



Faye, Frances (1912-1991)

by Tyler Alpern

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Frances Faye performing on the Mike Walsh television show in Sydney Australia in 1978. Image is a film still from a youtube.com video available here.

In a long career that spanned much of the twentieth century, openly bisexual entertainer Frances Faye recorded more than a dozen albums for major record companies, including Verve, Capitol, Bethlehem, and Imperial. She was a gravel-voiced vocalist and pianist whose style and sound evolved over the years to include jazz, pop, Latin, and rock influences; but her unique sense of rhythm and timing remained a strong constant.

In addition to her recording career, Faye was a bright star on New York's 52nd Street during its heyday in the 1930s and 1940s and a fixture in major nightclubs around the world for 45 years. Her on-stage persona was as much a comedienne as it was a musician.

Faye earned a reputation in the press as a social revolutionary because she did not shy away from warmly including references to homosexuals (or "gay kids") in her act and for being publicly known as bisexual at a time when few other performers dared to do the same. "Frances Faye, gay, gay, is there another way?" she would burst out singing in every show.

Faye was born in Brooklyn on November 4, 1912, "a Scorpio and Reform Jew . . . Jewess," as she would proudly tell her audiences. Onstage, she referred to astrology as often as she did to her Jewish heritage.

Faye left school at the age of 15 after suddenly finding herself in show business. At the last minute she was asked to fill in for an ailing piano player. She did so well that an agent offered her an astounding \$120 a week salary.

By the mid-1930s Faye was a fixture in 52nd Street jazz clubs, and that is when stardom came. The plump young woman was nicknamed "Zazz Zu Zazz" after her trademark scat phrase, and gained notoriety for her enthusiastic piano banging and her screaming vocals.

During the late 1930s and the 1940s, the entertainer toured constantly, lost weight, decreased the volume of her singing and playing, but grew more risqué in her onstage banter. She appeared on Broadway, filmed musical shorts, wrote the hit Andrews Sisters song "Well, All Right," and had two brief marriages.

Faye's first album was issued in 1946 and included the daring song "Drunk with Love," which had previously been recorded for a small under-the-counter "party" label by gay performer Bruz Fletcher, who committed suicide at age 35 in 1941 after police crackdowns on "pansy" performers and gay clubs made it virtually impossible for him to find work. The cover became one of Faye's signature songs and it functioned as a kind of code for her own sexual orientation. Faye's rendition of "Drunk with Love" was especially popular in lesbian bars in the 1950s, as Marijane Meaker attests in her memoir *Highsmith: A Romance of the 1950's* (2003).

The 1950s were the period of greatest artistic achievement and productivity for Faye. For most of the decade she sported a parakeet-style crewcut that still has shock value. Her first audience after the severe

haircut greeted her in stunned silence, prompting the quick-witted, matronly Faye to joke, "When you're pretty, it doesn't matter how you wear your hair." That line would become one of her signature statements.

Faye's masculine appearance in dress and coiffure was so different from the norm and ideal of the day that most articles and reviews mentioned it before her music. Her first two record companies did not feature her photograph on her album covers, but instead opted for cartoons and caricatures.

An increasingly raspy but lively Faye recorded for four different record companies in the 1950s. By the middle of the decade, her unconventional live act had become known for its outrageousness. Songs, hairstyles, and musicians would change, but Faye had found the successful sound, style, and format of jazz comedy, self-deprecating humor, fresh banter, and saucy *double-entendre* that would be her gold mine. She had sold-out performances on the Hollywood Strip and played the major venues in Las Vegas and Miami, earning about \$4,000 a week.

At a time when such topics were taboo, Faye parodied her bisexuality onstage. Occasionally, she chose to use same-sex pronouns in her love songs.

In the late 1950s Faye met a glamorous 22-year-old, Teri Shepherd, who became her lifelong companion and manager. In Shepherd's recollection, "Fran was one big girl, and I was the husband Once Fran's conservative mother exclaimed, 'Teri is the best son-in-law I ever had.' Offstage Fran was out there and didn't care what people thought. But backstage, I often overheard people saying the most hateful things out of Fran's earshot; especially from straight men."

Shepherd thought Faye was at her best performing live, so she organized the recording of the *Caught in the Act* album in 1958. It became Faye's biggest-selling record. That electric album was amazing in Eisenhower-era America for its frank embrace of gay people. Faye can be heard joking that she refused to sing "Way Down Yonder in New Orleans" because the "gay kids" do not like the lyric "...with those beautiful queens." Her comic song "Frances and Her Friends" boldly glorified same-sex coupling. She wove Teri Shepherd's name into the lyrics of classic songs, and as she always did onstage, Faye musically proclaimed, "Frances Faye, gay, gay, is there another way?"

At a time when there were no sympathetic gay characters in film or television, or any publicly out performers at her level of mainstream success, Faye was quite literally a pioneer.

Suddenly in 1958, disaster struck. While booked at the Las Vegas's Hotel Riviera and playing to capacity crowds, Faye tripped on a bathroom carpet and shattered her hip. For eight years she was in terrible pain and often could not walk. Despite the accident, she still worked hard when she could. She toured and made great albums for Verve in 1961 and 1962. Her energetic nightclub appearances earned her the finest reviews of her career.

Faye was especially well received in Australia, where she made ten tours. In 1962, at Chequers, Sydney's top nightclub, Faye's unconventional act dazzled the young Peter Allen. The seasoned entertainer became a mentor to Allen and taught him about comic timing, how to structure an act, and relate to an audience, lessons that he would use his entire career. In addition, she introduced him to black music and helped him develop his stage persona.

Faye was also influential on the young Bette Midler. In the early 1970s funnyman Bruce Vilanch brought the emerging singer to see and learn from Faye's act, which attracted an increasingly large gay following.

In October 1975 Faye returned to New York City after a decade's absence. Her performances at the Spindletop Cabaret received glowing reviews, including one by jazz critic John S. Wilson of the *New York Times*. From the stage she flirted with female members of the audience, joked about marijuana, and comically outed the club's managers, columnist Rex Reed, singers Johnny Mathis and Peter Allen, and writer

Noël Coward.

In 1977 Faye had an extended engagement at Studio One in West Hollywood, a cabaret that catered to a large gay and lesbian audience. Part of that show was filmed and worked into a television movie about gay runaways, *Alexander: The Other Side of Dawn*.

Director Louis Malle and screenwriter Polly Platt attended the Studio One show and the next day cast Faye in the film *Pretty Baby* (1977), which starred Brooke Shields as a child prostitute. Faye's riveting performance as the madam of a brothel in New Orleans' Storyville district earned her renewed attention and a wider audience.

In 1978 Faye suffered a heart attack and required a pacemaker; but that fall she was back on tour. Despite her fragile health, she continued to present shows that were upbeat, energetic, and uninhibited. She performed until 1981, when she finally retired.

Faye died on November 8, 1991, after a series of strokes.

Although cabaret performance is an ephemeral art, Faye's memory has been kept alive, thanks to some high-profile fans. Drag performer Lypsinka (John Epperson), for example, included in his act a rendition of "Frances and Her Friends," the song Faye recorded about same-sex coupling. That same song was the inspiration for the tribute "Blues for Frances Faye" on singer Mark Murphy's album *Lucky To Be Me* (2002).

Photographer Bruce Weber's documentary film *Chop Suey Club* (2001) not only pays warm tribute to Faye and her influence on his early life, but also features an interview with Teri Shepherd about her life with Faye.

Peter Allen described Faye as "truly one of the free people of the world and the wildest woman I ever met," and added: "She was also the first person I ever met who didn't care what other people thought of her." Because Faye was unashamed of her sexuality and of her life, she was able to help pioneer an atmosphere of tolerance and acceptance by publicly embracing her gay and lesbian audience.

Some of Faye's albums, including *Caught in the Act*, have been re-released on compact disc.

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About the Author

Tyler Alpern is a painter. He teaches art at the University of Colorado at Boulder and other schools. Music and film studies are a consuming interest for him.