

MY QUEER LIFE

Singing a different tune

Maybe 10 is too young to know whether a kid will be gay, but when he knows all the lyrics to *Cats*, you gotta wonder

by Michael Thomas Ford

When my nephew, Jack, was about to turn 10, I called my sister well in advance of the actual date and asked her what he would like for his birthday. The 10th year is a big one for any child, marking a transition between the dreamlike world of kick-the-can and paper dolls and the horrors of adolescent life—like spontaneous erections and big bullies named Kurt—and it should be commemorated accordingly.

I still recall vividly the gold eagle pendant my cousin, David, my childhood hero, presented to me on my 10th birthday. I wore it religiously, until one sad day the clasp snapped and it was lost forever, improving dramatically my choice of accessories but leaving me cheerless. I wanted Jack to have such a moment to remember.

Karen knew instantly what Jack would cherish above all else on this earth. "CDs," she said promptly. "He's really into music now."

This was good news. Children as a rule have no taste whatsoever, so when buying music for them, it's just a matter of going to the record store and picking up whatever is hovering at No. 1 for that given week. Even if they have no idea what it is, kids will play it loudly and thrash about in some semblance of dancing, feeling very grown up and pleased with themselves. The week of my 10th birthday, it was the soundtrack to *Grease* burning up the charts, and I received it with delight and some surprise, considering that my mother had forbidden me to actually see the movie after learning that the word "shit" was uttered freely. I played it endlessly, naturally taking Olivia Newton-John's solos, and to this day I wonder how my life would have turned out if, instead, AC/DC or Bruce Springsteen had ruled the airwaves in the fall of 1978.

"So what should I get him?" I asked. "Hootie and the Blowfish? Coolio? Maybe Garth Brooks?"

Karen laughed. "Oh, no," she said cheerfully. "Nothing like that. He likes soundtracks."

"Great," I said, visions of *Grease* filling my mind. "So maybe the music from *The Lion King* would be good." I had this vague notion that every 10-year-old thrilled to all things Disney.

"Actually," Karen said, "He wants the soundtracks to *Cats* and *Les Miz*."

I was speechless. I wondered if my sister had any notion of what the implications were of what she had just said. Maybe, I thought, I'd just heard her incorrectly. "You mean the Broadway shows?" I asked doubtfully.

"Yep," she confirmed. "He loves those. We

went and saw a touring show of *Cats*, and he's been humming the songs ever since."

I didn't know what to say. This was my sister talking, the one whose only response to my coming out was, "Well, you know I'm OK with it, but God says it's wrong, so you're probably going to hell." Now she was telling me, in effect, that her very own son was exhibiting early signs of becoming a raging queen, and not only did she not seem to mind, she was enthusiastically supporting his bid for queendom.

OK, I know the stereotype of the gay man singing show tunes is one many people find offensive. I know I don't happen to like them very much.



And we all go out of our way to reassure kids that just because some boys like ballet and some girls like softball they aren't necessarily going to end up with rainbow flag stickers on their Volvos and mineral water in the fridge. But really, when was the last time you saw a little boy who could belt out "I'm Just a Girl Who Can't Say No" grow into a fascination with Pamela Anderson Lee's breasts? Can you blame me for being suspicious?

Still, I knew I had to be careful. I certainly didn't want to out the kid to his mother, especially so near to his birthday. If he really was tripping gaily on the heels of Dorothy's ruby slippers, I didn't want his mom to freak out, which I knew

she would. She was already worried about the effect it might have on him being raised by a single mother, and she'd probably go out and buy him a rifle to compensate. She still harbors a suspicion that I'm gay because our father never built a tree fort with me.

"Um, Karen," I said, trying to determine exactly how serious the situation was. "Does Jack just kind of hum the music, or does he know all the words?"

"It's amazing," she said ingenuously. "He knows every word to every song. He hears them once and has them down. He can even do the motions Grizabella makes when she sings

me. He had to be broken in slowly.

Once home, I wrapped the CDs up and shipped the whole mess off to my sister with a prayer to the Patron Saint of All Young Queens, Charles Nelson Reilly. On Jack's birthday, I called to see how things were going.

"Hello?" Karen shouted when she picked up the phone. In the background I could hear the swelling tones of "Music of the Night" filling the apartment.

"Hi," I said briskly. "How's the birthday boy?"

"Just great," Karen said. "He's absolutely thrilled with the CDs. You didn't have to send so many, you know."

"That's OK," I said. "You only turn 10 once. What's that shrieking?" In the background I could hear what sounded like a recent castrato bemoaning its fate.

"He's singing," Karen said proudly. "All morning it was 'On My Own' from *Les Miz*. Now he's learning *Phantom*."

I tried not to crow in triumph. "That's really great," I said. "He'll be a singer in no time." I imagined what my sister would think when Jack started renting Joan Crawford movies. She'd probably blame it on me, but I didn't care. Score one for our side.

"Oh, he already is," Karen said. "You should hear him try to do 'Evergreen'."

This was more than I could stand. "He sings Streisand?" I said incredulously.

"Oh, yeah," Karen answered. "He's been getting into my Barbra records since he was six. In fact, my present to him was his own copy of *The Broadway Album*. We sing it together."

I had to hang up.

So maybe 10 is a little young to know for sure. Still, I think the fact that I asked for an Easy-Bake Oven when I was 7 was probably some kind of early indicator, sexist or not, of what would come. My friend Anne agrees. She gave her Barbie a crew cut and rechristened her Alix when she was 4. Now Anne drives a UPS truck and plays rugby for her women's collective team. You can't ignore the facts. Jack's birthday is coming up again, and this year he wants to visit the Smithsonian to see the exhibit of first ladies' gowns. Karen says she's glad he's showing such a healthy interest in U.S. history.

Michael Thomas Ford's book of humorous essays, *If Jesus Loves Me, Why Hasn't He Called?*, will be out from Alyson later this year.

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