

## Aurora set to have its first Pride Festival, kickoff

Aurorans celebrate Pride Month in various ways, but for the first time this year, the community will have a Pride Festival to call its own.

Aurora's inaugural Pride Festival is set to take place at Aurora Town Square on the evening of May 31, timed specifically to kick off Pride Month celebrations across the community.

The first-time event is an initiative of the Aurora Community Band, in collaboration with York Pride and Aurora Town Square, with support from several community organizations.

The evening will begin with opening ceremonies at Town Square beginning at 6.30 p.m., followed by interactive displays by York Pride and other community organizations. The party itself kicks off at 8 p.m. with a concert from the Aurora Community Band and a performance from drag queen Ivory Towers.

Leading the organizing this year is Gord Shephard, long-time leader of the Aurora Community Band, along with band trombonist Warren Fetterly, who is a member of the local 2SLGBTQIA+ community.

"The arts is a really good way to be inclusive," says Shephard. "When I create concerts, I always create them around themes, and I happened to come across two really amazing pieces that were reflective of inclusion and diversity and that's really how it all came to be. I thought it would be really great if we had a concert that was around the theme of diversity and then I thought of inviting other arts organizations to join us as well."

Describing himself as an "idea man," Shephard then turned to Fetterly to help him bring the idea into full flower.

"In this current climate, when we're seeing what's happening in the US and the UK, they're still trying to pull back people's rights, even today, so it is important to continue as an arts organization to be at the forefront and to remind people that we're still here, we still matter, and taking away rights from people is not a good idea," says Fetterly. "The arts is a great vehicle to have that melting pot between everybody and have some fun at the same time."

"Most of our audience is going to be straight, to be honest, but they are allies and they are there to help support us - they are our friends, our family, our coworkers, and to have space for them to celebrate with us at the same time is really important."

This sentiment is very much reflected in the event's mission statement which is to "celebrate the 2SLGBTQ+ community with friends and allies."

"Through the power of the arts, we aim to create meaningful connections with the community to foster more inclusive spaces, ensuring all residents and visitors - regardless of gender, orientation, or identity - are celebrated. In partnership with the Aurora Town Square and participation by local community organizations, this event marks the beginning of what we hope will become a destination for love, acceptance and solidarity in Aurora," reads the statement.

Following the opening ceremony, at which remarks will be delivered by Ward 1 Councillor Ron Weese and Phil Rose, Cultural Services Manager for the Town of Aurora, there will be an art show, photo-ops with Ivory Towers, a performance from the Borealis Big Band, the Aurora Community Band, and a lip-sync performance of Lady Gaga's Abracadabra.

Be prepared for confetti cannons!

Selected music by the bands include works from Lady Gaga, Elton John, Aretha Franklin and Billy Strayhorn, along with special pieces: A Mother of a Revolution, composed by Guyanese-American artist Omar Thomas in 2019; and Sharp Corners by Wesly

Cheang.

"This piece is a celebration of the bravery of trans women, and in particular Marsha 'Pay It No Mind' Johnson," said Thomas, in comments shared by Shephard. "Marsha is credited with being one of the instigators of the famous Stonewall uprising of June 28, 1969 – one of the pivotal events of the LGBTQ liberation movement of the 20th century – which is commemorated annually during the worldwide Gay Pride celebrations.

"Existing as a trans woman, especially a trans woman of color, and daring to live authentically, creating space for oneself in a transphobic world is one of the bravest acts I can imagine. Over 20 trans women were murdered in the United States in 2018 alone. There is no demographic more deserving, and frankly, long overdue for highlighted heroism and bravery. The disco vibe in the latter half of the piece is meant to honor club culture, a sacred space held amongst LGBTQ persons in which to love, live, mourn, heal, strategize, connect, disconnect, and dance in defiance of those outside forces who would seek to do LGBTQ persons harm simply for daring to exist and take up space."

On Sharp Corners, Shephard notes: "It is very special as it was commissioned by the Aurora Community Band just for the occasion.

Comments Cheang: "It is one of the most honest compositions I have written as it reflects concert band textures but also my roots in R&B and jazz music. Sharp Corners explores the chord qualities that have the property of 'resting dissonance.'"

On resting dissonance, Shephard notes, "They do not require resolution yet carry a degree of tension. Cultural dissonance is a sociological term for the discomfort people experience when belief systems interact in diverse cultures. Both these forms of dissonance are neither good nor bad. We can spend time analyzing them, appreciating them and finding beauty in their nuances."

For tickets for the inaugural Aurora Pride Festival, visit [boxoffice.auroratownsquare.ca/event/109:98/109:135](https://boxoffice.auroratownsquare.ca/event/109:98/109:135).

Among the supporters who have come together to make this event possible are Phil Rose, the Town itself, which provided an \$8,000 grant towards the event; York Pride Festival, and Pflag York Region.

Participating community organizations include the Aurora Black Community Association, Aurora Cultural Centre, Aurora Historical Society, Aurora Museum & Archives, Aurora Public Library, Borealis Big Band, Delmanor, members of the Pine Tree Potters Guild, SOYRA (The Society of York Region Artists), Sport & Community Development, You Can Play, and Theatre Aurora.

**By Brock Weir**