

# Orange Juice, Milk, and the Rise of the Gay and Lesbian Choral Movement in the United States

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## Abstract

LGBTQIA+ choruses in the United States play an important role in the development of queer movement culture by providing safe spaces other than bars and clubs, by emotionally supporting queer people through extended political struggles and the AIDS crisis, and by presenting public counternarratives to anti-gay propaganda. Jon Sims, a music teacher from Kansas, inspired to action by queer activists like Harvey Milk and the anti-gay countermovement of Anita Bryant, founded the world's first publicly identifying gay music ensembles in San Francisco in the late 1970s. By the 1990s, hundreds of queer music ensembles had organized across five continents. At the start of the 21st century, LGBTQIA+ choruses in the United States are beginning to dismantle the structural and social inequities inherited from mid-20th century queer organizing, in an attempt to better reflect the diverse intersectional identities that comprise the queer community and to collaborate more effectively with activists from other historically marginalized groups. The historical development of the LGBTQIA+ choral movement in the United States demonstrates how processes of cultural institutionalization reproduce social inequalities enacted by systemic prejudices like racism, sexism, ablism, and transphobia, even in marginalized communities. A critical musicological analysis of this community's history may help music educators recognize and interrogate discrepancies between the benevolent intent and the complicated, sometimes inverted, impacts that music institutions have on participants, communities, and culture.

## Keywords

LGBTQIA+, community, singing, chorus, activism, agency, counterstory

Community musicking practices are critically important for human societies because music making with others fulfills the fundamental need for self-expression in a social context (Murray 2017). Furthermore, for at least 50 years, music educators have recognized the vital role adult musicking plays in the cultural lives of our communities (Bliss 1971). “Affinity choruses” are singing ensembles dedicated to a particular cultural or sociopolitical identity, also referred to as socially-identified choruses (Mensel 2007, Snyder 1984, Thorp 2016). These ensembles enhance communities by combining the benefits of group musicking with the added benefits of affirming participant identity and advocating for social justice. Therefore, it is valuable for music educators to understand the systems and processes by which these sociocultural institutions are created, sustained, and transformed over time.

The vision of one music educator catalyzed an international movement resulting in the formation of hundreds of choruses with tens of thousands of singers across North and South America, Europe, and Asia—the gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex, asexual, allies, and others (LGBTQIA+) choral movement. The meteoric rise of this community music phenomenon provides evidence of the positive effects these ensembles have on the lived experiences of participants, but these organizations have also reproduced discriminations like racism, sexism, classism, and transphobia so deeply rooted in American society. Today, many LGBTQIA+ choruses strive to remain socioculturally and artistically relevant in the face of unprecedented social change by engaging in a critical analysis of programming, policies, and procedures to better meet the needs of their community members’ intersecting identities beyond merely sexual orientation.

I begin this essay by acknowledging my positionality as an active participant in the LGBTQIA+ choral movement. Then, I briefly review historical LGBTQIA+ activism in the United States, followed by the history of the LGBTQIA+ choral movement. I utilize a critical musicological approach for establishing a timeline, identifying influential events and individuals, and recognizing the reciprocal impacts of musical practices and society on each other. The organization of sound is inexorably intertwined with power and subjectification (Attali 1985, 7); thus, I argue that the institutionalization of musical organizing like that of the LGBTQIA+ choral movement reproduces preexisting sociocultural power dynamics through programming, policies, and procedures. I conclude by considering the complicated

sociopolitical positionality of LGBTQIA+ community choruses in contemporary society and the opportunities which these choruses have as agents of change for the future. By understanding the past, present, and imagined future of the LGBTQIA+ choral movement in the United States, music educators may be better equipped to analyze the systems of power and subjectification which characteristically pervade community musicking institutions everywhere.

### Positionality and Context

I first participated in LGBTQIA+ choruses as a volunteer singer almost two decades ago, and now professionally as a director for over a decade. I've attended regional and national conferences and served on several national committees. Combining my love of choral singing and my activism for queer identities brings me a tremendous amount of satisfaction.

A few years ago, I started hearing upsetting stories from many singers, both in my and other queer-identifying ensembles—singers who identified as Black, Indigenous, or People of Color (BIPOC)—who identified as women, transgender or gender expansive (TGE), as bisexual, asexual, poly or pansexual. These singers shared with me privately and publicly that their ensembles did not feel safe. They had been harassed and ridiculed by other singers, directors, volunteers, and staff members because of their identity. Some had considered quitting or had friends who refused to participate out of fear. These revelations horrified me. Were these ensembles tolerating, or even perpetrating, harm to their singers?

In response, I reached out to colleagues from GALA Choruses (formerly “Gay and Lesbian Association of Choruses”), a national organization that organizes events for, provides support for, and fosters collaboration between LGBTQIA+ chorus organizations predominantly in North America. Yes, my colleagues informed me, it was true. Chorus members and leaders of queer choruses had harmed and continue to harm singers by failing to address harassment and by enacting policies rooted in racism, sexism, classism, ableism, and transphobia.

I was heartened to learn that GALA Choruses, often shorthand as “GALA,” had begun a strategic initiative—at that time called the “Open Table Committee”—to help chorus organizations create more equitable, accessible spaces for singers with diverse identities. Motivated by my interest in equity activism, I contributed to this committee skills I had developed as a scholar. I researched and analyzed

the history of the movement to better understand how past events contributed to present reality. I interviewed culture bearers and influential leaders of the LGBTQIA+ choral movement. I participated in countless conversations with my colleagues to dissect how the practices I personally upheld in my choruses mirrored the privileging of whiteness endemic of the LGBTQIA+ movement in the United States (Peacock 2016). Then, I synthesized my understanding through writing.

This article is one result of that process. I recognize that the analysis herein is inherently flawed because I am biased—I care deeply for the people who inhabit these organizations. It is because of this care, therefore, that I seek to shine a purifying light on the systems of oppression which prevent too many people from experiencing the unbelievable joy of queer choral singing (see Balen 2017).

A Brief History of the Queer Political Movement in the United States  
LGBTQIA+ individuals in the United States have been fighting for public acceptance and political recognition since the pseudoscientific pathologizing of same-gender attraction and “gender dysphoria” in the late 19th century (Rubin 2007, Foucault 1978). During the 20th century, technological and social changes facilitated the organization of LGBTQIA+ individuals for political and social recognition (Hayes 2007). The development of rapid transportation and instantaneous communication allowed queer people to associate more easily, as did the establishment of queer communities in culturally diverse cities like San Francisco and New York City in the wake of two world wars.<sup>1</sup>

Gay and lesbian<sup>2</sup> political organizing in mid-20th century America took two competing approaches (D’Emilio 1998). Some activists believed that gay and lesbian people would be tolerated only if they conformed fully with the social norms of the White middle-class heterosexual majority, a practice referred to in contemporary queer culture as *heteronormativity*. These “homophile” activists—coined from Greek meaning “same loving”—organized publicly for the first time in the 1950s, most notably through organizations like the Mattachine Society (Peacock 2016). Throughout the 1950s and 60s, homophile activists argued that gay and lesbian people must completely blend into “respectable” society, and they distributed pamphlets arguing for members to adhere to strict gender norms in clothing, appearance, and behavior (Boyd 2003). Gender norms, however, like all social

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constructs in the United States, are also heavily racialized. As a result, homophile activism either ignored or intentionally excluded those who could not adequately perform these stereotypes, particularly members of the transgender community and BIPOC communities.

Activists associated with gay liberation, or “gay lib,” in contrast to homophile activists, argued that gay and lesbian people deserved social acceptance and legal protection regardless of how they appeared or behaved (Davidson 2019a, Boyd 2003). Gay lib’s perspective was not new in the 1960s. Queer communities that celebrated diverse identities had flourished in large cities as early as the 1920s, typically centered around bars and nightclubs (Doyle 2010b). By the late 1960s, gay lib and queer radical activists working from this perspective rejected traditional gender norms, embraced diverse gender and racial identities, and were the catalyzing force behind the political successes following the Stonewall Riots in June 1969.<sup>3</sup>

In the years immediately following Stonewall, gay liberation briefly succeeded in destabilizing the homo/hetero binary. Famed Stonewall activists Marsha P. Johnson and Silvia Rivera, both transgender people of color, publicly challenged the homophile, Cleaver-esque<sup>4</sup> stereotypes of gays and lesbians as exclusively White, middle-class, cisgender, and heteronormative (Marcus 2019). This period represented a distinct break from previous queer organizing and coincided with a change in priorities, focusing less on specific political goals and more on shifting public opinion through public visibility of queerness. Nevertheless, despite this momentary shift toward a populist queer agenda, high-visibility gay rights groups like the National Gay Task Force fixated on heteronormative political objectives like marriage equality, with no consideration for the needs of diverse queer people based on class, power, race, or gender performance (Valocchi 1999, 220).

By the 1970s, the seemingly contradictory homophile and queer liberation strategies resulted in some social and political success for queer people. In 1975, the American Psychological Association (APA) removed homosexuality from its list of mental disorders (American Psychological Association n.d.). The US Civil Service Commission repealed bans on homosexuals serving in the Civil Service, and several states had reformed or even eliminated sodomy laws (Fetner 2001, 411–14). A few cities and counties, while revising local laws to include protections for race discrimination, quietly added sexual orientation to their non-

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discrimination statutes (Graves 2013, 2). This sudden visibility of homosexuals in public life, however, did not go uncontested.

### Anita Bryant and the Anti-Gay Counter Movement

Starting in the 1970s, “anti-gay” activists repurposed racialized and class-inflected tactics, first used to oppose the Black American civil rights movement, against this newly publicized gay rights movement. In 1956, a Florida legislative committee led by state senator and white supremacist Charley Johns attempted to undermine African American civil rights efforts by accusing them of being communists (Frank 2013, 143). When this effort was blocked by lawsuits from several African American civil rights organizations, the group pivoted to publicly attack lesbian and gay teachers instead, vilifying them as a “threat to children and American freedom” (Hubbs 2014, 133). These attacks mirrored language used against Black Americans to oppose school integration.

Sensationalist journalism of the early 1970s further contributed to public panic by focusing excessively on issues of child pornography (Frank 2013, 145). Child protection activists claimed, without any proof, that there was a politically powerful but clandestine pornography industry in the United States preying on children. Anti-gay activists used this panic as an opportunity to perpetuate long-standing stereotypes of LGBTQIA+ people as child molesters.

Anita Bryant leveraged these public anxieties about child protection to establish the most visible anti-LGBTQIA+ campaign of the post-McCarthy era (Fetner 2001, 412–14). Bryant was a beauty pageant runner-up turned pop star, best known in the United States for her television commercials advertising orange juice for the Florida Citrus Commission between 1969–1979. Bryant was also a conservative Christian and outspoken “traditionalist,” opposed to abortion, feminism, and gay rights.

In January 1977, Dade County, Florida, passed an ordinance banning discrimination in housing, employment, and public accommodation based on sexual orientation (Frank 2013). In response, Bryant organized Save Our Children, Inc., an organization initially formed with the sole purpose of overturning the Dade County ordinance. Like other conservative political activism at that time, Save Our Children appropriated tactics often used against the African American civil rights movement. Messaging focused on the “civil rights of parents to save their children

from homosexual influence” because, Bryant falsely claimed, “homosexuals cannot reproduce, so they must recruit” (Frank 2013, 127).

Bryant’s coalition successfully convinced the Dade County Commission to call a special election on June 7, 1977 (Clarke 1977). The results were overwhelmingly in support of repeal (Holmberg 1977). *Good Housekeeping* that year hailed Anita Bryant as “The Most Admired Woman in America” (Hilliard 2002), and she used the publicity from the win in Dade County and funds raised by Save Our Children to start anti-gay organizations in other communities (Fetner 2001).

California state senator John Briggs was a vocal supporter of Anita Bryant’s anti-gay campaign (Fetner 2001). The day before the referendum vote in Dade County, Briggs flew to Miami to promote Bryant’s campaign. The day after its success, Briggs announced from the steps of City Hall that San Francisco was the “nexus of all homosexual activity in the United States” and needed to be “liberated” (Fetner 2001, 415). He then announced a new initiative: Proposition 6, known commonly as “Prop 6” or the “Briggs Amendment.” This law would ban gay and lesbian individuals from employment in public schools. In this way, Briggs “flipped the script of victimization” (Sides 2011, 38) claiming that conservative, White Americans were the community under attack. In stark contrast to Dade County, the Briggs Amendment failed to pass and catalyzed successful LGBTQIA+ organizing across the United States.

## Harvey Milk and the Counter-Countermovement

Whereas Anita Bryant acted as the public face of the anti-gay movement, Harvey Milk proved to be an overwhelmingly effective spokesperson for the burgeoning pro-gay and lesbian movement (Graves 2013). Milk’s public notoriety as a successful small business owner in the Castro District and outspoken advocate for gay liberation led him to run for San Francisco City Council in 1977. Milk already had some political organizing experience establishing the organization “San Franciscans Against Prop 6.” His vehement opposition to the Briggs amendment played a central role in his campaign messaging.

Milk also advocated strongly for greater public visibility for gay and lesbian people (Milk 2013). Whereas the homophile movement had argued that gay and lesbian people should remain invisibly in “the closet” and adhere closely to gender and racial stereotypes to appear “respectable,” Milk vehemently rejected this idea.

Instead, through a series of speeches, which today are known as the “Hope Speech,” he encouraged gay and lesbian people to make their queer identities known to their employers, family, and friends. Milk believed that by publicly coming out, gay and lesbian individuals could establish a visible political class, thus producing leverageable political agency as a marginalized community. The themes of the Hope Speech became widely popular in the gay community, as did his campaign slogan, “Come out, come out, wherever you are!” (Vermillion and Beeler 2009)

### Jon Sims and the SFLGFDMBTC

For some gay lib proponents, coming out as an individual did not seem like enough. Jon Sims, a music teacher originally from Kansas, envisioned a gay and lesbian performing arts movement where queer people could be visible not just as individuals, but as a collective expressive voice dedicated to queer liberation (Davidson 2019a). In the years following the Stonewall Riots, San Francisco held a commemorative Gay Freedom Day parade each June, a precursor to modern Pride and Christopher Street Day festivals. In the 1970s, activists used these parades as an opportunity to associate Anita Bryant (third portrait from the left) with fascist leaders and hate groups such as Josef Stalin, Adolph Hitler, the Ku Klux Klan, and Idi Amin ([LINK TO IMAGE](#), San Francisco Gay Day Parade, Ueda 1977).

Jon Sims, originally from Kansas, had moved to San Francisco as a young adult. He became politically active in the gay lib movement soon after moving there, attended gay lib meetings, and attended the Gay Freedom Day parades each June. Sims enjoyed the Freedom Day parades but felt they lacked color (Beeler 2007). So, in early 1978, Sims formed the San Francisco Lesbian and Gay Freedom Day Marching Band and Twirling Corp (SFLGFDMBTC), the first-ever performing arts organization to include the word “gay” directly in its name. He tacked flyers to phone poles around the city and persuaded friends to excavate long-forgotten musical instruments to give the parade a proper band. Rehearsals were held on the dance floor of the Trocadero Transfer, an after-hours dance club, where Sims asked them to “make the sound of pride” (Beeler 2018).

There was great anxiety around the Gay Freedom Day Parade of 1978, particularly for the soon-to-be-elected Harvey Milk (Vermillion and Beeler 2009, Beeler 2007). Several death threats had been made against him, but he refused police



protection, unafraid of the consequences. So, on June 25, 1978, Harvey Milk rode as the parade's Grand Marshall in an open convertible emblazoned with his coming out motto down San Francisco's Market Street. Preceding his car that day were 70 members of the SFLGFDMBTC, triumphantly playing "California, Here I Come"—the first public performance of an openly gay music organization in United States history ([LINK TO IMAGE](#), The band marching for the first time, San Francisco Lesbian/Gay Freedom Band n.d.).

There are differing views about what motivated Sims to start the band. Sims's sister, Judith Billings, felt that he was not making a political statement, but that he just wanted people to have fun making music (Billings 2018). Other sources argued that Jon's motivations were explicitly political. Nancy Corporon, Jon's long-time college friend from Indiana University, said, "Jon started the band because he firmly believed that communicating through music was the one way the L/G [lesbian and gay] community could change hearts and minds" (Beeler 2018). Some cite Harvey Milk's 1977 campaign urging people to come out, citing this as a call to action in founding the band (Castrovinci 2019, Light 2019),<sup>5</sup> while others believe it was a direct reaction to the Bryant campaign (Doyle 2010a, San Francisco Lesbian/Gay Freedom Band n.d.). It is equally possible that all these factors contributed to his decision to start the band.

Sims expected the band would be a one-time endeavor for the Gay Freedom Day Parade of 1978. The band was such a success, however, that it incorporated as a permanent organization and inspired the formation of queer bands in other major American cities (Beeler 2007). Sims was excited by this rapid success and felt there was an opportunity to expand, so he started recruiting for a new ensemble to complement the band's performance—a gay men's chorus.

### Founding the San Francisco Gay Men's Chorus

In August 1978, Sims stapled flyers to telephone poles around the Castro district of San Francisco advertising a new gay men's chorus, with tear-off tabs that read simply "Call Jon" (Davidson 2019a). SFGMC held its first rehearsal on October 30, 1978. Five weeks later, on November 27, 1978, City Councilman Harvey Milk and San Francisco's Mayor George Moscone were assassinated at City Hall. The queer community, devastated by the sudden loss of such a public icon, organized a

spontaneous candlelight procession. Jay Davidson, the chorus' first manager, wrote about his recollection of that night:

We arrived at rehearsal, all shocked by the news of the day. Our new director, Dick Kramer, had music for a Mendelssohn piece, which he passed out and rehearsed with us. We left the rehearsal space at Church & 16th Street, to walk the two blocks to Market Street to join the candlelight procession that was en route to City Hall, about a mile or so away. (Davidson 2019b)

The chorus joined marchers along the route to the steps of City Hall, where thousands of mourners had gathered (SFGMC Program Notes, cited in Balen 2017, 42). There, after only four rehearsals, the SFGMC sang "Herr Gott, du bist unsre Zuflucht" by Mendelssohn in memory of Milk and Moscone (Castrovinci 2019). This was the first public performance by an openly gay chorus in the nation's history (Hilliard 2002).

It is critical to note here that SFGMC was not the first gay chorus in the United States, but like the marching band, was the first to perform publicly with the word "gay" in its name. In 1975, Dr. Catherine Roma founded "Anna Crusis Feminist Choir," a women's chorus in Philadelphia that included both straight and lesbian women and openly sang music in support of gay rights (Roma 2019). Similarly, in 1977, the Gotham Male Chorus in New York City was founded to create a space where chorus members would "dig music as well as each other" (Attinello 2004, 213). In 1980, the chorus began including women and was renamed the "Stonewall Chorale," today considered America's oldest gay and lesbian mixed chorus. Together with the San Francisco Gay Men's Chorus, these early queer-affirming choral music organizations inspired a national and international LGBTQIA+ choral movement.

## Fomenting a Queer Chorus Movement

"Movement culture"—the articulable signs and rituals that define a movement's shared identity—is hard to invent from nothing. It is much easier to adapt existing cultural signs and apply them to new goals, ideas, and strategies defined by the movement (Reed 2019, 14). Gay and lesbian rights activists looked to the African American civil rights movement for inspiration, but queer culture lacked group singing traditions like those of the African American civil rights movement (Balen 2017, 35).

Music associated with White queer culture prior to gay choruses came primarily from solo repertoire—cabaret standards, folk music, disco, and Broadway (Doyle 2010b). None of these repertoires easily adapted to the specific needs of a traditionally structured European-style choral ensemble. A major challenge for the chorus in the early years was the lack of available repertoire that spoke to the gay experience. Directors of LGBTQ+ choruses at this time relied heavily on repertoire from the White European classical canon, likely learned as part of their formal music education and professional experiences, programming pieces by Ives, Bizet, Bach, Brahms, Britten, Mozart, and Schubert (Doyle 2010a).

Despite this, SFGMC did perform some songs featuring explicit queer identity. For example, the 1979 season included a work altered by then-director Dick Kramer to evoke queer meaning by inverting female pronouns in the song “She Touched Me” to “He Touched Me” (Hilliard 2002, 87). That same season, SFGMC member Tad Dunlap composed what is possibly the first ever gay-specific choral work, titled “I Understood,” which used text taken from a Harvey Milk speech (Castrovinci 2019). Since its founding, the chorus has made commissioning new works a priority, hiring renowned queer composers like Ned Rorem to write new repertoire for tenor and bass voices specific to the gay community. These commissions helped reinvigorate the genre of tenor-bass music, which had become less popular since universities in America became coed.

The chorus became successful very quickly, praised for both their musical quality and their visible representation of queer identity in the community (Hilliard 2002, 87). To improve members’ singing quality, the director offered ten-week voice classes in addition to the weekly rehearsals. Members proudly advertised the chorus’s performance in and around the Castro district of San Francisco ([LINK TO IMAGE](#), Group of Men on Balcony, Leleu 1979).

By May 1979, the chorus had 145 members, and their spring concert sold all 1,500 seats before tickets were available for public sale. Critics in local newspapers raved about their performances.

The chorus took the national stage in 1981, touring eight major American cities: New York City; Boston, Massachusetts; Washington, D.C.; Lincoln, Nebraska; Detroit, Michigan; Minneapolis, Minnesota; Dallas, Texas; and Seattle, Washington (Gordon 1990, 25). The chorus performed a highly refined program of music including Dunlap’s “I Understood.” The touring choir received rave reviews for the

quality of the musicianship, and the chorus released a critically acclaimed album from the concert recordings, the first record from an openly gay American music ensemble. Indeed, SFGMC's tour demonstrated a shift from local community music praxis toward a national movement.

New LGBTQIA+-identifying choruses formed quickly, at first in large cities. In 1979, new choruses formed in Los Angeles, Seattle, and Chicago in response to Harvey Milk's assassination (Hayes 2007, Attinello 2004). In 1980, the National Gay Task Force assisted in founding the New York City Gay Men's Chorus (Hayes 2008). SFGMC's 1981 national tour directly inspired the founding of choruses in Washington, D.C., and Boston, and likely contributed to others.

Directors of choruses across the country wanted a network with which to share queer repertoire, exchange organizing best practices, and unify the movement's message. Representatives of several choruses met for the first time as a group in Chicago in 1981 (Davidson 2019a). They recognized the need for a national presence, to coordinate efforts between their organizations and facilitate choral festivals so members from different groups could come together and share musical performances (Doyle 2010a). Plans were already underway for a major national chorus festival in New York City in the summer of 1983, so representatives from SFGMC suggested doing a smaller "West Coast Choral Festival" to coincide with the first annual Gay Games in 1982.<sup>6</sup>

Several choruses, including San Francisco and Chicago, were part of umbrella non-profit organizations that included marching band ensembles (Davidson 2019a). Thus, the plan originally was to establish a national organization known as the "Gay and Lesbian Association of Performing Arts Groups." No representatives from any bands, however, attended the meeting in 1981. Neither did any band representatives participate when the directors and managers met during the West Coast festival the following year. So, the organizers decided instead to move forward with Articles of Incorporation in California, establishing GALA Choruses. The articles were ratified the next year at the Come Out and Sing Together (COAST) festival, and Jay Davidson was elected the organization's first president.

Twelve choruses were signatories to GALA's founding charter. By 1983, there were 39 choruses (Hilliard 2002, 91). By 1990, there were already 74 choruses, and a new chorus applied for membership nearly every month (Gordon 1990, 25). By 1999, there were 189 choruses—at least one in nearly every large and medium-

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sized city in the United States. Interestingly, while LGBTQIA+ choruses flourished, bands remained much less common (“Lesbian Gay Band Association” n.d.). Whereas bands are expensive and require considerable resources like instruments and uniforms, choruses are relatively inexpensive to start and operate. This may explain why there are now hundreds of choruses but only roughly three dozen bands (Doyle 2010a).

Another factor contributing to the rapid establishment of choruses was the sudden and horrendous tragedy of the AIDS epidemic (Balen 2009, Doyle 2010a). Although not the founding mission of the first gay choruses, these organizations became sanctuaries for those facing challenges brought on by the AIDS crisis. Gay choruses became a place where people were literally “singing for their lives” (Sparks 2005, Castrovinci 2019).

Jon Sims himself was among the earliest diagnosed cases of HIV infection, at a time when no effective treatments were available (Ward 2019). Mercifully, he survived long enough to see his dream of a national queer music movement become a reality. In 1982, the same year as GALA’s incorporation, Jon started feeling “burned out,” suffering from what he believed was exhaustion. In 1984, just before the first joint concert of the Lesbian and Gay Bands of America (LGBA), he was hospitalized with acute toxoplasmosis infection complicated by AIDS and transferred to hospice care. While in hospice, Sim’s “second in command” of the band, Ken Ward, played recordings of the band’s performances for him. Although Sims could no longer speak, he would conduct the performances silently as he listened. Sims died six months later (Beeler 2018). Stories of Jon’s death and legacy appeared in newspapers in Kansas, San Francisco, and even the *New York Times* (White 1984).

The service for his funeral was over two hours long, with performances by nearly every ensemble with which he had worked, including a particularly lively New Orleans jazz-inspired rendition of “Just a Closer Walk with Thee” (Janovy 2018). The theme for the funeral, “Over the Rainbow,” reflected Jon’s reputation as the boy from Kansas who led the band like “Dorothy down the yellow brick road.” Attendees wore rainbow armbands and entered under an archway of balloons (Vermillion and Beeler 2009).

## Changing the Tune: Community Musicking as Counterstory

In struggles for civil rights, one immense challenge that marginalized communities face is the propaganda that intentionally slanders marginalized groups through the repetition of negative stereotypes. Even before the formal pathologizing of same-gender attraction in the late 19th century (Foucault 1978), queer people of every identity were slandered as degenerate, morally insufficient, or pedophilic. These false, defamatory narratives are weaponized through harassment, defamation, denial of public services, and even murder; for example, the brutal targeting of TGE individuals, particularly BIPOC TGE people, which the Human Rights Campaign has described as “an epidemic of violence” (An Epidemic of Violence 2021; 2021 Is Now the Deadliest Year on Record for Transgender People 2021).

To combat derogatory stereotypes, social movement activists reframe public discourse by offering an alternate interpretation, or *counterstory*, of shared social history (Sanger 1995, Balen 2017). Activists share counterstory narratives through demonstrations, artistic performances, speeches, and debates. Through counterstorying practices, marginalized communities disrupt pejorative stereotypes by presenting personal stories of authentic lived experiences. Activists hope, and experience suggests, that public portrayals of authentic narratives slowly shift societal values away from stereotypes and prejudice toward tolerance, understanding, and eventually, acceptance.

Group singing is an effective tool for counterstorying for three main reasons. First, it is intentionally public and visible. Second, it engages participants and audience members through discursive and non-discursive artistic expression (see Adorno 1997). Third, it contributes to the development of movement culture (Hebert 2009).

The LGBTQIA+ choral movement in the United States, like other group singing movements that came before it (Balen 2017), produces a counterstory narrative to combat stereotypes about queer identities. LGBTQIA+ choruses around the world leverage the sociopolitical opportunities of group singing with several goals (Balen 2017, Beale 2017): (1) to promote a positive public image of the LGBTQIA+ community, (2) to create queer safe spaces outside of bars and clubs; (3) to provide emotional support for those struggling with trauma from family rejection, identity shame, and the AIDS crisis; and (4) to provide a platform for communicating movement strategies and ideals.

Choruses empower individuals to express their identities in a safe environment while also increasing awareness of the LGBTQIA+ community (Strachan 2006, 248). As Kenneth Cole, executive director of GALA from 1994–2001, explained, “Singing in a gay choir is essentially a political act” (Sparks 2005). Jay Davidson, GALA’s founding president, never considered himself to be very political: “The best political thing I could do is to sing in the chorus... This is what I can do to be out there, to be out and visible” (Davidson 2019a). In this way, LGBTQIA+ choruses directly respond to Harvey Milk’s vision of a group political class established through public self-identification.

Although LGBTQIA+ choruses are visible as representatives of queerness in communities where they organize, since their earliest days these organizations have wrestled with balancing public acknowledgment of queer identity with the realities of American life. Many choruses still consider and manage the threat that “out-ness” has for members, such as possible repercussions from employers and families by being associated with an openly gay organization. For example, early in its history, SFGMC debated whether to retain the word “gay” in their name. Ultimately, the membership decided to keep it (Hilliard 2002).

Other groups made different choices. The Turtle Creek Chorale, founded in 1980, decided it was more prudent not to include “gay” in their name given their location in the conservative state of Texas (Balen 2009, 40). Although they were booed by the audience during an early GALA Festival performance, the organization felt that avoiding public queer identification encouraged participation by straight allies. Today, only about half of the chorus in the GALA Choruses network explicitly include the words gay or lesbian in their names (Doyle 2010a).

## The (Counter) Story Needs a Critical Revision

The sociopolitical landscape in much of the United States has changed considerably for queer people since the 1970s. Following US Supreme Court cases legalizing queer relationships (*Obergefell v. Hodges* 2015, *Lawrence v. Texas* 2003) and confronted with the ongoing violence enacted on BIPOC and TGE people, many LGBTQIA+ choruses shifting their programming to call attention to the needs of BIPOC and TGE communities. Queer choruses, however, struggle to address the needs of these communities, in part because their organizations lack

representation by members who identify with BIPOC and TGE communities (Southerland 2020).

Why are LGBTQIA+ organizations whose missions explicitly champion diversity failing to attract diverse participants? Unfortunately, this is not a new phenomenon in community music praxis or the LGBTQIA+ community. Studies investigating community music organizations in the United States suggest their participants are overwhelmingly White, middle-class, and highly educated (Brown 2016; Bradley, Golner, and Hanson 2007; Southerland 2020). Similarly, despite appearing nominally “diverse” to outsiders, LGBTQIA+ community activist organizations have never mirrored the diversity of the United States with respect to race, socioeconomic status, or gender identity (Peacock 2016, Wilder 1964, Valentich and Gripton 1986, Camp 2020).

The history of the queer community is fraught with incomplete, inadequate, or blatantly absent attempts to account for systemic biases beyond sexual orientation. As early as the 1960s, queer community organizers recognized a fault line within the burgeoning gay and lesbian community along racial lines (Wilder 1964). Early queer activists drew parallels they thought were productive between the gay and lesbian rights movement and the African American civil rights movement. Unfortunately, this analogy may have further segregated these two intersecting communities by insinuating that gay people were White, and Black people were not gay (Valentich and Gripton 1986). Furthermore, police throughout the United States enforced race-based segregation well into the 1960s, barring anyone who appeared to be BIPOC from the White neighborhoods where most gay bars were located.

As highly visible representatives of the LGBTQIA+ community, queer choruses have a tremendous responsibility to represent many different communities. Yet queer choruses continue to struggle to overcome the homophile presentation of the original 1970s choruses and, as Attinello (2006, 326) argued, “it is undeniable that the [LGBTQIA+] choruses are essentially white institutions producing performances of white music.” Does a “gay”-branded ensemble of majority White, tuxedo-clad singers on an orchestral stage represent “the LGBTQIA+ community” ([LINK TO IMAGE](#), The San Francisco Gay Men’s Chorus n.d.)?

What does this message send to those outside the LGBTQIA+ community, or to those within the LGBTQIA+ community who do not identify as White, affluent, or homosexual? Are LGBTQIA+ choruses racist, transphobic, and classist?



I believe that the lack of participant diversity common in many choruses is unlikely intentional. Rather, I argue this is more likely caused by intersecting artistic, cultural, and structural factors. To start, access to music education plays a role. Some LGBTQIA+ ensembles have strict audition requirements. Most choruses require music literacy skills such as note reading.<sup>7</sup> These processes reflect the problem Wright (2015) identified: that music education may interact with larger social patterns which uphold inequities, and that a student's identity may shape or even predetermine the benefits of their education. Children who grow up without access to high-quality music education may be less likely to participate in music-making activities as adults (Brown 2016).

Choruses must recognize and provide explicit accommodations for these inequitable realities. Many LGBTQIA+ ensembles offer additional sectional rehearsals as opportunities for singers to practice, and some even provide musicianship classes that teach Western musical notation literacy. Thorp's (2016) findings with urban, socially identified community ensembles, found extensive use of differentiated multi-modal learning, and many socially identified choirs use technology as a productive tool. LGBTQIA+ choruses often provide singers with rehearsal tracks—recordings of a singer's part used for practice outside of the normal rehearsal. Rehearsal tracks make it possible for individuals with limited music reading skills to learn music aurally at their own pace, to come to rehearsals better prepared, and to feel more successful throughout the rehearsal process. During the COVID-19 lockdown, some ensembles, like the Seattle Men's Chorus, extended this practice by providing videos of the conductor conducting with the words and music displayed on the screen for singers to follow (Southerland 2021), although it is not clear if this practice will continue.

Alongside educational considerations, cultural factors and aesthetic preferences likely influence the types of music-making activities in which individuals participate (Pineda 2017). Each LGBTQIA+ ensemble has a unique history and artistic identity, so generalizing about repertoire selections of the movement overall is difficult (Doyle 2010a). Community music making is an intensely culturally inflected practice, so ideally the repertoire of an ensemble should reflect the mission and values of the community in which they exist. Furthermore, because repertoire likely impacts a singer's motivation to participate, directors should program music

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in various styles and from various cultures if they want to appeal to a diversity of singers (Shaw 2012).

Each LGBTQIA+ chorus chooses its own process for selecting repertoire. I have worked with choruses for which the artistic director chooses all musical selections without input from others. The cultural background and aesthetic preferences of the director in these choruses dictate the sociocultural and political “voice” of the chorus’s performances. I have also worked with ensembles that use contributory or collaborative repertoire selection processes. Sometimes, singers submit recommendations for repertoire or serve on music selection committees. Music selection committees with whom I have worked typically function in one of three ways: (1) as advisors to the artistic director, providing non-binding suggestions and recommendations; (2) as democratic bodies which choose repertoire by majority vote; or (3) as consensus bodies which choose repertoire only with unanimous agreement among the members. I have found unanimous agreement is more common in smaller organizations that put into practice feminist ideologies, while advisory committees are more common in large organizations where unanimous agreement or even democratic processes would be impractical.

Sometimes, the Board of Directors may select or “encourage” repertoire. Although many Boards oversee only the financial aspects of a chorus organization, some Boards prefer to have a more direct role in the management of chorus programming like repertoire selection. From my conversations with colleagues, such circumstances are not desirable, as Board members may not have the skills necessary to select music appropriate to the needs or skills of the ensemble.

When considering repertoire that represents diverse cultures and communities, conductors may not be comfortable teaching musical genres beyond their area of performance practice expertise. Furthermore, I learned at a recent conference that some ensembles are choosing not to perform music from cultures that lack representation in their ensembles. These anxieties, however, create a paradox that may lead to further whitewashing of ensembles.

Instead of preventing experiences with the unfamiliar, queer choruses could guide participants intentionally through encounters with unfamiliar music with an expressed purpose to foster cultural and epistemological diversity (Hess 2018). Undeniably, directors and ensembles must do substantial work to prepare music from outside their own cultural experiences (Bradley 2015). Nevertheless, refusing

to do so upholds a colorblind view of queer culture that masks racist thoughts, precludes the interrogation of racist attitudes, and prohibits participants from “broadening their awareness and respect for other people and cultures” (Bradley 2015, 200).

I found no evidence that Jon Sims, or any of the early chorus leaders, explicitly established music practices to promote the White, middle-class respectability pushed by Mattachine and others (Peacock 2016). In fact, the evidence I found suggested these individuals strongly opposed prejudice of any kind. The leaders of these early choruses used their knowledge and experience to produce the highest quality musical organization possible, as they had learned to do.

Nevertheless, LGBTQIA+ choruses in the United States formed and operate in a society that is systemically racist, sexist, homophobic, transphobic, ableist, and classist. So, when SFGMC toured the United States three years after their founding, they disseminated a White, bourgeois prototype of queer choral singing to a national queer audience. When new choruses were founded, many emulated successful prototypes without considering the intersectional factors that may impact participation and reception. By failing to analyze policies and procedures critically, by mimicking prototypical White European choral models, and by recycling White European choral music aesthetics, queer choruses unintentionally reproduced many of the sociocultural biases they ostensibly sought to disrupt (Wright 2015)

### Changing the Tune: A New Harmony

From my interactions with colleagues, I feel that leaders in the LGBTQIA+ chorus movement today are increasingly sensitive to the problems outlined in the previous section.<sup>8</sup> After the 2012 and 2016 GALA Festivals in Denver, Colorado, several attendees expressed serious concerns that the quadrennial GALA Choruses Festival was marginalizing underrepresented communities within the queer choral movement. One singer described the experience as feeling “welcome at someone else’s party” (GALA New Harmony Committee 2019). These comments came from singers with a range of identities including BIPOC singers, transgender singers, singers from the disability community, and bisexual singers.

In response to this feedback, GALA began a strategic national initiative to encourage member choruses to create spaces that are welcoming to more than just cisgender, White, middle-class, gay and lesbian people: “A New Harmony.” One

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central goal of this project is to identify barriers to participation by people from diverse backgrounds and to recommend solutions to help choruses be more identity responsive. Unsatisfied with the “Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion” model popular in corporate America, this initiative conceived of a new model: Equity, Access, and Belonging. Rather than using participant demographics as the reference point for success, this initiative seeks to eliminate the barriers to access that participants face no matter their identity or background and to provide a social space where everyone feels like they can find community.

This initiative is multipronged and includes the formation of a national task force, development of resource publications, expert advice through consultancy, and facilitated discussions with local organizations. The New Harmony Task Force has produced two publications which provide discussion guides and recommendations for action to chorus organizations working to make their policies and practices more equitable and welcoming. The committee’s first workbook (GALA New Harmony Task Force 2019) focused on the needs of individuals who identify as BIPOC, TGE, bisexual, poly- and pansexual, low income, and those who have a disability. A second volume (GALA New Harmony Task Force 2023) focused on mental health and neurodiversity, intergenerational dynamics, faith and religion, digital accessibility, and cultural exceptionalism.

This program has demonstrated successes. Immediately following the 2016 Festival, national leadership, in cooperation with task force members, reimaged programming to intentionally provide opportunities specifically tailored to the needs of BIPOC singers, transgender singers, and women. Then, in February 2019, the New Harmony Committee published the first edition of a new workbook titled, *A New Harmony: Equity, Access, and Belonging* (GALA New Harmony Committee 2019). This resource assists chorus leaders in having conversations with their members about race, class, gender, sexual orientation, and ability and in identifying barriers to participation based on these characteristics. Local choruses are encouraged to identify policies and procedures that exclude certain people, intentionally or unintentionally, and to brainstorm ways to alleviate these barriers. Today, across the United States, LGBTQIA+ choruses are using resources developed by this strategic committee to revise policies and procedures and hopefully, to improve access to individuals from identities and communities underrepresented within the LGBTQIA+ arts community.

Although no empirical research has yet been conducted, anecdotal conversations I have had with leaders of organizations who have engaged with the resources and advisors provided by the New Harmony project suggest that they are working. Choruses are revising their membership policies, modifying audition requirements, providing multimodal accommodations for music learning, and providing financial support for membership dues, performance uniforms, and travel. Chorus organizations, like the Gay Men's Chorus of Washington, have seen considerably more interest in their programs by singers of color following the creation of committees dedicated to the experiences of members of color, the intentional recruitment of staff members of color, and the intentional recruitment of volunteers of color to serve in leadership positions (Fyala 2022). There is still more work to do, but by being actively anti-racist and anti-colonialist, these legacy chorus organizations may reinvent themselves to better meet the needs of the whole LGBTQIA+ community.

## Conclusion

LGBTQIA+ choruses have become an important public face of the queer movement by destabilizing cisgender and heterosexual normative subjectivities through discursive and non-discursive implementation of counterstorying. Responding to the harassment of Anita Bryant and the clarion call of Harvey Milk, LGBTQIA+ choruses continue to address the needs of chorus members to socialize with queer people in settings beyond bars and clubs, to publicly present authentic stories as counternarratives to pejorative stereotypes, to provide emotional support during crises like AIDS, and to establish a platform allowing non-political individuals to produce political agency. Through the boundless energy of thousands of individuals like Jon Sims, these choruses have achieved a national presence through professional networking organizations like GALA.

Social acceptance and political recognition of LGBTQIA+ identities in the United States have made substantial progress in recent years. Legal victories in legislatures and courts have recognized queer people's right to assemble, to identify openly in public spaces, to advocate for social change, and most recently to marry. Yet, there continue to be threats for queer people; for example, employment discrimination based on sexual orientation or gender identity, as well as the epidemic of violence against BIPOC and trans individuals. Today, just as when they

started, queer activist organizations must continue the fight against the real impact that negative stereotypes and bigotry continue to inflict on queer people in American society.

Twenty-first century LGBTQIA+ choruses increasingly look outside the queer community for opportunities for advocacy. As queer people in the United States have secured certain rights, choruses are leveraging their public platforms to draw attention to communities whose needs are not yet being met. Choruses have produced concerts to raise money for and awareness of immigrant rights, reproductive rights, police brutality, sexual harassment, income disparity, and the underrepresentation of women and people of color in public life. As Tim Seelig, the current director of SFGMC, summarized: “I am so proud of the gay choral movement for having responded—having not just buried itself within its own sort of internal issues—but turned itself outward and said what can we do with our music to raise awareness for an incredibly wide range of issues” (Tim Seelig, quoted in Doyle n.d.).

The growth of LGBTQIA+ choruses in the last forty years has been exponential, but that rapidity led to unanticipated consequences from uncritical organizational policies and culturally unresponsive musical praxes. Hopefully, through intentionality and critical reflection, these choruses can become musical communities that authentically reflect the constellation of identities making the whole queer community. In this way, LGBTQIA+ choruses may finally achieve the universalist vision put forth by GALA—to sing into being “a world where **all** voices are free” (About GALA Choruses 2023, emphasis added).

## About the Author

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> According to D’Emilio (1998), individuals in the United States armed forces who received a dishonorable discharge for homosexual identity or activity often did not return to their hometown because of a lack of resources, social stigma, or both. New York City and San Francisco developed openly queer communities as early as the 19th century. During the 20th century world wars, ports in these cities functioned as hubs for moving soldiers between domestic and foreign theaters. Many LGBTQIA+ veterans chose to remain in these cities following their dismissal from service. Harvey Milk, famous for his work as an activist and city councilperson in San Francisco, is a famous example of this experience.

<sup>2</sup> Sexual-minority identities are a constellation of human variations that include differences in gender expression, gender identity, physical biology, psychology, sexual attractiveness or lack of attractiveness, and the countless cultural expressions that emerge from these communities. Language used to refer to sexual-minority identities has changed considerably over time and continues to change, so in this essay, I use several different terms when referring to sexual-minority identity. When discussing people, organizations, or events in the 20th century, I most often use the term “gay and lesbian” which was the most commonly term used at the time. Although people with other identities existed, their identities were too often left out of the public discourse. When referring to contemporary people, organizations, or events, I use the terms LGBTQIA+ or queer interchangeably. In my personal experience, these terms are the most used by queer people in queer communities currently, and LGBTQIA+ is the term preferred by GALA Choruses’s New Harmony Task Force. Scholars such as Bergonzi et al. (2016, 12) have recognized that acronyms like LGBTQ+ omit many communities and proffered a more comprehensive acronym, LGBTQQIP2SAA. I have chosen to limit my acronym and to privilege the term “queer”—the Q in LGBTQIA+—because, in my opinion, queer is sufficiently accepted in contemporary public discourse to mean all sexual minority identities. Hopefully, readers will perceive these terms as an attempt to be inclusive even though they may still fail to include every sexual-minority identity. As language continues to evolve, I encourage both contemporary and future scholars to interpolate whichever terminology for sexual minority people and communities best fits their contexts.

<sup>3</sup> The Stonewall Riots were a series of spontaneous, violent demonstrations by members of the LGBTQIA+ community against a police raid that began in the early morning hours of June 28, 1969, at the Stonewall Inn in the Greenwich Village neighborhood of Lower Manhattan in New York City. The Stonewall Inn was a Mafia-run bar that was popular with transgender women, gay men, and drag queens. The bar was regularly raided by the police, who would arrest patrons for offenses such as cross-dressing, public indecency, and soliciting for prostitution.

On the night of June 28, 1969, the police raided the Stonewall Inn as usual but, instead of complying, the patrons threw bottles and bricks at the police. Then, the riots spread into the surrounding streets where the rioters confronted police continuously for six days. The Stonewall Riots demonstrated unequivocally that LGBTQIA+ people are willing to fight for their rights and inspired a new generation of activists to demand political and social change. Today, queer communities around the world celebrate the Stonewall Riots with annual parades and street festivals.

<sup>4</sup> The Cleavers were a fictional family depicted on the American television show *Leave It to Beaver*, which aired from 1957–1963. Thematic plots of the show explicitly normalized and reinforced traditional White suburban social, sexual, and gender role stereotypes as “universal” (Pugh 2018).

<sup>5</sup> Joe Castrovinci related to me by email that this Wikipedia article is the only definitive history of the San Francisco chorus that exists. It is actively maintained by the organization and monitored for accuracy.

<sup>6</sup> Although not affiliated with a queer choral organization, the Gay Games continues to have choral performances at its opening and closing ceremonies featuring singers from all over the world, many of whom are members of their local queer choirs.

<sup>7</sup> In my experience, choruses that identify explicitly as “Queer” or TGE have much less strict music literacy requirements and provide more accommodations for music learning. Leadership of these ensembles strives to provide accommodation to overcome the limited resources members may have and social exclusion from music education their members may have faced because of their identity.

<sup>8</sup> In my experience, conversations among leadership and presentations at GALA Chorus events have focused almost exclusively on the issue of diversity and access since about 2017. I regularly have personal conversations with colleagues across the country to discuss realities and possibilities.