

The Music of Kings and Bio Queens

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Since its beginnings, conventional Western philosophy has placed crude limitations on the way we think about ourselves suggesting that who we are can be reduced to simple dichotomies based on differentiating bodies. Gender identity has suffered from bodily inscription allowing us to think of ourselves only as man or woman, and thus, behave accordingly. The social and political significance of being either man or woman becomes even more repressive when the two states of being become a binary dualism positioning the woman as a negative but necessary precondition for man. Binary dualisms are unrealistic ways of conceiving and naming human behaviour, yet they continue to pervade modern discussions of identity.

This examination draws on a postmodern concept of identity which reconfigures the individual as an embodied subject that is part of and informed by the discursive conditions and practices of society, as opposed to one that is biologically determined. Identity is highly complex, ever shifting and multifariously informed and cannot be fixed to, or in many cases, adequately described by words such as masculine or feminine, heterosexual or homosexual. These words continue to shape hegemonic discourse regarding gender and

sexuality, and limit the subject's capacity to understand and identify with feelings, bodies and actions that are not easily named or described within a binary system. In an attempt to fill the discursive gaps, our understanding of self becomes more fully informed and regulated by what Michael Foucault refers to as technologies of the self. According to Foucault, technologies of the self:

permit individuals to effect by their own means, or with the help of others a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts conduct, and ways of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection and immortality. (2003, p. 146)

Technologies of the self assist us in clarifying who we are to ourselves and who we are in relation to the constitutions of power and truth established by disciplinary and discursive institutional practices. In summarising Foucault, Judith Peraino states that technologies of the self are:

...fundamentally ascetic in that they entail 'an exercise of the self on the self,' and they are fundamentally ethical in that they take into account positive or negative feedback accorded by the moral codes or acceptable ranges of conduct produced in the given matrix of truth and power. (2003, p. 435)

From this perspective, understanding who we are becomes a complex procedure of doing, being, analysing and synthesising. The self is not essential, and has to be actively created and negotiated according to social and individual truths, thus Foucault suggests that life itself could be considered a developing work of art (Rainbow, 1984). Because the self is not something that is given to us in a whole or static form, the concept of life as art lends itself to theorising sexual practice outside of a scientific discourse. The recent epistemic shift from essentialist notions of selfhood and identity to a constructive understanding results in the loss of a fixed and timeless self, thus producing a selfhood of vast possibility and uncertainty. The queer subject embodies Foucault's theory as a fluid and dynamic identity in the process of creating itself, much like the fluidity and temporality facilitated by musical practice.

The bodies and behaviours of queer identified people differ from what the constitutions of truth and power posit to be normal. In this exploration of the music of kings and bio queens, musical performance is understood as a technique that allows queers to differentially regulate their bodies, thoughts and behaviours, when appropriate and meaningful discourse is lacking. While popular discourse fails to provide us with words to articulate the true complexities of the self, I offer in its place music as a non-literal

signifier and as a space in which identity can be realised and performed.

Music can be an exercise in creating a happy and ideal self, negotiating the margins of acceptable behaviour and blurring them. Theodor Adorno said that “music provokes individuals to question their subjectivity, their social identity in relation to ideological superstructures” (Adorno cited in Peraino, 2006, p. 3). David Hargreaves, Dorothy Miell & Raymond MacDonald are authoritative voices on the relationship between music and identity and they agree that music is instrumental in producing and monitoring our understanding of self and our social relationships. They suggest:

...music can be used increasingly as a means by which we formulate and express our individual identities. We use it not only to regulate our own everyday moods and behaviours, but also to present ourselves to others in the way we prefer.

(2002, p. 1)

Music effectively mediates identity and provides a space for one to negotiate their identity in relation to social power structures, and music is especially important in doing this when social discourse fails. Thus, I propose that music and musical performance can constitute a technology of queer identity.

Queer is not a homosexual signifier; queer broadly accommodates all non-normative behaviour which does not comfortably replicate socially acceptable practices, two of which are gender and sexuality. Queer theory draws heavily on the work of Judith Butler's theory of performativity which suggests that gender and sexuality are a performance; in other words, "identity is performatively constituted by the very 'expressions' that are said to be its results" (Butler, 1990, p. 25). Butler says that we have no essential identity, and instead, our performance of gender, sexuality and so on, is all that our identity may become. Once we understand that identity is not fixed, we become free to perform our identity (e.g. gender and sexuality) in multiple and conflicting ways and challenge the normative assumptions. If we accept this notion of performative identity, I believe that deeper meaning can be found in Foucault's understanding of the body and life as a work of art; art that is aesthetically and ideologically constructed in the pursuit of happiness and fulfilment.

The problem with queer theory is that it is somewhat ideological. While queer theory validates and encourages the blurring of imaginary sociocultural boundaries, not all people understand such boundaries as imagined and porous. For example, a biological male dressing as a female (and therefore confusing normative gender identity) who is seen in public courting a female (and therefore confusing normative sexual identity) is at risk of persecution for the

disruption they cause to the heteronormative sex/gender paradigm. The threat of physical violence is real and is a direct protest against the conceptual flexibility of identity as performance. For hegemonic bodies to accept and understand the queer subject and freely allow the performance of queer identity, they must consequently acknowledge that hegemonic notions of identity, which may currently appear “stable”, are by no means fixed or essential and therefore untrue. Using heteronormative logic, society perhaps, allows the ‘gay’ male to act feminine because his abnormality normalises the heterosexual male acting masculine, while the lesbian female is allowed to act ‘butch’ because she too, normalises society’s understanding of the heterosexual, feminine female.

Noticeable imbalances in the sex/gender paradigm destabilise heteronormativity and negatively brand the queer subject as abnormal. In an attempt to dilute this negative branding, music has at times been the pursuit of the socially disenfranchised and abandoned. Sophie Fuller and Lloyd Whitesell argue that historically “music [has] provided the accompaniment for confrontations between disparate conventions of social propriety in general, and in particular, for encounters between diverse idiolects of sexual identity” (2002, p. 12). Music can be a powerful social agent, it can soothe our discomfort with subject matter that disrupts social norms. Music has often been a refuge for queers, a space in which queer bodies can tolerably skew the margins of acceptable identity under the guise of

frivolity and entertainment—a kind of musical closet. Wayne Koestenbaum agrees that:

Forbidden sexualities stay vague because they fear detection and punishment. Historically, music has been defined as mystery and miasma, and implicitness rather than an explicitness, and so we have hid inside music; in music we can come out without coming out, we can reveal without saying a word. (1993, p. 189-190)

The art of drag is a prime example, arising from the traditions of minstrelsy, burlesque, variety and vaudeville as each craft valued the art of parody, allowing for insightful social commentary, cleverly masked by the jocular nature of entertainment. Contemporary drag queen performances emphasise the artifice and thus the performative nature of femininity while queering mainstream pop songs such as Gloria Gaynor's "I Will Survive" and Abba's "Dancing Queen". The drag queen has become a stable and acceptable performer of queer identity within the Australian cultural psyche reflected in Australia's embrace of films such as *Priscilla Queen of the Desert* and our love affair with transvestite entertainer Dame Edna Everage, to name a few of many examples. The perception of drag performance in Australia refers largely to "men in frocks" and is valued for its ability to amuse mainstream society. While drag is a form of self-expression, it

transcends entertainment, and as Butler argues, the power of drag lies in its ability to show that:

‘imitation’ is at the heart of the heterosexual project and its gender binarisms, that drag is not a secondary imitation that presupposes a prior or original gender, but that hegemonic heterosexuality is itself a constant and repeated effort to imitate its own idealizations. (1993, p. 125)

Thirteen years after Butler’s statement, the mainstreaming of drag has placed it in danger of losing its subversive, gender troubling potential. According to Rachel Devitt, “drag must reorient and expand itself to continue to reflect the range of gender identities and performances, both onstage and off, that it encompasses” (2006, p. 31). Queer culture and scholarship must start engaging with its female performers who are redefining drag and pioneering new styles of kinging and queening.

Drag kings are biological females, or female identified individuals who consciously perform masculinity, while bio queens are biological females, or female identified individuals who consciously perform hyper femininity. The term ‘bio queen’ has developed from the previously contested term ‘bio faux queen’—an abbreviation of biologically faux drag queen. The international drag king and queen community cautioned the term bio faux queen, identifying instead as

bio queens, because it is felt that by naming this behaviour as faux we are suggesting that it is an imitation of true, authentic, natural and superior behaviour, and thus the lesser of a binary dualism. Some transsexuals still regard the prefix 'bio' as problematic and prefer 'fem drag queen', however by using the word bio the international drag community hoped that they could challenge and expand upon notions of biology (Eve, Kentucky Fried Woman, Tristan Taormino & Venus Envy, 2004). Until recently, the women who do drag have had to fight for recognition within serious academic scholarship. Very little scholarly or popular criticism of drag kings existed before the late 1990s and as Devitt notes "the kind of work that femme drag queens are doing has yet to be seriously considered (2006, p. 37). Devitt, who earlier this year published a seminal discussion on the fem drag queen, goes on further to suggest that the bio queen is extremely important in articulating the nature of gender as performative because she does not rely upon the displacement of the imagined "authentic" gender and gender as it is being performed on stage (2006). This particular style of drag is predominantly affiliated with lesbian sexuality, thus it is often assumed that drag kings and bio queens sexually identify as lesbian, but this is not always the case. Such assumptions place unnecessary limitations on the fluidity of queer sexuality, so for the purpose of this exploration, sexual identity and gender performance of the king and bio queen is best understood collectively as queer, in that it disrupts the normative (i.e. heterosexual) project.

A case study of Kings and Bio Queens

Performing as a drag king or bio queen is not widely accepted as mainstream entertainment and still struggles to find acceptance within gay and lesbian communities, as was noted recently in an interview with Brisbane drag king performer Dita Brook:

A lot of hardcore dykes who are anti-men don't know how to take us because they think we want to be men and yet we are women who are very, very out and in touch with our own sexuality. We're portraying men funnily or affectionately—we don't take the piss out of guys, we're embracing a part of the world and having fun with it and some of the audience members don't know what to do with it, it's too uncomfortable for them. (personal communication, November 29, 2005)

In November 2005 I interviewed six members of a Brisbane based group who call themselves "The Twang Gang". I believe they exemplify the use of musical performance as a technology of queer identity, while offering an insight into the relatively unknown world of the drag king and bio queen in Brisbane, Australia. The Twang Gang was formed in August 2000 by Dita Brooke and Mary Alexander and grew to become known as a "travelling fantasy cabaret" (Twang Gang, 2002), which welcomed female identified performers of all kinds to join and experience what Dita refers to as "empowerment

through entertainment” (personal communication, November 29, 2005). The Twang Gang provides a forum for self-discovery by giving women the opportunity to use their bodies, via singing and dancing, to perform a part of themselves that is generally repressed or subdued by social constitutions. Dita comments and the other members agree that:

From being on stage it now overlaps into our real lives, it gives you the space or the freedom to express yourself in any way you want...it helps you stand on your own two feet and be more confident with who you really want to be. You don't have to fit into a pigeon hole of any sort, you don't have to conform to society. (personal communication, November 29, 2005)

On stage, each Twang Gang member performs a unique character identity, named and nurtured throughout one's career. Dita performs mostly as drag king Rock Hard and occasionally as bio queen Mitzee Burger, while Mary performs in some routines as Tricky (a parodic masculine drag king) and then in others as Boom Bang (a super fem bio queen). The Twang Gang have a playful, almost celebratory, air to their performances maintaining that entertainment and community engagement is an integral part of their show. However, this does not dilute their subversive potential, as their aesthetic is emphatically queer; an aesthetic they achieve and maintain by invoking their capacity for gender trouble and a pert camp sensibility.

The Twang Gang trouble gender and question the performance of lesbian sexual identity in two highly powerful ways. Firstly, by being female and performing masculinity and secondly by being female and also performing femininity, thus demonstrating that gender itself is performative and not limited by or attached to the body. As Devitt notes: "Performing and parodying the gender they are assumed to have allows fem drag queens to critique the connection between biology or body and gender or performance in ways not available to conventional drag queens" (Devitt, 2006, p. 37). At the same time, they explore the multiple manifestations of lesbian sexual identity and desire by demonstrating that lesbian sexuality does not necessarily imply a gender crossing to the butch or masculine, but rather allows one to freely assume multiple and conflicting behaviours thus deconstructing the presumed mutual exclusivity of gender performance and sexual identity. In regards to her performance as Tricky, Mary says that, "for me it's not about pretending I have a dick, it's got nothing to do with that. It's interesting...it's really empowering, it feels fantastic and it's such a release...when you're on stage its another world, it's my world" (personal communication, November 29, 2005).

The musical style and stylistic choices of the Twang Gang contribute to the troubling of gender usually enacted by the body. Referring again to the binary organisation of Western thought, rock music in

particular is situated in the masculine sphere while dancing and by extension dance clubs and disco music is thought to be a feminine pursuit (Dibben, 2002, p. 124). When asked specifically about the Twang Gang's musical choices Dita remarked:

When we first started, one of our catch phrases was 'if it ain't got a twang it don't mean a thang'. Twang meant a bit of guitar...[and] there just wasn't any guitar being used in dance clubs, so when our songs came on, and we often used classic type songs, it separated us from what was happening in nightclubs. (personal communication, November 29, 2005).

In this instance the masculine/feminine dualism is blurred by the incongruity of the sonic information and visual spectacle. The nightclub space encourages dancing, thus it is gendered feminine. Femininity is further authenticated via the elaborate costumes and choreography used in Twang Gang performances. However, by setting these performances to classic rock music which is gendered masculine, the performance consequently becomes gender troubled, confusing the feminisation of the space and spectacle with the masculinity that is culturally signified by rock music.

Camp sensibility is employed extensively in Twang Gang performances, both in their costume and their musical sketch comedy style. Mary's character Tricky is camp in his attention to artifice, and it

is “camp’s attention to artifice...[that] helps undermine and challenge the presumed naturalness of gender roles and to displace the essentialist versions of an authentic feminine identity” (Robertson, 1996, p. 6). Tricky is a playfully arrogant rock god^{i[1]}, so Mary chooses the music according to what best represents and identifies with Tricky’s personality. Tricky is hypermasculine in his physicality and mannerisms, he has excessive facial hair and is often sporting an exaggerated phallus. In a notable performance, Mary chose Spiderbait’s version of “Black Betty” as the soundtrack to Tricky’s performance: the heavily distorted guitar driven rock arrangement of this song musically authenticates Tricky’s masculinity. During this performance Tricky was onstage in a car, cruising to this song while dancing girls hung off the sides of the car swinging their long hair around. In this instance, Mary has used camp as a strategy for confusing heteronormativity via over-articulation and artifice: she has exaggerated heteronormative gender roles which are then queered by the audience who understand that the hypermasculinity is engendered by a female body.

Camp is used in other instance as an entertaining political device where by songs are appropriated from popular culture and inscribed with a new meaning that will resonate specifically within queer cultural circles. In response to religious and political oppression of queer lifestyles the Twang Gang developed a show they called “Our Tribe” which was performed at Brisbane’s annual “Pride” fare day in

2005. This performance reflects Jack Babuscio's definition of camp as "a creative energy reflecting a consciousness that is different from the mainstream; a heightened awareness of certain human complications of feeling that spring from the fact of social oppression" (1993, p. 19). "Our Tribe" queerly recontextualises Christian iconography and values. Mary describes the show as signifying to the audience that "this is our church" (personal communication, November 29, 2005).

The costumes were bastardised versions of sacred religious garments, redesigned with a stylistic fusion of fetish and punk fashions. The soundtrack to this performance comprised a collection of songs from popular culture thoroughly considered and arranged so that the concept may be realised both musically and literally. Musical styles including industrial rock, pop, dance, and dance remixes of soul and gospel created a shifting musical energy and shaped the choreography. The lyrics of each song articulated a particular idea. Some lyrics signify religion, while others were chosen for other sentiments. The songs chosen include: "Closer of God" by Nine Inch Nails which speaks of debauchery, temptation and desire; "Like a Prayer" by Madonna to represent the conflict between doing what we understand as "right" and what we desire; "Pride: A Deeper Love" which is an Aretha Franklin remix, encapsulates self-respect and determination and "Rise Up" by The Sun Kids is, as Dita suggests, indicative of exploring and reconciling what is best for the individual,

“it might be bad it might be good but make sure it’s the right thing for you” (personal communication, November 29, 2005). Finally the show ended with “Sing Hallelujah” by Dr. Alban which celebrates the collective queerness and diversity of both the performers and the audience. According to Susan Sontag, “camp doesn’t reverse things. It doesn’t argue that the good is bad, or the bad is good. What it does is to offer for art (and life) a different set of standards” (1966, p. 286), and as Dita previously suggested, this is precisely what the Twang Gang were trying to articulate in their “Our Tribe” show.

As I have demonstrated, popular songs are strategically incorporated into Twang Gang performances to signify character identity, articulate the vested interests of queer subjectivity, and for aesthetic appeal and continuity. Thus music assumes a crucial role in Twang Gang performance and facilitates multiple positive outcomes. Music provides accompaniment and a valuable support in the exploration and realisation of fluid and multifaceted identity; and in performing exercises of the self upon oneself. The playful nature of music provides a safe space in which individual Twang Gang members have effected, with the assistance of fellow performers, certain operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct and ways of being, so as to transform themselves in the pursuit of greater happiness and wisdom—a technology of the self. Likewise, music has assisted the critique of “moral codes” and empowered performers who were otherwise disempowered by their failure to align with the

“acceptable ranges of conduct produced in the given matrix of truth and power” (referring to earlier reference by Peraino, 2003).

Social interactions facilitated by music notably increase a positive sense of self and help to form alliances among all manner of queer performers, engaging and strengthening a community with many differences. Queer identity is dynamic, it is always in the process of constructing itself and never suggests that it is or can be conceived as whole or static. Alternative ways of being and perceiving the self create queer temporalities so that queer identified people can act and experience a world that exists, in this case, outside the heterosexual matrix. The capacity for music to facilitate these actions and experiences suggests that music is not only an important facet in the development of identity, but a vital platform from which to challenge the heterosexist gender paradigm and, by association, static sexual identity that, if remains unchallenged, will continue to perpetuate the false truths of gender and sexuality.

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Notes

^[1] The 'rock god' is an iconic figure of rock 'n' roll subculture. This status is generally reserved for men who achieve great success and fame from playing rock n' roll. It is often the case that fans and aspiring musicians will playfully assume this title to exaggerate a sense of their own importance.