

# QUEER ICONS *and their* CATS



BY ALISON NASTASI AND PJ NASTASI

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By Alison Nastasi and PJ Nastasi

  
CHRONICLE BOOKS  
SAN FRANCISCO



## DEDICATION

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*This book is dedicated to LGBTQ people across the world and the cats that love them. Keep shining.*

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# INTRODUCTION

The term *Old Masters* is usually reserved for giants of the art world like Leonardo da Vinci, but even he understood that some creations rank far higher than the works of mere mortals. The Italian Renaissance painter—who depicted cats in nearly a dozen of his drawings—is quoted as saying that even “the smallest feline is a masterpiece.”

The ancient Egyptians thought so too. Bastet—the Egyptian goddess and daughter of the sun god Ra—is just one deity depicted with a feline’s head. Archaeological discoveries of centuries-old temples and burial sites containing thousands of mummies and ornate statues of cats confirm the existence of ancient cat cults in Egypt.

Other cultures—including those of ancient Greece, Rome, and China—had their own interpretations of and reverence for the mighty feline. Despite being the subject of fantastical folktales, spooky myths, and superstitious legends, the cat has been adored and marveled over since the beginning of time.

There’s also evidence that queerness—a term that has been reclaimed in both academic and mainstream contexts to describe sexualities that do not conform to normative, heterosexual expectations—and gender nonconformity have been a part of human life throughout the ages. Returning to Ancient Egypt for an example of this, archaeologists discovered that Pharaoh Nyuserre’s royal servants Niankhkhnum and Khnumhotep were buried together. They found depictions of the two men embracing and touching noses (a pose interpreted by art historians as kissing). “Same-sex desire must be considered as a probable explanation,” scholar Greg Reeder told the *Independent* in 2006: “We can only say for certain that the carvings show a profound intimacy between the two men.” Historical documentation of same-sex interactions and



relationships, as well as variety in gender expression, can be found virtually everywhere. As the Nirvana song goes: “What else could I say? Everyone is gay.”

Despite changing cultural attitudes toward LGBTQ communities, queer folks today face much of the same discrimination and adversity that previous generations lived through. Advances have been made on certain fronts: Marriage equality has been enacted in twenty-eight countries worldwide, and LGBTQ visibility in media is higher than it has ever been. Still, discrimination against LGBTQ individuals is widespread, especially against queer and trans people of color. In housing, employment, and health care, LGBTQ people face many obstacles that straight, cisgender people rarely ever have to think about. Queer and trans people—particularly trans women of color—are more likely to be targets of violence. When it feels like no one understands or accepts you, when it feels like the entire world is against you, who can you turn to? Your cat, of course.

Multiple studies indicate that pet ownership is a balm for the soul. This may explain why, according to a 2007 national survey by Harris Interactive and Witeck-Combs Communications, seven out of ten LGBTQ households (71 percent) include a pet, compared with 63 percent of straight households. “Americans have well-deserved reputations as animal lovers and pet owners, and our latest findings underscore that [LGBTQ] Americans are among the most avid,” Wesley Combs, president of Witeck-Combs Communications, stated. The study also showed that 90 percent of LGBTQ pet owners consider their pet a beloved member of their family. Further, LGBTQ pet owners are more likely to own cats than straight pet owners are (63 percent versus 52 percent).

The 2003 Gay/Lesbian Consumer Online Census agrees that queer folks are more likely to own cats: 49 percent of LGBTQ people own at least one cat, ranking them more than 2 percent higher than LGBTQ dog owners. Additionally, many respondents belonged to multiple-cat households, owning 1,000 more cats than dogs. A 2018 study published by the journal

*Research on Aging* found that older LGBTQ adults with a pet felt happier overall. Felines are perhaps one of the most unacknowledged social support networks for LGBTQ people.

Once used in pop culture as a lazy visual shorthand signifying clichés about effeminate gay men and lonely lesbian women, cats have come to dominate the public's affection—online, worldwide. Cat memes and social media feline stars are ready and available to distract us at every turn. Cat lovers have also changed the way they express their adoration for their feline friends. The “cat lady” stereotype has been reclaimed as a point of pride.

In 2016, writer Hayley Gleeson of the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) praised “the rise of cat men, an antidote to toxic masculinity,” and discussed how “they’re giving others permission to embrace a gentler, more thoughtful kind of masculinity.” And a 2001 Gallup poll shuns the older-woman-with-cat stereotype, proving that “older men are just as likely to have cats as older women, and just as likely to have both dogs and cats.”

The 2018 *Autostraddle* Lesbian and Queer Stereotypes Survey found that “queer women and non-binary people continue obtaining, raising, and loving cats with absolute abandon, at relatively significant rates.” A 2019 article by Megan Wallace for *Dazed* discussed the history of cat imagery in lesbian pop culture as a “self-referential in-joke amongst lesbian-identified people.” In the article, Rachel Corbman—a scholar of women's, gender, and sexuality studies who curated the 2019 *Wide World of Lesbian Cats* exhibition at New York City's Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual & Transgender Community Center—explains: “Cats are connected with deviant forms of femininity like witches, spinsters, and lesbians. So when you see cats come up, the pejorative assumptions are kind of reclaimed in a way, like in the way that ‘dyke’ is reclaimed from being a slur against lesbians. Cats kind of recirculate specifically because they have all of these associations.”

Ultimately, the nonhuman animal world is not as binary as our human society's gatekeepers would have us believe. Animals don't care about human social constructs like gender, and they don't discriminate based on sexuality. Cats, in particular, expect to be revered and adored by all humans, and in return, provide companionship, cuddles (if you're lucky), and hours of heartwarming entertainment. The evidence supporting the benefits of cat-human relationships, particularly in the queer community, is clear: Cats are essential to LGBTQ communities as healthy support systems for emotional and physical well-being—and there is no limit to the lessons our felines may teach us. As William Burroughs once said: "My relationship with cats has saved me from a deadly, pervasive ignorance."

# ALISON BECHDEL

The influential comic strip *Dykes to Watch Out For* by Alison Bechdel contains poignant and realistic portrayals of queer women in everyday situations and relationships. “The secret subversive goal of my work is to show that women, not just lesbians, are regular human beings,” Bechdel told the *Guardian* in a 2000 interview.

Cats make frequent appearances in the comic’s domestic scenes, hogging the bed or hanging out with the family. In the 2006 strip “Sleep’s Sister,” Bechdel depicts the heartbreaking loss of a pet with striking emotion when Vanessa, the cat of characters Mo and Sydney, passes away.

The creator of the autobiographical graphic novel *Fun Home*—adapted into a Tony Award–winning Broadway production—shares a home with her wife, the artist Holly Rae Taylor, and has had several cats. Bechdel described her late cat Julia as “the small sun I’ve been orbiting for the past eighteen years” when the beloved feline passed away. More recently, a female cat called Donald, named after British psychoanalyst and pediatrician Donald Winnicott, has appeared on her social media pages. Bechdel explained her connection to Winnicott in a 2013 interview with the *Progressive*:

There are so many weird ways that I connect with [Winnicott], but maybe the main way is his kind of gender ambiguity. Before I knew anything about him, I thought he was a woman. I was reading a book about him that didn’t use a pronoun in reference to him. All these ideas sounded so deeply nurturing, I just assumed that this Winnicott person was female. But he was a man—I found out he was a small man, a man with a high-pitched voice, who suffered from impotence. And a man who was freakishly gifted with children. So he became this sort of androgynous mentor for me.

Images of the feline Donald accompanying her humans on walks in the Vermont woods, loafing, and posing for pictures are loved by Bechdel's fans.





# ANITA LO

Speaking to the *New York Times* in 2018 about *Solo*, her cookbook of recipes for one, chef Anita Lo said: “I originally told my publishers that the cover should be me and my cat,... but they thought it was too sad.”

Lo is a legendary New York City chef whose Michelin-star restaurant, Annisa, served Contemporary American cuisine in Manhattan’s West Village for nearly two decades. The first woman to be invited into the White House as guest chef for a state dinner hosted by the Obamas, Lo told the *South China Morning Post*: “When I got the call [to do the state dinner], it was a great honour. We did Chinese-American dishes, just bridging the gap in the food—that comes natural for me, because my parents were Chinese and I grew up in the States.” Lo has appeared on *Top Chef Masters*, *Chopped: All Stars*, *Hell’s Kitchen*, and a variety of other television programs.

You might assume that the cat companion of two chefs—Lo’s partner, Mary Attea, is also in the restaurant business—would eat only the finest foods, but Lo’s cat, Mika, proves otherwise. As Lo explained over email, “She loves to eat plastic of all kinds. And she doesn’t like fresh fish—only the cheapest canned stuff.”

Mika (whose name is Japanese for “tricolor”) is a study in contradictions: needy but standoffish, sweet but can turn on you in an instant. (“I figured she was a Gemini, but she’s actually a Leo,” Lo reported.) In fact, contradiction seems to be at the very root of Lo’s relationship to cats: She has always loved cats but is also allergic to them.

After her two dogs passed away, she says, she eventually went into “full-on cat lady mode,” rescuing and caring for two strays on Long Island and collecting cat figurines. For Lo, though, appreciation for cats and delight in dogs are not mutually exclusive. She loves them both.







# ANOHNI

British-born Anohni has been a fixture of the New York City art, music, and nightlife worlds for many years. Known in NYC not just for her music and art but also for experimental theater, Anohni has been charting a unique artistic path from the beginning. Her 2005 album with Antony and the Johnsons, *I Am a Bird Now*, won the Mercury Prize that year.

When Anohni released the album *Hopelessness* in 2016, the music was a shift away from her work with Antony and the Johnsons, both dancier and more confrontational than the melancholic, piano-heavy songs of *I Am a Bird Now*. So it only felt natural to the artist to release the album under a different name: Anohni, the name she had used in her personal life for several years.

Photographed at the Bronx Zoo with an orphaned big cat, Anohni demonstrates an almost preternatural connection to the creature. In a 2016 interview with Ruth Saxelby for the *FADER*, which the artist chose to complete at the Central Park Zoo, Saxelby notes that Anohni has “made a habit of visiting animals whenever possible.” That day, snow leopards basked in the February sunshine. “They’re being so generous today,” Anohni notes.

Cats in particular seem to show up in Anohni’s orbit, even as metaphors in her work. In 2019, Anohni’s experimental drama, *SHE WHO SAW BEAUTIFUL THINGS*, was mounted at the Kitchen in NYC and included multiple mentions of cats. As Jess Barbagallo points out in his review of the piece for *Artforum*: “Slinky and feral, the enigmatic cat functions as transfemme metonym.”





# ANTHONY PERKINS

“I think *Psycho* is one of the things that’s given me longevity in this business,” actor Anthony Perkins told the *Los Angeles Times* in 1990. “But of course it’s also kept me from roles. You know I would have hated to disappear like so many actors in the ’50s did. In a way, it’s a challenge to overcome something like that. I’m still here. That’s all I know.”

Perkins fought typecasting after playing the Bates Motel proprietor in Alfred Hitchcock’s masterpiece, but a more profound struggle was happening in his personal life. The actor was making a name for himself at a time when same-sex relationships were tightly held secrets. Though he never confirmed the rumors, Perkins has been romantically linked to heartthrob Tab Hunter, choreographer Grover Dale, and other men from his glamorous milieu. Perkins eventually settled down with photographer Berinthia “Berry” Berenson, raising two children with her.

The actor died from AIDS-related complications at only sixty years old. Before his passing, he was actively involved with Project Angel Food, an organization that provides free meals to homebound people with HIV/AIDS. “There are many who believe that this disease is God’s vengeance, but I believe it was sent to teach people how to love and understand and have compassion for each other,” he wrote in a personal statement published in *People* magazine. “I have learned more about love, selflessness, and human understanding from the people I have met in this great adventure in the world of AIDS than I ever did in the cutthroat, competitive world in which I spent my life.”

The presence of cats in Perkins’s life was a source of comfort. This image of twenty-five-year-old Perkins with his Siamese cat, Banjo, as well as its caption, evokes the actor’s boyish charm and melancholy: “Tony [Perkins] admits that he doesn’t have many friends, but says the pressure of his work doesn’t leave him much time to make friendships.” Poor Tony! At least he had Banjo to keep him company.







# BETH BRANT

Mohawk poet and activist Beth Brant—also known as Degonwadonti—used her observations and experiences with racism, abuse, sexism, and intolerance against LGBTQ and Indigenous communities to inform her work. “I was able to use writing to heal a wound that was very deep and festering. I was angry—writing brought me calm. I was obsessing about the past—writing gave me insight into the future. I was in pain—writing cooled the pain,” she revealed in her essay “Writing Life.” A mother of three, grandmother, and great-grandmother, Brant met her partner, Denise Dorsz, in the late 1970s. They were together for over twenty years.

Brant published her first book, *Mohawk Trail*, in 1985 at age forty-four. She was inspired to become an author after a spiritual encounter with an eagle as she traveled through the Mohawk Valley in New York to see the lands of her ancestors, Mohawk leader Molly Brant and Chief Joseph Brant. “I saw Eagle. He swooped in front of our car as Denise and I were driving through Iroquois land. ... I got out of the car and faced him as he sat on a branch of White Pine. ... I had received a gift. When I got home I began to write.” Brant received a 1991 National Endowment for the Arts Literature Fellowship and edited the 1984 edition of *Sinister Wisdom*, a lesbian literary and art journal. The collection, *A Gathering of Spirit*, was developed into the first anthology of Indigenous women’s writing in North America.

At home, Brant had a particular affection for cats. As Brant’s daughter Jill Walden explained over email, you could always identify one of Brant’s cats by a special mark: “[Brant] always had lipstick on, and she made sure she always kissed her cats’ noses. All her cats had stains around their noses from her kissing them so much.” A kitty named Maggie—named after Brant’s maternal grandmother—was one of the poet’s writing companions. Maggie, who lived twenty-two years, was the runt of the litter and had a distinctive tiny tail and a white spot on her chest. Maggie

was full of catitude toward most people but would frequently nap near the author while she wrote. “Mom thought Maggie was the best cat in the world.”



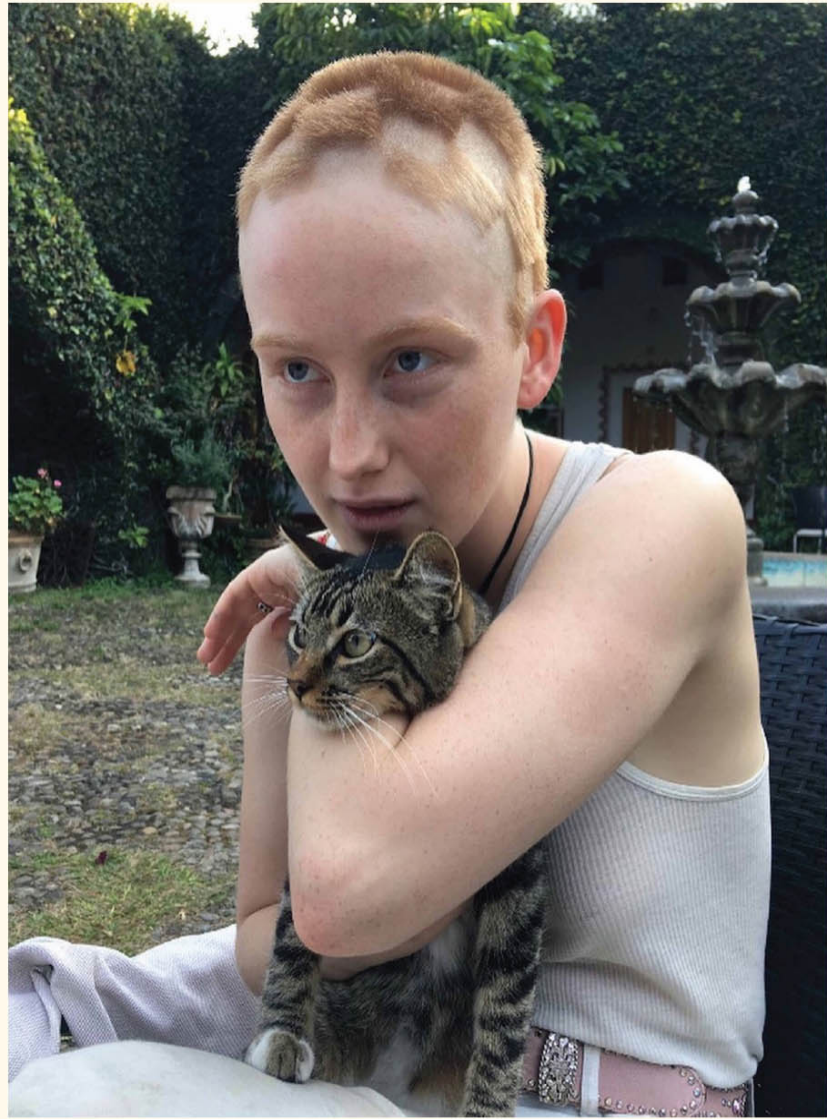


# BOBBI SALVÖR MENUEZ

“To reject forms of singular identity feels essential,” Brooklyn-born actor, performance artist, and model Bobbi Salvör Menuez told *Oyster* in 2016 about their many creative projects. “It has anti-capitalist implications and anti-binary implications that resonate for me—and kin—as necessary, but beyond that it just feels more honest.”

This philosophy has permeated everything Menuez does. Their conceptual, radical culinary experiments in the queer cooking collective Spiral Theory Test Kitchen push the boundaries of food, art, and sociopolitical experimentation. “Food is so referential and social and I like to play with that,” they told *Eater* in 2020.

Menuez’s innovative performances in cinema and television have found them collaborating with a who’s who list of creative luminaries, including Olivier Assayas, Jill Soloway, Tom Ford, Ariel Schrag, and Ryan McGinley, as well as institutions like MoMA PS1. “I used to feel this need to define myself to people,” Menuez explained to *Paper* magazine in 2016. “But I don’t feel that as much anymore. Now it’s about community.” Menuez’s community includes various creatures featured prominently on their Instagram page—several cats, birds, and a pug named Logan. In this photo, Menuez, in checkerboard chic, matches their pensive gaze with a stray tabby in Tepotzotlán, Mexico—two independent, kindred spirits sharing a moment of unspoken respect.





# BUCK ANGEL

Trailblazing trans porn star and producer Buck Angel has been pushing the conversation on gender forward since the early aughts. The first trans man to ever win Adult Video News' (AVN) Transsexual Performer of the Year award in 2007, Angel's career and activism have taken him on a groundbreaking journey that has shifted public perception and brought much needed attention to a number of issues affecting trans performers and people. Angel's status as trans icon was even immortalized in the pages of Armistead Maupin's book *Michael Tolliver Lives*, an entry in the Tales of the City series.

When it comes to pets, Angel had always been a dog person and was aware of the stereotypes that exist about LGBTQ people and pets. Over email, Angel said: "I always equated cats to lesbians because all my girlfriends and friends had them. ... I know it's a stereotype for sure, but it's also real." Nonetheless, Angel began to feed Obama, the nonbinary outdoor cat who called the courtyard of Angel's living space home. Obama stopped by daily and scratched at the door.

One day, Angel says, "I left my door open and Obama got in the house." Nervous that he wouldn't be able to get the feline back out of the house, Angel chased the cat around the space for nearly an hour, sensing Obama's playfulness all the while. "In that hour I fell in love. It was at that moment that Obama came to me. It was like they knew I gave in and became a cat lover." Obama doesn't lead Angel on indoor chases anymore, but you can sometimes spot them snuggling with Angel on social media.







# CHAZ BONO

“I don’t have the luxury of doing things privately,” Chaz Bono has said about his transgender journey. “So I thought, ‘Let me do the opposite and try to really help people and bring understanding and shed light on this issue that so many people just can’t seem to wrap their head around.’” Born to iconic entertainers Cher and Sonny Bono, Chaz’s personal life and sexuality were tabloid fodder even when he was a young teenager.

Chaz took ownership of his experience, first coming out as a lesbian in a 1995 cover-story interview with the *Advocate* and later sharing his journey to self-knowledge as a trans man in the 2011 film *Becoming Chaz*. Bono’s activism in the LGBTQ community—including work with the Human Rights Campaign and the Gay and Lesbian Alliance against Defamation (GLAAD)—has helped propel his message of honesty, love, and acceptance.

That steadfast love extends to Chaz’s affectionate sphynx cats: Lot, Cain, Stevie, and David. The first two cats are named after *American Horror Story: Roanoke* characters—one played by Chaz himself. Stevie and David are named after characters from the show *Schitt’s Creek*. Bono’s feline family graciously lets a cute French bulldog named Rosie live with them too.







# CLIFTON WEBB

Clifton Webb landed his breakout role as Waldo Lydecker in the noir film *Laura* (1946) at the age of fifty-one. Already a Broadway star with a dance and vaudeville background, the quinquagenarian quickly became an Oscar nominee as well. Born in Indiana, Webb Parmelee Hollenbeck moved to New York City with his mother, Mabelle, with whom he would remain close (uncomfortably so, according to some detractors) for the rest of her life.

Leonard Leff wrote in his 2008 essay “Becoming Clifton Webb: A Queer Star in Mid-Century Hollywood,” “Mabelle Webb was advisor and press agent, hostess and money manager.” Webb’s relationship with his mother fed into a stereotype from his time about gay men having overbearing mothers. Rumors about his sexuality circulated widely, and many of Webb’s Hollywood contemporaries would later admit that he did little to dissuade them. He seemed to take pride in who he was.

Not only was Clifton Webb widely understood to be gay by his contemporaries, he was cast in *Laura* precisely because of his queerness. Under the Hays Code, any portrayal of homosexuality was considered perverse, and therefore banned, but queerness could be hinted at with coded language and other signifiers. Though it might seem a small or subtle acknowledgment by contemporary standards, it was significant at the time that Webb, a queer man playing a queer-coded role, received an Oscar nomination.

Leff posits in his essay that Webb’s subversive performances were critical to altering public perception of gay men in postwar America. This photo of a young Webb with a cat gives a brief glimpse into the charismatic actor’s childhood. He is clearly delighted with his feline friend, and it’s easy to see why.



Mr. too -  
C. G. L. W. W. W.







# DOUG SPEARMAN

A true multi-hyphenate artist, Doug Spearman has lent his talents, both on- and off-screen, to many fan-favorite television shows, including *Star Trek: Voyager* and the '90s-era *Charmed* series. He's an actor, a longtime television creative director, a writer, an Emmy-nominated producer, and a commercial director. Spearman worked on the groundbreaking Logo TV series *Noah's Arc*—which made history as the first American series to feature an all-Black and LGBTQ cast—and the follow-up feature film. He's worked alongside legendary talents, including William Shatner, Morgan Freeman, and Halle Berry.

Spearman created his own film production company, the Ogden Group Entertainment, in 2006. He has been honored with many awards for his activism, including a Leadership Award from the Human Rights Campaign, which was presented to him before the US Senate.

“A lot of times I find myself the only Black, gay guy in the room,” the artist said in a video interview for the Diverse Story Project in 2014. He continued: “As an actor, and as somebody in the entertainment business, there's a lot of pressure to sort of conform to a certain kind of standard and a certain kind of model—both for Black and for gay. I don't feel like fitting in a mold. I feel like being me. I think I have a unique perspective, and I think we all do. I think that's what makes diversity important.”

Spearman's compassion makes him a great cat dad too. His feline companion, Mimi—whose buddy is a dog named Zorro—enjoys collaborating with her human while he works. “Mimi likes to sit in my lap when I write or my shoulders. When she really wants attention she'll sit on the keyboard with her back to me,” he shared in an Instagram message. “I don't know if LGBTQ people have a special affinity for pets, but I do know it's nice to come home to some very unconditional love.”





# DUSTY SPRINGFIELD

English '60s pop icon Dusty Springfield left behind a string of hits, including "I Only Want to Be with You," "Son of a Preacher Man," and "Wishin' and Hopin'." Being a queen of the British airwaves meant that her private life was the subject of speculation, particularly her sexuality. During an interview with the *Evening Standard* in 1970, Springfield addressed the rumors: "People say I'm bent, and I've heard it so many times that I've almost learned to accept it. ... I know that I'm perfectly capable of being swayed by a girl as by a boy."

The singer had several relationships with women, including a brief, tumultuous marriage to actress Teda Bracci in 1983. In 1972, Springfield met Los Angeles photojournalist Faye Harris. The couple spent the next six years on and off together. Harris and Springfield remained friends after their romance ended and were close in the '90s when Springfield's cancer returned.

Springfield also had a relationship with singer Carole Pope, from the provocative band Rough Trade. "She was a very funny woman," Pope told *Queerty* in a 2016 interview. "We used to laugh our asses off. She loved old-school R&B artists from the '50s and '60s. She could sing in five languages. She taught me how to diva it up. Taittinger Champagne, baby."

Indeed, Springfield is remembered as one of the great original pop divas. This reputation extended to the care and maintenance of her cat, Nicholas. Following her death to cancer in 1999, Springfield left instructions regarding the twelve-year-old Ragdoll cat she adopted as a kitten. Springfield asked friend and fellow singer Lee Everett-Alkin (a.k.a. Lady Lee) to take charge of Nicholas. Her directions for her fawned-over feline's care: that Nicholas marry Everett-Alkin's five-year-old British Blue cat named Purrdie, that he be fed imported American

baby food, that he live in a 7-foot indoor treehouse, that he sleep with Springfield's pillowcase and nightgown, and that he be serenaded to sleep by Springfield's musical oeuvre.





# ELTON JOHN

Animals have a huge place in Sir Elton John's heart. The "Rocket Man" has kept several dogs over the years, including an English cocker spaniel named Arthur, who served as the "best man" in John's civil partnership ceremony to filmmaker David Furnish in 2005 (the two were officially wed in 2014 after same-sex marriage became legal in the United Kingdom).

John is a passionate supporter of various animal charities, including the People's Dispensary for Sick Animals (PDSA), which assists the pets of people in need. Cats can't help but be drawn to the Rock and Roll Hall of Famer too. The multi-award-winning artist recorded several albums at Caribou Ranch in the Rocky Mountains, which was home to a studio cat named Frank, known for his fierce mousing abilities. The two are pictured here together.

Since the '80s, John has also raised international awareness about AIDS—the tragic passing of his friends Ryan White and Freddie Mercury, just one year apart, affected him deeply—and he established the Elton John AIDS Foundation in 1992 to further the cause.

John first came out as bisexual in a 1976 interview with *Rolling Stone*. Sixteen years later, he told the magazine he was "quite comfortable about being gay." In a 2019 *Variety* interview, John stated: "I've been very privileged because I'm in a business that kind of accepts gay people. There are kids that aren't privileged. They come from poor backgrounds. Their parents don't understand; religion gives them a hard time." John concluded with this advice for young people: "Be proud of who you are. There are so many wonderful diverse people in the world—straight people, gay people, [and] transgender people. We're all God's kids. People who should know better in places of responsibility [and] attack gay people, transgender people... they claim to be close to God, [but] they couldn't be further away from God if they tried."







# E. M. FORSTER

The childhood home of English novelist E. M. Forster was the ideal setting for the young writer. The Rooks Nest House—nicknamed “Howards” after the family that originally farmed the property—was the adolescent Forster’s home for a decade. He lived there with his widowed mother, two maids, at least two cats, and other assorted critters. The Hertfordshire property inspired Forster’s 1910 British masterpiece, *Howard’s End*.

Later, the author of *A Passage to India* took up residence in Weybridge, Surrey, where he lived with his mother and his beloved cat, Verouka. Their home was piled high with papers, as it was the place where Forster penned all his novels. “The house is littered with manuscripts to the great discomfort of every one except the kitten,” Forster once wrote to a friend. Verouka loved to leap about the rooms “until its destructions... [are] so appalling that I have to play a chord on the piano. The chord of C is enough. It stops in the middle of a bound and slinks under a book case, no more to be seen.” Two cats, Tom and Tinka, also lived with Forster at his home in West Hackhurst, where he stayed until his mother passed away in 1945. In a 1946 diary entry, he wrote: “What pleasure these cats have been and felt—years of purring, my creation.”

As a member of the famed Bloomsbury Group—alongside luminaries like Virginia Woolf and John Maynard Keynes, who eschewed the conventions of Edwardian England—Forster found a social circle of devoted cat lovers. In this photograph, Forster (center, wearing white) poses with some of the group, but it’s the feline on writer Sebastian Sprott’s lap that captures the eye. The photogenic cat most likely belonged to the artist Dora Carrington, since the image was captured at her home, the Ham Spray House, where she lived with her husband, Ralph Partridge, and their mutual partner, Lytton Strachey. (As Dorothy Parker once quipped about the Bloomsbury Group, they “lived in squares,

painted in circles, and loved in triangles.”) Carrington also painted an arresting portrait of Forster in 1920, but alas, no cats were depicted in the artwork.





# FREDDIE MERCURY

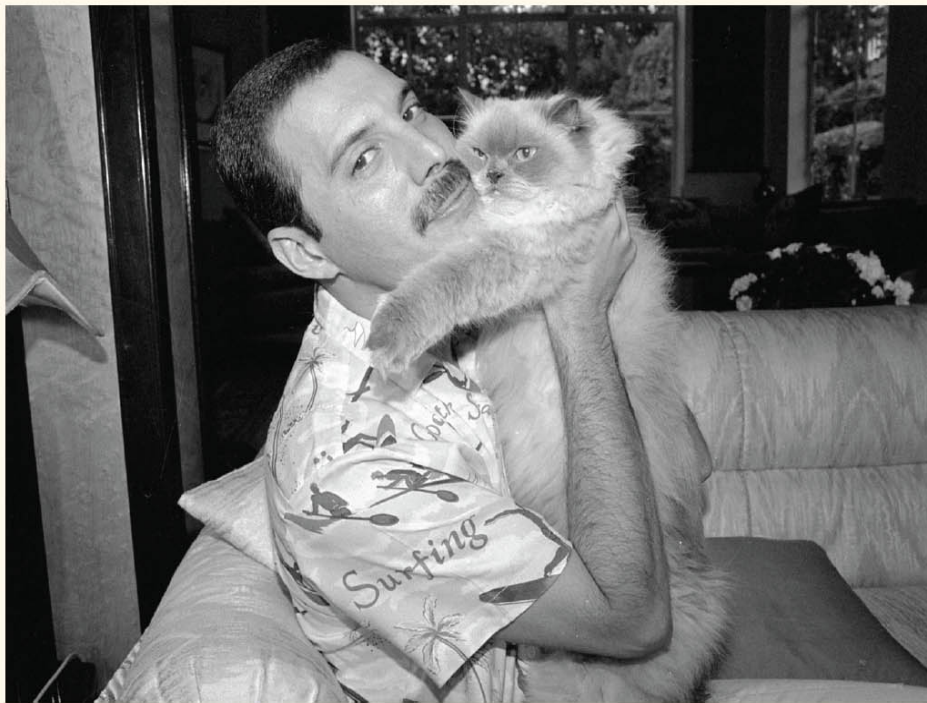
Queen front man Freddie Mercury hypnotized audiences with his legendary performances. The ultimate rock icon, Mercury was a true showman—but he was never more humble than when he was gushing over his many cats. The British singer-songwriter spoiled his feline family, giving them full run of the twenty-eight-room Kensington mansion where he lived with his partner, Jim Hutton.

“Freddie only ever personally fed his cats from the dinner table or by means of running snacks, elevenses or afternoon refreshment available at whim in the form of dried nugget food,” Mercury’s personal assistant Peter Freestone writes in *Freddie Mercury: An Intimate Memoir by the Man Who Knew Him Best*. “If Freddie had scrambled egg for breakfast, each of them would enjoy being given a little egg, a little sausage but on two or three occasions we tried to entice them with their own fresh-cooked scrambled egg with a little sausage or bacon and they turned their noses up at the slightest hint. Obviously it was the illicit thrill of the dinner table which was the great lure.”

Freestone writes: “Whenever Freddie was away from London, every now and then he had an urge to ‘call the cats.’ He’d get to a hotel, we’d dial through to Stafford Terrace and he really would talk to his cats. Mary would hold [cats] Tom and Jerry up in turn to the receiver to listen to Freddie talking. This continued throughout the years with all the succeeding feline occupants of his houses.” Along with Tom and Jerry, Mercury adopted Tiffany, Dorothy, Delilah, Goliath, Lily, Miko, Oscar, and Romeo. Delilah was Mercury’s favorite. The star wrote a song named “Delilah” about the beloved tortoiseshell. The track sounds like a heartfelt tribute to a woman... until Mercury starts crooning about Delilah’s claws and frustrating bathroom habits. The song even features meowing.

If you need further proof of Mercury's immense cat love, check the notes for his 1985 solo studio album *Mr. Bad Guy*. The dedication reads: "This album is dedicated to my cat Jerry—also Tom, Oscar and Tiffany, and all the cat lovers across the universe—screw everybody else!"







# FRENCHIE DAVIS

Actor, powerhouse vocalist, activist, and ... *Golden Girls* superfan? It's true, Frenchie Davis considers it her favorite TV show. It's just one more reason to love this talented performer, who came out as bisexual in 2012. Davis knew from an early age that music was her destiny. She found inspiration in everything from her parents' record collection to movie musicals. When she moved to Washington, D.C., to attend Howard University, she made ends meet by attending class during the day and singing in drag bars at night. Queer spaces were an important part of Davis's early adulthood.

In 2003, she competed in the semi-finals of *American Idol*'s second season. That same year she began her Broadway career performing in *Rent* and would go on to lend her talents to several more shows over the years. In 2011, she made it to the top eight of the first season of *The Voice*. Davis continues to thrive as an artist and to make the career choices that are right for her.

Davis told the *Washington Blade* in October 2019: "People love me for staying in this business for so long while maintaining my authentic self. ... I feel immense gratitude for being able to be real-life happy and enjoying the journey." To appreciate Frenchie Davis is to understand that she is always giving you her truth: in every vocal performance, in every acting role, and yes, even when she gets involved in animal welfare and other causes. Seen here promoting kitten adoption during the "Broadway Barks 5" event put on by Broadway Cares, Davis's smile radiates warmth as she cradles this little darling.





# GEORGE MICHAEL

George Michael's good looks and memorable singing voice made him destined for stardom. After forming the fan-favorite '80s pop group Wham! with boyhood friend Andrew Ridgeley, sharing the stage with Elton John at Live Aid in 1985, and forging a successful two-time Grammy-winning solo career, Michael's life was cut short in 2016 due to heart and liver failure.

The singer left behind his beloved yellow Labrador, Abby (her sister pup, golden retriever Meg, died in 2015). Michael hated leaving his dogs when going on tour. Fans from all over the world would travel to North London, hoping to spot the pups during their walk near Michael's home.

In the '80s, Michael's other faithful companion was of the feline persuasion, as evidenced in this photo of the star at home with his cat. Biographer Sean Smith also mentions that Michael mourned the loss of a "big grey cat" when he was younger.

Besides being a huge pet lover, the generous English singer was an LGBTQ rights activist and HIV/AIDS charity philanthropist, participating in various celebrity fundraisers and events throughout his career. He also championed different animal welfare causes, calling for the British government to create stricter laws regulating the sale of pets by unlicensed breeders and pet stores.

Michael's sexuality was often written about in the tabloids, as he was known for dating women and men. By the '90s, Michael knew he was gay. He told the *Advocate* in 1999, "I thought I had fallen in love with a woman a couple of times. Then I fell in love with a man, and realized that none of those things had been love."







# HOLLY WOODLAWN

In her memoir *A Low Life in High Heels*, Holly Woodlawn—the late trans Puerto Rican actress and Warhol superstar—shares stories from her rough beginnings as a Florida teenage runaway trying to make it in New York City. “At the age of sixteen, when most kids were cramming for trigonometry exams, I was turning tricks, living off the streets and wondering when my next meal was coming,” she wrote.

Woodlawn eventually met pop-art maestro Andy Warhol and his collaborator, director Paul Morrissey, who cast her in his 1970 film *Trash*. Oscar-winning director George Cukor loved her performance so much, he started a campaign for her Academy Award nomination. “I worked six days at \$25 a day,” she said in a 1970 *Village Voice* interview. “Except for the last scene, everything was done in one take. The clothes, the dialogue, like, everything was mine because the character I play is me. I’ve been in those situations.” The following year, Woodlawn appeared in *Women in Revolt*, Morrissey’s satire about the Women’s Liberation Movement, alongside superstars Candy Darling and Jackie Curtis.

Musician Lou Reed wrote about Holly in his song “Walk on the Wild Side.” Woodlawn worked the cabaret scene during the ’70s. She made a space for herself in the ’90s indie film scene and eventually found herself on the West Coast. In 2014, she appeared in Jill Soloway’s TV series *Transparent*, about a Los Angeles family and one parent’s gender transition.

In this photo by photographer Jack Mitchell, Woodlawn poses with Mitchell’s studio cat, Nik, named after the Nikon camera. “Nik lived in the studio and became a kind of mascot. Nik was very comfortable around strangers and so there are many photographs of celebrities holding and posing with Nik,” Craig B. Highberger, executive director of the Jack Mitchell archives, writes on Mitchell’s blog.





# JAMES BALDWIN

Photographer and filmmaker Sedat Pakay, born in Turkey, was only nineteen years old when he met novelist James Baldwin. Pakay was a student at Robert College, now called Boğaziçi University, in Istanbul.

The New York City-born essayist and author of *Giovanni's Room* lived in Istanbul on and off throughout the 1960s. Journalist Suzy Hansen describes that period of his life, writing that “Istanbul was Baldwin’s escape. ... Baldwin loved the city. ... [He] was delighted by the Turkish custom of holding hands—even men could be openly affectionate! It was easier to be gay in Istanbul than in America, easier to be Black.”

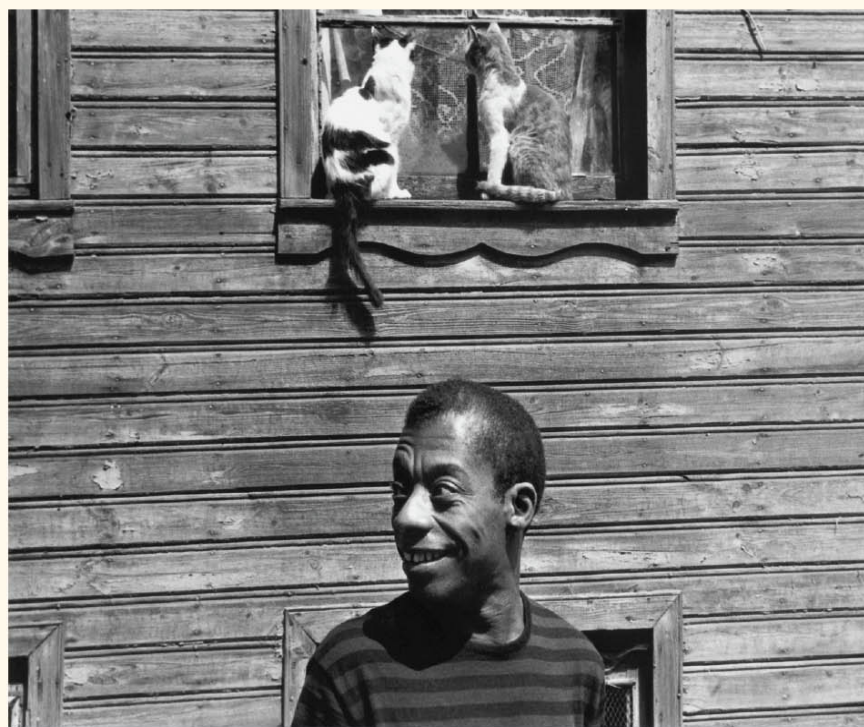
According to Pakay’s wife, Kathy, the two men became very close friends. “He took literally thousands of photos of [Baldwin], in Turkey, New York, and Los Angeles,” Kathy relayed by email. One of those images features a smiling Baldwin, two cats perched on a windowsill behind him.

For centuries, feral cats have roamed the streets of the Turkish city. Ayse Sabuncu, from the Facebook group Cats of Istanbul, explained to the BBC in 2016: “Back in the Ottoman times, the Ottoman type of architecture was a lot of wooden houses. These wooden houses would get a lot of bugs and mice and stuff, so cats were basically a mechanism to ... keep all the unnecessary foreign animals out of the houses.”

Baldwin first left America for Paris as a young man to experience life outside the racism and prejudice that dominated the United States. “I think Americans are terrified of feeling anything,” he told journalist Richard Goldstein in the early ’80s. “And homophobia is simply an extreme example of the American terror that’s concerned with growing up. I never met a people more infantile in my life.” He expounded on this further in the context of race: “A Black gay person who is a sexual conundrum to society is already, long before the question of sexuality comes into it, menaced and marked because he’s Black or she’s Black.

The sexual question comes after the question of color; it's simply one more aspect of the danger in which all Black people live." LGBTQ African Americans were frequently sidelined during the civil rights movement. Baldwin found a friend in gay civil rights leader Bayard Rustin, an adviser to Martin Luther King Jr. and co-organizer of the 1963 March on Washington.

Baldwin sometimes refuted the word *gay*, considering himself more of a "maverick." As he put it to Goldstein, "I'm not a member of anything." For Baldwin, the word gay spoke to "a false argument, a false accusation." He believed there were other, more compelling issues and questions to explore in his life and work. For example, he stated that "[*Giovanni's Room*] is not really about homosexuality. It's about what happens to you if you're afraid to love anybody. Which is much more interesting than the question of homosexuality." Baldwin summed up this sentiment in his very frank and incisive way: "I have nothing to prove. The world also belongs to me."



“I HAVE NOTHING TO PROVE. THE WORLD  
ALSO BELONGS TO ME.”

*James Baldwin*

# JANIS JOPLIN

In the biography *Love, Janis*, a collection of letters written by the larger-than-life singer-songwriter Janis Joplin, the artist muses about her new kitten's sweet and silly relationship with her dog, George, describing both pets as "family." She writes: "I still have George & I got a new kitten, no name yet, gray w/a little brown & white and very aggressive—when she's hungry she follows me around and shrieks at me. George takes really good care of her—licks her, carries her around in his mouth & she in turn eats only dog food & chews on his bones. It's a strange family, but it's mine." Myra Friedman's Joplin biography, *Buried Alive*, reveals that animals were "always essential to Janis's happiness." The author describes the Woodstock icon's cat Sam, another feline presence in the artist's life, as "aloof." He "stalked possessively about [Joplin's home]."

Biographer Holly George-Warren writes about the "Queen of Psychedelic Soul" as a trailblazer during a time when men dominated the stage spotlight: "Janis never compromised her vision. She wasn't afraid to cross boundaries—musical, cultural, and sexual. Openly bisexual in an era when it was illegal, she was not afraid of jail, of judgment. Similarly, when critics and fans expressed umbrage at her audacity to quit her role as 'chick singer' in a band that she felt was holding her back, she did it anyway."

Joplin's wild rock persona and affairs with partners of both sexes are the stuff of legend. Joplin herself once claimed she'd "gotten it on with a couple of thousand cats ... and a few hundred chicks." She had some serious relationships with women. In 1963, Joplin hitchhiked from her home state of Texas to the North Beach neighborhood of San Francisco. That year she met the musician Jae Whitaker and moved in with her after only two weeks together. They bonded over blues music and R&B. In the 2015 documentary, *Janis: Little Girl Blue*, Whitaker elaborates



about Joplin's personal life: "I don't think she was with girls to shock people. I think she was with girls because that's what she felt at the moment."





# JASMIN SINGER

When Jasmin Singer's activism work focused on AIDS awareness, she was a vegetarian. After meeting a vegan through her work, she realized that she couldn't support the consumption of eggs and dairy, the production of which rely on the exploitation of female reproductive systems. From that point she began to incorporate animal activism into all of her work. Singer told *VegNews* in 2012, "I can't help but note that my dietary shift from meat-eating to vegetarianism, then to veganism, immediately preceded me shifting my sexual identity (straight to bisexual, bisexual to gay)." Singer has made a name for herself as an activist keenly aware of the interconnectedness between the many struggles for justice. She noted over email: "The LGBTQ community is used to questioning assumptions and challenging norms ... and for me, that discernment ultimately—and permanently—changed the way I view my own relationship with animals. ... Now, I can pet my cat or dogs knowing that I do my best to boycott animal cruelty, which is a mindset that, for me, stemmed directly from my LGBTQ activism." Singer co-founded Our Hen House, a nonprofit dedicated to ending the exploitation of animals, and co-hosts a podcast of the same name. Her memoir, *Always Too Much and Never Enough*, was published in 2016.

Singer's cat, the elusive yet inquisitive Stella, didn't always welcome being petted. Adopted from a rescue group while Singer was living in Northern California, Stella slowly learned to trust her human. Singer said over email, "She'd start coming out for little love fests." When Singer moved to Los Angeles, she noticed something: Stella was coming out of her shell. The cat became more vocal when asking for something, and her curiosity seemed to flourish. Gone was the shy kitty who would only occasionally make appearances to receive affection. Stella now shares a home with Singer and her wife, Mariann Sullivan, as well as their two dogs. You might think a formerly hesitant feline could get lost in the mix,

but not Stella. She is living her best life. Singer says, “Stella has learned how to take up space—which is something that so many LGBTQ people could certainly get inspiration from.”





# JASON WU

Jason Wu has been honing his design skills since childhood. When he got his first sewing machine at age ten, he practiced his craft on dolls, designing intricate outfits for them with a close attention to detail. These early experiences foreshadowed his future accomplishments in more ways than one: Little did baby Jason know that he would go on to design collectible dolls professionally (including one of RuPaul) for several years before launching his fashion career with his ready-to-wear collection in 2007. That collection established Wu in the fashion world as a talent to watch.

In 2008 he received the Rising Star Award for women's ready-to-wear from Fashion Group International. In 2009, when Michelle Obama chose to wear one of his exquisite designs to the inaugural ball, Wu quickly became a household name. His melding of meticulous craftsmanship with a fresh perspective serves him well with high-profile clients like Mrs. Obama. Wu's subsequent (and very successful) collaborations with major retailers like Target and Kohl's speak to the universal appeal of his designs. Wu is not one to stand still or rest. He always seeks to challenge himself and evolve as a designer, applying his perfectionist eye to his craft.

In 2018, Wu opened his stunning Tribeca, New York, home to interior design and fashion blog *Coveteur*. While there is much to appreciate in the immaculate furnishings depicted in the photographs, Wu's cat undeniably steals the show in this photo as she arches her back into her human's hand for affection. A self-described "crazy cat lady," Jason Wu loves his babies, Jinxy and Peaches. Perhaps unsurprisingly, cat imagery has featured prominently in his designs. In 2012, he told *People* magazine about his Target collaboration: "Cats are so elegant and embody the spirit of the collection."







# JES TOM

Jes Tom's half-hour comedy special *Cold Brew* comprises humor rooted in vulnerability, empathy, and raw honesty. "What I am trying to do in my work, especially as a standup comic, is to make comedy that people can connect to even if they have never met a nonbinary person before, even if they have never heard of that, even if they have never met someone who is a fifth-generation Asian-American," Tom told *Forbes* in a 2019 interview. "I am trying to do comedy that is meaningful both to people who have something in common with me and those who don't."

Tom's mission is essential. When they started performing in 2013, space for queer performers seemed nonexistent. They told the *New York Times* in 2020: "There was, as far as I know, no queer comedy open mic. By which I mean I Googled it and nothing came up." Tom explained to *GO* magazine that one of their main goals is to "expand the collective imagination in a way that humanizes queer people, trans people, and people of color."

A self-described "weird queer comedy babe," Tom starred in the Amazon short *Soojung Dreams of Fiji* and played the lead in the Sonja O'Hara indie short *Anatomy of an Orchid*. They were a 2018 StandUp NBC semifinalist. The comedian also produces their own work—such as the viral short about the Scarlett Johansson–*Ghost in the Shell*–casting controversy, created with fellow stand-up comic Chewy May.

Tom also describes themselves as a "true cat queer." They explained by email, "I grew up with my grandma's cats, and I live with a cat now." Their feline roommate is named Ludovic, an affectionate gray, striped kitty with white mittens. For Tom, it's true cat love.





# JOSEPHINE BAKER

In 1906, Freda Josephine McDonald was born in St. Louis. Her family struggled in poverty, and at the age of fifteen, young Freda joined a Black dance troupe. She married as well, dropping her first name and taking her husband's last name, Baker. Her career took her to New York City, where the Harlem Renaissance was underway, but Baker would not become a superstar until moving to Paris in 1925. Audiences in France were not segregated, so Baker could perform for mixed (though largely white) crowds. Her exotic costumes and unique dance moves helped her become one of the most in-demand entertainers in Europe at the time.

When World War II disrupted life around the globe, Baker got involved in relief efforts. She worked for the Red Cross and entertained the troops, and she helped the French Resistance pass secret messages, sometimes tipped between her sheet music and written in invisible ink. When the war ended, she was awarded the Croix de Guerre and the Legion of Honour with the rosette of the Resistance.

Baker also loved animals. She kept a goat, a pig, and many other exotic creatures throughout her lifetime. Her pet cheetah, Chiquita, attracted the most attention. A gift from Casino de Paris owner Henri Varna, Chiquita appeared in Baker's dance act wearing a diamond collar. Baker took Chiquita with her everywhere. She walked her on a leash—sometimes strolling along the Champs-Élysées—and the cheetah even rode in her Rolls Royce, went to the movies with her, and slept in her bed.

Baker had relationships with both men and women, though most accounts of her life do not mention her same-sex relationships. As Lester Q. Strong points out for the *Gay & Lesbian Review*, Jean-Claude Baker's *Josephine: The Hungry Heart* is one exception. Strong notes that “more was known publicly about her male lovers than her female lovers partly because heterosexual behavior was socially acceptable, while queer behavior was not.” Strong also writes that Baker led a queer life, not just

because she was bisexual, but for “the fact that nearly everything she did expressed desires and needs that deviated significantly from the prescribed social norms of her times.”









# JUDITH BUTLER

Philosopher Judith Butler is best known for her 1990 text *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, which theorizes that gender and sex are performative social constructs. Butler's work changed the cultural landscape of feminism, queer theory, and beyond. "What's not often enough read in my work is the emphasis on power and the intense normativity that governs gender," Butler told *Artforum* in 1992. "I was trying to interrogate the painful ironies of being implicated in the very forms of power that one explicitly opposes, and trying to understand what kinds of agency might be derived from that situation."

In a 2020 video interview with Matt McManus for Zero Books, Butler reflected on her relationship with identity politics and her own identity:

I thought in *Gender Trouble* I was saying, look, let's not presume identity as the basis of our politics because feminism was trying to say that women were all linked in some fundamental way, and it was on the basis of our shared identity that we form a political movement. Every time they started to talk about what that shared identity consisted of, I found myself saying "That's not me, that's not me, that's not me." And it wasn't just me. I did because I was gender non-conforming without quite having the language for that. ... Well, I thought, well why can't we have a movement with a wide range of orientations and different ways of understanding who we are? Do we have to settle the question of a common identity? I hope not. Because there are a lot of differences among us.

The queer internet practically exploded with glee when cultural studies lecturer and author Hannah McCann, creator of the *BinaryThis* blog, published a lighthearted and genuinely educational comic diagram called "Judith Butler Explained with Cats." It all comes full circle since Butler is the cat parent of this eye-catching feline named Pluto.





# JUJUBEE

Airline Inthyrath is better known to fans around the world as the drag performer Jujubee. Drawn to the stage from an early age, Inthyrath's Jujubee became a standout contestant on the second season of *RuPaul's Drag Race*, winning viewers over with her makeup skills, quick wit, and ability to slay a lip sync. There's little mystery as to why she was nominated for "Most Addictive Reality TV Star" at the 2010 NewNowNext Awards. The fan favorite came back as a professor for the spinoff show *Drag U* and even competed twice on *RuPaul's Drag Race All Stars* (most recently in 2020), finishing in the top three both times.

When the coronavirus pandemic shut much of the world down in 2020, entertainers around the globe figured out new ways to reach their fans. For many drag performers, this meant doing online shows. A longtime friend to felines, Jujubee's show was titled *Live from Boston (At Home with My Cats)*. This title conveys much of what her fans love about Jujubee: She's funny as hell, she knows how to razzle-dazzle, and—perhaps most importantly—she loves her cats, Mister and Priss.

Pictured here holding Priss, Jujubee said over email: "I love Priss so much I say her name twice when I call her." Jujubee describes Priss as "gentle and very independent," but make no mistake, Priss is "the queen" in Jujubee's home: "She always gets her way." An animal lover from early on, Jujubee has felt especially drawn to felines: "They maintain fierceness even when they're full of fear. Cats are resilient and oh-so-adorable. I keep loving them more and more as time moves."





# JUSTIN SIMIEN

Filmmaker Justin Simien burst onto the scene in 2014 with his award-winning debut, *Dear White People*. Influenced by his experiences attending Chapman University, Simien's film gives voice to the academic experiences of Black students on majority-white campuses. That he also centers queerness/intersectionality in his storytelling means that a whole range of underrepresented perspectives comes through in his work.

The success of Simien's film attracted the attention of Netflix executives, who asked him to adapt the hit into a series. His sophomore feature film, a thriller called *Bad Hair*, made waves at Sundance 2020 and was scooped up by Hulu in a multi-studio bidding war. Simien acknowledges that although *Bad Hair* is a good time, there is a serious theme as well: "This is a film about white supremacy, let's not get it twisted. ... It's a fun movie. ... But it's also about these systems that appear like choices but aren't really choices," he said at the ESSENCE Festival of Culture.

Simien and his boyfriend, Rick Proctor, have a cat named Taylor. In 2016, Simien created a list for social media titled "7 Reasons My Cat Is Dope AF." Included on the list, with accompanying pictures, are these items: "that time she watched *The Lion King* like it was her *Roots*" and "that time she burrowed into my hoodie 'cause that's where she wanted to sleep." Simien admits he's obsessed with Taylor, and his last reason on the list makes it clear why: "that time she made our lives better by coming home with us."







# LEIGH BOWERY

The underground club scene can be divided into two eras: before Leigh Bowery and after Leigh Bowery. A subversive artist and avant-garde designer known for his outrageous costumes and theatrical makeup, Bowery was the promoter of a boundary-pushing London nightclub event called Taboo at the Maximus disco in Leicester Square. The nightspot fully lived up to its name and had an equally raucous motto: “Dress as though your life depends on it or don’t bother.” In a 2008 interview, Bowery’s friend Boy George describes the performer’s unconventional appeal:

For me the most interesting thing about him was the way he used his body as a style statement. ... His designs were often breathtaking, but it was the way he used his body that was so utterly new and refreshing. I can’t think of anyone who had done it before or to the extent that Leigh did. He was actually quoted as saying, “Flesh is my most favorite fabric.” I’ve seen many a freak make a scene and go, but Leigh was a special kind of exhibitionist because he was dedicated and saw it as an art form.

In a 2019 interview with [Artnet.com](https://www.artnet.com), the artist Cerith Wyn Evans and director Baillie Walsh, describe a “vulnerable,” “sweet,” and “gentle” side to Bowery that emerged most often in the presence of his black cat, Angus, who was named after Wyn Evans’s boyfriend at the time. “He did it to punish him [human Angus],” Wyn Evans said of Bowery’s moniker choice. Walsh initially got the cat for Bowery as a joke, “but then he was a great father to the cat. Leigh adored Angus.” Walsh added, “The cat was always sleeping in amongst fabric.” Bowery’s last photo shoot took place in London, shortly before his death in 1994. The images included Angus. The maverick collaborators share a piercing gaze and unapologetic pose.





# LISA BEN

*Vice Versa*, the first known lesbian magazine in the United States, was created in 1947 by Lisa Ben, an anagram pen name (“lesbian”) used by Edythe D. Eyde, then a secretary at RKO Pictures in Los Angeles. “I was by myself, and I wanted to be able to meet others like me,” Ben once explained. “I couldn’t go down the street saying ‘I’m looking for lesbian friends.’... [*Vice Versa*] gave me a way of reaching out to other gay gals.” Ben typed up each copy of the free magazine from her office desk and delivered copies by hand to avoid obscenity charges under the Comstock Act, which forbade mailing materials that included any discussion or depiction of homosexuality.

*Vice Versa* became a thoughtful and reliable resource for lesbian culture, including reviews of books, films, plays, and music. Ben’s writing offered a positive portrayal of life as a queer woman, her way of confronting the hostility toward same-sex relationships that she observed in the media and beyond.

Ben had a lifelong love for science fiction and was a devotee of fanzines starting in the early 1940s. She struck up a friendship with sci-fi giant Forrest J Ackerman and collaborated on several stories with him, as well as writing her own under the name “Tigrina.” Illustrations of Ben always depicted her as a witchy woman with cats.

By the 1950s, Ben started officially using her pseudonym across all aspects of her life and refocused her creative energy on her music—lesbian-themed song parodies that she performed at bars. She also started writing for the *Ladder*, the first national lesbian magazine.

Ben went into isolation during the ’60s, preferring life away from the spotlight. She lived in Burbank, California, and cared for dozens of cats during her lifetime. Ben has been recognized for her pioneering achievements by the National Lesbian and Gay Journalists Association,

which inducted Ben into its Hall of Fame. You can browse her papers at the University of Southern California's ONE National Gay and Lesbian Archives and hear her singing on Eric Marcus's *Making Gay History* podcast.







# LYNN CONWAY

The National Center for Transgender Equality states: “One in four transgender people have lost a job due to bias, and more than three-fourths have experienced some form of workplace discrimination.” Sadly, this was the case for Lynn Conway, a pioneering computer scientist and electrical engineer whose groundbreaking work and teachings revolutionized microelectronic chip design.

After a painful beginning in life beset by depression and gender dysphoria, Conway sought the help of pioneering physician Harry Benjamin to begin her gender transition, which she completed in 1968. But Conway’s employer, IBM, fired her after learning about her plans. After her gender confirmation surgery, Conway was forced to reinvent her career and live in stealth mode for fear of being ostracized. Still, she quickly rose through the ranks, first with Memorex and later Xerox’s Palo Alto Research Center, earning herself a role as a visiting professor of electrical engineering and computer sciences at MIT and a lead position at the Defense Department’s Advanced Research Projects Agency.

In the late 1990s, acclaimed in her field but still keeping her past a secret, Conway faced a life-changing decision when researchers rediscovered her early work at IBM. She chose to tell her life story and share the legacy of her important work. On her University of Michigan staff website, Conway chronicles her struggles and accomplishments, provides resources for the trans community, and writes about her own family. The site features stories and pictures with her husband, Charlie Rogers, and the many cats they’ve loved through the years, including Conway’s first, the “somewhat shy” Samantha.

Cats have been more than just pets for Conway. “‘Kitties’ (as I call them) were especially important in my life during my early post-transition years,” she explained via email. “Those years were stressful and lonely

ones for me. My kitties Samantha ('Sams') and Rapunzel ('Punz') provided wonderful companionship and affection back then. They really helped me get through all that and go on to a full and happy life."





# MARLENE DIETRICH

In 1928, before her breakthrough role in *The Blue Angel*, Marlene Dietrich performed in a cabaret revue with the openly bisexual star Margo Lion. The actresses performed the song “Wenn die beste Freundin” (“When My Best Girlfriend”), about two women who were not happy with their husbands and shared an intimate relationship. Barbara Kosta’s book *Willing Seduction: The Blue Angel, Marlene Dietrich, and Mass Culture* states that “the song became an unofficial anthem for German lesbians in the late Twenties.” Dietrich gained fame as a gender-bending star who explored androgyny on the big screen during Hollywood’s closeted early days. She once said, “I am at heart a gentleman,” and she had many famous male and female lovers (while she was married). The actress was often spotted partying at Berlin drag balls.

Here is Dietrich with her feline co-star, Blackie, in the 1931 Josef von Sternberg film *Dishonored*. The cat plays a prominent role in the movie as we follow Dietrich’s character, a spy hired by the Austrian Secret Service to keep a watchful eye on Russian forces. As the website Cinema Cats shares, Blackie’s movie career started at Paramount Pictures. Cinema Cats cites a 1931 article by Robert S. White for the *Scrutiner* about Blackie’s inclusion in the film:

When put before the cameras in *Dishonored*, he purred with conscious pride and proceeded to give one of the most remarkable feline performances ever witnessed by an astonished director and company. Blackie was promptly assigned a more important role. He became Marlene Dietrich’s pet, and thus carries an extended role through-out the entire production, even winning himself a big-eyed closeup at the end of the picture.

According to White, director Von Sternberg was quite pleased with Blackie’s box office prowess. The feline was valued at \$8,000, and the filmmaker made moves to hire him for another picture. Modern-day cats

are still thanking Blackie for paving the way for their celebrity status.







# MATTHEW MITCHAM

Matthew Mitcham always wanted to be recognized for his athletic accomplishments rather than for his sexuality. Shortly after coming out in 2008, he told the *Advocate*, “I just want to be known as the Australian diver who did really well at the Olympics.” And he was. Mitcham left the 2008 Summer Olympics in Beijing with a record-shattering gold medal. Twelve years later, *Out Sports* called Mitcham’s accomplishment “one of the great underdog victories of all time.”

While recovering from an injury in 2010, Mitcham discovered a new love: music. He told arts writer Jo Litson in 2015: “Because I was going stir crazy I bought a toy ukulele for \$24 and started teaching myself how to play it by watching YouTube videos. And from there, that ignited a hunger for more information.” After videos of his ukulele covers of pop songs went viral, Mitcham’s new career began to flourish.

Ultimately, he transformed his 2012 autobiography, *Twists and Turns*, into a cabaret, which premiered in 2014 at the Fringe World Festival in Perth. Mitcham married Luke Rutherford in 2020. Mitcham is pictured here with a tiny ginger foster kitten he named Eric “Grimples” Mitcham. The athlete wrote on Instagram that he had “fallen so hard” for the little kitty that he and Luke were planning to adopt him.





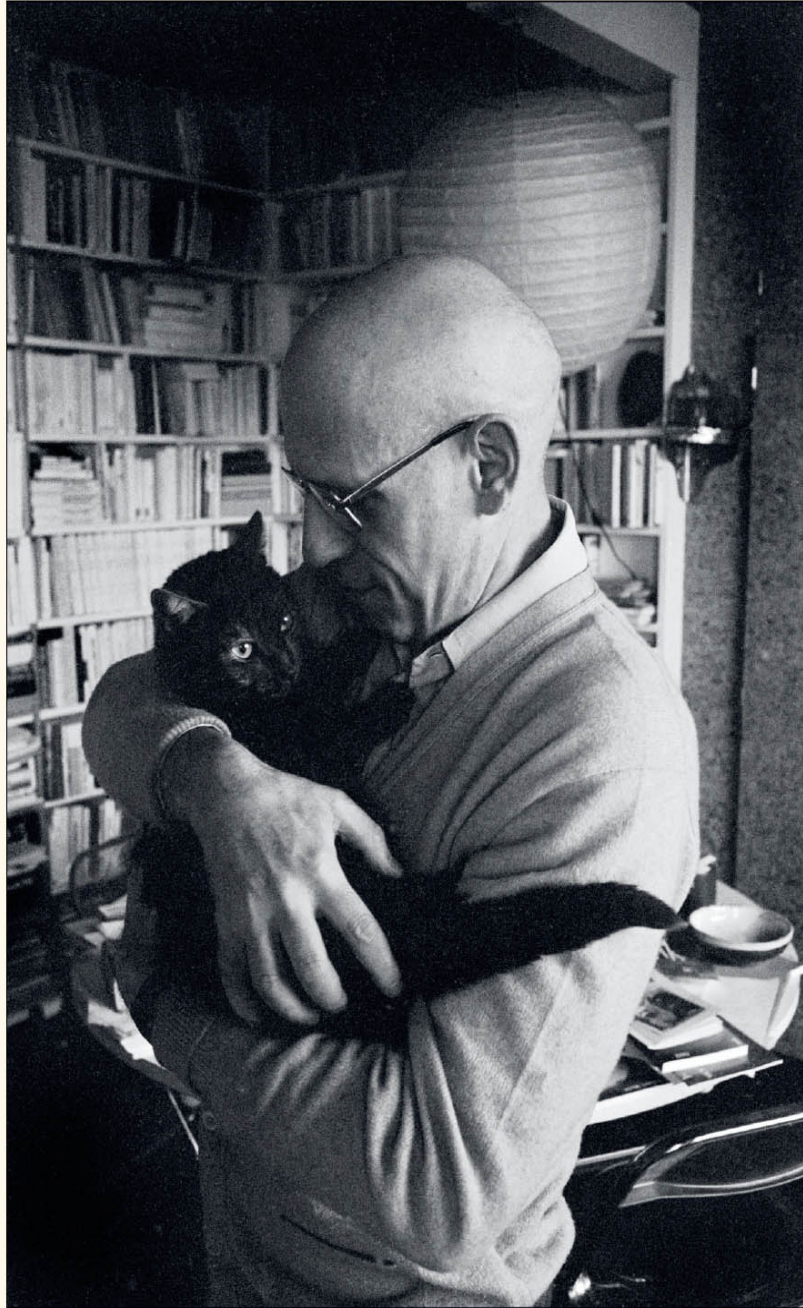
# MICHEL FOUCAULT

In the 2002 book *Who's Who in Contemporary Gay and Lesbian History: From World War II to the Present Day*, editors Robert Aldrich and Garry Wotherspoon write of the French philosopher Michel Foucault:

“Foucault initially had some trouble dealing with his sexual orientation. He drank heavily as a young man and at least twice attempted suicide, but he came to terms with his homosexuality in the early 1950s and thereafter lived it happily and to the full. Foucault later stated: ‘There is objective proof that homosexuality is more interesting than heterosexuality.’ ”

David Macey’s biography of the French philosopher shares a softer side of Foucault, telling a story about the writer playing host and sitting with his guests while stroking the cat, who remained nestled in his lap the entire time. Foucault, an influential and often controversial figure, wrote *The History of Sexuality*. His work helped build a strong foundation for queer theory and LGBTQ cultural studies.

A popular internet hypothesis suggests that Foucault named his cat Insanity—an appropriate choice for many a feline, particularly one belonging to the author of *Madness and Civilization*.





# MIMA SIMIĆ

In the essay “Prides and Prejudices: Confessions of an LGBTIQ Activist,” Mima Simić describes growing up in Croatia in the 1980s. The film critic, theorist, and activist had extremely limited exposure to LGBTQ people and culture as a youngster. Family and friends didn’t talk about gay people, and she did not find any meaningful queer representation in the media she could access. Moving to England in 1994, Simić experienced an awakening as she discovered queer media and culture. She saw same-sex couples holding hands and openly showing affection in public as if it were completely normal.

She eventually sought to bring the openness and acceptance she witnessed in London back home to Croatia. Simić helped organize the first pride parades in the country. She made advances but was also met with indifference and pushback, sometimes even violence. During the 2011 pride celebration in Split, Simić faced one such horrific encounter: “Thousands of inflamed, wild normal citizens... throwing bottles, coins, stones.... Police standing there, doing nothing. Bleeding heads, people screaming, tear gas bombs.” Ultimately, the violence snapped indifferent Croatians awake to the struggles of the LGBTQ population. Such an advance would never have been possible but for the efforts of activists like Simić.

Looking at the stark black-and-white photo of Simić with her black kitten, Đebo, we at once feel Simić’s directness, bravery, and radical vulnerability. Simić adopted Đebo over a decade ago with a girlfriend. The cat has outlasted the girlfriend, who Simić says over email “immediately rushed to adopt a dog” with her new partner and never asked about Đebo again. For Simić it was an important lesson: Her next partner, Marta Šušak, is an animal activist “who now loves our cats ... more than me.” The couple has been married for nine years.







# NOMY LAMM

Nomy Lamm once described herself as a “bad-ass, fat-ass, Jew dyke amputee, writer, performance artist, and activist.” Lamm is all that and more: a riot-grrl musician, a performer who centers disability and queerness in her art and activism, a self-identified witch who studies kabbalah, and, of course, a friend to felines.

*I’m So Fucking Beautiful*, Lamm’s revolutionary fat-positive zine, first released in 1993, dared to question assumptions about weight and examine fat oppression as a systemic force. Lamm joined a growing chorus of activists and creators whose work rejected fatphobia. When *Ms.* named her one of its Women of the Year in 1997, the magazine said it selected Lamm for “inspiring a new generation of feminists to fight back against fat oppression.”

At twenty, Lamm moved into a punk collective called The Pirate Haus in Olympia. There, she met a cat named Jezebel. All black save for a small white spot, Jezebel had a crack across her right eye that became prominent in sunlight. “I always wondered if it gave her a special kind of sight. It made her seem magical to me,” Lamm said over email.

Lamm was suffering from depression when she met this special kitten. During tearful nights, the activist recalls, “Jezebel would sneak into my room and cuddle me so hard. Then she would ignore me during the day.” Eventually, Lamm and Jezebel grew closer. The cat’s original human caretaker had passed away, so when Lamm left The Pirate Haus, she took the cat along with her.

While Jezebel sometimes asserted her independence, disappearing for days at a time, this kitty cat was also a profound healer who was drawn to humans going through tough times. Lamm feels that she and Jezebel supported one another over the years, confronting past traumas and

growing together. At the time of her passing, Jezebel was surrounded by stuffed animals, with Lamm singing to her. Today, Lamm and her partner, Lisa Ganser, share their Olympia home with both cats and dogs.





# OPHELIA PASTRANA

Chosen for the BBC's "100 Women" list in 2018, trans icon Ophelia Pastrana is an economist, physicist, technologist, presenter and spokeswoman, comedian, and LGBTQ activist. She is also a popular YouTuber who owns her own media properties. Her videos touch on everything from trans issues, to online censorship, to tech news.

The Colombian-born Pastrana lives in Mexico City and dispenses her unique brand of intelligence, expertise, and wit across multiple media platforms. A self-described online nerd, Pastrana makes regular appearances to speak on various topics. Her work mostly focuses on technology and communication, but as an out and proud trans woman, Pastrana always tries to include some LGBTQ content in her work. She has spoken at TEDx and runs a stand-up comedy event called La Explicatriz.

In some ways, her Siamese cat, Matú, shares her fame. He appears frequently on her social media in selfies and other posts, and there are entire videos dedicated to him on her YouTube channel. One such video includes the caption: "Este es Matú, la bola de pelos que me acompaña a hacer todo mi desmadre" ("This is Matú, the ball of fur who helps me make all my messes"). Matú is the perfect feline partner in crime, it seems, and Pastrana's love for him is evident.







# OSSIE CLARK

English fashion designer Ossie Clark cut a striking figure in London's Swinging Sixties scene, a time that saw hemlines rise dramatically and inhibitions drop. Clark's flamboyant designs combined a youthful Mod vibe with a gauzy romantic sensibility. His wife, Celia Birtwell, a textile designer who looked to the art world for inspiration, supplied Clark with her unique prints—a union made in heaven. The couple clothed everyone from the Beatles, the Rolling Stones, and Jimi Hendrix to Twiggy, Paloma Picasso, and Marianne Faithfull.

During the height of the couple's fame, artist David Hockney, who viewed Birtwell as a muse and was rumored to be Clark's lover, painted the couple with their beautiful white cat. The Tate art museum explains the meaning behind the appearance of the elegant feline in the now-famous painting *Mr and Mrs Clark and Percy*:

The cat on Ossie's lap carries symbolic resonances of the libertine and somebody who disregards rules and does as they please ... Hockney has pointed out that his painting reversed one of the conventions of wedding portraiture, by seating the man while the woman stands.

In a 2017 interview with the *Guardian*, Birtwell explained of the portrait: "The cat in the picture is actually Blanche, but David said Percy had a better ring to it. I have had a lot of cats in my life, but Blanche was a special one."

Clark and Birtwell divorced in 1974, and Clark met his partner Nick Balaban in 1978. "Money and space were in short supply but his imagination remained as fertile as ever," artist and activist Guy Burch details on his website. Balaban was diagnosed with AIDS in 1991 and died from complications related to the disease in 1994. "At the end love was what Nick needed," Burch explains, and "Ossie gave it to him."





# RACHEL CARSON

Growing up in rural Pennsylvania, Rachel Carson connected with nature at an early age. She discovered her talent for writing as a youngster as well: At ten, Carson had her first piece published in a children's magazine. Her twin passions for nature and writing would become the dominant forces in her life, culminating in 1962 with the publication of *Silent Spring*, an era-defining book that influenced public policy regarding the use of pesticides (especially DDT) and energized the burgeoning environmental movement, eventually leading to the creation of the Environmental Protection Agency. Unfortunately, Carson succumbed to cancer less than two years after the publication of *Silent Spring*.

The other defining force in Rachel Carson's life was no doubt her passionate and intimate friendship with Dorothy Freeman. Whether Carson and Freeman were ever physically intimate is almost irrelevant. What's clear is that these two individuals were in love. Their relationship played out largely through correspondence. Prior to Carson's death, she and Freeman burned many of their letters. The surviving ones were published in a volume titled *Always, Rachel: The Letters of Rachel Carson and Dorothy Freeman, 1952–1964: The Story of a Remarkable Friendship*.

In more than one of her letters to Freeman, Carson discussed her cat, Jeffie, whom she loved very much. Upon completing *Silent Spring*, she wrote to Freeman: "I took Jeffie into the study and played the Beethoven violin concerto—one of my favorites, you know. And suddenly the tensions of four years were broken and I got down and put my arms around Jeffie and let the tears come. With his little warm, rough tongue he told me that he understood."





# RAMON NOVARRO

Silent film sex symbol Ramon Novarro was born in Mexico to Roman Catholic parents. Novarro was deeply religious. At one point, he even considered giving up Hollywood altogether and becoming a Trappist monk. He struggled to reconcile his Catholicism and his sexual attraction to men, suffering from feelings of guilt and shame over his identity and often turning to alcohol as a crutch. Be warned: His story is not a happy one.

Novarro was one of the rare talents in early twentieth-century cinema who made the transition from silents to talkies, including small parts in television. However, his greatest success was playing the scantily clad lead in the 1925 film version of *Ben-Hur*. Novarro became known as Hollywood's new "Latin lover" thanks to his titillating performance. The movie became one of the biggest grossing films of the silent film era.

Novarro's affairs with men—including his publicist, the Hollywood writer Herbert Howe—were the stuff of studio gossip. While filming 1927's *The Student Prince in Old Heidelberg*, the star reportedly butted heads with director Ernst Lubitsch, writes Novarro biographer André Soares. The filmmaker reportedly added a scene featuring Novarro playing opposite an "effeminate extra," taking jabs at the actor's sexuality. The scene was eventually cut by producer Irving Thalberg.

Novarro's life came to a tragic end in 1968 when he was beaten to death in his Laurel Canyon, Los Angeles, home by down-and-out brothers Paul and Tom Ferguson.

This photo of Novarro as character Tommy Winslow on the set of MGM's 1929 Navy film *The Flying Fleet* captures his Hollywood smile and star appeal. Apologies to the spotted wild cat posing with Novarro, who was nearly upstaged by the actor.







# SYLVIA RIVERA

Sylvia Rivera has sometimes been credited with throwing the first Molotov cocktail during the uprising at the Stonewall Inn in June 1969. Rivera is said to have joked, “I threw the second one. I did not throw the first one.” She told Leslie Feinberg: “I remember when someone threw a Molotov cocktail, I thought: ‘My god, the revolution is here. The revolution is finally here!’” The trans civil rights pioneer was instrumental in the early work of the Gay Liberation Front. She was a member of the Gay Activists Alliance and later collaborated with her trans sister Marsha P. Johnson to form the Street Transvestite Action Revolutionaries in order to provide services for homeless LGBTQ youth.

The burgeoning gay rights movement would eventually center on middle-class cis-male whiteness, sidelining trans people, drag queens, people of color, the poor, and other disenfranchised groups. Rivera championed the rights of the most vulnerable among us: queer and trans youth of color, the homeless, the incarcerated. It’s sad that early activists like Sylvia Rivera and Marsha P. Johnson were excluded and suppressed rather than lifted up and honored.

Recent reexaminations of queer history recognize the vital contributions of these radical figures; artists like New York-based transgender activist and filmmaker Tourmaline remember and tell their stories, honoring their legacies. In 2019, for the fiftieth anniversary of the Stonewall Uprising, the City of New York announced that Sylvia Rivera and Marsha P. Johnson would be honored with a monument in Greenwich Village.

Having run away from home herself at the age of ten, Rivera knew what it meant to live on the streets at a young age, to be vulnerable, and to not have the proper support system, which is why she felt such a strong drive to protect queer youth as she got older. This photo of a smiling Rivera gently holding a black-and-white cat conveys some of her fiercely protective spirit.





# TIG NOTARO

“Pretty much every day I’m wearing argyle socks,” Tig Notaro admits in the “Secrets” section of the bio on her website. And if you’re familiar with Notaro’s work, you can instantly hear her deadpanning that line. Her comedy lives in the space between discomfort and absurdity, perhaps most clearly illustrated by the legendary 2012 set she performed the day after being diagnosed with cancer. The groundbreaking comedian opened her set by greeting the audience at the Largo nightclub: “Hello, I have cancer.”

Notaro had already been through it that year: She had contracted pneumonia, followed by a painful and emaciating intestinal disease; her mother had passed away unexpectedly; and then her girlfriend had broken up with her. After all that, cancer came calling. Thankfully, the comedian is healthy now. When she’s not involved in a slew of projects across various media, including the 2016 publication of her book, *I’m Just a Person*, Notaro is selling out live shows across the country.

Notaro grew up in Mississippi and Texas. Despite what you might think about growing up queer in the South, Notaro told *Mother Jones* in 2013: “I never ran into a single problem with any friend or family member. ... There’s so many assumptions made about the South that I just don’t relate to because I didn’t have that experience.”

She recalls being “very into animals and nature, and really obsessed with cats.” She and her wife, Stephanie Allynne, currently share their Los Angeles home with their two children and a photogenic cat called Fluff. Notaro posts on Twitter under her own name, but Instagram is another story. An account originally used to post nothing but cat pics (@therealfluffnotaro) eventually became the place for Notaro to post all kinds of pictures of family, friends, work, and, yes, new pictures of Fluff as well.







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Co-authors and siblings ALISON NASTASI and PJ NASTASI have a shared appreciation for animals.

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