

ELTON JOHN

PRIDE WITH PURPOSE

BRANDI CARLILE &
CATHERINE SHEPHERD

MELISSA ETHERIDGE |
INDIGO GIRLS

GIGI PEREZ SAILS FORTH

TRIXIE MATEL GIVES 'EM HELL

WE ♥ PRIDE



REPUBLIC
COLLECTIVE



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MUSIC



OUTRIGHT
INTERNATIONAL

Celebrating Pride

Introducing this year's **Stronger Together** campaign, empowering unity, empathy, and collaboration among LGBTIQ communities and allies in every corner of the world.

SCAN TO
LISTEN



Outright International launches its multi-month Outright Proud campaign annually to amplify LGBTIQ voices, galvanize support for the global movement, advocate for the human rights of LGBTIQ communities, and celebrate the acceptance of LGBTIQ people across the globe.

Featuring songs released since Outright's founding in 1990, celebrating 35 years of unity and dedicated activism for and on behalf of LGBTIQ people everywhere

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THE FACILITATOR: BRANDI CARLILE



Americana troubadour Brandi Carlile was already a Grammy-winning phenomenon in her own right when she assisted the great Joni Mitchell in her return to the stage. Next came her album with Elton John, *Who Believes in Angels?* (Interscope), which found both artists stretching into new territory. We asked Carlile and her wife and co-manager, Catherine Shepherd, about the meaning of Pride in this strange new era, cultural inspirations, coming out and much more. For some reason, they answered our questions.

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18

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36

JUST STAND UP! MELISSA ETHERIDGE



72

ON THE COVER: ELTON JOHN



COURTESY OF ELTON JOHN AIDS FOUNDATION

In this issue we celebrate an artist who is not only one of the most influential, adored and commercially impactful singer-songwriters of all time but also a trailblazing advocate for LGBTQ+ rights and recognition—particularly in his boosting of young queer artists—and a tireless crusader for AIDS research and treatment. Yes, he's been knighted, but he doesn't insist on being called "Sir," though he has earned all due deference. Six decades into his career, Elton is, to quote one of his many giant hits, "Still Standing." We, meanwhile, are barely breathing.

Vibe-Raters

OUR PICKS TO BREAK ♦ CHOSEN BY THE HITS EDITORIAL STAFF

1



LW: 1 2W: 2 3W: 2

ALEX WARREN

Atlantic

Album: You'll Be Alright Kid (Chapter 1)

Tracks: Ordinary

Album due 7/18; 52m+ monthly listeners; 2b career streams; 553m+ Spotify streams on "Ordinary," #1 on Spotify U.S. and Global, hit #1 Spotify U.K., more; #3 Pop, #1 Hot AC, #12 AC; You'll Be Alright, Kid (Chapter 1) #15 on Top 200 Albums chart; sold-out Cheaper Than Therapy World Tour; Lollapalooza, Summer Fest, Bonnaroo, more; Fallon; Netflix's Love Is Blind performance; featured in People, SiriusXM, more. Booking: Marty Diamond, Zac Bluestone & Mike Malak/Wasserman. Mgmt: Brian Sokolik/Odd Projects

5



LW: 5 2W: 11 3W: 11

RAVYN LENAË

Atlantic

Album: BIRD'S EYE

Track: Love Me Not

24m+ monthly listeners; "Love Me Not" #13 at Pop, #19 Rhythm, #32 Hot AC, #7 Spotify U.S., #8 Global; added to Pop Rising (cover), more; announced fall U.S., U.K. & EU tour; direct support on Sabrina Carpenter's Short n' Sweet Tour (fall) (5 nights at Crypto.com Arena); sold out NA/EU Bird's Eye Tour fall 2024; Coachella, Lollapalooza, Vivid LIVE, more; Fallon; featured in FADER (cover), NYT, more. Booking: Fred Zahednia & Evar Hancock/Wasserman; Andy Duggan/WME (Int.). Mgmt: John Bogaard/Terrains

2



LW: 2 2W: 3 3W: 3

THE MARIÁS

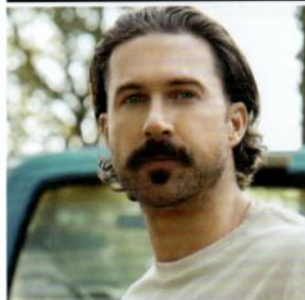
Nice Life/Atlantic

Album: Submarine

Tracks: Run Your Mouth & No One Noticed

33m+ monthly Spotify listeners; 1.8b+ global streams; "No One Noticed" hit Top 20 at Pop and Top 5 Spotify U.S. (peak), Top 50 Global; "Run Your Mouth" spent 26 weeks on Alt chart; opened for Billie Eilish; Coachella, Lollapalooza Chicago, Argentina & Brazil 2025; 2025 The Submarine Tour (Extended); Zane Lowe; featured in L.A. Times, Variety, more. Booking: Sam Kirby & Parker Glenn/UTA. Mgmt: Jonathan Eshak/Mick Management

6



LW: 6 2W: 10 3W: 10

RILEY GREEN

Nashville Harbor/BMLG

Album: Don't Mind If I Do

Track: Worst Way

5b+ global career streams; four #1 singles to date, "Worst Way" (300m+ streams) #2 at Country radio, added to Spotify's Hot Country, Apple Music's Today's Country; won three 2025 ACM awards; Damn Country Music spring/summer headline tour; Country Thunder Arizona (4/10) and Florida (5/2), Sand in My Boots (5/17), CMA Fest (6/5), more; Kimmel, Fallon, more; 2024 CMA Award winner, more. Booking: Austin Neal/The Neal Agency. Mgmt: Daniel Miller, Zach Sutton & Danielle Broome/Fusion Music/Red Light Management

3



LW: 3 2W: 3 3W: 3

TUCKER WETMORE

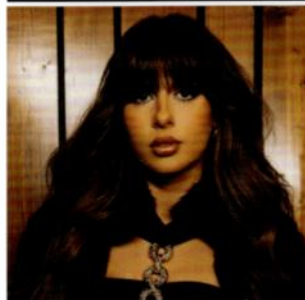
Back Blocks/Mercury/MCA

Album: What Not To

Track: 3,2,1

1b+ global streams; biggest new artist country album debut in 2025; ACM New Male Artist of the Year nominee; "3,2,1" #27 at Country radio; "Wine into Whiskey" hit #4 on Spotify Viral Global/U.S.; "Wind Up Missin' You" platinum, hit #1 at Country; Ryman debut 5/1; Opry debut; extended Waves on a Sunset tour; support on Luke Combs' FARM TOUR, Thomas Rhett's Better in Boots (2025); CMA Fest, more; Kimmel debut. Booking: Braeden Rountree & Carrie Murphy/WME

7



LW: 7 2W: 6 3W: 6

ELLA LANGLEY

SAWGOD/Columbia

Album: hungover

Tracks: you look like you love me & weren't for the wind

"you look like you love me" platinum, 5x ACM winner, including New Female Artist of the Year, single of the year, more; hit #1 at Country radio, hit Top 25 Spotify and Apple U.S., 10b+ TikTok views; "weren't for the wind" #7 at Country, entered U.S. Spotify; supporting Riley Green's Damn Country Music Tour, sold out upcoming 30-date still hungove' headline tour; appeared on Fallon, TODAY. Booking: The Neal Agency. Mgmt: Bradley Jordan & Megan Hinde/Painted Rock Management

4



LW: 4 2W: 7 3W: 7

SOMBR

SMB Music LLC/Warner Records

Album: N/A

Tracks: back to friends & undressed

40m+ monthly listeners; "back to friends" #1 at Alt radio, hit #2 Spotify Global and U.S., added to Today's Top Hits, Hot Hits USA, more; 1b+ TikTok videos, 1b+ views; 1m+ first-day global streams on "undressed," #16 at Pop, #17 Hot AC, hit #3 Spotify U.S. and #6 Global; announced The Late Nights & Young Romance headline tour; opened for Daniel Seavey's U.S. Tour & Nessa Barrett's EU Tour (5/27-6/23); featured in OTW, UPROXX, more. Booking: Matt Meyer & John Taylor/UTA

8



LW: 8 2W: 5 3W: 5

SAM BARBER

Lockeland Springs/Atlantic

Album: Restless Mind

Track: Indigo

1.4b+ streams; 11.8m+ monthly listeners; 460k+ TikTok videos on "Indigo" f/Avery Anna, #39 at Country radio; hit Top 10 Spotify Viral, Top 15 Apple Country, more; extended Restless Mind World Tour (U.S., EU & AUS); performed Stagecoach, Lollapalooza, more; "Thought of You" Spotify Editors' Picks: Best Songs; "Better Year" sync on Yellowstone; "Straight and Narrow" 2X platinum; featured in NPR, SPIN, more. Booking: Matt Runner, Joe Atamian & Jonathan Levine/Wasserman. Mgmt: Colton Kramer & Jerin Uecker/Outlaw Foundry

BLACK EYED PEAS



- 65 MILLION RECORDS SOLD -

- MULTI-PLATINUM ALBUM CERTIFICATIONS -

- THREE DECADES OF TIMELESS HITS -

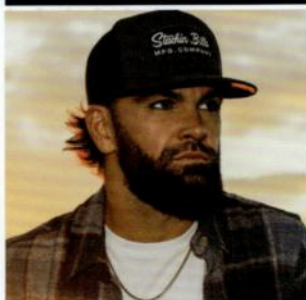
CELEBRATING 30 YEARS OF THE BLACK EYED PEAS

INTERACTIVE **h**UM^e

Vibe-Raters

OUR PICKS TO BREAK ♦ CHOSEN BY THE HITS EDITORIAL STAFF

9



LW: 9 2W: 8 3W: 8

DYLAN SCOTT

Curb Records

Album: *Livin' My Best Life (Still)*

Track: *This Town's Been Too Good to Us*

4b+ global streams; album 1.4m+ ATD; 5.8m monthly listeners; five #1 singles, currently 4th most-played artist at Country radio, two singles Top 10 at Country twice in 2025; 6b+ TikTok views; headlining Country Til I Die Tour, kicked off 4/3; Stagecoach, Country Stampede, Country Jam USA, Rock the Clock, YQM, more; TODAY Show, CMT; 2x ACM nominee, CMT Music Awards Winner; featured in Holler, Muscle and Fitness, American Songwriter, more. Booking: WME. Mgmt: Kerri Edwards/KP Entertainment

13



LW: 13 2W: 9 3W: 9

MALCOLM TODD

Columbia

Album: *Malcolm Todd*

Track: *Chest Pain (I Love)*

Album out now; 8.7m+ monthly listeners; 4m+ video creations, 9.5b TikTok views on "Chest Pain (I Love)," 230m+ streams; SiriusXM's TikTok Radio Takeover; "Bleed" f/Omar Apollo "Song of the Week" on KNDD-Seattle; sold-out North American headline tour; appeared on Kimmel; TikTok's "Behind the Breakthrough"; GENIUS Verified, VEVO DSCVR; featured in Rolling Stone, UPROXX, more. Booking: CAA. Mgmt: OSV Projects

10



LW: 10

MARIAH THE SCIENTIST

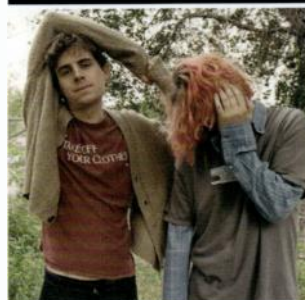
Epic

Album: *N/A*

Track: *Burning Blue*

6m+ monthly listeners; "Burning Blue" 60m+ global streams, #1 Apple Music, hit #7 Viral 50 USA Spotify; #13 at Rhythm, #22 Urban; #8 Top 200 Song Consumption; #3 R&B/Hip-Hop On-Demand audio; 10m video views, peaked #2 U.S. trending music; performing DLT Malta, Balta Island U.K. (6/5), CFG Bank Arena, Baltimore MD (6/14), The Vic Theater, Chicago, IL (8/2), Gov Ball, Lollapalooza, more; Kimmel; featured in Complex, UPROXX, more. Booking: Mark Cheatham & Olivia Mirabella/CAA. Mgmt: Morgan Buckles

14



LW: 14

ROYEL OTIS

Capitol

Album: *TBA*

Track: *moody*

7.9m+ monthly listeners; "Murder on the Dancefloor" hit #1, "Sofa King" broke Top 10 at Alt; "Linger" SiriusXM session cover cracked Hot 100; announced meet me in the car national U.S. headline tour; Gov Ball, Lollapalooza, Outside Lands, Osheaga, more; Kimmel debut; won four ARIA Awards, including Best Rock Album and Best Group; featured in PASTE (cover), NME (cover), more. Booking: Arrival Artists (U.S.), ATC Live (EU), WME (Aus/NZ/Asia). Mgmt: Andrew Klippel/OURNESS

11



LW: 11 2W: 12 3W: 12

FORREST FRANK

river house records/10K Projects

Album: *CHILD OF GOD II*

Track: *YOUR WAY'S BETTER*

Album out now; 1.2b+ global streams; two songs Top 40 on Christian radio, "YOUR WAY'S BETTER" (first solo Hot 100 entry, #72 debut) and "Nothing Else"; 9m+ weekly audience on MB's Christian Audience chart; on his sold-out CHILD OF GOD II arena tour; wrapped 2024 as #1 top new Christian artist; 33 entries on Hot Christian Songs, six Top 10 tracks; two-time GMA Dove Awards winner; first Grammy nom for CHILD OF GOD album. Booking: Jeffrey Hasson/UTA. Mgmt: Zach Friedman & Tony Talamo

15



LW: 15 2W: 14 3W: 14

WET LEG

Domino Recording Company

Album: *moisturizer*

Track: *catch these fists*

moisturizer due 7/11; 2.9m+ monthly Spotify listeners; single "catch these fists" #10 on Alt chart, #2 at AAA; 19-track 2025 North American tour; appeared on Fallon; won three Grammys and two BRIT Awards. 76m+ combined YouTube video views, 225k+ subs. Booking: Latane Hughes & Marty Diamond/Wasserman. Mgmt: Martin Hall & Elena Pelse/Hall or Nothing Management

12



LW: 12 2W: 13 3W: 13

HUDSON WESTBROOK

Warner Music Nashville/River House Artists

Album: *N/A*

Track: *House Again*

5.5m+ monthly Spotify listeners; 350m global streams in the first year; "House Again" #31 at Country radio; hit #1 on SiriusXM's The Highway and Texas Radio; nearly sold-out spring headline tour, support for Parker McCollum, Cole Swindell, Midland & Ian Munsick; named a 2025 Spotify Artist to Watch, SiriusXM Highway Find and Future Five Artist, more. Booking: Jodi Cockrell & Andrew McWilliams/Evergreen Artists. Mgmt: Zebb Luster/River House Artists

16



LW: 16 2W: 15 3W: 15

THE HIVES

Play It Again Sam

Album: *The Hives Forever Forever The Hives*

Track: *Enough Is Enough*

Album due 8/29; 1m+ global streams on "Enough Is Enough," 35k playlist adds; 970k+ Spotify streams, 8k+ Shazams, 200k+ Apple Music streams; "Enough Is Enough," KROQ world premiere, added at Alt Nation's Advanced Placement, KPNT, KROX, WGBJ, WRXL, more, played on Strykers Out of Order, more; "Enough Is Enough" x Fox Sports; The Hives North America Tour (9/8-9/25); featured in NYT's Weekly Playlist, Pitchfork, FLOOD, Stereogum, more. Booking: Robby Fraser/WME. Mgmt: Matthew Greer/ATC

TOP 5 2025
AIRPLAY LABEL



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TOP 50

WEEK ENDING 6.12.25

MARKETSHARE: UMG 60% WMG 19% SME 16% OTHERS 5%



Morgan Abides, Debuts Abound

Morgan Wallen adds another 209k to his already swollen coffers this week as *I'm the Problem* (Big Loud/Mercury/Republic) spends yet another week at #1. Meanwhile, no fewer than three debuts land in the Top 5.

The biggest of these is *Tha Carter VI*, by Young Money/Republic's Lil Wayne, which bows at #2 with 114k. That's followed by K-pop septet ENHYPEN (Belift Labs), locking down 97k+ with *DESIRE : UNLEASH*, good for #3, and Columbia's Addison Rae, whose *Addison*—Is she ditching the "Rae"? Is that still pending? Won't someone send us a press release?—notches a nifty 48k+ and a #4 berth in her opening frame.

SA's unstoppable *SOS* (TDE/RCA) rounds out the Top 5.

Roadrunner rock band Turnstile, which has been turning heads on the festival circuit, scores an impressive Top 10 premiere with about 37k, which we're told is a career high.

Speaking of career highs, our bong awaits, so let's wrap this up. This week saw the arrival of a new set from Galactic/Republic rapper Lil Tecca, who's got DSP heat at present with two singles, as well as music by MCA's Dierks Bentley, RCA's Backstreet Boys, KQ's Ateez, The Other Shoe/Reprise's Neil Young & the Chrome Hearts and Fiction/Capitol's The Cure, a live set courtesy of Republic's Jonas Brothers and an anniversary reissue from Columbia/Sony's New Kids on the Block (yes, Backstreet and NKOTB). Consult your local record emporium for details.

This weekend, America will debate whether we want to return to being ruled by a monarch. It should be stimulating.

LW	TW	ARTIST TITLE LABEL	TOTAL ACTIVITY	CHANGE	ALBUM	TEA	SEA
1	1	MORGAN WALLEN I'M THE PROBLEM BIG LOUD/MERCURY/REPUBLIC (UMG)	209,500	-14%	11,024	1,299	197,177
—	2	LIL WAYNE THA CARTER VI YOUNG MONEY/REPUBLIC (UMG)	114,423	—	36,460	782	77,180
—	3	ENHYPEN DESIRE : UNLEASH BELIFT LAB/GEFFEN (VMG)	97,543	—	92,070	110	5,363
—	4	ADDISON RAE ADDISON COLUMBIA (SME)	48,274	—	22,388	132	25,754
4	5	SZA SOS TDE/RCA (SME)	42,556	-8%	2,142	165	40,249
—	6	MY CHEMICAL ROMANCE THREE CHEERS FOR SWEET REVENGE REPRISE (WMG)	41,059	—	34,580	32	6,447
8	7	SABRINA CARPENTER SHORT N' SWEET ISLAND (UMG)	40,223	18%	6,386	273	33,564
6	8	MORGAN WALLEN ONE THING AT A TIME BIG LOUD/MERCURY/REPUBLIC (UMG)	38,539	0%	835	233	37,471
—	9	TURNSTILE NEVER ENOUGH ROADRUNNER (WMG)	36,999	—	26,575	79	10,345
7	10	KENDRICK LAMAR GNX PGLANG/INTERSCOPE (UMG)	35,457	-1%	6,366	278	28,813

TOP 50

WEEK ENDING 6.12.25

MARKETSHARE: UMG 60% WMG 19% SME 16% OTHERS 5%



LIL WAYNE



ENHYPEN



ADDISON RAE

LW	TW	ARTIST TITLE LABEL	TOTAL ACTIVITY	CHANGE	ALBUM SALES	TEA	SEA
9	11	PARTYNEXTDOOR & DRAKE \$OME \$EXY \$ONGS 4 U REPUBLIC/OVO/SANTA ANNA (SME)	32,073	-1%	1,447	176	30,449
10	12	BAD BUNNY DEBÍ TIRAR MÁS FOTOS RIMAS (THE ORCHARD)	30,251	-6%	227	111	29,913
11	13	MORGAN WALLEN DANGEROUS: THE DOUBLE ALBUM BIG LOUD/MERCURY/REPUBLIC (UMG)	28,910	-1%	856	148	27,906
13	14	BILLIE EILISH HIT ME HARD AND SOFT DARKROOM/INTERSCOPE (UMG)	27,417	-3%	3,601	160	23,656
14	15	SHABOOZEY WHERE I'VE BEEN, ISN'T WHERE I'M GOING AMERICAN DOGWOOD/EMPIRE (EMPIRE)	27,349	-1%	641	815	25,893
12	16	FUERZA REGIDA 111XPANTIA STREET MOB/RANCHO HUMILDE/SONY MUSIC LATIN (SME)	27,043	-5%	104	35	26,904
31	17	HAMILTON ORIGINAL BROADWAY CAST UPTOWN/ATLANTIC (WMG)	26,842	52%	935	102	25,806
16	18	CHAPPELL ROAN RISE AND FALL OF A MIDWEST PRINCESS ISLAND (UMG)	26,172	3%	3,898	541	21,732
15	19	ALEX WARREN YOU'LL BE ALRIGHT, KID (CHAPTER 1) ATLANTIC (WMG)	25,740	-1%	157	872	24,710
20	20	THE WEEKND HURRY UP TOMORROW XO/REPUBLIC (UMG)	22,632	1%	3,680	97	18,855
17	21	TAYLOR SWIFT THE TORTURED POETS DEPARTMENT REPUBLIC (UMG)	22,212	-10%	1,728	69	20,415
18	22	TATE MCRAE SO CLOSE TO WHAT RCA (SME)	21,922	-10%	1,534	131	20,257
22	23	NOAH KAHAN STICK SEASON MERCURY/REPUBLIC (UMG)	21,599	-3%	1,333	109	20,157
19	24	PLAYBOI CARTI MUSIC AWGE/INTERSCOPE (UMG)	21,117	-7%	208	37	20,872
24	25	POST MALONE F-1 TRILLION MERCURY/REPUBLIC (UMG)	20,761	0%	732	267	19,761
26	26	FLEETWOOD MAC RUMOURS WARNER (WMG)	20,656	2%	2,550	204	17,902
21	27	LADY GAGA MAYHEM INTERSCOPE (UMG)	20,511	-8%	2,718	382	17,411
—	28	POST MALONE THE DIAMOND COLLECTION MERCURY/REPUBLIC (UMG)	20,297	—	128	131	20,038
25	29	BENSON BOONE FIREWORKS & ROLLERBLADES NIGHT STREET/WARNER (WMG)	20,162	-2%	998	327	18,837
27	30	ED SHEERAN + - = ÷ x TOUR COLLECTION ATLANTIC (WMG)	19,081	-2%	382	220	18,479

TOP 50

WEEK ENDING 6.12.25

MARKETSHARE: UMG 60% WMG 19% SME 16% OTHERS 5%



LW	TW	ARTIST	TITLE	LABEL	TOTAL ACTIVITY	CHANGE	ALBUM SALES	TEA	SEA
5	31	TAYLOR SWIFT	REPUTATION	BIG MACHINE/BMLG (UMG)	18,959	-56%	2,276	160	16,523
28	32	BIGXTHAPLUG	TAKE CARE	1504484 RECORDS (UNITED MASTERS)	18,699	0%	390	110	18,199
23	33	SLEEP TOKEN	EVEN IN ARCADIA	RCA (SME)	18,245	-15%	2,280	93	15,872
29	34	BAD BUNNY	UN VERANO SIN TI	RIMAS (THE ORCHARD)	18,030	-4%	112	35	17,883
39	35	TEDDY SWIMS	I'VE TRIED EVERYTHING BUT THERAPY (PART 1)	WARNER (WMG)	17,144	2%	1,031	356	15,757
33	36	ZACH BRYAN	AMERICAN HEARTBREAK	WARNER (WMG)	17,033	-2%	269	68	16,697
32	37	ELTON JOHN	DIAMONDS	ISLAND (UMG)	16,845	-4%	370	263	16,212
34	38	NETÓN VEGA	MI VIDA MI MUERTE	JOSA (INDIE)	16,807	-3%	2	14	16,790
2	39	SEVENTEEN	SEVENTEEN 5TH ALBUM HAPPY BURSTDAY	PLEDIS/GEFFEN (UMG)	16,693	-65%	15,247	25	1,420
38	40	GRACIE ABRAMS	THE SECRET OF US	INTERSCOPE (UMG)	16,689	-1%	1,656	123	14,909
40	41	DRAKE	TAKE CARE	YMCMB/REPUBLIC (UMG)	16,593	-1%	1,004	26	15,563
30	42	TAYLOR SWIFT	LOVER	REPUBLIC (UMG)	16,202	-10%	1,927	128	14,147
41	43	JELLY ROLL	BEAUTIFULLY BROKEN	BROKEN BOW/REPUBLIC (BMG/UMG)	16,184	-3%	1,945	405	13,833
36	44	ZACH TOP	COLD BEER & COUNTRY MUSIC	LEO33 (INDIE)	16,080	-5%	1,734	160	14,186
37	45	KENDRICK LAMAR	GOOD KID M.A.A.D CITY	TDE/AFTERMATH/INTERSCOPE (UMG)	16,028	-5%	1,946	30	14,052
35	46	FORREST FRANK	CHILD OF GOD II	RIVER HOUSE/10K (WMG)	15,619	-9%	1,110	492	14,017
48	47	CREDENCE CLEARWATER REVIVAL	CHRONICLE: THE 20 G/H	FANTASY (UMG)	15,289	1%	2,282	222	12,785
—	48	MARINA	PRINCESS OF POWER	QUEENIE/BMG (WMG)	15,270	—	8,452	88	6,730
—	49	CHARLI XCX	BRAT	ATLANTIC (WMG)	15,222	—	1,478	72	13,671
43	50	EMINEM	CURTAIN CALL	SHADY/AFTERMATH/INTERSCOPE (UMG)	15,214	-5%	1,048	206	13,960



“Club” Remix

Our Pride 2025 special issue offers a perfect opportunity to revisit one of the best **Grammy** segments in recent memory, BNA winner **Chappell Roan**’s performance of “Pink Pony Club,” her joyous anthem of queer self-discovery. As we detail in the following pages, LGBTQ+ people are particularly imperiled by our present political landscape, so the inclusive, welcoming space envisioned by the song (and **Island** star Roan’s vivid rendition) represents both a communal ideal and a refuge for the resistance.

Massey, D’Arduini Take Charge at Arista

Clio Massey and Matt D’Arduini will usher **Arista Records** into the future as newly named co-presidents, reporting to **Sony Music Group** Chairman **Rob Stringer**.

“We are pleased to announce a seamless transition for Arista,

which was creatively reborn in 2018,” Stringer said. “Clio and Matt are dynamic and forward-thinking executives who are best placed to build on the artist development they have been involved with in the first phase of the new Arista. Their skills complement each other neatly and as a partnership will lead to an exciting future for the label.”

Clio is the daughter of outgoing Arista President/CEO David Massey, who in April announced he would retire at the end of June after presiding over the relaunched imprint since 2018. Since then, the label has enjoyed success with such acts as **Måneskin** and its singer **Damiano David**, **JP Saxe**, **Paul Russell** and **Lola Brooke**.

In addition to serving as VP of A&R at Arista, Clio Massey is the

GM of **Work of Art Publishing**, which she co-founded with her father in 2018 and which has represented such songwriters as **Saxe** and **Russell**, **Neek** and **Adam Friedman**. She’ll continue to oversee **Work of Art**.

D’Arduini has been with Arista since 2018 and was most recently EVP of A&R. He previously spent 10 years at **Robbins Entertainment**, working with acts like **Afrojack** and **DHT** before moving to **Island**, where he lent a hand to projects from **Nick Jonas**, **Demi Lovato**, **Shawn Mendes** and others.

“I’m thrilled and thankful for this opportunity,” Clio Massey said. “I look forward to continuing the work with the great artists and exceptional team at Arista alongside Matt. We’re excited to help shape and grow our group into its next chapter.”

Added D’Arduini, “We are eager to expand on Arista’s progress and reach over the last few years, cultivating even more talent at our company. We’re also grateful for the leadership at Sony Music, who believe in this organization and will help us advance our creative core.”





Q&A TOK

Behind the Breakthrough

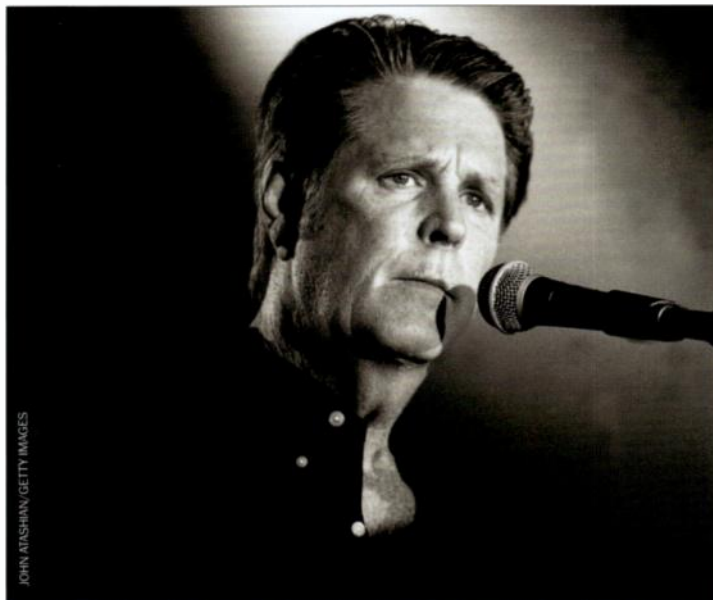
with

ALEX WARREN

Every breakthrough has a beginning.

Q Search "Ordinary"

Beach Boys Auteur Brian Wilson Dies at 82



Brian Wilson, the visionary songwriter, singer, producer and founding member of the quintessential California group **The Beach Boys**, died on June 11 at age 82. A statement from his family confirmed the death but did not specify the cause. Wilson had long struggled with mental health issues, though he'd managed to battle through them and remain musically active.

The Beach Boys wrote on Facebook, "The world mourns a genius today, and we grieve for the loss of our cousin, our friend and our partner in a great musical adventure. Brian Wilson wasn't just the heart of The Beach Boys—he was the soul of our sound."

Mike Love, The Beach Boys co-founder and Wilson's cousin, wrote, in part, "From the first time we sang together as kids in my living room, I knew there was something otherworldly in him. His musical gifts were unmatched... Like all families, we had our ups and downs. But through it all, we never stopped loving each other... Brian, you once asked, 'Wouldn't it be nice if we were older?' Now you are timeless."

Added band co-founder Al Jardine, "the most comforting

thought is that you are reunited with [late brothers] Carl and Dennis, singing those beautiful harmonies again."

Lifelong Wilson fan Bob Dylan wrote on X, "Heard the sad news about Brian today and thought about all the years I've been listening to him and admiring his genius."

"He was the biggest influence on my songwriting ever," Elton John said on Instagram. "He was a musical genius and revolutionary. He changed the goalposts when it came to writing songs and shaped music forever."

Born on June 20, 1942, in Hawthorne, California, Wilson was a prodigy whose early fascination with complex vocal harmonies and studio experimentation led to the creation of some of the most beloved and innovative music of the 20th century. Alongside Carl and Dennis, Love and friend Jardine, Wilson co-founded The Beach Boys in 1961, crafting sun-soaked anthems like "Surfin' U.S.A.," "California Girls" and "I Get Around" that captured the youthful spirit of an idealized Southern California.

But Wilson's ambitions quickly outgrew the confines of surf, cars and girls. With the

1966 album *Pet Sounds*—largely written and produced while the band was on tour—he created a symphonic-pop masterpiece that included ravishing tracks like "God Only Knows," "Caroline, No" and "Wouldn't It Be Nice."

"I wasn't trying to make hits—I was trying to make something beautiful," Wilson later said of *Pet Sounds*, which would inspire countless musicians, most notably **The Beatles**, whose **Paul McCartney** famously called it the greatest album ever made.

Wilson's follow-up project, *Smile*, was intended to push the boundaries of pop music even further. Released ahead of the album in progress, "Good Vibrations"—the most complex pop single ever made to that point—had become a #1 hit, but Wilson's worsening mental health derailed the project, leading to decades of seclusion and erratic behavior.

Diagnosed with schizoaffective disorder and bipolar tendencies, Wilson spent years under the controversial care of therapist **Eugene Landy**. But against the odds, he reemerged in 1988 with a reassuringly strong self-titled solo album (*Sire/Reprise*), highlighted by its gorgeous opening track, "Love and Mercy."

In 2004, he finally completed *Smile*—retitled as *Brian Wilson Presents... SMiLE*, after which he continued to tour and record, his fragility only heightening the poignancy of his songs.

Wilson's life and music were the subjects of numerous books, documentaries and films, including the 2014 biopic *Love & Mercy*.

"He was an unqualified genius, but everyone knows that," said **Irving Azoff**, whose **Iconic Artists Group** entered into a partnership with The Beach Boys earlier this year. "But Brian the father and brother and friend had a heart of gold."

"Brian Wilson was one of the

most talented singer-songwriters in the history of recorded music," **Sir Lucian Grainge**, chairman and CEO of **Universal Music Group**, said in a statement. "Not only did his songs capture the spirit of youth, joy and longing in ways that still inspire millions of fans around the world, his innovative work in the studio transformed the way musicians record even to this day."

"We are deeply saddened by the passing of Brian Wilson, one of music's most cherished and influential songwriters, composers, and producers," wrote **Jody Gerson**, chairman/CEO of **Universal Music Publishing Group**, the pubco for Wilson. "Over the course of more than six decades—through his groundbreaking work with the Beach Boys and his extraordinary solo career—Brian created music that touched the hearts and souls of millions around the world."

Bruce Resnikoff, president and CEO of **UMe**, added that Wilson "redefined pop by blending The Beach Boys' signature harmonies with rich, complex arrangements, introspective lyrics and groundbreaking studio innovations."

"Brian Wilson was one of the rare true geniuses in our industry," said attorney **John Branca**. "As a writer, producer, singer and arranger his talent was unparalleled. He was my first client in this industry and I will miss him and his spirit dearly."

Wilson's wife, **Melinda Ledbetter Wilson**, who was widely credited with helping him reclaim his life and career, died in January 2024. He was subsequently placed under a legal conservatorship by a Los Angeles court due to a "major neurocognitive disorder."

Wilson is survived by daughters **Carnie** and **Wendy**, from his marriage to **Marilyn Wilson-Rutherford**, as well as five adopted children he shared with Ledbetter.

WE
LIVE
MUSIC

GUNPOWDER & SKY

Funk-Rock Visionary Sly Stone Dies at 82

Sly Stone, aka Sylvester Stewart, the mercurial artist, producer and electrifying performer, who transformed American popular music with his revolutionary funk-rock band Sly and the Family Stone, died on June 9 at age 82.

On landmark late-'60s and early-'70s hits like "Everyday People," "Dance to the Music," "Hot Fun in the Summertime," "Thank You (Falettinme Be Mice Elf Agin)" and "Family Affair," Stone fused soul, rock, funk and psychedelia into a new, inclusive sound that broke racial and genre boundaries.

The **Roots' Ahmir "Questlove" Thompson**, who directed this year's acclaimed documentary *Sly Lives! (aka The Burden of Black Genius)*, wrote on Instagram, "His songs

weren't just about fighting injustice; they were about transforming the self to transform the world... His work looked straight at the brightest and darkest parts of life and demanded we do the same."

Clive Davis, who signed Stone to Columbia Records in 1967, said in a statement, "I had the very special experience of knowing him when he was at his most creative, his hardest working and his genius flourishing vibrantly. Sly's artistry influenced so many of our important creative talents. He will be forever missed."

Born March 15, 1944, in Denton, Texas, and raised in Vallejo, California, Stewart played multiple instruments and was producing records before he was out of his teens. Working as a DJ at San Francisco's KSOL and KSAN, where he became known for his genre-blending sets. He also ventured into rock production, notably for *The Beau Brummels*, the first American band to score

hits amid the British Invasion.

In 1966 he formed Sly and the Family Stone, one of the first high-profile American bands to be both racially integrated and mixed-gender. The band's kaleidoscopic grooves, punctuated by Larry Graham's pioneering slap bass and Cynthia Robinson's brassy trumpet blasts, built the foundation for funk, modern R&B and hip-hop. They became the voice of a new generation—joyous yet defiant, idealistic yet grounded in the

complexities of American life.

The band's performance at Woodstock was one of the 1969 festival's defining moments, a euphoric call to unity that crystallized Sly's vision of "everyday people" dancing to the music together. After that, Sly and the Family Stone

were all over radio and sales charts.

But the pressures of fame, internal conflicts and drug use took their toll. The band began to fragment in the early 1970s, and Sly's erratic behavior increasingly overshadowed his musical output, though 1971's *There's a Riot Goin' On* and 1973's *Fresh*, both essentially solo efforts, are viewed as radical masterworks.

There would be no more indelible moments, however, as drug use and mental-health issues virtually incapacitated Stone. His later years were marked by long stretches of silence, reclusion and sporadic appearances.

Despite his personal struggles, Stone's influence never waned. Artists ranging from Prince and George Clinton to Public Enemy, Janet Jackson and Kendrick Lamar have cited him as a key inspiration.

He was inducted into the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame in 1993.



A BLATANT RIP-OFF OF A GOOD MAGAZINE

Hits List

WHAT WEASELS ARE WEASELING ABOUT THIS WEEK

1 SABRINA CARPENTER: Island superstar's new "Manchild" is an absolute monster, sprinting to #1 at Spotify global and U.S. as word of new album, *Man's Best Friend* (due Aug. 29) roils her fanbase. Man, are Janelle, Imran and Justin psyched.



2 MARIAH CAREY: A bona fide megadiva returns via gamma. as new track proves "Dangerous" at radio, video drops, global trek heats up. Lionel Ridenour, Larry Jackson and L.A. Reid are hitting the high notes.



3 THE WEEKND: XO/Republic force of nature wails through three sold-out MetLife stadium shows, reaching a staggering 150k+ people and racking up billions of streams. That kind of success is "Timeless."



4 LIL TECCA: Two blazing-hot streaming hits from Galactic/Republic rapper have all "Thoughts" turning to his new album, streeting now. How will *Dopamine* affect the market's bloodstream?



5 JONATHAN DICKINS: Super-manager is said to be brushing up on key phrases like "por favor," "gracias" and "¿Cuanto?"



6 KEITH ROTHSCHILD: RCA promo driver has pedal to the metal at Pop radio as Tate McRae's "Sports car" crosses the finish line at #1. He's got a Tedder in his tank.

7 ADDISON RAE: She may be shortening her name, but Columbia artist is definitely extending her reach, thanks to "Fame Is a Gun" and new album. Ron, Julian and team are adding some rum to their "Diet Pepsi."

8 AARON ROSENBERG: Myman Greenspan attorney uses his platform to advocate strongly for gender and racial diversity. He's a source of Pride for his team.

9 GRAMMYS: In wake of last year's superb show, Academy rolls out two new categories and freshens up eligibility rules. Game on.

10 PRIDE & BLACK MUSIC MONTH: This month's special issues have added meaning given Trump's parade of authoritarianism. Time to stand up for inclusion.

**THE
T!TS
OUT
TOUR**

**NEW ALBUM
OUT JULY 4TH**

**FEATURING
JOYRIDE
& BOY CRAZY**

FREEDOM

PARTY



KESHA
SCISSOR✂SISTERS
SLAYYYTER
ROSE GRAY

ada

LIVE NATION

CRUSH

FEELD

spot

WDR



THESE ARE TIMES OF TRIBULATION.

Let's not mince words.

The country is now ruled by an authoritarian and his cadre of haters. Those who have always been marginalized and persecuted are now more threatened than we've been in decades. White nationalism and religious extremism rooted in bigotry are now not only on the march, but guiding policy at all levels of government.

Although LGBTQ+ people are already among the first to feel the most harrowing impact of this ferment, the danger is real for any group deemed "the other."

So, what *does* "Pride" mean in such an era?

This is what we set out to ask the creators, executives and other members of the music community in this issue, including **Sir Elton John, Brandi Carlile & Catherine Shepherd, Gigi Perez, Melissa Etheridge/Indigo Girls** and **Trixie Mattel**.

Their answers varied, but there was one constant:
WE WILL NOT *back down from speaking truthfully about who we are.*

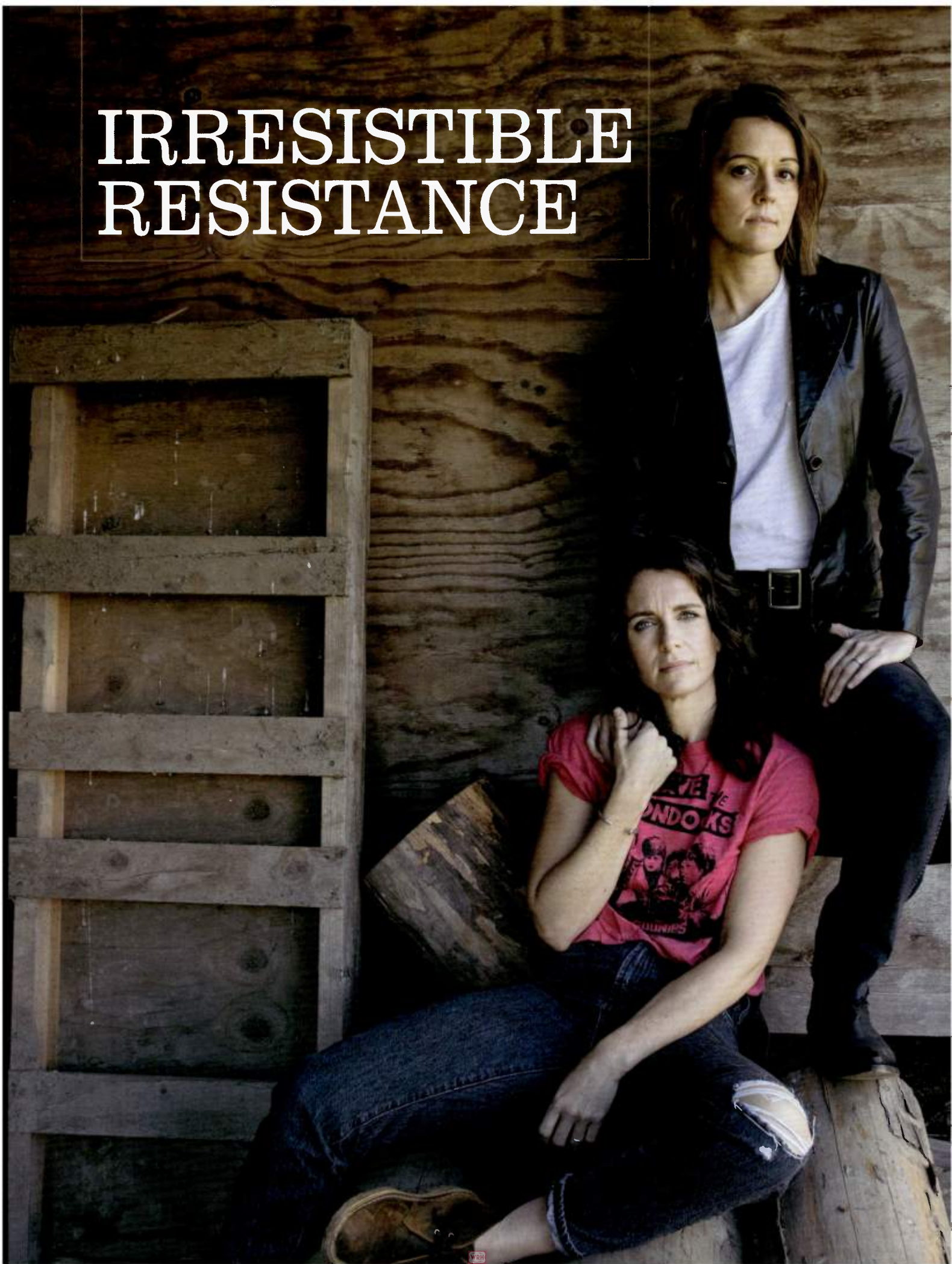
WE WILL NOT *go back in the closet.*

WE WILL NOT *be silent in the face of violence, repression and intimidation.*

The way forward in the midst of this storm is uncertain, but we must find it together. Here's hoping this issue contributes a step, however small, in that direction.

Happy Purposeful Pride.

IRRESISTIBLE RESISTANCE





A conversation with BRANDI CARLILE and CATHERINE SHEPHERD

By David Bender

Singer-songwriter **Brandi Carlile** and her wife, actress-turned-philanthropic executive **Catherine Shepherd**, make up one of the most visible gay couples in pop culture, and their work both together and separately has been hugely influential.

**“Yeah, it’s scary.
Guess what?**

It’s *always* been scary.

And we do it anyway.

And we did it 20, 30 years ago.

It might be scary right now.

**We remember when it was
scary then.**

And we’re still OK.

We’re still here.”

BRANDI CARLILE

Carlile, who gained huge acclaim for her own work, has also been instrumental in assisting **Joni Mitchell**’s triumphant return to the spotlight and, most recently, in orchestrating a collaborative album with **Elton John**, the critically adored *Who Believes in Angels?* (Interscope). Shepherd, who pivoted from acting to a career in philanthropy, spent a decade leading **Paul McCartney**’s foundation; in addition to co-managing Carlile (with the estimable **Jason Owen**) she now runs the artist’s **Looking Out Foundation**. They were married in 2012 and have two daughters. We asked them about music, LGBTQ+ culture, activism and what lies ahead.

PHOTO: ANNIE MARIE MUSSELMAN

BRANDI, let me start by saying two words to you: “Skylar Pigeon.” That song, from *Empty Sky*, Elton John’s first record, was what brought you to his music. I go back that far, too. I was a teenager when the *Elton John* album came out. And I said, Oh, my God, is there more? Then I found that purple album with “Empty Sky” and “Lady Samantha” and all the rest.

BRANDI CARLILE: [Sings] “Come to Val-hala, in your own time.”

We can just do this all in song! But you’ve covered his music and you’ve talked about the influence Elton and Ellen DeGeneres had on you growing up. In 1997, on the night of *Ellen*’s coming-out episode, you said you went to bed and wrote yourself a letter.

“Because little teenage girls, they get funny at night.” Can you tell me about what it was like as a teenager to watch that episode on television? And you’re in a town in Washington of, what, 500 people?

B: Yeah, if there were 500 people, I never saw them in one place at one time. But if you remember that year, there was so much activity on television around that time. There was all the drama around the kiss on *Roseanne* and the *Ellen* episode leading up to the episode that you’re talking about. There were, like, five episodes with all this innuendo, which was huge to everyone at the time. I was experiencing the film *Philadelphia* and the *Indigo Girls* were making cameos everywhere. So the gay ’90s were in full effect.

But the monumental shift that came when Ellen actually said those words; it was so empowering for all of us. Every night before I went to bed, as soon as things got quiet—we didn’t have iPhones or access to any other media—I would listen to my music and I would think, “Yeah, this is me. I’m these people and they are me and we’re one kind of person. And I’m different from everybody else in my



PHOTO: HANSEROTHPHOTO

family, even though I love my family. I’m different.”

And then I’d wake up in the morning, the sun would come up and everything would look normal again. And I’d go, “No, you’re not. You’re a Carlile. You’re cool. Just go to school and forget about all this weird shit going on in Hollywood.” I would get really practical again, because I’m a practical person. So the night of that episode, I wrote myself this one-page letter and hid it in a CD box. It was like, “Listen, you’re going to wake up tomorrow and you’re going to forget that you ever felt this way. But I want there to be evidence... this is definitely who you are. These feelings you’re having are really real. And you need to try and remember that in the light of day, at some point in your life.” I came out really shortly after that.

Just around the corner from the light of day. Do you still have that letter?

B: I was so ashamed of it and so embarrassed about it for so many years. I kept it and couldn’t let it go. Then at some point I destroyed it. Now that I’m an adult, I really have compassion for that little girl. But even my daughter, now she’s 10, and if she hears her voice as a two-year-old or sees baby pictures, she’s embarrassed. And it’s so weird how I wish that I could go back and tell my younger self that everything isn’t embarrassing, because now I would love to have the letter, but I don’t.

CATHERINE SHEPHERD: That was such an adult thing to do at that age.

B: I know. I really was two different people. I was like a 40-year-old woman half the time, and just a completely unhinged adolescent child the rest of the time.

Catherine, I want to ask you about this too, because these



LISTEN TO OUR **SOUNDCLOUD OUTLOUD**
PLAYLIST ON SOUNDCLOUD NOW



WHAT'S NEXT IN
MUSIC IS ON
SOUNDCLOUD



“Non-binary people exist. Queer people exist. They can’t make it not so. We just need to move the culture forward, have huge smiles on our faces and make the resistance irresistible. And stay in.” BRANDI CARLILE

moments were very American moments for us. In some ways, in the U.K., they were happening earlier. You were ahead of us.

C: Yes, slightly. Slightly.

So how were you in growing up? At what point did you have the moment that Brandi just described?

C: I was late in realizing that I was gay. I came out in my sort of mid-20s. So I spent a lot of my adolescence thinking that I was straight. We had cultural moments in the U.K. that I remember being really impacted by, but not really understanding why. I was very interested in watching *Queer As Folk*—a little *too* interested. And we had a very famous soap opera called *Brookside* in the U.K. And they had the first lesbian kiss; I remember being in my early teens and thinking, I’m a little bit more interested in that than I should be. I didn’t have that realization as young as Brandi, but I was undoubtedly influenced by that culture.

But I remember that kiss you just described, Brandi. Remember what happened? She made a joke out of it. She had the kiss, and then she mimed wiping her mouth. Because it couldn’t be a serious moment. It was Ellen who actually made it real.

B: The only thing that was really significant about that kiss was all of the controversy leading up to it, that sensationalized and sexualized it when it wasn’t even a sexual moment. And that’s what’s impactful historically about that kiss, was the outrage before and after. The kiss was nothing, and *that’s* why it’s significant. I don’t really credit anyone for that. I just think that it exposed a really ugly thing in media at that time.

That was the power of television. Let’s talk about the power of music. When I first saw Elton, I didn’t even fully understand what being gay was. But I connected to him. Brandi, I’ve seen



COURTESY OF BRANDI CARLILE AND CATHERINE SHEPHERD

your description of feeling the same way. You connected to him—you felt there was a kindred spirit in his music and persona. Can you talk a little bit about that?

B: Yeah, I mean, you don’t have a language for it at the time. But if I had to guess, I’d say you’re watching somebody shatter gender norms and blur those lines, take risks socially and physically. And you see somebody just going a little bit further in redefining art. And that’s the queer thing to do. That’s why we set standards from this place of marginalization, because we don’t dim our light to assimilate. We already know we don’t have a hope of blending in. So why not push the art as far as it can go?

And if I had to guess why Liberace and Freddie Mercury and Elton—and

even some of these powerhouse lesbians that I have worshipped my entire life—push the envelope around these areas is because they knew. Why not take the art as far as it can go? And why not make that my haircut? Why not make that the clothes I wear? Why not make that the way I present myself vocally? Presenting myself vocally has always been a way for me to connect to lesbian singers—not to marginalize or exclude anyone from that LGBTQIA rainbow of gender-based vocalization.

But I have found that in certain situations, women, even women I really admire, make themselves *smaller* to appeal to men in one way or another. Especially in the ’80s and the ’90s, one of the calling cards of lesbians was that they didn’t shrink their voices to appear more demure or to infantilize themselves. So a powerful voice meant a powerful woman to me. And I don’t know if that’s stereotyping, but that’s how my 15-year-old compass worked.

It seems to me that you had a moment where you said about Joni Mitchell, “Oh, this woman is too heterosexual.” And you

HAPPY PRIDE MONTH

FULLSTOP
MANAGEMENT

“To me, Joni Mitchell represented a form of femininity that was unparalleled in terms of her bravery and her willingness to kind of walk around with a really thin skin and reveal everything to the world in such a profoundly brave way. She didn’t seem to have a filter. And it was so empowering.” CATHERINE SHEPHERD

two had a fight about this. You heard “A Case of You” and said, oh, no, please.

B: Not only was that a deeply heterosexual sentiment to me, but there was no question in my mind that the woman singing that song was straight. I couldn’t identify with it. It wasn’t until I was much older and I realized that, probably due to coming out of the closet in the ‘90s and having to navigate a small town in a single mobile home as a 14-year-old lesbian, I had to narrow my scope of what was safe and what was me. And so it gave me a skewed, stunted perspective on femininity. And it wasn’t until I let myself out of my own boundaries...

Your own closet?

B: Well, kind of, because I came out and cut my hair and stopped eating red meat and did everything I thought a lesbian was supposed to do. And then all I could think about was getting to Burger King and having a Whopper. And all I could think about was how much I hated my hair. And it wasn’t until I in was in my mid-20s that I was like, “I want long hair and I want Whoppers. And I’m also still gay.” I let myself out of my own stereotypes because I let my very small town and I let my limited exposure to the world define what queer was to me. And I’m still untying those knots. So as soon as I let Joni Mitchell’s voice and her existence into my understanding of femininity, it expanded my mind and it made way for my wife and my daughters and my whole life to develop into color.

I’m going to go to you, Catherine. So Brandi heard “Case of You” and found it too heterosexual. And you said, “wait a minute, what about this song?”

C: Yeah, it was actually “All I Want.” It was the line: “I want to renew you.” And then “Little Green.” Because to me, Joni Mitchell represented a form of femininity that was unparalleled in terms of her bravery and her willingness to kind of walk around with a really thin skin and reveal everything to the world in such a profoundly brave way. She didn’t seem to have a filter. And it was so empowering, especially for women that had actually gone through that experience themselves, to have a song that could speak to that was really revolutionary.

Just to explain for people who don’t know the background, say

a bit about “Little Green” and the power behind that song.

C: Yeah, Joni Mitchell was forced to give up her baby for adoption.

B: By circumstance, not by anyone else. By the fact that she had to make a decision, as a mother, that the child could have a happier life with more resources. And she made a really, *really* difficult decision. And she did it in a way that not a lot of people do. And then she released herself from any guilt or shame, and wrote a really powerful, empowering—but sweet—song that just came across to me as one of the toughest and most enduring sentiments I had ever heard in music.

I listened to it last night and cried. Again.

C: It doesn’t undermine the need for a young adolescent gay woman to be able to find herself in music. And it’s interesting, for me, coming out a little bit later, even when I heard women, who I knew were straight, not use the word “he” and replace it with a “she” in the song, like, it was like this morsel of, “Wait, is there a chance that this person is gay? Is she talking to a woman?” Like Sarah McLachlan with “Adia.” Even the chance that there might be a song written from another woman to a woman, whether it was platonic or not, was just hugely important. And like I said, very few and far between. So where you looked for it in vocalization, Brandi, I was definitely mining for it in lyrics from female singer-songwriters.

Brandi, did it click immediately when Catherine explained “Little Green,” or did it take some time?

B: It took time, because it’s not really about “Little Green” or even Joni. It’s about restrictions that I had put on myself and on queer people. If you’ll indulge a metaphor, there’s a street here in Seattle called Broadway. And you used to be able to go to Broadway and all of the little stores would have knickknacks, upside-down triangles and rainbows and all these symbols of queer identity. I would go to Broadway as a teenager and I would buy these things and I would just sit there and have coffee just to watch gay people walk down the street because of the town I told you that I lived in. And then we would have our pride parade and it would be on Broadway. It was the place where all the gay people were relegated to. That was where we were safe, where we partied, where we expressed ourselves. The only



Carlie and Joni Mitchell at the Gershwin Prize salute to Elton John and Bernie Taupin, 2024

PHOTO: TAYLOR HILL/GETTY IMAGES

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on your Pride Month Issue.



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“Elton gets out of bed every morning to help people, especially younger people. He gets on his phone and he starts calling around. He helps people with sobriety, with identity issues, with music-business questions. And with me, Elton explodes my boundaries in every way you can imagine.” BRANDI CARLILE

place I wanted to be in the city of Seattle was Broadway.

And the parade started getting huge and more and more and more important because of these events that you're talking about that were happening on television. And so straight people were coming to our parades and wanting to sponsor us and wanting to march with the dykes on bikes and all the police. The straight police wanted to march with the gay police and the straight firefighters wanted to march with the gay firefighters. And it became culturally diverse and had to expand into the city.

You had to go beyond Broadway.

B: I didn't want to leave Broadway. And sometimes I think there is a kind of queer between your age and say, Chappell Roan, that has witnessed both legs of the evolution. And I am that kind of queer. I had to narrow my vision of what queer was to be accepted and to accept myself. And then I had to go through the pain of expansion when it became more culturally accepted. And I didn't want to leave Broadway. I didn't want to like Joni Mitchell. And I didn't want to date a feminine woman. But my expansion on my orientation is evidenced so beautifully in this younger generation. And it's like your dreams coming true. And I get to be an intermediary of it.

How does Pride feel to you this year? Does it feel different? How do you feel about where we are in 2025 dealing with Pride, particularly in the United States?

B: Well, my birthday is June first. So I'm, like, extra-Pride girl. And Pride has been dangerous, edgy, to me before. It's always been a celebration, but also an act of defiance. And when you wrap defiance in celebration, it's contagious. People want to experience it. And that's why Pride went from Broadway to Main Street. And I think that it may require a little more bravery, and it may even require a little more celebration. But we have to keep showing up, even if we're scared, even if bad things happen, because we've been there before. And we overcame it before. And that's what people my age are for. We're intermediaries. We bring the messaging of the AIDS crisis. We bring pre-marriage equality arguments. We bring the struggle to

the younger generation that's doing such a beautiful job perpetuating [queer life]. But we're saying, "Listen, this is where it came from." And I think that this year, it's a bigger statement and a bigger act of defiance than it's ever been before. But the way we do defiance when you're gay is we make it fun. We make it sexy. We make it irresistible because gay people make profound changes in the culture through art. And Pride this year is important. And that's all I'll say about it. It's important, but we don't even know how to do important seriously.

We only know how to make it fun. And that's not resistible.

C: It's interesting that the word "resist" is in the word "irresistible."

I lived through a lot of this. I lived through the AIDS crisis. I don't remember Stonewall contemporaneously, but I was alive for it. This feels different to me. Catherine, as you're looking at this and living in America, are you seeing a concern, a reaction?

C: Yeah. I mean, I would really just echo Brandi's sentiments. I couldn't say it better myself. I think that it does feel different.

It feels like there's been a swelling happening between last year and this year. And like you, David, I've been at Pride parades where I've almost felt a sense of shame and embarrassment about being seen, but never scared. I think that a lot of people this year are feeling genuinely afraid. And I think that gives us even more of a reason to show up. Like Brandi said, it feels more profound than ever that we celebrate pride in that irresistible way.


B: And that's what people our age are for. Yeah, it's scary. Guess what? It's *always* been scary. And we do it anyway. And we did it 20, 30 years ago. It might be scary right now. We remember when it was scary then. And we're still OK. We're still here.

So how do we build bridges, not walls—as Elton says—with people who've never gone through this? And by the way, in my lifetime, this is not just our community, it's everybody. It's happening for Black people. God knows it's happening for Latinos. What do we do, as activists?



PHOTO: KEVIN MAZUR/GETTY IMAGES

Carlile, Elton John and David Furnish



**MUSIC IS LOUDER WHEN EVERYONE IS HEARD.
LOVE IS BRIGHTER WHEN EVERYONE IS SEEN.
HAPPY PRIDE MONTH.**

HYBE AMERICA

“You’re watching somebody shatter gender norms and blur those lines, take risks socially and physically. And you see somebody just going a little bit further in redefining art. And that’s the queer thing to do. That’s why we set standards from this place of marginalization, because we don’t dim our light to assimilate.” BRANDI CARLILE

B: How do we address and galvanize and strengthen young people? By recalling our experience and showing that we’ve been picked on many times. And we’ve been denied basic civil and human rights in this country many times. And then erasing our language or taking away little nuanced rights and turning screws and trying to poke holes in us—it’s so futile, because we’re standing here and we’re huge. We’re so bright. And they don’t want us gone. They need us. They need our art and our music and the things that we create. They want our vibrancy. They’re jealous of it. They want to celebrate the way we celebrate. They want the joy that we use as an act of defiance. And taking away our language is just like standing in our light and taking our shadow. It’s temporary. Eventually they’re going to have to move. And guess what? We never went anywhere.

So, we know we’re gay. We know what to call each other. We exist. Trans people exist. Non-binary people exist. Queer people exist. They can’t make it not so. We just need to move the culture forward, have huge smiles on our faces and make the resistance irresistible. And stay in.

You just gave me my pull quote. Thank you for that.

B: It’s not just mine. There’s a bunch of people using that. And I think it started with [artist-photographer] Alex Hedison and [author-podcaster] Glennon Doyle. They were talking about “less empire, more community” as well, how resistance as a concept makes the thing you’re resisting the important subject. And if you can make the resistance irresistible, that’s how you’re going to move the culture forward.

It’s wonderful that activism brought you together. I want to tell that story for people who don’t know it.



PHOTO: YVONNE MURRAY

B: She was running Paul McCartney’s charity organization. She read about a campaign I was running in Seattle in the paper and reached out.

And the campaign, what was it for?

C: It was called **Fight the Fear Campaign**, teaching at-risk women and communities self-defense.

B: Particularly LGBTQ+ people, because there was a violent crime committed against an LGBTQ+ couple. And so we wanted to create an organization that would teach self-defense to vulnerable people, whether they were homeless in youth shelters or battered-women’s shelters, hearing- and vision-impaired people, and LGBTQ+ people who are inherently at risk for many reasons. So Cath read about that and reached out. That’s how we met.

From across the pond. And what year was that?

C: 2009. Then we met backstage in New York after corresponding for maybe a year.

B: But before we met, while we were corresponding, I thought Catherine was McCartney’s age. So I thought I was talking to a woman in her seventies. I did not know that she was exactly my age or anything about her until we met backstage. And it was shocking.

Brandi, we met once for 30 seconds backstage at Dodger Stadium, where I called out your name and said, “Thank you for Joni.” That’s the only time we’ve ever met.

B: I love your love for Joni.

So let me ask you about Elton, because in the same way now, you’ve helped him through a lot and helped get that album finished. I also know that what came out of it was amazing.

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LEAD WITH LOVE

DIVERSITY HAS ALWAYS BEEN AT THE HEART OF WHAT WE DO AT GRANDERSON DES ROCHERS, LLP. AS A FIRM REPRESENTING A BROAD SPECTRUM OF TALENTS FROM ALL WALKS OF LIFE, WE ARE CONTINUALLY INSPIRED BY THE PASSION, CREATIVITY, AND ARTISTRY OF THOSE WE SERVE. EVEN IN THESE UNCERTAIN TIMES, WE CONTINUE TO CHAMPION INCLUSION AND REPRESENTATION. WE PROUDLY STAND WITH THE LGBTQ+ COMMUNITY AND ALL ARTISTS WHOSE VOICES DESERVE TO BE HEARD. WISHING EVERYONE A SAFE AND JOYFUL PRIDE MONTH, FROM ALL OF US AT GDR.



“I was in a store the other day, and I asked a question about where something was. And this really sweet person was helping me. And she said, ‘Oh, perhaps you would like to buy this for your husband.’ I had that moment where I thought, ‘Do I say something? Do I not?’ But before I could even get the words out, my seven-year-old said, ‘She has a wife. I have a mommy and a mama,’ and that is the evidence of what we’ve built.” CATHERINE SHEPHERD

And he and I talked about “Swing for the Fences.” You have a song that couldn’t be more anthemic right now. Can you talk about the song?

B: Yeah. And it was based on a mandate from Elton. I don’t feel that I’ve helped Elton a lot. I feel that Elton gets out of bed every morning to help people, especially younger people. He gets on his phone and he starts calling around.

He helps people with sobriety, with identity issues, with music-business questions. And with me, Elton explodes my boundaries in every way you can imagine. He wanted me to write a really right-down-the-middle rock & roll song that was positive, anthemic and uplifting for everyone.

And of course, when the greatest gay icon of all time asks you to write a song that’s uplifting, it was hard for me to think outside of the scope of, “Yeah, but you took me out of myself as a 12-, 13-year-old girl. I want to do that with you. Let’s go lift some people up.” And so it was Elton’s mandate that made me write that song. Elton is my great mentor and my great helper and a really important, paternal force in my life.

Well, the song does just that. I’m so struck by the fact that it was Brandi’s activism that caught your attention, Catherine, and that brought you together. And that is a bond that is as profound as anything.

B: If you want to further the metaphor, my activism was rudderless until I met Catherine.

C: You had some firm beliefs.

B: And until I met Catherine, I didn’t like Joni Mitchell, and my activism wasn’t dialed in.

You’re raising your girls right now, and they’re seeing the future through their present. What are they seeing, and what do you hope that they’re going to see through your eyes? Obviously,

they’ve gotten to know Elton’s and David’s boys, too. Can you talk about that?

B: I mean, they’re getting to see people accept their mothers overwhelmingly. They’re seeing the good side of fame and art. They’re seeing the acceptance. They’re obviously not reading the criticism or taking in any negative messaging. And what’s really fun for me is,

back to Elton and David and the boys—those two boys, they’re so handsome and so cool. As a queer person, when I’m around them, my inner 11-year-old feels intimidated by them, because they look like the boys that caused us a hard time in school. But when they come downstairs, and they’ve got their pride gear on, they’re a living representation of how masculinity is progressing in the right direction, and how the general understanding of what queer people are holistically is changing, despite what you think, despite what’s in the media.

C: They’re evidence of it.

B: They’re evidence of it, and they influence our girls. And when our girls are around Elton and David and their cool sons, our girls’ messaging is that our moms are cool, our dads are cool.

C: And they’re so proud of it. I was in a store the other day, and I asked a question about where something was. And this really sweet person was helping me. And she said, “Oh, perhaps you would like to buy this for your husband.” I had that moment where I thought, “Do I say something? Do I not?” But before I could even get the words out, my seven-year-old said, “She has a wife. I have a mommy and a mama,” and that is the evidence of what we’ve built.

B: We are overwhelmed with gratitude.

I am so grateful for being here right now with the two of you. Please enjoy being at home with your girls and getting some rest. Well deserved. Happy Pride to you.

BOTH: Happy Pride to you, David. •



COURTESY OF BRANDI CARLILE AND CATHERINE SHEPHERD



SCAN TO DONATE

Elton John and Brandi Carlile join forces to ***Make Music Mean More.***

Looking Out Foundation is raising vital funds to support the Elton John AIDS Foundation's mission to drive progress in the global HIV response and ensure compassionate care reaches those who need it most.

Photo credit: Peggy Sirota



Trixie Mattel

**FIERCELY
FORWARD
(AND IN
HIGH
HEELS)**

BY REATH NEILSON



Coachella, 2025 (courtesy of Coachella)

Trixie Mattel does not do mince. Don't mess with her, baby, because she gives far better than she gets.

With a tongue as sharp as a stiletto and a wit quicker than her fiercest wig flip, Trixie's the spiritual heiress to the legendary drag queens of Stonewall—Marsha P. Johnson and Sylvia Rivera. Like them, she's meeting the moment with verbal bricks aimed squarely at a homophobic police state. Righteous, regal, and royally pissed, Trixie Mattel is our Queen for this day.

Trixie cannonballed into the pop-cultural mainstream in 2015, when she competed on the seventh season of *RuPaul's Drag Race* at just 24 years old, finishing in sixth place. Not winning, though, didn't set her back on her heels. If anything, in the decade since, it's served as rocket fuel for her career that's now garnered an international following.

She's created podcasts, web series, TV shows and an immersive DJ set. She's launched a cosmetics company, starred in a Netflix documentary (*Trixie Mattel: Moving Parts*) and written a bestselling book, *Trixie and Katya's Guide to Modern Womanhood*, with longtime collaborator Katya Zamolodchikova. The first two of her four studio albums, *Two Birds* (2017) and *One Stone* (2018), both entered the Top 20 on the Folk Albums chart. From the Emmys to the Webbies, from the GLAAD Media Awards to the Television Critics' Association Awards, she's been nominated nine times, and taken home 12 statues. She has a devoted YouTube audience of 2.3 million and a powder-pink hotel that she designed and renovated herself, called Trixie Motel. Heavy is the head that wears the tiara. Literally: She's done all of this and more in a 10-pound wig, including winning *RuPaul's Drag Race All-Stars* in 2018.

During a break in the shooting of her web series with Katya, *The Bald and the Beautiful*, Trixie answered our questions about Solid Pink Disco, her blush-colored DJ tour, and what Pride looks like in 2025. She was angry, grateful, hopeful, joyful and hilarious.

Thank you, Trixie for speaking with HITS.

Hello. Sorry, I'm in drag.

That's okay, I wish I was too.

We'll let it slide this time.

Thank you. Let me ask you about a scene in your documentary. A young fan tells you about how your example helped him to accept himself, even to find pride in his sexuality. What's it like to hear something like that?

This is a thing to be grateful for, and people say things like that to me a lot. You know, often how people feel about Trixie has very little to do with me. It mainly has to do with them and what time in their life they discovered Trixie. Usually, it's around the time when they really need it. I'm used to hearing, "When I was sick in the hospital, I watched you all the time," or "Me and my roommate who *died* used to listen to *The Bald and the Beautiful*."

It's a blessing and a curse when people are regularly saying, "Something horrible happened to me, so I thought of you." But that usually means that I was accidentally very present for someone I didn't even know, which is the privilege of having an audience, right? You don't know what's going on in their lives and it takes a lot of vulnerability to just blurt out something very personal to a stranger.

How do you view Pride in 2025?

Lately, I've been thinking about the people who fought Don't Ask, Don't Tell and Prop 8—that era of activism. Those people must be having the worst kind of déjà vu while watching all these things being snatched away. They're like, "Didn't we do this? Didn't the gay '90s happen? Didn't *Ellen* kiss someone on TV already? Did *Will and Grace* happen? Didn't we do this?" It's a little like that *Jasmine Masters* meme where she's like, "Again? A-fucking-gain. Nothing new, nothing's changed."

That's kind of what I feel like. Every year, by Pride, I'm usually happy and blessed. For drag queens, it's like our Christmas, because every day is a party and we're the guest of honor. In some ways though, I feel like I don't know what the future of Pride is anymore, which scares me. Between the administration that we're under and Gen Z who's [now] conservative? That's fun...

I don't know what happens now. We used to have the privilege of complaining about a rainbow suit at Target, and now we won't even have *that* to complain about, because all these brands who allegedly loved us for four years surely did fucking peace out.

I encourage everybody to google the major companies who've donated money to the inauguration of Donald Trump. It is shocking. Your little besties where you get your coffee, your besties where you get stoned and buy groceries, that company that makes your phone... all of these people that used to be at Pride waving a flag with you are not doing that now. They're giving money to people who don't want you to succeed. It goes to show you why all these previous Prides were so critical of the corporate dollar. We're your poster child—until we're not. It's fucked up.

America is so flop. We grew up with all this propaganda telling us we live in the greatest country in the world. Not really. Not fucking really.

But you know, Pride, yay!

What Pride is *actually* about is celebrating the uphill battle of getting straight people off our back. Being gay is not difficult until straight people make it difficult. If you grew up on an island and you were gay, and you didn't know anything about homophobia or shame, you would just *be* gay. You wouldn't even think about it. Pride really is positive, but at the end of the day it's about celebrat-

ing that you've overcome the trauma that is wrought upon you by other people. This is a hard year for Pride. Maybe I'm not the one to talk to, I don't know...

I think you're the perfect one to talk to, especially since your Solid Pink Disco tour is finishing up during Pride. Your DJ set at Coachella was a sensation and introduced you to a lot of new fans. How important has Team Trixie—your agents, your management, your publicists—been in helping you evolve musically?

I'm probably everybody's least favorite client because I'm incredibly demanding. I want everything to go as well as possible. With Solid Pink Disco, we're really trying to pin down a cloud. We're trying to get a bunch of people to dress in head-to-toe costumes and show up to a venue where there are live performances. It's basically a mini-festival that travels every night. Everything—from getting me on a plane to making sure the venue has the right equipment—gets handled by managers, producers and agents. If that stuff was up to me, I think this tour would only go as far as Van Nuys, California.

You've already done 12 cities with the Solid Pink Disco tour, and you're just starting the last leg. In fact, by the time this goes to print, you'll be finished, right?

We only have four [shows] left! We're going to Salt Shed in Chicago, The Pinnacle in Nashville, First Avenue in Minneapolis, and then the final one is the week of WorldPride in D.C. We've been everywhere. We've been to Australia, Canada and all over America. Some of those venues, I couldn't even believe.

Coachella, 2025 (courtesy of Coachella)



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2025!

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ENTERTAINMENT AND MEDIA LAWYERS

I remember going to Minneapolis to see bands there because I'm from Wisconsin. It's crazy to play in venues that you've seen bands in yourself. It's very *Black Mirror*, but it's really fun.

And the show is joyous, it's a joy bomb, it's escapism in a little pink bottle. It's more about the audience than me. I love DJing and creating the sounds in real time. But for every picture the guests take of me, they take 20 of themselves, so it's really about the guest experience. They go to the event feeling like the star they are. Look, I know there are straight people there, but we don't talk about it, because they're dressed up. Everybody's gay. Everybody's doing gay shit. That's Solid Pink Disco!

Your team at UTA, Zoe Williamson and Nikos Kazoleas, told us they particularly love championing you because of the unique way you're able to bring drag and music together. What does that collage mean for you?

I play guitar and I write music and sing and stuff, but something I love about DJing is that it feels so much more like the creative process of drag. Part of what I did in drag was to create mixes and mashups and steal clips from movies. In a way, it's like I was flirting with DJing for years. What I love about it is that you're telling a story, you're communicating, you're speaking a language. It's a very interesting form of mass communication. The music I play tells people what kind of event we're having, what they're meant to be feeling, and [it] invites them to do their own drag show. I mean it is drag, they're lip-syncing and twirling and have wigs on.

Drag queens, we work in collage. We're like, "I'm part this pop artist, this comedian, this movie, this TV show." Something I love about doing Solid Pink Disco is that it's very autobiographical. You can hear artists, movies, cartoons—all kinds of things I love, coming together. I'm telling a story up there.

It reminds me of when I was younger. I used to cut things out of magazines, glue things together, make collages, you know. I was always trying to make a woman. I'd cut out this woman's face, that woman's boobs and this woman's hair. It feels like that. I'm using a beat from one thing, with another phrase from a cartoon, and a musical element from an '80s track. I'm building something that's original every night.

[Since] I play everything completely live, there's also mistakes, like the other night. Obviously, I wear these huge fake boobs, and when I reached over the decks to grab my camera, my boobs stopped the music. But that's live DJing, when your big fake breast rests on the deck and it stops spinning, [all you can say is,] "Oops, sorry!" If you like pre-taped performances though, there are plenty of drag queens I can recommend.

Any final thoughts about Pride?

I want to leave people with this message: gay bars *really* fucking matter. We had to close the oldest gay bar in Wisconsin this year. Go get a drink at a gay bar. I don't care if you buy it and pour it out, just go support the local gay facilities. These are your churches, your temples, your chapels, your community meeting areas. This is where our culture has developed and rebirthed itself, over and over again, for decades. This is where pop stars get their best ideas. This is where fashion icons are born. This is where comedians go with their gay friends to learn how to have a quick wit. Gay bars are the fountain of creativity, so go support them. Just get a *real* drink, because bartenders don't like making anything complicated. ■



“For drag queens, Pride is like our Christmas because every day is a party and we’re the guest of honor... I feel like I don’t know what the future of Pride is anymore, and that scares me.”

good
world.

gay
summer.

Good World^{GW}



GIGI PEREZ HAS THE WIND AT HER BACK

Island singer-songwriter **Gigi Perez** has enjoyed huge streaming success with her “Sailor Song,” which has earned more than 1 billion worldwide streams on **Spotify**. The New Jersey-born, Florida-raised artist’s work reflects the struggles she experienced growing up queer in a conservative religious environment. She began writing songs as a teen, shortly before she began coming out to friends, and for a time attended **Berklee College of Music**; her subsequent uploads to **SoundCloud** and **TikTok** spawned a record deal and the beginnings of a global following. As her remarks below underscore, she experienced firsthand how toxic religious repression can be—and how freedom lies in fearless self-expression.



Perez with Island co-bosses Imran Majid and Justin Eshak and the label's PJ Walshe

"It has taken years to break away from the shame and conditioning I experienced. I'm grateful now to be on the other side and experience a beautiful honest life and help others look to their best chance at life as well."

You were just 15 and still figuring things out about yourself when the Supreme Court legalized same-sex marriage. You were at a megachurch conference that day. What do you remember feeling in that moment?

I remember feeling confusion and fear. At this point, I think I was still in denial and struggling to admit it to myself. I did not feel safe, to be honest. Seeing and hearing tens of thousands of people around me lifting their hands in prayer against the "attack and perversion of marriage," when I was suppressing my emotions, can only be explained as the feeling of not being able to breathe. That same year, I attended a "music worship camp" right after I came out to myself. The whole week at the camp, I was very conflicted between my understanding of the religion I grew up with, my earnest relationship with God, and my sexuality.

It has taken years to break away from the shame and conditioning I experienced. I'm grateful now to be on the other side and experience a beautiful honest life and help others look to their best chance at life as well.

Not long after that, you started sharing more openly about yourself. That journey is different for everyone. What was it like for you?

I started to tell my close friends [when I was] around 16, and that continued throughout high school. It was still very much a secret. By senior year of high school, I felt much more comfortable and confident. A lot of that came from having great support from my best friends. I became excited for the possibilities of my life. At some point in my senior year, it became an open secret, and I loved that. I didn't really tell my parents until I was going through my first break-up. They are my biggest supporters in every aspect of my life, including accepting who I love. Back then, it was a big struggle in my relationship with them, and they needed to experience life differently and separately from the church before they could come back to reality. I'm blessed that they did. Because of that, I believe in changing hearts through education and giving relationships room to grow and change.

You've said that Hayley Kiyoko and Troye Sivan "literally saved my life." Can you describe what it felt like to hear "Girls Like Girls" for the first time?

When I found "Girls Like Girls," it was the only [video] I watched. The song itself is one of the greatest pop songs of all time, and it was the message that I needed to hear. Stating "girls like girls like boys do" and putting it in the simplest way got through my head full of fear, and it really did save my life. I didn't have awareness of lesbian media that wasn't highly sexualized, so it was the first glimpse I saw that mirrored exactly how I felt: the innocence and intensity, yet simplicity of liking girls. Hayley really paved the way, and I'm here sharing the music I am [making] today because she shared her music with the world. Luckily, it fell into the view of a very scared young girl who knew what she felt but didn't have the courage to speak up yet. So, thank you, Hayley, for being a voice to so many young girls and my inner teenager. [Troye Sivan's] *Blue Neighborhood* was the same thing for me. It went double platinum privately in my headphones and was the safe space I needed during those years.



"It's OUR month! We've gotta celebrate! I saw something about how queer joy is an act of rebellion in itself. Our trans brothers and sisters are being denied the right to exist by a vile administration that hides behind weaponizing Christianity to fit a sick and poisonous ideology called Christian Nationalism."

Have you been able to tell Hayley Kiyoko or Troye Sivan how much their music affected you? Conversely, after the phenomenal impact of "Sailor Song," have queer kids shared how much your music has affected them?

It's unbelievable to think about the kid I was back then and having the privilege of impacting the young LGBTQ community now. As I've grown up, I've been privileged that my sexuality has become second nature to me. I've been able to spend time just enjoying being who I was as a person and enjoying the life I've built. "Sailor Song" and the community that's been built around the music has given me the gift of looking back in the mirror and seeing the inner teenager inside of me. I did get to tell Hayley last Pride month, pre-"Sailor Song!" It was such crazy timing. She found this song off my first EP last Pride, "Kill for You." and we bonded over the enjoyment of each other's music.

The biggest thing for me is putting into perspective how cared for the music is. Nothing about the engagement with my music feels passive. The thing that gets me is the intense degree to which it has impacted individual listeners. It's palpable from the DMs, to watching videos of people breaking down and dissecting the album, to experiencing the songs with them in concert. It's in the air. And I carry that feeling with me as I continue to share my story.

What impact does the business of music have on you as an artist?

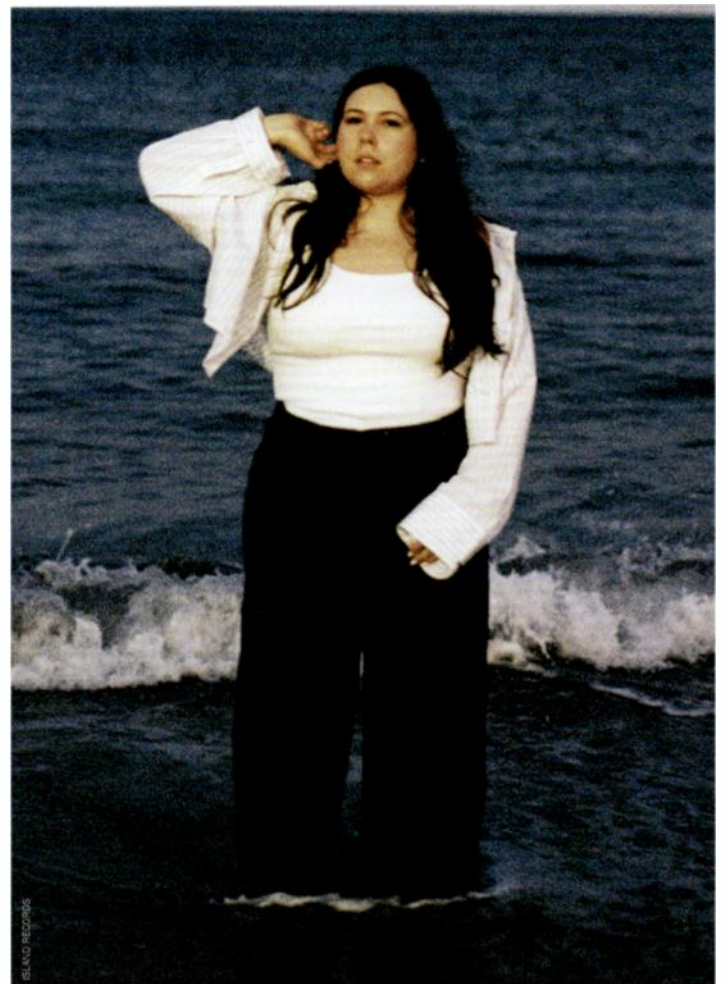
I've been writing songs for ten years and started putting music out on SoundCloud when I was 15. Here and there I had singles coming out, I was touring, not touring, putting the first project out, dropped by the label, then finally jumping back into it all. When I turned twenty, my life turned upside down when I lost my sister.

Six months later, I met the music business. I learned the language quickly and the unfortunate sides of it as well. I think it's important as an artist to be fully aware of your business and finances and to be in the driver's seat for all decisions that will ultimately shape the quality of life you will have as an artist and in turn, a person.

Being with the right people has been integral to my growth. I'm grateful to know that I stand in partnerships that I'm proud to be a part of. I think so much of how I carry myself today is because of the knowledge I gathered during my first few years in the industry. Every single failure or situation that was not in my favor was a nugget of knowledge that allowed me to know better, do better and use discernment in my life as a person and artist.

Finally, in these uncertain times, how important is it to recognize Pride Month? Normally, it's called a "celebration." Does it feel different to you this year?

It's OUR month! We've gotta celebrate! I saw something about how queer joy is an act of rebellion in itself. Our trans brothers and sisters are being denied the right to exist by a vile administration that hides behind weaponizing Christianity to fit a sick and poisonous ideology called Christian Nationalism. The reality right now is very scary and it's real, but we are called to stand side by side and be here. It's so important to celebrate who we are and be loud as fuck, because we are not going anywhere. ■





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HAPPY PRIDE MONTH 2025!

biz pride

Aaron Rosenberg, Robert Minzner:

"LAVENDER" LAWYERS

BY ELIZABETH DAUBEL

L.A.-based entertainment-law firm **Myman Greenspan Fox Rosenberg Mobasser Younger & Light LLP** is a rare legal entity where several LGBTQ+ senior attorneys are part of the leadership team. Four of the firm's principal players—including partners **Aaron Rosenberg** and **Robert Minzner**, as well as associates **Steven Arnst** and **Jacob Nober**—identify as LGBTQ+, and their powerhouse roster of queer artists and allies includes **RuPaul**, **Ariana Grande**, **Jennifer Lopez**, **John Legend**, **Meghan Trainor**, **Bebe Rexha**, **Jason Derulo** and **Tate McRae**, among others.

Navigating the complex and high-stakes landscapes of brand partnerships, record deals, international touring, movie contracts, ownership rights and more for any artist is tricky business. Albeit now in 2025, when the Resolute desk has become a launch pad to deploy executive orders targeting

and scapegoating members of the LGBTQ+ community, it's become necessary for attorneys like Rosenberg and Minzner at Myman Greenspan to serve as sword, shield and strategist for their clients.

Harvard-educated Rosenberg is the youngest partner in the firm's history, and he led the legal team overseeing Tate McRae's rise to stardom, including her #1 **RCA** album *So Close to What*. He also played a key role in Ariana Grande's transition from global pop star to Oscar-nominated actress, overseeing all legal aspects of *Wicked*, as well as managing her chart-topping **Republic** album *eternal sunshine*. Rosenberg's other major accomplishments include **Troye Sivan's** *Sweat* tour with **Charli xcx** and deals with **Prada** and **The Gap**, **JLo's** recording and publishing deal with **BMG** and **John Legend's** **Pfizer** campaign, among others. Rosenberg is also



AARON ROSENBERG



ROBERT MINZNER

“Because of the climate that we’re currently in, everybody feels and picks up on what’s happening, but in this moment you can’t know exactly what the chilling effect will be.”—Robert Minzner

active on the boards the Anti-Defamation League and the Human Rights Campaign.

Partner Robert Minzner’s work with eight-time Emmy winner RuPaul has included negotiating deals with Maybelline, Cheez-It and Build-A-Bear, along with the paperback release of RuPaul’s recent book, *The House of Hidden Meanings*, and the launch of his online book marketplace Allstora. Additionally, Minzner oversaw Emmy-nominated songwriter-producer Alex Seaver (aka Mako)’s deal to executive produce the new *Arcane Season 2* soundtrack, as well as Role Model’s critically acclaimed Interscope album *Kansas Anymore (The Longest Goodbye)*, sold-out North American headline tour, publishing deal with Kobalt and Bravado merchandise agreement.

With Pride Month upon us, *HITS* checked in with both Rosenberg and Minzner for their perspective on Pride in 2025.

What, if anything, feels different to you about Pride this year?

AR: On the business side, support seems to have been cut back. While we might not necessarily see it in terms of making deals on the artist side, you get a sense of it out in queer spaces. On the human side, there’s a real sense that our brothers and sisters in the trans community are being singled out and targeted. To know the history of the trans community is to know that targeting this highly vulnerable community—especially our brothers and sisters of color—is a death sentence. These ancient tropes like, “they’re coming for your children” are a sick and twisted call to arms. Thankfully, you’re seeing artists speak out in defense of the trans community in a powerful way.

Has there been any backlash towards artists who speak out in support of the transgender community?

AR: Artists like Ariana, Troye Sivan and Justin Tranter have been very vocal in their support of the transgender community, and we have clients like RuPaul, Jennifer Lopez and Frankie Grande appearing at World Pride in Washington, D.C., this year because it’s important to them to be seen as allies. I can tell you that artists who have reaffirmed their commitment as allies aren’t experiencing any sort of downturn in streams or ticket sales. If anything, we’re seeing advocacy leading to an even stronger connection to the fan base.

Same question to you, Robert. Does Pride feel different to you this year?

RM: It does, because of the climate that we’re currently in and the state of the world. Everybody feels and picks up on what’s happening, but in this moment you can’t know exactly what the chilling effect will be.

Aaron, you refer to Myman Greenspan as “the lavender law firm.” What does that mean to you?

AR: When you are part of a group that hasn’t had an equal level of visibility, that has been oppressed and suppressed, and yet has been so instrumental in the history of popular music in the culture, it’s extra-important to feel like you see representation in the team around you. Coming up as a young lawyer, I can’t recall meeting any visible, out attorneys.

Are you hearing from your clients that there’s a need to be more visible?

AR: In the aftermath of the 2024 election, there isn’t yet the sense in the artist community of being petrified. We’re also not going to wait for this to blow over. We’ve been through this before. We’ve been through the AIDS crisis, in the ’80s, and the fight for marriage equality. We’re not going to take this, and neither are our allies.

Speaking of visibility, it’s hard to think of any single artist who’s been more visible than RuPaul over the years.

RM: I think that there are very few people who have tangibly changed our culture. Madonna has done that. Ru has done that.

Does someone like RuPaul, at his level of success, feel any backlash from this politically negative undercurrent?

RM: If you’re going to do business with RuPaul, you’re going to do business with a Black, gay drag queen, and that’s it. There will always be trolls who don’t like that he and the show *RuPaul’s Drag Race* have been as globally successful as they have been for so long. Trolls may not like it, but it doesn’t take away from the fact that RuPaul has won the most Emmys of any Black artist of all time—and the most Emmys for a host of a reality or competition program in television history. ■

“When you are part of a group that hasn’t had an equal level of visibility, and yet has been so instrumental in the history of popular music in the culture, it’s extra-important to feel like you see representation in the team around you.”—Aaron Rosenberg

TRANS ACROSS AMERICA

By Deborah Sprague and Reath Neilson



Donald Trump wants to erase transgender identity in America. **Full stop.**

Seven months ago, shortly after declaring he'd won a sweeping mandate from the American people following his "landslide" election victory (fact-free check: it was one of the narrowest margins in presidential election history), Trump gave the keynote address at **Turning Point USA's "AmericaFest"** conference in Phoenix, AZ.

The self-proclaimed "Dictator on Day One" smirkingly made this pledge about his plans for trans people come Jan. 20: "We're going to stop the transgender lunacy. Under the Trump Administration, it will be the official policy of the United States government that there are only two genders: male and female. Doesn't sound too complicated, does it?"

From Trump's point of view, it was just that simple-minded. No one in attendance at his gathering of ultra-conservative acolytes was surprised by his pledge. Demonizing trans people almost certainly helped provide Trump with his narrow margin of victory in the key

swing states. For weeks leading up to the election, voters were inundated with television commercials warning that if you didn't vote for Trump, your child would go to school in the morning as your son and return home that afternoon as your daughter.

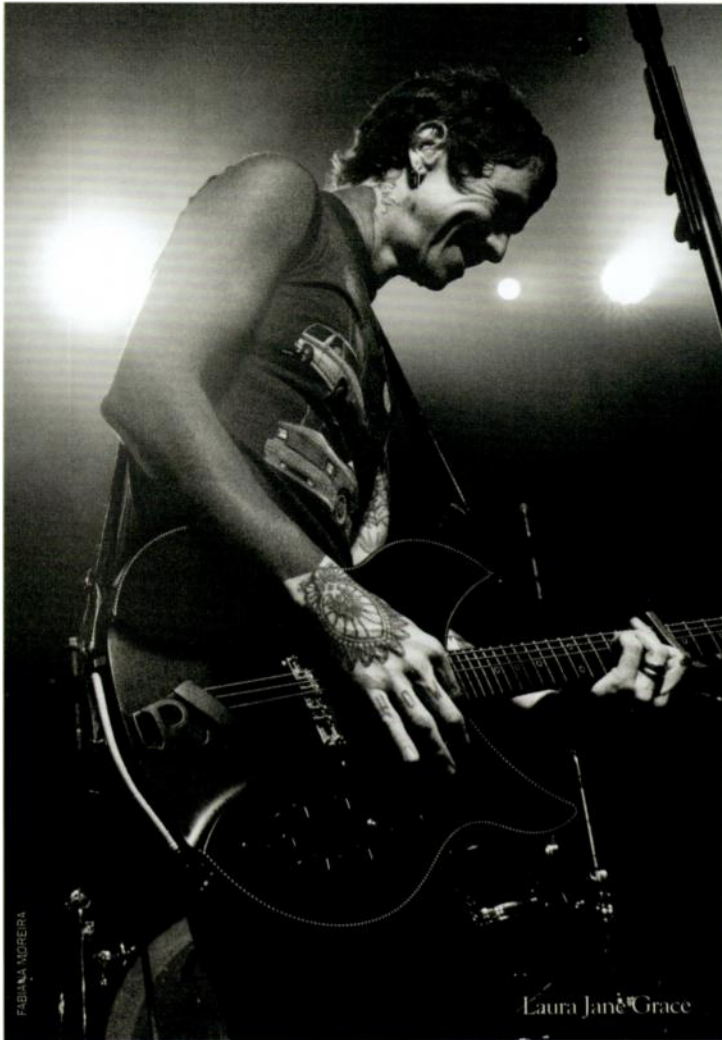
On January 20, Trump kept his "uncomplicated" promise. He signed a presidential Executive Order that effectively

rendered transgender people as non-human: "It is the policy of the United States to recognize two sexes, male and female." He directed the Executive Branch to "enforce all sex-protective laws to promote this reality."

During Trump's first term, his bluster rarely translated into policy. The difference this time was that from Day One, Trump had a playbook on how to wield his Sharpie as an effective weapon, rather than just as Oval Office theater. Now his signature was effectively signing death warrants to queer immigrants, and everybody who'd criticized him in any way.

The words of the Executive Order about gender were lifted almost verbatim from *Project 2025*, a 927-page document that candidate Trump repeatedly claimed he knew nothing about.





"There's a real chokehold on education in Florida now, and it's hard to see how that's going to make anything better," says Against Me! singer Laura Jane Grace. "I felt really strange when I was last there a year ago driving across the state line and reading the 'Welcome to the Free State of Florida' sign that's been put up. So gross."

Given its length, this is a highly plausible claim. However, Trump's appointees *had* read it. In fact, **Russell Vought**, now Director of the Office of Management and Budget, was the author of *Project 2025*. In his Cabinet-level position, Vought is implementing its provisions to the letter, no matter how flagrantly they violate the U.S. constitution.

Project 2025 contains numerous references to the elimination of gender heterodoxy. It makes plain that when fully implemented, it will effectively eradicate the very idea of transgender people from American society. The Administration's attacks on diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) have already demonstrated just how far these true believers are prepared to go to Make America Straight Again.

Under Trump's despotic order, if a teacher or university professor even acknowledges gender non-conformity in an academic setting, they could be required to register as sex-offenders for promoting "transgender ideology."

A subsequent Executive Order, "Defending Women from Gender Ideology," is even more insidious, in that it pits trans people against cisgender women. The directive dictates that agencies "take all necessary steps" to strike any mention of trans identity from official government documents and records.

Every day these draconian policies are being implemented,

they are causing real and present danger to trans Americans. For instance, the Department of Veterans Affairs announced that it would no longer provide gender affirming care to trans veterans.

Civilians are not exempt either. Under Trump's proposed "Big, Beautiful Bill," (his words) the Federal Budget would require Medicare and Medicaid providers to cease care for their trans patients, causing life-threatening harm to those who are currently receiving it. The bigotry is in the details: once a patient begins to biologically transition, the administration of hormone replacement therapy (HRT) is a medical necessity and cannot be interrupted. Yet, that same HRT will still remain available to cisgender people who require it for other medical reasons.

The tentacles of *Project 2025* have extended into Congress and are quickly reaching out to state and local governments. One recently introduced federal policy proposal, the Interstate Obscenity Definition Act sponsored by Utah Senator **Mike Lee**, calls trans people a threat to children and equates transitioning to pornography. Lawmakers in Texas are seeking to make the act of transitioning itself a crime, calling it "gender identity fraud."

The blurring of traditional gender roles has been a fact of life in American popular music since **Little Richard** shouted



"I'm going to try to stay in the moment," Vandoliers singer Jenni Rose told *Rolling Stone*. "In the last few years, I have always thought about this light emitting from my chest. I've been behind a mask, and I could still feel that light, and I could still share it with people, but now it is going to be, like, really fucking bright."

his first "whop-bop-a-loo-bop-a-whop-bam-boom," in 1956's "Tutti Frutti." **David Bowie**, **Prince**, **Little Richard**, hell, even **Twisted Sister** proved that their onstage fluidity was a feature, not a bug. When **The Kinks** sang, "I'm a man and so is Lola," and **Lou Reed** took his "Walk on the Wild Side," the lyrics were broadsides against traditional sexual mores. The problem for the self-proclaimed protectors of America's children was that these songs were wildly popular among the young people they were trying to "protect."

Still, it was only three years ago that the first openly trans artists reached #1 (**Kim Petras** and **Sam Smith** with their 2022 hit, "Unholy"). This year, Smith found their artistic success offers them no protection in the face of growing transphobia, not only in the United States but around the world.

After the U.K. Supreme Court ruled against trans rights regarding the legal definition of a woman, Smith posted to their Instagram. "A world without trans people has never existed and never will. Trans rights are human rights. I am heartbroken for our community. But we cannot and will not be erased. We are real."

The Trans Legislation Tracker currently identifies 25 bills across the country "targeting gender non-conforming events and the businesses that host them." With the addition of the 53 bathroom-focused bills the website also lists, trans artists and fans could feel a significant impact as early as this summer.

Laura Jane Grace, lead singer of punk band **Against Me!**,

reflects on touring while trans. "I'd say that there's a feeling of 'This tour could get canceled at any moment or not happen at all.' I was out [on tour] for all of April, mostly [on the] West Coast, but red cities are feeling less and less safe. Especially after all the online drama that happened after I opened the **Bernie Sanders** rally [in Wisconsin in March] and played 'God's Dick.'"

When asked about her home state of Florida, Grace sounds



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somewhat resigned, saying, “There’s a real chokehold on education in Florida now, and it’s hard to see how that’s going to make anything better. I felt really strange when I was last there a year ago driving across the state line and reading the ‘Welcome to the Free State of Florida’ sign that’s been put up. So gross.”

Trans kids and young adults are especially at risk. According to the Pew Center for Research, 66% of trans adults are under 30 years old. Conservative lawmakers have introduced 260 anti-trans bills that specifically target education, 188 that attack gender-affirming care, and 112 bills aimed at restricting or eliminating trans student athletics. Many of these bills claim to protect cisgender female students. It’s calculated misdirection, packaging transphobia as the protection of traditional values.

Indigo Girls’ Amy Ray has lived this experience as the mother of an 11-year-old non-binary child. “It’s like, ‘Let’s find the most vulnerable population, [trans kids], and instill the fear in the second most vulnerable population,’ which is parents that are scared their kids are going to be messed up somehow. Or hurt in a bathroom. Or not get a scholarship because there’s someone on the team that’s stronger than them. And ‘Let’s pit those people against each other because they’re not as likely to notice this time.’”

In the face of intentionally divisive tactics, some cisgender artists have responded with allyship for the trans community. Merrill Garbus, self-identified queer frontwoman of Tune-Yards, has said that her band’s new single, “How Big Is the Rainbow?,” is meant to reflect a sentiment of unity in the community. In a press release she said, “The title lyric came out in a flash, and felt more sincere than I’ve ever been lyrically, maybe. But in this day and age, there is no room for subtlety when it comes to advocating for every single human being, for our trans family especially. And *shit*, how big is the fucking rainbow?! It feels like the time to prove it to each other, to show each other how big it can be.”

Despite the increasingly suppressive, dangerous reality for LGBTQ+ artists in America, one constant still prevails: the joy of coming out. For Jenni Rose, lead singer of cowpunk group The Vandoliers, her visibility is especially brave, as her

band is based in Texas.

In a recent interview with *Rolling Stone*, Rose recounts how activism led her to discover herself. In March of 2023, the Vandoliers played a motorcycle bar outside of Knoxville, Tennessee, hot on the heels of Gov. Bill Lee signing the first law that criminalizes drag performances. The band elected to play the show in dresses, observing the classic punk tradition of music activism. The performance quickly went viral, sparking a flurry of press interviews. “The entire world got to see me in a dress the first time I wore one outside of a locked door,” Rose said. “My shell shattered.”

The year that followed involved careful self-reflection, leading Rose to come out to the rest of the band on November 4, 2024, one day before the presidential election. To her relief, Rose’s bandmates greeted the news with loving acceptance.

Today, she acknowledges the very real possibility that some promoters could cancel her shows due to her identity. Ultimately, though, she’s more taken by the euphoria that being Jenni Rose provides her. “I’m going to try to stay in the moment,” Rose told *Rolling Stone*. “In the last few years, I have always thought about this light emitting from my chest. I’ve been behind a mask, and I could still feel that light, and I could still share it with people, but now it is going to be, like, really fucking bright.”

Make no mistake, it isn’t exclusively trans Americans in the crosshairs, it’s all of us. They’re coming for our rights. They’re censoring our social media and banning our books. They’re coming for our music. Through executive action and legislation, they’re attempting to remake and control our culture.

German pastor Martin Niemöller saw it happen in his country. His words, spoken almost 80 years ago, resonate today. Past is prologue: “First, they came for the socialists, and I did not speak out... because I was not a socialist. Then they came for the trade unionists, and I did not speak out... because I was not a trade unionist. Then they came for the Jews, and I did not speak out... because I was not a Jew. Then they came for me—and there was no one left to speak.”

If Donald Trump wants all transgender men and women out of America, we must make him go through Americans to do it. **Full stop.** ■



MICHAEL BAILEY GATES

Sam Smith and Kim Petras

HAPPY PRIDE MONTH



10K [PROJECTS]





PRIDE WITH PURPOSE

Elton John

The *HITS* Interview

BY DAVID BENDER



Anyone who's seen *Rocketman* (and if you haven't, your film, music and gay education is woefully incomplete) knows the scene: young **Reg Dwight**, the keyboard player in **Bluesology**, **Long John Baldry's** British blues band, has chosen to strike out on his own as a performer. Deciding he needs a new name to launch his solo career, he chooses to honor his former bandmates: "Elton" for **Elton Dean**, **Bluesology's** saxophonist, and "John" for **John Baldry**, the group's very tall, very flamboyant frontman.

Today, almost 60 years on from that pivotal decision, Elton John has become an integral and invaluable part of the world's cultural consciousness. His music has touched billions of hearts, and through the work of his **Elton John AIDS Foundation**, his philanthropy has saved millions of lives.

For anyone else, those facts would be satisfaction enough for a dozen lifetimes. It would be a completely reasonable moment to stop, take a well-deserved victory lap, and look back proudly on a life well-lived.

Let's now state the obvious: Elton John is *not* anyone else. He has little interest in looking back, unless it serves a greater purpose going forward.

In the epilogue to his bestselling autobiography, *Me*, he sums up his philosophy of life succinctly: "There's really no point in asking what if? The only question worth asking is: What's next?"

So it was hardly surprising that when we were given the privilege to speak with him for *HITS* Pride 2025 issue, Elton John responded with an important agenda about the future. He particularly wanted to address the urgent need to preserve funding for PEPFAR, the President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief, launched in 2003 under President **George W. Bush** to address the global HIV/AIDS epidemic.

Elton, thank you for joining us for HITS 2025 Pride Issue.
Good morning, David.

There's so much to talk about this year with respect to LGBTQ+ issues. But I know that there's something specific you want to address—something timely right now that you're very focused on.

Yes, I want to concentrate in our talk today about the inspiration that I still get from America. I want to concentrate on the positive things that America does, that I've been inspired by.

That's still the case, right?

That is still the case. President Bush introduced PEPFAR in 2003 with \$15 billion in funding. It was so inspirational. Then I remember speaking at the International AIDS Conference in Washington in 2012. The fact that we'd come so far in the pursuit of ending AIDS—all the amazing science that had produced HIV medicine. We'd gone so far that we could actually see an end to AIDS. That Conference was the first time I'd felt so inspired, so hopeful about the role America was playing in helping to end AIDS.

At this point, you already had your own foundation, the Elton John AIDS Foundation, isn't that correct?

I'd had an AIDS Foundation since 1992 in Atlanta, and it was a tough journey. I was delivering meals for Project Open Hand in Atlanta. It was so rough for people with AIDS back then, because they had no help; they had no future or treatment.

I remember.

So, in that journey for America to come up with this money, this incredible amount of money, in 2003, \$15 billion at that time was just the most incredibly exciting thing to happen. And it's been carried on with every president ever since.

And it's been completely bipartisan.

It's a totally bipartisan thing. And when I've gone to Congress to testify, I talk to Republicans and Democrats. Senator Lindsey Graham and Senator Patrick Leahy started the bipartisan effort together, and it was so inspiring. Whenever I go to Congress to talk to people, I have so many wonderful conversations on both sides of the aisle. I'm talking about a truly bipartisan thing. And it is a truly incredible, positive thing that's saved 25 million lives.

That's extraordinary.

When I've been to Africa with David [Furnish] and people from my own AIDS Foundation, and with members of Congress, it's just amazing to see the tremendous impact on people's lives. It's the joy in people's faces that America has funded this thing, which means they can live full lives. They have a future. They have a life ahead of them. I remember the last time I went with Lindsey Graham. He's got a great sense of humor, but he was very serious when he said, "PEPFAR is the biggest bang for your buck that you could possibly get."

Didn't you recently travel to South Africa?

South Africa, right. We went down there and it was an amazing trip to see how PEPFAR was doing. And as Lindsey Graham said, "It's doing fantastic work." So, I just want to concentrate on sharing that story of how America is doing so much good in the world. There are all sorts of rumors that PEPFAR may be cut. I'm saying to all Americans, whether you're Republican or Democrat, you should be so proud of what America has done within the field of AIDS, with the PEPFAR program. It's helped so many millions of people, and so many people around the world are grateful to America for it.

Left: Elton John at the Stonewall National Monument, 2024; right: Elton, David Furnish and the EJAF team in South Africa, 2023



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“I’m not a politician; I’m a diplomat. My job is to bring people together.”

You can’t really talk about it until you go and see the results. The results are amazing. They’re so humanizing. They’re so beautiful to watch. Every president since George W. Bush, including President Trump, has carried this forward, and I’m just hoping and praying that we can continue with this. Because if we continue, we will end AIDS, and the world will be a much better place. And America will have a gold star above its head for leading the way.

I’m not in the position to be political. I’m in the position to say, “America, you should be very proud of yourself. Let’s continue this. Let’s continue the good work that’s always been bipartisan in both the House and the Senate. Now, let’s just get this job done. We’re nearly there.”

And you’re saying it at the perfect time, because the budgeting is going on in these next few weeks and months.

Yes.

You see this as a call to conscience, a call to bring people together...

The strength of unity is an incredibly powerful force. Being unified in *anything*, being unified as a gay community, being unified in supporting PEPFAR—everything good comes out of staying unified. You have to stand your

ground, and you have to fight your corner. Now, I can’t say, “this is wrong,” or “this is right,” because I’m not a politician. What I can say to America is, “You guys are doing such a great job; don’t stop. You’re doing a wonderful job. The world is so proud of you. I’m so proud of you. It will be crazy for you to pull back now. You’re doing so much good work.”

That’s the message...

I’m so proud of PEPFAR. I’m proud of being associated with it. And because all the government officials, all the congressmen and senators that I’ve met, have been so incredibly kind and supportive, I’m just very optimistic.

Are you planning on going back to Congress?

If I’m needed, David, I will come back. Because I’m not a politician; I’m a diplomat. My job is to bring people together. I’ve been there to the Congress many times. I’ve testified, and I’ve always been met with open arms from both sides. All I can preach is love and give praise. Be proud of what you’ve done. It’s an incredible record—25 million lives have been saved. Be proud!

EJAF gratitude; Elton and David keep the torch lit.



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So many have been helped by the Elton John AIDS Foundation that I would be remiss not to say that what you're doing in this moment is stepping up yet again. You have an initiative with Brandi Carlile's Looking Out Foundation...

Yes.

It's called *Who Believes in Angels*? I'm not sure where you got that name...

Not sure!

Can you speak about that just for a moment?

EJ: Well, because people have lost funding recently with foreign-aid cuts, we talked

about doing a cooperative thing together with our two foundations. We want to make sure that they get the funds that they need. So, with our two foundations we're launching a campaign to raise money for people that need that money desperately. We're talking about people who need that money *right now*.

DAVID FURNISH: The Foundation is fundraising to keep clinics open, and so that people continue to have access to their life-saving treatment, which you can't stop and start. They need to stay on the treatment and have the surrounding care to do so.

EJ: So that's what we're hoping to do.

Thanks for the cameo, David! That's funding needed to fill a need that's going unmet right now.

EJ: Yes, that money is needed *right now*.

In real time.

Absolutely!

Thanks again for speaking with us. Happy Pride, Elton.

And Happy Pride to you, and Happy Pride to everyone. Let's just rejoice in that and then let's all get together to try and keep PEPFAR going! ■

“Whenever I go to Congress to talk to people, I have so many wonderful conversations on both sides of the aisle. I’m talking about a truly bipartisan thing. And it is a truly incredible, positive thing that’s saved 25 million lives.”

Bipartisan: Elton with Sen. Lindsey Graham (left) and Furnish



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ELTON JOHN

The Diplomat

On June 21, 2019, during a small, private ceremony at the Élysée Palace, Elton John, accompanied by his husband, David Furnish and their sons, Zachary and Elijah, President Emmanuel Macron presented him with France's highest civilian honor, the Legion of Honor.

Praising Elton John's "melodic genius," President Macron's earlier public statement noted that along with recognizing his lifetime of cultural contributions, the Legion of Honor was also being given for Elton John's unwavering commitment to use his voice on behalf of the LGBTQ community, especially in the fight against HIV/AIDS.

Writing in his autobiography *Me*, Elton John vividly describes the intimate private ceremony: "We all sat there flabbergasted while President Macron gave a 35-minute speech—in perfect English, without notes—about my career. It wasn't just complimentary, it was incredibly personal: he mentioned songs and quoted lyrics, he talked about the Elton John AIDS Foundation, he addressed Zachary and Elijah and told them they should be proud of me..."

After the award ceremony, President Macron and Elton John walked out of Elysee Palace together to address thousands of people packed into the courtyard for *Fete de la Musique*, France's annual music celebration.

Clearly moved, Elton John delivered remarks that were brief, but heartfelt:

"Like music, the fight against AIDS has been my passion for many, many years. And like music this fight reminds me every day of the extraordinary power of the human spirit. And that things that bind us are stronger than those that divide us. It is this magical human spirit I will carry with me as a proud member of the Legion d'Honneur, with your music ringing in my ears."

Then, never one to miss out on an opportunity to do more, Elton John used the remainder of his remarks to urge other world leaders to commit additional financial support to the Global Fund for Fighting AIDS, Tuberculosis, and Malaria.

"We have made such incredible progress [in the fight against AIDS], but we cannot become complacent," he declared. "A fully replenished Global Fund is essential if we are going to consign this disease to history."

(It worked. A week later, British Prime Minister Theresa May announced that the U.K. would contribute £1.4 billion to the fund's replenishment.)

After their remarks, the two men embraced warmly. In his book, Elton John provides perspective on that moment and on the power of personal diplomacy to effect change, both publicly



Elton with Macron: "Melodic genius" finds international harmony.

and privately: "Afterwards, we walked out hand in hand and gave speeches to the assembled press. President Macron reinforced France's commitment to the fight against AIDS... Then he quietly slipped me a piece of paper with his personal mobile number and e-mail on it and said I could call him anytime. I did, too: a few months later, just before the replenishment conference, I called him from Vancouver to gently remind him what he'd said about AIDS after the Legion d'Honneur ceremony. The Global Fund got their money—\$14 billion in total." ■

“We all sat there flabbergasted while President Macron gave a 35-minute speech—in perfect English, without notes—about my career. It wasn't just complimentary, it was incredibly personal...”

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THIS MONTH AND ALWAYS**



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ELTON JOHN

The Advocate

Last year, *Time* named Elton John “Icon of the Year,” citing “his transformative impact on music, philanthropy, and pop culture.” The Rocket Man’s herculean advocacy over the last 35 years on behalf of HIV/AIDS and LGBTQ+ issues is known the world over.

Less well known is how Elton John actually came to be an advocate. In his 2019 autobiography, *Me*, he candidly admits that he was late in stepping up to the plate, writing that it wasn’t until 1990, after watching his young friend Ryan White lead by example while facing incurable AIDS, that he recognized, “I was the highest-profile gay rock star in the world... but what had I done [to help others]? Virtually nothing.”

“Arete” is the Greek concept of a person who fully realizes inherent potential for moral virtue. The stories of how people come to recognize it in themselves vary widely; no two are exactly alike. Rosa Parks was tired, so she simply refused to go to the back of the bus. The drag queens at Stonewall reached their tipping point on a hot night in 1969, when the gay bars had been raided brutally yet again. This time, it was just one beating too many. Greta Thunberg was a 15-year-old Swedish girl who one day just sat down outside of her country’s parliament to protest the climate crisis. She remained until the whole world took notice.

On that day in 1990 following Ryan White’s funeral, Elton John thought about his friend Elizabeth Taylor, who “had the guts to stand up and do something, helping start the American Foundation for AIDS Research, forcing Hollywood to pay attention, despite everyone telling her getting involved with AIDS would damage her career. I should’ve been doing the same. I should’ve been on the front line. I should’ve put my head on the chopping block the way Liz Taylor did... I should’ve been using my fame as a platform to gain attention and make a difference.”

Elton John spent the next two decades making up for that lost time in the only fashion he could—spectacularly. Now the chairman of his own AIDS Foundation, he found himself at the

Alliances: With Eminem at the Grammys; with Elizabeth Taylor



PHOTO: FRANK MIZELGOTT ARCHIVE GETTY IMAGES

PHOTO: KEVIN MAZUR GETTY IMAGES

podium in Washington D.C. giving the keynote address at the 2023 International AIDS Conference:

"By all rights, I shouldn't be here," he declared. "I should be dead, six feet under, in a wooden box. I should have contracted HIV in the 1980s and died in the 1990s, just like Freddie Mercury, Rock Hudson and many friends and loved ones.

"Every day, I wonder: how did I survive? I don't know the answer, but I do know that the message that saved my life is the message that can save millions of lives if we put it into practice: Everyone deserves compassion and dignity, and everyone deserves love.

"Love is the most powerful force in the world, and I know that from experience. During the darkest days of my recovery from addiction, I was shown extraordinary compassion by people I didn't even know. Their love changed my life. It saved my life. The gift of love from strangers, from a community of people who believe in you and support you, is one of the most remarkable gifts you could ever receive"

Elton John has traveled the world spreading the message of love and compassion. He calls it "building bridges, not walls." By keeping that drawbridge down, he has found himself in common cause with unlikely allies. One of them was Eminem, with whom he performed "Stan" at the 2002 Grammys. The unlikely duo received a tumultuous standing ovation. Not everyone saw it the same way. In fact, GLAAD (Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Discrimination) condemned him for appearing with the controversial rapper, who'd had a history of employing homophobic lyrics in his music. Unphased by the criticism, Elton John forged a friendship with Marshall Mathers that abides to this day.

Elton John's advocacy has also inspired others to find their arete. In 2016, when Elton John and David Furnish presented U.N. Secretary General Ban Ki-Moon with the EJAF Founders Award, he made it clear that Elton John had inspired him to become an advocate as well: "I grew up long ago in a deeply conservative Korea," he recalled. "There were almost no visible gay and trans people. We never discussed sexual orientation and gender identity. I think that's true for many people of my generation—in Korea and most other countries."

"So, this advocacy did not come naturally to me," he continued. "But, when I saw that lives were at stake, I had to speak up. This is a matter of life and death. It is a struggle for human rights. I started listening to colleagues and to human rights activists. I heard their stories. I was inspired by their courage. I also reached



Elton with Ryan White

out to many LGBT people living with HIV. Far too many still suffer stigma. They struggle even for basic health care. This is a terrible injustice."

"If my 20-year-old self could see me talking about these issues," Ban concluded, "he would have been very surprised. But, I am happy to say I found my voice. And every day more and more people are finding theirs. A certain brilliant superstar and humanitarian once asked: 'Can You Feel the Love Tonight?' Here, now—yes. We feel the love."

Through his advocacy, Elton John keeps taking bigger and bigger swings for the fences. But he's well aware that it takes more than just a single power hitter to win the game. One of the greatest musical collaborators of our time has come to understand the power of teamwork and the strength that comes in numbers. As he told *The Advocate* in 2017, "You know, scientists have shown us that birds fly faster in flocks than they can on their own, because the flock shares the burden of wind drag, constantly shifting those in the lead, and enabling the entire group to fly faster and more efficiently. It's an excellent metaphor for why we are all stronger when we work together." ■

“Elton John has traveled the world spreading the message of love and compassion. He calls it “building bridges, not walls.” By keeping that drawbridge down, he has found himself in common cause with unlikely allies.”

ELTON JOHN

The Artist

Earlier this year, Elton John was chosen to be the Laureate of the 15th Glenn Gould Prize, Canada's highest cultural award, internationally recognized "as the Nobel Prize of the Arts."

Previous Laureates include Yo-Yo Ma and Yehudi Menuhin, who, like Elton John, were selected for a lifetime body of work that has "enriched the human condition through the arts."

"Elton John has used his enormous talent and his great success to change lives," noted Glenn Gould Jury Chair and former Canadian Prime Minister Kim Campbell. "He's been courageous in taking on causes, whether AIDS, LGBTQ+ rights, addiction and all sorts of issues that were not popular when he engaged with them, and he was prepared to take the wonderful success that his musical talent had given him to make a difference in the world. And from our perspective, that represents the highest level of achievement for an artist."

We sat down to try and quantify those achievements and well... frankly, the Captain Fantastic Pinball Machine went "Tilt!"

After the smoke cleared, here's what we can tell you: In his six-decade career Elton John has:

Family night: With husband David Furnish and their sons, Zachary and Elijah, at Dodger Stadium



Sold over 300 million records worldwide.

Grossed nearly \$2 billion from touring, including a record-setting \$937 million from his five-year Farewell Yellow Brick Road trek—which ended his touring life in 2023, though not his performing career. ("I [have] no intention whatsoever of actually retiring from music or even live performances," he has explained. "All I said was that I wasn't going to schlep around the world anymore.")

Had 30 consecutive years with Top 40 hits (1970-1999), breaking Elvis Presley's previous record. It's unlikely that anyone will break his.

Sold over 30 million copies worldwide of *Goodbye Yellow Brick Road*, his best-selling album, which was certified 8x Multi-Platinum in the U.S.

Sold 7 million copies in the U.S. (and more than 24 million worldwide), of *Greatest Hits*. It spent 10 weeks at #1, the record for a greatest hits album.

Toured more than 80 countries on all inhabited continents from 1969-2023, performing more than 4,000 shows.

Grossed \$1.98 billion from those shows, which makes him the #1 highest-grossing solo artist in history.

Holds the record for most performances at Madison Square Garden with 72 shows, including his historic 60th performance—on his 60th birthday—in 2007.

Debuted an album at #1 with *Captain Fantastic and the Brown Dirt Cowboy* (1975), and then repeated the feat five months later with *Rock of the Westies*—becoming the first artist ever to do so.

Achieved seven consecutive #1 albums between 1972-1975, unmatched by any artist in that decade.

Grossed more than \$6 billion worldwide for *The Lion King*, making it the highest-grossing musical ever.

Become the first artist to achieve Top 10 singles over six consecutive decades when *Who Believes In Angels?* (his collaboration with Brandi Carlile) reached #1 earlier this year.

Achieved "EGOT" status in January 2024, becoming only the 19th person to win Emmy, Grammy, Oscar and Tony awards

Been inducted into the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame during his first year of eligibility in 1994—more than 30 years ago. Does he now get a new round of eligibility?

Whew.

But if you ask him (and we did), Elton John thinks far more about the future than he spends dwelling on his unparalleled past. He especially loves discovering and mentoring younger artists—especially LGBTQ+ artists who he says "inspire" him.

We mentioned Chappell Roan, Troye Sivan, Sam Fender, Jacob Lusk and Rina Sawayama, and asked if he felt it was part of his responsibility to pass the torch to younger artists.

"Of course," he said, "because every time they make a great record, I feel inspired. Yeah, I love it. I love the future. I know the past, but I'm enamored with the future and what these young artists are doing and what they're saying and how good their music is. And it's good to champion. I mean, when I heard Billie Eilish's first record when she was 15, I just could not believe that a 15-year-old person had made this record or written that song. Anything I can do to help a young artist I will always do." ■

CELEBRATING EVERY VOICE

TURN IT UP FOR PRIDE

SAM WILLIAMS

Reinventing the Rhinestone Cowboy

BY JASON BERK



PHOTO: THOMAS CRABTREE

Legacy brings tension: the burden of expectations, the anxiety of deviation, the pressure to stay palatable. Few families in music carry more weight—or contradictions—than the descendants of **Hank Williams**.

Williams, “The Father of Country and Western Music,” was only 29 when he died in 1953. Yet, in the seven decades following his untimely passing, Hank Williams’ legend and legacy has never stopped growing. He’s now been a myth far longer than he was a mortal man.

Cited as a musical influence by everyone from **Bob Dylan** to **Jerry Garcia**, in 2010 Williams received a posthumous **Pulitzer Prize Special Citation** for his “craftsmanship as a songwriter who expressed universal feelings with poignant simplicity and played a pivotal role in transforming country music into a major musical and cultural force in American life.”

Enter **Samuel Weston Williams**, the 28-year-old grandson of an American music legend, and youngest son of **Hank Jr.** (Hank Williams’ only son and namesake), is forging his own path as one of the few openly gay voices in country music.

In the heart-rending autobiographical song “Tilted Crown,” a bonus track added later to his 2021 debut album, *Glasshouse Children*, Williams writes poignantly of “the grace and the same that came with the name that I got handed down.”

In the video accompanying the single’s 2022 release, Sam Williams sits alone in a theater, watching his life and legacy play out onstage before him. Actors portray both his grandfather and his father. In the video’s finale, Sam plays *himself* onstage, tenderly sharing a kiss with his real-life boyfriend.

Appearing at the time on **Apple Music’s Proud Radio**, Williams told host **Hunter Kelly**, “I identify as gay, and I’ve never said that

to anybody else. I mean, people at my label know and people in my personal life know, but this is the first time that I've ever been... this public about it. And it is scary, but it feels good."

About the kiss, Williams told Kelly, "At first, I kind of thought, 'I'm tackling something else with this,' and, maybe that's for another project. But [then] I felt like I was promoting invisibility, like I wasn't being myself. [I decided] it was the perfect opportunity to just show who I was."

Sam Williams tells us that after he came out publicly, the support surprised him. "A lot of my fans still stood by me," he recalled, "and maybe weren't as shocked, because there's always been a sense of *upfrontness* in my music."

"I was fortunate to be born with a discernment to live authentically," Sam says. "There's a lot of pressure growing up feeling the weight of my family—destined for greatness, but with a daunting 'how?'"

That "how" haunted his early career. In another life, Williams jokes, he might have been repackaged as a Hank Sr. cosplay—a traditionalist heir to the throne with the boots and twang to match. "I could've [had] an industry push and not been 'out,' a Hank Williams dress-up situation," he shrugs.

Instead, Williams chose the harder route: honesty. Not just in how he presents himself, but in how he writes, sings, and lives. His upcoming album, *Act II: COUNTRYSTAR* (out July 11 via Mercury Nashville), doesn't just blur genre lines—it defies them. The title track is a swirling mix of Southern roots, hip-hop swagger and personal pain. At one point, he riffs, "I'm Peyton in the backfield / Me versus the industry, McCoys and the Hatfields," turning birthright into battleground.

Top photo (l-r): Hank Jr., Sam, mother Mary Jane Williams and sister Katie Williams-Dunning

"When you have more privilege by circumstance, you've got to show up for people who don't. Pride takes a lot of courage in showing up for what you believe in—[especially] for someone whose voice isn't as loud as yours."



PHOTO: SPENCER MILLER

It doesn't sound like Nashville—and that's exactly the idea. "Too much of the same is always going to end up hurting someone," he says. "Country music gatekeeps in a way that other genres don't. It takes longer to be seen if you're different."

But make no mistake: *COUNTRYSTAR* isn't a pitch for country radio airplay—it's a message to the misfits. "I just try to do it for me and for real-ass people," he says. "For people who were like me growing up."

That message feels especially urgent in 2025. LGBTQ+ rights are under attack from a right-wing movement targeting everything from gender-affirming care to drag shows. Williams, who once considered a career in international affairs, doesn't call himself an activist. But his presence—open, emotional, unapologetically queer—is an unstated protest by its very fact.

"When you have more privilege by circumstance, you've got to show up for people who don't," he says. "Pride takes a lot of courage in showing up for what you believe in, [especially] for someone whose voice isn't as loud as yours."

Asked what it's like to be a gay man in one of music's most conservative spaces, he doesn't flinch. "I'm from a super-red state and an extremely... let's just say, *Republican* house growing up, and that instilled in me that it can be different for everyone."

"There was so much natural rebellion in me," he says. "But before it could ever surface, there was already misunderstanding on top of it."

He also knew early on that he wouldn't follow the family template. "My music was never going to have the cultural connotation of my dad's or my grandpa's," he says. "It was like, 'Oh my gosh, that's Sam Williams. He's Hank Sr.'s grandson, but he also raps.'"

While Hank Jr. leaned on blues and Southern rock, Sam blends the swagger of *Little Jimmy Dickens* and *Marty Stuart* with his love of *Nicki Minaj*, *Miley Cyrus* and mid-2000s pop. "I grew up watching the VMAs and pop stars," he says. "I had a phone way too young."

Still, he knows change in country music won't come quickly. "Country doesn't reward difference easily," he says. "But it's going to have to evolve—or lose the people it claims to represent." He's hopeful more queer country artists are on the rise. "There are voices coming up who won't ask permission. I want to be part of the reason they know that's possible."

That balance between legacy and reinvention pulses through everything he makes. "Your career never looks exactly like what you think it will," he says. "I've come to be proud of the pieces I've laid out—it feels like I'm chipping away at a goldmine." As for the future? "You've got to get into the marina first, one way or another. I'm coming in after dark, no law enforcement," he quips. "And when the lights turn on in the morning, I'm there."

Williams knows he doesn't sound like his family before him. That's the point. "Taking your power, in all senses—your sexuality, your values, your morals—is a testament to who you are and what you leave," he says.

Don't mistake the rhinestones for nostalgia. Sam Williams isn't here to play dress-up—he's rewriting the dress code. ■

"Taking your power, in all senses—your sexuality, your values, your morals—is a testament to who you are and what you leave."

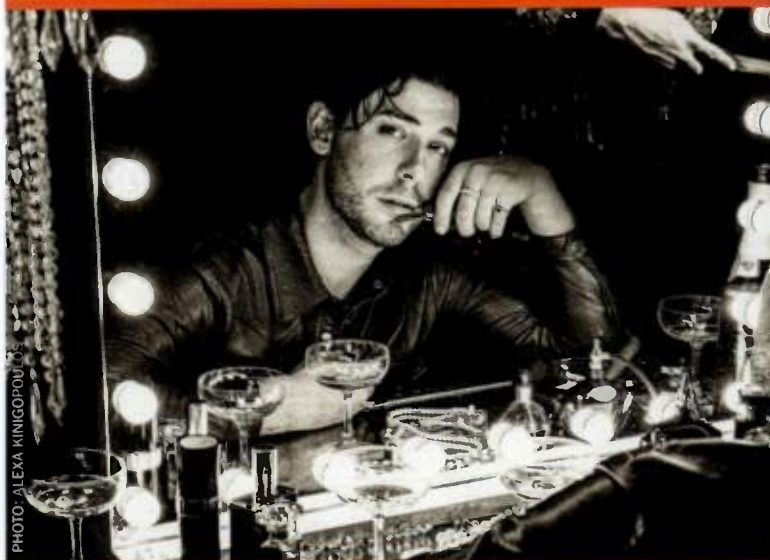


PHOTO: ALEXA KINGPOPOULOS

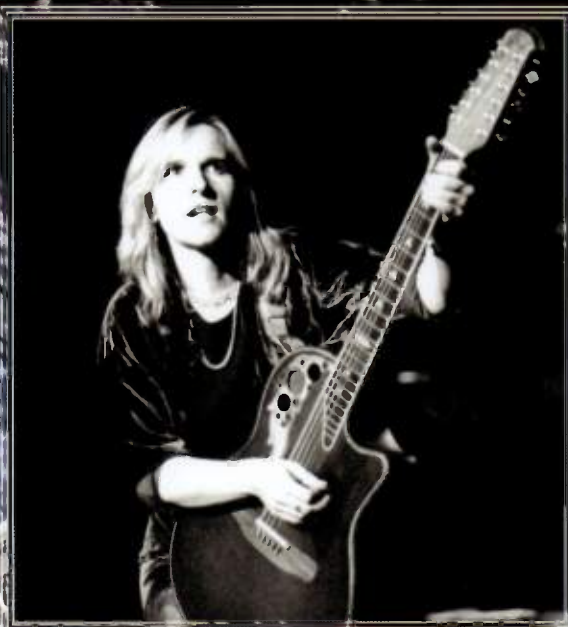
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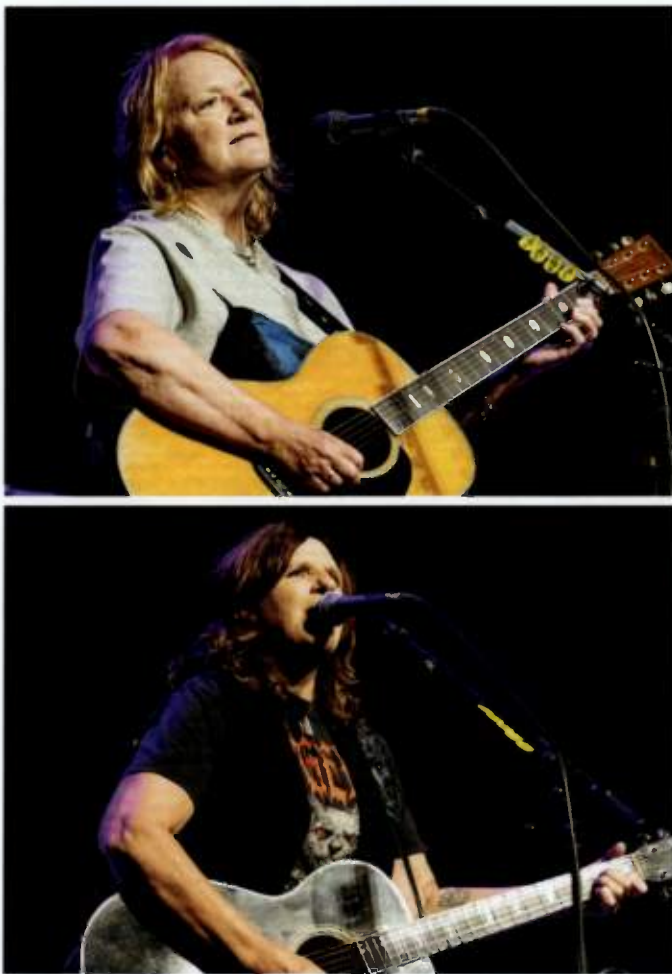
Yes, They Are

Melissa Etheridge and Indigo Girls on Pride, Music and Changing Times

By David Bender

In July, Melissa Etheridge and Indigo Girls kick off their co-headlining 31-city *Yes We Are* tour at Red Rocks, in what is certain to be a musical feast for their multigenerational audiences, who have an insatiable thirst for Etheridge's gutsy guitar and bluesy voice and the incandescent harmony vocals

PHOTOS FROM LEFT: NATASHA MOUSTACHE/GETTY IMAGES; JIM SMEAL/RON GALELLA COLLECTION VIA GETTY IMAGES; BOB BERG/GETTY IMAGES



PHOTOS: NATASHA MOUSTACHE/GETTY IMAGES

Clockwise from top left: Emily Saliers, Melissa Etheridge and Amy Ray

“Yes, we are here. You can’t get rid of us. We’re gonna rock and roll you and make you feel good.” —Melissa Etheridge

of Indigo Girls’ Amy Ray and Emily Saliers.

However, these three women have more in common than just being artists with tremendous talent who’ve respectively spent the past four decades touring, recording, nabbing **Grammys** (two for Etheridge, one for Indigo Girls) and accruing massive, loyal fan bases.

And, just in case you’ve been living *under* Red Rocks since the ’80’s, yes, they are: Melissa Etheridge and Indigo Girls are out and proud lesbians.

Friends since they attended same elementary school in Decatur, Georgia, Indigo Girls’ Ray and Saliers inked a deal with Epic in 1987. The following year, their self-titled major label debut landed in the Top 25, propelled by the visceral folk-pop of tracks like “Closer to Fine” and “Land of Canaan.”

Unlike most of their musical peers in the ’80s, Indigo Girls were publicly “out” from the start of their careers. As highly

regarded as they are for their impeccable harmonies, Amy Ray and Emily Saliers are equally admired for the purity of their commitment to social-justice causes, particularly LGBTQ+ issues.

While Indigo Girls never needed to come out professionally, things were decidedly *under* the rainbow over at Island Records, when Melissa Etheridge, one of the label’s new artists, was dropping her eponymous debut album.

While Etheridge was living openly as a lesbian in her personal life, some executives at the label discouraged her from “flag-waving” about her sexuality, concerned that it would negatively impact the launch of her career.

Reluctantly, she heeded their advice through the release of her next two albums, 1989’s *Brave and Crazy* and 1992’s *Never Enough*, keeping her blonde hair long and remaining publicly demure about her personal life. Etheridge went along to get along, and her

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records were selling. Island was happy, but she wasn't.

It wasn't until her performance at the 1993 "Triangle Ball," held in honor of President Bill Clinton's first inauguration, that Melissa Etheridge finally decided the time was right.

"I have been proud to be a lesbian all my life," she declared, guitar in hand like a sword, as the crowd cheered. Her friend k.d. lang, already a queer trailblazer, whooped in delight when Etheridge burst through the closet door in full view of the crème de la crème of the nation's political elite.

And wouldn't you know it? Despite all the years of music-industry hand-wringing about the negative impact it would have on her career, Etheridge's subsequent record sales actually surged. Her next album, 1993's *Yes I Am*, reached #15 on the chart and went on to sell more than 6 million copies domestically. Both singles from the album, "Come to My Window" and "I'm the Only One," were nominated for Best Rock Song at the 1995 Grammys.

In 2025, all three of these women are now queer icons. In a world where even the phrase "coming out" seems anachronistic, they laughingly refer to themselves as "OWLS" (Older Wiser Lesbians). Their self-effacing humor is evidence of the joyfulness they still bring to their music and to their activism. Yet, while they don't take themselves seriously, they do view the times that we're in as very serious.

Before leaving for the road, Etheridge, Ray and Saliers, sat down with *HITS* to discuss the bracing new reality of Pride under prejudice.

Let's jump right in. Same question to each of you: How does Pride feel to you in 2025?

MELISSA ETHERIDGE: Who wants to go first? OWLS. OWLS, unite! Go ahead, Amy.

AMY RAY: You know what? It feels very pressing and it's really important to do the work right now more than ever. Pride, for me, is always a time when we all come together and we celebrate—and it's great. It was more politicized, of course, when we were younger, and now it's become more politicized again. But what feels good is the strength of the community.

So the events are important because I think they reinvigorate us and make us think about people who live in areas that may not be as safe as a city that's super-progressive and taking a stand against all the Trump administration policies. It might feel different if you live somewhere that's really giving in to it and you're feeling really scared. So, I think these [Pride] events are needed not only to invigorate us, but also to remind us that there are people who need us to have their backs right now.

And you know, I've kind of always felt that way, because I've lived in a rural area for the last 35 years. But it's more than ever now. It really is. And I'm prouder than ever too, to be standing up and fighting.

Amy, what part of America do you live in? You said in a rural area.

AR: I live in north Georgia, about an hour and a half north of Atlanta. It's like the foothills of the Appalachians. I guess the Democratic vote was probably about 17%, and that was progress last year. It was a two-point rise. I love my neighbors, and I love living there. But my community up there really responds to the pulse of what's going on as far as polarization. So, it might have felt like a very gay-friendly place six years ago, but it doesn't right now.

Has it changed in terms of how you feel in that community



A woman with long, wavy blonde hair and black-rimmed glasses is smiling broadly. She has several tattoos, including a star on her neck, a heart on her chest, and various designs on her arms. She is wearing a white ribbed tank top. The background is a dimly lit club with other people and bright lights.

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since the rise of the red hats?

AR: Well, I'll say, with my neighbors that I know that are politically in opposition to me, we all still help each other out. I don't feel any sense of fear. But as a generalized feeling, yeah, I definitely feel less safe than I felt four years ago, six years ago or eight years ago.

I feel like there's a disconnect between the progress that's being made in certain circles in my town and what's actually going on in the government. A lot of people are making friends and building bridges, and that's going to continue happening. But there's still this general sense of fear, and you can't tell if you're just buying into it, or if it's really feeling that way in my area. I'll think, "Am I scared for no reason, or are we making sure we know what to do in an emergency?" Because there really might be one.

Emily, how about you?

EMILY SALIERS: The whole thing?

Sorry! But, yes, the whole thing too. Starting with Pride this year.

ES: Pride this year. Well, we definitely need it now as much as ever, and certainly more than in the recent past. And when I think about Pride, what comes to mind is the celebratory part. It's the most colorful gathering of human beings you can imagine, and their allies. I think about a world of acceptance—not only acceptance, but *appreciation* for diversity in life. When I go to a Pride parade or attend Pride events, that comes to life right before my eyes. So, I think it's very important to be *counted* in this moment: to keep saying, "We are a beautiful, diverse people: different walks of life, different colors of skin, different ethnic backgrounds." And it's very important to be visible right now. Unfortunately, it's more difficult for many people to be visible.

Another thing about Pride gatherings is that they are *safe havens* for people who are afraid otherwise to be out in their lives or who may live in communities that are more rural, as Amy was talking about. It's a place to raise our flags and be together, along with our allies.

I think too, I'd like to see a return of Pride to becoming *more* politicized, because right now there's something like 900 anti-trans or anti-LGBTQ+ bills out there. Some of them have passed, some of them haven't, and some of them are pending. But there is an absolute *onslaught* against queer people, particularly trans people, right now. It's important that Pride becomes politicized, more than it ever has. So, then when you're walking down the street with your peeps, you're feeling inspired to be part of the political system. What's going on with the Trump administration is terrible—they're basically trying to dehumanize anybody except for people who look and act a certain way.

They're saying that the whole anti-trans movement in sports is for the protection of feminism and women. But they've twisted everything to such a dark, very *ill* place. It's now hard to know up from down.

More than ever, we have to get involved in the political system. There's a lot of people who say, "I feel so removed from politics," and "The system never works." But the people who were active in planning Project 2025 were organized, political. And we can be just as organized and political and take back a country that honors the diversity of humanity, that honors immigrants who have made this nation what it is and that honors queer people.



PHOTO: STEVE EICHNER/WIREIMAGE



PHOTO: SHERRY RAYN BARNETT/MICHAEL OCHS ARCHIVES/GETTY IMAGES

From top: Etheridge with k.d. lang; with wife Julie Willem at 2018 NAMM She Rocks Awards

"[At a 1993 party celebrating Bill Clinton's inauguration] I had been thinking I was going to come out that year anyway... Whenever you are in the presence of such strong gay leadership and community, there's just so much power there. I just felt so clear to say, 'Yeah, I'm a lesbian.' I didn't plan on it. I just walked out. You can see it—there's a video. You can see k.d. lang going, 'Whoa, I didn't know you were going to do that.'"
—Melissa Etheridge

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PHOTOS: CHRIS WALTER/WIREIMAGE (INDIGO GIRLS); JIM SNEAL/ROD GALELLA COLLECTION VIA GETTY IMAGES

Out—and winning—at the Grammys: Indigo Girls in 1990; Etheridge in 1993

“I think it’s important for artists to be involved in social issues and movements because they’re citizens of a nation that needs the help and they can be very influential. Like Chappell Roan—she’s a very powerful artist, and there are many artists like her who are now living openly across all the spectrums of gender and sexuality. It’s a beautiful and inspiring message.” —Emily Saliers

Melissa, let me pose the same question. How does Pride feel to you in 2025? Different? And, if so, how?

ME: Well, for the last 40 years I’ve made my home in the great country of California. So personally, I feel safe in California. I remember my first Pride in 1984, at the height of the AIDS epidemic. Pride back then was *highly* political. Even saying you were gay in 1984 was dangerous and huge.

Now, 40 years later, I’ve seen the strength and goodness that comes from people coming together and coming out. It’s that visibility. It changed the world when people came out, because all of a sudden it wasn’t just, “Oh, the weird people in that bar are gay.” It’s, “The people down the street are gay. The person at my work is gay. My *cousin* is gay.” It brought it home to people. And that’s one of the strongest things about the divide-and-conquer mentality: “No, these are *my* people.” I think in this day and age, with the instant information that we have, it’s definitely horrific and mind-bending that *he* could be president again.

But we’re here and it’s even worse, just like we thought it would be. Yet, I’ve seen so much good in my life. I was at the Berlin Wall when it was coming down, when they were there with chainsaws. I saw what *people* can do. I have a deep belief and hope in the human spirit to do what feels better. There will always be those who are afraid of people who are different than them in any way: looks, sexuality, economically. We are now living in a time when that fear got so *puffed up* that they were able to take charge.

And this is when artists come together. We do what we love. The girls and I are going to inspire and lift people up all summer long. So, I feel safe. I also feel more driven about it because of what’s at stake, what’s happening that we can see around us.

You’re about to go out on the road. Do you have any anticipation about what you’re going to see? If you’re going to be constrained to keep visibility out of it?

ME: No, no, no. They know what they’re getting when they book a show that’s the Indigo Girls and Melissa Etheridge. They know exactly what’s going to happen and it’s going to be an audience full of really strong women, mothers, grandmothers, and their husbands and significant others. They hunger for a safe space to bring their children, to bring their family, to see music they know and love.

How do you talk to your kids about what’s happening now?

ES: My daughter’s 12 and she’s in a public middle school. In her group of friends there’s complete acceptance. But on the other hand, as parents, we hear all the time what kids are like, particularly boys. I hate to say it, I’m sure there are girls too who are getting in on it. Things like, if a person with brown skin is walking quickly down the hall, the latest chant is, “Are you running for the border? Are you running for the border?” And we’re hearing again about kids saying to each other, “You’re so gay.” It’s still

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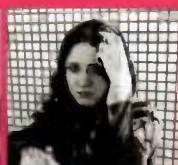
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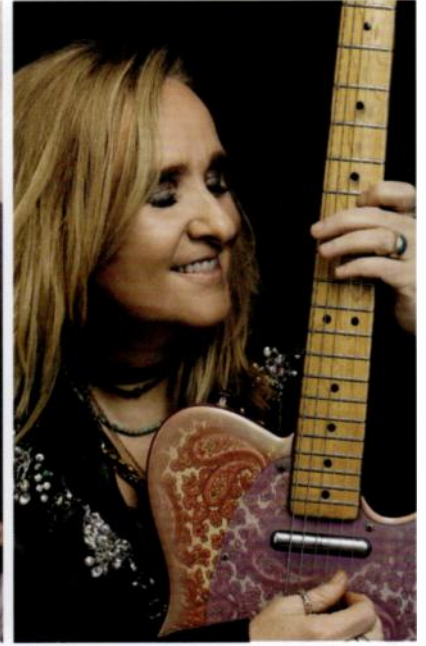


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HOL RECORDS





At left: MTV/Rock the Vote days with Jeff Pollack, Hale Milgrin, Ricki Seidman, Judy McGrath, Jeff Gold, Bonnie Raitt, Queen Latifah, Etheridge and Sydney DeBear

derogatory. Kids are differentiating other kids, and it's largely based on race or gender identity.

And this is a return to hardcore, blatant propaganda. That's what this administration is trying to do. We have to take kids to the monuments in Montgomery, where black people were lynched not very long ago in our history. We have to tell them what happened to the indigenous peoples and why the mounds near Macon are these incredible human endeavors that the indigenous peoples built. They need to know how they all got moved out of the state on the Trail of Tears. These are the real stories of history. You don't learn to hate your country by learning what really happened. No, you learn to think about and understand what could happen again.

Melissa, are your kids seeing anything different? Are you having this conversation with them about this moment we're in right now?

ME: Ever since the pandemic my two who are still in school, who are 18 right now, have been homeschooled. So we don't have what Emily was describing. And they do really well homeschooled. My oldest, who is now 28, attended an amazing academic high school, so her situation is also different. She's a lesbian. She's getting married. I got a gay one. I'm so happy!

Mazel tov! I didn't know!

ME: She works in tech and is really amazing. She dedicates her time to the issue of banned books. She goes around states and cities that are the worst hit, and she goes to publishers and gets donations. She buys all these books and then she puts them in the free libraries. As a mom, I'm just doing my best to raise aware children who understand that everyone's different. They're part of a great kaleidoscope of humanity.

Almost 20 years ago, you and other artists did the "True Colors Tour." It was organized by an amazing ally, Cyndi Lauper. You

went on the road to talk about PFLAG (Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays) and the Human Rights Campaign. Is this a time for artists to be out there doing that again?

AR: I'm going to let Emily answer, because I'm taking care of my mom today. But this has been amazing!

Thank you, Amy! Emily, what about that? Is it time to do something like the "True Colors Tour" again?

ES: I think it's always time to do that again. "True Colors" was so joyful. With an ally like Cyndi Lauper at the helm, everybody was happy to be there. And it's a mix of people. It's not homogenous.

As Melissa was saying, we're gonna go out there on our tour, and we're gonna bring joy. There are plenty of songs that have content that make people think about issues, and then there are plenty of songs that don't. They're about love or empowerment. I think it's always important when you can get a gathering to speak to social issues. The thing about queer gatherings is that they're always joyful. We've all been through a lot together, and when we come together to sing and dance and play music, it's empowering.

I think rather than hammering people over the head with messaging, if you can stir their hearts with music and storytelling, for me that can be as inspiring as a direct political message.

I think it's important for artists to be involved in social issues and movements because they're citizens of a nation that needs the help and they can be very influential. Like Chappell Roan—she's a very powerful artist, and there are many artists like her who are now living openly across all the spectrums of gender and sexuality. It's a beautiful and inspiring message.

Melissa, you actually used an event to come out. It was the first gay event ever held at a presidential inauguration. You and k.d. lang were backstage, just before you went out to perform. Can you share what happened then?

ME: This was an amazing time. It was 1993. Bill Clinton was the

LAFFITTE MANAGEMENT GROUP

first candidate to even say the words “gay and lesbian” nationally. The word “lesbian”—people didn’t even *know* it then. It was *that* different. The gay community really got behind him. We’d been through AIDS and 12 years of Republican rule.

And when he won, they said, “We’re gonna throw an inaugural party.” It was the best inaugural bash of any of them, of course. I had been thinking I was going to come out that year anyway, and I was there. Whenever you are in the presence of such strong gay leadership and community, there’s just so much power there. I just felt so clear to say, “Yeah, I’m a lesbian.” I didn’t plan on it. I just walked out. You can see it—there’s a video. You can see k.d. going, “Whoa, I didn’t know you were going to *do* that.”

So you surprised k.d.?

ME: Oh, yeah! She didn’t know.

How should the music industry—artists, labels, management—respond to this moment?

ES: Well, I think it’s important for artists to be influential, especially in the world of country music, for example. It’s really important that Maren Morris made the statements that she did. Or someone like Eric Church, who’s not a flag waver per se, but shows where his heart lies, his social heart. As to the music business, Melissa, maybe you could speak to this better than I can, because we’ve been independent for a while now.

ME: The record industry is filled with weirdos like us, people that never followed the rules. The weirder you are, sometimes, the more records you sell. And now, especially with social media, boom: We’ve got a direct line.

ES: I think too, with social media, I’ve learned about so many artists coming up through my Instagram feed. It’s awesome. They are creating their own careers through their post and shows. I’m thinking of an artist, Maddie Zahm. I love her. I didn’t know about her history, but I discovered her music. And she’s queer and she’s out like so many of these young artists.

Does your tour have a name?

ME: Yes, it does. And it’s: Yes We Are. Yes, we are here. You can’t get rid of us. We’re gonna rock and roll you and make you feel good.

This is a Pride that is as much about what’s ahead of us, as it is a celebration of what we’ve accomplished. We’ve got a lot to fight for. And I know you’re going to do it. Yes, you are!

ME: Yes, we are bringing the joy!

ES: Listen, I can’t wait to see you.

ME: I can’t wait. July! Love you all. ■

“Pride, for me, is always a time when we all come together and we celebrate—and it’s great. It was more politicized, of course, when we were younger, and now it’s become more politicized again. But what feels good is the strength of the community.” — Amy Ray



Saliers and Ray with Joan Baez and Mary Chapin Carpenter at 2017 Rock & Roll Hall of Fame induction ceremony

PHOTO: THEO WARGO/WIREIMAGE FOR ROCK AND ROLL HALL OF FAME

A promotional poster for the band The Beaches. Four women, the band members, are standing against a dark blue background. From left to right: the first woman has long red hair, wears a white tank top with a graphic, and has tattoos on her right arm; the second woman has long dark hair and wears a black leather jacket; the third woman has short blonde hair, wears a black strapless crop top and denim shorts, and has her arm around the fourth woman; the fourth woman has dark hair, wears a black and white zip-up crop top and jeans, and has her arm around the third woman. The text 'THE BEACHES' is overlaid in large, bold, orange letters.

THE BEACHES

NO HARD FEELINGS

NEW ALBUM - AUGUST 29TH

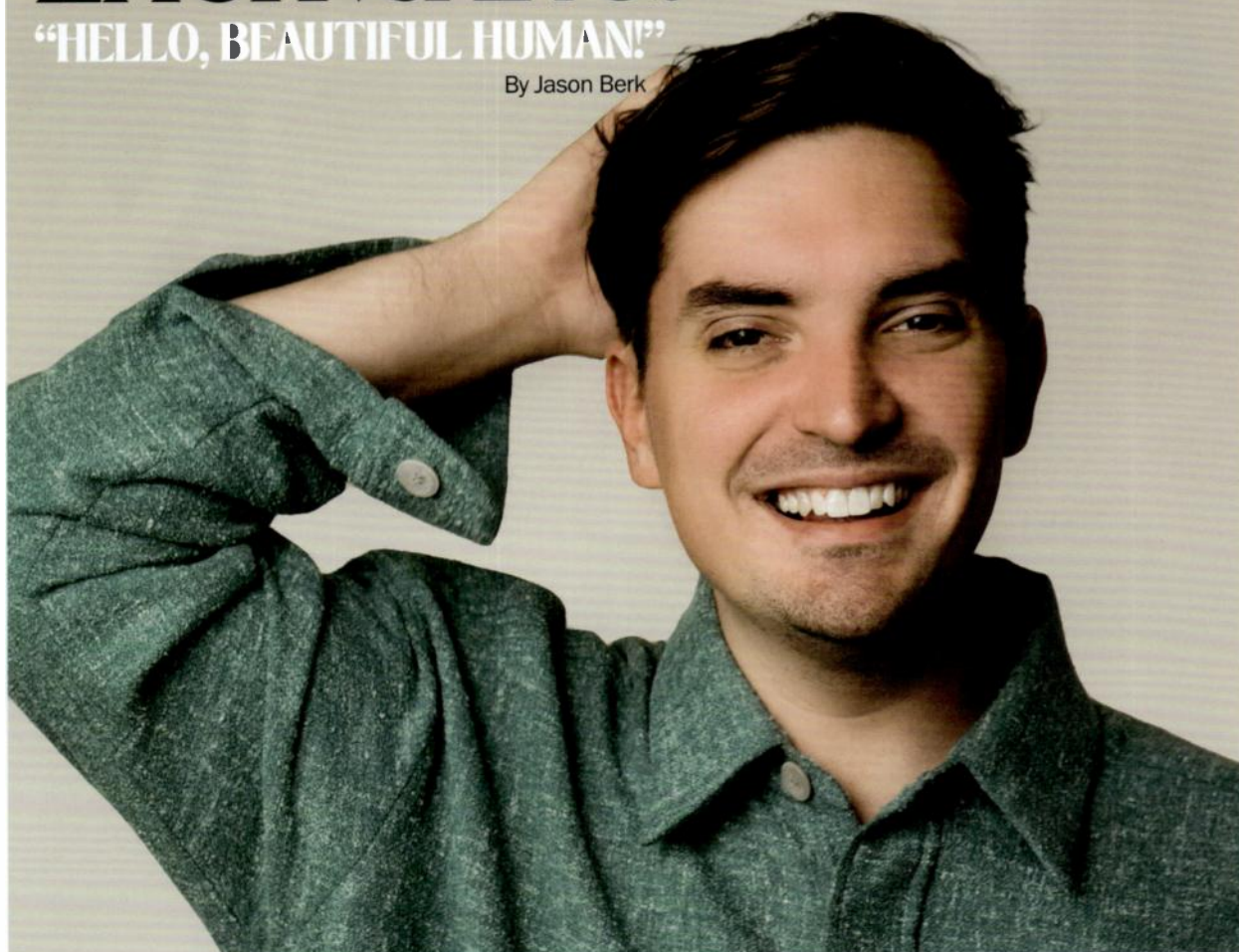
HEADLINE NORTH AMERICAN TOUR FALL 2025

AWAL

ZACH SANG:

“HELLO, BEAUTIFUL HUMAN!”

By Jason Berk



On June 26, 2015, the U.S. Supreme Court handed down its ruling on *Obergefell v. Hodges*, ensuring that same-sex couples had the constitutional right to marry. That night, Zach Sang took to the airwaves and opened his phone lines. For the next five hours, he took calls from listeners expressing everything from relief to rage. Sang remained steady throughout, often posing the question, “Where were you when you found out love won?”

Remembering it now, Sang tells me over Zoom, “Two phone calls would be positive. Then the next three would be, ‘Fuck you, faggot.’ Then the next two would be amazing. I got everything in one night. If you want to understand the landscape of America, hang out for a week with a radio host who has [nationwide] coverage, and you’ll get it.”

From a cultural perspective, America in 2025 looks a lot like it did in 2015—people document their lives on social media, Taylor Swift just wrapped a major world tour and *SNL* celebrated a milestone anniversary. But our top story today is that just below the surface, it’s a precarious time for civil rights. The Trump administration has aggressively targeted

such protections, leaving our most vulnerable communities exposed to real harm.

And yet Sang, an openly queer public figure with a national multimedia platform, continues to keep the focus on honesty, compassion and community.

Sang, now 32, began his broadcast career as a teenager in Wayne, New Jersey, hosting *Zach Sang & the Student Body* on the GOOM Radio internet service. His first syndicated program, *Zach Sang & the Gang*, launched in 2012 and was rebranded as *The Zach Sang Show* in 2016. A mix of live broadcast and pre-taped interviews with high-profile guests like BTS, Marcus Mumford, and Neil Young, the show aired on more than 70 stations across the U.S. and 13 in Canada before transitioning to digital platforms in 2022. After a run on Amazon’s now-defunct AMP app, the show found new life as a podcast distributed through Amazon Music, with full interviews also posted on YouTube—where Sang has racked up over 900,000 subscribers and more than 260 million views—and on TikTok, where he’s followed by more than 600,000 devoted fans.

No matter the format, his approach has remained

“I am deeply grateful for anyone who gives me time and energy, as time is the most valuable substance on Earth. I’m a fan of anybody who can turn their own experiences into something so deeply tangible [that] it shapes people’s lives and has a ripple effect that is immeasurable.”



consistent. His demeanor is calm yet inviting, his voice gentle but emphatic. Even over a video call, Sang is as warm, gracious, and present as he comes across on the air, navigating our conversation with ease while walking through the halls of his studio.

Sang’s guestlist reads like a VMA booker’s dream: **Selena Gomez, Billie Eilish, BLACKPINK, Justin Bieber, Zendaya, Miley Cyrus, Lil Nas X, Dua Lipa, Sam Smith** and **Normani**. He was the first host to play **Ed Sheeran’s** “Thinking Out Loud” on FM radio. **BTS** have appeared on the show numerous times—because, he says, his show gives them a safe space to share who they are as real people, not just K-pop idols.

Yet, he’s quick to clarify that those high-profile bookings aren’t what he’s chasing.

Although he now counts the likes of **Ariana Grande** as a close friend, he says, “My interview style is rooted in being someone who didn’t have friends growing up. I am deeply grateful for anyone who gives me time and energy, as time is the most valuable substance on Earth. I’m a fan of anybody who can turn their own experiences into something so deeply tangible [that] it shapes people’s lives and has a ripple effect that is immeasurable. But it’s also rooted in who I am, which is someone who never really had anyone to talk to. So the fact that **Tucker Wetmore** will come here today and give me an hour is crazy. Or **Cynthia Erivo** comes and hangs out for an hour and a half. That’s incredible.”

That deep gratitude—informed by humility—permeates everything Sang does. “The responsibility to be a vessel for the fans is something that weighs on me super-heavily,” he says. “I very much understand and feel the weight of what we do here, in a way that maybe is both a blessing and a curse.”

That sense of responsibility is also personal. Sang’s show has always been built on transparency. “I was always being honest, right? I’m queer. I date men,” he says. “But for a long time I kept it gender-neutral. I gave every detail—just not the gender.” That choice wasn’t about fear; it was about trust. “There was never a question of if I’d come out. The question was when,” Zach explains. “I knew there’d come a day when I’d tell the same story I always told, and I’d just say ‘he.’ And maybe that moment would matter.”

His loyal audience remembers where *they* were on June 20, 2020, when Sang tweeted, “i am queer af and proud. happy pride month to all! you are loved.” It was quiet and unceremonious, drawing just over 100 replies—nearly all of them messages of love and support.

A later exchange made a much bigger splash. During a 2024 interview on Sang’s show, rapper **NLE Choppa** discussed his feelings of support for the queer community, even expressing interest in performing at Pride events. Sang paused before replying, “As a gay man, that means a lot.” Choppa looked surprised, then lit up, responding with a heartfelt, “I didn’t know I was talking to you specifically,” punctuated by an enthusiastic, “Wassup gang!” The clip has since racked up nearly 2 million views on TikTok and been shared more than 30k times—met, once again, with overwhelming support.

To Sang, being out was a deliberate act of relationship-building. “I wanted the audience to know me first, to care about me first,” he says. “And then, when they learned this one piece of who I am, it wouldn’t change how they saw me—it would deepen it.”

He doesn’t downplay his queerness, but he doesn’t let it define the entirety of his public identity either. “I do think we’re moving toward a world where you’re not defined by your



sexuality," he says. "You're a thousand other things [along with] that. Queerness is part of me, but it's not the headline. It's not the whole story."

That balance—being fully out while not letting his sexuality consume the narrative—is part of what makes Sang so effective as a communicator. He greets his listeners with the same phrase every episode: "Hello, beautiful human." The singular form is intentional. "I've always spoken to the listener as one person," he explains. "I never addressed anybody as a group. So if you listened, it was like, 'Oh, he's talking to me.'"

Over the years, that greeting has turned into something more than a catchphrase. "You can't underestimate the power of a couple of words to somebody who really needs to hear it," he says. "I have messages from 60-year-old men battling addiction, from people who were suicidal, who said those words changed everything. When I say you don't know who the fuck is listening—you really don't."

Sang's driving principle is a belief that the work matters—not just for his listeners, but for the cultural moment. He built the show from the ground up, often with just one or two other people behind the scenes. "At our biggest, we had maybe four or five people. All severely underpaid," he says. "I had to

find the blessing in it. I cared first about the audience, second about the [programming director], third about sales."

It paid off. In the past, his show has pulled massive numbers in competitive markets, and these days, his YouTube interviews rack up millions of views. Even so, Sang isn't in it for the metrics. "I don't think I would've done any of this if I knew how hard it would be. But I had this blind confidence, this naïve belief that I was born to do this. And I still believe that."

Today, that belief feels like an act of resistance. In an environment where queerness is increasingly demonized and the clock is turning backward to the era when visibility was a liability, Sang continues to show up with pride. "Pride means honesty. It means truth. It means freedom. It means pure love, no matter what—no matter who," he says. "It's a scary time to be who you really are. But it's also the most important time to be prideful. Because the second you change who you are for somebody else? That's the second they win."

He pauses.

"We hold them in their place by staying as brave as humanly possible in the face of legitimate monsters. Pure love, no matter what." ■

When gay marriage was legalized, Sang took to the airwaves and opened his phone lines. For the next five hours, he took calls from listeners expressing everything from relief to rage. Sang remained steady throughout, often posing the question, "Where were you when you found out love won?"

PRIDE 2025

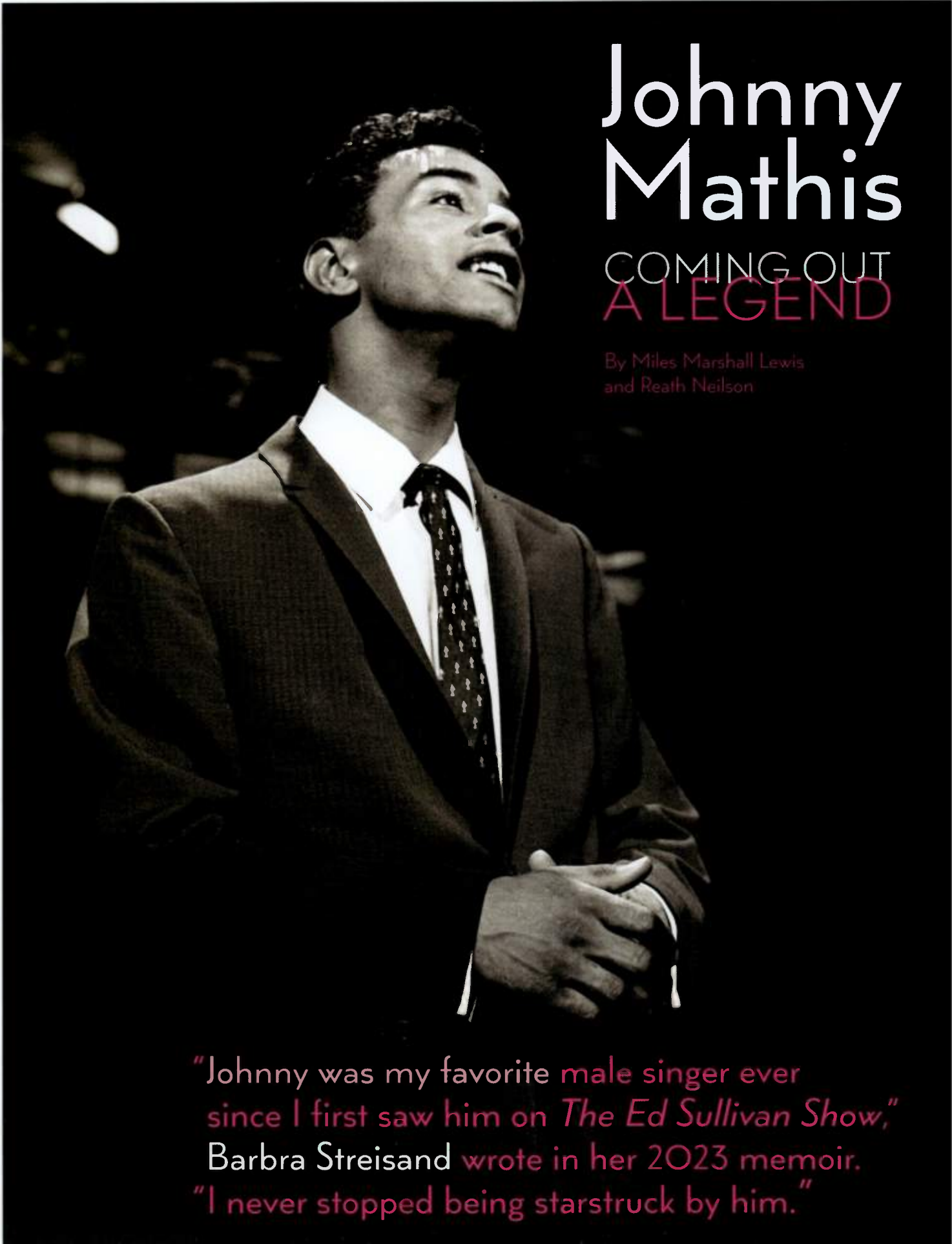
Now's the time to get *loud*.



Democracy: *Use it or lose it.*

HITS





Johnny Mathis

COMING OUT
A LEGEND

By Miles Marshall Lewis
and Reath Neilson

"Johnny was my favorite male singer ever since I first saw him on *The Ed Sullivan Show*," Barbra Streisand wrote in her 2023 memoir. "I never stopped being starstruck by him."

In 1957, 22-year-old **Johnny Mathis** made his debut on *The Ed Sullivan Show*. He was well received, and even the stodgy Sullivan seemed impressed. There was no hysteria, no rending of garments and the smooth tones of the velvet-voiced balladeer could be heard clearly by both the studio audience and those watching at home. (Seven years later...well, that's a story for another time.)

Just across the East River in Brooklyn, a teenage girl sat transfixed in front of her family's small, black-and-white set. At 15, **Barbra Joan Streisand** of Flatbush knew she had talent, but she'd not yet performed before an audience, let alone on television. Having been mesmerized by the velvet-voiced singer's sultry rendition of "It's Not for Me to Say," Streisand would recall the moment vividly in her 2023 memoir, *My Name is Barbra*. She describes herself "sitting in that cramped living room... and wanting desperately to be somebody, like him."

Four decades later, when she went into the studio to record her 1993 duets album, *Back to Broadway*, Streisand asked her teenage idol to join her on "I Have a Love/One Hand, One Heart."

In her book she describes it as one would a first crush: "Imagine what a thrill it was to sing with him! It felt as if I were fulfilling a childhood dream, and it brought back a rush of memories... watching him on our little Zenith TV. Johnny was my favorite male singer ever since I first saw him on *The Ed Sullivan Show*. I never stopped being starstruck by him."

The son of two domestic cooks from a small town in rural Texas, five-year-old John Royce Mathis moved with his family to San Francisco just before the outbreak of World War II. His father, Clem (whom Mathis still calls his "best pal"), had been a singer-pianist during the Vaudeville era. Quickly recognizing that his tiny son possessed a huge musical gift, he scraped together the money to purchase a used upright piano for the boy to learn how to play. Clem taught Johnny the scales while he was still teaching him how to ride a bicycle.

In 1955, **George Avakian**, the head of A&R for **Columbia Records'** Popular Music department, heard Mathis sing at San Francisco's 440 Club. After the show, he went straight to Western Union. The telegram he sent to Columbia's president was direct and prescient: "Have found phenomenal nineteen-year-old boy who could go all the way. Send blank contracts." The label released his eponymous debut album when Mathis was just 20 years old.

Even though Johnny Mathis looked and sounded like a heartthrob, unlike Elvis he was somehow never perceived as "sexual." In 1961, at a time when the word "gay" was still not used to mean anything other than "carefree," a *Variety* reviewer was purposefully opaque in describing Mathis as "a romantic with a style which gets to the females and doesn't antagonize the males."

Long before he would become a pop-music legend, Johnny Mathis transcended racial barriers simply by never acknowledging them. Many fans who heard his voice before seeing his face were surprised to learn that he was black. But that discovery didn't stop them from buying his records. "It's Not for Me to Say" made it all the way to #5 on the singles chart in February of 1957. Later that same year, his signature ballad, "Chances Are," made Johnny Mathis a household name.

In the '50s and well into the '60s, the hits continued to roll in for Mathis. His live television performance of "Wild Is the Wind" (from the movie of the same name)

at the 1958 Oscars ceremony was almost unprecedented for an African American artist in the Jim Crow era.

Although never a civil rights "activist," Mathis did perform at the 1963 "Salute to Freedom" concert in Birmingham, Alabama, alongside Ray Charles and Nina Simone. Later, he helped raise money for the 1964 March on Washington, where Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. would share his dream for a more just America.

But sexual orientation was a subject Johnny Mathis never addressed publicly until a 1982 interview for *Us*—and then only inadvertently. Believing he was off the record, Mathis said, "Homosexuality is a way of life that I've grown accustomed to." His statement, just as the public was beginning to hear of the emergence of a "gay cancer," was assumed by most in the industry to be career suicide. Yet despite receiving death threats in the immediate aftermath of his "coming out," Mathis continued to tour and record as if nothing had changed.

Remarkably, nothing had. Even after Mathis' controversial interview hit the stands in June of '82, the producers of a new NBC sitcom, *Family Ties*, still chose to use "Without Us," a duet track recorded four years earlier with R&B singer **Deniece Williams**, as the show's theme song.

In 2017, Mathis opened up about his inadvertent coming out to CBS *Sunday Morning*'s Nancy Giles, saying he was more concerned that [the interview] "bothered other people." With his trademark nonchalance, the octogenarian smilingly declared, "I'm a kid at heart... I come from San Francisco. It's not unusual to be gay in San Francisco, so I thought it was maybe a little bit blown out of proportion."

In recent years, Mathis has become increasingly more candid with both the press and public: "I was [always] comfortable with my sexuality," he told *The Washington Post* in 2018. "I had a talk with my dad when I was about sixteen or seventeen. He said, 'Son, I'm your dad. I know these things.'" The singer now expresses a bit of regret for avoiding the question of sexual orientation for so long. "It doesn't hurt my parents," he told the *Post*'s **Karen Heller**. "They knew from the beginning. My friends knew. It was the times. And time marches on. And now it doesn't matter."

In April 2025, after his appearance at the **Bergen Performing Arts Center** in Englewood, New Jersey, Mathis announced his retirement from touring. Dubbed "The Voice of Romance" when he was only 22, Mathis will celebrate his 90th birthday in September.

Throughout her own extraordinary career, there's been no greater champion for the LGBTQ community than Barbra Streisand. Now, during Pride, it's fitting to hear her describe the musical and cultural legacy of the man whose voice stole her heart, a full decade before she would steal ours.

Describing Mathis to the *Post* in 2018, Ms. Streisand sounded much like the teenage girl she was back in Brooklyn: "There are a number of good singers, a smaller handful of truly great singers, and then there's Johnny Mathis." ●



UTA's Zoe Rae Williamson



"[Trixie said,] It's gonna feel like you basically threw up Pepto Bismol at the venue."

BY REATH NEILSON

Zoe Rae Williamson of UTA knows whom to hand the mic to. More importantly, she also knows *why*. From St. Vincent to Spoon, from Arlo Parks to Big Freedia, the queer voices she amplifies matter to her personally as well as professionally. Williamson also books Pride and LGBTQ+ events for UTA, creating invaluable safe spaces in these turbulent times. In fact, her love of building community is what drew her to become an agent in the first place.

We spoke with Ms. Williamson about one client in particular, Trixie Mattel, about whom she says, "the possibilities are truly boundless." Nikos Kazoleas, Mattel's UTA representative in the U.K., couldn't agree more, adding, "The sky is the limit for Trixie."

HITS caught up with Zoe Williamson shortly after Trixie's breakthrough DJ set at Coachella.

Do you think that Pride is particularly Important in 2025?

The short answer, of course, is yes. It's particularly important because with increased visibility on the LGBTQIA+ community, there is also vulnerability. There is a reaction that we see from the administration and from local, federal and state government that makes representation and community-gathering essential.

I would also argue that the *business* of Pride is important this year, as we read articles about corporations and brands no longer sponsoring Pride events that they were long-term sponsors of. The fact that in those cases, artists have still been able to confirm, announce and eventually perform at those events shows the strength of the community. It also provides a lot of hope for people attending the events, that they still happen without corporate sponsorship. We can still benefit the community and the Pride organizations that put events on.

Much of your career has been spent elevating LGBTQ+ artists, particularly in the context of Pride. Could you talk about what drew you to Pride in the first place?

I've been at UTA for nine years. When I first started, Pride was mainly handled by organizers with long-term relationships with agents and organizations. Over time, agencies started to realize that they were going to need a point person who handles specific festivals or colleges. The Pride landscape is quite specific. It's attached to local organizations and boards with specific budgets that are not in the music industry every day. Also, the business has grown exponentially over the past five years.

At the same time, as a queer person, I've always cared about the community. It just made a lot of sense to step up and be able to center events and help to advise clients on what the best opportunities are for them.

Have you talked to your queer clients about what going on the road might be like for them in 2025?

Yeah, this comes up. These conversations are case-by-case. If we're leaving the scope of North America and entering global touring, we must know what the laws are in every country. We have to be aware of whether or not identity is a risk in and of itself. When it comes to specifically the United States, yes, we do advise. We ensure that teams are well prepared and understand the landscape. We had to do this very recently, when drag bans were happening, for artists like Trixie Mattel, Bob the Drag Queen, Katya and Monet Exchange. We had to get a very quick understanding of where the legal and political boundaries were in specific cities.

On a positive note, let me say that for every person I don't agree with, I can immediately find at least five who are aligned with what I want, which is freedom, safety and embracing the LGBTQIA+ Community. There will always be more people in music that want to see these communities highlighted, supported and protected. But we need to ensure that shows happen in a safe way. What we often find is that artists especially want to perform to offer space to the communities that have been targeted by the local and state government. They often partner with local organizations, like the Ally Coalition, Plus1 or Headcount. It's an exceptionally brave thing that so many artists do. Creating an opportunity for community-building, strength and empowerment is essential.

What's it like working with Trixie Mattel?

Our job is to help artists realize their goals. We have been able to help build an exceptional touring business for Trixie



Williamson (l) with Darcy Briks, spouse of UTA's Jonathan Briks

because she had a vision. She fell in love with DJing and started working with Mateo Segade, who has helped her create what is now her Solid Pink Disco tour. Half of my job is respecting and trusting her instincts as a businesswoman, a creator, and an artist because she's so knowledgeable of what will make her fans happy.

That's where Solid Pink Disco came up. I remember she said a line that was essentially, "It's gonna feel like you basically threw up Pepto Bismol at the venue, all the girls are dancing and we're having the time of our lives." In a weird way, that's kind of all we needed, because we thought, "Okay, great. I know exactly what you're talking about. That is a ticket that sells. That is a concept that makes sense. That's a really fun night."

Her Coachella set looked incredible.

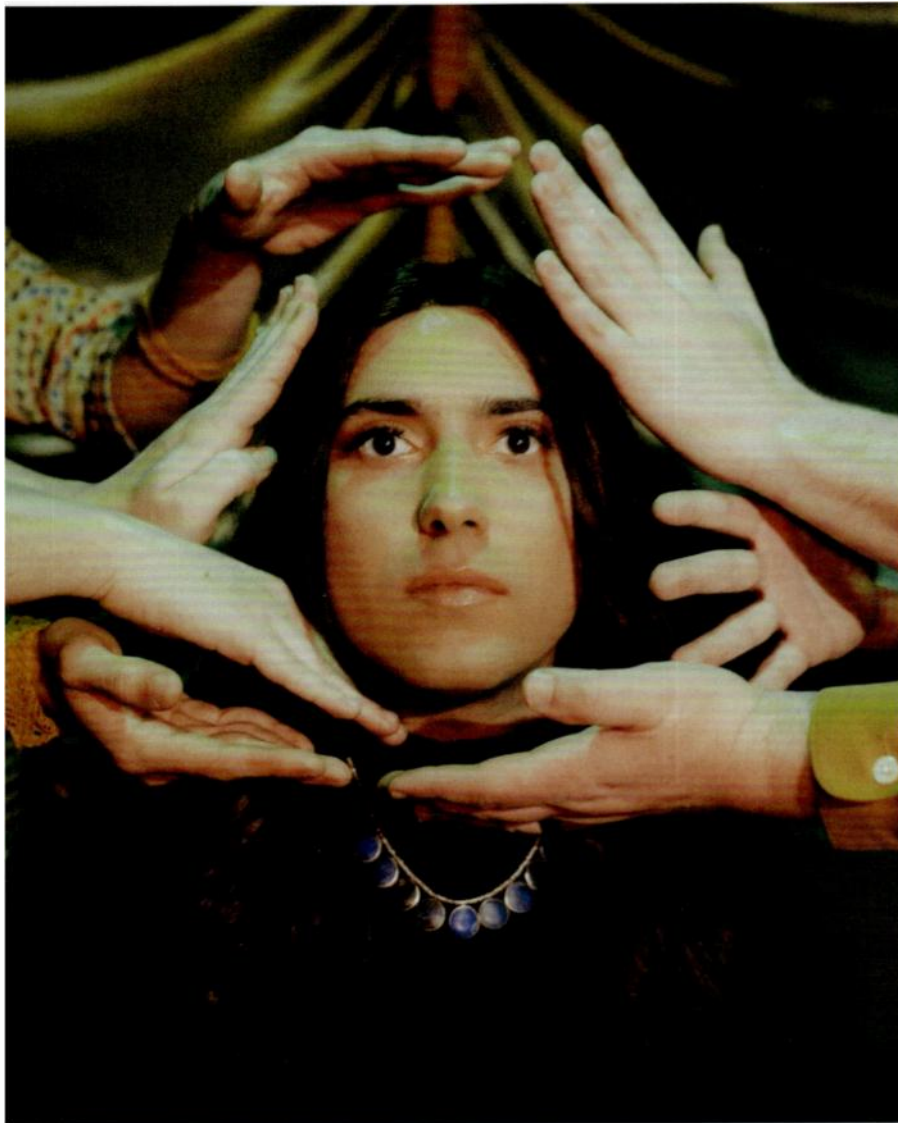
It really was! The Coachella team, and especially [the festival's EDM-focused] Do LaB program, identified that Trixie DJing was going to be an incredible event. and of course that was correct. She is offering something that very, very few artists do. There's nothing simple about being in drag. It takes a very long time. It's a lot of hard work and there is a performance aspect to it that every respected queen has on their own. How Trixie puts together a DJ set is different because there are elements of that drag performance in the set. It's beautiful to watch because you see what it does to her audience. People that think this is going to be a DJ set are excited to hear the music, then they get a performance aspect to it that they were not expecting.

With Trixie, the possibilities are truly boundless. She does digital comedy, short-form unscripted, scripted, publishing, cosmetics, touring, music, recording—the list goes on. I would argue that's because of who *she* is and what *drag* is. Drag is comedy. Drag is performance. Drag is digital. Drag is fashion. Drag is makeup. Drag is live events. Drag is music. ■

"...With increased visibility on the LGBTQIA+ community, there is also vulnerability. There is a reaction that we see from the administration and from local, federal and state government that makes representation and community gathering essential."

RAINBOW KITTEN SURPRISE: Titrating the Trauma

By Deborah Sprague



Appalachian State University may not seem like the kind of place where a shot would be fired in music's gender revolution, but alumnae Rainbow Kitten Surprise have been doing just that—thanks to charismatic singer Ela Melo, one of the most prominent trans voices on the alt-rock scene.

Melo, who co-founded the band a decade ago, began her transition in 2021, three years after coming out as gay in the lyrics of “Hide,” one of the most upfront songs on the band’s 2018 album, *How to: Friend, Love, Freefall*. Her public reveal in March of 2022 was surprisingly simple for such a complex decision: She wrote, “Over the past couple of years, I’ve been doing some major soul searching in the pursuit of my authentic self. I’m happy to share with you that I am trans. My pronouns are she/her.”

The singer, who went through treatment for bipolar disorder during the hiatus that spawned her transition, says, “It took me 30 years to come to terms with it and understand what was going on in my life. I like to say, my life before transition and post-transition is like black-and-white versus not only color, but [also] HD.”

That’s evident on the 2024 album, *Love Hate Music Box*, RKS’s first since the emergence of Ela. Rather than concentrate on the storm that she’d gone through to get to the finished set, Ela allows herself some moments to appreciate the peace that followed. It’s reflected in the enveloping, maximalist atmosphere of the album, which features an appearance by ally Kacey Musgraves.

It’s not that she ignores the darkness, but as she told *Consequence* last year, “My thing is figuring out how to titrate with trauma; how to talk about it without re-traumatizing yourself. There are good ways to talk about it, and bad ways to talk about it. In my opinion, this record is like titrating out of that darker place.”

Ela acknowledges the current political climate has some impact on her personally, saying, “How can you be unaffected when things are so fucked up for you and for people you care about?” Still, she maintains that the inner workings of Rainbow Kitten Surprise haven’t been that affected on a day-to-day basis by the harsh winds prevailing around them.

“I can’t say that things have been that much different for us because of [my transition],” she says. “Getting treatment for my mental issues has been more important. I know a lot of people have my back. I’ve never looked at this whole thing as me against the world. It’s me and all the people who care about me against the world.” ■





Thomas Krottinger

PROUD SURVIVOR

By Elizabeth Daubel

The music industry might seem like a jungle sometimes, but Sony Music Publishing SVP of Creative A&R Thomas Krottinger has some serious survival skills. The exec recently (albeit temporarily) swapped life among the apex music industry predators for the actual wilds of the Mamanuca Islands, where he competed on the CBS' reality competition *Survivor*. Trading in the comforts of home and husband in Los Angeles for a televised adventure in the withering heat of Fiji is a gutsy move.

And a chat with the 34-year-old Texas native reveals that his gutsy instincts are the North Star that led him to sign the likes of Olivia Rodrigo, Dove Cameron, Caroline Polachek and Addison Rae, among others.

Seen discussing how to Survive a mention in our publication are (l-r) Krottinger, artist Leland and Sony Pub's Katie Welle and Tyler Trouillot

Did you learn anything on *Survivor* that translates to your job in the music industry?

In all my pregame press I was asked what prepared me, and I would joke the music industry is a viper pit, right? However, something that was helpful was my ability to listen and understand someone else's motivation and point of view, because I do that all with my artists.

How did you land on the publishing side of the biz?

I was working as an assistant in the music department at CAA, but instead of wanting to talk about tours and connecting artists in the film and television space, I was always dying to talk about who artists should write their songs with, who they should get in the studio with and what inspired them. I'd gotten to know Dr. Luke and Beka Tischker, so when I found out Beka needed an A&R assistant, I tricked her into hiring me.

When you're considering a new signing, what's something that brings you to the table?

The success I've had has always been from relationships and gut instinct. I don't ever want to be in a transactional relationship where we're not engaged creatively and emotionally. When I get that *feeling* about the music—that's what brings me to the table.

As a gay man, does Pride feel different than it has in years past?

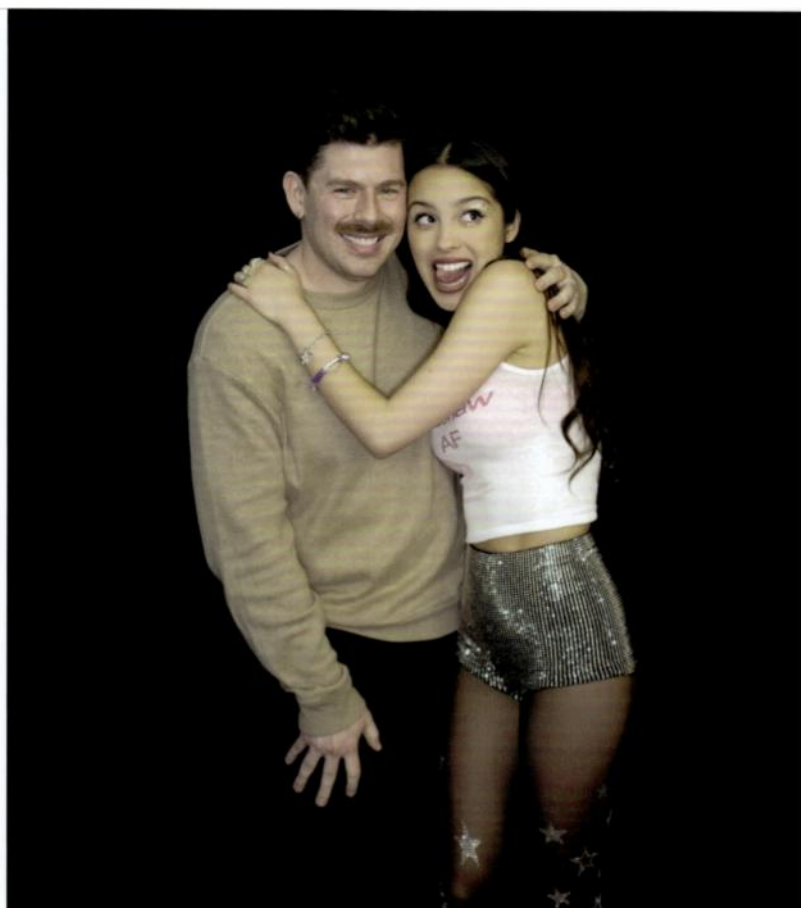
There's never been a more vital time to be yourself and be open and uncompromising. A lot of things are going on in our country and the world, but the universal thing is, people respond to honesty and truth. Whatever letter of our beautiful LGBTQ alphabet you identify as, there are moments when we feel safer—and moments when we feel less safe. Regardless, when you're unabashedly honest, people respond. It's hard to hate someone you know.

What's next that you're excited about?

I got to sign Addison with my colleague Scout Easley, who is the best A&R person we have globally. Her new album "*Addison*" came out on Columbia Records on June 6—during Pride Month—and it's just amazing. Seeing her write all these amazing songs is truly inspiring. She has a point of view. She has something to say. I can't express how much I love Addison Rae. She's the truth.

What would you describe as the creative strategy at Sony Publishing?

From Jon Platt down, everyone is so aligned with the mission of putting our creatives and our songwriters first, and every day I get to learn from our new president, Katie Welle; I affectionately call her "the sniper," because when she makes a move it's always the perfect one. The music is always first, and *that's* the strategy. ■



With Olivia Rodrigo

"There's never been a more vital time to be yourself and be open and uncompromising. A lot of things are going on in our country and the world, but the universal thing is, people respond to honesty and truth."

Chris Chambers

BY MILES MARSHALL LEWIS

Introducing The Chamber Group CEO Chris Chambers at the annual Native Son Awards event in New York City, where the achievements of Black gay/queer men are recognized and celebrated, Dr. Isolde Brielmaier, the chief strategy officer at Work of Art Holdings, declared, “[Chris] consistently finds ways to pay it forward, to lift up others—listening, guiding, celebrating all of our achievements, big and small, and is working on doing that for himself.

The openly gay founder of a boutique PR, marketing and events company representing Mariah Carey, USHER, Naomi Campbell and Future, among others, the Bronx-born Chambers has also held posts at Interscope Records, Arista Records, Sony BMG and more, spanning over 30 years.

Chambers spoke with *HITS* by Zoom from his Manhattan office.

Tell me about the formation of the Chamber Group.

I was in the label system for years, worked at Interscope Records for six or seven years. From there, I joined L.A. Reid when he took over Arista Records and pretty much was there until there was a bigger shake-up under SonyBMG. L.A. left, Clive Davis took over, and Arista was further folded into the BMG system. But they created a role where I was SVP of communications and artist development.

I stayed in that role for three years. I had learned and grown within the record label system, but I still definitely wanted to challenge myself [further]. Even if I stayed in PR, could I move into film or fashion? Before I knew it, I had a year left on my contract, and I worked up until the last day. They didn’t want me to leave completely, so they created a consulting situation for me. I was still working with USHER, Outkast, and a lot of other music-related projects, and that’s how The Chamber Group was formed. I started hiring a full-time staff and really building out the company. That was in 2006.

How important is Pride Month to you, particularly this year?

I love the fact that the music community has grown in their mindset. There’s a lot more understanding and a lot more knowledge now. I love the fact that faces like me still exist within the music community. I feel there’s a sense of respect for what you do, what you bring to the table, more than [your] sexuality. It is a part of who I am, but in the environment of the music business, I feel that people first respect me for my career achievements.



“We also have been schooled and taught by our ancestors. It’s always about having the mindset of never letting the roadblocks hinder you, not allowing people’s prejudices to derail you.”

As we [celebrate] Pride Month, I feel like I didn't have to build a character around me. I show up in my authentic self.

I think that in these times, it's so important for all of us, [regardless of] gender, sexuality, race, where we have to show up being true to who we are—not hiding or feeling like you have to morph into someone else. I feel that [we need to] teach and educate people for better understanding. I think showing up in your authentic self helps bring that knowledge, helps people to have a little bit more understanding of what they don't know.

What do you think about the evolution of tolerance in the music industry, from discussing “the gay rapper” in the '90s to openly out rappers like Doechi in 2025?

Well, there's really no more “outing” anyone. I had this conversation with someone recently. We came from an era where, “Oh, *US* magazine just outed someone,” or “Wendy Williams just outed someone on the radio.” But the whole idea of an artist who happens to be gay or bisexual? I don't think that's really a story anymore. People who show up now are fueling us with information in terms of who they are and what they're about as an artist.

I don't know if sexuality really moves the needle anymore. I think artists are saying, “This is who I am. Period.” You may discover elements of what an artist is about *through* their art. Times have really changed compared to the early '90s—I don't know if the phrase “coming out” is even *used* anymore.

Talk to me about your personal journey in terms of “Inviting In.”

To be honest, I don't know if I ever felt like I had to. But it wasn't something I was hiding or not honest about. I always just showed up as Chris Chambers. People may have thought, “He's gay.” And we just moved on from there.

With my family, yes. There was a period as a young adult when I felt like I wanted to have that conversation with my family because I wanted them to be privy to all of Chris. They saw one part—the son, the grandson, the nephew. I was fortunate. I came out to my family in my late 20s. My Jamaican family, they were totally accepting, loving and very nurturing. It was honestly such a good feeling to know I am loved unconditionally. [After that] it has never been an issue in my life.

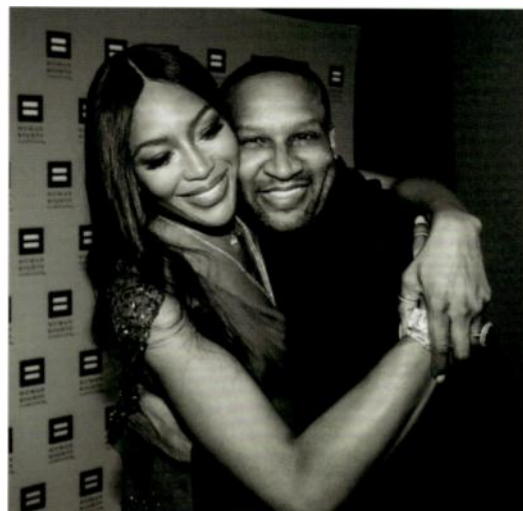
From a business standpoint, maybe there have been people that didn't want to do business with me because of my sexuality. But I never felt that was overtly thrown at me. Again, I'm not saying that does not exist, because we all know that it does. But I've always looked at my sexuality as a piece of who I am, not the whole picture.

Given our current climate, what do you think the industry's best response is to attacks against DEI?

As a Black man in this country, even [before] DEI, I came up believing that I needed to work harder. I have to show up in a certain way and think about how I step out of my front door every day as a Black man. It's an armor that most people don't really understand, [but it's] how we live. It's always been work.

But we also have been schooled and taught by our ancestors. It's always about having the mindset of never letting the roadblocks hinder you, not allowing people's prejudices to derail you, not allowing a certain mindset to have you lose track of your goals. I feel like I'm my own DEI. I was taught that I can't afford to be the “B” or “C” student. I have to aim for “A.”

The mindset is, “It has to be great.” That is how I was raised in my little Jamaican family. ■



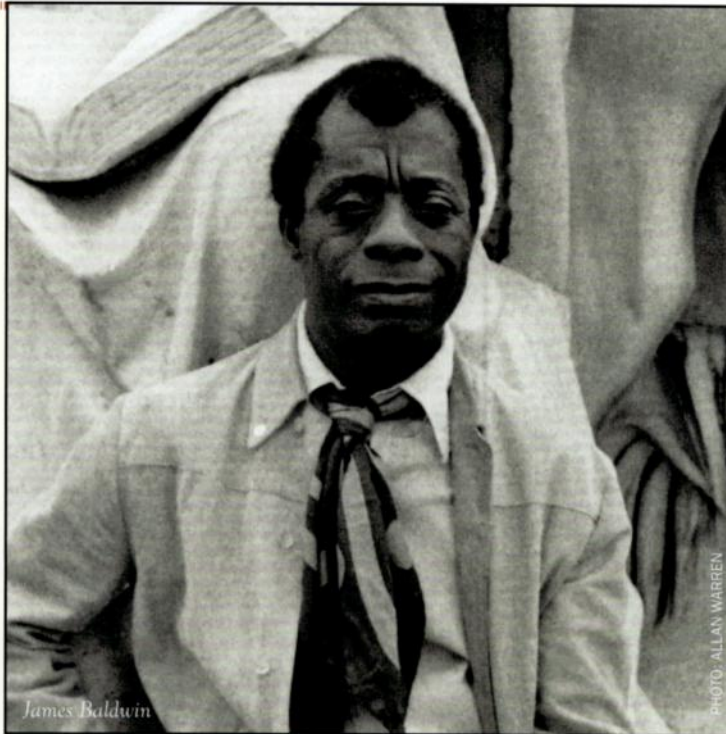
From top: Stylist/fashion editor Yashua Simmons, USHER and Chambers; Chambers with Erykah Badu; with Naomi Campbell

Past is Prologue

David Bender

ON AUGUST 5, 1963,
a group of artists from around the country
traveled down to Birmingham, Alabama, to
perform at a “Salute to Freedom” benefit concert
held to raise funds in support of the upcoming
March on Washington.

Three weeks later, 250,000 Americans would gather
in front of the Lincoln Memorial to hear **Dr. Martin
Luther King, Jr.** deliver his “I Have a Dream” speech:
“I have a dream,” he intoned, “that one day this
nation will rise up and live out the true meaning
of its creed.”



DR. KING WAS IN ATTENDANCE ON THAT SWELTERING NIGHT IN ALABAMA, as was acclaimed author (and closeted gay man) James Baldwin, who thundered from the stage, “This is a living, visible view of the breakdown of a hundred years of slavery. It means that white man and black can work and live together. History is forcing people... to stop victimizing each other.”

Among the performers were Ray Charles, Nina Simone and twenty-eight-year-old singing sensation Johnny Mathis (also a closeted gay man).

R&B and gospel music filled the Miles College auditorium, and the show went on well past midnight, with no sign that the crowd wanted it to stop. At almost 1am, Mathis began to sing “I Got a Lot of Livin’ to Do,” and a throng of his fans rushed the stage. Unable to sustain the weight, the makeshift structure collapsed and the lights went out, pitching the auditorium into darkness. Several people were injured and needed to be taken to the hospital. But none of that stopped the show. During the power outage, a gospel choir led the audience in a rousing chorus of “We Shall Overcome.”

Mark Twain said, “History doesn’t repeat itself, but it often rhymes.”

The discordant notes we’re hearing today are not music to the ear. They are guttural sounds of anger and rage. Despite the hope to which James Baldwin gave voice on that long ago summer night, Americans are still victimizing each other in 2025, and they’re doing it in ways that recall not just the Jim Crow south, but the War Between the States and the American Revolution.

HERE’S THE STATE OF PRIDE IN THE UNITED STATES IN 2025.

These are not opinions. *They are facts.*

- **AS OF LAST MONTH**, according to *The New York Times*, the Administration has scrapped more than \$800 million worth of research into the health of LGBTQ+ people, abandoning studies of cancers and viruses that tend to affect members of sexual minority groups and setting back efforts to defeat a resurgence of sexually transmitted infections.

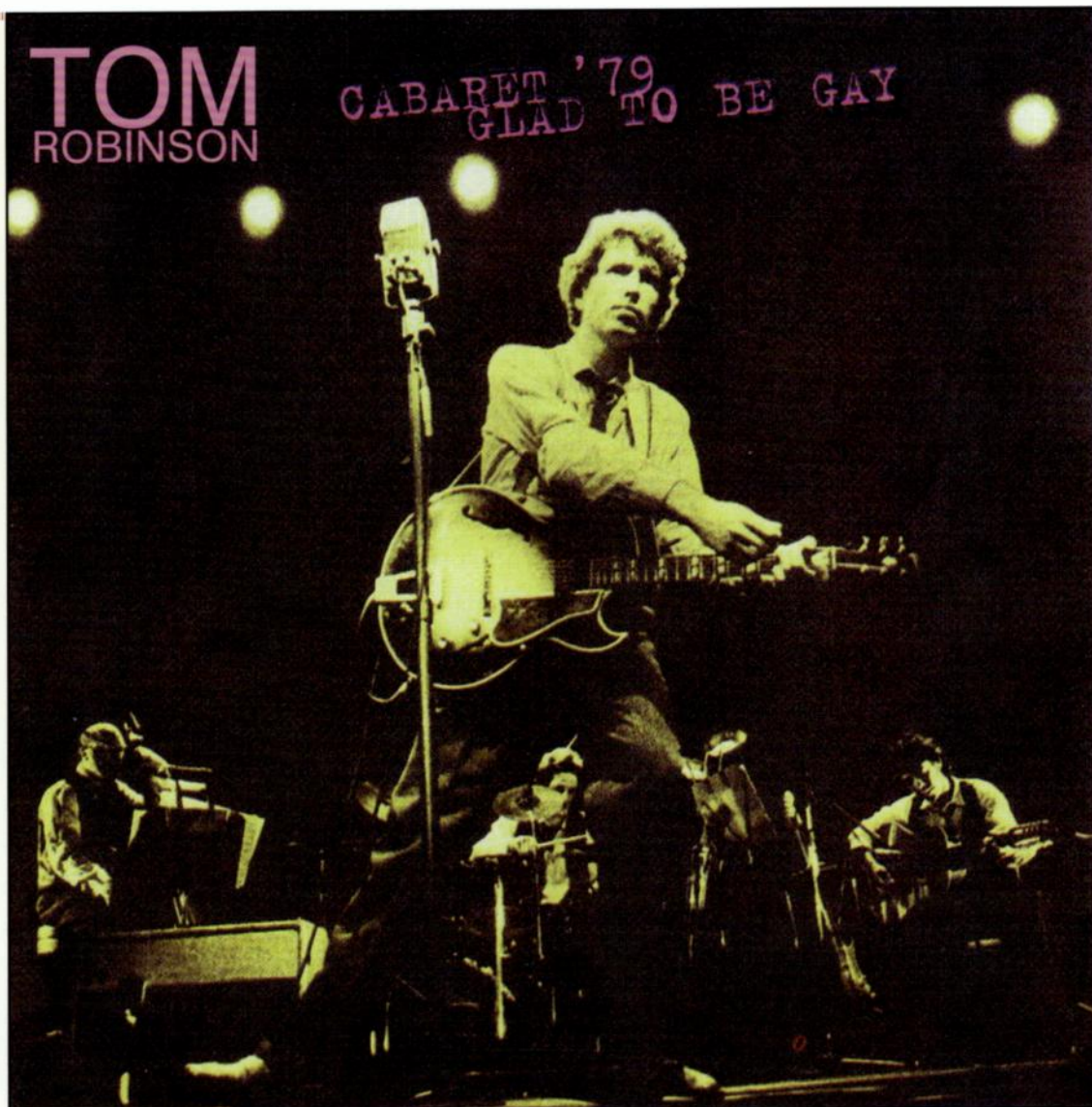
- **OF THE 669 GRANTS** that the National Institutes of Health had canceled in whole or in part as of early May, at least 323—nearly half of them—related to LGBTQ+ health.

- **THE N.I.H. JUSTIFIED** the cuts by telling scientists that their LGBTQ+ work “no longer effectuates agency priorities.” In some cases, the agency said canceled research had been “based on gender identity,” which gave rise to “unscientific” results that ignored “biological realities.”

- **“CERTAIN PEOPLE** in the United States shouldn’t be getting treated as second-class research subjects,” Simon Rosser, a University of Minnesota professor whose lab was studying cancer in LGBTQ+ people before significant funding was pulled, told *The Times*. “That, I think, is anyone’s definition of bigotry,” added Rosser. “Bigotry in science.”

- **ACCORDING TO THE TREVOR PROJECT**, LGBTQ+ young people are more than four times as likely to attempt suicide than their peers. It estimates that *every 45 seconds, at least one LGBTQ+ young person in the U.S. attempts to take their own life.* Whether it’s anti-LGBTQ+ bullying, or feeling that they do not have support at home, or the increasing volume of anti-LGBTQ+ laws and harsh political rhetoric, there are far too many compounding mental-health-risk factors being hurled at LGBTQ+ youth across the United States in 2025.

BUT this president of the United States is not Abraham Lincoln. This president’s creed is “With Charity toward none and Malice for all.” His history does not repeat, nor does it rhyme. It erases.



HAPPY PRIDE.

When I sat down to write this essay, I might have turned to the words and music of the many LGBTQ+ artists whose work has inspired me as an activist.

It could have been Tom Robinson's anthemic "(Sing If You're) Glad to Be Gay," a song I heard for the first time when I was taking my very first tentative steps toward coming out (a young female friend in high school asked me in hushed tones, concern evident on her face, "Are they sure?"). Or it could have been Lady Gaga's "Born This Way," the song that inspired me to create and produce *Visible: Out on Television*, a documentary series about the power of LGBTQ+ images to change hearts and minds.

Instead, it's been the spoken words of Bruce Springsteen, a straight ally, that have struck the deepest chord in me this Pride. They epitomize the defiant spirit of Stonewall, they honor the joyous legacy of Harvey Milk, and they remind us of the promise of Dr. King: "The arc of the moral universe bends slowly, but it bends towards justice."

Last month, The Boss launched his *Land of The Free and Home*

of the Brave tour in Manchester, England. He interspersed his set with jeremiads aimed directly at the Occupant-in-Chief, aka He-Who-Would-Be-King:

"In my home, the America I love, the America I've written about that has been a beacon of hope and liberty for 250 years, is currently in the hands of a corrupt, incompetent, and treasonous administration. Tonight, we ask all who believe in democracy and the best of our American experience to rise with us. Raise your voices against authoritarianism and let freedom ring."

Throughout this issue, we've tried to ask everyone the same question: "How does Pride feel to you in 2025?" The answers ranged from discouraged to defiant, but no one dismissed the question out of hand. It was obviously something they'd already considered.

If there was one constant in their answers, it was how Pride has never mattered more than it does right now, even if the reasons *why* it matters are frightening to some, a call to conscience to others and universally infuriating across the board.

There was Trixie Mattel's righteous screed: "Lately, I've been thinking about the people who fought Don't Ask, Don't Tell and



PHOTO: ELVERT BARNES

Prop 8—that era of activism. Those people must be having the worst kind of déjà vu while watching all these things be snatched away. They're like, 'Didn't we do this?'"

There was the optimism of **Melissa Etheridge**: "We're here and it's even worse, like we thought it would be. Yet, I've seen so much in my life. I've seen so much good. I was at the Berlin Wall when it was coming down... and I saw what *people* can do. I have a deep belief and hope in the human spirit to do what feels better."

We have **Gigi Perez**'s determination to be joyously defiant of bigotry: "It's **OUR** month! We've gotta celebrate! I saw something about how queer joy is an act of rebellion in itself. Our trans brothers and sisters are being denied the right to exist by a vile administration that hides behind weaponizing Christianity... It's so important to celebrate who we are and be loud as fuck, because we are not going anywhere."

And the infectiously affirmative view of **Brandi Carlile** and **Catherine Shepherd**, who believe that "resistance is irresistible."

These are the four words of Bruce Springsteen that define Pride 2025 for me: "THIS. IS. HAPPENING. NOW." And that brings us back to The Boss.

Despite echoing **Thomas Paine**'s call to conscience and common sense, despite invoking the anguished plea of **Woody Guthrie** to "Tear the Fascists Down" and despite his own righteous anger at the beleaguered state of the country he holds so dear to his heart, in the end, Springsteen found hope. He found it by recalling the words of a gay American from out of the past, a passionate patriot-poet, much

like himself:

"The America that I've sung to you about for 50 years is real, and regardless of its faults, is a great country with a great people. So we'll survive this moment. Now, I have hope because I believe in the truth of what the great American writer James Baldwin said. He said, 'In this world, there isn't as much humanity as one would like. But there's enough.' Let's pray."

As I write this, we are only three days away from what will have been an inflection point in American history. The events of June 14 may well have determined the future of civil rights protections and basic freedoms for LGBTQ+ citizens, if not all Americans.

POSTSCRIPT: JUNE 13, 2025

As you're reading this, we will have witnessed an unprecedented (and profoundly un-American) Soviet-style military parade in the streets of Washington, DC.

150 military vehicles, including 28 tanks and 28 armored troop carriers, will have barreled down Constitution Avenue in a jingoistic display of "peace through strength," as the homophobic Speaker of the House, **Mike Johnson**, describes the use of military force on domestic soil. Johnson has long prayed that "God's will" will replace the foundational American principle of the separation of Church and State.

If this repression remains unchecked, there can be no mystery about where all this is heading.



Bruce Springsteen

PHOTO: SHIRLEY FORREST

As in other theocratic and authoritarian regimes like Iran, Russia and China, openly LGBTQ+ Americans will have real reason to fear for their lives, simply by the fact of their existence. This was true in Nazi Germany, where pink armbands were used to publicly identify gays, subjecting them to lives of daily terror. The Nazis used “sexual deviants” for dangerous medical experimentations. Of course they did, as they were considered to be even less human than laboratory rats.

Yet, as Springsteen and Baldwin remind us, it is also possible that this past Saturday, we will have seen an unprecedented uprising of Americans, in the form of millions of citizens having taken to the streets for massive “No Kings Day” protests timed to coincide with the jingoistic military theater on display in the Capital.

Yet, as I write these words, one thing is entirely predictable:

By the time you read this, the rubber will have met the road. The massive rubber that makes up the treads of tank tires will have destroyed the streets of Washington, D.C., as those roads were not designed to bear their enormous weight. No matter. This “efficient”

use of \$45 million of government money (our money) will have rewarded us with bread and circus, for which no price tag is too high to pay in vainglorious service to an emperor.

By the time this article is in print, we will know something else as well, something that may be real cause for hope.

We will know how many rubber souls of millions upon millions of individual citizens, in all 50 states, will have marched in peaceful protest against the onset of tyranny.

Whatever has happened, it is still essential to remember daily what the noted scholar of authoritarian history, Professor Timothy Snyder, wrote in his book *On Tyranny*:

“Be calm when the unthinkable arrives. Modern tyranny is terror management. Remember that authoritarians exploit [fear] in order to consolidate power. The sudden disaster that requires the end of checks and balances, the dissolution of opposition parties, the suspension of freedom of expression, the right to a fair trial and so on, is the oldest trick in the Hitlerian book. Do not fall for it.”

To quote the Bard of Asbury Park, “LET US PRAY.” ●

STAYING IN THE FIGHT: DAVID BENDER

DAVID BENDER, who curated this issue and wrote much of its content, is an acclaimed author, activist and media personality whom Rachel Maddow once described as her “political guru.” A founder of the **Human Rights Campaign (HRC)**, he was the first West Coast contributing editor for *George* magazine (at the behest of JFK Jr.) and is the author of nine books, including (with rock legend David Crosby) *Stand and Be Counted: A History of Artist Activism*. He also conceived and co-produced the Apple TV+ series *Visible: Out on Television*, along with Academy Award-nominated producer David Permut. In March, he created and produced a viral video of John Lithgow reading “20 Lessons from On Tyranny,” based on Professor Timothy Snyder’s best-selling book.

Last November 5, just as the polls were closing on Election Day, David Bender received a long-awaited kidney transplant. In the definition of cognitive dissonance, he awoke from anesthesia the next morning only to be informed of the election results. Mr. Bender uttered an Anglo-Saxon epithet and promptly fell back into unconsciousness.

Says David, “To everyone who’s been a part of this effort, from the artists who graciously opened their hearts and shared their words to the extraordinary team at *HITS* who believe that pride comes from making a difference in the world, I’m deeply grateful to you. And, on a personal note, I dedicate this issue to Andrea Helling Weidman (1955-2025), the beautiful rose in my window box, now and always.”



HITS June 16, 2025

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NOISEN

NOISEMAKERS

THE INDUSTRY FOLK *showcased here haven't appeared often in our publication—and after this mortifying experience, they probably hope they never will again.*



Bianca Nour

Day-to-Day Manager, Volara Management

Nour played a key role in bringing MARINA's Coachella 2025 mainstage moment to life—a career high that synced with the artist's biggest solo single yet and the announcement of a new album. She also helped coordinate the launch of HAIM's "Relationships," their strong return after a four-year break. Lately, she's been focused on MARINA's latest album, *PRINCESS OF POWER*, which arrived 6/6, and is prepping for HAIM's 6/20 release, *I quit*. Nour speaks fluent English, Armenian and Farsi—and has told us to get lost in all three languages.



William Gamble

Digital Marketing Specialist, Primary Wave Music

From working with Bell Biv DeVoe, CeeLo Green, Donny Hathaway and Count Basie to cooking up marketing campaigns, Gamble lives and breathes the culture. He'll never forget marching behind BBD's float at the Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade while they performed their new single, "Act Like You Know," before their hit "Poison" blasted down 5th Ave—just one part of a 35th anniversary celebration that kicks off this summer with the Boston Pops. Outside of work, Gamble's exploring global cuisine or hanging with his Goldendoodles. Which reminds us: Our flea collar needs adjusting.



Katherine Firsching

Director of Commercial Partnerships, Warner Music Nashville

Firsching went from attending Stagecoach in high school for a friend's birthday—while burning CDs to study the lyrics before—to repping WMG artists like Ashley McBryde, The Castellows, Avery Anna, Austin Snell, Dasha and Maddox Batson on the very same festival grounds more than a decade later. These days, she's been busy working with YouTube on the premiere of Anna's *let go letters* short film, which was timed to the 5/16 album release. If you're lucky, she might make you one of her coveted salads. We'd like to try one, but we're violently allergic to fresh produce.



Mike Greene

VP, Artist & Label Services, ADA

Greene's career highlights include bringing Big Freedia to millions during the 2020 Grammys with a nationwide Facebook campaign and turning Dropkick Murphys' St. Patrick's Day livestream into a global event at the start of lockdown, drawing 10m views in a week. Now, Greene's team is focused on powering new releases from Kesha, Lil Tjay and The Rose while riding TikTok wins from Yves and Jack Black, plus amplifying Mau P's remix of Tame Impala's "The Less I Know the Better." This former Massachusetts state tennis champ has a killer serve. The best we can do is a double fault.

LAKEERS

IN ANY EVENT, meet another batch of professionals from different parts of the biz whose dedication and effort make their superiors look good.

Lauren Goldberg

VP, D2C Marketing & Communications, Rhino Records/WMG

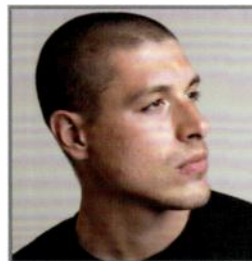
Goldberg has created content for Radiohead's AOL bot, shot B-roll on Green Day's *American Idiot* set, interviewed Andy Rourke, been called "Sugar Puddin'" by Percy Sledge and road-tripped through Florida with Gene Simmons and Ace Frehley. Now, she's leading D2C marketing, overseeing fan-favorite drops like the "Rhino High Fidelity" series—made from original master tapes and pressed on 180-gram vinyl—and *Enjoying the Ride*, a 60-CD Grateful Dead box set. Belle & Sebastian once pulled her onstage at the Hollywood Bowl. We're banned from most venues.



Dañiel Paz Alexich-Duran

Director of A&R, EMPIRE

Alexich-Durán once watched 15,000 fans rap along to an unreleased Pouya track and served as tour manager for Kxllswxtch's debut European run—his first-ever trip abroad. Now, as Director of A&R, he's helping expand All But 6's distribution machine and working closely with Terrace Martin to roll out a series of his executive-produced *Sounds of Crenshaw* projects, including an album with Kenyon Dixon that's due this summer. Before all this, he was a professional cook. We own a chef's knife, but it's stayed in the drawer since "the incident."



Alexa Disney

A&R and Studio Lead, Duetti

Disney once helped mass-produce Travis Scott's *Rodeo* action figures and saw Bobby Shmurda do his viral dance on an Epic conference table. She's since gotten a personal thank-you from Iggy Pop, been shouted out mid-set by 2Chainz and more. Now at Duetti, she's leading the buildout of the company's first L.A. studio and helping artists own their futures through life-changing catalog deals—part of her mission to make Duetti the most artist-empowering brand in music. Disney asked Ali Shaheed Muhammad to teach her to DJ. We're still trying to unmute ourselves on Zoom.



Danny Silverman

Head of Music Legal Affairs, Riot Games

Silverman's got a front-row seat to music and gaming. He steered negotiations that helped Riot Games secure Linkin Park's return for the League of Legends Worlds 2024 Anthem at the O2 Arena, and NewJeans and virtual artist HEARTSTEEL gracing the Worlds stage in Seoul. His dealmaking also supported Riot's all-original *Arcane* Season 2 soundtrack featuring Twenty One Pilots, Stromae, d4vd and more, plus the Coldplay feature on "Ma Meilleure Ennemie." A legal mind with a foodie's heart, he's the go-to man for deals and restaurant recs alike. Our calls go straight to voicemail.



THE FIGHT CONTINUES



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