

# Variations on a Theme: Got Three Lives, How Channel Orange Helped Me Come Out

written by Guest Contributor | June 6, 2017



I have this theory: every queer person remembers a coming-out that impacted their own.

On July 4, 2012, Frank Ocean published a two-paragraph note on Tumblr—a screenshot of it, actually, typed all-caps on a word processor. He details the first time he fell in love. It was with another man when they were both nineteen; it wasn't requited; it was therefore "malignant, hopeless." The note uses ambiguous language, affective details rather than clarity of terms, but it is still unmistakably him coming out. At the end, he says he feels like a free man. It was originally meant for the liner notes of his upcoming album.

I was sixteen and ostensibly straight; I considered myself an ally to the few gay people I knew and an avid consumer of pop culture. I'd heard of Frank Ocean, listened to his music sometimes, but didn't give him a lot of thought until I read the note, and only then because my friends were talking about it on Twitter. The sharp fascination and relief I felt swoop through my gut was a surprise—I attributed the feeling to some general gladness that the world was more open-minded than it had been. It was nice to see things happening like this, especially when I was stuck in my rural corner of Tennessee, where I hadn't even known gay people existed until middle school.

When Frank Ocean posted those two long paragraphs of text on his blog, he had a couple of minor hits to his name, a 2011 mixtape titled *Nostalgia, Ultra.*, and an older-brotherly affiliation with the hip-hop collective Odd Future. In short, he was a rising star with no album out and just about everything to lose. He released his debut studio album *Channel Orange* one week later. Both the note and the album were more or less unanimously praised, and I bought the latter with money I'd made babysitting.

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The plurality of *Channel Orange* thrilled me, and it still does. Its possibilities for interpretation are endless. As a feat of narrative and musical dexterity, as an album—it is, I think, unrivaled by almost anything else released this decade, and its ranking on such lists indicates I'm not the only one who feels that way. Frank moves deftly through gender, race, class and sexuality to narrate his songs, sometimes even within one song, like the nine-minute sprawl of "Pyramids" that imagines Cleopatra as the Egyptian queen and as a present-day sex worker. Even the title—*Channel Orange*—is both a proper noun and an imperative sentence. As a work of art, it's mobile and fluid, resistant to easy classifications. I listened while I did my biology homework, while I agonized over college pamphlets, while I rode the bus to marching band competitions. I tried to parse the pronouns on the album, figure out the differences between Frank and his narrators, until I realized the point was that I couldn't.

One slick-hot day in August 2012, I played the song "Forrest Gump" for my dad, riding through downtown Clinton in his duct-taped station wagon. It's the penultimate track on the record, the last full song before the two-minute closing exhale, "End," and it is *Channel Orange's* clearest statement of homoerotic desire. "You're so buff, and so strong," Frank sings. "My fingertips and my lips, they burn from the cigarettes, Forrest Gump. You run my mind, boy." From the dirt-gray passenger seat I clicked the tape into its slot, plugged the attached aux cord into the iPhone of which I was so proud, and waited for the synth organs to start.

It was a calculated move, more than the music recommendations we often shared in the car. It was a litmus test. My dad was a member of the Greek Orthodox Church, and I'd heard what the priest said about homosexuality. I wasn't about to broach the subject directly. Instead, my arm lolling out the open window, I let Frank Ocean bring it up.

"This is good," my dad said, offhand and unprompted. I felt that sharp relief again that I had felt upon reading Frank's note the month before, rising up in my throat. In the song, Frank started whistling, and I smiled out the window into the wind.

Frank fascinated me. He literally refused labels, demurring from journalists' questions about whether he was gay or bisexual, refraining from perky It Gets Better videos, taking very few major political stances. In one unusually forthcoming interview, he explained the risk he took of coming out and having that event overshadow *Channel Orange* itself. The album had to be a work of genius on its own merit, he said, because people would conflate their own enthusiasm for his coming out with enthusiasm for his art. He clearly had no interest in the idea of becoming some kind of queer hero; it almost seemed like he was uncomfortable even at the idea. At sixteen, the famous gay people I knew about—namely Neil Patrick Harris and Ellen DeGeneres—were peppy and certain of themselves, so they were foreign to me. Most of the fictional gay people were either tragic or overwrought stereotypes.

Frank felt real. His love story had had an unhappy ending, he rarely talked about his sexuality without someone coaxing it out, but here he was anyway: successful and uncertain. In his reluctance to be a queer icon, he became the

exact kind of queer icon I needed, someone who didn't seem like they had it all figured out. Maybe it was okay not to know.

That summer of 2012, my best friend had moved away, a girl I'd been closer to than any other person outside my family. In her absence that fall semester, I was able to see what I'd felt for her with much more clarity. I started to think of her as the person about whom I would write a poignant and sad coming-out note. I told one of my other friends during band practice, my cheeks burning, "I don't think I'm entirely heterosexual."

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I lived in a tenuous and generally miserable space for several years that I don't think straight people can ever really understand. Who do you tell? Who don't you tell? And after that, the constant tracking, the balancing act of *who knows, who suspects it, who has no clue*. On the most harrowing *Channel Orange* track, "Bad Religion," the one I have listened to more than any others, Frank uses the backseat of a cab like a confessional. "Taxi driver," the second verse starts, "I swear I've got three lives balanced on my head like steak knives." Is there a better description of being a third of the way out, halfway out, mostly out but not quite?

Frank Ocean largely disappeared after early 2013. He performed "Forrest Gump" at the Grammys (which I watched fervently), won Best Urban/Contemporary Album, went on tour and topped countless album-of-the-year lists. Then he deleted his Twitter, his Instagram, his Snapchat. He stopped appearing in public. He emerged sometimes as a guest artist, notably appearing on Kanye West's *Yeezus* and Earl Sweatshirt's *Doris* in 2013, and he still dropped the occasional Tumblr post. But his absence was so pronounced that it became a veritable meme on the Internet. When would Frank return to us? people asked. Would our grandchildren maybe get to hear new Frank Ocean music someday? Rumors of release dates kept popping up and then deflating as they passed uneventfully. He was one of my all-time favorite musicians, but I started to make peace with the idea that he had made a masterpiece and was gone forever.

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On June 12, 2016, I had lunch with my grandparents, my aunt and my mother. We were in a Mexican restaurant in Oak Ridge, filling up on chips and salsa, chatting. Then my aunt looked at something on her phone and said, haltingly, "There was a mass shooting at a club in Orlando. It looks like—it's a gay club."

There was nothing I could say with a tortilla chip halfway to my mouth, stuck around a table with my family members, none of whom I'd come out to. This was a sad thing to them—horrific even—but not personal. Our meal continued.

I logged onto Tumblr after we got home. Frank Ocean had posted a note, one long paragraph. It's the most plainly, unapologetically queer thing he's written; it made me cry. About midway through, he says, "So we express love for who and what we are. Because who else will in earnest?"

I knew what I needed to do because it felt unconscionable to do anything else, and I decided to come out via Facebook status update, lying in my bed just after midnight. I figured it would reach the most people that way and would require the least interaction from me. Frank and I are more similar than I realized.

I rewrote the post again and again before I published it. Scrutinizing the wording, agonizing over the sentences—every letter felt like a nonreturnable investment. Finally, when I hit *return*, that now-recognizable feeling plunged through my stomach, as if someone had scooped the unsteady ground out from under me.

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In August 2016, Frank released *Endless*, a visual demo rollout, and *Blonde*, the gorgeous full-length follow-up to *Channel Orange*. Once again, he put the music out and largely stayed quiet. But he did one big interview with the *New York Times* that addressed his elusiveness and his fame. At one point, the interviewer asks if dating has been difficult for him as his celebrity increases. He responds, “I’m in a very different place than I was four or five years ago with all that stuff. Different in my relationship with myself, which means everything. There’s no, like, shame or self-loathing. There’s no crisis.”

I hope to get there, too.

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*Music can hold enormous power in memories and experiences, transporting us instantly to an age, location, or person. What sonic joys, mysteries, disbelief, and clarity have you experienced? Identify songs of influence in your life and explore them like variations on a theme, melding syntax and song structure, recalling the seriousness or levity that accompanies. Whether it’s an account of when a specific song first entered your life, the process of learning to play a song, teaching someone a song, experiencing the same song in different places as it weaves through your life, unbelievable radio timing, sharing songs with those in need, tracking the passing down of songs, creative song analysis, music as politics, etc, I am interested in those ineffable moments and welcoming submissions of your own variations on a theme, as drawn from your life’s soundtrack. Please email submissions to [meganentropy@gmail.com](mailto:meganentropy@gmail.com) and keep an eye out for others’ [Variations](#).*

*\*\*("song" is a broad phrase: could be a pop song, a traditional tune, a symphony, commercial jingles, a hummed lullaby, 2<sup>nd</sup> grade recorder class horror stories, etc)\*\**

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