

OutSmart

APRIL '24

HOUSTON'S LGBTQ MAGAZINE

BREWS & BITES

**QUEER-OWNED
BARS AND
RESTAURANTS
FLOURISH**

FEATURING:

Rich's,
Salt & Sugar,
Side Peace, and
Tacos Doña Lena
Pg.51

ARTISTIC ARCHEOLOGY

Kehinde Wiley
at MFAH

Pg.66

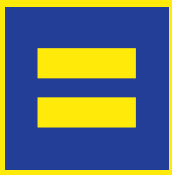
DINING OUT

CULINARY CREATIVITY

CHEF HENRY LU
LAUNCHES A "NEW ASIAN-
AMERICAN" CONCEPT

Pg.42





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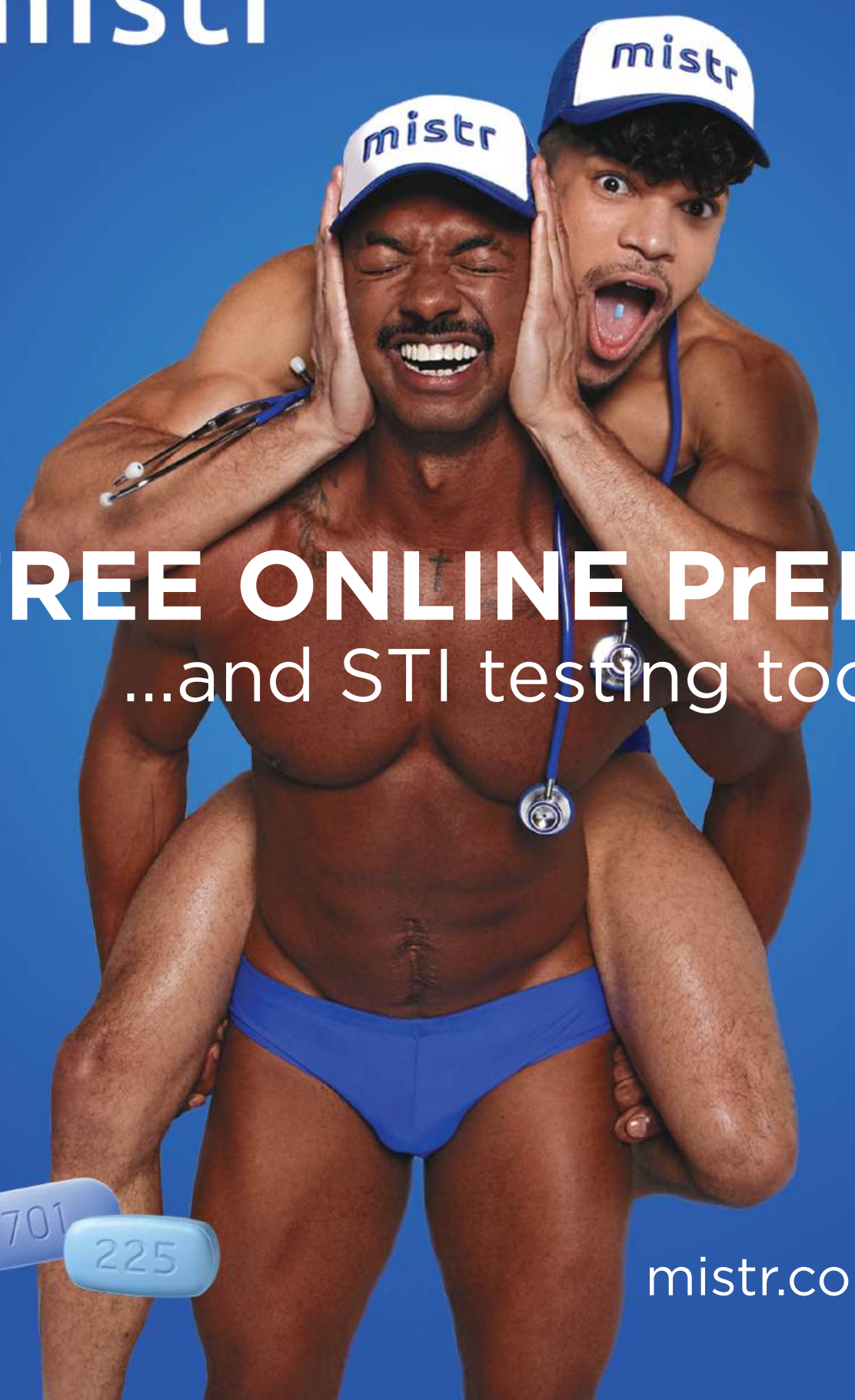
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46



41



51



62



66



72



29

41 COVER STORY CULTURED CUISINE

Chef Henry Lu and Evelyn Garcia's "New Asian-American" restaurant

46 EXCLUSIVE EATS

Chef Sasha Grumman is one of Houston's most sought-after private chefs

48 TOGETHER THROUGH TEA

McHugh Tea Room's Amy and Woody Quinn offer a variety of welcoming tea experiences

51 LGBTQ-OWNED BARS AND EATERIES

A sampling of Houston's dining and drinking establishments where creative queer owners are in charge

62 HARMONIZING THE COSMOS

The Houston Symphony premieres composer Jimmy López Bellido's *Eclipse*

66 SOCIAL-JUSTICE ART

The thought-provoking work of artist Kehinde Wiley at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston

68 ANOTHER SEASON OF 'ISLAND IDOL'

Galveston's Carly D. Nation rolls out the drag talent for Season 7

70 A GALVESTON THEATER'S HOME RUN

Island ETC's new production of the baseball-themed *Damn Yankees*

82 WIGGING OUT

Franky Fraud measures up to the competition on the Houston drag scene



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NEWS & COMMENT

24 NEWS

The Human Rights Campaign hosts its annual fundraising dinner downtown at the Marriott Marquis Houston

29 COMMUNITY

The Houston Gayers will celebrate 15 years with a meetup event on May 18 at KIKI Houston

34 MONEY SMART

Unmarried couples should be aware of the legal and financial protections they will need, especially when owning a home together

59 READ OUT

Author David Meischen explores his small-town Texas memories in two new collections entitled *Nopalito, Texas* and *Caliche Road Poems*

OUT & ABOUT

14 CALENDAR

18 SCENE OUT

69 OUT THERE

76 WEDDING GUIDE

79 BAR GUIDE

80 SIGN OUT




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ON the COVER

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Chef Henry Lu launches a "New Asian-American" concept. **Photography by Luke Chang, Jiā Media**

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Spring has sprung, and Houston is blossoming with fresh business concepts, world-premieres, and artistic excitement. This April issue of *OutSmart* offers an inside look at the local LGBTQ leaders and organizations making waves across the city—from the restaurant industry to nonprofit groups and arts organizations.

This special Food and Drink issue highlights local LGBTQ- and ally-owned bars and restaurants and the chefs who play a major role in ensuring that Space City's foodie culture thrives amidst a diverse culinary landscape. For example, this month's cover star, chef Henry Lu is the owner of JÜN, a critically acclaimed restaurant in the Heights. Writer Zach McKenzie introduces us to Lu, who discusses his diverse cultural upbringing and partnership with chef Evelyn Garcia to launch a "New Asian-American" dining concept. And don't miss McKenzie's interview with *Top Chef* star Sasha Grumman, who discusses her journey from appearing on Season 18 to becoming one of Houston's most sought-after private chefs.

Also in our Food and Drink feature, writer Connor Behrens sits down with McHugh Tea Room owners Amy and Woody Quinn. When the couple took over the Bellaire establishment, they made it their mission to bring the Houston community together through new tea experiences. Behrens also reports on the latest developments in the local LGBTQ-owned bar and restaurant scene, chatting with Levi Rollins about his new cafe Salt & Sugar, Julie Mabry about her new lesbian bar Side Peace, husbands Angel Cabrera and Brian Ponce about opening their second Tacos Doña Lena location, and Diego Chiarello about his new position as executive chef of Rich's Houston.

Elsewhere in this issue, we honor the Houston Gaymers' 15th anniversary in an interview with the organization's president, Jeffrey Huyhn. The group, which provides a safe space for LGBTQ folks to play video games, will celebrate its anniversary in May at KIKI Houston.

April 6 is the annual Human Rights Campaign (HRC) Houston dinner at the Marriott Marquis Houston. Writer David Clarke chats with HRC dinner co-chairs Rey Ocañas and Chris Barry about their involvement in this year's program and the importance of investing in the queer community.

On the arts and entertainment front, you won't want to miss Jimmy López Bellido's world premiere at the Houston Symphony this month. Writer Rich Arenshiedt chats with Bellido about the composer's new "cosmic" creation. Elsewhere, writer David Brasher reviews Kehinde Wiley's thought-provoking new exhibition *An Archaeology of Silence* at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston.

This April issue also looks back on last month's iconic Bunnies on the Bayou event. Photos by Dalton DeHart showcase the 45th anniversary of Bunnies, which brought thousands of guests downtown on Easter Sunday to Sesquicentennial Park.

Finally, new writer Lucio Nieto (a Galveston Island actor who was featured on the cover of *OutSmart*'s July 2023 issue) fills us in on the Island's creative scene. Nieto previews Season 7 of 23rd St. Station Piano Bar's 'Island Idol' competition, as well as a performance of *Damn Yankees* at Island ETC Theatre.

See you next month!

Greg Jeu
Publisher







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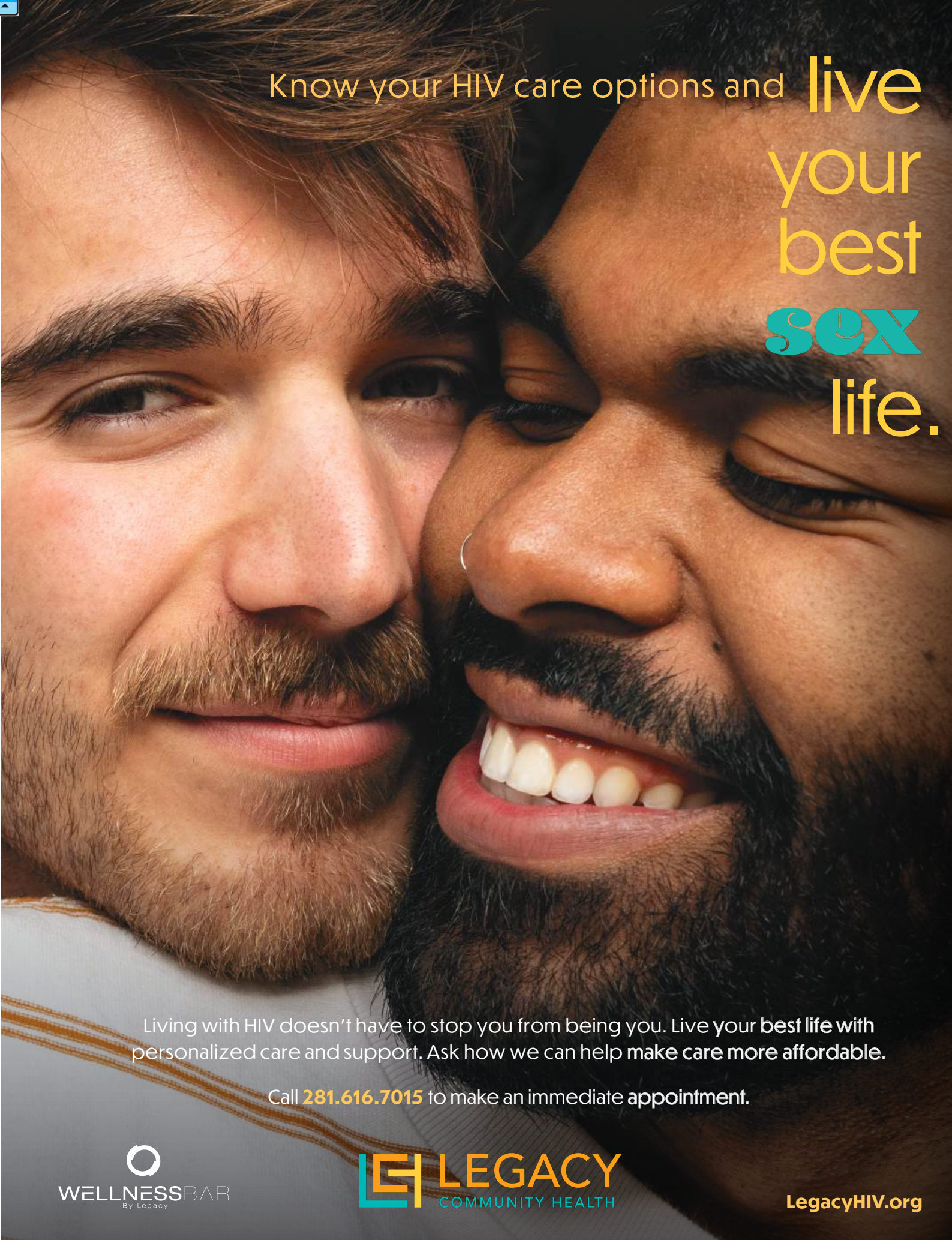
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A close-up photograph of two men's faces. The man on the left has light brown hair and a mustache, looking slightly to the side with a gentle smile. The man on the right has dark hair, a beard, and a nose ring, smiling broadly with his teeth showing. They are positioned very close together, with their faces nearly touching.

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QUEER THINGS to DO

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STAGE

April 25

OUT@TUTS: *THE CHER SHOW*

After the April 25 performance of *The Cher Show*, Theatre Under the Stars presents its Out@TUTS reception for LGBTQ theatergoers and friends featuring light bites, drink specials, and live music. Use the promo code OUT@TUTS and get 25% off your tickets! tinyurl.com/4z7d9btp



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COMMUNITY

April 6

HUMAN RIGHTS CAMPAIGN DINNER

The Human Rights Campaign Houston Dinner will be held on April 6 at the Marriott Marquis downtown. The 2024 edition will honor Rice PRIDE, the organization supporting and empowering all LGBTQ undergraduate students at Rice University—and those studying at public institutions that have been forced to disband their LGBTQ student centers. The event will also honor actor Kevin McHale, a Texas native who is best known for portraying Artie Abrams on Fox's *Glee*. Tables and individual tickets for the 2024 HRC Houston Dinner are still available for purchase, and *OutSmart* readers can save \$25 with promo code OUTSMARTMAG. tinyurl.com/29np9zfp



COMMUNITY

April 19

BRENÉ BROWN

The Council on Recovery hosts its 40th-anniversary Spring Luncheon with special guest speaker Brené Brown. tinyurl.com/ywzre2r8

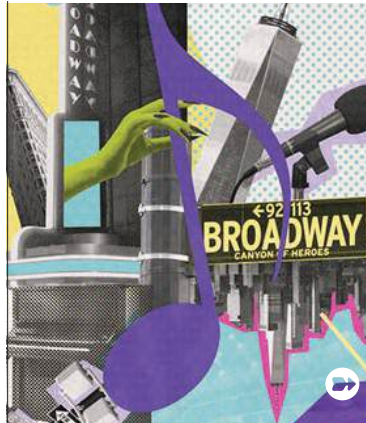


COMMUNITY

April 3

FINDING HOME: SOBER AND OUT

Avenue CDC presents an evening with Tate Barkley, author and Avenue board president, discussing his memoir, *Sunday Dinners, Moonshine, and Men*. tinyurl.com/2nn3dex6



STAGE

April 5-7

HOUSTON SYMPHONY ON BROADWAY

Take a musical trip to the Big Apple with selections from Broadway hits *Hamilton*, *Wicked*, *Dear Evan Hansen*, *Spring Awakening*, and many more. tinyurl.com/ykfhvuem

STAGE

April 5-21

RUTHLESS! THE MUSICAL

Art Factory presents *Ruthless! The Musical*. Full of Broadway spoof, twists, and turns, this “stage mother of all musicals” guarantees the laughs. tinyurl.com/yek5au3d

COMMUNITY

April 12

SPIRIT OF LEATHER 2024 AWARDS

The National Leather Association Houston hosts its 33rd annual Spring Iniquity Spirit of Leather Awards Dinner. tinyurl.com/5n8sk6h2

COMMUNITY

April 13

EMPOWERING OUR FUTURE GALA

The Montrose Center presents Empowering Our Future, a fundraiser for HATCH Youth, Houston's longest-running LGBTQ youth support group. tinyurl.com/yxwh55d3

COMMUNITY

April 12

LEGENDARY ART CAR BALL

The Orange Show presents the Legendary Art Car Ball, a collision of creative automotive visions in a night of interactive installations and pulsating beats. tinyurl.com/33njspk3



FESTIVAL

April 13

ART CAR PARADE

The 37th annual Houston Art Car Parade is the largest celebration of its kind in the world, featuring over 250 mobile entries and attracting hundreds of thousands of spectators. tinyurl.com/3y6pz8k8

STAGE

April 17

AN EVENING WITH AMY SEDARIS

Performing Arts Houston presents a hilarious evening of conversation with actress, author, comedian, and rabbit educator Amy Sedaris, followed by an audience Q&A moderated by Ernie Manouse. tinyurl.com/n7vyxv2e



STAGE

April 18

MAIN STREET THEATER PRIDE NIGHT

Main Street Theater hosts a pre-show LGBTQ Happy Hour and post-show entertainment for their world premiere of *Stagolee and the Funeral of a Dangerous Word*. tinyurl.com/cy4939xh

COMMUNITY

April 20

TLACT LEGAL CLINIC

Volunteer attorneys with Trans Legal Aid Clinic of Texas offer assistance with getting documents in order to file for a name change. tinyurl.com/2xwvbbws



STAGE

April 25

ALLEY THEATRE ACTOUT FOR JANE EYRE

The Alley Theatre hosts a reception for LGBTQ theatergoers and friends featuring cocktails and appetizers before the performance of Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*. tinyurl.com/4u8dzsj3

MORE QUEER THINGS TO DO →



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May 2-5

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MUSIC

June 14

MEGAN THEE STALLION

The "Hot Girl Summer Tour" is the H-Town hottie's first headlining tour, and Memphis rapper GloRilla will join her for all US stops. tinyurl.com/MeganHTown



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LOCATIONS

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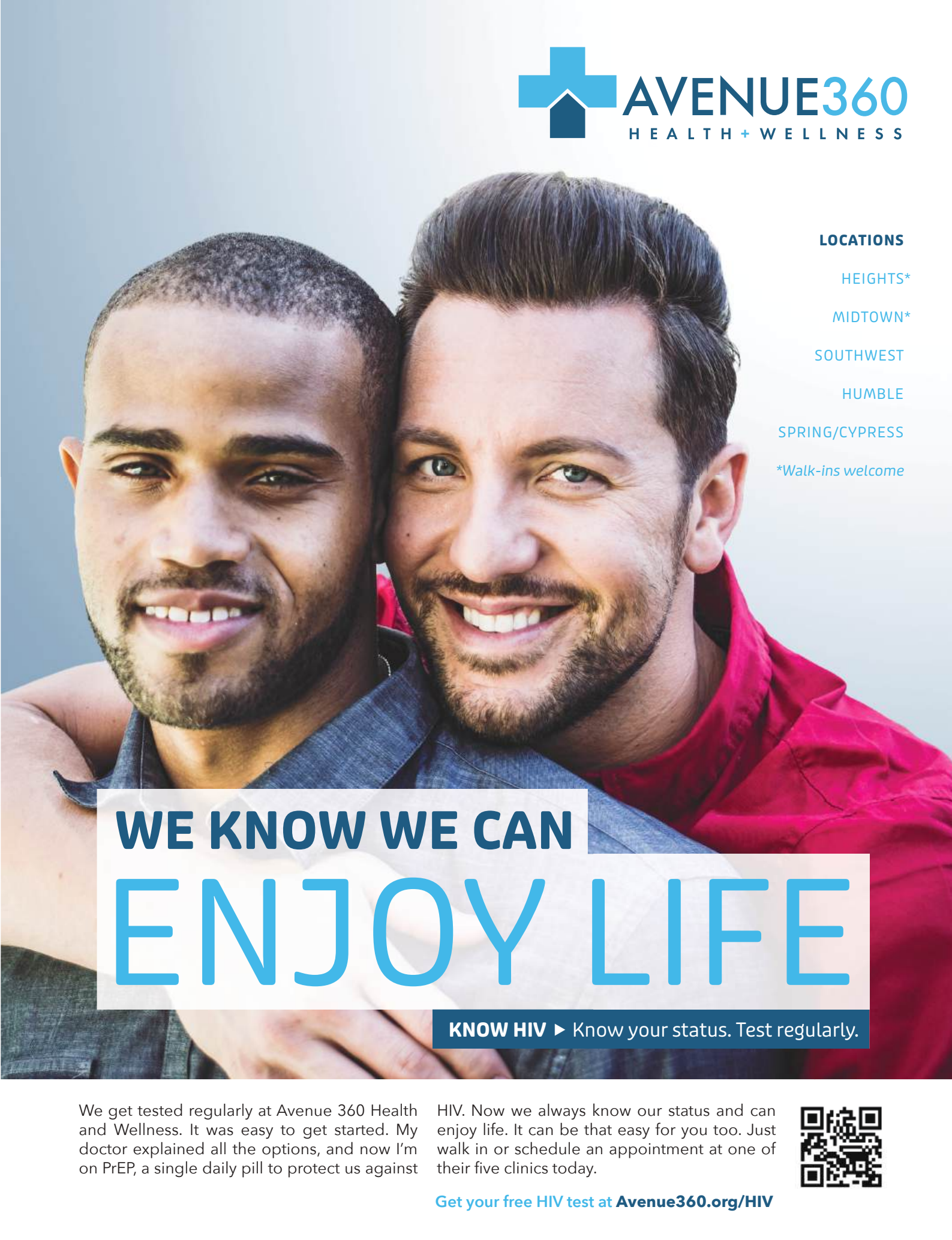
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A close-up photograph of two men smiling and embracing each other. The man on the left is Black with short dark hair and a light beard, wearing a dark blue button-down shirt. The man on the right is white with dark hair and a beard, wearing a red jacket. They are both looking towards the camera with warm, happy expressions.

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SCENE OUT

Photos by
DALTON DEHART AND CREW



Miss Lone Star Volleyball Association (LSVA) held *The Hunger Games* event at South Beach on March 2, 2024. Pictured are Miss LSVA 2024, Ms. Luanne Platter; and Miss LSVA 2023, Ms. Shenita Q. Pon



On March 3, 2024, Lazarus House held its Bubbles & Tacos meetup prior to participating in Allies in Hope's Walk to End HIV. Pictured are members of the Lazarus House Team.



Allies in Hope hosted its Walk to End HIV at Sam Houston Park on March 3, 2024. Pictured are **LaRence Snowden, William "Jeffrey" Campbell, Kyle Pierce, and Erica Davis Rouse.**



On March 5, 2024, Houston's New Faces of Pride honored *The Normal Anomaly* at JR'S Bar & Grill. Pictured are (top row): **Andrea Simonton, Marcus Wade, Joelle Espeut, Tim Stokes, Joey Jackson-Streeter, Jordon J. Edwards;** (front row): **Joe Mendoza, Rita Miao, Sarah McCoy, Bryan Cotton, James Drake, and Ian Haddock.**



On March 7, 2024, the Alley Theatre held its ActOUT pre-party for *The Nerd*. Pictured are **Carol Blacknall, Aaron Rublein, Matthew Janak, Lauren Pelletier, Davin Hutcheson, Aurora Villafranca, and Kevin Pope.**



Art Factory Houston presented *Stranger Sings, The Parody Musical* on March 8, 2024. Pictured are members of the cast and crew.



On March 9, 2024, Krewe of Olympus held its Appreciation Rush Party at JR'S Bar & Grill. Pictured are **David Wallace, Clint Harwell, Bruce Reeves, Andy Eversole, and Debbie Helweg.**



Pride Chorus Houston presented its *Dream a Little Dream* concert at Unity Houston on March 9, 2024. Pictured are **John Piermarini, Lore Wheatley, David York, Juan Trujillo, and Matt Leslie.**



On March 10, 2024, Texas Pride Impact Funds held its Houston Impact Brunch at La Griglia. Pictured are **Bob Mosser, April Bethea, Tripp Carter, Kelli King-Jackson, Tanner Williams, Lisa Madry, Chree Boydston, and Ron Guillard.**



Bunnies on the Bayou held its VIP Garden Party at the home of Richard Werner and Tony Bravo on March 10, 2024. Pictured are Bunnies on the Bayou hosts.



On March 14, 2024, the Montrose Center held its annual Bringin' in the Green fundraiser at the home of Chris Robertson. Pictured are **Ashton Harper, Russell Rybicki, Julian Hernandez, Kennedy Loftin, Avery Belyeu, Kevin Nguyen, and Dan Cato.**



OUT Professionals (OUT PRO) held its March 2024 Meaningful Networking Mixer at White Rhino on March 14, 2024. Pictured are **Samuel E. Camacho, Georgina Palencia, Esteban Gago, Shannon Hart, Tina Lambert, and Connor Hart.**

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SCENE OUT

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On March 16, 2024, The Diana Foundation held its 71st annual awards show at Ballroom at Bayou Place. Pictured are **Edward Vivas, Tasha Kohl, Deborah Hope, Ernie Manouse, and Howard Huffstutler III.**



On March 21, 2024, University of Houston's LGBTQ Alumni Network held its 7th annual drag bingo fundraiser at Star Sailor. Pictured are members of the LGBTQ Network's board with its hosts and performers, **Persephone and Hun'ee B.**



Mr. Tony's Corner Pocket's Ashton Houston & Boy of Montrose Mykey Whitney presented a fundraiser for PWA Holiday Charities on March 23, 2024. Pictured are **Anastacia Fontaine-Whitney, Kirk Wyllie, Ashton Houston, Mykey Whitney, Angela Mercy, Angie Moon Mercy, and Dustin Rouge Whitney.**



Puppy of Montrose 2023 presented "Puppy Love, a Blind Game Dating Show" fundraiser for PWA Holiday Charities at KiKi on March 23, 2024. Pictured are the participants.



Pride Night with the Houston Rockets, with participants from the Greater Houston LGBTQ Chamber and other organizations, was held on March 25, 2024. Pictured are **Kiotti Brown and Mell Gamboa.**



On March 25, 2024, the premiere of "Old Lesbians, the Story of Herstorian Arden Eversmeyer" was held at the UH Student Center South. Pictured are **Elizabeth Gregory, Rengim Mutevellioglu, Meghan McDonough, Barbara Kucharczyk, Sara Fernandez, Joyce Gabiola, and JD Doyle.**

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HRC Houston Hosts its Annual Fundraising Dinner

Co-chairs **Rey Ocañas** and **Chris Barry** advocate for investing in the LGBTQ community.

By **DAVID CLARKE**

The Human Rights Campaign (HRC) hosts numerous fundraising dinners across the nation that honor members and allies of the LGBTQ community. This year's HRC Houston Dinner will be held on April 6 at the Marriott Marquis Houston. Co-chairs Rey Ocañas and Chris Barry share the importance and objectives of the annual fundraising event.

This year's dinner, themed "We Belong," delivers a simple yet potent message. "With all that's going on across the country—in the presidential election, and currently on the right that is so anti-LGBTQ+ and anti-trans—we want to remind ourselves and remind our friends that might join us at dinner that we belong," states Ocañas, a cisgender gay man and adoptive father of two. "We belong in Texas. We belong in the US. We belong in society."

"Honestly, that's exactly what's going on," echoes graysexual-identifying Barry. "It's got everything to do with celebrating our community, as well as restating, 'You might try to erase trans people, you might try to erase the LGBTQIA+ community as a whole, but that's not going to happen because we belong.'"

Ocañas, an executive VP and managing director of community development banking, has been involved with HRC for years and has worked with them in multiple cities. When PNC acquired BBVA, the company took over sponsoring this annual event. "I managed the sponsorship and soon enough was asked to join the national board of HRC," explains Ocañas. "A couple of years later, I was asked to become one of the co-chairs [of the dinner]."

"I joined the steering committee with HRC in Houston when I moved here about three years ago," says Barry. "I was connected to leaders within the board here in Houston, and after being with the board for a year, they asked me to be one of the co-chairs for the dinner."

As a localized fundraiser for a national nonprofit, there are multiple reasons for the event to exist. "The first is to gather us and



Chris Barry (l) and Rey Ocañas

raise awareness about the important issues facing the LGBTQ+ community and our fight for equality and liberation. The second is to raise important funds for the work of the Human Rights Campaign and the Human Rights Campaign Foundation," Ocañas says. "The last is to celebrate and honor those that have worked really hard on behalf of (and to bring positivity to) the community."

The 2024 HRC Houston Dinner will honor Rice PRIDE, the organization supporting and empowering all LGBTQ undergraduate students at Rice University; and actor Kevin McHale, a Texas native who is best known for portraying Artie Abrams on Fox's *Glee*.

"We're honoring Rice PRIDE for opening up their queer student center to all. What they intended was to open it up to all the Houston-area college students to be able to come to their events, and what happened was it went statewide," Barry notes. "They literally have students from around the state who are joining in on Zoom if they can't personally drive to the Rice PRIDE events. We thought that that was

just a tremendous lift—and what a wonderful thing to do!"

"I'm a Rice alum, so I'm super-proud of the fact that the school and its students really have led the charge to support others," adds Ocañas. "It's just nuts what's happening with state schools. This is such a glimmer of hope for students around the state."

With many of us still feeling the budgetary crunch of inflation (and its more nefarious counterpart, greed-flation), it can be challenging to justify donating. "The funds [raised] locally go to support volunteers so that we can have things like the block walking that we do as electioneering work for LGBTQ+ supportive candidates in local and state races," Ocañas says.

Ocañas and Barry also pointed out that funds raised are used to send volunteers to Washington, DC for training on how to testify in both the Texas and United States House of Representatives. Funds are also used to support local LGBTQ causes, such as registering for local Pride events. →

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"We support Trans Day of Remembrance and a variety of other local Prides like The Woodlands Pride, not just the main Houston one," says Ocañas.

"Last year, one of the things we did was take some of those funds to purchase banned books to give to students around Houston," adds Barry. "We were able to provide over a thousand dollars' worth of books for [2023 HRC honoree] Cameron Samuels to distribute at the read-ins they were having around the Katy school district."

 **Tables and tickets for the HRC Houston Dinner are still available for purchase at Houston.HRC.org/Events/houston-dinner. OutSmart readers can save \$25 with code OUTSMARTMAG. Or as an alternative to buying a ticket, you can volunteer for the event. For volunteering info, visit Houston.HRC.org.**

What: HRC Houston Dinner**When:** April 6 at 5:30 p.m.**Where:** Marriott Marquis Houston,
1777 Walker St.**INFO:** houston.hrc.org**Michael Kaphingst • 1968-2023**

Beloved Member of the Houston 1990's Gay Community, Former Employee of Lobo Book Shop, and University of Houston Graduate, Master's in French.

Michael Kaphingst unexpectedly passed away in December of 2023, in Knoxville, Tennessee. He left us much too soon and will be greatly missed by all those he touched on his remarkable journey. He left an indelible imprint on everyone he met.

Michael came to Houston as a graduate student in French in 1992 and settled into Montrose, making many dear friends in the gay community. While successfully pursuing his degree, he worked at Lobo Book Shop for a number of years—an important gay cultural nexus at the time—which allowed him to befriend so many in the LGBTQ community. His loss will be felt by all who knew him.

Michael was fiercely out and proud, deeply soulful, the most loyal friend imaginable and a passionate caregiver and advocate for those who dealt with HIV and AIDS in the early days of the crisis. He had a beatific smile, impossibly kind eyes, an unerring sense of style and physical grace, a wickedly dry sense of humor, and



a personal charisma that could move mountains. Yet, he somehow remained the most humble and kind man I've ever known. He literally never met an underdog he didn't defend. Being his friend has been one of the great privileges of my life. I hardly know how to go on without him.

Michael leaves behind a mother, two brothers, a sister-in-law, an absolutely beloved nephew, Justice, and a vast number of friends.

Though the world is diminished without him, we are infinitely more enriched by his time with us.

—I will miss you, my dear friend.

*He sees deep and is glad, who
accedes to mortality
and in his imprisonment rises
upon himself as
the sea in a chasm, struggling to be
free and unable to be,
in its surrendering
finds its continuing.*

What Are Years—Marianne Moore
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From Pixels to Pride

The game nerds of Houston Gaymers celebrate 15 years of inclusivity.

By CONNOR BEHRENS



The Houston Gaymers group first met up in 2009, and now the organization is celebrating 15 years of providing a safe space for LGBTQ people to come together and enjoy all things nerdy.

"I'm naturally introverted, so playing games was a fun way to meet and make friends who had similar interests as I did," group president Jeffery Huynh says. "The group has always been open to **all** members of the LGBTQ+ community and continues to be a safe space for people to come out and share their nerd enthusiasm." →



Houston Gaymers
president Jeffery Huynh

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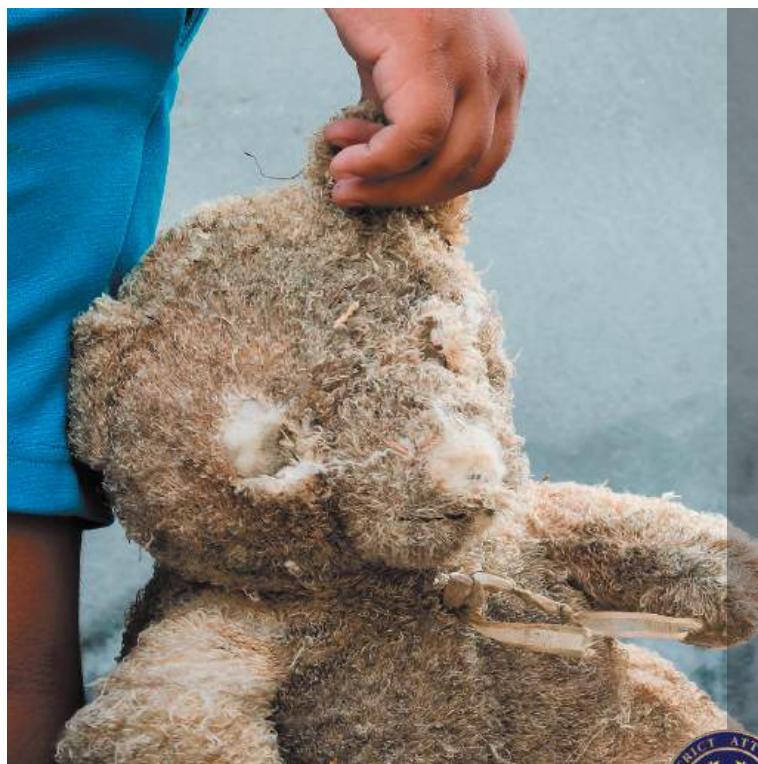


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Houston Gaymers at the December Meet Up event

The group is holding a free event May 18, 6 p.m. to midnight at KIKI's, 2409 Grant Street. There will be games available for everyone to play, Huynh says. There will also be vendors such as Red Bull.

"We have a couple other surprises we are working on, as well. We do not charge dues or fees to be a part of our organization. We really hope everyone comes out to celebrate with us."

Houston Gaymers has lasted this long because the group goes beyond video games to include movies, comics, anime, and pop culture. It's a space where everyone is welcomed and can feel included.

"I think the group has existed for this long because space is needed," he says. "Gaymers are introverted by nature, so creating a space that is open to the public is a great way for our members to come out and get that social interaction about things they have a genuine interest in. Our board does a lot to help with this. When you come to our events, we have board members ready to greet people and give them a rundown of the event. And we encourage everyone to wear a name badge so there's no awkwardness. Lastly, our board helps members connect with others who may play similar games so there is a common point of interest."

With 15 years under their belt, Huynh says he would like the organization to branch out to various charity initiatives next. "Our number-one goal right now is to be an active member in

**"GAYMERS ARE
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COME OUT AND GET THAT
SOCIAL INTERACTION."**

—Jeffery Huynh

our community. We have done various events with Montrose Grace Place, Law Harrington Senior Living Center, and our own initiatives such as Project Blue Shell, Project Level Up, and Gaymers Give Back. We are open to any ideas on ways to collaborate, and we look forward to helping our community."

Gaming is a popular subsection of the gay community, with r/gaymers on Reddit having more than 200,000 followers. Huynh says gaming gives anyone the chance to be someone else and escape into a fantasy world.

"Over the years, video games have evolved from the early days of PAC-MAN and Mario.

They have deeper stories, tones, and themes. There are more opportunities for characters to be portrayed and represented. You can customize your character in games to be an online image of you—make a character with your preferred gender, wear clothes that fit your style, play games that have characters that share where you are on the LGBTQ+ spectrum. All of this is supported by a community that is doing the same. For some people, that is support and representation they may not be getting from their friends or family because they are not fully out yet. Video games are very important for that sole reason."

For newcomers attending the May event, Huynh says he hopes they join the group and that friendships are made over the course of the night.

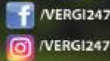
"We've had a lot of members join our group in the last 15 years. Every time we get a new member, they bring another person, and we have grown into what we are today. At our 15-year celebration, I want everyone to come out and celebrate that journey with us. Come out and see the bonds and community we have built. Come out! Make friends! Have fun!"



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By GRACE YUNG, CFP

Home Ownership for Unmarried Couples

There are special legal and financial issues to consider.



Home ownership has always been considered part of the American Dream. For many couples—whether married or unmarried—a key component of building a life

together is attaining and maintaining a home. But in some cases, that dream may start to crumble if unexpected issues like death or disability occur. With that in mind, it is critical to put precautions in place that will protect both parties under a wide variety of circumstances.

Risks to Your Home Sweet Home

Unfortunately, fire, natural disasters, and theft aren't the only risks that you can face with your home. In fact, some relationship perils could actually pose more of a threat to the home that you and your partner reside in together.

These risks can include:

- Death of a partner
- Disability or incapacity of a partner
- Ending of the relationship

While nobody likes to think about it, unexpected situations can and do occur, so it is essential that you are prepared legally and financially to protect your home and each other—especially during an emotionally difficult time.

For example, today many households have two income earners, and the loss of one of these income streams due to death or disability can make it difficult or impossible for the survivor or healthy partner to pay for housing costs and other essential living expenses.

In addition, if one partner becomes ill and requires financial assistance from Medicaid, this could have implications for the home. For example, there is a home equity limit of \$713,000 (in 2024) in order to exempt a Texas home from the assets that Medicaid has access to if there is no spouse living in the home. (Source: [medicaidplanningassistance.org/medicaid-eligibility-texas/](https://www.medicaidplanningassistance.org/medicaid-eligibility-texas/))

Plus, even if the home is exempt from Medicaid's asset limit, it may not be exempt from the Medicaid Estate Recovery Program. In this case, following the death of a Medicaid



recipient, the Texas Medicaid agency will attempt to obtain reimbursement for its costs of care from the remaining assets of the decedent, including his or her home. (Source: [medicaidplanningassistance.org/medicaid-eligibility-texas/](https://www.medicaidplanningassistance.org/medicaid-eligibility-texas/)) Without protections in place, this situation could force the surviving partner to move out of the home.

So on a short-term basis, such as a health condition that is just temporary, it may be possible to cover your housing costs using money from an emergency fund. However, in case of death or long-term incapacity, one should have other precautions in place.

It is also possible that, in the event of one partner's death, his or her blood relatives may take over ownership of the property, based on the laws of inheritance. This could pose a significant threat to the surviving partner who risks losing his or her home.

If your relationship ends, you'll need to decide what to do about your home—whether one of you will remain there, and if not, how to go about moving forward.

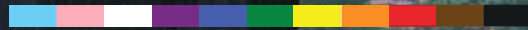
Separately, cases where there is a significant age difference between partners could also pose some challenges. For instance, in Texas, homeowners who are age 65 and older may qualify for an additional homestead exemption of \$10,000. This is in addition to the homestead exemption that all homeowners in Texas can receive. Those who are partial owners may also qualify for this exemption.

If a homeowner is over age 65 when they pass away, their surviving spouse can receive the exemption, provided that they are age 55 or older. This is not necessarily the case for an unmarried surviving partner, though. You must apply with the →

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county appraisal district to receive the homestead exemption in Texas. Survivors should complete Texas Comptroller Form 50-135 to apply. (Source: texaslawhelp.org/article/property-taxes-and-homestead-exemptions).

When married couples get divorced, they typically have several options available, such as:

- One spouse buying the other out
- Selling the home and then splitting the profit

Often, a divorce court will mediate a decision.

But for unmarried couples who separate, things are handled differently. For instance, if both partners have equal legal ownership (i.e., if both names are on the home's title), then both must agree to sell the property, regardless of how much either of the parties contributed to the purchase and other expenses.

If one of the partners decides to instead buy the other out, the transfer could cause taxation for unmarried individuals. (This is not the case with married couples, as the transfer of assets between the parties in a divorce is usually tax free.)

Legal and Financial Protections

In addition to obtaining homeowners insurance to help ease the financial consequences of damage or theft, there are other things you should have in place to protect yourself and your partner from financial devastation in case of death, incapacity, or the end of your relationship.

These protections should include:

- **Life Insurance** – The proceeds from a life insurance policy are received income-tax free by the beneficiary. These funds could be used to pay off a remaining mortgage balance or to replace the deceased's income, in turn reducing the financial stress of home-related expenses for the surviving partner.
- **Disability Insurance** – The income from disability insurance could be used to help pay housing expenses if one partner becomes injured or ill and is unable to work. Depending on the policy, the benefits may pay out for a set time period, such as 5 or 10 years, or until the insured is age 65.
- **Long-term Care Insurance** – If one partner requires long-term care services, either in a facility or at home, the benefits from a long-term care insurance policy could help to pay for some or all of the care, while preserving your other assets. →

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- The percentage of profits each partner will receive upon the sale of the home
- Type of ownership on the home’s deed or title
- How housing expenses will be shared
- Dispute resolution process in case of a split

If one partner already owns a home and the other moves in, an agreement could also be drawn up that clarifies all of the above, as well as an accounting of how much money was put into the home by the partner who originally purchased it.

Retitling the home to either “joint tenants” or “joint tenants with rights of survivorship” could also be an option to protect unmarried partners who own a house. Going this route can allow the property to bypass probate if one partner passes away.

Protection from Unseen Dangers

To make sure that you haven’t left any legal or financial gaps in your plans to protect your home, talking with a financial-planning professional can help. This can also help you to better anticipate the potential tax, legal, and financial consequences you’ll have, and put a plan in place to protect yourself and your partner. Working with a professional who is also well-versed in LGBTQ legal issues can help you keep up-to-date on the changing landscape of same-sex marriage laws.

Grace S. Yung, CFP®, is a CERTIFIED FINANCIAL PLANNER practitioner with experience in helping LGBTQ individuals, domestic partners, and families plan and manage their finances since 1994. She is the managing director at Midtown Financial Group, LLC, in Houston. Yung can be reached at grace.yung@lpl.com. Visit letsmakeaplan.org or midtown-fg.com/lgbtqplus.10.htm.

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FOOD AND DRINK ISSUE

BREWS & BITES

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FEATURES A SAMPLING OF SPACE CITY'S
DYNAMIC CULINARY LANDSCAPE,
INTRODUCING YOU TO THE INNOVATIVE
ENTREPRENEURS WHO ARE PUSHING
THE BOUNDARIES AND EMBRACING
NEW FLAVORS AND CONCEPTS.

First, meet cover star **Henry Lu**, head chef and founder of the "New Asian American" concept restaurant JÜN. Next, discover why *Top Chef* superstar **Sasha Grumman** is now one of the most sought-after private chefs in Houston. Then learn more about a few of Houston's LGBTQ bar and restaurant owners who make their establishments so successful. Finally, get to know **Amy and Woody Quinn**, the couple serving up creative high-tea experiences at McHugh Tea Room in Bellaire.



CULTURED CUISINE

Chef Henry Lu blended his background and creative talents to launch a “New Asian-American” concept.

By **ZACHARY MCKENZIE**
Photos by **LUKE CHANG, JIÄ MEDIA**



A drag queen in a pink leotard and thigh-high white boots leaps from a bench into a death drop while the crowd roars with applause. The DJ playing rap and pop songs does a quick mic check before welcoming a mariachi band that delights attendees with traditional music. Across the bar, an artist draws live portraits of guests while servers criss-cross the restaurant space carrying plates of delicious bite-size dishes.

This one-year anniversary party earlier this year at JÜN was emblematic of chef Henry

Lu's and chef Evelyn Garcia's backgrounds and cultures, as well as the diverse makeup of Houston. Lu, a Bronx native, has already accomplished big things in the Houston food scene at his “New Asian-American” concept and has made it his mission to live out queer authenticity as a means of championing the LGBTQ community.

“The earliest memories I have are of working in my family’s [Chinese] restaurants,” he reminisces. “It was like my after-school program. I would leave school, do my homework, and then help out at the restaurant—mopping the floor, washing dishes, and eventually food prepping when I was old enough to hold a knife.” His role in the family business evolved over time. “My mom woke me up one day, and she told me I was going to get my driver’s permit. I was like, ‘For what? I don’t need to drive. I’m in New York City.’ My mom responded, ‘You’re going to start delivering for us!’”

Out of all of his duties in the restaurant, cooking was the most satisfying for him. “Cooking fascinated me. Watching the guys work the woks was so thrilling and fun. I also ate so much. No one should ever eat as much as I did!”

Ultimately, Lu distanced himself from the kitchen to pursue a career in fine arts, concentrating on ceramics and other media. “I was terrible at school, but going to art classes made it more interesting and welcoming for me,” he admits. “I went to college at the University of Buffalo after getting into the architecture program. I spent a year in the program, and I hated every second of it.”

So Lu altered course. “I earned a degree in art history, and while I was in school I did a lot →



JÜN's menu items have various influences, including blends of Asian, Latin, and Caribbean flavors.



JÜN co-founders Henry Lu (l) and Evelyn Garcia at their Heights restaurant and wine bar.

of extracurricular activities.” He shares that in his leadership roles, including as president of the Lesbian Gay Bisexual Transgender Alliance (LGBTQA), he worked alongside fellow group members to cater their various events. “We cooked meals ourselves, like a fancy potluck. That sparked a really happy memory for me, working around food and cooking. I decided to go to culinary school right after college.”

That creative spark led Lu to the French Culinary Institute before becoming the executive chef for a hospitality group in New York City, leading all of their concepts. In 2020, the chef set his sights on H-Town. “I needed a change. I worked my way up in New York, and in 2020 I was going to take a sabbatical year. I was gonna travel and remind myself why I enjoy this profession so much,” he explains. “Then, in 2020 everything shut down. I was stewing in my feelings in my apartment with my dogs and wondered what I should do.

“I realized I’d done everything I could for my career in New York. Moving to Houston was on my radar, because Evelyn was trying to get me down here. I had done some events with her and it just made sense. We started talking about our futures and goals; I started understanding the food scene here and how it’s changing. That’s what really enticed me to move here.”

Lu shares how quickly his eyes were opened to the importance of being a visible member of Houston’s queer community. “In New York, queer people are all around you,” he says. Interactions with LGBTQ Houstonians, such as his barista who expressed a desire to paint his nails like the chef, inspire him to live his life out and proud.

“I’m very secure in where I am in my life. It doesn’t matter if people don’t like who I am, what I do, or how I present myself. I’ve made it a point to be more expressive of my Asian heritage and my LGBTQ culture—whether it’s painting my nails or being more expressive in everything I do.”

“IT’S THE FOOD WE GREW UP WITH—A MELDING OF EVELYN’S MULTICULTURAL HOUSTON ROOTS AND MY UPBRINGING IN THE BRONX, WITH A LOT OF DIFFERENT LATIN AND CARIBBEAN FLAVORS.”

—Chef Henry Lu

My City with Chef Henry Lu

Which restaurant is Houston’s best-kept secret?

Bon KBBQ, formerly known as Jin Korean BBQ. Best deal ever—\$19.99 Korean BBQ for lunch. It’s a drive-thru.

Favorite spot for a cocktail or mocktail?

Bar No. 3 in the La Colombe d’Or hotel on Montrose, or BLT.

Favorite place to go dancing?
It’s been awhile since I went dancing.

What is your go-to spot for self care?

Ryde & Barrys, Midtown Reflexology, Heyday Facials, and Gloss Nails.

Best place to satisfy your sweet tooth?

El Bolillo Bakery, off of Airline Drive. Their Choco-Flan: drool!

Favorite brunch spot?
Squabble

What’s your favorite local business you like to support?
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Lu and Garcia ultimately blended their culinary talents to open JÜN, their James Beard Award-nominated restaurant in the Heights. “It’s the food we grew up with. The multicultural environment of Evelyn’s Houston roots, with generations of Vietnamese and Asian influences, and my upbringing in the Bronx, with a lot of different Latin and Caribbean flavors. We wanted to meld them all together and pay homage to our families.”

His success in the kitchen is a testament to his other creative talents. Lu still considers himself an artist, and JÜN’s interior design certainly reflects that. “There’s so much different artwork in JÜN because art plays a huge role in our lives. Evelyn and I love making ceramics,” he says. Lu and Garcia both made the small ceramic pitchers and utensil holders used in the restaurant. The chef explains that the art the chefs create in the kitchen is what adds vibrancy to the neutral space. “The restaurant has a clean palette. It’s inviting and homey, like you always wish your home to be. We allow the food to add the color.”

Lu describes JÜN as a place where all are welcome, and his goal is to cultivate a safe space for all who enter. “We want to have people around us from different backgrounds and walks of life with the same goal of offering the best hospitality. I tell the team every day, ‘We hire you based on your personality, so share that personality.’ If they feel more comfortable wearing a dress, they should wear a dress. This is not corporate America. Evelyn and I are chefs and artists, and we want our staff to express themselves—and our customers to feel welcome.”



Keep up with Chef Henry Lu on Instagram @_henrylu_.



Ekλεκtik
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EXCLUSIVE EATS

Chef Sasha Grumman
is one of Houston's
most sought-after
private chefs.

By ZACHARY MCKENZIE
Photos by MEGAN SNELL





It's a Friday evening and Sasha Grumman is packing her suitcases for a work trip she is leaving for the next day. She runs through a checklist of

what she'll bring to the Bahamas, where she will prepare a variety of expertly made meals for her clients. The private chef quickly assesses the contents of her suitcases: comfortable shoes, toiletries, and a selection of her favorite Moroccan spices.

Grumman couldn't have imagined herself in this position just a few short years ago. Today, the *Top Chef Season 18* contestant has catapulted her dreams into a successful and exciting career after years of hard work and believing in herself.

Traveling isn't a foreign concept for the Newport Beach, California, native. "I went to culinary school in New York after graduating from college in Ohio. Then I moved to San Francisco, L.A., and Austin before moving to Houston to open the C. Baldwin Hotel as the executive chef," Grumman explains. On why she chose to call Houston home, she shares in part, "The food community here is ginormous, and the number of different kinds of restaurants is astounding."

Culinary seeds were sown at an early age for the professional chef. "I grew up in a Sicilian family, so we're all in the kitchen during every holiday and family gathering. The culture was ingrained in me as a kid," she says. "I was in the kitchen from the age of 5, on a step stool getting my hands dirty. Nobody in my life was in the industry as a

chef, so I never saw it as a potential career."

After graduating with a sociology degree, the future entrepreneur returned home and received sage advice from an important source. "I moved home and just started cooking. I'd make a grocery list and my dad would go buy a bunch of stuff that I wanted, and I would just cook all day. I loved it so much," she says. "One day, my dad said, 'You know that you can do this as a career?' My parents were so supportive, so I applied and went to the French Culinary Institute in New York, where I spent three months before moving to Italy to work in a restaurant six days a week, 14-hour days, for eight months."

The down-to-earth chef, whose style is a flavorful blend of her Sicilian upbringing and other Mediterranean influences, returned to the states before the COVID-19 shutdown to begin an illustrious career working the line in revered restaurants across the country. She made lemons out of lemonade during the pandemic and found purpose in working for the Southern Smoke Foundation, vetting applications for financial assistance after being furloughed herself.

Then the Bravo network came calling. "*Top Chef* was a roller coaster and a dream. I really enjoy making people laugh, performing, leading, and being in front of the camera—I don't think that's a shock to anyone that knows me. I told myself that if I made it onto that show, I would really hit a level with my cooking where not only I believe in myself, but others also believe that I'm at that level."

Reflecting on the show's impact, Grumman explains that it confirmed she was heading

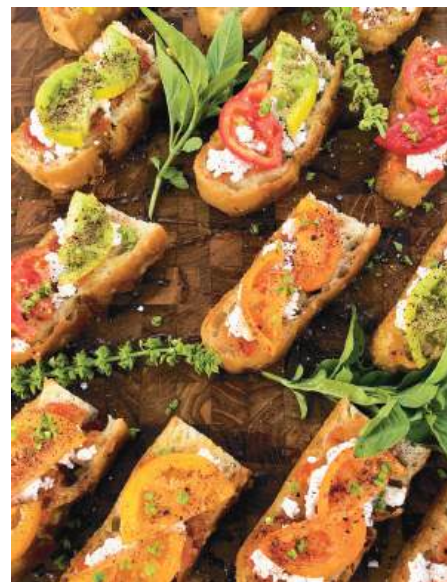
in the right direction. "The show helped my career immensely. It reminded me that I love my job and what I do. I was so excited to get my hands dirty and create food that other people would get to enjoy. I realized that feeding and connecting with people is largely what I love about my job."

Today, Grumman has found her sweet spot. "My work life now is all over the place and so unpredictable, but in the best way." The owner of SASS Hospitality shares that her company has taken her career to a place she never could have imagined. "I'm going to the Bahamas tomorrow with clients from Houston. If you told me I was doing that four years ago, I'd ask, 'How does that even happen?' I've really put myself out there and now I do a lot of private dinners, big corporate lunches, restaurant consulting, and intimate parties. Day-to-day is always different, which I really enjoy."

Grumman finds peace and respite out of the kitchen in boxing, reading, and leaning into her newfound "homebody" status. A champion for the next generation of culinary pros, she frequently reminds up-and-comers that patience is the key. "I think the restaurant community is a safe place, and it's always been a safe place for people who don't feel comfortable in other situations. Anthony Bourdain says we're a gang of misfits and we find our refuge in the kitchen. I think that's still true. There are people in kitchens that I would have never met in other industries, because this place just attracts people that are a little wild, a little crazy."



Keep up with Chef Sasha Grumman on Instagram @thefiercechef.



A few of chef Sasha Grumman's culinary creations



McHugh Tea Room
owners Woody (l)
and Amy Quinn

PHOTOGRAPHY BY ALEX ROSA

TOGETHER THROUGH TEA

Amy and Woody Quinn have created
a welcoming tea experience in Houston.

By CONNOR BEHRENS

When McHugh Tea Room owner Kim McHugh “passed the tea-pot” to Amy and Woody Quinn, the duo made it their mission to bring the Houston community together with their pinkies held high and their teacups full.

“We like to think of this as a local neighborhood spot, or someplace that you remember as you’re passing through the area. We’re not a place where you have to feel proper or fancy. Tea can be casual and fun,” says co-owner Amy Quinn.

Amy describes McHugh Tea Room as a premier gathering place to connect with family,

friends, and the wider community, and where both tea enthusiasts and first-time visitors can enjoy a relaxing tea experience. McHugh Tea offers a “casual-elegant” tea experience where customers can indulge in an assortment of brewed teas served alongside tiers of finger sandwiches, scones, and pastries.

“If you have an afternoon tea booked and you want to dress up as if you are getting ready to meet the King of England, go for it,” she says. “Put on that big hat, wear your best dress, come in and experience high tea and feel fancy. If you don’t want to do that, if you’re just celebrating a birthday with a girlfriend who’s out of town or you’re having a little-kid tea party, come in

your jeans and flip flops. There’s no dress code. There’s no standard, but our staff will still provide you with our standards of excellence. However you come, we just want you there.”

Wanting to serve the Bellaire and Greater Houston area with a business that could bring people together, Amy and her husband knew pretty quickly that McHugh Tea Room was the perfect fit.

“People sometimes think high tea is unchangeable or it’s rigid,” she says. “We’ve actually found quite the opposite. We have found that we can be so creative within this world of tea and high-tea experiences.



We are having such fun discovering all the things that we can do with it—even with people who like to sit and play table games and just gather, chat, and celebrate. Our motto is ‘come as you are.’ It’s casual elegance, right?”

McHugh Tea Room offers themed tea events for holidays, and their “tipsy tea” service includes champagne and wine to help increase community engagement while also

distinguishing the tea room from other drink businesses in the city.

“We’ve been having monthly themed special teas,” Amy says. “We started it with a Halloween-themed tea that ran all month. You can come and be fancy or casual while you have your cucumber sandwich, scone, and tea, or you can have a Frankenstein monster brownie as your dessert. We also plan to celebrate Pride Month in June with a colorful and festive

themed afternoon tea choice. We have found people just love to embrace a theme. It’s so much fun to see people come in and dress up, too. We’re taking some high-tea traditions but just having a little bit more fun with them.”

While tea will continue to remain a highlight for the business, Amy and Woody hope to incorporate live events and other fun activities to pair with the tea.

“We really want to add a little bit of a night-life feature to the tea room,” she says. “Happy hours, book signings, poetry readings, live music, game nights, book club gatherings—things like that. I think one of the hardest things about owning your own business is not trying to implement new ideas all at once, because everything feels so exciting and you want to do it right out of the gate. Patience is something that we’ve kind of had to learn.”

No matter what additions the business implements, Amy notes that tea and community will remain at the forefront.

“We really want the tea room to be a place of safety, comfort, and fun,” she says. “We’d really love for people to experience it as much as possible.”



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Shaping Houston's Foodie Landscape

LGBTQ-owned bars and eateries evolve within the ever-changing industry.

By CONNOR BEHRENS | Photos by ALEX ROSA

Houston is famous for many things. NASA. Sports. Oil and gas. Yet many people will tell you that the food scene in and around the Greater Houston area might be its most prized possession, with the fourth largest city in the United States making a reputation for itself over the years as a place where you can find some of the best things to eat.

From authentic Tex-Mex to fresh Gulf seafood,

the city has something to offer for everyone. With Houston's sprawling food and bar scene comes new developments and expansions to satisfy everyone's appetites. Whether it's restaurateur Levi Rollins opening up a new bakery, Rich's Houston hiring a chef, Tacos Doña Lena's owners adding a second location, or Julie Mabry expanding her Pear Bar with a new addition, there's plenty of exciting news in the city's food and bar scene so far this year.



SAVORY AND SWEET

Levi Rollins' new Salt & Sugar bakery opens in Spring Branch.

Levi Rollins, owner of the now-closed Urban Eats, has opened Salt & Sugar. It's a new sandwich shop and bakery in the city's Spring Branch area. The new restaurant features baked goods, pastries, sandwiches, salads, small bites, and dinner options.

The bakery has slowly been cooking since 2016 and originated because Rollins was looking for a way to showcase his love for great sandwiches in a different way than he was doing at Urban Eats, he says.

"Our menu at Urban was so big already, and we sold fantastic signature sliders. Adding more sandwiches didn't seem right," he says. "Salt & Sugar was also meant for a smaller footprint and for customers that just wanted a great sandwich on the go."

Salt & Sugar is a place where you can stop for a quick snack or enjoy a full meal, the gay restaurateur says.

"We focus on epicurean sandwiches and gourmet pastries. A core part of the business is the bakery; our custom cakes are amazing, and we have an existing business that's been built over many years in the Spring Branch community. Urban Eats was my baby; it came from the inspiration of my family and the recipes I grew up making and eating with my mom and grandma. It is also my vision of a modern bistro."

As the food connoisseur looks to the future, he says he wants to add a small epicurean market adjacent to the bakery that features imported cheese, cured meats, jams, preserves, and honey.

"Long term, we look to grow the brand and open additional locations in and around the city of Houston," he says. "We love our city and look forward to bringing our new concept closer to more people."

➔ For more information, go to eatsaltsugars.com.



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RAISING THE BAR

Julie Mabry and Valerie Redman's Side Peace is Houston's newest lesbian establishment.

Located on Washington Avenue right next to Pearl Bar, Side Peace is a new upscale venue that caters to the happy-hour crowd with specialty craft cocktails and special events, such as R&B Night, Lesbian Latin Nights, a Pride Market, and more.

The lesbian community is one of the smallest in the world, and trying to carve a space for the lesbian community in one of the most diverse cities in the country hasn't always been easy, Julie Mabry, owner of Pearl Bar, says. It became clear to her that she needed to expand her business to make sure there was a safe haven for the lesbian community to call their own.

"The most important thing was to show our community that I will continue to make Pearl better as a whole," she says. "Valerie Redman and I have put in hundreds of hours to make this bar special. I have to say it's my favorite bar I've helped bring to life."

Mabry says Side Peace is her way of continuing to make sure the lesbian community has a place to call their own.

"When I said in *The Lesbian Bar Project* that I would continue to make Pearl better and keep her around for a long time, I meant it," she says. "I want our customers to see that their money is spent on making their home better. I am eternally grateful for the support the community has shown so far."



For more information, go to pearlhouston.com



Co-creators Julie Mabry (l) and Valerie Redman

"¡UNO MÁS, POR FAVOR!"

Husbands Angel Cabrera and Brian Ponce open their second Tacos Doña Lena location.

Husband team Angel Cabrera and Brian Ponce are taking their successful Tacos Doña Lena Spring Branch restaurant and adding a second location in the Heights. The restaurant will have the same Mexican spirit that's become a staple at their first location, including orange walls and colorful piñatas.

"Opening our first restaurant was a dream come true," says Cabrera. "Opening our second location feels so surreal. It's been almost four years since opening Tacos Doña Lena. Thus, it felt right to open a second location. We decided to go with the Heights/Timbergrove area because we love the neighborhood. We love how convenient it is to get on all major highways. There's so much growth happening in the area and we are super excited to be a part of it now."

Cabrera says he plans to offer the same menu items, including the restaurant's beloved tacos and homemade salsas. Additionally, unlike the first location, the Heights restaurant will offer beer margaritas, Cabrera says.

"We have so many delicious items on our menu," he says. "My favorite item is constantly changing. I do have to admit I've been eating a lot of our birria street tacos lately. Stop by and try some of our menu items and let us know what your favorite is. And don't forget, we carry 13 different meat options and three meatless, as well as six different salsas to try and pair to your liking!"



For more information, go to donalenateacos.com.

Angel Cabrera (l) and Brian Ponce

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Rural Recollections

Author **David Meischen** explores small-town Texas memories in two new collections.

By NEIL ELLIS ORTS



If you've grown up rural and gay, certain things stay with you long after you've left that home—not all of them tangible. These are the memories that

animate two new books by David Meischen—the short-stories collection *Nopalito, Texas* (University of New Mexico Press) and *Caliche Road Poems* (Lamar University Press). Meischen will be signing and reading from both books at Blue Willow Bookstore this month.

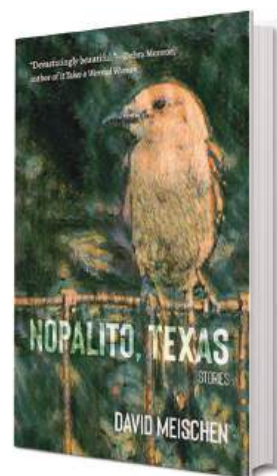
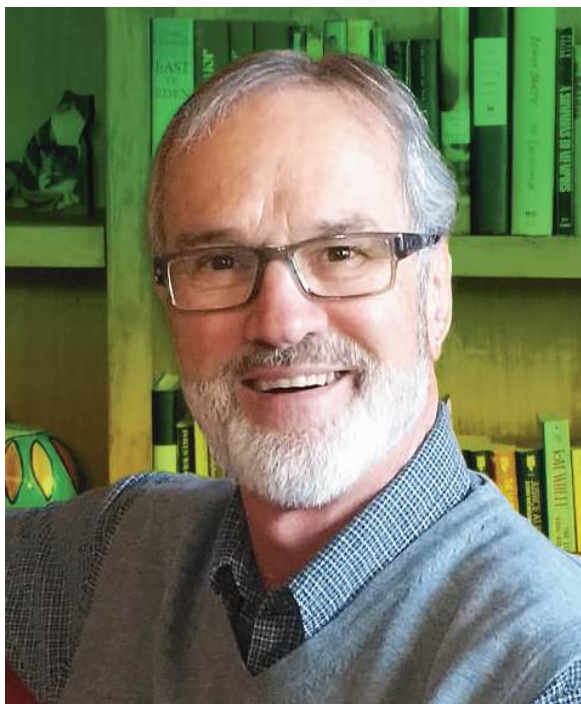
Fictional Town

Meischen grew up on a remote south Texas farm in the 1950s and 1960s, about 45 miles inland from Corpus Christi Bay. He went to high school in Orange Grove, a town that still has fewer than 1,500 people today. In 1969, he moved to Austin to study at the University of Texas, after which he spent 27 years teaching high-school English in Galveston; Elk Grove, California; and back in Austin for the last 12 years of his career.

From the time he was about 10 years old, he pictured himself a fiction writer. His long detour in poetry began as he was teaching high schoolers about poetry by giving them poetry prompts and practicing along with them. He started submitting his poems for publication, and in 1992, one was accepted by the Houston Poetry Fest. “Well, maybe I’m a poet then,” he told himself.

The lure of fiction continued to attract him, though, and in his mid-50s, Meischen enrolled in the creative-writing MFA program at Texas State University. It was there that his stories set in the fictional town of Nopalito had their start. The stories are linked by the shared locations and characters, and they span a time period from 1955 to 1998. He doesn’t call the collection “gay themed,” but there are three gay characters that appear throughout the stories.

One such character is Albert, who pronounces his name *Al-bear*, as if it were French. Albert is loosely based on someone Meischen knew in Orange Grove who worked in a liquor



David Meischen's new book *Nopalito, Texas* is available now.

store. Albert speaks in an affected soft voice, dyes his hair black as he ages, and wears clear fingernail polish. In Meischen’s fiction, this character becomes a lonely caretaker of his mother and occasionally escapes to San Antonio for sexual encounters.

“I didn’t want Albert’s life to come across as utterly depressing, but I felt like I knew how claustrophobic...” Meischen pauses for the right words. “People in a small town would take one look at him, and even if they didn’t use words like ‘gay,’ they would be awkward. They wouldn’t know what to do with him.”

Meischen recalls seeing the 50th-anniversary Broadway revival of *The Boys in the Band* with a friend and another gay man he did not know, who said something denigrating about the play and how its characters were depicted as sad pre-Stonewall gay stereotypes. Meischen didn’t want to get into an argument

with the friend of a friend, but internally he was boiling. “I wanted to say to him, ‘You are standing on their shoulders. They made your life possible. Yes, there’s back-biting, yes, there are games, but those men in *The Boys in the Band* would have been born in the ‘30s. They are making a life for themselves.’ To further his point, Meischen adds, “And people don’t walk out of *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* saying, ‘Oh, those straight couples, they’re so mean to each other!’ There’s a lot of similarities between *The Boys in the Band* and George and Martha—the games, and the meanness.”

And while Meischen’s *Nopalito, Texas* characters are treated sympathetically, the harshness of the rural mid 20th-century setting is also treated realistically. Being gay was not easy.

At the same time, Meischen is quick to →



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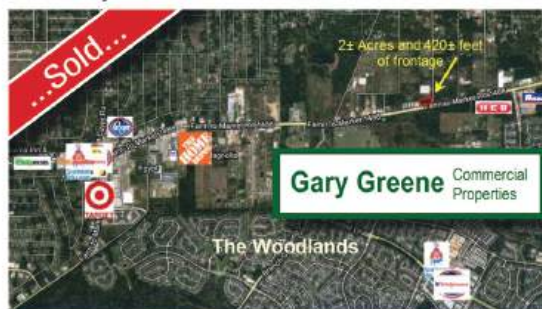


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say Nopalito isn't a direct analog of Orange Grove. In a brief author's note at the front of the book, Meischen notes, "Nopalito is a fictional town, but I can tell you where it is." He placed the town on the map near Orange Grove at an intersection on Highway 281, about 100 miles south of San Antonio. "I know where the county road goes across it. It's about five miles from the farm where I grew up, so the place is familiar to me," he says. "I didn't want to borrow the town whole cloth, but I know that part of the world."

Real Life

"My poems grow out of the same part of Texas that the short stories do," Meischen says as we turned to *Caliche Road Poems*, "except the poems are based on the actual places—the actual Meischen farm, the actual caliche drive that goes from the farm to the highway. So my parents are in the poems; my great-grandfather, who I remember well, is in the poems. The dance hall in town is in the poems."

Meischen didn't come out until his early 40s. He had been married to a woman for 16 years and had two sons, but when they separated, he started asking himself if he

was gay. "I think I clearly knew the answer, but I was still trying to be skeptical," he says.

Thirty years later, he feels his coming out is core to his identity. He had grown angry with himself for "dithering and denying" who he was for so long. That explains why he came out to his parents in 1994. "It's the hardest thing I've ever done," he recalls, "but it seemed essential to me. I thought if I was going to have a life, these people had to know." So one day he told the high school office where he worked to get a substitute for him, and he drove down to the Meischen farm. It did not go especially well, but they didn't disown him. In fact, Meischen says, "My mother got up out of her chair, proclaimed herself flabbergasted in this very brusque voice, and she put her hand on my shoulder. She said, 'But you're our David.' That was life-saving."

As time passed, his mother settled more easily into the news. Two weeks before her passing from cancer, Meischen was visiting his parents. Mother and son waited until the father was off the farm, and then they sat and talked. "Just the two of us, she could talk to me about that news," he said. "She died knowing who I was without screaming at me or disowning me."

As for his father, Meischen illustrates

their relationship post-coming out this way: "Daddy never set foot in the house that Scott and I owned in Austin for 18 years. My dad died right before we moved to New Mexico. He would not have Scott on the farm." His father didn't disown him, but there were limits to their conversations. "He didn't want to know, he didn't want me to talk about it, but he knew. To me, that was important."

Meischen is referring to his husband, poet Scott Wiggerman. Together they run the small poetry publisher Dos Gatos Press. They've been together 27 years and married since 2013.

Reflecting on how both new books are so closely related, Meischen says. "I think part of it is my age. I'm in my 70s, and there is this nostalgia. There's this really strong force of memory that takes me back to when I was growing up. The books feel like companion pieces."

WHAT: Author David Meischen reading and book signing

WHEN: April 15, 6:00 p.m.

WHERE: Blue Willow Bookshop, 14532 Memorial Dr. at Dairy Ashford

INFO: bluewillowbookshop.com/event/meischen-24

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Harmonizing Cultures and the Cosmos

Jimmy López Bellido's cosmic composition *Eclipse* premieres at the Houston Symphony.

By RICH ARENSCHIEDT | Photo by ASHKAN IMAGE

Born in Peru, trained in Finland, and showcased worldwide, Jimmy López Bellido is one of today's most sought-after and cosmopolitan composers. Known to local audiences as the recent composer-in-residence for the Houston Symphony, Bellido has been called "one of the most interesting young composers anywhere" by the *Chicago Sun-Times*.

Bellido earned his doctorate from UC Berkeley in 2012 and is known for melding European compositional techniques and South American musical influences, resulting in music that is both accessible and dramatic. He catapulted to national prominence when he composed an operatic adaptation of Ann Patchett's novel *Bel Canto*. Its story recounts relationships between terrorists and their captives, based on an actual 1996 hostage crisis that occurred at the Japanese embassy in Lima, Peru, where Bellido lived at the time. He was chosen by the Lyric Opera of Chicago to compose the work, assisted by creative consultant (and superstar diva) Renée Fleming. The production was nationally broadcast on PBS's *Great Performances* in 2017 and gave Bellido instantaneous international recognition.

Bellido's compositions are currently being performed globally—a piano concerto in Philadelphia, a trombone concerto in The Netherlands, as well as other engagements in London and São Paulo. His works are now part of the standard orchestral repertoire, especially throughout South America.

Bellido is scholarly, sophisticated, and completely approachable—a tribute to his humble upbringing, having been raised in a conventional Peruvian family. His work, especially his oratorio *Dreamers* (premiered in 2019) mirrors his own personal and musical journey.

"I grew up in a pretty conservative country—we were very traditional," Bellido says. "My mother was a kindergarten teacher and my father was an architect. He was a tremendous influence in my life and very support-



ive of my music. We were Catholics, but not strict. My parents were tolerant and respectful of everyone, but their exposure to homosexuality and gay culture was *very* limited. I wasn't sure how they would cope with a gay son."

While some South American countries were making progress with LGBTQ equality, Peru was lagging. "I often felt as if the country was taking two steps forward and one step back," Bellido says. "It's a pretty reserved culture, even about heterosexuality. Any expression of affection to a same-sex partner would probably attract attention."

"My first relationship was in my late teens, but at that time I was already very focused on my musical studies. In 2000 (at age 20) I moved to Finland to continue my education at the Sibelius Academy in Helsinki."

In Peru I was somewhat closeted; my family had no idea. I then left my country to live on my own and learn a new language, a new culture, and a new climate.

"I realized that I was 'carrying' so much with me," Bellido recalls. "I decided to come out, gradually, to friends, knowing that Finland was now my home, a place where I could live authentically."

The timing was perfect for Bellido. "Your early 20s are a wonderful period of discovery in so many ways," Bellido says. "I was able to realize my true self. Finland was immensely liberating. I stayed there seven years, returning to Peru only for holidays."

In 2005, Bellido had been living abroad and wasn't in regular communication with his family. "I came out to my parents. It was rather late, and it took some time to accomplish," Bellido says. "When it finally happened, both of them were sitting in the living room. They were quiet for a minute, and then my mother looked at my father and said, 'See? I told you so!'" Bellido laughs at the memory.

"I discovered that this process [of revelation] was a lot more complex than I had initially thought," Bellido says. "It's not always guided by external factors. Sometimes the biggest limitations are self-imposed. Also, surprisingly, acceptance often comes from unexpected sources. Those whom you thought would have an adverse reaction embrace you. Others, whom you expected to support you, may not."

"This was much more difficult for my family than I imagined, especially for my sister who lives in Finland. I had completed my studies in Helsinki and was working on my thesis. I ended up spending six months in Peru. This was a difficult time for me and my family, but even so, I felt it was time we



Jimmy López Bellido and his husband, Franciel Braga Machado

"THE UNDERSTANDING OF THE UNIVERSE THAT WE HAVE NOW IS SO DIFFERENT. I REMEMBER WHEN THE HUBBLE TELESCOPE WAS LAUNCHED IN 1990, AND THE REVOLUTION THAT IT STARTED IN THE FIELD OF ASTRONOMY—THE EXPANSION OF KNOWLEDGE."

—Jimmy López Bellido

owed to each other. I wanted to give them time to go through all of the stages necessary to deal with my coming out. They couldn't accept the entire endeavor, but at least I knew that they understood."

During this time, Bellido "sheltered in place," composing. "It was a bit solitary. My creative shell was protecting me. I was able to completely lose myself in music, a refuge and pillar of strength which anchored me—my safe space. Music is something that has always enabled me to move forward, regardless of whatever else is happening in my life," he says.

During this period, Bellido created one of his most enduring orchestral works, including *América Salvaje*, commissioned for the inauguration of the National Library of Peru.

In 2007, Bellido moved to California to pursue a doctoral degree at UC Berkeley, and in 2010 while in San Francisco, he met and dated people who were not in any way connected to classical music. "Many friends took me out of my 'world,'" he says.

Though he's currently married, previous partnerships were truly healing for Bellido. "I had lived in so many different places. I had been separated from my parents, and I was missing my life in Finland." Connecting with others in a profound way made Bellido finally feel like California was the place he could call home.

Bellido is widely respected for his oratorio *Dreamers*, created in collaboration with Pulitzer Prize-winning playwright Nilo Cruz. It was inspired by on-campus interviews with undocumented students attending UC Berkeley.

As national, state, and local politicians became embroiled in issues surrounding immigration, the juxtaposition of life imitating art could not have been more actualized than with Bellido's *Dreamers* project. "When we embarked on this, prior to the 2016 election, the American political atmosphere was quite different—much more optimistic. After that, things took a turn," Bellido says. "Staying centered during a creative process that was completely (and inadvertently) enmeshed in politics was difficult."

Creating *Dreamers* amidst the events of 2018 had an unintended side-effect: press coverage of the new piece (which would not usually be noticed beyond musical circles) was extensive. "To my surprise," he says, "many media outlets that may not have been interested in classical music were seeking interviews. That's a double-edged sword. Sometimes the interview can be about the subject, rather than the music. We wanted audiences to know that this is an art form capable of communicating a compelling, relevant story."

Though Bellido's music isn't strictly programmatic in nature, it always conveys thoughts, feelings, and emotions to the listener, and his upcoming premiere of *Eclipse* is no exception. This piece—the first movement of his larger *Symphony No. 4*—is shaped by two main influences: the composer's love of things celestial, and his tenure in Houston, home of the NASA space program.

Bellido's enchantment with the cosmos began at a young age. "It was a childhood dream for me. I was always fascinated by space, the science of physics, and the way in which those things always led to other discoveries. I used to read *Scientific American* and watch *NOVA* on PBS in order to stay on top of what was happening. The unknown, along with the expansion of human knowledge, has always interested me. There have been so many advances in how we understand prehistory and the formation of our planet—the cycles of creation and devastation. The understanding of the universe that we have now is so different. I remember when the Hubble telescope was launched in 1990, and the revolution that it started in the field of →

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astronomy—the expansion of knowledge. I'm fascinated by how we can see so much happening in a single lifetime. It excited my imagination," he says with obvious enthusiasm. As expected, those formative experiences inform much of Bellido's music, especially as they relate to his *Symphony No. 4*.

"I saw a partial eclipse in 2017 while living in San Francisco," he says. "Witnessing people's reaction to that event motivated me to think about how all of us are connected to it. It enables us to understand our place in the universe and, if for only a second, feel a sense of connection and vulnerability. It's quite unique."

Bellido's *Eclipse* depicts the first phase of a solar eclipse, as part of the larger symphony's depiction of the moon's movement across the sun. The first dent into the sun, as if a bite were taken out of it, is the initial phase. "It begins at that period when nothing exists, nothing is there—the First Contact," Bellido says. Additional phases of the eclipse are represented and culminate in the Diamond Ring.

Bellido's composition will receive its premiere as a total solar eclipse traverses through the entire state of Texas on April 8. The second and third parts of the work will premiere again in two and four years, happening concurrently with solar events in the United Kingdom and then in Australasia, respectively.

For this Houston Symphony subscription series, *Eclipse* is paired with Carl Orff's popular *Carmina Burana*, giving Bellido some additional exposure with Houston audiences, many of whom responded favorably to the 2019 premiere of his *Symphony No. 2, "Ad Astra"* (To the Stars).

Unlike many contemporary composers, Bellido is keenly aware of how his music is experienced. "Music is an art that takes place over time, and you need to make sure that you can maintain interest and keep the audience engaged, always being conscious of what listeners hear," Bellido says. "I want music to take me on a journey. I see music in terms of layers. There should be a sensual layer that initially attracts you and is immediately appealing. Then, listeners should be able to dig in deeper. [As a composer] you want to give them more, so they keep discovering new connections as they listen to a piece."

What: Jimmy López Bellido's *Eclipse*

When: April 26–28

Where: Jones Hall, 615 Louisiana St.

INFO: houstonsymphony.org

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Hauntingly Beautiful

Kehinde Wiley's thought-provoking new collection
at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston

By DAVID BRASHER
Photo by FRANK XAVIER



COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND GALERIE TEMPLON. © 2021 KEHINDE WILEY

Foreground: Kehinde Wiley, *The Young Tarentine (Mamadou Gueye)*, 2021, bronze.
Background: *Young Tarentine I (Babacar Mané)*, 2022, after Alexandre Schoenewerk's 1871 sculpture.



In 2017, former President Barack Obama commissioned Kehinde Wiley to paint his official portrait, unveiled to the public in 2018. This pivotal moment catapulted Wiley, a respected figure within the art community, to widespread national recognition. Notably, Wiley also made history as the first Black gay artist to create an official portrait of a US president. While previously known for his portraits of Black men, Wiley currently creates monumental paintings and sculptures of both genders. And now, in Houston, his artwork on display for public viewing.

The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston (MFAH) is currently showing Kehinde Wiley: *An Archaeology of Silence*, the artist's latest

collection produced amidst the COVID-19 pandemic, the senseless murder of young Black people, and the widespread emergence of the Black Lives Matter movement. Having made its debut earlier this year at the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco, MFAH is only the second space in the US to showcase this impressive collection.

Wiley's latest body of work is both haunting and beautiful. Exhibition curator Dr. Anita Bateman says that entering into the exhibit has been described as "walking into a chapel or even a tomb." The space is dark, quiet, and meditative. As you enter, you are met with a quote from Wiley describing his title *An Archaeology of Silence*: "That is the archaeology I am unearthing: the specter of police violence and state control over the bodies of young

Black and brown people all over the world." It's both a description of what's to come and almost a warning that what you are going to see will be difficult to face. The experience of Black trauma and suffering will confront viewers, yet notably, among the two dozen artworks and bronzes, only a few images make direct eye contact with the observer. The rest have their eyes closed, perhaps in a peaceful sleep or in death.

There is an eroticism and sensuality in death that Wiley appears to fetishize. Figures are posed horizontally, their bodies contorted and writhing in a state of ecstasy. They are depicted wearing modern clothes and sneakers.

One painting from 2022, *Femme piquée par un serpent (Mamadou Gueye)*, shows a

man lying in nature amongst flowers and an ornate background, a signature of the artist. He wears a bright yellow shirt covered in the Louis Vuitton LV monogram. But pay close attention. A closer look at the shirt reveals tags showing it is not a genuine Louis Vuitton shirt. Wiley elevates every intricate detail within his artwork. Whether it's the meticulous rendering of accessories, the intricate braiding of the model's hair, or the inclusion of stylish sneakers, each element is imbued with significance and intentionality.

Wiley reimagines and reshapes conventional portrayals found within Greek myths and Christian iconography, infusing them with contemporary perspectives and cultural contexts. He portrays Christ and other deceased or incapacitated figures by featuring contemporary Black men and women as the focal points of his compositions. Images are named after famous figures in works of art, such as St. Cecilia, Achilles, and Morpheus, giving them an infinite and larger-than-life quality.

"I AM UNEARTHING THE SPECTER OF POLICE VIOLENCE AND STATE CONTROL OVER THE BODIES OF YOUNG BLACK AND BROWN PEOPLE."

—Kehinde Wiley

While none of Wiley's art explicitly depicts homosexuality, much of his work has homoerotic qualities. The artist pays close attention to male figures. He investigates masculinity and works to destabilize it. By situating masculine figures within elaborate floral backdrops, Wiley challenges traditional perceptions of masculinity. Additionally, the way in which Wiley positions his figures and how he paints them switches the feminine and masculine roles, disrupting gender narratives. Take Morpheus, the Greek god of dreams. Traditionally depicted as a male, Wiley paints Morpheus as a modern-day female awake and looking like she has been disturbed.

Arguably one of the most remarkable sculptures is the monumental 13-foot bronze equestrian statue titled *An Archaeology of Silence* (2021). This sculpture portrays a shirtless Black man draped across the saddle of a horse, commanding attention with its towering presence. Dr. Bateman



Kehinde Wiley

explains that, due to its size, the 7,000-pound bronze had to be transported in three separate pieces and assembled upon arrival at MFAH. Occupying an entire room, the piece evokes comparisons to Confederate statues, yet diverges significantly; here, the figure is depicted in a horizontal, vulnerable position, symbolizing the collective vulnerability of ordinary individuals. It serves as a poignant reminder of a nation's failure to safeguard its citizens.

The MFAH exhibit comprises a monumental collection of Wiley's paintings and sculptures. Some paintings are more than 25

feet wide, taking up entire rooms. Through deliberate scale manipulation, the series exalts its subjects to a heroic stature, a departure from the traditional portrayal of reclining or fallen figures in Western art. This truly impressive collection honors and memorializes its subjects, all while allowing the viewer to see the faces and the humanity of the fallen, to say their names, and to become stronger advocates for racial justice.



Kehinde Wiley: An Archaeology of Silence will be at MFAH through May 27.

'Island Idol Season 7' Unveils Spectacular Galveston Talent

Hostess Carly D. Nation is also well-known for her upcoming *Transfolk* YouTube series.

By LUCIO NIETO

Season 7 of the Island Idol competition has kicked off and is already making waves as the most talented group the show has yet seen. Carly D. Nation is one of Galveston's most familiar faces who is currently producing and filming her own series, *Transfolk*, here on Galveston Island. That project has been a decade-long process, from writing to filming while recasting principal roles.

"That series is a labor of love, and I have to get this story out," says Carly. "The only option is that it gets done, no matter what it takes." The official trailer has been released on YouTube with an anticipated series release this summer.

As the hostess of Island Idol and *The Voice Galveston*, Carly shares her platform with other aspiring artists throughout Texas. Many competitors in the singing competition travel off the Island each week for their chance at winning this season. "People who don't even know each other in the competition end up becoming friends well after the competition is over," says Carly. "Seeing the growth from beginning to end is pretty amazing."

After seven seasons as the show's hostess, it's apparent that the love and respect she has for each competitor allows others to eagerly join in for future seasons. For some, this season will mark their stage debut, while others return as previous competitors.

Last season, Skeeter made it half way through the competition before being eliminated. Now, he's returned to the competition stronger. "This season has made me want to progress more with singing and continue to pull out all the stops to make everyone's jaws drop," he says.

On March 24, the week's theme was Michael Jackson, and Skeeter performed as drag alias Aleesha Tryde with a slowed-down rendition of "Billie Jean," advancing to the next round.

The show is presented at 23rd St. Station Piano Bar, voted Best Live Music Venue in Galveston by *The Daily News*. Partners Tommy Fiero and Todd Mackenzie are the owners, and Jim Greaser manages. Each week, Sherry



PHOTOGRAPHY BY PATRICIA NIETO

(l-r) Contestants Assi, Lily, and Skeeter; host Carly D. Nation; contestant Dave; judges Natalia Castravet, Lucio Nieto, and Chris Monteith; contestants Cherita and Courtney



Island Idol Skeeter L'Angelle

Arnold is behind the bar serving patrons a slew of varietal cocktails during the show. The audience is primarily supporters of the contestants, parents of the judges, and BOI locals. The "Top 6" will compete for six more weeks before one of them becomes the winner of Island Idol Season 7 on May 12.

➡ For more information, visit 23rdstreetstation.com.

Lucio Nieto is an entrepreneurial creative and the CEO of Grandson Studios. He currently works as the Brand Culture Expert at Del Sol & Cariloha in Galveston. Lucio serves his community by supporting youth in the performing arts and helping his neighbors with artistic service. Connect with Lucio and his mission by emailing him directly at lucio@grandsonstudios.com, and follow his journey on social media @reikiminister.



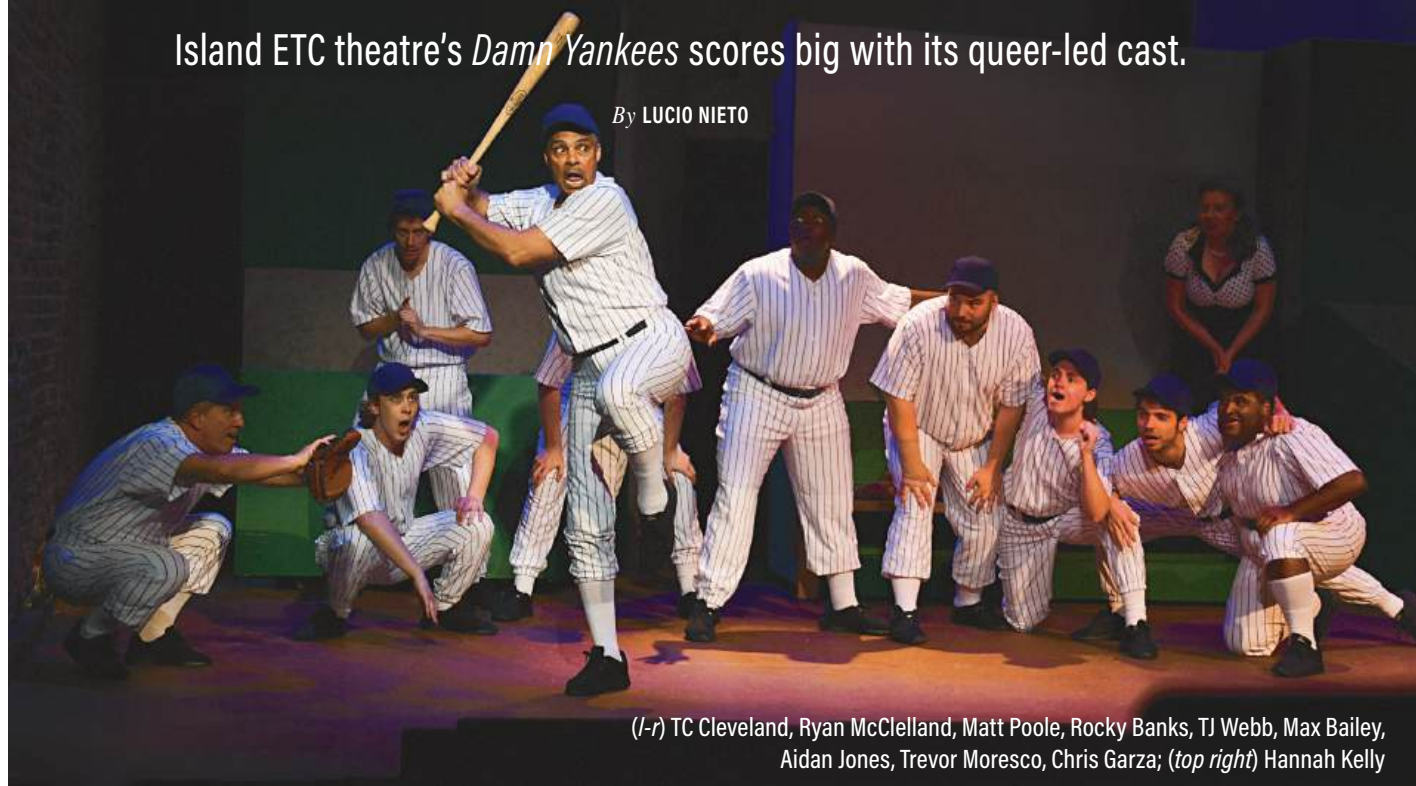
**32ND ANNUAL "BRINGIN' IN THE GREEN"
ST. PATRICK'S DAY PARTY
MARCH 14, 2024**

Houston's green-clad partygoers came out to celebrate at Bringin' in the Green, an annual fundraising party benefiting the Montrose Center. Thanks to the generous underwriting of Chris Robertson—who opened his home for the event—together with the other event hosts, Paul Brockman and Scott Greenwood.

A Home Run for Creativity

Island ETC theatre's *Damn Yankees* scores big with its queer-led cast.

By LUCIO NIETO



(l-r) TC Cleveland, Ryan McClelland, Matt Poole, Rocky Banks, TJ Webb, Max Bailey, Aidan Jones, Trevor Moresco, Chris Garza; (top right) Hannah Kelly

PHOTOGRAPHY BY LUCIO NIETO



"At Island ETC, we are celebrating the opening of baseball season with the hit Broadway musical *Damn Yankees*, says show director Kim Mytelka. Kim has been

spearheading Island East-End Theatre Company (ETC) for the last 21 seasons, where she produces six shows and upholds the Island's reputation for creativity, art, and inclusivity. Kim's success alongside choreographer Jennifer Daugherty has allowed the company to continue its work here in Galveston. Last year, during the fall production in the current 21st season, Kim and company added performances to sold-out shows of *Four Old Broads on the High Seas*—something the company has had to do with other popular shows over the years. As part of her mission to produce quality work, the shows she selects feature a wide range of roles available to aspiring actors and artists alike. In her 20th season, Kim directed the queer-centric drag musical *La Cage Aux Folles* starring J. Kyle Crawford, voted Best Actor by Galveston.com. Kyle also leads the cast in ETC's current musical, *Damn Yankees*, in the role of Joe Hardy.

"Acting alongside my best friends and queer brothers gives me such joy," says Kyle,



Director Kim Mytelka

referring to his stage mates Justin Gonzalez, in the role of Mr. Applegate (the Devil), and Cameron Dunbar in the role of team manager Ben Van Buren. "There's an unmatched familiarity that makes it all the more fun on stage."

All three actors have been in numerous ETC productions led by Kim in recent years. The onstage bond has developed into true and sincere off-stage friendships, allowing an un-

deniable chemistry when they appear onstage together.

"It's easy for queer actors to get pigeon-holed into certain roles that fit their personality more than their talent," says Justin. "I'm thrilled to share the stage with predominantly queer actors who are all playing traditionally heterosexual roles."

"There is so much talk today about whether or not queer actors should play straight roles (and vice versa)," adds Cameron. "At the end of the day, it's acting. I appreciate getting to flex my talent and artistry outside of my sexuality."

All three leading members of this cast identify under the queer umbrella, allowing ETC to demonstrate its commitment to inclusivity by giving each actor a fair chance at taking on the roles of multi-layered characters. In *Damn Yankees'* baseball-heavy narrative, each member of the company excels in their role—from lights and sound to costuming, stage direction, and choreography. The talent in ETC's production of *Damn Yankees* truly knocks it out of the park (pun intended).

WHAT: *Damn Yankees*

WHEN: Through April 13, Thursdays, Fridays, and Saturdays, 8:00 p.m.

WHERE: Island ETC Theatre, 2317 Mechanic St. in Galveston

INFO: islandetc.org



**THE DIANA FOUNDATION 71ST ANNUAL AWARDS SHOW
MARCH 16, 2024**

The Diana Foundation hosted its 71st Annual Awards Show, "The Golden Age of Hollywood," at the Ballroom at Bayou Place. Partygoers in formal attire enjoyed spectacular performances by legendary Texas entertainer Tasha Kohl and the mesmerizing aerialist Edward Vivas.





**BUNNIES ON
THE BAYOU 2024
MARCH 31, 2024**

The 45th edition of Bunnies on the Bayou was a huge success, with approximately 2,500 attendees in their best Easter bonnets and bunny ears flooding downtown Houston's Sesquicentennial Park for the Easter Sunday extravaganza. The air buzzed with excitement as DJ Marti Frieson kicked off the festivities, and Tracy Young's electrifying performance marked the climax of the day, leaving hearts full and spirits soaring. Charming the crowd with her typical sass and wit, Houston's bearded queen Blackberri hosted the event with flair. As the outdoor party wound down, the energy continued with Jack'd Rabbit, an epic afterparty at the Ballroom at Bayou Place. Let these images transport you back to a day filled with music and magic.

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Courtney Wright (l) and Dove

Nothing Wrong with the Wrights

Courtney Wright and Dove didn't let an awkward start keep them from their journey toward a lifetime of love.

By **RYAN M. LEACH** | Photos by **AKINTAYOTIMI PHOTOGRAPHY**



"I know you. Isn't your name Hope? No. Angel? No. it's Precious! Isn't it?" asked Courtney Wright the first time she met her future wife.

"It's just Dove," was the reply.

Six years later, on January 7, 2023, Courtney and Dove were married at The Bougainvilleas in West Houston. The brides each wore sweetheart gowns with a mermaid flair at the bottom. Their bridal parties were decked out in emerald and gold, to match the reception decor. As they exited the party, Courtney changed into an emerald tuxedo with a bejeweled bow tie, custom-made by Jervon Whitney. There

were no longer questions about names. They were now officially Mrs. and Mrs. Wright.

That first meeting was at a brunch thrown by Courtney's cousin. The women bumped into each other in the kitchen where another cousin tried to introduce them before Courtney's guessing game commenced.

"I noticed her silly and extroverted personality," recalls Dove. "Although I wasn't initially interested, I still thought she was so outgoing and had a lot of energy."

"I noticed her beautiful figure. She has a booty that people are paying to get, but hers is natural," laughs Courtney, "I also noticed her being shy and on her phone like she was

conversing with someone important. When I got closer, she started scrolling. I sat next to her to try to spark conversation."

When they finally had their first date, they opted for a movie—Dove's favorite thing to do. They met at the Marquis Cinemark and snuck in their own food. Courtney brought Chick-Fil-A, but had grabbed the wrong sauce. Dove didn't let it ruin the sweet gesture, though, even when it ended up spilling everywhere.

"I guess Courtney learned how clumsy I was that night," says Dove.

They shared a cherry icee and decided that from that point forward they would plan



dates that included a bit more conversation and a bit more light. They dated regularly for two months before becoming exclusive.

"I knew Courtney was the one when she made sure to continue to think of me even when I was away from her," Dove says. "She always made it a priority to create moments for us that we can cherish. That showed me how kind and thoughtful she was, which was a huge factor for me."

"I knew Dove was the one when she would send me gifts to my job," Courtney adds. "I would be working so hard, and then a delivery person would come through the door. I'd ask who they were looking for, and they'd say my name. I was blown away every time."

The two continued to find small ways to express their love for one another. Courtney gave Dove a key to her place so that they could spend more time together after work or school. Dove would leave little notes or cards with a kiss on them in lipstick and do things like straighten up the kitchen or make the bed—small acts of romance that

reminded them how special they were to each other.

Although Courtney technically proposed to Dove first, Dove then proposed to Courtney three weeks later.

"I was completely shocked and unaware that it was going to happen on the day it did," Dove recalls. "I didn't get the memo until we walked up the stairs, and on each step was a note about what she loves about me."

"I was confused when Dove had my clothes laid out on the bed with instructions," says Courtney. "I thought we were going to have a nice dinner. Then when I came down the stairs I heard the violinist playing and immediately knew what was happening. I was happy to get the same feeling of being proposed to. Nothing was one-sided, which was humbling."

The two planned their wedding together, working from a common vision that they were able to pull off. Guests commented that it was one of the best weddings they had ever been to. And to make the most important day of their lives even more memorable, Dove sang to Courtney during their vows—one of Courtney's

favorite moments. And both agree that the support they had from friends and family meant a lot to them.

"My favorite part of the day was walking out to our song with all of the bridesmaids chanting and cheering for us," says Dove.

Their emerald-and-gold wedding was indeed beautiful, and the couple was able to accomplish it with the help of several supportive and LGBTQ-friendly vendors such as officiant Ericka Davis, their videographer Akintayotimi Photography, their catering service (on Instagram @toostuffedkitchen), and violinist Jamie Perry, whom the couple said was awesome. Dove's sister Joi contributed the balloon arrangements (Enjoi Ballon's @enjoiballoons), and Houston Wedding Floors provided a custom flooring pattern to enhance the event venue.

The couple is grateful that they will always be able to look back on their wedding day as one filled with friends, family and, most of all, love.

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By LILLY RODDY



Time to Reconnect

Make the most of this Mercury retrograde in Aries.

We start the month with Mercury retrograde in Aries, though it will be direct by the 30th. Mercury retrograde is our opportunity to go back and take care of things we have put off or just forgotten about. In business, this is a great time to reconnect with existing clients and research a project or job change you are considering. This is also one of the best times to clean up and get rid of stuff you don't need. Give yourself extra time to get to where you are going, as we won't have a lot of patience with Mercury retrograde in Aries. Good days this month are the 6th and the 19th. Difficult days are the 1st, 3rd, 8th, 21st, and 29th. The solar eclipse on the 8th will also be in Aries, keeping our energies elevated. The Sun leaves Aries and enters Taurus on the 19th. Venus moves through Aries and Taurus, while Mars continues his boat ride through Pisces.

ARIES (Mar. 21-Apr. 19)

This is your annual birthday month when you look back into the past, reviewing your activities and accomplishments, and look forward to what is on the horizon. This month, Mercury, our organizer and planner, is retrograde in your sign. This is a better time to take care of what's on your plate before you add more to it. Reconnecting with old friends, workmates, and clients can be very beneficial under Mercury retrograde. In the middle of the month, you are more aware of your resources and how you may use them in the future. You may be reexamining your investments, as well. Delays are possible, so flexibility counts! Mars, your ruler, enters your sign at the end of the month, and you are ready to act on your ideas.

TAURUS (Apr. 20-May 20)

As the month begins, you are more sensitive to your environment and in more of a rest-and-retreat mode. You are more prone to look at the bigger questions about your existence and life purpose. You are being more selective and boundary-conscious with friends and work associates. There are major shifts both in your industry and in your personal path, and you are more than ready to change. Between the 18th and 22nd, you will be pushed to make some real changes in your life. Personal relationships continue to be positive, whether or not you are partnered. With Mercury retrograde until the end of the month, it is best to start new projects or relationships after the 29th to ensure success.

GEMINI (May 21-June 21)

Career activity continues to be on your plate for April. You are looking at taking on a leadership role, starting your own business or, if you are older, stepping back and having more personal time. Boundaries and decisions are very important for you, as you are beginning to put your desires into play. Mercury is retrograde this month in your area of friends and work colleagues. This is an excellent time to connect with friends from the past. If you are looking for a new position, it is a good

time to check with previous employers as well. This is a better time for social activity and finding your tribe. Toward the end of the month, you are entering a time of rest and retreat. You will want to step back and get a better view of the whole situation. There are some big shifts occurring at the end of May. Life gets a lot busier.

CANCER (June 22-July 22)

Mercury retrograde is moving through your career sector this month. You may be rethinking your career and considering taking a different direction. This may be a time when you get fed up with the existing problems and want to find a better place to work. This could be a time of massive cleaning and examining how communications and social media can best benefit you. Old clients and customers may return and seek your services as well. You will find that dealing with overly religious types can be very taxing, and your patience is very low. Friends and colleagues can be especially beneficial this month and next. You are more social in the latter half of the month. You are continuing to work on getting rid of debt and making your financial life more manageable.

LEO (July 23-Aug. 22)

You are expressing your views more easily and more often. This is changing the dynamic of your relationships as you are more real and less of a people pleaser. This is a better time to write, teach/attend a class, travel back to a familiar place, or learn more about different cultures. And with Mercury retrograde, this is a great time to go back and visit your school chums and relive some of your youth. You are very focused this month on getting rid of your debt and making safer investments. In the latter part of the month, you are more absorbed with your career or your duties and expectations. With career, you are looking for some real change. The 18th through the 22nd could be a trigger to push you to get moving in a totally different direction.

VIRGO (Aug. 23-Sept. 22)

Relationships continue to be at the top of your list this

month. With existing positive relationships, this is a time of reconnection and setting new goals. For difficult relationships, this is the time to get it right or move on. In all relationships, you are better at saying "No" and not being drawn into other people's misery. Mercury will be retrograde in the area that rules investments, debt, and personal secrets. You will be working on making that area of your life cleaner and neater. You are wanting more intimacy and clarity in your communications with your partner, as your patience is running low. In the latter part of the month, you are more into the flow. This is a better time for writing, podcasting, and traveling to places you have been before. With your ruler Mercury being retrograde, this is a better time for planning and research. Put your plan into action after the 30th.

LIBRA (Sept. 23-Oct. 23)

You are continuing to pay attention to your health this month, improving your health routines and not just hoping you can lose some weight. And with Mercury retrograde, this is a great month to return to some of your beneficial health routines of the past. You are less patient with co-workers this month and will continue to make your workspace more efficient and comfortable. With Mercury retrograde in your relationship sector, old friends and partners may be in contact with you. It will be a time to remember the past, both good times and bad. In current positive relationships, this is a great month to take a short vacation and reconnect. In difficult partnerships, you will have to find a solution before you can move forward. In the latter part of the month, you are looking at improving your resources and financial picture. Next month is a good time to put your new ideas into play.

SCORPIO (Oct. 24-Nov. 21)

This is a busy month for you. You are exploring ways to make your creative efforts profitable. You may be investing in yourself and your career. You

are releasing a lot of the fears you brought with you from childhood, and this is changing your motivation and direction. With Mercury retrograde in your health and work arenas, this is an excellent month for you to return to a better diet and work regimen. This is also a good time to schedule a doctor's appointment to get an update on your physical condition. In the latter part of the month, your relationship arena opens up. There could be major decisions made from the 18th through the 22nd. Shifts in the family continue as you wonder who will be in charge. This month is an excellent time to clean things out and visit your therapist.

SAGITTARIUS (Nov.22-Dec.21)

You are working on cleaning up your home and relationships with your family. You may be doing some repairs or remodeling, relocating, and making your nest more comfortable. If you have older relatives, there also could be a shift in the power hierarchy, as well. If you choose the top position, be sure and set your boundaries early. Mercury retrograde for you will be about looking for more fun and pleasure in your life! You may also be interested in making your passion more profitable. If you have children, this is a time to reconnect with them, as they are more interested in sharing past memories. In the latter part of the month, you are making some changes with your health and your

workplace. You could be doing some major upgrades. You will want more personal freedom of choice with your work schedules and agendas.

CAPRICORN (Dec. 22-Jan. 19)

You are continuing to get your day-to-day activities more organized and under control. You are paying more attention to when you should say yes and when you should say no. Your BS tolerance is lower than usual, and you question whether patience is really a virtue. Mercury is retrograde in your home and family arena. You may be redoing your interiors, looking for some other place to live, having a family reunion, or looking into your family history and genetics. You may also be reviewing issues that need some focus and resolution. This may also impact your career, as you may question your motives for your career choice. In the latter part of the month, you are looking for some personal space so you can relax and get away from the demands of the day. Personal freedom becomes more important throughout this year and next.

AQUARIUS (Jan. 20-Feb. 18)

Aquarians are going through a time of major changes in their lives. Although slow moving (but life altering) Pluto is making her way through your sign. This is having the strongest impact on those of you born in the earliest days of the sign. You may be letting go of a particular way of life or making changes in your

relationships. Pluto will be a background energy, pushing forward slowly but relentlessly, no matter what is currently going on. Mercury retrograde pushes you to get your daily life more organized. You could easily feel that you have more than you want to handle, even if you did it in the past. You are more direct in your communication. You are also paying more attention to your financial future this year. Flexibility will be needed from the 18th through the 22nd because of some shifts in the family.

PISCES (Feb. 19-Mar. 20)

Practical action is your theme as the month begins. You are in the process of making changes to your career direction. You could be taking on a leadership role, starting something on your own or, if you are older, even cutting back. You are wanting to be sure you spend your time on activities and with people you care to be around. This is a good time to renew an exercise or health regimen. Mercury is retrograde in your financial arena this month, and you may be looking at reducing debt, making some investments, increasing your fees, renewing a skill or talent from the past, and just doing what you want to do! You will be ready to act on these ideas after April 30. The 18th through 22nd will be busy, and you may be changing your schedule to accommodate all of that activity.

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The Showstopping Seamstress

Franky Fraud measures up on the Houston drag scene.

By SAM BYRD



Franky Fraud isn't your run-of-the-mill performer. She has a stylized, comic-book style look and a gender-bending flirtation between their feminine and masculine side.

Franky isn't afraid to show off those dangerous curves in costumes they make from scratch. Read more about this sewing-drag maven who combines a bit of comedy with a dash of live singing thrown in for good measure.

Pronouns?

They/Them, but I accept them all respectfully.

Inner avatar?

Doodle Bob or Erica Andrews.

Hometown?

Lufkin, Texas, but I claim all of the Piney Woods.

Drag birthday?

I can't recall the first date I actually went out, but I first posted myself in drag in late 2015.

What got you interested in drag?

Manilla Luzon's pineapple dress, specifically. I saw how crazy and fun she looked, and I wanted to try it out.

Describe your performing persona.

Franky is best with a mix in her hand. She sings, wears some of the most unique getups in town, and will absolutely take your man.

Thoughts about legislation restricting drag performances?

I think that what we do as drag performers is important for queer culture and our community. I think that people are so willing to blur the lines of what is and is not appropriate for certain audiences based on their own moral and religious compass, and that's okay, but I don't think that they should be telling me what to do unless they would like to pay my bills. I've found love for myself in this art form I can't get anywhere else, and I love sharing my talents and creativity with others. It would be a shame to lose such a special outlet for me and others.

What are your favorite hangout spots?

I love Ripcord, Poison Girl, and my home bar Michael's Outpost.



Follow Franky Fraud on Instagram @frankythefraud and on TikTok houseoffraud.

What's your guilty pleasure?

Making costumes that I don't have to pad or wear tights for. I love showing off my legs and chest.

Describe your aesthetic.

I make everything I wear, and that's a huge part of what I do. I love experimenting with a mix of cartoon-style animation and high-contrast makeup, and I've never been afraid to try something even if it doesn't go 100% how I planned. I'm always looking for a way to make people keep looking to find details in my garments, like the style lines, texture, or jewelry choices. But I mostly run around in really cute cocktail dresses after my karaoke show on Thursdays at Michael's Outpost.

What would people be surprised to know about you?

She. Sings. LIVE! I love a little Britney Spears moment or anything from Scott Bradley.

Any advice for up-and-coming performers?

Learn a skill you can make money from without being onstage. I don't have a daughter of my own because new girls always worry too much about being fierce and not enough about being useful. There are only so many shows to work at, but there's always someone who needs a wig styled or a look made.

What have you learned from drag that you use in your everyday life?

Show. Up. On. Time. I've had so many good things happen just by being around a little before call time or having a costume done early.

Have you ever had a defining moment in your life? If so, share more.

My sister outed me to my parents about 10 years ago, and I lost everything I owned. That experience taught me a lot about myself and how resilient I actually am in times of crisis. It also showed me what chosen family is and how important they are for queer people.

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