

Cherry's New Taste

D.C.'s annual circuit party makes the move to Pride weekend -- and wraps itself in Roman inspiration

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by Doug Rule*

Months removed from its namesake cherry blossoms, this year's Cherry circuit party instead takes its cue from even further back in time -- all the way back to ancient Rome.

Did someone say toga party?

"We definitely encourage people to dress in Roman attire," says Kat Danaher, chair of Cherry's planning committee. "The more togas the merrier. Let the games begin!"

It certainly should be warm enough for togas this year. Unlike the previous 11 spring incarnations, this year's annual party coincides with Pride and helps kick off the summer.

"We're really excited about what a great draw it will be for the city to have both events on the same weekend," says Danaher, about Cherry and Pride. "It gives people two times the reason to come into the city [and] to go out, to make it a big weekend for the GLBT community."

Togas or not, Cherry organizers have lots of new things to drape -- and reveal. Four of the five venues for this year's lineup are new to the party, including Saturday's Main Event at the former City Museum, now the National Music Center & Museum. The party's Romanesque theme was picked before they had settled on the museum, originally a Carnegie Library. But Danaher says the Beaux-Arts edifice, with a grand main hall flanked by columns and marble staircases, ties it all together perfectly.

"That's what's fun about this space [is] it's roomy but it's intimate enough," she says, noting it's not nearly as big as a similar past Cherry venue, the Mellon Auditorium. Also, the Music Center "is not a government building, so boys will be able to take their shirts off. We don't have to have all the same general security things [either]."

In addition to the move to Pride weekend, this year's Cherry has also been scaled back. There's only a Friday night happy hour event, not a dance party -- though Be Bar's Be: Cherry Happy Hour will feature local sensation DJ Glanson, so good luck standing still. Danaher says the happy hour provides "a great jumping-off point not only for people through the weekend, but as a transition to Pride's event at Apex that night." Another scaling back is in the price for passes to the party, which start at less than half last year's cost.

Also that evening is the Ladies Capital Pride Dance Party, Pride Possession, co-presented by the Cherry Fund and benefiting both Capital Pride and the Mautner Project. Taking place at Adams Morgan's Tom Tom Club, Pride Possession will feature a performance from up-and-coming Indianapolis-based folk singer Lindsay Bloom.

Danaher says the fundraising goal is as it ever was: to raise more money for charity than the year before. Last year, Cherry donated \$30,000 to its beneficiaries. **This year's beneficiaries are the Whitman-Walker Clinic, the National Gay & Lesbian Task Force and the Mautner Project.**

"We're so focused on doing whatever we can to make the event not only good, but make smart decisions money-wise so that we can give back as much as possible," Danaher says. They've been able to cut a lot of costs, she says. And they're optimistic that the Pride Weekend will be a boon.

"The Prides always do well, so to move [Cherry] and couple things with Pride makes a lot of sense to me," says DJ Dan De Leon, the headliner for Cherry's Main Event. Just a few years into his career, De Leon, who currently lives in San Diego, is quickly rising on the circuit. This year will mark his second time spinning for Cherry.

De Leon grew up as part of the trance rave scene, but he's now a tribal house DJ, and far more inspired today by Victor Calderone, Chus & Ceballos and Danny Tenaglia than his early influences Sasha or Steve Lawler. He says he's most inspired by the increasing merger of all sub-genres of house, from tribal to electro to progressive house.

At Cherry, De Leon says he'll debut a Tony Moran remix of his new single with Yinbarr Massi, "Show You," which will also appear on Moran's highly anticipated forthcoming compilation, *The Event*. Further, De Leon arranged to have the track's vocalist, Breathwaite, come to Cherry with a couple dancers to perform the song for the first time. "This is really like a dance industry breakout for him," De Leon says about Breathwaite, who's a close friend. "So we wanted the first performance to be done in a special place."

Cherry will also have other dancers at the Main Event, where famed Nation and Tracks lighting guru John Niederhauser will handle lights. Meanwhile, local DJ and Cobalt manager Jason Royce will spin in a separate side room at the Music Center, where he says he'll "keep things fun and interesting" by playing familiar vocals, electro house and tribal.

Susan Morabito will spin for this year's Cherry After Hours, presented by Calor at FIVE. Morabito, still going strong after 25 years as a circuit DJ, revels in the "downtrip," or the music at evening's end. It's a key reason this pioneering lesbian DJ is a staple at after-hours parties. For Morabito, the "downtrip" is a bit lighter, happier, more uplifting sound than earlier in the night.

And then after the Pride Festival, Cherry takes one last dance dip, this time at the new Ultra Bar. Formerly Home Nightclub, Danaher calls it a "fun and intimate space with different levels, including a lounge for when people want to take a break." Also perfect for Cherry, the club is decked out in the color red. Yiannis, one of D.C.'s most established DJs, will open for Manny Lehman, one of the circuit's most popular --and most populist in song selection. He's also one of Cherry's most-frequently returned DJ. Somewhat like De Leon before him, Los Angeles-based Lehman blossomed through his support in D.C.

"It's funny, I always read press associating me with New York and L.A., but I don't think many people realize my strong ties to D.C.," Lehman says, who held a monthly residency during Velvet Nation's earliest days. "I absolutely love D.C. and make it a point to play there as much as the city will have me. And Cherry is especially exciting. It's when the city and the men are most beautiful!"

Lehman says to expect "hard fun beats" and new tracks from Shakira, Kristine W. and D.C.-native Rachel Panay. "You know I love my divas," he says.

Danaher sums it all up. "We're really looking forward to having everyone come. We've gotten a lot of good feedback about the whole weekend.

"I'm looking forward to seeing everyone on the dance floor."

For a full listing of events and locations visit www.cherryfund.org. Tickets for each individual event can be purchased at the door, or at the Cherry Welcome Center at the host hotel, the Latham, 3000 M Street, NW. Host Passes and VIP Passes, starting at \$90, can also be purchased at the Welcome Center.