



Music and AIDS

by Paul Attinello

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A number of musical works in various genres have responded directly or indirectly to the AIDS crisis. Many musical works that refer to AIDS are about emotions, thus focusing on expressions of grief, anger, or sympathy, rather than on the personal and social consequences of the disease (as in novels, film, or drama) or on political confrontation (as in many works of visual art).

As a result, music about AIDS sometimes seems less specific than work in other media. Nevertheless, music of all kinds has registered the enormous impact of AIDS.

The earliest works appeared around the same time as the first AIDS plays, including punk songs by Karl Brown and Matthew McQueen for San Francisco's collaborative *The AIDS Show* ("Safe Livin' in Dangerous Times" and "Rimmin' at the Baths," September 1984).

The first commercially distributed music appeared soon after: Frank Zappa's "Thing-Fish" (November 1984), a satire of Broadway where abusive racial and sexual stereotypes people a demented tale of government conspiracy.

Much music about AIDS was written for fundraising purposes. An early and typical success was the vaguely sympathetic "That's What Friends Are For" by Burt Bacharach and Carol Bayer Sager (1985).

The benefit compilation *Red, Hot + Blue* (1990), in which contemporary pop artists cover Cole Porter songs, led to the foundation of the Red Hot Organization, which has since produced numerous CD and video anthologies. Notable Red Hot productions include the alternative rock collection *No Alternative* (1993), the sophisticated jazz/rap *Stolen Moments* (1994), and the hip-hop collection *America Is Dying Slowly* (1996).

Some major popular vocalists have made a point of performing songs about AIDS (usually one each), including Prince ("Sign o' the Times," 1987), James Taylor ("Never Die Young," 1988), Lou Reed ("Halloween Parade," 1989), Linda Ronstadt ("Goodbye My Friend," 1989), Elton John ("The Last Song," 1992), Madonna ("In This Life," 1992), Reba McEntire ("She Thinks His Name Was John," 1994), Tori Amos ("Not the Red Baron," 1996), Patti Smith ("Death Singing," 1997), and Janet Jackson ("Together Again," 1998).

Most of these are written as though by a survivor remembering a friend or by an "outsider" developing sympathy for PWAs. Popular groups sometimes take a more complex approach, including the radical remix of "All You Need Is Love" by The JAMS (1987) or U2's eerie "One" (1992).

Some gay popular artists have not only specifically referred to AIDS but have also explored the resultant emotional and social climate, especially Michael Callen and the Flirtations, Marc Almond, Jimmy Somerville, the Communards, and the Pet Shop Boys. The last group is known for songs that present their ironic, oblique view of 1990s gay life, including the discomforts of safe sex.



U2 in concert in Brussels, Belgium in 2005. U2 is one of many bands that have made a point of performing songs about AIDS. Photograph by Bertrand Perron. Image appears under the Creative Commons Attribution ShareAlike License.

The most successful musicals that highlight AIDS have been William Finn's *Falsettoland* (1990) and Jonathan Larson's innovative *Rent* (1996), both of which engage gay characters with survivors at various stages of acceptance.

Other stage works, mostly in a soft-rock style, include Brian Gari's *A Hard Time to be Single* (1991), John Greyson's sloppy but amusing *Zero Patience* (1994), Stephen Dolginoff's *Most Men Are* (1995), James Mellon's *An Unfinished Song* (1995), Cindy O'Connor's family study *All That He Was* (1996), *The Last Session* by Jim Brochu and Steve Schalchlin (1996), and *Elegies* by Janet Hood and Bill Russell (1996).

Some films about AIDS have notable music. For example, the soundtrack for *Philadelphia* (1993) included new songs by Bruce Springsteen and Neil Young. Bobby McFerrin created a vocal score for the AIDS Quilt documentary *Common Threads* (1989), and Carter Burwell wrote an orchestral soundtrack for *And The Band Played On* (1993).

The classical music community has produced a number of works, many of them neo-romantic in style. The most important of these are John Corigliano's *Symphony No. 1* (1990) and the ongoing *AIDS Song Quilt* (begun in 1992), created by baritone William Parker (1943-1993), which consists of a series of AIDS poem settings by composers including William Bolcom, Libby Larsen, and Ned Rorem. Younger composers such as Chris DeBlasio and Robert Maggio have made reputations partially on the basis of successful chamber works about AIDS.

Gay and lesbian choruses have performed many apposite works since early in the crisis, including reinterpretations of older songs. New cantatas written for them include *Hidden Legacies* by Roger Bourland and John Hall (1992) and *Naked Man* by Robert Seeley (1996).

The most important figure in avant-garde circles--and probably the most important figure in music about AIDS--is vocalist/composer/performer Diamanda Galás. She has been creating works about AIDS since before the death of her brother, writer Philip-Dimitri Galás, in 1986. The most important of her works include the *Plague Mass* (1984) and the three-part *Masque of the Red Death* (1986-88), both of which exemplify her combination of savagely visceral texts with extraordinary vocalizations and complex musical textures.

Other women composers who have written avant-garde works include Meredith Monk (*New York Requiem*, 1993), Laurie Anderson (*Love among the Sailors*, 1994), and Pauline Oliveros (*Epigraphs in the Time of AIDS*, 1994).

Works by gay men include Gerhard Stäbler's *Warnung mit Liebeslied* (1986), Robert Moran's minimalist *Requiem: Chant du cygne* (1990), and Bob Ostertag's powerful *All The Rage* (1993), recorded by the Kronos Quartet.

Artist/writer David Wojnarowicz worked on many collaborative pieces of which one of the most "musical" was *ITSOFOMO*, written with composer Ben Neill (1989).

The health crisis has directly affected the musical world as much as other areas of the arts. Among many musicians who have died are Klaus Nomi (1944-1983), Calvin Hampton (1938-1984), Sylvester (1947-1988), Freddie Mercury (1946-1991), Michael Callen (1954-1993), and Robert Savage (1951-1993).

Outside the urban West, protest and educational musics referring to AIDS have appeared in Mexico, South Africa, and (undoubtedly) many other countries. Limited distribution networks and language barriers have kept most from becoming available to English-speaking audiences. An exception is *AIDS: How Could I Know?* (1989), a bilingual recording produced by the Central Australian Aboriginal Media Association.

Despite the range of genres and works, there has been less music written about AIDS than there has been

production in other art forms. This fact may be attributable to the strictures of the music industry, or to aspects of the nature of music.

Still, it is perhaps not too much to claim that the evident increase during the 1980s and 1990s in musical works that focused on grief, sympathy, or healing, some of which can be associated with "new age" music, is rooted in cultural changes that came out of the AIDS crisis.

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