



Sarria, José (1922-2013)

by Ruth M. Pettis

Encyclopedia Copyright © 2015, glbtq, Inc.
Entry Copyright © 2004, glbtq, inc.
Reprinted from <http://www.glbtq.com>



José Sarria.
Photo provided to the public domain by the International Court System.

José Sarria--also known as "the Widow Norton"--was a San Francisco singer, drag performer, and activist who exemplified gay pride before the phrase was invented. As the founder of the International Court System, he presided over the expansion of drag culture into a vast network of charity balls and extravaganzas.

His venue from the late 1940s to 1964 was the Black Cat Cafe, a bohemian North Beach hangout that Sarria made famous by his high-camp performances. With accompanist James McGinnis (a.k.a. "Hazel"), he perfected a routine using his natural tenor voice that parodied opera and celebrities--augmented by ribald banter with the audience--and closed with the singing of "God Save Us Nelly Queens," often projected to the officers and inmates of the jail across the street.

As a pioneer in gay political theater, Sarria fought back against the oppression gay men and lesbians experienced in the 1950s and 1960s, when gay and lesbian bars were extorted for payoffs to the police and regularly raided in "clean-up" campaigns, when gay men were routinely arrested for cruising the city parks, and drag queens were habitually harassed for cross-dressing. Sarria injected his act with political commentary and with defiant pride. As one frequent patron of the Black Cat remembered, "we were not really saying 'God Save Us Nelly Queens.' We were saying 'We have our rights too.'"

The son of a Colombian mother (Dolores) and Nicaraguan father (Julio), Sarria was the first of his family born in the United States. His birth certificate states December 12, 1923, but Sarria suspects that his mother added a year to deflect attention from her unmarried state.

He lived for much of his childhood with his godmother, Jesserina, while his mother worked as a live-in domestic. The women combined their households in a move from San Francisco to Redwood City during the Great Depression. Both indulged young José's fondness for dressing up in their clothes and encouraged his interest in singing and dancing. Blessed with a fine voice, he received lessons from a retired opera singer during his teens.

Already identifying as gay but not wanting to be labeled a "4-Fer," Sarria enlisted in the army during World War II. Lifelong coping strategies began to emerge during his military service. He overcame his barracks-mates' disdain by treating them to a lavish tour of his home city. By becoming a young officer's personal assistant, Sarria accompanied the occupation forces to Berlin and ended up managing the officers' mess hall.

After the war Sarria began subbing for his lover as waiter and greeter at the Black Cat. Once customers heard him sing, however, he moved to the stage and began developing his signature female impersonation roles.

In that era, the Black Cat's bête noire were the state's vice and alcohol control agencies, which made repeated attempts to close the bar down. The owner of the Black Cat, Sol Stoumen, refused to make

payoffs to the police and sued the liquor control commission, which sparked more police harassment and license revocations.

In response to harassment of gay bars after the 1959 mayoral election, the San Francisco Tavern Guild was formed. In 1961, at the height of a police crackdown, the Guild backed Sarria for a seat on the city's Board of Supervisors. Thus, Sarria became the first openly gay candidate in the world to run for public office.

As an open homosexual and drag queen, Sarria experienced some trouble collecting sufficient signatures to get his name on the ballot, but eventually found enough brave men and women willing to face exposure by signing his petitions. He knew that he had no chance of winning the election, but that was not his goal. His 5600 votes demonstrated for the first time the heft of a gay voting block in the city. Moreover, as historian John D'Emilio has observed, it forced gay San Franciscans "to think about their identity, their sexual orientation, in political terms."

Sarria's activism was of the merry prankster variety that prefigured that of the Radical Faeries. He would call attention to plainclothes cops who infiltrated the Black Cat and instigate a round of applause for them. He distributed "I Am a Boy" labels for cross-dressing Halloween celebrants to wear, so police could not arrest them for "intent to deceive."

Once the target of a morals arrest himself, he urged others in that situation to demand jury trials. Filling the court dockets with such cases prompted judges to demand better evidence from officers and made prosecutions difficult. He helped found the League for Civil Education in 1960 and the Society for Individual Rights (SIR) in 1963.

In 1964 the Tavern Guild declared Sarria the Queen of the Beaux Arts Ball. Sarria rejoined that since he was already a queen, he should henceforth be Empress. His inspiration was a colorful character from the city's history: Joshua Norton, self-proclaimed "Emperor of North America and Protector of Mexico." As "Her Royal Majesty, Empress One of San Francisco, Jose I, the Widow Norton," Sarria purchased a cemetery plot adjoining that of the quirky nineteenth-century merchant and launched the International Court System.

The organization now has chapters throughout the United States, Canada, Mexico, and Britain, providing both men and women arenas for creating drag personae amidst elaborate ritual.

Presiding over celebrations and hobnobbing with notables are recurring themes in Sarria's life. His army stint garnered him connections with Berlin's theater crowd. He once lunched with Pancho Villa's widow. With emblematic flair he served Lyndon Johnson a flaming dessert at the 1968 San Antonio World's Fair, an incident that nearly got him gunned down by the Secret Service. His life is a study in transforming the mundane into high drama.

Robert Rosenberg's and Greta Schiller's documentary *Before Stonewall: The Making of a Gay and Lesbian Community* (1984) features Sarria leading a chorus of "God Save Us Nelly Queens" at a Black Cat reunion.

Sarria was honored by the San Francisco LGBT Pride Celebration Committee with its Lifetime Achievement grand marshal title in 2005. On May 25, 2006 the city of San Francisco renamed a section of 16th Street in the Castro district Jose Sarria Court. A plaque outlining his contributions is embedded in the sidewalk in front of the Harvey Milk Memorial Branch of the public library at 1 José Sarria Court.

In 2009 the California state Assembly honored Sarria during an official celebration of LGBT Pride Month.

Sarria died on August 19, 2013 at his home in Albuquerque, New Mexico. He had been diagnosed in 2012 with a rare cancer of the adrenal glands. He declined chemotherapy treatment for the disease.

Bibliography

Burlingame, Matthew. "The Emperor is an Author: Conversations with Michael R. Gorman." www.angelfire.com/ca3/mattsmind/gorman.html.

Cain, Paul D. *Leading the Parade: Conversations with America's Most Influential Lesbians and Gay Men*. Lanham, Md.: Scarecrow Press, 2002.

Canessa Gallery Artists Resource. "History: Black Cat Cafe." www.canessa.org/html/the_black_cat.html.

D'Emilio, John. *Sexual Politics, Sexual Communities: The Making of a Homosexual Minority in the United States, 1940-1970*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983.

Gorman, Michael R. *The Empress Is a Man: Stories from the Life of José Sarria*. New York: Harrington Park Press, 1998.

International Court System--Official Web Site. www.impcourt.org/.

Jones, Jeff. "Her Most Imperial Majesty, Empress Jose I, the Widow Norton." www.qx.net/jeff/gaylex/jose.htm.

Rosenberg, Robert, and Greta Schiller, dirs. *Before Stonewall: The Making of a Gay and Lesbian Community*. Videocassette, 88 min. New York: First Run Features, 1984.

Shilts, Randy. *The Mayor of Castro Street*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1982.

About the Author

Ruth M. Pettis is the Oral History Project manager for the Northwest Lesbian and Gay History Museum Project in Seattle and editor of *Mosaic 1: Life Stories*, a collection of stories from the project's oral history collection. She has contributed articles and fiction to a number of gay and women's publications. She has an A.B. in anthropology from Indiana University and an M.L.S. from Simmons College in Boston.