

# FOLSOM STREET EAST

## FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

**WHAT:** Folsom Street East  
**WHEN:** Sunday, June 20, 2010 – 2-8pm  
**WHERE:** 28<sup>th</sup> Street btw. 10<sup>th</sup> & 11<sup>th</sup> Avenues, New York City  
**WHO:** Co-Hosts: Peppermint and Mike Dreyden  
Performers: Sylvia Tosun, Fredrick Ford, The Johns, Brian Kent, Noa Tylo, Unisex Salon, The I.C.N.Y.

## A KINK OF OUR OWN: FOLSOM STREET EAST RETURNS

(NEW YORK CITY) On Sunday, June 20th from 2-8pm, the Folsom Street East (FSE) street fair returns for the 14th consecutive year, celebrating its adolescence with a day of fetish-fueled fun on West 28th Street between 10th and 11th Avenues on Manhattan's West Side.

While most New York City street fairs feature a lot of the same stuff – tube socks sold in bulk, 10-minute massages, a variety of meats-on-a-stick, maybe a couple of pet adoption booths with cute puppies -- FSE is a little different. True, there are tube socks – but mostly just visible above the laces of black leather boots -- and any massages given are more friendly than therapeutic. You're far more likely to encounter bears and wolves than puppies, and "meat-on-a-stick" can quickly take on an entirely new meaning.

### Out and Proud

Inspired by San Francisco's legendary Folsom Street Fair, FSE was founded in 1997 by Gay Male S/M Activists (GMSMA) chair John Weis and a cohort of similarly-minded New York City leathermen. Since its inception, FSE has evolved into the only open-air leather/fetish street party of its kind on the East Coast. The first Folsom Street East was held, appropriately enough, on the grimy cobble-stoned street in front of the notorious (and sadly missed) Lure leather bar in Manhattan's Meatpacking District. This was the event's home until 2005, when the Lure closed and the party moved to its current location in front of the Eagle bar on West 28th Street in Chelsea.

From the beginning, FSE featured live music and performance art, bootblacks, barbers, health and community information, and vendors selling everything from cigars to harnesses to handmade floggers. From a handful of vendor tables and a few hundred attendees that first year, FSE has grown exponentially: the 2009 event drew over 50 vendors and nearly 10,000 leather and fetish-clad revelers over the course of the afternoon.

Of course, getting a very gay, fetish-themed block party off the ground isn't the easiest project – most community boards and neighborhood associations would probably prefer sock vendors and lemonade stands to shirtless, cigar-smoking leathermen and twinks on leashes. Weis however, says that the process wasn't as torturous as one might think.

"In many respects, the only challenges were in the sheer logistics of making it happen," he says. "Community Board 2 in the Village was very supportive, and frankly, there wasn't much in the Meatpacking District in those days besides actual meatpacking, leather bars and hookers."

"Cultivating good relationships with the city community boards was key in getting the whole thing moving," adds GMSMA archivist Gil Kessler. "We wanted to recreate the *idea* of the original Folsom Street, just on a smaller scale than in San Francisco."

### Kink with a Conscience

While FSE has always been a sterling opportunity for sexy people-watching and public displays of leathery misbehavior, the event was conceived as more than just an excuse to gear up and be seen. "One of GMSMA's tenets was activism," says Weis. "I thought that having a fun day in the sun for the SM/leather community celebrating our diversity would go a long way in helping dispel myths and stereotypes. We see FSE as important opportunity for visibility, outreach and activism. A key part of that is taking a proud stand -- outside in the sunshine – embracing and celebrating sexual diversity."

It's an opportunity to flex some philanthropic muscle as well. According to Kessler, charitable contributions have been a hallmark of the FSE mission since day one. "Folsom Street East was designed to be a big, wonderful, SM/fetish get-

together with the money going to charitable groups," says Kessler. And it's been precisely that: to date, FSE has donated over \$210,000 to a wide array of non-profit organizations, including the Lesbian and Gay Community Services Center, the New York City Anti-Violence Project, and the National Coalition for Sexual Freedom (NCSF).

Each year, FSE also names the winner of the organization's annual Sexual Freedom Award, which is given annually to an individual or group whose work promotes equality, respect and openness among people regardless of sexual orientation or gender expression. Past recipients have included Peter Schwartz, Rick Weber, Matt Foreman, Kwame Banks, Matthew Bank and John Weis. In addition to public acknowledgment and a commemorative plaque, each year's recipient receives a \$500 grant to the charity of their choice.

This year's Sexual Freedom Award recipient is Ms Susan Wright, founder of the NCSF. In addition to establishing the group in 1997, Susan was also instrumental in reforming the National Organization for Women's anti-SM policy in 1999, and created the SM vs. Abuse policy statement through the Leather Leadership Conference in 1997-98. Susan is a member of the organizing committees for Smarter Sex NYC, the Sex Positive Journalism Awards, and the advocacy committee for the American Association for Sex Educators, Counselors and Therapists. If that wasn't enough, she has published over 25 books, both fiction and non-fiction.

### **Your Friendly Neighborhood Fetish Fair**

While FSE's West Coast predecessor sprawls over multiple city blocks, like any good New Yorker Folsom Street East manages to concentrate a lot of content into a much smaller area. And despite the intimidating appearance of most of the attendees, event organizers take pains to make it clear that all are welcome at the party, regardless of sexual orientation, gender identity, or experience level. The only requirement is a respectful attitude.

"Folsom Street East has more heart and soul," says Weis. "There are no buses filled with tourists being dropped off to stare. It's people who come out to have fun with friends. It is a predominantly gay male crowd, but it's more overwhelmingly friendly than anything. Come out, have fun, and celebrate diversity -- otherwise, stay home." "It's just a nice marketplace and a fun day," adds Kessler. "There are plenty of more mainstream organizations represented there as well, like GOAL (the New York Gay Officers Action League) and the gay firemen's organization. You can just check out all the different groups who take tables and put out literature, enjoy the atmosphere, and see that we're not crazy."

It's also important to remember that FSE is organized and staffed entirely by volunteers who give of their time and talents to make the whole thing happen. Planning for each year's event starts many months in advance, and dozens of volunteers are needed to make things run smoothly. "Volunteers from any part of the community are always welcome to help set up the site, staff booths during the event, and close the evening," says FSE volunteer coordinator Mike Ryan. Anyone interested in contributing to the success of the event is invited to visit [www.folsomstreeteast.org/category/volunteers](http://www.folsomstreeteast.org/category/volunteers), or email Mike himself at [volunteers@folsomstreeteast.org](mailto:volunteers@folsomstreeteast.org).

Of course, even with a small army of staff, a certain amount of mayhem is to be expected when 10,000 people show up to anything. Add a beer truck, a healthy dose of rowdy sexual tension and several hundred pairs of chaps, and you've got yourself a party that your Aunt Millie should probably skip. "The second or third year, a thunderstorm of monsoon proportions swept through in the middle of the afternoon," Weis recalls. "Tents were flying away, people were freaking out. [City Council Speaker] Christine Quinn -- who was executive director of the New York City Anti-Violence Project at the time -- and I skipped up and down the block to allay the fears of those huddling in doorways trying to stay dry. I also once heard someone complimenting an NYPD officer of his uniform -- and then realized he was flirting with a real cop."

While the crowd may be the main star at Folsom Street East, the event's stage hosts an impressive array of live musical acts, performers, and contests ranging from the sublime to the...well, less sublime. FSE Board President Devin MacLachlan recalls one year when one performer spent most of her time scaling the sound system, rather than actually singing. "Then there was the lady who played balloons as musical instruments -- that was a memorable performance."

The dubious honor of Master of Ceremonies has gone in years past Activist and adult film producer Kwame Banks, drag queens (ChiChi LaRue) porn producer/director and infamous drag queen and DJ. 2010 brings one of each. This year, drag star Peppermint and porn star Mike Dreyden will preside over a performance roster that includes headliner Sylvia Tosun, as well as Billboard recording artists Brian Kent and Frederick Ford. The dirty boys of The Johns, Unisex Salon, Noa Tylo, and the Imperial Court of New York round out the line up of talent on stage.

"We've evolved a lot as an event over the years," says MacLachlan. "We've come from balloon music to having three Top 40 dance vocalists on our stage." This year will also mark the return of FSE's notorious pie-eating contest, which is a far cry from the wholesome County Fair version, and which may forever change the audience's relationship with coconut cream.

Whether someone comes to Folsom Street East to volunteer, donate, get information, or just get lucky, “It really is about being out in the sunshine and having fun (in gear) with friends,” says Weis. “It’s the only sex positive event that takes place outdoors in all of New York City. The fact that we raise a ton of money for important charities is a terrific bonus.”

In addition to the street fair, this year FSE will be spanning the weekend, kicking off with BULLY—a Friday night party—at View Bar, moving through Saturday night with Bad Apple at Rush (presented in conjunction with NY promoter Mark Nelson), and on into Sunday’s street fair. For more details about these and other weekend events, visit the FSE website.

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