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The Bay Area Reporter's

Nightli

RAY OF LIGHT - ON THE TAB



ON THE TAB

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On the cover: Cenre and Steve enjoy the Rocket Collective beat at The Rickshaw Shop. Photo: Georg Lester

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## BAR QUEEN?

Camille O'Grady

by Dr. Jack Fritscher

o woman ever conquered SoMa bar culture more than Camille O'Grady. Gender-bending as a Jim Morrison lookalike leatherman in 1979, she placed third in the Brig's "Mr. Leather Contest."

As a biker, she gunned her Harley-Davidson through the aisles of the Leatherneck. As an artist, she helped her lover, iconic Oscar Streaker Robert Opel, re-conceptualize the bar art of Chuck Arnett, Lou Rudolph, and Jim Stewart to gallery legitimacy on the walls of Fey-Way Studio. Championing bar artists, Fey-Way was the first gay galley South of Market. Its 1978 founding re-branded "South of Market" into the trendy new acronym SoMa.

Before Camille arrived on-scene, gay men's acquaintance with women in leather began with Ann-Margret in Kitten with a Whip (1964) and ended with llsa: She-Wolf of the SS (1975), two cult favorites screened by the Ramrod to draw crowds on Tuesday nights. While Cynthia Slater (Society of Janus) preferred private dungeons to Folsom bars, O'Grady was a public sex and art provocateur. Hanging in 1960s Manhattan with Lou Reed, she both balled the young Robert Mapplethorpe and performed at CBGB before her arch-rival Patti Smith.

Brig owner Hank Diethelm, who fled Hitler's Germany and later created his own pop-up Folsom Cabaret, booked Camille, who performed her baraction songs like "Toilet Kiss."

Camille set the men's bar scene on its ear. Hot 1970s bar culture was haute on exhibiting art. During that Titanic decade before the iceberg of HIV, I was editor of Drummer magazine, featuring different bars monthly. As an activist, Camille wrote to me defending edgy leather-bar exhibits, like artist Tom Hinde's, from politically correct critics damning Folsom culture as a "hell of depravity" as described in The Sentinel.

She joined our diverse Drummer salon of artists, photographers, and writers like Thom Gunn, whose poems praised Folsom bar behavior. Like Christopher Isherwood romancing 'Sally Bowles' in 1930s Berlin, many 1970s leathermen pub-crawled with a straight hot girlfriend who was a player.

The beautiful O'Grady had a big personality



Camille O'Grady featured in an Ambush art exhibit flyer

Camille. How did you get her to part with them?" He/she answered, "Darling, I am Camille."

know

her, "Hey, man, You're

wearing all those long

T

necklaces.

On March 3, 1979, leathermen jammed the Ambush for the opening reception of a photography exhibit by Jim Stewart, author of Folsom Street Blues. Ambush owner David Delay's poster featured Stewart's photograph of a 'bead-dazzled' Camille holding a phallic whip: "Special Guest Performance Camille O'Grady."

Four months later, during mid-evening, July 7, two gunman entered Fey-Way, and forced Camille and a visitor to lie flat on the floor while they demanded money from Robert Opel who said, "Don't hurt them." They killed him.

Even with O'Grady's detailed courtroom testimony, Opel's assassination remains one of the great unsolved mysteries of San Francisco. Emerging from witness protection, O'Grady is penning her memoir and appears in Robert Oppel's Netflix documentary Uncle Bob, and in the books Hard Corps, Folsom Street Blues and Gay San Francisco, and at www.JackFritscher.com. \*\*

o 2012 Jack Fritscher

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