

REVIEW

An Evening with Peaches and Honey: A History of San Francisco Drag

by Daniela Segovia



PEACHES and HONEY: The Past, Present, and Future of SF Drag Thursday, March 25, 2021

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.

Organized by QCCA, Critical Ethnic Studies, and CCA Illustration.



Michael Wertz, Assistant Chair of Illustration at CCA



Alexander Hernandez, who hosted for the evening.

Every year, California College of the Arts and the Queer Cultural Center of San Francisco collaborate to bring together socially, nationally, and globally renowned artists, writers, filmmakers, performers, and scholars for a series of conversations. On the evening of March 25th, I had the privilege of learning about the vast history of the San Francisco Drag scene with drag Superstars of San Francisco Honey Mahogany and Peaches Christ.

Honey Mahogany serves not only lewks darling, but as the Vice-Chair at the San Francisco Democratic County Central Committee, is the co-founder of the Compton's Transgender Cultural District—the world's first legally recognized Transgender district in San Francisco—is a co-owner of The Stud Bar, and works as a legislative aid in San Francisco. Peppy Queen Peaches Christ is a self-produced San Francisco filmmaker and co-owner of the Into the Dark Production Company. The production company produces immersive theatre, including the hugely popular "Terror Vault Show" at the historic San Francisco Mint Building. Micheal Wertz, the Assistant Chair of CCA's Illustration program, opened the conversation with a warm introduction to the night's moderator, CCA alum Alexander Hernandez. Hernandez is a mixed media artist with an emphasis on textiles, who received a BFA in painting from Rocky Mountain College of Art and Design from Denver, Colorado, and an MFA in studio arts at CCA. His world explores multiple identities rooted in immigrant experiences, gender expectations, HIV-positive survivors, and queer sensibilities.

The Drag community of San Francisco is vivacious, innovative, and an epicenter for the LGBTQIA community. During the prohibition era, clubs like Finocchio's and The Black Cat became famous for doing drag shows mainly as a gag for straight viewership. After WWII, San Francisco became a military stronghold with bases like Fort Mason and Fort Funston. With thousands of men relocating there after the war and the prohibition era,

it became a home for freedom, festivity, and liberated love. Pioneer José Sarria started the drag scene at The Black Cat. At this point, it was illegal to dress in clothing meant for the opposite sex, something the police enforced religiously. To retaliate, José would wear signs saying “I’m A Man” as if to say, “You can’t arrest me; I am not trying to entrap or trick men.” A trailblazer of his time, he was the first openly gay candidate to run for public office in 1961, even before Harvey Milk. He began some of the first sing-alongs with songs like “God Save Us Smelly Queens” and is still celebrated today for all his work and contributions. Towards the end of the ‘60s, early ‘70s, Bohemian Bars like The Black Cat and Finocchio’s Club became respected as high-class drag. Sadly, many queens were not fortunate enough to have jobs at these bars, so many turned to sex work. Compton Cafeteria in the Tenderloin district became a haven for these women though it did not provide security. Many of the ladies turned to the 24-hour Compton Cafeteria as a place of gathering. In 1966, a riot erupted due to repeated violence and continuous police harassment towards drag queens and, more particularly, trans-women. A moment in history that should never be forgotten.



Honey Mahogany

We began to speak of Australian-born San Francisco-based queen Doris Fish, who appeared in the epic (1991) sci-fi film *Vegas In Space*. The filmmakers had so many radical ideas about drag and how to navigate the world, which closely mirrored the “Dreamlanders,” a term given to cast and crew regularly seen in John Waters films. Soon after making the film, Doris Fish passed away from complications due to HIV AIDS—a story sadly too familiar in the community during the late ‘80s and early ‘90s. In many ways, drag was created to deal with the pain of that era and was a form of activism to change such circumstances. The Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence was an organization using drag and religious imagery to call attention to sexual intolerance and issues of gender. It formed as an act of counterprotest to the religious groups who harassed gays living in the Castro. “A gaggle of gays dressed up as nuns and chased away those protesters,” as stated by Honey. They ended up loving it so much that they continued to do so. It’s a known fact that becoming a Sister of Perpetual Indulgence is very difficult. Candidates must take the fundraising and the sisterhood seriously. The sisterhood is also credited for making the first safe-sex pamphlet at the height of the HIV Crisis before people even knew what caused AIDS and raising money for those affected by the disease.



Peaches Christ

During desegregation, there was a substantial white flight to the suburbs. “People didn’t feel comfortable having their children go to school in the same school district as colored children” Honey stated. This left many Victorian Homes in the Castro for the gay community to set up. The Castro has been a space for the gay community to gather but hasn’t always been welcoming to black and brown communities. As explored in Marlon Riggs’ *Tongues Untied*, the district has been criticized for its whiteness. Bars such as Esta Noche moved to the Mission District because of discouragement from playing their traditional Latin ballads in the Castro. The now-closed bar was known as a space for queens of color to be celebrated and welcomed. As Peaches explained, nowadays, “queer kids of color have taken over, and it’s a wonderful thing to see.” The Stud Bar was also a topic of discussion, with performers like Etta James coming through its doors. It has a

historical significance to the community. Honey explained that Huey P. Newton, co-founder of the Black Panthers, to create a more intersectional movement, called out to the Gay Liberation Front to use The Stud Bar on Folsom Street as a meeting ground for both political movements. Honey stated, "It speaks to the richness of San Francisco's legacy of anti-racism work and also intersectionality and diversity." "The Stud was a place for everybody: furies, people who love David Lynch—almost every night was a different theme," said Peaches.

Since the pandemic, The Stud has closed, but not forever. Honey and her crew plan to search for a new home and keep the Stud Bar alive and work with the city to write new legislation. Peaches has been working on a TV Show pilot with her friend Varla G. Mernan, writing a new feature film, and pitching a documentary film unpacking the history of San Francisco Drag to streaming services called *Aggressive Glamour*. Alexander is having a show in Chicago at Flex Contemporary Gallery. As Peaches said, "Do it because you love it and accept who you are because you aren't cut from the same cloth as everyone else. The challenge is not to imitate other performers but to sit there and be sloppy, messy, and creative and come up with something new." We can all find our place in San Francisco, no matter which part of history we fall into.

Daniela Segovia is an individualized studies artist with a focus on painting, textiles and printmaking.



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