

IT'S "GIVING CHER": GAY IDENTITY, DIVA WORSHIP, AND MUSIC

Author:
Michael Trerotola

Faculty Sponsor:
Wayne Heisler
Department of Music

ABSTRACT

How do musical preferences both reflect and constitute identity? As it pertains to gay men, there is a cultural assumption that we exclusively listen to certain types of music. Often the assumption is gay men indulge in pop or dance music that features powerful female singing. Lady Gaga, Madonna, Whitney Houston, and Britney Spears are just some of many examples. This paper seeks to answer why this phenomenon may occur and why gay men gravitate to female pop "divas." I argue that gay men are attracted to the diva because their music preferences are shaped by how gay men make sense of their lives and by socio-historical contexts.

The focus of this paper is on Cher. She is emblematic as a gay icon because she bridges multiple generations of gay men through her adaptability of old and new queer appeal tactics. These tactics include appeals based on the diva's voice, personal life, camp, ambiguity, personal identification, bodily sensations, and explicit gay messaging. Disrupting notions of what is real or fake, masculine or feminine, creates ambiguity that allows queer interpretation and identification. I demonstrate how Cher accomplishes her appeal by analyzing her performance on her first farewell tour in Miami with appeal tactics to gay men in mind.

INTRODUCTION

We all have our musical preferences, and a myriad of factors can shape such preferences. Identity, including race, ethnicity, gender, and sexuality, is among those factors that invite us to look deeper. How do musical preferences both reflect and constitute identity? As it pertains to gay men, there seems to be a cultural assumption that we exclusively listen to certain types of music. Often the assumption is gay men indulge in pop or dance music that features powerful female singing. Lady Gaga, Madonna, Whitney Houston, and Britney Spears are just some of many examples. This paper seeks to answer why this phenomenon may occur and why they gravitate to female pop signers (i.e., "the diva"). I argue that gay men are attracted to the diva because their music preferences are shaped by how gay men make sense of their lives and by socio-historical contexts.

Many gay men ask if something is "giving Cher," which is another way of asking if something can be read as being feminine or "gay." The now popular viral term comes from Shawn Mendez saying this exact phrase after seeing a picture of Camila Cabello's dress. I take the phrase in its literal meaning while also nodding to its implications. I don't mean to cast judgments on musical preferences but rather to explore what makes

certain music perceived as “gay music.” The focus of this paper is on Cher. She is emblematic as a gay icon because she bridges multiple generations of gay men through her adaptability of old and new queer appeal tactics. These tactics include appeals based on the diva’s voice, personal life, camp, ambiguity, personal identification, bodily sensations, and explicit gay messaging. Disrupting notions of what is real or fake, masculine or feminine, creates ambiguity that allows queer meanings of interpretation to arise and, therefore, an appeal tactic that a diva may use. I demonstrate how Cher accomplishes her appeal by analyzing her performance on her first farewell tour in Miami with these appeal tactics in mind (“CHER”).

While I argue that there is an important relationship between musical preferences, idolatry, and gay men, I want to note the limitations of this paper’s analysis. Gay men are the focal point of this paper, but this group of people is diverse. While I speak of gay men in general, important intersections based on race, ethnicity, generation, or class may impact the gay male’s musical attraction. Additionally, the phenomena of gay interpersonal relationships may influence musical choice. How gay men talk amongst themselves and boast about their favored diva could also affect the preferences of other gay men. Music is both an individual and social experience. A deeper dive into this topic would need to consider both intersectionality and interpersonal relationships to nuance the discussion. With these limitations in mind, gay men still have a shared experience that is worth discussing. Their shared identity affects how they listen to and identify with music. This paper explores that common experience.

GENDERED MUSIC

To begin to analyze musical preferences, one may ask: why are specific musical genres and artists considered “gay music?” This question can be partially answered by exploring how genre categories are gendered and considering historical gay identification with such music. The taxonomy of “gay music” is noted and discussed by participants in studies that sought to understand the relationship between gay men and music (Aronoff and Gilboa 431; Jennex 343). Jennex mentions how listening to female musical artists is perceptible (343). This is recognized in the first place because categories of pop and rock are heavily gendered along the lines of a masculine and feminine binary. As Richard Smith suggests in his discussion of disco music, pop allows sexuality to be discussed and included (198). Pop, but disco particularly, as a dance genre with origins in gay communities, invites gay relationships and interactions on dance floors and other spaces, whereas rock does not share this characteristic, Smith argues (198). After all, if a man says he listens to Cher rather than Fleetwood Mac, his sexual orientation comes under question. Stevie Nicks embodies characteristics gay men may be attracted to (her dominance as a female vocalist leading a band, the raspiness of her voice). Still, she is coded and read as a rock performer, which signals something different. Rock places great value upon authenticity, and Stevie Nicks’ voice and performances ultimately are perceived through that lens. Her voice, however raspy or paralleling masculine qualities, cannot be queered within rock. Cher can use autotune

to obscure realness or even challenge it, but Nicks' voice has been placed in a box that has to be as authentic as the guitars, bass, and drums.

Pop's perceived femininity and openness to gay sexuality do not yet offer a complete picture of gay men's attraction to certain music. Gay men have stereotypically loved divas before being open with their sexual identities. The open secret is "not to conceal knowledge, so much as to conceal the knowledge of the knowledge" (Brett et al.). Essentially, this means that certain music is known to be of gay preference, but historically it could only be enjoyed when a gay identity is concealed, not risking social stigma and other severe social sanctions. In relation to Broadway musicals, D. A. Miller describes that when men and their music preferences have the "homosexual" label put upon them, it elicits several reactions, ranging from a forceful emotional denial, indifference, and admittance. However, a man's adoration should not be exaggerated with admittance, lest they risk the homosexual label placed upon them (16-17). Musical and gay music, in general, become very ordinary but still elicit personal surprise (Miller 23-24). The notion of the open secret alongside gendered genres places a mirror before gay men. Regardless of era, gay men are routinely reminded of what musical categories parallel their lives. Gay men come to see themselves in the music they enjoy; relatedly, Wayne Koestabaum points out that "he [a gay man] loved the opera because it matched his soul; He felt now that his surroundings explained him" (Koestenbaum 28). Gay men are consistently reminded of who they are through these music preference choices.

IDENTITY

The projection of identity by music and music taste occurs because it gives people, especially adolescents, the ability to develop and try on new identities and experiment and normalize different emotions (Aronoff and Gilboa 425). In addition, music can provide comfort, much like a friend would. Because of identification, emotional expression, and perceived interpersonal relationships, music helps aid in the coming out process for gay men (425). The multiple ways music functions in connecting to our sense of self is just another example of how music is reflective of the gay identity. This is true regardless of being in or out of the closet. Whether music has these gendered genre associations, fosters an open secret, or is conducive to the coming out experience, the point here is that identity is incredibly interconnected to the music listener's experience. Music runs parallel to gay men's lives.

Identity is essential to explain music preferences, but a gay identity has not been consistent over time. Gay men in the decades following Stonewall were placed in a complicated position with the open secret being a commonplace – for example, where their love for Broadway musicals "must be granted existence ... but only a shady one, tucked away in the closet" (Miller 26). As Miller mentions, a gay man living in the seventies and eighties could be open with himself and his sexuality, but things still had to be kept quiet (26). There is considerable social stigma and potential harm that gay men face. Gay men, therefore, must employ different strategies to survive or thrive in society while being able to enjoy the music they adore. As a result, musical strategies must reflect this shift as well.

For much of the twentieth century, gay men still relied on music strategies to deploy queer encoding in musical texts. For instance, in musical theater, especially before Stonewall, many main themes focused on heterosexuality, which, however, retained coded queer messages within lyrics, characters, or plots (Brett). Disco became enormously popular in the seventies on the heels of gay liberation. In contrast, in the eighties, queer music became coded once more due to renewed conservatism in the United States (Brett). Explicitness in music and more coded forms alternate over time and parallel gay men's position in society diachronically. What do these changes in identity mean? Many historical events, politically and musically, shaped the identity of gay men. Therefore, in analyzing how gay men identify with particular forms of music, it is crucial to understand that such music's appeal must also change with it. With many changes and political developments happening over the course of the twentieth century and beyond for gay men, it only serves to reason that their "worship" of the diva also changed based upon these conditions. Changes in social status and becoming more assimilated into society transform expectations and reason for worship (Draper 135-136).

CHER

Cher is a perfect case study. Her multiple decades of experience in the music industry, with at least one hit in each, has shown not just her musical adaptability but also her adaptability in her appeal. Moreover, she has maintained a large gay following, and to do so for long periods requires adaption. Not only has she used traditional forms like camp and queer texts that attract gay men, but she also does so with newer forms such as making texts explicit and using references to the gay community. Cher, therefore, is the perfect bridge for diva worship at the cusp of the twentieth century.

A question remains as to how specifically the diva or, for that matter, any other music artist can become a gay icon when that artist identifies as heterosexual, as Cher does. The answer lies in the traditional strategies of queer coding that might be deployed, recognized, and interrupted. However, not every female singer is a gay icon. Many gay men are attracted to the diva for reasons I will soon discuss, but would it not stand to initial reasoning that gay men would praise and adore one of their own, a popular and famous gay man? Initial evidence suggests this is more of a lesbian phenomenon and that gay men tend to focus more on the art than the artist (Dickinson 346). How the diva attracts a gay male following involves playing on artifice: ambiguity and disruption of the real and the unreal, the masculine and the feminine, attract the queer ear and the gay heart. The diva's voice, campiness, and personal life also contribute significantly to this process.

The reason gay men consciously or subconsciously search for queer texts in music is because they gravitate to voices that they can identify with. Gay men aim to make sense of themselves in a heteronormative society and need somewhere musically to place themselves and find others like them (Jennex 353). In particular, the diva's voice is a reminder that gay men, by way of their excitement, have bodies when they mimic and engage with their diva of choice (Koestenbaum 42). When the singer sings, her voice enters the gay man's body, destroying the fourth wall between them and

opening up engagement (Koestenbaum 43). Gay men may describe this process as having power and control over them (Jennex 353).

The diva's voice is also powerful because it disrupts binaries. In opera, the diva sings with equal parity to a male performer, more often entirely dominating the stage. Moreover, her singing in any lower register disturbs gender assumptions of how women should sing (Jennex 354-355). Not only does queer listening pick up on gender subversion, but in some cases, it may remind the gay male listener of his own voice in which he can further identify with such pitch (Jennex 355; Koestenbaum 14). Even voice effects like autotune start to blur the realness of the voice. As it was initially used in military voice transmissions, the use of vocoder, "coding of human expression," is still retained in music (Dickinson 333). For women, the voice from "the body is their instrument," and the vocoder confuses the listener as to where sound's place of origin comes from, either manufactured or biological (339). The voice as being heard simultaneously as authentically originating from a female singer yet artificial in its production generates ambiguity. With such ambiguity, a gay man identifies with a diva's music because it is a musical space they can attach themselves to and develop queer interpretations, much to the same effect that queer coding has or the over-exaggeration that comes from camp.

Throughout Cher's performance in her Farewell tour, her voice commands attention ("CHER"). Although one might mark her voice as feminine, it is remarkably deep; even when she sings high, her voice still possesses this quality. Her voice shakes and vibrates when she holds notes, and it is hard not to remain separate from her singing as her voice (building on Koestenbaum's experience of operatic voices) "assault[s] and make[s] demand" (Koestenbaum 16). Cher's voice, therefore, shares affect with operatic singing, making such analogies between Cher the pop diva and the Opera diva clearer. In "Believe" and "Different Kind of Love Song," Cher's autotune highlights her voice's real and unreal aspects. Notably, such effects are more potent in the verses as almost all of Cher's real and fake voices engage with an ambiguous message with ambiguous musical sounds. It is not until the chorus of each song that the effect becomes more muted. Cher reminds the listener what they are listening to, thereby breaking the fourth wall ("This is a different kind of love song") and singing about innate human emotions. This is what Dickinson observes about the lyrics of "Believe": Cher's voice transitions from artificial autotune to more human, and this is enhanced by the singing about human emotions (believing, loving), further driving open the play on the artifice (360). As I will discuss more, playing between the real and unreal and disrupting gendered categories opens a queer interpretation allowing gay men to place themselves within the music.

The song lyrics Cher deploys and singing styles that she uses relate to two other traditional strategies for gay devotion of the diva: ambiguity and camp. In John Gill's article titled "Is Madonna Queer," anthologized in his book *Queer Noises*, he mentions the importance of ambiguous meaning, arguing that open-endedness is "where queer joins hands with post-modernism" (174). Finding queer meaning exists where there is no clear meaning. Furthermore, Craig Jennex references the musicologist Judith Periano by saying, "because of their malleable nature, such [cultural icons] can become

objects of fantasy and identification for wider audiences. What enliven these icons are the ‘experiences, memories, and fantasies’ of individuals who venerate them” (351). Essentially, the argument is that ambiguity provides a broadened space where queer meanings are possible, much in the tradition of encoding within musical texts.

Camp is the tool that brings to life ambiguity and its many meanings. Camp had an essential and long history with gay communities before coming out was a possibility. In cultural texts, camp uses “disruptive styles of humor that defies canons of tastes” (Brett et al.) It is the irony and exaggeration of camp, like the opera’s spectacular portrayals of heterosexuality, that has attracted gay men to the opera (Jennex 352). As mentioned previously, Cher’s use of autotune disrupts notions about what is and is not real and also extends to Cher’s different versions of herself. The older futuristic Cher differs from the midcentury “organic” Cher (Dickinson 340). Cadilhe contends that Cher uses excessive femininity in her dress to camp herself, which attracts a gay following (116), and that Cher’s multiple versions of self, “the replica,” signify a reproduction of who Cher is (110) – a reproduction that invites non-Chers to imagine collaboration or identification with the diva, most notably gay men.

Cher demonstrates this well in her performances on her first Farewell tour (“CHER”). From performance to performance, she changes outfits and wigs, begging the question of who the real Cher is, similar to the queering strategies deployed by Annie Lennox, among many other gay-friendly divas. The concert was a mix of Cher’s greatest hits. Her outfits and performances showcase the new and old versions of Cher, which obscures time. What makes the notion of Cher camping herself along with her “replicas” is best shown in the medley with “Half Breed,” “Gypsies, Tramps, and Thieves,” and “Dark Lady.” On a large screen, the older original Cher performs the songs juxtaposed with the current Cher dressed in a costume version of her older self while she is singing live. It is hard to parse through who is the original and who is the copy. In the very first song of the set, a cover of U2’s “I Still Haven’t Found What I’m Looking For,” Cher descends from above in a high priestess-like outfit. She is basically camping her diva status by playing on the idea of worship and religion, all the while singing U2’s lyrics about an ongoing quest. Cher also is very aware and outspoken about her legacy, as she mentions this several times in her monologues throughout the show.

Ambiguity does not just exist in musical texts, but also exists within the contrast between the celebrity version of the performer and her private personal life. A gay man can identify with a diva’s struggles and suffering, recognizing their own experience living in marginalization by a homophobic society. Note the stark difference between the perceived innocence of Judy Garland and her suicide attempt: such differences between her on-stage and off-stage selves are analogous to a gay man’s life and can therefore attract a gay following (Draper 131-132). It is analogous because gay men know well how to put on a mask and float between their straight passing selves in order to cope with a homophobic society. The diva’s private suffering and the displayed public strength allow queer interpretations to exist because of the fluxation between the real and unreal diva herself.

Cher has discussed much about her drug-addicted gambling father and mobile family lifestyle. She mentions struggling to live according to blonde female beauty standards in the mid-twentieth century with her Armenian and Cherokee ethnic identities (Cadilhe 103-105). The private and public versions help Cher attract a gay following because both play into analogous forms of suffering and camping these notions simultaneously. Additionally, gay identification with the diva's multitude of selves (i.e., real or unreal, private or public) is furthered by her performance and ability to act (Jennex 348). On the first Farewell tour, Cher's "Strong Enough" performance displays such a strength separate from a man's space, showcasing her empowerment. She also mentions how younger female divas will not take her place, "but they'll take somebody's place." Cher places herself on a relatively high pedestal, much like a man would on stage. All these factors mentioned above create a space where gay men can identify strongly with the person, singer, performer, and entertainer – Cher.

A diva, however, needs more than these coded queer appeals. Draper's main argument in analyzing diva worship is that gay men need a form of worship that is more than queer subtexts and relatable suffering and adequately applies to the modern gay man (135-136). Listening to music is more than just texts; to better understand and negotiate a position in the world, queer people must experience and feel. As Cusick argues, in classical music analysis, we need not overly focus on the composer (Cusick 80), which can be extended to a focus on audiences and receptive individuals in popular music. Aptly expressed by Sarah Hankins in studying queer hermeneutics, "a queer relationship with music represents a 'both/and' approach in which experience and interpretation are constitutive of each other" (84). Of course, musical texts serve some importance, but they still do not retain full explanatory power over gay men and their relationship with divas and music; this is especially true as time and history change the gay identity. With any social change, the need for social support becomes prevalent. The diva needs to make a genuine effort to help this marginalized group by political support or by hiring or collaborating with them to champion them (133).

Likewise, the body's stimulations and ability to be aroused by music are essential in understanding queer musical listening. This relationship has no clear end or beginning where "arousal enables the individual to locate herself, and to locate music, within social power structures that are undergirded by a sexual order" (87) – similarly, Koestenbaum's anecdotes about his relationship with the diva's voice underscore the same idea. You are reminded of your body, human experience, and feelings as a gay person in a homophobic heteronormative society (42-43). I invoke Koestenbaum here because of his arguments regarding the importance of the diva's voice to draw a link between the body and the diva's voice that enters the gay listener. A female's "voice often serves as an emblem for pure human physicality within dance genres" (339). This connection between musical arousal, body physicality, and dance music has been a pillar in the gay community.

Cher certainly demonstrates encoded meanings in her music and performances, but she also captures these more explicit messages ("CHER). "Strong Enough" has a funky rhythm that is disco-influenced, but Cher's most iconic gay performance just might be her disco hit "Take Me Home." This is an explicit queer form for Cher because

disco provided many gay men with a true sense of community and the ability to discover themselves (Smith 198). Disco also gave gay men the ability to be intimate because of dance, thereby necessitating potential dance partners. This "Take Me Home" performance does not just allude; it provides these images clearly to the audience. Whereas the background dancers were mostly opposite gendered couplings for the entire concert, it is not until the remixed part of "Take Me Home" that these dancers engage in homoerotic rhythmic movements with one another, both male and female. This indicates queer relationships as acceptable but also nods to such gay relationships during disco's peak. Other explicit references include Cher mentioning the need to make her shows fabulous, her concern that the drag queens of America would be furious with her, and the line "ladies and gentlemen ...and flamboyant gentlemen." Cher's monologues highlight her acknowledgment and direct appeals to her gay male following. She keeps them in mind in her art and performances. And yet, these explicit references further cement, but do not define, gay male identification. Rather, they work in tandem with implicit forms.

CONCLUSION

I have discussed how identity is integral to a gay man's music listening experiences and how historical contexts can shape such identities. I have asserted that the diva attracts a gay following because of her voice, camp, ambiguity, and personal identification. She invokes explicit forms that connect directly to gay men, their bodies, and their community. Cher can accomplish all of the above. At the end of the twentieth century, Cher can retain her gay following from the midcentury and the gay following of future generations. She is the bridge between gay generations because of her ability to use all queer appeal forms. The title of this paper, in a tongue-in-cheek manner, alludes to Shawn Mendez's popularized line "is it giving Cher?", understood in the gay community as "is it gay" or is something coded as queer. Cher's music and performances demonstrate that she has gay appeal in more ways than one and can live up to the legacy of this gay cultural banter.

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