

Schattenkirk, K C 2014, 'Matthew Shepard, Music and Social Justice: Discourse on the Relationship Between Homophobic Violence and Anti-Gay Sentiment in Two Performative Contexts', *Eras*, vol. 16, no.1, pp.83-96



# Matthew Shepard, Music and Social Justice: Discourse on the Relationship Between Homophobic Violence and Anti-Gay Sentiment In Two Performative Contexts

Kevin C. Schattenkirk  
(University of Western Australia)

**Abstract** | *This article examines music and performances in two performative contexts (popular music and gay choruses) with regard to one particular case study, the 1998 murder of Matthew Shepard, an openly gay university student in Laramie, Wyoming. The implications of Shepard's murder pertain to the relationship between anti-gay sentiment and homophobic violence. Music and performances related to the Shepard murder address these implications, and, in many instances, it questions responsibility for such crimes against Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Queer (LGBTQ) people. This paper focuses on Shepard-related performances by Gay and Lesbian Association of Choruses (GALA) in the United States. Such performances are designed to address contemporary LGBTQ issues, affecting audiences with accessible music while humanizing LGBTQ performers through emotional musical expressions. As such, I will draw from my work with the San Francisco Gay Men's Chorus (SFGMC) and their concert for Shepard in Laramie, Wyoming in 2012. Most significantly, the findings of my work with SFGMC address the necessity of performing music for, and memorializing, Shepard as a means of confronting homophobic violence that results from anti-gay sentiment.*

## Introduction

In the performative contexts of both Western popular music and gay chorus concerts, a variety of songs and larger musical works memorialize and confront the implications of the 1998 murder of Matthew Shepard.<sup>1</sup> At the time of his murder, Shepard was a 21-year old, openly gay student at the University of Wyoming in the city of Laramie. According to the most well-known and substantiated narrative of the tragedy, Shepard met Aaron McKinney and Russell Henderson at the Fireside Lounge on the evening of 7 October 1998.<sup>2</sup> McKinney and Henderson allegedly pretended to be gay

---

<sup>1</sup> Kevin Schattenkirk, "The Road From Laramie: Musical Location, Rhetoric, and Relevance in Mainstream Popular Songs About Matthew Shepard" (MA diss., University of Washington, 2010).

<sup>2</sup> American journalist Stephen Jimenez published a book titled *The Book of Matt* in 2013. In his book, Jimenez claims Shepard's murder was due to a drug deal gone wrong and not primarily the result of homophobic violence. Jimenez's theories date back to 2004 and have been criticized as unsubstantiated and disproven. While I respect Jimenez's right to examine and question the details of the Shepard murder, I personally remain convinced that, based on existing substantial evidence, the Shepard murder was in fact the result of homophobia. However, I am neither altering nor disputing the Shepard narrative in my work. Rather, I am interested in examining the manner in which the implications of his murder are addressed by songwriters, composers and performers. See

Kevin C. Schattenkirk

and offered Shepard a ride home in order to lure him out of the bar. However, McKinney and Henderson instead drove Shepard to a remote location just outside of Laramie city limits. The two men then tied Shepard to a fence in a manner resembling a scarecrow (a recurring image in song lyrics about the murder), proceeding to beat and pistol-whip him before departing the scene. Aaron Kreifels, a passing bicyclist, called police to the scene upon discovering Shepard several hours later still tied to the fence and barely alive. Shepard was then rushed to a hospital in Fort Collins, Colorado where he remained in a coma for five days. On 12 October 1998, he died from blunt force trauma to the head. In the time since his death, songs and works by popular music artists/bands and gay choruses have continued to address the larger implications of Shepard's murder: what is the relationship between anti-gay sentiment and homophobic violence in the US?<sup>3</sup>

With specific regard to popular music, Shepard-related songs largely protest acts of homophobic violence that result from anti-gay sentiment. These songs encompass a wide variety of genres by a wide variety of artists, independent (or 'indie') and mainstream. In general, and for the sake of creating a distinction, indie artists and bands often self-finance and promote their own music, which contrasts with the financial support mainstream artists and bands receive from major record companies.<sup>4</sup> The intended result of such support for mainstream artists and bands is to reach larger audiences. Mainstream songs memorializing Shepard and commenting on the implications of his murder include 'Merman' by Tori Amos,<sup>5</sup> 'Scarecrow' by Melissa Etheridge, 'Laramie' by Amy Ray (of the popular folk-rock duo Indigo Girls), 'Jesus is on the Wire' by Peter, Paul and Mary (written by Boston folk singer/songwriter Thea Hopkins) and 'American Triangle' by Elton John. These songs attempt to initiate dialogue with popular music audiences about the relationship between anti-gay sentiment and homophobic violence in the US. However, their omission from canonical discourse raises questions concerning the manner in which songs confronting homophobic violence are valued, and whether such messages constitute social protest.

In contrast to canonical discourse in popular music, gay choruses in the US continually engage audiences in musical dialogue with songs and works addressing anti-gay sentiment and homophobic violence. Grounded in musicological,

---

Stephen Jimenez, *The book of Matt : Hidden Truths About the Murder of Matthew Shepard* (Hanover, New Hampshire : Steerforth Press, 2013).

<sup>3</sup> See Beth Loffreda, *Losing Matt Shepard* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2000); and Jennifer Petersen, *Murder, the Media, and the Politics of Public Feeling* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2011).

<sup>4</sup> See Ryan Hibbert, "What is Indie Rock?," *Popular Music and Society* 28:1 (2005): 55-77.

<sup>5</sup> In the aftermath of his murder and throughout her 1998 concert tour, Tori Amos would often dedicate performances of 'Merman' to Shepard at the request of gay male fans. While the song was originally inspired by Amos's husband Mark Hawley, repurposing 'Merman' (through dedications to Shepard) functions as a commentary on anti-gay sentiment and homophobic violence. Amos would eventually release a studio recording of 'Merman' in 1999.

ethnomusicological and sociological frameworks, my work draws from research interviews and fieldwork as well as historical and text-based analyses. The following section addresses popular music and canon formation, specifically focusing on the question of where songs about the Shepard murder are situated in the canon of protest music. Then, the remainder of this article focuses attention on a Shepard-related performance by the San Francisco Gay Men's Chorus (SFGMC) in 2012, inclusive of music that addresses anti-gay sentiment and homophobic violence. Such performances represent the voice of gay men speaking on behalf of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans(gender/sexual) and queer (LGBTQ) experience contending with hatred—a voice that remains absent in canonical discourse on protest music.

### **Popular Music and Canon Formation**

In surveying the vast amount of music addressing the Shepard murder and its implications, this section considers the question of where such songs are situated in the canon of protest music. Such an inquiry only seems to compel more questions, the most significant of which pertains to who or what shapes the canon of protest music. The term 'taste-makers' appears in popular music studies literature focused on canon formation, referencing various avenues of influence in popular music.<sup>6</sup> 'Taste-makers' include newsprint (such as the New York Times and the Los Angeles Times) and popular music magazines (such as Rolling Stone and Billboard) as well as journalists and critics employed by these publications. Radio (such as National Public Radio), television (such as MTV and VH1) and online mediated sources with a popular music focus (such as Pitchfork Media and PopMatters) are also among prominent 'taste-makers'. Others include cultural institutions such as Smithsonian Folkways, a record label devoted to preserving and disseminating various musical cultures, and the Experience Music Project, a rock and roll museum in Seattle, Washington. Additionally, musicians should be included amongst 'taste-makers', as both Tom Morello (guitarist for the rock band Rage Against the Machine) and rock singer-songwriter, John Mellencamp compiled separate lists of their favourite protest songs. Morello's list was published in the pop culture magazine Entertainment Weekly in 2004.<sup>7</sup> Mellencamp's list was published in Rolling Stone in 2011.<sup>8</sup> Finally, audiences

---

<sup>6</sup> See Roy Shuker, *Understanding Popular Music Culture* (London: Routledge, 2008); Matthew Bannister, "'Loaded': Indie Guitar Rock, Canonism, White Masculinities," *Popular Music* 25, no. 1 (2006); and Jason Toynbee, *Making Popular Music: Musicians, Creativity and Institutions* (London, UK: Arnold, 2000).

<sup>7</sup> Brian Hiatt, "Redemption Songs," *Entertainment Weekly*, October 4, 2004, accessed October 24, 2014, <http://www.ew.com/ew/article/0,,708813,00.html>.

<sup>8</sup> See John Mellencamp, "News - Rolling Stone Magazine: John Picks His Favorite Top 10 Protest Songs," *John Mellencamp*, accessed October 24, 2014, [http://www.mellencamp.com/news.html?n\\_id=1547](http://www.mellencamp.com/news.html?n_id=1547).

legitimize and arguably assist in shaping canon, as evidenced by a Rolling Stone magazine reader's poll of top protest songs, published in February 2008.<sup>9</sup>

### Protest Songs, Canon and the Shepard Murder

Several 'best protest songs' and similarly-themed compendiums were examined for this article.<sup>10</sup> The subjectivity of 'taste-makers', reflected by personal musical preferences regardless of stature and popularity (or lack thereof), results in the inclusion of songs that often do not repeat between such lists.<sup>11</sup> However, songs repeating between many lists (such as 'Strange Fruit' by Billie Holiday and 'Ohio' by Crosby, Stills, Nash and Young) reflect a similar subjectivity as well. These songs are accepted first on an individual level and then collectively legitimized by 'taste-makers' as socio-political statements of value. Songs that appear in many 'best of' lists suggest the make-up of the canon of protest music are accepted and legitimized by audiences as statements of cultural value.<sup>12</sup> Despite the specificity of meaning in many of these songs (such as 'Strange Fruit', which addresses the lynching of black people in the American south, and 'Ohio', which confronts violent responses of the US government to protesters of the Vietnam War), many have been repurposed for social commentary on, or protest of, similar issues and historical events.<sup>13</sup> Such fluidity of meaning (such as a song's original meaning and the manner in which it can be repurposed), in combination with a song's stature as one of the 'best' (put forth by 'taste-makers' and

---

<sup>9</sup> "Rock List: Readers' Best Protest Songs," *Rolling Stone*, February 4, 2008, accessed October 24, 2014, <http://www.rollingstone.com/music/pictures/rock-list-readers-best-protest-songs-20080204/rock-list-protest-songs-1-creedence-clearwater-revival-fortunate-son-14581106>.

<sup>10</sup> 'Best protest songs' and similarly-themed articles and compendiums examined for this project include those published by 'taste-makers' such as Los Angeles Times, Rolling Stone, Entertainment Weekly, National Public Radio, PopMatters, TIME Magazine, New York Daily News and rock critic Dorian Lynskey. This is a readily available convenience sample intended to be comprehensive. All of these sources are included in Appendix A.

<sup>11</sup> For instance, 'Material Girl' by Madonna appears in a list of political and protest songs published by The Guardian in 2009, but in no other similarly-themed compendiums that I have yet encountered.

<sup>12</sup> Aside from 'Strange Fruit' by Billie Holiday and 'Ohio' by Crosby, Stills, Nash and Young, songs appearing consistently in 'best protest' (and similarly themed lists) include 'Born in the USA' by Bruce Springsteen and 'Fortunate Son' by Creedence Clearwater Revival, both of which address the Vietnam War; 'A Change is Gonna Come' by Sam Cooke, about civil rights and race relations in the US; 'Rockin' in the Free World' by Neil Young, confronting 1980s US conservative political policies with specific regard to the Gulf War; and 'American Idiot' by Green Day, confronting divisive US politics in the 2000s.

<sup>13</sup> For instance, the lyrics for 'Ohio' by Crosby, Stills, Nash and Young specifically refers to US President Richard Nixon's mishandling of Vietnam War protesters in 1970 ('tin soldiers and Nixon's coming'). 'Ohio' protests the National Guard shootings, allegedly ordered by President Nixon, at Kent State University in Ohio that resulted in student fatalities (as sung in the song's lyrics, 'four dead in Ohio'). Neil Young, composer of 'Ohio', has consistently performed the song in protest of similar historical events in the time since 1970—most notably, the Tiananmen Square massacre in Beijing, China in 1989, and during Crosby, Stills, Nash and Young's 2006 American tour, as a protest of US President George W. Bush's invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan. See Jimmy McDonough's book, *Shakey: Neil Young's Biography* (New York, NY: Anchor Books, 2003) 346; 633.

*Matthew Shepard, Music and Social Justice: Discourse on the Relationship Between Homophobic Violence and Anti-Gay Sentiment In Two Performative Context*

legitimized by audiences), suggests that the canon of protest music functions as a facilitator of dialogue. The absence of LGBTQ-related music in canonical discourse raises questions about societal values, messages in song lyrics that constitute social protest, and how all of this is reflected by the canon.

Songs about Shepard and the implications of his murder remain absent from 'best protest songs' and similarly-themed compendiums examined for this article. In addition to a wealth of Shepard-related songs by indie artists and bands, mainstream songs such as 'Merman' by Amos, 'Scarecrow' by Etheridge, 'Laramie' by Ray, 'Jesus is on the Wire' by Peter, Paul and Mary, and 'American Triangle' by Elton John, were recorded and released between 1998 and 2004. In the context of that time, and certainly since then, these artists have had access to large audiences. Yet, the absence of these and other songs addressing anti-gay sentiment and homophobic violence in 'best protest songs' and similarly-styled lists raises questions concerning the manner in which this reflects the values of 'taste-makers' and US society as a larger whole. Which specific characteristics, topicality and approaches to socio-political commentary in song lyrics constitute protest? Does the use of rhetorical devices and detailed lyrics legitimize such songs? Have Shepard-related songs confronting anti-gay sentiment and homophobic violence been inadvertently overlooked or intentionally ignored? Or, are the Shepard songs just uniformly 'bad' (a subjective determination) and therefore unworthy of inclusion in the canon of protest music? None of these questions point to solid, concrete answers. However, if canon ultimately reflects the values of popular music, which also reflects the values of society, then the question of why songs about Shepard and the implications of his murder are absent from canonical discourse must be addressed.

In his work on popular music, English, film, theatre and media studies scholar, Roy Shuker contends that "the canon embraces value, exemplification, authority, and a sense of temporal continuity (timelessness)".<sup>14</sup> Furthermore, Shuker acknowledges that critics attribute the "privileging of Western, white, male, and middle-class cultural work" to music represented in the canon.<sup>15</sup> As such, the absence of Shepard-related songs in the canon reflects the lack of dialogue in the US on the relationship between anti-gay sentiment and homophobic violence as an overall American epidemic. With regard to this point, media studies scholar Jennifer Petersen contends that with McKinney's and Henderson's imprisonments, "opportunities for discussion of the very normalcy of homophobia across the nation and in more urban and urbane locations were foreclosed."<sup>16</sup> That is, as Petersen suggests, US society on a large scale appears to have attributed responsibility for Shepard's murder entirely to McKinney and

---

<sup>14</sup> Roy Shuker, *Understanding Popular Music Culture*, 132.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> Jennifer Petersen, *Murder, the Media, and the Politics of Public Feeling*, 44.

Henderson: they acted on their own and have been punished accordingly, case closed.<sup>17</sup>

Societal dialogue on what Petersen terms the ‘normalcy of homophobia’ essentially floundered in the eleven years following Shepard’s murder. US culture on a large scale failed to address the relationship between anti-gay sentiment and homophobic violence—pejorative and often violent rhetoric such as ‘fag(got)’, ‘dyke’, ‘lez’, ‘gay’, and ‘homo’ in everyday language, popular music, film, television, as well as in political discourse and legislative processes. In the latter case, social, political and religious beliefs were frequently expressed in language opposing rights for LGBTQ people, including fear-inducing rhetoric on the ‘gay/homosexual agenda’, positioning LGBTQ people as a threat to conservative constructions of morality. In the aftermath of Shepard’s murder, debate in the US was (and still is, to some extent) greatly polarized as to whether or not a relationship exists between anti-gay sentiment and homophobic violence.<sup>18</sup> As a consequence, hate crimes legislation inclusive of those committed against LGBTQ people would not come to fruition until 22 October 2009, a little over eleven years after Shepard’s murder.

Lack of societal dialogue on issues pertaining to homophobic violence is reflected by an absence of discourse by popular music ‘taste-makers’ in ‘best protest songs’ and similarly-themed compendiums and, consequently, in the canon of protest music. If dialogue on the implications of Shepard’s murder is not facilitated by popular music ‘taste-makers’ on a larger scale in canonical discourse, then there is a need to examine where such musical dialogue is indeed taking place. The Gay and Lesbian Association of Choruses (GALA), an organization of choral ensembles, regularly performs songs about Shepard and the relationship between anti-gay sentiment and homophobic violence in a manner that is not reflected in popular music via ‘taste-makers’ and canonical discourse.

### **GALA Choruses and San Francisco Gay Men’s Chorus**

For the purpose of providing historical context, GALA was formed in the United States in 1982 by the San Francisco Gay Men’s Chorus (SFGMC). GALA functions as an umbrella organisation for international gay and lesbian choruses, with a specific mission of outreach and activism through performance. A significant component to such outreach, GALA is the biggest contributor of new and commissioned works to

---

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Keo Nozari’s 2013 article, “An Open Letter to Elton John on Enabling Eminem’s Hate Speech”, is a good representation of debate pertaining to the relationship between anti-gay sentiment (and in this case, rhetoric) and homophobic violence in US popular culture since the early 2000s. See Keo Nozari, “An Open Letter to Elton John on Enabling Eminem’s Hate Speech,” *HuffPost Gay Voices*, November 18, 2013, accessed October 24, 2014, [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/keo-nozari/an-open-letter-to-elton-john-on-enabling-eminems-hate-speech\\_b\\_4295158.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/keo-nozari/an-open-letter-to-elton-john-on-enabling-eminems-hate-speech_b_4295158.html)

*Matthew Shepard, Music and Social Justice: Discourse on the Relationship Between Homophobic Violence and Anti-Gay Sentiment In Two Performative Context*

choral music.<sup>19</sup> New and commissioned songs and multi-movement works about Shepard are often designed to simultaneously memorialize and address such acts of homophobic violence that result from anti-gay sentiment.<sup>20</sup>

In a performative context, the use of Shepard's name evokes his narrative and the public construction of his memory, which can serve as the basis for protest and social commentary on the relationship between anti-gay sentiment and homophobic violence in the US. Specifically, the remainder of this article will examine the case study of SFGMC and their 12 July 2012 *Love Can Build a Bridge* concert in Laramie, at the University of Wyoming, sponsored by the Matthew Shepard Foundation, a civil rights organization founded by Shepard's parents in the aftermath of his murder, in order to "replace hate with understanding, compassion, & acceptance".<sup>21</sup> Following a brief summary of SFGMC's history, I will examine aspects of this particular performance and address the findings of my work with the chorus.

SFGMC formed in late 1978, holding their first rehearsal on 30 October of that year.<sup>22</sup> Less than one month later, the chorus unexpectedly held their first performance on 27 November on the steps of city hall to protest the assassination of openly gay San Francisco city government supervisor, Harvey Milk.<sup>23</sup> This performance cemented SFGMC's commitment to outreach and activism on behalf of the LGBTQ community and paved the way for their work in the decades following. Aside from engaging with the larger LGBTQ community, SFGMC also consistently performs in 'red' areas—politically, socially and religiously conservative regions of the US not necessarily sympathetic to the LGBTQ community. Thus, audiences in 'red' areas differ from SFGMC's usual hometown 'fans' (as termed by many chorus members with whom I spoke). Emblematic of outreach in 'red' areas was SFGMC's

---

<sup>19</sup> Robert Mensel, "A Music of Their Own: The Impact of Affinity Compositions on the Singers, Composers, and Conductors of Selected Gay, Lesbian, and Feminist Choruses" (Ph.D. diss., University of Oregon, 2007).

<sup>20</sup> Among Shepard-related works, San Francisco composer David Conte composed 'Elegy for Matthew' with text by the late John Stirling Walker, commissioned by the New York City Gay Men's Chorus in 1999. Similarly, 'Matthew's Lullaby', commissioned by the Twin Cities Gay Men's Chorus (TCGMC) in 1999, was composed by former TCGMC artistic director Craig Carnahan, with text by New York poet Perry Brass. 'A Whitman Oratorio' by New York composer Lowell Liebermann was commissioned and world premiered by the Boston Gay Men's Chorus in 2008 in order to commemorate the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Shepard's death. Of special note is 'What Matters', a pop song originally written, recorded and released in 1999 by Los Angeles singer/songwriter Randi Driscoll. 'What Matters' was arranged by Kevin Robison, current artistic director of the Atlanta Gay Men's Chorus, and world premiered in 2004 by the Gay Men's Chorus of Los Angeles (with Robison as their artistic director at that time). In the time since its choral premier, 'What Matters' has entered into the GALA standard repertoire, as choruses in the organization continue to perform the song each year.

<sup>21</sup> "The Foundation's Story," *Matthew Shepard Foundation*, accessed October 24, 2014, <http://www.matthewshepard.org/our-story>.

<sup>22</sup> "About," *San Francisco Gay Men's Chorus*, accessed October 24, 2014, <http://www.sfgmc.org/about/>

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

Kevin C. Schattenkirk

*Love Can Build a Bridge* concert on 12 July 2012, in Laramie at the University of Wyoming. SFGMC's affiliation with the Matthew Shepard Foundation (who sponsored the performance) for a concert at the site where Shepard lived (Laramie) and studied (University of Wyoming) at the time of his death is particularly striking. The use of Shepard's name through sponsorship of the concert by the Matthew Shepard Foundation at the site where he lived and studied prior to his death suggests and attempts to evoke the narrative of his murder, a consequence of homophobic violence.

### **Concert Program Analysis**

In examining the song selections for SFGMC's *Love Can Build a Bridge* concert, none are specifically about nor inspired by Shepard. However, song selections such as 'True Colors', 'Love Can Build a Bridge' and 'Beautiful City', reflect an overarching theme of compassion and acceptance of diversity. Song selections reflect a performance aesthetic encompassing a wide variety of genres—American folk music with 'Home on the Range', jazz with 'Orange Colored Sky', contemporary classical with composer Ola Gjeilo's 'The Ground' and country with 'Love Can Build a Bridge', among other styles and songs. The program also values entertainment and musical proficiency, balancing humorous moments such as gay men playing with gender stereotypes on 'Mama I'm a Big Girl Now' (from the Broadway musical *Hairspray*) with songs containing serious messages. Stephen Schwartz's 'Testimony' is the most predominant example, as it addresses homophobic violence as manifest through self-destruction. While some songs address issues pertaining to anti-gay sentiment and homophobic violence, overall, care is taken to *not* provoke and alienate audiences. This is where GALA differs from pop music, in the sense that choruses appear to value accessibility as a crucial component of outreach and activism. For instance, the song 'Love Can Build a Bridge' (originally recorded by country duo the Judds) appears as the final selection of the concert, an anthemic plea for acceptance despite difference.

By contrast, musicians in popular music can risk making direct, provocative and confrontational messages about socio-political issues such as homophobic violence. For instance, 'Laramie' by Amy Ray attributes responsibility for the Shepard murder to anti-gay rhetoric and sentiment in religious, social and political discourses that strive to inform legislative processes, negatively impacting the LGBTQ community. Consequently, Ray risks alienating listeners with differing ideological beliefs. Conversely, a GALA performative aesthetic essentially embraces accessibility and outreach in song selections and in messages, striving to frame social commentary in a manner that does not alienate the audience. Thus, GALA choruses maximise their potential to promote sentiment of social inclusiveness to a wide audience.

### **SFGMC, Shepard and homophobic violence**

Most SFGMC singers surveyed came from rural, religious and politically and socially conservative backgrounds. This often served as a point where singers could ally themselves with Shepard because of perceived similar conditions he might have faced

*Matthew Shepard, Music and Social Justice: Discourse on the Relationship Between Homophobic Violence and Anti-Gay Sentiment In Two Performative Context*

in Laramie. As such, singers expressed that they ultimately moved to San Francisco, the 'gay mecca' as termed by some singers, because it appeared to be a 'safe' environment for gay people. With regard to such perceptions, the sense of community within SFGMC is highly valued. Singers always refer to one another as 'brothers', a familial term that underscores the cultivation of communality. Strikingly, inquiries about singers' individual perceptions, feelings and thoughts on music and performance often elicited 'we', as opposed to 'I', responses. That is, whatever an individual singer's perceptions of music and performance might be, the sense of community within SFGMC compels each singer to think and respond in terms of the entire chorus. Such responses indicate that this sense of community extends beyond the rehearsal space and the stage and into recollections, thoughts and feelings about the actual music itself.

With regard to the song selections for *Love Can Build a Bridge*, discussions with singers largely gravitated toward 'Testimony' by the American composer Stephen Schwartz. After SFGMC world premiered 'Testimony' in June 2012, many GALA choruses including Boston, Seattle, Portland and Philadelphia have accepted and performed the song as a statement on behalf of the LGBTQ experience. While 'Testimony' is not about Shepard, the song addresses the consequences of homophobic violence as manifest through suicide and self-destructive thoughts and actions. As such, many singers I interviewed expressed the necessity of performing 'Testimony' for conservative 'red' areas like Laramie, in order to remind audiences that self-destruction and suicide are forms of homophobic violence that result from anti-gay sentiment. Additionally, evoking Shepard's narrative (via concert sponsorship by the Matthew Shepard Foundation) allows SFGMC to challenge and shape discourse on the relationship between anti-gay sentiment and homophobic violence.

Individual experiences of the Shepard murder and its immediate aftermath varied. Some singers were part of SFGMC at that time, and discussions about Shepard and the implications of his murder were prevalent among chorus members. However, most singers came from rural, religious and politically and socially conservative settings, and were not part of SFGMC (or any other GALA chorus) at that time. Singers often expressed that the use of Shepard's name and narrative (as with the *Love Can Build a Bridge* concert) serves as a reminder of the violent consequences of anti-gay sentiment that continue to occur in the present. The intention behind evoking Shepard's narrative is to engage audiences in dialogue on anti-gay sentiment and homophobic violence that LGBTQ victims have suffered in the time since his murder. Furthermore, and with regard to 'Testimony' in particular, Bruce, an SFGMC singer, expressed that "the value of exploring sensitive subjects in an accessible way...is entirely valuable and appropriate in this situation". That is, 'Testimony' provides one perspective, with the intent of educating audiences, on specific conditions of anti-gay sentiment that result in acts of homophobic violence.

Because ‘Testimony’ was still relatively new and fresh when I initiated work with SFGMC, singers continually expounded upon the song’s message, relevance and the specific manner in which the lyrics are designed to evoke emotion. Most singers found ‘Testimony’ particularly difficult to rehearse because each performer connected uniquely with the emotional content of its lyrics. Some verses specifically address anti-gay sentiment (and rhetoric to various extents) and fear of alienation: “When they find out/no one will love me/I’ll lose my family/and all of my friends”.<sup>24</sup> Other verses address self-loathing for being ‘different’ (not heterosexual) from ‘normal’ (heterosexual) people and the resulting self-destructive thoughts (suicide as a form of homophobic violence): “Every day that I don’t change/I blame myself...today I’m going to hang myself/today I’m going to slit my wrists/today I’m going to jump off my building”.<sup>25</sup>

The intended impact of ‘Testimony’, as well as the whole of the *Love Can Build a Bridge* concert, reflects a performance aesthetic of singing accessible and melodic music, appealing to audience’s emotions and challenging thought processes about LGBTQ people. SFGMC’s approach to performing ‘Testimony’ represents an attempt to humanize the LGBTQ experience in an effort to evoke compassionate and empathetic responses from the audience. Thus, dual messages are communicated from the stage: the intended message to heterosexual audiences is that ‘this is what gay people go through’, and the message to LGBTQ audiences is ‘you are not alone’. Overall, the impact is designed to convey the LGBTQ experience to heterosexual audiences by highlighting both commonalities and differences, while projecting a sense of solidarity with LGBTQ audiences.

In response to the intended emotional content of ‘Testimony’, singers recalled hearing “sobbing”, “weeping” and “gasping” in the audience during performance. However, for SFGMC’s part, singers often humorously recalled pre-performance instructions by the artistic director, Dr. Tim Seelig: “nobody paid for your catharsis”. When asked to elaborate on their experience of singing ‘Testimony’, the singers explained that their approach was to simultaneously imbue the performance with affect while restraining physical expressions of emotion. Dr. Seelig describes this as a process of meeting the audience halfway, allowing listeners to respond to what they hear without prompting from the visible facial expressions of the singers onstage. As such, singers often attributed the success of ‘Testimony’—the sobbing, weeping and gasping emotional responses of the Laramie audience—to specifically following Dr. Seelig’s directive.

Generally, singers recalled that Laramie audience reactions to the *Love Can Build a Bridge* concert contrasted significantly with the usual reception of SFGMC’s hometown audience. Polite applause from the audience in the half-full theatre at University of Wyoming stands in stark contrast to consistently sold-out performances

---

<sup>24</sup> Stephen Schwartz, “Testimony, Lyrics”, *Stephen Schwartz*, accessed 24 October 2014, <http://www.stephenschwartz.com/testimony-lyrics/>.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*

and fanatical San Francisco responses which include rapt applause and standing ovations. The most common estimate among people within the SFGMC organization is that, in Laramie, there were 300 performers onstage and approximately 150 audience members in the theatre. Singers most commonly recalled that, though the Laramie audience was receptive, they also expressed a reserved appreciation throughout the *Love Can Build a Bridge* concert. Overall, such recollections are representative of the singers' standard perceptions of singing in other 'red' areas, to audiences not necessarily sympathetic to LGBTQ people.

Additionally, few singers recalled talking with LGBTQ audience members in post-performance meet-and-greet interactions with people leaving the University of Wyoming theatre. One singer rhetorically questioned why this might be the case: were the gay people of Laramie, as Bruce queried, 'not prepared to be present' at such a concert, and what type of statement does this make about the state of LGBTQ life in Laramie in the time since Shepard was murdered? Further questions arose as to whether or not the Laramie audience might potentially have been larger if SFGMC had instead been named San Francisco Men's Chorus (with 'Gay' absent from their name). While beyond the scope of this article, these questions warrant further investigation of audience perceptions of openly gay choruses, especially in 'red' areas, and whether such openness impacts the ability of choruses to draw larger 'red' audiences. Nonetheless, conversations with SFGMC singers largely indicate that singing to 'red' area audiences, such as those in Laramie, is a necessary component in outreach and activism.

## **Conclusion**

While this article begins to investigate Shepard-related music, three research frameworks—music and memory, emotion and affect, and social movement theory—guide further investigations into music that confronts anti-gay sentiment and homophobic violence. Specifically pertinent is the manner in which choruses such as SFGMC take responsibility for their role as agents of social movement, performing music that comments on and attempts to instigate, societal change. Ancillary to this is the manner in which singers perceive their individual roles within choruses that function as part of a larger social movement. Because the overarching concern here is where dialogue about the Shepard murder and its implications—the relationship between anti-gay sentiment and homophobic violence in the US—is indeed taking place (as this article asserts earlier, not in the canon of protest music), the effectiveness of choruses engaging in such dialogue with audiences is vital. While none of the Shepard-related songs in a popular music context have entered into canonical discourse by 'taste-makers', 'Testimony' has quickly become part of the GALA choruses' standard repertoire. In making 'Testimony' part of the standard repertoire, choruses essentially embrace the song as a necessary component of engaging audiences in dialogue pertaining to homophobic violence. Finally, the

Kevin C. Schattenkirk

relevance of music that comments on the Shepard murder, its implications and larger issues that pertain to the relationship between anti-gay sentiment and homophobic violence in the US is particularly fertile for future research.

## Appendix A

- Collis, Clark. "‘Give Peace a Chance’? ‘Fight the Power’? ‘American Idiot’? What’s the best protest song of all time?" *Entertainment Weekly*, April 6, 2011. Accessed October 24, 2014.  
<http://music-mix.ew.com/2011/04/06/protest-songs-revolutions-per-minute-protest-song/>
- Hinckley, David. "Top 10 political songs." *New York Daily News*, October 15, 2008. Accessed October 24, 2014.  
<http://www.nydailynews.com/entertainment/music-arts/top-10-political-songs-toplist-1.6232>
- Johnson, Reed and Deborah Vankin. "For politically aware songs, the 00’s were all for naught." *Los Angeles Times*, December 25, 2011. Accessed October 24, 2014.  
<http://articles.latimes.com/2011/dec/25/entertainment/la-et-1225-music-politics-20111225>
- Lynskey, Dorian. *33 Revolutions Per Minute: A History of Protest Songs, From Billie Holiday to Green Day*. New York, NY: Harper Collins, 2011.
- Martin, Michel. "Sound and Fury of Protest Movements" (transcription). *National Public Radio*, November 9, 2011. Accessed October 24, 2014.  
<http://www.npr.org/2011/11/09/142174282/sound-and-fury-of-protest-movements>
- Mellencamp, John. "News - Rolling Stone Magazine: John Picks His Favorite Top 10 Protest Songs." *John Mellencamp*. Accessed October 24, 2014.  
[http://www.mellencamp.com/news.html?n\\_id=1547](http://www.mellencamp.com/news.html?n_id=1547).
- "Rock List: Readers’ Best Protest Songs." *Rolling Stone*, February 4, 2013. Accessed October 24, 2014. <http://www.rollingstone.com/music/pictures/rock-list-readers-best-protest-songs-20080204/rock-list-protest-songs-1-creedence-clearwater-revival-fortunate-son-14581106>.
- "Say it Loud! 65 Great Protest Songs." *PopMatters*, July 15, 2007. Accessed October 24, 2014.  
<http://www.popmatters.com/special/section/say-it-loud-65-great-protest-songs>
- "Top 10 Protest Songs." *TIME Magazine*, May 3, 2010. Accessed October 24, 2014.  
<http://entertainment.time.com/2010/05/04/kent-state-40-years-later-top-10-protest-songs/>

## Bibliography

- "About." *San Francisco Gay Men’s Chorus*. Accessed October 24, 2014.  
<http://www.sfgmc.org/about/>.
- Bannister, Matthew. "'Loaded': Indie Guitar Rock, Canonism, White Masculinities." *Popular Music* 25, no. 1 (2006): 77-95.
- Hiatt, Brian. "Redemption Songs." *Entertainment Weekly*, October 4, 2004. Accessed October 24, 2014. <http://www.ew.com/ew/article/0,,708813,00.html>
- Hibbert, Ryan. "What is Indie Rock?" *Popular Music and Society* 28, no. 1 (2005): 55-77.
- Jimenez, Stephen. *The book of Matt : Hidden Truths About the Murder of Matthew Shepard*. Hanover, New Hampshire : Steerforth Press, 2013.
- Loffreda, Beth. *Losing Matt Shepard*. New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2000.
- McDonough, Jimmy. *Shakey: Neil Young’s Biography*. New York, NY: Anchor Books, 2003.
- Mensel, Robert. "A Music of Their Own: The Impact of Affinity Compositions on the Singers, Composers, and Conductors of Selected Gay, Lesbian, and Feminist Choruses." Ph.D. diss., University of Oregon, 2007.

*Matthew Shepard, Music and Social Justice: Discourse on the Relationship Between Homophobic Violence and Anti-Gay Sentiment In Two Performative Context*

- Nozari, Keo. "An Open Letter to Elton John on Enabling Eminem's Hate Speech." *HuffPost Gay Voices*, November 18, 2013. Accessed October 24, 2014.  
[http://www.huffingtonpost.com/keo-nozari/an-open-letter-to-elton-john-on-enabling-eminems-hate-speech\\_b\\_4295158.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/keo-nozari/an-open-letter-to-elton-john-on-enabling-eminems-hate-speech_b_4295158.html)
- Petersen, Jennifer. *Murder, the Media, and the Politics of Public Feeling*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2011.
- Reed, T.V. *The Art of Protest: Culture and Activism from the Civil Rights Movement to the Streets of Seattle*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2005.
- Sant Cassia, Paul. "When Intuitive Knowledge Fails: Emotion, Art and Resolution." In *Mixed Emotions: Anthropological Studies of Feeling*, edited by Kay Milton and Maruska Svasek, 109-126. Oxford, UK and New York, NY: Berg, 2005.
- Schattenkirk, Kevin. "The Road From Laramie: Musical Location, Rhetoric, and Relevance in Mainstream Popular Songs About Matthew Shepard." MA thesis, University of Washington, 2010.
- "The Foundation's Story." *Matthew Shepard Foundation*. Accessed October 24, 2014.  
<http://www.matthewshepard.org/our-story>.
- Shuker, Roy. *Understanding Popular Music Culture*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. London: Routledge, 2008.
- Tilly, Charles and Lesley J. Wood. *Social Movements: 1768-2012*. 3<sup>rd</sup> edn. Boulder, CO: Paradigm Publishers, 2013.
- Toynbee, Jason. *Making Popular Music: Musicians, Creativity and Institutions*. London, UK: Arnold, 2000.

