Fig. 1. The Flirtations Sextet (c. 1988), l–r: Aurelio Font, Michael Cal- len, Elliot Pilshaw, Cal Grogan, TJ Myers, Jon Arterton. Courtesy of Jon Arterton.
The Flirt Song

You can be anybody you want to be.  
You can love whomever you will.  
You can travel any country where your heart leads  
    And know I will love you still.  
You can live by yourself; you can gather friends around.  
You can choose that special one.  
And the only measure of your words and your deeds  
Will be the love you leave behind when you’re gone.  
— Fred Small

Jon Arterton and Elliot Pilshaw were restless. After touring for two years with Tom Wilson Weinberg’s gay and lesbian musical, *Ten Percent Revue* (1985), the two friends were anxious to keep up their momentum and to continue making LGBTQ+ music. Over breakfast one morning in a Brooklyn diner, they had an
epiphany. As a child in New Jersey, Elliot had fallen in love with the close vocal harmony he heard in choral performances that his family attended at Princeton University. Jon had sung in collegiate *a cappella* groups, mixed choruses, and men’s choirs as an undergraduate at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and as a graduate student at The New England Conservatory of Music. Both men also admired the alchemy of close-harmony singing and progressive politics of Sweet Honey in the Rock. “Why not start some kind of gay men’s political singing group that would go sing at ACT UP and gay pride events,” they reasoned, “to just lend support and inspiration?” A band, with its equipment and rehearsal space, would be too expensive an endeavor, but a vocal ensemble could rehearse and tour with little more than a pocket-size pitch pipe and the clothes on their backs. A gay *a cappella* group! So, they drew up a flier that read “Singers Wanted for Politically Active, Openly Gay, *A Cappella* Men’s Singing Group,” printed it on lavender paper, of course, and posted copies in gay clubs, bars, and at the Lesbian and Gay Community Center (208 W 13th St., henceforth The Center).

The time was right for their mixture of *a cappella* pop and politics. Much of the country was in the midst of a close harmony and *a cappella* revival. The Manhattan Transfer (founded in 1972) and Rockapella (1986), Toronto’s The Nylons (1979), Huntsville’s Take 6 (1980), and San Francisco’s The Bobs (1982) enjoyed commercial success with doo-wop-influenced close harmony. Established artists like Billy Joel and rising stars like Bobby McFerrin turned nostalgic *a cappella* harmony into chart-topping hits like “The Longest Time” (1983) and “Don’t Worry, Be Happy” (1988), and the music of Ladysmith Black Mambazo found its way into mainstream popular culture through Paul Si-

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4 Ibid.
mon’s *Graceland* (1986) and growing interest in what was called World Beat or World Music. Spike Lee captured this resurgence of close-harmony singing in a PBS documentary called *Spike Lee & Co., Do It A Cappella* (1990).

The *a cappella* turn in music was of a piece with a more general fad, as aging baby boomers revisited, and their children discovered, the music and pop culture of the 1950s. Emerging “oldies” radio programming brought the sounds of the 1950s and early-1960s back to the airwaves on stations that were specifically packaged as nostalgic listening, which fueled demand for concert appearances that helped revive the careers of rock-and-roll, doo-wop, Motown, and girl group stars on the nostalgia tour circuit. In 1985, Nickelodeon created a correlate “oldies” television program called *Nick at Nite* on which the network aired reruns *The Many Loves of Dobie Gillis* (1959–1963), *The Patty Duke Show* (1963–1966), *My Three Sons* (1958–1972), and *The Donna Reed Show* (1958–1966) while contemporary shows aimed at younger audiences like *Saved by the Bell* (1989–1993) included icons of the 1950s: malt shops, burger joints, jukeboxes, poodle skirts, and rock-and-roll. Disney even got into the retro act with *MMC*, a stylized reboot of *The Mickey Mouse Club* (1989–1996) that featured sketch comedy, kid-friendly celebrity news, and of course, lots of close-harmony singing, including numerous covers of 1950s and 1960s classics.

Politically, socially, and economically, this cultural glance to the past may have relieved some of the hard realities of the 1980s. To many, the assassination of John Lennon on 8 December 1980 signaled the end of the counterculture era of which he had been a leading artistic, musical, and political figure. The inauguration of Ronald Reagan ushered in a new era of conservative social policies and neoliberal economics that would define the “yuppie” decade. Unrest was the norm around the world: the bombing of the US Embassy in Beirut; lingering Cold War tensions between the US and Russia; and the devastating Ethiopian famine; while in the US, there were two recessions; the national trauma of the *Challenger* explosion; and the exacerbation of gang activity and the crack epidemic by inner-city poverty,
high unemployment rates, and Regan-era defunding of social assistance programs and trickle-down economics. In 1981, the first deaths associated with what would become the global AIDS pandemic quietly signaled an existential threat for humankind.

Turning to 1950s in popular culture provided a convenient fiction, an image of American innocence (or, perhaps ignorance) fueled by post-war prosperity. With money in their pockets, new suburban homes, and college educations, middle-class and mostly white Americans in the 1950s could believe that things would only get better. As the 1980s slogged onward, many Americans sought solace in media myths of that supposedly simpler time.

One afternoon, Richard spotted Jon and Elliot’s lavender flier at The Center and thought it would be an ideal opportunity for Michael, who had been kind of rudderless since the breakup of Lowlife and the recording of Purple Heart. So, he brought home a copy of the flier and encouraged his lover to audition. Michael was intrigued.

On a wintry day in 1987, Michael swept into the audition room at The Center, his performance résumé and a copy of his newly minted LP in hand and joined a few dozen other hopefuls. With a queenly grandeur that masked his feelings of insecurity, Michael introduced himself and announced his intention to join the group, without actually offering to audition. After some conversation, he did sing, impressing Jon and Elliot with his flexible tenor and his extraordinary falsetto and securing a spot as a founding member of “the world’s most famous, openly-gay, all-male, politically active, multicultural, a cappella singing doo-wop group,” the faaaaabulous Flirtations.5

On 8 January 1988, baritones Jon Arterton, Elliot Pilshaw, and Cal Grogan; and tenors Michael Callen, TJ Myers, and Aurelio Font held their first rehearsal at The Center. As he entered the room, Michael spied Aurelio, who he knew from the New

5 Variations of this description appear in numerous publicity materials located in the Michael Callen Papers at The LGBT Community Center National History Archive (henceforth, MCP).
York City Gay Men’s Chorus, and greeted him with campy con- 
consternation. “Miss Font!,“ he announced. “I might have known 
you would be in this group.”6 But the new group quickly got 
down to musical business. Like Mike & the Headsets and Low- 
life, The Flirtations would perform an eclectic repertoire that 
included American oldies from rock-and-roll, pop, and doo- 
wop, American Songbook standards, folk music from different 
cultures, Women’s Music, and even a few original compositions. 

Their first performance took place in the heart gay New 
York, at the corner of Christopher St. and Seventh Avenue, 
where they literally passed a hat to collect pocket change from 
onlookers. A home video captures the original sextet perform- 
ing ‘The Angels’ “My Boyfriend’s Back” (1963) at an act up rally 
in New York in 1988. Bundled in coats and scarves against the 
bitter winter wind, the six singers huddle together around three 
handheld microphones, trading solos, punctuating their singing 
with rhythmic handclaps, and camping it up for an appreciative 
crowd, happy to hear a queer version of this classic pop tune.7 

Notions of propriety for an AIDS protest varied widely, and some 
participants felt that The Flirtations’ cheeky humor was inap- 
propriate for an act up event. Jon recalled a performance at an 
early act up rally near Columbia University in 1988 when pro- 
testers tried to drown out their singing with shouts of, “People 
are dying! Stop singing!”

6 Aurelio Font, interview with author, 9 March 2016 (henceforth, AF and MJ [2016]). In our interview, Aurelio recalled a brush with fame when he got 
to meet Stephen Sondheim. “He created a medley of his pieces for the New 
York City Gay Men’s Chorus, and the director at the time needed some so- 
loists and called me up. I had to sight read [“Not While I’m Around” from Sweeney Todd] with Sondheim in the room! You could tell by the state of 
my armpits how much I was enjoying it!” But during the audition, the com- 
poser put down his pen, leaned forward, and listened to Aurelio sing. He got 
the solo, and Sondheim gave Aurelio a copy of the arrangement inscribed 
with a note: “To Aurelio Font, Thanks for the Voice.” Still beaming with 
pride over this accomplishment decades later, Aurelio laughed, “I clutched 
my pearls! And I still have that score!”

7 BettyByte, “The Flirtations sing ‘My Boyfriend’s Back’ at a demo ca. 1988,” You- 
Tube, 10 October, 2010, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1xE51shSSWM.
The Flirts, as they were affectionally known, were an instant hit. As their reputation grew, they graduated from street corners to venues like The Center and Don’t Tell Mama (343 W 46th St.). Faced with the possibility of actually making it as performers, the group reevaluated their sound and determined that an ensemble of three baritones and three tenors had balance issues. Because he was considered by all to be the weakest singer, Cal Grogan was asked to leave, a decision that Jon Arterton admits “created some ill will.” Shortly after Grogan’s ouster, Elliot Pilshaw quit because he was not ready to make a full-time commitment to a fledgling group, having just started a new job and a new love affair. The loss of two baritones left room for one true bass whose voice would balance the ensemble. Aurelio recalled an acquaintance with whom he once sang in a gospel choir in

8 Jon Arterton, interview with author, 17 October 2013 (henceforth JA and MJ [2013]).
Chelsea. A military veteran, literate musician, skilled sight-reader, arranger, and composer who had studied oboe performance and composition at Indiana University, Cliff Townsend perfectly suited the group’s musical needs. That he was Black also helped balance the number of white and POC singers, an important factor for the diversity-conscious ensemble. The addition of Townsend solidified the “classic quintet” lineup.

The Flirtations polished their vocal craft in live shows until they were ready to cut a record. As had been the case with Purple Heart, the album was a DIY affair. Working on a shoestring budget with Richard Dworkin acting as producer, they released the eponymous album on Michael and Richard’s Significant Other Records in 1990. The Flirtations captures their eclectic mixture of doo-wop, classic rock-and-roll, folk, and contemporary song, and it was uniformly hailed a classic in the gay press. The Bay Area Reporter heralded the arrival of “the hottest new a cappella doo-wop quintet out of the Big Apple.” Susan Spence of The Orlando Center Fold gushed that The Flirts, “simply sang their way into [her] heart and soul […] on an emotional journey through the triumphs and struggles of the human spirit.” The music critic for 7 Days (Vermont’s independent newspaper) praised them for having “the elegance of Take 6, the earthiness of Sweet Honey in the Rock, and the winking humor of La Cage aux Folles” as well as for their “courage to be who they are,” adding that although “at present their audience looks to be limited to a particular persuasion, it’s only because the rest of the music biz hasn’t yet caught up.”

Accolades and adulation piled up, and The Flirtations were on their way.

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9 Cliff also assumed the role of group historian and librarian, keeping track of their repertoire, performances, and changing personnel in several thick scrapbooks which he shared with me in 2013.
10 Various undated reviews collection in Cliff Townsend’s scrapbooks.
The Queer Politics of *A Cappella*

Aside from a few contemporaries like Romanovsky and Phillips, Sylvester (1947–1988), or Jimmy Sommerville, The Flirtations had few models they could turn to in order to craft a career as openly gay male singers. Inspired by these men as well as by the diverse roster of lesbian and feminist artists on Olivia Records, The Flirtations made a conscious decision to perform as openly gay men. To queer up their music, The Flirtations utilized many of the same strategies Michael had used with Mike & the Headsets, Lowlife, and in his solo music: singing love songs directed to men, changing lyrics to make them gayer, adapting easily identifiable queer gestures and language, and campy humor. Jon handled most of the arrangements, making full use of his training in choral music, with occasional input from other members. In rehearsals, they would “sit down and say, ‘here’s the arrangement,’ and sing through it and ask ourselves, ‘What is it that we are trying to say in this song? What is its purpose? Is it the camp element? To relay a message? Some were quite apparent, and some were not. Every song that we did, we had a specific reason for doing it. It wasn’t just for entertainment.’”¹¹ According to Arterton, the group won over the audience “with doo-wop and fun songs from the ’50s that [were] given a particular gay slant […] and once we’ve got them squealing, then we can launch into some songs that have more of a message to them.”¹²

Lyrics were of the utmost importance to The Flirtations, and they would not perform a song whose message did not fit, or could not be adapted to fit, their progressive political convictions. According to Jon, “the words pop out at you; they aren’t hidden” in an *a cappella* format; accordingly, listeners pay more attention to the text.¹³ Knowing that audiences were listening closely to what they sang and that many of their nostalgic clas-

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¹¹ AF and MJ (2016).
¹² Quoted in “The Flirtations: Out There and Outrageous in the Age of AIDS,” a promotional essay in the MCP. The essay was produced to raise funds for a documentary about The Flirtations; the film was never finished.
sic rock-and-roll and Broadway songs were well-known to their fans, The Flirts could play with listeners’ expectations and familiarity with the material. Classic rock-and-roll, Motown, and girl group songs had been the soundtrack of their childhoods, and by performing them as gay men, The Flirts offered a glimpse of what it might have been like to feel the first flush of teenage romance and hear a man singing to very own “Jonny Angel.”

Their arrangement of The Beach Boys’ “Surfin’ USA” (1963) offers a lesson in queer history and geography. By namechecking famous gay vacation spots like Provincetown, Fire Island, Key West, and West Hollywood, they drew a musical map of queer America that would make Rand McNally proud. By adding a well-placed and suggestive sigh, TJ Myers turned the innocuous phrase “waxing up our surf boards” into a naughty double-entendre. Likewise, The Flirtations may have sung the word “surfin’,” but they were really singing about “cruising,” the gay male subcultural practice of seeking out sex in public, and sometimes, engaging in public sex. In the final verse, TJ even added a flirty emphasis to the line “We’ll cruise Venice [Beach] all day. Tell our boyfriends we were surfin’ USA,” just to drive home the point.

While camp was an important weapon in their political arsenal, The Flirtations were well-read intersectional feminists, fluent in the multicultural political topics and theories of the day, and committed to the idea of music as political liberation. They were also serious musicians. Thus, they sang songs that reflected the experiences of other marginalized communities including Sweet Honey in the Rock’s “Oughta Be a Woman” (1981, based on a text by bisexual, Jamaican American poet June Jordan [1936-2002]) and “Breaths” (1988), Peter Gabriel’s “Biko” (1980) and “Wallflower” (1982). Singing these songs not only linked the struggles of gay men and PWAs to global antisexist, antiracist, and other progressive political movements but also gave these songs a new meaning when they were sung by gay men and gay men with AIDS.
Songs of Conscience and Concern

Two songs became signature pieces for The Flirtations. Fred Small, a unitarian minister, singer-songwriter, and lawyer, has written music about racism, feminist issues, homophobia, environmentalism, and disability rights. “Everything Possible” (from which this chapter’s epigram was borrowed) first appeared on his album *No Limit* (1985). It is a lullaby about embracing the full spectrum of gender and sexual identities and being strong in the face of adversity. The austere partwriting of Jon’s arrangement reveals his training in choral music and the importance that the group placed on declamation of text. Flowing contrapuntal sections alternate with moments of homophony and monophony, text painting, and a variety of techniques borrowed from collegiate and barbershop singing such as “bell chords” and the “blossom.”\(^{14}\) The arrangement ends with a brief but poignant solo, sung by TJ on *The Flirtations*. As he completes the phrase “Oh, the love you leave behind when you’re gone,” the rest of the group responds with hushed chromatic harmonies that gently fall to the tonic chord with a sweetly dissonant major second, a piquant sound that perhaps signifies the bittersweet memories of departed loved ones or the often belated realization that love is truly the only thing that matters.

“Something Inside So Strong” was composed by British musician Labi Siffre to critique South African apartheid in 1987. Images of prisons, barriers, walls, and fences signify injustice and oppression, but for Black South Africans, there were also literal barriers that divided their country along racial lines. Siffre

\(^{14}\) Gage Averill, *Four Parts, No Waiting: A Social History of Barbershop* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 205. Averill defines “bell chords” as “four voices enter[ing] in succession to create a chord, each voice ringing like a bell” (205) and the “blossom” as a technique by which four voices begin in unison and expand to a four-part chord in contrary motion” (205). There are two blossoms in this arrangement. The first occurs at the words “Some grow in their own space and time” (1:57 in the 1990 studio recording) and “They will give the same back to you” (2:51 in the 1990 studio recording).
acknowledges the difficulty of overcoming these literal and metaphorical obstacles but insists “I know that I can make it though you’re doing me wrong. You thought that my pride was gone, but there’s something inside so strong.” That something is a persistent yearning for justice, and it resonated with The Flirtations, who were fighting anti-gay discrimination and the AIDS crisis in the US. In his arrangement, Jon again utilized different musical textures to accentuate the sentiment of the lyrics, including persistent percussive rhythms that animate the song and signify the long historical march toward freedom for all oppressed groups.

The Flirtations closed almost all of their live concerts with both songs, and they recorded both songs on all of their albums. In live shows, Michael often introduced “Everything Possible” by asking the audience to imagine “how different you might be and how different the world might be if more parents would sing lullabies like this to their children,” and audiences responded with thunderous applause as the final chord rings out in the theater.

One of the most moving moments of their shows was a recitation of the spoken-word piece “One of Us,” a version of which appears in the liner notes for their debut album. Each line begins with the phrase “One of us…” as members of the group exchange sometimes humorous, sometimes heartfelt pieces of information about each other

“One of Us” (1990)

One of us has had the same lover for eight years
One of us is from a family in which the gays outnumber the straights
One of us was in the closet until he was 37
One of us took his boyfriend to the high school prom
One of us coached high school wrestling
One of us wants to carry a child to term
One of us helped start Hispanos Unidos Gays y Lesbianas
One of us has never seen a porno film
One of us was an MP in the US Army
One of us was entrapped, arrested, handcuffed, and beaten by the police
One of us has smuggled AIDS drugs into the country
One of us has been arrested for civil disobedience
One of us was fag-bashed with a two-by-four
And two of us have AIDS

HIV/AIDS was an important aspect of their musical activism because two men in the group were living with AIDS: Michael, and more quietly, TJ Myers. By the time he received an AIDS diagnosis, TJ was already quite ill, yet for a time, he kept it a secret while he “worked out his relationship to AIDS” in public view. TJ pushed himself, sometimes to the point of exhaustion, during rehearsals and live shows with The Flirtations. Eventually, TJ confided his diagnosis to Michael, but it made things “really weird” for the two PWAs. Because TJ was “getting very bad medical care at the beginning” of his diagnosis, Michael wanted to advise him about his healthcare options. However, Michael’s motherly instinct created some tension, and the two friends just “circled each other as far as what [TJ] should and shouldn’t do” instead of having a serious conversation about TJ’s health. Likewise, the other Flirtations wanted to protect him. They knew that singing and dancing gave TJ “something to live for. If he wasn’t performing, he was doing other stuff, but most of what he did had something to do with this group.”

Michael believed that “TJ choked on the cosmic injustice of the fact that he got sick […]. He was a dancer. His body was at the peak of physical fitness. He was the cute one and a can-

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15 This version comes from the liner notes of The Flirtations (1990). However, the text remained open and changed over the years.
17 Ibid.
18 Ibid.
19 Ibid.
20 Ibid.
do person.” 21 TJ continued to throw himself into performance with gusto, but as his health declined, his body started to betray him. During a performance at the Judson Memorial Church (55 Washington Sq. S), Jon watched in horror as TJ’s legs buckled under him as he executed a dance move. “His body wasn’t reacting the way he expected it to. It was really heartbreaking.” 22

In August of 1990, TJ moved to San Francisco to be with his partner, Michael Weiss. Tragically, TJ died on 28 August 1990, a few days after he moved. The Flirts announced TJ’s passing in a card mailed to fans, noting that “TJ would expect one thing from us: that we carry on. So carry on we shall, but his boundless energy and spirit will be greatly missed.” 23 Michael insisted that TJ should be remembered not for his illness but for the life he lived. He was “the young one, the pretty one, the one who moved well, the one who would take charge on stage if there

21 Ibid.
22 Ibid.
23 Ibid.
was a slow moment. TJ viewed The Flirtations as a collection of strengths and weaknesses and was always trying to lead with his strong suit,” and he encouraged the others to do the same.24

With a new album and a tour booked, The Flirtations needed a singer to replace TJ. At Jon’s insistence, Georgia transplant Jimmy Rutland joined the group, although the other singers felt that he had a weak voice, was a poor sight reader, had difficulty learning his parts. The Flirts rallied, however, making tapes of all his parts so he could learn them by listening and singing along before rehearsals. Jimmy also had the unpleasant task of touring in support of an album upon which neither his image nor his voice appeared, a situation that laid the seeds for tensions that would erupt later and eventually tear the group apart. But for now they hit the road, because the show had to go on.
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*Table 1. Flirtations personnel, compiled by Cliff Townsend*