

Setting the Stage: The Selection, Programming, and Staging of Musical Entertainment at Pride Toronto

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Figure 1: Village Stage at the 2010 pride festival in Toronto

Pride festivals today are both political and celebratory in nature. These events commemorate historical protests by members of the queer and allied communities for equal rights in the United States (Stonewall riots of 1969 in New York City)¹ and Canada (Bathhouse raids of 1981 in Toronto).² In smaller towns they may involve a short parade or street fair, but in larger cities they can include hundreds of musical performances, a handful of marches and parades, and a one- or two-week schedule with film festivals, art shows, and dance club events. With over one million participants and roughly 300 musical performances each year, Pride Toronto is currently the largest pride festival in North America.³ Members of the queer and allied communities who attend the event each summer may hear anything from folk and country to rap and heavy metal on one of the numerous stages found throughout the Village in downtown Toronto

(the heart of which is located at the intersection of Church Street and Wellesley Street East).

Musical programs are sometimes aimed at subsections of the larger queer community, often differentiated by gender identity, biological sex, race/ethnicity, age, language, and other factors. For example, in 2010 there were programs aimed at the lesbian community (*Dyke Day*), the trans community (Transverse), queer youth (Fruit Loopz), and the black queer and trans community (Blockorama), among others. The processes for selecting, programming, and staging musical entertainment for Pride Toronto, and the political and cultural issues surrounding these decisions and subsequent outcomes, played an important role during the 2010 and 2011 festivals in Toronto. Some members of gendered and racialized communities felt marginalized by the Pride Toronto organization through their representation on

various stages, as well as their positions within the festival space, both of which may provide visual cues on the underlying power structures present within the organization and the community at large.⁴ Although the outcomes of these decisions are readily apparent for participants during the festival, the selection, programming, and staging processes occur months before the festival, out of sight from many in the community.

For the 2010 festival I conducted interviews with Mary Zondanos, the Arts and Entertainment Manager and permanent staff member of Pride Toronto in 2010, as well as Bryen Dunn and TK, both programming pride committee volunteer coordinators.⁵ Among the numerous items discussed during these interviews was this “behind the scenes” selection, programming, and staging process. Drawing largely from these interviews conducted before the 2010 festival, this article discusses the importance of music for the festival overall, the selection of musical artists for various programs aimed at subgroups of the larger community, staging these programs within the festival space, and the internal arguments over the separation of groups at different stages based on these identity factors.⁶

The Importance of Music at Pride Toronto

Before delving into the process of musical entertainment selection and programming, I began each interview with Zondanos, Dunn, and TK by asking a simple question: Why is music important to Pride Toronto? Given the rich history of protest marches, pride parades, and the rise of a huge, celebration-focused pride festival in Toronto, I was curious how the three people tasked with selecting and programming entertainment for one of the largest pride festivals in the world would respond to such a basic, yet vital, question. Zondanos stated:

Well, I think that it's important because it creates an experience. It's part of the celebratory nature of what Pride is about ... Our studies show that over 50% of people who attend the festival attend because of the entertainment component ... I think that any kind of celebration needs some kind of entertainment and music, especially in regards to the content of that music, as in who is producing it, and who's on stage. [Pride Toronto] can really be a leader as far as creating an awareness about queer culture, and more importantly, queer rights, and the striving for equal rights. So if you look at an artist like Cyndi Lauper that we have this year, she's not queer, but she's a queer activist. And having her perform at Pride Toronto draws so much attention from the world, that whatever issues we would like to make important,

we get all that much more attention for it, because we have an anchor artist...

So while we do have the parades – the [pride] parade, the dyke march, and the trans march – we also do have these spaces where people can interact and meet each other and have dialogue and participate and show their support for the festival. And [we] create opportunities for artists to do that, too. For a lot of artists who perform at the festival, it's sometimes difficult for them to get these kinds of shows in other venues. Not because they're queer, but because it's hard to get a show playing for two and a half thousand people in Toronto. (Zondanos 2010)

Zondanos brings up a number of key elements in her response. First, music helps in the creation of a celebratory atmosphere that enhances the public queer space of the festival. As a form of entertainment, music provides opportunities for members of the diverse queer community to interact in a more intimate setting, as opposed to the large crowds found at the parade and marches. It also provides an important opportunity for political discourse within the festival, both among the festival participants and between the festival and mainstream news outlets. As stated in her example of Cyndi Lauper, by choosing a well-known musical artist as the headliner, Pride Toronto can almost certainly count on mainstream media coverage of the event, and, more importantly, discourse on the pro-equality messages of Lauper's performance. In this way, musical discourse becomes a key element in disseminating messages of the queer rights movement in Canada and abroad.

When asked the same question about what role music plays at pride festivals, Dunn stated bluntly (with a bit of laughter): “The most important role.” When pressed to elaborate, he continued as follows:

I think it is actually because ... without music I don't think there'd really be Pride as it is known today. After Stonewall I think it was more about politics and protesting, and obviously I wasn't there so I don't know if there was music and stuff, but now it's become a party atmosphere – a party atmosphere with music. (Dunn 2010)

Dunn focuses on the importance of music within a celebratory “party atmosphere”, thus seeing its role primarily through the lens of entertainment. His response links the entire concept of pride festivals today with music, arguing that one cannot exist without the other. TK largely agreed with this aspect of his response, but went further with the important connection between music and the queer community:

Well, it's really the main part of the festival. It takes up more space than probably anything else. Although the parade itself is kind of the flagship piece in the whole pride week, it too is just filled

with non-stop music. Music is such a big part in the queer community anyway. So many musical forms and musical styles have developed out of the queer community ... it all just comes together in our festival. It celebrates all of that. Music – BIG thing! (TK 2010)

TK focused on this strong connection between the history of various musical styles and the queer community, arguing that there is a logical connection between this historical significance and the need for musical programming during pride festivals. Although Zondanos, Dunn, and TK each had slightly different arguments as to why music is a vital component to Pride Toronto, all three agreed that it was integral to the festival. Based on their responses, all three would argue that without the musical components, pride festivals would be unrecognizable to participants today.

The Selection of Musical Artists

Accepting applications and selecting artists for the festival begins months in advance, often in early spring. This process is important because the artists selected by Pride Toronto are more than just random entertainment for the festival – they are representatives of the queer community and its great diversity. Thus an artist who is queer and also a member of a racial minority becomes a face for this subgroup within the queer community, and his or her presence (or lack of presence) in the festival space is an important political statement for others in that group. Dunn explained that an early part of the application process for artists is to create a profile on *Sonicbids*, a website that is similar to *MySpace* where musicians can post songs and biographies of the artist or group. The artists are also allowed to choose musical genres (country, folk, blues, disco, etc.) that most closely align with their musical style. Zondanos mentioned a second component to the application process – the three programmers seeking out specific artists themselves:

As we are all music nerds, we all pay a lot of attention to what's going on, and we have a pretty good sense of who we'd like to see at the next year's festival. So there are some artists who we go after, there are other artists who come to us. We review everything all at once over a three- or four-month period, and then we program... While I am building the artistic vision I may have an idea of what we are going to do, sort of in December, and then we start reviewing all the material and who we want where and what program they might fit into, and we kind of take it from there.

Overall, Zondanos's comments reveal the involvement of herself and the programming coordinators in the process, and how their opinions and suggestions are important in determining who is selected to perform.

When asked about the application and scheduling process, TK discussed the difficulties they encountered while trying to focus on artist diversity:

It's really a challenge to try and make sure we have inclusivity and diversity on all of the stages, [and] at the same time making sure – Mary's really concerned that we make sure – we have quality performers at all times. And, you want it to be good, right? It's just trying to reach out and find people. There's a lot of outreach that goes on, that's for sure, to try and diversify the stages.

I asked if TK could elaborate on a stage program mentioned by Mary that was particularly difficult for scheduling a diverse group of artists. TK responded:

That's *Transverse*. That was the one. I spent three months researching that, and then probably another month trying to book everyone, and find everyone who was appropriate, and make sure we have trans guys, trans women, intersex folk, people from different backgrounds, two-spirited people, people of color – and it was tough. And we're still getting criticized. But you can't please all the people all the time, either. And I recognize that. I think we've put together a pretty good program. It's a nice little selection, given that we only had, like, five hours.

These comments demonstrate the difficulty of scheduling artists for each program, given the focus on diversity and quality. Although Toronto is a large city, one can imagine that finding a person who fits the multiple categories discussed above could be a challenge.

Possibly the most important element in the selection of artists to perform at the festival is their connection to the queer community. This does not mean that the artists must be members of the queer community, although that is probably the easiest route the artist or group can take in getting past the initial application review stage. When asked if being a member of the queer community mattered in the process, TK stated:

Oh it sure does. It's a big thing. It's a question on the application: What's your connection to the queer community? I mean, we can't just come out and say, "Are you queer?" That's just not a question that people can ask in this day and age. But we can certainly ask people what their connection is, and of course, we do have input from allies in our festival as well... People often choose to self-identify at that point and say "Yes, I'm queer," or "Yes, I'm bisexual," or whatever. And then if not

it's just a matter of asking that question ourselves, then well, what is their connection to the queer community? Why would they want to come and play at the Pride Toronto festival?

If artists do not self-identify as members of the queer community, either because they are not, or do not wish to identify as such on the application form, they can still perform during Pride Toronto if they provide examples of how they are allied to the community, and/or have been involved in queer rights activism and politics in the past. TK discusses this aspect in relation to the selection of Cyndi Lauper:

Like certainly in the case of Cyndi Lauper, she's not queer. But there's definitely a connection, right? She's got the foundation.⁷ A lot of people really like her, she's seen as an icon, and [she has] the True Colors Tour.⁸ So that's kind of a no-brainer with her. And with others it's the same kind of thing. It's like kind of look and see, have they done other queer events? Have they been reaching out in that regard? And we can sort of make the grade then. And then there's certainly lots of people we say no to as well, because sometimes I just don't see the connection.

When Dunn was asked if most of the people he selects for his staged programs are members of the queer community, he responded: "Yeah, I'd say with me personally I like to program exclusively that way." He also mentioned that he tends to focus a lot on local artists as well, trying to be supportive of Toronto musicians who may struggle to find gigs in the area throughout much of the year.

The Programming and Staging of Musical Artists

The selection of artists is the first key step in the process because it dictates which faces will be seen (or not seen) on stage, and who will act as representatives of their communities. The next two steps of programming and staging these artists are also important because they reveal how communities are differentiated, which communities are given entire programs (rather than individual artists), and how the commodities of time and space within the festival are allocated to these groups. After the application process was completed in 2010, Zondanos, TK, and Dunn had the difficult task of programming over 300 artists at 10 different stages/areas for Friday, Saturday, and Sunday (July 2, 3, and 4, respectively). Many of the programs were aimed at particular subgroups within the queer community, often differentiated by gender identity, biological sex, age, race, or ethnicity. Zondanos explained the rationale in this way:

Well, most of our stages are a general template, but there are some stages that we have that are for

a specific community group, or showcase a specific community group and [are] open to everybody.

The programs are not only scheduled for the group's entertainment, but they are also a way to highlight artists from that group for the rest of the festival participants. Artists selected for programs aimed at specific communities such as Dyke Day, Transverse, and Blockorama were chosen because they represented the people within these communities (female/lesbian, trans/inter-sex/two-spirit, and people of color, respectively). Rather than focusing on the genre of music, the programs were built primarily around the identities of the artists. Thus festival participants often heard a variety of musical genres within each program. Zondanos later stated emphatically that this does not mean that members of these groups are restricted to any area, and will not be found in only one area:

So, yeah, it definitely creates a lot of variety. And, though, we're not restricted to it, right? It's not like the only place in the festival where people in the trans community will be Friday at the South Stage [*Transverse* program]. This is the misperception that is created. That's not the case. Although we have these programs that highlight certain members of the community, we also filter all members of the community into the more general templated stages.

But is this separation really necessary? During the pre-festival interview with Dunn, I questioned him on the rationale behind separating groups based on various traits, wondering how this might affect the building of a community during the festival. Here is an extended excerpt of this portion of that interview, which was conducted in the Queen Street West (Queer West) district of the city (TR = author, BD = Bryen Dunn):

TR: Are you thinking specifically, in a lineup [for example], that this artist would be particularly for the gay male crowd, [and] you need to follow it by one that is good for the lesbian crowd...

BD: On the same stage?

TR: Yeah, or do them in different categories?

BD: Yeah, do them on different stages. So there is the one that TK programs, Central Stage, where it's all DJs and mostly, you know, it's going to be the muscle boys who go there. And that's just what they want, and they'll go and they'll stay the whole day. And then there's Dyke Day afternoon, which is all kind of women bands, and it attracts, caters to, lesbians. Then there's Blockorama, which caters to black people. Then there's Alterna-Queer, which caters more to misfits, I guess (laughs). I don't fit in anywhere. Drag, some people just want to go and watch drag. Trans ... I

think it's okay, but I would also like to see, like say you have a muscle boy set, then a lesbian set, then a trans set, like all in one stage. Who cares, right? But it, right now, it is separated in that way. So if you are looking for a certain type of music you know to look at this stage, and hang out there.

TR: OK. What do you think that means for building a community, if the music is specified towards different groups within the community? Like you say, if we did it all together then people would be mixing.

BD: Yeah, yeah.

TR: I just wondered your thoughts on that. If, even though we call ourselves this big community, we're still...

BD: Segregating?

TR: Yeah.

BD: No, I agree. That's why the closest I can see to being diverse would be my stage that I'm doing, the Alterna-Queer ... I could have electro, then hip hop, then metal, then maybe some sort of comedy thing, and then back to straight-ahead rock and roll, so it is like, if you go there, you can't really go there and say I'm going to hear house music all night long, or hear lesbian folk, or just drag queens. It is a mix, and that's probably what I want, and this year I'd be interested to see the trans one. I think the trans one is going to be quite diverse too, so one act to the next is going to be different. So I think it might cater to people that go with an open mind and just want to mix. And a lot of the events that happen in this part of town, where we are now (Queen Street West) they sometimes refer to it as Queer West...

TR: Yeah, I've heard of that.

BD: So it's here and a little down further, but all the events here are all mixed. So it's gay, straight, black, white, male, female ... it's just a mixed hodgepodge, whereas pride and I think, you'd have to ask Mary, Mary had the same idea: Why can't we just make mixed stages? But this is the way it's developed. And whether people want it, I don't know. Like I don't know if we could force it on them. Because, like the whole Blockorama thing had a controversy this year that their stage was being changed and they felt like they were being pushed out of the way and stuff, and then my thoughts are well, you don't have to go to that stage, you can go anywhere, right? But they want a special area. And dykes want a special area. And drag queens want a special area. But I don't know, to each his own I guess. You don't have to go to that stage if you don't want to. So as a community it's not really, ah, I see it as a little segregation in planning, in the way it's planned, but not in attending. So not segregating the com-

munity because anybody is free to go wherever they want to.

TR: Do the crowds represent that in your experience? In the past five years, if you're going to a set that's primarily aimed towards lesbians, is that who you're going to find?

BD: Yeah, and they're going to have other people there, but, yeah, predominantly the larger segment of the crowd will be that. And if you go to the DJ [stage], it's going to be all white guys with their shirts off, and then you'll see a couple girls, or you know, maybe one black person. It's just weird. I find it strange, but that's the community right now.

This longer portion of the interview reveals that although Dunn did not necessarily agree with the way the programs were scheduled on separate stages, he took part in this scheduling process due to the perception of what the larger community wanted for the festival. Although many in the community did want these separate spaces (as discussed in greater detail below), during interviews with participants at the festival I learned that not everyone in the community was fond of this separation of different communities and subsequent space allotment in the festival area. However, clearly the perception of the three entertainment programmers for the 2010 festival was that the larger community wanted this separation of entertainment.

Numerous subgroups within the queer community did ask for their own space within the festival. Their rationale may have been similar to why the larger queer community asks for a space within Toronto's downtown to host a pride festival. Physical and discursive spaces are vital components for legitimacy within the larger group, whether that is the queer community, a political domain or entity, or the larger society. In her book *Songs in Black and Lavender* (2010), musicologist Eileen Hayes discusses the use of space within lesbian music festivals. She describes the inclusion of a "Women of Color" tent at some of these events, which is an area created for black, Latina, Asian American, and Native American women. She states:

Participants describe being drawn to the tent because of the opportunities it provides to meet with other women of color. Moreover, it gives them a physical and discursive space that is separate from the madding crowds of white women...Although festivals are generally thought to be lesbian-friendly places of recreation, women of color often experience what one black woman described as "white overload". (Hayes 23)

In this scenario, participants wanted separate areas in which to congregate. Here, the factor was the race/ethnicity of the participants, and relates to the

experiences of those at Pride Toronto who supported the Blockorama stage programming aimed at the black queer and trans community. During an interview with Nik Redman, a member of *Blackness Yes!*, the organizing committee for Blockorama, he described the importance of such a space within Pride Toronto:

Personally, as a black queer trans man who has been out for 28 years, damn right it's important and necessary that the space exists. [It] does not mean that only one type of music or one type of person should be in that space. We have lovers, allies, [and] friends who may not identify as black queer or trans, but they are just as welcome in the space once they respect the fact that because of colonization, marginalization, and racism we have to set aside that space for our communities. (Redman 2011)

When asked if there is a risk of marginalization of this community if entertainment aimed at them is relegated to a certain area, he responded:

I think that just because that space exists, it does not mean that black queer and trans people should

be relegated to one area. We are not talking segregation here. I am forever encouraging Pride Toronto to program a variety of artists on all the stages.

Clearly Nik recognizes the need for, and advocates for the inclusion of, a separate space for the black queer and trans community. He relates the need for such a space to three interconnected issues: colonization, marginalization, and racism. Although he does not believe that the community should be restricted to this one area, it is still important that the space is available for them. The problem for the 2010 festival was not that the space was denied for the Blockorama programming. Rather, it was the location of the space in relation to the rest of the festival that created issues for many in the black queer and trans community and its allies. The program was placed in George Hislop Park on the very northern edge of the main festival area. Some in the community viewed this as marginalizing the black queer and trans community within the festival space.⁹



Figure 2: The 2010 Blockorama program in George Hislop Park

Conclusion

Music is a vital component to the annual pride festival held in downtown Toronto. With over 300 musical performances on ten stages in 2010, music at Pride Toronto provided opportunities for festival participants to interact and celebrate queer culture within a public space. The interview excerpts with Pride Toronto staff and programming volunteers included in this article provide greater details on the selection, programming, and staging processes for the festival, and reveal the importance of diversity and representation of selected communities for the musical entertainment. There are differing opinions on the need for separate spaces and programs for various communities within the festival space. However, for the 2010 festival, a number of programs showcased artists from groups differentiated by gender identity, biological sex, race/ethnicity, age, and other factors. Although this was in line with the requests from many in the larger queer community, the separation of programs provided the potential for marginalization of particular subgroups.¹⁰

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Notes

¹ See Martin Duberman, 1994, *Stonewall*, New York: Plume.

² The documentary *Stand Together*, created by York University faculty member Nancy Nicol, provides a comprehensive overview of the events surrounding the 1981 raids.

³ More information on the festival can be found at its official website:

<http://www.pridetoronto.com>.

⁴ The Community Advisory Panel Report from 2011 addressed these and other issues through an analysis of responses to surveys, interviews, and town hall meetings. See the report, pp. 59-74 and 84-92, for more details on the issue of marginalization.

⁵ For the 2010 festival, TK was also an intern, and considered "seasonal staff".

⁶ A special thank you must be given to everyone who took time out of their busy schedules to talk to me about musical entertainment at Pride Toronto. This includes Pride Toronto staff and volunteers, as well as festival participants.

⁷ Information on Cyndi Lauper's True Colors Fund can be found at its official website:

<http://www.truecolorsfund.org/>.

⁸ Information on the True Colors Tour can be found at its official website:

<http://www.truecolorstour.com/>.

⁹ See the Community Advisory Panel 2011 report, pp. 84-92.

¹⁰ The connection between musical programming and marginalization within the context of Pride Toronto is the focus of my dissertation, *Music and Queer Culture: Negotiating Marginality through Musical Discourse at Pride Toronto* (2012).

