

April 2019



## Capturing Nightlife in Black and White: Unbridled Self-Expression in a Dark Time

by Mark Sawchuk

From the late 1980s to the mid-1990s, partiers at one of the queer clubs in San Francisco's SoMa District might well have observed a young woman carrying an army-surplus gas-mask bag checking the f-stop settings on her camera as she prepared to capture the activity. This was Melissa Hawkins, a photographer for the San Francisco gay weekly *The Sentinel*. Her black-and-white images from 1986 to 1994 are now on display at the GLBT Historical Society Museum in "[SoMa Nights: The Queer Nightclub Photography of Melissa Hawkins](#)."

Curated by Hawkins and nightlife historian Marke Bieschke, the exhibition documents the extraordinary vitality of queer nightlife in San Francisco during the darkest years of the AIDS crisis. The exhibition has received extensive media coverage since opening in February and has been attracting excited viewers to the museum. *History Happens* sat down for a chat with Hawkins to discuss how she created these indelible

images.

**What was it like to photograph these nightclubs in an era before digital cameras?**

I fell in love with photography and its technical approach to visual expression. At the time it was fairly complicated: The camera and flash equipment were completely manual (no autofocus!) and required training for operating with speed and accuracy. Because the clubs were very dark, I'd do my best to manually focus but also used f 5.6 or f 8 to increase the depth of field. The shutter speed had to be set at a 60th of a second to synchronize with the flash. It was a bulky setup to carry in my bag with rolls of film and other supplies.

I loved black-and-white photography! I found it to be more flexible than color and aesthetically pleasing. Plus, it was enjoying a resurgence as an artistic medium. People wanted their pictures taken and wanted the notoriety of having their latest and greatest outfit published in the paper. Occasionally we would encounter someone who didn't want their photograph taken, and we respected that. We shared an understanding of what it was like to navigate coming out and the possibility of facing professional, housing or other forms of discrimination.

**How would you characterize the atmosphere of these clubs?**

I've often thought that the atmosphere might compare with depictions I've seen of World War II-era parties showing people enjoying life the best they could driven by youth, biology and hope. Life during the AIDS crisis in San Francisco was a dichotomy of death and decay countered by outrageous creative self-expression and hedonism. The attitude was live for today, because who knew what tomorrow would bring. There was an art show, a response to AIDS by photographers and visual artists, called "The Indomitable Spirit." The name captured how I felt about my community's response to the crisis and the subsequent activism.

**How did the nightlife community get involved with activism during this era?**

It seemed like everyone was involved in some kind of activism. There were so many groups because so much support was needed. Highly visible groups did amazing actions like shutting down the Golden Gate Bridge while others were doing less dramatic things, such as delivering meals and helping people care for their pets. It was another form of creativity. These groups became another way that the gay community formed strong bonds — both the providers and those they assisted.

**NOTE:** "[SoMa Nights: The Queer Nightclub Photography of Melissa Hawkins](#)" is on display at the GLBT Historical Society Museum through May 27.

*Mark Sawchuk is the communications manager at the GLBT Historical Society.*

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## From the Staff

# Supporting the Society on Give OUT Day



by Laura Adams

**Give OUT Day** — the only national day of giving for the LGBTQ community — takes place on Thursday April 18, and we're proud to announce that the GLBT Historical Society will be a beneficiary.

The 24-hour online fundraising event connects donors from all over the country with hundreds of LGBTQ nonprofit organizations, ranging from the arts to social services agencies, advocacy groups to sports leagues, community centers to healthcare nonprofits. A project of the Horizons Foundation, an LGBTQ-focused community foundation, Give OUT has raised over \$5,000,000 since 2013 and continues to grow every year.

What makes Give OUT such a special fundraising event is that it is run by and for LGBTQ groups. It offers small queer nonprofits and community organizations like ours the opportunity to connect with donors across the country and get the word out about our activities. We hope you will consider making the GLBT Historical Society one of your Give OUT Day [beneficiaries](#). When you donate via Give OUT day, the society receives 100 percent of the proceeds.

Your contributions go directly to sustaining our mission: curating museum exhibitions that highlight various facets of the queer past, promoting events that inspire and educate the public about the importance of LGBTQ history and acquiring new archival collections that reflect the diversity of our community. To donate, click [here](#).

Your ongoing commitment to the society is what makes our work possible. Thank you for your continued support!

*Laura Adams is the development associate at the GLBT Historical Society.*

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## In the Archives

# Celebrating the Legacy of *Aché* Magazine

by Lisbet Tellefsen

This year marks the 30th anniversary of *Aché* magazine, a free journal and community organization for, by and about black lesbians that I cofounded with Pippa Fleming. The GLBT Historical Society's archives preserve a full run of *Aché*, which was published from 1989 to 1993.



Reflecting on the magazine after three decades, I'm struck by the outsized impact it's had. Over its four-year run, *Aché* morphed quite a bit. In the beginning, it featured artwork, poetry and a calendar of events, and was less of a literary journal. It quickly became apparent that we struck a chord in the community, and people started contributing work. Writers contributed short stories, and organizers used our pages to reach a wide audience.

## All Things Black & Gay

The years we were active were in many ways to black gay culture what the Harlem Renaissance was to African American culture. There was so much happening in our community: in politics, art, the literary world and organizing. As *Aché* was an integral communication vehicle, it served as an important nexus for all things black and gay. The journal developed a following in upwards of 12 countries and published over 200 artists and writers, most of whom had never before appeared in print.

Scholars and researchers examining the journal today in an exploding age of instant communication and social media won't be able to help noticing that it's dated; it's a time capsule of the golden era of bitmap printing. But you can go to the back page and see what kind of organizations and support groups existed in the early 1990s and you can peruse the artwork produced by the artists we invited. The magazine charts the development of our aesthetic.

Whether it's organizing, culture or art you're interested in, there's something in *Aché* that can be illuminating today. At a 30th-anniversary event held this past month, I had people come up to me and say that *Aché* changed their life in some way, which was a phenomenal feeling. To think that a project I devoted an intense chapter of my life to is going to be preserved 50 years from now is remarkable.

*Lisbet Tellefsen has been an archivist, collector and event producer in the Bay Area for more than three decades.*

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## Special Series

### Programs Recount 1950s Homosexual-Rights Efforts



In April, we're sponsoring a special three-part series that will highlight the history of the Mattachine Society, founded in 1950 as the first enduring homosexual-rights organization in the United States. All the programs take place from 7:00 to 9:00 p.m. at the GLBT Historical Society Museum at 4127 18th St. in San Francisco.

The story will be told through episodes from a



new podcast, "[Mattachine: A Queer Serial](#)," presented on three consecutive Thursday evenings. Each program will feature an audiovisual presentation of the podcast, followed by community-based historian Joey Cain interviewing Devlyn Camp, the Chicago-based creator, producer, writer and host of the podcast. The series is cosponsored by the [Calamus Fellowship](#).

### Part I

Dawn of the Movement: From Henry Gerber to Harry Hay

Thursday, April 4

[\\$5.00](#) | Free for members

The first evening in the series features the Mattachine podcast episodes titled "Strange Sex Cult Exposed" and "The Call." It covers the origins of the movement with Henry Gerber, a postal worker in 1920s Chicago, whose ill-fated attempt to organize homosexuals later inspired Harry Hay, a young communist in Los Angeles, to take up the cause in the late 1940s. Tickets are available online [here](#).

### Part II

To Be Accused: Government Crackdown and Homophile Resistance

Thursday, April 11

[\\$5.00](#) | Free for members

The second evening in the three-part series features the Mattachine podcast episodes titled "To Be Accused," "The Lavender Scare" and "Diversified Individuals." It will survey the Mattachine Society's early years, the entrapment of one of its founders by the police and the State Department's witch hunt for "sexual deviants." Tickets are available online [here](#).

### Part III

Cracks in the Foundation: Splintering Into Homophile Alliances

Thursday, April 18

[\\$5.00](#) | Free for members

The third evening in the three-part series features the podcast episodes titled "Are You Now or Have You Ever Been A Homosexual," "People Like Other People" and "Silly Letters." It will survey the rise in Mattachine's membership and an attempted organizational coup by conservatives and an FBI informant. Tickets are available online [here](#).

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## Upcoming Events

### Reception

## Juanita MORE! Pride Artwork Unveiling

Wednesday, April 3

6:00–8:00 p.m.

The GLBT Historical Society Museum

4127 18th St., San Francisco



Free

Join us at a special champagne reception as we unveil the artwork for this year's 2019 Juanita MORE! Pride poster, a collaboration between celebrated San Francisco drag queen Juanita MORE! and anonymous street painter BiP. BiP is best known for two striking street murals, "Golden Brains" in the Tenderloin and "No Ceiling" in SoMa. His artwork for Juanita MORE!

Pride measures 6 feet by 5 feet and is being donated to the GLBT Historical Society's archives. The society is the beneficiary of Miss MORE!'s 2019 Pride party in June. Champagne cocktails will be served.

## Fundraiser

### SuciaAF 4.20: Latinx Queer Dance Party at El Rio



Saturday, April 20

2:00–8:00 p.m.

El Rio

3158 Mission St., San Francisco

\$10

SuciaAF is a Latinx queer dance party at El Rio that builds community through music, featuring Afro-Latinx inspired sounds combined with the deep beats of house and reggaeton. SuciaAF

4.20 will benefit "Chosen *Familias*: LGBTQ Latinx Stories," a new exhibition opening at the GLBT Historical Society Museum on June 7. Drag queen Ms. Clair Voyant will be joined by Per Sia, who is making her debut at SuciaAF. Tickets are available online [here](#).

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## Current Exhibitions

### Front Gallery

[SoMa Nights: The Queer Nightclub Photography of Melissa Hawkins](#)

Open through May 27, 2019

[More information](#)

### Community Gallery

[Two-Spirit Voices: Returning to the Circle](#)

Open through May 6, 2019

[More information](#)

### Main Gallery

[Queer Past Becomes Present](#)

Permanent exhibition

[More information](#)

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## Join Our **LEGACY CIRCLE**

A pledge for the future to preserve our past.

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GLBT  
Historical  
Society  
*museum & archives*

## Visit Us

### THE GLBT HISTORICAL SOCIETY MUSEUM

#### Exhibitions & Programs

4127 18th St.

San Francisco, CA 94114

(415) 621-1107

[www.glbthistory.org/museum](http://www.glbthistory.org/museum)

Monday - Saturday: 11:00 a.m. - 6:00 p.m.

Sunday: Noon - 5:00 p.m.

### DR. JOHN P. DE CECCO ARCHIVES & SPECIAL COLLECTIONS

#### Research & Public History Center

989 Market St., Lower Level

San Francisco, CA 94103-1708

(415) 777-5455

[www.glbthistory.org/archives](http://www.glbthistory.org/archives)

Call to schedule a research appointment or make an appointment online by [clicking here](#).

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**CREDITS.** FEATURE: Melissa Hawkins, *Duo with Cigar, The Eagle* (undated); used with permission. FROM THE STAFF: Photo of Terry Beswick by Gareth Gooch. IN THE ARCHIVES: Detail of April/May 1991 cover of *Aché* magazine, courtesy of Lisbet Tellefsen. UPCOMING EVENTS. Artwork unveiling: Detail of 2019 Juanita MORE! Pride poster artwork, used with permission. Special series: Logo of "Mattachine: A Queer Serial." Fundraiser: Logo of SuciaAF 4.20. DISPLAY AD: Marie Ueda, Harvey Milk speaking at the 1978 San Francisco Gay Freedom Day (1978), GLBT Historical Society,

Executive Director: Terry Beswick

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