

ESSAYS

**Between Decadence and Denial: Two
Studies in Gay Male Politics and 1980s
Pop Music****Aaron Lecklider***Boston University*

This essay offers a counterhistory of 1980s pop music that places dance-oriented music at the center of what counts as politics in this moment. Such a project displaces studies that attempt to bracket off dance music as inauthentic, unimportant, or politically disengaged.¹ At the same time, this project restores what is arguably among the most lasting cultural legacies of the 1980s—ephemeral dance pop—to its rightful place in the center of this historical milieu. Considering Frankie Goes to Hollywood and Pet Shop Boys as important historical agents reveals the centrality of sexual politics within a time period and musical genre too readily dismissed as disposable and self-absorbed, and further illustrates the socio-political centrality of gay male sexuality in the late twentieth-century.

In a decade that was supposed to have been dominated by conservative national politics and the rise of the straight-laced power-lunching yuppie, the world of popular music in the 1980s looked awfully gay. Bands like Erasure, Depeche Mode, Soft Cell, and the Bronski Beat made it to the top of the US pop charts with self-proclaimed, sometimes flamboyantly gay members. Professed heterosexuals like George Michael, Prince, Michael Jackson, and Madonna challenged established codes of sexual conduct by adopting fashions and styles long associated with the gay community. Aerosmith, whose image was already a surprising alchemy of androgyny and sheer machismo, recorded a gender-bending tune in 1987 called “Dude Looks Like a Lady.” And to top it all off, that stalwart fortress of traditional American values, *Life* magazine, inaugurated January 1985 with a provocative and lavishly illustrated lead story: “Gender Benders: The Year of Living Androgynously.” “The talk of rock was roles—sexual ones,” read the article, “as performers flaunted their androgynous zones right to the top of the charts” (94).

For the gay male community in the 1980s, this explosion of visibility could not have come at a more awkward moment. By 1983, it was all too clear that AIDS was rapidly decimating gay men. In 1986, the United States Supreme Court, in *Bowers vs. Hardwick*, ruled that it was constitutional for states to criminalize gay sexual behavior. The year 1987 saw a nearly unanimous senate ban on federal funding for gay AIDS education (Vaid 72). Every gain that appeared in the cultural sphere seemed to be accompanied by another closed door in the political arena and another death in the community. Every triumphant gain was countered with a devastating loss.

The full history of gay male sexuality in 1980s pop music has not yet been written.² In this essay, I look at two moments when sexuality intersected with culture and politics on the pop music charts. I first examine Frankie Goes to Hollywood's 1985 top-10 pop hit, "Relax." Frankie Goes to Hollywood included two openly gay members, a fact that was key to the band's reception. I then consider, by way of contrast, *Actually*, the second album by the closeted Pet Shop Boys, an album that generated several hit singles and strong record sales, yet garnered relatively little national media attention dedicated to the band's sexual orientation. These two bands represented distinctly different approaches to gay cultural politics, and their paradoxical reception by straight and gay audiences reveals the profound ambivalence about sexual diversity in the 1980s: Frankie Goes to Hollywood was attacked for being too gay (too explicit and decadent) whereas the Pet Shop Boys were not gay enough (too closeted and reticent). I argue that though these bands are frequently overlooked in both general histories of the 1980s, which still shy away from explicitly gay content, and gay histories that demand certain activist behavior and strategic visibility from their central actors, "Relax" and *Actually* represent crucial moments in the emergence of gay visibility, growing awareness of AIDS in everyday life, and the continuing struggle for civil rights for all Americans. I am writing about British artists and American audiences because I wish to explore how the American gay rights movement made use of popular music, and British pop music dominated the 1980s new wave scene.³ My argument attacks two long-standing myths about the 1980s: first, the myth that gay artists in the decade were reduced to stock stereotypes and represented a victory of gay style over substantial political change, and second, the myth that artists who were not "out" did not challenge hegemonic constructions of sexuality in any meaningful way. I argue that many contemporary historians

dismiss these bands as too vacuous for serious analysis for precisely the same reasons that they mattered. In a world where silence equaled death, pop music was the soundtrack of survival.

Part I: Frankie Goes to Hollywood, or the myth of the vacuous gay pop song

“For the dominant culture,” cultural critic Michael Bronski has written, “the threat of homosexuality is that it embodies and prioritizes the pleasure principle—the denial of which, we have always been told, is necessary for civilization, as we know it, to go on” (14). Popular musicians have frequently refused to deny this seductive threat. After the “disco sucks” backlash closed the 1970s with a riot at Chicago’s Comiskey Park, the visibility of sexual nonconformity in popular music precipitously declined. The Village People put their homoerotic costumes into storage and Gloria Gaynor’s career did not survive. When Frankie Goes to Hollywood made it onto Billboard’s Top 40 with “Relax” in 1985, they helped swing open the closet doors for good, encouraging Americans to talk openly about sexuality, and offering a hopeful vision for gay men beginning to feel the tragic effects of AIDS in their lives.

Entertainment Weekly called Frankie Goes to Hollywood’s debut album, *Welcome to the Pleasuredome*, an “unapologetic tribute to hedonism” (Cheng 76). This was a curious designation for an album that included, among other decidedly nonsexual songs, straightforward cover versions of Bruce Springsteen’s “Born to Run” and Edwin Starr’s Vietnam-era classic “War.” Most of the album’s content was either banal pop fare or strident political diatribe. *Entertainment Weekly*’s inappropriate charge of “hedonism” was most likely a response to two factors. First, Frankie had recorded a somewhat dirty single, “Relax.” The song, which climbed to number 10 on the American pop charts, was a repetitive, synthesizer-driven dance track containing few lyrics other than “relax, don’t do it, when you want to come.” “Relax’s” refrain might have been construed as “hedonistic” simply because it was explicitly sexual.

The second reason *Entertainment Weekly* designated *Welcome to the Pleasuredome* as hedonistic was because the band included two openly gay members—or, as *Rolling Stone* put it, “both have admitted to being gay” (Thomas 36). At a time when American sexuality was widely considered a matter of making choices—the less outrageous, the better—being gay was increasingly perceived as a decadent lifestyle choice and a crime against both nature and society. The strategy of gay liberation favored in the 1970s, favoring the freedom of sexual choice,

was used in the 1980s to discredit homosexuality as a rabid disregard for the principles of an orderly society. “The election of Ronald Reagan,” writes John Loughery, “on an anti-ERA, family values platform, validated a yearning in America, a wish to return to a more ordered world where deviance and disruption were supposedly nonexistent or invisible” (406). Indeed, Reagan’s inauguration in 1981 closed the door on much of the flamboyant activism that had marked gay politics in the 1970s. Open, public declarations of homosexuality were worse than private indiscretions: sexual deviants could at least keep their pathology behind closed doors. *Rolling Stone*, a magazine known more for their splashy photo spreads of rock-and-roll vixens than as a stronghold for queer affirmation, described sexual minorities as shameful secrets. *Rolling Stone*’s real political artists were the likes of macho Bruce Springsteen and U2; the others were amusing curiosities. By “admitting” to being gay, Frankie Goes to Hollywood’s two gay members were confessing their dashing, daring sexual extravagance. For the editors of *Rolling Stone* and so many others, such unabashed decadence could not coexist with serious political activism; gay men were, by definition, merely hedonists.

Such charges appeared in venues other than *Rolling Stone*. The ostensibly objective newsweekly, *Time*, could not understand why Frankie Goes to Hollywood refused to deal with real world problems. “They came from one of the most disenfranchised cities in Mrs Thatcher’s England and hit it big at a time of bitterly divisive labor strife, but the band’s response to this is to salve everything under a coating of helpless hedonism. Relax” (Cocks 73). It apparently did not occur to this writer that “Relax” could be a political song. The small matter of an openly gay man advising another man to “relax, don’t do it’ when you want to come” did not appeal to the categories of social problems familiar to *Time*’s editorial staff (urban disenfranchisement, labor strife); gay sexuality was construed as an excess of pleasure; the exact opposite of responsible politics; a “helpless” gesture. The fight for gay visibility was a curiosity limited to pride parades and police logs. Proper political pop bands were stopping Sellafeld and feeding the world, not making public declarations of their deviance.

In this light, it is difficult not to view the media’s refusal to recognize a connection between Frankie Goes to Hollywood’s politics and their sexuality as a willful ignorance. *People* offered a startlingly similar criticism to that expressed in the *Time* piece, occluding sexual politics from their purview: “Sure, there’s a new kid at Kensington Palace, been a bombing at Brighton, labor trouble in coalfields and lots of other

things for the British to think about. But the big news lately—that is, for budding pubescents who are into leather, scorching dance videos, and street bands that are two-fifths gay—is Frankie” (Jerome 73). In this article, as in the *Time* piece, the author demanded political content from Frankie Goes to Hollywood. He did not simply ignore all political posturing from the band, who should have been, apparently, composing songs about labor trouble and Brighton bombings. The media demanded political content from Frankie Goes to Hollywood because anything seemed like a more important issue than a couple of gay guys getting off.

Though they could not quite figure out how “Relax” could be political, everybody seemed fully aware that Frankie Goes to Hollywood was “two-fifths gay.” The same *Time* article quoted above notes that frontman Holly Johnson “comes across as the archetypal Brit pop poofter, waving a salmon-colored silk scarf as he wafts his way through Springs-teen’s ‘Born to Run’” (73). The excess of a “pop poofter”—the latter term the British equivalent of America’s beloved “fag”—apparently made its way into the band’s music as well. *Rolling Stone’s* review of the album called it “the ultimate victory of mercenary style over substance, a work of extraordinary studio imagination and perverse commercial ambition dedicated to the elevation of hip agitprop and homoerotic self-absorption” (Fricke 44). In both these articles, the authors could not seem to remember if they were writing record reviews or condemnations of homosexuality’s Roman decadence. The terms used in describing Frankie, disguised as a critique of their presentation and production values, were the exact same terms used to criticize gay men in American culture: they were perverse, they favored style over substance, they were hopelessly self-absorbed. The media’s conflation of Frankie Goes to Hollywood’s music with their sexual orientation and lyrical content was consistent and vicious, repeatedly invoked to dismiss the band as ephemeral, apolitical, and ultimately insignificant.

Yet, these critics were not entirely wrong in their critiques. As entrenched as they were in homophobic discourse, mainstream media attacks on Frankie Goes to Hollywood revealed the tremendous historical significance of “Relax” in America’s gay liberation struggle. As Michael Bronski writes, “the creation of the homosexual menace—at once a threat and a temptation—is complicated by the fact that gay culture actually does, if its alternatives to institutionalized heterosexuality are embraced, present a threat to basic social structure” (11). Each of these articles, dripping as they were with innuendo and voyeuristic curiosity, voiced

a realistic concern: too much visibility really might make homosexuality attractive, threatening the socio-political dominance of heterosexuality. Rather than a grotesque paean to mindless fucking, “Relax” represents an important moment in the history of gay men in popular culture, boldly challenging the hegemony of the heterosexual worldview.

Rolling Stone could not help noticing that “Relax” even sounds gay. The thick bass line repeats one note throughout the entire song, a gay house staple introduced by disco and employed by popular club DJs from Chicago house originator Frankie Knuckles to Twilo NYC’s Junior Vasquez.⁴ The rhythm is sexy but masculine, intense, and insistent in its pulsating desire. The vocals are delivered in the whiney-yet-butch style perfected by Queen’s über-masculine Freddie Mercury, the musical equivalent to visual art’s Tom of Finland, the butch illustrator whose sexual-fantasy drawings brought S/M into the gay mainstream. The repetitive lyrics are clearly about a man performing oral sex on another man. The male narrator, sung by Holly Johnson, is unyielding in his urgent desire to extend the sexual act as long as possible. “Relax” is confident, raunchy, and explicit, unwavering in forcing its audiences to listen to explicit gay sex-talk: “Relax, don’t do it / When you want to suck it to it”; “Make making it your intention”; “Live those dreams / Scheme those schemes”; “When you want to go to it / Relax, don’t do it.” The audience is made part of this sexual experience both lyrically and musically: framed in the trappings of a dance track and employing a royal “you,” the song demands audience participation.

Though mainstream media like *Time*, *People*, and *Rolling Stone* claimed authority in describing Frankie Goes to Hollywood, they did not speak for a significant contingent of the song’s audience: gay men. “Relax” was described in these venues as an assault upon straight values, indicating a universal heterosexual subject. Such assumptions about audience reception were reversed in periodicals like the *Advocate*, a nationally circulated gay newsmagazine. The *Advocate* did not devote a great amount of space to pop music in the 1980s. At a time when AIDS was killing off a vast cross-section of the gay community—friends, lovers, and journalists—there was a certain gravity to the magazine’s editorial selection. Still, the *Advocate* introduced the readings of “Relax” that were not discussed in mainstream accounts. A 1984 article suggested that the song might be about “fist-fucking” (de Jongh 35). Though the *Advocate*’s transgressive reading of “Relax” as a reference to anal sex or more extreme sex acts reveals a certain proclivity among gay

men for reinscribing texts with their own secret meanings, the reading does not exhaust the full range of uses gay men might have made of the song.

Another article in the *Advocate* made explicit connections between national politics and popular music. "In 1984," wrote Adam Block,

the intolerant New Right gained a stranglehold on the Republican party platform, while the courts upheld laws against gay immigration and gays in the military. In England, the Thatcher government busted a gay bookstore, confiscating its inventory. Meanwhile, AIDS shattered gay lib's irreverent celebration of untrammelled, unashamed gay sex. In the face of this grim dread, gay images exploded in pop music; drag was everywhere (4).

Though Block followed this statement with an attack on the superficiality of gay pop performers and went on to decry the new visibility as "inspired more by catchy fashion than shared passion," his recognition that the widespread appearance of gay men in pop music was part of a larger socio-political climate was a significant step in recognizing the value of pop.

In *Making Things Perfectly Queer*, Alexander Doty proposes a reception theory that incorporates "non-, anti-, or contra-straight" audiences. His reinvigorated usage of the term "queer" "recognizes the possibility that fluctuating queer positions might be occupied whenever *anyone* produces or responds to culture" (3). Rather than assuming gay audiences respond equally in their transgressive readings of cultural texts, or that straight audiences simply do not respond to gay content, Doty's theoretical approach considers "expressions of queer perspectives on mass culture from the inside, rather than descriptions of how 'they' (gays and/or lesbians, usually) respond to, use, or are depicted in mass culture" (3). In other words, reception theory has often assumed that gay audiences respond to texts in subversive, yet overly generalized, ways, and that these queer readings are not shared with straight audiences. Doty proposes that transgressive audiences be de-centered, examining in their stead the ways queer content is already inscribed in texts themselves. Rather than assuming a clear delineation between straight and gay, Doty argues that sexual categories are always unstable, and therefore queer content may be found in all three corners of the cultural studies model: producers, consumers, and texts. His approach seems particularly well suited to exploring "Relax," a text that was given a dominant, straight reading (hedonism),

and a transgressive gay reading (anal sex), both of which ignored several key features of the song.

Given its appearance in the midst of the AIDS crisis, and taking into account the tremendous attention to gay-male sexuality surrounding the song's reception, "Relax" must be understood in the context of the growing AIDS epidemic for three primary reasons. First, the song celebrated gay male sexuality, a positive message that was increasingly needed in the gay community as sexuality became associated with death. In 1987, Douglas Crimp wrote an essay called "How to Have Promiscuity in an Epidemic," in which he argued the urgent need for positive representations of gay male sexuality. Simon Watney offered a similar argument in "How to Have Sex in an Epidemic." The possibility that the gay audience for "Relax" might not have been helplessly hedonistic, but rather might have been scared into celibacy (or the closet), was not addressed in the mainstream media. "I enjoy certain things, no one else has to enjoy them," writes frontman Holly Johnson in *Welcome to the Pleasuredome's* liner notes. "[N]o one has the right to tell me it's immoral or selfish or wrong to do what I do." Though Johnson was insistent that judgments about his lifestyle cease and desist, a pro-sex song did not necessarily imply hedonism; it may have simply reintroduced a discourse of healthy sexuality to a community within which sex was being constantly equated with death and immorality.

Second, "Relax," in its repeated mantra of restraint, might have referenced confusion among many gay men in the early days of AIDS about safe-sex practices. The AIDS virus was presumed to be spread through sex, but the gay community was used to dismissing safe-sex instructions as thinly veiled masks of homophobic intentions. It is not impossible to imagine gay men assuming that interrupting the sex act without ejaculating could have reduced their risk of contracting AIDS. An article appearing in the *New York Native* in 1982 illustrates this early confusion:

We, the authors, have concluded that there is no mutant virus and there will be no vaccine. We veterans of the circuit must accept that we have overloaded our immune systems with *common* viruses and other sexually transmitted infections. Our lifestyle has created the present epidemic of AIDS among gay men. But in the end, whichever theory you choose to believe, the obvious and immediate solution to the present crisis is the end of urban male promiscuity as we know it today (Berkowitz and Callen with Dworkin 563).

This article stands out for its association of AIDS with a build-up of various “traditional” diseases, a cause advanced by a rise in promiscuity. The authors’ insistence that AIDS is not unique argues that reducing the amount of semen exposure will reduce likelihood of infection. Larry Kramer offers a similar argument in his famous essay, “1,112 and Counting,” where he enumerates a string of possible causes for AIDS: “promiscuity, poppers, back rooms, the baths, rimming, fisting, anal intercourse, urine, semen, shit, saliva, sweat, blood, blacks, a single virus, a new virus, repeated exposure to a virus, amoebas carrying a virus” (34). Taking into account this common, paranoid explanation for infection, “Relax’s” obsessive restraint just before orgasm could be read as a pragmatic call to safer sex. If semen was the problem, refusing to ejaculate might be the solution. “Relax” made physical intimacy that never reaches a climax sound sexy and appealing.

Third, and perhaps most significantly, the switching narrators in the song indicate that “Relax” might be read simultaneously as both an invitation to extended pleasure and as discouraging irresponsible sex altogether. In the second verse, two lines suggest this latter reading: “Relax don’t do it, when you want to go to it,” and “Relax don’t do it, when you want to suck it to it.” Holly Johnson’s use of “you” in both of these lines suggests that the narrator is instructing somebody else (a lover, the audience, and all gay men) to think, or relax, before engaging in sexual activity. In any case, the lines are hardly hedonistic in their refusal to allow sexual release. The final message is “don’t do it.” The phrase “when you want to go to it” sounds far less like a reference to ejaculation than a warning off the entire sex act. The line discourages any sexual contact (“going to it”), not just orgasm. Similarly, the admonishment to not “suck it to it” does not even address the orgasmic party: it is the giver of pleasure who is told to relax, not the receiver. These lines suggest that Frankie Goes to Hollywood was speaking far more directly about abstinence, or at least sexual responsibility in an age when giving in to sexual impulses could be deadly, than promoting sexual abandon. “All it seems to take,” Larry Kramer wrote to young gay men in 1983, “is the one wrong fuck. That’s not promiscuity—that’s bad luck” (35).

The third stanza reinforces this prohibitive reading, and is itself virtually nonsensical by the “dominant” or “gay” readings. The phrase “make making it your intention” could be read as a sexual euphemism, but it is also used in a more colloquial sense of overcoming an obstacle. “Making it” is certainly slang for sexual intercourse, but it is also

employed as an expression of survival against difficult odds. In “Relax,” the phrase is followed by two more lines that encourage this reading that privileges surviving: “Live those dreams / Scheme those schemes.” Survival is the dominant theme tying these lines together: making it through; living to see dreams fulfilled; and continuing to scheme about the future. As Richard Berkowitz and Michael Callen soberly recount in a 1982 essay, “The motto of promiscuous gay men has been, ‘so many men, so little time.’ In the 70s we worried about so many men; in the 80s we will have to worry about so little time” (571). When the lines from “Relax” are considered as a performance by two openly gay men in the confusing and terrifying early days of AIDS, it seems logical to privilege a queer reading begging for survival through sexual restraint.

If “Relax” offers little room for ambiguity, considering the song in relation to three other songs of *Welcome to the Pleasuredome*—“Krisco Kisses,” “War,” and “Bang”—further illustrates how the song was an important contribution to both gay male history and the history of AIDS. The title of the first, “Krisco Kisses,” refers explicitly to gay male sexuality, either in the form of masturbation or the practice of anal fisting, and offers a useful comparison with “Relax” in its unabashed expression of sexual themes.

“Krisco Kisses” boasts the speediest tempo on the already-upbeat album and contains a driving, tom-driven percussive rhythm featuring unpredictable syncopation and occasional full musical stops. Shifting dramatically between chaotic, frenzied passages that employ scat vocalizing, and sublime, mellow passages featuring an organic, ethereal musical texture, the song resembles nothing so much as an effort to replicate the act of masturbation in musical terms within the conventions of a three-minute pop song. The lyrics forgo the clever double entendre of “Relax,” offering instead an outrageously explicit masturbatory or fisting fantasia: “Let’s take it to the top / with a fist way past the rest . . . you fit me like a glove my love.” In this song (which never stood a chance at receiving radio airplay) Frankie Goes to Hollywood again offers a positive outlook on gay sexuality in the age of AIDS. Like “Relax,” the song makes use of a hyper-masculine sound and structure. Each time the phrase “take it to the top” is repeated, a chorus of male clones (sounding burly as anything performed by the Village People) joins the lead vocalist. The overall effect creates an exclusive male space, bursting at the seam with overdetermined masculinity. The song produces the listening equivalent to a visit to a 1970s gay S/M bathhouse, complete with suggestive interruptions from

the audience—"blow me," for example—at the beginning and ending of the song. The song is explicitly performed by, to, and for an audience of men. Yet, the song stops short of promoting anything that might put its narrator at risk of contracting AIDS through transmission of bodily fluids: masturbation is among the safest form of sexual expression, and fisting, while an "extreme" sex act, is relatively safe in terms of HIV transmission. As it revels in the impolitic celebration of "deviant" sexual expression in "Krisco Kisses," Frankie Goes to Hollywood nonetheless urges the audience to vicariously enjoy gay male sexuality without engaging in high-risk sexual activity.

The gay sex-positive rallying cry for masturbation as a safer substitute for sex during the epidemic, around the time of *Welcome to the Pleasuredome*'s appearance, was being used by many visible AIDS activists. In 1988, Gran Fury, the artist arm of the guerilla advocacy group, ACT-UP, introduced a campaign featuring the slogan, "Men: Use condoms or beat it" (Crimp with Rolston *AIDS Demo Graphics* 64). Such campaigns countered the conservative response to AIDS that demanded a denial of sexual expression or a "reversion" to sexual conformity by offering safe, kinky alternatives. "Krisco Kisses" also, however, alluded to the spectre of fisting, a sexual practice often closely associated with gay bathhouses like the Mineshaft, the closing of which became a central rallying cry among AIDS activists, particularly with the appearance of ACT-UP in 1987. Still, though the setting may have been conducive to the spread of AIDS, the practice of fisting, in isolation, avoided the transmission of potentially deadly bodily fluids. Above all, the unrestrained sexual cries of "Krisco Kisses" provides a certain amount of contrast with "Relax"; there is no delaying pleasure in this song, rendering the repeated mantra of "don't do it" in "Relax" that is much more conspicuous.

"Krisco Kisses" offered gay audiences a titillating visibility and, if one reads the song as describing non-penetrative sexual expression, a safe alternative to unsafe sex practices. When considered in relation to "Relax," the two songs reinforce readings that privilege both an openly gay sexual orientation and, alternately, sober responsibility for sexual practices. Though both songs offer open expressions of male sexuality, they also issue an ambiguous understanding of the parameters set by the AIDS epidemic, recognizing implicitly that though silence might equal death, sex was an integral part of the equation.

Frankie Goes to Hollywood's inclusion of a cover version of "War," the Motown classic recorded by Edwin Starr in the midst of the

Vietnam War in 1970, on *Welcome to the Pleasuredome*, reinforces the band's deeply held and openly expressed pacifist convictions. Though their flagrant discussions of sexuality and sexual orientation opened the band to critique of their hedonism, the intentional inclusion of an overtly political anti-war song on the album acted as something of a buffer for those critics who would ignore the political salience of gay male sexuality in the 1980s. "War" offers an angry, yet ultimately optimistic, vision of American society. "War!" Edwin Starr exclaims on the original recording. "What is it good for?" Starr's version is tough and dirty, replete with funk guitar, aggressive, militaristic drums, and a snarling vocal delivery. Promotional photos of Starr from 1970 picture him looking stern and intense, with an American flag serving as a backdrop.

If "War" stands as a quintessential song of Motown's activist stance in 1970, its presence on an album by a British band in 1980 is something of a curiosity. Frankie Goes to Hollywood, freely improvising off the original recording, do not radically alter its message or tone (this is not, for example, an irony-laden treatment à la Pet Shop Boys' mordant cover of U2's "Where the Streets Have No Name" in 1991). This version seems to replicate the message of the original with little alteration: we despise war; it's good for absolutely nothing. Though the American war in Vietnam was a history lesson by 1985, Frankie Goes to Hollywood's original song, "Two Tribes," which offers a stinging critique of Reagan- and Thatcher-era hardline policies toward the USSR, helps to identify the war in question as the ongoing cold war. Frankie Goes to Hollywood's political message in "War" is achieved by adopting an angry song to address a war that is in perpetual stalemate.

"War" is a sober intervention, and it productively illustrates the band's serious-mindedness, illuminating the political intentions in "Relax." Contemporary media in 1985 were ruthless in their characterization of Frankie Goes to Hollywood as a band emerging from a turbulent milieu, who had shirked their political responsibilities in favor of a hedonistic pursuit of lusty pleasure. "War" disrupts this overly simplified understanding of *Welcome to the Pleasuredome*, bringing the underlying political nature of "Relax" to the surface. If "War" was a political rallying cry to action in 1970, its fading relevance to society in 1984 reminded audiences that there were other battles being fought.

The final song on *Welcome to the Pleasuredome*, "Bang," offers a surprisingly bleak and ambiguous message. While the album opens with "The World is My Oyster," its closing message is far less sanguine. The

title, "Bang," offers paradoxical readings: "bang" is both a slang term for sexual intercourse and a term indicating the firing of a gun. The final song revels in the ambivalence that pervades the rest of the album, and which characterizes the unique epistemological mode of "Relax." Refusing to settle schematically on the pleasure or repression, sex or death, hope or defeat, the song settles for the paradox of these two positions, both equally impossible for gay men living in the age of AIDS.

"Bang" is a melancholy little number, a one-minute elegy comprised of a somber keyboard bass line, dark orchestral swells, and the voice of a Ronald Reagan impersonator intoning, "Frankie say . . . Frankie say . . . Frankie say: no more." The song begins with an elegant synthesized arpeggio, proceeding into a dramatic, if minimalist, repetition, swelling with an extravagant orchestral sweep. Just before the words, "Frankie say no more," are spoken, a cymbal crash abruptly ends the song. So ends the album.

The voice of Ronald Reagan might have signified many things to a pop band in 1986: the renewed vigor of cold war aggression; the onward march of American economic imperialism; and the official silence about AIDS within the government. The use of Reagan's voice is a clever device for the band to tease its audience with their multiple meanings. Is Reagan preaching his standard intolerance, cutting off Frankie's album before it becomes too threatening? Is he finally taking a stand on the troubling issues of the day? Is he casually observing the end of the album? "Bang" revels in the band's refusal to settle on a meaning, playfully avoiding giving a final direction in how to read the album, the band, and the songs. The song may be seen as a form of high camp or low-grade cultural critique. In any case, it replicates, illustrates, and cleverly recognizes the ambiguity of the album's refusal to privilege politics or sexuality. "Bang's" ambivalence encourages viewers to look beyond the surface of the album and consider the multiple layers of meaning held within its superficiality. Acknowledging this play between party and politics is vital for understanding how the song "Relax" entered American popular culture.

Though "Relax" has frequently been read as a mere blip on the radio from another of 1980s pop music's many one-hit wonders, or as a vacant, meaningless song by hedonistic gay men, its history is far more complicated than this. "Relax" cannot be removed from the historical circumstances of gay men in 1984 and 1985, especially vis-à-vis the AIDS epidemic. The song's message of restraint is vital in understanding its appearance on the cultural scene. Nor can it be removed from its popular

reception as a forthright celebration of gay male sexuality, an important moment in the ongoing struggle for gay visibility. Both these factors were at play in “Relax’s” success, in its significance to both gay and straight audiences, and in its conspicuous absence from official histories of the 1980s that have denied the force of the song’s cultural politics.

One reason Frankie Goes to Hollywood created such a sensation was because their two gay members, Holly Johnson and Paul Rutherford, were vocal about their sexual preference, and therefore visible. Suzanne Danuta Walters has recently written about the political limitations of gay visibility:

We all carry with us a belief in a sort of causal connection between cultural visibility and political change, but I am convinced that, more often than not, there is actually a radical *disconnect* between the two. . . . At times, cultural visibility can simply be synonymous with commercial exploitation or with the “de-gaying” of gayness for heterosexual consumption. (15).

It would be false to claim that the appearance of openly gay pop stars easily translated into social structural changes. It is a similarly false premise to assume that artists who did not make public declarations of their sexual orientation were politically useless. Not all gay pop stars in the 1980s were as open about their sexuality as Frankie Goes to Hollywood, but this did not mean they were of no significance to gay history. The Pet Shop Boys may have been reticent about their sexuality in interviews, but their songs offered a complex window into 1980s gay life and made invaluable contributions to the political movement towards gay liberation.

Part II: The Pet Shop Boys' *Actually*, or the myth of the impotent closet

In his 1997 book *Sing Out! Gays and Lesbians in the Music World*, gossip journalist Boze Hadleigh attacks the two gay members of the pop duo Pet Shop Boys, Neil Tennant and Chris Lowe, for their refusal to come out in the 1980s. “There was a time,” Hadleigh writes, “when the Pet Shop Boys were so paranoid of the truth that they required interviewers to sign a document stating they would not ask Neil Tennant or Chris Lowe about their private lives” (307). For Hadleigh, the fact that the Pet Shop Boys were not speaking to the press about their sexuality means that they were “paranoid” about the public’s reaction, and that Tennant and Lowe were somehow denying the “truth” of their sexuality, a truth to

which Hadleigh, apparently, has special access. John Gill, in *Queer Noises: Male and Female Homosexuality in Twentieth-Century Music*, compares the Boys' skittishness about public declarations of their sexual preference as "akin to someone sidling around the back of a school class photograph, escaping one position to appear in another" (3). Yet, Gill also acknowledges that "their career has been studded with references, some sly, many others overt, to queer culture" (4). These two impulses—closeted public persona, queer artistic production—strike both Gill and Hadleigh as paradoxical and incompatible.

The Pet Shop Boys' 1987 sophomore album, *Actually*, is more than "studded with references" to gay culture. To a degree far greater than on their 1986 debut, *Please*, the Pet Shop Boys' *Actually* employs a full-throttle queer aesthetic, exploring such indicatively gay subjects as rent boys, AIDS, religious condemnation, camp, consumption, dancing, and other gay pop musicians. In contrast to the public visibility of Frankie Goes to Hollywood, the Pet Shop Boys express their sexuality almost exclusively through their music. By taking attention off their personal lives and redirecting it towards their aesthetic, the Pet Shop Boys are able to create music that addresses issues that allows both straight and gay audiences to experience the pleasure, pain, and pathos of queer culture without the legibility of an out and proud frontman. Rather than condemning the Pet Shop Boys for their public confidence, *Actually* should be recognized as a moment in gay American history when an album infused with not only gay content but also a thoroughly queer aesthetic was defining the cutting edge of the day's popular culture. The myth that their closetedness cut the Pet Shop Boys off from any real influence in gay cultural politics does not adequately address the queer content running through *Actually*, though it does expose some of the contradictions of gay male culture in the 1980s.

Gay-cultural politics have been historically dominated, at least for much of the twentieth-century, by questions concerning the "outness" of central-cultural figures. Whether this has involved soldiers in World War II or celebrities in Clinton's America, the act of coming out has been seen as an act of extreme political significance.⁵ Richard D. Mohr writes that "no substantial gay progress will be made until the shame-enhancing Secret is abandoned . . . gay progress requires both being publicly out and living in the truth" (47). Celebrities like Elton John, Melissa Etheridge, Frankie Goes to Hollywood, and Greg Louganis have been seen as having become valuable to the gay liberation movement precisely because of their

“courage” in openly declaring their sexual orientation to those who would listen. The fact that a gay diver looks exactly like a straight one has not been considered politically problematic; the significance of the coming-out interview has been seen as the single most important contribution a figure can make to the gay rights struggle.⁶ Urvashi Vaid expresses this most succinctly when she writes, “until each gay and lesbian person tells the truth about his or her life—by coming out every day, everywhere, and in every situation—the heterosexual world will be able to deny the existence of homosexuality” (30). But focusing on this one speech-act has caused too many valuable cultural figures—not the least of which might be queer consumers—to be occluded from serious analysis. The act of gay producers coming out is satisfying to heterosexual consumers largely because the latter can then comfortably look upon sexual otherness without interrogating their own subject position. When the Pet Shop Boys refused to be identified clearly as gay, queer consumers could enjoy the privileged access they had to the songs’ “hidden meanings”—they were all “in the know”—while straight consumers were drawn into a gay aesthetic, forced into a sexually ambiguous world where no one was other. Rather than impeding the political movements of gay men in the 1980s, the “hidden” sexuality of the Pet Shop Boys was their most powerful weapon against the othering tendencies of gay visibility. Ian Balfour has written, “so much depends upon this text being ‘sub’ ” (359), yet just as much depends upon the audience recognizing a subtext is present.

In his brilliant essay, “Glamour and Evasion: The Fabulous Ambivalence of the Pet Shop Boys,” Fred E. Maus discusses the “double-voicedness” of many songs by the duo. In Maus’s argument, “gay listeners have special insight into the songs, whether the songs convey a ‘gay sensibility,’ and whether particular songs imply experiences and situations specifically from gay lives” (382–3). At the same time, Maus argues that the broad appeal of the Pet Shop Boys has been due, in good measure, to the “deniability” of their songs’ gay content: while gay audiences can hear the winks and nudges throughout the songs, straight audiences can simply ignore this coded queerness. The band “leaves out any fully determinate specification of sexuality” (384). Furthermore, the Pet Shop Boys “depended on deniability for some of their circulation and commercial success, taking advantage of a predictable failure of many listeners to accept explicit gay meanings or, more subtly, of a public appetite for thinly disguised representations of homosexuality” (385). While Maus’s argument is remarkable for its nuanced articulation of the

tenuous closet the Pet Shop Boys (and their listeners) inhabit, his emphasis on deniability, double-voicedness, and ambivalence does not fully exhaust the political uses of the Pet Shop Boys, particularly in the queer 1980s. Maus lets straight audiences off the hook too easily: he privileges their avowed distancing from the Pet Shop Boys' gay subtext while denying the powerful indictment of rigid sexual categories implied in a straight embrace of queerness. Rather than "thinly disguised representations of homosexuality," the songs on *Actually* should be considered as barbed threats to a sexual order that sees homoeroticism as limited to self-professed homosexuals and trusts a straight audience that claims they thought the guy at the microphone was just singing about his girlfriend.

Of course, the Pet Shop Boys differ from Frankie Goes to Hollywood in the sheer volume of serious criticism that surrounded them, even (especially) before they (partially) came out in 1994.⁷ Distinguished rock critics like Greil Marcus, Simon Frith, Christopher Heath, and Robert Christgau celebrated the Pet Shop Boys at their earliest appearance, noting the "brittle elegance of their arrangements" (Frith, *Performing* 7), but also making note of Neil Tennant's carefully crafted, detached persona: Robert Christgau unforgettably writes, in a review of *Actually*, that "calling Neil Tennant a bored wimp is like accusing Jackson Pollock of making a mess." Music critics in the 1980s found value in the intelligence, craft, wit, irony, and politeness of the Pet Shop Boys' songs and image. They also recognized Neil Tennant as one of their own: before creating his pop group, Tennant was a music journalist writing for *Smash Hits* magazine, and he approached songwriting with a critic's eye, skeptical of high-minded pomposity or lowbrow shenanigans.⁸ Still, even the most celebratory critic was cautious about acknowledging too publicly the sexual subject matter in the songs, though they could not entirely ignore it. Christgau demurred that Tennant was merely a "bored wimp" (as opposed to a fey dandy), and Simon Frith notices in a later work that "their gayness is less significant here (at least for a heterosexual fan) than their emotional fluency" (8).

This critical response offers a striking contrast when set against that generated by Frankie Goes to Hollywood. Where Frankie is discredited for their vulgar sexual openness, the Pet Shop Boys are celebrated for their polite restraint. This critical context permits audiences to imagine the queerness of the Pet Shop Boys as simply an overdetermined detachment or a dry, ironic rendering of pop music gone melancholy. Yet, in this section, I argue that this context does not adequately account for the Pet Shop Boys' reception. The attention to detail on *Actually* offers no

credible distancing from the gay content that may hardly be considered sub-anything here. While their position as “artists” as opposed to “hacks” may have granted a certain permission for the Pet Shop Boys to revel in the mundane or wallow in their preciousness, these very qualities would have been legible to most audiences as indicative of a gay cultural context, particularly within the serious business of popular music.⁹ Yet the pleasure of consuming queerness was too seductive for even the straightest audiences to resist. By indulging in fanciful readings of the songs of *Actually*, I aim to elevate the position of the subtext to the position of the main text, and in so doing to discredit the notion that Pet Shop Boys fans were able to willfully ignore the big gay ghost in the drum machine.

The song “Hit Music” offers a pointedly self-referential description of the cultural uses of dance music. Employing the Pet Shop Boys’ trademark ironic detachment, “Hit Music” describes a popular dance track in a song that is itself designed to be a pop smash. All the trappings of a 1980s super pop hit are here: crashing orchestra hits, dark synth bass, catchy vocal repetitions. Yet in the middle of the song, “Hit Music” takes an unexpected turn: “Live a lie, dance together / all night long to your favorite / hit music.” Other than here, the song does not broach a subject of any greater gravity than listening and dancing to hit music. The introduction of a character who “lives a lie” disrupts the breezy flow of the song’s content, introducing a new intrigue into an otherwise dull song. Who was living a lie, and what kind of a lie was it?

First, the reference to living a lie, dropped into the song without any narrative context, offers a wry description of *Actually*’s presumed-straight audience, the “deniable” audience of Maus’s essay. The Pet Shop Boys’ disco-influenced dance music was designed with an eye towards current trends in gay club tracks, yet *Actually* found a popular audience among a broad group of consumers that included a large heterosexual contingent. Positioning this audience as the central consumers addressed in “Hit Music” reverses the standard attacks on closeted gay men as “living a lie,” reinscribing the closet around anyone who blindly consumes gay texts. Those who experience the “Hit Music” as just another number from the Top of the Pops would be securely ensconced in their complacent heterosexuality by denying or ignoring the influence of a queer aesthetic in their lives. Dancing together to the same song might have forced gay and straight audiences to consume the same pop song, but it was a lie if straight audiences did not extend this equality beyond the dance floor. In this sense, the Pet Shop Boys offer a sharp critique of

their own audience's deniability, interpreting their ambivalence as a willful lie.

Second, "Hit Music" also proposes that the dance represents the singular moment when the narrator's life is not a lie. Two gay men living public "lies" in the closet could still dance all night to the hit music. This reading requires a stop between "live a lie" and "dance together." However, just as his public life evades scrutiny, Neil Tennant's deadpan vocal delivery avoids fixing the meaning of his lyrics. The song's ominous orchestral hits and dark bass line, replete with syncopated cello stabs and grave string arrangements, reinforces, in its sweeping gravity, this latter reading, suggesting a certain danger lying just inside the glossy, pop exterior of "Hit Music"; yet the vocal delivery offers no additional legibility. Life among closeted gay men is marked by a constant fear of being found out; going out and dancing to pop songs allows such fears to be temporarily allayed while affirming a gay identity. The self-reflexive content in this pivotal line reveals a complex re-negotiation of the closet. Just as their refusal to publicly discuss their sexuality opened new forms of public expressions of sexuality for the Pet Shop Boys, the narrator of "Hit Music" will not be contained by the closet constructed by the heterosexual lines between public and private, truth and lie.

Other lines in "Hit Music" richly describe the secret life of gay nightclubbing: "Don't have the strength to work all night / or fight until it's almost light" immediately calls to mind the hard-fought battle of closeted life: one can work to keep gay identity under wraps all day, but he cannot continue this ruse all night as well—particularly not in bed. Night suggests the hour for clubbing, but also unavoidably elicits illicit sexual encounters. Alternately—and outside the closet—the narrator suggests the exhaustion felt by gay advocates. The burden of carrying the weight of an entire sexual community on one's back can be numbing; the nightclub could be a space where the "fight" is put on the shelf in exchange for a sexually expressive night of dancing among fellow gay men. None of these readings offers a final interpretive framework for the song, yet each reading reinforces the notion that the song's pointed references to staples of gay culture are not easily denied.

Finally, the line "Live and die, it's all that we know" suggests the tragic effects of AIDS. Again, dance music is positioned here as a space for escape and rejuvenation from the pressures of public gay life. When among other gay men, the freeing solidarity of an embracing gay community offers a telling contrast to the public face of AIDS, which had, by

1986, become the tragic, conventional synecdoche for the whole gay male community in American life. Historical accounts of the AIDS crisis such as Randy Shilts's bestseller *And the Band Played On* and popular films like *Longtime Companion* made the tragic victim of disease the public face of homosexuality. The disease's death toll contrasts with the hopeful life found in dance clubs; the pop songs offer a gay aesthetic through which to negotiate the trappings of everyday life among gay men. The spectre of AIDS altered the relationship between gay men and nightclub dancing and made it more necessary: what had been a scene of sexuality became a site of survival. The Pet Shop Boys' Neil Tennant told *Rolling Stone* in 1993 that "the function of the dance club has been permanently changed by AIDS. It ceased to be a place for mating rituals and became more a place of companionship" (Tannenbaum, 22). The solidarity, camaraderie, and shared tragedy of gay men surviving was acted out on the dancefloor. Though "Hit Music" does not explicitly discuss homosexuality, it relies heavily on the legibility described in Alexander Doty's queer aesthetic and did not mask its gay content with any seriousness or conviction.

In a less serious mood, "Shopping" is a song about just that: the pleasures of consumption. Though the act of shopping may have been a shallow or vain pursuit, and was certainly easy to place in the context of 1980s consumer culture, the stereotypical image of the gay man who loves to shop cannot be ignored as deeply informing this song. The idea of identity as something that can be changed has been important to gay male culture throughout its history, with its most extreme expression found in the performance of drag. As Richard Dyer has written, "Surviving as a queer meant mastering appearances, knowing how to manipulate clothes, mannerisms and lifestyle so as to be able to pass for straight and also to signal that we weren't" (63). This emphasis upon performing identity is an outgrowth of the paradox between a desire for invisibility and recognizability, a quotidian variety of masquerade where the costume is worn with a knowing wink. A concern with fashion and style speaks to gay male conceptions of identity as fluid: accessorizing could fundamentally rearrange who one was. Shopping has the potential to become, in the gay community, a political act.¹⁰

Very few straight 1980s pop bands were singing about shopping as a pursuit, particularly not bands with male lead singers, let alone in a rollicking Bay City Rollers / Village People style shout out ("S-H-O-P-P-I-N-G!"). Yet the relationship between disco, sexuality, and consumption

was a broadly understood trifecta of the time. Simon Frith has written that “disco was about eroticism and ecstasy as material goods . . . disco pleasure, as it moved into the commercial mainstream, became the pleasure of consumption itself” (Frith, *Sound* 247.) The very subject of shopping as a pursuit was always-already a comment on the gayness of popular culture. The Pet Shop Boys’ performance of “Shopping” was a triumphant celebration of a “throwaway” aspect of gay culture. “We’re buying and selling our history,” sings Neil Tennant, forcibly historicizing his consumption. “Shopping” reinforces the centrality of cultural practices within the gay community that might have been considered peripheral or ephemeral in the straight world: shopping was a radical political act where identity was reinforced, reinscribed, and rearranged.

Another song on *Actually*, “It’s a Sin,” was among the 1980s most explicit songs in expressing gay themes. Though the song never comes out and identifies what sin is in question, the over the top production provides some telling clues: “It’s a Sin” takes the guilt associated with sexual decadence and makes it into an exuberant celebration of transgression rather than a condemnation. “We are a community of shame,” writes Patrick Moore of post-AIDS gay male culture. “Shame defines our view of a sexual past that segued into AIDS, confirming to us our worst fears about our selves and lending the condemnation of bigots a truthful echo” (xxi-xxii). The Pet Shop Boys’ campy expropriation of Catholic doctrine in “It’s a Sin” employs a distinctly queer aesthetic to address concerns about religious and social objections to the gay “lifestyle”: “It’s a Sin” is a rollicking, no-holds-barred disco extravaganza, produced to such excess as to be nearly comical.

“When I look back upon my life / it’s always with a sense of shame,” sings Neil Tennant in his trademark deadpan against manic synthesizer arpeggios. The irony between the narrator’s professed shame and the abandon signified in the gay disco beat is the locus of the song’s meaning; neither fully resolves the other; shame and abandon are each a central aspect of gay male identity. Just as invisibility and recognizability have been contradictory impulses within the gay community, “It’s a Sin” revels in the tension between sin’s danger and sexiness. The song works precisely because of its refusal to either reject the hegemonic definition of sexuality as a sin or to suffer for it.¹¹ The prohibition on expressing gay sexuality is employed as a strategy of deviance; a self-representation of non-normative sex practices as pleasurable because of their overtly transgressive potential.¹²

One of the strongest arguments for the relevance of *Actually* to gay liberationist concerns is found in the album's remarkably self-conscious collapsing of form into function. "It's a Sin" illustrates the Pet Shop Boys' manipulation of elements of style—the sound, energy, and rhythm of the music and the deadpan vocal delivery—to construct a powerful argument about gay sexuality. Politicized style has been, for at least the past one hundred years of queer culture, a common tool for interrogating (and demolishing) repressive social binaries, not the least of which has been the opposition of male and female. In "What Have I Done to Deserve This," the Pet Shop Boys enlist the services of Dusty Springfield to sing a duet about a relationship gone sour. Though the mere inclusion of Springfield, long a cultural icon within gay male circles, ensured the song's place in the gay pop canon, "What Have I Done to Deserve This" is more remarkable for blurring the lines between the vocals of Dusty Springfield and Neil Tennant. Springfield's voice is a bit husky, and Tennant's is rather thin and slight. Together, in the same song, it becomes all but impossible to establish who is singing which part. Pop music, Roger Baker writes, has "been embracing 'genderfuck' and androgyny since the 1950s. Its history is littered with men who have challenged and changed what it means to be a man, and blurred the boundaries of gender" (240). Still, the Pet Shop Boys represent a unique instance where the gender confusion is introduced in the voice rather than the body.

Joshua Gamson has written (in a different context) of the intentional confusing of gender and sexuality through cross-dressing. "It's all in good 'fun,' of course, but what's being promoted is the kick of gender confusion, of suddenly not being able to tell the difference, and therefore of not knowing how to act, what to do, how to speak, whom to want. You think you can tell the difference between men and women [...] but can you?" (156). Though "What Have I Done to Deserve This" does not offer any suggestively gay lyrical content, the confused blurring of Springfield's and Tennant's voices establishes the latter as an heir to the former. At the same time, the blurring of the voices signifies the collapse of male into female. "Good singing consists in opening the throat's door so the secret goods can come out" (158), Wayne Koestenbaum has written.¹³ "What Have I Done to Deserve This" lets out the secret that Neil Tennant not only passes as an iconic female performer, but that his fetishization of this performer has broken the acceptable boundaries of gender and sexuality. Significantly the voice of the queen, usually silenced in a drag act, is heard as a form

of coming out rather than squelched to disguise the tell-tale signs of masculinity.

One of the “classic” gay male novels in the United States is John Rechy’s 1963 classic *City of Night*, a first-person account of the hustler’s trade. Although such a subject might have been shocking to mainstream audiences in 1963, gay men have historically had less reservation about the existence of such activities within their ranks (much to the chagrin of assimilationist-style gay reformers).¹⁴ The Pet Shop Boys’ hit song, “Rent,” contains all the trappings of a conventional love song: warm synthesizer sounds, stirring melody, and yearning vocals. Yet the song describes the relationship between a hustler and a john: “I love you / you pay my rent.” The subject of gay male escorts has not been addressed with any great frequency in pop music. While this could have been an occasion for high camp or ironic jest, the song is given a mawkish treatment, suggesting that the occasion of soliciting sex has a certain emotional resonance that transcends mere economic exchange.

In the context of gay male culture, particularly in light of other cultural output on the subject of male hustling, the idea of a romantic song involving a hustler and his john is not so verboten. “But look at the two of us in sympathy,” the first-person narrator pleads in the song. Though this could have been heard as an ironic plea to straight audiences, the chorus seems to assume a sympathetic, queer audience. The song does not employ the campy excess of “It’s a Sin,” an option available to the duo at the touch of a button. The song begs for sympathy rather than disgust.

Actually relies heavily upon gay cultural references to construct its musical and lyrical universe. The album is littered with further nods to gay culture: “I Want to Wake Up” features a character who stands at his kitchen sink while his radio plays “Tainted Love,” a song made famous by Marc Almond’s gay-fronted band, Soft Cell; and “It Couldn’t Happen Here” references AIDS by describing “our dignity and shattered innocence.” Throughout the album, this “closeted” band makes explicit use of gay codes and conduct, assuming their legibility from gay audiences and introducing straight audiences to the secret lives of gay men. If the closet was a tool of the straight world in the 1980s, used to keep gay cultural influences from crossing over into the mainstream and inscribing sexual boundaries in everyday life, the Pet Shop Boys used the closet to infuse 1980s popular music with a distinctly gay sensibility. Their official silence about their personal life allowed their songs to be

integrated into straight culture, validating gay cultural concerns from within. The Pet Shop Boys' closetedness in interviews was inversely proportional to the queerness of their songs. Rather than delivering a neat press release to satisfy audiences demanding gay artists remain at a comfortable distance, the Pet Shop Boys' silence about their sexual orientation forced audiences to inhabit the closet they despised and experience gay life as a participant, rather than as an observer. Rather than reinscribing clear boundaries between gay and straight, the Pet Shop Boys confused these categories, challenging the hegemonic definition of the closet to include everyone. Rather than privileging their sexual orientation, the Pet Shop Boys demanded audiences to assume their aesthetic orientation, and become themselves queer.

Simon Frith has written, "It's as if the Pet Shop Boys are both quite detached from their music...and completely implicated by it" (Frith, *Performing* 7–8). Frith's conceptualization of these pop musicians somehow implicating their audience is useful in trying to place pop songs within the history of a subaltern group. *Actually* implicates the Pet Shop Boys' straight audience in their queer aesthetic while remaining quite legible to a gay audience. This was a different process than the bold declarations of Frankie Goes to Hollywood, who afforded audiences the option of positioning themselves as similar or dissimilar to the producers; yet both approaches were important in the movement towards acceptance of gay male sexuality and the increased recognition of queer contributions to popular culture and everyday life in the 1980s.

Each of these bands refused invisibility, and each refused to apologize for their gay content. "Relax" intersected with *Actually* on the ground of gay male cultural politics. Though Frankie Goes to Hollywood would be remembered for their outspoken sexuality and purported hedonism, and the Pet Shop Boys would have to endure nearly constant criticism for their supposed refusal to come out of the closet, neither of these critiques seem to capture the true significance of these important bands. Reducing them to simple categories laid out by a homophobic culture places Frankie Goes to Hollywood and the Pet Shop Boys on the peripheries of gay and straight history as curiosities and sites of contest, but hardly key players. Problematizing gay and lesbian audiences and exploring queer reception in these texts reveals surprising historical specificities and exposes the fallacies of myths about 1980s society and gay male culture. This history is too urgent to ignore.

Notes

1. David Szatmary, for example, places his discussion of disco, in his social history of popular music, *Rockin' in Time*, in a chapter titled, "The Era Of Excess." "The various elements of the disco culture," he writes, "embodied the narcissistic extravagance of the mid- and late-1970s" (216); and he later refers to disco as "a mirror for the excesses of the rock generation" (217). Unsurprisingly, Szatmary also appears to consider homosexuality a product of the "me decade," citing statistics claiming extreme promiscuity among gay men in the 1970s to support the claim that "many gays became absorbed by their own search for pleasure" (207).

2. Studies of gay male culture in the 1980s have largely focused on identity politics (e.g. Loughery) or AIDS activism (Crimp with Rolston, *AIDS Demo Graphics*; Shilts, *And the Band Played On*).

3. This is not to suggest that American artists were not producing valuable pop or that British audiences were not receptive to queer content—neither of these is correct. Nor do I consider it incidental that these bands are British; Nabeel Zuberi has richly described, for example, how the Pet Shop Boys "mapped a history and geography of London during the AIDS crisis" (75), commenting particularly on how the band's "stylized restraint emerges from a characteristically middle-class, English approach to aesthetic (under) statement" (76). Both the Pet Shop Boys and Frankie Goes to Hollywood were "out" about their Britishness, though the former was more open about this. It could also be argued, particularly in the case of the Pet Shop Boys, that permission to cross sexual boundaries was granted these artists because it appeared to American audiences as some exotic form of European cultural practices. For the purposes of this article, however, I seek to explore narrowly the relevance of gay artists to American sexual politics as a starting point because this is where other AIDS-oriented gay cultural activism (such as ACT-UP) emerged, and this has also been the site of much cultural erasure. Further investigation into the nature of this transatlantic cultural exchange will be necessary.

4. The rich history of gay house music, particularly its origins in black Chicago, has been described by Anthony Thomas in his essay, "The House the Kids Built."

5. See, for example, Allan Berube's *Coming Out Under Fire*, which explores soldiers' discovery of their own—and each other's—gay identity in the homosocial environments of World War II.

6. The significance of the coming-out narrative to contemporary gay politics has been most fully developed, of course, by Eve Sedgwick in her masterful *Epistemology of the Closet*, an account of the appearance of the closet

as a product of coming out in literature and culture. The debates surrounding “outing” which erupted in the 1980s also illustrate how centrally questions of being out have played into this cultural attachment.

7. After their “coming out” interview in *Out*, in which Chris Lowe declined to comment on his sexual preference, the Pet Shop Boys were far more outgoing about associating themselves with gay causes, but their music remained (and remains) pretty much the same. Critics who have tried to bracket off their output as “before” and “after” have largely tried in vain; the boys still have only one song with the word “gay” in it, their pronouns remain gender neutral, and the songs remain queer as a three-dollar bill.

8. The Pet Shop Boys’ intense distrust of rock-and-roll posturing is a veritable trope in Chris Heath’s *Pet Shop Boys, Actually*, an authorized account of the band’s first tour in 1989. “All those rock stars are embarrassing” (176), says Neil Tennant in an interview. He reserves his strongest critique for U2: “To me, U2 are a total dinosaur group. They’re saying nothing but they’re pretending to be something. I think they’re *fake*” (178).

9. One need look no further than the aforementioned “Disco Sucks” riots at Comiskey Park to see what happens when an unwilling audience is exposed to something just a little too gay for their taste.

10. This argument does not extend beyond the cultural representation of shopping as activity; I am not arguing for the notion that identity is constructed in any politically meaningful way from shopping, a viewpoint intelligently debunked by writers as divergent as Suzanne Danuta Walters and Thomas Frank. Rather, I am arguing that the cultural logic of shopping has been so closely associated with ideas about homosexuality and femininity that its significance cannot be contained within a critique of capital. The relationship between homosexuality and consumption needs to be further developed; historians such as David Halperin have argued that sexual orientation as lifestyle is a product of a modern capitalist system. Still, it is naïve to ignore the evidence that shopping has been a frequent site for gay affirmation and heterosexual-masculine anxiety in modern times.

11. In 2001, the Pet Shop Boys released a live DVD, *Montage*, following their 1999/2000 world tour. The concert included a version of “It’s a Sin” in which the Pet Shop Boys interwove the song with Gloria Gaynor’s disco classic, “I Will Survive.” This latter song has long been a classic gay standard, routinely performed by drag artists, perhaps most famously in the Australian drag-queen-road-movie, *Priscilla, Queen of the Desert*. The intermingling of a song associated with gay survival and a song celebrating sin reinforces the notion that this song is a not-very-ambiguous gay anthem by design; this has never been

secretive or subtle. Again, the myth of the closet has been far more useful to conservative gay pundits and right-wing nuts than to gay artists and audiences. Pet Shop Boys, *Montage*, Sanctuary.

12. Earl Jackson, in *Strategies of Deviance*, has defined “strategies of deviance” as “the ways in which gay men assume representational agency to articulate deliberately ‘deviant’ or contestatory subjectivities” (1). He has described the ways in which gay cultural producers such as Robert Gluck, Samuel Delany, and Pedro Almodavar have intentionally presented “deviant” imagery to combat the hegemonic/heterosexual associations of deviance with evil. For Jackson, deviance is a strategy as much as a category; the label of deviance functions as an erotic, and self-identifying, device.

13. Koestenbaum’s collection of thoughts collected in the essay, “The Queen’s Throat,” offer a number of useful points in considering Neil Tennant’s limited, and feminine, vocal range: “Homosexuality is a way of singing. I can’t *be* gay, I can only *sing* it, disperse it. I can’t knock on its door and demand entrance because it is not a place or a fixed location. Instead, it is a million intersections—or it is a dividing line, a membrane, like the throat, that separates the body’s breathing interior from the chaotic external world” (156).

14. George Chauncey has explored the ways hustling shaped early gay identity in turn-of-the-century New York in his now-classic, *Gay New York*. Chauncey describes how hustlers were often considered queer, while johns were considered straight. Rechy’s book relies upon a similarly ambiguous definition that is given a gendered inflection. “I don’t like em queer: if I did, Id go with a woman – why fuck around with substitutes?” (22) At various points in gay male history, identifying as a hustler can allow one access to the pleasures of gay sex without the burden of a historically troubling identity. The Pet Shop Boys’ use of the hustler figure allows for a frank discussion of lust and economic reward that is indicatively, yet not explicitly, gay.

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