Love Don't Need a Reason
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Fig. 1. Barry Callen, Michael Callen, Richard Dworkin, Andy Dworkin in the studio (1993). Richard Dworkin Private Archive.
Sometimes Not Often Enough

Sometimes, not often enough,
We reflect upon the good things,
And those thoughts always center
Around those we love.
— Henry Mancini & Felice Mancini

Michael had been fortunate to meet so many talented musicians who were willing to donate their time and talent to Legacy, but he puzzled over one problem: how to include The Flirtations. He felt strongly that their a cappella sound belonged on The Flirtations’ records, a separate sonic experience from his own solo records. The Flirtations hemmed and hawed, rejecting Michael’s suggestions for repertoire and refusing to commit to a recording date. So, Michael wrote a blunt letter to the group in which he explained, “Hey! I’m dying. Do you want to be on my record or not?” The Flirtations finally agreed, and Michael scheduled a studio at Sear Sound for 16 June 1993.

Initially, Michael and Richard suggested that The Flirtations record an arrangement of Tom Judson’s “Two Men Dance the Tango” (Two Men Dance the Tango, 1990). Its lyrics deal with the perception of masculine gender in a series of scenarios in which

male–male intimacy and contact go unnoticed: drinking beer in a bar, working on Wall Street, singing “Home on the Range” on the prairie. Likewise, “when flavors of the Argentine start to issue from the bandstand […] there is no reason for asking, ‘Why?’ Don’t lose your composure if you should spy two men dance the tango together! Maybe you should, too!” In spite of the campy humor and the political sentiment in the lyrics, which Michael felt would appeal to his chosen musical family, The Flirtations dismissed his choice as somehow too trivial for them.

As a compromise, Michael suggested that they rework Cliff Townsend’s arrangement of “Sometimes, Not Often Enough,” a song written by conductor and composer Henry Mancini and his daughter, Felice, that had been recorded by The Carpenters on their 1971 self-titled album. The Flirtations agreed to sing the new arrangement.

Although the short, sentimental text encourages listeners to “reflect upon the good things, and […] those we love” and to remember to tell friends and family “just how much [you] love them,” the session itself was anything but meditative or harmonious. Even though the meter was ticking on the studio at the price of one hundred dollars an hour, The Flirtations showed up more than an hour late, and Jon Arterton had brought a semi-professional video camera to film the sessions, much to the chagrin of others in the studio. The sound engineers, too, were confused. Was Jon there to sing — and therefore in need of a mic and sound check — or was his role was that of documentarian? Cliff Townsend refused to learn the new bass part which had been designed to limit doubling with the piano that might muddy the bass end of the final mix. Frustrations reached a breaking point, so Michael corralled the group into the studio lounge for a group therapy session.

While the other men were “honored by [Michael’s] extending an invitation to sing backup, and it was a joy to be singing with [him] again, it was an extremely stressful recording — all of
us brimming with emotions we couldn’t quite name or control.” Eventually, they had to face the underlying issue: this musical family was not ready to handle the death of their beloved Mother Diva. The prospect of Michael’s death brought back unresolved feelings about the loss of TJ Myers in 1990. Jon felt that the group needed to meet again in order to verbalize “those dark and dirty things that we feel about each other” in a supportive environment and discuss the consequences of those emotions.

A few weeks later, they met in Provincetown for a final group therapy session, which they recorded. Jimmy admitted that the group had “major issues” and that he was “pissed off” because Michael would be touring and performing with them less often. However, he knew that the bigger issue was the loss of Michael’s nurturing influence, which posed an existential threat to The Flirtations. Jon agreed that “the thought of going on without Michael is terrifying to all of us.” However, Cliff remained frustrated over what he perceived as Michael’s indecisive flip-flopping. “We agreed to give [Michael] the permission to stay home and rest, but the first chance he had to travel,” he joined the group on the road. “What do you want,” Cliff demanded, “to stay at home or travel with us?” Michael wanted — needed — both.

Do Not Turn Away

Over the weekend of 25–27 June, Michael, Richard, and Patrick traveled to San Francisco where Michael and Richard were scheduled to record with Holly Near, Cris Williamson, John Bucchino, and Arnold McCuller at Hyde Street Studios (245 Hyde St.), the former home of Wally Heider’s legendary studio where Grace Slick and The Jefferson Airplane had recorded their album Volunteers in 1969. In those historic rooms, Michael

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4 Ibid.
5 Ibid.
Love don’t need a reason

recorded his wistful ballad about a street musician, “Street Singer,” John Bucchino’s “Do Not Turn Away” and Cris Williamson’s “Mother, Mother.” Together, Michael and his friends worked out a beautiful arrangement of Bernice Johnson Reagon’s “They Are Falling All Around Me.”

Originally written and released on Bernice Johnson Reagon’s *Give Your Hands to Struggle* (1975), “They Are Falling All Around Me” pays homage to “the musicians who lived to make their music and died singing. John Davis, King Curtis, Lee Morgan, Peter LaFarge, Skip James, Fred McDowell, and Mahalia Jackson are names that come to mind. […] The list grows with each passing day.”6 The text was inspired by Senegalese poet Birago Diop’s “Breaths,” a text Reagon would later set to music with Sweet Honey in the Rock and that The Flirtations would record. Sung by a long-term survivor of the AIDS epidemic, “They Are Falling All Around Me” becomes what I elsewhere call a “musical plague palimpsest,” or a preexisting song with no connection to HIV/AIDS that is given new meaning when filtered through the experiences of PWAs.7 Michael used the song to pay tribute to those lost in the war against AIDS. In 1990, he wrote:

I was diagnosed with AIDS before the term AIDS even existed. It’s been nearly eight years since a doctor told me I had what was then known as GRID — Gay Related Immune Deficiency. According to the best estimate, of the 1,049 Americans diagnosed with AIDS during 1982, twenty-five are still alive. I am one of the lucky ones.8

That Michael was still alive in 1993 was more than luck. It was extraordinary, and he wanted to honor his fellow activists and PWAs who had not survived.

“They Are Falling All Around Me” utilizes a variant of the traditional AAB blues form, adding a third iteration of the A material (thus the form is AAAB). Johnson’s recording is in compound duple meter, but Michael and his friends shifted the meter to common time and added a simple organ part, played by John Bucchino. The five singers alternate solo sections, paired duets, and homophony, with each singer adding expressive flourishes and ornaments in individual and idiosyncratic ways. The result is a tapestry of musical personalities, woven by collective effort in the studio. In a sense, the arrangement harkened back to “Home,” the final song on Purple Heart. But while “Home” had explored austere, almost Medieval polyphony, “They Are Falling All Around Me” is indebted to florid close-harmony traditions with roots in Black gospel.

Michael made subtle alterations to the lyrics of the last stanza, changing Bernice Johnson Reagon’s future tense (“I will try to sing my song right. Be sure to let me hear from you”) to the present perfect tense (“I have tried to sing my song right”). These lines stand as a summative assessment of Michael’s activism, and in the context of the AIDS crisis, Michael’s rapidly declining health, and his atheism, the final line, “Be sure to let me hear from you,” is sweetly ironic. He seemed to be comforting his friends by letting them know that he would be listening to them from beyond the grave.

Archival video footage from the sessions (shot by Quentin Scobel) captures Michael and the other musicians working out details of the arrangement in the studio, singing one line at a time to perfect their individual parts. Between takes, Cris Williamson and Holly Near crack jokes and engage in bits of friendly mischief as Michael sips from his ubiquitous can of Classic Coke. For Holly Near, that day was “full of love but not

9 Quentin Scobel, Legacy Recording Sessions, 25–27 June 1993, video recording, RDA.
Fig. 2. *Legacy* studio session (1993), l–r: Arnold McCuller, Michael Callen, Cris Williamson, Holly Near. Photo by Patrick Kelly. © Significant Other Records.

Fig. 3. Michael Callen, Holly Near, Richard Dworkin in the studio control room (1993). Photo by Patrick Kelly. © Significant Other Records.
lighthearted. Sometimes we made the room for very quiet moments. I was glad that everyone in the room knew how to hold the weight of the situation without falling prey to fear or nervous chatter.”

Michael recorded two other covers for these sessions. Originally released on Williamson’s *Country Blessed* (1989), an album of country and folk tunes by Williamson and Teresa Trull, “Mother, Mother” is another musical plague palimpsest. The lyrics express intense longing for a maternal figure who will “come into my room at night and hold me in your arms.” It is difficult not to hear this song in relation to “Nobody’s Fool,” Michael’s ballad about his strained relationship with his father. In the first verse of “Nobody’s Fool,” however, Michael portrayed a

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10 Holly Near, p.c., 30 October 2012.
sympathetic, though tentative, mother figure, caught between her husband and her child. A biographical reading of “Mother, Mother” continues the family saga. Now, the gay son is dying of AIDS and reaching out for his mother in the final moments of his life. “I was your one true miracle […]. Keep me safe from harm.”

The family theme continues with John Bucchino’s touching ballad, “Do Not Turn Away.”\(^{11}\) Bucchino, whose brother died of AIDS-related illness, wrote the song about an experience his mother had at a support group meeting. As the composer explained in a 2009 interview:

Well, my brother was dying [of AIDS] and my mom had gone to an AIDS support group with his partner, and after this meeting she called me in tears. She said there was this beautiful eighteen-year-old boy who got up and told the group that when he came out to his parents and told them that he had AIDS, they kicked him out of the house and wouldn’t have anything to do with them. It just broke her heart; she couldn’t imagine how parents could do that to a child. And that’s what prompted me to write the song.\(^{12}\)

Bucchino, who gained initial critical acclaim on the New York Cabaret circuit, has written hundreds of songs, done arrangements for numerous albums, written a musical, and is a long-time collaborator with Holly Near. He described Michael as “one of the realest people I ever met […] an extraordinary human being, really powerful, really charismatic, and passionate and committed to gay rights and AIDS education… God, what an extraordinary fellow.”\(^{13}\)

Bucchino’s lyrics beseech parents who might turn their backs on queer children or family members with AIDS to instead offer love and support. “Death is looming; hope is frail. Do not

\(^{11}\) My thanks to John Bucchino for providing me with a copy of the score for “Do Not Turn Away.”
\(^{13}\) Ibid.
“Sometimes not often enough turn away.” Together, he and Michael recorded an intimate performance of the piece with just piano and vocals, though there was some dispute over the actual performance. John wanted Michael’s melodic line to follow in lock-step with the piano, which doubles the tune. However, Michael felt that singing *rubato* (or in and out of time with the accompaniment) heightened the song’s impact. Ultimately, Michael’s aesthetic sense won, and the version on *Legacy* is sung *molto rubato* to haunting effect.

Whether or not Michael intended “Mother, Mother” and “Do Not Turn Away” as testaments of his personal feelings, or meant to leave them as posthumous salve for wounds that would endure after he was gone, the two songs, along with the other music Michael recorded that day, left the entire crew emotionally spent. Patrick arranged a celebratory dinner at Alice Water’s famed farm-to-table restaurant, Chez Panisse. A stretch limo charioted them to the restaurant where they laughed and reminisced over a locally sourced meal, decades before the farm-to-table craze became the norm. The meal capped off what Richard
believes may have been “the best day in Michael Callen’s life. He got to do what he loved at a very high level: to sing with incredible artists in an amazing studio and eat incredible food with people he cared deeply about.”

On Sunday, Michael rode in the International Lesbian and Gay Freedom Day Parade alongside the lesbian women of Olivia (the pioneering record label that reformed as a lesbian travel company in 1988) — a fitting end to a fabulously queer weekend.

14 Richard Dworkin, interview with the author, 5 June 2017.