



Rock Music

by Craig Kaczorowski

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Rock Music refers to an array of related musical styles that have come to dominate popular music in the West since about 1955. Originating in the United States, rock music was initially influenced by the black rhythm-and-blues (R&B) music of the American South.

Over the last five decades, rock music has been shaped by, and in turn has been an influential force on, a broad range of cultures and musical traditions, including country-and-western, folk, gospel, blues, electronic, dance, and the popular music of Asia, Africa, and Latin America. The genre also encompasses a wide range of substyles, such as heavy metal, punk, alternative, worldbeat, rap, and techno.

Rock music has become closely associated with freedom of expression, symbolized especially by the rebellious rock star. As such, rock music and musicians have helped to establish new fashions, forms of language, attitudes, and political views.

Surprisingly, however, homosexuality is still generally considered a stigma in the world of rock music. Despite the large number of gay and lesbian people working behind the scenes in the industry, mainstream gay and lesbian rock artists are often discouraged by their corporate record companies from being publicly open about their sexual orientation.

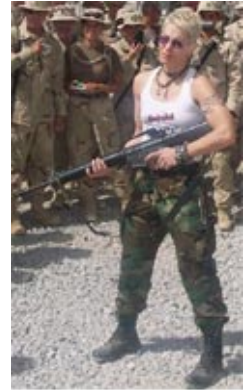
Little Richard to Wayne/Jayne County

In the late 1950s, Little Richard (born Richard Wayne Penniman) brought a flamboyantly theatrical style to early rock music with his sequined vests, tight trousers, eyeliner, and pompadour hairstyle. His shouted vocals and frantic piano playing defined the dynamic sound of rock and roll and led to an uninterrupted run of smash hits--"Tutti Frutti," "Long Tall Sally," "Rip It Up," "Lucille," "Keep A Knockin," and "Good Golly Miss Molly." Little Richard was inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in 1986. He has, however, never explicitly come out as gay.

Flamboyant theatrics reemerged in the early 1970s with the flourishing of glitter and glam rock, a fusion of feminized--or at best androgynous--images and virile rock anthems.

Glitter or glam rock groups include, most notably, the New York Dolls, T. Rex, Mott The Hoople, and Alice Cooper. Despite their image as sexual outlaws, these rock performers were, nevertheless, firmly ensconced in the world of heterosexuality. Even such rock luminaries as Lou Reed and David Bowie flirted with glam rock and cultivated fashionably gay or bisexual personae; they later married, however, and claimed they had been straight all along.

The one openly gay performer in the era of glam rock was Jobriath, born Bruce Wayne Campbell, in 1946.



Top: Joan Jett entertaining soldiers in 2005.

Above: Michael Stipe performing in Italy in 2003.

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"I'm a true fairy," the renamed Jobriath Boone proclaimed to the press when his eponymous debut album was released in October, 1973. The release of that album was followed by a colossal media blitz. Full-page ads appeared in *Vogue*, *Penthouse*, *Rolling Stone*, and the *New York Times*, with an image of Jobriath as a discreetly nude statue crawling on smashed legs. The image was even reproduced on a Time's Square billboard and splashed across hundreds of New York City buses.

Jobriath's first album was quickly followed up with the release of a second one, *Creatures of the Street*, a mere six months later. Although the albums, especially the first, received a few respectable reviews, the extensive media hype did not help to sell records. Drug and alcohol addiction also hastened the rapid descent of Jobriath's music career; he was abandoned by his manager and record company halfway through his first U. S. tour.

Jobriath promptly announced his retirement from the music industry and moved to New York where he pursued an acting career with little success. Jobriath died of an AIDS-related illness in 1983.

Perhaps rock's most prominent transgendered performer is Wayne/Jayne County, born Wayne Rogers, in 1947. A performance artist as much as a rock musician, he began his career in the late 1960s as Wayne County in New York's underground theater world. In the early 1970s County formed his first band, Queen Elizabeth. The band recorded several music demos, most notably a song titled "Max's Kansas City," celebrating the legendary New York club of the same name where County had begun performing in drag. County subsequently formed another group, Wayne and the Back Street Boys, which became part of New York's burgeoning punk scene. The group's first album, recorded in 1976, was never released.

Unsuccessful in finding an American label interested in his brand of rock music, County moved to England. There he formed yet another group, The Electric Chairs; they were signed by the independent label Safari Records, which issued his 1978 debut album *The Electric Chairs*. Soon after came the release of the most renowned of County's songs, "Fuck Off," which Safari chose to release under a pseudonymous label. Further albums included *Storm the Gates of Heaven* (1978), the group's most commercially successful work, and *Things Your Mother Never Told You* (1979).

In 1979, Wayne County moved to Berlin and later that year reemerged as Jayne County. A live album titled *Rock 'N' Roll Resurrection*, County's first recording as Jayne, was released in 1980. Her next album was the self-produced *Private Oyster*, released in 1986. Periodic releases followed in the 1990s, some featuring new songs, others featuring reworked versions of past material. County published her autobiography, *Man Enough to be a Woman*, in 1996. Her most recent album is *So New York* (2003).

Freddie Mercury to Melissa Etheridge

The 1970s disco scene saw the emergence of such gay, or at least gay-friendly, performers as Sylvester, the Village People, and Grace Jones, and in the 1980s, dance and techno groups such as Bronski Beat, Frankie Goes to Hollywood, and the Pet Shop Boys. The world of adult-contemporary music has also seen several openly gay--and best selling--artists such as Boy George, Elton John, George Michael, Rufus Wainwright, and k.d. lang.

However, within the realm of rock music, a world dominated by swaggering men with electric guitars and their mostly straight male audiences, there have been, until quite recently, few openly gay musicians whose music also reflects their sexuality.

For example, Freddie Mercury, the gay rock icon and former front man for the British power rock group Queen, only publicly declared his homosexuality one day before his death from AIDS-related illnesses in 1991.

Likewise, Morrissey (born Steven Patrick Morrissey), lead singer of the British rock band the Smiths from

1984 to 1988, who has been embraced by many in the gay community as one of their own, has never publicly come out and has contradicted himself repeatedly on the subject of his sexuality.

There have, nevertheless, been a few exceptions. The British rocker Tom Robinson broke political ground in the late 1970s with his song "Glad To Be Gay." Although Robinson subsequently married and fathered two children, he continues to define himself in the media as either queer or bisexual. And his music continues to reflect his sexuality. He cleverly titled his 1996 album *Having It Both Ways*, and the bisexual-themed "Blood Brother" won him Best Song at the 1998 Gay/Lesbian American Music Awards.

Joan Jett rose to fame in the 1970s' all-girl rock band The Runaways. Her cover of "I Love Rock 'N' Roll," with her band The Blackhearts, was a number one hit in 1982; "Crimson and Clover" was another hit. Jett, however, did not come out as a lesbian until the 1990s.

One of the most successful gay rock artists today is the award-winning singer-songwriter Melissa Etheridge, who began recording in 1988. Etheridge's sensual, blues-based, and autobiographical songs became even more deeply personal and confessional after she publicly came out as a lesbian in 1993. Moreover, her coming out caused her career no harm; her album *Yes I Am*--released in the year of her coming out--became her biggest seller to date.

Although Melissa Etheridge has a strong lesbian following, she has also become a crossover success; among her ardent fans are men and women of all sexual orientations.

Queercore

Angered by the homophobia and sexism within much of the rock and punk music scenes, a group of young, militant gay musicians started a movement that has been dubbed "queercore." It is characterized by hardcore punk music and frank lyrics that address such issues as queer desire and societal prejudice.

Queercore gained notoriety in the late 1980s through such underground 'zines as *Homocore*, *JD's*, and *Chainsaw*, and in the art of Bruce La Bruce and G.B. Jones. Later, throughout the 1990s, queercore was most visibly exemplified by the raw music, political rage, and social commentary of such groups as Pansy Division, Fifth Column, Team Dresch, and God Is My Co-Pilot.

At the same time, the "Riot Grrl" movement started to take off. Riot Grrl was a grassroots feminist movement with several lesbian bands in the forefront, including Bikini Kill, L7, Tribe 8, and the Butchies. As the Riot Grrl movement gathered steam, queercore participants (both men and women) started to take notice, and the two movements began to feed off each other, leading to a diverse assortment of music and ideas.

Although queercore has a small, but passionate, group of supporters, it is perhaps too raw and controversial to move beyond the fringes of the music industry. Few radio stations are willing to play queercore music, and the independent labels that support queercore bands rarely have the resources to market them sufficiently.

As more musicians publicly declare their homosexuality, being gay in the world of rock music may become less of an issue or a perceived detriment to a mainstream career. In recent years, for example, such rock musicians as singer-songwriter Ani DiFranco, Kathleen Hanna, of the bands Bikini Kill and Le Tigre, Corrin Tucker and Carrie Brownstein of Sleater-Kinney, Michael Stipe, the lead singer for R.E.M., Jónsi Thór Birgisson, the front man for the Icelandic techno-rock group Sigur Rós; Chuck Panozzo, the longtime bassist and co-founder of the arena-rock band Styx; and Rob Halford, vocalist of the heavy metal British band Judas Priest, have all come out publicly as gay or bisexual.

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Craig Kaczorowski writes extensively on media, culture, and the arts. He holds an M.A. in English Language and Literature, with a focus on contemporary critical theory, from the University of Chicago. He comments on national media trends for two newspaper industry magazines.