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## The Original Kylie Shows the City of Angels a Good Time

Survivor -- wait, no, thriver -- Olivia Newton-John is the perfect headliner for L.A. Gay Pride

By Caroline Ryder

Olivia Newton John wasn't on roller skates when she opened her gay pride set with the theme from *Xanadu* -- but her crowd was definitely in a spin. "I'm proud to be here," she yelled, shimmying around the stage, wearing a slick tuxedo suit and black sequined vest, looking like Madonna's slightly older, friendlier sister.

Olivia Newton John kept a low profile after being diagnosed with breast cancer in 1992, in the same week her father passed away. Subsequent financial woes and separation from her husband kept her out of the limelight for a stretch. But she's been increasingly visible, playing Sydney Mardi Gras in February and recently returning from a fund-raising walk along the Great Wall of China, trudging 200 kilometers in 21 days to raise money for the Olivia Newton-John Breast Cancer Center in Australia.



Her closing night Gay Pride L.A. show came ahead of the June 24 DVD rerelease of *Xanadu* and the July 23 launch of Logo's *Sordid Lives* series in which she stars. Based on Del Shores's 1996 play and 2000 film, the series brings us Newton-John as a mulleted, ex-con bar singer named Bitsy Mae Harling.

There were no mullets (onstage, at least) on Sunday -- just classic pop hit after classic pop hit, with Newton-John performing four songs from her two most beloved movies: *Xanadu* and *Grease*. When she launched into "Hopelessly Devoted to You," a thousand queer voices rose in the air in a collective "But, now -- there's nowhere to hide, since you pushed my love aside!" and when she donned a cropped leather biker jacket for "You're the One That I Want," West Hollywood knew all the words, roaring the immortal "You better shape up, cause I need a man ... who can keep me satisfied!"

Newton-John, who splits her time between Los Angeles, Australia, and Florida, showed off some rather impressive aerobics moves during "Physical" and encouraged the audience to chime in "it's a bitch" during her rendition of the *Sordid Lives* theme song.

Statuesque blond Australian singer Delta Goodrem (also a cancer survivor) stepped onto the stage for a syrupy duet, and Newton-John wiped tears from her eyes after performing the title track from her most recent album, the spiritually inspired *Grace and Gratitude*.

After performing an a cappella encore, she retreated backstage to the tents and kept smiling for a good half hour while dozens of well-wishers -- including drag queen and Pride MC Momma and a young man in a wheelchair wearing an "Olivia" T-shirt -- lined up to get their photos taken with the star.

I found my way up to the legend and congratulated her on the show, mentioning the *Xanadu* DVD rerelease this month. "It's being rereleased?" she said, blue eyes widening. "That's great. I had no idea! You know, when we filmed *Xanadu*, I had no idea it would ever be this big. It was difficult to film and certainly wasn't a critical hit when it first came out."

Why was it difficult to film?

"Well, the script left a lot to be desired. It was being rewritten every day during shooting, and the director (Robert Greenwald) wasn't someone who loved music. He even said that. The street dancing [choreographed by Kenny Ortega] was incredible, however. Way ahead of its time."

I asked her why she thinks gay people connect so strongly with her, and she laughed. "I don't know! Because I'm still around?" She talked about a group of gay fans who follow her to every single show she plays around the world. "They're so loyal!"

Maybe they love her because she's a survivor, I venture? "I'm not a survivor ... I'm a thriver," she said. So how did she cope when, 15 years ago, she was diagnosed with breast cancer in the same week her father died? She wasn't even able to attend her father's funeral because she had to have surgery. "I compartmentalized," she shrugged. "I had to put my father's death in a drawer because I couldn't cope with that and the breast cancer at the same time. So I don't think I properly mourned him for a quite a while. It really was a stressful time."

We didn't discuss her daughter's anorexia and the disappearance of her boyfriend Patrick McDermott (who, according to an Australian tabloid, was recently sighted in Mexico).

Instead, I closed with a question that has been on my mind for many, many years -- did Sandy go all the way with Danny, after flying up in to the clouds with him in Greased Lightning?

"Actually, we didn't go very far," replied Newton-John, matter-of-factly.