

History in the Present: Peaches and Honey Talk Drag

by Menaja Ganesh



PEACHES and HONEY: The Past, Present, and Future of SF Drag

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San Francisco has a decades-long history of mashing fashion and politics. At a time when drag is enjoying a sort of mainstream popularity, local queens continue to create a regional culture and a style unique to the left coast. Join Honey Mahogany, Peaches Christ, and your host Alex Hernandez (CCA MFA 2012) as they highlight local luminaries, past and present bars and clubs, and post-pandemic performance possibilities.

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As a queer person, I often think about how I just happened to move to San Francisco completely by chance four years ago, with no knowledge of the city's culture, politics, or social history. All I knew was that the weather was temperate and closest to what I would find in India, so my family and I decided to move here. In retrospect, it's ironic that this beautifully queer city is now home. I never realized the conditions and opportunities that this city would create to explore my gender and sexual identity over the last four years. I'm able to present how I feel most comfortable, walk out on the street on my terms without having to answer to anyone, and hold hands with the person I love without fearing persecution, all while being held so tenderly by this city. It was an honor and a privilege for me to attend a talk with Honey Mahogany and Peaches Christ, hosted by California College of the Arts' Illustration Program. During the discussion, I learned more about the city's queer history that welcomed me as a scared, queer, brown immigrant and nurtured me to where I am today. First and foremost, I would like to pay respect to the Black and Brown queer and trans people who came before us, who fought for our rights and resisted against the institutions that tried to suppress us.

The talk began with a history of queer spaces in San Francisco, starting with the struggles during the prohibition era of the 1930s. Finocchio's, on Stockton Street, was a bar that spearheaded showgirl culture and was a space where queer and trans people could perform in drag, but it wasn't an exclusively queer space. Instead, it catered to cis men during a time of rampant sexualization and fetishization of trans women and people in drag.

The panelists spoke more about Black Cat Cafe, which initially opened in 1906 and closed in 1921. It reopened in 1933 and stayed open for another 30 years, after which it closed for good. This was a bar at which gay activist and drag queen Jose Sarria was known for performing. Peaches and Honey spoke about how his work and performance directly challenged the legality of men dressing in "women's clothing." The mystery of his persona transformed what it meant to have agency in outward presentation, especially as a queer person who faced persecution. He was also the first openly gay person to run for office when he ran for the San Francisco Board of Supervisors in 1961, even before Harvey Milk.

As the talk progressed from Finocchio's to Compton Cafeteria in the Tenderloin, the speakers began to shed more light on the implicit hierarchy of the drag and performing community in San Francisco. The queens who performed at Finocchio's were regarded as celebrities. At the same time, the people who fre-

quented Compton Cafeteria were often sex workers who didn't have the same kind of money or connections. The Compton Cafeteria Riot took place in 1966 following the systemic persecution and violent harassment of drag queens and trans women in particular by the police. However, even beyond the riot, the Tenderloin was a space where queer people could meet and gather safely outside the gatekeeping from the upper-class communities that visited spaces like Finocchio's. Thinking about class-related gatekeeping in the queer community is reminiscent of struggles queer people face today. Black and Brown queer people, poor queer people, and marginalized queer people do not have the same opportunities and privileges that upper-class white gays, especially cis men, continue to enjoy.

The panelists then spoke more about the evolution of drag as entertainment in the bar scene, to drag as art and performance. The Cockettes was an avant-garde theatre group founded by the queer entertainer Hibiscus in 1969, three years after the Compton Cafeteria Riot. They played with the norms of gender presentation, blurring the gender binary, no longer just for the gaze of cis men. The group's sloppy, DIY aesthetic contrasted with the work and performance on Broadway in New York—a performance style that was clean, refined, and polished rather than spontaneous. Because of these aesthetic dissonances, The Cockettes were very popular in San Francisco, but weren't as successful in New York, as audiences were not comfortable with their aesthetic presentation.

Aside from the developments of queer performance and art spaces, queer people were still facing persecution in mainstream society at the time. During World War II, thousands of queer people were discharged from the military based on their sexual identity, and many settled in the Bay Area. In the 1950s, many white families abandoned their houses in the Castro for the suburbs, and many of these discharged service people were able to move in and claim that neighborhood as their own. This change made it a historically queer neighborhood. This was almost a way of being integrated into broader society when homeowners mainly were traditional white nuclear families. Thinking of the Castro as a gay suburb is empowering, but problematic when we think of the amount of gentrification in San Francisco today. The people who live in the Castro are much more affluent and primarily white, thinking in contrast to the multiple queer and trans people in the city who do not have the same access to housing, many of whom are houseless altogether. It was something I faced firsthand when I first tried to move into a home with my other queer housemates—we were turned away from so many places when I found that, in contrast, white people had no trouble finding housing. This is something to be mindful and aware of as people residing in San Francisco—we are most likely contributing to the gentrification.

In the '80s and '90s, during the AIDS epidemic, queer people as a collective were dealing with a tremendous amount of grief and loss, losing chosen family and community members who were cherished and loved. Drag transformed from a means of expression into a means of coping with loss. The drag community protested against the oppression and discrimination that queer people were facing at the height of this epidemic. The Folsom Street Fair began in 1984 to create a foundation for the emerging queer BDSM community in San Francisco as a sex-positive movement. It started and grew as an event for San Francisco's queer communities to come together during a traumatic period when queer bars in the area were either being shut down or facing extreme regulation. In addition to this, the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence emerged as an organization that utilized drag and performance on the streets of the Castro neighborhood to raise awareness regarding the social conflict in the Castro and around the queer community. They dressed in the attire of nuns to subvert and satirize the sexual intolerance and gender conformity

within the Catholic faith. Even though the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence and the Folsom Street Fair took very different approaches, their ultimate goal was queer liberation and community building and healing.

The Stud was a queer bar with its roots in San Francisco since the 1960s and was one of the foundational establishments that led to the Folsom Street Fair. Although it changed locations many times over the years, it continued to exist as an essential queer-run institution in San Francisco. It was home to T-Shack, a weekly drag performance started by drag queen Heklina in 1996. It showcased different kinds of drag queens and performers from 1996 up until 2008. They hosted several celebrity performers who are icons within the queer and drag community, including Lady Gaga, Gwen Stefani, and RuPaul. It is crucial for us to note the importance of the Stud as a safe space for queer people in San Francisco, especially during present times, when the economic circumstances caused by the pandemic shut it down. As a space, it was resilient and adaptive. We are fortunate to have documentation of the people and communities it hosted over the decades. Its legacy continues to live on in our community, despite its physical location (or lack thereof). With the influx of social media in our present day, it may seem that our communities have been fragmented, but it is a way for us to come together without sharing physical space, especially during the pandemic. This has led to a rise in mutual aid and community-funded projects, something many queer spaces have relied on during times of instability.

As our speakers discussed drag in contemporary times, especially with queer youth, the conversation naturally moved towards how one can sustain oneself financially and emotionally by nurturing craft and performance. Drag is an art form that contains within itself layers and multitudes, perhaps initially to control public perception of oneself while balancing one's presentation and expression of identity. It is a craft where all the details are ultimately important, adding up to the creation of an outward character that entertains the public, builds community, and creates spaces. One of our speakers, Honey Mahogany, was a contestant on the fifth season of RuPaul's Drag Race, a show that has done immense work to bring drag to the forefront of mainstream popular culture, within queer and non-queer spaces alike. They spoke about Drag Race, its pros and cons, and how it often creates a false narrative about drag, reducing it to a commercial art form. Peaches Christ also talked about drag as a reflection of one's inner self, as a labor of love.

Both the speakers talked about drag tenderly. They advised the young emerging drag community not to be afraid to experiment and create characters and personas outside the box while also being aware of the people who came before, who made it possible for us to be who we are.

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