



Michael, George (b. 1963)

by Nathan G. Tipton

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Although pop singer/songwriter George Michael began his musical career in 1980 as half of the queerly inflected pop duo Wham!, Michael's sexual orientation remained elusively undefined until 1998. On April 7, 1998, he was arrested for "lewd behavior" in a park restroom in Beverly Hills, California. Following his conviction, Michael confirmed his long-rumored homosexuality and was sentenced to perform community service.

A week before his 1998 "official coming-out" interview, Michael met with *Advocate* editor Judy Wieder on the set of his music video "Outside." The video explicitly details (and parodies) the events surrounding Michael's arrest, including the resultant media frenzy. In his interview with Wieder, Michael addressed his contentious relationship with the press and the question of why he did not come out sooner.

He remarked, "If you tell me that I have to do something, I'm going to try not to do it. And what people don't understand in the equation of my relationship with the press is that I've had people talking and writing about my sexuality since I was 19 years old."

Born Georgios Kyriakos Panayiotou in London on June 25, 1963, Michael is the son of a Greek-Cypriot restaurant owner. His family moved to the affluent London suburb of Bushey and, while in school there, Michael met Andrew Ridgeley, who became the other half of Wham!

In 1982 the duo won a contract with Innervision Records and, in the summer of 1982, released the album *Fantastic*, which became a hit in Britain. Their next album, *Make It Big* (1984), with its infectious single "Wake Me Up Before You Go-Go," exploded worldwide and cemented the pair's success but led to the accusation that Michael and Ridgeley were merely pretty-boy pop stars.

In 1986, at the height of their popularity, Michael and Ridgeley amicably dissolved Wham! and Michael forged ahead as a solo artist. In sharp contrast to Wham!'s "bubblegum pop" sound, Michael's first solo album, the Motown-inspired *Faith* (1987), featured songs with a much more soulful sound.

In addition to topping the Pop chart, *Faith* also went to the top of the Black album chart, making Michael the first white artist to achieve this honor. The album went on to win American Music Awards for Best Pop Male Vocalist, Best Soul/Rhythm and Blues Vocalist, and Best Soul/Rhythm and Blues Album, as well as the Grammy award for Album of the Year.

One of the album's singles, "I Want Your Sex," reached number two on the American charts, due in no small part to its controversial content, widely interpreted as encouraging people to have sex in the age of AIDS. Michael, however, explained that the song's message promoted monogamy rather than promiscuity.

In 1992, he appeared at the AIDS-awareness Concert for Life, a benefit and tribute to Queen singer Freddie Mercury. The concert led to Michael's involvement in the album *Red, Hot, + Dance*, another project



George Michael performing in Antwerp in 2006. Photograph by Yves Lorson. Image appears under the Creative Commons Attribution License version 2.0.

organized to raise funds for AIDS charities. In 1993 Michael released *Five Live*, a five-song EP (extended play, or shorter length LP/CD) featuring his Freddie Mercury tribute. All proceeds from the record went to the Phoenix Trust, an AIDS charity set up in Mercury's memory.

AIDS has been a particularly poignant charitable choice for Michael since the death in 1993 of his first boyfriend, Brazilian designer Anselmo Feleppa. The death spurred Michael to write a coming-out letter to his parents who, according to him, were more concerned that he had just lost his partner than that he had actually finally said what they already knew.

Michael explained to Judy Wieder that AIDS not only changed his behavior but also helped him along his journey to honest self-discovery. For Michael's life and music, this self-discovery has been liberating and has led to a new sense of joy and triumph.

Michael's popularity seems only to have been enhanced by his "coming out," despite the circumstances that forced him to be more honest than he intended. The music video "Outside" was well-received and worked to defuse the controversy of his arrest.

Michael's most recent work, however, has not received the acclaim he expected. For example, his single "Freek" (2002) reached only number seven in the charts.

Moreover, in the summer of 2002 Michael found himself at the center of a firestorm prompted by the release in Britain of "Shoot the Dog," a video and song skewering the policies of President George Bush and Prime Minister Tony Blair in the wake of the war on terrorism.

When Americans complained that the song was an insult to the United States, Michael replied that "I am definitely not anti-American, how could I be? I have been in love with a Texan for six years." Michael's partner Kenny Goss is from Texas.

A musical artist of notable versatility, Michael emerged from the backlash that "Shoot the Dog" generated, but his vulnerability is indicated by the fact that the *New York Post* headlined its story about the song "Pop Perv's 9/11 Slur," which no doubt alluded to his homosexuality as much as his arrest.

Despite this setback, two years later Michael once again reclaimed the pop music spotlight with the success of his critically acclaimed album *Patience*. Released by Aegean/Sony Music in March 2004, the album represented what *Billboard* columnist Paul Sexton characterized as a "dramatic rapprochement for Michael and Sony Music," signifying the culmination of a successfully mended relationship between Michael and his record label.

Although immediately before the album's release Michael was quoted as saying that *Patience* would be his last major label release, Sony executives are already planning Michael's next album, a duets record featuring four new collaborations, plus archived duets with Elton John, Whitney Houston, Queen, and others.

Michael, who had also been rumored to have said that, after *Patience*, he would quit the music business and release his songs free on the Internet, has apparently discovered that *Patience* is, indeed, a virtue. His patience was further rewarded when, in May 2004, he was honored by U.K.-based PPL (Phonographic Performance Ltd.) as the most-played artist on British radio in the past twenty years. In accepting the honor, Michael paid tribute to his early musical hero Elton John by telling the assembled gathering, "Without Elton John, there is no way I would be standing here. I used to dissect his records and obsess about song after song and it was the beginning of my love affair with pop."

After wild successes and equally notable failures, Michael has seemingly and finally found peace with both his homosexuality and his music.

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