

# Singing Out Together:

*Towards a Queer Ethnography  
of Music and Sexuality*

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Thesis submitted for the degree of PhD  
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## **Declaration**

I declare that this thesis is my own work, and the research presented is the result of my own investigations. This thesis has not been submitted in substantially the same form for the award of a higher degree elsewhere.

Esperanza Miyake  
Lancaster University, 2007

## ABSTRACT

This thesis seeks to understand the relationship between music and sexuality within the context of urban lesbian and gay music and music-making practices.

Theoretically, I am mainly informed by queer musicology, popular music studies, cultural and subcultural studies, and the sociology of music. Building upon existing queer and feminist understandings of music and sexuality, I problematise both the conflation of sexuality and gender in music, and the conceptualisation of sexuality as part of an erotic exchange in music. How might we think about the relationship between music and sexuality beyond questions of gender and the erotic? I attempt to answer this question through an ethnography of the Manchester Lesbian and Gay Chorus, based in the city of Manchester.

My practical research follows other ethnographers like Ruth Finnegan and Tia De Nora who chronicle the social process of music-making in everyday life. Through qualitative interviews and participant observations conducted with members of the *MLGC*, this project explores what part music plays in affirming, re-affirming or otherwise challenging the position of lesbians and gay men within a contemporary British city like Manchester. What kind of social, cultural, and political conditions are necessary in bringing music and sexuality together?

During the course of my investigations, I also investigate what terms like *queer*, *queerness*, and *queering* mean in relation to the music-sexuality relationship. What does *queer* mean within the context of lesbian and gay music and music-making practices?

What is *queerness* in music, and how might we read it? What does *queering* music and *queering* through music entail? This project seeks to answer such questions by taking an interdisciplinary approach to the ethnographic material and situating itself within the existing literature on music and sexuality.

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*Permission obtained where possible (Fig 1. and 4). Fig.2 taken by myself.*

# ☐ Introduction ☐

## Why Music and Sexuality?

Around six or seven years ago, I worked part-time in a lesbian bookshop where my job was to serve and help customers, take mail and phone orders, stock the shelves, and to generally ensure the smooth running of the shop. One of the things I was told to do first thing in the morning was to put some music on, and the shop had a stack of CDs that were put on loop: all of kd lang's albums, a couple of Melissa Etheridge's, Ani De Franco and *Woman2Woman Vol.1* and *Vol.2*<sup>1</sup>. After months of hearing the same CDs everyday, I finally snapped one day and decided to take some music of my own, just like my co-worker had done the week before. I spent a good ten minutes the night before making sure the CDs I took would not be inappropriate or offensive for a work environment. I decided on Spanish classical guitar music because that is what I play and listen, and I thought that it would be sufficiently neutral, being softly instrumental and non-intrusive.

How wrong I was, for what I thought was neutral caused quite a strong and rather negative reaction from my boss. Within a couple of minutes into playing the album, my boss stormed out of the office and told me promptly to switch it off because 'this is a lesbian bookshop and we need to inspire our lesbian customers. Spanish music *really* doesn't do that you know'. Of course I stopped my CD and obediently went back to playing kd lang, but for the rest of the day I was left in self-doubt about my own lesbian

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<sup>1</sup>lang and Etheridge are out lesbian singer-songwriters, DiFranco is a female singer with a large lesbian following. As the title suggests, *Woman2Woman* is a collection of female singers and all-female bands.

credibility and sensitivities. I began to wonder about my choice of music. Was it problematic because it was not k d lang? Was it because it was Spanish guitar music? I also wondered at my boss's statement, 'inspiring our lesbian customers': inspire our lesbian customers to do what? Presumably to buy lesbian books, but then why is playing k d lang conducive to this whilst Spanish music not? Do all lesbians listen to k d lang? Such thoughts have haunted me ever since and led me to ask: 'what is the relationship between music and sexuality<sup>2</sup>?', a question which formed the starting point for this thesis.

I am interested, for example, in how my boss and I were each attempting to define the supposed lesbian space of the bookshop through music, despite our different approaches to it. For me, music was occurring within as a lesbian space; Spanish guitar music was sexualised for me at that point because it was played within the context of a lesbian bookshop. In addition, my choosing Spanish guitar music was based on aesthetic appreciation of music, it was informed by taste. Upon being told to switch the music off on the grounds that it was not inspiring to lesbian customers, suddenly musical taste became a political issue relating to sexual identity.

For my boss, music was creating a lesbian space; k d lang's music was crucial in sexualising and defining the bookshop as lesbian space. Furthermore, my boss made a musical choice based on a more consciously political drive; her business depended on her shop successfully presenting itself as a proud and open women's and lesbian bookstore, something which k d lang's music would signal first and foremost. For her, music was a

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<sup>2</sup> As shall become clear in a moment, I am using the term 'sexuality' to describe the condition of 'being lesbian' (or 'being gay', 'being queer') in all that it encompasses. This includes but is not restricted to the term 'sexuality' as relating to sexual orientation defined by one's subjects of desire.

vehicle for communicating a lesbian message across to her customers, where lesbian politics was in effect the musical taste. Yet despite these differences, both of our positions describe differing relationships between music and sexuality, and highlight the complexity behind the very terms *music* and *sexuality*. My boss's and my conflicting opinions on the matter suggest there are a variety of ways in which the music-sexuality relationship can be socially understood, and as such they need to be addressed and opened to careful examination.

This thesis seeks to ground itself precisely at a point where music and sexuality cross over as part of a social interaction. Through an ethnography conducted with the Manchester Lesbian and Gay Chorus (*MLGC*) in Manchester, I identify what kind of factors bring music and sexuality together, and analyse what social, cultural, and political implications such a convergence has upon lesbian and gay musicians living in the city. The project is driven by my passion for music and its ability to organise and engage people and spaces, and how such a process produces the kind of dialogue that occurred between my boss and myself. The fieldwork carried out for my research thus aims to draw out such dialogues in order to gain a deeper understanding of the music-sexuality relationship as they are manifest in a variety of social situations.

By describing my thesis as a *queer* ethnography on music and sexuality, I am also signaling my disciplinary and theoretical engagement with queer musicology and queer theories of music. I want to address and build upon existing definitions of music and sexuality by thinking through concepts of *queer*, *queerness*, and *queering*. I am specifically interested in the conflation of sexuality and gender in most queer

musicological understandings of the music-sexuality relationship<sup>3</sup>. Here, the study of sexuality in music is more often than not related to how gender operates in music: gender as a musical performance, the effeminization/masculinization of a musician, gender as being an eroticised subject to and object within music and music performance. How can we separate out sexuality from gender in music? And if not gender, how can we conceptualise the idea of sexuality in music?

I am also interested in the tendency to focus on the *sex* in *sex*-uality within queer musicology<sup>4</sup>. By *sex*, I mean the physical enactment that involves an erotic exchange and hence, *sex*-uality as all that is related to this process including questions of desire and pleasure. Within this context, sexuality in music is conceptualised predominantly through the eroticisation of: a sound, a performance, artists and composers, a musical practice like opera singing. By extension, the idea of pleasure and desire in music are also defined through the erotic, as part of *sex*-uality. My question then is: are there ways in which we can think about the relationship between music and sexuality that do not directly involve an erotic exchange? If so, how else might we define desire and pleasure in music which includes but is not restricted to erotic understandings of sexuality?

Therefore, there are two main concerns behind this project. Firstly, building upon queer theories of music, I want to explore how we might conceptualise the relationship

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3 Chapter 1 shall problematise and discuss in depth the way music and sexuality become collapsed within Queer Musicology.

4 A good example of relating sexuality to sex is found in queer musicologist Suzanne Cusick's work where she equates music to sex (as in the physical practice), defining *sexuality* as 'a way of expressing and/or enacting relationships of intimacy through physical pleasure shared, accepted or given (1994: 71). Hence her work consists of examining how sexuality within this context is enacted through music. As shall become apparent in Chapter 1, within Queer Musicology, sexuality is often understood along these grounds of pleasure, the erotic, desire, power and how these are enacted through music.

between music and sexuality when separated from questions of gender and the erotic. By extension, I want to consider how the idea of desire and pleasure are configured within such a formulation. Secondly, through the analyses of the ethnographic material, I want to think through terms like *queer*, *queerness*, and *queering* in relation to the music-sexuality relationship, particularly within the context of lesbian and gay music and music-making practices. I want to now expand upon this main second concern.

### *Queer theory, and Gay and Lesbian music*

It's a home that says to artists, 'We not only are okay with who you are, but we embrace that as part of your identity,' said Mr Farber, who founded Logo, an MTV channel specifically designed for gay audiences. He added that new acts signed to Twist could have mass appeal regardless of the artists' sexual orientation. Mr Faber (*sic*) likened the gay label to being similar to other niche ventures, such as hip hop and urban music, which have been picked up by major labels and filtered into the mainstream

(BBC NewsOnline, 12 Jan 2006. [accessed: June 2006] )

In January 2006, Sony and Wilderness<sup>5</sup> launched a gay record label called *With a Twist* for the sole purpose of promoting and signing on LGBT<sup>6</sup> musicians. What interests me about this news article is that not only does it present music and sexuality within the same cultural domain, but it also introduces the idea of gay music<sup>7</sup> as a specific 'niche

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5 A new gay media company, led by Matt Farber, founder of MTV's gay entertainment channel LOGO.

6 Whilst 'With a Twist' is reported as 'gay label' for 'gay artists' on BBC, news broadcasters elsewhere such as ABC news, CBS news, and gay newspaper PinkNews report, 'music label dedicated to nurturing lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender artists'

7 I am using the term *gay music* as a reference to 'With a Twist' being a 'gay music label'

venture' alongside hip hop and urban music. Hip hop and urban music are niche ventures because they are particularised and defined by a certain (usually localised) culture that surrounds a social group: rappers' posse or a DJ collective<sup>8</sup>. These social groups in turn become associated with their particular sound. How do LGBT musicians and their music form a separate niche within culture whilst simultaneously being part of it? What exactly is different, if at all, about gay music? How, why, and when does music become 'gay music'?

During the course of answering these questions, I also want to question the usefulness and limitations of using queer theory to understand the music-sexuality relationship. Queer musicology is a field which is largely based on using queer theories<sup>9</sup> – which constitutes terms such as *queer*, *queering*, *queerness*<sup>10</sup> – to understand the relationship between music and issues that surround mostly gender, sexuality, and race. Broadly speaking and simplistically put, queer theory and politics sought to problematise, deconstruct and destabilize essentialised identity categories such as 'lesbian', 'gay', 'woman' and 'white'. Within this context, *queer* denotes the move away from identity politics towards a more anti-assimilationist and anti-essentialist politics of disruption informed by queer activism of the 1990s<sup>11</sup>. Furthermore, the term *queer* was and still is to

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8 In the UK, one example is the Bristol-based trip-hop band Massive Attack, founded by Robert Del Naja, Grant Marshall, Andrew Vowles in 1987. Together they established a DJ/musicians' collective (or 'crew') called The Wild Bunch and collaborated with other Bristol-based artists and English rapper Tricky.

9 Queer Musicologists who discuss the specific relationship between music and sexuality (McClary, Cusick, Wood, Brett, and Koestenbaum) refer to queer theory, mainly evolving around the works of theorists such as Judith Butler and Michel Foucault.

10 Chapter 1 shall deal with these terms in depth. But briefly, *queer* moves

11 As a backlash against LGBT politics, groups like Queercore and riot grrrl created a style of politics which distinctly moved against lesbian and gay, male or female identifications.



a large extent, an umbrella term that covers all different kinds of identities that fail to make it under lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender identifications.

Both my boss's desire to play k d lang to inspire lesbian customers in her bookshop, and the emergence of *With A Twist* as a 'gay record label' are examples where music is defined through a more essentialised understanding of sexuality and identity. What is at stake in turning to queer theory – which is in effect in opposition to LGBT identities – when analysing gay music, LGBT musicians and composers, or LGBT music-making practices? Hence I want to be reflexive about using the term *queer*, especially within a gay and lesbian music-making context: how can I engage with queer theory when discussing a social group who identify themselves as the Manchester *Lesbian and Gay Chorus*?

Supported by my ethnographic material, I thus intend to answer the questions raised so far by incorporating theories drawn from popular music studies, cultural and subcultural studies, and the sociology of music alongside queer musicological understandings of music and sexuality. Inasmuch as this thesis is concerned with the relationship between music and sexuality, it is also concerned with queer theory itself. I question how terms such as *queer*, *queerness*, *queering* can be understood within the context of lesbian and gay music and music-making practices. What does *queer* mean within the context of lesbian and gay music and music-making practices? What is *queerness* in music, and how might we read it? How are lesbian and gay musicians *queering* music and *queering* through music? How do such considerations enrich our understanding of the relationship between music and sexuality?

Part I grounds my research in both the theoretical and ethnographic field of exploration. Chapter 1 shall provide an overview of the ways in which the relationship between music and sexuality has been understood so far in queer musicology, popular music studies, cultural and subcultural studies, and sociology of music. I structure my discussion around the idea of reading *queerness* in music; and the *queering* of music and music scholarship. The aim here is to map out my theoretical field, but also to explore the terms *queer*, *queerness*, and *queering* as relating to music and sexuality. In this chapter, I shall also problematize some of the current theories on music and sexuality; particularly the conflation of gender and sexuality as manifest in music, and the defining of sexuality through the eroticisation of desire and pleasure in music. I argue that we need to think of other ways to understand the music-sexuality relationship which include but are not restricted to questions of gender and the erotic: here I suggest ethnographic research as one way we can address the problems and issues raised in the chapter.

Chapter 2 describes the research processes I went through to conduct fieldwork. Here I explain how some of the practical research problems I faced at the onset of the project reflect the possible reasons behind the conceptual problems raised in Chapter 1. This chapter will also introduce you to the *Manchester Lesbian and Gay Chorus* who form the basis of discussion for this research. As a group of lesbian and gay musicians who meet on a weekly basis and frequently perform for various different occasions, I discuss how and why they form the basis of discussion for this project. I shall also explain why participant observation and conducting qualitative interviews were my chosen

practical research methods relating specifically to singing and being in a lesbian and gay chorus.

Part II contextualises the research in Manchester and focuses mainly on the idea of urban gay and lesbian music-making practices. Chapter 3 explores Manchester as a city both rich in music<sup>12</sup> and LGBT<sup>13</sup> history, and its relationship to the *MLGC* as a musical-sexual group to have emerged out of these conditions. These two points make Manchester and its relationship to the *MLGC* an ideal grounds from where to investigate the kinds of social, cultural, political, and economical conditions necessary in bringing music and sexuality together in a given place. The aim of this chapter is to therefore explore the importance of the city in bringing urban music-making practices and lesbian and gay culture together, and to reflect upon some of the difficulties in carrying out this process. By analysing some of the struggles faced by the *MLGC*, I want to understand the political implications of lesbian and gay music-making practices in the city. Why is a *MLGC* so important to lesbian and gay musicians living in the city of Manchester?

Chapter 4 zooms into the area known as the Gay Village in Manchester, paying particular attention to its transformation from being a street<sup>14</sup> hiding a gay club-based subculture to its current heavily promoted tourist-friendly area of the city. I want to look at the tensions between the Village as a localised place for the LGBT community and the

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12 Apart from Manchester's large number of pubs and concert halls, the city boasts for example, the Halle Orchestra and Halle Choir, and 'Madchester' and Factory Records/the Hacienda.

13 Manchester-based HIV/AIDS charities such as George House Trust and AIDS.Helpline. Manchester also played a crucial role in co-ordinating some of LGBT civil-rights related rallies and demonstrations from 1960s onwards, which is probably why there is a very culturally, socially and politically active LGBT community surrounding the Gay Village area in Canal St.

14 Most famous being Canal Street, popularised most recently in Channel 4's *Queer as Folk* (1999), a British series based on a group of gay men living in Manchester.

Village as a more globalised and homogenised part of a newly regenerated Manchester. Through an analysis of the *MLGC*'s relationship to the Village, I want to explore the ways in which music is configured within this dynamic. In the process I want to also reflect on the term and use of *queer* in relation to lesbian and gay politics, the effects of commercialisation upon the lesbian and gay community, and ideas of the local and global.

Part III pays closer attention to music itself and its relationship to sexuality through the idea of 'gay songs'. The overall aim is to explore what exactly a 'gay song' consists of: what are gay songs? Why are they gay songs? Why is it important to sing gay songs? I answer these questions through the concept of *queering* music and reading *queerness* in music. In the process I want to think about the consequences of using the term *queer* in relation to 'gay songs': *queer* being an umbrella term, gay (and lesbian) being specific sexual identifications. Both Chapters 5 and 6 are based on the criteria outlined in a Proposal to change the repertoire, drawn by the *MLGC* committee in response to members' dissatisfaction at what they were learning and singing

Chapter 5 analyses songs made famous by gay icons, and show tunes from musicals. Why are members of the *MLGC* both embarrassed but also proud to sing 'obvious gay songs'? Here, I am concerned with the relationship between music and the lesbian and gays cultural past. Furthermore, I consider what it means to reproduce 'gay songs' within the context of contemporary Britain. In the process, I shall also be looking at ideas of desire and pleasure beyond their immediate associations with questions of the erotic.

In Chapter 6, I turn to the two remaining criteria listed in the Repertoire Proposal

regarding what a 'gay song' should consist of. I first examine: 'songs that reflect the experiences or struggles of LGBT people' as outlined in the Repertoire Proposal. By questioning why certain songs were deemed inappropriate for a lesbian and gay choir, I identify what LGBT experiences and struggles are, and how these are either contested or celebrated in music. I then continue the discussion by turning to Labi Siffre's *Something Inside so Strong*, and question why it was a unanimously chosen song: it both fit the final criterion of the Proposal – 'songs by LGBT composers' – as well as being meaningful to everyone in the choir regardless to their individual struggles and experiences as LGBT people. By reflecting on why Siffre – as a gay man and a composer – is so prominent in nearly all of the interviewee's accounts, I examine why musical authorship is of political significance to lesbian and gay musicians.

Throughout the course of Part III I shall be touching upon questions of taste and aesthetics, politics and meaning as factors informing members' relationships to 'gay songs'. Can a song be political *and* beautiful at the same time? By analysing the *MLGC* members' efforts to find a political and beautiful song that suits *everybody* – Siffre's *Something Inside So Strong* being one example – I want to explore what is at stake in bringing music and sexuality together through the concept of identity. In many ways, these points relate to my initial confrontation with my boss concerning *k d lang*. Are gay songs essential to the musical articulation of sexual identity? Is identity the only thing being expressed through music?

The interviews and the observations undertaken with the Manchester Lesbian and Gay Chorus provide an account of the social process behind urban lesbian and gay music-

making practices within the context of a contemporary city in Britain. By analysing the issues and problems which emerge from the ethnographic material, this project thus presents different areas and ways of thinking about sexuality and music beyond the immediate considerations of gender and the erotic. In the process, this thesis questions what terms like *queer*, *queerness* and *queering* mean in relation to lesbian and gay music-making practices.

# **Part I**

## **Grounding Music and Sexuality**

# ■ Chapter 1 ■

## Queer Musicology: putting *music* and *sexuality* together

The underlying concern of this thesis is to investigate the relationship between music and sexuality. Queer musicology is a field which is largely based on using queer theory to understand the relationship between music and issues that surround mostly gender, sexuality, and race. By entitling my thesis as a *queer* ethnography of music and sexuality, I am signalling my disciplinary and theoretical engagement with queer musicology and queer theories of music. I want to think about the implications of using queer theory and the concept of *queer* in relation to lesbian and gay music and music-making practices. In this chapter, I shall explore existing definitions of music and sexuality, and how their relationship has been conceptualised within queer musicology: the discussion will centre around the concept of *queering* music theory and practice, and what *queerness* means in music. I shall also be engaging with other related fields which consider the issue of sexuality in music, such as: popular music studies, cultural and subcultural studies, and the sociology of music. In the process, I wish to highlight some of the problematic aspects of using queer theory to understand the music and sexuality: mainly the conflation of sexuality and gender in music; and the conceptualisation of sexuality as concerning the erotic, as sex-uality.



But first, I want provide a brief overview of the feminist music scholarship that immediately preceded the emergence of queer musicology in the 1990s. I believe that feminist critiques on music and music scholarship had a bearing on some of the theoretical issues within queer musicological understandings of music and sexuality which I shall problematise and discuss later on in this chapter.

The intervention of feminist theorists of music shed light to some of the neglected areas within such discourses on music, mainly how the issue of gender affects music composition, practice and scholarship. Feminist scholars argued that music is a system of difference and thus the issue of gender should be considered in musical analyses and criticism<sup>1</sup>. The driving force behind Susan McClary's pioneering *Feminine Endings* (1991) arises from her need to challenge the inherent gendered differences within music and music scholarship which subjugate women. Hence her analysis of Bizet's *Carmen* concludes with: 'opera becomes a bitter critique of European patriarchal forms of gender construction' (1991:66). In other words, through her analysis of Carmen, as a female protagonist in Bizet's work who embodies female sensuality, McClary demonstrates how gender is musically constructed within European patriarchal society which sexualises femininity and subjugates women as the Other.

Soon after McClary's *Feminine Endings* (1991), feminist anthologies on music and gender followed: *The Diva's Mouth* (ed. Leonardi *et al*, 1996), *Embodied Voices* (ed. Dunn *et al* 1994), and *Cecilia Reclaimed* (ed. Cook, 1994) are some examples. All these

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<sup>1</sup> Anthologies which address this issue: *Audible Traces: gender, identity and music* (1999); *Queering the Pitch: new gay and lesbian musicology* (1994); *Music and Difference: gender and sexuality in music scholarship* (1993)

collections challenge the idea of gender difference and gender marginalisation within musicology and problematise the consequent subjugation of women within music scholarship and practice. In this manner, by interrogating the discursive engenderedness of music theory and practice, feminism shed light on the sexism and misogyny found in music theory and scholarship<sup>2</sup>.

Following feminist music scholarship, queer musicology emerged as a field consisting largely of musicologists who extended the lines of feminist enquiry into music, to include issues of sexuality, sexual identity, and queer politics alongside gender. *Music with Difference: gender and sexuality in music scholarship* (1993) and *Queering the Pitch: the new lesbian and gay musicology* (1994) are anthologies that reflect the time in early 1990s when queer theory and politics were gaining momentum both within and without academia. Queer theory's anti-essentialist politics thus enabled musicologists 'to know what role musics play in the construction and reinforcement of ideologies of difference and, conversely, how they may challenge or resist those ideologies (Solie, 1993: 20). What feminism achieved for female musicians, composers and music scholars, queer musicologists sought to emulate for lesbian and gay musicians, composers and music scholars. Queer musicologists turned to queer theory for this purpose.

Queer theory of course is a large area of study, and so I want to first identify what aspects of it have been relevant to musicologists so far. Queer theorists Arlene Stein's and Ken Plummer's essay (1996) provides a useful outline of the hallmarks that define queer theory. They list:

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<sup>2</sup> See Warwick (2004), Mayhew (2004), Abbate (1993).

(1) a conceptualization of sexuality which sees sexual power embodied in different levels of social life, expressed discursively and enforced through boundaries and binary divides; (2) the problematization of sexual and gender categories, and of identities in general. Identities are always on uncertain ground, entailing displacements of identification and knowing; (3) a rejection of civil-rights strategies in favor of a politics of carnival, transgression, and parody which leads to deconstruction, decentering, revisionist readings, and an anti-assimilationist politics; (4) a willingness to interrogate areas which normally would not be seen as the terrain of sexuality, and to conduct queer "readings" of ostensibly heterosexual or non-sexualised texts (1996: 134).

According to Stein's and Plummer's summary, queer theory can be regarded as consisting of two major points in relation to current queer musicological scholarship. Firstly, the use of queer theory as a critical voice and a tool for analysis, the *queering* of Western music theory and practice, deemed oppressive to lesbian and gay musicians, composers and scholars of music. Here, points 3) and 4) are the most relevant: to conduct deconstructive queer readings of ostensibly heterosexual or non-sexualised music texts or practices as part of a politics of intervention. Secondly, through such a process of *queering*, to read and to write *queerness* into music theory and practice: this often consists of analysing constructions of gender and sexuality in music, 'as expressed discursively and enforced through boundaries and binary divides' (*ibid*).

In this light, I regard and use *queer* in this thesis primarily as a term to reflect both: the concept of *queering* and *queerness* in music and music-making practices. In addition, as shall be revealed in due course, the term *queer* is used by some of the participants I interviewed for this project as a shorthand to mean lesbian and gay people

('us queers', 'put a bunch of queers together'). Such uses of *queer* stem from its initial conception during the late 1980s as an umbrella term to incorporate the range of identities between and beyond 'lesbian and gay'<sup>3</sup>. My use of the term *queer* incorporates this definition as well, and in fact, one of the concerns of this project is to think about the discrepancies surrounding *queer*: how can we think about lesbian and gay music and music-making through queer theory and what are the implications of using the term and concept, *queer*?

I want to now investigate these two aspects – *queering* and *queerness* – in relation to queer musicology in greater depth. Firstly, I shall discuss the concept of *queering* musicology as a field, highlighting some of the problems related to conducting queer readings of music. Secondly, I shall explore the idea of *queerness* in music and shall be problematising some of the theoretical aspects of the existing scholarship on music and sexuality: mainly the conflation of gender and sexuality, and the conceptualisation of sexuality as concerning the erotic. Finally I shall explain how through an ethnography, this thesis attempts to think about other ways in which we might conceptualise the relationship between music and sexuality beyond issues of gender and the erotic.

### Queering *musicology*

Musicology is a field dedicated to the analysis of music, both in its compositional and notational form, and as a subject of philosophical discussion<sup>4</sup>. By extension, the study

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3 See Eptain's work (1996: 152) which explore the *queer* as a replacement for 'lesbian and gay'.

4 See Bent (1996)

of music has branched out into anthropology and ethnomusicology<sup>5</sup>, social theory<sup>6</sup> and sociology<sup>7</sup> of music, and more recently, subcultural<sup>8</sup> and popular music studies<sup>9</sup>. I identify two main ways in which the discipline of musicology itself is queered. Firstly, the problematisation and consequent resistance of the inherent heterosexuality in what authors often refer to as the Western canon (Shepherd, 1993). Secondly, proposing deconstructive strategies aligned to queer politics where new systems of signification, interpretation, and organisation seek to reclaim and represent past and present lesbian and gay musicians and music theorists.

Through his analysis of Benjamin Britten's 'open secret', a composer in a relationship with Peter Pears (with whom he often collaborated), queer musicologist Philip Brett demonstrates how the production of musicological knowledge has ramifications upon queer musicians and scholars in the field: 'it is no wonder that feminism, gender studies, and gay and lesbian perspectives have taken so long to surface....the appearance of this work is hampered by our knowing very little about the social experience of those composers who are known or suspected have been heavily involved sexually or emotionally with others of their own sex.' (1994: 15). In other words for Brett, Western music scholarship has become an arena for the self-policing – the closeting – of queer musicians and scholars.

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5 See: Bohlman and B.Nettl (eds.) (1991), Shelemay's (ed.) (1990), Gourlay (1990), Merriman (1964) who studied music 'of non-literate people', Blacking (1974). More recently, Daynes (2004), Stokes' (1994). 6Attali (1985), Adorno (1967); Benjamin, (1969)

7 Finnegan (1989) DeNora (2000) Martin (1995), Shepherd (1991), Leppart and McClary (1987), Weber (1958)

8 McRobbie (1999), S.Cohen (1997), Bayton, (1997), Malbon (1999)

9 Webb (2004), Frith (1998), Whitely (2000, 1997) , Straw (1997, 1991), also see T.Swiss *et al* (eds.) (1998)

Similarly, queer musicologist Wayne Koestenbaum analyzes voice manuals as a discursive example of how the discipline of the musical body is often related to the punishment of the (homo)sexualised body (1994). Lesbian musicologist Suzanne Cusick's almost apologetic tone is an example of the fear ('I am very afraid' states Cusick) musicologists themselves must face in outing themselves within the field and discipline: 'To speak....not just the love that dare not speak its name...to say the word lesbian in a musicological crowd...to try to make sense of it there' (pauses are Cusick's) (1994: 68). Such works attempt to demonstrate how music scholarship and pedagogy itself is a discursive system of differentiation which essentially positions those who study it.

Within this context, music scholarship can be regarded as a regime of the power-knowledge-pleasure<sup>10</sup>: a discipline which administers silence, prohibits and circulates misconceptions of homosexuality to the detriment of queers engaged in both music theory and practice. *Queering* musicology is thus about being critical of how music scholarship can silence, prohibit and circulate misconceptions of homosexuality which subjugate music scholars and lesbian and gay queer musicians. At the same time, in bringing lesbian and gay musicians' existence into a musicological discussion, *queering* is also about reclaiming lesbian and gay music history.

This brings me to the second point concerning the *queering* of musicology. The *queering* of musicology is also often informed by a queer politics of resistance, 'to know

10 In the *History of Sexuality Vol.1* (1976), Michel Foucault discusses the need to define the regime of power-knowledge-pleasure which sustains the discourse on human sexuality (1976: 11). According to Foucault, discursive production 'administers silences', the production of power 'sometimes have the function of prohibiting', and the propagation of knowledge 'often causes mistaken beliefs or systematic misconceptions to circulate' (1976: 12). Lesbian musicologist Suan Cusick follows Foucault power/knowledge/pleasure dynamic and devises her own rubric – 'power/pleasure/intimacy triad' – which she uses to think about the relationship between music and sexuality (1994: 73).

what role music plays in the construction and reinforcement of ideologies of difference and, conversely, how they may challenge or resist those ideologies' (Solie, 1993: 20). One way such a resistance takes place is through biographical mis-readings of the composers' and musicians' work.

This mode of *queering* musicology has the effect of interrupting the circulation of knowledge designed to censor or punish homosexuality in music theory and practice. In other words, such works re-cover and re-claim the gay and lesbian music history<sup>11</sup>. For example, in tracing Ethel Smyth's music and life, queer musicologist Elizabeth Wood writes, 'I believe Smyth constructed her autobiographical literary narratives in ways that replicate the horizontal and vertical lines of musical counterpoint....my interpretive strategy, then, is to reread according to contrapuntal principles her work that both "constitutes and transforms the codes...and the individuals using the codes, performing the work" ' (1993: 166). Brett's more politically charged essay (1994), on the other hand, searches for the discrepancy between biographical facts and the work in order to challenge what he still regards as being oppressive in music theory and pedagogy:

What was the point of all those coded messages about homosexual oppression and pederasty if they prompted only further denial of their meaning, further entrenchment of the universalism and transcendentalism that make Western classical music a weak substitute for religion in capitalist society and divorce it from meaning? (1994: 22).

Such readings of music and (homo)sexuality therefore attempt to reclaim the silenced

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<sup>11</sup> Wood (1993), Thomas (1994), Mockus (1994), Gill (1995)

figures from past and present through an 'interpretive strategy' of re-reading music against the biographical grain.

Another aspect to *queering* musicology is not only about conducting queer readings of music theory and practice, but also about presenting alternate models of thinking and practicing music theory. Lesbian musicologists Wood (1994) and Rycenga (1994) have also actively introduced alternative models of structuring music criticism and practice, ones which are structured around lesbian ideologies. Wood devises a new rubric inspired by Rich's idea of the lesbian continuum – 'Sapponics' – which in her words, 'is a mode of articulation, a way of describing a space of lesbian possibility for a range of erotic and emotional relationships among women who sing and women who listen' (1994: 26). Similarly, Rycenga's 'Lesbian Compositional Process' (1994) offers a practical model of music criticism and composition based on lesbian ideology:

As a composer, I have found lesbian sexuality to create ideal atmospheric and geological conditions (to be a hothouse, even) for the growth of time. What is most telling for me is the way in which two women can use their bodies to *cocreate* time and *develop* telos. It is the experience of being enwrapped in time, inseparable from it, part of it, that links music and lesbianism (1994: 283).

Both Wood's and Rycenga's pieces are part of an anthology entitled *Queering the Pitch* (1994), and their readings of music theory and practice based on lesbian ideologies seem to be at odds with *queer* theory, which opposes identity politics and categorical ideologies: to reiterate Solie's argument, "to know what role music plays in the



construction and reinforcement of ideologies of difference and, conversely, *how they may challenge or resist those ideologies*' (emphasis mine) (Solie, 1993: 20). What are the implications of using queer theory to understand lesbian and gay music, music scholarship and practices?

### *Queerness in music: defining sexuality in music*

McClary's influential *Feminine Endings* (1991) specifically attempted to bridge the idea of music and sexuality, and perhaps her work has set a precedence over how the music-sexuality relationship is defined and conceptualised. McClary is very much informed by feminism and her analysis of music is based on a discursive understanding of gender: 'beginning with the rise of opera in the seventeenth-century, composers worked painstakingly to develop a musical semiotics of gender, a set of conventions for constructing 'masculinity' and 'femininity' in music (1991: 7). For McClary, 'music serves as a public forum within which various models of gender organization are asserted, adopted, contested, and negotiated' (*ibid*). Therefore, in interrogating musical constructions of gender, McClary challenges the sexism that can be found within music (like opera) and music scholarship.

McClary's understanding of sexuality is defined through the idea of pleasure and sex as a discursive part of 'a semiotics of desire, arousal, and sexual pleasure that circulate in the public sphere through music' (1991: 7). In other words, for McClary, sexuality is about sex, the erotic 'channeling of desire' (1991: 8). The manner in which

sexuality – as sex-uality – is conceptualised is through its engendered manifestation or presentations in music and music performances: hence Bizet's *Carmen's* sexuality is tied to the sensuality of her femininity. Within this context, sexuality cannot be discussed without considerations of gender and the manner in which they are bound is through their eroticisation. How then might we understand the idea of *queerness* in music? I identify two main interrelated grounds of analysis within queer musicology and theories of music which consider the issue of sexuality: firstly, the performance and subversion of gender; secondly, sexuality as eroticism, or degenerate and perverse desire. I shall now expand upon these and highlight what I regard are their theoretical limitations.

In *Gender Trouble* (1990), feminist philosopher Judith Butler refers to drag performances as an example in which imitation and parody both highlight the performativity of gender and subvert the discursive and socially inscribed body: 'the performance of drag plays upon the distinction between the anatomy of the performer and gender that is being performed' (1990: 175). Queer theorist Judith Halberstam's investigation of punk styles in drag king cultures (2005) is an example of how queer performances can be understood through queer theory's politics of subversion and disruption: 'lady-men who rock and roll, drag up, and slam their way toward new queer futures and the punk rockers of an earlier generation of subcultural activity' (2005: 154-5).

Whether it is Butler's influence in queer theory, or because terms such as *performance* and *performer* are part of musicological and queer lexica, a *musical performance* has a tendency within queer musicology to be conceptualised as being an

event which can expose the performativity of identities. As popular music studies scholar Sheila Whitley states, 'in one sense these (cock-rockers') images can be interpreted simply at the level of performance, the acting out of a role. At the same time, they lock into the discourses surrounding gender and masquerade' (1997: 94). This would explain the vast amounts of work (particularly in popular music studies) dedicated to the study of specific performers and their performances, usually through notions of a 'stage persona'<sup>12</sup>. A musical performance in these cases is set as a stage for the dramatization of identities, 'expressed discursively and enforced through boundaries and binary divides' (Stein and Plummer, 1996: 134).

But what happens outside of a musical performance? What happens to *queerness* off-stage? Focusing on one performance or a performer limits our understanding of how *queerness* is articulated in that it does not necessarily consider the 'different levels of social life' (Stein and Plummer, 1996: 134). Queer ethnomusicologist Carol Robertson (1993) investigates the idea of gender difference by positioning herself as a researcher-cum-cultural 'midwife' and exploring a tribe's day-to-day practices surrounding music. In this manner, her study touches upon gender as experienced in all areas of life. Similarly, Halberstam (2005) explores the relationship between drag-king cultures and punk/rock; Mitchell Morris's 'Reading as an Opera Queen' (1993) investigates the gay male culture that surrounds the opera/diva through ideas of aesthetics, life-style, and ideology; 'the

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12 For example, Sheila Whitley refers to kd lang and how 'the tension in lang's performance expresses itself as a dissonance between her anatomical sex, her sexuality and her gendered performance which communicates itself to her audience (in part instinctively) as different' (2000: 153). Referring to Dolly Parton, fellow popular music theorist Simon Frith writes she 'doesn't only play on a male notion of femininity, but in *performing* the signs of vulnerability – little the little-girl voice, the giggle, the nervous flounce – makes their meaning problematic <italics Frith's>' (1996: 213)

music and its performances become a ruling metaphor for life, and a serious opera queen is apt to make many of his day-to-day decisions in the spirit of *imitatio operae*' (1993: 185). The key concept I am interested here is the 'day-to-day', what lies outside of the immediate musical act, and moves into the social process of everyday life<sup>13</sup>.

Sociologist Ruth Finnegan's discussions on the 'hidden work' behind a performance – be it tea-making during a rehearsal, or fund-raising for an amateur band – provides a most thorough account of the social processes which occur outside of a performance. More recently, sociologist Tia DeNora's *Music in Everyday life* has provided a similar ethnography on the uses of music in a variety of spheres in all levels of social life. By analysing how music is consumed, practiced and produced outside the space-time of a performance, such works re-define music whilst providing a means for contextualising a performance. Yet most ethnographic investigations into music do not incorporate the issue of sexuality within an analysis of music in everyday life. One of the aims of this thesis is to explore how music and sexuality inform and are informed by the 'different levels of social life' which surround and are outside of the musical performance. I want to think about how we might conceptualise sexuality within the context of music in everyday life, and how it might be manifested and articulated through music beyond the performance.

Like the term *performance*, 'feminine' and 'masculine' are part of a shared nomenclature between music theory, queer theory and feminism. Again, because of the influence of Butler within queer theory and feminism, it is perhaps unsurprising that a

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<sup>13</sup> Here I am referring to the ordinary, the mundane, the quotidian activities of day-to-day existence. I take my cue from social theorists like Michel De Certeau (1998)

large proportion of queer musicology evolves around discursive understandings of 'masculine' and 'feminine' in music, and the subversion of gender. For example, Koestenbaum (1994) and Wood (1994) both analyse the idea of vocal travesty as a form of not only deconstructing the idea of gender but simultaneously conceptualising these voices as queer voices which break the vocal and gender register. Lydia Hamessley's work on the other hand, investigates the relationship between Katherine Philips' passionate literary/poetical text written for her female friends and Henry Lawes' musical text which adapts Philips's work. Hamessley's close analysis of Lawes' music demonstrates how uses of musical gender and harmonic arrangement reflect and represent gender characteristics as they were socially understood in the seventeenth-century:

Through parallel first-inversion triads and cadences in first inversion, Lawes articulates a gentle, almost tentative, feeling in this song. Thus the text is delineated without force, determination, or strong goal orientation.....such a song, imbued with diffusive cadences and sweet parallel thirds and sixths, is aptly described as elegantly refined (1994: 120).

Hamessley relates the engendered music text to ideas on 'female love and friendship' which is signalled through the notational arrangements and their juxtaposition against seventeenth-century social understandings of what is 'feminine' and 'masculine': a 'feminine' piece of music represents female love and friendship.

Whilst such discussions serve to highlight the genderedness of music, be it the singing voice of the *castrati* or a piece of musical score, I wish to problematize this approach. Using the terms 'feminine' and 'masculine' to understand queerness in music

relies on essentialising these very categories. For example, if we turn to the use of Hamessley's adjectives, her argument is dependent on essentialising what constitutes as being 'feminine' (gentle, almost tentative, feeling in this song' or 'elegantly refined' ). My question here is: how might we understand *queerness* in music without it being directly or solely related to discursive gender binarism and as being subject to subversions?

Furthermore there is a second problem I wish to raise concerning the conceptualisation of sexuality through engendered understandings of music. There is a predominance within musicology to define sexuality through the erotic and as pertaining to pleasure, or as McClary states, the 'arousing and channeling of desire' (1991: 8). This tendency is probably partly due to philosophical debates within musicology (and beyond) hinged upon the Cartesian mind/male/purity and body/female/impurity divide: music of the mind is pure and thus masculine, and in contrast, music of the body is impure and thus feminine. Sexuality in theories of music has often been explored as a carnal matter, particularly of the female body which is thus endowed with sexual-ity, as being erotic and exotic<sup>14</sup>.

Susan Cusick for example asks: 'what's to prevent music from *being sex*, and thus an ancient, half-sanctioned form of escape from the constraints of the phallic economy? Is that why we have so many intellectual barriers in place to prevent thinking about music as *like sex*, or as having the capacity to *represent* sexuality and gender? (1994: 79).

Similarly, fellow queer musicologist Phillip Brett explicitly states, 'what happens when we separate the word "musicality" from the word "music" is comparable to what happens

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<sup>14</sup> Scott (2003), McClary's study of *Carmen* (1991), and Brett's reading of Britten and *Orientalism* (1994)

when we separate "homosexuality" (or "sexuality") from "sex" ' (1994: 10). In other words, the term *sexuality* within the context is defined through an erotic dynamic, as *sexuality* and sensuality found in and through music: pleasure and desire are part of this eroticised music-sexuality axis.

Given this theoretical grounding, it is perhaps unsurprising that queer musicologists have tended to conceptualise *queerness* in music as the *re-channelling* of desire through gender subversions. Queer musicologists Joke Dame (1994), Linda Austern (1994) and Koestenbaum (1994) configure the idea of sexuality in their work through an investigation of how gendered forms of signifying heterosexual desire can be subverted for a queer reception and performance: Dame explores the mis-hearing of the *castrati*'s voice as an eroticism derived from confusion; Austern discusses the erotic power of Renaissance boy-actresses' performances which relied on the discrepancy of what one saw and one heard (1994). Whilst I do not in any way wish to entirely de-eroticise the concept of sexuality in music, I am also concerned with the lack of investigation into other definitions and manifestations that sexuality may encompass. In what other ways can we think about sexuality in music which do not directly involve an erotic exchange? Must sexuality in music always be read through eroticised and often engendered desires?

What I want to suggest is that there might be other ways in which the concept of desire may be read in music. In *Outside Belongings* (1996), feminist and queer scholar Elspeth Probyn discusses the relationship between desire and belonging through a

Deleuzian model of becoming<sup>15</sup> and movement: 'Desire is the mode of connection and communication between things' she writes, it is a 'productive force which compels a theory of belonging that in its singularity may exceed much of what passes for contemporary identity politics' (1996: 41). Similarly, can we understand the desire in music as a desire of belonging? Can music be understood as a 'mode of connection between things'? Some works in ethnomusicology, subcultural studies and the sociology of music have investigated the way in which music forms part of a given group's sense of belonging: *Music, Space and Place* (2004) or *Mapping the Beat* (1998) are anthologies which address this issue, but whilst there is a large body of work covering the musical demarcations of race<sup>16</sup>, class<sup>17</sup>, youth<sup>18</sup> culture, the idea of sexuality is strangely omitted or mentioned only in passing within this discourse.

I want to suggest we build from the existing discourses surrounding music and cultural identity by incorporating the idea of *queerness* and *queer* within a given analysis of music, space, and sense of belonging: I want to *queer* ethnography on music. I shall now discuss how I turned to ethnography as a way of opening up such areas that need further investigation, and to think about some of the theoretical limitations outlined so far.

### *Towards a Queer Ethnography of Music and Sexuality*

The two main theoretical problems that I want to address in this thesis are: the

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15 Deleuze and Guattari (1983): *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, see section on Desiring-Production under 'Desiring-Machines'.

16 Mitchell (2004, 2001) Liera-Schwichtenberg (1998), Daynes (2004)

17 Sample (1996), Lipsitz (1997), Cohen (1997)

18 Ross *et al* (eds) (1994), Bennett (1994), Redhead (ed.) (1993), McRobbie (1989)



conflation of gender and sexuality, and the defining of sexuality through an erotic dynamic. In other words, I want to explore how else we might think about the relationship between music and sexuality beyond questions of gender and the erotic. Furthermore, I am interested in how *queer*, *queerness*, and *queering* work in relation to lesbian and gay music and music-making practices.

To this end I conducted an ethnography of the Manchester Lesbian and Gay Chorus, a group of lesbian and gay singers making music in the city. I engaged in participant observation as well as conducting qualitative interviews with 14 members (9 women, 5 men), between the ages of 25-65: Tinny, Clara, Katya, Katherine, Eleanor, Denise, Kristen, June, Charlotte, Jed, David, Chongwei, John, Jeff. The ethnographic material gathered for this project presents different social contexts in which we might understand the relationship between music and sexuality: from group discussions on music, individual reflections on their relationship music and the choir itself, different kinds of musical events they choose to participate in, incidents that arise during rehearsals or performances<sup>19</sup>. By analysing their everyday life musical activities both as a group and as individual members, I attempt to draw out what kind of factors – which might include issues surrounding gender and the erotic – bring the concepts of music and sexuality together. By taking an interdisciplinary approach to the material, the ethnography also hopes to provide a basis for a dialogue between musicology, queer theory, sociology of music, popular and (sub)cultural studies of music.

There are two authors whom I would like to refer to at this point, both of them use

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<sup>19</sup> See Appendix for more information on fieldwork and practical research methodologies.

ethnographies to explore the conditions which organise and enable the social enactment of music in everyday life: Tia DeNora's *Music in Everyday Life* (2000), and Ruth Finnegan's *Hidden Musicians* (1989). DeNora's investigates a wide range of social activities detailing how music is 'pressed into action' (2000: x) in each case: what music does during aerobics classes; interviewees accounts on their use of music to set and changing their mood, music therapy, or the use of music as a consumerist strategy in retailing. For DeNora, music is thus a backdrop, a 'dynamic material of structuration' (2000: x) which individuals use according to their emotional, practical, or psychic needs. DeNora's functionalist approach to music means her understanding of 'music pressed into action' is less about the sociality involved in music, instead, it is more about the utilitarian functionality of music for individuals to order their actions in their social lives.

In contrast to DeNora's work, sociologist Ruth Finnegan's *Hidden Musicians* (1989) is dedicated specifically to the investigation of the sociality of music, where music is regarded as being inseparable from social interaction for it is 'a matter of active collective practice rather than just passive mass-controlled consumption of the solitary contemplation of musical works' (1989: 297). Basing her research on participant observation, collecting of leaflets/posters/newsletters, phone interviews as well as talking to some key figures on an informal basis in various settings in the town of Milton Keynes, Finnegan examines how different individuals are linked 'not just by shared views or emotions but by social *practices*. People may or may not feel a sense of closure or separation from others in specific situations, but what does define their habitual musical pathways are their shared and purposive collective *actions*' (emphasis Finnegan's) (1989:

305). For Finnegan, music is not so much 'pressed into action' as DeNora postulates, music *is* the action, it is in effect a social practice in itself.

DeNora and Finnegan have very different understandings of what 'music in action' consists of: the former analysing the use of music for the construction of everyday social life, the latter analysing sociality as constructing music in everyday life. My own position is somewhere between the two authors. On the one hand, I am interested in music as being 'pressed into action' by lesbian and gay musicians. Here, I am concerned with how musical action might relate to *queering* as an action, a verb reflecting a queer politics of intervention as discussed earlier. On the other hand, I am also interested in analysing lesbian and gay music-making to understand how *queerness* is read and articulated in music. Finnegan argues that music is 'defined in different ways among different groups, each of whom have their own conventions supported by existing practices and ideas about the right way in which music should be realised' (1989: 7). By examining a group of lesbian and gay musicians' 'ideas about the right way in which music should be realised' my ethnography thus explores how *queerness* might be read and articulated as part of a collective social process, and what this says about lesbians and gay musician today. In other words, I want to include lesbian and gay musicians as part of the 'different groups' which remains largely unexamined: what are the social values and social conventions that they hold in common, and how and where is music configured within this process?

Furthermore, as outlined in the Introduction, boundaries between culture and subculture, dominant and other, mainstream and alternative, heterosexual and homosexual are shifting. With the legal and socio-cultural changes in Britain – gay record

label *With a Twist* being one indication – how marginal is lesbian and gay culture now? Therefore, by centralizing lesbian and gay music and music-making practices, my ethnography aims to provide a means for understanding the relationship between music beyond the question of gender and the erotic. In addition, it also hopes to re-think and open up new ways in which we might think about *queer*, *queerness*, and *queering* music and music-making practices.

## ■ Chapter 2 ■

### Becoming a Queer Ethnographic Chorister: singing my way into fieldwork

In *Hidden Musicians* (1989), Finnegan explains how the amateur musicians she studies are hidden in two ways: they rarely receive scholarly attention, and their practices are part of a large network of local music-making of which those outside are unaware. These reasons are why Finnegan conducted her ethnography, 'to reveal something of a reality that has too often remained unnoticed' (1989: 11). I share the same drive as Finnegan in wanting to conduct an ethnographic study to expose the hiddenness related to amateur *and* lesbian and gay musicians in everyday life. For 'hidden' within a lesbian and gay context has implications of being 'hidden in the closet'<sup>1</sup>, both within academic discourse and in life<sup>2</sup>. I have another important – politically driven – reason behind my using an ethnography and so add a third definition to Finnegan's *hidden musicians*: the doubly hidden lives of lesbian and gay musicians.

I am concerned with using fieldwork to unearth what hidden musical practices – in the case of this project, choral singing – might be falling outside of sociological, cultural and subcultural studies of music. In being *amateur* musicians, they also do not get the attention that other more renowned lesbian and gay composers might within queer

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1 *Epistemology of the Closet* (1991); *Hidden from History* (1989); *Celluloid Closet: homosexuality in the movies* (1981); *Closet Space: geographies of metaphor from the body to the globe*

2 Regarding academic life of queers, see W.G. Tierney (1997).

musicology: Benjamin Britten or Ethel Smyth as discussed in the last chapter. But what is hiding them? Where are why they hidden?

In *Music in Everyday Life* (2000), DeNora carries out her fieldwork in metropolitan areas and small towns in United States and United Kingdom. Through a combination of participant observation and interviews conducted with women from these areas, DeNora investigates 'how real people actually press music into action in particular social spaces and temporal settings' (2000: x). I borrow DeNora's term, 'ground level' to describe two important aspects to this chapter. Firstly, I am referring to the literal ground, street level of the Gay Village in Manchester, where I first begun my investigations. How and where does music materially ground sexuality? Secondly, by 'ground level' I am also referring to the large body of existing literature that grounds the idea of sexuality and music within the realms of erotic sociality. For reasons which will become apparent in due course, my fieldwork moves away from the notion of 'ground level, in both senses of the term.

I want to first provide an account of the initial 'failed' fieldwork I carried out at the ground level in Canal Street, the main area in the Gay Village of Manchester. The discussion will centre around *Vanilla*, a lesbian bar, where at first I attempted to investigate how music and sexuality were crossing over as part of lesbian sociality. I shall highlight some of the practical problems which emerged from this initial research because these 'failings' provide a clue into why music and sexuality have been so predominantly conceptualised through the erotic dynamic, within which questions of desire and pleasure are configured. How can we investigate music and sexuality outside of the eroticised

context?

It is at this point that the ethnography with the Manchester Lesbian and Gay Chorus (*MLGC*) begins: away from both the physical and theoretical ground level of an eroticised field. No matter what venues they choose in the Village, the *MLGC*'s rehearsals always occur upstairs and away from the main ground level of Canal Street. The *MLGC*'s spatial separation from ground-level means their kind of musical activities are hidden from scholars and the rest of Canal St, both of which centralise the erotic aspects of sexuality and music. Reflecting and building upon Finnegan's *hidden musicians* (1989), I shall therefore explain how the *MLGC* provided an ideal ground from where to study the relationship between music and sexuality: as removed from the directly eroticised context of a place like *Vanilla*; away from the physical and theoretical ground-level of the music-sexuality relationship.

The latter half of this chapter will explain how and why participant observation and qualitative interviews enabled me to become part of field. Here I shall be referring to the idea of the queer ethnographic chorister as a figure who brings ethnographic, musical, and lesbian and gay social practices together. The overall aim of this chapter is to ground some of the theoretical questions raised in Chapter 1 within an ethnographic context. Furthermore, by including my fieldwork experiences in *Vanilla*, this chapter also thinks about two different kinds of sexualised spaces. *Vanilla* and the *MLGC* are both part of the Village as a 'lesbian and gay area': does the meaning of sexuality change? If so, how can we think about music in relation to these changes?

## At Ground Level: Canal Street

### Vanilla

*Three girls link their arms, clicking their heels as they giggle their way towards a little corner just off Canal Street. Below an illuminated poster with female figures crayoned in, dancing in a burst of colours, stands a burly woman dressed as no other can be dressed- she's a bouncer, a protector, a vigilante and a no-messer. The girls go in, flirty and showy, waving their hands and leaning against each other for support. And for that brief moment when the door opens, the street is filled with sounds of techno emanating from within, a vibration riding upon waves of drunken laughter. The door shuts and the noise is dampened once again by the cold night air. I can smell Manchester in the air, a mix of slightly rank canal water and that strange beer-toilet-cleaner-cigarette smell that often fans out of pubs. With my left hand I check my tape-recorder in my pocket, I take one last deep breath. This is it, I've got to go in.*

*The bouncer looks me in the eye. I feel like I'm passing through airport security, or a teenager wanting to buy booze. If only I had a girlfriend now, or even a friend who was a girl – whatever, just not alone. The bouncer catches my eye. One second passes and I can see she is trying to work out whether I'm a straight woman or a femmy dyke. She nods, gives me a proof card and I'm in.*

(Fieldnotes, December 2003)

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I had just moved to Manchester around the time I began to undertake fieldwork and the most obvious – or the loudest and thus most immediately present – place to go seemed to be the Gay Village. I chose *Vanilla*, the main lesbian bar situated just off Canal Street with the intention of interviewing their clientele and perhaps some of their DJs about their relationship to music. Feminist ethnographer Amanda Coffey argues that because of the embodied nature of fieldwork, the fieldworker's body as a participatory



body is an 'ethnographic body', a corporeal entity which must place itself in relation to the peopled field of investigation: appearance, conduct, emotional reaction, communication; all forms of body management which make the ethnographer's body into an 'ethnographic body'. (1999: 68). Analysis of the ethnographic body's management can be a way of examining the field itself, what kind of social codes are organising the people within a given location. Following Coffey's argument, I shall briefly discuss the way I managed myself within *Vanilla* to reflect upon *one* definition of sexuality, and how music is pressing it into action.

I initially placed posters calling for anyone willing to be interviewed up on *Vanilla*'s notice boards, alongside advertisements for dildos, personals, glamour photo-shoots: already tell-tale signs of a place defined largely through the erotic; even the name 'Vanilla' and its special £500 machine pumping out vanilla essence are allusions to lesbian vanilla sex. As can be seen in the poster (**Fig. 1**), the title of the night ('CLIMAX'...live countdown and explosion!), its tongue-and-cheek reference to New York's sex joints (Girls! Girls! Girls!), the sexualised image of the alluring DJ who returns our gaze with a becoming finger and exposed torso: these are all representations of how *Vanilla*'s sense<sup>3</sup> economy is defined by sex and the promise of erotic exchange. How is music configured within this environment?

Because of the sheer volume of the pumping beats, any prospect of conversation – let alone interviewing people – were killed there and then. Ironically, the dominance of music meant I was thus forced to participate through a 'mode of listening that prioritises

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<sup>3</sup> See Laura Marks's *Touch: sensuous theory and multisensory media* (2002)



(Fig 1.) Poster advertising a special night at *Vanilla*.  
 <<http://www.vanillagirls.co.uk>> [accessed: Dec 2006]

the motional understanding of music'

(Malbon, 1995: 84). Within such an

auditory field, the DJ and the dancers

become central figures.

Sarah Thornton (1996) writes

specifically about the role of DJs in *Club*

*Cultures: music, media and subcultural*

*capital* (1996) and her work investigates

how DJs have gained 'subcultural capital'

within the club/dance scene, where they

gain celebrity status, complete with fans:

'DJs are artists in the construction of a

musical experience' (1995: 65), she writes; but in the case of *Vanilla* and its DJs, I would

argue that the DJs were artists in the construction of a lesbian experience in Manchester

first and foremost by not only providing their beats, but providing themselves as 'lesbian

DJs' (DJing is a predominantly male world), potential subjects of desire<sup>4</sup>. One of the DJs

stated, 'my sole concern is to fill the dance floor with lots of girls having fun and if that

happens I consider it a good night' (DJ Lin); another DJ told me how she aims to create a

'sexy buzz' through the music she plays which 'rubs off on people as they dance, literally'

(DJ Harvey). These statements indicate how within this context, music fulfils a functional

4 *Vanilla's* website for example provides DJ profiles which state their availability ('single', 'happily attached' etc) along with their interests. Their message boards are often filled with discussions 'who fancies who', and even acts as an on-line dating site.

purpose for the DJs in creating an erotically charged environment. In his work on clubbing and dancing, Malbon (1999) argues that to dance is not only to experience music as time, but to also experience time as music: the DJs in *Vanilla* thus musicalise a lesbian temporarily, one which was motionally materialised through dance propelled by an erotic drive.

One of the greatest practical problems I faced at the time was how I myself as a researcher had to respond to music within the overtly eroticised space:

*'Wanna dance?'*

*'Sure' (oh god here we go again)*

*'So, what's your phone number? Or shall we just go back to mine?'* END

*'Are you gay?'*

*'Excuse me?' (why am I even doing this?)*

*'Dunno. Just thought I'd ask. You're sort of standing there and...'*

*'And what?' (trying to do research? losing my voice trying to speak to you?)*

*'Oh nothing.'* END

*'So, what's your research about then?'*

*'Well, I'm trying to see how music and sexuality are linked' (finally!)*

*'Sex, eh? Can I be your guinea pig subject?'* DESPERATELY END

(Fieldnotes, January 2004)

Spoken words became swallowed up as part of an erotic exchange circulating within the sonorous economy of *Vanilla*. All questions I received were ultimately for the purposes of

flirting, and even the utterance of academic research melted into such an interaction (last example). Within this context, I either had to dance or adopt a more scopical and observational position. Yet my ethnographic gaze<sup>5</sup> too, was eroticised, where my observations were interpreted as part of lesbian cruising practices: a form of voyeurism within a sexualised field. Whilst this is not a problem in itself, my inability to reconcile these two gazes stemmed from my reservations about ethical issues regarding the relationship between researcher and their field<sup>6</sup>.

Subcultural studies<sup>7</sup> covers a range of practical research problems such as confronting drunkenness, witnessing and recording supposed 'illegal' activities like prostitution (Barnard and McKeganey, 1996), drug-taking, cottaging (Humphreys, 1997), gaining trust from those who are suspicious of institutionalised forms of interaction (Polsky, 1997). Humphrey's (1997)<sup>8</sup> and Bolton's work (1995)<sup>9</sup> embody their sexualised field by becoming an erotic subject themselves, where their ethnographic practices are

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5 By using the word 'gaze', here I am referring to some of the discussions on subjectivity, identity and spectatorship by feminist film theorists like Stacey (1994), Mulvey (1989), Silverman (1988)

6 Feminist ethnographies place an importance on, if not often centralise the analysis of the self in relation to fieldwork by questioning the role of the researcher/theorist in relation to power and knowledge-production; hence feminist ethnographers have argued that analysis of the self needs equal amounts of theoretical attention as the collected data. See Coffey, 1999; Skeggs, 1997, 1995; Stanley, 1993, 1990; Reinharz, 1992; Wise, 1990; Farran, 1990; Pugh, 1990; Kondo, 1990; Griffiths, 1990; Wise, 1990; Poland, 1990; Haggis, 1990. See also Hammersley (1993) for more general problems relation to practical research.

7 See also: *Taboo: sex, identity and erotic subjectivity in anthropological fieldwork* (1995), an anthology which deals precisely with the tenuous position of the researcher in a sexualised field. Anthropologist Don Kulik argues in the introduction that 'erotic subjectivity *does* things. It performs, or, rather, can be made to perform, work. And one of the many types of work it can perform is to draw attention to the conditions of its own production' (1995: 5).

8 Humphrey's practical research into homosexual activities carried out in tearooms (1997) overcomes such methodological problems by ensuring his own anonymity – 'passing as deviant' as he states – during the initial part of his research: 'shorn of pastoral contacts and unwilling to use professional credentials, I had to enter the subculture as would any newcomer and to make contact with respondents under the guise of being another gay guy' (1997: 233-4).

9 Bolton's research involves him actively participating in the sexual activities within the Belgian gay community and seeking information 'post-coitally'. In his case, cruising in the gay saunas was part of his search for informants, and he built trust with his informants through his sexual relationship to them.

part of the gay men's erotic sociality they are studying.

As my experiences in *Vanilla* and the remarks made by the DJs would indicate, music proves to be a functional part of a lesbian club culture<sup>10</sup> which operates through a sense economy based on the erotic exchange of sexuality. Furthermore, I am asked whether I am gay based on my 'sort of standing there'. In other words, my lesbian credibility seems to be based on the level of corporeal participation within the auditory field: either dance or be danced at, and unless I was willing to use my body for 'listening that prioritises the motional understanding of music' (1995: 84), I ceased to exist as a lesbian, as a researcher, and as a clubber in the eyes of those in *Vanilla*.

I regard my experiences in *Vanilla* as relating not just to the issue of body management within a field, but also an indication of how the erotic is what often underlines queer sociality: 'for queers eroticism is the basis of community' write Bell and Binnie in their work on sexual citizenship and the city (2000: 87). Perhaps this is the reason why not only is there a prevalence within queer theory to theorise *sexuality* through the erotic, but *music* too: queer cultural politics is so strongly tied to the politics of the social, and vice versa, that both musical practices become instrumental or even bridge the gap between the cultural and social politics of sexuality. This is particularly the case within subcultural spaces like *Vanilla*, where music facilitates the circulation of eroticised desire and choreographs social relations based on the consumption and production of sex-uality.

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<sup>10</sup> Hankin's *The girls in the back room: looking at the lesbian bar*, 2002, and Thornton, 1996);

## **Hidden away upstairs, above ground level: Manchester Gay and Lesbian Chorus, and a choral ethnography**

*Type type type: 'Manchester' 'lesbian and gay' 'choir' 'singing'. Enter.*

*Bingo. Search found results.*

*Click. 'Welcome, come and join us for rehearsals on Mondays, 7.30, upstairs in Manto, Canal Street'*

\*

*I am not even carrying my tape-recorder, I don't want to jinx things, I don't want Vanilla. I pace around for ages outside Manto Bar on Canal St. because I'm early - You can do this. You've got nothing to lose. If it's not good, you would've at least sung - c'mon you'll feel better afterwards for it. 10mins to go, I impatiently and nervously enter Manto and find a pretty queer boy vacuuming the floor and bar staff setting up for the evening. I ask the bartender where the choir sings and she points towards the ceiling with a dishrag. One step at a time, I walk up their spirally staircase and I finally reach a set of double doors: this is when my fieldwork began.*

(Fieldnotes, February 2004)

The *MLGC*'s homepage advertises the following: 'We meet to rehearse, socialise, to give concerts and to perform at events promoted by other LGBT community groups and affiliated organisations' (website). Because the choir is also regarded as a social space (to mean, socializing and getting to know people through conversation), I had no problems in approaching people unlike in *Vanilla*. Whilst the question of sex might be one aspect of the *MLGC*'s social interactions, the prime reason for the members' presence was to make music with other lesbian and gay men. Even the physical setting of

rehearsals and performances ensure that music is what brings people together, not sex.

Whilst the bar is open during rehearsals, it is used for refreshment rather than socialisation purposes and in fact, members are discouraged from talking during rehearsals. Despite being part of the Village as a designated lesbian and gay area, the *MLGC* are positioned away from the main ground of eroticised queer spaces: thus an ideal location for this project. The following will provide an account into how and why I engaged in participant observation and conducted a series of qualitative interviews with members of the *MLGC*.

(i) Ethnographic chorister: singing and embodying the field

One of the main problems I faced in *Vanilla* was my failure to embody the field through social interaction – adopting suitable codes of behaviour – rendering me silent and invisible. In being part of the *MLGC*'s organised choral sound – not just passively but actively as a soprano – my own singing voice positioned me within the field. In other words, my singing and occupying a space in the soprano section meant I was an active participant and no longer a voyeur of the scene: I became an ethnographic chorister conducting participant observation (or singing) within the auditory and ethnographic field<sup>11</sup>. Here, participant observer and chorister are one through the voice, where both positions are dependent on being part of the existing organised choral framework.

Furthermore participant observation is a method which involves a rather tenuous and

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<sup>11</sup> Please refer to the Appendix for further notes on fieldwork and practical research methodologies.

precarious state of being both part of and yet analytical of a field. In the *Cambridge Companion to Singing* (2000), Heikki Liimola's work discusses the techniques to choral singing in particular and advises choristers to 'be conscious that you are a line of singers trying to act as one: breathe and articulate together, think yourself into the voice of the person next to you' (2000: 151). The musical director similarly would tell us often to look at each other (indicated by an index finger to the eye), to smile at each other, and most importantly to listen to each other in order to create the right balance between the voices.

Previously in *Vanilla*, music organised social relations based on the circulation of eroticised desire. Within this configuration, I argued that all social practices became part of an erotic exchange, and this included my ethnographic practices. In contrast, within the context of the *MLGC*, the ethnographic voyeurism that I problematised in *Vanilla* became a matter of musical skill rather as part of a sex-ualised social practice. This is not to say that desire was not part of the configuration: in fact, the pleasure of singing and the desire to be part of the social formation of a lesbian and gay chorus are very much at the heart of my ethnographic practices<sup>12</sup>.

#### (ii) Telling musical stories: choral accounts

In his empirical study of gay and lesbian choruses<sup>13</sup> around USA (1994), sociologist Paul Attinello argues that a choral structure is by nature an authoritarian one and suggests the use of a 'gay anarchy' to disrupt such a 'force field' which he states is

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12 Please refer to the Appendix for further descriptions of fieldwork and practical research methodologies.  
13 Attinello studied five different LGBT choirs in Los Angeles, San Francisco and Chicago.



'often barely balanced' (1994: 323). Attinello states he is speculating and suggests how 'a study of rigidity of format in rehearsals might be productive in analyzing the authoritarian ambivalence of the choruses'. Attinello's study is based on quantitative research methods in the form of questionnaires<sup>14</sup>, and the reason he gives for not undertaking qualitative methods are the following:

Unfortunately many of the more important or interesting points are in areas where it is difficult to quantify or even to extract responses. The defensiveness of subcultures is a serious problem, and the powerful human desire to avoid examination of one's deeper motives constantly gets in the way of open discussion of these areas (1994: 324-5).

Interestingly enough, as part of a democratic process, a sub-committee group of the *MLGC* dealing with the chorus's repertoire (which I was part of) handed out slips of paper requesting members to list songs they felt they wanted the chorus to sing along with reasons why. Seeing these returned pieces of paper made me realise a similar questionnaire for the purposes of my research would probably not give me the level of thought and articulation the same members had expressed during AGMs or informal meetings/discussions/debates. For example, in answer to 'why would you like the choir to sing your song of choice?' the response was 'Cos I like it', a significant felling of words compared to opinions voiced with passion at a different time and place. Therefore, the manner in which I tried to record the more elaborate and passionate opinions by *MLGC* members was to write down or remember certain points they might have made during a

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<sup>14</sup> Attinello provides a full appendix of the questionnaires he handed out to gather information starting from the basic personal profile (age/gender/race/sexual orientation/music degree) to the more 'complicated' and 'opinion' based (reasons for joining/reasons for staying).

meeting or an AGM, or during a casual conversation at the bar.

I mean I've come out at home, at work, everywhere else...but it doesn't actually affect what you do day-to-day, you get up, you get to work, you see your family, you go to the cinema. But to me, it's making a statement...by being a member of the choir and being proud to be member of the choir. And it...sort of...it's an affirmation every 2 weeks that...yes, I am gay and because I'm gay I'm mixed with these people (Clara).

Such 'day-to-day' details of lesbian and gay life ('I've come out at home, at work, everywhere else...but it doesn't actually affect what you do day-to-day, you get up, you get to work, you see your family, you go to the cinema') cannot be obtained from participant observation alone.

When I began to listen back to the tapes in order to transcribe the interviews with the members of the *MLGC*, it occurred to me how the voices telling me the stories of their lives were the same voices which had sung at another point in life. In discussing the question of orality, Michel De Certeau and Luce Giard state, 'orality is everywhere, because *conversation* insinuates itself everywhere, organizing both the family and the street, both work in a business and research in a laboratory' (emphasis in original) (1998: 253). The voice acts as a sonorous passage which connects and separates the ordinary life outside of the choir, and the musical practices occurring within the choir. So many of my interviews compare the choir against their 'ordinary day to day basis' (Tinny) or as 'what you do day-to-day' (Clara). Yet the choir is also an 'important part of my life' (Charlotte). As Clara's statement would indicate, it is something about the choir as a musical *and*

lesbian and gay group that make it a meaningful place: somehow the choir enables members to articulate a sense of *queerness* they normally do not articulate, even if they are out. In terms of this project, this music-sexuality cross-over is an ideal field to explore questions of *queer*, *queerness*, and *queering*: the ethnographic analysis attempts to draw such points out from the accounts.

In DeNora's interviews, her subjects are treated separately with no particular connection made between them. At the other end of the spectrum, Finnegan does not analyse her interviews at the level of depth DeNora does but instead tends to collapse individual accounts into one general grouping, such as 'the rock bands' or 'the musicians at the pub'. For Finnegan, the musicians' accounts are about the overall continuum of events and people being organised through their music-making processes. My aim is to embrace both DeNora's and Finnegan's approaches to their interviews: to analyse how a lesbian and gay individual's account – and I include myself and my observations here – is unique, and to also regard it as part of a collective story<sup>15</sup>. Here, I am thinking about the concept of collectivity as both a chorus and as a *queer* group, a pluralism of voices. In other words, I approach my qualitative interviews as individual accounts by lesbians and gay musicians who are, at the same time, members of a collective chorus. I am interested in how the individual translates to communal, and by extension, how lesbian and gay translates to *queer*, if at all. What kind of factors in music bring lesbian and gay musicians together, as part of a 'shared cultural understanding' (John)?

And I went to choir just to see him (Chongwei) rehearse [...] I

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<sup>15</sup> Again, please refer to the Appendix for further descriptions of fieldwork and analysis.

felt like—even though I'd never sung with them—I felt I was part of the choir, and I was sat down watching them! Oh, that's amazing that! (John).

Despite having never sung with them or not being an official member of the choir, John still feels he 'was part of the choir'. Thus 'being part of the choir' is not simply about being part of its auditory field in a specific timespace, but its existence as a social group and what John calls, 'making connections with people' with 'shared cultural understanding', where 'people understand what it is to be gay'. I myself like John, had felt immediately comfortable as a queer musician and researcher, and have been attending Monday night rehearsals ever since. Mondays have become like a tick in the metronome, a measure in everyday life for people like John and myself.

Folklorist and anthropologist Roger D. Abrahams writes, 'when an experience can be designated as typical, then the doings of the individual and the community become shared, not only with regard to what actually happens under those circumstances, but also how one feels about the happenings' (Abrahams, 1986: 60). I am interested in searching for moments within a member's account when whatever they are referring to – a particular song, a concert, a discussion – is constructed as being just part of a 'typical night', or 'typical concert', 'typical argument in the choir'; by extension, I am also interested in searching for recurring sets of particular incidents or themes (again, be it a song, concert, discussion) in different members' accounts, to understand how the individual value in music is shared and thus communal: can these accounts be read as part of a queer dialogue, an 'entire archaeology of voices' that act as a 'polyphony of speakers who seek

each other out, listen, interrupt, overlap and respond to each other' (DeCerteau and Giard, 1998: 251-2)?

Therefore, my ethnographic research seeks to unearth the kind of lesbian and gay music-making practices taking place within the Village. By being part of but removed from the rest of the Village, the *MLGC*'s music and music-making practices provide us with a way in which to understand the music-sexuality relationship outside of the immediately eroticised contexts of a queer club cultural sociality. By using a combination of both participant observation and qualitative interviews, my analyses seeks to understand the movement between individual to communal, the interiority to the exteriority of the choir, and lesbian and gay to queer.

## **Part II**

### **Singing in the City: Manchester, the Gay Village, and the *MLGC***

## ■ Chapter 3 ■

### **We're proud members of the *Manchester Lesbian and Gay Chorus*: the city, lesbian and gay culture, and local music-making practices**

The *MLGC* began as a small group consisting of two gay men and six lesbians who simply wished to sing together in Manchester<sup>1</sup>. Whilst this may sound simple enough, the choir's founder, Chongwei, told me they initially faced a lot of problems: 'we were meeting in this tiny little room...that was part of the church that two of the members were part of. And that was it. And there was...it was a very disorganised group, there was no...there was no funding, no one collected subscriptions, the people who led the singing were very poor<sup>2</sup>...' (Chongwei). What marked a turning point for the choir was when they attended a conference held in Norwich where queer choirs from around Britain showcased their music. Realising the need for a more regulated and structured organisation like the other choirs, Chongwei sought funding, registrations, wrote a Constitution (both as a mission statement and for funding purposes), and re-located the small group to the Gay Village. Chongwei emphasised how important it was that they received 'a lot of help along the way': members' connections to at least three trained music

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1 For more general background information regarding the choir, including changes in total number of members over the period of this research, please refer to the Appendix.

2 When I asked him to clarify his use of 'poor', he said, 'as in, musically not good'.

directors, Manchester's various funding bodies<sup>3</sup> (both specifically LGBT and non-LGBT), the free venues provided by some bars in the Village (*Manto*, being one of them). Such matters relating to co-ordination, finance, administration, commitment and skill are the kinds of 'hidden work' chronicled by Finnegan in *Hidden Musicians* (1989). But what of the actual place that produces and maintains these hidden musicians and their practices? Who and what helped *MLGC* along the way?

I just love living in Manchester—I'm from 30 miles away so I am alien still—but I just love being in Manchester. I mean, it's got a lovely Village...I mean it's got its faults doesn't it the gay Village, Manchester's got its fault. But it was to *mean* something, it was to *ground* us, you know. So we've got the meaning with our Lesbian and Gay kind of notions, but we're also grounded as a Manchester choir, you know so it would locate us. And...I'm really proud to live in Manchester yeah, and it was to express that really. (John)

Manchester's been my home and it's characterised what I've done in my life for 20 odd years [...] I suppose I've always been involved in music, for most of my life really...so it's kind of part of being a lesbian, living in Manchester which is quite a musical place to be...I've been in a lesbian band before and stuff like that back in the 80s...so music's been quite a big part of my life.  
(Charlotte)

According to a member named John, for the *MLGC* to mean something for its members it needs to be 'grounded as a Manchester choir'. How and why does Manchester ground the choir and make it a meaningful place for lesbian and gay amateur local musicians? Fellow member Charlotte's explanation on why she joined the *MLGC* suggests a possible answer to this questions. For Charlotte, Manchester brings together all

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3 Operation Fundraiser, part of George House Trust, a Manchester-based AIDS/HIV charity, the Manchester City Council.



aspects of her life ('characterised what I've done in my life for 20 odd years') and this includes her being involved in music and being a lesbian. Such a statement point toward the importance of Manchester as a city which is *both* 'quite a musical place to be' (Charlotte) *and* has 'got a lovely Village' (John). Finnegan argues that urban amateur musical groups 'turn out to be neither formless nor...just a product of individual endeavour, but to be structures according to a series of cultural conventions and organised practices' (1989: 306). The *MLGC* is a simultaneously lesbian and gay *and* musical group to have emerged out of a city with existing lesbian and gay *and* musical cultural conventions and organised practices. Manchester forms the basis from which this chapter, and indeed this thesis, explores the set of conditions that inform localised, urban lesbian and gay music making practices. In examining the relationship between the *MLGC* members and Manchester, this chapter therefore aims to explore the way the city, lesbian and gay culture, and local music-making practices come together.

*Musical grounding: "Manchester's a musical place to be" (Charlotte)*

In his study of Manchester and its local musicians, Manchester music historian Christopher Lee (2002) writes 'over the years, a musical infrastructure has been built up, one that is capable of nurturing and sustaining an indigenous sub-culture of musicians, engineers, designers, promoters, etc all of these elements combining to create the right atmosphere for new talent to emerge and thrive' (Lee, 2002: 3). Yet, there are reasons why 'new talent' emerges in the first place, otherwise there would be no musical evolution and

no *MLGC* for that matter. During my interview with Chongwei, I was struck by the manner in which he casually referred to at least three music directors who had come and gone within the space of about a year. There are also quite a few members in the choir who are trained themselves to teach music, and some are even choral directors for other groups around Manchester. Furthermore, several members referred to their 'other choir', usually one defined as being of 'high musical standards' (Chongwei) and/or 'more classical pieces' (Clara): in one instance, I was invited and driven for an hour to a rural church<sup>4</sup> to listen to what my interviewee called her, 'other posh choir'<sup>5</sup>. In this light, I feel that it is of no coincidence that the choir started in a church before moving to the Village. Manchester has the structural and social means of supporting choral practices in and around the city, something which stems back from its Industrial era when the initial wave of workers moved to the city bringing along their rural music-making practices. Coupled with the actual process of industrialisation, Manchester indeed is a 'musical place to be' (Charlotte).

According to Elbourne's (1980) study of music-making in Lancashire between 1780 and 1840, there seem to have existed two main forms of vocal music-making (a differentiation which can be loosely seen today): the 'high' sacred, and the popular or 'folk' singing where both forms of music-making were specific in content and context. From hand-loom weavers, harvesters to rural festivals and wakes, music-making was tied closely to village life. But with the stirrings of industrialisation, Manchester underwent a

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<sup>4</sup> The fact that her 'posh choir' performed in a church points towards the relationship between the church as both an institution and a place for music. I explore the relationship between the Church as a religious institution and as a musical institution in Chapter 6.

<sup>5</sup> Please refer to the Appendix where I discuss how I considered conducting a comparative study of the *MLGC* against some of these 'other choirs'.

slow but steady urbanisation which led to large groups of villagers moving to the city to seek employment in The Great Industrial City. With the booming cotton industry, Manchester began to prosper and by early nineteenth-century rural festivals and wakes began to suffer as people, both rich and poor sought musical entertainment in the city. By 1843, the *Manchester Directory* recorded a total of 920 beer-shops, 624 taverns and pubs, 31 inns and hotels, 1575 liquor establishments...that is one for every 154 inhabitants (Kidd, 2002:45). But as chroniclers of Manchester's history<sup>6</sup> are quick to note, all was not drink!...by the 1840s, taverns and pubs began to develop 'singing saloons'—a prototype of the musical hall—where singers, dancers and even jugglers performed and communal singing, from traditional melodies to sacred hymns were practiced. Towards the end of the nineteenth-century these traditional orchestras playing in taverns were commercialised as part of urban entertainment which was quickly becoming an industry in itself, and music halls catered primarily to members of the working and lower middle classes, for a fee. Around the same time, Charles Hallé was busy transforming the *Gentlemen's Concert Society* into what became the internationally acclaimed *Hallé Orchestra*, and furthermore in 1893, the Royal Manchester College of Music was founded (where the choir have performed).

Given this history, it is no wonder that the *MLGC* found the structural and social means to emerge as another local music group. Jeff, the present musical director for the *MLGC*, trained at the Royal Northern College of Music, and is one of the organisers for educational programmes ran by the *Hallé*. He also runs six other choirs around

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<sup>6</sup> Kidd, 2002; Davies, 1992; Elbourne, 1980

Manchester. The choir also rehearses in pubs albeit being converted pubs in the Gay Village (but more on that later). In this light, it is of no surprise that at least musically speaking, the *MLGC* was able to emerge and continue to exist in Manchester as a 'musical place to be'. Manchester's material conditions (music venues, colleges, streets, districts) and existing music practices (communal singing, shows, concerts, music education programmes) thus form part of the urban music infrastructure 'capable of nurturing and sustaining an indigenous sub-culture of musicians, engineers, designers, promoters, etc all of these elements combining to create the right atmosphere for new talent to emerge and thrive' (Lee, 2002: 3). However we must also not forget that initially, the *MLGC* nearly failed to maintain itself back when its founding members were meeting in a church. It was not until Chongwei made the decision to relocate to the Village that the group became stable and numbers began to grow. Chongwei states that the Village was chosen because it was more 'central and safe' for the choir members. In this manner, for a *lesbian and gay* musical group like the *MLGC*, the musical infrastructure which Lee refers to is not enough to maintain its existence. Clearly, the Village and its LGBT community also had an equal part to play in the *MLGC*'s survival in the city. Let us now examine Manchester as a queer<sup>7</sup> city.

*Queer grounding: "Manchester's the queer capital of the North" (Charlotte)*

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<sup>7</sup> I am using *queer* to reflect the city's and the Village's common use of the term: QueerUpNorth, being an LGBT arts festival held once a month in Manchester, the phrase "Queer Capital of the North" (which Charlotte uses) is often an advertisement slogan in both LGBT and non-LGBT street press. Here *queer* is in part, a reference to the specific queer movement of the 1990s (QueerUpNorth showcases many 'gender-bender' acts for example), and is in part a shorthand for LGBT (in the manner Charlotte uses).

The relationship between cities, urbanisation and gay subculture has been investigated by a number of queer historians like George Chauncey, who explores the emergence of a particular flamboyant male gay world in New York between 1890 and 1940, one which revolved around dances, drag balls, bars, saloons, speakeasies. Chauncey argues that particular urban conditions – such as migration of single people seeking work in the city, changes in kinship and social structures, anonymity, numerous cultural outlets – enabled gay men to be part of a 'organized, multi-layered, self-conscious gay subculture' (1994: 133). This gay subculture in New York was thus one where gay men found not just sex and pleasure, but emotional support, a sense of belonging, and a means for self-identification.

One of Chauncey's main concerns is to restore this particular period of LGBT<sup>8</sup> history, and to challenge popular conceptions that queers only 'came out' post-Stonewall. Similarly, there was a thriving LGBT community long before the Gay Village in Manchester became a formal sector of the city. Or to put it slightly differently, the Village now exists because of the existing venues and social activities which were occurring since Manchester first began its process of urbanisation. The pubs that align Canal Street for example, once catered to the dock-workers and sailors who were working or stopping by at the canal during the Industrial Revolution. According to the guide (John A) for the *Manchester Lesbian and Gay Heritage Trail*<sup>9</sup>, it was not uncommon to find gay men and

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<sup>8</sup> I am using the term 'LGBT' here instead of 'queer' to signal the historical specificity of lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans identities. Charlotte's use of "Queer Capital of the North" denotes the rise of Queer activism and theory during the 1990s, where the term signalled a politics of opposition as well as being an umbrella term for identities between and beyond LGBT labels.

<sup>9</sup> The *Heritage Trail* was first a one-off event as part of Europride 2003 which was held in Manchester. Because of its success, the organisers continued the walks every Pride, and eventually it became a regular monthly event which is ongoing to this day.

drag acts in these pubs, the most famous being *New Union Pub* on Canal Street where during the day they held political meetings concerning the Revolution, and in the evenings hosted a lesbian three-piece band. Such snippets of history reveal the close relationship between Manchester as a the city where the Revolution occurred, and the emergence of its homosexual subculture.

But between 1930s and 1950s Canal Street was subject to police raids and gay men were persecuted. During the trail, John A read us some accounts on how policemen would be silently riding canal barges equipped with search lights, ready to be turned on just when men could be 'caught in the act like rabbits' (John A). As already mentioned, Chongwei's decision to relocate the *MLGC* was mainly because of the Village being a safe place for queers. All three times I went on this trail, I was always struck by the juxtaposition of John A's historical account and the present day revellers who laugh merrily as they lean against the walls of the canal bridge where such an incident would have occurred. What was once an area heavily policed and not safe for homosexuals (gay men in particular), is now considered the safest area for queers where there is even special policing for the *protection* of queers. In this light, the Village provides a physical ground where the *MLGC* can situate themselves within Manchester. But before I expand upon how the *MLGC* situate themselves in Manchester, I want to briefly outline some of the pre-Village LGBT activism which occurred in Manchester. Because Manchester hosted so many national LGBT meetings, rallies and nationwide collaborations, not only did the vast amount of LGBT activism contribute to the city's LGBT community and the Village's safety but it also had an effect on the rest of Britain's LGBT rights. Furthermore as shall

be seen, the local LGBT history in activism is reflected and continued in the *MLGC*'s overall ethos and their musical practices.

Queer urban geographer Manuel Castells' study of the Castro district in San Francisco explores the way a gay neighbourhood is inseparable from the development of the gay community as a social movement (1983). The existence of Manchester's strong LGBT community is partly due to the city's and the local LGBT community's engagement with LGBT activism from the 1960s onwards. In 1966 Diocese of Manchester Board for Social Responsibility jointly organised a meeting with the Homosexual Law Reform Society from London. Together they campaigned for homosexual reform and after the law changed in 1967, the two bodies became the North Western Homosexual Law Reform Committee (later on the Committee for Homosexual Equality [CHE] )<sup>10</sup>. With the introduction of Section 28 in 1988, The North West Campaign for Lesbian and Gay Equality (NWCLGE) consequently organised many events to lobby against the clause, and one of the largest national marches was a rally and festival in Manchester on 20th February 1988<sup>11</sup>. There is a plaque in Manchester's Town Hall which commemorates this event and demonstrates how as a city, its LGBT history is one which is an integral part of its identity and growth<sup>12</sup> and indeed a relationship which pre-dates the Village in its

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10 Manchester City Council Library's archives: <<http://www.manchester.gov.uk>>

11 This attracted 20,000 people, filling Albert Square outside the Town Hall. In the evening the Free Trade Hall on Peter Street was filled for a festival of entertainment for the demonstrators. Up to 120 local lesbians and gay men attended the NWCLGE meetings in the Town Hall to plan this rally and it was then that the NWCLGE adopted the 'Never Going Underground' symbol for its campaign against Section 28 (Manchester City Council's archives). The very slogan 'Never Going -Underground' itself challenges the 'hiddenness' and 'seedy-ness' (John A) of the Village before its commercialisation.

12 Manchester Central Library and the People's History Museum have both run exhibitions of LGBT history (according to the curator at the People's History Museum, they often shared archival notes and material) and one historical artifact which gets taken out of its storage time and again is a banner from the Miner's Strike showing miner's support for the LGBT community

contemporary sense.

AIDS activism is of course one of the important aspects of Manchester's LGBT history<sup>13</sup>. In 1985 six gay men got together in Manchester and to set up a voluntary helpline for which the Manchester Council awarded them a small grant to help set up the Manchester AIDSline and in 1990, set up the George House Trust which now hosts the biannual AIDS Vigils in the Village and sets up countless charity events raising funds and awareness. Therefore it is of no wonder that once the founding members of the *MLGC* relocated to the Village they were able to tap into this lesbian and gay social network, and consequently found the material means to exist as a musical *and* lesbian and gay social group: the use of a physical space in the Village to practice in, financial support from LGBT charities like Operation Fundraiser<sup>14</sup>, funding from the Council, the skills to raise awareness, funds, organizing events, the opportunities to perform and represent the LGBT community in Manchester during national events like the AIDS Vigil. In this light, we can begin to understand the reasons behind John's urgency in wanting to be 'grounded as a Manchester choir, you know so it would locate us', and furthermore why he (and others like Charlotte) are 'really proud to live in Manchester yeah, and it was to express that, really'. In fact the word 'proud' appeared in a number of accounts, often used ambiguously, referring to LGBT pride and/or Mancunian pride: 'This is a high profile

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13 The important relationship between AIDS activism and the lesbian and gay community is of course not specific to Manchester. See, Epstein (1996), Woodhead (1995), Brown (1995), Yingling (1991), Nunokawa (1991), Crimp (1988). See some of the AIDS literature: *Dancer from the Dance* by Holleran (1986), or *Eighty-sixed* (1989) by Feinberg.

14 Operation Fundraiser is a joint venture between George House Trust and the Lesbian and Gay Foundation, both based in Manchester. Their aim is primarily to benefit AIDS/HIV charities but their funds are used for other purposes within the LGBT community in Manchester. For example, the *MLGC's* overhead projector was bought with from some of their funds.



event - be there and show Europe how proud we are to be Mancunians and representing the UK at the *OutGames!*' (email circulated prior to *Europride* in London, 2006).

Identifying with one usually meant people identified with the other.

Such is the importance of Manchester as a 'Queer capital of the North' for the local queer community that the 2005 Vigil centralised Manchester and its role in the history of AIDS activism as its main point of focus<sup>15</sup>. Poems, reflections, pleas, and appeals were passionately delivered to express this pride by those connected in some way to Manchester and its queer community<sup>16</sup>:

*Where are you?!*  
**Manchester!**  
*What are you!?*  
**Queer!**  
*How do you feel?!*  
**Proud!**

(Fieldnotes, Vigil Chant, 2005)

The above chant triplet led by the *compere* was repeated throughout the particular Manchester-themed Vigil and as has become a tradition now, the *MLGC* performed two songs alongside other performing acts. I am interested in how the choir has now become an expected part of the Vigil to a point where the organiser of the event and head of the *George House Trust* (a leading AIDS charity) stated: 'I can't imagine the Vigil without you guys any more, you're such a part of it now' (Michelle Reed). Inasmuch as Manchester's existing musical and lesbian and gay cultural conventions have laid the groundwork for the *MLGC*, Michelle's statement suggest that by the same token, the *MLGC* have

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<sup>15</sup> Each year, the theme of the Vigils changes.

<sup>16</sup> Every year the speakers change, but usually there is a council representative, an AIDS charity representative, an external (non-Manchester) AIDS activist, and nearly always some personal accounts.

grounded themselves in Manchester as a unique musical *and* queer entity. So far I have explored how Manchester as a musical and queer city has provided the means to support local-music making practices and the local LGBT community's social practices. What I want to discuss now is how the *MLGC* brings these two aspects of Manchester together as a queer musical place within the city.

### *MLGC: a musical and queer place*

How then does space become place? By being named [...] Place is a space to which meaning has been ascribed (Carter *et al*, 1993: xxi)

If as according to Carter *et al*, a space becomes a place when meaning has been ascribed, how can we understand this process in relation to the choir? An alto named Eleanor states how 'the choir's there, obviously people want to sing, but it *is* a way to get to know other people [...] it's a place that's welcoming. (Eleanor).' Eleanor uses the word *place* to describe the choir as both a musical space ('people want to sing') and a queer social space ('a way to get to know other people', 'instant social network' stated Charlotte as well). Similarly a soprano called Clara states the *MLGC* is 'my main *place*' where she feels like herself (more on Clara later). How did the *MLGC* become a meaningful queer musical place, when originally it had begun as a small group of lesbians and gay men in a church? I want to answer these questions by examining some of the difficulties the *MLGC* face in being 'grounded as Manchester choir' with 'lesbian and gay notions' (John). By analysing how the choir attempt to overcome these problems through their music-making, I aim to

achieve two things: firstly, to highlight the problems which are of continuing relevance to queer urban lives today despite the social changes in contemporary Britain; secondly, to understand how music-making is related to queer place-making within the city.

As well as singing formally for charities<sup>17</sup> and events<sup>18</sup> strongly associated with the LGBT community, the choir sometimes sing more casually for members' own social events or parties. One such occasion was when we sang at a member called Paul's 50th Birthday Party, an event held in a big venue located in the city centre. Because Paul is a very prominent member of many communities around Manchester, the guests were from a variety of backgrounds. During the course of the evening, it transpired that one of the members was absent because he was in hospital, having suffered an homophobic attack right outside his house the night before. This news caused grave concern and anxiety, and suddenly all the colourful revelling was touched by a tone of solemnity. After we sang for Paul, the chair of the choir (Jed) publicly announced this piece of news and incorporated a rather impassioned speech alongside the birthday wishes. Reflecting upon the homophobic attack, Jed argued that we must not be lulled into a false sense of security; if such incidents can occur *even in a city like Manchester*, then the attack should pose as a reminder that despite having 'come a long way', the LGBT community's 'work is yet to be done'. Jed emphasized the political importance of being out *outside* of the Village and beyond: he concluded the speech by stating the choir will strive to perform outside of the Village as much as within, to raise awareness of homophobia and most importantly *to be*

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17 Body Positive, George House Trust, LGF, Mind are some of the charities the *MLGC* were approached by.

18 Pride, Vigil, civil partnerships, birth-naming ceremonies, memorials, scattering of ashes.

*seen*, to create gay visibility.

As the founders of the *MLGC* had experienced before, such moments remind us of the difficulties in maintaining queer spaces outside of the central network of the Village. 'Outness' is a negotiated state, and whilst queers in Manchester can be out within the geographical and spatial closet<sup>19</sup> of the Village, to *really* step out of the Village means you risk your own safety or lack of social support. But as queer theorists such as Diana Fuss (1991) and Jeffrey Weeks (1977) have taught us, what lies 'outside' is as much part of lesbian and gay identity politics as it is to be 'in': in the words of Fuss, 'to be out is really to be in – inside the realm of the visible, the speakable, the culturally intelligible' (1991: 4). In what way does music enable queers to negotiate their position in relation to the urban closet? The *MLGC* performed in St. Anne's Square which is situated in the heart of the shopping district in Manchester's city centre. However on this particular occasion, the performance was to coincide with a football match and there was an email sent around warning members of the potential for queer bashing. Many members pulled out but of those who performed (such members named Kristen, Katya, Tinny, and Jed), the performance marked a moment where they felt they had 'done something for the community' (Kristen) and had felt a 'sense of pride because of all that crap' (Tinny): 'we were all supporting each other' (Kristen); 'pulling together' (Katya); 'made it more special, we were there' (Jed). Clearly, the event was memorable to many members despite its low attendance rate. Because we were wearing the choir's rainbow-themed T-shirts, we had

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19 See Michael P. Brown's *Closet Space* (2000) where he spatialises the metaphor of the closet by exploring its material demarcations through Chritchurch's (New Zealand) gay area. Brown's discusses the ways in which the closet can be understood as a spatial and metaphorical means of demarcating urban gay culture and identities. Also, the anthology *Mapping Desire* (1995) which contains essays on the sexualisation of space, and geography.

been very obviously present in the face of potential danger.

Queer theorist Judith Halberstam argues in her work entitled *In queer time and space* (2005), that queer uses of time and space develop 'in opposition to the institutions of family, heterosexuality, and reproduction' (2005: 1); Halberstam defines 'queer space' as the 'place-making practices' within a postmodern context in which 'new understandings of space are enabled by the 'production of queer counterpublics' (2005:6). In this light, the performance in St. Anne's Square demonstrates how music-making practices are tied to queer place-making practices and the production of queer counterpublics. Jed's promise to ensure the *MLGC* perform publicly outside the Village suggests that it is thus music-making which enables a certain queer use of time and space which would simultaneously redraw the boundaries that demarcate the urban closet whilst challenge overtly heterosexist spaces through becoming visible and present. Jed's and John's following comments point towards the importance of music in enabling queers to become more visible through the counterpublics of singing:

Jed: But then, is there also not something to be said for...are we not actually saying something in a political fashion *by being a Lesbian and Gay choir?*

Es: Sure, I think so.

Jed: Yeah I think we are. I think we're going, 'here's who we are, we are here, we ain't going and get used to it'.

So not only where we're suddenly visible and vocal, we're *vocal* as well. So it's a *vocal group!* (laughs) Suddenly, we're refusing to be silent, you know, so we're not just walking down the street you know, with our partner. We're standing in the street—which we have done—we're standing on stage saying, 'oh we're lesbian and gay' and we're being vocal (John).

Jed's question, 'are we not actually saying something in a political fashion *by being a Lesbian and Gay choir?*' proceeds from a discussion on how some members of the *MLGC* at the time were wanting to sing more 'gay songs'<sup>20</sup>. Jed dismissed this point of view, for him, 'saying something in a political fashion' comes not through *what* the music is, but through the very process of making music in itself. Hence for him the importance lies in *being* a lesbian and gay choir, a sentiment which is echoed by another member called Katya who states: 'You know what makes something gay? Well *it's made gay because we're gay in it*, we don't necessarily have to sing gay songs' (emphasis mine). Within this context the process of music-making – or specifically vocal production – enables the kind of embodied political presence<sup>21</sup> Jed, John and Katya refer to: 'I think we're going, 'here's who we are, we are here, we ain't going and get used to it' (Jed); 'We're standing in the street—which we have done—we're standing on stage saying, 'oh we're lesbian and gay' and we're being vocal' (John).

For John, the voice is thus *both* a metaphor *and* a physical entity and he keeps emphasising the importance of the latter by referring to material things (street, partner, stage) and actions (walking, standing)<sup>22</sup>. Social theorist and philosopher Henri Lefebvre argues that 'ideologies relate to space in a most significant way, because they intervene in space in the form of *strategies*' (emphasis in original) (1991: 105). John's use of words like 'vocal' and 'silence' in both figurative and literal terms can thus be understood as a description of a moment when the choir's 'lesbian and gay kind of notions' become

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20 I shall explore the definition of 'gay songs' in chapters 5 and 6

21 For more on embodiment, bodies, politics, space see Grosz (1995), Braidotti (1994).

22 See Urry (1985)

grounded upon the material, intervening in space in the form of a queer strategy. Recall John's earlier statement: 'it was to *mean* something, it was to *ground* us, you know. So we've got the meaning with our lesbian and gay kind of notions, but we're also grounded as a Manchester choir, you know so it would locate us'. If Manchester's musical and queer infrastructures ground the choir, then it is the *MLGC*'s music-making processes which in turn anchor their queer politics and situate them within the city. The singing voice makes queer bodies present in space through the literal breaking of silence ('we're suddenly visible and vocal, we're vocal as well. So it's vocal group! (laughs) Suddenly, we're refusing to be silent'. Singing is part of a queer politics of counterpublics, a form of spatial intervention that arises from the presence of the queer voice.

There is one other point in John's statement I want to highlight because it suggests another equally important reason behind the process of singing in relation to queer place-making practices. John's distinction between the literal and metaphorical voice moves concurrently with his shift between 'we' as a 'vocal group' to mean the choir, and 'we' that implies the rest of the wider lesbian and gay community ('we're refusing to be silent'). I want to now investigate this movement more closely because it suggests there is another way in which the process of singing is significant to queers living in the city: a queer sense of belonging. Ethnomusicology, popular music and subcultural studies have explored the ways in which a given group demarcate their shared identity in space through music<sup>23</sup>. Within ethnomusicology – particularly in discussions concerning

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23 Usually musical demarcations are examined through the idea of music scenes. Webb on Bristol Scene (2004); Olson on the Seattle scene (1998), Cohen's study on the Liverpool sound and scene (1994). See also Straw (1997)

race/class demarcations of a given place – the spatial and territorial qualities of music receive much attention; music is regarded as an institutional<sup>24</sup>, textual<sup>25</sup>, or interpretive<sup>26</sup> means for making sense of the self in a place through its production, articulation, and/or consumption: however, within terms like 'community', the gay and lesbian community is virtually overlooked. In the following I shall build on these existing discourses on place, music and identity by exploring how the *MLGC* create a place of belonging and shared cultural identity

*Choral belonging: 'my main place where I can feel I'm expressing who I am' (Clara)*

It's become...my main...place where I can...feel I'm expressing who I am....cause my job is the same. I mean I've come out at home, at work, everywhere else...but it doesn't actually affect what you do day-to-day, you get up, you get to work, you see your family, you go to the cinema. But to me, it's making a statement...by being a member of the choir and being proud to be member of the choir. And it...sort of...it's an affirmation every two weeks that...yes, I *am* gay and *because* I'm gay I'm mixed with these people.

(Clara)

Clara is a singing co-ordinator in schools in and around Manchester and what I find interesting is that she refers to being out 'everywhere else' in her life. Similarly, a fellow member called Tinny told me how when she first moved to Manchester, 'my mum was like, "well, you're in Manchester now there should be really good choirs", and it was like

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24 Whitely (1998), Sanjek (1998), Kruse (1998), Frith, (1993), Jones, (1993), Wallis and Malm, (1993), L.Grossberg, (1993)

25 Liera-Schwichtenberg (1998), Hanke (1998), Daynes (2004), Levy (2004) Dawe (2004), Mitchell (2004), Hawkins (2004)

26 Dickinson (2004), Flores (1994), Christgau (1994), Walser (1994)



*Hallé* and this and *Hallé* that and I'm thinking, 'how would the *Hallé* like it if I turned up like this (laughs looking down at herself) they wouldn't even let me fucking audition like this'. Tinny is also someone who sought the *MLGC* because she was avoiding the rest of the Village's bar/club scene. Whilst Clara and Tinny *do* have the existing means for music-making and channels to express her sexual identity in Manchester, clearly there is something about the manner in which the *MLGC* brings music and their sense of queerness together in a meaningful manner. Clara's and Tinny's remarks reveal the importance of the choir as a separate place within a city like Manchester where there is already a strong basis for musical and queer social practices. How is the *MLGC* a place of queer musical belonging?

I want to answer this question by examining the relationship between vocal production and queer sense of belonging. Queer musicologists studying significance of the voice as a means of articulating or reading queer identities<sup>27</sup> focus on the subversion of the engendered voice. Here, the idea of crossing, or 'breaking' the engendered registers – 'register theory' – are used in order to understand the homosexual voice, either as a site for desire, for difference (such as authentic/fake, or male/female) or as transgressive acts of 'vocal travestism' (Wood, 1994). Koestenbaum's work perhaps examines the relationship between the very mechanism of vocal production and queer articulations most closely (he discusses the larynx's similarity to female genitalia, for example), challenging the manner in which 'queers have placed trust in coming out, a process of vocalization' where 'we define voice as openness, self-knowledge, clarity' (1994: 158). By examining voice

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27 Koestenbaum, (1994), Wood (1994) , Dame (1994)

manuals written between 1849 to 1940, Koestenbaum explores the discourses surrounding 'voice culture', particularly techniques relating to operatic singing. Koestenbaum's suggests how this 'voice culture' is inseparable to nineteenth- and twentieth- century discourses on the sexual body, within which homosexuality is a regarded as degenerate and in need of discipline, like 'bad singing': 'the channelling of breath through the body's vocal factory is disciplinary, as the production of homosexual identity' which is part of a 'vocabulary of pain: the arduousness that accompanies the ardor of training a voice, or voicing sexuality' (1994: 228-9). How might we understand the idea of 'voicing sexuality' in relation to the production of homosexual identity and queer sense of belonging?

Choral singing by nature is a communally shared activity as it involves more than one voice, a vocally co-ordinated articulation of sound. Within this context, the voice as a personal instrument (unique to the person, and also as something 'private') transforms into a communal instrument, and singing becomes an act of publicly being private with other people:

Using your voice is quite a personal, quite intimate thing to do.  
To use your voice for other people is, I find it quite a bonding  
sort of experience. So like you know, going to a concert, going  
through that experience together and coming out the other side.  
You kind of feel like you've got a connection with people.

(Charlotte)

Phrases like 'I find it quite a bonding sort of experience' or 'you kind of feel like you've got a connection with people' suggests the specific significance of the voice in bringing a sense of togetherness between the singers. In his essay 'Making music together: a study in

a social relationship' (1964), Alfred Schutz discusses the temporality involved in music-making and how there are two kinds of times: outer time which is measurable through clocks, minutes, seconds; and inner time (the dimension music occurs in) is immeasurable since musical tempo works through its own temporality, whether a piece of music slows down or speeds up regardless of outer-time<sup>28</sup>. Schutz states that it is during musical inner-time – or *duree* – that those within it (performer, listener, conductor) experience a mutual 'tuning-in' and are thus 'sharing the influx of Other's flux of experiences in inner time, by living through a vivid present together, by experiencing this togetherness as a "We"' (1964: 177). Schutz's statement echoes Charlotte's 'going through that experience together and coming out the other side' which thus reveals the importance of the actual process of music-making – not just the music itself – in enabling queers to articulate and share a sense of belonging. In this light, 'voicing sexuality' can be about demarcations of queer belonging which include but are not limited to the voice's engendered or pathologised inscriptions.

Furthermore Charlotte's 'coming out the other side' implies a time outside of musical *duree*; for she then states, 'you kind of feel like you've got a connection with people'. Herein lies the moment when the voice exists beyond its sound and beyond the breath it took to create it and moves into a different temporality related to a more imaginary<sup>29</sup> sense of queer community. One of the comments the musical director usually makes during rehearsals following a public performance is: 'even if you weren't there, you

28 Many of the *MLGC* members' accounts often referred to the choir in similar terms of a shared moment in time, separate to 'real life outside' (Tinny): 'going to the choir is bit like... 'cause you kind of get lost when you're singing and it's just like, the time goes *so* quickly I just get so absorbed into it' (Katya), or 'you go in and then it's nearly over, and it's like, 'already'? (Tinny).

29 For more on imaginary communities see Anderson (1991)

were there because you rehearsed with everyone before....so when everyone sang, you were still part of that, your voice during rehearsals came with us' (Jeff). In turning up to rehearsals every week (or at the time Clara was interviewed, two weeks), the members' repeated markings of their voice persist through time and connects them to moments of musical *duree* where they 'feel like you've got a connection with people'. Why is it important for the members that their 'voice during rehearsals came with us'? Clara took some time off the choir (as have other members) and she stated that despite her physical absence, she always wanted to see herself as being part of the choir. Clara is not alone in this sentiment, for countless of members keep their choir T-shirts after a prolonged break or even leaving the choir for good because somehow, they feel they are still part of its existence ('I've still got the T-shirt, you know, for symbolic reasons' stated one ex-member). 'Being a member of the choir' thus implies not just being part of a musical ensemble, but also creating a sense of belonging which persists beyond musical *duree* within a wider gay and lesbian community in everyday life.

Such issues of belonging and community can be related to the idea of everyday life and a temporality marked through repetition. In *Practice of Everyday life* (1998) Michel de Certeau and Luce Giard discuss the idea of a neighbourhood in relation to everyday life and a sense of belonging. The authors argue that the feeling of being part of a neighbourhood requires 'a progressive apprenticeship that grows with the repetition of the dweller's body's engagement in public space until it exercises a sort of appropriation of this space (De Certeau and Giard, 1998: 10-11). Similarly, through the repeated vocal engagement of rehearsal and performance spaces in Manchester, the *MLGC* have thus

carved out both a physical and a more imaginary *place of belonging* in the city. Through the process of singing in everyday life, the *MLGC* demonstrate how their music-making practices anchor the imaginary and figurative into very material grounds of existence. Within this context, the concept of voicing sexualities is no longer just about coming out or about the articulation of desire, pain/pleasure: vocal production is also a mechanism of musically appropriating, challenging, intervening and delineating existing queer spaces within the city whilst demarcating a place of belonging.

To conclude this chapter, I return to Charlotte's remarks on why she joined the *MLGC*, as it encapsulates the relationship between the city, music-making and queer urban life:

Manchester's been my home and it's characterised what I've done in my life for 20 odd years [...] I suppose I've always been involved in music, for most of my life really...so it's kind of part of being a lesbian, living in Manchester which is quite a musical place to be...I've been in a lesbian band before and stuff like that back in the 80s...so music's been quite a big part of my life.

(Charlotte)

Manchester has characterised what Charlotte has done during her 20 years of living there as a lesbian and musician. In Charlotte's statement, 'being a lesbian' is part of 'being a musician' and being Mancunian (she refers to herself as Mancunian). Within this context, sexuality is less about an essential identity but more about the spatialisation of belonging; or perhaps finding a space of belonging to various cultural conventions and arriving to a point where one feels 'at home', as Charlotte states. The process of music-making organises and defines the manner in which sexuality spatialises a queer sense of

belonging. In this manner, the city is an important ground from where music-making and queer practices emerge, which in turn, characterise the city itself: hence Manchester as a 'musical city' and a 'queer capital of the North'. In bringing these two aspects of the city together, the *MLGC*'s music-making practices materially and symbolically ground the choir as an interventional queer musical place of belonging within the city. It is thus that the city, music-making, and queers come together through a relationship between the musical production of a queer space, and the queer production of musical space.

## ■ Chapter 4 ■

### Coming out with music: from gay subculture to queer culture

Well I think the big thing for me is, when the bomb went off in 1992 (*sic*) and I heard it and felt it. I really like what's happened to the city centre...it's about change, I think it's a good change.  
(Charlotte)

On Saturday 15 June 1996, a 1500kg IRA bomb exploded in Manchester's City Centre, injuring more than 200 people and requiring the reconstruction of 50,000 square metres of retail space and 25,000 square metres of office space. This incident changed Manchester's City Centre. After the event, central government set aside £1million of European Union finance, and a further £20 million from the European Union regional aid budget (1997-99) for the redevelopment of the City Centre. For better or for worse the bomb changed both the urban landscape and cultural outlook of the city, marking the beginning of a new Mancunian cultural identity<sup>1</sup>. I walk around Manchester and encounter many a poster advertising cultural events (fashion and food markets, music and arts festivals) organised by the Manchester City Council as part of the Urban Regeneration Scheme.

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<sup>1</sup> Urban regeneration projects were part of the British Government's attempts since the 1980s to reverse the decline in Britain's post-industrial economy, which saw poor housing and unemployment in many major cities like Manchester, Liverpool and Birmingham. Originally, these plans focused on physical regeneration (for example, housing) but more recently since the late 1990s, funds have started to concentrate on social, cultural and economic regeneration. For a comprehensive list on Urban Regeneration companies, go to Guardian's website: <<http://society.guardian.co.uk/internet/page/0,,527765,00.html>>. In this sense, Manchester's IRA bomb, which required more *physical* regeneration, was unique in that the City Centre went through even more changes yet again compared to the other cities.

The Gay Village as an area was included in the city-developer's Regeneration Scheme and similarly, the local queer<sup>2</sup> community became part of Manchester's overall active cultural drive to present itself as a cultural capital, possibly in competition with other national cities like London: as Charlotte states, 'I think culturally people always think London is the capital of Britain but I think culturally, in many respects, Manchester is the cultural capital'. Indeed one look at tourist maps, events listings, guidebooks, or the BBC local news page will list the Village and local queer activities in its own separate category as one of the city's several cultural 'experiences'<sup>3</sup>.

Charlotte's above comment preceded a discussion on the Village and how it has changed since she first moved to Manchester twenty years ago. The aftermath of the bomb affected not just the City Centre but the city's local LGBT community both in terms of the Village's physical transformation and the LGBT community's position within the city. In a city which actively incorporates queers in its efforts to be nationally and internationally recognised as a cultural capital, the way queers are presented and present themselves culturally are changing accordingly. For example, when the *MLGC* participated in an international concert for queer choirs in Montreal as part of *OUTgames!*, Manchester City Council insisted they shoulder the costs for printing spare choir T-shirts. The new T-shirts all came with Manchester City Council's own logo on the sleeve, suggesting the city's desire to present itself as being supportive of its LGBT community. Similarly, there was a period when the choir members wanted to re-brand

<sup>2</sup> I am using the term *queer* to reflect the LGBT community's own transformation during the 1990s, a culture which adopted a politics of consumerism. The city of course had a large part to play in the growth of the 'pink pound'. I shall discuss this point later on in this chapter.

<sup>3</sup> A term used by the Manchester Tourism Board: 'Choose Your Manchester Experience' states the website. <<http://www.visistmanchester.com>> [accessed June 2006]



themselves by changing their logo into something else which specifically did not involve a rainbow-coloured theme: an extraordinary step considering how for so long, the rainbow emblem has served as a visual representation of queer politics and being out and proud.

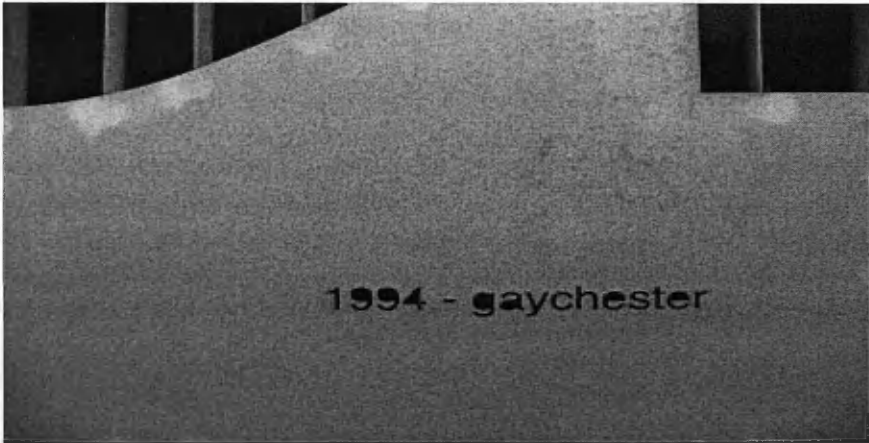
Much work has been conducted concerning the effects of globalisation and the emergence of a more homogenous queer identity since the 1990s, where discussions cover issues surrounding commercialism, visibility, the pink economy, and mobility<sup>4</sup>. Whilst this body of work provides an in depth understanding of the movement from local to global, very little attention has been given to the effects of the global on the local. Queer scholar Jasbir Puar (2002) focuses on the relationship between the construction of homosexual identities and tourism, within which are configured ideas on marketing, advertising, and 'how in the face of the nation's marketing as a gay-friendly destination, local homo/sexual cultures are affected by queer tourism; how (global) tourism affects (local) sexualities; and how (local) sexualities are perceived by (global) tourism' (8:104). The question is: how are such transformations affecting local gay and lesbian music-making practices? How is music configured and configuring the 'local homo/sexual culture'?

In the following, I want to first explore the idea of a gay subculture as a localised music scene of the Village between late 1980s throughout the 1990s. By investigating the relationship between the *MLGC* and the Gay Village, I want to then understand what effects Manchester's urban regeneration scheme has had on its gay subculture and lesbian

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4 Puar (2002), Rushbrook (2002), Hennessey (2000), Binnie, (2004); Weston, K (1995)

and gay community. In the process, I examine what part localised lesbian and gay music-making practices has in defining or challenging the position of queers living in the city.



(Fig.2) Outside of the Hacienda, now converted into a block of luxury apartments that kept the original name. Photo: E.Miyake

'Gaychester': *gay subcultural scene, the closet, music*

Well, I would've loved to have been in Manchester in '91 and my friends were telling me and I was married and there was nothing I could do and it was buzzing wasn't it? You looked and....have you seen *24 hour party people*?

(John)

He'd<sup>5</sup> never have even known what it's like to think you're the only person. It's impossible, 'cause heterosexuality is always there...and I thought I was the only person. I knew there were things in London but that didn't count did it?

(John)

*24 Hour Party People* (2002, dir. Michael Winterbottom) is a film which recreates the

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<sup>5</sup> John is referring to Jeff, the musical director who is straight.

story of Factory Records and Hacienda<sup>6</sup>. John was discussing how he wanted the *MLGC* to incorporate more 'Manchester songs' and he began to tell me about his passion for Inspiral Carpets, Stone Roses, and Happy Mondays: all bands to have emerged out of the Madchester era. What is significant here is that within this discussion, John refers to his pre-coming out self (John runs support workshops for married gay men) who was 'married and there was nothing I could do'. The second quote provides a further insight into John's experiences as a closeted gay man ('to think you're the only person') and how they are presented in contrast to heterosexuality which is 'always there'. The manner in which the domestic, heterosexual, life (married, reference to Jeff) is juxtaposed to the club, gay and 'out' life (reference to *24HPP*, London) suggests how John regards his sexual identity as a gay man is linked to issues of gay subcultural life, particularly within an urban context.

In *Coming out: homosexual politics in Britain from the nineteenth century to the Present* (1983), queer sociologist Jeffrey Weeks discusses how in the UK (mainly London), the arrival of mega-discos during the mid-70s in effect created a gay subculture in Britain. Weeks argues that these megadiscos symbolized a 'new hedonism, where sexual pleasure was placed at the heart of the new gay identity', and consequently, the gay

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6 *Factory Records* was a Manchester-based independent record label started in 1978 by Tony Wilson, a presenter for Granada Television, teamed up with Alan Erasmus, an unemployed actor and band manager. Together they managed The Durutti Column, Cabaret Voltaire, and most famously Joy Division (later New Order), Happy Mondays, and A Certain Ratio: bands which created a certain 'Manchester sound', part of a new local rave scene. This is referred to as 'Madchester'. In 1981, Wilson and New Order decided to fund and found a nightclub and took a lease on an abandoned yacht showroom (which became part of the club's overall distinct post-industrial décor) and named it the *Hacienda*. Despite the financial and drug-related problems which caused the club to eventually close down in 1997, both *Factory Records* and *The Hacienda* became and remain as one of the most famous independent labels and clubs in the world. See: <http://www.prideofmanchester.com/music/hacienda.htm>, <http://www.partypeoplemovie.com>, <http://www.manchester.com/music/features/hacienda.php>.

community experienced an 'increasingly overt sexualisation of the gay male subculture' (1983: 323). Yet the important point is that for John, London 'didn't count' and in this light, his year of choice (1991) is significant. Whilst 1991 is strictly speaking after the height of the initial Madchester boom, it also happens to coincide with the opening of a gay night at the Hacienda called *Flesh*. John's remarks suggest the emergence of Manchester's localised music scene and the localised gay subculture are interrelated in some way. In fact, during the *Manchester Lesbian and Gay Heritage Trail* the guide (John A) always stops outside of the Hacienda to explain the importance of *Flesh* for the local gay community in providing both a social outlet and a way of being recognised nationally and internationally (more on this later). How has music thus defined gay subculture so far since the late 1970s onwards? To answer this, I want to first explore the relationship between the local music scene in Manchester and the emergence of a gay subculture in the Village.

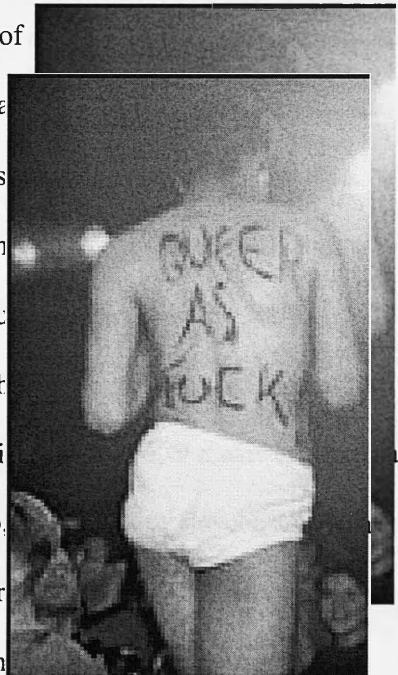
As Lee states, 'Manchester's music scene was content to proceed along on its own way until, in 1988, something happened to it that had never happened before it caught the attention of the world's media' (2002: 2): local music-making<sup>7</sup> activities escalated into what is now commonly referred to as 'Summer of Love' in 1988, a defining moment for Manchester where the city fell into the national and international cultural radar. But despite this recognition, by mid-1990s the Hacienda lost money due to ecstasy-taking (no one was buying drinks, getting fined) and complications arising from gun-related crime

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<sup>7</sup> During the late 80s, indie bands like Joy Division, The Fall, Happy Mondays, and Stone Roses mixed Manchester's post-industrial miserablism (The Smiths being a notable example), and the existing dance culture of Northern Soul, with the new ecstasy culture connected to the house scene from the US and Amsterdam to create the movement known as 'Madchester'.

(dubbed by the media as 'Gunchester'). In an attempt to revive the *Hacienda's* financial loss, the organisers opened a gay night called, *Flesh* in 1991<sup>8</sup>: and so 'Gaychester' began. If the initial 'Summer of Love' in Manchester meant a musical 'something happened to Manchester' (Lee, 2002: 2), then *Flesh* had a bearing on a similar 'something' for the LGBT community. Firstly, *Flesh* created a new gay consciousness in Manchester, a mode of being 'out' which was defined specifically through music and the body's relationship to it, where embodying dance music was to embody an out queer identity.

There is a body of work<sup>9</sup> which addresses the close relationship between male gay subculture and dance/disco scene, interlinking the idea of gay pleasure, homosexual identity, and dance music as a strong gay subculture. For example in (Fig. 3), 'queer as fuck' is literally inscribed on the dancer's body, where the homosexual body and visibility are inseparable from club music and its subcultural scene. *Flesh* thus opened up the means for queers (particularly gay men) to be 'out' within public space, granted within a confined area. The motto, 'Queer as Fuck' reveals the manner in which indeed, 'for queers *eroticism is the basis of community*' (emphasis in



[accessed: 1 May, 2000]

original) (2000: 87). To consume music was to thus consume gay subculture defined by

8 The Hacienda/24HHP website quotes Paul Cons, the Hacienda's entertainment manager: 'I hadn't realised the extent to which the gay scene had changed, how ecstasy and house music had crossed over and how there wasn't an outlet for that. In Manchester there was just the Number One club, which was quite small, and a bit of a shithole. There was nothing else for gay crowds, so there was no sense of how large it might be. When *Flesh* came out and there was 1500 people there on the first night, it was amazing'.

<<http://www.partypeoplemovie.com>>

9 Kooijman (2005), Bollen (1996), Hughes (1994), Dyer (1979).

erotic sociality.

Secondly, Manchester became recognised as 'the Gay Capital of Europe' (John A, in talking about Flesh and the *Hacienda*). In studying the 'Liverpool sound', theorist of music and subcultures Sarah Cohen argues that 'locality can be seen as a political strategy within a global, plural system...within this strategy, music exercises territorialising power, framing public and private spaces and domains' (1994: 133). Within this context, *Flesh* as a local music scene opened up a new spatial possibility for gay men, vital to the eventual demarcation of the Gay Village as a separate area in the city, a geographical closet<sup>10</sup>. Furthermore, the localisation of a gay subculture through music was politically significant not only for individuals like John who did not have the means to go to London, but also, it mobilised and centralised the LGBT community's activist work. During the AIDS crisis<sup>11</sup> for example, the Village formed an important point of contact for those involved in its activism: every Vigil, this point is made clear by those who were there at the time, or through second-hand accounts. In this manner, existing urban and local music-making practices played an important part in the production and consumption of Gaychester as a localised gay subculture, signalling a moment when Manchester's LGBT community became more 'culturally intelligible' (Fuss, 1991: 4) and also marked the start of the Village area's transformation.

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10 Queer geographer Brown's study of Christchurch's gay area demonstrates how the material and geographical closet enables queers to be safely 'in' within public spaces of the city (2000: 70-83). Similarly, sociologist and anthropologist Dennis Altman argues in *Global Sex* (2001) that the American model of using the 'ghettoization' of queer communities as a basis for their political activism has dominated and been replicated throughout the world' (2001: 87). In Manchester, this model has been replicated to a certain extent both in name and culture: 'The Gay Village' being a direct reference to New York's gay area. See also a collection of essays on spatiality and sexuality in *Mapping Desire* (1995)

11 Altman, D. (2001).

*From 'Queer as Fuck' to Queer as Folk*



(Fig. 4) Flyer advertising Manto's 15th Birthday party night., Feb 2006

Probably early 1990s, which was sort of the start of the Village. It was kind of Manto's really, it started the Village, the Gay Village. The move from pubs where you couldn't see through the windows and all the bars were empty, and you know it was a lesbian and gay bar. But I think we all fantasise about the Village and I never was sure whether it ever was that cosy. I never go there, I eat out in Chorlton [...] Well I guess they want to make money out of it. But I suppose it's better than...like when I first moved to Manchester there were lots of isolated bars you know, and I think it's probably better than that. You don't get beaten up, you know. (Charlotte)

Manto originally opened in 1990 when the Gay Village wasn't really a village, "AIDS" was how many people saw us, and what passed for a gay bar was firmly rooted in the 1970s. In its 10 year history, Manto became synonymous with changing attitudes, throwing parties, just for the hell of it, like the Gay Village has never seen : big wheels and circuses, legendary all-nighters, cutting-edge music and design, beautiful people, warehouse parties, a record label and Top 20 singles.(Manto's homepage)

Manto is the first bar to have opened on Canal Street with clear windows and to bring homosexual bar life out onto the streets for the eye to see: as Charlotte states, this was the 'start of the Village, the Gay Village'. The city planners regarded 'Gaychester's' subcultural capital as translating into economic capital<sup>12</sup>. Not so coincidentally, 1991 was also the year that city-planners formally named the area around Canal Street as the 'The Gay Village' – its name borrowed from New York's Greenwich Village – as a separate planning area. In both Charlotte's account and Manto's self-description, life before Manto and the start of the Village are presented under a rather negative light: 'couldn't see

<sup>12</sup> See Thornton. (1995: 203)

through windows', 'bars were empty', 'get beaten up' (Charlotte); ' "AIDS" was how many people saw us", and interestingly referring to the mega-disco culture explored earlier, 'what passed for a gay bar was firmly rooted in 1970s' (Manto description). Between the city's and the Village's own efforts to encourage and maintain the gay subcultural scene – as mentioned earlier, the active conversion of subcultural capital into economic capital – the entire Village went through a process of commercialisation ('I guess they want to make money out of it') altering both the physical and social landscape of the Village: policing of the area around Canal Street (hence the choir members feeling safe in the Village, and Charlotte's 'you don't get beaten up'); the bars using clear windows where people could see inside ('couldn't see through the windows and all the bars were empty'); the opening of more gay bars with the increase of gay migration into Manchester<sup>13</sup> ('lots of isolated bars' in contrast to the whole of Canal Street area being a line of bars and clubs).

However whilst Charlotte approves of the Village's transformation in terms of safety and how the 'streets got cleaned up' (Charlotte, at another point in the discussion), she is equally dismissive or apprehensive of the Village and states 'I never was sure whether it ever was that cosy. I never go there, I eat out in Chorlton'. In contrast, the clientele whom I interviewed in *Vanilla* were mostly from outside of Manchester and had come specifically for the 'Lesbian Mecca of the North'<sup>14</sup>. As Dereka Rushbrook argues in

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<sup>13</sup> Hindle (2001)

<sup>14</sup> The *Vanilla* website states: 'Described as "the lesbian mecca of the north", vanilla is a lively women's den situated in the heart of Manchester's gay village. Since opening in 1998, vanilla has won many awards for its total dedication and commitment to the lesbian scene, not only in Manchester but throughout the UK'. The reference to 'not only in Manchester but throughout UK' is indicative to its part in queer tourism <<http://www.vanillagirls.co.uk>>



her work exploring queer tourism<sup>15</sup>: 'while CD collections, restaurant choices, and clothing may mark our cosmopolitan consumption of other races and cultures, the consumption of gayness is much more difficult to demonstrate without marking gayness...the artefacts of queerness depends on interaction...where the deliberate consumption of queerness almost necessarily takes place *in place*' (2002: 198)<sup>16</sup>. The commodification of the Village is probably most evident during events like Pride<sup>17</sup>. Whilst fund-raising and awareness-raising based on entertainment – having fun whilst causing disruption and noise – have been long-established queer street tactics<sup>18</sup>, Pride events are often lucrative business occasions for Village bars/clubs. Bar owners raise their drinks prices and even charge an entrance fee, Pride ticket prices are raised each year: Pride has become a predominately a white, middle-class, gay male affair and is criticized for its exclusivity by those who are marginalised<sup>19</sup> from 'this globalized McPink economy, those who are trapped in poverty, unable to buy into the global gay lifestyle' (Bell and Binnie, 2000: 116).

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15 See Rushbrook (2002)

16 During the 1990s, the philosophy and politics behind queer activism (such as Queer Nation) used 'a performative politics that associated identity less with interiority than with the public spectacle of consumer culture', a movement driven by an 'anti-assimilationist politics which understood and made use of the commodity as part of a campaign for gay visibility' (Hennessy, 2000: 127).

17 'Pride', a British term for 'Mardi Gras' (San Francisco, New York, Sydney all hold famous Mardi Gras events are festivals that celebrate gay pride. Depending on the size of the city and how active the LGBT community are, Pride/Mardi Gras events can be anything from a single parade to a week event which also includes live shows, workshops, markets and special club nights. Prides are mostly about 'fundraising whilst having fun'. Manchester's Pride events are one of the biggest and longest with the UK.

18 A legacy of the Stonewall Riots in New York City's Greenwich Village, June 1969

19 Alternative events along the lines of 'Gay Shame' in the US led by students, women of colour, and 'others who don't fit' are now emerging in Manchester as an antidote to Pride: an example being *Kaffequeeria* who organise counter-Pride events 'to poke the gay conscience with our knitting needles... we object to gay ghettoisation, the selling off of our pride to corporate sponsorship and the absence of any awareness raising about gay rights and gay activism history as the source of our pride' <<http://www.kaffequeeria.org.uk>>

Running parallel to the commercialisation of the Village is the queerification of Manchester: events like *QueerUpNorth* (which BBC News Website described as, 'Featuring a staggering array of queer stars, be them local, national, or international, the festival has highlights a-plenty and something for every taste' 2 May 2006) and Europride; Granada TV's soap-opera *Coronation Street* showing the (in)famous first 'gay kiss' to be aired on British television, in 2003; and whilst not Manchester-made (as opposed to Granada TV studios which *is* in Manchester), Channel 4's series *Queer as Folk* in 1999 which used Canal Street as its backdrop probably epitomises the extent to which Manchester has become queerified. In almost every scene with Canal Street in the background, the sound of techno and pop dominate the series where subtitles even state, 'Booming Techno Music'. A quick check through the tracklist on one of the *Queer as Folk*'s soundtrack albums (such is the mainstream and commercial success of the series) reveals the inclusion of contemporary mainstream songs, Air's 'SexyBoy' alongside Abba's 'Mamma Mia' but have been remixed ('The Kinky Boyz Feat. Kia') or covered ('Abacadabra'). Furthermore, Manto's website description boasts its 'record label, and Top 20 singles'.

These songs and the existence of the album in itself further demonstrate how both musically and culturally, gay subculture and local-music making are not as removed from the rest of Manchester and dominant culture, as was the case with Factory Records, for example. However, Charlotte's account reveals there is also a deliberate consumption of queerness *outside* of the Village. Charlotte even thinks 'we all fantasise about the Village', and as an advertisement, Manto's self-description is perhaps an example of such a

idealised version of the Village, presented as a haven for queers: 'big wheels and circuses, legendary all-nighters, cutting-edge music and design, beautiful people, warehouse parties'. The contrast and difference between the two accounts suggest that indeed there is a tension between the fantasy or imaginary<sup>20</sup> Village as it is presented and the local queers. There is even a website called 'TheRealManchester.com' (many of the *MLGC* members use this site) where people's pictures, profiles, announcements, and blogs from the Village are posted, again, as if there is another more authentic version of Village life.

Both Charlotte's remarks and the existence of TheRealManchester.com website suggest how the transformation of the Canal Street area into The Gay Village has had an effect on the local queer community. There is now an alternative queer social life (for example, Chorlton) to what was once the alternative place in Manchester for queers, like *Flesh*. In this light, we must interrogate terms like 'alternative' or 'subcultural' in relation to queers: does coming out in the Village mean the same thing it did back during the *Flesh* days? How are queers defining themselves within this context, and furthermore, how is music configured within this process?

*Coming out in 2000s: entertaining the gay scene, and singing for the queer community*

### **Gay village plans divide community**

**Bold plans to regenerate a corner of Manchester's Gay Village have divided the community. The proposals are said to include residential and leisure units and a 24-storey glass tower on the site of a car park at the junction of Princess Street and Whitworth Street. It is also rumoured that developers West**

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20 Wegner (2002); Soja (1996), Anderson (1991)

Properties want to purchase bars Manto and New Union as part of the development and link the two sites with a glass bridge over the canal.

(Brian Lashley, *Manchester Evening News*. Wednesday, 16.08.2006 [accessed 01.09.2006])

Since the IRA bomb hit Manchester in 1996, there has been steady increase of consumerist culture and commerce in the Village with businesses like *CloneZone*<sup>21</sup> and the Village Business Association network being set up in the area. As the above article from *Manchester Evening News* suggests, such changes are partly due to the Urban Regeneration Scheme which is 'dividing the community'. In addition, there have also been significant changes to gay civil rights in the UK since the initial transformation of the Village: most notably the repeal of Section 28, the introduction of Employment Equality Regulations both in 2003; Sexual Offence Act, Gender Recognition Act, and the legalisation of Civil Partnership for same sex couples all in 2004. Within the context of these changes since 2000s, what *does* community mean in contemporary British queer culture? What is the significance of local music-making practices within this context?

I've been in Manchester twenty years so you know, I've got a good group of friends but when I came out, there were a lot of things that weren't commercial....then there was a time where there didn't seem to be much that wasn't part of the commercial scene and I think if I'd been coming out at that point, or moved to Manchester, that would have been really hard. And then the choir's there [...] Cause I mean as well as being fantastic singing and all that, I just think there's *another part of it which is about the community and that it's quite hard getting to people know on the scene, if you're going on the commercial 'scene'* [italics mine].

(Eleanor)

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21 A gay chain store selling everything from show tickets, greeting cards, clubwear, sex toys. They even offer a sauna/tanning service. The central branch in London even lets out apartments.

Eleanor's juxtaposition between her coming out amongst friends whom 'I had something in common with'<sup>22</sup>, and her belief that it 'would have been really hard' to come out in the commercial scene demonstrates the marked separation between community – to mean a body of people whom you have 'something in common with' (Eleanor) – and the commercial scene which is regarded as devoid of a sense of shared meaning. Many of my interviewees set up such an oppositional and comparative relationship between themselves (and the choir) as an alternative and community-based place, and in contrast, what they perceive as being the rest of the Village's bar/club-based commercialism, or 'going on the commercial "scene"' (Eleanor). Tinny and other interviewees told me how they were 'purposefully looking for stuff that was going on in Manchester because I wanted to find something to do that didn't involve going clubbing or pubs' (Tinny). As discussed in Chapter 3, the choir is thus regarded as a place which is specifically non-scene, a place where people 'feel more part of the community' (David). A social space where they are there 'to meet other people as well within the lesbian and gay community' (Kristen) and here, 'community' is always referred to it in terms of forming 'real friendships' and meeting people 'without sex in mind' (Jed). The divide between community-as-commonality and scene-as-commodity is geographically manifest too. Charlotte for example states how she 'never goes there (Village), I eat out in Chorlton' where she feels that she is part of the community more. How then does the choir *musically* experience this divide?

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22 One of the groups she mentioned later on was the Young Lesbian Single Mothers' group, for example.

David: I suppose when we were wearing the T-shirts, that identifies us as the choir but the policeman said some nice things about us....he said that our voices were representing the community and we were singing out, and we were being heard and all that...I mean it was a bit corny but it was a nice thing to say I thought.

Es: So why did you like that one particularly?

David: It just seems like....because we were doing something that was connected to the lesbian and gay community....

Es: Did you feel like that during Pride?

David: I did at the Vigil, I didn't feel that on the main stage...I thought that was more 'entertainment' (laughs) people had come to just watch drunkenly and didn't really care about what we were singing and so I didn't enjoy that as much. But the Vigil definitely felt more...

David is referring to an event which was organised by the Manchester City Council and it was to raise awareness about homophobia. The Manchester Metropolitan Police were present as part of awareness raising and as a campaign for increasing safety for queers out on the streets. What David liked about this event which he relates to the Vigil was how it was something about the 'lesbian and gay community' and most importantly, feeling though as though the choir was 'representing the community'. The events which members list as being meaningful are usually those concerned directly with political and civil issues surrounding queer lives: AIDS Vigil, memorial service, private performances for *BodyPositive*<sup>23</sup>, civil partnership ceremonies/baby naming ceremonies. In contrast, the events where the members felt they had not gained as much satisfaction from performing were those which they considered as being for entertainment. These are events like Pride Mainstage or concerts unrelated to the queer community<sup>24</sup>, where members feel 'out of

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<sup>23</sup> A charity and home set up for those who are HIV positive.

<sup>24</sup> An anti-nuclear weapons group once contacted the choir, and the committee decided it did not wish the *MLGC* to be affiliated with it as it was not directly benefiting the local queer community.

place and dunno, a bit weird' (Tinny) or because people 'didn't really care about what we were singing' (David). Therefore, running concurrently with the community-as-commonality and scene-as-commodity is the divide between music-as-meaningful (often to mean political) and music-as-entertainment.

I want to now expand upon these two strands in greater depth before I discuss the significance behind the choir's attempts to bring them together. Broadly speaking, most of the choir's performances fall into two kinds of occasions: events where the choir is required to entertain the crowds, where singing is for the sake of entertainment ('I thought that was more "entertainment" (laughs) people had come to just watch drunkenly and didn't really care about what we were singing' as stated by David); and serious events where the choir takes on a more supportive role, where singing is providing a contemplative background to more prominent activities of the event. I want to examine these two kinds of occasions because they correspond directly to the two main aspects of contemporary queer culture as discussed so far: 'going on the commercial scene' (Eleanor); and the 'grass-roots politics of queers' (Charlotte).

(i) Music for the community: 'Soundtrack to Politics of Manchester' - (Charlotte)

Without question, *Manchester Lesbian and Gay Chorus* is about fun, community and inclusiveness. We may compete again in the future, but the joy of singing with such a great community and supporting local, charity and LGBT events is far, far more important to us than competition.

(Jed, interview with BBC Manchester, Aug 2006 [accessed: Aug 2006])

I think that the overall sound is fucking great, and the community feel is great, and it does feel like a real community thing and I never actually felt that doing a lesbian and gay thing before...it's like...cause it doesn't feel competitive, and everyone's just got...everyone's got the right to be there, and I think that's really cool. (Tinny)

Jed is discussing the choir's participation in an international competition for queer choirs which took place in Montreal as part of the *OUTgames!* in 2006. Jed emphasises the local ('supporting local, charity and LGBT events' where 'charity' signals non-profit) and 'community and inclusiveness' in contrast to the more globalised and international LGBT community denoted by the choir's participation in Montreal (registration for the event was over £100). Similarly, Tinny enthuses about the 'community feel' of the choir in contrast to other more competitive spaces outside ('doesn't feel as competitive'-Tinny). Within the context of these two discussions, both seem to prefer the choir directing its musical energies towards generating a 'community feeling' rather than towards gaining fame or engaging in competition within a wider LGBT community. What *is* the sound of the community, and how why do the choir wish to produce this sound?

One of the main, local LGBT charity events the *MLGC* supports year after year (as outlined in Chapter 3) is the Manchester AIDS Vigils. Always occurring in Sackville Park, the event is open to all even during Pride where there is no cost to get in unlike other areas of the Village. The Vigil represents a moment where Manchester, queer politics, and music come together: as Charlotte states, the choir provides 'the soundtrack to queer politics in Manchester'. During each Vigil, the choir always sings next to the Beacon of Hope<sup>25</sup> which stands as a mark of queer solidarity, alongside the statue of Alan

25 The Beacon of Hope is a pillar-shaped sculpture by Warren Chapman and Jess Boyn-Daniel (erected in



Turing<sup>26</sup>. These two monuments make the park an area of reflection in contrast to and removed from the main area of the Village (Canal Street) with its noisy bars. In other words, the event is always spatially and culturally separated from the more commercial and club cultural aspect of the Village and the queer community. The Vigil for Pride 2005 was televised by Manchester BBC and Manchester Radio and broadcast across the nation so in this sense it was a high-profile event. Famous British soul singer Beverly Knight performed on the night and in contrast to her as an established and 'famous face' (organiser Michelle), the choir as a large group of anonymous faces were to represent the local LGBT community (according to the organisers). During Pride Vigil 2006, this metaphor was actively enacted where the organisers wanted that year's theme to have a 'focus on community' and thus placed the choir as the main performing act to emphasize this point.

The choir performed 'Step by Step', a song by Pete Seeger who put music to words from a 19th century Mining Union rulebook. The song has a militant and somewhat Unionist feel because of its lyrics ('step by step the longest march, can be won, can be won...and by Union what we will, can be accomplished still...'), its marching tempo, and its over all Soviet-esque feel: all aimed to match that year's 'angry at the horrible bug message' (Michelle). The choice and singing of 'Step by Step' was significant. A choir member named Martin made the effort to research the origins of the song and upon discovering that it was from a Mining Union rulebook, posted this information to

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2000) and the UK's only permanent memorial dedicated to all those lost and still fighting against AIDS  
26English mathematician and 'father of computer science' who committed suicide in 1954, unable to cope with the persecution of his homosexuality.

everyone. Some members even commented upon Manchester's LGBT community's strong links with the miner's union ever since their support for one another during the Miner's Strike (1984-5) in Manchester. In this light, singing 'Step by Step' in juxtaposition to Beverly Knight's 'A Change is Gonna Come'<sup>27</sup>, became emblematic of local community activism, something which relates back to Eleanor's sentiments about grass-roots activism and community networks of the pre-commercialised Village era. Hence such occasions mark a moment when the choir's music practices are localised through music of local reference, and in turn, how the choir's music-making practices become part of the local community and its socio-political practices.

(ii) Music for entertainment: 'people had come to just watch drunkenly'- David

If making music is more meaningful when it is 'something that was connected to the lesbian and gay community' (David), the question is, why then does the choir keep agreeing to perform at events like Pride mainstage every year where they are 'more "entertainment" '(David)? One answer is that in being part of mainstage events, the choir gets 'free' publicity. Europride 2003 did bring a fresh batch of members which boosted the numbers in the choir from less than ten members to thirty: the founding members, like Eleanor, Charlotte, and Chongwei all use the term 'turning point' in reference to what Europride achieved for the choir by way of publicity. By 2005, the *MLGC*'s reputation had grown and suddenly the choir were an awaited 'quirky' (Kristen) addition to the rest

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<sup>27</sup> A UK chart hit (1965) by Sam Cooke.

of the sexy clubby acts. Even David who had hated the Pride mainstage events until that point, when I asked him again, stated he really enjoyed mainstage that year and was 'on a high'.

Much discussion always goes into what should be incorporated into the repertoire<sup>28</sup> but one of issue that the committee, the musical director, and the members all agreed upon was that the repertoire should 'suit each occasion' (Jed, who became chair in 2005). The choir committee carefully chose 'Downtown' and 'I'm Beginning to See the Light' because they suspected these songs would be a 'sure hit' (Jed and Geoff) with the Pride crowd: and they were right, in the words of the musical director, 'the audience didn't know whether to watch or to sing along with us, it was great' (Jeff). Since then, the committee have strategically chosen songs they believe would be 'sure hits' for entertaining a queer crowd: 'It would be good to sing songs that everybody, including the audience knew, to maintain our popularity' (Point 56, Minutes from the Repertoire Meeting Oct 2005). Such a statement reveals the choir's willingness to popularise itself, and *popular* in this case is defined by the committee as something familiar enough for audiences to sing along to. Why is this important?

Es: You know there's all this talk about changing the repertoire.  
Would you change anything? I mean for example, did you put in requests?

Kristen: Yeah I did, the song that was in the Coke ad (laughs)?  
We've sung it once or twice in the choir but I'd quite like to go back to it. I like songs that you know, they're popular, and that they've got quite a good beat and feel to them really.

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28 The question of a gay repertoire will be covered extensively in the next two chapters

Kristen is referring to the song, 'I wish I knew how it would feel to be free' written by jazz pianist Billy Taylor, and recorded originally by Nina Simone. Since then, it has been covered by Solomon Burke, Ray Charles, remixed, sampled, and has been used in countless of films. As a song it is, as Kristen states, 'popular': her reference to 'the Coke ad' being an indication of its ubiquity. Interestingly enough, this song was mentioned by other interviewees like Denise or Jude who arrived to it through Nina Simone, but whatever route they came to the song, the underlying feeling is that they feel positive when they listen or sing the song: 'good beat and feel' (Kristen), 'it's so inspiring!' (Denise). Thus there is another reason why singing songs for entertainment is significant for queers today: the pleasure of popularity. Kristen states, 'they're popular, and that they've got quite a good beat and feel to them'. Such a statement suggests how there is pleasure in singing these songs and what's more, in singing them for the sake of singing them with the audience.

In discussing the idea of value judgements made in popular music, popular music theorist Simon Frith argues that judging music – whether it is 'good' or 'bad' – moves beyond the issue of taste, and is about how 'we establish our place in various music worlds and use music as a source of identity' (1996: 73). Therefore in choosing the 'Downtown' for example, the *MLGC* was being judged ('they were judging us' Tinny states referring the *Pride 2005*) not just musically but as queers: it is about seeking queer social validation and acceptance through an articulation of knowledge of queer culture, and in the process creating a sense of togetherness. For as Jeff's statement regarding 'Downtown' and the choir's Minutes imply, familiar songs can diminish the clear divide

between audience and performer and singing together creates a sense of shared togetherness ('everybody, including the audience'): 'I felt *closer to the community* that way' (emphasis mine) states David, in reference to how the audience sang along with the choir for 'Downtown'. In this sense, *popular* to mean familiar ('songs that everyone, including the audience knew, to maintain our popularity') is an important social process by which queers feel a sense of belonging despite the apparent homogeneity and commercialism of events like Pride.

#### *Local Brands of Queer Choirs: You'll Never Walk Alone*

The *MLGC* took part in a national festival in Leeds College of Music called 'Out Tonight!' as part of the *Rainbow Weekend*, 2004 . The festival brought together queer choirs from around Britain who all performed their repertoires individually, but as a grand finale, all the choirs came on stage to sing a song together which had been learnt throughout the day called, 'You'll Never Walk Alone'; a song from the musical *Carousel* (Rodgers and Hammerstein) arranged for the *Pink Singers* (London's mixed LGBT chorus) by W.Stickles. 'You'll Never Walk Alone' is a piece which appears in the musical *Carousel* at two points: the first time, it is sung at a rather poignant death scene, where one of the protagonists (Julie) is comforted by those around her because her lover (Billy), who had turned to crime, has just killed himself and gone to heaven; the reprise occurs when Billy, having been sent back down to earth by angels to redeem himself, invisibly tells his daughter Louise to be strong. Upon hearing his unseen words, both Julie and

Louise join in together in song with Billy. The manner in which the piece was sung at Leeds, mirrored the reprisal: an accompanied soloist began as one voice in the room, and gradually, other vocal parts joined in one after another to escalate towards a Bolero-esque climactic moment which filled the room with queer singing voices. This marked a turning point for the choir for several reasons.

The occasion is referred to by the interviewees as being one of the most memorable, and one theme which arises from all the members' accounts is the shock of realising the sheer number of queer choristers in one room: 'And then singing *with* everybody, it's like singing...you know like 'Never Walk Alone' ...I mean it's just incredible with that *many*' (June); 'And then when we sang together at the end (quietly, whispering)...it was phenomenal! (Katya). As if mirroring the song's effect in the musical, the choir's microcosmic existence in the Village as choristers was suddenly placed within a larger macrocosmic community – specifically a queer choral community – itself a part of the larger, queer community in UK: indeed, using June's words as an analogy, 'music's been a thing that has been a one-person affair, a very individual thing.....it was the first time that I actually felt part of it more.' Singing this particular song marked an almost symbolic initiation of the choir into the 'rest of the community' (Chongwei), a process of coming out as a group in public through music. In other words, for the choir, this moment marked a time when musical community was directly related to the queer community and thus being part of it was a necessary, or at least, symbolic rite of passage<sup>29</sup>.

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29 Plummer (1996)

In a discussion concerning the process of coming out, Ken Plummer states that coming out is a 'process by which individuals pass of the moratorium...and are "reborn" into organized aspects of the homosexual community, a process during which they come to identify themselves as "homosexuals"'(1996: 78). The LGBT community had originally been defined through the differences in culture, social relationships and practices, politics and so on. This is why the idea of the closet was so significant in the construction of homosexual identities in the city as explored in Chapter 3 and earlier on. Paradoxically in attempting to become culturally intelligible by coming out of this closet, these differences have become displaced through processes of commercialisation, tourism and queer mobility, and legislative changes as has been discussed. In this manner, coming out in contemporary British queer culture is about going back in, so to speak, finding the queer community again. This is not to say that the community cannot exist outside of the closet, on the contrary, it is about finding the 'community feeling' (Tinny) outside of the closet by recreating a sense of communal belonging. The event in Leeds demonstrates how music-making as a social process is a meaningful way to come out again into the queer community from a localised position<sup>30</sup>.

Chongwei: [...]I think a performance is something for the group to work towards otherwise we'd be singing songs and getting them to a good standard, but we'd be only singing for ourselves. I don't think that's what I want the group to be like, it is for us to share the music

Es: With the rest of the world!

Chongwei: With rest of the world, and the rest of the community.

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<sup>30</sup> Please refer to the Appendix where I discuss how I considered engaging in a comparative study of the *MLGC* with the other queer choirs who participated in Leeds.

So the two things that could stamp our identity are: location, which is about community; and our sexual orientation, which is the community. And I think if we can just do that, if we can do that by next year, by next Mardi Gras, I think people are going to be, 'Oh. My. God' .

(John)

Chongwei corrects my excited outburst, and relocates or at least refocuses my direction ('the rest of the world!') to face the local audience ('rest of the community'); furthermore, the manner in which he indicates the importance of breaking the interiority of the choir ('but we'd be only singing for ourselves') to be part of the exterior but local queer community reveals a simultaneous desire for a localised cultural incorporation and recognition through the 'sharing the music'. Similarly John, who was giving me ideas on how the choir could change its repertoire, brings together 'community' with 'location', which are then juxtaposed against the more international and global event of Mardi Gras<sup>31</sup>. Furthermore John's wanting to shock the Mardi Gras audience for example, suggests a desire for the choir to be somehow different from the other acts whilst simultaneously wanting to be considered, if not admired, as part of them. It is precisely this dual force which drives the choir and propels it forward, between wanting to form an uniquely localised lesbian and gay identity through music against the homogeneity of the Village *whilst also* seeking a more globalised cultural incorporation – even acceptance – into a larger queer culture, represented by events like Mardi Gras (Pride).

I want to conclude this chapter by reflecting on something the *compere* at the Leeds event said when she welcomed everyone: 'it's wonderful to see all our local brand

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31 Manchester uses the term, 'Pride' whereas other cities like New York (USA) or Sydney (Australia) use 'Mardi Gras'. I use the term 'Mardi Gras' here referring to John use of this term.



of queer choirs brought together'. I think 'local brand' describes the conditions of queers in the city today: wanting to be part of a localised sense of communality and belonging, whilst also recognising the need for and seeking acknowledgement from a more global and competitive community. Whether it is for entertainment or as a political instrument, music enables local queer musicians to adopt a position of partiality. Queer theorist Arlene Stein refers to artists like k d lang who 'embrace lesbian identifications while achieving mainstream success, simultaneously acknowledging both lesbian marginality and membership in the dominant culture' (1995: 416). Stein's overall argument being that queers 'comprise a "partial culture", that is we share some basic interests that separate us from the rest of society, but we also wish to belong to the mainstream society' (ibid). What I want to suggest here is that whilst queers still comprise a partial culture, it is one which is defined less by being partial along the mainstream/subcultural axis. Instead, the partiality one that is now defined by questions of local/global identifications.

Within this context, coming out in contemporary queer culture is about creating a sense of queer belonging outside of what has increasingly become a diffused closet. Music spatialises the closet once again by creating pockets of queer belonging despite or because of the increasing fragmentation of the queer community. Being part of this sound through the social process of music-making can thus form part of a process of coming back out (or going back in) the closet. In this light, sexuality is that which informs when, where and how the closet is resurrected through music. Furthermore it concerns pleasure, a pleasure which is rooted less in the eroticisation of sexuality, but more in the pleasure in the very musical process of creating a place of queer belonging.

# **Part III**

## **A Lesbian and Gay Repertoire: Queerness in, and Queering of Music**

## ■ Chapter 5 ■

### What is a gay song?

#### Gay icons' songs, musicals, and queerness in music

At the moment, most of our songs, which are very enjoyable nonetheless, are not very different from those performed by other generic community choirs. As a LGBT organisation, we should have some songs in our repertoire that uniquely identify our membership. To expand the repertoire to include pieces which reflect our LGBT membership. These could be, but are not limited to:

- a. Songs made famous by gay icons
- b. Compositions of LGBT musicians
- c. Showtunes from musicals
- d. Disco or party songs
- e. Songs that reflect the experiences or struggles or lives of LGBT people (e.g. songs with a reflective, aspirational or inspirational nature).

#### (Proposal Regarding Chorus Repertoire)

When I first joined the choir, the repertoire was small and limited to a number of songs brought by the musical director, and did not differ from performance to performance other than their running order. But as the choir began to grow in number, skill, and reputation, members began to recognise their own place within a wider social context of the queer community as explored in Chapter 4. Consequently, the choir's own self-identity became an issue. Members began to regard songs as not just about being fun, but as reflecting their queer cultural identity: 'As a LGBT organisation, we should have some songs in our repertoire that uniquely identify our membership' (Proposal). Song choices therefore came

under heavy scrutiny, mainly because many felt the repertoire 'lacked the lesbian and gay element' (John). The repertoire was thus regarded as reflecting the *MLGC*'s group identity in facing the public: 'I want them to think, "that's why they're singing that" '(John); 'most of our songs, which are very enjoyable nonetheless, are not very different from those performed by other generic community choirs' (*MLGC* Repertoire Proposal).

'cause we are called you know, 'Manchester Lesbian and Gay Chorus' yet we lack the lesbian and gay element in our songs...to it's detriment really....we want to make the choir *mean* something, to being a Lesbian and Gay choir. (John)

Led by John, some members of the *MLGC* got together and formed a subcommittee group to deal specifically with repertoire related decisions. Along with 'song request forms' which the rest of the choir filled out, there were special meetings for the sole purpose of debating what should or should not go into the repertoire. Two related issues always seemed to arise from these ongoing debates. Firstly, many members were pushing for 'more gay songs' (as observed by Jed) but when it came to actually defining what a 'gay song' was, people varied in their opinions regarding what, where, or why a particular song was or was not gay and disagreed with the criteria listed in the Proposal.

What does this mean?

I don't know what constitutes a 'gay and lesbian song' really, I know what constitutes women's songs, or political songs...you know I've never been in this place of gay and lesbian culture before. (Kathryn)

Kathryn separates political songs and women's songs from 'this place of gay and lesbian culture'. Kathryn's statement suggests that there is a connection between 'gay and lesbian culture' and the ability to identify 'what constitutes a "gay and lesbian song"': hence her explanation for not knowing 'what constitutes a "a gay and lesbian song" ' being her unfamiliarity with 'gay and lesbian culture'. Over the course of this chapter and the next, I follow Kathryn's reflections to find out what exactly comprises 'the lesbian and gay element in our songs' (John). Through a careful examination of what the *MLGC* members consider as being a 'gay song' – and their reactions to singing these 'gay songs' – I want to identify what queerness means today, and how this is articulated and reproduced through music.

Secondly, there were many members who simply did not want to sing 'gay songs' because they found the given song either distasteful or embarrassing and wished to sing something else entirely. As a result there was a tension between those who wanted to be 'obviously gay' and those who wished to simply sing what they want. Herein lies the same tension explored in the last chapter, between music with a political purpose and music for entertainment (a matter of taste and enjoyment): this is reflected in the Proposal's 'At the moment, most of our songs, which are *very enjoyable nonetheless, are not very different* from those performed by other generic community choirs' (emphasis mine). Clearly there is a difficulty in bringing music, queer identity politics, and the question of aesthetics together. Throughout these next two chapters I want to investigate how the choir attempts to resolve this issue and what their resultant actions can tell us about the difficulties of

reading and articulating queerness in music. In the following discussion I shall focus on 'songs made famous by gay icons' (point A of the Proposal), and 'show-tunes, and disco/party songs' (points C and D)<sup>1</sup> to analyse them as music which is already associated with queer culture. What does it mean to sing these 'obviously gay' songs?

*'Songs made famous by gay icons' (point A, Proposal)*

Denise states that 'when it comes down to is there a genre that's gay, I wouldn't put 'Bohemian Rhapsody' in it but then I'd put Nina Simone in it but a lot of people wouldn't'. In Denise's remark, Nina Simone herself is listed alongside a song, 'Bohemian Rhapsody' (later on Denise states she wished the choir would sing, 'I wish I knew how it would feel to be free'). Certain songs are inseparable from the very singers who made them iconic, and similarly, certain singers are inseparable from the song(s) that gave them iconic status within LGBT culture: Gloria Gaynor and 'I will Survive', Judy Garland and 'Somewhere Over the Rainbow', Freddy Mercury and 'Bohemian Rhapsody' to name some of the specific requests made by members of the choir. What does it mean for queers to sing 'songs made famous by gay icons'?

Jed: [...] But well... is 'I am what I am' by *La Cage Aux Folles* a gay song? It's written by a straight composer as far as I know.

E: Does it have to be the composer?

J: Does it have to be the person who wrote it who's gay? Does it

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<sup>1</sup> In the next chapter I shall address 'compositions of LGBT musicians' and 'Songs that reflect the experiences or struggles or lives of LGBT people' (points B and E); here I shall be looking at issues surrounding authorship, authority, and the authoritative and the increasing emphasis within the choir to sing songs which were specifically written by, about, and for lesbians and gay men

have to be an artist who first did is gay? Shirley Bassey is hardly gay.

E: But she's a gay icon (twiddles fingers in mock reminder).

J: Yeah, she's a gay icon and what does that mean? What does gay icon mean? (mock desperation)

E: And lesbian icons?

J: There so few.

E: Yeah, really irritating.

J: k d lang. (laugh) are there any more?

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Katya: Yeah. And you know, what kind of songs would be there to sort of represent lesbians, d'you know what I mean?

What, you know....

Es and Katya (unison): k d lang?

Katya: OH. GOD. NO! D'you know what I mean!?! (sings)

'Black coffeeee' ...it's like, NO (laughs), you know, nooo!

These interviews were conducted soon after an AGM when the Proposal was passed around, and so the above statements were made in context to the internal discussions concerning the repertoire occurring at the time. Both Katya's and Jed's responses reveal prior knowledge of who 'gay icons' might be, and interestingly enough both mention k d lang as an icon who would 'represent lesbians' (Katya)<sup>2</sup>. Lang and Bassey are of course from different moments in music (and in fact gay and lesbian) history, not to mention from different factions of the LGBT community: lang is associated with lesbians, whilst Bassey more with gay men and drag queens. Yet as the countless Shirley Basseys walking down Canal Street almost every weekend to the ubiquitous Elvis-quiff<sup>3</sup> seen on many lesbians even today may suggest, these icons are an important part of queer culture.

Two main points struck me during interviews when the conversation veered

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<sup>2</sup> For specific reasons why k d lang is a lesbian idol, see Martha Mockus's 'Queer thoughts on k d lang' (1994), and Louise Allen's *Lesbian idol: Martina, kd and the consumption of lesbian masculinity* (1997)

<sup>3</sup> See, 'Women who do Elvis: authenticity, masculinity and masquerade' by Francesca Brittan (2006)

towards the repertoire, particularly the criterion 'songs made famous by gay icons': firstly, when thinking about who these 'gay icons' were, people either feigned ignorance at first and then consequently revealed their knowledge of these 'gay icons' and assumed automatic prior knowledge on my behalf; secondly, of all those I interviewed, everyone had an aversive reaction to the idea of singing 'songs made famous by gay icons' despite the song request sheets and the Proposal stating a majority of votes for 'songs made famous by gay icons'. Let us look at these two developments closely. One of the greatest aversions to 'songs made famous by gay icons' was the fact that people could still hear the 'ghost'<sup>4</sup> of the icon's voice. In other words, there was an inability to separate the icon from the song, so in singing their songs, members felt they were impersonating these icons. When Katya sang 'black coffeEEEE', at that moment we were not listening to Katya's voice but her imitation of k d lang's voice: there was a discrepancy between k d lang's voice and the actual voice of Katya, who was mimicking lang.

One way we can understand this gap between the 'original' voice (k d lang) and the 'copy' (Katya) is of course through Butler's ideas on imitation and impersonation<sup>5</sup>: 'there is a subversive laughter in the pastiche-effect of parodic practices in which the original, the authentic, and the real are themselves constituted as effects' (1990: 200). In this sense Katya is a purposeful 'failed copy' and our laughter could be defined through the idea of self-parody achieved through the vocal distance between lang and herself. However, the important point here is that Katya was never trying to embody the original or attempting

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4 I am using the word 'ghost' to allude to Terry Castle's work on the 'apparitional lesbian' (1993), a figure which describes the persistent but invisible lesbian presence and space of lesbian desire in films and literature.

5 See also Carole-Anne Tyler (1991), Sue-Ellen Case (1988/9); Esther Newton (1993)



to destabilize the authentic, and if anything, she was trying to mobilize the authentic in the past whilst she remained in the present. In other words, Katya's vocal imitation and mimicry of k d lang are not so much about the subversive discrepancy between original/copy in terms of Butlerian performativity and artifice, but about the conscious distancing between past and present. So whilst her vocal parody lies in the 'pastiche-effect' (*ibid*) as Butler states, the kind of pastiche happening with the Katya-lang axis is related more to a temporal practice, rather than a performative practice. Referring to pastiche (more on this later) Dyer states that it 'embodies the dialectic of our relationship to the past' (2007: 133). Katya's singing was thus a simultaneous acknowledgement but distancing (nooooo!) from times when k d lang was *the* only main lesbian icon available to lesbians ('k d lang (laughs) are there any more?' as Jed states).

However inasmuch as Katya's temporary imitation of k d lang marks her active distancing from a certain point in lesbian cultural history, there are those for whom singing 'songs by cultural icons' is way to bring them closer to their icons and is a part of their present queer everyday life. June told me how she 'is so good at impersonating gay icons that (she) does not know what my own voice sounds like', and in fact, she impersonates her icons so much that 'I don't even know what my voice is that's part of the problem. So in the choir it's quite difficult cause I've got nothing to go on other than just my voice and I find that really difficult'. Unlike the Katya-lang relationship, in June's case there *is* no gap or discrepancy between the original voice and the copied voice, her vocal impersonation being so complete that that she does not 'even know what my voice is'.

In her work discussing the female voice in cinema, Kaja Silverman argues that

'when the voice is identified with presence, it is given the imaginary power to place not only sounds but meaning in the here and now...it is understood as closing the gap between signifier and signified' (1988: 43). In closing the gap between herself ('my voice') and the other (her idol), June also closes the temporal gap between herself and her idol's voice, bringing their relationship together in the 'here and now' rather than being separated into past and present as it is with Katya and lang: 'I love to feel it, and just getting into it, to become part of the song really'. In 'becoming part of the song' she thus *becomes* the gay icon: 'Kathryn laughs cause she says 'who were you last night' and I said, 'I was Celine Dion last night when I got home' or 'I was Shakira', you know stuff like that'. Similarly, David likes to impersonate Kate Bush, and he told me how singing her songs were meaningful to him because at 'one level I feel like I *am* her perhaps'. In both of these accounts, singing is a process of coming as close as possible to the icon, unlike Katya's singing which was about distancing herself as much as possible from k d lang. Vocal impersonation in their case is thus not about parody, self-mockery, or even imitation; furthermore, vocal impersonation is not about the relationship between past and present but the presence of a past voice in the present, and it is in embodying this voice that is of significance to them as queers.

Phrases like 'becoming part of the song' echo Jackie Stacey's discussions of female spectatorship and how female spectators 'becoming part of the fantasy world on the screen' marks a 'temporary loss of the self and the adoption of the film persona' (1994:151); similarly, June loses herself – she does not even know what her own 'real' voice sounds like – and adopts the voice in the moment of singing. 'Songs made famous

by gay icons' link singers/listeners to their personal idols and icons, and are important in creating a sense of identification and/or desire; the relationship between June's voice and Celine Dion for example, is thus a sonorous equivalent of what Stacey argues as being part of 'the spectator/star relationship (which) significantly concerns forms of intimacy between femininities' based on a 'homoerotic pleasure in which the boundary between self and ideal produces an endless source of fascination' (1994: 173). In David's case, the situation is different in that he is a gay man and thus his vocal relationship with his idol is not one defined by a homoerotic pleasure but perhaps a queer heteroerotic desire *for* (rather than of) identification<sup>6</sup>. David's desire to become the other is based more on difference and paradoxical unattainability; a vocal travesty in effect, but a dragging which is based no so much on gender performativity, but more on issues surrounding fandom and star-gazing<sup>7</sup>. Singing songs made famous by gay icons are thus processes of identification, which constantly play with the boundaries of self and other, self and ideal through a process of vocal imitation and impersonation.

But June also likes to impersonate lesbian folk singer Christine Collester (she 'turned purple from embarrassment' when the two met) as an ardent fan, and I even accompanied June to go and see Christine Collester in concert. Within such a context, June's impersonation of Christine Collester is not only about a desire to be the other but *for* the other and thus relates to what queer musicologist Elizabeth Wood calls, 'sapphonic voice', a 'mode of articulation, a way of describing a space of lesbian possibility, for a

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6 Andrew Ross reflects upon the gay male identification with female stars and states, 'gay male identification of the female star was, first and foremost, an identification with women as *emotional* subjects in a film' (1999: 323).

7 Reference to Stacey's *Star gazing: Hollywood cinema and female spectatorship* (1994)

range of erotic and emotional relationships among women who sing and women who listen....an imaginary intimacy between voices' (1994: 27). Therefore, as these accounts begin to reveal, singing songs made famous by gay icons are thus often about the relationship between singer and icon, whether this is defined through questions of identification, disassociation, desire, or an acknowledgement of the past. One way or another, they reveal how songs become embodiments of the icon and vice versa, icons become the song.

But despite the apparent adversity (Jed, Katya) and beyond individual significances (June, David), singing 'songs made by famous gay icons' seem to have wider, social implications relating to the reproduction of queer culture and articulating a sense of 'shared meaning' (John):

So when people might think, 'well why does John keep going on about wanting to do "Bohemian Rhapsody"?' Well I think it's probably it's one of my least favourite songs, I actually don't like the song...it was written by probably one of the most famous gay men in Britain, you know? So yeah, it's about shared meaning really, so I would share that meaning with anyone who's interested. (John)

What is striking about John's statement is that he does not even like 'Bohemian Rhapsody' as a song, but because of the iconic status of its singer/composer Freddie Mercury as 'one of the most famous gay men in Britain' who died of AIDS in 1991. 'Bohemian Rhapsody' becomes iconic of a particular moment in gay and lesbian history<sup>8</sup>, a history that has to a large extent shaped and is still shaping queer political activism and lives as was discussed in the previous chapter. Plenty of choir members remember the AIDS epidemic first hand

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<sup>8</sup> See Richard Meyer's analysis of Rock Hudson's body in relation to media, homosexuality and AIDS (1991)

and as they have told me, Freddy Mercury stands as a symbolic public figure who reflected the millions of others who were 'fighting the horrible bug' (Michelle). Thus for John as a gay man, singing 'Bohemian Rhapsody' is both about remembering Freddy Mercury as 'one of the most famous gay men in Britain', and also, about the commemoration of a particular moment in LGBT history. DeNora analyses the ways in which her informants remember certain incidents in their past through the use of music, and argues that 'music may thus be seen to serve as a container for the temporal structure of past circumstances', particularly when such incidents 'came to be meaningful with reference to music, musical structures may provide a grid or grammar for the temporal structures of emotional and embodied patterns as they were originally experienced' (DeNora, 2000: 68). Not everyone remembers AIDS directly or as an 'embodied pattern as they were originally experienced', yet 'Bohemian Rhapsody' is part of a collective cultural jukebox demarcating a shared cultural memory: 'it's about shared meaning really, so I would share that meaning with anyone who's interested' (John).

In this manner, whilst 'Bohemian Rhapsody' does provide the 'grid of grammar for temporal structures of emotional and embodied patterns' of the queer past, its significance moves beyond the individual memory of a specific moment into being about the 'transmission of collective memory of identity' (Daynes, 2004: 3)<sup>9</sup>: hence John's 'it's about shared meaning really, so I would share that meaning with anyone who's interested'.

Singing 'Bohemian Rhapsody' is thus part of transmitting a queer collective memory of identity, where the musicalisation of LGBT history reflects a particular queer temporality

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<sup>9</sup> Sarah Daynes's essay discusses the musical construction of diaspora in relation to Reggae and Rastafari, how music serves as a cultural memory of the 'homeland'.

of living: as Halberstam argues, 'queer time perhaps emerges most spectacularly at the end of the twentieth century, from within those gay communities whose horizons of possibility have been severely diminished by the AIDS epidemic' (2005: 2). These songs are thus part of the politics of queer culture, because as queer historians<sup>10</sup> would tell us, it is in reclaiming and recovering gay men and lesbians pasts that is of political import: 'the history of homosexuality has an importance that goes well beyond filling in missing gaps in our knowledge of the past. It has already demonstrated that personal sexual behaviour is never simply a private matter, but is always shaped by *and* shapes the wider social and political milieu'. (Duberman *et al*, 1990: 13). By following the vocal footprints made famous by gay icons, the singing voice of the present stamps them into relief anew, making sure it leaves a constant mark in LGBT history, to 'never forget our past' (a motto for Winter, AIDS Vigil 2005).

Because of the close relationship between gay icon and a particular song, singing 'songs made famous by gay icons' becomes significant to queers in a number of ways: as June's or David's accounts demonstrate, it is often about the desire for and/or to be the icon and to embody them through the act of vocal impersonation. It is about signalling a knowledge of a shared culture and thus creating a sense of belonging, the same reason why *Downtown* was a success at Pride because audiences sang along. It is also about a shared history, memory, and the relationship between queers to their past, where singing songs like 'Bohemian Rhapsody' can situate queers upon a gay and lesbian time-line.

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10 See more in: Neil Miller (2005); George Chauncey (1994); Karla Jay (1992); Martin Duberman *et al*(1990)

*'Show tunes/songs from musicals, Disco/party songs' (points C and D, Proposal)*

In this section, I shall explore the idea of a 'gay genre', and address not only why certain genres have historically come to be associated with queers but what relevance this has today. For example as discussed in Chapter 4, the relationship between gay men and disco/dance was established because of their simultaneous emergence within an subcultural urban context. The expression of homosexuality and the consumption of a erotic sociality was thus related to a particular style of music which evolved solely around dancing<sup>11</sup>: hence the association between disco and 70s clone culture with gay men. Whilst the initial Proposal presented 'disco/party songs', when it came to practicalities this genre proved to be problematic. As an *a capella*, stylistically it became difficult for the *MLGC* to not only find the music but to reproduce it through singing voices alone. Referring to how he gets asked to arrange ABBA's disco songs, Jeff states: 'it's very difficult sometimes to be able to arrange a song like that...that's orchestral or electronic background to it....you just can't emulate it, it just wouldn't be possible'. However following the Proposal and repertoire related debates, the choir members *did* search for arrangements of show tunes. In this present discussion, I shall focus specifically on them as a 'gay genre'. Showtunes, particularly stage musicals, are by nature written to be performed by a large changing cast, and so they are on the whole polyvocal. Furthermore, whilst there are some songs which have become vocally iconic through a particular singer (like *Sound of Music* sung by Julie Andrews's distinctively clipped and clear voice),

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<sup>11</sup> Chapter 4 discusses this issue through Manchester's gay dance-based culture.

showtunes in general are not immediately associated with one particular voice. In this sense, 'showtunes/songs from musicals' differ from 'songs made famous by icons' because the focus lies not so much on a particular artist but rather its generic style. This might be an obvious statement to make but it is an important distinction because in the absence of a specific voice of 'a gay icon', the relationship between queers and a piece of music changes. If not an icon, what are queers relating to and being drawn by?

The relationship between musicals and gay culture has been explored mostly in cultural studies and queer studies. Some, like queer theorist Corey Creekmur reflect upon the aesthetic and ideological reasons behind the gay love affair with musicals: 'perhaps because musicals as a form acknowledge performance and reject bourgeois idealism or allow the vibrant vocal expression of private thoughts and feelings, gays have historically been especially attracted to this otherwise heterocentric genre' (Creekmur, 1995: 404)<sup>12</sup>. Similarly in discussing the relationship between gay men and Judy Garland – within which her music and singing are configured – film theorist Richard Dyer (1986) makes connections between Garland's double-life (between beautiful public persona as icon and tragic real life person in private) to queers' double-lives<sup>13</sup> in living in/out of the closet. Michael Bronski explores the movement from the other direction, arguing that Hollywood films 'shape gay culture but they are also shaped by the culture in which they exist....Hollywood turned to the gay sensibility to give straight audiences an alternative view of sexuality and gender' (1984: 109). Interestingly enough, Tinny alludes to this fact

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12 Sue Richard's 'Movies in disguise: negotiating censorship and Patriarchy through dances of Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers' (1996)

13 See Dyer's discussion on gay men and Judy Garland as being about 'a special relationship with ordinariness, particularly in the disparity between the image and the imputed real person' (1986: 156).



by stating how 'censors weren't even cottoning' onto how Hollywood was being 'so fucking queer' and 'people were getting away with stuff that by the 60s-70s would have never been possible'.

As the term 'friends of Dorothy' (a coded term for gay men) would suggest, Hollywood musicals have thus played an integral part in the production of gay and lesbian culture and sensibility and vice versa: as Alan Sinfield argues, 'cultural is political because texts are inseparable from the conditions of their production and reception in history' (Sinfield, 1994: viii); at the time when the majority of gay men and lesbians were still leading double-lives and were far more closeted than today, 'songs from musicals' were part of gay and lesbian knowledge production and can tell us 'of the way that a social-sexual identity has been understood and felt in a certain period of time' (Dyer, 1986: 194).

To expand upon the politics behind musicals in relation to queer culture – particularly gay men – I turn briefly to queer musicologist Philip Brett who reflects upon terms such as, 'friends of Dorothy' and 'he's musical' which signify male homosexuality. Brett conceptualises the relationship between music and homosexuality through the idea of a 'musical closet'. Brett links music – as a 'dangerous substance' that stirs the bodily passions – and homosexuality through the idea of deviance, and what must be 'hidden' and controlled (1994: 11-23). Consequently, Brett contests the oppression that gay musicians, music students and teachers, and composers must face in having to negotiate their position within/out of the musical closet; referring to Section 28 for example, Brett's discussion ends on a politically charged note, driven by his call for an end to the

suppression of a queer pedagogy in music teaching and practice: 'what was the point of all those coded messages about homosexual oppression, and pederasty if they prompted only further denial of their meaning, further entrenchment of the universalism and transcendentalism that make Western classical music a weak substitute for religion in capitalist society and divorce it from meaning?' (1994: 21). Yet, as explored in the last chapter, with the abolition of Section 28 and the increasing dissolution of the musical closet, the link between music and homosexuality must be conceptualised through other means than hiddenness or deviance. Within this context, how are queers relating to musicals as a genre commonly associated with queers, particularly gay men?

Denise: Yeah. You see *Something inside so strong* is an obvious one, it's not a song I like but it's an obvious one to put into the category.

Es: How is it 'obvious'?

Denise: Well Labi Siffre's gay. And I think it's often played... you know, at the end of nights and stuff like that? I've often heard it. And it's also a strength song isn't it? in adversity, you know, it's a more tasteful version of 'I will Survive' (laughs) which is the worst song on earth!

*Something inside so strong*<sup>14</sup> by Labi Siffre is not a song from a musical but I include Denise's remarks on it here because we were at this point talking about what a 'gay category' means, and what songs would be part of it. What is interesting about Denise's thoughts on *Something Inside So Strong* is that she finds the song to be a 'more tasteful version of *I will Survive*'. This suggests that whilst both songs are similarly understood through her thematic assessment of them ('strength song'; 'in adversity') they are separated

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14 I specifically discuss Siffre and *Something Inside so strong* in the following chapter.

by the fact that one is 'tasteful' and the other is perhaps not so tasteful ('worst song on earth!'). Similarly, other members' attitudes towards show tunes and the idea of a 'gay genre' in general are relatively negative, underlined by a sense of defiant rejection and an active refusal to sing musicals. John does not even like 'Bohemian Rhapsody' (Denise stated the song is 'obvious' but dismisses it); Jed rolls his eyes at the thought of doing 'gay songs' and even playfully challenges the very idea of anything being intrinsically gay ('what does gay icon mean anyway?'); Katya holds her head in her hands and cries out 'Noooooo!' at the thought of singing kd lang's songs.

Such reactions reveal the aforementioned underlying tensions between music with a purpose (political) and music for entertainment/enjoyment (aesthetic). On the one hand, members like John believe singing songs associated with queers (like 'Bohemian Rhapsody') is politically important at the cost of aesthetics. On the other hand, members like Denise value the aesthetics of a song over what is considered as being of political significance for the choir. However if we examine Denise's account below for example, what begins to emerge is an awareness, if not a sense of pleasure derived from this tension:

Yeah I mean which to me is...I mean when it comes down to is there a genre that's gay, I wouldn't put 'Bohemian Rhapsody' in it but then I'd put Nina Simone in it but a lot of people wouldn't. So you know, there is but...it's, you know there's lots of different gay scenes within the gay scene aren't there? And lots of different age groups so it's different and it's very difficult to... and yet! and YET! you know when we went to Leeds on the coach (laughs) and I had a really good laugh that day actually (laughs) Simon and I got really giddy on the way there and then on the way back but on the way there there were a group of guys behind us who started singing the songs and we really enjoyed

that, but what we really enjoyed most about it was that we accurately predicted the next one (laughs) we sat there, and they started singing 'New York, New York' and then I said, 'it's "I am what I am next"' (laughs) and they sang that! And we got it right five times in a row. (Denise)

Despite there being 'lots of different gay scenes within the gay scene', Denise is amused by the fact that she was able to accurately predict the next songs the boys were going to sing: the songs Denise refers to are both from musicals (*New York, New York* sung by Liza Minnelli in Martin Scorsese's *New York, New York* (1977); *I am what I am* from *La Cage aux Folles*, a Broadway musical by Arther Laurents (1983)) and as far as I can remember the others were 'Over the Rainbow' from Victor Fleming's *Wizard of Oz* (1939), 'Summer Nights' from Randal Kleiser's *Grease* (1978), 'Big Spender' from Bob Fosse's *Sweet Charity* (1966), 'Sound of Music' from Rodgers and Hammerstein's *Sound of Music* (1959), just to mention a few. Beneath the wincing that often accompanies such discussions of 'songs from musicals', there is always a slight crooked smile playfully suggesting a sense of pride. Members were embarrassed but fiercely proud, and this tension reveals how the relationship between musicals and queers in present day British culture is often about the pleasure of re-producing and the articulating of a sense of shared queer culture, and the knowledge of a shared cultural past. I use 'knowledge' because the very fact that singers in the coach knew all the lyrics – *expected* to know the lyrics – or that Denise and Simon played a game of predicting-the-next-song, all point toward the pre-existence of a collective cultural knowledge manifested as a collective gay repertoire. Being able to recognise and sing along these songs, is to participate in an act of

community-making as explored in the previous chapter.

In his discussion on gay heritage cinema, Dyer defines heritage as 'an attitude towards the legacy of the past, and thus a heritage sensibility values these 'left-overs' for 'their own sake, savours the qualities and presence of dwellings, costumes, artworks, objects' (2002: 206). Generic songs – particularly musicals – are thus referents of the past; they are citations of the knowledge once produced by gay and lesbians during the age of Hollywood musicals. In this sense, the question of aesthetics becomes a taste for the past, a nostalgia surrounding queer heritage values, 'our belonging in what is handed down as cherishable from the past' (Dyer, 2002: 210). Singing 'Over the Rainbow' is not so much about indirectly expressing a hidden sexuality through the lustre of musicals, but about directly expressing the existence and acknowledgement of this hidden past – in the gay and lesbian heritage – and 'sharing with anyone else who's interested' (John): herein lies the political relevance of musicals and established 'gay genres' for queers today, they form part of a musical queer nostalgia, lovingly mocked as musical relics from the past which now exist out of the closet: in the process of singing them, these songs have the effect of resurrecting the closet in some way, creating a sense of being 'in' by being 'out'. Perhaps this is why 'Over the Rainbow' is evoked time and time again, for as Dyer's detailed discussion on Judy Garland and this song suggest, part of the song's appeal to a gay crowd is its sense of renewal and hope, a mixture of both nostalgic longing for a lost innocence back in Kansas, but a hopeful moment looking over the rainbow.

John: (excited) How nice it would be if we did 'Somewhere Over the Rainbow' (sic) where the *men* sit down (laughs). That

would be remarkable, because everyone would expect the women to sit down, you know what I mean, 'cause 'friends of Dorothy' are typically gay men.

Es: Yeah, definitely...not breaking the rules perhaps but... playing with the rules perhaps, and—

John : Yeah, playing with the rules (winks).

I think the reason why there is a resistance towards singing these songs is because ironically, in being part of a gay and lesbian heritage, 'gay songs' and musicals have been subjected to repetition and re-citation. In order to be 'handed down as cherishable from the past' (Dyer, 2002: 210), these songs must be repeated in time to ensure their continuity in other words, to ensure continuity, these songs must be re-enacted time and again to a point where they are 'just too obvious' (Katya): 'it's often played...you know, at the end of nights and stuff like that'; the song itself is an almost expected part of queer musical culture, it 'is an obvious one to put into the category' (Denise). However nor is the singing of these songs just a matter of an historical torch being carried between queers' past and present, there is also an aspect of pleasure: the pleasure of looking back whilst simultaneously knowing that queers have moved on.

Being conscious of how 'Over the Rainbow' is now an 'expected' and 'obvious' song, John makes suggestions to 'play around with the rules': his wishing women to sing reflects the increasing awareness within the choir, for example, to include women in areas which have been largely associated with men<sup>15</sup>: 'songs from musicals' are often regarded 'as a gay men thing' (Katya, Denise, Kathryn). By moving against the common expectation that gay men – or 'friends of Dorothy' – would sing this particular song,

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<sup>15</sup> Terry Castle writes about her love of opera, and interestingly she explains how as a lesbian and woman she must 'come out' as an opera lover.

John's suggestion is related directly to the idea of pastiche which I want to now discuss in relation to the question of heritage. In his work which explores the different definitions and uses of pastiche, Dyer argues that pastiche is about being close to its referent, being neither identical nor distinct from it and as such it is both social and sociable. Social, because it accepts the 'forms and frameworks of meaning and affect available to it, it acknowledges itself as being in the realm of already said'. It is sociable because 'in acknowledging where it comes from, it embraces closeness and accepts the possibility of being seduced, penetrated, dependent or ventriloquised' (2007: 179). 'Over the Rainbow' is the referent and it is 'obvious' because within the context of pastiche, it is 'within the realm of already said' (*ibid*): hence the existence of terms like 'friends of Dorothy'. Interestingly, when I responded to John's suggestion with 'yeah...not breaking the rules perhaps but...playing with the rules', he immediately jumps at my rewording and accentuated the change of wording with a wink. This is a revealing moment, for 'breaking' implies an alteration so complete that it disassociates one with the referent, whereas 'playing' implies a sense of staying within the existing frameworks of meaning and affect available to it' whilst simultaneously producing something different, all the whilst signalling the fact that he is doing it.

In this light, John's pastiche of 'Over the Rainbow' is both social and sociable because it acknowledges the cultural importance of the song in the past for queers (as discussed earlier on) and builds upon it, ensuring its continuity whilst avoiding the 'obviousness' that comes from repetition. John's vision can thus be read as his attempt to re-connect and re-align present day queer culture to its past by coming closer to its

referent: his pastiche is indeed an example of a 'connection to the affective frameworks, the structures of feeling, past and present, that we can inherit and pass on' (Dyer, 2007: 180). Furthermore, there is a sense of pleasure in re-assigning, re-enforcing, and re-producing queer culture through a piece of music to 'reflect the experiences or struggles or lives of LGBT people' (Proposal) today: John is excited about his plans, as are the rest of the choir who have unanimously agreed they would enjoy singing 'Over the Rainbow'. As I am writing these words, 'Over the Rainbow' is being arranged by a choir member called Paul. His arrangement of 'Over the Rainbow' will be handed out to the choir members to be taught and eventually, the song will become part of the *MLGC* repertoire.

I want to conclude this section with Paul because it captures the movement between past, present, and future through queer musical temporalities. 'Obviously gay' music is a precious cultural relic which connects gay men and lesbians to a shared cultural past, and furthermore, transmits a 'collective memory of identity' (Daynes, 2004: 3) into the future. In the process of singing them in the present, these songs signal that we are all in 'the know' together – mocking but secretly celebrating – and can understand their relevance to queer culture because we are queer. Within this context, queerness in music is less about the 'lesbian and gay element' *per se*, but more about the ability to read and to articulate the cultural significance behind the 'lesbian and gay element' in a song. It is thus that the singing of 'songs made famous by gay icons' and show tunes from musicals often surpasses the question of taste. Or rather, taste becomes part of the politics of queer cultural production, and part of the pleasure taken in embodying, signalling, articulating and re-affirming a sense of shared culture and queer belonging: 'to share that meaning



with anyone who's interested' (John). Queerness in music is thus about finding 'this place of gay and lesbian culture before' (Kathryn) through existing 'gay songs'.

## Chapter 6

### The Struggle to Sing:

#### LGBT composers and the politics of representation

I feel it's (the repertoire) lacking in cultural understanding, I think it would be. Because Jeff's straight, he doesn't understand what it is to be gay. It's impossible 'cause heterosexuality is always there, and I thought I was the only person. I knew there were things in London but that didn't count did it? So he'll never know that.

(John)

I mean if you look at straight people, and heterosexuality...so many different ways of expressing that heterosexuality, like ordinarily, queer people don't really get to show that side.

(Tinny)

John's and Tinny's accounts indicate lesbians and gay men<sup>1</sup> are still dealing with a sense of marginality: '(Jeff) doesn't understand what it is to be gay. It's impossible 'cause heterosexuality is always there' (John); 'like ordinarily, queer people don't really get to show that side' (Tinny). In contrast to homosexuality, both accounts present heterosexuality as being a more privileged position, freer in expression as well as being 'always there' (John). Such points demonstrate that whilst social and cultural changes in contemporary Britain may have liberated LGBT people, as Jed's speech made after the homophobic attacks referred to in Chapter 3 suggests, the queer community still have a 'long way to go' (Jed). Within this context, calls for changes in the repertoire reveal how members are still trying to make sense of their marginality through music. Hence the

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<sup>1</sup> Tinny uses the term *queer* (people) whilst John on the other hand, refers to 'gay'. However both use these terms against 'heterosexuality'. In this chapter I shall be using mostly LGBT people, or lesbians/gay men to reflect the repertoire criterion which uses the term 'LGBT people'.

criterion in the Repertoire Proposal: 'songs that reflect the experiences or struggles of LGBT people'. As shall be seen, these are experiences specific to LGBT people such as being in the closet ('I thought I was the only person' -John) or 'passing' ('don't really get to show that side' -Tinny).

Furthermore, the desire to take control over what kind of songs the choir sings is related to another issue in the choir. In comparing the *MLGC* with other queer choirs she saw at a festival in Leeds, Kathryn states, 'I think they were more political than we are. I would like us to be more political'. Asked what she meant, Kathryn responded, 'political songs, you know, about being lesbian'. Kathryn's statement suggests that a 'political song' is a song which somehow reflects an LGBT person's condition in life: 'about *being* lesbian' (emphasis mine). How these two – politics and the articulation of LGBT experiences through music – are connected takes us to the heart of understanding the relationship between music and the queer politics of cultural production. In defining the politics of culture in *Culture of Queers* (2002), Dyer argues that 'works of art express, define and mould experience and ideas, and in the process makes them visible and available'; and it is here that culture becomes of political importance to queers because the 'sense of social identity, of belonging to a group, is a prerequisite for any political activity proper, even when that identity is not recognised as political' (2002: 15). Similarly, how can we understand 'gay songs' as being not only about the production of queer culture as seen in the last chapter, but also about queer politics of cultural production? In other words, how does music politicise queerness? Can music-making be a form of queering?

In the following discussion, I want to examine the two remaining criteria outlined in the original Repertoire Proposal: 'Songs that reflect the experiences or struggles or lives of LGBT people (e.g. songs with a reflective, aspirational or inspirational nature)' (point E); and 'Compositions of LGBT musicians' (point B). In the first half of this chapter I shall examine why some *MLGC* members found certain songs chosen by Jeff to be: 'total oppression in my eyes', 'inappropriate' (John), 'offensive and homophobic' (Eleanor), 'hurtful' (Kathryn), 'harmful' (Denise). Here, the aim is to identify what exactly are the 'experiences or struggles or lives of LGBT people' today and how music draws attention to areas of queer contestation. The second half of the chapter will explore the question of queer musical authorship, and why a composer's queer sexual orientation is important to the members of the *MLGC*. Why is it political to sing songs by LGBT composers? I want to thus understand not only what the 'experiences or struggles or lives of LGBT people' are today but also how these sentiments are politicised through the very mode of musical production.

*'Songs that reflect the experiences or struggles or lives of LGBT people' (point E, Proposal)*

I wonder if we had a lesbian and gay musical director, whether the choices of songs would be different? (Kathryn)

After Kathryn made the above statement, she referred to Jeff's predecessor, a lesbian musical director called Miriam. According to Kathryn, the choir had been 'more political'

with the lesbian musical director because she had chosen more songs 'about being lesbian'. As Kathryn's juxtaposition between Jeff as a straight man and Miriam as a lesbian suggests, running concurrently with members' attempts to define who they are through the songs they sing, there is also an urge to define who they are *not*. Why should lesbians have to sing about how '*he* drives me crazy' (Vivian referring to 'We Go Together' from *Grease*)? Why should we have to sing about an 'Irish Blessing' when 'Ireland is so heterosexualist' (John)? For many members, Jeff's identity as a straight man is regarded as the reason behind 'inappropriate' (John, Kay) song choices which are 'lacking in cultural understanding' (John) or at times 'offensive and homophobic' (Eleanor). As a consequence many members challenged Jeff and his song choices, arguing they were either sexist and/or homophobic.

There was an accumulation of incidents which led to John's aforementioned 'little rebellion' but there were two particular songs introduced by Jeff which were significant in that they are both referred to in a number of my interviews, and they are what caused most problems. In the first case, the song was deemed offensive to lesbians and women, where gender subjugation and what some members regarded as being sexism was of concern. In the second case the song was for some members, offensive to LGBT people in general where issues of homophobia and the oppression of homosexuality were problematised. Therefore, in the following discussion I want to identify what aspects of these songs members are troubled by and how they reflect ongoing queer political issues relevant to LGBT members' lives today. I noticed how during interviews, discussions about the repertoire, or confrontations between some members, many talked as a group

(or small factions within the choir) whose concerns originated from similar individual negative experiences in their lives as LGBT people. Furthermore by exploring the 'little rebellions' (John) against Jeff and his choices in music, I want to explore how singing or not singing these pieces of music can be an active, political means of challenging the 'total oppression in my eyes' (John).

(i) 'Humbalulu': lyrics, lesbians, and language of signification

Denise states some songs have 'suggestions built into them, they have messages encoded'. She was referring to how the children she worked with often rapped all day long, and she had observed these suggestions becoming ingrained into them. I referred to the Beenie Man<sup>2</sup> at this point because at the time of our interview, his song lyrics had caused a lot of controversy amongst LGBT activists who regarded them as homophobic and harmful to the LGBT community. Denise agreed. Yet she also clarified that she was not necessarily referring to lyrics. She regarded some songs as 'narratives' whilst others had messages running beneath the lyrics, 'built into' the song. It was the latter kind of song that she was most concerned about in relation to the choir's ongoing search for 'appropriate songs to sing' (John). There is a large body of work which addresses the

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2 Jamaican reggae artist and dancehall entertainer Beenie Man first created controversy in September 2003 when gay rights campaigners such as Peter Tatchell and OUtRage! complained to the police that his lyrics and music incite homophobic assault and murder. In 2004 he was banned from an MTV concert, and again in 2006 after a three day protest, organisers of an HIV/AIDS charity concert decided to exclude him from the event. The interview with Denise occurred midst of these events being reported in both national and LGBT news. <<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/entertainment/music/3600572.stm>>, <<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/entertainment/music/3120096.stm>>, <<http://arts.guardian.co.uk/news/story/0,,1284708,00.html>>, <<http://www.pinknews.co.uk/news/articles/2005-2205.html>>

question of musical meaning<sup>3</sup> through a variety of avenues from musical score (notation, tone, scale, rhythm) to the semiotics of lyrics and sounds<sup>4</sup>. Following Denise's cue, I want to investigate her idea of songs with 'messages encoded', messages which for some lesbian members of the choir were troublesome because they had meaning beyond the narrative words of a song.

The song in question is an African song entitled 'Humbalulu', and the choir was singing along quite happily until the day Jeff took time to translate the lyrics. The story behind the song was of a young girl who was lamenting the prospect of having to leave her village and beloved family in order to marry. When Jeff finished translating the song, Kathryn raised her hand and challenged him, stating she did not want to sing 'such an oppressive song to women'. There was a supportive cheer from a lot of women in choir as Jeff took the acetate projecting the lyrics off from the OHP and set it aside. Kathryn, John, and Tinny all refer to this incident as being a moment where the choir was 'political with a small p' (Tinny). What is interesting here is that how melodically and phonetically, no one had a problem with 'Humbalulu' until the lyrics were translated into English. This suggests that the problem lies in the articulation of the meanings behind words, rather than the articulation of words *per se* as musicalised phonetic sounds. Kathryn's protest is therefore related to two issues.

On a personal level as a feminist lesbian, she did not want to identify or be

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3 Musical meaning can entail gestures, expressions, social meaning, aesthetics of a music. See for example, Steven Davies, *Musical Meaning and Expression*, (1994); Wilson Coker's *Music and Meaning: a theoretical introduction to Musical Aesthetics* (1972)

4 See Julia Kristeva's discussions on poetic language and language code (1986); Roland Barthes 'Grain of the Voice' (1977)

identified as the girl in the narrative. According to popular music theorist Simon Frith who discusses the relationship between lyrics and the voice, 'words are used to define a voice and vice versa (Frith, 1996: 199)'. The 'I' in 'Humbalulu' is a woman, and her subjectivity is defined through her imminent (forced) marriage. By refusing to sing the words to 'Humbalulu', Kathryn was in effect refusing to be defined by the song lyrics. Similarly, there were several lesbian members of the choir who did not want to sing male pronouns in songs, particularly in relation to a female 'I'. For example 'We Go Together' from the musical *Grease* caused problems because of lines such as: "shoop be du bop shoop be du bop, I know he's my baby'. Vivian stated, 'it's a bit awkward really, I feel uncomfortable' because the song describes a heterosexual relationship. At a lesbian civil partnership ceremony, 'We Go Together' was sung but the pronouns were changed in order to suit the occasion: 'I know she's my baby'.

Kathryn was also problematising the choir singing the song to an audience, where her concern was related to the representation of women and aestheticisation of the condition of women being forced into marriage. Therefore 'Humbalulu' was 'total oppression in my eyes. And total oppression in Kathryn's eyes' (John) because of the social 'message built into' the musical narrative. Such moments highlight the specificity of lesbian experiences as women, and how they are articulated not through what songs are sung but through the *refusal* of singing certain songs. Such issues can be related to feminist critiques on female subjectivity, languages of signification and speaking positions<sup>5</sup>. Lesbian philosopher Monique Wittig for example argued that it is only in

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<sup>5</sup> Luce Irigaray (1996); Farwell, (1992), Diana Fuss (1989); Helene Cixous (1986); Denise Riley (1988); bell hooks (1982); Monique Wittig (1981rep1992)



lesbianism that women are free from the binary system of phallogocentric signification: 'the refusal to become (or to remain) heterosexual always meant to refuse to become a man or a woman....for a lesbian this goes further than the refusal of the *role* "woman". It is the refusal of the economic, ideological, and political power of a man' (1992: 13). In this light, Kathryn's refusal to sing 'Humbalulu' or the changes in pronouns for 'We Go Together' for the lesbian civil partnership ceremony, are part of their politics that refuses the economic, ideological and political power of man: 'you know, political about being lesbian' (Kathryn, referring to how she wants to sing more political songs). Their acts demonstrate the use of lyrics as a textual basis for the contestation of sexist and heterosexual modes of signification, a queering of lyrics that reflect seeks an alternative mode lesbian signification. As such they challenge the inherent sexism and heterosexuality of the songs as part of a wider political lesbian agenda.

(ii) 'Religious songs': homosexuality, homophobia, and songs as discourse

One of the most divisive rehearsals I attended involved a song called, 'Irish Blessing'. Upon Jeff presenting it to us and before we even got past the first line, some members sat down refusing to sing it, others walked off to the bar, went back home, or even left the choir permanently. In the interviews, no one particularly remembers the narrative or the story behind the song (like 'Humbalulu'), but what people remember is the word 'blessing' and/or 'God'. Related, on a separate occasion, we were presented with *Locus Iste* by Anton Bruckner and despite no member having any great knowledge of

Latin, the reaction was similar to 'Irish Blessing'. Both songs and others like it became classified and referred to as 'Religious songs' in consequent discussions/debates and has always caused concern amongst some choir members. Some argued that 'religious pieces' were 'detrimental' (John) to the choir, whilst other argued that most music we sing today is commissioned by the Church so they saw no reason why the choir could not sing 'religious pieces'. This conflict is related to the fact that choir members regard 'religious pieces' as being connected to the Church as an institution: a moral institution<sup>6</sup> for the former group, and a musical institution<sup>7</sup> for the latter. It is the former association which caused problems, both an individual level and a wider social level.

Yeah, I mean the other thing is I mean you might think I'm labouring a point really, but Ireland is still quite a homophobic – I hate that term actually – it's quite a heterosexist country. You know, we buried one of John's – my partner's – aunts this year and this old dear came back, obviously very Irish said, 'who are you?' and I said, 'I'm John's partner' and she went apopleptic (*sic*). 'John's partner!? John's partner!? What does it mean!? John's partner!?' and people had to calm her down, 'Oh you mean, friend, friend' and I said, 'No-oo' I said, 'I'm his partner' I'm not bothered, they can throw me out (laughs) but 'friend'? You know what I mean? So then I am getting this, 'Irish Blessing' this Irish God's Blessing and everything, there aint blessing in this you know what I mean (laughs). (John)

John presents us with a recent and personal example (2004) of the 'experiences, struggles, and lives of LGBT people', where his account describes a homophobic – or as he

rephrases, 'heterosexist' – reaction to his identity as a gay man. This incident is given as a

<sup>6</sup> Here, I am alluding to Michel Foucault's discussion on the Church as one of the three institutions to produce the discourse on sexuality: canon law, Church pastoral teaching, civil law (1978). 'Religious music', can thus be read as being part of the Church's discourse on sexuality which constructs homosexuality as being morally and spiritually 'deviant' and 'wrong'.

<sup>7</sup> John Potter discusses the institutionalisation of music, and the standardisation of vocal pedagogy (1998)

reason for his refusal to sing 'Irish Blessing', related to the position of homosexuality (gay men's in John's case) in relation to the Church as an institution. Here, the lyrics from 'Irish Blessing' (John specifically picks 'God's Blessing' out) is associated to the Church and its moral and its canonical law against homosexuality: 'so then I am getting this, 'Irish Blessing' this Irish God's Blessing and everything, there aint blessing in this you know what I mean'.

Similarly, Eleanor sent an email around to the choir expressing her distress and concern over these pieces of music because for her, singing them was the equivalent of supporting and affiliating the choir with the Church as an institution which condemns homosexuality: 'the Church is homophobic' she wrote. What fanned the flames even more at the time was the fact that this song was presented to us shortly after the death of Pope John Paul II and the election of Pope Benedict XVI, known for his strong views against homosexuality. In discussing discursive constructions of sexuality, philosopher Michel Foucault states, 'from the singular imperialism that compels everyone to transform his sexuality into a permanent discourse, to the multiple mechanisms which, in the areas of economy, pedagogy, medicine and justice, incite, extract, distribute and institutionalise sexual discourse, our civilization has demanded and organized an immense prolixity' (1978: 45-6). In this light, we can understand 'religious songs' as being related to the discourse of the Church and similarly, John's and Eleanor's protestations can be read as a refusal to 'incite, extract, distribute and institutionalise' such a discourse.

ACTUP's response to Pope Benedict XVI and the Catholic Church<sup>8</sup> (same period

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<sup>8</sup> ACTUP (AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power) state: 'The Catholic Church has long taught men and women to loathe their bodies and to fear their sexual natures. This particular vision of good and evil continues to

as *Locus Iste* being presented to the choir) reveals that queer activism – particularly surrounding the issue of AIDS – is still very much concerned with challenging the power of the Church. As I have been discussing in Chapters 3 and 4, the global fight against AIDS and homophobia are two main concerns for the local queer activists, and as a local queer choir who actively participates and supports anti-homophobic and AIDS awareness-raising events and charities, singing religious pieces poses a problem for the choir. Members like Eleanor and John were concerned over the presentation of the choir, and what the audiences might think if they sang 'religious pieces'. Paradoxically, in enacting ACTUP's 'silence=death' motto, those who sat down during the rehearsal were using silence – rather than noise or sound – as a vocal device.

However having stated this, such acts of defiance by some members of the choir had the effect of silencing others. For example, not everyone in the choir is lesbian and similarly, some members are Christian. Concerning the latter, several emails by Christian choir members followed Eleanor's initial calls for removing 'Irish Blessing'. As one of the emails explained, it was already 'a challenge to be both Christian and gay', and so they were hurt and disappointed that they felt they had to 'come out as a Christian'. Such incidents and remarks highlight the difficulty in defining *one* experience common to the LGBT community, reflecting the debates within queer theory regarding the erasure of difference under an umbrella term 'queer': racial, class, LGBT, gender identifications and

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bring suffering and even death. By holding medicine hostage to Catholic morality and withholding information which allows people to protect themselves and each other from acquiring the Human Immunodeficiency Virus, the Church seeks to punish all who do not share in its peculiar version of human experience and makes clear its preference for living saints and dead sinners. It is immoral to practice bad medicine. It is bad medicine to deny people information that can help end the AIDS crisis. Condoms and clean needles save lives as surely as the earth revolves around the sun. AIDS is caused by a virus and a virus has no moral'. (ACTUP website)

so on<sup>9</sup>. Furthermore, there were some members who just wanted to 'enjoy singing, without all the politics' (Mel), and in 2006 an independent 'Madrigals group' (to meet at the organiser's house) formed for those in the choir who wished to 'work through beautiful music together' without causing offence. This group were also the same people who regarded the Church as a musical institution, and by extension 'religious pieces' as an aesthetic choice. The fact that the Madrigals group sought a different time and place to sing 'religious songs' reveal the difficulty in bringing music and politics together within the realms of the aesthetic: 'It's very, very hard to find music that's unaccompanied – that's *a capella* – that's beautiful *and* that fits with the community, that it fits their perception of who they are and that they want to get that over in what they're singing' (Jeff). The question is, how does the choir resolve – if at all – the tension between queer politics and 'beautiful music' whilst simultaneously attempting to represent the diversity of experiences and political identifications within the LGBT community?

*I would want to sing things that were written by lesbian and gay composers' - Kathryn*

Labi Siffre's 'Something Inside So Strong' is consistently mentioned in nearly all of my interviewees' accounts, and has also persisted through multiple revisions of the Repertoire Proposal. Why is this the case?

Yeah, I mean I'm not too crazy about fluffy stuff. I would say, it would be songs that mean something to us as a community. Now, 'cause we are so diverse we're going to have to find a way of balancing that. You know for me, 'Something Inside So

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<sup>9</sup> See Donna Haraway's work on situated knowledges (1991), Nancy Hartsock's standpoint feminism (1998)

Strong' by whatisname....Labi Siffre, which is written about  
being gay isn't it? (Kathryn)

Kathryn is pondering what song would balance the diversity within the choir and she chooses 'Something Inside So Strong': her reason being, it would 'mean something to *us as a community*' (emphasis mine). The implication here being that Siffre's song describes some sort of common experience of 'being gay'. Furthermore, Kathryn continued on describing songs that she thought were 'communal' songs ('socialist songs, I suppose) but she concluded that at the end of the day, the song would mean more if they were written by LGBT composers: 'I would want to sing things that were written by lesbian and gay composers'. Why is a gay composer's music meaningful to queers as a community? And why is their music interpreted as 'written about being gay'? I want to answer these questions by examining the choir members' thoughts on 'Something Inside So Strong'.

'Something Inside So Strong' won the Ivor Novello award in 1987 and reached number 4 in the UK charts. On his personal website<sup>10</sup>, Siffre describes himself as a 'Black, English poet, songwriter and singer' and later on in his biography, his sexual orientation is implied through a reference to Peter, his partner since 1964. Siffre states that he wrote 'Something Inside So Strong' 'for those people who do not have a voice'<sup>11</sup>, and indeed, the song has been used by many different groups since then. The website lists: used as an anti-apartheid anthem in South Africa, sung by countless women's groups, disability groups, sexual abuse recovery groups, Amnesty International, used in a car advert and as an anthem by the IRA. Clearly, the song is inspiring to many people because as Denise

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10 <<http://www.intothelight.info/>>

11 See interview with Siffre published in *The Argonist* (1997)

states, it is a 'strength song' (Denise) in the 'face of adversity' (Kathryn). Why is this song of particular significance to LGBT people?

The chorus includes, 'you thought that my pride had gone', a line which a choir member named Dom (who eventually arranged and taught the song to the rest of the choir) thought was particularly important because 'well it has the word "pride" in it doesn't it?'. Similarly Kathryn told me how the phrase 'something inside so strong' refers to feelings of having to keep one's sexual identity repressed, 'inside my head' which 'simply cracked me up' (Kathryn). Thus the two common experiences of 'being gay' which members seem to interpret and be drawn to in 'Something Inside So Strong' is: being in the closet, and being proud once out of the closet.

There are people from different parts of the community....I suppose different strands within the community, like there are young, trendy people, and there are older people who might not have been out, you know what I mean? (Eleanor)

'Young, trendy people' suggests a kind of free and outgoing sense of being 'out', whilst 'older people who might not have been out' refers to the state of still being in the closet, or just about coming out of it. Clearly, despite the diversity of the choir and the social, cultural and legislative changes in Britain as already discussed, these two experiences remain as a common aspect of 'being gay' today. It is of no wonder, that 'Something Inside So Strong' is 'meaningful to us as a community' (Kathryn) because it seems to describes both of these conditions of 'being gay'. However, there must be something other than the meaning of the lyrics, otherwise other songs that include the word 'pride' could

be just as significant to the members. What begins to emerge out of the interviewees' remarks is the importance of a composer's life and sexual identity in interpreting lyrics 'written about being gay' (Kathryn).

Denise: Yeah. You see 'Something Inside So Strong' is an obvious one, it's not a song I like but it's an obvious one to put into the category.

Es: How is it 'obvious'?

Denise: Well Labi Siffre's gay.

Denise does not even refer to the lyrics or the content of the song, she simply equates the song as an 'obvious one' (in relation to 'gay songs') simply because 'Labi Siffre's gay': Siffre is the *reason* the song is about 'being gay'.

In discussing the issue of authorship, queers and cultural production through the director/film dynamic, Richard Dyer states:

The idea of authority implied in that of authorship, the feeling that it is a way of claiming legitimacy and power for a text's meanings and affects, is indeed what is at issue in overtly lesbian/gay texts. They are about claiming the right to speak as lesbian/gay, claiming a special authority for their image of lesbianism/gayness because it is produced by people who themselves are lesbian/gay' (2002:40).

Siffre wrote this song 'for those people who do not have a voice', and as an LGBT composer, he claims legitimacy and special queer authority over his words – like 'pride' – 'because it is produced by people who themselves are lesbian/gay'. Siffre's words are thus valued and trusted as a representation of how life is or once was for LGBT people *as told* by someone who 'knows what it's like' (John), unlike Jeff, a straight man whom John feels



would 'never know that'.

John: [...] So for example 'Something Inside So Strong', it's about...being oppressed, yeah? It doesn't matter *how* you're oppressed...I can see it from a Black person's point of view even though I can't really, but I can...understand...I can....

Es: Intellectually?

John: Yes thank you, intellectually see it from a Black person's point of view. But I see it from a gay point of view, but whatever sense of marginality you get from that song, it's a deeply emotional song...yeah....so that would have "obvious" meaning, we wouldn't have to spell that one out really, would we? And whoever was in the choir, whoever is in the audience: they would get that.

John states, 'it doesn't matter how you're oppressed', the song is about oppression and 'whatever sense of marginality you get from the song, it's a deeply emotional song'. John's reference to whether he can 'see it from a Black person's point of view' or 'from a gay point of view' is a direct reference to Siffre's identity as a Black, gay man<sup>12</sup>. Siffre's identity as a gay man thus particularises the oppression described in the song as being about gay oppression. However, it is not only Siffre's sexual identity that makes this a 'gay song', for John brings his own 'point of view'. John is quite careful in stating that he cannot understand the song from a Black man's point of view (because he is not Black), in contrast to how he *can* as a gay man. John's reference to his own sexual identity suggests that 'Something Inside So Strong' is valued emotionally because of the empathetic exchange occurring between Siffre as gay man and John as a gay man. This empathetic transaction is precisely what makes the song significant – and political – to

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<sup>12</sup> McBride (2005) explores the figure and work of James Baldwin using black and queer studies to examine similar issues concerning authorship, race and sexuality.

LGBT people as it establishes a 'sense of a shared cultural understanding', 'sense of marginality' (John), and 'mean something to us as a community' (Kathryn). Furthermore it is also the articulation of empathy that John finds meaningful and significant within a wider social context: 'And whoever was in the choir, whoever is in the audience: they would get that'. In this light what does it mean to thus *sing* such words by a LGBT composer?

According to popular music theorist Simon Frith who discusses the relationship between lyrics and the voice, 'words are used to define a voice and vice versa (Frith, 1996: 199)'. There was a 'little rebellion' against Jeff at one point, the underlying problem being that as a straight man he should not be the one to choose songs for an LGBT choir, or introduce the choir at the beginning of performances: indeed as Dyer states, it is 'about claiming the right to speak as lesbian/gay, claiming in a special authority for their image of lesbianism/gayness because it is produced by people who themselves are lesbian/gay' (2002:40). 'Songs by LGBT composers' is thus about self-representation, and the right to choose who is defining one's voice. Herein lies the political drive behind the choir's attempts to take control over the repertoire, and over the insistence to sing 'songs by LGBT musicians'. As Eleanor states, 'it's about principle': singing words written by a gay man is about musically defining queerness through an empathetic shared 'cultural understanding'. It is about social continuity, a shared authorship of a song, and about the right for self-definition and claiming authority over self-representation.

Such points move us into another aspect of authorship and 'songs by LGBT musicians' which concerns the choir members' desire to arrange their own music. One of

the most unresolved and problematic issues in the choir (from as early as when I joined in 2004) is the tension between: the straight musical director's choices in music based on technical issues (difficulty, availability of music, ease of teaching the song) and the LGBT choir members' choices based more on their desire for self-representation. Kathryn for example states, 'I would like us to be more political. And *I think the choir has been depending on who's been in it*. You know, political about being lesbian (emphasis mine)'. Kathryn is referring to Jeff's predecessor who was a lesbian, and straight after making this comment, she muses, 'I wonder if we had a lesbian and gay musical director, whether the choices of songs would be different?'. The relationship between the LGBT choir members and Jeff as a straight, music director needs further exploration as it relates directly to issues of 'claiming the right to speak as lesbian/gay, claiming in a special authority for their image of lesbianism/gayness because it is produced by people who themselves are lesbian/gay' (Dyer, *ibid*). Often the case is more about the right to choose songs, than the what the songs are *per se*.

In an essay entitled, 'Authority and Freedom: toward a sociology of the Gay Choruses' (1994), queer musicologist Paul Attinello discusses the relationship between gays and authority and the manner in which this relationship is played out within gay choruses. Arguing that gay subculture is characterised by 'gay anarchy' which pushes against what he calls 'an administrative society i.e. paranoid/facist', Attinello turns to the implicit structures of gay choruses which he regards as being 'a highly authoritarian structure, requiring strict allegiance to the sole figure of the director, from whom all power flows' (1994:322). Attinello describes this power as being a result of the

conductor's role in having control over people's voices (as opposed to other instruments), which he argues can 'attack certain very basic aspects of (one's) presentational identity' (*ibid*). Jeff's role is to a certain extent the most authoritative – and here I mark a difference between 'authoritative' and 'authoritarian' – within the choir because he is in control over the sounds, voices, and the space the choir consists of. For example, Jeff physically adjusts the choir when he thinks a sound is not right, he commands the choir to sing in certain ways, or even introduces the choir during performances. In relation to the Repertoire Group which he formed, John states, 'but I explained to him (Jeff) that you know, the final word comes from him because we can't teach it, he's our coach...if there isn't an arrangement, that's the word...cause we can't exclude Jeff on this one.' (John). In this sense, Jeff's musical skill and ability to teach – 'we can't teach it, he's our coach' – makes him a unique figure of authority within the choir.

However in being a straight man, the question of being directed and organised in this manner became an issue for some members of the choir who equated his musical authority to a representational authority. An example of this occurred when some members were unhappy about Jeff introducing the choir during performances, arguing that it should be an LGBT member of the choir 'who speaks for the choir' (Choir Bulletin, May 2005). Consequently, it was decided that a committee member should always introduce the choir, where possible. But as John's acknowledgement of Jeff's *musical* authority and the choir's dependence on him as a musical group reveals, the choir also realised that to gain greater control over their self-representation, they needed to lay greater *musical* control over the choir: not just as an LGBT group, but as a choir.

I think that we should use the talent of the choir 'cause there's so much talent, unbelievable! I can't believe how much talent we've got. I personally believe, the choir's structure is a little bit too rigid.

(John)

As from 2006, the membership forms included the question, 'What skills can you offer the choir?' alongside name, address, telephone number and so on. The question was designed for the purposes of 'gathering a database of all the skills and talent' in the choir to 'support the local LGBT community as much as possible' (Jed). 'Something Inside So Strong' was unanimously chosen because it 'fits their perception of who they are and that they want to get that over in what they're singing' (Jeff). But as soon as people began the search for a suitable arrangement, members found out that other queer choirs had already laid a claim to those existing arrangements. It was then that the choir decided to take it upon themselves to arrange their 'own version' of the song, and to this effect, a couple of people volunteered to do so (Dom arranged and taught it in the end). This process also applied to the song 'Over the Rainbow' (currently being arranged) and 'You Walk with Me', a song taken from *The Full Monty: the musical*, both of which were arranged by a member called Paul. What does it mean to re-arrange 'Something Inside So Strong' and to have 'our own version'?

Two factors can be drawn from such a process relating to the queering of music. Firstly, by letting members of the choir like Dom arrange and direct the music through their musical skills, the choir lays claim over how they choose to organise, present and author themselves as an LGBT group. Arranging music is about what and *how* music is

realised in a way that does not silence LGBT musicians, both empowering LGBT musicians and localising them. Inasmuch as music consists of the arrangement of notes and sounds, in practice, it is also an arrangement of space. This is why songs which have been arranged by choir members often get sung at performances where there is an emphasis on the local LGBT community: the choir personally chose Paul's arrangement for 'You Walk with Me' for the AIDS Vigil 2006, where the theme was 'Community'. Queering in this case is about the queering of music-practice, and the re-arrangement and authorship over queer uses of space and time.

Secondly, in getting members of the LGBT community like Paul or Dom to arrange/direct songs, authorship of music is also about the claim over 'their image of lesbianism/gayness because it is produced by people who themselves are lesbian/gay' (Dyer, 2002: 40). This is similar to situation explored in relation to Siffre. The knowledge that a piece being sung – even if originally written, performed by straight composers/musicians – has been *re*-arranged by an LGBT person makes the piece more authentic or at least proves to be more meaningful. This is why each time songs arranged by choir members are performed, someone usually announces the fact that they have been arranged by 'Dom/Paul, our very own member of the choir'. These songs always tend to be more successful in the repertoire, receiving greater applause or even standing ovation. Such moments reveal the queering of music itself and the ability of music to create a sense of communal togetherness and furthermore, re-emphasize the importance of the identity of the author/arranger in the way music is realised and interpreted. Queering music in this case is about creating a means to increase a sense of community, a sense of

empathetic commonality between all those involved in the social process of music-making from arranger, singer, conductor, to the audience.

To conclude, music and music-making form part of a queer politics of cultural production, or the *queering* of music and music practice. Music is both a cultural discourse and a language of signification which can either silence or empower LGBT musicians. As we saw with 'Humbalulu' or 'We Go Together', 'Irish Blessing', they can suppress homosexuality because in singing these songs, musicians place themselves within their heterosexualist/sexist/'homophobic' cultural framework of signification. Within this context, there is no room for queer representation. In taking creative control over these pieces of music, LGBT musicians destabilize the inherent heterosexualism or sexism found in lyrics, for example. Authorship over music forms the basis of a queer mode of signification and representation, producing music that reflects what it means to be LGBT. As we have seen, these usually consist of struggles specific to LGBT lives: as people who suffer homophobia, sexism, having to be in the closet, living with AIDS. This is probably also one the reasons why 'songs by LGBT composers' is so important to LGBT people because singing words written or arranged by LGBT composers is about musically defining queerness through an empathetic shared 'cultural understanding' of what being LGBT means. It is about social continuity, a shared authorship of a song, and about the right for self-definition and claiming authority over queer self-representation.

# ■ CONCLUSION ■

## **Re-creating the Closet: Singing Out Together In Tune**

In the Introduction, I described an interaction between my then boss and myself, a debate over what should or should not be played in a lesbian bookshop. This incident led me to ask: what is the relationship between music and sexuality? The whole purpose of this thesis has been to answer this question through an ethnography based on the Manchester Lesbian and Gay Chorus, where such a dialogue as the one between my boss and myself were commonplace, if not an expected part of the choir's internal discussions. Throughout my investigations, I had two specific concerns in mind: to conceptualise music and sexuality beyond immediate concerns of gender and the erotic; in the process, to think about what terms like *queer*, *queerness*, and *queering* mean, particularly within the context of lesbian and gay music and music-making practices.

Through an analysis of the qualitative interviews and my own participant observations, all the preceding chapters have presented different areas and ways of thinking about sexuality and music according to the terms outlined above. Chapter 1 provided an overview on how queer musicology is informed by queer theory in two ways: as a theoretical tool for *queering* music theory and practice, interrogating musicology as a discipline that silences homosexuality; and as a field which addresses and defines the meaning of *queerness* in music, usually as relating to the subversion of gender and/or the



reading of homosexual desire in music. As outlined above, I problematised the tendency in queer and feminist theories of music to centre discussions on music and sexuality around the idea of gender and/or the erotic (often together). My ethnography – of a carefully chosen field like the *MLGC* – has attempted to draw out where and how else we might think about the relationship between music and sexuality according to these terms.

In Chapter 2 therefore, I discussed my practical research methods and explained just why the *MLGC* was the perfect field for the purposes of this thesis. As the accounts have repeatedly revealed, one of the main reasons why the *MLGC* members join the choir is to make music with other lesbian and gay people, away from the other more eroticised spaces of the Village: denoted by their reference to avoid clubs (Tinny) or having sex (Jed). What this means is that not only must we pay attention to the different kinds of sexualised spaces that make up LGBT culture, but also how the meaning of sexuality changes according to the different social practices that are occurring within a given space. I argued that by analysing the way music organises, defines, and is defined by these social practices, we can examine what these various meanings of sexuality are.

By entitling it as a *queer* ethnography, I was also signaling my disciplinary engagement with queer musicology and queer theories of music, directly addressing and building upon existing definitions sexuality and music. Here is the second main concern behind this project: I wanted to see what *queer*, *queerness*, and *queering* meant when sexuality and music were no longer defined through questions of gender and the erotic alone. What does *queer* mean within the context of urban lesbian and gay music and music-making practices? What does *queerness* in music consist of, and how can we read

*queerness* in music? How do the members of the *MLGC* engage in the process of *queering* music and *queering* through music?

I want to briefly reflect back on all the chapters by way of summarising the project, and also, to consider what the terms *queer*, *queering* and *queerness* have meant in each chapter. Based on these reflections, I shall then make some concluding remarks on the relationship between music and sexuality as conceptualised beyond immediate considerations of gender and the erotic. As the title to this conclusion indicates, I want to argue that within the context of localised lesbian and gay music-making processes in a contemporary British city, the relationship between music and sexuality is more often than not about re-creating the closet. I want to suggest that within this configuration, sexuality can be defined as the desire to be part of and the pleasure taken in re-creating the closet through music and social process of music-making.

*Da capo: Queer theory, and Gay and Lesbian Music*

Chapter 3 looked at Manchester as both a musical and the 'Queer city up North', and how the *MLGC* brings these two cultural urban conventions together through their music-making practices. I examined how the actual process of music-making – the *duree* of musical inner-time – demarcates a material space for the grounding of queer politics and queer belonging. The incidents discussed in this chapter reveal how despite the changes in legislation and advances in LGBT civil rights, the LGBT community still have 'a long way to go' (Jed) in terms of general social acceptance. Homophobia (alongside

issues such as AIDS activism) still remain at the heart of the LGBT community's main concerns. In this light, the strategic use of a musically organised timespace often forms part of queer place-making practices. Music-making is thus related to queer uses of time and space as defined by Halberstam (2005), as a production of counterpublics: the physical space created through the process of music-making acts as an interventive space, where music practice grounds queer politics.

Perhaps more than any other chapter, the incidents discussed here relate most strongly to the transgressive aspects of queer politics as defined originally during the nineties. The manner in which the *MLGC* members sang within ostensibly heterosexual public spaces (or at least spaces where LGBT people are more subject to homophobia) with a definite political agenda reflect the queer politics of intervention and disruption. 'Being a vocal group' as John states thus relates to being *queer* as a political position, whereby music-making is part of the process of *queering*, a politics of intervention.

Chapter 4 chronicled the emergence of the gay subcultural scene surrounding the Canal Street area of Manchester to its consequent transformation into the Gay Village as a separate development area by the city-planners. I discussed the tensions which arise from the effects of commercialisation and tourism, mainly the marked divide between the LGBT community and the gay 'scene'. To a certain extent, this separation is also related to the emergence of the Queer as a more consumerist-oriented, globalised movement in reaction to LGBT identity politics. Musically speaking, this divide seems to be more or less manifest in the political or aesthetic value given to songs: music which carries and conveys 'a political message'; or music as a form entertainment, to be enjoyed. LGBT

seems to favour the aestheticisation of politics (making politics meaningful, or carry more impact through music), whereas Queer prefers the politicisation of aesthetics (a politics of carnival, of having fun as a 'doing politics'). However, as demonstrated by the *MLGC*'s attempts to retain its sense of lesbian and gay community, whilst also facing a more global queer community, the boundaries between the two are not so defined.

With the boundaries between dominant and subculture all but gone, what is becoming increasingly evident is the desire to find other ways in which to establish a sense of difference and to *communally* articulate a sense of queerness. Here *queerness* is no longer so much defined in contrast to dominant culture, but instead, defined through a sense of locality, a *localised* sense of belonging. I argued that a sense of belonging is often dependent upon the resurrection of the closet, and music-making can often re-create this sense of commonality. Whether music is regarded as an instrument to convey a 'political message' (AIDS awareness, for example) or as a form entertainment (Pride showcasing), the end result is that music-making spatialises the closet again, enabling those to be go 'back in' to be 'out' once more: it is about returning and defining sexuality through the in/out dynamic of the closet once again.

Within this context, localised music-making practices are less about the *queering* of space as a mode of transgressive intervention, but *queering* as an inhabitation of a common ground between all the 'different scenes within the gay scene' (Denise). Through the localisation of popular songs ('Downtown'), and the popularisation of localised songs ('Step by Step'), music-making enables lesbian and gay people to simultaneously retain a sense of being part of a geographically situated LGBT community whilst also being part

of a more homogenised, imaginary, and globalised queer community.

In Chapter 5, I specifically sought to understand what *queerness* in music might consist of. By examining where, how, and why choir members construed certain songs as being 'obviously gay', I questioned whether *queerness* can be inherent within a given piece of music and if so, how might we conceptualise this *queerness*? Referring to the criteria listed in the choir's Repertoire Proposal, my main concern was to focus on why 'songs made famous by gay icons' and musicals are considered as being 'obviously gay' by the choir members. Furthermore I wanted to know what significance these songs had within the context of contemporary British culture.

Songs made famous by gay icons and show tunes from musicals are 'obviously gay' because at one point in the LGBT history, they resonated strongly with LGBT sensibilities: reflected a condition of LGBT life; Judy Garland and 'Over the Rainbow' being a perfect example of both 'a gay icon' and a 'musicals' genre. The underlying relationship between lesbians and particularly gay men ('I Will Survive', 'Over the Rainbow') today seems to be about articulating a shared cultural past; songs are cultural relics that resonate strongly with lesbian and gay heritage sensibilities. I argued that by distancing themselves from these songs through the use of (dis)taste, queer musicians signal a new sense of freedom and willingness to unburden themselves from a repressed past.

However, running concurrently with this process is the equal importance placed in reproducing this past. Singing 'obviously gay songs' forms part of an acknowledgement and signalling of a shared sense of cultural history: it is about re-creating and articulating

a sense of togetherness, much like in the preceding chapter. Within this context, I think *queerness* can be defined as the simultaneous desire to move away but also closer to 'obviously gay' culture. This dual force also relates and continues on from the politics-aesthetics theme which emerged in Chapter 4. In an attempt to find a middle-ground, queer aesthetics becomes part of a politics of queer cultural production.

*Queering* is the process by which queers place themselves in relation to the past in order to affirm the present. In this way, the political-aesthetic dynamic of music enables the staging of such a process to occur. It is a performative process, it is about signalling one's place within LGBT and Queer culture: and here I capitalise Queer to mark the historical difference between the two factions which are brought together through the social process behind music-making.

Between Chapters 3 and 4, I explored the idea of *queering through* music, particularly in relation to music-making as a counterpublic, space-making practice. The final chapter examines in closer detail the *queering of* music itself: I investigated this through questions of authorship and the claim to self-representation. I argued that music – particularly the singing of lyrics – places lesbians and gay men within certain linguistic and cultural frameworks of representation. As the accounts and 'little rebellions' (John) in the choir have indicated, the problem arises when songs are essentially heterosexual or sexist and are thus deemed to be oppressive to lesbians and gay men. Within this context, music-making can entail the propagation of heterosexualist or sexist discourse at the cost of lesbian and gay representation.

Authorship and creative control over existing music can be a means for

destabilizing the inherent heterosexuality found in a piece of music. The choir members' efforts to change the pronouns in the lyrics to a song, or their active refusal to sing certain songs altogether can be understood as an interventive process of *queering* music: singing words written or arranged by LGBT composers is about gaining greater control over self-representation. Here, *queering* is about creating new speaking/singing positions that represent queers in ways that reflect their lives. One of the reasons why 'songs by LGBT composers' proved so important to the choir members was because they felt the song could be trusted as a genuine 'gay song'. As the choir members desire to sing Siffre's 'Something Inside So Strong' indicated, being represented by and representing an LGBT composer through their song is about creating a 'shared sense of culture' (John).

*Queerness* within this context is about deciding what kind of experiences are a common part of a 'shared sense of culture' (John). However, as the separate cases of 'Humbalulu' and 'Irish Blessing' indicate – the former being challenged for its apparent sexism by Kathryn, the latter for homophobia (against gay men) by John – there are differences between lesbians' and gay men's experiences and struggles. Finding songs that represented an overall *queer* experience, establishing one single *queer* position within the context of a lesbian and gay choir was a difficulty in itself. Some identities inevitably become erased – for example the Christian members of the choir – in the process of defining a group of LGBT musicians through a single style or song. In this manner, as the internal arguments and confrontations between members explored in both Chapters 4 and 5 indicate, there is a difficulty in bringing music together with the question of sexual identities and the politics that emerge from different identifications.

These problems relate directly back to the Queer vs. LGBT debate. As revealed in nearly all the previous chapters, there is a drive towards finding a meeting point between *queer* as an umbrella term and group identity ('bunch of queers together', Tinny) and *lesbian and gay* as specific identifications ('lesbian and gay chorus', or 'about being lesbian', Kathryn). What is interesting is the manner in which this Queer-LGBT tension is resolved by the members the *MLGC*, or at least close to being resolved. Running concurrently, are the choir members' attempts to bring the question of aesthetics and politics together which so often seems to divide the choir (madrigals, for example). It was in the quest of finding music that is both 'meaningful *and* beautiful and fit the perceptions of who they are' (as Jeff stated) that the LGBT-Queer conflict was resolved in the process.

Labi Siffre's 'Something Inside So Strong' proved to be the song that 'balanced' (Kathryn) the choir's diversity, as well as being both meaningful and beautiful to all the members of the *MLGC*: as a piece, 'Something Inside So Strong' manages to create a unified speaking (or singing) position, whilst retaining the choir's polyvocality and diversity of experiences and identifications. Upon examining why this was the case, Siffre's song reveals that there are still common experiences in most LGBT lives: being in the closet, and by extension the process of passing, and coming out; these are what define the *queerness* of the song and provide the basis for an empathetic exchange between the singers themselves and in relation to the LGBT composer.

Having thus looked at the various ways in which the terms *queer*, *queerness* and *queering* can be conceptualised within the context of lesbian and gay music and music-



making practices, I want to now relate the issues discussed so far to the other main question of this thesis: how might we conceptualise the relationship between music and sexuality beyond questions of gender and the erotic? I want to suggest that the closet is a key concept in answering this query, and how *queer*, *queerness* and *queering* can be understood as being part of its re-definition and re-construction.

*In/out: musical re-creation of the closet*

The idea of the closet, and the state of being in/out of it, has been an important part of understanding and defining homosexuality, both within and without academia. Queer theorists like Sedgwick (1991) and Fuss (1991) have argued that the inside/outside polarity of the closet 'functions as the very figure for signification and the mechanisms of meaning production' (Fuss, 1991: 1). In other words, the interiority of the closet (as homo) set against the exterior (hetero) is what both subjugates homosexuals, and paradoxically, enables articulations of (homo)sexual difference.

The ethnographic material gathered for this thesis often confirms this argument: the homophobic attack which led to Jed urging choir members to sing outside of the Village; the popularity of Siffre's 'Something Inside So Strong' among choir members; the *MLCG*'s re-location from the church to a 'safer place' in the Village; the refusal to sing certain songs regarded as being about 'total oppression' to lesbians and gay men (John). These are all examples of how choir members have in one way or another, experienced a

sense of being inside/outside of the closet. Their choices in music and practices in music-making thus reveal the need to articulate this sense of marginality, and a willingness to challenge what Fuss would argue as being an 'outside' that attempts to 'contain and defuse' the inside (1991: 3).

As we have seen from the choir's willingness to interrogate, challenge, alter and author their own music and music-making practices, in terms of *queering*, the political tactics and strategies defined in the 1990s (outlined by Stein and Plummer [1996] and referred to in the Introduction) still remain: counterpublics, anti-essentialism, deconstruction and the politics of noise. The difference between now and then is that a large part of *queering* today consists of *re-creating* the closet. What do I mean by this?

How exactly, do we bring the hetero/homo opposition to the point of collapse? How can we work it to the point of critical exhaustion, and what effects – material, political, social – can such a sustained effort to erode and to reorganize the conceptual grounds of identity be expected to have on our sexual practices and politics? (Fuss, 1991: 1)

I have argued in Chapters 3 and 4 that within the context of Manchester, a city which actively promotes the Village and its community as one of its key urban 'experiences', the idea of the closet must be re-assessed and re-examined. Since Fuss posed the question quoted above, changes in social mores, legislation, and city-planning have meant the boundaries between homo/hetero and in/out are not as

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<sup>1</sup> See the Manchester Tourist Board website which separates different aspects of the city into 'Manchester experiences' <<http://www.visitmanchester.com>>

pronounced as they have been ten years ago. In some ways, *Manto's* famous open-windows policy which in effect began the Village (referred to in Chapter 4) took a brick out of the closet wall, so to speak. Whilst this increased visibility, it has also meant that the closet has become more porous, has been eroded over time: the filming of Channel 4's *Queer as Folk* a testament to its mainstream accessibility. We are, in many ways, at a point where the closet has been eroded, and are thus in need of reorganizing the grounds of identity, in the words of Fuss.

The most important theme that emerges from all the chapters is the strong determination on behalf of the *MLGC* members to create a 'sense of shared culture' (John) through their music and music-making practices. In this light, I would argue that a large part of being lesbian and gay today seems to consist of reconstructing the closet in order to reaffirm and reconfirm a shared sense of culture and belonging, because of the closet's dissolution. This would explain why there is such a strong pull towards the local, and emphasizing the local community: locality provides a place of reference – a geographically defined closet - as seen from the strong sense of connection the choir members have towards Manchester.

I would therefore suggest that *queer* is about 'sense of shared culture' (John) – recreating the closet – something which, as the members' accounts have revealed, is enabled through music and the social process of music-making: Siffre's song, or the Leeds concert being two examples where choir members' felt they were part of a group, felt a meaningful sense of belonging. Yet bringing *queer* together with lesbian and gay identifications proves difficult, which of course, is nothing new. However, in being a

group of musicians who must perform and present socially acceptable pieces of music, the necessity of being musically united with a drive to be popular, force the choir to reach a point of reconciliation. The choir members' actions and accounts reveal a strong determination to find a meeting point, sometimes at the cost of one's political and/or aesthetic inclinations: the members' simultaneous love and embarrassment towards singing musicals being a case in point. In this sense, the choir's musical togetherness depends on members' willingness to at times forgo their political and aesthetic principles. Similarly, by musically arriving at a point of political and aesthetic harmony – Siffre's song being an example – the choir members accounts reveal the 'balancing out' (Kathryn) of the diversity within the choir.

Within this context, *queerness* in music can be understood as the experiences, struggles, and issues that somehow facilitate an empathetic exchange, as discussed in Chapter 6. As the popularity behind Siffre's song revealed, some aspects to lesbian and gay life remain common or of concern to all, despite and because of the wide range of identifications. It is in finding these points of commonality – shared sense of a cultural past (musicals), shared sense of marginality (Siffre as a black, gay man), shared political activism (the significance of singing at AIDS Vigils over Pride Mainstage) – that *queer* comes together with lesbian and gay music and music-making practices. The overall effect is, the re-creation of the closet, the creation of a shared sense of culture and belonging.

Therefore, the closet is a key concept in understanding the relationship between music and sexuality beyond considerations of gender and the erotic. It is through a

musical resurrection of the closet, or the creation of a musical closet, that the outside/inside dynamic is brought into effect once more. As the concert in Leeds demonstrates, being 'in', or rather, the process of re-creating an 'in' through music and music-making, having already come 'out', forms part of a symbolic rite of passage. *Queer, queerness* and *queering* in music therefore all evolve around this process of identifying, defining, and articulating a sense being 'in' a shared culture.

*Final note: desire and pleasure?*

One of the two main concerns of this thesis has been to separate out sexuality from questions of gender and the erotic in music. However, the ethnographic material reveals that both gender and the erotic are part of the music-sexuality relationship. Kathryn's reaction to 'Humbalulu' is an example of how questions of gender form an integral part in her understanding of music, and how this relates to her own sexuality and lesbian identity politics. Tinny's, Chongwei's, and Jed's wish to purposely avoid areas and activities within the Village where people go 'to get laid' (Jed) reveal that the existence of the choir itself is in part, oppositionally related to questions of the erotic. Clearly, the relationship between music and sexuality cannot be entirely separated from questions of gender and the erotic. Therefore, having separated out issues of gender and the erotic from the music-sexuality relationship thus far, I want to now think about how we might re-incorporate them back in. I propose to do this by addressing the concept of desire and pleasure.

As revealed in June's or David's accounts, there are cases where the relationship

between music and sexuality is about the desire for and desire to be the Other. In June's case, the pleasure taken in impersonating her favourite lesbian singers can be read as a form of same-sex, lesbian desire for the Other. In David's case, we can read his pleasure taken impersonating Kate Bush as the desire to be the Other, much like Butler's conceptualisations on drag (1990). Both are about the unattainable, the pleasurable channeling of desire through music and music-making which is based on engendered and even eroticised (in the case of June) understandings of sexuality. However, I wonder how we can bring such understandings of the music-sexuality relationship together with ideas of the closet discussed so far? To put it slightly differently, how and where else is the pleasurable channeling of desire in and through music and music-making being directed towards?

The strongest form of desire that emerges from all the chapters seems to be: the desire to belong. Probyn argues, desire is a 'productive force which compels a theory of belonging that in its singularity may exceed much of what passes for contemporary identity politics' (1996: 41). Can we understand desire in the music-sexuality relationship as a force related to questions of belonging? As seen from the members' efforts to balance out the differences and diversity of experiences and identifications within the choir indicate, the desire to belong and keep belonging does indeed 'exceed much of what passes for contemporary identity politics' (*ibid*): this would explain the choir's relentless search for a song that suited everyone, even at the cost of members' individual aesthetics and/or political inclinations.

Furthermore, the members' accounts repeatedly reveal how the desire to be part of

a musical formation go hand in hand with the desire to be part of a social group consisting of lesbians and gay men. Similarly, the desire to belong to a group of lesbians and gay men is realised through their being part of the choir as a musical group. In this sense, desire in lesbian and gay music and music-making practices can be read as a *musical* force that propels a desire for queer belonging. Within this context, pleasure is part of the productive musical force, or even a product of this musical force that propels a sense of queer belonging. The interviewees often talk about the enjoyment they derive from the actual act of singing songs or reassigning queer meanings to songs, and these statements are often followed by references to their feelings of being 'together with everyone' (Kristen, as well as John, Katya, Daniel). In other words, part of the desire for a sense of queer belonging stems from the pleasure derived in creating such a place of queer belonging: of re-creating the closet through music and music-making practices.

To conclude, the ethnographic material suggests how within the context of localised lesbian and gay music-making practices in a contemporary British city, the relationship between music and sexuality is more often than not about identifying, defining, and articulating a sense of shared culture. The idea of the closet is a key concept in understanding this process. One could argue that a large part of lesbian and gay culture has always been about mapping out its sense of difference against the hetero/outside. But what is different today is that the closet itself has become less pronounced, and the inside/outside dynamic increasingly flattened out within the last decade. Lesbians and gay men might have more rights and visibility, but only at the cost of losing a sense of

difference which had defined them for so long.

As the accounts have revealed, lesbian and gay music and music-making seems to consist of re-creating a sense of being in/out of a shared sense of culture despite and because of the diversity of identities found within a LGBT group. In this manner, lesbian and gay music and music-making can be understood as the desire for and the pleasure taken in re-defining and re-constructing the closet as a cultural place of queer belonging. It is about being *in* a shared culture and coming *out* together, being *in* tune and singing *out* together.



# ☐ Appendix ☐

## Further Notes on Fieldwork and Methods

### *Manchester Lesbian and Gay Chorus: the main body*

As explained in Chapter 2, my joining the *MLGC* as a singer in February 2004 marked the start of my fieldwork which continued till I left in December 2006, although the recorded interviews were carried out between July 2004 – January 2005 (see below). In 2004, the choir officially amounted to about 60 members (around 25 women, 35 men)<sup>1</sup>, aged between 25 and 70 years old, from or around Manchester. Members paid either the full (employed) or concessions (unemployed/receiving benefits/OAP<sup>2</sup>/students) rate each week, although by 2006, the Treasurer insisted on a monthly standing order system. No auditions were required and in general, the choir maintained an 'open for all' policy. However the figure of 60 members – or indeed any other 'total' the choir presented officially – is rather deceptive, for as the choir themselves (particularly the Committee) would often argue during AGMs and other general discussions, membership could be defined in two ways. There are the 'core members' - those who turn up without fail every week for rehearsals, and are usually dedicated enough to, for example, cancel a prior engagement just to make it to a concert at short notice. There is also the administrative

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1 There are no exact figures and records from the time – possibly because the choir were not as organised as they later became – but people (including myself) recall '60' being the official number back then.

2 'Old age pensioners'.

membership, which covers a broad range of members: apart from the 'core members', those who turn up semi-regularly (once or twice a month), irregularly (a couple of months intensively and then absent for half a year), and those who turned up just the once but nonetheless show up in figures because they had registered. In other words, when I first joined, the choir *officially* consisted of 60 members but as a 'body count', the choir was closer to holding 30-40 members at any given rehearsal or performance.

By 2005, the official membership pushed over 100 people but the 'core members' still remained roughly at around 40-50 people, who were also more or less the same 'core members' from when I first joined. Around the time, there was much discussion on whether membership should be capped or not – particularly when space became an issue – and whether this was fair and true to the 'open to all' policy of the choir. Furthermore, as the choir became more successful, there was friction between its 'core members' and the rest of the group because a lot of the 'core members' felt frustrated about the fact that each week, songs had to be re-taught for the benefit of those whose attendance was minimal. The 'core members' were particularly concerned about this issue during concerts when members who did not know the songs would turn up to sing and would have to use folders to read the lyrics/music. In other words, membership was difficult to measure and define as it was a contested matter within the choir.

By the time I left in December 2006, official membership was over 160 people, with a more or less similar gender ratio although the age range widened to between 18-80 years old. By then, rehearsals typically held around at least 80 or more people with seats being arranged no longer in an arc, but rather into four rectangular blocks.

*The Interviewees: the individual voices*

I interviewed 14 members (9 women, 5 men), between the ages of 25-65: Tinny, Clara, Katya, Katherine, Eleanor, Denise, Kristen, June, Charlotte, Jed, David, Chongwei, John, Jeff. There are also others whom I refer to by name throughout the thesis (Dom, Michelle, Paul), but they are the more informal participants whose words I wrote down during a casual conversation or from my observations during a meeting. I nonetheless asked everyone permission whether I could quote them in my thesis. Out of my key 14 interviewees, all were asked before the interview and once again when I was writing up, whether they preferred their real name or a pseudonym. Apart from a couple of interviewees, everyone was either indifferent or in some cases, I felt, purposefully emphasizing their indifference to signal their 'out'-ness and lack of shame with full pride. However, for the sake of those who did prefer an alias, I decided to be consistent and changed all names with the exception of Jeff (musical director), Chongwei (founder and chair at the time of interview), and John (head of Repertoire Group), who all held 'official' titled positions<sup>3</sup>. The reason behind this move is because not only were they proud of having their names associated with these titled roles, but also, I felt it futile to anonymise them given their relatively public – and hence more recognizable – positions

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<sup>3</sup> Although not a key interviewee but nonetheless quoted in my thesis, Michelle Reed's name remains the same. Because she is the head of the George House Trust and a very activist, public figure who goes by this name, I decided against anonymising her for the same reasons I decided not to with Chongwei, Jeff and John: both the charity and her position in it make her easily recognizable. She herself was indifferent, although she did add, 'Michelle Reed is fine'.

in the *Manchester Lesbian and Gay Chorus*, a name itself which has not been changed.

Whether by chance or because of their regularity and level of active commitment to the choir (and thus more vocal in their opinions, drawing my initial attentions to them), the initial 14 people I interviewed were all, with the exception of Clara, part of the 'core members' that remained so for the duration of my time there. Nearly all of those I interviewed also ended up joining the Committee at various points. Furthermore, most of these key interviewees became my closest friends within the choir, and were those whom I kept in touch with long after my departure from both the choir and from Manchester.

### *Participant Observation*

My levels and the kind of participation within the choir changed according to different roles and positions I adopted during my time with them. As discussed in Chapter 2 through the idea of the queer ethnographic chorister, I juggled and tried to integrate three different kinds of participation: as a member of the local LGBT community in Manchester, as a researcher, and of course as a chorister. All members knew beforehand about my research through an email I sent to the Chair straight after my first ever attendance, and I was particularly careful to let them know about my sexual orientation and commitment to the LGBT community, my love for music, and how these were important factors behind my research. In other words, they understood that the three positions were integral to me. I also found out that another member had previously

interviewed some people for the purpose of their research, so in general, people seemed to be used to the idea of being 'observed academically', if not treating it as a matter of pride. My project became their project too: 'so, how's the writing going, are we there yet?'

I never took notes during rehearsals (I was too busy singing!) but nonetheless at the beginning of my research I did keep a diary where I would type up the most memorable of incidents when I got back home: this included notes on members' interactions with one another, their comments, their facial and body movements during singing and what kind of sounds the choir were making depending on the context<sup>4</sup>. However, during AGMs and more formalised discussions, I did make notes as to what was being said and by whom. This was for the sake of ascertaining the kind of recurring themes (such as 'what is a gay song?') that concerned the members, and also to chase a member up afterwards to ask them further questions, to arrange an interview, or where necessary, ask permission to quote them if it was a more casual conversation.

Musically, my participation started as a soprano, and by summer of 2004 I joined the committee as a 'Soprano Rep'. The sections representatives (soprano, alto, tenor, bass representative) had the job of ensuring their section group were happy, collecting the weekly subscriptions, keeping an updated attendance sheet, taking any problems or queries to the Committee, as well as being the first point of contact. This meant that I was also part of the choir's administrative and policy-making body. I initially wondered

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<sup>4</sup> Unfortunately, due to time restrictions, I had to omit a chapter where these observations were analysed, particularly in relation to physical gestures, sound and the embodiment of sexuality through the music-making process.

whether this would be inappropriate in terms of my thesis – whether I would be 'altering' my field – and I even discussed this with both the Committee and the members of the choir at the time. I eventually decided that I would have joined the Committee regardless of my thesis, and perhaps this is where my position as a queer chorister came forward: I was truly a part of the day-to-day running of the choir because I cared both for the music, and also for the LGBT issues (visibility, safety, networking and so on) that the choir were presented with. This having said, I do believe I gained a deeper understanding of the choir because of my active extra-musical involvement which presented me with 'insider' information.

In late 2005 I moved to the tenor section. In this sense, my musical participation changed with my vocal register and standing position in relation to the musical director. Furthermore, I found that each vocal section formed a a micro-social network which also changed my social participation once I moved to the tenors: suddenly I was talking to a lot more gay men than I was to lesbians. In general, I believe that by participating in both the *MLGC*'s intra- and extra- musical activities as a queer chorister, I as an ethnographer, was presented with a more panoramic understanding of the chorus.

### *Qualitative Interviews*

Whilst I always made the effort to talk to as many members as possible – particularly at the beginning of my research when its size was still relatively small and thus manageable

– the 14 people I approached specifically with an interview in mind were those who were already quite vocal about their opinions on music, the choir, LGBT issues and so on. In other words, I purposely sought out those who seemed willing, if not wanting to have their opinions aired. Most of my interviewees were delighted and proud when I asked, and even more so when I informed them of a *recorded* interview. This was particularly the case with Chongwei who wanted to use the opportunity of a recorded interview as a form of having the choir's history and foundations chronicled and 'on record'. I was even contacted by one member after I had left the choir about the possibility of them using these interviews for archival purposes. For ethical reasons I declined (some interviewees had left by then and I had no way of getting in touch) but the point being, these interviews seemed to be beneficial to both myself and the participants.

Usually, I would arrange an interview to occur either at the interviewees' own homes or in a public space (bar in the Village, train station cafe, supermarket cafe, community buildings, offices). The interviews lasted around an hour, and were recorded with permission. I never had a specific set of questions in mind as I wanted to keep both a casual, conversational atmosphere, and also, I would usually start off with a topic or an incident which they had alluded to or done during a rehearsal, a performance, or a casual conversation at the bar. This meant that I was presented not only with general opinions about music, for example, but also with an insight into their individual experiences and specific relationship to the *MLGC*.

I transcribed the tapes as soon as possible, making note of any gestures or tone of voice which I felt might have significance when I came to analyse them. Analysis

involved me going through all interviews, annotating them and searching for any recurring themes both within each account and also in relation to other accounts.

### *Comparative methods*

One final note regarding a method I did *not* undertake but considered<sup>5</sup>, which was to engage in a comparative study of the *MLGC*. I did think of comparing the *MLGC* to either a straight choir (to which members like Clara or David alluded to) or another LGBT choir (Birmingham, Leeds, London are some of the stronger 'local brands of queer choirs'), particularly after the Leeds concert. I even conducted a recorded interview with a lesbian singer in a straight choir in Manchester (who was not a member of the *MLGC*). But eventually, I decided that given the time I had, I wanted to concentrate on the *MLGC* alone. This decision was made partly because the accounts and general ethos of the *MLGC* were so rooted in Manchester that I felt I wanted to study this specific relationship in depth – between the choir as an LGBT body, and a localised urban space – rather than a choir against another choir. Furthermore, because other ethnographies of music (particularly urban music-making) tend to study a variety of activities and groups, sometimes in different cities, I felt that I would have something to offer by remaining with one single group, to study the way this one group made sense of their place in the city, and themselves through music.

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<sup>5</sup> In Chapter 2 I also explain why I did not engage in quantitative methods.



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