

48hills



Fresh Meat Fest chops it up with fierce bomba, deaf drag, queer taiko

23rd edition of groundbreaking queer-trans arts festival continues to grow with thrilling diversity and up-and-coming talent.

By [JOSHUA ROTTER](#) JUNE 14, 2024

San Francisco's [Fresh Meat Festival](#) shows no signs of expiring after 23 years. If anything, this year's edition is dripping with new blood, a healthy number of new premieres, and the choicest cuts around.

Hitting Mission District's [Z Space](#) for three nights (Fri/21-Sun/23), the festival celebrating prime trans and queer performance returns with a whole charcuterie platter of voguing superstars, deaf theater visionaries ([Iman](#)), queer Salsa champions, Trans-Americana musicians ([Shawna Virago](#)), taiko drummers ([Queer Taiko](#)), hip-hop luminaries ([LBXX](#)), comedians, South Asian contemporary dancers, bomba musicians ([Batey Tambó](#)), and more.

Organized by [Fresh Meat Productions'](#) artistic director [Sean Dorsey](#) and managing director [Eric Garcia](#) and femme-ceed by drag personality Churro Nomi, the beefy showcase includes two programs, four presentations, and over a dozen artists and ensembles in a 13,000-square-foot venue.

In advance of this year's festival, I spoke to Iman, Queer Taiko's Kristy Aki Oshiro, and the folx behind Batey Tambó about queering art forms, challenging norms, and celebrating differences.

IMAN

From Oasis to [Oaklash](#) to Fresh Meat Festival, Bay Area's deaf drag trailblazer Iman is one queen whose performance—a signature blend of ASL and dance—is dragging the art form into the 21st century.

48 HILLS *What can you tell us about the show you'll be putting on at the Fresh Meat Festival?*

IMAN It's gonna be super fun! It's gonna have dance, amazing costumes, and great music. There will be some iconic moments, for sure.

48 HILLS *Have you faced any specific challenges or misconceptions about being both deaf and a drag performer?*

IMAN So many! Even now, I still get asked all the common misconception questions about being deaf and what that means. I've been discouraged and discriminated against in both communities. Being told that "Deaf people can't enjoy music" or that we can't do something... story of my life.

Coming into the drag space as a deaf performer puts more pressure on me in the sense that I feel like I have more to prove. I think the challenge in getting bookings is that folks couldn't see how that could work. Or dealing with people who will try to use you as a "Token Deaf." As a drag performer, the notion that you weren't a "Real Queen" if you didn't look or perform a specific way was the mindset for so long. It wasn't until I moved to the Bay that that notion changed.

48 HILLS *Can you share any memorable experiences that highlight the empowerment and representation you've brought to the stage as a deaf drag queen?*

IMAN Oaklash was a definitive moment, for sure! The first show we did that I felt "seen" as a deaf artist was during the pandemic. I had the opportunity to not only perform and interpret but also do it at a time when accessibility was just starting to become a topic of conversation and where it felt like those conversations were taken seriously. Having my face/name attached in those spaces felt like it had an impact.

I got to be in an incredibly life-changing play/stage production series called *Paradise* with the amazing and super-talented India Sky and Brandon Kadden Maddox, where I talked with them extensively about identity and deafness.

Performing for [Reparations](#) was part of those highlights, especially as a Black, queer, deaf drag artist. Reparations allowed me to perform and showcase multiple identities and be respected.

We still have a long way to go in terms of opening doors, and I'm gonna keep going until we do.



Queer Taiko. Photo by Mark Shigenaga

QUEER TAIKO

Queer Taiko, the revolving multicultural and intergenerational LGBTQIA+ group led by Oakland's Kristy Aki Oshiro, demonstrates how even diverse communities can come together by playing to the beat of their own Japanese drums.

48 HILLS *What can you tell us about the show you'll be putting on at Fresh Meat Festival?*

KRISTY AKI OSHIRO I had performed at the Fresh Meat Festival before as a taiko drummer. To be invited back with my own trans and queer-centered taiko group is super exciting.

We'll feature an original song that I wrote and named after my very favorite food, which is Japanese curry. So the song is called "Kare." What I like about that song is it includes improvised solos done by certain members of the group so it's going to feature members' very unique individuality. They get to be themselves through the drum.

48 HILLS *Talk to me about your journey into taiko drumming and how it intersects with your identity as a member of the LGBTQ+ community.*

KRISTY AKI OSHIRO I started learning taiko drumming when I was nine in a youth group in my hometown of Kona, on the west side of Hawai'i Island. I got into it because it was part of my cultural heritage.

What it became was a great outlet for me, being a young, queer, trans-nonbinary person trying to figure out who I was and what my life can be.

There weren't a lot of safe spaces for me to feel like I could be myself openly. And even though I didn't have the language that I do now to talk about all the things that I am, I found a safe harbor through the art

form itself, like being able to drum when I was playing taiko. That is when I felt like I could express who I was in a very nonverbal, physical way.

48 HILLS *In what ways does your identity influence your approach to taiko drumming and your overall artistic expression?*

KRISTY AKI OSHIRO When I first started learning taiko, there was a lot of value and importance placed on everyone playing, looking, and sounding the same. And now my approach is the exact opposite, which is we don't all have to look the same.

When I teach other people how to play taiko, I tell them certain ways to move their arms and go through the forms to be safe and not hurt themselves or other people. But then there's a lot of room outside of that to move in a way that works best for your body and represents who you are. I like to celebrate and embrace our differences and encourage them among our members. As long as we are authentically ourselves, we are doing justice to ourselves and the art form.



Batey Tambó. Photo by Miranda Guzman

BATEY TAMBÓ

Don't call them bombastic. Bay Area-based, women-of-color-led Batey Tambó's forceful fusion of drum and dance is only matched by directors Denise Solis and Julia Cepeda's demand for more inclusivity within the centuries-old musical tradition of Afro-Indigenous Puerto Rican bomba.

48 HILLS *What can you tell us about the show you'll be putting on at Fresh Meat Festival?*

JULIA CEPEDA This will be our fourth year participating. We always strive to connect with a special theme and to present our authenticity as a diverse group within the LGBTQ community. We want to showcase the heart of our existence and resistance.

DENISE SOLIS This year the theme of our performance is *El Fuego de mi Tambor*, which translates to *The Fire of my Drum*, which is the breath of strength that the Afro-Indigenous Puerto Rican people's ancestors felt to resist through gathering and practicing it.

Our wonderful audience can expect to see and hear voices, drums, and dancers on the stage honoring Afro-Puerto Rican resistance while showing up as our authentic queer selves with some allies in the mix.

48 HILLS *In what ways does your performance group celebrate and honor the cultural heritage of bomba while also expressing queer experiences and perspectives?*

DENISE SOLIS Our group was started by two queer women and has always been a safe space that is centered on queer Black/Latinx experience. We are a diverse group of queers and allies and celebrate taking on roles that have primarily been taken by cisgender straight males in the tradition. We expand that construct to have a mostly female, black, and brown queer-led group that is open for all to learn and be a part of as their authentic, unapologetic selves!

JULIA CEPEDA In each piece we put together, we strive to honor the roots of the oral tradition of bomba. For example, in the songs we want to dance to or interpret and in the resistance of who we are as queer or bisexual women or trans/nonbinary individuals, we openly want to show our love for the community while feeling connected to the respect for others.

48 HILLS *Can you share any memorable experiences that highlight the empowerment and representation you bring to the stage as a queer bomba performance group?*

DENISE SOLIS There have been so many. About seven to eight years ago, we played plena for the [SF Trans March](#), joined by some of our elders (Jesus and Carlos Cepeda)—and the awesome ladies from [El/La Para Trans Latinas](#) wore their Trans Flag-inspired skirts and danced to our music as part of the El/La Para Trans Latinas contingent for the march. That was a great moment.

JULIA CEPEDA Every moment has been unique. However, I remember that during one performance, my cousin Rafael Cepeda (an international bomba dancer) visited California for the first time and participated. But the most important thing is that after being here, he felt so empowered that he asked for my support to tell his father that he wanted to have an open relationship with a man and live freely. Thank you, Fresh Meat!

FRESH MEAT FESTIVAL runs June 21-23 at Z Space, SF. For tickets and more info, go [here](#).