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Since the moment of its very inception, music has existed as both a prevalent and crucial means of exploring one's identity and discovering how our existence as individuals relates to the larger world around us. Perhaps most meaningfully, though, is its ability to unite those of a certain demographic or minority group. Delving into the history of any time, place, or era will reveal endless accounts of music being used to empower those who have been disenfranchised, whether it be a rallying cry of an army readying itself for battle, a lullaby sung in the hush of night, or a melody of instruments, dancing, and laughter around a humble campfire. However, there's nothing more perplexing than when this type of cultural euphoria is achieved completely by accident, and there are few modern zeitgeists better fit to serve as an example of this phenomenon than Andrew Byrne. Since the debut of his hit 2013 single, "Take Me to Church," the Irish singer and songwriter known as "Hozier" has left a global impact on musical savants and everyday listeners alike. More specifically, though, his unique discography has mysteriously found its home in many LGBTQ spaces, particularly amongst queer women. A cursory Google search will demonstrate this pattern clearly, with articles such as "Why do lesbians love Hozier?" by Diva Magazine and "The fascinating story of how Hozier became a Sapphic icon" by PinkNews being some of the very first to hit the top of the webpage. Despite being a heterosexual man himself, the musician has managed to unintentionally solidify himself as an icon in the eyes of an entirely unfamiliar audience. While on the surface, the correlation between these two groups may seem unclear, examining the rhetoric of some of Hozier's most popular

works reveals a narrative that actually compliments many of the core values and experiences of the queer community.

The most obvious example that most fans will point to is his first song: “Take Me to Church.” After the initial release of the track over a decade ago, the song quickly rose to the top of the charts with its music video having now amassed over 814,000,000 views on YouTube. In fact, the commentary that originally signaled Hozier as an ally to LGBTQ communites didn’t reside in the content of the song at all; rather, his support was emblazoned much more prominently in its supplementary music video. Throughout the duration of its four minute run-time, the video depicts the short story of two young gay men fighting to establish a safe haven away from the overwhelmingly hostile and even violent reality of a queerphobic society. Not only was the subject matter of the video still considered to be quite controversial at the time of its release, it was published before same-sex marriage had been legalized in both Ireland where Hozier is from, and the United States where the song gained most of its traction. Although the discussion of LGBTQ rights was certainly on the rise in political spheres all across the world at that point, it was relatively uncommon for such well-known figures to use their platform to promote such a cause so straightforwardly, especially a male celebrity so new to the scene.

The lyrics of the single were equally polarizing despite not explicitly referencing same-sex relationships at all, with its short narrative instead focusing on the gripping romance between the male singer and his female lover. Instead, it was Hozier’s brazen criticisms of Christianity, specifically the Catholic Church, that caught the public’s attention. As written by Danielle Dekeyser of Medium: “The song is a direct reference to the Catholic Church’s shaming of sexuality, but more broadly about institutions that try to suppress the very natural parts of human nature. Hozier is using the platform of music to convey a critical message of the moral

hypocrisies of the church" (Dekeyser). Through the combination of a backing track inspired by traditional hymns and gospel music as well as hard-hitting lyrics, the musician makes these themes impossible to ignore.

Throughout the song, the Church is framed as an antagonistic, overbearing force that threatens to keep the couple apart, with Hozier positioning himself as the speaker as a "pagan of the good times" who blasphemously worships his partner "like a dog," praying to her instead of the Catholic Church's one true God (Byrne). The track's most poignant lyrics are found in its chorus, which serves as a "direct jab at the followers of the Church, who blindly and naively follow the Church like dogs even though the Church is full of lies, hypocrisy, and unjust actions like child abuse and the shaming of sexuality" (Dekeyser). As an article written in 2014 so aptly puts it: "This isn't the solipsism of [Taylor] Swift, and this isn't the self-objectification of [Meghan] Trainor. Instead, what we have on our hands is a deliciously acidic criticism of religious institutions, particularly their interference in our bedrooms" (Messitte). Nearly a year after the song's initial release, music critic Nick Messitte writes: "the last political protest song I can remember discussed in the mainstream was John Mayer's "Waiting for the World to Change"—an utterly toothless and passive song if ever I heard one [...] But now, at the tail-end 2014, we have something palpably political on the pop charts—something decrying our deeply dysfunctional institutions with passion and fervor" (Messitte). More recently, Hozier has gone on record to express the mixed emotions he feels about these types of sentiments and explains the original inspiration behind both the song and its music video: "Russian state media was sort of doing this whole campaign that tried to equate child abuse with [LGBTQ people] [...] That led to this horrendous rise of attacks by very far-right gangs that filmed these attacks and put them on social media with impunity… That was what the music video back then was about. And the

criticism that I faced — mild criticism — was, 'Hey, this is happening somewhere else in the world, why make a big fuss about it?' … And increasingly, you know, in the last 10 years, we've witnessed some of that culture kind of cross borders…. What strikes me is that song is sadly more applicable now than it was 10 years ago" (Rashotte). It's made clear by both recent and past reviews that this wasn't just another song on the radio; "Take Me to Church" is a true work of activism that completely defied the standards set by the industry.

Ultimately, though, it was one verse in particular that stood out amongst the rest, as Hozier sings: "We were born sick, you heard them say it" (Byrne). It's an image that virtually any queer person can instantly relate to, with homosexuality and transgenderism often being labeled a disease, sin, or curse by various religious hierarchies. What's even more compelling is the specific verb Byrne chooses to describe this brief exchange of words, specifying that the narrator "heard" these words as if eavesdropping on the conversation. This is the form this type of homophobic language often takes, as queer people often spend so much of their lives hiding their identity, they are less likely to be directly confronted with bigotry than they are to overhear and internalize it. Despite taking up a mere percentage of the song's overall composition, it's this one line that elevated it from a simple love song to what eventually became a nationally revered queer anthem. With this lyric alone, it becomes incredibly obvious as to why queer audiences would take a liking to its messaging.

However, on its own this parallel does not explain the cult following of queer women, specifically, that have amassed due to Hozier's influence, although its explanation is comparatively much more simple. As his discography is most notably defined by its poetic and romantic presentation, it inevitably attracts a predominantly female audience more likely to engage with such emotionally-charged content. Moreover, as a heterosexual man, his love songs

often revolve around his affections for a female subject rather than a male one, and the obvious and painstaking care he takes to describe his muses only resonates with Sapphic listeners even more. For example, “Angel of Small Death and the Codeine Scene,” which details the unique affair between a headstrong woman and her reverent lover: “Feeling more human and hooked on her flesh / I lay my heart down with the rest at her feet / Fresh from the fields, all fetor and fertile / It’s bloody and raw, but I swear it is sweet” (Byrne). Not only does the shocking and unusual nature of their love feel natural to the many queer folk whose love has only ever been perceived as such, the genuinity and affection woven so deeply into each verse feel especially meaningful compared to the often vulgar and derogatory portrayal of women in modern pop music. Combined with his continued outward support for the LGBTQ community, it’s practically inevitable for such a fanbase to take shape.

Furthermore, it cannot be understated how important it is that such a space exists for queer women in particular to take comfort in. As described by Annamarie Jagose in her piece “Queer Theory: An Introduction:” “Lesbian feminist models of organisation were correctives to the masculinist bias of a gay liberation which itself had grown out of dissatisfactions with early homophile organisations” (Jagose 75). While here she is referring to the construction of the modern queer liberation movement, the unrest between queer men and women that she describes is still very much a prevailing issue. In today’s society, the word “gay” is more often used to denote homosexual men specifically than it is to include all identities regardless of gender, and as a result has prevented many LGBTQ women from seeing themselves represented in their own community. Thus, the infamous joke of Hozier’s status as a “lesbian icon” goes a step beyond humor and instead acts as a signal to potential fans that his following is more than just a space to appreciate his music, but one where Sapphic women can feel both loved and respected for who

they are. While Andrew Byrne may have never set out with the intention to build such a reputation for himself all those years ago, the community that has come to rally behind the name “Hozier” has managed to become a wonder and a marvel of its own.

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