

LGBT+ Representation in Music

Jesse Robertson, 2023

Over the summer, I set out to explore a topic that is near and dear to my heart: LGBT+ representation in music with a focus on the emergence of popular music and pop culture during the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. As a student from the South who identifies as LGBT+, I was never exposed to LGBT+ artists or the history of the LGBT+ community. If anything, LGBT+ artists were often brought up in negative and dehumanizing contexts. Additionally, I was also curious as to how music played a role as a source of community and safety for the LGBT+ community during the gay rights movement and the AIDS pandemic. This curiosity arose from my own experience with using music as a way to feel safe, seen, and understood. With these experiences and thoughts in mind, I began my research.

In a previous course I took with Professor McMullen, we read excerpts from “Rednecks, Queers, and Country Music” by Nadine Hubbs. In her book, Nadine Hubbs creates a foundation describing the rise of America’s middle class and its designation as the narrating class, which determines what the social norms are or should be. Hubbs mentions the middle class as first being homophobic; however, as time goes on, she describes the middle class as eventually becoming more accepting of the LGBT+ community and the working class as now homophobic. Using her ideas as a foundation, I began to explore specific artists and groups starting from the 1920s to the present.

During my research, I looked into the lives of many artists, performers, and composers. Some of the earlier examples I took particular interest in were Gladys Bentley (a drag performer whose career began in the 1920s), Cole Porter (composer), Bessie Smith (blues singer), and Ma Rainey (blues singer). Additionally, I explored more contemporary examples such as the Gay Men’s Chorus of Los Angeles (the group lost over 150 members to the AIDS pandemic), Elton John, Freddie Mercury, Brittany Howard, Omar Thomas (composer), Julie Giroux (composer), and Randall Standridge (composer). By looking at their work through a historical and social context, I now see their work in a new light.

Through my work, I found a new appreciation for those who came before me. I also found myself seeing an ebb and flow trend for the acceptance of LGBT+ people. It seems to me as though the acceptance of LGBT+ people ebb and flows like the tides, but the tides are only getting stronger. This idea reinforces the fact that there is still much work to do to achieve equality and acceptance in the United States and music is a key place where the battle must be fought. This research led me to find representation that my younger self lacked, and it has helped me remind me of something simple yet powerful: representation matters.

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