

## CHAPTER 10

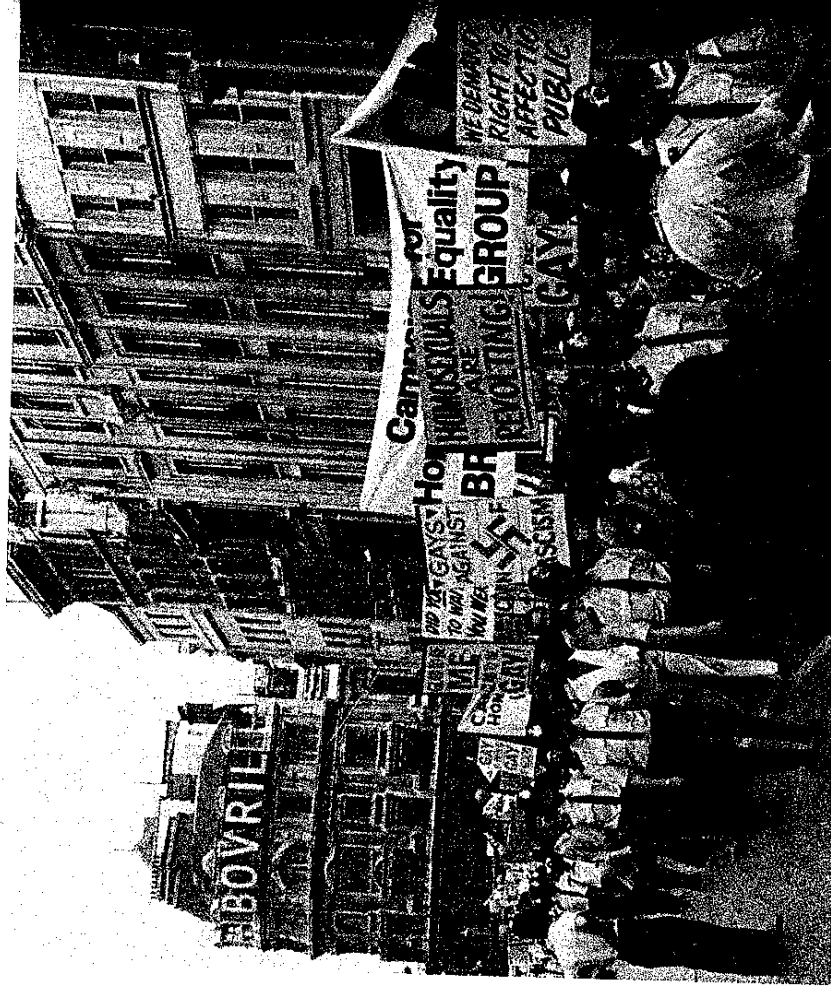
### After Stonewall

'I'm sure gay rock will be the next thing. Now that gay is open they need their own music and their own bands to follow, just like everyone else. Why not?'

David Arden of Jet Records<sup>1</sup>

28 June 1969 – the date of the first night of direct action in the Stonewall Riots – is often referred to as the most important date in the modern LGBT movement. While it's certainly true that the riots, a reaction to years of police oppression, were a catalyst for the start of the Gay Liberation movement, in truth the people were already massing, learning valuable lessons in how to protest effectively from the Civil Rights Movement, Women's Lib, the anti-war protests of the mid-1960s and the civil unrest seen on the streets of Paris in May 1968.

Police raids on LGBT bars were commonplace in America in the 1950s and 1960s, and several other violent protests had already taken place: in Los Angeles in the spring of 1959 at the all-night coffee shop Cooper's Donuts<sup>2</sup> and in August 1966 at Gene Compton's Cafeteria in San Francisco's Tenderloin district. But when the New York City Police Department decided to raid the Mafia-run Stonewall Inn on Christopher Street, the members of Greenwich Village's LGBT community that used the bar as its base decided they had had enough, and the violent demonstrations that erupted are now enshrined in history as the most important event in the fight for LGBT rights in the United States, if not the world.



The Campaign for Homosexual Equality march, London Pride 1974

Three important things happened after Stonewall. Firstly, there was a palpable change in attitude from LGBT activists. Polite requests for better treatment of LGBT people, such as the annual picket outside Philadelphia's Independence Hall (organised by the Mattachine Society, an early gay rights organisation established in Los Angeles in 1950), were quickly replaced with more militant action from a politically aware community who had experienced the success (in media terms, anyway) of the mass demonstrations against nuclear weapons, the Vietnam War, police brutality and racism. Secondly, LGBT people became more visible: in Canada the first 'legal' gay wedding took place, between singer Michel Girouard and his accompanist Rejean Tremblay (same-sex marriage was not recognised, but Quebec's Civil Code allowed for a legal partnership similar to marriage, regardless of sex), and *le couple* issued an album in celebration. LGBT characters were seen in the cinema and, in 1972 the hit Australian soap opera *Number 96* – which regularly attracted around a fifth of all Aussie TV viewers – became one of the earliest prime-time TV shows to introduce a gay character, the lawyer Don Finlayson 'in his natural surroundings and behaving just like an ordinary person'.<sup>3</sup> Ellen DeGeneres may have grabbed the headlines when she came out on her self-titled sitcom, and there's no doubt that she lowered the drawbridge and allowed *Will and Grace*, *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* and so on to traverse the ramparts of Castle Primetime, but *Number 96* beat her by a quarter of a century. Finally, just a week after the riots began, the Gay Liberation Front was formed by a politically active splinter group of the Mattachine Society in New York; on the first anniversary of the Stonewall Riots the world saw the first ever Gay Pride marches, held simultaneously in Chicago, Los Angeles and San Francisco. In October 1970, Aubrey Walter and Bob Mellor founded a British branch of the Gay Liberation Front; London saw its first Gay Pride march in 1972, the same year that *Gay News*, Britain's first widely available LGBT newspaper, was founded. Other countries soon followed suit.

Alongside all of this political upheaval, LGBT music started to infiltrate the mainstream. In 1969, American singer Jewel Akens, who had a Top Three hit in 1965 with 'The Birds And The Bees', recorded 'He's Good

For Me' for the small West One label. Reissued in 1973 to cash in on the publicity David Bowie, Lou Reed and the rest of the new crop of LGBT acts were receiving, the disc was marketed in the pages of *The Advocate* as 'the first gay rock single 45'.<sup>4</sup> Jewel was married and insisted that he was not gay himself, but he took a co-composer credit on the 45 and followed up the release with the sexually ambiguous 'What Would You Do'. Swedish singer Johnny Delgada's 'Vi är inte som andra vi' ('We Are Not Like The Others') was an early (1970) attempt to write a ballad specifically for gay men. Also issued in Germany as 'Wir Zwei, Wir Sind Nicht Wie Die Anderen' – both countries put the record out in a picture sleeve featuring two naked young men cuddling up to each other – it was an odd career move for the singer and composer better known in his home country as Johnny Bode who had begun his recording career in 1929. Sterilised while undergoing treatment in a psychiatric hospital, at one point Bode enlisted with the German army and apparently was sent to the Grini concentration camp – although he was known to be a pathological liar, so any of the above could be untrue.

London-born singer-songwriter Labi Siffre, who scored his first chart hit in 1971 with 'It Must Be Love' (also a Top Five hit for Madness a decade or so later), met his partner Peter John Carver Lloyd in July 1964. The pair would remain together until Carver Lloyd's death in 2013, having been a couple for 49 years. Labi Siffre was an anomaly: an openly gay, mixed-race singer whose work tackled homophobia and racism head-on and who had several UK chart hits, including four Top 30 singles. In 1998, ten years after he had his last chart single, his 1975 song 'I Got The' was sampled by Eminem for his international hit 'My Name Is'; Siffre originally refused to allow his work to be sampled until certain lyrical changes were made. Siffre also wrote the anti-apartheid anthem '(Something Inside) So Strong', which in 1987 provided him with a Top Five hit of his own and won an Ivor Novello award, presented annually for songwriting and composing and named in honour of the Cardiff-born gay composer. In recent years, Siffre has turned to other forms of writing, issuing three collections of his poetry and producing the play *Deathwrite*.

Suddenly, LGBT-themed songs, and LGBT performers, were everywhere. A reviewer in *Gay News* called Lou Reed's 'Make Up', from his

Bowie-produced album *Transformer* (which features the line 'We're coming out, out of our closets'), 'the best Gay Lib song I have heard, going on to say that *Transformer* is an essential record. The record sleeve, especially the reverse side, is remarkable too'.<sup>5</sup> The back of the sleeve featured Reed's roadie Ernie Thormahlen sporting a very visible erection: photographer Karl Stoecker would later reveal that this was in fact, a plastic banana that Ernie had thrust down the front of his tight jeans.<sup>6</sup> Reed's international smash 'Walk On the Wild Side' provided a window onto the gender-bending antics of various members of Andy Warhol's Factory, and in doing so opened up an exotic new world of possibilities, one where you could change your look, change your name and even change your sex if you wanted to. Formerly singer, guitarist and songwriter with the Velvet Underground (a huge influence on Bowie who recorded a cover of Reed's 'I'm Waiting For my Man' in 1967 with his band, former Joe Meek protégés the Riot Squad), as a teenager, Reed suffered a breakdown and was forced to undergo electroshock therapy, an experience he described in detail in the book *Please Kill Me*: 'They put the thing down your throat so you don't swallow your tongue, and they put electrodes on your head. That's what was recommended in Rockland County to discourage homosexual feelings. The effect is that you lose your memory and become a vegetable.'<sup>7</sup> He would also document the experience in his song 'Kill Your Sons'.

Although it was widely assumed that Reed, like Bowie, was bisexual in an incendiary 1973 interview he told writer Lester Bangs, 'The notion that everybody's bisexual is a very popular line right now, but I think its validity is limited. I could say something like if in any way my album helps people decide who or what they are, then I will feel I have accomplished something in my life. But I don't feel that way at all ... adding that in future he 'may come out with a hardhat album. Come out with an anti-gay song, saying, "Get back in your closets, you fucking queers!" That'll really do it!'<sup>8</sup> Tom Robinson remembers, 'For those of us involved with Gay Liberation, this was disappointing at best and at worst, downright betrayal. Had a queer hero deceived us, or deceived himself? Or had Lou been a heterosexual impostor all along, only in it for the money?'<sup>9</sup> After his death (on 27 October 2013), his sister Merrill Reed Weiner wrote:

It has been suggested that ECT was approved by my parents because Lou had confessed to homosexual urges. How simplistic. He was depressed, weird, anxious, and avoidant. My parents were many things, but homophobic they were not. In fact, they were blazing liberals. They were caught in a bewildering web of guilt, fear, and poor psychiatric care. Did they make a mistake in not challenging the doctor's recommendation for ECT? Absolutely. I have no doubt they regretted it until the day they died.<sup>10</sup>

Glam rock gave men an excuse to wear make-up, don outrageous satin clothes and stick sequins on their faces. The glittery icons on *Top of the Pops* may have looked like dockers underneath the glitz, but this manufactured androgyny created a safe space to camp it up without necessarily getting beaten up. In its own way, glam rock (or glitter rock as it was referred to in the States) subversively blurred the fine line between straight and queer. The New York Dolls were not averse to using the new trend for gay rock to further their career; in fact they embraced it, donning street-gutter drag and glitter-rock make-up for the cover of their debut LP. Briefly managed by Malcolm McLaren, the Dolls' look and sound owed a lot to both Lou Reed and shock-rock Alice Cooper. Cooper, mostly because of the name and the make-up, was routinely being 'outed' by the press. Even before he (then leading the band of the same name) had even had a hit, when he/they were still signed to Frank Zappa's Straight Records label, Cooper was talking about how 'biologically, everyone is male and female ... what's the big deal? Why is everyone so uptight about sex?'<sup>11</sup> In August 1974, in an incredible interview in *Spec* magazine, the former Vince Furnier revealed the truth:

'I'm straight ... but if I could have chosen my own sexuality, I think I might have chosen to be bisexual ... I think in the future everyone will be bisexual. And everything would be so much simpler then - you'd just make love with anyone you liked, and it wouldn't matter what sex they were, and maybe it also wouldn't matter what color they were, or what age, or anything, except that you liked them ... I actually prefer the concept of pansexuality, rather than bisexuality. The prefix "pan" means that you're open to all kinds of sexual experiences,

with all kinds of people. It means an end to restrictions, it means you could relate sexually to any human being, it means an end to unreal limits. I like that idea.<sup>12</sup>

The unbridled sexuality of the New York Dolls, Alice Cooper, Lou Reed and the like was more about androgyny (or, as Cooper put it, pansexuality) than about being gay or bisexual. In an interview with Ted Castle, David Johansen – the Dolls' singer – said, 'sexuality is a very personal thing... whatever you perceive as sexuality, that's what it is. And it's not for one person to say that they're heterosexual or homosexual or bisexual, because none of those things are real. People are just sexual.'<sup>13</sup> In 1974, during an unguarded moment backstage in Hamburg, teen heartthrob David Cassidy came out to the German monthly *Du Und Ich*. 'I've nothing at all to hide,' he told reporter Valentino Rhonheimer. 'I have many friends, men friends who I sleep with – and I enjoy it. I don't let anyone dictate to me who I shall sleep with, just as I don't tell anyone who they should sleep with. I only know that I wouldn't want to sing to audiences who didn't like me just because I had slept with a man.'<sup>14</sup> Gossip about his sexuality has followed Cassidy for all of his life, but in this instance he may have been simply kidding around: although he has gone on record on many occasions to say that he supports LGBT rights, in his 2007 autobiography he backtracked on his candid admission, saying, 'I had some thoughts about homosexuality – I'm sure we all have some thoughts about it as we're growing up, finding ourselves. So I was, at times, unsure. It was only when I was actually confronted with the situation that I realised... I'm really just not into it.' The book is surprisingly frank about his sexual exploits and his close friendships with a number of LGBT celebrities and, as he wrote, what did it matter 'if I slept with men, women, snakes or sheep' anyway? One thing the book did reveal was that his father, the actor Jack Cassidy, was also bisexual, and that dad had enjoyed a long affair with Cole Porter.<sup>15</sup>

The inference was obvious: sexuality was fluid. Or at least it was so long as that fluidity helped sell records and gain column inches in the press. When the actor and singer Peter Straker appeared as a woman who is really a man (though it's never made clear in the movie whether Jo is the son or the daughter of a West Indian High Commissioner, or if in fact they are trans) the issue of androgyny left the recording studio and the

concert stage and became comedic fodder for the big screen. Straker had his first stab at pop stardom as part of the original London cast of *Hair: The American Tribal Love-Rock Musical*, which opened at the Shaftesbury Theatre on 27 September 1968 and ran for almost 2,000 performances.

The US and UK productions of *Hair* provided a training ground for a number of actors and musicians, and would also bring Richard O'Brien and Tim Curry together for the first time, five years before they would collaborate on *The Rocky Horror Show*. Born in Jamaica, Straker released a one-off single for Polydor (a version of the Jacques Brel song 'Carousell') and appeared in the aforementioned movie *Girl Stroke Boy* (as the girl/boy of the title) before signing to RCA, who issued his first album, *Private Parts*, in 1972. All of the songs on the album were written by gay songwriting duo Ken Howard and Alan Blaikley, who had written the British Number One single 'Have I The Right' for the Honeycombs; the pair based the songs on aspects of Peter's own life, including the death of his father. 'The album is very personal,' he told Peter Holms and Denis Lemon of *Gay Times*. 'I discussed everything with Ken and Alan. We tried to be explicit – as explicit as Jacques Brel.'<sup>16</sup>

The startling cover, featuring a naked Straker with a map of Hampstead Heath projected onto his body, made it fairly evident what audience RCA were looking for, and as the concept album dealt with issues including bisexuality, early sexual experiences and death, the company marketed *Private Parts* almost exclusively to a gay audience, with a number of ads for the album and subsequent singles in the gay press. Despite a well-received performance with full orchestra at the Queen Elizabeth Hall, *Private Parts* didn't sell, and it would be five years before Straker got to record again.

A long-time friend and collaborator of Freddie Mercury, Straker's next album, *This One's On Me*, would be co-produced (and financed) by the Queen frontman and issued by the band's label, EMI. Again the album, and its single 'Ragtime Piano Joe' bombed (although the single did make the Dutch Top 30), as did the follow-up, *Changeling*; moving to Elton John's Rocket Records (Elton and Queen were both managed by John Reid at the time, and Reid and John were lovers for several years), Peter issued his fourth album *Real Natural Man*. Straker appeared in the video for Mercury's 'The Great Pretender' single, sang backing vocals on his

*Barcelona* album and is still performing today. A few years after *Girl Stroke Boy* bombed at the box office, comedian Red Foxx starred in the movie *Norman ... Is That You?* (based on the play of the same name), which switches this around a little but intrinsically plays with the same idea. Thelma Houston, whose next single would be the huge international hit 'Don't Leave Me This Way', recorded the song 'One Out Of Every Six' for the soundtrack. Howard and Blaikley's next project was writing for a duo named Starbuck: their singles 'Do You Like Boys', 'Wouldn't You Like It' and 'Heartthrob' were aimed squarely at gay record-buyers but, like the Straker recordings, failed to sell.

*Private Parts* came out at a point where RCA, buoyed by the success of David Bowie and Lou Reed, would sign pretty much anything that could potentially be marketed to an LGBT audience. The company had a Filipino-born singer Junior (aka Antonio Morales), whose 'Excuse Me For The Strange Things I Do' (an English-language version of the Spanish hit 'Perdóname') was offered free to 'all gay discos, clubs and bars' to promote.<sup>17</sup> Junior had been a member of Spain's biggest pop band, Los Brincos, and his single, co-written by out-gay manager and songwriter Simon Napier-Bell (who, during his long career in the music industry, has managed Marc Bolan, the Yardbirds, Boney M, Sinitta, Wham! and many others) had provided him with a huge hit in Brazil and in other South American territories, but British fame eluded him.

Brought up in the West Country, Steve Swindells moved to London in 1973, when he was 21. Then a member of Bristol-based rock band Squidd, the out-gay Swindells persuaded the band to play at one of the earliest fundraising benefits for the Gay Liberation Front at Fulham Town Hall. Approached by Mark Edwards ('a posh, gay hippy from Dorset with a pretentious beard'),<sup>18</sup> who had produced Curved Air's *Air Conditioning* album and who had worked with Howard and Blaikley (on the 1968 singles 'The Tide is Turning' and 'Uhi' by The Barrier), he was quickly signed as a solo artist to RCA, releasing the album *Messages* the following year. Pictured on the cover as a leather boy, a judge, a piano player and in full drag, and with songs about Earl's Court (London's gay ghetto), the album was unlikely to find mainstream acceptance.

A second album was recorded but remained unreleased until 2009. Splitting from Edwards, who he branded 'a junkie, an alcoholic and a

psychopath', Swindells joined the UK chart-toppers Pilot before becoming the keyboard player for the Hawklords, a band formed by former Hawkwind members Robert Calvert, Dave Brock and Simon King. Since then he has written for Who vocalist Roger Daltrey (he contributed the song 'Bitter and Twisted' to the soundtrack of *McVicar*), formed the short-lived band DanMingo with Culture Club drummer Jon Moss and tried his hand at DJ-ing and club promotion, as well as becoming a regular contributor to gay magazine *Attitude*.

In their desperation to sign anyone who would appeal to this emerging new market, RCA offered out-gay actor Peter Wyngarde a contract, and the resulting eponymous album is one of the single most peculiar things you are ever likely to hear. Central to the album is a song called 'Rape', which manages to incorporate huge gobs of racism and sexism and so offended Alan McGee (the owner of Creation Records and manager of Oasis) that he refused to reissue the album. *Peter Wyngarde* is also notable for 'Hippie And The Skinhead', the tale of young Billy, a 'queer, pilly, sexy hippy' who 'one night went to troll the "Dilly"' (the use of Polari echoing its appearance in the Tornado's 'Do You Come Here Often') and picked up a skinhead called Ken. It was only when the two of them engaged in their rough sex games that Ken discovered that Billy was actually a woman. Billy, apparently was a cross-dressing bisexual, or quite possibly transgender; Ken it would seem, was a latent homosexual. Wyngarde's career – up until that point he had been one of the biggest stars on British TV thanks to his starring roles in *Department S* and *Jason King* – was all but over after he was arrested for importuning in a bus station in Gloucester. Although he would later appear (behind a gold mask) as General Klytus in the movie *Flash Gordon*, the former lover of actor Alan Bates would never fully recover from the ignominy.

The company also bankrolled brothers Clive and Peter Sarstedt and Junior's manager Simon Napier-Bell, who together produced the album *Fresh Out Of Borstal* by the band Fresh. Coming just a year after Peter Sarstedt had enjoyed the huge hit 'Where Do You Go To, My Lovely', *Fresh Out Of Borstal* is a bizarre semi-documentary of life in an all-male remand home and one of the songs, 'And The Boys Lazed On the Verandah' (covered by pop singer Lou Christie in 1971) made very

explicit references to gay sex. Fresh made a second album, *Fresh Today*, but their odd skinhead/glam sound failed to ignite much interest. Clive, who was originally managed by Joe Meek, changed his name to Robin Sarstedt and had a solo hit in 1976 with 'My Resistance Is Low'.

With a career that spans five decades and worldwide sales in excess of 300 million units, Elton John – the man Bowie called 'the Liberace, the token queen of rock'<sup>19</sup> – is the most successful out-gay musician of all time. His re-recording of 'Candle In the Wind', released as a tribute to Diana, Princess of Wales, is the world's best-selling single; he has had seven consecutive Number One US albums and 58 *Billboard* Top 40 singles, including nine Number One hits. In Britain, as of December 2016, he had clocked up seven Number One albums and 69 Top 40 singles, including seven Number Ones. In 1998 he was knighted by Queen Elizabeth II, making the man born Reg Dwight Sir Elton John.

In 1976, at the height of his fame and on the eve of the release of his latest album *Blue Moves*, John gave a candid interview to *Cliff Jahr* of *Rolling Stone* magazine (sadly, Jahr died of AIDS in August 1991). He talked openly about going to New York gay disco 12 West, about his adventures with John Waters' leading lady Divine at another gay club, Crisco Disco, and that he believed, 'There's nothing wrong with going to bed with somebody of your own sex. I think everybody's bisexual to a certain degree. I don't think it's just me. It's not a bad thing to be. I think you're bisexual. I think everybody is.'<sup>20</sup> John was lonely; he was tired of the constant cycle of touring and recording and he wanted someone to settle down with. 'But . . . as soon as someone tries to get to know me I turn off. I'm afraid of getting hurt. I was hurt so much as a kid. I'm afraid of plunging into something that's going to fuck me up. Christ, I wish I had somebody to share all this with.'

The backlash wasn't immediate. 'Sorry Seems to Be the Hardest Word', his next single was still a sizeable hit, and *Blue Moves* made the US Top Three. However, it came at a time when he was ready to make changes, splitting with long-term writing partner Bernie Taupin, dismissing members of his band and coming off the road for a period. Was it the change in direction, or were tastes simply changing? For whatever reason, his career in America hit a major trough after the interview, and *Blue Moves* would be his last Top 10 album in the States until 1992's *The One*.

John would dominate the pop charts in the 1970s, but it was his close friend Rod Stewart who, in 1976, became the first major star have an international hit with an unambiguously gay-themed song. 'The Killing of Georgie' tells the tale of a young man who is kicked out of his family home for being gay. He moves to New York and finds love, only to die at the hands of a gang, the victim of a mugging gone wrong. Stewart's song was based on a true story: 'George was a friend of mine,' he told Keith Howes of *Gay News*.<sup>21</sup> 'I'd forgotten all about him until I moved to America. America just encourages you to write more radical things because it's all killing and death and robbery and violence. I'm surrounded by gay people so there were no objections.' It was the most overtly romantic song on an album scarred by misogyny (on one song, 'Ball 'Frapp', Stewart tells his girl that he would 'rather see you dead with a rope 'round your neck'); in the same interview, Stewart admitted to going to bed with a pre-op transsexual in Melbourne and to being sexually attracted to the model and singer Amanda Lear, widely believed at the time to be transsexual.

Chris Robison, a former member of Steam and Elephant's Memory (a band who had played on John and Yoko's *Sometime In New York City* and Yoko's *Approximately Infinite Universe* and had issued their own self-titled album on the Beatles' Apple label), issued his first album *Many Hand Band* in 1972 and, although he was not signed to a major (Robison issued the album on his own Gipsy Frog label; it has since been reissued by Chapter Music), he was the first musician to issue a gay-themed rock album. 'The lead track was "I'm Looking For A Boy Tonight," says Tom Robinson. 'It was just a quite crude, country-picking song, not particularly interesting musically, but it was blatant, out there and without precedent as far as I know. Then there was Steven Grossman, who made one album called *Caravan Tonight*. It was standard kind of wimpy acoustic singer-songwriterly love songs, except that they were about his boyfriends. That was pretty courageous for the time.'

Brooklyn-born Steven Grossman's *Caravan Tonight* (1974) was the first album dealing with openly gay themes and subject-matter to be released on a major label, Mercury, and came out within months of *Jobriath*, the eponymous album from the Bowie clone born Bruce