

OBITUARIES

From First Ave to the Weisman, Camille Gage 'had this amazing spark'

The visual artist and singer for Têtes Noires died of cancer at age 66.

By **Chris Riemenschneider** (<https://www.startribune.com/chris-riemenschneider/6370586/>) Star Tribune

DECEMBER 8, 2022 — 11:40AM

When former Mayor Betsy Hodges wanted to blend music, visual art, theater, dance and poetry from Minneapolis into her 2014 inauguration party — with a little progressive politics, too, of course — [Camille Gage](https://www.gageart.net/) (<https://www.gageart.net/>) was the perfect person to employ as a co-organizer.

A musician who performed at First Avenue, an artist whose works hung in the Minneapolis Institute of Art and Weisman Art Museum, a writer and editor who championed environmental and feminist causes, a community activist who fought for Indigenous groups and homeless people, and an overall booster and planner for the arts in Minnesota, Gage died of cancer Monday at age 66.

Gage largely kept her illness private since her diagnosis last February. Her death was met with shock alongside an outpouring of tributes on social media.

"She was a quiet but determined fighter till the end," said her husband, Patrick Mulligan.

Gage originally hit the scene as a singer and keyboardist in the '80s sextet [Têtes Noires](https://tetesnoires.com/) (<https://tetesnoires.com/>), often heralded as the first all-female rock band in the Twin Cities. Then a single mom, she helped form the band in 1983 after moving to Minneapolis from Racine, Wis. — "because she needed to be somewhere more creatively vibrant," Mulligan said.

"The Têtes," as they were often called, blended girl-group and a cappella pop harmonies with punk/new-wave grooves and gender-equalizing lyrics. The New York Times praised their "dark character studies, blithe melodies and ... mock-sweet arrangements."



PROVIDED

Camille Gage became a visual artist and activist after her '80s rock group Têtes Noires disbanded.

ADVERTISEMENT

Keyboardist Angela Frucci said Gage brought "an incredible amount of fun, emotion and enthusiasm" to the group, which would disband after making the 1987 album "Clay Foot Gods," (<https://open.spotify.com/album/015wIZH9KMIrW5JnmPKecn>) with members of Milwaukee's Violent Femmes. Gage's experiences in the band, however, would shape her art and activism in the years to come.

"Being in an 'all-girl band' and the sexism and challenges we faced, that only sharpened her feminist blade all the more," Frucci said.

Gage's devotion to the Têtes was second to her devotion to her daughter, Jennifer, who was "like another member of the band" even though she was only 6 when the group formed, Frucci recounted.

Jennifer Gage Rossum pointed to the way her mom juggled the band, jobs and parental duties as an indicator of how she would ably weave multiple artforms and roles later in life: "She had boundless energy. She could have 17 irons in the fire at once."

After Têtes, Gage enrolled at the Minneapolis College of Art and Design and became heavily involved in visual arts. One of her multimedia pieces, the white feather-adorned "Untitled (Robe for Judith)," (<https://www.gageart.net/moving-day/view/36>) is part of the Weisman's permanent collection. She also had pieces shown at the Katherine E. Nash Gallery and Walker Art Center.

ADVERTISEMENT



(<https://chorus.stimg.co/24275811/TetesFirst.jpg?format=auto&compress&cs=tinysrgb&auto=comp>)
CATHERINE SETTANNI

Camille Gage, seated third from right, posed with the other members of Têtes Noires in the women's restroom at First Avenue in the mid-1980s.

Some of Gage's most admired art work was seen outside museums, though.

She was heavily involved in pop-up displays and public art projects, such as the neon-lit "Walk of Remembrance" (<https://www.gageart.net/walk-of-remembrance/1>) for the MN AIDS Project and artful billboards. One such recent billboard in downtown Minneapolis featured Minnesota mothers protesting George Floyd's murder under the banner, "When the cry is 'Justice!'" (<https://www.gageart.net/when-the-cry-is-justice----/1>)

Gage's experience setting up rock shows led her to help organize cultural events such as the Hodges inauguration, the opening of the Open Book literary center, and In the Heart of the Beast Puppet and Mask Theatre's May Day celebrations. She also oversaw a lecture series with late Vice President Walter Mondale at the University of Minnesota's Humphrey School of Public Affairs, where she worked for many years.

She helped start several art galleries and organizations, including Form + Content Gallery and WARM — the Women's Art Registry of Minnesota, now known as the Women's Art Resources of Minnesota. In the literary world, she produced and edited poetry and essay books, including "Fierce Lament" and "One Minneapolis: a City in Verse," featuring poets from a cross-section of neighborhoods.

"She was an avid believer in the power of art to connect, form a sense of place and advocate for change," said state Sen. Scott Dibble, DFL-Minneapolis, Gage's friend.

ADVERTISEMENT

Joan Vorderbruggen, former director of Hennepin Theatre District Engagement, worked with Gage on the "Made Here" storefront art displays and other downtown Minneapolis projects and cited yet another job of hers, yoga instructor, as informing her other work.

"She made a lot of instillations and did a lot of work that provided peace and calm," Vorderbruggen said.

"She always made an impact and sought positive results in her projects. And she did a lot to make sure other artists and poets were recognized and actually paid for their creative work."

While her art often had an activist bent, Gage also took a hands-on approach to the causes she championed, attending many protests and events for climate change and women's reproductive rights. In recent years, she regularly volunteered and served at Minneapolis homeless encampments, the Native American Community Development Institute and the Indigenous-led Nibi Walks (the latter largely to fight climate change).

"She just had this amazing spark that she applied to everything she felt passionate about," her husband said.

ADVERTISEMENT

In addition to her husband and daughter, Gage is survived by three grandchildren.

Gage's family hopes to host a public memorial event in her honor in the coming months with a charitable component for one or more of the causes she supported.

Chris Riemenschneider has been covering the Twin Cities music scene since 2001, long enough for Prince to shout him out during "Play That Funky Music (White Boy)." The St. Paul native authored the book "First Avenue: Minnesota's Mainroom" and previously worked as a music critic at the Austin American-Statesman in Texas.

chris@startribune.com 612-673-4658 ChrisRstrib

