Tampere University of Applied Sciences

The Importance of Queer Musical Experimentation

In What Ways Does Queer Experimentation Contrast with Heteronormative Norms?

Ole Magne Hansen

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ABSTRACT

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The objective of this thesis was to find out what fuels queer musical experimentation and expression and how it differs from our heteronormative norms. It was also important to explore the importance of such experimentation and shine a light on how queer musical experimentation specifically has led to much innovation throughout music history.

This thesis examines how queer musical expression, both historical and contemporary, functions not merely as artistic experimentation but as an intrinsic mode of identity, resistance, and survival. By analyzing the ways in which queer artists have navigated and challenged heteronormative musical standards, the study argues that their innovations often emerge from a position of necessity rather than choice.

The role of intersectionality in music history is also explored extensively in this thesis. Although queer artists have gained more recognition in the last decades, queer artists of colour, and especially women, still face many roadblocks in their musical careers.

The work situates queer musical practices within broader sociopolitical contexts, acknowledging intersecting struggles faced by queer artists of color and marginalized genders. It traces queer contributions to the evolution of popular music over the past century, highlighting how such experimentation has driven innovation and critiqued mainstream norms.

Through the study done for this thesis, it was concluded that queer musical experimentation is an essential part of queerness itself because of its alternative meaning of being positioned opposed to the normative. When the norms are heteronormative, it is understandable that queer artists want to challenge these norms and break the generally accepted boundaries of what is correct and incorrect ways of being.

In the end, this thesis showcases the importance of queer musical experimentation by showing how it is linked to almost every modern popular music genre. Ultimately, the thesis underscores the vital role of queer artists in shaping musical culture and advocates for broader recognition of their impact.

Key words: queer, experimentation, intersectionality, music, hyperpop

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1 INTRODUCTION

Queerness is an important and widely talked about part of today's musical landscape. We have many openly queer artists, as well as straight artists who are outspoken in LGBTQ+-issues. This has not always been the case. Many queer artists, and especially queer women of colour, have had their musical legacy downplayed by the heteronormative historical narrative. And still to this day we see that people are more willing to listen to straight artists talking out about these issues than they are to listen to queer artists. Queer artists have been innovators and groundbreakers throughout our contemporary musical history. Most modern genres have roots that can be linked to marginalized groups, and in turn, to queer artists. And we see that queer artists keep innovating and experimenting in new and exciting ways to this day, which often leads to an impact on contemporary mainstream music.

There's many reasons why it is important to explore queer musical experimentation, and how it differs from heteronormative ways of expression. Queer people are one of the groups that have been subjugated and discriminated against throughout history the most, despite having made big impacts on our culture. It is important to explore why they experiment, and how our accepted norms are built on a heteronormative framework that often inhibits experimentation and innovation. For music to thrive and evolve, we need people to break the norms, and queer people have proven time and time again that they are able to do so.

In this thesis I have described what it means to be queer, and what queer music is. I have explored the history of queer music and the ways intersectionality affects who gets remembered and who gets to break through to the mainstream, and I have explored the different ways queer artists have innovated and experimented and how it is fueled by their queerness and nonconformity in a way that is different from the heteronormative methods of experimentation and innovation.

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accuracy of the written content. The model was also employed to summarize complex research papers, enabling more efficient and time-effective analysis. All AI-generated summaries have been carefully fact-checked for accuracy and AI has not been used to generate new information.

2 WHAT IS QUEER MUSIC

2.1 Defining Queer

Queer is a polysemic term, meaning it carries multiple meanings depending on the context in which it is used. Over time, its use has evolved, making it a fluid and adaptable concept that can signify different things in different academic and social discussions. In some contexts, it serves as an umbrella term for identities and experiences that do not conform to norms of gender and sexuality. In others, it is understood as a broader critique of fixed categories and rigid binaries, emphasizing fluidity, resistance, and the rejection of normativity. Because of these multiple interpretations, engaging with queer theories requires careful consideration of how the term is being used and what theoretical perspectives inform its meaning. Rather than having a single, fixed definition, queer exists as a flexible and dynamic concept that can shift depending on disciplinary approaches and cultural contexts. (Berlini, 2021, 35.) This is why it is important to clarify which definitions are most relevant to this thesis and why they are being applied. Establishing a clear framework for its usage will help ensure consistency and precision in the analysis that follows.

According to professor Karl Whittington, the word “queer” will usually be interpreted by the reader to have something to do with the LGBTQ+-culture and community when used in academia, despite the word originally meaning odd or peculiar (2012, 157). Queer was originally used as a derogatory term against homosexual people, but in the 80s the queer community started adopting it in an effort to disarm the homophobes. Some sources claim that the group Queer Nation was the first to use the term in a positive way to describe gay people and the larger community and subculture. (Perlman, 2019.) Cambridge Dictionary (Queer, 2025) now defines the word as “having or relating to a gender identity or a sexuality that does not fit society's traditional ideas about gender or sexuality”.

Queerness is a way of existing outside the norm, challenging the dominant structures that dictate what is considered acceptable or expected. To be queer

is to embody difference, to stand apart from societal conventions, and to resist rigid definitions of identity. Rather than fitting into pre-established categories, queerness disrupts them, questioning the very foundation of what is deemed "normal" and who holds the power to define it. Beyond being an identity, queerness can also be understood as a position, one that exists in opposition to the dominant culture and its normative assumptions. This perspective emphasizes queerness as an active stance rather than a fixed label, allowing for fluidity, resistance, and continuous renegotiation of meaning. It is not solely about who one is but also about how one navigates the world, critiques established norms, and creates alternative ways of being. In this sense, queerness is not just a personal experience but a broader social and political engagement with structures of power, representation, and exclusion. (Ruberg & Phillips, 2018; Whittington, 2012, 157-158.)

2.2 Queer Music

For the purpose of this thesis, I have defined queer music as a combination of music containing aspects of or relating to the two previous definitions of the word queer. That means that non-conformist music that has nothing to do with queer gender identity, like black metal broadly speaking, doesn't get considered as queer music. And on the other side, normative and mainstream music written by queer writers doesn't automatically count as queer music either. The focus lies not solely on who creates the music, but on how queerness is thematically, sonically, or culturally embedded within the work itself.

Queer studies scholar Sara Ahmed explained in her book "Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others." that a piece of art's perceived identity is not static and that it can shift depending on the audience that engages with it and how they choose to interpret and connect with it (2006, 126). This means that music, for example, does not have to be explicitly created as queer to be experienced as such. Listeners can assign new meanings, find queer resonance in lyrics or themes, or reinterpret a work through their own perspectives. In this way, queerness is not always inherent in the art itself but

can emerge through its reception and cultural context. There's several queer icons throughout music history who did not identify as queer themselves, but became queer icons through their gender nonconformity and experimental nature. Some of these have been touched on later in this thesis.

2.3 Why it Matters

Recognizing and trying to prevent the appropriation of marginalized cultures' art is important because appropriation is always violent and can lead to negative consequences in the future and lay a foundation where taking inspiration without due credit is seen as okay. Culture-normative people can appropriate and move as they wish, whereas marginalized people have less motility. (Ahmed, 2006, 132-149.)

It is also important if you're looking for inspiration to try to go to the source, instead of consuming watered-down regurgitations of styles and trends that seem new and innovative, but have actually existed in the underground for a long time. This is important so we avoid exploitation of marginalized artists and groups. The problem isn't performing, learning or borrowing from marginalized groups' culture, but to do so without properly appreciating and learning about their history and acknowledging their struggle to get their art to be seen in the first place. Marginalized people have through history had a much harder time being heard than people identifying with the majority peoples' culture, and for them to then have their art stolen without proper acknowledgement can feel deeply hurtful and unfair. (Howard, 2020.)

Another reason why it is important to recognize, acknowledge and explore queer music, and queer culture in general, is because a lot of the perceptions about queer culture and queer people come from the heteronormative outsiders, and can often have a quite negative and stereotypical view of queerness. Queerness has therefore often been described as an antithesis to heteromasculinity, and therefore a "bad thing". (De Smet & Dhaenens, 2023, 696.) It is therefore important that if queer people, or other marginalized groups,

make music and tell their stories, that the rest of us listen, so we can better understand what it actually means to be queer. Not in relation to heterosexuality, but as its own thing entirely.

3 QUEER MUSIC HISTORY

In this part of the thesis, I have presented a history of queer music from both a broad perspective and through the personal histories of specific queer icons, whose lives have come to symbolize the ongoing struggle for queer identity within modern music culture. It's not all-encompassing, but by examining artists' and genres' stories, I have drawn connections between their experiences and the contemporary cultural trends that continue to shape and influence the representation of queer identity in music today.

3.1 Bulldyke Blues and Cabaret Culture

The 1920s and 30s witnessed the rise of numerous popular recordings featuring raunchy and sexually charged lyrics, often made for a heterosexual audience. However, even from the very inception of blues and jazz, there have been deep ties to the queer community, with many of these sexually explicit songs being written by and for queer individuals. Despite the outwardly mainstream nature of much of the music from this era, a significant portion of it reflected the creative contributions of the queer community, underscoring the often-overlooked role that queer artists played in shaping the sound and spirit of these genres. (Bullock, 2023, 7-8.)

K. Allison Hammer at the department of women's and gender studies at Vanderbilt University has stated that one of the main reasons the blues emerged as such a significant and powerful form of expression in its earliest days is that, for many years, it served as one of the very few visible and accessible ways in which Black women could assert and express the fact that they possessed a sexuality worth acknowledging, discussing, and exploring. (2019, 280.) The issue of sexual repression among Black women has been a persistent and deeply rooted problem that continues to ring through to this day, which further underscores the radical nature of early blues artists. Figures like Ma Rainey and Bessie Smith were not only talented performers but also bold pioneers who challenged prevailing norms through their music and presence,

making their contributions far more revolutionary and impactful than you might think at first glance. (Lee, 2010 vii-viii.)

Ma Rainey and Bessie Smith did not identify as queer in the contemporary sense of the word, but they inhabited the blues style known as “bulldyke” which can be considered queer. Bulldyke was a style where women took on the bravado and sexual confidence often shown by straight white men, and twisted it into something new and unique. They were not scared to break with traditional notions of black women being domesticated slaves, only to serve their family. They instead chose to sing about sexual encounters and liberation. They took on trends only seen in the heteronormative zeitgeist and claimed them as their own, which has been seen as a multifaceted response to racism, homophobia and misogyny. (Hammer, 2019, 279-280.)

Berlin had also seen a burgeoning queer scene grow forth before World War I, but after it, in the 20s and 30s, it started to blossom. The social upheaval and relative liberalism of the Weimar Republic created fertile ground for queer expression, allowing a previously marginalized community to step confidently into public life. By 1921 there were around 40 venues that profiled themselves as meeting places for queer people, ranging from intimate bars and salons to more extravagant nightclubs. Amongst these clubs was the cabaret club Eldorado, which was so popular that not only queer people visited it, but artists, authors and celebrities as well. The club’s flamboyant performances and atmosphere of gender fluidity made it a hotspot, emblematic of Berlin’s avant-garde and inclusive spirit during the interwar years. (Visit Berlin, n.d.; Whishnant, 2016.)

Figure 1. The Eldorado club in Berlin (Bundesarchiv, 1932).

One of the most famous cabaret singers from the German queer community was Claire Waldoff. Not only did she cater to the queer community, but also to the often overlooked lower class. As previously stated, being queer can also mean being positioned against the normative, so queer artists have often made art for all sorts of disenfranchised groups. One of the questions she tried to answer through her performances was “what is a true Berliner?”, and just like most true Berliners, she too was from elsewhere as she grew up in Gelsenkirchen in the 1880s and 90s. Her performances also played a lot with gender identity, playing both male and female characters. It was well-known that she was a lesbian woman, but her lyrics sexualized both men and women. (Jelavich, 1993, 97-103.)

3.2 Tharpe, Rock’n’Roll, and Cultural Appropriation

The appropriation of black music in the 50s committed by white artists isn’t all that different from the appropriation of queer music today done by heteronormative artists. It’s still being committed by the mainstream against the marginalized. An interesting case in the history of queer music is Sister Rosetta Tharpe. Most music enthusiasts today know that Elvis and Johnny Cash were inspired by black rock’n’roll artists like Chuck Berry and Little Richard, but it’s not as common knowledge that all of the above were inspired by Sister Rosetta Tharpe. (Rock & Roll Hall of Fame, n.d..)

Tharpe was born March 20th, 1915 to her parents who were both cotton pickers in Arkansas. Her parents were active members of the Church of God in Christ, where Rosetta first was introduced both to her faith and to music. Both of her parents were avid singers and introduced Rosetta to singing and gospel very early in her life. By the time she was four, she was already performing music at church. She learned how to play the guitar at a very young age, and grew up to become a pioneer of the rock-and-roll guitar, and has left behind a legacy of innovation and perseverance. (Wald, 2023a, 1075-1077; Amoah-Ramey, 2019, 33-34.)

Another interesting aspect to her story is that she was a queer woman, not only by sexuality, but also in spirit as a radical and non-conformist musical innovator who many people claim invented modern rock'n'roll music. This has led modern queer and black artists like Lizzo and Janelle Monae to claim her as a big inspiration for their own boundary-pushing musical expression. (Wald, 2023b.) Lizzo has been so inspired by her that she has even co-produced, and is starring in, an upcoming biopic about Sister Rosetta Tharpe's life called "Rosetta" (Minton, 2025).

Her legacy, alongside the legacies of Ma Rainey and Bessie Smith who were mentioned in the previous chapter, is an interesting case of intersectionality, because of the fact that she was both black and a queer woman could lead to the likelihood of her not being as well-remembered as her male counterparts to be even higher than if she was also a man. Intersectionality as a term was originally coined to describe cases of oppression against black women specifically and therefore seems like a perfect term to use when discussing Tharpe's legacy. The idea is that at the crossroads of race and gender, the combination and interplay of both identities creates a new whole of how you are being perceived. A straight black woman, a queer black woman, and a queer white woman will all be perceived and treated differently and it's therefore inherent to believe that had Sister Rosetta Tharpe been straight or white she could have been more widely remembered and recognized today. (TED, 2012; Losleben & Musubika, 2023, 73.)

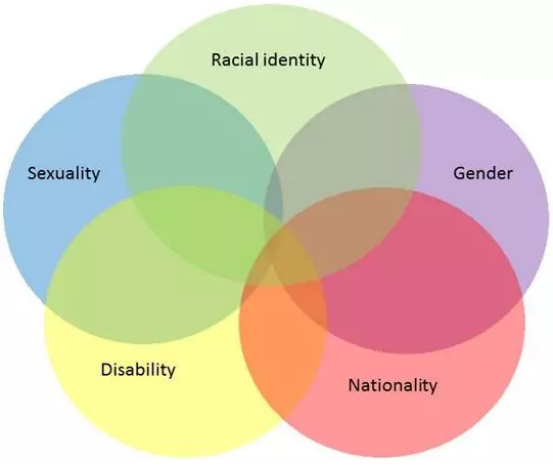

Figure 2. Graph showing different identities' intersectionality (Taylor, 2019).

3.3 Disco's Mainstream Queer Appeal

As we have established earlier with rock'n'roll, blues and jazz, there's an aspect of intersectionality to a lot of these queer music spaces and racial minorities, and disco is no different. Music historians have established that the birth of disco happened at black and gay clubs in New York at the transition of the 60s and 70s. Even though scholars have researched both black origins of the genre, and its queerness separately, they have often failed at properly describing the interplay between these two subcultures' influence on the genre as a whole. The rise of disco didn't just happen in tandem with the social movements at the time, but essentially because of them, since disco helped broaden public knowledge of all the different aspects of blackness and homosexuality. Even though these disco spaces weren't strictly just inhabited by queer black men, containing people from all different sexualities, races and classes, queer black men were certainly a big component of this emerging sound and culture. (Kehrer, 2022, 20-22.)

Before the Stonewall riots of 1969, there were few viable options for queer people who wanted to socialize with other people of similar orientations. The queer clubs before this in the United States were often subjected to police raids, which resulted in the patrons' names being published in the newspaper. This public outing of ordinary citizens often had dire consequences and often led to them losing their jobs, friends and family. In the years after the riots however, queer spaces started popping up all over the place. The queer community didn't just feel the need to gather, but also to show off their pride and sexual freedom in a public way. The riots showed the queer community that there is strength in numbers and that they no longer wanted to sit idly by and accept the discrimination they'd been facing. Discotheques became an important part of this liberation, and became venues for social progression and political change. (Kehrer, 2022, 22-23.)

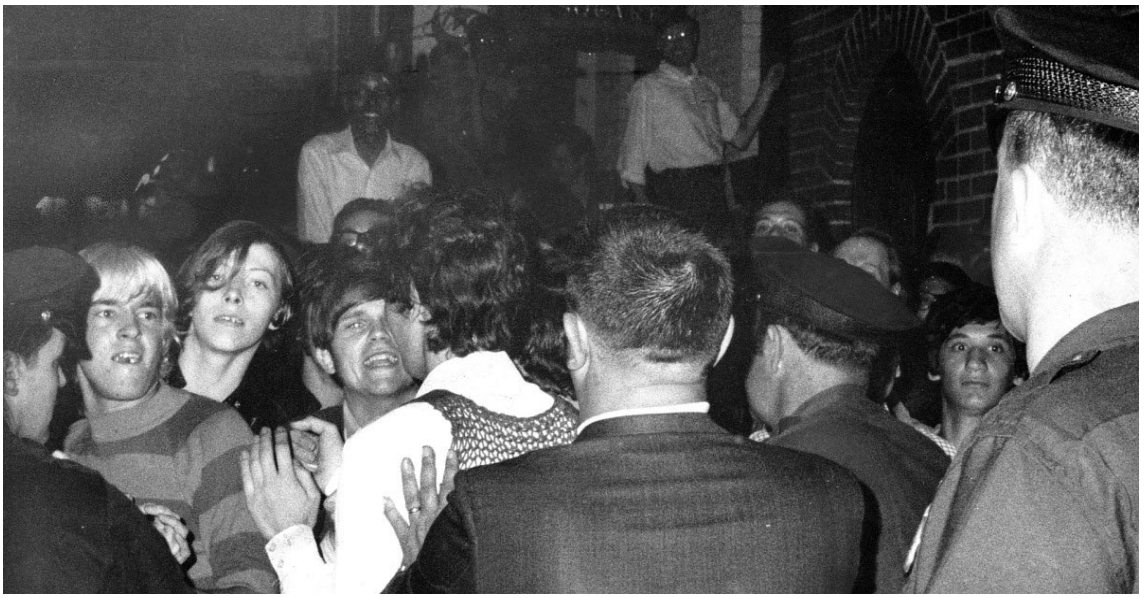

Figure 3. The Stonewall Riots (Ambrosini J., 1969).

Although the origins of disco are deeply rooted in the Black and Latinx communities of New York, the rise of mainstream discotheques in the 1970s was largely dominated by white clientele. This shift in demographics can be attributed in large part to the high cost of entry into many of these clubs, which often included steep membership fees, dress codes, and exclusivity policies that targeted a wealthier, predominantly white clientele. Many of the most popular and widely publicized discos, such as The Flamingo, intentionally cultivated an upscale, elite image that catered to affluent socialites, celebrities, and trendsetters, creating an environment that was not only economically inaccessible but also culturally exclusionary to many of the communities that had pioneered disco in the first place. Despite the significant legal and social gains achieved during the Civil Rights Movement, the racial wealth gap between Black and white Americans remained stark throughout the 1970s, limiting the ability of many African Americans to participate in these new, high-profile nightlife spaces and further marginalizing their presence in the commercial disco scene. (Kehrer, 2022, 23; Intrator et al., 2016.)

Although disco gained significant popularity within queer spaces and became a prominent venue for public expressions of gay pride, very few of the artists performing within this genre identified as queer themselves. However, as previously discussed when defining queer music, this does not diminish disco's place within the queer musical landscape. The fact that the queer community

embraced disco, using it as a platform for empowerment, self-expression, and a sense of belonging, solidifies its significance as an integral part of queer subculture. Disco became more than just a musical style; it served as a meeting place, a space of liberation, and ultimately, as a soundtrack to the queer community's emerging pride and visibility. In this way, even if its creators were not queer, the adoption and transformation of disco by the queer community grants it a lasting and meaningful connection to queer identity and history. (Kehrer, 2022, 23; Ahmed, 2006, 126.)

A popular artist within the genre who was queer, both identity-wise and in his performances, was Sylvester. Sylvester was openly gay, and played with gender identity on stage. He would crossdress as a woman, but keep his beard, mixing both masculine and feminine tropes. He was largely influenced by black blues women from the past, like the ones that have been mentioned earlier in this thesis. And just like some of these women, Sylvester is another victim of intersectionality. Despite his big impact on the genre, he often goes overlooked when recounting the history of disco, probably because of his performances as a gay black man. Even though the genre was often performed by black artists, and enjoyed by gay men, black gay men were a rarity in the scene. (Kehrer, 2022, 23-24.)

3.4 Leather Jackets and Androgyny

The 70s and 80s marked a significant emergence of queer culture and iconography within rock music, with various artists both embracing and representing elements of queer identity. Some of these artists were queer themselves, while others engaged with the culture without necessarily identifying with it personally. A notable example of this is David Bowie, who, despite being straight, became an iconic symbol of queer culture during this period. His androgynous style and willingness to challenge societal norms resonated deeply within the queer community, making him an influential figure in its visibility and representation in mainstream music. (Geffen, 2020, 33.)

Figure 4. David Bowie dressed as his androgynous character Ziggy Stardust (Rock, 2016).

The end of the 60s marked a significant rebranding for David Bowie, who, up until then, had been largely viewed as just another long-haired folk artist with a distinctive sound. As the decade drew to a close, Bowie began to experiment with a more flamboyant and visually striking persona, incorporating spandex, styled hair, and dramatic makeup into his look. This transformation reflected his rejection of the heteronormative gender norms that were dominant at the time, as he boldly embraced androgyny in both his appearance and performance. However, his new style was not an entirely original creation; it drew significant inspiration from Andy Warhol's play Pork. Warhol, a contemporary artist renowned for his avant-garde approach, had long identified as gay, and his social circle was predominantly composed of other gay and queer individuals. This queer presence within Warhol's world had a profound influence on the art and cultural movements surrounding him, helping to shape the visual and conceptual elements of Bowie's new identity. (Geffen, 2020, 32-33.)

David Bowie was a straight man, despite publicly stating in the 70s that he was both gay and bisexual. He had a wife and children, and eventually came out in Rolling Stone as a "closeted heterosexual" many years later. This has led to audiences having split reactions to his legacy. On one hand, his adoption of queer culture and style, and his public lies about his sexuality, have been seen

as clear signs of blatant cultural appropriation which could have been used as tactics to get more fame and seem more unique. On the other hand, he was an important figure in getting queer culture to the mainstream and has had a big impact on queer culture as a whole. (Geffen, 2020, 33-34; Lowder, 2016.)

Rob Halford of Judas Priest played a key role in bringing queer style to the forefront in the 70s and 80s. Dressed in leather and wielding whips, his look echoed the art of Tom of Finland more than the typical rock star image of the time. Today, that bold style is iconic of 80s rock. Unintentionally, Halford influenced a generation of rock stars to adopt a look rooted in queer aesthetics. The band turned to leather to better match the power and intensity of their sound, moving away from their earlier, more conventional image. (Hodgkinson, 2018.)

Figure 5. Tom of Finland (Mankkinen, J., 2024).

Queen’s lead-singer, Freddie Mercury, also brought queer culture into the mainstream through his flamboyant performances and fashion. During most of his career, he was closeted, and at the start of Queen’s career he very much blended in with the rest of the heterosexual rock stars. His career would see a big transformation both in style and sound, going from a conformist glam metal vocalist, to an experimental, eclectic and interesting songwriter writing some of the most famous songs ever like “Bohemian Rhapsody” and “We Will Rock You”. Mercury has however transcended the label of “queer icon”, and is

universally loved and lauded by mainstream audiences and the queer community alike. His songs have been used both as stadium anthems at sports events, and as battling cries during the AIDS-epidemic during the late 80s. (Malhotra, 2012, 1.)

The AIDS epidemic played a significant role in his decision to eventually come out of the closet towards the end of his life, publicly announcing his diagnosis and the little time he had left. Prior to his announcement and his subsequent death, the majority of society viewed those affected by AIDS as responsible for their own fate, blaming them for their supposed carelessness and sexual promiscuity, seeing them as “guilty victims.” In this context, AIDS victims were often judged harshly, stigmatized for their perceived moral failings, which led to a deep societal divide between the afflicted and the rest of the population. However, after his death, the Western perspective on the disease and its victims began to shift, largely due to the fact that AIDS had now claimed the life of someone widely loved and admired, “one of their own,” a beloved rockstar and idol who had touched the hearts of millions. This marked a pivotal moment in how the disease and its impact were viewed, with his passing serving as a catalyst for greater empathy and a broader understanding of AIDS, challenging the prior judgment and stigma that had surrounded it. His death showcases how an artist’s queerness can influence not only mainstream music, but societal norms and opinions. (Kitzinger, 1995, 52; Walfisz, 2023.)

Freddie Mercury wasn’t born as someone the mainstream West would have typically claimed as their own though. Not only was he gay, but he was an immigrant from an Indian ethnic and religious background. He wasn’t born as Freddie Mercury, but as Farrokh Bulsara. He wasn’t a white British man, but a Parsi Zoroastrian man born in Tanzania. Even though his queer identity is well-remembered and even celebrated nowadays, his ethnic background has largely gone forgotten. This brings us back to the concept of intersectionality. Being a famous gay rock star was okay in the eyes of many, and being a famous brown rock star was also okay, but being both gay and brown might have been too much and could be the reason why Freddie Mercury’s roots have been swept under the carpet. Not to mention that Indians and South Asians in

the UK as a whole have faced both systematic and societal racism and discrimination for decades. (Malhotra, 2012, 1; Robinson, 2005, 191-192.)

3.5 Paris Is Burning

The 70s and 80s saw the emergence of drag culture, which involved people crossdressing and vogueing to music popular in queer circles, especially disco and ballroom, creating a vibrant and expressive form of performance art that celebrated identity, resilience, and community. The birth of this culture stretches way further back in time though, having its roots in the 20s and 30s in Harlem, New York, where early drag balls provided a space for queer Black and Latinx individuals to find solace, solidarity, and self-expression. The culture surrounding the drag queens of the time was for a long time underground and not well-known by the mainstream, remaining a closely guarded subculture until 1990, when Jennie Livingston released the critically acclaimed documentary Paris Is Burning, which not only introduced people to the culture, but also the challenges and dangers of living out this lifestyle during a volatile time in history, marked by systemic discrimination, the AIDS crisis, and social marginalization. As long as there have been queer music circles, drag and playing with gender norms have been a part of it. (Lhooq, 2018; Alessandro, 2020.)

On its surface, the film is about drag culture and vogueing, introducing the audiences to the broader culture surrounding it and its terms and rules. But the film is much deeper than that and is just as much about identity, race, class and cultural appropriation. The performers are performing a character on stage, but are also performing their gender and identity off of it, and there’s an interesting fluidity to their identities both on and off stage. There’s a lot to be said about the film and its cultural impact and importance, but for the purposes of this thesis I want to focus more on how it spread the music popular in these circles to mainstream audiences. The movie’s soundtrack blends together disco, house, pop and soul to showcase the diverse identities and sounds found within the scene. The fluidity of the soundtrack’s genre perfectly mirrors the fluidity and

diversity of the identities seen in the film itself. (Hilderbrand, 2013, 11-12; Rovetta, 2020.)

Figure 6. A still from the film showcasing vogueing (Roxy Cinema New York, n.d.).

Drag culture has continued to grow and has long ago fastened its grip around the cultural zeitgeist. The ongoing show RuPaul's Drag Race, starring the popular drag queen RuPual, has since 2009 been a breeding ground for culturally important memes, moments, icons and music and for many marks the peak of drag's cultural impact. There has been a notable shift in drag's demographic since the inception of the show, whereas in the past it was mostly an underground subculture for queer people, it has now reached such a mainstream appeal that many straight people are just as interested in the culture surrounding it, which many has traced to the popularity of the show. Drag has grown to become an important part of queer music culture, and mainstream culture alike, that likely won't disappear any time soon. (Crookston, 2021, 2.)

3.6 Pop Stars and Queer Visibility

Before the 90s there were a plethora of queer icons who came and went, as we have previously established, but out of the mainstream ones we have discussed most of them were either closeted for most of their artistic career like Freddie Mercury, or not actually queer like David Bowie. The 90s however, saw the emergence of openly gay artists who also found mainstream success. An example of an artist that fits this description is the Canadian singer k.d. lang.

k.d. lang is an lesbian artist who is known for experimenting with a fusion of country, folk and jazz in the 90s. Even before she came out of the closet, she had amassed a large queer following for her gender non-comforming fashion and self-presentation. Her gender nonconformity did not come without controversy, seeing as it clashed with her country roots' conservative view on gender and the "nuclear family". Even though she did not intend for her music to be enjoyed by a largely queer audience, the queer community claimed her as a queer icon way before it was public knowledge that she was gay herself. It goes deeper than just her androgyny and potential queerness, but also her bold and confident personality and queering of a so-called straight genre, made her a powerful figure. Lang herself rejected the way her music was being read by queer audiences however, and stated that there was no connection between her sexuality and her music, even after she had come out of the closet in 1992. She also continues to assert that she wants to be seen as an artist first, not a lesbian. Despite this, her concerts became a meeting place for queer women and a place where they were free to be themselves. She eventually found mainstream success, won Grammys and has definitely asserted herself as a mainstream artist, lesbian or not. (Valentine, 1995, 475-477.)

In 2008 Lady Gaga, one of the biggest modern queer icons, burst onto the scene with her debut album "The Fame", and one year later she publicly came out of the closet at bisexual and stated that some of her songs were inspired by her queerness. Not only was she a queer woman, but she was revolutionizing the pop music landscape by being provocative, innovative and mainstream all at the same time. She also incorporated elements from gay subcultures such as drag and leather/s&m from the beginning of her career, both as a homage and

for shock value. She was always interested in challenging the status quo and opposing the mainstream and using her platform to raise awareness about feminist and LGBTQ+ causes. There's maybe no modern pop star who has been this popular, and at the same time as outspoken about queer culture and pride, but it hasn't come without a cost since there has been constant speculation about her sexual and gender identity which eventually even sparked widespread rumours about her being transsexual. (Chatzipapatheodoridis, 2022, 134; Reynolds, 2019.)

The 2000s and 2010s saw a rise in what can be called 'rainbow capitalism' within the pop music world. Suddenly it could be beneficial and even profitable to speak out for gay rights, even if the artist doing so was straight. Artists like Katy Perry and Taylor Swift were at the time accused of 'queerbaiting', or pretending to be queer for profit. Interestingly, these same concerns were not brought up to the same degree when David Bowie, a white man, did so many decades earlier. These female artists on the other hand never claimed to be queer, and instead used their platforms for queer advocacy. This did however not prevent them from facing significant criticisms and mockery for their stances at the time, and they were even accused of 'hijacking queerness'. (Smialek, 2021, 101-107.) Even though Katy Perry has a more contentious public image nowadays, Taylor Swift is seen as a widely popular figure both in the mainstream and within LGBTQ+-communities because of her proven long-term track record of supporting queer causes both publicly and monetarily (Loftin, 2023).

3.7 Hyperpop, Brat Summer and the Situation Today

In 2025 the British producer A. G. Cook was named "Producer of the Year" at the Brit Awards. He dedicated the award to the groundbreaking artist Sophie, who tragically passed away in 2021 at the age of 34, and with whom he had collaborated early in her career, helping to launch her into the spotlight. Many people thought the award was well-deserved seeing as the label he co-founded, PC Music, for many is seen as ground zero for the massively influential and

quintessentially queer genre of Hyperpop. If you run back time to 2013 and to the foundation of PC Music, few would have expected him, or the genre of hyperpop, to be as big as it is today. (Mullen, 2025.)

Hyperpop was from the very beginning abrasive and non-conformist. It has always been a queer genre performed by queer artists. Interestingly though, it has both taken inspiration from underground genres like Nightcore and Punk, and from mainstream pop-stars like Lady Gaga and Katy Perry. When mixed together, it has created something that has managed to take the experimental sensibilities of the underground and mixed it with the catchiness from the pop-music. Interestingly, artists from the genre and from the label never shied away from the fame, despite its underground appeal. Sophie often played with the fact that her antics were partially to gain more fame. The author Sasha Geffen noted that hyperpop's flirtation with the mainstream, marketing and fame led to the artists being seen as even more authentic and real, and even became a part of the aesthetics surrounding the genre. There's a fluidity to the concepts of fame and underground within the genre that draws parallels to many of the artists' own identities and sexualities. (Birgy, 2021; Jóhannsdóttir, 2021, 9.)

Several of the genre's biggest and most influential stars have been transsexual women. As we have already briefly touched on, Sophie stands out as one of the most significant figures in this space, but there is also another key example: the hyperpop duo 100 gecs, which is widely considered to be one of the most prominent and groundbreaking bands in the genre. This group is fronted by a trans woman, Laura Les, who has been integral to the band's unique sound and success. Beyond them, many of the newer and younger emerging stars within the hyperpop scene, such as Underscores and Dorian Electra, are also trans. This trend speaks to a broader and ongoing shift within the genre, where trans women have become key players and major influencers. In the case of Laura Les, her trans identity and queerness have played a central role in her creative process, particularly in terms of experimentation and pushing musical boundaries. These aspects of her identity have been crucial in fueling innovation within her work, especially with regards to the role that gender dysphoria has played in her artistic journey. After this experimentation, her work has gone on to inspire and influence mainstream pop music trends, making

significant contributions to the broader musical landscape. (Jóhannsdóttir, 2021, 13-14; Holte, 2023, 44.)

The genre serves as a really important source of queer, and specifically trans, representation during a volatile time for queer people in the western world. In the first half of 2025, American president Donald Trump has passed several pieces of anti-trans legislation, sparking national and international backlash. These legislative actions have been met with distress by activists, scholars, and members of the LGBTQ+ community alike. Some experts have gone so far as to deem the new laws unconstitutional, arguing that they violate fundamental civil liberties. The American Constitution states that the nation should protect the equal rights of all of its citizens, regardless of gender identity or expression. However, these laws stand in direct contradiction to that ideal, as they specifically and deliberately target trans people, undermining their rights and protections under federal law. (Raymond, 2025.)

In 2024, the British hyperpop star Charli XCX released the album Brat, and with it came the phenomenon of “brat summer,” which saw her hyperpop-inspired album dominate the charts and the social zeitgeist. The project, filled with raw emotion, experimental sounds, and an unapologetic attitude, struck a chord with many, especially within the LGBTQ+ community. Charli herself does not identify as gay or LGBTQ+, but she has been accepted and is beloved by the queer community, and her music is seen as part of queer culture. She is a good example of how a straight artist can use her platform for queer empowerment, having collaborated with influential queer artists like the late SOPHIE and Kim Petras, and consistently speaking up for gay rights. Rather than simply appealing to queer audiences for trend’s sake, Charli has built a genuine, long-standing relationship with her LGBTQ+ fans, rooted in mutual respect, emotional vulnerability, and artistic freedom. (Wratten, 2024.)

Figure 7. Charli XCX's album cover for her album "Brat" has also become iconic in its own right (XCX, 2024).

Another related modern genre is the latin genre neoperreo. Neoperreo is a subgenre of reggaeton, with big influences from hyperpop and largely fronted by women. The genre has turned the mainstream genre of reggaeton into something Camilo Medina from the band Divino Niño would call "for the weirdos". A lot of the lyrical content of the genre is about latina womens' empowerment, but the genre has also been seen to represent the queer community. Similar to the bulldyke blues described earlier in this thesis, the female artists of the genre takes on the sexual bravado typically performed by straight men and puts their own spin on it. It celebrates eroticism and the right to be yourself, with artists of the genre presenting a fluidity of gender identities and representations. (Angele, 2024; Julious, 2022.)

Despite the fact that queer visibility in the western mainstream is more prevalent than in the past, and that queer people enjoy more rights than previously, there's still parts of the world where queer artists are important to the queer communities in those countries' activism and liberation. An example of this is the middle east, which is a region that, despite misconceptions that the whole region is deeply homophobic, still has some problems with gay acceptance. One of the most important artists in this movement is Mashrou Leila from

Lebanon. Their singer, Hamed Sinno, is an openly gay man who has become a queer icon in his own right in the middle east. The band is widely popular and successful, despite several bans and arrests of their fans across the region still going on to this day. (Sabaner, 2017.) Bashar Murad is another middle eastern queer icon. Being an openly gay man from Palestine, he has stated that his career is fighting both against homophobia in Palestine, and against the occupation and genocide in his country. (Estrin, 2022.)

Figure 8. The bans against Mashrou Leila have often led to protests in the Middle East (Hussein, 2019).

This queer music history is definitely incomplete, seeing as there are so many artists, genres, and subcultures I didn't include, and queer music has arguably existed way before the 1920s and in many different parts of the world that I didn't include as well, with the eunuch singers of the Byzantine Empire being an example of this. There's also new developments as I'm writing the thesis, for example with the American artist Ethel Cain being the first trans woman to have a top 10 album in the US. (Galiher, 2025.) Still, what I have written here gives a solid starting point for what comes next in the thesis, where I will describe how queer artists have taken their queerness and used it not just as part of who they are, but as something that actively fuels their creativity and experimentation,

driving them to innovate, break norms, and carve out space in the musical world in bold and unexpected ways.

4 EXPERIMENTATION AND NONCONFORMITY IN QUEER MUSIC

Queer music is full of experimentation and innovation. As I have laid out in the previous chapter, many of music history's most significant innovators were queer. Being queer means being positioned against the normative and the mainstream, and how can one innovate if one simply just follows the mainstream anyway? It's no surprise, then, that this is the case. My hypothesis was that much of this experimentation has been directly influenced by the artists' queerness. In this part of the thesis, I will elaborate on this idea by presenting several examples that illustrate how queerness has shaped musical innovation.

4.1 Gender Dysphoria and the Role of Pitch-shifting

As mentioned in the last chapter, several queer and especially transsexual artists have experimented with pitch-shifting, a technique that has since evolved into a recognizable and popular trend within broader aspects of mainstream music. This kind of pitch manipulation has often emerged as a direct response to experiences of gender dysphoria and vocal nonconformity, with many vocalists feeling discomfort or alienation from their natural voices, which they feel do not accurately reflect or represent their true identities. This dissonance between voice and self-perception plays a significant role in the artistic choices these performers make. Before we dive into the specifics of pitch-shifting itself, I want to first lay out the various challenges and underlying theories connected to trans singing and vocal expression.

As a society we have determined that some voices sound masculine and some sound feminine, but not everyone's voice fits perfectly with their gender. A man with a high pitched voice isn't less of a man than one with a low pitched one. They're both men. The only reason why we have "gendered voices" is because of the outdated idea of a gender binary. There's nothing intrinsically male or female about a voice since everyone's voice differs. This binary thinking can lead to unfair expectations and social pressures that harm those who don't conform. When people are judged or misread based solely on their voice, it

reinforces narrow definitions of gender that exclude many lived experiences. Greater awareness of this issue can foster more inclusive environments. Being cautious of this and fighting the gender binary when it comes to voice is more important than one might think, seeing as misgendering based on voice has been shown in studies to be linked with a low self-evaluation of one's own health in trans people, and especially in trans people of colour. (Jackson & Kremer, 2018, 42; Lagos, 2019, 814.)

This leads us to the first example of queer music experimentation that I hinted to in the last chapter, which is pitch-shifting. Many artists have used pitch-shifting over the last decades, but Laura Les from the band Hyperpop band 100 gecs popularized the technique. Interestingly, what caused her to experiment with pitch-shifting in the first place was the gender dysphoria she felt as a trans woman with a traditionally male voice. Not only were her early vocals pitched up, but they were highly processed and almost alien-sounding, which also was reflected in her lyrics about not belonging or not feeling human. The idea of pitching up her vocals in the first place came from the subgenre Nightcore, which many see as a predecessor to Hyperpop. Nightcore features remixes of songs that have been sped up. When you speed up a track it also gains a higher pitch, leading to the high pitch vocals Les gravitated towards. She has stated that she couldn’t listen to her own voice, and therefore when she found Nightcore, she thought pitching up her voice was the perfect way to mask her voice and feel some sort of gender affirmation while singing. (Holte, 2023, 43-45.)

Laura Les’ desire to explore a voice that affirms her gender is entirely valid; however, it is also shaped by the narrative that each gender must have a "correct" type of voice. While some trans people relate to the "wrong body" narrative of transness, many reject the idea that their voice is an essential marker of gender. Societal expectations continue to enforce assumptions about how a person should sound based on the binary gender they are perceived to represent. Yet, in singing, these expectations are more fluid, vocalists often enjoy greater freedom to experiment with range, pitch, and tone. If there were truly a medically necessary way that each gender should sound, it would be curious that society polices speaking voices much more strictly than singing

voices. This discrepancy suggests that vocal gender norms are less a biological imperative and more a social construct. (Fink, 2019, 23–28.)

The way pitch-shifting worked in the past was simply by speeding up or down the recording, leading to the frequency and pitch changing. When pitched up, the frequency is increased and the duration of the recording is decreased. This is also how it worked in the case of Nightcore. The problem with this approach to pitch-shifting is that it also affects the speed of the recording. Therefore there have been developed plugins that can alter the pitch without changing the speed. When we use these plugins to alter the pitch of the recording, they work in a way where they keep the formants, which are the specific frequency qualities that determine the phonetic quality of a vowel, unchanged from the original pitch. The ones that don't do this quickly sound very artificial, although several of the plugins allow you to alter all the parameters related to pitch-shifting to make it sound however natural or unnatural you want. This is the same technology used in autotune. (Titeux, 2022.)

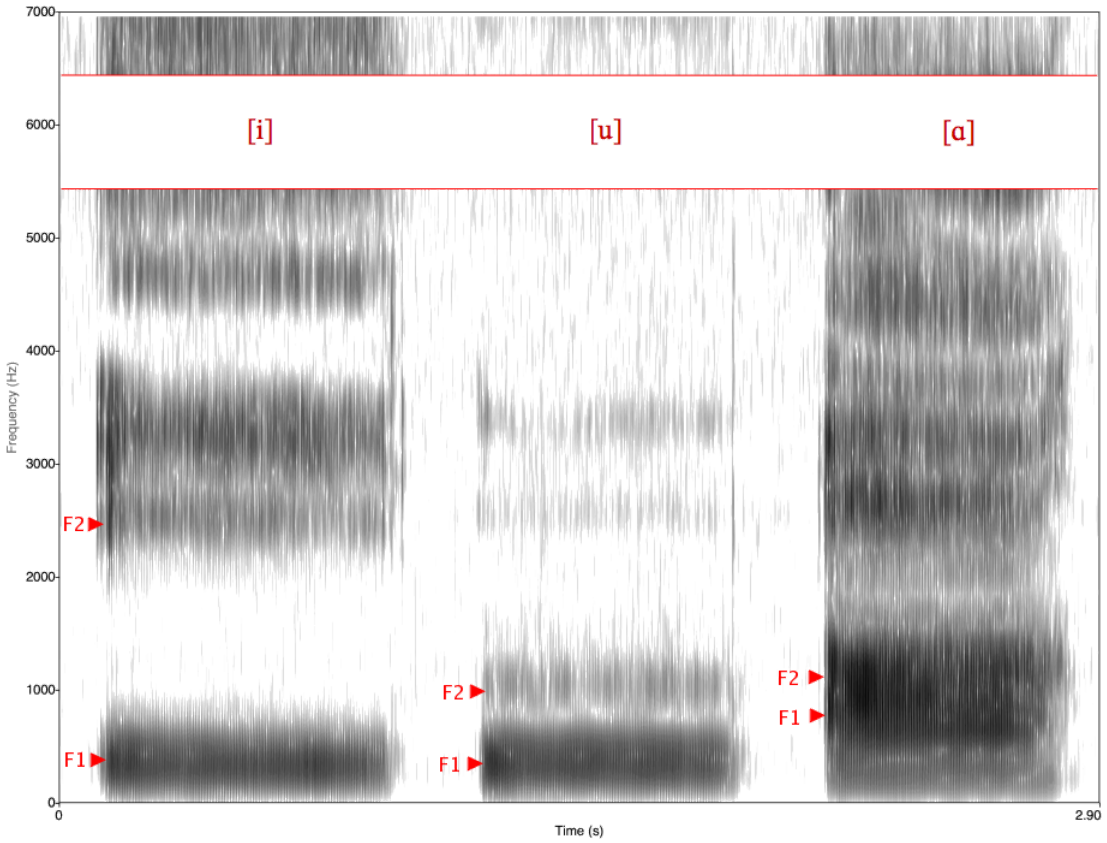

Figure 9. A graph showing the formants of different vowels (Ish ishwar, 2005).

Cher is another queer icon who laid the groundwork for the way Laura Les chose to use pitch shifting several decades later, with her use of autotune as an artistic choice rather than just a tool for pitch correction. This approach was a clear shift from how the technology had usually been used, which was more subtle and practical. The effect was first prominently heard in her 1998 hit song ‘Believe’, where producer Mark Taylor made the bold decision to apply Antares’ Autotune software to Cher’s vocals. The result was a striking, heavily processed sound that gave the track a distinctive, at the time unique and innovative timbre, something that hadn’t really been heard in mainstream pop before. The mechanical edge of her voice created a kind of emotional ambiguity that both masked and amplified feeling, allowing for a layered and complex performance. It also invited listeners to question the relationship between voice, authenticity, and persona in pop music. ‘Believe’ went on to become not just a commercial success, but also a beloved queer anthem. It can be guessed that the queer community was drawn to its strange, synthetic vocal quality for similar reasons that Nightcore resonated so strongly with Laura Les. In both cases, the digitally altered voice becomes a space for transformation, expression, and identity. (Chaplin, 2021; Titeux, 2022.)

The rise in popularity of high-pitch vocals happened in tandem with the rise of sped up music on TikTok, which is a trend that has even led some artists to release official sped-up versions of their tracks. For the music industry this has been an effective and cheap way to market their tracks to new and younger audiences. Instead of paying for a fully-fledged remix, they can just speed up the song with minimal effort. Sadly, there seems to be little research done on why young people gravitate towards these sped-up songs and what makes them so popular, but the trend is undeniably enjoyed by millions around the globe, and is reminiscent of the popular genre of Nightcore from the early 2000s. Some people have theorized that its popularity has a correlation with the youths’ diminishing attention spans, which could explain the popularity of sped-up songs, but fails to account for the pitched up vocals in songs of a more average length. (Demopoulos, 2023; Borg, 2023.)

This trend extends far beyond just Laura Les and Cher. It has become a widely popular phenomenon, visible across the entire musical spectrum, from the

underground scenes to the mainstream, and especially in the liminal space in between where genres like Hyperpop thrive. Even within genres that have not traditionally been associated with queer expression, such as Hip Hop, artists like Young Thug and Lil Uzi Vert have embraced this stylistic experimentation. Their sonic choices, as well as their visual aesthetics, are often informed by queer cultural influences, creating a sense of symbiosis in how they blur and bend the norms. In the world of Hyperpop, we've witnessed queer artists such as SOPHIE, Arca, and ANOHNI pushing the boundaries of vocal manipulation through pitch modulation and pitch-shifting. These techniques become more than just artistic tools. They are acts of reclamation, allowing queer and trans musicians to reshape their voices through technology and, in doing so, to assert their presence against traditional gender constructs. Importantly, their identities are not always defined by gender, but often expressed in ways that challenge or exist independently of it. (Schaffer, 2019.)

4.2 Abrasiveness and Noise

Some outsiders of the queer circles often stereotype queer music as melancholic and sad, but there's a rich history of angry, intense, and abrasive sounds found in queer culture and music. This emotional intensity isn't incidental. It's a reflection of lived experience and resistance. Anger is often seen as a counterproductive and primitive reaction when western societies' oppressors evaluate the oppressed, as a shortcoming, but isn't anger a natural reaction to disenfranchisement and discrimination? It is a visceral, human response to systemic erasure and marginalization. There should therefore be no surprise that queer people have experimented with noise and abrasiveness as long as they have been oppressed. Bands like Tribe 8 and Pansy Division fused together the typically heteronormative genre of hardcore punk with queer lyrics and anti-homophobic messages, reclaiming space in a scene that often excluded them. (Abi-Nakhoul, 2021; Chow, 2022, 334.)

In the last couple of years we've seen some very clear queer tendencies in abrasive genres like screamo and post-hardcore with queer-fronted bands like

Zulu and SeeYouSpaceCowboy rising to prominence. Zulu is not just a queer band, but a band made up of black people, exemplifying another case of intersectionality within modern music history. They're known for mixing their black legacy and queer expression with the extremely aggressive sounds of screamo, skramz and powerviolence. This is not just interesting, but also important, as queer and black people have been looked down upon and called emotionally weak if they show anger throughout history. Zulu on the other hand is weaponizing these primitive perceptions of marginalized identities to create something beautiful that unites people, no matter if everyone sees the beauty in it or not. (Brown, 2023.)

Noise music can be seen as a perfect venue for queer expression, seeing as it's a non-conformist genre on the outsides of the mainstream. The capitalist mass market tries to appeal queer sensibilities by marketing music full of queer stereotypes to queer people, but being queer is also about not conforming, so blindly following what the heternormative mainstream has assigned to be typically queer genres would be against queer people's identities. This is part of the reason why noise music, and in general angry and abrasive music, speaks to so many queer people. Similarly to the term 'queer', 'noise' is a genre that's hard to define. You can find elements of it in a multitude of genres like rock, alternative, jazz, hip-hop, etc., similar to how queer people can be gay, trans, bisexual, genderfluid and so on. (Surkan, 2010, 1-13.)

If you trace the history of noise music, its queer roots can be traced back to John Cage, who famously composed the piece '4'33', which interestingly enough doesn't include a single noise. The piece includes complete silence for 4 minutes and 33 seconds, with the exceptions of the audience's rustlings and breaths. The piece has been theorized to have been directly linked to Cage's secret homosexuality, linking the silence in the piece to the silence about his sexuality. Several queer artists have incorporated noise straight into their lyrical contents, like Xiu Xiu, Throbbing Gristle, and Coil. In these works, noise becomes not just a sound but a form of resistance, a way of disrupting normative expectations around music, identity, and expression. It's hard to tell if queer audiences gravitated towards noise because of the queer themes heard in these artists' works, or if they came to it before then simply because of the

genre’s non-conformist nature, but it’s clear that both influence why the genre has a big queer following today. (Surkan, 2010, 6–10.)
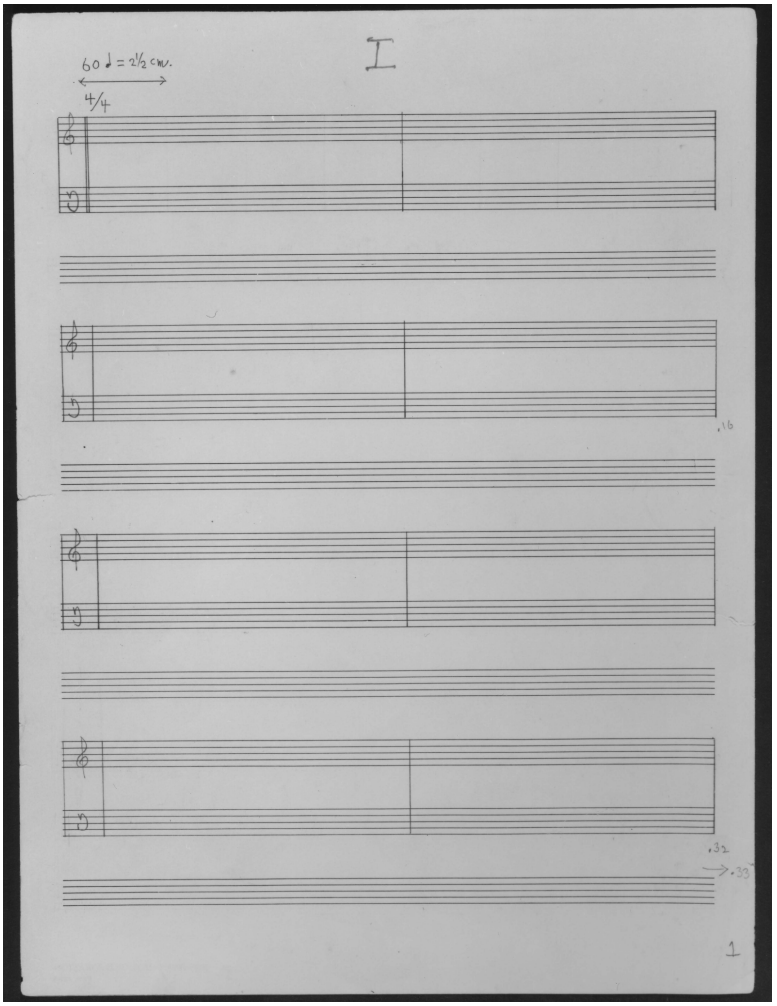
Figure 10. Reconstruction of John Cage’s original score for ‘4’33’ (Pritchett, n.d.).

Queer engagement with noisy and heavy genres is not merely an artistic choice, it is a radical act of defiance, survival, and identity formation. In embracing the abrasive, the dissonant, and the difficult, queer artists refuse the clean, marketable narratives assigned to them by heteronormative culture. Where others might hear chaos or unrefined aggression, queer listeners and creators find honesty, catharsis, and communion. Noise becomes a space where boundaries blur, between music and protest, between identity and resistance, between silence and visibility. Just as queerness resists fixed categories, noise resists musical conventions. Together, they forge a powerful language of expression that is as much about being heard as it is about refusing

to be erased. In this way, queer noise doesn't simply push against the mainstream, it redefines what music can be when it dares to be unapologetically real.

4.3 Visual Self-Expression and Camp

An important, but often overlooked part of being an artist is one's visual profile and aesthetics. The way an artist presents themselves, through fashion, body language, and visual choices, can be just as integral to their work as the art they produce. This visual self-expression serves not only as an extension of the artist's identity, but also as a crucial part of how their work is experienced and interpreted. For queer artists, this aesthetic experimentation becomes a powerful tool for both performing their identities and challenging societal norms. By pushing the boundaries of conventional fashion and self-presentation, they engage in a form of visual resistance, using their appearance to make bold statements about their personal truths. These artists intentionally craft their public personas in ways that disrupt traditional expectations, creating spaces where heteronormative ideals can be questioned and reimagined. Through deliberate choices in their style and presentation, queer artists open up new possibilities for how queerness can be seen, understood, and celebrated, inviting others to broaden their perspectives and rethink the limits of identity.

An essential term when discussing queer artists' visuals, performances, and fashion is the term 'camp', which originates from the 1909 edition of the Oxford English Dictionary and was initially used to describe the theatrical, exaggerated, and ostentatious characteristics often associated with homosexual men. Similar to the trajectory of the term 'queer', 'camp' was originally coined by the heteronormative mainstream to label and stereotype gay people, but was later consciously reclaimed and proudly adopted by the queer community as an act of resistance and defiance. Over time, the meaning of 'camp' evolved beyond its early derogatory connotations, and today, the queer community embraces it as a way to perform one's identity with deliberate exaggeration, irony, and playfulness, in a manner that challenges rigid gender and cultural norms and

actively deconstructs traditional ways of looking at gender identity. (Bekhrad, 2019; Botescu-Sireșeanu, 2019, 89–90.)

Queen is a band that encompassed the term 'camp'. Freddie Mercury didn't just have musical talent, but an amazing talent for performance as well. From the beginning of the band he realized the importance of image. Even though being openly queer was risky at the start of his career, he still chose to perform his identity on stage and in music videos. His performances, visuals and style played with gender norms the same way as his music toyed with genre. Queen didn't just revolutionize queer aesthetics in a musical setting, but artistic visual profile as a whole through their now-legendary music videos. Before 1975, it was not usual for bands to promote their music this way. Freddie Mercury's theatrical, flamboyant and campy persona did not go unnoticed, with comments and criticisms being written about him from the very beginning. Their video for Bohemian Rhapsody has by many seen as the first music video in the contemporary sense of the word, and it showcased all the significant aspects of ‘camp’, by parodying the mainstream, being theatrical and subverting expectations. (Botescu-Sireșeanu, 2019, 92-93.)

Another artist who has challenged typical gender stereotypes through their visuals and performances is Dorian Electra, whose style very much fits the term ‘camp’ as well. Their style directly reflects their genderfluid identity, mashing up stereotypically female and male fashion trends and visual representations to create a style that fits them perfectly. Rather than adhering to any one traditional standard, they combine elements from across the gender spectrum to craft a look that feels both rebellious and authentic to who they are. Their video for the song ‘Adam & Steve’ is a perfect example of how they use their art to challenge the norms we as a society have put forward about sexuality and gender. The title of the song plays on the homophobic idea rooted in Christianity that two men shouldn’t be together because “God created Adam and Eve, not Adam and Steve.” In the video, they contrast the sexual repression of the Middle Ages and in Christianity’s history with images of a future where sexual expression is free and uninhibited. Through a blend of historic references and futuristic fantasy, they showcase in a visual way how the gender norms society has come to accept are outdated and primitive, offering a powerful critique of

the ways in which these restrictive ideas have persisted over time. (Holte, 2023, 76-80.)

Figure 11. Still image from the music video for ‘Adam & Steve’ (Russ, 2019).

‘Camp’ isn’t just a way to dress or show off one’s identity, but an active resistance against the mainstream and restrictive gender norms. It thrives on exaggeration, irony, and theatricality, deliberately pushing against the boundaries of what is considered acceptable or tasteful by conventional standards. ‘Camp’ does therefore very much fit into the second definition of ‘queer’, which is to orient oneself in opposition to the normative. It embodies a spirit of defiance, celebrating the eccentric, the artificial, and the excessive as a way to challenge the rigid expectations surrounding gender and sexuality. By embracing the flamboyant and the absurd, ‘camp’ creates a space where the rules of traditional beauty and propriety are not just broken, but completely transformed. Therefore, it makes sense that queer artists bend and toy with social norms to create something unique that they feel better symbolizes who they are. Through this playful and subversive approach, ‘camp’ becomes not only a form of personal expression but also a powerful political statement. (Moore & Purvis, 2018, 27-28.) This challenges the audience to reconsider the meanings of authenticity and taste, as it celebrates what is often dismissed as ‘bad’ or ‘wrong’, turning it into something rich with possibility and significance in

a similar way to how the queer genre of Hyperpop challenges its listeners to do the same.

4.4 Producing Hyperpop

The most easily recognizable characteristic of Hyperpop is the pitched up vocals I have already described, but there's plenty of other experimental techniques in this queer genre that are worth exploring. It's worth noting that the genre is pretty loose, and it's hard to find a consensus on what techniques have to be utilized for it to definitely count as Hyperpop, but most people agree that Hyperpop usually features a maximalist and overall eclectic production style. Loads of saturation and distortion are used mainly on vocals and 808s, but can also be used on all other instruments. (Alfakir, 2022.)

The experimental nature of Hyperpop closely aligns with the identity exploration and boundary breaking character of many of its queer creators. By disrupting conventional sound and visual culture, queer artists challenge traditional ideas of gender performance, expression, and identity (De Lellis da Silva, 2020). A song like Hollywood Baby by 100 gecs is a perfect example of this, featuring heavy distortion, compression and pitch shifting, as well as glitch effects achieved with synth plugins like Serum or Massive X. These types of effects are widespread throughout the entire genre, making the abrasiveness a key factor of the sound. (Haven, 2025.)

The popular Hyperpop artist Underscores live streamed herself going through the Ableton project files of her widely popular album 'fishmonger' and the reuploads of this livestream gives us good insights in various different methods and techniques modern Hyperpop-artists use when producing their music. As previously stated, distortion and abrasiveness is an important part of the sound, and we can see at 29:44 in part 1 of the reupload that even her master channel is clipping at her song 'second hand embarrassment'. (reph, 2021a.) This is definitely something that you're advised not to do when studying music production, but this song now sits at over five million streams on Spotify so it's

clearly something fans of the genre gravitate towards. In the song ‘my favorite sidekick’ in the second part of the reupload, she explains the thought process behind her distorted 808s, which also have become a staple of the genre, which she basically just took from the genre Hardstyle and repurposed into her own sound. (reph, 2021b.) This is emblematic of almost all queer musical experimentation we have discussed so far, where queer artists ignore genre norms and boundaries.

Figure 12. Screenshot from underscores’ livestream (Musical Streams, 2021).

4.5 Queer Songwriting and Musical Theatre

Music historians often ask whether it's possible to detect an artist's struggle with their sexuality purely through their music. For instance, according to senior lecturer of musicology at Sydney Conservatorium of Music, Gavin S. K. Lee, some have speculated that Austrian composer Franz Schubert may have been gay, citing elements in his work that seem to reflect a conflicted relationship with conventional masculinity (2023, 238). His 1828 composition ‘Der Atlas’ has been seen by historians and music scholars as a queer composition, not just because of its lyrics, but also because of its non-normative structural features.

The song flows unpredictably between different sections and key-changes. The motifs of the song are altered for each time they are repeated, and finally the song ends with an unsettling diminished chord. On top of this, the lyrics can be interpreted as being about a man who is eternally doomed to a life of unrequited love because of his sexuality, which he didn't choose himself. No matter if this is what Schubert meant when he wrote the piece, queer people today have chosen to interpret it this way and find solace in this reading. (Lee, 2023, 77-92.) This is an early example of possibly queer songwriting, but since then there have been many examples that are both directly or indirectly influenced or about its creators' queerness.

We can also observe in musical theatre how structural experimentation can be utilized as a form of queer resistance. Musicals like Fun Home, Hadestown, and A Strange Loop all actively disrupt heteronormative temporality through their use of queer dramaturgy. In other words, these productions break away from the traditionally linear, time-bound way of telling a story in this medium, instead offering a more fluid, diverse, and less predictable depiction of experiences related to identity and relationships through their subversion of established trends. By doing so, they provide a space where we can witness the formation of identity, relationships, and the passage of time in a manner that better mirrors the queer search for identity, which does not always align with or adhere to heteronormative expectations. (Whitfield, 2020.)

Figure 13. Image from the musical "Fun Home" (Marcus, 2015).

While there are numerous examples of how queer songwriters have used their queerness to innovate musically and challenge the heternormative hegemony, it is equally important to acknowledge that there are many queer songwriters within the mainstream who, although queer, may not engage in the same level of experimentalism as those previously mentioned. Artists such as Rihanna, Beyoncé, Ariana Grande, and Katy Perry, for instance, have all collaborated with queer songwriters to help create some of their most popular and iconic hits. One notable example of this is the songwriter Justin Tranter, who, over the course of more than a decade, has written some of the biggest and most successful songs in the world. (Moayeri, 2025; Rude, 2023.)

4.6 Genre Fusion and the Impact of Black Creativity

As previously stated in this thesis when discussing intersectionality, it is unwise to discuss queer culture and art without considering the vital contributions of people of colour and the ways they have historically experimented and innovated in spite of the unique challenges they face, challenges that queer white people do not have to navigate. These individuals have had to overcome societal barriers and prejudice that have often erased or marginalized their voices, yet they continue to create and redefine art across a multitude of mediums. In music history, queer Black voices in particular have been suppressed and largely forgotten, despite their immense and largely successful efforts to innovate, influence, and express their identities. Their work has often gone unrecognized, yet it remains a critical force in shaping the cultural landscape, as evidenced by their ongoing impact across various artistic genres. (Tobias, 2023.)

One of the many powerful ways Black queer artists have innovated and reimagined music history is through genre-blending and genre-breaking, effectively creating entirely new sonic landscapes. An excellent example of this is Missy Elliott, who, for instance, merged elements of glam, rhythm, and Black musical traditions, such as rap and R&B, with avant-garde visuals and experimental techniques, creating a unique fusion that redefined mainstream

music. (Tobias, 2023.) This groundbreaking approach to blending aspects of different sounds and techniques resonates with themes we have previously explored in this thesis, particularly in relation to drag culture and disco. Just as those forms of expression celebrate a fluidity of identity and an ability to cross boundaries, the blending of genres also speaks to a broader cultural shift. When one embodies multiple identities, embracing a more fluid and expansive way of identifying, it naturally follows that such fluidity would also be reflected in their art. This cross-pollination of styles and genres creates space for new forms of creative expression and challenges traditional norms, ultimately reshaping the cultural fabric.

4.7 Heternormative vs. Queer Experimentation

Experimentation is not just commonplace in music, regardless of identity and genre, but also very important because it trains your creativity and helps foster musical innovation. Just like with the scientific method, to discover new things you have to experiment. Each experiment has different amounts of theoretical background behind it, but similar to all of them is that without someone doing the experiments, nothing new or groundbreaking would be discovered. Therefore experimentation is essential for the future of music. (Lapointe, n.d..)

Part of what differentiates queer from heteronormative forms of experimentation is that our societies are set up in a way that favours the heteronormative, offering it visibility, validation, and institutional support, while often marginalizing or ignoring other ways of being. Meanwhile, for queer people, the world can at times be seen as quite hostile, a place where self-expression may carry risk, and where cultural narratives rarely reflect their lived experiences. Therefore, it makes sense that queer artists take aspects of the mainstream and repurpose it in a way that’s contingent for queer people, creating subversive reinterpretations that both critique and reimagine dominant norms. (Lee, 2023, 13.)

For certain artists, musical experimentation can be an instrument of survival and self-realization. If you can’t find yourself in the heteronormatively shaped musical landscape, you have to carve out your own piece to reside in. Not only can experimentation be used as a way to defy mainstream norms, but also as an act of resilience between one’s experience of oneself in contrast to other people's perception of who you are. (Holte, 2023, 82-85.) This is not as big of a problem for heteronormative artists, who often find that people’s perceptions of them neatly align with their own perceptions of themselves. When queer artists often feel like they don’t have a choice but to experiment, straight artists are free to be however conforming or experimental as they want.

5 CONCLUSION

In this thesis, I have explored how both historic and contemporary queer musical expression and experimentation go beyond mere artistic choices, they are intrinsically tied to queerness itself. They represent survival, resilience, and a vital expression of queer identity. Some artists have been led to experiment simply as an effort to find themselves, because they do not relate to the heternormative musical norms which oftentimes have been fronted as the “correct” way to do things. While others have done so in direct opposition to the idea that there’s a right and wrong way of being.

To be queer is to be in a position opposing the normative. If you identify as queer you are automatically nonconforming, and this can sometimes directly lead to experimentation that differs from the way heteronormative artists experiment, because queer artists oftentime simply don’t have the same level of choice as a straight one does. Our society has been hostile to people who do not conform, not just queer people, but also ethnic and religious minorities. Some of them have broken through this hostility, like Freddie Mercury, meanwhile most have been lost to history. And even though we have made progress in recognizing queer artists and their importance, we still have a long way to go recognize and empower queer people of colour, especially women.

Queer musical experimentation has led to many popular and groundbreaking trends and is deeply linked to most mainstream popular genres throughout the last 100 years, from blues to hyperpop. When the mainstream is too busy using the same formula that has been proven to generate profit, the outsiders who have thought there was no space for them in the mainstream have been busy innovating and finding new ways to express themselves that aligns better with who they are. A lot of queer musical expression isn’t just in opposition to the mainstream, but directly critiques it.

Through this thesis, I have shone a light on why queer musical expression is important to discuss, not just for the music itself, but its deeper impact and meaning on the world around us. We need artists who innovate if we want

music to evolve and get better, and throughout history queer artists have been at the forefront of this innovation.

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