

THING, the '90s zine about Black queer Chicago nightlife, republished as anthology

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The essence of *THING*, a groundbreaking magazine that documented Chicago's Black queer nightlife scene from 1989-1993, can best be described by the publication's tagline: "She Knows Who She Is."

THING's first issue was a 20-page, photocopied zine that came out in November 1989, just as Chicago's burgeoning house music scene and ballroom culture was thriving in underground club spaces. And *THING*'s founders—Robert Ford, Trent Adkins and Lawrence Warren—were there to document their rise.

"We were in this mini renaissance of Black creativity and artistic expression," said Simone Bouyer, who owned Wholesome Roc Gallery and collaborated with *THING*'s founders as a designer. "And they were also gay guys who were straddling the fence of how accepting people would be if they knew they were gay, which signaled to them that there was a need for them to come out and say, 'We're gay, and this is what's going on in the gay world.'"

Through a mix of interviews, poetry, gossip, fiction and art, *THING* documented Black queer history during a pivotal time in Chicago—and a new anthology containing all 10 issues from the revolutionary publication's run is revisiting that era.

The *THING* anthology was released in February via publisher Primary Information. It's available for \$35 and [is available here](#). The anthology will also reach physical stores, Amazon and other online retailers in March.

Ford, Adkins and Warren have since died, but Bouyer said the three editors would be proud to see the renewed interest in what they created back in the '90s, Bouyer said.

"They'd be pretty amazed and excited that this is happening, but they'd also probably still be publishing *THING* today," Bouyer said. "After all, a lot of what we were doing back then is especially still needed now."

By its 10th and final issue, *THING* had grown to dozens of pages and established an influence that far exceeded its humble beginnings, Bouyer said.

THING was central to Chicago's house music scene, documenting artists like Frankie Knuckles, Gemini, RuPaul and Deee-Lite before they rose to mainstream prominence. But it also featured a range of other artists, including literary trailblazers like Dennis Cooper, Vaginal Davis, Gary Indiana and Marlon Riggs.

“The cool thing about Robert, Trent and Larry is they were fearless,” Bouyer said. “They would just get in touch with anybody they knew was coming to town and had no qualms reaching out and asking them to spare a minute for an interview.”

Each issue of *THING* included a mix of news, politics and activism, Bouyer said. The first issue came out just months after ACT UP activists in New York staged a large protest against the cost of AZT, the first antiretroviral medication used to treat HIV/AIDS, and the epidemic loomed heavily in *THING*'s contents.

In addition to its arts and culture coverage, *THING* included reflections on the AIDS crisis and resources for people affected by it, Bouyer said.

Readers would find an interview in which RuPaul shares her wisdom next to a diary from the 1993 March on Washington for Lesbian, Gay and Bi Equal Rights and Liberation. Another issue features an essay by poet Essex Hemphill, an activist who openly addressed race and HIV/AIDS, next to a gossip column by writer Michael Musto.

“Robert really took it on as a mission to make sure people were informed about AIDS and knew where to go, how to be safe and about people who were living with HIV,” Bouyer said. “And that was almost unheard of at the time.”

Stephanie Coleman, who co-owned Wholesome Roc Gallery with Bouyer and also collaborated with *THING*'s editors, said the people behind the magazine were motivated by their passions and interests, but didn't realize then that they were playing a pivotal role in preserving history.

“It was a fun, exciting time for us to just be young and go out and create things without any inhibitions,” Coleman said. “Looking back, we can see this was part of Chicago history. But at the time, we were just doing what we loved to do.”

THING was also a blueprint for the role a magazine can play in building community, supporting others and uplifting marginalized voices. After *THING* ended in 1993, the magazine's influence continued through BLACKlines, a monthly magazine published by Outlines that sought to fill a void left by the end of *THING*'s run. BLACKlines, which stopped running in 2004, was later bought by Windy City Times and is currently being revived as a monthly email newsletter.

“*THING* was the precursor to all of this,” Bouyer said. “It proved there's a need for publications like this to exist and from there, the movement grew.”

Revisiting *THING*'s archives to edit the anthology helped Coleman recognize the significance of the time she, Bouyer and the magazine's founders spent together, she said.

“Most of those guys are gone off the Earth, but I just wish they could experience the thrill of seeing everything revisited,” Coleman said. “It's surreal to see this anthology coming out.”