Donna Summer’s Letter to ACT UP

June 12, 2012 By Peter Staley

When the news hit that Donna Summer had died, I was reminded of her little-known scrape with ACT UP, the AIDS activist group I joined shortly after its first demonstration in 1987. As many will recall, even though her music was hugely popular with the gay community, she faced an ongoing backlash after the Village Voice attributed some quotes to her from a concert in 1983, saying she slammed gays and claimed AIDS was a punishment from God.

As some in the community continued to embrace her, others grew angrier at her hedged denials (words like “misunderstanding” were used), and the issue continued to percolate (see this transcribed 1985 story from The Advocate).

By 1989, various ACT UP chapters started protesting at Donna Summer appearances, including this Boston Gay Pride event, as reported by Gabriel Rotello in Outweek Magazine (July 3,1989):

To everyone’s surprise, Donna Summer wrote a letter to ACT UP New York attempting to mend the divide. A few quotes from the letter were reported at the time, and appeared often in recent online obituaries, but the letter itself has never been seen publicly.

So I asked Jay Blotcher, who was ACT UP’s media coordinator at the time, if he still had a copy. He said he had kept it, but it was now with his ACT UP archives which he donated to the New York LGBT Community Center. After a few phone calls and emails, the Center pulled Jay’s archives out of storage, and sent me a scan of the two-page letter.

I don’t think ACT UP kept up their demonstrations after she sent it, but that probably had more to do with our priorities at the time, rather than this strange letter. Note to PR agents: when you apologize to the gays, it’s probably not best to quote at length from the bible (even though it’s a lovely quote).

So here it is, and I’ve transcribed it below the scanned images...

Transcribed:

July 26, 1989

Dear Members of Act-Up:

I am really sorry that my reply has taken so long, but this is not a matter that I take lightly and because of my schedule, I was forced to wait until I was clear and not under pressure.
First of all, let me say that these accusations are unjust and unfair. At first, I was unknowingly protected by those around me from the bad press and hate letters I was receiving regarding this matter. During that time I was pregnant (twice in 18 months), was engulfed in a major law suit and several of my family members passed away. My manager, at that time, felt my life and emotional health was at stake so there was no response.

Since then, however, I have made numerous replies and spoken openly to try and clear up this misunderstanding. I cannot force you to believe what I tell you, so if you choose to continue on with this fighting and arguing, that's up to you. I did not say God is punishing gays with aids, I did not sit with ill intentions in judgement over your lives. I haven't stopped talking to my friends who are gay, nor have I ever chosen my friends by their sexual preferences.

We have too many good memories together to live in this state of unforgiveness. I never denied you or turned away, but in fact you turned away from me. If I have caused you pain, forgive me. It was never my intention to reject you but to extend myself in love. I know that some of you really need me now because you've written and told me so. Can't we just forgive each other for this past confusion?

My motto in this life is 1st Corinthians 13. "If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a face that can move mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. If I give all I possess to the poor and surrender my body to the

flames, but have not love, I gain nothing.

Love is patient, love is kind, it does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres.

Love never fails, but where there are prophecies, they will cease; where there are tongues, they will be stilled; where there is knowledge it will pass away. For we know in part and we prophecy in part; but when perfection comes, the imperfect disappears. When I was a child, I talked like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I put childish ways behind me. Now we see but a poor reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known.
And now these three remain: faith, hope an love. But the greatest of these is love."

I love you,

Donna Summer

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http://beta.docker.poz.com/blog/donna-summers-letter-to-act-up