

MICHIGAN'S LGBTQ+ NEWS SOURCE SINCE 1993

# Between THE CITY Lines™

## Ferndale in *Focus*

The Artists | The History | The Musical Activist

**QUEER AS FOLK**

Inside the Revival with  
Star Johnny Sibilly

**A NOBLE LEGACY**

Urvashi Vaid's Lasting  
Impact on Michigan

**BOTTOM, TOP... SIDE?**

A Local Therapist  
Penned the New Term

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Photo: Steven Piper

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Happy Pride season, BTL readers! We've got your Pride Guide so you can stay in the loop on all this season's upcoming Pride events across Michigan. Visit Pridesource.com for more info.



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# 5 Queer Things You Can Do Right Now-ish

BY SARAH BRICKER HUNT

The end of May means Memorial Day picnics, skimpy shorts weather and a prelude to the queerest month of the year. As we zoom right into Pride Month, here are a few ideas to kick off the season. Whether you're a music lover, a bookworm or someone who just needs a little extra Zen, we've got you covered.

## Revel in Some Queer Country, Y'all

Saddle up for an early summer infusion of queer-friendly country music. Masked gay crooner Orville Peck will bring his "Bronco Tour" to Royal Oak Music Theatre May 31, and outspoken ally Miranda Lambert plays Pine Knob June 3, the only Michigan stop on her "Bandwagon" tour, with Little Big Town opening. Netflix's "Queer Eye" features Lambert's "Y'all Means All" as the theme song for its latest season, set in Texas. When Pride Source editorial director Chris Azzopardi interviewed the country star in 2019, she said she takes her role as an ally in the public eye seriously. "I do have a platform, and I try to use it for the better," she told Azzopardi.

*Tickets for both shows are available through [ticketmaster.com](https://www.ticketmaster.com).*



Miranda Lambert and Orville Peck. Photos: Alexa King / Gordon Nicholas



Zion Well outdoor yoga session. Photo: Zion Well

## Strike a (Yoga) Pose for a Good Cause at Zion Pride

Join Zion Well for Zion Pride in Ypsilanti at 10 a.m. June 5 for an all-levels yoga class at Riverside Park. The donation-based event also features a mental health fair starting at 9:30 a.m. Proceeds will benefit Ozone House, a shelter and support community focused on LGBTQIA+ youth outreach in Ann Arbor. Following the yoga class, stick around for a dance party hosted by DJ Myint. Zion Well founder Art Schupbach says one of the organization's missions is to create an environment where everyone feels seen and loved. "This event means so much to us because our community is diverse and unique," Schupbach says.

*Register for the event at [Eventbrite](https://www.eventbrite.com).*



Catfight for the Crown 2021. Photo: Ruth Ellis Center

## Sharpen Your Claws for Catfight 2022

Catfight for the Crown is billed as "your favorite, no-holds-barred, unapologetic, highly inappropriate fight to the finish" where "out-of-control" amateur drag queens battle for the coveted title of none other than Miss Kitty," and if you're not already buying tickets, what else could possibly lure you out for a night of fun? Food? Drinks? They'll have those, too! Krystina Edwards, community engagement manager at Ruth Ellis Center, says Catfight will benefit the Center's operations and core programs, including the Drop-In Center, Ruth Ellis Claimount Center, the Ruth Ellis Health & Wellness Center and the Family Preservation program. Edwards says the concept behind the show is a unique, interactive way of "raising critical funding to support an incredible cause." The event, Edwards adds, is designed to celebrate all forms of identity and expression.

*This 18+ event takes place June 3 at The Fillmore in downtown Detroit. Doors open at 5:30 p.m., and the show starts at 6:30 p.m. Buy tickets at [universe.com](https://www.universe.com).*



"fluid. man. woman. and the space between." exhibit at Gutman Gallery. Photo: The Guild of Artist and Artisans, Facebook

## Examine Gender Through an Artistic Lens

The Guild of Artists and Artisans invites the public to a special Pride Month exhibition. "fluid. man. woman. and the space between." is on display in The Guild's Gutman Gallery in Ann Arbor through June 18 and explores "what is inherently masculine or feminine and whether or not it's even relevant," according to organizers. Michigan-based artist Armando Pedroso juried "fluid. man.

woman. and the space between." alongside Guild staff, selecting 26 works from 16 artists across a variety of styles, techniques and media. Throughout the exhibition run, the gallery will host Artist Pop-Ups on Saturdays, giving visitors a chance to meet the artists behind the work. Follow Gutman Gallery on Facebook and Instagram for the latest line-up.

Gutman Gallery is located at 118 N. Fourth Ave. in Ann Arbor. Visit the exhibition Wednesday to Saturday 11 a.m. to 5 p.m. through June 18 or by appointment (email [elizabeth@theguild.org](mailto:elizabeth@theguild.org)).



## Snag a BIPOC-Centered LGBTQ+ Read

When it's time to take a break from your busy spring schedule, head to Detroit's 27th Letter Books, a bookstore that supports the idea that "exposure to new ideas and lifetime learning is at the center of our existence," and pick up a book curated for open-minded readers. The store is Black-owned, woman-owned, Filipino-owned, neurodivergent-owned, veteran-owned and cancer-survivor owned. "As readers ourselves," the owners write, "we've found frustration within the current book world, where our selves are rarely represented in books. We can only read so many books by dead white guys (am I right?), and when our readership is included, the industry allows few voices and stories into the mix instead of others that are more representative of reality."

27th Letter Books is located at 3546 Michigan Ave. in Detroit. Visit the store's website at [27thletterbooks.com](http://27thletterbooks.com) for current hours.

Please check event pages for the most up-to-date scheduling information.

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Brian Lacey paints the new mural at The Ringwald Theatre inside Affirmations. Photos courtesy of The Ringwald



Greek American,” he said. “Baklava has been passed back and forth between cultures for thousands of years, each taking their own twist on it. I like the name as a sweet-appearing desert but also that it represents cultural transmission and is representative of my background as well.”

Lacey’s origin story is, he said, “kind of a common artistic beginning. I was creative as a kid. I was active in the world of graffiti for a long time before I decided to take the plunge and start art school. That’s where I discovered muralism — large scale painting and fine arts painting, in general — and found a passion in that.”

Today, when someone looks at one of his murals, Lacey said he hopes they walk away with “a feeling of either relaxation or playfulness, maybe some degree of escapism. I prefer to tap into some of the more basic human reactions that people might get from artwork. That’s one of the reasons I produce my work into basic geometric shapes. People can take away their own artistic impression of the work.”

Lacey’s mural has received praise from Affirmations Executive Director Dave Garcia.

“It pops with color and is clearly visible for hundreds of people to see every day as they park, walk and drive behind the center,” he said.

The Affirmations/Ringwald union has, so far, been a pleasure, Garcia said.

“I’m excited for the community to see the mural and think it will bring attention to the fact that The Ringwald is now at Affirmations. The Ringwald and Affirmations has been a great partnership, and this is an important step in the marketing, communications and creativity of that partnership.”

Kelley agreed.

“When we first moved, which was scary and exciting, we thought we were just upgrading our space, working air conditioning, more bathrooms, more parking, that kind of stuff,” Kelley said. “What we couldn’t have known about is the people at Affirmations. Welcoming, collaborative, transparent and, best of all, we share a goal, highlighting and lifting up the marginalized and unique members of our shared community.”

The Ringwald, a professional performing arts company whose mission is to engage diverse audiences through fresh, risk-taking theatrical experiences, will present Robert O’Hara’s outrageous comedy “Bootycandy” later this season. Stay tuned for updates at [theringwald.com](http://theringwald.com).

In addition, The Ringwald is holding open auditions for the 2022/2023 season on Wednesday, June 8 and Saturday, June 11 at their location inside Affirmations, which is located at 290 West Nine Mile Road in Ferndale.

# Michigan’s Diverse LGBTQ+ Community Inspires New Mural at The Ringwald Theatre at Affirmations

## Artwork Is a Visual Display of Partnership

BY JASON A. MICHAEL

The Ringwald Theatre, now operating inside Affirmations LGBTQ+ community center in Ferndale, has unveiled a new mural by local artist [detroit\\_baklava](https://www.detroitbaklava.com), aka Brian Lacey.

The mural, which is untitled and measures 20-by-12 feet, now resides in the large window adjacent to the entrance of the theater, which is the rear entrance of Affirmations. The mural was made possible thanks to a grant from the Ferndale Community Foundation earlier this year.

Vince Kelley, a member of Ringwald’s board of directors, was the one who reached out to Lacey about creating the mural. Kelley knew that Lacey had previously designed and completed another mural inside the center.

“When the idea of incorporating our brand on the exterior of Affirmations came up, I wanted to give Brian the opportunity to get his work out where everyone could see it. Thankfully he’s also very talented and has a colorful and unique style because, if he sucked, that would have been awkward.”

Kelley said the only guidelines he laid out for Lacey were to incorporate The Ringwald’s new logo and to make sure the mural represented The Ringwald as a cornerstone in the Ferndale LGBTQ+ community. In other words, it needed to include a rainbow.

“We all are fully obsessed,” Kelley said of the finished product. “The speed at which he worked was crazy. It came to life before our

eyes. Every time I pull into a parking space in the lot, I smile. It’s just straight up joyful and couldn’t represent the colorful characters at The Ringwald any better.”

Lacey, who finished the mural in about a week, said his mural work plays upon the emphasis of space and value, and “in relation to the Ferndale community, it’s a very diverse community that celebrates everyone’s value and space, no matter who you are as an individual. So that kind of clicked for me.”

Lacey said he’s been doing murals since about 2014.

“I got a wall in Brooklyn, New York that I painted, which was a cool way to start off my mural career. Then I stepped back and I was able to assist some large, more established artists and I was able to learn that way.”

He took the moniker [detroit\\_baklava](https://www.detroitbaklava.com) for a few reasons.

Among other things, part of my heritage is



# This New Grindr Term Was Just Added as an Option Thanks to Local Therapist

## Top? Bottom? Vers? None of the Above? Well, There's a Name For That Now!

BY JASON A. MICHAEL

Gay men get down in a variety of ways, so if you're not a top, bottom or vers, then maybe you're a "side." The term was coined right here in Michigan, by Royal Oak psychotherapist and sex expert Dr. Joe Kort. Now, thanks to Kort's suggestion, Grindr's gotten on board with Kort's term, which came to him nearly a decade ago.

"I was talking with friends, and I was admitting that I don't enjoy, nor have ever done, anal sex," Kort told BTL. "They said, 'Then you aren't a top or a bottom,' and I jokingly said, 'No, I am a side.' I was thinking about a box. Everyone laughed, including me. But then I thought, 'Why can't that be a word?'"

Kort could think of no good reason it couldn't be, so he penned a piece for Huffington Post in 2013 declaring it so. Nearly a decade later, the word has caught on to the degree that gay hookup app Grindr is adding it to their sexual preference options.

"Sides today feel very frustrated," said Kort. "They want love. Love and commitment is hard to find in the gay male community, and adding being a side makes it even harder to find."

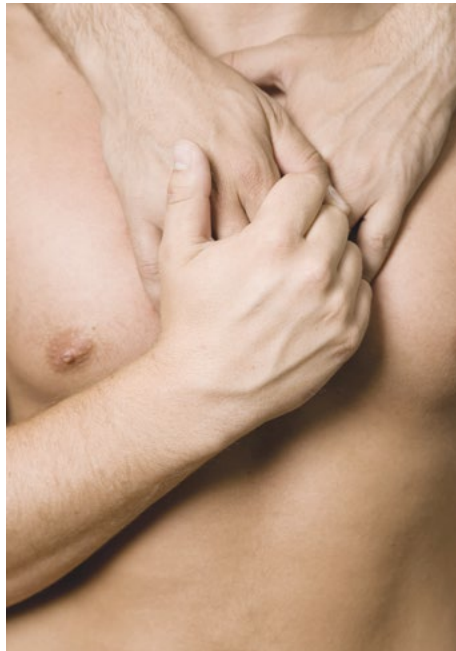
For years, sides suffered in shame "from other gay men," he said. "Gay men do not support one another."

Instead, Kort says, they sometimes attack that which they do not understand. They pressure sides by saying things such as, "So, you're still a virgin, maybe you haven't met the right guy, what happened to you that you don't like it, and are you asexual?" It's hard for a lot of traditional tops and bottoms to accept that gay men have healthy and satisfying sex lives without engaging in anal sex.

"So gay men shame sides, especially on apps," Kort said. "That is why Grindr adding it as a position is huge."

Kort said he felt that shame himself for years. In his 20s, when he would tell guys he wasn't into anal sex, "many moved on," he said.

"I did feel incredible shame because I felt marginalized not being a top or bottom," he



Joe Kort.

added. "Everyone talked about fucking, and I felt embarrassed that I didn't."

There has been resistance, according to Kort, to embracing the term. Gay men, he said, say that the gay sexual lexicon is sufficient as is.

"What they don't recognize is that sides have always been around without a term,"

said Kort. "Having a name makes someone feel a sense of belonging and visibility."

Regardless if others accept it or not, Kort encourages his clients not to let the judgment of others rule how they feel about themselves.

"Stay true and authentic to yourself about what you want

and don't want in bed ... you can endure this and persevere and find the right partner for you relationally and/or sexually," he said. "It is not different from those who are kinky. They have to sift through a lot of vanilla before they find the kinks they enjoy in a partner."

*Kort runs a Facebook group just for sides. It can be found at <https://m.facebook.com/groups/sideguys>.*



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SATURDAY – 10:30PM  
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# Uh... Berkeley? Berkly?

## How This Michigan Town's Spelling Triggered Fraud Allegations in Local Circuit Judge Election

BY ELLEN SHANNA KNOPPOW

Beverly Hills attorney Amanda Shelton may soon be one step closer to winning her race for Oakland County circuit court judge, well ahead of Election Day. Shelton's wife, Kay Shelton, has filed a complaint with the Michigan Bureau of Elections challenging the nominating petitions of her wife's opponent, Oakland County Assistant Prosecutor Tricia Dare. The Dare campaign is accused of signature fraud.

The eight circulators named in the complaint are also implicated in scandals plaguing the campaigns of at least three other Michigan candidates — most notably, former Detroit Police Chief and gubernatorial hopeful James Craig. “We were suspicious early on, even before we looked at the petitions, to be honest,” Kay Shelton said. “There was a social media post that went out from the Dare campaign where it says, ‘Most candidates take months and months and dozens of volunteers to gather 4,000 petition signatures. The Dare campaign has more than

6,000 verified signatures in 28 days.”

The Shelton campaign thought that sounded questionable. Significantly, signature gathering had been especially challenging during a very cold March. Upon review, Kay Shelton cited what she called “red flags.”

“Handwriting started to look very similar,” Shelton said. There were also spelling irregularities.

“They spelled ‘Berkley’ wrong,” Kay Shelton said. “They spell it ‘Berkeley,’ California instead of ‘Berkley’ here, and we know a lot of people who live in Berkley. And they say, if you’re from Berkley, that’s just not something you do. You don’t spell it wrong. It’s kind of like a Berkley pride sort of thing.”

“Berkly” and “Berkely” appear on the petitions as well.

Individuals’ names were spelled incorrectly, too: In one case, “Eduard” was misspelled as “Edward,” Shelton said.

In several instances, a curious pattern of signatures emerged from people residing in non-adjacent cities, such as Royal Oak, Novi and Waterford, then repeated for numerous pages. Shelton said they

tried to imagine how that many people from only those cities would be signing petitions in the same place.

Shelton cited obituaries for people whose names appear on Dare’s petitions, as well as signed affidavits from people who claim their signatures were faked. The scandal reached one of the Shelton’s own neighbors.

“She’s elderly and not been well, so I walk over there and her husband answers the door,” Kay Shelton said. “He’s like, ‘That is not her signature. I know that’s not her signature and she has not left this house in three months.’”

Kay Shelton does not believe the Dare campaign was aware of the scheme. She called it a crime of opportunity. She said she didn’t know how much the Dare campaign paid, but when they were looking into people to hire, the going rate was \$5 a signature. As the filing deadline approached, she said people were expecting “anywhere from \$20 up to \$35 a signature.”

Both Shelton and attorney John Allen, of John M. Allen, P.C., who is representing Amanda Shelton and

assisted with filing the complaint, emphasized the responsibility the rival campaign bears in ensuring their own petitions are properly vetted.

“There’s probably been an enormous lack of oversight and neglect in the way that it was done,” Allen said. “When you turn these petitions in, you generally are certifying that they’ve been reviewed and that they are being submitted in good faith and are accurate.”

“I don’t know what kind of a review was undertaken by the candidate before these went in,” he continued, “but if the candidate had done even a fraction of the due diligence that anybody else looking at these petitions had done, a candidate might have seen that there were problems with the petitions — and not turned them in.”

For their part, the Shelton campaign hired one paid circulator late in the process, an individual Kay Shelton said they were able to vet to their satisfaction. An earlier attempt to hire outside help resulted in 200 to 300 duplicate signatures having to be tossed before filing.

Shelton said it was her understanding that because signature gathering firms do their own hiring, “you have no idea really who’s out there on the streets getting signatures for you.”

Allen called what the Shelton campaign had accomplished “truly

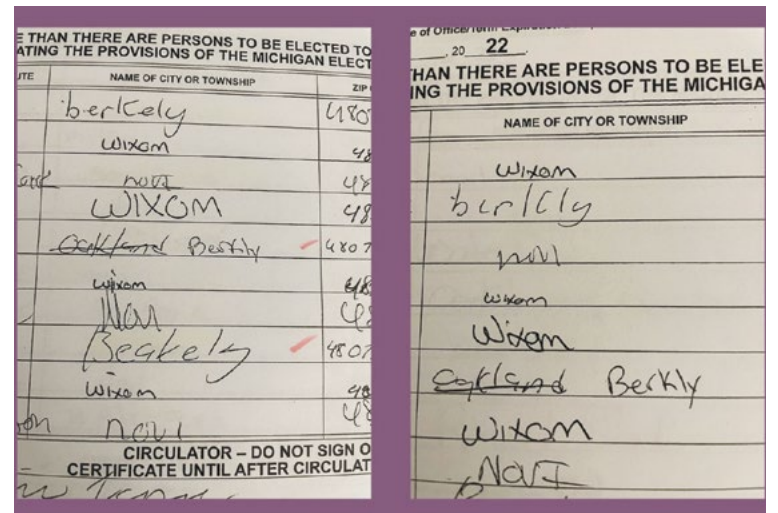
campaign and willingness to get out and actually interact with the people that you’re gonna be asking to [vote] for you.”

Separately, Shelton is facing a petition challenge of her own, unrelated to forgery. The Dare campaign has filed a complaint challenging Shelton’s residence. “Beverly Hills” appears in the field on the petitions designated for the candidate’s city or township, when it is in fact a village. Technically, the Sheltons live in Southfield Township. Southfield Township comprises the villages of Beverly Hills, Franklin and Bingham Farms.

According to Allen, Shelton confirmed with the Bureau of Elections that her petitions were properly prepared before filing them. He said the requirement for the candidate’s address to appear in the heading is to inform voters whether the candidate resides in the electoral district they are competing in.

“Amanda has resided in Beverly Hills and Oakland County for the past 18 years,” Allen said. “She has satisfied the letter and the spirit of the law and the challenge to her petitions is entirely without merit.”

Based on their findings, the Michigan Bureau of Elections was scheduled on May 24 to make a recommendation to the bipartisan Board of Canvassers. On May 26, the Board of Canvassers is scheduled to vote on whether to certify the



a grassroots effort” by family, friends and people who believed in her. He described how challenging it can be to approach busy people for a conversation about the candidate and why you’re asking for their signature. “It’s not an easy thing to do,” Allen said. “And it really is the first test of the candidate’s commitment to the

petitions. “Whether it’s gathering signatures or whether that’s through actually casting votes, the last thing we need is additional questions over the integrity of the process,” Allen said. “Anyone that contributes to that or is neglectful about that, shame on them.”

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Michigan **ADRC**  
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Photo: Jurek Wajdowicz

# Leaving a Legacy: Urvashi Vaid's Lasting Impact on Michigan's LGBTQ+ Community

## Foundation Gave Average of \$2.5 Million a Year to Michigan LGBTQ+ Causes Under Vaid's Leadership

BY JASON A. MICHAEL

The Michigan LGBTQ+ philanthropy community is in mourning following news that longtime LGBTQ+ activist and philanthropist Urvashi Vaid died at age 63 earlier this month.

Vaid was a superstar in the movement for LGBTQ+ equality long before philanthropist Jon Stryker moved her to Michigan to helm his Arcus Foundation. An attorney, activist and author, she had previously served as executive director of the National LGBTQ Task Force. In that role, Vaid helped create the annual Creating Change conference.

Upon moving to Kalamazoo in 2005 to serve

as executive director of Arcus, Vaid hired former Detroit Black Gay Pride Executive Director Johnny Jenkins to serve as program manager of Arcus's Michigan Program. Together, Vaid and Jenkins hired Bashar McKay to serve as program associate.

"Urvashi, her approach was, I think, more holistic than other people at the time," said McKay. "At the time, there was such heavy focus on marriage everywhere and that wasn't Urvashi's M.O. Urvashi's M.O. was about changing hearts and minds and changing policies."

Vaid made it her mission to change the culture in Michigan and open up minds to

the LGBTQ+ community. She wasn't looking for a quick policy change — she was looking for something permanent.

"She wanted something holistically done that just couldn't be undone due to somebody passing another law or a court ruling," McKay said. "She wanted the culture of the land to change throughout the country."

Jenkins admitted he had little experience in philanthropy when Vaid hired him.

"She invested in a community activist who knew very little about managing a multi-million-dollar grant portfolio," he said. "What she wanted was someone with strong analytical skills and relationships on the ground."

Under Vaid's leadership, "Michigan benefited from the distribution of millions of dollars designed to advance social justice in LGBT rights, racial and economic justice," said Jenkins. "She was committed to cultivating collaboration and building capacity among LGBT organizations across the state."

Sean Kosofsky was director of policy for the Triangle Foundation when Vaid came onboard at Arcus. While Triangle and Equality Michigan would merge in 2010, taking the name of the latter agency, they were operating as two separate entities in 2005.

"When she came in as executive director at Arcus, she noticed that Michigan Equality was getting funding and Triangle Foundation was not," recalled Kosofsky. "She was puzzled by that, so she worked to make sure there were resources for both organizations."

McKay estimates that Arcus gave an average of \$2.5 million each year to Michigan LGBTQ+ causes while Vaid was in charge.

"Arcus essentially funded most all of the successful programs in Michigan," he said.

Though it wasn't her personal primary cause, Vaid did advocate for marriage equality while in Michigan, as well as amending the Elliot Larsen Civil Rights Act to include sexual orientation.

"She made sure money moved to important community organizations and statewide organizations in Michigan," said Kosofsky. "Her leadership of the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force was instrumental in shaping queer advocacy at Triangle Foundation and other organizations for many years."

Former *Between The Lines* publisher Susan Horowitz first met Vaid in the early '80s when they were both living and organizing in New York.

"She was an incredible thinker — bold and daring," Horowitz said. "She knew how to move forward and bring so many with her no matter the challenges. She encouraged all of us to push and do more than we could imagine."

Vaid was more than just a thinker and leader. She was a teacher as well.

"She was an incredible mentor to so many in the state and across the country," said Horowitz. "I encourage those who did not get to know her to read her books and Google her projects and continue on the path she blazed."

McKay said he looks back fondly at his time working with Vaid, and to this day keeps something he learned from her.

"She used to say, 'To what end?'" he remembered. "We used to have lots of conversations. We were moving a lot of money and putting it in the hands of a lot of organizations, and we had to make some difficult decisions. She would always say 'To what end? Where are we going here, and what are we trying to accomplish and how are we doing it?'"

"I've always kept that with me in my world in thinking about long-term change," McKay continued. "What are we doing today to create change in the future, and what does that change look like, and how are we going to get there?"



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Tieanna Burton (left) and Mykell Price have been named Miss and Mister Hotter Than July 2022. Photo: Jason A. Michael

## Cis Woman, Trans Man to Hold Hotter Than July 2022 Titles For First Time Ever

BY JASON A. MICHAEL

LGBT Detroit, organizers of Hotter Than July (HTJ), the world's second oldest Black LGBTQ+ Pride, have announced the crowning of 2022 Mister and Miss Hotter Than July.

For the first time ever, a cis woman, Tieanna Burton, will be named Miss HTJ and a trans man, Mykell Price, will be crowned Mister HTJ. A private coronation ceremony will take place at LGBT Detroit's Pride month kick-off on June 3 at the organization's headquarters.

Burton, 32, is LGBT Detroit's project manager.

"To know that people see me, and they notice and appreciate the work that I'm doing, at least the effort that I'm putting into the work that I'm doing, it's a phenomenal feeling," she said.

Price, 37, agreed. "It is an utmost honor," he said. "I am so excited to provide representation for the transmasculine community. My community is often left out of these type of opportunities."

Like Burton, Price said he sees being named Mr. Hotter Than July as an "acknowledgement."

"I am very active in the community," he said. "I have done a lot of community service work. So, I see it as a thank you and a level of acknowledgment for all the work that I have done for the transmasculine community."

Price, for his part, is director of talent and development for the Ruth Ellis Center. He said he believes the lack of transmasculine representation is "related to cultural norms and cultural traditions."

Price has created, to his knowledge, the first transmasculine space on Facebook.

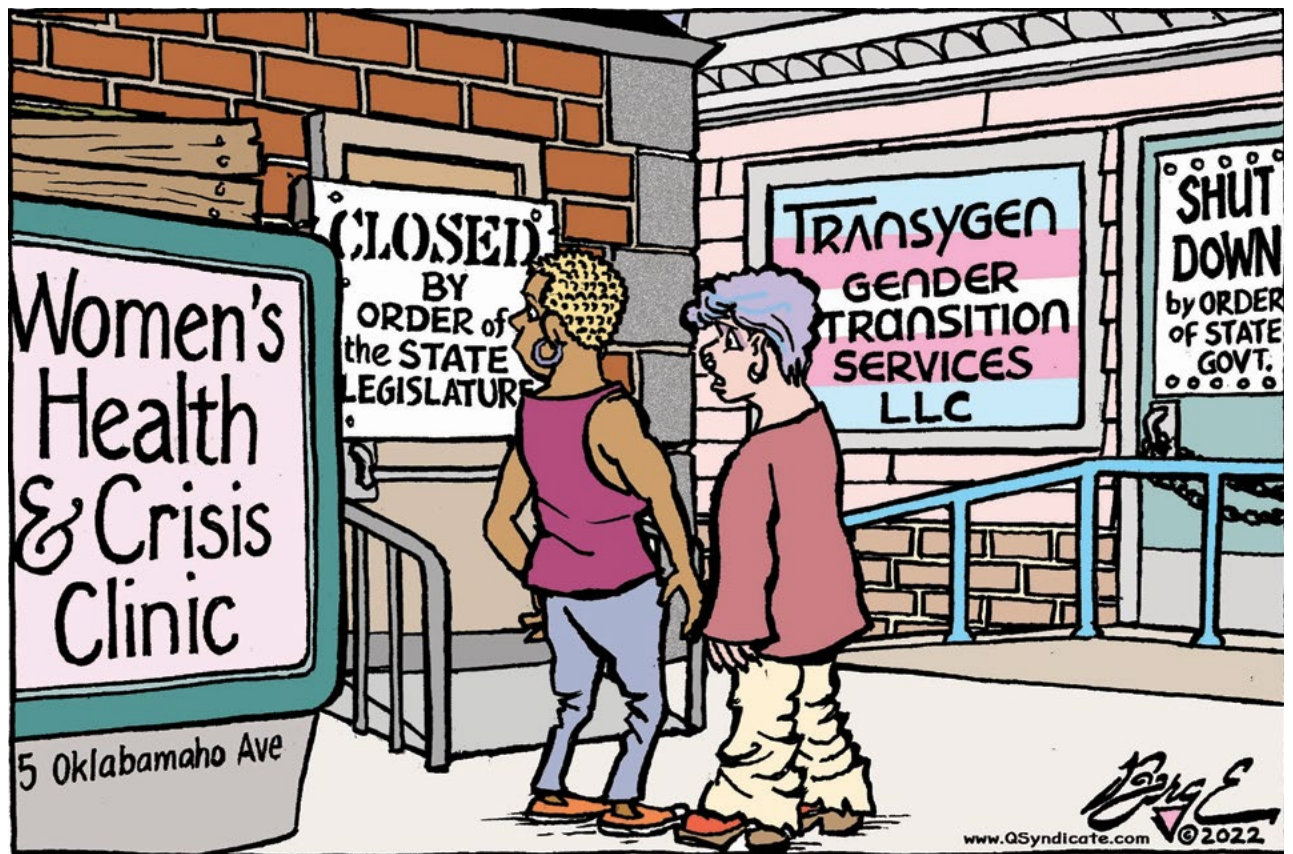
Both Burton and Price say that HTJ means something special to them. Burton's first time at Pride was in 2009, just as she was coming out fully.

"I took my little cousin with me because I was afraid," she said. "Just to be in that space and be surrounded by Black, queer folk and to feel comfortable and watch other people feel comfortable being their true selves ... it was really humbling."

Price first attended an HTJ picnic in 2002.

"I was wearing my rainbow colors and really just, you know, experiencing a lot of excitement and enjoyment. I

See HTJ, next page



**"FOR A PARTY OPPOSED TO 'SOCIALIZED MEDICINE,' REPUBLICANS SURE ARE EAGER TO MAKE EVERYONE ELSE'S HEALTH CARE DECISIONS!"**

## A Queer Mom's Perspective on Reproductive Rights



By Dana Rudolph

In 1989, I was part of the March for Women's Lives in Washington, DC, as abortion rights were at risk of being overturned by the U.S. Supreme Court. I was still recently out as a lesbian, with no thoughts of parenthood yet on my mind, but the idea of the government forcing people to carry unwanted or life-risking pregnancies was as anathema to me as their telling me who to love.

Fast forward more than a decade, and my partner (now spouse) and I started our family through assisted reproduction. This deliberate choice to become a parent, and parenthood itself, with its challenges as well as joys, only reinforced my belief that pregnancy should always be a choice — and terminating one a choice to be made between pregnant person and doctor, not the government. Now, with reproductive rights again under threat at the U.S. Supreme Court, I still feel that protecting those rights is as important as any other LGBTQ+ advocacy work.

Queer people can and do have sex that can lead to pregnancy. For bisexual people, trans and nonbinary people with partners whom they can be fertile with, questioning people, and others who choose for whatever reason to have intercourse that could

result in a pregnancy — access to abortion is a necessary part of controlling our bodies and our lives. Even with birth control, accidents happen; there may be medical reasons for terminating a pregnancy; and anyone with a uterus is still at risk of pregnancy from rape.

If the right to abortion is overturned, people will still seek them. Those with more financial means will be more likely to have them safely; the risk of injury and death from illegal abortions will fall most heavily on marginalized communities. (This is why we must speak not only of abortion rights but of abortion access.) Others will carry unwanted pregnancies to term, leading to people who are too young to parent or not in positions to do so well, placing more families below the poverty line as they struggle to support more kids, burdening our already overburdened adoption system, and upending individual lives and plans that did not include a child (or another one). Every child should be a wanted child.

If abortion rights are overturned, there could also be implications for assisted reproduction. RESOLVE: the National Infertility Association explains on its website that in states that define life as beginning at conception, "Anything that puts an embryo at risk could be a violation of law." This would lead to worrying legal questions like: Do all embryos have to be

See Reproductive Rights, next page

## → HTJ

Continued from previous page

didn't really know what I was attending," he said. "I just knew it was a space of joy, laughter and excitement, and a sense of inclusion and belonging to the community."

As part of their responsibilities, both Burton and Price were required to be a part of this year's planning committee and to put in their share of the work.

"We're familiar with all the intricate details of what's happening," she said, "[and] what's

going on down to fundraising and grants and sponsorship to booking entertainers and contracts and things of that nature."

Miss and Mister HTJ responsibilities during the actual three-day celebration include hosting all of the long weekend's events, including the church service, Sunday brunch and HTJ's first-ever concert, where rapper Da Brat will be featured at Sound Board at Motor City Casino.

"The theme is the 'Evolution of Hotter Than July,'" said Burton. "This year we have a lot of firsts, which is really exciting."

*HTJ will take place this year July 15-17. For more information, visit [hotterthanjuly.org](http://hotterthanjuly.org).*

“

*For all these reasons and more, reproductive rights are queer rights. Queer people are not 'allied' with the reproductive rights movement; we are part of it.*

## → Reproductive Rights

Continued from previous page

transferred after fertilization? If they are frozen for later, who is liable for ones lost in the freezing/thawing process? And more. Some medical practices may then decide not to take the legal risk of offering such services. As of this writing, these are open questions, but certainly worrying ones.

Access to abortion is not just about pregnancy, either, but about the broader issues of personal and body autonomy, which lie at the very heart of queer rights. Many people have speculated that overturning abortion rights could lead to the overturning of the rights enshrined in the key U.S. Supreme Court decisions *Lawrence v. Texas* (the right of consenting adults to engage in private sexual acts) and *Obergefell v. Hodges* (marriage equality).

Here's how: In the draft U.S. Supreme Court memo that leaked in early May, Justice Samuel Alito says that the Due Process Clause of the 14th Amendment "has been held to guarantee some rights that are not mentioned in the Constitution, but any such right must be 'deeply rooted in this nation's history and tradition' and 'implicit in the concept of ordered liberty.'" Abortion, he says, does not fall into this category.

Later, Alito says that those in favor of abortion access should not lean on *Lawrence* and *Obergefell* as precedent for a "broader right to autonomy" and thus to abortion. He explains that none of the rights that *Lawrence* or *Obergefell* enshrine "has any

claim to being deeply rooted in history."

That seems to imply that the rights affirmed by *Lawrence* and *Obergefell*, too, could be at risk. Alito later seems to walk this back a bit, noting that *Roe* says "abortion is 'inherently different from marital intimacy,' 'marriage,' or 'procreation,'" and adding "We emphasize that our decision concerns the constitutional right to abortion and no other right. Nothing in this opinion should be understood to cast doubt on precedents that do not concern abortion."

I somehow don't think that the right-wing groups pushing to overturn *Roe* are going to follow his advice on that last sentence. Many of these groups are the same ones that have long opposed LGBTQ+ equality and are now ramping up anti-trans legislation — legislation that threatens trans youths' body autonomy, as *Texas*, *Alabama* and other states try to prevent them from accessing medically proven, gender-affirming health care, even with parental permission. If these groups can make a crack in the idea of autonomy in one area, you can bet they'll try to extend it further.

For all these reasons and more, reproductive rights are queer rights. Queer people are not "allied" with the reproductive rights movement; we are part of it. And we must work as hard as we ever have on any part of LGBTQ+ equality to ensure that these rights remain with us.

*Dana Rudolph is the founder and publisher of Mombian ([mombian.com](http://mombian.com)), a GLAAD Media Award-winning blog and resource directory, with a searchable database of 900+ LGBTQ+ family books, media, and more.*

## CREEP OF THE WEEK

### Ginni and Clarence Thomas Definitely Don't Talk To Each Other About Hopes, Dreams, Overthrowing Government



By D'Anne Witkowski

Clarence Thomas should not be a Supreme Court justice. But because we don't believe women about sexual harassment, especially not Black women, he is.

I'm old enough to remember Anita Hill testifying about being sexually harassed by Thomas when she worked for him. Granted, I was in seventh grade, the same age my son is now. And Thomas is STILL on the bench.

I certainly don't remember things very clearly. I wasn't exactly super into politics at that point in my life. From what I could tell, the media made it all out to be a "he said/she said" situation rather than a very credible woman accusing a powerful man of something many, many powerful men have done and continue to do — a man who was set to become even more powerful for the rest of his life. (And yes, Brett Kavanaugh should also not be a Supreme Court Justice for the same reason.)

I did not know that Thomas would one day decide whether or not I could get married (his vote was, unsurprisingly, no on marriage equality in 2015). And I certainly didn't know that he would be sitting on a Supreme Court with an ultra-conservative majority that wants to, and very well could, overturn marriage equality.

And then there's Thomas's wife, Ginni the Insurrectionist. Ginni Thomas actively engaged in trying to overturn the election. She meddled in Arizona, trying to get lawmakers to overturn the state's vote for Biden. She also sent wild and frazzled texts to Mark Meadows, Trump's Chief of Staff, urging him to keep Trump in power: "Help This Great President stand firm, Mark!!!" she texted. "You are the leader, with him, who is standing for America's constitutional governance at the precipice. The majority knows Biden and the Left is attempting the greatest Heist of our History."

Another text was even more out there: "Biden crime family & ballot fraud co-conspirators (elected officials, bureaucrats, social media censorship mongers, fake stream media reporters, etc) are being arrested & detained for ballot fraud right now & over coming days, & will be living in barges off GITMO to face military tribunals for sedition."

Wild if true! (It's totally not true.)

I'd like to point out that in order for this election "heist," as Ginni called it, to work, SO MANY PEOPLE in so many different places would have to agree to do this. I challenge you

to walk into a city clerk's office anywhere in Michigan and get everyone who works there to agree on the exact same lunch order, much less all agree to throw an election.

I mean, believing the Big Lie is truly batshit crazy stuff. This is not in any way reasonable or normal. This is not backed by ANY evidence. At all. Reasonable people do not believe this. People who we should take seriously do not believe this. Only conspiracy theorists who can't BELIEVE that the most inept and unpopular president in modern times could lose an election.

Now, is the wife of a Supreme Court justice entitled to her own beliefs and opinions, however completely unmoored by reality? Yes, of course. But should that justice be presiding over lawsuits based on the Big Lie that the election was stolen? No, he should not.

But of course, that's exactly what he's doing. An ethical justice would recuse himself, but not Thomas. According to the Associated Press, "In February 2021, the Supreme Court rejected challenges to the election. Justice Thomas dissented, calling the ruling not to hear arguments in the case 'befuddling' and 'inexplicable.'" Thomas was also the only justice who was cool with Trump withholding Jan. 6 documentation.

In other words, he's the only justice sold on the Big Lie. And his wife has been selling the hell out of it.

But then, Ginni and Clarence never talk about politics. They have their own separate lives and don't discuss work with each other. Or so says Ginni. That is, frankly, bullshit.

Apparently Ginni was terrified that America was literally about to be destroyed, so terrified that she contacted people in the highest reaches of state and federal government begging them to DO SOMETHING, but she didn't talk to her husband about it?

I simply do not believe that Ginni's level of frenetic insurrection energy went unnoticed or was not discussed in the Thomas household. Of course, maybe they have a communication issue they need to work out in couples' therapy.

Either way, Clarence Thomas shouldn't be in the business of deciding who can get married or not.

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- ▶ **Severe liver problems,** which in rare cases can lead to death. Tell your healthcare provider right away if you get these symptoms: skin or the white part of your eyes turns yellow, dark “tea-colored” urine, light-colored stools, loss of appetite for several days or longer, nausea, or stomach-area pain.
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Tunde Olaniran. Photo: Steven Piper

# Burning Bright

## Ferndale Pride Headliner Tunde Olaniran on What Really Matters

BY SARAH BRICKER HUNT

**A**Tunde Olaniran performance is everything all at once: Afro-centric rhythms, interpretive movement, gorgeous costumes, pumping bass, with soulful, vulnerable lyrics belted from somewhere deep inside. Then there's that contagious energy, the kind that wills audience members from their seats.

When Olaniran takes to the Ferndale Pride Main Stage at 8 p.m. Saturday, June 4, Pridegoers will, of course, discover all this for themselves. For the performance, the Flint native says they have two simple goals: getting audiences up and moving, and leaving them feeling “happier and energized.” In fact, Olaniran tells BTL they love to see who in the audience is first to “really let loose and start moving along with us!”

But dancing is only a part of the bigger picture. Pride events, Olaniran says, should focus on connection and community. Pride, they say, isn't about them — or any other single performer. “It's a community event, and we're there to spread good energy for the day and to let people feel comfortable, joyful and connected to each other,” says Olaniran. “Pride events should be a place where LGBTQ+ people feel safe and welcomed and appreciated and see that their city, town and neighborhood are there for them the other 364 days in the year, not just for an afternoon.”

Still, they can't wait to hit that stage. Like many musicians and

artists, Olaniran had to hit the pause button on live performances during the pandemic. In fact, Ferndale Pride will mark their first live performance since 2019. “I'm really happy it's in a city like Ferndale that always has such welcoming energy,” they say.

Back in late 2017, when Olaniran's critically lauded single “Symbol” dropped, they told NPR that a lyric from the song, which was later included on the artist's “Stranger” album — “My body is a symbol” — had taken on additional significance in light of Trump-era politics.

“I wrote ‘Symbol’ as the child of an immigrant (Olaniran's mother was born in Nigeria), under the global specter of violence against Black and brown bodies and in light of the international refugee crisis,” they told NPR at the time. “Now, with the Trump Administration, Black and brown bodies are again held up as political symbols to attack DACA and feed white nationalism. It saddens me that these lyrics feel like they will be relevant for many more generations.”

Since that 2017 interview, the world has experienced significant challenges, including a pandemic that has hit communities of color especially hard. “Being a pandemic-era artist can be very challenging,” they recount. “Sadly, there have been so many examples of why the country I call my home is a dangerous place for my body to exist, as well as the bodies so many of us have.”

Olaniran notes that they are not alone in coming to the realization

“Pride events should be a place where LGBTQ+ people feel **safe** and **welcomed** and appreciated and see that their city, town and **neighborhood** are there for them the other 364 days in the year, not just for an afternoon.”

that the very core of their being — their safety, autonomy and health — are connected to, and dependent on, the community and the social environment the world faces in 2022. It’s a perspective that seems to drive Olaniran’s latest work, which is fierce, brutally honest and layered in musical complexity. The artist regularly posts new music to their social media platforms and is planning a new album release later this year.

That’s not to say musical complexity is new for this creator — Olaniran has rightfully earned a place on the inner track to artists like world-renowned cellist Yo-Yo Ma. Among their impressive list of independent and collaborative projects is the 2021 release “Notes for the Future,” an album Yo-Yo Ma put together featuring Olaniran and eight other musicians from five continents. Olaniran’s contribution, “Doorway,” is a dreamy track accentuated by Ma’s haunting orchestral trills and slides.

Olaniran has always approached musical storytelling through an introspective, no-holds-barred lens, but in true Olaniran form, it’s not always about them specifically. Sometimes, it’s more about expressing an emotion than a literal take on their life.

“A lot of my lyrics are freestyles that I came back and cleaned up or reorganized,” they explain. “I’m usually not concerned with being autobiographical as much as I’m trying to capture hard-to-describe feelings and energy in lyrical form.”

Case in point: “Propane.”

The multi-hyphenate’s latest single, a

collaboration with Ahya Simone and Thair, captures one of those hard-to-describe feelings. “I’m the propane!” they proclaim on the track, an energetic, ephemeral experience that dares listeners to keep their feet still (and which deserves a spot on every 2022 summer playlist). “Propane,” they tell BTL, describes the feeling of being so hot, “everyone wants a piece of you.”

About that collab: Olaniran says they played a show in Chicago with Simone, who is based in southeast Michigan, and Thair, a Chicagoan, a few years ago and has been “dreaming” about getting together again. “Ahya (Simone) is an incredible harpist, vocalist, composer, filmmaker and trans-rights activist,” they say, “while Thair has such an incredible voice. ... I’m so lucky they agreed. Ahya really set the tone and energy for this song. She is just a hottie, and everything she does is fire.”

“Propane” is off the artist’s latest project, “Ephemerrreality,” a mixtape packed with collaborations with 26 guest vocalists and songwriters. “The whole vibe of the mixtape is nostalgic,” they say. “It’s a very femme mixtape, and really I tried to approach each song as ‘What song would I love to hear from this guest artist that they maybe haven’t done yet?’” The result, Olaniran says, is a mix of tracks that represent sounds we were hearing in the ’90s, early 2000s and 2010s. “Ephemerrreality” will debut later this year on streaming platforms. “There will basically be new music coming every month this summer,” Olaniran adds.

See **Tunde**, page 38



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# The Complete Ferndale Pride Lineup

Drag Queens! Drag Kings! Femme Bands! Female Rappers!



Avery and Keaton of Detroit duo Blow Pop. Photo courtesy of Blow Pop

BY JASON A. MICHAEL

Back in June where it belongs, this year's Ferndale Pride is sure to be a fun and fantastic opportunity to come out loud and proud. With a wide range of entertainment options, including music of all genres and both drag queens and drag kings, there's something for everyone. So come out to the gayest little town in Michigan and show your Pride!

## 12:30 Opening Ceremony

Officials speaking at the opening ceremony include Julia Music, executive director of Ferndale Pride; Michigan Attorney General Dana Nessel, and Michigan State Sen. Jeremy Moss. There will also be a special appearance by this year's Ferndale Pride Hot Daddy and Cougar.

## 1 p.m. Furillostar

Furillostar, a Flint native, shines a new light on his city as he seamlessly blends R&B and pop to form head-bumping, radio-style hits. His most recent EP is "Flame," which received mentions from "Billboard" and "Paper" magazine.

## 2 p.m. Blow Pop

A disco-pop experience like no other, Blow Pop is the collective fever dream of Keaton and Avery, two Detroit artists with nothing to lose. This dynamic duo utilizes a sonic palette both retro and refreshingly modern. Keaton is a classically trained cellist and country artist and Avery spent all his formative years holed up in his room wearing a torn flannel, pouting and shredding ACDC licks.

## 3 p.m. London Beck

London Beck is a musical jack of all trades who holds various titles including singer-songwriter, producer and multi-instrumentalist. Beck stands out among a new generation of brilliant musical minds capable of blending all shades of their storytelling soundscapes. Every refreshing and vivid audible adventure is a genre-bending ride to destinations

where themes of empowerment and self-love reside.

## 4 p.m. Valerie the Vulture

Valerie the Vulture, a femme-led rock band from Detroit, is doing its part to rule the grunge rock scene. A mixture of boldly honest lyricism, powerful guitars and hard hitting drums promotes an environment of blatant fun and fearless authenticity.

## 5 p.m. LVRS

Based out of Lansing, the trio LVRS has been described as having unbridled creativity with a polished indie-rock sound. They have a knack for mixing their uniqueness with a touch of the familiar, creating a musical collage of the last couple of decades that feels new, with honest lyrics that strike a chord in all types of listeners, but especially for the LGBTQ+ community.

## 6 p.m. Freshmen Drag Show

Performers TBA.

## 7 p.m. Motor City Drag Kings

Performers TBA.

## 8 p.m. Tunde Olaniran

Another Flint native, Tunde Olaniran released their latest full-length album, "Stranger," in 2018. The gender nonconforming singer-songwriter and rapper weaves their Nigerian heritage and self-introspection into an eclectic, ethereal experience not to be missed.

## 9 p.m. Jackie Faye

Born and raised in Dallas, Chinese-Korean-Texan rapper Jackie Faye cultivated her love of music in the dirty south, surrounded by the musical influences of Erykah Badu, UGK, Three 6 Mafia, DJ Screw, Outkast, 2 Chainz and many more. She released the single "Fts" earlier this year.



# *The City Without Closets* How Ferndale Became So Queer

Inside the Rich LGBTQ+ History of One of Michigan’s Queerest Hubs

Story: George Elkind | Photos: Andrew Potter

Ferndale has been known as one of Michigan’s biggest queer hubs for decades. With many of the hallmarks that distinguish a Greenwich Village, a Castro, an Andersonville — traits like a walkable downtown, a diverse

array of restaurants, bars and cafes, and housing stock that’s long proven catnip to renovators — it fits the mold of many urban queer enclaves which preceded it or developed in parallel. But it differs in one important way from those other areas: it’s a suburb,

located just past 8 Mile beyond the bounds of the City of Detroit — and so it lies outside the heart of the metro area its resources often serve.

For Emma Maniere, a Grosse Pointe native and an NYU doctoral student studying Ferndale’s queer

development, this fact is more than incidental. Ferndale, she explains, is considered by historians to be an inner-ring suburb — something that’s played a key role in shaping its identity, including its queer one, as distinct from but tied to the City of

Detroit’s.

“It’s right on the outskirts of Detroit, built in the early 20th century, [with] homes geared toward working-class families,” says Maniere, noting that much of Ferndale’s housing stock went

See *Ferndale History*, page 22



Julia Music on a recent walk through downtown Ferndale.

up in the mid-20th century. “It was designed as kind of a factory town.”

According to Maniere, Ferndale’s identity as a blue-collar burg held through most of its 20th-century history, when the most visible commercial centers of the region’s queer community were quartered further south along Woodward — well into the heart of Detroit.

In fact, it held even into the 1980s, when Ferndale’s downtown was riddled with commercial vacancies and the area, in the absence of the industries that had once held it up, became economically depressed. By the late ’80s, when a significant number of queer people began to move into the area, this situation created an opportunity in the form of low-cost space. But it presented them with an unglamorous history to push back against as well.

“Looking in the archives from the ’80s, ’90s — when more of a queer community [was] developing — there is a lot of rhetoric about ‘hip new Ferndale.’ Like we have to prove that we’re not a backwards, blue-collar, racist town. There’s a pushing up against what Ferndale formerly was, and still was to some degree, [or] maybe never was,” says Maniere, gesturing at aspects of history that rarely get written down — and so become the hardest to tell. “They understood themselves to be replacing something else that was older, that was whiter, that was straighter,” she says of Ferndale’s queer community at that time.

Less tony than Royal Oak, less intellectual than Ann Arbor — and cheaper than them both — the Ferndale that queer people have made a home of since the 1980s became a kind of safe space from fears both real and imagined, building its identity — whether successfully or not — on notions of inclusion. At the same time, its story intersects with histories of white flight and segregation which affected and divided the queer community then — and in so many instances, still do. Even while studying Ferndale’s history, Maniere seems struck by it as one that’s somewhat singular, if marked by imperfect efforts: a case study with a lot to tell.

## Taking flight

The largely white segment of the

queer community that settled into Ferndale didn’t come from nowhere; for decades, Detroit was its primary home. And bars and clubs were — as has often been historically the case — its most visible, best-documented institutions, even during times when they had to operate quietly.

“The earliest bars were right downtown, near Cadillac Square. Downtown in the 1940s, there was a queer presence at Greenfield restaurants and bars like the Ten-Eleven and the Palais and La Rosa’s,” recalls Tim Retzloff, a BTL contributor and LGBTQ+ historian at MSU. “So then over time, starting in the ’50s, they started moving up the [Woodward] corridor.”

As queer Detroiters gradually migrated, with communities and businesses taking hold farther and farther up Woodward, the tenor of such spaces varied. There was the Palais, a lesbian bar which stayed open from 1949-1980, and Todd’s, a racially integrated bar on Seven Mile. Todd’s was co-owned by an interracial gay couple who Retzloff said “set the tone,” and its constituency bridged a “racial chasm” which has often divided queer people: a rare feat in queer commercial nightlife.

“Lots of people, depending on their economic class or their closetedness, didn’t partake in that. And then, of course, it’s largely white Detroiters,” notes Retzloff of Detroit’s queer bar scene. “So the kinds of experiences and spaces for African American Detroiters throughout this time were often different. There were overlaps, too — movie theaters and certain cruising places would have been places where people converged. There was a lot of racism in the bars themselves.”

For Maniere, these decades-spanning dual histories of segregation, and of movement from a downtown core, overlap with the racial dynamics of “white flight,” which saw rapid disinvestment from many American urban centers. For much of the past century, white people with the ability — and desire — to flee cities for less close-knit environments have done so, though urban queer people have not always followed suit. In the case of Detroit’s queer community, the movement outward proved a bit more gradual, with the Palmer Park neighborhood — close to the city’s border with Ferndale — becoming a major queer center through the 1980s, when a combination of forces began

to pull the community there apart.

## A queer ‘magnet’

Alongside the dynamics propelling white flight from Detroit proper — with narratives around “crime” often standing in for less plain racial ones — Maniere points out that AIDS was a major contributing factor. In decimating queer communities, it also attacked queer spaces, hurting even the strongest among them. She specifically recalls an old letter to an editor by a Palmer Park resident grieving the community’s losses, a telling artifact of that time.

“I believe someone was mentioning: ‘I lived in this building — but everyone in the building either had AIDS or had died from AIDS, and I needed to move,’” she recalls. “So aside from racialized depopulation, there’s also reason and community and a fresh start — or maybe not an entirely fresh start. But I could understand why someone would want that if their community is being depleted around them.”

At the same time, she cautions against using words like “decimated” for the situation of Detroit’s queer community at this time and since, noting that plenty of queer institutions still held together as white residents left the city behind — and still do.

“There’s Black life in Detroit, [and] there’s Black gay community in Detroit throughout this period,” notes Maniere. “So I think it’s definitely important not to gloss over that.”

Retzloff, too, emphasizes the durability and adaptability of the city’s Black queer institutions — which played a major role in advocating for the

passage of a Human Rights Ordinance in 1979.

“Certainly, politically, people [involved] in different organizing, wanting it to not be all white. But there’s also just people in the African American community who just — they’re going to forge their own way because they’re there. They were fed up with being excluded, feeling excluded, or feeling erased — or marginalized or unheard. Or tokenized. There’s multiple examples of spaces that opened up, both commercial and non-commercial.”

At the same time, Maniere adds, AIDS helped to make Ferndale “a magnet” for queer people.

Thanks to the presence in the late ’80s of support groups and queer advocacy organizations like MAPP and Affirmations within the city, there were not only accessible resources, there were also signs that it might be a comfortable place to be.

Maniere notes that the state of Ferndale at that time — with its wealth of single-family housing, plentiful open commercial spaces and a desirable location near both Detroit and Royal Oak, as well as the less concentrated queer communities that existed in neighboring suburbs — gave it a specific appeal for many.

“Here’s a place in Ferndale where there’s opportunity, there’s ‘authenticity’ in these kinds of homes, there’s these beautiful tree-lined streets but not too ostentatious, there’s business opportunity, and there’s opportunities to refurbish homes and kind of create a community in our own image — whatever that means,” she says.

For many, a new vision of queer community meant building on its roots in activism — something Ferndale’s then-cheap real estate had become a modest hub for. With a number of leftist organizations already calling the city home since the late 1970s, Ferndale provided a springboard for expanding queer advocacy.



## A space for advocacy, then for Pride

“At the beginning of 1988, we had an organization called MOHR [Michigan Organization for Human Rights] and they were basically a lobbying group and a sort of civil rights group,” recalls Gary Roberts, a longtime

See *Ferndale History*, page 34



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# Local Queer History Through an Artistic Lens



"Havana #14," Paula Allen. Photo: MR/QD

## 17 Local Galleries, Public Spaces to Host Works Created by LGBTQ+ Artists from 1945-Present

BY JASON A. MICHAEL

Greater Detroit is about to become awash in queer art — including rare pieces from as far back as the '40s.

Seventeen galleries, organizations, businesses and public spaces across the metro Detroit area will join together to present Mighty Real/Queer Detroit (MR/QD), a month-long, groundbreaking exploration of art celebrating more than 140 emerging and established

LGBTQ+ artists, past and present. Planners say the citywide project may be the largest exhibition focused exclusively on queer art that has ever been put together.

The exhibition, which will run throughout Pride Month beginning June 3, was originally scheduled for 2020, but was canceled that year and in 2021 due to Covid restrictions. Now, finally, MR/QD is ready for launch.

"It's really all worked out," said Patrick Burton, who came up with the idea for the exhibition

and actually curated it. "Everything unfolded so perfectly for us by postponing the exhibit."

The exhibition has gained several galleries and art spaces since the 2020 planning. There are 17 in total. Burton also said he's happy MR/QD will coincide with the 50th anniversary of Detroit's first-ever gay Pride march and rally.

"It's historical in many respects," he said. "It's 77 years of queer art from 1945 to the present. ... It's pretty amazing when you look at it."

Burton said he is proud to present a Pride

event of a different kind, something cultural and beyond just parades and parties.

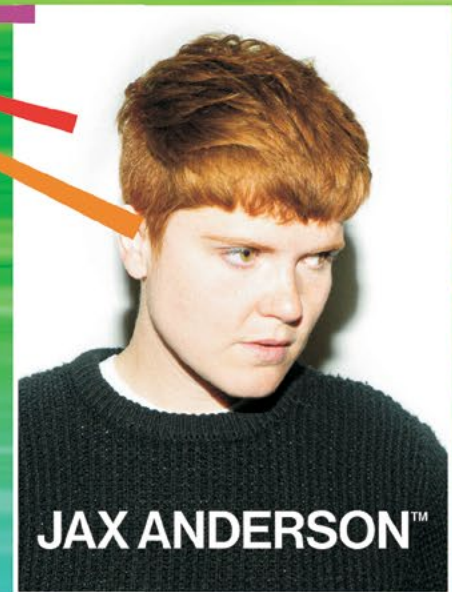
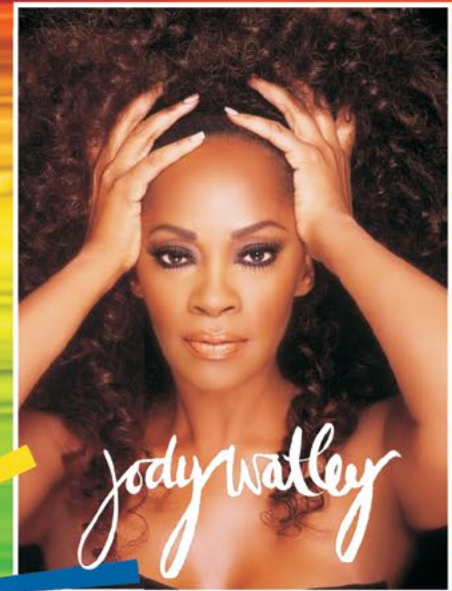
"I think it broadens people's views of who we are," he said. "We are so often sexualized and this gives our audience a better view. To use a cliché, we're expanding hearts and minds through art."

The exhibition is being launched in conjunction with the City of Detroit Office of Arts, Culture, and Entrepreneurship. The Ford Foundation is the presenting sponsor. Burton

See **Mighty Queer**, page 32



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# Pride Stage

Sponsored by MGM Grand Detroit

**Saturday, June 11, 2022**

<u>Time</u>	<u>Act</u>
1:00 p.m.	Sing Out
2:00 p.m.	JonPaul Wallace
3:00 p.m.	TYLR_
4:00 p.m.	Alizabeth Von Presley
5:00 p.m.	Sabin
7:30 p.m.	Jody Watley
8:00 p.m.	DJ JOHNB
<b>9:00 p.m.</b>	<b>Closes</b>

**Sunday, June 12, 2022**

Noon	Loading...
2:00 p.m.	PRISM
3:00 p.m.	Miss Bouvee
4:00 p.m.	Otto
5:00 p.m.	Jax Anderson
6:30 p.m.	DJ named Loading...
<b>7:00 p.m.</b>	<b>Closes</b>

# Riverfront Dance Stage

**Saturday, June 11, 2022**

<u>Time</u>	<u>Act</u>
1:00 p.m.	xtrMayo
2:30 p.m.	DJ JOHNB
4:00 p.m.	Cooper Crank
5:30 p.m.	Metawav
7:00 p.m.	Mac Diesel
<b>9:00 p.m.</b>	<b>Closes</b>

**Sunday, June 12, 2022**

Noon	MONiCO
1:30 p.m.	Garrison XR
3:00 p.m.	REEM
5:00 p.m.	Wrecko
<b>7:00 p.m.</b>	<b>Closes</b>

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# Pyramid Stage

Saturday, June 11, 2022

Time	Act
1:30 p.m.	HIM HIM
3:00 p.m.	Julie H.
4:00 p.m.	Kendra Baker
5:00 p.m.	Cullen Blue
6:00 p.m.	Darvon
7:00 p.m.	Destiny S
8:00 p.m.	Closes

Sunday, June 12, 2022

Noon	
1:00 p.m.	Out Loud Chorus
2:30 p.m.	Ryan Bacorski
3:30 p.m.	Crystal Harding
6:00 p.m.	Closes

# Festival Stage

Saturday, June 11, 2022

Time	Act
1:00 p.m.	Wake Up Jamie
2:00 p.m.	Anthony J Fink
3:00 p.m.	Katie Stanley
4:00 p.m.	Rodeo Boys
5:00 p.m.	Nuke & the Nightshift
6:00 p.m.	The Doozers
7:00 p.m.	Corry Michaels
8:00 p.m.	Closes

Sunday, June 12, 2022

1:00 p.m.	Grand Circus
2:00 p.m.	Summer Like The Season
3:00 p.m.	Urban Muse
4:00 p.m.	Drew Schultz
5:00 p.m.	The Band Mint
6:00 p.m.	Closes



**SATURDAY**  
Welcome Gates Open at 1 p.m.

---

FESTIVAL EVENTS 1 - 9 p.m.

**Four Stages of Entertainment Featuring over 50 Artists!**  
Over 120 Sponsors, Vendors, Non-Profits & Food Booths, plus thousands of LGBTQ+ people coming together for Equality!

**1 - 5 p.m.** Family Area with youth activities and games (See page 19)

**8 p.m.** Festival Entrance Closes (No Admission or Re-Entry after 8pm)

**9 p.m.** Festival Closes

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**SUNDAY**  
Welcome Gates Open at 12:30 p.m.

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FESTIVAL EVENTS 12:30 - 7 p.m.

**Four Stages of Entertainment Featuring over 50 Artists!**  
Over 120 Sponsors, Vendors, Non-Profits & Food Booths, plus thousands of LGBTQ+ people coming together for Equality!

**Noon** 2022 Motor City Pride Parade Sponsored by Jeep (See page 27)

**1 - 5 p.m.** Family Area with youth activities and games (See page 19)

**6 p.m.** Festival Entrance Closes (No Admission or Re-Entry after 8pm)

**7 p.m.** Festival Closes

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**Sunday**  
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Photo courtesy of Orion Story

*“I had a really rough time at first adjusting, but it was through the ‘Drag Race’ experience that I really came into my own and overcame a lot of the things in my life that were bringing me down.”*

Michigan folks and felt proud to be there to “represent the mitten.” But don’t go thinking there’s not a drag scene right here in Michigan; in southwest Michigan, especially, Orion says the drag scene is on the upswing.

“The Grand Rapids scene has really been slowly starting to blossom a lot lately,” she noted. “I’ve had a lot of queens in Michigan reach out about how they never felt like they could do ‘Drag Race’ and watching me shows them that they can do whatever they put their minds to.”

Orion, who will be taking the stage for a Pride event for the first time, said she’s thrilled to be headlining Kalamazoo Pride. “I’ve been so many times, and it’s always a blast,” she said.

But Orion hasn’t been able to spend much time in the Great Lakes State as of late. She’s taken advantage of everything “Drag Race” has offered her and secured national management, which has kept her zigzagging the globe. Her life has changed considerably, and in some ways, for the better. She’s doing exactly what she loves for a living, and she’s proud of what she accomplished while under duress. But perhaps most importantly, she says, “getting on the show really made me fall in love with myself again.”

---

*Orion Story takes the Kalamazoo Pride stage on Saturday, June 4 at 10:40 p.m. following a meet-and-greet with fans starting at 9:30 p.m. For more information on Orion, visit [theorionOrion.com](http://theorionOrion.com) or [@theorionOrion](https://twitter.com/theorionOrion) on all socials.*

# Orion’s Story

## The First Michigan Contestant to Compete on ‘Drag Race’ Opens Up Before Kalamazoo Pride Performance

BY JASON A. MICHAEL

We saw her only briefly on Season 14 of “RuPaul’s Drag Race,” but Orion Story, who will headline Kalamazoo Pride on Saturday, June 4, made quite an impression. Self-described as “what would happen if you took Barbarella and put her on a runway in the middle of Sesame Street,” Orion is more than her quirky, sex kitten image. There is a depth to Orion (the stage name created by performer Chance Lambert), the kind one only develops once they’ve been through something. And Orion has certainly been through some things.

The Grand Rapids native, and first Michigan queen to ever appear

on “Drag Race,” came to the show at what she describes as one of the worst times in her life. She was still recovering from her beloved mother’s suicide, she had just moved out of her apartment and had no idea where she’d call home once her time on the show was up and, perhaps most challenging, she was dealing with substance abuse issues and going through withdrawal while she was filming the show.

“My ‘Drag Race’ experience was quite a ride, to be honest,” Orion shared with BTL. “I had a really rough time at first adjusting, but it was through the ‘Drag Race’ experience that I really came into my own and overcame a lot of the things in my life that were bringing

me down.”

Even if her mother — whose maiden name, Story, inspired Orion’s stage name — was no longer physically with her, she said she could feel her while filming “Drag Race.” Orion also says she based some of her looks on her mom.

“My mom would be so incredibly proud,” she said. “She was always proud of everything I did, and we just got each other. She’s the one who originally pushed me to do drag.”

With suicide in the media spotlight in the wake of country music superstar Naomi Judd’s death, Orion reflected on the pain that suicide brings to the survivors left behind.

“I’ve lost a lot of people in my life to suicide, and it really affects the

way you look at the people in your life,” she said. “You never know what people are going through, and nine times out of 10, people won’t come forward about it.”

Even as she struggled with her grief, Orion believed she would make it onto “Drag Race.” She had faith in her talent and, despite it all, a strong belief in self. “I’ve always really believed in myself and what I do,” she said. “I take a lot of pride in my work, and I really care a lot about the art of [drag] as well as the creative process.”

Orion returned to Michigan following the show, where she felt so much love from her hometown. When she attended RuPaul’s DragCon in L.A. recently, she ran into lots of



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(Top) "Blooming (Big Indian, NY) 2020," Matthew Papa. (Bottom) "HopeLess," Bakpak Durden.

## → Mighty Queer

Continued from page 24

said the most meaningful part of curating the exhibition was "uncovering Detroit's past. Finding things, discovering things that I was not aware of, like the LeRoy Foster sketch book with the photo inside of [his female alter ego] Martini Marti."

Burton said the exhibition will also "address loss and remembrance" by including rarely seen works by artists who died from AIDS in the 1980s and '90s. Several of these works will be shown for the first time. There will also be a special tribute to Foster, who is featured not only in his self-portrait of Martini Marti, but also his drawing of the late Ruth Ellis, some early sketches and other pieces from throughout his prolific career. Local artist Jack O. Summers will also receive tribute.

In BTL's original story on the exhibition from 2020, Burton shared that the idea for the exhibition came to him while chatting up fellow artist and longtime BTL columnist Charles Alexander at a Scarab Club show.

Burton said he noticed several pieces in the show by LGBTQ+ artists and his brain went to work.

"I just had this kind of surreal idea," he said. "I wanted to put a show together to celebrate the experience of others — to reveal the community

emerging from a desire for visibility. And to show how real and good that desire is."

*MR/QD runs through June. To learn more about Mighty Real Queer Detroit and for a list of events, visit [mrqd.org](http://mrqd.org).*



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AJ and Brendan enjoying a day in downtown Ferndale.

## → Ferndale History

Continued from page 23

Oak Park resident who's remained involved in Ferndale's queer community since that time. "[They] ended up getting a block grant for 12 months to fund a local AIDS center because there was nothing here. Other than bars and clubs, there was no kind of 'center' here."

Before long, MOHR held a kind of town hall where allies and community members could workshop a plan for a center. Roberts and several friends attended, drawing up a plan that prioritized community needs — not just for

Ferndale itself but for the metro area as a whole.

"It was decided that the first thing they would do is create a hotline for people to call in and get information. Whether it was a parent because their children had come out to them, or someone who has come out and doesn't know where to find the gay community or had any kind of questions," Roberts remembers.

After spending a year taking calls, it became clear to Roberts and his peers that there was a tremendous need for the services they'd been providing, which included substance counseling and even suicide prevention. When grant funds ran dry, they resolved to keep going on their own.

After bouncing between whatever spaces they could find — for a time, space in Gigi's, a still-

operating gay bar on Warren, then a friend's spare rental property in Detroit — they eventually found three rooms in a commercial building in downtown Ferndale. This would become the base of operations for their organization — which soon after was called Affirmations — for years.

"That was a debate: whether we should stay in Detroit or be in Ferndale. But in the '80s, Detroit wasn't as safe and friendly of a town as it is these days to go in. So there was that — people were kind of afraid to volunteer, especially at night, to come in and do the phone lines," remembers Roberts.

In quartering itself in Ferndale, Affirmations may — in choosing a location more inviting to people based out in the suburbs — have actually broadened its reach. But it undoubtedly played a role in transforming Ferndale, helping to make it the last stop for the queer folk who'd been migrating up Woodward for decades, along with plenty of others.

"We [at Affirmations] really brought a lot of people into the city: into the used record store, into the downtown area, got [the city] more foot traffic because we were there," says Roberts. "I think Affirmations really turned the tide, where people stop exiting downtown Ferndale for greener pastures of Royal Oak or Berkley or other cities that were doing better economically overall."

Throughout the 1990s, as Affirmations' constituency grew and its services evolved to meet new needs, so did Ferndale's commercial footprint. Soon, restaurants, record stores and coffee shops sprang up in old commercial spaces, some relocating for various reasons from both Detroit and Royal Oak. With these, too, came a network of openly queer and inclusive businesses and arts festivals. Eventually, Pride came to Ferndale, too.

"We started saying the words gay and lesbian back then, when that was terrifying to a lot of people — but it's a gay Pride event!" remarks Michael Lary, the former director of Pridefest, which eventually became Motor City Pride. (He serves as Ferndale's Special Events Director today). "How [could] you call it Pridefest without also saying what it's for? So that was very controversial back then. People in Ferndale and Metro Detroit were very closeted... I mean, our only social outlet was the bar."

For Lary, taking over Pridefest — held through much of the '90s in a parking structure in Royal Oak — meant employing a proactive approach, looking to other cities as examples of how to run, present and frame such events. In 2000, when he sought to move it into the streets, integrating the festival better with the fabric of the city, his request to do so was denied. And so he turned to Ferndale, where the event was held for the first time in 2003.

By that point, Ferndale was garnering a reputation as a queer-friendly environment on a number of fronts. In 1999, Ferndale elected its first gay city official in Craig Covey, who eventually became Ferndale's mayor in 2008 — as well as Michigan's first. MAPP and other queer advocacy organizations, too, continued their work at the same time and several bookstores centered on queer work blossomed around town.

All of this made the festival a natural fit.

Like Ferndale's queer community itself, the festival grew and became a fixture within the city, drawing few protests and ample support as time went on. As it grew, Ferndale's businesses came to depend on it — so much so that when the festival relocated to Detroit in 2012, it hit the whole community as a visceral sort of shock.

"We felt this tremendous loss in our community," recalls Julia Music, who in the wake of Motor City Pride's departure founded a new event, Ferndale Pride. "It was our bid for our businesses — for some of them, that's Christmas; there's no better business day for them. And those are businesses that give back to our community in huge ways."

In developing Ferndale Pride, Music has collaborated with the city's growing web of queer-run and -allied local businesses each year, ensuring they have support to get them through the rush of each year's festival. This kind of reciprocal, harmonious approach, suggests Music, who found comfort and solidarity in visiting Ferndale as a teen, exemplifies the ties between the city and its queer community.

"We're able to contribute back to the businesses; they're able to give back to the charities, and it just becomes this kind of cyclical motion."

But these relationships cut both ways. Businesses that refuse to evolve to address community needs, failing to become inclusive spaces which cultivate healthy relationships with the community, don't often survive for long in Ferndale. Those that do, suggests Music, tend to enjoy widespread support from within and outside the queer community.

"The stores and institutions that have been able to keep up with the times have definitely stayed," she notes, citing Soho, the Elks Lodge and J's Penalty Box as examples. "Because they treated people the right way."

## Bridging old divides

As Music acknowledges, though, efforts at inclusion are always works in progress. And for all its efforts at creating a progressive environment, Ferndale's population remains extremely white — 87.72% as of the 2020 Census.

According to Lilianna Reyes, who served as Affirmations' Interim Director for most of 2018 and now works at Ruth Ellis Center in Highland Park, Ferndale's nature as a largely white and increasingly gentrifying suburb makes it difficult for it to be racially inclusive, and for businesses and organizations there to be attentive to the needs of residents living south of 8 Mile.

"It's really great to see LGBT businesses in Ferndale — my question is how many Black and brown people will go to support those places, because there's also really great LGBT businesses in Detroit," says Reyes, who notes that a good number are run by Black and brown proprietors. "Even if they're not Black and brown, they cater to more Black and brown culture."

For Reyes, the divides aren't only geographic

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Julia Music.

but: 'We are an open-minded community.' 'We value diversity, we love diversity,' often not specifying exactly what that means. And I think that kind of speaks to a larger pattern, in which queer diversity masks other forms of exclusion."

For Maniere, thinking about Ferndale's queer community requires looking critically at the ways it approaches inclusion while keeping in mind the context of what surrounds it. For all the ways Ferndale follows certain historical patterns — of urban-suburban divisions, of racialized migration, and of gentrifying and heavily white queer spaces — it's been an exception in many others that make it unique, both within Detroit and more broadly.

### → Ferndale History

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or cultural — they're also often economic.

"Black and brown people need housing, we need jobs, we need food. We need transportation and shelter. And very few Oakland County LGBT agencies focus on it," says Reyes, who points to the late-'80s decision to quarter Affirmations in Ferndale as key in cementing an urban-suburban divide within the community — one exacerbated, too, by the city's rising real estate costs. "I think Ferndale as a whole is a good space. But it is always going to be very white."

Even so, Reyes applauds the efforts of Ferndale's city officials in working to build a more inclusive environment, as well as the efforts of queer community leaders like Music who advocate to make the city and community more inclusive — and who Reyes considers a close friend.

For Maniere, who points to research on Ferndale's passage of a Human Rights Ordinance in 2006 — the culmination of an anti-discrimination campaign that began there in 1991 — the dialogue found surrounding it has proven illuminating.

"There is a lot of language that comes up around not just [protecting] LGBT people,

"It's this blue-collar place in the middle of a very important metropolitan area that is staking its ground on being, beyond even queerness, a progressive hub. The degree to which it accomplishes that is a different question," she notes. But it's a place that stakes its claim to being tolerant, to being diverse, to parading those things as positive values, when that's not the norm surrounding it."

For Music, who's sometimes felt out of place elsewhere, the sensation of being queer in Ferndale can seem both palpable and distinct, and hard to find elsewhere. Its successes, while marred by certain histories and necessitating ongoing work, still offer something to celebrate.

"Every once in a while, I'll stand back and see something and I'm like: 'Oh, this is different.' But a lot of times I'm in it: I'm writing a speech, I'm up on stage. And it's not like I can take it all in," says Music, recalling several moments of queer people and allies coming together in a show of support. "After the Pulse nightclub shooting, seeing how many people showed up to the candlelight vigil was very, very inspiring. There [was] just this sense that we know the community is hurting, and we want to make sure that people are going to be OK."

"We have people who bring their kids to Pride Festival," she adds, "not because they as parents are gay, but because they want their kids to know: 'There's not going to be a closet in our house.'"

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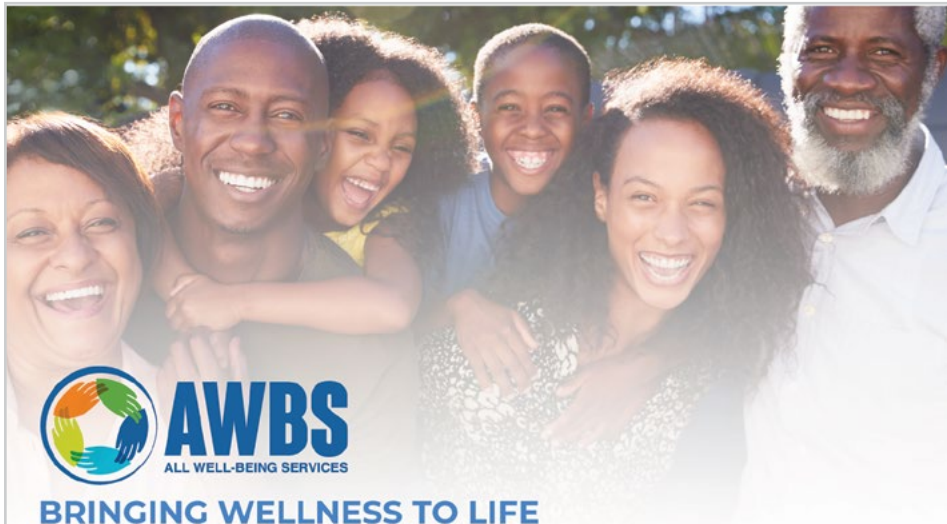
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**→ Tunde**

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Olaniran’s approach to creating the mixtape is emblematic of their approach to, well, life. The artist just doesn’t center themselves very often, even when they are literally appearing on stage in a spotlight. The musician pours their energy into directing resources to other artists, especially, they say, to Black, queer and women artists.

“I am really just one person,” they say. “The main thing I focus on is trying to do what I can to help other artists in my life that can benefit from anything I’ve learned.”

Next, Olaniran will add another hyphen to the list with an upcoming short film and museum exhibition at Detroit’s Cranbrook Art Museum.

“Made a Universe” opens June 18 at the museum. The film and exhibition is the product of Olaniran’s collaboration with several Detroit-

based artists. Together, they created the film’s scenography, costuming and props, elements that have been reimagined as gallery exhibits set up in the screening room.

Visitors, the museum’s website says, will encounter an “immersive, parallel journey through Olaniran’s creative universe. ... The film examines what it means to unlock your power in the face of fear and repression, and how one must unify various fragments of their psyche to connect with the world and themselves on a deeper level.” The short film features a score crafted by Olaniran, who also wrote and directed.

No single performance could encompass everything Olaniran has to offer the musical and artistic world, but if you’re new to that world, prepare to dive down deep into the rabbit hole where Olaniran’s “everything” resides — their growing list of albums, collaborations, art pieces, films and more.

You could start anywhere and what you’ll find is Tunde Olaniran doing what they do best: honestly, earnestly creating from the soul.



Photo: Steven Piper

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Billy Eichner in "Bros." Photo: Universal Pictures

# Billy Eichner Wants to Give You the Gay Orgy You Deserve in 'Bros' Trailer Woof!

BY CHRIS AZZOPARDI

Billy Eichner is on it, and in the R-rated red-band trailer for "Bros," which debuted on May 17 and will easily be the gayest thing you've seen all day, he's already delivering on that promise.

And with "Brothers and Sisters" star Luke Macfarlane, no less.

In the sexy, stripped-down clip, Macfarlane is as naked as you can be in a mainstream rom-com trailer, but it's not all those muscles (though it's that too, woof) — it's the two guys going down at him at the same time that feels revelatory and long overdue.

"First and foremost, I wanted to make a movie that felt authentic for the LGBTQ+ folks that the movie is about — and who have been so profoundly underserved by Hollywood over the years, particularly the major movie studios," Eichner wrote in a letter sent to LGBTQ+ "media elites" who got an exclusive preview of the trailer on May 17.

"To that end, I asked that LGBTQ+ folks and media outlets be given this exclusive first look at the film," he added.

In the letter, Eichner notes that "Bros," which is directed by Nicholas Stoller and produced by Judd Apatow, is the first major studio film with an all LGBTQ+ cast in every single role, "even the straight ones." Eichner, known for "Billy on



the Street," co-wrote and stars in the film, making him the first openly gay man to ever do so for a major studio movie. He called this noteworthy milestone "bizarre and infuriating but somehow true." In addition to Eichner, the movie stars Ts Madison, Monica Raymund, Guillermo Diaz, Guy Branum, Amanda Bearse, Bowen Yang, Jim Rash, Harvey Fierstein, Dot-Marie Jones and Jai Rodriguez will also appear.

In theaters Sept. 30 via Universal Pictures, "Bros" is an "authentic, hilarious and heartfelt film about what it's like to be a single adult gay man attempting a relationship in 2022," he wrote. "I'm prouder of it than anything I've ever done — and I hope you'll be proud of it too."



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Johnny Sibilly on "Hacks." Photo: HBO

## With 'Queer as Folk' and 'Hacks,' Johnny Sibilly Keeps Ascending to New Career Heights

BY CHRIS AZZOPARDI

If you think you've heard the name Johnny Sibilly, you have. Or at the very least you've seen him, whether on FX's groundbreaking trans-focused series "Pose," where the 34-year-old actor had a three-episode stint as Costas Perez, or on HBO's "Hacks," appearing alongside Jean Smart in one of last year's best new shows. That series is currently in its second season (and still just as deliciously queer).

But the show guaranteed to give Sibilly's profile a generous boost is his role on the revival of "Queer as Folk," where he plays Noah, a smoke-and-mirrors lawyer. Groundbreaking when it premiered in the U.K. in 1999 and then in the U.S. in 2000, the show was one of the more authentic representations of LGBTQ+ life when it premiered, spotlighting important

political and cultural LGBTQ+ issues alongside frank depictions of queer sex.

Peacock's new "Queer as Folk" understands what the show was then and what, in 2022, it has to be now. So, naturally, there's sex. And lots of it. Orgies, toys, full-view anal. Sex that looks real enough for it to appear to be unsimulated.

But this self-proclaimed "reimagining" also knows that being a queer person in our modern day means, in some ways, what it did in 2000: homophobia, fear and acts of anti-queer violence so horrific they hurt your heart. The trailer doesn't hide the fact that the first episode is a hard, gutting and emotional watch: reminiscent of the Pulse nightclub tragedy in 2016, there's a shooting at Babylon, the local gay club.

Here, Sibilly talks about the importance of threading that hard-to-watch narrative into this revival, the detailed conversations the "Folk"

crew had about queer sex onset, and why he'll continue to play queer characters.

### **You've been keeping busy.**

Yeah. With the pandemic and everything, and being so busy, it's been truly a blessing. I'm so happy to be working and to be doing this. I'm really grateful.

### **During the beginning of the pandemic, were you afraid of work drying up?**

It's funny. At the beginning of the pandemic, it was like, "Ha, now the rest of the world knows what it feels like to be an actor or an artist, where your job isn't guaranteed." And then, after a while, it was like, "Oh, wait. OK. What's going on?" But then, I remember I got the call for "Hacks," the first season, and I was like, "Oh, yes. Yes, we'll do this." [I filmed] that in the height of the pandemic, and then

"Queer as Folk" when things were tapering down. But then, all the variants were another journey, but here we are.

### **It sounds like the producers of "Hacks" just called you. Or Jean Smart personally called you.**

[Laughs.] She's like, "I don't know who you are, but I think you'd be great." Yeah, no. "Hacks" was interesting, because it wasn't... I auditioned for it, but it was a Sunday night [when] I got a call asking for my availability, and they asked if I could put something on tape that night to film on Wednesday that week. And then, we got a call on Monday that said I got it. It was pretty quick. "Queer as Folk," not as much...

### **What was the process for "Queer as Folk"?**

For "Queer as Folk," for me, the process in my head started when I found out that there

was going to be a reboot made. Back in 2018... I always tell this story, but I put out a tweet when I found out that they were maybe doing a reboot, and I was like, "Who do you guys think they would cast in the reboot?" People said names like Billy Porter and a lot of the actors that are known in the community.

Flash-forward to the actual thing getting launched and the auditions happening, and I messaged my team, as I usually do when I see something that I really like. I was like, "I got to be a part of this somehow." The audition came through, and it was funny, because I was sick with a cold when it came through. I was like, "Oh my gosh, can we push it a day or two?" And they were kind enough to do it.

But yeah, it was that same thing, where you audition, and then you get the call back, and then you do the chemistry session. But it's a month to two months of your time just waiting to know. And for me, as an actor, I'd rather know right away if it's a yes or a no, so I can, in my head, deal with that rather than waiting and waiting. Because you build up all these things of like, "My life could change," or, "This would be so exciting." But it worked this time.

**When I watched "Queer as Folk" as a teenager, the big draw for me then, as a closeted gay kid, was watching guys on screen have sex. And clearly, that's still a big part of the show. Is gauging sexual chemistry an important part of the audition process?**

The sexual chemistry, not so much. My only chemistry read was with Devin [Way], who plays Brodie. And it's funny, because when I saw him pop on the screen, I was like, "That's him. That's the one," whereas he did a couple of chemistry reads with a couple different Noahs. But it is interesting, because we were doing it on Zoom, too, so you're not in the room. You don't feel the vibes of what it would feel like.

But I'd seen Devin before somewhere, and I was like, "I know this guy, I just don't know where to place it." And, come to find out, it was years before. He had come up to me on the street and told me that he liked my Instagram videos, because I used to make character Instagram videos. When he told me that finally, I was like, "That's where I know you from."

But anyway, it was just such an easy little flirty scene, that, when you meet a new gay, you're just like, "Hmm..." We clicked, and I guess that's the point of a chemistry read, because I've done chemistry reads before where I was like, "Oh, this isn't really clicking." But it clicked with Devin and I.

**What has it been like to be a part of "Hacks" knowing that it treats its queer characters so matter-of-factly?**

It's a dream, because the show itself is very much queer-coded, in that there's a strong female character that is rich. So many things that we grew up loving [about] strong female characters, and then to add in the queer

characters, not only the ones that worked with her, but just peppering the universe of "Hacks" with these characters was super exciting and important. Because maybe years ago, if a show like this was made, that wouldn't have been the case, but it feels like a very real world.

I feel like Deborah would have queer people around her, and it's been so exciting not only to play these characters in a way that feels real and authentic, but not just feel also like we're just thrown in because they needed to fit a quota, or because a lot of things these days get called out for being too woke, or whatnot, which is crazy in and of itself. But I do love that this show feels like a reflection of what the world looks like.

**What's your earliest memory of wanting to be an actor?**

I was always a little rascal, I will say. I loved doing impersonations. When I used to watch "Forrest Gump," I used to go around the house and be like, "My name's Forrest, Forrest Gump," and whenever we'd go out, my mom's like, "Do the Forrest Gump. Do it." And she'd always push me to do it.

I remember one year, I was signing up for classes for seventh grade, and she's like, "Why don't you do drama?" And I was like, "I want to do French," because all the cool kids were doing French. And she's like, "Yeah, but you're always doing characters and things. You should do drama." And I'm glad that she said that, because it really took me to a place that I needed to be, especially at that point in my life, when sexuality started playing a role in my confidence. I was a very vibrant little kid, and then as I started realizing I was queer, I became the shy kid. Acting and drama really allowed me to spread my wings and show myself in a way that didn't feel like I was attached to my sexuality and hiding that anymore.

**Did you find yourself finding a community within the acting and drama worlds?**

100%. I never was that kid that played in the street with friends. I was in my room watching Joan Rivers on the red carpet, and I knew everything there was to know about celebrity culture, but I wasn't one of these kids that played hide-and-seek in the neighborhood. Drama really offered me a place and a space to create friendships and camaraderie and family with people that were like me. Not only queer people, but artists as well.

**Where did you go to drama school?**

I did a little bit in college. I grew up mostly in Miami, so all of my drama club and theater stuff I did in middle school and high school. And then, in college, I was like, "I don't really need to have a degree in order to be on TV," so I did two years of college in Miami, and then I moved to New York City at the end of 2012 and started just hitting the pavement, doing extra work, all those reenactment shows that

See **Johnny Sibilly**, page 44





The new reimagining of “Queer as Folk” takes queer sex to the next level. Photo: Peacock

## → Johnny Sibilly

Continued from page 43

you see on Discovery. It was just a steady climb, for sure. It wasn't an overnight “Here's the keys to the kingdom” kind of situation.

**If you look at your Wiki page, it's like an episode here, an episode there, an episode here, and then three episodes on “Pose.”**

“Pose” was funny, because I had just moved to L.A. and they called me back to film the three episodes of “Pose,” or two episodes of “Pose” in the first season and then one in the second. But that was my first big thing. It's so nice that my first big series regular role is also another queer show, because a lot of times, as queer actors, people are like, “Oh, I don't know if I want to pigeonhole myself...” and I'm just like, “Oh, thank god we have more opportunities to play gay characters.”

**It seems like you might be happy playing queer roles for the rest of your acting career.**

For the rest of my days. Because, if I do get to play queer characters for the rest of my days, that means that there are queer characters being written and created. The whole point of this thing is to continue to move the needle forward, because three, four years ago, we

were all fighting for it. It's nice that they're opening space for us.

**I always think, when I interview a queer actor who plays queer roles, what it must be like to connect with your younger self, thinking, “What would this have meant to 14-year-old Johnny?” Do you ever think that way?**

All the time.

**And what's that like for you?**

I was watching “Heartstopper,” and I just had a moment where I had to pause it, and I was like, “Wow, if I would've had this as a kid...” Because it is also a very child-friendly show about sexuality, whereas there hasn't really been a lot of that. “Love, Victor” is one of them, but usually, a lot of queer shows are sex-forward, and that's important, because that's part of the community as adults. But I do definitely think about that 100%, especially with “Queer as Folk.”

I remember being petrified of this even being on TV in front of me, and now, I am so unafraid, and so unwilling to go back into the closet in order to present art, that I am very excited to even think about where I started versus where I am now in telling these stories. And I can only hope that, by me being onscreen, whoever is watching can be like, “Oh, yeah. I'm absolutely unafraid to be

myself after this.”

**Did you watch the original “Queer as Folk” growing up?**

I watched it in hiding. I wasn't an avid, weekly watcher when it was on Showtime, or before, when it was on in the U.K. But I did go back and watch a lot of it after the fact in 2018, when I found out it was getting rebooted. And then after, when we finished wrapping our season that we just shot, I went back and started watching the Showtime episodes again, because I missed it. I missed telling the queer story, so I was like, “What can I watch that's going to bring me that same kind of feeling?” And it just happened to be “Queer as Folk.”

**What were the conversations you had with the cast and crew about how to honor the show's legacy while also moving the needle forward?**

I can't really speak for anyone else, but I think it was important for me to acknowledge how important “Queer as Folk,” both of them, were at the time that they came out. I think it's also important to honor the actors that portrayed these characters at a time when it was not popular, or sometimes even safe, but it was also really important to separate myself from all of that, because even online, when it was announced that we were going to be the cast, you have a lot of pushback from

fans of the first two original shows that are like, “Why would you redo this? It's perfect the way it is.” And a lot of times you read the comments, you're like, “OK, I don't know if ‘perfect’ is the word, but I understand your love for this show.”

But I think it was important to put all of that aside, to know the legacy that it has, and to also be willing to create something new that hasn't been seen before. There's definitely Easter eggs, and little things here and there, that people will be like, “Oh, he's like this character, and this character, and this character combined, if they were one character,” which is what I love too, because it is throwing it back to the older versions. But these are queer people that exist in this time, in this space, and I think it's important that we honor the legacy of other queer people, but also showcase that we still very much exist as a very different kind of people now.

**With Noah, who would you say that he would most identify with from the original series?**

I'd say Noah has a little bit of Michael from the American version. He's got a little bit of Brian in him in certain respects. He does feel a little bit like all of the lead male characters, except for Peter Paige's character, because he is a little more fun, and Noah's getting there,

See **Johnny Sibilly**, page 48

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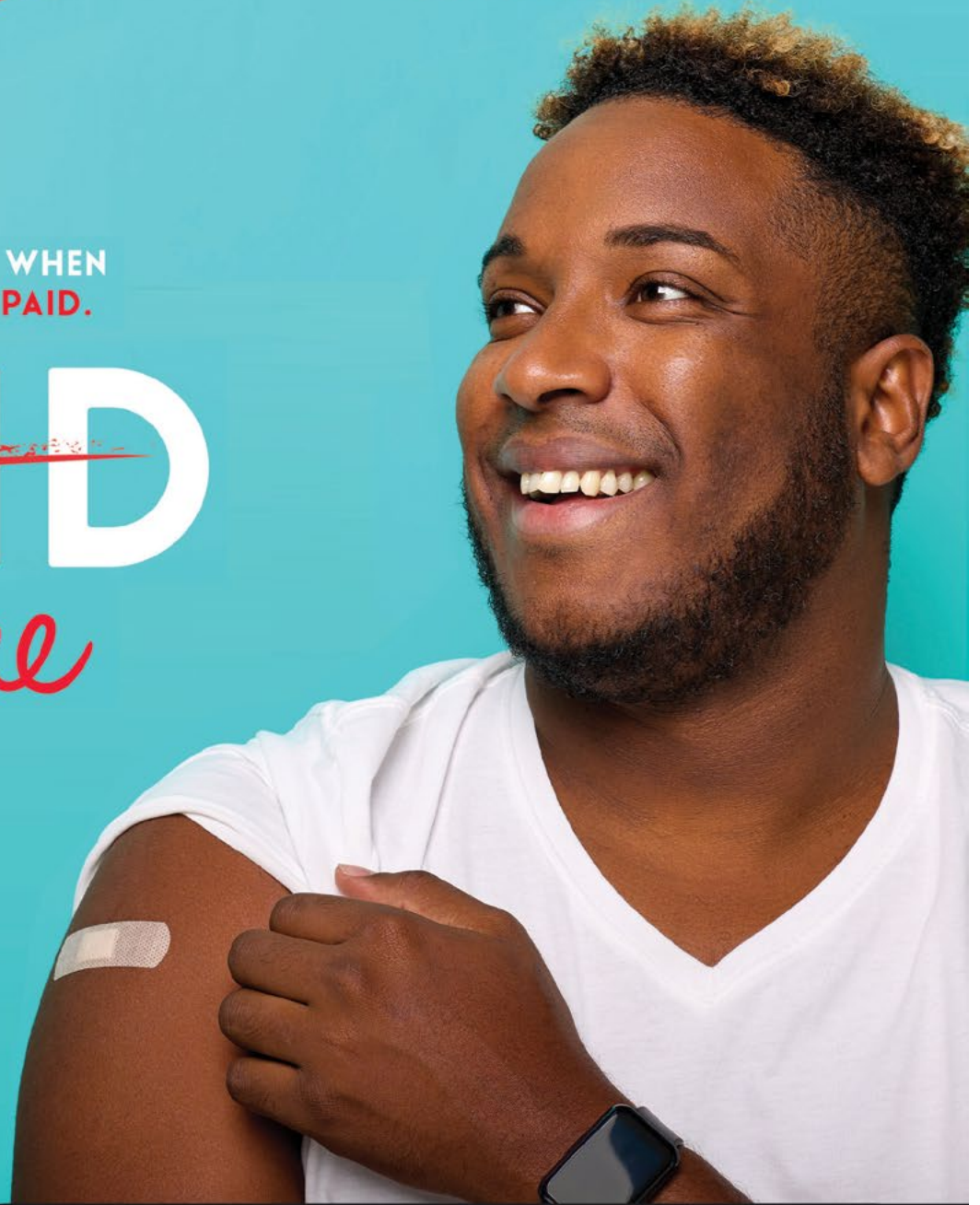
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Robbie Couch. Photo courtesy of Robbie Couch

# Michigan Native Responds to Attack on LGBTQ+ Content By Publishing Yet Another Book For Queer Youth

## 'Blaine for the Win' Is Robbie Couch's Second Queer YA Novel in Less Than a Year

BY JASON A. MICHAEL

As bitter, homophobic parents across the country continue to attack books with LGBTQ+ content to get them banned from school libraries and classrooms, author Robbie Couch feels his mission is reaffirmed. The Michigan native is the author of two queer young adult novels, including "Blaine for the Win," which was just released through Simon & Schuster Books for Young Adults. The book is his followup to "The Sky Blues," published in 2021.

"It's critical that kids have stories at their fingertips that affirm their identities," he told BTL. "It's much more difficult to feel like the world has a place for you in it if you can't find characters that look like you, or love like you do or share similar life experiences. Queer YA books are literal lifesavers, and it's vital that teens have access to them."

Couch, 33, now living in California but originally from Clio, northwest of Flint, said the teen years are filled with so much tension, joy, despair and conflict that they're ripe for storytelling.

"It's such fertile ground to explore the growing pains that come with being human," Couch said. "Layer on top of that being LGBTQ and having to navigate the largely straight, cisgender world around you, and you've got a genre that's filled with storytelling potential."

In "Blaine," a loose retelling of the film "Legally Blonde," Couch recounts the story of high school junior and artist Blaine Bowers. Bowers' perfect world comes crashing down on him when his boyfriend drops him amid claims that Bowers is not serious enough.

Like Elle Woods did in the film, Bowers picks himself up and decides to prove his ex wrong. No, Bowers doesn't apply to law school — he's only a high school junior after all — but he does decide to run for student council president. You have to read the book to find out if he wins the race (and if he wins back the heart of his ex).

The queer YA genre is still emerging, Couch said. For years, authors have been writing LGBTQ+ stories for young readers, "but often have had to push the queer characters to the margins to get their books published or use coded language related to queerness in order for their work to gain attention and mainstream."

Thankfully, Couch said, that's not the case anymore.

"That's changed a lot, especially in the past five to 10 years, as many queer YA authors and books have gained commercial success and proven that young readers are hungry for diverse stories," he said.

Still, the genre is under attack by anti-LGBTQ+ forces.

"The genre is growing, but its books and authors are still vulnerable, especially if they center BIPOC and/or transgender characters," he said. "As we've seen with Florida's 'Don't Say Gay' bill, there are many adults who simply want to erase LGBTQ people and our stories. It's scary, and we need to fight back."

For Couch, doing his part means writing several days a week. "Except when I'm on tight deadlines," he said. "Then, it's closer to 24/7. My third book, a time loop romance called 'If I See You Again Tomorrow,' will be out in 2023, and I'm starting book four soon!"



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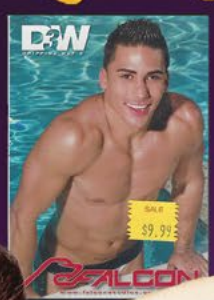
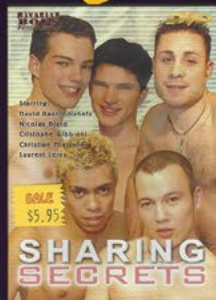
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Ryan O'Connell and Johnny Sibilly. Photo: Peacock

## → Johnny Sibilly

Continued from page 44

but I feel like Noah's a little more of the daddy of the group.

**Even now when I see queer sex on screen, I'm still marveling at the fact that it exists. I definitely watched this and had a lot of appreciation for the fact that they didn't shy away from the sex. What was it like knowing that you were signing up for a show that would mean that sex was pivotal?**

You see "nudity required" in the breakdown for the audition, and as an actor, I think it's important for me to push myself and move out of my comfort zone, but I also think it's important that we tell authentic queer stories, and queer people have sex in those stories, just like if we were to watch "Euphoria" or any other show on TV that has cis, heterosexual people.

It's very sex-heavy, and we should be able, and have the space, to do the same. And also, doing it in person, and choreographing it, and filming it, it was very important for me, and Stephen Dunn, the creator, and all the directors we've worked with, to show queer sex in a way that felt authentic and real, even so much as, lube was a conversation. Would we have enough time for lube in this? Would we use spit in this? And I am so grateful that we're having this conversation, because there's been times where I see queer sex onscreen, and I'm like, "Mm, OK. I don't know if that's how we get down, but..." It was really nice to have a collaborative situation when it came to that.

**Yeah. I still don't know how Jack and Ennis were able to do it with just spit in that tent.**

[Laughs.] Yeah. I'm sure it was very dry in those mountains.

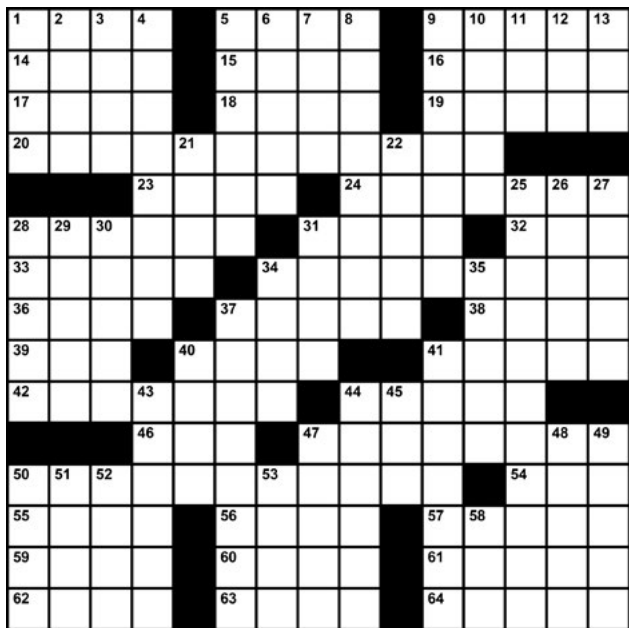
**As you know, the whole show is centered on a Pulse-like shooting at Babylon. And for me, admittedly, it was really hard to watch, though I have a real understanding that it's dealing with trauma and working through that. What did it feel like when you got to that part in the script?**

I remember when I first read the pilot, I was shocked. I was like, "Oh my god, I did not know that this is where we are going." And then, the more I thought about it, the more I thought how important it was to show something like that. One, because I think there is a responsibility for us as queer people to acknowledge the things that our community has been through, whether it be HIV/AIDS or all of the [other] things our community has been victim to.

I think it's important to present that as truth, and I also think it's super important that we show stuff like that now because we are still undergoing a lot of fire from not only legislation, but bars getting broken into and potentially burned down. We are under attack, and I think it's important that, while we celebrate a lot of queer representation, we also take a moment to understand where we still are in this time.

I really am grateful to the creators for creating space for this story, and not only in a way that shows the tragedy as it is, but also makes it about so much more than the tragedy: makes it how queer people are incredibly resilient and come together in times of strife, as we always have and always will.





- 36 Not so exciting  
 37 "De-Lovely" star Kevin  
 38 Sappho's H's  
 39 D.C. summer clock setting  
 40 What we eat  
 41 Dull surface  
 42 More of the quote  
 44 Take a breather  
 46 In addition  
 47 Cut  
 50 End of the quote  
 54 Threesome for Marcella Hazan  
 55 Poet Kitty  
 56 Humorist Bombeck  
 57 Dress with a flared bottom  
 59 Respondents to 911  
 60 Elite Navy diver  
 61 "You'll \_\_\_ Walk Alone"  
 62 Sexy clothing material  
 63 "The \_\_\_ the limit!"  
 64 They go down south for the winter
- 12 Ran first  
 13 Nutty fruitcake center?  
 21 Big bag  
 22 When actors should come  
 25 Like a partner who causes gayngst  
 26 Get a bead on  
 27 Return to homophobia, e.g.  
 28 Where some may lie  
 29 Comedienne Radner  
 30 Like a bottom  
 31 Somewhat  
 34 "Break \_\_\_!"  
 35 Cut out  
 37 It's from the heart  
 40 Break bread  
 41 Stallion on the range, maybe  
 43 Like Liberace's mansion  
 44 Organ appendages  
 45 "\_\_\_ live and breathe!"  
 47 Wallace running mate  
 48 Sea eagles  
 49 Brand for cutting leaves of grass  
 50 Ellen and Anne, once  
 51 "Woe \_\_\_!" ("Hamlet")  
 52 Testicles  
 53 Star journey for George Takei  
 58 Writer Harper
- 1 Went right in the field  
 2 City where Dick Button won gold  
 3 Reclined, for Nathan?  
 4 Marlene of "Blonde Venus"  
 5 Private's position  
 6 Dangles  
 7 Lutheran gay minister Christensen  
 8 Like some stomachs  
 9 One who gives hand jobs?  
 10 To date, but not to go out with  
 11 Mil. sub-division?

## Tallulah

## Q Puzzle Down


### Across

- 1 Tracey of "Growing Pains"  
 5 Frequent Trump portrayer Baldwin  
 9 Former "American Idol" judge Abdul  
 14 Morales of "Resurrection Blvd."  
 15 Japanese attack word  
 16 Boneheads or tails  
 17 Peace Nobelst Wiesel
- 18 Larry Kramer and classmates  
 19 "Wonder Woman" star Carter  
 20 Start of a Tallulah Bankhead quote  
 23 Diana or Betsy  
 24 B. or D. to Wong  
 28 "Lesbians \_\_\_!"  
 31 Rainbow shapes  
 32 Long in the field of acting  
 33 Dorothy, to Em  
 34 More of the quote


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