

MICHIGAN'S LGBTQ+ NEWS SOURCE SINCE 1993

Between THE LINES Lines™

The Arts Issue

The Art of Being Seen

Detroit Queer Sketch Series models transform vulnerability into visibility through nude figure drawing

By Sarah Bricker Hunt

MARRIAGE EQUALITY AT RISK

How Michigan can protect state rights

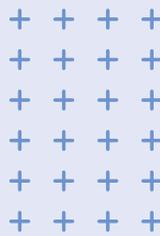
TRANS GIRLHOOD IN TAYLOR SWIFT

Professor finds past in the pop icon's lyrics

DRAG QUEENS THROW DOWN

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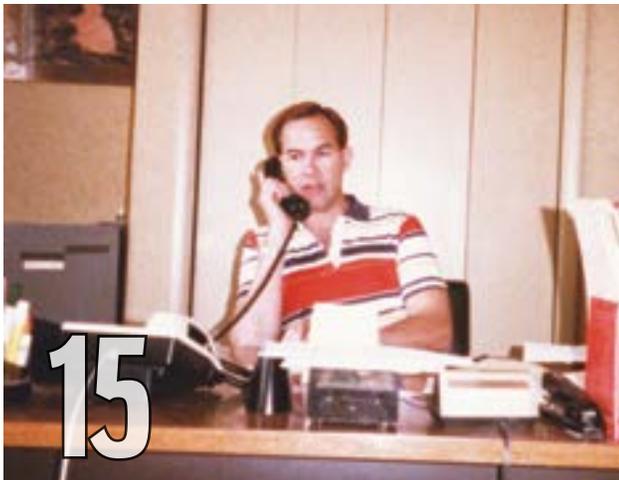
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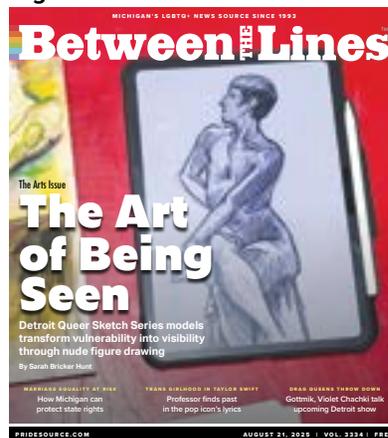


Dr. Benson and Dr. Bornstein



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A sketch of subject Elliott Vargas from a Detroit Queer Sketch Series session.

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5 Queer Things You Can Do Right Now-ish

BY KELLI DUNHAM

August may be cooling off, but queer Michigan is still cranking the emotional thermostat to scalding. Whether your joy comes from belting out an '80s power ballad, twirling under a disco ball or crying cathartic tears into your concert beer — or celery juice superfood mocktail (no judgment either way) — this week's lineup has you covered. We've got legends sharing the stage, bold outfits taking a stand and music that will make your heart ache in the best way. Let's go!



Melissa Etheridge. Photo: Jenny Anderson

Sing Along with Sapphic Icons

Folk-rock icons and queer trailblazers Indigo Girls and Melissa Etheridge are joining forces for the Yes We Are tour. And yes, we are very excited. Expect harmonies that feel like home, anthems that take you back to your college coffeehouse days and maybe a little collective therapy disguised as a sing-along. Whether you're more of a "Closer to Fine" or "Come to My Window" brand of queer, you'll leave with a full heart, sore vocal cords and more memories to keep your pre-existing Indigo Girls and Melissa memories company. Buy a ticket for a younger queer and sing it forward!

Aug. 26, 7:30 p.m., Michigan Lottery Amphitheatre (14900 Metro Pkwy, Sterling Heights). Find tickets at bit.ly/closetofine.



Waltz and Wow at 'Wear Your Truth' Gala

Sequined jumpsuit? Leather cape? Burlap utility-kilt? Full glitter beard? Whatever fashion statement has been waiting in your heart and your closet for a worthy occasion, Equality Michigan's upcoming Wear Your Truth fundraising gala offers the perfect opportunity to support a perfect cause.

"We are encouraging people to wear their boldest, most daring fashion all while supporting advancing LGBTQ+ rights in Michigan." Equality Michigan Senior Director of Communications Leila Farwana told BTL. "Our community is coming together in this act of resilience to show that we are not going anywhere, no matter how hard they try to erase us."

Your ticket directly supports LGBTQ+ rights across the state. Show the world we're here, we're queer and we're not retreating. Except for maybe an hour in the late afternoon for a disco nap.

Sept. 5, 8 p.m., 215 West (215 W. 9 Mile Road, Ferndale). Reserve tickets at bit.ly/weartruth.



Katie Pruitt. Photo: Instagram/
[@katiepruittmusic](https://www.instagram.com/katiepruittmusic)

Sigh and Swoon with Katie Pruitt

If that tissue box you carry around in your backpack hasn't quite been emptied, make sure you find a refill before you head to The Ark to hear Katie Pruitt. Pruitt hasn't put out an album in a bit (no judgment Katie, we've just missed you) and "Mantras," Pruitt's latest, is a mix of emotional intensity and sly self-awareness that will make your queer heart ache.

Expect unironic emotional honesty (actual track name: "Self Sabotage") that invites you in like an old friend. Who, statistically speaking, is probably also an ex.

Sept. 10, 8 p.m., The Ark (316 S. Main St., Ann Arbor). Buy tickets at katiepruitt.com.



Sway and Slay at Sunset Karaoke

Sunset Karaoke isn't your average, slightly awkward, off-key/low-key experience. No, leave it to the queers to take karaoke up a notch. Or a barrelful of notches.

Every Wednesday, Parasol and Staycation bring you live band karaoke with, yes, a full backing band — actual humans playing actual instruments. Plus, there's golden hour lighting and a patio full of cheering queers. Whether you're channeling Pat Benatar or Harry Styles, the Orchid Theatre patio is your stage, the city skyline your backdrop and the crowd your new best friends.

Wednesdays, 8 p.m, Orchid Theatre Patio (141 W. 9 Mile Road, Ferndale). Learn more at linktr.ee/Sunsetkaraoke.



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Manifest Mindfulness

As an ex-nun (long story) gone very astray (like, "GPS can't find me" astray), there's nothing I hate more than a self-help suggestion like "just sit quietly and be present." And yet, annoyingly, meditation is one of few daily practices that actually make my daily life better. Rude.

Meditation isn't one-size-fits-all, especially for queer and trans folks who live with layers of personal and collective trauma. Sitting still in a quiet room might not feel safe or even possible, but that doesn't mean the patriarchy gets to take this practice (and its well-documented positive impacts) from us.

Mindfulness can be noticing your breath while making coffee (or, let's be real, kombucha), taking a slow walk or throwing yourself into your favorite hobby like it owes you money. Start small, honor your limits and remember: Mindfulness is for staying present, not pretending oppression doesn't exist.

Ongoing, start with the resources at queermindfulness.org.

Supreme Court Asked to Overturn Marriage Equality as Michigan GOP Escalates Attacks

Jim Obergefell warned BTL readers it would happen, and now Kim Davis is asking the Supreme Court to destroy his legacy

BY SARAH BRICKER HUNT

A decade after the U.S. Supreme Court extended marriage rights to same-sex couples nationwide, the justices will consider this fall whether to take up a case that explicitly asks them to overturn that landmark decision. The petition comes from Kim Davis, the former Kentucky county clerk who was jailed for six days in 2015 after refusing to issue marriage licenses to gay couples on religious grounds.

In her appeal, Davis, who has been married four times, argues that the court's decision in *Obergefell v. Hodges* was "egregiously wrong" and calls Justice Anthony Kennedy's majority opinion "legal fiction." Her attorney claims the ruling must be "corrected," marking the first time since 2015 that the court has been formally asked to overturn the marriage equality decision.

For Jim Obergefell, whose name is forever linked to marriage equality through the case that changed history, the current threats cut deep. The weight of potentially losing what he and his late husband John Arthur fought so desperately for is almost unbearable. "I do not trust the Supreme Court," he told BTL earlier this year. "It isn't a question of if a case to overturn marriage equality will make it to the Supreme Court, but when."

Obergefell's journey with his late husband John Arthur, who died from ALS, exemplifies how love and desperation drove the marriage equality movement forward. Their story — racing against time and illness to secure legal recognition of their relationship — became a beacon of hope for countless families facing similar struggles.

"Marriage equality brought dignity, security and a sense of belonging to people across our nation," Obergefell wrote in a BTL op-ed marking the ninth anniversary of the Obergefell



Jim Obergefell in 2015. Photo: AP/BTL archives

decision. He continued, reflecting on the profound impact of their fight: "A young woman once told me that, if it weren't for Obergefell v. Hodges, she would have committed suicide. She found a reason to keep living in that court decision, rather than end her life, and countless others undoubtedly found hope when before they had none."

But Obergefell's case didn't emerge in a vacuum. In Michigan, another couple had already been laying the groundwork for the historic victory that would change everything. In 2012, April DeBoer and Jayne Rowse, a lesbian couple raising children together, initially sued the state for the right to jointly adopt their kids. When a federal judge suggested they broaden their challenge to include marriage itself, they took that leap of faith — a decision that would ultimately help topple marriage bans across the nation. Their case, *DeBoer v. Snyder*, became one of the four cases consolidated into *Obergefell v. Hodges* in 2015.

The profound impact of these personal stories cannot

be overstated. Obergefell's case, along with the courage of couples like April DeBoer and Jayne Rowse, transformed not just law but hearts and minds across America. "Over these nine years, hundreds of thousands of couples have married, and thousands of families have formed," he wrote in the op-ed. "Whether they want marriage or not, queer people see a future that includes them."

The importance of their fight resonates with devastating clarity when considering Michigan's painful history with marriage equality. Unlike many states that eventually embraced LGBTQ+ rights, Michigan didn't just resist them — it actively crushed hopes and dreams for decades.

Michigan's current and historic opposition to marriage equality

Michigan's resistance to

marriage equality runs deep, leaving scars on generations of LGBTQ+ families who were told their love didn't matter. In June 1995, the Michigan House of Representatives voted 88-14 to ban same-sex marriage in the state, while the Michigan State Senate voted 31-2 in favor. The same month, the House approved by a 74-28 vote a bill banning recognition of out-of-state same-sex marriages. Gov. John Engler signed both bills into law, effectively erasing LGBTQ+ families from legal existence.

The cruelty escalated in 2004 when voters approved a constitutional amendment banning same-sex marriage and civil unions in the state with 59% of the vote. This wasn't just a rejection of marriage equality — it was a constitutional wall built specifically to ensure LGBTQ+ families could never find safety or recognition in their own state.

When marriage equality briefly flickered to life in Michigan following a federal court ruling in

March 2014, the window of hope was heartbreakingly short. Only 323 same-sex couples managed to marry before the Sixth Circuit Court of Appeals slammed that window shut. Those couples faced months of agonizing uncertainty about whether their marriages would survive, their love reduced to a legal question mark until the federal government finally stepped in to validate what should never have been in doubt.

It wasn't until the Supreme Court's Obergefell decision in June 2015 that Michigan was forced to recognize marriage equality — a ruling the state had actively fought against.

Michigan Republicans' recent opposition to marriage equality continues this heartbreaking pattern of rejection and cruelty. Five Michigan House Republicans voted against the federal Respect for Marriage Act in 2022, which enshrines marriage equality in federal law and provides additional protections. This vote came after the conservative Supreme Court signaled that same-sex marriage could be targeted following the overturning of *Roe v. Wade* — a chilling reminder that hard-won rights can vanish overnight.

The most visible face of this hatred has been Rep. Josh Schriver, R-Oxford, whose relentless attacks on LGBTQ+ rights have escalated throughout 2025 with a viciousness that takes the breath away. In February, Schriver introduced a resolution urging the Supreme Court to overturn Obergefell, using language so inflammatory it seemed designed to wound: targeting "gays, queers, transsexuals, polygamists and other perverts" and claiming they were advancing "attacks on our children."

That press conference became a defining moment when out state Sen. Jeremy Moss, D-Southfield, refused to let such hatred go

See **Obergefell**, page 14

Michigan Must Act Before Marriage Rights Disappear

From defending Obergefell to changing our constitution, here's how to safeguard same-sex marriage



BY ELI SAVIT

I was in the courtroom in 2015 when the Supreme Court formally recognized a constitutional right to same-sex marriage in Obergefell. At the time, I was a law clerk for Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg — one of a handful of recent law school grads selected to help justices with research, case evaluation and drafting opinions. When the justices took the bench that morning and the Chief Justice announced “Justice Kennedy has the opinion in Obergefell v. Hodges,” there was an audible gasp in the courtroom. Earlier than expected, the Court surprised the nation by announcing, on a beautiful Friday morning in early summer, that the Constitution protects every person’s right to marry the person they love.

Soon, people flocked to the Court to celebrate love and equality. Though law clerks are supposed to keep a low profile, a handful of us removed our court ID badges and surreptitiously joined the throngs outside. (I forget if I asked Justice Ginsburg her permission, but I’m quite confident she wouldn’t have cared.) We watched as the D.C. Gay Men’s Chorus sang a beautiful cappella rendition of “America, the Beautiful.” All around, celebrants joyously waved American flags and Pride flags as sunshine glimmered off the Supreme Court’s immaculate marble steps.

It was a striking moment. Only about a decade earlier, before



the Lawrence v. Texas decision that struck down sodomy laws, Supreme Court case law provided that the men singing that ode to America could be imprisoned for being with the person they loved. But that day, the same institution had extended the equal dignity of marriage to every American. It brought to mind the famous quote from Martin Luther King: “The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends towards justice.”

But does it always?

For the first time since Obergefell, marriage equality is now back before the Supreme Court. Earlier this month, former Kentucky county clerk Kim Davis filed a petition asking the Court to eliminate the constitutional right to same-sex marriage. Given these developments, it’s imperative that Michigan act to protect that right here at home.

To get one thing out of the way:

It’s far from clear that the Court will actually grant Davis’ request. Davis’ petition was just that: a petition. She’s been sued (and lost) for refusing to issue marriage licenses to same-sex couples. She’s now asked the Court to hear her case and reconsider marriage equality. But any petition for Supreme Court review faces long odds. The Supreme Court grants only about 60 of the thousands of petitions it receives annually, and typically considers

only issues already litigated in lower courts. The lower courts in Davis’ case never addressed whether Obergefell should be overturned.

Still, even if the Court declines to hear the case, marriage equality might be on shaky ground. Justice Clarence Thomas has publicly written that he wants to reconsider Obergefell and all cases relying on

See [Eli Savit](#), page 11

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The Art of Being Seen

How these Detroit Queer Sketch Series models found empowerment through nude figure drawing

BY SARAH BRICKER HUNT

The first time Elliott Vargas posed nude for artists, it wasn't at the Detroit Queer Sketch Series. The 27-year-old had already tried their hand at modeling at Detroit's venerable Scarab Club, coaxed by something deeper than exhibitionism.

"It's extremely validating in a way for your self-confidence," Vargas explained. "I do it because it honestly boosts my confidence a bit and makes me enjoy my body image more."

When Vargas, a professional healthcare coordinator and professional dancer, heard about a sketch series designed exclusively for queer people, something clicked. "When I heard about this one, I was like, 'Oh my gosh, even better,'" Vargas said.

In a world that often feels hostile to queer bodies, DQSS offers something radical: a space where being completely exposed as exactly who you are becomes an act of courage, artistry and community celebration.

DQSS, founded over three years ago by James "Staycation" and co-organizer Chris Gorski, meets twice monthly at Gorski's Detroit GT studio in Ferndale. The format is simple: Models pose for a series of short sketches — typically lasting between two and 10 minutes — followed by one longer 30-minute pose. At the end of each session, all artwork gets displayed gallery-style, and the model gets to choose their three favorite pieces while chatting with the artists about their work.

The artists themselves represent an incredibly diverse mix of experience levels and backgrounds. The combination of newcomers and formally trained artists has created something truly unique and accessible, given the typical costs involved with adult art classes.

Finding confidence through vulnerability

What made Vargas's experience at DQSS particularly meaningful was timing. They chose to model for the first time after having top surgery, turning what could have been a vulnerable moment into something deeply affirming.



A sketch of Derek Davis from a DQSS session.

"It was extremely validating and almost empowering because I had never modeled like that before," they said. "It felt right to do it in that setting because it was for queer people and this is something that I'm very sensitive about, so that was really affirming."

Derek Davis echoes Vargas' sentiment. The former Mr. Trans Michigan had never done nude modeling before his session in

2023, but like Vargas, he waited until after his top surgery when his scars had healed. Davis, an activist, public speaker and the creator of the annual SOHO Leather Weekend in Ferndale, currently serves on the entertainment committee for Lansing Pride. He saw his participation as more than personal empowerment.

"I guess it's kind of like, hey, this is what an example of a trans person's body looks

like. Obviously, not everybody's body is the same. But this is what my body looks like," Davis said. "I don't mind being the example of someone's first trans person that they may have either met or drawn."

Meanwhile, content manager Zach Brooke came to modeling from a different angle.

See **The Art of Being Seen**, page 22

FEEDBACK

Dear BTL Editorial Team,

I recently read your article highlighting the Michigan Democratic leadership's failure to deliver real protections for the transgender community ("Even in Trans-Friendlier Michigan, Democratic Allies Are Failing Us" by Anni Arbour, Aug. 7 issue), and I want to sincerely thank you for publishing it. Your coverage was both honest and necessary.

Too often, trans rights are treated as bargaining chips instead of basic human rights, especially by those who claim to be our allies. Michigan's Democratic trifecta had a historic opportunity to enact long-overdue protections like safe name-change processes, ID corrections and health care access for trans people. My spouse

has faced years of difficulties with their ID and name change, and the fact that Democratic leadership failed to act decisively doesn't just disappoint, it sends a message.

I'm reaching out because I want to be part of the solution. I'm currently running for Michigan's 7th Congressional District, and trans rights will be a central issue in my campaign. I believe it's time for leaders who aren't afraid to speak plainly and legislate boldly in defense of our community.

Thank you again for using your platform to tell the truth. It matters more than ever.

In solidarity,
Elyon Badger, Candidate, Michigan's 7th Congressional District (2026)

◀ Eli Savit

Continued from page 7

"substantive due process" — the doctrine protecting fundamental rights like marriage from government restriction. When the Court overruled Roe in 2022, it rejected substantive due process for abortion rights, signaling that other fundamental rights, including marriage, may now be at risk.

If Obergefell falls, each state would be allowed to decide for itself whether to allow same-sex marriage. Michigan, lamentably, still maintains a constitutional provision defining marriage as between one man and one woman. If Obergefell is overruled, that constitutional provision would spring back into effect, preventing Michigan from blessing same-sex marriages.

This moment calls for a three-pronged effort to protect marriage equality in Michigan.

First, we must fight to defend Obergefell itself. In 2015, Michigan's attorney general led the charge against same-sex marriage, arguing before the Court that states should be permitted to bar it. That was wrong then, and it's wrong now. Our next attorney general (and yes, I am running for that position) must take the opposite approach and defend people's constitutional right to marry the person they love.

Second, we must defend existing marriages. The 2022 Respect for Marriage Act requires states to recognize any marriage that was legally valid when celebrated. But if Obergefell is overturned, opponents will inevitably challenge that Act's constitutionality. Our next attorney

general must fight such efforts to ensure existing marriages endure and that Michiganders can marry in other states and have those unions recognized here.

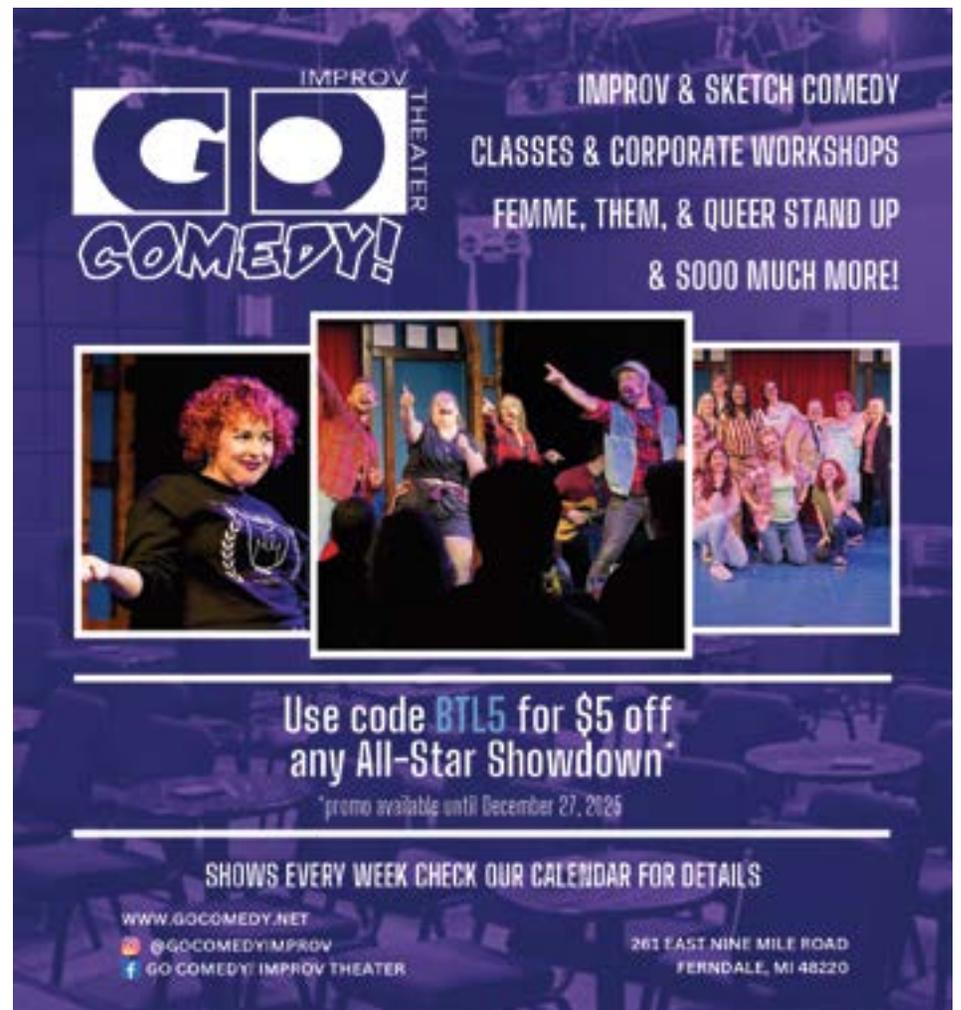
Third, we cannot rely solely on the courts to preserve marriage equality in Michigan. Though our state constitution currently provides that marriage is reserved only for heterosexual couples, it also provides that "all political power is inherent in the people" and grants the people the authority to amend our Michigan Constitution via a ballot initiative.

After Roe was overturned in 2022, Michigan voters acted. We amended our state constitution, passed the Reproductive Freedom For All ballot initiative, and protected abortion rights in our state. A similar effort is needed to defend the right to marry. Nearly 70% of Michiganders support same-sex marriage. We should get rid of our constitution's discriminatory definition of marriage now, before it can ever spring back into effect. Only then can we be sure that every couple in Michigan will retain the right to get married in our state.

I still believe in the promise of that sunny June day 10 years ago, when the Supreme Court recognized that love is love. But we are in a period of retrenchment for civil rights in this country.

If we want the moral arc of the universe to keep bending towards justice here in Michigan, we must bend that arc ourselves. And we must do so before it's too late.

Washtenaw County Prosecuting Attorney Eli Savit is running to become Michigan's next attorney general in 2026.



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Gavin Newsom Is Having a Social Media Moment, But He's Still a Creep



BY D'ANNE WITKOWSKI

I have spent a lot of time in the car lately. I've just returned from a trip Up North (which, in Michigan, is basically anything above the Zilwaukee bridge) where I spent time with my wife and son, my mom, my three sisters and their respective spouses, and three little kids. It was a nice trip. But I'm exhausted.

One thing I didn't spend much time doing while Up North was paying a lot of attention to the news. But now that I am home I see that people are talking about California Gov. Gavin Newsom a lot. And, honestly, that is making me feel even more exhausted.

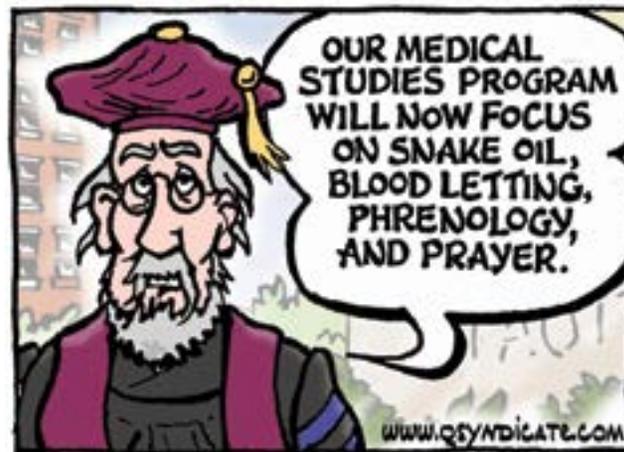
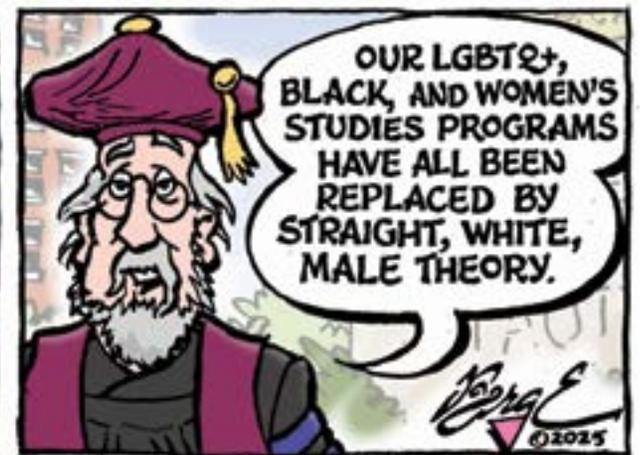
In case you missed it, Newsom's office has been "trolling" Trump by posting on X in a style that mirrors Trump's own ALL CAPS rants on Truth Social, even ending the posts with, "THANK YOU FOR YOUR ATTENTION TO THIS MATTER," which is Trump's sign off.

"DONALD 'TACO' TRUMP, AS MANY CALL HIM, 'MISSED' THE DEADLINE!!! CALIFORNIA WILL NOW DRAW NEW, MORE 'BEAUTIFUL MAPS,' THEY WILL BE HISTORIC AS THEY WILL END THE TRUMP PRESIDENCY (DEMS TAKE BACK THE HOUSE!)," Newsom's office posted on Aug 12.

“

It would be so nice to feel some glimmer of hope right now. But I sure as hell am not finding hope in Gavin Newsom.

Now, if this all sounds like a string of nonsense to you, congratulations on practicing self-care. Let me attempt to explain. "TACO" means "Trump Always Chickens Out," which cropped up during the rollout of the Trump tariffs. "The deadline" refers to a letter Newsom sent to Trump asking him to call off redistricting plans in Texas that are



aimed to boost the number of Republican seats in the state, thereby sealing the deal on a Republican congressional majority in the 2026 midterm elections. Trump did no such thing, thus Newsom is moving ahead with plans to play the same trick in California in order to increase the number of blue seats in the state in order to get a Democratic majority in the 2026 midterm elections.

On Aug. 14, Newsom's office posted, "DONALD IS FINISHED — HE IS NO LONGER 'HOT,'" throwing in a dig at Trump's hand size ("SO TINY").

The response to these X posts have been what you'd probably expect: pissing off Trump supporters and causing the Blue Wave social media sphere much glee.

On Bluesky I'm seeing posts that say things like, "#GavinNewsom is the hero America needs right now!" and "In a world full of Donald Trumps, be a Gavin Newsom."

I wish I could share this enthusiasm. I really do. It would be so nice to feel some glimmer of hope right now.

But I sure as hell am not finding hope in Gavin Newsom.

Granted, I used to think quite highly of the guy. Back in 2004, when Newsom was the mayor of San Francisco, he gave the go-ahead to the city clerk to issue marriage licenses for same-sex couples. It was a BFD! This move, though eventually smacked down by the courts, led to legal marriage

equality in California in 2008.

Apparently Newsom thought he could use this undeniably cool move to make liberals fall for him forever and ever. So much so that in just the last couple of years alone, he has done some pretty unforgivable shit. First, as governor he basically banned being homeless. In fact, he personally helped clear away homeless encampments in California, throwing away all the worldly possessions of unhoused people.

Then he started a podcast in which he interviewed right-wing extremists like Charlie Kirk and Steve Bannon, giving them a free platform for their heinous ideas. During his interview with Kirk, Newsom essentially agreed with Kirk on transgender issues, including transgender athletes saying, "I think it's an issue of fairness; I completely agree with you on that. It is an issue of fairness, it's deeply unfair."

Now maybe, MAYBE, if the right's entire issue with transgender people was centered on sports and sports alone, Newsom's response could be interpreted as kind of reasonable. Except that the right's concern with transgender people, especially trans women, isn't that sometimes they play tennis, it's that they exist at all. Remember, the right's whole trans panic began in the bathroom. They didn't want trans women to be allowed in women's restrooms. And, of course, they still don't. They also don't want trans people to be around children, serve in the military or have access to healthcare.

They want to erase trans people entirely, from our history, our present and our future. And THAT is deeply unfair, Gov. Newsom. That is what you should have said to Kirk (though not inviting him on your show would've been even better).

So, yeah, Newsom may be having a moment. But if the guy won't protect the homeless or trans people, what the hell makes you think he'll protect you?

Highland Park Teen Charged With Felony Murder, Hate Crime in Death of Trans Woman

An 18-year-old Highland Park man has been charged with felony murder and a hate crime in the death of Christina Hayes, a 28-year-old transgender woman from Taylor who was found dead behind a Detroit laundromat in June. Malique Javon Fails, 18, was arraigned and remanded to jail Monday morning in 36th District Court on charges of felony murder, larceny from a person and hate crime with gender identity bias. The judge called Fails a "significant danger to the community."

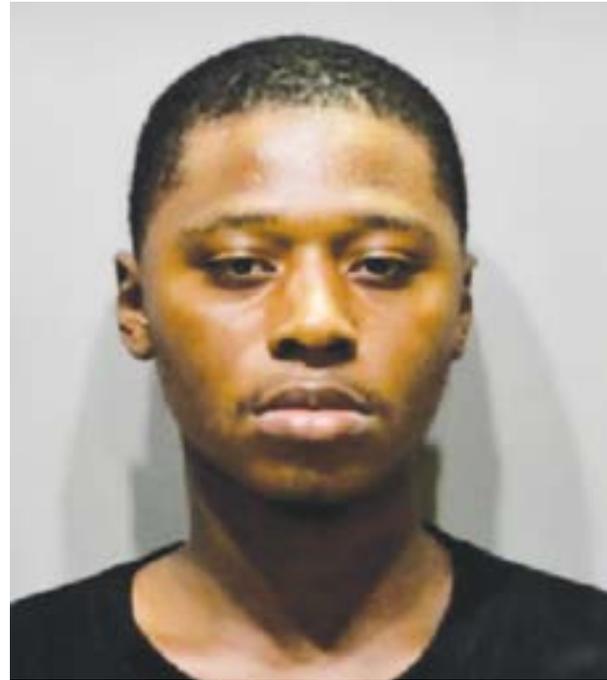
Detroit police found Hayes deceased from injuries to her face and neck in an alley behind a laundromat in the 17600 block of Woodward Avenue on June 21. According to the Wayne County Prosecutor's Office, Fails allegedly

gave Hayes money in exchange for sexual acts at approximately 4:30 a.m. on June 21.

Prosecutors said that during the transaction, which occurred in an area where police frequently arrest trans women for prostitution, Fails learned Hayes was transgender, which allegedly led to him strangling her to death. Fails then reportedly took back the money, along with Hayes' shoes and cellphone, before fleeing. Security footage later captured Fails attempting to sell Hayes' phone at a kiosk, according to prosecutors. Detroit police arrested Fails on Aug. 15.

"This case represents a continuing pattern of vicious attacks and murders on trans women of color," Prosecutor Kym Worthy said in a news release. "The epidemic against the lives of trans women of color is a tragedy," Julisa Abad, Wayne County prosecutor community engagement liaison, told BTL.

Fails' probable cause conference is scheduled for Aug. 26, with a preliminary examination set for Sept. 2.



Malique Javon Fails. Photo: Detroit Police Department



Kathy Kozachenko. Photo: Ann Arbor District Library/The Ann Arbor News

Ann Arbor to Unveil LGBTQ+ Historical Marker at City Hall

The city of Ann Arbor will unveil a new historical marker honoring its LGBTQ+ trailblazers and anti-discrimination laws from the 1970s. The ceremony, taking place on the south side of Larcom City Hall at 11 a.m. Sept. 4, will feature remarks from city officials and community leaders.

The marker will commemorate the landmark efforts of Nancy Wechsler, Jerry DeGriek and Kathy Kozachenko, who made history as the first openly LGBTQ+ elected officials in the United States. It will also recognize the city's pioneering Human Rights Ordinance, which protected LGBTQ+ community members from housing discrimination.

Mayor Christopher Taylor praised the city's commitment to civil rights in a news release, writing, "This marker is not just about honoring the past, but about reaffirming our commitment to equity, dignity and inclusion for all."

Michigan Joins Lawsuit Against Trump's Trans Youth Health Care Restrictions

Michigan Attorney General Dana Nessel has joined 16 states and D.C. in a lawsuit challenging President Donald Trump's executive orders

restricting federal funding for institutions providing transgender health care to youth under 19. The orders, deemed "illegal and dangerous" by Nessel, have led to Department of Justice subpoenas and care disruptions nationwide.

Medical experts emphasize the necessity of such care, warning that denying it worsens mental health outcomes. The lawsuit seeks to block enforcement, arguing the orders violate

the Constitution and exceed federal authority. Equality Michigan praised Nessel's action, stating "Health care decisions for kids should be made by parents and doctors, not by politicians."

The coalition, led by attorneys general from New York, California, Massachusetts, Illinois and Connecticut, aims to protect Michigan families and health care providers from what they describe as devastating federal overreach threatening essential care.

Queer Young Adults Say 'I Do' to Marriage Dreams

A new Pew Research Center survey reveals that 59% of never-married LGBTQ+ American adults under 50 aspire to tie the knot someday, nearly matching the 63% of non-LGBTQ+ adults with the same goal. Cupid's arrow strikes younger, with 67% of LGBTQ+ folks aged 18-29 dreaming of wedding bells, compared to 48% of those 30-49. The findings paint a hopeful picture of queer young people envisioning futures full of love and commitment.

SCOTUS Move Signals Potential Threat to Marriage Equality

The Supreme Court has requested a response from plaintiffs in Kim Davis' appeal, which challenges the Obergefell same-sex marriage decision. With the Court's conservative majority, this move indicates they are closely considering the case, raising concerns about the future of marriage equality. The plaintiffs' response is due in October, and many are now watching to see if the Court will agree to hear the case this fall.

Sniffies Suitcase Saga Has Queer TikTok in Stitches

Queer TikTok is abuzz after Sniffies' "Twink of Staff" Micah Eames lost his company suitcase, packed with about 20 jockstraps, sex toys and the coveted "company paddle." Eames, donning six-inch pumps, shared his hilarious tale of woe on the platform. For their part, Sniffies promises to name a glory hole after whoever returns the bag.





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◀ **Obergefell**
Continued from page 6

unchallenged. “This was just as buffoonish as I expected it to be,” Moss told BTL after Schriver fled without taking questions. “I think that people respect their LGBTQ+ neighbors, their LGBTQ+ family members. These marriages have been the law of the land for 10 years. They contribute to family security. They contribute to economic security.”

The attacks on LGBTQ+ rights have prompted fierce pushback from Michigan’s Democratic leadership. Gov. Gretchen Whitmer, whose openly gay daughter has made these issues deeply personal for her, posted on Threads Aug. 11: “They are coming for our rights, one by one. I will not let bigots rip away rights from our LGBTQ+ community, including some of the people I love most in the world. Michigan will always be a place where everyone is free to love who they love and be who they are. That’s just the way it’s going to be.”

“We must do better as citizens of this nation. If we don’t, I fear not only marriage equality but our democracy itself will come to an end.”

— Jim Obergefell

Schriver’s attacks have continued with a persistence that feels personal and cruel, with his recent introduction of HB 4751, which would strip sexual orientation and gender identity protections from the Elliott-Larsen Civil Rights Act — attempting to erase the anti-discrimination protections that took advocates over 50 years to secure for LGBTQ+ Michiganders.

As threats to marriage equality mount nationally, advocates carry the emotional weight of knowing how quickly progress can be reversed. The fear is real, visceral and rooted in lived experience of loss. “It is foolish to believe the right to marry is safe, especially because the U.S. Supreme Court overturned *Roe v. Wade* in 2022 with their *Dobbs* decision,” Obergefell warned in his op-ed. “This was the first time in our nation’s history the court rescinded a right instead of affirming one. This court has turned its back on its bedrock principle of precedent because of personal attitudes, not law.”

“We must do better as citizens of this nation. If we don’t, I fear not only marriage equality but our democracy itself will come to an end,” he continued.

While the current threats from the Supreme Court and conservative legislators are real and terrifying, Michigan’s transformation from a state that actively crushed LGBTQ+ dreams to one that protects them offers a glimmer of hope in dark times. The question now is whether advocates can maintain the fierce determination needed to protect hard-won gains against an increasingly hostile conservative movement.

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Terry Ryan: Connector, Advocate, Guide

Community remembers Michigan's first AIDS hotline staffer and longtime advocate, who became a spiritual teacher and mentor

BY SARAH BRICKER HUNT

Terrance "Terry" Patrick Ryan packed several lifetimes of service into his 80 years, leaving behind a legacy that spans from the earliest days of the AIDS crisis to the modern HIV prevention landscape in Michigan. When he died March 17, our community lost not only a tireless advocate but also a spiritual teacher whose impact reached far beyond the realm of public health.



(Left) Terry Ryan. (Right) Terry Ryan at his office in the early days of HIV. Courtesy photo

In the late 1980s, Ryan was working as a textile buyer when he encountered a crisis that would define the rest of his life. AIDS was still called GRID — Gay-Related Immune Disorder — and fear dominated public understanding of the disease. Despite the stigma and uncertainty, Ryan began volunteering for Wellness Networks in September 1985, Michigan's first organization to address the emerging epidemic.

By early 1986, the organization needed to hire its first full-time employee to run the hotline and manage office duties. That first employee was Terry Ryan. He became Michigan's first full-time paid employee of an AIDS service organization, staffing the statewide Michigan AIDS Hotline and establishing support groups and education programs.

"Terry was never interested in accepting an executive director position at that time," recalled Ken Owens, who worked alongside Ryan in HIV/AIDS advocacy. "He was more interested in 'doing the work' and helping people versus management and politics."

At his core, Ryan was a connector. John Joannette, who was close friends with Ryan for more than 30 years and worked in the HIV community at the Michigan AIDS Fund in the late 1990s, said that Terry's most endearing quality was his ability to be "a connector of health and healing. And most importantly, a connector of loving care between well meaning people on this earth."

Ryan recruited and trained volunteers for hospital visitation programs and buddy systems, creating networks of care for people facing what was then considered a death sentence. As the epidemic evolved, so did his role. He worked as a state-certified HIV counselor for the Macomb County Health Department while serving as a consultant for the Michigan AIDS Fund, launching an AmeriCorps team that trained hundreds of AIDS educators and activists.

When Ryan became CEO of the Michigan AIDS Coalition in January 2008, the role represented a significant shift for someone who had always shied away from the spotlight. As Joannette noted, "In his various groundbreaking roles within the HIV community, he preferred to always be in the background, just getting up every day and doing the hard work of making sure individuals in our community had the programs and services they needed."

"Terry was not only a dear friend, but an incredible mentor to me both in my nonprofit professional life and in my

personal life," Joannette added.

Under Ryan's leadership, MAC conducted thousands of workshops and training sessions, reaching more than 500,000 people. Ryan championed the organization's merger with Matrix Human Services in December 2015, where he continued working until his retirement in 2021.

While building his career in public health, Ryan pursued another calling. His spiritual journey began in the late 1970s when he and longtime friend Jim Hafer began exploring Spiritualism. Around 1982 or 1983, Ryan first learned about Camp Chesterfield in Indiana, the home of the Indiana Association of Spiritualists. Ryan began studying at Camp Chesterfield in Indiana, home of the Indiana Association of Spiritualists. Ryan became a resident medium and teacher there in 1995. He was ordained on Oct. 28, 2000 as a minister through The Indiana Association of Spiritualists.

"Ryan's spiritual journey continued as he became a gifted teacher at Camp Chesterfield. He was a talented clairvoyant medium," Hafer said. "He was always passionate about Spiritualism and all its teachings."

Owens observed Ryan's unique balance. "It is rare to find an individual like Terry who was so grounded and balanced in both the left-brain linear aspects of business and daily life, along with being equally as free and expressive in right-brain creative spiritual pursuits," he said.

Ryan's dual commitment to public health and spiritual development offers a model for holistic service — recognizing that people facing health crises need not only medical information and social services, but also meaning, connection and hope. Throughout his career, Ryan remained what colleagues remember as a "gentle giant" and mentor, someone who connected people and missions to solve problems and serve the community.

Visit pridesource.com for an extended tribute and to view a gallery of images.

Celebration of life services will be held 2-3:30 p.m. Saturday, Aug. 23 at Royal Oak Women's Club (404 S. Pleasant St., Royal Oak), with an "Afterglow" at 4 p.m. at 215 West (215 W. Nine Mile Road, Ferndale). A second service will be held at 3 p.m. Saturday, Oct. 18 at Camp Chesterfield Chapel (50 Lincoln Drive, Chesterfield, Indiana). Visit revterryryan.com for updates.

SPONSORED EDITORIAL

TRUMP INSTILLS FEAR IN THE LGBTQ+ COMMUNITY, BUT WE CAN COMBAT IT

BY GREGORY JOHNSON

Licensed master social worker with The Center for Relationship Health in Royal Oak



President Trump has been quoted as saying, "there are only two genders," and his actions are echoing those words, creating intense fear among the LGBTQ+ community. His opposition to diversity and inclusion has millions of Americans legitimately afraid.

It seems as if a relentless and unprecedented attack targeted on the LGBTQ+ community is gaining dangerously rapid momentum with no signs of slowing. The Trump administration's 300-plus anti-LGBTQIA actions, statements and policies (as reported by GLAAD) are alienating these individuals, forcing many into isolation and pushing countless more over the ledge emotionally.

Mental health therapists at The Center for Relationship Health in Royal Oak now are seeing almost double the number of LGBTQ+ clients who are breaking down emotionally, desperate for help and hope. They fear public backlash and hate with nowhere to turn because they justifiably feel the government is not protecting them.

I am seeing clients who are afraid to leave their home, who are experiencing hypervigilance and flashbacks from past traumas. They are suffering from anxiety and depression. Many won't go to work and stay inside their homes, isolated from the public's judging eyes.

To help maintain our own mental health during these precarious times, I have found neuroplasticity extremely helpful.

Neuroplasticity is the brain's ability to reorganize or rewire its connections and create new networks in our brain that can respond positively to what is happening in the world that negatively influences our thoughts. Through neuroplasticity, we can learn to adapt in a positive way to negative messages. Our brains have the flexibility to update, reprogram, change and adapt.

To break off the negative thoughts and feelings from your brain, try the following:

- Reduce your exposure to the news, which only perpetuates your fear.
- Carve out quiet time for you to reconnect with all that is good in your life.
- Prioritize face-to-face interactions with people who support you, accept you and love you.
- Seek professional help from a therapist trained to work with LGBTQIA individuals.

At The Center for Relationship Health, approximately 70 percent of our therapists are part of the LGBTQ+ community. We not only have specialized training in working with this community, but we also understand you and the experiences you are struggling to manage on your own because we, too, are going through similar issues. The center is a safe place for you to seek help, advice and resources that can improve your mental health and your life. You are surrounded by people you can trust.

At the center we provide the following gender-affirming resources: access to HRT referrals, referral letters for medical procedures and trauma-informed therapy by therapists specially trained in this modality.

Take care of you! No one should live in fear. Practice neuroplasticity. It is a natural gift that will help you heal, grow and adapt to unwanted challenges like the ones we face today.

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Queer and Immigrant Artists, Reclaimed

University of Michigan exhibition celebrates Carmen Herrera and Leon Polk Smith, artists who defied the margins

BY BRIDGETTE M. REDMAN

Carmen Herrera and Leon Polk Smith had a lot in common. They were neighbors. They were artists. They were pioneers in the geometric abstraction movement.

And both struggled for the recognition their work deserved because of their identities.

Now the work of the two friends and colleagues will be on display at the University of Michigan Museum of Art from Aug. 30 to Jan. 4 in an exhibition titled “Both Sides of the Line: Carmen Herrera and Leon Polk Smith,” curated by Dana Miller.

It’s the first major exhibition which shows their works jointly, though Miller said they both had items in a small show together in 1975 in a harpsichord factory. That exhibition had three works by Smith and one by Herrera.

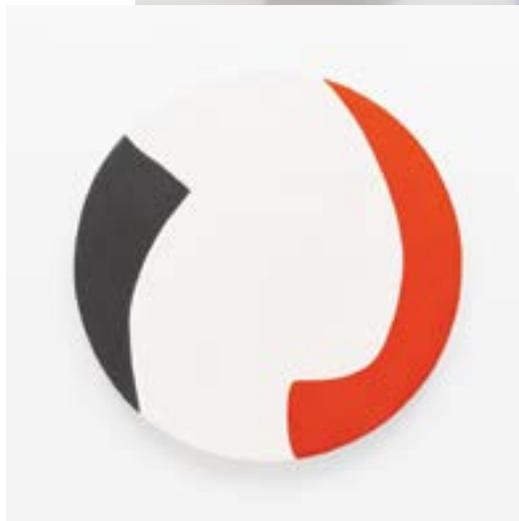
Smith, a gay artist of Cherokee heritage, was born in 1906 in Indian Territory, a year before Oklahoma became a state. Inspired by his heritage and artists like Dutch painter Piet Mondrian, he used geometry and space in a way that became the foundation of the Hard-Edge Movement. By the time he died in 1996, he was a recognized artist whose work was in many major museums.

The two artists met in 1964 where they became friends and confidants, frequently championing each other’s work, according to The Leon Polk Smith Foundation website.

Meanwhile, Herrera, born in 1915, was a Cuban immigrant who developed her art in Cuba and Paris before moving to New York. While she studied architecture and wove that training into her work, she did not receive recognition for her artistic talent until late in life. By the time she



Leon Polk Smith, “Six Involvements in One,” 1966, acrylic on canvas mounted on wood panel. Photo: Lisson Gallery/Leon Polk Smith Foundation



Leon Polk Smith, “Okie,” 1957, oil on canvas. Photo: Lisson Gallery/Mark Waldhauser/Leon Polk Smith Foundation

died at the age of 106 in 2022, her work was selling for millions of dollars.

Miller is one of the foremost

experts on Herrera, having researched her extensively and collaborated with her on exhibitions during the later years of the artist’s life. So when U-M approached her about a major gift from a donor — including works by both Herrera and Smith — she was eager to take on the challenge.

The title of the show was taken from a 1964 quote by Smith: “I am not just drawing one form; I am drawing two forms with one line, and I am having to think of both sides of the line, feel both sides, know both sides and one side is no more important to me than

the other.”

Miller was drawn to Smith’s approach to space, which echoes how both artists described the act of drawing a line as the starting point for all their work.

Much of the conversation around Smith, Miller said, focuses on his Oklahoma roots — the vast landscapes and open skies. While that influence is undeniable, she believes there’s more beneath the surface.

“When you look more deeply at his works and the way he speaks about his work from the ’60s on when he’s in New York, when he and Carmen Herrera are

neighbors on 19th Street, you see that he’s interested in the notions of space and architecture and all kinds of urban environmental influences.”

She draws parallels to Herrera, an artist for whom the conventions of architecture were very important. An interest in architectural urban spaces — built environments — were common to both artists.

The exhibition explores how the two artists advanced modern art by redefining its visual language, while also centering identity,

See **Both Sides**, page 26

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How Taylor Swift's Music Gave a Trans Scholar Her Girlhood

Harvard professor and poet Stephanie Burt explores how Swift's music offers a window into the girlhood experiences she never had

BY CHRIS AZZOPARDI

When Harvard professor and celebrated poet Stephanie Burt listens to Taylor Swift's "Fifteen," she doesn't just hear a bittersweet teenage memory wrapped in twangy chords and locker-lined hallways. She hears the sound of a girlhood she never got to live but finally can.

"I have listened to 'Fifteen' over and over and over, of course," Burt tells BTL, speaking about her new book examining Swift's evolution as a songwriter and pop icon. "I am told not just by my friends who were relatively popular in high school who were cis girls that that's what it's like, but also, at this point, tens of millions of cis girls who I'll never meet."

As a trans woman who transitioned in adulthood, Swift's music unlocks something powerful for Burt: access to the emotional landscape of a teenage girl, one that once felt out of reach.

No wonder the track resonates with her at 54. "I've found time can heal most anything, and you just might find who you're supposed to be," Swift sings, adding, "I didn't know who I was supposed to be, at 15."

That kind of deeply personal connection isn't mentioned at all in "Taylor's Version: The Poetic and Musical Genius of Taylor Swift" from Hachette Book Group's Basic Books imprint. The book, out Oct. 14 — coinciding with the release of Swift's 12th studio album, "The Life of a Showgirl" — is Burt's rich, cerebral dive into the artistry of one of pop's most analyzed figures. But even if her story is absent from the page, it hums quietly beneath the surface. There's an inherent queerness in Burt's lens — sometimes explicit, as when she explores the Sapphic undertones between the two girls in "Seven" — that adds emotional texture to her critical analysis.

Her connection to Swift's work is rooted in the ache of what she missed. "I did not get to dress up dolls. I did not get to have a pink room," Burt says. "I did not get to have the kinds of friendships that I wanted and the kinds of social groups that I wanted — not only with girls, though that too."

And perhaps most poignantly: "I didn't get to have the kind of intimacy that Taylor sings about with girls and with teen girls until I was a grown-ass adult," she says. "And I have it now."

That deep sense of personal reclamation

naturally leads to broader cultural questions about Swift's place in the queer canon. When asked directly whether Swift qualifies as a gay icon, Burt's response is characteristically nuanced: "Yes, but no."

She explains her complex position: "A gay icon is someone who gay people think about a lot, gravitate to and form social groups around and want to talk about and keep track of. Of course Taylor's a gay icon in that sense."

But Burt draws important distinctions about the nature and depth of Swift's gay icon status: "What percentage of Swifties treat her as camp? What percentage of Swifties treat her as for the gays, and not for the straights? Much lower, I think, than for other world famous pop performers."

She contrasts Swift with artists like Chappell Roan and Kylie Minogue, noting: "Those are people where, if you're not looking at what it means to be a gay icon, and you're not looking at how queer communities support these artists, you will not understand their rise or their art at all. That's not true for Taylor."

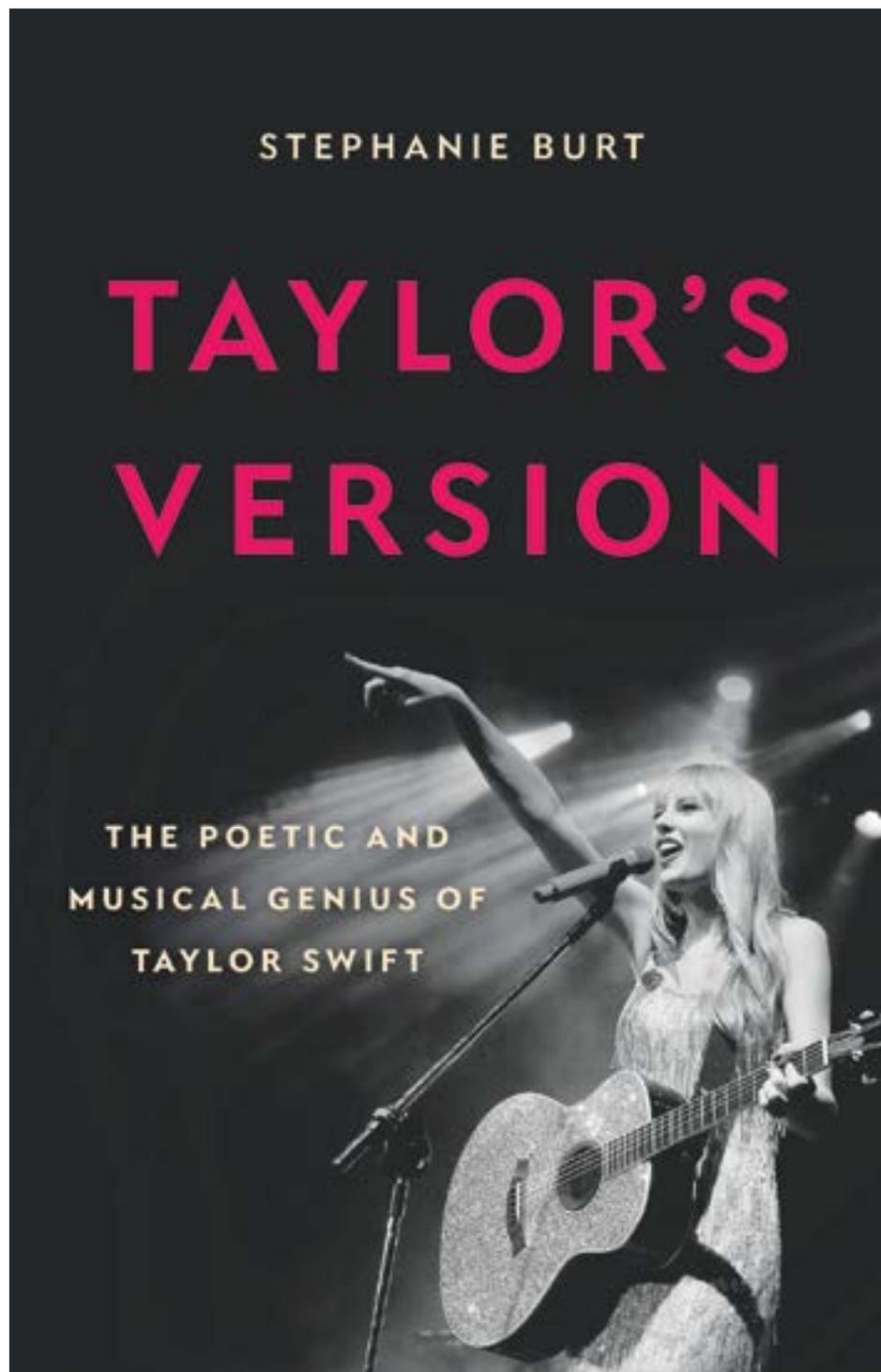
Her final assessment: "She happens to be a gay icon because she has worked in a thoughtful, inclusive way that includes a lot of same-sex attachments to become an icon for a lot, a lot, a lot of people. And many of those people are queer."

But for Burt, Swift's impact goes beyond labels and iconography. What Swift's artistic journey represents to her is something larger than entertainment — it's a validation of experiences that society often dismisses. Her book serves multiple purposes: "It's a defense of girlhood, which Taylor is also doing. It's a defense of the stereotypically teenage experience as a valid subject for deep art."

This defense feels particularly urgent in the current political climate. As someone who says she can't "pass" in traditional terms ("because here's my voice, right?"), Burt sees Swift's unapologetic visibility as a model for resistance.

"Especially for trans people who can't pass, the current federal government is telling us to hide," she says, defiantly adding: "And no, I'm not hiding."

Swift, she says, has challenged cultural expectations that tell girls and queer people to minimize themselves. "A lot of girls and weirdos are told, 'It's OK to be you. Just don't flaunt it,'" Burt observes. "Make sure it's very niche, and that no one notices. Have plausible



deniability. Don't stand out."

Burt admires Swift's unashamed ambition — something she argues is particularly

revolutionary for women and marginalized people. "She really wanted that. And she even wrote songs about wanting it — that it's OK to

want to be seen.”

As a scholar analyzing Swift’s work through a queer lens, Burt sees intentionality in the artist’s choices, particularly in her live performances. She points to Swift’s diverse casting of dancers and other performers during The Eras Tour as evidence of thoughtful representation.

“Do I think she’s seeing the people in her massive audience who are not like her, including us queer people? Yeah, I do,” Burt says. “She really wants to support people who aren’t like her — groups, she says, that she’s not a part of. As someone who plans her stage act and her performances and hires her dancers, she knows exactly what she’s doing.”

However, Burt notes the limitations of expecting Swift to write explicitly political songs. She says when Swift attempts overtly activist messaging, as in “You Need to Calm Down,” the results are less successful artistically than, say, “Miss Americana.” “When she writes subtextual queerness, it’s great. When she tries to write a song that is overtly and publicly about how she sees and wants to protect her queer fans, which is what ‘You Need to Calm Down’ was about, that’s not great.”

While Burt wishes Swift would take stronger political stances in the current moment, she understands the limitations. Having watched Swift’s previous political endorsements largely fail (noting that most candidates she’s supported have lost, including Kamala Harris and Phil Bredesen, the Democratic nominee for U.S. Senate in Tennessee who lost in 2018 against Marsha Blackburn), Burt believes the artist has learned hard lessons about the limits of celebrity influence.

“She’s seen the limits of top-down, celebrity-oriented, national-first politics in a way that the chuckleheads who have been running national Democratic politics have been slow to see,” Burt observes.

Instead, she argues that Swift’s primary contribution may be modeling the very visibility that authoritarianism seeks to suppress. “Taylor is absolutely telling us not to hide in the Trump era when we’re being told to hide. She’s not saying things she doesn’t believe, and she’s writing the songs she can write and being the person who she can be.”

This act of courageous authenticity sets the stage for not just a new era in Swift’s career with the announcement of “The Life of a Showgirl,” its title seemingly self-reflective, but the larger themes Burt explores in her book. Ultimately, “Taylor’s Version” is

about more than one artist or even one fan’s experience — what Taylor’s saying changes depending on who’s hearing her message. But Burt adds that the book is also about the right to dream beyond the limitations society imposes, whether based on gender, sexuality or any other form of difference.

“It’s also a book about ambition — about making awesome works of art that not only endure and speak to a small number of people deeply, but that obviously endure, get noticed and speak to a large number of people.”

For Burt, Swift represents proof that such dreams — of girlhood, of emotional clarity, of being fully seen — can be realized without compromising authenticity. It’s a lesson that resonates far beyond pop music, especially for those who’ve lived outside its most visible narratives.

Throughout our conversation, Burt returns again and again to the deeply personal nature of her connection to Swift’s music. Songs like “The Best Day,” about Swift’s relationship with her mother, stir something bittersweet.

“My parents were great, but they weren’t that, and they couldn’t be that,” she says. “Partly because boys are socialized to seek more independence from parents.”

But Burt doesn’t dwell on what was missing. Instead, she turns toward what Swift’s music has made possible — moments that feel like reclamation, like arrival. “All of these experiences that I wish I had had,” Burt says, become possible “for the space of about three-and-a-half minutes per song.”

In “Taylor’s Version,” the word “aspirational” surfaces often — a reflection of what Swift has represented to her fans over the years: someone to look up to, to grow alongside, to believe in. For Burt, that aspiration has become something more tangible. A Guggenheim fellow, a past judge for the Pulitzer Prize for Poetry, a board member of the National Book Critics Circle and the author of over a dozen books on poetry and pop culture, she’s carved out a singular space where deep feeling and academic thought meet. Another major milestone? Teaching Harvard’s first-ever course on Taylor Swift — a boundary-breaking class that didn’t just cement Swift’s place in the canon, but Burt’s place at the center of the cultural conversation.

In some ways, that’s the full-circle power of aspiration: Burt has become, in her own right, exactly what Swift has long been to fans such as herself — someone who proves it’s possible to rewrite your story and make it count.



Stephanie Burt. Courtesy photo



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When Queens Clash, Culture Wins

Gottmik and Violet Chachki on how their single 'TKO' and Knockout Tour turns sisterly spats into a fierce spectacle – with a message



Violet Chachki and Gottmik. Courtesy photo

BY CHRIS AZZOPARDI

What do you get when two of drag's boldest rule-breakers turn their creative tension into a pop anthem? A total knockout, literally.

With their debut musical collaboration, "RuPaul's Drag Race" stars and "No Gorge" podcast co-hosts Gottmik and Violet Chachki aren't just stepping into the ring — they're redefining what it means to

fight fabulously. Equal parts glam, grit and campy chaos, the duo's new single, "TKO," launches a gritty new chapter for these longtime sisters-in-drag who have clashed like siblings, reconciled like best friends and who have now transformed that fiery dynamic into a full-blown tour.

The Knockout Tour, their first co-headlining North American outing, is more than pure spectacle — it's protest-meets-pageant, a defiant

statement that drag isn't going anywhere despite persistent attacks on the art form.

Ahead of their Detroit stop on Sept. 28, I caught up with the duo, who revealed their Motor City love runs surprisingly deep. "We literally, randomly send each other properties in Detroit," Gottmik said, laughing. Violet chimed in: "I've seen an Art Deco streamline that I have my eye on."

During our conversation, the pair opened up about the inspiration behind "TKO," why queer power remains vital in 2025 and how being loud, proud and unapologetically visible — whether on a tour stage or the Met Gala red carpet — is still a radical act.

How did you know "TKO" had to be your debut music collab?

Gottmik: It started from the reality of us fighting. [Both laugh.]

Violet: We are definitely a chosen family. And just like any family, you fight. Sometimes you make up; there's love. We really are ride or die for each other, and we've been through so much already. And there's a bit of crossover with our drag aesthetics, a juxtaposition of me being more rock-'n'-roll and Gottmik more

classic glam. So we thought, what better way to showcase that than highlight our differences and play it up?

Gottmik: Battle it out. And let the audience decide.

Is there a champ in the end? Will we have to wait till the end of the tour to find out?

Violet: The audience is going to have to let us know September 28th in Detroit. I mean, that's really what it's all about. Majestic Theatre, darling, that's where it's all gonna happen.

All the queens should be working their shit out in music, right? Because there's some shit to be worked out.

Violet: There really is, especially these days.

It's good to see two queens battle it out and still remain friends and collaborators. In the "Drag Race" world, there's no shortage of iconic feuds, including the infamous 2013 beef between Alyssa Edwards and Coco Montrese and the latest clash between past contestants Mistress Isabelle Brooks and Willam.

Violet: I don't even keep up. I don't see everything that goes on. I just hear people are talking about Mistress and Willam a lot right now. I don't know what's going on.

Gottmik: [Laughs.] Zip it! Yeah, we feud in a very family way.

Violet: Maybe they should have a song?

Gottmik: Nah. [Laughs.]

What was the most challenging aspect of working together?

Gottmik: We both are such insane perfectionists that sometimes what we think is perfect isn't for the other person. We do have an extremely similar vibe, and we always want the same end goal. But the process is extremely different.

Violet: The reason I love drag to begin with is: I get to choose the song. I get to choose the makeup. I get to choose the outfit. It's not a team sport. And even the group challenges on "Drag Race," I hate them. I do not think drag is a group challenge thing. So collaborating with someone

like this who is an equal, and we're both sharing the spotlight, you do have to be like, "OK, we want the same goal." A lot of times we find ourselves talking in circles and we get a bit frustrated. But we do, at the end of the day, have the same goal. And so every artist just has their own approach, and sometimes one of us is right and sometimes the other one's right, and sometimes we're both right.



Gottmik and Violet Chachki. Courtesy photo

Violet, you've said that "TKO" feels like "walking into a club and taking over a room." Gottmik, you called it "queer power." Why were those the feelings that you wanted to bring to the surface of the song?

Gottmik: I said it feels like queer power because I think it's just that energy of being strong, entering the ring and gearing up for the fight — training for this like it's a big moment. I feel like that's what being queer is like. We're constantly being thrown crazy stuff every day. I feel like when I wake up, there's a new bill. There's a new thing that's telling me that I'm not the person that I know that I am. Sometimes it feels really tiring. But you have to look at yourself in the mirror and be like: I know me. I know I'm not going anywhere, no matter what anybody says, and I am entering the ring to show people that I'm not going anywhere. I'm gonna win this.

How do you define "queer power" in 2025, Violet?

Violet: I've always thought of drag as escapism and as a form of therapy for myself, personally. That's kind of how it started. Since, it's really evolved into taking

up as much space as possible, usually in spaces that drag queens or drag artists don't necessarily get the opportunity to go to — like the Met Gala, or other spaces that are reserved for cis heteronormative people.

You both walking the Grammys red carpet in 2023 is another example of that.

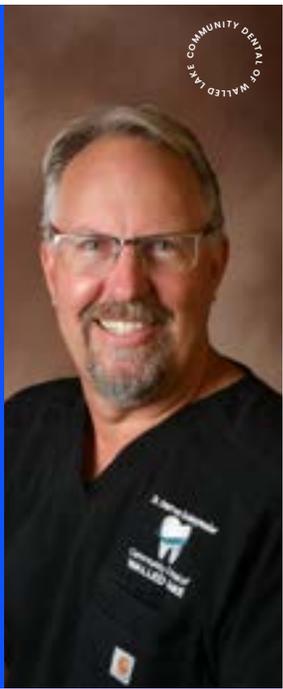
Violet: That's a good example. We were there when Kim Petras won her Grammy. Just existing in those spaces is an act of rebellion, an act of progress. And so I do like to revisit that kind of escapism. This show is 90 minutes, and you can just come and look at something really beautiful and fantastical and forget about all the chaos and troubles happening in the real world. Just with the imagery that we're using as very strong fighters — aggressive, queer, loud, proud people — we want to relay to the general population: We are intimidating, strong, queer people, and we're not going anywhere.

Did the sound of "TKO" come first, or did you build the track with the visual world already in mind?

Violet: The visual world was first — it always is with us. I've been doing drag for so long that I feel like I've been every character and done every outfit, except for athletics. So I'm checking off the boxes of all the characters I could be. And so now I'm a boxing star.

Who's your dream collaborator for a "TKO" remix?

See **Knockout Tour**, page 24

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Glam Proclamation
Puzzle can be found on page 25

◀ The Art of Being Seen

Continued from page 10

During the pandemic, like so many of us, he'd gotten serious about fitness — first biking when gyms were closed, then diving deep into weightlifting once they reopened. He was also training for something most of us only dream about: climbing Mount Kilimanjaro.

"I was just very much in a headspace where I was doing new things, exploring new things, physical things, and you know, living in the moment," Brooke said.

Despite having no modeling experience, Brooke took the session seriously. "I've never done any modeling. James told me in advance that they'd need [various] poses, and he didn't really give me any suggestions, so I spent a lot of time prepping. That's just kind of how I do it. And I think I was rewarded."

"I have no desire or aspirations to have a modeling career," Brooke added. "This was kind of like a bucket list thing for me."

Getting comfortable while naked

Vargas, who works remotely doing insurance verification for physical therapy clinics and is a dancer, found the queer-centered environment made all the difference. "Just knowing that this space was exclusively for queer people and the community just always makes me feel better. It makes me feel a little bit more comfortable and that I'm in a safe place," they said.

Davis discovered that being naked somehow changed the whole dynamic. "Even though everyone's staring at you, they're not staring at you to be hurtful," he said. "You're inviting the gaze in."

For first-time model Brooke, the initial nervousness quickly gave way to something more comfortable. "There's always a little discomfort at the beginning, but once you take the leap and get over it and you hear people respond favorably, you feed off the audience and you do feel very comfortable," Brooke said.

The experience proved rewarding for Brooke in unexpected ways when his husband, who has formal fine art training, decided to attend and draw him, so he knew there'd be at least one familiar face in the crowd. "It was something that we could do together. It was really nice," he said. (By the way, Brooke did successfully summit Kilimanjaro after his modeling session, making good on all that training.)

The physical space itself helps create a comfortable kind of magic. Gorski's studio is what Staycation describes as "very queer and very eclectic and very authentic" — filled with Detroit-themed art, vintage cars and the kind of creative chaos that immediately puts people at ease. The atmosphere during



(Top) James Staycation poses for DQSS artists. (Left) Zach Brooke in watercolor. (Right) Joni Genovesi becomes emotional seeing artwork depicting her.

sessions is deliberately chill — deep house music, dim lighting and an overall meditative vibe that helps everyone settle in.

"It's really interesting because you have so much time to think just posing there," Vargas said. "For me, at least personally, it's like, wow, I am a piece of art and these people are drawing me."

The unique ritual of model selection at the end of each session adds another layer of meaning. Unlike traditional classes where

models rarely see the finished work, here they become curators of their own artistic interpretation.

"You're looking at someone else's vision of you," Davis said. "Someone actually taking the time to sit down and put a pencil to a paper or their iPad and really draw you the way that they see you, I find very intriguing."

Sometimes those different visions reveal something profound. Joni Genovesi, a trans woman who modeled for her first time

ever in February, found exactly that kind of revelation in the artwork created during her session.

"Being a trans woman, I have some pretty high discomfort with my physical presence. I wanted to do this to hopefully help shed some of my own insecurities," Genovesi told BTL in May. "The minute my robe came off, everything just felt right. Seeing the artist's drawings at the end brought me to tears. I saw my masculine features beautifully complimented with my

feminine self. It was incredibly empowering, and I took so much more out of it than I could have possibly expected.”

Both Davis and Brooke ended up taking artwork home. Davis was gifted a piece by a friend who'd attended the session, while Brooke received one of the quicker sketches. “I didn't feel anyone made me look bad and that was wonderful,” Brooke said. “I felt like the depictions were realistic and quite flattering and that was empowering to see.”

Staycation has observed that regardless of background or body type, the experience tends to be transformative. Even people who might seem like obvious choices for modeling often have their own insecurities and nerves, but something shifts once they begin posing. “All of a sudden you get up there and you do your poses and then you get to see the artwork at the end,” he said. “You get to see what you've inspired.”



An artwork depicting Elliott Vargas from a DQSS session.

Bringing personality to the pose

The series actively encourages models to bring elements of their personality into their poses. Staycation and Gorski want models to express themselves through props, costumes or themes that reflect who they are.

Brooke leaned hard into his mountaineering theme, posing with hiking boots, hat, backpack and trekking poles. “Quite a full wardrobe for a nude model,” he said. Davis went full cheeky during a 420-themed session, posing with a slice of pizza that one artist immortalized with “Snack Daddy” in blue lettering scrawled across it.

For Davis, knowing most of the artists personally added another layer to the experience. “It wasn't like strangers seeing me naked; it was friends and acquaintances seeing me naked,” he said. “That seems better and worse at the same time.”

But there's something deeper happening here too. Davis sees his participation as educational, offering people a chance to see a trans body in a non-medical, non-sexualized context. “A lot of people had never seen a body like mine,” he explained. “And I think that's pretty cool to expose people to things that they've never seen in an educational way.”

The series has become a magnet for

people at pivotal moments in their lives. Staycation mentioned one model who posed after significant weight loss, wanting to celebrate his transformation. Even Staycation and Gorski stepped in front of the easels for their two-year anniversary, splitting poses throughout the evening.

“One of the things that we often hear from models is how liberating it is,” Staycation said. “And I got that after my session.”

There's also a practical element that shouldn't be overlooked. As Brooke pointed out, his husband “paid a lot of money to be in a space where you could draw a nude model live” during art school. DQSS makes nude figure drawing accessible for a small fee. “It's affordable,” Brooke said. “You don't have to be enrolled in art school to have access to draw nude models. It's a nice activity that I don't think many people have the ability to do.”

Would they pose nude again? Vargas is definitely up for it. Davis called it “such a warm and welcoming experience, and as a trans person you really hope for that.” Brooke, ever the pragmatist, put it best: “I mean, if people call me up and beg for me to and beg to pay me to get naked for them, I'll listen. But I'm not out there actively searching for modeling gigs.”

The Detroit Queer Sketch Series meets twice monthly. For information about modeling or attending as an artist, visit dqss.org or follow [@detroit_queer_sketch_series](https://www.instagram.com/detroit_queer_sketch_series) on Instagram.



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4 Knockout Tour

Continued from page 21

Violet: My dream collaborator of all time, like I would cry to work with her or do a song with her, would be Kylie Minogue. Someone more realistic would be Slayyyter, Cobra or Kim Petras.

Gottmik: Definitely Rob Zombie would be my number one. I would just die.

Violet: That should make so much sense for the tour in general. Rob Zombie versus Kylie Minogue. That basically sums up the tour. [Laughs.]

Given your platform, do you think of yourselves as role models during an era in which trans people and drag queens are being attacked?

Gottmik: I mean, I love being able to have this platform and standing up for what I believe in and being able to take what's going on politically, research it, digest it, give my opinion and have an impact. It's just so beautiful to me. I love getting to travel the world and meet other queer people that I've inspired and helped, and then I get to know them, and their journeys inspire me, and that whole process inspires me. The fact that I opened doors for someone that was inspired who then pushed and opened another door that inspired other people.

It's just never-ending, the stories of queer people telling their stories and making a difference. It's just really crazy because it feels really hard right now, especially. But no matter what happens, that's not going to change who we are or who any of us are. And so we're not going to go anywhere, and we just have to come together and band together and learn from our queer elders and make sure that we are constantly fighting and showing everyone that we're not going anywhere. And we are. We're queer, and we're here to stay, honey.

It's literally about crushing the system. Somebody created the rules that we follow in society and who's to say we have to follow those rules? If you know you're you, and society is telling you something different, it's up to you to soul search and find yourself and share that story and inspire others. Crash the system. Change the world.

In this political era, The Knockout Tour feels like more than a show — but a space for joy, love and community. As the ones leading that, what does it mean to you to create that kind of environment, and how do you imagine it will feel on stage?

Violet: I never set out to be a role model per se. I started out doing drag as a form of therapy, just really embracing the feminine side of myself that I was repressing as a child. I got to a point where I was going to be whoever the fuck I wanted to be as loudly as I wanted, and

on purpose. I got power and strength from that and healed myself. And then it turned into this career, and it just coincided with all of these crazy political things going on.

It feels like a responsibility in a way. A lot of queer elders have shaped me, and now I feel like there's a new generation coming up, and I almost feel the need to pass the baton. It feels like such an important role to get the facts right and position the new generation. Even what you were just saying about being in a room of people where it's almost like a protest: We're all here together, supporting each other. And there is this love I cannot wait to feel in those rooms. Sometimes I do get a natural high and it is very emotional. I hope this will be that for everyone who comes.

It might be too soon to say, but who will take longer to get ready on tour?

Violet: Me. Mik is a professional makeup artist and was a professional makeup artist for many, many years. I don't know how you do it. Sometimes we'll get ready and your makeup will be done and you're having a cocktail, and I'm still gluing my eyebrows down. When you've done my makeup before, you've made me cry because you're really fast. You jab my eye and I'll start crying. I'm just a little more sensitive in the eye.

Gottmik: It's like, "Gotta go! We don't have time!"

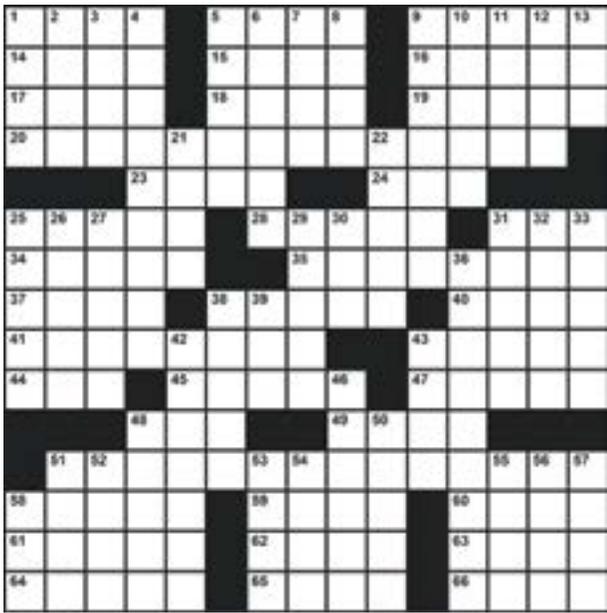
Everyone needs a boss in their life. It sounds like you've found yours, Violet.

Violet: Yeah, I think that people have perceptions of our relationship. It flip-flops. We switch. We're very versatile.

Every city on the tour will feature queer talent. Why was that important to you? And how does the community element shape these shows?

Gottmik: It's just so important to go to every city and really just engulf ourselves in the vibes of the city. We love traveling every time we go on tour. We love to make sure we set time aside to go out and see the bars and see the vibes and shop. I literally was talking to Violet earlier about how sometimes I'll be like on a bus tour in Middle America, and I'll just be in the smallest town ever thinking, I'm moving here.

Violet: I worked many, many years as a local entertainer in Atlanta. I miss it. I miss those drag queens in the dressing room, and I really miss what that was like — the local chosen family. It's so nice to travel and meet queens and other queer entertainers that have that sort of punk, "no-fucks-given" mentality that I almost feel like we're missing a bit in the mainstream. Older queens who have been doing this for a long time resonate with me, and to see how they do drag regionally — because it is different — is inspiring.



Glam Proclamation

Across

- 1 Learning inst.
- 5 Give the once-over
- 9 Says a word or two to Mary
- 14 Auto racer Yarborough
- 15 Humorist Bombeck
- 16 Words to a waiter
- 17 Guinness of "The Lavender

- Hill Mob"
- 18 Pick up
- 19 Fouls, to the Pinball Wizard
- 20 Start of Bowie's 1972 proclamation
- 23 Prefix with tubbies
- 24 Ice in Ulm
- 25 Warren of Billy Bean's sport
- 28 Weapon used in Caesar's day
- 31 Pump purchase
- 34 Word before bells or angels
- 35 More of the proclamation
- 37 What "let" means to Martina

- 38 Dinah of a golf classic
- 40 Katharine's "Butch Cassidy" part
- 41 More of the proclamation
- 43 Cast supporter?
- 44 He wears very little clothing
- 45 Vietnam capital
- 47 Bones below the elbows
- 48 Title for John Gielgud
- 49 Arrears
- 51 End of the proclamation
- 58 Rita Mae Brown's "Cat on the ____"
- 59 Electronic synthesizer
- 60 Donned
- 61 "Dykes to Watch Out For" section
- 62 "Look ____, I'm Sandra Dee"
- 63 Will portrayer McCormack
- 64 "Corydon" author Gide
- 65 Costner character
- 66 Give a lot of mouth

Down

- 1 Anti-oxidant berry
- 2 Collected
- 3 "Break ____!"
- 4 Jenner's Olympic event
- 5 George of "It's My Party"
- 6 Frasier's family
- 7 Surrounded by
- 8 "Peter Pan" pooch
- 9 Crank up without the key
- 10 Oral performances
- 11 In a lazy way
- 12 Do-overs for Amelie Mauresmo
- 13 MTF operation

- 21 Itches
- 22 Ease on down the road, perhaps
- 25 Ogre voiced by Mike Myers
- 26 Bone to pick
- 27 Pilgrim John
- 29 Platter player
- 30 Stud site
- 31 Gain admittance to Chromatica Ball
- 32 Prudential rival
- 33 Pantyhose woes
- 36 It leans in Galileo's home town
- 38 Small fragment
- 39 Barnyard layer
- 42 What to do while you work, in a Disney tune
- 43 Hist. or sci.
- 46 "Friend of Dorothy" and others
- 48 Less nuts
- 50 Rims
- 51 Optimist's phrase
- 52 Go (one's way)
- 53 "____ For All Seasons"
- 54 Help re-elect Tammy Baldwin, e.g.
- 55 "You've Got Mail" female
- 56 Sinead O'Connor's country
- 57 Religious splinter group
- 58 Site for three men in a tub

See p. 21 for answers

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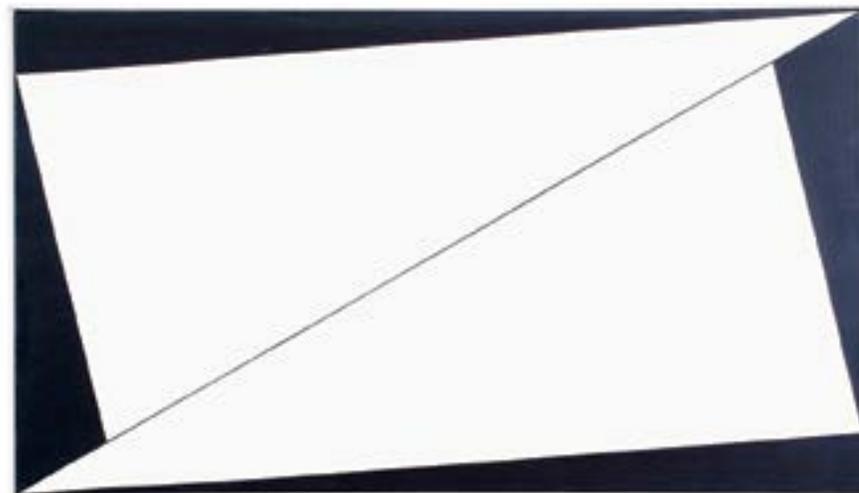


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Carmen Herrera, "Equation," 1958, acrylic on canvas. Photo: Lisson Gallery/Estate of Carmen Herrera

◀ Both Sides

Continued from page 16

abstraction and their friendship. Miller said they bonded over their outsider status in the art world, though Smith achieved recognition earlier in his lifetime, while Herrera's acclaim came later. "They both felt that they were overlooked," Miller said. "They both felt that the art world could be quite xenophobic and misogynist."

Societal prejudices and expectations worked against both of them, particularly Herrera, according to Miller. "Carmen was of a generation where women were not taught to be professionally ambitious and to self promote. She tried her hand at finding a gallery and promoting herself and it did not go well. Leon Polk Smith had a little more leeway or permission to self promote and license to be ambitious as an artist."

Still, Miller said, both believed their art was part of a universal language — something that could be understood by anyone, regardless of the identity of the maker or the viewer.

With an exhibition featuring two artists, Miller said they decided to produce two catalogs — identical inside, but with a different artist on each cover. The pairing of the two works, which alternate as front and back covers, speaks volumes about both of their careers.

Both use a limited color palette and embrace abstraction. Smith's work explores curvature and sensuous contour, while Herrera draws on her architectural training to create precise shapes and compositions built from straight lines.

One Herrera work featured is from 1958, a black-and-white painting called "Equation."

"It's almost like a Rosetta Stone where you see this work and you can understand almost everything else that she made after," Miller said. "It's just so simple and perfect.

It's black and white and she makes the entire composition by drawing five lines. She creates a composition of triangles within rectangles. It's emblematic of her use of the straight line."

Miller compares this to Smith's 1957 circular work, "Okie," also featured in the exhibit.

"It's similar in that the actual composition is made by just drawing a couple of lines and then putting paint within those contours," Miller said. "But for him, it's about the curved line and the curved line on a circular canvas. You have these two

"They both felt that they were overlooked. They both felt that the art world could be quite xenophobic and misogynist."

— Dana Miller, curator

emblematic works and they set the tone for both artists and were made within a year of one another."

Both artists lived and worked on both sides of many lines — cultural, personal and artistic. They expanded what abstraction could mean while insisting that their work transcended labels.

For visitors, the exhibition offers a glimpse into two remarkable careers while issuing an invitation to stand at that shared line, seeing the world as they did — balanced between form and space, history and innovation, individuality and universality.



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