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Over the Rainbow and Into the Music:

Analyzing the History of the Queer Icon

On Oct. 19, 2019, at a meet-and-greet for a concert promoting her self-titled studio album, Charli XCX signed a douche. Previously she had signed a fan's mother's ashes and a bottle of poppers (an inhalant that relaxes the sphincter muscles for anal sex). This made her an icon, a legend, the moment, and most of all, a queen.

All jokes aside (am I really joking though?), what is it with queer people and their pop stars? Queer listeners have adopted many genres of their own but queer people, specifically gay men, have an almost unstated rule of worshiping pop stars as icons. I can attest myself that even though my music taste is eclectic, I feel in touch with my queerness when I listen to Lady Gaga, or Charli XCX, or Madonna. Why is this? It can not simply be that I identify with their lyrics directed toward loving men; if this were the case then these artists would have the same appeal to straight women. The queer appreciation of pop stars, however, is not the same. My goal is to explore what it means to be a queer icon in the music industry. I aim not only to define why female pop artists attract queer fanbases, but to reveal what implications the queer icon status has on the music industry, the queer community, and the individual performer. My approach is to look at the history of queer icons in the media and to compare how they appealed to queer audiences and identify what sustained and what developed over time.

My use of the word "queer" as a collective adjective is to encompass many sectors of the queer community without constantly using lengthy parentheses-indulgent phrasing. The queer

community contains a web of identities whose cultures and experiences both differ and intersect. While writers typically define the topical phenomenon as that of gay men (and many of the sources in this paper refer to gay men and use the more common term "gay icon"), the same audiences can also consist of transgender women, gender non-conforming men, and nonbinary people. A similar lesbian icon phenomenon exists (e.g. k.d. lang, Hozier, Johnny Cash), but while I encourage other writers to center that phenomenon, I am interested primarily with the female pop stars who attract audiences of gay men and, for the lack of better phrasing, their adjacents.

I must start by defining what a queer icon is. A queer icon is not so because of their gender or sexual identity, though they may be queer themself. The mere fact that a queer person idolizes a personality also does not make that personality a queer icon. A queer icon is a personality that has attracted a queer audience significant in both number and impact, and relies on their queer idolizers as part of their brand and career longevity. Despite what she may have you believe, Taylor Swift is not a queer icon. She could arguably be a lesbian icon, but Swift's dominant target audience has and always has been straight women. As my preceding disclaimer notes, the subjects of this paper are female queer icons who primarily attract gay men. This traditional definition of queer iconicity is cross-gender: it involves a man (or someone who grew up as a man) identifying with a prominent female idol.

Queer icons exist in many fields of entertainment: Joan Crawford in the movies, Sandra Bernhard in comedy, Joan Rivers in indignity. The queer icon is prominent particularly in the music industry: Madonna, Lady Gaga, Lana Del Rey, Charli XCX. I regret that this paper's list of queer pop icons is not exhaustive, but more like exhausted. There are many. The woman who is arguably the first true queer icon inhabits the spheres of film, stage, and music: Judy Garland.

Garland's mainstream legacy is her role as Dorothy Gale in *The Wizard of Oz*, but modern generations forget her extended acting and singing career, how it faltered, and how the queer community adopted her as an icon. A now archaic euphemism for homosexual men was "friend of Dorothy," which apparently pushed the Naval Investigative Service to search for a mysterious "Dorothy" at the center of a ring of homosexuals in the Navy. (Shilts 387) Garland is important not only as a historical figure, but because she is evidence of how the gay male/popstar female relationship is not simply gay men identifying with androphilia. Garland contained a special sensibility that appealed to gay men more than her female colleagues. In his classic essay "Judy Garland and Gay Men," Richard Dyer (1987) examines why gay men adored Garland in the pre-Stonewall era. Dyer cites writing from gay men identifying with Garland's dual image of patheticness and resilience. Dyer writes,

> "...the gay sensibility holds together qualities that are elsewhere felt as antithetical: theatricality and authenticity. Equally I'd want to suggest that the sensibility holds together intensity and irony, a fierce assertion of extreme feeling with a deprecating sense of absurdity." (p. 150)

Garland's struggle to reconcile with her awkward career and industry abuse—a struggle she made clear both visually and audibly in her musical performances—resonated with gay following's struggle to choose between staying closeted or coming out.

Dyer also argues that Garland also exhibited two facets that enhanced her queer appeal: androgyny and camp. When Garland performed femininity, she was glamorless and ordinary, and according to Dyer, "not being glamorous is to fail at femininity, to fail at one's sex role." (p. 163) Garland's song "In-between" is about frustration with adolescence, though drag queens would appropriate the song as a statement on androgyny and genderfluidity. Her anti-femininity implied

a queer sensibility of failing at post-war gender roles and her androgyny certainly confirmed it. Garland's tragedy and androgyny informed her status as a camp icon along with her uniquely exaggerated performances. Dyer goes into lengthy detail into how Garland uniquely attracted queer audiences, but for the purpose of this paper, my summary of Dyer's conclusions supports my own argument that Garland's traits set a standard for queer icons to come.

Post-Stonewall, the gay liberation movement became more visible and militant. The general culture was also becoming more provocative and liberatory after the social transformations of the cultural and political counterculture of the late 1960s that enabled the Stonewall riots to happen. This is especially evident in the music industry. Queer artists and audiences were the faces of glam rock, disco, and new wave. The era of "friend of Dorothy" faded away as queer people saw Garland's tragedy as a miserable old tale that should make way for a new narrative that could satisfy more confident political optics. David Halperin (2012) in his manual to queer studies *How To Be Gay* writes,

> "No wonder that in the heady atmosphere of those glory days in the late 1970s, before AIDS or the rise of the New Right, when sex was everywhere … that young gay men like me had little use for Judy Garland. Traditional gay male culture–with its female icons, its flaming camp style, its division between queens and trade, its polarized gender roles, its sexual hierarchies, its balked romantic longings, its sentimentality, its self-pity, and its profound despair about the possibility of lasting love–all that seemed not only archaic and outdated but repulsive." (p. 55-56).

Disco in particular ushered the era of a new type of queer icon. Artists like Donna Summer, Diana Ross, and Grace Jones embraced their sexuality as both romantic and erotic. Dyer (1991)

writes in his essay “In Defense of Disco” that disco involves an eroticism that is obvious about its physicality through its dance moves, sweaty discotheques, and explicit lyricism.

The disco era did conserve Judy Garland’s standards of camp when it discarded her tragedy. Or really, it represented queer tragedy as something to overcome with queer confidence. Grace Jones was the only mainstream pop star and queer icon to absorb queerness as her total image at the time. Jones was the queer Judy Garland: she dressed in avant-garde androgynous fashion; she aired Broadway-style longings of “fucking needing a man;” she embraced the campiness of an exaggerated diva performance. In one of Jones’ early performances in 1977, she is standing on stairs in front of a spotlight wearing makeup that if she was not a woman would make her seem as much of a drag queen as the gay nightclub partiers below her. (Walters 2015) She beckons the piano player to keep playing a fanfare “more dramatically this time.” Her androgyny was unique, a dialectic of hyperfemininity and butchness. On an episode of the Midnight Special she dons a modest white coat that she removes to bare a skimpy boxing outfit.

Disco also featured queer fans adoring female queer icons; it was a queer reaction to the hypermasculine eroticism of rock music. “Rock confines sexuality to cock,” Dyer writes, “....Disco music, on the other hand, hears the physicality in black music and its range.” (1991: 415) Queer people, through disco, exercised a poptimist anti-masculine antidote to rockism.

The title for the ultimate queer icon of the post-Stonewall era belongs to the queen of pop herself, Madonna. She built upon the disco precedent of flipping the meaning of queer icon from misery to confidence; queer audiences in the Garland era identified with her struggle among tragedy, but Madonna was an active provoker, not a passive sufferer. Michael Musto (1995) writes in his essay “The Immaculate Connection,”,

> "It's not the divisive old Judy story, with guys weeping along with the diva as she longs to go over the rainbow and track down the man that got away, while women cringe. *We all* cheer Madonna as she climbs barefoot over the rainbow, grabs the pot of gold, and forces that man to trade it in for the world's largest diamond ring." (p. 429)

Madonna's brand as a proud disrupter of social norms further differentiated her from the disco divas by being more vocal and clear about her allyship. Musto repeats a rumor about Donna Summer turning into a homophobic Jesus freak, but his point stands that Madonna "[would] never use the Bible against queers, but she might just use queers against the Bible." (p. 428) Madonna satisfied a visibility of queerness that Musto calls "an exploitation we enjoy." (p. 430)

Musto's enjoyment is his own opinion, however. Madonna was and is not immune from criticism. Her bold allyship culminated with the release of "Vogue," an ode to the New York ballroom scene of urban queer Black people and Latinos. (Fincher 1990) Madonna paid tribute to the subculture while also paying homage to the Hollywood icons of the pre-Stonewall era, including Garland. She danced in monochrome burlesque, often donning Garland-esque androgyny. These Hollywood icons, of course, are all white. "Greta Garbo, and Monroe/Dietrich and DiMaggio," Madonna raps. (Ciccone 1990) Nevermind what Joe DiMaggio has to do with any of this. Her vogue team in the music video is multiracial, but at no point does she acknowledge the actual queer non-white forerunners of the craft. Still, what the song did not outright say it certainly gestured toward. "Vogue" is an example of how Madonna as a queer icon proudly wore the label and visually advocated for queer acceptance and culture.

Madonna continues to be the primary queer icon (i.e. she has not croaked yet) for her generation while newer performers take her spot for the newer generations. For Millennials this

new face was Stefani Joanne Angelina Germanotta: Lady Gaga. Gaga rose during a time Brian O'Flynn (2018) for the Guardian calls "socially and politically sterile" with most popular artists being "hetero banalities." O'Flynn writes that Gaga "taught a new generation of young queer people how to drag identity out of a barrenness around them, by looking to history and pop culture." The history in question is the legacy of Judy Garland, Grace Jones, and Madonna, influences toward Gaga's diva-esque femininity, campy performances, and gender-bending fashion. The videos for "Telephone" and "Paparazzi" exhibit this well, but I want to focus on the song and video that cemented Gaga's queer icon status, "Born this Way." (Knight 2011) Producer Fernando Garibay told MTV reporter Jocelyn Vena (2011) that upon listening to the song, he interpreted it as that "we have to birth a new race." Garibay and Gaga recruited director Nick Knight to create a video featuring Gaga as Mother Monster, birthing a new generation of quirky queer-coded beings.

What is important to realize prior to analyzing "Born this Way" is that while Grace Jones and Madonna were/are ambiguous about their sexuality, Lady Gaga was the first queer icon in this discussion to actually be queer, as an open bisexual. Gaga's bisexuality inspired her to release "Born this Way," a song in which she sings that someone is "on the right track," "no matter gay, straight, or bi/Lesbian, transgendered life." (Gaga 2011) The image of Gaga being the mother of a new queer generation symbolized Gaga's queer icon status of the time as a successor to Madonna. Gaga, like Madonna, embraced and vocalized her queer icon status, but instead we have a queer icon who herself is queer and can spread her queer openness as metaphorical genetic inheritance.

Gaga is probably the artist who the majority of the mainstream would agree is the current primary queer icon, but she has muted her extravagance several times for commercial tameness.

Her most successful song to date is arguably “Shallow” from the *A Star is Born* (2018) soundtrack, an arena rock track she performs with full sincerity and without any of her once-trademark avant-garde fashion. “Shallow” is a duet with Bradley Cooper, both in character as the film’s couple; this is not a gay song. Gaga’s 2020 “Chromatica” era briefly called back to the queer-in-vogue days of “Born this Way” and “ARTPOP,” but in the meantime a Gen-Z iteration of queer iconicity brewed.

Enter hyperpop, a relatively new genre of experimental electropop pioneered by the British PC Music label and Scottish producer SOPHIE. The definitive Gen-Z popstar/queer icon who arose from this is Charlotte Aitchison, better known as Charli XCX. In 2016, XCX collaborated with SOPHIE on the “Vroom Vroom” EP for a radical change in XCX’s sound from standard bubblegum pop to noisy, almost industrial electronica. The bulk of the video is monochrome, with XCX in shiny black clothing and dancing to the freakiness of the song. (Bradley and Jones-Soler 2016) The final scene is in color, with blue and pink club lighting and an assemblage of an androgynous/drag entourage. Note that SOPHIE was a closeted trans woman at the time. The video is an updated “Vogue” infused with the postmodern extremity of the contemporary hyperpop era. The track is loud, attention-grabbing, and abrasive, as is the music video. XCX speeds the already energetic sound in live concerts, where she also belts a scream once the song begins. Her young queer fans applaud their queen. “Vroom Vroom” represents queerness that does not ask for ease but assertion. “Vroom Vroom” is a song for queer audiences not just because of its lyrics (though the double entendre repetition of “Let’s ride” carries its own Madonna style of sexual campiness) but because of its unrestrained sound and image.

By looking at the history of the queer icon, one can see a development in attitude and image that coincides with the growing visibility and acceptance of queer communities. As pop stars recognized the appeal they have to the queer community, they gradually began expressing that appreciation in their music and image. The phenomenon began with Judy Garland, who set the standard of romantic longing and social isolation that unintentionally resonated with (mostly closeted) queer audiences. Garland also set the standard of campy, ostentatious performance along with androgynous costume that broke the stringent gender roles of her era. Garland's tragedy of isolation stayed consistent with future queer icons, but these singers paired the tragedy with a remedy of community and confidence: they would vogue, yell that they were born this way, and proclaim that they fucking need a man. What does it mean to be a queer icon? It means to perform a role that requires dignified responsibility as an audiovisual role model for generations of queer communities. And of course, to make good music.

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