

In *LGBT: San Francisco*, Celebrating the Birth of Pride

By [Mark Holgate](#)

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It's rare you leaf through a book of reportage and portraiture that makes you want to know what happened to every single person captured in every single frame. With photographer [Daniel Nicoletta](#)'s *LGBT San Francisco* (Reel Art Press) a remarkable, transfixing record of the gay, lesbian, and trans communities from the very early 1970s to today, you're compelled to think just that. Of course, many of the narratives which unfolded for the people in these photographs are writ large, providing an oftentimes deeply painful, other times hugely uplifting, backdrop: the election then later assassination of Harvey Milk, a member of the San Francisco Board of Supervisors (Nicoletta met Milk and his partner Scott Smith at their photo shop, Castro Camera); the rise of the fabulous Radical Faeries; and the war against HIV and AIDS.

Flicking through Nicoletta's book, it's fantastic to see the fearlessness, wonderful to witness the joy, yet also empowering to observe history relate that when you resist, the world can end up tilting in a more progressive and welcome direction. There's plenty of bravery on show here, not to mention beards, big hair, bare breasts and all manner of incandescent, proud beauty. Nicoletta spoke by phone about his book, which, he says, has been in gestation ever since he arrived in San Francisco as a kid barely out his teens and found a city that has nurtured, challenged and inspired him ever since—and always with a camera to hand. Nicoletta will be making various [appearances in New York and San Francisco](#) in the days leading up to the city's Pride march on June 25.

Why this book and why now?

The book has been a long term dream. Books have a staying power that other forms of presentation do not. Ever since I was a young man, I've dreamt of publishing something that could be passed along to future generations. As to why now . . . it was more a matter of patience, of it happening organically. I love shooting pictures, so my mind set was that there would be a time in my life that I'd engage with all the images I'd shot as a living organism.

When did you start taking pictures?

My childhood was full of Instamatic moments! We were a typical household of artists, photographing each other, and my interest in photography was carried forward from my mom; she had a roll camera to document her family. The torch was actually passed in more ways than one; a shared a sense of theatricality—my mom was a showgirl. She was part of the Norman's Revue, one of the last burlesque troupes. She'd travel by train around the country performing. She was a beautiful showgirl and then she met my dad. The rest is herstory!

Tell me about starting to take photographs in San Francisco. . . .

It sort of coincides with my arrival on Castro Street as a young man of 19. I realized that timidity in the face of my own sexuality was not going to be useful; I wanted to be steeped in a community that was intent on making a better world for the LGBTQ community. I wanted to use whatever creativity I had to interface with a vibrant community that was exploding. And then [Anita Bryant challenged us](#) a year later, and that became a real call to action.

Your book chronicles an ever more tangible presence of the LGBTQ community in San Francisco over the decades. . . .

One thing that is very palpable to me, and I am glad I got to experience it, is the humble beginning of everything; meeting Harvey [Milk] and Scott [Smith] at Castro Camera. . . . A recognition of anything gay was hugely exciting because evidence of it was so scant. Armistead Maupin's *Tales of the City* came along and that raised visibility, and the explosion that came afterwards is the tell of history. When I look at my career, it was a very incestuous scene—community based slide shows, community based film shows. We wanted a wider audience, but were content with this little hotbed of community interface. Yet we always had an eye towards preserving our stories. We understood the power of storytelling.

In the last few years, we've seen a lot of depictions of [San Francisco in the '70s](#), from Gus Van Sant's brilliant *Milk* to ABC's *When We Rise*. What are your thoughts on that?

The Life and Times of Harvey Milk I always think of as Harvey Milk 1.0, and Gus's movie took it to another stratosphere, that movie was such a blessing. All of these are a reminder that there's a kernel of hope in every situation. Great liberties might get taken with the authenticity of the narratives, but the basic theme is that we are a movement, and we want, we *have* to get involved. Every time a creative piece comes out—and I hope my book is a part of that—it is a call to action. When we are challenged, we rise. Anesthetization is the antithesis of vibrant life, whether it's because of the material commodification of our existence, or a sense of apathy. It's heartbreaking when people feel that they can't change things.

Can you tell me about some of the images?

The cover [two guys, one wearing a tank bearing the legend 'Faggots are Fantastic'] was a happy surprise. I didn't know either of them, but the apartment they were about to walk into was become a very significant location in my life. The guys themselves became good friends over the years. They're both gone now, but they embodied ideas that have gone into today. They were radical faeries before that term had even been uttered. At the time, we turned the image into a postcard, and sent it out as a lark. It has become a beloved image, certainly beloved to me. The 1979 image of Lawanda Rose and Chaudoin, taken on Haight Street, I knew it would stay strong; one of the guys is still a close friend. By and large, my editor Tony Norman and I were able to distill a lot of poignance into the book. That's why the page count kept rising! We couldn't encapsulate this movement in 100 pages.

Will you do another?

I have a decade's worth of studio work I'd like to do as second volume. The city's queer community marched its way through my studio. I fancied myself as the Richard Avedon of the gay community!

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You have some talks planned in New York. What will you be discussing?

There are so many stories. Google any one of the names in the book and you will come up with amazing tales. That's the incredible thing about tech: I don't want to sound patronizing, but for the younger generations, it's good to not have a vacuum. You can stay strong through the ritual of storytelling.

Story-wise, does one person from the book particularly stand in your mind?

Towards the end of the book, there's a portrait of Jose Julio Sarria. In 1961 he was one of the first people to run for political office as an openly gay man; he precedes Harvey Milk. He happened to be a drag queen, a very beloved drag queen, who performed at the Black Cat bar. He was a survivor and a friend. He created a complex history that has really nested in the transformations that we take for granted. It's my obligation to connect us to that longer narrative that sets up the '70s. . . .

What has been the reaction so far to the book?

My Facebook page is blowing up right now! It's been very favorable, and there has been a lot of tears shed. It's just beginning, and it's very moving. I lost many colleagues who didn't get to do this. I feel very blessed that I can.



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Harmodius and Hoti, August 1975



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Jose Julio Sarria, Absolute Empress I de San Francisco, aka the Widow Norton,
October 27, 2011



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Castro Street Fair, August 1976, Enchantra



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San Francisco LGBT Parade, June 1975
Grace Jones



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© Daniel Nicoletta
SF LGBT Pride Parade, June 26, 1978.
Administrative Assistant, Anne Kronenberg and recently elected
Supervisor, Harvey Milk.



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Dan Nicoletta and LZ Love, June 27, 1982



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© Daniel Nicoletta
Haight Street Thrift Store, May 15, 1979. Lawanda Rose and Chaudoin.



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Angels of Light show, Inferno Reason, October 1975. David Flatley, Gregory Cruickshank, Steven Brown and Lichen



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Willie and Sylvester,
San Francisco LGBT Pride Celebration
June 1976