



The Village People

by Robert Kellerman

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The Village People were a disco-era singing group formed in the late 1970s. Although the group never identified itself as gay, its primary appeal was clearly to a gay male audience. It successfully translated the interests, coded language, and iconography of the gay male subculture into music that crossed over into mainstream pop.

Because the general public was largely unaware of the meanings and suggestiveness of the lyrics and costumes associated with the group, the gay audience not only enjoyed the music on its own terms, but also relished the irony of a mainstream audience unknowingly embracing subculture values and images.

The Village People were formed in 1977 by French record producer Jacques Morali, who was inspired to create the group after seeing performer Felipe Rose, dressed as a Native American, singing and dancing in the streets of Greenwich Village. Hence the group's name.

Morali approached Rose about forming a group and then, with his partner Henri Belelo, auditioned other singers by advertising in trade publications for "singers with mustaches."

All members of the group performed in costume to represent other masculine (and, not coincidentally, gay male fantasy) archetypes: Native American Rose, construction worker David Hodo, policeman Victor Willis, soldier Alex Briley, cowboy Randy Jones, and biker leatherman Glenn Hughes. Rose was openly gay, but the other singers never addressed their sexual orientation.

Regardless, The Village People's core audience was undeniably gay men, and their most popular hits were overtly homoerotic.

"YMCA" (1978), for example, told its presumably male audience about the delights of staying at the YMCA with other young men; "In the Navy" (1979) sang the joys of being in the Navy with other young men; and so on.

The group's other major hits included "Macho Man" (1978), "Fire Island" (1977), and "Go West" (1979). Three of their albums went gold (selling more than 500,000 albums) and four went platinum (selling more than 1,000,000).

The Village People starred in a largely fictionalized film version of their origins, Allan Carr's *Can't Stop the Music* (1980), which featured blatantly homoerotic production numbers. One of the most memorable took place in a gym and involved a large number of muscular men going through Busby Berkeley routines to the tune of "YMCA." Although critics savaged the film, it has gone on to achieve a certain status as a camp classic.

Several of the Village People's albums were released only in Europe, where they had a large and faithful following. Their third album released in America, *Renaissance* (1981), was their attempt to reinvent

themselves as a new wave 1980s group, after the decline of disco. The album was a commercial flop and the Village People disbanded from touring in 1986. Morali, the group's founder and creative director, died of AIDS-related illnesses in 1991.

Never taken particularly seriously (musically or otherwise), The Village People nevertheless remain one of the enduring legacies of 1970s gay male popular culture. They regrouped in 1998, with three of the original singers and three replacements (Jeff Olson as the cowboy, Ray Simpson as the cop, and Eric Anzalone as the leatherman biker). They continue touring, performing both their early hits and new material as well.

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About the Author

Robert Kellerman holds a doctorate in English literature from Michigan State University.