

**Hidden in Plain Sight: Queer Songwriters and The Pansy Craze**

by Jake Bellissimo

For many, the LGBTQ rights movement began on June 28<sup>th</sup>, 1969 when police raided the Stonewall Inn in Manhattan and were confronted with a riot, inspired and lead by activists Sylvia Rivera and Marsha P. Johnson.<sup>1</sup> In a mainstream sense, this is not incorrect; what had previously been an exclusively underground movement was suddenly propelled to the attention of the mainstream public and this changed the way in which people would value and present queer identity drastically. Whereas LGBTQ (to be used in this paper interchangeably with queer and gay) culture had thrived in other cities such as Berlin, Germany in the 1920s, the Stonewall riots of 1969 indicated for many Americans that not only could queerness be presented in public, but that it could also be fought for with pride. This changed both the political and social climate, leading into what we know now as the modern queer rights movement.<sup>2</sup>

Though many people are familiar with how the tension that lead to Stonewall developed, previous movements of open queerness that facilitated spaces for an LGBTQ community aren't as well-known.<sup>2</sup> One of these movements was the Pansy Craze, a retroactively-named era of queer history (acknowledged as mainly occurring between 1930-1933) in which LGBTQ performers thrived as underground spaces became more public, having many performance opportunities and freedom

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<sup>1</sup> More information about the Stonewall Riots, the lives of Rivera and Johnson, and more can be found in the book *Stonewall: the Riots That Sparked the Gay Revolution* (St. Martin's Griffin, 2004) and Gossett/Wortzel's film *Happy Birthday, Marsha!* (To be self-published in 2018)

<sup>2</sup> The Schiller and Rosenberg film *Before Stonewall: America's LGBT Movement* (First-Run Features, 1984) describes in greater detail the nuance and difficulty of earlier gay rights movements to gain notoriety on a mainstream level.

to openly express their gender identities and sexualities.<sup>3</sup> Prohibition provided the groundwork for this, with popular speakeasies coinciding with queer-centric bars, drawing the crowd to otherwise underground venues. Through this, many performers gained an audience they wouldn't have otherwise had and found success in being themselves. The prominence of Ma Rainey, Bessie Smith,<sup>4</sup> and Jean Malin all hinted at a culture that was changing, allowing space for identities not only to exist but to thrive in a new counterculture.

A notable performer to emerge from this scene was Bruz Fletcher; a rambunctious, creative, and direct composer-performer, Fletcher would cement his reputation as one of the most dynamic queer performers during the 20s and 30s before fading into near-obscurity after the Pansy Craze ended.

This more-visible underground proved an interesting contrast to other queer composers and performers of the era, such as Cole Porter, who was able to thrive in plain sight, nesting his sexuality in clever lyricism, social stature, and a heterosexual marriage.<sup>5</sup> Praised as one of the most important composers in American pop music both during his lifetime and after his death, Porter benefitted from various privileges that would go on to affect his ability to present his queerness, how he was

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<sup>3</sup> Chauncy, *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Making of the Gay Male World, 1890-1940* (BasicBooks, 1994) p. 301.

<sup>4</sup> The queer blues scene of the 1920s is thoroughly examined in the film *T'Ain't Nobody's Bizness: Queer Blues Divas of the 1920s* (Frameline, 2011).

<sup>5</sup> More history and analysis of "the closet" and how to dissect it can be found in Ryan and Berkowitz's *Constructing Gay and Lesbian Families: "Beyond the Closet."* (*Qualitative Sociology*, 2009), 32(2), 153-172.

able to do that, and the way in which he wrote his songs. Putting Fletcher and Porter side-by-side shows how their respective socioeconomic statuses changed the way they interact with culture and songwriting, a phenomenon that was not uncommon for queer people of the time. The socioeconomic conditions felt during the Pansy Craze affected the way queer composers and performers wrote about themselves and the world around them.

An important facet of Porter and Fletcher's work is that they both wrote the music *and* lyrics for their songs, often citing or coding personal experiences into their narratives. This aspect of their work provides good insight both for understanding their music and how their socioeconomic positions directly affected how their work was created and received.

For example, Porter's familial background provided a significant basis for him having the tools and resources to grow into the upper class socialite he remained for his entire life.<sup>6</sup> He was born on June 9<sup>th</sup>, 1891 in Indiana and was raised in a wealthy family, and—despite defying their wishes that he become a lawyer, choosing music instead—was classically trained at piano and proved a virtuoso, composing from an early age. He continued to develop his musical skills during his adolescence, attending Worcester Academy in Massachusetts and showing a penchant for songwriting, composing songs that helped him in social

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<sup>6</sup> Standard biographies of Porter include McBrien's *Cole Porter: A Biography* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1998) and Schwartz' *Cole Porter: A Biography* (New York: Da Capo Press). The following biographical details are drawn from McBrien's book.

situations and allowed him to express himself while making friends. Having a strong academic record and a familial history of intellectualism, Porter became valedictorian of Worcester Academy in his graduating class and would go on to study at Yale, where he would major in English and minor in music, while also studying French.

This background of culture and academia would influence the way he conducted himself, how he composed, and how he presented his queerness in his work. He wrote a significant number of songs during his time at Yale, including his most well-known, “Bingo Eli Yale”, which continues to be one of the most-acclaimed Yale fight songs to this day.<sup>7</sup>

Porter’s dedication to his school would provide an interesting canvas for him to work through his queer desires. This is seen clearly in his other Yale songs, such as “A Football King”. The song, written in the summer of 1912, was originally intended for the Delta Kappa Epsilon initiation play *The Pot of Gold*. Though it didn’t end up being used in the show, it serves as a document of Porter’s increasingly self-aware attraction to a specific kind of man.

In a beefcake fashion comparable to the work of Tom of Finland, Porter waxes about the beauty of masculine, muscle-oriented football-playing men:

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<sup>7</sup> Kimball and Porter, *The Complete Lyrics of Cole Porter* (Da Capo, 1992), 5.

*Now I'm in an awful condition  
Filled with a vaulting ambition  
While I rave on deliriously  
Please don't take me too seriously  
I merely want to say,  
I'd like to shine in a physical way<sup>8</sup>*

Through the first verse he is able to acknowledge that he shouldn't be taken too seriously (detaching himself from accountability for what he is writing) while simultaneously praising someone who “[*shines*] in a physical way”, a notion that can be contextually assumed to be a machismo, masculine physique that would allow the women in the audience to hear the lyric in a heterosexual context.

Because empathizing with women was (and still is) a common manner in which gay men were able to express their queer sentiments from a distance, it makes sense that Porter used this as a vehicle to speak about his admiration for men (“*When wearing my Y to chapel./The girls would write for my autograph.*”). This would be addressed as well in other songs from this time period, such as “I Want to Be a Prom Girl”, which contains the lines:

*I want to learn to tango,  
Boston and two-step too.*

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<sup>8</sup> Kimball and Porter, *The Complete Lyrics of Cole Porter*, 5.

*Mother, if you can, introduce me to a man,  
For I want to be a Prom girl too.<sup>9</sup>*

By writing from different perspectives, Porter was able to speak autobiographically while retaining a distance from the feelings he was writing about. This was both similar to and different from Bruz Fletcher, whose output has a more direct, candid approach to speaking about his life. In the song “It’ (Peter Lillie Daisy)” Fletcher spoke directly and degradingly about the main character, referred to as “it” throughout the entire song.

This is achieved through the opening lines:

*Little Peter Lillie Daisy had the doctors in a whirl  
For physically it certainly could vex  
They simply could not tell if it were boy or girl  
For the minute they decide, it would quickly change its sex  
  
This unusual ability it plied with great agility  
In the space of just one second, it would switch  
And because it loved to do it and did when no one knew it  
They called it neither he nor she but much more simply, “which?”<sup>10</sup>*

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<sup>9</sup> Kimball and Porter, *The Complete Lyrics of Cole Porter*, 6.

<sup>10</sup> Lyrics transcribed by the author from the compilation album *Drunk With Love* (Saxony Records, 2010) by Bruz Fletcher, compiled by Tyler Alpern. The specific

The character of Peter Lillie Daisy floats between genders and faces familial abuse, both being dehumanized as an “it” and being kicked out of the house by their father. Though the problematic nature of the dehumanizing vocabulary is outdated with regards to our modern understanding of both intersex and transgender individuals, it is contextualized by the very likely notion that this is autobiographical and describes not only Fletcher’s upbringing but also his relationship to gender identity.

This makes sense when paired with his upbringing; Bruz Fletcher was born on March 12<sup>th</sup>, 1916, also in Indiana, but raised in an incredibly dysfunctional family.<sup>11</sup> Though he grew up surrounded by wealth like Cole Porter, Fletcher’s family was plagued with tragedy. He ran away from home when he was 8 years old and attempted suicide, a narrative that bears a striking similarity to the character of Peter Lillie Daisy. During adolescence his mother and grandmother committed a double suicide by means of poison while his sister was committed to an asylum, later dying of meningitis at the age of 24, and his father lost his fortune, spending the rest of his life as an elevator operator. In any life these events would be traumatic and have longstanding effects, but in the context of Fletcher’s queer identity and childhood abuse, this has an extra poignancy which makes the

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song can be found at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CYOcLRkYchs> and the entire album at <https://www.amazon.com/Drunk-Love-Bruz-Fletcher/dp/B00B2TVV38>.

<sup>11</sup> Alpern’s book *Bruz Fletcher: Camped, Tramped & a Riotous Vamp* (Self-published, 2010) is an extensive look into Fletcher’s life.

aggressiveness of the aforementioned song all the more significant. It is also interesting for modern listeners to note the role of gender in the song, which emphasizes dismantling the gender binary in favor of more fluid gender identity. Though there were period understandings of sexuality being fluid and not binary (the Kinsey scale<sup>12</sup> and Cole Porter's reference to it in "Too Darn Hot"<sup>13</sup>), with few exceptions, non-binary gender identities were still mostly outside of Western mainstream society.<sup>14</sup>

Though this could be paired with discussing sexuality as something tied to gender (cisgender<sup>15</sup> gay men traditionally using female perspectives to justify their attraction to men), the sincerity with which Fletcher both wrote and performed<sup>16</sup> about gender projects a different impression. It appears instead that Fletcher came from the opposite perspective, using his sexuality as a foil to speak about not only his attraction to men but also about his gender identity, struggling in-between before settling on not being a man or woman. Provided that the narrative of Peter

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<sup>12</sup> First referenced by Alfred Kinsey in his *Sexual Behavior In The Human Male* (W. B. Saunders, 1948) Table 147, 651, the Kinsey Scale is a scale representing sexuality with intervals from 0 to 6. 0 is pure heterosexual, 6 is pure homosexual, and everybody in-between isn't closely aligned with either binary.

<sup>13</sup> "According to the Kinsey Report, ev'ry average man you know/Much prefers his lovey-dovey to court/When the temperature is low" (Kimball and Porter, *The Complete Lyrics of Cole Porter*, 277).

<sup>14</sup> More about the history of non-binary identities can be found in April Scarlette Callis' *Bisexual, pansexual, queer: Non-binary identities and the Sexual Borderlands*. (Sexualities, 2014), 17 (1-2): 63-80.

<sup>15</sup> Coined by German sexologist Volkmar Sigusch in "The Neosexual Revolution" ((Archives of Sexual Behavior, 1998), 27 (4): 331-359) to mean somebody comfortable with their assigned gender identity upon birth, a contrast to transgender.

<sup>16</sup> Heard on the aforementioned compilation album *Drunk With Love* (Saxony Records, 2010).

Lillie Daisy is verifiably autobiographical, this context makes sense and is also common among many other Pansy Craze artists such as the aforementioned Ma Rainey.<sup>17</sup>

Fletcher's upbringing would go on to influence his songwriting, helping to develop the direct, autobiographical style that would enable him to occupy the world between camp and real life effortlessly and with confidence. His songs are often characterized by a cutting, gripping style with which he wrote about topics such as familial abuse, drug addiction, and queer lust in an incredibly candid manner.

In his song "My Doctor", Fletcher describes a lust he had for a doctor he was a patient of:

*Once upon his table never yet has one been able*

*to say "no" to any treatment he'll suggest.*

*His smile is so contagious and his fee is so outrageous*

*that the size of it assures you of the best.*

*He'll stick you with a needle, just like that oh, very quick;*

*which the weakly call the very neatest trick.*

*The size of his prescription quite belies human description*

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<sup>17</sup> From her song "Prove It on Me Blues" (1928): *"I went out last night with a crowd of my friends,/It must've been women, 'cause I don't like no men."*

*He's just as well for well as well for sick*

*My doctor, his understanding really is huge-  
tree-mendous.*

*My doctor, he keeps his nurse as merely a stooge.*

*His work is more first than last rate.*

*The ladies take it at a fast rate;  
and every man would like to cast  
ass-pursions on  
my doctor.*

From this lyric, one can clearly see just how different his songwriting method was from Cole Porter's. In places where Porter might change perspectives or offer metaphor as a means of distancing himself, Fletcher is direct and confident. By titling the song "My Doctor", he does not leave anything to the imagination—this is a song published and performed under his name speaking about homosexual lust. By painting the picture of a doctor as an incredibly handsome man, Fletcher is able to use double-entendre effortlessly, making the size of the doctor's fee and his work sound like descriptions of a penis ("*his fee is so outrageous/the size of it...*" and "*His work is more first than last rate/the ladies take it at a fast rate;*", respectively).

He also hints at the community he was performing within, having the song end with other men also wanting to be seen by this doctor for presumably queer

reasons. He hides this through cleverness, riding the line between sincerity and comedy to entertain people who are both queer and people who are unfamiliar with the terminology. He also litters the text with self-deprecation (adding to both the comedic and sincere aspects of the song) with the line “He’s just as well for well as well for sick”, hinting at the stereotype that queer people are mentally ill.

This approach to songwriting is similar to Porter’s in the sense that it often operates on cleverness and multi-purpose songs that can present queerness differently depending on the situation and audience. However, Porter’s songs are not as directly autobiographical as Fletcher’s, and Porter never assumed a remotely public identity of being queer in the same way that Fletcher did.

Instead, Porter was able to hide his identity within songs on a deeper level than is typically seen in a Bruz Fletcher song. This may have also been because of his socioeconomic status; though Fletcher was comfortable working in underground music venues and queer communities, Porter was very much a public outlier amongst his peers and had more at stake to lose if he were to be outed over his work. Thankfully, his academic, English-major background helped him navigate this seamlessly, including lines that were both poetic, clever, and queer without having to sacrifice any artistic integrity.

In his song “A Picture of Me Without You” (from his show *Jubilee* (1935)) Porter hides one of his most well-known cleverly queer lines: “*Picture Central Park*

*without a sailor...*". Being hidden within one of his list songs (songs in which he listed pop culture references one after another, typically as a means of comparing one character's love for another) allows this line to go unnoticed as just another witty pop culture reference that Porter is able to utilize at the drop of a hat. However, this wittiness is underestimated for many: how many people would recognize that Central Park was and is an iconic cruising spot (read: casual sex) for queer people, and historically sailors are associated with queer stereotypes? Certainly the queer people in the audience would understand, but everybody else would probably not bat an eyelash.

These types of parallels and nuances are what distinguishes Porter's work from Fletcher's; where Fletcher might have described a more illicit encounter in a laughing manner for comedic effect, Porter used sincerity in many cases to hide his queerness, a characteristic that can be described as "hiding in plain sight".<sup>18</sup>

This ability to be cleverly queer was not pioneered by Cole Porter, though. In fact, it was thriving at the same time across the Atlantic through the songs of Noël Coward, another queer songwriter who was able to disguise his queerness in clever metaphors and socioeconomic status. Similar to the aforementioned songs Porter

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<sup>18</sup> My thanks to William Marvin for suggesting this phrase.

wrote while at Yale, Coward's "Mad About the Boy" uses perspective to distance himself from what are clearly autobiographical feelings.<sup>19</sup>

The song was originally intended for the 1932 revue *Words and Music* and takes on the perspective of women idolizing a performer outside of a cinema:

*Although I'm quite aware  
That here and there  
Are traces of the cad about the boy  
Lord knows I'm not a fool-girl  
I really shouldn't care  
Lord knows I'm not a school-girl  
In the flurry of her first affair<sup>20</sup>*

What operates similarly to Porter's "I Want to Be a Prom Girl" when interpreted from the perspective of a woman, the homosexual undertone of the same passage becomes quickly apparent in an alternate version that Coward had penned for a man to sing in a version that was never performed:

*My doctor can't advise me  
He'd help me if he could*

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<sup>19</sup> All finished versions of Noël Coward lyrics are taken from Barry Day's *The Complete Lyrics of Noël Coward* (Overlook Press, 1998), with biographic material from Sheridan Morley's *Noël Coward—Life & times* (Haus Publishing, 2005).

<sup>20</sup> Day, Barry, and Coward, *Noël Coward: the Complete Lyrics*, 129.

*Three times he's tried to psychoanalyze me*

*But it's just no good.*

*People I employ*

*Have the impertinence*

*To call me Myrna Loy*

*I rise above it*

*Frankly love it*

*'Cos I'm absolutely*

*MAD ABOUT THE BOY!*<sup>21</sup>

In this version of the lyric, Coward not only sets up the stage for Cole Porter's pop culture-centric use of references (Myrna Loy was a popular woman actor and the Doctor line refers to queer psychoanalysis and perhaps electroshock therapy, so presumably the character is being ridiculed for their sexuality being perceived as feminine) but also his ability to shift between different characters and perspectives while still writing autobiographically. This tactic allowed them both to operate smoothly within whichever musical or societal scene they occupied at any given moment.

As Cole Porter's life would continue, parts of his persona would catch up with him both in his personal and musical lives. He was married to the socialite Linda Lee Thomas for most of his adult life, having met in 1918 and married in 1919.<sup>22</sup> They would go on to have no children except for a miscarriage; though they remained

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<sup>21</sup> Day, Barry, and Coward, *The Noël Coward Reader*, 170.

<sup>22</sup> McBrien, *Cole Porter: A Biography*, 70.

married, it is documented that Thomas carried disdain for Porter's homosexuality, something that undoubtedly caused friction in their lives, as Porter was well-known for being promiscuous and loose with his escapades. Though the meaning of the title song from his show *Anything Goes* (1934) is disputed and fictionalized (in the 2004 film *De-Lovely* it is presented as a rebellion against his wife's judgement of his homosexuality), it is clear that the song in general is written in opposition of a society that is too traditional. Throughout the song he mentions various pop culture references to show how society has changed and how it will continue changing, a parallel that contextually can be assumed to in some way refer to early 20<sup>th</sup>-century queer-phobic stigma, possibly best seen in the lyric "*When ev'ry night the set that's smart is in-/truding in nudist parties in studios/Anything goes!*".<sup>2324</sup>

While he continued to write songs that were primarily societal critiques, it took a horse-riding accident in 1937 where Porter's legs were crushed to change the way he lived his life and wrote his music. Having been rendered (by his horse rolling over him) disabled with chronic pain for what would be the rest of his life, his songs changed in tone, becoming more grounded in cynicism and realism. Though he still maintained the light-hearted aspect that allowed him to have his songs on Broadway, later shows like *Kiss Me, Kate* (1948) and *Can-Can* (1953) displayed a side of Porter's songwriting in which he spoke directly about specific issues in a way more akin to the Bruz Fletcher's candidness.

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<sup>23</sup> Kimball and Porter, *The Complete Lyrics of Cole Porter*, 121.

<sup>24</sup> James Hepokoski's essay "From 'Young Bears' to 'Three-Letter Words'" from *A Cole Porter Companion* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press) provides further insight into how double entendre plays a role in this song.

The song “Live and Let Live” from the latter show presents another societal commentary similar to “Anything Goes”. By comparing tastes and pop culture references to each other, Porter is able to hint at broader concepts, specifically with lines that hint at not only sexuality but gender identity as well.

The last refrain summarizes this attitude best:

*Talk and let talk, quip and let quip*

*Dress and let dress, strip and let strip*

*Live and let live, and remember this line*

*Your business is your business*

*And my business is mine<sup>25</sup>*

In simply a few lines Porter is able to not only address that his personal life should not be the business of others, but also addresses three aspects that people might take problem with regarding queerness: preaching (whether religious or otherwise), arguing (with political perspectives) and clothing (both which clothes one chooses to wear and how they choose to take them off, a metaphor that can allude to either rejecting a prescribed gender identity or an expression of sexuality).

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<sup>25</sup> Kimball and Porter, *The Complete Lyrics of Cole Porter*, 301.

Porter's social status was intertwined with the economic wealth that he maintained throughout his life and undoubtedly allowed him to muse about the troubles of marriage, homosexuality, and his luxurious lifestyle through the traditionally bourgeois career of musical theater. As a contrast, Bruz Fletcher and his family didn't sustain their wealth for long, something queer historian Tyler Alpern describes as "[going] from riches to rags."<sup>26</sup> Later in Fletcher's life he had a devoted audience and is typically associated with L.A.'s Club Bali, where he had a successful 5 year run as a house performer. Unlike Porter's secretive lifestyle hidden behind his marriage, Fletcher took his candidness into his personal life as well. In the late stages of his life he maintained a relationship with an artist named Casey Roberts, with whom he lived openly for many years.<sup>27</sup>

Because of the queer culture during the Pansy Craze being underground, queer performers and composers were typically impoverished and as a result were exposed to more disadvantaged and crime-ridden lifestyles. In Fletcher's song "She's My Most Intimate Friend" he reflects on this, speaking about a (possibly fictionalized) friend of his who has trouble with both a heroin addiction and a murder conviction:

*Of course, I knew it was true, she's my most intimate friend.*

*And, after all, I did try to defend her.*

*I said she was drunk when she shot him.*

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<sup>26</sup> Alpern, *Bruz Fletcher: Remembering a Gay Voice*.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

*Why she'd be drinking like crazy for days?*

*She was blind, it's miraculous that she got him.*

*...*

*And dope.*

*Lord, she has stuck herself with that needle*

*So many holes front and back,*

*if she had any inner radiance*

*she'd be a living tower of jewels.*

*It's a shame for the tourists*

*that her soul is so black.*

*I like her and you can't get me to say one bad thing about her.*

Regardless of whether or not the character in the song is fictionalized or not, it shows Fletcher's candidness and how that reflects his audience. If lines about opioids and murder that aren't necessarily judgemental are not only played off as funny, but also relatable and not coloring a person's judgement or personality, it says a good deal about what the audience listened for, connected with, and could tolerate. While Cole Porter spoke about cocaine usage (in "I Get a Kick Out of You" from *Anything Goes*), that was from a time when the hard drug was somewhat societally accepted and not as conjoined with the criminal aspect or the sincerity with which he sang.

This association of queer fugitives is not something unique to Bruz Fletcher's body of work. Another performer from the time, Rae Bourbon, was known as a rambunctious personality who spent the latter part of their life on the run only to receive a murder conviction down the line and die while serving their sentence. They would go by many pseudonyms and interchangeable she/him pronouns throughout their life but would mainly stay under Rae (or Ray) Bourbon, being an influential performer in San Francisco during the Pansy Craze and performing in the show *Boys Will Be Girls*.<sup>28</sup>

They would also go on to publish albums under the self-run label UTC ("Under the Counter") which would typically include a mixture of spoken word and musical numbers. The song "Peter Pan" from his album *It's Me Again...You're Stepping on My Eyelashes!* exhibits a mixture of the trends observed in Fletcher's and Porter's music, utilizing perspective to speak openly about queerness:

*Now I'd be the last in the world t've panned Peter*

*But I've always had a weakness for Peter Pan*

*I guess it's that sisterly kind of feeling*

*for the boy who would never grow up to be a man*

*Many actresses have tried to play him*

*but history will only remember three*

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<sup>28</sup> Riddle, *Don't Call Me Madam – the Life and Work of Rae Bourbon* (2005)

*And when they write about the ones who did portray him  
It'll be Maude Adams, Mary Martin, and me!<sup>29</sup>*

This lyric brings up another aspect of queerness within the Pansy Craze—though not as rooted in disrupting the gender binary as Bruz Fletcher (someone who might have identified as non-binary given the vocabulary), Rae Bourbon spoke a great deal about their gender identity, showing that the way one presents the gender they identify as is more complicated than not, a topic that was visible but not discussed with proper nuance in queer culture at the time.

It should be noted that openly queer performers weren't the only people who made up the queer culture during the Pansy Craze. Mainstream culture also affected this, with many artists recording what queer historian and musicologist JD Doyle refers to as “cross-vocals”, “songs intended to be sung by a woman but instead sung by a man, keeping the pronouns intact”.<sup>30</sup> A famous example of this is Bing Crosby's recording of “Ain't No Sweet Man Worth the Salt of My Tears”—this was not a consciously queer thing and was instead the result of publishers keeping tight restrictions on the rights to certain songs, not allowing artists to change any words. Though it was not a direct aspect of queer culture during the Pansy Craze, it presents an interesting contrast to somebody like Bruz Fletcher, who had trouble navigating his life in mainstream society due to his candidness. Unfortunately the

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<sup>29</sup> Lyrics transcribed from the Rae Bourbon album *It's Me Again - You're Stepping on My Eyelashes!* The full song and album can be found at <http://archive.org/details/RaeBourbon-YoureSteppingOnMyEyelashes> .

<sup>30</sup> Doyle, “Queer Music History 101: The Script” (2010)

intolerance of mainstream society would eventually catch up with the Pansy Craze (Prohibition ending in 1933 marked the end of the era), and subsequently Fletcher, who wasn't able to find work and committed suicide at the age of 34 on February 8<sup>th</sup>, 1941.<sup>31</sup>

As for Porter, his wife Linda passed away from emphysema in 1954 and he followed 10 years later due to kidney failure.<sup>32</sup> His influence on American music is undeniable—Porter is frequently included in lists of the most influential American musicians and songwriters both of all-time and of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. He not only brought a brand of intellectualism to the mainstream musical that was unparalleled at the time, but also went on to influence contemporary songwriters and his shows still benefit from revival after revival in today's musical theater culture.

Bruce Fletcher wasn't as fortunate with his long-lasting influence; his song "Drunk With Love" would go on to become a staple in queer bars after Frances Faye began performing it as a standard, but that was the extent of how much his work traveled after he passed. In the past decade this has changed, though, as his work has re-surfaced both through the documentation of Tyler Alpern but also JD Doyle's "Queer Music Heritage" website and radio show.

Admittedly, his influence is also present in my own endeavors and I currently run a record label named Drunk With Love Records and our compilation *Now Secret*

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<sup>31</sup> Alpern, *Bruce Fletcher: Remembering a Gay Voice*.

<sup>32</sup> Schwartz, *Cole Porter: A Biography*, 269.

*is Told: Songs of Bruz Fletcher*<sup>33</sup> features our artists (all in their early 20s) covering songs of his with the proceeds being donated to charity.

The influence of Cole Porter on my personal endeavors is indisputable, given his stark presence in musical theater and how that has directly affected my songwriting. However, Fletcher's candidness and his embrace of melodrama proved to be something I could relate to directly, and to have the only recordings of his work (sans Faye's aforementioned rendition of "Drunk With Love") be performed by himself touched me in an unprecedented way and inspired me with confidence to embrace honesty as a musical tool as much as a personal one.

Fletcher's lust for life is most clear in his song "Spring in Manhattan", a timeless melody that showed his inherent determination break through despite the misfortune he frequently wrote about:

*Summer, winter, fall*

*I adore them all,*

*but in April or in May*

*a day is born*

*that makes me say...*

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<sup>33</sup> The compilation *Now Secret is Told: Songs of Bruz Fletcher* (Drunk With Love Records, 2017) can be found here: <https://drunkwithlove.bandcamp.com/album/now-secret-is-told-songs-of-bruz-fletcher>

*I wanna sing because it's spring in Manhattan  
I'm so glad to be alive  
There's a little tree just across the street from me  
I wanna shout, the leaves are out  
and soon a bluebird will arrive*

*The winter's gone, the spring is on in Manhattan  
High above my head the sky is blue  
There's sunshine in the air  
Throw away your coat and care  
It's spring, Manhattan sings for you<sup>34</sup>*

As a result of the determination of both Bruz Fletcher and Cole Porter, it is possible to use their music as a gateway into a complex but rich underground queer culture that occurred alongside Prohibition, manifesting in the Pansy Craze. Though it was short-lived, this movement presented a distinct queer culture that was not common in the USA at the time and laid a significant foundation for the tension and solidarity that would later contribute to the Stonewall riots of 1969. However, due to the socioeconomic statuses of many songwriters during this period, it is clear that more than just subject content affected the music written, whether it be due to representation, presentation, or ability to write about certain subject topics. This is

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<sup>34</sup> Lyrics transcribed from the compilation album *Drunk With Love* by Bruz Fletcher, compiled by Tyler Alpern. The specific song can be found at [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=N1vhEEgP\\_eE](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=N1vhEEgP_eE) and the entire album at <https://www.amazon.com/Drunk-Love-Bruz-Fletcher/dp/B00B2TVV38>.

why it is important to acknowledge, dissect, and understand how the socioeconomic positions of queer songwriters in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century directly affected how their work was created and received, so we can learn how the LGBTQ culture of today developed and how it can move forward.

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