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Gay Icons: What is the contemporary importance of Queer role models in music and media?

Bachelor's thesis in Bachelor i Musikkvitenskap

Supervisor: Lone, Solvei Rivenes

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1.0 Introduction:

The term “Gay Icon” is one that as of the 19th of May 2023, still has no place in any official dictionary. The term, however, is often used in the queer community. Most gay icons tend to be singers, actresses or celebrities who have accumulated a big following within the LGBTQIA+ community e.g., Madonna, Judy Garland and Diana, the Princess of Wales. Since the term doesn’t seem have a place in any official dictionary, I decided to look it up in an urban one, and I got three good examples there.

1. “A musical diva who has a large gay fanbase.”
2. “A gay icon is someone who is famous or found in popular media who is also proudly part of the LGBTQ+ community.”
3. “Somebody the gay community looks up to.”

“The a minima definition of a gay icon could be a celebrity who is particularly liked by gays” (Guilbert, G.-C. (2018). *Gay Icons* (p. 2)). Although the term “Gay Icon” tends to focus on people of importance and cultural significance to the entire LGBTQIA+ community, I have decided to narrow my focus down to three musical icons from three different queer generations of queer culture.

A word that will be repeated over and over in this paper is queer. To specify what I mean by queer, I’ve found a good explanation from a research paper about queer visibility: “Our use (of the word queer), however, attends not to ignore this history nor to suggest that every identity under the expanding alphabet of LGBTQIA+ is a queer one. Instead, we utilise it as a sociopolitical stance against the exclusions mentioned above of genders and sexualities outside of cisnormative and heteronormative frameworks.” (Wagner and Kitzie, 2021, p. 2). Another great wording for what queerness is, is as follows “*Queer is ... whatever is at odds with the normal, the legitimate, the dominant. There is nothing in particular to which it necessarily refers. It is an identity without an essence.*” (Gavin Lee, 2020, *Queer music theory*. p147).

According to ILGA World- the International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Intersex association there are as of the 19th of May 2023 64 countries in which it is illegal to be in a consensual same-sex relationship. In 11 of these countries, the death penalty can be given for being in a consensual same-sex relationship. In other words, there are 64 countries in the world where queer people have to look to other countries for hope for being accepted for being their true selves. 64 countries where people have to look at pride parades in other

countries in order to get a sliver of the self-expression that queer people in the rest of the world can experience on a daily basis. Seeing that freedom of self-expression is obtainable in other places in the world can give hope that given time, their own country might legalize queerness.

With this in mind, the aim of my thesis is to explain why queer representation within music is still culturally relevant in a time where queerness is generally accepted across the westernized world. Queer people that have just gotten basic human rights in the last decades, are being targeted again. The queer population of the world still needs Gay Icons.

2.0 Theory

When I started writing this paper queerness still remained controversial in today's societies. A law passed in Tennessee that bans “Adult Cabaret entertainment” near children. “Adult Cabaret entertainment” seems to point towards the direction of strip shows, burlesque and the like. Instead, the law passed in Tennessee states that “Adult Cabaret”: “Means adult-oriented performances that are harmful to minors, as that term is defined in § 39-17-901, and that feature topless dancers, go-go dancers, exotic dancers, strippers, male or female impersonators, or similar entertainers.” - TN SB0003. All of the explained variants of what is featured in “Adult Cabaret” show some form of sexualised content, that is until it mentions male and female impersonators. Male and female impersonators have been around for centuries, an example is the “onnagata, actors playing women’s roles in all-male kabuki theater in Japan.” (Isaka, 2016). Onnagata were actors that impersonated their female counterparts from the early 1600’s and onwards. The kabuki performances were open to people of all ages and featured stories that were appropriate for various ages.

Later in the bill for the law, it is stated that “It is an offense for a person to perform adult cabaret entertainment: (A) On public property; or (B) In a location where the adult cabaret entertainment could be viewed by a person who is not an adult... A first offense for a violation of subdivision is a Class A misdemeanor, and a second or subsequent such offense is a Class E felony. “

Although the bill itself doesn’t immediately read as homophobic or transphobic, it is. To quote the legendary trans woman Sasha Colby, “It’s wild to see what’s going on, all of these anti-trans bills being disguised as anti-drag bills”. Due to the way this bill was worded, it lets police officers in Tennessee arrest anyone accused of crossdressing, aka dressing in clothing that was designed for the opposite sex of what you were born as in public. This means that

trans people can be arrested in public if their visual transition isn't deemed to be the same gender as the clothes they wear. This is due to the fact that "male or female impersonators" is on the list of features in an adult cabaret entertainment. Now, this legal jargon might seem like it doesn't have much relevance to my theme, but it greatly does.

Queer culture and history is one that has been both shunned by society and been a subject of prejudice and prosecution. Magnus Hirschfeld was one of the early sexologists and queer activists. His life was dedicated to the people he knew as "Sexual Intermediaries", which he used as a term similar to how we use queer today. In 1919, he opened a clinic in Berlin called "Institut für Sexualwissenschaft". For the sake of this paper, I choose to translate it into English as "The institute for sexual science and research". At the time of opening the institute, Germany had a very harsh law against homosexuality at the time known best as "Paragraph 175". The law specified that that homosexual relations between men were seen as equally horrific and illegal as bestiality. Hirschfeld's clinic was a place where queer people could be themselves and not fear for their lives. This clinic was also the first place in the world where gender re-affirming surgeries were performed. Trans-people came there for hormone treatments and Hirschfeld was also able to procure "Transvestite Identity Cards" for them. These identity cards made it so that police were unable to arrest the women based on accusations of them being homosexual men by saying that the person was trans. His methodology gave new hope to queer individuals across the world. Hirschfeld also went on international tours to explain how homosexuality and other queer identities were natural and not a psychological issue. Sadly, most of his research and accomplishments were burned in 1933 when nazis did a purge of all "non-human" research and knowledge. The institute was completely emptied, and decades of research and medical files were lost.

"We encourage all of Norway to show solidarity and celebrate Pride at home, in their neighbourhoods and towns." Leader of Oslo Pride, Inger Kristin Haugsevje.

This statement was given on the 25th of June 2022. At 1:10 AM that night, shots were fired by a terrorist towards "London Pub"- a gay bar in Oslo. Twenty-three people were shot, two of which died. The rest of the victims ended up in hospital. During the press conference where the above statement was given, the police also said that Oslo Pride 2022 was canceled and that no parade nor other scheduled public celebrations would take place. Some pride celebrants however, decided that they wouldn't let fear and terror destroy their celebrations. There were only a few people in the parade to begin with, but people flocked after the parade

until it spanned several blocks. The parade shifted its path so that it ended up outside London Pub. The sound of the celebration was audible several streets over. Life, celebration and love conquered the streets where fear had been induced less than 24 hours earlier. A bed of flowers, cards and other gifts were laid down next to the police tape that closed off the area of the attack. The crown prince and his wife showed up and held a speech that could be heard between speakers blasting queer hits and drunken celebrants.

The shooting was spoken out against worldwide at other pride celebrations. The attack was directed at the queer population that had gathered in Oslo. Sadly, it wasn't the first nor will it be the last attack at a queer place of joy. Queerness was decriminalized in Norway in 1972. Queer marriages were legalized in 1993. 50 years after decriminalization and 30 years after marriage equality, there was a shooting that nearly halted celebrations of freedom.

2.1 Queer visibility

"In life, we hide the parts of ourselves we don't want the world to see. We lock them away. We tell them "no." We banish them. But here, we don't. Welcome to Montero" (Lil Nas X, Montero video, 2021).

Queer visibility is another term that there is a need to explain. Queer people are quite obviously physically visible. The term means more of a metaphorical visibility, being seen as queer in public is different from being seen as heteronormative. Lil Nas X is a great example of this. When he first hit the public image with "Old Town Road", he presented himself as a cowboy. He did, however, never claim to be straight or heteronormative. In fact, he came out in 2019 following the hit song's release. The revelation didn't necessarily spark much outrage, just solidified who the artist was. But as most queer people have heard in their lives, he wasn't so in your face about it. He publicly identified as gay but didn't have any show-y presentations of it. That changed when he in 2021 released the music video for "Montero (Call Me By Your Name)", the intro to which is readable above this paragraph. This intro goes to explain that Nas had hidden parts that he didn't want the world to see, but now he was going to put it on display. "Welcome to Montero" working as a new introduction to who he is as a person, this being due to Montero being his birth name. The music video features Nas in every role, beginning as both the biblical Eve and the snake from the garden of Eden. Instead of an apple as the forbidden fruit, Eve and the snake embrace in a very sensual kiss. The rest of the music video includes Nas being judged by various iterations of himself as statues or dragged-up versions of himself. The finale of the video being him pole dancing down to hell

before giving Satan a lap-dance that ends in Satan dying and Nas stealing his horns to become the new ruler of hell. The imagery of a gay man giving Satan a lap-dance mirrors how people of the LGBTQIA+ have long been associated with going to hell within Christian belief systems. When Nas then takes Satan's horns and becomes the new ruler of hell, he embraces the idea that he might go to hell, and when he gets there, he won't be punished but be welcomed as an esteemed guest. By doing this, Nas gives a fictional finger to any of his fans that might not support his queerness, showing that he isn't afraid of criticism or hatred.

Now how does this show queer visibility? Let me quickly explain. When Lil Nas X came out as gay, his public image was a cowboy singing about riding a horse down an "Old Town Road". Appearing as gay, but not with an image that was outside of the heteronormative world. By doing everything to appear as non-heteronormative in his music video for "Montero" he shows that not only does he disagree with a heteronormative image, he shuns it and wants to be seen more as a queer individual. By doing this, he allows other queer people to feel as if being a fan of his includes acceptance into a world of queerness.

3.0 Method

The data and sources I have collected come from reading through an endless number of pages and terms using NTNU's online access to Oria. The sources that were chosen to be included in this paper, needed to have a direct connection to the overarching theme of the paper, which is queer icons. While reading and systematically going through the works of experts in the likes of Hirschfeld, I found relevance between the past, the now and the future. This also led me to make an understanding of American lawmaking, in regard to the topic of gender expression. Through the work, I experienced a shortage of research of newly modern queer icons, such as Sam Smith and Lady Gaga. The field of ethnomusicology has long dealt with the preservation of various cultures through music, yet on this topic I was coming up empty on recent research into a field that is ever changing. With this lack of research, the most important way of constructing the analysis was to look at articles, mentions and interviews, both in regarding constructing an understanding of their positions, but also trying to create a firm positioning of the queer community in regard to my analysis.

3.1 Lack of historic research.

During my research, there were not many academic sources that described Queer Icons, nor showed the importance they have had on the ever-changing environment of entertainment.

One of the reasons could be theorized to be partially due to the hatred of the queer community through the centuries. While researching the topic of queerness, I came across the studies of Magnus Hirschfeld, and read about the burning of his research during the Nazi raids that removed the “undesirable”, which was all that opposed the cleanliness of the aryan race. How much of the research that was lost, we will never know, but there could be a belief that, had these documents and his research survived, our understanding about queerness and its direct relation to culture would have been a ground block for today’s researchers.

4.0 Artistic analysis

Before I can begin shedding light on the three Gay Icons that I will elaborate on and why I picked them, I need to further explain what makes some artists or their music culturally queer. Most of the music that is used within the queer scene tends to be music that has been under the pop-umbrella at one time or another. A great example for this is Demi Lovato and her journey the past few years. To preface her recent journey, Demi Lovato is a well-known singer that got her start acting in Disney projects like *Camp Rock* and *Princess Protection Program*. When she later in her career pushed away from Disney, her career as an artist quickly changed her image from happy Disney teen to rough and real vocalist. With hits like *Skyscraper* (2011) and *Heart Attack* (2013), she solidified herself as the real deal. Demi’s journey into queer fandom started when she in 2021 broke off an engagement to Max Ehrlich. In an interview shortly after she stated that “I am too gay to marry a man right now, I don't know if that will change in 10 years and I don't know if that'll never change, but I love accepting myself.” (Demi Lovato, 2021). Most of her earlier works were considered to be regular pop songs, but once she started identifying as queer, plenty of her earlier works were considered to be queer as well. Later in 2021, Demi Lovato would change her preferred pronouns to they/them as she considered herself to be non-binary at the time. Towards the end of 2022 she changed them back to she/her.


For the sake of this paper and the coming analysis, Prince represents a time in which queerness was considered mostly controversial worldwide. He represents a generation of queer people who grew up without necessarily having strong queer models to lean on and be shaped by. Lady Gaga represents a time in which queerness was beginning to gain more acceptance in western countries. She represents a generation that could lean on queer models like Madonna, David Bowie and yes, Prince. Sam Smith represents a time in which queerness is widely accepted in western countries, however still facing controversy in the rest of the

world. They represent a generation that could deal with less opposition and hatred for defining how they identified.

4.1 Prince, also known as ♀

Prince became a gay icon early on in his career. As Reiss Smith from Pink News wrote, “On the cover of Prince’s third album, *Dirty Mind* (released in 1980), the singer stares seductively down the barrel of the lens, nude but for a biker jacket, high-waisted briefs and a pair of thigh-high stockings cropped just out of shot.” While the look at the time might have been seen as highly controversial and groundbreaking, today the same look would have been seen as modern and queer. Amongst several other similar looks, one can be seen donned by Sam Smith in their music video for “I’m not here to make friends”. Wearing only a corset, elbow length gloves, a jockstrap and some high heels, the visual gives the same nude feeling that Prince’s look did. Prince would in the years after the release of “*Dirty Mind*” become quite the symbol for both gender and sexual fluidity. On the second track of “*Dirty Mind*” he sings about a breakup that gravely hurt him, and at about halfway through the song he sings “I never was the kind to make a fuss, when he was there, sleeping in-between the two of us.” which alludes to bisexuality. His next album, “*Controversy*” released the year after, would have further allusions to sexual fluidity. The opening lyrics of the title track goes as follows: “I just can't believe what people say. Am I black or white, am I straight or gay.”. Later in the song, after the word “*Controversy*” has been repeated plenty with various statements in-between, he sings “People call me rude, I wish we all were nude. I wish there was no black or white, I wish there were no rules.”. These sentences seem to mirror the opening lyrics, and instead of singing he wishes there was no sexuality, he sings of wishing there were no rules, seemingly showing a wish for sexual fluidity as the norm. In 1987, Prince released a track called “*Sign O the Times*”. Within the first few sentences in the song, it contained the first musical mention of the HIV/AIDS epidemic that was spreading around the world at the time. The song also tackled various other heavy subjects. Gang wars in adolescence, the brutality of hurricanes and starvation are just a few of the themes the song points to. It also pokes fun at the way the US spends their money on things like rockets and outer space when there are people in the country that might need the money more.

Prince dressed and acted androgynous from early in his career. Wearing an unusual amount of makeup, an excessive amount of glitter, an obscene number of rhinestones and donning

both of the gender symbols several times through his career. In 1993 when celebrating his 35th birthday, Prince gets a self-proclaimed spiritual awakening and decides he has to change his artistic name. The one he decided to change it to is one that defies male or female, black or white and above all else, language itself. This name is of course the famous symbol . Giving no explanation on how the symbol should be pronounced or what it was called, the media quickly called the symbol “The Love Symbol”. The media at the time didn’t know what to call the artist either, as calling someone “The Love Symbol” seemed out of reach and artificial. Therefore, the synonym TAFKAP aka The Artist Formerly Known as Prince became his new nickname. Prince himself however, didn’t acknowledge that TAFKAP was his name, nor did he ever call himself that. When he was interviewed by Chris Rock for MTV in 1997, Chris asked about his androgyny and whether it was “an act or searching for a sexual identity”. Prince elusively answered that he “I don’t suppose I was searching really, I think I was just being who I was, being the true Gemini that I am.”. By responding in this way, Prince almost outright describes himself as being androgynous. In modern times, this way of dressing would most likely get him called non-binary or gender fluid. Prince decided to return to his old stage name in 2000 after being signed to a new record label.

At the turn of the millennia, Prince got his second self-proclaimed spiritual awakening. This time, it made him turn to faith as a Jehovah's Witness. According to the official Jehovah’s Witness website “The Bible says: “Men who practice homosexuality . . . will not inherit God’s Kingdom.” (1 Corinthians 6:9, 10) The same applies to women. —Romans 1:26.”. In other words, Prince deciding to follow this faith, meant turning his back on his queer fans that had previously supported him. Since Prince died in 2016, there is no telling what his opinions were. He never spoke out against anything queer; he never spoke out in support either which is quite different from the next artist I will discuss.

4.2 “To god and the gays” - Lady Gaga 2009.

Lady Gaga has been a staple within the queer community for a long time. In an early interview she stated that "When I started in the mainstream it was the gays that lifted me up, I committed myself to them and they committed themselves to me, and because of the gay community I'm where I am today." (Lady Gaga, September 2009, Out Magazine). Earlier in the same year, there had been an upskirt photo taken of Lady Gaga where a wardrobe malfunction made it look like she had a bugle. Due to this photo, a rumour started claiming

that she was a hermaphrodite, a person born with the genitalia of both sexes. Her management brushed it off as ridiculousness, and she made fun of it several times over the years. In a 2011 interview with Anderson Cooper for 60 minutes overtime, he asks about the scandal, and she quickly replies “Maybe I do, would it be so terrible?... Why the hell am I gonna waste my time and give a press release about whether or not I have a penis? My fans don’t care and neither do I.” The way Gaga acts and speaks unapologetically and with clear love of her fans has reflected well on her fans and has contributed greatly to why her fame has remained to this day. In 2010 while being interviewed by Barbara Walters, Gaga would explain her sexuality due to a big public debate saying “I’ve only been in love with men, I’ve not been in love with women... I have certainly had sexual relationships with women”. To her fans, this was just further proof of how she always strives to be herself a hundred percent. She also explained in the interview how she wanted all of her fans to unapologetically be themselves. “I aspire to try to be a teacher to my young fans who are, who feels just like I felt when I was younger... I felt like a freak. I guess what I’m trying to say is I want to liberate them, I want to free them of their fears and make them feel like they can create their own place in the world” (Lady Gaga to Barbara Walters on 20/20, 29th of January 2010).

The 23rd of May 2011, Lady Gaga released the album “Born this way”. The title track became an instant anthem within the gay community. The entire song features lyrics that express how each and every person should live as themselves, “I’m beautiful in my way 'cause God makes no mistakes, I’m on the right track, baby, I was born this way, Don’t hide yourself in regret, just love yourself, and you’re set I’m on the right track, baby, I was born this way” being one of the most quotable lyrics of the song. Later on in the song is also the biggest rainbow flag Gaga had raised through her lyrics thus far in her career; “No matter gay, straight or bi, lesbian transgender life”. The song is one of the most prominent songs heard in pride celebrations worldwide to this day.

At the 2010 MTV VMAs Gaga decided to wear a dress that has since been seen as her most iconic outfit. That outfit being her infamous meat dress. During the evening, Gaga was surrounded by gay ex-military men that had lost their position in the military due to the “Don’t ask, don’t tell” bill. It was a bill that was overturned the 20th of September 2011, a year and eight days after Gaga wore the dress. In her words, “It (the dress) has many interpretations, but for me this evening it’s as if we don’t stand up for what we believe in and if we don’t fight for our rights, pretty soon we’re gonna have as much rights as the meat on

our bones” (Lady Gaga on Ellen at the VMAs the 12th of September 2010). Lady Gaga in this way showed even further support for the gay community by promoting gay rights issues.

The next big gay thing that Gaga did was the start of her ARTPOP album, beginning with releasing the single “Applause” in 2013. In the music video for the song, Gaga references various pieces of pop culture, art and theatre. The first visual reference is to Little Edie from the grey gardens. Then Gaga references the Mad Hatter from Alice in wonderland. With this reference, Gaga dons an outfit that is the second most masculine outfit she has worn, the most masculine being her outfit for her “Yoü And I” music video. The next outfit reference appears to be to her own look in her previous music video for “Telephone”. She has a wig that seems to be the same one, but her face is covered in more soot and the makeup is smeared. She is also in a cage, possibly alluding to putting her past behind her. Commedia dell’arte inspires the next look, with her face being painted completely white with blue and red paint used to show emotions. This seems to draw a fine line to Pierrot from classic commedia theatre. Gaga does another variant of this look in the video, where her face is completely white with yellow brows and an obnoxious amount of blush. The next look that Gaga draws inspiration appears to be Botticelli’s “Birth of Venus”. She wears nothing but a pair of shells to cover her breasts and some stringed shells to cover her vagina. The final reference that is clear seems to be to her look in her “Love Game” music video, which again is a reference to the 1974 movie “The Night Porter”. The final look Gaga wears in the music video is one that seems to blend all sorts of art together, likely a reference to her upcoming album being called ARTPOP or to the lyrics in Applause that go “Pop culture was in art, now art's in pop culture, in me”. When ARTPOP finally released later in 2013, it caused a new revival of her music and made her once more stand out to queer people across the globe. Gaga’s next big album wouldn’t be until 2016. “Joanne” had the most unassuming cover of all of Gaga’s big albums so far but held powerful songs like “Perfect Illusion” and “Million Reasons”. Although her newer material didn’t hit the queer itch like her early hits did, they were still great songs in their own rights. Before her next big solo album, Gaga was cast in the remake of A star is born. The 2018 version of the classic story featured Gaga as the main character Ally. Her origin story was shifted to start as a vocalist that performed in drag bars. The movie birthed several new top hits, one of which, “Shallow” would go on to win two Grammys. Gaga once more soared to top lists across the world.

2019 marked the 50th anniversary of stonewall and the queer rights movement taking off in the US. For the occasion, Lady Gaga was invited to speak to the New Yorkers celebrating

Pride. Gaga gave a fourteen-minute-long speech that praised the queer community and how they had embraced her even if “I may not even be considered a part of this community even though I like girls sometimes.” (Lady Gaga, 2019). She also highlighted how the Trans community was the ones who started the riots at Stonewall, and how the queer community needed to still flock around their trans sisters and brothers to keep them safe. Gaga ended her speech by saying “true love is when you would take a bullet for someone, and you know that I would take a bullet for you any day of the week... Happy pride”.

The following year of doom (2020), Gaga released the single “Stupid Love” to start garnering some interest for her next big album “Chromatica”. Although the album was released in the middle of the Covid Pandemic, it did great on lists across the world. The two tracks that did the best among queer individuals were “Stupid Love” and “Rain On Me (with Ariana Grande)”. “Stupid Love” being a song that was similar to Gaga’s early hits like “Poker Face” and “Just Dance” but with a beat that was somehow even more enticing and alluring. The whole song just being a dance song with love as a theme. “Rain On Me” became an overnight hit within the queer community almost mirroring “Born This Way”. The clear queerness of the song was so apparent that it was used in several tv shows to showcase queer existence. One of these was season 11 episode 7 of *Shameless*, two of the main characters, Ian and Mickey dance to the song several times throughout the episode, even ending the episode while singing it to each other in a bathroom. Throughout her career, Lady Gaga always embraced her queerness. Which is something that isn’t just as easy for everyone.

4.3 I've always been Non-Binary; I've always been Queer – Sam Smith 2022.

Sam Smith became popular in 2013. They released several songs that became hits quite fast, “Money On My Mind” and “I’m Not the Only one” being early classics and both being on Sam’s first album “In The Lonely Hour”. Sam never hid the fact that they were gay, but in 2019 they came out as non-binary.

To explain how Sam have been evolving as a queer artist, I’m going to take a deep dive into their newest album “Gloria”. The reasoning behind this is that “Gloria” has been the epitome of Sam coming to term with themselves and fully embracing their identity and queerness.

The album opens with “Love me more”. The track explores how Sam previously battled with body dysmorphia and self-hatred. This comes through in the first lyrics of the song “Have you ever felt like being somebody else? Feeling like the mirror isn’t good for your health?”

Every day I'm trying not to hate myself" The song does however pivot towards loving yourself and how every day you should strive towards self-acceptance and drop the negative feelings in the back of your head. Sam has previously spoken about how early in their career they would look in their mirror and no matter how much weight they lost they would only see themselves as big. (Sam Smith, 2023, Apple Music).

The next track on the album is "No God". The song plays with someone who has a god complex, believing themselves to be above anyone else and that their opinions are nothing but the honest truth. "It's about the ignoring of a human being and allowing someone's drastic politics to get in the way of caring for someone else." (Sam Smith, 2023, Apple Music). In many ways, this sentiment mirrors how queer people have been handled throughout the years. During the start of the HIV/AIDS epidemic, some queer people who caught it would be feared. People thought that the disease could spread through hugs or physical touch. The 11th of December 1984, the Reagan administration in the US were asked about whether or not the president had expressed concern about the disease, and its estimated exposure to 300'000 people. As a response, they infamously answered that they "Haven't heard him (Reagan) express concern" (Larry Speaks, 11th December 1984, press briefing).

The third slot on the album is called "Hurting Interlude". For this interlude, a clip from the first New York pride is played. "Having to lie, I feel, is the saddest and the ugliest part of being a homosexual. When you have your first bad love experience, for instance, you can't go to your brother or sister and say "I'm hurting"." Sam has stated that they wanted to include this clip as it sums up how queer youth can really struggle when it comes to young heartbreak as there might not be anyone to go to.

After the interlude, a quiet edited hum turns into a dance beat. The song "Lose You" starts playing. The song and its lyrics have a message of heartbreak and not being ready to lose someone, explaining why "Hurting Interlude" was before it. The song exudes the same feelings as Robyn's "Dancing on My Own". Robyn being one of Sam's beloved divas. According to Sam, they wanted the song to "take me to a German gay club.". The song fully embraces this with its euro beat and overall queer aesthetic.

Once "Lose you" is done, the next song is "Perfect (feat. Jessie Reyez)". From the start to finish of this song, it's easy to hear that the song is both a metaphor for being imperfectly perfect and for sex. "I'm not perfect, but I'm worth it. I'm not perfect, but I'm working on it. I go up, I go down, I go all the way around.". The lyrics really brings out a feeling of

oppressed sexuality and getting constant reminders from others about what you should and shouldn't do. On the tour that accompanied the album, Sam has two of their backup dancers mimic sexual acts in the background throughout the entire song, even the spotlight lights up the dancers instead of Sam.

After "Perfect (feat Jessie Reyez), the next thing we hear is a choir chanting the phrase "Mommy don't know daddy's getting hot, at the body shop, doing something Unholy", and with this the sixth track of the album begins; "Unholy (feat. Kim Petras)". Unholy, like the previous track, features sex as one of its main themes. The other one main theme being unfaithfulness or dishonesty. In their interview with Apple Music about the album, Sam stated that "There's a certain humour that only a queer person can understand because we've been through it, and we live it.". This statement likely points to how the song pokes fun at the trope of a married man having an affair with a gay person or trans woman. This is further elaborated by the fact that Kim Petras is featured on the song. She's a trans-woman who has been outspoken about her experiences as a queer person. When the song won a grammy for Best Pop Duo/Group Performance at the 65th grammy awards, Petras said in her acceptance speech that "Sam graciously wanted me to accept this award because I am the first transgender woman to win this award". On their tour, Sam ends the show with "Unholy", prefacing the song by saying: "Welcome to my gay cabaret", indicating that the song is meant to embody the queer experience.

The next song on the album is called "How to Cry". According to Sam, this song, while being completely different from "Unholy" is about the same person. Where "Unholy" jokes about the situation and how bad it was, "How to Cry" embodies more of the emotional sadness that the situation brought at the time. The song also reflects well on how the heteronormative world expects young male presenting youth not to be honest about their feelings. "Nobody told you how to cry, but somebody showed you how to lie".

Next on the list is "Six Shots". After the last song being a slow and thoughtful ballad, "Six Shots" returns to the theme of sex. The song has a similar feel and pacing as Marvin Gaye's "Let's Get it on". A slow beat that feels organic and lyrics that clearly relay that the song is about sex. The only lyrics in the song that doesn't immediately allude to sex is "there's no loving me" which is repeated a whopping 14 times. According to Sam the reasoning for that is that "I was insanelly single and that's where the lyric 'there's no loving me' comes from." (Sam Smith, 2023, Apple Music).

The sexual innuendos continue in “Gimme (feat. Koffee & Jessie Reyez)”. Throughout the song, the word Gimme is said a total of 120 times in 2 minutes and 49 seconds. Averaging the word being said approximately once per 1,4 seconds. The song’s lyrics mention voyeurs and keeps repeating that the singer wants more than anything just to get down and dirty. The song itself draws on beats and moments that could remind of the dancehall music from Jamaica, which coincidentally is where the song was recorded.

Once “Gimme” finishes, the second interlude of the album starts playing, namely “Dorothy’s Interlude”. This interlude is split in three. The first sentence is a clip from the movie *Pink Flamingos* (1972), where the drag queen Divine says, “How’s this for a center spread?”. The interlude then does a swap over to Judy Garland in the *Wizard of Oz* (1933) singing “Over the rainbow”. Finally, the third clip is from a 1973 rally where the trans woman Sylvia Riviera says, “Believe in the gay power”. In the full speech that Sylvia Riviera held, she spoke out about how trans people were treated in hospitals while other members of the queer community were booing her off the stage.

As if it was part of the interlude, the next song “I’m Not Here To Make Friends” starts with a quote from RuPaul Charles saying “If you can’t love yourself, how in the hell you gon’ love somebody else? Can I get an Amen in here?”. This song follows the theme of most of the album by talking about lovers. Sam also tries to show their disdain towards trying to please others and with this song very much explains that they’re done with that.

The title track of the album finally shows up next with “Gloria”. Out of the entire album, this is the only song where Sam’s vocals aren't the main attraction. Instead, it’s on the choir and the lyrics.


“It’s a really classic love song for everyone.” is how Sam described the final song of the album, “Who We Love (feat. Ed Sheeran). The song is a pulled back, almost acoustic duet that has a simple but powerful message. “We love who we love”. The song underscores what has been the general meaning of the entire album, and that is to embrace who you are as a person, even if the world wants to shut you down and tell you that you can't be yourself, there is nothing more natural than being yourself.

As written before this analysis of “Gloria” as a full album, this album fully explores Sam’s self-acceptance and queer expression.

4.4 Summarizing the analyses

Throughout the analyses we find three queer coded artists that have lived three very differently experienced lives. One as a very straight man with allusions to androgyny and fluid sexuality, one as a sexually free woman who embraces the queer community as her own due to their overwhelming support and one non-binary homosexual person who has expressed their queerness, sexuality and identity through the release of their last album.

Each of these queer coded artists became queer icons in their own rights.

Prince became a queer icon early in his career by having lyrics that broke the heteronormative stance on gender and sexuality. He kept his status when he changed his name to a symbol that combined the female and male symbol to create  which the public dubbed as “The Love Symbol”. Prince even explained that at some point, his androgyny was just an expression of who he was at the time.

Lady Gaga became a queer icon due to her unapologetically exploration of her own sexuality from the very start of her career. Never denying that she wasn't a straight woman and embracing the weird and the unusual in life. Her status as a gay icon has kept growing as she has made homages to great pieces of art and big pop-culture moments.

For Sam Smith, there is no timeline as to where their status as a queer icon began. They just grew into the role over time, and when they started to fully embrace their identity as a non-binary person, their fandom grew even more and solidified their role as a queer icon.

When it comes to what kind of legacy each of the three icons leave as of today;

Prince leaves behind a legacy as a formerly beloved icon that became a hypocrite and seemingly left his former queer identity and fans behind.

Lady Gaga has built a legacy that relies on loving oneself for who you are and never giving up. Sticking up for those around you and loving them for who they are.

Sam Smith has built a legacy that is all about embracing and expressing your identity regardless of what others around you might think.

5.0 Discussion.

Through this paper I have tried putting forwards different facts that explain how Gay Icons are of a great importance in the modern world. To do this I have used relevant literature to try

to find an understanding about how laws have historically tried “knocking” down queer people. I’ve also tried to find an understanding about how the importance of queer visibility has grown. Being able to see people on tv, in other media and even in music that reflect how one feels inside has been more important than ever. I have made an effort to familiarize myself with these issues while also dealing with a lack of historical documentation and research due to historical erasure of important information.

On the world as it is today, queer identity and acceptance is at it’s all time highest. 129 countries have legalized consensual same-sex marriage. There are however 64 countries in which it is punishable by several years in prison, or even death. Although two thirds of the world have legalized and therefore in a way accepted queerness as part of their culture, there is still plenty to do.

In a country as big and with a subtitle such as “The land of the free”, it is surprising that the United States have started passing bills and laws that remove the freedom of expression of some of their people. Similarly in 1930’s Germany, there were laws made that removed the freedom and rights of several of their minority groups at the time.

TN SB0003, (2023) and Paragraph 175 cf. German law 1935, have some of the same freedom restricting wording that oppress their own citizens. These two laws reflect on the current hostility towards queerness both in today's society by the law of TN SB0003 (2023) by indirectly criminalizing the trans community and by criminalizing any gay person for just the thought of them being gay cf. Paragraph 175.

Paragraph 175 encapsulates the past, one where exploration, self-love and acceptance were deemed to be “lesser than” and illegal. Whereas TN SB0003 hinders both current and future explorations, self-love and acceptance. Though TN SB0003 primarily exists as a law to protect children from exposure to lewd and inappropriate conduct, it also indirectly puts non-binary people and trans-men and –women in a position where expressing their gender can cause legal punishment.

Queer visibility has in the last years become more important than ever. Lil Nas X showed this in the way he changed his entire image with a single music video. Going from a very heteronormative gay man, that also could resemble what we know as A4 in “Old Town Road”, to an effeminate and queer gay man in “Montero” by making fun of negative things that are typically said about queer people. The term “You will go to hell”, being the most prominent wording that is being made fun of. By doing this he shows that he is not afraid of

being perceived as a queer man. All of these points, along with several others are what creates a “Queer” visibility in the modern era.

Prince, Lady Gaga and Sam Smith all have in common that they started their careers as gay icons. Prince with his commentary on societal norms surrounding gender, sexuality and race. Lady Gaga by openly being bisexual and embracing other queer people around her. Sam Smith by being an openly homosexual man and singer. They’ve all written music that are inclusive to anyone and everyone, wanting nobody to feel left out of the message that their songs present.

As gay icons, I feel that the following quotes best summarize the three main artists discussed in this paper. The first one being Prince when he said, “I was just being who I was, being the true Gemini that I am.”. By doing this, he showed how his androgynous phase was part of his exploration of self, both gender and sexuality. When Lady Gaga said “When I started in the mainstream it was the gays that lifted me up”, she showed how the queer community has together with her, created a safe environment to exist as oneself. No matter what criticisms one might face there will always be someone there to back you up. Lastly, when Sam Smith announced, “I’ve always been Non-Binary; I’ve always been Queer”, they showed how self-identification is something that might take time, but it is always hidden under the surface and not to be afraid of.

By placing these three quotes up against one another, one can see the most important part of them is about exploration, self-love and acceptance.

With Prince’s Sign O the Times, Prince sings about how there are negative things happening across the world, but that they cannot necessarily be fixed. They’re just a “Sign O the Times”. The song is a social commentary on what is actually happening in the world. It is in no way supposed to represent celebration. The song talks about war, drugs, plague, poverty and much more. The societal problems that the song describes can be likened to the restless human spirit. Contrastingly, Lady Gaga's song “Born this Way” celebrates the human soul inspiring spirit, describing each person as being “born superstars”. Then re-affirming it by singing about how as long as you are true to who you are and who you believe you were born to be, you’re on the right track of life. Sam Smith’s “Love me More” tackles the human recuperating spirit, that can deal with seeing themselves as a failure on a daily basis. “Feeling like the mirror isn’t good for your health”. Yet the song says that hearing our own words thrown back at us can cause a slow healing and a recuperating of the self.

All these songs deal with various states of the human spirit, whether it is restless, inspiring or recuperating. By this I mean that each of the songs evoke a different feeling, mood and way of thought. Sign O' the Times brings about restless feelings that can lead to hopelessness or in the worst case a frenzy, but it also reminds us to think about other people, remembering that our experience is not the only one. Born this Way inspires feelings of hope, expression and a genuine feeling of self. It reminds us that we're all equal at birth, and that we all have the opportunity design our own path or as Gaga might state "track". Love me More brings about feelings of reflection, growth and perseverance. Its themes about accepting who you are and learning to love yourself can be important in growing as a person and to persevere through hard times.

When you compare how the three artists have held their responsibilities as queer icons, Prince becomes an outlier. He never clearly stated any support, nor affiliation with a queer identity. Even so, does this matter? In Prince's lifetime, he re-defined what both masculinity and femininity can look like. His music tackled difficult themes like race, gender, sexuality, cultural differences and so much more. Although he never proved himself to be a vocal supporter of any queer person or ideology, the actions he took while he was alive created a discussion around themes that were often avoided or seen as taboo by the mainstream public.

The reason to include him in this paper was to depict a queer icon from a time where queerness was still seen as outside of the norm of the western world. Another reason I include him, is that he up until his death, he had a major following of queer people and was acting in a way that didn't fit to societies expectations of a cisgendered heterosexual male. To this date, his behaviours and actions still challenge the expectations of a cisgendered heterosexual male, even without ever seeing himself as an icon of change or innovation. Lady Gaga and Sam Smith have both accepted their status as queer icons and know that their actions, no matter how small can lead to a shift in the perception of queer people as a whole. Prince is the only cisgendered heterosexual male in recent time who can truly be considered a challenger of societal norms and a genuine queer icon.

6.0 Conclusion

To conclude, the contemporary importance of Queer role models in music and media is to aid in acceptance and to bring hope on a global scale. As we've seen through the years, the laws that have opened up so many spaces for queer people can quickly be redacted or overwritten.

Though many of the laws passed today strive for inclusivity and protection of the queer communities across the world, they don't just happen by themselves. Magnus Hirschfeld and his studies on sexuality and gender expression in the 1920s show how gender and sexual expression is something that happens in nature. Although his studies showed this more than a hundred years ago, there are still lawmakers or even whole countries that disagree with what can be argued to be scientifically proven for more than a century.

Even though there are plenty of people who claim that gender and sexuality are socially constructed, Hirschfeld's studies show that people who identify outside of the heteronormative standard are in no way socially constructed. Sadly, plenty of his research and discoveries were lost to erasure by those that deemed his works to be illegitimate.

Through music, artists and tracks, we can experience feelings that might've felt locked away. Restlessness, inspiration and hardships can feel easier when one is listening to music that is made by/for someone of their own or similar identity. The songs Prince produced in his lifetime can give hope and a sense of understanding to someone who might be struggling with their identity and how to find out who they are. Lady Gaga's discography can be described as a community building framework that promises security, acceptance and understanding. Sam Smith's album "Gloria", promises that if we managed to persevere through the hard times in life, there will be joy, acceptance and a feeling of freedom on the other side.

Although music and identity can be seen as two separate ideas of expression, when musicality can help express identity, it strengthens the emotional bonds that music can cause onto its listeners. A song about love can become about self-love and accepting oneself, a song about heartache can be about losing a sense of self.

Foreign words and abbreviations:

- NB; abbreviation for non-binary. Someone who doesn't fit within the binary of male/female.
- LGBTQIA+; Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans, Queer, Intersex, Asexual and all others who fall outside of the umbrella of cis-hetero.
- Cis; someone who identifies with the gender they were assigned at birth.

- Crossdressing; someone who dresses in a way to look like the opposite gender.
- Heteronormative; the way our world is structured to believe a person is heterosexual unless else is specified by the individual.
- Queer; similarirly to LGBTQIA+, it stands for anyone who feels they identify outside of the umbrella of cis-hetero people.

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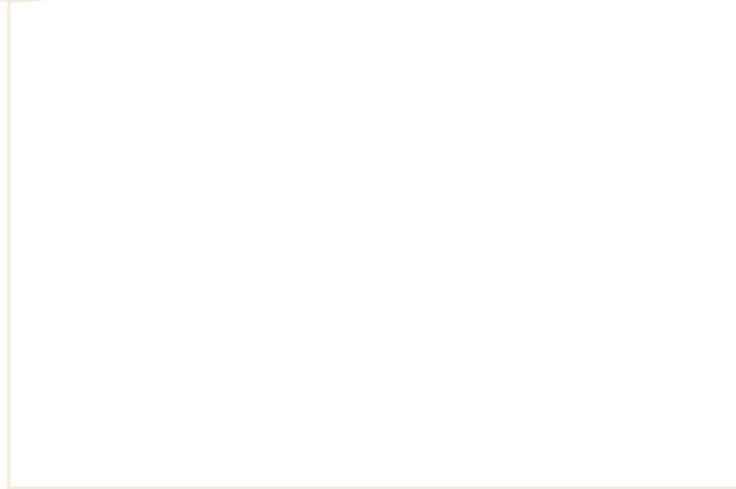
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