

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](#)



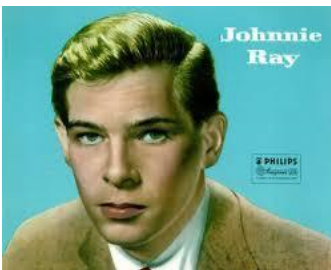
1940 Lyricist Lorenz Hart collaborated with composer Richard Rodgers to produce the musical *Pal Joey*, which contained the song “Bewitched, Bothered and Bewildered.” Loaded with gay subtext, this show tune became hugely popular in contemporary culture. [More](#)



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](#)



1954 Charlie & Ray, a rhythm and blues duo, released “I Love You Madly.” [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](#)



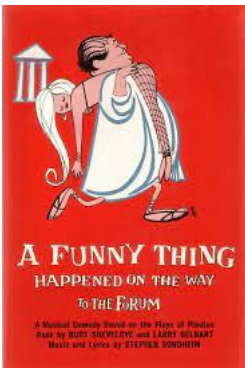
1957 Leonard Bernstein composed the hit musical *West Side Story*, which featured lyrics by Stephen Sondheim and a book by Arthur Laurents. Gay people often interpreted its song “Somewhere” as a tender cry for liberation. [More](#)



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](#)



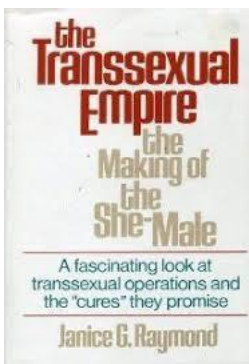
1977 DJ Larry Levan started his decade-long residency at the disco and gay nightclub Paradise Garage in NYC. [More](#)



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](#)



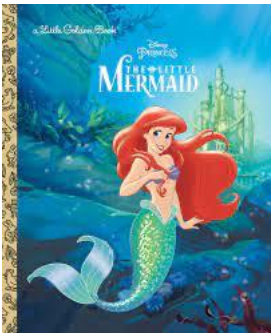
1985 Lesbian musicians and activists Amy Ray and Emily Saliers formed the Indigo Girls. [More](#)



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 Kathleen Hanna, Johanna Fateman, and Sadie Benning formed Le Tigre. [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)