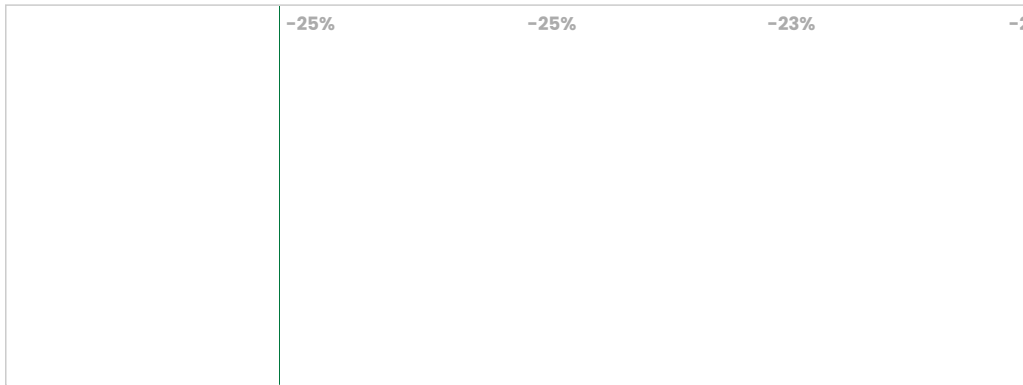


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**ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT**

Why Sam Smith's Castro Theatre promo is sparking backlash in San Francisco

By **Aidin Vaziri**, Staff Writer

Oct 1, 2025



Sam Smith's Castro Theatre promo sparked backlash from LGBTQ+ advocates this week who say its smoking imagery glamorizes tobacco use in queer spaces.
Collier Schorr/UMusic



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[Sam Smith's](#) announcement that they will reopen San Francisco's historic [Castro Theatre](#) with [an eight-night residency](#) in February is drawing criticism from LGBTQ+ advocates. But not because of their music.

The Grammy- and Oscar-winning English singer [released a video](#) this week promoting the residency, "To Be Free: San Francisco," that prominently features people smoking cigarettes. Advocates say the imagery endorses tobacco use in a community that has long been a target of cigarette marketing.

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"It really saddens me to see 10 instances of smoking in the two-minute video," said Rob "DJ Rotten Robbie" Doughty. "The LGBTQ+ community has been a target of the cigarette companies for years and years. They think of us as expendable. The smoking in the video was so blatant it almost felt like they were paid by the cigarette companies to glamorize and sexualize cigarettes."

Tobacco Free Solano co-chair Joseph Hayden, who has [campaigned to reduce smoking](#) in queer communities, drew a direct line between Smith's video and the tobacco industry's notorious past.

“Smith is either unaware or uncaring about his product placement for Big Tobacco,” he said, pointing to the industry’s 1990s “SCUM” memo, shorthand for “subcultural urban marketing,” which targeted San Francisco’s Castro District.

Sam Smith - Ain't No Sunshine (TO BE FREE: SAN FRANCISCO - The Castro Theatre)



The issue spilled onto [Facebook](#), where one commenter described the clip as “Making cancer cool again.” Others suggested Smith was going for a retro aesthetic but agreed the repeated smoking was “glaring.”

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“The amount of smoking in this video is shocking & disturbing,” Doughty wrote in one widely shared post.

The criticism comes as data shows [LGBTQ+ youth and young adults](#) smoke and vape at [significantly higher rates](#) than their peers, in part due to decades of targeted advertising.

In San Francisco, health officials continue to report elevated tobacco use in LGBTQ+ and lower-income neighborhoods.

Smith, who has spoken in the past about quitting smoking, did not respond to the Chronicle's request for comment regarding the backlash.

"I fell into the pit of smoking cigarettes," they admitted in a 2018 interview. "I'm battling it. ... When I have my time off in between shows, I find it really difficult."

Smith acknowledged "it's so bad for you" and noted that it's not only dangerous for their voice.

"It affects my mood as well, smoking. I feel like I'm hurting myself in a way when I do it," they said.

Smith won an Oscar in 2016 for the song "Writing's on the Wall," from the James Bond thriller "Spectre" and received global attention in 2014 by winning four Grammy Awards, including best new artist Grammy and record of the year for "Stay With Me."

They are scheduled to perform at the Castro Theatre on Feb. 10-11, 13-14, 17-18 and 20-21, marking the first event at the renovated theater since it closed in 2024 for a \$41 million overhaul.

Chronicle staff writer Tony Bravo contributed to this report.

Oct 1, 2025

**Aidin Vaziri**

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Aidin Vaziri is a staff writer at The San Francisco Chronicle.

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