



Gately, Stephen (1976-2009)

by Linda Rapp

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Singer, songwriter, and actor Stephen Gately gained fame as one of the lead vocalists in the Irish pop group Boyzone. He came out publicly as a gay man in 1999 when the band was at the peak of their success.

The singer was born on Saint Patrick's Day, March 17, 1976, in Dublin. The second-youngest of five children, he grew up in what he described in a 2003 interview with Jane Ridley of *The Mirror* as "one of the toughest areas of the city."

The family scraped to get by. When his shoes had holes in them, Gately stuffed them with cardboard so that they could serve until there was money for a new pair.

Despite the difficult circumstances, Gately aspired to a career in music or theater. "I'd practice my autograph over and over on the back of schoolbooks," he told Ridley. "I remember one kid once laughed at me and I told him 'That'll be worth something one day.'"

To realize his dream, he took part in plays and musicals at school and also entered and won an all-Ireland disco-dancing championship when he was sixteen.

In 1993 Gately was among some four hundred young men who responded to a newspaper ad placed by entertainment manager Louis Walsh, who was seeking to form a boy band. Such ensembles, composed of four to six youngsters singing a cappella and presenting a charming and wholesome image, were enjoying great popularity at the time. Teen-aged girls were the most avid fans.

At seventeen, Gately was the youngest of the singers chosen to become Boyzone. The very day after assembling the group, Walsh got them an appearance on Irish television's *Late Late Show* where, having no repertoire yet, they did some improvised dancing to disco music.

After that rather strange introduction to the public, the group got down to the business of making music. Early on, there were a few changes in personnel, but the membership soon stabilized with Gately, Ronan Keating, Mikey Graham, Keith Duffy, and Shane Lynch as the boys of Boyzone.

The band soon began touring and gaining fans in Ireland. They signed a contract with Polydor Records in 1994, and the following year they released their first album, *Said and Done*, which went to the top of the charts in Ireland and the United Kingdom. Several of the songs on the album became Top Ten hits as singles.

Boyzone's success continued with their subsequent albums, *A Different Beat* (1996), *Where We Belong* (1998), and *By Request* (1999), a compilation of their greatest hits.

And many hits there were. Sales of Boyzone albums would eventually exceed fifteen million. Songs released



Top: Stephen Gately performing with Boyzone in 2009.

Above: Boyzone on stage.

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as singles did equally well: a long string of them earned Top Ten status during the heyday of the group.

Gately and Keating sang lead vocals on Boyzone's most successful single, "No Matter What" (1998). Written by Andrew Lloyd Webber for the score of the musical *Whistle Down the Wind*, the song was not intended as a gay anthem but can certainly be heard as one. Gately's knowing smile as he sings in the music video encourages the possibility of such an interpretation.

At the time that "No Matter What" was released, however, Gately remained closeted, fearful that revealing his homosexuality might be detrimental to the popularity of the group, particularly among the legions of teen-aged girls who constituted a large segment of the fan base.

In June 1999 Gately learned that a person from the band's road crew intended to out him to the British tabloid *The Sun*. He countered by giving the paper an interview himself in order to maintain some control of the situation.

By then Gately had already come out to his sister and his bandmates, all of whom were supportive. He worried, however, about springing the information on his mother immediately before it would be splashed across the front page of the tabloid press. Although Margaret Gately acknowledged that the timing and manner of the announcement made the experience stressful, she and the rest of the Gately family remained steadfast in their love for their son and brother.

Prior to the revelation in the *Sun*, wrote Andrew G. Marshall in the London *Guardian*, "[Gately's] sexuality [was] an open secret among show business journalists," but, he added, "the same reporters would link him to a list of beautiful women" including several other singers and a Miss Scotland, suggesting romantic attachments.

Gately was finally able to say openly that his love was another man, Eloy de Jong of the Dutch boy band Caught in the Act. The two had become acquainted when their respective groups crossed paths on European tours, and they began dating in November 1998.

The response to Gately's coming out was overwhelmingly positive. "Graham Norton sent a beautiful letter, [Sir] Elton [John] sent flowers, George Michael rang," he told Caroline Sullivan of the *Irish Times*.

He was especially touched by the strong support from the general public. "I couldn't believe the reaction," he stated. "I got millions of e-mails and letters from people in all walks of life—;young, old, gay, straight, some from gay people who hadn't come out and didn't know what to do."

Gately and de Jong soon moved in together. Gately dreamed hopefully of a future that might include adopting children.

Soon after this major change in Gately's personal life came one in his career: Boyzone broke up in January 2000, mainly because Keating wanted to work as a solo artist.

Gately recorded an album of his own, *New Beginning* (2000), which topped the charts. Sales of singles from it were disappointing, however, and in 2001 he lost his contract with Polydor.

In 2002 he lost de Jong. Gately blamed the break-up on the amount of time that he had had to spend traveling to perform and do promotional work.

Thereafter, Gately became severely depressed, and conventional medical treatment was ineffective. For two years, he told journalist Linda Duff, "I was on antidepressants and they just made my depression

worse." He also tried various forms of herbal and alternative therapies, likewise without success.

Gately credited Sir Elton John for bringing him out of his depression and ending what had become an addiction to prescription drugs. A call from John with an invitation to spend time with him and his partner, David Furnish, in the south of France came, declared Gately, as "a bolt out of the blue."

The visit accomplished what the antidepressant drugs had not. "When I got to sit down with him and talk over things, he was so genuine, so nice, and just wanted to offer words of encouragement. No pressure, he just asked me how I was, and we had a lovely, lovely time. After that my life just changed," he told Duff.

Among the changes for the better was a new love, businessman Andrew Cowles, whom John and Furnish introduced to him.

Gately and Cowles had a commitment ceremony in Las Vegas in 2003 and legalized their union with a civil partnership in London in 2006. Gately told Duff of the couple's desire to add children to their family, saying, "We two are just so mad at the moment, too loony to look after children, but when we get a little older we would love to."

Shortly after his stay in France, Gately took his career in a new direction, starring in a West End production of *Joseph and His Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat* (book and lyrics by Tim Rice, music by Andrew Lloyd Webber) in 2003 and playing another leading role in *Chitty Chitty Bang Bang* (book by Jeremy Sams, music and lyrics by Richard Sherman and Robert Sherman) at the London Paladium the following year. He also appeared in various other theater productions, including a Christmas pantomime of *Cinderella* in 2005.

Bands that break up very rarely reunite, but the singers of Boyzone—boys no more—did just that with a charity performance for Children in Need in November 2007. They then embarked on a reunion tour and put out another album, *Back Again . . . No Matter What* (2008).

The video for one of the songs on the album, "Better," featured Gately embracing Cowles in a montage of romantic couples, according their gay relationship equal status with the heterosexual relationships of the other band members.

The video sparked some controversy, with a Northern Ireland Presbyterian minister, the Reverend David McCullough, charging that it was "yet another subtle effort of the homosexual propaganda machine."

While the sales of recordings and concert tickets did not match the extraordinary levels of Boyzone's heyday, they were nevertheless impressive. After this success, the group began recording another album with a planned release date of 2010.

Gately was also working on another project, a children's fantasy book entitled *The Tree of Seasons* that had been some four years in the writing. He was excited to land a publishing deal for it in May 2009. His last Twitter post some five months later was about putting the finishing touches on it.

Gately died of acute pulmonary edema on October 10, 2009 at the holiday home that he and Cowles shared in Port Andratx, Majorca.

Expressions of shock and sympathy poured in. Former Taoiseach (Irish Prime Minister) Bertie Ahern stated, "The Gatelys are in my own constituency. I know the family, I know Stephen. . . . Boyzone and Stephen, they've all been part of Irish life and far wider than that for the last fifteen years, and so successful, so it's a huge, huge tragedy."

Gately's bandmates spoke of their affection for him and the magnitude of his loss. "Stephen was one of the best," said Graham. "He wasn't just a friend to us, he was a brother. We've lost our brother."

Sir Elton John told the press, "David and I are stunned by this tragedy," and added an assessment of Gately's nature that would be echoed by one friend and colleague after another: "Stephen was the kindest, gentlest soul."

A devastated and bereft Andrew Cowles ruefully expressed his regret and bewilderment at his loss: "I just don't understand it. What hurts most is that he was only yards from me in the room next door and I didn't even know he was slipping away. If only I had gone in to check him."

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