

Musical AIDS: On the Popularity of American Musical Responses to HIV/AIDS in the 1990s
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[Slide 2] Ronald Reagan did not mention AIDS in public until 1987.¹ In February 1990 Reagan apologized for his neglect of the pandemic while he was president of the United States.² [Slide 3] On April 8, 1990 Ryan White died at age eighteen after fighting AIDS-related lung infection. [Slide 4] In 1991 John Corigliano won two Grammy awards for his AIDS Symphony. [Slide 5] In November 1991 Magic Johnson announced that he was HIV-positive. [Slide 6] Later that month Freddie Mercury, the lead singer of Queen, died from AIDS. [Slide 7] In 1992 Arthur Ashe announced that he had AIDS and later that year was named Sports Illustrated's "Sportsman of the Year." [Slide 8] That year also marked the beginning of the Elton John AIDS Foundation. [Slide 9] In May of 1993 the FDA approved the Reality Female Condom, which offered STD protection for women without relying on the cooperation of their partner. [Slide 10] At the end of 1993 "Philadelphia" was released. [Slide 11] In 1995 Greg Louganis announced that he had AIDS. [Slide 12] In 1996 the AIDS Quilt, transported by ten train cars, was displayed along the National Mall in Washington. [Slide 13] In December 1996 TIME magazine's declared that its "Man of the Year" was an AIDS researcher. [Slide 14: Blank]

Do these events sound familiar? Many of them should. In contrast, how many celebrities can you name that have announced their seropositive status since the turn of the century? Today when we talk about AIDS we most often are talking about policy or statistics, but in the 1990s AIDS had many faces -- too many faces. [Slide 14: Cases] From 1990 to 1999 the number of AIDS cases in the United States grew six times larger. [Slide 15] In this graph, the upper curve shows the estimated number of new AIDS diagnoses by year and the lower one represents the number of deaths of people with AIDS. As you can see, in the 1990s -- the section within the white box -- the number of new cases and deaths increased considerably in the beginning on the

decade but decreased dramatically in the mid-1990s, due in part to the success of highly active antiretroviral therapies (HAART) that emerged in 1996. [Slide 16]

Despite its public faces, knowledge about AIDS was and continues to be limited. There are still people who believe this is only a disease of men who have sex with men. Even today the best scientists in the world cannot recognize HIV, only the virus's antibodies. Even today few people are able to list the four bodily fluids that can transmit HIV infection. Even today some people are afraid of acquiring HIV from a mosquito or other insects. [Slide 17]

I hope this short introduction demonstrates two things: that AIDS in the 1990s was visible, but also misunderstood. What is less obvious is how music fits into this picture. [Slide 18] For the remainder of this talk I will touch on a half-dozen popular musical responses to HIV/AIDS, focusing on identity politics -- that is the methods by which these artists on the screen signal that their work is connected to the crisis. All of these works were either released as singles or on albums that were on *Billboard's* Top 40 Charts. Today, at least, I am measuring popularity in terms of commercial value. These works are all related not just because they were popular, but also because not one of them mentions HIV or AIDS in the text. I hope to convince you that the relationship between this very popular music and AIDS was complex, and that your identification with these works will adjust as I expose their intricate identity politics. [Slide 19]

TLC: WATERFALLS

This first song I am going to discuss is TLC's 1994 hit "Waterfalls." This is the most popular musical response to HIV/AIDS. When I have conducted surveys concerning music about AIDS, this is the song that is most frequently mentioned. Yet the message of the song is ambiguous. [Slide 20] The second verse of the song provides the biggest clue that its subject is

HIV/AIDS, particularly the line “three letters took him to his final resting place.” Presumably the three letters are H-I-V. However, we should not forget that HIV does not kill -- AIDS is what kills. AIDS is a condition that results from HIV infection. And AIDS has four letters.

Consequently, this verse is potentially confusing not only to people who know just a little bit about HIV/AIDS, but also to people who know a lot about it.

[Slide 21] For many people, the video removes all doubt that the reference is to HIV because it suggests a man and a woman having unprotected sex, that the woman had multiple sex partners, and that the man developed lesions on his face. Before I play this clip from the video I want to say a word about the musical structure. [Slide 22] Harmonically the entire song is an endless repetition of the sequence $E^b - B - D^b \text{maj}7 - A^b$ and the chords change in the same place every time. This highly repetitive construction is consistent with the message of the text, which encourages us to stick to the safety of our daily routines -- symbolized by rivers and lakes -- and not to do anything too crazy -- like chase waterfalls. [Slide 23] [Watch] [Slide 24]

In case the video was not convincing, one can remove all doubt that this song is a response to the AIDS pandemic by looking at reviews and interviews. [Slide 25] For example, in a 1998 *Rolling Stone* interview, Lisa Lopes says explicitly that “Waterfalls” is about “personal hardships” and that they “talk about an AIDS situation where a couple has been careless. That's their waterfall. Anything that is going to hold you back in life is a waterfall.”³ What interests me is not simply that the song is ambiguous, but that the video and the interviews are not. From a prevention standpoint, the people that are most at risk for HIV infection would have been the least likely to have understood the message of this song because the people they are the people without money for food, *Rolling Stone* magazine, and especially cable television. [Slide 26] What is more, I think there is an obvious comparison between “Waterfalls,” which mentions

those “three letters,” Salt-N-Pepa’s “Let’s Talk about Sex,” with its reference to “a three-letter word I heard was a curse,” and Prince’s “Sing O the Times,” which refers to “a big disease with a little name.” TLC was following a pattern.

JANET JACKSON: TOGETHER AGAIN

[Slide 26: Blank] Unlike “Waterfalls,” the text of Janet Jackson’s “Together Again” contains no clear references to HIV/AIDS. Like “Waterfalls,” “Together Again” was immensely popular and there are countless means by which one could connect this song to HIV/AIDS, but I will mention the one I find most interesting. [Slide 27] On the album’s liner notes next the words “Together Again” there is a small red AIDS ribbon. [Slide 27: Arrow] As you can see, it is not a large ribbon. Here is a closer view. [Slide 28] This is the only reference to HIV/AIDS in the liner notes. In other words, Jackson uses a symbol rather than words to imply significance.

U2: ONE

[Slide 29: Blank] U2’s “One” is another song with connections to HIV/AIDS that was immensely popular in the 1990s. Like “Together Again,” “One” contains no clear references to HIV or AIDS in the text. [Slide 29: Royalties] However, the liner notes for this song plainly state, “All royalties from this single went to AIDS Research.” Unlike the ribbon in Jackson’s liner notes that suggests awareness, U2’s liner notes clearly state that “One” was meant to raise money. [Slide 29: Cover] Additionally, the cover of the album was designed by a person living with AIDS, David Wojnarowicz. A subtle correlation to be sure, but it supports the argument that this song is in fact a musical response to HIV/AIDS. [Slide 29: Dedications] It is not only the textual ambiguity that makes it difficult to connect this song to the crisis. At concerts over the

years Bono has dedicated this song not just to people with AIDS but to other groups including homosexuals, the people of Sarajevo, and the victims of the September 11th attacks. [Slide 30: Text] A few people believe this song is a conversation between a father and a son that takes place shortly after the son reveals that he is homosexual and has contracted HIV. Understood this way, the lyrics are somehow heartbreaking and hopeful at the same time. While possible, it is unlikely that anyone hearing this song without knowledge of its dedication would come to this conclusion.

The harmonic structure of this strophic ballad is nearly as ambiguous as the text, moving back and forth from A minor to C major. I am going to play the second verse of this song because it illustrates the ambiguous nature of both the text and music. [Slide 30: Sound]

ELTON JOHN: LAST SONG

[Slide 31: Blank] Elton John is usually associated with HIV/AIDS as a result of his foundation. While Sir Elton has donated the sales from many of his singles to AIDS charities, “The Last Song” has the most intimate association with HIV/AIDS. It was released shortly after the death of Freddie Mercury and the establishment of the Elton John AIDS Foundation. It was his first American single to benefit his foundation.⁴ And it is the song played at the end of the 1993 HBO movie about AIDS, *And the Band Played On*. [Slide 31: Album] The cover of the album on which “The Last Song” appears, *The One*, was designed by some who was rumored to be HIV-positive, Gianni Versace,⁵ and the album was dedicated to Vance Buck, a friend of Elton John’s who died of AIDS.⁶ [Slide 31: Lyric] There are a number of suggestive lyrics that indicate AIDS, such as, “Today I weigh less than a shadow on the wall,” consistent with one of the most visible changes in people with AIDS, weight loss due to malabsorption. Although this song

clearly establishes itself harmonically in the key of C, the weightlessness of the texture and the almost painfully slow rhythm of the song nearly equal the general sense of loss and anguish in the lyrics. In interviews, Elton John later said that he cried as he wrote this piece. This audio excerpt is for the beginning of the first verse. [Slide 31: Sound] [Slide 32] The last point I want to make about this song is that the theme is reminiscent of U2's "One" because it concerns the rapprochement between a gay man dying of AIDS and his estranged father.⁷ However, that relationship is much more clearly articulated in "The Last Song" because of the reference to a "father and a son."

MADONNA: IN THIS LIVE

[Slide 33: Blank] Madonna's "In This Life" is dedicated to just one person, Madonna's longtime friend Martin Burgoyne. [Slide 33: Dedication] She was holding his hand when he died from complications due to AIDS in 1986.⁸ He was one of the first people that Madonna met after dropping out of college and moving to New York in 1978 to try and make it big. In his battle with AIDS from 1981 to 1986, Madonna supported him emotionally and financially. One time at a party, people were shocked as Madonna shared a piece of cake with Burgoyne. [Slide 33: *Enquirer*] Their friendship was the topic of tabloid gossip, especially after a 1986 cover on the *National Inquirer* read, "MADONNA'S FORMER ROOMMATE HAS AIDS -- SEAN IS TERRIFIED AND FURIOUS." Knowing the stories behind this song makes its impact all the more powerful.

LIZ PHAIR: RIDE

[Slide 34: Blank] My final example is Liz Phair's "Ride," a song that is less popular than any other song I have mentioned today. I include "Ride" in this presentation for two reasons.

[Slide 34: T-cell] First, the ending of the song contains a clear reference to HIV/AIDS. Let's listen. [Slide 34: Sound]

I get a ride
98.5
Positive T-Cell
Regeneration

T-cells are a type of lymphocyte and an important part of the immune system. T-cell count is a very important to an HIV-positive person. When a T-cell count goes below 350, most doctors begin antiretroviral treatment. So this was a very sick person at 98.5. But most of the critics who bring up "Ride" do not seem to get the reference or they simply choose not to mention it.⁹ [Slide 34: Father] Although there is no reference to AIDS in the liner notes, the item that makes this scenario fascinating is that Liz's Phair's father, John Phair is a world-class medical authority on HIV who published his first paper on AIDS two years before Liz left home for college. One can only imagine what young Liz learned about HIV/AIDS growing up.

CONCLUSIONS

[Slide 35] The most popular American musical responses to HIV/AIDS are united by their omission of specific references to the pandemic, yet each song is clearly connected to the crisis through textual references, symbols, dedications, relationships, interviews, biographies, and more. Curiously, none of them contain the overt musical references to AIDS like one can hear in an instrumental work like Brian Rulyon's *Self Requiem* or, more famously, John Corigliano's *Symphony No. 1*. The subject of instrumental responses to HIV/AIDS, as well as

music that has a clear message of prevention, such as Coolio's "Too Hot," are other pieces of my larger project.

These songs I have discussed today bring with them a host of issues from a variety of genres, including mourning music, program music, music education, and political music. [Slide 35: Blank] In other words, what I am talking about today is really nothing new: music is political and musicology is a political act. Indeed, this music is almost completely ignored in scholarly literature. The politics of this music is not the politics of sonata form. I have touched on a group of works with an intricate identity. Yet none of these songs screams out in anger, at least not like activist art. Not like activist videos which one scholar has described as "voices raised in anger, seeking not to describe reality but to change it." [Slide 36] The musicians I discussed today are not like members of ACT UP who take to the streets yelling, "Fight Homophobia. Fight AIDS" or "Women don't get AIDS, they just die from it." [Slide 37: Blank]

While the musicians I have discussed today may have experienced the same anger that members of ACT UP felt, their responses come to us in different forms, tempered by unique forces. [Slide 37: Jackson] Janet Jackson said that she "had been advised that her use of 'socially conscious themes' in her material would have a negative impact on . . . sales."¹⁰ [Slide 37: Taupin] Bernie Taupin wrote the lyrics for "The Last Song" and it was his belief that AIDS "was a big subject that's never been covered in a song before and I thought somebody should deal with it."¹¹ [Slide 37: John] When Elton John wrote the music for "The Last Song," he was thinking, "I must write something that one can sing in church"¹².¹³ [Slide 37: Madonna] And Madonna is frequently quoted as saying, "I want to do anything I can to promote AIDS education, awareness, prevention -- whatever."¹⁴

It is possible that specific references would raise more awareness, but it is also possible that specific references make a song less popular and therefore less effective. [Slide 38] Case in point: Are you familiar with Dan Bern's "Cure for AIDS"? How about Robert Savage's "AIDS Ward Scherzo"? How often do you listen to Canibus's "AIDS Is Gold, HIV Is Platinum"? How many times have you heard Bob Rivers's "Hello I Love You Let's Get Tested For AIDS"? Most of you have heard Salt-N-Pepa's "Let's Talk about Sex," but I am willing to bet there are only a handful of you who have heard their 1994 remix, "Let's Talk about AIDS." [Slide 38: Blank] In other words, while the consensus seems to be "let's talk about AIDS, let's NOT sing about it directly," it seems equally clear that the musicians I have discussed today made their messages public in other ways. While initially it may seem surprising that these works avoid specific reference to AIDS they find other ways to make their messages known, and for that these musicians should be commended. [Slide 39]

¹ The first time he uttered the word "AIDS" in public was at the Third International AIDS Conference on May 31, 1987.

² Kim Painter, "Glaser's Find Support for their AIDS Fight," *USA Today*, 6 February 1990: "In the [PSA, Reagan] says, 'We all grow and learn in our lives. And I've learned that all kinds of people can get AIDS. Even children'"; Mimi Hall, "Reagan Savors Freedom: Life after White House is Satisfying," *USA Today*, 16 March 1990: Reagan "filmed a heart-tugging public service announcement for the Pediatric AIDS Foundation."

³ Jancee Dunn, "Waterfalls," *Rolling Stone*, 9 July 1998

⁴ Bernardin and Stanton, *Rocket Man*, p. 182.

⁵ For more on Versace's serostatus, see, for example, James Bone, "Versace 'HIV Positive,'" *Times* (London), 8 March 1999; "Versace HIV Claim 'Rubbish,'" *Daily Telegraph* (Sydney, Australia) 19 March 1999; David Wiegand, "Vulgar Favors' a Guilty Pleasure: Breathless Account of Versace's Killer," *San Francisco Chronicle*, 25 March 1999.

⁶ Bernardin and Stanton, *Rocket Man*, p. 14.

⁷ See Rosenthal, *His Song*, p. 340 and Bernardin and Stanton, *Rocket Man*, pp. 2, 94, 145.

⁸ For more on the relationship between Madonna and Martin Burgoyne see Rodger Streitmatter, "Madonna Educates a Generation about AIDS," *Gay Today*, 14 April 2003; Jordan Levin, "'Material Girl' Started from the Bottom and Worked Her Way to the Top of Pop," *San Diego Union-Tribune*, 26 August 2001; George Rush, Joanna Molloy, and Baird Jones "New-Old Skinny on the Material Girl" *Daily News* (New York), 22 April 1997; and, to a lesser extent, Harry Levins, "Lurking Out There Somewhere, Like a Killer Comet: The Madonna Diaries" *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* (Missouri), 24 April 1997.

⁹ This is the only reviewer I know of that mentions the AIDS reference: Mark Jenkins, "Liz Phair's Flair for Novel Pop," *Washington Post*, 26 August 1998. These articles all review *Whitechocolatespaceegg*, mention "Ride," but do not mention HIV/AIDS: Patrick Macdonald, "On the Road Again: Liz Phair Overcomes a Colossal Case of Stage Fright and Returns to Touring after a Three-Year Break," *Seattle Times*, 24 September 1998; Anthony Violanti, "Phair to Middling: A Mellowed, but Still Introspective, Songwriter," *Buffalo News* (New York), 14 August 1998; "Heart and Soul: Levert Album Has Depth, Staying Power," *Plain Dealer* (Cleveland, Ohio), 9 August 1998; and Jane Stevenson, "All's Phair with Liz on Her Latest," *Toronto Sun*, 9 August 1998.

¹⁰ *She's a Rebel* (2002), p. 325

¹¹ *His Song*, p. 340.

¹² Sean Cubitt, *Timeshift: On Video Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 140.

¹³ *His Song*, p. 341.

¹⁴ Bego, *Madonna: Blonde Ambition*, p. 194.