



Porn Stars

by Joe A. Thomas

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Performers in gay pornography hold a relatively esteemed position in gay culture, in contrast to their heterosexual counterparts. This is largely due to the fact that hard core pornography itself is such an integral and accepted part of gay male life, especially in comparison to the marginalized position straight pornography holds for its audiences.

Gay porn performers are the idolized rock stars of the gay world, showing up for personal appearances and autograph sessions, participating in gay pride parades, and establishing a celebrity presence that permeates multiple levels of the gay subculture.

Lesbian Porn Stars

Because very little approaching a lesbian sex industry exists, gay porn stars are almost exclusively male. Although an enormous percentage of footage filmed in the adult industry features two women having sex, these scenes cannot be classified as lesbian.

They are produced and directed by heterosexual men for the consumption of heterosexual men. Anything approaching a true lesbian identity almost never appears in these scenes, many of which are only preludes to the appearance of one or more men. Instead, same-sex female activity is presented as an exotic diversion, doubling the erotic object of the straight male gaze.

While some porn by and for lesbians has been produced over the years, it has been relatively rare, making the emergence of lesbian porn stars unlikely.

Annie Sprinkle, a veteran of the heterosexual porn industry and today a self-identified lesbian, offers the closest approximation to a lesbian porn star. Although she has produced and acted in some lesbian-oriented features, her primary focus since leaving the mainstream adult industry has been on performance art and humorous theater that espouse themes of sexual liberation and self-fulfillment.

Author Suzy Bright, perhaps better known as Suzy Sexpert, is a similar liberationist and pro-porn activist. Her public appearances consist of entertaining seminars about pornography and its history.

The 1970s: Casey Donovan, Al Parker, Jack Wrangler

Gay porn stars--referred to as "models" in the industry--were relatively rare until the early 1970s. Because the modern pornography industry has developed most extensively in the United States, and because Hollywood provided the template for notions of stardom, most gay porn stars--at least until recent years--have been American.

A number of print models for companies such as the Athletic Model Guild achieved a modest fame in the 1950s and 1960s through pictures printed in limited circulation physique magazines. However, the first real

gay porn star was Casey Donovan.

Donovan, an aspiring actor and successful fashion model, was the featured performer in the first big gay porn film, *The Boys in the Sand* (1971). The surprising commercial and popular success of this first attempt at a technically proficient gay porn film launched Donovan's career as a gay icon.

Through the 1970s and into the 1980s Donovan not only acted in a series of pornographic films, but he also became a poster boy for the burgeoning gay movement--not through direct political activity, but because of his high profile as an unashamed, self-confessed gay man.

The same was true of another 1970s performer, Al Parker. Parker, whose dark good looks and beard contrasted with the blond, smooth Donovan, made his first hard-core feature in 1976 after starting out in print media. Whereas Donovan represented an earlier generation of gay men, Parker came to symbolize the late-1970s "clone" look--the macho, flannel-clad men often seen strolling the streets of San Francisco's gay Castro district. Both men had performing careers that lasted well into the 1980s.

Jack Wrangler was another gay porn icon of the 1970s, a convincing actor who later ended up in a heterosexual marriage with singer Margaret Whiting. Both Parker and Wrangler were especially qualified for their jobs because of their unusually large penises--an important attribute for those aspiring to gay porn stardom.

The 1980s: Jeff Stryker, Ryan Idol, Joey Stefano

As gay porn changed in the 1980s, so did the nature of gay porn stars. The opening years of the decade saw the decline of theatrical porn features as home video became increasingly common. Some of the biggest stars of these new videos were straight men who performed for money.

By far the most famous of these was Jeff Stryker. With sultry good looks reminiscent of Elvis Presley, and an endowment the equal of his predecessor Al Parker, Stryker epitomized the "gay-for-pay" mentality. He was exclusively the insertor in all his sex scenes, performing the active role in anal sex and the passive role in oral sex.

Similarly, the late 1980s saw the emergence of Ryan Idol, another young straight performer whose striking good looks led to a busy career of personal appearances and porn films that continued sporadically into the 1990s.

A self-identified gay performer, Joey Stefano, also came onto the scene in the 1980s. Unlike most of his predecessors (with the notable exception of Casey Donovan), Stefano made his career primarily as a "bottom," taking the receptive role in anal sex. This contrast between the straight-identified "tops" and gay-identified "bottoms" became in some ways a hallmark of 1980s porn.

Stefano's legendary problems with drugs led to his death by an overdose in 1994, but his troubled life and career only enhanced his romantic appeal for many viewers, making him the James Dean of the porn world.

The 1990s: Lukas Ridgeston, Ken Ryker

Foreign-produced porn, especially from eastern Europe, became increasingly common and popular during the 1990s. Sometimes produced or directed by Americans, these films featured attractive, young athletic men, among whom the most famous was Lukas Ridgeston.

Ridgeston's classic good looks and youthful innocence even led to occasional personal appearances in the United States. However, the geographic distance between these performers and their primary market in America meant that stardom was difficult to attain for most.

The 1990s saw yet another shift in gay porn stardom, perhaps best represented by Ken Ryker. His first performance dating to the mid-1990s, the strapping Ryker (his name undoubtedly purposely chosen to echo that of Stryker) was initially a straight-identified top. As the decade wore on and his fame grew, he began to be more active in his roles, engaging in kissing and oral sex.

More importantly, in interviews Ryker hinted that he was not straight, without actually identifying himself as gay. This tactic was similar to the hedging done by many mainstream Hollywood actors when queried about their sexuality. Ryker's fuzzy sexual identity heralded a gradual decline of interest in the straight top in favor of gay-identified stars.

The New Millennium

In the new millennium, Tom Chase and Steve Cassidy came to represent the new wave of gay porn stars: masculine and muscular, sexually versatile, and confidently gay.

Gay porn stars are paid relatively little for their performances. Salaries even for top level models rarely exceed several thousand dollars per scene. Instead, they rely on personal appearances and engagements in clubs as strippers for most of their money. Many also turn to prostitution--"escorting"--to boost their incomes. Their faces also appear in a vast array of advertising for gay products, from night clubs to sexual aids.

Porn stars' presence in the gay subculture--in entertainment, advertising, and as representatives in gay pride parades everywhere--is ubiquitous. They represent the unashamed expression of gay identity through their open practice of the sexuality that defines that identity.

Coupled with pornography's accepted, even exalted status in gay life, and the lack of many visible gay role models in the broader culture, it should not be surprising that porn stars constitute an important part of gay culture.

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