

## Iconic Divas and why Gay men are attracted to them

### Summary

This paper explores how the histories of female icons in entertainment have developed a lifelong gay male fan base. The acting and music careers of Judy Garland, Barbara Streisand, Diana Ross, and Madonna, have been strongly supported and enhanced by legions of devoted gay male fans all over the world. In fact, these women have been emulated, imitated, worshipped and idolized to death. Streisand, Ross and Madonna have enjoyed a long career supported by gay audiences. Garland, although deceased still lives on in movies and the fame of her daughter Liza Minnelli.

It's an age-old question: Why are gay men so fascinated with divas? Is it their attitude or a vicarious experience? Are we inspired by triumph over adversity? Entertainers have attitude. Who has not lived vicariously through their favorite star? Has there ever been a person in general who has not triumphed over some kind of adversity? Gay fans unlike others in entertainment are fiercely loyal, dedicated, and steadfast to their icons long after the hit records and box office bonanzas have dried up.

A gay icon is a public figure, gay or straight who is embraced by many in the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender communities. Qualities of a gay icon often include glamour, flamboyance, and strength through adversity. Judy, Barbra, Diana and Madonna embody many of these qualities and more.

## Scope

This paper focuses on the careers of four women who continue to have a strong gay following...one even after death. Each of these women has had a successful singing and movie career.

## **Somewhere over Judy Garland, skies are blue**

(1929-1969) Judy Garland could be called the first non sexual gay icon. According to Jon Murphy of *ScotsGay Magazine*, the first example of a gay icon was St. Sebastian who, in the Nineteenth Century, was viewed by gay men as a classic closet case (suppressed homosexuality) and a tortured image of homosexual desire (Murphy 1). St Sebastian was a Christian saint and martyr, who is said to have been killed while the Roman emperor Diocletian engaged in the persecution of Christians in the 3rd century. There exist many paintings of him nude as a young man with arrow piercings all over his body.

The Twentieth century gave birth to the Hollywood film system giving gays females on screen they could adore without any sexual attraction. Gay audiences have related to Judy Garland's journey to the land of OZ as the perfect metaphor of being different in a world and the acceptance of social outcasts. Judy sang "Somewhere over the Rainbow" and ironically the rainbow flag is the symbol of the gay pride movement.

The death of Judy Garland is considered one of the contributing factors to the tension that erupted the Stonewall riots. This event marked the birth of the gay pride movement. The fictional film *Stonewall*, combines an imaginary storyline of characters woven with facts that occurred on the night of Garland's death. Hours after hearing of her death, the gay community stood up to the police harassment of gay bars. Ironically Garland was harassed too, but from the Hollywood movie system, the same people who made her a star.

Garland's early days at MGM was wrought with complexity. She was seen as an ugly duckling being a talented singer actress who did not fit the Hollywood glamour mold set by Lana Turner or Ava Gardner. The studio system constantly tried to sculpt glamour image for her. MGM put her on diet pills as a teenager and put a clip in her nose to angle it in the proper direction. Gays have often related to not fitting the standard mold. When Garland was eventually fired from MGM, in order to make a living she toured doing live concerts. Her most devoted fans were gay men. Garland's Carnegie Hall concerts were huge gay meeting places (Gross 68). As fate would have it, she would have a family connection to the gay community.

Judy married Vincent Minnelli, a Hollywood director who was considered gay in many circles, produced a daughter. Liza Minnelli, (who could also be considered an icon by relation) married Peter Allen, a gay man. Even after their divorce, they remained friends until he died of complications due to the AIDS virus. Judy's last husband, Mickey Deans was a gay nite club promoter.

Judy received a special juvenile Academy award for her performance in *Wizard of Oz*. She was nominated for Best Actress in *A Star is Born*. Her role in *A Star is Born* mirrors facets of her own life. Produced by Garland and her third husband Sidney Luft, her fans could see elements of the talented girl trying to fit into an image of what people believed she should be. Her larger than life persona made her all that more appealing to gay audiences who sympathized in her journey and struggles. In the article “Gay Icons & Divas” Judy was asked why she appealed to gay men in 1967:

“When you have lived the life I’ve lived”, she said, “when you have loved and suffered and been madly happy and desperately sad – well that’s when you realize that you’ll never be able to set it all down ... maybe you’d rather die first”.

Gay men knew she empathized with them, feeling similar love, pain and rejection. A secret code phrase used to identify another member of the gay community was to call them “a friend of Dorothy.” This is a direct association to Judy’s character in the *Wizard of Oz*. Dorothy became friends with the outcasts of the land of OZ. The gay community is seen as outcasts of a “normal” society. Judy’s images, music and films are still admired and performed by a loving gay audience many years after her death. Jim Bailey, a gay performer made a career of impersonating Garland on the Ed Sullivan show and other mainstream venues.

**People who need Streisand are the luckiest people in the world**

(1942- ) In 1963, when Garland sang a duet with Barbra Streisand on her television variety show introducing her to audiences, it was like one icon passing the torch on to the next. If Garland typified the diva of the fifties, Streisand carried the banner through the sixties.

With the success of the Broadway show and film *Funny Girl*, Barbra also embodied the ugly duckling/beautiful swan syndrome perfected by Garland. She won an Academy Award for her first movie performance. Unlike Garland, Barbra refused to have her large nose fixed to fit the image of standard beauty. She made awkward beautiful and had success with movies that reflected that attitude in “The Way We Were” “The Owl and the Pussy Cat” “What’s up Doc,” “Yentl” and her own remake of “A Star is Born.”

It is a belief that “imitation is the sincerest form of flattery.” Barbra was also impersonated on national television by Jim Bailey in addition to female comedian/singer Marilyn Michaels who made a living off her striking resemblance and sound. Michaels even toured with *Funny Girl* after Barbra had left the show. Drag queens have copied her unique look and lip-synched her songs in gay clubs since her debut. Celebrity look-a-like talent agencies keep a Streisand impersonator in their lineup.

Like Garland, Streisand would have a family connection to the gay blood line. Instead of having a husband who was gay, it would be her son. Jason Gould Barbra’s son with husband Elliott Gould was “outed” by the National Enquirer in 1991. In 1997 Jason directed a short film about being the gay son of

celebrity parents. His father played the role of one of the parents in the film (Bernstein 167).

Streisand, a dedicated liberal Democrat, has always been very vocal about political beliefs. Barbra is the kind of role model parent who stands up for the dignity and rights of gay sons and daughters.

"Nobody on this earth has the right to tell anyone that their love for another human being is morally wrong. I will never forget how it made me shudder to hear Pat Buchanan say that he stood 'with George Bush against the immoral idea that gay and lesbian couples should have the same standing in law as married men and women.'... Unfortunately, however, as long as people like Newt Gingrich and Pat Buchanan continue in public life, the fight to codify gay marriages will be a tough battle to win." -- Barbara Streisand to the Advocate, Aug 17.

## **If you need me... call me Miss Ross**

(1944- ) When Berry Gordy, founder and creator of Motown discovered *The Supremes*, his goal was to create the perfect crossover act that would appeal to both black and white audiences. The same cross-generational mix of black and white gay fans that followed *The Supremes* made Diana Ross a true gay icon with major crossover gay appeal.

Diana Ross, the lead singer of the trio, stood out from the start. She is a drag queen image come true. Her huge wigs, heavily made up eyes, and sequined gowns are imitated nightly in gay clubs across the country. In 1964, Ross was a skinny black, hunched back singer with popping eye movements.

She inched her way ahead of the two identically dressed background singers beside her. Diana became the first cross-over gay icon. She became an icon for white as well as black gay followers.

By the seventies, Ross left the Supremes and evolved into a more confident performer with a natural beauty accented by ever changing glamorous Bob Mackie gowns in her live concerts. Gay audiences got a fashion show as well as a concert when they bought a ticket to a Ross show. The Ross familial connection to the gay community was her gay brother Chico, who performed as a dancer during her live performances in the seventies.

When interviewed by the Advocate magazine, Ross commented on why drag queens imitate her look:

“It's just amazing! And you know the reason why I think I inspire a lot of female impersonators? Because it's not difficult to try to look like me! Put on a nice, big fluffy wig and lots of eye makeup. It's such a blessing for me to know that gay people really like me. You know, I'll walk down the street, and I'll get, "Hey, Diana baby!"

Ross is vague when asked about gay political issues, but she is quick to stress that love is love and people should be free to love who they want. She does not pass judgment about the sexuality of her friends, but admits she has a lot of gay friends (Weider 33).

In 1973 the Academy Awards committee nominated Diana Ross for Best Actress in her first screen role as Billy Holiday in “Lady Sings the Blues”. She lost to Liza Minnelli, the daughter of another gay icon, Judy Garland, but Diana

won the Golden Globe's "Best Newcomer" award. Although Ross did not publicly acknowledge her gay fans early in her career, they identified with her characterization of the drug-addicted jazz singer who was repeatedly abused by men.

Ross' follow up movie was panned by mainstream critics who yelled "Weak script!" but *Mahogany* earned more money than *Lady*, and became a cult favorite among gay audiences thanks to over the top fashion designs by Diana and her trademark Supreme glamour.

The 1980 release of "I'm Coming Out" solidified her standing with gay audiences forever. It became a gay anthem in discos around the world. In January of 1996, Ross shot the video for "I Will Survive" another gay anthem made popular by Gloria Gaynor. Diana performed as a duet, using drag queen RuPaul and a cast of West Hollywood Diana Ross look-a-likes.

### **Madonna, like a virgin touched for the very first time**

(1958- ) The 80's marked a new kind of gay icon when Madonna exploded on the musical scene with her smash hit "Borderline" in 1984 as the AIDS epidemic took off. Rebellious and fearless, unlike Diana Ross, Madonna tackled controversial gender, religious, and sexuality issues in her songs and music videos. Madonna boldly acknowledged her gay fans with open arms and was one of the first celebrities seen embracing an AIDS patient. Previous icons surfaced from some tortured kind of image. Garland was plain looking,

Streisand had the Jewish nose, Ross was the skinny poor girl group singer, but Madonna was brazen, self confident and attractive from the start. She posed nude for art classes while a struggling singer.

Like Ross' brother Chico, Madonna's gay brother has always lived in the shadow of his big sister. Christopher Ciccone recently wrote a tell-all book about his sister's life, but everyone must surely wonder ("What's new?") since Madonna has always been very candid about her life. She has talked openly about her bisexual experimentations and flaunted her affair with Sarah Bernhard.

The daring diva also popularized an underground gay dance movement with her huge dance hit "Vogue." The "Vogue" music video showcases popular gay vogue artists such as Jose Xtravaganza, and Willi Ninja. The "Truth or Dare" video shows Madonna interacting with many of her gay dancers. Madonna's honesty, compassion, and raw performances have captivated and empowered gay audiences all over the world.

Her love affair with the gay community stems from her early days of hanging out with drag queens and "rent boys (*male prostitutes*)." Madonna's philosophy was that there was no such thing as homosexual or heterosexual, and she unknowingly quoted Truman Capote when she would say that either a person is "sexed or not" (Victor 58).

Madonna more so than any other diva, has been about re-invention. Her look has changed continuously over the years. Her fashion, hair styles and color have created fashion trends that can be followed on a time line. She is credited for wearing underwear as outerwear. She became the darling of the Paris runway when Jean Paul Gaultier designed the famous “bullet bra” for her *Blonde Ambition* tour. Her gay fans have emulated all those looks in gay clubs everywhere.

Madonna tackled the “big screen” with mixed results. Although her music was at the forefront of most of her films, she is even recognized with a Golden Globe for her acting in the 1996 film *Evita*. The movie critics have panned her acting skills in movies like “Who’s That Girl,” “Shanghai Surprise,” “Swept Away,” “Dick Tracy,” and “The Next Best Thing,” she continues to make films and her gay fans continue to be loyal.

Madonna is quoted saying, “I am a gay man in a woman’s body.” In a poll for American gay magazine “Advocate”, Madonna was named as the greatest gay icon of all time - ahead of both Cher and Judy Garland (Murphy 1). Arguably Madonna is one of the last divas to appeal widely in the gay community. She exemplifies elements of the larger-than-life representations of outsider-stars struggling to win their place. Madonna in her early days struggled against her Catholic background, sexual repression and AIDS-induced sex panic, and the father figure. She adapted current trends like vogue, electronic trance and hip-hop (Milnes). Aren’t gay people considered the

outsider of mainstream society struggling to get in and be accepted? Madonna is seen as that outsider too.

## **DIVAS, DIVAS and More DIVAS**

Other actress and musical divas have also enjoyed a strong gay following. Bette Midler, discovered singing in gay bathhouses during the seventies was nominated for an Academy Award for her first film, *The Rose*. It was also the story of a drug addicted singer. Cher developed a huge gay following when she left the duo Sonny and Cher and played a lesbian in her first film role, *Silkwood*. Her daughter Chastity is also an actively out lesbian.

## **CONCLUSION**

The women covered in this paper share several traits. They survived adversity or at least portrayed a struggle on screen. They have had personal connections to the gay community and used the public personas to embrace the situations. Are they divas because of an attitude or have they lived up to the attitude that was expected of them? That could be the subject of another paper.

These women have evolved into a distinct personal style that was not considered traditional. These women have set fashion standards. Their larger than life images are emulated by gay and straight fans who adore what they have seen. The stories of triumph are like dreams come true for gay audiences who want to believe the odd one out can come out on top.

Wayne Koestenbaum is quoted in the “Fabulous Sublimity of Gay Worship” saying that “gay culture has perfected the art of mimicking a diva—of pretending, inside, to *be* divine—to help the stigmatized self imagine it is received, believed, and adored. (Farmer 8)” Gay self image is constantly under attack. Diva worship reinforces self esteem and adds a coating of invisible protection. Queer theorist Daniel Harris suggests gay worship paved the way for gay liberation (Milnes).

What stands out most, is the connection these women have to gay audiences during their concert performances. The audiences feel their love and total acceptance. It is something that cannot be faked. Their gay audiences believe their divas truly love them.

When Judy Garland cries, singing *Over the Rainbow*, her fans cry. When Barbra Streisand says she has stage fright, her fans support her fears to get her through those moments. When Diana Ross goes into the audience and sings *Reach out and touch somebody's hand*, her fans get to touch her. When Madonna shocks the world by kissing a black man in a field of burning crosses they know she speaks for them by breaking all taboos. It is hard not putting these women on pedestals who have given themselves to their gay audiences in the most pure honest way they know how, through their art. It is this complex connection to divas and gay men. It is an unarticulated awareness of his own differentness and society's signals to him about his emotional orientation, sexual identity, and gender roles.

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