

Remember when MTV's *The Real World* was relevant? Yes, I'm convinced that was a real time that actually existed, long before *RW* casts devolved into shirtless, vapid drunks. No, I'm not your grandfather and I'm not demanding that you kids get off my lawn. Think pre-Andy Cohen and the relentless Bravo machine, pre-*Will and Grace*—at least before it really became gay. Before that, the only homos we saw frolicking onscreen were, ostensibly, the smattering of token gays gracing *Real World* seasons. Call it the compelling gay arc—starting with Pedro in San Francisco and ending, I'd argue, in New Orleans with Danny Roberts.

*The Real World: New Orleans* (the first) happened over a decade ago. Perspective: We had just survived the (non-)apocalyptic Y2K debacle, had no idea we'd stare down the horrors of 9/11 and W. was still months away from being appointed president. It was the year 2000 and, looking back, we seemed wholly naïve and innocent. Remember all we thought the new millennium would bring? Well, it did bring us Danny, the blonde, clean-cut, all-American gay who came out to the country during his inaugural van ride to the Belfort Mansion in New Orleans.

I was a young, idealistic gay, convinced folding jeans at the Gap was the most prestigious job in the city. Having recently come out to my hyper-religious family, I dealt with the rough aftermath by drinking, cavorting with gentlemen, fancying myself an indispensable fashionista and watching Danny

## Daniel, Meet Daniel



lady about town

BY DANIEL BORGEN

Nostalgia is at times subtle and quiet, sometimes harsh, always compelling us to remember, to scrutinize.

Roberts. Obviously he was aesthetically pleasing—but he represented much more than another fantasy notch on my made-up celebrity bedpost.

Danny weathered religious oppression (remember that peculiar, hip-hop loving, super-Catholic roommate who repeatedly declared Danny hell-bound?) and famously brought attention to “Don't ask, don't tell.” When his military boyfriend, Paul, was on set, Paul's face remained blurred throughout episodes. And we witnessed a strained family dynamic when Danny's Christian kinfolk visited.

I so related that I had a framed picture of him that traveled with me from abode to abode. Ever a sucker for tangible proof of objects of my affection—signed Sleater-Kinney record, autographed Rufus Wainwright photo—I trust the tactile as a stopgap when memory fails me. The month Danny graced the cover of *Out* magazine, I sprinted from work to the bookstore across the mall and

back again, procuring a stack of copies for myself and a handful of sweater-folding co-workers. From there Danny was trimmed and framed.

For Pride, a couple of old, dear friends visited, to partake in the weekend's big gay festivities. One of them, Gino, worked alongside me during my retail heyday and knows better than anyone my preoccupation with The Roberts. Come Pride Saturday evening, still aching from an all-night feathered theme party (really) the night prior, I marched my cohorts to Blow Pony. They had no idea the glorious monstrosity awaiting them; I think Blow Pony could take up five city blocks and still boast lines 200 deep, endlessly wrapping around corners.

Outside on the patio, standing shoulder to shoulder with the usual suspects, acquaintances whispered Danny's name. Wearing vodka goggles, I squinted—looking, but sure they were wrong. *No way*, I thought. *What the hell would he be doing here?* Sufficiently lubricated, I decided to march up to the mystery man at whom half the bar pointed. (Not that me marching up to a stranger at a bar is some arduous task.)

It was, indeed, Danny Roberts, impatiently *Email DANIEL@JUSTOUT.COM.*

scanning the crowd, searching for his boyfriend. I sauntered up to him, managing to refrain from creating a spectacle. No small feat—I'm sort of known for a spectacle. Once, I was so elated to see Sleater-Kinney at an in-store record signing, I tripped during my approach, dropping all I held, spilling the contents of my man-purse all over the floor. Like the band, Danny was gracious, patient—and I finally got the snapshot I always wanted.

Nostalgia is at times subtle and quiet, sometimes more potent or harsh, always compelling us to remember, to scrutinize. It masquerades as a visit from old friends who distract you from current worries, even reminding you who you are. With said friends, time inevitably passes, but it can feel, albeit briefly, as if it's frozen. Nostalgia can mean stumbling upon members of your favorite band or meeting and greeting a revered, accidental gay icon like Danny.

Whether or not said icon abhors his old moniker doesn't matter much. He still evokes seemingly simpler days, ones before digital recorders and on-demand gratification, times when I'd hole up in my apartment on a Saturday morning, watching a dozen episodes of his show back to back. And I still have that photograph—it's moved from prominently placed frame to refrigerator door, an obscure part of a larger collage of pictures and postcards. I doubt I'll ever throw it away. **JO**

# Tuesdays

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