



Celebrating CircuitMom – 20 years entertaining Chicago

By Ross Forman

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Harvat: 'It seems surreal to me that I have been able to continue doing what I love to do...'

In 1996, [Matthew Harvat](#) and a bunch of friends from Chicago went to Hotlanta, a large, long-gone circuit party. They were at the main dance event when the venue ran out of bottled water. The hotel where the party was held rolled out some catering carts with stacks of plastic cups and pitchers of water for people to help themselves.

"I thought it would be really funny to randomly show up on the dance floor with four pitchers of water and a stack of cups in my cargo pants pocket," Harvat recalls with a smile. "A group of guys that I encountered on my way back to the Chicago crew stopped me and said, 'Are you our circuit angel here to save us with water?'"

"One guy then said, 'No, it's our circuitmom,' like the old Kool-Aid commercial mom, when the mom would open the screen door holding a pitcher of Kool-Aid and scream 'Hey kids, Kool-Aid'"

"It cracked all of us up and I made my way to the Chicago guys, told the story ...and the name stuck."

Harvat, 53, who lives in Ukrainian Village, is the president/owner of CircuitMOM Productions. He is celebrating 20 years in Chicago's LGBT community in 2018.

"It seems surreal to me that I have been able to continue doing what I love to do and be, mostly, my own boss for two decades. That is not something many people can say and I am very grateful for the countless people who have selflessly helped me create this dream career," Harvat said.

He never envisioned CircuitMom at 20.

"This was supposed to be a 6- or 7-year thing. I used to always say 'She's going to call it quits (from drag) when she turns 40,' but here I am at 53, still producing events, still spackling up my face here and there and trying to be better each time out of the gate.

"I am from Chicago, so being able to work, live and create here is an amazing feeling. I am very proud of my city. Plus, with so many people visiting here and coming to our events, Chicago has truly opened the door for me to travel with my brand of chaos to produce events and perform in other cities and countries. Costa Rica, Vancouver, Prague, Nassau, Puerto Rico and Toronto are just a few of the amazing places my career has taken me. I hope to keep adding to the list."

CircuitMom produces four to seven events annually at the [House of Blues](#) and/or [Aragon Ballroom](#) during International Mr. Leather (IML) weekend, Gay Pride, Market Days and Halloween. There are other events that CircuitMom Productions is a yearly contributor to, such as About Face Theaters "Wonka Ball" in May, Microsoft's "America's Gold Club" event every November and Lyric Opera's Board Gala every spring, which coincides with their Broadway musical for their season.

"The company, like any business, has had to evolve with the times and expand its offerings. CircuitMOM has always been a very positive personality, striving to bring happiness to the performances and events she produces and performs for, so the character specifically has not changed much with the exception of updating makeup techniques and costuming looks to stay somewhat on trend. Oh, and there are a lot more wrinkles and non-synthetic grey hair on my head, but those are well earned and embraced," Harvat said.

Before CircuitMom

Harvat has a musical theater background and "always loved being on stage."

While working at Roscoe's in the mid-1990s, the staff created an "all-employee drag benefit," which everyone was required to participate.

So, at age 31, with the help of Terri Michaels and Monica Munro, Harvat for the first time was wearing a wig, dress and heels ...as Leigh Ving, performing Natalie Cole's "I've Got Love On My Mind."

Harvat changed to "Jean Poole" not long after that first night to have a more comical tone to it.

"CircuitMOM" came along in 1997.

"I feel very fortunate to have come along when I did. I have always been drawn to the opportunities that would allow me to create a large production and performance for my time on stage," Harvat said. "Back in the late-1990s and into the early-00s, there was an extremely successful charity event produced by Patrick Russo called, 'Who's That Girl,' held at The Park West, which was probably the biggest drag event in Chicago for many years. Patrick and his team created an incomparable show with elevated production values, staging, lights and choreographed numbers, and (they) brought it to the masses.

"I was lucky to be included in that show a few times. Lady Bunny came to town with her historic 'Wigstock' show from New York at The Chicago Theater in 2002, invited us to be a part of that massive stage. Oh, and one time, I was a surprise performer for a massive Kentucky Derby/birthday party in Louisville. To walk out onstage and see the look on the birthday boy's face was priceless. He got a little teary-eyed and almost made me cry."

Harvat said there have literally been hundreds of times over the past 20 years when he's had to ask himself, 'Is this all really happening?'

"I think being suspending 57-feet high, over the center of the Aragon Ballroom dance floor, hidden from the audience by a curtain, waiting to make my entrance for my show at our 'SuperHero' party for Market Days last year may be the most memorable. I was hanging up there for about 10 minutes, surrounded by a curtain that was meant to drop suddenly when the music hit a certain point. Just listening to the 3,500 people dancing and partying down below, not knowing I was up there was really energizing, but also the most calm I had been in probably six months. (It was) just me, hanging there in the dark, in the center of aerialists' ring with my thoughts. I sat there, feet dangling, thinking, 'This is it ...the entrance ...the party. All of these people who came through the doors tonight for this event. This event created by 80 cast, crew and staff members that have worked tirelessly to make this night happen. Some of them have been with you for the last 20 years. This is two decades in the making. Don't mess it up!'

"When it was time for the curtain to drop, all I could hear was the 'click... click... .click, click, click, clickclickclick!!!!' of the electronic release mechanism FAILING and not letting the curtain fall! All I could think was, 'I am 57-feet from the floor and the song is just going to play on without me. Then suddenly I see shadows of dancers all the way down on the stage physically pulling the curtain down off the release track around me so I could be revealed. We were only about 35 seconds late, but it certainly amped up everyone's energy in the show."

Harvat said he is "very lucky" to be surrounded by extraordinary talent. CircuitMOM is not one person, it is a family, he said.

"I try to embrace the up-and-coming performers, try new event production styles and stay as current as I can on music, artists and trends," Harvat said. "Probably the biggest change or evolution in the last six years has been my assistant, Edwin Martinez. He started out as a part-time employee when my last one left to become a Chicago police officer.

"I think two weeks in with me landed him on the cover of [Grab Magazine](#) when Belvedere Vodka named me as one of their 'RED' spokespersons, (representing) the AIDS Red Ribbon symbol, (which) is a charitable campaign where companies like Apple and The Gap create special products for people to purchase, then donate a portion of the proceeds to help fight AIDS worldwide.

"Since then, he has taken on so much responsibility for our company that he has evolved into a partner. We have a floral division; we build sets and decor for [Sidetrack](#) and other corporate clients. We design weddings and fashion shoots, art direct videos, produce dance parties for 200 to 5,000 people and provide staffing for private parties. We plant rooftop gardens for residential clients as well as some restaurants and bars. We decorate 20 clients for the holiday season and travel to other cities and countries to produce events. He has become an invaluable part of my life and vision for the future. I have been building this career and brand for a long time, (but now) think I have the right person to carry on the legacy if I should ever figure out how to simply sit down and relax."

Harvat said one of the biggest changes he's witnessed in his business and beyond is, no surprise, the explosion of social media, which has forced many to rethink and reinvent their products, services and themselves, he said.

"I miss the days of massive crowds out every night of the week, excited to hear a new DJ or producer that you knew would be playing things you've never heard before or getting to meet new people," Harvat said. "Let's face it, in today's society, anything you want can be ordered, drop-shipped, downloaded, streamed or sexed online. The convenience of life's 'immediate gratification' culture has brought us everything more quickly, but also, alienated us in a way.

"Also, there no longer are any mega-clubs here, or in other major cities. Gone are the days of Shelter, Castle, Crobar, Roxy (and) Roseland Ballroom. Large events (now) have to be created in non-club spaces. What is interesting is that the demand is suddenly back for these massive dance parties. Dallas Purple Party, Winter Party in Miami and our Market Days events here in Chicago are just a few that have seen significant growth in the last few years."

Harvat said another major change over the past two decades is simply the success of RuPaul's Drag Race.

"Talk about a juggernaut for drag performers," Harvat said. "I was not a fan of the show initially because I could not relate to the catty, bitchiness that seemed to be the one note drag cliché they were focusing on. Soon, I started to focus on the actual performance talents of the girls and, as the show evolved and got more creative with the challenges, I started watching regularly. I especially enjoyed it when someone I have worked with in the past landed on the show and won.

"I am happy for all 10 seasons of performers who have been given this amazing opportunity to share their art form. These gals are not messing around and some of them have elevated the art form into the stratosphere."

Harvat said Chicago is filled with plenty of talented performers/entertainers, starting with Dixie Lynn Cartwright and Trannika Rex – "two of the funniest and quickest wits in the business," he said. "Kat Sass is a vocal powerhouse who is fearless in her art. Debbie Fox has mastered dramatically changing her look, yet staying 1,000 percent true to her brand. She can go from pin-up girl 1940s glam to heroin chic club kid Minnie Mouse, and sell them both with ease. Mercedes Tyler is a sassy bitch with a microphone, but has a social conscience that is unmatched. Khloe has been in my corner for quite a while painting my face for bigger shows so I can focus on other things, and also is a huge supporter and great friend. And I live for and love working with Molly Callinan and Adam LeBlanc; both are consummate professionals who make me work harder to be better."

CircuitMom Takeover at Sidetrack

On Thursday, May 24, Harvat will be in full force. Make that, CircuitMom. Actually, both.

CircuitMOM Productions takes over Sidetrack for a Memorial Day Weekend Circuit Dance Party. At 9 p.m., after Chicago's Official RuPaul's Drag Race Season 10 Viewing Party, DJs Karsten Sollors and [Matthew Harvat](#) will spin with multiple laser light filled dance floors and special performances by DiDa Ritz and CircuitMom.

Harvat admitted, he is a bit of an introvert and pretty private in general. "Sure, I post a lot on all of my social media, but never deeply personal things," he said. "I am social for a living, but keep most of my private life out of the public eye. A couple years ago, Chicago Magazine named me one of Chicago's Most Eligible People, and it gave me such anxiety. It was an honor to be included, but I am glad nothing ever came of it in the way of people contacting me. Is that weird?"

Harvat said one of his local goals is to produce a gigantic post-Gay Pride Parade party for Chicago. "I look at other cities, like New York, Toronto and San Francisco that have these massive events that cap off their parades. It baffles me why Chicago does not have (its) own.

"We have worked on ideas the last 20 years and even tried a few of them. Some worked well, some failed miserably. The goal is to offer an outdoor concert/dance party for 20,000 of the 1 million people attending the parade. (It would be) something to look forward to after the parade. Boystown can only fit so many people and needs to get people moving out of the neighborhood. Why not create something for the masses? Give me [Wrigley Field](#) or Millennium Park and I will get you two world class DJs, an amazing light show and Kelly Clarkson to come perform."

Harvat also envisions performing on Broadway – in New York, not the street just east of Halsted.

So who is Harvat?

"He's Chicago-born, loves all animals, comes from parents that were professional rodeo competitors, has been known to be decent at growing and arranging flowers, is not a great ice-skater but loves the Chicago Blackhawks, knows his way around a kitchen and (is) pretty dedicated to the people I care about," he said.

NOW SERVING ...[Matthew Harvat](#) (aka CircuitMOM)

Favorite Chicago Bar: Sidetrack.

Favorite Chicago Restaurant: Wood

Favorite TV Show: Schitt's Creek

Favorite Movie: The Color Purple, followed by First Wives Club and Sordid Lives

One Celebrity You'd Like to Meet: Michelle Obama – "I would crumble into a blubbering mess."

Preferred Pizza Toppings: Italian Sausage, spinach and mushrooms

Feet Facts: "I wear a (size) 10.5 in men's (shoes) and a 12 in women's."

Favorite Entertainer: Madonna – "Love her or hate her, you have to give her props for creating one of the most iconic bodies of work, spanning 30-plus years."

Drink of Choice at a Bar: Warm months: Effen and Soda with a lemon. Cold months: a Bulleit Manhattan, up.

CircuitMom's Fashion: "Is usually custom-made, not because she is a snob, but because every outfit is truly specific to the event."

CircuitMom Loves, But Matthew Hates: "CircuitMOM loves a couple seven drinks. Matthew hates the hangover."

Boxers or Briefs: "I am an equal opportunity undie style supporter. Sometimes it's briefs, sometimes a jockstrap, sometimes none at all."