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Read more stories online, and check out
our complete bar listings at www.bartabsf.com

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Cover photo: Queen Cougar at the Powerhouse
with her dog Roscoe. photo: Rick Gerharter.

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PERVERSATILITY

Mapping the DNA of Gay "Identity" Bars in the Titanic 1970s

• by Jack Fritscher

Life on the sidewalks of 1970s Castro was bar culture. It spilled out of the bars into the streets where we Castro village people congregated after we left our 1960s hippie style in the Haight. In that first decade of gay liberation, "identity bars" helped define who we were and what we wanted. Bars were parade and parody of the "diversity drag" that Walt Whitman embraced: leathers, feathers, construction workers, cowboys, musclemen, gender-benders, hippies, piss-elegant queens, and Castro clones, all sporting keys on the right (bottom) and keys on the left (top), and back-pocket bandanas coded in the rainbow flags of gay semaphore.

In San Francisco, the intersection of 18th and Castro was the Gay Ground Zero destination for sex refugees fleeing homophobia from all across America. Ideals are universal, but sex is specific. Bars, which are the soul of gay small business, competed to exploit every personality kink, thereby creating more of the diverse culture they courted. We sorted our identities in the bars which, despite "discrimination," enforced specific dress codes to great applause. Gay style diversified; the bars were our performance art spaces. We acted out with "perversatilty" every gay desire that Father O'Grady, the priest from Our Lady, had denounced as sinful. Our mantra was: What you do with your body is the ultimate political act.

Gay liberation intended to mainstream everyone inclusively, but bar owners knew that hard dicks with no conscience thrived on the adrenaline of fetish, fun, fantasy, and fraternity. SFPD-fetishists

from the original Midnight Sun founded the Pacific Drill Patrol, San Francisco's first uniform club. Country-Western dudes two-stepped the night away bumping buckles at the Devil's Herd bar wearing cowboy clothes from Ed Wixson's second-hand store, Worn Out West. Rollerskaters, every Tuesday night, chartered a bus from the Castro to a rink in South San Francisco where, dragged up like the Village People plus a tutu or two, we skated in roaring circles through streaming vapor trails of poppers.

Brawny loggers in plaid shirts and bears with beards bellied up to Bear Hollow by day and the Ambush by night because bear bars added another ten years to a mature man's sex life. Leather bikers, parked outside Castro bars for afternoons, decamped at night for Folsom Street running the leather-bar gauntlet from Fe-be's to the Black and-Blue, to Folsom Prison, to the Leatherneck, to the Arena, to the Ramrod, to the classic sleaze of the No Name which became the Bolt which became the Brig which became the Powderhouse.

All were satellites to the core Castro bars where, during daylight and evening hours, the first sense of neighborhood emerged during the Titanic 1970s when our first-class party cruised on, full speed, innocent of the iceberg of HIV that lay ahead.*

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Castro Street in the early 1970s.

Crawford Barton, courtesy the GLBT Historical Society.