

# Bambi meets Tenderloin art critic – a twisted saga

BY ED BOWERS

**B**AMBI Lake has been a habitu  of the Tenderloin for at least two decades. She's a transvestite poet/performance artist/singer who recently put out a CD titled "My Glamorous Life as a Broadway Hostess."

The word glamorous on the cover is spelled oddly. It looks almost right.

Just like Bambi. She looks like a woman but she's not. She's artifice.

But this CD is a masterpiece, a real work of art. The minute I heard it, I wanted to review it, and I don't even like this kind of music, much preferring the work of dead jazz musicians to the living songs the dead sing when all they want to do is make money.

The album perfectly captures the decadence of the '30s and fully documents the visceral extremes of joy, delusion and self-indulgence that reflect a myopic world reduced to trivia, momentary pleasure and egocentric glory that will eventually end in carnage, genocide and the atomic bomb.

The names and Social Security cards of the characters have been changed, but in the 21st century the actors remain the same.

My friend Vlad Popolev, a poet, once had to throw Bambi Lake out of his second-story window. She was obnoxiously out of control. He's from Russia. He knows.

A rendition of "Song of the Siren" is an anthem to self-obsession aimed at seducing those who would follow Bambi's path, thinking it romantic. Believe me, I've known Bambi Lake for six years. This is a song sung by Death.

My friend Snow at the 21 Club had to punch Bambi in the face to get her to shut up and back off. I guess if two speed freaks are added together with an argument then two and two equals one broken nose. I've never been good at math but I have learned the basics.

The next song, "Jaded Lady," is a lively up-tempo ditty about the glamorous life of a male prostitute working in a midnight meat market whose only goal is making lots of money; a story not so much different from that lived by the average hardworking slob.

Some idiot calling himself The King of Satan clocked Bambi Lake at his satanic celebration. Not even Hell wants her.

"Midnight in Manhattan" is a perfect New York City sophisticated lady taxicab romance song. It's a myth, but Bambi renders it perfectly. It is moonlight and skyscrapers in young eyes.

Bambi was stabbed by the manager of a punk rock club a few months ago. She lived to tell me about it at the recent City Hall poetry reading.

Nobody really cared about her being stabbed, but the fact that she survived caused a certain amount of disappointment among the underground poets who have known her for years.

Then on the CD there's an amusing narrative, followed by the song "Cigars, Cigarettes," whose subject is how wonderful it is to be a gangster's mistress dying from loneliness and alcoholism.

One week after I met Bambi in the year 2000 she entered Alcoholics Anonymous. It didn't work.

The content of this show is very funny, and

the fact that Bambi has connections with many famous and glamorous show business gangsters but is currently homeless adds irony to its sinister subtext.

Sean Penn and Henry Rollins had something to do with the production of this CD. I'm not sure precisely what they did and since she and I are no longer on speaking terms, I suppose I'll never find out. I'm not a famous person. I'm ignorant.

"Marahuana" is a tango sung about the soothing caress of getting high on pot. The word marijuana was misspelled. It should have been spelled "Meth."

Bambi prefers hard drugs, but art is illusion and she does a great job of creating a romantic fantasy in the mind of the listener concerning the virtues of oblivion.

"The Golden Age of Hustlers" is a masterpiece and it was written by Bambi Lake. It's a precise and hard look at what being a gay hustler is in San Francisco. The way it is sung is minus any trace of self-pity, and actually conveys an affection and feeling of universal brotherhood for those who have shared her lifestyle.

It's nice when somebody who is narcissistically psychotic can look outside herself for a few seconds and bring to light a vision. I admire that.

My friend Veronica was sitting with singer Mark Eitzel at the original Baobab when Bambi Lake saw them, threw a fit, put her foot through a plate glass window, and was spotlighted by the Beauty Bar and carted offstage by an ambulance team who laughed in her face.

The rest of Bambi's repertoire is also per-

fectly rendered. It is pure show business, the songs of a 57-year-old transvestite who sings like a fallen angel and lives out of a trunk.

But right now Bambi is living out her Tennessee Williams fantasies at the kindness of strangers. She's homeless, as are many mentally ill people in San Francisco and the United States of America.

Poet-photographer Ramu Aki gave me her CD and suggested that in my capacity as art critic for Central City Extra that I review it. Then my friend Veronica ran into Bambi on Polk Street and informed her as to where she could locate me.

Bambi contacted me, and I scheduled a photo shoot for her. Then I mentioned to her that I had been told that someone might be moving out of my residence and that she should inquire as to its availability. I forgot that you have to watch what you say around unstable people.

One mistake, that's all it takes around here. So Bambi came back the next day and said that she wouldn't do the photo shoot if she couldn't get the room.

The room, as it turned out, was not available, so, after insulting me because I had no power to cure her homelessness, she walked out. But then she returned after I canceled the photo shoot at her request and screamed out my name on the street for 15 minutes of fame because she wanted to go to the photo shoot.

With some losers you cannot win. The Diva was now transformed into the Wicked Witch of the West.

I've read books about people who are demon-possessed. You don't want to engage these creatures in conversation. Just review

their CDs and get the hell out.

Later, Bambi returned twice to insult Ramu with racial epithets, and caused a certain amount of unnecessary stress to people like me who only wish her well, don't know any famous people, and are just surviving from paycheck to paycheck.

The Bambi Lake saga is a Tenderloin story. It is selfish and it is sad. She received thousands of dollars for this CD, but it didn't do her any good. She blew it.

But she is not alone. There are many like her here. They are not nice people. They destroy themselves, and sabotage anyone who would help them.

Yet there is a light inside them that is dying to get out and, heroically, some of them manage to shine for a bright second in a precise and focused manner that can be for the good of others before their flame is extinguished.

I suggest that anyone who loves music purchase "My Glamorous Life." If you're smart enough to read between its lines, you will get quite an education.

How can you purchase it? I don't know. Bambi sells them for three dollars on the street. All you have to do is find her. Check out Polk Street. Or wait for her to get mad at me again and go down to Hyde.

Warning: A few months ago, while trying to order coffee, I was sitting with Bambi outside the Caf  Zoetrope when she spit at the waiter for giving her \$800 fur coat to Goodwill because she hadn't retrieved it for two weeks and we took off in opposite directions.

Maybe you should just order this CD on the Internet. Getting too close to the source can often be a losing proposition. ■



PHOTO BY RAMU AKI  
**Bambi Lake** is a transvestite poet torch singer whose CD is a masterpiece. She sings like a fallen angel and lives out of a trunk.

# Rat season — 'We've got 'em. Huge. The size of cats.'

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berries and other food."

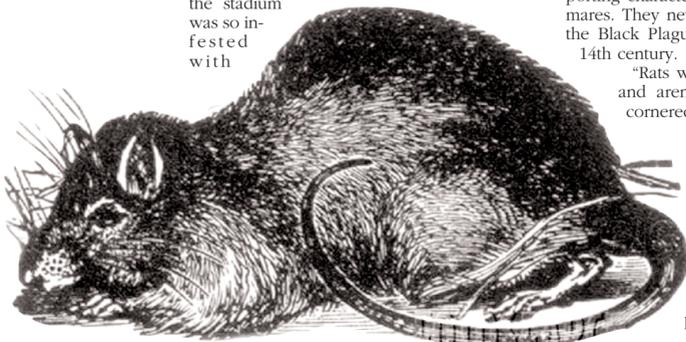
Abandoned sandwiches are high on their list.

Nobody knows how many rats are in the Tenderloin let alone in San Francisco, but they are present just about everywhere at one time or another. With food, water and shelter they multiply like crazy.

How do rats do it? Quickly and often. Male and female rats may have sex 20 times a day, according to Robert Sullivan's book, "Rats." One pair of rats has the potential to birth 15,000 descendants in a year.

Phil Rossi, who coordinates Integrated Pest Management for Rec and Park's 250-park system, said a rule of thumb is that rats equal the human population, which puts the number in San Francisco at close to 800,000. "And I think that's conservative," he said, "but it's just a guess."

Park facilities can be overrun quickly. One Rec and Park employee recalls when Kezar Stadium had to be closed to any event that had food because the stadium was so infested with



ART FROM ANIMALS BY WILDSIDE PRESS

rats gobbling up what people were throwing away. "We had to ban events at Kezar," she said. "They were all over the place."

The Tenderloin is especially vulnerable because it is old and densely populated. Rats like to burrow through the mortar of its large brick buildings to look for food and to hide and perhaps nest, although shrubs suit them best, which is why they're rampant at Boeddeker and TL's other two open spaces. Metal plating is used to repair the brick intrusions. For the brown sewer rats, which are slightly bigger than roof rats, a large underground sewer system accommodates them. They are more prolific and more aggressive. They can push roof rats out of their territories.

Sewer rats live in or near garbage dumps, sewers and basements and are good swimmers. A roof rat likes warmer weather and is a poor swimmer but an agile climber. Both are nocturnal and omnivorous — although grains rank high — and both are burgeoning now.

Children, or adults for that matter, are usually not in any danger from rats, though they may be frightened. Long viewed as disgusting, disease-carrying parasites, rats are often supporting characters of horror stories and nightmares. They never got over being blamed for the Black Plague that ravaged Europe in the 14th century.

"Rats will run away from loud noises and aren't dangerous unless they are cornered and you're trying to hurt them," said Olga Jaurigui, senior Environmental Health technician with Public Health. "Then they will attack humans."

DPH advises other city departments that contract separately for pest control, and under the health code requires property owners to keep their spaces unattractive

to rodents and to do their own trapping. The PUC, which has jurisdiction over sewers, contracts with Pestec, a company in the Mission.

Rats can carry upward of 30 diseases, although it is the roof rat that's most likely to carry plague germs (see sidebar) and show up at Boeddeker, the Tenderloin Playground and Sgt. John McCauley Park on Larkin Street between Geary and O'Farrell.

What attracts rats is food and that's what's bringing them to the Tenderloin Children's Playground and Boeddeker.

"Rats," said Children's Playground Director Kay Rodrigues, making a face. "We've got 'em. Huge. The size of cats."

She was standing on the playground next to the garbage enclosure and its porous metal gate. The gate had a new 3½-by-2½-foot solid metal plate at the bottom to keep out rats. Park and Rec's three-man pest management team, responding to the infestation, had installed it when they put two traps inside by the garbage can.

Nine-year-old Dominic Eik sidled up to Rodrigues. Sure, he has seen rats several times, he said, in the grass on the other side of the north fence, running on the top of it, and on the 10-foot wall and fence to the east. "I look for them," he said. Nope, he wasn't scared, he said.

The next day, Berrios was at the eastern fence. He pointed to a rat hole in the ground on the other side where he said pest management put poison when they set traps by the garbage cans. Garbage got out of hand while he was away three weeks, he said. "We're short on staff and if it was only cleaned up once or twice a week, then it happened," Berrios said. "That's the way I see it."

Food attracted those rats from the hole and more from the garbage cans that he pointed to farther down the fence. They belong to the Arundell Apartments at 526 Ellis.

He said he has seen the rats running atop

the fences there. He held his hands 9 inches apart to show their body size.

Mice have beleaguered the park before, he said, but "this is the worst we've had rats."

Some mornings now Berrios sees two rats at 5 a.m. scampering across the front steps. Walking out to the steps, he climbed over the rail and pulled back vegetation to show a rat hole at the edge of the building. "I saw one in the building yesterday. I'll have to put in another work order."

Three days later, the Arundell Apartments manager, who refused to give her name, denied that the property had any rats. "Absolutely" no rats, she said, "and no droppings." She wouldn't say more.

It is possible the rats in the front of the playground are the brown to gray sewer rat, also called the Norway rat. "Remodeling or work on sewer lines will disturb colonies that weren't apparent before," said DPH's Zverina. "They need new hiding places."

They are a problem in the sewers where they find the grease they adore. The PUC has a program that encourages North Beach and Chinatown restaurants to contain their fats, oils and grease (FOG) instead of dumping them down the drain. Clogging means a feast for rats.

The PUC wants to eliminate dumping altogether. Next year, the PUC will start a pilot program to collect FOG and turn it into biodiesel fuel for city vehicles.

"You'll never get 100% eradication," Phil Rossi of Pest Management said. "McCauley Park has regular activity and we always keep a black box in it."

A black plastic box is about a foot long, 8 inches wide and 4 inches high and has a door that allows a rat to go inside, eat tasty food off a spit, then leave. Pest Management has one each at the playground, Boeddeker and Sgt. John McCauley parks.

Besides grain, the roof rat likes sourdough

bread and peanut butter but even so the food in the box is Generation Mini Block and it's irresistible. It contains chemicals that destroy the rat's nervous system. One dinner is enough to kill it in two to three days, Rossi said.

"All you can do is monitor," Rossi said. "In one month they should be declining. If they are not taking the bait, they're not present."

The Boeddeker clubhouse gets cleaned regularly. It has a kitchen and refrigerator in one corner. The seniors who play bingo three afternoons a week have doughnuts and snacks and Pastor Roger Huang from the San Francisco Rescue Mission brings food in on Tuesdays and Fridays.

The snap traps were put down after a thorough cleaning of the facility, and always away from children and dogs in rooms accessible only to staff, according to Rossi. The "ReCreation," a volunteer cleanup operation Sept. 9 sponsored by the San Francisco Parks Trust was followed by another session. Assistant Recreation Director Pat Wiley, who oversees Boeddeker, found "mice poop." And when others told her they had seen rodents, she was "horrified."

"People leave food on Ellis Street and in the park," Wiley said. "It's unsanitary. I don't know how police can handle that. I don't know the answer."

"If I walk up (to the encampment) and ask them not to sleep there they look at me like I am talking a different language. If they are stoned, they get angry. I've been spit on and my car's been kicked in. It's not a director's job."

But in recent weeks the street encampments have diminished. Diamond-shaped SFPD signs reading "No obstruction on street or sidewalks" are posted on the park's Ellis Street gate. Dan Stein, a resident of Presentation Senior Community at Ellis and Taylor, said Tenderloin Police Capt. Kathryn Brown is probably responsible for it.

## When rats brought death to S.F.

**S**AN FRANCISCO's rat problems are nothing compared to our bubonic plague years in the early 20th century when the city had a bounty on rats and killed a million of them in two months.

The dead rats were taken to Bureau of Health Rat Receiving Stations.

From 1900 to 1909, about 200 people in San Francisco died from the plague. It was the same plague, or "black death," that devastated Europe in the Middle Ages. The plague hit here twice.

In 1900, rats and people off a boat from Hong Kong were blamed. Houses in Chinatown were inspected and 1,200 were scoured. A move to close Chinatown failed. The plague subsided in 1904, but 122 had died and no one knew with certainty what caused it.

After the 1906 earthquake, rat and flea populations exploded. A larger plague outbreak began in May 1907 and peaked in September. All parts of the city were affected. Of 160 human cases, 77 died, all "white persons, many of them of a good condition in life ... and dwelling in houses that would commonly be called 'sanitary,'" one report said.

In 1908 it was accepted as medical fact that fleas off rats spread the plague's germs. In a historic civic effort, organizations throughout the city pitched in to educate the citizenry and eradicate rats. The U.S. Public Health Service established Rat Receiving Stations and the bounty concept was very successful: a million were killed in two months. By 1909 it was over.

In a 1926 follow-up study, 20,000 rats were trapped, killed and analyzed by a five-man crew to determine if the city was in any danger of the plague. It wasn't. ■

—TOM CARTER

"So far, it seems to be working day and night," he says.

And as the colder weather sets in, rats will stay closer to their nests and won't mate as much. ■