

**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](#)



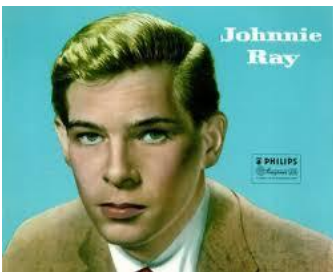
**1940** Lyricist Lorenz Hart collaborated with composer Richard Rodgers to produce the musical *Pal Joey*, which contained the song “Bewitched, Bothered and Bewildered.” Loaded with gay subtext, this show tune became hugely popular in contemporary culture. [More](#)



**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](#)





**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 Furries 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](#)



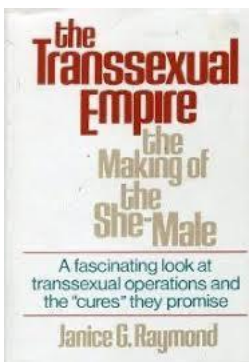
**1977** DJ Larry Levan started his decade-long residency at the disco and gay nightclub Paradise Garage in NYC. [More](#)



**1978** The “Y.M.C.A.” by the Village People became a disco and dance hit. [More](#)

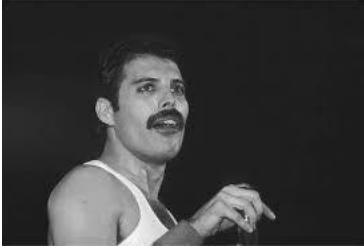


**1978** Sylvester's album *Step II*, which contained the legendary singles “You Make Me Feel (Mighty Real)” and “Dance (Disco Heat),” was released. [More](#)



**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](#)



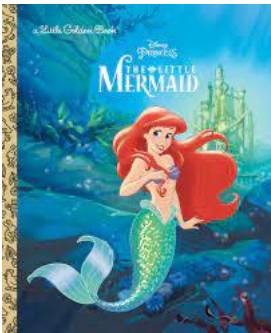
**1985** Lesbian musicians and activists Amy Ray and Emily Saliers formed the Indigo Girls. [More](#)



**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 October 5, 2020)