Love Don't Need a Reason

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Published by Punctum Books

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Love Don't Need a Reason: The Life & Music of Michael Callen.
Fig. 1. Mike & the Headsets in Central Park (1980). Richard Dworkin Private Archive.
It was a small-town depot on the Massachusetts border.
We slipped past the eagle-eye red cap porter,
And it was true love, till we ran out of quarters.
There was a faucet in my back, and the walls was all greasy.
Matter of fact, the only word for it was sleazy,
But who ever told you love would be easy--
So, we did it anyway.
— Pamela Brandt

Michael may not have been part of the downtown avant-garde, but he was surrounded by creative gay men and lesbians who shaped his expectations for his own endeavors. Performing as a solo act was emotionally tough for Michael, whose insecurities could be paralyzing, but he enjoyed being part of a musical group. Back in Hamilton, he had been in church choir, school musical theater, and even a short-lived garage band with some Warr Court kids, but never a working band. In 1980, he decided to put together an all-male, gay close-harmony group with friends he made in the New York City Gay Men’s Chorus who, like Mike, wanted to sing a more than the standard choral fare. So, Michael, Joel Jason, Bobby Butler, Chris Humble, and Mark Howansky became Mike & the Headsets, an all-male, five-voice a cappella ensemble modeled on 1960s girl groups; they sang pop, rock, rock-and-roll, doo-wop, and of course, the girl group songs. Joel introduced Michael to a lot of music he grew up
hearing on New York’s eclectic AM radio including Rosie and the Originals’ “Angel Baby” (1960), The Five Satins’ “In the Still of the Night” (1956), and The Chantels’ “Maybe” (1958), and these songs became part of the new group’s repertoire.¹

A single surviving tape captures Mike & the Headsets rehearsing in Michael’s apartment. They were rough around the edges, but what the fledging group lacked in professional polish, they more than made up for in moxie. Mike & the Headsets performed benefit concerts for GMHC at Blue Skies (183 W 10th St., at the corner of 10th St. and W 4th St.), Kelly’s West Village (46 Bedford St.), and Badlands (388 West St.).² Joel recalled two other shows, one at Rawhide (212 8th Ave.) and another at famed punk club CBGB (315 Bowery), though Joel admitted that their “stuff was nothing like what they were doing.”³ The apo- gee of Mike & The Headsets’ short career was a performance on the dais in Central Park during the 1980 Gay Pride festival. The only press mention of their performance was unkind, and Mike & the Headsets “fell apart piece by piece.”⁴ Although the group didn’t last long, Michael learned a great deal from the experience. When he put together a new group, he knew they would need to rehearse more often, a process that could be facilitated by recruiting top-notch musicians.

For his next musical project, Michael dreamed of something radical, a gender-balanced ensemble of two gay men and two lesbian women, singing songs with queer social and political significance in four-part harmony. His queer version of The Mamas and the Papas would bring gay men and lesbians together in an unprecedented way. Michael loved lesbians, lesbian feminist politics, and women’s music; however, in the early 1980s, political and cultural divisions between lesbian and gay male

¹ Joel Jason, interview with author, 23 May 2020 (henceforth, JJ and MJ [2020]).
² Michael Callen, undated résumé, n.d., written at 29 Jones St., typewritten original, Michael Callen Papers at The LGBT Community Center National History Archive (henceforth, MCP).
³ JJ and MJ (2020).
⁴ Ibid.
communities made this dream difficult to realize. Still, Michael knew that lesbians and gay men would be stronger together and believed that a musical-political partnership was key. He placed an ad for like-minded musicians in the *New York Native* and the *Village Voice* then waited for the telephone to ring. One of the first responses came from Pam Brandt (1947–2015).

Born in New York City and raised in Montclair, NJ, Pamela Robin Brandt attended Mount Holyoke, a prestigious women’s college in South Hadley, Massachusetts. Pam’s mother encouraged her daughter to pursue her dreams, and Pam’s own “dissatisfaction about the traditional role [her] mother had assumed” strengthened her own position as an independent woman.\(^5\) In college, Pam played bass guitar in rock bands until she graduated with a Bachelor of Arts degree in 1969. She co-founded The Deadly Nightshade with guitarist-singers Helen Hooke and Ann Bowen in 1972. The group signed with RCA subsidiary Phantom Records in 1974, securing its place in music history as one of the first all-female rock bands signed to a major label. A self-described “drummerless but very danceable, high-energy female band,” The Deadly Nightshade recorded two albums, *The Deadly Nightshade* (1975) and *Funky & Western* (1976).\(^6\) Although music critic Robert Christgau dismissed the band as lit-


\(^6\) “We’re The Deadly Nightshade Band,” The Deadly Nightshade Homepage, 2009. https://www.thedeadlynightshade.net/Home.html
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tle more than “squeaky-clean folk rock” mixed with “the smug folkie sarcasm that seems to have its roots in junior high school talent shows,” their albums each received Grammy nominations, and the band was popular among feminist rock fans.\(^7\) They even scored a Top 100 hit with their disco version of the theme song to *Mary Hartman, Mary Hartman* (1976–1977), which peaked at #67 in 1976; and the band made a memorable performance on *Sesame Street*. In 2012, they released their final album, *Never Gonna Stop*. Sadly, Pam died of a heart attack in 2015.

Although Pam had been “playing with all-women bands for a long time,” she was curious about a mixed sex group. “At the beginning, [she] wondered if this was a step forward or a step down.”\(^8\) However, the growth of anti-gay and lesbian activism spearheaded by the Moral Majority and its beauty-queen-turned-agitator, Anita Bryant, in the 1970s convinced Pam that gay men and lesbians should “work together, to focus on our similarities and not just our differences.”\(^9\) She and Michael arranged to meet at 29 Jones St., where he had recently relocated from his Christopher St. studio, to chat and rehearse. The pair hit it off instantly, and what should have been a “normal forty-five-minute mutual audition where you try to play together and see if you’re musically compatible and all that” turned into the first of many all-nighters.\(^10\) Pam got back home around four in the morning. Enthusiastic about the prospects of a new band, Michael continued his search for other musicians.

Drummer Richard Dworkin also spotted Michael’s ad. A Chicago native who had lived on a commune in Minnesota before making his way to San Francisco in the late 1960s, where he

\(^10\) PB and JD (2013).
would play for bands like Buena Vista (a gay soul trio featured in the groundbreaking 1977 documentary film *Word Is Out*), Richard relocated to New York in November 1980. Soon, he joined eclectic jazz group The Microscopic Septet, an important force in New York’s Downtown scene that included founding member, avant-garde composer and saxophonist John Zorn. Intrigued by the idea of performing with an East Coast gay band, Richard left several telephone messages for Michael, all to no avail. In the meantime, he took a gig drumming with a band on a cross-country train trip and was out riding the rails for two weeks. Upon his return to New York, Dworkin made one final call at about 5:30 pm on 14 June 1982. This time, Michael answered. He and Pam were scheduled to rehearse that very night at Michael’s apartment, so Richard hopped on his bike and headed over to 29 Jones St.

As Richard mounted the stairs, bicycle in hand, Michael made quick mental notes, “very Jewish looking, high forehead, balding slightly. He had kinky hair cut short. He was wearing chinos and a T-shirt.”\(^\text{11}\) Although, he was cute, Michael thought, “this little drummer boy put out no gay vibes.”\(^\text{12}\) Michael also found it incredulous that someone in New York owned, much less rode, a bike. Richard stashed his bike somewhere and made his own assessment of the situation. The tiny studio apartment contained virtually no furniture, “a carpet, two — maybe more — director’s chairs, an upright piano, a Yamaha PA mixer, a mic stand, a microphone, must’ve had a couple of speakers. Maybe a pillow or two.”\(^\text{13}\) So, the trio sat on the floor, ordered Chinese food, talked about music, and after enjoying a sorbet Mike made for them, gathered around the piano to harmonize on The Dixie Cups’ “Chapel of Love” (1964). There was a powerful energy between the three musicians.


\(^{12}\) Ibid.

\(^{13}\) Richard Dworkin, interview with the author, New York, February 2012 (henceforth, RD and MJ [2012]).
Me and Dickie D

Although Michael wasn’t sure if Richard was actually gay, Pam sensed that “some of the excitement in the room was vibes passing forth between [them!]”14 Around 9:30 pm, she said her goodbyes and returned home to her girlfriend, but Richard lingered. Still unsure of his new acquaintance’s sexual orientation, Michael started to worry. “How can I get him out of here? What if he’s really straight and an ax murderer who answers personal ads?”15 To solve the riddle of Richard’s sexuality and put an end to the awkwardness, Michael pulled out a book called S I N E M A, “an overview of porno films of the late-60s and early-70s.”16 That was all the encouragement it took. Richard pounced, trying to plant a kiss on Michael’s lips, but Mike responded with “total shock.”17 Flattered yet flabbergasted, he pushed Richard away, exclaiming, “Whoa! Wait a minute. You don’t understand. I think I have GRID.”18 Although he hadn’t yet been officially diagnosed, Michael had all the symptoms of the new “gay cancer.”

Richard was unphased. After spending a decade in San Francisco, he had “been there, done that, so that horse was out of the barn,” and he didn’t believe that sex with Michael would be “anything novel for [him] in terms of disease.”19 So, Richard stayed. That night, they talked, made love, and had their first fight. A diehard, sex-positive Gay Liberationist, Michael doubted whether love between two men was even possible, while Richard’s politics had a romantic countercultural streak. He felt

14 PB and JD (2013).
15 Callen, “Handwritten Biography.”
16 Ibid.
17 Ibid.
18 GRID stands for Gay-Related Immune Deficiency, an early predecessor used to describe what was eventually termed Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome (AIDS). Dworkin’s and Callen’s memories of this night are quite similar, though in his written account Callen says he warned Dworkin that he had “AIDS.” This isn’t chronologically possible, as the term “AIDS” was introduced in September of 1982, several months after they met. This suggests that Callen wrote this account sometime after the events happened.
that love between two men was not only possible but necessary. Though, of course, love between men didn’t mean monogamy, marriage, and the other accoutrements of heteronormativity, but love, that was possible. “I just adored Mike from the moment I met him,” Richard remembered in 2012. “He was cute in a goofy Midwestern kind of way. He was smart. He liked to talk; I liked to listen. He liked to sing; I liked to play drums. He liked to write; I liked to edit.” Thus began a musical-romantic relationship that would endure for the next decade.

In the morning, the couple awoke early because Michael had to get to his day job as a legal secretary. As his new lover showered, Richard made a cursory pass through the record collection and spotted Al Jarreau’s live album, Look to the Rainbow (1977). Pulling the vinyl out of the sleeve and placing it on the turntable, he selected “Could You Believe,” a beautiful ballad featuring Jarreau’s expressive vocals accompanied only by a quavering Fender Rhodes piano. Accustomed to living in a loft in a largely abandoned building downtown, Richard cranked the volume to full blast, filling the apartment with Jarreau’s flexible tenor. Exasperated, Michael leapt from the bathroom, shouting, “What are you doing? What are you doing??!!” and turned down the music so as not to disturb his neighbors. It was a lovely moment in their new relationship that encapsulated complementary aspects of their personalities: Richard, the free-spirit, and Michael, the self-described control queen. For Richard, “Could You Believe” had a gay subtext lodged somewhere between Jarreau’s vocal performance and the homoerotically suggestive lines, “I spent the night with David; he taught me what to say. I was looking for a smooth stone when I heard him pray.” And, as he later told me, “somehow Mike just made me feel that way.”

Michael had been mostly unlucky in love. When he moved to New York, he packed the hope of finding love in his suitcase, but until he met Richard, the search had been fruitless. Michael captured the exuberance of new love in “Me and Dickie D,” a
musical paean to his boyfriend. The title is a pun of the Kris Kristofferson song “Me and Bobby McGee,” made famous by Janis Joplin on her final album, *Pearl* (1971). But where Kristofferson’s song is a wistful ballad about a transient affair, “Dickie D” is a jive talking, Motown-loving, dancing machine who “goes bump bump” and “hump hump hump [...] like a kangaroo” all night on the dance floor. Michael built his rollicking rock-and-roll tune around a bluesy chord progression and a boogie-woogie piano hook. Vocally, he took cues from Little Richard (1932–2020) and Buddy Holly (1936–1959), growling, stuttering, and scatting his way through the melody with an infectious energy. He leaps from chest voice to his piercing soprano over a bass countermelody sung by Dickie D himself. A campy, feel-good queer love song, “Me and Dickie D” demonstrated that Michael could both croon and rock. John Hagen later arranged the song for a recording session that featured guitarist Richard Lloyd, bassist Pamela Brandt, saxophones played by Hagen, and Dickie D himself on drums. On the day of their sessions, the original pianist never showed at the studio, a decision Richard believes may have been motivated by homophobic, last-minute professional jitters about performing on an openly-gay love song. Mindful of the clock (and the cost) of the studio, Richard frantically called musician friends who might know an available pianist. Eventually, Jonathan Hardy arrived and did a “phenomenal job” with the song.22 “Me and Dickie D” would be released on Callen’s debut solo record, *Purple Heart* (1988). Richard also produced the recording, an experience he described as “absolutely mortifying. Imagine having to play on, produce, and edit a song about yourself!”23 But it was a labor of love.

Making It Official

About a week after meeting Richard, Michael collapsed in his apartment and was admitted to hospital. Although doctors had

22 Ibid.
23 Ibid.
been unable to determine the cause of his chronic health problems and generally poor health over much of the past year, this time they unmasked the culprit. “With the satisfaction of Miss Marple,” a nurse delivered the diagnosis. “Well, it’s GRID. You have cryptosporidiosis. Before GRID, we didn’t think it infected humans. It’s a disease previously found only in livestock. I’m afraid there is no known treatment […]. All we can do is try to keep you hydrated and see what happens. Your body will either handle it or…it won’t.”

She then smiled “not too optimistically, patted [his] leg, and left [Michael] alone to confront in earnest the very really possibility of [his] imminent death.” Now, at least, he knew he had GRID. When the CDC revised its terminology and defined Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome on 24 September 1982, Michael became one of the first men in the US

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25 Ibid.
to receive an AIDS diagnosis. At the time, doctors knew very little about AIDS, and what they did know was evolving and changing rapidly. However, a few things seemed certain: AIDS was a serious illness, and it appeared to be fatal.

The diagnosis left Michael feeling like “factory seconds or damaged merchandise,” and he almost threw in the towel because he “didn’t have a lover and [now was] going to die without a lover.”26 Determined to spare Richard the agony of watching him die, Michael “kept trying to push [him] away.”27 Getting involved with a man who had just been diagnosed with a stigmatized, deadly, and mysterious illness, Michael reasoned, was not exactly an auspicious set of conditions for new love or a lasting relationship. However, Richard visited Michael in the hospital, ignoring warnings from friends and disregarding Michael’s own protests. “Some people thought it was amazing or strange or weird that I continued to see him,” Richard recalled.28 Richard realized that Michael “was kind of warning [him] of all the horrible things about him; besides that, he had this new killer disease and wouldn’t last that long,” but he dismissed Michael’s protestations, saying, “Love’s a crazy thing.”29 Michael would later misremember that Richard had said, “Love don’t need a reason.”

After Michael recovered, he, Richard, and Pam began to perform as a trio at small venues in the city. These intimate shows were based around Michael’s cabaret act, supplementing and expanding the texture of piano and voice with a variety of percussion elements and bass. Working with an ensemble boosted Michael’s confidence on stage. He became a stronger and more confident singer, and he took risks with repertoire. Between songs, he made campy stage banter with the audience and performed amusing impressions of TV divas like June Lockhart, the matriarch of Lost in Space. Archival recordings show the group’s

26 David Schmidt, interview with Michael Callen, 12 November 1987, typescript, MCP.
28 Ibid.
29 Ibid.
growing sophistication and eclecticism. In addition to piano-based ballads and original songs by Michael and Pam, their sets included doo-wop, country, rock-and-roll, rock, and pop, original songs by friends and songwriters they admired like Don Yowell (1953–1984), Bobby Blume (1956–1984), and Grant King alongside Billy Joel, Elton John, and even Bruce Springsteen.

Michael's repertoire choices were guided by his identity as a gay man. As he told an audience at SNAFU in 1982:

I sit down, and I'm a gay man. And for years, I would listen to the radio, mostly female singers, and I would imagine a man singing to a man. And I always imagine songs that do not require a change of pronoun to express my experience as a gay man. And I found one in the work of Bruce Springsteen.

The audience giggles, given Springsteen's reputation as an über-macho man, the embodiment of virile heterosexuality. Michael hastens to add that in this case, he's had to do a little tweaking of the lyrics. “I’ve changed three lines having to do with New Jersey and cars because I cannot relate to New Jersey or cars,” he jokes before launching into a performance of “Backstreets,” Springsteen’s nostalgic rock epic from Born to Run (1975).

30 Some of these archival recordings are housed in the MCP. Richard Dworkin possess his own private collection of unreleased live recordings as well.
31 Don Paul Yowell was an accomplished songwriter whose works were recorded by Aretha Franklin (“There’s a Star for Everyone” from her 1981 album Love All the Hurt Away); Leah Kunkle, sister of “Mama” Cass Elliot, recorded Yowell’s “I Run with Trouble” for her album of the same name in 1980. Desmond Child has been a champion of Yowell’s work, recording and performing “A Ray of Hope” for many years. Michael’s recording of Yowell’s “Small Town Change” appears on his 1988 debut album, Purple Heart.

Bobby Blume received a bachelor’s degree in music from the Manhattan School of Music, taught music, directed musical theater productions, and performed around New York City. There are two commercially available albums of Blume’s music, Falling for You Was a Trip (2000), for which Michael recorded Blue’s “Fool Heart,” and With Love, Bobby Blume (2000).
33 Ibid.
Fig. 4. Michael Callen at SNAFU (1983). Poster design by Richard Dworkin. The Michael Callen Papers, Box 5/Folder 60, the LGBT Community Center National History Archive.
Michael loved passionate performances and powerful lyrics, two elements of Springsteen’s music, and he aspired to emulate these qualities in performances and in his own songs. Joel Jason remembered that they saw Springsteen together during their days as Mike & the Headsets while on vacation in Ft. Lauderdale.34 Before the concert, Michael spent some time teaching a very handsome and very stoned young stranger the finer points of Barbra Streisand’s choreography from the final scene of On a Clear Day You Can See Forever (1970), offering him a peck on the cheek once the young man executed the moves to Michael’s satisfaction.35 Michael may have also been drawn to “Backstreets” out of a feeling of nostalgia.36 His high school best friend was named Terry Tincher, and Springsteen’s narrative revolves around the backstreet adventures of two friends, one of whom is named Terry. Singing “Backstreets,” Michael channeled Springsteen’s passionate urgency, and he handled the rock piano parts with finesse. Vocally, however, he pushed a bit too hard, shouting more than singing, which led to intonation problems in the final iterations of the refrain.

Eventually, Michael, Richard, and Pam found guitarist and songwriter Janet Cleary, and the new foursome brainstormed ideas for band names: The Amoeba Farts (a campy play on a symptom of a serious intestinal parasite that was being diagnosed among gay men with alarming frequency); The Scandells (a playful take on stylized girl group names); and Take Back the Nitrites (a reference to “poppers,” a common inhalant vasodilator used on the gay circuit to produce a quick high and to enhance sexual experience). Eventually, they settled on Lowlife, a moniker selected on the assumption that “some people would figure we were lowlifes anyway, just ’cause we’re queer.”37

Lowlife played at gay benefits, queer proms at the Gay and Lesbian Community Center, and even some mainstream, i.e.,

34 This was probably Springsteen’s concert at Hollywood Stadium in 1981.
35 JJ and MJ (2020).
36 RD and MJ (2012).
37 Walter, “Rock ’N’ Roll Lowlife with a Gay Conscience.”
straight, music clubs. Their sets mixed oldies from the rock-and-roll era, girl-group hits, country, reggae, and rock alongside originals that covered “the gamut from fucked-up love affairs to gays fighting for our rights.” In 1984, Michael told the New York Native that “all songs are chosen for their queer content. If it’s not there, we force it.” Lowlife’s intersectional political stance made them unique among New York’s gay and lesbian musicians, and the balance between gay men and lesbian women in the group brought diverse constituencies together “in a room, having a good time together. This is what the band can do. Maybe the men are watching [Richard] and Michael, and the women are watching Janet and Pam, but inevitably they have to look at the whole band, and at everyone else in the room.” Ms. magazine praised the group’s mixture of “good-time rock with a political bent,” and Bruce Eder of The Village Voice wrote, “I don’t know if the world is ready for Lowlife yet — but I’d like to think there are a few thousand of us, gay and straight, who are.”

Although each member of the band took queer politics seriously, they also made room for fun and pleasure — two important political tools — on stage. Michael would yodel, a vocal technique he learned from his mother and something both Pam

39 Ibid.
40 Richard Dworkin quoted in Walter, “Rock ‘N’ Roll Lowlife with a Gay Conscience.”
and Richard recall that he could “actually [do] really well, really, really, really well.” He also twirled “one of those electric batons that had light-up ends, so it almost looked like you’re twirling flaming batons.” Mike’s antics were a hit with audiences, who delighted in his unapologetic flamboyance. Eventually, however, Lowlife had to face the music. Unable to play as many gigs as they hoped or to secure a record contract, the group disbanded in 1986. Brandt’s only regret was “that we were ahead of our time. I really wish that the time had indeed been right for a band of gay men and gay women working and playing together because I think it was a darn good band. And I wish we had gotten more recognition when we were doing it. I wish it had gone farther.”

42 PB and JD (2013).
43 Ibid.
Although Lowlife never released an album, the band did raise $5,000 to record several demos at Philip Glass’s Living Room Studio in 1985. The resulting tape included two original activist anthems by Michael (“No, No” and “Living in Wartime,”), two songs by Pam (“Uh Oh!” and “Mama,”), and their campy rendition of the 1960 Connie Francis classic, “Where the Boys Are.”

**Activist Anthems**

Michael was determined to use his music to express experiences of PWAs and to use music as a tool for AIDS activism. One of his first activist songs, “Living in Wartime,” captures the zeitgeist. It’s an angry song, fueled by the righteous indignation of PWAs who were frustrated by the glacial pace of the federal government’s response to the crisis. Michael employs military metaphors that were common in 1980s AIDS activist rhetoric, and his wordy text decries the “conspiracy of silence” and the “bigotry and greed” that mire activist efforts, obstacles that can only be surmounted by PWAs and their allies working to overcome their differences and fight together.

Like Joni Mitchell’s *Dog Eat Dog* (1985) and Starship’s “We Built This City” (1985), “Living in Wartime” harnesses the sounds of ’80s synth-pop ironically to buttress the damning social critique in the lyrics. The song commences with an angular, syncopated fanfare on a synth organ over a wailing air raid siren, two musical gestures that signify intensity and danger. In the verses, murky minor-tinged harmonies churn over a low tonic pedal, while Michael calls for action: “This is no time for doubting/ to stop and wonder why / This is a time for shouting: / I don’t believe the lies!” The swirl of synthetic sounds and the monotonous, mechanical music suggest alienation and cold indifference, and the contrast between Michael’s voice and these synth effects gives his singing a humane poignancy. His is the voice of a PWA crying out against powerful forces that would rather see him, and people like him, ground to dust. The music of the chorus works its way from minor to major with a series of rising melodic sequences. In Western music, the journey from
minor to major has been interpreted as a narrative trajectory from strife to victory, benediction, or a happy ending (mostly famously, perhaps, in Beethoven’s Symphony No. 3, but also in Leslie Gore’s “You Don’t Own Me,” [1963], which uses a shift from minor to major to articulate a stance of feminist empowerment). In “Living in Wartime,” Michael employs the minor to major tonal trajectory to mirror his hope that the war against AIDS would soon be over.

Lowlife recorded the song during their sessions at The Living Room in 1985. That year, it was also chosen as the exit music during the original run of Larry Kramer’s AIDS activist play, *The Normal Heart*. Testing the Limits (a filmmaking collective formed in 1987 by Gregg Bordowitz, David Meieran, Sandra Elgear, Robyn Hutt, Hilery Joy Kipnis, and Jean Carlomusto as an ACT UP affinity group) used “Living in Wartime” as a “vehicle to organize information and propel the viewer through” their

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Fig. 7. Lowlife at *The Late Show Tonight* (c. 1985). Richard Dworkin Private Archive.
first documentary film, *Testing the Limits*.\(^{44}\) In the film, Michael’s song “functions to organize the dense arrangement of information, shaping it into a work of propaganda.”\(^{45}\) Although Michael’s song resonated with other activists, Richard Dworkin mused decades later, “Maybe it was too late for an anthem anyway.”\(^{46}\)

Queering the Cover

Censorship and cultural taboo kept overt references to homosexuality out of movies, television, and popular songs. However, queer culture creators employed complex, multi-layered, and double-voiced techniques to hide queer points of view in plain sight, following the examples of Cole Porter (1891–1964) and Noel Coward (1899–1973) as well as earlier Black American blues queens like Lucille Bogan (1987–1948), Ma Rainey (1886–1939), and Gladys Bentley (1907–1960). But Michael was not content with subtext. Having done the work of coming out to live openly and proudly as a gay man, he craved songs that affirmed and celebrated gay experiences. In his covers, he retained male love-object pronouns in songs originally performed by women (a musical choice for which his father had once slapped him when Michael was a child), and as he had with Mike & the Headsets, Michael changed other lyrics as needed to make them gayer. He also manipulated the pitch, timbre, and inflection of his singing, especially through shifts in the accent or tone of single syllables and carefully placed sibilants, to sing in what many listeners would hear as a stereotypically “gay” voice.

Lowlife’s cover of Connie Francis’s “Where the Boys Are” exemplifies Michael’s campy cover style. Originally the title song of a 1960 movie about college co-eds on spring break, “Where the Boys Are” is a piece of mid-century pop schmaltz and sentimentality. Its lyrics detail the fantasies of many a young, straight


\(^{45}\) Ibid., 31.

\(^{46}\) Richard Dworkin, interview with the author, 2 June 2012.
woman who yearns to find her special beau somewhere in the hazy, heteronormative future. Francis’s expressive voice swells with longing, but her desire remains G-rated. She’s a good girl who waits, patiently, in the holding cell of adolescence, knowing that all it will take is a single look to spot the man of her dreams, then it’s off to the bridal shop, next stop, Chapel of Love! “Where the Boys Are” reinforces heteronormativity, yet a masterful performer can queer it by “decoding and recoding the heterosexual or heteronormative meanings already encoded in that culture so that they come to function as vehicles for gay or queer meaning.”

Michael transforms this anthem of compulsory heterosexuality into a celebration of the possibilities that await young gay men where the gay boys are, namely in cities like New York, San Francisco, and Los Angeles where cruising for sex on public streets was an everyday part of urban gay life. On the recording, he used studio production techniques to camp up the cover. Multi-tracked vocals proclaim the titular refrain with a mock seriousness that also includes a cheesy synth trumpet call that adds to the bombast and silliness. Throughout, he uses shrieks, giggles, cracks, purrs, squeals, and slides to make fun out of the sentimental song and changes the lyrics to suit his aesthetic agenda. When Michael sings of throngs of urban denizens on crowded sidewalks, gay listeners know that the smiling face and tender embrace are more likely to be those of a mid-day trick than a lifelong partner. In the original lyrics to the second verse, Connie Francis sings “I’ll climb to the highest steeple and tell the world he’s mine.” Michael queers the text by changing three little words: “I’ll climb right up on his steeple and tell the world he’s mine,” adding an orgasmic cry just to drive home the point that this steeple was not erected atop any church.

Arguably the queerest moment in the song occurs on the penultimate note. A lifelong devotee of La Streisand and an avid collector of trivia about her, Michael vowed to break his favorite

diva’s record for the longest belted note on a recording. As the song comes to a close, he belts an E4 on the insignificant word “for,” holding it for a staggering twenty-three seconds—a feat he had to repeat twice in the studio after the sound engineer erased the first take. Pam remembered that in live performances Michael “would camp it up like crazy when he sang it, of course, and sing really high, much higher than Connie Francis ever sang!” Michael played up the campy humor of his “Streisand” moment by pantomiming funny gestures, making faces, glancing at his wristwatch, or feigning a yawn as he showed off his powerful voice. However, behind the camp façade lurked more serious realities.

- “Where the Boys Are” (Connie Francis, Neil Sedaka & Howard Greenfield, 1960)
- “Maybe” (The Chantels, 1957)
- “Come See About Me” (The Supremes, Holland-Dozier-Holland, 1964)
- “Be My Baby” (The Ronettes, Jeff Barry, Ellie Greenwich, Phil Spector, 1963)
- “Love Potion No. 9” (The Searchers, Jerry Lieber and Mike Stoller, 1959)
- “Little Bitty Pretty One” (Bobby Day, Thurston Harris, 1957)
- “Secret Agent Man” (Johnny Rivers, P. F. Sloan and Steve Barri, 1964)
- “We Did It Anyway” (Pamela Brandt)
- “Vigilante” (Pamela Brandt)
- “Living in Wartime” (Michael Callen)
- “No, No” (Michael Callen)
- “Uh Oh!” (Pamela Brandt)
- “Mama” (Pamela Brandt)
- “If I Could Only Win Your Love” (The Louvin Brothers, 1959)
- “The Locomotion” (Little Eva, Carole King and Gerry Goffin, 1962)

48 PB and JD (2013).
• “You Don’t Own Me” (Leslie Gore, John Madara and David White, 1963)
• “Great Balls of Fire” (Jerry Lee Lewis, Otis Blackwell and Jack Hammer, 1957)
• “Who Hit Me” (Janet Cleary)
  — Lowlife Repertoire List, c. 1985