Stonewall National Museum & Archives
A Selection of LGBTQ Musicians in the United States

Introduction

The United States has had a long-standing discomfort with the transgression of sexual and gender norms. Influenced by religious ideals, society viewed people who had same-sex desires and engaged in same-sex practices to be immoral and sinful. As such, the US has long enacted laws to control and condemn those who betray sexual and gender norms. Since the nation’s earliest days, federal, state and local laws punished those who betrayed sexual and gender norms, often as a capital offense.

During the latter part of the nineteenth century, commerce and industry flourished, causing people to move from rural communities to more developed urban areas. As a result of these social transformations, same-sex practices increased, as did organized efforts to suppress them. Accordingly, our examination of LGBTQ history in the United States begins after the Civil War and the growth of industrialization and urbanization. Despite insistent homophobia and transphobia in politics, culture, and society over the past 170 years, LGBTQ people have remained resilient, creative, and dedicated to the fight for rights and visibility.

Check out other LGBTQ history timeline selections on visual art, theatre and dance, literature, film and television, AIDS, sports, and more in this series.

To learn more about each artist, please click on the “More” link. Many thanks to Jackson Davidow for his research on this project.

1916    Tony Jackson, a jazz pianist, singer, and composer, wrote the hit song “Pretty Baby.” More
1922  Jazz singer Alberta Hunter and musician Lovie Austin composed “Downhearted Blues.” A year later, Bessie Smith released a recording of the song, securing her status as one of the most talented vocalists of her era. More

1925  “Dinah” by jazz singer Ethel Waters became a hit. More

1928  Ma Rainey, a pioneering blues singer, recorded the song “Prove It on Me Blues,” whose lyrics directly reference lesbian sexuality. More

1934  Cole Porter created the music and lyrics for the hit musical Anything Goes. More

1939  Pianist, composer, and arranger Billy Strayhorn, who was openly gay, began a longstanding collaboration with Duke Ellington. More
1940  Lyricist Lorenz Hart collaborated with composer Richard Rodgers to produce the musical *Pal Joey*, which contained the song “Bewitched, Bothered and Bewildered.” Loaded with gay subtext, this show tune became hugely popular in contemporary culture. [More](#)

1945  Aaron Copland’s orchestral composition was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for Music. [More](#)

1951  Credited with revitalizing American opera, Gian Carlo Menotti wrote *Amahl and the Night Visitors*—the first opera to be created for live broadcast on television. [More](#)

1952  With the release of his debut album, Johnnie Ray established himself as key pop singer, prefiguring the rise of rock and roll. [More](#)

1953  Chris Connor, a jazz singer, recorded her hit, “All About Ronnie.” [More](#)
1953 Echoing her glamorous roles on the silver screen, Marlene Dietrich started appearing regularly in a cabaret act—a type of performance she continued until the mid-1970s. More


1955 Little Richard’s song “Tutti Frutti” became an instant hit, catapulting the musician to fame. More

1957 The Billy Tipton Trio recorded and released two albums of jazz standards, *Sweet Georgia Brown and Billy Tipton Plays Hi-Fi on Piano*, which were tremendously popular. Upon his death in 1989, Tipton was discovered to have been a transgender man. More

1959  Known for his campy and frenetic style, R&B singer and songwriter Esquerito released his single, “Hey Miss Lucy. More

1959  Frances Faye recorded the album *Caught in the Act*, which included the song “Frances and Her Friends,” an ode to bisexuality and free love. More

1962  Stephen Sondheim wrote the music and lyrics for *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum*, one of his first major hits. More
1963  Willmer “Little Axe” Broadnax started recording singles with his gospel quartet, Little Axe and the Golden Echoes. More

1963  Lesley Gore recorded her single “You Don’t Own Me,” which is often described as an anthem of second wave feminism. More

1967  Soul singer Arthur Conley’s “Sweet Soul Music” became a massive hit in the US and internationally. More

1968  Singer-songwriter Laura Nyro released “Emmie,” a song that hinted at lesbian romance. Nyro herself was privately bisexual. More
1970  To much acclaim, British musician Elton John made his debut at the Troubadour Club in Los Angeles, giving some of the most legendary performances of his career. More

1973  Members of the Washington, D.C collective the Furies and the Radicalesbians formed Olivia Records, a radical lesbian feminist music record label. More

1973  Folk singer Joan Baez came out as bisexual. More

1974  At the height of gay liberation, *Caravan Tonight*, a debut album by singer-songwriter Steve Grossman, became the first album directly dealing with gay themes to be released by a major label. More
1976  The B-52’s, a new wave band that tackled queer themes and was comprised of queer members, formed in Georgia. More

1977  DJ Larry Levan started his decade-long residency at the disco and gay nightclub Paradise Garage in NYC. More

1978  The “Y.M.C.A.” by the Village People became a disco and dance hit. More

1978  Sylvester’s album Step II, which contained the legendary singles “You Make Me Feel (Mighty Real)” and “Dance (Disco Heat),” was released. More

1979  Lesbian scholar Janice Raymond attacked Sandy Stone, a trans member of the Olivia Records collective, because of her gender identity. Stone was defended by the other collective members, and this incident of transphobia was widely debated in lesbian and trans discourse. More
1980  “Another One Bites the Dust” by the British rock band Queen—whose lead vocalist was Freddie Mercury—spent three weeks on the top of the US Billboard charts. More

1981  Grace Jones released *Nightclubbing*, a groundbreaking album that combined reggae, dub, synth-pop, and funk. More

1982  Johnny Mathis, an immensely popular jazz singer, came out as gay in *Us Weekly*. More

1983  Jerry Herman composed the score for the Broadway musical *La Cage aux Folles*, one of the first musicals about a gay couple. More

1985  Lesbian musicians and activists Amy Ray and Emily Saliers formed the Indigo Girls. More
1986  The flamboyant yet closeted pianist and singer Liberace gave his last stage performance at Radio City Music Hall in NYC. He died from AIDS complications the following year. More

1988  The Flirtations, a gay a cappella musical group with a commitment to LGBTQ rights and AIDS activism, was formed.

1989  Howard Ashman wrote the lyrics to Alan Menken’s music score for *The Little Mermaid*. More

1990  Justin Vivian Bond and Kenny Mellman started performing as a drag cabaret duo called Kiki and Herb. More
1993  Melissa Etheridge’s rock ballad “Come to My Window” reached number 25 on the Billboard charts. More

1993  Janis Ian’s album Breaking Silence came out, announcing her lesbian identity—despite the fact that the Village Voice outed her in 1976. More

1997  1.8.7.—the stage name of Jordana LeSesne—released her first album, When Worlds Collide, establishing herself as a pioneering drum and bass musician. More

1998 *Rolling Stone* named Rufus Wainwright the Best New Artist of 1998 after the release of his debut album. [More]

1999 On his debut English-language album, Ricky Martin’s “Livin’ la Vida Loca” became one of the best selling singles of all time. [More]

2001 The pop band the Scissor Sisters was born in the queer nightlife scene of NYC. [More]

2003 Bounce musician Big Freedia released her first studio album, *Queen Diva*. [More]
2006  Lance Bass, former member of the pop boy band NSYNC, came out as gay. More

2012  With his album Trespassing, Adam Lambert became the first openly gay artist to top the Billboard charts. More

2016  Rapper Mykki Blanco’s debut studio album, Mykki, was released. More

2017  Barry Manilow, one of the world’s bestselling musical artists, came out as gay. More

2019  LGBTQ artists make history at the Grammy Awards. More

(END May 26, 2021)