



Rebel playwright Joe Orton was part of the landscape of the Swinging Sixties. Irreverent black comedies that satirised the Establishment, such as *Entertaining Mr Sloane* (1964), *Loot* (1965) and *What the Butler Saw* (first performed in 1969), contributed to a new counterculture. Orton's representation of same-sex desire on stage, and candid account of queer life before decriminalisation in his posthumously published diaries, also made him a gay icon. Part of the zeitgeist, he was photographed with Twiggy, smoked marijuana with Paul McCartney and wrote a screenplay for The Beatles. Described by biographer John Lahr as

a 'cool customer', Orton shopped for clothes on Carnaby Street, wore 'hipster pants' and looked — in his own words — 'way out'. Although he cast himself as an iconoclast, [Emma Parker](#) suggests that Orton's record collection reveals a different side to the ruffian playwright who furiously pitched himself against polite society. The music that Orton listened to in private suggests the same queer ear, or homosexual sensibility, that shaped his plays. Yet, stylistically, this music contradicts his cool public persona and reputation for riotous dissent.

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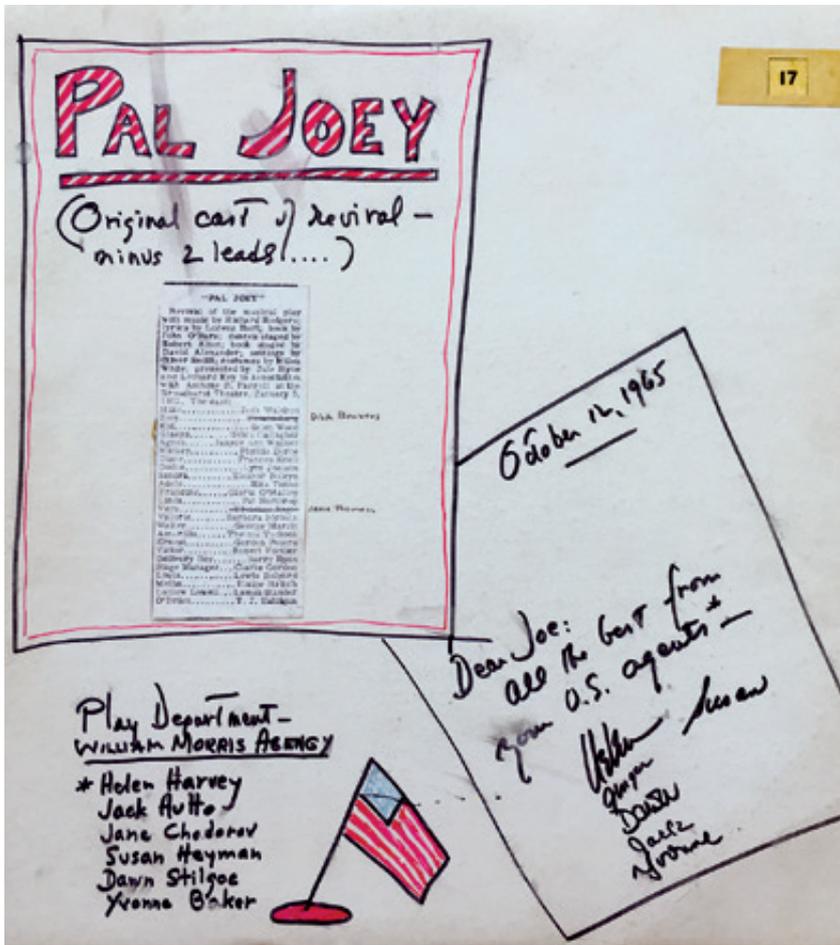
Joe Orton and Music

Music was important to Joe Orton from an early age. His unpublished teenage diary, kept sporadically between 1949 and 1951, shows that he saved desperately for records in the face of poverty. He also lovingly designed and constructed a record cabinet out of wood from his gran's old dresser. It is striking that, despite the evolution of pop and rock in the early 1950s, Orton shows no interest in popular music as a teenager. Instead, he buys classical, ballet and opera. His appreciation of this music is undoubtedly sincere. The recordings are described as “lovely” or “wonderful” and Verdi's *Macbeth* is “Super de dooper”. As such a camp, mannered phrase suggests, music played a pivotal role in Orton's adolescent process of self-fashioning and social advancement. According to cultural critic Wayne Koestenbaum, prior to gay liberation, many homosexuals felt a special affinity with opera, which signalled “membership of a sexual subculture”. Koestenbaum observes that, in a historical moment when homosexuality was “the love that dare not speak its name”, the “grandiosity of operatic utterance” offered “wild compensation for the listener's silence”. The heightened theatricality and artifice of opera that conveys being-as-playing-a-role also has a powerful resonance for closeted or straight-acting gay men. Simultaneously, cross-dressing, castrati and travesti affirm gender and sexual difference. If ballet and opera give covert expression to Orton's emergent queerness, his immersion in high art (part of a programme of self-improvement) also helped him escape his working-class roots in provincial Leicester: the diary ends with him winning a scholarship to RADA and moving to London.

After RADA, Orton spent several years as an unsuccessful novelist but achieved success and celebrity as a playwright. Unpublished letters to his partner Kenneth Halliwell from New York, where Orton went to oversee the Broadway production of *Entertaining Mr Sloane*, reveal more about his musical tastes. Having decided that classical music is “a terrible racket”, Orton develops a passion for stage musicals. John M. Clum argues that gayness circulates through musical theatre, which has historically attracted a large number of gay men as its creators and audience. Like ballet and opera, the flamboyance of musical theatre, that renders it larger-than-life, appeals to sexual minorities who feel restricted in the everyday world. Although Orton was open about his sexuality with friends and associates, the criminalisation and pathologization of homosexuality forced him to be guarded beyond his immediate circle. He even pretended to be divorced when he contributed to a discussion about marriage on *The Eamonn Andrews Show*. In New York, Orton spends hours in “Goodies' record store” (most likely Sam Goody's on 9th Avenue) searching for LPs, including the music from *Pal Joey* (1940) and *Bells are Ringing* (1956). Working with composer Richard Rodgers, the homosexual lyricist Lorenz Hart wrote some of the most famous show tunes of the 1920s, 1930s and 1940s, many of which articulate unrequited or impossible love that resonated deeply with gay men. In *Pal Joey*, Hart's number “What Do I Care for a Dame?”, sung by the eponymous hero, exemplifies the sexual subtext that pervaded mid-century American musical theatre. The coded expression of desire makes Orton's interest in musicals understandable, although his disdain for the “poove” and “queeny” men also makes it surprising. Despite making a concerted effort to distance himself from the stereotypical image of the effeminate gay man through his muscular, tattooed, leather-clad body, Orton's collection of original cast albums indicates that he himself was something of a show queen.

If Orton's sexuality is reflected in his musical tastes, it can also be seen in his artistic influences. According to composer Ned Rorem, Orton's plays are very musical, and the records he buys in New York illuminate some of the sources that shape his work, such as Kurt Weill and Berthold Brecht's *The Threepenny Opera* (1928). Like this play set to music, which turns John Gay's *The Beggar's Opera* (1728) into musical theatre, Orton sought to subvert the boundary between high and popular art by mixing canonical literature with popular culture. *Loot*, for example, features characters who pastiche Shakespeare's *Henry IV* (Hal) and Arthur Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes (Inspector Truscott). Parallels between the two plays point to Orton's debt to Weill and Brecht. In *The Threepenny Opera*, hints of homoeroticism in the relationship between Macheath and Chief of Police Tiger Brown contribute to an atmosphere of sexual ambiguity, amplified by songs inspired by Berlin cabaret, associated with hedonism and sexual decadence in the 1920s. *Loot*, which centres on the relationship between a policeman and a group of criminals, suggests sexual dissidence in the relationship between Hal and Dennis, and shares Brecht's satirical perspective on capitalism, justice and the hypocrisies of bourgeois society.





Orton's copy of *Pal Joey*, gifted to him by the William Morris Agency, New York, 1965. © Orton Estate



The New York letters also reveal Orton's taste for torch singers, a further sign of his queer musical sensibility. An anecdote that Orton shared with his friend Kenneth Williams about a potential pick-up illustrates the strong relationship between music and sexual identity. The man tells Orton that some of his sexual partners are "really manly and you'd never dream they were queer. Not from the look of them. But I can always tell 'cos they've all got LPs of Judy Garland. That's the big giveaway." In Goody's, Orton purchases an "LP of Ruth Etting singing Shine on Harvest Moon, Ten Cents a Dance, Shaking the Blues Away, At Sundown and a lot of others" and one of "Helen Morgan singing a lot of songs - Body and Soul, Bill, etc." Etting, one of the most prolific female recording artists of the 1930s, was dubbed "queen of the torch singers" and Morgan created the torch singer's tragic pose, perched on a piano, wringing a silk scarf between her hands. Dogged by romantic tragedy and resigned to suffering yet determined to survive, the torch singer's combination of vulnerability and resilience made her an essential part of gay culture. Like those who followed, such as Judy Garland and Dusty Springfield, Etting and Morgan produced melancholy songs about romantic suffering and sultry laments about lost or unrequited love that became gay anthems.

Another of Orton's musical interests, the big band sound of the 1940s, challenges the prevailing view that gay men don't like jazz. He purchases "Jimmy Dorsey, Bob Eberley and Helen O" (O'Connell), whose major hits include 'Amapola', 'Green Eyes' and 'Tangerine Song', the latter from *The Fleet's In* (1942), a film that belongs to that most outré of genres, the navy musical. Orton's enthusiasm for the big band poses a further challenge to his rough, tough public image. The Stan Kenton LP that he takes home to Halliwell, featuring catchy Latin rhythms like 'The Peanut Vendor', suggests that the bad boy of postwar British theatre was always ready to rumba. Moreover, the homoerotic appeal of Jimmy Dorsey's "fabulous" all-male big band is enhanced by the presence of the jazz diva. Like

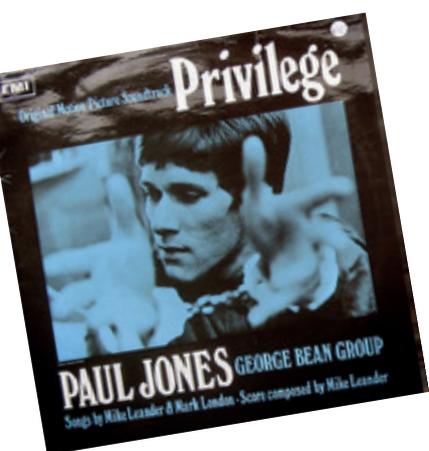
Ella Fitzgerald and Sarah Vaughan, Helen O’Connell embodied glamour and empowerment, inspiring identification by men who longed to be the object of male adoration and to exude sexual assertiveness.

Orton’s love of old records might be explained by Koestenbaum’s proposition that the man with a “quintessentially gay soul” has “retro” musical tastes inspired by the need to “invent precedent and origin”. Orton’s fascination with the past is further evidenced in his London diary: “K.H. and I went down to the record shop and bought some records. Old ones. For the collection. A Jessie Matthews, a Carl Brisson, the Boswell sisters, and an original recording of *Band Wagon* with Fred and Adele Astaire from 1931.” A queer aesthetic is suggested in the nostalgia of Orton’s list of 1930s singers, many of whom were sexual nonconformists. Dubbed “The Diva of Debauchery”, Matthews led a life of sexual notoriety that ended in a showbiz scandal when steamy letters to her married lover were read in court. She was also closely associated with gay writers. Matthews starred in *Ever Green*, a musical by Rodgers and Hart, and performed songs by other closeted gay writers such as Noël Coward and Cole Porter. Although he deems it “a dismal show”, Orton considers *The Band Wagon* “worth getting for the original rendering of ‘Night and Day’ and The Gold Diggers’ Song, ‘We’re in the Money’.” Both songs come from shows that epitomise the “pansy craze” of the 1930s and ‘40s: *The Gay Divorcee* and *Gold Diggers*. Based on stereotype, the foppish men or “sissies” that served as comic, secondary characters epitomise what is known as the “double operation” of musical theatre that simultaneously hides and manifests homosexuality on stage.

Orton’s preoccupation with the music of the past might be further explained by John Gill’s observation that the 1960s pop scene “seemed absolutely heterosexual”. Orton once told an interviewer “I like pop music” and his London diary records that he watched *Top of the Pops*. Although he deemed the songs featured on the programme “Mostly rubbish”, he enjoys Procol Harum’s ‘A Whiter Shade of Pale’ and The Kinks’ ‘Death of a Clown’. Here, the queerness of Orton’s musical predilections is reflected in his attraction to what is odd, aberrant or perverse as well as what is gay. Joe Queenan describes ‘A Whiter Shade of Pale’, a baroque song deeply indebted to Bach, as “resolutely anachronistic” and “one of the weirdest pop songs ever”. The Kinks’ guitarist Dave Davies, known as “Dave the Rave”, had relationships with men and women and Jon Savage includes The Kinks’ track ‘See My Friends’ on his CD compilation *Queer Noises ‘61-’78: From the Closet to the Charts* (2006). According to Savage, The Kinks were the “queerest of the sixties beat groups”.

Though Orton presented himself as a hardman, Lewis Morley saw him as “lamb posing as ram” and actor Kenneth Cranham described him as “cuddly”. The humiliation that Orton experienced when he applied for a US visa in 1965 partly explains his macho posturing. After being forced to undergo a medical examination, Orton was asked directly if he was homosexual and described as “effeminate” on the doctor’s report. Aware of the terrifying potential consequences of being read as queer (prison, aversion therapy, chemical castration), Orton likely felt reluctant to directly express any softness that might make him visible and vulnerable as a gay man in a culture hostile to homosexuality. Instead, he identifies with non-masculine men through pop, itself a feminine genre in contrast to the masculine “cock rock” of The Doors, The Who or Jimi Hendrix. He buys Donovan’s single ‘Sunshine Superman’. Orton likes The Beatles and the Stones but not Bob Dylan. Tommi Avicolli describes Donovan as “an effeminate folk-rock star” who exudes “gentle sensitivity”. According to James E. Perone, The Beatles, renowned for their emotional intensity and high voices, “blurred gender lines and gender stereotypes”. Mick Jagger flirted with androgyny and sexual ambiguity. In contrast, Paul Hodson argues that Dylan “contested many aspects of the dominant culture, but not its preferred styles of masculinity”. Unlike Orton, he also distanced himself from sexual promiscuity.

Orton’s preference for Beatles songs by McCartney rather than Lennon reflects his literal as well as his figurative gayness – his sense of fun and lust for life. He likes “very much” the light and jaunty ‘Penny Lane’ but is less keen on the eerie, hallucinogenic, somnambulistic B-side: ‘Strawberry something’. As Beatles scholar Ian MacDonald explains, ‘Penny Lane’ is as essentially McCartneysque as ‘Strawberry Fields Forever’ is Lennonian. Veering away from the more experimental, psychedelic songs on the *Sgt. Pepper* album, Orton admits to liking some tracks more than others: ‘With a Little Help From My Friends’ and ‘When I’m Sixty-Four’ and ‘A Day in the Life’. He tends to favour the comforting,



cheeky, McCartney songs, or songs in which McCartney’s upbeat tempo counteracts what MacDonald calls Lennon’s “sorrow and sarcasm”.

Orton also admits to a penchant for “stupid songs” like ‘Marta, Rambling Rose of the Wildwood’. He once told an interviewer, “I’ve just bought a record of Carl Brisson when he does a scene from *The Merry Widow*. It’s utterly absurd and ludicrous, but he does it in style – the scene where he’s telling the girl off because she doesn’t love him, it’s all done in a sort of absurd style, but it works and it’s very moving...” Orton’s contradictory response to the song suggests an attempt to manage emotion (coded feminine) with irony (suggestive of masculine detachment). He has a similar response to numbers from the musical *The Desert Song*. In his London diary, Orton’s appreciation of this musical appears archly ironic: he and Halliwell laugh “at the ridiculous lines...v. discreetly because most of the audience (of old ladies) were taking it seriously and enjoying it.” Nonetheless, his praise seems genuine: “wonderful numbers. High romance. Very moving in spite of their silliness”. Comic songs, which tend to eradicate emotion, are another favourite genre. Orton tries to purchase the soundtrack to the film *Privilege* (1967), a comedy starring Manfred Mann vocalist Paul Jones about a pop star whose career is controlled by the church. He finds but does not buy the record because “the only numbers I wanted – the pop versions of Onward Christian Soldiers and Jerusalem - weren’t on it. So they can stuff it up their fundamental gap.”

Like his plays, Orton’s music articulates a camp aesthetic by stressing artifice, imitation and irony. He bought an album of hit songs of 1967: not originals but songs “faked... to sound like the originals”. His record collection certainly contains plenty of kitsch. The London diary states: “Went into the West End. Bought records of ‘Peek-a-boo’, ‘Release Me’ and ‘I was Kaiser Bill’s Batman.’” The New Vaudeville’s hit ‘Peek-a-boo’ was a whimsical pastiche of a pre-war song. Whistling Jack Smith’s ‘I was Kaiser Bill’s Batman’ was an equally perverse one hit wonder. Alongside these novelty songs, Orton purchases the UK’s highest selling single of 1967 and the record that prevented ‘Penny Lane’/ ‘Strawberry Fields’ from reaching Number One: Engelbert Humperdinck’s schmaltzy ballad ‘Release Me’. Despite his close association with The Beatles, Orton chose to buy a record by a mainstream crooner over one by the Fab Four. “Saw the Beatles LP but didn’t buy it. Shall hear it first”, he wrote. Though Orton has come to be known as the proto-punk playwright who inspired avant-garde artists like David Bowie and cult indie pop bands such as The Smiths and Pulp, he embraced the housewives’ heartthrob and declared himself a ‘Humperdincker’.

The ‘60s were in full swing by 1967, when Orton’s life came to an untimely end during the Summer of Love. Nonetheless, despite his reputation for anarchy, Orton’s queer ear produced a soundtrack to the decade more suited to swaying than swinging.

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— LISTEN TO THE SONGS DISCUSSED IN THIS ARTICLE VIA THE SPOTIFY PLAYLIST: ‘A QUEER EAR: JOE ORTON AND MUSIC’.