



Gore, Lesley (1946-2015)

by Linda Rapp

Encyclopedia Copyright © 2015, glbtq, Inc.
Entry Copyright © 2005, glbtq, inc.
Reprinted from <http://www.glbtq.com>

Best known as a teen singing sensation in the 1960s, Lesley Gore was also a successful songwriter and an influence on a number of other women artists, from Debbie Harry to Madonna, as well as an actress. After coming out publicly in 2003, she hosted episodes of *In the Life* and reached out to members of the glbtq community.

Lesley Gore, born May 2, 1946 in Brooklyn, New York, grew up in nearby Tenafly, New Jersey. Since she showed a gift for music at an early age, her parents arranged for her to take lessons with a voice coach in New York.

In 1963 Gore's coach had her make some demonstration recordings that an agent then gave to Irving Green, the president of Mercury Records, who in turn passed them along to music producer Quincy Jones. Impressed, Jones called the young singer in and soon had her record a pop song called "It's My Party."

Green cautioned Gore that she should not be disappointed if the record did not get released, but exactly a week later Gore was surprised to hear it on the radio while she was driving to school.

"It's My Party" shot to number one on the pop charts. Chronicling the emotional turmoil of a teenager who learns that her boyfriend has left her for another girl, the song declares "It's my party, and I'll cry if I want to. You would cry, too, if it happened to you." In Gore's richly lyrical interpretation, the song became emblematic of teenage angst.

The runaway success of the record brought tumult to the life of the sixteen-year-old Gore and her family: fans called the house at all hours and even camped out on the lawn.

Gore followed her auspicious debut with a string of other hits, most of which, in the words of reviewer Jesse Fox Mayshark, "condensed the tempests of teenage life into two-and-a-half-minute bursts." One of her recordings, "Judy's Turn to Cry" (1963) was a kind of sequel to "It's My Party." Another of her signature songs, "You Don't Own Me" (1964), became a sort of anthem for the nascent women's movement.

Gore released two albums in both 1963 and 1964. Once she entered Sarah Lawrence College the pace of her recording slowed, and she limited touring to holiday breaks and summers. She chose to attend Sarah Lawrence because its proximity to New York permitted her to participate in the music scene there, but it also gave her empowerment as a woman. "They treat women like human beings, and they were doing that back then," she stated in a 2005 interview.

Gore was something of an anomaly in the pop music world--a solo female artist in an age of "girl groups." She would later comment that she had not been able to find a woman mentor in the music industry, which she described as patriarchal.

Gore continued to release albums, but with the tastes of pop fans changing, none achieved the phenomenal

success of her early work. The last album of the first stage of her recording career, *Love Me by Name*, came out in 1976.

Gore co-wrote the album's title song, which was subsequently covered by Dusty Springfield. With her brother Michael Gore, she wrote "Out There on My Own" for the movie *Fame* (1980, directed by Alan Parker), which earned them an Academy Award nomination.

Although she had stopped recording, Gore continued to perform her music at state fairs and casinos and to compose songs. She also took to the stage, acting in musicals, including a 1999 Broadway run of Jerry Leiber and Mike Stoller's *Smoky Joe's Café*. She also appeared in John Waters' film *Hairspray* (1988), singing "You Don't Own Me."

Gore collaborated on a song sung by a closeted teen character in Allison Anders' *Grace of My Heart* (1996). The young singer was supposedly loosely based on Gore herself, but Gore said that she was in her twenties before she realized her sexual orientation. (Although she was not in the film, Gore's recording of "It's My Party" was, no doubt, the source of the title of Randall Kleiser's moving AIDS film, *It's My Party* (1996), another indication of the song's continuing presence in the popular imagination.)

Gore's family and the people working with her were long aware of her lesbianism, but her first public acknowledgment of it came when she hosted an episode of the glbtq magazine show *In the Life* in 2003. She subsequently did another episode and was touched by the response from glbtq people--particularly those not from urban areas--who approached her when she was on tour.

"I saw what a difference a show like *In the Life* can make to their lives in some of these small towns," she stated, adding that "a lot of young gay people in the Midwest . . . really had nothing to relate to. At least I felt this program is presenting them with some options."

After a long hiatus Gore returned to recording with her 2005 album *Ever Since*, described by Mayshark as a "cabaret cocktail of jazzy pop and spry ballads." Gore herself called it "another chapter [in her career]: reimagining a few old hits and bringing listeners along to new stuff." Evincing the influence of such heroes of hers as Nina Simone and Dinah Washington, the new album highlighted Gore's mature--smoky and husky--voice and her unusually intelligent delivery.

The album was produced by the independent label Engine Company Records and was sold on Gore's web site. One of the cuts from it, the haunting ballad "Better Angels," was featured on a 2005 episode of the popular television show *CSI: Miami*.

Gore did publicly name her partner during her lifetime, though she acknowledged that she had been in a committed relationship with another woman since the early 1980s.

On February 16, 2015, Gore died at New York Presbyterian Hospital, where she was undergoing treatment for cancer. She was survived by her partner Lois Sasson, her mother, and her brother, Michael Gore.

Bibliography

Hanna, Kathleen. "Ms. Conversation: Lesley Gore and Kathleen Hanna." *Ms.* 15.3 (Fall 2005): 50-53.

Mayshark, Jesse Fox. "It's Lesley Gore's Career, and She'll Revive It If She Wants To." *New York Times* (October 23, 2005): 2, 34.

Swartz, Shauna. "Interview with Lesley Gore." (June 23, 2005). www.afterellen.com/People/2005/6/lesleygore.html.

Treacy, Christopher John. "Lesley Gore, of 'It's My Party' Fame, Comes Out Formally; Plays Northampton Sept. 16." *In Newsweekly* (September 15, 2005). www.innewsweekly.com/innews/?class_code=Ar&article_code=486.

www.lesleygore.com.

About the Author

Linda Rapp teaches French and Spanish at the University of Michigan-Dearborn. She freelances as a writer, tutor, and translator. She is Assistant to the General Editor of www.glbtc.com.