

Grand River Rainbow Historical Project

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celebrating the lives and times of rainbow folk in Grand River country

Rainbow Chorus Events (1995-)

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Narrative for "Sing and Swing" concert

*Requires a number of narrators and two female voices for the love letters.
This calls for 4 to 6 narrators (some gender suggestions are given), but it could be done by a single narrator, or by two narrators (one male, one female?) alternating parts.*

1. Another op'nin', another show

Narrator 1 (male):

That song from the musical "Kiss Me Kate" is the kind of music that flooded Broadway and dance halls in the first half of the 20th Century, the music we'll be singing tonight. The songwriter, Cole Porter, was one of the big names in the early jazz era.

Porter was born in 1891 to a wealthy Indiana family. His career got started when, as a student at Yale, he gained renown for writing football fight songs. This might explain why, later in life, he showed a preference for big, strong men.

In July 1917, after writing his first Broadway flop, Porter headed to wartorn Europe and Paris, where he flourished socially. He lied to the American Press about working with the French Foreign Legion and French Army. This allowed him to live as a wealthy American socialite while being regarded as a war hero back home, a reputation he encouraged throughout his life. The story was later told in a Hollywood film about his life, starring Cary Grant. Porter loved it.

What was Porter really doing in Paris? Hosting parties--elaborate, fabulous ones! They included gay and bisexual acitivity, Italian nobility, cross-dressing, international musicians and lots of recreational drugs.

2. Blue suede shoes

Narrator 2 (male or female):

The Roaring 20s were a time of post-war bouyancy. Art and music were thriving. Gay and lesbian culture had established havens not only in Paris, but also Berlin, London and New York.

One of the most prominent cultural movements of the time in England centered on the Bloomsbury Group, a loose association of writers, artists and philosophers. Two of its most important members were Leonard and Virginia Woolf. Their relationship was amiable and supportive, but it wasn't a conventional marriage. Leonard was mostly attracted to Virginia's brains. When it came to sex, he was more interested in men.

3. Don't get around much anymore

After "Don't Get Around Much Anymore"

Narrator 2 (again):

Another unconventional creative couple became known to the Bloomsbury crowd. Vita Sackville-West and Harold Nicholson had a long and fond marriage and raised two children. They eventually bought Sissinghurst Castle and established one of England's most famous gardens. But they knew from the beginning that both had homosexual liaisons. In fact Vita had a passionate lesbian affair and eloped to France in 1918. It ended when her lover got married to a man. Vita returned home and Harold supported her emotionally throughout the ordeal. English society branded her a Sapphist, a label she did not reject.

In 1922, Vita met Virginia Woolf. Within three years they became lovers. Vita was immortalized as the model for the main character in Woolf's 1928 novel, *Orlando*.

4. *It had to be you*

Vita:

Margy

Written in Milan, mailed in Trieste
Thursday, January 21st, 1926

I am reduced to a thing that wants Virginia. I composed a beautiful letter to you in the sleepless nightmare hours of the night, and it has all gone. I just miss you, in a quite simple desperate human way....I miss you even more than I could have believed; and I was prepared to miss you a good deal. So this letter is just really a squeal of pain. It is incredible how essential to me you have become. I suppose you are accustomed to people saying these things. Damn you, spoilt creature.

Vita

5. *The very thought of you*

Virginia:

Sue

52 Tavistock Square
1927

Look here Vita--throw over your man, and we'll go to Hampton Court and dine on the river together and walk in the garden in the moonlight and come home late and have a bottle of wine and get tipsy, and I'll tell you all the things I have in my head, millions, myriads--They won't stir by day, only by dark on the river. Think of that. Throw over your man, I say, and come.

Your Virginia

6. *I'm beginning to see the light*

Intermission

Narrator 3 (female):

Our last song, "I'm beginning to see the light," was written by Duke Ellington. You would have heard some of his earlier hits spilling from Manhattan nightclubs during the 1920s and 30s. This was the Harlem Renaissance, an explosion of jazz in the African-American musical community. In the midst of this movement was an extensive circle of lesbian and bisexual women like Jackie Mabley, Josephine Baker and Ethel Waters. While many were married, they also had affairs with other women. Their songs told stories of "the life" to curious nightclub audiences and anyone who bought their recordings.

One night in 1925, blueswoman Ma Rainey was arrested for holding a lesbian house party. Here protégé, Bessie Smith, bailed her out the following morning.

7. Somewhere over the rainbow

Narrator 3 (male):

Mark

In those days, when a gay man spoke about "coming out," he wasn't talking about emerging from the secretive closet the way we think of it today. At the turn of the century there were elaborate drag balls, particularly in African-American communities. With a wink to the elite tradition of the young female debutante being introduced to society, participants in these balls spoke of their "coming out" as the time that they were formally presented to the gay world.

They were often held in the finest venues of Chicago, New York, Baltimore and other cities. These were not secretive affairs, in fact by the 1930s they had become a popular spectacle. The annual Hamilton Lodge Ball in Harlem routinely drew hundreds of participants and thousands of spectators, gay, lesbian and straight, African-American and white.

8. A salute to doo-wap

Narrator 4 (male or female):

Diane

changed | World War II and the years following it brought a new wave of official homophobia. The US government began a witch hunt for Communists. But gays and lesbians, also considered a security risk in government jobs, became the scapegoats. Each year in the 1950s, hundreds of people were fired from the American Civil Service, and thousands were discharged from the Army. Most of them were dismissed on accusations of sexual perversion.

added | The paranoia spread to Canada, where the 1952 immigration act explicitly barred homosexuals from entering the country. The RCMP formed a special investigative unit to identify and root out gays and lesbians in government jobs. They watched gay bars and public parks and hired gay male informers.

The unit tried to plot groupings and meeting places of gay men on a map of the city of

added
Ottawa. Every concentration was marked with a red dot. Soon there were so many dots that it became an indecipherable mass of red ink. They purchased a new map, the largest one available, but it soon became one big smudge. A Mountie finally approached the Defense Department with a request to fly over the city with a high-resolution camera to produce an even larger map. But the Defense Department was experiencing a financial crunch, and the mapping of Ottawa's homosexuals came to an end.

It was a demoralizing time for gays and lesbians, forcing them to become more secretive. They were considered morally corrupt, and their right to a job, and to live without harassment, was not protected. It brought new anxiety and meaning to the term, "coming out."

But looking back, we can take some comfort from the jazz era, from gay Paris, the Bloomsbury Group, the Harlem Renaissance, and other times and places when people were more open-minded about sexual preference. We are reminded that the world wasn't always so repressive, and it doesn't have to stay that way.

Narrator 5 (male or female) (could be read by narrator 4):

added
We've chosen our next song to dedicate to 2002 Gay Pride in Toronto. In June, the Rainbow Chorus will participate in the Gala festival of gay and lesbian choirs from across Canada. As part of the event, we'll sing at a flag-raising to mark the city's official recognition of Pride. If you know this song, you'll soon realize we changed the lyrics to invite everyone to celebrate across our land, the True North strong and free.

9. Dancing in the street

Narrator 6 (male or female) (could be read by narrator 1, could be Bob?):

added
We began with a Cole Porter song about the excitement of opening night, and we'll end with a farewell from the same songwriter's pen. You might interpret it as saying goodbye to the song, the performance, or the show that has taken so much of your creative energy. Throughout life there are times when we must say goodbye to cherished experiences and relationships. But even when it comes time to move on, we can't help feeling a little sad.

10. Ev'ry time we say goodbye