



## Camp Records

by Claude J. Summers

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In the early 1960s, the Camp Record label issued two long-playing albums and ten 45-rpm records of gay parody songs. Although the music is without much artistic merit, the records, whose story has been told by Houston-based radio producer and activist JD Doyle on his Queer Musical Heritage website, are significant for what they reveal about pre-Stonewall gay culture.

Little is known about the label itself or the musicians it recorded. Its address was P.O. Box 3213, Hollywood, California, and it credited all selections to "Different Music Co., Hollywood."

The singers and musicians performing on the label were either uncredited or given obvious pseudonyms such as "Byrd E. Bath" and "B. Bubba." The author of the notes on the back of the album "Mad About the Boy" apologizes for not being able to give credit to the arranger and the many talented artists involved in the production, but adds, tantalizingly, that those "with a discerning ear" may "recognize the stylings of some very fine and well known personalities."

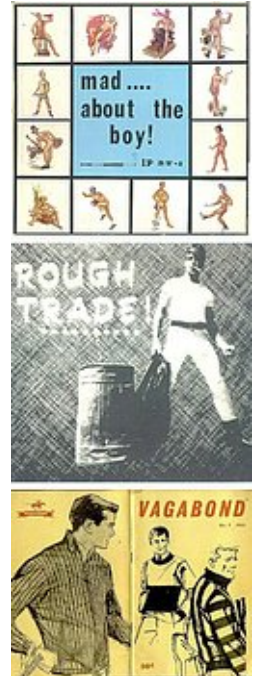
One advertisement for Camp Records has been discovered: a two-page ad for the 45 records and a half-page ad for the albums appeared in 1965 in a gay catalog published under the name *Vagabond*.

*Vagabond*, published in Minneapolis, featured items of interest to gay men, including books--ranging from serious literature and psychological case-histories to pulp potboilers and soft-core pornography--nudist magazines and films, comic greeting cards, and novelty items. In targeting gay men as consumers, *Vagabond* was in the vanguard of the era's change in attitude that would lead to a mass movement for homosexual rights.

One of the albums and all of the 45 records are original parodies that make fun of gay life at the time. The producer(s) may have been attempting to appeal to heterosexuals for whom homosexuality and homosexuals would be sources of humor, as well as to gay men who were able to find humor in their sometimes tragic plight. References are rife to "rough trade" and toy boys, nelly queens and leathermen.

As Stephen M. H. Braitman has observed, "In the 1950s and early 1960s, the idea of gay (or queer or fag, in its contemporary nomenclature) was considered funny. Just like fart records, gay records allowed unacceptable behavior to surface in the mainstream--but only as a joke."

While the exaggerated effeminacy and other negative stereotypes that characterize the representation of gay men on these records may seem offensive today, it is important to realize that camp humor helped a persecuted minority cope with oppression and stigma. Moreover, many of the stereotypes would have offered a basis for identification to many listeners and would have contributed to a growing sense of



**Top:** The cover of Camp Records' album "Mad About the Boy."

**Center:** The cover of Camp Records' 45-rpm "Rough Trade."

**Above:** The cover of *Vagabond*, a catalog that catered to gay men in the 1960s.

All images courtesy [queermusicheritage.us](http://queermusicheritage.us).

community in the early 1960s.

The album "Mad About the Boy" consists of well-known Broadway and cabaret songs that were originally sung by women. This album becomes campy simply by keeping the pronouns intact, as men sing of their love for other men. More than a little disingenuously, the liner notes state, "The primary reason for doing this album was to prove that good songs could and should be sung by everyone. Gender should not be the determining factor as to who should sing what."

As Doyle points out, an amusing characteristic of the records is their label numbers. "Almost all of them are tongue-in-cheek gay references, if the letters and numbers are read individually. For example, ICUR1-2 becomes "I see you are one, too." This kind of in-group humor not only appeals to shared though restricted knowledge, but it also builds a sense of participation in a particular community.

Camp Records apparently recognized in gay men a market hungry for validation and recognition, featuring songs that record a wide range of gay male experience and (in the case of "Mad About the Boy") songs that could easily be adapted to gay male experience.

Camp Records should probably be seen as an offshoot of the "adult" or "party" records that were distributed sub rosa from the very beginning of the recording industry. Legendary drag performer Ray Bourbon, for example, issued risqué records in the early 1930s. In the 1940s and 1950s, he released a series of albums on the UTC (for Under the Counter) label, which were sold by mail order and at Bourbon's appearances.

What distinguishes Camp Records from the "party" records is that its releases, while parodic and often featuring double entendres, are not particularly off-color. But both the "party" records and Camp Records faced similar difficulties of distribution and marketing in a society where censorship was enforced by guardians of morality and postal inspectors.

After all, until 1958, when the United States Supreme Court issued a ruling in favor of *ONE Magazine* in the most significant legal victory of the American homophile movement, the very discussion of homosexuality could be banned from the mails on the grounds of obscenity.

Hence, Camp Records needs to be seen both in the specific context of censorship and in the larger context of the pervasive assumption that homosexuality is ipso facto obscene.

In the early 1960s, the legal underpinnings of censorship were under massive attack and--with the advent of the (heterosexual) sexual revolution--would soon collapse almost entirely.

But the notion that homosexuality was "unspeakable," at least in polite society and public discourse, was still largely in place though it was beginning to come under siege. Only when that notion was confronted directly could a gay liberation movement emerge.

Camp Records needs to be seen as challenging the "unspeakableness" of homosexuality. It is also significant for reflecting the sense of community that was emerging among homosexuals in the late 1950s and early 1960s and that would ultimately make the gay liberation movement possible.

Further information about Camp Records may be found on JD Doyle's excellent Queer Musical Heritage website, which not only reproduces images of the albums and records and the issue of *Vagabond* in which the label advertised, but also presents downloadable mp3 files of the songs.

## **Bibliography**

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### **About the Author**

**Claude J. Summers** is William E. Stirton Professor Emeritus in the Humanities and Professor Emeritus of English at the University of Michigan-Dearborn. He has published widely on seventeenth- and twentieth-century English literature, including book-length studies of E. M. Forster and Christopher Isherwood, as well as *Gay Fictions: Wilde to Stonewall* and *Homosexuality in Renaissance and Enlightenment England: Literary Representations in Historical Context*. He is General Editor of [www.glbtc.com](http://www.glbtc.com). In 2008, he received a Monette-Horwitz Trust Award for his efforts in combatting homophobia.