

Madonna dancers talk about the risk touring with pop idol

Strike a Pose had Vancouver premiere as part of the Vancouver Queer Film Festival

By Liam Britten, [CBC News](#) Posted: Aug 18, 2016 3:47 PM PT Last Updated: Aug 19, 2016 10:01 AM PT

Jose "Xtravaganza" Gutierrez and Kevin Stea say they are incredibly grateful to have been Madonna's backup dancers in 1990 during her Blonde Ambition tour.

But at the time, as gay men in a time of greater intolerance and the growing HIV crisis, they didn't know how to deal with the newfound exposure brought to them by the tour.

"Being gay, homosexual, HIV — those conversations were taboo," Stea told [On The Coast](#) guest host Gloria Macarenko.

"In the entertainment world, they were death to an entertainer. You could easily be labelled a pariah. It was tantamount to being a murderer in some places.

"So to declare yourself gay was not a moment of pride: it was a moment of risk. It was scary."

Gutierrez and Stea are in town during the Vancouver Queer Festival this week for the Vancouver premiere of *Strike a Pose*, a new documentary exploring the tour's effect on its numerous male backup dancers — many of whom were gay.

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Lawsuits and gratitude

The Blonde Ambition tour was notable for pushing gay culture into the mainstream in a way it had never been before.

"It put it on the world stage, as they say," Gutierrez said. "I think it took someone like Madonna to do something like that."

"The dance and the music really bridged the gay and the straight community," Stea added. "It was a language both could speak and it was popular with all of them. It became this sort of common language."

At the same time, the tour and an accompanying documentary, *Madonna: Truth or Dare*, put the male dancers themselves in the spotlight in a way that made them fearful — so much so that Stea and another dancer, who later died after contracting HIV, sued the pop idol.

Stea says his reason for suing was over not being paid for the documentary, but the other dancer was more concerned about his privacy being invaded. The lawsuit was eventually withdrawn and the case settled out of court in 1994.

But Stea and Gutierrez both agree today they're grateful for the experience and the opportunity to join the tour and put gay culture more into the mainstream.

"Now, you hear these messages and people tell you, 'You saved my life, you prevented me from suicide because of my sexuality,'" Gutierrez said. "I mean, what do you do with that?"

Strike a Pose had its Vancouver premiere Wednesday night, but will also be showing Friday at International Village Theatre.

Strike a Pose - Official trailer



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