

New Wave Saved My Life*

Wanda Alarcon

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Abstract

*The title of this piece is inspired by the short story, "Minnie Riperton Saved My Life," by the poet & playwright, Luis Alfaro. (Shuffle) I watch you breathe, I cannot sleep, I touch your hair, I kiss your skin, And hope the morning sun won't wake you too soon.

Keywords

Music (Subfield), Article, Chican@/Latin@ Studies, Identity, Listening, Memoir

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**The title of this piece is inspired by the short story, “Minnie Riperton Saved My Life,” by the poet & playwright, Luis Alfaro.*

(Shuffle)

*I watch you breathe,
I cannot sleep,
I touch your hair,
I kiss your skin,
And hope the morning sun won't wake you too soon.
For when you wake,
and look at me,
You never know,
you just might see,
Another boy who crept in your room...
Take your time...(that's what you told me),
Take your time...
But I fell head first, and I just don't know what to do
—“Nothing Looks the Same in the Light,” Wham!*



<https://youtu.be/Egkct45fQ9k>

I was a teenager in the 80's. I grew up in South East Los Angeles, Huntington Park, to be exact, H.P. for short—home of the Huntington Park Senior High Spartans and the local after game hangout, Spartan Burgers. In those years, almost everyone in my school was Mexican and most kids were either *preppy* or *cholos* or Florentine Gardens disco-types—almost no one was “alternative.” That is, until we caught our first glimpse of Boy George on Video One with Richard Blade – that MTV style video show that came *before* MTV. If you remember, or have YouTubed it recently, a key scene in the video for Culture Club's “Do You Really Want to Hurt Me?” begins with Boy George stepping out of a swimming pool, fully clothed and dry (a lo-tech effect even by 80's standards), wearing a

flowing tunic, white-boy dreadlocks, and expertly applied makeup. I remember being instantly fascinated watching him dance to a reggae beat and hearing him sing so longingly about a mysterious “you.” I had never seen anyone who looked or sounded like that before, and I went from listening to my brothers’ heavy metal records, my mom’s *cumbias*, and my grandpa’s Beethovens to listening to Culture Club, Eurythmics, Wham!, and Bow Wow Wow almost overnight.

Soon after, I started noticing in my neighborhood sprinklings of pink, purple and green hair, spikey egg white mohawks, brown boys in skirts and makeup, and the girls from St. Mathias High wearing black chunky combat boots with their proper, pleated, Catholic school uniforms—my personal favorite look. And when I bought my very own first pair of 8-hole lace-up Doc Marten’s, I was forever transformed. I sensed that crossing fashion lines somehow meant crossing other lines too, although, I was perhaps a bit too young to really cross anything. As a questioning adolescent, I embraced the freedom that music, fashion, and expression represented. It’s strange to think about how such a global phenomenon took shape in my little eastside town. That time of 80’s new wave, the “Second British Invasion,” told me something about who I would become. I learned fearlessness from the bold and transgressive acts of fashion and wit my favorite gender bending pop stars regularly deployed on American network TV. And I learned to “tune in” to the sexually ambiguous language of songs like “Time Clock of the Heart” or “Nothing Looks the Same in the Light.” All of those blurred lines felt “normal” to me. And it meant later on that I didn’t have to have an identity crisis when I was coming out. And I really didn’t. I didn’t really think about “identity” in this way again until much later.

(Shuffle)

*I’m only sad in a natural way
And I enjoy sometimes feeling this way
The gift you gave is desire
The match that started my fire*

—“The Paris Match,” The Style Council

<https://youtu.be/5bY6fenuTuY>

As I copy and sometimes re-purchase 25-year old lost albums for my new e-music library, I’ve started to wonder about some of my musical choices. Why did I still like what I liked? How do I trace my musical habitus? Culture Club, George Michael, The Style Council – they’re all on my iPod *right now*. And I ask myself, is my musical taste really so wrapped up in what I perceived to be my pop idols’ alternative sexuality so long ago? In this post-gender, post-queer, post-race (rhetorically speaking), trans-border era, is there even such a thing as “alternative” anymore?

Because when I listen to those old songs now, part of me still “hears” the skillful crossing of gender lines in every ambiguously phrased lyric, like the Pet Shop Boys’ clever line, “Which do you choose, a hard of soft option?” And I recall vivid images of Annie Lennox at once crossing and keeping those lines in the video for “Who’s That Girl?” which ends with an impossibly queer kiss. (She queered the Lacanian mirror long before *Black Swan*!) I still sense how all of these wildly public expressions of queer desire, with all of its spectacle and taboo, flowed into my childhood

home through the sturdy Zenith television set that brought us together to “listen” to music anew. And this kind of hearing has to do with a particular way of remembering my adolescence – the memory of how felt for the first time to hear those songs and see the images of Boy George winking his long painted lashes at the video camera, seriously putting pressure on the word “Boy”; or seeing George Michael dancing with Andrew Ridgley in the macho ditty “Wham Rap”, their two beautiful and stylish female band mates conspicuously superfluous in that dance. And also remembering how the combined effect put something like the question about boys on hold for me in a really powerful way. There were options out there, is what I understood, and that was all I needed to survive – to save my queer soul.

(Shuffle)

*Don't make me feel any colder
Time is like a clock in my heart
Touch we touch, was the heat too much?
I felt I lost you from the start
In time it could have been so much more
The time is precious I know
In time it could have been so much more
The time has nothing to show because
Time won't give me time
And time makes lovers feel like they've got something real
But you and me we know they've got nothing but time*

–“Time Clock of the Heart,” Culture Club



https://youtu.be/8tl1_KlO6xl

But I also detect another kind of crossing, or rather, multiple crossings in those same songs. Somewhere between the funk inspired bass line of “Nothing Looks the Same in the Light” and the soulful oohs and ahs of Helen Terry’s backup vocals in “Time Clock of the Heart,” I sense this

music also crossed a race and a class line, however precariously treaded. From the perspective of a young, working class Chicana, quickly interested in all things British and gay, it seemed to me that these young white British boys took up a mic and pen and left their own working class accents behind for the promise of America. Clearly raised on a diet of soul and R&B, their eventual collaborations with Luther Vandross, Stevie Wonder, and Mary J. Blige – American musical royalty – seemed only natural on the Grammy stage. And I wondered in my youthful, pop star fantasies, how did they feel when they learned they could sing like that? What did it mean to be queer and black at the same time? Musically speaking. What was the bigger transgression? Because the 80's were deadly years for many of us, on both sides of the Atlantic, who were confronted with the authority of the lines drawn by Reagan, Thatcher, and AIDS. Maybe the transgression is to survive. And to remember.

Listening as an adult now to George Michael's greatest hits collection *Twenty Five*, it is easy to see that there is no longer any doubt about his sexual orientation. In songs like "An Easier Affair," he celebrates that he's "dancing with the freaks now/I'm having so much fun/I do my dance with everyone." So I wonder, when your pop idols sex lives stop being curiosities or taboo, what still fascinates? Even their notorious falls from grace, and their celebrated "come backs" didn't really provoke the public imagination in the same way again. But I detect there are still clues in the music. In his brilliant cover of "Feeling Good," George Michael pays humble homage to Nina Simone saying: "It's a new day, it's a new dawn, it's a new life, it's a new low/*Oh we all know it's too much to expect a man, a white man, to do it like Nina*" (my emphasis). That simple musical gesture, a crossing of many sorts, tells me something about what she means to him. And I think that it has ever been and ever will be *music* that will save our collective souls... I was seventeen when I left HP for a much larger Los Angeles. In some ways I was too young to leave home and sometimes I thought that I didn't survive some things that came my way. But I always had a song to guide me and show me something new—a different way. I know I'll never fully rebuild my archive on something like iTunes. But as I contemplate my growing digital library, I really do believe that new wave saved my life.

(Shuffle)

