

OTIS R. TAYLOR JR.
On the East Bay



Bay Area

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Rainbow Sign was herald of black culture

It wasn't the enormous raised fist, an indelible symbol of black power, that made me pause as I toured "Black Power," the new exhibit at Oakland Museum of California.

I shook my head when I saw the photo of a white man dressed in blackface at a party in Livermore circa 1970.

What caught my attention was a black-and-white

membership pamphlet with a cartoonish owl on the cover. It was for Rainbow Sign, something I'd never heard of.

"It was like a gathering place that a lot of people don't know about," Lisa Silberstein, the exhibit's experience director, told me. "It was really important in the East Bay, specifically, and was a place that people came through and made a

point to come speak."

Underneath Rainbow Sign's logo on the pamphlet are these lyrics: "God gave Noah the rainbow sign; no more water, the fire next time." I know "The Fire Next Time" is the title of a book by the black writer and activist James Baldwin, and the title was inspired by the lyrics of "Mary Don't You Weep," a Negro spiritual.

I learned the lyrics were printed on the pamphlet by a woman named Mary Ann Pollar, a Bay Area concert promoter who founded Rainbow Sign with her husband, Henry Pollar, in 1971. Baldwin was a frequent guest. So were the writer Maya Angelou and the singer Nina Simone.

I had to learn more. I

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Black culture thrived under Rainbow Sign

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reached out to the Pollars' daughter, Odette Pollar. Four decades after Rainbow Sign closed in 1977, Pollar is thinking about what to do with the archives she has in her basement.

She knows she has a trove of the Bay Area's black history that isn't widely known.

"My mom probably had a sense that this was important," Pollar told me this week.

Rainbow Sign was a black cultural center in Berkeley on Grove Street, now Martin Luther King Jr. Way. It was an art gallery. It was a supper club. It was a stage for lectures, poetry readings and intimate concerts. The Pollars turned a run-down funeral home into a destination for black artists and writers who spoke and performed in front of diverse audiences. The building is now used for an adult mental health services program.

The "Black Power" exhibit, a response to the museum's 2016 exhibit "All Power to the People: Black Panthers at 50," explores the relationship of black activism in arts and culture. It opened Feb. 8.

"The black arts movement served as sort of the spiritual leg of the black liberation movement," Erendina Delgado, the museum's associate curator of history, said.

Tessa Rissacher, a UC Berkeley undergraduate researcher, has spent two years studying Rainbow Sign's significance to the black arts movement.

"One of the things that Rainbow Sign really opens up is the way that so many other parts of the black community were very much involved in figuring out what black art meant, what it meant to be creating culture at that point," she said.

Activism in black art was entrenched in self-determination and self-definition.

Eugene Redmond read poetry at Rainbow Sign. Bobby Hutcherson and John Handy played jazz there. Elizabeth Catlett, who created art depicting the black experience, exhibited her work there. Shirley Chisholm, the first black woman elected to Congress, and Josephine Baker, the entertainer and activist, made appearances.

"Having performers and entertainers around was very normal," Pol-

lar, an Oakland native, said.

Back then, Rainbow Sign didn't mean much to her because she was young. Besides, running a cultural center was simply something her parents did.

"Looking back now and understanding how fundamental and how different and new and unusual, and in some ways unheard of (it was) then, it's hugely significant," said Pollar, now 63 and retired from a career as a time management and organization consultant.

Mary Ann Pollar was creating cultural experiences long before she opened Rainbow Sign. She's the kind of black trailblazer history often overlooks. As a concert promoter, she booked folk music shows at the Berkeley Community Theatre, San Francisco's Masonic Auditorium and other venues. If Pete Seeger came to town, she found him an outside venue to play.

"She was doing it, as far as I know, even before Bill Graham," Pollar said, referring to the concert promoter who has an auditorium named after him in San Francisco. "She taught him some of what he

knew."

She booked Peter, Paul and Mary, Richie Havens, Arlo Guthrie, Judy Collins, Joan Baez, and Simon and Garfunkel.

"She did the first Bob Dylan concert on the West Coast," Pollar claims. "She turned him down twice, because she'd never heard of him."

Did Pollar go to the shows?

"I went to *all* of them," Pollar said. "I grew up around music and got to sit in the front row, because I was a little kid. Front row on the end."

The entrepreneurial spirit rubbed off on Pollar. In 2007, she started the Plant Exchange in front of her house as a way to meet her neighbors on Lakeshore Avenue. About 75 people showed up. Twelve years later, the event that allows people to swap plants and gardening tools attracts more than 1,000 people.

"I tend to grow things," she said. "My parents were very social. I am social."

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