



## Pet Shop Boys

by Eugenio Filice

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A fortuitous meeting between Neil Francis Tennant (b. 1954) and Christopher Sean Lowe (b. 1959) in August 1981 led to the formation of the Pet Shop Boys. With Tennant's distinctly British and somewhat effete vocals and Lowe's deft synthesizer-based Pop compositions, their creative partnership has given rise to a significant body of work, one central to the field of Western popular music of the 1980s and 1990s.

The Pet Shop Boys are at once a very fine example and a result of the various experimentations that emerged in the wake of the early 1980s New Wave movement. Moreover, two of their albums, *Disco* (1986) and *Disco 2* (1994), pay homage to a musical genre that is meaningful in terms of gay history and bar culture.

Their entire oeuvre may be seen as a personal documentation and reaction to events that stirred the British gay community in the last two decades of the twentieth century.

The Pet Shop Boys' music engages both traditional themes, such as love and relationships, and socially conscious subjects, such as AIDS and opposition to the notorious Section 28 bill that prohibited the promotion of homosexuality by government bodies in the United Kingdom.

Their first album, *Please* (1986), with its wistful melodies and overarching themes of love, relationships, and unrequited desire, is a pastiche of longing, irony, and camp familiar to all, but perhaps especially to gay, lesbian, and transgender people.

"It's a Sin" (1987) makes a deeply poignant and forceful statement about the Catholic Church's sexual prohibitions and its power to regulate desire.

The duo's music has also brought to the fore issues relating to AIDS. For example, their 1993 LP, *Very*, contains two tracks, "Dreaming of the Queen" and "Go West," that confront the loss and despair occasioned by AIDS.

Interestingly, the musical arrangement of "Go West" may be understood as a synecdoche of the effects of AIDS on gay communities. For the first five minutes, Tennant and Lowe cover the Village People's gay anthem in a relentless, though somewhat reflective mood, which is followed by two minutes of silence. The pause is broken by a "Postscript," whose tone is utterly somber.

Tennant and Lowe's contribution extends beyond music into the important cultural phenomena of music videos. Some of their music videos are notably homoerotic, as, for example, "Domino Dancing" (1988).

Often they have collaborated with important figures from the visual and performing arts, particularly with fellow gay artists. For example, the filmmaker Derek Jarman (1942-1994) produced the video for "It's a Sin" (1987), as well as other songs. Photographer Bruce Weber (b. 1946) created a dramatization of "Being



Christopher Lowe (left) performing with Neil Tennant at the Boston Opera House in 2007. Photograph by Kevin Church.

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Boring" (1991), while actor and gay rights activist Ian McKellen (b. 1939) was prominently featured in the visualization of "Heart" (1988).

Further, the Pet Shop Boys have supported the theme of transgenderism by producing, with vocals from Boy George (George O'Dowd, b. 1961), a cover of Dave Berry's 1964 ballad, "The Crying Game" from Neil Jordan's (b. 1950) 1992 film of the same title.

In 1994, Tennant agreed to an interview with the British lifestyle magazine *Attitude*. Without trepidation he revealed what his creative work stated unequivocally: "I could spend several pages discussing 'gay culture', but for the sake of argument we have contributed a lot. And the simple reason for this is that I have written songs from that point of view. What I'm saying is that I'm gay, and I have written songs from that point of view. So, I mean, I'm being completely honest with you here, but those are the facts of the matter."

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### **About the Author**

**Eugenio Filice** is a doctoral student in art history at McGill University. He is currently preparing a dissertation on representation of gay men in contemporary Canadian art, and on the revival of figurative painting that occurred during late 1970s and 1980s.