

TAINTED LOVE: A Brief Chronology of Soft Cell's Relationship with the LGBT+ Community

Harriet Purbrick & Matt Purbrick

As you pass Leeds Beckett's Student Union directly opposite Dry Dock, you may notice a rainbow plaque. The rainbow plaques across Leeds tell the LGBT+ history of the city by honouring LGBT+ figures. This particular plaque is dedicated to Marc Almond and David Bell, who formed the synth-pop duo Soft Cell whilst at what-was-then-known-as Leeds Polytechnic. Soft Cell are best known for their 1981 hit version of Tainted Love which was the best-selling single of 1981 in the UK and topped the charts in sixteen other countries.

The rise of synth-pop as a genre can tell us a lot about attitudes towards gender and sexuality in the early 1980s as many synth-pop artists, not just Soft Cell, flirted with a queer aesthetic. It also helps us explore the complicated relationship of queerness between 'art' and 'artist', and how the interpretation of this has changed over time. After all, Soft Cell are much more associated with queer culture now than in their heyday.

After moving from Leeds to Soho, Soft Cell wrote their debut 1981 album 'Non-Stop Erotic Cabaret' around the sex industry they found themselves living next door to. Dave Ball recalled "we would go to places like the Naked City Cinema just to get the vibe of it. We were like sex tourists, but without doing the sex!" Their songs were subversively sexual. But they were not directly LGBT+, and instead often detail heterosexual encounters. For example, in their ode to sex cinemas 'Seedy Films', Almond is heard flirting with a woman by asking her "isn't that you up on the screen?".

Soft Cell produced an incredibly transgressive music video for their track 'Sex Dwarf', which featured a man with dwarfism pitted against women wielding whips and chainsaws with everyone, including Almond, wearing fetish clothing. The video was banned and is still difficult to find online. It opens with Almond teasing a woman chained to a table, her breasts exposed, once again showing that during their time in the limelight, Soft Cell presented heterosexual sleaze, rather than queerness.

By contrast, other synth-pop was overtly queer. Again in 1981, the all-male synth-pop group Depeche Mode released their debut album which featured lyrics such as "you're such a pretty boy" and "boys meet boys / get together / boys meet boys / it's forever". Meanwhile, the Human League released their best-known hit 'Don't You Want Me' whilst lead vocalist Philip Oakey flaunted full make-up and androgynous clothing.

Also, in 1981, punk pioneer Pete Shelley released a surprisingly synth-pop song 'Homosapien'. He had previously written songs in the punk style with LGBT+ themes such as 'Ever Fallen in Love (With Someone You Shouldn't've)'. As well as using more synthesizer, 'Homosapien' was also much more explicitly queer: the couplet "homo superior / in my interior" was enough to get the track banned by the BBC.

However, some of these groups are no longer seen as LGBT+. Perhaps due to the group members' personal lives and their subsequent musical output, Depeche Mode are no longer overtly associated with queer culture. And although there is a disconnect between the lack of queerness found in Soft Cell's music itself and how Soft Cell are remembered, it can be explained by how Marc Almond presented himself later in his career alongside the wider evolution of synth-pop as a genre.

In 1984, the synth-pop group Bronski Beat came to prominence. All the band-members were openly gay, which was highly significant at the time. Departing from the outrageously camp aesthetic of earlier synth-pop, Bronski Beat used the genre to poignantly share their experiences as gay men. Their seminal single 'Smalltown Boy', and its accompanying video, describes a young man who departs from his hometown to leave behind homophobic attacks and a family that doesn't understand him. The song reached number 3 in the UK charts, and remains a gay anthem.

In that same year, Marc Almond teamed up with Bronski Beat to

cover Donna Summer's 'I Feel Love', a disco song that was extremely popular in gay nightclubs.

In 1985, Coil (John Balance and Peter Christopherson, who were also a couple) released a bleak cover of 'Tainted Love' to raise funds for the Terrence Higgins Trust: this single has since been recognised as the first benefit record for an HIV/AIDS charity. Christopherson's music video for their version of the song featured a cameo appearance from Marc Almond.

However Almond only publicly came out as gay in 1987, three years after Soft Cell's split. He has said "I didn't want to be defined as a gay artist. I didn't want to be labelled and go into a ghetto. I just wanted to be a pop singer."

Four years later in 1991, a dissolved Soft Cell released a re-recorded version of 'Tainted Love', with an accompanying music video directed by Coil's Christopherson. The video featured Almond apparently singing through the cosmos to a handsome young man, who tosses and turns in bed before getting up and dressed as a Castro clone (LGBT+ slang for the style of the idealised working-class man).

Whilst Soft Cell's association with the LGBT+ community evolved through the years; they are clearly deserving of their Rainbow Plaque. Not only did they have the biggest hit in a broadly queer movement, they continued to align themselves with the gay community over the next decade.



Soft Cell Rainbow Plaque on the Woodhouse Building of Leeds Beckett University, Woodhouse Lane.

Further Reading:

Judith A. Peraino, 'Synthesizing difference: The queer circuits of early synthpop' in *Rethinking Difference in Music Scholarship*, eds. Olivia Bloechl, Melanie Lowe, Jeffrey Kallberg, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014) pp. 287-314.

Lucas Hilderbrand, "'Luring Disco Dollies to a Life of Vice": Queer Pop Music's Moment', *Journal of Popular Music Studies*, 25, (Irvine, CA: University of California,) pp. 414-438.