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FILM

Free exchange

Queer composer Thomas Lauderdale third-degrees
 Portland's newest gay filmmaker acquisition

"They were hippie, acid-freak drag queens, which was really new at the time...it still would be new."
 —John Waters

Joining the ranks of international superstar filmmakers living in Portland is David Weissman, a cultural and political activist from San Francisco. He produced and co-directed the award-winning *The Cockettes*, which documents the rise and fall of a group of hippie drag queen hedonists who articulated the idealistic visions of American counterculture in the late 1960s and early '70s.

In anticipation of a free screening of *The Cockettes* June 10 at Cinema 21, Pink Martini pianist and composer Thomas Lauderdale caught up with Weissman to talk about Portland, American culture and flirting on the street.

Thomas Lauderdale: You lived in San Francisco. Why move to Portland?

David Weissman: In thinking about where else to live in the country other than New York or Los Angeles, this is the only town that I've found that's a really desirable place to live that also has cheap rents. So it encourages kind of a young bohemia that is very hard to find anywhere else in the country. It's a unique combination—there's politics, there's art, there is music, and it's all functioning within a system that doesn't seem as driven by money as it does in other major cities.

TL: And yet in some ways the city is losing its progressive, trailblazing edge—becoming more suburban with a parade of Pottery Barns and Costco warehouses and bad architecture.

DW: All cities are at risk of that, but Portland is pretty unique. It's much more interesting than Seattle...and there is this feeling that the city is bubbling with activity.

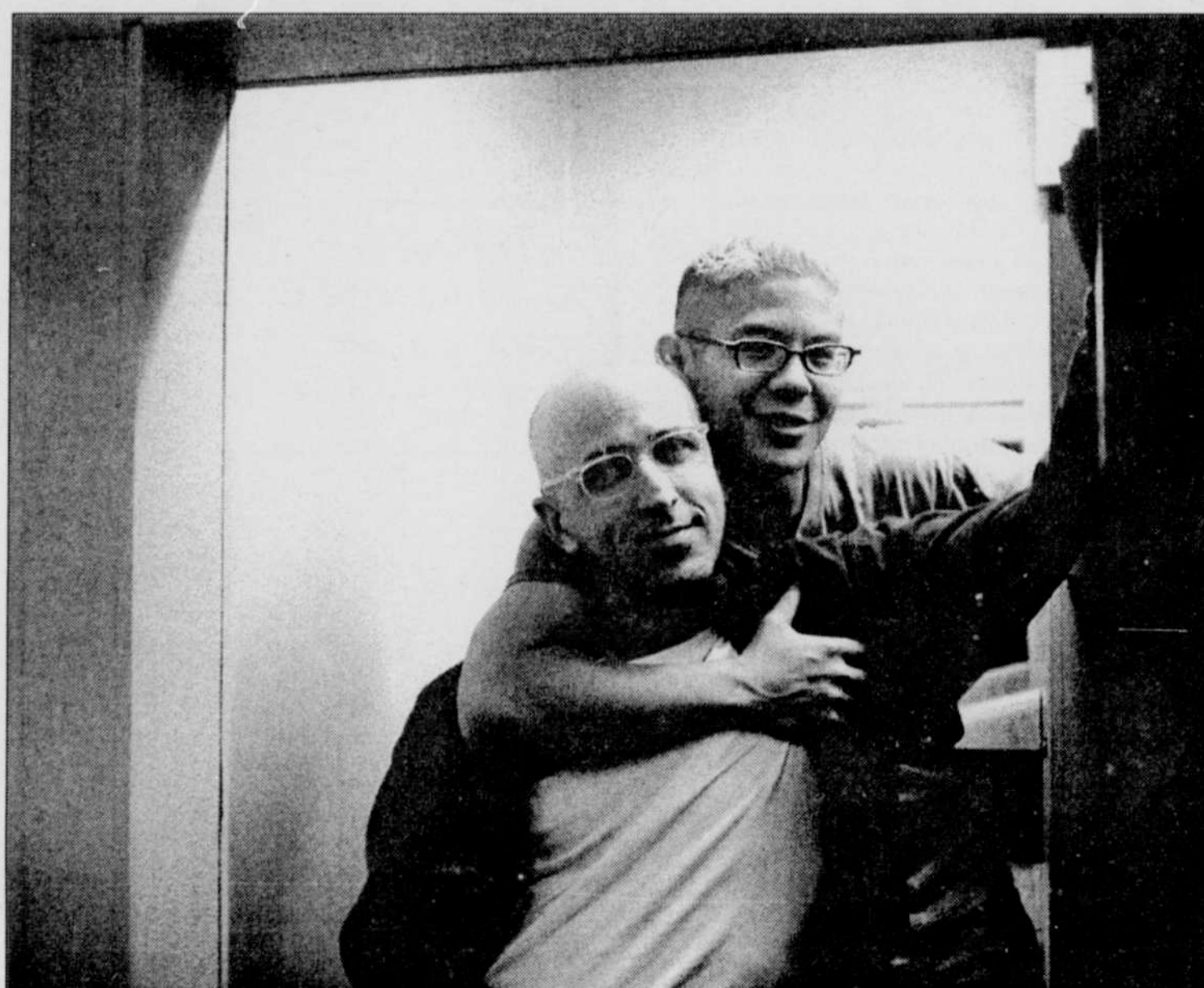
TL: And yet the streets often feel empty here. San Francisco, on the other hand, is very much a walking city.

DW: There is almost no queer street life here. And that's really weird for me because I've lived in the queerest city in the world for a long time, and I'm so used to flirting every day on the street, and it just doesn't happen here.

TL: No one flirts with you on the streets of Portland?

DW: Yes, but not nearly as much...I mean in San Francisco it happens literally every day. You go out, you go to a cafe, and you flirt, and it's just fun. It doesn't necessarily lead to anything or need to. It's just about that kind of exchange of energy. And it contributes to a kind of sexual buzz.

TL: It seems fitting to have this free



Thomas Lauderdale (right) and David Weissman get close in the recesses of Silverado

screening of *The Cockettes* to celebrate your Oregon arrival, especially because the concept of "free" is central to the film.

DW: I was really lucky to be approaching my teens as the '60s were in full tilt. And so the idea of how far you could imagine things to be different than they were was unlimited. What would it mean to drop out of society and create something alternative that really wasn't money-based, wasn't profit-based, but that was based in

that moment without becoming an anachronism. So he developed as the culture developed. And the directions that he went afterwards made total sense for him as a pied piper again. It wasn't necessarily an idealistic direction. It was a darker, more coke-driven, more sex-driven, less utopian-driven process. But I think he logically followed his own nature to always be on the cutting edge, for better or for worse.

TL: There's that line in Gus Van Sant's film *To Die For*: "You're nobody if you're not on television." Achieving fame has certainly become a real American preoccupation.

DW: Well, it's funny because [the film] really deals with that. The Cockettes...started out with completely hippie values. It was just about basically acting out their daily lives on stage.

These people were completely fabulous, creative freaks, and they thought, "Well, let's throw it up on stage and have fun." And at a certain point in their development they started to get famous. And what evolves out of that is a very kind of archetypal commentary on the question, what does fame do to the purity of your vision?

TL: What do you think it does?

DW: It really depends on the individual. Some people are destined and have the metabolism and personal fortitude to become famous. And some people I think really prefer on a certain level to stick to their guns and do what they like to do and to be gratified by their creativity, by their community, regardless of those external issues which can be corrupting.

TL: Everybody knows you in San Francisco, and you've seen a lot there.

DW: I know lots and lots of people. I've

"There is no queerer experience than in having lived in San Francisco from 1976 until now.... It's just been great, and it's just been awful, too."

art and community and spirituality and exploration? And it was specific to that moment in time, but I think the aspirations are timeless.

TL: The film follows Hibiscus and his evolution from an East Coast prep boy sticking a daisy into the barrel of a gun during an anti-Vietnam War demonstration to a dazzling glitter glam drag performer to a coked-out, Armani-wearing soap opera star in the 1980s.

DW: He was a visionary in all respects, and he always was a step ahead of what was to come both in good ways and in bad ways. He was very much a hippie pied piper, and he was incredibly magnetic and wildly creative in his visual flamboyance and his magnetism to bring people around him together to do shows.

In the Haight in San Francisco he reflected those high ideals of "art has to be free, we're doing this for totally pure reasons." And that was a moment in time. He could not have stayed in