

Pink Noise: Queer identity and musical performance in a local context

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INTRODUCTION

It is widely accepted that music means something different to each of us. Musical compositions and performances are the product of particular times, places and people that manifest themselves in multiple styles and genres, each with characteristics that extend far beyond music's sonic properties. Moreover, as DeNora suggests, "music may serve as a resource for utopian imaginations, for alternative worlds and institutions, and it may be used strategically to presage new worlds" (2000: 159). Within musical worlds one is often free to perform a variety of roles: we can independently or simultaneously compose, perform and listen; we can play multiple instruments; perform and appreciate various styles. As musicians and music lovers, we are permitted a fluidity that allows us to create music, to interpret it, and to reinterpret it: in other words, we are permitted a multiplicity of musicalities.

The same fluidity and freedom of expression however, is not readily available to the sexed human being. As a man or woman our sexual and gender roles are largely fixed. The logic of heteronormativity normalises and privileges heterosexual expressions of sexuality and places same-sex desires in negative binary opposition to this (Corber and Valocchi, 2003). Furthermore, the sex/gender/sexuality paradigm suggests that our biologically categorised body determines the socialisation of our gender and our gender determines the bodies that we are normatively permitted to desire (Rubin, 1984; Butler, 1990). Those who do not subscribe to these logics, and indeed choose to subvert them are socially marginalised, and in the context of this paper can be identified as queer.

Queer does not collectively signify gay or lesbian sex nor is it an umbrella term for gay, lesbian, bisexual and trans identities. As Butler argues:

Queer is not being lesbian. Queer is not being gay. It is an argument against lesbian specificity: that if I am a lesbian I have to desire in a certain way. Queer is an argument against certain normativity, what a proper lesbian or gay identity is.
(Butler, 2001)

Queer theories point to the fundamental indeterminacy of human identity recognising gender and sexuality as fluid and multifarious identity performances and targeting the notion of unity or transparency within persons or groups (Jagose, 1996; Phelan, 1997). Thus, in the context of this research paper, queers are people who are challenged by the limitations of heteronormativity to create new ways of being and articulating themselves which they achieve, in this instance via musical performance.

Queer work and ideology permeate stylistic and disciplinary borders and queer artists can exist at once inside and outside popular culture, borrowing existing cultural material and embedding it with queer signifiers to create queer world-views. The queering of cultural texts is political insofar as it is dedicated to large-scale social change through deconstructing the sex/gender/sexuality paradigm, and it is aesthetic because it instigates this change largely from within the realm of popular culture. Rather than favouring political action and legal reformation on a macro level, queer work tends to focus on a micro level favouring aesthetic commentaries and representations of social improprieties. Thus, it is often via aesthetic critique that queer politics are activated (Altman, 1996; Sullivan, 2003).

Music composition and performance are two such methods used by queers to contest normativity. Music is particularly suited to this as it has often depended upon and reiterated conditions of gender. Moreover, music is inextricably tied to our gendered and sexualised bodies and in some instances it has been argued that music signifies the gender and sexualised body of the effeminate and the deviant

(Brett, 1994; Fuller and Whitesell, 2002; Leppert, 1993; McClary, 1991). Music's corporeal alliances, its physicality and emotionality have, in terms of Western culture's mind-body split, "predispose[d] it to be assigned to the feminine" (Dibben, 2002: 121): the terms music and femininity themselves have been interchangeable in Western society since the eighteenth century at least (Leppert, 1993). However, not all musical discourses affirm this assertion. In other instances – take rock music for example – music may reaffirm masculinity. Rock in particular, suggest Coates, "is indeed a technology of gender in that 'masculinity' is reinforced and multiplied in its many discursive spaces" (1997: 52).

In terms of sexuality and physical desires, one need only consider the phrase 'sex, drugs and rock 'n' roll' indicating that rock 'n' roll is synonymous with physical and emotional pleasure and by extension suggesting its participants are hedonistically inclined towards illegal and immoral acts as evidence of music's suitability to deviant pursuits. Brett argues that, "music has often been considered a dangerous substance, an agent of moral ambiguity always in danger of bestowing deviant status upon its practitioner" (1994: 11). Fuller and Whitesell further suggest that historically:

Music [has] provided the accompaniment for confrontations between disparate conventions of social propriety in general, and in particular, for encounters between diverse idiolects of sexual identity. (2002: 12)

Thus, I draw upon music's historical association with deviant bodies and propose that music is a creative space in which queer bodies continue to skew the margins of socially acceptable identity performance. Furthermore, I shall demonstrate the subversive potential of queer musical performances in a local context. To do this, I begin by specifically examining two queer musical acts from Brisbane, Australia, they are; drag cabaret performance troupe The Twang Gang and queer punk band Anal Traffic. While these ensembles differ stylistically, they both successfully use musical composition and performance to queer the heteronormative construction and expression of sex, gender and sexuality.

THE TWANG GANG

The Twang Gang use a highly visual style of musical performance as a means for unsettling heteronormativity and troubling gender, while offering an insight into the relatively unknown world of drag king and bio queen performance in Brisbane. Drag kings are biological females, or female identified individuals who consciously perform masculinity, while bio queens, or fem drag queens as they are sometimes called, are biological females, or female identified individuals who consciously perform hyper femininity. The Twang Gang employ both performer identities in their live shows and use these roles to queerly critique gender.

The Twang Gang was formed in August 2000 by two queer identified women, Dita Brooke and Mary Alexander, and in due course become known as a "travelling fantasy cabaret" (<http://www.twanggang.org.au>, accessed 1 November 2005), which welcomed female identified performers of all kinds to join and experience what Dita refers to as "empowerment through entertainment" (interview with the author, 29 November 2005). The Twang Gang provide a forum for women to use their bodies, through singing and dancing, to perform a part of themselves that they feel is generally repressed by normative social constitutions. Dita comments and the other members agree that:

From being on stage it now overlaps into our real lives, it gives you the space or the freedom to express yourself in any way you want ... it helps you stand on your own two feet and be more confident with who you really want to be. You don't have to fit into a pigeon hole of any sort, you don't have to conform to society. (interview with the author, 29 November 2005)

The Twang Gang trouble gender and question the performance of lesbian sexual identity in two highly powerful ways. First, by being female and performing masculinity and second by being female and also performing femininity, thus demonstrating that gender itself is performative and not limited by or attached to the body. While conventional drag queens exemplify the performative nature of gender to

a certain degree, the bio queen – due to her female sexed body – is able to more acutely critique the feminine gender rather than merely exposing its pretence. As Devitt notes:

Performing and parodying the gender they are assumed to have allows fem drag queens to critique the connection between biology or body and gender or performance in ways not available to conventional drag queens. (2006:37)

Furthermore, The Twang Gang explore multiple manifestations of lesbian sexual identity and desire by demonstrating that lesbian sexuality does not necessarily imply a gender crossing to the butch or masculine. Through various performances of female masculinities and well as female femininities, the Twang Gang deconstruct the presumed mutual exclusivity of gender performances and sexual identity as predicated by the sex/gender/sexuality paradigm. As Mary suggests in regard to her drag king roles:

For me it's not about pretending I have a dick, it's got nothing to do with that. It's interesting ... it's really empowering, it feels fantastic and it's such a release ... when you're on stage it's another world, it's my world. (interview with the author, 29 November 2005)

Rock music is a focal element of Twang Gang performances and its inclusion in their shows further increases the gender troubling effect. Western musicology has demonstrated that rock music culturally signifies masculinity, while dancing and, by extension, dance clubs and disco music are gendered feminine (Dibben, 2002). When asked specifically about the Twang Gang's musical choices Dita remarked that:

When we first started, one of our catch phrases was 'if it ain't got a twang it don't mean a thang'. Twang meant a bit of guitar ... [and] there just wasn't any guitar being used in dance clubs, so when our songs came on, and we often used classic type songs, it separated us from what was happening in nightclubs. (interview with the author, 29 November 2005)

In this instance the masculine/feminine binary is blurred by the incongruity in the sonic information and visual spectacle. The nightclub space encourages dancing, thus it is gendered feminine. Femininity is further authenticated via the elaborate costumes, make-up and choreography used in The Twang Gang's performances. However, by setting these performances to classic rock music which is gendered masculine, the performance consequently becomes gender troubled, confusing the feminisation of the space and spectacle with the masculinity that is culturally signified by rock music.

A camp sensibility favouring parody and artifice is employed extensively in Twang Gang performances, both in their costume and their musical sketch comedy style. Mary's drag king character, Tricky, is camp in his attention to artifice, and according to Robertson:

Camp's attention to artifice ... helps undermine and challenge the presumed naturalness of gender roles and to displace the essentialist versions of an authentic feminine identity. (1996:6)

Tricky is a playfully arrogant rock god, so Mary chooses the music according to what best represents the identity Mary has constructed for Tricky. Tricky is hyper masculine in his physicality and mannerisms, he has excessive facial hair and is often sporting an exaggerated phallus. In a notable performance Mary chose Spiderbait's version of 'Black Betty' (2004) as the soundtrack to Tricky's performance, the heavily distorted guitar-driven rock arrangement of this song musically authenticates Tricky's masculinity. During this performance Tricky was onstage in a car, cruising to this song and ogling dancing girls who hung off the sides of the car swinging their long hair around. In this instance Mary has used campish over-articulation and artifice as a parodic critique of heteronormativity. She has exaggerated heteronormative gender roles, which are then queered by the audience's gaze who understand that Tricky's hyper-masculine sexual desire for the dancing girls is being enacted by a female body.

Camp is used in other instance as an entertaining political device whereby songs are appropriated from popular culture and inscribed with a new meaning that will resonate specifically within queer cultural circles. In response to religious and political oppression of queer lifestyles The Twang Gang developed a show they called *Our Tribe* which was performed at Brisbane's annual Pride Fair in 2005. This performance reflects Babuscio's definition of camp as:

A creative energy reflecting a consciousness that is different from the mainstream; a heightened awareness of certain human complications of feeling that spring from the fact of social oppression. (1993:19)

Our Tribe queerly recontextualises Christian iconography and values. Mary describes the show as signifying to the audience that "this is our church" (interview with the author, 29 November 2005). The overarching narrative of *Our Tribe* was revealed through a stylistic melange of traditional drag and musical sketch-comedy, incorporating choreography and elaborate costuming. The costumes were bastardised versions of sacred religious garments, redesigned with a stylistic fusion of fetish and punk fashions. The soundtrack to this performance was a cut and paste medley of songs by Nine Inch Nails, Madonna, Aretha Franklin, The Sun Kids and Doctor Alban, reflecting the musical incongruence and bricolage that is symbolic of queer culture in general. In this instance, both the costumes and the music provide an obvious example of queer cultural borrowing, cultural synthesis and aesthetic recontextualisation.

ANAL TRAFFIC

In contrast to the Twang Gang's musical cabaret style, I turn now to the genre of queer punk which has surfaced in recent years as yet another potent critique of both hetero and homonormativity (Halberstam, 2006). Located broadly in the style of queer punk and exhibiting synthesiser pop and rock overtones, Anal Traffic is a six-piece band from Brisbane who strongly resist alliance with mainstream gay pop culture and homogenised gay identity, defining themselves as queer in the most radical and fluid sense of the term. Band member, Paul Jones describes their sound and aesthetic as "raw, fun, filthy and very queer" (interview with the author, 12 December 2005).

In the original traditions of punk – which can be loosely described as a culturally mutinous response to political and social conservatism (see further O'Hara, 1999) – the members of Anal Traffic create a playful, almost anarchic atmosphere on stage. Their sensibility of seditious play, or fun as Paul Jones previously described it, allows Anal Traffic to critique and escape the oppression of hegemonic culture because "a playful sensibility can wage a powerful assault on 'serious' cultural normativity" (DeChaine, 1997:9). Anal Traffic wage their assault on social and sexual normativities primarily via the lyrical content of their music and subsequently by their physical performance – which in this instance will be limited to a critique of the gender and sexual identities they perform on stage. Their lyrics, delivered in an aggressive war-cry tone, are blatantly distasteful and shocking, and their physically dynamic, unchoreographed and musically vociferous performance are all reminiscent of punk's disorderly aesthetic. However, Anal Traffic skew or 'queer' this aesthetic by juxtaposing the raucousness of punk against a clearly delivered vocal line, synthesiser solos and tight rhythm section. Overall, this effect is to maintain the anti-authoritarianism afforded to punk through its stylised mayhem and intensity, while incorporating synthesiser pop and rock influences to create a musical melange that is unique to them and reminiscent of queer's ideological resistance towards cultural unity or transparency.

Collectively the band shares a sexual and political consciousness that is overtly present in their lyrics. Both in their live performances and on their self-titled EP (2005), the vocal lines sit high in the mix which suggests that there is an explicit intention that the content to be heard and understood by the audience:

We've got multiple agendas [says singer, Blint Darfur] ... there are a lot of expressions of queer sex, lots of sex, but we're a politically conscious bunch with a lot to say about society as a whole so in the best traditions of punk we're trying to do a bit of commentary at the same time. (interview with the author, 22 November 2005)

Songs such as *Six Beer Queer*, *In Past Your Wrist*, *Daddy's Chocolate Kisses* and *Two Pumps and a Squirt* exemplify Anal Traffic's preoccupation with sexual acts, specifically acts that defy normative sexual practice and are, in many circumstances, deemed unnatural or morally corrupt. The sexual content is unashamedly explicit and broaches such controversial themes as anal sex, oral sex, anal fisting, coprophilia and voyeurism. "Anal Traffic is all about exploring our inner filth," says guitarist Shane Garvey, "we've all got it and the reason why we do it is because it's part of our culture" (interview with the author, 30 June 2006). The sexual narratives and practices represented in these songs are not strictly autobiographical. Band members acknowledge that in some instances lyrical content is chosen to stimulate thought around a particular sexual taboo and encourage the listener to question the limitations they place upon 'normal' or 'acceptable' sexual behaviour. Anal Traffic's most prolific songwriter, Paul Jones remarks that:

It's all about dirty disgusting sexual things that people are probably doing this very minute and we make no judgement of it. I want listeners to get into the heads of people who get off on things that others don't find very savoury. I've always wanted to write something about people who are into scat [coprophilia] because I find that really fascinating. It's like the best and worst things you can think of are happening right now and someone is into it, that's human nature. People seem so surprised when they hear these things but really if they understood themselves they'd know that nothing is surprising. (interview with the author, 12 December 2005)

In conjunction with tackling sexual taboos in their lyrics, Anal Traffic voice political anxieties in songs such as *Shit for Dickheads* and *Scapegoat*. These songs comment on a range of social issues including: the Howard government; inflation; the importing of low quality goods into Australia; the 2001 Children Overboard Affair; and social prejudice towards queers. Anal Traffic's blend of politico-sexual content in many ways reflects the potential for queers to deconstruct the opposing categories of political and personal, intimate and public that have reinforced the archetypal male position (Warner, 1996). Furthermore, this seditious, anti-authoritarian attitude is a hallmark of the original punk rock ethos and emphasises that:

Queer issues are not limited to categories of sexuality and sexual preference, and that 'anger' and 'humor' are but discursive tactics 'played out,' as it were, yet anchored in real issues which impact the lives of human beings. (DeChaine, 1997:22)

As I previously suggested, Anal Traffic maintains a critical distance from institutionalised gay culture and in keeping with this ethic they make numerous attempts at subverting the stereotypes of male homosexuality. While many of their lyrics are suggestive of overt homosexual masculinity in the tradition of gay leather and bear culture, the corporeality associated with this culture is subverted by the physicality of the band members, particularly the slender and boyish features of the guitarist and keyboardist and the female drummer. In reference to this Paul Jones recalls,

I find that with some of the gay men, like the rough trade who are into leather...will turn up to see us and because I'm a skinny little thing, Shane's tall and slim and Sam's a woman, we don't fit their ideal of what dirty filthy homo bears should be so they put their guard up ... then walk off because we're not the big rough brooding masculine men they thought we'd be. (interview with the author, 12 December 2005)

The male and female bodies that make up Anal Traffic present a fractured array of masculinities, boyishness, androgyny and femininity which reinforces the indeterminacy and fluidity of queer identity and highlight queer's sophisticated capacity to resist the totalising effects of the sex/gender/sexuality paradigm. By refusing to present themselves as a unified and exemplary spectacle of either heterosexual or homosexual masculinity, Anal Traffic further defy the cultural expectations of masculine gender performance typically associated with punk rock music and with certain factions of gay male culture. Thus, the physicality of Anal Traffic's on-stage performance serves as a challenge to the codification of gender and sexual performativity that is predicated by both hetero and homonormativities. Furthermore, their overtly homosexual content serves as a challenge to

musico-normativity, specifically due to the silence or ambiguity of the homosexual voice that is typical of both pop and rock music traditions (Gill, 1995).

THE RESONANT FREQUENCY OF PINK NOISE...

Through the use of musical performance both ensembles have created a space in which expressions of gender and sexuality are released from the binding logics of heteronormativity and the sex/gender/sexuality paradigm, and where social and sexual normativities are playfully negotiated and subverted. Such musical performances thus demonstrate the capacity of these queer performers to create new ways of being and engaging with a world that offers limited modes of socially acceptable self-expression and identification.

While the longevity of this musically facilitated liberation from gender and sexual repression remains to be quantified, it is certain that the musical space offers these artists at least a momentary release from gender and sexual norms: to recall Mary's words, "it's such a release ... when you're on stage its another world, it's my world" (interview with the author, 29 November 2005). The world imagined by Mary and each of the other performers discussed here, comes to life through music, thus reinforcing music's facilitation of utopian imaginings and its potential to envisage new ways of being that is, in this instance, particularly suited to queer bodies and queer-world views.

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