



KING SONGS

He's friends with will.i.am and Ricky Martin and is good at playing gay. Mat Verevis tells Matt Myers how the LGBTI community helped him find his voice.

DNA: You came to prominence on season three of *The Voice* auditioning with *New York State Of Mind*. Have you stayed in touch with your mentor will.i.am?

Mat Verevis: Occasionally. I sent him a message the other day to say how impressed I was with his performance at the Manchester *One Love* concert. I learned a lot from him, I got the chance to work in his studio in LA, and to meet his network of people and they are lovely. He's really a superstar.

Did you get to know any of the other judges that season: Joel Madden, Kylie Minogue and Ricky Martin?

Yes, Ricky approached me to meet up the following year when he was in Australia. I went to his concert, hung out with him afterwards and met his kids. I speak to him more than Will. He came across as very giving on *The Voice* and he's legitimately like that. I was taken aback that he reached out to me when I wasn't even on his team! That was nice.

You've had roles in *Torch Song Trilogy* and *Boys In The Band*. Do you think you have an affinity to playing gay?

"Affinity" is the perfect word. My grade four teacher was my favourite teacher and was a very extravagant man. I thought he was the best human ever. I didn't





realise he was gay until I was a teenager. I just thought he was flamboyant. When I left WAAPA (West Australian Academy Of Performing Arts) I was often up for young gay male and drag roles, which I liked because I've always been attracted to character roles that took a lot of research and were a challenge. Especially when they have cultural significance as well as a good story.

Do you get feedback on your gay roles from your gay mates?

A bit. Obviously being gay is a massive part of *Torch Song Trilogy* but I never tried to "play gay." I was more interested in the character's story. I reached out to some gay friends and they said there was more to the character than just being gay, and that's so true. I didn't want to play a one-dimensional character.

Are you ever mistaken as gay in real life?

When I first met my girlfriend she had a few question marks, actually! I think that's because I have some effeminate qualities. I have more gay friends than straight friends but I'm definitely straight. I guess it's a part of the affinity we were talking about before.

Did you ever witness homophobia while growing up?

For sure; a fair bit in high school. I'm from Cairns where the gay lifestyle is... [not obvious]. I always thought that the guys who were homophobic were just scared of something different. I could see that homophobia was based on fear. It's a lack of understanding of someone who's different - even slightly different.

Congratulations on scoring the role of Barry Mann in *Beautiful: The Carole King Musical*. Tell us about who Barry was.

It's interesting because Barry is a real person so it's unlike reading a script about a fictional character. Barry is a singer/songwriter, a self-diagnosed hypochondriac and the funny guy who cracks jokes. His journey is pivotal to Carole's life, but he and his wife Cynthia Weil also provide the comic relief.

What kind of character research did you do?

I watched interviews with him to get an idea of his

DNA: If you were gay, who would be your ideal man?

Mat: I think we can all agree, gay men and straight men alike, that Ricky Martin is a good-looking bloke! He's also got the personality to match it.



“ I never really tried to play gay, especially in *Torch Song Trilogy*, because I was more interested in the character's story.

INSPIRATION

(ABOVE) MAT RECREATES CAROLE KING'S TAPESTRY ALBUM COVER. (LEFT) THE NEW YORK CAST OF *BEAUTIFUL*.

persona. I looked at his catalogue of songs to get an idea of what he wrote about when he was my age. That's a story arc in itself because they began by writing generic pop songs targeted at tweens but then began to write differently.

Before this production, did you know much about Carole King?

Oh, God, yeah! I can't stress enough the role she played in my upbringing. I grew up studying her songwriting. In my first ever singing lesson my teacher introduced me to *So Far Away*. I was about seven years old and that's when my obsession with her started. My dad's a musician and one day he put *Tapestry* in front of me and said, "Listen to this!" Her presence in my life is substantial.

Carole would be one of your biggest musical influences then?

She's obviously up there. I grew up with a lot of Stevie Wonder, and straight-up jazz artists like Oscar Peterson and Donny Hathaway, very much in the old-school style. John Mayer has been a big influence, too.

What about in the diva stakes?

It's hard to go past Whitney Houston. I studied Whitney's *Run To You* - how it's written, the way she sings it. It's a gorgeous song. I love a good ballad more than an up-tempo song. I also love Aretha Franklin, who does a version of *Amazing Grace* that brings me to tears. She could sing the telephone book and I'd love it!

You made an interesting film last year called *Down Under...*

Yes, it's a black comedy about the Cronulla riots and it won a couple of awards. I had a small role and I do the voiceover in the final shot. It was an awesome experience and a movie about something that really impacted me. I remember those racial riots dominating the headlines for a long time.

Your dad is a musician and your mum has a theatre background; were they always supportive of your career choice?

Dad always supported my music and songwriting, and mum has always supported me in the theatre. When I took a leap of faith to drop classical music to do musical theatre they were so supportive and I'll never forget that. That was just one moment of many.

Musical theatre is famous for wardrobe malfunctions. Have you got a good story?

When I was at WAAPA I was doing a production of *Xanadu* with Rob Mallett (*Les Miserables*) where we had to skate into the room in a figure eight. We were pretty fresh on the skates and I slipped and grabbed Rob's silver spandex tights, pulling him to his knees. There we were in the final pose, and Rob's jocks were half way down. I dacked him in front of 800 people. So I always wear fitted boxers. Comfort comes first - and you never know when you'll be dacked!

MORE: *Beautiful: The Carole King Musical* opens at the Sydney Lyric Theatre in September. Go to beautifulmusical.com.au