



## **#MusicMonday: How Being Queer or Trans Affects Success in the Music Industry**

*by Ryan Cassata*

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After touring quite a bit this year, I've realized how my queer and trans identity has affected my music career. I can see both the positives and the negatives. I personally believe that being trans and queer makes the mountain of the music industry a little harder to climb, but with lots of work and determination, I believe that it is still possible to get to the top.

Touring has showcased both positives and negatives to me. Getting to connect with folks who deeply relate to the lyrics in my music has been one of the greatest successes for me and a true source of joy in my life. Being out has given me that gift.

However, there are certain areas of the country (and world) where I might not feel as open to playing my song "Daughter" in which I very openly discuss being trans in the

lyrics. That's because I am fearing my physical safety. I also have noticed that more people come out to my show when it's in a safe place like an LGBT Center versus a dive bar. Safety is one of the biggest concerns for LGBTQ people so choosing venues is something that needs to be a bit more strategic. Choosing places that feel safer for me and my following is sometimes not easy, but it does make for a smoother show.

I've had a lot of people rally behind me to help me rise. I've also been able to form a community of queer musicians in hopes to all grow our careers together. There's lots of cross promotion that happens. Queer artists supporting other queer artists.

There are also lots of queer newspapers like Billboard Pride who specifically covers queer artists, The Rainbow Times, Out Magazine, The Advocate, etc...who help LGBTQ folks to get the coverage that they need to rise in this competitive industry. Luckily, going into 2020, there are a lot more resources for queer artists. A lot more than there has ever been which makes rising in this industry a bit easier than it was, say, 5 years ago.

I've spoken with other queer-identified artists about their personal experience with these topics. I've asked them all to keep in mind three questions in our conversation. 1. Do you think being LGBTQ has affected your success in the music industry? 2. What's been your most positive experience? 3. What's been your most negative experience?

[Mylo Choy, a Brooklyn-based singer-songwriter](#), who identifies as queer/trans/non-binary also feels that queer artists are likely to support other queer artists saying: *“Queer people know what it is to not have the support of others, of course not just within music. It has been my experience that many queer people strive to support one another, and I have felt encouraged because of this. It's hard to speak to success and how it is measured. If success is feeling free to make what you want to make, so far I feel I have it because of being queer and not despite of it.”*

[Lucas/Luna, guitarist from Long Island based band Title Wav](#), who identifies as pansexual and gender fluid, hasn't felt discriminated at shows but has faced some discrimination and harassment from other musicians in past collaborations. They shared: *“My worst experience was a band I was in a year ago, where the drummer and guitarist kept ripping on me for my sexuality and gender identity, and constantly dropping slurs around me, knowing it'd piss me off.”* Their most positive experience has been: *“playing in my band Title.Wav. Everyone is super accepting of my identity, and having other band members who are LGBT is certainly very helpful.”*

[Kat Hamilton, a queer/fluid Los-Angeles based singer-songwriter](#), shares that the way she sees the music industry is different because of her LGBTQ identity. Her identity also

impacts who she is more comfortable to collaborate with. *“I prioritize working with other queer collaborators and being a part of queer projects. It affects how I engage with cis het men, more so than women. I’m more guarded around them.”*

[San Francisco based singer-songwriter, Shawna Virago](#) has been out as a trans woman for nearly 30 years. Shawna shares openly: *“The mainstream music industry has never held any allure for me. I can’t think of more than 5–6 or artists who I consider mainstream, that I have any respect for. I’ve been playing music as an out-transwoman for nearly 30 years and honestly, there was no place for me in the music business. Luckily, I have found community with like-minded oddballs in outsider music and art scenes. Yes, I have experienced sexism and transphobia in recording studios, guitar stores, and years ago when I started out and was usually the only trans person in the club. Nonetheless, I feel very lucky to still be here and I appreciate that I have managed to carve out some alternative music space for myself.”*

[Los Angeles-based singer and performer Leonardo Martinez](#), shared how pride festivals have helped to launch his career as a gay musician and attributes these performances to his success. He believes that LGBTQ community has been very welcoming even with his genre of music. *“I was shocked at how much support and love I received because performing my original Christian music at gay pride events isn’t a thing that would ever happen considering the Church vs LGBTQ history. But committees from various Pride events around the country were inviting me knowing who I am and offering.”*

Mya Byrne, a singer-songwriter from San Francisco, who identifies as a butch trans dyke has had some hardships since coming out. *“I’ve had people in the mainstream folk-rock-Americana scene, where my own music falls genre-wise, cancel gigs they’d promised me before I transitioned because they didn’t know “how to market that” (direct quote).” Mya talks about how it’s harder to rise as a trans musician than a cis musician, who she continues to play and work her way up. “It’s discouraging, yet I go on. I know I rock, and the folks who do book me, who play my music on the radio, and who come and dance at my shows, know that’s true, too. Yet it feels since transition like the metrics have changed. I don’t know how to measure career success anymore, and I work hard every day to make sure I’m doing the best I can and pay the bills. I think the biggest problem within the industry is not just the overall lack of representation — it’s the lack of acknowledgement, too. When Teddy Geiger gets nominated for a Grammy but doesn’t win, when Laura Jane Grace or Kim Petras are the only trans people in popular music that most people have heard of, when we all know there are so many, in so many differing genres — who aren’t white, who aren’t punk or pop — we’ve got a problem. Trans excellence abounds. We trans and queer folks are emerging and rising to a place of greater visibility, and that has everything to do with our persistence, the unique time in our history that we are currently in, the opportunities we’ve created for each other, and our talent. I want to be on those stages with my friends, kicking ass, without any asterisk, and I also don’t want the next generation to go through the hurt that being passed over entails, or to be forced to adhere to cisnormativity to be accepted*

*as a valid artist in a commercial setting. There's a place for all of us at the table — and where there isn't, the industry should roll up their sleeves and build a bigger table.”*

I totally agree with Mya. There is enough space for all of us. LGB artists are starting to rise in the industry (example: Troye Sivan, King Princess, Lil Nas X). The trans community still feels far behind but I am confident that change will come for trans musicians soon.