
Book Review: *Straight Histories of Queer Music*

Darryl W. Bullock. *David Bowie Made Me Gay: 100 Years of LGBTQ Music*. London: Duckworth Overlook, 2017. 368 pages.

Martin Aston. *Breaking Down the Walls of Heartache: How Music Came Out*. Milwaukee: Backbeat Books, 2016. 592 pages.

Chronology is often a blunt and brutal tool. One of its major methodological drawbacks is the tendency to obscure messy and haphazard realities for tidy, linear fictions whose components fit neatly together. This is especially problematic for LGBTQ+ historical work. When they exist at all, queer historical records are notoriously incomplete, ephemeral, and haphazard while our queer ancestors, especially those who lived prior to the 1970s, often toiled in relative isolation, obscurity, or in small, subaltern communities. There are also issues of terminology. As queer critic Heather Love has asked, is it possible, or ethical, to speak of LGBTQ+ identities in eras or cultures for which those terms did not exist or do not apply?¹ Such preoccupations fuel queer theoretical debates, but just as important, especially beyond the white-washed ramparts of the Ivory Tower, is the need to claim queer ancestry, to declare that *we were here*. Without some sense of a shared queer past, it is very difficult to imagine better queer futures. Chronological history may be blunt and brutal, but in this regard, it is also very effective.

LGBTQ+s cultivate a sense of the past to serve the affective and political needs of the present, often divining from cultural objects (books, art, film, television, music) signs of other queer lives. This process, which anthropologist Kath Weston once called “tracking the gay imaginary,” can be slapdash and haphazard and its results uneven.² Depending on when or where one lives and looks, a search for evidence of queer existence may yield a treasure trove or nothing of special interest. It can also hinge on *how* one interrogates the available data; familiarity with historical and cultural codes that may mask queerness in plain sight; and may be at best speculative. In the first case, I am thinking of George Chauncey’s groundbreaking work on the white working-class gay male culture of New York City prior

1. Heather Love, *Feeling Backward: Loss and the Politics of Queer History*. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007).

2. Kath Weston, “Get Thee to a Big City: Sexual Imaginary and the Great Gay Migration,” *GLQ* 2/3 (1995): 253–77.

to WWII; in the last, I hear echoes of those pernicious 1990s debates about (and paranoid defenses of) Handel (*was he??*) and Schubert (*wasn't he??*).³

Today, we live in an era of heightened LGBTQ+ visibility in certain, limited cultural arenas. *Ellen* and the *Queer Eye* reboot are hits from coast to coast. Laverne Cox and Caitlyn Jenner have graced the covers of *Time* and *Vanity Fair*. Professional athletes, singers, actors, and everyday folks come out of the closet in increasing numbers—in the process, creating a new genre, the coming-out video. And LGBTQ+s appear in popular musicals, plays, sitcoms, dramas, and feature films. Neil Patrick Harris even hosted the Oscars! But it's a mistake to confuse quantity for quality, depth, or diversity.

Visibility is an important sign of socio-political and cultural change, but I am wary of its seductive siren song, especially when sung by the successful few when so many past and present injustices and erasures still need to be remedied for the nameless many. It's far too easy to be distracted by the latest victory for queer cultural and economic one-percenters, to confuse that for real structural changes that defend against the mounting assaults on what precious few civil rights, human rights, and legal protections we have managed to secure: anti-LGBTQ+ religious "freedom" bills, bans on transgender military servicepersons, the lack of federal housing and employment discrimination, conversion therapy, the brutality directed toward transwomen of color, and LGBTQ+ teen homelessness. History alone won't solve such problems, but as the saying goes, a tree without roots is just a piece of wood. From the thickets of history grow forests of community, affect, and solidarity necessary for action and change.

Heterosexuality is scrawled—often in invisible ink—on the walls of our most hallowed cultural institutions. Its taken-for-grantedness is the building block of the very heterocis privilege that keeps most people, including a fair number of queer folks, ignorant of the LGBTQ+ past. Social movements for LGBTQ+ civil rights are not included in K-12 history curricula. On college campuses we are regularly excluded from syllabi outside of niche classes nested in specialized departments. When our contributions to history, politics, science, technology, war-making, or art do require our inclusion in mainstream narratives, the stories told typically belong to the dominant class of white, cisgender, affluent, urban gay men and lesbians. And even then, all that inconvenient queerness gets stuffed into the back of the closet like that harness you only break out for Pride each summer and keep hidden from hetero eyes the rest of the year, lest you have to explain what you're doing with something like that.

To Eve Sedgwick, it seemed that "this society wants its children to know nothing, wants its queer children to conform or (and this is not a figure of speech) die; and wants not

3. George Chauncey, *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Making of the Gay Male World, 1890-1940* (Basic Books, 1995); Gary C. Thomas, "Was George Frideric Handel Gay?" On Closet Questions and Cultural Politics," in *Queering the Pitch: The New Gay and Lesbian Musicology*, 2d edition, ed. Brett Woods, Thomas (New York: Routledge, 2006), 155–205; Maynard Solomon, "Franz Schubert and the Peacocks of Benvenuto Cellini," *19th-Century Music* 12/3 (1989): 193–206; Susan McClary, "Constructions of Subjectivity in Franz Schubert's Music," in *Queering the Pitch*, 205–35; Rita Steblin has devoted considerable energy to "defending" Schubert from accusations of queerness, beginning with "The Peacock's Tale: Schubert's Sexuality Reconsidered," *19th-Century Music* 17/1 (1993): 5–33 and more recently in "Schubert's Pepi: His Love Affair with the Chambermaid Josepha Pöcklhofer and Her Surprising Fate," *The Musical Times* (2008), 47–69 as well as in various letters to editors.

to know that it is getting what it wants.”⁴ I suspect that this stems from the same general aversion to sex and gender difference described by Leo Bersani in the famous opening lines of his 1987 essay, “Is the Rectum a Grave?”: “There’s a big secret about sex,” he writes. “Most people don’t like it.”⁵ Queer sexuality requires that even LGBTQ+ folks confront the body’s messy, abject corporeality and the still-taboo subjects of queer desire, love, and fucking. The big secret about queer sex(uality)? Most people, especially LGBTQ+s who purchase visibility and tolerance with a gag order against their own identities, don’t like it either.

Rooted in queer bodies and desires, such oppressions form one connective fiber that binds the diverse experiences and identities subsumed in our unwieldy acronym. Our relationships to cultural objects and productions constitute another. Sedgwick speculates that in childhood many LGBTQ+s grow attached “to a few cultural objects, objects of high or popular culture or both, objects whose meaning seemed mysterious, excessive, or oblique in relation to the codes most readily available to us, [and these] became a prime resource for survival.”⁶ More recently, David Halperin echoes Sedgwick when he writes that queer subjectivity

expresses itself through a peculiar, dissident *way of relating* to cultural objects [. . .] and cultural forms. [It] involves a characteristic way of receiving, reinterpreting, and reusing mainstream culture, of decoding and recoding the heterosexual or heteronormative meanings already encoded in that culture, so that they come to function as vehicles of gay or queer meaning.⁷

One such cultural object shows up in queer memoirs, life stories, and memories with surprising regularity: music.

Pioneering queer musicologist Philip Brett once observed that gay children “often experience a shutdown of all feeling as the result of their parents’ and society’s disapproval of a basic part of their sentient life [thus] music appears as a veritable lifeline.”⁸ Brett also made the audacious claim that “all musicians are faggots in the parlance of the male locker room,” anticipating by a couple of decades Drew Daniels’s assertion that “all sound is queer.”⁹ Perhaps because it is closely linked to emotions and expression, music is often gendered feminine. Or perhaps because even the most thunderous passages in Beethoven, the most dexterous shredded guitar solos, the vocal pyrotechnics of soul’s melismas, and hip-hop’s fastest flowing rhymes require a nuanced touch, close listening, and careful attentiveness. At the same time, Suzanne Cusick observes that music puts us flat on our backs in a receptive (i.e. feminine) position.¹⁰ It touches, with and without consent, and demands to be touched. Music, then, is a lot like sex, an observation that led Cusick to ask

4. Sedgwick, “Queer and Now,” in *Tendencies* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 3.

5. Leo Bersani, *Is The Rectum a Grave and Other Essays* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2010), 3.

6. Sedgwick, *Tendencies*, 3.

7. David Halperin, *How to be Gay* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2014), 12. Emphasis in original.

8. Brett, “Musicality, Essentialism, and the Closet,” in *Queering the Pitch*, 17.

9. Brett, “Musicality,” 17 and Drew Daniels, “All Sound is Queer,” *The Wire* 133 (2011).

10. Suzanne Cusick, “On a Lesbian Relationship with Music: A Serious Effort Not to Think Straight,” in *Queering the Pitch*, 67–85.

one of the all-time great music-scholarly questions: who's on top? Who can tell? Maybe music is versatile. At the same time, music requires traditionally masculine attributes: great technical, analytical, and executional skill; someone once called musicians "small muscle athletes," a turn of phrase that harks back to, and complicates, Brett's locker-room talk. Furthermore, certain types of music and musicians are exalted in the hetero-male canons of both vernacular and concert repertoires. This leads to a lot of musical gender trouble, so at the risk of asking what appears to be a rather tacky question: *Music, are you a boy, a girl, or someone else?*

This echo of David Bowie's "Rebel, Rebel" (1974) is not incidental. Bowie's gender-bendy, shape-shifty star text and his intergalactic, stylistic promiscuity loom large in two exciting new histories of LGBTQ+ music. Martin Aston's *Breaking Down the Walls of Heartache: How Popular Music Came Out* and Darryl Bullock's *David Bowie Made Me Gay: 100 Years of LGBTQ Music* fill an urgent need for foundational work in queer popular music studies. Aston and Bullock offer meticulously researched narratives, thick with names, dates, places, song and album titles. Discussions of individual artists and scenes form rhizomatic networks connected through music but also through sex, partying, love, gossip, and friendship. Such detail-rich writing evokes Timothy Lawrence's fine works on dance music, and I anticipate that these two books, like those by Lawrence, will become essential reading for anyone interested in queer music history.¹¹

Aston's book is *massive*. At more than 500 pages, it seems like a pop music answer to J. Peter Burkholder, Donald Jay Grout, and Claude V. Palisca's monumental *A History of Western Music*, a text that has formed the core of undergraduate survey courses for decades because it crams a couple thousand years' worth of European music history between two covers. Aston's attention to detail, broad historical scope, and transnational sojourns bring together queer musical practices in a readable narrative organized into a decade-by-decade periodization. His story begins in the 1920s with Blues Queens and Pansies in the 1930s and ends with a twenty-first century "rainbow riot." In between, readers encounter the queer wartime figures who shaped jazz and big band, LGBTQ+ rock and holy rollers, hippies, punks and disco freaks, androgynous New Wavers, and the queer forces behind 1990s alt-rock. While some of Aston's transitions and juxtapositions lack a certain rhetorical grace, there is also something delightfully queer and performative about this celebration of "the ways in which meanings and institutions can be at loose ends with each other."¹²

The most successful parts of Aston's text are the chapters spanning the 1950s through the 1980s. Their heft and density gives them the feeling of a stand-alone project about queer music in the mid-twentieth century. They link the development of underground dance scenes to the disco juggernaut, extending the geographic scope of Lawrence's focus on New York and, to a lesser extent, Chicago and San Francisco; and they follow the cultural exhaustion and fallout with disco through the various reactions to and appropriations of dance music that have kept turning disco's disciplinary beat around

11. Tim Lawrence, *Love Saves the Day: A History of American Dance Music Culture, 1970-1979; Life and Death on the New York Dance Floor, 1980-1983* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004 and 2016).

12. Sedgwick, *Tendencies*, 6.

and around and around for decades.¹³ Multiple chapters on the '70s cover important developments in dance music, rock, the Women's Music movement, and the small but important corpus of openly gay male singer-songwriters from the era between Gay Liberation and AIDS. This asset also reveals a limitation, however, for Aston devotes almost as much space to the 1970s alone as to the chapters on the '20s–40s and '90s–2000s combined. Given the strength of these interior chapters and the relative paucity of those that bookend them, one wonders if a thematic, rather than chronological, schema might have allowed Aston to more deliberately connect temporally disparate eras, perhaps through lenses of nostalgia and cultural retrospection—theoretical projects positively dripping with the pearls of queer affect. Nevertheless, *Breaking Down the Walls of Heartache* is an important tome, and I'm happy to have it on my shelf.

At a more modest 327 pages, Bullock's monograph explores the same century of queer popular music using a similar decade-by-decade progression, though each chronological chapter is formed around a specific conceit or motif. Where Aston aims for breadth and inclusion, Bullock examines individual currents and developments, which may make his book of great interest to those who favor explorations of the quirky and obscure. The chapters on Camp Records, Lavender Country, and Women's Music are long-overdue revelations. Both authors place music against the backdrops of history and politics, but Bullock really excels at situating individual stars, labels, and records in their moment but cannot match the all-encompassing sweep of Aston's survey. Both books benefit from interviews with musicians who were part of the scenes described, preserving these oral histories for future generations of queers who track the gay imaginary by scouring books, media, and the internet for traces of LGBTQ+ ancestry.

Each text is indebted to the pioneering work of another LGBTQ+ music historian J D Doyle, whose Queer Music Heritage website is put to excellent use in both texts. Doyle's invaluable work deserves more of our attention and use. His vast archive of rare recordings, photographs, and other ephemera is augmented by more than a decade of interviews with LGBTQ+ musicians which made up his weekly radio program. Full transcripts of each episode, playlists, audio (including material that didn't make the final broadcast), and an open-access Queer Music 101 PowerPoint presentation are all available at Doyle's website.¹⁴ I've had the great pleasure of working a bit with J D over the past few years, and he's not only a living archive (of both queer music and queer Texas history), but also what we from the South call "good people." Doyle's archives were recently selected for preservation by the Library of Congress, an honor much-deserved and long overdue.

Straight histories of queer music establish lineage, presence, and our contributions to the broader project of queer (and straight) world making. These two texts complement one another like good friends, playing off one another's strengths and minimizing each other's respective weaknesses. Together, then, they exemplify what Foucault, in a

13. Walter Hughes, "In the Empire of the Beat," in *Microphone Fiends: Youth, Music, Culture*, eds. Tricia Rose and Andrew Ross (New York: Routledge, 1994), 147–57.

14. <http://www.queermusicheritage.com>

discussion of gay culture, once called “Friendship as a Way of Life.”¹⁵ Those of us living and working at the margins of history, politics, and society understand the need for such projects and such circles of friends. Aston, Bullock, and Doyle have done a great service to queer music history, popular music, and LGBTQ+ studies more generally.

Matthew J. Jones
St. Francis Episcopal Upper School in Houston, TX
Email: drmatthewjjones@gmail.com

15. Michel Foucault, “Friendship as a Way of Life: Interview with R. de Ceccaty, J. Danet, and J. Le Bitoux,” *Gai Pied* (1981).