

QUEER NIGHT FEVER

*Can't tell your Booty from your Snatch?
Just Out sets the record straight about
the freaky scene that's sweeping Portland.*

by Aaron Scott



At a recent show by the performance art group Sissyboy, a crew of young gender pirates raided a revue of female-impersonator robots called "Duracelles" (a not-so-veiled satire of Darcelle's). The young pirates went in search of hidden treasure, only to realize in an after-school-special style that, although early drag queens might not push the edge as they once did, they nonetheless set the cultural stage that made the current wave of genderqueers possible.

The performance's crude but shrewd shredding of sexuality and gender was devoured by its audience of eccentrics, artists and queers, whose yearning for something other than the status quo of Stark Street has changed the face of queer Portland.

During the past decade, Portland's alternative queer community has blossomed into a rash of queer nights infesting the city. These queer parties (generally at straight clubs) are unabashedly freaky and filled with genderqueers, punk-rockers, hip-hoppers and all the

artistic folk who have continually sought the cultural edge, but who are only now experiencing force of numbers enough to create their own viable scene.

An Ice Age

By the early 1990s, the modern gay and lesbian movement (which burst into life in 1969 with a gaggle of New York drag queens blurring the lines between street riot and block party) had arguably settled into mainstream mediocrity. This stagnation leached further into that wholesome and profound activity that brings us together, helps us forge bonds of solidarity and serves as a venue of creative self-expression and stress release: the sacred institution of night life.

Back when "queer" was still a bad word, lesbians had little night life choice other than the Egyptian Club's Tomb, while gay men at least had the Stark Street buffet: Would I rather have the dollar drinks at Boxxes or the beer bust at Silverado? The options catered to a

crowd grown more institutionalized and mainstream because of its burgeoning acceptance in straight society.

"Stark Street is the same now as it was 15 years ago. There's been no evolution," says Howie Bierbaum, the man behind Howie Baggadonutz Productions, who has lived in Portland since 1981.

Shoshanah Oppenheim, a San Francisco transplant, expresses the same sentiment regarding the Egyptian: "It's a lesbian bar with a very specific audience and a very steady diet."

Which ain't all bad. The E-Room and Stark still have perfectly happy crowds looking to drink, dance and get down with the same sex. But if you ask someone who doesn't fit their prepackaged vending machine molds, it ain't all that, either.

"I'm all for Stark Street," says a sympathetic Thomas Lauderdale, the puckish bandleader of

Pink Martini and a serious connoisseur of camp. "But it can be exhausting, and it's certainly not for everyone."

By the early '90s, there was little alternative to the establishment and consequently only a fractured alternative queer community. Even

filmmaker Gus Van Sant, who is generally attributed as the first to capture Portland's bohemian underbelly, says, "I wasn't aware of an

alternative queer culture at the time."

That was the case, at least until Chris Monlux, gay co-owner of the rock club La Luna, snatched an idea from a Seattle venue and passed it off to an energetic Dutch boy, D-J Haanraads, to organize.

"Queer Night didn't fill a vacuum, it broke a mold."
—Byron Beck

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"Queer Night didn't fill a vacuum, it broke a mold," remembers Byron Beck, Willamette

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