Love Don't Need a Reason

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Fig. 1. Michael Callen headshot modeled after Barbra Streisand’s *Memories* album cover (c. 1980). Richard Dworkin Private Archive.
Now, some would say I’m just my father’s son,
That I am cold and distant and hard on everyone.
Father to son, now son to lover,
I judge you and begrudge you the love you need.
I wanna be your fool.
— Michael Callen

New York City was the East Coast hub of gay life, and by the time Michael arrived in 1977, Gay Liberation was in full swing. In enclaves like the West Village, gay life achieved an unprecedented level of visibility due to the sheer numbers of LGBTQ+ people in the city. Gay-owned and gay-friendly bars, restaurants, bookshops, coffee houses, community organizations, and social groups flourished, providing community members safety, visibility, and opportunity. In the 1970s, gay sex was gay revolution, and urban gay male sexual culture developed in radical opposition to ubiquitous homophobia, draconian sodomy laws, medical mandates, and religious condemnation by embracing the pleasures and politics of the flesh. The influx of young, single, and horny gay men into New York ushered in a new culture of public and commercialized sex in cruisy areas like the Central Park Ramble, the Hudson River Piers, and a plethora of bathhouses, sex clubs, and gay bookstores throughout the city. Such sexual-cultural practices intentionally disregarded norms of compulsory heterosexuality. A popular t-shirt then worn by
love don’t need a reason

gay men captured the zeitgeist with a simple slogan: so many men, so little time.

Michael moved to New York ostensibly to pursue a career in music, and while he did write some songs and play a few gigs at piano bars, his musical efforts were half-hearted. His real passion was sex, lots of sex. For a young gay man in the late 1970s, New York City was the proverbial candy store, and Michael had an insatiable sweet tooth. Because a virile young gay man never knew where or when sex in the city might strike, Michael always carried with him the gay man’s sexual survival kit: small packets of K-Y lubricant, a bottle of amyl nitrate poppers, two tetracycline pills, and Handi-Wipes to clean up after a tryst.

While the city presented unparalleled opportunities for sex, it also presented certain challenges for naïve and inexperienced young men, especially those with uncertain career aspirations and limited financial means. “Not only must one be on the way up at work,” gay author Edmund White warned, but also “produce good conversation, good food, good sex, attract the right friends, dance all night, jog three miles, press 200 pounds, and have an opinion about Caballé’s pianissimo. One must have the drive of a tycoon, the allure of a kept boy, the stamina of an athlete, the bonhomie of a man of the world.” In White’s final estimation, this “is not a formula for happiness. No one can embody all or even most of these virtues, and the failure to do so can produce grave self-doubts.”

Michael suffered from what he called “classic gay low self-esteem,” a complex of self-doubts, anxieties, and fears that resulted from the friction between homophobic society (which regularly denigrates LGBTQ+ folks as second- and third-class citizens, when it recognizes their fundamental humanity and rights at all) and queer lived experiences. With the help of a psychotherapist, he battled his own internalized homophobia, sought to be assertive and present-focused, and learned to state clearly his needs and wants. His therapeutic journey also includ-

ed confronting his parents about their inability to communicate openly and their continuing refusal to accept his sexuality. The ongoing Cold War of words with his father was a major source of pain in Michael’s life. No matter how hard he tried, Michael could not get through to his father.

In spite of the geographic and ideological gulfs separating them from their son, Barbara and Cliff maintained a lively written correspondence with Michael. From the late 1970s to the early 1990s, they exchanged impassioned letters often. These letters offer a glimpse into the private workings of one American family dealing with homosexuality in the last decades of the twentieth century. Among the letters in the Callen archive from 1973 to 1993, two things stand out. First, father and son were equally stubborn. Clifford’s resolve to avoid the subject of homosexuality met its match in Michael’s insistence on its manifestation in every aspect of his daily life. Second, the members of the Callen family loved each other very much, evidenced by their willingness to exchange ideas about the nature of masculinity, family, and sexuality over three decades.

Throughout the 1970s and ’80s, Michael and his father typed their letters, using the page as a scrim behind which they could, to some extent, hide. They subjected one another’s letters to painstaking semantic analysis, ferreting out meaning in every textural detail. Their tone is often dispassionate, academic, and detached, though both Michael and Cliff erupt through the page with great feeling on more than one occasion. In person or over the telephone, however, aversion became an art. Their conversations consisted of polite exchanges of pleasantries about work, family members, or the weather. This pattern repeated in Barry’s conversations with his father, and the two brothers used to get some catharsis by comparing the details of their respective conversations with their dad.

There is a gap in the archival record at The LGBT Community Center National History Archive from 1981 to 1992, with few letters to or from members of the Callen family. Certainly, their relationship continued to change as they negotiated new pathways into loving one another.
By the end of the 1980s, Clifford started to write his letters by hand using a whimsical novelty notepad with “Cliff’s Notes” at the top in the familiar yellow and black design of the popular *CliffsNotes Guides*. A different Cliff spills out onto these pages among words scribbled in his messy penmanship. His gruff demeanor softened over time. No longer a stern patriarchal father, Cliff became more of a dad and grandpa. These later letters tend to be brief yet more deeply personal, filled with touching observations about post-retirement life (Barbara played a good bit of Nintendo, it seems) and warm declarations of fatherly love. Though they are shorter, less critical, and sometimes perfunctory, each letter ends with the same closing: “Take care, and we will be talking. Love, Dad.”

A common theme in their correspondence was the love that bound their family, but they also clashed over contentious issues, especially Michael’s homosexuality. Cliff refused to verbally discuss it, yet his letters demonstrate that he was willing to face and discuss his son’s sexuality in written form. During a particularly heated epistolary exchange in the last two months of 1979, father and son negotiated the boundaries of their relationship. Michael fired the first shot, writing that “therapy hasn’t been successful unless you can tell your parents that you love them or to go fuck themselves.”³ Over several eloquent and impassioned pages, he condemned his family’s tendency to “hint for love [then] wait around hoping someone will sense we are deep in the need — to be touched, to be reassured, to be talked to, brought up, brought down.”⁴ As his letter closed, Michael confronted his father’s homophobia directly. Perhaps Cliff was embarrassed about having a gay son, Michael reasoned, but the path to reconciliation and healing could only begin with an open admission of these feelings. Michael believed that they could work toward a better relationship “together, out of mutual love.”⁵

³ Michael Callen, letter to Clifford Callen, 7 November 1979, typewritten original, Michael Callen Papers at The LGBT Community Center National History Archive (henceforth, MCP).
⁴ Ibid.
⁵ Ibid.
Cliff preferred dispassionate, intellectual conversation over emotional exchanges, which he handled clumsily, and his rebuttal illustrates his taste for analytical discourse, even when the subject was his son’s identity. First, however, he took a pot shot at the insights Michael gained from psychotherapy, noting its near complete bankruptcy as a helping profession. “If your therapist is telling you that you are not being assertive enough,” he quipped, “he reads you differently than I do or ever have.” Then, he adopted a critical distance that allowed him to wipe away any residual confusion about his view of homosexuality. Mr. Callen felt that his son

...consciously and freely chose [the homosexual] lifestyle with the full realization and knowledge that the relationships of family and most friends would be adversely affected. [...] In short, Mike, you with more potential than I ever dream any son of mine could have, effectively caused to be closed many, if not most of the doors or opportunities to serve mankind, to the degree theretofore possible, or even likely.

He even blamed Michael for resorting to “some subterfuge at times” in order to disguise his sexuality and he reiterated his wish to avoid the subject of Michael’s sexuality completely. “A satisfactory relationship does not require complete agreement,” he wrote. However,

all relationships must have reasonably outlined parameters within the basic tenets of each person’s philosophy. Outside these parameters there is too much conflict or not enough common ground on which to operate successfully. I feel that if you and I can agree on the above underlined sentence, we can function [...] . It is unlikely we will spend large blocks of

6 Clifford Callen, letter to Michael Callen, 13 November 1979, typewritten original, MCP.
7 Ibid.
time together, so I don’t feel I’m asking for the moon for you to ‘play it straight’ when we are together.⁸

Cliff proposed that they take pleasure in common interests and safe topics: entertainment, travel, family, shared past experiences, and future plans.

Although the twenty-first-century discourse of heterosexual privilege was not contemporary with the Callen family’s correspondence, it is clear that Michael and his mid-century queer compatriots were working out the foundations of that concept in their personal relationships and their political thought. Michael attempted to explain systemic homophobia and the invisible, or unmarked, nature of heterosexuality to his father by providing a list of compulsorily heterosexual behaviors in which his parents engaged thoughtlessly and without comment, molestation, or protest from anyone:

You touch mother. You discuss your marriage. You mention that you live together. That you have children. All these are silent expressions […] of your basic heterosexuality. No one accuses you of slapping your sexuality in everyone’s face just because [mother] wears a wedding band. And yet it says as much about your sex life as my admission of gayness says about [mine].⁹

By contrast, invisibility was the norm for gay men and lesbian women. “Nowhere in the mass culture,” Michael reasoned, “can we see two men holding hands or kissing or in any way feeling good about themselves.”¹⁰ Headstrong, determined, and self-assured, Michael refused to relent. “I cannot isolate my gayness,” he insisted. “I do not do so with my present and vital relationships, and I cannot and will not revert to hiding an aspect of my

⁸ Ibid. Underline in original.
⁹ Michael Callen, letter to Clifford Callen, 17 November 1979, typewritten original, MCP.
¹⁰ Ibid. Emphasis in original.
being of which I am very proud and which is one of the primary sources of pleasure in my life.”

Michael even tried to appeal to his father’s political sensibilities by offering a brief summary of gay history from the nineteenth century through the 1969 Stonewall rebellion, hoping that this historic display of community pride might vanquish his father’s homophobia. The eloquent passage in Michael’s letter reveals the depth of his thinking about the relationship between sexuality, power, and the human capacity for growth through critical self-reflection:

The only answer for us, father, is education. You are going to have to trace back the source and power of your negative reaction [to homosexuality] and brutally and painfully examine it to see what is reasonable and what is not. I mean emotionally reasonable as well as intellectually, although I repeat that I feel that the mind (your mind especially) is one of the ways to your heart. We can’t always change how we feel, but we can change how we think, and sometimes that can change the way we feel.

Finally, Michael made a heartfelt plea to his father’s basic emotions as a father:

When you think on the subject of gayness, you need not think much farther than me. Look closely at who I am. You saw me form. Am I much different now that you know than I was before you knew? What difference is there, if you perceive a difference? Is that difference for the better or the worse?

11 Ibid.
12 Ibid. Emphasis added. Underline in original.
EACH OTHER. Society and socialization are standing between us—a civil war between father and son. I have fought alone for so long […] and now, war weary, I am watching your suffering intensify.

The givens are that I am homosexual, and you are heterosexual. We must build love from that basic difference. Just remember, all we are talking about here is love.¹³

Clifford Callen would not waver. He vehemently disapproved of his son’s chosen lifestyle and prohibited any discussion of homosexuality, claiming to get “physically nauseated when forced to consider the subject, much less talk about it.”¹⁴

Although Cliff had encountered gay men during his time in New York with the Merchant Marines, and both he and Barbara knew of isolated gay or lesbian individuals, mostly older spinsters and confirmed bachelors, as a general rule homosexuality was “very abstract and very foreign” to them.¹⁵ As was (and remains) the case for many parents, they assumed that all three of their children were heterosexual, inasmuch as they considered it at all. From this assumption came an array of other presumed “facts” of heterosexual life: the relative degree of masculinity/femininity which should correspond to a person’s biological sex; personality traits and appearance; the biological sex, gender, and degree of masculinity/femininity of an individual’s preferred partner; procreative decisions; the way you have sex; and the parts of your body you (and others) consider appropriately erotic.¹⁶ From his parents’ perspective, Michael’s coming out

¹³ Ibid. Allcaps in original.
¹⁵ Barbara Callen, interview with Michael Callen, 24 February 1992, audio recording, MCP; Clifford Callen, interview with Michael Callen, 26 February 1992, audio recording, MCP.
¹⁶ Eve K. Sedgwick, Tendencies (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993), 6–7. Sedgwick writes: “Think of all the elements that are condensed into the notion of sexuality identity, something that the common sense of our time presents as a unitary category. Yet, exerting any pressure at all on ‘sexuality
“upset their plans […]. It meant that they wouldn’t have grandchildren. It meant that they didn’t know what it would mean.”

Even though Michael could muster some degree of understanding of their beliefs, he never capitulated to his parents’ prejudices. When Linda married in the early 1980s, she wanted her brother to sing at the ceremony, but their parents worried that he would show up with a male companion as a date. In a letter to his sister, Michael insisted that until things are worked out between Mom and Dad and I about whether my friends and lovers are allowed into 66 Warr Court — until I can be convinced that I can expect that anyone I would bring [there] would be treated with fundamental human dignity and respect […] I will never again cross that doorstep myself. If who I truly am is not welcome

identity; you see that its elements include” all the items listed above and others. For Sedgwick, there is no “truth” in sexual or gender identity. They are part of the operations of heteronormative power in culture.

18 love don’t need a reason

[...], then the silhouette of a son that they would like to perceive me to be has no place there either.18

With Barry and Linda also living away from home, Barbara was left to mediate the feud between father and son. One on hand, she strongly believed that homosexuality was morally wrong; on the other, however, she felt that the “biblical mandate for mothers to love their children [was] stronger.”19 During a trip to New York in June 1981, mother and son had a “good, honest ‘gut-spilling’” which left both feeling optimistic.20 In a three-page handwritten letter to her son after the visit, Barbara worked out her complex and contradictory feelings. “If we truly love someone,” she wrote, we “must accept them as is.”21 Mrs. Callen believed that father, mother, and son could “work out (of compromise)

18 Michael Callen, letter to Linda Callen, 10 March 1981, typewritten original, MCP.
20 Barbara Callen, note to Michael Callen, June 1981, handwritten original, MCP.
21 Ibid. Boldface and underline in original.
[sic] ways to make it easier on each other.” However, she knew that her son would have to initiate that compromise, given her husband’s extraordinary stubbornness. Her letter closed with a heartfelt declaration of affection, praising Michael for growing into “the kind of person we raised you to be—kind, thoughtful, intelligent, and a unique individual—your own kind of person.” With a knowing wink, she added that “most of these attributes can be directly attributed to your father, as I’m sure you know.” In both his constitution and the strength of his convictions, Michael was truly the son of his father.

Please, Talk to Your Daddy

Second-wave feminism was animated by the notion that the personal is political, and the use of personal, lived experience as a key to unlock larger systemic forms of oppression worked its way into other forms of activism as well as the arts. Many songwriters and poets turn to their own experiences for inspiration. Anne Sexton (1928–1974) and Sylvia Plath (1932–1963) epitomized the “confessional” midcentury poet, and their respective battles with depression and eventual suicides seemed to solidify mis-readings of their art as direct reflections of their private lives. Songwriters like Joni Mitchell have resisted the “confessional” label, insisting that their works should be mined not for autobiographical trivia but for something that resonates in the listener’s own life. There are degrees of theatricality in art and in everyday life, as Erving Goffman, Simon Frith, Philip Auslander, and others have shown. There is the real artist, off-stage, going about daily life, and there is an artistic persona or

22 Ibid.
23 Ibid.
24 Ibid.
star text created around the artist. Finally, there are infinite dramatic personae adopted in individual songs and performances, and this is as true for singer-songwriters as it is for composers of musical theater and pop stars. The semantics of musical performances and recordings can make it difficult to distinguish between one “lamination” (Goffman’s term) or layer of a star persona and another, but all musicians utilize musical and non-musical elements to construct authenticity. In the hands of lesser talent, such “confession” become mere journaling or reportage, but from gifted artists, the results can be sublime.

One of Michael’s greatest virtues (and one of the things that could make him difficult as a child, friend, or lover) was his insistence on speaking his own truth, even when it revealed painful or embarrassing things about himself or those around him. It was also one of his greatest assets as a writer. He had a knack for capturing the nuances of conversational language in his lyrics and prose. Inspired by Joni Mitchell and Laura Nyro (1947–1997), whose music he admired, Michael began to use personal experiences as song material, making universal gay art rooted in his own gay truth, and this can be heard in one of his most beautiful ballads.

A masterful portrait of a family in crisis, “Nobody’s Fool” is a domestic triptych in three irregular verses. Stretching his dramatic writing and performance skills, Michael sings the roles of Mother, Father, and their estranged gay Son. The title echoes a line from one of his father’s letters. Describing what he felt after learning that his son was gay, Cliff did not mince words:


Michael was experimenting with similar themes as early as 1980. In the MCP, I discovered a handwritten, unfinished lyric from 5 June 1980 on stationary from the Georgetown Dutch Inn in Washington, DC, that reads, in part, “Papa don’t like me / He thinks I’m no good / Mom’s disappointed / She never thought I would / Be who I came to be / She don’t want me loving you / You weren’t raised that way / What do you want me to do / What will the neighbors say.”
“To be thought a fool is anger provoking to the greatest degree possible.” 28 Michael used his father’s anger as the point of departure for a deep exploration of the impact of his coming out, and to examine the chilling effect his father’s rectitude had on the other members of their family. He captured the resulting breakdown of communication among members of this most loquacious family in terms that balance the personal and the political, the particular and the universal.

Talk to your Daddy
He misses you. He does—
In his own way
I know it was rough
For you and your brother
But do it for me
Talk to your Daddy

If you could see him
Through my eyes
Sometimes he tries so hard
But he’s old now
And he’s set in his ways
And sometimes I worry
He’s just counting the days
Please talk to your Daddy

*

Hello? Son?
Yeah, your Mom said it was you
How’s the job?
Who me? Hell, I’m just old
And gettin’ older
How’s the weather there?
It’s gettin’ colder here

28 Clifford Callen, letter to Michael Callen, 13 November 1979, typewritten original, MCP.
Wish you could come home
And see your Mom
She sure misses you boys
What'd you say?
Mama, turn down that TV!
You know I can't hear
With all that noise
She sure misses her boys

Your brother called the other day
Said he got screwed out of a
Whole day's pay
Him and some foreman,
They got in a fight
That boy's got a bad temper
I told him it served him right

Your mother says I'm too hard on everyone
But I ain't nobody's fool
Do unto others
Before they do unto you
That's my golden rule
I ain't nobody's fool

How long we been talkin'?
I ain't made of money
Honey, come and say goodbye
Take care now and call your Mom
I'll let you go now
Anything you need...
Just let me know.

*

Now, some would say
I'm just my father's son
That I am cold and distant
And hard on everyone
Father to son, now son to lover
I judge you and begrudge you
The love you need

I wanna be a fool
I wanna be a fool
I wanna be your fool

— “Nobody’s Fool” (Tops and Bottoms Music, BMI)
   Courtesy of Richard Dworkin

In the first stanza, Michael sings quietly with measured precision. Careful pitch placement and clear diction suggest that the mother has carefully chosen her words, and yet her opening plea reveals just how difficult this situation is for her. Although “Talk to your Daddy” is a declarative statement, Michael’s voice trembles slightly, and in that small gesture he reveals the mother’s emotional burden as she serves as the go-between for her husband and son. Michael’s expressive piano playing underscores the shifting affective state of each speaker. The first section begins with a stately piano figure, and throughout both Michael’s playing, like his singing, remains hushed and deliberate, a sonic reflection of the mother’s mindfulness of the impact of every word she utters.

The second section is spoken by the father. There is a rehearsed banality to his words, typical of a certain sort of phone call home in which “all the players [try] not to talk about what was really going on.”29 The father asks about work and the weather, the same sorts of “safe” subjects Cliff had suggested that he and Michael stick to in their exchange of letters. Specific rhetorical gestures distance the father from the situation as well as from rest of the family. He uses second-person possessive pronouns, emphatically referring to “your” mom, never “my wife,” and to his other son as “your” brother instead of “my son.” Whereas

the mother’s singing in the previous verse was deliberate and precise, the father slides between pitches, sings through throaty r and nasal n consonants, utilizes a greater range of dynamic contrasts, and occasionally abandons singing for pure speech. Michael sings in his chest voice, a choice that makes the father seem more vocally masculine. Throughout this verse, powerful bass notes and agitated rhythms in the piano accompaniment reflect the father’s stormy emotions. Powerful bass notes and agitated rhythms reflect the father’s stormy emotions. This more unrestrained music is ironic, given how hard the father works to conceal his emotions through small talk. Like Michael’s own dad, the father in the song seems most comfortable when discussing uncontroversial subjects. However, he gets caught up in the emotional swell of a story about a fight between his older son and a foreman at work. This provides cover for a revelation of his true feelings: “Your mother says I’m too hard on everyone, but I ain’t nobody’s fool.” Rather than risk being duped by anyone, he espouses a decidedly offensive philosophy: “Do unto others before they do unto you. That’s my Golden Rule.” Yet his verses, like Clifford’s own letters, end abruptly, with a bittersweet declaration of affection for his son: “I’ll let you go now. Anything you need, just let me know.”

In the last section, Michael adopts the persona of the narrator-son. Although some people might note similarities in the personalities and dispositions of father and son (coldness, distance, and being too hard on others), the son wants to break the chain that stretches “father to son, now son to lover.” Rather than “judge and begrudge” his lover, the gay son resolves to be his lover’s fool, indicated by a leap into his soaring falsetto on that word, the higher register seemingly more comfortable and authentic, perhaps a sonic expression of his gayness. The accompanying music is lighter, its rhythms gentler, and played in piano’s treble register. The son experiences a cathartic transformation and embraces his full range of emotions. He allows himself to be loved, and quite possibly hurt, rather than live a life of manly stoicism.