

Dedicated to the Last Pearl

*Jojo “Josefina Larina Queen of the Congolina” Gilbert,
of the Pearl Box Revue*

HARRISON APPLE

Jojo came into my life when I threw the One More Time ball in October of 2013, an evening dedicated to septuagenarian drag legends who wanted to come out looking glamorous after more than thirty years out of the spotlight. While I was busy making arrangements in the background for the evening, scurrying around in my thrift store dyeable heels and brocade skirt suit, she caught me by the arm, pulled me to her side, and told me that, especially for me, she was singing “My Funny Valentine.” Jojo was the last living member of the Pearl Box Revue, a 1970s stage show managed by Lucky LaBaker and Bobby Lopez out of Buffalo, New York. We became fast friends. I was her captive audience, with her teaching me when I do and don’t look glamorous, giving advice on the finer points of pleasure that



Figure 1. Jojo poses in her apartment, wearing a shake dancer dress and platinum wig, in the late 1960s. This picture is part of the Jojo Gilbert Collection at the Pittsburgh Queer History Project.

come with removable dentures, and her encyclopedic knowledge of stage show monologues. Elsewhere I've talked about Jojo and her contemporaries as troubling the field of oral history, in which the interview is taught as a pristine and unadorned event. But Jojo's life was about getting more. To her dying day, she spoke in stage patter. And like the movement of images across a scrapbook page, that rhythm is how she taught me to share her memory.

Harrison Apple is an oral historian, reluctant community archivist, and PhD of gender and women's studies with a minor in information from the University of Arizona. Their dissertation, "A Social Member in Good Standing: Pittsburgh's Gay and Lesbian Afterhours Social Clubs," weaves the oral history of club owner and gay would-be mafiosa "Lucky" with urban history of race and sexuality in Pittsburgh to reconstruct the meaning of "membership" to these after-hours queer discos. In their work to rediscover records of club activity beneath layers of complex and intentionally opaque documentation, they simultaneously lean toward betraying the archival profession by preserving materials in place, even as they are imminently deteriorating. Apple's writing has been published in *Archivaria*, *TSQ*, *Outhistory.org*, and the *Introduction to Transgender Studies* (2019).