

CULTURE

Quick—name Oregon's oldest queer nonprofit organization. If you thought of the Imperial Sovereign Rose Court, skip to the head of the wagon train—without tripping on some diva's gold lamé train.

Bet you didn't know the first drag title in Portland was actually bestowed in 1958. Talk about pioneers—this was such a radical action, it didn't happen again until 1966, which was still three years before Stonewall.

In the early years, monarchs reigned for just six months and were chosen at balls in the spring and fall. In 1969, the court sashed up the first African American queen, Empress Rochelle X, who died in 1999.

1969 also saw the birth of the Portland Forum, the oldest chartered gay organization in the state of Oregon. It began staging the balls and eventually was transformed into the Imperial Sovereign Rose Court.

Another black beauty reigned in 1971 as Empress Telane XIII. During the party-hearty '70s the court was very much an organization created by drag queens for drag queens. But following the lead of the San Francisco "mother court" in 1975, Portlanders crowned their first Emperor, a title then reserved for men who look like men.

The following year, a former track-and-field star sprinted onto the scene and ran for Emperor. Harold eventually triumphed as the second Emperor and the only black man to hold that title in the Imperial Sovereign Rose Court. As one anonymous board member observes, "We need to recruit some studly black guys!"



Rose Empress XXXVI Maria

"The experience of being Emperor was different then than it is today," Harold recalls. "In the '70s the court was the main gay group in the city, so the Emperor and Empress were very much the focus. It was pretty much all we had."

The most memorable thing about his reign? "Just the idea that I was only the second Emperor in a court that was previously only about drag queens. It was one of the most challenging years of my life because I was very much out there with nothing to hide behind," Harold says, referring to the wigs, makeup and costumes used by drag queens. "You had to be genuine. I had a great time representing our court in a positive manner."

By the 1980s, the court was well established and the titles more hotly contested. There was talk at the time among some about not electing a black Empress, but enlightenment prevailed, and those attitudes are a thing of the past—which paved the way for the next two black monarchs. Although they are no longer with us, their legacy lives on in many ways, and these two queens are remembered in our community for their generous spirits.

In 1983 the court crowned the tempestuous Rose Empress XXVI Rosey Waters, who always said he won because he earned the lesbian vote from being a disc jockey at the 927 Club.

Poison Waters was just an innocent girl of 20 when she became Rosebud XIII. He repaid his fans by pushing to

create the Ms. Oregon title especially for lesbians.

Waters was also a mentor and "drag mother" to the current monarch, Poison Waters. "I just knew of Rosey as this great party girl, and he loved hanging out at the City club and helping the kids," Poison recalls. "It wasn't until years later that I realized what his Empress title had meant."

It was Rosey who taught Poison how to apply makeup. "He would paint half my face, and I'd do the

other half, and we'd do it six times a day 'til I learned to do it myself," Poison explains. "He didn't want people to see him as his health was declining, but he did a command performance and sang a nice ballad at my stepping down as Princess in 1995."

In 1986 perhaps the best-known monarch was enthroned with the rise of Lady Elaine Peacock as Rose Empress XXIX. Fittingly, her reign was known as "The Legend of the Rose." Although she passed on in 1993, the organization she founded, Peacock in the Park, continues to thrive as a scholarship fund-raising event.

Poison Waters also has fond memories of Peacock. "Lady Elaine worked at Darcelle's when I was there, and Woody [Peacock's alter ego] was just the greatest guy. He wasn't into the bitchy drag queen mode. He was always nice to everyone in or out of drag."

Waters even tried to model his own behavior on Woody's actions. Rosey Waters was crowned in 1983



A diamond tiara is a girl's best friend—Empress XLIV Poison Waters

"He told me, 'Don't take yourself too seriously'...he had a lot of elegance and grace, where I'm a little rougher," Poison admits.

Waters also points out that Woody was "really active all the time. He was never idle, always doing something. He went to all the meetings, always at shows or pageants."

Which sounds a lot like the schedule Waters keeps now. With a lighthearted laugh, she agrees. "For some queens it's a lot of work to get into drag. I just whip it on and go."

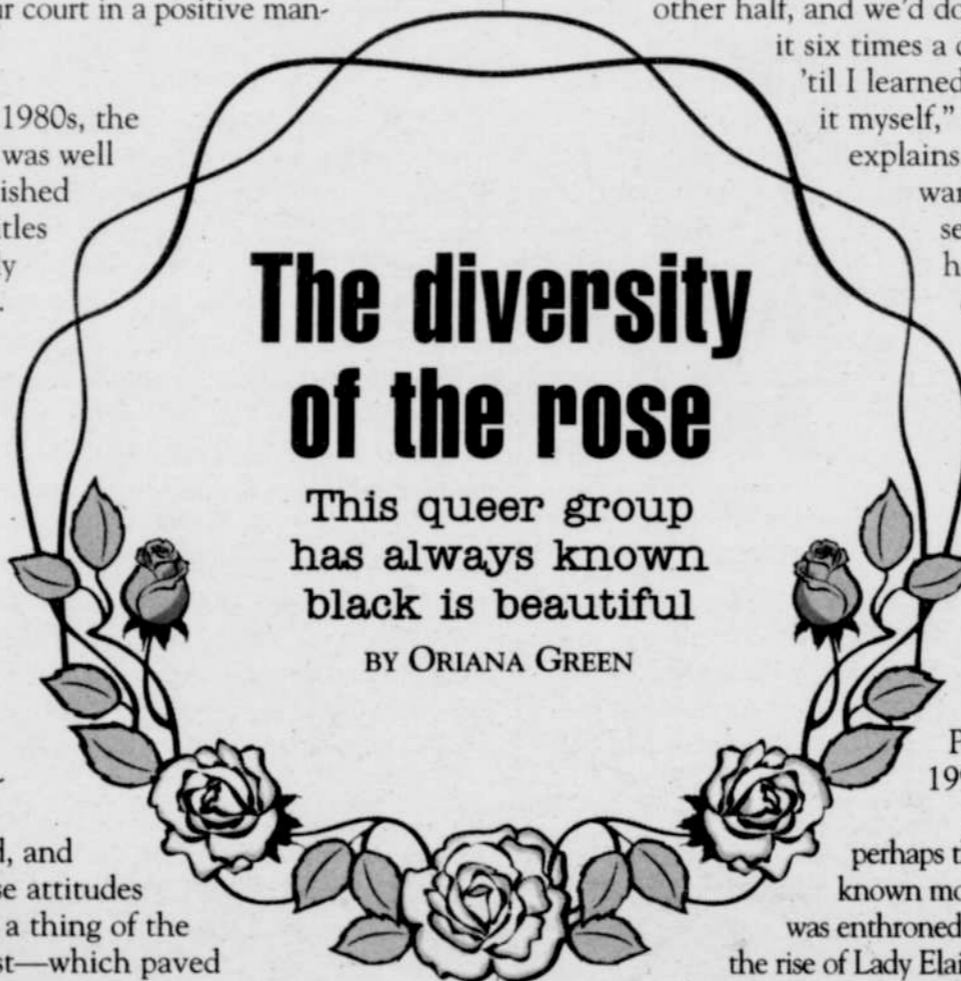
History was made in 1988 when Harold, the second Emperor, transformed himself into the elegant Rose Empress XXXI Cicely, who purred through her year like a sleek black panther. He's still the only one to hold both titles.

"I didn't think I'd ever do drag. It just wasn't in my psyche...I'd never thought I'd be onstage in any context!" the still-shy Harold reveals.

So what inspired him to don those pumps? "Some fellow Emperors all decided this one year we'd go in drag to a private party, but we looked horrible. The second time I did it I took it more seriously, and the reaction was positive. The rest is history," he laughs.

That's for sure. In 1985 the once-reluctant drag queen went on to win the title of the world's most glamorous drag queen, La Femme Magnifique.

"The most difficult thing for me to do at court functions is juggle the two identities of Harold and Cicely. Some people reacted negatively to the idea that I started doing



The diversity of the rose

This queer group has always known black is beautiful

BY ORIANA GREEN



Poison Waters was just an innocent girl of 20 when she became Rosebud XIII.

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