



FAYETTE HAUSER

Bursting onto San Francisco's countercultural and experimental scene in the late Sixties, The Cockettes, a loosely fashioned commune and theatre troupe formed in 1969, embodied the fantasy and rebellious spirit of the West Coast to perfection, challenging the very foundations of reality with über-flamboyance. Between 1969 and 1972, they concocted a melting pot of subversion and their own signature of psychedelic glamour, "hippie meets drag on LSD", performing lavish stage acts regularly at San Francisco's Palace Theatre, usually singing and dancing while tripping on generous amounts of LSD. Original Cockette member Fayette Hauser reminisces about the good times had at The Cockettes old Victorian house in Francisco's Haight Ashbury neighbourhood; lauds the fluidity of today's fashion and enthuses over "soul sistah" Lady Gaga.

"Talent wins games, but teamwork and intelligence wins championships" - Michael Jordan

Interviewed by [Maggie Kelly](#)
Portrait by [Clay Geerdes](#)

Fayette, you were one of the founding members of the famous Cockettes theatre group of the 1960's. Did you have any idea of the significance of what you were creating at the time?

At the time we were into creating as magical an experience as possible. It was very significant to me as an artist and to us as a group. I had a lot of art theory and art history in my head from university but it all became real to me through psychedelics. I knew we were creating the New. And our instant popularity meant that we were successfully channeling the energy that was on the street in San Francisco, the direction that our own society was moving towards and the innovations that we were experiencing. The fact that it took the larger society so long to grasp these Truths is what was surprising to me. I think that the psychedelic experience is core to this consciousness that I and the Cockettes were exploring. Petty thinking and meaningless boundaries simply vanished in the face of the greater vision that we all had.

Your signature look was one of fabulous excess: beads, feathers, glitter, and wild headpieces. How did this reflect the attitude of the 1970's?

San Francisco in the 70's was all about excess, the abundance of the Universe, the celebration of more, more and more! I think that the seeds of this new positive thinking were planted in the 60's but the true flowering happened in the 70's. There was an explosion of creative energy, everyone had so much on their minds. We were overflowing with imagination and ideas and we all wanted to share that wealth, to put it on display as much as possible. For the Cockettes, nothing was hidden, we declared ourselves full on, all day, every day. We created our own visual language with items of clothing and bits of things, like an eclectic surreal puzzle that the viewer had to figure out. Each one of us had our own signature style. We pushed the idea of excess right to the limit and beyond.

Truman Capote said that The Cockettes were "the most outrageous thing I've ever witnessed." Did you feel like this was deliberate, or you were unaware of how wild your performances were?

I don't think we started out to be intentionally "wild" onstage, we just happened to be wild creatures so it couldn't have come out any other way. The wildness was our "normal", it was our ball-out lifestyle so we were just being truthful onstage. Actually, the real wildness was going on backstage! Also, we were not into controlling the experience in any way. This has often been perceived as some kind of incompetence on our part, like we were trying to be "professional" and not succeeding. It was just the opposite. We were trying for a new, magical experience. Something that had not been seen before, especially in theatre. If anything, we were anti-theatre. We wanted to venture into the unknown, in the moment and onstage. I think we were very brave. But then again, we didn't care what others thought. It was all fabulous.

What do you think about modern 'performance' artists like Lady Gaga and Miley Cyrus? Do you feel like their costume work is influenced by the Cockettes?

I love Lady Gaga, she is a true talent and very committed as an artist. Of course I adore her style. She's right in the Cockette pipeline, a true Soul Sistah! To me the Cockette style is part of a level of consciousness that is timeless, that artists have reached since the beginning of Art itself. It's a particular abstract landscape that encompasses the metaphysical and psychic world as well as physical perceptions. Many artists of the past explored this terrain and we were very inspired by them. Artists like Cocteau, the Surrealists and Dadaists, William Blake, too many to mention. I believe that this work was interrupted by WW2 and the artists of my generation picked up where the others left off. I also think that this is what has inspired the younger generations. They realize the importance of this work and are continuing in their own explorations.

The Cockettes are said to have created a new genre of drag style, 'high drag'. What do you think the difference was between existing drag dressing at that time, and the over-the-top costumes your group created?

At the time Drag, as in Drag Queens, was part of a sub-culture that was hidden from society. It only existed in small clubs here and there, like Finochios in San Francisco. From what I could see they were wearing old prom dresses and bad wigs. But there was such an androgynous nature within the Counter Culture that anyone who was gay or bisexual had no problem with dressing in a gender fluid manner.

It was not only accepted, it was heralded. The pioneers of our culture were all dressing that way. But The Cockettes really took this ball and ran away with it! We called it High Drag to give a new definition to the concept, one that incorporated more than just female impersonation. We wanted to express a more cubistic idea of sexuality and the human psyche and be funny at the same time. We were very irreverent.

Your photography work has been shown in galleries and exhibitions around the world. How do you feel about being on display? Do you feel old enough to be viewed in retrospect yet?

I'm honored to have my work and the work of our group shown in galleries and museums as I think the work we did was important. We made a significant contribution to thinking positively about the Self and celebrating the Body and we had such fun doing it.

I feel that the youth of today have been born into Corporate Slavery and they need to know that it ain't necessarily so! Our generation rebelled against the satus quo and successfully created an alternate and sustainable society. This could all happen again, in a new and even better way.

The Cockettes were famous for their gender-bending antics and joyous acceptance of gender fluidity. Why do you think it's taken over 40 years since your group's establishment for this to enter mainstream culture?

Well, America was founded by the Puritans, after all. It seems Americans have much more of a problem with Sexual Freedom than other cultures. The Cockettes successfully leap-frogged over this dilemma by taking all the taboos, the social boundaries of the straight world, dressing them up and and spewing it back at them with great fervor and irreverence.

It was so freeing. But its taken the mainstream forever to catch on. Older generations hang on to old ideas to the Death! But younger folks really don't care about gender boundaries. They realize that gender identification has a much broader scope in the psyche than in mere biology. And letting go of all that repression is such a joy, so much fun to explore that boundless realm.

What is your favourite memory from your time living with the Cockettes in the rambling Victorian mansion in San Francisco?

My favourite memory is of the Cockette House itself. Our environment was so highly decorated that it was pure joy to live there. We were constantly on the hunt for that magical item or piece of clothing and if it wasn't on our bodies, it was up on the walls. Then, as we did more shows, the props and drag came home to live with us so it was one great big Magical Fantasyland. It was so all-of-a-piece that it's hard to separate the memories from the space we occupied.

How did the famous Cockette leader George Harris, 'Hibiscus', influence you as an artist and creator? How did you meet?

I had seen Hibiscus on the streets, you couldn't miss him, he looked so fantastic and unique with his giant floral headwreath and robes, always dancing with a frenetic kind of energy. But I hadn't actually met him until he came to our house, his arms full of flowers, to ask if he could move in with us. We welcomed him of course, he was so obviously one of us.

Everyone in the house had created their own singular environment in their room and Hibiscus' room was a beautiful extension of his unique persona. It was lovely to go into his lair and hang with him. Almost at once he presented his idea of having us all go onto the stage. Up until then our creative ideas were very personal, Hibiscus galvanized our creative energy into a group mind. He had come from underground theatre in New York so his ideas were radical theatre mixed with a cosmic consciousness. What could be better than that? We all dove in and within two months of his arrival we were up on the stage. Hibiscus had no boundaries at all, he was like a timeless explorer riding point in the psychic realm so he pushed us all into seeing greater possibilities and ideas. He led, we followed.