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His Identity

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By Chris Azzopardi

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DJ Minx. Courtesy photo



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5 Queer Things You Can Do Right Now-ish

BY SARAH BRICKER HUNT

Spring has sprung and it's time for all the cute little cubbies and big, strong bears to emerge from hibernation — sunshine and good times await. On tap in the coming weeks are opportunities to observe International Transgender Day of Visibility, multiple film festivals offering queer films, an exciting Planet Ant performance featuring aerial performers and local drag stars, and Easter services at local LGBTQ-inclusive churches.



Observe International Trans Day of Visibility

Transgender Michigan executive director and co-founder Rachel Crandall Crocker established the annual International Transgender Day of Visibility in 2009 as a day to focus on trans joy. Until then, the only major day of recognition for the trans community was the annual Transgender Day of Remembrance on Nov. 20, an important day for reflection, but one with an inherently somber overtone. "I wanted a day where we could celebrate the living," she told BTL in 2021. "I kept on waiting for someone to create a special day for the transgender community. Finally, I said, 'OK, enough is enough. I'm going to do it.'"

Celebrate the 15th International Transgender Day of Visibility at a Transgender Michigan open mic event on March 27 at The Dovetail in Warren. Crandall Crocker told BTL the event will feature poetry, storytelling and music focused on the trans community.

March 27, 7-8:30 p.m., The Dovetail (29200 Hoover Road, Warren).

Catch a Queer Film at a Local Film Fest

If you're a film buff, your calendar is about to get a lot busier — film fest season is in full swing in Michigan, and that means lots of chances to catch intriguing films focused on queer themes, often produced or directed by members of the LGBTQ+ community. Here are a few picks you won't want to miss at upcoming local fests:

- **"Summar Qamp"** (Greater Farmington Film Festival) — a documentary about Camp fYrefly, a summer camp for LGBTQ+ teens in the woods of Alberta, Canada where campers can get away from the political and cultural battles being waged around them in their daily lives. March 22, 9 p.m., The Riviera Cinema (30170 Grand River Ave., Farmington Hills). Visit gffilmfest.com for tickets.
- **Various** (Ann Arbor Film Fest) — the fest's Out Night on March 28 features a series of six short films with queer themes. The fest also includes two full-length queer films, **"Playland,"** about Boston's oldest gay bar, and **"Esther Newton Made Me Gay,"** a documentary about the cultural anthropologist. Out Night - March 28, 7:30 p.m., Michigan Theater (603 E. Liberty St., Ann Arbor). Visit aafilmfest.org for tickets.
- **"Chasing Chasing Amy"** (Freep Film Fest) — a documentary exploring the legacy of Kevin Smith's cult classic "Chasing Amy," which was controversial in queer circles, and the link between the film and filmmaker Sav Rodgers' own life as a queer kid. April 14, Noon, Michigan Science Center (5020 John R. St., Detroit). Visit freepfilmfestival.com for tickets.



Attend a Queer-Inclusive Shabbat Dinner

Temple Beth Emeth invites members of the local Jewish community to join its second annual Trans Day of Visibility Shabbat service on March 29. "We're offering this Shabbat service to highlight the beauty in being trans, the joy that comes from it, and how there is and always has been enough room in Judaism for us all," coordinator Ariane Smith told BTL. "This is a celebration of trans identity and community." Visit templebethemeth.org for more information about the queer-affirming congregation and its LGBTQ+ affinity group, Mishpacha, which offers a weekly queer Torah study and a monthly Shabbat dinner.

March 29, 7:30 p.m., Temple Beth Emeth (2309 Packard Ave., Ann Arbor).



First Congregational Church of Ann Arbor. Courtesy photo

Find a Queer-Friendly Easter Service

Celebrate a religious Easter service on March 31 at a local queer-affirming church. Places like the First Congregational Church of Ann Arbor (fccannarbor.org), where out lesbian head minister Rev. Dr. Darcy Crain leads congregants in joyful, fully inclusive services each week (and a sign along State Street reads, "God's doors are open to all"), welcome many local LGBTQ+ community folks to join them on Easter Sunday. Here are a few other affirming local options — visit their websites for Easter service information:

- **Christ Church Cranbrook**, Bloomfield Hills (christchurchcranbrook.org)
- **St. John's Episcopal Church**, Royal Oak (stjohnsroyaloak.org)
- **First Unitarian Universalist Church of Detroit** (1stuu.org)
- **Metropolitan Community Church of Detroit** (mccdetroit.org)

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Mimi Southwest.
Photo: Instagram/
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Catch Some Burlesque, Aerial and Drag

Head to Planet Ant in Hamtramck on April 13 for "Big Bang," presented by Midnight Garden. Organizers promise an exciting performance showcasing burlesque, aerial and drag performances, with a glittering, galactic theme. Performers include local and Midwest favorites like Honey Love, Lushes LaMoan, Margaux Royale, Medusa Damage and Mimi Southwest.

April 13, 7:30 p.m., Planet Ant
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Fern Fest Is Moving, But Staying True to Its Inclusive Roots

Weeklong event celebrates music, nature and the feminine spirit

BY BRIDGETTE REDMAN

Change is in the air for Michigan's Fern Fest, a six-day women's music festival that has experienced rapid growth since its first ever gathering in 2022.

Built on the foundation of the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival (aka Michfest), a 40-year tradition that ended in 2015, Fern Fest, set for July 9-14, is in its third year and moving to a new location. Smiling Acres, in Trufant, Michigan, 36 miles north of Grand Rapids, allows organizers the ability to increase capacity and make space for more people.

While Fern Fest is leaving The Land, which was home to the previous festival, festival producer Abra Wise said the move has been exciting because Smiling Acres already hosts music festivals and the infrastructure exists for them to step in with a built-in stage, upgraded sound system and lighting.

Fern Fest, Wise said, is designed to be a time of connection and healing for women as they spend a week listening to music in the woods, off the grid and disconnected from everyday life.

"Just having a new venue and a new space feels like a clean slate of so much possibility," Wise said. "The Land was so wonderful and so beautiful for the first two years. It's the place that we birthed Fern Fest and really got our feet wet starting to build our community. But to have this new space and all the possibilities is really exciting."

Smiling Acres is less secluded than the previous location, allowing for greater accessibility for those with disabilities or physical limitations, a priority for Fern Fest's organizers — all stage performances will be interpreted for the deaf and hard-of-hearing communities.

Wise understands and supports those who create different spaces but it was



Fern Fest. Photos: Ilana Bar-Av



important to her that Fern Fest be a fully inclusive gathering for all women, non-binary and trans folks and those who live on the spectrum of the feminine spirit.

In other words, you don't have to have been assigned female at birth to be welcome at Fern Fest. The gates are open to nonbinary and trans women — and to anyone who identifies as a woman. "I wanted an umbrella," Wise told BTL. "It really is everyone showing up authentically,

how they are and who they are. It's been really, really well received. We've had such a great support system from everyone in the community."

Another foundational value of Fern Fest, Wise said, is to engage in anti-racism work and to create a safer environment for BIPOC participants. Founded at Fern Fest in 2022, the (QT)BIPOC/Global Majority Collective is one of the festival organizers. It grew out of the legacy of the Women of Color Sanctuary Tent at MichFest and seeks to continue its traditions.

While they are a festival organizer and coordinate with Fern Fest, the Collective is also a separate organization that operates independently, planning all the music and workshops in their space. On the Fern Fest website, it notes that "our language is changing to welcome and include additional facets of our identities while also acknowledging and centering Black and

indigenous — embracing the terms BIPOC/QTBIPOC (Queer, Trans, Black, Indigenous, and People of Color), and Global Majority."

"It's a beautiful space for BIPOC people to go and have their own community within a community," Wise said.

And then, of course, there's the music. Wise, a musician herself, said that finding new artists is her favorite part of organizing the festival. "My passion in this is the music," Wise said. "I get excited about being able to find new artists. I don't book artists two years in a row."

Wise said that as much as she loves the performers who come to the festival every year, she recognizes the breadth of musicians that exist. She sees Fern Fest as an opportunity for music lovers to connect with new artists they've never heard before. "It really pushes me as a producer to not get complacent," Wise said. "I'm always reaching out to other musician friends and

[asking them] to send me new artists. Now that we have a few years under our belts, we have a lot of musicians that apply.”

Another important goal for Wise is to diversify the music genres at the festival. You won’t hear just folk or country festival. In fact, you might also see and hear comedians, poets and spoken word artists. After an opening concert on Wednesday night, Wise said they’ll typically have three performances each day, two at night and then a DJ.

As an avid festivalgoer herself, Wise said an element that makes Fern Fest special is how long it runs. Over nearly a week, participants have a chance to pitch their tent and take time to be present before having to pack up and leave again.

Fostering a sense of community and growth, she said, is why they have workshops and other activities happening beyond the onstage acts. The setting provides a place for rustic camping (though nearby hotels can accommodate those who want more creature comforts) and a place for people to unplug and meet other like-minded individuals.

“It’s an experience like no other,” Wise said. “You don’t know until you come for the week. The thing that excites me the most is



Abra Wise. Photo: michiganfernfest.com

to see the healing, the friendships formed and the community-building. In the first two years of Fern Fest, there are so many people who have fallen in love and now are couples. It fills me with joy to think that people are finding their people there.”

Fern Fest takes place from July 9-14. Visit michiganfernfest.com for more information. Tickets will go on sale in April when the lineup is announced.

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Your Queer Guide to Music Festivals

Make a plan for queer-friendly fests and mainstream mainstays happening in 2024

BY MADELEINE AITKEN

Something about a music festival feels intrinsically and irrevocably queer. Perhaps it's the fact that they pretty much originated, at least in the United States, with 1969's Woodstock, a symbol of counterculture and proud self-expression. Since Woodstock, music festivals have maintained this reputation, and now their lineups are finally — slowly — starting to reflect that too.

There's such a proliferation of music festivals these days that during the summer months, you could go to one every weekend. Below, learn more about the 2024 music fests you won't want to miss, from Michigan favorites to women and LGBTQ+ music gatherings, big and small.

Movement Music Festival May 25 - 27, Detroit

Memorial Day marks the officially unofficial start of the summer, and what better way to celebrate than with an electronic music festival? Movement Music Festival is hosting several LGBTQ+ performers in Detroit's Hart Plaza, including Black trans DJ Honey Dijon, a powerful LGBTQ+ voice in the electronic music world who also works as an advocate for trans rights. Meanwhile, Detroit's own DJ Minx, who came out publicly in 2021 during June Pride Month, will also get you to dancefloor.

Detroit is credited as the birthplace of techno, making it a fitting location for an electronic music festival. Another Movement performer, producer LP Giobbi, founded Femme House, a non-profit that creates opportunities for women and gender-

expansive individuals in the technical and behind-the-scenes areas of music, as producers, mixers, engineers, DJs, artists and executives. movementfestival.com

Governors Ball Music Festival

June 7 - 9, Queens, New York

Gov Ball has been held at a few outdoor locations in New York City since its inception in 2011 — this year's event takes place in Corona Park-Flushing Meadows in Queens. By far the most mainstream festival on this list, it saw over 100,000 attendees in 2023. Even though it sometimes gets written off for being a hotbed of drunk tri-state area teens, it usually pulls together pretty solid lineups, and attendees say it's worth it even with the younger crowd, especially if you go VIP.

This year, the lineup includes LGBTQ+

performers Ryan Beatty, who famously came out a few weeks after the Pulse nightclub shooting in 2016; Chappell Roan, who is on the up and up as a major queer pop superstar; and Renée Rapp, who is bisexual and gained notoriety for her character's moving sexuality arc on "The Sex Lives of College Girls," not to mention her recent starring role as Regina George in the "Mean Girls" reboot. (You can also catch both Roan and Rapp at Bonnaroo the next weekend, if Tennessee is more your speed.) governorsballmusicfestival.com

Electric Forest June 20 - 23, Rothbury, Michigan

Electric Forest is a four-day electronic music festival in Rothbury that's been around since 2008. This year, longtime LGBTQ+ ally Nelly Furtado is headlining the festival, along

with big names like Ludacris and Subtronics. Furtado, of “Promiscuous” and “Maneater” fame, has long been open about her closeness to the LGBTQ+ community — in 2012, she told BTL about going to her first gay club at 17: “My sister took me to this awesome gay club, which was the first time I saw beautiful queens on stage...I’m going, ‘Oh my god, there’s a whole other world out here.’ I was transfixed.” And for fans of her recent single “Eat Your Man” with Dom Dolla, who is also on the lineup, this might be an opportunity to see them perform the song together. electricforest.com

Fern Fest
July 9 - 14, Trufant, Michigan

There are some music festivals, like Michigan’s Fern Fest, that exist specifically for women, trans and non-binary folks. Michigander Abra Wise founded Fern Fest in 2022 because she “wanted to continue to find her community, specifically women, nonbinary and trans folks, in the context of a music festival and allow others to access healing and connection during a week in the Michigan woods.” Now heading into its third year, Fern Fest will be held at a new mid-Michigan venue (Smiling Acres in Trufant) with a diverse lineup of fantastic stage performers, plus camping, learning and other activities. Wise has spent time at countless music festivals, including Fern Fest predecessor Michigan Womyn’s Music Festival, which was held annually from 1976 to 2015.

“Queer community brings a lot of meaning to my work in creating Fern Fest,” Wise said. “We may have some shared identities or similar lived experiences as women, non-binary and trans folks but making the decision to show up and connect with each other is what’s special.” michiganfernfest.com

Day In Day Out Festival
July 12 - 14, Seattle

Daydream State will host its fourth annual Day In Day Out festival this July, with a new surprise announced in early February: “With the overwhelming success of last year’s sold-out weekend, we decided to expand in 2024 by adding a third day,” said Jason Lajeunesse, CEO and founder of Daydream State. That third day is headlined by queer-loved queen Carly Rae Jepsen, who has established

a cult following that consists largely of gay men. The other headliners are Bleachers, led by prominent ally Jack Antonoff, and The Head and the Heart, whose co-founding member Josiah Johnson is openly queer, though he left the band in 2020 to pursue solo ventures. Other LGBTQ+ artists playing that weekend include Miya Folick and Sir Chloe, whose frontwoman Dana Foote shared an emotional Instagram post last Pride about her journey with queerness, where she wrote about growing up in a small, conservative town. “When I was dating my first girlfriend, we were too afraid to tell even our closest friends,” she wrote. These days, she shared, the band is helping fans find community and connection. “The kid in me who kept secrets from her friends heals a little more with each show we play.” dayindayoutfest.com

OUTLOUD Music Festival
May 31 - June 2, West Hollywood

Leave it to West Hollywood to know how to do a queer music festival exactly the way it should



OUTLOUD 2023. Photo: Jon Viscott

be done. The OUTLOUD Music Festival kicks off Pride Month — it actually takes place during WeHo Pride — and their recently announced lineup is one for the books: Kylie Minogue, Janelle Monáe and Diplo will all headline, with other acts including DoeChii, Ashnikko, Noah Cyrus, Trixie Mattel, Keke Palmer, Channel Tres, Yaeji, Big Freedia, Sophie Ellis-Bextor and VINCINT also on the roster. Now in its fourth year, the festival’s goal is, according to press materials, simple — “championing queer artists and creating a space for people to live authentically.” weareoutloud.com

Pitchfork Music Festival
July 19 - 21, Chicago

You don’t have to go too far to check out Jepsen (again), MUNA, Jessie Ware

See **Festival Guide**, page 23



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DJ Minx. Courtesy photo

How Detroit techno icon Jennifer Witcher, aka DJ Minx, is living a life she never thought she could

BY CHRIS AZZOPARDI

Jennifer Witcher is better known as DJ Minx at the Spot Lite Detroit nightclub and coffeehouse, where she saunters in one weekday afternoon in late February in a cropped leather jacket that exposes the full length of her hip-hugging jeans. Upon entering, the native Detroiter, who shows up performance-ready, looks around like Dorothy waking up in monochromatic Kansas. It's the different light she's noticing, warm and deceptively sun-soaked, and this is not her usual crowd, which, when she's frequenting this spot, is less work-from-home and more... *werk*.

Even Witcher is surprised she's here — her typical place isn't the sofa she's sitting on; it's planted in the DJ booth, with a sea of folks, many of them queer Gen Z'ers, letting loose right in front of her. They flood the dance floor to feel the kind of club-community freedom that Witcher, for several decades now, has long inspired through a steady blast of bright techno grooves — the kind of freedom she is now living herself. The empowered state she's in during our conversation could help just about anyone step proudly out of the closet, even if it has taken them a while to get there.

For Witcher, it took many moons, some men, some women, a supportive daughter and the big hurdle she has now jumped over — the taboo she felt in the post-Stonewall-era years of being a Black queer woman who grew up in a very different Detroit, where you might have been able to be free in the disco light, but on the east-side streets of Mack Avenue and Cadillac, where Witcher grew up, you had to be someone else.

Forty years after first thinking she might be gay and just three after coming out publicly in 2021, it's safe to say that Witcher is exactly who she wants to be right now in whatever light is cast on her.

At Spot Lite, it's clear she has been loved no matter what. Everyone from the barista to

the bartender cordially greets her and her cover story in the British magazine DJ, signed by her, is prominently hung in a large frame in the record store nook of the establishment. "One of the Detroit sound's original champions" reads the subhead in the article, noting "DJ Minx hasn't had the attention lavished on some of her peers."

"Minx's enduring place in the techno community is something she earned not only by honing her craft so well, but by being such a warm, loving, gracious person to all she encounters," says Vincent Patricola, a store manager at Spot Lite, where Witcher has been performing as part of a residency at the venue. "Her love for music and the scene is as true as it gets. She is such a star, yet humble to the core. She truly embodies what it means to be a creative class Detroiter in that she can talk the talk and walk the walk with charm and a humble nature."

As much as Witcher is one of our beloved own, she is also an international star, exporting Detroit techno to all corners of the world, most recently to Zurich and Barcelona. Coming out impacted where she performed too — now, you can find her doling out dance vibes at Pride parties everywhere, including upcoming ones in Milwaukee and Detroit (she's also done some of the biggest in San Francisco and New York — "the New York gays, honey"). She would've loved to accept an invitation to perform at Pistons Pride Night this month, she said, but was already booked for a gig in Europe. "I bring in all crowds, all different sets of people with my sets; even if it's not a Pride party, it's queer, it's Asians, it's Blacks, whites — people from all over. And people have said, 'We've not seen anyone bring everybody together like that.' I just appreciate everyone's support."

One of her favorite places to play is Heideglühen in Berlin — "an adult playground," she calls it, a place with "a foam bathtub like a sauna and some big swings and a coffee area" that attracts a crowd that is older than the average

age, 20 to 35, she's been playing for regularly since the 1990s. It is a place, one of her favorites, she says, where "adults can come and be themselves."

There is something special about Witcher playing Pride events in Detroit — her home since the late 1960s — where she felt she couldn't be herself completely until 2021, when she got a call from a Spotify rep interested in including her on a Ruth Ellis Center building mural that would honor her as an LGBTQ+ icon in the Detroit community; she wasn't out, but it became the impetus for her to be. She knew what the Ruth Ellis Center was — a place that offers support to LGBTQ+ youth and young adults of color — and Pride Month was just around the corner. It was time, she thought. On June 2, 2021, she was forthright about who she is in an Instagram post, on multiple levels: "People suffer from emotional anxiety at the mere thought of 'coming out,' but the stress of not doing so is taking up WAY too much of my space and is shaking my energy to the core. So here I am. Minx, DJ, producer, Momma, partner, lesbian, friend."

In just two years, Witcher went from a "rough" 2019 — fearful she wouldn't get booked if she came out — to, a couple years later, feeling liberated and widely supported and affirmed by people like her manager, Jonathan McDonald, and her youngest daughter, who told her she was still a "queen." "Big time support," Witcher says.

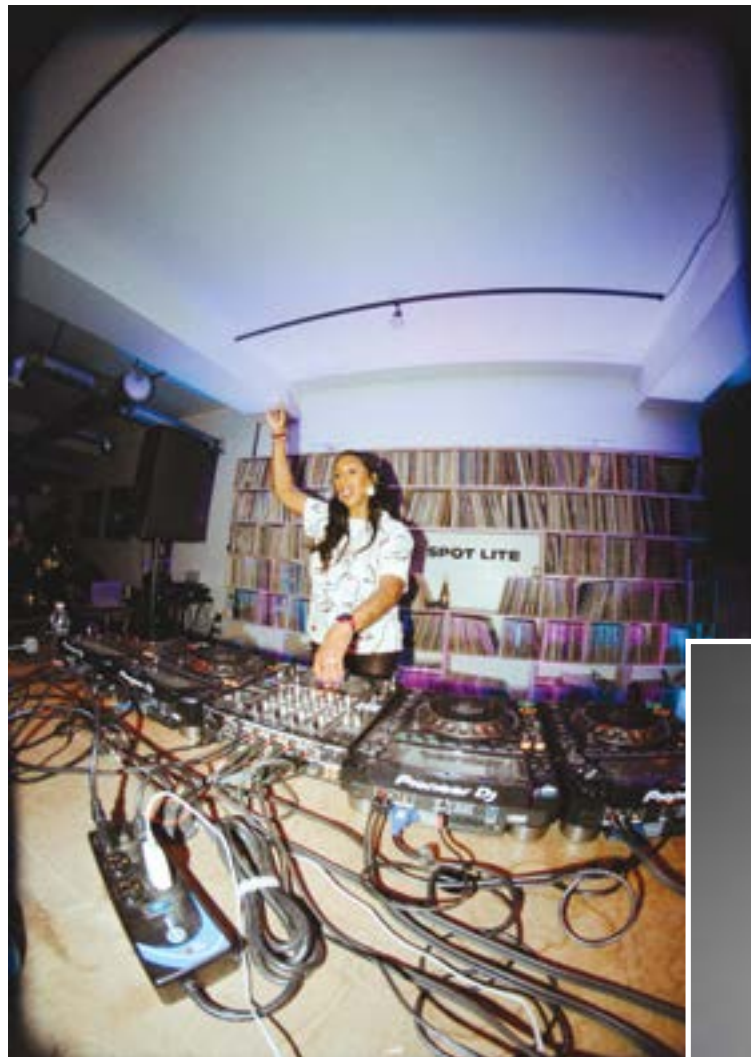
Her post reached beyond what she could have imagined, immediately attracting hundreds of likes and fans showering her with gratitude for just being herself and helping them through their own struggles with being openly queer. "Everywhere people would stop me and say, 'You helped me come out,'" Witcher says, beaming.

An official Spotify Pride playlist followed, part of a campaign that month that had each artist, including Hayley Kiyoko, Big Freedia and MUNA, curate a playlist featuring LGBTQ+ artists and allies from their respective hometowns. They were also featured in a mural, painted by the Philadelphia-based artist ggggrimes, in that same city. And then there was Witcher, very visible now, right on the side of the building of a famed LGBTQ+ community organization in her hometown.

This moment was decades in the making, and there's a sense that Witcher, who is married to her wife now but grew up in the early 1970s when many people like Witcher kept quiet about their queerness, is surprised she came out at all. These days, her wife

colorful." Even though she says she was seeing plenty of queer people, "I just didn't feel like there was a place for me in the world at that point."

Around this time, she began spinning herself. Techno first, then house. Detroit techno artist



Top: DJ Minx at Spot Lite. Photo: Sidd Finch. Right: DJ Minx. Courtesy photo

runs bubble baths for her, and Witcher has her name tattooed on her arm; life for her currently is in stark contrast to that closeted fear-inducing period of time, when the thought of being gay was just that — a thought. "I always had that idea," she says, "but I was never going to say anything about it."

A boyfriend in her 20s at least had a hunch, and once told her, "If you want to date a girl and me, that's fine." She is still good friends with that ex-boyfriend. "He's like, 'You finally got what you want. I'm proud of you.'"

Pivotal to understanding her sexuality was going to raves at the Shelter, in the basement of St. Andrew's Hall, just as a clubgoer. "I was just hanging out and I noticed the difference in the people," she says. "They were very friendly. They were nice and

Derrick May was her initial inspiration. "That's all I knew," she says. "So I just had to kind of grow from there and find my own feel of what I wanted to play."

Witcher found her own path as a DJ, defying gender expectations when it comes to what a woman DJ is capable of in an industry that has a history of putting them in boxes. Because her sound was more in line with what male DJs were playing at the time, she was met with resistance; women even studied her neck wondering where her Adam's apple is. "When I first started," she says, "one woman was like, 'You play like you got a dick. I've never heard a woman play like this before.' I'm like, girl, are you kidding me? You need me

to justify whether or not I have a dick? Do you want some?" She laughs devilishly like she almost wishes she said that. "I'm just kidding."

I ask Witcher what she thinks it says about the way she plays — or the way people interpret *how* she plays. "It goes back to the man's world thing. DJing is a man's world, right? I don't play the soft, soulful, smooth, little 'lolly lolly' music. I go bang and bang, bang, bang, bang, and I mix. And I got on a skirt and some heels and I got on pearls and shit, but I'm still banging because I know how to be classy."

Even though she played the violin for a brief time in fifth grade, Witcher's interest in music began in earnest while growing up in Detroit in the 1970s and absorbing the Philly soul and Motown sound that dominated her parents' record collection. Artists such as Barry White and Earth, Wind & Fire were on repeat. Without knowing it at the



time, she was already preparing herself for the booming nature of a club career: "The older I got," she says, "the more I listened to it louder and louder."

Eventually, her first apartment in downtown Detroit became the "go-to spot" for a small group of friends to gather to play Nintendo games and listen to a Friday mixed radio show on 97.9 WJLB, hosted by The Electrifying Mojo, which got her into techno and house music. Many of the artists she was hearing were Detroiters

themselves, like Stacey "Hotwaxx" Hale, Jeff "The Wizard" Mills and Cybotron. "The music is moving," she recalls. "It's getting to main radio on WJLB, and some of my friends wanted to go to The Music Institute, which I thought was some institution. They're like, 'It's a club.' So we went to The Music Institute and I heard Derek May play, and I saw the way he's jolting around and playing. I was like, 'Wow, this is fascinating, seeing all these people and all the love.'"

As DJ Minx, she started playing sets at places like the Loft and other clubs in the city. What should have been liberating for her instead felt like a crushing defeat — it was the nerves, but also how terribly other Black women treated her. The first time she got on a stage and performed as a DJ was, she says, "stressful."

"I'm sorry, it was," she goes on. "When I walked in the club, the women at the front desk wouldn't let me in. I got my records and they're like, 'Well, no, you're not getting in here.' And they were laughing at me. It was demeaning. They were bullies, pretty much."

She recalls the women whispering like mean girls on the playground to each other about her as Witcher defended herself, along with friends who also had her back, and the reason she was *supposed* to be there, but the women wouldn't relent. Little did those women know at the time that Witcher would go on to receive recognition for the very thing they tried to stop her from doing. In 2015, Mixmag named her as one of the 20 women who shaped the history of dance music, and Time Out New York included her in a list of the Top 10 house DJs of all time in 2016. For "exceptional achievement, outstanding leadership and dedication to improving the quality of life," she was awarded the Spirit of Detroit award by the city council in 2018, along with Hale and other women who played a major role in Detroit's dance scene.

I ask Witcher what she thinks it feels like for those women who once bullied her to drive by 77 Victor Street in Highland Park, where the Ruth Ellis Center is, only to see her giant, iconic face painted on the building — right alongside other Detroit notables like Griz, Dr. Kofi and Ruth Ellis

See **DJ Minx**, page 24

Libs of Tiktok Fuels Threats Against Schools Nationwide, Endangering Children



BY D'ANNE WITKOWSKI

This morning I got a text from my son's school district that one of the elementary schools in the district was closed due to a bomb threat.

While the threat was determined to be a hoax, they were still canceling school out of an abundance of caution.

Issuing a bomb threat against a school is a sick thing to do. Encouraging and/or inspiring people to make bomb threats against schools? That's even sicker.

Alas, that apparently is one of Chaya Raichik's hobbies. Raichik runs social media accounts using the handle "Libs of TikTok" that are absolutely obsessed with demonizing LGBTQ+ people, allies and policies that protect LGBTQ+ people.

So on the same day that a school in my son's district was closed due to a bomb threat, I also read a news story stating, "Over the last two weeks, parents of Butler Middle School students in Waukesha have received multiple notices from district administrators about bomb threats at the school."

Now why would Butler Middle School be the target of multiple threats? Well, gosh, it could have something to do with the fact that on March 4, Raichik targeted an employee at the school by posting two screenshots from his personal social media account: a photo of him and his partner as well as him saying, "Acceptance, equity and inclusion should

be cornerstones of our schools."

Butler received the first bomb threat on March 8. "Subsequent threats followed on March 11, 12 and 14," one of which referenced a school shooting, according to Wisconsin Public Radio.

This is not Waukesha's first foray into anti-LGBTQ+ territory. As WPR reports, "In 2021, Waukesha was the first district in Wisconsin to require the removal of all 'political' signage including Black Lives Matter, Thin Blue Line posters and rainbow signs and flags supporting LGBTQ individuals. Four months later, a special education kindergarten teacher was suspended for displaying a rainbow flag in her classroom."

But wait, that's not all! The district also doesn't let students "change their pronouns without written parental consent" and the school board board "voted to end any diversity, equity and inclusion work in the district."

All under the guise of "protecting" parental rights. The district's "Parental Rights and Transparency Resolution" includes that "students deserve to feel welcome at school, regardless of religious beliefs, race, ethnicity or sexual orientation," which sounds good. Until you realize there is an entire section outlining how transgender, genderfluid and genderqueer kids are to have no say

in their identities and are to be outed to their parents.

"District staff will not be permitted to call a minor student by names, nicknames or pronouns other than ... pronouns consistent with the student's biological sex, without written permission from the parent," the resolution reads in part.

The district also bans students from bathrooms, locker rooms, and sports teams that aren't "consistent with their biological sex" with very limited exceptions.

So basically the district has bent over backward to make it clear that this isn't a place where LGBTQ+ kids are welcome — and LGBTQ+ staff, for that matter. And yet they STILL were targeted by Raichik.

Gosh, it's almost as if harassment and cruelty are the point.

Threats against schools after they receive Raichik's unwanted attention via Libs of TikTok is par for the course, unfortunately.

Raichik and her followers are a clear and present danger to kids at school across the country. If Raichik decides to target your kid's school because they allow rainbow flags or have a lesbian principal or affirm their support of transgender kids, you can bet that the threats will follow. So much for protecting kids.



Issuing a bomb threat against a school is a sick thing to do. Encouraging and/or inspiring people to make bomb threats against schools? That's even sicker.

Arrest Made in 2023 Highland Park Murder of Ashia ‘Charm’ Davis

.....

An arrest has been made in the June 2023 shooting death of local trans woman Ashia Davis. On March 15, Wayne County Prosecutor Kym Worthy announced that 18-year-old Carlos Lamar Scotland, who was 17 when the killing occurred, has been charged with first-degree murder, felony firearm, resisting and obstructing police and carrying a concealed weapon.

As BTL has reported, there has been very little movement in the case publicly in the months following 36-year-old Davis’ shooting death in the 16300 block of Woodward Avenue

in Highland Park. Human Rights Campaign reported that Davis was at least the 12th transgender or gender non-conforming person killed in 2023.

In a press conference, Worthy described Davis as “beloved” by her community and noted that her nickname was “Charm.” She had recently finished nursing school and was preparing for a new job at the time of her murder. Worthy also talked about the Fair Michigan Justice Project. Julisa Abad, guest contributor and Fair Michigan’s director of outreach and advocacy, noted in a recent BTL editorial that the group has helped police prosecute more than 41 capital cases with a 100% conviction rate. Abad described Davis as her best friend of 10 years.

Scotland, who has been charged as an adult, faces up to life in prison if convicted. A probable cause conference is scheduled for March 26.



Ashia “Charm” Davis.



Abigail Rowe. Photo: Facebook

Fate of Gen Z-Founded Pride Fest Hangs in the Balance in Ortonville

.....

Abigail Rowe launched the Abigail’s Pride non-profit organization in 2021 when she was 15. The group’s inaugural 2022 Pride event in Oakland County’s Ortonville was a smash. The 2023 event was even bigger, and Rowe is anticipating continued success in 2024 — that is, if the local village council reverses a recent decision to deny the group’s event permit.

The Ortonville Village Council rejected the permit in a 5-1 vote in February, citing safety concerns and the impact of road closures on local businesses. Abigail’s Pride issued a statement expressing skepticism — after all, the event has been held successfully (and safely) for two years.

Ortonville Village Manager Ryan Madis said the council is “eager to review” a new application and emphasized the concerns mentioned at the meeting. Ultimately, Abigail’s Pride is not willing to budge on road closures. “I can’t hold the event in good conscience without having the roads close for the safety of our vendors, volunteers and everyone attending the event,” Rowe said.

Ensuring safety and comfort for all has always been a critical goal for Rowe’s grassroots Pride festival. In her “very conservative town,” Rowe said she was encountering bullying and harassment, as were other students. “So I just wanted to give this to them, and to me — one day where we can live freely and have joy and love.”

The next council meeting is set for March 25. Should the council ultimately deny the permit, Rowe is working on a backup plan. *Watch for updates at PrideSource.com.*

Queer Musician Brandi Carlile on ‘Sesame Street’

.....

Queer singer-songwriter Brandi Carlile performed with an unlikely duet partner when she appeared on “Sesame Street” earlier this month. Carlile, with backup from Big Bird and Mr. Snuffleupagus, performed “That’s Why We Love Nature,” a joyful ode to the natural diversity of our shared planet. Watch the video on YouTube at the @SesameWorkshop channel and just try not to smile.



Photo: Zach Hyman

Prism Chorus Earns Grant Money

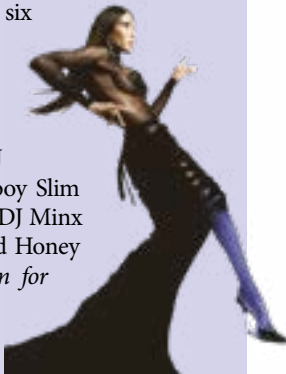
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Prism Chorus, Michigan’s largest choral org for LGBTQ+ people and allies, was recently awarded two grants totaling \$45,000 from The Community Foundation for Southeast Michigan and The Michigan Arts and Culture Council. “With these grants, we’re equipped to write the next chapter of our story — one filled with harmony, growth, and boundless possibilities,” wrote Prism Chair Shane Dunbar in a media release. “These gifts signify more than just financial assistance; they symbolize a resounding endorsement of our goals to inspire, uplift and unite through music.”

Full Movement Lineup Announced

.....

Start making your plans for the Movement Music Fest, set for Memorial Day Weekend in downtown Detroit. Event organizers have released the full lineup: 115-plus acts, six stages, five showcases and lots of impromptu pop-up sets. Headliners include electronic music innovator Richie Hawtin, German-Bosnian superstar DJ and producer Solomun and Fatboy Slim alongside LGBTQ+ legends like DJ Minx (see our feature on page 10) and Honey Dijon. *Visit movementfestival.com for all the details.*



Honey Dijon. Photo: Instagram/@honeydijon

Let's Try This Again

Rap 'foremother' Cakes da killa would like to remind you that his identity is also 'musician'

BY CHRIS AZZOPARDI

It's a sign of the times that a rapper can be Black, openly queer and free from the genre's deep-seated hypermasculinity, and not just be named Lil Nas X. Most of the artists currently expanding the limitations of hip-hop won't end up as household names, but they are worthy of stardom nonetheless. Count Cakes da killa among them. At the forefront of hip-hop and dance music since 2011, Cakes, now 33, was part of a wave of queer hip-hop artists that included Le1f, Mykki Blanco and House of Ladosha, musicians who helped roll out the red carpet for an artist like Lil Nas to run, not just walk.

In 2011, when Cakes was in his 20s, the world was so surprised that an artist like Cakes could even exist that what he was creating was overshadowed by who he is. In his mind, he was a musician first and foremost, but that's not the way his place in music was spun; many called him a "queer rapper," tokenizing his sexuality. The title of Cakes' latest album, "Black Sheep," refers to his experience in the music industry during a critical moment in hip-hop that shaped where we are currently but also sidelined him in the process — or as press materials put it, "a coronation of his graduation to foremother." For the album, once again a melding of rap, house, jazz and dance, the New York rapper teamed up with the same producer, Sam Katz, as he did for his last album, 2022's "Svengali."

Recently on Zoom, where he appeared in a geometric-patterned caftan, Cakes spoke about the benefits of not being a mainstream rapper, big artists who ride on the trend-making coattails of smaller ones and what he thinks is a major turning point for the visibility of queer performers.

You are an incredibly versatile artist. With this album, where were you in your life that led to its creation?

I kind of have to live life a lot before I start writing. The intention is never to write a certain type of record. So there's never a specific genre intention, but I do have a certain arsenal of sounds that I'm known for, and it just bounces around. For this, it's split — the first half of it is more dance- and electronic-focused, and then that electronic kind of carries off, and then it becomes more rap and boom bap. This is just the music that I make naturally, and I feel like it's a kind of style that's missing in the market. I could have easily just made a drill record or a ballroom record, but for



Cakes da killa. Photo: Ebru Yildiz

me, I'm also trying to do things that are not so prevalent.

Are you purposely going against the grain? Is this just you wanting to make the music that you want to make regardless of what's happening in mainstream music culture?

It's definitely more the latter. But as a homosexual, I feel like I'm always going to go against the grain, just naturally. It's not like I'm trying to be different. I just am different. And I also feel like when I first started making music, it was at a time where there was still an underground scene, and this was a bit before social media became so prevalent. And I feel like at that time, you couldn't sound like someone else, so you couldn't even work with the same producer. That's ingrained in me, where it's like every artist has to have their identity.

What helps to keep moving your sound forward?

I think me being authentic is always going to make me be ahead. Because once you get into that kind of system of being a mainstream artist, you're dealing with a lot of pressure to be more palatable to a large amount of people. I don't have that job. I don't have that pressure. So, for me, just not having that pressure alone makes me a little more, I guess, ahead of the curve.

But I also attribute that to me still being active in nightlife. I see a lot of the times people actively trying to make dance albums or [have] these alternative moments, and a lot of those sounds are associated with clubs, venues or actual scenes. And if you don't have any connections in those kinds of scenes, you're appropriating. What keeps me in the mix is that I actively enjoy going out and being in the mix.

Why did you land on "Black Sheep" for

the title of this album?

Because when I started writing it, I was in a very weird place and feeling very isolated, but not in a dramatic way. I've always felt very much like an outsider among outsiders, even amongst the peers that I came out with. And so I kind of just took that energy and decided to use it to frame the whole album.

Was that inspiration a result of the beginning of Covid?

No. During the Covid era, I really didn't care. This was after, just trying to figure out slowly getting back into the swing of touring and the swing of things and just figuring out what my place was. Because I do feel like I have a set place. I will always be a footnote, but as someone that's not dead or dying, I'm like, "How do I then reestablish myself in the market?"

You recently retweeted this from JD Samson, a fellow artist who is queer: "Straight people mimicking queer trends for underground credibility continues." What would you like to add to that conversation, and how does mainstreaming by straight artists affect queer artists?

It's a double-edged sword because in one sense it's those things that are so ingrained in our identities that make us unique. So when someone else who's not a part of the community puts that on like it's drag, which is fine, it becomes an issue when they start getting financial gain from it, where it's just like, "Oh, this is me." And then as an originator of something, you kind of look like you're following a trend versus being the pioneer of something. But the other side of that is, it's kind of a blessing. Because it just shows how we as a society are slowly becoming more accepting of seeing those types of things in mainstream media. Because at one point, I can remember for a drag queen to be on television or on a commercial was salacious. Now everyone's a fucking drag queen.

I just think with most art, if you're being inspired by a scene or by a movement, you just have to do it in a tasteful way and just cite your sources, and that's fine. But the general public really just... let me not call them "dumb." It's just that most people are kind of like sheep in a

See **Cakes da killa**, page 30



Holy Week & Easter



Easter Sunday Services | March. 31

7 AM, 9 AM, 11:15 AM | Church & Online

Easter Egg Hunt for Kids! 

Before/Following 9 AM & 11:15 Services



March 29 | 7 PM

Christ Church Cranbrook & Online

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March 30 | 7 PM

Christ Church Cranbrook & Online

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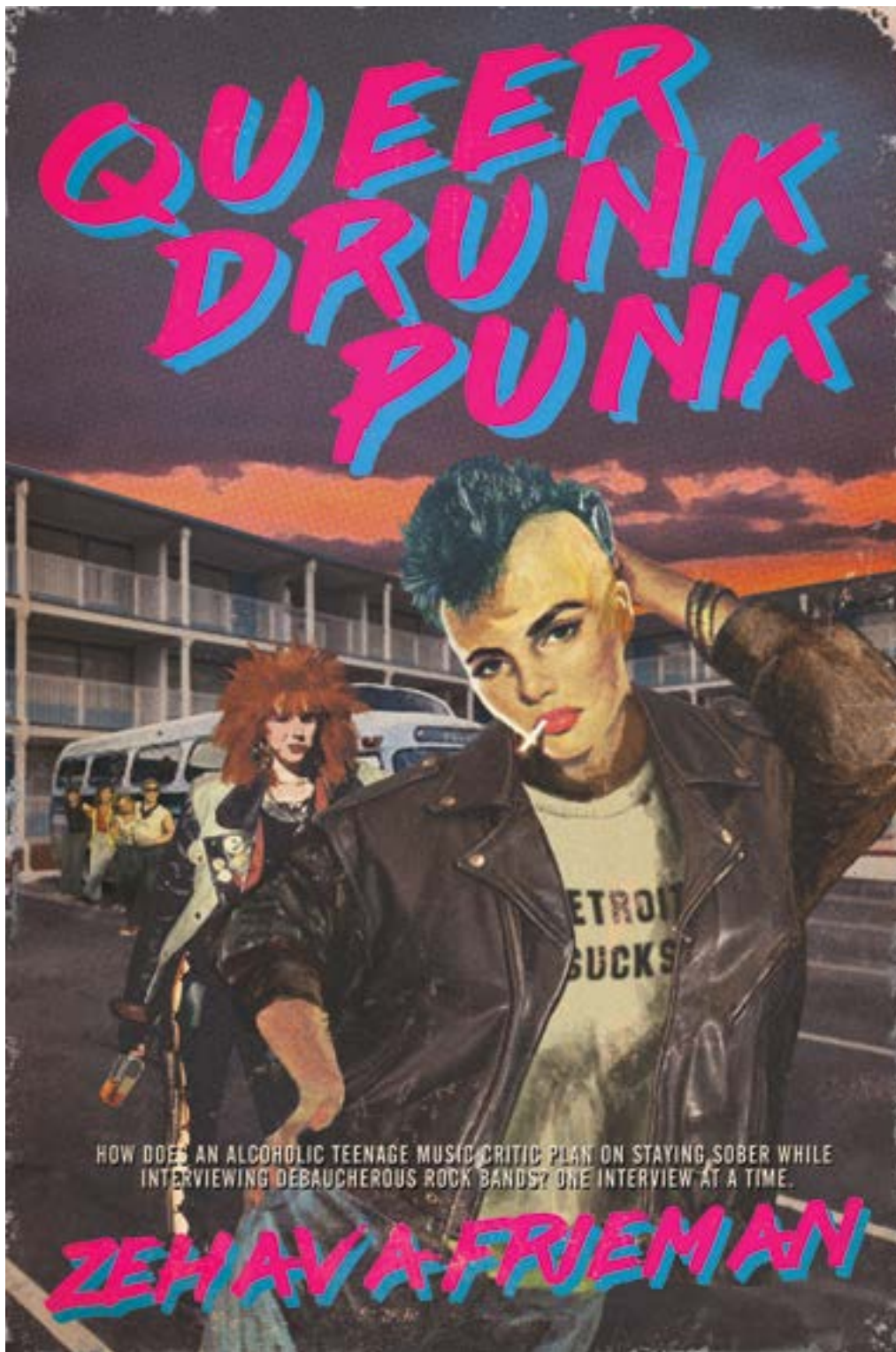


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‘Queer Drunk Punk’ Author on How Growing Up in Grosse Pointe Park Inspired Her Debut Novel

Riot grrrl and grunge movements shine
bright in Zehava Frieman’s work

BY DREW SAUNDERS

When Zehava Frieman finally sat down to write “Queer Drunk Punk” in 2021 on the tail end of decades of what she describes as “creative constipation,” the debut novel all but poured out of her. “It was literally nine months of what you would call automatic writing,” she told BTL. “My brain was in sync with my hands, and I was just furiously typing.”

In part, Frieman’s writing sessions were inspired by her personal experiences growing up in Grosse Pointe Park as a closeted, cisgender lesbian in the 1980s. By the 10th grade, she says in her author’s bio, she started writing “angst-ridden prose and screenplays” and was watching MTV instead of studying for her civics tests. After high school, she spent 35 years working at a wide variety of jobs, including as a grave digger, screen printer, corrections officer, FedEx courier and truck driver, gathering characters and life experiences as she went.

In her writing, Frieman also draws from years spent watching the punk and associated scenes of the Gen X era from afar as a teenager and, later, from memories of going to shows in her 20s. Along the way, she conducted an exhaustive series of interviews with people who participated in the music scene of the time.

“Queer Drunk Punk,” billed as a “teenage anthem about sex, sobriety and rock ‘n’ roll” in press materials, starts with main character Quinn Snyder slogging her way through high school, before being eventually outed after the death of her mother. This leads to a struggle with alcoholism and a burgeoning career as a music journalist covering the life of a childhood friend turned feminist punk rocker.

“A lot of this is fiction. I was not that person in high school; I knew a lot of those people. I took from their experiences, but I myself did not go through that. I sat next to a bunch of burnouts and new wavers in high school, so I took from that experience,” Frieman said.

As soon as she finished up with “Queer Drunk Punk,” Frieman was back at the keyboard typing up her second novel, “Nasty Grrrls.”

“Nasty Grrrls” is the direct sequel (both books are out now), set during the riot grrrl and grunge eras that characterized much of the Clinton Administration. Now out of a job and at a low ebb, Quinn is tasked with finding an AWOL rock star to solve the mysterious recent death of the lead singer of a punk band.

Todd Alcott, who created the cover art for both books, told BTL he was influenced by his Gen X upbringing and Frieman’s vision for the cover. “We

RUGS	ACTS	SCAT
ASIA	GLEE	SARA
IAMPRE	ORGASMIC	
TIM	ODDMAN	EER
TREAT		NELLY
	DOESTHAT	
EDAM	AMO	AUTO
TONI	TORN	GNAW
STIR	IKID	EDGE
	MEANYOUARE	
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Shortbus
Puzzle can be found on page 27

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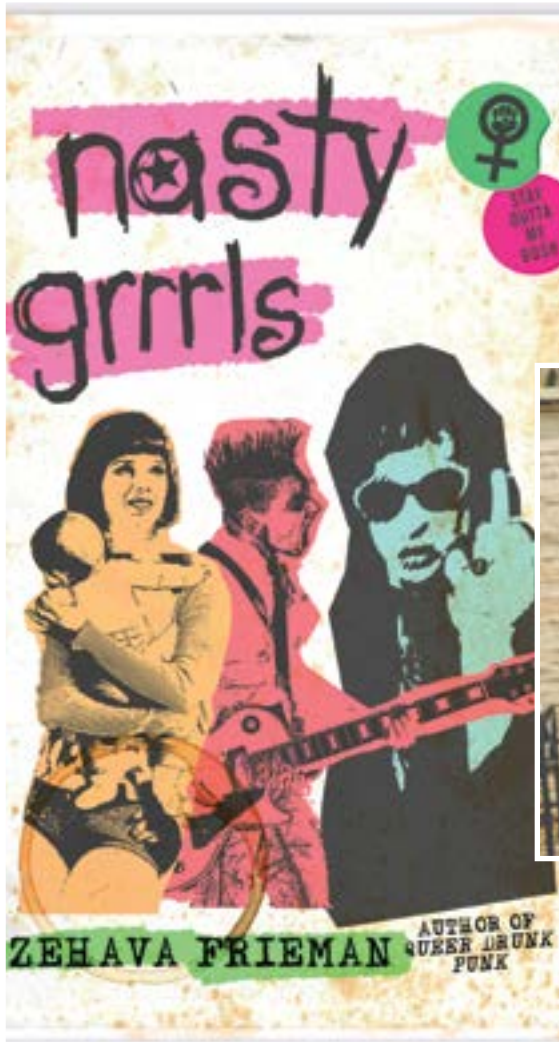
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“A lot of this is fiction. I was not that person in high school; I knew a lot of those people. I myself did not go through that. I sat next to a bunch of burnouts and new wavers in high school, so I took from that experience.”

— Zehava Frieman



Zehava Frieman. Courtesy photo

both ‘get’ punk culture, zine culture, that 1980s indie thing of ‘Well, there’s no internet, so if you want to hear new music, you have to

go to the club, you have to hang out in the record store, you have to see a hundred terrible shows in dive bars where the floor has been mopped with a bucket of last night’s spilled beers.”

Also influencing Alcott’s artwork is what he sees as a nihilistic streak in Frieman’s Quinn character, who he described as a “kind of rebel without a cause who’s just kind of crashing through life making problems for everyone.”

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Rob Smith Is Winning

Why the Phluid Project founder left the corporate world to promote gender inclusivity

BY SARAH BRICKER HUNT

Thanks to the era of “new media,” where no stone is left unturned when it comes to invading the privacy of every public figure from social media influencers to the Hollywood elite (and not-so-elite), you’d be hard-pressed to find more than a handful of influential people who are truly as good as they’d like us all to believe. Few and far between are people like Mr. Rogers, Dolly Parton and, apparently, Tom Hanks. I’d like to humbly request we add a new name to the nice list: Rob Smith, founder of The Phluid Project. Here’s my case.

First of all, Smith spent a good chunk of time at the beginning of our recent call trying to figure out how to tag my LinkedIn to a recent post he shared of an article I wrote about an upcoming collab between Phluid and the Detroit Pistons. “Come on, Rob. I can do this,” he assures himself (and me). “Really, it’s fine,” I tell him. “I just always try to give credit to authors. It’s important,” he insists. Eventually, we figure it out, and you know what? It does feel nice to get that recognition. Score one for the guy who seems to thrive on making other people feel better. We could use more of that in 2024.

Smith knows a lot about how important validation can be, growing up as a closeted kid in Grosse Pointe in the ’80s. He’s nearly in tears when I ask about those growing-up years (oops). But in what has already become signature Rob Smith behavior to me, he starts off by making sure I know that this difficult time in his life had nothing to do with his supportive family. “I’ll start off there. I have a wonderful family — I love them so much,” he says. “But a young kid doesn’t understand. I mean, your school is your world and words that I heard all the time as a kid... ‘sissy, faggot...’ you hear those words and you intuitively, instinctively understand that being gay is dangerous.”

As much as he knew his family loved him, Smith

says he was somehow afraid they might disown him if he didn’t hide his queerness. His brothers played football and baseball and his dad was a Pittsburgh Steeler. “And I was the creative kid. I loved theater and art and playing with my sister’s dolls,” he explains. By high school, “I’d butched myself up,” he recalls, joining the football team and hoping the change would make it easier to go through life. “And I finally had friends, but I don’t know if it was fully authentic.”

Before he came out, Smith says, he couldn’t fully accept his family’s love because he didn’t feel they knew him authentically. “I just didn’t fully receive their love because I didn’t know if they would really fully love me if they knew I was gay,” he remembers. “That was my own voice talking to me.”

Smith attended Michigan State University after high school, and then, he was gone. Miami Beach was calling, and it was hard to imagine a place more polar opposite to East Lansing or a more affirming atmosphere in which to come out in his early 20s. Still, coming out to his family was a daunting prospect in the late ’80s. True to those “he’s a really good person” vibes, Smith was worried more about protecting them than how he was feeling. “It was this time when you came out and usually followed that up with ‘I’m also HIV positive,’” he says. “I was so afraid to tell them because I knew they’d feel like ‘My son’s gonna have AIDS and die.’ There was a lot of trauma around coming out to your family because of the HIV crisis. They weren’t just worried about

See **Rob Smith**, page 24

“

Honestly, a big part of creating Phluid was making my little self proud.



Rob Smith. Photo: The Phluid Project

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Doors open at 7 pm. Must be 18+ to attend; alcohol will be available for purchase for ages 21+ with ID.





We Left Christianity But It Didn't Leave Us

If you still feel controlled by the church you thought you left behind, you're not alone

BY ERYN JOHNSON SUNNOLIA

I curled into a fetal position and sobbed. All my partner had asked for was to reschedule our plans so they could have some alone time. What was wrong with me? Why did such an innocuous request send me to the floor, the night ruined, too anxious and wrecked to enjoy the alone time I also needed?

I didn't understand it in the moment, but later I realized what was behind my tears: fear that with any space from me, Quinn would realize my inherent badness — the badness Christianity taught me was my core — and leave me.

Many people assume you can just leave Christianity and be done with it, but that's not how it works for many of us. Ingrained rules, ideas and norms often

don't disappear overnight. They can continue to show up in our lives, especially within our most intimate relationships.

That's an inherently shame-based fear, something that Jeremy Lehmann, associate director and practitioner at the Center for Trauma Resolution and Recovery, sees as one of the big things that affects our relationships as queer, ex-Christian adults. "Shame is a belief that I'm not worthy to be in connection because of this fundamental flaw," he explains. "We have to restore belief in our inherent goodness to be able to have the kinds of relationships we want to have."

Hannah P., who left the church five years ago and asked to remain anonymous, regularly experienced that shaming. "I remember our pastor saying to

the entire congregation, 'You are a degenerate.' That's stuck with me, the idea that we're inherently evil and nothing without the grace of God." It sometimes comes up for them in not feeling good enough for their wife.

Sexual shame was another holdover from Christianity Hannah experienced creeping into their relationship. Early on, it felt really hard to receive as a sexual partner. What's been helpful is feeling like they can trust their wife wholeheartedly and tell her anything that's happening in their brain.

Milla Lubis, a therapist at The Expansive Group, backs up the idea that our relationships can be healing ground. "Rarely are you going to heal relational wounds in isolation," they say.

For Jamie B., who requested

anonymity, non-monogamy and kink have been a big part of the queer ex-Christian journey. They knew that married, heterosexual monogamy never quite fit them, but then again, nothing about the church ever did, either.

"There was no selfhood that was not sinful. To think or to question, 'Does this actually work for me?' would have required me to center myself as the prime directive of my own life, and that was beyond me to imagine at the time," Jamie explains.

The church taught them love needed to be forced into one shape: marriage. In their first relationship at 25, it took a lot of heartache to realize they couldn't contain something that alive. They eventually realized they didn't actually want to make anyone conform to anything.

"If we both chose monogamy, sure. But it had to be a free choice. The default of church life was coercion. It took a long time to not unconsciously play out the same coercive dynamics that were normal to me my whole life," Jamie says. They were taught the opposite of consent — not just sexually, but in pressuring non-believers to say yes to Christianity. "That constant coerced yes to the church eroded my ability to say no." It's been critical for them to reclaim their no and to have their no invited in relationships.

Figuring out who we are and how we want our relationships to be is part of the process for many ex-Christian queer folks, especially those who come out later in life like Lehmann. "There

See **Christianity**, page 25

Alanis Morissette at Pitchfork in Chicago — and, frankly, with a lineup like that, you may not want to miss out. Ware, of course, is one of modern music disco-lite delights, bringing a soulful sound to her '70s-era throwbacks. Notably, Brittany Howard will also perform. A five-time Grammy winner, Howard is the former



Carly Rae Jepsen at OUTLOUD 2023. Photo: Jon Viscott

frontwoman of Alabama Shakes; her solo music, including her newly released second album “What Now,” embraces her identity as a queer Black woman. pitchforkmusicfestival.com

Hinterland Music Festival

Aug. 2 - 4, Saint Charles, Iowa

Hinterland is like a queer haven in the middle of Iowa. And with one stage and around 15,000 attendees, it has a more intimate feel than some of the big festivals, which can be a draw especially for a first-time festivalgoer. Headlined by Hozier, Vampire Weekend and Noah Kahan, queer artists dominate the rest of the lineup, which includes Ethel Cain, Chappell Roan, Orville Peck, The Japanese House, Blondshell, Katy Kirby and Palehound. hinterlandiowa.com

Stargaze

Aug. 23 - 25, Tolland, Massachusetts

Stargaze provides another opportunity for women, non-binary and trans people to experience a weekend of community

and connection. Held at a sleepaway camp in Massachusetts, the weekend includes workshops and activities alongside live performances from queer and nonbinary artists.

Stargaze’s website describes its festival as “the way life should be: fun, beautiful, and all-inclusive.” The beauty of LGBTQ+ and women-focused festivals, as Fern Fest’s founder noted, is this ability to spend a weekend free from the rest of the world. These festivals provide great

options for people looking to experience this kind of community and enjoy music alongside non-traditional festival components like workshops and activities. stargazefestival.com

All Things Go Music Festival

Sept. 30, Columbia, Maryland

When All Things Go announced its 2023 lineup, it became an Internet sensation. “gay ppl coming out of the woodwork to freak out over the All Things Go lineup today,” one commenter wrote on social media. “I keep calling All Things Go the ‘gay girl music festival’ and when people ask what that means I just show them the lineup,” another said.

That lineup had Tegan and Sara, boygenius, MUNA, FLETCHER, Ethel Cain, Leith Ross and Ella Jane, among others, plus Jepsen and other big names like Lana Del Rey and Maggie Rogers. The festival intentionally centers women and queer artists, and if last year’s lineup is any indication of what this year will bring, it’s sure to be a very queer time. allthingsgofestival.com

A vertical poster for Ferndale Pride. At the top is a rainbow-colored bar. Below it is the Ferndale Pride logo, which consists of a stylized white 'F' and the text 'ERNDALE PRIDE' in white. The background is dark blue. In the center, the text 'We're powered by volunteers like you!' is written in white, with 'like you!' in pink. Below this is a large white QR code. At the bottom, the text 'Scan here to sign up to volunteer or be a hugger at Ferndale Pride.' is written in white, with 'Ferndale Pride.' in pink. At the very bottom, a pink rectangular button contains the text 'VISIT FERNDALEPRIDE.COM TO LEARN MORE' in white.

◀ Rob Smith

Continued from page 20

you getting through life as a gay person. They were worried about you living.”

After college, Smith’s career path followed a jet-fueled trajectory many fashion industry pros would envy. As he scaled the corporate ladder, executive vice president positions at major corporations (Macy’s and Victoria’s Secret) led Smith to the Global Chief Product Officer role at Haddad Brands (Nike, Levi’s, Jordan, Hurley and Converse). A quick trip through Smith’s LinkedIn reveals all the expected corporate lingo from an era he left behind in 2017: lots of “vertical retail growth” and “positioning the company” fodder. And then there’s a shift — a good guy shift, if you will, from corporate executive to the founder of Phluid, a gender-free clothing, accessory and beauty brand targeting the LGBTQ+ community. His role at Phluid now encompasses the organization’s educational aims, which has him traveling to companies as a diversity coach and consultant on gender inclusivity policies and gender-expansive practices.

“We are Phluid,” a page on the brand’s



Above: Phluid promo shot. Photo: The Phluid Project

website reads. “Phluid in our expression, externally to the world and internally to ourselves. Phluid means dissolving the artificial boundaries of gender, skin color, and status, we and they. Phluid means following like water, free from contracts

we never agreed to sign. Phluid means embracing the core idea that this is our world and that the way things are is unrelated to how things could be.”

“Honestly, a big part of creating Phluid was making my little self proud,” Smith says. “It’s something that maybe my younger self would look at and say ‘Wow. I’m really proud of you.’ Because I shut him out at 14 years old. I erased him.”

These days, Smith’s trips home to Michigan include family visits and, often, a little philanthropy and community-building. For the first time, Phluid is partnering with a pro sports franchise, launching a line of all-gender apparel created by Smith that will be released on March 24, the date

of the 10th annual Pistons Pride Night. Fans can purchase “Basketball for All” sweatshirts, T-shirts and hats at Pistons313shop.com and at the team store in Little Caesars Arena.

Smith stresses that the Pistons project is about more than a simple clothing

collaboration — in fact, he feels strongly that sports can be a gateway to LGBTQ+ acceptance all over the world. “It’s about changing people’s hearts and minds in a place where there is rampant transphobia and homophobia,” he says. “You’re tapping into a huge community of players and massive fan bases. If there is some way to have sports open up to show inclusion and acceptance for all — not just queer folks — I think it’s a game changer that sets the stage for many organizations to follow.”

Unsurprisingly, Smith only had good things to say about working with the Pistons team, from the support staff all the way up to the executive suite. “The team has been amazing. They have really been leaning into wanting to do what’s right and showing what real inclusion looks like for queer folks,” he says. “Whatever is going on with their season, the thing is that winning comes in many forms, as far as I’m concerned. And they are winning in this space of inclusion and celebration. The values of their organization show in the way they treat people, and the way they’re willing to step up and be courageous — that’s winning, too.”

We could say the same thing about ultimate nice guy Rob Smith.

◀ DJ Minx

Continued from page 11

herself. She smiles, seemingly amused at the thought. “To this day, one of them I still talk to often and we’re friends,” she says. “And they have asked me if they could date me.”

At one point during our sit-down, Witcher rolls up her sleeve to show me her tattoos. Fittingly, one reads “Empowered women empower women.” A throughline to her experience as a woman who hasn’t always felt supported by other women is so clear I don’t have to ask about it. You can’t forget that history, but you can try to do your part to change it for future generations of women musicians, which Witcher continues to do. She formed Women on Wax, a collective of female DJs and producers from the Detroit area, in late 1996, and she launched her own label, Women on Wax Recordings, in 2001, which supports and uplifts local talent.

In May, she’ll return to the Movement stage during its closing day on May 27 in Hart Plaza, with plans to bring a newfound authenticity to her set. Since 2000, she’s been DJing at the festival, one



DJ Minx at Movement Music Festival. Photo: Douglas Wojciechowski

of the longest-running dance music events in the world. This time, though, her performance will be, perhaps, the most honest reflection of who she is at this point in her life. “This year I’m switching it up because I need some color. I need some drag queens. I need some drama,” she says. “So this is going to

be a different one.”

For this particular set, she’s planning on including drag queens, new visual components and she will also play alongside New York City DJ Honey Dijon, who is trans. “I’m supporting a lot of our people,” she says. In conjunction with her Movement gig, she will continue

to host a June Pride party this summer — its launch tells you a lot about how Witcher coming out in her 50s is making its mark. The party kicked off in 2021 right after Witcher wrote that Instagram post. Two days later, she says, reps from Paxahau, the festival’s production company, were on the phone with

her manager, asking her to headline a party inspired by her — all because she came out.

“The idea happened naturally,” says Chuck Flask, senior talent buyer at Paxahau. “We were looking to book some parties for Pride Month, and with Minx recently coming out, it made all the sense in the world to have her headline and play her first residency at Spot Lite that June, and we’ve been doing it ever since — they’re always a great time. We’ve been friends with Minx for a long time; she’s an incredible DJ, producer and inspiration — we are happy for her success and the recognition she deserves, locally and globally.”

Witcher tells me she feels positive change on a personal level — she has, after all, been on the front lines of seeing *and* living a shift in how women and LGBTQ+ people are treated both inside and outside the club.

“I feel there’s a lot more opportunities for women than there was before,” she says. “And believe me, I know.” In the half-century-long process of helping to get us there, Witcher has also landed on something special she never could have imagined before she hit “share” on that coming out post: “a whole new community to love.”

was this whole person that I didn't know yet and I had to figure out what was important to me. What are my values? How do I even know what a well-lived life looks like when I've been told that who I am isn't a valid way to be a human being? What do I want in my relationships?" he says. "We got a lot of practice being who other people need us to be."

Some of Lehmann's clients have experienced traumatic events known as adverse religious experiences, and for others, the trauma is in neglect, in the ways we don't learn how to develop as relational beings connected to our emotions and sexuality. "Those are the kinds of experiences that can result in lasting impacts in our physiology, emotional lives, and relationships with ourselves," he says.

Lubis does somatic work with clients to help them figure out what beliefs and ideas are coming from themselves versus something outside of them like the church or a parent, and how that feels in their bodies.

Communal spaces can also be helpful, Lubis points out. They co-host a queer divinity space with folks of various religious backgrounds who are all looking for a space to embrace queer spirituality.

"It's been incredibly healing and provides evidence that our trauma does not have to be dealt with in isolation."

The relational piece is key because healing the negative impacts of religion isn't just about undoing faulty thinking. "You need to have reparative experiences where the feared situation doesn't happen," Lubis says. "If you're constantly having an experience that mirrors the past, where you had little control, had to be hypervigilant, had to modify yourself, that's what you're going to lean on as an adult. But that's not going to help you repair that faulty belief. You need to have different experiences where you're vulnerably intimate or a little bit bad or a little bit unlovable to believe this is possible."

That's been true for me. Letting my partner see the "worst" of me and not losing their love has been deeply healing. Something that's been healing for Hannah has been realizing that they don't have to only be with someone who has the same religious background. "I worried they wouldn't get it," they admit. "But that puts my identity in my religious past. At the end of the day, I'm not my history. I'm building a whole new life with a new set of beliefs. I get to start over with a partner that comes from a different experience, and we get to build something just as diverse as our relationship."

Pardon me, but amen to that.



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How Julio Torres Used Imagination to Tell a Touching Story About Immigration

The queer comedian wants to show ‘people as people’ with new film

BY CHRIS AZZOPARDI

When I think of Julio Torres, I think of someone who gave life to Ferrero Rocher. It’s a wild detail to recall about someone, but indicative of Torres as a comedian who has the sharp wit and stone-faced delivery to make a comedy bit about a beloved chocolate and hazelnut confection more memorable than it has any right to be.

During his HBO special “My Favorite Shapes,” which debuted in 2019, Torres, who is queer, hilariously acts like he’s doing us a favor by showing us what a square is, what a rectangle is and, of course, what the prized sphere is — “who you may recognize for her current role as a Ferrero Rocher chocolate,” he says. He brings out another Ferrero Rocher chocolate, this time without the additional wrapper it sits in.

“Originally, we had booked a different chocolate to play this part but then I was backstage and I was like ‘places, places’ and I was like, ‘I’m sorry, but where’s your little skirt?’”

Torres, a hyper-aware observational humorist, has built a career on this very special way of seeing the world and translating that into bone-dry comedy. He’s obviously a standout in “Los Espookys,” the Spanish-language horror-comedy from Fred Armisen that ran for two seasons on HBO, but even when he shows up as Patti Harrison’s co-worker at a coffee shop in “Together Together” for just a few scenes, you’re always wishing he could be the lead confection in a skirt.

He gets that starring role in “Problemista,” which the former “Saturday Night Live” writer also wrote and directed. Alongside Tilda Swinton, Torres plays Alejandro, an aspiring toy designer; the two create something otherworldly that is still very much grounded in our world — it is the tale of a person who needs a visa sponsorship to stay in the U.S. rather than return to El Salvador. The story, inspired by Torres’ own journey as a Salvadoran, he told NBC News, is,



Julio Torres in “Problemista.” Photo: Jon Pack

at its heart, one about outsiders — “people who feel that they are on the fringes.”

When I connected with Torres recently on Zoom, he talked about bringing his vision to life (minus the spaceships), a very specific element in Disney films that inspired the film visually and how he hopes his work can engender empathy for the experiences of those like Alejandro.

I’m interested in knowing how you get to the places you get to artistically, and with “Problemista,” how did you land where you landed?

I think with me, it’s always a matter of reining it in. I mean, the first version of the script would’ve amounted to a three and a half hour movie with three times the budget. We’re talking spaceships...

There is social commentary about immigration that’s really impactful and based on your own experience.

Do you start with the social commentary or do you start with the spaceships?

I think I start with emotion. I definitely don’t start with social commentary. I think the social commentary comes as a byproduct of being honest and as a byproduct of showing truth, and truth comes from trying to accurately depict an emotion. So, I was not out to make some grand thesis statement about anything; I just really wanted to show how that process felt, and it is in the audience’s empathy that a commentary comes.

How do you think a film like “Problemista,” and comedy itself, can help make issues

like immigration more accessible to a broader swath of people and generate empathy?

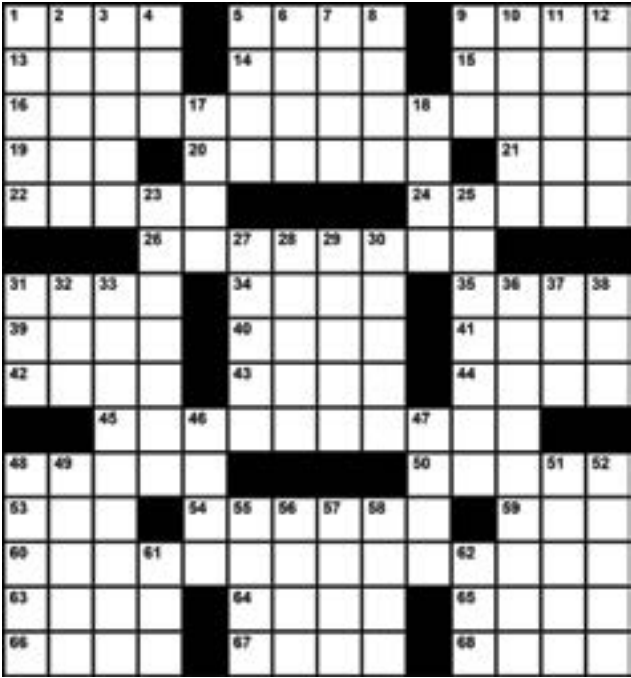
I think that it’s [through] being very honest and being very specific and showing real people going through real problems and seeing characters not as vessels for ideas — seeing characters not as two-dimensional case studies that have no lives beyond the problems that they’re going through, but seeing them as fully fleshed beings that we can access real empathy. And that is the difference between consuming a work of fiction or getting to know someone and seeing a chart about any of these problems, right? It’s [about] people not as case numbers, but people as people.

You recently said that, directing this, you brought together your visual and

spatial interests, humor writing, story writing and world building. How did all those aspects of your work come together to create this film?

Everything is in conversation with each other, and everything is in service of everything else. And I am a very visual person, so I think visually. Even if it ends up being different, I do think about what people are wearing, what the environments look like, what the camera movements are like. And so, directing afforded me the opportunity to make those things happen. I don’t cook. I’ve never cooked. I’m a bad cook, but it sounds like cooking is a little bit like this.

See *Problemista*, page 28



Shortbus

Across

- 1 They may burn lovers on the floor
- 5 Fragments of "The Glass Menagerie"
- 9 "Beat it!"
- 13 Tibet setting
- 14 Fox comedy with Jane Lynch

- 15 Poet Teasdale
- 16 Statement by Sofia in "Shortbus"
- 19 Curry of Rocky Horror fame
- 20 One who's "out"
- 21 Comics cry
- 22 Trick alternative
- 24 Nervous sort
- 26 Start of Jamie's response to Sofia
- 31 Cheesy side trip from Amsterdam

- 34 Mine, to Rimbaud
- 35 Station wagon, e.g.
- 39 Tara portrayer Collette
- 40 Actor Rip
- 41 Chew like a mouse
- 42 Direction from Susan Feniger
- 43 "___ you not"
- 44 Beat, but barely
- 45 More of the response
- 48 She had her hand up Lamb Chop
- 50 Elton John's source for "Aida"
- 53 How some like it
- 54 Seaport of Italia
- 59 Son of Abe
- 60 End of the response
- 63 X-rated material
- 64 Steed stopper
- 65 Da Vinci's Lisa
- 66 Big name in pumps
- 67 Nuts
- 68 "The ___ the limit!"

Down

- 1 Singer Bonnie
- 2 Name on jetliners, once
- 3 Easy putt for Spencer-Devlin
- 4 Type of sucker
- 5 Like a chickenhawk
- 6 Lump of earth
- 7 Six years for a senator Baldwin
- 8 Video game name
- 9 Sound of an inflated doll leak
- 10 "Lawrence of Arabia" ride
- 11 Princess with fins
- 12 Tasteless

- 17 Magazine section
- 18 Jodie Foster's role with the King
- 23 Valentine sender
- 25 Place for trinkets
- 27 Try a Rick Rodgers cookbook, e.g.
- 28 Like gay bars that allow cigars
- 29 Hope-Crosby flick, "Road ___"
- 30 Gandhi, e.g.
- 31 Cause of Venus envy?
- 32 Decimal point
- 33 Some Disney employees
- 36 Saw to
- 37 Touching children's game
- 38 Be in debt to
- 46 "It ___ Necessarily So"
- 47 Word on a map of Israel
- 48 Triangle, e.g.
- 49 Migratory guys
- 51 Kaye of "Hans Christian Anderson"
- 52 Think tank products
- 55 It can give a drag queen smooth legs
- 56 Hart Crane work
- 57 Birth state of Langston Hughes
- 58 Like young Abe Lincoln
- 61 Game with "Reverse" cards
- 62 Scrabble 3-pointers

See p. 18 for answers



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◀ Problemista
Continued from page 26

About the visual references in “Problemista” — I was getting some “Alice in Wonderland” vibes from the beginning of the film.

Fairy tales are definitely influencing and informing this movie. I was a child in the '90s, so I was watching a lot of the Disney animated stuff, and there was something that they would always do, which is they would have this huge orchestral music, and then you'd have this long pan into whatever the main architectural structure of the story was going to be.

That was very important to just glide down until we got to the cave. And that's the castle.

How did that detail about how you wanted to do that camera pan stick with you for so long?

Because they all follow the same recipe. I'm assuming that they thought it worked one time and then they did it over and over

and over again. We glide on the jungle and then we end up in the rock where Simba is baptized or whatever that ritual is, and then we glide on Paris, and we find Notre Dame. We glide on Agrabah, and we find Aladdin's castle; it's all the same.



Julio Torres and Tilda Swinton on the set of “Problemista.” Photo: Jon Pack

One of my favorite projects of yours is “My Favorite Shapes.” Do you see a relationship between a project like that and a project like “Problemista”?

Yeah, they're all coming from the same well. It just so happened that, at that point, I was in a time where what I wanted to say was best explained by showing little objects and, here, what I wanted to tell was best explained in this way. But all those worlds are connected.

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◀ Cakes da killa

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sense, where they could hear a country record and not like it, but if a mainstream artist does it, suddenly that adds validity to it.

When I heard “Mind Reader,” a single from the new album, I was picking up some C+C Music Factory vibes. What sonic headspace were you in when you created that song?

Well, the hook, I definitely wanted to write a hook that did feel kind of very C+C and very Soul II Soul, because it's kind of just my vibe overall. I feel like not a lot of people do that kind of hip-house fusion right, to me. So I wanted to do something like that, and I think it was easy for me to write the lyrics. The harder part was trying to find a singer that could actually carry the vocal the way I wanted them to. I had met Stout a couple months prior at a bar. She has that kind of powerhouse voice, like a Martha Wash, because she's from the church and we don't really hear vocals like that a lot in dance music. I wanted to bring that back.

How did you get to that point of wanting to find a singer like Martha Wash for that song?

Well, if you are going to do a record like that, you have to do it right. I know I couldn't carry the vocal even with all the Auto-Tune and pitching, and I definitely just wanted it to be reminiscent of that time, but I didn't want it to feel outdated, so I couldn't skip on not having the vocal be correct.

More than 10 years into your career, how does the support feel now for LGBTQ+ artists versus when you started?

Well, I always say that I don't think that that is just a hip-hop or rap problem. I think that that was very much a society problem, because even when you look at genres like country music or rock — I mean, rock could be a little bit more free-form, but in the mainstream sense, it is kind of very gendered. So I think it's just across the board. Rap just kind of gets that connotation. But for me as an artist, I don't

really focus on the spaces I may or may not be welcome to because, like I said, making music was never my career.

So for me, I just was focused on making my money. When I started, it was like there's no way a drag queen would have a talk show or we'll have “Drag Race” and there's no way a gay artist will ever become a mainstream moment, so just enjoy touring the world and making a little money. I think what started the shift in society accepting these very visible queer people is queer people started supporting queer talent. Because



Cakes da killa. Photo: Matt Nelson

for so long, going to Prides, you would see Martha Wash or Crystal Waters. And that's not to say that there weren't queer people making music, it's just the gay dollar wasn't going into gay acts. Slowly that shift started happening where queer people decided, “Hey, we have money. We want to support people that talk about the things we want to talk about and look like us.” That was kind of the main shift.

What's your earliest memory of wanting to make music?

Well, I never wanted to make music. It kind of started off as a joke. When I was in college, I would just upload videos of me rapping, making fun of people that I went to school with. And from that, somebody hit me up and was like, “Oh, would you be willing to come to the studio and come to New York and record?” Being young and living in Jersey, I always had an excuse to go to New York. So that's kind of how it started, because at that time it was kind of unheard of to be gay. Also, on top of that, being feminine and open and making rap music, it wasn't an option. So it wasn't like a career shift where I was like, I'm going to be this artist. It was mainly like, “Oh, if I do this and become a little underground person, I could get more drink tickets when I go out.”



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