

Queer Representation in Popular Music

by Sophia Jozwiak

As a queer artist, I love finding songs that relate to my queerness, but it doesn't happen easily. As I enter the music industry professionally, I want to bring recognition to at least some of the artists who contribute much-needed visibility to the LGBTQ+ community.

There are a few recognizable queer artists in popular music, but they're primarily cis white men.



George Michael



Elton John



David Bowie



Janelle Monáe



Hayley Kiyoko



Lil Nas X

I believe that the prevalence of more queer voices in music will help the general public form a more expansive understanding of what it is to be queer, and in turn will result in less fear, discrimination, and aggression toward queer bodies overall.

It's important to recognize the emerging and established artists who are breaking boundaries for themselves and for the good of the community.



Sam Smith



King Princess



Troye Sivan



Frank Ocean

The music industry has historically been run by men catering to the straight male gaze, often exploiting the integrity of women and people of color in the process. This ideology is challenged by artists who celebrate their divergent identities and create art that draws from their own unique, intersectional experiences.



“I chose an android because the android to me represents ‘the other’ in our society. I can connect to the other, because it has so many parallels to my own life – just by being a female, African-American artist in today’s music industry... Whether you’re called weird or different, all those things we do to make people uncomfortable with themselves, I’ve always tried to break out of those boundaries.”

Janelle Monáe (they/them, pansexual)

“I never thought I would be shown support from the industry. I remember you’d go into a label and, if you weren’t attractive to the men, you weren’t gonna get any attention. I was concerned there was not a lot of room for someone like me.”

Hayley Kiyoko (she/her, lesbian)



“The music industry is a bit homophobic, it’s a bit sexist at times. So being feminine like this, in the way that I move, dance, and am... It feels quite scary at times. But it’s worth it.”

Sam Smith (they/them, gay)

Artists such as Janelle Monáe, Hayley Kiyoko, Sam Smith, King Princess, Troye Sivan, and Lil Nas X use their public platforms as a way to benefit the LGBTQ+ community on and off stage. By both incorporating queer themes into song lyrics and advocating for marginalized groups in the real world, these musicians double as activists just by speaking out against the norm. While each has their own way of going about it, they're all making positive waves that could make the industry a more inclusive place.

“Everybody has a choice of how they want to express their queerness and if this is the way that I can provide for people to attach themselves to my art and feel like I'm voicing something for them, then fuck yeah.”

King Princess (she/her, lesbian)



“We're starting to get, finally, a diverse group of different LGBTQ perspectives. That's why I politely don't want to take on that 'gay icon' thing. I'm one voice of so many that are missing, and so I'm just trying to tell my story.”

Troye Sivan (he/him, gay)

“The honest truth is, I planned to die with the secret... But that changed when I became Lil Nas X. I 100% want to represent the LGBT community.”

Lil Nas X (he/him, gay)



On the other end of the spectrum, artists like David Bowie and Frank Ocean have been less explicit when it comes to their relationship with the LGBTQ+ community. While Bowie revoked his own coming out statement after the fact and Ocean has avoided specifically labeling his orientation, both musicians are widely regarded as queer icons. Cases like these could be indicative of a lack of sufficient representation, but they can also remind us that queerness should transcend categorization, not reinforce it.

New York Times on David Bowie:

“Mr. Bowie was not an activist in the traditional sense. Instead, the musician provided a soundtrack and visuals which reshaped our world. In other words, he was not a campaigner for gay rights, but Mr. Bowie’s art complemented a larger fight for acceptance and civil rights.”



The Fader on Frank Ocean:

“I increasingly question whether criticism surrounding his work reflects a sincere impact of it or an overcompensation for the lack of artists like Ocean in the mainstream. All levels of progress should be celebrated, but within reason.”

While discrimination against queer identities is still very prevalent in the music industry, available literature fails to address it directly. Until this issue receives appropriate coverage, we can use peripheral works to better understand how artists, audiences, and societies are impacted by queer representation in popular music.

Billboard contributor Tatiana Cirisano discusses how women are impacted by discrimination in the music industry, pointing out that recording studios are often a dangerous environment for those most vulnerable to sexual harassment. As of 2018, the vast majority of artists, songwriters, and producers on the Billboard charts were men, and this is likely due to the exclusionary nature of recording and distribution spaces. It can be assumed that queer people are similarly threatened by this monopoly, as people who don't always perform gender in ways that are desirable to those in power.

Sociologist Adam Latek concludes that as the widespread acceptance of queer identities increases over time, the queering of the music industry has become more overt than covert. He argues that for as long as the industry has been dominated by hegemonic masculinity, queer artists have simultaneously been expressing an opposition to this ideology through their musicality, lyricism, and performances. He also points out that works with explicit references to queerness have historically received less commercial success than those with heteronormative themes, and while monetary gain isn't necessarily a pivotal goal of the queer community, widespread exposure to queer experiences is crucial to societal acceptance and understanding.

Music therapist Derrick Lacasse links validation of experience in queer individuals to queer representation in music through his participation in a community engagement project. He argues that representation can help reduce minority stress, something many queer individuals experience at some point in their lives. Overall, exposure to queer music has proven to be beneficial to the mental health and wellbeing of queer folk.

Queer representation in popular music can be achieved in a number of ways. Anything from album art to the pronouns used in a song can make a queer listener feel seen and understood. In a community where so many suffer from internalized homophobia and poor mental health, it's important to recognize the proven benefits of musical connection. Music can create a sense of community when we need it the most, and the more voices we have, the better.





In conclusion, representation matters. When we support queer artists, it creates space for *more* queer artists, which in turn makes life for queer individuals a little less scary. Next time you're looking for new music to listen to, consider an artist from the playlist above! Queer artists go through a lot just to get the chance to be heard, so let's show them that their work is important. As we continue to share queer narratives, the music industry will become a more welcoming place for people of all identities. We all deserve to feel heard, and I hope that one day, we won't have to try so hard to.

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