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EDITOR'S PICK

SPOTLIGHT

Sister Roma leads singalong bus tour of downtown SF LGBTQ+ history sites

By Patrick Hoge | Examiner staff writer |

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Sister Roma of the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence will host a Queer History Bus Tour and Sing-Along of LGBTQ+ historical sites the downtown area in honor of this year's Pride Month.

Courtesy of Fred Rowe Foto

Sister Roma fell in love with San Francisco several decades ago when she watched The City's huge Pride parade march up Market Street from the Financial District during a visit from Grand Rapids, Mich.

Now a globally known drag luminary, Roma moved to The City in 1985 and went to work for a large accounting firm at One Market Plaza. There, she frequented nearby downtown haunts where gay people were welcomed, like the old Sutter's Mill Saloon on Bush Street.

“Happy hour was very gay. It was beyond happy,” Roma recalled with a laugh. “It didn't even have to be a gay bar. There was just such a huge presence in downtown with queer people that we could take over just about any place.”

It wasn't until Downtown SF Partnership asked Roma to lead a Queer History Bus Tour and Sing-Along, however, that Roma learned about how important various sites in and around downtown have been to The City's LGBTQ+ past.

“I will learn a lot on this tour along with everyone else because I've seen the itinerary, and there are spots that I had no idea existed,” said Roma, 61, now the creative director for an adult movie company and has been performing for 37 years with the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence, “a leading-edge Order of queer and trans nuns” known for dramatic makeup and costumes.

“Even though I'm 100 years old, there are things that predate me,” Roma said.

Sister Roma's double-decker bus tours are part of Downtown SF Partnership's second “Drag Me Downtown” pride celebration, which includes weekly drag venues at different restaurants every Thursday this month. The first one was set for June 6 at 5 p.m. at Harrington's Bar and Grill.

As to the prospect of singing pride anthems with scores of bus passengers, Roma is not worried. “I'm not the best singer, but this is really about fun,” Roma said. “We're not gonna worry about hitting the notes. We're just gonna hit all the queer spots and we're gonna have a ball.”

Downtown SF Partnership is a community benefit district covering 43 blocks across The City's Financial District and Jackson Square Historic District.

The bus tour — which promises to reveal the “hidden LGBTQ+ past of downtown San Francisco” — will begin and end at 1 Market Street, Roma's stomping ground from so long ago, where there will be an evening drag show featuring D'Arcy Drollinger, whom The City crowned as the nation's first official drag laureate.

Also acting as a host will be architectural historian Shayne Watson, a longtime volunteer with the GLBT Historical Society and co-author of multiple publications about San Francisco's LGBTQ history.

"It's exciting to see this history highlighted because it's sort of unknown," Watson said.

The City's earliest "queer neighborhood" was just north of the current downtown around Pacific Avenue, Watson said, in the infamous Barbary Coast zone that in The City's early days was filled with saloons, concert and dance halls, gaming houses and brothels.

According to a publication Watson co-wrote for the National Park Foundation and the National Park Service, cross-dressing and crossgender entertainment in the area were commonplace.

After the repeal of Prohibition, more than twenty venues catering to the LGBTQ community opened for business in the North Beach neighborhood, it said.

Those came to include nightclubs like Finocchio's, which featured female impersonators; Mona's 440 Club, an early lesbian-centric space featuring tuxedo-wearing male impersonators; and the Black Cat Café, a popular 1950s gay hotspot that hosted politically infused drag operas starring gay rights pioneer José Julio Sarria.

The Black Cat was at the center of a landmark 1951 state Supreme Court ruling in favor of owner Solomon "Sol" Stoumen, who sued after having his liquor license repeatedly revoked for catering to homosexuals. The decision "essentially legalized gay and lesbian bars in California," putting the state out front nationally, the National Park Service paper said. Watson called the case "hugely significant."

Sarria, of Black Cat renown, went on to become the first openly gay candidate to seek public office in the United States when he ran for San Francisco's Board of Supervisors in 1961. The cafe served as his campaign headquarters. He placed fifth among 29 candidates.

There are other noteworthy spots close to downtown. In 1961, police raided a coffee house near Union Square and arrested a large number of people in a crackdown now credited with helping turn public opinion toward tolerance.

Nearby, at the corner of Turk and Taylor Streets in the Tenderloin, for several days in August 1966, transgender women, drag queens and young men militantly resisted police harassment at Gene Compton's Cafeteria, preceding the better-known 1969 Stonewall riots in New York City.

Part of this month's Drag Me Downtown series proceeds will benefit the Transgender District, which includes the Compton's site and stretches across parts of the Tenderloin and SoMa.

The exact itinerary of the Queer History Bus Tour is being kept secret, but the bus itself will carry a living piece of history in the incarnation of Sister Roma, who has served as the grand marshal of Pride celebrations in San Francisco, Prague, and Shanghai.

Roma remains dedicated to the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence, a group famed for its humor, charitable giving, and service work, notably to people with HIV/AIDS.

She proudly recites some of the Sisters' accomplishments, like the pathbreaking safer sex literature the group produced, the opening of chapters in other countries and the organization's human rights activism.

On average, Sister Roma makes about three appearances a week. This week, she has been supporting the AIDS/LifeCycle benefit bicycle ride as it rolls from San Francisco to Los Angeles. On June 15, Sister Roma will also host the San Francisco Giants Pride Day festivities, billed in part as a benefit for LGBTQIA+ community organizations.

"The secret, I think, to happiness really is giving of yourself. It's being of service," Roma said.

Patrick Hoge
