# Remembering Roberta Flack: a champion for gay love



RIP to perhaps the greatest soul singer of all time, Roberta Flack. In this extract from an interview conducted by a Jake News writer in 2006, she showed herself to be not only a consummate artist but a life-long friend to gay men and totally unconcerned about anyone who thought they had seen her snogging women at parties.

**Did you know this is a gay interview?**

I think that’s fabulous! I moved in with a man who is probably the most influential man I’ve known in my life musically… and he was a gay man! He was in the original production of Porgy and Bess… [Someone else comes over and says something] Well, hi there!... I’d moved out of my mom’s house - I came home one night and my mom had put the mattress out on the street and it was wet and raining and I was crying - and I told him what had happened. His name was Wookie and he said, ‘Come on over here, Poo’ - he called me Poo - so I went over there and started to play for him in his studio, ‘cause he was a voice tutor, and he introduced me to great people like James Baldwin. They hung out together. All of these fabulous people, most of them were… I won’t say straight and I won’t say gay but they were all extremely unusual and artistic and I’m 19 at the feet of James Baldwin. What went on behind his own doors, who knows? We shouldn’t judge people. We don’t know and it doesn’t matter anyway.

**You did the soundtrack to [hugely controversial gay romance] Making Love, didn’t you?… Did you get flak?**

It was a song. I don’t know about the controversy. If you stay true to what you’re all about… I am not a problem solver for the world. I’d like to help everyone I can who needs it. On my first album there’s a song called The Ballad of the Sad Young Men. That’s from a Broadway play called The Nervous Set, which was the first all-out play about homosexuals. This was in the 70s and when I got that song I was singing in a gay bar on Capitol Hill. That’s where I started. Someone walked up and gave me this song and explained where it came from. The Ballad of the Sad Young Men, it talks about men making love with each other, men who are lonely, men who are anxious for companionship with someone who will make them feel important, feel safe, you know. It doesn’t matter who you are, how old you are, what colour you are. That’s our human right, isn’t it? We all have the right to want to feel good. We all have the right to want to be with someone who cares for us, who brings us a cup of tea, who says, ‘Has your headache gone?’ All those things. Anyway, he told me I had to do this. I played that song in the gay bar and it made me a hero, they used to pick me up off the piano to carry me to my dressing room, and they bought me gifts, made me clothes, did my hair. But guess what? The 70s was also the time of the riots in Watts. Remember the Black Panthers? The Los Angeles group sent me a picture of them with their fists raised, ‘Dear Roberta, we love you! From all the sad young men.’

**From the Black Panthers?**

Hello! Do you get my point? It really doesn’t matter. You can’t live in a world where you judge people. I’ve been in the street and had people walk up to me and say, ‘I heard that you were gay!’ and I was, ‘Who said that?’ and they’d say, ‘So and so told me they saw you at a party with your tongue down some girl’s throat.’ And I’m like, ‘Honey I don’t know what you’re talking about but what does it matter to you anyway?’ I don’t get caught up in labels. Here we are facing a major war, some of these kids that are getting caught up in Iraq are 17 and 18 years old. Do we care? I’m not happy. I can’t handle that. 17 years old and you haven’t had any nookie yet and you’re going off to war! It’s crazy and I’m very concerned about that. I don’t care what you do when you close your doors, I just hope that makes you feel fine.

## References

* <https://www.harpersbazaar.com/culture/art-books-music/a63904361/roberta-flack-grammy-winning-singer-and-pianist-has-died> - This article supports Roberta Flack's advocacy for gay rights and her impact on the LGBTQIA+ community throughout her career.
* <https://www.pbs.org/wnet/americanmasters/what-roberta-flacks-music-means-to-her-lgbtqia-audiences/25558/> - This piece highlights how Roberta Flack's music, particularly 'Ballad of the Sad Young Men,' resonated with the LGBTQIA+ community and her early performances in gay bars.
* <https://hotspotsmagazine.com/2015/04/15/roberta-flack-comes-to-florida/> - This interview shows Roberta Flack's openness about love and her support for universal love, including her involvement in the theme song for 'Making Love,' a film about gay romance.