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Photo: Brad Douglas

LET YOUR FREAK FLAG FLY: DIRTWOMAN'S LEGACY RETURNS TO RICHMOND TONIGHT

BENJAMIN WEST | APRIL 5, 2019



TOPICS: [ARTS](#), [DIRTWOMAN](#), [DONNIE CORKER](#), [FIRST FRIDAY](#), [GALLERY 5](#), [GALLERY5](#), [PAINT ME BITCH](#)

Porno theaters and biker haunts, streams of punk rockers flowing from bar to street to bar again, stitched up in Germs gear and Buzzcocks back patches. A line of motorcycles slouch crooked near the sidewalk, like iron horses in front of a saloon.

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This was Grace Street in the 1990s, which, at that point, had maintained a rowdy reputation for decades.

"It was a very unusual place," arts and culture critic and video producer Jerry Williams said. "All the canyons of buildings were not there, it was a bunch of funky stores."

Anyone can picture the ripped jeans, the stained flannel and chunky boots padding around, a result of our fetishized nostalgia for the grunge era — from which cyclical fashion tendencies are coming back around to a smartphone generation — but the much harder sell is the beautiful weirdness that was Donnie Corker.

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PHOTO: Dirtwoman, Alice McCabe

Corker, like a bug in amber, is forever suspended in the Richmond consciousness under his moniker 'Dirtwoman.' He was a gay man and a drag queen, who began wearing his sister's dresses in the 60s when he was just 13, and made a living as a sex worker in his youth. As an adult, he melted into the

Grace Street scene, selling flowers from a lawn chair on the corner of Grace and Harrison.

Menu Donnie was really a sweetheart of an individual, and very intense," said Parker Galore, executive director of Gallery5 and a friend of Corker for many years.

From his stoop in front of the Village, Corker hurled insults (Williams refers to his famous "potty mouth") or unleashed pick-up lines and flattery when an attractive guy walked by. He was an endlessly "social creature," according to Chris Dovi, Codeva (https://www.facebook.com/Codeva-791391487675169/?ref=br_rs) executive director, longtime Richmond reporter and friend of Corker's, and although Corker never learned to read or write, he would memorize the phone numbers of people he met, calling them throughout the day. He could talk for hours.

When Corker died on September 26, 2017, he left behind a lot of stories — from having crabs eaten out of his crotch for a GWAR video (<https://vimeo.com/204204556>), to his over-the-top charity performances, to crashing the inauguration (https://www.richmond.com/news/local/city-of-richmond/from-drag-shows-to-a-run-for-mayor-stories-from/article_03a4b7dc-05bb-5520-990a-a65e2ce28bd0.html), of former Governor Doug Wilder — everybody who knew him has their own, and many who didn't are intimately familiar with the legends. Williams has spent the last 20 years compiling these stories into a feature-length documentary set to have its hometown premier at the Richmond International Film Festival (<https://www.facebook.com/RVAFilmFest/>) April 25, and in conjunction with their 14th anniversary celebration, Gallery5 is hosting a Dirtwoman art exhibition (<https://www.facebook.com/events/421535305319430/>) tonight — paintings, photos, drawings, and more inspired by Corker himself. This all comes on the tail end of the first-ever Dirtwoman Week, (https://www.richmond.com/news/local/city-of-richmond/dirtwoman-week-richmond-mayor-devotes-first-week-of-april-to/article_775ca235-6473-5ade-9417-54fc4f29f4f9.html) the news of which broke Monday (on April Fool's Day, ironically enough).

So get out and celebrate the way Corker would have done it.

Let your freak flag fly.

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PHOTO: Dirtwoman, Noah Scalin via Jerry Williams

The Exhibition

Among the DJ booths, fold-out tables, singing saxophones, and fire dancers populating the downtown streets every First Friday, Richmonders are bound to encounter Gallery5 at some point in the night. It juts out into a Marshall Street intersection like the stern of a ship, both a literal and figurative masthead of Historic Jackson Ward.

Though he said he's never used these labels, Galore said the Gallery has been identified as the "art rebels" over the years. They've maintained a staunchly-DIY ethic, and the public has latched on, recognizing the nonprofit as something special.

"The city just is bursting with creativity and wonderful ideas," Galore said. "It's always really great for us to do what we can to give any of those ideas a home or an incubator."

Friday, in conjunction with their 14-year anniversary celebration, Gallery5 is hosting an art show dedicated to Corker — who would sometimes hang out on the front steps of the converted firehouse, according to Galore.

The exhibition, Galore said, features "about 34" pieces of art depicting Dirtwoman in many different mediums, from blown-up photos featured in artist Alice McCabe's famous Dirtwoman calendar, to paintings and illustrations.

"There's a lot of really interesting, and endearing, and awesome interpretations of Dirtwoman, and it's a lot more eclectic than you would probably imagine," Galore said.

So among live music and a local vendor takeover of the second floor, go check out [Paint Me, Bitch!: The Dirtwoman Artshow](https://www.facebook.com/events/421535305319430/) (<https://www.facebook.com/events/421535305319430/>) beginning tonight at 7 p.m. inside Gallery5.

"It's cool to do something that's part of Richmond history with this person who should be celebrated for all the quirky, wonderful, weird things that they brought, and gave permission for us to be ourselves," Galore said.



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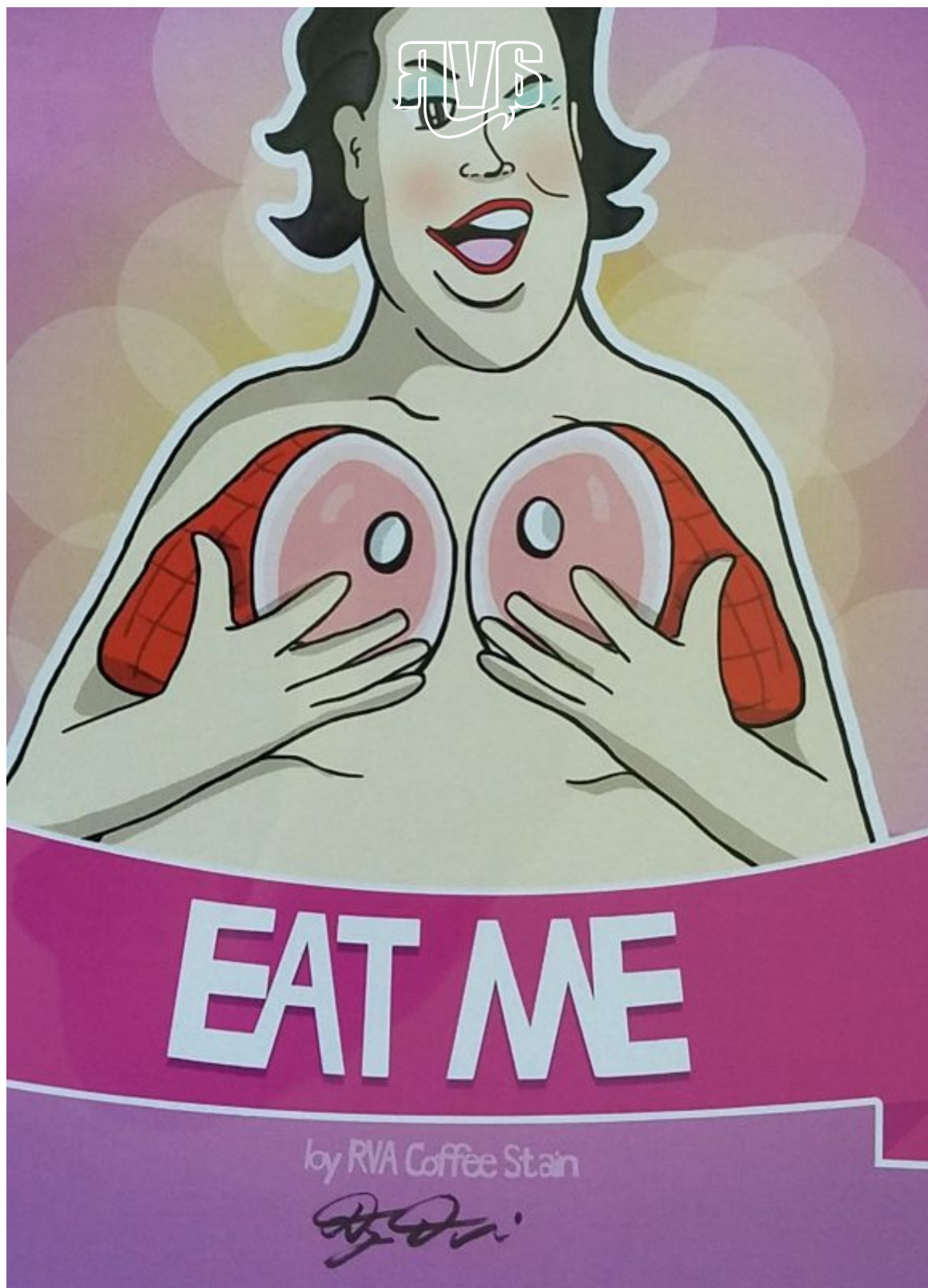


PHOTO: Dirtwoman, Douglas Orleski via Jerry Williams

The Documentary

Much of the Dirtwoman portraiture flooding the first floor of Gallery5 doesn't stand alone — the art comes directly from Williams' much-anticipated documentary about the life of Corker.

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Spider Mites of Jesus (<http://dirtwomandoc.com/>) is set to premier at the Florida Film Festival in a couple weeks, followed by a hometown premier at the Byrd Theatre April 25 for the Richmond International Film Festival. The project, nearly two decades in the making, encapsulates Dirtwoman's history and pinpoints Corker's unique personality. It's built from a collection of 70 interviews, rare historic footage, and the loving work of a community of people who knew him well.

Director Jerry Williams, also known as TVJerry, often encountered Corker as a student at VCU in the late 60s.

"I remember him walking around with a wig on," Williams said. "...He was unashamed, he would call you out if you gave him any shit."

When the "good old disco days" rolled around (eg. the 70s), Williams started at CBS 6, and Corker, who watched a lot of TV, became fond of Williams. He doesn't remember exactly how they met, but soon enough, they became friends.

"I guess you could say we were both semi-famous gay people in town," Williams said with a little laugh.

The idea for the documentary began in the late 90s, when Williams wrangled together a crew of friends to interview Corker and film his 50th birthday bash at a former club on Grace called Caffeine's. The whole shebang was complete with other drag queens and live music, and later they filmed the aforementioned GWAR music video skit — Sleazy's Crabhouse.

"And then we all got busy making a living for a number of years," Williams said.

Corker had congestive heart failure in 2017, and the waysided passion project was resumed once again. Williams said at that point he was "cruising into retirement," and he knew this was a perfect time to begin again.

He called in many favors from his friends in the industry, a community of local professionals, many of whom had been active on his website — Tales from the Grips, and later Sifter — who collected stories from the TV and film world, told by those who lived it.

"Everybody who worked on it pretty much worked for free," Williams said.

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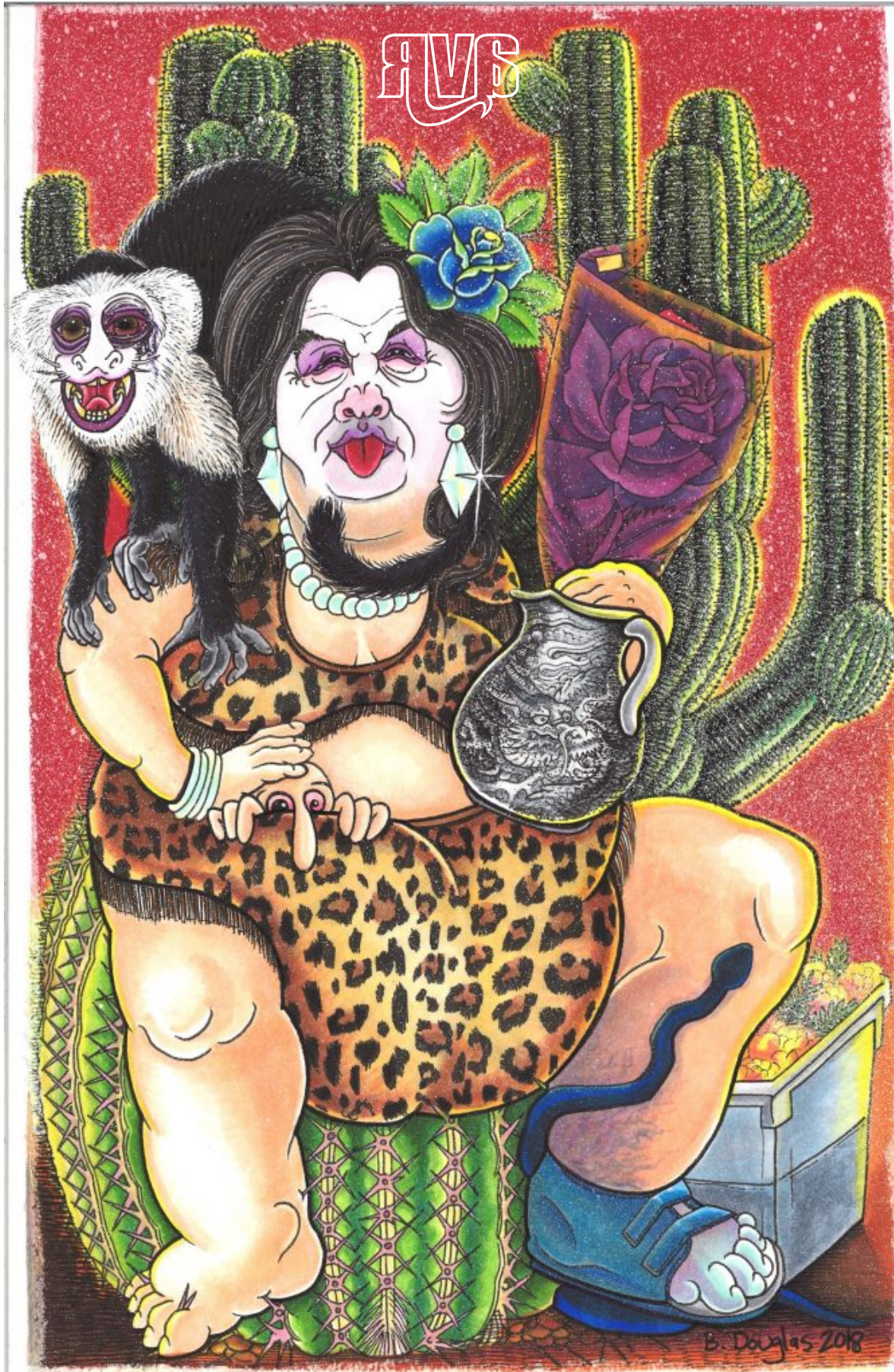


PHOTO: Dirtwoman, Brad Douglas

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The footage, the interviews, and the stories when crafted into the film were much too long at first, according to Williams. He spent over a year editing -- cutting, and cutting, and cutting.

"Which was hard because there's so many stories about Donnie and so many outrageous things that I just couldn't include them all," Williams said.

While the task, like Corker, might have seemed huge and daunting, the resulting film is like Dirtwoman in other ways: hilarious and heartwarming.

It's hard to summarize what Dirtwoman meant — and means — to the Richmond community. Douglas Orleski of [RVA Coffeestain](http://www.rvacoffeestain.com/) (<http://www.rvacoffeestain.com/>), whose work will be featured in Paint Me Bitch! said it wonderfully:

"In a world that is increasingly unauthentic, I found [Corker's] unashamed nature refreshing."

"You might have difficulty explaining Dirtwoman to someone from out of town, but Richmonders, they get it."

Tickets for the hometown premier of Spider Mites of Jesus are \$10 for general admission and available here. (<https://riff.eventive.org/schedule/5c82a3435d008b001eeecda7>)



Benjamin West

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Benjamin West has lived in Richmond for about half a decade. He loves long walks on North Bank trail and adding to his collection of mid-grade pens. His New Year's resolution was to choose campy, sci-fi paperback illustrations for all of his Spotify playlists, but he's already tripped up a few times.

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