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Parker Westwood, a co-founder and working member at Answer Detroit. Photo: Nomadic Madam



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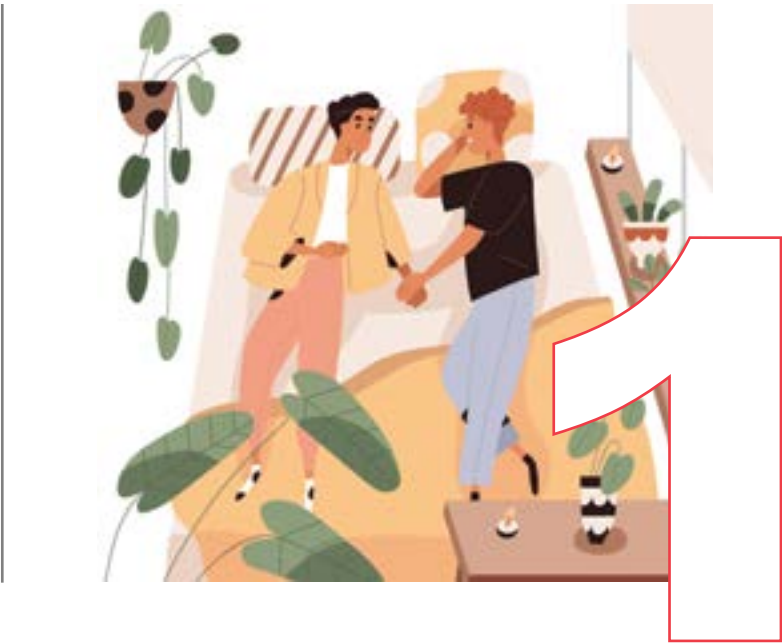
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5 Queer Things You Can Do Right Now-ish

BY SARAH BRICKER HUNT

Valentine's Day might just be the most divisive of all holidays. Is it a celebration of love or a cynical, collaborative marketing ploy perpetrated by the nation's largest producers of chocolate, booze and sexy-time products and events? Both? However this pink-hued day lands for you, the good news is that the V-Day season brings with it opportunities for fun, debauchery and guilt-free calorie indulgence. Check out a sweet theater production focused on queer love at Planet Ant, attend a wintery Pride festival, enjoy sexy Valentine's drag and dancing, or support your local Girl Scout during the true reason for the season: cookie time. You can also take part in a local effort aimed at urging a ceasefire in Gaza.



Celebrate Queer Love at Planet Ant

Planet Ant's "Lovebird Jamboree: Love Stories From the LGBTQ Community," a new production at its Black Box Theater by playwright and Eastern Michigan University graduate Sarah Elisabeth Brown, will take audiences on an exploration of queer love in the style of Eve Ensler's "Vagina Monologues." The performance includes a series of humorous monologues combined and created from interviews Brown conducted with LGBTQ+ community members, centered on a group of people anticipating the new millennium in the late '90s.

Feb. 9-24, various times, Planet Ant Black Box Theatre (2357 Caniff St., Hamtramck). Buy tickets at bit.ly/48gPQRX.



Attend a Wintertime Pride Event

Restaurant and entertainment complex Detroit Shipping Company will hold Winterfest, its first winter-time event celebrating LGBTQ+ Pride, on Feb. 17. "DSC wishes to provide a safe and an inclusive environment to celebrate love, positivity and people with an event on Valentine's Day weekend," press materials read. The ticketed, family-friendly event will feature activities like friendship bracelet making, a DJ-led dance party, a hot cocoa station, vendors, photo opportunities and an optional drag bingo add-on.

Feb. 17, 12-9 p.m., Detroit Shipping Company (474 Peterboro St., Detroit) Reserve tickets at bit.ly/42ojSI7.



Support LGBTQ+ Youth (and Eat Cookies)

In case you haven't noticed, it's Girl Scout cookie season. Don't hesitate to indulge in those addictive delights — the Girl Scouts of America is boisterously supportive of the LGBTQ+ community, including trans kids and leaders. The group has had an explicitly trans-inclusive policy for more than a decade and has gone on record rejecting large donations from anti-trans donors. So the next time you're gently urged to buy some cookies outside your local grocery store (or dispensary), remember you're not only getting your Thin Mint fix, you're also supporting a great cause.

Find your nearest cookie hook-up here: girlscouts.org/en/cookies/how-to-buy-cookies.html.



Participate in a Call for Peace in Gaza

A trio of local organizations representing a wide array of backgrounds and ideologies is working together to promote a ceasefire in Gaza. Community organization Queer Folk, Ferndale Palestine Solidarity Coalition and DSA Detroit are taking part in a concert at Drifter Coffee in Ferndale on Feb. 9 and urging the Ferndale City Council to pass a ceasefire resolution. "The event will bring together our community of poets, musicians, singers and peace activists from Ferndale and neighboring cities, who are united with the global movement in demanding an immediate and permanent ceasefire in Palestine," event organizer and Queer Folk founder Amrit Kohli tells BTL. "We want to raise awareness of our efforts to get Ferndale City Council to join over 50 cities nationwide in passing a ceasefire resolution."

Friday, Feb. 9, 6-11 p.m., Drifter Coffee (770 Woodward Heights, Ferndale). Email amrit@queerfolk.com for information about performing at the event.



Auntie Chanel. Photo: Instagram

Enjoy Sexy Valentine's Drag

Head to UFO Factory for the premiere of a new monthly queer night called Siren, hosted by the fabulous Auntie Chanel. First up is "Coquette Valentine's Day" on Feb. 10, featuring high femme energy, thumping club music, high-tech visual effects and more. UFO Factory encourages attendees to lean into an aesthetic that includes a cute Valentine-inspired look — think Lolita, "cutecore," coquettish or anything pink! You're guaranteed to get some excellent, social media-worthy pics at this one. Future dates to be announced.

Feb. 10, 9 p.m., UFO Factory (2121 Trumbull Ave., Detroit). Advance tickets at ra.co/events/1847156.



LET'S TALK ABOUT SEX WORK



Parker Westwood. Photo: Beautiful Spirit Boudoir

These Metro Detroiters are fighting for decriminalization and the safety of local sex workers

BY LAYLA MCMURTRIE

Metro Detroit individuals and organizations are spearheading efforts to decriminalize sex work, recognizing that it is not simply a matter of legality, but a crucial step toward safeguarding the well-being of the LGBTQ+ community.

The field of sex work — which encompasses dancers, escorts, online-only adult content creators, street-based sex workers and others — disproportionately affects queer people. In the interconnected landscape of oppression and economic insecurity, sex workers often find themselves at the crossroads of multiple marginalized identities. These individuals struggle not only with issues including poverty, homelessness, mental illness, substance abuse and sexual health risks, but also face a heightened risk of violence.

For many in the LGBTQ+ community, sex work is a lifeline used to navigate the complexities of identity and self-expression. LGBTQ+ individuals, especially low-income queer people of color, experience higher rates of poverty, according to the National Center for Lesbian Rights. Consequently, sex work, as well as decriminalization of it, is often a matter of survival.

Bree Rowe, a harm reductionist in Detroit and former sex worker, says that the conversation surrounding sex work and the queer community cannot be had without also discussing why people could have been brought to sex work in the first place.

“When we talk about survival sex work, we’re looking at the largest portion of queer people because queer people are also the young folks getting kicked out of their houses, getting kicked out of school, getting fired from their jobs because they’re queer — all of this pushing them to the outliers of society,” says Rowe, who is nonbinary. “When you’re given two options that both suck, you’re still in some way being put into a position that you might not have chosen had housing been an option, had you had access to food, had you had a family that supported your identity.”

Kevin Chadwin-Davis, a queer sex worker who actively works as an escort and on OnlyFans, agrees.

“Unfortunately, [many in] the queer community [have] done sex work at some point to survive, or as a form of therapy,”

“

“If we give sex workers humanity, autonomy and dignity as a group, it’s going to be a lot harder to manipulate people in that industry.”

— Parker Westwood, co-founder of sex worker advocacy group Answer Detroit

he says. “Sex work has always been a form of therapy for me because of things I went through as a child. It’s been where I’ve channeled my trauma for most of my life, and it’s saved my life because I’ve had that outlet because I couldn’t afford therapy and I didn’t have insurance because I’m a queer person.”

Aside from outward sex work advocacy, Chadwin-Davis works mainly with organizations that serve people living with HIV. He recently moved to Detroit from Dallas, Texas, currently attending Wayne State University in pursuit of a master’s degree in public health. Chadwin-Davis found a more welcoming and accepting home in Detroit, and while the full-time move was made just weeks ago, he has been working with Detroiters to advocate for sex workers at a grassroots level for years.

One organization he has been involved with is Answer Detroit, a sex worker justice collective started by a group of sex workers in 2018 that provides mutual aid to the local sex work community. ANSWER is an acronym for A Network of Sex Workers to Excite Revolution. The mission of the organization is “to allow anyone involved in sex work to not only survive, but thrive,” and “eliminate the shame, stigma, and criminalization around sex work.”

Parker Westwood, a co-founder and working member at Answer Detroit, has been passionate about sex work advocacy from a young age, writing a paper in eighth grade about the censorship of porn. They became a sex worker at the age of 19, first as a stripper.

Westwood, who is genderqueer and

uses any pronouns, says that at the start of the pandemic, Answer raised \$30,000 in three months for mutual aid. For a group of people in an isolating career who often cannot ask for help, peer support is extremely important. Further resources that Answer provides include sex work safety protocols, harm reduction and clothing, as well as connecting people with housing opportunities and doing outreach to see what the community needs most.

In the future, Westwood says that Answer Detroit hopes local sex workers can share their stories more often, and do even more work specifically for the fight toward decriminalization.

While criminalization affects all sex workers, queer people can be faced with heightened hardships including compounded stigma and discrimination, increased internal struggle and higher risk of violence. With fear of being prosecuted themselves, queer sex workers cannot report the violence against them.

While Westwood has “seen some assholes,” they say they have been lucky to have not experienced violence, and when a client says something intolerant or displays toxic masculinity, they take the opportunity to dive into a conversation and talk to the person about how problematic it is.

“If you’re voting, I would prefer that we talk about this right now. I’ve definitely lost clients to political

talk, but I would rather do it than not do it,” they say. “I think I’m privileged in that I appear femme and cis, and I’m white, and that gives me a certain amount of privilege that [allows me] to take those opportunities to push those buttons.”

For Westwood, the experience of being a sex worker while queer has been mainly an internal struggle of balancing gender expression, facing the realization that the more feminine they presented, the more money they made.

Even within the sex work community, various degrees of privilege are prevalent, and Westwood feels that decriminalization would help to allow people with more privilege in the community to be able to better help others who are faced with challenges. “If we give sex workers humanity, autonomy and dignity as a group, it’s going to be a lot harder to manipulate people in that industry and it’s also going to be easier for those of us who are not being manipulated to identify where something feels off and report it,” Westwood says. “It just makes the environment safer when we have the autonomy to say ‘something’s not right.’”

Apart from Answer Detroit, other local organizations that advocate and provide resources for sex workers include Corktown Health and Detroit Recovery Project.

Rowe’s advocacy, which encompasses harm reduction initiatives and HIV prevention efforts, is normally tailored specifically to marginalized sex workers who use substances and are in poverty. Through needle exchange programs and sexual health advocacy, Rowe has been able to connect with sex workers who may be scared to ask for help otherwise.

“The sex workers that I work with are typically survival sex workers, sex workers using sex work as a means to an end. Most of my work is done outside of my 9 to 5 that pays me because the type of advocacy and clients that I serve are clients that don’t typically have accessibility to resources,” Rowe says. “Criminalization harms those on the lower end of the spectrum, which are

See **Sex Work**, page 8



Kevin Chadwin-Davis.
Courtesy photo

going to include queer people more so than the privileged sex workers simply because of the way that we're viewed as humans."

While queer people as a whole are faced with challenges within the sex work community and due to the criminalization of sex work, trans people specifically, especially trans women of color, are faced with even more issues. In 2023, 320 transgender people were murdered, according to Forbes. Of this group, 94% were trans women, a majority of whom were Black. And many were sex workers.

Chadwin-Davis and Rowe emphasize that there are very few statistics about sex workers, and it is hard to trust that the number of deaths is accurate. Often, while reports of transgender people being killed don't mention anything about sex work, people in the community know that it is often a missing piece of the story. Plus, when stories are written about sex workers, they often don't include quotes from people who have been in the community themselves.

In the quest for sex worker rights, decriminalization is a critical step toward safety and autonomy for marginalized individuals. While fighting for

decriminalization, people understanding the difference between sex work and sex trafficking is critical. The most important difference is the fact that sex trafficking is against someone's will, while sex work is consensual. The differentiation between legalization and decriminalization is also important, as simply legalizing sex work would still create inaccessible barriers.

Still, the path to decriminalization is filled with many obstacles, from decades-old city ordinances to systemic biases within law enforcement.

Rowe's encounters with city officials underscore the need to align legislation with harm reduction principles. When Rowe had a syringe service van in Detroit, a client they were providing with medical attention and clean paraphernalia was arrested for possession of paraphernalia, even though the items were purchased with federal dollars. Rowe says they would often meet with the city's chief of police at the time to urge him to alter city ordinances so issues like this could be prevented. "The money and the laws are not aligning at the same time," Rowe says.

Westwood, Rowe and Chadwin-Davis emphasize the importance of federal protections for sex workers against discrimination and harassment in the workforce, advocating for policies that prioritize consent and human dignity.

Chadwin-Davis says he himself has been discriminated against in previous workplaces due to the fact that he is a sex worker and is publicly proud of it.

"As of right now, you can still be fired, unhoused, kicked out onto the streets with nothing, for simply claiming sex work as an identity factor, so the first step 100% would be federal protection under discrimination," Rowe says. "It needs to be a protected status in Title V where it says that you cannot discriminate against age, race, sexuality, gender — sex work needs to be in there."

Rowe highlights that although sex work is not necessarily an identity factor, the hardships that come along with it make it feel just as important. "I now hold 'sex worker' as an identity piece, not because it necessarily changes who I am in my character, but it does change my worldview; it has exposed me to a lot of things that the average person won't be exposed to," they add. "I've been able to explore sex in ways that other people don't explore sex, which ultimately heightened my senses of sexuality and gender, which is why I'm a genderfluid person and a queer person because of the sex that I explored while I was a sex worker. That status needs to be protected federally, that you cannot discriminate employment, housing or social services like WIC and Medicaid, because of sex work."

Organizations being public allies to sex workers is also important, Chadwin-Davis says, as well as including sex workers in policy-making and diving deeper into intersectionality.

"We could do better as far as including all types of sex workers and maybe not just street-based. We could use the allyship from people from OnlyFans, we could use the allyship from people that are in policy, starting to include more people into the conversation so that the conversation can expand past what it's looked like historically," Chadwin-Davis says. "We need new people. We need mentorship, we need leadership and we need guidance."

Westwood says people can help the sex work community in small ways first, such as by interrogating their own views around sex work and speaking up to eliminate stigma in their own communities.

"With sex workers, we've always been here, we've always been queer and we're not going anywhere," Westwood says. "People can continue to fight who we are and continue to see us as inhuman, but there's so many of us and we're all so diverse and so human with our own beautiful stories. They're missing out. Anyone who wants to dehumanize us is just missing out on a whole lot of cool people who, in my view of the future, are just going to take over the world, and it's going to be beautiful."



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Reclaiming Valentine's Day as a Queer Person

The world has taught us this day is not ours. Let's change that.

BY SOFÍA AGUILAR

Even before I came out as bisexual, I never liked Valentine's Day. I grew up seeing couples giving each other boxes of chocolates, dollar store balloons and stuffed bears year after year — a reminder of my loneliness. It also othered me in my queerness — my identity as a femme queer person of color influenced how I saw and moved through the world, isolated by everything that made me different.

Even now, Valentine's Day remains the absolute pinnacle of heteronormativity and straight culture, and that's not by accident. Look past the fun pink and red color palette and you'll notice who is allowed to celebrate publicly — and who isn't — as dictated by social and political norms. Many people in queer relationships, especially visibly queer ones, still don't feel comfortable holding hands in public, let alone engaging in other physical forms of affection.

This is obviously an issue in film and on

TV, where depictions of straight couples are abundant. Still to this day, queer relationships in media are often a second thought or, even worse, only included for diversity points. Then there's the dismal number of queer rom-coms that exist. Even with a film as groundbreaking as last year's queer-focused "Bottoms," we're not adequately represented and included in the national conversation. No wonder so many of us haven't felt like we could or should celebrate.

It's not like we haven't tried to make this day our own. I can't tell you how many blog posts and guides I've read that share tips for how to celebrate Valentine's Day as a queer person, or how many Galentine's Day brunches I've tried to organize only to feel like I'm masquerading as someone I'm not. I know plenty of us would just rather say "screw it" and completely boycott

See **Valentine's Day**, page 22

Deep State Taylor Swift Exposed by Very Rational, Very Intelligent People



BY D'ANNE WITKOWSKI

We need to talk about Taylor Swift.

It was never going to last forever. And now that the secret's out and the most popular singer in the United States has had her cover blown to pieces, she will never, ever get it back together.

First, Republicans claimed that Democrats rigged the 2020 election (Editor's note: Democrats did no such thing). Now they're claiming that Democrats are going to rig the Super Bowl all so Taylor Swift and her boyfriend, Kansas City Chiefs tight end Travis Kelce, can use the largest televised event in the country to demand that everyone vote for President Joe Biden.

If you didn't have "Taylor Swift discovered to be an agent of the Deep State" on your 2024 Bingo card, then you need to seriously ask yourself why you even bother playing Bingo in the first place.

Divide that by 2024 and you get 1.942. Coincidence? Hardly. When you round 1.942 up, you get 2, which is clearly an endorsement of two terms for Biden.

1942 (the year Biden was born) + 1989 (the year Swift was born) = 3931. Divide that by 2024 and you get 1.942. Coincidence? Hardly. When you round 1.942 up, you get 2, which is clearly an endorsement of two terms for Biden.

We should have been suspicious back when Swift re-recorded and re-released her old albums. How did we not notice that all of the "Taylor's Version" albums have song titles like, "All You Had to Do Was Vote for Biden," "I Wish You Would Vote for Biden," and "The Story of U.S. Voting for Biden."

Still don't believe me? When you play Swift's song "Anti-Hero" backward, you'll hear secret messages like, "Ticketmaster is the devil" and "President Joe Biden 4-Ever."

I mean, just do the math!

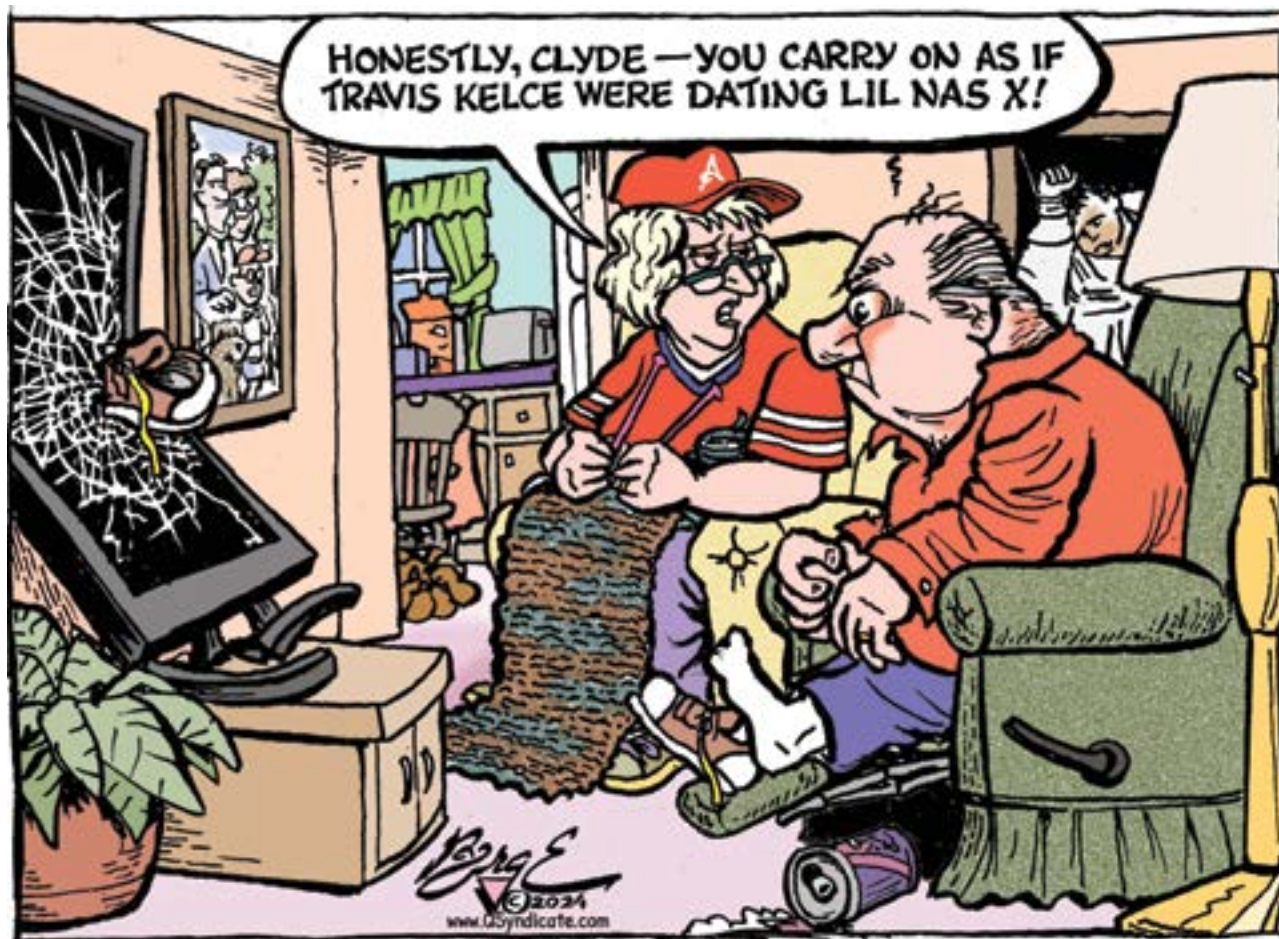
1942 (the year Biden was born) + 1989 (the year Swift was born) = 3931.

Republicans have, naturally, latched onto this conspiracy theory with unbridled enthusiasm.

It certainly doesn't hurt that disgraced former president Donald Trump has had, um, issues with Swift for years now.

"Trump himself is apparently jealous of the singer-songwriter's fame, according to sources who said the former president is angry that she would back his rival and mystified that she was chosen as Time Magazine's Person of the Year instead of him," reports Raw Story.

Swift was Time's Person of the Year in



2023 and she also appeared on the cover in 2017 with a number of other women "as one of the Silence Breakers who inspired women to speak out about sexual misconduct," according to Time.

Trump is, no doubt, pissed about both.

MSNBC's Joe Scarborough and Mika Brzezinski addressed the Swift controversy on Jan. 31's episode of "Morning Joe."

"Trump himself recently claimed in private that he was more popular than the music star and that his fans were more committed than hers," Brzezinski said.

Scarborough replied in the only possible way: "Well, her fans won't actually kill four cops. They won't try to take the government over, if that is what you mean. They won't take American flags and turn them into spears, if that is what you are talking about."

IS that what Trump was talking about? I mean, probably!

That said, there really is no telling what Swifties would do if Ticketmaster fucks them over again. Just saying.

"The absurdity of it all boggles the mind," an anonymous senior administration official told Politico about the Swift conspiracy (Swiftspiracy?). "It feels like one of those 'tell me you are a MAGA conspiracy theorist, without telling me you are a MAGA conspiracy theorist' memes."

It's easy to laugh at all of this, but we

have to remember that believing in, and acting on, absolutely baseless conspiracy theories is exactly what MAGA extremists do. Remember the guy who walked into a D.C. pizza joint and opened fire because he believed in a widely circulated (and widely believed!) conspiracy theory that the restaurant was a front for a child sex trafficking ring? Or how about the time a deranged loser told thousands of his followers that the 2020 election had been stolen and set them loose on the U.S. Capitol?

Truly, these wild accusations about Swift put her in real danger, as her people are all too aware.

"We know all too well the dangers of conspiracy theories, so to set the record straight: Taylor Swift is not part of a DoD psychological operation. Period," Swift spokesperson Sabrina Singh told Politico.

I cannot imagine that demonizing Taylor Swift and Travis Kelce, aka "Miss Americana and the Heartbreak Prince," is going to work out well for Republicans. But then again, demonizing people is kind of their thing: women, BIPOC, LGBTQ+ people. You know, anyone who isn't white, Christian, cisgender and heterosexual. Also anyone who believes in science, public education, and basic human decency.

"Call It What You Want," but "This Is Why We Can't Have Nice Things."

THE SCROLL

QUICK HITS & CAN'T MISSES

Affirmations Reports Budget Shortfall

.....

At the Jan. 24 virtual annual meeting of Affirmations, Ferndale’s LGBTQ+ community center, attendees learned the non-profit is in the red on its latest profit and loss statement — but fear not. While a \$330,000 budget shortfall seems alarming, Affirmations Executive Director Cheryl Czach tells BTL she expects the discrepancy to resolve itself as anticipated funds from various grants roll in over the next few months. “The organization is still in a really good position financially,” she said. “We have about \$820,000 in cash reserves in the bank.”

In fact, the region’s leading

LGBTQ+ organization is set to unveil several new initiatives this year, including a partnership with MiGen, Michigan’s LGBTQ+ elder network, to bring a community center for seniors to Affirmations. The organization is also expanding its focus on health and human services under the direction of its first HHS Director, Kate Spinney. That program offers in-person counseling and teletherapy resources.

Czach invites the community to attend an open house on Feb. 9, a free event where the Affirmations staff will be on hand to discuss programs and services, including its dozens of community support groups. In March, Affirmations will host a carnival event for families with younger children. Visit goaffirmations.org.



Affirmations Executive Director Cheryl Czach. Courtesy photo

Have You Experienced Housing Discrimination?

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The Michigan Civil Rights Commission invites LGBTQ+ community members and others to share information about discrimination experienced when trying to buy, sell, rent or finance a home. The Commission also invites feedback from individuals with disabilities denied housing or a reasonable accommodation that would allow them to access and live in a rental property. “We know that housing impacts every aspect of life, including health, wealth, security and peace of mind,” said Michigan Department of Civil Rights Executive Director John E. Johnson, Jr. in a news release.

Two hearings have been held; upcoming dates include March 16 in Flint and April 28 in Grand Rapids. The annual Civil Rights Summit on Fair Housing is set for June 12 in Detroit, where experts, advocates and policymakers will draft legislative recommendations to combat housing discrimination. Visit bit.ly/3w4KkUT.



Michigan Reps Working to Ease Name and Gender Marker Changes

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Equality Michigan is urging community members to put pressure on state legislators to pass a package of bills aimed at removing barriers to legal name changes and accurate identification documents in Michigan. The organization warns that the scenario playing out in Florida is part of an

escalation of attacks on transgender people. Florida has threatened transgender residents with criminal penalties for having “inaccurate” identification. House Bills 5300-5303, sponsored by Michigan Reps Laurie Pohutsky, Emily Dievendorf, Felicia Brabec, Helena Scott and Jason Morgan, seek to remove obstacles like a surgery requirement to update a birth certificate. The bills allow for a self-attestation policy for state IDs and driver’s licenses and would codify the non-binary gender marker (X) policy the Secretary of State established in 2021. Learn more at bit.ly/4bsxrEc.

Ack — Biden Wants to Reduce Teen Pregnancy

.....

In news that has triggered Fox News viewers, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services has earmarked \$700,000 in funds for a pregnancy prevention program that includes trans boys. “Data suggests that AFAB trans-identified youth may be less likely to use condoms,” materials about the program read. The funding is similar to programs like a Seattle Children’s Hospital grant that created an LGBTQ+ sex education tool intended to reduce STIs and sexual risk behaviors. Oh noes?

Rainbow Resilience Fashion Show

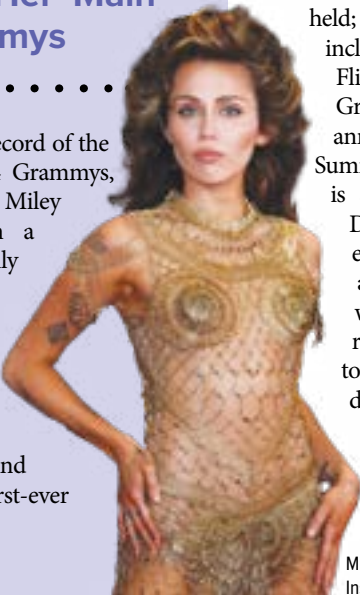
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Tickets are selling fast for MiGen’s Rainbow Resilience: An Ageless Fashion Affair, set for March 3 at the Motown Mansion. Hosted by the legendary Lady T, the drag and fashion show will give LGBTQ+ older adults the opportunity to prove that style is “truly ageless,” according to press materials. You can also visit the org’s pop-up vaccine clinic. Tickets at bit.ly/493fCtO.

Miley Thanks Her ‘Main Gays’ at Grammys

.....

While picking up her Record of the Year award at the 2024 Grammys, pansexual songstress Miley Cyrus, decked out in a golden dress created only from safety pins, made sure to pay tribute to her “main gays — because look how good I look.” Cyrus’ song “Flowers” earned her the award, her second of the night — her first-ever Grammy wins.



Miley Cyrus. Photo: Instagram/@mileycyrus



Food Is Our Love Language, No Matter the Distance

The magic of creamy pasta and fresh baked pretzels helps us stay connected

BY JORDYN BRADLEY

A year ago, my cooking capabilities extended to recipes involving ingredients like jarred pasta sauce and pre-cooked chicken. Homemade sauce seemed too tedious, and I was incredibly afraid of undercooked chicken and salmonella. A year ago, I was also teetering on the line of, “Do I like girls too, or am I confused?”

Fast forward to now, nearly all my meals are homemade — sauces and personally prepared chicken included — and I’m in the healthiest

relationship of my life, which happens to be a queer one. Though these two things may not seem related, they are for me.

The five love languages are quality time, physical touch, words of affirmation, acts of service and receiving gifts. In my relationship, we’d argue for a sixth: cooking and eating food. My partner and I learned quickly that we are both somewhat picky eaters, but coincidentally, we share a dislike for many of the same things. My palate always prefers lots of cheese and carbs, and hers tends to favor protein. Our weekly menu,

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much like our relationship, is about compromise. One night, we might make my favorite creamy Parmesan pasta, and the next might be the homemade chicken teriyaki and rice she always craves. We communicate clearly, from the things we are hungry for, to the ingredients we’d prefer to swap, and we divvy up the tasks of the recipe according to our strengths. She’s great at prep, and I find it mind-numbing.

It was clear to me from the beginning of my relationship that it would be different from any

other I’ve had, and not just because this is the first time my partner is also a woman. We also started as great friends, which was unique compared to my past relationships and added to my confusion a year ago when I was so sure I liked her but didn’t want to read too deep into a friendship.

The first thing we made together as a couple was scratch-made soft pretzels. That seemed like a huge feat to me, but they turned

See **Love Language**, page 22

Meet the Queer Twosome from Peacock's 'Couple to Throuple' Who Love Date Nights in Detroit

Before signing onto the show, Ashmal Ali and Rehman Bhatti met while Ashmal was in law school at MSU

BY CHRIS AZZOPARDI

Polyamory has officially reached the zeitgeist. Beyond the queer community, where it has, perhaps, lived more openly for some time now, it is represented prominently in a recent issue of New York magazine in a way that can speak to an even wider swath of the promonogamy population, thanks to the adorable four-cat polycule on its cover.

Polyamory has also reached executives at Peacock, who knew exactly what they were doing with the new reality series "Couple to Throuple," which, beginning Feb. 8 for 10 episodes, will take four twosomes and make them... moresomes. Enter Rehman Bhatti, who grew up 20 minutes south of Detroit, and Ashmal Ali, a Michigan State University law grad who's originally from Atlanta. The two met while Ali was living in Lansing. "I was in Lansing, so I didn't really experience Detroit as much," he says. "I just didn't really even have a reason to go until I met him." Soon, they were spending time at places like Detroit's Campus Martius skating rink and hanging out around Ferndale. Ali called Bhatti a "great tour guide."

"When we first met, and before Ashmal thought it was going to be something serious, he didn't refer to me by my name when he would talk to his friends," Bhatti recalls. "He would refer to me as 'Detroit Boy.' He was about to save my name in his phone as 'Detroit Boy' instead of my real name. And then once it became serious, he's like, 'All right, we'll drop that and we'll call him by his name.'"



Rehman Bhatti and Ashmal Ali on "Couple to Throuple." Photo: Peacock/NBC

As of last year, the couple now both live in Chicago, though Bhatti says "Detroit is always where my heart is."

How did you two get involved in this show?

Rehman Bhatti: I actually was scrolling Facebook one day and saw a Facebook ad for it, and it was just like, "Looking for couples that are open to experimenting and have an open mind about where they want to take their relationship." So then I basically just applied, and then the next day I got a phone call that was like, "Hey, we want to do a quick

phone interview." And then after that, a week later, they were like, "Oh, we want to set you up with a video interview with our casting agents." That's when I let Ashmal know: "Hey, on this day we have an interview. Be ready because I signed us up for the show."

Ashmal Ali: I was studying for my bar exam at the time so really that was my study break. I looked up, I showered, got a haircut, and here we are.

So it doesn't sound like you had a lot of hesitation, Ashmal.

Ashmal: Oh, no. I mean, he said it's a show for open-minded couples experiencing something new, and I was like, "We're a new couple."

Had you had conversations about polyamory before the conversation about being on the show?

Ashmal: I think to a certain extent, yeah. I mean, at that point we didn't really have the words for what we were talking about. We didn't have the terms like polyamory or anything like that, but we were talking about exploring. I think there was

always a sense of, there's so much this world has to offer, and I think we both had that mentality throughout our relationship so I think this was just a normal conversation for us.

What surprised you most about the experience?

Ashmal: How hot it was. Honestly, it was so warm. I've never sweat like that I think my whole life. I think, because you don't see people sweating on TV, I was like, "Is this going to translate?" I'm

See **Couple to Throuple**, page 14

◀ **Couple to Throuple**
Continued from page 13

dripping, I had tinted moisturizer on. I was like, “Is this coming off?”

Rehman: I did not realize that it was going to be as much of an emotional journey as it was. Looking back on it, I’m so glad that I just went through the experiment with a very open mind and participated. I think we initially thought we were going to go there, have fun, and then when we found out it was serious about our relationship, we really took it as seriously as possible and that was definitely surprising to me.

Had either of you been in front of a camera before like that, especially for those confessional moments?

Rehman: No, first time for me.

Ashmal: Never a camera like that, and I think it was actually the second day when the camera became so real. I remember

looking over and I was like, “There it is. There it is just staring at me.” And that’s when it became way more real. I think the first day we were just meeting everyone, it felt like meeting friends or meeting people for the first time; I was focusing more on that and then it became, “Oh wow, we are filming something.” There’s no script to follow, so we were just all figuring it out together, and I think that was cool about the experience.

What was it like to have that camera in your bedroom knowing that this would be on television?

Rehman: I was just like, “I hope they’re getting my right angles at all times,” that was basically it. [Laughs.] No, but seriously, you just totally forget about it, and you’re just so immersed in the experience and making new experiences with new people and all of that, that I just totally, at some point, forgot that we were filming a show.

So it was never on your mind what would be shown



A still from “Couple to Throuple.” Photo: Peacock/NBC

and what might not be shown on TV during those intimate moments?

Ashmal: I think after the first day, after the camera becomes real, you

have to just remember that you’re a regular person and that you’re doing what regular people do. And it’s just, there happens to be a camera there. If you keep thinking about it, I think it not only affects you, but

also the people you’re around. I never thought that I’d be exploited, so I think it was easy to let go and just focus on the experience. And it was the first time we could kind of focus on ourselves. We didn’t have

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to reply to emails, we didn't have to worry about jobs, we didn't have to do anything.

How did exploring polyamory on this show challenge your relationship and get you to think about relationships differently?

Rehman: I think because it was so new to us, we had never had prior communication about it. Let's be honest, Ashmal and I have very interesting communication just naturally, so I think this added to that and made it even more difficult because our normal communication can sometimes be a little crazy, but now throwing in something that we don't have very much experience with, we really had to take a step back and say, "Hey, we actually have to really talk about things, and we have to really be on the same page for the first time, in a very limited amount of time too." We were only on the show for so many days and so many weeks, so we only had so much time to really talk about it, think about it, and then make decisions going forward. So

it was definitely, I would say, a test for our communication, for sure.

After the show, are you still interested in pursuing polyamory?

Ashmal: I was open to whatever the world had to offer before, and I'm open to whatever the world has to offer after the show. I think it was just a great experience. Being open to things has been great so far. So yeah, I'm open to everything.

Rehman: One of the really cool things that I learned from the show is there isn't necessarily one right way to be polyamorous. There's so many different ways, and there are so many different ways that you could take your relationship. I think that's the thing that Ashmal and I were so excited about: to explore how else we could have a relationship. Could we have something that's not necessarily what people consider to be the norm? And that was the coolest thing for me to experience, seeing the other couples take on polyamory in a different way. So, a huge learning experience for me

and I'm definitely open to what else comes in the future.

What was it like to be queer men in a group of seemingly mostly straight men?

Ashmal: For me, honestly, it was super fun. I think even on day one walking in, it made you forget whatever preconceived notions you might've had. I remember one person from one of the couples, Dylan Bair, a big muscular guy, I walked in and maybe I had my guard up for a sec. And then he opened his mouth, I was like, "This man is truly a teddy bear." Living in that house with everyone, you kind of forgot. It's not that you forgot your differences, but you remember you were all here figuring this stuff out. So I was learning from Dylan. I mean, he would always work out, so I was copying his workouts. I just had the best time. It was like those barriers that we have in the real world were down. So you really got to meet these people for who they were and not necessarily what I would think they were if I saw them out.

Rehman: I think the one thing that

made me a bit nervous coming into it being the only queer men was that, "Oh my god, people are now going to see us as the only [queer] people on there, that's the only representation they're getting; we have to make sure we're dotting our i's and crossing our t's because we are going to be judged like crazy." It took a little while for me to get over that and realize, listen, while I am somewhat representing the LGBTQ+ community, I'm representing Rehman and that's it. So I really had to just go with the flow, do what I felt was right, and not necessarily worry about what other people are going to say or how I might be perceived by maybe non-queer people, but then also the queer community in general. I just had to do my own thing.

Why do you think more people seem to be openly talking about polyamory now?

Ashmal: For me growing up, exploring my queerness was already so out of the mold. It was already out of tradition. So it's like just by being me, I'm already

taking a step outside of what's "normal." Nothing else new feels like anything different because I've already stepped away from the tradition, so I'm way more open to everything else because I'm already doing something that's not "normal." We hold ourselves back less. And I think now heterosexual people are being more open to it because they're not taking the traditional roles of male-female in a relationship.

Rehman: Some people are probably already practicing polyamory, and they're just not maybe as open about it. I know we've talked to so many people when we've mentioned, "Hey, we're going to be on the show," and people have been like, "Oh yeah, I've tried that out myself." And maybe they haven't just been so public about it. I'm hoping that the more this topic and this way of having a relationship becomes more normalized, people will feel a lot more comfortable to talk about it, say publicly they're in a polyamorous relationship, and feel a lot more comfortable to be themselves and try new things.

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A Pink Sack Makes Him Tingle
Puzzle can be found on page 21

Queer Delights Await: What to Know About This Year's Dirty Show in Detroit

Performers Faggedy Randy and Samson Night ready to bare (nearly) all



(Clockwise) P. No Noire, Faggedy Randy and Samson Night. Photo: Mike White

BY SARAH BRICKER HUNT

If you could pick up Detroit's Dirty Show and plunk it down in any other city, it wouldn't be the same. There's something uniquely Detroit about the annual erotic art show, which has become a veritable institution in this Midwestern Rust Belt town. It's not just the public bondage displays or the simulated sex acts that have made the exhibit, which premiered in 1999, so successful, though these are typical examples of what draws an audience from all over the planet.

No, the show is successful, founder Jerry Vile tells BTL, because it's just so genuinely welcoming. "When we say all are welcome, it's just true," he says. "And you'll see it all, too," he adds with a knowing chuckle.

He doesn't just mean the performers and exhibitionists — Dirty Show patrons come from every walk of life, from straight-laced suburban married couples to scantily-clad exhibitionists to queer throuples and quads and people who embrace any fetish you can dream up. All ages, all genders, all sizes, all races and nationalities, all gathered together to see it *all*.

In the beginning, Vile says, the show was a money suck. "We didn't make money for five years," he recalls. Early on, the show was a one-day event that fit inside a small part of Detroit's Eastern Market and, at one point, the offices of the now-defunct, alt-culture '90s publication Orbit Magazine, where Vile served as head editor.

The 2024 Dirty Show, set for two

weekends in February (Feb. 9-10 and 16-17), will take place at the Russell Industrial Center, a former auto factory turned commercial artist complex. The facility offers plenty of room for four full days of erotic performance art, burlesque and drag performances (an eclectic mix that includes national "Drag Race" contestants and local favorites like DeAngela Show Shannon Jackson), sexy musical acts, wandering entertainers and lots and lots of bare skin on stage and off. Just about any flavor of sexual expression imaginable can be found in this feast for all senses.

Highlights of the 2024 event

"People come to the Dirty Show to see erotic art and step away from sexual repression. Being able to see a performer representing something you identify with can be very fulfilling and inspiring and affirming."

— performer
Faggedy Randy

include a Burlesque Extravaganza with burlesque and striptease performers from all over the U.S., an artwork gallery with original pieces and prints for sale created by renowned erotic artists, the Cinerotic Film Festival, go-go-dancers, a spanking booth and much, much more.

See **Dirty Show**, page 20

Why It Matters That Detroit Is Featured in the New Lil Nas X Film

A rising Black queer singer-rapper contemplates his place in music history, right here in Michigan

BY AARON FOLEY

It matters that Lil Nas X's 2022 tour kicked off in Detroit, where the first third of the new documentary "Lil Nas X: Long Live Montero" takes place. In the film, now streaming on Max, we see Nas prepping for his first show, anxiety on high, in the historic Fox Theatre, and later a few musical selections from that first show. The first voices we hear from fans are queer Metro Detroiters proud of him for feeling seen and represented; this is probably the first time audiences outside the region will realize just how gay this area is.

Emphasis on performance and not letting the crowds down is a running theme throughout the documentary, and while Nas doesn't say it, it does matter in a city like Detroit, where legends were made and audience expectations are high. Detroit is also one of the bigger make-or-break radio markets in the country, and our history of producing queer audience favorites — hello Madonna and Diana Ross — has landed us a permanent spot in gay canon. It's also in Detroit where we see Nas engage with fans for the first time, and privately (though on camera) wonder where his career goes from here.

Embarking on the tour was historic in itself in furthering — or at least attempting to — Nas' stature as one of the few, very few, out Black musicians in history who can have a career while publicly embracing their sexuality. There's a moment midway through the film where Nas ponders the career of Little Richard, the pioneering rocker who leaned into femme-presenting aesthetics while also commenting on having male lovers, but infamously condemned homosexuality during his later years and essentially died back in the closet. Nas, who is seen in the film experimenting with makeup,



Lil Nas X in "Long Live Montero." Photo: HBO

femme clothing and other forms of expression throughout as he notes along the way his own doubts about wanting more femme presentation (he seems fearful of backlash), is only one of a few unquestionably queer Black pop stars in history, and perhaps the only one to reach his level.

Whether Nas' musical catalog can support this level of introspection is left to the viewer and totally dependent on where their fandom level is. On one hand, Nas does have the hits. "Old Town Road" is one of the great viral success stories, showing how an extremely online Gen Z'er can parlay 15 seconds into an actual career. Subsequent songs like "That's What I Want" and "(Montero) Call Me By Your Name" were boosted by controversial imagery and marketing, at times overshadowing the songs themselves. On the other hand,

everyone can agree that Nas' career is new and still in its early stages, and his staying power is still in question.

It seems Nas, who is unabashedly self-aware and has never minded sharing this, knows this, which is why "Long Live Montero" instead leans into more personal moments than the music, unexpectedly giving us a rare coming-of-age story of a young Black gay man who is negotiating his newfound queerness both publicly and privately, and where he sits on the queer spectrum that can easily sideline someone in his position.

Nas' closest counterpart in Black gay music might be the late disco queen Sylvester rather than Little Richard. Sylvester isn't mentioned here, but he's one of a few that can be tallied up in Nas' position, or close to it. R&B singer Jermaine Stewart died from AIDS

after a brief run, and neither Luther Vandross nor Billy Preston were out to their fans during their peak career years, and Billy Porter has commented in recent years on how staying closeted possibly hindered a would-be R&B career in the 1990s. Nas comments throughout that he knows he has to be a role model; there's a sense that he's reluctant to do so until he figures himself out.

Every Black gay man has gone through what Nas has at some point, which means there will be some emotional triggers in the film: He talks about God and religion, and early worries about Satan and hell, stopping short of saying (we've all said it, though) that he wished God could fix him. There's an unspoken bit about body image; Nas is shirtless for much of the film, suggesting that he's comfortable with that level of vulnerability. He talks

about coming out to his family, a process in itself, but also wonders out loud if he's being "too gay" around them. And then there is wanting to be gay while also being close to his family, particularly a young nephew who adores him as Nas teaches him a lesson in homophobia.

Few and far between are any kind of screenwork that features the interior lives of Black gay men, but there are some increased markers of progress. This year, Colman Domingo became the first out Black gay man to be nominated for an Oscar for playing a gay Black man in the biopic "Rustin." The Showtime series "Fellow Travelers" featured Jelani Alladin and Noah J. Ricketts playing a Black gay couple throughout history alongside their white leads. "Montero" occupies rare air in that regard, and may, even if just a little, help open the door for more Black gay stories.

The Best Gay Sex I've Ever Had Is With People Who Look Like Me

‘Doppelbanging’ is a thing, and it’s not that weird

BY TOM DISALVO

Entering my “ho phase” fresh out of a years-long relationship brought with it a smattering of unexpected results. Granted, seeking out new sexual partners after long-term monogamy was bound to provoke some unease, especially in a gay dating scene where shirtless profiles reign supreme and Grindr small talk is so small it rarely exceeds one word.

Even after navigating all the monosyllables (“host” and “pics” sit atop the Grindr lexicon), my post-breakup unease only continued once I’d assembled a roster of casual flings. Amidst mid-coital mentions of my ex’s name (yikes) and post-coital tears (double yikes), the most confounding throughline in my string of encounters was the fact that, in retrospect, most of the people I slept with bore some resemblance to me.

It’s worth noting that not every one of my “ho phase” partners was a lookalike. One guy, in a choice that almost had him booted from my roster, confidently sported an eyebrow piercing (pause for collective gay gasp), and another had those Cillian Murphy-esque eyes that said he either wanted to kill me or kiss me. Thankfully it was the latter, but I’ve seen “Red Eye” enough times to know that blue eyes can’t be trusted.

These, however, proved to be exceptions to an unconscious rule — the other guys on my roster looked remarkably like myself. There was the brown-haired man (we’ll call him Dave) whose curls fell in such a familiar way I wondered if we shared a barber, and another who had the same ankle tattoo as me, and likely regretted it just as much.

Some might gasp at the seeming narcissism that underpins this trend, and indeed these doppelgänger hookups elicited similar thoughts about my own vanity. I’m certainly not the type who jacks off in front of a mirror — the guy whose name is probably Chad or Brad, and who is behind the aforementioned shirtless profiles. So why was I consistently running into arms (and thighs) that looked uncannily like my own?

It’s a question I asked Dr. Beth Ribarsky, a communications professor at the University of Illinois. According to Dr. Ribarsky, who teaches courses in romantic communication, people “seek out [lookalikes] because they are inherently familiar.” The familiarity of brown

eyes and curls is likely what initially piqued my interest in Dave, since these similarities were “a starting point of attraction,” Dr. Ribarsky said.

With the groundwork of attraction expedited, Dave’s familiarity led me to “make assumptions that we might also share characteristics [beyond our appearance],” she explained. While Dr. Ribarsky said these assumptions might be “wildly inaccurate” — in my case, Dave was a sports fan and the only team I follow is the cast of “The Real Housewives” — they nonetheless propelled me to someone who at least had the semblance of compatibility.

What Dr. Ribarsky speaks of is known in psychology circles as the “mere-exposure effect,” which not only sounds like something I should get tested for but also explains the phenomenon in which people gravitate toward things that feel familiar. It also explains why the lookalikes on my roster were the best in bed.

It was here that Dave and I shared an unspoken shorthand. And boy, what his (short)hands could do. While experts could debate ad nauseam about the science behind this chemistry, for Dave and I, it’s perhaps as simple as the fact that a familiar face was more approachable than a headless, nameless and hairless six-pack.

“When we feel comfort in a relationship,



we are able to relax and be ourselves,” Dr. Ribarsky explained. “We are apt to spend less time questioning our connection.” It’s why, free from the barrier of unfamiliarity, my lookalike sexcapades felt intrinsically more intimate. Like reacquainting myself with an old friend, Dave spoke in a mutual love language of words (and tongues) that stretched well beyond one syllable.

I’m not the only person who has been one degree away from sleeping with a mirror. While the phenomenon is common among straight people, the so-called “doppelbänger” appeal has its roots in gay communities. The term itself appears in many queer slang glossaries, often cited alongside synonyms like “boyfriend twin” or “dyke-alike.”

So plentiful are gay lookalikes that they’ve inspired countless social media pages, populated by couples who were probably George Lucas’ inspiration for “Attack of the Clones.” The prevalence of gay “doppelbanging” is partly due to the similar features that those of the same sex are likely to share. For gay men, especially, the phenomenon is also wrapped up in hardwired beauty standards which, for better or worse, inform our ideas of what is attractive, and therefore who we seek to emulate (and eventually fuck).

For Dr. Joe Kort, a queer relationship

therapist based in Royal Oak, doppelbanging is also a means of safety for queer people. “The more familiar a partner appears, the safer you are psychologically,” Dr. Kort explained.

In this way, the pursuit of a lookalike is one of convenience, offering a “safe bet” that lightens the burden of hyper-scrutiny already placed on queer couples by society. A gay couple who look similar might better conform to heteronormative ideals and invite less external judgement than one marked by notable differences in age, upbringing or appearance.

Some have taken the popularity of doppelbanging as a reinforcement of the centuries-old stereotype that gay men are vain. “There is a history of pathologizing this in psychotherapy by calling these [queer] couples narcissists,” Dr. Kort explained.

While Dr. Kort conceded that some level of vanity — whether subconscious or not — might be at play, the more overwhelming driver of lookalike sex is deeper than face value, regardless of whether that face resembles your own.

“You feel safe within your own body so you’re going to be drawn to somebody who matches yours,” Dr. Kort said. “I don’t think [that desire] is narcissistic.” Dr. Ribarsky agreed that doppelbanging “isn’t a hallmark of narcissism,” and it’s in unpacking the forces behind my attraction that the clones on my roster seem less a manifestation of vanity as they were of comfort and convenience.

Indeed, my affinity for someone familiar was entangled not only in my desire for security amid my breakup, but in the broader idea that courting a lookalike was something of a romantic shortcut — accelerating my attraction and appeasing the glare of hetero eyes.

What all of this amounts to is about as murky as my post-Dave sex haze, but at least a few insights can be gleaned from my doppelbanger sexcapades. Those currently sleeping with lookalikes can rest assured that their roster is not built solely on vanity, but on the comfort of familiarity. Lookalike sex is an expressway to connection, easing our navigation of both the queer dating scene, and the expectations of society writ large.

In the end, perhaps we needn’t think too deeply about the science of doppelbangers. Maybe, if technology someday allows, we’ll all bang our clones and share identical douching regimes. But in the meantime, I’ll find myself a plethora of Daves. Heck, I’d even settle for a Chad.



Honey Dijon. Photo: Facebook

Several Notable Queer Performers Announced for Detroit’s Movement Festival

Black trans DJ Honey Dijon and Femme House founder LP Giobbi are among this year’s LGBTQ+ performers

BY SARAH BRICKER HUNT

Movement Music Festival, the multi-day electronic music festival that has become an international draw since its inception in 2006, will include a diverse range of performers Memorial Day weekend, May 25-27.

Set to play are LGBTQ+ artists like queer Spanish Psytrance artist Indira Paganotto and Austin-based producer LP Giobbi, who founded Femme House, a non-profit focused on building opportunities for women and gender-expansive people in the technical and behind-the-scenes areas of music.

New York and Berlin-based Honey Dijon, a Black trans DJ who works as an advocate for trans rights and awareness, is also on the bill. (In 2017, Honey Dijon led a roundtable discussion at an event at the MoMA PS1 museum in New York about the safety and outlet for creative discussion she found in the club scene in that city.)

The event draws acts from all over the world to Detroit’s Hart Plaza. As always, the 2024 lineup promises major headlining acts as well as a mix of up-and-coming and local artists who will keep the crowd moving with eclectic house, techno and classic electronica.

The legendary Fatboy Slim, known as a pioneer in the big beats genre, is one such headliner. Perhaps best known for early 2000s hits like “Praise You” and “Weapon of Choice,” along with its video featuring the dance moves of Christopher Walken, the artist boasts an extensive electronic music catalog

beyond these radio hits and frequently tours all around the globe.

There will be six distinct stages, each with its own vibe, during the event. The Movement Stage features headliners and established acts, while other stages showcase emerging artists pumping out a dizzying array of styles, including funk, hip-hop, Ghattotech, breakbeats and more. The Underground Stage offers a “warehouse party” experience



Indira Paganotto. Photo: Facebook

underneath Hart Plaza, while the Stargate Stage is a quintessential Detroit block party.

Other performers include DJ James Blake, German-Bosnian DJ Solomun and French producer I Hate Models. DJ Idris Elba will also play a set at the festival — yes, that Idris Elba, who will perform alongside Detroit artist Kevin Saunderson, known as a co-founder of the original techno sound.

See the full list of artists (still in the works) and reserve tickets at movementfestival.com.

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Dirty Show

Continued from page 16

Queer representation at the Dirty Show has become a cornerstone of the event over the years. "Are there queer artists involved? Um, yes," Vile assures me with a chuckle, before rattling off a list of names that certainly sound inclusive. "There's Faggedy Randy, King Molasses — he's a drag king — Samson Night. I think these people are, but you should check, never assume. And we want to get the pronouns right, too."



Faggedy Randy. Photo: Mike White

Due diligence reveals that Vile was on the right track with his suggestions. Chicago-based performer Faggedy Randy (Burlesque Hall of Fame's Duchess of Burlesque) was happy to chat about his involvement, which includes performances with his husband P. No Noire, who won the Burlesque Hall of Fame titles of Mr. Exotic World and King of Burlesque in 2022. Randy will celebrate his birthday during the first weekend and perform a special Valentine's act with a Tom Jones soundtrack. "I love combining sexy with stupid — it's kind of my whole personality," he says. Randy will be performing at his second show and promises that even the "straightest of straight men can enjoy a Faggedy Randy striptease."

Randy's act might be on the light side, but he's serious about the importance of queer representation. "Sexuality and gender representation is awesome," he

says. "People come to the Dirty Show to see erotic art and step away from sexual repression. Being able to see a performer representing something you identify with can be very fulfilling and inspiring and affirming."

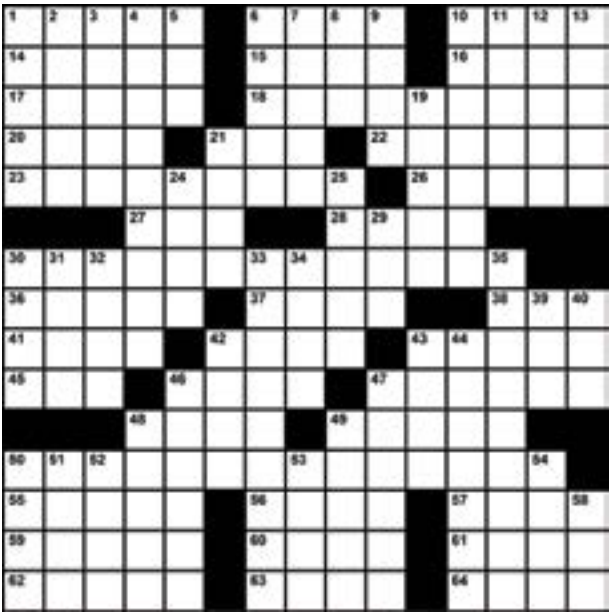
"Sexuality is for everyone," he adds. "It's human nature. So it's important to showcase as much of the spectrum of sexuality as possible because I guarantee you, the attendees' sexualities are also all over the place."

Samson Night is another Dirty Show performer who focuses his act on burlesque but from a very different angle. Night (reigning Burlesque Hall of Fame Queen of Burlesque and Miss Exotic World 2023) is a well-regarded mainstream performing arts professional, but he enjoys the freedom of expression that comes with his work in burlesque. He tends to keep the two worlds separate. "Burlesque allows you the space to create your own narrative," he says. "Many of the scripts written for people who look like me barely scratch the surface of who I am and where we are."

Burlesque, Night says, allows him to create acts that encompass the full spectrum of his experience as a Black man, "whether that is being able to express sexuality without fear of it being weaponized or being comedic without being the butt of the joke." Night's act is sometimes political or a vehicle for paying homage to his ancestry. Other times, it's just about enjoying the freedom and joy of dancing. "Having the choice to express those things is what makes burlesque special to me," he explains.

If there's a common denominator to be found among Dirty Show performers, it might be a lack of clothing. Skin is, after all, the sexiest suit of all. What does founder and sexy-circus leader Vile suggest attendees wear, or not wear, to the Dirty Show? "Well, you can wear jeans and a T-shirt or you can wear a suit," Vile advises. "You can be kinky or sex-positive and gender does not apply, ever. It's a very safe place to just... be."

Feb. 9 and 10 and Feb. 16 and 17, 7 p.m.-2 a.m., Russell Industrial Center (1600 Clay St., Detroit). Visit dirtydetroit.com for more information and to reserve tickets, which are also available at retailers Noir Leather in Royal Oak, Roadshow in Roseville and Found Sound in Ferndale.



A Pink Sack
Makes Him
Tingle

Across

- 1 Homonym for the mom of Chaz
- 6 Fruity cobblers, e.g.
- 10 Nemesis of Tinkerbell
- 14 Anouk of "Lola"

- 15 Old Dodge
- 16 Shade of blue
- 17 Tingle, who wears a pink sack on his head for anonymity
- 18 A necessity for a lasting relationship, per Tingle
- 20 Diced meat dish
- 21 Org. for bears
- 22 Neil Patrick of "How I Met Your Mother"
- 23 Tire reinforcement
- 26 "___ ear, and out the other"
- 27 Opponent of Wade
- 28 Drumbeat start

- 30 Another necessity for a last- ing relationship, per Tingle
- 36 "Climb Ev'ry Mountain" experiences
- 37 Voyeur's confession?
- 38 Suffix with homoerotic
- 41 "Spamalot" writer Eric
- 42 Larry Kramer, to Yale
- 43 Patty Hearst's SLA name
- 45 Born, in gay Paree
- 46 Coin for Kahlo
- 47 Crime jobs
- 48 Em, e.g.
- 49 Becomes unclear
- 50 Literary genre of Tingle
- 55 Check out
- 56 They come before kissing
- 57 Have the big O
- 59 Make a swap
- 60 Position for Louganis
- 61 What you do at the other end
- 62 Curious one
- 63 Editor's word
- 64 Serve drinks at a gay bar, e.g.

Down

- 1 Goldman's business partner
- 2 Part of a drum kit
- 3 Tickle a funny bone
- 4 Lavishly elegant
- 5 Prissy cry of fear
- 6 Group of manhunters
- 7 Push forward
- 8 Doe in Disney's "Bambi"
- 9 Love-making sound
- 10 Of breastbones
- 11 Gide's subway

- 12 Try a Susan Feniger cook- book, e.g.
- 13 Name in a Beethoven opus
- 19 Cole Porter's "Katie Went to ___"
- 21 His brother laid him in his grave
- 24 Elton's Johns
- 25 Out on a limb
- 29 Verlaine's soul
- 30 Stroke it
- 31 Be hard to find
- 32 Gaze at gays, e.g.
- 33 Places for Amelia Earhart to land
- 34 Poet ___ Wu
- 35 Forerunner of videotape
- 39 Country once part of the U.A.R.
- 40 Rainey and Kettle
- 42 Drag queen ___ Pool
- 43 Having no play
- 44 Brandy fruit
- 46 Club of Patty Sheehan on the green
- 47 Many are out of it
- 48 Broadway whisper
- 49 Strapped
- 50 ___ Hari
- 51 Cather's "One of ___"
- 52 Neighbor of Minn.
- 53 Ready for press
- 54 Sherman Hemsley religious sitcom
- 58 "The Living ___"

See p. 15 for answers

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◀ Love Language

Continued from page 12

out surprisingly good. We still talk about them. Then it spanned to her making me pancakes for breakfast, with a

someone about my partner or highlighting them on my social media. I'd just talk and post. I was never told it was a "phase" to like who I dated.

Perhaps all this newness is what made this partnership feel like the first one. But I think it's because it's special. As queer

in Michigan over the holidays, the last thing I wanted to do was prepare food because my cooking partner was over 700 miles away in Connecticut. When we lived in the same city, cooking together always took priority. I never thought I'd be the person who prefers



generous shake of cinnamon and a dash of vanilla to make them especially hers. Then we tackled full meals together. Taco nights with margaritas, DIY pizzas, all the pasta you could think of; even steaks and mashed potatoes populated our weekly menus. Cooking with my girlfriend has opened my eyes to new pantry and fridge staples, and new ways to experience and feel love. Our relationship has kind of felt like falling in love for the first time too.

This relationship has brought up feelings and experiences unique to the other relationships I've been in. I rarely cooked with other partners; we'd instead spend half the day deciding where to go to dinner. I also never worried if the wrong eyes would see my former partners and me holding hands; we'd just hold hands. I didn't consider whether my appearance and clothing choices portrayed me and my identity the "right" way. I didn't worry there could be repercussions to telling

people, it can be hard to find a safe space in a judgmental world. But even through navigating the newness and the loudness — of both the world and my thoughts — she has stayed. She's my comfort person. Much like my favorite meal, I can always rely on her to give me what I need, and it's usually just security.

We are now long-distance and cooking still plays a huge role in our relationship. We plan our grocery lists together over text and prepare meals — sometimes the same, sometimes different — over FaceTime. We watch recipe videos over FaceTime too, and send each other TikToks and Instagram Reels throughout our work days of potential meals to cook together, but separately. Cooking and eating together through a screen suffices for the time being. When we plan trips to see each other, though, we plan what we want to cook together before the other activities we want to do.

While spending time at home

cooking at home to eating in a restaurant, but to me, it's not about the food we're eating; it's about the dance break we will have between seasoning meat and chopping garlic. Or the subtle hip bumps and giggles while I wash dishes and she dries them. And even talking about how we can't wait to cook breakfast together for our kids someday, and wondering if they will have similar tastes as us. Together, the mundane things have become my favorites.

I've realized that if you have the right person to do a task with, nothing is boring, and nothing is too far-fetched. I look back on the person I was a year ago and hope she's proud of my newfound cooking capabilities and that I was honest with myself about who I am. Now, I'm the girl who makes homemade sauces and chicken. I'm still out here avoiding salmonella, always poking that chicken multiple times with a thermometer, but now I have a partner who never minds.

◀ Valentine's Day

Continued from page 9

Valentine's Day altogether and, honestly, that's not an invalid response to a holiday that has never tried hard to include us.

But I'd argue that when our rights are being debated and taken away on the political stage as is our current reality, when we're not getting the representation we deserve onscreen, when the world would rather we be invisible or not exist altogether, there's no better time than the straightest holiday of the year to celebrate ourselves and all the different ways we love — to reclaim this day as our own.

This year, I'll be celebrating Valentine's Day for the second year in a row with my partner. Among other things, being with him has helped me fall in love with Valentine's Day because it's always unexpected. Last year included a morning at Chuck E. Cheese and an evening watching a horror movie and building a bouquet of Lego flowers. He's the kind of person I can have fun with anywhere, which has completely shifted my feelings about this holiday.

We're in a straight-passing relationship, so this day is complicated for me because it forces me to come to terms with my own privilege. I never have to worry about holding his hand or showing any other form of affection in public. I don't have to pretend he's just a friend to other people in my life. By all accounts, Valentine's Day isn't that hard for me to enjoy because our queerness is, to most people, invisible. Yet that also means that when people look at me, a major part of my identity is erased. I'm not seen in the entirety of who I am. I'm a pinboard of other people's assumptions.

But as I've grown up and thought about the differences between perception and truth, I've come to realize that it matters very little what other people think

about me or if they assume I'm straight, which has only ever granted me safety. If I'm going to embrace Valentine's Day without feeling shame or uncertainty or embarrassment, I have to look outside myself and embrace the community that accepts me and celebrates me and loves me for who I am. It's the community that keeps my faith because platonic love, especially among queer folks, is just as sacred and important as any romantic relationship we'll ever be in.

So this Valentine's Day, in addition to spending time with my partner, I'm also planning to write and send love letters to my queer friends. I will also organize an event at a local space for queer folks to write their own love letters. Maybe I'll even organize a potluck

*Look past the
fun pink and red
color palette
and you'll notice
who is allowed
to celebrate
publicly – and
who isn't – as
dictated by
social and
political norms.*

dinner. If I want people to start looking at this day in a new way, I have to start by making it a safe and comforting experience to do so. Because the truth is that it's long past overdue for queer people to reclaim Valentine's Day and establish new rules for how we show up, rather than changing ourselves to fit.

Being with our partners and being in community with one another is one of the most powerful things we can do. Because queer people, and all the ways we love, are worth celebrating.





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