The Queer Aesthetics of Dionne Warwick: A Fashionable Analysis

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Veneration

The six-decade long career of Dionne Warwick has been that of the consummate lady—sophisticated, ravishing and witty. At 84, the recording artist and celebrity has mastered the art of making an entrance. Her title, Queen of Twitter, goes uncontested, and while I do venerate her as such, this is probably my best chance to convince her to make the jump to BlueSky.[1]

From her recent appearance at the 2024 Rock and Roll Hall of Fame induction ceremony, it became very clear that she also is the master of how and when to leave the room. With sincere gratitude, she had very little to say: "I'm gonna just say this and get on off the stage: Thank you. Thank you. Thank you."

Thank you, Ms. Warwick, for your inimitable contributions to music. Her welcome to the Hall of Fame recognizes her formidable body of work, a repertoire that rivals that of Aretha Franklin, Diana Ross, and Patti LaBelle.

What sets Warwick apart from the standard guard of black female vocalists in the sixties, seventies, and eighties is her peculiar performativity, her gossamer-like, silken timbre that guaranteed her ability to leverage crossover appeal for many years.

In addition, Warwick, a trained musician, parleyed her abilities to sightread music as well as her formative experiences within the church and as part of the Gospelaires. Together, these experiences allowed the performer to pursue technically demanding arrangements with precision and accuracy. Vocal performances that are ubiquitously Dionne, too many to name but include 1962's "Don't Make Me Over," 1967's "I Say a Little Prayer" and 1979's "I'll Never Love This Way Again". Dionne's voice proved immensely popular at a time when American popular music began to understand audience interest and desire.

Late Night Calling

For someone who devotes all his TV time to Judge Judy reruns, and archival footage of Mariah Carey, I was startled by my algorithm one September morning, just after 4 AM, The sound was familiar, unexpected, but at first sight, I was immediately connected: I saw Dionne Warwick singing, "What the World Needs Now." I took the cue and set out to study the program.[2]

Warwick's segments singing and in repartee with Bacharach; these scenes—perhaps scripted—provide us with an intimate look at the moments that defined the relationship she enjoyed with Bacharach and David.

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[1] Handy, Bruce. "Never Tweet, Unless You're Dionne Warwick." The New Yorker, November 22, 2021. https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2021/11/29/never-tweet-unless-youre-dionne-warwick.

[2] T.C. Archive, "Dionne Warwick & Burt Bacharach | The Kraft Music Hall 1970" National Broadcasting Corporation. YouTube. 17:50. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X0SU9bIyQGU

At Penn, I've studied Dionne Warwick's career and music under Anthony DeCurtis to consider a method of longform criticism from studying the written record, in part. Contemporary critics argued that Warwick relied on professional relationships with Burt Bacharach, Hal David, Barry Manilow and Clive Davis to continue her recording career and that she lacked very little performative agency herself.

As a black woman whose creative control served as the aural bottleneck from music written by white men, the very foundation of Warwick's stardom proved problematic for critics charged with making sense of popular music. Feature pieces in her honor, such as Nick Toches's 1972 profile, wrestled with her genre, "Dionne Warwick isn't a rock'n'roll singer. She's not a jazz singer either. Rhythm and blues? Nope. A pop singer? No way."[3]

Though such accusations could not be farther from the truth, Warwick possesses a performativity that works from beyond an opaque interior. She is vocally arresting, but perhaps guarded, or even performing a public-facing role. While her vocality maintains a subtle defiance resisting genre classification, and her energies as a celebrity are indicative of an alternative modes, I argue that Warwick's sartorial choices are a yet another transmission of opaque interiority.

My thesis is this: Dionne Warwick effuses an attractive queerness that can be perceived in her vocality and her attire. Warwick's ability to persist with an air of sophistication in sound and presentation is a testament to her performance of an opaque interiority. Warwick's queerness resulted in rock criticism that could never arrest her to genre, nor pin her physique outside of slender compliment. I refer to Oxford's fundamental definitions: strange, odd, peculiar, eccentric, and I desire to investigate the queerness of her style as an overt refusal of sexuality in the promotion and release of her music.[4]

The Dress

Dressed in a show gown of purple chiffon with a green and pink foliate motif, Warwick beautifully performed, "What the World Needs Now," a new arrangement of her 1962 demo "Make It Easy on Yourself," as well as "Loneliness Remembers What Happiness Forgets," the last of which also featured in a warm recording session between vocalist and her composer. Led by Bacharach on piano, the two reminisced on their years together while performing a medley of earlier hits including "Walk on By," "Alfie," and "I'll Never Fall in Love Again" amongst others.

As a fan, I am attracted to Warwick's lilt—her vocal timing, the swing of her strong belting into the breathless air of her head voice, the voice wrapped within its rasp, her sung and spoken vocalizations. I enjoy her comedic restraint in her subtle retorts to Bachrach's suggestions about songs, vocal range, and their partnership—they're pleasantly funny, but likely toned-down for television.

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[3] Tosches, Nick. "Dionne Warwick: "...The Holy Ghost, Of Course."". *Fusion* (1972). Dionne Warwick. Rock's Backpages. Accessed December 26, 2024. http://www.rocksbackpages.com/Library/Article/dionne-warwick-the-holy-ghost-of-course.

[4] Oxford English Dictionary Online. s.v. "Queer." Accessed March 1, 2025, https://www.oed.com/dictionary/queer_adj1

Re-watching Bacharach and Warwick's chemistry, however, I never thought of thought of her dress. I thought that to be peculiar from what I've known about fan worship of female celebrities and musicians, the ensemble always takes part of the equation. What was different about Dionne?

In the same vein, any awareness of Warwick's off-stage persona had proved elusive for decades, almost as though she could delineate her private affairs from her celebrity. Then again, we have flashes of strangeness that suggest a definite quirk in her off-stage antics.

In the seventies, Warwick spent most of her nearly hit-less period at Warner Brothers with a stylized 'e' at the end of her last name, as directed by a numerologist.

Leading the charge in the nineties against misogyny in rap, Warwick directly confronted rapper Snoop Dogg at her home, suggesting he reduce the presence of certain words in his music, and he obliged.[5]

And upon her 2002 arrest for possession of several joints, she disavowed the use of any drug—including aspirin, and we obliged.[6]

Save for these few and far between incidents, Warwick has remained the primary force in her on-stage celebrity and persona while largely keeping mum about her off-stage activities.

This paper celebrates Dionne Warwick's quirk, her strangeness in her dress, and her queer vocality—the silk-like sound that tells us nearly nothing of its source but allows us to see deeply into ourselves. In her career, Ms. Warwick, so polished and pristine in her fashion, inspires questions about desirability, sexuality, interiority, and music criticism.

Queer Where There Is Love

In a 1973 op-ed on Warwick and her upcoming album *Just Being Myself*, music critic David Nathan charges Warwick as being a charming young lady, who "totally has feminine air about her". This comes after reporters cheekily asked her "What makes a female feminine?" An interesting question to pose to Warwick; the brunt of praise she received, none of the other ladies I juxtaposed with Warwick would be affronted with questions about their femininity. Matched by a natural desire to know and to reveal, our intention to implicate someone's sexuality, Warwick encounters questioning that suggests the presence of a strangeness in her life.

While in Europe, particularly in Paris, Warwick was taken under the wing of Hollywood actress Marlene Dietrich during her first tour. It was Dietrich who proved instrumental in introducing Warwick to European fashion couture, thus contributing a significant change to Dionne's sartorial sensibilities.

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[5] AcrossGenPodcast. "Dionne Warwick Reflects On the Time She Schooled Snoop Dogg Over Lunch." YouTube. 10:09. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6pU2bCusXGk

[6] CNN. "Dionne Warwick arrested for pot possession." CNN Online, May 13, 2002. https://www.cnn.com/2002/SHOWBIZ/News/05/12/warwick.arrest/#:~:text=Officers%20discovered%2011%20suspected%20marijuana,possession%20of%20marijuana%2C%20police%20said.

There remains the question: given what we know of Dietrich—of her bisexuality and her predilection for the underground bars of Paris and Europe—and of Dionne Warwick—a young Black American ingenue raised within the strict confines of the black church—of whether more can be speculated of their relationship than a simple mentorship and sartorial advice.

Did Dietrich introduce Warwick to the thriving gay bars of Europe? Could they have become lovers? Quite possibly, but given the lack of evidence and Warwick's desire to guard private matters, this remains a matter of speculation

Dionne, when placed next to others who proved their popular longevity during her major charting years (1962-1992) possesses s a difference in sexuality, interiority, and music criticism. Also, slender and equally beautiful, but far less vocally talented, Diana Ross found herself on equal footing of adulation at the apex of Dionne's years with Bacharach and David. This meant that as Diana continued to prevail as Motown's darling, comparisons, competition, and other questions were asked of Dionne. Her documentary *Don't Make Me Over* features reporters asking questions about the possibility of her joining Motown's ranks, to which she fans away the attention with grace.

Warwick's queerness is more capacious than an investigation into clandestine same-sex relationships, though a longer meditation on her escapades in Europe with Marlene Dietrich in the early sixties could prove illuminating.

Nevertheless, I declare and study Warwick as a site of refusal that is decidedly queer. Her vocality, and the sound she cultivated with Bacharach and David, and later with Manilow and Davis resisted reductive mandates governing the curation, and cultural production of 1960s popular music. She didn't have to be and chose not to be sexy.

Further, with a sound that garnered cachet in both black and white audiences, Warwick had an appeal and presentation that made it difficult to relegate her to a single genre, rendering her sonically illegible for rock critics. As a result, Warwick was never the critical darling that Diana or Aretha became.

Speaking of Fashion

To speak to Dionne Warwick's fashionable queerness, I make use of Michael Mohammed's definition of vocality, where all the singer's *vocal* manifestations are "invested with social meaning and not wholly determined by its linguistic content." [7]

Perhaps, Warwick decided to invest her fashion with social meaning, not wholly determined by its fabric or its hem. What statements do her choices in clothing make after six decades?

What intersectional social meanings are derived by Warwick, an artist who found derision from rock critics? What aspects or elements of Warwick's vocality, or her fashion proved illegible to

[7] Mohammed, Michael John. "Sounding and Signifyin': Representation and the Theatrical Black Voice." Order No. 27998339, Teachers College, Columbia University, 2020, 13. https://proxy.library.upenn.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/dissertations-theses/sounding-signifyin-representation-theatrical/docview/2424510023/se-2.

us at the time? What aspects of her fashion remain illegible, especially when its social meaning, not the physical construction of her dresses, determine her femininity, celebrity, and even her paradoxical right to privacy?

And why was the need to categorize so important to the examination of Warwick's tenure as a popular vocalist? And if we continue her life beyond her voice, we may be led to ask ourselves, what queer affirmations from Warwick's tenure as a celebrity sustain, encourage, and enliven?

If we can accept what signifies Warwick's distinct voice, the unique sounds it makes, perhaps we can also behold what signifies Warwick's distinct style, and sartorial choice.

Parallel to her sound, a mélange of pop, jazz, gospel, and rhythm-and-blues, Warwick's impeccable wardrobe points to a liminality that is at once nondescript and confounding. Often wearing beautiful gowns—a gift from her days in Paris with Dietrich—Warwick received rave reviews from her slender figure but never showed it.

Due to its strange presentation in American popular music—covered on television, a forum that sells and trades in sex—it's strangely admirable to find a female vocalist who sold so much in that same market without yielding to more amorous standard. In an industry where the insatiable demand for celebrity intimates operates on sexiness as currency, Warwick evaded both "selling out" and participating in a "respectability politics" by not cashing her body in to drive profits towards her musical craft. Perhaps incidental, or maybe a reflection of her values, her choice in fashion matches a lack of intense sexuality in her music.

Though today, we regard Warwick's sound with a timbre that feels at home with an intersection of blackness and womanhood. Her celebrity and vocality remained unfettered by regimented genre categorization, the clamor for suggestive ensembles, and even sexual classification, too.

The chronology of her public decisions and private matters makes for a celebrity that deserves deeper inquiry. The sound and style of Dionne Warwick leaves an inimitable legacy that render her longstanding career impossible to follow. They also render her very queer.