

**Queer Public Podcast**  
**Public Figures**  
**Air Date: June 25**

Emma: Well I didn't want to believe it, of course. Because I loved their music and wanted to be able to continue to be able to enjoy it.

Ugh. It hurts me so much

Erin: That's Emma. Emma identifies as gender non binary and uses they/them and she/her pronouns. They live with their family in Menlo Park near san Francisco. They're 17 now but they were 15 at the time of this story.

Welcome to Queer Public, the podcast about real life queer life. Today we're asking What is the responsibility of public figures, especially those who appeal to our queer youth?

Because we look up to those figures for guidance and inspiration.

We celebrate their work, their art and their actions.

And queer kids need that, they need people to look up to to figure out who they want to be. We also know that when you're 16, you love your idols with your whole heart.

A quick word before we get started.

This story is at times joyful and at times heartbreaking. But it also deals with sexual misconduct. And you need to take care of yourself, so if hearing stories about sexual assault will upset or trigger you, maybe skip this one.

Emma: See what happened is I got really into PWR BTTM, they were kind of all of my music and I did a little bit of research into other people like them but I never found anyone i connected to on quite the same level.

SO it was around October I believe of 2016 A friend of mine saw the PWR BTTM Tiny Desk Concert with NPR and shared it with me. And so we both sort of became really big fans at that point because I mean it's a really fun video. ... like a lot of what what made them attractive was their live performance.

So I wasn't like oh this is a type of indie music that I like. It was more attracted to the lyrics and how genuine it all seemed

There's a lot of people I know that were really just into the music but there was a whole other level with how they performed and who they were definitely performing for. Like they were definitely performing for the queer community.

Erin: Ben Hopkins and Liv Bruce met at Bard college and formed the garage punk duo PWR BTTM. In 2015 They released a hit album called Ugly Cherries. Pitchfork called the album a collection of quote "complicated statements on what it means to be young and queer and confused and somehow othered."

Emma: Ben, used they used any pronouns, and Liv was exclusively they them, and by the end Ben was exclusively they them, and Liv had started identifying as they them or she her. The fluidity of all of it was really what interested me, the way that one day, like as a band, they could be wearing pants and a baseball hat and they next day being wearing glitter and a crazy dress and wild accessories, just the way that gender and its restrictions are internalized by most people in their youth, those restrictions don't really matter.

So that was where I discovered a lot of how I fit into society and how I don't fit into society and society's ideals about gender

Erin: PWR BTTM had a very specific aesthetic. To give you an idea -- in their NPR tiny desk concert, Ben wears a red dress, a face full of facepaint, and a mess of flowers in their hair. Liv on drums and wears a vintage floral button up, long earrings and bright pink lipstick. And this was a part of their appeal; they played with the coded genders of their clothing and accessories.

Emma: They were coming to San Francisco. So I was like we have to go. So I get my friend that showed me the tiny desk concert and my aunt to drive us. So we go up to San Francisco on the day after the 2016 election results came out.

Erin: November 6th, 2016. Donald Trump is elected President of the United States.

Emma: it was not a hopeful day in the least. Definitely.

And their gear all of their stuff had been stolen the night of the election. So we were like oh they're going to cancel it for sure. But they borrowed gear from some local bands and the show went on But definitely seeing them making this show happen for all the people that paid for it and definitely on this day sort of needed that music.

So the tone of the show was definitely defiant. I felt like like it we were all there listening to this queer based music or the reason of being together at a community that didn't

want to feel alone at this point which was a really special thing to be able to feel that on a day that could have been so so terrible and was for so many people. So it really made my experience coming to terms with Trump and all of the political everything a lot better because I can sort of look back to that and say Oh well at least I have this community of people that's feeling the same way and that we'll still support each other no matter what.

**[tape of shows]**

Erin: So at the beginning of PWR BTTM shows, Ben gets up on stage and does this whole thing about consent and about being aware of the space you're taking up and about being mindful of the people around you. They declare each PWR BTTM show a safe space. This happens at every show, here's tape from one of them.

[TAPE] Ben: We're PWR BTTM from New York. These are safer spaces shows, be mindful of where you are and the people around you.

Emma: So I went to the concert and I think no more than a month later I recorded my first cover of their songs.

**[COVER]**

Emma: So I covered their song *I want a boy* which is one of their most popular songs definitely and I put the lyrics through google translate spanish, french, portuguese, latin and russian or something like that and spit it back out into English and it sounded really funny.

so Ben sees it, quotes the tweet and I believe says this is so fucking good.

And then people start retweeting it and I believe Liv was the first one to follow me and then followed suit after.

And Whoa, it was incredible,

And so as any other person would do when they get noticed one time, you do the same thing again and hope for the same result.

**[next cover]**

Emma: luckily they continued to find it funny.

Ben DMed me and they said Emma you're a genius

Yeah it was like every kid's dream of actually knowing their favorite band they actually talk to me personally

Erin: And queer kids all over the country are doing covers. Youtube is full of them.

This is a video of Eden Hain performing *C U Around*. They're sitting in a pink bathtub with string lights and a lava lamp. Eden's playing a pink fender electric guitar and has big glasses and a headful of curly blond hair. It's about the sweetest thing we've seen on YouTube.

[EDEN HAIN TAPE]

Erin: These videos are a perfect example of just how much these queer kids identified with the music. It's a form of flattery to perform a song you love, the very best that you can hoping your favorite band will see it. "Tweet this to Liv and Ben" the caption reads. So it's also a hugely vulnerable thing to post a cover to the infinite audience of the internet. You can hear that at the end of Eden's tape

Eden: I think that was alright.

Erin: While kids like Eden are singing their hearts out, Emma's preparing for their next PWR BTTM concert.

Emma: So I believe I saw that there was a second show sometime in the new year because it was in mid to late February so I was like well we're going to this so with my friend again and my aunt we miss time we got all dressed up again because that's what you do when you go to see PWR BTTM

I stepped it up in the second show.

It was a complicated look. I remember it had a lot of a lot of moving parts. Another glitter beard. I believe I had like smudged fine eye makeup. I had some Lisa Frank stickers pasted onto my face. There was definitely rhinestones involved. Certainly my hair was in like two space buns on top of my head with definitely glitter in the part. Pink who brings jean jacket covered and pins and a nightgown that te.

i t was a good time

So after the show is done they are pretty active with their fans are they were they would come out and greet people take pictures.

And then Ben comes out after Liv and sees me and I shit you not actually falls to their knees and like bows at my feet. Like what. Which is insane.

Like what

Like I worship you but you're doing that to me.

This is crazy.

And they actually as a souvenir from the show take off the dress that they wore during the show and give it to me which is like.

What. Like

I remember in the car home being like this is this is there's like I'm not supposed to have this

**Erin: The album is scheduled to come out May 12, and everything is leading up to the release. The music is released by NPR a week before its set to be available for purchase and right before a national tour kick off. If you're a super fan, you've already heard it and memorized the lyrics to sing front row.**

Emma: it's a great album

Like as much as I really hate to say it. It was a super powerful album and it covered so many like. Awesome queer topics and oh it hurts me so much that it can't be as influential as it should have been.

It's a Thursday morning and right before my class started I get a DM from Molly Woodstock and it's a screenshot of the original post on the DIY Chicago facebook group detailing the allegations and my heart drops. Like sinks all the way to my feet.

Erin: In the post Molly sent Emma, a community member calls Ben a "known sexual predator and perpetrator of several assaults" and calls for a boycott of PWR BTTM shows and music. The post mentions a slew of other offenses committed towards

members of the queer community. An article goes up the Jezebel website featuring a detailed account of the incident from the accuser.

Emma: So I am rapidly before this class starts trying to figure out more. Like I need to see have they posted anything, what's going on what are other people saying is this true and then the class starts.

The day of the allegations I made a post on twitter, saying basically hey this has been a really terrible day. If anyone needs to talk more or get more information and please DM me and I'll do what I can and basically I spent the rest of my day talking to queer kids i feel like everything i learned from them isn't okay anymore.

SO I am basically dying of anxiety this whole day but when it really becomes real is when their statements were released.

Erin: Ben and Liv a statement on the PWR BTTM Facebook Page. We're going to leave links to them in our show notes but essentially the statement acknowledges the severity of the claims against Ben, and explain that they've set up an email address for other survivor's can come forward quote "have a voice" and claim that Ben wont have access to it but that they're in search of a mediator to help manage the messages.

Erin: Ben and Liv's attempts to create a forum for the conversation is completely misguided. It's not clear whether they had any sort of legal advice here but asking victims of assault and sexual misconduct to come forward for a public mediation is offkey. And the community knows it.

Emma: It's like a mix of them trying to be sincere with a whole ton of legal BS, at first like what sort of world crumbling but I sided with the victim because that's the only thing you can do when someone is in a position of power and they obviously have the option to lie and silence this person, you can't ignore their side, you have to believe them or else nothing is ever going to get done

I think the thing that a lot of the media really grabbed onto was the flip flop from being so adamant about a queer safe space and then flipping completely to everyone to see that they don't practice what they preach. It was difficult for me to grasp because it was a whole part myself that i had based, a whole part of my identity of of basically just crumbled which is a terrible feeling and now here we are a bunch of sad queer kids with no one to look up to anymore and that's how it felt at the time. It was sort of horrible to

have to tell your friends, it was basically my job to inform them all of what happened and what the course of action was to do. So I was like hey, they've been some recent sexual allegations made in relation to PWR BTTM. So I've decided to stop supporting them as artists and people.

Erin : The opening bands for the upcoming PWR BTTM tour drop out.

The NYC release show is cancelled and Salty Artist Management drops PWR BTTM from their roster.

ON May 13 Polyvinyl records tweets that they will "cease to sell and distribute PWR BTTM's music", offer full refunds and even make donations to programs against sexual violence.

Ben releases a second statement a week later on May 18. Again this is taken from the PWR BTTM Facebook Page.

Essentially Ben's post says: This is has been hard on me, I figured out who it was, I didn't have the same experience, I believe victims, I feel like I'm checking myself and then he says and I quote "I strongly contest the account put forth in the Jezebel article."

Liv chimes in to say that the person did come forward to tell Liv beforehand but in order to respect her wishes to protect her identity, Liv didn't tell Ben. The final message from the two of them: Thank you to the people that are standing by us and We want nothing more than to be playing music again. The end.

But they never do. The album never drops, the tour never happens. Ben and Liv never play another live show again. For all intents and purposes, PWR BTTM is cancelled.

Emma: I don't want content out there in the world supporting them so I decided to go back and take down most of my tweets related to them that was probably like a month after the allegations had surfaced and almost everyone decided to unanimously drop them as people.

What was really a bummer is that I stopped and since stopped playing the ukulele. I remember after the allegations surfaced I went to an open mic night at this theatre company that I am a part of oh cool i'll play something on the ukulele and then I realized that every song I know how to play is a pWR BTTM song and maybe I won't perform

My life was devoid of music. I didn't want to listen to anything else. I was like depressed about the whole thing. I didn't feel like I wanted to jump back in. But everyone was at that point everyone was making lists of queer musicians that aren't horrible people. There are lists of 75 bands who make good and interesting music. And a lot of people could find solace in finding other people to listen to because there are so many amazing other artists out there it would be silly to only listen to one.

Erin: And Remember, all of this is pre-Me Too movement. The queer community stepped up, held strong and successfully made sure that PWR BTTM would benefit no further from their status as public figures.

The best thing about the way that the entire community who used to support them decided to come together and hold them accountable for what they'd done and didn't let them get away with it.

It allowed everyone to still feel like they still had a community and it allowed the whole magic of what they had created through their music to stay intact just with the toxic part pushed out.

Erin: The queer DIY scene took care of each other in those days after May 12.

Queers talked online and in social spaces and would come to understand how the abuse of power could happen. They processed the lengths Ben took to gain access to queer spaces and to make fans feel safe, leaving them vulnerable to abuse.

Alternate lists of other queer bands were published and shared to fill the void PWR BTTM left behind.

Teens like Emma held space to comfort their peers. Artists and activists spoke out publicly and condemned Ben's behaviour.

And that's what we should celebrate.

A community that stood together.

Let's celebrate the way we will continue to come together, show up to events and protests, and participate in queer culture.

Let's celebrate that everyday.

Erin: This episode was inspired by conversations with Molly Woodstock, the creator and host of the amazing podcast Gender Reveal. I listened to a conversation between former PWR BTTM musician Nicholas Cummins and Molly on this subject. The link to the Gender Reveal episode is in our show notes.

Queer Public is produced by Erin McGregor. This episode was edited and sound designed by Ariana Martinez. Our music supervisor is Homoground's resident expert on queer music, Lynn Casper. Special thanks to Molly Woodstock for your incredible dedication to the queer community, and to the very talented Emma.

We heard music from Chris Zabriskie, Mise Darling, Emma Denend, Eden Hain and from queer artists SuperKnova, and Fox Gluvv,

If you love Queer Public and want to compensate us for making this show, visit our Patreon. Rewards start with as little as \$5 a month and you can join our chosen family. You can even get access to our secret instagram account.

You can find transcripts of the show at [www.queerpublic.org](http://www.queerpublic.org) and sign up for our rad little mailing list.

Next On Queer Public:

Molly: I think something about being like a queer non-binary, a-sexual spectrum person in the world, in their late 20's. Is that it is really difficult for me to find someone who I feel like really represents the way that I see myself. Like so so, rarely do I see true representation of myself and like we could argue this is a true representation of myself because this is for the character a man in a straight relationship but I just think emotionally it was like such a pure representation of myself. It was just so powerful to see myself emotionally in a character in a way that I like literally don't know if i've really ever experienced before.

I am your host, Erin McGregor. Thanks for listening.