

MICHIGAN'S LGBTQ+ NEWS SOURCE SINCE 1993

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HISTORIC PROGRESS IN MICHIGAN

Senate Votes to Enshrine
LGBTQ+ Protections into
State Civil Rights Law

BILLY PORTER IS THE CHANGE
'80 For Brady' Star on New
Movie and Black History
Month

DRAG WARS
How Michigan's
Drag Performers
Are Staying Safe



The Fight to Keep Queer Books on Library Shelves

Michigan's Queer Librarians Speak Out on Book Bans
and Providing Comfort to LGBTQ+ Youth

By Ellen Shanna Knoppow



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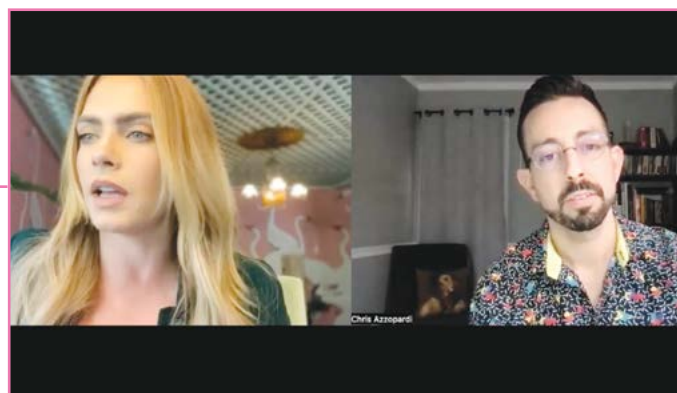


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PRIDE SOURCE MEDIA GROUP

www.pridesource.com
Phone 734-263-1476

PUBLISHERS

Benjamin Jenkins
benjamin@pridesource.com

Publishers Emeritus: Jan Stevenson & Susan Horowitz

EDITORIAL

Editorial Director

Chris Azzopardi
chris@pridesource.com

Assistant Editor

Sarah Bricker Hunt

Senior Staff Writer

Jason A. Michael

Writers and Columnists

Ellen Knoppow, D'Anne Witkowski, Jon King,
Gwendolyn Ann Smith, Dana Rudolph, Tim Retzliff,
George Elkind

CREATIVE

Cartoonists

Paul Berg

Graphic Designer

Sarah Wolf

Contributing Photographers

Andrew Potter, Andrew Cohen

ADVERTISING & SALES

sales@pridesource.com

Director of Sales

Tim Powers
734-263-1475
tim@pridesource.com

Ann/Andy Cox, 248-613-2513
anncox@pridesource.com

National Advertising Representative

Rivendell Media, 212-242-6863

MEMBER OF

Michigan Press Association
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5 **Queer** Things You Can Do Right Now-ish

BY SARAH BRICKER HUNT

February is an excellent time for self-reflection and community connection. With the worst of winter in the rear-view, it's not too soon to look ahead to the brighter, warmer days of spring and contemplate your place in this great big, multifaceted world. This list includes activities and events to help nourish your mind and soul. Get out into the community in intentional, meaningful ways, whether that's joining a new trans-masc support group, seeking out opportunities to create art or honoring Black History Month.



Join a New Trans-Masc Support Group

A new support group for trans-masculine identified young adults will meet at Affirmations in Ferndale on the first and third Thursday of every month, starting Feb. 16. "When you don't know anybody like you, it's easy to feel misunderstood and alone in the world. That, on top of struggling with the unique challenges that come along with being transgender, can make it hard to find adequate support," said support group co-facilitator Finn L. "The Trans Male support group strives to fill in those gaps in the form of connection. Creating a space exclusively for trans men gives our community the ability to confide in and support each other in ways that nobody else is able." The group is offered through Stand with Trans in partnership with Affirmations LGBTQ+ community center.

First and third Thursdays at 6 p.m. at Affirmations (290 W. 9 Mile Road, Ferndale). Learn more at standwithtrans.org/support-groups.

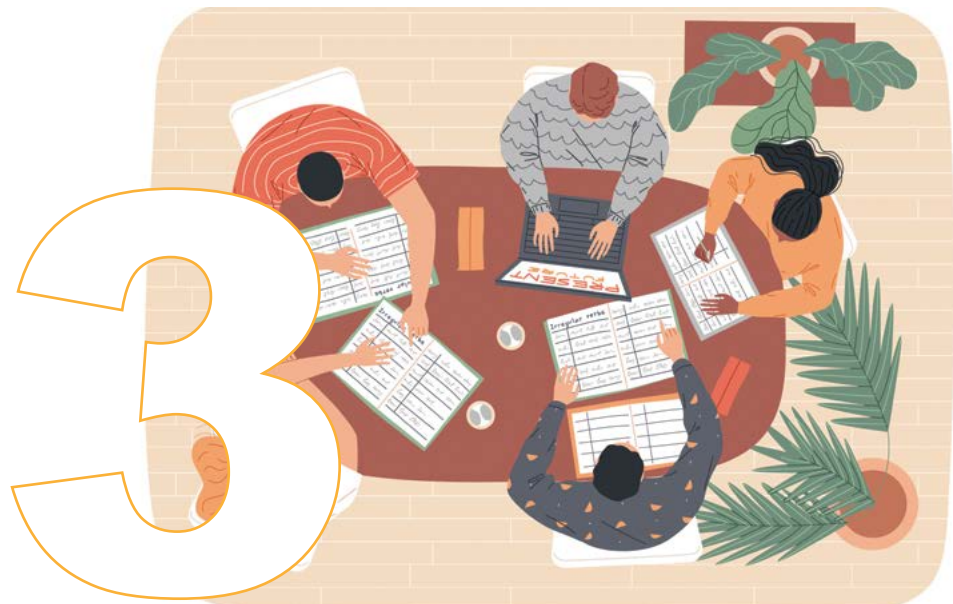


Make a Cultural Connection in Reflection of Black History Month

The "Detroit Renaissance" program at the Detroit Institute of Arts (DIA) on Feb. 26 is your chance to soak up some culture across several disciplines. The event features music, poetry and art, all with a Detroit focus. In addition to a performance by Detroit Chamber Winds & Strings, local harpist Maurice Draughn will perform original work alongside other Detroit musicians and premiere the song "African Violet," composed by local musician Jeff Scott.

The free-with-admission event (admission is free for Wayne, Oakland and Macomb County residents), which also includes a poetry reading by Detroit poet Kalimah Johnson, will be held in the DIA African American art exhibit space.

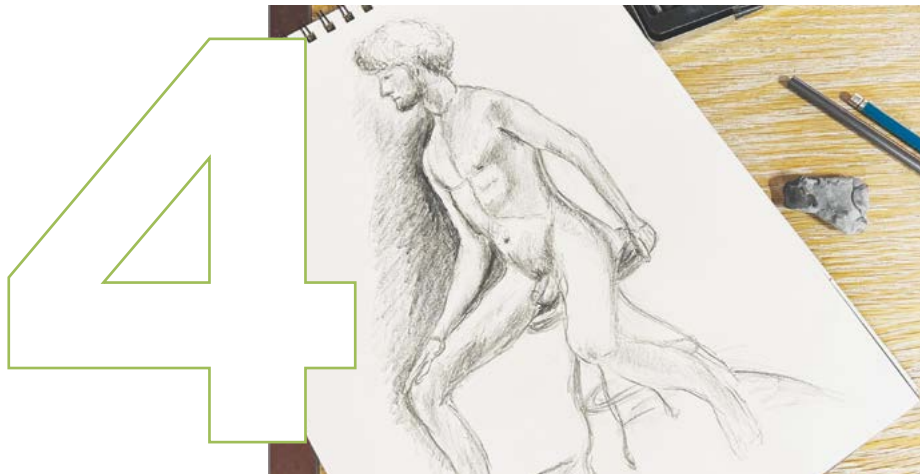
Feb. 26 at 3 p.m. at the Detroit Institute of Arts (5200 Woodward Ave., Detroit).



Link Up and Explore at a Queer Writing Workshop

Get in touch with yourself through the act of writing in a safe, affirming space at the Writing From Our Queer Bodies workshop on Feb. 26 at Room Project in Detroit. The body-based writing workshop, led by local healer E Simon Wolff, focuses on a gentle, accessible, trauma-aware, body-based approach that explores themes including grief, joy, pleasure, belonging and more. Participants can share their work, but it isn't required — this is fantastic opportunity to break out of your comfort zone and lean into your queerness.

Feb. 26 at 2 p.m. at Room Project (6513 Woodward Ave., Detroit). No prior experience with body-based writing required and open to anyone who identifies as queer.



Artwork by Chris Azzopardi. Photo: @detroit_queer_sketch_series

Sketch Nude Models with Other Queers

Whether you're a pro or it's been a minute since you've picked up a sketch pad (or even if you never have), the Detroit Queer Sketch Series is a welcoming, inclusive space for you to explore your artistic side while getting to know other local queer artists. Each second Thursday of the month, James Staycation and Chris Gorski of Detroit GT host a lively, encouraging sketching session with a live nude model. Supplies are available or feel free to bring your own sketch pad, pencils, charcoal, paints, tablet or other medium. Learn more at [instagram.com/detroit_queer_sketch_series](https://www.instagram.com/detroit_queer_sketch_series).

Feb. 16 at 6:30 p.m. at Detroit GT Studio (2301 Wolcott St., Ferndale). Bring your own alcoholic beverage (non-alcoholic refreshments snacks are available).



Bring Your Best Dish to an LGBTQ Shabbat Potluck

Wondering where your fellow queer Jewish community members are hanging out on the third Friday of each month? Well, starting Feb. 17, you might just find them at Temple Beth Emeth's LGBTQ Shabbat Potluck, an event hosted by the temple's new queer affinity group. Coordinator Ariane Smith says the event "is a way for queer Jews in our area to build community and increase connection to both their queerness and Jewishness. We can engage in Jewish tradition in a group that affirms our identities as whole individuals, and meet more people like us. Many queer people of faith want a connection to their heritage without going to services, and we hope to give them an avenue to participate and make friends in an ongoing, monthly dinner."

Feb. 17 (and every third Friday of the month) at 6 p.m. at Temple Beth Emeth (2309 Packard St., Ann Arbor). RSVP with your potluck dish to bit.ly/tbelgbtq or email Ariane Smith at brariane@umich.edu.

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

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The Underground Movement to Turn Michigan Into the Next 'Don't Say Gay' State

BY SARAH BRICKER HUNT

Discontent to limit their disruption to equitable public education through local school boards, a group of fringe right-leaning Republicans is promoting a new tactic — bombarding school administrators with parent-initiated opt-out forms demanding students be shielded from any mention of the LGBTQ+ experience.

As BTL reported in late January, right-wing groups have taken steps to insert elected

or factually inaccurate statements about reproductive health, family planning, LGBTQ+ issues and social justice and includes the demand that the student not be included in “any and all instruction on gender ideology, the physiological (including endocrinological), psychological and functions of reproductive health as it relates to human sexuality. This opt out includes, but is not limited to: gender identity, gender expression, gender assignment, sexual identities, sexual expression, sexual

attraction, sexual orientation [sic], gender fluidity, transitioning, and explicit [sic] sexual activity or behavior.”

Existing Michigan law already affords parents the ability to opt-out from sex-ed classes, but GSI specifically addresses what the organization is calling “rogue sex ed.” To this end, the opt-out form includes things like school-affiliated student clubs supportive of LGBTQ+ students, Pride flags and educators asking



officials sympathetic to their anti-LGBTQ+ agendas into school boards and other government bodies, including the widely reported takeover of the Ottawa County Board of Commissioners in West Michigan and the Jamestown Township Patmos Library board. The library is due to shut down after voters effectively defunded it through an initiative on the November ballot following an outcry about the availability of LGBTQ+ books at the public library.

The organization Great Schools Initiative (GSI) appears to serve as yet another tentacle reaching out to scrub the very existence of the LGBTQ+ community from the public school experience. In this case, the organization is urging Michigan parents to complete an online form aimed at excluding their children from discussions about gender identity and sexual orientation at school. Once completed, parents are urged to have school administration add the form to their children's files.

The form includes several misleading

students for their pronouns. Further, the group claims that anything related to promoting LGBTQ+ students should be considered sexual and labels educators who affirm LGBTQ+ “matters” as “groomers.”

GSI was founded in September by failed-candidate for the Oakland County Board of Commissioners Monica Yatooma and Walled Lake entrepreneur Nathan Pawl. Both parties used the address of Chicago law firm The Thomas More Society on their licensing application. The Thomas More Society has long been involved in highly-publicized and well-funded efforts to promote far-right conservative causes.

Pawl has gone public with his assertion that GSI was borne from his personal outrage that his son's school was required to wear masks during the height of the Covid pandemic. The Thomas More Society seems similarly motivated. The firm threatened lawsuits against Walled Lake Schools and Oakland County if officials refused to reverse mask mandates.



Historic Progress in Michigan

Senate Votes to Enshrine LGBTQ+ Protections into State Law

BY SARAH BRICKER HUNT

The newly sworn in, Democrat-majority Michigan State House is already making significant strides for the LGBTQ+ community. On Feb. 9, the Michigan Senate officially voted in favor of Senate Bill 4, which formally expands civil rights protections to LGBTQ+ Michigan residents via an amendment to the Elliott-Larsen Civil Rights Act (ELCRA).

Equality Michigan tweeted the news, adding, “Thank you @JeremyAllenMoss for your leadership and caring on the legacy of those who have worked on this for over 50 years.”

Also on Twitter, HRC

Michigan posted, “This legislation is proof that our elections matter. While across the country anti-LGBTQ+ bills are being introduced by extreme politicians, here in Michigan we’re making historic progress. Michiganders rejected the hate and chose unity and acceptance.”

After the vote, Equality Michigan Executive Director Erin Knott told HRC Michigan, “We know that it’s good for business, it’s good for retaining and attracting talent. But I don’t want to forget about the fact that you heard from me and the rest of the community last week. At Equality Michigan, our department of victim services gets calls from members of the LGBTQ+ community on a

daily basis that are experiencing some form of discrimination, harassment, or a horrific act of violence. Today’s vote on the behalf of this committee sends a message to the LGBTQ+ community that they are valued, that they are loved, and that discrimination will not be tolerated anymore.”

State Senator and ELCRA Bill Sponsor Jeremy Moss added, “For far too long, LGBTQ+ Michiganders have not been able to live as their true and authentic selves here with equal protection under the law. Without employment and housing protections

in the Elliott-Larsen Civil Rights Act, our community is vulnerable to being kicked out of our economy as workers and

“Here in Michigan we’re making historic progress. Michiganders rejected the hate and chose unity and acceptance.”

— HRC Michigan

consumers. By including sexual orientation and gender identity or expression as protected

classes in the act, we signal that Michigan is a safe place to call home. This committee vote is a win for all of Michigan.”

The bill’s passage comes on the heels of the November election where voters approved an initiative to amend the ELCRA and after Democrats took control of both chambers of the house for the first time in more than 40 years.

The blue wave didn’t stop there — they also voted for Democrats for governor, attorney general and secretary of state. Democrat candidates across the state ran on platforms endorsing LGBTQ+ causes including the amendment.

Earlier this month, local LGBTQ+ activists, allies and community members came

together to add their vocal support to the Michigan Senate Committee on Civil Rights, Judiciary and Public Safety’s historical hearing on amending the state’s civil rights act.

“This is nothing short of remarkable, this is the government working for the people and it’s powerful,” said Human Rights Campaign President Kelley Robinson said in a statement. “You can hear by every testimony, every story that was shared, this is about the fundamental values of being American. Restoring dignity, ensuring equality, ensuring fairness, and we can do that in the halls of government for everyone!”



The Fight for Queer Books

When the Professional Becomes Personal

BY ELLEN SHANNA KNOPPOW

Reciting prose from the pages of Penthouse magazine at a school board meeting is an unconventional way to make a point. But lately, caregivers and community

members in Michigan are going to great lengths to express displeasure over queer content found in their kids' book bags or on the shelves of school and classroom libraries. To be sure, in Milan, Michigan, where the Penthouse reading occurred, no

adult entertainment is available for check out.

Between The Lines "booked" interviews with half a dozen LGBTQ+ librarians in Michigan who had a lot to say about censorship — as well as the

support they afford to young LGBTQ+ library patrons at this moment in time. Tellingly, not all of our librarian contacts felt secure speaking out.

Kelly Boston is a librarian at a middle school in West Michigan

as well as a Grand Rapids library board commissioner. Like others interviewed for this story, she sees the hysteria over book titles as old wine in new bottles.

"I don't think it's new by any means," Boston said. "This is

something librarians have been dealing with forever, to be honest with you. I do think that currently, this is something that's been politicized and is being specifically used as a political scapegoat right now and a target. So that's why we're really seeing people emboldened or people circulating lists [of book titles] that they should be checking their libraries for."

From Dearborn to Williamston to Jamestown Township, public and school libraries across Michigan — and across the nation — are experiencing an onslaught of attempts to remove certain titles geared toward youth. In school libraries alone, PEN America's Index of School Book Bans lists 2,532 instances of individual books being banned, affecting 1,648 unique book titles for the 2021 to 2022 school year. Forty-one percent were banned for either LGBTQ+ content or LGBTQ+ protagonists or prominent secondary characters. Most commonly banned was "Gender Queer: A Memoir" by Maia Kobabe.

Boston said it's not uncommon for a parent or guardian to approach her with a concern over a particular title. In those cases, Boston will tell them she understands their apprehension but the library will not remove a book over individual complaints. "You get to decide what's right for your family, but really, our library serves all the students in the school," Boston tells these patrons. It should be noted that generally speaking, kids are exposed to social media, television, movies, music and other content without much oversight.

In terms of a formal reconsideration of a book, "I have never — knock on wood — actually had it get to the formal point," Boston said. "I know a lot of the librarians have."

Patrick Taylor is another school librarian who said "I'm gonna knock on wood" to avoid jinxing the relative calm. Taylor is his

district's library director and ESL coordinator. He works in Macomb County's relatively progressive community of Eastpointe.

In Taylor's estimation, "There will be other reasons that people cite in terms of trying to justify their wanting to censor library materials," he said. "But I really think that it just kind of boils down to homophobia, transphobia, that sort of thing." As for those who would censor materials, "I would encourage them to ask themselves who they're doing this for," he continued. "Is it for themselves or is it really for the students? 'Cause most of the time I would argue that it's for themselves."

Sadly, school librarians are an endangered species due to technological advances and budget cuts. According to Michigan Department of Education numbers, in 2019, 92% of schools statewide didn't employ a full-time, certified librarian. Fifty-two percent had no librarian. And Michigan ranks 47th in the country in terms of its librarians-to-students ratio. Not only has the case been made that school librarians are needed to combat the literacy crisis, it can also be argued that by being open about their sexuality, LGBTQ+ school librarians like Boston and Taylor represent safe adults to queer and questioning students. And that's



Kelly Boston, Grand Rapids library board commissioner. Courtesy photo

“

There's a lot of very stubborn, very angry queer librarians who are going to keep these books on shelves.

— Mary Grahame Hunter, Ferndale Area District Library

invaluable.

Boston said as an educator in West Michigan, coming out professionally was a difficult decision. "That meant not leaving out, at the beginning of the year when I do my introductions, like, 'Here's a picture of me and my wife,'" Boston said. "And I can't tell you how anxious I was the first time that I presented that to students,

and I talked to my administrator first."

"There's an example of some straight privilege that straight people don't have to think about," she added. "And ever since I did that, you can always see a couple kids in each class, their eyes light up. And I've had kids approach me right away who are like, 'When did you come out?'"

In Eastpointe, Taylor's district

received a Rainbow Library grant from GLSEN, who issued the grant based on an application inspired by a student who approached Taylor with questions about the gender binary. Not only that, Taylor reports the high school restored the LGBTQ club last year.

"For once, it's a little bit of a beacon of hope in Macomb County," Taylor said.

Still, according to the 2021 GLSEN school climate survey, only 43 percent of U.S. students said they have access to LGBTQ-related library resources at school.

Despite the differences between school libraries and public libraries, the manufactured controversy is much the same.

Lauren Catoni-Ellis, the youth services assistant department head of the Bloomfield Township Public Library, described the process of formally challenging a title. It begins by completing a request for reconsideration form, a list of questions asking why the book is inappropriate and does not belong in the library. The American Library Association (ALA) recommends each library have a collection development policy with a resource reconsideration process approved by its governing body.

"One of the most important parts of that form is asking whether or not the person has read the book," Catoni-Ellis said, "because I think many times people object to a book that they haven't read. So this sort of is hopefully a nudge for them to think, did I actually read this? Do I know what the content is?"

See **Queer Librarians**, page 24

Howard Bragman, Flint Native, Philanthropist and ‘Coming Out Guru’ to the Stars, Dies at 66



Howard Bragman. Photo: Twitter

BY SARAH BRICKER HUNT

Friends and family near and far are mourning the death of PR giant and Flint native Howard Bragman, who died from leukemia Saturday, Feb. 11. Bragman was 66.

Bragman’s enviable client list included big names celebrities like Cameron Diaz and Terrence Howard, but he was perhaps best known in LGBTQ+ circles for his expertise in a unique niche — helping his queer clients navigate the tricky process of coming out while famous.

Bragman helped several high profile clients on this front, including WNBA star Sheryl Swoopes, NFL player Michael Sam, country singer Chely Wright and the actors Meredith Baxter and Chaz Bono.

Bragman was also known for his

philanthropic pursuits, including a \$1 million endowment to establish the Howard Bragman Coming Out Fund at the University of Michigan in 2021, which included funds to support the campus LGBTQ+ organization, the Spectrum Center.

“I don’t care how liberal the school is. I don’t care how accepting and loving your parents are. I don’t care how ‘woke’ the times are. Coming out is the most personal of journeys, and it’s a challenging journey,” Bragman told BTL at the time. “It’s so important for students to know they are not alone and that the Spectrum Center is there for them.”

“It’s so important for students to know they are not alone and that the Spectrum Center is there for them,” he continued. “I want to assure that other people get that same access that I had:

life-changing, life-saving access.”

Bragman moved out of Michigan after graduating from U-M in 1978 and held prominent public relations positions in Chicago and Los Angeles and went on to open his La Brea Media firm there. But Bragman never forgot the acceptance he first found in Ann Arbor.

“It’s important to understand that the Spectrum Center has endured [and] that’s huge,” he said. “It was founded only two years after Stonewall, which we look at as the birth of the modern LGBTQ rights movement. So, the center is not a flash in the pan, but something venerable that’s been on campus for a long time and is going to be on campus as a permanent fixture, like the pillars outside Angell Hall.”

Is Kim Petras the First Trans Woman to Win a Grammy? Well, Actually...

Let’s Talk About Synth Pioneer Wendy Carlos

BY SARAH BRICKER HUNT

When openly trans woman Kim Petras took home a Grammy for best pop duo/group performance alongside openly non-binary queer musician Sam Smith, it was a historic moment. Few openly trans artists have even been nominated, and here was Petras at the podium — the first trans *winner*!

Except... she actually wasn’t.

Petras herself never made the claim — the German pop singer was quite clear when she said in her acceptance speech that she was the first trans woman to win in the pop duo category, not the “first transgender woman to win [a] Grammy Award,” as The Village Voice (and many other outlets) proclaimed.

The honor actually goes to electronic musician and Moog synthesizer pioneer Wendy Carlos,

whose “Switched-On Bach” album took home three Grammy Awards in 1970, for Classical Album of the Year, Best Engineered Recording and Best Classical Performance – Instrumental Soloist or Soloists. In electronic music circles, Carlos is highly regarded as one of the first, and best ever, synth programmers. You might see her referred to as the “Grandmother of Moog.”

At the time of her wins, Wendy was credited as Walter, but was already causing a stir by presenting as her true self. Get this crazy but true anecdote: When Carlos appeared on a BBC program in 1970 to demonstrate the new Moog synthesizer, producers were so uncomfortable with her “crossdressing” that they made her apply fake mutton chops and dress as a cis man.

Nevertheless, she persisted, and when the album was re-pressed a few years later, she was credited as Wendy.

In 1979, the typically media-shy Carlos granted a deeply personal interview to Playboy magazine, describing her early confusion. “I

remember being convinced I was a little girl, not knowing why my parents didn’t see it clearly. I didn’t understand why they insisted on treating me like a little boy,” she told the publication.

While “Switched-On Bach” focused on classical music, Carlos found more mainstream success when she composed scores for classic films like “A Clockwork Orange,” “The Shining” and “Tron.” These days, the 82-year-old musician and amateur astronomy photographer (her photos of eclipses have appeared on the NASA website and on the cover of Sky & Telescope magazine) mostly stays out of the public eye and still lives in her hometown of Pawtucket, Rhode Island.

Petras (and Smith) certainly deserve their dues, and “Unholy” is a fine pick for best pop duo/group performance. It’s a banger, as the kids say. But while we’re singing praises, let’s not forget to give it up for Wendy Carlos, the badass electronic music pioneer who was busting down doors (and bringing home Grammy Awards) 53 years ago.



Wendy Carlos. Photo: WendyCarlos.com

Building Bridges

LGBT Detroit Field Director on Long Days, Key Connections

BY ELLEN SHANNA KNOPPOW

When Tashawna Gill paused our interview to take a call from Lansing, it didn't faze me. I knew Gill was simply conducting official business for LGBT Detroit Mobilization, where she's served as field director since the 2022 election cycle. Using her vast political network in the service of the queer community is all in a day's work — a day that often begins by 5 a.m.

"I am the political arm of LGBT Detroit," explained Gill, distinguishing the 501c3 LGBT Detroit from LGBT Detroit Mobilization, a 501c4 launched at the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020. "I run the endorsements. I'm the connection to Lansing, to really strengthen the political power for the LGBT community."

With a career spent behind the scenes getting folks elected, Gill, an ally, is currently tasked with organizing to advance the political interests of LGBTQ+ people in Detroit and Southeast Michigan.

Nzere Kwabena, executive director of LGBT Detroit, calls Gill "a super ally."

"She built these relationships," Kwabena said about Gill's ability to build bridges between political candidates and voters. "It was because of her." He said LGBT Detroit Mobilization identifies candidates and political leaders to endorse who are interested in the needs of the growing LGBTQ+ community.

Gill first became acquainted with LGBT Detroit and Kwabena when she attended a political meeting shortly before joining the Gretchen Whitmer for Governor campaign in 2017 as a regional political and field director.

"As soon as I walked through the door, it just felt like home," Gill



LGBT Detroit Field Director Tashawna Gill. Courtesy Photo

recalled. "It just felt like everybody was welcomed. Nzere was amazing. The team was amazing. It just was the most comforting, safe feeling that I ever felt. And I'm not LGBT." Gill derided what she called "stupid stereotypes" about LGBTQ+ people.

At that meeting, the politically savvy Gill immediately recognized the power of the LGBTQ+ vote. She remembers telling the group, "I don't think y'all know how much power you guys actually have." But

it would be several years before Gill was ready to leave her Lansing-based work.

"I knew there was space for her," Kwabena said, "and I felt that she literally wanted to contribute to the mission. I found somebody very interested in our ability to express our interest to people who are either seeking office or are elected officials. And so when I first met her, I thought we had someone who was a strong ally and able to open

the door for us."

"We're happy that she brings this incredible energy and excitement to the company," he added. "And I'm glad she chose us."

Not only is Gill known for her role in Gov. Whitmer's election, she also served on the campaigns of Mayor Mike Duggan, Councilmember Jewell Jones (Inkster), Garlin Gilchrist for Detroit City Clerk and, in 2016, Hillary Clinton for President. And

when Gill wasn't campaigning, she was creating political organizations like United Precinct Delegates (UPD), which harness political power at the grassroots level.

UPD began with Gill's political mentors "forcing" her to become a precinct delegate before she really understood their role. She found many were in the same boat. Eager to learn, Gill educated

See **Tashawna Gill**, page 23

State Legislatures Move Ahead with Anti-Trans Bills in the Shadow of a Trans Teen's Murder



I just read an article about the murder of Brianna Ghey, a transgender teenager found stabbed to death in a park in England. As NBC reports, Ghey had “visible stab wounds”

and, just in case you didn't think this story could get any worse, “Police said they have arrested two teenagers, both 15 years old, on suspicion of the murder.”

My god. These are children. All of them. Perhaps many in the U.S. have become numb to stories about kids killing kids (our legislators certainly have), but this is truly horrific.

I don't have any further details about the suspects. I don't know if they did it and I don't know why they did it if they are, indeed, guilty.

I do know that scrolling through my newsfeed just about every article related to transgender people was “Texas Governor backs transgender ban for college sports” and “South Dakota governor signs bill prohibiting gender-affirming treatment for transgender minors” and “Ban on health care for transgender youth passed by Utah Legislature” and “Arizona Rep. proposes anti-transgender ‘women's bill of rights.’”

It goes on and on. State legislatures across the country are fixated on harming transgender people. Every single one of these measures, as well as the anti-trans rhetoric fueling debate on the issue, serves to spread the message that transgender people are, at best, “icky” and, at worst, subhuman and dangerous.

Reading about Brianna Ghey's murder surrounded by these stories really crystalizes the reality that every politician who introduces anti-trans bills, every religious leader who portrays trans people as evil, every school board member who demands books about transgender people be yanked from school libraries, every media talking head who uses their platform to dehumanize trans

people — they all contribute to a culture of violence where transgender people are unsafe.

Which is, of course, the point. What was it that Sen. Mitt Romney (R-Utah) said about “self-deportation”? That if we make the lives of immigrants horrible enough they'll just leave on their own?

That's what is being advocated for trans people: self-erasure. And anti-trans bigots don't care if that erasure manifests itself as staying in the closet or ends in death by suicide or murder.

And as Gillian Branstetter, a communications strategist at the American Civil Liberties Union, points out on Twitter, in places that lack self-ID laws — meaning transgender people cannot legally change their IDs, including their names — transgender people are further marginalized when newspapers print their “real” names and use the wrong pronouns. Families can essentially do the same if they did not accept or support their dead relative's identity.

“Trans people like Brianna are fighting to tell the truth when the whole world wants us to tell a lie,” Branstetter posted to Twitter. “We are routinely censored and penalized for that truth. And too often our death is seen as an opportunity — by police, the media, and even our own families — to erase that truth.”

Look, maybe even you, dear reader, are someone who doesn't “get” trans people. Maybe your gender identity is so entrenched



“

You know what being human feels like and, if you're a member of the LGB community, you know what it feels like to be dehumanized for who you are. So do trans folks.

that you can't fathom being trans or non-binary. Fine. But the thing is, you don't have to understand someone to treat them humanely and allow them to live in dignity. You know what being human feels like and, if you're a member of the LGB community, you know what it feels like to be dehumanized for who you are. So do trans folks.

You'd think that even cisgender heterosexual people would get that most basic principle: treat others how you would like to be treated. Very basic stuff.

But instead, it seems like people are allowing themselves to believe that public schools are somehow gender transition factories with teachers intent on creating a fully trans student body so that... I don't know what the end goal is in this wild theory, actually. To destroy the very idea of gender, maybe? There's no logic to follow, so that's my best guess.

In an op-ed in USA Today, Vanessa and Michael Anspach, parents of a transgender child in Arizona, write about the pending anti-trans legislation in Arizona, “It's another bill that, on its face, is aimed at harming our trans kids by instilling fear in others that schools are somehow ‘transitioning’ their kids behind their backs. It also aims to ‘protect’ adults in schools who care more about their politics than about treating others with dignity and basic human decency.”

Yep. And this is true for all of this pending legislation. It's all bullshit. It's the result of unserious people being elected to do a serious job for which they are unqualified and in which they are uninterested. They just want to use their power to hurt the people they don't like. And transgender kids are getting hit hardest of all.

In Shyamalan's Latest, a Rare and Affecting Depiction of Queer Parents

A Rock-Solid Family Comes Under Attack — But Not For Its Legitimacy



BY GEORGE ELKIND

In the opening minutes of M. Night Shyamalan's new thriller "Knock at the Cabin," a little girl named Wen

(played by Kristen Cui) is approached by Leonard, a hulking stranger (Dave Bautista), who offers to help her catch grasshoppers while asking about her life at home and school. Before we meet them, she announces that she has two parents over at the cabin nearby: Daddy Eric and Daddy Andrew — information Leonard, a second-grade teacher, receives with a studied, careful politeness. Her school counselor tells her it's a good thing, she goes on, but the counselor's overly enthusiastic tone conveys the opposite impression: that the performance of open-mindedness isn't sincere.

Minutes later, we meet Wen's parents: Andrew (Ben Aldridge), a wary, adamant human rights attorney, and Eric (Jonathan Groff), a more temperate but quite protective dad who spends much of the film concussed. It's not the legitimacy of their queer-led family that's under threat here — it's the continued existence of the family itself.

Within minutes of its opening, the family's woodland cabin is invaded by Leonard and his three companions, who explain that it's important they find their way inside. After forcing their way through doors and windows, then subduing and tying the couple up, Leonard offers an aggrieved apology as his colleagues tidy up the space, explaining that they didn't know what kind of family they would meet but that they needed to talk to them nonetheless. The motive for the invasion isn't hate, they insist, but a revelation: a shared vision that told them, in quasi-religious terms, that an apocalypse would come if the family refuses to sacrifice one of



Ben Aldridge, Kristen Cui and Jonathan Groff in "Knock at the Cabin." Photo: Universal Pictures

their own by the following morning.

This collision, of one group bound by possible fanaticism with a family whose ties are cemented by deep love, echoes contemporary politics without lending credence to those skeptical of queer parents. The cohesion of the family, joined by still-scrutinized processes of same-sex marriage and adoption, never comes under question, running counter to most depictions of queer couples who choose to raise children, especially young ones.

In fact, depictions of such families in U.S. media, both on TV and in film, still seem quite rare. While watching Shyamalan's thriller — which has been argued by some to be a conservative work for its sympathetic treatment of doomsaying extremists — I still struggled to think of films that treated queer family structures as matter-of-factly as

this film does. While a movie like "Beginners," released in 2010, may show a queer parent (and in this case a widower) coming out late in life, and something like 1996's "The Birdcage" shows familial relations structured by absenteeism, these films pit queerness — in the classic sense of running against the norm — as destabilizing traditional structures of family life.

Far more common is the figure of the queer homewrecker, a character who, in honoring their own needs, threatens or upends longstanding family ties. (In this, "Hedwig and the Angry Inch," "Transamerica" and "Transparent" all stand out, suggesting that trans characters remain disproportionately burdened with these associations). Alternatively, there's the affirmative structure of something like Lisa Cholodenko's 2010 film "The Kids Are All Right,"

which expels an interloper who threatens its key family's stability, thus affirming its queer family structure with a bill of ultimately good health.

For "Knock," though, the queerness of the family, the presence of gay parents, is not the issue — but the response to those around them is. Frictions of queer life are acknowledged in both present-tense moments and in flashback, bolstering Andrew's already justified skepticism of Leonard's home-invading troupe.

In this and other ways, "Knock" accounts for social frictions accompanying queer life without letting them take hold of the film's center. But when they are dealt with, it's often with an unexpected sense of grace. For Shyamalan, a director not known for subtlety, small notes of truth ring out through shorthand gestures, especially in flashbacks.

In one scene of the couple first

meeting Wen abroad, for instance, the couple claim to be in-laws instead of partners; in another, they endure a strained meeting with visiting parents. While these kinds of depictions — of white, cis and gay, financially stable couples in otherwise traditional family structures — could be considered assimilationist in their rhetoric, "Knock" makes clear that they're not only rare but welcome, particularly when not presented as some ideal, preferred queer path. Instead, the film's family life is normalized in spite of what they face. In offering a depiction that's far from tokenistic while hardly being radical, "Knock" provides a testament to what we lack — and proof this should happen more often.



The Kuntz Kittens. Courtesy photo

Drag Queens Have Become Culture War Targets. So How Exactly Are Michigan’s Drag Performers Doing?

BY D’ANNE WITKOWSKI

Drag performers are used to being center stage. What showgirl doesn’t love a spotlight? Unfortunately, in 2022 drag performers nationwide were in a spotlight not of their choosing and for all the wrong reasons. Drag performers have become visible targets in a culture war waged by people who believe that there are only two genders and that

masculinity and femininity are strictly defined. They’ve lobbed accusations of pedophilia against LGBTQ+ people at large, but with a particular ire directed at transgender people. Because drag performers are proud cultural icons, they are receiving a lot of negative attention from right-wing gender truthers. According to a report from GLAAD, there were “141 incidents in 2022 of anti-LGBTQ+ protests and

threats targeting specific drag events, including during Pride festivities and false rhetoric against performers deployed in campaign ads for the midterm elections. The analysis shows increasingly violent rhetoric and incidents as the year progressed, including armed white supremacists demonstrating in Texas and the firebombing of a Tulsa donut shop that had hosted a drag event in October.” In 2023 we’ve already seen legislative

sessions in states like Arizona and Arkansas kick off with bills to curtail drag shows. Republicans in Michigan tried that nonsense in 2022, but Michigan’s new Democratic majority means that anti-LGBTQ+ bills won’t be getting traction any time soon, especially in light of the recent Michigan Senate move to amend the state’s civil rights act to include LGBTQ+ protections. In the face of being the right’s

favorite political football of late, how is Michigan’s drag community coping? Well, for many, despite threats, the show must go on. “Our entertainers are not scared to face it,” says Brad Haas, co-owner of Beauty Beyond Drag Productions in Grand Rapids. “I’ve had some people who say, ‘Yes put me in this show because I am a social justice warrior and I want to show that kid out there that it’s OK to be different.’”

Haas has already had to respond to safety concerns for his performers. In 2022, Beauty Beyond Drag did Allegan's first ever Pride, which kicked off with drag queen story time.

Online commentators called Haas and his performers "disgusting" and "pedophiles" and they learned that the event was being discussed online by the white supremacist Proud Boys.

"We had to hire paid security because we were worried for our performers' lives and safety," Haas says.

Haas's co-owner Sue Haas, who is also his mother, makes it clear that the conservative right's claims that drag is dangerous for children is false. "I believe that the right-wing Republicans are over-sexualizing drag in general," she says, adding that Beyond Beauty does age-appropriate programming for all kinds of audiences "and we appropriately set the tone for those shows."

She prefers to focus on the positive aspects of drag, not "all this loud-mouthed overbearing political crap that you hear."

"It's not our mission to stir up trouble," she says. "We're into it for the art of drag."

Drag performer Jadein Black, who leads troupe Boylesque Michigan, had a run-in with the Proud Boys during an outdoor drag queen story time sponsored by Ann Arbor Public Library. "I didn't know who they were," she tells BTL as she gets ready for that night's gig doing drag bingo. "I just saw them carrying flags until I started reading books."

That's when they started shouting Bible verses through a megaphone.

"The police were called and [the Proud Boys] were told that they didn't have a noise permit like I did, so they were kind of irritated," Black recalls. The protesters eventually left.

"I'm a past teacher," Black says. "I've worked in public school systems. I know what's appropriate for children and what's not appropriate for children."

While she acknowledges that "not all drag is appropriate for children," she has no patience for those who want to demonize all drag. "People who don't agree or don't understand or don't want to understand, they're never going to understand," she says. "So if I give them the time of day or accept the hatred they give, then they win."

Black says that if those protesting drag shows were really so worried about kids they would advocate for better education policies in Michigan like repealing the third grade reading law, paying student teachers and increasing teacher pay.

Of course, the protesters aren't showing up to advocate for children. They are there to push a right-wing agenda focused on silencing and erasing LGBTQ+ people. "At first, they say it's inappropriate for kids and next, they're going to say it's not welcome in my community," Black says.

"There are so many people who are afraid to use their voice," Black says. She is not one of them. "I'm going to live my life the way I live it no matter what."

Author and drag performer Monique Madison of Kalamazoo shares this conviction.

"I deal with multiple threats, multiple incidents of hate speech every single day [on] my social media," she says. "But I'll take the punches for my community because I'm blessed enough to have this platform."

Madison received so many death threats before a drag story time as part of Queer the Block in Kalamazoo that she almost canceled. "But the night before I said, 'You know what, I have never been scared. There is no way that I'm going to let these haters, these bigots, win.' And I went out there and they just made sure there was a lot of security."

Madison is the owner and creator of The Kuntz Kittens, a troupe of seven drag queens who specialize in girl group numbers. The group began in 2016. When asked if the name "Kuntz Kittens" was in response to Trump she says, "Just doing drag is a response to Trump. It's just a protest every single day."

She thinks the negative focus on drag performers is ridiculous. "There are so many issues in the world. We've got people going hungry, we've got homeless people," she says, "and someone's worried that I'm in a pair of sparkly boots dancing to a Britney Spears song to make a living."

But it goes beyond sparkly boots. "I've always been a person who does drag with purpose," she says. Madison understands that drag is also a beacon for those searching for their place in this world and trying to be their authentic selves. "I try to be almost like a mama in the community for people who need someone to look up to," she says. "If I can save one young queer life, one young trans life, I'll do this until I'm 100 years old."

She hopes that young people see her and think, "That bitch is 45 and has been through it and is still up there smiling and representing and doing the best job she can do."

Madison is a regular host of drag queen bingo at Five15 in Royal Oak along with beloved drag queen Sabin. She said that so far they have never had protesters in Royal Oak, adding that it's a fairly progressive city with an incredibly supportive mayor.


Madison points out that drag is political, but it's also a livelihood.

"As political as we try to get, we also are business people, we also are showgirls: Tits out; smiles on," she says. "[Audiences] don't want to see the negativity. They come to see you to escape, they want to laugh, they don't want to see the man behind the curtain."

That said, there are more people supporting drag performers than people against them. Madison says that more and more audience members are expressing concern for her safety at events. "To see patrons doing that is probably the most heartwarming thing ever."

Bottom line — drag isn't going anywhere, and the shows will go on.

"No matter what, as much as you try to bring down the LGBTQ+ community, we're just stronger than ever," Madison says. "We're always going to shine. We're never going to let hate win."



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Billy Porter while directing an episode of "Accused." Photo: Fox

Billy Porter Is the Change

'80 For Brady' Star on Acting With Legends, Black History Month and His Return to Music

BY CHRIS AZZOPARDI

You could say Billy Porter was born to play just about all of his roles. This, of course, is true of his portrayal of Pray Tell, the actor's Emmy Award-winning part on "Pose," and his star-making, Tony Award-winning role in Broadway's "Kinky Boots." And you definitely can't argue with the fact that he was put on this earth to bring racial and gender diversity to his Fairy Godmother part in 2021's modern retelling of "Cinderella."

The trend continues with Gugu, the iconic choreographer he plays in "80 For Brady," a role he slips into with such natural ease that you might be asking yourself, "Billy Porter who?"

When I tell him that having seen him as Gugu, he may now always just be Gugu to me, he embraces it: "You can call me Gugu," he says, laughing.

In "80 For Brady," Gugu is, fictionally speaking of course, where Lady Gaga got her name from, so that makes Gugu immediately important to the whole gay world. He, with his smooth moves and flashy tracksuit, is also instrumental in the lives of four other ladies whose dream he helps to fulfill: Lily Tomlin, Sally Field, Rita Moreno and Jane Fonda, or rather their characters (Lou, Betty, Maura and Trish, respectively).

In addition to "80 for Brady," the 53-year-old stage and screen actor stepped behind the camera to direct an episode of "Accused," an anthology series on Fox. The Porter-directed

episode, called "Robyn's Story," features J. Harrison Ghee as a drag queen tangled in complicated legal drama after an escalating fling with a closeted man.

In our recent interview, Porter spoke about how his own life experiences inspired the episode, returning to his R&B roots for his upcoming album and why he thinks "80 For Brady" is the gayest sports movie ever made.

I want to know who Gugu is at night when he's not helping older women sneak into the Super Bowl.

Gugu is fabulous. Gugu is a brilliant choreographer, director of superstar shows, and he sprinkles magical creativity all over the world.

Who else has Gugu worked with, aside from Lady Gaga?

Gugu's old enough to have worked with Michael Jackson.

Well, I have to say I am not a football fan, but this movie made me think that perhaps I could be, if football always involved Sally, Jane, Lily, Rita, you and Tom Brady.

"Gayest sports film ever made." That's what somebody said earlier.

I think that might be true, honestly. I haven't seen a lot of sportsball movies, but...

I've seen a few. It's the gayest.

Thinking about the toxic masculinity in sports that I experienced as a gay person, this movie is turning sports

on its head.

I feel like I know that art has the power to transform hearts and minds, and what I loved about this when I read the script is it creates a space for us to have really complex and complicated conversations subversively without even knowing we're having them, and I think that's what art does so beautifully at its best, at its core. So it was very exciting for me to be a part of it for that reason. It's very queer and it's very positively queer in spaces that aren't so positive, historically, with queer subject matter or anything that's queer. So it's really lovely to see that collective humanity modeled through this piece. It really is lovely.

Did you play sports as a kid?

Honey, they tried to have me play something, tried a couple of things. I tried softball. I tried tag football, I think they called it. I got sacked one day and the wind got knocked out of me. I had an asthma attack and I never went back.

This movie has four national treasures in it. What was your reaction when you knew you'd be in a movie with Jane, Sally, Lily and Rita?

Well, when I lifted my chin up from the ground... these ladies have been an inspiration to me for decades. I am a student of life. I'm a student of the arts. I've studied, I've trained and I've watched these women in their careers and have been inspired not only by their work, but also how they move through life. The humanity, the philanthropy, the activism, all of those things. The 360-holistic approach that they've all had to their lives has just been inspiring and a blueprint for me in how I have tried to make choices and set up my own path. So it's been magical.

Was there a particular moment that you shared together that was just something that you'll never forget?

My favorite part of doing this was being able to sit in holding with all the ladies while they were setting up the camera shots, because that was the fun part. That was the really fun part. We got to know each other, we got to talk, we got to kiki. They're fun and naughty.

Had you hung out with any of them before?

No. I mean, I knew Sally. Sally actually gave me my Tony Award [for "Kinky Boots"] on stage with Matthew Broderick back in

2013. She's really good friends with Tony Kushner and she has a place in P-town. I just happened to be there one summer, a few summers ago, so we had tea together and watched a lunar eclipse.

What do you think is the affinity or the connection between gay men and older women?

I think queer people relate to anybody and anything that feels like an outcast. An underdog or an outcast, we always relate to because that's what we have to navigate from the moment we can comprehend thought. And so I think that alignment, it brings us together and makes us feel hopeful, helps in helping us continue to just breathe and put one foot in front of the other when we can see examples of, "Oh, it can be joyful." There are no time limits to your dreams. There is no time limit to anything. Ride your life until the wheels fall off with joy and hope and loving kindness and compassion and all of that.

Do you have any Super Bowl traditions?

I don't really have any traditions — other than when the Steelers are in it. Because I'm from Pittsburgh, I watch it. I usually tape it so that I can see the concert. I call it "the concert."

I watched the episode of "Accused" that you directed. As somebody who has seen where a story like this can go, it did not go where I expected it to.

Well, that's [series creator] Howard Gordon who saw the script and did the thing that allies are supposed to do and picked up the phone and called me because he knew that I was one of the people on this planet that could deliver that story in the way that it should be. And I'm grateful for that.

Your stamp is certainly on it. What was it like to put your big queer stamp on an episode of a show that is otherwise not particularly queer-focused at all?

It's one of those moments where you just... I stand in awe of what has happened to me once I chose my own authenticity. I got a second chance. I failed as somebody else very early in my career, and I've decided to choose myself. And so when you watch that episode, it's a manifestation of that. It's a manifestation of living a true and authentic life, and I get to then be able to tell the story of what that feels like in a really real way. I love that they've taken the risk with this particular episode.

We need to have tough conversations. As artists, we get to get right in the middle and have

conversations and create safe spaces to have conversations that otherwise are rejected. This is a Middle America show that's going to come on in Middle America on a Middle America network at a Middle America time. Folks will be changed after watching this, and I am so grateful to be able to be at the helm of something like that.

What do you hope those viewers walk away with after they see this episode?

I think the biggest thing that I'm hoping for, and in all of my work, is to be reminded of our collective humanity. There's a dehumanization that's prevalent in this world right now, and I'm hoping that my work can remind people of our collective humanity, because that's what heals.

You've been in front of the camera and behind. What is different about both for you? Are you more comfortable doing one over the other?

It's not about more comfortable or less

about this work. I got a chance to work with Justin Tranter, one of the greatest music writers of our time. I'm really excited about the work. I'm really excited about the message. I'm really excited to be able to put myself out in that way again.

With February being Black History Month, could you draw on your long career as a Black person in this industry and tell me what changes you are noticing, for better or worse?

I think that's a great question because I want to start with the change that has already happened. We, as human beings, are sort of hardwired to only speak of the negative, always take in the negative more than the positive, always push out the negative more than the positive. If you watch the news, it bleeds; if it bleeds, it leads.

There's not a lot of focus on the positive things that have happened in this journey. Me sitting here talking to you is the positive in the moment and



(Clockwise, left to right) Billy Porter, Jane Fonda, Lily Tomlin and Rita Moreno in "80 For Brady." Photo: Paramount

comfortable. It's just about exercising another creative muscle. My mind never stops, so directing uses every single piece of my being. It activates all of it, and I love that. Acting has its own thing, and I love it when I get to be in front of the camera. It's another way of communicating humanity. I love them both.

What can you say about your new music?

The single, "Baby Was a Dancer," has been pushed to March. "Children" came out last year. "Stranger Things" came out around the election. The album is called "Black Mona Lisa." I'm really excited to return to my original roots as a singer. My first R&B album came out back in '97. A lot of people don't know that. I'm just really excited

in the space that we're in. The fact that I can exist in my own authenticity in this world and show up the way that I do is the change. That's the change.

I encourage all of us to lean into what's positive about what's happening right now on this planet. I think about this Biden administration. Just do a deep dive on what has really been going on. There's a lot of good stuff. We've made a lot of good strides. A lot of stuff is great, and we have a long way to go. And so the hope for me is that we can take the time to regenerate ourselves through acknowledging the positive. We can revive ourselves. We can take a moment of self-care so that we can recharge and come back out swinging.

This interview has been condensed and edited for clarity.

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Bret Scott. Courtesy photo

For Out Pleasant Ridge Mayor, the Road Ahead Is Linked to the Past

Bret Scott on His Vision for the Queer-Friendly City

BY ELLEN SHANNA KNOPPOW

Since becoming mayor of Pleasant Ridge in 2021, Bret Scott has married twice, soon to be three times. More precisely, he's officiated at two weddings. Though he's single,

it's one of Scott's favorite mayoral duties.

"This is something that was totally unexpected to me as an ability to do as a mayor," Scott said. "It's a great pleasure to be able to help people get married."

Scott is Pleasant Ridge's first openly gay and first Black mayor. He's also an automotive enthusiast and self-described introvert, but he's more likely to be found tinkering with classic cars than tooting his own horn.

"It wasn't ever my interest to serve in public office because it seemed like such an extroverted thing to do," said Scott, who first secured a seat on the Pleasant Ridge city commission in 2013. "But I spoke with some neighbors and it seemed

that it was a good time for someone like me who had very practical experience in the business world and just a solid interest in helping out around town." Further, because residents had questions about the budget as well as a desire to become more engaged in local government, "It just seemed to make sense for me to participate," he said.

Nestled along the Woodward corridor between Ferndale and Royal Oak, Pleasant Ridge, almost exclusively residential, has a land area of 0.57 miles and a population of 2,627 according to 2020 Census data. Notably, this affluent city has the highest same-sex household ratio in the state — though those figures from the Williams Institute only reflect households, not every individual LGBTQ+ person. Known for its historic districts and tight housing market, it's been said that a resident of Pleasant Ridge who dreams at night of selling their home will wake up to a dozen offers.

"I met Bret when he started coming to city commission meetings when he was requesting some improvements in the parks to the in-ground grills," said Ann Perry, a Pleasant Ridge city commissioner. "It was a time when the city was going through a lot of changes. Bret recognized he could help make a positive difference in the city."

When Scott was elected in 2021 — in the midst of the pandemic — it was a difficult time for residents, but Scott and the city commission were able to help them return to their normal lives. "We helped senior citizens get back together with road trips and field trips," Scott said. "And we managed to get a major water infrastructure project approved and helped people understand how that would work despite the fact that there was social distancing and an inability to meet in person for so many of the months that we put that together."

Perry noted Scott's work on the Woodward streetscape projects, calling Scott a "transportation nut."

"His work in the automotive industry and his love of vehicles — including an amazing assortment of vintage, newer and electric vehicles, as well as really cool bikes from collapsible travel bikes to electric bikes — makes the Woodward improvement projects something he's very excited to work on," Perry said. "He really appreciates the

See **Bret Scott**, page 20

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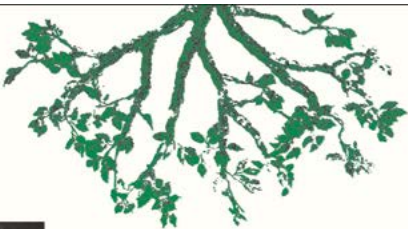
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◀ Bret Scott

Continued from page 18

complexities of the area we live in, and Woodward is something that is important to thoughtfully design so we have the road we want.”

Because of its dense population of LGBTQ+ residents, one might expect Pleasant Ridge to earn high marks on any scale of queer-friendliness — yet the city scored just 69 out of 100 on the HRC Municipal Equality Index (MEI) last year. By comparison, Detroit, Ann Arbor and Ferndale scored 100. In Macomb County, Sterling Heights earned a score of 91. What gives? Scott said it’s hard to compete with the big guys based on identical criteria.

“[HRC’s] focus is largely on big cities and big companies,” Scott acknowledged. “We’re just so small that it would be very difficult for us to hit all of their targets. With that said, we appreciate the targets. We know why they’re there, but we also know that we’ll probably never hit a 100 on their scale. We’re

fortunate to live in a community that has a high concentration of LGBTQ+ folks. In my conversations with them, they understand the challenges that we have.”

Scott was raised in Pontiac, an only child “in a really good family.” Having lived in other states, Scott keeps returning to Southeast Michigan where he enjoys the four seasons. When Scott’s current home in Pleasant Ridge came on the market, he was quick to make an offer.

“To be honest, I never thought about Pleasant Ridge until a friend had driven past my house,” Scott said. “It was for sale. I was living in Virginia at the time, and he took a picture of the house. I literally flew in the next day and left a deposit and then figured out that I kind of needed to find a job to move back to Michigan.”

With a degree in electrical engineering and a career in the automotive industry, finding work wouldn’t be too difficult. Scott spoke of his 20 years with GM, where he first came out publicly, around the same time he joined the Lambda Car Club, a club for LGBTQ+ classic car enthusiasts and their friends.

“For many of us, there’s that moment that first time that we hold hands in public,” Scott began. “Well, it’s a similar thing to hold hands or to talk about it in an office place, because so many of the hours of the day that we have, we spend [at] work. And

just building that level of comfort where we work and where we live can be a challenge for a lot of people. I’m fortunate to have had good folks around me to make that an easy process.”

While the office he holds is nonpartisan, Scott freely discloses he votes Democratic “95 percent of the time,” though on occasion, he’ll vote for a Republican. He said he votes for the right person for the job.

“America is the kind of place that needs at least two healthy political parties to function properly,” Scott said. “That tension could be a really healthy tension or really unhealthy tension. I think we’re going through a bit of an unhealthy phase right now, but when they’re working well together, then we see that push and pull moves us forward.”

He said he has no problem voting for a Republican candidate who shows a good fiscal conservative nature and also has public policy that aligns with Scott’s beliefs.

Still, as far as the Democrats’ recent big wins in Michigan are concerned, Scott couldn’t be more pleased. “The folks that are representing us in the Democrat

Party now are just phenomenal,” Scott said. “We’re really lucky to have [state Senator] Jeremy Moss and others to represent us in Lansing.”

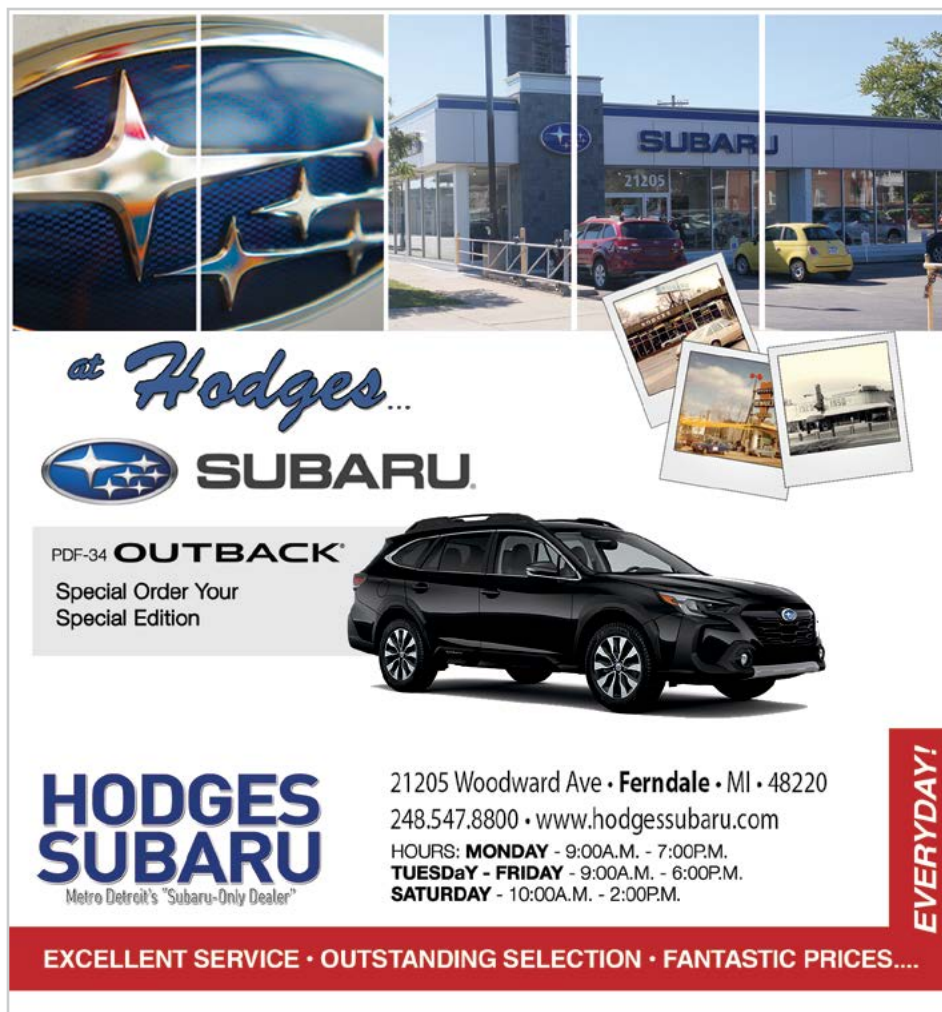
Scott is even considering a career shift to the public sphere himself. “There’s not much to tell,” Scott said. “I’m deciding whether I want to move into the public space and consider a future in Lansing or elsewhere moving forward.” Most of his life Scott has worked in the auto industry and then the technical industry around data and electronics and future technologies. “I’m just weighing what’s available,” he said.

Meanwhile, when he isn’t working on one of his 14 classic cars, a collection that includes a rare 1959 DeSoto, Scott enjoys traveling “and just understanding how other people live.” He said a recent trip to Bulgaria was a lot of fun. Exploring locales that aren’t necessarily “tourist-oriented” especially appeals to Scott.

At the same time, because he’s had to travel extensively for work, it’s been difficult to grow roots. Hence, Scott’s solitary status.

“It’s one of the things that will probably become more of a focus for me as time goes on,” Scott said. “Now that I’ve been home and in Michigan, it’s something that I think about more.”

“I spoke with some neighbors and it seemed that it was a good time for someone like me who had very practical experience in the business world and just a solid interest in helping out around town.”



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7 Queer Michigan Artists to Vibe With

BY JASON A. MICHAEL
& SARAH BRICKER HUNT

February in Michigan means lots of cold, gray days, but these rising Michigan-based queer musicians are pumping out new tunes sure to warm and brighten the season.

Each artist has an important story to share through their music. And while our list represents a range of genres, from pop to soul to the undefinable, they are united through their unique experience of not just love, loss and wrestling with identity but being an out queer musician in a field that doesn't always feel welcoming.

So pop open our Spotify playlist via our website, Pridesource.com, and read on to learn more about seven Michigan-connected queer musicians doing what they were born to do.

J. Santino

“Ride For You” (out soon)

It's not every artist who gets the mayor of Ferndale twerking during their performance. But that kind of thing is bound to happen at a J. Santino show.

The queer Michigan singer's latest, “Ride For You,” follows last summer's “Gemini,” an enthusiastically received track that “was more sultry in the vocal.” “Ride For You,” Santino said, hits different — it's “very vibey.”

When Santino heard the “Ride For You” demo, co-written by Sin Mavi, he knew it was something he wanted to do. “I was going through a tough time in a relationship, and I wanted to talk about how you can be confused in a relationship and yet still be so enamored with a person that you can overlook the red flags in front of you.”

Though he's a proud Detroit, Santino said his music has “such a different vibe than what's locally here. Pop music and LGBTQ+ music artists are such a niche market here in Detroit and in Michigan as a whole.”

Mikee' Anthony

“Get My Life Back (I'm Ready)” (out now)

Mikee' Anthony, the self-proclaimed “King of Detroit R&B” raised in Detroit and Sterling Heights,



Siena Liggins. Courtesy photo

got his start in music as a member of the Macomb Community College show choir. During college, he also recorded for Mo Thugs (of Bone Thugs-n-Harmony).

“The inspiration behind my music is a mix of my testimony about the last four years and how I struggled with addiction and came out of it,” Anthony said. “I also wanted to inspire anyone else struggling with anything that they, too, can overcome anything troubling them.”

“Get My Life Back (I'm Ready),” his new album, “came from my raw emotions,” he said. “I wrote about how I was feeling and built the song off of that.”

Anthony's inspirational sound, influenced by artists like Beyoncé, Usher and Mary J. Blige, is a combination of contemporary R&B

and soul. He describes himself as “a vocalist that likes to use harmony as colors.”

“I believe singing music is art, like a perfect painting,” he added. “Everything goes together.”

Yulia Duzy

“Debut” (out now)

A 20-year-old self-produced artist with a solid — and growing — social following, Michigan-based Yulia Duzy seems poised to break through to the mainstream. With a big, gorgeous voice that belies her young age and songwriting chops on par with many well-established singer-songwriters, it seems inevitable.

Duzy has been producing music since she was 16 and writing her own

songs since the tender age of 10. The artist says she created her Yulia Duzy persona after struggling with identity and how to find authenticity in not only her music, but herself, as well. Working under a stage name allowed her to explore totally new ways of using music.

“As a queer young woman, I think the persona I've created has almost become a more authentic version of myself,” Duzy said, adding, “I like to play with topics that are very coming of age, I think. I write about things I genuinely am struggling with or feel the need to release — I have released this new music without the need for people to necessarily like it, which was a pretty freeing experience that I think resonated with a lot of people.”

“A lot” is an understatement. Duzy's first release is approaching a million

streams and the artist has been added to more than 3,000 playlists, which, Duzy said, is “so cool.”

Matty P.

“Break It Down, Fuck It Up, Throw It Back” (out now)

Pontiac singer-songwriter Matty P., a finalist in the 2022 Detroit singing competition AMPLIFY, has been performing since age 4. His music is rooted in R&B but includes elements of pop, dance, rap and hip-hop.

A frequent performer all around Metro Detroit, Matty P. released his first full-length album, “Single AF,” in 2019 and has been featured on numerous independent albums with hip-hop artists across the country.

“Yellow,” Matty P.'s sophomore album, comes out this spring. “Singing and songwriting has always been my passion and it's important to me to share my experiences as a gay Black man through my music,” Matty P. said.

The new single “Break It Down, Fuck It Up, Throw It Back,” he said, was inspired by “Black gay club culture. I have always wanted to write a club banger that feels real and natural, and this song is one of the most fun songs I've written.”

Golden O'Hara-Polo

“Drag Queens” (out now)

Like many of the best urban vocalists, Golden O'Hara-Polo got her start in the church. Today, she's the current Little Miss Woodward and a popular Detroit-based drag queen.

O'Hara-Polo released her first EP, “Elusive,” in 2022. “It gave a transparent look into my struggles with falling in love with me,” she said of the project. The musician said she always knew she would one day become an entertainer, but she had no idea she'd become the “glamorous drag queen” she is today.

“I have so many songs written that I've collected since I was about 10 or 11,” she said. “It's one thing to sing a song, but to also be the writer of the music is a whole other battle. I was so worried about showing this vulnerable side of myself. But in the end — and over 4,000 streams later — I knew I

See **Queer Music**, page 26

1 Tashawna Gill

Continued from page 11

herself. Then she and others saw an opportunity: They would teach a class. “Leadership was against this, totally against this,” Gill said. With little help, they offered a free class to 20 people. The next one drew a standing-room-only crowd of 120.

“I believe knowledge is everything,” Gill said. “I believe knowledge should be free. People hold back knowledge to have complete control and to emphasize power. But the greatest thing that I find about power is pouring into other people.” She compared it to sowing seeds.

“It’s quite the opposite of what people think about leadership,” Gill continued. “Leadership should be pouring into people and empowering people, not holding people down. So, any group that I have created is, if you look at the mission, all about empowering.”

In 2019, Gill was recognized by Gov. Whitmer for her work founding United Precinct Delegates and Women for Michigan United. Whitmer commended Gill’s “strong work ethic and high efficiency” as well as her “professional excellence and meritorious work.”

Gill speaks often of her mentors. Attorney and political strategist Bruce Sullivan Feaster was like family; he called Gill his niece. It was Feaster who bestowed on Gill the moniker “Political Princess.” After he passed away, she embraced the name.

“[Feaster] called me ‘The Princess’ and he educated me,” Gill said. “He called me every morning. That’s probably why I wake up so early. He called me every morning at 5

o’clock to educate me on people that I don’t even know in politics around the state, which I used when I helped the governor win her first election. I try to honor that name every day by working my butt off to do a good job.”

By all accounts, Gill is a natural leader. “I lead with grace and kindness,” she said. Perhaps Gill learned that from her mother, a special education teacher where Gill attended elementary school. “I am my mother’s daughter,” Gill said.

It was during those grade school years that Gill met her best friend, a lesbian who was bullied at school and who at first bullied Gill. Instead of retaliating, she befriended her bully. They remain close to this day.

As a longtime ally, Gill is frustrated by the persistent stereotypes plaguing the queer community. “People don’t understand that the LGBT community are people,” Gill said. “They all want the same things as us.”

In particular, she said, it’s been her experience that the older Black community is more socially conservative due to the influence of the church. Gill addresses that challenge head on by holding events at “our home,” as she calls the LGBT Detroit facility on Greenfield Road.

“Once people come into this home like I did, they will leave feeling something totally different,” Gill said with confidence. “It happened every single time. We would pack the house for all different types of races, creeds. People who didn’t think they wanted to come, but they come and they just leave with a different aspect, and it changes their mindset.”

“They become allies and advocates and all of these things — and it is amazing what happens.”



Tashawna Gill. Courtesy photo



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Becca Russell, Royal Oak Public Library, and Patrick Taylor, Eastpointe Community Schools. Courtesy photos

◀ Queer Librarians

Continued from page 9

One local librarian, Simon, who currently works at the Ferndale Area District Library in adult services, is very familiar with book challenges. Simon asked that we not use his last name.

“The last place I worked, I got stuck with 15 title challenges in one day,” Simon recalled, “and I essentially had to write a book report on each title explaining why it was purchased, why it should be in the teen section, why we’re not taking it off the shelf.” It quickly became the bulk of his work.

Lately, as Boston mentioned, lists of books with queer content are now circulated to

“spam” libraries with formal complaints. Nationwide, coordinated attempts by conservative groups like Moms for Liberty justify book bans by drawing on harmful stereotypes of all LGBTQ+ content as inherently pornographic. Typically books that challenge racism are swept up in this too. Becca Russell, a librarian at the Royal Oak Public Library, knows of one formal challenge being presented there. She also referred to the so-called “Hide the Pride” campaign cooked up by CatholicVote, which encourages library patrons to check out all the LGBTQ-themed books featured in Pride Month displays.

The form letter reads in part: “To protect our children and the community, we have

checked out the books in the pride display. We plan to keep these books checked out until the library agrees to remove the inappropriate content from the shelves.” Ironically, holding multiple copies of a book hostage only signals their popularity when it comes time to buy.

For readers shaking their heads at this nonsense, several of the librarians suggested easy ways to be a library advocate: Use the library. Check out books. Fill out comment cards. Library professionals respond to positive reinforcement as well as negative.

Today, Simon is comfortable being openly trans in his professional life. However, at his previous place of employment, he was “essentially shoved back in the closet” in response to the wave of censorship attempts. There were times, he said, he feared for his life if others found out about his true identity.

Now Simon wears Pride gear to work, like the trans Pride skeleton shirt he wore for this interview or his trans Pride Pokemon lanyard, “because you do occasionally get a kid or even an adult that’s like, ‘Hey, you seem friendly. Can I ask you these questions?’” he said. He noted a recent interaction with a library patron printing paperwork for a gender-marker change who asked Simon if he knew of trans-friendly places to work.

For Catoni-Ellis, while she is sometimes worried that people might see her as an “unsafe” adult just because she’s married to a woman, she knows her work is worthwhile.

“I don’t know if they knew that I was queer at first,” Catoni-Ellis said, “but there was this 13-year-old boy who used to come talk to me regularly at the library and he came out to me. And I think I was the first person or one of the first people that he came out to. I think he appreciated just seeing somebody living a pretty average life who was queer, because that’s not really the narrative that

we get a lot of times.”

Mary Grahame Hunter also works in youth services. Alongside Simon, she’s a librarian in Ferndale. Hunter said that what’s new with the current wave of book hysteria is “the weaponization of social media.” She referred to closed Facebook groups instructing members to challenge specific titles or target certain library professionals.

Openly bisexual, Hunter is tasked with purchasing youth nonfiction. “That’s all of our sex ed books,” she explained. “That’s all of our books about gender. I feel lucky that I’ve got more parents coming in and saying, ‘Where are your books about this? I want to talk to my 3-year-old about gender stereotypes.’”

According to the ALA’s Library Bill of Rights, “Books and other library resources should be provided for the interest, information, and enlightenment of all people of the community the library serves. Materials should not be excluded because of the origin, background, or views of those contributing to their creation.” To put a finer point on it, “Libraries should provide materials and information presenting all points of view on current and historical issues. Materials should not be proscribed or removed because of partisan or doctrinal disapproval.”

In Royal Oak, the librarians put their heads together and came up with a way to visibly show support in the face of censorship. Borrowing an idea from another community library, they sold “I’m With the Banned” t-shirts as a fundraiser.

“We wanted to sort of publicize that this is a thing we were concerned about,” said Russell, who designed the shirts. “And thankfully the whole administration here is supportive of what’s the opposite of censorship: freedom to read.”

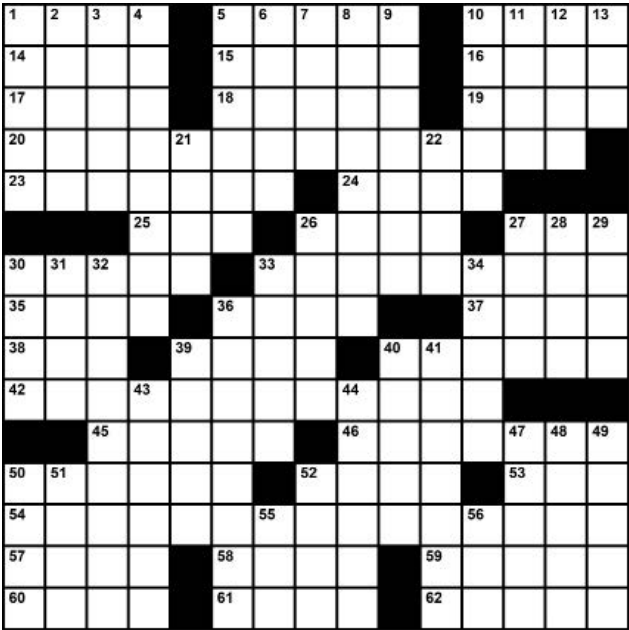
Russell and another queer librarian — the “bi-brarians” — run the library’s Instagram account, frequently used to demonstrate the library’s inclusivity. “I made a post with sort of the tongue-in-cheek ‘make the Yuletide gay’ [theme] with a bunch of queer romances that you could read for the holidays, and it was very popular,” Russell said. At this moment in time, she feels it’s important to be visibly queer.

That’s also important to Hunter, whose partner is a man and who presents very femme. She said she finds herself coming out frequently because it’s an integral part of her identity. Hunter emphasized what she and other queer librarians are doing is nothing like “going rogue.”

“It can be very easy to read all of this news and feel very scared and very hopeless,” Hunter said. “And I don’t want to downplay that fear. I feel scared too. But certainly, from the work that I am doing, and the colleagues that I have, the community support that I am seeing, there’s a lot of very stubborn, very angry queer librarians who are going to keep these books on shelves.”

“There was this 13-year-old boy who used to come talk to me regularly at the library and he came out to me. And I think I was the first person or one of the first people that he came out to. I think he appreciated just seeing somebody living a pretty average life who was queer, because that’s not really the narrative that we get a lot of times.”

— Lauren Catoni-Ellis, Bloomfield Township Public Library



Born This Gay

Across

- 1 Where she blows, for seamen
- 5 Younger daughter of Michelle
- 10 Salty white stuff from the Greeks
- 14 Weaving of Priscilla fame
- 15 "Guilty" for Leopold and Loeb
- 16 Epps of "The Mod Squad"
- 17 Ending with switch
- 18 Perry of fashion design
- 19 Easy partner

Q Puzzle

- 20 Start of a quote from Randy Rainbow's "Born This Gay"
- 23 Partner of the desperate
- 24 Hawaiian wedding party, perhaps
- 25 Printer's measures
- 26 A cruising sailor may grab it
- 27 Atomic energy org.
- 30 Where to find people in the navy
- 33 More of the quote
- 35 Holly of song
- 36 Come clean, with "up"

- 37 Say whether or not you're coming
- 38 Tongue for immigrants
- 39 Sci-fi sky journey
- 40 Abercrombie & Fitch binges
- 42 More of the quote
- 45 Cuts back
- 46 Mercury once of Queen
- 50 Horse of another color
- 52 Start of a Shakespearean title
- 53 Not in the pink
- 54 End of the quote
- 57 Suffix with prefer
- 58 Somewhat
- 59 River of Cocteau's country
- 60 Active one
- 61 Wine's partner
- 62 The sounds of music

Down

- 1 Bara of the silents
- 2 One of the Great Lakes
- 3 Opposite of ecstasy
- 4 Part of a tutti-frutti float
- 5 Goes lickety-split
- 6 Pour oil on
- 7 Autoerotic beneficiary
- 8 Like some pussy cats
- 9 Battery partner
- 10 Ballet bend
- 11 Do a nocturnal activity
- 12 Meaty Mexican dish
- 13 "We ___ Family"
- 21 Good, to Caesar
- 22 Unit in a Shakespearean sonnet

- 26 Sled dog
- 27 NASDAQ rival
- 28 Go from one gay bar to another
- 29 Protection for packages
- 30 De novo
- 31 New Ager John
- 32 Bargain figure at Barneys
- 33 Bronx cheers
- 34 Screwed up
- 36 Sponge
- 39 Number of sides to a gay symbol
- 40 Like a sourpuss
- 41 Order in advance
- 43 More lemony
- 44 In the recent past
- 47 City in the land of Rimbaud
- 48 "The L Word" creator Chaiken
- 49 Cary of "Robin Hood: Men in Tights"
- 50 Scand. nation
- 51 Cry after getting the shaft
- 52 Gomer's "Encore!"
- 55 Glenn Burke stat
- 56 P on fraternity row

See p. 17 for answers

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◀ Queer Music

Continued from page 22

was on to something.”

O’Hara-Polo said “Drag Queens,” the second single from her debut album, is a chance “to shed some layers of Golden and introduce a new era of me. I’m here, and I have something to say.”

Siena Liggins

“Floozy” (due in late February)

Saginaw native Siena Liggins is based in Atlanta these days, but her Michigan roots shine through on bass-thumping, earnest tracks that often explore Liggins’ love life from a distinctly queer lens.

In 2018, Liggins released “Flowerbomb,” based on her real life experiences with women. As Billboard wrote at the time, “The lyrics to debut single ‘Flowerbomb’ are dripping with swagger: ‘I know that she ain’t doing her job/So when she slip up/I pick the shift up/And put in work overtime.’ Siena Liggins will steal your girl, no question.”

Next up is the single “Floozy,” due for release in late February. “The process of creating ‘Floozy’ was a regenerative out-with-the-old-and-in-with (so much) new energy when I had so little to spare,” Liggins told BTL. “2022 was a year of breakups, pushing me to find myself in a way I had never done before. It forced me to cope by weaving through unearthed affections. And

on the other side of my challenges, I animated those feelings into a series of undeniable bops that I cannot wait for people to find themselves within, as well.

Cory Shorter

“Do It to You” (out now)

In the two years since he released his first full-length project, “Moods,” Cory Shorter has been doing big things, making boss moves and living the dream.

Last year, Shorter performed in the Tony Award-winning Broadway show “Kinky Boots” for Norwegian Cruise Lines. He’s appeared in commercials for automobile makers Ford and Cadillac. Now, there’s “Dusk,” the first of a two-part album, now available on all streaming services (“Before Dusk,” the second installment, is out this spring).

Shorter, who wrote all the tracks on both albums, says the material is “definitely a journey and very relatable.” For his favorite song “Do It to You,” he stacked the harmonies himself and worked closely with producer Vin Ace.

On the albums, which exhibit his growth as an artist, Shorter’s catchy and accessible lyrics are paired with high-energy production.

“I am an actor, as well, so I’m able to put myself in many other people’s shoes and tap into feelings that way,” he said. “I write a lot based on personal experiences. All of ‘Dusk’ were things I’ve gone through.”

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Did you know over 600 Michigan residents test positive for HIV every year? Matrix Human Services operates one of the largest HIV Prevention and Treatment programs in the city of Detroit, providing a full range of services to those in need.



GET YOUR FREE AND CONFIDENTIAL HIV TEST TODAY



Anonymous Testing | At-Home Test Kits | Free Condoms and Lube | PrEP + PEP Services

 877-931-3248  TimeToKnowDetroit.org

 Individualized Health Education + Peer Support

TESTING POSITIVE FOR STDs CAN MEAN A HIGHER RISK OF HIV. WHEN'S THE LAST TIME YOU WERE TESTED? PROTECT YOURSELF AND OTHERS WITH A **FREE HIV TEST**.