THE VILLAGE PEOPLE: ANALYSIS, RECEPTION HISTORY,

AND CULTURAL TRANSFORMATION

By

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This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in Music in satisfaction of the dissertation requirements for the degree of Doctor of Musical Arts.

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Abstract

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The purpose of this dissertation is to examine the reception history of the four major songs of the 1970s disco group the Village People, namely "Macho Man," "Y.M.C.A.," "Go West," and "In the Navy," and their ironic transformation from gay-oriented pop pieces to iconic songs imbedded in American popular culture. I will trace "Y.M.C.A.," for example, from its beginnings as a camp entertainment targeted at the urban gay male audience at the height of the disco movement, through its transcendence to one of the most famous and, arguably, beloved pop songs of all time. This work will show how a tongue-in-check number parodying the sexual proclivities of gay men in the pre-AIDS era became a song regularly heard at major sporting arenas around the world while the work's original intent lay well beyond the "machismo" of the professional sporting arena. The irony is extraordinary, and, as I will show, the irony itself may be a part of the lasting appeal of the music of the Village People.

Gay males in New York City were the initial target audience of the Village People's music, but they were not the consumers responsible for the music's ultimate popularity and commercial success. Still, certain of the tunes have since taken on strong cultural significance within the gay community at large. The meaning of the song "Go West," for example, was transformed by the AIDS epidemic; no ironic evolution here, but merely an adapted secondary meaning brought on by changes in the environment of gay male audiences for whom this music, as well as the disco era itself, began to hold nostalgic significance. The 1992 cover of "Go West" by the British band Pet Shop Boys, an almost reverent remake, stands as a testament to the historical significance of this song and others by the Village People in gay culture.

Paradoxically, this "gay music" caught on furiously with the American disco-crazed populace, a majority of whom either did not understand its coding of parodied sexuality or chose to ignore it. The songs were intoxicating and their incredible success can be attributed to a combination of factors, including the cultural function of disco music, the marketing of the Village People, and the distinctive sound and look of the group. But above all, the songs remain extraordinarily popular today because of the music itself—the easy-to-memorize melodies, the verse-chorus structure, the hook appeal of the choruses, and the production and aural design of the records. In addition to tracing the reception history of these iconic songs, this dissertation offers a detailed analysis of the music and recordings themselves in an attempt to account for their lasting appeal.

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CHAPTER 1

Background

1.1 The Disco Style

The exact details of the founding of the Village People[1] have been somewhat blurred by many factors, including popular myth, the 1991 death of the group's founder Jacques Morali and inconsistencies in his own recollections prior to his demise, and the desire of both current and former members to distance themselves and the group from its gay roots to maintain their marketing appeal. However, the following timeline of events will at least assist in understanding the social and artistic climate which brought the Village People into being.

In the summer of 1977, as disco was sweeping across American airwaves and dance floors, the composer/producer team of Jacques Morali and Henri Belolo were enjoying the chart success of their group the Ritchie Family. It was the era immediately following two important American social movements: the so-called "Stonewall Revolution," a 1969 political demonstration at a gay bar in New York City's Greenwich Village which marked a major turning point in the modern gay movement; and the African-American Civil Rights and Black Power Movements. The renewed popularity of dance clubs in the early 1970s, primarily in Philadelphia, Manhattan, and San Francisco, offered gays and African-Americans a temporary retreat from their marginalized status as dancing once again became a powerful communal force.

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[1] The name of the group is simply Village People. However, as they are popularly referred to as *the* Village People by the majority of consumers and the media, the articled version of the group's name will be used in this dissertation.

Dancing had been an important social activity in several earlier periods in American history: for example, the nineteenth century, when ballroom dancing and various folk dance styles were regularly practiced by the upper and lower classes respectively; the "Roaring Twenties," when jazz-influenced dances such as the Charleston were popular in speakeasies, the illegal drinking and dancing establishments brought about by Prohibition, as well as famous night clubs such as the Cotton Club in Harlem; and the "Swing" period of big bands surrounding World War II. The nature of organized social dancing changed during the turbulent 1960s, however. Andrew Lamb, in his article on twentieth-century dance in the *Oxford Dictionary of Music*, states:

> Dancing in the 1960s revealed a gulf between the generations. The older generation danced ballroom and Latin, jive and the twist, whereas the younger generation (aged 16–25) focused on solo beat dances to express their individuality. The era witnessed the demise of the traditional dance halls (replaced by the discotheque) and the rise of club culture and the disc jockey who played the records for the clubbers to dance to.[2]

At a June 1979 conference on disco organized by the Atlanta-based Burkhart/Abrams media consultants and attended by managers of 17 disco-formatted radio stations from around the U.S., Dr. John Parikhal, a social scientist and consultant to Burkhart/Abrams, urged radio stations to continue playing disco dance music in response to waning interest in the genre. Prior to disco, according to Parkihal, "dancing was polarized between teenagers and Lawrence Welk. Now disco has closed the gap."[3]

This social dancing in nightclubs as a means of personal expression in the wake of the country's newly-found freedoms, both socio-political and sexual, fostered the

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[2] Andrew Lamb, with Helen Thomas, Chapter 7, "20th Century" in "Dance," *Oxford Music Online*. http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com (accessed July 18, 2008).

[3] Doug Hall, "Sex Rhythm Spurs Disco Pull?" *Billboard* 91 (June 2, 1979): 12.

eventual musical merging of black and white popular musical idioms: a postmodern amalgam of 1960s funk, soul, rhythm and blues, the Motown sound, and Latin and other Caribbean influences, with pop, "Top 40," and rock styles. With the characteristic rhythmic complexities of many of these predominantly African-American and Latin styles simplified in favor of a studio-created, more danceable, metronomic beat, the new club music became known as "disco"[4] (short for discotheque) and became almost exclusively associated with the newly interracial, urban dance scene.[5] In his article "Disco" for *American History Magazine*, Peter Braunstein writes:

> The revival of dance music began in mid-1973, when the African singer Manu Dibango's "Soul Makossa"—generally considered the first disco song of the 1970s—hit the pop charts. Disco became a verifiable, nationally recognized phenomenon in 1975, when Van McCoy and "The Hustle" went to the top of the pop charts, set off a nationwide craze for "touch dancing," and eventually sold ten million copies. With "The Hustle," disco's underground incubation period had come to an end. The disco was now a fully actualized concept, the term comprehending both the physical venue and the new music created for it.[6]

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[4] The term "disco" was allegedly coined by music journalist Vince Alletti in his September 13, 1973 article for *Rolling Stone* entitled "Discotheque Rock '72: Paaarty!"

[5] Craig Werner, *A Change is Gonna Come: Music, Race & the Soul of America* (New York: Penguin Putnam, 1998), 206; Robert G. Pielke, *You Say You Want a Revolution: Rock Music in American Culture* (Chicago: Nelson Hall, 1986), 189.

[6] Peter Braunstein, "Disco," *American History Magazine*, 50/7 (November 1999). http://www.americanheritage.com/articles/magazine/ah/1999/7/1999_7_43.shtml (accessed June 29, 2010).

Recording artist Gloria Gaynor, who achieved her own disco immortality with her No. 1 hit song "I Will Survive"[7] in early 1979 and would later tour as an opening act for the Village People, attributed the loss of rhythmic complexity to the needs of the white audience stating, "I think it was kind of hard for white people to get into R&B because the beat is so sophisticated and hard for the kind of dancing white people were doing. The kind of clearly defined beat that's in disco music now makes it easier to learn our kind of dancing."[8] White gay bars had traditionally featured black music and the styles which would meld into disco, distancing themselves from the rock styles played in white straight bars, and by the mid 1970s, disco music was the primary dance music of gay clubs. At this point, disco was still an underground genre as gay bars and some African-American clubs were the only places it could be heard before hitting the airwaves. Early disco hits by Gaynor and Donna Summer received their first major exposure in gay clubs.[9]

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[7] Similar to certain Village People songs, Gaynor's would become another disco hit to be embraced by gay listeners through adoption of a secondary meaning. "I Will Survive" became a gay anthem for perseverance in the wake of the HIV/AIDS crisis. The song gained similar stature among women as a song about female empowerment. In her excellent 2007 article for the journal *Popular Music* entitled "'I Will Survive': Musical Mappings of Queer Social Space," Nadine Hubbs discusses the song's status as a "classic emblem of gay culture in the post-Stonewall and AIDS eras and arguably disco's greatest anthem." Hubbs describes certain gay signifiers and resonances present in the song, among the most significant being the use of the minor mode to signify a move from tragedy to transcendence, rather than the more expected minor-major shift. Hubbs points out that there are many slower pop songs in minor keys, but few upbeat dance tunes maintain the minor modality throughout. Another key signifier is the "polygendrous, polyracial powers" of the female lead singer and her message of inclusive resilience.

[8] Werner, *A Change is Gonna Come,* 207.

[9] Neil Miller, *Out of the Past: Gay and Lesbian History from 1869 to the Present* (New York: Vintage Books, 1995), 427-28.

The gay liberation which brought about this need to dance as a means of self expression also gave rise to a new sexual freedom, and with it a blatant sexuality on the disco dance floor. Sex and sensuality became hallmarks of the majority of song lyrics created for this new musical style. Disco was generally a partner dance, although groups could dance together and have the same experience. Disco dancing was about sexuality expressed through close contact, sinuous body movements, and revealing attire; disco was at times as much about a sweaty, communal experience on the dance floor as it was about the rhythm and the music. In addition to social dancing and the influence of African-American popular music, the ascendancy of disco was hastened by new technologies, including drum machines, synthesizers, and synchronized turntables, the latter allowing for longer sessions of uninterrupted dance music to a non-stop beat; the role of the Hollywood film industry in promoting musical trends, such as the highly successful *Saturday Night Fever* of 1977; and the economic recession of the late 1970s, which encouraged many nightclub owners to hire disc jockeys rather than live musicians as a cost-saving measure.[10] By the mid-1970s disco was no longer merely a phenomenon of east coast urban centers and San Francisco, but had spread throughout the country. By 1975, there were an estimated ten thousand discos across the United States.[11]

Some saw disco as a revolt against earlier rock and roll styles of the 1960s, such as the overblown proportions of progressive rock, and protest songs with their angry

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[10] Larry Starr and Christopher Waterman, *American Popular Music: From Minstrelsy to MP3*, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 342.

[11] Peter Shapiro, *Turn the Beat Around: The Secret History of Disco* (New York: Faber & Faber, 2005), 292.

social seriousness. In his February 1979 article "The Dialectic of Disco: Gay Music Goes Straight" for *The Village Voice*, Andrew Kopkind wrote:

> [Disco] is the anti-thesis of the "natural" look, the real feelings, the seriousness, the confessions, the struggles, the sincerity, pretensions, and pain of the last generation. Disco is "unreal," artificial, and exaggerated. It affirms the fantasies, fashions, gossip, frivolity, and fun of an evasive era. The '60s were braless, lumpy, heavy, rough, and romantic; disco is stylish, sleek, smooth, contrived, and controlled. Disco places surface over substance, mood over meaning, action over thought. The '60s were a mind trip (marijuana, acid): Disco is a body trip (Quaaludes, cocaine). The '60s were cheap; disco is expensive. On a '60s trip, you saw God in a grain of sand; on a disco trip, you see Jackie O. at Studio 54.[12]

This may not have been a ringing endorsement of the style, but the idea that disco music emerged partly as a more mindless reaction to previous popular music styles was seconded by Dr. Parikhal who, at the Atlanta conference, suggested, "In the late 1960s, acid rock appealed to mystical thinking. Now people don't want to think at all. There are no protest songs in disco."[13]

The Ritchie Family had been part of an older, more closeted gay tradition in pop music: songs about men sung by women, often while draping themselves over attractive men, and songs about women sung by boys, but all aimed, indirectly or not, at gay men.[14] Gay men purchased these albums because they had few other options. Cher's disco albums fell into this category, if only for her outrageous drag-like outfits, and so did David Cassidy, the Osmonds, and the Jackson Five. (See Figures 1.1a and 1.1b.) Michael Jackson was 12 years old when he appeared as the lead singer with his older brothers on

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[12] Andrew Kopkind, "The Dialectic of Disco: Gay Music Goes Straight," *The Village Voice* (February 12, 1979): 1.

[13] Hall, "Sex Rhythm," 12.

[14] Richard Smith, "Back in the YMCA: The Village People," in *Seduced and Abandoned: Essays on Gay Men and Popular Culture* (London: Cassel, 1996), 21.

the hits "ABC" and "I'll be There" in 1970. Mrs. Osmond, in fact, may indeed have been wary of those who were buying her sons' albums since she insisted on having any crotch bulges airbrushed out of their publicity photos.[15] Morali, accordingly, felt it was time for a group featuring gay men singing about men, and he fully intended to do without the airbrushing. The new "mindless" disco style which reveled in sexual liberation and dancing fun, rather than serious issues, created the perfect musical environment for the emergence of a gay dance group.

Figure 1.1a: Cher, *Take Me Home*, 1979. Figure 1.1b: The Osmonds, undated photo, 1970s.

1.2 The Emergence of the Village People

According to varying accounts, in the spring of 1977 at a Greenwich Village disco (either 12 West, Les Mouches, or The Anvil, or all three, depending on the story) Morali saw either a group of men dressed in macho costumes, or just one, Felipe Rose, a go-go dancer who was dressed in an American Indian costume. It is not clear whether Morali

[15] Smith, "Cock Rock: the Penis in Pop," in *Seduced,* 47.

already had the idea to create a camp rock/dance act that would openly flaunt gay "macho male" stereotypes while not offending the gay audience, or if seeing men dancing in these costumes inspired him that evening.[16] The truth may be somewhere in between, but what is important is that Morali, even before a group was in place, secured a recording contract with the disco label Casablanca which was enjoying lucrative success with Donna Summer songs, and who seemed willing to take a chance on Morali's campy idea.[17] Morali and his business partner Henri Belelo engaged songwriters Phil Hurtt and Peter Whitehead to compose songs with suggestive, gay subculture themes such as "Greenwich Village," "San Francisco," "Fire Island," and "West Hollywood," all American gay meccas.

Morali arranged to have the songs recorded with studio musicians since, at this point, the Village People was still just a marketing concept with a freshly-coined name, and not yet an actual group. The studio recording musicians were joined by lead singer Victor Willis, whom Morali had seen in the Broadway musical *The Wiz*. For the album cover, Morali placed Rose, as the Indian, alongside models from the legendary California-based Colt Studio, best known for its work in gay pornography.[18] Dressed in costumes supposedly representing various gay visions of the ideal man, or stereotypes

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[16] Shapiro, *Turn the Beat Around*, 224–25.

[17] http://www.sonicnet.com/artists/biography/18551.jhtml (May 16, 2001).

[18] Colt Studio Group remains one of the largest producers of gay pornography. Founded in 1967 in New York City by well-known photographer James French, the company was later sold to John Rutherford, a former executive of Falcon Studios, another large gay entertainment company. Colt Studios eventually relocated to Los Angeles and then San Francisco and has expanded to a broad line of erotic products including online entertainment, videos, publications and apparel. By many estimates, internet pornography generates worldwide revenues in the range of $100 billion.

thereof, the images could also be seen as a spoof of gay pornographic iconography (see Figure 1.2a).

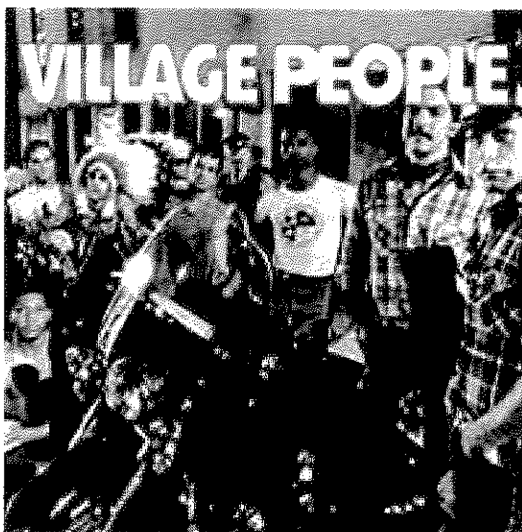

Figure 1.2a: *Village People*, 1977, featuring Felipe Rose as the Indian and non-performing models.

The resultant album, *Village People*, quickly became popular in the discos, but when certain songs started crossing over to pop radio and the album neared sales of 200,000, Morali and Casablanca Records needed an actual group to do promotional appearances.[19]

An ad was placed in trade papers for "gay singers and dancers, very good-looking, with moustaches," but in a September 25, 1978 article in *The New York Times*, Morali said he conducted impromptu auditions on the streets of New York stating, "Every time I was speaking to someone good-looking, I sa[id] 'Do you sing?'"[20] This less-than-artistic tactic led to a rapid turnover of members within the first few months, reportedly as a result of some disastrous live appearances while promoting the first album. Rose and Willis, who took on the character of the cop, were eventually joined by

[19] Shapiro, *Turn the Beat Around,* 224.

[20] http://gratuitous.com/village-people/articles/rhino.html (accessed April 16, 2001).

Alexander Briley as the G.I./soldier. Studio musicians were again used for the second album *Macho Man* (see Figure 1.2b), this time adding their voices to the trio already in place, but the first "permanent" group of six was assembled in time for that album's cover shoot. Morali had his cast—the Indian, the cop and the soldier were joined by Randy Jones as the cowboy, Glen Hughes as the leather-clad biker, and David Hodo as the muscled construction worker in mirrored sunglasses—and the Village People were on their way.

In 1978, the Village People beat out the Bee Gees for "Disco Group of the Year" at *Billboard's* International Disco Forum. This was accomplished after the release of just two albums and only one top-forty hit ("Macho Man" from the second album) and despite the overwhelming commercial success of the *Saturday Night Fever* soundtrack and its three chart-topping Bee Gees singles "More Than a Woman," "Stayin' Alive," and "How Deep is Your Love." Interestingly, the successes that would put the Village People in the annals of pop music history had not even been recorded yet.

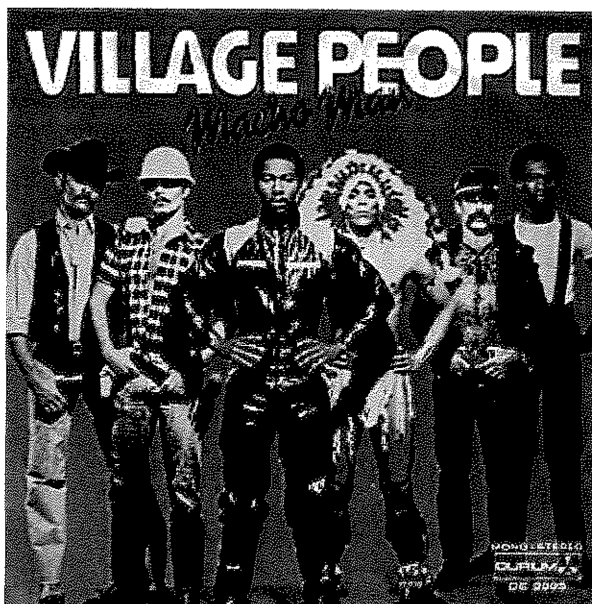

Figure 1.2b: *Macho Man*, 1978, featuring the first permanent group of six.

In the fall of the same year, the group released its third album, *Cruisin'* (see Figure 1.2c), and from that LP came their biggest single "Y.M.C.A.," the song which would become their signature, peaking at No. 2 on the U.S. charts and No. 1 in the U.K. The year 1979 included the release of the album *Go West* and two more defining songs, "In the Navy," which peaked at No. 2, and the less successful "Go West," which only reached No. 45 (see Figure 1.2d.). The Village People had one more modest success in 1980 with the appropriately-named "Ready for the 80s," from the 1979 album *Live and Sleazy*. The song managed no better than No. 52, however, and marked the last appearance of the Village People on pop music charts in any country. But it was "Y.M.C.A." that had set the tone for the Village People, one wrapped in a combination of marketing genius, sexual ambiguity, and "Who gets the joke?" daring.

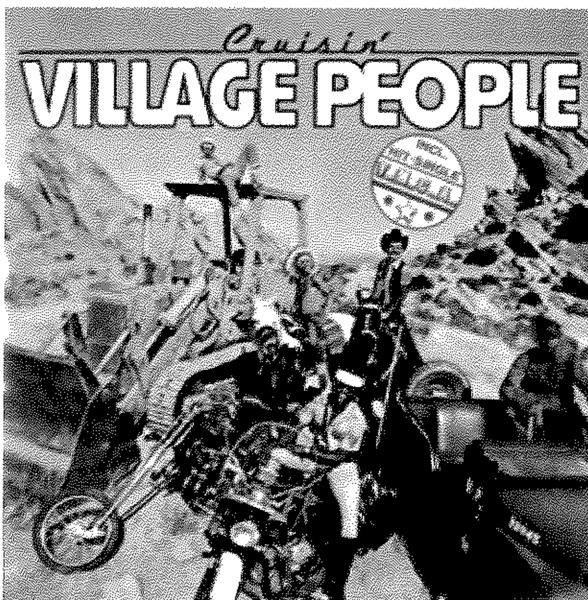

Figure 1.2c: *Cruisin'*, 1979.

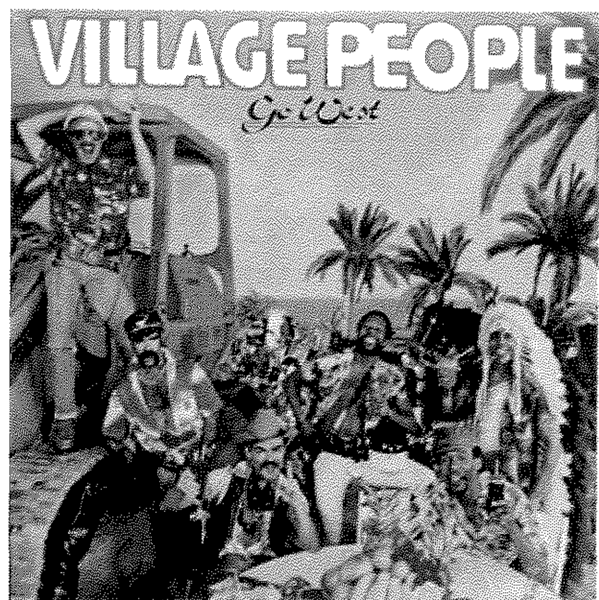

Figure 1.2d: *Go West*, 1979.

1.3 The Disco Backlash

By mid-1979, disco was rapidly losing its short-lived popularity, and the reasons for its demise are varied. The over-saturation of the genre on the airwaves and in the record stores may have simply brought about a desire to hear other types of music. "Antidiscomania," as the media called it, may have been, in part, not so much a rejection of disco music, but a need for variety and a return to the 1960s ideal of freedom of choice and expression.[21] Rock and funk music fans began to view disco as frivolous and effeminate, and objected to the heavy use of electronic drum beats and synthesizers rather than live performers. Some listeners objected to the perceived sexual promiscuity and illegal drug use, namely cocaine and Quaaludes, which had become widely associated with the disco scene. Feminists felt that disco reduced women to sexual objects, and reports of women offering sex or drugs for admission to exclusive dance clubs strengthened their case.[22] In major clubs in large cities, such as the famous Studio 54 in New York, bouncers only admitted fashionably-dressed clientele, celebrities, and their entourages. The increasing exclusivity of discotheques was ironic and self-defeating, given the genre's roots as a means of self expression for groups newly included in society.

At the 1979 Atlanta disco radio conference, Dr. Parikhal also presented a theory on the rock-oriented opposition to disco. Parikhal contended that rock had been aimed at young men who were afraid of sex: "The violent sex rhythm of rock reflects their frustrations. Women can't relate to this. Disco has a smooth sex rhythm which has a

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[21] Pielke, *You Say You Want a Revolution*, 191.

[22] Werner, *A Change is Gonna Come*, 210.

widespread appeal." Parkihal stated further, "Rock reflects teenage sex frustrations of people who are afraid they won't measure up sexually. There will be a great teenage peer pressure this summer against disco." Nevertheless, Parkihal boldly predicted that disco would sur vive for years to come, and that radio stations should rethink their plans to retreat from the all-disco format. Parkihal based his projection on his ideas that "reality is getting tougher and disco is an escape from reality" and that rhythm created a sense of social belonging. He stated "People don't feel close to anyone [in the 1970s]. Disco holds a tribal dance [sic] and the Village People is the perfect group for this."[23] Parkihal's predictions were wrong, of course, and while his argument that male rock fans hated disco because its rhythm lent itself to better sex and, accordingly, created higher expectations among their female partners might have been a stretch, his reference to the Village People's tribal-like rhythmic appeal was not.

Some have contended that there was also an element of bigotry to the anti-disco backlash. In the United States, the homophobic "Disco sucks!" reached incendiary heights when an anti-disco riot erupted between games of a double header at Chicago's Comiskey Park in July of 1979. Craig Werner writes, "The antidisco movement represented an unholy alliance of funkateers and feminists, progressives and puritans, rockers and reactionaries. Nonetheless, the attacks on disco gave respectable voice to the ugliest kinds of unacknowledged racism, sexism and homophobia."[24] By the end of 1979, the disco movement was essentially over and its music receded from the mainstream as new styles emerged from disco's musical shell and moved the listening public into the 1980s. For example, the British synth-pop group New Order and the American band The

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[23] Hall, "Sex Rhythm," 12.

[24] Werner, *Change is Gonna Come,* 211.

System both owe an allegiance to disco's dance beat. Further, as I will show in Chapters 4 and 5 of this dissertation, some disco songs would endure into subsequent decades, growing in popularity out of nostalgic reverence for the carefree disco era and as artifacts of new cultural contexts.

CHAPTER 2

Musical Analysis, Production, and the Village People Sound

It would be a mistake to categorize the songs of the Village People as merely unsophisticated pop music confections. These seemingly simple works became some of the most popular songs of all time, masterfully musical in their own right, perfect amalgams of melody, harmony, rhythm, form, and orchestral color. What musical elements made these songs "catchy?" Is their very lack of musical complexity an intrinsic part of their brilliance?

While each of the four major hits of the Village People are distinct, they share certain musical and structural commonalities which contribute to the longevity of the songs and represent part of the Village People's formula for commercial success. I have organized my discussion of the music according to five primary elements, which I have called "Village People Signatures." First, however, it will be beneficial to review the form and overall harmonic pattern of the songs. There are four basic pop-rock prototypes found in these hits as outlined below.

2.1 Comparative Analysis: Pop-Rock Harmonic Prototypes and Form

A straightforward approach to form, meter, and harmony in disco music was an important part of the style if the emergence of the genre is viewed partly as a reaction to earlier, more complex rock styles. Progressive rock of the earlier 1970s, for instance, had

been characterized by long forms with interludes and extended solo sections; inventiveness of sound and structure over melody; complex harmonies laced with modal mixture and added dissonance; and a penchant for odd time signatures. The standard meter for disco music was 4/4, a practical dance beat marked by steadiness and constancy. Selections from Pink Floyd's concept album *The Dark Side of the Moon* or even Queen's "Bohemian Rhapsody," for all their ground-breaking musical complexity, would have been difficult to dance to. For most disco music, a lack of complexity in form and harmony was the norm.

The song "Y.M.C.A." has a standard verse-chorus structure, preceded by a 14-measure introduction (a lead-sheet transcription is given in Example 2.1). The original introduction creates a suspenseful musical build-up, preparing the listener for the arrival of the first verse and the subsequent alternation of the verse and chorus. Interestingly, the first 8 measures of the introduction, which contribute most to the mounting anticipation, are rarely heard today. They consist solely of a series of sustained A-minor seventh chords over a dominant (D) bass pedal.[25] This is sometimes referred to as a "slash chord," in this case ii7/^5. In his talk "Absent Tonics in Pop and Rock Music," Mark Spicer refers to this chord as the "so-called 'soul dominant'" and states, "This distinctive sonority—which is best thought of as a close position IV chord over scale degree 5 in the bass, hence conflating both subdominant and dominant functions—is common to many pop and rock styles, but is particularly prevalent within the lush, extended harmonic

[25] My lead-sheet transcription below is given in G major, although the actual recording sounds closer to G-flat major.

language of 1970s soul music, hence its nickname."[26] These measures were excluded from the Village People's "Greatest Hits" albums and other subsequent compilations. Today the song is widely considered to begin with the six-bar fanfare-like introduction shown at measure 9 in Example 2.1 below, the brass melody of which also sounds above this signature soul-dominant harmony.

The verses and chorus are each 16 measures in length (8 plus 8), lending symmetry and balance to the song. In his article "Form in Rock Music: A Primer," John Covach distinguishes two types of verse-chorus form. The first is "contrasting verse-chorus form" in which different harmonic progressions are heard in the verse and chorus, and the other is "simple verse-chorus form" in which the harmonic pattern is the same for both verse and chorus.[27] Following this taxonomy, "Y.M.C.A." is, strictly speaking, in contrasting verse-chorus form as the chord progressions for the verse and chorus, while similar, are actually two different variations of the so-called "doo-wop" progression (I–vi–IV–V in the verse and I–vi–ii–V in the chorus). This progression was common in R&B music and reflects this disco song's roots in that genre. The substitution of ii for IV in the chorus of "Y.M.C.A.," accompanied by the distinctive chromatic walkdown in the brass (^2, ^#1, ^1, ^7, a four-note descent from the chord's root)—a clichéd

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[26] Mark Spicer, "Absent Tonics in Pop and Rock Songs," paper presented at the annual meeting of the Society for Music Theory, Montreal, October 2009. In lushly orchestrated 1970s soul and disco tracks, the upper triadic component of the soul dominant—the close position IV chord—is sometimes extended by adding a fourth pitch at a third above or below, resulting in either a ii7/^5 (as in "Y.M.C.A.") or IVmaj7/^5 (as in, for example, Earth, Wind & Fire's "September").

[27] John Covach, "Form in Rock Music: A Primer," in *Engaging Music: Essays in Music Analysis*, ed. Deborah Stein (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 71–74.

embellishment for minor chords often found in standards, Broadway music and other popular styles—provides a marked contrast at that point in the progression. Here, a spotlight, and perhaps a coded gay wink, shines on the words "everything for young men to enjoy/You can hang out with all the boys."

The arrival of the chorus is prepared by an exciting four-measure extension of the dominant (mm. 29–32) featuring a syncopated descending melodic motive (doubled at the lower octave by the bass guitar) that leads into the distinctive four repeated quarter-note horn punches on the soul dominant chord. This prolongation of the dominant teases the listener's mounting anticipation and makes the eventual arrival of the chorus all the more exciting.

Each of the four songs analyzed here ends with a gradual fade-out, a musical effect which adds to the songs' lingering appeal. In each case, the fade suggests to the listener that the song, and the dance, is not actually over. Rather, the fade keeps the experience of the song alive and encourages the listener to anticipate its return when they can experience it all over again. In the case of "Y.M.C.A.," the fade-out occurs on a continuous repetition of the chorus, giving the audience additional opportunities to perform the dance, while the soloist improvises on the words "Young man." The form of "Y.M.C.A." is summarized below.

FORM:
Introduction 14 measures (8 plus 6)
Verse 1 16 measures
2 bar pickup including hammer chords
Chorus 16 measures
Verse 2
2 bar pickup including hammer chords
Chorus
Verse 3
2 bar pickup including hammer chords
Chorus Repeat and fade

Y.M.C.A.

Intro

Am7/D

5

9

13

Verse

G

Young man

17

Em

young man

C

young man

21

D C/D D C/D G/D D G

young man

25

Em

young man

C

Chorus

29

D C/D D C/D G/D D Am7/D N.C.

Example 2.1 – "Y.M.C.A." lead sheet.

Example 2.1 – "Y.M.C.A." lead sheet (continued).

"Macho Man" (Example 2.2 below) utilizes a more clichéd pop-rock harmony, namely the I–IV–I–V chord pattern of the chorus. In fact, this pattern is so ubiquitous in pop and rock that it is beyond cliché. So, where "Y.M.C.A." is slicker with its chord progressions and the R&B-influenced doo-wop staple I–vi–ii (or IV) –V, "Macho Man" is built upon the more straightforward I–IV–V chords, albeit decorated by slippery chromatic neighbor chords A^{b}m7 and D^{b}13/7 in the verse (built on ^^{b}3 and^ ^{b}6 in F major, upper neighbors to ii and V respectively).[28] The chromatic-neighbor-chord motive A^{b}m7–Gm7 is foreshadowed in the D-minor introduction with the A-flat to G (^^{b}5–^4) "blues" melodic marker heard at the end of measure 5 into measure 6. The introduction and bridge are in D minor while the verse and chorus are in the relative F major which makes this another example of contrasting verse-chorus form, according to Covach's models. The chord progression of the verse is ii7 (Gm7) –V13/7 (C13/7) with the F-major tonic chord finally "emerging" at the onset of the chorus. The chorus is preceded by the two-measure "Hey Hey" hammer chord riff. Unlike "Y.M.C.A," the hammer chords are not a true soul dominant, but a V7 chord with ^3 (added 13th) in the topmost voice. The verses are 14 measures long and the "Macho Macho" man chorus is 16 measures (eight bars repeated) followed by a 24-measure bridge between verses (a four bar "body body" vamp reminiscent of the introduction repeated four times followed by an 8-measure brass interlude over the same D-minor groove). The bridge consists of the word "body" chanted alone twice, followed by previously unheard "action" phrases, namely "wanna feel," "gonna thrill," "don't cha stop," and "it's so hot." After the second verse, the fade-out again occurs over repetitions of the chorus creating the illusion that

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[28] My lead-sheet transcription below is given in F major, although the actual recording sounds closer to G-flat major.

the feeling and touching—the sex—continues even after the song has ended. The form of "Macho Man" is summarized below.

FORM:		
	Introduction	16 measures (8 plus 8 preceded by two-bar drum pickup)
	Verse 1	14 measures (12 plus two bar pickup)
	Chorus	16 measures (8 plus 8)
	Bridge	24 measures (16 measures of "body body" vamp [4 x 4]; and 8 measures of brass countermelody)
	Verse 2	
	Chorus	Repeat and fade

Macho Man

Example 2.2 – "Macho Man" Lead Sheet.

Chorus

13
C7 F B♭

23

Hey, hey, hey, hey, hey, Ma - cho, ma - cho man

F C7 F

27

Ma - cho, ma - cho man

B♭ F C7 F

30

[Start of the 24-measure bridge - repeated four times]

Dm

33

[end of bridge - brass countermelody]

37

8

(Last Time) D.S. and Fade on Chorus

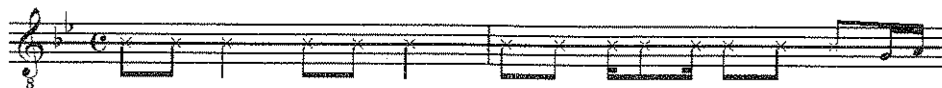
Example 2.2 – "Macho Man" Lead Sheet (continued).

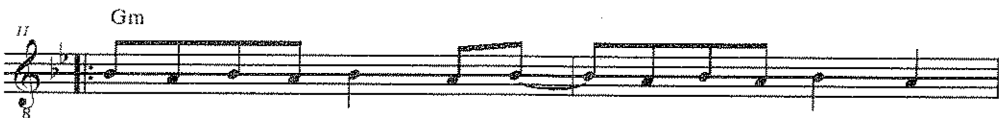
Contrasting verse-chorus form is also used in "In the Navy" (Example 2.3) which utilizes a major/minor alternation, but here the parallel minor is heard rather than the relative. The 8-measure introduction and the 16-measure verse are in G minor. The verse ends on a D dominant chord and is followed immediately by the chorus in G major, which consists of a I–ii7–V–ii7–V–I– (V) pattern. The G-minor introduction is highlighted by a descending walking bass, a lament bass reminiscent of Percy Mayfield's frequently-recorded song "Hit the Road Jack."

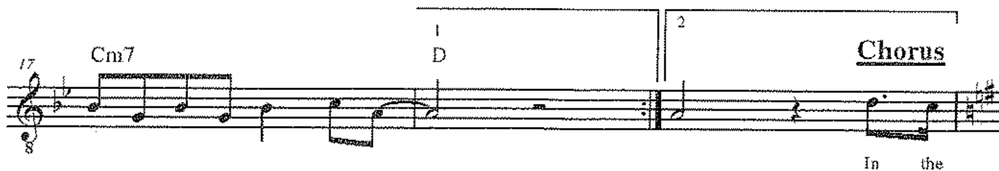
The fade-out of "In the Navy" occurs over a spoken, or shouted, chant to the phrase "They want you as a new recruit" accompanied only by hand claps, one of the trademark Village People musical devices which will be discussed below. The chant and the rhythm are aggressive, masculine, as if a military order were being barked. The elision of the 't' and the 'y' between the words "want" and "you" is performed as a 'ch' sound, a common, American, "everyman" dialect which lends virile authenticity. This counteracts any double meaning discerned in the text. (I will address the lyrics in more detail in Chapter 3.) The form of "In the Navy" is summarized below.

FORM:		
	Introduction	8 measures (plus two-bar drum and hand clap pickup
	Verse 1	16 measures (8 plus 8)
	Chorus	16 measures
	Bridge	4 measures (hand claps and chant)
	Verse 2	
	Chorus	
	Bridge	24 measures of hand claps, chant, counter instrumental melody, and improvised spoken dialogue
	Chorus	Repeat and fade

In the Navy







Example 2.3 – "In the Navy" Lead Sheet.

20 Gmaj7 Am7

na - vy In the na - vy

23 D7 Am7 D7

In the na - vy In the

26 G G/D C/D Gmaj7

na - vy In the na - vy In the

30 Am7 D7 Am7

na - vy In the na - vy

33 Am7/D Gmaj7 G/D D7sus

In the na - vy

36 Gm N.C.

they want you they want you

39 1 D.S. 2 D.S.S. and Fade 3 (Optional Ending)

they want you as a new re - cruit!

Example 2.3 – "In the Navy" Lead Sheet (continued).

"Go West" (Example 2.4) is the only one of the Village People hits in "simple verse-chorus form" as both the verse and chorus are heard over the same chord progression.[29] The song contains no bridge or instrumental break. The harmonic progression is evocative of Pachelbel's Canon in D with its recurring sequence of chord roots moving down a fourth and up a step (I–V–vi–iii–IV–I, etc.).[30] Other "classical music" elements exist in the Village People's music such as the lush orchestrations rich with strings and brass, the strictness of the dance meter, and the very escapist nature and sense of "artificiality" created by both disco and classical music. Many of these classical-music elements are attributable to Horace Ott, the arranger and orchestrator of the Village People songs who clearly understood how to effectively synthesize these musical ideas to create a fresh and inviting soundscape on the dance floor. In his article "A Fifth of Beethoven: Disco, Classical Music, and the Politics of Inclusion," Ken McLeod states:

> As in a discotheque, classical music is often enjoyed and appreciated in escapist settings by wealthy, well-dressed devotees. This parallel can be extended to similarities between classical and disco compositional style. Like much classical dance music, disco relies on rigid structural symmetry and formulaic rules of composition. As such, formal classical dances, such as the minuet or sarabande, are stylized and highly choreographed in much the same manner as disco formalized many dance steps and dances such as the Bus Stop or L.A. Hustle. Indeed, disco often invoked classical music through its incorporation of complex orchestral arrangements and elaborately virtuosic vocalizations as epitomized by Donna Summer or Diana Ross. Disco was heavily produced and presented a hedonistic,

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[29] John Covach, "Form in Rock Music: A Primer," 73. The V6 of vi heard in measure 20 occurs only in the chorus yet is not significant enough to warrant a "contrasting verse-chorus form" designation.

[30] Edward Aldwell and Carl Schachter refer to this common sequential progression as the "root position variant" of a "descending 5-6" sequence. See Aldwell and Schachter, *Harmony and Voice Leading*, 2nd ed. (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1989), 261.

> sartorial image similar to that sometimes promoted in classical music circles. Paired by their similar sonic and visual projections of wealth, leisure, and excess, disco and classical music often were a comfortable match. [31]

An 8-bar introduction is followed by a 16-bar verse and a 16-bar chorus. The introduction is an up-and-down journey in and of itself with its sequence of ascending chromatic half-steps in the background strings accompanying the brass melody (B-flat to B natural, then A-flat to A natural, then steadily creeping upward from F to F-sharp, then G to the dominant A-flat which accompanies the brass fanfare on that pitch). The lead vocalist riffs on "Wow, wow, wow" and "yeah, yeah," perhaps in anticipation of what might actually be found out west. The effect is actually quite theatrical: in the first two measures, the vocalist says "Wow, wow" as if to say "Take a look." The viewer peeks around the corner, but then sneaks back, the music dipping lower accordingly. Then, encouraged by the lead vocalist's shouts of "yeah, yeah," the viewer becomes more daring, slowly stepping around the corner to get a full view of what lies ahead. The tension mounts throughout the introduction as the promised land is revealed.

The concluding fade-out of "Go West" occurs over the recurring chorus with the lead vocalist improvising additional text and embellishments on the word "together," reinforcing the spirit of community inherent in the song. (I will discuss this aspect of "Go West" and additional meanings in the lyrics in Section 2.2 and in Chapter 5.) The form of "Go West" is summarized below.

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[31] Ken McLeod, "A Fifth of Beethoven: Disco, Classical Music, and the Politics of Inclusion," *American Music* 24/3 (2006): 359.

FORM:	Introduction	8 measures
	Verse 1	16 measures (8 plus 8)
	Chorus	16 measures
	Verse 2	
	Chorus	
	Verse 3	
	Chorus	16 measures then fade

Go West

Orchestral Intro.

Verse

D♭ A♭ B♭m Fm

To - ge-ther to - ge-ther to -

G♭ Fm B♭m E♭7 1. G♭/A♭ 2. G♭/A♭

ge-ther to - ge-ther to Go

Chorus

D♭ A♭ F7/A B♭m Fm

West Go West Go

G♭ Fm B♭m E♭7 G♭/A♭

West Go West

Example 2.4 – "Go West" Lead Sheet.

2.2 Five Village People Signatures

1. Participatory Chorus Chants – Primary and Secondary

Short, memorable choral responses in which the listeners, dancers, and audience can participate in the Village People's songs are an important part of their formula for success. These elements of audience participation are responsible, in part, for songs such a "Y.M.C.A." and well-known songs by Queen and other groups becoming sports anthems. In many of the Village People's songs, there are both primary and secondary chants, or "hooks," both of which act as structural bookmarks in the piece. The primary participatory chant is always heard at the beginning of the chorus and is, conveniently, the title of the song, with the secondary chant found in the verse. The most famous of all, of course, is the "Y.M.C.A." chorus which is made even more memorable by the "Y.M.C.A." dance. The song also contains the secondary chant on the words "Young man."

These hooks, both primary and secondary, are usually sung by the ensemble of the Village People, singers other than the lead, which encourages the audience to sing along and become part of the group, part of the community. "Y.M.C.A." is triumphantly sounded 12 times through the course of three choruses and "Young man" is used five times each in verses one and two, and four times in verse three for a total of 14 times, sometimes replaced by other fragments of text. In the fade, as mentioned above, the ensemble continues to chant "Y.M.C.A." while the soloist improvises a riff on the "Young man" chant. Here, the primary and secondary chants are merged together

reinforcing the message which most listeners clearly received: never-ending youthful masculinity, dancing, and good times.

"Macho Man" follows the same model. The primary chant is the famous "Macho, Macho Man" phrase which begins the chorus. The word "body," heard throughout both the verses and the bridge material, is the secondary chant and it is heard 16 times in the introduction and another 16 times in the bridge. The two-word phrase "macho man" is heard throughout the verse as well as the chorus, but the complete, double-macho phrase "Macho, macho man" is the primary chant of the chorus. It is heard twice in each repetition of the chorus for a total of four times, in addition to the chorus fade.

The primary chant in "Go West" is the title phrase heard at the start of the chorus, and the secondary participatory opportunity is the word "together." "Together" is chanted 16 times throughout verse one and the first half of verse two before being replaced by other text fitting the same rhythm such as "I love you" and "I want you." "Go West" is chanted throughout the chorus, of course, and is heard 24 times prior to the fade-out over which, as mentioned above, the lead singer improvises on the word "together."

"In the Navy" contains a notable twist on this formula. The primary chant is "in the navy" which appears on cue at the start of the chorus. It is the most repeated of any of the Village People's signature participatory hooks appearing 10 times in each pass of the chorus for a total of 20 times prior to the chorus fade-out. The secondary chant is not in the verse in this case, but rather in the bridge material and is the longest of any of the Village People's signature participatory choruses. The phrase "They want you! They want you! They want you as a new recruit!'" is spoken and accompanied by hand clapping in the same rhythm.

The secondary chants are interesting in that they both reinforce the main message of the song, and sometimes imply a secondary, sexual connotation if one is looking for any tongue-in-cheek double meaning. The "young man" of "Y.M.C.A." can refer to both the innocence of all youth, any man who might stay at a Y, as well as a young gay man who chooses the steam rooms of the Y to cure his wanderlust. "Body," the secondary chant of "Macho Man," speaks for itself. The text describes its meaning as a healthy, well-toned, admired specimen, and even mentions teasing, touching, and exploring. This is by far the most sexual of all of the Village People's hit songs, with the word "body" clearly implying sex and the regular repetition of the word reinforcing that message. But there is nothing homosexual about the meaning of the text. Women were attracted to men on the disco dance floor as well as gay men to each other. Accordingly, this song was an equal-opportunity permission slip to reach out and touch.

The phrase "They want you as a new recruit!" can be taken many ways as the secondary chant performed in "In the Navy." The U.S. Navy considered using this song as a recruiting vehicle, but the phrase could also be interpreted as a statement on the recruiting of gay men, the "they" being the gay community on a mission.[32] Still, the phrase is harmless as the word recruiting has a strong association with the military. Finally, the word "together" has a great deal of resonance in the song "Go West." Its significance and message of community morphed over the years from one of fun and adventure and a group migration to a sunny coast, to one of strength: stay together as a community ravaged by AIDS and go to San Francisco where a cure, perhaps, may be found.

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[32] Ed Vulliamy, "Everyday People," *The Observer* (November 12, 2006): http://www.guardian.co.uk/music/2006/nov/12/popandrock8 (accessed February 26, 2011).

2. Hammer Chords

I will not suggest that the music of the Village People should be compared to Mozart, Haydn, or Beethoven, but while the group's use of hammer chords is not a direct borrowing from the classical masters, it has a similar kind of resonance and impact. Hammer chords, rhythmic repetitions of the same chord for dramatic effect, serve to reinforce a cadence or to announce the arrival of a new musical episode. The latter usage is a Village People signature. In both "Y.M.C.A" and "Macho Man," hammer chords are heard in the measure before the famous choruses. In "Go West" they are heard in the final measure of the introduction, effectively leading the listener to the first hearing of the word "together" and at the ends of each verse as a segue back to the chorus. Hammer chords are also used in "In the Navy" in the middle and end of the chorus. In all cases, the chords are quarter notes, sometimes extended over a two-measure phrase with chords on beats one and three of the measure followed by three or four consecutive beats in the next measure, such as their appearance in "Macho Man," or as four accented beats over a single measure as in "Y.M.C.A," "In the Navy," and "Go West."

In most cases, the hammer chords are IV/^5 "soul dominant" chords adding a driving beat to a common disco sound. (The exception is "Macho Man" with its V 13/7 hammer chords.) This technique represents another element of classical music which binds that genre with disco music, as Ken McLeod described.[33] Keeping in mind the functionality of disco music, that it is, after all, dance music, the hammer chords also serve to excite the crowd, to get their hands and arms thrusting in the air. Their use is not unique in popular music, however. Indeed, big, punchy quarter- note hammer chords can be found throughout the rich tradition of 20th-century popular music, including Swing,

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[33] Ken McLeod, "A Fifth of Beethoven," 359.

Big Band styles, and 1960's pop music, and Motown. While their use may be rooted in tradition, hammer chords are nonetheless exciting, especially the way the Village People use them.

3. Hand Claps

Hand claps are another musical and stylistic Village People signature. They not only function as a percussive variation in the orchestral texture, but as another means of inviting audience participation. Hand clapping was a part of the disco dancing vocabulary as even the least proficient dancers were able to perform a simple step-touch, step-touch with hand claps on beats two and four. The Village People use hand claps in two of their four major hits either in the body of the song or as part of a percussive pickup. Most notably, hand clapping is heard throughout "In the Navy," on beats two and four of each chorus, as the accompaniment to the "We want you as a new recruit" chant, and in the two-measure pickup to the introduction. In both "Y.M.C.A." and "Go West" the device is again used in the choruses to emphasize beats two and four. Hand claps are not used in "Macho Man" which is the earliest of the hits released by the group, although the strong beats in the chorus are often punctuated by percussive effects such as snare or rim shots which often sound like human claps. Perhaps this musical element became a signature in later songs with a growing awareness by the composers and arrangers of the effectiveness of such participatory elements. A pair of hands is a musical instrument which every dancer brings to the floor, thereby allowing everyone to participate and be a part of the band just as they are when they participate in the musical chants with their voices. It is a

simple device, but a masterful hook drawing the listener in through multiple layers of fun (and easy) participation either by themselves or as a group.

4. Horns as Secondary Melody

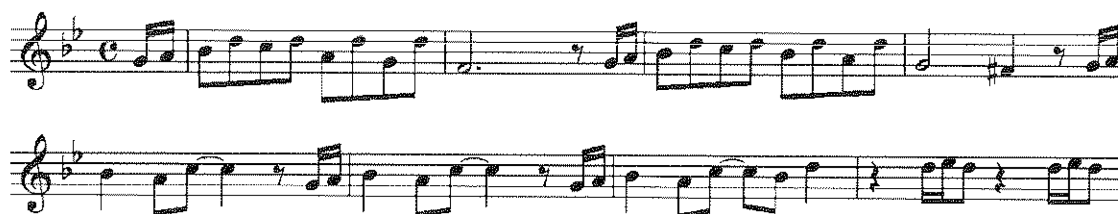
The rich orchestrations of these Village People hits, including the lavish use of brass and strings, add to their distinctive sound and appeal. But the brass section often plays more of a role when they are heard in secondary melodies which seem to either comment on or partner with the main vocal melody. In "Y.M.C.A.," the melody which appears at measure 8, what most listeners now know as the introduction, has become as familiar as the "Y.M.C.A" melody itself. Occurring over a continuation of the Am7/D soul-dominant which is heard in the first eight measures, it calls the dancers to the floor and is, arguably, among the most recognizable introductions in the history of pop and rock music (see Example 2.5a).

Example 2.5a. "Y.M.C.A." brass introduction.

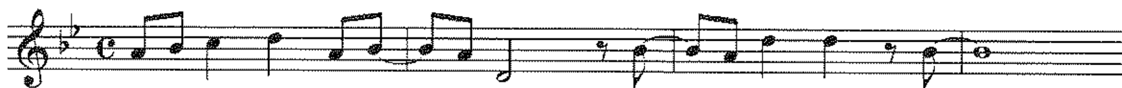
Under the first verse, the horns play a seductive countermelody as if seconding the notion that the "Y" is an easy-going, fun place to stay (see Example 2.5b.). This is heard with the first verse only, however. In verses two and three, the horns have effectively checked into the "Y" and become part of the vocal ensemble by offering pickups to the repeated tutti "Young man" chants.

Example 2.5b. "Y.M.C.A." verse one brass countermelody.

"In the Navy" also has a brass introduction, albeit not as readily identifiable as that of "Y.M.C.A." Nevertheless, the brass section announces itself and prepares the listener for the secondary role it will play, as if the brass section were the sailors in the Navy. Again, a countermelody is heard underneath the verse, but here it is heard in both verses (see Examples 2.6a and 2.6b).



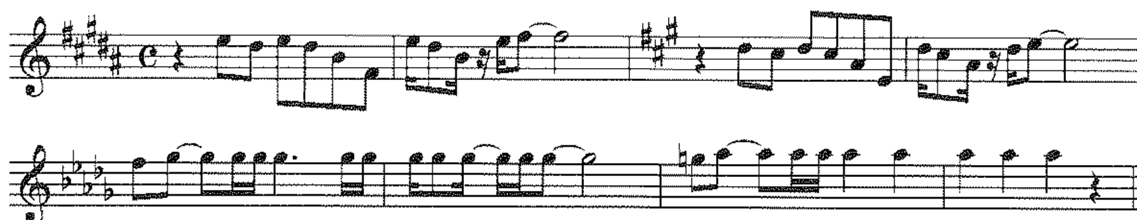
Example 2.6a. "In the Navy" introduction brass melody.



Example 2.6b. "In the Navy" verse brass countermelody.

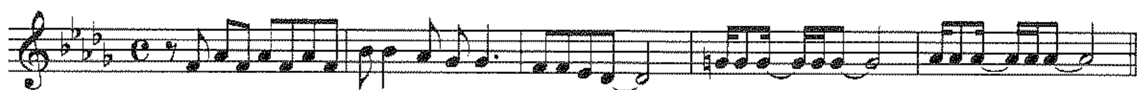
In "Go West," this signature device is heard underneath the vocal improvisations on "yeah" in the introduction as well as in both the verses and the chorus. The orchestration of the verses is primarily strings to start, clearly displaying the Pachelbel

progression, but the brass joins the accompaniment in the second half with increasing volume and fullness with each pass of the verse. The brass countermelody in the chorus adds an exciting commentary in the background, complete with trumpet fanfare licks as if to announce the arrival on the sunny west coast (see Examples 2.7a, 2.7b, and 2.7c.)



Example 2.7a: "Go West" introduction brass melody.

Example 2.7b: "Go West" verse one brass melody beginning at m. 5.



Example 2.7c: "Go West" brass countermelody occurring at the end of the chorus.

Finally, the brass is heavily featured with their own material in the last eight measures of the 24-bar bridge in "Macho Man." Here, it is not as much a countermelody as there are no lyrics being sung, but rather a very jazzy, macho "big band" type orchestral sound (see Example 2.8). Again, as this is the earliest of the group's major hits, appearing on their second album *Macho Man* in 1978, it may appear that Horace Ott, the

brass and string arranger/orchestrator, grew more innovative and daring with his use of these brass countermelodies. In later songs, he more fully integrated them into the texture of the vocals and lyrics through which the horn section became characters of sorts, part of the story of the song—young men visiting the Y, sailors in the navy, carefree adventurers leading the way west—rather than mere orchestral accompaniment.

Example 2.8: "Macho Man" instrumental interlude brass melody.

5. Spoken dialogue and improvisation

Two other devices common to the Village People hits are the use of spoken dialogue, whether rhythmic or freely improvised, and vocal improvisation, both sung and spoken. Spoken dialogue is used most prevalently in "In the Navy" in the "they want you as a new recruit" chant, and in the spoken vocals by the lead vocalist in the bridge consisting of "Who me?," "But I'm afraid of water," "Hey look man, I get seasick even watching it on the TV," "Oh my goodness," and "What am I gonna do with a submarine?"

In "Macho Man," the lead singer improvises vocal lines above the introduction (repeating the lyrics sung by the ensemble in a call-and-response fashion), the well-known "macho man" chorus (adding "yeahs" and a shouted "ow"), as well as in the bridge as the ensemble intones the rhythmic "body, body, body, wanna feel my body" text (text repetitions, laces with shouts of "baby, alright," "ow," assorted grunts and random "body" interjections). Interjections of "Well, well, well!" are heard by the lead vocalist above the introduction to "Go West," and at the song's fadeout he uses

previously heard "together" lyrics in a half-spoken, rhythmically free descant above the repeating chorus. This lends an effect of freedom and spontaneity which may be a comment on the lifestyle those heading west will enjoy upon arrival. This musical signature is not heard in "Y.M.C.A.," but in its place is an improvised physical response which became the famous "Y" dance.

Below is a chart summarizing the five Village People musical signatures I have discussed and the iconic hit songs in which they are incorporated. As the chart clearly shows, the signatures are consistent throughout the four songs, with the exception of the two missing elements in "Macho Man," the earliest of the hits. Interestingly, the missing signatures in "Macho Man" are the hand claps and spoken or sung interjections, the most improvisatory of musical elements. Again, the producers, composers and arrangers of the Village People's songs may have realized the importance of these two elements in the experience of participants on the dance floor. This would explain their inclusion in all subsequent hits.

Song	**Participatory Chorus Hooks**	**Hammer Chords**	**Hand Claps**	**Brass Secondary Melody/ Counter-Material**	**Spoken/ Improv**
"Y.M.C.A."	X	X	X	X	X
"Macho Man"	X	X		X	
"In the Navy"	X	X	X	X	X
"Go West"	X	X	X	X	X

2.3 The Village People Sound

Philadelphia was an important city in the history of disco music. "Philadelphia Soul," or "Philly Soul," was a style of R&B music popular in the early 1970s and noteworthy for its classically influenced orchestral arrangements utilizing large string sections and splashy brass. Many of the hits in the Philly Soul style were recorded at Sigma Sound Studios which was founded in Philadelphia in 1968 by Joseph Tarsia. An article on the famous recording studio on the website *jahsonic.com* describes the sound in this way:

> The core of the Philadelphia sound was not much different than most R&B records of its time with their driving rhythms and soulful vocal performances. The elements that made the Philadelphia sound so special were its great melodies and orchestrations which bordered on the classical. Strings, horns and layers of background vocals brought R&B music to a new level. It was not uncommon for a typical production to have, with layering, as many as 50 players.[34]

Philly soul was primarily a producer's medium as the trio of Kenny Gamble, Leon Huff (Gamble & Huff) and Thom Bell created the instrumental textures that came to distinguish the genre. The vocals were important as well and many of the acts featured distinctive, soulful voices, but the sonic elements that made Philly soul distinctive were the creation of the producers and engineers. The highly produced sound of the genre paved the way for the studio-created styles which came later in the decade, namely disco and urban contemporary rhythm and blues.[35] Notable artists who were associated with this style and sound included Billy Paul, Dusty Springfield (her 1971 album on the

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[34] http://www.jahonic.com/Sigma.html (accessed January 19, 2011)

[35] http://www.allmusic.com/cg/amg.dll?p=amg&sql=77:2635 (accessed January 5, 2011)

Atlantic record label was produced by Gamble & Huff), Wilson Pickett, Patti LaBelle, the O'Jays, the Delfonics, Harold Melvin & the Blue Notes, and many others.

Jacques Morali began his American career as a producer at Sigma Sound Studios and the Philadelphia sound undoubtedly influenced the slick aural packaging of the Village People. The group recorded at Sigma's New York studios, which had opened in 1976. The New York studio was considered one of the city's leading recording studios and was in demand by a number of recording artists of the 1970s and 80s including Billy Joel, Madonna, Paul Simon, Whitney Houston, Steely Dan, and the Village People.[36] The team responsible for the Village People's songs for the Casablanca label was lead producer Morali and his partner Henri Belolo, of course, but others contributed as well. Morali composed the melodies and is also credited with the rhythm and percussion arrangements on the *Village People* album on which "Macho Man" was released. There is no separate credit for rhythm and percussion arrangements on the *Cruisin'* ("Y.M.C.A.") and *Go West* ("In the Navy" and "Go West") albums. The vocal arrangements are credited to Morali, Phil Hurt ("Macho Man") and the lead singer Victor Willis.

The string and horn arrangements were by Horace Ott who had composed, arranged, conducted and recorded with an impressive list of R&B and pop artists including Nina Simone, Nat King Cole, Aretha Franklin, Roberta Flack, Carla Thomas, the Shirelles, Shirley Bassey and many others. He was also a band leader and had worked with such notable jazz musicians as pianist Count Basie and trumpeter Dizzie Gillespie. Ott brought his considerable experience in R&B and jazz to his arrangements for the Village People and meshed those styles beautifully with the Philly Soul sound, another

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[36] http://www.jahonic.com/Sigma.html (accessed January 19, 2011)

hallmark of which was jazz influences in its melodic structures and arrangements. Ott's brass licks for all four of the iconic hits are steeped with jazz band stylings such as quick, energetic horn outbursts of one or two notes, bent notes (allowing the pitch to bend downward at the end, especially on the signature hammer chords) and frequent brass solo features which would become a Village People "signature." The brass section is almost more important, and certainly more featured in these arrangements, than the strings, although the entire orchestral sonority is rich and full. The arrangements give the aural impression that the entire brass section, heavy on trumpets, is standing up for their solo licks, as they might have in the Basie bands.

The overall sound of the Village People recordings is bright, dominated by excited treble timbres. Certainly the bass sound and the driving beat is always present (it is dance music, after all), but it is the treble colors and sounds, the higher partials of the sonority, which generally take the lead in the Village People songs. When the strings do come to the fore in the orchestration, they, too, are often in a higher range, sometimes adding excitement such as at the end of the introduction to "Y.M.C.A" with the ascending flourish leading to the words "Young Man." At other times, the high strings lend a still-water sheen such as in "In the Navy" when ethereal, sustained chords emerge in the first verse and through the start of the chorus.

In "Go West," the strings are used in a brass-like way as they provide the quick, high interjections in the introduction. They are heard in a different role when they provide the famous Pachelbel progression in the verses. The bass sounds in the sonority are filled out by the baritone range of the singing, both by Victor Willis and the

ensemble, and the high brass instruments seem to partner with the vocals in a role which is often more than mere accompaniment.

Disco is often thought of as a producer's genre, much like its predecessor Philly Soul, and in fact the genre is sometimes criticized for its over-production. But it is that very quality, the extraordinary excess, the elaborate amalgam of musical elements—jazz, R&B/gospel-tinged vocals, pop, classical orchestrations, and bright-toned engineering—which created the unique Village People sound and formed the foundation for the lasting success and appeal of the music. The entire musical package, in fact, can be looked at as a microcosm of the group's overall commercial appeal as well as the entire disco experience: there was something for everyone, and it worked.

CHAPTER 3

The Lyrics

3.1 "Y.M.C.A."

For his April 1979 *Rolling Stone* article, Abe Peck questioned the group, its producers, and Casablanca Records' executives on the lyrics of the Village People's hits, to which Glenn Hughes commented, "Jacques makes the songs universal. That's another reason why the songs are so popular in Europe. You're dealing with very basic concepts that everybody understands."[37] But the songs were popular in America as well and if those basic, universal concepts included having a good body ("Having the kind of body always in demand ..." from "Macho Man"), having sex ("I'm sure you will find many ways to have a good time" from "Y.M.C.A" and "Ready to get down with anyone he can" from "Macho Man"), having sex with men, specifically ("They have everything for young men to enjoy, you can hang out with all the boys" from "Y.M.C.A." or "You can join your fellow man" from "In the Navy"), then Hughes was right.

Peck believed that the lyrics were broad-based enough for both gay and straight males to accept as "either gospel or goof."[38] Neil Bogart, president of Casablanca Records, stated, "Their songs are about the lifestyles of the late Seventies. They sing about doing what they want to do." Victor Willis added, "There's nothing in 'Macho

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[37] Abe Peck, "The Face of Disco: Macho Men with their Tongues in their Cheeks," in *Rolling Stone* 289 (April 19, 1979): 11–14.

[38] Ibid., 13.

Man' lyrically that's gay."[39] Willis was also right, of course. There was nothing *explicitly* gay in any of the songs by the Village People, which made it easy for listeners to simply dance to the beat of the music and ignore any gay coding or double entendres in the words.

The gay coding in the lyrics to most Village People songs is obvious. The song-writers, Jacques Morali, Henri Belolo, Phil Hurtt, Peter Whitehead, and Victor Willis, did exactly as they set out to do—write songs about gay men and gay sex, but without using the words "gay" or "sex." What was it that mainstream listeners either ignored, or missed, in these lyrics? Below are the lyrics to "Y.M.C.A."

Verse 1
Young man, there's no need to feel down.
I said, young man, pick yourself off the ground.
I said, young man, 'cause you're in a new town
There's no need to be unhappy.

Young man, there's a place you can go.
I said, young man, when you're short on your dough.
You can stay there and I'm sure you will find
Many ways to have a good time.

Chorus – Verse 1
It's fun to stay at the Y.M.C.A.
It's fun to stay at the Y.M.C.A.
They have everything for young men to enjoy.
You can hang out with all the boys.

It's fun to stay at the Y.M.C.A.
It's fun to stay at the Y.M.C.A.
You can get yourself clean.
You can have a good meal.
You can do whatever you feel.

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[39] Ibid.

Verse 2
Young man, are you listening to me?
I said, young man what do you want to be?
I said, young man you can make real your dreams
But you've got to know this one thing.

No man, does it all by himself.
I said young man put your pride on the shelf,
And just go there, to the Y.M.C.A.
I'm sure they can help you today.

Chorus – Verse 2
It's fun to stay at the Y.M.C.A.
It's fun to stay at the Y.M.C.A.
They have everything for young men to enjoy.
You can hang out with all the boys.

It's fun to stay at the Y.M.C.A.
It's fun to stay at the Y.M.C.A.
Young man, young man, there's no need to feel down.
Young man, young man, pick yourself off the ground.

Verse 3
Young man, I was once in your shoes,
I said, I was down and out with the blues.
I felt no man cared if I was alive.
I felt the whole world was so jive.

That's when, someone come up to me,
And said "Young man, take a walk up the street.
It's a place there called the Y.M.C.A.
They can start you back on your way."

Chorus – Verse 3
It's fun to stay at the Y.M.C.A.
It's fun to stay at the Y.M.C.A.
They have everything for young men to enjoy.
You can hang out with all the boys.

It's fun to stay at the Y.M.C.A.
It's fun to stay at the Y.M.C.A.
Young man, young man, are you list'ning to me?
Young man, young, man, what do you want to be?

"Y.M.C.A" is about sex in a steam room. Before the onset of AIDS, gay men commonly participated in anonymous sexual encounters in public baths and gyms, and Ys across the country were notorious meeting grounds for such activity. Not all of the lyrics to "Y.M.C.A." are loaded with double meaning, of course, but the following lines are suggestive, thinly-veiled references to sexual behavior: "They have everything for young men to enjoy. You can hang out with all the boys."; "Many ways to have a good time"; and "Do whatever you feel."

The lyrics to most disco songs were unimportant and, in some cases, lyrics hardly existed at all. For instance, Donna Summer's hit "Love to Love You Baby" consisted mainly of repetitions of the title lyric, and the Silver Convention's hits "Fly, Robin Fly" and "Get Up and Boogie" each consisted of only six words. Disco lyrics seldom addressed social or political content. (There are no protest songs in disco, nor any "rage against the machine" sensibility.) Few lyrics outside of the Village People's output offered any gay content at all, implicit or explicit. But the lyrics of disco were definitely about sex and sensuality and while the Village People's lyrics seemed innocent enough to most of America, and, in fact, less overtly sexual than "Love to Love You Baby" and other disco hits, the actual Y.M.C.A., Inc. did take notice when a song by the same title first appeared.

It seems logical that the organization's legal department was skeptical of a song about their historic name-brand sung by a group from Greenwich Village. Abe Peck noted that an official at the Los Angeles Y was quoted in *Melody Maker* as saying that the song's "homosexual overtones" had his people thinking lawsuit. That Y official later

denied the comment.[40] Peck had conducted an interview with Joe A. Pissaro, the executive director of the National Council of Y.M.C.A.s, then located in lower Manhattan, in February of 1979, expressly to get the Y's reaction to the new song. Pissaro insisted that any concern the organization had with regard to the song had only to do with intellectual property matters and potential trademark infringement and public confusion, and not with any perceived homosexual overtones. Pissaro stated, "I don't get the feeling that it is widely known that, if in fact this is a gay group, that it is [sic]. Nothing about the song bothers me." Members of the group had their own spin on the use of the name Y.M.C.A., with or without permission. "We have always dealt with positive things and a very positive place is the Y.M.C.A. They have always provided food, shelter and spiritual encouragement [and] that's why we decided to sing about it," said Randy Jones.[41] Victor Willis comments "Y.M.C.A." is a humanitarian song. It just deals with helping somebody. It's just a place. We could have used any name." Peck's response to that comment in his article was a somewhat disbelieving, "Uh-huh."[42]

Perhaps a similar song could have been written about "The Men's Room at the New York Public Library," but that has too many syllables and the tune may not have been as catchy. In any event, these comments were made when the group was deliberately trying to distance themselves from their gay roots, denying any gay subtext to their lyrics. Jones further claimed that the Y may have simply let any concerns rest once the song became a sensation and it was clear that the public heard it as a tribute to

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[40] Peck, "The Face of Disco," 14.

[41] http://www.classicbands.com/village.html

[42] Peck, "The Face of Disco," 14.

the Young Men's Christian Association, Inc. What is important for the discussion of the reception history of the song "Y.M.C.A." is that the Y now cherishes the song and considers it a true and honest celebration of their mission. In his interview with Peck, Pissaro stated that while he appreciated the attention this "out of sight" hit was bringing to the Y, his only concern was that the song did not truly represent the full range of services which Ys around the country had to offer.

Not all Y officials joined the "Y.M.C.A." juggernaut quite so quickly, however. In November of 1978, Robert Crispen, director of the Eastside Y in Tulsa, Oklahoma, wrote to local radio stations asking them to "give some thought" before playing the song. Crispen described the song as "kind of crude" and stated, "[the song] doesn't give an image that's anything like our YMCA or any of the Ys in Tulsa." Crispen's letter included a memo from Robert Harlan, executive director of the National Board of YMCAs, which outlined similar intellectual property concerns as Pisaro. Only one Tulsa radio station honored the request to drop the song. Steve Owens, program director at KTFX-FM, a Tulsa station which decided to continue to air the song, stated, "I can't see the lyric content as being offensive – it sounds like a commercial for the YMCA. After the group's appearance on Dick Clark's live show, we added the record the next day." Another Tulsa program director, Dave Michael's of station KWEN-FM, suggested that the controversy would bring more attention to the lyrics, which may previously have been ignored, stating, "It's basically a dance record. I don't think the public is listening to the lyrics of the song, but they will now."[43]

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[43] Ellis Widner, "Village People's YMCA Stirs Controversy Breeze in Oklahoma," *Billboard* 90 (November 25, 1978): 36.

Years later, in 1999, Rex Wockner of the magazine *Planet Out!*, struck by the irony of the song becoming a celebration of wholesomeness embraced by the Y, contacted Arnold Collins of the Y's Media Relations Department. Understandably reluctant to admit that the song "Y.M.C.A" had a gay subtext (after all, the song had been free advertising for Ys everywhere for twenty years by that point), he finally relented, but added, "these days, most people just consider it a fun song."[44]

Not everyone thought the song was harmless, though, or that its lyrics were thinly veiled. In his 1978 *Melody Maker* article "Village Idiots," Bob Gallagher described how a young friend of his was offered oral sex at a New York Y. In his article, he referred to the solicitor as a "YM" and railed against the group and their song. After his description of the encounter, Gallagher angrily continued:

> What's all this leading up to, I hear you ask? Well, I'll tell you, particularly those of you who've filed Village People's "Y.M.C.A." disco singalong under "Cute And Silly Tunes Jonathan Richman-style."[45] Cute, the tune most certainly is, and Silly, too—but Silly in a serious sort of way. For all the stress merrily placed by the Village People on the facilities offered at the Y.M.C.A., the "good time" they advertise concerns encounters of the above kind rather than bracing showers or wholesome cafeteria fare. Honest, my imagination isn't *that* depraved.[46]

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[44] http://www.planetout.com/news/wockner/archive/11191999.html (accessed April 2003). In 2009 Planet Out, Inc. was acquired by Here Media, Inc. The planetout.com website is now defunct and the URL redirects to www.gay.com, another website formerly operated by Planet Out, Inc. and subsequently acquired by Here Media, Inc.

[45] Jonathan Richman (born May 16, 1951) is an American singer, songwriter and guitarist who founded the group The Modern Lovers, an influential proto-punk band, in 1970. He is known for his unaffected, wholesome image, optimistic outlook, and upbeat lyrics.

[46] Bob Gallagher, "Village Idiots," *Melody Maker* 53 (December 9, 1978): 13.

3.2 "Macho Man"

"Macho Man" is the most overly suggestive of the Village People hits. The lyrics repeatedly address touching, feeling, exploring, teasing, and popping the body. These action verbs are strongly sexual. However, the text of verse 1 refers to working out at the gym and verse 2 discusses confidence and a "lifestyle," both of which imply a non-sexual bodily admiration, perhaps a "Chelsea Boy" type or a "yuppie" who has enough disposable income to join a gym and work out regularly.[47] Still, the suggestion is obviously there—it is certainly one thing to look and admire, and quite another to be asked to touch. The touching may not be sex, but it is at least foreplay.

More interesting about the lyrics of "Macho Man" is the title word itself – Macho. The word is of Spanish and Portuguese origin and defines a man who displays excessively masculine tendencies, one who is showy, tough, virile, and full of bravado. The word is not used to describe an everyday, average male. Rather, it has associations with excessiveness. A macho man is an exaggerated figure, a caricature of masculinity. Rarely is the word used with a serious tone. Instead, it now has a comic connotation, and tends to imply that one might be trying too hard or may, in fact, be pretending to be truly masculine. The word is often used ironically. If someone is referred to as macho, they

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[47] Chelsea is a neighborhood on the west side of Manhattan, roughly between 14th Street and 30th Street, popularized by gay men in the late 1970s and 1980s when Greenwich Village, the long-time gay neighborhood, became both too crowded and too expensive. A "Chelsea Boy" refers to a young, attractive gay man living in that neighborhood. The term is mainly used as a pejorative, referring to a gay man more interested in a bronzed, toned appearance than a lifestyle of substance. The term "yuppie" (Young Urban Professional or Young Upwardly-Mobile Professional) also emerged in the late 1970s and early 1980s, but fell out of usage after the stock market crash of 1987. Both terms may be too late to have a meaningful connection with the song "Macho Man," so the reader could substitute the terms "Village boy" or simply "looks-obsessed gay man of the 1970s."

may or may not be the most masculine individual. In the sexually-charged 1970s, it may not have made a difference—real masculinity, or pretend? Who cared!—but the word was certainly provocative and suggestive of sexuality, or a mocking jibe thereof. After all, even a parody of sex, even making fun of it, was titillating and liberating. Whether that macho man was straight or gay, there was no shortage of listeners who wanted to touch him.

The lyrics to the third verse are interesting as they refer to clothing and appearance, a gay-signified amalgam of western shirts, leather, chains, chest hair, and "Mr. Eagle." Mr. Eagle refers to the Eagle Bar, a historically famous gay bar on West 28th Street in Manhattan. After the Stonewall riots, the Eagle became a leather bar and "Mr. Eagle" is the winner of its "Mr. Leather" competition.[48] In 1977, when "Macho Man" was released, the neighborhood in which the Eagle was located was a dark, seedy area, ridden with gay bashings and other crime. Accordingly, the bar was known only to the population of gay men into the leather scene so the reference in the song was obscure. To most listeners in 1977, the mention of gold chains and chest hair could just as well have been Mike Brady, the dad from television's *The Brady Bunch*, and Mr. Eagle could have been a "prom king" from Eagle High, a distinctly more wholesome or safe image than the little-known west side leather scene. Only the gay listeners would have understood that reference, and perhaps not even all of them, as the leather scene was still on the fringes of the emerging gay culture. The lyrics of "Macho Man" are below.

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[48] Today, Mr. Eagle is New York City's representative at the annual International Mr. Leather competition held in Chicago since 1979. http://www.eaglenyc.com/mreagle_current.php (accessed February 16, 2011).

Introduction
Body, wanna feel my body?
Body, such a thrill my body.
Body, wanna touch my body?
Body, it's too much my body.

Body, check it out, my body.
Body, don't you doubt my body.
Body, talkin' bout my body.
Body, check it out my body.

Verse 1
Every man wants to be a macho macho man,
to have the kind of body always in demand
Jogging in the morning, go man go
works out in the health spa, muscles glow.
You can best believe that he's a macho man
ready to get down with anyone he can
Hey! Hey! Hey, hey, hey!

Chorus – Verse 1
Macho, macho man,
I've got to be, a macho man (yeah).
Macho, macho man,
I've got to be a macho! Ow....

Macho, macho man (yeah)
I've got to be, a macho man
Mucho, macho man
I've got to be a macho!

Bridge
Ugh! Macho..baby!
Body, body, body, wanna feel my body.
Body, body, body, gonna thrill my body,
Body, body, body, don't cha stop my body.
Body, body, body it's so hot my body.

Verse 2
Every man ought to be a macho macho man.
To live a life of freedom machos make a stand.
Have their own life style and ideals.
Possess the strength and confidence, life's a steal.
You can best believe that he's a macho man.
He's a special person in anybody's land.

Chorus – Verse 2
Macho, macho man
I've got to be, a macho man
Macho, macho man
I've got to be a macho! (all right)

Macho, macho man (yeah, yeah)
I've got to be, a macho man
Mucho, macho man
I've got to be a macho! All Right!

Additional bridge lyrics (recorded on original long-side version only)[49]
Body, it's so hot, my body.
Body, love to pop my body.
Body, love to please my body.
Body, don't you tease my body.
Body, you'll adore my body.
Body, come explore my body.
Body, made by God, my body.
Body, it's so good, my body.

Verse 3 (recorded on original long-side version only)
You can tell a macho, he has a funky walk
his western shirts and leather, always look so boss.
Funky with his body, he's a king
call him Mister Eagle, dig his chains.
You can best believe that he's a macho man
he likes to be the leader, he never dresses grand.
Hey! Hey! Hey, hey, hey!

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[49] Michael Mueller, ed. *The Disco Era*, piano-vocal anthology (Milwaukee: Hal Leonard, year unknown), 191.

Chorus – Verse 3 (recorded on original long-side version only)
Macho, macho man (macho man)
I've got to be, a macho man.
Macho, macho man
I've got to be a macho! (dig the hair on my chest)

Macho, macho man (see my big thick mustache)
I've got to be a macho man.
Macho, macho man
I've got to be a macho! (Dig broad shoulders)

Macho, macho man (dig my muscles!)
I've got to be, a macho man.
Macho, macho man
I've got to be a macho! Hey!

3.3 "Go West"

"Go West" is the least suggestive of all the Village People hits. A listener would be hard pressed to find any double entendre or sexually provocative connotations in this song, unless the phrase "take my hand" evokes titillation. Nothing in the song, however, refers expressly to men or women, whether straight or gay, so who exactly is holding hands with the male lead singer is left to the interpretation of the listener. The reference to loving each other is also distinctly non-sexual. It implies the love of brotherhood, of community and friends who share a common bond, as much as it does romantic love between either men or women. Rather, the text of "Go West" encourages the newly-liberated gay community to summon the courage to move beyond the urban centers of the east coast, much the same way the expression "Go West, young man," popularized by American author Horace Greeley, became a rallying cry for westward expansion and Manifest Destiny in the 19th century. The lyrics empower both men and women to find

their own manifest destiny, to be themselves, to teach understanding and acceptance, and to seek peace and happiness even in the suburbs across the Hudson River. For those in the know, it also expressly suggests that San Francisco was the place to go as that city was quickly becoming a gay mecca in the post-Stonewall era. The lyrics to "Go West" are below.

Verse 1
Together we will go our way, together we will leave some day.
Together your hand in my hand, together we will make the plans.
Together we will fly so high, together tell our friends goodbye.
Together we will start life new, together this is what we'll do.

Chorus

Go west, life is peaceful there.
Go west, lots of open air.
Go west, to begin life new.
Go west, this is what we'll do.
Go west, sun in winter time.
Go west, we will do just fine.
Go west, where the skies are blue .
Go west, this and more we'll do.

Verse 2
Together we will love the beach, together we will learn and teach.
Together change our pace of life, together we will work and strive.
I love you, I know you love me; I want you happy and carefree.
So that's why I have no protest when you say you want to go west.

Chorus (same as chorus after verse 1)

Verse 3
I know that there are many ways to live there in the sun or shade.
Together we will find a place to settle down and live with the space
without the busy pace back east, the hustling, rustling of the feet,
I know I'm ready to leave too, so this is what we're going to do.

Chorus (repeat and fade)

3.4 "In the Navy"

The U.S. Navy clearly did not get the irony behind "In the Navy," a song which was poking fun at the "macho" bravura of the military and the fact that there were plenty of closeted gay men serving in the armed services. An openly gay man was not allowed to be a member of any branch of the U.S. military.[50] The Navy, however, much like the Y, has clearly benefited from this campy spoof and, in fact, wanted to use the song in an ad campaign shortly after its release. The navy even allowed the Village People to film their video of the song on an actual warship based in San Diego. After tax-payer complaints about the use of government property for such purposes, especially for this controversial group, the navy did not proceed with the campaign, but the group's music video for the song was shot on the USS Reasoner complete with the crew in the background.[51]

The mildly suggestive gay coding in the lyrics includes lines such as "where can you find pleasure?" and "Join your fellow man." The phrase "your team" could easily be interpreted as "whose team do you play for?" meaning "are you straight or gay?" These highly veiled references were lost on most listeners other than those seeking the double meanings, such as that found in the word "seamen" in verse 2 which can be heard as a double entendre for the word "semen." The constant repetition of the phrase "They want you as a new recruit" was heard by some as a recruiting chant not only for the navy, but for the gay community. A "new recruit" could be a new navy seaman as well as a young gay man newly out of the closet and joining the gay community. But again, there is nothing overtly sexual

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[50] The "Don't Ask Don't Tell" policy with regard to gay men and women serving in the U.S. military was instituted in 1993 by the Clinton administration. It was overturned by Congress in 2010 paving the way for openly gay citizens to serve in the military.

[51] Ed Vulliamy, "Everyday People."

about the text, so for most listeners it was safe and simply fun to dance to. The lyrics to "In the Navy" are below.

Verse 1
Where can you find pleasure,
Search the world for treasure,
Learn science technology?
Where can you begin to
Make your dreams all come true
On the land or on the sea?
Where can you learn to fly,
Play in sports and skin dive,
Study oceanography?
Sign up for the big band
Or sit in the grandstand
When your team and others meet.

Chorus
In the navy,
Yes, you can sail the seven seas.
In the navy,
Yes, you can put your mind at ease.
In the navy,
Come on now, people, make a stand.
In the navy. In the navy.
Can't you see we need a hand.
In the navy,
Come on, protect the motherland.
In the navy,
Come on and join your fellow man.
In the navy,
Come on people, and make a stand
In the navy, in the navy, in the navy (in the navy).

Bridge
They want you, they want you
They want you as a new recruit.

Verse 2
If you like adventure,
Don't you wait to enter
The recruiting office fast.
Don't you hesitate,
There is no need to wait;
They're signing up new seamen fast.
Maybe you are too young
To join up today, but
Don't you worry 'bout a thing.
For I'm sure there will be
Always the good navy
Protecting the land and sea.

Chorus (same as chorus after verse 1)

Bridge (repeat and fade)
They want you, they want you
They want you as a new recruit.
  Who me?
They want you, they want you
They want you as a new recruit.
  But, but, but I'm afraid of water.
  Hey, hey look
  Man, I get seasick even watchin' it on TV!
They want you, they want you in the navy.
  Oh my goodness.
  What am I gonna do in a submarine?
They want you, they want you in the navy.

CHAPTER 4

Reception History

4.1 Critical and Popular Reception

From the sometimes hazy mass of details, as found in various historical sources, came one of the most intriguing pop-culture phenomenons of our time. Jacques Morali set out to form a gay dance/pop group because the time was right for such an ensemble to be accepted, at least by the burgeoning gay music-buying public. Again, the image Morali wanted to project played along with the new "masculinism" in American gay culture.[52] As gay men's visibility increased in the post-Stonewall years, many sought a new direction and a break from the old stereotypes of effeminacy by looking and acting like their ideal (heterosexual) fantasy figures—the hunk with mirrored-shades, the guy in the military uniform, the cop, the cowboy, and so on.

But early on in the group's existence, even before "Y.M.C.A." began climbing the charts, it was clear that the Village People were appealing not just to gay audiences, but to mainstream America—and to Great Britain, too, on whose charts the Village People first appeared, and where they would remain popular after the demise of disco in the U.S. However, most fans of these new songs were not hip to the gay subtexts of the lyrics. They were simply responding to the music itself, and to sexy men singing fresh, fun, catchy tunes. They were also responding to the "look" and the packaging of the group:

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[52] Smith, "Back in the Y.M.C.A.", 21.

plaid shirts, tight-fitting, faded jeans, and moustaches became the look women wanted and men were more than happy to oblige. It did not matter that this was, supposedly, a gay fantasy ideal, a parody, caricatures of masculine, heterosexual types. It could also be seen, perhaps, as a parody, a spoof, on the sometimes outrageous, visual excesses of the glam rock bands such as Kiss, David Bowie, and Alice Cooper which often embraced androgynous, effeminate personas.

Still, some critics simply saw everything about the group, the visuals and the lyrics, as gay. Bob Gallagher, in his 1978 "Village Idiots" article mentioned above, dismissively described the Village People characters as "the butch end of the gay spectrum, dig?" Gallagher sarcastically continued, "Indeed, a couple of singles before 'Y.M.C.A.,' Village People nearly made the Top 30 with a song called 'Macho Man.' Hey! There's an idea for a follow-up, a sort of 'Y.M.C.A.' sequel. That's it! 'Y.M.M.C.A.'"[53]

In an October 1978 *Rolling Stone* article, Glenn Hughes (the "biker") said that girls were attracted to the Village People "because we're six humpy guys and they get off on the sex we're selling."[54] Apparently those same mainstream-American girls had not read Guy Trebay's March 27, 1978 review of the group in *The Village Voice* in which he referred to them as "a faggot high school band" which is just as well.[55] The more records they sold, and the clearer it became that the Village People were not necessarily being

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[53] Gallagher, "Village Idiots," 13.

[54]Ken Emerson, "Machomania: The Village People: America's Male Ideal?" *Rolling Stone* 275 (October 5, 1978): 30.

[55] Guy Trebay, "Riffs: How Macho is that Doggie in the Disco?" *The Village Voice* 23 (March 27, 1978): 47.

perceived by most listeners as a "gay group," the more willing the members were to retreat into the closet. As one writer put it, "[t]heir dress codes and point of reference may have made them screamingly obvious to other gay men, but this was still surprisingly lost on many straights who…could display a quite breathtaking capacity for self deception."[56]

In a September 1978 review of a Village People concert in New Orleans for *Billboard,* Kelly Tucker wrote:

> An atmosphere somewhat similar to Mardi Gras prevailed at the Village People's concert Sept. 17. The group's 90-minute, seven-song set was so intense and invigorating that the aisles and open area in front of the stage remained a frenetic dance floor throughout the show. With strobe lights flashing and the introduction to "Key West" [sic] pounding in unison, the six members danced onto the stage one by one, giving each a chance to individually acquaint the crowd with the different macho images. All six projected well in their sex-symbol images.

Tucker made no mention of the group's homosexual connection. In fact, her only criticism was that the group performed exclusively their own material, and that their performance of their hit "Macho Man" didn't sound as complex as the recording.[57]

A July 19, 1978 *Variety* review of a concert in Santa Monica, California was equally enthusiastic, making mention of the group's "macho" poses and "in character" ensemble. In a perhaps unknowing nod to disco's rhythm and blues ancestry, the writer commented that "[l]ead vocalist Victor Willis was exceptionally appealing, his execution firmly rooted in R&B singing patterns."[58] While this West-Coast reviewer noted the

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[56] Smith, "Back in the YMCA," 22.

[57] Kelly Tucker, review of the Village People concert at Municipal Auditorium, New Orleans, September 17, 1978, *Billboard* 90 (September 30, 1978): 38.

[58] Kirk, review of the Village People concert at Santa Monica Auditorium, in *Variety* 291 (July 19, 1978): 44.

"primarily gay audience," it was evident that the Village People had begun to capture the attention of a far broader audience.

Ten months later, in a review of an April 29, 1979 concert in Providence, Rhode Island, *Variety* reported that it had been "family night" and that the Village People played to "screaming 10 and 11 year olds and their moms and dads." The paper also reported, "The Village People are now aiming their campy double entendres at middle class sensibilities. Toss in a basically rhythmic disco beat correlated with clever catch phrases and you've got an image streamlined and sanitized for the masses."[59] This comment shows that certain early reviewers and music writers did, in fact, understand the original intent of the group's lyrics, but if any segments of the growing fan base did, they either did not care, or were simply interested in the musical and visual entertainment rather than any sexual implications. When the group played a four-concert, sold-out run at the Greek Theatre in Los Angeles in early June of 1979, Paul Grein of *Billboard* reported that the overall impression of the audience seemed to be that of "Exotic, isn't it?" He described the opening entrance sequence in the following manner:

> The entrance is spectacular. While a fast-blinking strobe light lends a surreal quality, the curtain parts to reveal a port-o-san, a saloon and a teepee, out of which come, one by one, hard-hat David Hodo, gun-firing cowboy Randy Jones and Indian Felipe Rose. They are joined by whip-cracking leather man Glenn Hughes and, in a jeep, soldier Alex Briley, until finally cop Victor Willis arrives on a motorcycle with red lights flashing and restores order. The sequence lasts four minutes; its effect is like a wild, weird hallucination.[60]

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[59] Levy, review of the Village People concert at Providence, RI, Civic Center, *Variety* 295 (May 9, 1979): 530.

[60] Paul Grein, review of the Village People Concert at the Greek Theatre, Los Angeles, June 6, 1979 in *Billboard* 91 (June 23, 1979): 36.

Grein states that the "melodic simplicity" and "corny lyrical nature" of the Village People's biggest hits make them "instantly endearing," and that their "joyous abandon" was contagious.[61]

The gay community, the ones who actually understood what the tongue-in-cheek lyrics meant, had, again, become major consumers in the overall music-buying market and accounted for 25 percent of all disco record sales in the U.S.[62] But they were not large enough alone to generate the massive sales and exposure that the Village People were experiencing, and the group's position became the now-clichéd "don't ask, don't tell." Members began either denying their homosexuality or, at least, not admitting to it outright. In his aforementioned *Rolling Stone* article, writer Abe Peck asked the group how they related to the gay community which had helped them get started. Victor Willis said, "The group has never performed gay. Nobody has ever come out on stage in drag. The group performs a masculine show. It's a male-image show. Gay people like us; straight people like us. But we're not a gay group."[63] Glenn Hughes responded, "We're six very positive, male, energetic symbols. We are definitely going to have a gay following. And so we don't discount the fact that we have a gay following. But we're not going to let them label us as gay."[64]

Adding to the mixed message was the fact that two of the group's members, Willis and his 1980 replacement, Ray Simpson, were both heterosexual, a fact the group became all too willing to point out. By never openly declaring their sexuality outside of

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[61] Ibid.

[62] Miller, 429.

[63] Abe Peck, "The Face of Disco," 12–13.

[64] Ibid.

the "in" Greenwich Village scene, the Village People allowed the record-buying, concert-going public to reach whatever conclusions they needed to in order to be comfortable with the product. Many seemed entirely comfortable. Anita Bryant, no friend to the gay cause, even appeared with the group on *The Tonight Show*, and Walt Disney released an all-quacking "Macho Duck" for kids. It was a brilliant concept, backed by "in the right place at the right time" marketing.

The general public had little choice but to see the Village People as all-male (i.e., all heterosexual), given what else was on the disco market. The Bee Gees were another enormous commercial success, but a look at the manner in which that group was packaged and sold—brothers, luxuriously photographed in soft focus and warm light, leaning on each other wearing spandex and lamé disco attire—made the Village People look like the Marlboro Man by comparison (see Figure 4.1a).

Figure 4.1a: The Bee Gees in an undated, late-1970s publicity photo.

The Village People were a new take on disco. Even their singing styles stand out in obvious contrast. High falsetto was a hallmark of the Bee Gees sound–not the most masculine of vocal techniques, but one used to great effect by the Bee Gees, nonetheless, to invoke sympathy and vulnerability and a sort of puppy-dog quality. The Village People, however, were baritones and basses. The vocal sound was deep, rugged, and swaggering. Indeed, even the group's singing was a parody of machismo. Victor Willis's voice, a higher baritone, was still dark and grainy, hued by both his Broadway and gospel backgrounds. If other disco groups of the day were puppies, the Village People were bulldogs and everyone—girls, boys, men, women, straight, gay—seemed to be buying their records.

The only market they had lost was that segment of gay men who did not appreciate the Village People's message, viewing the group as closeted sellouts. While some gay men were, and still are, reluctant to accept the Village People's apparent endorsement of what they saw as heterosexual norms and dictates—"What price coming out of the closet if you just walk into the closet of your oppressors?" [65]—still more "got the joke." Most gay men understood the spoof, whether of pornographic images, which the heterosexual audience might not recognize, or simply of masculine stereotypes, and laughed along with the campiness. The potential humor was apparently not lost on the group either. In various interviews during the "Macho Man" period, other members seemed to second Hodo's comment, "We had the sense not to take [the group] seriously, and if we had, we would have been laughed off the stage."[66]

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[65] Smith, "Back in the Y.M.C.A.," 22.

[66] See gratuitous.com.

In its December 27, 1979 edition, *The Advocate* published a piece on the making of the Village People's movie *Can't Stop the Music*. The writers commented on the "de-gaying" of the Village People stating that at the inception of the group [1977], they had "seemed like a godsend…Six versions of our macho drag right up there. Then… something happened. Big macho became Big Macs—more of the counterculture, caught up by the middle class—and straight—America."[67] Cowboy Randy Jones dismissed such criticism, telling *The Advocate*, "I don't think gays should be offended by the image of six hot men. I'd be offended if gays were presented as six screaming queens."[68]

Abe Peck pursued the topic of criticism from within the gay community with members of the group for his *Rolling Stone* article, noting Kopkind's recently published article in *The Village Voice*. Kopkind had stated that "Gays are amused by the Village People," to which Randy Jones replied, dodging the issue, "I thought the whole country was amused by the Village People."[69] Kopkind went on to say that "Gay activists have protested that Casablanca is deliberately closeting the Village People to make the act safe for straights." Hodo responded, "Gay activists wonder why they aren't getting anywhere, and it's because they have no goddamn sense of humor." Hughes added, "They're pissed because we don't limit ourselves to their movies." It is not clear what "gay movies" Hughes may have been referring to, but Hodo stated further, "We as a group don't like labels, don't like black-white, straight-gay, disco-rock & roll. Whatever. We're not Joan

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[67] Don Romesburg, "From the Advocate Archives: De-gaying the Village People," *The Advocate* 863 (May 14, 2002).

[68] Ibid.

[69] Peck, 14.

Baez."[70] In an earlier article in the *Los Angeles Times*, Hodo was quoted as saying "We don't leave anybody out when we're onstage…We don't advertise our preferences. Why cut out part of the audience? We're not saying we're gay and proud. We're selling the music, not ourselves."[71]

As I have shown, 1970s music critics often commented that the Village People's homosexual origins did not deter the huge following of the group. When the band played Madison Square Garden in July of 1979, Davitt Sigerson, reporting for *The Village Voice*, also made a point of noting "their singing being done for them by six fellows discreetly seated behind the stage." But more importantly, Sigerson wrote as follows:

> The Village People represent the triumph not of licentiousness, but of apogean valuelessness, the ultimate mellow experience. All races, ages and sexual tastes were represented in the New York audience. They seemed to comprehend that the *schtick* is funniest if taken straight because the VPs may be manically/tallismanically homosexual, but more profoundly they are Republican, champions of isolation ("my body") over intervention (sex) and self-gratification as a moral imperative. They've got a great future.[72]

In referring to the explosive mainstream, or "crossover," appeal of the Village People, Abe Peck, in his 1979 *Rolling Stone* article (written just after the group was named disco group of the year) referred to the Village People as "American male cartoons: Busby Berkeley Meets Greenwich Village on Either Main or Christopher Street." Peck's article, "The Face of Disco: Macho Men with their Tongues in their Cheeks," was accompanied by an original illustration by Lol Brooks entitled "The

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[70] Ibid.

[71] Ibid.

[72] Davitt Sigerson, review of the Village People concert on July 3, 1979 in *The Village Voice* 54 (July 7, 1979): 5.

Cartoon that Conquered the World" which depicted the Village People as snarling, sharp-toothed monsters with clenched fists. The cop, front and center, was shown ferociously breathing smoke from his nose (see Figure 2.1b). Peck was reviewing a March 1979 concert at New York's Roseland nightclub. He categorized the Village People's output in the following manner:

> Fire Island" "San Francisco" and "Hollywood" recall the gay roots of Seventies disco. "Macho Man" straddles both gay and straight disco cultures. And "Y.M.C.A." is the all-American success; the simple song that's open to tongue-in-cheek interpretation... ."[73]

In his article, Peck recalled a previous interview with David Hodo, who portrayed the construction worker in the group. On the success of the Village People, Hodo had commented, "We gave disco a face. That's why it was so hard for disco to break through. There was nothing for audiences to see. When they finally saw we had a face, [disco] came out of the discos and into pop and kids started turning on to the group."[74] Morali, commenting on the success of "Macho Man" the year before and the appeal of the Village People beyond the gay community, stated, "When 'Macho Man' came out, I did it believing that the gay audiences were going to like it very much. But the straight audiences liked the song much more because straight guys in America want to get the macho look."[75]

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[73] Peck, 12–13.

[74] Ibid., 12.

[75] Ibid., 13.

Rolling Stone, Issue 289, April 19, 1979, p.11

Figure 4.1b: Drawing by Lol Brooks in *Rolling Stone* 289 (April 19, 1979): 11.

Other critics of the time also wrote about the irony of the Village People playing to increasingly straight audiences, and, unlike most of the disco-dancing public, not every critic enjoyed the music. In addition to referring to the group as a "faggot high school band" in his *Village Voice* review, as mentioned earlier, Guy Trebay also referred to the Village People as a "concept group" which had undergone some "weird transmutations after it left the drawing board." Trebay described the group further as "Christopher Street masturbation fantasies" and stated, "The lead singer is costumed as Ben Vereen."

On the music itself, and his estimation of the sexuality of the audience listening to it, Trebay wrote:

> A competent Miami-sound backup band does behind them all that can be expected with a six-song set written on the same bass line. The three times I've seen Village People perform . . . the group has played the exact same set, without even minute adjustment or variation. That is not too strange. No one expects much spontaneity from a dance band; you don't go to discos to hear a jam session. What is confusing, though, is that on two consecutive weekend nights—at a gay dance bar—these six men posing as homosexuals played to an audience that was 90 per cent straight.[76]

Trebay commented that the songs all sounded "more or less the same."[77] Of note in his generally unfavorable review is his remark that the group was "posing as homosexuals," despite referring to them earlier as a "faggot high school band." This would seem to indicate that Trebay either believed that the members of the group were heterosexual, or that he was aware that some, in fact, were. In any event, his review of the Village People in March of 1978, before the release of "Y.M.C.A.," shows once again that even critics of the group's concept and music acknowledged their growing appeal to audiences beyond their gay male fan base. Trebay noted in his review that the group seemed to court the female audience by shouting from the stage "How many of you women out there are Macho Women?" to the delight of female fans.[78]

To capitalize on their widening fan base, the Village People attempted to broaden their musical appeal on their 1980 album *Live and Sleazy* by including rock elements and a soul ballad. Paul Grein interviewed Morali in October 1979 for a *Billboard* article entitled "Once Darlings of Gay Discos, Village People Broaden Appeal." When asked about the group including musical elements outside of the standard disco vocabulary,

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[76] Trebay, 47.

[77] Ibid.

[78] Ibid.

Morali responded, "That's where music is going. Not that people are tired of dance music, they're just tired of the traditional 4-4 disco beat."[79]

4.2 Gay [Straight] Burlesque, Queer Minstrelsy, and Macho Drag

As I have shown, the Village People appealed to a massive audience regardless of the gay origins of the group and its music. To some audiences, the group may have seemed acceptable, or "safe," if it was viewed as a comic act rather than a serious band. Comedy soothes discomfort and can be disarming; laughing along with something which may otherwise make us uncomfortable, or which may be deemed in questionable taste by some, is often easier than acknowledging it directly. Topics such as politics, religion, and sex can be made palatable for audiences if presented in the form of comic parody and satire. I have already noted that members of the group acknowledged that a sense of humor was an important aspect of the Village People's appeal, but they may have underestimated the power of that appeal and just how deeply-rooted it may have been.

Ribald acts, bawdy humor, and burlesques were commonplace in Vaudeville, at least at the outset of the genre before the appearance of "polite" vaudeville, a more genteel entertainment form which emerged in the 1880s.[80] Comediennes such as Sophie Tucker, Fannie Brice, and Mae West began their careers in burlesque houses and became popular with both male and female audiences. Viewing the Village People as a latter-day

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[79] Paul Grein, "Once Darlings of Gay Discos, Village People Broaden Appeal," *Billboard* 91 (October 20, 1979): 64.

[80] John Kenrick. *A History of the Musical Burlesque*. 2003. http://www.musicals101.com/burlesque.htm (accessed July 7, 2010).

burlesque act can help explain the group's acceptance. Among the principal elements of burlesque entertainments, at least until the strip tease later became its best-known feature, was the idea of re-examining social norms and institutions and making fun of them. Established art forms such as opera, Shakespearian theatre, and ballet were often parodied, or "burlesqued."[81] If the rise of disco can be viewed partly as a reaction to earlier popular music styles such as the musical excesses and concept albums of progressive rock and the over-the-top costuming of glam rock, or glitter rock, as I have pointed out, then the look of the Village People can be seen as a dual burlesque act, a parody of both these earlier musical styles and of general sexuality stereotypes.

A hallmark of glam rock, for instance, was not only outrageous costuming, but gender ambiguity and androgyny. David Bowie rose to international stardom as the flamboyant alter-ego persona Ziggy Stardust, and the British group Sweet, among others, also adopted the glam style (see Figures 4.2a and 4.2b below).

Figure 4.2a: David Bowie as Ziggy Stardust.

Figure 4.2b: The British band Sweet in the 1970s.

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[81] Ibid.

If a band were to produce a parody of this type of early-70s pop-music style, what more outrageous costumes than those of heterosexual norms, or men dressed up as the heterosexual fantasy objects of gay men? Funnier still would be men costumed as the butch or "macho" end of the gay spectrum. Along with parodying glam rock and the concept-oriented progressive rock, the Village People were also spoofing the concept of masculine society in the sexually-liberated 1970s—moustaches, flannel, work boots, leather, denim, uniforms, rugged ethnicity. Were these actually gay or heterosexual archetypes? Here was the wildness of a cowboy, the daring of a motorcycle rider, the machismo of a construction worker (appealing to the everyday working-class man trying to make a living, perhaps), and the bravery of a sailor. These were standard images of masculinity, easily recognizable iconography. The Indian in full native regalia was perhaps not as commonplace, but nevertheless represented an image of fierce, warrior-like masculinity.

There was visual gay coding, however, which, to those who recognized it, was comical and ironic. Similarly, the lyrics were laced with double-entendres and gay "inside" jokes. The cowboy wore a red bandana around his neck, and while this is a standard part of the American cowboy outfit, colored hankies have significance in the gay community with different colors corresponding to a particular sexual fetish or activity. Similarly, black leather had long been associated with a gay subculture involving sadomasochistic sexual practices, but if an audience member was not aware of that correlation, the leather man simply represented another parody of a macho image. The group can be seen as a simultaneous spoof, a burlesque send-up, of a concept-oriented pop-culture product such as those created by progressive rockers, and the costumed look

and gender ambiguity of glam rockers (in the Village People's parody, gender ambiguity—is he a boy or a girl?—would become sexual ambiguity—are they straight or gay?), along with a spoof of both heterosexual male norms and the objectification of gay male desires.

If audiences decided to consider the Village People a gay group, then it was funny to watch and listen to them make fun of themselves and gay stereotypes. If listeners were content to consider them a straight band, then the Village People characters could be enjoyed as exaggerated 1970s archetypes of hyper-sexualized male culture. This was the age of sexual liberation, after all, and the Village People were adept, at least, in "playing" sexy if that is what their audience wanted. They were sexual chameleons, happy to please both straight and gay audiences without fully committing to either "camp," pun intended.

Social parody and satire has a rich history in American entertainment.[82] Nineteenth-century minstrel shows exploited African-American racial stereotypes through broad characters such as Jim Crow, the happy-go-lucky "darky" slave or plantation rustic; urban dandies such as Jim Dandy and Zip Coon; the mixed-race Sambo

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[82] Parody had a history in European entertainment as well. A hallmark of Gilbert & Sullivan's comic operettas is parody and many of their shows involved poking fun at the British government (especially the excesses of Parliament and its complex procedures), military institutions (particularly the navy), and society. Both composer and librettist were fans of American blackface minstrelsy as many minstrel troupes toured England to great acclaim. In fact, Gilbert & Sullivan's penultimate work together, *Utopia Limited* (1893), includes a minstrel show in its first act. They would have enjoyed the Village People as delicious sexual satire. The British television show *The Black and White Minstrel Show* aired as a popular BBC Saturday night prime time series well into the 1970s. Such a TV show, complete with blackface performances, would not have been tolerated in the U.S. in that decade. American audiences appear to have had an appetite for many types of social satire, including political and sexual, but not racial.

character;[83] and Uncle Tom, a bumbling fool subservient to white masters named after the character in Harriet Beacher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*.[84] However derogatory the characterizations, minstrelsy was popular with both black as well as white audiences, and all-black minstrel troupes were eventually formed capitalizing on these characterizations. Black and white audiences enjoyed seeing African-American performers mock white peoples' perceptions of their society through song, dance, and skits, or simply laughed along with the spectacle of African-Americans making fun of themselves. Whether 1970s disco audiences perceived the Village People as a spoof of straight or gay stereotypes did not matter, as long as they were laughing. Some may have been laughing *at* the group, enjoying the spectacle of this macho drag however they interpreted their message, but most, it is clear, were laughing *with* them, a distinction which helps us partly understand the success of the group and their music.

David Hodo, who portrayed the construction worker in the group, commented that some audience members, both straight and gay, were taking the Village People too seriously, focusing on the imagined sex lives of the characters. In a nod to their comic

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[83] Eric Lott, "Blackface and Blackness: The Minstrel Show in American Culture," in Annemarie Bean, James V. Hatch, and Brooks McNamara, *Inside the Minstrel Mask: Readings in Blackface Minstrelsy* (Hanover and London: Wesleyan University Press, 1996), 10–11.

[84] Another theatrical tradition based on stock character types was *Commedia dell-Arte*. Of medieval Italian origins, *Commedia* acting troupes performed mostly improvised sketches involving stock types and scenarios. Lovers, the miser, the clown, the fool, the servant, and other familiar personas became popular in touring shows and many of the characters acquired well-known names such as Arlecchino, Pantalone, Pedrolino, and Colombina. These character names, as well as the personal traits and social statuses associated with them, resonated through centuries of western theater, including Shakespearean drama, opera, vaudeville, silent film and, as I have shown, American minstrelsy. The Village People can be seen as an assembly of familiar types, whether gay or straight, much like a *Commedia* troupe or a minstrel show.

aura in a 1978 *Rolling Stone* interview he said, "Some people totally overlook the humor of the situation and are really into the sex and the heavy stuff that the real life characters we are portraying are possibly into."[85] As I have already described, reviewers and fans alike described the group as "campy," a term with can be taken as a pejorative, but which can also be understood as an aesthetic at the root of which is an intentionally humorous take on a common social norm or cultural artifact.

In her 1964 essay "Notes on 'Camp'" Susan Sontag described the central elements of camp as artifice, frivolity, naive middle-class pretentiousness, and shocking excess."[86] The 1976 edition of *Webster's New World Dictionary* defines camp as "banality, mediocrity, artifice, ostentation, etc. so extreme as to amuse or have a perversely sophisticated appeal."[87] *American Heritage* describes it as "an appreciation of manners and tastes commonly thought to be outlandish or vulgar."[88] This was precisely the appeal of the Village People. Their artifice, as well as their perverse sophistication, lay in their sexual pretense, along with an excess of irony which is among the camp factors which would keep their music popular well past the disco era.

The group itself pointed out in numerous interviews that they were merely trying to have fun, to entertain, to offer something new to the disco scene. Again, Sontag offers

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[85] Ken Emerson, "The Village People: American's Male Ideal?" *Rolling Stone* 275 (October 5, 1978): 30.

[86] Susan Sontag, "Notes on 'Camp'" in *Against Interpretation and Other Essays* (New York: Farrar, Strauss & Giroux, 1966), 275–292.

[87] *Webster's New World Dictionary* (Springfield: Merriam-Webster, 1976).

[88] *The American Heritage Dictionary, Second College Edition* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1976).

insights on camp which can help enlighten the Village People's place in disco by the appeal of the anti-serious :

> The whole point of Camp is to dethrone the serious. Camp is playful, anti-serious. More precisely, Camp involves a new, more complex relation to "the serious." One can be serious about the frivolous, frivolous about the serious. Camp proposes a comic vision of the world. But not a bitter or polemical comedy. If tragedy is an experience of hyperinvolvement, comedy is an experience of underinvolvement, of detachment.[89]

The Village People were nothing if not "serious about the frivolous" and they successfully dethroned the serious. They were taking a comic vision of the world—in this case, a sexual world inhabited by homosexuals, heterosexuals, men and women, offering audiences and disco dancers a chance to be detached from the prevalent and blatant sexuality of the culture, at least temporarily. Even though sexual liberation was at the very root of the disco style itself, as I have discussed, when listeners heard the introductions to "Y.M.C.A.," "In the Navy," or "Macho Man," it was time for a laugh break. Camp is fun, not serious. Camp cuts the sexual tension with a wink. Of course camp, as an aesthetic, has its detractors, those who believe that it promotes superficiality and triviality, and that camp celebrates surface over substance. But this was precisely what the Village People were trying to celebrate, and why campiness was an inherent part of their appeal and remains so. They offered no substance, at least not one beyond double entendres and lyrics and visuals laced with gay codings. What they offered was non-thinking excess and ostentatious abandon. It was campy and it was wildly popular.

Drag has always been a popular form of camp entertainment and the Village People was perhaps the greatest drag routine of all time, albeit with a unique take. The male members of the group were not dressed as women, of course, but they appeared in

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[89] Sontag, "Notes on 'Camp'," 288.

campy costumes, the debate over the actual nature of which I have described. Were they dressed as gay men or straight men? What male types were the Village People portraying? The answer was in the perception of the fan, but the Village People was macho drag in its most mass-marketable permutation. Men dressing in female clothing had a long history in the theater, from Shakespeare to blackface minstrelsy to Ru Paul. Eventually the art form was mostly comic and based on broad caricatures and stereotypes. Here, the Village People's take on drag is ambiguous, an important quality of the group's allure. They were costumed as archetypes of masculinity, as defined by the sexually liberated 1970s, images which could be viewed as comic caricature. Even the aforementioned Marlboro Man could seem ridiculous when looked at objectively. The entry on the Village People in *The Gay & Lesbian Almanac* begins with this statement: "Thanks to the Village People, America can no longer look at masculine icons as anything but a campy joke."[90] The Village People was an exaggerated take on what society thought was sexy, macho drag accompanied by fun tunes with a dance beat. It was a part of their lasting success.

4.3 Sexual Ambiguity on the Dance Floor

Ambiguity can be a desired trait in art, lending interest and mystique through the possibility of multiple meanings and interpretations for the viewer, reader, or listener. Da Vinci's *Mona Lisa*, for example, is one of the most beloved paintings in the history of

[90] Neil Schlager, ed., "Village People" in *Gay & Lesbian Almanac* (Detroit and New York: St. James Press, 1998), 420.

western art. The interpretation of her facial expression and state of mind has been a fascination for centuries. Moral ambiguity is a frequent theme in literature with characters seen as both good and bad, both villain and hero; or, when a literary character seems to understand, or at least acknowledge, the moral underpinnings within a dramatic situation, but is unable or unwilling to make the choice which most would deem correct or moral. Heathcliff in Emily Bronte's *Wuthering Heights* is frequently discussed in this regard. His actions and revengeful motives, coupled with his passion for Catherine and his troubled past, make him both villain and hero. He draws both sympathy and disgust making him the archetypal "anti-hero." In his essay "Moral Ambiguity in Dostoevski," R.M. Davison shows that moral ambiguity is the backbone of many of Dostoevski's novels, but that in Dostoevski's hands, the notion of moral ambiguity is "a more subtle and far-reaching version of the common view that things are not always what they seem."[91]

The quintessential literary "anti-heroine," or "vixen," is Scarlett O'Hara in *Gone with the Wind.* In opera, we find these traits embodied by Carmen, of course, as well as Dalila, Amneris, Tosca, The Queen of the Night, and countless others. There are numerous examples of these types of morally ambiguous anti-heroes and heroines throughout literature and opera and it is precisely that blur between good and bad, right and wrong, human and inhumane, which have given these characters and their stories lasting appeal.[92]

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[91] R.M. Davison, "Moral Ambiguity in Dostoevski," *Slavic Review* 27/2 (June 1968): 313– 316.

[92] An excellent example of the morally ambiguous anti-hero in modern pop culture is Dexter, the beloved serial killer of bad guys from the HBO television series of the same name.

Sexual and gender ambiguity, however, is somewhat more rarified in the history of art and literature. Clear and unambiguous sexuality—characters or story lines which are clearly heterosexual or homosexual—is commonplace, of course, as sexual relationships are a central tenet in the fine arts. The human relationships may be complicated and morally ambiguous, but the sexuality itself generally is not, the androgyny often found in popular music and certain styles as discussed above being an exception.[93] But in those cases, the look and, sometimes, the sound, of the individual artist or the band are vague and ambiguous. Are they male or female? Are they straight or gay? But the Village People branded a unique type of ambiguity as their look was either clearly heterosexual or homosexual, depending on your point of view. They did not inhabit a middle ground and they were most certainly not androgynous, yet there was an allure of ambiguity fueling their success.

In some instances, a piece of visual, literary, or musical art takes on added appeal because of a perception that the work's creator intended it as a tribute for a secret lover, or that the artist may have been homosexual. Beethoven's legacy, for instance, has been impacted by the fascination of his so-called "immortal beloved." Who was she, and what impact did the undisclosed love have upon his music? Tchaikovsky dedicated works to both men and women who may have been objects of his desire, and speculation over Da Vinci's perceived homosexuality has intrigued art lovers and historians for centuries.

French symbolist poets such as Paul Verlaine, Stephan Mallarmé, Arthur Rimbaud, and Paul Valéry, some of whom were homosexuals, were frequently

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[93] The androgynous pop-star type in contemporary pop music is exemplified by Adam Lambert. While he has since admitted to being gay, his ambiguous stance while he was a contestant on *American Idol* arguably added to his popularity.

characterized as decadent by critics, yet they generally refrained from overt sexuality in their writing. As Wallace Fowlie put it, "The symbolist style embraced subtle suggestion over direct rhetoric and the creation of moods and feelings through the color of words and language and through repeated sounds and the rhythmic cadence and meter of verse."[94] I am not suggesting that the Village People and their creators should be considered latter day symbolist poets, however this description of the symbolist style is of interest within the context of a discussion of sexual ambiguity and the success of the Village People. Like the symbolists, there are no blatant depictions or references to sex in the lyrics and performance practices of the Village People. And while the disco group's indirect sexual references in their lyrics may not be described as subtle, perhaps, they too created their sexually ambiguous mood through the language of double meaning, as well as through textual repetition and clear and identifiable musical and poetic rhythm and meter (which was analyzed in Chapter 2). But the Village People also had the obvious advantage of being visual artists: their appearance is the primary element in their ambiguity. Were they costumed as straight men, or as the fantasy objects of homosexuals? The answer lay with the beholder, and what both male and female members of the disco audience found attractive.

In his article "Effeminacy, Camp and Sexual Subversion in Rock: The Cure and Suede," Thomas Geyrhalter discussed the controversy surrounding the group Suede and the history of sexually ambiguous pop and rock stars. He cites a December 1992 article in *Melody Maker* in which Richard Smith states that "although 'pop … has been absolutely riddled with camp and androgyny, male effeminacy and moral outrage' there have been

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[94] Wallace Fowlie, from a series of lectures on French Symbolism given at Holy Cross College, Worcester, MA in March of 1983.

very few out gay stars. On the other hand [Smith] notes the emergence of 'ambisexual' acts that celebrate sexual ambiguity and employ imagery 'borrowed' from a gay context."[95] Geyrhalter points out that this discussion sheds light on the importance of gays and the perceived "sexually divergent" on the history of pop culture, "The consensus seemed to be that it is more subversive to suggest and flirt with the sexually ambiguous without declaring a fixed sexual identity."[96] While the Village People were certainly anything but androgynous or "ambisexual," they certainly more than flirted with the sexually ambiguous and purposefully blurred their sexual identity.

Susan Sontag further states in her "Notes on 'Camp'":

> Camp taste draws on a mostly unacknowledged truth of taste: the most refined form of sexual attractiveness (as well as the most refined form of sexual pleasure) consists in going against the grain of one's sex. What is most beautiful in virile men is something feminine; what is most beautiful in feminine women is something masculine.[97]

This is another important component in the broad appeal of the Village People. At the height of the sexually liberated 1970s, the Village People tapped into the sexual desires of both men and women, yet, in symbolist fashion, there was nothing overtly sexual about their act. Still, men may have found something secretly erotic in the group which went "against the grain" of their own sexuality. This was, after all, the 1970s, although it would be a stretch to suggest that male listeners enjoyed the Village People because they appealed to their feminine side. But if, in fact, there was an unacknowledged "against the grain" sexual appeal to the Village People, they were not a serious threat to masculinity.

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[95] Thomas Geyrhalter, "Effeminacy, Camp and Sexual Subversion in Rock: the Cure and Suede," *Popular Music* 15/2 (1996): 217.

[96] Ibid, 217.

[97] Susan Sontag. "Notes on 'Camp'", 279.

It was comedy, after all, a campy approach which allowed male fans to keep a safe grasp on their masculine identities while enjoying the dance music. They also enjoyed the fact that they were in the midst of a sexual revolution. They were dancing in a new era of unbounded sexual freedom where the pursuit of physical pleasures was the expected norm and one in which more women were willing to have sex with them prior to marriage.

Who had paved the way for this sexual awakening? The gays, through the persistence of their post-Stonewall pursuits, had liberated the masses. So if there was something gay about the Village People, some masked effeminacy or even some perverse inside joke about gay sex, it did not matter. Stephen Holden, in his article "The Village People Liberate Main Street," wrote, "Exploiting the homoerotic connotations of American blue-collar machismo for equal measure of titillation and comedy, they turn camp into mainstream show biz shtick."[98] The success of the Village People can therefore be viewed partly as a result of an appreciation of the gay movement and its widening impact, including sexual freedoms and, perhaps, better sex. In his book *How We Got Here: The 70s: The Decade That Brought You Modern Life (For Better or Worse)*, David Frum writes:

> That sense that homosexuals somehow incarnated a more equitable, more pleasurable future may explain the extraordinary explosion of gay cultural influences in the 1970s. From Perrier to sandblasted Victorian rowhouses, from Quaaludes to anthologies of women's literature, gay society set the tone for the rest of America. To see this pace-setting come to life, one needed only to pay a visit to the top tourist attraction of late 1970s New York: the Studio 54 discotheque.[99]

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[98] Stephen Holden, "The Village People Liberate Main Street," *The Village Voice* 24 (April 23, 1979): 61.

[99] David Frum, *How We Got Here: The 70s: The Decade That Brought You Modern Life (For Better or Worse)*, (New York: Basic Books, 2000), 212.

The disco represented the new culture which gays had been so instrumental in creating, and from which straight society had benefited. Frum further states, "Straight America was pushing its way into a new world of pleasure and freedom. And it was gays who manned the ropeline between that world and the old one."[100]

[100] Ibid., 213.

CHAPTER 5

The Music in the Post-Disco Era

5.1 The Y.M.C.A Dance and the Sports Rock Anthem

The demise of disco had little effect on the popularity of the major hits of the Village People which are discussed in this dissertation. Many of these songs would evolve from their original milieu and flourish in popular culture through their improbable conversion to sports anthems, their use in many motion pictures and television shows, a well-timed cover, and, in one case, a highly effective dance.

It is widely reported that the Y.M.C.A. dance originated on Dick Clark's *American Bandstand* show. During the January 6, 1979 episode which featured the Village People, the dance is seen being done by audience members during the performance of "Y.M.C.A." and lead singer Victor Willis is seen practicing the dance himself at the beginning of the interview sequence.[101] The association of this dance with the song "Y.M.C.A." is extremely significant to the work's history, its continuing popularity, and its adoption as a sports anthem. The dance involves the spelling out of the letters Y, M, C, and A during the choral refrain of the song: Y—arms outstretched overhead at an angle to spell a Y with the body; M—made by bending the elbows from the Y pose so the fingertips meet on top of the head; C—Arms/fingers extended to the left in a curved position to form a C; A—arms extended overhead and held together to

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[101] http://www.events-in-music.com/dance-craze-music-the-village-peoples-y-m-c-a.html (accessed June 30, 2010).

form a triangle. Today, the dance is an inseparable part of the song and is seen around the world at weddings, awards ceremonies, functions of all sorts, and sporting arenas.

The relationship between sports and music is rich and complex. The cross-marketing of music and sporting events through video games, exercise videos, and the increasing aim of professional sports to associate with popular musical styles and artists, has increased dramatically since the 1970s and gave rise to what Ken McLeod has described as the "hypermasculinized sports anthems by gay icons Queen, the Village People and Pet Shop Boys."[102] In his article "'We are the Champions": Masculinities, Sports and Popular Music," Ken McLeod states:

> The significant convergence of music and sports has had perhaps its most prominent manifestation in the form of several rock tunes that have acquired anthem status through repeated play at sporting events[,]...songs such as Gary Glitter's "Rock and Roll, Part 2," Steam's "Na Na Hey Hey Kiss Him Goodbye," The Village People's "YMCA," and "Go West" and Queen's "We are the Champions." As such, these are all works that, while neither originally popularized through sporting events not overtly thematically concerned with sport, have subsequently risen to iconic anthem status due largely to their significant exposure at sporting events and their perceived associations with sports culture. Significantly, these anthems are often the products of gay icons and contain overt lyrical celebrations of homosexuality. As such, they problematize the typical heterosexual masculine associations of music and sport.[103]

While I agree with the author with regard to the paradox imbedded in the elevation of these songs to sports anthems, in the case of the Village People, at least, there was

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[102] Ken McCleod. "'We are the Champions': Masculinities, Sports and Popular Music," *Popular Music and Society* 29/5 (December 2006): 531.

[103] Ibid., 541.

nothing "overt" about their lyrics, nor do these songs celebrate homosexuality.[104] Neither were the Village People gay icons, as I have already discussed. Gay men were not the principal consumers of the Village People's music, and many fans did not even consider the group to be gay at all.

Still, the irony is palpable, particularly with "Y.M.C.A." The song is, after all, laced with codings about gay sex in a steam room. Yet "Y.M.C.A.," along with the other songs mentioned above, became widely adopted by the sports world because of the same musical elements which made it popular first on the dance floor and on the airwaves. The Y dance added to the appeal of "Y.M.C.A" just as the stomping and hand-clapping in Queen's "We will Rock You" created the perfect sporting-arena participatory appeal. "Y.M.C.A." is regularly performed by the grounds crew at New York's Yankee Stadium, as well as many other sports venues around the world. McLeod further states:

> The popularity of the hypermasculinized sports anthems described above—gay anthems that use aggressively unison rhythms, muscular bass lines, and male choruses singing in relatively low registers emulating sports chants—simultaneously celebrate masculine power and physical performance while also permitting an open, communal expression of bodily expression that transcends sexual orientation and gender preferences. Thus the desire exhibited by, principally, heterosexual sport fans to enact the letters of YMCA with outstretched arms, overrides any consideration or awareness of the homosexual connotation of the song's lyrics.

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[104] Likewise, Gary Glitter (Paul Francis Gadd) was a heterosexual artist, despite his roots in the glam rock genre, and there is nothing gay about the group Steam or the 1969 hit "Na Na Hey Hey Kiss Him Goodbye," unless, of course, the phrase "kiss him goodbye" when sung by men was to be considered homosexual. Freddie Mercury was openly bisexual, but, similarly, there was nothing gay about Queen's music. Mercury's onstage look was occasionally flamboyant given that their early style was rooted in progressive rock and heavy metal, but they were not considered a gay group. The group's name has homosexual connotations and is used in gay slang, but the group was from Great Britain where the word had royal connotations as well.

5.2 Nostalgia, Soccer, and "Go West"

The 1979 Village People song "Go West" has a slightly more complicated, and perhaps less obvious, post-disco history. Richard Smith sees in this song the embodiment of why the Village People are more popular now among certain segments of the gay community than they were in the later 70s and early 80s, the appeal being rooted in a longing for the "golden age of the homosexual." "The words [to "Go West"] have become very sad," said Neil Tenant of the Pet Shop Boys' decision to cover "Go West" for their 1993 CD *Very*, "because it's a pre-AIDS gay ideal, the idea of moving to San Francisco and everything will be fabulous. Now it has a kind of elegiac quality."[105] In the age of AIDS, there was a certain wave of migration to San Francisco by gay men as it was believed that if a cure for the disease was to be found, it would be there. So while this song had the most innocent of gay undertones of any of the well-known Village People songs, it has turned out to be perhaps the most profound in its evolving meaning. This is undoubtedly why the Pet Shop Boys' treatment of "Go West" has an almost reverential quality. It is not at all an interpretation, but a memorializing of the spirit of the original "Go West."

In his article "Taking it Seriously: Intertexuality and Authenticity in Two Covers by the Pet Shop Boys," Mark Butler states that The Pet Shop Boys' cover of "Go West" "amplified and expands the characteristics of the original song."[106] He also examines the notion of community found in the song, pointing out that the lyrics are almost entirely in

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[105] Smith, "Back in the YMCA," 24.

[106] Mark Butler. "Taking it Seriously: Intertextuality and Authenticity in Two Covers by the Pet Shop Boys," *Popular Music* 22/1 (2003): 7.

the first-person plural with an emphasis on the pronoun "we." This "we," Butler states, represents both two gay partners in a relationship as well as the gay community at large. "In this sense, the song describes the migration of gay men to the West Coast of America in the 1970s, a time when gay liberation—and disco—were in full bloom. It presents the west as a utopia where freedom can be fully achieved."[107] The song highlights the role of the individual within a community through a call and response format. Members of the group (representing the community) sing a short word or phrase, such as 'together,' and then the soloist (representing the individual: Victor Willis for the Village People and Neil Tennant for the Pet Shop Boys) responds with a longer phrase.[108] The Pet Shop Boys maintained this structure in their cover, but they expanded the size of the "community" by using a chorus of 16 male voices.

While the lead vocals and supporting instrumentation were recorded separately in London, Tennant and his producers came to New York in October of 1992 to record the choral vocals. They wanted a distinctly "American sound," complete with uniquely American English-language diction such as the [r] sound at the end of the word 'together' and the elided 'ch' sound at the junction of the words "want" and "you." They further asked the ensemble for "rugged, masculine, virile, macho" singing all in an attempt to add authenticity to the cover and to amplify the original meaning of the song. The sound of the choral vocals also added a contrast to the more effete sounds of Tennant's tenor, a very different timbre than Victor Willis's baritone in the original.

Another way in which the Pet Shop Boys expanded upon the meaning of the original song is through additional music and lyrics placed as a bridge between the first

[107] Ibid., 8.

[108] Ibid.

and second verses. The text "There where the air is free/We'll be what we want to be/ Now if we make a stand/We'll find our promised land" addresses both freedom to express personal identity, or, more to point, freedom to be gay, and political activism and the need for both individuals and community to speak up about AIDS. As Butler puts it,

> The climactic reference to the "promised land"...takes the song to a new level, invoking the weight of a familiar biblical image to suggest that the West is not just a nice area in which to live, but also a place where an oppressed group can be free.[109]

The Pet Shop Boys' version also adds a more unified form to the song than the original version exhibited. This is accomplished by an instrumental break, well-placed modulations which lend forward momentum and increasing excitement, and a more formal interaction between soloist and chorus. In the original version, Victor Willis generally sang the interjections along with the band and often improvised a joyful descant above their responses. In the 1990s version, Tennant does not sing with the chorus, and later in the song the roles of community and individual seem to be reversed briefly when Tennant and the chorus switch parts: Tennant sings the one-word responses and the chorus sings the longer lines of text. Butler states: "This progression toward a more fluid interaction suggests...that the poignancy associated with this 'pre-AIDS' song has been transformed in a positive way." The song was transformed to reflect the fact that while gay men looked back nostalgically to the disco era as a time of intense individual and sexual expression, the innocence associated with that era has been lost in the specter of AIDS and a changing social and political climate.

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[109] Ibid.

The Pet Shop Boys' video of "Go West" adds additional elements. McLeod describes it in the following manner:

> The video took an altogether different approach, using the lyrics to portray an ironic comment on the defeat of Soviet communism and the increasing "westernization" of Russia. Sport plays a prominent role in the video which features the buff, athletic bodies of young men, resembling Soviet-era gymnasts, set against the odd spectacle of the Pet Shop Boys in futuristic suits on flying surfboards (symbolic of the California lifestyle or the original tune, but also resembling cold war-era intercontinental ballistic missiles). The athletic male chorus butchly intoning "Go West" is contrasted by Neil Tennant's effete lead vocal and both are supplemented by the presence of the Statue of Liberty come to life in the form of a black R&B diva. The thematic inversions at play here are numerous. The presence of the black female liberty, representing the West, contrasts the white male bodies of the East while the Pet Shop Boys' futuristic outfits enigmatically resist location. Notably the song ends openly on a dominant seventh chord, rather than a traditionally normative tonic close, reinforcing the luminal and open-ended message of the work. Further, the chord progression of the song references Johann Pachelbel's *Canon,* as emphasized in the opening phrases. Thus the song in the Pet Shop Boys' version takes on several layers of meaning: gay anthem and AIDS lament, western social critique, and a postmodern musical pastiche that transfers meaning from Pachelbel through the Village People to the Pet Shop Boys.[110]

Since the release of the Pet Shop Boys' cover, the melody has been used regularly as the basis for various English soccer chants such as "One Nil, to the Arsenal" and "Go West Bromwich Albion," along with other more profane parodies. The song, with unaltered lyrics, was used as a chant at the 2002 World Cup soccer tournament which was co-hosted by Korea and Japan. Sung by thousands of Japanese and Korean football fans and heard around the world, the song was further transformed into an ironic

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[110] McLeod, "We are the Champions," 542. As to the Pachelbel Canon reference, there are many pop songs which use this chord progression and there are several websites devoted to this topic including www.pachelbelcanon.com and www.listology.com/lukeprog/list/songs-based-pachelbels-canon.

statement on the "far eastern" setting of the popular tournament as well as the general globalization and commercialization (westernization) of the game of soccer itself.[111]

This international exposure, multiplicity of interpretation, and amplification of the song's original intent afforded by the Pet Shop Boys' cover made the song "Go West" even more popular in the 1990s and beyond than the original version by the Village People.

5.3 The Village People in Pop Culture

Through the advent of the aforementioned Y dance and the rise of the sports anthem, covers by other pop groups, the adoption of new meanings and social significance to some of the songs, and the lasting endearment of the music itself, the Village People and their four biggest and most iconic hits have become engrained in popular culture, despite any gay underpinnings in the lyrics and the origins of the group. Millions have memories of doing that Y dance at a prom, a wedding, or a sporting event. The song "Y.M.C.A." is welcomed at diverse, faith-based events everywhere. Christian pep rallies are even built around it. In the summer of 2000, the Village People performed a concert at Chautauqua Institute, a walled "Christian Community" in upstate New York formerly affiliated with the Methodist Church. The theme song for the 2001 annual meeting of the National Christian Educators Association, sponsored by the Roman Catholic Diocese of Milwaukee, was "N.C.E.A.," sung to the tune of "Y.M.C.A." There are internet references to the song from all corners of the globe, many on the personal websites of foreign men who are eager to show they are hip to American culture, so they either list

[111] Ibid., 542.

"Y.M.C.A." as among their favorite songs, or they share photos of themselves spelling out one letter or another. It is clearly among the most ubiquitous and most recognized songs in the world.

The Village People have appeared in dozens of magazines and commemorative books including *Guiness Book of Hits, Time, Playboy, Gentleman's Quarterly, US, People, Paris Match, World Book Encyclopedia, Dick Clark's 25 Years of Rock 'n Roll,* and on the cover of *Rolling Stone.* They have made hundreds of television appearances in more than 20 countries over the last few decades including such shows as *The Love Boat, American Bandstand, Solid Gold, Soul Train, Midnight Special, Rosie O'Donnell, Oprah, Married with Children, The Tonight Show Jay Leno, Bob Hope Specials, Dick Clark's 50th Anniversary of American bandstand,* ABC's *Disco Ball-30th Anniversary of Disco,* and numerous appearances on MTV and VH1. They have also been featured on news and popular culture programs such as *Good Morning America* and *20/20,* on which they appeared twice.

The hits of the Village People have been heard in dozens of motion pictures such as *Down Periscope, Wayne's World II, Addams Family Values, The Adventures of Priscilla: Queen of the Desert, Longtime Companion, In and Out* and *Terminator 3: Rise of the Machines.*[112] While the references in television shows and movies are often overtly gay and comic in nature, such as the scenes in *In and Out* and *Priscilla*, the tunes are also used to invoke comic irony through their appearance in heterosexual environments, be it a parody of hyper-masculinity, such as *Wayne's World*, or one in which the masculinity need not be proven or questioned, such as *Terminator*. There are still other instances

[112] http://www.events-in-music.com/dance-craze-music-the-village-peoples-y-m-c-a.html (accessed June 30, 2010).

where the music is used to invoke sweet nostalgia, such as the scene late in the movie *Longtime Companion* in which "Y.M.C.A." is played by a string quartet.

But not all pop culture references to the Village People invoke any sort of gay roots or "inside joke" nods to homosexuality. The National Museum of the American Indian (NMAI), a wing of the Smithsonian Institution on the mall in Washington, DC, includes among its exhibits a gold 45 rpm record commemorating the 1978 hit song "Y.M.C.A." Felipe Rose, the son of a member of the Lakota-Sioux tribe, donated it to the museum which displays it. "We want people to see all aspects of Native American Life and Felipe's gold record helps tell the story of current Native involvement in popular music, not just traditional music" said Emil Her Many Horses, an associate curator of the museum.[113]

Finally, what better testament to the place of the Village People in popular culture than a 2007 article in *The New York Times* entitled "Maybe the Village People Were Right." Author Bonnie Tsui's article is on rediscovering the benefits, beauties, and general affordability of many outdoor Y.M.C.A. resort campsites throughout the country and internationally from upstate New York to the Arkansas Ozarks, the Colorado Rockies to Hawaii, and from Australia to India. In discussing the "retro-cool appeal" of Ys today, she states: "As the lyrics say: 'It's fun to stay at the Y.M.C.A.' No, really."[114] Hence, the Village People and this song, despite its origins, have firmly made their way into the lore of mass pop culture, and not just as a gay inside joke.

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[113] Owen Edwards, "Going for the Gold," *Smithsonian* 36/4 (July 2005): 20.

[114] Bonnie Tsui, "Maybe the Village People Were Right," *The New York Times* (September 30, 2007): 3.

CONCLUSION

Cultural Transformation

As I have shown, there are many factors which combined to explain the original seductiveness of the Village People hit songs: the distinctive musical elements; the catchy lyrics; the aspects of camp, queer minstrelsy, and burlesque; the broad-based appeal in a time of sexual freedom and exploration; and clever marketing by savvy promoters. But not one of these elements alone is sufficient to illuminate the lasting allure of the music and the songs' evolutions from mere disco songs to aural emblems of modern pop culture. This involved a more complex journey, one fueled by both the varied perspective of the individual listeners and the power of irony as a potent sustaining component in art.

To some listeners, the songs of the Village People were mere pop-music confections, fun upbeat songs with a decidedly sunny spin—an easy-going place to stay, travel to a nice warm climate, work out so you will be pretty and popular, join the Navy because it sounds fun. The songs had no sexual undertones to this group of fans. To others, however, the appeal was precisely in those undertones and in the double meanings, whether they were thought to be humorous inside-jokes, or more titillating sexual foreplay. Not only did the perspectives vary from listener to listener, but also whether or not the experience of the Village People was primarily musical (melody, orchestration, the famous hooks, the lyrics) or visual (To what degree did the look of the group add to the way a listener perceived the music? Was the group straight of gay?), or both. Comparable situations have existed elsewhere in pop music, acts for which the visual coding and ambi-sexual flirtation is as important to their success as

their music such as the Progressive Rock and Glam Rock groups discussed above, but also artists such as Boy George, Madonna, and Lady Gaga.

Today, it is undeniable that the popularity of the Village People's songs is partly attributable to the irony which exists in their presence. To some, the fact that the songs continued to be heard and loved after the disco era, and remain popular to audiences today despite their gay roots, heightens the pleasure of the music. That the original intent of the songs has been blurred, if not completely forgotten, through the adoption of new meanings and perspectives on the songs is an example of the power of popular culture, as well as chancing social circumstances, to transcend meaning and transform art. Was it easier for audiences to pretend that the music was about something else in order to dance to it? Was the music just so fun and easy to sing along with that they did not care what it meant? Did gay men suddenly find a use for the Village People after all when "Go West" took on a more profound meaning? The answer to all of these questions, as I have attempted to show, is probably yes.

Why *do* some baseball fans stare in wonder at the site of the grounds keepers dancing the "Y.M.C.A." dance at Yankee Stadium? Perhaps because they get it, they know what the song was intended to convey, they understand the irony behind the spectacle, and can enjoy the remarkable journey the song has taken since 1978. The word "macho" still has a comic connotation. There has been no cure found for AIDS in California or anyplace else, but the song "Go West" still embodies both nostalgic resonance for the carefree, sexually-liberating times of the 1970s and the forward-looking ideal of understanding and acceptance. And soon there will be gay men and women serving openly in the U.S. Navy and "In the Navy" may take on yet another meaning. The Village People are possibly the greatest paradox in pop

music history, flamboyantly and knowingly exhibiting the most contradictory of traits while creating pieces of art which remain many things to many people.

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