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FILM

Too good for this world: The Cockettes drove drag to new levels and performance to new lows



Queens of anarchy

The Cockettes revives the legendary San Francisco performance troupe

BY GARY MORRIS

The legendary Cockettes are reborn in David Weissman and Bill Weber's appropriately wild new documentary *The Cockettes*, which plays June 28 to July 4 at Cinema 21. Witnessing the volatile group, it's more than a little surprising they're back at all.

In existence for a mere 30 months from the late '60s into the early '70s, the Cockettes were the essence of the marginal and the ephemeral—in a sense too innocent and, really, just too good for this world.

Started by hunky George Harris, who redubbed himself Hibiscus and became a Total Mad Queen, the group lived hand to mouth in free-love communes, supported mostly by welfare—not always eating but always looking scintillating in thrift store rags, towering wigs and glitter-drenched dresses fabricated from anything at hand.

The Cockettes' brand of drag, seen to splendid advantage in nonstop period clips, would be barely recognizable to the smart tranny of today. Their increasingly bizarre getups were both an artistic and a political statement—a kind of Pied Piper masquerade to lure as many of the self-styled "freaks and pervs" into their web as possible.

And who could resist? The Cockettes had it all: glamour, frivolity, orgies and no pesky day jobs to get in the way.

Much more open than some of the more insular queer groups then and now, they were welcoming to women, who were integral to the troupe's existence and shows. Women rubbed elbows and sometimes more with the queens. (A few had kids by their male "sisters.")

What brought the Cockettes out of the commune and onto the stage were a series of theatrical events—mostly unrehearsed vignettes of song and carry-on, often little more than an impromptu display of sex 'n' drug culture abandon. These brief bits at San Francisco's freaky Palace Theater were expanded eventually into a three-hour tableaux of decadence, under such titles as *Gone with the Showboat* or *Oklahoma* and *Tropical Heatwave/Hot Voodoo*.

They were equal opportunity offenders, terribly un-P.C., with blackface characters and loads of nudity. In a typical effort, *Fairytale Extravaganza*, a Cockette explains, "All the fairy tale characters came together for the first time—on acid."

Of course, it wasn't all wonderful. The anarchic Cockettes were perpetually at war with their more "Beat" counterparts in another commune who believed in more organization and overt political action. (They did, however, share a penchant for highly theatrical drag and a rather limited cuisine.)

Directors Weissman and Weber managed to get access to hundreds of hours of taped interviews and contemporary footage of the Cockettes in their glory, giving viewers a remarkable insider view of what the performers' daily lives and haphazard careers were like. Instead of merely hearing about Hibiscus, for instance, we get to see him, twirling in mountains of gossamer through the streets of San Francisco, his eyes festooned with glitter and bleary with acid.

The Cockettes weren't destined to remain a local phenomenon (though they were fundamentally San Francisco), becoming deified when *Rolling Stone* covered a Cockette wedding. The in-your-face attitude and scads of public nudity, nicely sampled in the film, helped liberate many a Midwestern queen and various eccentrics puzzling over that first piece of chintz or furtively eyeing that push-up bra.

By the time the troupe was invited to New York, they were the toast of the town, carrying with them the praise of such luminaries of the time as Truman Capote, Rex Reed and Gore Vidal. But while their image was one of liberated sophisticates, East Coast audiences found the production *Tinsel Tarts in a Hot Coma* amateurish, indeed unbearable.

Fayette, one of the female Cockettes, recalls the stampede out the theater. The brittle hauteur of the Big Apple hip crowd gelled not at all with this unabashed libertinage. The troupe was happy to leave after what sounds—and looks, in the you-are-there clips—like a miserable three weeks.

This also spelled the end of the Cockettes. There were always internal rifts—some of the queens wanted to become more professional, others insisted on spontaneity and fun. Some were junkies and acid heads, others tried to steer clear of such indulgences. And many died, victims of overdoses in the early days and AIDS later. With the world a wretched mess, the resurrection of these merry pranksters, if only in this documentary, is timely and, of course, fabulous. **JM**