



Country Music Gays & HIV

Publicist-turned-country crooner David Michael shares his HIV story and love of Patsy Cline.

May 15, 2023 By [Trent Straube](#)

Queer recording artists are pickin' and a-grinnin' at the top of today's country music charts—think Brandi Carlile, Lil Nas X, Orville Peck and T.J. Osborne—but when it comes to openly gay HIV-positive singers, David Michael is blazing the trail. (Longtime POZ readers may recall Jimbeau Hinson, the bisexual HIV-positive country singer-songwriter; sadly, he died last year at age 70.)

Michael hails from Greenville, South Carolina, where he worked as a car salesman before founding the public relations firm MY PR Lab—he loves to talk up his current client Land of Oz, an immersive three-hour tour near Banner Elk, North Carolina. Michael moved to Nashville a little over a year ago after breaking into the country music scene in the most unusual way. He has released two singles—“He’s Got You” and “A Poor Man’s Roses” from his Patsy Cline tribute EP—plus the track “Pretty Boy,” which he says, “tells the story of a young me—bullied, battered and beat down.” That song was released last June in honor of Pride Month.



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A post shared by David Michael - Recording Artist & Publicist (@davidmichaelhawkins)

Also in June 2022, Michael launched the CMgAys (pronounced “CM Gays”), a daylong celebration of LGBTQ recording artists that coincides with the Country Music Awards (the CMAs) and Nashville’s related festival. Michael, 37, took a break from touring and planning this summer’s CMgAys, slated for June 10, to talk with POZ about blue states, industry disrupters and the power of everyday disclosure.

You’re new to Nashville. Tragically, the city recently experienced a school shooting, and Tennessee has made national news for rejecting free federal HIV funds and trying to ban drag shows. What’s the vibe there?

Obviously, I’ve been less than thrilled with the recent political events, but I am extremely inspired by the Nashville LGBTQIA community activation, and I’m grateful that a large swath of our straight allies are in full support. Running to a blue state for convenience and lifestyle ease is so not me. I’ll always run toward the battle, never retreat. Plus, it’s humbling to be a part of the right kind of change, whether it’s for my drag and trans friends in Tennessee or all those affected by HIV and AIDS around the world.

How did you break into country music?

In December 2019, I went to a young Democrats fundraiser in South Carolina. The champagne had hit, and I was ready to [bid on] the big prize—to go to Nashville and record one song in an iconic studio with Grammy-winning performers. And as someone who always loved music and karaoke—it’s one of my flexes—I thought, That’s fun! They called the next day and were like, “Congrats! You won this thing.” But a few months later, we all went to hell in a handbasket [because of COVID-19], and, trying to keep my business afloat, I completely forgot about winning the recording session.

Michael Michael with his dad, Mark, at his 2004 graduation

Courtesy of David Michael

So move on down the line. My dad was very ill with alcohol-related issues, and I was in therapy and prepping emotionally—passing from alcohol is a slow burn, but it does give you time to tie up relationships. My dad passed on October 13, 2021. On the same damned day, or maybe the day after, I get a call from a Nashville area code, and they go, “This is Charlotte Avenue Entertainment, and you bid on a song. Anything you’d like to do?” The proximity to my dad’s passing was bewildering because he was a musician—he had been in bands forever and was a great sound engineer. Southern rock was his vibe. But the dark side was being in bars. What I saw growing up was, if you’re in the music business, it takes you from your children and turns you into an addict. He knew I could sing well and would ask me to participate. I always said no. But getting that call, I realized this was something my dad had created for me.

You chose to record a Patsy Cline song, and the studio liked you so much it turned the session into a six-track EP. Why Patsy?

She was a terrible disrupter to the industry, and she didn't let a man or manager tell her what to do or how to sing a song. There's a reason you don't see a lot of videos of her interviews. They were so terrified she'd drop the F-bomb or not look ladylike. They thought it'd ruin her reputation. So from one disrupter to another, I really feel her spirit.

Can you tell us your HIV story?

I was living in Asheville, North Carolina, with my mom 10 years ago. I was getting symptoms, so I went [to get tested]. I got a cheek swab, and 15 minutes later, they said I was positive. A week later, after I had my bloodwork done, they said I had AIDS, and they were concerned the virus had gone into my spinal column and brain. I was hospitalized. I never looked at it like a death sentence. I was like, We'll just have to figure this out. No way it was going to take me down. Now I'm on one pill a day and am undetectable. It took me five or six years of keeping [my status] mostly a secret, just among best friends and partners. I think my next phase will be entering in a more public official role, but I don't want it to seem like something I'm exploiting. I want to be someone you can DM and we can have a conversation.

Now that you're open about it, do people ask you about HIV?

They do. I was on a plane. I'm a performer, so I have swag clothes and love swagging at the airport. And the flight attendant was like, "Are you famous?" And I said, "No, but I am a performer." Sometimes I feel like a divinity has come over me, and I know I need to share—not every time but sometimes. I said, "I'm the first openly gay, openly HIV-positive country music entertainer in the world." And she got tears in her eyes. She grabbed my hand and said, "One of my favorite coworkers in the world was just diagnosed, and he's really struggling." I teared up and said I'll give you my name and phone number to give to him. And he was terrified. So those first six months [after his diagnosis], we stayed in touch biweekly or more. And we still chat.

And there was a time recently I was in Houston on the way to the airport. And it was like an hour from my hotel. I got in the car with the driver—a real lovely lady—and I'm not the type of Uber rider to sit quiet in the back. I engage and chat. She asked why I was in town. I said I was performing, and I don't know why—this was an elderly Black woman—but I can read the room, so I took a risk and said, "I'm the first openly gay blah blah blah." And she pulled over and started weeping. I put my hand on her shoulder and said, "Can I ask why you had this reaction?" and she said, "My son's currently dying of AIDS." I said, "Are you sure it's not HIV?" She said, "No, it has progressed. He decided to stop taking his meds. I don't know why." So we sat there for 20 minutes and cried. She said it was kind of a miracle that she was able to have this breakdown with me—she had prayed for someone to share with—she said she couldn't do it in front of her son or

the doctors or by herself. So I just held space on the side of the interstate with a stranger I was connected with by this disease. That she has to see her son perish from AIDS in 2023—it's shocking.



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You have a show planned for June 23 in Manhattan for Pride. Do you talk about HIV in your act?

I am booked, promoted and billed as “The First Openly Gay, Openly HIV-Positive Country Music Performer” for all my gigs. It’s a badge that I wear proudly, and no matter the audience—gay or straight—I find there’s still quite a bit of power in representation. So yes, no matter the stage, I’m speaking about HIV.