

Submitter: Johna LaRoque
On Behalf Of:
Committee: House Committee On Rules
Measure, Appointment or Topic: HR3

Chair Bowman, Vice-Chair Drazan, Vice-Chair Pham and members of the committee on rules:

Black drag has been an essential part of Portland, Oregon's vibrant cultural fabric for decades, bringing creativity, resilience, and joy to the city's LGBTQ+ community. Its evolution tells a story of self-expression, empowerment, and the transformative power of art and performance.

The roots of Black drag in Portland can be traced back to the 1970s and 80s, a time when drag culture was still pushing against societal norms and barriers. Black performers had to navigate not only homophobia and transphobia but also the unique challenges of racism within broader LGBTQ+ spaces. Despite these challenges, Black drag queens and kings carved out spaces of their own, where they could unapologetically celebrate their identities, talents, and heritage.

Pioneering Black drag performers in Portland were not only artists but activists, using their platforms to advocate for civil rights and inclusion. Their shows were more than entertainment—they were acts of defiance, pride, and community-building.

Performers like Poison Waters, a local legend, brought visibility to Black drag in the city with her dazzling performances and dedication to social justice causes.

In the 1990s and early 2000s, Black drag began to flourish even more, with an increasing number of venues embracing diversity in their lineups. Spaces like Darcelle XV Showplace, the longest-running drag cabaret in the United States, became more inclusive over time, offering Black performers a larger stage to share their stories and artistry. Community-organized events also sprang up, providing platforms specifically dedicated to showcasing Black talent and culture.

Today, Black drag in Portland continues to thrive and innovate. Performers blend traditional drag elements with Afrofuturism, hip-hop, spoken word, and political activism, creating dynamic and thought-provoking shows. Events like Black Pride PDX and the Portland Drag Festival have become critical spaces for celebrating Black drag excellence, ensuring that new generations of performers have the recognition and support they deserve.

Beyond the stage, Black drag artists in Portland have also taken on leadership roles, mentoring younger performers and fostering inclusive spaces for LGBTQ+ youth of color. Their work has helped create a more welcoming and diverse Portland, where Black drag is celebrated not just as entertainment but as a vital cultural and social force.

The history of Black drag in Portland is a testament to the power of creativity, resilience, and community. From its roots in struggle and activism to its current era of celebration and innovation, Black drag has left an indelible mark on the city's cultural landscape—a legacy that will continue to inspire for generations to come.

Thank you, Johna L.