

Does Queer Representation in Music Fall Flat?

By Abby Tiska

Imagine: you are front row and center, anticipating your favorite artist to grace the stage just feet away from you, separated only by a silver, metal barrier. The lights dim, the audience screams, and suddenly you feel invisible in the crowd of people, all here for the same reason. You feel safe.

Now imagine *not* feeling at home or safe in this exact space you came to enjoy music and be your true self.

Ian Davies, 21, a junior at Shippensburg University, knows both of these feelings.

Although Davies, who came out as gay at 14, says the atmosphere at shows, or concerts, are “usually a more progressive, accepting environment,” he and many other LGBTQ members have experienced some form of discrimination-- whether blatantly or underhandedly.

“I’ve noticed usually when I’m talking to a guy I haven’t met before at a show I’m like, I’m just like regarded totally differently if I’m wearing something more feminine than I am something masculine, or straight-passing,” Davies said. “If I’m like, more obviously queer, it’s just like, they talk to me as if I’ve never heard music in my life.”

According to a report by Bianca Fileborn from the University of Melbourne as part of the Australian and New Zealand Critical Criminology Conference in 2012, “there is evidence to suggest that GLBTIQ individuals frequently conceal their sexual or gender identity in order to avoid violent or harassing encounters when occupying public spaces.”

Davies is also part of the 68 percent of LGBT music fans (compared to 63 percent of non-LGBT fans) who attend at least one live music event a year, according to Nielsen’s 360 2016 study. More than half of the reported LGBT music fans on the same study said they would be completely lost without their music.

“Music at its core, to begin with, is healing,” said Jayleen Galarza, an assistant professor in Shippensburg University’s social work and gerontology department. Galarza, who is out as a queer woman, holds a doctorate in human sexuality, co-chairs Shippensburg University’s LGBTQ+ Concerns Committee, and also chairs the faculty union Social Justice Committee.

Galarza said music was paramount to her journey in self-expression. In fact, the first thing her mom did when she came out in high school was buy her a Melissa Etheridge CD. Galarza said she could relate to music in a way that she couldn’t with depictions of LGBTQ people on TV. In fact, according to the Tegan and Sara Foundation, which seeks economic justice, health, and representation for LGBTQ girls and women, less than 1 percent of TV characters are lesbians, and 25 queer female characters were killed on-screen in 2016.

“So with the music, I felt like that was more freeing. And so finding people like Tegan and Sara, Ani DiFranco, Melissa Ferrick... seeing people and hearing people that represented me was so important. And so, like, from a personal experience, I could really connect with that. From a professional lens, then, I see how that helps support folks in their journeys,” Galarza said.

That’s also why Galarza outs herself in the classroom. “Number one, because it’s just my life... And number two, because I understand how important that could be for someone who might be sitting in that space and hears me say I’m queer, or hears me talk about my wife or whatever. For them, that could be a larger meaning,” she said.

More musicians have also identified themselves as members of the LGBTQ community in recent years such as Frank Ocean and Laura Jane Grace, frontwoman of punk band Against Me! who came out as transgender in 2012. Just last month, an EP, “Universal Love - Wedding Songs Reimagined,” came out that turned popular songs into wedding anthems for same-sex couples. Bob Dylan, who opens the EP, turned 1929 hit “She’s Funny That Way” to “He’s Funny That Way.” The EP also features St. Vincent, Kele Okereke, Valerie June, Benjamin Gibbard and Kesha.

However, this June will only be the third anniversary of the U.S. Supreme Court decision that made same-sex marriage a nationwide right. According to a Washington Post article, President Trump even declined last year to recognize June as National LGBT Pride Month. June 12 this year will also mark the second anniversary of the Pulse Nightclub shooting, where 49 people were shot and killed at a gay nightclub in Orlando, Florida. Many people believe there is still progress to be made.

Some are trying to combat issues of representation, inclusivity and safe spaces for the LGBTQ community, specifically in the music scene, both nationally and locally.

Dan Reynolds, the frontman for Imagine Dragons, founded LoveLoud music festival and foundation last year to “ignite the vital conversation about what it means to unconditionally love, understand, accept and support our LGBTQ+ friends and family,” according to their website. Proceeds from ticket purchases are donated to LGBTQ+ organizations, such as the Trevor Project, The Tegan and Sara Foundation and Encircle.

Lance Lowry, the director of LoveLoud music festival, said the organization hopes to raise \$1 million in ticket sales to donate this year. However, Lowry added that the ultimate goal is to raise awareness, something he feels that they have been “incredibly effective” with.

“Music has a transcendent ability to reach us in ways that nothing else can. It helps us experience emotions and themes that help us work through our own life experiences,” said Lowry.

Tegan and Sara took the initiative on their Con X tour to make all venues safer spaces to promote inclusivity, and instituted a zero-tolerance policy for homophobia, transphobia, sexism, racism and religious discrimination while making all-gender restrooms available in venues.

“If you see people that are like you, whether it be sexuality or race, that are, like, doing something like that, you find it really cool and really inspiring,” said Davies, who is tackling this issue locally in Shippensburg. Through DIY shows in his best friend’s apartment, Davies books diverse artists and advertises the shows as safe spaces for all.

Although progress is being made, Galarza hopes that the next step of LGBTQ representation in music is understanding and recognizing the different intersections. “We need more folks who are gonna be able to diversify who we see at the front of the stage, or in the front of the room.”