionize independent labels and stigmatize major label-affiliated companies for treating commercial music as a business opportunity. Second, such a statement suggested that rock ‘n’ roll was a long established genre during the post 1958 decline, when in actuality its reign as a formal commercial genre was short-lived and aesthetically open to growth. Rock histories appeared adamant in sealing off rock ‘n’ roll’s possible range.

In a structural sense rock ‘n’ roll was more a part of the pop music continuum than a complete break so it seems unusual to expect it to operate differently from other commercial music genres. When Palmer argued that major labels, “rushed into a vacuum left by imploding careers and tragedy with a safer, sanitized pop-rock sound and a brace of manufactured teen idols”⁴⁶² this suggested a unique and conspiratorial campaign but in actuality such an approach was business-as-usual in the music industry. Independent labels focused on R&B and rock-and-roll less because of ideological and

⁴⁶⁰ Gillett, 67.

⁴⁶¹ Ibid, xiv.

⁴⁶² Palmer, 33.

aesthetic commitments than a desire to focus on such genres when it was evident they would sell. Further, when independent labels collaborated with larger labels for distribution they obviously sought mainstream exposure, perhaps with the hope that broader interest in rock ‘n’ roll could benefit them even if larger companies participated in the phenomenon.

The notion of teen pop as sanitized was interesting because rock ‘n’ roll historians were deeply invested in rock ‘n’ roll as dangerous, unsafe and even inaccessible. Such a minoritarian approach intended to imbue rock ‘n’ roll with a rebellious cachet linking rock to “roots” music forms. However, despite Garofalo’s argument that “From a musical point of view rock ‘n’ roll was a rather limited science that by then had been sufficiently absorbed into the collective unconscious that singers, songwriters, and producers with no particular feel for the music’s roots or subtleties could turn out commercially viable approximations,”⁴⁶³ rock ‘n’ roll was not roots music. Indeed many of the accusations historians aim toward teen pop/schlock rock are the very arguments blues and swing musicians have made toward rock ‘n’ roll that it is a simplified, formulaic variant of more complex and dynamic musical styles.⁴⁶⁴ The aesthetic and commercial foundation of rock ‘n’ roll as part of the commercial recording industry and as inherently based on recording rather than performing, unlike preceding genres, made rock ‘n’ roll’s “danger” a fleeting perception historians could latch on to but ultimately a neutral threat with limited revolutionary potential.

⁴⁶³ Garofalo, 160.

⁴⁶⁴ For example Jazz critic Will Friedwald who openly declares his hatred of rock ‘n’ roll and argues that rock ‘n’ roll is merely a narrower version of R&B, 373-4; Miller describes “jump” characteristics as simplified version of swing, 29.

Perhaps the greatest misconception was that rock 'n' rollers were not teen idols which contradicted the original audiences for the genre. If rock 'n' roll signified a generational divide, it was not clear how Frankie Avalon, the Shirelles, Connie Francis, etc. disrupted this. There was no clear proof that such performers ushered in an older audience to rock 'n' roll given these girl groups' and teen idols' historic location as teen favorites rather than "adult" music. As many critics pointed out, the Beatles, who emerged commercially in 1964 were one of the first rock acts to appeal to younger *and* older audiences and transcended the teen idol tag which was not necessarily true of rock 'n' roll's earliest pioneers.⁴⁶⁵ Perhaps it is more accurate to structure rock's history into late 50s to mid-60s teen-oriented music, rather than rock 'n' roll which implied a greater stylistic consistency than is accurate, and the mid-60s self-consciously artistic and experimental music which clearly had a broader appeal to multiple generations of audiences.

Rock historians' disdain toward teen idols raises the question of is rock 'n' roll defined by historians and critics or audiences? After all for millions of people Avalon, Darin, Francis, etc. do comprise their memories of rock, less as ideological rebellion than something apart from their perceptions of their parents' tastes and as something created with their interests in mind. If teens responded to Presley, Berry, etc. this did not make their tastes mutually exclusive from the teen idols who later emerged. Ultimately audiences are integral to defining what means rock 'n' roll/rock to them, historians and critics are ultimately devoted audience members with formal outlets for articulation, not necessarily the final voice of what comprises the genre.

⁴⁶⁵ Miller discusses commentators and cover stories on Beatles as sign that they are being taken seriously, 215-6.

The association of teen idols with the feminine-coded ritual of dancing and the symbolic presence of prominent female singers during the “schlock rock” era including Brenda Lee, Connie Francis and myriad girl groups were also notable elements of the era.⁴⁶⁶ The “. . .romantic lyrics and upbeat melodies for and about teenage girls”⁴⁶⁷ Brill Building songwriters created, represented a fresh moment in rock ‘n’ roll’s history. Rock ‘n’ roll’s early *recognized* pioneers were almost exclusively male, with the exception of underrepresented R&B singers such as Etta James, Ruth Brown, Lavern Baker and Tina Turner, who aside from Brown held minor spots in most rock histories.⁴⁶⁸ Rock historians consistently devalued female subjectivities in their coverage of the era. It is less practical to argue that female audiences were the exclusive audiences for female performers than to note how the “schlock rock” era added feminine expression to rock in unprecedented ways since the early 50s reign of the previously mentioned female R&B singers. Historians have essentially coded rock ‘n’ roll as male expression and dismissed the period when feminine taste, however narrowly conceived during the era, became relevant to rock ‘n’ roll.⁴⁶⁹ Connie Francis may not have generated Presley-like controversy, or any controversy but this does not diminish the identification she may have provided for listeners.⁴⁷⁰ If rock ‘n’ roll

⁴⁶⁶ Szatmary discusses girl groups, 66-7; Palmer, 35-6.

⁴⁶⁷ Szatmary, 61.

⁴⁶⁸ Garofalo notes rock ‘n’ roll’s initial elimination of women from the charts, 97; Frith and McRobbie notes this in p. 377 in Frith, Simon and Angela McRobbie. “Music and Sexuality.” On the Record: Rock, Pop and the Written Word. Eds. Simon Frith and Andrew Goodwin, eds. New York: Pantheon Books, 1990. 371-89.

⁴⁶⁹ Frith and McRobbie note how in rock histories, “The decline of rock ‘n’ roll rested on a process of ‘feminization,’ ” “Music and Sexuality,” 383.

⁴⁷⁰ Barbara Bradby comments on girl group songs as referring to boys but primarily addressing female audiences, on p. 366 in “Do-Talk and Don’t-Talk: The Division of the subject in Girl-Group Music.” On the Record: Rock, Pop and the Written Word.

represented a sea change in the music industry, the emergence of prominent female voices during the “schlock rock” era must be included because it added a dimension of gender inclusiveness the initial mid-50s rock revolution lacked. However, rather than recognizing how the inclusion of women in rock opened up the genre, the sentimental songs or fabricated images of female performers dominated historical accounts. The influx of female performers during the teen pop era should have made gender a significant factor in any attempt to historicize rock ‘n’ roll’s role in speaking to young America’s consciousness in the late 50s through the early 60s.

Further, though historians typically treat Ricky Nelson, Frankie Avalon, and Fabian as little more than good-looking imitations of Elvis without the musicality or threat, their “softness” may well have appealed to audiences much the way Liberace or Johnnie Ray did. Notably, such idols provided alternatives to the hypermasculine personas rock historians lionized. Further, Neil Sedaka, Paul Anka, and Bobby Darin, who rock historians and critics have sometimes dismissed, represented a hybrid of instincts that combined the romanticism of crooning with the production style of rock ‘n’ roll. They suggested attempts, however limited, to bridge traditional pop songcraft with formal and stylistic elements aimed at teenage tastes. Years later the influence of these transitional gestures surfaced in the spirit, if not the content, of folk-rockers and singer-songwriters comprised of young songwriting performers with an old-fashioned concern for craft who reached younger and older audiences. The generation of singer-songwriter teen pop performers focused more on bridging gaps between pre-rock musical sensibilities and rock ‘n’ roll rather than completely separating these eras which

troubled their place in history. Most rock histories essentially demonized teen idols as cultural traitors who represented the antithesis of rock because they offered a version of rock 'n' roll too light, polished and safe to adhere to rock 'n' roll as anti-pop, teen rebellion. Yet, despite efforts to section off "schlock rock," in terms of its actual resonance with teens it fits alongside early rock 'n' roll as music with a distinctly teenage appeal even if for different reasons.

Corporate Consolidation

Historians have attributed the "death" of the golden age of rock 'n' roll to major record companies' appropriation of the genre at the expense independents. There is however more nuance to rock 'n' roll's industrial history than major labels squeezing out independent labels. Rock 'n' roll made the recording industry a high stakes industry because records were cheaper to produce and there was a clearer target market than ever—teenagers or youth markets. Thus industry personnel at majors and indies sought their share from rock and related genres. The result of rock's commercial promise was a trend of consolidation which began in the late 50s and continues today. Rock 'n' roll gave birth to newfound potential for lucrativeness among record labels and the most enterprising of musicians. The corporate consolidation trend may have only indirectly influenced musicians' choices in the 60s and 70s. But it had direct benefits on the fortunes of musicians willing to risk their commercial appeal via retreating from industry pressures (Laura Nyro) or coming out as queer (Elton John).

The shift among major U. S. labels from autonomous entities to components of international corporate portfolios illustrated the evolving circumstances which provided an ironic economic and creative freedom for musicians aware of their potential worth

and power. The roots of the U. S. recording industry lied in the development of recording and playing technologies (gramophones and phonograph machines) by hardware companies who needed software to display their technologies.⁴⁷¹ Indeed the earliest U. S. record companies Columbia Records and RCA-Victor were offshoots of the Columbia Phonograph Company and The Victor Talking Machine Company formed in 1901 and purchased in 1929 by Radio Corporation of America.⁴⁷² Immediately prior to rock 'n' roll's commercial development in the 1950s there were six major record companies with independent distribution networks and creative staffs. Each grew out of major urban centers. These companies included the already established Columbia and RCA-Victor alongside U. S. Decca (f. 1932 in New York as U. S. branch of British label Decca), Capitol Records (f. 1942 in Hollywood), MGM Records (f. 1946 in Hollywood as division of the film company) and Mercury Records (f. 1946 in Chicago).⁴⁷³

Today, each of these labels, which have continually changed ownership since the 1950s, is owned by one of four international conglomerates which sell the majority of music sold in the world: Universal Music Group (UMG), Sony-BMG, Warner Brothers Music, and the EMI Group. The dawn of rock 'n' roll in the mid-50s and its prospective profits in the 1960s and 1970s solidified the genre's appeal to contemporary companies and manufacturers interested in the vast cross-promotional opportunities available to companies with record companies, film companies, song publishing rights, retail stores, etc. in their corporate stables.

⁴⁷¹ Frith, "The Industrialization of Popular Music," 57.

⁴⁷² Gillett, 53; Frith 56-7.

⁴⁷³ Gillett, 7.

By briefly tracing the path of the pre-rock major label companies we can understand the often fortuitous situation many musicians were in as rock's business potential developed over the decades. The complicated paths of the pre-rock major labels from independent labels to conglomerate holdings convey the essence of the consolidation trend. The abundance of consolidating activity from the early 1960s through the 70s and the interest of global companies from Japan, Germany and the United Kingdom in acquiring music properties indicated the particular importance of this period in redefining the industry's structure.

As musical biographer Philip Furia noted, when the U. K. based company Electric and Musical Industries' (EMI) music division purchased Capitol Records in 1955 it was significant because, "It was the first attempt by an international conglomerate to acquire an American record company and reflects how popular American music had become in England and Europe after World War II."⁴⁷⁴ He based this on music historian Russell Sanjek's estimation that American music accounted for one-third of Europe's recording purchases during the era.⁴⁷⁵ EMI music division was a part of Thorn-EMI a firm producing defense and medical equipment, lighting, electronic technology, among other services. In the 1990s the division expanded adding Chrysalis and Virgin Records as well as SBK and Filmtrax music publishing catalogs. Capitol Records is contemporarily referred to as EMI-Capitol.⁴⁷⁶ EMI has divisions in every major territory in the world and its U. S. labels currently include Angel Records,

⁴⁷⁴ See p. 204-5 in Furia, Phillip. Skylark: The Life and Times of Johnny Mercer. New York: St. Martin's Press, 2003.

⁴⁷⁵ See p. 244 in Sanjek, Russell. American Popular Music and Its Business. New York: Oxford University Press, 1988.

⁴⁷⁶ See p. 37-8 in Negus, Keith. Music Genres and Corporate Cultures. London: Routledge, 1999.

Astralwerks, Back Porch Records, Blue Note Records, Capitol Records, Capitol Nashville, EMI Latin, Narada, Priority Records, Virgin Records America, among numerous others.

The Universal Music Group (UMG) was formed in 1998 when Canadian beverage manufacturer Seagram, acquired PolyGram to form the largest record company in the world. Vivendi Universal, a merger of media empire Vivendi with Seagram is the parent corporation of UMG. UMG owns U. S. Decca, MGM and Mercury. Below is a condensed timeline of the three labels' ownership paths:

- 1961-MGM acquired Verve Records,
- 1962-Music Corporation of America Inc. (MCA) acquired U. S. Decca,
- 1972-PolyGram, a Dutch-German conglomerate which combined Polydor and Phonogram Records, acquired MGM,
- 1973-MCA Inc. renamed U. S. Decca as MCA Records,
- 1982-MGM Inc. and United Artists Corporation merged and MGM was discontinued,
- 1991-Japanese-based Matsushita Electric Industrial Company purchased MCA Inc.--owner of MCA Records, ABC Records, Chess Records, Geffen Records, and GRP Records,
- 1995-Beverage manufacturer Seagram acquired 80% of MCA Inc.,
- 1996-MCA Inc. renamed Universal Studios Inc. and the MCA Entertainment Group renamed Universal Music Group,
- 1998-Seagram acquired PolyGram (which owned Verve Records [formerly MGM; PolyGram purchased MGM; MGM purchased Verve in 1961; PolyGram bought MGM in 1972], Island Records, A&M Records, Motown Records, 60% of Def Jam Recordings, Rodven Records) and combines it to form Universal Music Group,
- 2004-UMG owns Island Def Jam Group, Interscope A&M Records, Geffen records, DreamWorks Records, Lost Highway Records, MCA Nashville, Mercury Nashville, Mercury Records, Polydor, Universal Motown Records Group, *Decca*, Deutsche Grammophon, Phillips, and the Verve Music Group.⁴⁷⁷

⁴⁷⁷ <http://new.umusic.com/History.aspx>

A slightly less convoluted path was the August 2004 merger of Sony Music Entertainment and Bertelsmann AG (BMG) into Sony-BMG. The merger shifted the already conglomerated ownership of RCA Records and Columbia Records to an even bigger conglomerate. Sony Music Entertainment, a division of Japanese hardware corporation Japanese Sony Corporation, purchased CBS records and Columbia/Tri-star pictures in 1988 and 1989, respectively. The move included the purchase of Columbia Records, and subsidiary labels Epic, Sony Classical and Sony Discos. In a broader sense the purchase enabled the company to create synergies between hardware and software such as promoting music in films and using recording artists to introduce technological and recording innovations.⁴⁷⁸ The Sony-BMG merger combined Sony labels-- Columbia Records, Epic, Sony Music Nashville, Sony Classical, and Sony Music international--with BMG labels Arista, J Records, RCA Records, RLG-Nashville, BMG UK, BMG Japan, and BMG Ricordi.⁴⁷⁹ BMG had previously purchased RCA Records in 1979 making it one of the few major labels to remain relatively stable undergoing only two corporate transfers.⁴⁸⁰

The final corporate music group among the dominant quartet was Warner Brothers Music which most clearly capitalized on new music trends in the 60s and 70s when it signed singer-songwriters, acid rockers and country-rock performers. Created in 1958 as a division of Warner Bros. Studios, Warner Brothers Records was part of Warner Communications until 1988 when Warner Communications and Time

⁴⁷⁸ Negus, 40-1.

⁴⁷⁹ <http://www.sonybmg.com/>

⁴⁸⁰ Negus, 38-9.

Incorporated merged to form Time-Warner Inc. in 1988.⁴⁸¹ Warner Brothers Music is now a subsidiary of America Online (AOL) Time-Warner, one of the largest media communications empires in the world. Warner Brothers Music distributes Atlantic, Elektra, Reprise, Rhino, Warner Bros., Nonesuch, WBR Nashville, WB Jazz, Maverick Word and Sire records, all labels formed after rock 'n' roll. Warner purchased Frank Sinatra's Reprise label in 1963; in 1973 it combined indie folk label Elektra, with David Geffen's label Asylum, and Atlantic Records in 1973 forming WEA.⁴⁸² Warner Communications also acquired publications such as Ms. and Mad magazines in the 1970s.⁴⁸³

The motivations for such acquisitions and mergers were money and power, but also an unprecedented potential the music industry offered. After WWII, there was a resurgence of independent record labels specializing in outsider genres such as R&B. Some of the more notable of these include New York's Atlantic Records, Chicago's Chess Records and Sun Records, of Memphis. During rock 'n' roll's golden age rock grew from a recording phenomenon to a multi-media cultural style with appeal on TV variety shows and on film.⁴⁸⁴ From 1955-9 record industry revenues which had increased by 30% to \$277 million in 1955 rapidly expanded to \$377 million in 1956, \$460 million in 1957 and \$603 million by 1959.⁴⁸⁵ During this period the apparent divide between major labels and independent labels dissolved in the rock era because major labels began rapidly absorbing smaller labels to increase their market share and

⁴⁸¹ Ibid, 39-40.

⁴⁸² Gillett, 290.

⁴⁸³ Garofalo, 241-2.

⁴⁸⁴ Gillett, 206.

⁴⁸⁵ Frith, 66.

tap into specialty markets (i.e. rock 'n' roll, country, R&B) One of the results of the 1964 British invasion, which further unleashed teenage spending with popular acts like the Beatles and Rolling Stones, was the explicit globalization of rock. During the 1963-4 "British Invasion" British labels gained a more prominent role than ever on the record charts indicating a broad scope for American rock and R&B.⁴⁸⁶ In an effort to compete and avoid missing out on another phenomenon U. S. record companies rapidly signed promising musicians including folk-rockers and acid rock performers. As Gillett noted, ". . . the leading underground bands all signed direct to major record companies, enabling those companies to reinforce their hold on the American record industry and effectively drive out virtually all the indie companies."⁴⁸⁷

Thus in the 1960s the U. S. recording industry established divisions in London to gain distribution rights for new acts with immense appeal and profit potential. In 1967 the industry reached one billion dollars, by 1973 this doubled, and in 1978 revenues doubled to four billion.⁴⁸⁸ Industry consolidation from independently operated major labels and smaller labels with local, regional and national distribution to large conglomerates with international distribution was uniquely relevant for rock era performers. Globalization ushered in a new era of concentrated potential--for profit and failure.

By the early 70s the music industry, booming from the acid rock and the singer songwriter phenomenon was a two billion dollar-industry with serious investment

⁴⁸⁶ Gillett, 280-3.

⁴⁸⁷ Gillett, 377.

⁴⁸⁸ Frith, 67.

potential outside industries capitalized on.⁴⁸⁹ Thus the late 60s and 70s era of what Garofalo termed “Merger Mania” began wherein large corporations purchased indies and/or major record labels. Consolidation grew more sophisticated and strategic in the 70s through the present as companies sought out record companies because of cross-promotional opportunities to promote new technology and the commercial arts. Thus, Dutch electronics company Phillips purchased Mercury and MGM, which UMG now owns.⁴⁹⁰ MCA Inc. already owned Universal Films and TV stations, among other businesses; RCA owned NBC-TV and radio, and book publishers including Random House and Alfred Knopf.⁴⁹¹ As I noted in Chapter One in the late 70s four companies comprised ~ 50% of records and tapes sold. Of these, CBS and Warner controlled about 40%.⁴⁹²

The changing corporate structure was less a death of the industry than an expansion or even a rebirth of the music industry which made rock ‘n’ roll a global industry. The shifts toward consolidation offered a unique opportunity for popular musicians, which was the freedom to take unprecedented risks. For example when Elton John became the first major rock star to come out as bisexual in 1976 in Rolling Stone,⁴⁹³ John, the most popular singer of the decade at that time had the freedom to take such a risk because his worth as a commodity was solidified. In June 1974 when John re-signed with MCA for the U.S. and Canada for a five album contract he signed

⁴⁸⁹ Garofalo, 240; Szatmary, 219.

⁴⁹⁰ Garofalo, 241.

⁴⁹¹ Szatmary, 219.

⁴⁹² Garofalo, 242; Szatmary, 219; Stokes, “The Mid-70s.” Rock of Ages, 521.

⁴⁹³ Jahr, Cliff. “Elton John: It’s Lonely at the Top,” Rolling Stone, 7 October 1976. 17.

what was reportedly for the largest sum paid to a recording artist at that time.⁴⁹⁴ 1974 and 1975 saw the release of the chart-topping Elton John's Greatest Hits and Captain Fantastic and the Dirty Brown Cowboy, the first album to debut at number one on the album charts.⁴⁹⁵ Given his already immense sales and record-breaking contract John was in a position where he could take risks, possibly lose his career and still live comfortably beyond the moment. His 1976 “coming out” as bisexual was a personal decision but the music industry’s structure fostered the commercial risk of coming out when he did. A similar parallel can be found in Laura Nyro’s career decision which I highlight below in my discussion of the singer-songwriter era and the album era. Of course Elton John was hardly the typical singer of the 70s given his immense commercial success but evidence would suggest that as the music industry changed its ability to profit from musicians grew savvier about securing appropriate payment for their work. The Nyro scenario I describe below and the reinvigorated R&B artists of the 1950s who sought proper royalty payments in the 1980s are examples of a growing awareness among musicians, fostered by the industry’s growth, that rock’s role as a global commodity meant musicians were entitled to demand due compensation.

The Death of Soul

If rock and roll was a more streamlined version of R&B it was unsurprising that one of the consistent narratives of rock and roll history was that R&B music and its late 50s-late 60s offshoot, soul music, died alongside rock and roll evidenced by lush

⁴⁹⁴ See p. 273 in Norman, Philip. Sir Elton: The Definitive Biography of Elton John. London: Sidgwick & Jackson, 2000.

⁴⁹⁵ *Ibid*, 286, 293-4.

R&B in the 70s and the advent of disco. In historians and critics' efforts to promote rock and roll as racial liberation soul music became synonymous with the most authentic and politically symbolic black expression. Such beliefs have led many to overstate soul music's commercial and political impact. Though soul musicians reached many major artistic and commercial heights, British rockers such as the Beatles, the Rolling Stones, and Herman's Hermits, teen idols such as the Four Seasons and Brenda Lee and pop/R&B crossover acts such as Dionne Warwick and Motown acts were more commercially dominant than soul music, which spawned a limited number of major crossover hits. For example according to the Billboard Book of Top 40 Hits of the top 25 singles artists of the 1960s, only four, Ray Charles (#7), James Brown (#16), Sam Cooke (#19), and Aretha Franklin (#20) non-Motown soul-oriented acts made the list.⁴⁹⁶ It is important to remember that throughout most of the decade, singles were more a measure of success than albums, which gradually gained dominance in the late 60s and early 70s. Though some of these acts recorded in the South none recorded for the Memphis label synonymous with soul, Stax/Volt. The Supremes, Marvin Gaye, The Temptations, The Miracles and Stevie Wonder, also placed in the top 25 but most of these acts were aimed at a pop teenage audience, in keeping with Motown's mission, and none resemble the soul music sound synonymous with performers such as Franklin, Brown and Otis Redding. That more hybridized pop/R&B acts had the broadest crossover success spoke to the somewhat limited commercial crossover appeal "gritty" soul music had at pop radio and for many listeners and consumers. My argument is that critics' admiration for soul music has caused them to over-determine its overall impact

⁴⁹⁶ See p. 819 in Whitburn, Joel. The Billboard Book of Top 40 Hits. 7th ed. New York: Billboard Books, 2000.

and to overlook the notion that hybridized acts represented another facet of black music no less authentic or representative than soul music. Further to represent or suggest the crossover of black music as a sign of a predominantly white nation willing to embrace black assimilationist or liberationist politics was simplistic given the nation's historic willingness to simultaneously embrace black entertainment but reject racial equality.

Critics' essentialized investment in soul music as the primary form of authentic black expression and a symbol of broadening racial acceptance confined their perceptions of the sound and function of black popular music. Just as rock and roll was supposed to represent rebellion against a white, mainstream, sentimental, feminized culture in some pure form, black music was supposed to adhere to certain sounds and images to remain true to form. However the expansion and refinement of 70s R&B, including more lush arrangements, softer rhythms, a greater number of concept albums and more sophisticated, upscale, fashion conscious images of performers was an affront to such narrow perceptions of how blackness could be expressed.

The so-called "descent" of R&B into disco, ushered in a new musical variant on R&B and funk music with an unusual sociological mélange of gay men, women and ethnic minorities congregating in underground clubs. Initially, disco's most famous singers were black women and its prime audience was gay men in urban areas. In this state disco went virtually unnoticed. However when disco eventually crossed over to the mainstream largely through the commercial film and music industry synergies of Saturday Night Fever disco became a threatening to the social order of rock. The combination of yet another form of R&B with social roots in communities of social outsiders was new for rock music and predictably many rock critics, historians and fans

stigmatized the genre as musically limited, culturally decadent and antithetical to rock and R&B. Disco represented the ultimate dilution and transgression to those with conservative definitions of what rock and R&B music should sound and look like. Critics tended to view the racism, homophobia and sexism many directed toward disco culture as remarkable. But in many ways critical attitudes toward the genre simply brought such dormant assumptions to the surface, which indicated many troubling assumptions about the racial, sexual and gender expressions acceptable and permissible in the economies of rock music. I explore 60s soul music's commercial impact, soul/R&B's transition into the 70s and its role in the emergence of disco.

The Commercial Role of Soul

Rock historians have often overstated the commercial and cultural impact of soul music in America reveling in a symbolism not supported by facts. Szatmary quoted critic Jon Landau's declaration that 1967 was "the year in which 'soul' became the popular music of America"⁴⁹⁷ and he declared that by the end of the 60s "soul had become the music of white America."⁴⁹⁸ What Szatmary overlooked was that only a handful of "soul" songs actually crossed over commercially to the broad (white) audience. Further, by the mid-to-late 60s *albums* not singles were the greatest markers of artistic achievement in rock and were more profitable. During the late 60s white rock artists, many of who had R&B roots regularly topped the pop album charts. But soul music acts were generally confined to the singles chart limiting the accuracy of soul as a broad commercial phenomenon.

⁴⁹⁷ Qtd. in Szatmary, 169.

⁴⁹⁸ Szatmary, 171.

The historical assertion that soul music was America's preeminent music between the mid-60s through the late 60s was a questionable premise. For example, based on the types of singles and albums which reached number one in Billboard between 1964-9, there were no clear signs of soul music consistently crossing over. In fact, aside from Motown singers the presence of "soul" singers topping the charts was quite limited. If anything British rock and Motown were the dominant sounds of the era. From 1964-9 five hits by non-Motown black artists fitting the "soul" genre reach number one including the following:

"When a Man Loves a Woman" by Percy Sledge-(1966),
 "Respect" by Aretha Franklin (1967),
 "(Sittin' On) the Dock of the Bay," Otis Redding (1968),
 "Tighten Up" by Archie Bell and the Drells (1968) and,
 "Everyday People," Sly and the Family Stone (1969)

There were six number one hits by non-Motown black acts during the period including the following:

"Hello Dolly," by Louis Armstrong (1964),
 "Chapel of Love," by the Dixie Cups (1964),
 "Grazing in the Grass," by Hugh Masekela (1968),
 "Aquarius/Let the Sunshine In (The Flesh Fails)," by the Fifth Dimension (1969),
 "Get Back," by The Beatles w/ Billy Preston (1969) and,
 "Wedding Bell Blues," by the Fifth Dimension (1969).⁴⁹⁹

Thus 11 of the 123 songs to hit number one during the soul era were by non-Motown black musicians and only five adhered to general characteristics of 60s soul music.⁵⁰⁰ Interestingly during the 60s the R&B charts, traditionally the province of black musicians disappeared from 1964-6 which lent the illusion of cultural integration. The chart revision did not account for the numerous black "soul" musicians who did

⁴⁹⁹Bronson, The Billboard Book of Number One Hits: Revised and Updated 4th edition.
 4th ed.

⁵⁰⁰ Motown produced 18 number one hits from 1964-9, *ibid.*

not and probably could not crossover to the broader pop charts perhaps for the very reasons historians attribute to soul music's supposed commercial embrace—the singing, arrangements, images, etc. were too “ethnic,” “aggressive” or “militant” to appeal to broad audiences.

The albums or LPs charts also revealed a limited commercial interest in album-length explorations of the soul aesthetic. From 1964-9 only five black musicians had number one albums/LPs out of 54 number one albums/LPs. Three of the five were by Motown artists. The number one albums/LPs included the following:

Hello Dolly!, by Louis Armstrong (1964)
Supremes A' Go-Go, by The Supremes (1966),
Diana Ross and the Supremes Greatest Hits, by Diana Ross and the Supremes (1967)
Electric Ladyland, by Jimi Hendrix (1968) and,
TCB, by Diana Ross and the Supremes with the Temptations (1969)⁵⁰¹

Though charts were only one way to measure popularity, and did not account for every listener or potential buyer, they were accurate indicators of broad trends and usually reflected recordings' appeal to wide cross-sections of record buyers. The truth is that the 1964-9 soul era was commercially a genre with primary appeal to the black audiences who usually purchased music by black musicians rather than a genre that substantially crossed over. Such an interpretation does not diminish the possibility or reality that many white Americans may have warmed up to “soul” music but suggests

⁵⁰¹ Rosen, Craig. The Billboard Book of Number One Albums. New York: Billboard Books, 1996. During the 70s album sales for black musicians were not much better. Isaac Hayes, Sly and the Family Stone, Roberta Flack, Curtis Mayfield, War, Diana Ross, Steve Wonder (2), Barry White, the Ohio Players, Earth Wind and Fire, the Isley Brothers, George Benson and Donna Summer (2) were the only black musicians or mixed race music groups to release number one albums, with 15 total.

that music consumption is a flawed and unreliable way to assess such consciousness shifts. Further, few critics addressed the actual *political* concerns of Black Power positing the increased visibility of a handful of artists and white Americans purchasing soul records as an indication that blacks were gaining social and economic power. Such changes were not evident in the music industry itself, dominated by white men in positions of distribution, management and promotion, and did not extend to the broader black populace.

Death of Rhythm and Blues

The critical overstatements of soul's crossover appeal raises important questions about what stylistic elements comprise so-called "authentic" black pop among rock critics and historians. Most historians defined R&B as the musical basis for rock 'n' roll. Many of the criticisms critics leveled at rock 'n' roll define it as a slicker and simplified version of roots music styles. R&B was also a narrower version of blues and jazz, more structured and dependent on riffs and catchy choruses than it is rooted in improvisation. In the 1960s Motown provided perhaps the most slick, formulaic and accessible version of R&B music appealing to broad audiences in terms of race, gender and geography. As Motown gained commercial prominence Southern-style soul redefined the sounds of 60s black music by adding an intensity more reminiscent of gospel and blues than commercial R&B and Motown. However, as soul and R&B music transitioned into the 1970s and ushered in lush sounds and more album-oriented productions many historians believed soul music died. Similar to rock 'n' roll, historians associated soul's death with capitalist exploitation and a softening of the

genre. Another dimension was racialized assumptions about what topics and musical approaches comprised “authentic” black expression.⁵⁰²

In the mid-to-late 50s and early 60s, Gillett argued that R&B singing was already on the decline. The first example of this is his critique of late 50s and early 60s gospel-styled singers singing country and western material whom he viewed as, “. . . exploiting the sweet and sentimental aspects of both musical cultures, seeking to entertain and not to express themselves.” Based on his definition sweet and sentimental were the antitheses of genuine expression. He also critiqued eclectic, pioneering “soul” singer Ray Charles who reached his commercial peak in the early 60s. According to Gillett, “From 1962, Ray Charles degenerated, a musical decline closely matching that of Elvis Presley. Charles applied his style to anything, inevitably adjusting himself to awkward material, losing contact with the cultural roots that had inspired his style.”⁵⁰³ Charles’ explorations of country and pop were apparently inauthentic diversions from his “true” musical self which was tied to gospel and blues-oriented singing. Such narrow observations suggested that sentimentality, an aspect rock historians rarely unpacked, was inherently debased, insincere and perfunctory. Thus such a mode is shallow entertainment rather than challenging or engaging art.

Gillett’s observation also tied to a larger trend among rock historians and critics which was the assumption that black performers were defined by an essence, usually

⁵⁰² I recognize that there are clearly musical forms with historic origins in specific African-American cultural contexts, such as gospel and blues genres. I also acknowledge their resonance and affective ties with particular audiences. However I am arguing against critical attempts to confine African-American musicians to a limited range of genre and stylistic approaches/conventions. Brian Ward discusses similar concerns on p. 12 of Just My Soul Responding.

⁵⁰³ Gillett, 203.

connected to gospel and blues roots that they should maintain and leave other types of expression such as pop, country, etc. to other performers. Miller noted the separation of blacks and whites in the late 60s music industry where, “rock and roll had become . . . either real ‘White Negro’ music—that is music made by whites (like Janis Joplin) trying to sound ‘black’—or just plain white music.”⁵⁰⁴ The 60s may have unified cultural and musical strands, such as British blues-rock bands performing blues classics, but the separation of blacks and whites into separate spheres, of soul and rock were almost taken-for-granted patterns historians barely discussed.⁵⁰⁵

Such essentialized perceptions of so-called “black singing” histories often failed to address have simplified the range of expressions black performers sought to express. Shifts in 1970s R&B and soul singing were particular targets of historians and critics both for a new emphasis on lushness and danceable rhythms and the shift toward disco. According to Garofalo in the 1970s, “Soul music had not disappeared completely; instead social forces altered its character,” and “As radicalism in the black community was repressed . . . there was a fleeting attempt to use the music industry as a proving ground for black capitalism, which was then pushed as an alternative to urban violence.” Many historians linked the curbing of 1970s black power politics with a softening of black music. Garofalo referred to this when he noted, “If there was a dominant black sound that reflected the seemingly quieter mood of the early 1970s, it was Philadelphia soft soul, which was pioneered by the writer-producer team of Kenny Gamble and Leon Huff and producer-arranger Thom Bell who joined forces with Sigma

⁵⁰⁴ Miller, 269.

⁵⁰⁵ Palmer at least describes the growing stylistic differences between rock and roll and rhythm and blues and notes the racial context from which soul emerges, 83.

Sound Studios.”⁵⁰⁶ The notion that the 1970s was quiet, soft and mellow for blacks belied much 70s political organizing. It also was a simplistic leap in that much of the shift in black music was attributable to industrial shifts as political ones. Lush, romantic black music was always present even amidst political crises, yet the focus on Philly Soul etc. purported a dichotomy between political music and hedonistic music, once again simplifying the political and cultural landscape of black culture. Though it was economical to focus on black culture as heavily politicized in the 60s to suggest that most black 60s music is tied to “black power” or that most 70s music was inherently devoid of political content and detached from mainstream black life is an interpretation lacking in nuance and complexity. Such arguments seemed rooted in the association of popularity with artistic compromise i.e. sentimentality, romance, dance rhythms etc.

The interpretation of 70s black music as inherently compromised was largely rooted in the valorizing of roots culture, synonymous with Southern purity, and a lament toward the commercial decline of Southern soul. The decline led many historians to comment that after Stax goes bankrupt and Memphis soul singer Al Green switched from secular music to gospel, among other events, “there could be no doubt that the soul era was over.”⁵⁰⁷ Complementing this reading Garofalo noted, “If Philadelphia soul had supplanted its rougher southern variant, it was also clear that the heyday of vintage Motown had ended.”⁵⁰⁸ Thus Motown’s corporate shift to Los Angeles and expansion into film became synonymous with blacks desperately chasing capitalism and compromising “roots” by immersing themselves in Hollywood entertainment culture.

⁵⁰⁶ Garofalo, 258.

⁵⁰⁷ Palmer, 97.

⁵⁰⁸ Garofalo, 261.

One of the more dubious legacies historians attributed to 70s soft soul was its foundation for disco, among the more critically maligned genres in rock histories. Referring to the early 70s Garofalo noted, “Alongside soundtracks two events foster early 70s increased presence on singles charts: the emergence of a number of African American artists as album-oriented acts and the popularization of softer soul sounds that would provide one of the building blocks for disco.”⁵⁰⁹ For many critics and historians slicker 70s soul was guilty-by-association in its role as stylistic forerunner of disco.

Disco: Cultural Thriller or Soul Killer?

Disco was one of the main 70s musical developments rock critics attest to the decline of rock ‘n’ roll’s cultural vitality. The three chief criticisms of disco were that it was formulaic and producer driven, made the audience rather than performers the stars and as a cultural milieu heavily associated with hedonism, fashion, and overt sexuality was a sign of 70s “excess.”

Tom Smucker’s comment that, “no pop music scene has been as directly or openly shaped by gay taste before” was useful for understanding disco’s sociological origins among gay communities before it was mainstreamed.⁵¹⁰ However, his description was not fully satisfying. Smucker’s comment imagined a monolithic, essential view of gay taste and expression. Why was disco any more “gay” than broadly popular performers like Liberace or Dusty Springfield? The notion of a quintessential gay sensibility was often too narrow to capture the scope of the ways queer people communicated and signified. An additional limitation of Smucker’s observation was

⁵⁰⁹ Ibid, 258

⁵¹⁰ Smucker, 570.

that other examples of queer music, such as women's music (which I discuss in Chapter Eight) are invisible. It is worth noting that only one canonical history, Garofalo, acknowledged the lesbian-feminist based genre which offered a very different version of queer music and community than disco.⁵¹¹ In rock history gay music became so identified with dancing, hedonism and fashion that it became the automatic signifier of what was gay--something trendy, formulaic, artificial and ephemeral. Such notions made it easy to essentially erase confine queer musicians and audiences in rock to the 1970s outside of an aberration like Little Richard.

Even more alarming were historians and critics who conflated so-called 70s excess with the increased presence of gay men in the public sphere. Despite Szatmary's claim that disco clubs, "provided a focal point for gay liberation," he offered no evidence to support such an outrageous claim.⁵¹² Though dancing and the opening of the public sphere to vaguely gay-related popular culture was a type of liberation it must be understood as a separate development from 70s gay activism a distinction Szatmary never made. By never addressing actual political efforts such as anti-discrimination laws his reductionist logic distorted the genuine complexity of gay male life in the 1970s. It is also significant to note the invisibility of lesbians in his discussion, despite women's music.

Further, Szatmary cast a wide net in specifically defining gay male sexuality as a symbol of excess. Rather than framing sexuality as an ongoing set of desires and practices homosexuality suddenly appeared in the 1970s. Szatmary offered no clear comparative proof that gay men had more sex during the 1970s than any previous era.

⁵¹¹ Garofalo, 273-7.

⁵¹² Szatmary, 217, 208.

He almost seemed to rely on hearsay and “common sense” perceptions of gay male sexuality rather than any evidence of altered sexual habits from previous eras. Szatmary did list one Institute for Sex Research study to note the supposed sexual habits of gay men during the late 1970s. Besides the lack of a full citation or any sense of the size of the sample he nonetheless reproduced findings which made claims about everything from the percentage of men who have sex with strangers to the number of partners gay men had. My argument here is that one study cannot even begin to represent the behavior of a whole group, promiscuity is ostensibly a trait of *all* sexual orientations and finally, the logic undergirding his argument, which essentially attempted to define gay male sexuality as inherently “excessive” thus easily grouped as a part of a broader culture increasingly leaning toward drug use, freewheeling sex (singles industries, wife swapping, free sex clubs), and hedonism, is deeply homophobic.⁵¹³

Szatmary was not alone in his conflation of disco, gay male sexuality and excess. Martha Bayles’ discussion of disco was even more explicit than Szatmary’s veiled contempt when she wrote:

For the heyday of disco was also the heyday of recklessness in the gay male life-style. Gay men did not invent the gleeful promiscuity of the 1970s, and in recent years many have rejected it in favor of a moderation more suited to the plague years of AIDS. Still, it cannot be denied that the late 1970s were when gay sexual behavior was at its most ‘liberated.’ Nor can it be denied that many gay men saw disco as the theme music of their collective orgy with the attitude that straights

⁵¹³ Ibid, 208-9.

weren't really at the party . . . pounding, monotonous rhythm that carries sexual feeling to dehumanized extremes.⁵¹⁴

Besides the problematic assumptions here, such as the notion of gays as living “lifestyles” rather than lives, gay male lives defined by collective orgies rather than mundane living, and gay men as exclusionary elitists, what was most striking about such language was the way it reflected broader social attempts to define gay male sexuality as monochromatic, incendiary, and inhumane. Given such attitudes from critics and historians it is hard to separate them from rock audiences who felt threatened by disco, iconically the domain of black female singers (i.e. Gloria Gaynor, Donna Summer, Thelma Houston, Diana Ross) and supportive gay men, because it was a popular trend outside of traditional of white, straight male taste cultures. The “Disco Sucks” (note the verb) cultural backlash among such audiences was detectable in the writing of many rock historians who seemed opposed to the genre for reasons other than music.⁵¹⁵ Walter Hughes effectively noted this with his observation that, “The intensity of this hostility and its peculiar rhetoric result, I would like to argue from the enduring association of disco with make homosexuality . . . critiques of disco implicitly echo homophobic accounts of a simultaneously emerging urban gay male minority: disco is ‘mindless,’ ‘repetitive,’ ‘synthetic,’ ‘technological,’ and ‘commercial,’ just as the men

⁵¹⁴ Bayles, 281.

⁵¹⁵ Garofalo 347-8 and Tucker, Ken. “Outsider Art: Disco and Funk.” Rock of Ages, 532 describe the Comiskey Park anti-disco rally.

who dance to it with each other are ‘unnatural,’ ‘trivial,’ ‘decadent,’ ‘artificial’ and ‘indistinguishable’ ‘clones.’”⁵¹⁶

The reality many critics did not address was the social context and role of disco. As a musical genre and cultural scene disco emerged in the post-Stonewall era when police public harassment of queer social spaces was steadily declining.⁵¹⁷ Though arrests for public sex and solicitation continued, disco was a relatively safe space where gay men, and often women, could dance together, socialize, and engage in overt culture-building to an unprecedented degree in America. With the opening up of public space came possibilities for social, sexual and emotional bonding among queer men, absent from and/or stigmatized by mass culture. Critics who pointed to gay male sexual promiscuity in urban disco scenes used it as an indication of disco’s role in a depraved culture. However, such critics never engaged with the climate of sexual shame and repression many queer men of the era had experienced. Acknowledging these factors required one to acknowledge inequities in how the culture discussed sexuality, the fundamentally potent nature of sexual desire and the material impact of homophobia. For many queer men the public emergence of accessible queer social scenes fostered abundant sexual exploration. The relationship between such explorations and the AIDS epidemic was not as finite or single-stranded as some have argued. Critics who have used disco to make a point about queer sexualities must acknowledge the context which fostered such palatable but flawed equations of sex with stigma, shame and immorality.

⁵¹⁶ See p. 147 in Hughes, Walter. “In the Empire of the Beat: Discipline and Disco” in Microphone Fiends: Youth Music & Youth Culture. Eds. Andrew Ross & Tricia Ross. New York: Routledge, 147-56.

⁵¹⁷ According to McGarry and Wasserman, “The seventies witnessed a boom in gay male dance clubs. Same-sex dancing was no longer illegal, as it had been in the pre-Stonewall era, and clubs flourished,” 95-6.

The Death of Acid Rock

R&B and rock 'n' roll and were the most well-established forms of contemporary music rock historians typically focused on. However, many rock historians embraced acid rock because its performers acknowledged rock and blues-oriented music as their roots but asserted a quasi-spiritual and political dimension to their music. Acid rockers were among the first rock performers to identify as revolutionaries and philosophers as well as musicians. The emergence of acid rock and the progressive youth culture which spawned it is sometimes lamented by rock historians as a utopia eventually corrupted by commercialism. However, commercialization exposed a wider range of people to hippie expression and acid rockers, hippies, etc. and shifted it from the underground to the mainstream. Further the movement's musicians willingly participated in their commodification which negates the accusation that corporations corrupted their art. A flair for the commercial seems integral to the aesthetics of acid rock and hippiedom. The cultural shift toward more mellow music, conservative politics and cultural hedonism in America from the late 60s to the early 70s seems more representative of the cyclical nature of cultural forms, politics and social behaviors than the mere result of corporate corruption. The commercial embrace of romantic pop in the 70s simply reflected an ongoing taste for romantic music among the record buying public and the shift among singer-songwriters toward more questioning, introspective music was progressive because it continued to expand the range of rock to include more mature themes, even if much of it was not as

explicitly political as 60s protest rock. The next section discusses the commercialization of late 60s acid rock and commercial embrace of soft rock in the 70s.

“Pop music went on, but, having lost its communal vision, the genre became ethereal, self-indulgent, and personal.”- Durwood Ball⁵¹⁸

Where Have All The Revolutionaries Gone?

In the early-to-mid-60s “genuine” rock ‘n’ roll rebounded and expanded from “schlock rock” when the Beatles and Bob Dylan expanded rock ‘n’ roll into rock, a more sophisticated and complex variant of rock ‘n’ roll but with the same overall spirit. One of the cultural shifts that complemented the 60s rock spirit was a revolutionary ethos which crystallized into the late 60s hippie scene overlapping with student protest movements centered on war and human rights issues. Rock histories typically detailed the formation of hippie communes and outlined their overall ideology. But inevitably the youthful hippie spirit, which appeared as a beacon of hope, died as a result of commodification and ultimately cultural cynicism. The 70s embrace of “softer” music became a cultural indicator of failed revolution, selfishness and death.

Historians usually accused the commodifying music industry as the first blow to the hippie revolution. The 1967 Human Be-In and the Monterey Pop Festival were pivotal events in the commercial assault on hippiedom. Historians tended to describe the commercialization of hippie life as though hippies, including musicians, were not

⁵¹⁸ See p. 294 in Ball, Durwood. “Popular Music” in The Columbia Guide to America in the 1960s. David Farber and Beth Bailey, eds. Columbia University Press, 2001. 288-95.

willing participants in the commercializing and profiteering of their lifestyles and beliefs. According to Garofalo, “The commercial possibilities of the counterculture became apparent when the first Human Be-In Festival drew some 20,000 fans to San Francisco’s Golden Gate Park in the spring of 1967.” From this moment, “Almost immediately, some hip capitalist rock entrepreneurs from Los Angeles hoping to produce a profit-making festival along the same lines booked the Monterey fairgrounds for the weekend of June 16 through 18.”⁵¹⁹ The resultant event, “. . . pointed the way for all others. The event was patronized by the ‘hip-eoisie’ of the counterculture and by the elite of the recording industry, both of whom took it extremely seriously.”⁵²⁰ Garofalo’s tone was inflected by disdain and incredulity toward outsiders attempting to cash-in on the promising youth culture. Miller complemented when he noted, “On one level the pop festival was, as advertised, a latter-day Be-In, a gathering of the new hippie tribes and some of their favorite bands. But on another level, Monterey Pop was an unusual, and brilliantly orchestrated, new kind of rock talent showcase.”⁵²¹ He noted that, “. . . Monterey Pop marked the arrival of rock and roll as a mature form of show business.”⁵²² and “Above all, Monterey Pop accelerated the integration of even the hardest rock and roll into the mainstream of the global music business.”⁵²³ Again, decline of a subculture tied to its so-called mainstreaming.

When historians equated popularization with inevitable decline they posited musicians as passive victims rather than active participants in the co-opting of their

⁵¹⁹ Garofalo, 222.

⁵²⁰ Ibid, 223.

⁵²¹ Miller, 269.

⁵²² Ibid, 269.

⁵²³ Ibid, 270.

cultural expression. Further, it was never explicitly clear that hippies actively protested such commercial invasions nor were any direct links made between how commercializing acid rock, etc. inspired their commercial and artistic decline. The signing of hippie/acid rock bands should have provided such bands more resources and the opportunity to spread their revolutionary beliefs to larger audiences. But when the genres began to lose commercial appeal historians usually addressed the decline as the fallout of capitalist expansion and a reflection of cultural cynicism. Interestingly, an examination of internal hippie cynicism was limited to the infamous wave of rock deaths in the late 60s including Janis Joplin, Jimmy Hendrix, Jim Morrison, etc. Yet the quality of their lives reflected their individual experiences and was not inherently symbolic of the death of a “generation.” Numerous hippie bands continued in various forms, including Jefferson Airplane, Santana, etc. so such interpretations of the death to idealism reflected the biases of historians fixated on a moment and perhaps identifying with hippies rather than a clear-eyed assessment of the 60s generation.

Historians and critics sometimes framed the decline of hippie rock as a component of the early 70s “Cooling of America.” For example in response to Time’s February 1971 “Cooling of America” issue, prominent 70s rock critic Jon Landau wrote:

. . . it is believed that people have tired of the excessively loud brand of rock and are therefore to turning to new ‘soft sound’ typified by the music of James Taylor and Neil Young. It is an idea that has been repeated more than

once in these and other pages and it has proven to be something of an over-simplification.

Over-simplified or not it is having impact. Last week Time ran a cover story, ‘The Cooling of America,’ which maintained that this musical mellowing is but a reflection of general mellowing of America’s young people, and that we are already in a period of new-found tranquility and calm. There mistake is in believing that the ‘cooling’ will last when it is merely the clam before the storm, just as the soft sound is a but a musical clam lying between the extreme of the immediate past and a new extreme, yet to be defined lying in the future. The apocalypse is not over yet.⁵²⁴

The fact that Landau assured his readers life will go on, however humorous, spoke to a generational fear that if rock was fundamentally about rebellion what would come of it if the tone and content of the genre changed or expanded? The musical “cooling” was symbolized by the influx of softer, less political pop music which prominently entered the musical mainstream in the form of singer-songwriters (James Taylor, Carly Simon) and soft-rock singers (Carpenters, Bread, Anne Murray) more reminiscent of pre-rock pop than rock in tone.⁵²⁵ Though historians tended to lump these soft-rock performers together and dismiss it as commercial pop, its prominence suggested several things. First, there were other voices of the 60s or rock generation, who enjoyed and created pop. Second, the market for music aimed at youth and adults

⁵²⁴ See p. 213 in Landau, Jon. It’s Too Late to Stop Now: A Rock and Roll Journal. San Francisco: Straight Arrow Books, 1972.

⁵²⁵ Szatmary, 192-5.

expanded in the early 70s enabling such music to appeal to sectors outside of the youth audiences that critics prized.

For many historians the 1970s represented the death of rock because there was a feeling that music was going pop—becoming trivial, sentimental, soft and hedonistic and ultimately feminized. In the early 70s MOR singers The Carpenters, Olivia Newton John, Anne Murray, Helen Reddy, sensitive singer-songwriters Carole King, Elton John, John Denver, James Taylor, Bread, and pop singers such as ex-Beatle Paul McCartney, were among the most popular voices. Many historians interpreted the commercial ascendance of MOR and songwriter pop as a negation of rock values because MOR was too reminiscent of pre-rock pop in its melodicism, romanticism and accessibility and singer-songwriter music was too inward focused. Historians usually applauded the “mature” phases of late 60s Bob Dylan, the Beatles, etc. because this supposedly spoke to maturing rock audiences who sought something beyond dance music.⁵²⁶

In contrast rock historians usually read MOR and singer-songwriters as a reflection of corporatization and the result of a tamed America which failed to embrace political revolution.⁵²⁷ Rock critic Jon Landau noted the reactionary nature of soft-rock criticism in a 1973 review when he stated, “Underlying the more generalized attacks is a feeling that because these artists sacrifice the basic macho stance of the rock & roll band for a more emotionally complex-adult-attitude towards life, they exist in

⁵²⁶ Miller notes the studious audience behavior among Dylan listeners, 222-3; Palmer describes it as “rock and roll art music, explicitly designed for listening and thinking rather than dancing and romancing,” 110.

⁵²⁷ Szatmary 192-5; Garofalo 264-71.

opposition to rock rather than as a new, evolutionary development of it.”⁵²⁸ Soft-rock’s late 60s /early 70s emergence may have addressed audiences’ desire for romantic pop music and paralleled cultural shifts toward introspection where people were seeking more intricate understandings of the self in everyday life. Historians tended to read America’s embrace of MOR as the move of a culture under false consciousness rather than noting that melodic pop music was *consistently popular* in the commercial music industry and probing the appeal of such music beyond political conspiracies.

The onslaught of young musicians with an affinity for romantic, lush and/or softer music struck many historians as a generational betrayal because for many historians rock was fundamentally about being young or pretending to be young.⁵²⁹ However, a closer look at early 70s soft-rockers such as James Taylor, Carly Simon, Joni Mitchell, Jackson Browne does not completely displace political or idealized music and reveals rock generation performers addressing the anxieties of young adults dealing with romantic complexities such as marriage, coping with emotional trauma, etc. For example Taylor’s discussion of suicide (“Fire and Rain”) and Simon’s dissection of the marriage ideal (“That’s the Way I’ve Always Heard it Should Be”) were subjects which suggested a broadened social climate where such issues were conceivable song topics, which may been less true in previous decades. These were not “revolutionary” ideals but intricate subjects which reflected the changing needs of the rock generation.

Historians stigmatized MOR musicians even more deeply to the point that most histories did not address the emergence of soft-rock in the 70s or it was implied when

⁵²⁸ See Landau, Jon. “The self acceptance and triumph of ‘One Man Dog’ ” Rev. of One Man Dog by James Taylor. Rolling Stone. 18 January, 1973. 48.

⁵²⁹ Miller, 19.

historians refer to “corporate rock.” Much of the resentment toward this music and such performers seemed rooted in a general perception that such artists too closely resembled the music rock ‘n’ roll was supposed to have displaced. The emphasis on rock and rock ‘n’ roll as rebellious youth music overshadowed the reality that many people did not fully reject the music of their parents despite broad historical assertions to the contrary and eventually musical genres and those who perform and listen to the genre change. Rock historians’ readings of the death of the 60s was rooted in a nostalgia for social principles hippies broadly represented but betrayed not via corporatization but hopelessness, implosion, disillusionment, internal conflicts and burn out.

The Death of “Roots” Music

The commercial shift toward soft rock was a substantial ideological, musical and cultural shift for many chroniclers of rock music’s development because it seemed a regression. However, many rock performers who were not particularly interested in acid rock and hippies resisted the trends of the late 60s by explicitly relying on the past to create roots rock, which integrated country and folk-oriented roots music into rock, and in the 70s response to “corporate rock,” punk which reiterated rock’s initial adolescent tone. Despite the progress such genres symbolized, in many ways these shifts were musical and lyrical retreats. Country music provided a safe space for rockers who wanted to remain relevant but felt alienated by acid rock, making it more reactionary than evolutionary. While rock critics applauded the roots music revival the separation of country from mainstream pop during the 60s and 70s seemed to be growing, raising questions about how interested such historians were in the commercial role of roots music in the American popular music landscape dominated by rock. That many

performers abandoned country to return to rock suggested musical tourism, not a commitment to roots. Further, when the “country-rock” genre formally developed in the 70s by mainstream eclectic performers such as Linda Ronstadt, the genre was considered slick and diluted, though such performers integrated country music throughout the duration of their careers. Punk was cruder and less musically refined than rock ‘n’ roll and often celebrated rebellion and angst in intentionally juvenile ways rock and roll had already covered. What was missing from the brief roots revival and punk was a significant musical progress and content which reflected the changing needs in the consciousness of people of the rock era who were gaining life experience and growing out of adolescence. I assess the roots aspect of late 60s roots revival and 70s punk in the following section.

Returning to the roots?: Roots music, country-rock and punk

Despite the lionization of the acid rock period rock historians often seemed relieved the era ended because it ushered in rockers who self-consciously sought to connect with American “roots” music. The most consistent criticism rock historians had of hippies was that they were often privileged, middle-class well-educated white youth. These observations implied that hippies lacked a critical consciousness or connection to the political urgency, destitution and suffering attributed to black and poor and rural working class white cultures which spawned blues and country. In response to the more toward elaborately staged and produced commercial bohemia music and away from pure blues and country, a “back-to-the-roots” movement developed among rockers in the late 60s/early 70s.

Historians consistently have cited Bob Dylan, the Byrds, the Band and the Grateful Dead as leading the charge. According to Szatmary, “Confronted by the harsh, complicated realities of an unwanted war in Vietnam and events at Kent State, some folk rockers began to move toward a country music that extolled simple living and rural traditions.”⁵³⁰ Szatmary and Gillett cited Dylan’s albums John Wesley Harding (1968) and Nashville Skyline (1969) and his duet and TV appearance with Johnny Cash,⁵³¹ as prominent examples of a rocker separating himself from rock’s apparently bloated identity in search of something purer and more in touch with America’s real roots culture. Palmer, who cited Dylan along with The Band’s 1968 debut Music From Big Pink and The Band (1969), and the Grateful Dead 1970’s Workingman’s Dead and American Beauty as part of the movement saw the roots shift as inevitable. According to Palmer, “. . . in most art forms, periods of feverish experimentation inevitably give way to periods of reflection and retrenchment; what goes up must come down. The spate of drug-related deaths that decimated rock’s ranks during the late sixties was bound to have a sobering effect. And in their search for musical values that would provide some solid grounding in the trip’s inevitable aftermath, many musicians turned to the sustaining verities of the tradition, to their folk and country roots.”⁵³² Ball contrasted such efforts with the Beatles’ landmark Sgt. Pepper when he noted these, “Complex expositions on American land, myth and history, these albums held up better than Sgt. Pepper’s and psychedelia which too often dissipated into inside jokes,

⁵³⁰ Szatmary, 198.

⁵³¹ Szatmary, 198; Gillett, 365.

⁵³² Palmer, 171.

unresolved melodies, and self-indulgent collages.”⁵³³ In a chapter describing punk’s rise, Palmer noted how the post-Woodstock era ushered in a period of excess where bands became too big for smaller venues, thus violating some kind of intimate folk ethos his comment implies is inherent to rock, belying rock’s rapid growth since the mid-50s.⁵³⁴ There was almost a historical sigh of relief that some musicians came to their senses in response to 60s excesses and reclaimed the roots that reportedly supply rock with its roots.

None of these roots-music-movement readings directly cited the musicians themselves so it was not clear in rock histories that any of these musicians were actually reacting to hippie or commercial culture. But historically such interpretations conveniently established a context for critics and historians to reject lush MOR music and introspective songwriter music, and embrace nostalgia-minded rockers such as Bruce Springsteen whose music was a pastiche of past rock styles and the supposedly anti-corporate back-to-basic aesthetics of U. S. and U. K. punk. Nostalgia for a simpler time when rock was raw, spontaneous and male became the imperative for critics attempting to salvage the 1970s which saw the onset of MOR, singer-songwriter music, lush/softer R&B music and the emergence of genres with many queer elements such as disco and glam rock.

There are several limitations to the resurgence of “roots” rock worthy of noting. First, despite a few rockers embracing roots music the separation between country, blues and mainstream pop/rock music was greater than ever in the 60s and 70s. As Gillett noted, “During the sixties, country music virtually isolated itself from the world

⁵³³ Ball, 292.

⁵³⁴ Palmer, 262.

of pop, and most of the time it seemed that the artists and their record companies were equally happy to keep the worlds apart.”⁵³⁵ He noted Mercury was the only 60s label where pop and country were well-integrated.⁵³⁶ Structurally in the 60s and 70s the rock music industry so indebted to roots music relegated blues, country and folk music to the sidelines and posited rock and contemporary pop as aesthetically and commercially autonomous entities apart from roots music. Ultimately the rock era industry marginalized roots music so its commercial hybrid form could triumph commercially.

Interestingly, most of the roots rockers either broke-up, i.e. the Band or abandoned the roots style, i.e. Dylan. The only pop/rock singers who sustained a country-rock blend into the 70s and beyond were West Coast acts such as the Eagles, Linda Ronstadt, and J. D. Souther. Most country-rockers have uneven critical reputations, often because historians and critics deemed them the epitome of Southern California slickness and superficiality.⁵³⁷ Thus the roots rockers attempted to reinvigorate rock only to have their efforts flattened out by slick, commercial exploiters who softened the music for mainstream consumption. Once again mainstreaming was claimed to have killed a pure artistic moment.

Second, any discussion of roots rockers such as Springsteen, and back-to-basics punk musicians such as the Sex Pistols or the Ramones must consider how major label corporate support enabled such performers to flourish. As Miller argued, Springsteen’s mid-70s rise to prominence was not organic but the result of intense hype from supportive and influential music critics Jon Landau and Dave Marsh and the

⁵³⁵ Gillett, 359.

⁵³⁶ Ibid, 361.

⁵³⁷ Szatmary, 198-201; Garofalo, 281-2.

promotional power of Columbia Records. Springsteen's "aura of blue-collar authenticity" became a marketing strategy, an approach indebted to an approach Liberace pioneered in the 50s (which I discuss in Chapter Four) one which endeared him to critics, and perhaps audiences, longing for a "throwback to rock's golden age of innocence."⁵³⁸ According to Miller:

For the first time, the key players-music critics, record executives, publicists, disc jockeys, editors in the mainstream media-gained an appreciation for the marvelous circulatory of the process of rock star-making as it had evolved: if it was declared loudly enough that a musician had a wider cultural significance, it was feasible to manufacture, however briefly, at least a simulacrum of wider cultural significance, insofar as this could be measured by the attention paid to a performer by the mass media.⁵³⁹

Miller's observation tapped into a prominent definition of authenticity as nostalgia and the increasing role of authenticity in establishing musicians as noteworthy and historically relevant. One of the reasons soft, feminized 70s music genres such as MOR and disco were either absent from or mere footnotes in many rock histories was because rock historians did not deem the genres or performers "authentic," invalidating their commercial or artistic worth and influence because many presume they had none. Such presumptions enabled rock to seem an artistic alternative to commercial pop but ignored the commercial foundation for rock's emergence and endurance.

⁵³⁸ Miller, 318; 322.

⁵³⁹ Miller, 324.

Historical discussions of punk music must also include a consideration of how corporate hype and mass media informed its prominent place in rock histories. Compared to MOR or disco it was commercially insignificant and was not clearly more influential or enduring as a musical form. Commenting on 70s corporate rock and the punk bands' emergence Palmer said, "It was time for somebody with guts to reassert the primacy of feel and heart over technique and spectacle."⁵⁴⁰ Technique and spectacle become coded as inauthentic approaches because rock was supposed to be a Do-It Yourself (DIY) amateur art, all spontaneity, passion and luck.

Interestingly a quotation from Joey Ramone of the Ramones preceded Palmer's comment and noted the lack of spirit in rock 'n' roll and its corporatization. Yet, the Ramones were part of the quickly commercialized CBGB scene, were signed to major label, Sire Records in 1975 and appeared in the 1979 movie Rock 'n' Roll High, garnered considerable press coverage throughout their careers and in 2002 the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame inducted them. Thus, their initial separation from "corporate rock" seems in retrospect naïve and disingenuous. Punk music was a commercial genre with venues, festivals, major label contracts and a deliberate emphasis on raucousness and amateurishness. Punk, like any other rock era commercial genre had conventions that governed its sounds and styles. Punk's critical and historical lionization seems rooted in nostalgia for rock's earliest origins when it was uncharted male expression aimed at teenagers. Though most punk dispensed with the country and blues influences so integral to rock,⁵⁴¹ critics appreciated its affinity for short, fast, simple rock 'n' roll songs and aim toward youth because it represented the supposed innocence of early

⁵⁴⁰ Palmer, 263.

⁵⁴¹ Garofalo, quoting rock critic Robert Christgau, 304.

rock. However, the lack of stylistic lineage to American roots music rendered punk anomalous to rock aesthetically. In actuality the corporatizing and commercial aspirations fundamental to punk were, ironically, its primary link to rock. The prefabricated, deliberately implosive career of England's Sex Pistols epitomized the limitations rock mythology and cynicism punk performers extended into the 1970s.⁵⁴²

The symbolism of the Sex Pistols' self-destruction, as a result of musical incompetence, an alienating performing style and drugs, among other reasons, overlapped Elvis' death from a drug overdose. Numerous historians have noted this parallel. When Szatmary observed, "Elvis was transformed from an innocent country boy who belted out a new kind of music with animalistic intensity to a well-groomed, multi-million dollar product" he taps into the paradox confronting rock historians.⁵⁴³ Despite the mythological baggage historians and critics projected onto rock as a kind of revolutionary utopia, its "King" epitomized Raymond Williams' "structure of feeling"⁵⁴⁴ notion of individuals internalizing and enacting elements of the broader culture. Miller's discussion of Presley laid bare the truth about how ambition, escape, fame, money, and power—all either roots or outcomes of commercial success—complicated rock 'n' roll dreams. Presley's descent was less attributable to abstract notions of corporate corruption, capitalism or the flawed American Dream than the intricate connection between aspiration and dissatisfaction. Presley could not get enough because there always seemed to be more. Referring to Presley's post-death diagnosis as a drug addict Miller noted, "What emerged was a picture of an infantilized

⁵⁴² Ibid, 305-7.

⁵⁴³ Szatmary, 51.

⁵⁴⁴ See p. 48 in Williams, Raymond. The Long Revolution. New York: Columbia University Press, 1961.

sovereign, living a life of indescribable freedom and incredible luxury, innocent of lofty ambitions, drunk on his own crazy fountain of youth, heedless conventional limits able to satisfy virtually any passing impulse on whim, even able, if he chose, to blot out the everyday aches and pains of ordinary existence.”⁵⁴⁵ Miller seemed less interested in reflective muckraking than isolating the limits of myth. In existing as walking myths rock stars have to negotiate the demands of projecting personae, extending the rock legacy and maintaining themselves as actual beings with purposes beyond myth-making, legacy building and career building. Such negotiations of “structures of feeling” get lost in rock histories which have been quick to attribute the rise and fall of musicians to abstract factors rather than localizing how the historical emphasis on myth, revolution, utopia, etc. obscures the intimate human struggles inflecting the lives of people bound by the same broad cultural demands as non-celebrity citizenry. Aspiration and ambition untainted by the hunger for prosperity and power are not inherent features of rock singers, any more than any profession. Rather, such an imperative requires cultural actors with the consciousness to acknowledge and engage with the complexities of being a commodity fetish.

The earliest generations of rock stars seemed intent on “making it” with a limited sense of the moral, physical and spiritual consequences characterizing such a seemingly easy aspiration of surviving through commercial music. As the late 60s and early 70s emerged it seemed that many musicians notably “singer-songwriters” and perhaps to a smaller extent MOR singers, retreated from the allure of abstract rock myths and located the experiential including the romantic, domestic, emotional, and

⁵⁴⁵ Miller, 343.

ideological elements which were shaping themselves. These aspects had ties to myth, however, they were accessible to audiences and translatable to music and interrogation in ways that revolution and utopia have rarely achieved. That much “soft-rock” was inward focused, melodic, earnest etc, and contrasted sharply with the emphasis on virtuosity, hard-driving rhythms and attitude critics praised in “harder” rock era genres reflected how superficial, ephemeral and destructive the “hard” rock aesthetic could become when it had no connection to living beyond mythic purposes. MOR or singer-songwriter music was as vulnerable to superficiality and vacuousness as any other genre. However this was no more inherent to the genres especially in comparison with rock’s excesses. Traditional historiography may not remember Karen Carpenter as favorably as Elvis, because Carpenter was non-controversial, traditional, and difficult to mythologize. But their deaths are at least partially connected by the stronghold of aspiration and the limitations of the myths of control and power rock music promises.

Musicians play an active role in the artistic direction of rock ‘n’ roll and its ability to be exploited. Presley’s shift from Sun Records to RCA in pursuit of more money and exposure was a willful choice as were Little Richard’s choice to leave rock ‘n’ roll and Chuck Berry’s violation of the Mann Act, etc. Similarly the lush rhythms Philly Soul pioneers added to R&B music which musicians and audiences embraced were active choices. Acid rockers participated in large rock festivals and signed to major record labels, and those who indulged in, and tragically succumbed to, drugs exercised their agency. Finally, the emotional investment in rock as a pure genre that existed outside of corporate structures was an affective choice punk musicians took up, that many musicians, including self-conscious chameleon David Bowie, punk

subversives the Sex Pistols and numerous performers spurned. The rock-as-revolution mythology rock historians have authored, perpetuated and reacted to when it went awry was at the root of laments over rock death. The triumph of the sentimental, the spectacular, the soft, the feminized, etc. were symptoms of a trend rock historians have labored to resist, notably, a fear that rock, typically chronicled as a revolutionary masculinist culture, may be more closely linked to pop than its mythmakers would like to believe and that it must co-exist with other kinds of musical expression. To champion American audiences when they embrace rock 'n' roll but scold them for purchasing "schlock rock," MOR, or "corporate rock" and lament them for indifference to supposedly revolutionary fads revealed a megalomaniacal tendency among rock historians to expect consensual, universal acceptance of the rock-as-revolution dogma they fervently adhered to as a justification for rock's importance.

The notion of rock as a commercial genre with vague ties to roots music, but open to a wide range of expression with varying appeal based on the needs of its audience seems crucial to understanding the trajectory of rock music. Perhaps American teens responded to schlock rock because it spoke to their need to dance, sing, idolize and identify in ways that early rock 'n' roll did not. It was possible that black musicians wanted a richer and more romantic sound than Motown or 60s Southern soul music offered and that romantic textures were often relief from political strife. Further, when young audiences opened up to singer-songwriters and MOR it seems likely that they were identifying with the concerns of writers willing to tackle seemingly trivial and sentimental topics, like neuroses over maturity, and even reconciling their musical tastes with those of their parents.

Rock “Death” and Queer Musicians

The commercial and artistic shifts this chapter has outlined, including the commercial expansion of rock ‘n’ roll, greater inclusion of diverse sensibilities, and the commercial acceptance of more introspective music, represent the vitality of rock era music rather than its death or erasure. Rock has proven itself broad enough to include a wide range of genres, performers and taste cultures. Two key developments made rock particularly important for the emergence of openly queer rock performers. First, one of the most fundamental aspects of rock, the emergence of autonomous performers, resulted in greater sophistication and business awareness among rock performers who stood to profit from songwriting and production contributions from their records. Second, the late 60s commercial dominance of LPs, which paralleled the increased commercial embrace of singer-songwriters, was important because a commercial and artistic avenue opened up for performers to explore mature subjects in a more accommodating format than the singles-oriented market.

As rock’s commercial orientation changed, the political landscape for queer people changed as homophile politics became more overt and resistant, which led to the Gay Liberation era symbolically tied to the Stonewall Riots of June 1969. As a dimension of New Left movements, including feminist, racial and anti-war liberationist movements, Gay Liberation was less perhaps less visible and more stigmatized than any of the movements. However, the movements tangibly reshaped the consciousness of many people worldwide, including younger people, a shift reflected in popular

culture.⁵⁴⁶ Gay liberation and feminist politics did not instantly inspire queer singers to come out or politicize their music. But the choices Dusty Springfield, Laura Nyro, Elton John, Steven Grossman and “women’s music” performers made in the 1970s were arguably inspired in part by the emergent shift in the possibilities for queer visibility. The increased business sense of performers, commercial tilt toward albums and embrace of introspective music defines a central contrast between the queer performers of the 50s I discuss in Part II and those who emerged in the 1960s and 1970. Where some historians have defined such shifts as weakening rock, I argue that such changes

⁵⁴⁶ From 1968-70 a greater youth presence resulted in gay and lesbian movements which overtly aligned the gay and lesbian rights struggle with racial and war movements, more overt activism and the targeting of media coverage of gay and lesbian communities. 1969-70 solidified the growing generation gap among gays and lesbians the infiltration of New Left consciousness. June 27, 1969 was the first day of the legendary Stonewall Riots which symbolized a paradigm shift and inspired a rash of organizing in New York and beyond. The New York-based Gay Liberation Front (GLF), formed in July 1969 with its title borrowed from the Viet Cong National Liberation Front was perhaps the central post-Stonewall formation in New York. Shortly after the New York chapter opened chapters emerge in Berkeley, Chicago, Philadelphia, Los Angeles, Minneapolis, Detroit, and Madison and several cities internationally in Vancouver, London, Sydney. New Left activism also inspired younger radical members to form an Action Committee in the Mattachine Society. GLF chapters chiefly distinguished themselves from previous gay and lesbian organizing by actively involving themselves in complementary human rights movements. New York’s GLF participates in an October 1969 New York antiwar protest and the Washington D.C.’s GLF participated in a November 1969 D. C. anti-war protest. Berkeley and Los Angeles GLF chapters also merged gay and anti-war politics via anti-war protest participation. During the fall of 1969 New York’s GLF also protested the Village Voice and began printing the Come Out! Newsletter, whose title reflected a new call for visibility and pride. By the end of 1969 and beginning of the 1970s GLF chapters had developed in over 60 cities including many college campuses, an indication of the new generation’s concern with human rights activism from an earlier stage than previous generations and reflecting a greater connection with other movements. On the West Coast activism continued in various forms including independent groups such as San Francisco’s Committee for Homosexual Freedom formed in 1969 to protest employment discrimination at local steamship offices and West Coast activists, the Pink Panthers, who agitated for “gay revolution” and “gay power.” For a thorough overview of the development of Gay Liberation from the homophile movement and Gay Liberation see McGarry and Wasserman, 152-76.

benefited many queer performers in significant ways. All queer performers did not experience industrial changes equally; indeed few performers have approached Elton John's commercial success. But such shifts in commercial structure and audience taste opened up unforeseen possibilities for diversifying rock during the commercial peaks of many of the musicians I discuss.

The Business of Songwriting and Albums

The transition from pre-rock pop which ushered in singer-songwriters as a staple of the rock industry and the predominance of albums sales over singles were two industry shifts with unique implications for rock era musicians in the post-consolidation age. There were benefits of these changes for many musicians. I am particularly interested in how these shifts affected queer musicians because they reiterate the way structural shifts have affected the visibility of subcultural identities.

One of the chief distinctions between pre-rock popular singers and rock era singers was the division of labor. During the rock era self-contained musicians who wrote songs, played instruments, and/or arranged and produced their records became commonplace. Rock 'n' roll was the first major music form which developed after recording technology, thus *recording* was fundamental to its origins. Unlike jazz, gospel, blues and country which were performing mediums preceding the mass distribution of records, rock 'n' roll can only be understood in the context of a commercial recording industry. Whereas pre-rock singers generally divided creative duties among outside songwriters, record company producers, instrumentalists and musical arrangers, rock 'n' roll performers were the first generation of performers, who

generally speaking, were independent and self-contained. There were certainly pre-rock performers who wrote songs and played instruments on record, such as jazz musicians Mary Lou Williams and Mel Tormè, and there were many rock performers who did not write and/or play and/or produce. But as a general tendency rock 'n' roll performers had more potentially diverse sources of income. Because rock 'n' roll diminished the separation between performers and professional songwriters, its performers could benefit materially from their *composing* and *producing* as well as singing, playing and selling records.

During rock 'n' roll's transition into 1960s "rock" a more introspective, folk-oriented variant youth music emerged alongside the dance-oriented rhythmically driven music defining the "golden age" rock 'n' roll sound. The 1960s solidified the role of the proverbial "singer-songwriter" as a rock era archetype. Some folk-rockers were synonymous for explicitly addressing political issues such as war and racism (Phil Ochs, early Bob Dylan, Joan Baez) while others ruminated on personal relationships and idiosyncratic human behavior (Joni Mitchell, "electric" Bob Dylan, Randy Newman) By the late 60s and early 70s singer-songwriters generally shifted away from rock influences and political topics toward softer rhythms and more personal subject matter. Unlike rock 'n' roll many folk-rock songs had a longer shelf life because they lent themselves to a wider range of interpretations by rock, pop, jazz, R&B and country performers. Thus there was even greater potential for profits from publishing royalties than early rock 'n' roller songwriters.

As rock music grew more introspective and formal the notion of rock as "art" manifested itself in the emergence of LPs as the ultimate form of artistic musical

expression. With rare exception, most notably concept album pioneer Frank Sinatra and “songbook” albums recorded by performers such as Ella Fitzgerald, previous generations of performers largely recorded singles or “sides” and collected them on LPs with no overriding thematic ties. However, the new rock generation took advantage of the form to make conceptual statements.

The silence of earlier generations of queer performers regarding their sexuality was not inherently a matter of taste, a sign of self-loathing or indicative of an invisible gay and lesbian communal culture. There was a material reality which rendered their futures as musicians more vulnerable and uncertain than later performers. Most early 50s musicians such as Johnnie Ray and Liberace relied on sales from singles and concert appearances rather than album sales, which had unproven sales potential. Johnny Mathis, was one of the first big album sellers in the mid-50s and had more options than his predecessors.⁵⁴⁷ But the multi-platinum sales era was a decade away limiting his profit potential even though he who released multiple albums a year. As a non-writer he was ultimately reliant on hit singles and concert appeal, making his image crucial. The same was true of 60s singer Dusty Springfield. Rock ‘n’ roll writer and performer Little Richard was never a big album seller and was one of many young musicians exploited by record companies. However Laura Nyro and Elton John, who reaped the financial benefits of songwriting royalties and royalties from album sales, were part of a generation for whom albums were key to their financial success, which

⁵⁴⁷ For example according to Whitburn, Joel. Joel Whitburn’s Top LPs:1945-1972. Menomonee Falls, Wisconsin: Record Research, 1973: Johnnie Ray had one charted album in 1952, 121; from 1952-4, Liberace had five charted albums, 86; Little Richard had one in 1957, 87; In contrast Johnny Mathis had eight charted albums from 1957-60, 96.

fostered a greater sense of economic freedom than many of their queer musical predecessors

Artistically and commercially the late 60s and 70s originated the album era in rock. By the late 60s LPs surpassed singles as music industry's primary revenue source accounting for ~80% of industry sales by the early 1970s.⁵⁴⁸ Alongside publishing and producing royalties the new generation of musicians had profit potential stemming from the popularity of albums to draw from. Sanjek notes the by the 1970s record companies advances and record contracts to artists reached new heights to the point that many musicians insisted their music go to their own publishing houses.⁵⁴⁹

As I noted in Chapter Two, many early rock 'n' roll and R&B musicians sought quick profits and opportunities to perform but lacked knowledge about royalty rates and recording contracts. The result was exploitation in which many seminal performers were forced to share writing credits with promotional personnel (e. g. Chuck Berry's "Maybellene") or signed sub-standard record contracts denying them full and proper royalties (e. g. Ruth Brown) Fortunately, many of these early figures were able to receive proper compensation. But the new generation was more aware of their value and fought for it. For example Laura Nyro broke with her manager and renegotiated her recording contract (estimated at \$3 million dollars) and publishing ties to CBS Records in the 1970s to protect her interests. A 1976 Nyro press profile documented the intricacies of the process and clearly indicated she was aware her songs and recordings were valuable commodities and unafraid to burn bridges it if meant self-preservation.

⁵⁴⁸ Garofalo, 257.

⁵⁴⁹ See Sanjek, Russell and David Sanjek. American Popular Music Business in the 20th Century, 212.

That Nyro did not record from 1973-6 in an era when recording musicians were quite prolific indicated the measure of financial security she amassed.⁵⁵⁰ She again retreated from recording between the late 70s and early 80s, and the late 80s to the early 90s. Her stature as a hip, innovative 60s songwriter appealed to many popular recording artists such as Barbra Streisand, the Fifth Dimension, Blood, Sweat & Tears, and Three Dog Night who had major hits covering her compositions. Nyro could have probably relied on revenue from publishing royalties and never made another album and still lived comfortably. Such economic security functioned as a form of safety considering her uncommercial sound and frequent recording retreats. More significantly, it gave her the time to develop her political consciousness and create a personal life apart from the industry.

Conclusion

It is crucial for historians of commercial music to recognize how the motives of musicians, audience tastes—which change as audiences age, and a corporate recognition of these relationships shape the directions of mainstream popular music. Musical styles do not necessarily disappear so much as lose salience as time passes. Rather than longing for a return to a non-existent purity it is more useful to focus on what people are willing to embrace not what historians and critics think they should like. If rock ‘n’ roll and, later, rock’s commercial ascendance depend on the tastes of audiences, which triumph regardless of what labels, radio and the music press promote, historians must trust audiences to respond to music that speaks to their interests

⁵⁵⁰ Rockwell, John. “A Drop-Out Sings of Her Tangled Life.” New York Times 29 February 1976. Sec 2, 1, 17.

otherwise the audience for rock histories becomes limited to rock historians themselves. There are under recognized popular music audiences whose tastes historians sideline because their own tastes narrowly confine the discourse of who and what counts as revolutionary and relevant. What ultimately dies in rock is not music or audiences' desire for transcendence but the ability for diverse musical experiences to comprise the genre, its documentation and remembrance.

Chapter Four: 1950s Queer Chameleons

Post-WWII Masculinity

As many historians have documented, in the post-WWII era of the mid 1940s through at least the early 1960s popular culture wielded gender behavior and sexual orientation as weapons in a national war against Communism. Post-WWII popular culture emphasized the need for male virility, encouraged female domesticity and stigmatized all forms of gender deviance. By augmenting the U. S. government's emphasis on virility to fight Communism's imminent threat, popular culture functioned as a tool of normalcy and created its own gender economy in an array of cinematic and burgeoning televisual images.⁵⁵¹ Popular music performers, already integral to film and increasingly appearing on television, internalized such pressures and made specific tactical maneuvers to negotiate the cultural climate.

The cultural emphasis on virility inspired several key trends. First, there was an overt backlash against softness and femininity and a valorizing of hardness and strength, both equated with masculinity.⁵⁵² For example Julia Grant has noted parental

⁵⁵¹ For a discussion on gender expectations and images of gays and lesbians in TV, film and mass media see Gross, Larry. Up From Invisibility : Lesbians, Gay Men, and the Media in America. New York: Columbia University Press, 2001. For gender expectations in television see Spigel, Lynn. Make Room for TV: Television and the Family Ideal in Postwar America. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992. For a discussion of how gender expectations affect gays and lesbians in film see, Russo, Vito. The Celluloid Closet: Homosexuality in the Movies. Revised Edition. New York: Harper & Row, 1987.

⁵⁵² See p. 174-5 in Pyron, Daniel. Liberace: An American Boy. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001; D' Emilio, 49; Loughery, 209.

fears that they were raising “sissies,” effeminate boys who “posed a threat to the image of a strong, masculine and virile America, untainted by feminine influences and able to stand up to Nazis and Communists alike.”⁵⁵³ The rise of a male-dominated, misogynist modernist aesthetic also “hardened” popular culture.⁵⁵⁴ Second, governmental incentives for marriage coupled with aggressive popular culture images of marriage, family and traditional gender roles stigmatized gender deviance, such as bachelorhood.⁵⁵⁵ Dominant culture also expected women to behave submissively and confine their identity to the domestic realm. The culture treated gender deviance as a threat to national character, sense of order and ways of life. Third, more explicit characterizations of homosexuality as a cultural and social menace to family, health, spirituality, etc. emerged, especially during the 1947-55 era of “sex panics.”⁵⁵⁶ Fourth, among gays and lesbians explicit adherence to traditional gender appearance emerged as a survival strategy. For example a hypermasculine ideal, mirrored by the increasing circulation of physique magazines, emerged among many gay men as a way to conform within the virile era.⁵⁵⁷

From these four broad historical trends dominant images of gender expression emerge that defined cultural expectations. However, it is important to note how such expectations function as guidelines rather than absolutes which allowed for some

⁵⁵³ See p. 118 in Grant, Julia. “A Thought a Mother Can Hardly Face: Sissy Boys, Parents, and Professionals in Mid-Twentieth Century America.” Modern American Queer History, Ed. Allida M. Black. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2001. 117-30.

⁵⁵⁴ Pyron, 177.

⁵⁵⁵ See D’Emilio, 38; Loughery, 162; Gross, 21; Spigel, 2, 33.

⁵⁵⁶ D’Emilio, 42-4; Loughery, 168, 200-02.

⁵⁵⁷ Loughery, 214-6.

deviance. In order to assess queer male musicians' relationships to the gender economy of 50s broad and popular culture I explore the range of gender behavioral possibilities available for men based on the 50s benchmark male figures. Based on 1950s popular culture iconography one can imagine several dominant modes of male gender behavior using a "gendered sliding scale." On one end is the *macho* image, exemplified by John Wayne and 50s cowboys and soldiers populating TV and film. Related to the macho type are *rebels* or *juvenile delinquents* such as James Dean and Marlon Brando.⁵⁵⁸

As we slide further toward the left we hit the relatively *demure*, gray-flannel suit wearing male or *organization man*.⁵⁵⁹ Sitcoms solidified this more domesticated, consumer-oriented version of masculinity. The *organization man* was not particularly gruff or macho but was emotionally contained, physically sturdy and unquestionably male. (i.e. Ward Cleaver, Ozzie Nelson)⁵⁶⁰ The other extreme mode was the *femme*, a male who was physically weak or frail, introspective, artsy and any number of adjectives describing men who deviate from signifiers of strength (i.e. physical activity, sturdy build, and extroverted behavior)⁵⁶¹ The alternative to these historical tropes of masculinity was a type of *netherworld* behavior that did not comfortably conform to the sliding scale. Such 50s males as Johnnie Ray, Liberace and later Little Richard created a

⁵⁵⁸ See p. 9 in Corber, Robert J. Homosexuality in Cold War America: Resistance and the Crisis of Masculinity. Durham: Duke University Press, 1997.

⁵⁵⁹ See p. 210 in Loughery, 210 and Grant, 119, "A Thought a Mother Can Hardly Face: Sissy Boys, Parents, and Professionals in Mid-Twentieth Century America." Modern American Queer History, who notes how anxieties around this "type" becoming feminized because his work was less likely to provide modes to express masculine "strength, courage and decision-making."

⁵⁶⁰ Corber, Homosexuality in Cold War America: Resistance and the Crisis of Masculinity, 7.

⁵⁶¹ Russo, 113-5 and Loughery, 210-2, cite Tea and Sympathy and Cat On A Hot Tin Roof as exemplars of the era's gender anxiety.

type of unprecedented display of gender behavior that seemed exaggerated, radical or outrageous, but often neutralized the actual threat of “deviance” they embodied.

50s Scandal Sheets and Early Mass Media “Outing”

One of the most important sources for understanding how the public developed an understanding of what behavior and which individuals signified sex and gender deviance in the 1950s were scandal sheets. In the early-to-mid 1950s scandal sheets became an important source shaping public perceptions of celebrities. Scandal sheets emerged when the Hollywood studio system was disbanding and studios had less control over public images.⁵⁶² A central aim of scandal sheets was to provide alternative images to Hollywood produced discourse from studios and press agents.⁵⁶³ Former film critic and studio publicist Ezra Goodman noted how scandal sheets functioned to reveal the pallid and tentative writing in mainstream journalism’s celebrity coverage.⁵⁶⁴

The scandal sheets became a large enough phenomenon that in 1955 mainstream new magazines Time and Newsweek ran stories on the public’s fascination with them.⁵⁶⁵ Goodman noted that in the 50s scandal magazines scared and fascinated people and were a major subject in the Hollywood scene of bars, cocktail parties and

⁵⁶² See p. 215 in Desjardins, Mary. “Systematizing Scandal: Confidential Magazine, Stardom, and the State of California.” Headline Hollywood: A Century of Film Scandal. Eds. Adrienne L. McLean and David Cook. New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press. 206-31.

⁵⁶³ Desjardins, 207.

⁵⁶⁴ See p. 53 in Goodman, Ezra. The Fifty-Year Decline and Fall of Hollywood. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1961.

⁵⁶⁵ See “The Press in the Sewer.” Time 11 July 1955: 90; “The Curious Craze for Confidential Magazines.” Newsweek 11 July 1955: 50-2.

hangouts.⁵⁶⁶ In 1952 publisher Robert Harrison, who had a background in tabloid newspapers, film-industry trade publications, and girlie magazines began publishing Confidential the most popular and influential of many 50s scandal sheets.⁵⁶⁷ Mary Desjardins has noted scandal magazines, “were considered illegitimate and were read by a smaller audience than the legitimate press (although the circulation figures claimed for Confidential ranged from 250,000 to 4, 0000, 000, which put them in good competition with fan magazines).”⁵⁶⁸ Though there were numerous scandal sheets,⁵⁶⁹ Confidential was the most infamous, a fact attested to by the State of California’s 1957 criminal libel and obscenity charges against Confidential.⁵⁷⁰ According to Goodman Confidential’s primary interest was in the sexual peccadillo department.⁵⁷¹ Desjardins and film writer David Ehrenstein note how the Confidential capitalized on the scandalousness of homosexuality via “outing” celebrities such as Marlene Dietrich and two musicians I discuss, Liberace, and Johnnie Ray.⁵⁷²

Desjardins noted how Confidential created a systematic approach of obtaining information through establishing Hollywood Research Inc., a separate research company employing experienced reporters.⁵⁷³ These reporters used surreptitious methods such as surveillance (phone tapping, tiny tape recorders) and drew from a

⁵⁶⁶ Goodman, 51.

⁵⁶⁷ Desjardins, 207.

⁵⁶⁸ Ibid, 217.

⁵⁶⁹ Alan Betrock chronicles the major scandal sheets in the annotated bibliography, Unseen America: The Greatest Cult Exploitation Magazines 1950-1966. Brooklyn: Shake Books, 1990.

⁵⁷⁰ Desjardins, 207.

⁵⁷¹ Goodman, 53.

⁵⁷² See Desjardins, 213 and p. 100-1 in Ehrenstein, David. Open Secret: Gay Hollywood 1928-1988. New York: William Morrow and Company, Inc. 1998.

⁵⁷³ Desjardins, 210.

variety of sources including everyone from nightclub employees to private investigators to disgruntled movie personnel.⁵⁷⁴ Confidential published “composite” stories which embellished details from previously published stories lending the stories a tinge of believability, making them “plausible fiction.” Finally, for dramatic effect the stories frequently featured “composite” photos doctored to match the story or capturing the celebrity off-guard.⁵⁷⁵ Many of these elements are evident in the scandal sheet coverage of Liberace and Ray whom I discuss in the next chapter.

Queer Chameleons

In Chapters Four and Five I focus on five male rock ‘n’ roll and rock contemporaries-Liberace, Johnnie Ray, Johnny Mathis, Esquerita and Little Richard-- whose commercial emergence occurred immediately before and/or during the rock ‘n’ roll era. In the following two chapters, I examine five queer musicians who exemplify ways queer men negotiated the post-WWII popular culture gender economy. Each musician employed queer evasive strategies that allowed them to survive with varying levels of success. I begin my discussion with Liberace and Johnny Mathis.

Liberace (b. Wladziu V. Liberace May 16, 1919, d. February 4, 1987) and Johnny Mathis were chameleons who sustained successful careers as recording artists and concert draws through multiple decades of cultural, political and industrial shifts. Though their commercial sales and chart successes grew increasingly sporadic and uneven after the 50s and 60s, they managed to remain commercially viable through

⁵⁷⁴ Desjardins, 210; Goodman, 51.

⁵⁷⁵ Desjardins, 211.

several decades of cultural and musical change. They were chameleons whose styles remained essentially the same, though both slightly adjust their images and repertoire. Even as queer culture became more visible, organized and political from the post-WWII era to the post-Liberationist era, they consistently downplayed their sexuality. Instead they highlighted a type of overt (Liberace) and elusive (Mathis) “charm” defined by an unusually asexual intimacy. I argue that asexual charm was a commercial survival strategy tied to their emergence as popular musicians in the virile era, when their ties to family, the “opposite” sex and American values were overtly emphasized by the performers and/or mass media. As an African-American, Mathis had to be particularly careful about the presentation of his sexuality because he began his career during the beginning of the rock ‘n’ roll era (1956) when race-mixing in popular culture gained newfound notoriety. Liberace and Mathis relied on a mix of their natural personas and a shrewd business sense attuned to the social context of their lives.

Liberace

“If you believed the music critics, Liberace, who died yesterday at age 67, was not one of the great pianists. But he was definitely one of the great showmen . . . he transformed himself into the Lord High Poobah of Glitz, the King of Conspicuous Consumption, the Emperor With the New Clothes . . . The outrageousness of his act seemed curiously appropriate in the high-gloss age of rock stars who routinely wear sequined gloves and high drag and gleefully turn our notions of gender inside out. Liberace was, arguably their spiritual granddaddy,”- David Richards, The Washington Post.⁵⁷⁶

“. . . one of the most colourful American entertainers in more than three decades of the business. He was often attacked as camp and gay at a time when such suggestions were libelous, but he won the devotion of a vast following of older American women with a

⁵⁷⁶ Richards, David. “The Sparkling Showman.” Washington Post. 5 February 1987: B1.

clever act mixed with symbols of wealth, sophistication and mother love,”- W. J. Weatherby, The Guardian⁵⁷⁷

At the outset of Liberace’s career he was a critical joke. By his death he was credited with authoring the American mythology of accessible glamour and a broad influence on rock ‘n’ roll. 1940s and 1950s music critics and journalists were pivotal in establishing Liberace as a gender deviant in the virile era. Their criticisms were largely rooted in his violation of the era’s gender ethos in his musical and performance style. Some of Liberace’s chief gender violations include the following: First, Liberace embraced and cultivated his identity as a populist entertainer. By doing so, he indirectly rejected the concept of a high/low culture divide and the masculine-dominated modernist aesthetic separating art and entertainment. Second, Liberace also chiefly appealed to female audiences and became the era’s pre-eminent non-threatening, asexual “mama’s boy.” The popular press and comedians were among those who mocked Liberace’s overt love of his mother, a tendency that endeared him to female listeners but repelled many men. Third, Liberace reveled in a type of “soft” emotional delicacy and stylistic “excess” counter to the era’s emphasis on masculine hardness.

Though Liberace was not a rock and roll performer *per se* in terms of his music he was an important transitional pre-rock figure who represented several factors critics traditionally defined as counter to rock and roll which actually became intrinsic to the genre. As I note elsewhere in this chapter there were numerous performers who directly cited Liberace as an influence. But his contribution extended beyond the individual

⁵⁷⁷ Weatherly, W. J. “Showbiz glitter that was Liberace/Obituary of US Entertainer.” The Guardian. 5 February 1987.

influence on a few. Through his image and persona Liberace pioneered musical myth-making when he subversively used his opulence to establish the commonality of celebrity musicians with regular people. Liberace was one of the first popular musicians to master the medium of television, which became an integral part of the distribution and marketing of rock and roll. His ability to create a persona and incorporate the most marketable aspects of his life into his TV appearances made him a pioneer for rock era musicians who used television to reach large audiences, establish their personae and sell records. His TV work, alongside his concert appearances and books, were the cornerstone of his selling authenticity to audiences an aspect central to the marketing of rock 'n' roll.

Liberace understood how to capitalize on his “roots,” in this case a working-class Midwestern background, to develop a rapport and establish authenticity with his audiences. Despite his considerable wealth he established a distance from his fortune and fame through an earnest demeanor, which insinuated he was merely an inhabitant in an exotic celebrity world. His persona signified that ordinary people could live the American Dream through their consumption of him. Liberace fundamentally understood the vitality of the American Dream lied in making it seem accessible to everyone, even a modest kid like himself from the Midwest. The use of this illusory dynamic is a penultimate version of the “suspension of disbelief” associated with film. A similar tension, which capitalizes on the common “everyday” personas of celebrities with their audiences, is evident among a wide range of rock performers and their audiences. For example Bruce Springsteen’s working class persona and appeal is somewhat at odds with his well-established commercial savvy and legendarily over-the-top shows.

Similarly many performers in punk music and hip-hop rely on the illusion of their status as everyday people still in touch with their “roots” to appeal to audiences hungry for representations of themselves. Such overt attempts to establish affective authenticity reached mass success through Liberace’s use of mass media and later became central to rock music.

On television and in concerts Liberace focused on intimate details, such as lighting and the distance between his piano and the audience, along with self-deprecating humor to charm his audiences. These gestures marked him as an overtly soft, inoffensive performer in an era that includes Sinatra’s masculine swagger and later Elvis’ sexual rebelliousness. From his mid-40s ascent to the mid-50s Liberace was relatively unscathed by critics’ raised eyebrows until the mid-50s when newspapers, magazines and tabloids openly parodied and ridiculed his gender deviant image. Liberace retaliated by updating his image to better fit the era and took legal action against the sex/gender assertions with the most potential to harm his career. Liberace negotiated his sexuality in a way that signified deviance without declaring it, a tactic that permitted him mobility and sustenance. Music historians ignored Liberace or dismissed him as a vulgar showman. Despite these dismissals, his decadent showmanship, self-deprecating, earthy persona and ability to create intimacy influenced a wide range of musicians from Elvis to Elton John.⁵⁷⁸ Further his negotiation of queerness initiated a significant heritage of queer textures-- charm, intimacy and

⁵⁷⁸ “To kill time between sets, Presley and the members of his band sampled the other cats then playing in Vegas, which included (in addition to one of Elvis’ personal idols, Liberace) . . .” Miller, 135; Liberace biographer Pyron discusses Liberace’s influence on Elton John, 135.

ambiguous sexuality—queer musicians have employed to endear themselves to audiences since his arrival.

Liberace was a concert performer, TV personality and recording musician and appeared in a few films. His diversity made him subject to criticism from numerous branches of entertainment journalism. Popular culture critics' responses to Liberace are particularly important because they illustrated normative cultural sex/gender expectations for male performers. The tone of TV and concert reviews of his work became increasingly personal in the mid-50s which were clearly inspired by and inspired a rash of scandal sheet/tabloid stories. Both traditional and yellow journalism described Liberace with suspicion and condescension until he defended his right to be different.

The Legend Begins

Liberace was one of the first 50s musicians to use TV to promote his career and develop a public persona. In 1951 Liberace made his first TV appearances on four variety shows in February and March 1951. According to Faris, "In 1952 Liberace instantly became a star when the Liberace Show made Liberace the most watched entertainer in the United States. The name and face recognition provided by the experience catapulted Liberace to concert halls and major nightclubs. Liberace's career after his three years on the Liberace show became one of a concert touring artist traveling from town to town."⁵⁷⁹ A Los Angeles-based version of The Liberace Show

⁵⁷⁹ See p. 50 in Faris, Jocelyn. Liberace: A Bio-Bibliography. Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1995.

first aired in circa 1951 or 1952, depending on the source.⁵⁸⁰ The show aired on KLAC-TV and became a local hit.⁵⁸¹ According to biographer Pyron, on the show, “The performer wore a plain tuxedo and played a grand piano decorated, simply, with his now-trademark candelabrum. In a format he had perfected in his supper-club act, he played a mixture of condensed classics and pop tunes, intermixed with his supper-club patter. His brother conducted the house orchestra, and the piano-playing bother conversed with the violinist bother, who did not speak.”⁵⁸²

From July 1 to September 16, 1952 The Liberace Show, a 15 minute program which featured his brother George conducting the orchestra aired twice a week on NBC as a summer replacement show. The show was popular and in February 1953 Liberace and the show received Emmy Awards for outstanding male television performer and outstanding local television show.⁵⁸³ Liberace’s self-presentation on TV was among the most masterful and innovative of his peers because he had a command of TV’s potential for intimacy. Thus his wink, warm stage patter, cheerful rapport with his comically stiff brother, and trademark candelabrum projected an intimate, endearing persona.⁵⁸⁴ A Variety reviewer called Liberace “a good showman” with an “ingratiating” personality.

⁵⁸⁰ Faris, 33-4.

⁵⁸¹ Pyron notes there is some dispute among historians over the actual date in his Notes on 444. He argues it is February 3, 1952, based on a search of Los Angeles Times’ TV listings. 139, 444. Faris lists the date as August 7, 1951, 34.

⁵⁸² Pyron, 139-40.

⁵⁸³ Pyron, 142; Faris, 34.

⁵⁸⁴ Pyron discusses TV producer Don Fedderson instilling a need for a homey populist approach. He also describes Liberace playing to the camera in a manner derivative of and more skillful than popular Indian electric-organ player TV star Korla Pandit, 142-7.

But the review also noted he was “on the schmaltzy side” and “a little too saccharine,” foreshadowing the tone of many critics’ reviews Liberace.⁵⁸⁵

Despite his brief TV success no TV networks offered Liberace a TV series, thus he signed with syndicator Guild Films.⁵⁸⁶ A new 30-minute version of The Liberace Show aired as a syndicated program from February 18, 1953 to 1956. These shows solidified his public identity as a non-threatening, down-to-earth charmer who ushered a touch of glamour into viewers’ everyday lives. During the program’s run he made appearances on popular programs such as the Jack Benny Program and the Ed Sullivan Show.⁵⁸⁷ According to Pyron, “Generally the show began with a major production number followed by the local station’s commercial break. The next part of the program opened with the performer chatting intimately with the camera and the audience about some matter of personal or sentimental concern, playing for patients in a veteran’s hospital, or receiving letters from particular fans. He referred regularly to his mail. This discourse often moved the show into a second production number, which was similar to the first in form.”⁵⁸⁸ Liberace often had themed episodes, featured guest performers, and sometimes varied musical elements but the show featured numerous consistent elements. For example, the camera typically focused on either his face or his hands playing the piano and he ended his shows with “I’ll Be Seeing You.”⁵⁸⁹

Little evidence exists to precisely quantify the syndicated show’s popularity in its first half-hour incarnation because it was not a network show. But there are strong

⁵⁸⁵ July 16, 1952 Variety review qtd. in Faris, 110.

⁵⁸⁶ Pyron, 148.

⁵⁸⁷ Faris, 112.

⁵⁸⁸ Pyron, 153-4.

⁵⁸⁹ *Ibid*, 154.

suggestions that it was one of the most widely syndicated shows of its time and it clearly helped his recording career, media profile and concert grosses.⁵⁹⁰ Pyron noted how Liberace went from having no records during 1949-51 to over 67 recordings in 1954 and became one of the most popular, profitable and record-breaking concert performers in the country.⁵⁹¹ As his show grew from Los Angeles-based TV to national syndication he became a national and international phenomenon. On his numerous TV shows Liberace established his trademarks such as the candelabra placed on his piano, intimate stage patter, and the inclusion of his brother George and mother Frances. The image TV established endured the longest on Liberace's four decade spanning career as a popular concert pianist. By examining reviews of Liberace's TV show, his concerts and his tabloid coverage we can begin to understand the way Liberace's image conflicted with popular culture's vision of public masculinity.

The Measure of a Man: Liberace, Music Critics, and 50s Scandal Sheets

In a 1952 concert review Variety detected, "an infectious charm that spreads a warming aura over the room."⁵⁹² The prescience of that statement proved a blessing and a curse for Liberace for the remainder of his career. Over a year later in a February 4, 1953 review of his syndicated TV show, Variety noted, "That the overall impact may be too cloying for some tastes . . ." and called the performance "a calculated risk."⁵⁹³ Six months later Variety noted, "Liberace does everything to please" in a review of his

⁵⁹⁰ Ibid, 156.

⁵⁹¹ Ibid, 157-62.

⁵⁹² January 30, 1952 Variety review qtd. in Faris, 52. See Rev. of Liberace concert at Ciro's. Variety 30 January 1952. 52.

⁵⁹³ January 4, 1953 Variety review qtd. in Faris, 111.

Carnegie Hall concert.⁵⁹⁴ Based on these accounts Liberace wanted to be liked and charmed his audience through playful and romantic piano playing and an earthy, laid-back persona.

Some critics interpreted Liberace's easygoing demeanor as a commercial affront to good-taste. Liberace's performance of gender, notably an eager-to-please approach eschewing any pretense of "art" belied expectations of male performers. For example in a review of Liberace's TV show prominent New York Times music critic Howard Taubman referred to Liberace by a series of terms which bore an uncanny resemblance to the historical characterizations of sentimental pop music and future criticisms of queer-associated genres such as glam and disco. In referring to Liberace's tendency for "slackness of rhythms," "wrong tempos" "distorted phrasing" "excess of prettification and sentimentality," he replicated stereotypical perceptions of gender deviants as excessive and overwrought, and its practitioners as emotionally underdeveloped, into his popular music criticism.⁵⁹⁵ When Taubman claimed Liberace lacked "respect" for the composers he interpreted, he insinuated that Liberace disrespected structure, convention and normativity—dominant behavioral expectations of the virile era. Taubman viewed Liberace's success as a sign of how, "Tastes based on denatured music end in debasement of an art." Taubman acerbically concluded that Liberace's success was a triumph of audience-pandering bad taste less reliant on the quality and depth music critics seek than Liberace's skills as a salesman. According to Taubman

⁵⁹⁴ September 30, 1953 Variety review qtd. in Faris, 53. See "Liberace, Mid-age Bobby-Sox Idol; Mops Up on Pops Concert Route." Variety 30 September 1953. 52.

⁵⁹⁵ p. 44 in Taubman, Howard. "A Square Looks at a Hotshot: An ivory-tickling TV Virtuoso like Liberace really drags this music critic by his long hair." New York Times Magazine 14 March 1954: 20, 40, 42, 44.

Liberace, “depends on the loneliness of old girls and the slushiness of young ones” and he is a “product of the superficiality, sentimentality and uneasy nostalgia of our times.”

⁵⁹⁶ Taubman’s criticisms set the pace for a barrage homophobic, genderphobic and sexist tendencies of 50s male-dominated popular music criticism many of which surfaced in critiques of Johnnie Ray.

Taubman’s critiques were veiled language for broader perceptions that popular culture was softening. In the virile era the sentimental and emotive were soft/feminine forms of expression which belied expectations of men. Given the government’s eradication of gender deviant employees⁵⁹⁷ and the 50s popular culture gender economy it was unsurprising that the FBI maintained a file on Liberace entitled “compromise and extortion of homosexuals” whose content has apparently been deleted.⁵⁹⁸ Other 50s critics forecasted or echoed Taubman’s sentiments. The earlier review Variety which labeled him as being “a good showman although on the schmaltzy side” and possessing a “too saccharine” personality for television⁵⁹⁹ commented on Liberace’s emotionality and persona and drew attention to Liberace’s unusualness in contrast to other 50s era male performers. A 1954 TV Guide article referred to Liberace as “a perfect patsy” for mockery given his persona as, “A perpetually grinning matinee idol, slightly pudgy, who seems for all the world to be an overgrown little boy dependent on his mother.”

⁵⁹⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁹⁷ The definitive book-length discussion of these persecutions is Johnson, David K. The Lavender Scare: The Cold War Persecution of Gays and Lesbians in the Federal Government. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2004.

⁵⁹⁸ “FBI’s Files Offer Quirky Treasures.” Chicago Tribune 24 November 1989: 24; comment regarding deleted content from bibliographer Faris, 190.

⁵⁹⁹ Variety, July 16, 1952 qtd. in Faris, 110.

Tellingly the article was titled “When Will Liberace Marry?”⁶⁰⁰ Liberace’s departure from the era’s gender ethos began when critics and journalists marked him as a peculiarity but evolved into more specifically sexualized accusations during the mid-to-late 1950s. The notion of Liberace as a cuckolded mama’s boy was a firing shot in an arsenal of gendered ammunition popular press unleashed on his public image.

Liberace’s persona was very central to concert reviews in the 1954-5 season when his TV show’s success transformed him into a concert star. Some reviewers noted how central Liberace’s persona was to his concert to the point of overshadowing all else, including music. Billboard framed a 1954 Madison Square Garden concert as a very staged event centered on personality, perhaps to a narcissistic degree when it noted, “Liberace ran the ‘concert’ . . . as if it were an intimate little soirée between him and his more than 16, 000 good and loyal friends. Seated at the piano, he talked idly, almost endlessly about himself and everything he loves and admires . . .”⁶⁰¹ A 1954 Los Angeles Times review was overtly acerbic when it noted, “The key note was set by a piece called ‘Cornish Rhapsody’; thereafter so much corn spouted we thought we were back in Iowa.”⁶⁰² Variety effectively summarized Liberace up when it referred to him as a “personality-pianist” who was the center of “a big, gaudy, sumptuously mounted piece” in which “He sings, he plays the piano, he tap dances and he pleases.”⁶⁰³ The critical responses to his TV show and concerts did not go unnoticed as scandal sheets made Liberace a prime target for the gender deviance reviewers began to allude to.

⁶⁰⁰ “When Will Liberace Marry?” TV Guide 18 September 1954.

⁶⁰¹ June 5, 1954 Billboard review qtd. in Faris 53.

⁶⁰² September 7, 1954 Los Angeles Times review qtd. in Faris 54.

⁶⁰³ April 27, 1955 Variety review qtd. Faris, 54. See Rev. of Liberace concert at The Riviera. Variety 27 April 1955. 60.

However the scandal sheets were much more explicit in translating his gender behavior as an indication of sexual deviance.

In 1955 and 1956 reviews British music paper Melody Maker favorably reviewed Liberace's TV show. Though no fan of Liberace's recordings or persona reviewer Steve Race acknowledged, "Liberace is one heck of a performer" qualified with the caveat that for better or worse he, "plays the piano the way the world thinks the piano should be played"⁶⁰⁴ The 1956 reviewer asserted, "whether you like or loathe Liberace, you cannot deny the superb skill with which his TV programmes are presented."⁶⁰⁵ The show's negative reviews inspired articles defending Liberace from his critics⁶⁰⁶ and served as a springboard for tabloids to speculate on his personal proclivities.⁶⁰⁷ The show also generated articles noting details of Liberace's personal life and his appeal to women.⁶⁰⁸ Overall the success of his syndicated show made him a star but also a target for criticism

By 1956-9 Liberace solidified his performing style and during this time he reached his broadest audience playing major American and international venues. As his visibility increased, tabloid coverage intensified and critical attention to him increased. Critics were hesitant to call Liberace a great pianist or artist but acknowledged Liberace as a satisfying entertainer who pleased audiences. A 1956 review recognized his

⁶⁰⁴ Race, Steve. "Liberace—A Reassessment" Melody Maker 31 December 1955: 2; qtd. in Faris, 110-1.

⁶⁰⁵ Brand, Pat. "Liberace: Like Him; Loathe Him: The Show's the Tops." Melody Maker 29 September 1956. 9; qtd. in Faris, 111.

⁶⁰⁶ For example see Brent. Gloria. "Stop Kicking This Guy Around!" TV Fan February 1955. 26-9, 64-5.

⁶⁰⁷ "Liberace: Don't Call Him Mister." Rave. August 1954. 4-13; The article quotes a negative review before describing Liberace's effeminate hobbies (cooking, sewing, etc.) and incidents suggesting surreptitious homosexual behavior.

⁶⁰⁸ Fischler, Grace. "Why They Really Love Him." TV Stage. February 1955. 12-5, 56.

personal appeal as the core of his concerts when it stated, “However one may classify him as an artist, one would have to say that the smiling pianist gave the people who attended the concert just what they WANTED . . . a full measure of Liberace.”⁶⁰⁹

Through TV and concerts Liberace ushered in an archetypal persona much the way Billie Holiday or Frank Sinatra did. He established witty, non-threatening, self-deprecating men as a bankable, appealing “type” something 70s stars Elton John, Peter Allen and numerous other queer performers revived.

Liberace’s appeal resulted in two October 1956 bookings at London’s Royal Festival Hall and Royal Albert Hall. During the tour his show grew more outrageous in size appearing as, “. . . a cross between a circus turn and a fancy dress parade.”⁶¹⁰ His persona also grew more assured, as one critic noted, “Liberace, a deliberate peacock and a preposterous walking wardrobe, took the starch out of festival hall.”⁶¹¹ But Liberace was aware of his lack of popularity with critics. Regarding his October 1, 1956 Royal Festival Hall concert in London the New York Times noted how he, “. . . drew squeals of delight from feminine listeners and cries of pain from music critics,”⁶¹² and Variety noted, “He lashed out at his critics . . .” during the concert.⁶¹³ During the concert women reportedly outnumbered men 15 to 1 and demonstrators picketed with signs saying, “We Hate Liberace,” “Cyprus, Suez, and Now This” “Is this The End of Festival Hall.”⁶¹⁴

⁶⁰⁹ July 21, 1956 Hollywood Citizen-News review qtd. in Faris, 56.

⁶¹⁰ October 2, 1956 London Daily Express review qtd. in Faris, 56.

⁶¹¹ October 2, 1956 London Daily Herald qtd. in Faris 56.

⁶¹² October 3, 1956 New York Times review qtd. in Faris 57.

⁶¹³ October 10, 1956 Variety review qtd. in Faris 57. See Rev. of Liberace concert at Royal Festival Hall. Variety 10 October 1956. 63

⁶¹⁴ Faris, 57.

Reviews of his 1956 Royal Albert Hall performance referred to Liberace's female appeal ("Screams of delight from teenagers and ecstatic sighs from the older ladies, greeted his appearance on the platform") a growing pattern in his reviews which is sometimes descriptive but often pejorative. One 1955 tabloid story despairingly noted, "For over two hours this mob of flighty fans swooned, sighed, giggled, wept, howled, whimpered . . ." ⁶¹⁵ As with most reviews of this period the reviewer noted how, ". . .for the capacity audience he could do no wrong" again focusing on his appeal as opposed to his musicianship. ⁶¹⁶ Again outside demonstrators featured signs which read "Liberace Hate League" "Stop Choppin' Chopin" "Liberate Us From Liberace" "Give Us Back Our Moms." ⁶¹⁷

Most concert reviews were variations on the themes of these reviews citing Liberace's amazing ability to play to his audience, his clever humor, occasional jabs at his critics, and primarily female appeal. One of the more interesting patterns during this period besides his growing appearances abroad, were his popularity as an attraction on the west coast especially Las Vegas and Hollywood venues. Liberace's numerous appearances surely contributed to the synonymy of these areas with excess and flamboyance, especially Las Vegas which was reinvigorated in 1956 with the building of an interstate highway. By the early 60s Liberace was one of the city's premier attractions at leading venues such as The Riviera, the Sahara, Caesar's Palace and

⁶¹⁵ "Are Liberace's Romances for Real?" *Private Lives*. March 1955. 24-8.

⁶¹⁶ October 24, 1956 *Variety* review qtd. in Faris, 58. See "Women Weep at Final Liberace Brit. Concert; 'Hate League' Pickets." Rev. of Liberace Concert at Royal Albert Hall. *Variety* 24 October 1956. 2, 67.

⁶¹⁷ Faris, 58.

MGM Grand.⁶¹⁸ However before the 1960s dawned Liberace fought the tabloids and popular press in court, which by the late 50s shifted from jabs at his female audiences and “mama’s boy” image to thinly veiled insinuations of sexual deviance.

Liberace was one of the earliest performers 50s scandal sheets targeted as a sexual transgressor. According to Liberace: A Bio-Bibliography, Liberace was a frequent subject of tabloids being featured in at least 21 tabloid stories between 1954 and 1959 and featured on 24 covers through the 1980s. His tabloid cover appearances included such titles as Confidential, Hush-Hush, On the QT, Top Secret and Whisper. After Liberace successfully sued the London Daily Mirror for libel in 1959 potential publishers of inflammatory sexually speculative articles became more cautious.

Most 50s tabloid stories on Liberace speculated that he was really two men. The “Public Liberace” was a wholesome cozy, family-loving, audience pleasing personality-pianist who endeared himself to female audiences with self-deprecating humor and charming gestures. The “Public Liberace” was a popular entertainer who was the victim of jealous and mean-spirited critics, forcing him to take legal action against those who would slander him. According to the tabloids the “Private Liberace” was a disingenuous sexual deviant who had staged heterosexual relationships and defended his sexuality when his public façade came under attack.⁶¹⁹

⁶¹⁸ Pyron, 266-7.

⁶¹⁹ Some articles champion Liberace as “normal” e.g., “Liberace and His Women.” Sensation. August 1954. 58-62. According to Faris, the article favorably portrayed Liberace as a “normal” man with interests in women and discusses women in his life including Betty White, Selena Walters, April Stevens, 203; In contrast others question his image, e.g., “Are Liberace’s Romances for Real?” Private Lives. March 1955. 24-8.

Tabloids rarely stated he was gay, but insinuated it by suggesting he was among other things, a mama's boy, a man not likely to marry and noted his odd deference toward making a loving long-term commitment to a woman. The significance of such stories was the way they attempted to define public expectations of what male musicians and entertainers, particularly those defined by a wholesome All-American image and with a largely female audience, should be. Explicit heterosexuality and conformity to male gender standards of the era were integral to this definition.

For example a September 1956 On the QT story noted, "Those who have followed Liberace's career closely long ago came to the realization that women will probably never play an important part in his emotional life-with the exception of his mother, of course . . . Despite the thousands of women fawn over him, besiege him at public appearances and even follow him across the country, despite the few publicity-stunt 'romances,' Liberace has never been seriously linked with any woman in a romantic way."⁶²⁰ The article mentioned speculation from columnists regarding Liberace with singer and dancer Joanne Rio and Jane Dulo, but dismissed these as fruitless because nothing materialized from these relationships, notably marriage.

Less than a year later Confidential's July 1957 issue went even further painting Liberace as a sexual aggressor in "Why Liberace's theme song should be . . . 'Mad about the Boy.'" The article accused Liberace of attempting, ". . . to make beautiful music with a handsome but highly reluctant young publicity man" during concert stops in Akron, Ohio, Los Angeles and Dallas, Texas. Drawing on cultural hysteria surrounding homosexuality during the era, the author said, "His victim fought to keep

⁶²⁰ Cullen, John, "Mama's Boy in Curls." On the QT September 1956: 33-5, 54-6.

from being pinned, but he was at a disadvantage. For one, thing he was outweighed,” and “In a matter of moments, it turned into a boxing bout, too, with the press agent throwing desperate lefts and rights at Liberace. The latter, his determination stiffening, merely clung.”⁶²¹ The latter infuriated Liberace, who up to that point was the subject of 18 tabloid stories.⁶²² In retaliation Liberace sued Confidential in 1957 and won \$40, 000 because he proved he was not in Dallas, Texas during the incident not because he disproved the supposed encounter.⁶²³ As Desjardins noted, “. . . his willingness to bring libel charges against Confidential and to participate in an attempt to indict them for criminal libel by the grand jury suggests what is at stake in the 1950s for homosexuality to be considered in terms of libel as an assault on reputation as dignity. By accusing the magazine of libel, Liberace is suggesting their story has threatened his membership in the community.”⁶²⁴ By the late 50s scandal magazines became less sensational as a result of a barrage of lawsuits filed including a 1957 lawsuit brought against Confidential by the film industry and the state of California.⁶²⁵ Liberace’s 1959 trial against the London Daily Mirror, which I discuss below, also contributed to greater reluctance among tabloids to speculate and exploit homosexuality, thus Liberace’s disappearance from tabloids until the 1980s. The 1959 lawsuit also changed the tone of reviews of Liberace in the early 1960s.

⁶²¹ Streete, Horton. “Why Liberace’s theme song should be . . . ‘Mad about the Boy.’” Confidential July 1957: 16-21, 59, 60.

⁶²² Based on Faris’ bibliography.

⁶²³ Faris, 249; Ehrenstein, 100;. “Magazine Fights Liberace Lawsuit.” Hollywood Citizen-News. 18 July 1957;. “Liberace Hits Story Again; Extradition Hearing Set.” Los Angeles Herald-Examiner 19 July 1957.

⁶²⁴ Desjardins, 225.

⁶²⁵ *Ibid*, 207, 226.

Despite Liberace's efforts to downplay "sex" the term "sex" was central to his 1959 victory against the Daily Mirror. By the late 50s Liberace's response to public criticism shifted from grinning and bearing to suing. Liberace's 1957 case exhibited unexpected strength, which prepared him for his most significant negotiation of cultural expectations, personal identity and public relations. Given popular culture's virile gender economy accusing Liberace of being essentially homosexual and less than masculine threatened his career to such a degree that Liberace became militant about his image and reputation. In the late 50s Liberace's career was declining which he believed was the result of perceptions of him as homosexual. Pyron makes the reasonable argument that Liberace's fears inspired him to tone down his act, reject his earlier show and portray a more self-consciously masculine image.⁶²⁶ What is relevant here is *what is at stake* with the façade of a commercialized masculinity. What was initially charming became an affront to many.

In the infamous "Cassandra" case London Daily Mirror columnist Williams Conner who wrote under the "Cassandra" alias harshly critiqued Liberace and insinuated he was a pansexual gender deviant. Conner referred to Liberace as, "the summit of sex—Masculine, Feminine and Neuter. Everything that He, She and It can ever want," a "fruit-flavored . . . heap of mother love," "the biggest sentimental vomit of all time" who slobbers over his mother and winks at his brother. He also called Liberace "calculating candy-floss," a "slag heap of lilac covered hokum" and says "There must be something wrong with us that our teenagers longing for sex and our middle-aged matrons fed up with sex alike should fall for such a sugary mountain of

⁶²⁶ Pyron, 200.

jingling claptrap wrapped up in such a preposterous clown.”⁶²⁷ Conner’s column distilled the essence of more veiled critiques of Liberace—including the notion of him as a calculating hack and mama’s boy—but was most dangerous in its emphasis on the neutered, yet suggestive aspects of Liberace’s performance.

Prior to “Cassandra”’s column numerous journalists certainly made comments alluding to Liberace’s demeanor but none had so explicitly implied the explicit use of asexual (or modular) sexuality to appeal to audiences. In the instance of the article there was language implying sexual gestures pandering to multiple sexual needs and overt allusions that Liberace was gay including the notion of him as “fruit-flavored,” “candy-floss,” “lilac covered,” and a “sugary mountain.” In his autobiography Liberace noted how he and his defense team focused the line about himself as the “summit of sex” because this was a difficult aspect to prove and was a line numerous English papers quoted as a headline including the Northern Echo of Darlington and the Liverpool’s Daily Post.⁶²⁸

Liberace worked very hard to construct and maintain his image as wholesome--sexless, endearing, charming—and feared for his career if sex was associated with his act. Thus his lawsuit was as much a business decision as it was about privacy. Given his numerous tabloid appearances and the constant harsh criticism of his music and performances his commercial appeal was surely beginning to unravel. No surprise that in his autobiography he noted the centrality of a traditional image to his success. He noted, “Certainly my manhood had been seriously attacked and with it my freedom . . .

⁶²⁷ The article’s text is reproduced numerous places including: p.195-6 in Liberace, Liberace: An Autobiography. London: W. H. Allen, 1974; Pyron, 225-6.

⁶²⁸ Liberace, 195.

freedom from harassment, freedom from embarrassment and most importantly, freedom to work at my profession.”⁶²⁹ Liberace knew he couldn’t be perceived as gay or even mildly lascivious if he wanted to maintain his career necessitating overt defense of his sexuality.

The lack of sex appeal in Liberace’s shows was the cornerstone of his broad, appeal became the cornerstone of his trial. Liberace testified in typically self-deprecating fashion that he was not a sex symbol. When his attorney Gilbert Beyfus asked if he gave sexy performances he replied, “I am not aware of it if it exists. I am almost positive that I could hardly refer to myself as a sexy performer. I have tried in all my performances to inject a note of sincerity and wholesomeness because I am fully aware of the fact that my appeal on television and personal performances is aimed directly at the family audience.”⁶³⁰ Though there is a certain irony in man accused of being gay essentially neutering himself, which he did throughout the trial, it deflected attention away from the possibility of *any* sexuality making chaste heterosexuality the default sexuality.⁶³¹ To build on his claim that, “My appeal is to the type of people who want the type of entertainment I give, which is primarily wholesome entertainment not directed to sex appeal,”⁶³² actress Cicely Courtneidge,⁶³³ club owner Helen Cordet,⁶³⁴

⁶²⁹ Ibid, 192.

⁶³⁰ Ibid, 199-200.

⁶³¹ He says to the defense’s lawyer Gardiner, “I have never considered myself a sex-appeal artist.” Ibid, 203; He also says “I consider sex appeal as something possessed by Marilyn Monroe or Brigitte Bardot. I certainly do not put myself in their class!” Ibid, 205

⁶³² Ibid, 208.

⁶³³ Ibid, 213.

⁶³⁴ Ibid, 214, 215.

performer Bob Monkhouse⁶³⁵ and TV producer Don Fedderson⁶³⁶ all attested to Liberace's complete lack of sexual appeal on the witness stand. Liberace won the trial largely on the basis of disproving Connor's claim that he was a sexualized performer of any kind, thus he won on the basis of a certain kind of truth. Though Liberace claimed, ". . . I did not bring this action forward for the sake of money, but principle," this is a partial truth because he filed the suit to protect his career and financial well-being which entailed defending the right to appear gay but not be "outed," to borrow from contemporary parlance.⁶³⁷ Further his assertion that, ". . . if any lesson at all is to be drawn from the whole affair it is that no matter how bad a thing lay look, it can turn out do someone good," which refers to him donating the \$22, 400 award money to cancer research, is equally distorted.⁶³⁸ The lesson Liberace's trial established was that journalists should either not use homosexuality as an accusation and/or if they do, they should avoid targeting major stars with the resources and support to defend themselves. Liberace noted that his case, "was cited as a surrogate for a long list of celebrities"⁶³⁹ but perhaps the most closely related was the lawsuit Elton John filed in the 1980s to defend his sexuality, which I discuss later in Chapter Seven.

Post-Tabloid Liberace Coverage

As I previously noted, in the aftermath of Liberace's libel suit journalists discussed his persona more cautiously and focused more on his skills and consistency as

⁶³⁵ Ibid, 215-7.

⁶³⁶ Ibid, 218-9.

⁶³⁷ Ibid, 233.

⁶³⁸ Ibid, 236-7.

⁶³⁹ Ibid, 193.

a musician and performer than they dwelled on his personal life. In the 1960s, during rock ‘n’ roll’s transition to more teen-oriented, less “threatening” dance music Liberace added choreography to diversify his show. Numerous reviewers referenced a soft shoe routine and him inviting his audience onstage to do “The Twist,” the dance popularized by Chubby Checker’s identically named song. He also became a more sophisticated showman with a more elaborately staged, technologically advanced show. Reviewers now accustomed to his ornate piano playing and eager persona shifted from harsh criticism and recognized his skill and professionalism. During the era his customary warmth and flair became the very definition of showmanship. His appeal to older audiences was constantly referenced, a sign of an established and comfortable audience appeal.

A 1961 review gave qualified praise when it commented on, “. . . topflight showmanship”, but also added it was “rococo and saccharine.” Still, it continued the act that “made him the rage of the matronly set some years back, and it still clicks in spades.”⁶⁴⁰ “Showmanship” was a fundamental buzzword in his 60s act with such references as, “Liberace is showmanship to perfection all the way enhanced by his personable line of chatter, his self-kidding stories, his rapport with auditors, his attention to suiting, the smart staging of the act, and his studied musical score . . .”⁶⁴¹ Other reviews declared, “. . . he’s a hard pro. . . He has that air of surefire professional skill . . .”⁶⁴² and “. . . he’s unerring in programming—and showmanship.”⁶⁴³ Note that

⁶⁴⁰ March 8, 1961 Variety review qtd. in Faris, 70.

⁶⁴¹ September 18, 1963 Variety review qtd. in Faris 73-4.

⁶⁴² May 27, 1964 Variety review qtd. in Faris, 74.

⁶⁴³ June 15, 1966 Variety review qtd. in Faris, 75.

despite the reference to the “matronly set” these reviews refrained from commenting on elements beyond the stage.

No longer a novelty act, Liberace’s style became solid, reliable entertainment. The surest measure of his success was how even with changes to his show, “Whatever he does, he brings on a chorus of aahs from the geriatric set.”⁶⁴⁴ The reviews also noted his newfound production gloss including his costuming⁶⁴⁵ and sophisticated venues.⁶⁴⁶ The elaborate staging, flashy costuming and reliable stage patter defined Liberace’s image for the remainder of his career and a unique aesthetic.

After two decades as a concert draw, in the 1970s Liberace’s critics increasingly isolated the excess, irony and self-deprecating aspects of Liberace’s concerts making him a definitive icon of modern notions of “camp.” A sample of reviews reveals carefully considered, astute observations about the entertainer’s tongue-in-cheek take on American entertainment. One of the more analytic reviewers noted he and his concert are “. . . ostentatious to the point of grandiloquent excess in both costume, presentation and amount of time to put on his gigantic put-on . . . It all amounts to the grandest kitsch . . . because of Liberace’s attitude, and his own lack of pretense amid all of the pretentious nonsense.”⁶⁴⁷ Similarly, other reviewers noted, “It is a display of elegance and opulence so extreme it practically mocks the American dream of wealth and

⁶⁴⁴ March 21, 1962-Variety review qtd. in Faris, 72.

⁶⁴⁵ “a pyrotechnic display of sartorial fireworks”-March, 21, 1962 Variety review qtd in Faris, 71.

⁶⁴⁶ “. . . he makes full use of the stage equipment this swankery has to offer, i. e. multiple lighting, auxiliary wings, revolving center of the stage, and orchestra pit.” - December 6, 1961 Variety review qtd. in Faris, 71.

⁶⁴⁷ July 7, 1972 Variety review qtd. in Faris, 78.

status,”⁶⁴⁸ and that ultimately, “It’s almost all nonsensical, and it’s all wonderful entertainment.”⁶⁴⁹ Several reviewers surrendered to Liberace’s apparently indomitable style with one who asked, “What can be said about Liberace that hasn’t been said before?”⁶⁵⁰ and one who noted outright that his act was, “. . . sheer camp . . .”⁶⁵¹ As the seventies ended, Liberace, who defined excess for a generation, had so seamlessly integrated camp and kitsch into mainstream popular culture, they were his signature and became his legacy.

During Liberace’s final years of performing, 1980-6, critics approached him with a knowing tone and a delicate respect. They solidified his status as the ultimate populist entertainer—a modern P. T. Barnum with a campy twist. One reviewer commented, “. . . it isn’t so much his piano playing as it is his general attitude that keeps the people coming back.”⁶⁵² Another reviewer called Liberace, “. . . his own best huckster, so blatant a Barnum that the audience willingly pays to get into the tent where each act tops that preceding it . . .”⁶⁵³ The creeping sense of status Liberace accumulated did not erase his style but many simply mentioned rather than critique it for example, “. . . Liberace dominated the entertainment with his glittering wardrobe, expertly coiffed hair, bubbly personality and a piano style that was *sequined-fingered corn*.”⁶⁵⁴ Other critics simply coded his style as harmless because of his veteran status, “The lush, self-jibbing routine (‘I’ll just slip into something a little more spectacular’)

⁶⁴⁸ November 8, 1978 Variety review qtd. in Faris, 80.

⁶⁴⁹ November 8, 1976 Chicago Tribune review qtd. in Faris, 79.

⁶⁵⁰ June 30, 1972 Los Angeles Times review qtd. in Faris, 78.

⁶⁵¹ November 7, 1979 Variety review qtd. in Faris 80.

⁶⁵² December 10, 1980 Los Angeles Herald-Examiner review qtd. in Faris, 81-82.

⁶⁵³ July 8, 1981 Variety review qtd. in Faris ,82-83.

⁶⁵⁴ March 1982 Hollywood Studio Magazine review qtd. in Faris, 83; emphasis added.

actually improves with age, the exotic sartorial indulgences and ingratiating style being more acceptable from an older guy.”⁶⁵⁵ In an interesting contrast with his 50s debut, Liberace’s gender transgressive behavior became less threatening and more acceptable as he has aged. More significantly Liberace’s prominence may have been integral to this gradual shift toward a broader acceptance of a wider range of male images in popular culture, truly testing the waters for the camp images of Elton John, David Bowie and Boy George in the 70s and 80s.

Liberace’s celebration of excess also became more central in reviews particularly evident from reviews of his two week stint at Carnegie Hall in April 1984. The Wall Street Journal summarized the phenomenon when it observed, “Liberace has transcended ordinary everyday life to such a stupefying degree that he occupies his own special rhinestone-studded niche in the American Dream.”⁶⁵⁶ Related comments included observations of how, “. . . he trotted out his furs and diamonds and all other examples of his old fashioned love of conspicuous consumption”⁶⁵⁷ the way “Liberace’s unbridled knack for lavish display was made for the grand Music Hall setting . . .”⁶⁵⁸ Liberace created an ephemeral world of glamour for his audiences leading a critic to note how in his concerts, “. . . His is a material version of dazzling splendor. . .”⁶⁵⁹

Liberace’s theatrical glitz and self-deprecating style did not charm everyone, however. The Village Voice was one of the more prominent dissenting voices declaring, “At this point he is a celebrity whose only portfolio is sheer excess, and he deliriously

⁶⁵⁵ May 13, 1981 Variety review qtd. in Faris, 82.

⁶⁵⁶ April 24, 1984 Wall Street Journal review qtd. in Faris, 85-6.

⁶⁵⁷ April 19, 1984 Hollywood Reporter review qtd. in Faris, 85.

⁶⁵⁸ April 17, 1984 New York Post review qtd. in Faris, 86.

⁶⁵⁹ July 2, 1984 New Republic review qtd. in Faris, 86.

overstuffed it with outlandish costumes, Rolls Royces, chandeliers, and jewelry for days.⁶⁶⁰ Indeed during his second two-week run in October 16 through November 2, 1986, Variety, one of the most consistent and supportive reviewers of his concerts grew tired of Liberace and commented, “. . . all the shticks which were once fresh, like his myriad fancy pianos and costume changes with valet, a car on stage, etc., no longer have much excitement . . . there needs to be some rethinking, some reworking, if it’s going to regain the pizzazz it once had.”⁶⁶¹ The Voice continued its chilly reception to Liberace when it noted, “He gives emptiness form— specifically, a crust of rhinestones and fluff. He just can’t overdo his overdoing, since a stage can’t hold the surfeit we long for . . . Certainly he didn’t get rich in the first place for being a piano player of doubtful artistry . . . In Liberace, Camp is made safe for democracy. . .”⁶⁶² In contrast the New York Times jubilantly declared “Liberace, the reigning monarch of American glitz, outdid himself in campy showmanship . . .” including the appearance of the Rockettes, flying onstage attached to a wire and a tribute to the Statue of Liberty.⁶⁶³ Even at the end of his reign, Liberace generated some dissent but his transition from a pariah to a unique and even respected personality and performer subtly indicate his undeniable role as a unique pioneering performer in terms of ushering in persona, introducing camp to broad audiences and simultaneously defining and mocking American excess.

Despite his 1959 victory and disappearance from tabloids, scandal returned to haunt Liberace in two instances tied to his homosexuality. First, in 1982 his former

⁶⁶⁰ April 24, 1984 Village Voice review qtd. in Faris, 86.

⁶⁶¹ October 29, 1986 Variety review qtd. in Faris, 89.

⁶⁶² October 28/1986 Village Voice review qtd. in Faris, 89.

⁶⁶³ Holden, Stephen. “Concert: Liberace and the Rockettes.” New York Times 19 October 1986: Sec. 1, Part 2, 82.

lover Scott Thorson filed a lawsuit against Liberace for extortion and conversion of property, among other charges. Second, when Liberace died on February 4, 1987 his physician Dr. Ronald Daniels reported his death as cardiac arrest brought on by a brain inflammation. But in actuality Liberace died of cytomegalovirus pneumonia as a result of the human immunodeficiency virus or HIV.⁶⁶⁴ Both of these “scandals” shrouded Liberace’s life in mendacity by negating his earlier claims in the 1959 lawsuit that he was not “a homosexual” and feebly attempting to disassociate himself from a gay-male associated virus even as he lay dying. Liberace’s estate remained faithful to Liberace’s steely resolve about his sexuality and filed a claim against Riverside, California. It alleged, “the coroner damaged the late entertainer’s reputation by linking his death the AIDS.”⁶⁶⁵

Both of these developments were headline-worthy because the neo-conservative 80s witnessed a reinvigorated stigmatization toward homosexuality, especially in the wake of the AIDS crisis. Perhaps Liberace’s established reputation and age made him less “threatening” because there was no measurable damage done to his concert-performing despite Thorson’s accusations. The alignment of HIV and AIDS with male homosexuality and intravenous drug use were two stigmas amplified during the era of the “moral majority” and the “drug war” so it was unsurprising Liberace and his management were adamant about separating Liberace from HIV and AIDS which as a social phenomenon fraught with perceptions of promiscuous, irresponsible, deviant behavior which could have sullied Liberace’s reputation even in the final stages of his life. The most uniquely fascinating part of Liberace’s concern for “reputation” was not

⁶⁶⁴ “Coroner Cites AIDS in Liberace Death.” New York Times 10 February 1987: A17.

⁶⁶⁵ “Coroner sued by Liberace’s Estate.” Toronto Star 13 May 1987: B2.

that critics consistently maligned his talent. Rather, Liberace made sexuality central to his “reputation,” overwhelmingly concerned that audiences may not have rejected him if he did not fulfill the image he constructed that they wanted to believe. He saw his public asexuality as central to attracting and maintaining an audience, thus any suggestion otherwise would inspire a complete collapse.

Liberace’s Legacy

Liberace had a clear sense of how his sexual orientation, gender behavior, citizenship and career had to be in sync during the era when he noted in his autobiography, “I had to put myself on the block of public opinion in defense of one of the three most important things in a man’s life . . . perhaps all of them. They are life itself, manhood and freedom.”⁶⁶⁶ Liberace feared that his career was over and in a broader sense that his identity as a provider would be nipped by perceptions of him as a homosexual. Liberace’s investment in fulfilling the era’s definition of “man” addressed popular culture and the broader culture’s push for virility in an era where as Pyron noted, the homosexual is the un-man, lacking in work, achievement and ambition that defined “man.”⁶⁶⁷ Liberace triumphed from the Conner case and achieved perhaps greater popularity than he once enjoyed. By explicitly aligning himself with the broader culture’s beliefs about sex and gender he allayed people’s suspicions, based on his persistence and articulation of conservative gender ideology.

Liberace’s understanding of his audience’s expectations was central to his individual queer evasive maneuvering, which allowed him to be witty, charming,

⁶⁶⁶ Liberace, 191.

⁶⁶⁷ Pyron, 227-8.

intimate and spectacular without having to get personal, but also as a commercial strategy influential to rock. Liberace understood audiences' desire for someone they could seemingly identify with and relate to and by yoking together his Midwestern pastoralist narrative and non-threatening sexuality he used the tools at his disposal to create himself. Liberace's key gift was his ability to create warmth, intimacy and by focusing on surface appreciation and deflecting attention away from the self. Liberace publicly adored his audience but likely recognized an unspoken contract where audiences could adore entertainment and entertainers but did not desire that the perceptions framing their entertainment were disrupted. Through everything from sparkling rococo costumes, to elaborate set decoration to cozy rapport, Liberace always denied himself a self to his audiences. This queer evasive strategy established a pattern popular culture has continuously repeated where performers have downplayed their personal subjectivity for a performed subjectivity.

Johnny Mathis

In April 1956, black pop crooner Nat "King" Cole unerringly became political. Synonymous for his 40s swinging jazz trio and as one of the premier crooners of the 50s he was a genuine crossover phenomenon popular with black and white audiences. As an entertainer he was a prominent black role model but remained silent on political issues such as segregation. However during his April 1956 Birmingham, Alabama concert to a segregated white audience, in the midst of budding attacks on rock 'n' roll as a corruptor of whites and the Montgomery bus boycott, his soothing style could not

diffuse the era's harsh racial tensions. During the concert six white men rushed the stage, knocked Cole off his piano stool and dragged him off the stage. The mild-mannered Cole did not react with anger but questioned why whites would attack him given his silence on political matters. Many blacks were outraged Cole was so passive in his response. What Mr. Cole learned that unfortunate day is that he did not have a choice—a black man singing to a white audience at that time was a transgressive, political act.⁶⁶⁸

I can only speculate how Cole's experience affected an up-and-coming singer his music directly influenced, Johnny Mathis. Though Mathis was a crooner in the "King" Cole mode, he began his recording career in 1956 when rock 'n' roll instilled the fear of miscegenation and acculturation to such a degree that the White Citizens' Council formed in Alabama to protest "bop and Negro" music.⁶⁶⁹ As a young crooner he was as vulnerable as Cole and black male rock 'n' rollers like Chuck Berry and Little Richard to such hostility. Whatever differences separated these men musically, their shared racial identity as black men singing to white audiences required a cautious approach lest they violate well-established racial and sexual taboos in their performances. Like Liberace Mathis had to tread lightly around the fact that he was a gay man, but he had the added layer of racial stigma which required him to downplay his sexuality to avoid career and physical violence. The balancing act of race and sexuality are integral to interpreting Mathis' persona through his career. Mathis has a more demure, reclusive personality than many of the performers I discuss, rarely

⁶⁶⁸ Ward, Ed, "Don't Lose That Kid," Rock of Ages, 129; Gillett, 17-18; Brian Ward, 129-34.

⁶⁶⁹ Gillett, 18.

discusses his personal life and since the 1980s, rarely gives interviews. Though he is less accessible than some of the other musicians in this study there are discernible aspects of his career which suggest a very self-conscious approach—marked by subtle rejections of traditional expectations which gradually gave way to more suggestive but still guarded statements and behaviors—to his presentation of gender permeated by his awareness of longstanding taboos.

As a gay African-American pop singer with a largely white following Johnny Mathis had a precarious balancing act to maintain in the 1950s. Mathis had to finesse his way around potentially troublesome racial and sexual terrain to appease his audiences and maintain his identity. To appeal to white audiences his management urged him to sing in a soft, romantic style and avoid any association with the black-associated rhythm and blues and jazz genres that informed his musical sensibilities. Yet, in order to survive beyond the 50s pop moment he, or someone, had to assert his connection to black culture. To survive Mathis became his own sexual censor careful to avoid potentially sexualized performing rather than singing, which muted the sexual threat black male performers represented and deflected away from any semblance of a sexual or political life.

Authenticating Johnny

Ebony magazine is an arbiter of community standards and has consistently engaged in rhetorical gestures that highlight Mathis' conformity to notions of black "progress" by emphasizing aspects of Mathis' life which affirm a traditionally masculine image of heteronormativity. Mathis, who came out in 1982, was the subject of cover stories in 1956, 1965, and 1976. A close reading of these stories reveals several

tendencies to align Mathis with black heteronormativity. Mathis played along but gradually asserted his queer identity in subtle ways, especially outside of the black press.

First, Ebony self-consciously highlighted Mathis' "authentic" blackness by portraying him as a black role model who exemplified the economic aspiration, related to the belief in "racial uplift" which defined black life throughout the 20th century and gender normalcy. Second, Ebony's articles simultaneously reified Mathis' presumed heterosexuality and suggested he was queer by presenting him as incomplete and underdeveloped because he was unmarried. Third, by the mid 60s Mathis subtly alluded to his distance from traditional heterosexual romance and later acknowledged his homosexuality with little consequence. I argue that black cultural tolerance for Mathis' "open secret" in the 50s-70s, opened a space for future "queer-vague" or sexually ambiguous singers.

First, Ebony aimed to authenticate Mathis to black audiences by positing him as a role model. The authenticating strategy emerged during a heightened political investment in assimilation and acceptance among black Americans. The two most prominent 50s Black male jazz/pop musicians were Billy Eckstine and Nat "King" Cole. For example blues musician B. B. King recounted to Jimmy Scott's biographer David Ritz how, "Back then those deep-throated male voices—Billy Eckstine and Nat Cole—were dominating."⁶⁷⁰ Throughout the 50s Ebony published numerous feature stories on Cole, Eckstine and Mathis. The stories were interesting in that Ebony focused on Cole and Eckstine's interior lives including their spouses, children, friends

⁶⁷⁰ See p. 66 in Ritz, David. Faith in Time: The Life of Jimmy Scott. New York: Da Capo Press, 2002.

and home lives. Such stories defined them as financially successful and traditional family men making an obvious “contribution” to black culture--raising strong black families. In contrast Ebony’s coverage of Mathis almost suggested that he had no interests or acquaintances outside of his career and parents. Despite Mathis’ virtually absent sexual self, Ebony subtly used gender to assert Mathis’ connections to Black life. Through careful choices Ebony assured readers that Mathis conformed to 50s notions of “men”—and focused on his financial independence, competitive high school athletic background, and close family ties.

Ebony’s framing of gender in the text and photos of their Mathis articles vacillated between presenting Mathis as a traditional heterosexual man and images signifying queerness. Ebony’s stories marked him as potentially queer, because he was young, style conscious, artistic and, most importantly, unmarried. These were all signs of queerness in 50s America. There were numerous subtle signifiers in the written text and photos that suggested his gender deviance. For example the December 1957 debut Mathis story featured a photo of producer Mitch Miller chatting with several black-suited white male executive-types and Mathis standing behind Miller drinking from a cup.⁶⁷¹ The caption read, “**At recording session**, Johnny sips coffee while bearded Mitch Miller and recording executives talk shop. . . .”⁶⁷² The caption juxtaposed Mathis, who is Black, young and a singer, against the ostensibly “serious” male executives who were white, middle-aged business people. While the male executives talked shop, Mathis drank coffee, deferred and was a non-participant. “Talking shop”

⁶⁷¹ See p.30 in “Boy With the Golden Voice: Young Johnny Mathis sings way to \$100,000-a-year success.” Ebony December 1957: 28, 30, 32.

⁶⁷² Ibid.

typically describes a male conversational ritual about business or sports and usually excludes women. Mathis' physical separation positioned him as an outsider to the masculine communication which surrounded him. The same article ended with Mathis virtually proclaiming himself as the proverbial "mama's boy" when he said, ". . . I wanted to spend Christmas at home with my family. I promised Mama I'd be home for Christmas."⁶⁷³

The magazine offset these potential queer signifiers by emphasizing masculine signifiers such as Mathis' financial success and athletic past. Because Mathis emerged in both a virile era and during the early years of the Civil Rights Movement, Ebony predictably emphasized Mathis' identity as a cultural role model. Unspoken assumptions that black performers were cultural role models was a unique expectation that heightened pressure for Mathis to appear "normal" and distinguished him from his white peers of the era. Ebony also focused on his financial and managerial independence from former manager Helen Noga and questioned his bachelor status.

A March 1965 story on Mathis' split from Noga described him as, "often shy, quiet and sometimes child-like" which infantilized and even feminized him.⁶⁷⁴ The story also contrasted Mathis with the domineering Noga and noted, "Once early in his career when Mathis wore a wristwatch which Mrs. Noga did not feel was masculine enough in its design, she did not bite her tongue in telling him so; Mathis did not bite his in reply. 'You can say what you want to,' he retorted, 'but it's my watch.'"⁶⁷⁵ The

⁶⁷³ Ibid, 28

⁶⁷⁴ See p. 100 in Robinson. Louie. "Johnny Mathis: Millionaire With Problems." Ebony March 1965: 99-104.

⁶⁷⁵ Robinson, 100.

wristwatch incident performed several functions: it showed Noga's concern over Mathis' image especially in terms of gender; it showed Mathis' indifferent/casual attitude about his choices; and it also showed that Mathis could defend himself, as any "man" should.

Ebony's March 1976 follow-up article went further in its focus on Mathis' post-Noga career. The article recounted Mathis' lawsuit against Noga and featured Mathis owning up to his subordinated history under Noga, "We came to a point in our relationship where I was bored and tired of living with someone else . . . I was a man now; when she found me I was a boy. I had also decided that I wanted a choice in matters that pertained to my career and personal life. I didn't have a choice when I was with Helen."⁶⁷⁶ This was a loaded series of statements because it almost implied a romantic relationship and, more importantly, reiterated the article's thesis that he was now, finally at 40 a "man." Neither Mathis nor the article's author ever explored what the specific personal and career issues he was referring to were but there was a slight suggestion of a queer subtext that some force was preventing his full exploration of a self.

Mathis complemented Ebony's careful deflections from his queer signifiers through his resistance to revealing personal information. Though it is arguable what constitutes "personal" information, social, sexual and familial relationships generally constitute contemporary notions of the personal. Mathis has always been reluctant to claim the identity of a performer, which allowed him to avoid taking personal risks.

⁶⁷⁶ See p. 48 in "Johnny Mathis: His Own Man Now: Popular vocalist learns to manage his own affairs." Ebony March 1976: 44-52.

Though he was primarily a romantic balladeer he resisted the identification and did not identify as a particularly romantic person. Mathis was selling the *idea* of romance rather than the *experience*, perhaps because his own existed on the periphery of the romantic ideals of his era. Thus, the audience could swoon to Mathis without engaging with the notion that he had a sexual identity.

Mathis on Marriage

During the 1960s when sexual behavior made significant shifts, reflected in rock 'n' roll's cultural impact, Mathis became more explicit in his cynicism toward romance and defended his bachelorhood. Like many stars of his era Mathis' representatives occasionally hired young women to pose as escorts, lest Mathis appear as a conspicuous eternal bachelor in the post-virile era. For example the March 1965 Ebony article noted model Beverly Gillohm's then \$40,000 lawsuit against Mathis. Gillohm was hired to accompany Mathis at the Seattle World's Fair for photo ops and according to Mathis, "I did none of the foolish things people in my profession would do by trying to court affection. I thought people would want me to go to the World's Fair and be photographed with a pretty girl. I never asked anything of Beverly that wasn't a mutual agreement between both of us. She was angry that this association didn't last longer. I found out she wasn't the girl for me. But my intentions were very honorable."⁶⁷⁷ Mathis vaguely alluded to pressure from some force outside of himself to appear with a woman for a photo op, illustrating the sex/gender expectations of the time. His tone was quite perfunctory; there is nothing leering about his comment or remotely indicative of an interest beyond the "job," despite the fact that Gillohm ostensibly represented a

⁶⁷⁷ Robinson, 102.

heterosexual beauty ideal as a model. By declaring that Gillohm was not his type Mathis made a partially honest statement allowing him to be sincere without disclosing his sexual orientation.

The same article noted a Las Vegas altercation where a man who perceived Mathis to be arguing with his wife assaulted him. Rather than retaliating, Mathis left town though he was supposed to perform. The Vegas incident left Mathis sounding either like a peacekeeper or very cowardly. The article quickly followed this moment of “weak” behavior with a discussion of Mathis’ romantic future with the “opposite” sex noting, “. . . Johnny maintains that he still envisions a future life with at least one of its members. He is not, however, rushing the moment of matrimony.”⁶⁷⁸ The sequencing seemed to reassure readers that despite Mathis’ dismissive attitude toward Gillohm and his easily defeatable nature, he was still a traditional man, thus heterosexual. However *Mathis’* discussion of his marriage plans was functional and detached. “Of course I’m going to get married. But when it happens, I’ll probably just meet somebody and that will be it.”⁶⁷⁹ Such words did not resemble those of an impassioned heterosexual desirous of marriage; but did not overtly mark him as queer. Such ambiguity was a recurring aspect of his public comments during this era. The fact that Mathis said, “Of course” indicated the taken-for-grantedness toward marriage at the time. When one considers numerous stories linking Liberace with women and Johnnie Ray’s staged marriage to Marilyn Morrison (Chapter Five), Mathis’ blasé attitude about an inevitable heterosexual union was perfectly rational for a gay man the era. It was also notable that Mathis said “somebody” not a woman or girl. He continued on a more cynical vein, “I

⁶⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁷⁹ Ibid.

don't think you can expect too much out of marriage. Just wait and enjoy the surprise of marriage. My *salvation* as far as marriage is concerned is I've just been too busy."⁶⁸⁰

Mathis seemed to be having a candid internal dialogue where he weighed the socially-constructed joys of marriage with his personal doubts about it. His reference to work as "salvation" from marriage pressure was a blunt admission that suggested his disinterestedness in the union was more of a personal preference than an overt political statement. Again, Mathis' overall tone disdained conformity with a casual, rather than declarative candor, which was fundamental to Mathis' negotiation of queerness.

During the mid-to-late 70s in press interviews Mathis disowned any semblance of himself as a romantic person and dismissed love and romance. In a June 1974 interview he said, "'I think love chose me,' he says. 'I didn't choose it. It just happened. I don't know why I ended up being the love song singer.'"⁶⁸¹ The article also noted, "His love life was traumatic, moving from the ridiculous to the sublime—full of fantasy. 'I've finally gotten over all of my fantasies, he says, 'like falling in love, being spurned, and of course getting revenge and not seeing your lover as miserable as you.'"⁶⁸²

A 1978 article⁶⁸³ interview conducted on the heels of his number one pop duet with Deniece Williams, "Too Much, Too Little, Too Late" was even more revealing of Mathis' romantic cynicism and hinted at a burgeoning openness about his sexuality.

⁶⁸⁰ Ibid; emphasis added.

⁶⁸¹ See p. 30 in Renee, Lauren. "Johnny Mathis: 'I Always Sang For My Father.'" Encore, June 1974: 30-2.

⁶⁸² Renee, 31.

⁶⁸³ Windeler, Robert. "Happy." People 23 October 1978.

The article noted the Los Angeles YMCA and L. A. Health Clinic for Gay People as two Mathis-sponsored charities, Mathis commented, “‘It’s where you go to get your VD shots,’ he explains. ‘It’s a great thing for young people-not just gays-who are afraid to go to their parents.’” Pictured below Mathis plays pool with a muscular, younger white man the caption identified as Wayne Safine, his personal assistant. The juxtaposition of Mathis’ charitable giving to gay-iconic spaces and the peculiar photo of he and his assistant could easily tip readers off that Mathis’ real life sharply contrasted with his stage persona. Such ironies were elucidated when the article noted that, “‘As for romance, ‘I’d rather sing about it,’ Mathis says. ‘I’m as romantically inclined as anyone, but I’ve never had a relationship that’s lasted longer than a few months. . . The situation I’m most comfortable in is single and single-minded. Marriage is sharing. I want to do exactly what I want.’”

There was a subtext of choice, freedom and even the suggestion of promiscuity that belied the image Mathis initially established through song without overtly declaring anything about his orientation. Indeed throughout the 70s and through the early 80s Mathis adopted the single-minded philosophy. In another 1978 interview he declared, “‘I like to spend a great deal of time by myself. I want to be alone to balance off the rest of my life, where I have to be in the company of someone all the time.’”⁶⁸⁴ In the authorized biography Johnnie, Mathis discussed his love of aloneness and privacy, was adamant that his career came first and said his life revolved around family, home, cooking, and golf.⁶⁸⁵ More recently in an October 2002 interview the interviewer noted

⁶⁸⁴ See p. 89 in Shindler, Merrill. “Mathis: too little just in time.” US 11 July 1978: 69, 71.

⁶⁸⁵ See p. 151-2 in Jasper, Tony. Johnnie. London: W. H. Allen & Co. Ltd, 1983.

that Mathis was homosexual but, “Like a proper Victorian, he would probably like to be known as a ‘confirmed bachelor’ and leave it at that” and quoted Mathis’ belief that, “‘Music is what I do best, so that’s what I should espouse. I will leave other causes to people whose talent is making speeches.’”⁶⁸⁶ The interesting aspect of Mathis’ quotation was the near-defensive, seemingly outdated implication that one would only publicly discuss homosexuality as a radical, political topic rather than a mere personal reality. Perhaps he has had to do so much masking of his identity that silence and caution were interwoven into his sexual identity.

Mathis was part of a generation of performers for whom privacy and discretion were hallmarks of savvy queer entertainers, such as Liberace. Mathis also emerged at a time when African-Americans were arguably more apt to treat *perceived* gender and sexual deviance among performers as “open secret” aberrations. Mathis is one of many African-American performers, including Little Richard, and 70s disco singer Sylvester for whom this is true. The disco era through the 80s era of androgynous performers, such as Prince and Michael Jackson and crooners such as Vandross, ushered in sexually androgynous performers black music audiences broadly accepted. However, the late 80s/early 90s assertion of masculinist hip-hop culture has turned black hypermasculinity into a palatable commodity fetish. The industrial acceptance of hypermasculine black expression dominated contemporary black radio, video channels and record label rosters. Such narrow notions of black masculinity eroded cultural discourse by polarizing modes of gender expression. Hostile and stagnant notions of racial

⁶⁸⁶ Shelden, Michael. “Sometimes, I feel like a kid again.” Daily Telegraph. 14 October 2002: 17.

authenticity replaced the casualness of the “open secret” which tolerated many queers of color even in veiled form. Such trends threatened to erase black queer male expression from popular culture outside of comic ridicule and moral scapegoating. It also marginalized femininity and gender complexity from the black public sphere in a visible and influential forum. If Mathis and those he inspired in the 70s through early 90s represented the end of an era of casual tolerance and mobility for queer black performers, one wonders how burgeoning black queer performers could find a place in the contemporary black popular gender economy.

Mathis and the Closet

In the liner notes of Mathis’ 1993 boxed set, Johnny Mathis A Personal Collection, numerous pages featured slender columns that addressed Mathis’ experiences as an athlete, stage singer/performer and master chef respectively. These personal highlights were interesting because they revealed much about Mathis without ever alluding to his life beyond his career and hobbies. Within these seemingly benign activities we could extract that Mathis preferred his personal distance to maintain his professional illusion, a strategy surely tied to the era of his public commercial emergence. Though Mathis reportedly came out in a 1982 US magazine interview, he has never overtly aligned himself with any major gay political or cultural movement, though perhaps his status as a gay singer was enough.⁶⁸⁷ A 1993 interview illuminated Mathis’ demeanor:

⁶⁸⁷ See p. 136 in Studer; 34-5 in Kirk, Kris. A Boy Called Mary: Kris Kirk’s Greatest Hits. Richard Smith, ed. Brighton: Millivres Books, 1999; 104-5 in Hadleigh. Each

Campy around his chums but publicly shy, Mr. Mathis has always been evasive about personal matters. Queried about his love life by People magazine in 1978, he responded: 'I'd rather sing about it. I'm as romantically inclined as anyone. But I've never had a relationship that's lasted longer than a few months.' When US magazine revealed his homosexuality in the early 80's (he says he was quoted off the record), it barely caused a ripple; apparently few people had doubted it or even cared. But since then he has barred all questions about his sexuality, breaking that barrier only inadvertently. 'I was always embarrassed by being called a romantic singer,' he admits. 'You spend all your time being a man, and then they put you in this romantic category. It bothered me when I was kid. But you go through it, and then you accept what people perceive you to be.'⁶⁸⁸

Rather than simply branding Mathis as "closeted," it is important to consider the 50s context of his origins. His potential to be seen as a sexual and cultural threat to white female audience members, his potential distance from black music audiences and the subtle queer indicators he projected, had to be managed to survive the racial and sexual pressures framing the 50s commercial music industry. The commercial momentum he achieved in the late 50s and early 60s tapered off in the seventies, though

author references Mathis' coming out interview in US though I have yet to locate the article.

⁶⁸⁸ Gavin, James. "A Timeless Reminder of Back Seats in '57 Buicks." The New York Times 19 December 1993: Sec. 2, 36.

he scored occasional hits in the late 70s and early 80s. Today, Mathis is primarily a concert performer who only occasionally releases albums. Commercially Mathis has little at stake to lose by more overtly aligning himself with sexual politics or discussing his sexuality. His reluctance seems less about “the closet” than a genuinely discrete personality and the twin negotiations of racial acceptance and sexual normalcy defining his life.

Conclusion

As I noted in the Introduction, it is easy to dismiss pre-liberation era public figures as closet cases. But a closer look reveals the way a variety of contexts shapes a public and private sense of identity. Liberace and Johnny Mathis were not “out” during their commercial peaks; no such concept existed for queer people. Both musicians had to contend with sexualities in the process of becoming cultural, political and historic. Through culture they conveyed images which surely signified queerness to those paying close attention, broadened possibilities for masculine expression in popular culture and often demonstrated the boldness in subtle acts of resistance to norms. After harsh criticism and tabloid ridicule journalists and critics had to acknowledge Liberace’s unique genius, and clearly his negotiation of gender and sexuality were fundamental to his art. Mathis crafted a public persona in the context of a racial struggle for equality, and though his sexual identity was less salient for his image, there is an unspoken sense of comfort and acceptance which is quite remarkable given what we know about the period he began his public life.

Chapter Five: 1950s Queer Non-Conformists

Where Liberace and Johnny Mathis epitomized non-threatening asexuality and politeness, encompassing the opposite spectrums of exaggeration (Liberace) and self-effacement (Mathis) Johnnie Ray, Esquerita, and Little Richard presented images and performances so androgynous, colorful and uninhibited they seemed otherworldly. Each of these performers inhabited a liminal netherworld where they risked gender transgression and forged new paths of gender possibility, unfulfilled in rock until the gender bending and stylized camp of David Bowie and Elton John. None of these performers experienced significant commercial success from recordings beyond the 1950s. But, they established the possibility for non-conformists to secure cultural attention and commercial footing in the music industry beyond the virile era. Early 1950s crooner Ray was a white singer influenced by black music whose appeal to teenagers made him critically suspect, R&B singing style forecasted the rock 'n' roll boom to come and whose sexuality haunted him throughout his career. Esquerita was an obscure R&B pianist usually understood as an influence on Little Richard. He was likely too wild to gain a mass audience. In contrast his student Little Richard had the talent, style and *strategy* to win over his audiences during rock 'n' roll's "golden years" from 1956-9. Each of these artists, especially Ray and Little Richard may have given audiences a veritable hangover of new sounds, images and personae it did not recover from until the 1970s when their influences clearly surfaced in places such as David Bowie's cleverly sculpted image and Elton John's piano theatrics.

Johnnie Ray

Imagine for a moment that your name is Steve, Ethel Merman is your mother and the following dialogue transpires:

Molly: Steve I want to talk to you.

Steve: Sure mom.

[Both walk to the next room]

Steve: Are you disappointed in me too? The way dad is?

Molly: You can't blame your father Steve. The way you threw it at him. You know, just cold, without any build up. He wasn't looking for it. He had different plans for you.

Steve: But there's still Katy and Tim.

Molly: Yes but you're the first born. There's always something about the first. Life's funny. You raise a kid backstage, you teach him every trick you know about singing and dancing, how to make people laugh and then one day, this. Why? How come?

Steve: I don't know Ma. It's inside me. It must have always been there.

[Molly gets up and turns her back]

Molly: It's like losing you Steve. Oh I know not really. But—

Steve: But you are disappointed.

Molly: No, I'm not disappointed Steve. It's a wonderful thing. I'm just not used to it yet. But I'm proud. Very proud.

[Both hug]

Steve: Ma.

This dialogue, excerpted from the 1954 musical There's No Business Like Show Business⁶⁸⁹ and occurred between queer 50s pop singer-turned-actor Johnnie Ray as Steve Donahue and stage diva-gay icon Ethel Merman as his mother Molly Donahue. The scene played out like a prototypical contemporary coming out scene from a time when only women publicly “came out” as debutantes, though in closed quarters gay

⁶⁸⁹ There's No Business Like Show Business. Dir. Walter Lang. 20th Century Fox, 1954.

men cautiously came out among their peers as part of gay society. The shame, disappointment, and perversity of Steve's choice was actually about his coming out as a priest to his showbiz parents, but represents the way queerness infiltrated post-WWII popular culture in many unexpected ways.

Johnnie Ray was one of the most popular singers of the early 1950s who succeeded commercially in spite of his challenges to dominant belief regarding sexual orientation, gender behavior, and racial prejudices. Ray was born to an Oregon farming family, and after a childhood accident became partially-deaf, which added to his already eccentric persona. From the late 40s as a concert performer to his 50s recording career he parlayed his persona into a distinctive blend of blues phrasing, pop crooning and histrionic stage dynamics. A handful of biographers, historians and music critics have identified Ray as a key link between Sinatra-style crooning and Presley-style rock 'n' roll.⁶⁹⁰ But few scholars or historians have genuinely explored how his unorthodox demeanor and style inspired an unusual set of culture industry responses in the virile era of conformity. From record companies who editing his overt referencing of black blues music and torch singers as influences to extensive scandal sheet-coverage of Ray's sexuality, Ray's career is instructive of the sex, gender and racial ethos of his era. Ray and his handlers anticipated many of the challenges inherent in marketing a queer, black

⁶⁹⁰ For example See p. 116-7, 206, 235-6, 276 in Whiteside, Jonny. Cry: The Johnnie Ray Story. New York: Barricade Books, 1994; p. 809 in George-Warren, Holly and Patricia Romanowski, eds. Pareles, Jon, Consulting Editor. The Rolling Stone Encyclopedia of Rock & Roll. New York: Fireside, 2001; Johnnie Ray entry by Ken Burke, p. 394-5 in Knopper, Steve, ed. Musichound Lounge: The Essential Guide To Martini Music and Easy Listening. Detroit: Visible Ink Press, 1998.

culture-loving,⁶⁹¹ androgynous sounding crooner in the early 50s but failed to sustain his commercial momentum. Ray's style briefly captured the public's attention but his unorthodox style fell out of commercial favor by the late 50s.

Given Ray's "open secret" queer sexuality in the early 50s entertainment industry the movie scene allowed Ray to do something he was not able to openly do himself during his brief reign of early 50s commercial prosperity. Thus this scene could be read in hindsight as a posthumous public coming out for a singer whose sexual difference made him stand out among his 50s peers in the entertainment industry. Though Ray did not technically "come out" during the 1950s and shifts in musical taste and scandal diminished his commercial momentum, he infused popular culture with an emotional intensity and fervency which signified queerness in relation to broad definitions of masculinity and popular images of masculine types.

Building from scholars who have critiqued dismissals of pre-Liberation *politics*, such as John D' Emilio, I would add that those who would dismiss pre-Liberation *popular culture* overlook the wealth of significations circulating in the era. Christopher Nealon's exploration of pre-Liberationist "foundling" queer culture and emphasis on the historical worth of the fragmentary, islanded or anecdotal utterance particularly inspires my reading of Ray's pre-Lib era queer expression. Using Nealon I read Ray's queer infiltration culture along the "fault lines" rather than critiquing him along a progressive

⁶⁹¹ 1951's "Cry," topped both charts, making him the only white singer to top the "black" charts between 1946 and 1956, Starr and Waterman, 181. Ray wrote a story entitled "Negroes Taught Me To Sing: Famous 'Cry' Crooner Tells What Blues Taught Him" in the March 3, 1953 *Ebony* p. 48, 53 which I discuss later in this section.

or liberationist grain.⁶⁹² This approach avoids simply reducing pre-Lib culture to an antiquated “closet” culture.

In this section I argue that Ray’s body-in-performance was an index of queer emotional expression that pervades early 50s popular music culture. The novelty and emotional release Ray offered audiences coupled with his carefully managed image allowed him to openly access and utilize public space to add queer textures to the music and performance culture of his era. To explore his transgressive body and performances I address the post-WWII shift from big band singing to solo crooners and Ray’s radical concert demeanor. I conclude by describing attempts to balance his image and its relation to queer mobility.

Post WWII-Music Industry

Two contexts facilitated Ray’s commercial rise. First, Johnnie Ray emerged when big bands were declining in mainstream popularity and solo singers, especially romantic crooners, were on the rise. Ray succeeded by virtue of appearing to be a crooner but offering something more distinctive.⁶⁹³ Among male singers the “crooning” aesthetic stemming from the 30s style of Bing Crosby and Russ Columbo, further solidified in the 40s and 50s by Perry Como and Frank Sinatra, dominated pre-rock male singing. Ray’s emotional style and unusual phrasing conveyed a more androgynous sound than the Bing Crosby-inspired crooners who embodied the more traditional masculine croon of the post-big-band era (i.e. Frank Sinatra, Gordon McRae,

⁶⁹² Nealon 22-3; D’ Emilio, 240.

⁶⁹³ For discussions of the death of big bands and rise of crooner era see Miller, Flowers in the Dustbin, 29; Gillett, 5; Garofalo, Rockin’ Out, 71-3; p. 187 in Friedwald, 187; Starr and Waterman, 157-9.

Johnny Hartman) Ray's affinity for wearing stage makeup and expressive style-- comprised of everything from falling to his knees to actually crying onstage—marked him as a gender outsider compared to John Wayne-style grit, Sinatra-style swagger and Ward Cleaver-style reserve.⁶⁹⁴ Early rumors that Ray was a female impersonator and/or “a fugitive from a Kinsey report” further indicated the extent of his gender deviance.⁶⁹⁵

Second, Ray also reached commercial prominence when popular music was increasingly geared toward younger audiences, often referred to as teens, teenagers and/or bobbysoxers and a divide between adult and youth music was emerging.⁶⁹⁶ Though Ray's audience included teenagers and older cabaret patrons many critics used his appeal to teenagers to jab at his musical credibility. One of the most prominent and influential voices tracing the youth phenomenon was New York Times' music critic Howard Taubman who devoted a column to Johnnie Ray. Leaping from aesthetic criticism to amateur sociology Taubman viewed Ray as a man whose style, “speaks for young people beset by fear and doubts in a difficult time. His pain may be their pain. His wailing and writhing may reflect their secret impulses. His performance is the

⁶⁹⁴ Whiteside, 65, 81.

⁶⁹⁵ See p. 112 in Sylvester, Robert. “Million-Dollar Teardrop.” Saturday Evening Post 26 July 1952. 30, 112, 114.

⁶⁹⁶ Friedwald discusses this shift as a result of record company executives gaining prominence over musicians and aiming for lowest common denominator taste. See p. 186-7 and 220-2. For a discussion of the post WWII shift toward teenage consumerism see 64-71 Ward, Ed, Geoffrey Stokes and Ken Tucker. Rock of Ages; See. 173-4 Ibid. for discussion of 50s novelty record trend aimed at teenagers. The development of Top 40 radio and *Your Hit Parade* provide forums for the shift away from Tin Pan Alley toward catchy, more ephemeral pop songs. See Miller, Flowers in the Dustbin, 53-7; Garofalo, Rockin' Out, 100-1; Rock of Ages, 156-7; Palmer, Rock & Roll, 16-7 notes the lightweight nature of early 50s pop music.

anatomy of self-pity.”⁶⁹⁷ Taubman viewed Ray as a “shouter” who was part of a trend of male crooners and shouters whose singing and songs “are expressing something for the youngster that is all but inexpressible to him or her.”⁶⁹⁸ Taubman stigmatized Ray as a novelty act who exploited youngsters’ angst by over emoting. However, I argue that Ray’s emoting is worthy of praise and attention precisely *because* he broke through the wall of reserve previously taken for granted among mainstream white pop male singers and music critics.

Alongside the crooners Johnnie Ray emerged from the racially mixed “black-and-tan” nightclub circuit. With his emotive 1951 hit “Cry” and numerous hits during the early to mid fifties.⁶⁹⁹ Ray injected mainstream white pop singing with elements of R&B inspired phrasing and intensity. If the post-WWII period perpetuated such narrow notions of masculine expression how did Ray achieve national prominence?

Ray’s Concert Performances

First, Ray, like his contemporary singer and pianist Liberace, brought an apparently welcome dose of emotion and vulnerability younger and older audiences, especially females based on press accounts, seemingly starved for externally traditional males unafraid to subvert tradition and emote onstage. Liberace biographer Pyron offered a useful frame for understanding Ray when he described how Liberace ushered

⁶⁹⁷ Taubman, Howard. “Cry With Johnnie Ray: His Success May Depend on More Than Singing.” New York Times 27 April 1952: X7.

⁶⁹⁸ See Taubman, Howard. “Crooners, Groaners, Shouters and Bleeders.” New York Times Magazine 21 November 1954, 27.

⁶⁹⁹ Ray’s 1951 rendition of “Cry” was the only song by a white singer to top the pop and R&B charts between 1946 and 1956. See p. 81 in Whitburn, Joel. Top Rhythm & Blues Records 1949-1971. Menomonee Falls, Wisconsin: Record Research, 1973.

in a new sociology of performing where people pleasing served as relief from sexual alienation and personal isolation. He linked this sociology with Liberace's appeal to female fans who idealized Liberace as a proverbial "Good Son" or "Model Man" because his style, sympathy and romanticism contrasted with dominant male images of the 1950s.⁷⁰⁰

Ray, along with pre-rocker Liberace, queer rock era singers Johnny Mathis and Little Richard, and the feminine sounding balladeer Little Jimmy Scott expanded the acceptable range of permissible male musical expression in the 1950s. Ray's chief mode was his explosive concert performing style. Trade magazines and newspaper and magazine critics were chief sources that documented concert performances and audience reactions to performers. Throughout the 1950s Ray's concerts were legendary for his unusual physical and emotional displays. Most accounts focused on his intense voice, agonized appearance, and extroverted stage movement. His particular appeal to teenage female fans usually referred to as "bobbysoxers," and the emotional fervor he inspired also dominated reviews. Ray's commercial success with pop and R&B record buyers and bobbysoxer and cabaret audiences suggested a new direction in 50s white pop challenging race, age and expressive boundaries.

Prior to his major commercial fame Ray developed a reputation as an extraordinary concert and club performer who regularly sells out performing venues. For example, an early Billboard magazine story noted his budding audience appeal by recalling his growth from record-breaking sellout club dates in Ohio and Detroit to his

⁷⁰⁰ See p. 79 in Pyron, regarding Liberace's "sociology of performing." For a discussion of Liberace's female appeal see Pyron, 170-2.

1952 engagement at the prestigious Copacabana.⁷⁰¹ As Ray gained fame male reviewers and critics chiefly described Ray's extroverted performing style by surveying how his body and its movement signify emotiveness and vulnerability. Ray's voice, gestures and stage movement provided a map of his unusual style which reviewers often contrasted with other male singers. Ray's voice, gestures and audience were an index of what appears unusual or queer to male observers many of whom found him disturbing, in contrast to his admiring audience, critics usually described, often in condescending language, as predominantly female. Critical tendencies that spurn the body as a form of inferior depth and expression reflect enduring philosophical biases dichotomizing the mind and body. Elizabeth Grosz explored and critiqued the mind/body binary along gender lines when she noted how the association of man and mind and woman and body created a gender hierarchy that devalued the feminized body. Thus the (feminized) body, a term which applied to Ray's body-centered performances, "is implicitly defined as unruly, disruptive, in need of direction and judgment, merely incidental to the defining characteristics of mind, reason, or personal identity through its opposition to consciousness, to the psyche and other privileged terms within philosophical thought."⁷⁰² Criticisms of Ray's body-driven style forecasted future criticisms of rock 'n' roll performers as threats who primitively wielded their bodies.

⁷⁰¹ "The Ray Story: \$90 to \$1, 750." Billboard 6 October 1951: 1, 45.

⁷⁰² See pages 3-24, especially p. 3 in Grosz, Elizabeth. Volatile Bodies: Toward A Corporeal Feminism. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994. Though Grosz refers to female reproductive capability as a central factor in the philosophical gender hierarchy I am interested in the notion of emotion as irrational and thus inferior expression.

Vocally, in contrast to crooners Ray's singing disturbed smoothness, rhythm and emotional reserve. An early Life magazine profile noted in contrast to Frank Sinatra and other crooners Ray, ". . .has renounced restraint. He pants, shivers, writhes, sighs and above all cries. He is America's No. 1 public weeper."⁷⁰³ The tag of public weeper seemed innocent enough but eventually inspired a range of tags describing Ray's unusual emotiveness including the "Nabob of Sob" and "Million Dollar Teardrop" and Stan Freberg's novelty song "Try." Though much of this was seemingly innocent fun and did not overtly harm his career it illustrated the tentativeness and uncertainty which informed cultural responses to Ray's unusual sound. Upon hearing Ray, Howard Taubman said, "He sings like a man in an agony of suffering," by virtue of a voice which ". . . shakes and quavers thunderously. Occasionally, his misery sinks to a whisper, which makes for effective contrast, but soon its wracking pain is roared out in blasts of sound."⁷⁰⁴

Ray's quavering voice and flair for vocal dynamics suggested an effeminate fragility and dramatic flair counter to the cool of crooners, the smirk of cultural rebels and the demure organization man. Though these criticisms stopped short of labeling Ray as deviant or queer, they indicated a type of violation couched as agony, misery and pain. Drawing perhaps from his reported love of jazz and his R&B singing roots it was not too surprising that according to one writer "In his singing, he breaks rhythm constantly,"⁷⁰⁵ and Variety described him as a "wailer" and "full-throated"⁷⁰⁶ Ray

⁷⁰³ See p. 100 in "Johnnie Ray Sings and Sobs His Way To a Quick Fortune." Life 24 March 1952: 99-102.

⁷⁰⁴ Taubman, New York Times, X7, p. 1.

⁷⁰⁵ Sylvester, 112.

⁷⁰⁶ See Rev. of Johnnie Ray concert at the San Souci. Variety 24 June 1953. 61.

clearly did not rely on subtlety or measured cool in his performance but fully and unapologetically “gave his all” vocally relying on flamboyant dynamics and unusual breaks in rhythm and tone to engage audiences.

Ray also enacted a unique male vulnerability through open gestures and tearful onstage displays. A 1952 Life magazine teaser headline noted how, “a tearful new singer leads his young followers to the brink of frenzy.” Above the headline were photos of young women waving autograph books in their hands reaching for an unidentified man to sign them. Below was a similar picture without the man. The opening paragraph complemented the photos and established his audience by defining Ray as, “The young man on the previous page who is being buffeted by a female tidal wave . . .” On the adjacent page Ray, photographed during a performance, appeared incredibly tender and fragile with his head angled to the left, his eyes closed and mouth partially open as if crying, and his left hand clutching his upper chest. These words and photos deftly visualized the way Ray subtly expanded notions of what defined a male idol by showing an idol who possessed heteronormative appeal and simultaneously defied codes of masculinity by appearing vulnerable.⁷⁰⁷ One of the ways Ray drew in his audience was through which gestures suggested a need for connection. Taubman described this when he noted, “His arms shoot out in wild gesticulations and his out stretched fingers are clenched and unclenched.”⁷⁰⁸ and Robert Sylvester went deeper when he noted, “He throws out his arms in desperate supplication and reaches out open hands for some lost personal illusion.”⁷⁰⁹ Building from Sylvester, we can ask what was

⁷⁰⁷ p. 99-101 in Life 24 March 1952.

⁷⁰⁸ Taubman, New York Times, X7, p. 1.

⁷⁰⁹ Sylvester, 112.

lost, what was Ray reaching for? Ray's signature move seemed to serve as a type of longing for embrace, a plea for love and approval safely bathed in showmanship that transcended mere ritual. His willingness to open up his body and welcome his audience into his emotional aura can also be read as an erotic gesture which broke cultural taboos by inviting the audience to symbolically enter and partake of his body.

Ray also moved beyond restrained displays of tenderness associated with crooners by immersing himself to the point of grimacing and tears. According to Sylvester, "He grimaces as though in pain. He punches the piano with a frustrated fist. He can shed real tears."⁷¹⁰ Taubman supplied an even more vivid picture though he questioned Ray's sincerity. "Johnnie Ray accompanies his singing with a visual performance that is equally anguished. His face glistens with dew. Some observers say it is tears; some insist it is perspiration. It could be a little of both. His hair falls over his face. He clutches at the microphone and occasionally behaves as if he were about to tear it apart."⁷¹¹ Whether or not Ray was sincere or really crying were less germane than the way such movements and displays allowed him to balance acceptable male behavior, violence and anger, with stereotypically effeminate behavior, crying and by association, lamenting. Ray shrewdly vacillated between playing the role of traditional male teen idol by showing passable examples of gender normative behavior and giving listener unawares a discernible taste of how "normal" looking people can express extraordinary things, notably exposing an internal emotional state in a lucid, entertaining but no less honest form.

⁷¹⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹¹ Taubman, New York Times, X7, p. 1.

Finally, Ray broke the fourth wall barrier and directly used his body to court audience involvement and perhaps approval. At least two review/commentaries noted his movement from the stage to the audience in a display that resembled the rituals of a religious ceremony more than a pop music concert. Variety said, “Warming up the house . . . using a hand mike as he tours the floor, moving down among the customers hand-kissing and kidding with the distaff side for plaudits.”⁷¹² Sylvester noted that, “If he feels in the mood, he will run through the nightclub or theater audience, kissing girls and shaking hands with male patrons.”⁷¹³ Again, kissing women was gender normative as was shaking hands with men. But by moving through the audience Ray perpetuated a somewhat challenging notion that he and his audience were not separate but existed on a continuum, united by a need to connect and feel extraordinary. By presenting himself as one of the audience he resisted the modernist ethos among many performers of the era who self-consciously defined themselves as virtuosos and “artists.” Ray’s audience contact again located the extraordinary in the ordinary.

The combination of Ray’s voice, body movement and audience interaction endeared him to audiences. For example Sylvester noted Tallulah Bankhead, Marlene Dietrich and columnist Dorothy Kilgallen as fans along with his bobbysoxer audience.⁷¹⁴ Variety noted, “the squealing and whimpering of the dateless femmes”⁷¹⁵ Taubman had already noted his teen appeal but also noted “Those in the know contend that the teen-age set is the bulk of his public. But there were not many teenagers in the

⁷¹² Variety 24 June 1953: 61.

⁷¹³ Sylvester, 112.

⁷¹⁴ Ibid. Ray and Killgallen later engage in a romantic relationship which Whiteside documents throughout his Ray biography Cry.

⁷¹⁵ Variety, 24 June 1953: 61

Copacabana”⁷¹⁶ Despite forecasts of limited appeal Ray sustained his intensely emotional appeal to female concert listeners well into the mid-50s. For example an April 1955 review of a London Palladium concert noted, “Opening was extremely exciting with singer evoking ecstatic squeals and hysterical fervor from the excited bobbysoxers. Youngsters smashed the stage door barrier and police were called in to control the crowds outside the theatre.”⁷¹⁷ Though undoubtedly Ray’s audience featured male listeners, female fans seemed to dominate his concerts. Less than a month later a review of an Edinburgh concert noted how Ray, “was mobbed by his fans” as he arrived in Scotland, “thousands of squealing youngsters milled around” his hotel arrival and during a balcony rendition of “Cry,” “an estimated mob of over 1,000 teenagers and older femmes applauded in the street below.”⁷¹⁸

Ultimately Ray’s style grabbed attention because he deployed his voice and body in novel ways which provided a refreshing contrast. But his disruptive style evoked something more resonant among audiences. Male critics unable to reconcile his challenges chiefly expressed frustration and disconnection from Ray. In a critique of Ray and the industry that spawned him Taubman referred to him as, “another of a series of phenomena thrown up by a frenetic branch of the entertainment business. He will have his fling; his followers will weary of him; the talent hunters will dig up a new sensation to fill the incessant call for novelty . . .”⁷¹⁹ Americans were so conditioned to believe that people expressed themselves in such limited ways, largely according to

⁷¹⁶ Taubman, New York Times, X7, p. 1.

⁷¹⁷ See Rev. of Johnnie Ray at the London Palladium, London Variety 27 April 1955: 54.

⁷¹⁸ “Edinburgh’s Fans Mob Johnnie Ray at Airport.” Variety 18 May 1955: 2.

⁷¹⁹ Taubman, New York Times, X7, p. 1.

gender, that an emotive man's sincerity easily fell into doubt thus Taubman's question, "Is Johnnie Ray sincere about this agonizing in public? He could be, and he need not be. It is enough that he gives the appearance of sincerity to his audience. If his listeners are sent, he is doing his job well."⁷²⁰ Referring to Ray's stage performing style The Saturday Evening Post said, "As a nightclub and theater entertainer, he is startling and disturbing to put it mildly."⁷²¹ Another example of puzzlement toward Ray's style was a Variety review of a Ray performance at the Sans Souci in Montreal, Canada in which Ray threw a microphone. The reviewer concluded, "Ray still evidences plenty of show savvy but the offhand, independent attitude needs tightening for overall impact."⁷²²

Ray's "independence" infuriated critics who saw his style as a shallow put-on. But, what seemed like savvy showmanship was an act of emotional and performative courage in an era when performers were expected to conform and remain emotionally contained. Ray spilt over, actively sought approval, and courted connection. His tendency to perform "as though his life depended on it" and willingness to express pain "queered" male singing by breaking with musical conventions of rhythm, phrasing and tone and fully integrating a gender subversive visual intensity to his performance. On record Ray was quirky and offbeat compared to the popular crooners of his era. However, based on published reviews and commentaries, his live performing style most accurately captured his pent-up energy and desire to connect through emoting.

Through concert performances Ray embodied some of the emotional needs of his audiences of teens and cabaret sophisticates by challenging performing conventions

⁷²⁰ Ibid.

⁷²¹ Sylvester, 30.

⁷²² See Rev. of Johnnie Ray at the San Souci, Montreal Variety 24 June 1953: 61.

and expanding their capacity to engage with performers. Ray seemed to convey the emotion, anxiety, insecurity and vulnerability the culture scorned and discouraged in men and dismissed in women to his audiences. It is important to document the challenge he posited to emotional staidness and the implicit suggestion that there were alternative modes of public gender expression because these challenges asserted queerness in popular culture. His ability to integrate palpably subversive notions of gender propriety into what seemed like a mere singing performance exceeded simplistic notions that he exploited his audiences' emotional needs. If anything Ray affirmed and represented personal and audience needs which, along with Columbia Records' considerable promotional power, partially explained his commercial appeal and popularity as a concert draw.

Ray's Official Biography

Ray and his managers' ability to shrewdly balance his eccentricities with an image of normalcy was the second reason Ray survived the WWII gender aftermath. From the outset of his career Ray's managers, surely aware of his androgynous image and queer sexuality, encouraged him to establish an identity congruent with public expectations. The most overt move gesture toward normalcy was his rushed, arranged 1952 marriage to Marilyn Morrison.⁷²³

Despite Ray's childhood awareness of his queerness he attempted marriage and went overboard in an infamous comment that Morrison was, "the first woman to make

⁷²³ See p. 102 in Whiteside. Ray describes his marriage to Morrison as "unworkable" in a 1976 interview, see Smith, Jack. "Johnnie Ray: 'Cry' Is No Sad Song." L. A. Times 1 November 1976: Part IV, 1.

me feel like a man.”⁷²⁴ In an interview with Ray biographer Whiteside, Ray’s best man noted the important symbolism of the marriage for Ray’s image and another Ray friend/attendee noted that getting married was something Ray did for publicity and business purposes.⁷²⁵ Ray’s marriage was a big media event that temporarily certified him as a gender conformist though it resulted in divorce.

An interesting piece of post-divorce publicity surfaced in the 1955 fanzine/pamphlet The Complete Life of Johnnie Ray which attempted to curb the symbolism of Ray’s divorce. The pamphlet featured a four page spread of wedding photos including Ray carrying Morrison over the threshold and the newlyweds’ arms entwined drinking champagne.⁷²⁶ Like many images of the 50s it was an iconic ideal that rang completely false in light of Ray’s queer identity and Morrison’s “role” as a “beard.” Further in the pamphlet, rather than focusing on their divorce the book showed the divorced couple hugging and said they saw themselves as “just buddies,” which more accurately described their marriage as well.⁷²⁷ The pamphlet also featured more normalizing images such as Johnny’s visit to his parents’ Rosenberg, Oregon farm. Such photos look staged and Ray seemed infantilized, and perhaps less “threatening.” The images of farm life (Ray feeding chickens and carrying firelogs), family (Ray singing at the piano with his mother and sister, Ray’s father waking him up, Ray at the dinner table), religion (Ray playing hymns on an organ) and quaint images of Ray at his alma mater and drinking in a soda shop all crystallized Ray’s image as a quintessential

⁷²⁴ Whiteside, 127.

⁷²⁵ Whiteside, 128 and 134.

⁷²⁶ The Complete Life of Johnnie Ray. New York: Pocket Magazines, Inc. 1955, 26-9.

⁷²⁷ *Ibid*, 36-7.

All-American young man.⁷²⁸ Finally the pamphlet featured images of female fans displaying their affection for Ray and a photo of him entertaining his female fans.⁷²⁹ The pamphlet was small in scope but represented the quest for normalcy that quickly followed Ray's initial fame.

A rare concert souvenir program published in the early 50s (no copyright date is listed but likely 1951 or 1952) described Ray's childhood background and commercial ascent. The program was interesting in its emphasis on hallmarks of cultural normalcy and downplaying his R&B roots. The program's normalcy hallmarks include comments that he had, "the usual American small-town upbringing," his early musical talent including his picking out "Rock of Ages" on the family piano at age two-and-a-half, the lean years until his "big break" and his status as "a dutiful son" and "deeply religious" person. The program also featured an April 17, 1952 New York Daily Mirror story in which Ray discussed his desire to marry and bear children, his desire to emulate Perry Como's spiritual and domestic life, his family and religious background and the role of faith in fueling his emotiveness.⁷³⁰ The program skimmed over aspects of Ray's life that might have appeared seedy to a mainstream pop audience. Souvenir programs aim to preserve an image and ideal but by default often betray reality by strategically highlighting certain details over others.

Ray's roots as an outsider prefigured his career as a pop singer. Musically Ray's chief childhood musical influences were gospel, hillbilly, jazz and black popular music.

⁷²⁸ Ibid, 44-51.

⁷²⁹ Ibid, 52-5.

⁷³⁰ See pp. 1-7 in Untitled Johnnie Ray "Souvenir Program" from Hugo A. Keesing Collection at University of Maryland, College Park Performing Arts Library. Carlyle Music Publishing Corp.: (unspecified date; likely 1951 or 1952).

Bluesy pop singer Kay Starr and jazz singer Billie Holiday particularly influenced Ray.⁷³¹ In contrast to official materials, Billboard magazine and Saturday Evening Post profiles noted Ray's roots as a performer on the Midwest club circuit including Detroit's "black-and-tan" or racially mixed Flame Bar. Ray developed his chops as a blues-oriented singer under the tutelage of blues singer Maude Thomas and years of singing at the Flame bar where he developed a rapport with numerous Black musicians and endears himself to multiracial audiences.⁷³² The Post article noted, "It was here, in all probability that Ray developed his phrasing and vocal style which are reminiscent of so many top-flight Negro blues singers."⁷³³

Ray's official early materials also allowed listeners to avoid making connections between his playing with black performers and before black audiences and possible cultural attitudes. After his initial hits Ray proclaimed his attitude toward segregation in a self-penned March 3, 1953 Ebony story entitled "Negroes Taught Me To Sing." Ray boldly expressed his outrage at Jim Crow laws and related to blacks when he noted, "Coming up the way I did—the hard way—and having been almost laughed out of existence ever since I was a skinny, unwanted kid, I know how it feels to be rejected,"⁷³⁴ and ". . . they have an innate sympathy with the underdog and a delight in seeing a handicapper come from behind."⁷³⁵ Though some of Ray's statements were simplistic what was most notable was the significance of a white mainstream pop singer

⁷³¹ Whiteside, 29, 32 and Guild, Hazel. "Johnnie Ray on Presley: Giving Record Industry Greatest Shot-in-the Arm." Variety 21 August 1957: 49.

⁷³² See Martin, Joe. "Case History IV: Ray Credits Those Who Helped Him Up." Billboard 26 July 1952: 16, 19 and Whiteside, 49, 51, 54.

⁷³³ Sylvester, 112.

⁷³⁴ See p. 48 in Ray, Johnnie. "Negroes Taught Me To Sing: Famous 'Cry' Crooner Tells What Blues Taught Him." Ebony March 1953.

⁷³⁵ Ibid, 56.

overtly identifying with and praising Black culture and his disapproval of racial segregation. By focusing on Ray's white pop influences, rural background, marriage and overall desire to conform Ray's early official biographical materials told a distorted but historically savvy set of half-truths story that allowed Ray to record and perform without openly stirring up overt suspicion beyond light-hearted mockery and surly reviews. Ray's constructed image did not entirely erase his eccentricities or the ridicule but balances out his image. Only later in the 1950s do scandal sheets and arrest cover-ups gradually begin to tarnish his image.⁷³⁶

Ray's Queer Mobility

Ray's eccentric performing style garnered unusual attention largely because of its novelty as well as his empathy and the expressive freedom he models. The shrewdly crafted persona his handlers initially constructed enabled him to survive amidst criticism vulnerability to criticism as a result of his differences. The symbolic value of Ray's veiled but discernibly queer performing style and his contained image demonstrated the ways queer performers obtained access to the mainstream public sphere in the 50s through the safety of performance. Ray's gender subversion was particular to music in terms of anonymity and pervasiveness. 1950s film and television images overtly stereotyped and stigmatize queer characters or excluded them altogether. But popular music is a more personal idiom according performers more control over the style and content of their performances and more room for spontaneity.

⁷³⁶ See for example Williams, Jay. "Is It True What They Say About Johnny Ray?" Confidential April 1953: 37-9, 63-4 and Dudley, Francis. "Knock, Knock! Who's There? . . . Why Did Johnnie Ray try to break down Paul Douglas' door?" Confidential November 1955: 23, 46.

No amount of biographical distortion contained Ray's queer spirit and thus opened a space for him to be novel, popular, queer and accepted among the general populace and to signify to queer audience members. He represented the ubiquitous, boundary-crossing presence of queer space in a public setting in which queer and non-queer people have adopted a public (queer) gaze, as defined by scholar Jean-Ulrick Dèsert, at a seemingly queer-hostile time.⁷³⁷ Johnnie Ray's openly queer honeymoon with the public informed the historical work of D'Emilio, Loughery and Nealon who have all argued in different contexts that a pre-Liberation queer culture existed in covert forms that slyly signified to queer people and integrated queerness into daily living. Disorganized, decentralized, fragmentary social contact through face-to-face interactions which transformed into self-conscious networks, spaces and identities characterize much of the contact between queer Americans. Alongside such interactions queer engagement with literature, theatre, film, TV and music in live and recorded forms were also modes of identity formation and community building.⁷³⁸

Mass media fostered a burgeoning sensibility and sense of community solidified in the Liberation era and beyond. These forms provided a sense that scattered

⁷³⁷ See p. 20-23 in Dèsert, Jean-Ulrick. "Queer Space." Queers in Space: Communities, Public Places, Sites of Resistance. Eds. Gordon Brent Ingram, Anne-Marie Bouthillette, Yolanda Retter. Seattle: Bay Press, 1997: 17-26.

⁷³⁸ D' Emilio and Loughery both point to the possibility of seemingly "closeted" popular culture in signifying presence and behavior for queer people. For example Loughery effectively documents discusses the central role of literature for marginal populations focusing on queer-themed literature's shaping a collective reality for queer people. He and D' Emilio also address the way apparently "negative" 60s news magazine commentaries and stories on homosexual culture may aim to admonish the general populace about homosexuality, but can also inform queer people of relatively safe geographic, cultural and professional spaces. See D' Emilio, 139 and Loughery, 258. See Introduction for a discussion of Nealon's model of analysis.

individuals were part of an unnamed, but tangible sense of heritage. Those possibilities for bonding and connection existed in cultural forms pre-dating formal political organizing negate attempts to confine pre-Stonewall/Liberation culture to the paradigm of the “closet.” Subtle forms of gay/lesbian culture shaped individuals and held the possibility to connect individuals through mutual taste culture. Bonding, especially among the marginal, fostered points-of-connection that generated cultural and political organizing.

Ray was not overtly “political” on gay and lesbian rights, which was understandable at a time when the notion of marginal sexuality as a minority identity was in a fledgling state. Yet his queer performing style signified and resonated with many potentially liberated queer listeners who may have recognized themselves in his gender transgressive style. Ray’s appeal to multi-racial listeners and consumers, bobbysoxers and older cabaret audiences defied the presumed logic of the pre-Liberation era and was a type of unprecedented gay crossover that defied “the closet” label by placing what were traditionally shameful, male displays of emotion and vulnerability, at the center of recording and performance for mainstream consumption. Where Liberace (barely) contained himself initially offering the façade of personal restraint offset by rococo piano playing and clever humor, Ray overtly rejected restraint creating an odd tension with cultural expectations of his era.

In the early 50s Johnnie Ray redirected something he could not openly say in his performances and his one film role, by using his body—voice, gestures, movement, facial expression to paint a vivid portrait of queerness that is traceable and distinct. The novelty and release Ray offered coupled with his carefully managed image allowed him

to openly access and utilize public space to add queer textures to the music and performance culture of his era. Johnnie Ray's seemingly isolated performances comprised influential, unique examples of historical emotion emblematic of the permissible gender boundaries of post-WWII popular culture.

Popular Pop Singer 'Exposed!': Scandal Sheets "Out" Ray

The queer mobility Ray demonstrated in the early 1950s indicated a vaster range of possibility for sexual deviants than more facile portraits of the 50s might suggest. The underbelly of his initial access, besides negative reviews, were creeping suspicions that his image was too polished and perhaps he was overexposed. Ray's high profile in 50s scandal sheets was a significant source of irritation which contradicted the image Ray's handlers conveyed and possibly undermined Ray's initial momentum.

The careful promotional materials which defined Ray's image suggested an almost desperate feeling among Ray's managers that he Ray needed overt displays of conformity to survive, a notion Ray's perpetual presence in "scandal rags" reinforced. Hollywood Life, Confidential, Low Down and Hush Hush published a series of stories from the mid-50s through the 60s, a period that overlapped rock 'n' roll's commercial emergence, that "accused" Ray of being a social misfit and gender deviant. In the midst of the rock 'n' roll "sexual revolution" some writers asserted that Ray's press coverage and career opportunities dwindled because the rumors of his queerness grew too strong.⁷³⁹

⁷³⁹ Whiteside, 148-9; 162; 196-200; 273; 292; Ehrenstein, 161.

1950s scandal sheets are difficult to obtain perhaps because they are not “legitimate” journalism or canonical literature limiting their appeal to libraries and archives. Two Confidential stories on Johnnie Ray I obtained combined several techniques Desjardins and Goodman outlined as methods scandal sheets used to obtain information and protect themselves from libel. Notably, they built from previous public information to appear credible and from there developed several potentially harmful sensational assertions about Ray.

One of Confidential’s many 50s stories on Ray was Jay Williams’ April 1953 story entitled: “Is It True What They Say About Johnny Ray?: Everybody Wondered What America’s Crybaby Meant When He Said ‘She’s The First Woman Who Ever Made Me Feel Like A Man!’” The story focused on Ray as a gender deviant possessor a virulently contagious sexuality and supports this by presenting him as: 1) a *sexual late bloomer* incapable of satisfying his wife.⁷⁴⁰ The quotation in the article’s title stemmed from a quotation Ray made to the press at the time of his wedding announcement 2) a *pre-fame female impersonator* who occasionally indulged⁷⁴¹ 3) a *gender misfit* who suffered from gender confusion and cashed in on his abnormality, a claim it supported by quoting “eminent psychiatrist” Dr. Louis Berg who characterized Ray’s feminine hysteria in his performances as the outgrowth of being surrounded and affirmed by women⁷⁴² 4) a *powerful celebrity* whose press agents and publicists distorted his “drag” past and arrest records for morals charges and public lewdness, referred to as alcoholic rages and feminine fits of anger, but that actually involved solicitation and disorderly

⁷⁴⁰ See p. 38, 63 in Williams, Confidential April 1953.

⁷⁴¹ Ibid, 39, 63.

⁷⁴² Ibid, 39.

conduct charges. Of Ray's criminal past the article said that despite newspaper reports suggesting an arrest record, "there are no records on police blotters to support these stories" and though Confidential spoke with policemen they got, "plenty of off-the-record comment" but "In all cases, the complaint had been smoothed over."⁷⁴³

The thread running throughout the story was the notion that Ray's popularity could be harmful. Couched in the language of contagion and panic the article quoted Berg who said, "Once presented to an audience, the phenomenon very often generates a mass effect much like the frenzied religious revivals which have astonished the globes more phlegmatic citizens since the days of the cave man."⁷⁴⁴ It supported this assertion with a quotation from a Philadelphia concert attendee who recounted the hysteria during a Ray concert.⁷⁴⁵ Visual elements of the story supported the article's notion of Ray as a solicitous type on the opening page. The top half was a photo of him, possibly taken from a fan magazine or magazine article, that featured a close-up photo of Ray with lips pursed, eyes closed and the phone up to his mouth.⁷⁴⁶ On the next page there was a photo of Ray in front of a police station with Ray flanked by policemen signing autographs for teenagers. Beneath the photo ran the caption, "Admiring teen-agers greet Ray after release from Boston police station. Despite frequent brushes with law, Ray's name is mysteriously absent from official arrest records." This was a very pointed juxtaposition of text and image framing Ray as a distorted figure and a hidden threat to his large and easily influenced young constituency, a notion the photo amplified by

⁷⁴³ Ibid, 38.

⁷⁴⁴ Ibid, 39.

⁷⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁴⁶ Ibid, 37.

presenting him as the idol for American children.⁷⁴⁷ The article was a shrewdly manipulative piece that posed as both a sympathetic portrait of a troubled musician and as an exposé of corrupt industry practices.

The Confidential treatment of Ray continued throughout the decade. Francis Dudley's November 1955 story "Knock, Knock! Who's There? . . . Why Did Johnnie Ray try to break down Paul Douglas' door?: It was just 3:00 a. m. in London's swank Dorchester Hotel, when a slim, handsome boy slipped out of room 420-in his birthday suit-and swayed over to room 417" defined Ray as a man-hunting predator who vainly attempts to seduce a well-known 'real man,' though this is merely a hook to "out" Ray and expose his contrived image. According to the article Ray, "that strange Yankee creature who'd made millions out of being maudlin in front of a mike" stood "stark naked and plainly three sheets to the wind" at Paul Douglas' door "Lunging inside the room he made a determined grab for Douglas."⁷⁴⁸ In response the "husky and he-mannish" Paul Douglas who "was strictly for girls" violently resisted Ray.

To amplify the text a doctored photo of Ray with his arms stretched out in front of him on one page faced Douglas standing in a doorway with a cigar in hand blankly staring out on another page prefaced the article. The article continued by slyly noting the possibility of Ray's fans' shock that, "Their idol . . . the tenor with a million tears . . . making a pass at a man? Never!"⁷⁴⁹ and stretched a thread the April 1953 story establishes, that Ray has a criminal past. Leaping from this aside, Dudley claimed the Douglas incident fell into line with Ray's June 5, 1951 Detroit arrest for "accosting and

⁷⁴⁷ Ibid, 38.

⁷⁴⁸ See p. 23 in Dudley, Confidential November 1955.

⁷⁴⁹ Dudley, 23.

soliciting” and noted how, “The sob singer’s managers and agents made every effort to cover up Ray’s blunder.”⁷⁵⁰ Dudley concluded by reiterating the dishonesty shrouding Ray’s career when he noted, “his advisers have never been able to hide from insiders the facts about Johnnie” and how, “Every now and then—as Paul Douglas discovered to his surprise—the girl in Johnnie Ray just has to come out.”⁷⁵¹ Though a briefer passage than the 1953 story, this article more overtly accused Ray of being a sexual deviant without calling him gay, homosexual or queer and used factual evidence with a location and a date to sound credible. By reiterating the spin control his managers had the article highlighted the distorted nature of Ray’s image.

These two stories represented a small but likely demonstrative portion of articles centered on Ray as a sexual deviant. The scandal sheets’ calculated perception that an audience would be interested in sexual deviance indicated their hunger for something extraordinary and unusual in a time of conformity. They may not have approved but were fascinated by difference because it was so lacking in popular culture. The articles’ shrewd emphasis on revealing previously hidden information enabled them to carry out their mission to provide an alternative to studio and press generated notions of celebrities as vice-free.

Ray’s Legacy

The dominant style of music may have been changing by the mid-50s when scandals and shifts in taste began to diminish Ray’s commercial appeal but homophobia and genderphobia remained an integral part of the music industry’s structure. Ray’s

⁷⁵⁰ Ibid, 46.

⁷⁵¹ Ibid, 46.

eccentric stage style and bluesy phrasing were only permissible in a virile and explicitly heterosexual performer, one who could synthesize black music styles without necessarily foregrounding the culture spawning them. That performer came in the form of Elvis Presley, who many have speculated was the beneficiary of “black-sounding” white vocalists such as Frankie Laine and more obviously Johnnie Ray.⁷⁵² Presley, whom Ray defended and befriended, was a more shrewdly packaged and promoted version of the eccentric, blues inspired, outsider archetype Ray established. Whiteside noted Presley’s borrowing of Ray’s stage demeanor and repertoire and questioned why Ray’s influence on rock has been so overlooked.⁷⁵³ A handful of album guides and rock histories have referenced Ray but he was usually grouped with Columbia’s other pre-rock pop singers Tony Bennett and Rosemary Clooney⁷⁵⁴ or ridiculed⁷⁵⁵ but rarely cited as a major influence, though he essentially established the template for many white solo male rock stars to come.

Ray’s queerness, his overt indebtedness to Black music traditions, and his fascination with the pop showbiz culture of the pre-rock era (movie divas, torch singers, New York cabaret circuit) made him dangerous because his image debunked several notions fundamental to traditional rock histories. Notably, Ray’s ascent and decline illustrated that “sexual revolution” was a misnomer when referring to rock ‘n’ roll’s impact because heterosexism and gender conformity remained the key structures of the

⁷⁵² Miller notes that perhaps Presley’s resemblance to Laine and Ray inspires Sun Records’ interest, 72; Friedwald, liner notes, p. 4, Johnnie Ray: 16 Most Requested Songs.

⁷⁵³ Whiteside, 206, 232, 382; Whiteside, Tony Bennett comments 235-6; Whiteside, 401.

⁷⁵⁴ Garofalo 153.

⁷⁵⁵ Gillett, 6.

music industry governing the sound, look, persona and public images of popular singers. Rock 'n' roll did not significantly alter this, as I explore in post-50s queer musicians' careers.

Second, Ray's career reiterated that while rock 'n' roll was a synthesis of multiple musical traditions--white rock 'n' rollers who have benefited from Black influenced music traditions--their experience has been largely compartmentalized with rare connections to black people and culture as opposed to records. Ray's affiliation with black people did not erase the tradition of music minstrelsy that has primarily benefited white performers financially. But, it did suggest the possibility for cultural connections in the pre-rock era that many white rock 'n' rollers have never breached, suggesting the racial revolution rock ushered in was more of a *stylistic* rather than *cultural* shift.

Third, as much as rock historians dismissed pre-rock pop, rock music was not just a synthesis of blues and hillbilly/country genres whose musical qualities were often romanticized as a metaphor for a noble underclass. Pre-rock show business pop music--melodic, romantic, emotive music stemming from the Broadway stages, Manhattan cabarets and Hollywood studios--was integral to rock's sound and the rock industry's structure. Black jazz singers, black blues singers, white blues-inspired singers and torch and cabaret singers influenced Ray. His dramatic phrasing and intense stage demeanor fused together seemingly disparate traditions in a cohesive whole in a way rock historians have often overlooked in favor of a simplistic narrative that rock 'n' roll rose from the underbelly ashes of white hillbillies and black blues players. Rock 'n' roll was easily "co-opted" into the music industry (record labels song publishers, etc.) because it

existed on a continuum with pre-existing musical styles, promotional strategies and executive power. To acknowledge Ray's career is to debunk many of the historic tropes defining rock 'n' roll's foundation and evolution. It is common lore that Elvis Presley wanted to be the next Dean Martin as much as he wanted to be a rockabilly or R&B singer. Perhaps if we consider his resemblance to Ray and his differences rock's promise and failure becomes clearer.

1950s Coda: Esquerita and Little Richard

Little Richard (nee Richard Penniman) was one of the first musicians inducted at the inaugural 1986 Rock and Roll Hall of Fame induction ceremony and is a staple of virtually all historical discussions of early rock 'n' roll. Contemporarily he is a frequent interview subject and pervasive celebrity conveying the mix of wildness and charm that made him famous. Though his place in rock 'n' roll history is assured, he has long felt slighted by an industry he was at the forefront of and is not shy about saying so. For example, at the 1987 Grammy Awards ceremony (held March 2, 1988) Little Richard confronted the rock industry with a legendary moment Variety referred to as the, "most spontaneous and electric moment of the night."⁷⁵⁶ During a presentation of the Best New Artist category he lamented, "I have never received nuthin'! You never gave me no Grammys and I've been singing for years! I am the *architect* of rock 'n' roll! I am the *originator*!"⁷⁵⁷

⁷⁵⁶ Qtd. on p. 428-29 in O' Neil, Thomas. The Grammys: The Ultimate Guide to Music's Highest Honor. New York: Perigee, 1999.

⁷⁵⁷ *Ibid*, 429.

Richard's moment, met with an ovation and probably a few chuckles, was surely fueled as much by guilt from industry neglect as admiration for his chutzpah. When one considers Little Richard's sizable influence on rock 'n' roll *and* rock's sound, style and culture his seemingly egotistical moment was completely justified. Rock historians and critics inevitably *mention* Little Richard but he is usually not the subject of book-length academic analyses nor defended as the overlooked owner of the "King of Rock 'n' Roll" crown as Chuck Berry has been.⁷⁵⁸ The bemused Grammy audience should have felt scorned because the music industry that spawned Little Richard's legendary career was the same one that prematurely discarded and banished him to the nostalgia circuit before he reached middle-age.

Though historians take it for granted that Little Richard was a musical pioneer, one of his unique *cultural* contributions was his masterful negotiation of the twin stigmas of black male sexuality and queer behavioral and sexual tendencies in a manner that made him one of the most visible black gay men in post-WWII American popular culture. Little Richard attributed his sound to numerous influences including gospel singers such as Mahalia Jackson⁷⁵⁹ and Sister Rosetta Tharpe⁷⁶⁰ and fellow rock 'n' roller Esquerita, among others. But he was unique in synthesizing the fervency, drive, and style of his influences and crossing them over in the rock 'n' roll era. In the process

⁷⁵⁸ Most notably by rock critics, for example in Robert Christgau's "Chuck Berry: Eternal Rock and Roller," he says "Chuck Berry is the greatest of the rock and rollers," 140 and "Chuck Berry is the greatest rock lyricist this side of Bob Dylan, and sometimes I prefer him to Dylan," 144 from *Any Old Way You Choose It: Rock and Other Pop Music, 1967-1973*. Expanded Edition. New York: Cooper Square Press, 2000. 140-8.

⁷⁵⁹ Hoekstra, Dave. "Little Richard's gospel truth: Pop pioneer still singing soulful rock." *Chicago Sun-Times*. January 14, 2000. WEEKEND PLUS; Pg. 7.

⁷⁶⁰ Watrous, Peter. "Back to Basics, Little Richard Is Happy at Last." *The New York Times* December 8, 1992: Sec. C, 15.

he modeled the way sexually ambiguous style and a wild persona could distract attention away from race and sexuality stigmas and charm a rock 'n' roll audience hungry for novelty and excitement

Robert Palmer wisely referred to Little Richard and his band the Upsetters as “pioneers of what we might call the rock and roll lifestyle.”⁷⁶¹ Palmer’s reference encompassed Little Richard’s well-documented sexual adventures on road and influence on gender-bending male rocker fashion. Peter Watrous noted, “He made a strain of American extremism, all Saturday-night hysteria, a regular part of international mass culture.”⁷⁶² But even these comments may not have gone far enough to explain why the “King and Queen of Rock and Roll”⁷⁶³ mattered as a musical and cultural force more radical than either Presley or Berry.

Rock 'n' roll was fundamentally about making money and making records not politics, rebellion or revolution. However, critics and historians have justifiably accorded it with symbolic status for disrupting, however superficially, the apparent dominance of white pop musicians as the mainstream of the music industry. In searching for performers who represented truly subversive/transgressive possibilities cultural expression dare I suggest that Little Richard, not Elvis Presley, was the chief exemplar? Critics and historians have coronated Presley as the nexus of rock rebellion.⁷⁶⁴ Yet in truth the conservative Presley was an unwitting and unwilling

⁷⁶¹ Palmer, 141.

⁷⁶² Watrous, C15.

⁷⁶³ Palmer, 140.

⁷⁶⁴ “Before Elvis there was even something called rock and roll, but there was no revolution” p. 152 in Pielke, Robert. You Say You Want a Revolution: Rock Music in American Culture. Chicago: Nelson: Hall, 1986.

symbol not particularly suited to carry the banner for anomalous behavior. In terms of bringing “black” music to a white audience, it’s important to consider that R&B music and sensibility was one aspect of a singer steeped in gospel, country and pop. Unlike Johnnie Ray, Presley’s relationship to black music came from recordings, not extensive interaction or involvement with black culture. Presley’s distance was surely tied to cultural segregation, but as white musicians as diverse as Benny Goodman, Johnny Otis, Johnnie Ray demonstrated true hybridization could occur and did when white and black musicians interacted. As a black man and a gay man Little Richard was an outsider in a white-dominated music scene and black music cultures heavily invested in traditional gender behavior. By his own accounts Little Richard was not fully accepted by black male musicians because of his queerness. Black audiences were also somewhat leery of Richard’s style. Unlike Presley, who was a singer and sex symbol in the Sinatra and Ray tradition, there were few archetypes for Little Richard to emulate. The intensity of his music, explicitness of his lyrics and flamboyant camp of his image and persona genuinely offered a new kind of vitality.

I conclude my discussion of 50s era musicians with Little Richard because he demonstrated that even within the new era of rock ‘n’ roll queer gender and sexual expression and racism still had to be repressed and shrewdly channeled to avoid scandal and potential ruin. Because of Little Richard’s justifiably pervasive presence in rock histories and explicitly outlined influence I am more interested in intricate details pertaining to Little Richard’s cultural importance than recounting commercial information and frequently recycled details. Little Richard’s career also exemplified the changing nature of the music industry. Though the notion of progress cloaks memories

of the 1960s the music industry more rigidly radicalized genres in the 60s and making it increasingly difficult for early rock 'n' rollers to secure commercial footing in an industry defining rock and pop as white and R&B as black. Black rock performers had an even harder time surviving if they were not performing teen pop, adult pop (Nancy Wilson, Johnny Mathis) or R&B (Otis Redding, Aretha Franklin, Motown pop-soul). As the industry's artistic scope expanded and the industry became more consolidated the financial stakes created a dense atmosphere with great gaps between success and failure.

Little Richard's influence

Musically Little Richard was important for two primary reasons. First, his piano-playing grounded and focused Richard's sexual, spiritual, and emotional energy in a way that galvanized audiences turning the piano into a central rock instrument and a central part of performance. Historically in the 20th century, piano playing and other such solitary, introverted practices were considered feminine activities for boys who were encouraged to play sports. Richard, along with Liberace and Johnnie Ray, mainstreamed the piano, a queer and feminized instrument, as a tool for personal expression. Little Richard did not just play the piano. Rather as Gillett noted, "he stood up at, and sometimes on, the piano, hammering boogie chords as he screamed messages of celebration and self-centered pleasure."⁷⁶⁵ Perhaps this signified to queer boys and subordinated, contained little girls that pianos were musical instruments and *cultural* instruments for subversion. They allowed gender outsiders a potentially safe space to participate without having to subdue their uniqueness, one of the dominant

⁷⁶⁵ Gillett, 26.

characteristics of the era. His playing and exuberance was not bound by, but existed on a continuum with Johnnie Ray's raucous style and surely surfaced in the styles of later queer pianists Laura Nyro, Elton John (who directly cited Little Richard and Liberace as influences) and even chamber-pop singer/composer Rufus Wainwright. Pop pianists such as Carole King, Randy Newman and Barry Manilow also exhibited traces of Little Richard's piano-based exuberance.

Second, Little Richard's vocal approach established falsetto whoops and screams as signatures of rock 'n' roll auralty and symbols of the voice as a device for unleashing an intangible exuberance. Little Richard always sang as though there was something inside of him needing to be freed. Metaphorically speaking his voice was perhaps less an omen for the coming out paradigm, but an example of how queerness simply emerged, inadvertently leaked out through indirect if unsubtle gestures. The vocal freeing I refer to is not inherently queer, for rock is filled with such voices including Jerry Lee Lewis and James Brown, but one tangible dimension of a larger spirit of pent-up expression his performing style articulated. In a sense Little Richard gave himself away and came out every time he opened his mouth, unleashing the power of the voice as an expression of difference. One did not have to know his biography to know that there was something distinctive, seductive, exciting, and even unsettling about him. He sounded *queer* in relation to much of the pop, R&B and rock 'n' roll of the time. Little Richard's vocal style has been described as "tremulous and intense"⁷⁶⁶

⁷⁶⁶ Miller, 109.

and “distinguished by pure-voiced swoops and whoops out of a raucous shouting style.”⁷⁶⁷

Little Richard’s influence on a broad array of performers including Otis Redding, James Brown, Jimi Hendrix, the Beatles and Elton John was a well-documented and discussed subject among critics, biographer and historians. However, his importance was cultural because he was one of the most public exemplars of black and queer expression during an era of racial segregation and sexual conservatism. Little Richard’s shrewd use of his “difference” was notable for modeling a method for negotiating queerness in the context of the youth-oriented, racially integrated rock ‘n’ roll music industry. Unlike Liberace and Johnnie Ray, who were part of pre-rock musical traditions characterized by sublimated sexuality and segregated audiences, Little Richard performed in an industry where explicit sexuality and race mixing were integral to the aesthetic. His success indicated younger audiences willing to accept camp and flamboyance in the place of overt sexuality which accommodated a sexually transgressive performer. Though Little Richard downplayed the overt queerness and raunchy lyrics of his pre-fame existence for mainstream audiences, he still managed to bring some authentic parts of himself to his music and performances, a manageable compromise.

In the Beginning . . .

The 1950s signifies memories of mass conformity and cultural repression yet some of the more vivid and transgressive performers of the twentieth century emerged

⁷⁶⁷ Gillett, 26.

during the decade. In recounting Little Richard's initial commercial impact The Rolling Stone Illustrated History of Rock & Roll noted, "In an unprecedented burst of sighs, moans, screams, whoos and breathless panting, Little Richard opened whole continents of energy and expression for others to explore."⁷⁶⁸ Actually, before there was Little Richard there was the regional performer Esquerita. Though Little Richard counted numerous performers as influences, the only performer who could be said to have directly influenced Little Richard's look and sound was the historically obscure performer Esquerita, a Southern-born black gay pianist who died of AIDS in New York in 1986. In his autobiography Little Richard noted he learned to play piano from Esquerita whom he said, "was one of the greatest pianists." Though Little Richard has braggart tendencies even he noted, "I learned a whole lot about phrasing from him. He really taught me a lot."⁷⁶⁹ According to the Rolling Stone Encyclopedia, "he was among, if not the first to combine a pumping piano style, falsetto screams and whoops, and racy lyrics into some very wild early rock & roll records."⁷⁷⁰ A Little Richard profile also noted Little Richard learning about stage makeup from Esquerita.⁷⁷¹ Though Esquerita was acknowledged as a Little Richard influence according to the All-Music Guide his, "shot at the big time came when Capitol Records decided they needed their

⁷⁶⁸ See p. 52 in Winner, Langdon, "Little Richard." The Rolling Stone Illustrated History of Rock & Roll.

⁷⁶⁹ See p. 29-30 White, Charles. The Life and Times of Little Richard: The Quasar of Rock. New York: Harmony Books, 1984; Winner specifically notes Esquerita teaching Little Richard "the treble bass licks that would become fundamental in Little Richard's rock & roll piano," 54.

⁷⁷⁰ George-Warren, and Romanowski, 310-311.

⁷⁷¹ Watrous, C15.

own version of Little Richard after signing their answer to Elvis, Gene Vincent.”⁷⁷² In an ironic reversal of events Esquerita’s stardom came only after his star pupil reached the mainstream. Esquerita offered R&B with a gay twist and modeled a queer alternative to his R&B and burgeoning rock ‘n’ roll peers before the mainstream recording industry was ready for him. Little Richard refined and capitalized on Esquerita’s model through talent, perhaps luck, and a deeper, more savvy understanding of how to crossover to the mainstream.

The Neutering Dance

As a young black man Little Richard emerged at a time when white parents were overtly sheltering their children from the possible influences of black male singers. Whereas Presley was a proxy for the threat of black culture infiltrating white teenagers, Little Richard was the real thing. He was keenly aware of the threat and performed accordingly. According to Richard, “We were breaking through the racial barrier. The white kids had to hide my records cos [sic] they daren’t let their parents know they had them in the house. We decided that my image should be crazy and way-out so that the adults would think I was harmless. I’d appear in one show dressed as the Queen of England and in the next as the pope.”⁷⁷³ Visually Little Richard distinguished himself from his peers with a more feminized look, reflecting a savvy sense of marketing and image. Many published 50s and 60s vintage Little Richard photos show him as sleek and self-consciously stylized him with a powdered complexion, thin mustache, a thick

⁷⁷² See p. 316 Jeff Tamarkin entry in Erlewine, Michael, et al., eds. All-Music Guide to Rock. 2nd edition. San Francisco: Miller Freeman Books, 1997.

⁷⁷³ White, 65-6.

and tall pompadour, sculpted eyebrows and a suit.⁷⁷⁴ Most 50s male rock ‘n’ rollers have a stylized appearance with signature visual cues such as Chuck Berry draped in a tuxedo duck walking with his guitar and Buddy Holly dressed in a suit bespectacled with his thick black glasses and curly hair posing with a smile.⁷⁷⁵ But their appearances were masculine in a neutral, earnest way. Little Richard’s appearance was more stylized, feminized and prettified than his male peers. Even compared to the iconic Elvis Presley with his trademark sneer, round cheeks and thick, gelled hair Little Richard was a visual standout stunning because he was more vivid and sexually ambiguous.⁷⁷⁶ In photos he seemed less stiff than his peers, more keenly aware of the camera and eager to pose. Such visual acuity may have reflected an extroverted personality but also suggested an awareness of how to get attention and stand-out. Before David Bowie used sexual ambiguity as titillation, Little Richard presented a tamer version of this theme through details that suggested difference without compromising the perception of him as a mostly conventional man.

Eternal Outsider

By his own accounts Richard Penniman was always an outsider. Richard recounted the childhood stigma of his queerness and name-calling, “I went through a lot when I was a boy. They called me sissy, punk, freak, and faggot.”⁷⁷⁷ His differences were a hindrance when he began as a performer. Little Richard noted how in his early

⁷⁷⁴ Refers to photos from Winner, 52-9.

⁷⁷⁵ Refers to photos from “Chuck Berry” Robert Christgau, 60-6; “Buddy Holly” Jonathan Cott, . 85-91 in The Rolling Stone Illustrated History of Rock & Roll.

⁷⁷⁶ Refers to photos from “Elvis Presley” Peter Guralnick 21-36, The Rolling Stone Illustrated History of Rock & Roll.

⁷⁷⁷ White, 11.

career some musicians didn't want to play with him because of his flamboyance. For example he notes how members of B. Brown and His Orchestra didn't want to sing with him, "I was very effeminate. I was very frisky, I was *loud*, and all these old men didn't want me."⁷⁷⁸ Bumps Blackwell who ran Specialty Records recalled Little Richard's processed hair, loud shirt and noted, "Man he was a freak . . . My folks got a look at him and held a family meeting to ask me if I'd changed my ways!"⁷⁷⁹ Little Richard's differences framed him as an outsider from childhood through his career as a performer in a manner explicitly tied to his gender behavior. This was a notable contrast to the stigmas Presley experienced because of his poor background and quirky behavior. Little Richard's difference was less about style or circumstance than his fundamental personality and identity. You don't transcend gender stigma by making more money or outgrowing a teenage interest in unusual style. Instead one either accepts stigma as an inhibitor or mobilizes it to survive.

Indeed, after a few years of success in 1957 Little Richard temporarily gave up rock 'n' roll to study religion at Oakwood College, at least on the surface.⁷⁸⁰ Richard's retreat from rock 'n' roll was not the result of military duty (Presley), incarceration (Berry) or death (Holly). His retreat was tied to an attempt to escape his queer sexuality. Richard exemplified a closeting and self-loathing tendency omnipresent among several musicians including Johnnie Ray's staged marriage, Dusty Springfield and John's initial claim of "bisexuality" and Liberace's framing of homosexuality as a morally objectionable element in his libel case. Little Richard can be at least partially read as

⁷⁷⁸ Ibid, 22.

⁷⁷⁹ Ibid, 57.

⁷⁸⁰ Winner, 57

attempting to escape the stigma of homosexuality by going in the extreme directions of abandoning his secular career and getting married. In recalling his failed marriage to Ernestine Campbell he noted, “we were not compatible the way we should have been. When I met Ernestine I liked her a whole lot, but I never loved her in the way a man should love his wife. I loved her more like a sister.”⁷⁸¹ Little Richard described numerous sexual encounters throughout the book including meeting his female friend Lee Angel. He was drawn to friskiness but was at a sexual distance, “I loved angel and angel loved me, but in different ways. Marriage was a dream of hers, but I never wanted to marry her.”⁷⁸²

Premature Obsolescence

As his career progressed his gayness became unfashionable and a hindrance to his success. Biographer White noted how by the early 60s the campy shows and Little Richard’s over-the-top image cost him exposure, “The gay act went down well in the clubs and lounges, but it was working against him in other areas. When Richard was told by his booking agency that they were unable to get him television work because the producers objected to his long hair and his general image . . .”⁷⁸³ The novelty of Little Richard’s image was diminished as audiences Little Richard may have lost during his retreat moved on to new sensations. Ironically as Little Richard’s career faded several musicians he directly influenced including the Beatles and Otis Redding began their commercial ascent.

⁷⁸¹ White, 105.

⁷⁸² Ibid, 72-3.

⁷⁸³ Ibid, 130.

The sexual barriers Little Richard initially confronted and negotiated were augmented by racism. Commenting on his faded later career in the 1960s-1970s Little Richard bitterly described what he viewed as racist radio programming practices:

I would record a song that was good, and if a white boy didn't produce it, it wouldn't get airplay. I wouldn't go long with the system. I refused. I would have let a white guy produce it, if it didn't make no difference. But it wasn't like that. If a record was produced by a black man it wouldn't get played. I didn't like that . . . I insisted on using the producer who I thought would get the best result.

I found out very fast that the radio stations are controlled. And television is controlled Certain people are let on television to be seen, and certain people they don't want. They won't let them on cos they're not in their little clique. . . . Radio is race-biased targeting certain markets,⁷⁸⁴

Beyond the anger and bitterness, which have recurred in Little Richard's public comments, laid immense irony. Historians who credited the genre for opening doors of mainstream culture to the ethnic and economic underclass, less frequently assessed the way the genre and its industries spurned the racial outsiders who supplied its original cachet. Nor did many historians examine the rock audiences' ephemeral interest in performers who were sexual outsiders beyond titillation and curiosity or how twin stigmas of race and sexuality could limit a performer.

Whereas Liberace and Johnnie Ray contended with an industry unaccustomed to their unusual gender expression Johnny Mathis and Little Richard had to deal with

⁷⁸⁴ Ibid, 176-7.

industrial notions about who/what comprised black music and the audiences for their music. Mathis generally sang in a pre-rock crooning style popular with broad audiences and has always had a conservative image. In contrast the rock era was symbolically more risqué, in part because of Little Richard's image and lyrical innuendos. As the teen pop era developed and rock 'n' roll broadened to include contemporary youth music, thus became "rock" a more explicit racial divide emerged where "rock" became increasingly associated with white performers and audiences and black music was rhythm and blues (R&B). These shifts put Little Richard's commercial prospects in jeopardy because he wasn't a youthful white rocker or folk singer with clear audience appeal nor was he an R&B singer in the Motown, uptown R&B or Southern R&B/soul style predominant in the 1960s. Despite the elimination of the separate Billboard R&B chart in 1964, which symbolically represented a merging of musical sensibilities, Little Richard was an outdated rock 'n' roller unable to secure footing in the white and black music world. The more pronounced balkanization of radio stations was symbolic of general music industry trends in the 60s of categorizing performers by race and in the process limiting commercial potential of performers transcending rock and R&B categories.

In terms of gender Little Richard's waning appeal could be tied to numerous factors. First, his religious conversion surely turned off some of his audience and toned down the explicitness of his earlier performances. Second, the "threat" of black male sexuality in rock 'n' roll became less of an issue in the early 60s when white male teen idols Fabian, Frankie Avalon emerged and in a related, if hipper sense, the Beatles and their bad boy counterparts the Rolling Stones transferred sexual titillation to white

performers. Third, the “camp” theatrics” and spectacle Little Richard pioneered were losing appeal in the early 60s especially among audiences who embraced the folk revival and late 60s art rock and viewed the music as a serious form for listening as opposed to dancing. The fact that albums became a more popular medium during the 1960s reflected the newfound serious and surely hurt performers accustomed to rock as a singles medium. Fourth, it is arguable (and ironic) that as the press more frequently covered homosexuality in the 60s and as many in the medical field began to treat homosexuality as a normal part of life, gender and sexual deviance may have appeared less extraordinary and unusual than it had a decade earlier. In contrast to the experimental 50s, by the 60s rock audiences were open to musical innovations, but more comfortable with racial separation (whites created rock and blacks created R&B) and more traditional and familiar gender expression among male performers.

Little Richard’s odd path from innovator to pariah to comeback kid indicated the multi-stranded roots of progress during the 1950s and 1960s. The oscillating racial and sex/gender progress his career initially experienced foretold the ongoing centrality of social identity categories in shaping musicians’ careers. Notions of gender appropriate behavior play a unique role in the next chapter where I explore the struggles of two queer female musicians whose demeanor, sexuality and personal life choices affected their careers and historic perceptions of their artistry.

Chapter Six: Recovering Rock's Invisible Queer Women

In the opening credits of the 1997 romantic comedy My Best Friend's Wedding, folk-punk-feminist Ani DiFranco crooned a tongue-in-cheek version of Dusty Springfield's 1964 ode to romantic submission "Wishin' and Hopin.'" Listening to DiFranco it was easy to mock the dated, borderline sexist sentiments her rendition spoofed. *What were women thinking back then?* It was also impossible to separate the song from the image of Dusty Springfield, that ultimate exemplar of 60s femininity, in her femme drag—mascara-cloaked eyes, interminable eye lashes, bouffant beehive, bejeweled dresses, and pointy heels. *Wasn't she a gas?*

Actually Burt Bacharach and Hal David (whose ideas about women were frighteningly limited even for the early 60s) wrote the song--which had no inherent relationship to how the women who have sung the song and those who have heard it actually perceived themselves. Springfield's performance was likely voicing a male fantasy inflected with what some women may have believed. But like much commercial culture the song and performance confirmed the expectations of audiences rather than embodying the performers' identity. The distance between the persona Springfield projected in this and other similarly-themed songs revealed her to be a keen actress and symbolized the detachment Springfield felt necessary for her to succeed as a public star and maintain a personal self. Such compromise was not inherent to women performers--all pop stars maintain some distance. But Springfield's identity as a British queer woman required her to adapt to a male-produced industry, project an image befitting a heterosexual woman, lest she stand out, and maintain a certain level of cultural

decorum. Springfield played the role perfectly for awhile but beneath the surface her desire for creative autonomy and personal clarity were waiting to erupt . . .

While Springfield pledged “I’ll Try Anything” and cooed “The Look of Love” on the radio in 1967 a Brooklyn-based bohemian named Laura Nyro debuted on Verve Records with More Than A New Discovery. Where Springfield played chanteuse in song Nyro, who composed her own songs, sang of marital ambiguity on “Wedding Bell Blues,” observed the underground urban economy in “Buy and Sell” and pondered mortality on “And When I Die.” Tellingly “Wedding” did not become a hit until it was sanitized by the Fifth Dimension and “And When I Die” became a blaring hit in the hands of horn-driven rock band Blood, Sweat & Tears. There was nothing polite or compromised about Nyro’s acute observations and nothing particularly glam about her dark appearance and nothing familiar about her wailing voice, serpentine melodies, and abstract lyrics.

On the surface the glamorous Brit and New York bohemian could not have been more dissimilar. But as this chapter will demonstrate, they both shared an aversion to the music industry’s expectations of women and embarked on paths that explicitly challenged presumptions of inferior artistic abilities which added the dimension of sexism to their journeys in a way that differed from their queer male counterparts. Springfield’s gaudy appearance and lovelorn songs were only one side of an artist whose independent attitude forced her to abandon her role as a British diva to pursue love and freedom in the United States. Similarly Nyro fluctuated in and out of recording at will while she developed her political and personal self.

Dusty Springfield: I Only Want to Be . . . Myself

“Male and female sexuality alike are still referred to male desires; if homosexual, bisexual, and asexual men can now use their confusions (and zest) as a source of pop success, lesbianism remains a secret,” Simon Frith and Angela McRobbie⁷⁸⁵

Born Mary Isobel Catherine O’ Brien

When Mary Isobel Catherine O’ Brien (AKA Dusty Springfield) was born on April 16, 1939 in North London, private, consensual homosexual sex between adults was illegal. As she inched toward her 30th birthday homosexuality was legal but this fact did not alter its *de facto* stigma and most gays and lesbians, including Springfield, inhabited a metaphoric and literal underground keeping their sexuality unspoken and unseen. The uneasy relationship between queer sexuality and British public acceptance remained a part of the emotional constitution of the pre and immediate postwar generations such that Springfield, and her fellow countryman Elton John, whom I discuss in the next chapter, had more of an ambiguous “open secret” sexuality during the gay liberation era than an “out” identity. This was less because of self-hating closetry than a slower, less deliberate move toward gay and lesbian liberation in Great Britain. Though there were many parallels between the experience of gays and lesbians in the U. S. and Great Britain, such as the social stigma in general and widespread harassment, there were notable differences which likely shaped the way these British musicians expressed their sexuality.

⁷⁸⁵ See p. 420 Frith, Simon and Angela McRobbie. “Afterthoughts.” in On the Record: Rock, Pop and the Written Word. Eds. Simon Frith and Andrew Goodwin. New York: Pantheon Books, 1990. 419-24.

In 1954 the British government commissioned a report on homosexuality and prostitution commonly referred to as the Wolfenden Report. In 1957 the Report concluded homosexual behavior between consenting adults was not a criminal offense and based on these recommendations the Homosexual Law Reform Society (f. 1958) recommended the House of Commons adopt the report's findings. Eight years later the Labour Party amended the law of England and Wales to legalize homosexual sex between two consenting adults, with further stipulations added in 1967 including the strengthening of sex laws regarding sex with minors and soliciting.⁷⁸⁶ The lengthy systematic process of enacting the Wolfenden Report's findings to law did not immediately eradicate hostile public attitudes, the vulnerability of gay and lesbian bars/clubs from police harassment nor provide protection to gays and lesbians from job or housing discrimination. Immediately prior to the 1957 Report, British opposition to homosexuality was evident in numerous forms. According to historian Colin Spencer the high profile 1954 trial of Lord Montagu of Bealieu, who was accused of criminal sexual behavior, mirrored the Wilde trials in inspiring, "terror and panic through British homosexuals."⁷⁸⁷ From 1945-55 prosecutions for homosexual behavior rose from ~ 800 to over 2,500. Further, after the Commission began meeting parliamentarians and the clergy widely espoused fears of homosexuals as predators on youth.⁷⁸⁸ After 1967 police still fined and raided gay clubs and entrapped male solicitors with police

⁷⁸⁶ See p. 363-5 in Spencer, Colin. Homosexuality in History. New York: Harcourt Brace, 1995.

⁷⁸⁷ *Ibid*, 360.

⁷⁸⁸ *Ibid*, 359-61; 363-4.

decoys.⁷⁸⁹ Despite such setbacks, gradually Gay Liberation, essentially a United States movement spawned by a new generation of gay activists who outgrew 50s homophile organizing, reached England in the form of a British Gay Liberation Front (GLF) and the Committee for Homosexual Equality (CHE) which specialized in legal inequalities and discrimination issues. Other developments indicating the formation of queer communities included London's First Gay Pride March in 1971 and the founding of Gay News in 1972. Such events signified progress but had firmly established legal and social histories to resist.⁷⁹⁰

O' Brien noted in her Springfield biography that the British gay and lesbian social scene was quite limited in the 50s and 60s and featured only a few obscure social spaces and rigid gender separation between gay men and lesbians.⁷⁹¹ According to British actress and gay activist Jackie Forster, Springfield occasionally associated at one of the few English lesbians bars of the time, Gateways, a Chelsea club, and Kenric, a mixed gay social club begun in the mid-60s, but was not a regular.⁷⁹² The stigma attached to queerness and limited scene likely meant that privacy and discretion were the hallmarks of Springfield's explorations of her queer sexuality during the late 60s onward. Just as in America, the combination of social stigma and absence of a central gay and lesbian cultural scene or political movement translated into a personal perception of queer sexuality as something individual and private rather than a political statement or a defensible, legitimate alternative form of intimacy.

⁷⁸⁹ Ibid, 365-6.

⁷⁹⁰ See p. 177-8 in O' Brien, Lucy. Dusty. London: Pan Books, 2000; Spencer 370.

⁷⁹¹ O' Brien, 175.

⁷⁹² Ibid, 176.

In the late 60s Springfield met and began living with American artist Norma Tanega however after years of living together and tumult the couple broke up and Tanega moved back to the U. S. in 1970.⁷⁹³ In 1972 Springfield moved to Los Angeles and more overtly associated with lesbians, such as tennis player Billie Jean King. In the mid-70s Springfield actually came out to her parents, a subtle indicator of what the Liberation era wrought, however, they dismissed her admission as an arbitrary prank typical of their daughter.⁷⁹⁴ Tanega speculated that Springfield was haunted by her a perfectionism and always strove to fit social ideals, including wanting to be straight and a good Catholic. Despite the gradual opening up of cultural attitudes towards “difference,” a desire for normalcy informed Springfield’s sense of self.⁷⁹⁵ In 1983 Springfield even “married” her girlfriend Tedda, though the relationship, which developed during Springfield’s recovery from alcoholism, and a history of cutting and suicide attempts, ended as result of abuse.⁷⁹⁶

To understand Springfield’s public statements about her sexuality, which was unapologetic but guarded and her ability to have same sex relationships, one must grasp the context that framed a sexual life defined against societal norms, devoid of cultural protections from discrimination and sheltered from public view. Patricia Juliana Smith noted as much in regard to Springfield’s 1970 initial “coming out” comments to the Evening Standard:

⁷⁹³ Valentine and Wickham, 95-7, 127.

⁷⁹⁴ Ibid, 166.

⁷⁹⁵ Ibid, 168.

⁷⁹⁶ Ibid, 218-9.

A lot of people say I'm bent, and I've heard it so many times that I've almost learned to accept it . . . I couldn't stand to be thought of as a big butch lady. But I know that I am as perfectly capable of being swayed by a girl as by a boy. More and more people feel that way and I don't see why I shouldn't.⁷⁹⁷

Referring to the statements "I couldn't stand to be thought of as a big butch lady," and "I could never get mixed up in a gay scene because it would . . . undermine my sense of being a woman" Smith noted such comments ". . . are indicative of the baleful self-image from which many, if not most, lesbians then suffered. In 1970, Women's Liberation and Gay Liberation were still in their infancies and had yet to make significant inroads into the social consciousness of most individuals, much less that of the general public in Britain and America."⁷⁹⁸

I would modify Smith's acute observation by pointing out two things. First, Springfield's perspective, and that of her queer peers can't be read retrospectively as a position they "suffered" under pre-Liberation false consciousness; there was little in the way of a queer political consciousness for Springfield to latch on to. The mix of forthrightness and disdain Springfield expressed was a plaintive perspective fostered by the culture she originated from, which has to be accepted on its own historically mediated terms. Which leads me to my second point--the presence of a political movement does not inherently result in personal liberation, a queer-affirmative

⁷⁹⁷ See p. 117 in Juliana Smith, Patricia. "You Don't Have to Say You Love Me." The Queer Sixties. Ed. Patricia Juliana-Smith. New York: Routledge, 1999. 105-26; Valentine and Wickham, 131; O' Brien, 138.

⁷⁹⁸ Juliana-Smith, 117.

perspective or sexual openness. Political movements cannot and do not inherently erase the sense of difference, stigma, shame and caution permeating the consciousness of people raised in homophobic societies.⁷⁹⁹

Springfield was an individual affected by societal attitudes of her imagined community but she expressed herself as an individual which may have saved her from having to become too politicized. In at least two interviews during the 1980s Springfield discussed her sexuality with an increased agitation towards societal needs for her to conform to expectations. In a 1985 interview with Fleet Street journalist Jena Rook she said, “Look, let’s say I’ve experimented with most things in life. And in sex. I suppose you can sum it up that I remain right down the middle.”⁸⁰⁰ A 1988 News of the World interview found her even more adamant about her right to define her sexuality as she chose, “My sexuality has never been a problem to me but I think it has been for other people. They seem to want me to be either gay or straight, they can’t handle it if someone’s both.”⁸⁰¹ Incidentally, Springfield made these comments in the midst of palpably increased homophobia in Margaret Thatcher-era conservative 1980s Britain including increasingly negative public attitudes toward same sex relationships and couples’ adopting as revealed by public polls, moral panics in response to AIDS and the 1988 passage of Section 28 of Local Government Act which explicitly banned government funding of published materials “promoting” homosexuality.⁸⁰² Twenty five years after Springfield’s 1970 statement and her move to the United States, where she

⁷⁹⁹ Confronting issues of shame stemming from sexual difference is a central theme of Love, GLQ, 7: 4, (2001). 487-519.

⁸⁰⁰ Qtd. in O’Brien, 192.

⁸⁰¹ Ibid, 193.

⁸⁰² Spencer, 381-3.

was involved in same sex relationships and more involved in lesbian scenes,⁸⁰³ Springfield remained reluctant to clarify her sexuality in explicitly progressive political terms. In a 1995 promotional interview for the album A Very Fine Love her comments remained independent and resolutely personal in tone:

‘My relationships have been pretty mixed,’ she says. ‘And I’m fine with that. Who’s to say what you are? Right now, I’m not in any relationship by choice, not because I’m afraid I’d be that or that. Yet I don’t feel celibate, either. So what am I? It’s other people who want you to be something or other-this or that. I’m none of the above. I’ve never used my relationships or illnesses to be fashionable, and I don’t intend to start now.’⁸⁰⁴

Springfield never came across as oblivious to or unaffected by Liberation era consciousness in her interviews but avoided becoming an official spokeswoman or capitalizing on the popular press infatuation with “lesbian chic” which surrounded the early 90s “coming out” of musicians k. d. lang and Melissa Etheridge. She had already blazed a path in her own way and had nothing to prove. Springfield’s fierce negotiation of her sexuality on her own terms extended to her battles for artistic control as a female singer in an industry that devalued the artistic potential of women and was structurally changing as rock ‘n’ roll transitioned into the more self-consciously artistic “rock” and

⁸⁰³ For example O’Brien, notes her attendance at the U. S. women’s tennis circuit, 139-40.

⁸⁰⁴ See p. 36 in Hoeburger, Rob. “Dusty Rides Again.” New York Times Magazine 29 October 1995: 34, 36, 34-7.

aimed to maximize profits through consolidating and capitalizing on the massive potential of albums.

Women as Artists?

When rock histories referenced the 60s British Invasion they sometimes referred to Dusty Springfield⁸⁰⁵ but primarily described the era's preeminent British male bands- The Beatles, The Rolling Stones, and The Who. Such accounts have to skirt Springfield, as well as her female peers-Cilla Black, Petula Clark and Sandie Shaw- because women were only incidental to the internationalization of British music. It is worth noting that as rock 'n' roll music transitioned from teen pop to more artistically oriented serious music, women were virtually absent. A look at 60s British pop reveals that the very notion of women as progressive musicians with cutting edge music, wide-ranging, autonomous images and artistic aspirations was not conceivable within the confines of British pop. British record companies preferred to contain their female singers to the homeland and thus they were not given the same level of promotion and support as their male counterparts.

Singles are a good measure of these differences. From 1964-9 Springfield had 10 top 40 hits;⁸⁰⁶ from 1965-8 Clark had 15;⁸⁰⁷ Black had one top 40 hit in 1964;⁸⁰⁸ Shaw had no top 40 American hits. All of these women recorded for major record labels with access to international markets. In comparison from 1964-9 the Beatles scored 44

⁸⁰⁵ Gillett, 272-3.

⁸⁰⁶ Whitburn, Billboard Book of Top 40 Hits, 592.

⁸⁰⁷ Ibid, 133.

⁸⁰⁸ Ibid, 66.

top 40 hits⁸⁰⁹ and the Rolling Stones had 18.⁸¹⁰ In a shorter period, from 1967-9 the Who had six top 40 hits.⁸¹¹ Many factors affected the popularity of singles including radio airplay and single sales, all tied to the appeal of the music as well as the marketing and promotion songs received.

Another telling sign of differences between British female singers and British male groups can be gleaned from the popularity of their albums. As Chapter One noted, the 1960s, particularly the late 60s was the beginning of the “album era” in rock where albums became a definitive litmus test of artists’ merits and became hugely profitable for the industry outselling singles. Between 1964-9 The Beatles had 18 top 40 albums,⁸¹² Clark had three top 40 albums,⁸¹³ the Rolling Stones had 14⁸¹⁴ and The Who had two between 1968-9.⁸¹⁵ Black, Shaw and Springfield had no top 40 albums and only the male groups continued to make albums reaching the top 40 from the 70s and beyond.

Frith and McRobbie noted in “Music and Sexuality” how the traditional male/female division of labor defined the rock industry.⁸¹⁶ Essentially men were executives, A&R personnel, songwriters and producers; women were singers. The gendered dichotomy did not significantly shift until the end of the 60s and early 70s

⁸⁰⁹ Ibid, 53-5.

⁸¹⁰ Ibid, 538-9.

⁸¹¹ Ibid, 676.

⁸¹² See p. 28-9 in Whitburn, Joel. The Billboard Book of Top 40 Albums. 3rd ed. New York: Billboard Books, 1995.

⁸¹³ Ibid, 65.

⁸¹⁴ Ibid, 263.

⁸¹⁵ Ibid, 232.

⁸¹⁶ Frith and McRobbie, 376-7.

during the singer-songwriter era, and even then the most popular female singers⁸¹⁷ were not primarily songwriting singers. In the context of British pop music they noted how 60s British female pop singers were pushed into the role of non-threatening family entertainers and “smiling, charming hostesses.”⁸¹⁸ Springfield biographer O’ Brien provided an even fuller context for this when she noted how in the post-WWII period British female singers adhered to the “girl-next-door” image, which shifted to crooning in the 1950s, and the 1960s girl group sound.⁸¹⁹ In all cases O’ Brien argued women were limited to reliance on outside songwriters and cover songs. In comparison to male acts such as the Beatles and Rolling Stones O’ Brien commented, “Amid all this ‘serious’ talent, women singers were seen as ineffectual. Unless they proved otherwise, aspiring female pop singers were commonly viewed as dolly-birds who simply sang what was put in front of them.”⁸²⁰

Such notions were completely at-odds with Dusty Springfield’s temperament and musical instincts. Springfield constantly flouted conventions by crafting her image and insisting on particular songs and arrangements demanding perfection to her satisfaction. Springfield later learned that the music industry could be an unforgiving place for such female stubbornness, especially one perceived to be queer.

Rock historians have very rarely breached the surface of Springfield’s career making her personal identity virtually non-existent. Despite her commercial presence and artistic influence Springfield as a *person* eluded rock history. Springfield was

⁸¹⁷ Aretha Franklin, Dionne Warwick, Karen Carpenter of The Carpenters, Olivia Newton-John, Diana Ross; Whitburn, Top 40 Hits, 819.

⁸¹⁸ Frith and McRobbie, 376-7.

⁸¹⁹ O’ Brien, 2000, 200-1.

⁸²⁰ *Ibid*, 203.

rock's invisible queer woman whose identity as a sex and gender outsider illuminated her iconic image and influential music in ways traditional histories have overlooked. Her struggles for artistic control, personal fulfillment and resultant industry alienation were symptomatic of a particular kind of struggle women of her generation fought in the music industry. More specifically, Springfield's historical invisibility as a queer singer indicated the indecipherability of lesbianism in an industry lacking a visual, musical or cultural language for interest in lesbian experiences.

Dusty Springfield: Difficult Woman

By all biographical accounts Springfield was a strong-headed iconoclast throughout her life who exhibited strong-willed behavior in recording and performing. Springfield played the game very differently from most of her 60s female peers. Her perfection inspired her reputation for being "difficult."

Springfield biographers O' Brien, and Wickham and Valentine have cited numerous instances where Springfield engaged in almost unheard of behavior. For example in 1963 as a member of The Springfields the group was rehearsing for an electric, as opposed to acoustic performance at the Winter Garden in Blackpool and Springfield insisted on the presence of large amplifiers for the group's electric performance despite the owner's protests that they ruined the group's look. Dusty got her way but the concert organizer reportedly told her ". . .you'll never work in one of my shows again."⁸²¹ These instincts were amplified when she became a solo artist. According to writer Clive Westlake and writer/arranger/producer Ivor Raymonde, whom she

⁸²¹ Ibid, 39-40.

frequently worked with, Springfield was very demanding the studio. Westlake commented, “She was a bitch in the studio.”⁸²² Raymonde was more diplomatic and explicit noting “She’d got quite a reputation for being hard case. Vera Lynn or Anne Shelton had never spoken up. They’d just gone in the studio, recorded and walked out. Dusty took a more personal interest in a record . . . Bad musicians would annoy her, the tempo had to be just so, and before a session the key had to be set so it wasn’t too high or low.”⁸²³ Westlake’s comment, made some what in jest and Raymonde’s contrast of her work habits with other female singers illustrate how she was perceived and why. During a 1966 engagement in New York’s Basin Street East she had an infamous fight with jazz drummer Buddy Rich who was appalled that she was the headliner and dismissed her desire to rehearse with his band. Springfield responded by slapping him. The event received wide coverage in the British press, but Springfield emerged victorious, getting good reviews for her performance.⁸²⁴ After signing with Atlantic Records in 1969 at the outset of planning the recording of Dusty in Memphis she initially rejected all the songs her producers selected for her, though she gradually relented and sang some of the suggested material.⁸²⁵ During the 1969 recording at Muscle Shoals Studio in Memphis she and her producer Jerry Wexler, and his engineer Tom Dowd had tensions over her vocals. When Springfield went in to record her vocals over the backing instrumental tracks she insisted on a louder playback than they were accustomed to, even shoving an ashtray at the control room and arguing with Dowd. Despite this seemingly nightmarish behavior both complimented her with

⁸²² Ibid, 2000, 52.

⁸²³ Ibid, 2000, 52.

⁸²⁴ O’ Brien, 101-4; Wickham and Valentine, 73-4.

⁸²⁵ Wickham and Valentine, 114.

Wexler noting the excellence of her vocals and Dowd noting her impressive insistence on quality vocal performances.⁸²⁶ From these examples one gets the sense that Springfield was demanding but also concerned about the quality of her records and performances and unwilling to allow others to hinder her vision of her musicianship. The very fact that she sang as a musician or artist rather than a generic girl singer was bold for the time and the root of her reputation.

Springfield was also somewhat of a businesswoman who took charge of her management and record deal when she sensed she was not being treated fairly. First in 1968 she got a new agent and second she renewed her contract with Phillips to promote her records in the U. K. but signed with Atlantic Records for her U. S. recordings. Springfield was dissatisfied with the way her recordings were edited for American release without her approval and poor royalties. Though marketed as a pop singer Springfield was more inclined to R&B singing, which was unusual for white female pop signers at the time and insistent to join the prestigious R&B heritage of Atlantic Records. In transitioning she also parted with her personal manager who was unwilling to settle in America.⁸²⁷ Springfield knew her worth as a musician and though she maintained a good relationship with Phillips, her move to Atlantic demonstrated unusual business savvy and independence for the era. Neither the critically acclaimed Dusty in Memphis nor her 1970 follow-up album Brand New Me, recorded with Philly soul producers Kenneth Gamble and Leon Huff, were commercial successes⁸²⁸ and Springfield's U. S. fate was uncertain, though she still recorded for Phillips in the U. K.

⁸²⁶ O' Brien, 124-5; Wickham and Valentine, 115.

⁸²⁷ O' Brien, 116-20.

⁸²⁸ Wickham and Valentine, 115, 126.

Though both albums spawned a few hit singles, their failure may have been tied to the difficulty of mass audiences accepting the pop-oriented Springfield as an R&B singer especially during the tail end of the “soul” era when gaps between white and black pop were expanding. 1969-70 marked a transition in American popular music from 60s girl group sounds and ornate pop which defined Springfield’s early hits, acid rock and gritty soul music toward softer, more introspective white pop, via singer songwriters and easy listening/ MOR singers, and sleeker, more luxuriant black pop. A white singer singing R&B had a limited place in the new pop landscape. Further the music industry was consolidating and Springfield’s brand of eclectic pop-soul singing, coupled with her reputation and dated image limited her prospects for changing music industry.

Dusty Springfield: Has Been?

Dusty Springfield’s career exemplified the trajectory of the increasingly consolidated music industry from the 70s through the 90s. When Springfield began her solo career in 1964 she was part of a diverse music industry comprised of major and independent labels competing for chart positions in the U. K. and U. S. However, as her commercial fortunes and chart successes dwindled in the late 60s and early 70s she found it increasingly difficult to gain commercial footing in an industry skewed toward new styles such as singer-songwriter pop, and country-rock. Springfield, who had separate contracts in the U. S. and U. K., had to negotiate commercial pressures in the U. K. and U. S. which weakened her commercial focus because she lacked management able to focus her sound and capture the mainstream tastes of both territories.

After her Atlantic deal ended in the U. S. Springfield signed with U. S. company ABC/Dunhill and recorded two commercially ill-fated records Cameo (1973) and Longing (1974), the latter of which never received distribution. In the early 70s Springfield attempted to change her image and recorded more introspective and melodically subtle material. Much of her material was ballad-oriented, narrative material rather than catchy dance songs or over-the-top ballads. Cameo producer Dennis Lambert has recalled Springfield's obsessive recording techniques and noted how her legendary perfection stifled the recordings which were constantly being punched in and corrected it ". . . destroyed the feel of the performance."⁸²⁹ He also noted Springfield's emotional instability and vulnerability during the recording process, including emotional breakdowns.⁸³⁰ Though the album was well reviewed it was not a success. Longing was reportedly not released because it was rough and incomplete perhaps reflecting Springfield's personal bouts, doubts surrounding the commercial viability of a more subtle and contemplative sound and image likely limited her opportunity to outgrow her signature image and sound. Further, Springfield recorded Janis Ian's "In the Winter" and Margie Adams' "Beautiful Soul" both of which featured lyrics directly addressing other women. Perhaps anxieties about a reputed lesbian singer singing such material deterred the release. Similar to Cameo the recording of Longing was difficult with Springfield showing up late for recording sessions and lacking confidence in her abilities. The recording also overlapped a period of substance abuse and a suicide attempt.⁸³¹ The recording combined with Springfield's inability to promote the record,

⁸²⁹ Ibid, 151.

⁸³⁰ Ibid, 151.

⁸³¹ Ibid, 154-5.

as a result of her condition effectively ended her career with ABC/Dunhill and inspired a three year retreat from recording.

During this period Springfield prolifically recorded songs for Phillips that went unreleased or faltered in the U. K. She also had virtually no hit singles in the U. S. and literally disappeared from the U. S. charts relying on concert appearances and club dates to sustain her outside of the recording industry. Her commercial failures overlapped her struggles to negotiate her new life in Laurel Canyon, where she succumbed to alcoholism, drug-addiction, self-abuse and abusive relationships.⁸³² She also had difficulty securing consistent management. Such a struggle surely tied to her “difficult” reputation but also to an industry unable to find a commercial space for a fading 60s star whose sound and image was less palatable in a changed music industry

Springfield’s silence ended when she recorded It Begins Again for United Artists in 1978 and 1979’s Living Without Your Love. It Begins Again, essentially an MOR album targeted toward the adult market with the exception of one disco track, had a brief U.K. commercial presence before fading after two weeks. 1979’s Living which mixed disco, pop ballads was a complete commercial failure, not charting in the U. K. or the U. S. Before United Artists could begin promoting 1979’s Living, the record company was one of many late 70s labels bought out by larger conglomerates and her attempted commercial “comeback” floundered.⁸³³ Then in 1980 Springfield signed with Twentieth Century Fox Records, taken over by Casablanca Records which Phonogram purchased, and released White Heat, a mix of pop, rock and dance songs. The album

⁸³² Ibid, 145-9.

⁸³³ Regarding It Begins Again ‘s commercial failure see O’ Brien, 164; regarding Living Without Your Love see O’ Brien, 172.

never received distribution in the U. K. but was released by Casablanca Records in 1982 and failed commercially, possibly as a result of poor promotion affected by personnel shuffling and a lack of corporate focus/consistency.⁸³⁴ Valentine and Wickham speculated that perhaps the album which mixed hard-edged rock and dance music may not have fit the image the U. K. expected from Springfield.⁸³⁵ Indeed during the 70s Phillips, whom she still was contracted to, released five compilations of Springfield's 60s hits which may have undermined her attempt to redefine herself and inadvertently marked her as a has-been icon best resigned to 60s nostalgia.⁸³⁶ After White Heat Springfield randomly recorded several one-off singles including 1984's "Private Number" with Spencer Davis,⁸³⁷ several failed singles for Hippodrome Records,⁸³⁸ 1987's "Something in Your Eyes" with Richard Carpenter and most importantly the 1987 international hit duet with the Pet Shop Boys, "What Have I Done to Deserve This."⁸³⁹

Building from the duet's commercial momentum Springfield returned to album recording in 1990 recording Reputation for EMI subsidiary Parlophone. Only released in the U. K. the album was a moderate hit and spawned three hit singles, but her U. S. commercial career was much less likely to be resurrected for several reasons.⁸⁴⁰ First Springfield had less iconic status and a more scattered following than 80s comeback

⁸³⁴ O' Brien, 186-7.

⁸³⁵ Valentine and Wickham, 211-2.

⁸³⁶ This is Dusty Springfield (1971), This is Dusty Springfield Vol 2: The Magic Garden (1973) Dusty Springfield sings Burt Bacharach & Carole King (1975), You Don't Have to Say You Love Me (1976) Greatest Hits (1979), O' Brien, 265-7.

⁸³⁷ O' Brien, 187.

⁸³⁸ Ibid, 191.

⁸³⁹ Ibid, 212-4.

⁸⁴⁰ Ibid, 223-5.

queens such as Aretha Franklin, Patti Labelle, Tina Turner, and even Bonnie Raitt. All of these singers suffered their share of difficulties within the consolidating industry, but had a larger, more consistent U. S. commercial core following. Springfield had always been more of a cult figure in the U. S. so the nostalgia for Springfield fostered by her 80s duets, 1988's compilation of her biggest hits The Silver Collection and the 1988 U. K. re-release of '64's "I Only Want To Be With You" could have only occurred in the U. K.⁸⁴¹ She was not poised for a comeback despite the Pet Shop Boys' duet.

Second, the late 80s U. S. music scene heavily promoted young female dance-pop divas such as Madonna, Janet Jackson, Whitney Houston and Paula Abdul all of whom spawned numerous hit singles and generated massive album sales in the mid-to-late 80s. Springfield could not hope to compete commercially in this context. Indeed Franklin, Labelle and Turner lost some chart momentum during the mid-to-late 80s suggesting their shared battles with the dance-pop divas *en vogue* during the era.

Third, the music industry relied increasingly on prolific musicians who consistently garnered promotion and charted albums and singles. In the 70s Springfield recorded so sporadically she surely disappeared from many record buyers' conscience. For various reasons, including her diagnosis with breast cancer, Springfield took a five year hiatus between Reputation and her 1995 comeback album on major label Sony U.K./Columbia U.S., A Very Fine Love. In a narrowing the recording industry, securing promotion among the mainstream press and the narrowing major TV networks limited opportunities for promotion, required a variety of commercial angles to pitch new records. The aggressive promotion necessary to launch a new major label album in the

⁸⁴¹ Ibid, 216.

1990s did not guarantee success but Springfield's recurring cancer in the middle of the promotion for A Very Fine Love halted her ability to fully promote the record stifling attempts to capitalize on her burgeoning status as a U. S. icon. The momentum, aggression and consistency necessary for achieving commercial success in the U. S. recording industry limited the commercial prospects for older, established recording starts, especially one battling with her "reputation," recording for record companies vulnerable to corporate takeovers and amidst personal turmoil including geographic adjustment, low esteem, and eventually cancer.

Dusty Springfield: Unwitting Social Agitator

Springfield possessed an early sense of racial consciousness among white rock performers and appreciations for gay audiences before such practices were *de rigueur*. Springfield was pivotal in championing 60s soul and R&B music to the U. K. especially in serving as an ambassador for Tamla-Motown, which met with resistance at British radio. In 1965 she served as a co-headliner with the Motown Revue and hosted a TV special introducing Motown acts to the British TV audience.⁸⁴² Though the subsequent tour had rocky moments many attributed Springfield as a key voice in using her credibility to tout Motown's artists. In 1964 she further asserted her racially progressive attitude when she insisted on singing only to mixed audiences before she embarked on a series of concerts in South Africa in 1964. Though her management arranged for a non-segregation clause, after a few concerts the South African government stepped in criticizing Springfield for disrespecting apartheid laws and she and her musicians were

⁸⁴² Ibid, 61.

forced back to London. The controversy spawned debates among unionized musicians regarding their willingness to play before segregated audiences. Many South African officials accused Springfield of overstepping her boundaries, and despite support from the U. K. press and other musicians, she bowed under pressure expressing her naïveté in approaching the matter as a simple human rights issue rather than as a political statement.⁸⁴³

Perhaps Springfield's greatest risk was her open appreciation of her gay audience, alongside her growing forthrightness about her own queerness and. Beginning with her acknowledging drag queens as aesthetic inspirations⁸⁴⁴ onto her 1970 admission of bisexuality to the London Evening Standard, constant battles with the U. K. press regarding her personal life and frequent interviews in the gay press,⁸⁴⁵ Springfield claimed a queer identity and connection to gay and lesbian audiences in an overt manner unlike most of her peers. At the dawn of her 1978 return to 70s recording she stated the following in an Advocate interview:

I'm well aware that there are a lot of people who are curious to know if I'm a lesbian or not. I think that it is of no importance to anybody but the people I sleep with.

⁸⁴³ Ibid, 73-77.

⁸⁴⁴ O' Brien, 105; See p. 67 in D' Erasmo, Stacey. "Beginning With Dusty." Village Voice 29 August 1995: 67, 70.

⁸⁴⁵ "The press had also become increasingly curious about here private life, alluding to affairs with both men and women . . . her escape to Los Angeles in 1972 was largely due to British attitudes toward her bisexuality." p. 24 in Whiteley, Sheila. Women and Popular Music: Sexuality, Identity and Subjectivity. London: Routledge, 2000.

I have an enormously strong and loyal gay following and I'm extremely grateful for that. I cherish it. I want it always to be there. I don't think it matters to them what I am, as long as there's something in me that they are able to identify with, whether it's a bittersweet quality or a sadness. I'm grateful they saw something in me.

Maybe it's your vulnerability. [Interviewer]

Maybe. Because most gay people are intensely vulnerable. They seem overly sensitive, but not so—they are just plain open to being hurt. Maybe that's what they see in me. I am vulnerable and I have been hurt, but so have a lot of people. If they see that and they want to hold onto that I really do value it. I don't want to lose them they're very special to me. It makes me feel warm. I like that.⁸⁴⁶

There was something quite loving and appreciative in her comments; she humanized her gay audience and essentially identified *with* them. Rather than formally staging a “coming out” in the mid-1990s, in promotional interviews she acknowledged her diverse sexual relationships but resisted articulating a single label.⁸⁴⁷ Numerous biographical accounts have described the myriad lesbian relationships Springfield had, particularly during her time living in Los Angeles where she also became a regular attendee on the largely lesbian women's sports circuit. Springfield's willingness to publicly appear at marked events in the company of women was not likely a self-

⁸⁴⁶ See p. 28 in Galligan, David. “It Begins Again . . . Dusty Springfield's Second Flowering.” *Advocate* 31 May 1978: 27-28.

⁸⁴⁷ Hoeburger, 36.

conscious political statement, but suggested a more open level of comfort with sexuality as a social identity more profoundly than she could have in the U. K.

In her recordings Springfield made many gestures suggesting her affiliation with gay and lesbian cultures, particularly men. As her producer David Wolfert recalled, she insisted on recording to record disco songs on 1979's Living Without Your Love. This may have been influenced by a need to appease her gay male audience, who were the main audience for disco before the music industry mainstreamed the genre.⁸⁴⁸ On the same album she recorded "Closet Man" a song where a female protagonist promised a closeted man she would protect him by keeping his sexuality secret.⁸⁴⁹ During the late 70s and early 80s, at a professional low point and out of financial need Springfield also made numerous stage appearances at gay bars in the Los Angeles, lip-synching to her old hits to the delight of her fans. Valentine and Wickham noted the word of mouth promotion she received within gay communities.⁸⁵⁰ Springfield did have at least one male relationship during the 70s but made up several fictive male lovers in some press accounts.⁸⁵¹ I read this less as Springfield the "closet case" than as one two key realities. One, as a pop star, even a fading one, perhaps Springfield still believed the image of sexual availability was necessary to survive the conformist expectations of the music industry. This seemed consistent with her attempted 70s comebacks which featured material skewed toward older more conservative tastes in their emphasis on ballads and conservative album art.

⁸⁴⁸ O' Brien, 171-2.

⁸⁴⁹ O' Brien, 172.

⁸⁵⁰ Valentine and Wickham, 213.

⁸⁵¹ O'Brien, 156 identifies the man as "Howard" whom Springfield had a one year relationship.

Second, the coming out paradigm was a late 60s radical notion, still radical in contemporary life, which lacked an inherent incentive for a public person of Springfield's stature or correlation for someone of her age, ethnic heritage or temperament to embrace and integrate into her public identity. Openly claiming a gay male audience certified Springfield as an icon in the vein of Judy Garland and later Barbra Streisand, Cher and Bette Midler. But there was no precedent for a rock singer either openly claiming a lesbian following or identifying as one. This was uncharted territory Springfield hinted at in an ambiguous way that signified to her queer audiences. But explicitly identifying as queer may have permanently jeopardized her commercial future and forced her to articulate political and social stances she may not have been prepared to address in an informed or sustained way. In her own way Springfield said more about her identity and her sense of community by signifying to her audience than lecturing to them.

By the end of her life in 1999 Dusty Springfield was an icon whose recorded legacy earned her a spot in the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame, whose hit songs music were constantly being repackaged in compilations and soundtracks, and whose image was easy to spoof. But Springfield's most enduring contribution was her willingness to break from convention and defend her integrity as a legitimate female musician and negotiate her lesbian identity in a hostile cultural climate. Despite commercial setbacks her influence is clear--she never lost her core audience--and despite a reluctance to become a spokeswoman or represent a community her role as an icon is indisputable.

Laura Nyro

Laura Nyro may be the most influential 1960s-generation musician with the least recognition from the music industry and rock historians. Despite influencing performers as diverse as Barbra Streisand, Joni Mitchell, Todd Rundgren, and Rickie Lee Jones she is neither a Rock and Roll Hall of Fame nor Songwriter's Hall of Fame inductee and is barely present in rock histories. Nyro's queer identity, notably her sexual identity and feminist politics shaped her artistry and persona as her career matured. Her queerness, combined with her unconventional appearance, expansive music and bold rejection of music industry demands for conformity undoubtedly limited her appeal to historians who sought to easily summarize her in the context of other musicians to emerge from the 1960s.

Non-traditional, unpredictable and not particularly malleable, she avoided lapsing into a faded sex symbol or matriarchal icon. Rather as she deepened her social and political commitments her music became more "woman-centered" and her image became less marketable. Nyro was important for her influential writing and singing style. She was also an exemplar of how lesbian performers, notably her contemporary Dusty Springfield, acquired reputations as "difficult" and as a consequence retreated to redefine themselves to survive in a possessive and demanding industry. Nyro's sexuality was significant because throughout her career she resisted industry roles for women and blazed a trail by quietly defining her woman-centered identity to the point that it was an integral and unapologetic dimension of her aesthetic.

In May 1997 Astor Place Recordings released the tribute album Time and Love: The Music of Laura Nyro. The all-female album featured a group of performers, including Rosanne Cash, Phoebe Snow and Sweet Honey in the Rock, paying homage

to singer-songwriter Laura Nyro whose commercial recording career begins in 1967. The fact that the album emerged in 1997, shortly after Nyro's death and featured all female performers was significant in the context of women's roles in the 60s music industry and her distorted place in rock music history. Her vast influence and unique synthesis of musical styles are fascinating subjects however I am primarily interested in how her music, persona, and politics shaped rock music industry and rock press responses to her work.

1967-73: The Early Years

The rock era music industry mostly limited 60s women to singing and confined women, particularly white women to the roles of girl group singers, earnest folkies, and/or sexy ingénues.⁸⁵² These limits rendered Nyro an aberration because, unlike many popular female singers her era such as Janis Joplin, she wrote, sang, played piano and guitar and by her third album, 1969's New York Tendaberry, arranged and produced her material. It was not of small significance that a 1968 New York Times profile noted, "The company has allowed her unusual latitude in the record's production. She has

⁸⁵² Whiteley notes that in 60s rock culture "both the lifestyle and the musical ethos of the period undermined the role of women, positioning them as either romanticized fantasy figures, subservient earth mothers or easy lays," 23. She also notes how "In contrast, as discussed previously, women performers were largely viewed as ineffectual, as entertainment," 27. In his discussion of Joan Baez Gillett notes Joan Baez—"struck a very different image from the normal female stereotype that pop music was used to; instead of makeup, turned-on 'vulnerable' smiles, and figure-conscious poses, she exuded a serene self-confidence, wearing comfortable clothes and speaking her mind on all kinds of normally unspeakable subjects . . .," 292-3. Gillett also notes how Jackie DeShannon was, "A versatile singer and writer who did not fit into any of the available categories of 'little girl lost,' 'folk-pop,' or 'sexy image,'" 337.

chosen the musicians who accompany her, and all the arrangements are her own.”⁸⁵³

What the author did not add was that as a woman her desire for creative control resisted and negated industry assumptions that naturalized men as musicians and producers, and subordinated women to the roles of singers and objects. Nyro signified to musicians, but perhaps especially to female musicians the industry traditionally restricts, that they could and must assert creative control to maintain their “artistic integrity,” a clichéd concept perhaps, but a foreign one to industry perceptions of 60s female singers.

After recording five albums Nyro retreated from the music industry not recording an album between 1973 and 1976 and making few performing appearances.⁸⁵⁴ One of her main motivations was her disdain for industry attempts to commodify her talent, especially at the hands of two males with creative input on her career. Though her agent David Geffen (now an openly gay media mogul) and then-Columbia Records president Clive Davis were Nyro advocates and enthusiasts they engaged in an infamous bidding war over Nyro’s publishing company Tuna Fish Music. Further when Nyro re-signed with Columbia Records rather than Geffen’s Asylum Record she strained their relationship.⁸⁵⁵ Again, Nyro signified to musicians, and perhaps especially to women, that they could actively resist industry commodification. Contract disputes in the music industry were not uncommon, however, by walking away from the music industry for three years Nyro asserted her independence in ways highly irregular for her

⁸⁵³ Kloman, William. “Laura Nyro: She’s the Hippest-and Maybe the Hottest?” New York Times 6 October 1968: Sec 2, 32.

⁸⁵⁴ See p. 1 in Rockwell, John. “A Drop-Out Sings of Her Tangled Life.” New York Times 29 February 1976: Sec 2, 1, 17.

⁸⁵⁵ Rockwell, 17.

era, a time when record companies actively courted singer-songwriters and “outsider” musicians.

1973-7: Industry Retreat

As Nyro lived her life apart from the industry in the early 1970s her personal consciousness palpably shifted via sentiments and politics that surfaced in her songs, which many critics interpreted as feminist. Her newfound or at least more prominent consciousness overlapped the decline and end of her marriage to David Bianchini. On her 1976 “comeback” album Smile her interpretation of the Sylvia Robinson-penned “Sexy Mama” inspired one writer to note her “concern for love, womanliness and sexiness.”⁸⁵⁶ During the same period of the previous writer’s assertion a Village Voice journalist interviewing Nyro noted how few editors in the “hip press” would allow him to quote Nyro, “at length on U. S. cruelty to Indians, on the ineptness of this government, or on feminism.”⁸⁵⁷ In the same article Nyro said:

The first feminism I expressed was long ago through melodies and rhythms and a few years later my life caught up. Some women let their hair grow back under their arms and feel an earthy satisfaction in accepting themselves . . . I did. I feel this sweet rebellion against legal marriage as if my love were too deep and

⁸⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁵⁷ Moore, Carman. “Laura Nyro Comes Back (Yay!).” Village Voice 1 March 1976: 124.

passionate to answer to the government and its paperwork, and I have a longing to have a baby with this man I love who I wrote 'Midnight Blue' for.⁸⁵⁸

In this quotation Nyro claimed a feminist identity, rejected governmental regulation of her sexuality and freely expressed her desire to have a baby out of wedlock. Nyro clearly projected an image and ideology that eschewed the mainstream image of popular white 70s female singers such as Karen Carpenter, Helen Reddy and Olivia Newton John whom critic Stephen Holden described as representing a, “distinguishable, if bland, female archetype with wide demographic appeal.”⁸⁵⁹ Nyro’s assertion of creative control, refusal to be commodified and controlled, and gradual assertion of a feminist aesthetic marked her as an outsider to an industry accustomed to demure female conformists.

Nyro’s 70s-90s critical profile

Prior to Nyro’s late 70s and early 80s hiatus many critics began voicing their complaints toward Nyro’s sound and persona, and framed her as pretentious and shrill. In a favorable review of her 1970 version of “Up On the Roof” reviewer Ed Ward began his review with, “I hate Laura Nyro and her blackboard-and-fingernails voice and daintily soulful pretensions . . .”⁸⁶⁰ Though Ward concluded the review positively his lament established the tone for future Nyro critics.⁸⁶¹ Shortly after Ward’s review Alec Dubro, who indicated his appreciation of Nyro, described what he viewed as Nyro’s

⁸⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁵⁹ Holden, Stephen. Rev. of Have You Never Been Mellow by Olivia Newton-John. Rolling Stone 24 April 1975: 58-60.

⁸⁶⁰ Ward, Ed. Rev. of “Up On the Roof” by Laura Nyro. Rolling Stone. 26 November 1970: 40.

⁸⁶¹ Ibid, “I hereby take back all the nasty things I’ve ever said about her.”

stylistic and lyrical decline in a review of 1971's Christmas and the Beads of Sweat. He noted she was beginning to veer from, "substantial song to the more nebulous realm of the avant-garde" and lamented the loss of her music's "enjoyment factor." The statement "It's too bloody serious" effectively summarized his review.⁸⁶² Such critical tendencies violently surfaced in Peter Reilly's review of the 1973 re-issue of Nyro's 1967 debut More Than a New Discovery re-issued as The First Songs. Reilly noted "it is as impressive now as it was five years ago." But he contrasted the early Nyro with the more politicized Nyro, "I'd still trade such romps as 'Flim Flam Man' and 'California Shoeshine Boys' for any or all of Nyro's later pretentious pronouncements on Humanity's Problems. Somewhere along the way Nyro seems to have convinced herself that she-got-the-whole-world-in-her-hands and the result has been an ever-thickening haze of moral sanctimoniousness in everything she does. . ." Reilly never referenced music but alluded to Nyro's beliefs and behaviors. He seemed outraged that she dared to express something moral and personal, as though she was stepping beyond her place. He concluded praising her debut and noted, "my own complete turn off on Nyro's current downslide into Relevancy."⁸⁶³

The link among these reviews was a constant perception of Nyro as pretentious and overly serious. One of music historians' and critics' most consistent critiques of 70s music was an over-emphasis on hedonism and ennui. Yet a major singer-songwriter attempted to enrich her music with more spiritual and political-minded content and she

⁸⁶² Dubro, Alec. Rev. of Christmas and the beads of sweat by Laura Nyro. Rolling Stone. 18 February 1971: 49.

⁸⁶³ Reilly, Peter. Rev. of More Than A New Discovery by Laura Nyro. Stereo Review. August 1973: 87.

was pretentious and too serious. Nyro was certainly not above criticism; however my interest is less the fact of criticism than the *spirit and tone*. In these instances her critics did not establish a clear or useful boundary for what separated substantive and compelling musical subject matter from the pretentious and morose.

Nyro's gender was particularly relevant here because during the era there were few comparable examples of men or women voicing the issues Nyro covered. There is also a sense that male critics had a difficult time accepting a woman in an observatory or sage-like role in the same vein that songwriters such as Dylan and Morrison were acceptable. The line between pretense and substance seemed to shift in the context of female performers who broke from the role of romantic singers to tackling broader concerns. The critical investment in form is also germane. Though many critics critiqued her work as clichéd, many scholars discuss the cliché as a realist expression valid for communicating relevant notions to politically vital communities because of their familiarity and accessibility.⁸⁶⁴ If Nyro aimed to capture some semblance of women's experiences did the economic and social subordination of women in America factor into her choice of language and tone in conveying her ruminations on life, love and politics? If so what challenges did this present to critics devoid of feminist consciousness or an interest/awareness of the gender divide? These issues inflect any discussion of popular music produced in a context beyond romantic entertainment but remain unanswered in rock criticism. If one presupposed that a liberal political sensibility and a modernist literary consciousness helped one fully appreciate a wordsmith such as Dylan what knowledges were required to grasp Nyro's aesthetic?

⁸⁶⁴ Nealon discusses Andrea Loewenstein and Jeff Weinstein's commentaries on clichés and class/culture issues inflecting in Ann Bannon lesbian pulp novels, 152-6.

Nyro's absence from most rock histories effectively answers this question by excluding or denigrating Nyro.

Laura Nyro's commercial re-emergence with 1984's *Mother's Spiritual* opened up Nyro to further disdain for her new musical direction. By the 1980s Nyro almost fully shifted from eclectic, impressionist romantic pop to more folk-oriented music with political and spiritual overtones tied to her woman-centered identity. One of the most consistent criticisms of Mother's Spiritual was the album's resemblance to 70s "women's music." Though women's music developed in response to music industry patriarchal domination and sexism, and ushered in a genuinely progressive political consciousness into popular music it suffered an uneven reputation among rock critics. Given these facts it was unsurprising that many Mother's Spiritual reviews lamented the album's resemblance to "women's music," two apparently dirty words.

The New York Times' review noted that the album would have been released on independent women's music label, "Were Miss Nyro not a pop legend,"⁸⁶⁵ and the Village Voice more explicitly noted the albums' "unfortunate likeness to 'women's music.'"⁸⁶⁶ Good intentions do not always beget good art but such reviews do not fully consider the artistic and commercial risks Nyro took releasing such an album during the dawn of MTV and the prominence of more hedonistically minded pop singers such as Michael Jackson and Madonna. That a major label released such an un-commercial album was an important commentary on the potential for major label musicians to

⁸⁶⁵ See p. 25 in Holden, Stephen. "Pop Disks Contrast Romantic Styles." Rev. of Christine McVie by Christine McVie, Rev. of Mother's Spiritual by Laura Nyro. New York Times. 12 February 1984: Sec 2, 25, 27; Holden does cite Cris Williamson as a coherent and compassionate musicians working in this realm.

⁸⁶⁶ Willis, Ellen. Rev. of Mother's Spiritual by Laura Nyro. Village Voice. 10 April 1984: 58.

access the mainstream via mass distribution without compromising their use of music as political and cultural commentary. Had Nyro not recorded for Columbia her record may not have been noticed or remain in print. Such critiques also lumped together the “women’s music” genre with limited consideration for the racial, stylistic and lyrical diversity characterizing performers of the genre ranging from Holly Near to Sweet Honey in the Rock to . . . Laura Nyro. Again, the words used to label Nyro suggest flakiness and pretense which can be read into such descriptions as “politically tame and musically passé”⁸⁶⁷ appealing to those hungry for “earth mother sexual mysticism” and stunted by “febrile, quasi-biblical diction and preachy broadsides.”⁸⁶⁸ Rolling Stone’s review lamented Nyro descent into “didacticism” and noted how the “feminism always implicit in Nyro’s music has become explicit.”⁸⁶⁹ These reviews addressed the album’s aesthetic flaws but there was also an implicit sense that Nyro’s ideology felt irrelevant or old-fashioned to the reviewers. Such reviews broadly implied that the issues “women’s music” performers traditionally articulated, liberal feminism, environmental concerns, etc. were either resolved or moot. With the exception of Holden’s reference to Cris Williamson, there was also little in the way of critics suggesting how Nyro’s interests could be articulated in a way that was relevant and artful. One of the few “positive” reviews came from Musician’s Laura Fissinger who candidly addressed the album’s likely fate noting, “‘Women’s music’ overloaded with feminist polemic can be

⁸⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁶⁸ Holden, “Pop Disks,” 25.

⁸⁶⁹ Shewey, Don. Rev. of Mother’s Spiritual by Laura Nyro. Rolling Stone. 29 March 1984: 76.

tough going, but Mother's Spiritual is passionate and professional. Laura Nyro had made a beautiful record, and too few people will hear it."⁸⁷⁰

In the late 80s a revived interest in singer-songwriters ushered in many female musicians recording for major record labels. Many of these performers began on the "women's music" festival circuit such as Tracy Chapman. As Cynthia Lont noted, the new generation, including Suzanne Vega, Michelle Shocked, and Phranc among others benefited, though on different levels I would add, from the groundwork women's music established in the 70s. Lont noted the symbolic annihilation of women's music in the rock press and resented press coronations of the 80s generation as a new phenomenon without acknowledging the precedents the "women's music" genre established.⁸⁷¹

Nyro's recording of Mother's Spiritual was significant from a historical perspective as the first post-70s major label "women's music" album. Though not a large seller, the album ushered in an outsider sensibility to broadly reviewed, nationally distributed mainstream music. Perhaps its indifferent reception fueled what Lont refers to as a tendency of the 80s new generation of songwriters to emphasize gender neutrality and downplay queer female sexuality lest their albums be confused with the "women's music" tag as was Mother's Spiritual.⁸⁷² The probable commercial failure of albums and/or musicians with even a broadly feminist or woman-centered aesthetic reflected long held music industry practices which confined women to romantic subject matter,

⁸⁷⁰ Fissinger, Laura. "Laura Nyro: Organic Feminism." Musician September 1984: 28.

⁸⁷¹ See p. 250 in Lont, Cynthia. "Women's Music: No Longer a Small Private Party." in Rockin' the Boat: Mass Music and Mass Movements. Ed. Reebee Garofalo. Boston: South End Press, 1992. 241-253.

⁸⁷² *Ibid.*

and highly sexualized imagery. Subsequently audiences grew increasingly conditioned and easily accept women in such limited roles.

After a nine year major-label retreat Nyro released 1993's Walk the Dog and Lite the Lite, a varied set including romantic R&B doo-wop covers and songs about everything from her humorous response to menstruation ("The Descent of Luna Rosa") to animal rights issues ("Lite A Flame (The Animal Rights Song)"). Nyro received generally positive notices and several reviews reiterated her stature, though undoubtedly it felt late given the range of her career. Stereo Review declares the album among the Best of the Month and commented ". . . it makes clear just how large Nyro's influence has loomed in her absence. A whole generation of smart, eclectic (and truth be told, self-absorbed) female songwriter/performers seems to have sprung up in the last decade or so—and their debt to Nyro is suddenly obvious." In response to some of the more political songs Simels noted that many of the "heavier" songs were "charming despite the PC overtones."⁸⁷³ Rolling Stone praised Nyro's "superlative" R&B cover and noted her genius for "crafting pop-soul confections." But, noted "Any truly provocative writing ends there, however, as the soul sister-turned earth mother essays a panoply of PC themes. Delectable but evanescent odes to world peace, animal rights, 'kick-ass' women artists,' Native Americans . . . All undeniably melodic, all irrefutably sincere, all faintly insubstantial, all in 37 minutes. Lite, delite, indeed."⁸⁷⁴ There was a genial, conciliatory tone to these reviews which nodded to Nyro's past influence and politely

⁸⁷³ Simels, Steve. Rev. of Walk the Dog & Lite the Lite (Run the Dog Darling Lite Delite) by Laura Nyro. Stereo Review. September 1993: 90.

⁸⁷⁴ McAlley, John. Rev. of Walk the Dog & Lite the Lite (Run the Dog Darling Lite Delite) by Laura Nyro. Rolling Stone. 14 October 1993: 117-8.

applauded her present. Yet one gets the sense that reviewers keep reminding readers of Nyro's past because she has long gone unacknowledged as important and influential. Despite Nyro's influence most rock histories barely acknowledged Nyro's presence on the 60s music scene.

Nyro in Rock History

Flattering references of Nyro's 60s innovations suggested a vague recognition in the popular press that Nyro was unique and influential but overstated the degree to which this was solidified in *official written historical* rock lore. Despite inspiring numerous musicians, such as those on the tribute album, and having many performers cover and interpret her songs, Nyro's place in rock music histories was limited. Gillett briefly listed Nyro as one of the few rock artists signed to Verve records but did not go into detail on her career, which he did for Verve musicians Tim Hardin and the Velvet Underground.⁸⁷⁵ Palmer, Szatmary, Garofalo, and Miller did not reference Nyro at all. The out-of-print Rock of Ages noted her signing to Verve⁸⁷⁶ and appearance at the Monterey Pop Festival⁸⁷⁷ but the only detail they provided was that she was a "near rival" to Joni Mitchell. The reference reflected a journalistic trend to lump together and compare female singer-songwriters only to other females, and noted how Nyro, "whiled her way through unexpected rhythms and soulful phrasing to achieve a solid cult following."⁸⁷⁸ Stephen Holden's essay on singer-songwriters in The Rolling Stone Illustrated History of Rock & Roll discussed Nyro's career and described Eli and the

⁸⁷⁵ Gillett, 308.

⁸⁷⁶ Stokes, Geoffrey. "The Pros Turn Weird." Rock of Ages. 337, 407.

⁸⁷⁷ Stokes, "Love for Sale." Rock of Ages, 375.

⁸⁷⁸ Stokes, "Trimming the Sails." Rock of Ages, 454.

Thirteenth Confession as “dazzling” with “echoes of Broadway, folk and pop, gospel.” He also cited Eli as, “Hugely influential . . . a powerful signal to younger pop musicians that it is now permissible to begin exploring a broader stylistic palette. Wendy Waldman and Rickie Lee Jones were among many who took her eclecticism as an artistic manifesto to be followed.”⁸⁷⁹ Despite the taken-for-grantedness Nyro press profiles have taken regarding the Nyro legacy rock histories excluded or downplayed Nyro with rare exception. She was apparently not influential enough to warrant the intimate profiles her male peers such as Bob Dylan received.⁸⁸⁰

Nyro in Album Guides

Despite her virtual absence from rock histories Nyro was present in other “official” forms of rock history. Rock magazines regularly reviewed her recordings and she received critical and historical overviews of varying length, depth and quality in several popular album guides. A close analysis of magazine reviews of Nyro’s work and some of her entries in leading album review guides revealed consistent praise for Nyro’s skills as a synthesizer but critical disdain for her more politicized and less commercially accessible albums. It was difficult to separate such critiques from her politics which grow more overt over time.

The harshest critics tended to critique Nyro as pretentious, preachy and obscure. In The New Rolling Stone Record Guide, published in 1983, rock critic Dave Marsh called Nyro the, “hottest American songwriter in the pop and pop-R&B fields for a

⁸⁷⁹ Holden, The Rolling Stone Illustrated History of Rock & Roll, 486-7.

⁸⁸⁰ See for example Miller, 218-25; Light, Alan. “Bob Dylan.” The Rolling Stone Illustrated History of Rock & Roll. 299-308; Garofalo, Rockin’ Out, 196-8.

period in the late Sixties and early Seventies” and notes, “of all the American singer/songwriters of her era, she is certainly the most soulful.” His most significant criticism and perhaps the reason her 1975, 1977 and 1978 recordings rated two out of five stars, meaning “mediocre,” were that “Nyro has certain problems—a tendency to be both obtuse and precious, platitudinous and opaque.”⁸⁸¹ The 1992 Rolling Stone Album Guide featured a similar entry written by Mark Coleman who called Nyro, “a couple of years ahead of her time” and someone who, “helped pave the way for the female singer-songwriters of the 1970s.” However he noted how her, “whoops and sighs often cross the line into screechiness; her ruminative and intensely personal lyrics can easily slip into obscurity” and cited the way some of her albums, “dissolve into alternating currents of free-floating anxiety and preciousness” limited the appeal of some of her albums.⁸⁸²

The All-Music Guide to Rock referred to Nyro as, “one of pop music’s true originals: a brilliant and innovative composer” whose records were, “intricate, haunting works highlighting her singularly powerful vocal phrasing, evocative lyrics and alchemical fusion of gospel, soul, folk and jazz structures—remain her definitive artistic legacy.”⁸⁸³ The guide rated her early records with four diamond ratings but her 1977-93 records received two and three diamond ratings. William Ruhlmann rated Mother’s

⁸⁸¹ See Laura Nyro entry by Dave Marsh on p. 365 in Marsh, Dave and John Swenson, eds. The New Rolling Stone Record Guide. New York: Random House/Rolling Stone Press, 1983.

⁸⁸² See Laura Nyro entry by Mark Coleman on p. 514 in DeCurtis, Anthony and James Henke with Holly George-Warren, eds. Rolling Stone Album Guide. New York: Random House, 1992.

⁸⁸³ See entry by Jason Ankeny on p. 665 in Erlewine, et. al, eds. All Music Guide to Rock. 2nd ed.

Spiritual two diamonds and noted, “political concerns for women’s rights and environmentalism, while clearly deeply felt, are neither well integrated into her overall perspective or particularly insightful.” He rated 1993’s Walk the Dog & Lite the Lite three diamonds and noted, “By now, the political stands are a part of her persona, expressed as directly as her emotional ones, and this is a well-rounded portrait of a mature artist.”⁸⁸⁴

Musichound Rock: The Essential Album Guide called Nyro, “One of the best and brightest songwriters of the late 60s, Laura Nyro is essential listening for anyone seeking out the roots of rock’s singer-songwriter movement.”⁸⁸⁵ Musichound rated her debut and 1969’s New York Tendaberry as five-bone albums and rated a Nyro collection and three albums as four bone albums and her 1976, 1990, and 1993 albums as three bone albums. The guide rated Mother’s Spiritual with two bones and noted, “The urgent passion of her earlier music is replaced here by a cooler, more politically attuned sensibility that’s respectable but not compelling.”⁸⁸⁶ The entry concluded with a list of Nyro’s influences and those she has influenced a list which included Randy Newman, and Chaka Khan alongside Rundgren, Streisand, and Jones.

What emerged from these examples, besides the differently structured approaches such guides used for evaluation, was the reverence more recently published guides afford Nyro. Whereas the AMG and Musichound cited several Nyro albums as four star/diamond/bone albums and even several as five bone albums and cited her

⁸⁸⁴ Entry by William Ruhlmann, All Music Guide to Rock 2nd ed., 666.

⁸⁸⁵ See Laura Nyro entry by Christopher Scapelliti on p. 825-6 in Graff, Gary and Daniel Durchholz, eds. Musichound Rock: The Essential Album Guide. Detroit: Visible Ink Press, 1999.

⁸⁸⁶ Scapelliti, 826.

influence, the 1983 and 1992 Rolling Stone entries were more cautious with praise. What was also notable here was that men exclusively wrote the entries I have cited and almost all critiqued Nyro's post 70s politics and sentiments. Though it is problematic to speculate on the individual politics of these writers their politics and identities were not inseparable from their task of criticism. One of the more intriguing Nyro profiles of 1976 was from Carman Moore, who said, "I think of Laura's songs as her personal secret testament. What two men talking take for Laura Nyro's sentimental lyrics may be recognized by female devotees as pages from their own secret literature."⁸⁸⁷ Moore suggested that gender mediated the ability of critics to understand and relate to her music. Rock critics are typically male and often praise 60s songwriters such as Bob Dylan and Van Morrison for their uniquely personal and idiosyncratic styles. The whole of their careers usually overrides occasional artistic missteps.⁸⁸⁸ Yet some critics framed Nyro's more personal and idiosyncratic work as obtuse and platitudinous. Reviews of Nyro's 70s and 80s albums illustrated the shift in critical responses to Nyro, which mirrored her transition from a generally romantic songwriter to a writer more focused on motherhood, spirituality and politics.

1977-97: Woman Identified Woman

Nyro's queer sexuality and unapologetic "woman-identified" nature distinguished her from many rock music industry musicians, especially those recording on major labels. Several writers noted fans' interpretations of Nyro's 1968 song "Emmie" from Eli and the Thirteenth Confession as a song with strong lesbian

⁸⁸⁷ Moore, 124.

⁸⁸⁸ See Rolling Stone Album Guide, 1992, entries on Dylan, 214-6; Morrison, 487-8.

overtones.⁸⁸⁹ Though Nyro biographer Kort noted Nyro's assertion that the song was about womanhood⁸⁹⁰ rather than an individual lover *per se* the fact that people speculated about the song's meaning indicated her early resonance as a queer icon. Kort also quoted Nyro friend Harriet Leider's interpretation of "December's Boudoir" as a lesbian-oriented song.⁸⁹¹ Nyro's vaguely celebratory female centered songs took on different meaning when Nyro engaged in a long-term same-sex relationship. In 1977 shortly after her 1976 return to recording and performing, Nyro's met painter Maria Desiderio whom she lived with from 1977 through 1994 and raised her son Gil Bianchini.⁸⁹² It is imprecise to conflate Nyro's feminism with her lesbian relationship, however Nyro's women centered life from the 70s through her death emerged in numerous ways. For example in 1984 after a six year recording hiatus Nyro returned with 1984's Mother's Spiritual an overtly political album in which she addressed motherhood, romance, feminism, patriarchy, and environmental issues among others.⁸⁹³ A journalist who noted Mother's Spiritual's "strong feminist undercurrent" observed the "added political dimension in what had previously been primarily poetic personal work" as a notable aspect of Nyro's 80s music.⁸⁹⁴ In 1989 Nyro also performed at the women-only Michigan Womyn's Music Festival,⁸⁹⁵ a festival with a woman-centered aesthetic and largely lesbian following. Nyro's discernibly political and female-centered songs

⁸⁸⁹ See p. 197 in Kort, Michelle. Soul Picnic: The Music and Passion of Laura Nyro. New York: Thomas Dunne Books/St. Martin's Press. 2002; Avicoli, 192.

⁸⁹⁰ Kort, 60, 197.

⁸⁹¹ Kort, 197.

⁸⁹² See Sontag, Deborah. "An Enigma Wrapped in Songs." New York Times. 26 October 1997: Sec 2, 35, 36; Kort, 196.

⁸⁹³ Kort, 200-3.

⁸⁹⁴ See p. 10 in Heim, Chris. "A season veteran: Laura Nyro is back—and it feels like spring." Chicago Tribune. 31 July 1988: Sec. 13, 8, 10.

⁸⁹⁵ Kort, 230.

alienated many critics who enjoyed some of the music but largely accused Nyro of didacticism in their Mother's Spiritual reviews.⁸⁹⁶ If it was clear how Nyro's politics could turn off those with differing opinions or infuriated those who agreed with her politics but found her approach wanting, the impact of her queer sexuality, which she did not discuss in the press, on her career and place in rock music history was less clear.

Nyro's sexuality was queer in terms of her apparently fluid sexuality, but her queerness also extended to her persona. First, Nyro refused to adhere to musical genre conventions, to change her style or tailor songs for single release. Second, in terms of content, Nyro addressed spiritual, sexual and later in her career, political subjects, and eschewed the love songs that dominated popular music, especially among female musicians. Finally in terms of style she resisted framing her body in the objectifying language of rock music costuming and photography. Nyro's place in rock music history was embodied in singer-songwriter Jonatha Brooke's admission in the liner notes of the 1997 Nyro tribute, "I wasn't familiar with Laura Nyro's music—I'm not quite sure how I missed out. But I'm glad it found it now."⁸⁹⁷ That a burgeoning contemporary singer was unfamiliar with Nyro seemed puzzling given popular press accounts published from the 60s through the 90s which asserted, Nyro's contributions to rock's pantheon as secure. A 1997 article published shortly after Nyro's death noted her vast stylistic synthesis and declared her influence on Rickie Lee Jones, Suzanne Vega, Barry Manilow and Todd Rundgren⁸⁹⁸ but when it said, "many rock historians consider her an equal to the best of 60s musicians" the article did not list who these rock historians

⁸⁹⁶ Ibid, 205-7.

⁸⁹⁷ Time and Love liner notes.

⁸⁹⁸ Sontag, 36.

were.⁸⁹⁹ A 1988 profile listed the numerous Nyro covers by performers such as The Fifth Dimension and Barbra Streisand, noted her stylistic fusion and states how she, “helped define the standards for the singer-songwriter boom that followed.”⁹⁰⁰ If this was the case how did Brooke, or others who only discovered Nyro toward the end of her life miss Nyro? Two 1976 profiles noted Nyro’s stylistic diversity declaring her music a, “Striking blend of folk, rock, soul, jazz, and Broadway”⁹⁰¹ and cited the, “unlikely synthesis of soul music, folk-rock, and a mystery modern classical element.”⁹⁰² The New York Times’ 1976 profile quoted positive Los Angeles Times and Rolling Stone magazine reviews⁹⁰³ and a Times’ 1968 profile noted her unique sound observing how, “the reviewers obviously had trouble fitting Laura into existing categories.”⁹⁰⁴

Nyro’s queer sexuality and unconventional persona posed a problem for historians aiming to neatly categorize Nyro and reduced her to a white-soul singer or 60s singer-songwriter. It was arguable that some of her most vital work came after her initial success when she had the consciousness and commitment to overtly center women-centered political and social commentary in her overall sound. Many rock historians, reflecting the criticisms of some of her reviewers, seemed unsure of how to access and understand Nyro’s unconventional personal life, erratic career path and ever-deepening mix of spirituality, politics, and sexuality, in her recordings. As a result her

⁸⁹⁹ Sontag, 35.

⁹⁰⁰ Heim, 8, 10.

⁹⁰¹ Rockwell, 1.

⁹⁰² Moore, 124.

⁹⁰³ Rockwell, 1.

⁹⁰⁴ Kloman, 32.

negligible place in rock history reflected the music industry and rock historians' uncertainty and hesitance regarding female iconoclasm of the queer, headstrong variety.

Conclusion: What defines a revolution?

The importance of Laura Nyro and Dusty Springfield was something more and something less than “revolutionary” in the context of the decade their careers flourished from. One of the most poignant and balanced assessments of the sexual revolution of the 1960s came from historian Beth Bailey who argued, “It is when radical beliefs and practices are taken up (though perhaps less ardently embraced or strenuously practiced) by those who have not devoted their lives to subverting the norm that a true sexual revolution exists, rather than a set of sexual subcultures or bohemian lifestyles.”⁹⁰⁵ Rather than undermining the liberation movements Bailey put them into proper focus. The pioneering aspects of Springfield and Nyro’s careers, both in their negotiation of the music industry and the way they managed their public identities was notable because their actions were rooted less in overt alignments with radical movements than individual needs for freedom and expression that were radical, especially for women. Springfield’s choice to step beyond the realm of singer into musician was a significant shift for a British female singer and thus contributed to our notions of what was radical for its time. Similarly Nyro’s decision to retreat from the industry and to integrate her politics into her music during her re-emergence was not heralded at the time but can

⁹⁰⁵ See p. 139 in Bailey, Beth. “The Sexual Revolution: Was it Revolutionary?” from Farber, David and Beth Bailey w/ contributors. The Columbia Guide to America in the 1960s. New York: Columbia University Press, 2001. 134-42.

retrospectively be understood as a bold position given the industry she worked in and cultural expectations toward women born in mid-1940s America.

Springfield's coming out as bisexual and continual refusal to embrace labels and Nyro's women-centered aesthetic were new for popular music and reflected a shift which occurred at the everyday personal and professional level that was political and symbolic in ways more complex than obvious significations of radical, progressive, liberatory or political behavior. In a sense they came out, in their work and their public personas in subtle but clearly resonant ways. Their choices bridged gaps between silence and clearly marked liberation which forecasted the broadened palette of possibility musicians of the 70s exercised. In the following Chapter I explore the manifestation of their choices in the careers of David Bowie, Elton John, and Steven Grossman and women's music performers whose relationships to "outness" and liberation exemplified the diverse parameters informing such notions in mass culture.

Chapter Seven: Integration, Exploitation and Separation in the 1970s

The gay-Liberation era did not convert the majority of the gay and lesbian population into instant activists or inspire mass “coming out” in the United States or abroad. Political movements rarely accomplish this, especially movements centered on a private, socially stigmatized aspect of identity. However a broader range of possibilities for living and defining oneself gradually emerged during the era and beyond. By introducing “coming out” into the broader lexicon people could begin to envision life as openly queer public people rather than imagining ways to obscure or downplay their sexuality. I conclude my discussion of queer musicians by examining the diverse ways several key queer musicians negotiated queer sexuality in the 1970s. The commercial gap between the most popular musician of the 1970s and the most prominent queer man in music, Elton John, and the commercially obscure women’s music circuit which developed in the 1970s was significant. Their negotiations of queer sexuality was integral to this gap.

Elton John, the most popular musician of the decade came out as bisexual six years into his commercial recording career in the United States. His willingness to do so must be understood as the admission of a financially stable performer, but also as someone living in a cultural era where attitudes toward sexuality began to loosen and sexual minorities began to define themselves as a distinct constituency with legitimate social, political and cultural concerns. That John came out as a bisexual rather than gay and refrained from explicit political lyrics (Bernie Taupin was John’s lyricist) reflected one foot rooted in liberation and another rooted in the historical weight of a commercial industry unaccustomed to openly queer and political performers. David Bowie had

survived as a bisexual before retiring to a new image. But singer-songwriter Steven Grossman who debuted as an openly gay singer with personal lyrics, tinged with politics lacked an audience and faded. Women's Music performers, unwilling to conform to industry expectations of women as sex symbols restricted to singing, had nothing to lose because many could never fit in anyway. They eschewed commercial success in favor of music defined by their political convictions and experiences tied to sexual otherness. The key difference their stories illustrate is that John, whose sales initially declined after his announcement, could only survive after establishing himself, and even then after declaring himself bisexual and marrying, he was unable to claim a gay identity until the early 1990s. The women's music circuit continued but the commercial obscurity and cult status of the genre represented a paradox of the music industry: queer artists could be queer if they already had an audience, weren't too political and were tortured; openly queer artists could exist independent of the major record companies but were bound to the commercial margins and to appeal to like-minded audiences, thus openly queer music was a niche. Such compromises demonstrate the shifting hegemonies which characterized queer visibility over the decades my study covers.

1970s Queer Male Rockers: Gay Minstrelsy, Glam Rock and a Gay Lib Era Liberace

The 1970s ushered in an ideological battle in popular music as to what elements constituted "authentic" representations of homosexual experiences in popular music. The issue of whether homosexuality was a lifestyle fetish indicative of a decadent decade or an invisible identity destined to remain silent in popular culture played out in

the careers of David Bowie, Elton John and gay cult musician Steven Grossman. Though David Bowie, who identified as bisexual in 1972, and Elton John, who also came out as bisexual in 1976, were among the most prominent queer-identified performers during the 1970s critical responses to the much less prominent Grossman established the key terms of queer authenticity. In 1973 Mercury Records was one of the first major record labels to sign an openly gay (not bisexual) musician, Steven Grossman. Though openly gay glam-rock performer Jobriath recorded a self-titled 1973 album for Elektra Records, Grossman was the first gay man whose music and image consciously eschewed the overt stylization of homosexuality as exotic or decadent. Grossman's initial press coverage and quick disappearance indicated a lack of interest in complex representations of queerness even in the midst of the gay liberation era and rock's "bisexual chic" phase.

New York Times' music critic John Rockwell's May 1974 review of a Grossman performance noted, "Homosexuality in Grossman's case has nothing to do with glitter or trendiness: these are real efforts to compose love songs and set down personal impressions from a homosexual perspective."⁹⁰⁶ Rockwell's contrast of Grossman's musical evocation of with the stylized glam-rock version also surfaced in Stephen Holden's superlative Rolling Stone review of Grossman's debut album Caravan Tonight. Holden noted Grossman, ". . . is the first composer/performer recorded and promoted by a major label to write about homosexuality on the every day

⁹⁰⁶ Rockwell, John. "Grossman Offers Homosexual Songs," New York Times 7 May 1974: 52.

level, rather than exploit it as chic decadence or futuristic fantasy.”⁹⁰⁷ Holden noted Grossman was comparable to 70s singer-songwriters Elliott Murphy and Bruce Springsteen and noted the album’s emphasis on the act and consequences of “coming out.”⁹⁰⁸ Grossman himself articulated his displeasure with the prominence of glam rockers noting, in reference to Bowie, “I don’t know Bowie’s material because I politically disagree with his whole trip. Its all right to encourage role reversal by dressing the way he does, and by wearing make-up, if that’s what he’s doing: if he’s using it as a gimmick , though, I think it is a gimmick that perpetuates a certain stereotype of gay people, that disallows the possibility that you can be gay and be whatever you want to be.”⁹⁰⁹ Grossman thus suggested a possibility unlike any of his predecessors.

As of 1981 Grossman’s debut album, now out-of-print, sold 5,000 to 6,000 copies and his recording contract was not renewed.⁹¹⁰ Grossman’s name has occasionally surfaced in gay and lesbian themed books⁹¹¹ but he was absent from most rock music histories. Yet, the questions reviewers raised during Grossman’s public introduction indicated what was at stake for openly gay musicians, particularly male musicians during the era. Grossman came about at a time when gay liberation

⁹⁰⁷ Holden, Stephen. “A Gay Minstrel.” Rev. of Caravan Tonight by Steven Grossman Rolling Stone. 23 May 1974: 73-4.

⁹⁰⁸ Holden, 73.

⁹⁰⁹ “Gay Minstrel is Painfully Honest,” Berkeley Barb, May 23-30 1974: 15.

⁹¹⁰ See p. 41 in Block, Adam. “Tuning Up With Music of Our On Making” The Advocate. 12 November 1981: 41, 46.

⁹¹¹ Such as Studer’s Rock on the Wild Side, 99-100 and Mark Thompson, ed., Long Road to Freedom: The Advocate History of the Gay and Lesbian Movement. New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1994. 111.

movements overtly established gay as a political and cultural term, which included the notion of gay as inherently signifying external difference from a heterosexual/straight norm. Thus the public recognized effeminate and gender transgressive men, such as Bowie as exotic and gay. In contrast, John represented the classic “closet case” of introspective gay men whose asexual personae blunted the threat of their dormant homosexuality.

Grossman’s resistance to such easy stereotypes was actually more threatening to cultural perceptions of gender in the music industry because he fit in so well with the earnest, introspective singer-songwriter archetype popular at the time. There was no stylistic or behavioral difference in his image/persona to alert audiences to his gayness, limiting his potential cache because he did not make for an exotic story. The fact that Grossman was a sexually identified person who integrated his sexuality into his music inhibited his potential to build an audience and then come out as John did. The radical sex/gender potential Bowie’s pose suggested and the potentially broad appeal of gay men John’s pre-coming out career implied could have been realized in Grossman’s career.

Alas, Grossman offered a sound and image *too progressive* because it suggested both sameness and difference in a way that de-exoticized queerness, presented it as a way of life rather than a trend or fetish, and acknowledged the unique social and political challenges facing queer people. Holden predicted in his review that Grossman’s record was likely to be, “overlooked due to the timidity of programmers for so-called progressives FM radio stations who have stupidly judged its material too

controversial or its appeal too limited to warrant airplay.”⁹¹² Holden’s point was credible in its indictment of industry prejudices. However he overlooked the fact that *gay audiences* themselves may not have been ready to embrace Grossman precisely because he offered such a radical alternative to the exotic gender benders and asexual, closeted performers they were accustomed to. It is unclear how Grossman’s reception can be understood in terms of gender. Whereas “women’s music” audiences embraced independent lesbian performers who balanced the social and political in their music, my impression is that gay male taste seemed very focused on pop, rock, and R&B as well as the growing glam and disco scenes, leaving Grossman and others in a similar vein marooned in a place popular music was not ready for.

Despite Grossman’s commercial failure Elton John’s coming out and post-out career suggested the possibility that “out” gay performers could survive, however troubled, the industry. However, where Grossman began his career uncompromised, and faded, John’s approach was less political and challenging but ultimately more shrewd. John established an audience before coming out and was cautious in coming out as bisexual, and eventually coming out as gay after his failed marriage.

The Importance of Being Elton

Elton John’s image combined two aspects defining queer singers since the 1950s. First, John had a non-threatening, introspective image more delicate than many of his male peers of the era which made him appear virtually asexual. Because he projected little or no indication of a sexual self audiences and journalists presumed he

⁹¹² Holden, 73.

was heterosexual and no one overtly questioned his sexual identity which rendered it a non-issue. John perpetuated the heterosexual myth when he initially identified as heterosexual in interviews (discussed below) which may have quelled dormant perceptions of his covert homosexuality among some. His non-threatening, asexual image directly paralleled the public reception toward Liberace, whose largely female audience found him intangibly “charming”—a term synonymous with self-deprecating, non-threatening seemingly asexual male performers whose gender demeanor contrasted sharply with other male singers of the era.

Second, as John transitioned from an introspective singer-songwriter type to a more overtly campy performer, this too blunted his covert queerness. Elton’s wild stage antics and elaborate costumes buried Elton the person beneath behavior and an image so exaggerated and parodic it made it difficult to locate a “real” person beneath the glitz. Mirroring Liberace’s rococo appearance and elaborate staging, Dusty Springfield’s drag queen aesthetics and Johnnie Ray and Little Richard’s raucous stage behavior, John synthesized the over-the-top gestures of his queer predecessors. By conveying an aura of queerness through camp and performance without explicitly linking them to sexual behavior or identity these gestures functioned for him the way they did for queer performers before him.

However, John translated the “queer textures” of asexuality and camp into the gay liberation era in a bolder sense than his predecessors. Five years after Dusty Springfield boldly announced her bisexuality to the British press, Elton John came out as bisexual in Rolling Stone in a statement tinged with brashness, fear, nervousness and even a sense of self-destructiveness:

I don't know what I want to be exactly. I'm just going through a stage where any sign of affection would be welcome on a sexual level. I'd rather fall in love with a woman eventually because I think a woman probably lasts much longer than a man. But I really don't know. I've never talked about this before. Ha, ha. But I'm not going to turn off the tape. I haven't met anybody that I would like to settle down with-of either sex.

You're bisexual? [Interviewer]

There's nothing wrong with going to bed with someone of your own sex. I think everybody's bisexual to a certain degree. I don't think it's just me. It's not a bad thing to be. I think you're bisexual. I think everybody is.

You haven't said it in print before. [Interviewer]

Probably not. [*Laughs*] It's going to be terrible with my football club. It's so hetero, it's unbelievable. But I mean, who cares! I just think people should be very free with sex-they should draw the line at goats.⁹¹³

Unlike Springfield he did not retreat commercially, though his sales declined. Beyond the coming out interview John continued to assert his identity throughout the late 70s in print and on television, contrasting with Springfield who moved to L. A. and suspended her recording career for years before gradually returning to major recording. Indeed John made several public statements where proudly defended his identity and expressed general empathy for other queer men. Three years after coming out John openly discussed bisexuality with the Daily Mirror's Alasdair Buchan and noted, "I realise it's

⁹¹³ Jahr, 17.

not everyone's cup of tea, and I try not to dwell on it too much. But I had to get it off my chest. That's the way I am, and it's no good hiding it."⁹¹⁴ John also commented about how all guys do not fit the mincing stereotype but is empathetic for those who are because, "A lot of them are just very confused, frightened people. I know it was far easier for me to come out than for many others. They go through a hell of a lot of pain, and I would support anyone who was totally frank, because it's never easy." The fact that John actually used the term *come out* subtly indicated the gradual integration of gay argot into the consciousness of post-liberation era queers. Perhaps John's most risky political statement were his objections to apartheid—of any kind including color, class and sexual preference at a 1979 Russian press conference while on tour.⁹¹⁵

After coming out as bisexual during a period when "bisexual" chic was in vogue, John came out as gay in the late 80s and is currently one of the most prominent "out" gay men in popular culture. John added a new layer to the queer textures preceding his emergence by ushering them into an era where struggles for sex and gender liberation were gradually coming to light. Though it was extremely risky for the most popular musician of his era to come out as bisexual during the first few years of his public career and later as a gay man, his coming out and the inherent riskiness reflected the financial security he accumulated, perhaps a feeling of support from his immediate surrounding friends and family and, most profoundly the toll of secrecy and isolation on his freedom. The fact that John did not lose significant support from his management and distributors suggested a perception that John was a "safe" risk because he had such a established fan base and was so non-threatening, even as an "out"

⁹¹⁴ Norman, 373.

⁹¹⁵ Ibid, 372.

bisexual man. Further, since John did not generally sing overtly political material or align himself with any political organizations/movements during the 70s he represented the potential image of an “out” queer musician who was palatable because a non-threatening image and camp are already part of his image. Thus his sexuality was just another dimension of his unnamed but detectable and marketable non-normative gender behavior.

However, the fact that John survived, eventually coming out as a gay man and achieving a major commercial resurgence in the 1990s, did not permanently or significantly alter the music industry’s focus of marketing musicians based on their heterosexual appeal. If anything John’s coming out opened a symbolic and commercial space in the 1980s for overtly campy acts such as Culture Club and sexually ambiguous, but not necessarily queer, performers such as Luther Vandross and Tracy Chapman. Record companies could bank on the appeal of such performers who embodied the camp or asexual space 50s and 60s-era queer musicians constructed because in a post-Elton John world these images were commercially feasible regardless of whether the performers claimed a queer sexual identity.

The Other Side of “Excess”

One of the most pervasive theories historians and biographers asserted is Elton John as the epitome of the “excess” that defined the 70s pop music scene. For example Szatmary argued John mirrored the era’s extravagance serving as, “the transitional figure from the early seventies sensitive singer to mid-seventies excessive rock star”⁹¹⁶ and biographer Philip Norman said John, “personified the glorious shoddy glitter of the

⁹¹⁶ Szatmary, 209-10.

seventies.”⁹¹⁷ The notion of excess in popular music broadly applied to everything from extravagant living (vast income, private planes, owning grand real estate) to the indulgent nature of the cultures surrounding genres such as disco and glam rock. The fact that historians, such as Szatmary, conflated homosexuality with 70s cultural excess was ironic given his and other music writers’ neglect of John’s struggle with his sexuality as a historic reality of the era.

Such tidy theorizing simplified the particularities of struggles with sexual identity. Critics, historians and biographers unable or unwilling to explicitly address homophobia’s possible impact on John as a public person tended to isolate John’s sexuality from his public identity and project his image onto the decade. It is unreasonable for one person to carry the symbolic weight of a whole decade and group of performers. A closer examination of John and his supposed “excess” revealed his sexuality as a particularly central component of his identity because of internalized and external homophobia particular to a man of his age, national origin and profession. When Garofalo referred to John as, “something of the Liberace of rock” he was primarily referring to John’s “flair and showmanship” not the person struggling behind the façade, which was the ultimate parallel between the two performers.⁹¹⁸ It is most useful to explore what indicators, from childhood through his commercial zenith, suggest John reacting to broad social homophobia and internalizing it as a “structure of feeling.” John’s shift from an apparently reserved child to a publicly embraced but privately isolated young adult to someone willing to come out as “bisexual,” return to

⁹¹⁷ Norman, 4.

⁹¹⁸ Garofalo, 302-3

the closet via marriage only to fully embrace his homosexuality as an adult was a telling path.

Like Liberace, John was the perennial “good boy” with a maturity, politeness and a highly developed aesthetic sense. Throughout his childhood and adolescence he was unusually isolated from his male peers who socialized while he honed his musical skills and became a budding pop music enthusiast.⁹¹⁹ John began his career in earnest and publicly conformed to expectations of male rock stars—including the assumption of heterosexual orientation in image, manner of dress, song address and sexual desires. His virtual asexuality signified heterosexuality to the public because John blended in very well. Thus in interviews he played along with standard music press questions by downplaying any semblance of sex appeal or explicitly noting his desire to meet a woman, marry and have children when prompted.

In a 1971 Rolling Stone interview he said, “I’ve got no time for love affairs,” a convenient way to defer attention away from his bachelor status.⁹²⁰ The British music press played along commenting on John’s asexuality but constantly probing John regarding his sex life. For example a 1972 article a Sunday Mirror reporter built on the image of Elton as isolated and virtually asexual when it noted, “In his private life, too, Elton is scarcely superstar material. There are no groupies either outside his fifty thousand pound house, clamouring for autographs, or inside, begging for bed.”⁹²¹ A year later Melody Maker observed John’s non-threatening appeal in a way that evoked

⁹¹⁹ Norman, 19-isolated piano players, 22-growing up in Liberace era, 33-Dusty Springfield infatuation, 35-female classmate discusses his civility; Pyron, 35-Liberace dislike of sports, 49-among Liberace’s peers musical ability is characteristic of a sissy.

⁹²⁰ Norman, 177, quoting June 10, 1971 Rolling Stone cover story.

⁹²¹ *Ibid*, 209.

press responses to Liberace's adoring fans. According to the reporter, "Elton's fans don't want to go to bed with him. They want to mother him or hug him like a friendly Santa Claus after the show." In same story John deflects from his sexuality and commented, "It's a bit funny to be screamed at, because I'm not your actual sex idol, am I? The only way I ever thought people would scream for me was in horror." Such self-effacement frames John as earnest and effectively desexualizes him.⁹²² Biographer Norman speculated many British music journalists were aware of John's relationship with manager John Reid, with whom John shared a house but, "none made even the most oblique reference to it. Seventies pop might visually flaunt the homosexual, bisexual and 'unisexual' but there were still no words to express such a thing in NME or Melody Maker."⁹²³ However the release of "Someone Saved My Life Tonight," which chronicled John's separation from former girlfriend Linda Woodrow, inspired the British press to get more aggressive and John burrowed more deeply into mendacity. Melody Maker's Caroline Coon questioned John's sexuality like no one before had in a 1975 interview. She questioned why he hadn't settled with anyone since avoiding an engagement to Woodrow and John replied, ". . . I haven't met anyone who I want to settle down with." She continued with more pointed questions by asking if he liked women enough to want marriage. John defensively stated, "Oh yeah, of course. I find it easier to get to know ladies in America though. English ladies put up so many fronts. American ladies are very bold, and that breaks the ice for me. I can never say boo to a goose to anyone. I'm very shy. I need someone to help me out."⁹²⁴ Despite her

⁹²² Ibid, 231 reference to a March 3, 1973 Melody Maker story.

⁹²³ Ibid, 256.

⁹²⁴ Ibid, 298.

potentially lid-blowing questions John felt comfortable enough to discuss his self-destructiveness, depression, craving for affection, all symptoms of someone desperate to intimate his isolation with someone willing to listen and empathize.⁹²⁵

Such a willful move to claim a tie to heterosexuality paralleled similar behavior among his predecessors. Liberace claimed to have lost his virginity to Miss Bea Haven (a tongue-in-cheek drag name) in his autobiography and publicly rejected homosexuality in his 1959 libel case.⁹²⁶ Johnnie Ray married Marilyn Morrison under false pretenses. Little Richard briefly married after he left rock 'n' roll and entered into the Seventh-Day Adventist seminary. Dusty Springfield referenced male lovers in interviews when asked.

Simultaneously, John was in a romantic relationship with his manager John Reid, whom close friends and family understood to be his companion in an unspoken manner.⁹²⁷ John's growing incorporation of outrageous visual imagery and a camp aesthetic into his persona suggested a tension between public and private expectations he gradually breached until revealing his bisexuality in a series of interviews. John's "coming out" was an outgrowth of mounting dissatisfaction with fame, which for John was an alluring but unfulfilled notion promising glamour but resulting in a unique isolation for queer celebrities whose sexuality had to remain invisible or discreet. When John came out as bisexual this functioned the way it did years earlier for Dusty Springfield, as a bridge to homosexuality. By claiming at least some interest in women

⁹²⁵ Ibid, 299.

⁹²⁶ Liberace discusses Miss Bea Haven in on p. 40 in Liberace. The Wonderful, Private World of Liberace. New York: Harper and Row, 1986; "I am against the practice because it offends convention and it offends society." qtd. in Liberace. Liberace: An Autobiography, 233.

⁹²⁷ Norman, 169, 172, 211.

sexually and an interest in raising children John avoided the full gay stigma, a gesture which lent his brief marriage to Renate Blauel an aura of authenticity. As I've previously noted, John eventually came out as a gay man engaging in relationships with men for the remainder of his adult life since at least the late 80s.

Appropriating John as a symbol of the decade requires one to disconnect the significant ties between his image and persona with his struggle for personal and social acceptance. His experience has few parallels among 70s performers, including the bulk of the "glam" and "glitter rockers" with whom John is associated. Cabaret singer Peter Allen, glam and stadium rocker Freddie Mercury, and disco's Sylvester were 70s queer performers arguably more outrageous and radical in image than John. Yet critics did not frame them as embodying the decade. I suspect John made for a great target because of his broad popularity, but the story behind his image tells a more complex and troubled story than the tale of excess historians frequently cited. It also indicated the broad appeal of queer signifiers in rock, which suggested the integral nature of queer-associated elements like camp to rock music aesthetics and the omnipresence of queerness on the palette of popular music audiences many unawares. Both topics have drawn limited attention from rock historians, which is a prime motivation for my exploration of queer performers.

The Glam Game: Comparing/Contrasting David Bowie and Elton John

Elton John's struggle with coming out as a bisexual man, and eventually as gay, apparently haunted his existence throughout his life. His long-term struggle with sexual identity and its relationship to his public appeal, career momentum and personal health

differentiated him from the “bisexual chic” glam and glitter rockers ushered in during the 1970s. I separate John from glam rockers because the depth of his concerns were indicative of the commercial pressures facing mainstream queer performers willing to claim their identity as opposed to glam/glitter rockers who used queerness as professional titillation.

There were numerous differences between John and the glam/glitter rockers which challenged his status as the pioneer of the genre. First, John had a more potentially fragile commercial windfall because of his immense sales and popularity from 1970-6. Most glam/glitter rockers used androgynous imagery, feminine costuming, and camp at the outset of their careers to gain attention, never achieved John’s overall appeal and abandoned the queer strategy lest they be mistaken for queer. John was an already established performer with widespread appeal. His appeal was closely tied to his non-threatening early singer-songwriter days (linking him to Liberace and Johnny Mathis’ public images) and his later, more exaggerated image distracted and neutralized listeners from considering his personal identity or signifiers of queerness (mirroring Johnnie Ray, Liberace and Little Richard)

Second, John gradually integrated the general language and philosophy of gay liberation into his public persona, emerging as one of the first openly queer seemingly well-adjusted public figures, particularly in the British media. His open discussion of bisexuality in interviews, empathy for other gay men, willingness to collaborate with openly gay musicians etc. defined his queerness as an integral part of his life rather than a phase. This did not directly translate into overtly political music, in fact John records “All the Girls Love Alice” (lyrics by Bernie Taupin) which many critics have cited as

homophobic toward lesbians. However, in contrast most glam/glitter rockers attached no political connection between gender non-conformity and broader social pressures.

Third, because John maintained his identity, rather than abandoning it, he experienced measurable fallout. After John came out he experienced a downturn in his sales and airplay declined, and by the end of the seventies and early 80s, increasing harassment by British tabloids which eventually blossomed into attempts to scandalize his 1984 marriage. During his early fame he exhibited an indulgent, self-destructive streak that blossomed into numerous addictions by the 1980s marriage debacle. Because queerness was a temporary tactic rather than a career commitment for glam/glitter rockers their careers existed outside of a pre- and post-closet assessment.

Lest I appear to lionize John and demonize glam/glitter performers, I must note that glam rock was significant for introducing several innovations. Glam/glitter rock broadly integrated visual gender ambiguity and ironic, self-conscious performativity into rock. Musicians as different as glam rocker David Bowie, heavy metal performers Alice Cooper and Kiss, and punk acts Iggy Pop and the New York Dolls drew from queer-signifying elements, such as use make-up and cross dressing, to create their public images. Perhaps because many of these performers were obscure or publicly known to be heterosexual their images were less threatening to the acceptable range of imagery in rock music. Nonetheless, Queen and later Culture Club entered into mainstream consciousness at least partially as a result of a public broadly “prepared” for non-traditional images of male performers. The genre, which continued the androgyny of rockers Little Richard and Mick Jagger, and the self-awareness of Liberace added a new dimension to rock style and attitude. Arguably it unmasked the centrality of

persona in rock and the dormant drama, exaggeration and camp aspects that declined as rock 'n' roll transitioned into the more serious 60s rock scenes. The genre's arsenal of attitude was essential to understanding the publicly documented affect of prominent late 70s disco scenes such as Studio 54, and the public embrace (and controversies) of stylistic chameleons such as Prince and Madonna in the 1980s.

In the context of illuminating queer experiences in rock music glam/glitter rock was limited. Because of a lack of openly queer rock singers in the early 70s glam/glitter rockers served as virtual "representatives" of a queer sensibility in rock based more on appearances than identity or experience. Britain's Gay News' review of Bowie's July 8 1972 London Royal Festival Hall performance concluded, "David Bowie is probably the best rock musician in Britain now. One day he'll become as popular as he deserves to be. And that'll give gay rock a potent spokesman."⁹²⁸ The limitation of confusing the genre and its performers with queer experience stems from a tendency among glam/glitter rockers, several of whom identified on the queer axis, to repeatedly conflate queerness with decadence. For example in his book-length exploration of song lyrics Wayne Studer noted the, "gloomy, depraved vision of homosexuality that emerges from Bowie corpus. There's nothing 'gay' about it. It's all bitchiness, shock, pain, misery, loathing, and decadence."⁹²⁹ The issue here was not to deny that these aspects could define some elements of queer existence, but rather such notions dominated glam/glitter rock's depictions of queerness. Perhaps such lyrics were intended purely as fictional and situational but clearly related to broader perceptions of queerness during the era.

⁹²⁸ Holmes, Peter. "Gay Rock" Gay News, July 1972, in Bowie Companion Elizabeth Thomson and David Gutman, eds. New York: Da Capo Press, 1996. 77-8.

⁹²⁹ Studer, 38.

Remember, many historians and critics who defined the 70s as a time of decadence and excess often characterized queerness as a “symptom” of the time.

One of the most effective ways to understand the differences between John and glam rockers is to compare John with the performer audiences and critics/historians most frequently associated with glam/glitter rock, David Bowie. There were several key contrasts indicating the low stakes of Bowie overtly aligning himself with feminine imagery and identifying as gay and bisexual during his glam phase.

John wanted to leave a musical legacy whereas Bowie wanted to change rock and roll through style and performance. Bowie was a more visionary performer than John, with a deliberate and systematic approach to rock music. John self-consciously used camp and commented on rock music’s inherent disposability. But he anchored this with an aspiration to contribute some good songs and records. In contrast Bowie was more of a performer than a musician, and more interested in parodying and mocking reverent attitudes toward rock than making a musical contribution. According to Bowie, “What the music says may be serious, but as a medium it should not be questioned, analyzed, or taken so seriously. I think it should be tarted up, made into a prostitute, a parody of itself. It should be the clown, the Pierrot medium. The music is the mask the message wears—music is the Pierrot and I, the performer, am the message.”⁹³⁰

Bowie was more aware of and in touch with the range of his appeal than John. He seemed to have understood the potential value of attracting a queer core

⁹³⁰ Mendelsohn, John. “David Bowie? Pantomime Rock?” Rolling Stone, 1 April 1971: 18.

constituency and aware that such audiences were hungry for queer images. Bowie biographer Kate Lynch speculated that at the outset of Bowie's career he and his manager Tony Defries were explicitly aware that there was an, "audience for androgyny. The appeal was developed not only along sexual lines; Bowie's audience was composed of the generally disenfranchised, be it sexually, politically, philosophically, or otherwise."⁹³¹ He may have even perceived the sense of loyalty and iconicity he could achieve among these audiences seeking a gay rock messiah. Similarly Bowie seemed to understand the curiosity and titillation factor among non-queer audiences toward an androgynous looking yet queer identified performer. British rock-writer George Tremlett noted how Bowie gained an edge over other glam-rockers through overtly using sexuality. He noted, "This was the era of Sweet, Mud, Slade, and Gary Glitter, who minced and stomped the ballroom circuit and Top of the Pops, with no one wanting to mention Glam rock's gay undercurrent-and now here was A Star with no pretences. Overnight, the innocence of Glam Rock, with its sub-teen following, turned into something naughty-Fag Rock, Gay Rock, Camp Rock and The Parade of the Rock Queens."⁹³² Bowie ultimately played up the feminine and campy aspects of his sexually ambiguous persona to work both sides of the rock audience.

In contrast John was careful to separate his act from any images which may have alluded to queerness. For example in a 1973 interview regarding an upcoming tour he noted, "I think a couple of dates on the next American tour are going to be very bizarre.

⁹³¹ See p. 61 in Lynch, Kate. David Bowie: A Rock 'n' Roll Odyssey. London, New York: Proteus Books, 1984.

⁹³² See p. 164-5, Tremlett, George. David Bowie: Living on the Brink. New York: Carroll & Graf Publishers, Inc. 1996.

Not bizarre weirdo, like the Cockettes or anything, but bizarre showbiz.”⁹³³ John separated himself from the “weirdo” Cockettes, a San-Francisco based theatrical drag performance group.⁹³⁴ In the same interview he distanced himself from the controversies surrounding Alice Cooper when he noted, “I think visuals are very important to me, not in the sense of an act like Alice Cooper, who’s got it down to a fine art, but in the sense of high camp and just very, very tongue-in-cheek . . .”⁹³⁵ Again, John distinguished his interests from a performer surrounded by sexual controversy as a result of gender transgressive behavior. Ironically in the same interview John said his act was, “going to be a little more Liberaceized,”⁹³⁶ identified as a “Little Richard stylist,”⁹³⁷ and noted the numerous misinterpretations of “Daniel,” about a brother returning from war, as a homosexual song.⁹³⁸ John overtly detached himself from any sex/gender connotations of camp, which decontextualized the term from its gay culture origins. It is only fitting then, that he aligned himself with two chief purveyors of asexual camp and laughed off any homosexual connotations that might have pertained to his music.

Bowie likely viewed coming out as a fundamentally commercial act not a cultural or political statement. Because performance and illusion were so integral to his performance artist-musician persona identity was an ephemeral aspect making him too

⁹³³ See p. 110 in Gambaccini, Paul. “Elton John: The Rolling Stone Interview.” in What’s That Sound?: The Contemporary Music Scene. Ed. Ben Fong-Torres. New York: Anchor_Books/Doubleday, 1976. 107-25.

⁹³⁴ Loughery, 350.

⁹³⁵ Gambaccini, 110.

⁹³⁶ Ibid.

⁹³⁷ Ibid.

⁹³⁸ Ibid, 120.

elusive to represent a particular group or sensibility beyond himself. In a 1972 interview Bowie differentiated himself from overtly political gender transgressive queer men when he stated, “I just like to wear what I like to wear. It’s terrible in New York if you want to look feminine; you have to be very radical. Everything’s at that awful high pitch.”⁹³⁹ The article’s author noted, “That’s why he’s wary of the Gay Lib movement. He respects their ideals, but he doesn’t want to get lost in a group thing.”⁹⁴⁰ Further, because Bowie was married and had a child, he had a normative life to fall back on. Numerous reporters noted his marriage and child⁹⁴¹ which surely heightened the allure of his illusion of queerness for journalists and his audience because queerness became something to be performed rather than an internal life experience, thus safe, palatable and entertaining. Bowie and his associates often referenced the utility of queer titillation in launching his career. For example in a 1976 interview, after he’d abandoned the Ziggy persona Bowie commented, “I had no idea my sexuality would get so widely publicized. It was just a very sort of off-the-cuff little remark. Best thing I ever said, I suppose.”⁹⁴² In a book on Bowie his former wife Angie acknowledged the savvy of his coming out when she noted, “. . . David had been interviewed by Melody Maker and said he was gay which gained a lot of publicity.”⁹⁴³ Kate Lynch defined Bowie’s sexuality as somewhat of a miscalculated tease in her 1984 book. According to Lynch, “It’s doubtful that Bowie realized just how long others would want to play this same

⁹³⁹ Rock, Mick. “David Bowie is Just Not Serious”. Rolling Stone, 8 June 1972: 14.

⁹⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁹⁴¹ Rock, 14; p. 79 in Crowe, Cameron. “Ground Control to Davy Jones,” Rolling Stone, 12 February 1976.

⁹⁴² Crow, 79, 83.

⁹⁴³ See p. 59, Kerry Juby, ed. In Other Words . . . David Bowie. London: Omnibus Press, 1986.

game, and he seems rather bored by it all at this point. When asked about his sexual ‘orientation’ he’ll either flatly deny that he was ever homosexual or bisexual, admit both if he’s in the mood or chalk it all up either to youthful experimentation or a gigantic publicity ploy . . . Bowie had no interest in leading legions of gays out of the closet.”⁹⁴⁴

In contrast to Bowie John’s admission was a personal and professional risk, considering he built his career on the broad appeal of a safe, unchallenging image. There were no girlfriends or children to cushion his admission making him particularly vulnerable. It is futile to construct the argument of Elton John as “authentically” queer and glam/glitter rockers as the inverse because such an argument essentializes queerness and its possible representations. Nor can John be construed as a noble or infallible queer hero simply because he came out. But his ongoing experience in the music industry as a queer man was unique because he extended and refined the historical struggles of previous queer musicians. Whereas most glam/glitter rockers garnered attention and quickly faded, John survived and transcended trends which made his queer life and sensibility an ongoing part of mainstream popular music.

Conclusion

Because John inhabited *and* performed queerness his silent and internal negotiation made his queerness more complex and apparently less interesting to critics and historians who wanted to portray homosexuality as a seemingly titillating component of an era full of promise and betrayal. Thus homosexuality became a

⁹⁴⁴ Lynch, 60.

dangerous form of seduction rather than an identity individuals struggled with in a larger cultural context of systematic homophobia and expectations of gender conformity. While glam/glitter rockers treated the suggestion of homosexuality as a marketing strategy, queer performers such as John had sex/gender-specific struggles that often affected their commercial and personal livelihood via industrial harassment including mass media. Such struggles were more difficult to capture but richer, more nuanced, and ultimately more telling about relationships between individuals and societies. It is important to note how, based on rock histories, rock 'n' roll originally gave voice to unspoken pleasures, desires and statements about the tensions between individuals and a socially repressive society. The sex and gender divide was clearly a frontier to be conquered within this vision of an imperfect, restrictive society and its subjects in need of liberation.

Performers who overtly claimed a queer identity from the outset of their careers were not likely to receive support from mainstream record labels in the 1970s. The fact that Steven Grossman was an "out" man who integrated liberationist ideas into his music was symbolically progressive. But his major label contract was more a reflection of a bias toward male performers than political progress on the part of Mercury Records. This is particularly relevant to my discussion of 70s "women's music." The use of gender to separate performers was an arbitrary distinction and problematic hierarchy that has nonetheless generated real results in the commercial acceptance of musicians. The role of sexuality was also a key factor, which male and female queer performers seemed to have recognized during an overlapping period.

Women's music performers recognized the fundamental contempt the music industry held for women who existed outside of pre-fabricated notions of female musicianship and created a space where they could express their interests as feminist and queer-identified women and make a living. In an industry where women were demonstrably undervalued in terms of artistic ability and posed more complex marketing concerns than men, whose options have always extended beyond being marketed as sex symbols, men had more access to the commercial music market with fewer compromises. It is important to note that Steven Grossman generally espoused some of the same concerns of women's music performers, such as a willingness to sing of same-sex desire, but was signed to a major label and nationally distributed. However, when we consider the commercial plight of Steven Grossman what becomes clear is that as an "out" queer man and an explicitly politicized performer he was granted mainstream access but was not marketable in the vein of more conventional queer male singers, even one with Bowie's outlandish image. His self-identified queerness in his life and his music put him in a place more similar to performers on the women's circuit than other queer men, indicating the way "out" queerness outweighed even the presumed benefits of his male privilege in the music industry. Where Grossman faded commercially and abruptly, "women's music" performers, who were familiar with the industry's gendered script, had already given up on the industry as female musicians and were cognizant of how their political and sexual identities would further stigmatize them. Gender functioned as a central divide between their careers and comparable male performers from the outset. But the risks of identifying as queer people created a genuine common ground for consciousness among queer men and

women which was that outness was a commercial liability even for someone as commercially invulnerable as Elton John.

1970s “Women’s Music” Musicians

“Society at large may never know much about this creative explosion of feminist music. Major magazines, even Ms. for the most part ignored it. Mainstream newspapers wrote about it, but rarely did they herald its historic importance. Nighttime shows wouldn’t touch it. It was dismissed or ‘overlooked’ by those who were threatened by outspoken and independent women. But women’s music liberated thousands of women, as well as men and families, from traditional roles and ideas. This was a movement and a music that, although made fun of and often diminished to a single burning bra, would influence the mainstream’s image of women . . .” -Holly Near⁹⁴⁵

The 1970s musical and political marriage that most closely resembled the cultural revolution rock historians have attributed to early rock ‘n’ roll was not punk music, but “women’s music.” Women’s music was a set of artistic principles and industrial practices women musicians, and associates, established as an alternative to the mainstream music industry in the early 1970s. Most women’s music performers were openly lesbian-feminist identified women who created and performed politically oriented songs about female experiences which challenged the music industry’s narrow ideas about female artistry. Unlike the mainstream industry the genre prominently featured women playing instruments, producing records, and distributing and promoting their records through an independent network of lesbian and feminist-oriented bookstores, mail-order services, and festivals. Women’s music developed in the context of a mainstream music industry which contained women by emphasizing visual “sex appeal” and romantic song content to market female performers and confined women to

⁹⁴⁵ See p. 255 in Near, Holly. Fire in the Rain, New York: William Morrow and Company, Inc., 1990.

singing rather than playing, writing and/or producing. From the early 70s through the present the genre has shifted from primarily folk-oriented music to a wider range of genres and attracted a more diverse range of audiences and performers especially in terms of racial/ethnic identity and age. Central to women's music culture over time were performers who sang about the unique experiences and concerns of women, a strong connection between female performers and their primarily female audiences, the centrality of a feminist/womanist and anti-homophobic consciousness and the role of women's music festivals/concerts as "safe spaces" and quasi-spiritual pilgrimages for many women.⁹⁴⁶

If rock 'n' roll ushered in a new ethnic sensibility and challenged the pre-rock industry's discriminatory practices, "women's music" was its logical extension because it formed in response to cultural-industrial gender discrimination, introduced a new sensibility, and generated an independent industry. Of the canonical rock histories I surveyed only Garofalo mentioned women's music as a phenomenon relevant to rock music, supporting Lont's argument that the music press played a major role in symbolically annihilating the genre from contemporary music history.⁹⁴⁷ Even when rock histories addressed the 80s singer-songwriter rebirth, which prominently featured Suzanne Vega, Tracy Chapman, etc. the connections between feminist folk music and

⁹⁴⁶ Perhaps no definition of "women's music" will ever be definitive however I have based my definition on a composite of my perceptions and the definitions from the following sources: Lont 242; 417-8 in Stein, Arlene. "Crossover Dreams: Lesbianism and Popular Music since the 1970's" in Out in Culture: Gay, Lesbian and Queer Essays on Popular Culture. Eds. Corey K. Creekmur and Alexander Doty. Durham: Duke University Press, 1995. 416-25; Near 255; 3-4 in Morris, Bonnie J. Eden Built By Eves: The Culture of Women's Music Festivals. Los Angeles: Alyson Books, 1999.

⁹⁴⁷ Lont, 241.

“women’s music” was absent.⁹⁴⁸ Recovering the formation, execution and historical impact of “women’s music” reveals important lessons about the rock industry’s relationship to gender and the increasingly limited options for queer musicians despite the cultural climate of increased queer visibility.⁹⁴⁹

In the previous two chapters I intentionally focused on commercially mainstream queer performers rather than queer musicians on the margin. The lives of mainstream queer musicians illustrated the extent of *publicness* queer performers obtained during the rock era and the queer artistic influence —making their minimal presence or entire absences from major rock histories perplexing and unfathomable. I conclude my discussion of queer musicians by focusing on a group of queer musicians who comprise the commercially marginal “women’s music” genre. The genre’s development illustrated the extent of alienation sex/gender outsiders experienced in the music industry, and demonstrated how in a more consolidated music industry marginal performers with challenging content and images often had to generate alternative spaces to fluctuate. There is still no clear sign that contemporary sex and gender outsiders can secure major record label contracts and promotional support the way queer musicians of the 50s and 60s, devoid of an articulative queer language, culture or consciousness, could. Though the genre’s artistic and, to a smaller extent, industrial model endured in performers such as Tracy Chapman and Ani DiFranco and events such as the Michigan Womyn’s Festival, the marginal status of musicians with overtly feminist and anti-homophobic musical sensibilities in the music industry showed no sign of subsiding. If

⁹⁴⁸ Holden, *The Rolling Stone Illustrated History of Rock & Roll*, 490.

⁹⁴⁹ Walters, Suzanna Danuta. *All the Rage: The Story of Gay Visibility in America*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001.

openly queer and/or politically-minded musicians have to once again erect an alternative industry to create vital music and garner distribution and promotion, the promise of rock ‘n’ roll as an alternative sensibility and industry is officially solidified as a failure because it reiterates the contemporary rock-dominated music industry as the enemy to expression not the impetus or support system.

A Genre is Born

The “women’s music” industry’s origins can be broadly traced back to 1969 when Maxine Feldman, an open lesbian-feminist, recorded “Angy Atthis” (pronounced angry-at –this) a song focused on wanting to hold her lover’s hand in public.⁹⁵⁰ Feldman’s song was commercially obscure but her open identity and subject matter reflected an opening up of possibility surely fostered by the growing prominence of gay liberation and feminist politics at the time. In 1973 Alix Dobkin formed the all-women musical group Lavender Jane with flutist Kay Gardner and bassist Patches Attom. Their debut album, Lavender Jane Loves Women, released by independent label Wax Records, was perhaps the first album-length exploration of lesbian-feminist themed songs authored by “out” lesbians.⁹⁵¹ For example Faderman cited, “Talking Lesbian” as a distinctly lesbian-feminist song arguing lesbianism as the key route for women to build a woman’s culture.⁹⁵² The same year Lavender Jane debuted, a group of women musicians formed the Olivia Collective in Washington D. C.⁹⁵³ Among Olivia’s earliest

⁹⁵⁰ Faderman, 21; Lont 244.

⁹⁵¹ Lont 244, Faderman, 221; Gill, 146.

⁹⁵² Faderman, 221.

⁹⁵³ Near discusses Olivia’s founding using the term “Collective”, Fire in the Rain, 1990, 107

releases were Meg Christian's I Know You Know followed by Cris Williamson's 1975 album The Changer and the Changed. Saleswise Christian's debut sold between 10-12,000 units its first year and Williamson's album eventually sold over 250,000 units, an impressive figure for an independent album.⁹⁵⁴ A 1988 concert review noted that Olivia Records had sold an estimated 1.2 million records up to that point primarily through the independent festival and bookstore festival.⁹⁵⁵ From 1973 onward numerous other labels emerged including production company Wise Women Enterprises, Inc. (WWE) which formed in New York and recorded Cassie Culver and Willie Tyson, Wide Woman/Urana which released Kay Gardner's Mooncircles, and Pleiades whose roster included Margie Adams and Barbara Price.⁹⁵⁶ Incidentally in 1973 Dusty Springfield recorded Adams' "Beautiful Soul" for her unreleased 1974 album Longing which broadly suggested a budding awareness among lesbians, or more specifically lesbian musicians of the genre and possibly the "threat" presented by a mainstream performer recording risqué material with lesbian overtones.

Perhaps the most visible "women's music" performer of the era was actress/musician/activist Holly Near who founded Redwood Records in her Ukiah, California home. For example The New Rolling Stone Record Guide included an entry on Near, which noted, "Pacifist/humanist/feminist/ex-folkie Holly Near is a force field more than an artist per se, and for like minds who prize putting one's ass on the line even in this noncommittal age, she's one hell of a motivator."⁹⁵⁷ Ironically though Near

⁹⁵⁴ Lont, 245; Gill, 146.

⁹⁵⁵ Holden, Stephen. "Female Artists' Tribute To Record Company." New York Times, 28 November 1988. Sec. C, 20.

⁹⁵⁶ Lont, 245; Shapiro, Lavender Culture, 196.

⁹⁵⁷ The New Rolling Stone Record Guide, 1983, 354.

did not venture into “women’s music” as a lesbian-feminist. Employing her mother and father to run daily operations and featuring male musicians on her albums, Near did not found Redwood as a lesbian-feminist separatist enterprise. In fact she noted tensions between Redwood and Olivia, because she declined separatism, while acknowledging the companies’ shared goals and their status of being at the forefront of the genre.⁹⁵⁸ At the time of Redwood’s founding Near was feminist identified but was questioning and exploring the boundaries of her sexuality.⁹⁵⁹ As a straight-identified woman Near inspired some suspicion among separatists for her involvement in lesbian feminist circles.⁹⁶⁰

Near solidified her commitment and connection to the lesbian feminist separatist aesthetic at the 1976 Michigan Women’s Music Festival when Near, then romantically involved with Meg Christian, came out and played numerous women-only shows.⁹⁶¹ In the late 70s Redwood’s joining the Women’s Music Distribution Network and recording albums with all-female musicians further shifted the label toward a more explicitly lesbian-feminist direction more closely aligning Redwood with other “women’s music” companies.⁹⁶² Well into the late 70s and 1980s Redwood defied easy categorization, being one of the first “women’s music” companies to include women of color, notably recording African-American a capella group Sweet Honey in the Rock’s 1978 album B’lieve I’ll Run On . . . See What the End’s Gonna Be.⁹⁶³ Chilean folk

⁹⁵⁸ Near, 119.

⁹⁵⁹ Ibid, discusses founding-79-80, 88-9

⁹⁶⁰ Ibid, 122-23.

⁹⁶¹ Ibid, 124.

⁹⁶² Ibid, 141.

⁹⁶³ Ibid,; Near notes how controversy arose over a spiritual-themed song the group wanted to record when several white lesbian Redwood personnel objected to the song,

group Inti-Illimani also recorded three albums on the label. Of the women associated with the genre Near was one of the few to garner attention from mainstream publications.

An alternative female-run system of producing, distributing and promoting female-authored music was central to “women’s music.” From 1973-6 the Women’s Music Network operated as a distribution network for the newly emerging “women’s music” genre and was the first clear proof of a truly alternative production, distribution and promotional industry. Regional women’s music festivals began in the west in 1973 when Kate Millett organized a festival at Sacramento State University, in the Midwest at the 1974 Missouri Festival and in the east with the 1975 Boston Women’s Music Festival.⁹⁶⁴ Overlapping the network was the First *National* Women’s Music Festival in Champagne, Illinois which Kristin Lem organized in 1974.⁹⁶⁵ As the Network disbanded the Michigan Womyn’s Festival began in 1976 as an annual women-only event which showcased “women’s music” performers and endured well beyond the decade and eventually inspired women-centered festivals most famously, 1997’s more mainstream-oriented women’s festival Lilith Fair.⁹⁶⁶ By 1978 with numerous established labels and forums for selling and showcasing “women’s music” the Women’s Independent Labels Distributors (WILD) and Roadwork Inc. formed to handle everything from promoting and distributing women’s music records from

arose because of cultural misunderstandings of African-American spirituality. The group declined to record a second album on the label.

⁹⁶⁴ Morris, 28.

⁹⁶⁵ Faderman, 222; Lynne Shapiro, 196; Morris, 28

⁹⁶⁶ Morris, 28-29.

multiple labels to feminist bookstores to organizing tours, respectively.⁹⁶⁷ The women's music genre also spawned two publications, Paid My Dues and HOTWIRE dedicated to chronicling and preserving the culture.⁹⁶⁸

As an alternative industry the various "women's music" labels, performers and networks struggled to make profits and Lont noted a more overt shift in the industry by the early 80s to court mainstream attention. She cited Holly Near's 1981 album Fire in the Rain as a more slickly produced record intended to court the mainstream and noted the numerous performers who either left the genre in the 80s, such as Christian and Adams, or toned down their lesbian politics such as Cris Williamson.⁹⁶⁹ One positive shift was WILD's expansion to include a broader range of small labels and political bookstores. Music merchandising service Ladyslipper also expanded its catalog beyond "women's music" artists.⁹⁷⁰ By learning the intricacies of producing music and independently distributing their music through mail order festivals, bookstores, etc. through the independent circuit "women's music" performers epitomized the Do-It-Yourself (DIY) ethos rock historians have typically associated with surf and punk music.⁹⁷¹

Evolution or Annihilation?: Women's Music in the 80s and 90s

⁹⁶⁷ Lont, 246; Near, 142.

⁹⁶⁸ Morris, 55-6.

⁹⁶⁹ Interestingly Near specifies Don't Hold Back (1987) as Redwood's explicit attempt to appeal to a broader audience put off by political music, Near, 244.

⁹⁷⁰ Lont 249.

⁹⁷¹ Palmer, 41, 264.

In a broad sense a more fiscally and culturally conservative climate dampened sex and gender political movements in the early 80s.⁹⁷² Thus it was not surprising that feminist activism and queer politics lost some of its momentum, especially with the triumph of conservatism, failure of the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA) and the onset of the AIDS crisis. The increasingly consolidated music industry in which international conglomerates owned major labels and many promotional outlets such as TV stations and radio stations is a rock era trend which intensified from the 70s onward. Consolidation had material benefits for many mainstream musicians but limited the access independent labels had to major distributive channels such as music video outlets and their ability to secure space in record stores banking on records by big-named major label artists with wide-reaching promotion.⁹⁷³ These factors inhibited the “women’s music” genre’s commercial prospects and profit potential, even though labels continued to release records and the Womyn’s Festival continued. Despite escalating costs and a tight economy music festival historian Bonnie Morris noted the steady growth in the number of festivals in the 1980s.⁹⁷⁴ In the mid-70s and early 80s musicians as disparate as Joan Armatrading and Madonna evinced novel notions about female independence and expressed images that reflected a vaguely feminist consciousness. However, as I have argued elsewhere, musician Laura Nyro released the first “women’s music” oriented major label album with 1984’s Mother’s Spiritual which addressed motherhood and women’s rights at its core but had limited commercial success.

⁹⁷² Schulman, Sarah. My American History: Lesbian and Gay Life During the Reagan/Bush Years. New York: Routledge, 1994; Holden, 490 comments on how conservative climate halts songwriters’ willingness to express dissent.

⁹⁷³ Near notes the rising costs of record making in the 80s and the increasing difficulty of securing mainstream promotion, 216-8.

⁹⁷⁴ Morris, 6-7.

Several years passed in the mid-80s before female musicians with any discernible ties to lesbian culture or the “women’s music” circuit emerged on major record labels. Then, a wave of “serious” (Suzanne Vega, Tracy Chapman) and “quirky” (Phranc, Michelle Shocked, 2 Nice Girls) female singer-songwriters operating in folk and rock traditions emerged as signings to major record labels. Vega and Chapman, whom Holden described as a reflection of the “cooler, more streamlined pop world” of 80s pop, were the most commercially successful of the new wave. Margie Adam, who retreated from the circuit for a period in the early 1980s noted gradual shifts toward mainstreaming. For example she noted how several performers formerly associated with “women’s music” began to offer separate press/publicity kits for women’s music events and mainstream media and producers to ensure a broad appeal. Lont connected much of the mainstream appeal of the new women, particularly those who began on the 80s women’s circuit such as Chapman, Shocked, and k. d. lang and Melissa Etheridge,⁹⁷⁵ with the mainstream press’ separation of these new performers from the pioneering 70s lesbian-feminist oriented “women’s music” genre.⁹⁷⁶ She argued that “serious” female singer-songwriters appeared “new” to many journalists who were unaware of or ignored the codification of this archetype in the 70s. Near cited the genre’s influence on a wave of 1980s feminist-oriented film, TV and musicians including such lesbian identified musicians lang, Etheridge, Chapman, Phranc and the Indigo Girls.⁹⁷⁷

Lont and Stein have traced numerous strategies which separated the new from the old. For example many lesbian performers, such as Chapman and lang wrote

⁹⁷⁵ Stein, 420; Lont 250.

⁹⁷⁶ Lont, 250.

⁹⁷⁷ Near, 255.

gender-neutral songs and played on androgynous visual imagery, subduing explicit lesbian ties, even if they strongly signified lesbianism to many audiences. New lesbian performers Phranc and 2 Nice Girls were also explicit about appealing to gender mixed audiences and avoided what they perceived as the narrow commercial ghetto that confined “women’s music” to specialty bins.⁹⁷⁸ Both Lont and Stein recognized the commercial savvy of the new androgyny, but lamented the way lesbianism became either invisible or reduced to a floating signifier given the lesbian identities of many of the new performers.⁹⁷⁹ Lont also feared that 80s politics and economics weakened the “new breed”’s ties to “women’s music” because men are so integral to the production and distribution of mainstream popular music which halted the crossing over of a women-run industry.⁹⁸⁰

From the 1990s to the present lesbian performers existed in an industry where major label musicians lang, Etheridge and the Indigo Girls were out as lesbians and the married Holly Near and Ani DiFranco identified as bisexual and aligned themselves with gender progressive politics, thus symbolically doors have opened. However, few out lesbians were signed to major record labels, thus an alternative scene thrived. Indeed journalist David Hadju argued the urban acoustic folk-scene, “has become the sound of lesbian culture” largely because these scenes provided a space for non-commercial imagery and song content.⁹⁸¹ Like the 70s “women’s music” scene live performance venues, such as festivals and coffee houses, were prime showcases for

⁹⁷⁸ Stein, 420; Lont 251.

⁹⁷⁹ Stein 421-2.

⁹⁸⁰ Lont, 253.

⁹⁸¹ See p. 38-40 in Hadju, David. “Queer as Folk: How did an earnest voice and an acoustic guitar become the sound of lesbian culture?” New York Times Magazine. 18 August 2002: 38-41.

lesbian performers and alternative female performers. Unlike the “women’s music” era independent labels had a more consolidated commercial music industry to challenge which limited their potential impact. The lesbian-feminist separatist strain was also less prevalent thus the emergence of a centralized surfeit of women’s music-oriented indie labels and a female run production, distribution and promotion network was less likely to appear and impact audiences beyond the folk-scene itself. Urban folk-scenes were so lesbian-identified that ironically many non-lesbian performers, such as Jill Sobule and Dar Williams felt anxious about their acceptance and authenticity among folk audiences. Hadju suggested there was a general perception that the scene may be becoming too insular for men and straight women to gain favor.⁹⁸²

The Present and Future of Women and Womyn in Popular Music

The two historical constants one can extract from the “women’s music” genre’s ever-changing shape are the following: First, female performers with queer sexual identities and a desire to integrate sex/gender politics into their music are by definition “uncommercial” in the lexicon of major record labels. For example Near noted how major labels’ rejected her noting one who said her music was too political and her voice was too strong for a female on a major record label.⁹⁸³ Major record labels continue to contain female musicians in terms of the range of images and nature of songs most marketable to and palatable for audiences. The pop/rock musicians who have broken through commercially such as Lang and Etheridge were only able to be open about their identities *after* they were commercially established. A major label folk group such as

⁹⁸² Ibid, 39.

⁹⁸³ Near, 79.

the Indigo Girls is a safer bet because their outré sexual identities are easier to swallow for the folk genre, though tellingly their out status has not inspired a rash of signings of lesbian-identified folk singers to major record labels. The intentional subduing of lesbian connections that marks the careers of many “new breed” musicians signifies an acute awareness among them of how the conditions of the recording industry continue to demand compromises from queer female musicians. It is perfectly reasonable that those musicians who willfully sought to crossover and avoid commercial or stylistic marginalization were sincere in their desire to share their challenging images and music with an audience beyond a lesbian cult. It is also understandable that they sought the potential benefits of mainstream exposure. However, it is imperative to connect such desires with an awareness of how the broader society and the industrial music industry’s sex/gender biases stigmatize lesbianism to the point that musicians must fear the lesbian tag will forever limit their access to broad distribution and promotion.

Second, the music industry’s steady consolidation continues to squeeze out performers unwilling to compromise their images or messages for mass consumption. The 70s “women’s music” pioneers operated in a less consolidated industry and were thus able to create an alternative performing and recording industry and secure *some* mainstream attention alongside the major labels. However, with 80s cultural conservatism and industrial shifts the ability of alternative voices in music to thrive commercially and garner mainstream attention dwindles. It was not until the late 80s that overtly politically minded and/or visually and musically alternative female performers secured major record label support. This shift largely occurred by strategically downplaying elements of performers’ identities that suggest ties to queer

culture including performers' sexual orientation and roots in "women's music" performing venues. After a handful of mainstream musicians came out in the early 90s record companies and a few heterosexual female singer-writers such as Sarah McLachlan and Jewel hit their commercial stride in the mid-90s, major record companies quietly ignored the alternative folk-music scene in favor of more commercial performers and genres. The ongoing toll of this practice was a thriving performance scene where lesbian performers were finding consistent work and developing an audience but the continued confinement of queer women to the margins of the recording industry.

Regardless of aesthetic elements, rock historians often posited rock as a type of "folk" music by virtue of its accessibility and the numerous rags-to-riches narratives attached to successful rock musicians. Yet if folk music was the music of the people the nature of "the people" consistently excluded queer people's experiences. The ongoing marginality of queer people and experiences in the recording industry suggests that queer musicians are destined for the foreseeable future to be alternative rather than integral to who makes and what nations comprise popular music. Given the commercial triumph and artistic influence of mainstream queer performers from Liberace to Laura Nyro to Elton John, critical recognition of how queer musicians have shaped rock era popular music is the beginning of a conversation about the importance of fairness in the music industry. If the music industry provides access based on musical talent, the open acknowledgement of a queer identity should not fundamentally limit musicians' access to production, distribution and promotional resources. As long as queerness is a barrier to broad access the possibility of queer publicness in the music industry will only be

something we can reflect on rather than look forward to. Though queer musician Rufus Wainwright came out from the outset of his career, has received critical respect and recorded for a major label, he has yet to crossover commercially and it is unclear if major labels are willing to gamble on an openly lesbian musician.

Conclusion

Walking the halls of the Hall of Fame and Museum, glancing at photos of legends, standing inches away from classic artifacts encased in glass and listening to authoritative narrative voiceovers I wondered how rock's story might differ if it were more inclusive? In the immediate sense would audiences recognize Liberace's wide influence on the mythmaking inherent to rock stars' images or the style, wit and theatrics of rock performers who followed in his path? Would contemporary audiences understand why Johnnie Ray was such an aberration in the early 1950s? Would they warm up to the notion of "women's music" as perhaps more independent, rebellious and genuinely 'independent' as the oft-heralded punk genre? In a broader sense, such portrayals of history sanitized the residue of social inequality, along sex and gender lines, by presenting achievements as meta-historical rather than explicitly mediated by broader cultural biases and assumptions in the culture industries that produced and distributed music and the corresponding literatures.

The Hall of Fame and Museum wasn't necessarily created for a "special interest" audience beyond rock and roll fans. Similar assumptions apply to the rock and roll literature I analyze. Targeting a rock and roll audience, which includes as broad a range of fans as any cultural practice with museum status, such as baseball, does not mean intentional exclusion. Rather it reflects a naturalized view that queer sexuality and gender deviance are tangential to a "general interest" and ultimately American popular culture. My study reveals such assumptions to be contrary to understanding the music and experience of significant rock and roll's pre-cursors, core rock and roll performers and rock era innovators. If rock and roll history is ultimately a narrative about racial

politics, the influence of youth culture and industrial expansion, it is historically necessary to assess the story it tells about sexuality and gender in America. I have chosen to focus on how urban migration, the development of a queer social movements in major urban areas, the shift from homophile to liberationist and lesbian-feminist politics, and the overarching historic tensions of intersections of race, ethnicity, gender and sexuality reshape traditional understandings of rock and roll as an urban phenomenon and a mirror of social transformation. There is more work to be done on the subject of queerness and rock and roll. However, by reassessing traditional assumptions about rock's urban roots, exposing the intersections of music and politics and providing intimate glimpses at some of the struggles of queer musicians I hope to initiate new conversations and questions about the possibilities of exploring unique relationships between queer experience and American popular culture. My study emerges at a time when questions about the role of queer people in the public sphere, including law, politics and education are particularly central. There are relevant questions about the representations of queerness in marketing, journalism and academe that provide a wider context for this work which are relevant for my discussion.

“The old image of the gay was radicals and transvestites. Now it’s someone who drives a Maserati and has an Advent TV screen,” Joe Di Sabato, “gay-marketing consultant” and president of Rivendell Marketing, 1982⁹⁸⁴

“Following legalization of same-sex marriage and a couple of other things I think we should have a party and close down the gay rights movement for good,” Andrew Sullivan, 1997⁹⁸⁵

⁹⁸⁴ See p. 76 Stabiner, Karen. “Tapping the Homosexual Market,” New York Times Magazine. 2 May 1982: 34, 36, 74, 76, 78, 80-2, 85.

Throughout this study I have continually argued that as queer Americans have gradually gained visibility through medical, legal, and political shifts queer culture has reflected these advancements in various forms. Queer singers of the 1970s were able to come out during the decade partially because a political paradigm filtered into the social realm which fostered the notion of an authentic sexual identity as an act of liberation. The ability to “come out” and claim a queer identity was a symbolic form of cultural identification that was liberating for many. However the fact of claiming an identity did not eradicate social stigmas or marginalization of queer people. If anything claiming identity was a first step toward equality, liberation, etc. As performers as disparate as Elton John and the women’s music performers exemplified, coming out was fraught with complexities. Is it better to separate and create a separate culture or is it preferable to claim a queer identity after one has secured economic and social standing? What options have emerged since the post-liberation era? These are tough questions queer communities still struggle with in pursuit of civic equality and liberation. At the dawn of the 21st century gay and lesbian political organizing is at a crossroads struggling to rectify the seeming progress of increased visibility with the reality of being confined as a “special interest” rather than one fundamental to American democratic practice.

Popular culture is an important space for illuminating the parameters of such tensions. The rise of identity politics has shaped the trend of niche marketing to subcultural groups such that struggles for political justice and cultural representation are

⁹⁸⁵ Warner, 61, Trouble With Normal, quoting Sullivan in Out Facts: Just About Everything You Need to Know About Gay and Lesbian Life. Ed. David Groff. New York: Universe, 1997.

being subsumed by investments in equality as a principle rather than a practice. In my Conclusion I discuss the connection between gay and lesbian niche marketing and the creation of gay music as a marketing practice. Gay music is an outgrowth of a larger trend, the narrowing of what/who comprises and defines queer sexualities and subjectivities. This narrowing has implications for popular culture, politics and the way academics study cultural practices.

Gay and Lesbian Marketing and the Gay Music Market

One of the recurring themes in my exploration of queer musicians are the “queer textures” they express via non-threatening asexuality and/or campy imagery and behavior to cite two examples. Both approaches demonstrate the commercial palatability of queer performers whose external images are so non-threatening or exaggerated the performers seem devoid of a sexuality and/or removed from sex/gender political movements. Queer textures whether intentional or subconscious, reflect the way such performers internalized homophobia as a “structure of feeling.” Queer musicians employed strategies which distract attention away from their sexuality and allow them to avoid public stigmatizing and social marginalization. As William Cohen noted in his discussion of deviant sexualities in 19th century literature, sexual unspeakability fostered opportunities for sexual deviants to develop elaborate discourses.⁹⁸⁶ Indeed, despite the 1950s aura of oppressive conformity sexually deviant musicians quietly authored and employed “queer textures” as a form of clandestine survival, overtly downplaying their sexuality. By the 70s, during the era of gay

⁹⁸⁶ See p. 3 in Cohen, William A. Sex Scandal: The Private Parts of Victorian Fiction. Durham: Duke University Press, 1996.

liberation, the utility of “queer textures” as gimmick/titillation (David Bowie) and semi-confessional survival strategy (Dusty Springfield and Elton John) became clearer when numerous performers came out as bisexual.

After coming out in 1970 Springfield moved from London to Los Angeles, partially as a result of a reputation as a “difficult” musician among the male-dominated British music scene which her queer identity may have exacerbated by association. Though she sporadically recorded in the 70s her career did not rebound in the United States until the late 80s. Bowie’s 1972 “coming out” was crucial to his early career because it distinguished him from other glam rockers and attracted an audience of outsiders. As Bowie changed his image he downplayed his sexual difference and moved toward more conventional rock and R&B styles. In the mid-to-late 70s John’s popularity initially declined, more as a result of musical shifts in public taste and personal misdirection, but he achieved hits throughout the 80s before having a major resurgence as an “adult contemporary” singer in the 1990s and beyond. John’s survival may have signified to record companies that sexually ambiguous musicians who established audiences in spite of non-conformist gender behavior, such as camp, were safe commercial bets even when they came out.

Though sexually ambiguous performers emerged throughout the 1980s and 1990s, such as Prince and k.d. lang, as public tastes began to lean more explicitly toward more macho male images and sexually objectified women from the late 80s through the present, the commercial potential of sexually ambiguous performers lessened. However record companies, more aware of the gay and lesbian audiences, as a

result of burgeoning demographic research, have learned how to shrewdly market straight identified performers with queer appeal.

Numerous historians and critics have noted the deliberate targeting of gay and lesbian consumers and the resulting commodification of gay and lesbian culture. Based on published research begun in the late 70s and early 80s, advertisers began targeting the white gay male market based on research which suggested that marketing to white, single, well-educated, middle to upper class men was a potentially lucrative marketing strategy. Soon, such perceptions of queer spending power expanded to include lesbians.⁹⁸⁷

⁹⁸⁷ The following articles are a sample of articles from popular media which established the marketing appeal of gay and lesbian audiences: Woods, Gregory. "We're Here, We're Queer and We're Not Going Catalogue Shopping." A Queer Romance: Lesbians, Gay Men and Popular Culture. Eds. Paul Burston and Colin Richardson. London: Routledge, 1995. 147-63; Kahn, Eve M. "The Glass Closet." Print. September-October 1994: 21-32; Elliot, Stuart. "This Weekend a Business Expo Will Show the Breadth of interest in Gay Consumers." New York Times. 14 April 1994: D18; Scott, Jeffrey. "Media Talk; Formerly Standoffish Advertisers Openly Courting Gay Consumers." Atlanta Journal-Constitution. 5 April 1994: B3; Swisher, Kara. "Gay Spending Power Draws More Attention." Washington Post. 18 June 1990: F, F30-1; Cyr, Diane. "The Emerging Gay Market." Catalogue Age. November 1993. 112; Miller, Cyndee. "'The Ultimate Taboo,' Slowly but Surely, Companies Overcome Reluctance to Target the Lesbian Market." Marketing News TM 14 August 1995: 1; Kahan, Hazel and David Mulryan, "Out of the Closet," American Demographics. May 1995: 40-6; Levin, Gary. "Mainstream's Domino Effect: Liquor, Fragrance, Clothing Advertisers Ease into Gay Magazines." Advertising Age. 18 January 1993: 30; Moore, Martha. "Courting the Gay Market—Advertisers: It's Business, Not Politics." USA Today. 23 April 1993: B1; Reda, Susan. "Marketing to Gays & Lesbians: The Last Taboo." Stores. September 1994, 19. Book-length explorations of gay and lesbian consumerism include Lukenbill, Grant. Untold Millions: Positioning Your Business for the Gay and Lesbian Consumer Revolution. New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 1995; Badgett, M. V. Income Inflation: The Myth of affluence Among Gay, Lesbian and Bisexual Americans. New York: NGTLF Policy Institute, 1998; Levin, Sue. In the Pink: The Making of Successful Gay and Lesbian Owned Businesses. New York: Haworth Press, 1999; Wardlow, Daniel, ed. Gays, Lesbians, and Consumer Behavior: Theory, Practice and Research Issues in Marketing. New York: Hayworth Press, 1996. and Chasin,

The limitation of much gay and lesbian consumer research is a narrow characterization of white, male, affluence as representative of gays' and lesbian's economic status.⁹⁸⁸ Such a demographic profile distorts disparities in income tied to race, sex, geography and a host of other factors. It also reduces gay and lesbian taste to a limited universe of signifiers in advertising and marketing material that will attract gays and lesbians without alienating straight consumers because of sexually ambiguous imagery and language. The burgeoning interest in gays and lesbians is part of a broader trend of marketers who are literally using identity politics as a marketing strategy. Just as many scholars and social critics have questioned gay and lesbian niche marketing, they have questioned the effectiveness of identity politics, which I address later.

By using style and signifiers of difference to attract diverse audiences, but separating signifying elements from any political or social differences informing minority groups' social histories, marketers can appear progressive while catering to the dollars rather than the consciousness of queer consumers. "Gay window" or "gay vague" advertising⁹⁸⁹ is the prime example of these marketing strategies. In the context of popular music, pop and country singer k. d. lang's early 90s press attention after her 1992 "coming out" Advocate interview was integral to the '90s rise of "lesbian chic" in the popular press.⁹⁹⁰ lang's androgynous appearance, itself a "queer texture," became

Alexandra. Selling Out: The Gay and Lesbian Movement Goes to Market. New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000.

⁹⁸⁸ Chasin, 36.

⁹⁸⁹ See p. 82, 86-7 in Clark, Danae. "Commodity Lesbianism." in Popular Culture: Production and Consumption. Lee Harrington and Denise Bielby, eds. Malden, Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishers, Ltd., 2001. 80-93; See Chasin, 140, Walters, 237.

⁹⁹⁰ One of the most influential article son lesbian chic is Kasindorf Russell, Jeanie "Lesbian Chic: The Bold Brave New World of Gay Women," New York Magazine,

titillating enough in 1993 for Vanity Fair to place lang on the cover of being shaved by Cindy Crawford in a tongue-in-cheek homage to Norman Rockwell.⁹⁹¹ However, after the mainstream press' brief interest in lang as *lesbian de jour* her mainstream press profile was negligible. Mainstream press interest in lang waned after the novelty of her coming out passed.⁹⁹² Just as David Bowie and glam rockers used queer titillation to attract audiences, the popular press used seemingly palatable images of lesbianism-i.e. apolitical, novel, non-threatening—to attract readers.

During the late 80s a generation gap among lesbians, or the lesbian “style wars” emerged. The essence of the “wars” was a younger generation of lesbians who rejected butch-femme style and culture binaries and mixed styles. By presenting a more traditionally feminine appearance and more ambiguous images the new generation ushered in the “lipstick lesbian” archetype.⁹⁹³ Some critics argued the wars meant the correlation between fashion and identity was disappearing and necessitated a new political language to address the shift.⁹⁹⁴ However, many critics believed that marketers' and popular press appropriations of lipstick lesbian style simply replaced earlier images of lesbians as stodgy with a new and equally distorted image of them as

Vol. 26, Number 19, May 10, 1993, pp. 33-7. For additional lesbian chic articles see the Chasin and Louise Allen bibliographies.

⁹⁹¹ See the cover of Vanity Fair August 1993.

⁹⁹² Rose Collis discusses this on pp. 73 and 95 in in k. d. lang, Somerset , England: Absolute Press, 1999.

⁹⁹³ Clark, 82-3; See p. 479-81 in Stein, Arlene. “All Dressed Up, But No Place to Go?” in Out in Culture: Gay, Lesbian and Queer Essays on Popular Culture. Corey K. Creekmur and Alexander Doty, eds. Durham: Duke University Press, 1995. 476-83.

⁹⁹⁴ Stein, 482-3.

perfectly coiffed, nattily attired hedonists disconnected from cultural or political resistance.⁹⁹⁵

The 1990s saw the coming out of numerous singers including Lang, Melissa Etheridge, Pet Shop Boys and the appearance of openly gay singers such as Rufus Wainwright. The niche marketing trend has begun to filter into the marketing and promotion of music and is fraught with limitations parallel to those of “lesbian chic,” notably a narrow image of queer identity as exclusive as it appears inclusive. The presence of explicitly gay marketing strategies at major record labels is relevant because it indicates recording industry awareness that gay sensibility is marketable in certain forms. Most of these marketing efforts seem targeted to men which is why I use the term “gay” marketing. This reflects not only historic indifference to lesbians as a cultural group but perhaps an awareness of the demographic profile of upper-middle class gay men. In the mid-90s numerous record labels released dance and classical collections which targeted gay audiences including EMI/Capitol, Time Warner and CRI. For example Time Warner released Sensual Classics, which according to one article was, “a candles-and-Chardonnay collection of romantic classical pieces featuring two smoochy guys on the cover.”⁹⁹⁶ The same article attributed record company interest in the gay market as a result of growing cultural “tolerance” and the increased presence of queers in popular culture, including numerous “out” gay, lesbian and bisexual performers. However the record companies primarily expanded their marketing because gays became a clearer consumer group, making it easier to market toward perceptions

⁹⁹⁵ Walters, 161-2; pp. 1-3 in Cottingham, Laura Lesbians Are So Chic . . . That We’re Not Really Lesbians At All, London: Cassell, 1996,.

⁹⁹⁶ Ford, Dave. “The Play for Gay Dollars: Music industry woos a once-shunned community.” San Francisco Chronicle, 5 September 1997: C10.

of gay taste, thus the suggestive album covers. Commenting on the gay dollar in popular music, Bob Merlis, senior vice president of corporate communications for Warner Bros. Records said, “Economics drive us, as they should any responsible business. Why would you ignore a market segment that would have significant yield for you?”⁹⁹⁷

Musicians were also aware of their gay audiences and record labels’ direct attempts to court them. For example in 1996 British pop group Pet Shop Boys, comprised of openly gay musicians Chris Lowe and Neil Tennant, signed with Atlantic Records for the American record distribution of the album Bilingual. In a 1996 article the label’s gay marketing division discussed its marketing strategy which included holding parties at urban gay dance clubs to launch the first single off their upcoming album and promoting the single by giving away promotional copies to select clubs.⁹⁹⁸ While discussing the album singer Tennant noted the group’s lack of promotional support in America but felt free to acknowledge its diverse audience noting, “We care deeply that people like us—especially in America and we have that: this very large cult audience, gay audiences, a dance audience and we still have an alternative audience.”⁹⁹⁹ The presence of gay marketing divisions and the awareness of gay consumers suggested industry progress but there was still a gap between record companies’ willingness to sign and promote “out” queer musicians and their interest in marketing to “gay taste.” The latter is cheaper for record companies because it consists of repackaging past hits and easier to market because these are recordings devoid of a potentially controversial

⁹⁹⁷ Ford, C10.

⁹⁹⁸ Mirkin, Steven. “Pet Shop Boys Reopen on Atlantic with ‘Bilingual.’” Billboard. 6 August 1996.

⁹⁹⁹ Sullivan, Jim. “Pop Tart: The Pet Shop Boys go ‘Bilingual’ with irony and energy.” Boston Globe. 6 September 1996. C13.

performer anchoring them. Gay vague advertising approaches also increased the chances of such collections crossing over to broad audiences without stigma. In an era where anything could be commodified queer textures have gradually transitioned from clandestine strategies to marketable sensibilities, acceptable in certain forms. The transition of queer identity to a commodity was tied to shifts in politics and marketing, with relevance for gay and lesbian and queer scholarship.

Strange Bedfellows: Identity Politics and Niche Marketing

Identity politics, as a political strategy of inclusion and niche marketing, as a marketing strategy premised on diversity, are remarkably similar in their logic and limitations. Identity politics is organized around the principles that society is diverse, consisting of a majority and minority. Such diversity contributes to the richness of society and because the United States is a democratic society where all men are created equal those who are in the minority or different from the dominant culture warrant inclusion and equality.

Principles alone do not usually generate results. As a result the typical strategy of identity politics-based movements is to demonstrate how respectable and normal a minority group is in relation to the majority. Thus the homophile groups of the 50s emphasized the normalcy of their constituents by separating their concerns from Communist politics, emphasized gender normative behavior among its members and relied on scientific experts to gain legitimacy from the medical communities which historically pathologized homosexuality. The homophile emphasis on democratic politics, gender normalcy and faith in medicine did not hugely decrease stigma but they did secure some allies, gained visibility and the movement scored victories.

Identity served as an organizing principle for homophile groups but it also fostered the development of oppositional political perspectives, such as gay liberation and lesbian feminism, which had ties to identity politics but affirmed the reality of difference and located it as a source of cultural pride. Such separatist New Left movements developed out of awareness that homophiles' emphasis on sameness was not inherently more effective or useful than an approach which posited difference as morally righteous and even desirable. The New Left was an alternate movement and a critique of discrimination but also normalcy. Its influence on contemporary queer academic and political thought is essential for understanding how a cultural obsession with normalcy, based on the notion that sameness is the justification for inclusion and equality, is hindering the effectiveness of contemporary political movements with root sin identity politics.

Niche marketing utilizes cultural differences for profit by focusing on codes which will resonate with members of subcultures. One can understand the approach from an anecdotal and vernacular level. Niche marketing is evident when companies intentionally feature actors and models of a subcultural "minority" group in advertisements when advertising in media targeted to subcultural groups such as blacks, women and gay men. For some companies minorities are regularly featured in ads, for others such representations are an exception. But the goal is the same, to appeal to consumers using identity as an appeal. The increased societal discourse on multiculturalism and diversity which has gradually increased the visibility of subcultures has made niche marketing an essential tool for advertisers who do not want

to alienate the mainstream, but also wants to attract subcultural consumers. A detailed explanation of niche marketing in all its incarnations exceeds the scope of this study.

However in the context of gay and lesbian marketing one can understand the economic and political logic of niche marketing. Walter discusses how marketing to gays and lesbians is part of the growing popularity of niche marketing as a strategy and the increased gay and lesbian visibility, shifts which suggests increased political power and social inclusion.¹⁰⁰⁰ As Alexandra Chasin noted in her extensive study of the political implications of gay and lesbian marketing, “For gay men and lesbians in the United States, assimilation is not simply a process of absorption into straight culture, but also absorption into American identity, what I have been calling enfranchisement. Thus, the gay and lesbian niche marketers frequently portrayed gay men and lesbians as a social group with an assimilation drive, a social group whose consumption practices showed its members to be just like other Americans. In the formulation of marketers, national, even patriotic, sentiment united gay and lesbian Americans with straight Americans.”¹⁰⁰¹ Though most advertisers disavow any connection between advertising and political movements, however mild or radical, they are surely aware that advertising symbolizes acceptance, validation and legitimation. Yet, despite the 1990s rise of gay and lesbian niche marketing the presentation of queer lives in mainstream advertising is negligible. Despite a newfound awareness of the gay and lesbian market, they remain secondary and invisible in mainstream culture.

Commodity Journalism

¹⁰⁰⁰ Walters, 236-7.

¹⁰⁰¹ Chasin, 46.

The emergence of gay and lesbian niche marketing, by definition a narrow version of what is gay and lesbian, paralleled the 1990s emergence of conservative and libertarian gay and lesbian journalists/social critics, who also present a narrow view of progress for gays and lesbians. Warner, who discussed the shifting nature of gay politics toward normalcy saw many aspects as symptoms of the shift including, “. . . the rise of a politics of media celebrity, in which a handful of gay pundit selected within the media system dominate opinion making; and the extraordinary success of some of those pundits in promoting a neoliberal (that is, neoconservative) spin on what the movement is about.”¹⁰⁰² Firmly against gay liberationist politics, the notion of “queer” culture or politics, and insistent on the similarities rather than the differences between gay and lesbian and “straight” sexuality many of these figures have gained a much more prominent space than queer theorists and activists.

The prominent national debates on issues such as military inclusion of gays and lesbians, the legality of sodomy laws and the sanctioning of same-sex marriage have created a market for columnists and authors with a gay and lesbian perspective. However, many of the more dominant perspectives stem from writers who define themselves against subcultural particularities of gay and lesbian culture and larger challenges to the primacy of normalcy in the United States. Journalist Richard Goldstein has defined these writers, such as Andrew Sullivan, Camille Paglia, and Norah Vincent as the “attack queers” or “homocons.” According to Goldstein:

. . . they mock anyone who lives outside the orbit of respectability. If there’s a motive for this assault, it has less to do with gay rights than with assimilation. Job

¹⁰⁰² Warner, Trouble With Normal, 77.

number one for homocons is promoting the entrance of gay people into liberal society. But this deal comes with a price. It requires gays to maintain the illusion that we're just like straights, and precisely because this image is a pretense, it must be upheld by shaming those who won't play the part. Attack queers target these unassailable homos, thereby affirming the integrity of heterosexual norms. They perform a valuable service for liberal society by policing the sexual order.¹⁰⁰³

I would argue the “homocons” arguments were more heterogeneous than such labels suggested. Generally though, such writers did not tend to question the role of “normalcy” in the character of the nation, outside of critiquing homophobia, which they tended to deem as the aberrant behavior of an essentially well-behaved society. The investment in preserving norms was evident in the rhetorical binary between so-called “subcultural” gays and the “silent majority” of normal gays many conservative gay and lesbian journalists claimed to speak for. Many of these writers were so deeply opposed to the perception of queer people as a population with distinct histories and concerns, some dismissed the academic study of sexuality altogether as a one-sided political initiative. Bruce Bawer, more of a libertarian writer than many homocons, but equally invested in respectability, has expressed disdain toward gay and lesbians studies claiming that in gay studies programs, “. . . the subculture’s view of homosexuality is presented to students, gay and straight, as the definitive truth about the subject,” but seems equally dismayed by the “subculture.”¹⁰⁰⁴ His criticism is mild compared to

¹⁰⁰³ See p. 6 in Goldstein, Richard. The Attack Queers: Liberal Society and the Gay Right. London: Verso, 2002.

¹⁰⁰⁴ See p. 38 in Bawer, Bruce. A Place at the Table: The Gay Individual in American Society. New York: Poseidon Press, 1993.

Sullivan who called queer theorists, “a sect restricted to the academy, which they control as a cartel” and journalist Gabriel Rotello who believed the theory, “. . . seeks to over turn society’s traditional views of sex and sexuality,” thus, “No one would be stigmatized, no matter what they do; we’re not going to care about social approval.”¹⁰⁰⁵ The ideological split such writers erected was less a substantive *critique* of either gay and lesbian studies or queer theory than a monstrous reflection of the allure of normalcy, respectability and assimilation as political solutions. Their reasoning returns us to the well-intentioned but limited and unsatisfying results of identity politics.

Identity-based discrimination has been as fundamental to America’s historical path as democracy, its founding principle. The reduction of such struggles remains an open-ended question for the future. Several conservative and libertarian gay and lesbian writers have made many reasonable arguments against homophobia and for equality. But their explicit antagonism toward the differences in sexualities which affect social experience, a key aspect of gay and lesbian studies and the core of “queer” scholarship, and views of “queerness” as separatist, reductionist and counterproductive was a commonly circulated belief worthy of brief discussion.¹⁰⁰⁶ Conservatives and libertarians’ desire to secure national sympathy, and ultimately equality through images connecting queer and non-queer Americans tend to equate normalcy and integration with morality. Such critical investments in gay and lesbian normalcy was often redundant—gays and lesbians have systematically fought for inclusion since the

¹⁰⁰⁵ See Smith, Dinitia. “‘Queer Theory’ is Entering the Literary Mainstream.” New York Times. 17 January 1998. Sec. B., 9, 11.

¹⁰⁰⁶ For example see p. 38 in Bawer, 1993; Bawer, “Introduction.” Beyond Queer, ix-xv; Sullivan, 83-93.

1950s—and imagines an unproblematic relationship between cultural outsiders and access to the American cultural mainstream. Participating in “normalizing” institutions such as marriage and the military accords citizens status; when the possibility of such privileges are extended to “outsiders” such seemingly neutral institutions suddenly become contested arenas its beneficiaries seek to protect and defend. Queer people are queer because they constantly negotiate the tensions between sameness and difference in their participation in broad cultural life and queer-specific subcultures. Queers *are* integral to mainstream society, participating, often with complication, in institutions of family, religion, education, politics and popular culture. But their sexual identity is a core experiential cultural difference which often inflects queer sexual identity with the shame, stigma, fear, and vulnerability characteristic of difference in a society fixated on normalcy, integration and homogeneity. Within the cultural context of America, experiential differences inherently complicate queer people’s relationship to notions of what and who comprises mainstream American culture because their sexualities and gender expression have yet to be inscribed as part of the American “way of life.”

Advocates for gay and lesbian acceptance in the mainstream must acknowledge the limitations of normalcy as a moral cultural principle and not just dwell on the projected benefits of a few gains, such as marriage. Queer inclusion in such an area is potentially beneficial for some but such gains are too narrow to effectively inspire the broader culture to question the merits of centering normalcy and cultural homogeneity as cultural ideals. Further, promoting images of normalcy and integration as weapons against homophobia continues to be a questionable strategy. Opponents of gay and lesbian civil rights who have used “difference” as a justification for inequality usually

posit the suggestion of “sameness” as illusory and potentially more threatening to normal society. Normalcy fundamentally generates hierarchies of living which usually require someone to dwell on the margins and scramble for access and inclusion. Thus queer civil rights gains cannot be prematurely heralded without recognizing their fundamental tie to other efforts for inclusion such as anti-sexism and anti-racism efforts.

Just as niche marketing offers equality based in the ontology, rather than the distribution, of gay and lesbian images, gay and lesbian conservatives and libertarians espouse integration as a moral and cultural ideal but do not resolve the way the appearance of equality often results in secondary status. The arguments for images suggesting equality, whether advertising a product or a gay family member sitting at the family dinner table, are superficial because they ignore the discernible tensions which keep heteronormativity as constant of American society. Asserting equality is not the same as arguing for it or addressing the reasons people resist equality, such as religious beliefs, the comfort of conformity and affective investments in social status. Recognizing and confronting such issues is a more useful strategy, one that scholars in gay and lesbian studies and queer theory have embraced as a mission of intellectual inquiry.

Some of the political tensions I have discussed, notably the increased vulnerability of identity politics, tensions between “subcultural” and “normal” gays and the questionable logic of niche marketing have significant implications for the way scholars use gay and lesbian studies and queer theory as tools of cultural analysis. As I note in my Introduction, both approaches have limitations which necessitate a consideration of ways their scope and methods can progress.

Gay and Lesbian Studies

Gay and lesbian studies is central to my study but has limitations which necessitated the use of other theories alongside it to address the larger issues of normalcy, deviance and cultural participation I aim to address. Unlike conservative critics who suggest gay and lesbian studies lacks educational value, scholarly legitimacy and are political propaganda, I believe the field is necessary and important.¹⁰⁰⁷ There are several limitations I discuss here which suggest there are intellectual questions the field could begin to raise or develop more thoroughly. Queer theory has begun to address some of these issues, but questions remain.

Gay and lesbian studies depends on stable, vernacular notions of what and who fulfill and comprise the categories of gay and lesbian. Are these identities defined by sexual acts and/or discernible gender behaviors? If so, to what degree do certain acts and behaviors make one more authentically gay or lesbian than others? For example is a woman who asserts she was born a lesbian more “authentic” or “representative” than a woman who says she has chosen to be a lesbian? Is a gay-identified man who has exclusively held same-sex relationships more “authentic” and “representative” of gayness than a gay-identified man who has had relationships with men and women?

¹⁰⁰⁷ Examples which summarize some of the controversies include the following: Bull, Chris. “Theoretical Battles” *The Advocate*. 29 September 1998. 44, 47. Bull quotes Ward Connerly and Harold Bloom’s criticisms of gay studies. In Nussbaum, Martha. “The Softness of Reason.” *The New Republic*. 13 and 20 1992 July: 26, 27, 30, 32, 34, 35, she defends the field and addresses the charges of many conservative critics including Dinesh D’ Souza; D’Erasmus chronicles author Roger Kimball’s fear of “segregationism” and William Chace, president of Wesleyan University’s questioning of “how inherently interesting are the intellectual challenges posed?” on p. 85 in D’ Erasmus, Stacey. “In Schools Across the Country, Gay Studies is Coming On Strong.” *Rolling Stone*. 3 October 1991: 83-7, 130.

These questions are a small reflection of the wide range of possibilities the terms gay and lesbian encompass. The questions of what these identities are not linguistic exercises but a call for an articulation of the terms which gay and lesbian studies defines itself.

As Mary McIntosh, Michel Foucault, Jonathan Ned Katz demonstrated in pivotal writings on sexual behavior and the emergence of sexual identity, social categories stem from specific historic contexts which must be considered.¹⁰⁰⁸ The transition from sexual invert to gay and lesbian to the current usage of terms such as queer and same-gender loving complicate the scope of two terms to encompass a range of experiences. The fact that terms have layered representations does not diminish their utility or meaning. But the potential for new meanings can at least open minds to the possibility of expanding their possible meanings and seeking new terms in addition to pre-existing ones. As Penn noted, “. . . if we do not loosen the identity categories with which we examine history, we will overlook many sources that can develop our understanding of the construction of deviance, of homosexuality, and of queer.”¹⁰⁰⁹

The need to expand what gay and lesbian can mean overlaps into our conceptions of gay and lesbian politics. Prior to the late 60s/early 70s liberationist movements gay and lesbian politics has traditionally followed the “ethnic model” which was “committed to establishing gay identity as a legitimate minority group, whose

¹⁰⁰⁸ See McIntosh, Mary. “The Homosexual Role.” Social Problems 16 (Fall 1968), 182-92; Katz, Jonathan Ned. Gay American History: Lesbians and Gay Men in the U. S. A. New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Company, 1976: 6; and Foucault, Michel. The History of Sexuality Volume 1. Trans. Robert Hurley. New York: Vintage Books, 1978.

¹⁰⁰⁹ Penn, 36.

official recognition would secure citizenship rights for gay and lesbian subjects.”¹⁰¹⁰ According to Jagose, “Using the ‘equal but different’ logic of the civil rights movement, the ethnic model was conceived as a strategic way of securing equal or increased legal protection for gay and lesbian subjects, establishing visible and commodified lesbian and urban gay communities, and legitimating ‘gay’ and ‘lesbian’ as categories of identification.”¹⁰¹¹ The value of ethnic model movements such as the Mattachine Society and Daughters of Bilitis is the establishment of gay and lesbian as terms, however limited, for organizing and securing a national voice for sexual minorities. Defenders of these terms are rightfully concerned by what they perceive as attempts to downplay the importance of these identities, which still struggle for legitimacy and inclusion. In essence the ethnic model opened a space for sexual minorities to develop a public presence and indeed have resulted in subtle transformations of the public sphere including everything from changes in public attitudes to the gradual legitimation of sex and gender as necessary components of diversity and multiculturalism initiatives in education, politics, etc.

However the limits of the ethnic model are an abiding faith that tolerance and equality are solutions to inequities when they are usually stopgap measures. The fundamental problem is that by confining progress to inclusion rather than a questioning of the structures we seek to participate in there is the danger of reproducing hierarchies and the ever-present elevation of a norm or center as socially desirable. Turner highlighted this quandary in his critique of liberalism:

¹⁰¹⁰ Jagose, 61.

¹⁰¹¹ Ibid.

The work of queer theorists, by contrast tends toward the following suspicion: If our rights depend on our common identity as humans, then we all have to look, act alike, be alike in order to have rights. Of course, this is not how the system is supposed to work, but the experiences of women and minorities in the United States indicate that it does, in fact work this way. This is not to suggest a total absence of change, even improvement in the existing system. Rather it is to suggest that the model of free, rational individuals forming political institutions that guarantee our liberty may not be a terribly accurate way of thinking about how we govern ourselves on a daily basis.¹⁰¹²

His argument was not cynical or dismissive, but recognized that rational reasonable human beings rejected the equality of similar people all the time. Commonalities did not prevent discrimination, if they did then the gradual shifts the ethnic model fostered would be enough for minority movements. But as Turner noted despite gains, minorities, “remained dissatisfied with the culture and politics of twentieth century U. S. liberalism. In every case the connections among profound dissatisfaction, individual identity, and the institutions of government were central yet far from clear.”¹⁰¹³

The spirit behind the ethnic model and identity politics were admirable in their aim for equality but the practices of identity politics faltered on several accounts. Warner pointed out, “. . . theory has to understand that different identity environments

¹⁰¹² Turner, 16.

¹⁰¹³ Turner, 18.

are neither parallel –so that the tactics and values of one might be assumed to be appropriate for another-nor separable.”¹⁰¹⁴ Specifically, “. . . queerness has always been defined centrally by discourses of morality. . . . Queerness therefore bears a different relation to liberal logics of choice and will, as well as to moral languages of leadership and community, in ways that continually pose problems both in everyday life and in contexts of civil rights.”¹⁰¹⁵ Despite critiques that queer theorists do not pay attention to context, society and history¹⁰¹⁶ Warner’s argument pays precise attention to how context directly shapes the way politics works in practice not in theory. Ultimately his point that inclusion is not “synonymous with equality and freedom” highlights the necessity of modes of thought to address present and future conflicts in an era when identity politics are partially successful but far from fully satisfying. As I noted earlier queer theory is allied with gay and lesbian studies in its role of opposing forms of persecution but its targets are structural and organizational frameworks that perpetuate discrimination, beyond who is included in them. Champagne has noted, “Vital then, to an understanding of one’s own (academic) disciplinary practices is an interrogation of the rules and procedures whereby textual meaning is produced.”¹⁰¹⁷ By locating heteronormativity as a center of the academic disciplines gay and lesbian studies scholars work within and seek to expand queer theorists are beginning to unhinge some the fundamental assumptions which have necessitated gay and lesbian studies and queer theory, notably how sexuality, gender and normalcy have explicit rather than arbitrary

¹⁰¹⁴ Warner, *Fear of a Queer Planet*, xviii.

¹⁰¹⁵ Warner, , *Fear of a Queer Planet*, xviii-xix.

¹⁰¹⁶ See p. 11, 18 in Kirsch, Matthew. *Queer Theory and Social Change*. London and New York: Routledge, 2000.

¹⁰¹⁷ See p. xxxi in Champagne, John. *The Ethics of Marginality: A New Approach to Gay Studies*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995.

relationship to how knowledge is generated and structured. Gay and lesbian studies influences this work because I am seeking to expand the narrative of rock era music to include overlooked musicians who don't fit the masculine and heterosexually oriented story of rock histories tell and elaborate on the experiences of musicians whose gender and sexuality are downplayed in such histories. Queer theory is equally relevant because it provides a framework for understanding how the musicians I reference reveal the centrality of sex and gender normalcy as barriers to their inclusion.

Gay Sensibility Research

Within the field of gay and lesbian studies, which largely centers on textual analyses of popular literature and film, a major strand of research has centered on locating the so-called gay sensibility in popular culture created by and/or for gays and lesbians. The logic of this work is to isolate elements with a particular consistency representative of the experiences of gays and lesbians, thus resonant with audiences and distinct in its origins and appeal. I understand the need to identify gays and lesbians as cultivating a unique and discernible culture. However, too often the notion paints these communities with very broad swaths and often overlooks the specifics of race, gender, nationality, and other historic factors.

For example one of the definitive works on the development of the modern gay sensibility was Michael Bronski's Culture Clash: The Making of Gay Sensibility. Bronski's formulation provided a thorough history and several characteristics of the sensibility but his argument primarily identified the sensibility as a male sensibility

which limited its utility for understanding female experience.¹⁰¹⁸ He also defined the sensibility in relation to very Eurocentric notions such as Dandyism and Aestheticism which have ethnic and class biases leaning heavily toward a European upper-class vision of culture lacking in broader cultural nuance.¹⁰¹⁹ Such biases did not detract from the *quality* of his arguments but limits its *scope*. Similar limitations, tying the gay sensibility to Dandyism and Aestheticism, have appeared in Jack Babuscio, Al Valley and Daniel Harris's definitions of gay sensibility.¹⁰²⁰

There is no quintessential gay or lesbian sensibility, only sensibilities which exist in conjunction with other identity factors and social trends. No sensibility can transcend the historic contexts shaping the lives of its cultural participants. The greater liability of sensibility research is a tendency to cloister gay and lesbian culture in a minoritarian corner.¹⁰²¹ The notion of gays and lesbians as isolated can obscure the impact of broad historical events on nations, industries, and paradigms on gays and lesbians. In order to argue for gays and lesbians as an essential population within national identity one must locate them as part of the nation while recognizing unique and distinct circumstances shaping their relationships to the nation. My dissertation acknowledges the sameness and difference fundamental to the experiences of gay and lesbian people evident

¹⁰¹⁸ See p. 9 in Bronski, Michael. Culture Clash: The Making of Gay Sensibility. Boston: South End Press, 1984.

¹⁰¹⁹ Bronski, 39-59.

¹⁰²⁰ See Babuscio, Jack. "The Cinema of Camp (AKA Camp and the Gay Sensibility)." Camp: Queer Aesthetics and the Performing Subject: A Reader. Ed. Fabio Cleto. Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1999. 117-35; LaValley, Al "The Great Escape." Out in Culture: Gay, Lesbian and Queer Essays on Popular Culture. Eds. Corey K. Creekmur and Alexander Doty. Durham: Duke University Press, 1995. 60-7-; p. 8-39 in Harris, Daniel. The Rise and Fall of Gay Culture. New York: Hyperion, 1997.

¹⁰²¹ Bronski *does* point out the gay sensibility's broad impact on popular culture in fashion, disco, and mainstream cabaret singers but lesbians are invisible, 181.

through music. Rather than narrowly focusing on what appears discernibly “gay” or “lesbian” in the music of the musicians I discuss I focus on the broader picture of social experiences informing how they create music and how they are defined, marketed and received.

Queer Theory

Queer theory continues to be a controversial field not only from reactionary conservatives but also people within or close to the field. There are several important questions queer theory must address in order to remain useful and effective. One of the limitations of queer is a tendency for queer theorists to sometimes relegate the terms gay and lesbian to the heap of outmoded identity politics. The quandary of such actions is that it “. . . diminishes the courage exhibited by those who daily risk personal and professional relationships and reputations by writing, teaching, taking courses in, and living gay and lesbian lives.”¹⁰²² It also creates a false dichotomy with gay and lesbian studies. Both fields are oppositional by design, because they are attempting to correct historic trends within the academy such as exclusion and adherence to artificial norms. Though practitioners in these distinct but related fields pursue their aims and objectives differently Ablove, Barale and Halperin were correct in their belief that gay and lesbian as terms of identity are not inherently assimilationist and are still assertive and unsettling in society even in with the burgeoning adaptation of queer.¹⁰²³ My research focuses on musicians for whom gay, lesbian and bisexual are fitting descriptions for their sexual behavior because they have a discernible history of same sex or bisexual

¹⁰²² Penn, 33.

¹⁰²³ Ablove, etc., xvii.

relationships. They are socially queer because their sexuality is non-normative and their external behavior is measurably different from the gender norms of public people during their respective eras. These performers occupy gay, lesbian and bisexual sexual identities *and* are queer because their sexuality and gender behavior defines them apart from their industry peers in significant ways.

The questions of whom “queer” includes is also an ongoing issue. Many scholars and critics fear that corralling people together under an umbrella term based on a feeling of deviance overlooks genuine differences among diverse groups. For example Penn feared the term, “. . . might flatten the social, cultural, and material distinctions and liabilities confronting each type of queer and the different stakes for each . . . queer invites the possibility of building alliances based on our common identity on the fringes, it is equally possible that it performs the same elision it was intended to remedy.”¹⁰²⁴ Sullivan, who is virulently opposed to queer as an identity category argued, “It is an attempt to tell everyone that they have a single and particular identity; it is to define an entire range of experience . . .”¹⁰²⁵ Though the struggles of transgender people and gays, lesbians and bisexuals relate to hierarchies about gender behavior and sexual practices the issue of gender is in many ways more salient for transgender people. There must be spaces within queer theory that address such explicit differences even as it argues for a shared form of general oppression. This fear also relates to a feeling among many scholars and critics, especially of the gay liberationist generation that gay and lesbian identity, categories various communities fought to legitimize in those specific terms, may disappear and be disavowed despite the recent struggles to establish these terms as

¹⁰²⁴ Penn, 33.

¹⁰²⁵ Sullivan, 85.

real identities.¹⁰²⁶ Queer theorists who have resisted identity on the basis of its constructedness can embrace queer and more explicitly acknowledge the social utility of gay, lesbian and bisexual terms as resonant terms and the impetus for organizing and affiliation for many people, without abandoning their concern with broader issues beyond homophobia and heterosexism.

Queer theorists have often located political possibilities in eliminating sexual hierarchies. As early as 1995 Penn argued against a politics of sexual shame seeking to sanitize deviant sexuality for respectability and Warner centered the Trouble With Normal: Sex, Politics and the Ethics of Queer Life around the notion that sexual shame was at the root of gay and lesbian conservative movements to separate “normal” gays from sex-centered subcultures and downplay sex as an aspect of sexuality altogether in favor of normalcy. What neither author did was provide a sense of what incentives the sexually normative publics and assimilated queers would have in condemning sexual hierarchies. The non-queer majority likely perceives itself as benefiting from the sexual hierarchy queer theorists critique. Even if such an uncritical view overlooks the toll of sexual Puritanism, sexism, sexual abuse and rape as factors related to shame and stigma, the feeling of normalcy fostered by possessing normative sexuality is not a motivator for most people to question heterosexual privilege. Further many queers for whom their sexuality is the only major aspect of their identities, for example gender normative, middle-class, professional white men and women, benefit from the safety of normative gender behavior, racial dominance, and economic security provide other Americans. What should motivate them to care about the fate of gays, lesbians and bisexuals who

¹⁰²⁶ Jagose, 111-5.

are marked by gender, racial and/or economic differences? It is also unclear if condemning hierarchies is a matter of consciousness, a matter of street level politics and/or a matter of law. There is no clear strategy in place to suggest how this transformation could take shape. Perhaps by exposing the facts and effects of sexual hierarchies such writings can affect the consciousness and interpersonal behaviors of their audiences. The ideological debate between queer domesticity and liberation through sexual freedom are too reliant on identity politics and the rhetoric of liberation to serve contemporary queer lives. What is needed is a more expansive, nuanced formulation of queer intimacy that recognizes the diverse ways queer people define and experience intimacy in the context of their sexuality that neither downplays sex nor posits it as *the* privileged path to liberation.

Finally, though most queer theorists refer to queer as a critique of normalcy, sex and gender arguably dominate the field and the consideration of racial identity, ethnic identity and economic class are still underdeveloped areas among queer theorists. As I noted in my Introduction the cultural diversity and cross-cultural experiences among sexual queers necessitates specific attention, not broad allusion, to the contexts people negotiate as racial, ethnic and economically defined queers. If normalcy is a pervasive site of oppression, there are *subcultural norms* sexual queers contend with that complicate their negotiations of sexual queerness. I posit the models Nealon and Ross offer, as innovative ways to expand on the critiques of normalcy queer theory aims to provide. However the possibilities for expansion and refinement remain open-ended.

Shane Phelan's research on gay and lesbian citizenship illuminates how acknowledgement is an essential aspect of equal citizenship. Though queer citizens

technically have many of the same rights and privileges of their heterosexual citizens it is important to recognize how, “The classical liberal solution of support for rights without social acceptance fails to capture the dilemma of citizenship for all cultural minorities.”¹⁰²⁷ The performers my study includes emerged at a historic juncture where large corporations and related mass media industries redefined the public sphere with an unprecedented level of technology, sophistication and geographic scope. An essential component of these transitions were mediated processes of normalization that communicated, through widely broadcast sounds and images, the types of identities and behaviors which comprised contemporary society. The fact that much of the work this study has performed has served as historical recovery suggests the need for ongoing critical inquiries into the failures of inclusion and the efforts of groups and individuals to secure acknowledgment as social participants. Though several of the performers I discuss are British, the notion of acknowledgement is as relevant to their cultural status as it is to their American counterparts. Phelan notes that “The enactment of citizenship is itself the recognition that one has the right to claim to be heard and responded to—that one should be acknowledged. Citizenship is embodied in one’s access to rights and other institutions, but it is not identical to those rights and institutions. It is the emergence into publicity as an equal with other citizens.”¹⁰²⁸ The issues of acknowledgement and publicity are integral to our understandings of the social role of popular culture in culture.

The study of popular culture genres, such as my area of emphasis, popular music is essential to understanding the negotiation of social identity as a core aspect of a

¹⁰²⁷ Phelan, 15.

¹⁰²⁸ Ibid.

society's character. My concerns are how cultural practices, specifically the production, distribution and historicization of popular culture reflect the nation's definition of its self and its citizenry. The closet, sexual hierarchy, sexism, and other forms of discrimination can all be understood as hierarchies of citizenship which restrict the access and openness of citizens in certain dimensions and creates tension between the center of society and identities and behaviors which reside on the margins. Culture is an important measure of how the citizens portray the emotional and societal contours of their era. Such hierarchies motivate people to find ways to channel financial, social, psychological, and emotional burdens in forms that contain their vitality as human beings. In our capacity as critics, historians and theorists, scholars can never access the full depths of artists' motivations and choices. However what we are left with are the outlines and parameters of their struggles and each leads us to unique conclusions but illustrates the very necessity of such measures to achieve social membership

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