

# Shining brightest in the dark

An unusual concert will be staged in Portland's notorious Shanghai Tunnels

BY HELEN HILL  
STAFF WRITER

The present is reaching back to heal the past deep in the subterranean passageways beneath Portland's Old Town.

Across from the Street Roots office on Davis Street is one entrance to the Shanghai Tunnels. Regular tours lead visitors down dank passageways past barred cells, opium dens with bunk beds and discarded boots, allegedly from the men who were kidnapped and held

here. The tunnels were connected to the nearby waterfront where seagoing ships required men for slave labor and women for the sex trade. From the 1850s until the 1940s, vice and corruption flourished beneath the City of Roses.

"Denial is part of the history," said Michael

Jones, president of the Cascade Geographic Society. Jones has been the lead excavator and collector of oral histories and artifacts from the tunnels for decades.

Soon those dark halls will have a new audience to remember and reflect. An unusual concert aptly named "Songs from the Shadows" will be performed at 7 p.m. on Aug. 24 and 25 inside these infamous tunnels at 213 NW Couch St. Tickets are \$25 and available at Eventbrite.com.

Women who have experienced sexual violence have been meeting with local singer songwriters who themselves have experienced sexual violence. Together they have written a concert of original songs to be performed beneath the streets of Old Town, beside the doors to the elevator shaft where one enslaved woman, a young Native American named Nina, was thrown to her death when she told missionaries the identity of her kidnappers.

"This is the first organized concert in the history of the tunnels," said Crystal Akins,



Left to right: Kina Lyn Muir, Josephine Woolington, Tierrah Gulley, Marchell Hines, Emilie Wright and Crystal Akins, who will be presenting the Songs from the Shadows, Aug. 24 and 25.

PHOTO BY HELEN HILL

project organizer. "It is intended to bring awareness to human trafficking and to women who have been sexually and violently exploited.

"I believe the light shines brightest in the darkest places," Akins said. "These tunnels are dark places, and there is a dark, ongoing story of sexual exploitation in our city. I chose songwriters who have themselves experienced sexual trauma. I was molested as a young girl and this is how I get through, by expressing. Once we start talking to each other and sharing, the shame gets lifted."

Marchell "Shelly" Hines will be singing her song in the tunnels along with her songwriter collaborator, musical therapist Emilie Wright. Hines was homeless for four years following a bicycle accident that left her unable to work.

"After 25 years of being hit, I won't let anyone hit me now. I never thought I had choices, but now I do," said Hines.

"Shelly had such a clear idea in her head already. We clicked right away. She came in and sat down before me and we started singing. We both got chills," said Wright.

Josephine Woolington, one of the collaborating musicians, covered sexual trauma and sex-related sports scandals for The Register Guard newspaper in Eugene.

"I have a passion to share stories of survivors. This is an ideal musical situation because it raises funds for women in poverty

who have a story to tell," she said.

"Things happen and I can't breathe, the disrespect and random harassment, the name calling," said Tierrah Gulley, an African-American transgender woman who was interviewed for the project. "What's going on in my life, I don't want it to affect anyone else."

Featured musicians and songwriters include Josephine Antoinette, Joaquin Lopez, Megan McGeorge, Kina Lyn Muir, Desmond Spann, Vince Meneses, Emilie Wright, Sarah Lopez, Ashley Lowery, Crystal Akins and Amy Vanacore as Corazon de Lobo.

A piano will be moved underground through the Shanghai Tunnel Museum by Piano Push Play, an outreach project dedicated to rescuing pianos and putting them in places for everyone to enjoy.

Original folk-rock melodies composed of voice, piano and guitar will range from celebratory and empowering to raw and deeply personal.

All profits will benefit Rahab's Sisters, a nonprofit that offers radical hospitality to women marginalized by homelessness, poverty, sex work, violence and substance use.

"It won't be what people think. These songs are resilient, powerful and beautiful, like the women who wrote them," Akins said. "We are missing out if we don't have these stories in our hearts."

## IF YOU GO

**What:** Songs from the Shadows

**When:** 7-10 p.m., Aug. 24, 25

**Where:** Shanghai Tunnels/Portland Underground Tour, 213 NW Couch St. Portland, OR 97209

**Tickets:** \$25 at Eventbrite.com

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person planning to host the ticket recipient.

"They also learned to collect additional ways to reach participants for the follow-ups," he said in an email.

While Transitions Projects, which facilitates ticket distribution, attempts to make contact with each recipient three months after the ticket has been used, the county does not know how many Ticket Home participants are still homeless.

"Overall, 323 households used the program last fiscal year, and 72 percent of contacted clients were still stably housed," Theriault said.

But, he added, there are close to 20 other social service providers, in addition to churches and private groups, in Portland, that offer clients rent assistance that could potentially be used for

travel.

"Some programs don't check first before arranging someone's travel, and many don't do any follow-ups when they do help someone to another community," he said.

The county doesn't track the number of Ticket Home participants that eventually make their way back to Portland, but anecdotally, said Theriault, his office hears about very few people who try to use the program more than once.

"It's safe to make clear to constituents that we're tracking where folks are going, and have been since day one, and that we're just not seeing our program contributing to an influx of folks on the streets in other communities," said Theriault.

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A Bolt Bus heads out from the Greyhound Station in downtown Portland.

PHOTO BY EMILY GREEN