

MICHIGAN'S LGBTQ+ NEWS SOURCE SINCE 1993

# Between the Lines™

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By Jason A. Michael





# Advice to Be Well

From Dr. Mark Bornstein and Dr. Paul Benson



**Hi Doctor. My adolescent child just told me that they are trans. I am unsure how to react. What do I do?**

I am so glad that you are being thoughtful about your reactions as this is an important time in your child's life. This first and most crucial thing you can do, is be affirmative! While I understand this can be jarring, surprising or even confusing for you, it is important to remember that the emotions your child is currently going through are likely more meaningful and significant. I also want to assure you that it will be okay and that this is quite common. You are not alone.

Many times, when a child comes out to their parents they will want to start transitioning. It is often misunderstood that transitioning means hormone replacement therapy (HRT) and surgeries. While HRT and surgeries are definitely part of transitioning, it is not the only way to transition. It is up to your child to determine what constitutes transitioning for them. Perhaps coming out as trans is the start of their transition or maybe dressing like their gender around the house is their transition. I cannot stress enough, that there is more to being trans than just hormones and surgeries.

That being said, it is important to talk

about HRT as I assure you it is on your child's mind and can be the most affirming part to their transition. I would encourage you to bring your child in for an office visit where I can talk to the whole family together and to your child alone. It will be helpful to discuss as a group to set expectations going forward. We also recommend coming in for an office visit to discuss different resources that are available to you and your child. There are support groups for both you and your child to attend that we should talk about. While we do not require your child to see a therapist prior to transitioning, we do strongly recommend having your child see a therapist to talk to during this long journey ahead. Networking with other parents facing the same issues as you are can also be good. Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (PFLAG) is a great support group that meets monthly with parents and their children. There are chapters in many cities and a local one for you can be found in a Google search.

In summary, please be patient and affirmative with your child. While I do not want to disregard the feelings you must be going through, the step that your child just took by coming out was likely the most difficult thing

they have had to do in their life thus far. This is a long journey that we will all going through together. Remember, our goals are identical - to provide your child the best environment to thrive.

**I just found out that I have HIV. I have never been on therapy. My friend recommended the new injectable medication Cabenuva. My doctor says that I cannot use this medication at the present time. My friend disagrees. What do you think?**

Your doctor is correct. Cabenuva is an injectable medication that requires injections either once a month or every two months depending on preferences. It is only approved for patients already on treatment with an undetected level of HIV in their blood for at least 6 months. That is the only current indication because that is how it was studied in clinical trials before becoming commercially available. I cannot comment or would I prescribe it in patients new to therapy. It is also not indicated for persons with HIV medication resistance or history of previous HIV medication failure. My recommendation would be to take oral medications without

missing any doses and if it is still desired consider Cabenuva after 6 months of successful therapy. Many people like the injectable form of therapy. Others don't. Taking medication everyday is a constant reminder that you are living with HIV and have to remember to take your medications every day. Also, with oral medications there is a greater risk of people you don't want to know your status finding your medications by accident. Other people, such as many former IV drug users don't like injections.

The great thing is that there is now a choice. The Be Well Medical Center does have some clinical trials available with injectable medications.

*Since 1980 Dr. Paul Benson's Be Well Medical Center has been an inclusive medical center celebrating diversity. Do you have a health related question for Dr. Paul Benson and Dr. Mark Bornstein? Submit your questions to [bewelladvice@pridesource.com](mailto:bewelladvice@pridesource.com). This article is a sponsored editorial produced in collaboration with Be Well Medical Center. Between The Lines's journalism is made possible with the support and partnership of advertisers like Be Well. Learn more about Be Well from their ad below.*



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Photo courtesy of Mykal Kilgore

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# 5 **Queer** Things You Can Do Right Now-ish

BY SARAH BRICKER HUNT

It's beginning to look a lot like... well, it's been looking a lot like Christmas since before Halloween at certain retail establishments. Now that we're officially in holiday mode, you know what that means: too many events and activities to fit into your busy calendar. Some festive options include attending a formal charity gala, shopping for unique local gifts or drinking during a drag show.



## Get into the Holiday Groove with Drag and Drinks

Would it even feel like the holidays without a fabulously festive drag performance? A Drag Queen Holiday Extravaganza & Toy Drive, set for Dec. 11 at The Rust Belt Market in Ferndale, will get you moving in the jolliest of ways, all while supporting a great cause.

The event, hosted by "Queen of Ferndale" Mimi SouthWest, features a three-act show including burlesque performances, a best dressed elf costume contest, giveaways and a special drinks menu. Proceeds will benefit local children in need.

Dec. 11, 7-10 p.m., The Rust Belt Market, 22801 Woodward Ave., Ferndale. Tickets available at [eventbrite.com](https://www.eventbrite.com).



The PRISM Men's Chorus at a 2019 holiday show. Photo: Facebook

## Catch the PRISM Men's Chorus Holiday Concert

Reserve your tickets now for the ever-popular PRISM Men's Chorus holiday concert. This year's celebration, PRISM Men's Chorus Celebrates the Season, will take place Dec. 17 at the Macomb Center for the Performing Arts and will feature songs "from cozy to camp," according to the group's Facebook page. Expect a wide range of genres and holiday tunes representing various religions and plenty of fun surprises.

Interested in joining the group in 2023? New member vocal placement happens Jan. 24 at Prince of Glory Lutheran Church in Madison Heights.

Learn more about PRISM Men's Chorus and buy tickets to the holiday performance at [prism-chorus.org](https://prism-chorus.org).



## Enjoy a Charitable Black Tie Affair

LGBT Detroit's end-of-year fundraiser, aptly called Holiday, has long been a much-anticipated event, but like so many good things, the pandemic has thrown a wrench into the works for the past couple of years. This year, the gala event is back and promises a return to the glamorous and meaningful annual celebration that pays homage to past LGBTQ+ leaders and movements and welcomes what's yet to come.

The gala has an official theme of black and "sexy silver," so dust off your best dancing shoes and reserve a table with your stylish, community-minded friends. Proceeds will benefit LGBT Detroit's programs throughout the coming year.

The LGBT Detroit Holiday event is set for Dec. 10 at the Detroit Marriott Southfield.





### Find Unique, Locally Handcrafted Gifts

Earn cred as the best gift giver in your circle of family and friends by doing some of your holiday shopping at the Gutman Gallery Holiday Artist Market. Hosted by The Guild of Artists & Artisans ("The Guild"), the market will offer a wide range of creations you won't find anywhere else, crafted by local artisans specializing in glass work, jewelry making, ceramics, printmaking, painting, leather and more. On a budget? You're in luck — this classy shopping experience includes items available at "every price point," according to organizers. Prefer to craft your own holiday art? Sign up for The Guild's Watercolor Holiday Cards class led by Michelle Detering. The virtual workshop takes place Dec. 14 from 6-8 p.m.

The Holiday Artist Market runs through Dec. 22 at the Gutman Gallery, 118 N. 4th Ave., Ann Arbor. Learn more about the market and sign up for the watercolor class at [theguild.org/gutman\\_gallery](http://theguild.org/gutman_gallery).



Author Aaron Foley.

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### Virtually Hang with 'Boys Come First' Author

Join SAGE Metro Detroit for a virtual storytelling discussion with PBS NewsHour senior digital editor and journalist Aaron Foley at 1 p.m. on Dec. 11. Foley will lead a discussion on LGBTQ+ stories and representation. He'll also read from his new novel, "Boys Come First." The book, which one Twitter user called "The Great Gay Millennial Novel," follows three gay men as they seek out sex, love and acceptance in Detroit.

Foley, a Detroit native, has written extensively on the city from a nonfiction perspective. His books on living in the area include "How to Live in Detroit Without Being a Jackass" and "The Detroit Neighborhood Guide."

Visit [sagemetrodetroit.org/social](http://sagemetrodetroit.org/social) to learn more and to register for this Zoom event.

Please check event pages for the most up-to-date scheduling information.

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# Is the Respect for Marriage Act Enough to Protect Our Marriages?

## Bill a Positive Step, but Marriage Equality Still at Risk

BY JASON A. MICHAEL

Local LGBTQ+ advocates have mixed reactions to the passage of the Respect for Marriage Act (RFMA) in the U.S. Senate last week by a 61-

36 vote. On one hand, advocates are grateful Congress has acted on the marriage equality issue. Yet, at the same time, there is still fear about what a conservative majority on the Supreme Court could do to undermine it.

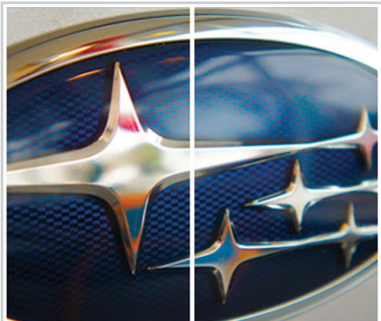



“This seems less a step in the right direction and more a ‘batten down the hatches and protect our gains [move],’” said Dave Garcia, executive director of Affirmations LGBTQ+ community center in Ferndale. “While it’s certainly better

than, say, the Defense of Marriage Act (DOMA), this law falls woefully short of what the queer community deserves and demands.”


Marriage equality has been the law of the land since a much more liberal U.S. Supreme Court ruled on the matter in 2015. But with the recent overturning of *Roe v. Wade* by the court’s now conservative majority, Justice Clarence Thomas has suggested that marriage equality might be next on the chopping block.

In response to that threat, Congress devised the RFMA to repeal the Defense of Marriage Act, which was signed into law by President Bill Clinton in 1996 and limited the definition of marriage to one woman and one man. It also ensured that states that prohibited same-sex marriage would not be forced to recognize those marriages performed in other states.


See **Respect for Marriage Act**, page 9

at *Hodges*...

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◀ **Respect for Marriage Act**

Continued from page 6

“This means the federal government has to recognize legal same-sex marriages and accord them the federal benefits associated with marriage,” said ACLU of Michigan LGBT Project Staff Attorney Jay Kaplan. “This is essentially a codification of what the U.S. Supreme Court did in 2013 in the case of Windsor v. U.S., when it struck down as unconstitutional the section of the DOMA which denied federal recognition of same-sex marriages.”

What the RFMA doesn’t (and couldn’t) do is prevent the U.S. Supreme Court from possibly overturning the Obergefell v. Hodges decision, which found, in 2015, that the right of same-sex couples to marry and have the benefits of marriage is a constitutional right, said Kaplan, who again pointed to Thomas’ threat. “Justice Thomas called on the Court to revisit the Obergefell decision, among other decisions that he believed to be based on a flawed constitutional right to privacy analysis.”

If that were to happen, same-sex marriages would become illegal in Michigan.

“It would be up to either the Michigan legislature or Michigan voters to codify the right of same-sex couples to marry in our state,” said Erin Knott, executive director of Equality Michigan and co-chair of the #HateWontWin campaign. Currently, there is a 1996 law on the books that denies same-sex couples the right

to marry and denies recognition of same-sex marriages performed in other states, along with a 2004 amendment to the state’s constitution that does the same thing.

“It needs to be repealed,” said Knott. Kaplan agreed.

“It could be repealed by the legislature,” he said, adding that an amendment would need to be passed by two-thirds of the legislature and then voted on by the electorate.

Kaplan also pointed out that while the RFMA extends only limited protections to marriage equality, he is “not certain that the U.S. Congress could have done more on this issue.”

If they passed a law requiring states to recognize same-sex marriages in other states, some states would probably challenge that provision, he said. “So, in sum, this is a positive thing ... but there is still more preventative work to be done in the state of Michigan in the event that the U.S. Supreme Court conservative majority would overturn marriage equality.”

Knott said much of the same. “What happened this week is a big deal,” she said. “Twelve Republicans in the U.S. Senate supported the right of same-sex couples to have their marriages respected by the federal government. This is significant.”

But to Garcia, it’s still not enough. “Our marriages and love should never be up for debate in the first place,” he said. “No state should have the right to deny us the same protections afforded to the straight community.”



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Vince Kelley. Photo: Brandy Joe Plambeck

# Please Don't Quit Your Day Job, Vince Kelley

## Ringwald Theatre Actor Starring in Campy One-Person Cindy Lou Who Holiday Show

BY SARAH BRICKER HUNT

When the Ringwald Theatre's "Who's Holiday" star Vince Kelley took his first steps into the big wide world after high school nearly 20 years ago, he couldn't have predicted who he'd be by the end of 2022: An out gay man in a longterm relationship, an accomplished actor who took on New York before coming home to Detroit, and a successful, in-demand costume designer.

Looking back, though, there were some clues. Kelley holds a clear picture of one early, critical memory, in particular. He was 8 years old and decided, at the urging of his uncle's high school girlfriend, to audition

for "The Sound of Music."

"She helped me and my mom, and we picked a little song for me to audition with — I think it was 'If I Only Had a Brain' from 'The Wizard of Oz,'" he remembers. "Afterward, I remember I told my mom, 'I just want to keep doing this.' And then I did."

Soon, Kelley was taking on roles in every high school drama production, and when that participation wasn't enough, he joined community theater, too, a journey that would lead to a coveted spot in the American Musical and Dramatic Academy in New York City. His first professional role after college may not have been the dream gig — Kelley played young Ben Franklin for "some horrible

children's theater" — but it was pivotal.

"I just kept working, kept working, kept working, until I said, 'I don't want to live in a suitcase anymore,'" he recalls. "So I came home to Michigan."

Kelley returned home living a life much like the one he'd been living before his time in New York. He returned to the acting world, joining up with several local theater groups. Then, on the advice of Brandy Joe Plambeck, one of the Ringwald's co-founders, he decided to try out for the first non-professional theatrical performance of "Rent," which the Ringwald was

preparing to cast. Kelley decided to go out for either Roger or Mark, straight characters in the play. They felt the most natural and comfortable to him, since, in real life, he was

Kelley would be a better fit for Angel, the gay, possibly transgender lead. "I was like, 'What, me? No, I could never... What are you talking about? Fine, I'll do it. It'll be like a fun challenge.'"

At that point, Kelley says, he'd never done drag or worn heels or makeup, as Angel does in the play. But the Ringwald staff, including Plambeck, who was directing the play, promised they'd help.

Later, Kelley says, Plambeck and other Ringwald actors and staff admitted they had an inkling right away that Kelley was actually gay. "They told me, 'Yeah, we all knew.

*"I don't want to get too cheesy, but I didn't have any role models as a kid. I grew up on the east side, and I didn't really have anybody."*

essentially playing a straight man as well.

But those casting the play thought



But that's not our story to tell, and that's not our journey. So, all we could do was give you your heels and your wig and help you and support whatever you needed to do."

A few shows later, Kelley met a "boy named Matt," and the rest, as they say, is history. The pair have been together for 12 years. When he finally said the words out loud, Kelley says, it was during a birthday outing for Ringwald founder and artistic director Joe Bailey. "Someone asked me about Matt, like what was really going on, and I said, 'You guys, I'm gay.' And (Ringwald co-founder) Joe Bailey, he said it was the best birthday present he ever got."

The Ringwald community, Kelley says, has been a true family to him over the years.

"I don't want to get too cheesy, but I didn't have any role models as a kid," he says. "I grew up on the east side, and I didn't really have anybody. I was really afraid of what my family would say." But being in the company of people like Bailey and Plambeck and other successful adults who had "great lives" gave him a lot of hope that he, too, could do exactly what he wanted to do to build the life he wanted to have.

"They were making theater, and they were having fun, and they have these full, rich lives," he says. "I was like, 'Oh shit, wait. I can do that. I can do that.' Without the Ringwald or the Joes and the family they introduced me to, I don't know how much longer I would have, sadly, not been living my fullest life. They gave me a glimpse as to what it could be."

Since Kelley joined the Ringwald 13 years ago, he's become a mainstay at the theater, which now shares space with Affirmations LGBTQ+ community center in Ferndale. An audience favorite who won a state-wide theater award in 2016 (EncoreMichigan.com's Wilde Award for Best Supporting Actor for his role in "Heathers: The Musical"), Kelley has starred in a wide range of productions, from "Hedwig and the Angry Inch" to "The Boys in the Band" and boasts a long list of costume designer credits, as well.

These days, Kelley truly seems to be living his best life. When he's not on stage, he spends time with family and friends and travels extensively with his partner to places like Palm Springs, New York and New Orleans. The two live in Ferndale and share a 10-year-old dog, a terrier mix named Mary J. Blige.

As far as hobbies go, though, for Kelley, his day job is his hobby.

"It's a job in a way, of course, but I love it so much — it's cliché to say 'Find a job you love and you'll never work a day in your life,' but I really, really do love every aspect of it," he says, adding that while he's often on stage, he's also a busy costume designer by trade. In addition to



Vince Kelley as Cindy Lou Who. Photo: Brandy Joe Plambeck

handling costuming at the Ringwald, he works for Troy High School, Grosse Pointe High School and Mosaic Theater as a freelancer.

Kelley says he created his vision for his "Who's the Holiday" Cindy Lou Who costume the same way he usually does — from the shoes, up. While other productions have leaned in more to the Christmas aesthetic when it comes to Cindy Lou's costuming, Kelley says his interpretation was that Cindy Lou had lost her youth, "due to some bad decisions on her part." Now that she can finally express herself, she wants to channel "real '90s fun, bright, fun fluorescent orange and pink fur, and print on print on print, because it's still the 'Who' universe. It's still that grinchy Dr. Seuss vibe, but I wanted to kind of do something a little different."

Bailey has nothing but confidence in Kelley's Cindy Lou Who portrayal. "He probably has the quickest mind of anyone I've ever worked with," Bailey says. "This is his first one-person show and I'm absolutely thrilled to watch him do his thing — no one else could do justice to the role."

The show itself will be a bit of a departure from recent holiday productions at the Ringwald, which saw tremendous success with last year's "Golden Girls"-themed show. "It's going to be different from 'Golden Girls,' but I really try to deliver some laughs, and there's some fun opportunities for audience participation — I hope people are excited about that and also a little bit scared."

"Who's the Holiday" tickets are selling quickly — visit [theringwald.com](http://theringwald.com) to buy yours.

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## CREEP OF THE WEEK

# Proud Boys Misunderstand What 'Slay, Queen' Means, Bring Guns to Drag Event



By D'Anne Witkowski

You know what the scariest thing about drag queen story hour is? The part where hooded men wearing body armor show up with assault rifles.

That's what happened at a holiday-themed storytelling event featuring drag queens on Dec. 3 when the Proud Boys showed up to protest.

Anti-queer protest has become the Proud Boys' new thing, giving them something to focus on besides worshipping disgraced former President Donald Trump and reliving their Jan. 6 Capitol riot by watching the footage they posted of themselves engaging in this act of terrorism on social media. After all, they're the Proud Boys, not the Smart Boys.

According to Newsweek, "The far-right extremist group has appeared at a host of LGBTQ events across various states, threatening violence outside a drag brunch in Texas, protesting a Pride event at a public library in North Carolina and disrupting a drag show in California."



And we can add Columbus, Ohio to their nationwide tour when the private Red Oak Community School was scheduled to hold a holiday fundraiser. That the Proud Boys would show up is not a surprise, as they announced it on Facebook as early as Nov. 15.

"The Columbus Proud Boys would like to

announce that we will be attending the Holi-drag Storytime...on December 3rd!" they posted. "We look forward to meeting all of the attendees and welcome Americans from all over to join us. It's gonna be wild! Stand by for details..."

Note their hat tip to Trump with their language. As you'll remember, Trump urged people to join him in D.C. on Jan. 6 with the promise that it would "be wild" and urged the Proud Boys to "stand by" during a debate with Biden when Trump was asked if he would disavow such groups.

The good news? No one was shot at the Holi-Drag event. The bad news? The Proud Boys succeeded in

getting the event canceled. Because people were afraid of violence. Because the Proud Boys were there. With guns. Threatening violence.

That, my friends, is terrorism. Which is, of course, the point. They want you to be so scared that you don't live your life. And the fear is real. The Club Q shooting is fresh in everyone's minds right now. This isn't hypothetical violence. This isn't LGBTQ+ people acting hysterical.

"If you look at the history of the way in which organized violence works, it can often start with protests, can often start with fights or fistfights, but very quickly then can become armed events," said TransLash Media CEO Imara Jones, in a Newsweek article. "What we are seeing overall right now is the transition and the legitimization of increasing violence and

targeting of trans people by these groups."

Equality Ohio urged people to stay away from the area and the organizers of the event canceled. Some believed the police would not protect them.

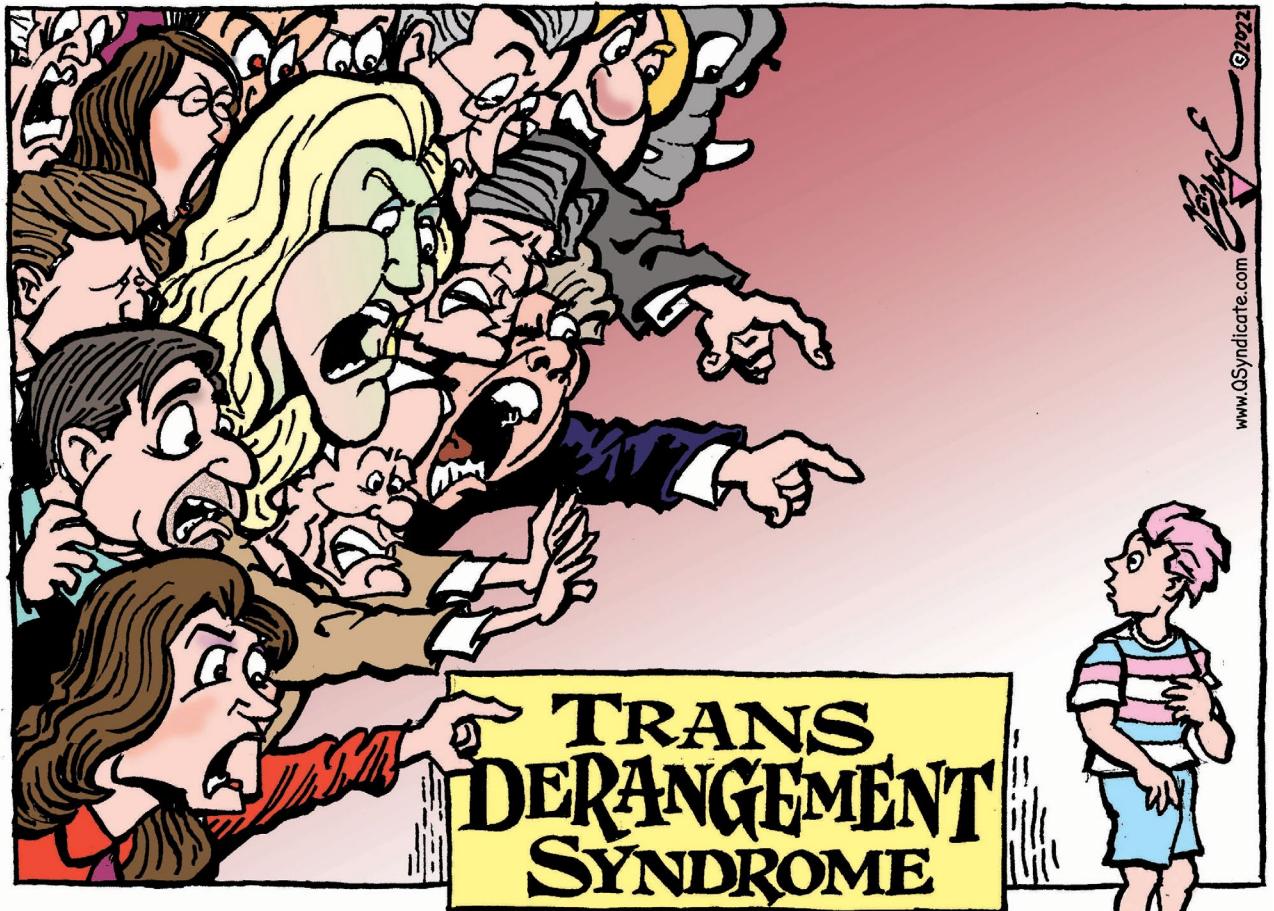
And it seems those instincts were right. Columbus Police Sergeant Steven Dyer was seen high-fiving a Proud Boy at the event. When confronted, he claimed the brief camaraderie happened after he was complimented on his mustache and that he did not support any particular side.

This made some people very upset, but, I mean, who among us hasn't high-fived an armed terrorist after they've said something complimentary about our facial hair?

Law enforcement is slow to catch up when it comes to who the "good guys" and the "bad guys" are in so-called culture wars. Police don't exactly have a great history regarding the LGBTQ+ community, and there are no doubt more Proud Boys in their ranks than drag queens.

But the Proud Boys are listed as a hate group by the Southern Poverty Law Center. They hate immigrants, Muslims, transgender people, women and Jews. While this is probably not an exhaustive list, the group claims they aren't racist, but they do protest Black Lives Matter marches, so... yeah, they're racist.

Imagine thinking that a drag queen is more dangerous to have around children than a group of men who are having some big feelings about their notion of masculinity being threatened while holding guns. Drag queens slay; guns slay. One is figurative and fun; one is very literal and deadly. The difference could not be more extreme.



“  
They want you to be so scared  
that you don't live your life.  
And the fear is real. The Club Q  
shooting is fresh in everyone's  
minds right now. This isn't  
hypothetical violence.”



# When Our Queer Safe Spaces No Longer Exist, Where Do We Go When Tragedy Strikes?



By Keith Orr

On Nov. 20, we woke up to another massacre targeting members of the queer community. Our sense of community causes our pain. We mourn the loss, not because we knew the Colorado Springs victims personally, but rather by the loss within the queer-verse.

Bars are our safe spaces. In bars, we can be our authentic selves. We can hold hands. We can dance. We can engage in high camp with our friends. We can search for intimacy, engaging in the intricate rituals of courtship. In short, we can be vulnerable.

Sadly, these are also the spaces where we have been vulnerable to our enemies; the police at Stonewall, an arsonist at the UpStairs Lounge, a religious zealot at Pulse. Though no more or less tragic than a gay bashing leading to a murder, these attacks in our sanctuaries cause special anguish. These are supposed to be our safe spaces. As one online commenter stated, “Anyone who doesn’t understand the idea of a bar as a sanctuary has never been afraid to hold hands in public.”

We must organize ... again.

How do we stop this? The question is really, “How do we fight hate?” There are so many things we have to address. Far too many for one short column. Solutions are long-term and involve reforming our broken electoral system, fighting racism and transphobia within our own community, preventing easy access to guns, restoring civics and civility in our schools and so much more.

But first, we must heal ... again.

We mourn in these same spaces for the same reason we live in them. They are where our community meets.

Martin and I created the \aut\ BAR in 1995 with a mission of creating one of these spaces. We curated the space, over time including a bar, restaurant, bookstore, performance space and community center. With all of the buildings facing a single courtyard area off the street, we had created a world of our own. A world dubbed “The Homoplex” by author/performer/activist Michelle Tea, and called the Queer Quad by students at the University of Michigan.

Our vision was utopian, even if we did not always achieve Nirvana. We built this sense of community out of a sense of need for ourselves as well as the community.

Though we were driven in our mission,



A candlelight vigil held in \aut\ BAR's famous courtyard after the Pulse Nightclub shooting in 2016. Photo courtesy of Keith Orr

our understanding of what it meant only gained clarity with the passage of time. When the Westboro Baptist Church invaded Ann Arbor, our little piece of the world became the place to gather and protect ourselves and our community center. When marriage equality became the law of the land, we gathered to celebrate in Braun Court. When Pulse Nightclub was attacked, we gathered at the Homoplex to pray together, to cry together, to sing together. We lit candles and mourned. And we started to heal.

If this sounds nostalgic, it is.

It was with great sadness that we saw everything we worked to create fall apart within months of our departure. At first we felt the loss of our legacy. Over time we have come to feel the loss of a community space.

After the tremendous memorial to the life of Jim Toy last spring, about 20 of us gathered in a largely deserted Braun Court. Where else was there to go? Though there are a few places that have gay nights, such spaces can never replace

the capacity of a queer-owned, all-inclusive, full-time establishment.

Ann Arbor is not alone in the loss of gay bars. Greggor Mattson, a gay bar researcher and professor and chair of the Sociology Department at Oberlin College and Conservatory, has been researching the decline of gay bars. Gay bar listings have declined more than 50% over the last 20 years. The pace is accelerating with a decline of 16% between 2019 and 2021.

In the last few years of the \aut\ BAR, I heard a rather constant refrain. Whenever I spoke of our mission, I would get looks and “how quaint” responses. Many people seemed to feel like we were living in a post-gay world in spite of clear evidence of violence against our community, especially in the transgender community, and high suicide rates among LGBTQ+ youth.

In 2016, we had the double blows of the Pulse Nightclub shooting and the election of Donald Trump. \aut\ BAR seemed relevant again.

I miss it. Clearly other people do, as well. I’ve gotten many messages over the last few

days from people asking where we can gather.

I miss the people. I miss the community. I don’t have a prescription to fix this loss. Perhaps someone else will step forward to create a space. Perhaps we are in the midst of a transformation, and the whole concept of a safe space will be something different than I imagine.

I just know that right now, we need to heal ... again. If you are reading this in a city or town that has a place where queerfolk gather, treasure that place and make sure the space is honored and appreciated. If your city or town does not have such a place, reach out to your friends and fellow queerfolk. In the words of NPR’s Stephen Dubner, “Take care of yourself, and if you can, someone else, too.”

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*Keith Orr’s varied career has included playing double bass with Toledo Symphony, Toledo Opera and numerous area orchestras. He and his husband Martin Contreras were the owners of Common Language Bookstore and \aut\ BAR.*





# The Groundbreaking Journey of Mykal Kilgore

## How the Grammy Nominee, Who Will Perform Two Local Concerts, Has Helped Change R&B For Black Queer Artists

BY JASON A. MICHAEL

**I**t's an age-old tale. Mykal Kilgore, a pastor's kid who was raised in the church, is also, of course, a singer. And a groundbreaking one, at that: Kilgore is the first openly gay male to be nominated for a Grammy in the Best Traditional R&B Performance category.

"I started singing in church when I was really little," Kilgore, 39, recalled. "Mostly, because I was given two options: I could be an usher, or I could be in the choir. I didn't want to stand the whole service. So, I chose choir."

It was clearly the right decision, and Kilgore's passion for music was soon evident. This month, Kilgore will be making two Detroit-area appearances. On Friday, Dec. 16, he'll be doing a holiday show with the Cranbrook Christmas Jazz series in Bloomfield Hills. Then, on Saturday, Dec. 17, he'll be appearing at the Schaver Music Recital Hall at Wayne State University. Both events are free.

Given his life as a performer now, it's hard to imagine that there was a time when Kilgore wasn't considering himself a singer.

"I didn't think of myself as a singer until middle school," he told BTL recently. "I would sing outside at the lunch table with my friends. People would request songs. I'd learn them that night and then come back and sing them for everybody. That's how it started."

He liked the attention when he was young, and a visit to his Orlando high school by members of the TV show "The Mickey Mouse Club" confirmed for Kilgore that he wanted a career in entertainment. Kilgore said he was "starstruck" and "blown away" by the cast members. "I think the closest I ever came to that feeling was when I met Patti

LaBelle. They were the Patti LaBelle of my childhood."

Kilgore was convinced to join the choir at school. His choir director was so impressed, he told his student that he could get a scholarship for his gift and go to college for free. Kilgore chose Florida State University.

"I thought I was going to teach choir," he said. "When I got into college, musical theater grabbed me, and I went on a journey that took me all over the world. I sang on cruise ships and in theme parks, and eventually on the Broadway stage, which was amazing."

Kilgore was encouraged to move to New York and try Broadway by none other than queer superstar Billy Porter, who he met while auditioning for a project Porter was spearheading. Porter was hugely influential to Kilgore. "We would have lunch together as a company and he said, 'You know, you need to move to New York,'" he recalled. "I told him, 'I don't know that I'm prepared or ready,' and he said, 'You sound stupid. You need to move.' That basically encapsulates our relationship. He is firm but fair."

Kilgore did eventually move to New York, but not before soaking up all the knowledge from Porter that he could.

“

*Every genre that we associate with American music was influenced, shepherded and built by Black voices, minds, bodies, hearts and souls.*

Mykal Kilgore.  
Courtesy photo



“His superpower is being authentic,” he said. “So, if you’re not being as authentic as he is, it becomes glaringly obvious.”

Porter, said Kilgore, “was one of those people who made me feel like it was OK for me to try to do what it is that I do now. So, really, I look at him as my example of how to maneuver in this industry.”

In New York, Kilgore appeared on Broadway in “Motown the Musical,” “The Book of Mormon” and “Hair.”

“That led me to feeling it was my time to record my own music,” he said. “I recorded an album, I got a Grammy nomination and the rest is history.”

That album was titled “A Man Born Black,” and that norm-shattering nomination was for its single, “Let Me Go.” The 2021 nomination marked the first for an openly gay man in the category of Best Traditional R&B Performance.

Kilgore said the nomination, while remarkable, was “bittersweet.”

“I love to be the first queer person nominated, but it’s also like, ‘Why is this taking so long?’” he said. “I don’t want to be the first Black person, the first queer person, to do stuff anymore in 2022. I want those doors to already be burst wide open.”

Regardless, the album did well. Kilgore credits the pandemic with giving people the time to listen to it. “For a lot of people, it was the worst year of their life. But, for me, it was a year that, without it, I think so many things in my life wouldn’t have happened. People were home and they were focused and able to sit and listen to the music and enjoy it. I think that might be why I got my Grammy nomination.”

Music critic and SoulTracks.com columnist L. Michael Gipson told BTL that Kilgore’s talent “reminds us of the best of both soul and Black Broadway’s past while daring us to reimagine a more liberated future for Black male performers.”

Gipson went on to say that Kilgore is part of a lineage that includes Black queer male artists who were often “denied the fruits and honors of the industry,” including the legendary Sylvester

and, of course, Porter. “Their candor about their sexuality was buried in brave but little spotlighted quotes in articles only aficionados read,” Gipson continued, “which makes Kilgore being the first to get a Grammy nod in the Traditional R&B category as an out Black gay man that much sweeter.”

Currently, Kilgore is at work on a follow-up album. He has also released a new single called “The Man in the Barbershop.” He calls it “the song that the 12-year-old me wished existed on

the radio.” It tells the story of a barber falling for the handsome man who ends up in his chair. So far, it’s really resonating with fans.

“It’s been a blessing to have people send me DMs and text messages and emails,” he said. “When they meet me, they shake my hand and look me in the eye, and they thank me for this song. ... I really don’t have the right word for what it has done for me, except to say that I told the truth on the record, and people received my truth. It makes me feel like I can continue

telling the truth.”

The new album, Kilgore said, is about “reclaiming.”

“I wanted this album to be an opportunity to reclaim American styles to Blackness,” he said. “I believe the lexicon of American music wouldn’t exist without the contributions of Black Americans. Every genre that we associate with American music was influenced, shepherded and built by Black voices, minds, bodies, hearts and souls.”

Kilgore said the currently untitled album will feature lots of ’80s and ’90s influences. “I tried to pay tribute to the Patti LaBelles, the Luther Vandrosses and Aretha Franklins and Donny Hathaways. The people who have listened to it have said, ‘What you did was uniquely you,’ and that feels like the biggest compliment in the world.”

As for the holidays, Kilgore again looks to the pandemic as influential on his feelings about Christmas. “Realizing that these special moments when families get together, when chosen families get together, was taken from us and we had to do what we had to do for the safety of others.”

Being able to come together and “be reminded of love and the importance of each other in our lives, that’s really what the holiday season means to me. Anytime we can stop and let go and think about the love that we have in our lives and think about ways to show each other that we love each other, I’m all for that.”

Performing at Christ Church Cranbrook in the Cranbrook Christmas Jazz series, Kilgore said, is especially significant to him.

“I’m really thankful as an openly gay, queer artist that I’m being invited into church spaces,” he said. “[I feel] these spaces should be open to us. We should feel welcome and we should feel comfortable there. We shouldn’t feel like we’re going

to a stranger’s house.”

If you’re wondering what you can expect from Kilgore’s live show, he said he’s going to “sing, and I mean sing with a capital S. They should expect that. You’ll hear what I feel and what I think. My full humanity will be on display on that stage.”

*For more information on Kilgore and his upcoming shows, visit [mykalkilgore.com](http://mykalkilgore.com).*



Mykal Kilgore. Courtesy photo



# Still Going Strong

## How Religion Brought Lady Vonne' and Her Wife Closer Together

BY JASON A. MICHAEL

Lady Vonne' is a survivor. She survived poverty and over a decade of sexual abuse as a child. Then, as an adult, she survived both a stroke and breast cancer. Throw in the suicide of a sibling struggling with depression, the toils of being a single mother and the burden of being a Black woman in a world that both discounts and underestimates them, and even the word survivor seems somehow inadequate to describe her.

Vonne' – real name  
Yvonne Dowell  
and age given  
simply as

“mature” – grew up on Detroit's west side and remembers moving frequently.

“We were here one moment and there the next, living in partially abandoned facilities,” she said, while sitting in the posh living room of her palatial home in Shorepointe Village, located just behind the Fisher Mansion in Detroit, that she shares with her wife. “It was a rough childhood. We struggled a lot.”

She remembers her father being in and out of the picture, often showing up long enough to get his wife pregnant and then gone again by the time the baby came. And when he wasn't on the scene, a family friend sexually abused Vonne' for over a decade, until she was old enough to defend herself and fight him off.

“Early on, I had to be the big girl ... with the babies and other siblings and everything; I wanted to be my mom's protector. I wanted to make sure that everybody was OK while we were in this dysfunction.”

From a young age, Vonne' learned to look to her faith to guide her. While her parents were not religious, her mother did allow her to go to church with a neighbor, starting at around age 7.

“This lady played the piano, and she was just so happy,” said Vonne'. “She would just be banging on the piano and one day she said, ‘Would you like to sing?’”

The song was “Walk Around

Heaven All Day,” and before she sang the last refrain her love affair with both the Lord and music had begun in earnest. Together, those two forces would see her through the personal trials that were to come.

She ended up married to a man jealous of both her talent and her beauty. She wanted to pursue a singing career, but he would not let her. A son came along. Dreams got deferred.

Years later, she was approached by a woman while working at the makeup counter at Hudson's in Northland Mall who asked if she sang. The question led to an audition and a part in a group called Heaven, with whom she toured. She sang and traveled with the group for about five years. Over time, she fell in love with the band's drummer and then along came baby number two. Juggling kids and life on the road was not easy — someone had to be brought along to watch the baby during rehearsals and while she was on stage — but she was still doing what she longed to do.

“We had a wonderful time together as a band,” she said. “But I learned soon about the jealousies and the inconsistency and the madness [of the business].”

Eventually, Vonne' returned to Detroit. She began dating women, and worked in sales for a while. But the music bug never went away. The only option, she felt, was to start her own band. She did, and soon had built up quite a reputation. She opened for legendary acts such as Phyllis Hyman and Chaka Khan.

All was going well. Until, that is, she was shopping in Monroe with her sister. Suddenly, her speech started to

Lady Vonne'. Courtesy photo

See **Lady Vonne'**, page 20



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ALVIN WADDLES


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# LGBTQ-Affirming Church and Faith Community Guide

## Find Your People This Holiday Season

BY SARAH BRICKER HUNT

The holidays can be stressful for anyone, but if you're an LGBTQ+ community member who recognizes a religion or faith but don't regularly attend church, this time of year can feel a bit lonely. It can be daunting to figure out which churches are truly welcoming.

The good news is that Southeast Michigan offers a wide range of opportunities for queer folks to attend services or join their congregations. This guide will get you started, but be sure to check out the Pride Source Worship Guide online, as well.

### Ann Arbor and Ypsilanti

**Blue Ocean Faith Church Ann Arbor (Blue Ocean Faith, emergent; post-evangelical)**  
2309 Packard Road, Ann Arbor 48104  
[a2blue.org](http://a2blue.org)

**Canterbury House (Episcopal Church)**  
721 E. Huron St., Ann Arbor 48104  
[canterburyhouse.org](http://canterburyhouse.org)

**Church of the Good Shepherd (United Church of Christ)**  
2145 Independence Blvd., Ann Arbor 48104  
[cogsaa.org](http://cogsaa.org)

See **Church Guide**, page 20

[www.PrideSource.com](http://www.PrideSource.com)



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mccdetroit.org

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Christmas Day - 11am



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Lady Vonne' and Rev. Dr. Selma Massey. Courtesy photo

## ◀ Lady Vonne'

Continued from page 16

slur, and the store clerk knew something was wrong and called for an ambulance. Vonne' was having a stroke. That was 2008, and she spent five weeks in the hospital.

She recovered, but just two years later she was diagnosed with breast cancer. Next up was chemo and radiation, then another long recovery. During this time, Vonne' reconnected with an ex-partner. Successful entrepreneur Selma Massey had changed quite a bit since the two had first been a couple years before. She was now Rev. Dr. Selma Massey, pastor of a church called Whosoever Ministry in Detroit.

"She found the Lord, and she found Him immediately after the breakup," Vonne' explained. "She started diving into the word of God then and, believe it or not, it was a 15-year break for us. It still amazes me when I think about it, that we got back together and we've been together ever since."

The two began rekindling their relationship when Massey made a special delivery to Vonne' during her recovery.

"I was completely bald, and very, very weak," Vonne' recalled of the time. "My son, he couldn't handle seeing me. So, I just wanted to go through this period alone."

Vonne' had lost her sense of taste due to the medication. But Massey made a home delivery and brought her bottled water as

requested. "That was a warm connection right there," she said. "Afterwards, it wasn't long, and we started talking again."

Where religion had once been an issue for the couple — Massey had been raised Christian Scientist — it was now a common denominator between them and actually brought them closer together. The two became a couple again in 2012. In 2018, the couple and their friends flew to Miami where they were married aboard the Celebrity cruise ship Millennium by the ship's captain. A cruise to the South Caribbean followed.

Now, Vonne' is both first lady of the church and its minister of music, as well as an ordained evangelist.

"It's very interesting because I'm learning things from behind the pulpit," she said of assisting her wife and pastor, whose church is now located in Grosse Pointe Farms, just a short distance from their waterfront home. "The needs of the people, the time that pastor puts in is unbelievable. Vonne' assists and supports as she can. "I know the pastor has to pour out and I can't be spoiled. And that's OK,

because I love loving our people."

Aside from her work with the church, Vonne' is also returning to music. She is self-financing the production of an as-of-yet untitled album. Recently, she released a first single and video called "My Turn to Fly." The song is a powerfully inspirational ballad she wrote herself. Her style reminiscent of Hyman and Anita Baker, her voice lush and full, Vonne' said the rest of the album will encompass a combination of genres and tempos. But all will reflect the special place she finds herself in as she prepares to release it.

"Now is my turn to fly," she said. "I want to get the song out there. It's trending. What I have to do now is to find distribution."

Massey, for her part, could not be more proud.

"Vonne' kept believing what God had in store for her," Massey said. "She knew that He would keep his promise and give her this dream come true."

"Without her there would be no Whosoever Ministry," Massey continued. "I saw her model her faith and I wanted to do what she was doing."

Today, Vonne' is open to all possibilities. She recently starred in Loren Harper's "The Legendary Soul of R&B" production and would like to do more acting. She's just waiting for God to move and lead her to her next opportunity.

"I went through what I called the 'valley period,'" she said. "But I'm out of the valley. I'm stronger. I'm wiser. And I'm ready to go!"

## ◀ Church Guide

Continued from page 18

### Episcopal Church of the Incarnation (Episcopal Church)

3257 Lohr Road, Ann Arbor 48108  
incarnationannarbor.org

### First Congregational United Church of Christ

Ypsilanti (United Church of Christ)  
111 S. Wallace Blvd., Ypsilanti 48197  
www.ypsiucc.org

### First Unitarian Universalist Congregation (Unitarian Universalist)

4001 Ann Arbor-Saline Road, Ann Arbor 48103  
uuuaa.org

### Lord of Light Lutheran Campus Ministry (Evangelical Lutheran Church of America)

801 S. Forest Ave., Ann Arbor 48104  
lcm-um.org

## Metro Detroit

### Central Woodward Christian Church (Non-denominational)

3955 W. Big Beaver Road, Troy 48084  
centralwoodward.org

### Christ Church Detroit (Episcopal Church)

960 E. Jefferson Ave., Detroit 48207  
christcd.org

### Dignity/Detroit (Catholic and allies)

8425 W McNichols Road, Detroit 48221  
dignitydetroit.org

### First Unitarian-Universalist Church of Detroit (Unitarian Universalist)

4605 Cass Ave., Detroit, MI 48201  
1stuu.org

### MCC Detroit (Non-denominational)

290 W. 9 Mile Road, Ferndale 48220 (inside Affirmations)  
mccdetroit.org

### Trinity - St. Mark's (United Church of Christ)

9315 W. Fort St., Detroit 48209  
trinitysaintmarks.org

### Whosoever Ministry (United Church of Christ)

240 Chalfonte Ave., Grosse Pointe Farms 48236  
whosoeverministry.org

## Online

### Believe Out Loud (Multiple faiths, including Jewish and Muslim)

Believeoutloud.com

### Queer Church (Non-denominational)

facebook.com/queerchurchpcusa

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**Lutheran Campus Ministry**  
**Lord of Light Lutheran Church**  
801 S. Forest Ave.  
[www.lordoflight.org](http://www.lordoflight.org)

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# FROM ONE WHALE TO ANOTHER

## Watching ‘The Whale’ as a Fat Queer Man



Brendan Fraser in “The Whale.” Photo: A24

“

*There I sat in the theater, one whale watching another, hoping to find just a trace of connection between the two of us.*



**BY SEAN DONOVAN**

When Brendan Fraser’s character Charlie first appears in director Darren Aronofsky’s new film “The Whale,”

he is masturbating to gay porn. Shown first as an anonymous shape sitting on a couch, Charlie is circled by the camera tentatively, as if it’s afraid to approach him too quickly, a reticence that is hard to distinguish as a fear of what Charlie is doing or a fear of what Charlie is.

Regardless, a fear it is, in a film where the dominant emotion alternates between slightly removed

shock and condescending sympathy. But this entanglement at the center of the film’s representation leads one to ask: gay or fat, what’s the “shocker” here? Which one is shocking, and which one is the provenance of patronizing faux concern?

Charlie weighs roughly 600 pounds, we are told in the film, and in his physical condition is largely housebound, confined to a small apartment in Idaho where he teaches a writing composition class online. The entirety of the film takes place inside this apartment, a sign of its origins as a play. It’s a device intended to place the viewer in Charlie’s solitary life, interrupted intermittently by visits from his best friend and unofficial nurse Liz (Hong

Chau), his estranged daughter Ellie (Sadie Sink), ex-wife (Samantha Morton), and a Mormon missionary (Ty Simpkins).

“The Whale” has attracted publicity and interest as a comeback vehicle for Fraser, a heartthrob in the ’90s and early 2000s who has since faded from stardom. What has acquired less media attention is the film’s notability as the rare film — one privileged to have a great deal of film festival buzz, a major Oscar-nominated director, and a boutique distributor in A24 —

to focus on the life of a fat gay man, potentially opening up a community to media representation that often lacks it.

I can’t be alone in facing this kind of representation with fear. When you’re a person of one or several minoritarian identities, seeing a film or television show allegedly “about” someone like you can be a discomfiting process of coming face to face with how you are seen in the imaginations of others. Any excitement you had to “feel seen”

stands to be outweighed by the disappointment of finding loaded misrecognitions in its place.

Unfortunately, my experience watching “The Whale” was more of the latter. There I sat in the theater, one whale watching another, hoping to find just a trace of connection between the two of us. Instead Fraser’s Charlie, in a fat suit and layers of prosthetic makeup, feels overcome by the baggage of a world doubly homophobic and tyrannically favoring thin body shapes, rendering the actual lived reality of a fat gay man somewhat sketchy and unconvincing, his consciousness written by belief systems that seek to destroy him.

As a fumbling, awkward teenager, much of my life was defined by keeping my queer sexuality a secret at all costs, scared enough of the straight world around me that, even without a direct threat of physical violence to me personally, I simply couldn’t imagine what a livable queer adulthood would look like. I was in an uneasy purgatory adolescence, seemingly awaiting nothing but gay hell (incidentally, great nightclub idea).

An image that sticks out to me now is from the TV series “Glee,” the first season of which aired in my senior year of high school, when the closet was becoming truly unlivable and I was starting to stick limbs out of it in a confused, furtive panic. Chris Colfer’s character, the young, starchy twink Kurt Hummel, was living a queer life, in all its challenges and pain, as well as its joys and validations.

The show was allegedly inspiring people — theoretically this could have provided a life raft for a young queer! But I looked at Kurt — trim, fashionable, small, cute — and I saw only new layers of blockages that prevented me from imagining a queer life. Sure, someone like Kurt could be gay. So could the fleeting other images I saw — predominantly white men, if not small and twinkly like Kurt then chiseled and muscular with an athletic physique, like the pack of men on “Queer as Folk.” But my body, my fatness, seemingly prevented me

See **The Whale**, page 28



Artwork by Ruth Crowe

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**She's a Prince!**  
Puzzle on page 27

# Queer Holiday CHEER

~ IS HERE ~

## BE MERRY AND GAY WITH DOLLY, MARIAH, MILEY AND MORE

BY SARAH BRICKER HUNT

No matter how the holiday spirit moves you, the perfect soundtrack is waiting to accompany all your festivities, including this mix of 2022 releases, holiday concerts and TV specials from LGBTQ+ music stars and vocal allies. So, bust out the eggnog, host a cookie exchange and fire up some holiday music as you reflect on another tough year filled with challenges and blessings. Treat your senses to a hard-earned break with music that makes you feel happy, loved and treasured (because you are, all year round).

### DOLLY PARTON

At a time when we all need a little Christmas, Dolly, as usual, over delivers. You might recognize the title of Parton's latest holiday album, "A Holly Dolly Christmas," and that's because it was originally released in 2020. But wait, there's more! The 2022 Ultimate Deluxe re-release includes "A Smoky Mountain Christmas," originally featured in Parton's 1986 movie, "A Smoky Mountain Christmas." This version of the album also pulls in two tracks that had been digital-only bonus tracks from the 2020 release, "Three Candles," and "The Wish Book."

Always one to graciously share the white-hot spotlight that seems to continually shine on our queer ally superstar unicorn, Parton included several duets on this one (many are also part of her "Mountain Magic Christmas" NBC special), including Michael Bublé, Billy Ray Cyrus, Miley Cyrus, Jimmy Fallon, Willie Nelson and her late brother Randy. This album, like all things Dolly, is a fantastic, feel-good gift choice for anyone (including you — go ahead, treat yourself, because you'll keep this one in rotation for years to come).

### SAM SMITH

Sam Smith fans were delighted when the out gay, non-binary singer dropped an original holiday tune in November, "Night Before Christmas." While Smith didn't release a whole holiday album this year, their 2020 album "The Holly and the Ivy" still deserves a prominent spot on your holly jolly

playlist. It's a short album featuring just five songs, but apart from one cover ("Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas"), it's the rare holiday album mostly comprised of originals.

Smith's latest album, "Gloria," hits stores on Jan. 27, just in time to help you power through the frigid Michigan winter.

### MARIAH CAREY

Mariah may have lost a court case that would have officially named her the "Queen of Christmas," but she'll always be the true Queen of *Queer* Christmas. Is Christmas even Christmas anymore without an endless loop of "All I Want For Christmas Is You" running through your head like so many sugarplums?

In addition to Mariah's assured appearance on your holiday playlist, this year, you


can catch the queen belt at a new Christmas concert event. Like most people on the planet, you'll probably miss out on Mariah's sold-out appearance at Madison Square Garden Dec. 13, but fear not: CBS is running a two-hour filmed version of the show Dec 20. "Merry Christmas To All" will also stream on Paramount+.

See **Xmas Music**, page 30



Miley Cyrus and Dolly Parton. Photo: NBC




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Michaela Jaé Rodriguez. Courtesy photo

# What's In a Chosen Name? *Everything,* That's What

## Michaela Jaé Rodriguez on the Importance of Chosen-Name Recognition for the Trans Community

BY CHRIS AZZOPARDI

In early 2022, Michaela Jaé Rodriguez made history as the first openly trans actor to win a Golden Globe, an award she earned for her role on “Pose.” Nearly a year later and she’s

yet to properly celebrate that groundbreaking moment for herself and the trans community, she told me during our recent interview.

And it’s not just because she’s been busy bossing around Maya Rudolph in the Apple TV+ sitcom “Loot,” which was recently

renewed for a second season. Rodriguez assured me she’d pop open a bottle of bubbly soon, but not until she was done with her ambassador duties for Citibank, which recently expanded its transgender-friendly chosen name feature to debit customers, allowing eligible Citi cardholders to update their cards with their chosen first name without requiring a legal name change.

In our interview, Rodriguez chatted about her own chosen-name experiences, her upcoming foray into music, and why “Loot” was such a “glorious surprise.”

### Why was it important for you to get involved with Citi’s chosen-name campaign?

It was most important to me [because of] the youth. I think about their level of confidence when they receive something that they’ve always wanted. And I also think about just trans individuals in general, regarding who they are and their identity, how that’s most important to them. Knowing that Citibank was willing to partner [with me] was not only, I feel, outstanding and kind of an honor, but to know that they’re willing to make sure we feel protected in ourselves and our identity. Also, they’re not slow in the process because they make it happen at the drop of a dime. There’s no long hauling to giving your information and giving all of this documentation that is quite embarrassing. You don’t have to go through that process.

So thinking of all those things, and regarding the youth as well, and just trans people in general, that’s why I partnered with them. It’ll give them a peace of mind. And they can walk out and know that not only they have a card that they’re going to be using, but a card that represents the name to their identity.

### Growing up, what was the thing for you that had your chosen name on it that meant the world to you?

I was 11 years old and I was in a music program, and I remember my dad taking me to go see “Spider-Man” with Tobey Maguire and Kirsten Dunst. And I remember them calling her MJ. And I was like, “Oh my god, those are my initials.” I wanted to be called MJ because she’s really cool, and she’s quite fab, and I love her red hair.

I remember receiving my first Equity card and them saying, “What’s your stage name?” And I said, “Well, it’s MJ Rodriguez. I’ve been called MJ all my life. That’s my name.” And they were like, “OK, perfect.” And from then on it stuck. Then, obviously, growing older, becoming a grown woman, you’re like, “OK, those little girl days are gone. People need to know who Michaela Antonia Jaé is. Who the creative artist is.”

The significance of Michaela is people getting to understand who the person is outside of the actress MJ Rodriguez. Michaela Jaé is my artist name. I wanted people to see the differentiations. I didn’t

want them to stronghold me to just one character, but a multitude.

### What are some of the challenges you’ve run into with changing your name?

I mean, there’s always a worry or a setback on the documentation and giving your dead name when you don’t want to give your dead name. All of these lawyers that I feel aren’t [necessary]. But yeah, I’ve gone through that, but it also didn’t deter me. It didn’t make me sad, it didn’t break me down. It just kind of pushed me a little farther.

I won’t say I was embarrassed, but I know a lot of my sisters who have also gone through this and have felt quite embarrassed about the process they have to go through with getting a name changed. And the youth won’t have to go through this anymore. They won’t have to worry about that when it comes to Citibank.

### Recently, we’ve seen a wave of anti-trans legislation, much of it focused on chosen names. What do you have to say to school administrators and politicians who’ve made it difficult for trans students to change their names and pronouns?

More than anything, I would say they need to probably open their minds and, even though they may not even receive a message like this, to open their minds and dig a little deeper into the actual human being that is there, beyond your expectations or your stigmas and ideas of who we are as people. I think what most importantly needs to be broken down is how we are as human beings. I would say just pay attention. If I were the person to give them the energy of anger, that would defeat the purpose of love. But I would say the disappointment that I have, as well, is needed for every trans person and every person who is an ally.

### Regarding your Golden Globe — do you carry it everywhere you go?

[Laughs.] Believe it or not, and I always say this to everyone, but I’m a regular shmegular girl, but I still have it in my case. This may be TMI, but I don’t know if I’ve actually yet really celebrated that moment of winning it. I know it’s weird to say, but I probably need to do that.

### I’d say that celebration is overdue.

Yeah, it definitely is. It’s a process. It was a lot that I had to process when I won that Golden Globe. I was so, so happy. But I also felt like I didn’t deserve it. But that’s due to, I guess, the shame, and what comes with transness in the industry, and how you feel you fit or how you belong. And when I got that, I was like, “Oh my god, does this mean I truly belong?” Maybe even worse, I was wondering, “Am I deserving of this?” And I had to really take the moment, and I’m still obviously in that space. Don’t think for a second, though, that I’m not proud of myself for winning because it was a feat for so many girls who have not



had space. It opened, hopefully, a good amount of doors, but also what comes with that is my reality.

**I want to ask about your role on “Loot” as Sofia Salinas, which feels groundbreaking because it’s not about being trans. I read that you decided that the character would be trans, but it wouldn’t be a primary characteristic. Why was that important to you?**

Being cast on this show, just a general role, was such an amazing moment in my life. I did not expect it. I did not believe I was even capable of getting that. Again, this was a totally different lane from what I am used to. I’m a drama girl, and being thrust into comedy in the most beautiful way was such a glorious surprise.

So being trans, I didn’t want people to just subject her to transness. People know me as Michaela Jaé, as a trans woman in the world. So being in that role of a woman who could possibly be trans or cis, it really bridges the gap between what actually we all go through as women, aside from being



Michaela Jaé Rodriguez and Maya Rudolph in “Loot.” Photo: Apple TV+

marginalized as trans. I had a show [“Pose”] where it showed the true experience of what trans women go through and I wanted, now in this moment, to try something different, make people laugh, and also let them see the struggle of not only just trans women, but cis women in general, and women in general. How we grow, how we fight, how we strive. And Sofia — she is starchy and real stiff, OK? That is just not Miss Michaela. I love the crap out of her. I love that she’s this way. You need someone like her in your life. So I’m just like, “She helps me.” When I read the script, I was like, “Damn, sis.”

**There’s a lot you could influence in the coming years. Have you thought about that and where you want your career to go from here?**

I’ve continued to pursue my acting career, but I also am really excited for my music career to start fully next year. I promise it’s something that... well, I think it will be good. I promise I’m not biased.

**You released the single “Something to Say” in 2021, so a full album?**

Well, I don’t think it’s going to be a full album. I’m going to do an EP, just to give people a snippet and see if they like [it], and then start writing more. Because my fans are really important. I really like having my hand in being creative and having a say.

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## ◀ The Whale

Continued from page 22

from finding a legible queer identity. My self-love and healthy self-image has soared since, but the vulnerabilities of queer adolescence are grave and formative.

Brendan Fraser played the kind of beefcake beauty I felt impossibly distant from in the 1998 film “*Gods and Monsters*,” a biopic of the gay 1930s horror filmmaker James Whale — another gay whale! — deliciously played by Ian McKellen. Fraser’s character Clayton Boone, Whale’s gardener, is certainly curious about his boss’s taboo flirtatiousness with him, when the film’s 1950s setting makes such flirtation criminal. Throughout the film we see Clayton re-conceptualizing his own physicality through Whale’s eyes, learning a new rhetoric of his own desirability that begins to excite him. I wish this openness to being desired existed for Fraser some 25 years later.

Fraser’s casting in “*The Whale*” — and his own body’s changes, not to the extent of 600 pounds but still weight beyond what mainstream Hollywood finds acceptable in a leading man — lends precious poignancy to the film, buoyed by Fraser’s sparkly eyes and light charisma evocative of his time as himbo par excellence in “*George of the Jungle*.” I do believe that Fraser, who came forward as a victim of sexual assault in 2018, has a deep and sincere awareness of the troubled politics of existing in a body in this world, as it changes through different shapes of variable desirability, and as it is exposed to violence.

But Charlie the character’s body rarely coheres as a lived-in body on screen at all, and it’s not just because of the hotly debated fat suit. Sweat stains on his shirts look more like aestheticized ink blots than the signs of a real, sweating person. When the film shows its cards as a story of depression and grief, Charlie’s obesity a manifestation of his negative emotions, it begins to feel jarringly vague, the man more of a metaphor with arms and legs than a human.

What realities are left unexplored when fat bodies like his stand as signposts for ideas rather than the bearers of complicated lives? The film is at its best when it slows down to capture Charlie’s daily routines, taking note of the difficulties a man of his size encounters, and the strategies he’s employed to get around them. Otherwise, “*The Whale*” resorts to an assemblage of slurring wet mouth sounds as we watch Charlie eat. Overwrought music cues emphasize how very pathetic the poor man is, living out a hopeless life both shocking and saddening.

Charlie is characterized as a saint and martyr, passively taking the beating of a brutal life. Not every film needs to be a story of joy — certainly people both queer and morbidly obese have more than their full share of tragedies that are worth exhuming and processing through storytelling. But the

one-note nature of the film crafts a very limited picture of what the filmmakers think a body like Charlie’s is even capable of feeling.

The ticking clock generating tension in “*The Whale*” is a health emergency. Charlie’s showing signs of congestive heart failure, with a deeply troubling blood pressure ratio. Despite all this, Charlie refuses to go to a hospital. The reasons for this refusal eventually become clear as part of the film’s soap opera plotting, revolving around interpersonal secrets hidden and revealed, in a perfect example of the film’s failure to generate meaning and nuance out of Charlie’s identities as both a fat and gay man.

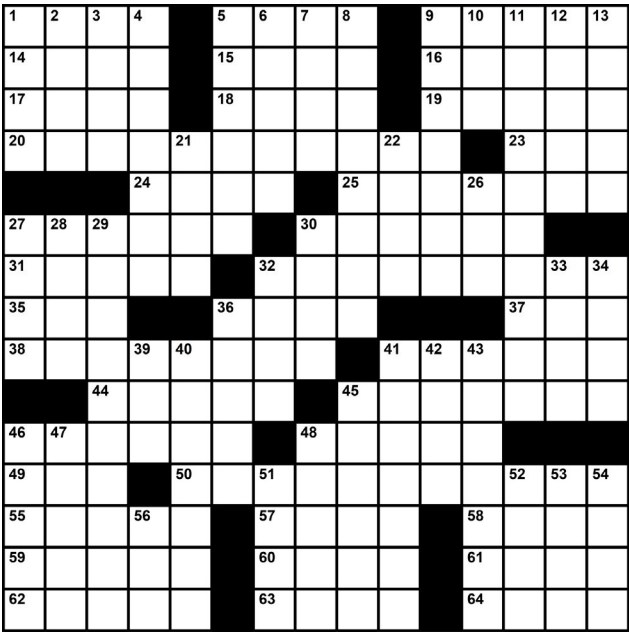
Hospitals are not neutral spaces for fat or queer people. Frequently they are places of immense judgment and mockery. Despite efforts to change, healthcare offices for many are reminders of what kinds of bodies and sexualities are most comfortably in tune with dominant patterns of social life. Like every other fat and/or queer person I know, I have had doctors diminish unrelated health concerns due to my fatness (“You just need to lose weight”) and stumble awkwardly over my sexuality in advice about sexual health and wellness. The shame felt in medical spaces is a real danger to queer and fat populations, causing us to avoid them precisely when they are the most needed. These contexts never come up in “*The Whale*,” to its detriment, as they could have invested the film with the breath of true challenges and barriers facing queer and fat people in the world.

In the play upon which “*The Whale*” is based, scenes end with the sounds of splashing waves, in reference to the essay on “*Moby-Dick*” Charlie continually clings to as an example of superlative writing, and in his own existence as a large, doomed animal. Perhaps too theatrical for film, this fantastical gesture is replaced with rain pouring down on Charlie’s apartment, keeping the same water-drenched vibe, but by more realistic means. The play’s version, as small a gesture as it is, allows us to imagine just for a moment whales as figures of serenity, even grace — not aberrations incompatible with their landscape. Large, majestic creatures, the kings and queens of the oceans!

Fat gay men have spent many years, dating to at least the 1970s, if not earlier, using bears as a cultural symbol, identifying not just with their large hairiness but their cuddly appearance, an animal comparison born of affection and warmth. I wonder what this film could have been had it embraced the whale. Media’s ability to conjure new possibilities of ways to be queer in this world can and should encompass a mode of being a fat queer defined not by the fear and shock of outsider’s eyes, but an embracing of self and body. I think Charlie deserves it.

*Sean M. Donovan (he/his) is a graduate student in film and media studies at the University of Michigan and a programmer for the Ann Arbor Film Festival. You can find him at @theseanmdonovan on Twitter.*





She's a Prince!

Q Puzzle

Across

- 1 Rita Mae Brown's "Pay \_\_\_\_"
- 5 Street liners
- 9 Begin on Broadway
- 14 Anti-oxidant berry
- 15 Penetrate slowly
- 16 "Fame" singer Cara
- 17 Tom or dick, but not hairy
- 18 Kind of package
- 19 Gain admittance to Studio 54
- 20 Start of a quote from Linda Prince

- 23 Ballerina's perch
- 24 Went lickety-split
- 25 Neptune's tool
- 27 Reed player
- 30 Like some fruit ready to ship
- 31 Water park attraction
- 32 More of the quote
- 35 Posed for Berenice Abbott
- 36 Hart Crane work
- 37 Be a couch potato, with "out"
- 38 End of the quote
- 41 Jack-in-the-box part

- 44 Kidney-related
- 45 Shakespeare's Arden and others
- 46 Abused orally
- 48 New money
- 49 Medium skill
- 50 Diana Prince's superhero title
- 55 Swiftly, to Shakespeare
- 57 Lesbos, for one
- 58 Surrealist Magritte
- 59 Wealthy, to Mauresmo
- 60 It winds up a Schumacher film
- 61 South Beach mementos
- 62 Preview type
- 63 Cutlass, e.g.
- 64 One-armed bandit's opening

Down

- 1 Linda of "Another World"
- 2 Judy or Barbra, for example
- 3 Male actor named Julia
- 4 Poorly endowed Dickens character?
- 5 Male companion
- 6 Hit the road
- 7 Mother, to 10-Down
- 8 Rainbow coalition?
- 9 Proper bearing
- 10 It may come before long
- 11 "Feud" character
- 12 It could be civil
- 13 Religious principle
- 21 Give the slip to
- 22 Sea bordering Kazakhstan
- 26 Some NFL linemen
- 27 "The Bells \_\_\_\_ Mary's"
- 28 Not so exciting

- 29 Where to find Uranus
- 30 Rep on the street
- 32 Turnpike fee
- 33 Blowhole
- 34 They get laid only once
- 36 Madrid museum
- 39 Director Craven
- 40 Barenaked Ladies hit from 1998
- 41 Chestnut-colored stallions, e.g.
- 42 It sticks out in front of a sailor
- 43 P-town and Fire Island
- 45 Put gas into
- 46 "Growing Up Gay in the South" author James
- 47 Clinton Secretary of Defense
- 48 Ford lemon that was not fruitful
- 51 Robert De \_\_\_\_
- 52 Eat it
- 53 The "A" in A.D.
- 54 Empty one in a Kristy McNichol sitcom
- 56 Chinese tea
- 50 Sondheim's staff members
- 52 "The Seven Samurai" director Kurosawa
- 53 Knocked off
- 54 Where some may lie
- 55 Ideal spots
- 57 Straight, at the bar
- 58 High flat area
- 59 E. Wolfson, for one
- 60 "Murder, \_\_\_\_ Meowed"
- 61 Homophobia or gay-bashing

See p. 24 for answers

# Prism of Possibilities

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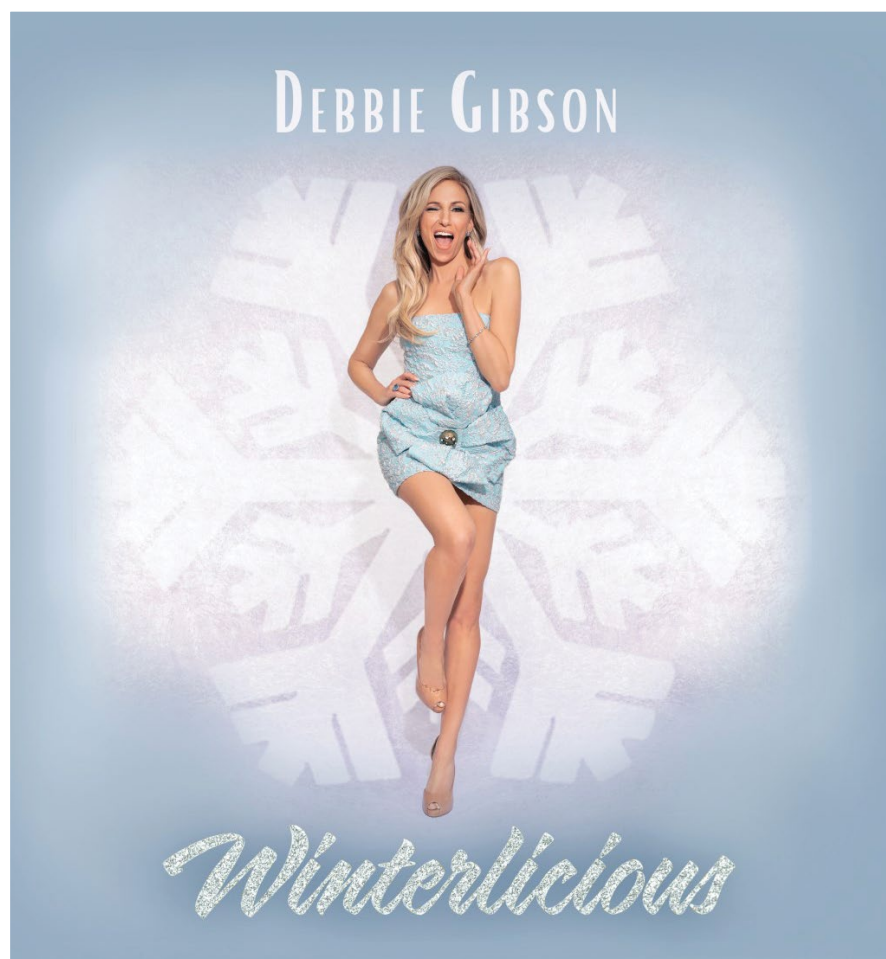


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career. The Broadway star launched her career in 1986 at 16 years old with the chart-topping hit “Only in My Dreams” and hasn’t stopped working since.

“Winterlicious” hits all the classics, from secular carols like “Sleigh Ride” and “Jingle Bells” to Christian mainstays like “God Rest Ye Merry Gentlemen.” Don’t miss Gibson’s “White Christmas” duet with her father, Daddy Joe — the singer’s voice is as rich and bright as it ever was, a lovely juxtaposition to her father’s mature baritone.

## PENTATONIX

For reasons that aren’t immediately clear, few music-related topics are as divisive as a capella. You either love it or loathe it, but even those in the latter camp would surely

agree that Pentatonix has a lock on this genre, especially when it comes to Christmas music.

The harmonic powerhouse quintet has put out five studio holiday albums over the past seven years, but “Holidays Around the World” is unique. You’ll find featured performers like Meghan Trainor (“Kid on Christmas”) and, true to the album’s title, a big mix of songs from all over the world. “Christmas in Our Hearts” features Lea Salonga, the Filipino singer who voiced Princess Jasmine in “Aladdin,” and a “Feliz

Navidad” rendition gets a boost from Latin American group La Santa Cecilia.

## GLORIA ESTEFAN

When Gloria Estefan’s daughter Emily publicly came out as a lesbian, there were a few side-eyes in the mix, especially related to Gloria’s revelation that she hadn’t been keen on Emily coming out to her grandmother, Gloria’s mom, who died in 2017. The longtime music icon has always insisted she’s nothing but supportive to Emily and to the LGBTQ+ community on the whole, and the release of “Estefan Family Christmas” seems to underscore that claim.

The album is a collaboration between Gloria, Emily and Gloria’s 10-year-old grandson, Sasha Esfetan-Coppola, and is the first Christmas album for Gloria in nearly 30 years, when the singer released “Christmas Through Your Eyes.” The new album is a true family effort, with features from Gloria’s husband Emilio and Sasha’s parents Nayib Estefan and Lara Estefan-Coppola. You’ll get your money’s worth here, too — the album features 17 classic and original songs in both English and Spanish.

## AMY GRANT

After a serious fall a few months ago, Amy Grant’s Christmas concert tour with Michael W. Smith was in question, but now that the tour dates have arrived, the Christian crossover artist and LGBTQ+ ally seems to be in top form. The Christmas tour, already in progress, will hit 12 cities across the country (including Detroit on Dec. 8 at the Fox Theatre). When Grant returns home to Nashville, she and husband Vince Gill will perform a series of Christmas shows at the Ryman Auditorium through Dec. 21, before the broadcast of Grant receiving a Kennedy Center Honors on Dec. 28 on CBS and Paramount+.

## MILEY CYRUS

You could get all dolled up and hit the town, or you could ring in the new year in your jammies with

Miley Cyrus and co-host Dolly Parton — the choice is yours. Heck, you could get dolled up and ring in the new year with Miley and Dolly from the comfort of your couch, for that matter. In any case, you won’t want to miss “Miley’s New Year’s Eve Party,” the second installment of the mega NBC hit (the 2021 event was the number one social entertainment special across all of TV for the entire year).

While the lineup for 2022 has yet to be announced, you can be sure this will be a star-studded event based on last year’s show, which featured stars like Jack Harlow, Brandi Carlile,



Noah Cyrus, Kitty Ca\$h and more. The show starts at 10:30 p.m. on Dec. 31 live on NBC and Peacock.

## MATT ROGERS

As the teaser for Matt Rogers’ upcoming holiday comedy special for Showtime says, this guy is the complete package. The out gay comedian, actor, writer, television personality and co-host of the podcast “Las Culturistas” (with Bowen Yang; both also star in “Fire Island”) has become a queer media darling over the past few years.

“Matt Rogers: Have You Heard of Christmas?,” available now on demand, promises a little bit of something for everyone, making this special a true crowd-pleaser, assuming your crowd digs snarky humor, hilarious takedowns and edgy comedy about the “reason for the season.” From comedy sketches to original songs, storytelling and a series of special guest stars, this is an ideal distraction from all the hustle and bustle of the season.

## ◀ Xmas Music

Continued from page 24

## BACKSTREET BOYS

The Boys are back! Well, they never really left, exactly, but the quintet’s latest release, “A Very Backstreet Christmas,” is generating more buzz than we’ve seen in a while for this beloved OG boy band. It makes sense, too. Holiday music is the perfect match for the kind of angelic harmonizing the band has been creating for — gulp — 29 years.

There’s a twinge of sadness here, of course — Nick Carter’s brother Aaron died unexpectedly last month — but fans may find a little catharsis in sweet, gentle takes on classics like “The Christmas Song” and “Silent Night.” The real standouts here, though, are covers of more modern pop tunes like Dan Fogelberg’s “Same Old Lang Syne” and the Wham! hit “Last Christmas.”

## REBA MCENTIRE

Over the years, Reba McEntire has become a true Christmas staple. She’s released a half dozen full length Christmas albums over the past couple of decades, hosted several

Christmas specials at the Grand Ole Opry and other big stages and these days, we’re watching her exude holiday joy in Lifetime movies like 2021’s “Christmas in Tune.”

By now, McEntire has left her mark on all the big Christmas carols and, lucky for you, she’s assembled 11 of them (plus an original song, “I Needed Christmas”) on a newly released album, “The Ultimate Christmas Collection.” It’s the perfect pick to accompany your tree-trimming festivities (or for singing very loudly from the privacy of your car/sleigh).

## DEBBIE GIBSON

If you’re a certain age, there’s a decent chance your inner 11-year-old is begging you to check out Debbie Gibson’s new Christmas album, “Winterlicious,” the singer-songwriter’s first holiday entry. That’s saying a lot considering Gibson’s lengthy



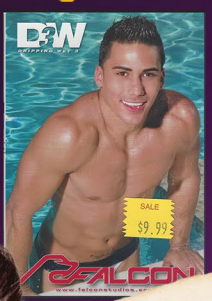
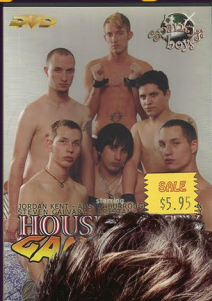
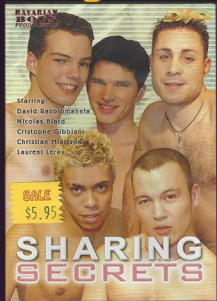


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