



How You Can Preserve the Music Legacy of AIDS Icon Michael Callen

New vocal music recordings of the great AIDS icon Michael Callen are being remastered and released.

July 24, 2023 By [Mark S. King](#)

It isn't very often that any of us can play a tangible role in honoring and preserving the legacy of one of the pillars of our shared history. Here's [just that opportunity](#).

[Michael Callen](#) is someone many people consider to be the original long-term AIDS survivor. He was public and quite vocal about living with AIDS beginning in the early 1980s, and then managed to live enough years thereafter that we thought his presence might be a given.

Fate had other plans. Callen died in 1993, but only after he founded [the People with AIDS Coalition](#), co-authored [the Denver Principles](#), and wrote the first safer-sex guideline pamphlet (with [Richard Berkowitz](#)) ["How to Have Sex in an Epidemic,"](#) all while keeping up his love of performance with two solo vocal albums and his a capella group The Flirtations.

Now, a collection of never-before-available musical recordings of Michael Callen are being remastered for public enjoyment, thanks to his long-time musical and romantic partner, Richard Dworkin.

Dworkin's [IndieGoGo page](#) is raising the funds needed to pull this off, and before you read another word of mine I urge you to visit the page [and make a donation](#), no matter how small. In doing so, you'll become part of this historical preservation. The campaign has met its original, modest goal of \$6,000, but additional funds will help create a CD and enlarge and expedite the project. The music will be available via online music platforms and anywhere you get your tunes. Your donation will be money well spent.

Richard Dworkin met Michael Callen in June of 1982, responding to an ad asking for musicians to form a group. "We had Chinese food and Michael made sorbet," Richard remembered. "He thought I was some weird straight drummer because I brought my bicycle up to his apartment for our meeting."

Whatever may have happened that first evening together, it demonstrated to Michael that his new drummer was definitely not straight. They were entangled musically and romantically for the rest of Callen's life.

On that first night together, Michael told Richard that he was participating in a study run by renowned gay physician [Joe Sonnabend](#), who would go on to make his own history as an important figure in the epidemic.

“Michael told me the study was about this new thing called GRID (Gay Related Immune Deficiency) and asked me if I knew what it was. I did. I knew someone who had died five weeks previously of GRID. Michael told me he might have the syndrome and he wanted me to know.”

The new album is a collection of songs that Callen recorded for his second album, “[Legacy](#),” that were never released but remain favorites of Richard Dworkin.

“There are a few tunes he wrote as a young gay man in the late 70s,” Richard explained, “about tortured relationships and romance. John Bucchino is the accompanist. There is a great disco throwback, ‘Hot Stuff Coming Through,’ that I’m really excited about. And then there’s a more elaborate version of ‘Love Don’t Need a Reason,’ Michael’s signature song.”

The project is a labor of love, certainly, but also has the urgency of preserving something that could easily slip into the ether.

“If I don’t do this project now,” Richard warned, “it’s never going to get done. If people don’t participate, it’s likely never to see the light of day, and that’s a shame. Michael was significant and his life was his music.”

To find out more about Michael Callen’s life and legacy, check the [Michael Callen website](#) or read the Martin Duberman biography [Hold Tight Gently: Michael Callen, Essex Hemphill, and the Battlefield of AIDS](#). For updates on the new album’s progress, stay tuned to the [Michael Callen public figure Facebook page](#) for updates.

Mark

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