

Good Gay Hair
The Queer Public Podcast
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Erin McGregor: Welcome back to the Queer Public podcast, where we ask critical questions about queer identity, politics and our queer culture. In today's episode we're asking about something that we all have to deal with, learn to manage, and that shapes queer identity. We're talking about Hair. Good Gay Hair.

In queer circles, hair is political. It defines how we want to be seen, where we sit in our queer identity, and the ease of which we can navigate the world. I've been obsessed with what makes a good gay haircut for the better part of a decade. So what is good gay hair? In my search, I found a place where hair dreams come true. Where amazing stylists will talk hair politics with you. They'll talk hair health, and about gender expression, and about real life queer life.

I'm your host, Erin McGregor.

Sparrow Fox: My name is Sparrow Fox. I am a colorist at Folklore Salon.

Madin Lopez: I'm Madin Lopez and I'm the curly hair slash ethnic hair specialist.

Joyce: I'm Joyce and I'm one of the newest members of folklore team.

Coral Lovera: Hi I'm Coral Lovera apprentice stylist at Folklore Salon.

Pony Lee: I'm Pony Lee. I own Folklore Salon in Silver Lake

Erin McGregor: Just off Sunset Boulevard in Los Angeles is Folklore Salon.

Pony Lee: We're at that like that, middle land where it's like two blocks that way. It's Silverlake, and then over here it's Echo Park. I think it was 2011 that I decided to open Folklore. I had just left the Pleasure Chest where I had a really great experience coming out as trans and queer, and I had a really difficult time finding work in shops doing hair.

I didn't think I was going to do hair again because it was really intimidating. It didn't feel like I was welcomed. I didn't feel like the type of people that I wanted in my chair or my community felt welcome in a lot of the spaces. I think that a lot of the people in salons don't have the language to really see people, how they want to be seen. I just kind of

was fed up, with the different shops that I was going to and having to explain my life because there was questions it was always that question of like identity like. I'm not sure where to put you like and it's all in the back of people's minds when they look at me you know like. Are you a boy? Are you a girl? Are you gay boy? Are like what is happening here? and because they don't know where to put you they don't know how to feel.

I just wanted a place to work. You know I wanted a place to work and I wanted a place to or I can feel safe. And I had no idea that a lot of other people felt that same way. And Folklore just ended up being that space. Everybody here has a different specialty that like bring something important to the table. You know. Also everybody's identities are so far from each other but so very parallel. We can see class and race and sex and gender and all these different things. We may have different opinions but we can talk about them openly and have space for all those things. I didn't realize how special It has become someone named Elliot can kind of come in and say, Hey I want to be seen as Jane or vice versa, and it's respected and known and not question. I see that and I'm like whoa this is. This is like magic with something magical just happens like every fucking day here.

Erin McGregor: OK. Let's. Let's go in. I ask Pony to take me in for a grand tour. We start walking around the small shop.

Pony Lee: Well when I first looked at the space it was there was so much stuff in here like you couldn't see the walls. But, you can barely even see the floor. But I saw the floor, and it, the floor is all hardwood it's actually an implant from an old Victorian in Montecito Heights, and the patina on it is just perfect. and I pulled some carpet. and I was like, oh my god this is gorgeous. This is perfect, the colors, the you know the imperfections but like how beautiful it just looked as a whole. I was like yeah this, this feels warm it feels really inviting and I think that's one of the things I wanted to I wanted people to feel when they walked into folklore because a lot of salons are very sterile, very cold.

I mean the salon was built on donation alone. That's all the rent happened. That's how the labor happened was people donating their time. I know a lot of the things had either been gifted or found and or dolled up. You're looking at like a like 50's style vanity with kind of a round mirror. Each mirror is a little different. I feel like the middle one is like the princess one because it's got the light ups on the sides and of course that Sparrow Fox's and each of the vanities came with a different story. And like the name Folklore everybody or everything kind of comes from some type of background or story.

Erin McGregor: In the first chair when you walk in is Madin Lopez.

Madin Lopez: Because there is a difference in the way that POC are brought up as opposed to people they are not of color. It does make their queer struggles a little bit different especially when it has to do with hair

Erin McGregor: Madin has been doing hair for a long time.

Madin Lopez: I actually started braiding hair when I was about 13 or 14 trading twisties for lunch tickets and bus tokens just to like be able to be self-sufficient

Erin McGregor: Madin went to hair school at 16, graduated at 18 and has been doing hair ever since.

Madin Lopez: Working with a lot of POC. See folks that come in, not really feeling comfortable in a barbershop setting but not feeling comfortable in a beauty shop setting. So it kind of goes beyond the division that happens within salons in general. They're very divided by sex and also by ethnicity and so kind of encompass all of those things.

As a female bodied QPOC person I was forced to have long hair. I had to relax it. I was not allowed to use my natural texture and I would go I would get to school and I would wash it. I just want an afro. You know I just wanted to wear my natural texture. But we're constantly told having straight hair having long hair. And even having light skin even though that's not necessarily part of this. Those are attributes of beauty and none of those things come naturally. And so we use the strongest chemical known to man sodium hydroxide to relax our hair make it straight and then you know we've put tons of heat on it in order to like create this facade that does not exist on a rainy day like today I would have been ducking under you know other people's umbrella trying to make sure that no one saw who I really was. Isn't that horrible. And so that being said keeping it long. And then when I first cut my hair off my family was so very upset. You know my grandmother would still buy me barrettes like when you grow your hair out and when you're girly again you know. And that was that was really what it was

I think that like coming up against that opposition of like who you are as a person is an OK. Not just like cutting your hair short but you've already been trained. I've been getting relaxation stuff in second grade so already being trained as in like you need to change who you are in order to fit in. That made it even harder to fit into who we actually are. Cutting it short is one thing but then not relaxing it is another thing. You

know in letting your natural curls out I think that it does make it different. Which is why I know that the demographic needs to be served

Erin McGregor: Part of Madin's work is education about caring for black hair.

Madin Lopez: So I have two clients that are caucasian male, gay couple that is super sweet but they have an adopted son that's full black and I met one of the dads on set and he was using my curly hair products and he was like oh you're black. Oh you work in Echo Park. Oh I have a black son. I'm bringing him to you. And it was really kind of matter of fact and I said OK. And he ended up bringing his son in and you know I showed them the types of products to use what's gonna be moisturizing on his hair. And I mean this kid is in every single sport that you could imagine and his hair was in really bad shape when he came in and he wanted to grow it longer but he didn't know how to do it and he's like 12. So he's also at that stage of where you know his mustache is gonna be growing in soon and his hair is changing anyway and so I sat with Dad and taught him how to pick his son's hair out. Got them a pic actually I sent them home with the one that I had and I have this amazing photo of Dad just like looking really perplexed but like, picking his son's hair out and, his son kind of like giving the like squint eye. I like it because it hurt, and Dad wasn't used to doing it quite yet but you know the fact that they're now able to have this conversation around how to work with their son's hair they ended up getting the dreadlocks on him so now that's just what he does and they don't have to pick it out anymore but they found something that works without trying to change him.

In a couple of weeks I was just told that we're gonna be dying some of his tips different colors which is also cool. You know he he just really gets to be expressive and that's what it's about. And so even though this kid in particular is not queer he has two queer parents that love him and that have been forced in their own lives to be other people. And so the fact that they've had that experience makes it so much more important for them to let him be himself even if they don't understand what that is. And it's so interesting that all of that is just wrapped up in this kid's hair.

They know that they've tried to take him into barber shops before but only one dad will take them in and he already gets looks because he's a white dude and then you know if they were to both come in then it would be a different situation. I don't know what their history is of going into barber shops but I know that they haven't stopped coming here since the first time that they've come in. And I think that a lot of that has to do with the fact that we're so welcoming of them as a couple and we have the ability to be

welcoming of their son. And it's you know it's the multicultural multi textural situation that we have here really covering all of our bases.

Erin McGregor: In the back of the shop is Joyce.

Joyce: I am thrilled to be part of this family and team. It's been a great experience as well as being new residents of Los Angeles and meeting new clients. And at the same time rebuilding and just making people happy.

Erin McGregor: I asked Joyce to describe their hair

Joyce: My hair. It's just past my shoulders probably hitting my collarbone. My bangs very high. So it's it can be a pixie bang or they sometimes they use micro bangs. It's very short it's very textured on top and it's very tapered on the sides as well. And I have a lot in the back. So I guess we'd be considered a modern mullet. So they always joke about it being party in the back and it there's so it has a shape to it. I've been told I look like Mr. Spock. When people see me when they see my hairstyle I believe they they know right away I'm queer. And and I feel comfortable I'm proud and when I'm walking around with that and I'm hopefully I can inspire them.

Erin McGregor: I asked Joyce about what good gay hair means.

Joyce: I think it's how each individual how their personal style how they. It helps them identify themselves. Like the shape of the hair is very important. Like I'm tomboy. I like to look androgynous sometimes so I think that helps. If you don't feel good about your hair it's psychological you just don't feel good. That's just the way I look at hair. It's very personal.

Erin McGregor: Next I wanted to talk to Coral.

Coral Lovera: What makes good gay hair? Well lately I haven't had any hair envy because I am leaving my hair dreams all of my punk hair dreams that I wanted to do when I was younger and even I couldn't because my job or because conservative household. No I didn't get to have the hair that I wanted during my teen years or whatever. I feel that I've had the hair that I wanted to have for at least five years of my life, and especially after hair school. I've been leaving all of my hair dreams from, cutting it, various styles. To like, just really fun dyeing jobs. and I'm currently experimenting with a tri hawk. I'm still deciding whether or not I like it. So. This is a middle side and the other side.

Erin McGregor: Oh wow. So there's like a one inch shaved line.

Coral Lovera: Yeah there is a fade. I mean it's like four fades situation. I actually Maddin and I having having fun with it because it's, it's a good practice when your skills to be able to fade within two inches of hair.

Erin McGregor: Coral has witnessed what happens when someone gets the haircut they're supposed to have. A good haircut is transformative.

Coral Lovera: If you have a vision of what you want and with the help of somebody that has the skills you can accomplish something that is you if a haircut represents you and how you feel inside it then it is a good haircut. It's a very spectacular thing to witness of how people you know could come in here all shy and nervous. There must either you should be very nervous about what's about to happen. Big changes, and then kind of standing up straighter taking, a lot of weight out of the head and just feeling complete like a completely different person and shining through like you can see and in their eyes they're very happy with whatever happens. And it's very powerful.

Erin McGregor: Then I sat in the back with Sparrow Fox. She is definitely the cool older sister of Folklore.

Sparrow Fox: I identify as a queer femme like I'm very out about who I am and so I'm very. I'm always seeking queer femmes to be in my chair because I think that something that I witness and get to lovingly experience here folklore is a lot of like a butch and androgynous and genderqueer identity in the salon and I love that and I also always am feeling the missing footprint of the femme. There is like a lot of different ways of being femme as we know with these like rockabilly girls and we've got the super high femmes and so these punk girls and everybody likes to wear their hair different ways and it's not just like how their cut is or their color. I try to really pay attention to how people themselves have styled themselves when they are coming through the door. You know I like to look at what is their vibe and where they comfortable, and to have honest conversations with people about how they care for their hair and how much time they're willing to put in, because I think that helps like achieve what they want in a way that's manageable for them. And it feels authentic to them and it's not this over styled precious experience of hair. You can have really cool hair and it can be really low maintenance.

I admit that like one of the things that I love is I love like really beautiful pretty hair. It's something that I love. I mean I love drag queens too. I want everybody to have like long flowing goldilocks hair. That's why I love my mermaid hair. I do. The longer the better

you grow your hair out. Get in my chair. Let me help you do that. I'm never that stylist that's gonna be like I just want to trim and then I take off six inches. I'm never gonna do that to somebody I always air on the side of caution. I'm growing your hair out especially when you're dealing with like genderqueer and trans identity. It can be like such a thing. So you want to be really sensitive to that.

I think one of the things that happens in here is that we become intimately acquainted with so many people's life experiences and some of the stories are really really heavy. And this kid who was just getting ready to graduate high school came and took a bunch of buses and had gone to a couple of different salons trying to get the haircut that they wanted and we're like flat out denied like a like a men's haircut basically and it wasn't even like a traditional men's haircut. It was like a Japanese anime boy haircut. And I don't know. I think I have such a tenderness for people that can't defend themselves. It's really is a really hard thing for me to witness and I really care so much about the people in this community and the things that they have to go through to just live their lives and they're not things that I have to fight. Those are not battles I have to fight. And so when someone is someone like that is in my chair and has a need I just feel like it's so important to be able to really honor them and to be deeply respectful of what they're asking for and without having to ask for their story to just like move through that experience with them like holding them through that experience. And for some people that's a haircut like that's sort of you know it's it's odd that it's like the top of your head like the pinnacle of like managing their identity and how they see themselves. So it really moved me to have this little person go so out of their way to get this like really simple thing that I don't understand why the world at large just isn't like who cares what kind of haircut you have. I've seen stylists do it so I don't I don't understand stylists that are like Oh that would look terrible on you you shouldn't do that like telling people why what they want is not right. I mean how many of us in life have just been shut down and been told they're wrong about what we think is important or what we like. I think this is like a huge aggressive thing to do to a person just to tell them that they can't have the haircut they want or for whatever reason because you don't agree with whatever their identity is. So it was pretty moving to have this little person come in this very small little person like desperately wanting to own their own identity. And I had the gift of being the person that could give that to them. Their first real haircut, you know. It's really special. It was like a fluke. I don't know what happened. Like I don't even have shortcuts available on the website. You can't go online and book one with me. So it was just you know sometimes you have to trust the universe.

Pony Lee: We're the next generation, the kids are looking up to us. Did we ask for it? No, but that's just what happened naturally.

Sparrow Fox: I think we had a we had a young woman, our receptionist, one of the things she said, and she's very out as trans so I can say that. She said that when she started working here was one of the things that was so hard for her about her life she couldn't envision for herself what her life could be. She was a queer person. She just thought it was always going to be a hard struggle. And that coming in here and getting to work with us allowed her to have a different vision for herself, she could be a person with a job. Like a lady with a job who has a life that's just not about being a part of the queer struggle. That she could have relationships, and she could expect that she could income to expect to earn enough income to support herself in a comfortable way, that she could have enough self respect and boundaries and have fun and be really who she is and now she's grown up and flown out of the nest and shes had two different jobs and right now she's doing this incredible work educating people about HIV and she has this job where she gets to dress nice and she bought herself a new car and she's just so proud of herself and to know that someone just meeting you and witnessing the thing that you do is the thing that allowed them to believe in themselves and step up in any way. That's a huge gift. Huge Gift. I think that we get to see that all the time in here, we get to see the way that we are connected. We are human beings who are connected. And it really is a big deal just the fact that we exist.

If you would have told me that I could not only make a living, but I could make a comfortable living entire living working in a salon, like we're very out. We're not hiding the fact that we are a safe space. You know its very clear, people google queer hair and they find us. We don't really advertise. So it's just kind of mind blowing that it has become what it has become.

All of us have that experience of working in those salons that nobody likes to go in to. You're always uncomfortable. It's very austere. The girls at the front desk are not very nice. They're not welcoming certainly. The stylist is always so busy, and one of the things that I like about this place is we don't overbook. We take on the work that we can handle. We spend individual time connecting with our clients so we have a human relationship that goes beyond just I am touching your head, which is like a real intimate thing, so shampoo their hair, to see them with their hair slicked back, people come in here with their dirty ass hair. That's like real intimate ok. You know, it's like a real intimate experience if you allow it to be. I think a thing that happens is we have relationships with the people that we work on their hair. It matters. I look on my schedule. Who do i get to see today not who do I have to see today. That's a big difference from where I come from as far as hair goes. I think it's learning to have a kind

of faith I never had, and this space has given me that. This my home, and I love these people and I would do battle for them.

Erin McGregor: Pony Lee still owns Folklore, but there's a new family now. Joyce works out of a different salon, Sparrow works out of her home in Glendale, and Coral followed Madin to Project Q. Project Q operates out of a community center in Chinatown, Los Angeles and is a non-profit organization that provides safe space for LGBTQ+ homeless youth. Where they can receive free mentorship classes and workshops, along with free gender affirming haircuts.

In their own personal journey and their interactions with queer youth Madin has seen first hand the difference a good haircut can make.

Madin Lopez: When I came out, I was like kind of shoved back in a few times, and taken to a period of therapy, and things like that. You know I've been in and out of foster homes and situations. It's always been a little bit more of a struggle to be able to come out as a queer person when your living in a more religious space. But, when I finally landed in a foster home that was with people of color, after hopping around different places. The woman sat me down and did my hair and made me feel like a person again. And even though I was just a number to this city and to the county, I felt like a human being again. And so Project Q is like going back and helping that person. I work with a lot of the homeless queer youth at the gay and lesbian center, and in different places. Most which have been kicked out of their homes for being queer, most of them are people of color. And all of them need to feel good about themselves. It's funny because it's such a nuch piece of our community, and it's not supporting them with food, it's not supporting them with housing, but it's supporting them with self-esteem. And so even if you don't have housing, but you feel good about yourself. It will be easier for you to get housing because you know you deserve it. And so, that's what it really comes down to. Being a guidance for them. I tell them my story all the time, and I let them know I've been in your shoes, I've been here, you know. I work really hard for what I have. I don't have much, but I worked for it. And if you work hard, you deserve to have whatever you want.

Erin McGregor: So it turns out Good Gay hair isn't about a specific look or vibe. How could it be? It's about how we feel good, feel seen, and affirmed in our own skin. This episode was produced by me, Erin McGregor. Editing and sound design by Ariana Martinez. Music supervision from Homoground's Lynn Casper. We heard music from Foxgluvv, Shi Da Buzzard and Mise Darling.

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Next time on Queer Public:

Molly: I think something about being like a queer non-binary, asexual spectrum person in the world, in their late 20's. Is that it is really difficult for me to find someone who I feel like really represents the way that I see myself. Like so so, rarely do I see true representation of myself and like we could argue this is a true representation of myself because this is for the character a man in a straight relationship but I just think emotionally it was like such a pure representation of myself. It was just so powerful to see myself emotionally in a character in a way that I like literally don't know if i've really ever experienced before.

Erin McGregor: I am your host Erin McGregor. Thanks for listening.