



## Divas

by Patricia Juliana Smith

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The term *diva* was originally an Italian word meaning, quite simply, goddess. Within the culture of Italian opera, the word came to signify a type of mortal female divinity: a soprano (or, in some cases, a mezzo-soprano or contralto) with tremendous musical virtuosity and a flair for the grandiose, a singer who deeply touched her audience's emotions with her performance and thus derived an often fanatic and obsessive admiration from her devotees.

In the twentieth century, particularly in the United States, the concept of the diva has expanded to include popular singers--for example, Judy Garland (1922-1969), Billie Holliday (1915-1959), or Dusty Springfield (1939-1999)--whose emotive qualities and, in many cases, personal sufferings made them objects of admiration and identification for their fans.

More recently, the title of *diva* has become rather less meaningful, as it seems now to be bestowed on any female singer who displays extreme emotions or a bad attitude, as evinced by the various *VH-1 Divas Live* television concerts.

Still, regardless of how the title is deployed, the diva has traditionally played a significant role in both gay and lesbian culture as an object of cult worship with whom those who suffer the heartaches of forbidden love and ostracism from an unaccepting society find solace and identification. In this sense, the diva is, for her queer following, a mortal divinity.

### Opera Divas

If opera has long maintained a certain queer appeal, it may well reside in the fact that opera has always provided a space in which, through performance, the boundaries of sex, gender, and sexuality are often blurred.

The castrati--that is, castrated male singers who flourished in the eighteenth century and had cult followings to rival those of female divas--played heroic male roles and also female roles in places where women were banned from the stage.

In their wake, female mezzo-sopranos and contraltos assumed the male leads that were once the sole possession of the castrati and, subsequently, performed male romantic roles in many nineteenth- and early twentieth-century operas. Thus, opera allowed a respectable venue for queer expression without naming it as such.

The cult of the diva, however, was not originally a solely gay or lesbian invention. By the nineteenth-century, numerous prima donnas had devoted followings similar to those now associated with movie stars



**Top:** Jenny Lind ca 1850.

**Center:** Mary Garden in 1898.

**Above:** Dolly Parton at the Grand Ole Opry in Nashville, Tennessee in 2005.

and rock stars. The image of the diva as flamboyant, extravagant, and temperamental--altogether larger-than-life in her demeanor--began to take hold, much as it had for the castrati.

Maria Malibran (1808-1836), her sister Pauline Viardot (1821-1910), Giulia Grisi (1811-1869), and--perhaps most notably--Jenny Lind (1820-1887) all evoked overwhelming emotions in fans of every sexual persuasion and background. This rather universal appeal, though, was probably the result of opera being, to a great extent, still a popular art form in the nineteenth-century.

As the twentieth-century dawned and other forms of entertainment became more accessible to mainstream audiences, the identification with and admiration of the diva became more clearly identified with gay and lesbian culture, and, indeed, many of the more prominent divas of the period were presumed to be lesbian or bisexual.

### **Lesbian Diva Worship**

Even before the advent of the Hollywood movie star, the operatic prima donna was often the idol of adoring female fans. In the early twentieth century, much of this homoerotic adulation, which Terry Castle calls "lesbian diva worship," was directed toward two figures in particular, the Swedish-born American soprano Olive Fremstad (1871-1951) and the Scottish soprano Mary Garden (1874-1967). Both were women of ambiguous sexuality who specialized in performing provocative, gender-bending roles.

Fremstad was best known for her Wagnerian heroines and seductresses (Brunnhilde, Kundry, Ortrud, Venus) as well as for playing the roles of Carmen, Tosca, and Salome. After her return to the United States in 1903, Fremstad quickly emerged as one of the biggest stars of the Metropolitan Opera, where, in 1907, she starred in the scandalous first Met production of Richard Strauss's *Salome*, an opera based on Oscar Wilde's decadent play.

Garden was noted for her forward performance style and was the foremost interpreter of many of the amoral female roles of *fin-de-siècle* French opera, including the leads in Gustave Charpentier's *Louise*, Claude Debussy's *Pelléas et Mélisande*, and Jules Massenet's *Manon*, *Thaïs*, *Sapho*, and *Cléopâtre*.

Garden was celebrated for her trouser roles (that is, male roles sung by a woman). In 1907, she made her American debut (upon which she was hailed as *Mary Garden, Superwoman*); from 1910 until her retirement in the 1930s, she was the leading soprano of the Chicago Opera.

Neither diva ever married, and, consequently, both were the focus of much speculative gossip--as well as several *romans à clef*--regarding their sexuality. Fremstad lived for a number of years with her secretary, Mary Watkins Cushing; their relationship is fictionalized--and pathologized--in Marcia Davenport's *Of Lena Geyer* (1936). A more heroic portrait of Fremstad can be found in *The Song of the Lark* (1915), written by that consummate lesbian opera fan, Willa Cather. Garden was rumored to have been a lesbian.

The biographical facts about either woman's sexuality remain speculative; what is significant, however, is the role these women played in reaching a vast female audience through their homoerotically-charged artistry.

Lesbian diva-worship has generally focused on certain singers who have specialized in heroic or gender-bending roles, generally mezzo-sopranos or, in some cases, dramatic sopranos. As such, more recent operatic divas who have had significant lesbian cult followings include such mezzo-sopranos as Brigitte Fassbaender (b. 1939) and Tatiana Troyanos (1938-1993) and dramatic soprano Jessye Norman (b. 1945).

### **Gay Male Diva Worship**

It is perhaps too broad a generalization to claim without reservation that while lesbian diva worship is

based on desire, gay male diva worship is based on identification. In queer culture, the lines between identification and desire are frequently blurred; critic Stacey DiErasmo, in discussing Dusty Springfield, has observed that the diva almost inevitably raises "that quintessentially queer question: do you want to be her or have her?"

Be that as it may, gay male diva worship, in contrast to the lesbian variety, has traditionally centered on more vulnerable figures, those who might well be described as "tragedy queens." A case in point is the continued gay male adulation paid to the memory of Maria Callas (1923-1977), known to her fans as *la Divina*.

Surely one of the most exciting singing actresses of the twentieth century, Callas specialized in playing the ill-fated and often emotionally fragile heroines of Italian opera who suffer and die for love. This tragic quality carried over into her turbulent personal life as well, in her well-publicized romantic involvements, her heartbreaks, and, ultimately, her loss of her vocal powers.

As Wayne Koestenbaum has explained, this devotion to Callas involves a highly complex system of psychic associations, arising from the conditions informing gay life, particularly social marginalization. Further, as Richard Dyer suggests, minoritized groups tend to exhibit a particularly intense need for cult icons with whom to identify as a response to and enactment of their exclusion from the mainstream.

Thus, as Callas was associated with presumably elitist high culture (and a controversial figure even within that rarified realm), devotion to her would mark her fans as different from the ordinary (that is, heterosexual) cultural consumer.

A more simple explanation, though, is that gay and lesbian audiences, given their all-too-frequent rejection by society, are drawn to divas because these extraordinary, often larger-than-life figures perform a cathartic function by embodying, whether in their performances or in their own lives, all the heartache, grief, humiliation, and suffering that almost inevitably play a large role in queer life.

### **Expansion of the Cult of the Diva**

Accordingly, the cult of the diva, particularly in post World War II culture, has expanded beyond the realm of opera into popular music as well. Holliday, Garland, and Springfield, for example, all evoked tremendous emotional responses through their performances, suffered publicly from overwhelming personal disaster and substance abuse, and died prematurely--and all had significant gay followings. Springfield, who was herself a lesbian, had a significant lesbian following as well.

As previously suggested, the title *diva* has lost much of its significance in recent years, thanks in great part to the mass media. Attitude or emotionality rather than virtuosity would seem to be the deciding criteria. Thus numerous young female pop singers appropriate the term for themselves. Indeed, it would seem that one need not even be female or, for that matter, a singer in order to call oneself a diva.

This is not to say that there are no longer divas deserving that distinction. A short list of grand divas among contemporary opera singers would surely include Renée Fleming, Deborah Voight, Lorraine Hunt Lieberson, Kathleen Battle, Susan Graham, and Jane Eaglen. And there are great living pop divas as well, including Barbra Streissand, Dolly Parton, Bette Midler, Cher, Celine Dion, and Madonna, many of whom have considerable queer followings. For as long as we remain an excluded group, we will need the diva, the cathartic figure who embodies and expresses our joys and sorrows.

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