

Madonna's Blond Ambition Dancers Strike a Pose

Imagine reaching the pinnacle of your professional artistic career at the tender age of 21. Imagine even further not being truly aware enough to appreciate it until a documentary crew comes calling, 25 years later, asking you to tell your story to the world.

That was the legacy for Madonna's backup dancers after her iconic Blond Ambition tour and subsequent cult-doc classic, [Truth or Dare](#), rocked the globe in the early '90s.

The seven artists—six gay, one straight—who helped Madge sell her message of sexual liberation had no idea that their fiercely flamboyant openness and self-expression, captured in all its provocative detail by the ravenous cameras, would literally change the lives of LGBTQ youth around the world.

Unfortunately, even as the men who made voguing mainstream taught a whole new generation to express themselves, painful secrets, bad blood and unexpected life twists simmered in the following decades.

It all comes cathartically to the surface, though, in *Strike a Pose*—a powerful new documentary by Dutch filmmakers Reijer Zwaan and Ester Gould that focuses on the men whose lives were forever changed by their close encounter with the Material Girl.

We caught up with one of the dancers, L.A resident Kevin Stea (pictured below, left), prior to his arrival in Vancouver for a screening of the doc, to find about more about the impact of the two wildly different experiences, and all that has unfolded in the 25 years between. *This interview has been edited and condensed.* —Kelsey Klassen



Image: Lisa Guarnieri photo

KK: When you learned that Ester was making this film [*Strike a Pose*], did you have any reservations about taking part?

KS: My initial concerns were about the lawsuit, what I could say and what I couldn't say. [*Stea and two other dancers sued Madonna after Truth or Dare over contract grievances and issues over the footage that was aired*]. Then it was about if the filmmakers themselves were trying to take a sensationalist bend or not, and once I met them I knew immediately their focus was much more humanist and compassionate. They wanted to know our stories, which I thought was fantastic. So I jumped on board immediately. I'm a gung-ho kind of guy!

KK: You say humanist... When the tour was actually happening did you feel like your stories were being told?

KS: I'm not sure that [the stories in *Truth or Dare*] were our stories. We were in the story, but I don't think they were our stories. I think this movie, currently, is our stories. I think the stories that were shown—everything that was shown in *Truth or Dare* was true, but the stories that were shown were the ones that I think contributed to her message and narrative the most. And in that sense that was only a slice of, really, who we are.

KK: What did the process of making *Strike a Pose* reveal to you? What did it possibly bring to the surface for you?

KS: It definitely had me realize how important these other guys are to me. And it made me consciously review my entire life. For better or worse... it's that time in my life anyways, you know, mid-40s. Errr...Twenty-three! [*Laughs*] People tend to start looking back, seeing where you've come from and where you've arrived. So as [the filmmakers] were discovering who we were, we were exploring who we are and our impact on the world. And if we like who we've become.

KK: For sure. You probably haven't stopped to reflect much, versus throwing yourself into your work and your career? [*Stea has since worked as a dancer and choreographer for such artists as Prince, Lady Gaga, Beyoncé and Michael Jackson.*]

KS: Oh, yeah. I've never really looked back on my body of work and thought, 'Wow, I've done work that has impacted people or made a difference for people. [...] Because I always thought it was about the artist I was working for and had nothing to do with my work—it's their message, not mine. But now it has me really view everything I've done and look at it with a different perspective; one that allows me more support and confidence for myself.

KK: What do you think that will do for you? Will it change how you approach your work? Or maybe you'll write a book, or something.

KS: Ha, I'm actually already writing a book. I've been writing it for, like, 10 years. I have way too much that I can even put in a single book. But what it's given me is a sense of closure for my book. I think for years I've been sitting in this conversation with myself. How do you close a chapter, how do you close a book? And participating in this film has really given me this moment of completion, where everything has kind of come full circle.



Image: *Strike a Pose* photo

KK: I don't like to use the word naive, but did you know the cultural impact that *Truth or Dare* would have at the time? Did it surprise you, or were you completely unaware?

KS: Ha, I think naive is an appropriate word. I had NO idea the sort of cultural impact it would have at the time. At the time, everything was kind of sensationalist, so if you look at the press from the period, everything was about: Look at this! or There's a lesbian in this film! The focus was all sensationalist, there was no sense of what is she doing, what is she saying, what is the message of the film? And so for us it didn't feel like anything other than a moment of pop fluff.

In retrospect, what we're discovering, especially since the advent of social media, is the sense that the audience that watches the movie can now communicate with us. Now we have this access to the people, the audience, and now they tell us, 'You saved my life. You showed me that I could be gay and still be myself.' Diversity was represented on film for the first time; gay people were human for the first time on camera, and the overwhelming majority of messages are that we gave them a sense of freedom to be themselves in a space that did not exist in media.

So only now has it really dawned on us that it had social impact. And it's weird to say that you had social impact when you're just being yourself, and it just so happens that they film you [*laughs*]. It's like going to the grocery store and someone telling you, 'You've made a difference to the world.'

KK: And that was before reality TV and this, now, ever-present cultural awareness of how we digest each other's lives.

KS: Yes, absolutely. There was no reality TV. There was *COPS* and the occasional rockumentary. That was all you got.

KK: I gather though, that despite how open and kind of, yourselves, you were being, there was still secrets and fear, and not everyone was as comfortable with the level of openness [*dancer Gabriel Trupin sadly passed away from complications due to AIDS in 1995, without ever revealing his diagnosis to the group*]. Has 25 years of perspective changed that?

KS: There's always secrets. That's the thing about being human is, as transparent as we are, there's always more to uncover. It's easy to be transparent, and then more comes up, more is created, more happens. And then the second you say something about yourself, you've let it go and there's more of you to share. I think life is a journey of discovering your own challenges and your own goals. I don't think any of that ever ends. But I think it's how we approach our sharing, how we approach our challenges now that has become important.

KK: During the tour, did you feel that Madonna was truly is a part of your lives, or do you ever feel that she was just taking advantage of the moment?

KS: You know, it's a very complex discussion to have. I think my personal feelings are that she's so focused on the message and has such an intention to making her point, that other things—and people, often—are not as important. Now, how that lands with people depends on the person. If the message saves 100,000 lives, is it worth one life? It's a hard scale to weigh.

Stea and fellow dancer Jose Xtravaganza will be in Vancouver tonight, Aug. 17, for the film screening and to take part in a post-show Q&A, as well as perform during Spacemelt, the event's genre-bending after-party. More info at www.queerfilmfestival.com.

