

Adored Pop Star or Freaky Artiste: The evolution of Harry Styles

HANNAH JOYCE BANKS

Harry Styles is one of the most popular faces in the music industry, yet the scholarly discourse around him is lacking. Perhaps he is seen to be not worthy of study given his 'artificial' beginnings in a boy band created for the X Factor. However, the evolution of Styles has been a complex journey and his current presentation of fluid masculinity and fashion, undefined sexuality, and political activation, seem to demonstrate an original self. This article is a counter claim to the many ways that Styles has been constructed, instead presenting him as a cultural figure worthy of study. The discussion also contains discourse about the phenomenon and gender performance of boy bands, to explore Styles's evolution from a teenage heartthrob in chinos and polo shirts in 2010, to becoming the 2019 host of the Met Gala in a sheer blouse, heeled boots, and a pearl earring.

KEY WORDS: Harry Styles; Boyband; Masculinity; Pop stars; Pop musics.

Singer, songwriter, actor and boy band alumni Harry Styles released his sophomore solo album, *Fine Line*, in December of 2019. For the unaware or 'uninitiated', Styles made his name in the record-breaking British/Irish boy band One Direction, who were formed on the *X Factor* in 2010 (Gross 2018: 5). Five albums, four world tours and one movie later they went on an indefinite hiatus in 2015. Since then, all five members have released one or two solo albums and Styles also made his acting debut in Christopher Nolan's war epic *Dunkirk* (2017). However, this list of achievements does not really begin to cover the potential impact of Styles. Allyson Gross (2018: 6) astutely describes Styles as 'a pop star of infinitely dissectible proportions' and writes that 'in the tabloids, his love life and sexuality are fodder for the masses; he is alternatively called a womanizer, a teen heartthrob, a queer icon, and the second coming of David Bowie'. This is a lot of identities for any one person to embody, especially when those identities and fame were thrust upon someone as a teenager and they are still now only in their mid-20s. In a 2019 *Rolling Stone* profile, Rob Sheffield (2019) described Styles as a 'curious kid who can't decide whether to be the world's most ardently adored pop star, or a freaky artiste. So, he decides to be both'. Being both seems to be working for Styles because at the time of writing, *Fine Line* is still in *Billboard's* Top 20 on the album chart after 67 weeks and his single 'Watermelon Sugar' climbed to number one on the *Billboard* Hot 100 chart in mid-August of 2020 (Trust 2020).

Styles has been one of the most recognisable and popular faces in the music industry for a decade, and yet the scholarly discourse around him is significantly lacking. Perhaps he has been seen to be not worthy of study given his 'artificial' beginnings in a boy band created for the *X Factor*. However, the evolution of Styles has been a complex journey from a manufactured young sex symbol to a man of his own creation. This development slowly occurred over the last decade and continually refers to the ways Styles was constructed by record labels and the media as a teenager. His current presentation of fluid masculinity and fashion, undefined sexuality, and political activation, seem to demonstrate an original and true self. While notoriously private with his personal life (except what he reveals through music), the current performance of 'Harry Styles' is not the presentation of an alter ego or a filter for self-protection, it seems to be genuine. In this article, I am presenting a counter-claim to the many ways that Styles has been constructed, instead presenting him as a cultural figure worthy of study. I believe that Styles's political activation began in One Direction, but the issues he was presented with were narcissistic (his sexuality, relationship status, and fashion choices). Perhaps this is a result of how boybands are portrayed in the media. Once you are branded as 'the sexy one' or 'the ladies' man' it is a difficult stereotype to escape. Nevertheless, throughout One Direction, Styles waved Pride flags on stage, lent his voice to movements like #HeForShe, and continually defended his largely female fanbase if they were denigrated in the media.

In order to discuss Styles's evolution I will outline some of the literature that does exist, and explore his journey from a teenage heartthrob in chinos and polo shirts in 2010, through his burgeoning socio-political stance (or increasing awareness), to becoming the 2019 host of the Met Gala in a sheer blouse, heeled boots, and a pearl earring.

Since the age of sixteen when he first auditioned for the *X Factor* in the United Kingdom in 2010, Harry Styles has been surrounded by cameras. The now infamous footage of a devastated Styles, Niall Horan, Louis Tomlinson, Liam Payne, and Zayn Malik being told that they were going home, only to be brought back on stage as a new boy band has been viewed nearly four million times on *YouTube* alone ('The new groups – *X Factor* Bootcamp' 27 Sept 2010). One Direction may have finished third on *X Factor* but were immediately signed and sold millions of records worldwide to become one of the most successful acts to emerge from a reality talent competition. Despite this success, One Direction were often dismissed due to their beginnings as a manufactured boy band, a trend that 'can be traced back to the formation of The Monkees in the mid-1960s' (Gregory 2019: 11). In the article 'Fashioning a Post Boy Band Masculinity: On the Seductive Dreamscape of Zayn's Pillowtalk', Kai Arne Hansen (2018: 196) posits that 'The lack of autonomy that is commonly associated with boy bands positions them as inauthentic in the opinions of many audiences'. While it is important to note that despite fulfilling many of the expected criteria of boy bands, (clean and harmless masculinities, 'light hearted romantic sentiments' in their music, generally not playing instruments, and 'representations of sustained adolescence'), One Direction reinvigorated the format and according to Hansen distanced themselves 'from some of the hallmarks of the 1990s boy band aesthetic, such as matching outfits and synchronized choreography' (Hansen 2018: 197).

However, as Georgina Gregory (2019: 8) discusses in *Boy Bands and the Performance of Pop Masculinity*, 'what exactly constitutes a boy band is contestable'. Gregory (2019: 11) writes that, '[m]ost observers would have no difficulty in seeing the Beatles as a prototype for bands like Take That and One Direction, but it is hard to imagine the Rolling Stones fulfilling the label's prerequisites'. But even if One Direction marked themselves as different from their predecessors by not dancing and from the third album writing their own music, they were still born in a televised reality competition. This is a format which contests the 'long-cherished and Romantic vision' of the struggling artist who fights the commercial mainstream (Gregory 2019: 5). Gregory (2019: 5) asserts that this means 'unlike auteurs, who occupy a privileged place in the canon and academic literature, identikit pop groups have

always hovered on the margins of respectability'. Like the differing definitions and characteristics of boy bands, One Direction's rejection from the canon and derision from critics and scholars is complex. Nevertheless, they are absolutely worthy of study and as Gregory (2019: 5) writes, 'If nothing else, boy bands make us question the fetishization of auteurs and virtuosos, inviting us to reflect upon the fragility of masculine authority if it is so reliant on evidence of self-authored music or mastery of an electric guitar'.

Referencing Gayle Wald, Hansen argues that another reason boy bands are dismissed is due to their largely female fan base. Hansen (2018: 197) writes that the 'feminized mass of consumers with whom commercial artists are conflated' devalues 'boy bands on the basis of their popularity among female fans'. Harry Styles himself has tackled this judgemental perception and in an interview with Cameron Crowe for *Rolling Stone* in 2017 he said,

Who's to say that young girls who like pop music – short for popular, right? – have worse musical taste than a 30-year-old hipster guy ... Young girls like The Beatles. You gonna tell me they're not serious? How can you say young girls don't get it? They're our future. Our future doctors, lawyers, mothers, presidents, they kind of keep the world going. Teenage-girl fans – they don't lie. If they like you, they're there. They don't act 'too cool.' They like you, and they tell you (Crowe 2017).

However, at the height of One Direction's success in 2013 in the middle of their first stadium world tour, they were being derided by the 30-year-old hipster guy and their fanbase of teenage girls were constantly shamed and described as crazy. For example, in the incredibly problematic 2013 cover story for *GQ*, Jonathan Heaf described a One Direction concert thus:

Inside the venue a hormone bomb has gone off: 20,000 females all turning themselves inside out, some almost literally, to the sight of Harry Styles, Niall Horan, Zayn Malik, Louis Tomlinson and Liam Payne. *GQ*'s overriding feeling (as a 34-year-old man in a Burberry biker jacket with a notepad and pen) is one of hapless isolation, marooned between a 20-year-old mother of three girls to my left and five screaming teenagers all aged between 15 and 17 to my right. I am an interloper trapped within Harry Styles' very own *Lynx* advert - I'm scared, bewildered and ever so slightly deaf (Heaf 2015).

Among other hideous examples of sexism – Heaf described the power of boy bands as being able to 'turn a butter-wouldn't-melt-teenage girl into a rabid, knicker-

wetting banshee' (Heaf 2015) – he also interviewed the members of One Direction. Heaf cornered the then 19-year-old Styles on his own, coerced him into revealing how many sexual partners he had, and then shamed Styles for the number being too low for a rock star:

GQ: Do you know how many people you've slept with?

Harry: I know the number of people I've slept with, yes.

GQ: What is that number?

Harry: I'm definitely not telling you!

GQ: Can you give me a rough, ballpark figure?

Harry: No!

GQ: Say "yes" or "no". Less than 100?

Harry: No!

GQ: So higher than 100?

Harry: No, it's definitely less than 100...

GQ: Lower than 50?

Harry: Yes, lower than 50.

GQ: Lower than 30?

Harry: I'm not doing this! You're cornering me!

GQ: Come on you're a rock star. OK, less than ten.

Harry: Yes. Two people. I've only ever had sex with two people.

GQ: I don't believe you.

Harry: Well, that's my answer. Read from it what you will! (Heaf 2015).

This is inappropriate journalism practice, especially considering that Styles was still a teenager, which makes this interrogation even more violating. Seven years later however, that very same journalist published another GQ article about the sleep story that Styles recorded for the meditation app *Calm* in July 2020. Heaf (2020) states that the sleep story was helping him through quarantine for COVID-19. He writes, 'Styles' voice pours over your troubles like runny honey over a toasted brioche bun ... Listening to Styles speak in this way, freely, even a little comedically, and certainly a touch erotically, has allowed me to consider prying open my own iron tautness, my own rigidity' (Heaf 2020). This strikes a very different tone and perhaps signifies some of the change that our society has gone through in this last decade. Although more cynically, it could be that Heaf takes Styles more seriously now that he's not in a boy band, is a solo artist who sometimes plays guitar on stage and is friends with Stevie Nicks. This is an issue that Gregory (2019: 5) also challenges when she questions the assumption that 'the texts and practices of mainstream pop bands have no value' and asks 'why we are only invited to appreciate these artists [boy band members] once they pursue a

solo career, reject pop or write their own music?'. While Styles is now on the solo artist pathway, he has never dismissed his boy band beginnings. He has carried One Direction and the fans with him into this second phase of his career and is carving out an original space within the current mainstream.

There have also been some other examples to suggest that boy bands and their fandoms are not as derided as in the past. The documentary *I Used To Be Normal: A Boyband Fangirl Story* (2018), the already mentioned Georgina Gregory's academic text (2019), and pop critic Maria Sherman's book *Larger Than Life: A History of Boy Bands from NKOTB to BTS* (2020), all suggest that more attention is now being paid to boybands and the fans that love them. Sherman also reviewed *I Used to Be Normal* for the feminist media website *Jezebel*, where she describes the documentary as 'undeniably delightful' (Sherman 2018). The documentary focuses on the fans behind boy bands without ever ridiculing or shaming them, and as Sherman (2018) writes, it is absolutely 'a celebration of adolescent absurdity, of sexuality, of the independence that comes with claiming ownership of an art artefact as your own for the very first time'.

Despite these cultural shifts, the academic discourse about Harry Styles in particular is still limited. This strikes me as odd, especially considering his evolution since One Direction began their hiatus in 2015. Gregory (2019: 7) writes that 'the soft masculinity purveyed by boy bands could even be deemed revolutionary. The boys' open expressions of vulnerability, the ease with which they express their emotions and their commitment to romantic love set them apart'. Styles is especially revolutionary in this regard because he has carried this soft masculinity with him into his solo career. He has never rejected his beginnings in a boy band and has played 'What Makes You Beautiful' (One Direction's first single) at every one of his live solo gigs. When boy band members go solo, they often completely reconfigure their image, explore a much more sexualised and hard masculinity, and there can be a lot of pressure for them to live up to their previous success. Examples of this can be seen in the early solo releases from Robbie Williams and his video for 'Rock DJ', the explicit content of Justin Timberlake's album *FutureSex/LoveSounds*, and Zayn Malik's first solo single 'Pillowtalk' which was released a year after he left One Direction. For the members of One Direction it is almost impossible to live up to their previous success considering that in five years they released five albums and did four world tours, two of which were in stadiums. While Styles's first eponymous album from 2017 was fairly well received by critics, in 2019 Styles said, 'When I listen to the first album now, I can hear all the places where I feel like I was playing it safe because I just didn't want to get it wrong' ('Harry Styles – Zane Lowe 'Fine Line' Interview' 22 Nov 2019). While this may be true

to some extent there were still risks involved. But when Styles released his first solo single, a 6-minute-long Bowie inspired epic, and it shot to number one on many music charts, the risk clearly paid off.

Styles also continued to push boundaries in terms of his fashion choices, especially on his first solo world tour. His concert wear was a blend of masculine tailoring and silhouettes mixed with glam feminine fabrics and colours. The Gucci sequined blouses, Charles Jeffrey jumpsuits, ruffles and velvet flares were a distinct departure from his 2015 concert style of black skinny jeans and t-shirts, occasionally with gold boots or a Saint Laurent patterned shirt. One gets a sense of liberation from the solo era Styles, an artist and adult coming into their own. In a profile for *The Guardian* when *Fine Line* was released, interviewer Tom Lamont interrogated Styles about these fashion choices and his sexuality. Lamont (2019) suggests that some of Styles's outfits 'have fed into an important political discussion about gendered fashion', and claims that the sheer blouse and pearl earring that Styles wore while co-hosting the Met Gala in New York in 2019, 'challenged a lot of stubborn preconceptions about who gets to wear what'. In the interview Lamont also discussed the 'popular perception' that Styles is bisexual and wonders whether anyone has ever directly asked him about it (Lamont 2019). Styles responded by wondering why that question is even asked and said, 'It's not like I'm sitting on an answer, and protecting it, and holding it back ... It's: *who cares?* Does that make sense? It's just: *who cares?*' (Lamont 2019, original emphasis). When pushed further about whether his fashion, lyrics and album art are virtue signalling, Styles said:

Am I sprinkling in nuggets of sexual ambiguity to try and be more interesting? No. In terms of how I wanna dress, and what the album sleeve's gonna be, I tend to make decisions in terms of collaborators I want to work with. I want things to look a certain way. Not because it makes me look gay, or it makes me look straight, or it makes me look bisexual, but because I think it looks cool. And more than that, I dunno, I just think sexuality's something that's fun (Lamont 2019).

Discussions of sexuality and relationships have followed Styles his entire career, from being directly asked by interviewers as a teenager whether he was the womaniser of One Direction, to more recently being asked which of his solo songs are about his famous ex-partners. In the 2019 *Rolling Stone* profile Sheffield (2019) writes that, 'Harry likes to cultivate an aura of sexual ambiguity, as overt as the pink polish on his nails. He's dated women throughout his life as a public figure, yet he has consistently refused to put any kind of label on his sexuality'. On tour with One Direction, but much more consistently on his first solo tour in 2017/18, Styles

waved Pride, bisexual and transgender flags, along with the Black Lives Matter flag, usually during the One Direction cover he and his band performed of 'What Makes You Beautiful'. One of his guitars also features Pride and Black Lives Matters stickers, and one that reads 'End Gun Violence'. When Sheffield asked Styles what those flags represent and mean to him on stage, Styles replied:

I want to make people feel comfortable being whatever they want to be ... Maybe at a show you can have a moment of knowing that you're not alone. I'm aware that as a white male, I don't go through the same things as a lot of the people that come to the shows. I can't claim that I know what it's like, because I don't. So I'm not trying to say, 'I understand what it's like.' I'm just trying to make people feel included and seen (Sheffield 2019).

The growing political allyship of Harry Styles has also been mutually constructed with his fan base. In the article 'To wave a flag: Identification, #BlackLivesMatter, and populism in Harry Styles fandom', Allyson Gross (2020) suggests that Styles is an empty signifier and that the 'fans relate to him as a populist unifier and collective representative of the fandom's values, and mobilize his image for their own political purpose'.¹ Gross (2020) writes that many of Styles's statements where he evokes uncontroversial and vague ideas of 'togetherness', are 'Politics Lite'. This extends to the slogan that adorns his merchandise, his branding, and even a song title on *Fine Line*, 'Treat People With Kindness'. While it is a vague sentiment, adopting this ethos of kindness is perhaps a reaction to how Styles was treated by the media when he was first catapulted to stardom. It also could be read as a message to his fans/stans to continue practising kindness in an age where the backlash or cancellation by a group of fans against a figure can be incredibly harsh. Gross (2020) also suggests that despite Styles being hesitant to publicly discuss his politics (beyond supporting various causes or giving to charities), 'his fans have repeatedly made his shows political spaces ... fans brought LGBTQ+ Pride flags and Black Lives Matter signs with the intent to not only affirm their own identities within the "safe space" of his concerts (Khan 2017), but also to receive recognition and support from Styles himself'. In her article, Gross (2020) argues that in those 'safe spaces' fans are attempting to 'shift the pop star's own performed politics'. Frustrated that Styles was only picking up Pride flags during One Direction tours and at the beginning of his first solo tour in 2017, fans began bringing Black Lives Matter signs and flags, until they eventually were picked up and waved by Styles and Black Lives Matter stickers were added to his guitar. Gross (2020) argues that Styles is a signifier and that he 'becomes a representative embodiment of his own fandom's values through the mobilization of his image

toward support for the #BlackLivesMatter movement'. I believe this suggests a reciprocal relationship between Styles and his fans. Through his expanding political allyship and his attempts to make fans feel safe at his concerts, fans respond in turn by pushing Styles further and challenging him to do more.

This mobilisation of Styles continued in 2020 in the wake of George Floyd's death and the Black Lives Matter protests that swept around the world. In an article for *Rolling Stone* Brittany Spanos interviewed several Black pop music stars who were frustrated at their idols only doing the bare minimum. Spanos describes a fan's reaction after they encountered Styles at a Black Lives Matter protest in Hollywood in June:

'I had seen figures like him at the Women's March and protests against Trump four years ago, but this is specifically for black lives', Angela says. 'This is specifically for my life, for my community. Harry Styles is at a Black Lives Matter protest. This is something I wouldn't have believed if someone had told me this two years ago' (Spanos 2020).

Prior to attending the protests in Hollywood, Styles had shared petitions on his social media accounts, but fans demanded more. Styles then wrote a longer post on Instagram and Twitter acknowledging his own privilege, promising to donate bail funds and signalling his desire to educate himself. But for fans like Angela, encountering him at a protest was different. Spanos goes on to describe their interaction in detail:

When they were face to face, she told him about her experience at his and One Direction's shows: the sea of white faces, her own developing sense of black identity, and the way she never felt certain that the inclusivity he preached was truly meant to include people who look like her. The masked Styles listened intently and gave Angela a hug before they parted ways. 'To see him out there ... it was just great to feel seen', Angela says. For black pop stars like Angela, that encounter with Styles was a rare moment of visibility in a genre with a loaded history of erasure (Spanos 2020).

The growing political activation and allyship has been a significant part of Styles's evolution from teenage heartthrob to original solo artist. This has also been supported by Styles himself growing more comfortable with his own identity expression as a young man with undefined sexuality and a fluid masculine sartorial presentation.

This shift absolutely began while he was still in One Direction taking tentative fashion 'risks' and calling out

interviewers for essentialist readings of gender. Styles did not simply emerge as an enlightened feminist for the 2017 Cameron Crowe interview that I quoted earlier in this article. It is interesting and worth exploring how this evolution began as a result of his experience in a boy band. Gregory (2019: 2) states that 'boy bands convey important information about gender identity', even if only a few academics have explored this subject. Gregory (2019: 3-4) writes that boy bands 'have provided young men with a vehicle for the expression of feelings that may be socially suppressed ... In particular, millennial boy bands illustrate how modern masculinity is less monolithic than previously, and is fraught with insecurity and instability'. While the scholarly discourse on these ideas may still be limited, there are many personal essays and think pieces which explore this. For example, in Alana Massey's 2017 essay 'Hold Your Laughter: Men Could Learn Something From One Direction' for *Mel Magazine*, she writes:

What if young masculinity didn't multiply its toxicity when it gathered, but acted as its neutralizer, or even an amplifier of the best that boys have to offer? One Direction had fans who adored them, not just for the love they professed for girls in their pop songs, but for how deeply they appeared to love each other. They worshipped fun rather than chaos; they elevated and adored girls and women, and were at their best when they were in each others' company (Massey 2017).

As Massey suggests, the members of One Direction are a unique example of positive pop masculinity and each member still discusses their time together fondly, while constantly reassuring fans that they will probably reunite someday. The exception to this being Zayn Malik. Following his abrupt departure from One Direction in 2015, he rebranded himself just as 'Zayn' and completely erased his boy band beginnings. Hansen (2018: 194-195) argues that 'Zayn navigates his transition into a solo career by setting up a diametrical relation between his past and present selves, thus attempting to shed the strictures of the various prejudices and expectations commonly associated with boy bands'. The song and video for 'Pillowtalk' contains provocative themes, explicit imagery and lyrics that deliberately draw connections between sex and violence, culminating in describing his bed with real life partner Gigi Hadid (who also appears in the video) as, 'Fucking and fighting on. It's our paradise and it's our war zone' (Malik 2021). The comparison of gender identity and the different performances of masculinity between Styles and Zayn absolutely demonstrates Gregory's point that 'modern masculinity is less monolithic' than it has been in the past (Gregory 2019: 4). Hansen (2018: 208-9) argues that Zayn completely rejected his past self and that,

' "Pillowtalk" presents Zayn's relaunched persona as dangerous and compelling', through 'an audio-visual theatricalisation of destructive romance that sensualises female nudity and showcases male virility'. While Zayn perhaps chose the more expected path post-boy band, conversely, the solo career of Styles is much more representative of both his past and present selves, melding them to create a genuine expression of self. In his first solo music video for 'Sign Of The Times', Styles is alone and literally flying through a deserted landscape. This was then followed by the video for 'Kiwi' which depicts children dressed in Gucci suits having a cupcake war. Styles then enters the fray with an armload of puppies. When his music videos do involve other people, they are not aggressively sexualised, for example the fantastical love story between a boy and his fish in 'Adore You', or the enthusiastic celebration of women's pleasure in 'Watermelon Sugar'. In another direct contrast to Zayn's rejection of his past, in the 2017 film *Harry Styles: Behind the Album*, Styles happily discussed life in and after One Direction. He said:

When you leave a band, or boy band, you feel like you have to go the complete other direction and kind of say, 'Don't worry everyone, I hated it, it wasn't me'. [But] I loved it. I wouldn't be here if it wasn't for that band, and I don't feel like I have to apologise for it. I never felt like I was faking it (*Harry Styles: Behind the Album* 2017).

Styles's presentation of fluid masculinity was evident in One Direction through his stage performance, behaviour in interviews, and his tentative experiments with fashion after he met his current stylist Harry Lambert seven years ago. But this fluidity has really blossomed over the first four years of his solo career. In December 2020, Styles appeared on the cover of American *Vogue* (the first solo male artist to do so), dressed in a lace-trimmed blue Gucci gown and tuxedo jacket. Ailish Wallace-Buckland (2021) wrote for *The Spinoff* that the 'conservative fallout from the cover focused on his apparent representation of the fall of masculinity in the west. "There is no society that can survive without strong men," tweeted US conservative commentator Candice Owens ... Owens condemned Styles' photoshoot and dress, and ended her tweet with a call to "bring back manly men" (Wallace-Buckland 2021). Styles playfully responded to the supposed controversy with an Instagram post of himself eating a banana and wearing a blue women's suit and ruffled blouse, accompanied by the caption 'Bring back manly men' (Harry Styles 2020). While the *Vogue* cover story and conservative backlash made headlines, Wallace-Buckland (2021) acknowledges that 'Styles is not the first to embrace androgynous style' and that 'in contemporary history, Black and brown queer, trans and non-binary people in particular have paved the way'. Styles is however continuing to push the mainstream

boundaries of fluid masculine and flamboyant fashion with every sartorial choice, especially with the ongoing partnership between Styles and Gucci's creative director Alessandro Michele. In the *Vogue* cover story Michele describes Styles as having 'the aura of an English rock-and-roll star – like a young Greek god with the attitude of James Dean and a little bit of Mick Jagger – but no one is sweeter. He is the image of a new era, of the way that a man can look' (Bowles 2020). This description is similar to the way Allyson Gross (2018: 6) describes him, but it would seem that as Styles matures and evolves as an artist that he has found a way to comfortably embody all these qualities.

The purposeful evolution of Styles is unique, as it is rare for members of boy bands to carry this level of success into their solo career. In the interview for the *Vogue* cover story, Styles reiterated to Hamish Bowles that he felt that he played it safe on his debut album. Bowles (2020) quotes Styles:

I think with the second album I let go of the fear of getting it wrong and...it was really joyous and really free. I think with music it's so important to evolve – and that extends to clothes and videos and all that stuff. That's why you look back at David Bowie with Ziggy Stardust or the Beatles and their different eras – that fearlessness is super inspiring (Bowles 2020).

Additionally, having just received a Grammy Award in 2021 for Best Pop Solo Performance for 'Watermelon Sugar', Styles now joins a small group – including Michael Jackson, Justin Timberlake and all the members of The Beatles – who have had success at the Grammys as solo artists post-boy band.

Throughout this article I have discussed the limited literature concerning Harry Styles, interwoven with discourse about the phenomenon and gender performance of boy bands, to explore how Styles has been constantly evolving over the past decade, into a pop culture figure worthy of study who is speaking back to previously demoralising narratives. While Styles could be read as a populist unifier who absorbs the political motives of his fan base, his gradual evolution and political activation suggests a performer and person who is defying the maligned trappings of a boy band to become an original expression of self. Perhaps Styles's delay in the adoption of #BlackLivesMatter is evidence of him maturing in the public eye, still encouraged and pushed by his fans, but also making up his own mind on reflection and attending a protest to affirm this position. Despite beginning in an 'inauthentic' reality television boy band, Styles has never rejected this past and instead carries it with him as he transforms into a magnetic and original artist. This growth was illustrated at the second Fine

Line album release concert he performed in London in December 2019. Styles let the crowd sing the final lyrics of 'Lights Up' on their own. His fans sang to him 'Do you know who you are?' and Styles replied, 'I do now' ('Lights Up Harry Styles Secret Show' 20 December 2019). The evolution of Styles from preppy boy band member to a mainstream representative of an alternative and fluid masculinity has taken place slowly over the decade of his career, and I have no doubt that he will continue to evolve. Harry Styles, adored pop star and a freaky artiste, is still at the beginning of his becoming.

References

- Bowles, H. 2020 'Playtime with Harry Styles', *Vogue* (US), 13 November <https://www.vogue.com/article/harry-styles-cover-december-2020> (accessed 10/04/2021).
- Crowe, C. 2017 '“Harry Styles” New Direction', *Rolling Stone*. 18 April <https://www.rollingstone.com/feature/harry-styles-new-direction-119432/> (accessed 1/10/2020).
- Gregory, G. 2019 *Boy Bands and the Performance of Pop Masculinity*, Routledge, New York DOI: doi.org/10.4324/9780429027574.
- Gross, A. 2018 'Sign(ifier) of the Times: On Pop Stars, Populism, and the Harry Styles Fandom', Unpublished dissertation in partial requirement for the degree of MA Media and Communications, Goldsmiths, University of London.
- 2020 'To wave a flag: Identification, #BlackLivesMatter, and populism in Harry Styles fandom', *Transformative Works and Cultures*, Vol. 32, 15 March (accessed 27/08/2020) DOI: 10.3983/twc.2020.1765.
- Hansen, K. 2018 'Fashioning a Post Boy Band Masculinity: On the Seductive Dreamscape of Zayn's Pillowtalk', *Popular Music and Society*, 41, 2: 194-212. DOI: 10.1080/03007766.2016.1242994
- Harry Styles' n.d. Artist Page, *Spotify* <https://open.spotify.com/artist/6KImCVD70vtloJWnq6nGn3> (accessed 17/09/2020).
- Harry Styles: *Behind the Album* 2017 Dir. Paul Dugdale <https://itunes.apple.com/us/music-movie/harry-styles-behind-the-album/1259614011>.
- Harry Styles [@harrystyles] 2020 'Bring back manly men', *Instagram* [Photograph], 2 December <https://www.instagram.com/p/CITD0senEDT/>.
- Harry Styles – Zane Lowe “Fine Line” 'Interview' 2019 *YouTube*, uploaded by Harry Styles, 22 November <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=moIOVVElffQ>
- Heaf, J. 2015 'This One Direction interview got us death threats' *GQ Magazine*, 24 August https://www.gq-magazine.co.uk/article/one-direction-gq-covers-interview?fbclid=IwAR1fLnhTv1RHISBmKfdzBTvg4aO2GXGt4TAAS8n-0DIksRQt2YUpa6_li4 (accessed 10/08/2020).
- 2020 'How Harry Styles became my Calm guru', *GQ Magazine*. 14 July <https://www.gq-magazine.co.uk/culture/article/harry-styles-calm-app> (accessed 10/08/2020).
- Khan, Aamina. 2017. "Harry Styles' Concerts are LGBTQ+ Safe Spaces." *them*, <https://www.them.us/story/harry-styles-concerts-are-lgbtq-safe-spaces> (accessed 10-08-1010).
- Lamont, T. 2019 'Harry Styles: I'm not just sprinkling in sexual ambiguity to be interesting', *The Guardian*. 14 December. <https://www.theguardian.com/music/2019/dec/14/harry-styles-sexual-ambiguity-dating-normal-rocking-a-dress> (accessed 20/08/2020).
- Malik, Z. 2021 'Pillowtalk', *Genius* <https://genius.com/Zayn-pillowtalk-lyrics> (accessed 14/04/2021).
- Massey, A. 2017 'Hold Your Laughter: Men Could Learn Something From One Direction', *Mel Magazine*. 3 May [https://melmagazine.com/en-us/story/hold-](https://melmagazine.com/en-us/story/hold-your-laughter-men-could-learn-something-from-one-direction)

- [your-laughter-men-could-learn-something-from-one-direction](https://melmagazine.com/en-us/story/hold-your-laughter-men-could-learn-something-from-one-direction) (accessed 19/10/2020).
- Sheffield, R. 2019 'The Eternal Sunshine of Harry Styles', *Rolling Stone*, 26 August <https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-features/harry-styles-cover-interview-album-871568/> (accessed 10/08/2020).
- Sherman, M. 2018 'I Used to Be Normal Centers the Fangirls at the Heart of the Boy Band Story', *Jezebel*. 21 November <https://themuse.jezebel.com/i-used-to-be-normal-centers-the-fangirls-at-the-heart-o-1830426620> (accessed 1/10/2020).
- Sherman, M. 2020, *Larger than Life: Boy bands from NKOTB to BTS, Black Dog & Leventhal Publishers*, New York.
- Spanos, B. 2020 'For Black Pop Stans, the Bare Minimum Is No Longer Enough', *Rolling Stone*. 5 August <https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-features/black-pop-stans-harry-styles-taylor-swift-bts-1021915/> (accessed 3/09/2020).
- Trust, G. 2020 'Harry Styles' "Watermelon Sugar" Surges to Top of Billboard Hot 100, Becoming His First No. 1.', *Billboard.com*. 10 August <https://www.billboard.com/articles/business/chart-beat/9431815/harry-styles-watermelon-sugar-hot-100> (accessed 13/08/2020).
- Wallace-Buckland, A. 2021 'On Harry Styles, campness and post-WWI men's fashion in New Zealand', *The Spinoff*, 5 April <https://thespinoff.co.nz/society/05-04-2021/the-nz-mens-magazine-that-celebrated-camp-80-years-before-harry-styles/> (accessed 10/04/2021).
- 2010 'The new groups – X Factor bootcamp (Full Version)', *YouTube*, uploaded by The X Factor UK, 27 September <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1yaD40dK31g>
- 2019 'Lights Up Harry Styles Secret Show Electric Ballroom London 19th December 2019' *YouTube*, uploaded by althea h, 20 December <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9RHJ9NLOprg>
- 2020 'Who Will Be The First Popstar To Actually Take Accountability For Their Fanbase?', *Junkee.com*. 29 July <https://junkee.com/popstars-responsibility-stans/263862>

Author

Hannah Banks is a theatre practitioner and academic originally from Aotearoa New Zealand. She has been teaching in tertiary education since 2011 and has worked as an actor, director, writer, producer, and production manager. She is one of the co-founders and creative directors of the award-winning theatre company My Accomplice, who have made over 20 productions together since forming in 2009. She has performed and toured all around Aotearoa New Zealand, including performances in the New Zealand Fringe Festival, Dunedin Fringe Festival, and New Zealand Comedy Festival. She was the recipient of The Richard Campion Accolade for Outstanding Performance at the Chapman Tripp Theatre Awards in Wellington in 2014 and she received a PGSA Postgraduate Teaching Award in 2017 for her work at Te Herenga Waka – Victoria University of Wellington. She also completed her PhD in Theatre in 2018 at Victoria University of Wellington. This groundbreaking research explored women in devised theatre in Aotearoa New Zealand. In 2020, Banks moved to Australia to take up a lecturing position in Theatre and Performance at the University of the Sunshine Coast. Her most recent publications include the article "Feminist Live Art in Aotearoa New Zealand: Bound and Unbound Tensions in the Work of Julia Croft, Virginia Frankovich, and Nisha Madhan" for Vol. 15 of *Performance Paradigm*, and the popular essay "Loving Harry Styles: On Fantasy Relationships and Self-Care" for *Pantograph Punch*.

End Note

1. See 'Who will be the first popstar to actually take accountability for their fan base' published on Junkee.com 29th July 2020.