Nunz With Attitude

Their mix of makeup and militancy has made jaws drop for two decades

December 1, 1997 By Scott Williams

It was San Francisco's gayest holiday, and a mass of revelers jammed the Market Street sidewalks for the annual Pride Parade. From inside the shaft of a 40-foot-long uber-penis, constructed of hula hoops and chicken wire and wrapped in a plastic fascimile of a condom, the ever-sassy Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence chanted, "*Cream Reverand Mother, not your lover!*" Dragging up the rear with two flesh-colored beach balls was Sister Mysteria, the order's lone female. Appalling many and amusing many more, this early-'80s safer-sex demo perfectly captures the Sisters' kooky mix of makeup and militancy that has made jaws drop for two decades.

The now-world renowned troupe of naughty nuns first splashed onto the colorful San Francisco scene on Easter Sunday, 1979. To fluster the flannel-and-501 set, they bolted down clone-clogged Castro Street, shrieking in black habits pilfered from an Iowa convent, on the pretext of putting on a production of *The Sound of Music*. The style and sensibility of the founding four-Sister Vicious Power Hungry Bitch, Sister Missionary Position, Sister Agnes De Garron and the Reverend Mother-attracted novices in droves.

Ever since that fateful debut, the Dis-Order of Twisted Sisters has used its cutting-edge creativity to trounce tired cultural taboos; these provocations ultimately landed them on the pope's Official List of Heretics. Their own vows, however, command them to "expiate stigmatic guilt and promulgate universal joy," a mandate they've followed religiously in the fight against AIDS since before the disease was named. By day, the eclectic brood pursues such prosaic professions as computer programming, publishing and counseling the distraught and downtrodden. Once outside the office, they don their pumps and flashy accessories to advocate safer sex, dispense blessings, perform funerals, protest, even peddle the AIDS Ride (in full makeup and habit).

In carefree days gone by, when VD was epidemic and "the gay cancer" waiting to be born, the Sisters published "Play Fair!," San Francisco's first safe-sex brochure. The illustrated pamphlet was full of sage advice for the urban girl on the go such as "Rimming. Sigh. This is the most dangerous sexual behavior. We've lost more Sisters to the clutches of hepatitis, amoebas, giardia and other awful diseases. Even the cleanest-looking, most desirable man can have shit full of bacteria and germs." This streetwise sex ed shows the Sisters' belief in following your bliss, but watching your step while getting there.

In general, “Play Fair!” took a witty, tolerant tone. Still, certain spooky admonishments-“We’re in for some harsh lessons in personal and social responsibility concerning health matters”-cause the spine to tingle when read today. “Play Fair!” was so popular in the city’s fornicatoria that it went into multiple printings. In 1982, the order organized a benefit for the city’s new KS clinic. Shirley MacLaine emceed the Castro Street dog show with Sister Boom Boom; the parade of pooches raised dollars for the new disease plaguing parishioners as well as many Sisters themselves. One of these was Bobbi Campbell, RN, aka Sister Florence Nightmare, who became America’s first spokesperson for PWAs, appearing on the cover of *Newsweek* in 1983. “Bobbi catalyzed us around the new health crisis,” says Sister Vicious Power Hungry Bitch, who realized in 1981-on a bus coming back from the VD clinic-that something unusual was going on in her body. (Sister’s still truckin’.) “Many Sisters would never have gotten involved if not for the AIDS work.” A savvy media maven, Campbell rarely mixed his all-American “AIDS Poster Boy” persona with his more controversial drag habits. His “I Will Survive!” column, which ran in a local gay newspaper, epitomized the struggle for empowerment in the face of imminent death that so many with AIDS have undertaken. It is eerily timeless.

The Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence, Inc., have secured a place in the pantheon of deified AIDS activists. While other groups have come and gone, after almost 20 years the Sisters still grace our community with their sparkling support. But it’s the early contributions of these sacred jesters that stand out as a shining example of people pushing the envelope for a compassionate response to AIDS-when lesser mortals looked away.

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