

MICHIGAN'S LGBTQ+ NEWS SOURCE SINCE 1993

# Between THE Lines™

REPUBLICANS TARGET BOOKS

Michigan schools risk  
funding over trans titles

WAITING FOR CHANGE

A queer pastor reflects  
on progress

'A NIGHT AT THE DISCO'

Book chronicles decades  
of queer anthems

## Legacy in Motion

Once told boys don't dance, Michael Novak now leads  
a modern dance powerhouse into Detroit

By Chris Azzopardi



# Advice to Be Well

From Dr. Mark Bornstein and Dr. Paul Benson



I am a transgender male. I want to get a bilateral mastectomy and go to a physician out of state that my friend went to and was very happy with. I went to my primary care doctor asking for a referral who told me that they would not refer me out of state and would be happy to refer me to a capable compassionate surgeon locally who has experience with transitional top surgeries. They said it is due to my HMO insurance and receiving care "out of network". Can they do that? - DD

Dear DD,

The concept of a Health Maintenance Organization (HMO) is to receive care within an organized system of care. This has good and bad points. The good point is that care within a group of providers is usually more efficient and less costly, often avoiding duplication of services and easier access. The bad point is if you want to go out of your physician's or hospital's network, it's not always possible.

Hospitals and providers accepting HMOs get paid a small monthly capitation for each patient to provide care whether you receive any services or not each month. Most medical services to other providers are paid out of that capitated amount. Capitated providers and hospitals would not want to pay another hospital or provider out of their monthly capitation allowance for services they can provide and are included in the monthly capitation. It's not your HMO paying most of

these costs, but your provider and their hospital. Giving out of "their" network referrals with every ask could put individual networks in a negative financial position quickly. This happens more than one would think.

Most providers will issue an out of network referral if there is a valid good reason and certainly for any emergency. HMO insurances are not that public with their financial arrangements with providers. People call their HMO and are told "You can go where you want" as long as you get a referral. The HMO insurance companies don't have much financial risk, so they can say that to keep their subscribers happy. My opinion is that they should change that as it misleads people.

The short answer is you are best off to accept an in-network referral from your doctor. If your consultation does not go well, or you have negative feelings about the specialist, you should go back and discuss this with your primary care physician. For people with little to no known health problems the referral issue is probably not a big deal. If you have health issues, especially you see several medical specialists, opting out of an HMO may be a good idea to allow you to see whoever you want. It's more of a problem for patients having different specialists from different hospital systems, and their insurance changes to an HMO. Usually, we are able to work this out in a satisfactory manner for all.

I hope this helps clarify your situation.

Hi Doc. I am a person living with HIV (PLWHIV) and I am going on a week-long vacation next week. I only have 4 pills left of my HIV treatment, so I will go about 7 days without medications. Should I space them out and take every other day so that I am covered for the entire vacation?

This is a very important question and it is essential that every PLWHIV knows this answer. We DO NOT space out our HIV medications. This is actually quite dangerous and something that can lead to problems in the future. With HIV medications, we typically tell people "All or None". This means take your medications every day or do not take them at all. Of course, if you miss a day every couple of weeks, it likely is okay although it is of the utmost importance to strive to take medications every day.

The reason for this is that spacing out medications can lead to resistance. When someone has HIV treatment resistance, that means that the HIV virus has mutated so that certain medications will not work on the virus. This limits our options on treating HIV and will increase your chance of having HIV in your body.

To better understand this concept, let's get into the weeds of the science behind resistance. I promise, it will just be for a moment! The HIV medication must be at a high level in your body to decrease the virus. If there is a large amount of medication in your body, it will be able to

suppress the virus. Conversely, if there is zero medication in your body, the virus will thrive as there is no medication trying to counteract the virus and there will be no need for the virus to mutate. The issue comes if there is some virus in the body AND some medication in the body. This is when the virus will be able to mutate and form a more resistant type of HIV. This is why spacing out medications can be so dangerous.

This is an essential concept to understand. Do not space out your HIV medications. Make sure to think ahead and request a refill from your pharmacy before a vacation. If you are truly in a pinch, you can always contact our office at Be Well Medical Center for some samples of medications. We do have a limited supply of most of the single pill regimen HIV treatments. I hope this helps!

Since 1980 Dr. Paul Benson's Be Well Medical Center has been an inclusive medical center celebrating diversity. Do you have a health related question for Dr. Paul Benson and Dr. Mark Bornstein? Submit your questions to [bewelladvice@pridesource.com](mailto:bewelladvice@pridesource.com). This article is a sponsored editorial produced in collaboration with Be Well Medical Center. Between The Lines's journalism is made possible with the support and partnership of advertisers like Be Well. Learn more about Be Well from their ad below.



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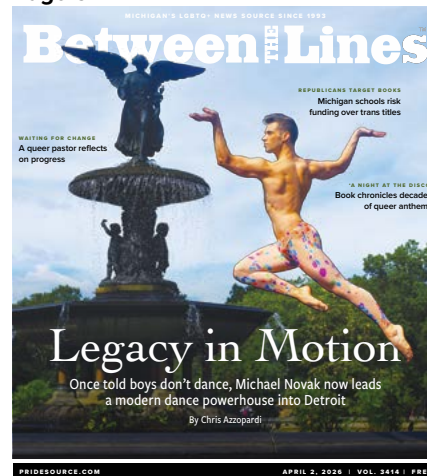
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Michael Novak. Photo: Jordan Matter

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# 5 Queer Things You Can Do Right Now-ish

BY KELLI DUNHAM

If your calendar for early April is giving mysterious blank-page energy, here's your chance to scribble something joyful into it. Yes, friend, we know your calendar is digital. Scribbling is a metaphor. But still. The queerfolk of Southeast Michigan (and beyond!) have spent their energy, time and cash to produce this week's offerings, which includes low-pressure creativity, high-chaos trivia and some very heartfelt drag. All they need to make it perfect is you!



## Find Your Voice Without Apologizing

If you've ever thought, "I long to make art, but my musical talents peaked playing 'Ladies Who Lunch' on a recorder in my fourth-grade talent show," this is your room. Rooted in Music is a drop-in workshop where the goal is not to impress anyone (including yourself) but to explore. Bring an instrument, a notebook or just your deeply relatable confusion about how songs happen. Whether you're a secret poet, a shower singer or a yet-to-be-discovered prodigy on the Sousaphone, you'll find a welcoming, affirming space to try things out and maybe even surprise yourself.

April 7, 5:30 p.m., Affirmations LGBTQ+ community center (290 W. Nine Mile Road, Ferndale). [bit.ly/rootedinmusic](https://bit.ly/rootedinmusic).

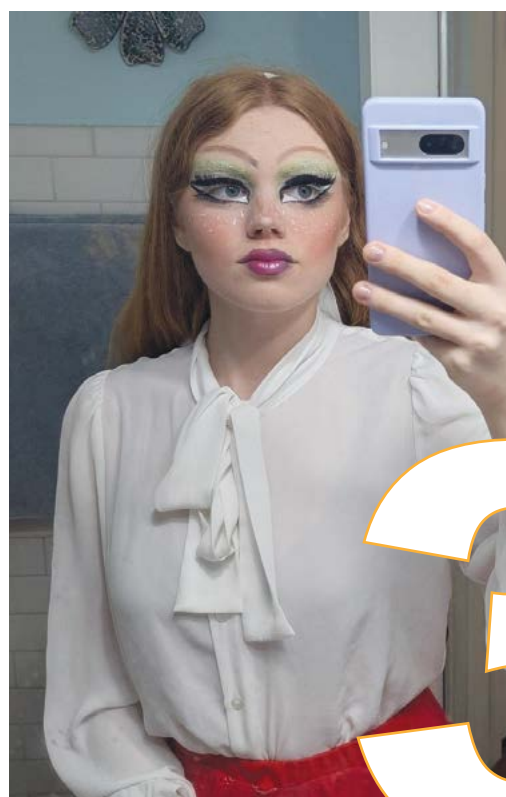


Ariana Love.  
Photo: Instagram/@\_ari\_lov3\_

## See Pokémon Drag in Ferndale

Finally, a trivia night that answers the question: What if Pikachu also served looks? Gather your most competitive Pokéfriends (or your one friend who knows everything and will carry your team emotionally and academically) and head to B. Nektar for a night of trivia, cider, food and a full-on Pokémon drag show courtesy of Ariana Love. Yes, that means wigs, references and at least one person celebrating that transition to Jigglypuff with their very soul. Whether you're here to win or just yell "Bulbasaur!" with joy and confidence, it's all in support of Ferndale Pride.

April 17, 8–10 p.m.,  
B. Nektar Meadery –  
Taproom & Headquarters  
(1511 Jarvis St., Ferndale).  
[bit.ly/pokemonwithdrag](https://bit.ly/pokemonwithdrag).



Ann Arbor's "Average Teenage Drag Queen"  
Mary Magdalene Towers. Photo: Instagram/  
@marymagdalenedrag

## Cheer On a Rising Drag Star

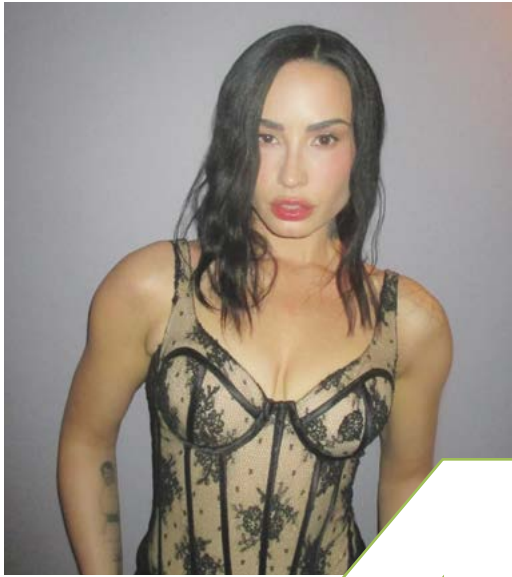
There's something deeply powerful about watching someone step into themselves in real time, and also possibly trip a little while doing it. "Aspiring teenage drag queen" Mary Magdalene Towers is making her proper debut at North Star April 16, bringing heart, humor and diva energy to the stage.

As she told BTL, "I want my show to be a sign that everyone is welcome and wanted, because that's how drag makes me feel.

Drag is for everyone, especially those who are too nervous to express who they really are. My show will include dancing, chatting, 'Drag Race' trivia and a lot of prayer that I don't fall on my face during my first real performance. Show up to support your local drag scene and promote a little girl's dreams of being a princess!"

Unless it involves a trip to the emergency room, do you really have a more important activity on Thursday night?

April 16, 5:30–6:30 p.m., North Star Lounge (301 N. Fifth Ave., Ann Arbor).  
[bit.ly/Mmagdalene](https://bit.ly/Mmagdalene).



Demi Lovato. Photo: Instagram/@ddlovato

## Belt Your Feelings with Demi Lovato

Demi Lovato, set to perform at Little Caesars Arena on April 29, has built a career on turning big problems into bigger feelings into even bigger anthems, and there is nothing queerer than that! The nonbinary, label-busting openly queer singer told BTL in 2017 in response to widespread speculation about her sexuality: "I love who I love." Nine years later, Lovato is still charting her own path and delighting queer audiences around the world.

April 29, 8 p.m., Little Caesars Arena (2645 Woodward Ave., Detroit). [bit.ly/demilavatoetroit](https://bit.ly/demilavatoetroit).



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## Teach a Straight Person a Queer Secret

Whatever they've made us out to be this election cycle, trans folks especially, we know we're more solution than problem. So in the spirit of spring renewal, take stock of everything — knowledge, skills, maybe even a fanny pack — that your fabulously queer life has given you. Polyamory, pronouns and packing. Hanky codes, harm reduction and HRT. Flannel, flyers and free clinics. You get the idea.

Pick one thing and offer it to a straight person who seems at least mildly curious and isn't currently being mean to you. Keep it specific, keep it human, and if you can make it a little funny, even better — that way they won't feel so silly when they mess it up. This isn't a lecture. It's a gift.

*Ongoing, wherever straight people can be found. Free. Emotional labor budget varies.*



Area Agency on Aging 1-B



## AGEWAYS NONPROFIT SENIOR SERVICES NOTICE OF VIRTUAL PUBLIC HEARING

AgeWays Nonprofit Senior Services is holding a virtual public forum to gather comments on its multi-year plan to spend approximately \$26.4 million in annual federal and state funding for critical senior services during fiscal years 2027-2029. The AgeWays service area includes Livingston, Macomb, Monroe, Oakland, St. Clair and Washtenaw counties. Older adults, family caregivers, senior advocates, senior care professionals and any other interested members of the public are invited to attend the forum and give comments. The forum will begin at 12 p.m. on Friday, May 8, via Zoom. It can be accessed using this link: [tinyurl.com/AgeWays27](https://tinyurl.com/AgeWays27). Interested parties may also phone into the meeting at (305) 224-1968/Meeting ID: 206 683 4621. The draft plan and a summary of the plan will be available for review at [AgeWays.org](https://AgeWays.org) on April 23, 2026. Written comments on the plan can be submitted by May 23, 2026, to Katie Scharf at [kscharf@ageways.org](mailto:kscharf@ageways.org) or to Katie Scharf, AgeWays Nonprofit Senior Services, 31700 Middlebelt, Ste. 140, Farmington Hills, MI, 48334. Questions about the plan or about accommodations to access the meeting (closed captioning, translation services) can be directed to Scharf by email or by phone at (248) 724-8624.

# Boys Don't Dance? Watch Him Anyway

Michael Novak carries Paul Taylor's legacy into Detroit with three masterworks — and a story shaped by resilience, identity and art

BY CHRIS AZZOPARDI

Just before Michael Novak, the artistic director of the Paul Taylor Dance Company, spoke at a late-March talk and screening of “Dancemaker,” the 1998 documentary about Taylor's early career as a choreographer, he's seated in a quiet corner at 215 West in Ferndale. He's remembering the last time he was in Detroit with the company in 2018. It wasn't made public that Taylor had asked him, then a dancer, to step into the director role. Behind the scenes, he was already thinking, “It's not about you anymore. It's about the whole machine, the whole ecosystem.”

When Taylor, who founded the company in 1954, died just months after passing Novak the baton, the pressure intensified. Details were still being worked out, the press didn't know Novak had assumed the title of artistic director and he asked himself, “How do you manage this massive legacy that has an incredible history, has an incredible following, but the founder's gone?” Over the last eight years, he has found the answer: by honoring Taylor's spirit while letting the company breathe on its own.

On April 11 and 12, the company returns to Detroit, performing three of Taylor's masterpieces at the Detroit Opera House: “Brandenburgs,” “Company B” and “Esplanade.” “Brandenburgs” features athletic choreography set to Bach's Brandenburg Concertos. “Company B” recalls the Great Depression era against the musical backdrop of the Andrews Sisters. “Esplanade,” meanwhile, is described by The New Yorker as “a mythic dimension on ordinary aspects of our daily lives.”

During the performances, Novak, as he does, will “watch the work, yes, but also watch the audience.” He says watching their reactions has been his artistic compass.

Before he became the artist he is today, Novak grew up in Illinois in the late '80s and early '90s, facing a combination of challenges that might have discouraged anyone else from pursuing a career in the arts. He was bullied for being “different” and for choosing dance as a boy. “Men don't dance — it's a huge stereotype,” he says. “That stereotype is reinforced constantly. I was bullied a lot when I was a kid. And I do have a stutter... even the word ‘stutter’ is hard to say.”

“I didn't speak for about a year or so, or I couldn't,” he adds. “It was so hard to get words out and dance became the only way I could relate to the world and gesture became everything for me.” Dance, he says, was “freedom.”

In our conversation below, Novak reflects on the responsibilities of artistic leadership, the lessons of resilience and the joy of watching Taylor's work continue to inspire.

**When you started as artistic director in 2018, what were the first steps you took to honor Paul's legacy while continuing to move the company forward?**

When Paul died, we built a three-year tour that was going to celebrate his repertoire. But then the pandemic cut that tour short. I think we got one year out before the pandemic shut us down. Programming is a skillset; you have to practice it, you have to learn what works and what doesn't. One of the best pieces of advice I got when I first started was from a gentleman who runs a theater down in Wilmington and he said, “Don't just watch the work — watch your audience watch the work.” And that stuck with me. How audiences change year to year, how they change regionally or internationally. You have to put your face right up to it. That's the most logical place to start.

It's interesting how some pieces of art are made in a moment in time, they respond to that time and they feel timely and then decades past, even a century can pass, and the same piece of art is still relevant. Beauty can be relevant, joy can be relevant, terror can be relevant, political commentary can be relevant.

**For the three pieces that will be performed in Detroit, what is it like for you to watch people in the audience during those works?**

Oh, it's great. So one of the things that's interesting about “Esplanade” — well, all three because “Company B” has this too — is there are five movements and the second movement is very dark. You have this beautiful 10-minute opening. It's joyful, it's communal. It's just like a group of friends just running, skipping and walking together. And it's so easy to take in. And the second section starts and it's very dimly lit and no one touches, spoiler alert. And I've noticed pretty consistently around the world, within I'd say 20 seconds of the second section starting, audiences literally lean forward. There's something about the lighting and the choreography and what they've just seen before, and the second section starts and people are like, “I thought I knew what was



Michael Novak. Photo: Rachel Neville

going on.”

With “Company B,” we get a lot of singing along because it's the Andrews Sisters. Nostalgia's a powerful thing. So sometimes they're not looking at the stage. They're looking to their husband or their wife or their friends like, “Do you remember?” The Detroit audience is getting greatest hits. I mean, this is a blockbuster program and “Brandenburgs”

has never been seen in Detroit. We first performed here in 1965 and it's our 10th time here and “Brandenburgs” has never been seen here. And then “Company B” and “Esplanade” were last done in 1994, so 22 years.

**What's it like to see Paul now in “Dancemaker” knowing you're in the role he was in?**

We knew Paul at the end of his life; it's a very precious and special moment to be with someone at the end. Their facilities are different, their cognition is different, their mobility is different. It's different than Paul in "Dancemaker," different from the videos of him creating work in the 1960s. And there weren't these deep philosophical conversations with him. So I say all that because I connect with him more in his writings and in the videos of him when he was younger. I learned a lot of things from working with him, but there are just as many, if not more lessons, in reading his writing and watching these videos and documentaries of him.

The personality, the quirks, how he makes things, things that he says that I'm like, "That tracks." He has a lot of pearls in there that I'm like, "You were right." There's still a surreal element to it, even though I believe I'm in the right place and in the right position and doing work that I feel really passionate about. I didn't know the Paul in "Dancemaker." Different generations. I knew the Paul at the end, so it's more exciting for me to see that part of him. And frankly, even with newer dancers who come in, who didn't work with him at all, we have a lot of conversations right now. They're like, "We want to watch the old videos."

**What's something that you catch yourself doing that reminds you of Paul?**

He was really good at like, "Oh, shucks. I tried it. It didn't really work out." In the first couple of years I was so terrified of making a mistake. You want to do a good job, but if something doesn't happen, learn the lesson and shrug it off as best you can and go to the next thing. There were moments in choreography with "Esplanade," as an example. There was a moment in the fourth movement of "Esplanade" that Paul was playing with until the end. Every rehearsal, he'd run the fourth movement and he couldn't figure out why this moment wasn't working. And as a dancer, it was very frustrating because you're like, "I keep doing what you're telling me to do. Is it me? Is it the step? Is it our space?" You're trying to help. We never got it right and as a dancer, I was always frustrated about it. Now I'm on the outside and I'm launching it and I see the exact same moment and there's something about it that's off. And I don't bring it up to the company because I'm trying to watch it enough to figure out, because sometimes it doesn't catch my eye and I don't know why. Other times it does.

I remember at the end watching him watch us — this goes back to watching your

audience watch the work — and I always felt like when he watched us dance, sometimes it wasn't to give us notes. It was almost like he was reflecting. It was like a slideshow. The people he danced with when he created the piece, he was just kind of letting it wash over him. And it wasn't about adjudicating us or criticizing us. It was just letting the art do the job. And there's certainly days in rehearsal where I come in or performances where there's a lot going on in my workday and sometimes I just come in, I sit down and the art recharges me and I only have like one or two notes.

It's usually like a hair note or like, "Your

*"I've been thinking a lot of queer joy recently and how accessible that is and how grateful I am that there are collaborators in our field who lean into that."*

shoes don't match. We need to make sure that they're like exactly the right color," and dancers are like, "That's it? In a 30-minute piece, you're talking about my French twist? Nothing about my movement? I'm like, "Yeah, yeah, yeah, it's fine. Your bobby pin was a bit too big, though." But he was the same. He'd watch us dance and he'd come up on stage and he's like, "Your belt buckle's twisted." And you're like, "With all that's happening, how is that the note?"

**Looking back, who or what made you believe that you should still pursue dance even when you felt like it wasn't for boys?**

My theater directors at my high school, and then the dance school I studied at. They were very encouraging and supportive. They helped drown the noise out. They were like, "If you want this, this is available to you."

See **Michael Novak**, page 9



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# National Book Ban Legislation Advances With the Support of Michigan Republicans

The ‘Stop the Sexualization of Children Act’ would strip federal funding from schools that keep books about trans people on their shelves

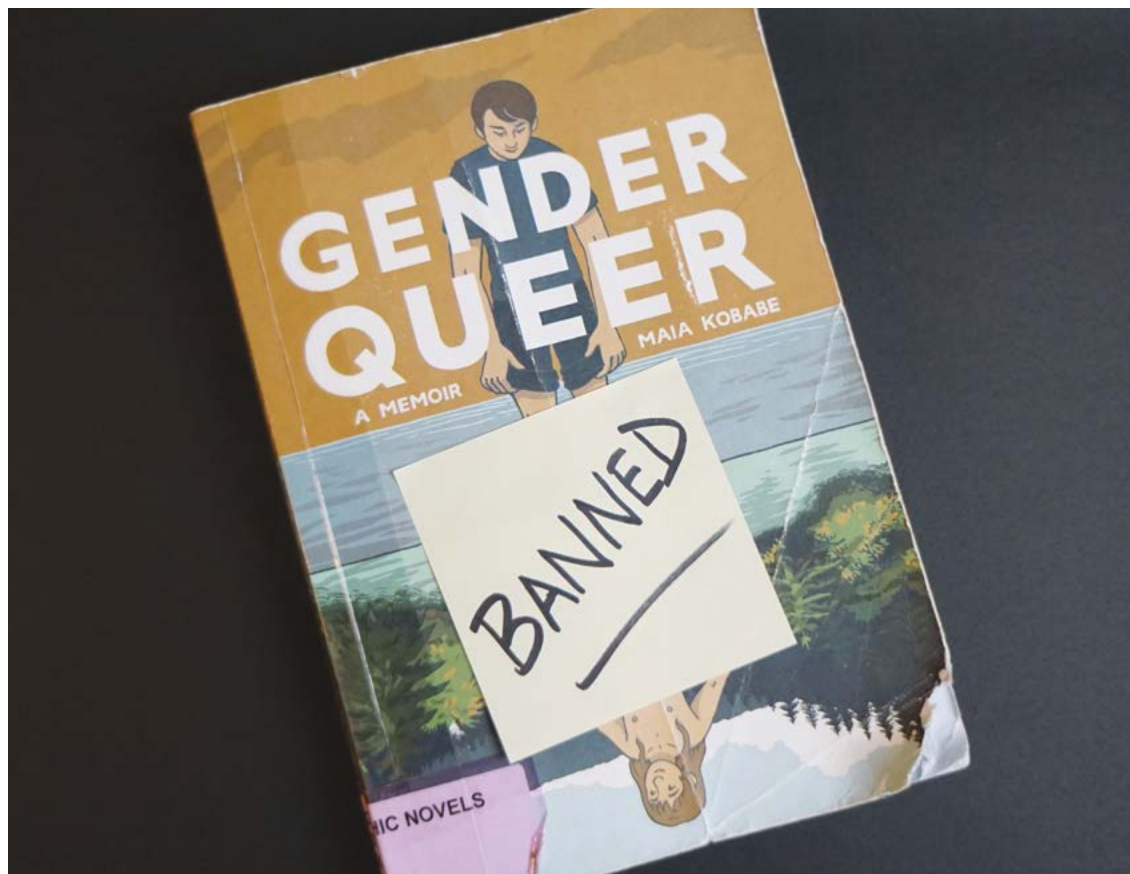
BY HANK KENNEDY

March is Reading Month, but some elected officials appear not to have gotten the message. With the support of two Michigan members of Congress, House Resolution 7661, the “Stop the Sexualization of Children Act,” was voted out of the House Committee on Education and the Workforce on March 17.

The bill bans federal funding from public schools provided by the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 unless schools take action to ban “sexually oriented material,” such as material dealing with “gender dysphoria or transgenderism” (a term widely considered pejorative by the transgender community, but used in the bill’s text) and “lewd or lascivious dancing.” If passed, schools could lose federal funding simply for having a book about a trans person in their school libraries or classrooms.

The bill was introduced by Illinois Rep. Mary Miller, a proponent of “Christian nationalism,” the idea that the United States is a nation for Christians only. Miller is well known for her opposition to protecting the civil rights of LGBTQ+ people. She voted against the Respect for Marriage Act in 2022, which codified same-sex marriage nationally. Miller claimed the act “attacks the traditional family.” She opposes the Equality Act, a bill extending civil rights protections to those discriminated against on the basis of sexual orientation and gender identity. Miller even misgendered Delaware Rep. Sarah McBride on the House floor.

Republicans Tim Walberg and Lisa McClain were the two representatives from Michigan to vote to advance Miller’s bill to the House floor. The only other Michigander serving on the committee, Democrat Haley Stevens, voted against sending it to the House. Walberg and McClain are both running for reelection to the 5th and 9th districts, respectively. Their vote for H.R. 7661, while troubling for advocates of the freedom to read,



“Gender Queer” has been banned from libraries and classrooms across the country.

is unsurprising given their long history of voting against the interests of LGBTQ+ people.

Walberg cosponsored a 2015 amendment to the U.S. Constitution banning same-sex marriage. He voted against the Respect for Marriage Act. In 2023, he traveled to Uganda to show his support for that country’s president, Yoweri Museveni. Walberg told him to “stand firm” in opposing international pressures to repeal the country’s law allowing for capital punishment in cases of “aggravated homosexuality.”

As House Republican conference chair, Lisa McClain is the fourth-highest ranking Republican in the House. Despite the added visibility that comes with this position, McClain has been less vocal on these issues than Walberg. She has, for example, never traveled to another country to tell its leaders to keep the death penalty for homosexuality. But

her views are essentially the same. Like Miller and Walberg, McClain voted against the Respect for Marriage Act, and in 2021 she voted against the Equality Act.

After H.R. 7661 advanced to the House, the Equality Caucus, a bipartisan group of members of Congress who advocate for equal rights regardless of sexual orientation, gender identity and expression, or sex characteristics, released a statement blasting the bill.

Caucus chair Mark Takano slammed the bill for stigmatizing “a tiny minority community” and “encouraging a school culture of hostility towards transgender students.” He pointed out that Miller had previously stated Adolf Hitler “was right on one thing ... ‘Whoever has the youth has the future.’” Given her sponsorship of H.R. 7661, Miller may also agree with Hitler on the necessity of burning certain books.

Jeff Trexler of the Comic Book Legal Defense Fund pointed out a significant constitutional problem with the bill. H.R. 7661 exempts “classic works of literature” from its ban, but defines “classic” by pointing to a reading list published by Compass Classroom, a Christian homeschooling company that markets its curriculum as teaching “a Biblical worldview.” By effectively outsourcing its literary standards to one religious organization, the bill runs afoul of the First Amendment’s prohibition on establishing an official state religion.

Trexler also cautioned that the bill is unlikely to pass, arguing that H.R. 7661 is specifically designed so that it will not become law. He called it an “unconstitutional campaign-year ploy,” predicting that its proponents will use the bill as a cynical fundraising tool with no intention of seeing it enacted. He argues it’s unlikely to

reach the 60-vote threshold in the Senate needed to overcome a likely filibuster. But Trexler warned that “giving this bill oxygen is keeping it alive,” and more publicity is exactly what McClain, Miller, Walberg, and the other cosponsors want.

Still, the American Library Association released a statement opposing the bill. “H.R. 7661 isn’t fundamentally about protecting kids. It’s about giving politicians broad authority to restrict whose stories are allowed on our shelves,” ALA President Sam Helmick said. “That should concern anyone who believes in the freedom to read and the right of families to make decisions for themselves.” The ALA is encouraging voters to contact their representatives to oppose the legislation. They are joined by Authors Against Book Bans, a coalition of writers and illustrators standing “against the deeply unconstitutional movement to limit the freedom to read.”

“Gender Queer” author Maia Kobabe, who uses eir/e pronouns, is a member of Authors Against Book Bans. Eir work has been the most banned book in the United States for three years in a row. Michigan has not been immune to these bans. A Lapeer County prosecutor threatened a public librarian with criminal charges over the book’s presence in the library in 2023. Kobabe released a graphic calling on citizens to ask their elected officials to take action. “H.R. 7661 is a national book banning bill ...” e writes. “This would ban my books and any other books with trans themes, from public schools.”

The “yes” votes on the House Committee on Education and the Workforce represent a remarkably small group. A 2023 Washington Post study found that the vast majority of book challenges filed in school and public libraries since 2020 came from just 11 people. Only 17 members of Congress voted to advance H.R. 7661 to the House. The national movement to decide what America’s children can and cannot read remains the project of a few dozen people.

**What's your earliest memory of a piece that you performed that made you feel like you were bigger than you felt as a kid?**

We did a tap number; it was a competition school. We did a tap number to "The Devil Went Down to Georgia" and we had cowboy hats on. I just remember it being the right piece at the right time and I was like, "Oh, this is coming naturally." That was the first time that I was like, "I can own this." And then I did "West Side Story" my senior year in high school. I was cast as "Dream Tony," which has less speaking, which was good. For me, lines were hard, but music was fine. But "West Side Story," I fell in love with it and I was like, "I think I could do this." But wanting to do something and being good at it and then finding your home in an industry is a whole other thing.

**It took you longer than most dancers to become a professional dancer, right?**

Yeah. I got into the company in 2010, so I was 27 when I joined Paul Taylor, and that was my first full-time dance job with benefits where I only had one job. Everything before that, I had at least three jobs. So thinking about graduating high school at 18 and then 27, it's a big window of life. All of which I'll add helped and are valuable things that certainly helped me get into the company and embody the work.

**You recently taught a dance class at Wayne State University. What's it like to be a mentor?**

One of the greatest parts of my job is watching a dancer have an aha moment or have a breakthrough. Because dancers work and work and work and they hone things, and sometimes there is this plateau where you're kind of coasting and then something happens. Sometimes it's life, sometimes it's the right role.

There's so many different dance styles out there where people feel

a sudden you become 40 or 50 or 60 and that window's so short relative to your life.

My generation also didn't have social media, we didn't have YouTube, we didn't have these devices. I remember having to drive 45 minutes to the one record store that had the LGBTQ+ newspaper from Chicago and then being secretive about it. We were coming out of the AIDS



Shawn Lesniak and Jada Pearman in Paul Taylor's "Esplanade." Photo: Luke J. Merlino

home. So when you see someone who's like, "Is this my home?" and you're like, "Come on over. Let's show you the landscape," it means a lot.

**What advice might you give somebody who felt like you did when you were a young gay boy who wasn't sure about pursuing a career in dance?**

The notion of chosen family is something I think about a lot. Finding your community that sees you as you, it may take time, but then all of

crisis. When Matthew Shepard died, I remember that was terrifying.

I've been thinking a lot of queer joy recently and how accessible that is and how grateful I am that there are collaborators in our field who lean into that. There can be beautiful things in life to celebrate. So, I'm very hopeful and grateful that this generation has different types of burdens relative to what we went through, and it feels like we've continued to move the needle further and further and further into a more equitable world, with still a lot of work to do.

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# Senate Mulls Giving Michigan's Same-Sex Marriage Ban the Boot

While dormant due to a 2015 U.S. Supreme Court decision, Michigan still has a ban on same-sex marriage enshrined in its constitution

BY JORDYN HERMANI

Senate Democrats are pushing to repeal Michigan's same-sex marriage ban, which remains on the books despite a 2015 U.S. Supreme Court ruling that legalized the marriages nationwide.

A resolution debated in March in the chamber's Committee on Civil Rights, Judiciary, and Public Safety would amend the state Constitution to remove the ban.

But doing so would require two-thirds support in both chambers of the state Legislature, including the Republican-led House, and approval by Michigan voters on the statewide ballot.

The Supreme Court last fall rejected a request to revisit its 2015 decision on same-sex marriages, but some justices have signaled a willingness to do so, prompting the new push in Michigan.

"This resolution would keep the status quo exactly as it is, right now," said State Sen. Jeremy Moss, D-Southfield. Moss is one of the handful of LGBTQ-identifying lawmakers actively serving in the Legislature.

In 2004, Michigan voters approved an amendment to the state Constitution to ban same-sex marriage and civil partnerships. The ballot measure passed with nearly 60% of the vote, asserting that opposite-sex marriages were beneficial "for our society and for future generations of children."

Senate Joint Resolution F would strip that wording from the Michigan Constitution entirely. A definition limiting marriage to one woman and one man would be replaced with gender-neutral language.

There were 13,875 married same-sex couples in Michigan as of the 2020 U.S. Census, including 8,357 female couples and 5,518 male couples. Another 12,306 same-sex couples reportedly lived together but were not married.

Same-sex couples accounted for about 3% of Michigan marriages in 2023, the most recent year for which state data is available.

Advocates who fear the Supreme Court could reverse its marriage decision point to a 2022 opinion handed down in *Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization*, which overturned guaranteed nationwide access to abortion.



"We don't want to go back to being second-class citizens," said April DeBoer, seen here with wife Jayne Rowse in 2015 following a ruling by the U.S. Supreme Court that struck down same-sex marriage bans nationwide. Photo via Bridge Michigan Republishing License: Paul Sancya/Associated Press

In that decision, Justice Clarence Thomas called for the court to "correct the error" in cases that used similar legal logic to uphold the right to contraception, same-sex sexual activity and same-sex marriage.

Last year, seven state House Republicans signed on to a request for the Supreme Court justices to revisit the legality of same-sex marriage.

"Marriage belongs to one man and one woman," sponsoring Rep. John Schriver said in a press conference where he did not allow questions. "This is a biological necessity to preserve and grow our human race."

The resolution did not advance or receive a hearing. At the time, House Speaker Matt Hall, R-Richland Township, called it "very divisive" within the GOP caucus, adding: "A lot of Republicans disagree with Rep. Schriver."

In the recent hearing on whether to

repeal the dormant same-sex marriage ban, no one spoke in opposition to the proposal. Lawmakers did not take a vote on the measure, and it remains in committee.

Among those who testified in support of the initiative: April DeBoer and Jayne Rowse, a lesbian couple who sued then-Gov. Rick Snyder in 2012 as part of an effort to overturn Michigan's ban on same-sex couples adopting children.

Their suit was later amended to challenge Michigan's same-sex marriage ban. After an extensive legal battle, they appealed the case to the US Supreme Court, where it was consolidated along with three other cases, including Ohio's *Obergefell v. Hodges*.

In testimony, DeBoer and Rowse said they feared the Supreme Court could reverse what had been a 5-4 decision in *Obergefell*, impacting not only their marriage, but their kids.

"We are now living in a time that we feel that this could all be taken away from us, that we can be legal strangers to each other — we could be legal strangers to our kids," DeBoer said.

She later added: "We don't want to go back to being second-class citizens."

It's the latest effort by Michigan Democrats to repeal dormant laws that could be resurrected by courts.

In 2023, the Legislature repealed a 1931 abortion ban even though Michigan voters had approved a measure adding abortion rights to the state Constitution the prior year.

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# Celebrating the Music That Made the Dance Floor a Queer Refuge

New book chronicles two decades of artists and sounds that gave a community its soundtrack

BY SARAH BRICKER HUNT

In the summer of 1979, 16-year-old French Canadian singer France Joli stepped onto a stage on Fire Island as a last-minute replacement for Donna Summer. She had no idea what she was walking into. The crowd was filled with thousands of gay men gathered for a legendary beach concert known as Beach '79, and Joli was about to perform her debut single, "Come to Me," for the very first time in the United States.

"I was brought to Fire Island. I had no idea what I was really walking into, but my first performance in the United States was for 5,000 gay men," Joli recalls in "A Night at the Disco," the new coffee table book from music journalist Christian John Wikane. "I just felt the wind was blowing in my hair. And every time that I did this move, they would lose their mind because they were connected to who I was, this young woman."

By the time summer was over, "Come to Me" had zoomed to No. 1 on the Billboard disco chart, and Joli's career was launched. She credits that Fire Island concert for everything that followed in her career.

It's one of dozens of stories featured in "A Night at the Disco," a 256-page hardcover that Wikane is currently promoting on a U.S. tour, including a stop at Flyleaf in Grosse Pointe Farms on April 14. The book chronicles the artists, sounds and cultural forces behind a decade of groundbreaking dance music from 1970 to 1979. With a foreword by Verdine White of Earth, Wind & Fire and exclusive commentary from more than 90 artists — including Donna Summer, Barry Gibb, Debbie Harry, Giorgio Moroder and founding members of CHIC, Labelle, The Trammps and the Village People — the book is far more than a glossy retrospective. It's an argument that the dance floor was, and remains, one of the most powerful spaces in American culture.

"When people see the title 'A Night at the Disco' they may think it's just about disco music — for me, it's more about the music that was played in the discos versus disco as a genre," Wikane tells BTL. "For me, it was important to show the



Norma Jean Wright, original lead vocalist of CHIC. Photo courtesy of Norma Jean Wright

foundation that was laid in the clubs."

## How the dance floor became sacred ground

Wikane, a New York City-based journalist who has interviewed more than 600 recording artists over two

decades, served as both writer and photo editor on the project, a partnership with bestselling author Alice Harris. The book is unmistakably Wikane's labor of love, built on a lifetime of listening and 20 years of interviews with the artists who lived this era.

Born in 1979, Wikane never set foot

See **Christian Wikane**, page 14



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## America Needs Saving From Republicans, Not Transgender People



BY D'ANNE WITKOWSKI

There are plenty of things that America needs saving from. Things like fascism, war (currently with Iran, but who knows where the whims of our dear leader will have us bombing next), skyrocketing health care costs, environmental pollutants, gun violence, roving armed gangs kidnapping and killing people on our streets (a.k.a. ICE), voter suppression, racism and its accompanying violence (shout out to ICE), not to mention Trump and his administration of incompetents including, but not limited to, Pete “War Boner” Hegseth, Stephen “Bodies Buried in my Backyard” Miller, Pam “Stephen Miller is My Boss” Bondi, Marco “International Shame is My Kink” Rubio, and RFK “Measles are Actually Good” Jr.

Unfortunately, none of these hazards are addressed in the so-called SAVE Act that Trump is so hell-bent on Congress passing. SAVE, which stands for Safeguarding American Voter Eligibility Act, is aimed squarely at the obsessions of Trump and the Republican party: immigrants, specifically keeping people who are not American citizens from voting, and transgender people, specifically denying them the right to exist.

*Trump cannot stop talking about transgender people. He cannot stop fantasizing about children being sex-changed by force. And, of course, he blames it on the Democrats.*

The initial intention of the bill was to create onerous new identification requirements that have no purpose other than to suppress the vote.

“The election provisions would require Americans to present documentary proof of U.S. citizenship in order to register to vote in federal elections, a change to current law,” reports The Advocate. “The proposal would also require photo identification to vote and limit mail voting, requiring



most ballots to be cast in person and restricting absentee voting to specific circumstances such as illness, disability, or verified travel.”

Fun fact: It’s already illegal for people who are not citizens to vote. It’s something that hardly ever happens. There is NO REASON for this stupid fucking bill except to make voting harder, which does not make it safer.

At the time of this writing, the SAVE Act has not passed. But it hasn’t been pronounced dead yet, either. Unfortunately, we live in a country where our government makes decisions to intentionally harm its citizens every day. So by the time you’re reading this, who the hell knows where things will stand.

One thing we do know for sure is that Trump’s obsession with hurting transgender people knows no bounds and is now also part of this terrible voter suppression bill.

“One provision would bar transgender women and girls from participating in school sports aligned with their gender identity,” reports The Advocate, “stating that it would be a violation of federal law to allow ‘a person whose sex is male to participate in

an athletic program or activity that is designated for women or girls,’ and defining sex ‘based solely on a person’s reproductive biology and genetics at birth.”

I would love for Trump to name a single women’s sport he follows or is even aware of. He does not care about women’s sports. Hell, he doesn’t care about women, period. This is not about protecting anyone.

“Another section would create federal criminal penalties

for gender-affirming care,” The Advocate continues, “or what the bill falsely describes as ‘genital and bodily mutilation of a minor’ and ‘chemical castration of a minor.’”

Again, Trump and his Republican party are obsessed with imaginary child abuse all the while they do not care at all about any of the minors who were sexually assaulted by Jeffrey Epstein and his group of rich friends (which includes Trump). He cannot even conceive of a situation where a parent could love a child as fiercely and fight for them as hard as many parents of transgender kids do. Because he’s never felt that. He’s never loved like that and he’s never been loved like that. He’s a broken and pathetic man.

Trump cannot stop talking about transgender people. He cannot stop fantasizing about children being sex-changed by force or whatever he thinks is happening. And, of course, he blames it on the Democrats.

“They’re fighting for men in women’s sports. They’re fighting for transgender for everybody,” Trump said March 23. “Everybody go out, get your kid a nice operation, and change the sex of your kid.”

“Get your kid a nice operation?” What even the fuck? Trump literally thinks that kids are getting surgery left and right. This is clearly someone who has never had to deal directly with this country’s broken health care system in order to get care of any kind for a child, let alone gender-affirming care.

And now if we’re so lucky, the SAVE Act will make getting registered to vote almost as big a pain in the ass as getting your kid’s elementary school to keep an EpiPen in the office.

To everyone who thinks your vote doesn’t matter, remember that these fascist creeps wouldn’t be trying so hard to steal it from you if it wasn’t worth anything. Also, stand up for transgender rights FFS.

### Grosse Pointe Father Sues School District Over Pride Flag Video



A Grosse Pointe Woods man is suing the Grosse Pointe Public School System after the district banned him from school property following a video he posted to Facebook showing rainbow and transgender pride flags displayed at Parcels Middle School.

Gary Pruitt attended a back-to-school night at Parcels in September 2024, where he observed LGBTQ+ flags in the school and contacted the principal about what was being taught. He later returned after hours to record the flags and posted the footage to a district parent Facebook group in October, describing the flag as representing “radical programming being forced upon children by adults”

and asking parents whether they wanted to “let these groomer teachers push their distorted worldview upon your children.”

The district’s attorney said staff and community members found the video intimidating and harassing, and that the “groomer teachers” reference was defamatory — citing disruption to the educational community as the reason for the no-trespass order. Pruitt’s photo was posted in the school office identifying him as a trespasser, which the lawsuit claims caused his child to be ridiculed by other students.

Pruitt’s lawsuit asks that the no-trespass order be expunged and seeks financial damages for emotional distress and damage to his reputation. In the filing, Superintendent Andrea Tuttle said unauthorized classroom entry violates board policy and “may warrant enforcement action.”



### New Fungal STI Is Spreading Undetected in Queer Communities



A fungal infection called trichophyton mentagrophytes genotype VII, or TMVII, is quietly spreading — and experts fear testing gaps are masking its true scope.

First detected in the U.S. in 2024, TMVII presents as a scaly, sometimes painful rash around the groin, buttocks and face that doesn’t respond to common topical antifungals. The largest known U.S. cluster was reported in Minneapolis in July 2025. Most cases have occurred in men who have sex with men. Tom Carpino, an infectious disease fellow at Duke University Global Health Institute, warns the infection may already be at epidemic proportions.

TMVII is treatable with oral antifungals, though testing can take several weeks. Anyone experiencing an unexplained rash is encouraged to consult a doctor and request a fungal KOH test.

### Trans Woman Sues Ann Arbor Shelter Over Workplace Harassment



A transgender woman has filed a lawsuit against the Washtenaw County Shelter Association, which operates the Robert J. Delonis Center in Ann Arbor, alleging workplace harassment and

discrimination based on her gender identity.

Devion Morgan, who became a full-time operational specialist at the downtown shelter in May 2025, claims coworkers used derogatory language, outed her as trans to colleagues and refused to use her correct pronouns. Morgan says she repeatedly reported the behavior to management, but her complaints went unaddressed.

The lawsuit, filed in Washtenaw County 22nd

Circuit Court in early March, seeks \$25,000 plus legal costs. Morgan alleges the shelter violated Michigan’s Civil Rights Act and says the ongoing harassment left her unable to return to work, contributing to elevated blood pressure, PTSD and depression.

Shelter executive director Nicole Adelman told MLive the organization does not tolerate harassment or discrimination and will participate in the court process.

### Lansing Queer History Zine Project Seeks Volunteers



A grassroots effort to document Lansing’s LGBTQ+ history is taking shape one cut-and-paste page at a time. On Saturday, April 25, from 11 a.m. to noon, community members are invited to a volunteer meet-up at Everybody Reads & Stuff (2019 E. Michigan Ave.) to help build a zine celebrating local queer and trans history. Organized by advocate Frank Vaca in support of the Salus Center, the free, trans- and queer-affirming event is open to adults 18 and up — no experience necessary.

### Druski’s Drag Parody Goes Massively Viral



Comedian Druski’s drag parody of “conservative women in America” is racking up numbers most queens would kill for — 13 million views on TikTok, 86 million on Instagram and 180 million on X. The viral moment doubles as a win for drag comedy, with Druski using the art form to skewer right-wing culture. Adding to the spectacle: Elon Musk’s AI chatbot Grok repeatedly misidentified Druski’s character as Erika Kirk, CEO of Turning Point USA.

### Necto Hosts ‘RuPaul’s Drag Race’ Stars



Ann Arbor’s Necto Nightclub hosts Denver’s Nini Coco and Indianapolis’s Ciara Myst, both stars of “RuPaul’s Drag Race” Season 18, on Friday, April 10. Doors open at 7:30 p.m. for a Season 18 watch party featuring an All RuPaul-A-Paruza Smackdown with commentary from local queens Perry Dox and Chanel Hunter and special guest Karmen Khameleon. Resident DJs keep the dance floor moving throughout the night. Tickets and meet-and-greet packages are available now at necto.com.



Nini Coco. Photo: Instagram/@theninicoco

on a 1970s dance floor. He jokes that he “exchanged souls with somebody that was transitioning out” and stepped right in, but his connection to the music is anything but secondhand. He remembers responding to the sounds of that decade from the time he was 2 or 3 years old, gravitating toward records that were only a few years in the past without knowing it.

“Growing up in the ’80s and the early ’90s, anything that was from the ’70s, my peer group was like, ‘Why are you listening to that old music?’” he recalls. “And that could be heartbreaking for a young boy to hear. But I never let that deter me from listening to the music that inspired me.”

Over the years, Wikane’s musical devotion became a career. He became a contributing editor at PopMatters, a contributor to People magazine and a consultant on the Emmy-nominated HBO documentary “Tina” as well as the films “Dionne Warwick: Don’t Make Me Over” and “Love to Love You, Donna Summer.” “A Night at the Disco” is, in many ways, a culmination of all of it.

The book gives every featured artist the same two-page spread, whether they were global superstars or cult acts known for a single beloved record. That equity is intentional, as is the book’s unblinking focus on the queer community’s role in breaking records and careers during the disco era. Joli’s Fire Island story is one example, and Wikane also highlights acts like Dr. Buzzard’s Original Savannah Band, whose debut album and hit “Cherchez La Femme” gained traction only after promoters brought the group to Fire Island and DJs there embraced their sound. By the end of that summer, the album had blown up in New York clubs and the band earned a Grammy nomination for best new artist. “‘Cherchez La Femme’ shows how the gay community really did help break certain artists because of the club play at that time,” Wikane notes.

Record labels, he explains, often had no idea why singles they had given up on would suddenly sell tens of thousands of copies. The Hues

Corporation’s “Rock the Boat,” for example, had a nine-month climb to No. 1 after nearly being discarded, revived entirely through NYC club play. The pattern repeated itself throughout the decade, with DJs and dancers essentially functioning as an underground A&R department, deciding which records lived or died long before the industry caught on.

The clubs weren’t just shaping the music industry. For the people inside them, particularly queer people navigating a world that offered few safe spaces, the dance floor was something closer to sacred ground. Wikane describes it as liberation — a place where people who spent their daily lives hiding or feeling oppressed could step into a room where none of that mattered. One of the artists featured in the book tells him that on the dance floor, “it didn’t matter whose hand was reaching out to you because you were all sort of united in that moment together. It could be a man, it could be a woman, it could be someone that you would never have any other occasion to meet, yet the music was this uniting force.”

## Detroit roots run deep

Michigan readers will find plenty to love in the book’s deep connections to Motown and the Detroit musicians

who helped lay the foundation for everything that followed. The Temptations are among the first groups Wikane mentions when discussing the early 1970s club era. When Norman Whitfield began producing the group with tracks like “Cloud Nine” in the late 1960s, it signaled a direction R&B would take for decades. By 1972, “Papa Was a Rolling Stone” had arrived as a 12-minute epic whose orchestral drama translated with staggering power in a club setting.

In the book, the late Dennis Edwards, one of the lead vocalists on that track, notes that because the Temptations were one of the most popular groups in the world, DJs would play the seven-minute version of the song. That version won three Grammy awards, but in the clubs, it lived on for years after its release, powered by the lush string arrangements of Paul Riser, the Detroit-based musician who arranged many of the classic Motown hits of the 1960s and ’70s.

“You realize in listening to them how important the strings are to the drama in that song, which when you hear that in a club setting, it’s like this movie playing all around you — a soundtrack,” Wikane says.

The Temptations sustained their club presence through tracks like “Law of the Land,” “Glass House” and “Shakey Ground” well into the mid-

’70s, and Wikane credits them as one of the early groups to make a lasting impact on the decade’s dance scene.

Then there’s Stevie Wonder, whose “Songs in the Key of Life” tracks like “Another Star” and “Sir Duke” found unexpected second lives on the dance floor. Wikane loves that the DJs of this era were adventurous enough to mix something like “Sir Duke,” a massive pop hit, into a club set alongside more expected fare. “Versus having to have the same beats per minute for five hours straight, it’s like, no, let’s actually take dancers on an entire experience,” he says. When you translate a song like “Sir Duke” into a club setting, with those horns and Stevie’s voice and his scattling, “it really kind of takes on a totally different personality.”

And of course, there’s Diana Ross. “Ain’t No Mountain High Enough,” produced and written by Ashford & Simpson, is the first song Wikane ever remembers hearing. In the acknowledgments, he thanks Valerie Simpson directly. “I said thank you for composing the melody that made my dreams come true,” he says, “because it’s because of ‘Ain’t No Mountain High Enough’ that I have the life that I have with music.”

There’s reason to think a younger generation is particularly primed for this kind of musical archaeology. The TikTok-fueled rediscovery of Billy Joel’s “The Stranger,” the way

“That’s the best-case scenario. It’s to have people interested in this music that for me has always been there, but for other people, they’re always discovering it for the first time.”

When asked what lessons from the disco era we can carry into this moment of political and social uncertainty, Wikane doesn’t hesitate.

“We’re living through a period of such uncertainty. Day to day, we don’t know what we’re going to see and who’s going to be here in our life,” he says, mentioning the power of togetherness at the club. “Dancing outside is a different type of high. Just being under the sun or under the stars or having a breeze blow through your hair. Bringing people together that might not ordinarily be together. You see, ‘Gosh, I’m connected to people’ in a way that you don’t get that feeling when you’re just sitting in your apartment worrying about the future.”

And that, for Wikane, is the whole point. “Being together versus being separate from each other. I think that’s one of the most important things that we can do right now.”

“A Night at the Disco” is available now from ACC Art Books and other outlets. Find a complete list of national book tour dates at [bit.ly/DiscoBookTour](http://bit.ly/DiscoBookTour).



Christian John Wikane and Valerie Simpson. Photo: Sekou Luke Studio

Gen Z listeners are leaning into music history and sampling sounds from the ’70s through an eclectic mix of artists including Taylor Swift, Dua Lipa, Tame Impala and many more — the appetite is there.

When Olympic figure skater Alysa Liu won gold at the 2026 Winter Games in Milan skating to Donna Summer’s “MacArthur Park Suite,” streams of the song surged more than 500% within days. For Wikane, it was one of the greatest gifts imaginable. Summer is widely celebrated for “I Feel Love” and “Love to Love You Baby,” but “MacArthur Park” had been somewhat overlooked despite being a masterpiece in its own right.

“Within 24 hours of her winning the gold, streams of ‘MacArthur Park Suite’ jumped by 1,200% on Spotify,” Wikane says.



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# Americans Are Leaving Christianity Because of Anti-LGBTQ+ Animus. Why Now?

As attitudes toward LGBTQ+ inclusion shift, growing numbers are deconstructing or abandoning their faith, despite the painful and often years-long process

BY JAKE ANGELO

*This story was originally published in Gay Times Magazine and Uncloseted Media.*

When Garth Huelskamp was on his Mormon mission at 19 years old, he journeyed through western Nevada, where he remembers meeting a lesbian couple.

While he remained tight-lipped, his companions quickly jumped into a conversation with them, speaking about how Jesus can save them from all sins, including homosexuality.

“[There was] always an elephant in the room,” he says.

That’s because at the time, Huelskamp knew he was gay. But like many queer religious people, he believed he could pray it away.

“I was hoping that I’d come up from my mission and be attracted to women and be able to live, like this very quintessential Mormon dream,” he told Gay Times and Uncloseted Media.

But after knocking on thousands of doors over the course of two years, Huelskamp had zero revelations from God.

After returning home to Utah, Huelskamp came out to his parents, both devout Mormons. Coming out to them wasn’t easy and he still maintains a difficult relationship with his father.

But that was just the beginning of the battle.

After years of rumination, he couldn’t bring himself to live as an openly gay man and be part of the Mormon Church. So he decided to leave. The process — which took about five years — was far more challenging than being open about his sexuality. It included hours of therapy, countless conversations with friends and family, years of turmoil and cut-off relationships from friends and relatives.

“I still held a lot of beliefs and values that the Mormon community still had,” he says. “I



Photos: Courtesy and Autonomous One via Getty Images. Design: Sam Donndelinger

had to internally question all of that; I had to question a lot of the narratives that I’ve been taught since I was literally a baby. I, quite literally, had to recreate myself from the ground up.”

Huelskamp, now 35 and working in human resources in Seattle, is not alone. In 2024, a Public Religion Research Institute (PRRI) study of 5,600 American individuals found a growing trend of Americans deconstructing their religion due to the treatment of LGBTQ+ people.

Forty-seven percent of adults deconstructed and left their faith due to these concerns, up from 29 percent who left in 2016. In addition, roughly 60 percent of people under 30 say they left religion for that reason. Despite this, some conservative Christian religions are digging their heels into anti-LGBTQ+ rhetoric. Earlier this year, the Southern Baptist church endorsed a ban on gay marriage and called on the Supreme Court to repeal *Obergefell v. Hodges*.

Meanwhile, queer worshippers are increasingly welcomed by more affirming churches and liberal denominations of Christianity, like the Episcopal church, which

allows gay members to become bishops.

According to psychologist Darrel Ray, churches often bend the interpretation of religious text to remain relevant. “Churches follow the culture, cultures don’t follow churches,” says Ray, the president and founder of Recovering from Religion, a nonprofit organization that aids people through the process of leaving their religion.

“The culture makes a change, and then the church has to adjust or it goes extinct.”

The line between church and state in the U.S. has grown increasingly blurred. In May, President Donald Trump signed an executive order establishing a religious liberty commission and questioned the necessity of keeping religion out of government.

Beyond politics, many interpretations of religious texts carry homophobic implications. For example, the biblical verse Leviticus 18:22 says “Thou shalt not lie with mankind, as with womankind; it is an abomination,” and is interpreted by many Christians to mean that homosexuality is sinful.

“This narrative of immorality

and sinfulness would be where the root of the tension might come from,” Panagiotis Pentaris, an associate professor of social work at Goldsmiths, University of London, told Gay Times and Uncloseted Media.

Huelskamp recalls learning that homosexuality was a sin at age 8 during his one-on-one worthiness interview with a bishop, a required step before baptism. Part of that interview required Huelskamp to say he lived by the “law of chastity,” which includes no sexual activity outside of marriage to a woman, no porn and no masturbation.

More than a decade later, while studying at Brigham Young University (BYU), a college sponsored by the Mormon church, Huelskamp was subject to the school’s Church Educational Standards Honor Code, a set of rules that condemned homosexuality.

The “Same Sex Romantic Behavior” section of the code states that “living a chaste and virtuous life also includes abstaining from same-sex romantic behavior.” In the section’s FAQ, one question addresses whether or not LGBTQ+ students can be disciplined for

dating, hand holding and kissing, to which it answers that “each situation will be handled on a case-by-case basis to help each student feel the love of the Savior.”

“The last two years I was there, I was out to close friends and family and because of BYU and their rules, I was looking at losing my housing situation. I was looking at being expelled ... I was looking at losing my social standing in the community as well as my family’s,” Huelskamp says.

Huelskamp remembers many of those on his mission using a non-confrontational approach to address homosexuality. “Instead of saying, ‘Hey, you’re going to hell,’ ... they’re going to say, ‘Hey, we’d love to teach about the plan of salvation and how Jesus can cover all sins, including homosexuality.’”

It was all of these factors that led him to officially leave the church in 2017.

It’s not just the church’s stance on LGBTQ+ issues that are pushing Americans to exit — 31 percent of surveyed individuals say they departed their faith due to clergy sexual abuse scandals and 32 percent cited mental health issues.

And a 2024 study by the Survey Center on American Life found that young women are disaffiliating more so than young men, with nearly two-thirds of Gen Z women surveyed saying that churches do not treat men and women equally.

Travis McKie-Voerste, director of the Secular Therapy Project, says he has encountered many young people fed up with faith due to “low-cred behaviors,” where adults and prominent religious figures fail to practice what they preach.

“If [someone has] parents that say, ‘As Christians, it’s important to love everybody,’ and then they see very different behaviors acted out ... I think [they] start that questioning [and say] ‘This doesn’t

See *Leaving Christianity*, page 19

# When Are Things Going to Get Better?

A queer pastor on why progress was never guaranteed and what we can do about it



BY REV. MATTHEW BODE

**H**oly crap. When are things going to get better?

People in my church look at me funny if I say “holy crap” from a pulpit, so I will say it here. Wondering when things are going to get better is legitimate, especially in times like these.

As queer people, especially as a white queer person in this country, it would seem that recent history tells us things will only get better, that progress is inevitable. Our rights, once we have them, will never be taken away. Of course the history of any oppressed community reminds us that progress is never assumed, even when it is fought for and won.

As a queer clergy person of almost 25 years in a mainline Protestant denomination, I started my career as an outlaw, illegal because of my sexual orientation. I became tentatively accepted, and then it became almost in vogue to welcome gay people — as long as we were in an urban or suburban community, white and cisgender.

Now it feels like the world has permission to question our existence again, even in public spaces and in places like Congress where we thought we had finally convinced people that we were too fabulous to cross. It is not difficult to be lulled into a state of denial when public figures were, for a while, canceled for using derogatory slurs to describe us. A couple of elections later, a cultural shift toward fear, and we are again facing those words and much more regarding queerness, race, gender, religious background, immigration status and beyond. Our immigrant neighbors, sisters who need healthcare options and friends who are in the military are all in danger, too.

It is OK to feel bad about that, or depressed, or angry or whatever we feel. Then we need to get moving again, reminded that this is what the ancestors always did, and what the next generations will also need to do. It does not stop. It never has. It never will. Whatever privilege we may have or claim can go away, often when we least expect it.

In the midst of all this, we can do some things that seem to be working for people around me.

First, we support one another. We check in when it has been a particularly difficult week. I am not always the best at this one, but it never fails that when the day’s news is particularly bad, one of my best friends will at least text me, if not call me, to lament and build each other up.

Second, we can physically go to places we know are safe, and do so intentionally, with safe people. Maybe that is a coffee shop, restaurant, house of worship or the living room of a friend. That safe place becomes, even if just for a few moments, critical in finding our mental, emotional and spiritual grounding.

Third, remember that we are not the issue. Those who hate are the ones with the spiritual, moral and mental problems. Hate-filled people and systems are designed by broken people. It is absolutely unjust that oppressed people live in systems built to abuse or discriminate. We remind ourselves that hatred is not acceptable and that we must push back in any way we can, taking acceptable risks that remind the haters and oppressive systems that we will not accept this crap. (Sorry, I said it again.)

We are on the side of justice, and we have power, especially when we use it collectively. We organize, we vote, we speak up wherever we can. We spend our money in places that help oppressed communities. Remember, Amazon will never come to save us, but our local merchant may be a critical community supporter.

We are a community of communities full of life and vision. We need to remind ourselves of that. Easter is on the heart of my faith community this time of year. In our tradition, Easter is the morning where our faith leader, killed by the state because he believed in compassion and justice, quotes his sister, Diana Ross, from the inside of a tomb saying, “I’m coming out, I want the world to know.” Then he does. Life always wins, even when injustice wins for the moment.

Whatever our faith or non-faith tradition, we need to come out as people who demand justice, who want a cohesive community, who want racism eliminated. We need to come out against verbal and physical attacks against the trans community. We need to come out. We do not get what we want, what we need, by waiting for oppressive people or systems to change their minds, or even just waiting for them to die.

Life may get a lot better or worse in the days and months to come, especially for those in marginalized places. Either way, we have strength, power and courage, not to mention the creative power of the universe that made sure we exist in the first place.

*The Rev. Matthew Bode is the pastor of Zion Lutheran Church in Ferndale, Michigan, a member of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. He has also served at Spirit of Hope in Detroit. He is a resident of Detroit with his husband and adult children.*

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# GODDESS IN SNEAKERS



Jessie Ware. Courtesy photo

## Jessie Ware on bigger vocals, queer fans who lift her up and the joy of wigs

BY CHRIS AZZOPARDI

For three albums, Jessie Ware has offered an escape hatch: a shimmering, 1970s-inspired fantasy, far removed from the world we live in. But with “Superbloom,” the likely closing chapter of a trilogy out June 17, Ware tries something trickier: She’s letting real life in. As she talks to me about that — about motherhood, about “just getting that balance right” — a knock interrupts us. It’s FedEx.

“I don’t know what I’ve got,” she says, laughing. “I don’t know what I’ve ordered on TikTok Shop.”

Even in this funny, fleeting moment, you can see how “Superbloom” exists between two worlds — just as Ware does here, caught between disbelief and campy outrage when someone shows up at her door mid-interview. She’s aware of her fans’ need for escapism, especially her queer audience, and this time, she’s weaving that need with her own: a record that’s both rooted in her reality (yes, sometimes FedEx shows up!) and unapologetically glamorous (yes, sometimes you just want to channel a Roman goddess!). In the video for the album’s lead single, “I Could Get Used to This,” she channels Juno and invites listeners to “step into my secret garden” against a pillow-soft, airy disco backdrop, promising that “everyone deserves their flowers.” The sensual “Ride” feels like a musical cousin to Madonna’s “Justify My Love,” a reminder that Ware loves our gay icons as much as we do.

Recently, I spoke with Ware about the confidence she’s found in her voice and storytelling, the ways she hopes her queer fans will feel seen and celebrated in the process, and what “White Lotus” has to do with any of this.

**Last time we spoke, you were fielding rainbow emojis from around the globe.**

[Laughs.] And our love is still going strong, so it’s great.

**How do you keep your queer fans in mind while creating your work, but particularly this work?**

My queer fans have given me such confidence in myself and my ability, but also the way I present myself. They’ve made me feel so adored and sexy. That’s an amazing thing to feel when you have had three kids and you are stepping into a leotard for the first time on the last tour. And for this record, I think I’ve delivered some queer moments for them.

**Doesn’t hurt that you cosplay as a goddess.**

We tried the goddess. We also tried a gorgeous actor in leather chaps.

**Do you run stuff by your gay brother — like James Norton in that “Ride” video in those chaps?**

[Laughs.] You know what? He did text me today and said, “Good job on the video.” That’s like him telling me, “Yeah, you did all right, sis.” I also feel like on this record, I provided big vocals and I feel like that my queer fans will appreciate that.

**You always provide big vocals.**

No, but I really went for it. I dug deep with my vocals, and that was very much because I know they want a diva that can sing.

**How did you decide that this would be the album in which you would deliver even bigger vocal moments?**

The success and response to the last two records has given me this confidence to try harder, work harder and show more of myself. I think I was ready. Lots of people would come to the shows and enjoy the live vocals and be like, “God, it’s even better live.” And that’s very sweet. So I felt like I needed to maybe have a studio moment like that too.

**There are elements of fantasy and escapism in your music. As a queer listener, I’ve always gravitated to that. How aware are you of that in your work and how much your fans might need it?**

See [Jessie Ware](#), page 20

## ◀ Leaving Christianity

Continued from page 16

feel right,” he says.

Social media and the internet have given easy access to those who are questioning their religious beliefs and want to explore leaving their faith.

“They might pop things into YouTube and [explore] ‘what’s the evidence that God exists?’” he says.

Ray says it’s also common to see individuals leave their faith later in life. “We have had 80-year-old people [leave],” he says. “It happens often.”

## Leaving isn’t easy

“I had to dig deep and really listen to my own personal voice and not the proverbial jargon that you’re programmed to think and feel,” says Huelskamp.

The more fundamentalist the beliefs, the harder it is to leave, according to Ray. He says that those who were raised in a fundamentalist religion often develop a trauma response in their healing process, while those raised in a more liberal sect don’t often experience that same response.

“When a person finally realizes what’s happened to them in their childhood training and church and religion, they

go through grief,” says Ray. “They were in a community that they thought was loving and supportive of them until ... they realize, ‘they hate me as much as they used to say they love me.’”

This was the case for Huelskamp. “Breaking myself out of the Mormon mentality was excruciating,” he says. “It felt like I had the rug ripped out from underneath my feet.”

What pushed Huelskamp to formally leave the church was his love for his partner. He was engaged and didn’t want to undergo disciplinary action from the church on his wedding day.

“I did not want our wedding day to be overshadowed by my excommunication from my childhood faith,” he says.

Officially leaving the faith requires removing one’s records and information from the church. And so, he had a lawyer help him do exactly that.

Huelskamp, now eight years removed from Mormonism and a father, says that the most prominent emotion he feels toward his former religion is anger.

“Imagine if you were going in a very intense long-term relationship with someone [and] had a really nasty divorce, and then you find yourself in a world where all of your family and friends, quite literally worship your ex,” he says. “And so [I feel] a lot of anger in

that regard.”

Huelskamp says there were also periods where he felt isolation, which is common for folks who leave their religion as they are also losing a community and a belief system.

Since leaving, he has cut off many close friends and family who remain in the church, as he believes their participation is an affront to his identity. Today, he only remains in contact with family and friends who have also left.

“Essentially, my Mormon social sphere went from 500-plus people over the course of my adolescence to about 20 to 30 people,” he says.

But for him, the quality of these relationships is invaluable. “Having that support system and having friends that — essentially we’re [now] trauma bonded — they are some of the most beautiful people I’ve ever met,” Huelskamp says. “It’s a silver lining.”

Today, he maintains a spiritual sense of self but has steered clear of organized religion. He thinks that unless something changes inside the church, Mormonism will become increasingly obsolete.

“If they can’t acknowledge their own faults, they’re not going to be able to shape a future for their religion,” Huelskamp says. “It’s got to be inclusive.”

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**Citrus and Substance**

Puzzle can be found on page 21

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## ◀ Jessie Ware

Continued from page 18

As much as my fans need it, I think I needed it too. I wanted to escape from myself and it started more on "What's Your Pleasure?," with the character, but also these idyllic pictures. The world was up in flames and I remember writing "Remember Where You Are," and I think Trump was visiting [the U.K.] and I wanted that feeling of, "The world's on fire, but we can still have this." So fantasy has been something that I've really played with and has become kind of part of my identity.

However, with this record, I was worried that I was becoming too much of a caricature with some of the characters, which I love to dance in. But I was like, hang on, am I losing sight of actual real life? And so that's why I wanted to pull domesticity and real life and my children into the record. I felt like I wanted to marry these two worlds together that I adore and feel very lucky to have. But fantasy, I didn't appreciate what that was doing for my queer fans until I listened to them and then I understood it. "Free Yourself" was a direct communication with my queer fans. I'm really glad that it became the song that it is and there wasn't meant to be an agenda behind it. It was just supposed to be like this celebration of who you are and that really resonated.

### Where were you emotionally while making this album?

I've been on this kind of Groundhog Day of touring and writing and then touring. I just had to sit back and actually take stock and appreciate that I have this wonderful life of being able to be a parent, living quite a normal life, but also I'm able to kind of play dress-up. Maybe I'd watched too much "White Lotus" at that point and I was feeling very Portofino. It's all probably due to my love of musical theater as well. Theater and performance and drama and a touch of camp and celebration and all of it.

### When you embody that "goddess energy," what does that performance look like — hairpieces,

### latex or just the vibe?

I'll tell you what: It is going to be hairpieces because I will fuck my hair up and I've just got it back to being glossy. So I'm going to do wigs. I don't give a shit. I'm going to do wigs and they're going to be fantastic wigs. And maybe I'll do a few different wigs because that's what I can do and that's what the people want. There will be costume changes and I want to fly in the sky, but I don't know if the budget will allow that. I want it all. I want all the decadence and revelry. I've assumed this role of goddess, and I say this with inverted commas because this is what you make me feel, but it's also a great theme: We can all be gods and goddesses.



Jessie Ware's latest album, "Superbloom," is out June 17.

### We all have to at least pretend to be gods and goddesses in this era.

[Laughs.] Well, at my show, you can. I want you in a toga. I want you with a little leaf on your... you know. All of it. I want the Garden of Eden. But yeah, I get quite greedy with it. I want it all. I want all that kind of romance of performance, like watching an old YouTube video of Bette Midler. I want that glamor.

### I'm getting showgirl vibes. We need the Jessie Ware Vegas show.

I did get offered a Vegas show.

See *Jessie Ware*, page 22

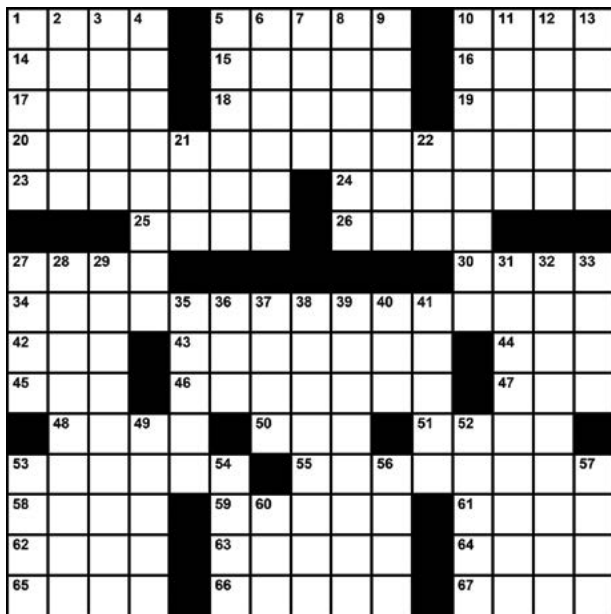
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- 44 \_\_\_ kwon do  
 45 Downward bend  
 46 Stores up  
 47 Gomer's mail service  
 48 Landlocked republic of Africa  
 50 Nurse in a bar  
 51 "Yeah, sure!"  
 53 Coarsely irreverent  
 55 Openly gay anchor with a tangy last name  
 58 Like a straight line, for short  
 59 Sometime label of Dusty Springfield  
 61 "Damn Yankees" girl  
 62 Gay Bob, for example  
 63 Take down a peg  
 64 They may be split  
 65 First name in mystery writing  
 66 The sounds of music  
 67 Pt. of DOS

**Down**

- 1 Provide new equipment for  
 2 Blown away  
 3 Word on a map of Israel  
 4 It may make a boxer go down  
 5 "If I may be \_\_\_"  
 6 "Liar Liar" star Jim  
 7 Like family  
 8 Online exaggeration, often  
 9 Turkish bathhouse locale  
 10 Between wife and wife  
 11 Run out of  
 12 World-weary  
 13 Puts in sequence  
 21 Degradable beginning  
 22 Hither's partner  
 27 Nickname for Streisand

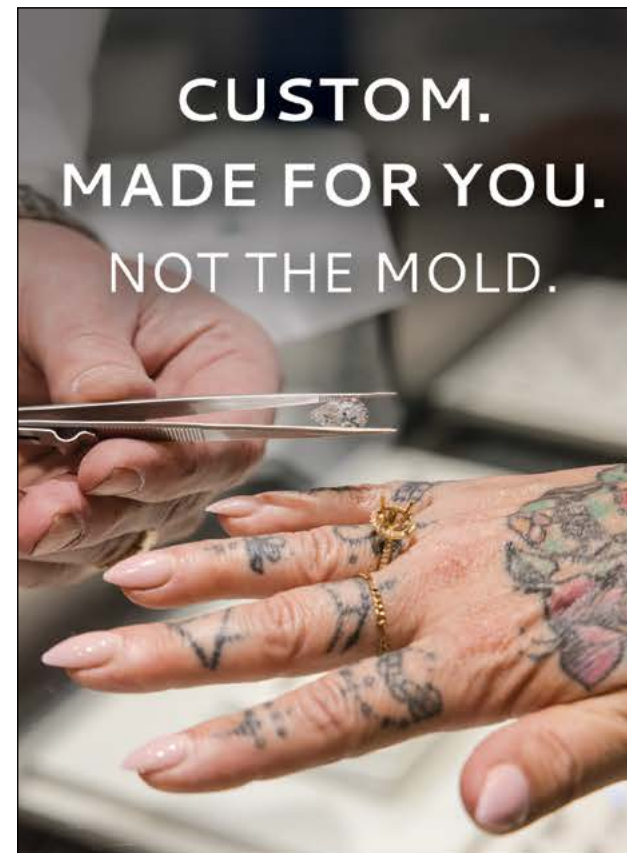
- 28 Turkey's peninsula  
 29 Jog one's memory  
 31 Inheritance coming'by right of birth  
 32 Frameworks on a Broadway stage  
 33 Barely got by, with "out"  
 35 Be of use to  
 36 School for Rev. Spahr  
 37 Supporters of drag queens  
 38 Volcanic glass  
 39 Applause in a theater  
 40 SSW's opposite  
 41 \_\_\_ metabolism  
 49 Utensil for giving "more" in "Oliver"  
 52 Tennis star that goes either way?  
 53 Straddled a stallion  
 54 "Nuts!"  
 56 Naysayers' words  
 57 Cartoonist that drew the Democratic ass  
 60 You can see "Desert Hearts" here

See p. 19 for answers

**Citrus and Substance Across**

- 1 Diana of "The Avengers"  
 5 Milan showplace, with "la"  
 10 Young bears  
 14 Organic compound  
 15 Like some old buckets  
 16 City where Dick Button won gold  
 17 Eleanor's pooch

- 8 Crucial point  
 19 Songwriter Holly  
 20 Start of a quote by  
 23 Kind of strength  
 24 Acting companies  
 25 Powell once of the White House  
 26 Dangle like a package  
 27 Silents vamp Theda  
 30 Recess at St. Peter's  
 34 More of the quote  
 42 "Ich \_\_\_ ein Berliner" (JFK)  
 43 Fragrant herb



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## ◀ Jessie Ware

Continued from page 20

### And?

We couldn't make it work, but I would love to make that happen. I love the idea of a residency. I love the idea of going to work and being like, "I got to go and do my show." I just love it: being a jobbing, working singer.

**Your albums — "What's Your Pleasure?," "That! Feels Good!" and "Superbloom" — feel connected. Do you see them as a thematic or emotional trilogy, and did that happen organically or consciously?**

I decided this at the end of "What's Your Pleasure?" I wrote "Remember Where You Are" and I was questioning whether I should keep that on that record or save it for the next record. Then I was like, "Oh no, this can be the way they tie together." So that informed how I made the next record. And then that happened again with "That! Feels Good!" I feel like I've got the cousins of "Ooh La La." You've got "Shake the Bottle." And then on this record, you have "Mr. Valentine." So I've tried to marry a song to a record from the last two. It hasn't always worked, don't get me wrong. But they have informed each other.

I don't know if I fucked myself by saying a trilogy. I think I know what I want the next

record to be: far more synth and electronic and kind of blue and crooner-y. I feel excited about where I go next. But also I really want to enjoy this moment that, due to the love that has been given to me, I've been able to make this very confident record that I feel is really coherent. It's very much like dancing with the gods and goddesses in heaven, because where do you go after you've had such satisfaction from "That! Feels Good!" and this intensity? You go to the heavens and dance with the fairies and nymphs. So that's what I want at the party.

**What tracks on "Superbloom" do you secretly hope become queer anthems, or songs a drag queen could lip-sync to for their life to?**

I feel like "Don't You Know Who I Am?" is a lip-sync song. I really believe that. And in fact, I really wanted to go to this Bangkok drag night where my choreographer was sending me videos of these amazing queens singing songs from my first record. "Sauna" is a song that was birthed from this amazingly beautiful night in New York with the "Joy Boys," coined by a friend. These boys were so gorgeous and we had this beautiful Passover dinner together and then it turned into this rave and we were dancing. And I was going to a lot of saunas at the time. So that may be too on the nose. I think "Ride" Judging by the school moms who are high fiving me after that video — I'm sorry, you can't only have that one because the gals like it too. The heteros like it too. [Laughs.]

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- Gonorrhea/Chlamydia
- Trichomoniasis
- Non-gonococcal urethritis (NGU)
- Scabies
- Pubic lice
- Hepatitis C (Testing Only)



**586-465-9217**

[macombgov.org/departments/health-department](http://macombgov.org/departments/health-department)



**Health and Community Services**  
Health Department



Persons 12 & older

Southwest Health Center  
27690 Van Dyke, Suite B  
Warren, MI 48093

Central Health Center  
43525 Elizabeth Road  
Mount Clemens, MI 48043



# Christ Is Risen! Alleluia!

Join the Holy Week and Easter celebrations at these Lutheran churches - churches that have made a public affirmation of welcome to YOU - members, family and friends of the LGBTQIA+ community.

**This is Christ's church. There is a place for you here.**

## **ANN ARBOR**

**King of Kings Lutheran Church**  
2685 Packard Rd.

**Lutheran Campus Ministry**  
**Lord of Light Lutheran Church**  
801 S. Forest Ave.

**Trinity Lutheran Church**  
1400 W. Stadium Blvd.

**Zion Lutheran Church**  
1501 W. Liberty St.

**BATTLE CREEK**  
**Trinity Lutheran Church**  
2055 Columbia Ave. E.

**BURTON**  
**Our Risen Lord Lutheran Church**  
4040 Lapeer Rd.

**CLAWSON**  
**Spirit of Christ Lutheran Church**  
749 W. 14 Mile Rd.

**DEARBORN**  
**All.together Campus Ministry**  
**St. Paul Lutheran Church**  
21915 Beech St.

**DETROIT**  
**Love Rising Lutheran Church**  
21230 Moross Rd.

**DUNDEE**  
**St. John Lutheran Church**  
460 Riley St.

**EAST LANSING**  
**St. Paul Lutheran Church**  
3383 E. Lake Lansing Rd.

**University Lutheran Church**  
1020 S. Harrison Rd.

## **FARMINGTON HILLS**

**Hope Lutheran Church**  
39200 W. 12 Mile Rd.

**FERNDALE**  
**Zion Lutheran Church**  
143 Albany St.

**FREELAND**  
**Zion Lutheran Church**  
545 7th St.

**GRAND RAPIDS**  
**Bethlehem Lutheran Church**  
250 Commerce Ave. SW

**JACKSON**  
**Immanuel Lutheran Church**  
1505 W. Michigan Ave.

**KALAMAZOO**  
**Lutheran Church of the Savior**  
3616 E. G Ave.

**KENTWOOD**  
**Ascension Lutheran Church**  
4252 Breton Rd. SE

**LIVONIA**  
**Emmanuel Lutheran Church**  
34567 7 Mile Rd.

**Holy Cross Lutheran Church**  
30650 6 Mile Rd.

**MONROE**  
**Christ Lutheran Church**  
225 E. Elm Ave.

**MOUNT PLEASANT**  
**Immanuel Lutheran Church**  
320 S. Bradley St.

## **MUSKEGON**

**Harbor of Grace Lutheran Church**  
1132 W. Southern Ave.

**OKEMOS**  
**Faith Lutheran Church**  
4515 Dobie Rd.

**PORT HURON**  
**St. Martin Lutheran Church**  
805 Chestnut St.

**ROCHESTER HILLS**  
**Abiding Presence Lutheran Church**  
1550 Walton Rd.

**SAGINAW**  
**Our Saviour Lutheran Church**  
2525 Hemmeter Rd.

**SAINT JOSEPH**  
**Saron Lutheran Church**  
510 Main St.

**SALINE**  
**Holy Faith Church**  
6299 Saline Ann Arbor Rd.

**SHELBY TOWNSHIP**  
**King of kings Lutheran Church**  
47500 Schoenherr Rd.

**SOUTHGATE**  
**Unity Lutheran Church**  
12250 Fort St.

**TRENTON**  
**St. Philip Lutheran Church**  
1790 Fort St.

**WATERFORD**  
**Christ Lutheran Church**  
5987 Williams Lake Rd.

*Keep your information*  
**FRESH to KEEP**

**SNAP**

*food assistance benefits.*

**TOGETHER WE CAN HELP KEEP FOOD ON THE TABLE.**

If you're getting SNAP food assistance benefits, are you getting the right amount? When it's time to update your information, it's important to report any changes to your income, employment, family situation or address.

Learn more at [Michigan.gov/FoodAssistance](https://Michigan.gov/FoodAssistance).

