

MUSIC

It takes a village

Macho men go west!

BY FLOYD SKLAVER

Weddings, bar mitzvahs, even water aerobics classes—at each, you see legions of straight people jumping about, waving their arms and shouting, “Y-M-C-A.” How in the world did an homage to gay life become de rigueur for heteros? And whatever happened to The Village People, anyway?

You can find out Jan. 25 when the aging group rolls into town as Cher’s opening act for the continuation of her farewell tour, now aptly renamed “Never Can Say Goodbye.”

In the 1970s, gay subculture came bursting out of the closet. Defiantly gay men paraded the streets of New York and San Francisco displaying their masculinity and wearing their sexuality proudly on their hip pockets.

Enter French music producers Jacques Morali and Henri Belolo, who spotted a young Native American named Felipe Rose wearing a Lakota headdress on the streets of Greenwich Village. The pair followed him into a gay bar where Rose, the bartender, twirled and danced as he poured drinks, occasionally even climbing on top of the bar. Morali noticed a cowboy also watching and suddenly had an idea: Why not put together a recording group of gay fantasy figures? And why not name the group after the place where the brainstorm occurred?

For lead vocals, they hired Victor Willis, who performed in Broadway musicals such as *The Wiz* and was married to actress Phylicia Rashad. The Village People’s eponymous debut LP was released in 1977. Aimed squarely at the gay market, it featured four songs, each a tribute to a gay mecca: “Hollywood,” “Key West,” “San Francisco” and “Fire Island.”

Disco was still in its infancy, so only one station spun the record regularly: WBSL-FM in New York. The legendary DJ Frankie Crocker (who inspired the character Venus Flytrap on TV’s *WKRP in Cincinnati*) started playing “San Francisco,” and suddenly the album became an underground success, selling more than 100,000 copies.

With their unexpected hit, Morali and Belolo realized they needed a group of real characters to perform live. So, they approached Rose to re-create his bar-twirling shtick onstage, and Willis was reoutfitted as a cop. (Rose continues to perform with the group today. Willis, heavily addicted to drugs, left the group in 1980.)

Next, they hired a minister’s son as the uniformed military man (Alex Briley, who continues to perform today), an aspiring television

actor as the cowboy (Randy Jones, who married his boyfriend of 20 years last May) and a Battery Tunnel toll collector from Brooklyn as the leather biker, a role he relished in real life as well. (Glen Hughes died in 2001, buried in his leatherman outfit.)

Finally, 28-year-old aspiring actor David Hodo (the third original member still performing) answered an ad in a trade paper and became the muscular construction worker in mirrored shades.

With all six now on board, the second album, *Macho Man*, included the stirring title anthem to muscular masculinity. The album went platinum, and a phenomenon was born.

“We were traveling constantly,” Hodo says. “Our national tour was 48 cities in 54 days.”

Evasive about their sexuality (reportedly on orders from producer Morali, who was himself gay), The Village People nonetheless embodied Christopher Street’s fantasies while courting mainstream audiences. They took a risk unprecedented in music history by allowing themselves to be perceived as gay (even though some members weren’t), and their songs were open to interpretation. (It doesn’t take a sleuth to discern the hidden meanings behind “It’s the place you will find me...the place where love is free” from “Fire Island.”)

In the fall of 1978, The Village People released their third album, *Cruisin’*, which included their biggest single, “Y.M.C.A.” At first, officials at the Young Men’s Christian Association balked. They had never heard of

The Village People and didn’t know if the tune represented a tribute, a rip-off or a slap in the face. They filed a legal challenge, but by the time a court sided with the Y, millions of copies had been sold, and the organization recognized the song as free advertising.

The Village People had one other major hit, “In the Navy,” which the U.S. military used for a television and radio recruitment campaign. Belolo offered the rights to the song for free provided the Navy helped shoot the music video. A month later, the group arrived at San Diego Naval Base, where the military provided a warship, several airplanes and hundreds of uniformed men. However, when the video started airing, *The New York Post* ran a front-page article protesting the use of taxpayer money to fund music videos (especially by such a “morally dubious” group). Amid the controversy, the Navy canceled the campaign. The scandal, of course, boosted the popularity of the song tremendously.

After riding the disco wave, The Village People’s popularity crested, and they split up in 1986 to pursue solo careers. Unsuccessful, they reunited two years later and have been touring together ever since. Their hits have been heard in dozens of major motion pictures, including *Wayne’s World* and *Addams Family Values*, and their albums and singles have collectively sold more than 85 million copies worldwide.

Remarkably, The Village People managed to exploit gay images without offending a straight audience. Yet, after finding mainstream success, the group received criticism for not embracing gay issues and for neglecting to hold themselves up as role models, representatives and crusaders for social justice.

“We were criticized for not pounding our chests and coming out in every concert and interview,” Hodo says, “but the fact is we wanted a career.”

Still, their music persists and has taken on a life of its own outside the group.

“As long as there’s a party,” Hodo says, “there’s going to be Village People music.”

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—David Hodo



Even though some members were straight, The Village People took an unprecedented risk by allowing themselves to be perceived as gay

THE VILLAGE PEOPLE open for Cher 7:30 p.m. Jan. 25 at the Rose Garden, 1 Center Court. Tickets are \$55.50-\$77.50 from Ticketmaster.

FLOYD SKLAVER used to dance to The Village People’s music at Studio 54 and longs for the day when disco comes back.

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