

ALL THESE POSES, SUCH BEAUTIFUL *POSES*:  
ARTICULATIONS OF QUEER MASCULINITY IN THE MUSIC OF  
RUFUS WAINWRIGHT

by

MATTHEW J JONES

(Under the Direction of Susan Thomas)

ABSTRACT

Singer-composer Rufus Wainwright uses specific musical gestures to reference historical archetypes of urban, gay masculinity on his 2002 album *Poses*. The cumulative result of his penchant for pastiche, eschewal of traditional musical boundaries, and self-described hedonism, *Poses* represents Wainwright's direct engagement with the politics of identity and challenges dominant constructions of (homo)sexuality and masculinity in popular music. Drawing from a vast lexicon of musical styles, he assembles an idiosyncratic persona, ignoring several decades of pop with an "utter lack of machismo [and] a freedom that comes to outsiders disinterested in meeting the requirements of the dreary status quo."<sup>1</sup> Though analysis of musical and lyrical characteristics of *Poses*, I establish a dialectic between Wainwright's musical persona and four historical modes of urban gay masculinity: the 19<sup>th</sup> Century English Dandy, the French *flâneur*, the 20<sup>th</sup> Century gay bohemian, and the "Clone." In doing so, I introduce Wainwright as a reinvigorating force, resuscitating the subversive potential of radical gay sexuality as a 21<sup>st</sup> Century model for imagining gay male subjectivity.

INDEX WORDS: Rufus Wainwright, Masculinity, Queer, Gender, Sexuality, Popular Music

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<sup>1</sup> Barry Walters, "Rufus Wainwright," *The Advocate* 12 May 1998.

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## DEDICATION

To my parents, Linda and Anthony Jones, for a life filled with music, love, and unwavering encouragement.

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## **Chapter One: Introduction**

*Time takes a sabbatical when Rufus Wainwright sings. Most of his songs float above languidly strummed guitar chords or homey piano shuffles, circling until he alights on a yearning chorus. And his voice, with an apparently infinite breath supply, sustains phrases in a pure legato, a moan that pays no attention to gravity.*<sup>1</sup>

Rufus Wainwright (b 22 July 1973), eldest child of Canadian folksingers Kate McGarrigle (b 6 September 1946) and Loudon Wainwright III (b 5 September 1946), grew up near Montreal and divided his time between Canada and New York following his parents' divorce in 1979. As a child, Wainwright played piano and sang with his mother and aunt, The McGarrigle Sisters. After coming out to his parents at the age of eighteen, Wainwright dreamed of "the perfect boyfriend, the perfect sex life, and the perfect apartment [but] was actually quite disappointed by what the gay life had to offer - at least in Montreal."<sup>2</sup> Following high school at the prestigious Millbrook School, Wainwright briefly studied music at McGill University in Montreal. However, he found classical music education lackluster and endeavored upon his career as a singer-composer an openly gay man, a rarity in the music business. As such, Wainwright challenged dominant notions of masculinity in popular music by writing topical songs about gay sexuality with an unflinching candidness.

Wainwright's 1998 eponymous debut album received widespread critical acclaim upon its release and includes a number of explicitly homoerotic love songs, among them "Danny Boy," and "April Fools." The deliberately anachronistic sound of *Rufus Wainwright* results from the combination of the singers' reedy baritone/tenor voice,

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<sup>1</sup> Jon Parales, "Reveries, the True Calling," *The New York Times* 18 December 1998.

<sup>2</sup> Randy Schulman, "The Wainwright Stuff: A Conversation with Gay/Lesbian American Music Awards-Nominated Singer-Songwriter Rufus Wainwright," *MetroWeekly* 11 March 1999. <http://www.metroweekly.com/feature/?ak=659>

romantic piano style, and quirky string arrangements by Van Dyke Parks. While touring extensively in support of the album, Wainwright continued to compose but also began to manipulate his image in the press using as his *modus operandi* the old adage that “no press is bad press.” His voracious appetite for fame, sex, alcohol, and drugs soon rivaled his music for attention in *The New York Times*, *The Advocate*, *Out Magazine*, and numerous other mainstream and underground media outlets. A music critics’ darling with a growing fan base, Wainwright’s worst danger seemed to be “that the good-looking, single, twentysomething buck-about-town might get a little full of himself.”<sup>3</sup>

His next album, *Poses* (2001), takes a radical departure from the sound of its predecessor, though Wainwright’s singing voice remains in the foreground. With this album, Wainwright deliberately sought to shed the style of his debut, opting to work with younger musicians, collaborators, and producers to create a thoroughly twenty-first-century record.<sup>4</sup> The unique sound of *Poses* stems in part from Wainwright’s collaboration with sound engineer Pierre Marchand, whom he met while working on music for the soundtrack of Baz Luhrman’s 2001 film *Moulin Rouge*. Following *Poses*, Wainwright checked himself into rehab for an addiction to crystal meth (methamphetamine) after a weekend of intense drug abuse and illicit sex that culminated with the singer-composer temporarily going blind. From rehab, Wainwright emerged as an advocate for awareness and treatment of the rampant crystal meth problem that plagues many urban, gay communities.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Kitty Empire, “Not as Queer as Folk,” *The Observer* 12 Oct 2003.

<sup>4</sup> Barney Hoskyns, “The Backpages Interview: Rufus Wainwright,” *Rock’s Back Pages* 2 June 2001.

<sup>5</sup> Wainwright discusses his meth addiction/rehab experience with Anthony DeCurtis in “Rufus Wainwright Journeys to Gay Hell and Back,” *The New York Times* 31 August 2003.

During treatment for his various addictions, Wainwright's creativity would not rest, and he composed the material for his next album, a meditation on the various facets of desire aptly entitled *Want*. Initially conceived of as a double-CD concept album, the collection was ultimately issued as two single discs, *Want I* (2003) and *Want II* (2004), though they can now be purchased together as originally intended. The *Want* albums display disparate sides of Wainwright as a composer. The first disc contains material in a familiar vein, sounding in many ways like the logical heir to *Poses*. By contrast, the second disc displays Wainwright's penchant for opera and classical music, with much longer, densely orchestrated, and complex pieces, some of which quite literally require Wagnerian orchestral forces. After *Want I* and *II*, Wainwright released his fifth studio album, *Release the Stars* in 2007, a "gilded" record full of "operatic...Baroque curlicues."<sup>6</sup> Most recently, Wainwright recreated Judy Garland's famous 1961 *Judy! Judy! Judy!* Carnegie hall shows and subsequent live album with a 2008 CD and DVD respectively titled *Rufus Wainwright Does Judy Garland* and *Rufus! Rufus! Rufus!*

Whereas *Rufus Wainwright* was a collection of beautifully crafted, individual tracks tinged with Romanticism, *Poses* (2001) took a thoroughly different approach. Essentially a concept album involving "the life of the Chelsea Boy: the young, gay, narcissistic achiever in New York," *Poses* employs similar tropes (notably the quest for love and satisfaction) with a less anachronistic sound palate that incorporates elements of trance, funk, and pop into Wainwright's piano-based blend of Broadway, jazz, cabaret, and folk.<sup>7</sup> "With *Poses*," writes *Rolling Stone* reporter Ben Ratliff, "most of his excesses [by which he means the first album's indulgence in such an idiosyncratic sound universe]

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<sup>6</sup> Michael Hill, "Rufus Wainwright: Release the Stars." <http://www.geffen.com/rufuswainwright> accessed 2 April 2008.

<sup>7</sup> Ben Ratliff, "Poses." *Rolling Stone* 29 May 2001.

have vanished, or been put to better use,” though the critic cautions that Wainwright is not the second coming of Cole Porter.<sup>8</sup> However, he continues, “the best of *Poses* transmits the impatient, careening, manic life of a pleasure-seeking New Yorker and still keeps a carefully calibrated lightweight focus, the way those old, literate pop songs did.”<sup>9</sup>

*Poses* engages with the politics of identity, offering a serious challenge to dominant constructions of (homo)sexuality and masculinity in popular music. Drawing from a vast lexicon of musical styles, Wainwright assembles an idiosyncratic persona, ignoring several decades of pop with an “utter lack of machismo [and] a freedom that comes to outsiders disinterested in meeting the requirements of the dreary status quo.”<sup>10</sup> Through analysis of musical and lyrical characteristics of “Cigarettes and Chocolate Milk,” “In a Graveyard,” “Poses,” and “The Greek Song,” I establish a dialectic between Wainwright’s quasi-autobiographical musical persona and four historical modes of gay masculinity: the aesthetic acumen of the nineteenth-century English dandy, the informed observations of the French *flâneur*, the fusion of sexuality and art realized by twentieth-century gay bohemians, and the hedonistic excess of the clone. In doing so, I introduce Wainwright as a reinvigorating force, resuscitating radical gay sexuality as a twenty-first-century model for imagining gay male subjectivity.

In Chapter Two, I examine a body of literature on homosexuality, gay subjectivity, gender, and musical genres. By paying attention to seminal works from feminist theory, queer theory, feminist and queer musicology, and representative works drawn from comparative literature and cultural studies, I tease out connections between historical conceptions of the sexed and gendered body and musical categories. In

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Barry Walters, “Rufus Wainwright.” *The Advocate* 12 May 1998.

particular, I posit that musical genres operate according to a *performative* logic not unlike the regulatory gender processes articulated by Judith Butler in *Gender Trouble*:

*Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* and placed within a musical context in works by Susan McClary, Philip Brett, and other scholars involved with the New Musicology.<sup>11</sup>

Chapter Three begins a series of case studies culled from *Poses*. First, I turn my attention to the title track and the specific, nineteenth-century precedents to which the term “poses” alludes. According to Moe Meyer and others, Oscar Wilde sought to create a new, specifically homosexual subject position near the *fin de siècle*.<sup>12</sup> Wilde’s synthesis of dandyism, aestheticism, and literary product entered the collective cultural imaginations of Europe and North America with the publication of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891) and a few earlier essays. Building on the Deslartean notion of the “pose,” Wilde successfully collapsed the distinction between art and artist, enabling a new, urban, gay male subject that would eventually speak back to the same nineteenth- and twentieth-century legal, social, and moral machinery which initially helped to define and police it. By evoking the term “poses,” Wainwright connects the present with a particular mode of masculinity first imagined by Wilde.

In Chapter Four, I consider the relationship between a series of dualities—excess/moderation and conformity/disclosure, for example—and Wainwright’s music in the songs “Cigarettes and Chocolate Milk,” “In a Graveyard,” and “Cigarettes and Chocolate Milk” (reprise). By placing Sontag’s “Notes on Camp” in dialogue with both Martin Levine’s and Patrick Moore’s complementary discussions of urban, gay male

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<sup>11</sup> See Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1999), Susan McClary, *Feminine Endings: Music, Gender, and Sexuality* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), and Philip Brett, editor, *Queering the Pitch: The New Gay and Lesbian Musicology* (New York: Routledge, 1994).

<sup>12</sup> Moe Meyer, *The Politics and Poetics of Camp* (London: Routledge, 1994).

culture in the 1970s and early 1980s, I offer an analysis of Wainwright's songs that situates the composer at the center of twenty-first century debates concerning gay subjectivity.<sup>13</sup> Specifically, I suggest that Wainwright's combination of a gay bohemian aesthetic and hedonism with the every-day realities of the post-AIDS North American city and the singer-composer's own self-disclosed drug and sex achieves a campy (re)articulation of gay, sexual identity: a twenty-first century dandy.

Chapter Five engages with this neo-dandy in the context of a specific musical genre: the pop love duet. In "The Greek Song," Wainwright's quasi-autobiographical protagonist lures a young, Greek man away from his female lover for a fleeting tryst that is ultimately more dangerous for the Greek than for Wainwright himself. The dandy's modification of social, gender, sex, and relationship norms is reflected in Wainwright's approach to musical structure, elements of the harmonic syntax, and the use of the singer-composer's own musical and poetic voice to speak of and for all three members of the love triangle.

Though Chapter Six is the end of my document, it is by no means the end of scholarly engagement with Rufus Wainwright's music. As a living artist whose star is still on the ascendant, his compositional and performance styles should continue to evolve, a lucky situation for those interested in the study or contemplation of his music. His catalogue as of 2008 consists of five studio albums, one live album, numerous tracks written or contributed to soundtracks, a scattering of music videos, two live DVDs, an

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<sup>13</sup> Susan Sontag, "Notes on Camp," in *Camp: Queer Aesthetics and the Performing Subject*, ed Fabio Cleto, (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2002); Martin Levine *Gay Macho: The Life and Death of the Homosexual Clone* (New York: New York University Press, 1998) and Patrick Moore, *Beyond Shame: Reclaiming the Abandoned History of Radical Gay Sexuality* (Boston: Beach Press, 2004).

autobiographical documentary, and a forthcoming opera commissioned by The Metropolitan Opera in New York City. There is much work left to do!



## **Chapter Two: A Survey of the Literature**

*The purpose of genres is to organize the reproduction of a particular ideology.*

--Robert Walser<sup>14</sup>

As is the case with many popular music performers and composers, little scholarly work exists on Rufus Wainwright.<sup>15</sup> What does exist, however, is a lively body of music journalism, album and performance reviews, interviews, and Internet-based fan discussion forums such as the one found on the artist's official homepage.<sup>16</sup> Such sources not only contain vital information concerning the artist's music but also locate the person and their work in terms historical, geographic, and (inter)national discourse. Interviews are often a replete with words from the mouth of the composer/performer concerning background, sexuality, education, family, and thoughts on music (their own and that of others), and fan discussion boards can serve as an invaluable source of virtual ethnography, capturing audience reactions to performances, reception of new albums, and criticisms of both the music and artist by a self-selected and often highly-knowledgeable community. I adopt an eclectic approach in my analyses of Rufus Wainwright's music that reflects the diversity of resources available that is consistent to the interdisciplinary nature of popular music studies. In what follows, scholarly and popular press materials, the words of the composer, and those of audiences intermingle in the same ways that

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<sup>14</sup> Robert Walser, "Forging Masculinity: Heavy Metal Sounds and Images of Gender," in *Sound and Vision* ed. Frith, Goodwin, and Grossbert, p. 154.

<sup>15</sup> Notable exceptions are Kevin Schwandt's "(Re)Queering Orpheus in the Music of Rufus Wainwright" and Erik Steinskog's "For Today I am a Boy: Voicing Queer Subjectivities," both presented at the Feminist Theory and Music 9 Conference in Montreal, Canada in May 2007. Wainwright is also the subject of Schwandt's forthcoming PhD dissertation at The University of Minnesota.

<sup>16</sup> Linda Serk, "Rufus Wainwright," 15 April 2005, [http://www.bbc.co.uk/berkshire/content/articles/2005/04/08/rufus\\_wainwright\\_review\\_feature.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/berkshire/content/articles/2005/04/08/rufus_wainwright_review_feature.shtml), accessed 12 November 2007; Michael Glitz, "The World According to Rufus Wainwright," *The Advocate*, 8 May 2001; Barney Hoskyns "The Back Pages Interview," *Rock's Backpages* [http://wiki.rutopia.info/index.php?title=The\\_Backpages\\_Interview:\\_Rufus\\_Wainwright](http://wiki.rutopia.info/index.php?title=The_Backpages_Interview:_Rufus_Wainwright), accessed 12 Nov 2007 see [www.rufuswainwright.com](http://www.rufuswainwright.com)

Wainwright's music crosses temporal, geographic, historical, gender, and generic borders.

### **Popular Press Materials**

Popular press and internet-based materials are invaluable when working with a living artist. The variety of mainstream and underground media available on Rufus Wainwright indicates that a discourse surrounding his music already exists, and consideration of these sources creates a context for Wainwright in a verbal and written economy. Furthermore, these texts make available a variety of insights that might otherwise be unattainable to researchers due to the difficulty and expense of scheduling interviews with a major-label artist with a hectic international touring schedule. By using print, radio, and television reviews, interviews, and conversations about Rufus Wainwright and his music in conjunction with insights from contributors to the discussion forum on the artist's homepage, I am able to engage with Wainwright's music from a variety of perspectives, including his own, those of his fans, and those of journalists thus enabling a richer understanding of how Wainwright's work is received, discussed, and critiqued.

From the onset of his career, Wainwright has been a media darling, and popular press pieces spanning the decade since his 1998 debut to the present laud his family pedigree, praise his unusual musical style, and dole out comparisons between everyone from Cole Porter to Randy Newman. In 1998, *Rolling Stone* reporter Neva Chonin describes Wainwright as a "lucky bastard [whose] incandescent pop songwriting, piano-based melodies and cool, brooding tenor combine on compositions that range from droll lounge ballads (the exquisitely pining 'April Fools') to orchestral noir (the lurid carny

stylings of ‘Matinee Idol’).”<sup>17</sup> Noting the remarkably poetic lyrics of *Rufus Wainwright*, Ken Tucker, writing for *The New York Times*, ranks them alongside those of Joni Mitchell for their “insouciantly absurdist take on contemporary romance.”<sup>18</sup> Tucker continues, giving accolades for Wainwright’s ability—unique among his contemporaries—to “distinguish himself by looking up and noticing others -- composing, for instance, a tender hymn to the beauty mark on his mother’s lip,” aptly titled “Beauty Mark.”<sup>19</sup> Artists often speak candidly about personal issues during interviews, a fact that complicates an understanding of their work. While it is often difficult to distinguish between an artist’s autobiography and their poetic-musical license, information culled from print and television interviews can often illuminate aspects of their work. Wainwright’s willingness to discuss his drug addiction with journalists often results in a one-to-one correspondence between songs about indulgence and the life of the artist.

### **Ethnography/Virtual Ethnography**

While the words of the particular artist in question provide answers to some of the questions encountered during the research process, they only tell part of the story. While Wainwright maintains a reasonably transparent relationship with the popular press, his comments reveal very little about how his music is received by audiences. Ethnographic work, interviews, and even casual conversations with the people who consume Wainwright’s music begin to fill in these gaps, leading to a thicker and more nuanced understanding of his body of work and its relationship to subjectivity and identity. However, the researcher necessarily stands at some distance from the fan community, an issue that confronts all ethnographers.

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<sup>17</sup> Neva Chonin “Rufus Wainwright,” *Rolling Stone* 18 May 1998.

<sup>18</sup> Ken Tucker, “Rufus, Son of Loudon, and His Take On Love.” *The New York Times* 19 April 1998.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid. The reference is to the song “Beauty Mark.”

Turning to studies in ethnomusicology for ethnographic models, I discovered a number of options for dealing with the insider-outsider issue. In their respective studies of Afro-Cuban musical/spiritual practices and Bulgarian music during and after Soviet rule, Katherine Hagedorn and Timothy Rice engage with these bodies of music across a spectrum of insider-outsider positions.<sup>20</sup> Initially drawn to Cuban music by folkloric performances, Hagedorn encountered resistance, skepticism, and sexism during her initial attempts to gain access to insider information concerning *batá* drumming. After making the decision to become a practitioner of the Santeria faith and undergoing an arduous initiation process, Hagedorn earned the trust of her spiritual-musical elders and with it, more intimate knowledge concerning the music. However, issues of race, class, sex, gender, and nation continued to influence her informants, some of whom expressed reservation at the idea of sharing revered knowledge with a white, North American woman.

Similarly, Timothy Rice's interest in Bulgarian music grew from initial exposure in the 1950s in the form of folkloric dance societies. After making the acquaintance of Kostadin Varimezov, a well-known *gaita* performer, Rice could more easily navigate the bureaucracy of the Soviet government in order to study various aspects of Bulgarian music. However, Rice, too, encountered a gender impasse. Through Todora, Kostadin's wife, he learned a body of vocal music, the difficult nuances of vocal technique, and the role of music in the lives of Bulgarian women, who were historically discouraged from playing instruments. The experiences of Hagedorn and Rice illustrate some of the obstacles concerning ethnography, including not only the difficulty of finding informants

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<sup>20</sup> Katherine Hagedorn, *Divine Utterances: The Performance of Afro-Cuban Santeria* (Washington DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 2001); Timothy Rice, *May It Fill Your Soul: Experiencing Bulgarian Music* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994).

to begin with but also how the roles of both informant and researcher interface, sometimes facilitating and sometimes impeding the dissemination of knowledge about a given music culture.

In considering the ways to incorporate ethnography into my own work on Rufus Wainwright, I found myself in an ambiguous position. Certainly, I was a fan of his music before I endeavored to write about it and engaged with his music at live shows, through his studio albums, and in conversations with friends and fellow fans. I even casually read the discussion forum at [www.rufuswainwright.com](http://www.rufuswainwright.com), particularly after the release of a new album or a performance in my area. However, I was by no means an active participant in discussions concerning any of Wainwright's music outside Athens, Georgia.

In a paper given in conjunction with The University of Georgia's musicology colloquium series in which ethnomusicologist Travis Jackson described, among other things, the benefits and pitfalls of virtual ethnography, in particular the role of the analyst/fan in the process of collecting information in virtual spaces.<sup>21</sup> Inspired by Jackson's presentation, I dutifully began reading various threads in the discussion forums on [www.rufuswainwright.com](http://www.rufuswainwright.com). Discussion threads on the forum are grouped thematically under the headings "General Rufus Discussion," "Rufus Music," "Family & History," and separate threads for each of Wainwright's albums. Within each general heading, a number of subheadings pertaining to specific songs, live appearances, Rufus-related media (such as photographs with fans or video footage), Wainwright's manner of dress, and his sexuality create virtual spaces in which fans can express their thoughts, feelings,

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<sup>21</sup> Travis Jackson, "At Home He's a Tourist: The Continuing Relevance and Challenges of Ethnography in the 21st Century," presented at The University of Georgia 27 March 2008.

and experiences concerning Rufus Wainwright. In other words, the forums contain the words of a living community united through Wainwright's music.<sup>22</sup>

Initially, I wrestled with the issue of my visibility and activity on the list. Indeed, until 2008, my relationship to the forum was that of a voyeur or "lurker." However, in April of that year, I posted a notice on the board to announce my presence, the purpose of my research, and a short summary of the sorts of information I hoped to gather from the virtual Rufus Wainwright fan community. Additionally, I informed the discussion board that I would be reading old posts for approximately two weeks, would refrain from using any identifying information in my final project, and asked that anyone who would prefer to opt out of the project email me privately so that I could ensure their words were not included in the study. Throughout the subsequent chapters, quotes from fans culled from the discussion boards provide illuminating answers to questions regarding reception of Wainwright's music by a myriad of individuals representing a multitude of races, classes, sexual orientations, nationalities, and genders.

### **Theories of Musical Genre**

Despite the growing body of work concerned with music and gender, surprisingly little engages directly with the ideologies surrounding the interrelated concepts of gender and genre. While a scattering of recent publications grapple with issues pertaining to femininity, masculinity, queerness, and various musical repertoires, the ideological underpinnings of gender and genre as they relate to queer expressions of masculinity in the first decade of the twenty-first century remain unproblematic within the field of

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<sup>22</sup> After making my initial post to the boards, I was shocked by the impassioned responses and by the general openness to a stranger and an academic (me) poking his nose into their forum. I suppose it helped that I, too, felt connected to these men and women through a mutual admiration of Wainwright's music and the sense of familiarity that can be achieved in virtual space.

musicology. While the argument that music is capable of performing particular types of cultural work has been well-rehearsed in certain musicological circles, it is insufficient to assume that music operates in relation to broader issues of subjectivity, particularly the ways in which we understand ourselves as sexed, gendered individuals then proceed without further investigation. Thus, to engage with the politics of identity using theories of musical genre as they relate to Wainwright's music, it is first necessary to contextualize my argument within a broader field of inquiry.

In perhaps one of the most cited and influential texts on popular music genres, "A Theory of Musical Genres: Two Applications," Franco Fabbri places generic categories at the nexus of a number of conditions including the formal/technical musical aspects of particular works and extra-musical economic, sociological, and ideological factors.<sup>23</sup> Until recently, most genre research primarily considered the formal and technical aspects of musical classification; however, as Fabbri notes, "formal archetypes and stylistic schemas might be constitutive of genre but are not equivalent to it."<sup>24</sup> Fabbri defines genre as a "set of musical events (real or possible) whose course is governed by a definite set of socially accepted rules."<sup>25</sup> This emphasis on communally-agreed upon rules indicates that genres are born neither from nor into musical vacuums. They rather emerge in relation to pre-existing systems of (extra)musical signification. Thus, while musical materials tell one side of the genre story, social, political, geographic, racial, gender, and other such issues complete it.

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<sup>23</sup> Franco Fabbri, "A Theory of Musical Genres: Two Applications." *Popular Music Perspectives*, ed. David Horn and Philip Tagg (Goteborg and Exeter: International Association for the Study of Popular Music, 1982), pp. 52-81.

<sup>24</sup> Fabbri, p. 57.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid. p. 52.

Folklorist Trudier Harris conceives of genre as an umbrella term that “allows for many disparate and often related concepts to be conveniently divided and subdivided.”<sup>26</sup> By erecting boundaries between cultural products, actions or ideas, we “inadvertently allow for crossover,” leading to hybridity, innovation, and change.<sup>27</sup> Thus, while genre appears static in a given moment, Harris concludes that genre is “a site of continuous contestation,” dynamic processes of construction, negotiation, and reconstruction.<sup>28</sup> In any field, the word “genre” serves multiple and simultaneous purposes, often providing both “a system of classification [and] a conceptual framework for articulating characteristics of the individual components within that classification.”<sup>29</sup> To illustrate the point, Harris turns to the classification *folksongs*, a genre she subdivides into either sacred or secular types. These categories respectively further break down into spirituals, hymns, or gospels (sacred) and blues, ballads, corridos, or cowboy songs (secular). Though far from exhaustive, this short list alludes to the complexity of generic systems and the difficulty encountered when faced, for example, with a secular song that relies on religious imagery in its lyrics or a sacred text set to a secular melody.

In “Reflections on Musical Categorization,” Olivier and Riviere define a musical category by the distinctiveness of a single feature or a bundle of features which function as a unit.<sup>30</sup> If the feature/bundle is highly distinctive, or if it is unique to the music in question, then that music functions as a separate genre, defined in part through its opposition to other categories.<sup>31</sup> The integrity of a musical category depends on

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<sup>26</sup> Trudier Harris, “Genre.” *The Journal of American Folklore* 108/430 (1995): 509-527.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid. p. 509.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., p. 510

<sup>29</sup> Ibid. p. 511.

<sup>30</sup> Olivier, Emmanuelle and Herve Riviere. “Reflections on Musical Categorization.” *Ethnomusicology* 45/3 (2001): 480-488.

<sup>31</sup> Olivier and Riviere, p. 481-482.



successful repetition of those musical features. However, “the introduction of new pieces [or non-distinctive features] does not undermine the organization...as long as these pieces adopt an already existing distinctive musical feature.”<sup>32</sup>

Simon Frith’s industry-oriented account of genre included in his influential text, *Performing Rites: On the Value of Popular Music*, commences with the recognition that “genre is a way of defining music in its market, or alternately, the market in its music.”<sup>33</sup> Similarly, Keith Negus asserts that the music industry produces a particular culture, and this culture simultaneously produces the music industry. In *Music Genres and Corporate Cultures*, Negus argues that the music industry is more than a duplicitous monolith, churning out undifferentiated music for a “mass market.”<sup>34</sup> Instead, he suggests a dialectical relationship between culture and industry.

Both the music industry and specific music (sub)cultures coexist within a broader social, economic, and artistic network. By collecting knowledge about musical production and consumption through various forms of research and information gathering then deploying this knowledge as a ‘reality,’ music companies organize their business activities and attempt to anticipate or “feel” the music markets.<sup>35</sup> However, there also exist types of knowledge that are “apparently intuitive, obvious, and common sense [that] do not so much involve an understanding of reality as [much as] a construction and

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid. p. 485.

<sup>33</sup> Frith, Simon. *Performing Rites: On the Value of Popular Music*. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996), p. 75.

<sup>34</sup> Keith Negus, *Music Genres and Corporate Cultures* (London: Routledge, 1999). Negus offers an alternative to the overly pessimistic Frankfurt School analysis of the music industry proffered by Adorno, for whom the notion of mass culture carried excessive, negative connotations. Adorno’s description of a culture machine betrays his elitist tendencies which favored modernist, classical music as well as his ignorance of the extra-musical factors that influence the production and reception of all forms of music. This is not to say that Adorno was entirely wrong in his assessments of mass culture’s potential banality. Rather, he makes a fetish out of a particular musical practice by which all others pale in comparison, forgetting that classical music can be banal, too.

<sup>35</sup> Keith Negus, *Music Genres and Corporate Cultures*, p. 19.

intervention *into* reality.”<sup>36</sup> That is, audience reception and opinion of musical works plays a part in industry categorizations. The industry exercises some awareness of existing trends and historical consumption patterns rather than acting as a Svengali.

Following a similar line of thought, Albin Zak writes of *The Poetics of Rock*, describing how the music industry shapes studio and recording practices in rock music and as a result sets particular techniques in motion for other genres influenced by rock.<sup>37</sup> Zak attributes particular developments in technology to the subsequent broadening of musicians’ expressive palate and by association, transformations at the level of genre made possible by these innovations. The role of technology in the evolution of genre conventions remains overlooked by most musicologists, who tend to focus either on the traditional musical details, which often give little useful information, or adopt an entire sociological approach, abandoning the music altogether. Technology figures prominently in my discussion of musical space and “Cigarettes and Chocolate Milk” in Chapter Four.

In a 2001 article, Allen Moore charts the distinctions between the notions of style and genre, both of which are “concerned with ways of erecting categorical distinctions, of identifying similarity between different pieces.”<sup>38</sup> Of particular interest are his three axioms concerning the referent of style and genre. He writes that the terms style and genre can broadly cover the same ground, sometimes with different nuances. Alternately, the terms might cover the same ground with style nested within the larger concept of genre, or each may have a different reference.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid, p. 19.

<sup>37</sup> Albin Zak, *The Poetics of Rock: Cutting Tracks, Making Records*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001).

<sup>38</sup> Allan Moore, “Categorical Conventions in Music Discourse: Style and Genre.” *Music & Letters* 82/3 (2001): 432-442.

<sup>39</sup> Moore, pp. 438-39.

While these may not appear particularly revelatory, Moore's axioms provide a concise guideline for distinguishing between style and genre in a variety of contexts. This is particularly relevant when dealing with popular music because the distinctions made among fan cultures, musicians, the music industry, and broadcast media do not necessarily agree.<sup>40</sup>

Moore continues to explore the specificities of genre, drawing particularly on the work of film theorist Stephen Neale, whose influential book *Genre* defines the concept "as patterns/ forms/ styles/ structures which transcend individual films and which supervise both their construction by the film maker and their reading by an audience."<sup>41</sup> Neale's take on genre highlights the importance of repetition (patterns, forms, styles, structures) which find counterparts in musical practice in patterns of notes, "sonata" and standard song form, stylistic epochs like the Baroque, as well as lyrical and semiotic structures which convey particular genres. However, Neale points out that "no mechanism for the supervision of meaning is involved"<sup>42</sup> in this repetition. Thus, genre conventions may point to a particular classification or category, but reception and interpretation of the combined elements remains in the hands of its audience. Like Negus,

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<sup>40</sup> For example, in the late 1960s and early 1970s, Joni Mitchell released four albums which helped define the singer-songwriter rock subgenre: *Song to a Seagull* (1968), *Clouds* (1969), *Ladies of the Canyon* (1970), and *Blue* (1971). For all intents, these albums were written, produced, distributed, consumed, and broadcast within the singer-songwriter genre. However, by the late 1970s, her music adopted the mannerisms of jazz and what came to be called world music. Despite these changes, her record label continued to push her as a singer-songwriter. This disjuncture impacted radio play and sales, both of which steadily declined for Mitchell. As a result, her record company spent less time and money promoting her subsequent albums, relegating her to cult audiences while empowering her to continue to develop as an artist in ways that other artists, due to genre constraints, are not prohibited. Detailed information about Joni Mitchell's career can be found in three books: Brian Hinton's *Joni Mitchell: Both Sides Now*, Stacy Luftig's *The Joni Mitchell Companion: Four Decades of Commentary*, and Karen O'Brien's biography, *Shadows and Light: The Definitive Biography*.

<sup>41</sup> Stephen Neale, *Genre* (London: The British Film Institute, 1980), p. 28.

<sup>42</sup> Neale, p. 28.

Neale sees a necessary dialectic between production and consumption in shaping our understanding of genres.

Neale echoes Fabbri by stressing the importance of iteration in genre production, though Fabbri cautions against the overly simplistic presumption that genres result merely from repetition. Negus critiques Fabbri's genre theory, noting it is too rule bound and focused on the "constraints rather than the possibilities...which seems to rub up against our experiences as musicians and consumers."<sup>43</sup> By anticipating such border crossings in terms of not only the specifically musical but also in terms of behavior and ideology, Fabbri moves the analyst toward a consideration of the more salient features of popular music that are often overlooked by a traditional musicological approach. Negus himself writes that we cannot study genre "without fully understanding how corporate organization actively intervenes in the production, reproduction, circulation, and interpretation of genres,"<sup>44</sup> and even goes so far as to say that we "all know the genre rules."<sup>45</sup>

Similarly, musicologist Roy Shuker discusses the difficulty in making crisp genre distinctions in his chapter "Musicology and Genre" in *Understanding Popular Music*.<sup>46</sup> Arguing that genre studies can move us beyond reliance on traditional textural analysis, Shuker posits an approach that echoes Fabbri, in which classification occurs along ideological and musical lines. Such an approach is beneficial as "many performers can fit under more than one classification or shift between and across genres [or exhibit] considerable genre bending, subverting, or playing with the conventions of existing

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<sup>43</sup> Negus, *Music Genres and Corporate Cultures*, p. 26.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid. p. 28.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid. p. 26.

<sup>46</sup> Roy Shuker, *Understanding Popular Music*. 2d edition. (New York: Routledge, 2001).

genres or adopting an ironic distance from those conventions.”<sup>47</sup> Finally, in his work on heavy metal music videos, Robert Walser makes explicit the connections between a particular genre and a gender ideology.<sup>48</sup> By examining the use of women in metal videos to portray female sexuality as dangerous or threatening or to defer accusations of homosexuality aimed at band members who, in the 1980s, embraced a decidedly androgynous manner of dress, Walser concludes that genres perpetuate ideologies, particularly those concerning gender and sexuality.

### **Gender/Genre**

Musical genres are but one manifestation of a compulsion to organize and categorize that took root in science, philosophy, theology, and the arts, an urge to create taxonomies that reached an apex during the Enlightenment. One deeply held tenant of Enlightenment philosophy is the so-called Cartesian divide between the mind and body. This fundamental binary segregates human gender, sexuality, activity, and thought into supposedly complementary male and female halves, with the mind and body corresponding to male and female, respectively. In short, rationality, intellect, and the world outside the home are constructed as the realms of men, while fantasy, emotion, and the domestic sphere belong to women, thus perpetuating and maintaining patriarchal control over the lives of both sexes.<sup>49</sup>

With the publication of her seminal text, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, Judith Butler dealt an incredible blow to patriarchal gender

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<sup>47</sup> Roy Shuker, *Understanding Popular Music*, p. 139.

<sup>48</sup> Robert Walser, “Forging Masculinity: Heavy Metal Sounds and Images of Gender,” in *Sound and Vision* ed. Frith, Goodwin, and Grossberg, p. 154.

<sup>49</sup> A lively discourse exists in feminist theory surrounding the Cartesian division of the social and intellectual order. See Sandra Harding’s *Feminist Standpoint Reader: Intellectual and Political Controversies* (New York: Routledge, 2004) for an excellent introduction to these debates across a variety of disciplines, including essays by Anne Fausto-Sterling, Patricia Hill Collins, Donna Haraway, Hillary Rose, and Harding.

assumptions across a variety of disciplines.<sup>50</sup> Each of the aforementioned theories of genre stresses the interdependent roles attributed to convention, repetition, and regulation using a language evocative of the concept of performativity. While none of these authors makes a specific connection to the work of postmodern gender theorists and philosopher Judith Butler, her definition of performativity subsumes ideas found in the works of Frith, Negus, Neale, and Fabbri. Drawing on the philosophical works of Michel Foucault and Lacanian psychoanalysis, Butler questions the very essence of our fundamental beliefs about gender. Masculinity and femininity are shown to result not from any natural or essential quality of male or female sexed bodies but as “the product of words, acts, gestures, and desires...on the surface of the body,” in other words as *performative* processes.<sup>51</sup> Both deliberate and unconscious actions within a larger, signifying matrix constitute the various categories into which we filter ourselves, propelled by iterative normalizing impulses. Belief in such categories, specifically the fundamental “genres” of male and female is sustained by a cycling of conventions that “stabilize and consolidate the coherent subject.”<sup>52</sup>

At birth, Butler writes, we are hailed as male or female on the basis of our genitalia then enter into a political economy and presented with a limited number of predetermined options to affirm gender identity. Since modalities of representation, recognition, and intelligibility thus depend on the fundamental Cartesian gender divide, we are forced us into an “either/or” dilemma: either one is man *or* woman, adult *or* child, straight *or* gay. Butler exposes not only the constructed-ness of masculinity and femininity but also the falseness of this male-female sex binary, citing as evidence recent

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<sup>50</sup> Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (London: Routledge, 1999.)

<sup>51</sup> Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble*, p. 173.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.* p. 7.

developments in genetic technology that demonstrate the diverse possibilities for sex at the chromosomal level, the lived experiences of transgender individuals, and the recognition of more than a single gender binary in many non-Western cultures.

Like the other sciences and humanities, Western music is striated by Cartesian thinking; particular genres, styles, performance practices, and even instruments carry strong gender associations. For instance, in the eighteenth century, all properly “educated” middle and upper class women played piano and sang yet seldom established careers in composition or performance, whereas men trained in music succeeded as conductors, composers, performers, and pedagogues. Since the late 1980s, scholars have sought to articulate the connections between musical practices and issues pertaining to race, class, gender, and sexuality, first by giving voice and recognition to the historical contributions of hitherto unrecognized members of the broader musical community, then by using analytical paradigms culled from such knowledge areas as feminist theory, queer theory, African and postcolonial studies, and disability studies, to name but a few.

Susan McClary’s seminal *Feminine Endings* initiated a discourse concerning gender and music from the operas of Monteverdi to Madonna’s “Material Girl.” Throughout, she discusses the history of gendering musical themes, harmonies, musical structures, and even individual pitches, noting their use to depict heroic, aggressive, or strong masculinity and dangerous, passive, or weak femininity. Her analysis of Madonna’s “Live to Tell,” in particular, relates these ideas to popular music in terms of harmonic language. Marcia Citron discusses the sexual division of classical music in her influential *Gender and the Musical Canon*. Susan Cusick also explores the mind/ body split as it relates to performance and identity in “Feminist Theory, Music Theory, and the

Mind/ Body Problem.” McClary further elucidates the issue in her *Conventional Wisdom: The Content of Musical Form*.<sup>53</sup>

Within popular music, particular musical genres have been subject to Cartesian gendering. For example, Rock and bop inhabit the masculine side the dichotomy, countered with “feminine” genres like pop or swing at the opposite end. The justification for the gendering of popular music practices stems from the belief that rock and bop are serious art forms intended for listening and contemplation like “masculine” German art music, while pop and swing merely accompany dancing, an undeniably “bodily” activity that requires only passive listening. Ostensibly, then, musical representations of masculinity and femininity should correspond to similar stereotypes.

Numerous scholars engage with gender/sexuality in terms of popular music. Angela McRobbie writes extensively about the relationship between music and gender/sexuality in her influential “Rock and Sexuality,” co-authored with Simon Frith, which helped initiate the discourse surrounding gender and popular music.<sup>54</sup> Together, McRobbie and Frith conclude that “popular music is a complex code of expression [that] involves a combination of sound, rhythm, lyrics, performance, and image,” that complicates the sort of analysis that points to a “straightforward contrast that can be drawn between...reactionary and progressive works only at the level of lyrics.”<sup>55</sup> Like Fabbri’s multi-modal conception of genre, McRobbie and Frith use musical specifics as a point of departure to consider broader, contextual issues that shape a genre’s ability to

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<sup>53</sup> Susan McClary, *Feminine Endings: Music, Gender, and Sexuality* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991). Susan Cusick “Feminist Theory, Music Theory, and the Mind/Body Problem,” *Perspectives on New Music* 32/1 (1994): 8-27. Susan McClary *Conventional Wisdom: The Content of Musical Form* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), p. 152.

<sup>54</sup> Angela McRobbie and Simon Frith, “Rock and Sexuality,” in Frith and Goodwin’s *On Record: Rock, Pop, and the Written Word* (London: Routledge, 1990), pp. 371-389.

<sup>55</sup> McRobbie and Frith, p. 372.



perform cultural/identity work on its audiences. While their work focuses specifically on rock, their conclusion that the genre “operates both as a form of sexual expression and a form of sexual control” applies to genres as diverse as country, pop, classical, and R&B and could be expanded to include issues pertaining to race, class, and geography.<sup>56</sup>

Similarly, in McRobbie’s “Settling Accounts with Subcultures: A Feminist Critique,” the gendering of subcultural practices, manner of dress, and choices of music reflect the differing ways in which young women and young men are socialized. Women, she writes, are “so obviously inscribed (marginalized, abused) within subcultures as static objects (girlfriends, whores, or “faghags”) that access to its thrills...would hardly be compensation even for the most adventurous teenage girl.”<sup>57</sup> Susan Fast deals explicitly with female subjectivity and rock fandom in her *In the Houses of the Holy: Led Zeppelin and the Power of Rock Music*, in which she destabilizes the (male) gendering of rock practice through an examination of Led Zeppelin’s often-overlooked female fan base.<sup>58</sup>

Judith Peraino discusses the appropriation of rural forms of folk music to promote decidedly urban political agendas in the 1940s, in the music of Woodie Guthrie, for example, and later in the 1960s when the “folk revival” merged with rock music to produce a new generation of socially conscious urban folkies.<sup>59</sup> By the 1970s, Peraino continues, the use of acoustic-based rural/folk styles was associated (not unproblematically) with the lesbian/ women’s music movement epitomized by

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<sup>56</sup> Ibid. p. 373.

<sup>57</sup> Angela McRobbie, “Settling Accounts with Subcultures: A Feminist Critique,” in *On Record: Rock, Pop, and the Written Word*, ed. Frith and Goodwin. (London: Routledge, 1990), pp. 66-80.

<sup>58</sup> Susan Fast, *In the Houses of the Holy: Led Zeppelin and the Power of Rock Music* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).

<sup>59</sup> Judith Peraino, *Listening to the Sirens: Musical Technologies of Queer Identity from Homer to Hedwig* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007) pp. 154-156.

performers Meg Christian and Cris Williamson.<sup>60</sup> These associations persist well into the twenty-first century in the music of the Indigo Girls, Tracy Chapman, Melissa Ethridge, and Ani Di Franco alongside other women performers who inhabit disparate genre worlds: Courtney Love, k. d. lang, Jewel, and Tori Amos. Likewise, certain musical styles and genres are often associated with gay men. Contemporary dance music, particularly beginning with disco which emerged roughly alongside the women's music movement, is often associated with urban gay masculinity.

### **Genre, Gender, Sexuality, and Rufus Wainwright**

Rufus Wainwright's music problematizes "either/or" generic categorization and the gender dualities on several levels. First, his use of musical pastiche undermines any sense of generic stability. Drawing on his knowledge of popular and classical music, Wainwright slides between genres, creating polymorphous pop that has been described as poperatic, neo-Tin Pan Alley, and twenty-first-century American lied.<sup>61</sup> Secondly, as an openly gay man, Wainwright throws a wrench into the heterosexist star machinery of popular music. Listening to his performances, it is impossible to ignore the fact that, regardless of where the music lies on a continuum of genres, he performs a gay man; his songs explore the politics of gay identity and sexuality with a bravura almost unheard of in any music.<sup>62</sup> Finally, it is Wainwright's actual singing voice that stands out on each of

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<sup>60</sup> Peraino, pp. 166-176.

<sup>61</sup> A number of journalists have used the term "popera" to describe Wainwright's blend of pop, jazz, classical, and folk music, though I have found no evidence of the composer himself using the term to refer to his music. See Doug Rule, "Popera," *Metro Weekly* 24 May 2007, [http://www.metroweekly.com/arts\\_entertainment/music.php?ak=2720](http://www.metroweekly.com/arts_entertainment/music.php?ak=2720), accessed 12 November 2007; Linda Serk, "Rufus Wainwright," 15 April 2005, [http://www.bbc.co.uk/berkshire/content/articles/2005/04/08/rufus\\_wainwright\\_review\\_feature.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/berkshire/content/articles/2005/04/08/rufus_wainwright_review_feature.shtml), accessed 12 November 2007 and for an assortment of such comparisons.

<sup>62</sup> This has historically been the case for gay men, whose sexuality often remains veiled or vaguely alluded to. The growth of Women's Music in the 1970s and 1980s provided an alternative space for lesbian women

his five studio albums. The singer's resonant, reedy baritone and lazy, affected diction permeate every track, providing a relatively stable point of reference in spite of the shifting generic topography.

Over the course of his five studio albums, the singer/songwriter/multi-instrumentalist asserts a distinctive musical persona using a postmodern bricolage of sounds and styles: melodies snatched from nineteenth-century opera; quotations from Ravel and Andrew Lloyd Webber; rhythms coaxed from Latin dances; concise structures borrowed from Tin Pan Alley and Brill Building song styles; a penchant for self-reference inherited from the music of his folksinger parents, Kate McGarrigle and Loudon Wainwright III. All of this, paired with the singer's lazy diction, a dexterous, reedy baritone voice, and a vibrato Judy Garland would envy, highlights the breadth of his musical knowledge and the prodigious talent that enables Wainwright to evade traditional categorization while garnering critical and popular acclaim. His distinctive musical persona, sense of dark humor, and quirky compositional style which meanders among genres with a self-assured nonchalance leads to comparisons with everyone from Cole Porter and Randy Newman to nineteenth-century opera composers.

Attempts to classify Wainwright's oeuvre through conventional means demonstrate the arduous and, frankly, arbitrary nature of such organizational systems. Any analysis that forces the music into one category or another, creates a new one-off category, or simply describes it as impossibly postmodern without further qualification ignores critical cultural work carried out by a particular composition. Indeed, the interesting questions surrounding Wainwright's music have less to do with generic

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to create music which articulated their experiences, epitomized by Olivia Records and artists such as Meg Christian, Cris Williamson, and Margie Adam. See Peraino, pp. 166-176.

designations than with the points of intersection between his music and the ideologies surrounding gender and sexuality. Wainwright's status as one of the only musicians in the history of commercial, popular music to build a career from the start as an openly gay person challenges genre conventions by providing an alternative to the dominant constructions of (homo)sexuality and masculinity within popular music. If Robert Walser's words that introduce this chapter are correct, and genres do organize and perpetuate ideology, then the difficulty encountered when applying generic labels to Wainwright's music may correspond to a particular construction of masculine, queer subjectivity.

### **Masculinities**

Historically, both maleness and masculinity have been the positions of privilege and power in the gender hierarchy, unquestionably stable, solid, and impenetrable. However, masculinities are socially constructed, subject to the same situational, temporal, geographical, and relational politics that influence the making of any subject position. In recent decades, especially since the late 1980s, scholars across a variety of disciplines have stretched the elastic boundary of gender theory around masculinity. A proliferation of research devoted to masculinity studies and the creation of specific journals devoted to analyses and theories of masculinity, notably *Men and Masculinities*, signal a shift in our understanding of the multiplicities of gender, sexuality, and subjectivity.<sup>63</sup> In works by Eve Sedgwick, R.W. Connell, Peter Nardi, and Maurice Berger, among others, masculinity emerges as "always ambivalent, always complicated...and as an interplay of

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<sup>63</sup> *Men and Masculinities* a journal devoted to the study of masculinity first appeared in 1998. Kenneth Clatterbaugh asks "What is Problematic about Masculinities," in the first issue of *Men and Masculinities*, 1998.

emotional and intellectual factors mediated by...race, sexuality, nationality, and class.”<sup>64</sup>

Furthermore, the recognition of diverse possibility *within* masculinity, or posed another way the acknowledgment of multiple modes of masculinity, represents an important step in articulation of new gender paradigms, political movements, and scholarly inquiries, including those pertaining to musical practices.

## **Queerness**

Definitions of the word queer have varied over time, but in general, the term implies difference, typically in a pejorative sense. In his introduction to *Queering the Pitch: The New Gay and Lesbian Musicology*, Wayne Koestenbaum’s exhaustive list of contexts and connotations of “queer” chronicles the word’s history from the nineteenth century through the 1990s.<sup>65</sup> In its earliest manifestation, to “queer” something meant to spoil or ruin it, though by the 1950s, “to be queer” for something or someone implied positive affection. Finally, by the 1970s, “queer” was slang for homosexuality, which had been seen as aberrant or ruined (hetero)sexuality since the nineteenth century. Queerness as an analytical rubric has involved the inclusion of contributions of gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender individuals to intellectual and cultural history in addition to the process of analysis of multiple modes of being, doing, and understanding a particular object of inquiry. To this understanding of queerness, I suggest a connection between notions of difference and multiplicity within musical practices that may include, but by no means necessitate, a particular gay subject position. Musical queerness at the level of

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<sup>64</sup> Maurice Berger, Brian Wallis, and Simon Watson, editors, *Constructing Masculinity* (London: Routledge, 1995), p. 3. Also see Sedgwick’s *Between Men, The Epistemology of the Close: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985). R.W. Connell, *Masculinities* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005); and Peter Nardi, *Gay Masculinities* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2000) for discussions on the social construction of masculinities and the plurality of masculinity types.

<sup>65</sup> Wayne Koestenbaum, “Queering the Pitch: A Posy of Definitions and Impersonations,” in *Queering the Pitch*, ed. Philip Bret, pp. 1-5.

genre, for example, involves the disintegration and reorganization of traditional generic boundaries. By transgressing genre boundaries, Wainwright not only violates the norms of gendered musical practice but also subverts broader notions of gender ideology.

### **Queer Geography**

Cities and urbanity figure prominently in Rufus Wainwright's music. Images of the city permeate the lyrics of *Poses*, from the "wondrous chorus" of city streets and drunken stumble down Fifth Avenue in the title track to Rome and Montreal in "The Greek Song." The city is writ large in his compositional process, whether because he writes in urban spaces, writes about them, records his albums in Los Angeles, New York, and Berlin, or because he resides in New York City. His musical influences, from Tin Pan Alley to Opera, are themselves products of the city, and as a gay man living and composing in a major metropolitan area, Wainwright positions himself within a continuum that stretches at least to the nineteenth century.

Urban spaces have long been a haven for those at the margins of society. The gendering of specific spaces, including those within cities, has been much theorized by both feminist and queer scholars in the past two decades. "The city is a map of the hierarchy of desire," writes Pat Califia, "divided into zones dictated by the way its citizens value or denigrate their needs... These are the sex zones—called red-light districts, combat zones, and gay ghettos."<sup>66</sup> San Francisco and New York City cast the longest shadow as gay meccas, but other North American urban centers from Atlanta to Minneapolis have their "gay ghettos." For gay men, specific urban geographical locations

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<sup>66</sup> Pat Califia, "The City of Desire: Its Anatomy and Destiny," p. 204. in *Public Sex: The Culture of Radical Sex*. Pittsburgh: Cleis, 1994. Also see Califia's "San Francisco: Revisiting 'The City of Desire'" in *Queers in Space*.

function as a locus of individual and community identity formation, a trend which began in the nineteenth century when the modern gay subject emerged as an identity category.

The anonymity of city life allows for greater personal experimentation and expression than does, say, a rural small town. Between the late nineteenth century and the early 1980s, untold homosexual men, migrated to cities across Europe and North America, gradually synthesizing politics, art, and sexuality into variegated expressions of specifically urban, gay masculinities. By the 1970s, numerous artists, musicians, dancers, and writers migrated to North American urban centers. An emergent “gay bohemianism” organized around gay men’s sense of community and solidarity within the city, inspired in part by the success of the feminist and lesbian movements.

Like the different cultural geographies moving North-South and East-West describe by Perry Meisel in *The Cowboy and the Dandy*, Patrick Moore identifies a national mobilization of gay men; however, this migration takes a decidedly non-linear path, as men from all areas of the nation move inward, outward, east, west, north, and south towards the various metropolises in which they began to forge new community and familial bonds.<sup>67</sup> Between two cities, New York and San Francisco, a queer geography emerged. Les Wright charts the queer history of west coast cities from the Gold Rush through the twentieth century. San Francisco, in particular, has long been a haven for homosexual men, in no small part due to its geographical distance (in the nineteenth century) from other major cities. However, in an isolated town with “an estimated 92 percent men...mostly in their twenties”<sup>68</sup> at the height of the Gold Rush, straight men

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<sup>67</sup> Patrick Moore, *Beyond Shame: Reclaiming the Abandoned History of Radical Gay Sexuality* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2004).

<sup>68</sup> Les Wright, “San Francisco,” in *Queer Sites: Gay Urban history since 1600*, ed. David Higgs (New York: Routledge, 1999), p. 165.

moved between gender roles as a matter of pragmatics. At weekly, Friday night dances, “some of the men would wear dresses, and sometimes a bandanna would be worn on the arm to indicate a man who would dance the woman’s part.”<sup>69</sup> By the early twentieth century, the City by the Bay became home to a number of gay and lesbian communities, and in the 1970s it became *the* place to be gay in North America. By the 1970s, these heavily-populated communities on the east and west coasts “turned inward collectively [and] began to see themselves and each other as a quasi-ethnic minority and to behave so.”<sup>70</sup>

In the introduction to *A Queer Geography*, Browning describes an “interior geography, a geography of the spirit marked by a longing for identity” among North American gay communities.<sup>71</sup> “The metaphors of geography, of location, of placement,” he writes, “continue to guide how we imagine our multiple selves,” noting that we have “lost the broader outlines of geography beyond ourselves,” as one consequence of our mapping of interior cartographies.<sup>72</sup> Browning attributes the formation of North American gay identity to specifically urban origins:

Gay people owe their existence *as a separate people* to geography. Original as homosexual desire may be to human beings, the arrival of gay people as a coherent social presence and political force owes everything to the transformations of modern urban geography. Though we are everywhere, our voice, with rare exceptions, is a voice of the urban metropolis.<sup>73</sup>

Browning emphasizes throughout that he speaks of a particularly North American gay community informed by specific queer liberation politics that differ remarkably from

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<sup>69</sup> Ibid. p. 165.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid, p. 177.

<sup>71</sup> Frank Browning, *A Queer Geography: Journeys Toward a Sexual Self*, (New York: Crown Publishers, Inc., 1996), pp. 1-8.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid. pp. 1-2.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid. p. 2.



“a young Neapolitan in Italy or a Sambia tribesman in New Guinea—two places where homosexuality has a rich and ancient history that few make much effort to *disguise*.”<sup>74</sup> Later, Browning contrasts his personal experiences with those of subsequent generations of North American queer-identified youth for whom the metaphors of the closet seem, perhaps, less relevant than they did to him in the 1980s. Ultimately, he concludes that like the political boundaries we map onto geographic features, sexual identities are, in some ways, cultural and political fictions. These artificial boundaries deny a continuum upon which we may experience a plethora of “uncertainties of desire...which may in fact change the way we come to see ourselves in future days.”<sup>75</sup>

### **Denizens of Queer Space: The Dandy and the *Flaneur***

To an outsider, the city can be a confusing, bewildering, and overwhelming place. Its streets invite our curiosity and arouse our anxieties. The city is also a place to see and to be seen, a microcosm of disparate groups living in close proximity who operate according to unspoken rules governing a complex human geography. When we visit unfamiliar urban spaces, a tour guide is often necessary, and in many ways, Rufus Wainwright as a resident of the city, acts as such. In his songs, he invites us to join in the exploration of the sights, sounds, smells, and inhabitants of city spaces. As a celebrity, Wainwright invites the gaze and attention of those he encounters, but as long-time resident of the city, he is also an informant, fluent in the gestures, speech, and patterns of city life. Wainwright’s dual role as voyeur and viewed has roots in two historical archetypes of gay masculinity: the dandy and the *flaneur*.

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<sup>74</sup> Ibid. p. 3-4 emphasis added.

<sup>75</sup> Browning, p. 5.

Both the English dandy and his French cousin, the *flaneur*, emerged from the nineteenth-century urban landscape during times of considerable socio-political, economic, and technological upheaval. Prior to the nineteenth century, bifurcated European society consisted of a lavishly wealthy aristocratic class who controlled the socio-economic fate of the larger peasant class. Monarchs flaunted their privilege through lifestyles based on opulence and extravagance in dress, diet, architecture, and recreation. However, as the Industrial Revolution gained momentum, a moneyed middle class comprised of merchants and businessmen threatened aristocratic dominance. With their increased wealth came power; subsequently, monarchies across Europe disintegrated. Mass modes of production made textiles, home goods, and countless other products available to anyone with the money to buy, and advances in transportation not only mobilized great numbers of people but brought an influx of goods from around the world. However, the sudden availability of goods, services, and transportation was viewed with caution by the new middle class for whom the memories of aristocratic abuses and excesses remained fresh.

In an effort to avoid those same pitfalls, some degree of restraint and prudence came to constitute the middle class norm. Homes were comfortable, not ostentatious, and clothing, particularly for men, became functional rather than flashy. The grand costumes of monarchs were supplanted by *l'habit noir*, a ubiquitous black suit worn by virtually all middle- and upper-class men.<sup>76</sup> Ironically, these forces of social homogenization birthed two highly aesthetic modes of masculinity: one based on being seen; the other, on making observation.

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<sup>76</sup> Women's clothing, in many respects, did not become standardized in this way; therefore, I exclude it from my discussion.

Given the general trend toward visual conformity, dress became particularly important to the dandy as “the relationship between dress, class, and individuality had become increasingly complex...because of their *reduction*.”<sup>77</sup> The drab interchangeability of *l’habit noir* led Balzac to comment that elegance had become “not a matter of class affiliation but of individual temperament and genius.”<sup>78</sup> Balzac even derived a scientific method, *vestignomie*, through which he believed it possible to “to deduce a whole series of meanings from the vestimentary signals” emitted through posture, gesture, speech, and costume.<sup>79</sup> Aspiring to “a kind of spiritual aristocracy...through his mastery of dress,” a skillful *l’homme hieroglyphe* could mediate the tension between conformity and disclosure, surface and content by becoming a conformist-individualist, exceeding other men “no longer in the obvious expense of clothes...but style, cut, and the *quintessence of personality* simultaneously concealed and revealed by the ensemble.”<sup>80</sup> Describing the dandy as an “ontological challenge that displaces bourgeois notions of the self as unique, abiding, and continuous,” Moe Meyer hypothesizes that the figure substitutes for this nineteenth-century notion of identity, a “concept of the Self as performative, improvisational, discontinuous and processually constituted by repetitive and stylized acts.”<sup>81</sup> The combination of these acts, gestures, and behaviors, these “poses,” led to the construction of a social identity which could be appropriated, worn, and performed.

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<sup>77</sup> Richard Burton, *The Flaneur and His City: Patterns of Daily Life in Paris 1815-1851*. Durham: University of Durham Press, 1994, pp. 9-10, emphasis added.

<sup>78</sup> Quoted in Burton, p. 10.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid. p. 4.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid. p. 10, emphasis added.

<sup>81</sup> Moe Meyer, *The Politics and Poetics of Camp* (London: Routledge, 1994) p. 75.

Whereas the dandy perfected an art of being seen, the *flâneur*, his French counterpart, developed an art of *seeing*. Assuming the position of a well informed and highly opinionated everyman, the *flâneur* acted as a sort of tour guide through his distinctly urban environment. Writes Richard Burton, “the flâneur stands apart from the city even as he appears to ‘fuse’ with it; he interprets each of its component parts in isolation in order...to attain to an intellectual understanding of the whole as a complex system of meaning.”<sup>82</sup> While the dandy focused almost entirely on himself, his manner of dress, and the cultivation of his manners, the flâneur saw all life as “a system of signs in which even the most trivial phenomenon is replete with meaning that if read correctly and linked to other perhaps widely disparate phenomena, will disclose a universe of significance.”<sup>83</sup>

During roughly the same historical epoch, a new socio-sexual identity emerged from psychology: the homosexual.<sup>84</sup> Though same-sex sexual activity and romantic relationships doubtlessly existed prior to the first use of the specific term “homosexual,” it was in the nineteenth century that the modern(ist) concept of the homosexual became a separate subject position.<sup>85</sup> Conceived as deviant, immoral, and punishable by imprisonment or hospitalization until the middle of the twentieth century, homosexuality sat (and continues to sit) at the nexus of social, spiritual, and moral debates. Although often united by contemporary theorists as icons of a specifically gay sensibility that

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<sup>82</sup> Burton, p. 1.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid. p. 2.

<sup>84</sup> Neil Miller’s *Out of the Past: Gay and Lesbian History from 1869 to the Present* (New York: Alyson Books, 2006) and Chris White’s *19<sup>th</sup> Century Writings on Homosexuality: A Sourcebook* (London: Routledge, 1999) attest to the existence of what we now consider a “gay” or homosexual man, though in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, a number of scholars and scientists sought to find a word to give this group, a collective label which would eventually enable them to engage in political movement and speak back to the heterosexual majority from a position of collective empowerment.

<sup>85</sup> The first documented use of the term “homosexual” occurred in an 1869 pamphlet attributed to novelist Karl-Maria Kertbeny.

evolved in reaction to the split-subjectivity or double life lived by many gay men, neither the dandy nor the *flaneur* signaled a particular sexual proclivity by nineteenth-century critics. However, by the *fin de siècle*, both identities were strongly identified with gay men, particularly following Oscar Wilde's infamous 1895 legal battles. Meyer's analysis recognizes the centrality of "posing" in the construction of Wildean sense of self, and as the title of Wainwright's 2002 album demonstrates, *Poses* remain central to urban gay masculinity in the twenty-first century. Therefore, a brief discussion of the historical significance of the pose is necessary to both my argument and the eventual construction of one form of homosexual subjectivity.

According to Steele Mackaye, a North American champion of the French Delsarte method of actor training, the pose provided a means by which one "could construct an exterior surface (the art object) that would signify the artist's interiority [thereby] collapsing the distinctions between subject and object thus transforming oneself into a living work of art," a preoccupation shared by Balzac.<sup>86</sup> For Delsarte, posing represented the highest form of art because of this lack of distinction between subject and object, and it is precisely this lack of distinction Wilde sought, for as Meyer notes, "constructing a sign by fixing, stabilizing, and giving [it] permanence...was a necessary first step [in this process]."<sup>87</sup>

Inspired by the Delsarte method of actor training and Balzac's science of *vestignomie*, Oscar Wilde endeavored to construct a specifically new male subject position. In order to commence with this process, Wilde had to take into account that Victorian-era minds had no concept of gay identity, per se. "A sexual activity in which

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<sup>86</sup> Meyer, p. 80.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid. p. 82.

men could engage,” sodomy was recognized (and prosecuted) but the notion of a homosexual individual remained as yet unimagined.<sup>88</sup> Since sodomy was relational, i.e. an act that required two participants, Wilde had to “construct a sign of homoerotic desire that could be appropriated to the surface of the body...by establishing his own identity on the surfaces of the body of the sexual partner.”<sup>89</sup> Meyer locates Wilde’s construction of the homosexual in his creative works, particularly “The Relation of Dress to Art,” “The Portrait of Mr. H. W.,” and *The Portrait of Dorian Gray*.

In the first essay, Wilde attempts to resituate “his own signifying project onto the body of...the artist’s model.”<sup>90</sup> Through the sacrifice and manipulation of the model’s body, Meyer continues, the artist is able to signify his/her own interiority in the resulting art object. “Conceptualized as a neutral surface, the model’s body could be ethically objectified...for the model’s own interiority would be left untouched, forever innocent.”<sup>91</sup> Likewise, both “The Portrait of Mr. H.W.” and *Dorian Gray* use painting metaphorically to create a distinct subjectivity through art. Painting is a lucid illustration of this process because the object (the painting) is filtered through the subject (the painter), and the model becomes the currency for the transaction between subject and object.

In *Dorian Gray*, Basil’s desire for Dorian manifests physically in a stunning portrait of the younger man. Following an act of miraculous intervention, a sort of deal with the Devil, the painting assumes Dorian’s spiritual essence while Dorian’s now-soulless body remains untouched by age. At the novel’s climax, Dorian murders Basil, and all remnants of Dorian’s terrible secret vanish: The artist is deceased, and the portrait,

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<sup>88</sup> Meyer, p. 82.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid. p. 82.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid. p. 88.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid. p. 83.

Meyer reminds us, remains hidden in an attic. It is at this moment that Dorian becomes a vessel or a template for pure homoerotic desire, a physical manifestation of one man's lust for another that exists outside time which then could be appropriated and inhabited as an identity: a homosexual "pose."

In her analysis of *The Portrait of Dorian Gray*, Eliza Glick portrays the dandy as the embodiment of split-subjectivity, though the other characters in the novel view him as a perfect synthesis of form and content: a beautiful *and* intellectual man.<sup>92</sup> Dorian's penchant for "acquiring a wide range of luxurious commodities that appeal to the senses" manifests in his various exotic and entirely ornamental collections. His accumulation of unique and handmade objects leads to the creation of "an alternative to the sterility and uniformity of the mass market."<sup>93</sup> In Gray's fictional world, illusion triumphs over reality in the form of antiques, dislodged from their context, sanitized, and displayed in tidy glass cases. By inverting the hierarchy of needs, Dorian "makes unnecessary things his only necessities," though he aspires to produce in himself the fiction of a "secretless self."<sup>94</sup> Ironically, such unity is precisely what Dorian lacks. By showing how the dandy straddles a series of such dichotomies, Glick constructs "a context for understanding how the gay male subject came to combine appearance and essence in the first place," and it seems safe to assume that for Glick and Wilde, the dandy is "the one who endlessly seeks to unite his divided subjectivity but can never do so."<sup>95</sup>

Glick elucidates the relationship between two forms of dandyism—one purely aesthetic, the other political—first by disentangling the concepts then flinging them even

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<sup>92</sup> Eliza Glick, "The Dialectics of Dandyism," *Cultural Critique* 48 (2001): 129-163.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid. pp. 140-142.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid. p. 143.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid, pp. 131-143

further apart to demonstrate the elastic strength of this bond. The first incarnation of the dandy avoids politics and history in favor of “an aesthetic world of art and/or commodity culture,” whereas the second sees himself as a form of political rebellion, fully cognizant of politics, history, and the present.<sup>96</sup> To him, “dissident aesthetic and cultural practices” function as controversial or subversive acts because they generate forms of resistance to “heterosexual norms, industriousness, and utilitarianism.”<sup>97</sup> These seemingly contradictory forms of dandyism highlight the internal contradictions of masculinity in queer culture: the balancing act between disclosure and conformity, action and complacency, production and consumption.

### **Gay Bohemians and Clones**

While the dandy and *flaneur* trace their origins to Europe in the nineteenth century, both were imported into North America via, for example, Oscar Wilde’s successful tour of the continent in 1882. These two archetypes along with drag queens and twinkies remained in vogue until the late-1970s, when a new figure emerged on the urban landscape. Edmund White locates the era’s gay zeitgeist in the formation of “short-lived or enduring,” relationship characterized by “an unspoken prejudice against fidelity, and domesticity.”<sup>98</sup> Characterized by “experimentalism, erotic sophistication, prejudice against materialism, elusive humor, ambition to measure up to international and timeless standards and the belief that art should be serious and difficult,” this gay bohemia flourished throughout the 70s, in part as a result of the Stonewall riot in 1969 and an optimistic energy to effect social change through art.<sup>99</sup> White’s language suggests a

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<sup>96</sup> Eliza Glick, “The Dialectics of Dandyism,” p. 130.

<sup>97</sup> Glick, p. 131.

<sup>98</sup> Edmund White, *Loss Within Loss* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2004), p. 9.

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid*, p. 9.



desire to synthesize life and art that is not unlike Oscar Wilde's desire to create his own dandy-homosexual subjectivity through literature.

In urban enclaves during the 1970s, different forms of gay masculinity rubbed against one another. Older forms of queer manhood, often modeled on dandyism of effeminacy, gradually gave way to a "hypermasculine sexuality as a way to challenge their [gay men's] stigmatization as *failed* men."<sup>100</sup> Around 1974, Moore writes, gay men began to organize a cultural (rather than political) lifestyle "in which masculinized representations of beauty, sexual experimentation, and drugs were central."<sup>101</sup> The "clone" quickly became the dominant expression of gay masculinity after Stonewall. Like the Old and New Left of the 1940s and 1960s, respectively, the clone (re)appropriated signifiers of blue collar masculinity, investing them with a distinctly queer subjectivity. With his "gym-defined body...bulging muscles...flannel shirts over muscle T-shirts, Levi 501s over work boots, bomber jackets over hooded sweatshirts, short hair...thick moustache or closely cropped beard," he shoved aside "gay liberationists, twinkies, drag queens, and leathermen" in his pursuit of "self-fulfillment in anonymous sex, recreational drugs, and hard partying."<sup>102</sup> If, as Levine writes, "gender identity and sexual behavior are learned, socially constructed sets of attitudes, traits, and behaviors that demonstrate successful acquisition of an identity," the near-ubiquitousness of clones in the 1970s suggests that gay men *en masse* recognized the limits of existing models of gay

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<sup>100</sup> Martin Levine *Gay Macho: The Life and Death of the Homosexual Clone* (New York: New York University Press, 1998) p. 5, emphasis added.

<sup>101</sup> Patrick Moore., p. 6.

<sup>102</sup> Levine, p. 7.

masculinity and the confidence instilled into these communities in the wake of the Stonewall riots.<sup>103</sup>

In the introduction to *Gay Macho*, Martin Levine describes a typical encounter between gay men in New York City in the late 1970s:

Men coming home from work thronged Christopher Street late one afternoon. The sultry weather caused many to undo their ties and carry their jackets...I noticed another onlooker a few feet down the block...positioned opposite me, learning against the wall of the Village Cigar store. By clone standards, he was very handsome, possessing a beautiful face, black hair, and a thick moustache. Tight jeans and a white tee shirt revealed his ample “basket” and pumped up body...Many men cruised him. Though he responded with an occasional smile and a wink, he was not interested. About five minutes later, he perked up. Two men had arrived...unabashedly cruising him. He eyed them back.<sup>104</sup>

Eventually, Levine tells us that Tee Shirt (his moniker for this particular clone) exchanged numbers with one of the men before continuing his walk down Christopher Street. Though he is approached by many other men before disappearing around the corner, Tee Shirt simply grins and points to the slogan emblazoned across his shirt: *So Many Men, So Little Time*.<sup>105</sup> Just another day in the city for the clone.

Levine’s sensitive portrayal of urban gay culture in the 1970s incorporates obligatory discussions of bar culture, the closet, sex, tricking, and cruising with detailed “insider” information about social networks, friendships, and the sense of *community* that bound gay liberationists, clones, queens, twinkies (twinks), and the myriad of other gay masculinities. His attention to detail rescues 1970s gay bohemia from hypersexualized stereotypes and exaggerated misrepresentations without denying the importance of sex and sexuality to the construction of gay identity in this time period. Together with Patrick

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<sup>103</sup> Ibid. p. 11.

<sup>104</sup> Levine, pp. 3-4.

<sup>105</sup> Ibid. p. 4.

Moore's challenge to reclaim the history of radical gay sex, Levine's work helps complete the portrait of post-Stonewall/ pre-AIDS urban gay masculinity.

Clones clearly illustrate the performance, or specifically the subversion of a performance of a set of socially constructed expectations regarding gender. By rejecting the supposed effeminacy of homosexuality, clones demonstrate that neither masculinity nor femininity are innate characteristics. Their adoption of hypermasculine iconography elucidates the performative nature of identity categories, which can be cast on and off through iteration of particular norms, behaviors, and characteristics. "All men in our culture, regardless of future sexual orientation, learn the male gender role and sex script."<sup>106</sup> Thus gay men became *Men* through the same "elaborate process of socialization, negotiations between the individual and his environment."<sup>107</sup> Though products of "relative suburban affluence," and almost always white, they were also victims of "discrimination, both systemic and interpersonal" who could recall "threats and the realities of violence."<sup>108</sup> Like the dandy, the flaneur, and the queen before him, the clone is another point on the continuum of negotiations between conformity and disclosure with which gay men continue to wrestle.

"The Sexual Flaneur" walked the back streets of gay sex in New York City from the mid-1970s to the early 80s, acting as an "informed walker or tour guide of a sort."<sup>109</sup> In Moore's *Beyond Shame*, the figure chronicles the rise and decline of numerous cornerstones of gay bohemia and the gay male sexual revolution, a movement built on the construction of pleasure. Moore, a self-described gay man in his 40s who survived the

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<sup>106</sup> Ibid. p. 11.

<sup>107</sup> Ibid. p. 11.

<sup>108</sup> Levine, p. 11.

<sup>109</sup> Moore, p. 107.

AIDS epidemic, searches urban landscapes for the archeological remains of a “community drawn together because of our mostly secret lives as sexual outlaws [that is now] connected by *shame*.”<sup>110</sup>

Gay bohemia evaporated in the wake of AIDS, and in its place rose a new “queer Puritanism,”<sup>111</sup> fueled by fear, ignorance, and increased pressure to conform to heteronormative socio-sexual structures. The urge to appear “normal” became so great with the AIDS crisis that gay art lost its “edginess, quirkiness, even violence...to a tackiness, a sort of steroid-injected, sex shop conformism.”<sup>112</sup> With the symptoms of AIDS and the wave of deaths came a staggering of sexually progressive politics. “We will remember our institutions, the legislative battles, the fiery speeches and marches,” but 80s and 90s political action turned toward AIDS-based research and treatment.<sup>113</sup> The sexual-cultural legacy of the 70s has been swept aside in the panic of disease. By recontextualizing 1970s gay male sexuality as a form of cultural protest and art, Moore sets the stage for artists in the coming decades to return to “gay bohemia” and pick up the threads of what should have been the most revolutionary moment in socio-cultural history.

The hyper-masculinized gay stereotype persists into the twenty-first century, and conflicts between groups of gay men who express their masculinity in a variety of ways, from the most outrageous queen to the Macho Man often draw sharp distinctions within gay culture, whether in the form of musical taste, hair style, choice of clothing, home décor, or favorite bar/dance club. Rufus Wainwright is well-aware of these divisions

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<sup>110</sup> Ibid, p. xxi, emphasis added.

<sup>111</sup> White, p. 9.

<sup>112</sup> White, p. 10.

<sup>113</sup> Moore, p. 12.

among groups of gay men. Though his music is often directed at gay men and “his obsessions about things like designer sunglasses and finding his ‘master prince’ are universal...at the same time, he goes ignored by a large number of gay men who seem turned off because he does not fit the current image of a pop star.”<sup>114</sup> “Maybe the problem is I’m too feminine, or that I sing about death when being gay is all about avoiding it,” Wainwright wonders in a 2001 interview, “or maybe it’s that having gotten themselves pumped up and tattooed to battle like gladiators against old gay stereotypes, many gay men are not ready for a punk, fey Rimbaud who compares himself to Cole Porter and Verdi.”<sup>115</sup>

### **Masculinities and Music**

Several essays in a volume edited by Sheila Whiteley deal primarily, if not exclusively, with masculinity and music.<sup>116</sup> For instance, Freya Jarman-Ivens’ analysis of hip-hop, masculinity, and misogyny concludes that “groups of disenfranchised young men work to enact an almost excessive display of masculinity not only through the exclusion of women from their space but also through physical actions.”<sup>117</sup> Jarman-Ivens develops the notion of a “homosocial arena” with discreet homosexual and heterosexual poles which “does not contain the potential for slippage between social and sexual that is integral, say, to Adrienne Rich’s formulation of a ‘lesbian continuum.’”<sup>118</sup> Her work demonstrates that excessive displays of a rap artist’s heterosexuality through, for instance, the degradation of women in video imagery or violently homophobic lyrics,

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<sup>114</sup> Morris, 2001.

<sup>115</sup> Morris, 2001.

<sup>116</sup> Shelia Whiteley and Jennifer Rycenga, editors, *Queering the Popular Pitch* (New York: Routledge, 2006).

<sup>117</sup> Freya Jarman-Ivens, “Queering Masculinities in Heterosexist Rap Music,” in *Queering the Popular Pitch*, ed. Whiteley, (New York: Routledge, 2006), p. 199-201.

<sup>118</sup> Ibid, p. 201.

require the assumption of a particular sort of hyper-macho, hetero-masculinity. However, the signs do not always clearly point “straight” ahead.

For Jarman-Ivens, the iconography of heterosexual rappers can be re-envisioned through a lens of same-sex desire. Both 50 Cent and Eminem manipulate visual iconography, the body, and clothing in ways that could elicit or suggest varying degrees of homoeroticism, the former through display of the near-nude, muscular body on album covers and the latter by wearing clothing that more closely resembles current, urban, gay club trends than hip-hop style. Since these images are predominantly consumed by a male audience, Jarman-Ivens writes, the conspicuous presence of homoeroticism problematizes an entirely “straight” read of either musician’s iconography. It is important to note that these forms of identification do not necessarily imply homosexual attraction, but rather homoerotic desire. The image of 50 Cent’s body, with the contour of his musculature outlined in black, signals on one hand physical prowess and on the other sexual desirability. Consumers who possess a literacy of the codes of gay subcultural, material culture may interpret Eminem’s short, gelled hair, white vest, and gold hoop earrings as signals of a homosexual identity whereas a listener who lacks such fluency may not.

Sheila Whiteley’s analysis of Mick Jagger suggests that the singer’s “performance style opened up definitions of gendered masculinity and so laid the foundations for self-invention and sexual plasticity which are not an integral part of contemporary youth culture.”<sup>119</sup> By blending showmanship, camp, and a “parody of the feminine and transvestism,” Jagger initiates a queering of rock masculinity, essentially paving the way

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<sup>119</sup> Sheila Whiteley, “Little Red Rooster v. The Honky Tonk Woman: Mick Jagger, Sexuality, and Image,” in *Sexing the Groove: Popular Music and Gender*, ed. Whiteley (London: Routledge, 1997), pp. 67-95.

for later performers like David Bowie and Freddie Mercury.<sup>120</sup> By contrast, Gareth Palmer uses the music of Bruce Springsteen “as a dominant force in promoting and signifying masculinity [with figures who] patrol borders, real and metaphorical...capture and keep their womenfolk...and struggle with their fathers...as embodiments of the patriarchal law [whose] tragedies lie in their inability to abandon the carefully drawn markers of masculinity.”<sup>121</sup>

For Stan Hawkins, the music of the Pet Shop Boys functions as a “key vehicle in deconstructing fixed notions of gendered identity in everyday life.”<sup>122</sup> Looking beyond musical analysis, Hawkins incorporates sociological shifts into his analysis to illustrate “how an uneasiness has gradually crept into society with the transformations in masculinity aligned to new trends in advertising,” such as men’s increased participation in fashion/shopping cultures in the 1980s.<sup>123</sup> Likewise, Fred Maus examines the relationship between homosexuality, queerness, and pop music in the music of the Pet Shop Boys in his “Glamour and Evasion: The Fabulous Ambivalence of the Pet Shop Boys.”<sup>124</sup> For Maus, the pitch materials and harmonic syntax of particular songs by the Pet Shop Boys combine with sometimes-oblique lyrics to form an ambivalent whole, one which gay and straight fans, according to their posts on the band’s discussion list, interpret in a variety of ways. For some, including Maus, their songs comment on gay men’s relationship with the closet, sexual activities such as cruising, and articulate

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<sup>120</sup> Ibid. p. 67.

<sup>121</sup> Gareth Palmer, “Bruce Springsteen and Masculinity,” in *Sexing the Groove: Popular Music and Gender*, ed. Sheila Whiteley (London: Routledge, 1997), pp. 100-117.

<sup>122</sup> Stan Hawkins, “The Pet Shop Boys: Musicology, Masculinity, and Banality,” in *Sexing the Groove: Popular Music and Gender*, ed. Sheila Whiteley (London: Routledge, 1997), pp. 118-133.

<sup>123</sup> Hawkins, p. 123.

<sup>124</sup> Fred Maus, “Glamour and Evasion: The Fabulous Ambivalence of the Pet Shop Boys,” *Popular Music* 20/3 (2001): 371-393.

“alternative non-macho masculinities in 1980s pop.”<sup>125</sup> Later, Maus cautions against reductive interpretations or the suggestion that the Pet Shop Boys’ music is *only* about homosexuality. In fact, their ambivalence toward sexuality manifests in the musical materials of individual songs as well as in Tennant’s and Lowe’s respective roles within the duo.

Both Walter Hughes and Judith Peraino connect notions of queer identity and race to the music of disco diva Sylvester, one of the first transgender popular music celebrities to achieve widespread fame.<sup>126</sup> Though Sylvester’s “identity as a gay black man stands at the origin of the disco tradition,” writes Hughes, “he is nevertheless rendered invisible if not impossible” due to homophobia and racism.<sup>127</sup> The struggle to assert a black, gay identity emerges on Sylvester’s “You Make Me Feel (Mighty Real).” In the late 70s, as machismo overtook much of the urban gay community, Sylvester epitomizes the effeminacy that Macho Men sought to escape. Through a synthesis of gospel and blues vocal techniques (particularly his flexible falsetto), disco rhythms, and synthesizer technologies “reclaims effeminate gay masculinity as a definitive position.”<sup>128</sup>

In a 2007 analysis of Freddie Mercury, Sheila Whiteley asks “whether [his] performing persona and sexual identity converge; and the extent to which they are constructed and stylized.”<sup>129</sup> By examining how Mercury’s songs “contribute to his self-realization,” not only as an individual but as a performer, Whiteley provides a case study

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<sup>125</sup> Maus., p. 382,

<sup>126</sup> Walter Hughes “In the Empire of the Beat” found in *Microphone Fiends: Youth Music and Youth Culture*, edited by Andrew Ross and Tricia Rose (New York: Routledge, 1994) pp 147-157. Judith Peraino, *Listening to the Sirens: Musical Technologies of Queer Identity from Homer to Hedwig* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), pp. 176-194.

<sup>127</sup> Ibid. p. 154.

<sup>128</sup> Peraino, p. 192.

<sup>129</sup> Shelia Whiteley, “Which Freddie? Constructions of Masculinity in Freddie Mercury and Justin Hawkins,” in *Oh Boy! Masculinities and Popular Music*, edited by Freya Jarman-Ivens, (New York: Routledge, 2007), p. 21.



of one particular queer masculine subject in male-dominated, presumably heterosexual 1970s rock.<sup>130</sup> “Blending showmanship and high camp,” Mercury assumed a number of masculine stances throughout his career, from androgynous glam rocker to mustached machismo [see Figure 1a].<sup>131</sup> This case in particular reveals the construction of masculinity through the adoption of specific iconographies, whether Mercury’s flamboyant Zandra Rhodes’ silks or his appropriation of the clone’s white “wife-beater,” jeans, and red bandanna.<sup>132</sup> While Mercury was somewhat shielded by a general trend toward androgyny in popular music of the late 70s, he made explicit the performative nature of gender roles and the existence of multiple forms of masculinity, two important fissures in the surface of what has historically been constructed as impenetrable.

Interestingly, play with the codes and signs of masculinities has not been limited to gay performers. Sheila Whiteley’s analysis of Mick Jagger suggests that the singer’s “performance style opened up definitions of gendered masculinity and so laid the foundations for self-invention and sexual plasticity which are not an integral part of contemporary youth culture.”<sup>133</sup> By blending showmanship, camp, and a “parody of the feminine and transvestism,” Jagger initiates a queering of rock masculinity, essentially paving the way for later performers like David Bowie and Freddie Mercury.<sup>134</sup>

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<sup>130</sup> Whiteley, “Which Freddie?” p. 22.

<sup>131</sup> Ibid. p. 23.

<sup>132</sup> The “Clone” culture of San Francisco and New York, as described by Patrick Moore in *Beyond Shame* and Les Wright in his essay “San Francisco” in the anthology *Queer Sites: Gay Urban History Since 1600*, consists of tight plaid shirts or tee shirts, tight jeans, construction boots, and facial hair. See Wright, pp. 182-183 for a discussion on Clones in San Francisco. Also see pp. 49-51 of this document.

<sup>133</sup> Sheila Whiteley, “Little Red Rooster v. The Honky Tonk Woman: Mick Jagger, Sexuality, and Image,” in *Sexing the Groove: Popular Music and Gender*, ed. Whiteley (London: Routledge, 1997), pp. 67-95.

<sup>134</sup> Ibid. p. 67.

Figure 1a, b, c, d  
The varied faces of Freddie Mercury  
All images: [www.queenzone.com](http://www.queenzone.com)



By contrast, Gareth Palmer uses the music of Bruce Springsteen “as a dominant force in promoting and signifying masculinity [with figures who] patrol borders, real and metaphorical...capture and keep their womenfolk...and struggle with their fathers...as embodiments of the patriarchal law [whose] tragedies lie in their inability to abandon the carefully drawn markers of masculinity.”<sup>135</sup>

Philip Auslander describes importance of androgyny in the 1970s in the short-lived Glam Rock movement for both Marc Bolan and David Bowie.<sup>136</sup> Likewise, disco and punk receive credit for opening up transgressive spaces for the (re)articulation of traditional masculinity, and New Wave artists of the early 1980s adopted an unquestionably androgynous or genderqueer aesthetic. Annie Lennox, one half of The Eurythmics, appeared famously in what I will call “corporate drag” in the music video for “Sweet Dreams (Are Made of This)” and took play with masculine, feminine, and even *human* signs to an extreme throughout the 80s and 90s, alternately appearing as hyper-masculine, hyper-feminine (in videos for her solo album *Diva*, for example), and as various animals (Minnie Mouse, in her 1995 video “Waiting in Vain” from *Medusa*). [See Figures 1e-g]

These radically different performances of masculinity with their attendant signifiers, behaviors, and sonic elements enable a plethora of interpretations. Hip-hop album covers and wardrobe choices may be seen as indicative of either a brand of male prowess or as referencing male (homo)social/sexual desire, though Jarman-Ivens makes it

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<sup>135</sup> Gareth Palmer, “Bruce Springsteen and Masculinity,” in *Sexing the Groove: Popular Music and Gender*, ed. Sheila Whiteley (London: Routledge, 1997), pp. 100-117.

<sup>136</sup> See Auslander, *Performing Glam Rock: Gender and Theatricality in Popular Music* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2006).

Figure 1e, f, g  
Androgynous Stars David Bowie (1973, [www.michaelochsarchives.com](http://www.michaelochsarchives.com));  
Annie Lennox (circa 1983, [www.annielenox.com](http://www.annielenox.com))  
and Marc Bolan (<http://www.bbc.co.uk/totp2/features/wallpaper/seventies2.shtml>)



explicit that she does not mean either of the rappers identify as gay themselves. The Jagger and Mercury examples illustrate how the play of signs in rock crept into both singers' images, as traditional symbols of heterosexuality were recast as a specifically gay, camp masculinity. Bowie and Lennox give evidence that queer masculinities can occur anywhere along sex/ gender continua. Sylvester and Pet Shop Boys provide a pivotal link between the musical-cultural practices of the 1970s and 1980s and later developments in the 1990s and 2000s, representing two radically different performances of gay masculinity over the course of a few decades. Rufus Wainwright highlights the performative nature of musical genres, enabling genre to signal gender and sexuality in the same way clothing, affect, and gesture work in the stage persona and visual iconography of these performers.

### **Representations of Queer Sexuality**

Though more than two decades since the onset of the AIDS crisis in North America have born greater awareness of gay men's presence (and indeed of the entire GLBTQ community), popular representations of gay men typically take one of three forms: pre-gay, not really gay, or soon to be no longer gay.<sup>137</sup> Furthermore, depictions of gay men as either the campy comedian or the hopeless conformist (Jack and Will from *Will and Grace* respectively typify these constructions) permeate popular culture and media. "What isn't being shown are gay men in a gay world, people as fully expressed socially. We never see two gay friends, two gay buddies...the gay's only function is to come out, camp it up, and die."<sup>138</sup> Even supposedly progressive media like *Queer as Folk* rarely stray from the safe stereotypes, and while exposure can lead to increased

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<sup>137</sup> Moore, p. 10.

<sup>138</sup> Moore, p. 10

acceptance, perpetuating the notion that gay men fall into one of two or three modes of masculinity strips gay men of agency and misrepresents the variety within the gay community as detrimentally as images of women confined to the home, Native Americans as feather-clad savages, or African Americans as broad-grinned submissives. In order to reclaim gay culture (not return to unsafe sexual practices), Moore argues that we must “dispel the sense of shame that has insinuated itself into gay history” and see 1970s gay male sexuality as “a tool for radical change...a powerful and laudable part of our legacy rather than an act of self-destruction.” What is called for is a reinvestment and re-engagement between politics and sexuality in the gay community.<sup>139</sup>

Rufus Wainwright’s music has a distinctly autobiographical quality. This is due in part to public knowledge about particular events in Wainwright’s life, particularly his candid disclosures on stage and in interviews concerning his drug habits, sexual appetites, and various other vices. Additional factors which contribute to the sense of Rufus-as-protagonist include his persistent use of first-person pronouns throughout the lyrics and the moniker “singer-songwriter,” which itself carries a freighted history of associations with ideas about authenticity stemming from the rock tradition.<sup>140</sup> The convergence of these factors in any number of Wainwright’s songs leaves listeners with the impression that Rufus Wainwright writes and sings about Rufus Wainwright.

The dilemma encountered here, namely the incongruence between Rufus Wainwright singer-composer and a fictive protagonist or even a stage persona can be explicated using Erving Goffman’s method of frame analysis.<sup>141</sup> While audiences,

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<sup>139</sup> Moore, p. xxiv.

<sup>140</sup> For more information regarding authenticity and rock, see Auslander’s *Performing Glam Rock*.

<sup>141</sup> Erving Goffman *Frame Analysis: An Essay on the Organization of Experience* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1974).

particularly musical ones, tend to collapse singer and subject into one and the same person, such performances are always mediated by limiting factors. Thus, when listening to a Rufus Wainwright song, one hears Rufus Wainwright the person acting in the capacity of singer-songwriter, then assuming various musical roles (which he constructs for himself) during the course of individual songs. Furthermore, it should be noted that in his description of any events in the lyrics of *Poses*, Wainwright exercises poetic license, whether by creating composite lyrics out of multiple experiences and in his decision to omit and include particular events. Thus, his performances are always partial, biased, and situated. While this may seem to contradict the previously described notion of a collapse of subject-object (see Chapter One), I would argue that even Wilde's homosexual subjectivity required the aesthetic distance between the author and the novel or the stage. Both Wilde and Wainwright blur the easy distinction between subject and object in their work, and Goffman's frame analysis adds another layer of richness to this understanding of the performance of gender roles and sexual scripts.

Wainwright's fan base is variegated in spite of (or perhaps due to) his openness about his homosexuality, and so are the appraisals of his music in light of his sexuality. As one contributor to the list said:

Why is it a star's sexuality is always the first thing to put in an article: eg: "gay singer/song writer rufus wainwright.... etc." Why is it needed? You never see: "Random Straight actor Joe Bloggs married with 5 kids." So why the gay label. Is it really necessary to label rufus or ian mckellan or any other brilliant queer? As far as I'm concerned it has no bearing on their ability and what they produce.. and it isn't just famous people who get it- its sometimes used almost as an after thought as if describing a unusual feature... My point is this- sexuality is not the defining feature of a person's character so why go overboard and fixate on it simply because it's "different."<sup>142</sup>

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<sup>142</sup> Discussion forum at [www.rufuswainwright.com](http://www.rufuswainwright.com), posting dated 31 March 2008. A note about the forum postings: I have made no alterations to the grammar, spelling, punctuation, or other aspects of any posting quotes from the site. It is difficult to determine when a contraction of misspelling is deliberate (a

Still, another replied:

As I see it...Making a study on gay musicians is like making a study on women artist or jewish writers...How many women painters do you know? (apart from Frida Khalo...). And there are many, just as good as men. Women in art are just the object, the subject of a painting, they don't hold the brush, they pose and that's it. I cannot begin to tell you how difficult it is for a woman to be recognized as a painter, as an artist (I personally know a few), so my guess that in an essay on a painter who happens to be a woman one of the subjects will be the fact that she is a woman. I don't see that as a discrimination. The fact that Rufus is gay is part of a cultural heritage of gay creators.<sup>143</sup>

A final post reads:

Speaking solely for myself, an artists sexual orientation is important to me, simply because when the celebrity identifies as gay, it's one more blow for freedom...where someone was brave enough to not hide such a huge part of who they are, showing that being gay, doesn't mean you can't be successful. For the United States, anyway, being gay does carry somewhat of a negative connotation and even Elton John has openly stated that Rufus' decision to be open about it (as if he could be closeted!) has probably negatively affected his album sales somewhat... We need MORE gay role models....not fewer. And I'm personally glad the media identifies his as a gay musician.<sup>144</sup>

Wainwright's decision to enter into the popular music business as an openly gay person and to write songs about specifically gay or queer experience mark his music at the level of lyric, musical detail, and genre. In the following chapters, I address these issues in light of the history of urban, gay masculinity and musical practices articulated by these scholars. In doing so, I connect Wainwright with the vibrant history of gay artists in North America and Europe, further enriching both the discourse surrounding musical practice and our understanding of the ways in which artistic and cultural practices impact constructions of subjectivity and identity.

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conversational norm in cyber-speak) or simply on editing oversight. To preserve the integrity of each individual post, therefore, I allow grammatical oddities to remain.

<sup>143</sup> Discussion forum at [www.rufuswainwright.com](http://www.rufuswainwright.com), posting dated 3 March 2008.

<sup>144</sup> Discussion forum at [www.rufuswainwright.com](http://www.rufuswainwright.com), posting dated 31 March 2008.



### **Chapter Three: The Art of Posing**

*He wears brooches on his windbreakers and his heart on his sleeve. He is unafraid of singing torch songs in a queenly, operatic voice. He wears several garish rings, lives with his mother and sings folks songs with his family. He even dislikes the gay icon Madonna.<sup>145</sup>*

Rufus Wainwright is an enigmatic anachronism in twenty-first-century popular music haunted by nostalgia for “a time when singers were more into enlightening audiences than telling them what to wear.”<sup>146</sup> An erudite, sophisticated thinker whose own comments about his work and his persona suggest an intimacy with the history of gay masculinities beginning in the nineteenth century, Wainwright employs a freighted term for the title of his sophomore album, *Poses*. The notion of the “pose” originated in a nineteenth-century technique for training actors but was soon adapted to creative writing by novelist-playwright-dandy-aesthete Oscar Wilde (1854-1900). By adopting a similar mode of self-representation, Rufus Wainwright further destabilizes the interior-exterior dyad by using his own body through the voice as the art object which he, simultaneously acting as the artist, manipulates through musical composition. In this chapter, I explore the connections between the title track of Wainwright’s *Poses*, historical modes of gay masculinity epitomized by the historical figure and literary works of Oscar Wilde, and the notion of the “pose.”

#### **Case Study: “Poses”**

The overall structure of *Poses* consists of two outer movements—“Cigarettes and Chocolate Milk” and a reprise of the same song—and three groups of thematically linked songs. The opening and closing material are the same, which suggests that the main “theme,” in this case the song “Cigarettes and Chocolate Milk,” emerges victorious at the

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<sup>145</sup> Bob Morris, 2001.

<sup>146</sup> Ibid.

end of some kind of musical journey. Between these iterations of the opening material occurs a series of eleven songs which can be grouped according to narrative function. The first group—"The Greek Song" and "Poses,"—explores themes of excess and indulgence through a sexual fling, materialism, as well as the drinking and drugs which accompany the protagonist's night out. The next group of songs—"Shadows," "California," "The Tower of Learning," and "Grey Gardens,"—suggests the realization of artifice, a loss of faith or interest in vice, and the beginning of a redemptive quest. A third group comprising "Rebel Prince," "The Consort," "One Man Guy," and "Evil Angel," finds Wainwright's protagonist in pursuit of redemption in the body of a beautiful young drag queen. Unsuccessful in his attempts to find solace in carnal pleasures, Wainwright realizes that though some people "meditate...trying to find the inner you...depend on family and friends and other folks to pull them through," he must rely on "three cubic feet of bone and blood and meat."<sup>147</sup> A final betrayal by an "evil angel with a cleft tongue" seems to derail his journey into excess, and the album's penultimate track finds a contemplative Wainwright "wandering properties of death" in a graveyard.

The title track from *Poses* betrays Wainwright's affiliation with a particularly Wildean pose, casting the singer as a modern day *l'homme hieroglyphe*, fluent in the language of cut, color, and detail. Noting every nuance from the color and décor of the

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<sup>147</sup> "One Man Guy." Interestingly, this song was written by Wainwright's father, Loudon Wainwright III, continuing a tradition of inter-textual communication between members of the Wainwright family. The elder Wainwright, known for his sardonic sense of humor, frequently composes songs to or about family issues. For example, his "Rufus is a Tit Man" was written after the birth of his son. Similarly, Wainwright's mother, Kate McGarrigle, and sister, Martha Wainwright, have written many songs about family issues, evidenced by the a number of songs from The McGarrigle Sisters' self-titled debut album as well as Martha's "BloodyMotherFuckingAssHole," dedicated to her father. A song on Rufus Wainwright's first album, "Beauty Mark," seems to have been written in response to his mother's "No Biscuit Blues." Both songs share a similar lyric structure, chronicling a list of "never had's."

room to an obviously expensive “red fetching leather jacket” and “brand name black sunglasses,” Wainwright moves through a series of materialistic poses, sidestepping a persistent warning to “watch his head about it.” The cumulative effect of his list of expensive and fashionable accoutrements constitutes a new performance of dandyism, one based not on a model of distinction within conformity as discussed earlier with *l’habit noir* but one infused with decadent extravagance. Accordingly, the luxuriousness of each item signals a specific socio-economic pose as well as a geographic pose, one of decidedly *urban* sophistication.

Figure 2  
“Poses” lyrics  
Rufus Wainwright

The yellow walls are lined with portraits,  
And I've got my new red fetching leather jacket.  
All these poses, such beautiful poses!  
Makes any boy feel like picking up roses.

There's never been such grave a matter  
As comparing our new brand name black sunglasses.  
All these poses, such beautiful poses!  
Makes any boy feel as pretty as princes.

The green autumnal park's conducting  
All the city streets, a wondrous chorus singing,  
“All these poses. Oh, how can you blame me?  
Life is a game and true love is a trophy.”

And you said watch my head about it.  
Baby, you said watch my head about it.  
My head about it  
Oh no, no kidding.

Reclined amongst these packs of reasons  
For to smoke the days away into the evenings,  
All these poses of classical torture  
Ruined my mind like a snake in the orchard.

I did go from wanting to be someone now  
I'm drunk and wearing flip-flops on Fifth Avenue.  
Once you've fallen from classical virtue  
Won't have a soul for to wake up and hold you

In the green autumnal parks conducting  
All the city streets a wondrous chorus  
Singing all these poses now no longer boyish  
Made me a man ah but who cares what that it

And you said watch my head about it  
Baby you said watch my head about it  
My head about it  
Oh no, no kidding.<sup>148</sup>

The subtleties of material culture and clothing play an important historical role within the gay community. According to interviewees in Scagliotti and Schiller's excellent documentary film "Before Stonewall," homosexual men in the nineteenth century often wore bold red neckties and pocket squares to indicate their sexual inclinations to one another. Likewise, in the S/M community, particular colors of bandanna correspond to specific sexual activities, and the placement of the bandanna in the left or right pocket signals whether the wearer is "top" or "bottom" in the scenario.<sup>149</sup> In a more general sense, clothing acts as an identity marker for many gay men, as evidenced by 1970s "Clone" culture, the flamboyant extravagance of club kids and drag queens, and the chic materialism of Chelsea boys. Each of these gay sub-communities distinguishes itself as much through clothing as attitude, affect, and location within the city itself.

The song "Poses" begins with a short, descending motive in the upper register of the piano, described by one contributor to the Rufus Wainwright discussion board as "that

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<sup>148</sup> Lyrics reprinted in *Poses* liner notes, DreamWorks, 2001.

<sup>149</sup> Martin Levine discusses this aspect of S/M culture in *Gay Macho*, p. 66; also see Peraino, p. 187.

gentle tinkling of the piano, it reminds me of an awakening,”<sup>150</sup> with which the left hand joins after 4 bars, playing a permutation of the tango [see figure 3], a dance rhythm that recurs throughout the album.<sup>151</sup> Popularized in Europe and North America shortly after the turn of the century, tango would have certainly appealed to the dandy’s voracious social appetite. The choreography of posing as a dandy, as a twenty-first-century gay man, or any other position in the social matrix is as detailed and nuanced as the steps of the tango. Furthermore, tango and similar dances first scandalized “good” society with licentious, sensual gestures, just as homosexuality has been construed as a threat to the chaste morality of predominantly Christian European and North American societies beginning in roughly the same epoch.

Figure 3  
“Poses” intro



<sup>150</sup> Post dated 15 March 2006.

<sup>151</sup> All transcriptions are by the author unless otherwise noted.

Figure 4  
“Poses” Melody

The image displays a musical score for the song "Poses". It consists of two systems of music, each with a vocal melody line (treble clef) and a piano accompaniment line (bass clef). The key signature is three flats (B-flat, E-flat, A-flat), and the time signature is common time (C). The lyrics are written below the vocal line, and chord symbols are written below the piano line.

**System 1:**

lined with por traits and I got my new red fetch ing lea ther ja cket

Chord symbols: D<sup>b</sup>, I, IV, V7, IV, V7

**System 2:**

all these po ses such beau ti ful po ses makes a ny boy feel like pick ing up ro ses

Chord symbols: ii, IVm7, ii, V7, ii, V7

Though the accompaniment sets up four-bar phrases in an unchanging rhythmic patten, the melody tugs at this rhythmic regularity, oozing over the ends of the piano’s tidy phrases, running ahead and lingering behind to emphasize particular lyric moments (Figure 4).<sup>152</sup> The incongruence between the regular rhythm of the tango and the long melodic phrase, which hovers around scale degrees 2 and 3, results in a boozy monotony through which Wainwright struggles to maintain his pose.

Narcissism plays a central role in this “pose,” as the identity of whomever Wainwright is talking to remains unclear. He banishes any presence but his own, speaking of and for the other person with a self-directed egotism that plagues the entire album. His voice, too, figures prominently in the song’s mix, occupying a persistent, central position indicative of Wainwright’s egotism. The placement of background

<sup>152</sup> The melodic transcription in figure 4 is not an exact representation of Wainwright’s vocal performance. His use of rubato to highlight particular words, lingering on some longer and moving past others with subtleties conventional notation cannot capture. However, the basic conflict between the melody and the regularity of the tango accompaniment is evident even in this transcription.

vocals, provided by Wainwright’s sibling Martha, at the “bottom” of the mix suggests a devaluing of both the contributions of women to his art and, more generally, those of others. Kept from finishing a complete word until the final iteration of the chorus, the background vocals conduct the listener’s attention back to Wainwright’s voice, and by association, Wainwright himself.

The same harmonic progression, I-IV-ii-V, is repeated in the first two verses, and Wainwright thwarts our expectation for another iteration in the third verse. The melody remains the same, but the accompanying harmony slides downward to V-V/IV-IV-V. This dominant prolongation accompanies a descending line in the strings from 7 to 3. Wainwright’s voice moves in contrary ascending motion, fighting against the ensemble’s downward inertia, but finally succumbs to the weight, tumbling down to tonic. Musically, this passage mirrors Wainwright’s downward fall, alluded to in the chorus and detailed in verses 4, 5, and 6. Figure 5 is one realization of a reduction of this passage. The top line represents Wainwright’s voice, and the descending string motive is located in the tenor voice with barred, upward stems.<sup>153</sup>

Figure 5  
Reduction of “Poses”

V    V/IV    IV    V    I  
V \_\_\_\_\_ I

<sup>153</sup> Reduction by the author.

The conflict between melody and accompaniment resolves momentarily at the chorus when the tango rhythm disappears from the piano, its residual presence felt in gentle, quiet percussion. The melodic line reaches upward in long, deliberate tones, propelled by pulsing eighth notes provided by strings and the piano, as Wainwright sings “you said ‘watch my head about it.’” As the melody reaches its pinnacle, it hastily slides downward to scale degree 6 as he dismisses the severity of this warning. Tension mounts anew as the harmonic progression moves upward against a descending melodic sequence. The disjuncture between tango rhythms, the sense of upward motion in the harmony, and the descending melodic line suggests disembodiment or the loss of control that comes with drunkenness or a drug-induced high. Wainwright shrugs off the warning with a glib, “no kidding,” as a return of the tango accompaniment in the piano ushers in the next verse.

Though musically nearly identical to the first half, the second portion of the song contains an affectual shift brought about through the lyrics, the addition of a busier string arrangement, and multi-tracked voices singing counterpoint to the melody. Through he once “reclined amongst these packs of reasons for the smoke the days into the evenings” with the regality of a dandy, Wainwright is now “drunk and wearing flip-flops on Fifth Avenue.”<sup>154</sup> This reference to a change in footwear is telling. Consider the costumes typically worn by the wealthy, the fabulous, and their imitators in clubs, bars, restaurants, award shows, public appearances, or other such occasions. Contrast these images with the casual connotations of flip-flops or sandals. The latter seems incongruous with Wainwright’s velvet blazers, jeweled brooches, and gaudy rings.

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<sup>154</sup> “Poses” lyrics.



Clearly, he is losing his internal struggle, describing himself as tortured, ruined, and utterly alone. However, this is not a self-pitying lament. Glimpsing his own demise, Wainwright recognizes the seriousness of his condition and glares in disbelief at the precariousness of his situation. The moment of self-revelation is short lived, though, and following a final “no kidding,” we find him inebriated in a club, fighting back “Shadows,” and looking for “The Tower of Learning.” However, he is distracted by a beautiful, seventeen-year-old (drag) queen to whom he sloppily and hastily pledges his allegiance. These actions take place over the course of six songs, “Shadows,” “California,” “The Tower of Learning,” “Grey Gardens,” “Rebel Prince,” and “The Consort.”

By drawing connection between the lyrics and the conflicts between the voice and ensemble, it is possible to hear “Poses” in a number of ways. On first inclination, one may acknowledge the conflict between Wainwright and the cautionary voice in the chorus, which could be that of a parent, loved one, concerned friend, or even a record company personality with a vested interest in the artist’s well-being. Mapping the historical figures of the dandy and *flaneur* onto the music, however, a second series of conflicts between the individual and society emerge. Dandyism and *flanerie* were dissident modes of masculinity taken up by gay men in order to establish a network of associations or a sense of acknowledgment through mastery of conformity. Moving between positions of resistance and conformity became a game of poses, with men like Oscar Wilde alternately assuming very heteronormative roles (his marriage to Constance Lloyd) and positions of resistance (his relationship with Lord Alfred Douglas, “Bosie”). As a modern manifestation of these archetypes, Wainwright similarly engages with the

dichotomy between resistance and conformity. However, unlike Wilde, Wainwright does not move between positions of hetero- and homosexuality. Rather, he dances between the gilded society ballroom and a dive bar in a dark corner of the city.

A third interpretation of these conflicts involves morality and religion. The lyrics of “Poses” allude to roses, princes, snakes in the orchard, virtue, a fall from virtue, and a tortured soul. Each of these images carries religious significance: the roses of the Virgin of Guadalupe; Christ, the “Prince of Peace,” and Satan, the “Prince of Darkness”; the Garden of Eden; The Fall. Casting himself as a Job-like figure, tormented by the very streets of his beloved city, Wainwright struggles against conservative Christianity and its condemnation of homosexuality. Religious imagery and sexuality will infamously collide on the later album, *Want Two*, on which Wainwright heralds the coming of a “Gay Messiah....reborn from 1970s porn, wearing tube socks with style” who “baptizes” the faithful in semen. Though the language of “Poses” is much more subtle, the song may represent Wainwright’s initial engagement in song with the sexuality, spirituality, and politics, conflicts in which gay men have been involved since long before the trials of Oscar Wilde.

By effectively queering the text of “Poses,” Rufus Wainwright provides an alternative to the dominant discourse surrounding music, masculinity, and sexuality. His careful manipulation of musical materials, dance rhythms, harmonic structure, melodic line, the voice, and lyrics connects his art to that of Oscar Wilde and historical representations of gay male masculinity. It is my hope that this preliminary examination of Wainwright’s music and masculinity contributes to the lively discourse recently initiated around the subject of masculinity in popular music by addressing specifically

queer ways of “doing” a masculine subject position, an act that, in the hands of Rufus Wainwright, connects the present and past of gay history and bridges the personal and political components of the artistic pose.

## **Chapter Four: Camping in the City**

The emergence of specifically gay zones within the city sets into motion a flourishing of gay masculinities, the assertion of which allows the gay community to speak back to the heterosexual majority from a position of collective empowerment. Likewise, these various gay masculinities participate in a dialogue with one another, critiquing, influencing, and changing the ways sub-communities view and construct themselves. With his performance of highly aesthetic, effeminate, neo-dandyism, Rufus Wainwright reflects a dissident form of gay masculinity back at the gay community using an ostentatious, antique, gilded mirror through which he invites us to step, like Alice, into a campy wonderland.

Stereotyped as a sort of decadent kitsch marked by the *passé*, the *démodé*, and often failure to be glamorous, to be serious, or to be masculine, camp has been a component of gay identity for more than a century. Since the 1960s, it has been increasingly associated with drag performances, effeminate flamboyance, and a caustic sort of humor. A strict definition of camp threatens to undo its fundamental characteristic, that is, its flexibility or elasticity. However, when theorized as a way of interpreting the world rather than a fixed point along a continuum of personality traits, camp becomes a useful theoretical tool for thinking about particular aspects of gay masculinity. Susan Sontag promotes such an approach in her influential “Notes on Camp.”<sup>155</sup>

Sontag’s essay takes the form of a series of bullet points with which she attempts to isolate and illustrate some of camp’s salient characteristics without codifying them into a formal analytical paradigm. Differentiating between the “almost but not quite ineffable” sensibility that constitutes camp from that which has been “crammed into the mold of a

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<sup>155</sup> Sontag, pp. 52-65.

system and handled with the rough tools of proof,” Sontag describes camp’s penchant for the “unnatural: artifice and exaggeration...and [its ability to] convert the serious into the frivolous [noting that it remains] disengaged, depoliticized, or at least apolitical.”<sup>156</sup>

Later in the essay, Sontag calls camp a dandyism for the age of mass culture and locates the major modes of difference between the nineteenth and twentieth century manifestations of the dandy by highlighting the inherent appreciation for high culture, refinement, and “good” society in the form then contrasting it with the latter’s infatuation with crassness, the gutter, and low culture. Guided by a “vision of the world in terms of style...a love of the exaggerated, the ‘off,’ of things-being-what-they-are-not,” this neo-dandy willingly embraces “vulgarity, is continually amused, sniffs the stink [of the gutter] and prides himself on his strong nerves.”<sup>157</sup>

Written in 1964, Sontag’s essay describes camp as a ephemeral and therefore dynamic, though her approach has been critiqued in decades since by a number of scholars, including Jack Babuscio whose “The Cinema of Camp” takes Sontag’s initial formulation as its point of departure for an extended analysis of what makes camp *campy*. Babuscio identifies a “gay sensibility,” described as a “heightened awareness of certain human complications of feeling that spring from the fact of social oppression...which is coloured, shaped, directed, and defined by the fact of one’s gayness.”<sup>158</sup> Like Balzac’s quintessence of personality, this sensibility is culturally, geographically, economically, and historically contingent and participates in the economics of identity which “define

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<sup>156</sup> Sontag, pp. 53-54.

<sup>157</sup> Ibid. p. 63.

<sup>158</sup> Jack Babuscio, “The Cinema of Camp,” in *Camp*, ed Fabio Cleto (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2002), p. 118.

people as falling into distinct types.”<sup>159</sup> Babuscio dissects his sensibility into four constituent elements—irony, aesthetics, theatricality, and humor—and suggests that these may serve as adaptive strategies for the oppressed and repressed gay community. Eventually, Babuscio christens this sensibility “camp,” though his definition contains precisely the political element Sontag denies.

Camp’s irony stems from an “incongruous contrast between an individual/ thing and its context/association.”<sup>160</sup> A brief list of common ironic dichotomies includes masculinity/femininity, sacred/profane, mind/body, high/low culture, and form/content. In the hands of a capable auteur, irony is necessarily shaped and manipulated through various aesthetic processes; thus what had been a general sense of juxtaposition becomes an art for Babuscio, with an implicit though by no means fixed set of rules, regulations, and expectations. This aesthetic rendering of irony often takes the form of a “heightened awareness and appreciation for disguise, impersonation, the projection of personality,” which Babuscio calls theatricality.<sup>161</sup>

For gay men, Babuscio writes, “the inner knowledge of our unique social situation has produced in us a heightened awareness of the discrepancies that lie between appearance and reality, expression and meaning.”<sup>162</sup> The homosexual community, for Babuscio, possesses a Hegelian sort of knowledge about social realities by virtue of their position outside heteronormativity, since homosexuality subverts the patriarchal paradigm.<sup>163</sup> Seen this way, homosexuality and camp highlight the performative nature

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<sup>159</sup> Ibid. p. 118.

<sup>160</sup> Ibid. p. 119.

<sup>161</sup> Ibid. p. 120.

<sup>162</sup> Ibid. p. 119.

<sup>163</sup> Feminist scholars, among them bell hooks and Judith Butler, have noted similar forms of knowledge among marginalized communities of women including women of color and lesbians.

of sex and gender roles given that gay men, for example, can use their outsider knowledge of the patriarchal social order to “pass” as straight either for personal gain (for example, by concealing one’s gayness in order to get a promotion at work) or for reasons of personal safety in the face of the violent reality faced by gay men in many places. The end result of these levels of awareness is a specific sense of humor, camp, that emerges in the form of the incongruence between an object and its context and a feigned innocence concerning the juxtaposition. However, this humor can be tinged with pain, anger, and indignation, resulting in what Babuscio calls a “bitter-wit.”

Both Babuscio and Sontag highlight the tensions between substance and surface as the site of meaning for camp. However, their meanings sit at opposite poles in terms of social work. Sontag explicitly strips camp of any political power, keeping it safely in the closet. For Babuscio, camp is implicitly political and plays a major role in defining both gay/lesbian identity and space. The dialectic proposed by Eliza Glick through which two forms of dandyism, one politically invested, the other not, provides a way to ease the tension between Babuscio and Sontag. By flinging the dichotomy further apart, Glick emphasizes the interrelationship between two manifestations of the same figure, suggesting that while it may not often seem so, the personal is always-already political. If seen in this way, camp, too, becomes a political project through a variety of factors including intent, performance, and reception. This dialectical conversation between the substance and surface occupies a central position in Wainwright’s music.

If Sontag’s assertion is that camp is the mass cultural manifestation of dandyism, then Rufus Wainwright may very well be its poster boy. As an openly gay songwriter, his music participates in the politics of homosexual identity, providing a musical template for

being a gay man. Armed with stylish clothes, a beautiful voice, and a tendency for over-indulgence, Wainwright acts as a tour guide, taking his audience on a stroll through the kaleidoscopic underworld of modern, urban gay identity. However, something sinister lurks in his performance of this persona. Perhaps it is his excesses in drug and drink (his own mother calls him a “party animal”), or maybe his frankness about sexual indulgences while AIDS continues to plague the gay and straight communities, or perhaps it is the charm of his talent (for certainly someone “that talented” would not really do all these things), but Wainwright’s twenty-first-century dandy comes off as particularly decadent.

While I do not wish to make facile connections between an artist’s life and music, the line between disclosure and poetic license is porous. The autobiographical details Wainwright chooses to reveal constitute as much a component of his performance of a queer masculinity as the music. For instance, during a 1998 concert at The Variety Playhouse in Atlanta, Wainwright elaborated on the importance of accessories in making him feel comfortable on stage, happily recounting an afternoon spent shopping for brooches in Little Five Points (a trendy, bohemian area of the city). He then exhibited the three brooches for the audience, often exchanging one for another on his lapel between songs, hoping to attract what he called “beautiful, Southern boys.” Here, the use of material culture, the brooches, seemed mightily campy, the sort of thing Joan Crawford or Bette Davis would do.

Many other elements Wainwright isolates in his music and persona mirror gay community practices: cruising in bars, clubs, and public places; gallivanting with drag queens and fabulous people; various, fleshy pleasures; the use of illicit drugs. This is not to argue that these belong exclusively to gay culture, but such associations are widely



recognized by theorists, sociologists, and even Wainwright himself.<sup>164</sup> Though Wainwright would not reveal his struggle with drug addiction until almost a year after the release of *Poses*, he calls the period a “descent into gay hell,” and the album’s lyrical and musical depictions of excess mirror Wainwright’s own life at the time.<sup>165</sup> Describing the project of writing the album to a reporter, Wainwright noted that although he had not intended to be autobiographical, in fact he claimed to have written several of the songs about a friend, he eventually realized he was writing about himself.<sup>166</sup>

### **Case Study: “Cigarettes and Chocolate Milk”**

This distinctly autobiographical quality results in part from public knowledge about particular events in Wainwright’s life, especially his candid disclosures concerning drug habits, sexual appetites, and various other vices. Additionally, his persistent use of first-person pronouns throughout the lyrics and the fact that we *hear* Rufus Wainwright singing in first-person confuses the difference between the lyric/poetic “I” and the autobiographical “me.” Furthermore, the moniker “singer-songwriter,” Rufus Wainwright’s generic designation at the most general level, is fraught with ideologies concerning authenticity, self-representation, and sincerity. The convergence of these factors in any number of Wainwright’s songs helps construct the notion that the singer/composer writes and sings from a position of personal experience.

This confusion between artistic, performing, and biographical identities seems like an analytical snarl, yet we can commence to untangle the knot using Erving

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<sup>164</sup> Again, I refer to Moore’s *Beyond Shame* and Levine’s *Gay Macho*.

<sup>165</sup> DeCurtis, “Rufus Wainwright Journeys to Gay Hell and Back.” *The New York Times* 31 August 2003.

<http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?res=9B03E5DF1039F932A0575BC0A9659C8B63>

<sup>166</sup> DeCurtis, “Rufus Wainwright Journeys to ‘Gay Hell’ and Back.”

Goffman's method of frame analysis.<sup>167</sup> Beginning in the early-nineteenth century, when the image of Beethoven as tortured artist engaged in a battle to express his tumultuous emotions through music emerged, musical audiences tend to collapse the biographical person, the composer, and the performer into one entity. A similar issue arose in the mid-twentieth century in the poetry of Anne Sexton, whose "confessional" style freely mixed fact and fiction, as biographer Diane Middlebrook demonstrates, yet Sexton's work was received as a truthful expression of factual experience.<sup>168</sup> The singer-songwriter movement of the 1970s brought together these two methods of subjective expression, through music and through words, in one artistic persona. Though Goffman's work deals with acting, the model translates into musical performance easily. When we hear, for example, Rufus Wainwright perform a first-person song, we simultaneously experience Rufus Wainwright, the person, acting in a number of his capacities: composer, singer, pianist, stage persona, and activist. Depending on a particular audience member's level of engagement with Wainwright, any or all of these factors may influence the ways in which his work is received, discussed, and disseminated.

The lyrics of "Cigarettes and Chocolate Milk" illustrate this point rather clearly [see Figure 6]. Throughout the song, Wainwright grocery-lists his excesses and indulgences. However, aside from the use of first-person pronouns, nothing in the song immediately suggests that Wainwright is singing about himself. Factors external to the music itself, such as those described above, contour the way this song is understood in relation to Wainwright's own life. So widely acknowledged is his reputation as a party animal—even by his own mother—that when he sings, it seems logical, indeed *natural* to

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<sup>167</sup> Erving Goffman, "Frame Analysis: An Essay on the Organization of Experience." (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1974).

<sup>168</sup> Diane Middlebrook, *Anne Sexton: A Biography*, (New York: Vintage Books, 1992).

assume the lyrics are autobiographical. Whether or not “Cigarettes and Chocolate Milk” is a confession or a caricature (or both), it exists as part of gay musical culture, thereby playing some part in the ways in which gay men understand and construct their own subjectivity.

Irony, humor, and theatricality—three of Babuscio’s constituent elements of camp—permeate the lyrics, particularly the juxtaposition of innocence and experience. Noticeably absent are details concerning these other vices. Wainwright toys with the tension between disclosure and concealment, knowing that audiences possess a particular insight into his personal life from the facts revealed in interviews and various public appearances. By 2002, Wainwright had already developed a reputation as a hard-partying, promiscuous egomaniac, and the whimsical quality of these lyrics (and later the accompanying music) makes fun *out of* the dangerous realities he faces.<sup>169</sup> Playing with the already established tensions between disclosure and conformity, Wainwright’s ambivalence heightens the song’s drama. He confesses to his “sins” through evasion; he is the gatekeeper and strictly patrols the borders of his persona. However, as already noted in the analysis of “Poses,” he soon finds himself “drunk and wearing flip-flops on 5<sup>th</sup> Avenue.” His inability to withstand the pressures of conformity to a particular type of gay masculinity and grappling with the need to disclose what constitutes his real self, his essence, are stand-ins for the wrestling matches in which we all engage, constructing our identities out of the negotiations and sacrifices we can withstand.

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<sup>169</sup> Wainwright is also capable of treating the same subject matter rather seriously. On his self-titled first album, the track “Barcelona” describes the singer’s fear of AIDS and death with more decidedly more serious music, even quoting Verdi’s *Macbeth*, in Act III when Macbeth calls out “fuggi regal fantasima!” In Wainwright’s own words, “the ghost was AIDS.” For more information see <http://rufus.it.org/song.php?i=Barcelona>

Figure 6  
“Cigarettes and Chocolate Milk” Lyrics

Cigarettes and chocolate milk.  
These are just a couple of my cravings.  
Everything it seems I like's a little bit stronger,  
a little bit thicker,  
a little bit harmful for me.

If I should buy jellybeans,  
have to eat them all in just one sitting.  
Everything it seems I like's a little bit sweeter,  
a little bit fatter,  
a little bit harmful for me,

and then there's those other things  
which for several reasons we won't mention.  
Everything about them is a little bit stranger,  
a little bit harder,  
a little bit deadly.

It isn't very smart;  
tends to make one part so broken-hearted.

Sitting here remembering me,  
always been a shoe made for the city.  
Go ahead, accuse me of just singing about places  
with scrappy boys faces  
have general run of the town.  
Playing with prodigal songs  
takes a lot of sentimental valiums.  
Can't expect the world to be your Raggedy Andy  
while running on empty  
you little old doll with a frown.

You got to keep in the game,  
retaining mystique while facing forward.  
I suggest a reading of *A Lesson in Tightropes*  
or *Surfing Your High Hopes* or *Adios Kansas*.

It isn't very smart;  
tends to make one part so broken-hearted.

Still, there's not a show on my back,  
holes, or a friendly intervention.  
I'm just a little bit heiress, a little bit Irish  
a little bit Tower of Pisa whenever I see ya.  
So please be kind if I'm a mess...  
cigarettes and chocolate milk.<sup>170</sup>

By combining naivety and experience, equating disparate sorts of pleasures, and alluding to sinewy, shadowy vices, Wainwright emphasizes a series of dichotomous tensions between surface/appearance/innocence/conformity and substance/essence/experience/disclosure. Wainwright invites us to read between these lines, delightfully cognizant of the possibility that we will dislike whatever stink we find there.

Grouping stanzas 1-3 and 4-6 reveals a hermeneutical downward spiral that is played out in the accompanying music. The first two stanzas of each group sit comfortably in major, introduced by a simple rhythmic-harmonic gesture illustrated in Figure 7. Cradled within the accompaniment, the melody consists of consonant intervals which outline the major tonic triad as Wainwright sings of cigarettes and sweets. The overall effect is something like a nursery rhyme or children's song. The incongruence here, between lyrics and musical setting, is both ironic and humorous. Though cigarettes, chocolate milk, and jelly beans number among Wainwright's vices, "there's those other things which for several reasons [he] won't mention."<sup>171</sup> The exact nature of these other temptations is made meaningful through their deliberate absence. The third stanza in each group initiates a contrast, using the same melodic shape transposed to minor (see Figure 8) before the chorus melody rises in slower, stepwise motion over a tango rhythm in the accompaniment, as Wainwright alludes to his darker pleasures. The corresponding lyrics, beginning at "It isn't very smart," rise to consciousness like a half-forgotten piece of

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<sup>170</sup> Lyrics reprinted in *Poses* liner notes, DreamWorks, 2001.

<sup>171</sup> Rufus Wainwright, "Cigarettes and Chocolate Milk" lyrics.

Figure 7  
 “Cigarettes” Melody and Harmonic  
 Reduction

Piano

Cig a rettes and cho co late milk

These are just a cou ple of my cra vings

Ev ery thing it seems I like's a

li ttle bit strong er a lit tle bit thick er a lit tle bit harm ful for

me. If I should buy jel ly beans

have to eat them all in just one

Figure 8  
 “Cigarettes and Chocolate Milk”  
 Minor Transposition of Melodic Motive



advice and stumble back into the gauzy recesses of memory as the accompaniment tumbles down a scale and returns to the “nursery rhyme” figure. Stanzas 4-6 unfold similarly, shifting from major to minor then retreating to the safety of the opening motive each time Wainwright risks over-exposure, thus maintaining the tension between substance/conformity and essence/disclosure.

Throughout “Cigarettes and Chocolate Milk,” the tango sections contrast vividly with the nursery rhyme material. Whereas tango rhythms were the rhythmic foundation of “Poses,” functioning like a habanera rhythm in an opera aria, here they assume an almost sinister quality, an auditory equivalent to accidental glimpses into rooms where our musical *flaneur* chooses not to take us. These rhythmic contrasts parallel different modes of masculinity. The deliberate childishness of the nursery rhyme might signal the fanciful yet pervasive obsession with youth embodied by the prepubescent boyishness of

twinkies/twinks while the tango seems to suggest an urbanity, sophistication, age, or perhaps the corruption of innocence with sensuality.

Later in the song, Wainwright again confronts the parental figure whose admonition he hardly takes seriously. “Go ahead, accuse me of just singing about places where scrappy boys’ faces have general run of the town,” he sings to the opening “nursery rhyme” melody. However, he reminds this cautionary figure that “playing with prodigal sons takes a lot of sentimental valiums,” alluding to unseen, internal struggles glossed over by his oh-so-fabulous veneer. Ultimately, he resolves to “keep in the game, retaining mystique while facing forward.” So, the posing continues, and Wainwright continues to make folly from seriousness without regard to consequence. The campy humor masks his very real and dangerous flirtations with disaster in a wash of music as brightly colored as those jelly beans, with only the occasional whiff of cigarette smoke.

Things remain in uneasy balance until the instrumental break following the second chorus, where the addition of a counterpoint between oboe and clarinet both playing in a high tessitura add tactile dissonance to the ensemble. The texture of the “nursery rhyme” is thickened by the string motive, evocative of “Frere Jacques,” and background vocals singing the first syllable of each word.<sup>172</sup> The distinction between sincerity and sarcasm collapses in an ecstatic orgy of musical textures: the nursery rhyme figure, tango rhythm, strings, clarinet, bass, guitars, and percussion pile atop one another as Wainwright wryly admits, “I’m just a little bit heiress, a little bit Irish, a little bit

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<sup>172</sup> This quotation carries double signification for erudite listeners familiar with Mahler’s symphonies. In the Second Symphony, a similar quotation occurs in the context of a child’s funeral march, signaling the death of innocence. This sort of play with signs is integral to Wainwright’s compositional style. On subsequent albums, he uses quotations from Ravel and Andrew Lloyd Webber, among others, in an often ironic, humorous, or campy context.



Tower of Pisa whenever I see ya. So, please be kind if I'm a mess.”<sup>173</sup> Enraptured by this sensual world, Wainwright achieves a true Delsartean pose in this final confession as art and artist, lyric and music, sound and sense become one before the whole quickly yields to a conspicuous return of the opening material which gradually fades to end the song. While he achieves a true pose, he also dissolves the sense of camp that characterizes the song by becoming too real. Things are no longer exaggerated or artificial, and he promptly backs away from reality as quickly as he recognized it.

### **The Voice**

I have previously alluded to the primacy given to Wainwright's voice throughout the recording, and “Cigarettes and Chocolate Milk” illustrates this phenomenon rather clearly. His voice sits in the foreground of every track, and he utilizes the same reedy, nasal timbre and exaggerated diction consistently. Wainwright specifically chose Marchand, who has worked extensively with a variety of singer-songwriters including Sarah McLaughlin and The McGarrigle Sisters (Wainwright's mother and aunt), to produce *Poses* due to Marchand's reputed sensitivity to the centrality of the voice in the mixing process. Known for his innovative fusion of acoustic and technological aspects of musical production and meticulous studio habits, Marchand often spends as long as four days mixing a single track in order to achieve the desired sound and does not shy away from innovations in recording studio technology to elicit the best performances from musicians with whom he works.<sup>174</sup> After “rubbing off some of the pixie dust [Marchand]

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<sup>173</sup> Here, he also alludes to the Donny and Marie Osmond duet “I'm a Little Bit Country (You're a Little Bit Rock and Roll).”

<sup>174</sup> Paul Tingen, “Pierre Marchand, Producing Sarah McLaughlin on Land and on Sea.” <http://www.digitalprosound.com/Htm/Articles/June/Marchand1.htm> accessed 9 Jan 2008.

used in recording Sarah McLaughlin,” the duo managed to take Wainwright’s voice and make it sound “immense.”<sup>175</sup>

The immensity of Wainwright’s voice imbues it with physicality beyond that of a mere instrument in the mix; it becomes the central figure in the unfolding drama of not only each individual song but indeed of the entire album. He sings with an affected diction, quite distinct from that of his speaking voice, with long, nasal vowels and soft consonants that often completely disappear, muddying his lyrics considerably. In his often-cited essay “The Grain of the Voice,” Roland Barthes defines the “grain” as the “body in the voice as it sings.”<sup>176</sup> If Barthes’ determination to “listen to my relation with the body of the man or woman singing” constitutes an “erotic” relationship, it is significant that Wainwright uses details of his own life in the songs he sings and that even when performing songs not written by him, Wainwright’s star text is that of an openly gay man.<sup>177</sup>

One of the few contemporary scholars engaged with music, masculinity, and the voice, Gabriel Solis writes of the “funny relationship with genre” through which musician Tom Waits “plays with images of masculinity without necessarily positing a particular essence to which to be either true or false.”<sup>178</sup> By demonstrating the ways Waits manipulates “the grain” of his voice, his backing musical ensemble, and musical genre, Solis uncovers a series of performances of masculinity in Waits’ music that draw upon images of white, working-class masculinity; black, jazz-inspired hipsters; and a later

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<sup>175</sup> Barney Hoskyns, “The Backpages Interview: Rufus Wainwright.”

<sup>176</sup> Roland Barthes, “The Grain of the Voice,” in *On Record*, ed. Simon Frith and Andrew Goodwin, pp. 293-300.

<sup>177</sup> Barthes, p. 299.

<sup>178</sup> Gabriel Solis, “‘Workin’ Hard, Hardly Workin’/ Hey Man, You Know Me’ Tom Waits, Sound, and the Theatrics of Masculinity.” *Journal of Popular Music Studies* 19/1 (2007): 26-58, pp. 30-31.

trend toward surrealist theater. In doing so, argues Solis, Waits “clearly presents masculinity as a set of performances, masks that can, at least to some extent, be exchanged at will...without relying on the implication that musical expression is autobiography.”<sup>179</sup>

Rufus Wainwright arrives at a similar representation of gay masculinity using “musical sounds—texture, timbre, and the ‘grain of the voice,’” oscillating between *bel canto* and a slightly raspy, wearied folk voice that alternately affirms and contradicts the style of his musical arrangements.<sup>180</sup> These delicious tensions mirror the relationship between dissonant modes of masculinity and societal masculine norms. By appropriating a variety of musical styles and genres, though with an expressly autobiographical slant, and by persistently focusing on his own voice, Wainwright achieves an effect similar to that described by Solis. Wainwright’s masculinity is a performance textured by the reality of his own lived experiences expressed through a series of theatrical poses. Waits confronts issues of race, authenticity, and persona by inflecting his voice with “grains” of jazz, blues, and torch song, musical styles with strong African American connotations, as well as a heavily white-identified working class grit he shares with Bruce Springsteen and John Mellencamp. Likewise, Wainwright’s vocal models include classical and popular music traditions, folk music, and musical theater/ cabaret. Though their styles contain complementary textures, particularly those surrounding the cabaret/ torch song and their mutual use of the piano rather than the guitar, Waits is free to ignore heterocentrism while Wainwright confronts it head on.

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<sup>179</sup> Ibid. p. 27.

<sup>180</sup> Ibid. p. 27.

The emphasis on the voice, in particular the unique “grain” of Wainwright’s voice, represents the masculine subject he constructs throughout the album.<sup>181</sup> The relentless assertion of his voice often rubs against the arrangement or style of individual songs, creating subsequent layers of contrast and tension. While an exhaustive analysis of Wainwright’s use of the voice would doubtless add richness to a discussion of his construction of musical queerness, that project exceeds the limits of the present research. However, it is worth noting here the way in which Wainwright consistently manipulates musical space to (re)assert the importance of his own voice.

A common recording studio technique involves the manipulation of the left-to-right stereo field to create a sense of physical space.<sup>182</sup> Often, the desired result on the final recording will mimic a band’s physical positioning on stage, though the technique has been deployed for a variety of other interpretative purposes such as the evocation of specific moments in the history of recording, specific genres, and even specific musicians. A convenient and rather transparent example of this left-to-right manipulation can be found on many of the Mamas and Papas recordings from the late 1960s, “Look Through My Window” from the 1967 album *Deliver*, for example. Using the equalizer on most any home stereo, it is possible to shift the sound to the extreme left or extreme right and lose a large portion of the vocal mix. The lead vocal at times occupies the far right or far left, and meanders across the spectrum to reach these points. The harmony and background vocals, provided by the other members of the group, similarly shift positions in relation to the lead vocal. Returning the equalizer to a middle position, the lead vocal obsessively walks the aural cartography of the stereo field as if he is wandering room to

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<sup>181</sup> Roland Barthes, “The Grain of the Voice.”

<sup>182</sup> For a detailed discussion, see Albin Zak’s *The Poetics of Rock: Cutting Tracks, Making Records* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001).

room in a house or apartment, stopping to peek through the “window to the street below, see the people hurrying by with someone to meet, some place to go.”

Wainwright makes little use of the left-to-right stereo field on “Cigarettes and Chocolate Milk.” Rather, interest comes from vertical manipulation of sounds on the record to queer the sense of space. Given the album’s urban setting and the previously mentioned cosmopolitan histories of the dandy and flaneur, his choice to make use of vertical sound mirrors the physical setting of the city, with its skyscrapers, high-rise buildings, and crowded streets. Furthermore, the manipulation of vertical space allows Wainwright to position his voice at the “top” of the mix, rather than the center or to either side. Thus, regardless of whatever musical, generic, or lyrical geography we travel on *Poses*, Wainwright’s voice remains the central, almost unchanging focus, brining us back time and again to his particular sort of dandyism.

#### **Case Study: “In a Graveyard”**

“In a Graveyard” is both an elegy for gay bohemia of the past and a prophecy for its return. The album’s most sparsely arranged track, consisting only of voice and piano, its elegiac quality stems from the intimate arrangement which, in the popular music imagination, can convey sincerity, authenticity, and honesty (think, for example, of the piano-based music of other singer-songwriters like Joni Mitchell or Jackson Browne). Wainwright’s liberal use of plagal cadences (which carry strong associations with Christian sacred music), heavy use of reverb evocative of a cathedral setting, and major triads built on the lowered sixth and seventh scale degrees imbue the song with a hymn-like quality. The evocation of church music is ironic, perhaps campy, given the thoroughly secular, hedonistic quality of the rest of *Poses*. Completely absent are the

tongue-in-cheek humor and decadent self-revelation of “Cigarettes” and “Poses.” In their place, Wainwright wanders “properties of death,” stopping “amongst these granite tombs to catch our breath.”

The album concludes with a reprise of “Cigarettes and Chocolate Milk,” and it is possible to interpret the song as a sort of recapitulation of the opening material, providing the sort of sonic closure one expects in symphonic, operatic, musical theater, and other such contexts—a reasonable assumption given Wainwright’s familiarity with and affinity for classical music. However, this understanding of the album is undermined by what is *heard* on the record. A tremendous pause of almost 10 seconds separates “In a Graveyard” from the reprised material, though even this silence seems insufficient to some listeners who wonder why “there isn’t more silence after In a Graveyard. It’s not enough time to reflect on what you were just submersed in.”<sup>183</sup> Another post to the Rufus Wainwright discussion board describes “In a Graveyard” as “a song that continues to demand your attention even when it is finished. I feel like I have been stranded halfway along *the bending path away* that I’ve not yet finished my quiet walk through the graveyard before being interrupted by a bunch of noisy Californians,” when the reprise begins.<sup>184</sup> To my ears, the reprise sounds more like exit music, a curtain call, or the soundtrack over which a film’s closing credits roll rather than part of the album itself.

If we consider the penultimate track to be the proper conclusion of the album, the decision to conclude with the *adagio*-like “In a Graveyard” connects Wainwright’s *Poses* with Tchaikovsky’s Sixth Symphony and its controversial *Adagio lamentoso* finale. Noting that the lament is “fundamentally vocal and specifically gendered [female],”

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<sup>183</sup> Discussion forum post dated 27 March 2008.

<sup>184</sup> Ibid. dated 27 March 2008.

Judith Peraino examines the reception history surrounding the *Pathetique* ultimately hypothesizing that Tchaikovsky's decision to end with a "nuance of transgendered vocality... brings us back to the possibility of subjectivity and disclosure."<sup>185</sup> Likewise, in the history of popular music, vocal genres have been mapped onto the feminine side of a Cartesian divide, too. The sensitive, introspective ballad "In a Graveyard" concludes Wainwright's album using a rhetoric of queerness.

Figure 9  
"In a Graveyard" Lyrics

Wandering properties of death,  
Arresting moons within our eyes and smiles,  
We did rest amongst these granite tombs  
To catch our breath.

Worldly sounds of endless warring  
Were for just a moment silent stars.  
Worldly boundaries of dying  
Were for just a moment never ours.  
All was new  
Just as the black horizons blue.

Then along the bending path away,  
I smiled in knowing we'd be back one day.<sup>186</sup>

In her discussion of Madonna's "Live to Tell," Susan McClary notes the "delicious tension" created by the sixth scale degree as an emotional apex or an indicator of Otherness.<sup>187</sup> McClary's analysis demonstrates the way Madonna negotiates the destruction of vi by the tonic by stepping outside this conflict during the verses, ultimately leaving the argument unresolved. By allowing the "feminine" chord (vi) to remain unconquered, Madonna enables a feminist revision of traditional tonal schema.

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<sup>185</sup> Peraino, pp.98- 91.

<sup>186</sup> Lyrics reprinted in *Poses* liner notes.

<sup>187</sup> McClary, *Feminine Endings* pp. 148-168.

Likewise, in religious hymns, a harmonic or melodic move to vi might signal spiritual transcendence, an eschewal of earthly boundaries which must ultimately be resolved through a return to human consciousness or entry into the spirit realm through death.

Similarly, both the chord built upon the sixth scale degree and scale degree six serve a transcendent function in Wainwright's music. As he sings of "sounds of endless warring" turned to "silent stars" (either stars themselves or the artists, actors, dancers, and other lost "stars" of gay bohemia) and the momentary transcendence of "worldly boundaries of dying," Wainwright exits temporal and musical constraints with the addition of flat VI and flat VII [see Figure 10]. Using a similar "nested" melodic technique as these earlier songs, "In a Graveyard," begins with Wainwright singing in unison with the accompaniment [see Figure 11]. As the song progresses, Wainwright's voice and the accompaniment become increasingly independent, moving in and out of time with one another, their disjuncture mirroring the incongruence between the phantom innocence of gay bohemia and the reality of danger that now lurks in these dark, city streets. Later, the right hand continues to play the same melody atop a four-part chorale style accompaniment while Wainwright sings a melismatic *obligato* at the beginning of the second and third verses.



Figure 10a and b  
Lowered VII and VI Chords

a.

war ring were for just a me-ment sil - ent stars

F: bVII

b.

new just as the black ho ri zons blue.

bVII bVI

In the final verse, voice and accompaniment realign over and imperfect plagal cadence. McClary notes the strong tendency for 6 to resolve downward to 5, yet Wainwright avoids this resolution almost entirely. Frequent first inversion IV chords, with scale degree six in the bass, imbue the accompaniment with restlessness, momentarily touching on the dominant mid-phrase but undermining a strong sense of cadential function. Irregular phrase lengths, too, mask the presence of the dominant, and placing it in second inversion at the end of each phrase allows Wainwright to avoid true

motion to V, instead using it as the connective tissue for a tonic prolongation and voice exchange [see Figure 10b].

Figure 11  
“In a Graveyard”  
Nested Melody

The musical score for "In a Graveyard" is presented in three systems. Each system consists of a vocal line (treble clef) and a piano accompaniment (grand staff). The key signature is one flat (B-flat), and the time signature is common time (C).

**Introduction:** The piano accompaniment begins with a series of eighth-note chords in the right hand and a single note in the left hand. The vocal line is silent.

**First Stanza:** The vocal line enters with the lyrics: "Wa— der ing pro per ties of death — a res ting moons with in our eyes and smiles we did". The piano accompaniment continues with the same rhythmic pattern.

**Second Stanza:** The vocal line continues with the lyrics: "rest — a mongst these gra nite tombs to catch our breath. Wor — dly sounds of end less". The piano accompaniment continues with the same rhythmic pattern.

The “wondrous chorus” of city streets now sings a somber lament, as Wainwright presumably makes his way home from a night of “cigarettes and chocolate milk...and those other things” to which he only makes vague allusion. Spoken to the ghosts of gay

bohemia, the final phrases of “In a Graveyard” thwart the sense of religious redemption evoked by the hymn-like musical content. Wainwright sings “I smiled in knowing we’d be back one day,” making a decidedly political turn by prophesying a reawakening or rising from the grave of this particular type of masculinity. Furthermore, “Gay Messiah,” a later song from the composer’s *Want Two*, heralds the second coming of a savior “reborn from 1970s porn, wearing tube socks with style, and such an innocent smile.”

### **Case Study: “Cigarettes and Chocolate Milk” (reprise)**

In musical theater contexts, a reprise more often serves as an interlude rather than an ending, so the use of the term “reprise” suggests a continuation or transition rather than a finale.<sup>188</sup> Traditionally, a reprise presents a truncated or modified version of previously heard material. In this case, however, the entire song is presented in full with an additional drum track added. Some contributors to the discussion forum “don’t understand the point of a CCM reprise/remix,” noting that “it’s not really different enough from the original to make it interesting, so it’s always seemed kind of superfluous.”<sup>189</sup> Still others feel that the reprise “ruins the ending. Whenever “In a Graveyard” comes on, I get such a peaceful sense of ending, it’s a PERFECT last track. I don’t really see the point in robbing it from its function.”<sup>190</sup>

The addition of new material to the entire song suggests a remix rather than a reprise. In his discussion of the remix, Serge Lacasse defines it as a sub-category of “hypertextual” practice, that is “uniting a text B to an earlier text A...but not as in

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<sup>188</sup> The scores of hundreds of Broadway shows are littered with reprised fragments of important musical material. As a rather facile example, the score of *Godspell* contains a number of fragmentary reprises of “Day by Day,” which serve as a sort of aural punctuation throughout the story.

<sup>189</sup> Discussion forum post dated 27 March 2006.

<sup>190</sup> Ibid. dated 15 May 2006.

commentary.”<sup>191</sup> LaCasse describes eight types of hypertextuality in music: parody (as in the songs of Weird Al Yancovick); travesty (“rewriting a well-known text in another style in order to debase it,” such as Walter Murphy’s 1976 disco hit “A Fifth of Beethoven); pastiche (for example, composing a new song using the codes and characteristics of a canonical musician’s style with such exactness that the song might pass as having been composed by the canonical figure); copy (the faithful recreation of a song as in a Beatles tribute band, for example); covering (an interpretation or reading of an existing piece of music); translation (into another language); instrumental covers; and finally, remix.<sup>192</sup> Remixing can then be subdivided into too many varieties to name in one essay, though LaCasse deals with three: edited versions of songs, instrumental remixes, and remix. Of particular interest is the last category in which “it is possible to make drastic changes, simply by removing important parts [or] adding new material.”<sup>193</sup> Generally, he notes, a purpose of a remix is to “present a given song in a different style (‘dance’ versions for clubs offer one example).”<sup>194</sup>

The introduction of new musical material at what should be the end of an album suggests the continuation of a larger performative impetus. According to Judith Butler, any particular gender performance might conform to, uphold, or subvert previous manifestations of gender norms, and slight variances in each iteration collect like sediment in a riverbed, eventually hardening into a new gender archetype. Here, the addition of this drum track might be considered a new layer of sediment at the level of genre. Pre-programmed drum tracks appear in any number of genres and styles; however,

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<sup>191</sup> Serge LaCasse, “Intertextuality and Hypertextuality in Recorded Popular Music,” in *The Musical Work: Reality or Invention?*, ed. Michael Talbot (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2000), pp. 35-88.

<sup>192</sup> Ibid., pp. 40-48.

<sup>193</sup> Ibid., pp. 49-51.

<sup>194</sup> Ibid., p. 51

they maintain strong associations with particular types of dance music from disco to trance. This additional sonic layer, presented on the concluding track, pulls away from a tidy, redemptive sort of ending for *Poses*. Instead, it feels more like an irreverent raspberry in the face of what had been a serious, poignant moment, a campy reaction to the naked confessionalism of “In a Graveyard.”

*Poses* deviates from the standard linear model of character development epitomized in a protagonists’ struggle from “initial strife to victory and redemption, celebrated [musically] in a high-energy, triumphal ending.”<sup>195</sup> Among the most widely discussed instantiations of this linear-redemptive phenomenon, Beethoven’s *Eroica* and Ninth symphonies continue to elicit varying degrees of controversy and skepticism including Susan McClary’s (in)famous interpretation of the latter as an instance of attempted but failed rape.<sup>196</sup> While the application of a model used in studying classical music to popular song may seem questionable, the same sort of linear, tonal struggle occurs in standard song forms as well. For example, in an AABA form song, the disruptive B-section material is eventually obliterated by a return to A in the same way second and third themes succumb to tonic in Sonata-Allegro form. Throughout *Poses*, Wainwright alludes to such a redemption model, inviting his audience to observe a series of “poses,” conflicts for which Wainwright knows listeners will expect a tidy resolution. By toying with and thwarting this expectation, Wainwright queers the album’s narrative strategy.

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<sup>195</sup> Peraino, p. 84

<sup>196</sup> Susan McClary, “Getting Down off the Beanstalk,” *Minnesota Composer's Forum Newsletter* January 1987, pp. 5-7. This passage is rephrased in the chapter of the same title in *Feminine Endings*.

## **Chapter Five: A Queer Duet**

Sexuality and gender do not exist in some sort of vacuum. Rather, they cohabitate the same spaces as issues related to race/class/nation. The points of intersection between gender/sexuality/race/class/nation and other factors form a complex matrix in which self and other constantly (re)negotiate their respective and often porous boundaries, define, and (re)articulate one another. Such issues emerge in “The Greek Song,” the second track on *Poses*. The song’s name alone immediately conjures images of Grecian history and culture, particularly popular representations of Antiquity, philosophy, religion, and sexuality. In the North American cultural imagination, classical Greece simultaneously evokes “a culture which provided the foundations of Western political, philosophical, and artistic life” as well as one which also “institutionalized same-sex relationships...which lost its salience as a model for the West only in the past few centuries.”<sup>197</sup> However, these institutionalized same-sex relationships in ancient Greece also serve anti-gay sentiment. In our idealization of Greek philosophical, governmental, and artistic practices, we gloss over or condemn an aspect of that same culture deemed too radical, too bizarre: a sexual fluidity in which men and women traveled across a continuum of sexual identities during the course of their lives. Through the now-taboo practice of pederasty, Wayne Dynes writes:

In Sparta ...at twelve the Spartan boy became the erotic companion of a young man who trained him for the next eight years, after which he sprouted facial and body hair and was considered ready for full-time military duty. Between twenty and twenty-two the ephebe (maturing youth) made the major transition from “listener” to “inspirer” and then took a boy of his own. At thirty, having completed the boy’s instruction, he married a girl of eighteen, and only then would he leave the all-male barracks, though continuing to mess with his male cohort. A somewhat parallel system of coreasty (women loving girls) existed at

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<sup>197</sup> Wayne R. Dynes, *Homosexuality in the Ancient World* (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1992) pp. ix-xii.

least for a while. Spartan pederasty was so successful that it soon spread to the other Greek city-states...However, the Athenian focus turned more to intellectual, athletic, and character training rather than military instruction for the boys...Pederasty prepared males for the rights and duties of citizenship in the world's first democracy...After the transition to marriage, homosexuality ceased according to the paiderasteia model.<sup>198</sup>

While pederasty in today's world is considered child molestation, some of the same intellectuals whose works constitute the ancient canon of philosophical, mathematical, scientific, and artistic thought "embodied a class ethos and the aristocratic desire for self-perpetuation" through the practice.<sup>199</sup> In the first volume of his *History of Sexuality*, Foucault writes that "in Greece, truth and sex were linked, in the form of pedagogy, by the transmission of a precious knowledge from one body to another; sex served as a medium for initiations into learning."<sup>200</sup>

I highlight this issue neither to resuscitate the practice of pederasty nor to connect it to Rufus Wainwright's music directly. Instead, the practice of pederasty illustrates clearly the dynamic nature of sexual and gender identities in specific temporal, geographic, and political spaces. Browning describes the varying relationships between homosexuality and culture in North American cities in the 1980s and 1990s, noting in particular that during the 1980s, coming out came with difficulties with which younger generations are less and less familiar. He contrasts the process of coming out in North America with Sambian tribes, whose members openly accept homosexual men as integral to their culture.<sup>201</sup> In other words, sexuality is far from fixed, a notion that elicits discomfort in western societies and illustrates a fundamental contradiction in a North

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<sup>198</sup> Ibid, p. ix-x.

<sup>199</sup> William Armstrong Percy, *Pederasty and Pedagogy in Ancient Greece* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1996).

<sup>200</sup> Michel Foucault, *History of Sexuality Volume One: Introduction* (New York: Random House, 1998), p.61.

<sup>201</sup> This theme comprises much of Browning's entire book and recurs throughout each chapter.

American construction of self and Other. Though Westerners freely rummage the globe for inspiration and entertainment, we interject a different set of morals when it comes to sexuality and sexual practices. However distanced North Americans feel from ancient Greece, the specter of prejudice haunts our construction of Greek men as Others who possess an innate proclivity toward sexual deviance serves to buttress a particular idealization of North American masculinity.

In a chapter entitled “Form” in Horner and Swiss’ *Key Terms in Popular Music and Culture*, musicologist Richard Middleton examines the relationship between the concepts of form and content, respectively believed to contain the musical shape and substance of a particular composition. As discussed above, the application of this dichotomy to popular music raises interesting questions. For the *classicist*, popular music’s “schemata (verse-chorus, 12-bar blues) are just too basic,” argues Middleton, yet for the *modernists*, “the very use of structural formulae is enough to condemn the music.”<sup>202</sup> Ultimately, the merit of the classicist approach was called into question, most notably by Adorno, who felt that “only a modernist approach that used new, one-off structures which disrupted listener’s expectations could offer the necessary quality of *critique*.”<sup>203</sup> However, Middleton concludes that either approach ultimately works to confirm “the view of popular music’s aesthetic poverty.”<sup>204</sup>

Conversely, I argue that this “aesthetic poverty” can function as the site of radical critique or as proof of the potential aesthetic, social, and political richness of popular

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<sup>202</sup> Richard Middleton, “Form,” in *Key Concepts in Popular Music and Culture* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, Ltd., 1999), p. 141-155.

<sup>203</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 142.

<sup>204</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 142. Furthermore, Simon Frith (1982) argues that this method valorizes lyric analysis and sociology, eschewing the music altogether. While this is certainly true in music journalism, I do believe that the lyrics function as important structural, interpretative, narrative, affective, and ideological mechanisms. It is naïve to ignore any element of the object of analysis entirely.



music. In the following analysis of “The Greek Song,” I address heterosexist assumptions in the context of the love duet, a common device employed in popular music, and demonstrate how Wainwright’s song queers an overwhelmingly straight genre by troubling the gender make up of a traditional love triangle. In doing so, Wainwright enacts a critique of popular music’s heterosexism and offers one solution to the dilemma. By questioning the relationship between form and content in this anthem to same-sex, one night stands, Wainwright promotes the antithesis of Bourgeois sexual mores with their emphasis on “linearity, rational control, and self-sufficiency.”<sup>205</sup>

The tensions between self and Other, robust, Western masculinity and its supposed effeminate Eastern counterpart, conformity and disclosure, as well as those between normal and deviant sexuality haunt Wainwright’s “Greek Song.” Assuming that Wainwright (or at least a quasi-autobiographical composite) is the speaker, the lyrics chronicle an ephemeral tryst between Wainwright and a bisexual Greek man. Further evidence to support this reading of the lyrics comes from Wainwright’s own in-concert comments about the song. During a 2002 concert in Athens, Georgia, Wainwright revealed direct autobiographical connections to the subject, recounting a summer fling with “an Apollesque Grecian boy.”

It follows, then, that each of the song’s stanzas are sung alternately by Wainwright (stanzas 1, 3, 6, 8) or the Greek (stanzas 2, 4, 7, 9). [See Figure 12] The chorus assumes the same cautionary voice who in “Cigarettes and Chocolate Milk” warns “it isn’t very smart. Tends to make one’s heart so broken hearted,” and in “Poses,” cautions Wainwright to “watch his head about it.” As in these previously discussed examples, Wainwright ignores this advice and proceeds with his seduction. From the

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<sup>205</sup> Middleton, “Form,” p. 147.

dialogue established in the lyrics emerges a double-narrative of self and Other, with each partner first describing a biographical fact about the other then delivering a sexual epithet. This back-and-forth creates sexual tension as the Greek wrestles with the fact that Wainwright “turns me on, but so does *she*,” and later fact that he will “bleed after his beating” should the details of this affair become known. Eventually, the Greek throws aside his fears and the two engage in an ephemeral sexual experience before Wainwright returns home to “dream in Barnes and Nobles.”

Figure 12  
“The Greek Song” Lyrics

You who were born with the sun above your shoulders,  
you turn me on, you turn me on.  
You have to know

You who were born where the sun she keeps her distance,  
you turn me on, you turn me on,  
but so does she.

You who were born there where beauty is existence,  
you turn me on, you turn me;  
your body heals my soul.

You who were born where you shiver and you shudder,  
you turn me on; the girl is gone  
so come on, let's go!

All the pearls of china fade astride a Volta.  
Don't sew bee-lines to anybody's hide.  
Save your poison for a lover who is on your side

One way is Rome, and the other way is Mecca  
on either side,  
on either side of our motorbike.

One way is home and the other way is papa  
on either side, on either side,  
prepared to strike.

When I get back, I will dream in Barnes & Nobles,  
Oh leave me here,  
Leave me where angels fear to tread.

When I get back, I will bleed after my beating.  
Don't leave me here.  
Don't leave me here; I'm scared to death.

All the pearls of china fade astride a Volta.  
Don't sew bee-lines to anybody's hide.  
Save your poison for a lover who is on your side.<sup>206</sup>

In a discussion thread that took place sporadically between 2 December 2006 and March 2008, members of the Rufus Wainwright online discussion forum shared their thoughts on “The Greek Song.” The conversation began with a discussion of the possible meanings of the lyric “don’t’ sew bee lines to anybody’s hide/save your poison for a love who is on your side.” A number of contributors admitted they simply did not understand the line, while others made deliberate attempts to link this metaphorical language to Wainwright’s seduction of the Greek in the song:

I'm wondering if he is also making a *straight* pun...You know: A lover who is *on your side*.

Rufus way of seduction.  
He used to be very attracted to straight guys.  
Mentions this in the commentary for “Harvester of Hearts.”

It seems the boy is very interested in this adventure with Rufus, but reluctant.  
Rufus is just trying to push him a little.  
But the poor kid is worried about being found out by his family.  
He is sure his father will beat him.  
He knows that Rufus will go home and he will have to stay behind to face reality.

Well.  
Lots of times Rufus has multiple meanings in his phrases.<sup>207</sup>

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<sup>206</sup> Lyrics reprinted in *Poses* liner notes, DreamWorks, 2001.

<sup>207</sup> Post dated 5 March 2008.

Another contributor says that:

For me, sewing a beeline to someone's "hide" means attaching yourself quite firmly and painfully to someone else. Native Americans sewed hides of animals to wear as clothing\_\_\_so the imagery of "getting under one's skin" or of "wearing" someone as an adornment for yourself comes to mind.

In the subsequent line this idea of possessing someone by making the effort to physically attaching him to you is described as "poison." (*Save your poison for a lover who is on your side.*)

I always thought this to mean that you (in this case, a gay man) shouldn't expend enormous energy in attracting and possessing a man who is not homosexual. In general, I would think that if attracting someone to you involves a lot of energy in making them attached to you and only you, stitch-by-stitch (as "sewing a beeline" would be), then you should step back and think about what you're doing.

There is a lot to be said for *mutual* attraction, admiration and respect. Otherwise, one of the two of you becomes smothered.<sup>208</sup>

Still another interpreted the line through a story from Greek mythology:

It is a reference to Greek mythology... Aristaeus was a god enamored with bees and their keeping, and sought from Proteus one of the greatest ways of accumulating more. Proteus told him to sacrifice cattle to the gods. Out of the rotting corpses of the cattle came great swarms of bees... So there's the beelines in hides. I was surprised to find actual cattle. I was anticipating Rufus was going for the 'man as earthy beast' allusion by calling skin "hide."<sup>209</sup>

Clearly, Wainwright's virtual fan base understands his work as relating to his own expression of sexuality and grounds an analysis of the lyrical content of Wainwright's songs in their knowledge of his biography and within a larger discourse on homosexual identity.

Interestingly, though the lyrical dialogue suggests a duet, Wainwright's musical presentation takes the form of a soliloquy. Duets traditionally function as love songs, comment on amorous situations, or explore patterns of sexual tension and release, issues

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<sup>208</sup> Post dated 5 March 2008.

<sup>209</sup> Post dated 1 April 2008.

relevant to the text of “The Greek Song,” yet the composer’s decision to sing his words in addition to those attributable to the Greek contextualizes the song within the discourse surrounding self and Other at the level of the individual, race, class, gender, and nation. Wainwright is an affluent, Caucasian, openly gay, North American, which affords him a *laissez-faire* attitude toward this transient romance that betrays an embodiment of a Western imperialist concept of the self, a luxury to the Greek, whose subservient status in Wainwright’s imagination as composer, singer, and protagonist is evident in his very namelessness; he is reduced to his national identity.

Furthermore, a third player in this drama is similarly banished from the musical text and only present in the text through reference to her *absence*: the Greek’s female lover. In his work on heavy metal music videos, Robert Walser describes the use of women to elicit desire in heterosexual male fans, to emphasize the threat of feminine sexuality, or to defer accusations of homosexuality among all-male bands. Though Wainwright is by no means a metal artist, his “Greek Song” conforms surprisingly well to Walser’s theory of female exscription. Her presence confirms the Greek’s heterosexuality, thus in her absence, he is free to enjoy a homosexual affair. In his reconfiguration of the classic love triangle, Wainwright exercises power over both the Greek and his girlfriend by composing their scripts then proceeds to physically voice the parts for them.

Writing on the love triangle in *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire*, Eve Sedgwick locates the oppression of women (defined as Other to men) under patriarchy in the geometry of love. According to Sedgwick’s interpretation, women function to connect groups of men through marriage, effectively joining two

male-dominated kinship groups through marriage rites. In North American culture, for example, it is common for a woman to give up her maiden name for the last name of her husband and to replace her middle name with her maiden name, so that Beverly Anne Smith becomes Beverly Smith Williams when she marries Michael Williams. Thus, she becomes a ligament between her father and her husband, merely a piece of joint property. Stephanie Doktor translates Sedgwick's model into a musical context, noting that in opera, women typically serve as the currency between two rival men or are cast in conflict with other women, vying for the affection of a single man.<sup>210</sup> This sentiment emerged in one post from the discussion board in which a contributor notes that:

Greece is both a place where he can enjoy passion and a place where he is subjected to violence - presumably for stepping outside of his father's perception of "moral order". I'm going to assume that the "girl is gone" indicates they are not openly gay, the tryst is secretive and the girl has been handy to have around to make their relationship look like a couple of regular heterosexual guys. And if the Greek man is caught, he will be beaten for stepping outside of the moral order.<sup>211</sup>

Wainwright's "Greek Song" takes this model one step further, completely eradicating any female presence to facilitate the sexual-social bond between two men. This drama manifests in salient musical characteristics of "The Greek Song" in terms of lyric, form, and harmony.

Beginning with the iteration of the previously discussed text units, Wainwright erects a larger musical structure, augmenting a 12-bar blues into 24-bars interspersed with instrumental interludes of irregular length. The question-answer/call-response form given to the lyrics structures Wainwright and the Greek's conversation into an *a b a b* structure followed by a chorus/refrain, designated *c* in Figure 13. Mapping the musical

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<sup>210</sup> Stephanie Doktor, "Between Women," presented at the Feminist Theory and Music 9 conference in Montreal Canada, 2007.

<sup>211</sup> Post dated 1 April 2008.

structure onto that of the lyrics results in an overall  $a\ b\ a'\ b'\ c$  form where  $b$  is a transposition of  $a$  and  $c$  is derived from neither the  $a$  nor the  $b$  melody. If we “move up” on level, it is possible to create a larger AAB form wherein each A subsumes one  $a\ b$  or  $a'\ b'$  musical-textual pair, and B corresponds to the refrain. Thus, the entire form of “The Greek Song” might look something like this:

Figure 13  
“Greek Song” structural levels

Introduction	A	A	B	Interlude	A	A	B	Coda/ Fade
	$ab$	$ab$	$c$		$ab$	$ab$	$c$	

These parallel AAB forms evoke associations with the 12-bar blues and its standard I-IV-V harmonic progression [Figure 14a]. By incorporating a musical form with strong ties to African American musical practice, Wainwright (perhaps inadvertently) plays with the Otherness issue at the level of form or structure. While it would be reductive and simplistic to say that all AAB forms and their derivatives correspond one-to-one with African American music, the association exists in Western musical discourse and provides yet another piece of subtle evidence to demonstrate ways in which Wainwright engages with difference in his compositions.

Figure 14a and b  
12-Bar Blues and Greek Song

a. Typical 12-Bar Blues Progression

<b>A</b>	<b>A</b>	<b>B</b>			
I	IV	I  V7	IV	I	

b. Greek Song Progression

<b>A</b>		<b>A</b>		<b>B</b>	
I	V	I  I	V	I  I	V  V I

In the gendered life of “The Greek Song,” each of the three expected chords that typically accompany AAB form might represent Wainwright (I), the Greek (V), and the female lover (IV). While the speaker’s gender is never definitively stated, given the quasi-autobiographical and self-referential nature of Wainwright’s music and that it is his distinctive singing voice which conveys the narrative, it seems safe to assume that the speaker is Wainwright himself or Wainwright speaking as an archetypal gay figure. The music relentlessly returns to tonic, emphasizing Wainwright’s subject role both in the lyric narrative and as composer/creator of the musical text. If sung by another man or by a woman, the speaker remains seated comfortably in a position of privilege and power. As noted above, the persistent return to tonic emphasizes the speaker’s position, and as McClary has noted, the tonic key exerts dominance on the other musical elements, typically demanding they submit to its authority.<sup>212</sup> Likewise, the Greek’s gender is never actually stated in the song, yet if the speaker is a gay man, the Greek must necessarily be also. Regardless of the Greek’s gender, the relationship with Wainwright violates existing social mores concerning the sexual boundaries of heterosexual relationships, and in the years following the North American AIDS epidemic, homosexual relationships, too. I align the Greek with the dominant because both represent others to which the tonic and Wainwright journey and ultimately conquer.

In her feminist revision of tonal language, Susan McClary has noted that certain chords, particularly vi, frequently denote Otherness or femininity.<sup>213</sup> By borrowing McClary’s tonal paradigm to engage with “The Greek Song,” then transposing her argument from vi to IV, it becomes possible to read Wainwright’s aversion to the

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<sup>212</sup> McClary, *Feminine Endings*, pp. 128-130.

<sup>213</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 156-168.



subdominant as a parallel to the exscription of the woman from the text. Like the woman in the text (and interestingly, the only person whose actual gender is indicated in the lyrics), the subdominant is missing from the expected harmonic syntax, mere footnotes to an illicit sexual rendezvous. Therefore, in his reconfiguration of the classic love triangle, Wainwright exercises power over both the Greek and the female lover by speaking of and for them in the lyrics, reasserting the primacy of his own voice, and eradicating any harmonic obstacles between himself (tonic) and the Greek (dominant).

In his writing on queer subjectivity and desire, Jose Quiroga teases out connections between sexuality and politics, and his work allows me to explore the ways in which Wainwright “negotiates his sexuality...to map out one distinctive praxis” of North American, Caucasian, gay male desire communicated by means of a “system created within his work...that limns metaphysics and trash, the gutter and High Art.”<sup>214</sup> Wainwright sets into motion a critique Bourgeois values with their emphasis on “linearity, rational control, and self-sufficiency,” through the juxtaposition of sensitive text painting and candid sexuality: his admiration of the Greek’s suntanned body and ephemeral pearls that “fade astride a Volta,” a luxurious metaphor for ejaculation and the blissful afterglow of sex.<sup>215</sup> Such explicit sexuality in pop music used to describe the homoerotic seduction of a presumably straight man destabilizes the traditional power dynamic that makes up the love duet/love triangle.

Otherness, or a caricature of Otherness, occurs in the arrangement, as well. The song begins with guitars and dobro playing repeated rhythmic cell over a simple harmony while the percussion contributing something like a South American clave rhythm gone

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<sup>214</sup> Jose Quiroga, *Tropics of Desire: Interventions from Queer Latino America* (New York: New York University Press, 2000), pp. 51-52.

<sup>215</sup> Richard Middleton, “Form,” p. 147.

awry. When the piano introduces a pentatonic flourish, which becomes the basis for a violin counterpoint later in the song, Wainwright seems to have collapsed a number of Others into an amalgam of difference with no regard to actual Greek music. Though Wainwright's ensemble uses some Western counterparts for traditional Greek instruments (guitar rather than the *lauoto*; violin in the place of the *lira*, for example), the confusion of pentatonic scales, *clave*-like percussion, and other Western instruments can be interpreted as an Orientalist attitude, wherein regional, ethnic, and cultural differences are interchangeable. Few of the posts on the discussion board deal with the sonic material on the album, aside from questions about identifying particular instruments or performers, frequent descriptions of his "beautiful" melodic lines, and his dexterous piano technique. One post, however, does engage with the music and its ability to evoke a sense of Greek place:

I think it is called "Greek Song" cause it takes place in Greece. The music tells us that. The background music and instrumentation are Greek-inspired. Takes you right to a Grecian Isle as soon as the music starts. Maybe Rufus called it "Greek Song" just in case anyone did not get the musical reference. To me, this song is a fantasy of being in Greece and having a wonderful sexy fling with a beautiful guy. But reality is always lurking in the background. But you are right that it really could take place anywhere.<sup>216</sup>

By excluding the voices of the Greek and his female lover, speaking for them in the song, and confusing a specific national identity with a *mélange* of "Others," Wainwright succeeds in becoming the subject and object of his own desire in a self-created sonic universe. As the singular actor in the drama, Wainwright frees himself to explore the limits of sexual experience in accordance with the hedonism described in "Cigarettes and Chocolate Milk" and "Poses." After all,

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<sup>216</sup> Post dated 11 March 2008.

It's a song about representatives of two different societies meeting each other and having a brief sexual relationship and motorcycle adventure, and their different expectations of life. Rufus is a free agent and can go whichever way he wants - whether it's to Rome or Mecca, or back to the land where "the sun keeps her distance." He can have sex with whoever he wants (providing the desire is mutual) The boy is dependent on his parents. He is trapped on the Greek island (I don't know why, but the song seems appropriate to one of the islands rather than the mainland). Sex with another boy is taboo for him, and he's going to have the shit beaten out of him when he gets back home.<sup>217</sup>

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<sup>217</sup> Post date 29 May 2003.

## **Chapter Six: Conclusions**

Through my analysis of Rufus Wainwright's *Poses*, I hope to contribute to the discourse surrounding identity politics and popular music, illuminating a few of the ways in which popular music works on our sense of self-identity. By no means an exhaustive analysis of Wainwright's oeuvre, these case studies point to future research in the intersections of queer theory, musicology, and popular music. My discussion situates the album, songs, and Wainwright's semi-self portrait within a historical continuum of gay masculinities dating back to the nineteenth century. Considered by many scholars to be the first modern homosexual, or at least the first time self-consciously perform such a subjectivity, Oscar Wilde traveled a spectrum of sexual "poses." Sometimes heterosexual, sometimes homosexual and often somewhere in between, Wilde influenced the Western world's concept of gay identity through his writing and his life, achieving in the end a synthesis of artist and art object for which he was penalized, persecuted, and imprisoned.

Rufus Wainwright's music invites analysis through the lens of queerness not only because Wainwright is himself a gay man but because the music disregards traditional boundaries and dichotomies and invites exploration and play. In evoking dandyism and simultaneously transforming himself into a *flâneur*, he successfully "poses" himself throughout the album using humor, irony, and theatricality to achieve a stylized, erudite, and wholly aesthetic end. He slides between genres like sexual partners and makes musical materials objects of desire capable of eliciting desire, then he indulges in the musical components of genre with the voracity of an addict. Wainwright reminds us of a time before fear or of innocence, when sex and sensuality intermingled with art and

music, and an economy of pleasures sustained the urban gay ghetto. His music takes us back in time to a place and space liberated from worry, disinterested in pain, and focused almost exclusively on enjoyment.

An heir to the Wildean tradition, Wainwright similarly collapses the artist-art object opposition, infusing a sense of decadence and dandyism into our conceptualization of gay men: an aesthete, singer-composer, and highly public persona. During a 2001 interview with *New York Times* reporter Bob Morris, Wainwright wondered if he “would have been happier in the nineteenth century with Oscar Wilde.”<sup>218</sup> Perhaps Wilde would have been happier in the twenty-first century with Wainwright.

Nonetheless, Wainwright’s performance of Wildean dandyism is informed as much by nineteenth-century ideals as it is by a sense of hedonism that stems from the “gay bohemia” of the 1970s. The result of transnational migration, “gay bohemia” thrived for a brief period near the end of the 1970s, built upon the momentum of the African American Civil Rights movement, feminist liberation struggles, and the sense of community offered in urban enclaves. Like Wilde, artists, musicians, and writers in the 1970s sought to fuse art and life in order to express the unique perspectives and experiences of gay men in the mid-twentieth century. The promise of this generation was cut short by AIDS, fear, and ignorance in the early 1980s.

“Cigarettes and Chocolate Milk” resuscitates the experimentation, reckless abandon, and urgency of “gay bohemia” for the post-AIDS world. In the face of conservatism ushered in after AIDS nearly destroyed the urban gay world and after the disease left the supposed confines of the gay community to impact men and women regardless of race, class, sexual orientation, or national identity, Wainwright reintroduces

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<sup>218</sup> Morris, 2001.

a sense of pleasurable excess, sexual experimentation, and indulgence with danger filtered through a campy playfulness in direct opposition to heteronormative expressions of gay male subjectivity that emerged in response to the AIDS epidemic.

Finally, in “The Greek Song,” Wainwright collapses any remaining distinction between self and other by eradicating the seemingly necessary presence of a partner in this queer duet, sung by one voice. Bound up in his erasure are issues pertaining to race, class, and nation, in addition to sexual politics. The combination of Orientalism and female exscription reassert the primacy of Wainwright’s persona as well as his desire to create a new “gay bohemia” in which traditional sexual norms and mores fall out of fashion in favor of experimentation and free love.

Though often unexamined, masculinities result from the same performative cultural processes that construct notions of self and other, race, class, and sexuality. Gay masculinities are variable, dynamic, and often contradictory. They encompass a spectrum of persona-types from the grandiose effeminacy of drag queens to the hyper-macho stance of clones; from opulent dandyism of Rufus Wainwright on stage to the reticent shyness of a fan in the back of the house where he is performing. So, I conclude not with my own words which fill the majority of this thesis but with those of another contributor to the discussion board who, responding to my initial query for thoughts on gay masculinity in the music of Rufus Wainwright said:

Some gay men seem to have the attitude that to be 'accepted' by straight society, homosexual men should aim to behave in a 'masculine' fashion and 'blend in'. Men like Rufus who just are themselves are seen as 'letting the side down.'

One of the things I most admire about Rufus is that he makes no attempt to disguise his true nature. He is proof that so-called 'queenie' men can be successful, strong and courageous.<sup>219</sup>

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<sup>219</sup> Discussion board at [www.rufuswainwright.com](http://www.rufuswainwright.com), posting dated 1 April 2008.

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