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A Slow Dance for Fast Times

John Cameron Mitchell brings NYC's hottest party, and a faerie-inspired vision, to the Rose City

BY NICK MATTOS

"I wrote my first song this week," John Cameron Mitchell explains, excitement in his voice. For someone who's proven himself as a director, actor, producer and dancer, and who is perhaps most famous for writing and directing the story of a transgender rock musician named Hedwig, he sounds surprisingly pleased by this recent musical development. "A friend of mine encouraged me," he continues, "but I've never really written a song before. There's always something new that can come out of you." Innovation and surprise, with a little help from your friends—exactly the vibe that Mitchell creates at his celebrated New York City party Mattachine. On August 6, Portlanders will get a taste of how innovative old school can be when Mitchell brings the party, and its vision of ethical and creative homo culture, to Mississippi Studios.

Three years ago, Mitchell teamed up with Justin Bond, PJ DeBoy and Paul Dawson to start Mattachine as an underground, unadvertised party at the nation's oldest gay bar, Julius in New York City. The party quickly gained a devout following for its distinctively creative vibe, unlike anything else in the scene at the time. "We at Mattachine have an old-school style—we play a lot of old music, kind of keep it mostly pre-1984 with a little new stuff too, but we avoid club music," he explains. "It's a Madonna-free and Gaga-free zone. We play a lot of old soul and country and classic rock, New Wave. We'll even play LCD Soundsystem once in a while, but we avoid the clichés of gay bardom."

One of the most unusual elements of Mitchell's devotion to the old school is shown through a dance that many haven't swayed through since junior high. "My specialty is slow dancing," he explains, "which is something a lot of gay people—or anyone really, nowadays—just didn't experience unless they were 13 and perhaps dancing with someone that they didn't want to dance with. I'm rediscovering and reclaiming the slow dance, which was very important to me as a 13-year-old deejaying in my basement, playing Barry Manilow and Teddy Pendergrass and then bumping up to Boston and the Sylvers."

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—JOHN CAMERON MITCHELL,
ON MATTACHINE



John Cameron Mitchell (center) in the DJ booth at Mattachine in NYC with PJ DeBoy and Amber Martin.

With this intense undercurrent of nostalgia, some young queers may think that Mattachine sounds a bit like your father's gay dance night. *Au contraire*, asserts Mitchell. "You know, there's this sort of ageist thing in the gay world that gets on our nerves," he explains, which runs counter to the party's stated intent of "promoting ethical gay culture everywhere." But what exactly is Mitchell's notion of ethical gay culture? "It's just promoting a good vibe—respecting everybody, all ages, all genders, making up your own gender, keeping it relaxed," he says. "That's the ethical part—everybody is welcome, so please be friendly. Get off your phone! Look people in the eye!"

Mitchell continues: "Being queer is a privilege in that you have to question everything you're told. You see a lot of queer people questioning less and less. Unfortunately, the price of acceptance is meanness, which is better than the way it was but eventually there's going to be as many gay Republicans as there are straight Republicans. Selfishness is a trait that humans have a problem with. So, the ethical part is self-respect, and respect for others—not judging, not corraling yourself into a category. No sheeplike mentality that says that you need to identify yourself with endless thumping music, or the haircut that you have, or your body hair, or your size. Those things are based on fear."

With his talk of fearlessness and remaking gay culture into something loving and

ethical, Mitchell sounds remarkably like his hero, Harry Hay. "I've always been very interested in him," he says of the early gay rights activist who was a founding member of the Mattachine Society. "I never met him, but strangely I did go to his memorial, which was very beautiful, and met his partner of many decades [John Burnside]. John told a story about their relationship: Every night before they went to bed, Harry would tell him that he loved him. On the last night before he died, Harry couldn't speak, but he told him the same thing with his eyes. John described it as 'unendurable,' 'an unendurable love,' which was a strange way to put it, but it's made me fascinated with him."

Beyond the tenderness of Hay as a lover, Mitchell also appreciates the great variety of other roles Hay played throughout his life. "He had so many guises," he says, "and I really appreciate that he's one of the American heroes that we won't hear being recognized because he was queer. He won't get the sort of recognition that women's suffrage activists or civil rights activists get because he was queer."

One guise of Hay's that has proven particularly influential to Mitchell was his role as founder of the Radical Faeries. Mitchell has been involved with the Faerie community for decades, and cites the Faerie sensibility as a major inspiration behind 2006's sex comedy *Shorthus*. The idea for the tour even came through the Faeries: Mitchell and his Mattachine mates (including Portland's own Amber Martin) brought the West Village party down to a Radical Faerie sanctuary last