

Cher

On May 20th, 1946, John Sarkisian, an Armenian-American truck driver, and Georgia Holt, a retired model and actress brought a baby girl, named Cherilyn, into the world.

10 months later, Cherilyn's parents divorced.

Her Mom moves to Los Angeles, marries an actor, and has another daughter. Her mom starts acting, while also working as a waitress.

Cherilyn's childhood was turbulent— her stepfather (who she considers her father) drank a lot, and her mom remarried often. There were times Cherilyn was so poor, she'd use rubber bands to hold her shoes together.

But, by 5th grade, Cherilyn was all about performing. She literally *produced* Oklahoma! In her school. She organized girls to perform, but had trouble finding boys to perform, so she performed the male roles herself.

In 1961, when Cherilyn was 15, her mom married a wealthy bank manager, who adopted her under the name Cheryl. She was enrolled at a private school, and was considered unconventional there. She was creative and would perform songs for her peers during lunch— later recalling “I was never really in school, I was always thinking about when I was grown up and famous.”

And grown up and famous she did become.

A year later, Cher dropped out of school, ran away from home, and started supporting herself working in clubs on Hollywood's Sunset Strip.

Disclaimer

- Ok— before we go on— this story is COMPLICATED. I'm leaving a lot out. It's impossible to do this story justice in only one episode. Yes, I'm going to breeze over some very important developmental information. Also, I didn't grow up during her rise to fame, so I might miss extra.
- This section of Cher's story is literally just part of it. There's so much more. She's considered part of the big 3 - Sinatra, Elvis, and Cher— she's a household name, often dubbed the Goddess of Pop— and very deserving of the title.
- She's at least 170 awards for her work—including a Grammy, an Emmy, an Academy Award, three Golden Globe Awards, a Billboard Icon Award, and awards from the Kennedy Center and the Council of Fashion Designers of America

Background

Ok– this is the part I’m really skimming over– Cher’s background.

- It’s 1962 – Cher is 16
- She’s willing to approach anyone. She wanted auditions and contracts.

Sonny

- Then, in November , Cher was at a radio station, overhearing some other girls chatting about a guy who was about to arrive
- In walks Sonny Bono – and to Cher, everything fades into the background– like the Gym scene in *West Side Story*
- Cher was fascinated - saying he was “That’s the strangest man [she’d] ever seen in [her] life”
- They chat, she lies about her age (she’s still only 16), and she says she can clean but can’t cook, and eventually he offers her a place to stay because “he’s not attracted to her”
- Cher ends up recording as a backup singer for Sonny, and they become good friends
- One of their first songs together, “Ringo, I Love You,” wasn’t received well because people thought Cher’s deep contralto voice was a man’s– and he was singing a love song for the Beatles drummer, Ringo Starr
- Anyway– they start singing, fall in love, and have an unofficial wedding in 1964
- They perform together for decades– first getting their break in 1965, when they perform in England
- By the 1970s, their music stops charting, because they’re anti drug and they’re performing folk-rock, and not the new electric guitar music
- They end up launching a TV program, *The Sonny and Cher Comedy Hour*, and we’re just gonna buzz past this portion because it’s complex and not related to the story
- They start having marital problems, but stick together for the appearances, and eventually divorce in 1974
 - It was messy – Sonny files the divorce, and Cher counters the suit, charging Sonny with involuntary servitude – because he was withholding her earnings from her
 - They also fought over custody over their child, Chaz Bono– Cher eventually custody
 - This sounds *horrible*, like a Britney situation, but it’s not the story here, and they ended up appearing as friends until Sonny’s death, so it’s hard to tell what actually went down
 - In fact, she even spoke at his funeral in 1998, and said he was “the most unforgettable person she’d ever met” – the video of her eulogy is incredible, and

as someone that didn't live through this, I learned so much– check it out on the blog

Rise to Gays

1998 was a big year

- Sonny dies, Cher delivers her eulogy to him, and in May she airs a CBS special tribute to him
- Also in May, Sonny and Cher receive their star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame
- She also publishes a collection of autobiographical essays
- In June, she releases her 19th album *Heart of Stone*, which features her hit single “If I Could Turn Back Time”-- we'll come back to this
- Later in 1998, she releases her twenty-fucking-second album, *Believe*
 - It was her first dance-pop album
 - It has been certified quadruple platinum, and is gold or platinum in 39 countries
 - Her title track on the album became the UK best selling recording of 1998 and the US best selling recording in 1999
 - It's Cher's most successful single to date
 - It was the best selling single by any female artist in the UK until 2018
 - She received a Grammy and a Billboard Music Award for *Believe*
 - Also– it's so popular that if you Google search “Believe”-- the album is in the first couple results– *among dictionary definitions for Believe*
- And we have arrived. Meanwhile Cher is rising to fame, she's also becoming a gay icon and her song *Believe* is becoming a gay anthem
 - At this point, she was an autonomous female artist and already celebrated for it
 - She was a female artist not reliant on any man to make her music shine
 - She was an early third wave feminist
 - She presented sexuality without questioning it
 - She wasn't embracing her body and not hiding it because it made men uncomfortable
 - She was putting out culturally shocking music videos – like “If I Could Turn Back Time,” where she dances on the USS Missouri in a sexy, tight leather thong, revealing a butt tattoo, while she's surrounded by 100s of navy sailors and literally straddles a cannon
 - It was the very first music video ever banned from the MTV network
 - Interestingly, the song initially sounded very different– the chorus was a hit, but the rest of the song was “meh”-- so they rewrote it for Cher
- Ok yeah, but why is it a *gay anthem*? Isn't she straight???
- It's all a little confusing– cause as someone who didn't go through the early 1990s, it's hard to understand *why* it's still a gay anthem
- Let's get a dictionary definition to start– what is a gay anthem?

- A gay anthem is a popular song that the LGBTQ community identifies with. Often they're not written to be gay anthems, but end up being gay anthems because of their content or their popularity in gay spaces.
 - There's a list of gay anthems on Wikipedia– and it's actually fascinating
 - They've got everything from 1937 My Funny Valentine, to showtunes like Somewhere from West Side Story, and Somewhere Over the Rainbow from The Wizard of Oz, and then songs like Dolly's I Will Always Love You, ABBA hits, Tracy Chapman, Melissa Etheridge, Sara Barellies, Ariana Grande, and Lil Nas X– seriously its comprehensive
- First of all– Cher has always been an advocate for queer people
 - As early as 1979, we have evidence of her as an ally
 - She hired 2 drag queens to perform alongside her
 - This is one of the first times a mainstream-culture accepted artist welcomed drag performers into the spotlight
 - In addition, she's stated that when she was 12 she met a gay couple her mom was friends with (this would've been in 1958– the same year NASA was created)
 - She said they were “much more fun than the regular men that came over to visit”
 - Granted, this was in a 2012 interview with the Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation (or GLAAD).-- But since the interview was in 2012–who really knows if she was an ally since she was 12
- Ok– second of all– she's rarely used hard pronouns in her love songs– her love songs rarely fit a single sexuality– believe is also like this
 - It doesn't matter who you are, where you come from, or who you love– Believe is applicable to your story.
- Third– The song sounded futuristic. It was like Cher reinvented. It was dance music from an artist that hadn't released dance music.
 - The song uses what was then a “brand new” effect now dubbed the “Cher Effect”
 - The producers used Auto Tune to correct pitches, set to the fastest possible correction time
 - This results in an almost robotic sound, but still a very human vocal track
 - (share sample, starting at 1:39 until 2:12 ish)
- Reason 4 why *Believe* is a gay anthem – it's lasted the test of time and been adopted by the queer community
 - It's in the repertoire now. Any night at a gay club you're almost certain to hear it
 - It's been performed in drag thousands of times – Cher's personality, voice, and fashion sense really work well with drag
- And 5 - she continues to be a queer ally and has been awarded for it
 - In 1983, she performed in the movie *Silkwood*, as a gay woman

- In 1997, she was recognized as a LGBT community advocate, and was invited to be a keynote speaker at the national Parents, Families, and Friends of Lesbians & Gays (or PFLAG) convention
 - In 1998, she received the GLAAD Vanguard Award for “having made a significant difference in promoting equal rights for lesbian and gay men”
 - The award is presented to an entertainer who isn’t LGBT, but has made a significant difference in promoting queer rights
 - In the early 2000s, her status as a gay icon was acknowledged by NBC sitcom *Will and Grace* by gay character Jack McFarland
 - Jack believed she was a drag queen and thought he could do a better Cher himself
 - Which like– same– I didn’t realize Cher wasn’t a drag queen for a while
 - In 2010, her son Chaz Bono came out as trans - which isn’t like any sort of proof Cher is an ally, but her openness about their relationship and her support of Chaz since he came out definitely means a lot, especially because of her status
- Sooo yeah– that’s the highly abbreviated story of why *Believe* is the hit it was and still is today
 - The reason why young twinks are still bopping to this 30 year old bop
 - And, why a 76 year old legend is still writing music for queer people

Notes

This story is so so so complicated. There's love. There's heartbreak. There's so much information. There's nerd facts and songs that will bring you to your knees or make you want to shout from the top of a mountain.

We're going to gloss over probably too much.

- Lied about age - said she was 18 (she was 16 when she met him)
 - Phobias and insecurities
 - Didn't have anywhere to stay
 - He offered because he wasn't attracted to her
 - She moved in
 - She was "just Cher" – he took care of him
 - Told mom she was living with a stewardess
 - Whenever mom would come over, she'd call first, and Cher would gather up all his clothes, and throw them in her friend's window down the street
 - Mom makes her move out
 - They both start crying and realize that they miss each other
 - "I can't go through the rest of my life without you"
- Reader's Digest section: Most Unforgettable Person You've Ever Met - Sonny Bono
- Met at a radio station
 - Sonny walks in, and everyone just kind of fades

Sources

<https://youtu.be/Fba-YxHIm6c> - Sonny Bono Funeral - 1/9/98

https://youtu.be/9n3A_-HRFfc

<https://youtu.be/e3cTjZrHt-Q>

<https://youtu.be/7msTqzjZ7PU>

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/If_I_Could_Turn_Back_Time

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_awards_and_nominations_received_by_Cher

<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cher>

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gay_anthem

<https://www.thisisdig.com/feature/believe-cher-song-story/>

<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1958>

<https://www.today.com/parents/cher-opens-about-son-chaz-bono-s-transition-t204243>

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/GLAAD_Vanguard_Award

<https://www.pinknews.co.uk/2020/12/18/cher-gay-men-icon-trans-rights-chaz-bono-new-album-cnn-interview/>

<https://thebluntpost.com/cher-the-greatest-gay-icon-of-all-time/>

<https://www.kennedy-center.org/digitalstage/kennedy-center-honors/>

<https://www.biography.com/news/sonny-cher-relationship#:~:text=When%20Cher%20and%20Sonny%20first,Cher%20told%20Elle%20in%202018>

<https://www.dailymail.co.uk/tvshowbiz/article-5450189/Cher-reveals-really-feels-gay-icon.html>

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sonny_Bono