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# God save the nelly queens

An interview with **José Sarria** by Wickie Stamp





**In the 90's, the gay/lesbian community is squabbling over its "respectability." Some of its members put on power suits, pick up brief cases and trot off to the State House. Others, usually in the bars, prance around in dresses. Each is appalled by**

## **God save the nelly queens**

**— and is usually trashed by — the other.**

**Since the emergence of the gay/lesbian community, this cat fighting divides us. José Sarria, a leader in the embryonic Sixties gay/lesbian community fell on the side of the unrespectable. A female impersonator at the Black Cat, a San Francisco bohemian bar, Sarria insisted on flamboyance in his leadership. At the 1965 Halloween Beaux Arts Ball, he summoned up the spirit of Joshua Norton, a rice merchant gone mad who, 100 years earlier, had declared himself Emperor of the United States and Protector of Mexico. Seizing upon this madcap character, who San Francisco held dear to its heart, Sarria dubbed himself the "Widow Norton," claiming to be the dearly departed Emperor Norton's long-lost "husband."**



José Julio Sarria is considered by many to be the grand dame of gay liberation. An outlandish professional female impersonator, he has fought for gay rights since 1950. In 1961, he was the first openly-gay candidate to run for public office in the United States.

But Sarria's grandest scheme was revealed in 1965. At the Halloween Beaux Arts Ball, he resurrected Emperor Norton, a legendary San Francisco character. At the ball, Sarria declared himself Empress José Norton I of San Francisco, Dowager Widow, Empress of San Francisco and Protectress of Mexico. Shortly thereafter, to the horror of the more conservative members of the gay/lesbian community, he pulled together his imperial council, including his "royal hairdresser Fernando," and founded the Royal Courts, a pre-Stonewall gay philanthropic and social system.

**Tell us about yourself, José.**

Well, my dear, my name is José Sarria...S-A-R-R-I-A...Make sure you put the accent on the "e." I am known also as the Widow Norton and the Queen Bee of San Francisco.

**Do you mind if I tape this?**

Oh, I think you should as what I am going to tell you is very important.

**How did you become the Queen Bee of San Francisco?**

Well, in the 50's, I was quite well-known in San Francisco. I used to perform at a bar called The Black Cat. I got to the Cat right after the war.

**Excuse me, but was that World War Two?**

Oh, my dear, how dare you? Of course. I got to the Cat around 1947 or 1948. The Cat was one of the most famous bars in the Barbary Coast. It used to be a sailor's hangout, and then became a Bohemian hangout where artists such as Steinbeck could be found. The Cat was quite a place. A little wild, if you know what I mean. And when I arrived, well, that just put the dot on the i.

**How do you mean?**

Because I put on a single-artist show at the Cat on Sundays, which was quite the show. Well, I performed opera, told stories. I carried on. Sometimes during my operas, I died three times. I wore dresses. I carried a torch. I had the afternoon cornered in San Francisco. I also let the community know what was going on.

**What do you mean you let them know what was going on?**

If you wanted to know what was going on in San Francisco you came down to the Cat. I told the news of where the police of the Alcohol Beverage Commission were raiding. I read and interpreted the news in a gay way. It was total camp.

**Can you give us some examples?**

Well, I would hear that the police were going to raid the parks where there used to be a lot of action (especially around two a.m. after the bars closed). So, Sunday would come and during my performances I would say "Uh, the News of the Day just came through. It seems that the bushes and trees in the parks of San Francisco have a new blue fungus. They haven't been able to identify it but at night time it shines like the stars. Therefore, all the bushes will be trimmed three feet up from the ground and then sprayed. So, my advice to you is to stay out until the poisonous spray goes away." And everyone got the message. Another time I found out that the cops were arresting men at Penney's, which, my dear, had a hot toilet back then. So, during my show, I would say "Penney's is having a fire sale. It's beginning in the basement and working up. Anyone caught there has nobody but themselves to blame for getting burned!" So, you stayed out of Penney's. That's how I interpreted the news.

**Was there a lot of trouble with the police back then?**

Oh dear, yes. They wanted to close the Black Cat and the other bars where gays went because they were gathering places for homosexuals. Back then, the ABC Liquor Board could close a bar for men seen touching each other. You couldn't touch. But they wouldn't tell you when it was coming. They would wait six months and then you would get a citation which, for example, said "On January the third, two men, one blond haired, blue eyed, wearing a pin-striped suit sat down next to another one. One put his hand on the other's knee." These are the charges the ABC, the liquor board, would bring against the bar. Then, after you got so many points, they would take your license away. How could you defend yourself? Do you understand?

**Can you give some examples of how you preached gay pride?**

At the end of my shows, I asked everybody to stand up and I would say "I want everybody for one minute to be proud of what he is." And then we would sing *God Save Nelly Queens* which was the song I closed my act with. Now, the Black Cat was on the street behind city prison and the windows of the prison faced the Cat. The police often arrested 100 to 120 people a week for lewd and lascivious conduct. And we of the Cat would come to the Cat's door and sing *God Save the Nelly Queens* and give those boys moral support for Monday when they went to court. And the Sargent on the beat in the prison would raise the windows and say to the prisoners, "Your leader is singing." (At this point José sings *God Save the Nelly Queens* to the tune of *God Bless America*.) God save the nelly queens, God save the nelly queens. God save us queens — and lesbians, too. From every mountainside, long may we live or fly. God save us nelly queens, God save us queens! And that was the end of my show.

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I noticed how people were living double lives, being closeted, which is something I have never done. I was someone who had been able to live a very open life. My family, when I was a little child, gave me dresses to dress up in. I also played house and I carried on. I was always the queen and everyone on my block built carriages and pushed me around. So, at the Cat, little by little, I started to preach that gay was good and that you should be proud and put your head up high. Now, you don't need to wear a sign, but don't be looking in the mirror and saying 'Hi, butch' when you are Mary!

**When did you leave the Cat?**

In 1963. We fought, but the Cat's license was taken away.

**What did you do then?**

Well, at that time there were gay ad hoc committees made up of one to ten people

who said they were going to be the representatives of the then well-established gay community of San Francisco. And I said, "No, no, no, I have been the queen bee too long and I am not just moving over and letting some of you assholes take over!"

**What did you do?**

God, there is so much to tell! Well, in 1964, the Tavern Guild put on a New Year's Eve ball. The Tavern Guild was an organization made up of bar people who, for years, hosted a social gathering where bar owners would discuss such things as bad check artists or lay out a plan of attack for when the police would come around and sneak into the bars. They had their first ball in 1964, which I did not attend. They had their ball anyway at the Hilton Hotel, which was just finished at that time. Of course, people were closeted and they didn't tell the truth when they went out to rent a place. It was the Guild's first function and first endeavor and it was such a big undertaking. They went in as the Tavern Guild and the Hilton manager didn't say anything. Actually I think he was a little gay himself, and he didn't inquire who the hell the Tavern Guild was! The Guild's New Year's Eve ball shared the main ballroom with a Chinese wedding. Can you imagine women dressed as men, men dressed as women, coming up the escalator, mixing in with the Chinese wedding reception? My dear, there were two-hundred people gathered outside the Hilton just to watch the

show! The Chinese wedding went to hell, the Hilton wrote a letter and said, "Don't you ever set foot in our doors again!" and they fired the manager! The story hit national coverage.

**This is in 1965?**

No, 1964. That's when the Tavern Guild did this? No queen was crowned. So, then I attended in 1965 when the event was held at Winterland, which was the ice-skating rink here in San Francisco. The rink no longer exists; in fact the Billy Graham

offices replaced it. At the end of this ball, I was chosen, or rather nominated, by the Tavern Guild and made queen of the ball. It was then that I dubbed myself Empress José Norton, the First, after the Emperor Norton of San Francisco, a real kooka-looney, but a good man here in San Francisco, whose real name was Joshua Norton. This was going to be my vehicle to unite the community.



# God save the nelly queens



## An interview with José Sarria

### Part 2

March 1, 1993

#### Who was Joshua Norton?

Joshua Norton was a rice merchant who died about a hundred years ago. When Norton first came to San Francisco, he was quite wealthy. He came from South Africa, became a prosperous merchant (whose office had been down in the same area where the Black Cat would later be). He tried to corner the rice market, but the bottom fell out of the market, and he lost everything. Then he disappeared.

Then he came back one day and entered the newspaper office at Montgomery and Market, gave them a piece of paper and asked them to print it. On the paper it said, "I hereby proclaim myself Emperor of these United States and Protector of Mexico." The newspaper decided to print it!

Of course, he came into the office dressed crazy with a feather in his hat and a long coat. They realized that he had lost his mind so people humored him. And for 25 years, the Emperor Norton ruled. He never declared war, he opened the opera and the theater and printed his own money. He received the King of Brazil. He even made proclamations and declared that a bridge should be built across the bay. He said that humans would fly. All the restaurants honored him. He would go into the banks to

negotiate a loan, and he would come out with fifty cents. You had another character who would run in front of him sweeping the sidewalk ahead of him. Once the authorities tried to lock him up, but a judge ruled that he was the only Emperor in history not to declare war, and he was always peaceful. He even wrote letters to Queen Victoria when Albert died. He had two good old dogs. When he got a little ratty, well, the Board of Supervisors would vote to buy him some clothes. He was, in fact, the only person they ever bought clothes for. For the Emperor of San Francisco couldn't be looking tacky, now could he? The city of San Francisco has always loved characters — which is why I could always get away with murder!



### How did he die?

He had a heart attack on the corner of Dupont and California Streets. His funeral was the largest ever held in San Francisco. Over 20,000 people attended. He died a pauper, but the city buried him. He had a gun salute, a band and everything. His grave was moved from the original site during the Depression when the WPA dug up the original gravesite. They were going to put all unclaimed bodies in a common grave. So the people who helped to originally bury him

said, "Well, the old god damn fool, we can't allow them to put his bones in with everybody else!" So, in 1935, they reburied him — again with pomp and circumstance. On Joshua Norton's grave it even says "Emperor Joshua Norton, Emperor of these United States and Protector of Mexico."

### What did you do with your title of Empress?

Well, after I declared myself Empress and said that I was going to represent the gay community, the community held three meetings and debated whether I, a cross-dresser and an entertainer, would represent them. The community was already well-organized with people stepping out of the closet. You had the Daughter of Bilitis, Society for Individual Rights (SIR), which was an organization I founded, and the Mattachine Society. So the community held three debates.

Well, at the third one, I put a finish to them. I, with my crown on and my little lady-in-waiting, who was Fernando, my hairdresser, told them that I wanted to speak to all of them. I got up and said, "Fine, number one, if I want to walk around the streets in a dress with a crown and a cape and call myself Empress José Norton, nobody in this room was going to stop me. NOBODY! This is America, and I have that right. However, I want to represent the gay community, and it seems you find problems with the idea that I, as a man, would dress as a woman and be an Empress. So, consequently, I will wear men's clothes, but you will address me as Your Royal Highness or Pure Majesty, but I will be addressed in the feminine. I will wear men's clothes."

But I had my daughter, Fernando, who was my hairdresser and my lady-in-waiting. She was Princess Royal, and she wore the dress!

### Now, who wore the dress?

Fernando Zapain. He was a very well-known hairdresser in the City of San Francisco. He used to do my hair when I did my shows at the Black Cat. He was the first member of my court. Of course, my lady-in-waiting brought my robes. My court was made up of the best beauties of the day. I

always wore dresses when I did my shows at the Cat, but when I appeared as the Empress I wore men's clothes — but with a poofy crown with a dead bird on it, because I had also been given the name of "Nightingale of Montgomery Street" one Mother's Day. So I designed a crown with a dead bird on top of it.

### How did you get the title "Nightingale of Montgomery Street"?

Herb Caen gave it to me. It was for Mother's Day and he said [in his column in the *San Francisco Examiner*] that if your mother hasn't heard a nightingale on Montgomery Street sing, take her down to the Black Cat on Mother's Day. This was my title before my title of Empress.

### So what happened once you had the debates in the community about your representing them?

Well, the leaders of the community were also afraid that I would act without their permission. So, I had to have a council made up of the leaders of the community. I had a member from the church, a representative from the legal community, an attorney who is

now a judge [José giggles] — I had a member from the Daughters of Bilitis, a member from the Mattachine Society, a member from Society for Individual Rights, a member from the Tavern Guild and people from the then-gay newspaper. There were about 24 people who were to advise me. But if they didn't agree with me, I would do what I wanted anyway.

### What official acts began your reign?

I went to the French and English Consulates and got information. They thought it was a gas. At my first ball, which was a fundraiser to send people to a gay conference in Kansas City, we rented a hall and had a ball. We played my theme song, "God Save the Nelly Queens," and once I arrived, the ball began. That was the first state function you could say over which I reigned! There was going to be an international gay conference held in Kansas City in 1966, no 1965, and none of the organizations had the money, so I commanded my council to come to the royal palace as I needed seed money to give a ball, at which time I would raise enough money to send somebody to the conference. And they came. Truly this is what I did.

### Where was the royal palace located?

The royal palace was located at Steiner and Grove. It was Fernando's home. There was a nice dining room where you could sit the whole council. None of our silver matched; it all came out of the Goodwill. But it was our royal silver. We had two sets of dishes which





also came from Goodwill, and this was the royal china. Fernando and I took all of the chairs out of the front room. The Daughters of Bilitis gave me a chair and this was my throne. One boy acted as the butler; another boy acted as the maid. So the council would arrive and be shown into the throne room. I would be upstairs watching them arrive and they would all arrive, *exactly* at the appointed time or a little before. I would come down and they would pay obedience to me, and I would sit on my throne and tell them why I had called them.

**Now were there any lesbians involved in this original council?**

The Daughters of Bilitis.

**Who, in particular?**

The two that founded it, Phyllis Lyon and Del Martin.

**Did they have titles?**

Of course, they were Duchesses! [giggle]

**Did they dress up?**

Del wore men's clothes and Phyllis wore an evening dress on one occasion.

**So, all of this took place in Fernando's home, which was the Royal Palace?**

Yes, if the council agreed with me, I would invite them into my private sitting room, which was a nice room, where all the front room furniture was. They would get drinks and hors d'oeuvres. If they didn't agree with me, I threw their asses out. If anyone challenged me, I would take my army and kill them. Meanwhile, Fernando was in the kitchen beating her brains out fixing the food. She would be cooking; we would feed them. This was out of my pocket. At that point, the Royal Kingdom was not supported by anyone.

**Were there ever any Emperors after Norton?**

Oh, yes, my dear. In time, the he-men south of Market Street wanted something to do with the courts. The dizzy queens on this side of the road weren't including the he-men. South of Market is the more butch scene, you know. The butch boys thought the Empresses were neglecting them. So they decided they wanted to do their own thing, so I helped them get their organization started. I crowned the first Emperor, which was Marcus — and the second Emperor was Russ Higginbottom — and Bob Cramer was the third. Of course, Emperor Norton was the first. Our Emperor would keep the ideals of my husband, Joshua Norton.

**Someone told me that you would make yearly pilgrimages to the gravesite of Joshua Norton.**

Oh, my dear, yes. I started going up with Cramer and the newly elected Emperor Hector in (I think it was) 1974. We got in a limousine and ran up there. We didn't tell anyone that we were doing this. We went in, and put flowers on Joshua's grave. On the way out, I was stopped by the park manager who wanted to know what was going on. I said I was the widower of the late Emperor Norton, and I came to put flowers on his grave. And the manager said we were wel-

come, and he asked why didn't we let them know as they would have put on suits and joined us, as no one comes up to visit the old Emperor's grave. And I said, "Well, I thought you wouldn't like it as you know I am gay." And the manager said, "No, we think it is fabulous. So, next year, just let us know!" So, the next year, I telephoned them, and my dear, they put flags up. And out we went! By the third year, I had invited a band and we all marched in. Another time, I got a judge of the Superior Court to come and give the oath because it was at Emperor Norton's gravesite that we would give the oath of office to the newly-elected Emperor. We rented buses. We served a brunch afterwards. I gave gifts. By the fourth or fifth visit, all the board members of the park, which was Woodland Park, came out in limousines to meet the widow. My dear, I died! Here I was, all dressed up. They didn't come into where we were holding our ceremony, but parked their car at a distance where they could see. The

park served coffee and donuts to as many as 2,000 people at times. We would all line up according to rank and position. First came the flag-bearers, then the band, then me with my sons and daughters who were part Emperors and Empresses. Then came the dignitaries, like City Hall sheriffs, then came the visiting nobility, then the masses. It was strike up the band and in we all marched. I can guarantee you that everyone behaved, as I would have been the first one to lock them up!

**So, this all started with the third Emperor?**

Yes, the third.

**Tell me about some of the Empresses that reigned after you.**

We actually had one Empress. Tenderloin Tessie that started up kitchens for the poor and fed the little old ladies and the little old men. She fed them three times a week, and my dear, when it came time to vote, they marched their little asses over to the polling places and voted for Tessie. They didn't know *what* they were voting for, but they had a piece of paper, that said "Vote, for Tessie" and they pulled the lever for Tessie and Tenderloin Tessie won. This must have been 1976. Oh, my dear, she was from the Tenderloin, so she was not glamorous. She had an old, ratty fur coat, and she would put on lipstick and, oh my dear, she was a mess. You would see her coming and you'd just say "Oh, no!" When she was Empress she would kiss you and, oh my God. They one day, for a ball she came to raise money. She came dressed like a movie star. Everybody flipped out. Now, I say "her," but, of course, she was a man. Her contribution was the kitchen. Another one helped three or four people get seeing-eye dogs for the blind.

**What about the involvement of lesbians over the years?**

The lesbians were not that vocal. It was only much later with women's rights that they became more vocal in the community. There was one lesbian bar owner that I remember that used to give money. Back then you couldn't call young ladies a "girl" and I was furious because we, the men, would go and raise money for the lesbian mothers for Christmas time and now, when I said "young ladies," and, oh my dear, they would get so upset.



**Is it true that, if you should ever die, you would like to be buried with the Emperor?**

Yes, the cemetery would like to put me in front of him, but I feel that might cause a revolution. So, I haven't decided yet. But they do have the space there, and they do want me there. Perhaps I'll just have my tombstone there, and I'd be buried with my mother. But my tombstone would read, "José Sarria, the Widow Norton, Empress José the First."

**What else do you want readers to know about the courts?**

I compare the courts to the Lions or the Elks as a fundraiser, but it's a tongue-in-cheek fundraiser. Some people think that the court system is ridiculous, but they don't understand. We would have never had some of the people, the leaders, men and women, come out and do some of the things that they did had it not been for the establishment of the court system, because when they were dubbed Grand Dukes and Grand Duchesses this gave them confidence. They were somebody all of a sudden and these somebodies sat down and they organized a benefit, a march, or whatever. They were somebodies even if all they ever won was a contest for Mr. Fluffy Balls or Mr. Jockey Shorts. They were somebody. The court system brought them out. We came about when there were virtually no gay organizations. In the courts we also had some of the best gay male theater. In the courts it was the first time we were somebodies.

**Do I dare ask you how old you are?**

Oh, yes, I am a very young 67, my dear.

The Royal Courts caught on like wildfire spreading throughout the U.S. and Canada. In some locales the campaigns for Empress and Emperor are known as Olympias and Rainiers. Such "royal" campaigns, which are usually held in gay bars, feature real scratch-your-eyes-out competition, including leafleting, speech-making and public appearances. The lavish coronations, complete with sets out of opera houses and royal drag that would put to shame the costume designer for Cleopatra, conclude each campaign. Visiting royal cousins attend the lavish affair, often traveling from empires in other states and with entourages as large as 30, including dukes, baronesses, marquises and ladies-in-waiting.

**So you have to clean up your act?**

Not for them. They cleaned up their act, but I didn't clean up my language. I told them that, as far as I was concerned, everyone in the room at the Cat was a young lady and that was the way I was brought up. You were a "woman" once you got married and screwed!

Most view the decentralized courts, loosely overseen by the informal authority of the International Court Conference, as a gay Elks or Kiwanis club. Due to their pomp and circumstance, others say they are more reminiscent of the Shriners. Throughout their reign, court members volunteer at hospices, organize fund-raisers or, as in San Diego, M.C. gay/lesbian dog shows that sport the most butch or fem canines in town.

Empires, despite rumors of back-stabbings, outright revolts and maniacal fits of vanity, raise millions of dollars for AIDS organizations, the Jerry Lewis Telethon, Dogs for the Blind and battered women's services. These civic clubs were the first to raise monies to fight homophobes such as Anita Bryant and Lyndon Larouche.

The courts were also the first social outlets and grooming grounds for future gay leadership. In the larger cities, huge court balls were frequently the first and only contact many straight politicians, cow-towing to the new notion of the "gay vote," had with the emerging gay/lesbian community.

*So, next time you think of how far we have come, remember how much we owe to José Sarria, our Queen Mother. ★*