

DRAG CULTURE OF LOS ANGELES:
INTANGIBLE HERITAGE THROUGH EPHEMERAL PLACES

By

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Dedication

This work is dedicated to all people out there still fighting for their rights and recognition as human beings, and to their allies.

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Abstract

This thesis explores the history of the Drag culture of Los Angeles, its relevance to today's society, and why it is essential to preserve the tangible and intangible heritage of a marginalized subculture experiencing a surge in popularity today.

Today, Drag culture has become popular after many years of being buried under society's "moral" prejudice. Existing in the shadows, most of the stories about this LGBTQ+ subculture have been erased, even within the LGBTQ+ community.

This thesis analyzes the duality between Drag history and today's mainstream Drag culture to highlight its significance to the community and development of Los Angeles.

Because documentation of the stories of this culture is limited due to its nature and societal biases, a significant portion of my research relies on oral histories, interviews with people in the community and allies, and the LGBTQ+ archives at USC.

Many places where the Drag culture developed in Los Angeles are already gone, giving way to new developments or leaving urban voids. However, these stories still need to be told. It is important to identify enclaves in southern California that, in spite of their ephemerality, served as the foundation of Los Angeles's Drag culture.

Introduction

This thesis research focuses on the Drag culture of Los Angeles, its history, its relevance to today's society, the places that allowed for its development, and why it is important to preserve the heritage of a marginalized subculture that today is experiencing a surge in popularity. The research aims to analyze the duality between erased histories, disappeared places, and today's mainstream Drag culture to reconcile their history and highlight its significance to the community and the development of Los Angeles, utilizing LGBTQ+ archives at ONE Archives and the University of Southern California (USC) and other pop culture sources, documenting oral histories from Drag performers to map the significant places of Los Angeles Drag culture.

Today, Drag culture is well recognized after centuries of being buried under society's "moral" prejudice. Existing only in the shadows, most of the stories about this LGBTQ+ subculture have been erased. Even within the LGBTQ+ community, the subculture has been cast out and looked down upon. Gender non-conforming individuals have often been a vulnerable population, often leaving their homes after experiencing rage or shame in their personal circles. Historically, this pushed many early performers to neglect their gender expressions and/or to submit themselves to conversion therapy.¹

The early Drag as we know it today in Vaudeville circuits and burlesque shows provided a new platform and escape valve for gender-nonconforming individuals on both sides of the performance, stage, and orchestra. The characteristic sass and sexual expression made it an easy target for an increasingly conservative society; however, Drag Culture prevailed in the shadows,

¹ Lillian Gieseke, "Gladys Bentley's Confessions." *Center on Religion and Culture at Fordham University*, August 4, 2022.

encouraging society to embrace the self-gender expression of future generations. High architecture theaters in the Beaux-Arts and Deco, among other styles, were hotspots for the overall LGBTQ+ community development, and this side of the story needs to be recognized, embraced, documented, and told.

The New York's Ball Room culture of the last quarter of the twentieth century and the Drag House phenomenon played a critical chapter in the LGBTQ+ history of the United States, providing a support network for marginalized individuals and becoming the backbone of the community during the Gay liberation movement and then the 1980s AIDS pandemic.² The courage and resiliency of Gays, Lesbians, and, above all, Transgender individuals fueled by Drag Culture helped initiate the arguably most influential moment in LGBTQ+ history, the Gay liberation movement at both ends of the United States, including major protests and unrest at Stonewall, Cooper Do-nuts, and the Black Cat. Drag Houses, as the nuclear structure of the community, also provided one of the most robust support networks during the darkest moment in LGBTQ+ history, the 1980s AIDS pandemic. The cultural, economic, and political landscape and development conditions of Los Angeles prompted a different growth of the Drag community, resulting in a unique community equally as important as its East Coast counterpart.³

Throughout time, Drag has provided a space for the empowerment of minorities and underrepresented communities within the LGBTQ+ community; Drag culture became the basis for the empowerment of many transexual activists through history, activism that led to necessary

² Although commonly called the 1980s epidemic, I personally think the proportions of the spread were of a pandemic nature. The virus spread across international borders without means of containment, other than discrimination, for years, targeting specifically the LGBTQ+ community across the world.

³ *Paris is Burning*. Directed by Jennie Livingston. Produced by Miramax Home Entertainment. Performed by Barry Swimar, Nigel Finch, Lacy Davis, Dorian Corey, Pepper LaBeija, Venus, Xtravaganza, et al. Jennie Livingston, 1990.

reforms in civil rights and law improvement making America what it is today. Marsha P. Johnson and Sir Lady Java became the cornerstone for the Stonewall riots in New York and the fight against Rule 9 in Los Angeles, respectively.

Drag culture is also part of mainstream show business, constantly bridging the gap between a conservative audience and a world everyone would otherwise look the other way from. Through satire, comedy, and patience, Drag Queens and Kings have shown the world the insides of the LGBTQ+ community, always carrying a message of acceptance, community, and inclusion. Drag culture's cultural, social, and legal contributions are essential not only to the LGBTQ+ community but also to the development of the present society.

As it evolved, Los Angeles created the perfect pool for Drag Culture to develop. Heavily linked to the different stages of development throughout history, clusters were formed around the city where specific conditions created new forms of acceptance and entertainment. Theaters provided a safe space during the Vaudeville era, and the high flux of the Army Corps prompted completely different spaces during WWII.

In general, documentation of the stories and places in Drag culture is scarce because of its nature and societal biases. This research relies on oral histories, primary source pictures, era propaganda, and interviews with people in the community and allies to try to uncover Drag personalities and landmarks in the Los Angeles area. Most of the places where Drag culture developed in L.A. are already gone, giving way to new developments or even leaving urban voids behind; however, these stories still need to be told. It is important to localize and recognize enclaves in Southern California that, under their ephemeral nature, became the foundation of the Drag culture. The performers and site information are ordered chronologically by periods herein.

The terminology I use in this document is LGBTQ+ terminology accepted at the moment as part of an inclusive language; some terminology is used as a reference to archaic ways of referring to performers and people. This section includes some definitions of the terms used throughout the document as a basis of what I am referring to since terms and language evolve with time.

Definitions:

Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Plus (LGBTQ+):

LGBTQ+ refers to lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and the plus sign acts as an umbrella that includes the rest of the subcultures and identities within the community like transexual, and pansexual, to mention some.

Drag

Drag as an artistic form is the art of combining different elements of performance, such as fashion, makeup, character creation, dance, and comedy. The performer transforms themselves into exaggerated glamorous personas that challenge traditional gender norms. There are various styles and genres of Drag, allowing Drag Kings and Queens to explore their creativity and push boundaries of self-expression.

Some of the key elements of Drag performance are:

Characterization: Drag performers create unique characters by adopting stage names, personas, and backstories. The characters vary from glamorous divas to comedians or avant-garde personalities. The creation of a different persona is crucial in Drag performance.

Makeup and Costume: Drag performers work hard to create a unique fashion and makeup style.

Their often handmade costumes are an extension of their Drag persona, pushing boundaries in fashion and style in dramatic and exaggerated looks. They also use theatrical makeup techniques to create a unique makeup style that often becomes their personal Drag signature.

Performance: Drag is a performative art form. The performers develop one or different performance skills that go from lip-syncing to singing, dancing, comedy, and interpretations. The performances are energetic and always linked to their Drag persona. They use their performance to entertain, advocate, engage, educate, and be altruistic. Most performers have a regular or side job that helps them pay their bills. Drag performances are characterized by evoking emotional responses in their audiences.

Drag provides a platform for self-expression and artistic freedom. It allows performers to challenge societal norms, explore gender identity and sexuality, and experiment with different styles, themes, and concepts. Drag artists often incorporate social commentary, humor, satire, and personal narratives into their performances, creating provocative and engaging experiences.

The Art of Drag has evolved over time, influenced by diverse cultures, communities, and movements. It has gained significant mainstream recognition through television shows like *RuPaul's Drag Race* and has become a powerful tool for promoting inclusivity, diversity, and acceptance. Drag celebrates individuality, creativity, and the power of self-expression,

captivating audiences and fostering a sense of community and belonging within LGBTQ+ and broader artistic circles.⁴

To dress in Drag:

To dress in Drag, in its most common form, means to present oneself in clothing, makeup, and accessories associated with a different gender for the purpose of performance or self-expression. When someone dresses in Drag, they adopt extravagant and exaggerated styles, fashion, and aesthetics. For example, a person assigned male at birth can dress in attire typically linked to females by using dresses, wigs, and makeup to create a character opposite to the gender assigned at birth. However, a person can dress in Drag of the same gender, as Drag is not exclusively associated with portraying the opposite gender.

Drag King and Queen:

A Drag King is an entertainer who performs in drag, presenting themselves in a masculine or male-identified persona embracing its expression. They may embody a range of masculine archetypes, from suave and debonair figures to rugged and charismatic personas.

A Drag Queen is an entertainer, typically (but not exclusively) male-bodied or assigned male at birth, who adopts a feminine character through Drag. Drag Queens are known for their creativity, artistry, and ability to embody femininity in ways that challenge traditional gender norms and expectations.

⁴ Simon Doonan, *Drag: The Complete Story (A Look at the History and Culture of Drag)*, Laurence King Publishing, 2019.

Drag Kings and Queens often perform in venues such as bars, clubs, or LGBTQ+ events, showcasing their talents. The performances are humorous, satirical, thought-provoking, and emotional but always reflect their individual styles and creative expressions. Drag performers may lip-sync or sing live, dance, and engage in comedic or dramatic performances. They often embrace elements of Camp, humor, and satire to entertain and captivate audiences.⁵

Drag plays an important role within LGBTQ+ communities as a source of empowerment, visibility, and cultural expression. Drag Kings and Queens have been influential figures in the history and development of LGBTQ+ rights.

While Drag performers predominantly identify as part of the LGBTQ+ community, it's important to understand that not all are gay or transgender. Drag is a form of artistic expression and performance rather than a reflection of an individual's gender identity or sexual orientation. Nonetheless, the art of Drag often provides a safe platform and space for individuals still discovering their gender. Performers come from diverse backgrounds, and the motivations for pursuing Drag can vary from personal expression to entertainment and activism.⁶

Butch vs. Femme:

In gay culture, the term "butch" is slang used to describe individuals, usually lesbians or queer women, who exhibit a masculine or androgynous appearance, and behavior is also linked to a strong or aggressive character. The term originated within Black lesbian communities in New

⁵ Camp is a deliberately exaggerated and theatrical style, typically for humorous effect. It is associated with the Gay liberation movement and the New York Ballroom Culture.

⁶ Katie Horowitz, "Drag, Interperformance, and the Trouble with Queerness" 1st ed. United Kingdom, Routledge, 2019.

York and has since been adopted by a broader LGBTQ+ community. When applied to Drag performers, it denotes the masculine traits of the individual while still calling out the femininity of the Queen. For example, a “butch Queen” is usually a Drag Queen that impersonates a masculine personality and mannerisms. The term can also be applied to individuals of other sexual orientations who embody masculine qualities or present themselves in a masculine or aggressive way.⁷

"Butch" is often contrasted with "femme," which refers to individuals who exhibit feminine appearance and mannerisms. The concepts of butch and femme are not static; these are fluid and self-defined expressions of gender and identity and part of the Drag culture's ever-evolving vocabulary. The understanding and interpreting of what it means to be "butch" or “femme” and its interchangeability depend mostly on the context and the individual.⁸

Crossdresser:

A crossdresser is an individual who wears clothing associated with a gender other than the one assigned at birth. Crossdressing is a form of self-expression and identity exploration. It does not indicate a person's gender identity or sexual orientation. The motivations for crossdressing can vary, ranging from personal enjoyment to exploring different aspects of one's identity or seeking

⁷ Bianca D.M. Wilson, "Black Lesbian Gender and Sexual Culture: Celebration and Resistance," *Culture, Health & Sexuality*, 2009, 11 (3): 297–313; Asia O'Hara, post. A Clarification of the term “Butch Queen,” Reddit web source.

⁸ M. Reuel Friedman, PhD, “Butch Queens Up in Pumps: Gender, Performance, and Ballroom Culture in Detroit by Marlon M. Bailey (review).” *The Michigan Historical Review* 40, no. 1, 108–109, 2014.

personal comfort and fulfillment. Crossdressing is a personal choice that aligns with personal views of aesthetics and identity as clothing, in my opinion, has no gender.⁹

Impersonator (male/female):

A female or male impersonator is an entertainer who imitates the appearance, mannerisms, and behavior of a different gender. Drag culture stems from early impersonators' entertainment industry as sexuality and gender identity concepts broadened through the years. Impersonators often focus on imitating iconic characters in entertainment and pop culture media. This is one of the key aspects of Drag culture. Impersonating personalities of the opposite gender is not strictly linked to sexuality and gender identity, and historically, most early impersonators were not identified as queer. However, these facts are not clear and biased due to the poor understanding of gender identity at the time.

Cisgender, Gender-conforming and non-conforming:

Cisgender, or simply Cis, describes a person whose gender identity aligns with the sex they were assigned at birth. Gender-conforming and gender-nonconforming describe individuals' adherence or deviation from societal Cis normativity regarding gender expression. Gender-conforming refers to individuals whose gender expression aligns with the Cis norms and its expectations associated with their assigned sex at birth. Gender-nonconforming, gender nonbinary, or gender diverse, refers to individuals whose gender expression differs from society's Cis norms and expectations. They may express themselves in ways that challenge traditional gender binaries

⁹ Alisa Grigorovich, "A Queer Aesthetic: Representations of Gender and Sexuality in Sadie Lee's Tomboys and Crossdressers," *Queer Studies in Media & Pop Culture* 2, no. 3, 293–308, 2017.

and usually adopt inclusive pronouns such as “They/them.” Additionally, gender expression is separate from gender identity, which refers to an individual's internal sense of their own gender. Gender nonconforming individuals may identify as transgender, nonbinary, or have other gender identities.¹⁰

Drag House:

Originating during the 1960s Ballroom scene, Drag Houses function as chosen families for members of the LGBTQ+ community and allies; these provide a support system and mentorship for their members, offering guidance, acceptance, and a sense of belonging. Each House has a “Mother,” who is the matriarch of the House and often a legendary figure within the community. Houses adopt new “children” who eventually may go and create their own House, passing on the knowledge acquired.¹¹

Latinx:

A gender-neutral term referring to someone living in the United States who was born in or has ancestors from Latin America, it is an alternative to the masculine (Latino) and feminine (Latina) forms. The word came into usage in the early twenty-first century as more people rejected binary categorization of gender and sought greater inclusivity.¹²

¹⁰ Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation, “*GLAAD Media Reference Guide, 8th Edition. Transgender Glossary of Terms*”; Laurel Wamsley, “A Guide To Gender Identity Terms,” *NPR*, June 2, 2021. <https://www.npr.org/2021/06/02/996319297/gender-identity-pronouns-expression-guide-lgbtq#:~:text=Cisgender%2C%20or%20simply%20cis%2C%20is,the%20sex%20assigned%20at%20birth.>

¹¹ Wendy Martinez, “How the Queer Ballroom Scene Shows Us the Meaning of Family,” Moms Rising Education Fund, June 30, 2023, <https://www.momsrising.org/blog/how-the-queer-ballroom-scene-shows-us-the-meaning-of-family>.

¹² T. Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica, “Latinx.” *Encyclopedia Britannica*, November 14, 2023. <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Latinx>.

Chapter I explores the history of Drag as an artistic expression worldwide, in the United States of America and specifically in the Los Angeles metropolitan area, from early cultures and medieval theater to the twentieth-century cultural censorship and uprising of civil rights. Chapter II uncovers the Los Angeles Drag diaspora, the particular Houses existing in the city, and their correlation to the New York Houses. Then, I document the significant Drag personalities in Los Angeles during the twentieth century, dividing it into three different time periods corresponding to the city's major periods of development. Chapter III showcases the places and the people that allowed for Drag culture development in the city, explains why these are significant, and documents some successful preservation efforts taken. These significant places are clustered together by similarities in social, cultural, and economic environments, as exact dates of the opening, closure, and Drag performances are not available in most cases.

Chapter I – Drag Culture in Los Angeles

Drag Culture as World History

There are different theories of how the term Drag was coined. It is believed that the term originated in theater. “According to an explanation from Drag Queen Trixie Mattel for *Them* online magazine, nineteenth century male actors would play women characters, donning petticoats that would drag across the stage.”¹³ According to Sister Unity, the term’s origins are more complex. During one of our interviews, she explained the term comes from Polari, an early made-up language based in slang, as it was the way gay people could communicate with each other, as drag meant dress. Slang is a considerable part of the Drag culture; wordplay and puns are part of a Drag performer’s lexicon.¹⁴

Because Drag was, in modern times, perceived as a “perversion” and people who practiced it experienced a great deal of discrimination, the amount of available documentation depicting the way people lived within the Drag circles is minimal. This is also true for most places they used to frequent and their performances.¹⁵ Most available information comes from performers’

¹³ Visit West Hollywood, “Wigs and Wonder: West Hollywood’s Drag Legacy,” January 12, 2022, Accessed Jan 23, 2023. <https://www.visitwesthollywood.com/stories/drag-culture-celebrated-west-hollywood/>.

¹⁴ “Until 1967, homosexual sex was illegal in England and Wales. To avoid imprisonment, gay men used Polari, a language that the Oxford English Dictionary says is “made up of Italianate phrases, rhyming slang and cant terms.” It had sprung up in the 1700s and 1800s as a secret language vagrants, itinerant performers, sailors and “gypsies” – many of its words, in fact, derive from the Romany people scattered across Europe.” BBC, “BBC Culture.” “Polari: The code language gay men used to survive,” February 12, 2018, Accessed February 13, 2023. <https://www.bbc.com/culture/article/20180212-polari-the-code-language-gay-men-used-to-survive>.

¹⁵ Discrimination against Drag Performers was common even within the LGBTQ+ community. During the Gay Liberation Movement, Cis-gay males became the accepted stereotype of Gays. Queer, Transgender, and even Lesbians experienced discrimination in gay bars for not being cis-gender looking.

photographs without names and demonizing newspaper articles about raids and incarcerations largely filled with derogative terminology and questionable facts.

During his interview with Drag performers, Sam Sanders suggests that Drag has been present since the beginning of time.¹⁶ Drag Queens have been part of the Kabuki Tradition in Japan for centuries and Drag has been a central part of burlesque performances.¹⁷ Documentation suggests that female impersonators were present in theater since its beginning. According to most people in the LGBTQ+ community, most of Shakespeare's plays always included at least one character who was inherently a Drag Queen. Characters like Beatrice in *Romeo and Juliet* have the character, audacity, and nerve of any Drag Queen.¹⁸

Evidence and documentation of "Male impersonators" in China dates back to the Tang Dynasty, from 618 to 907 AD.¹⁹ Crossdressing was an accepted and venerated job in past times and ancient cultures. Chinese courts used to have Drag performers during ceremonies. During Queen Elizabeth I's time in England, female impersonators were among the most influential performers in the kingdom, commonly known as Pantomime Dames.²⁰ During Louis XV's reign in France, Drag performers were part of all court parties and androgynous clothing and styles became a

¹⁶ Sam Sanders, interview by Noel King, 'It's Been A Minute With Sam Sanders': The History Of Drag Queens, June 26, 2019.

¹⁷ F DeCaro, B. Vilanch, *Drag : Combing through the Big Wigs of Show Business*, Rizzoli International Publications, Inc., 2019.

¹⁸ Most people in the LGBTQ+ community agree that all of William Shakespeare's plays always included a queer character, Sister Unity interview by Jesus Barba February 12, 2023.

¹⁹ Mo B. Dick., Drag King History, 2023, Accessed August 15, 2023. www.dragkinghistory.com.

²⁰ Due in part because women were forbidden to perform during this period in England. However, this does not diminish the importance of drag performances in the early theater and entertainment industry. Victoria and Albert Museum, "The Story of Pantomime," n.d., Accessed January 3, 2023. <https://www.vam.ac.uk/articles/the-story-of-pantomime>.

symbol of status to the highest strata of society. Some type of performance was attached to this sort of crossdressing, even if it was for fun or as part of the night's repertoire.

In the second half of the 1800s, Annie Hindle, Vesta Tilley, and Ella Wesner began performing and became Drag King pioneers. Go-won-go Mohawk was arguably the first Indigenous male impersonator in the 1910s.²¹

In 1901 in Mexico City, queer men gathered at private parties to Drag and meet other members of the community. These parties were rarely documented, but the evidence came to light after a national scandal.²² In 1901, the police raided one of these parties and arrested forty-two men. However, only forty-one were convicted since the forty-second man was, the then-president of Mexico, Porfirio Diaz's son-in-law. This event is remembered as "*El Baile de los 41*" (the ball of the 41).²³

Crossdressing is also a common practice for indigenous peoples in Central America and South Asia. In the Zapotec culture in Oaxaca, Mexico, Muxes are highly appreciated and respected. Muxes are male-born people who dress and behave as the opposite sex. It is common to have a Muxe in every family taking care of the household and the parents in their retirement.²⁴ In South Asia, the Hijra community is considered the third gender in India.²⁵ Although both Muxes and Hijras are considered a part of the transgender community in the LGBTQ+ spectrum, Drag is one

²¹ Ranjani Chakraborty, "Drag kings, explained by drag kings," *Vox*, June 30, 2022.

²² Mario Yair T.S., "*El Baile de los 41*," *Time Out Mexico*, February 3, 2016.

²³ Minika Revilla, *El Baile de los 41*, Directed by David Pablos, Produced by Canana Films, Performed by Alfonso Herrera, 99 min. 2020.

²⁴ G. Subero, "Muxeninity and the Institutionalization of a Third Gender Identity in Alejandra Islas's *Muxes: auténticas, intrépidas, buscadoras de peligro*," *Hispanic Research Journal*; 14(2):175-193, 2013, doi:10.1179/1468273712Z.00000000022.

²⁵ Vice TV, Hijras, the Third Gender in India: *GAYCATION* (Clip). <https://youtu.be/Nk0sO37F4js>.

of the most distinctive characteristics of both groups. It is used as a way of making money through performances.

Drag Queens were popular in early television as well, as is the case of the transgender performer “La Veneno” (Poison Girl), one of the most famous and acclaimed Drag performers of Spain, who climbed her way up from the streets to national television in the ‘90s, and today is still a star and role model to the transgender community.²⁶ In the words of DeCaro, “Drag Queens were a hit in the early days of TV, but in the last decade or so, we began to see Drag on TV not just as comedy. Queens became three-dimensional human beings with and without their makeup, in large part due to one reality show, *RuPaul’s Drag Race*.”²⁷

Although Drag performances have been part of human history, at some point in time, the profession became taboo. Western societies began to ban crossdressing. Drag and its performance were then only allowed within very closed secret circles. Only a few were able to come out and experience fame like Miss Destiny or La Veneno, but most of the performers had to rely on small bars, coffee shops, and establishments willing to take the risk of allowing Drag. These places were commonly associated with prostitution, which, in many cases, also became the source of income for the performers. It is also important to point out that most of the performances that remained during these prohibition years were those of Drag Queens, as Drag Kings suffered an even more challenging criminalization and demonization. Today, the stigma around Drag Kings persists. Maya Durham, who performs as a Drag King named Malcolm

²⁶ Atresmedia, TV series “*La Veneno*.”

²⁷ *RuPaul’s Drag Race* is one of the most popular reality TV shows of the last decade and showcases a competition between drag queens from all over the United States. It is in its fourteenth season and has been franchised to more than fifteen countries around the world. Sam Sanders, interview by Noel King, 'It's Been A Minute With Sam Sanders': The History Of Drag Queens, (Jun 26), 2019.

Xtasy, thinks the reason we still do not see a lot of Drag Kings in mainstream media is that the comedy industry is still very male-dominated, people are only interested in seeing male performers, and in femininity as a performance.²⁸ The world of comedy has been predominantly a male profession, and female performers, whether in Drag or not, have had a tougher time finding an audience that receives them without judgment and misconception.²⁹

Drag Culture within LGBTQ+ Communities in the United States

When talking about LGBTQ+ stories, it is imperative to conceptualize terminologies and how different people within the community are addressed. Along with gender identities and sexual expressions come additional expressions that are not explicitly linked to one identity, such as Drag culture. Because Drag is a form of artistic expression that is heavily linked to LGBTQ+ communities, it is important to acknowledge its intersectionality.³⁰ Performers do not belong to a specific community, gender identity, geographic region, religion, or other forms of identity expression.

Within the LGBTQ+ community, Drag is now seen as an art, but that was not always so. In the previous decades, the art of Drag was a joke for most people. Impersonator shows, for the most

²⁸ Dan Sanders, Interview with Maya Durham, 2019.

²⁹ Michael O'Connell, "THE MARVELOUS MRS. MAISEL: No longer just a throwback to the '60s, season three of the Emmys' most-lauded comedy (twenty noms!) had the pre-pandemic luxury of shooting with eight hundred and fifty extras and occupying the iconic Fontainebleau lobby." *Hollywood Reporter*, August 12, 2020, S28+. Gale In Context: Biography, accessed March 6, 2023. https://link-gale-com.libproxy1.usc.edu/apps/doc/A633845683/BIC?u=usocal_main&sid=bookmark-BIC&xid=a6ccbd2a.

³⁰ Katherine Crawford-Lackey, and Megan E. Springate, *Preservation and Place: Historic Preservation by and of LGBTQ Communities in the United States*, New York: Berghahn Books, 2019.

part of the twentieth century, were held in secret at bars with a very small and selected clientele, specifically those within the most open-minded in the LGBTQ+ community spectrum.³¹

I have chosen the terms Drag Queens and Drag Kings to refer to female and male impersonators relatively, as these have become accepted worldwide as a result of the mainstream media and TV shows like *RuPaul's Drag Race*; however, during research, I have come across many other different terms that were used to describe this activity. Many of these terms were used in derogative ways, including crossdresser and male or female impersonator, among others. According to Sister Unity, even within the gay community, the word “Tranny” was used in a mocking derogative way to refer to Drag Queens and Kings, alluding to the fact that dressing in the other sex attire meant becoming transexual. People performed Drag for fun, to be silly, and to enjoy their own personalities among other accepting members of the community. However, it was rarely considered fully as the profound art, talent, and craftsmanship that Drag represents. As a form of art, Drag has become an intrinsic part of today's intangible heritage in pop culture.³²

Although the term Drag does not only apply to LGBTQ+ individuals, it is prevalent and associated with the community. Drag has become part of today's culture, and it includes Gay, Lesbian, Transgender, Queer, Bisexual, Cisgender, and even Heterosexual people. The art of Drag has to do with performances and talents; some of the most common are lip-syncing, dancing, comedy, outfit fabrications, and makeup; however, the variety of talents displayed

³¹ There are, of course, a couple of exceptions where female impersonators became famous as comedians in the show business industry; Sister Unity interview by Jesus Barba February 12, 2023.

³² Simon Doonan, *Drag: The Complete Story (A Look at the History and Culture of Drag)*, Laurence King Publishing, 2019.

today at Drag shows may appear infinite. Drag has become a statement of empowerment for the LGBTQ+ community and outcasts around the globe, emphasized by RuPaul's famous mantra, "If you don't love yourself, how in the hell are you gonna love somebody else."³³ Drag performers are some of the funniest, loud, flamboyant, and proud people in the community but they do not necessarily have to be gay.³⁴

LGBTQ+ culture in the city of Los Angeles works very differently than it works in the rest of the country. Cities like New York and San Francisco have enclaves that are very well-known as LGBTQ+ safe places, as is the case of Greenwich Village in New York and the Castro District in San Francisco. However, the nature of the city of Los Angeles has caused the community to spread throughout different neighborhoods through different eras and subcultures, like in the city of West Hollywood, where most people of the community are cisgender White gay people. In the late 1800s and early 1900s, most of the community and the bars were concentrated in downtown Los Angeles, but after the 1950s, because of the strict regulations against sexuality, the community fled to other parts of the county like West Hollywood and Silver Lake which became safe havens for gay men, and Long Beach and the San Fernando Valley where many lesbians concentrated.³⁵

As depicted in the acclaimed work *City of Night*, downtown Los Angeles was a thriving LGBTQ+ spot before the 1950s, and a handful of bars stood out for their acceptance and

³³ This is one of RuPaul's most iconic and well-known phrases, and he ends every single episode of *RuPaul's Drag Race* with it.

³⁴ Lip-syncing consists of moving your lips on a playback track so it seems like you are singing the song. | A Cisgender woman won the equivalent version of the popular American show *RuPaul's Drag Race* called "*La Más Draga*" in Mexico City in 2019. *La Más Draga*, season II, finale episode, 2019, YouTube.

³⁵ Moira Rachel Kenney, *Mapping Gay L.A. - The Intersection of Place and Politics*, Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2001.

hospitality to the LGBTQ+ community back then. The streets around Pershing Square were well-known hookup spots for cis-gender gay men's sexual encounters. Crossdressers would frequent the surrounding bars in the hope of finding an affluent man who would pay for their living expenses (clothing, wigs, makeup, food, and lodging) in exchange for sexual services. The primary source of income for the then-called Queens was prostitution. At the beginning of the twentieth century and outside of the Vaudevillian circuit, the Queens were not performers, but the posh elegance of a Drag Queen has always been part of the Drag world. During the 1940s and 1950s it was used primarily as means of seduction. Most of the Queens worked at specific bars where a recurrent clientele would pay for their sexual services, and it was not uncommon to work for a pimp under miserable wages. The Queens lived together in nearby apartments under overcrowding conditions. The biggest aspiration of a Drag Queen at that time was to find a client (almost always a cis man) who would provide a better way of life. Allegedly, this dream could only be achieved during the Queen's young years.³⁶

Early in World War II, the National Theater Conference lobbied to authorize soldier shows as "a necessity, not a frill." By early 1942, approval was granted by leadership in Washington for the Special Services in concert with the United Service Organization (USO) and American Red Cross to begin soldier show productions to entertain the troops both on the homefront and abroad.

During World War II, Irving Berlin created the show "This is the Army," which opened on July 4, 1942, in a theater on Broadway in New York. The show was an all-male Drag performance that raised money for the corps and provided entertainment for the Army. In the play, United

³⁶ John Rechy, *City of Night*, New York: Grove Press, Chapter 3, 1963.

States soldiers performed in Drag for their mates with colossal success. The performances included skilled feminine singers, comedic routines, dancers, and impersonators of female stars of the period. The show was taken into the big screen in Hollywood, starring Ronald Reagan with the same success.³⁷

Drag Culture History in Los Angeles

When the Spanish arrived in California in 1542, they found a handful of Native American cultures settled in what today is Los Angeles. There is evidence in documentation from the Spanish settlers that men among the Chumash practiced same-sex relations. Among Gabrielinos and Luisenos, some boys were selected at early ages and taught to dress and act as women.³⁸

Crossdressing and any other form of gender non-conformity have been outlawed in Los Angeles since 1898 under Municipal Ordinance 5022, a citywide ban on crossdressing between 6:00 pm and 6:00 am. In 1922, this ordinance was amended to allow a fine of \$500 dollars and six months in jail to those who violated it.³⁹

³⁷ Aaron Jura, "GIs as Dolls: Uncovering the Hidden Histories of Drag Entertainment During Wartime," National WWII Museum, June 15, 2021, Accessed Oct 3, 2023. <https://www.nationalww2museum.org/war/articles/drag-entertainment-world-war-ii>.

³⁸ Gerónimo Boscan, Alfred Robinson, Phil Townsend Hann, and John Peabody, Harrington, Chinigchinich (Chi-Ni'ch-Nich) : A Revised and Annotated Version of Alfred Robinson's Translation of Father Geronimo Boscan's Historical Account of the Belief, Usages, Customs and Extravagencies [!] of the Indians of This Mission of San Juan Capistrano, Called the Acagchemem Tribe. Santa Ana, California: Fine Arts Press, 1933.

³⁹ Caroline Thrasher, Los Angeles County Natural History Museum website, *Stories Sir Lady Java*, 2021, Accessed April 20th, 2023. <https://nhm.org/stories/sir-lady-java>.; City Council Motion, presented by Kevin de Leon, May 3, 2023, https://clkrep.lacity.org/online/docs/2023/23-0468_misc_5-3-23.pdf.

Prohibition fueled Drag's first big moment in the United States a century ago when Congress passed the Volstead Act, prohibiting the production and sale of alcohol in America in 1919. Underground clubs or "speakeasies" proliferated, paving the path for the success of Drag Queens such as Barquette, Julian Eltinge, Karyl Norman, and Bruz Fletcher.⁴⁰

During Prohibition, nightlife in Los Angeles stayed highly active. Numerous speakeasies emerged, creating a completely different subculture. The act of hiding, already well known by the LGBTQ+ community, provided the perfect conditions for people of all genders and sexual orientations to mix together and proliferate. Drag Queens at the time experienced a surge in job opportunities during the 1930-1933 "Pansy Craze" and were some of the highest-paid performers in the United States, specifically in New York, San Francisco, and Los Angeles.⁴¹

The B.B.B. Cellar bar in Hollywood had ten Drag Queens performing on a show called "Boys Will Be Girls," Rae Bourbon was one of the leading performers on those nights. Fred Monroe also performed here, impersonating actresses and celebrities sitting in the audience. Celebrities in the 1930s were some of the most common guests in these underground places. The Cellar and Jimmy's Backyard were raided by the police in October 1932.

In his autobiographic novel, John Rechy presented a gay Los Angeles in *City of Night*, but before authoring his novel, he witnessed a riot in a small coffee shop in 1959. The place's name was Cooper's Doughnuts. It was a hole in the wall right between two of the older gay bars in the city, the Waldorf and Harold's. It was a well-known spot for the Drag and Trans community where

⁴⁰ Dan Avery, "Prohibition launched first drag craze in America," Logo TV, October 28, 2019. Accessed Oct 3, 2023. <https://www.logotv.com/news/zjvsv5/prohibition-launched-first-drag-craze-in-america>.

⁴¹ Drag Queens in the 1930s were called Pansy Performers. SurveyLA, Los Angeles LGBTQ Historic Context Statement. September 2014, revised 2023.

Queens, butches, and hustlers, many of them Black and Latinx, could go and feel accepted. According to Lillian Faderman and Stuart Timmons, Rechy declared during an interview in 2005 that people first started throwing doughnuts at the “cops,” and it rapidly escalated into a major event that would define the course of the Los Angeles LGBTQ+ community.⁴² During their research, they discovered that Los Angeles is the place where the most lesbian and gay institutions started. This is in part because of the nature of the city, the way it is spread across the land, and where enclaves are not really defined like they are in New York and San Francisco. LGBTQ+ communities in Los Angeles have historically been nomads, moving from city to city, trying to find niches where laws are less stringent and where the community is able to thrive. The impact of Los Angeles’s activism can be seen worldwide.⁴³

Nevertheless, there is plenty of evidence that Drag is not new to Los Angeles in any way. Drag Balls have been staged annually for eighteen years in Los Angeles since 1931, according to Faderman and Timmons’s research.⁴⁴ Los Angeles Public Library has some documentation of a 1945 ball at the Club Alabam, some photographs show Drag Queens of the Black community gathered together in their finest dresses. This was a well-known ballroom to the Black community of the ‘40s.⁴⁵

By 1940, the Board of police officers developed a series of regulations that required bar owners to get permission for any Drag performances; this will be later known as Rule 9. No show was

⁴² John Rechy interview by Stuart Timmons, August 29, 2005.

⁴³ Lillian Faderman and Stuart Timmons, *GAY L.A. A History of Sexual Outlaws, Power Politics, and Lipstick Lesbians*, Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2006.

⁴⁴ Lillian Faderman and Stuart Timmons, *GAY L.A. A History of Sexual Outlaws, Power Politics, and Lipstick Lesbian*, Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, (Page 4), 2006.

⁴⁵ Items S-0000000000000000-3 120, Shades of Los Angeles Collection, Los Angeles Public Library.

allowed without the explicit permission of the Board, something that was extremely hard to get and could also be used to target LGBTQ+ individuals during the L.A. noir period. To avoid violating the ordinance, performers were required to wear at least three gender-conforming clothing pieces during their performance. Rule 9 was enforced from 1967 until 1969, preventing any type of Drag shows from happening and actively criminalizing transgender people.

Transgender Drag Queen and performer Sir Lady Java was notorious for her activism fighting against Rule 9.⁴⁶

The contemporary Drag scene of Los Angeles was very different from any other scene in the country and the world in part because of all the different city policies and law regulations throughout the years; most of these empowered but the common migrant fluctuations of the city and its unique culture. When Reyner Bahman arrived in Los Angeles, he described it as a place with four ecologies and a series of layers overlayed on top of each other. Although an architectural historian, his description of Los Angeles relied mostly upon the contrasts and nuances between regions and social strata of the city.⁴⁷ His description of development phases can also be seen in the development of the Drag culture of the city.

Before becoming mainstream and after the stringent anti-gay regulations of the Los Angeles Noir era, most Drag shows were held as private events or underground bars and clubs across towns.⁴⁸

Prior to *RuPaul's Drag Race*, Drag shows in West Hollywood were discrete, catering to a neighborly clientele. Now, they are one of the main attractions of the city. For Drag fans who

⁴⁶ Caroline Thrasher, Natural History Museum website, *Stories Sir Lady Java*, 2021, Accessed April 20th, 2023. <https://nhm.org/stories/sir-lady-java>.

⁴⁷ Reyner Banham, *Los Angeles : the Architecture of Four Ecologies*, Berkeley, California, University of California Press, 2009.

⁴⁸ Sister Unity interview by Jesus Barba. February 12, 2023.

have only been able to see their favorite Queens on-screen and online, West Hollywood is a chance to experience the spectacle right before our eyes.⁴⁹

⁴⁹ Visit West Hollywood, “Wigs and Wonder: West Hollywood’s Drag Legacy,” January 12, 2022, Accessed Jan 23, 2023. <https://www.visitwesthollywood.com/stories/drag-culture-celebrated-west-hollywood/>.

Chapter II - The Drag Diaspora

In Los Angeles, the Drag culture diaspora refers to the presence and influence of Drag from various regions and communities around the world within the vibrant Drag scene of the city. Los Angeles has been described as the perfect melting pot of diverse cultures and is recognized as one of the most important hubs for entertainment, attracting people from all backgrounds. These people bring their unique Drag traditions and styles to the city, making it one of the world's most diverse, progressive, and LGBTQ+-friendly cities.⁵⁰

Los Angeles has an enormous Latinx population; Los Angeles is home to more Mexicans than any other city in the world after Mexico City, and almost a third of its population identifies as Mexican.⁵¹ Latinx Drag artists have made a very important impact on the city's Drag scene. Many performers draw inspiration from Latinx cultures, such as Mexican, Salvadoran, Puerto Rican, and Cuban. Their Drag depicts elements of Latin music, fashion, language, and performances. Los Angeles Drag scene flourishes within Black and Brown communities that are doing Drag.⁵²

Los Angeles is a global city known for its diverse LGBTQ+ immigrant communities. Drag performers from different backgrounds incorporate cultural heritage elements into their performances, creating a fusion of traditional and contemporary influences, resulting in a rich

⁵⁰ Carey McWilliams, *Southern California: An Island on the Land*, 1st Peregrine Smith ed. Santa Barbara, Calif: Peregrine Smith, 1973; Isabelle Kliger, "L.A.'s Drag Performers Share Their Favorite Places Around Town." *Los Angeles Magazine*, November 18, 2022, <https://lamag.com/food/l-a-s-drag-performers-share-their-favorite-places-around->.

⁵¹ Massoud Hayoun, "Mexican LA: History, culture and resistance." *Aljazeera*, August 5, 2017. Accessed December 26, 2023.

⁵² Sasha Urban, "L.A.'s drag scene is bigger than ever. But it'll take a 'rebellion' to keep it safe." *Los Angeles Times*, Jun 6, 2023, <https://www.latimes.com/lifestyle/story/2023-06-06/la-drag-scene-is-bigger-than-ever-but-it-will-take-rebellion-to-keep-it-safe>.

and multicultural Drag landscape. Asia, the Middle East, Eastern Europe, Africa, and other regions have added their perspectives and experiences to the scene and have contributed to the diversity of the Drag culture in the city.

The Drag culture diaspora in Los Angeles highlights the city's openness and inclusivity. It has allowed artists from diverse backgrounds to express their identities and contribute to the vibrant Drag community for decades. This mix of cultures, traditions, and experiences intertwined and led to the dynamic and evolving Drag scene we see today.

Tracing the Los Angeles Drag Family Tree

Drag Houses are part of the LGBTQ+ community heritage as a phenomenon and place. Their significance relies on the support and sorority within members of an underrepresented and systemically misunderstood community. Still, these happened at specific places linked to the social and economic situation of the community. Flats, apartments, and warehouses in cities like Los Angeles and New York are potential heritage sites, and their significance can be stated similarly to what has been done with tenement buildings in New York.

Los Angeles's Drag scene differs from other enclaves like New York City, where ballroom culture prompted the creation of Drag Houses during the '70s and '80s. In the 1990s and early 2000s in Los Angeles, several Drag Houses or families emerged as prominent fixtures within the

community. These Drag Houses serve as supportive networks and creative collectives for Drag performers, providing a sense of belonging, mentorship, and collaboration.⁵³

Although not considered historic, some of the most iconic Houses in Los Angeles include the House of Avalon, House of Xtravaganza, and House of DnA, among others. The House of Avalon is a popular Drag House founded by Drag Queens and fashionistas Marco Marco, Bryce McKinzie (Gigi Gorgeous), and Adam Ouahmane (Adam Joseph). The House of Xtravaganza originated in the New York City ballroom scene but has expanded its presence to Los Angeles, where it found a new landscape that inspires more diverse artistic expressions. The House of DnA, led by Drag performers Delta Work and Raja Gemini (winner of *RuPaul's Drag Race* Season 3), has established itself as a prominent Drag House in Los Angeles. Members of all the Houses in Los Angeles showcase their diverse talents and personalities through performances influenced by the city's Drag and entertainment legacy. All of these Houses in Los Angeles created in the 1990s and 2000s are built on the city's particular cultural environment.⁵⁴

Although not a traditional Drag House, the Boulet Brothers have created a distinct brand and community through their *Dragula* competition series. Known for its alternative, punk, and horror-themed Drag, *Dragula* has become a platform for unconventional and boundary-pushing Drag performers in Los Angeles. It is hard not to imagine a connection between this form of Drag and the Los Angeles movie industry. Cult picture movies such as *The Rocky Horror*

⁵³ *Paris is Burning*. Directed by Jennie Livingston. Produced by Miramax Home Entertainment. Performed by Barry Swimar, Nigel Finch, Lacy Davis, Dorian Corey, Pepper LaBeija, Venus, Xtravaganza, et al. Jennie Livingston, 1990; Manuel Betancourt, "All hail the drag queens raising L.A.'s tight-knit families," *Los Angeles Times*, May 5, 2022.

⁵⁴ Cailyn Szelinsky, "RuPaul's Drag Race: Drag Families With Multiple Members On The Show," Screen Rant, September 3, 2023, Accessed January 3, 2024. <https://screenrant.com/rupauls-drag-race-families-multiple-members-on-rpdr/>.

Picture Show, *The Adams Family*, and Hitchcock's films inspire make-up styles and performances uniquely linked to the city's history.⁵⁵

The presence of Drag Houses in Los Angeles could be considered as recent history compared to the scene in New York City; therefore, it is hard to trace a lineage far down to the midcentury, but this does not mean that the city's cultural landscape and LGBTQ+ History has had no influence creating the perfect environment for the Houses to be found. Even today, Drag Houses are a very particular phenomenon mostly found in the United States, a cornerstone of Drag culture and LGBTQ+ Heritage.⁵⁶

Important Characters in Los Angeles Drag Scene

1890-1939 Drag Los Angeles

The Los Angeles Drag scene in the early 1900s was less well-documented than contemporary Drag scenes, but a few important figures emerged. Information about Drag in L.A. between 1890 and 1939 is extremely limited due to the absence of historic documentation. While the visibility and acceptance of Drag were limited due to societal norms and legal restrictions, these individuals played a significant role in shaping the local Drag culture.

The specific names of popular Drag performers in Los Angeles between 1890 and 1939 still need to be discovered. However, it is widely documented that the concept of cross-gender

⁵⁵ Simon Doonan, *Drag: The Complete Story (A Look at the History and Culture of Drag)*, Laurence King Publishing, 2019; Steve Holden, October 31, "Halloween: How the Boulet Brothers' Dragula blends drag and horror." BBC News, 2020.

⁵⁶ Manuel Betancourt, "All hail the drag queens raising L.A.'s tight-knit families," *Los Angeles Times*, May 5, 2022.

impersonation and Drag performances were prevalent during that time, especially in theatrical and Vaudeville circuits.⁵⁷ For instance, Kitty Doner, a male impersonator in the Vaudeville circuit, is known to have performed in Los Angeles.⁵⁸ North American Vaudeville theater plays a crucial influence to the movie industry worldwide, including Hollywood.⁵⁹

Gender-bending performances and male impersonators were popular in the entertainment industry at the beginning of the twentieth century. While these performers were not referred to as Drag Kings at the time, they exhibited all the characteristics by assuming masculine personas on stage.⁶⁰ The concept of Drag Kings, as we understand it today, was not understood during this period; therefore, a lot of the information available is about women who were known for dressing in the times' understood as men's attire. In her 1933 film *Queen Christina*, Greta Garbo dresses as a male to tour the country and find her faith, opening the mindset of audiences about crossdressing in the country.⁶¹

The visibility and recognition of individual Drag Kings and Queens in historical records are challenging to trace, as societal norms and legal restrictions often limited these performers'

⁵⁷ North American Vaudeville performance is a theatre genre comprising a series of separate, unrelated acts grouped on a common bill. Types of acts have included popular and classical musicians, singers, dancers, comedians, trained animals, magicians, ventriloquists, strongmen, female and male impersonators, acrobats, clowns, illustrated songs, jugglers, one-act plays or scenes from plays, athletes, lecturing celebrities, minstrels, and films. A Vaudeville performer is often referred to as a "vaudevillian." Merriam Webster Dictionary, Accessed August 16, 2023.

⁵⁸ *Los Angeles Times* Archives, "Kitty Doner, Male Impersonator in Vaudeville," Los Angeles, September 3, 1988.

⁵⁹ MCLC Resource Center, "The Ancient Art of Falling Down Vaudeville Cinema between Hollywood and China - A Conversation between Christopher Rea and Henry Jenkins", August, 2017.

⁶⁰ Romy Shiller, "Drag King Invasion: Taking Back the Throne." *Canadian Theatre Review* 86, no. 86: 24–28, 1996.

⁶¹ 48: Gayness and Hollywood, 1974-01-09." Stonewall Nation Radio Program. Madeline Davis LGBTQ Archive of WNY. Archives & Special Collections Department, E. H. Butler Library, SUNY Buffalo State. <https://digitalcommons.buffalostate.edu/stonewallnation/50>.

documentation and public acknowledgment. Additionally, many Drag performers and their contributions during this time may have yet to be widely recorded or have faded from historical memory.

One of the most renowned performers of the era was Vesta Tilley, an English actress and singer specializing in male impersonation. Tilley was very popular and performed internationally, including in the United States, during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Although she may not have performed in Los Angeles, she was known for her male roles and was influential in the tradition of female-to-male theatrical impersonation.⁶²



Figure 2.1- Sydney's Holidays Are in September, music by Kenneth Lyle, lyrics by Fred Murray and Chas. Hibury, performed by Vesta Tilley. 1908.- Source USC Digital Libraries.

⁶² Steven L. Davis, and Maglina Lubovich, *Hunks, Hotties, and Pretty Boys: Twentieth-Century Representations of Male Beauty*. Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars, 2009.

Another significant Drag King was Hetty King, a Canadian male impersonator popular for her comedy shows. King often portrayed working-class male characters and was celebrated for her wit and ability to engage audiences.⁶³

Some Black male impersonators were thriving by the early 1900s. Gladys Bentley and Stormé DeLarverie became Drag pioneers. By the beginning of the twentieth century, there was a thriving Drag King scene in cities like New York City, San Francisco, and London.⁶⁴ Gladys Bentley moved to California in 1937 and kept performing between San Francisco and Los Angeles. Ultimately, she joined a church group where she was urged to undergo conversion therapy.⁶⁵

In the case of female impersonators, Julian Eltinge was one of the most successful stage actors of the era. He was an American stage and film actor who gained popularity for his female impersonations. Eltinge performed in various Vaudeville theater productions, showcasing his talent for transforming into female characters. He moved to Hollywood in 1914, where he starred in various silent films. His residence, known as Villa Capistrano, is designated as a historic resource of the city of Los Angeles. His popularity decreased when Vaudeville and female impersonators fell out of favor in the 1930s. Still, there is no doubt that his career significantly impacted the development of Drag culture.⁶⁶

⁶³ Stephen Dixon, "Voices of Variety," 2013, Accessed July 15, 2023. www.voices-of-variety.com.

⁶⁴ Ranjani Chakraborty, "Drag kings, explained by drag kings." *Vox*, June 30, 2022.

⁶⁵ Lillian Gieseke, "Gladys Bentley's Confessions." Center on Religion and Culture at Fordham University, August 4, 2022.

⁶⁶ Los Angeles Conservancy, "Julian Eltinge Residence." Los Angeles Conservancy website 2023, Accessed August 15, 2023. www.laconservancy.org/learn/historic-places/julian-eltिंगe-residence/; Historic Places LA, Los Angeles Historic Resource Inventory, n.d. Accessed September 23, 2023, <https://hpla.lacity.org/report/21763aed-2d9e-4612-adc2-cb88073c9179>.

Rae Bourbon, born Hal Wadell, was an early Drag Queen and vaudevillian performer; they were one of the key performers of the “pansy craze.” Bourbon was known for their extravagant and comedic performances. They gained fame in the 1920s and '30s and performed in various venues in Los Angeles, including Jimmy’s Backyard, the Playtime, and the Follies Theatres.⁶⁷ They were arrested in the 1950s in several cities for appearing on stage dressed as a woman and was convicted for alleged murder in 1967.⁶⁸

In the late 1930s, Doc Benner founded The Jewel Box Revue, an all-male Drag show that toured extensively throughout the United States.⁶⁹ The cast was diverse, including Drag Queens and transgender women. The Jewel Box Revue made several stops in Los Angeles, presenting at the then Music Box theater, today’s Fonda theater, and drawing attention to the Drag scene in the city.⁷⁰

1940 – 1959 Drag Los Angeles

The Drag scene in Los Angeles between 1940 and 1959 was a mix of influences from the entertainment industry, LGBTQ+ communities, and underground scenes. During this period, there were both mainstream and underground spaces where Drag performances took place. There

⁶⁷ Randy A. Riddle, “Don’t Call Me Madame – The Life and Work of Ray Bourbon,” 2020, Accessed Aug 5, 2023. www.raebourbon.com.

⁶⁸ “Rae Bourbon,” *Drag 2*, no. 5: 24–, 1972.

⁶⁹ “Doc Benner Dies.” *Gay Scene* 7, no. 5: TWENTY. Archives of Sexuality and Gender, 1976, Accessed August 17, 2023. https://link-gale-com.libproxy2.usc.edu/apps/doc/IENAPU665426408/AHSI?u=usocal_main&sid=bookmark-AHSI&xid=84888032.

⁷⁰ “Jewel Box Revue Lavish Spectacle,” *Los Angeles Sentinel* (1934–), Nov 16, 1961. <http://libproxy.usc.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/jewel-box-revue-lavish-spectacle/docview/564595622/se-2>.

were instances of male impersonators or performers who specialized in portraying male characters on stage. Hollywood played an important role in the period Drag scene when actresses and actors played cross-gender roles in movies. For instance, Charlie Chaplin did some female impersonations, and Cary Grant performed Drag in some of his films, for instance, *I Was a Male War Bride* (1949).⁷¹

Finocchio's Club in San Francisco was an establishment that featured Drag Queen performances. It was opened as a speakeasy during the Prohibition. Although not in Los Angeles, the club

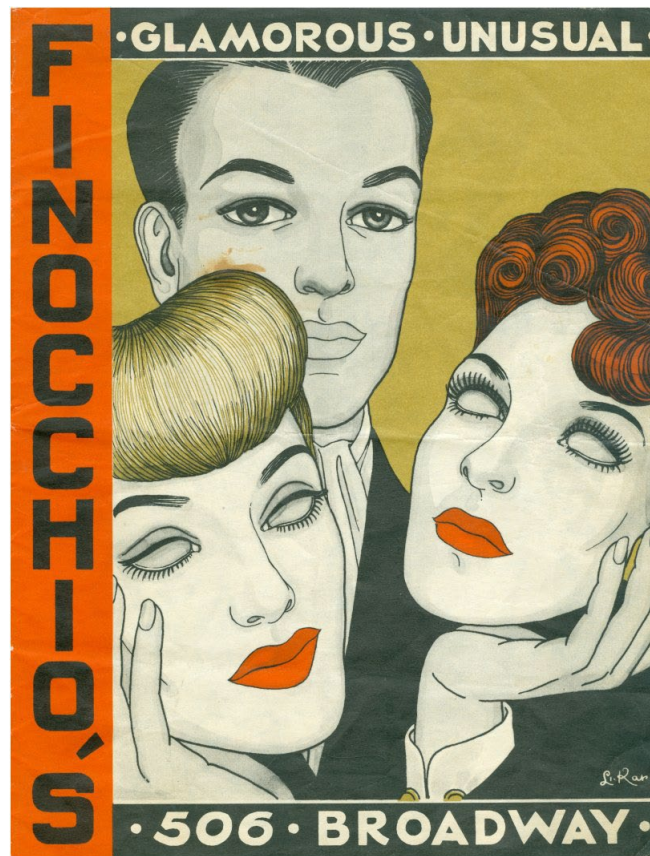


Figure 2.2 - Finocchio, Marjorie, and Finocchio, Joseph. "Glamorous Unusual Finocchio's (1946)." Program. 1946. Digital Transgender Archive, <https://www.digitaltransgenderarchive.net/files/rr171x509> (accessed August 23, 2023).

⁷¹ 48: Gayness and Hollywood, Stonewall Nation Radio Program. Madeline Davis LGBTQ Archive of WNY. Archives & Special Collections Department, E. H. Butler Library, SUNY Buffalo State, Jan 9, 1974. <https://digitalcommons.buffalostate.edu/stonewallnation/50>.

attracted audiences from various locations, including Los Angeles residents who traveled to San Francisco to witness the gender-transgressive and racialized performances.⁷²

Charles Pierce, a trained actor in the Pasadena Playhouse, had worked in New York Off-Broadway shows in the early 1950s and was doing impersonations all over the United States.⁷³ He moved to San Francisco and started at Ann's 440 Club in North Beach. He never approved of the title Drag Queen and preferred to call himself a male actress. After that, he started performing at Finocchio's, where he was billed as The Master or Mistress of Surprise and Disguise, impersonating celebrities such as Jeanette MacDonald, Bette Davis, Tallulah Bankhead, Marlene Dietrich, Katharine Hepburn, Joan Crawford, and Carol Channing.⁷⁴

In the 1940s and 1950s, Hollywood films often featured female actors in roles that required them to dress as men or adopt masculine behaviors. An example of this is the film *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* (1953), where Marilyn Monroe and Jane Russell dressed in male attire. *In Some Like It Hot* (1959), Tony Curtis and Jack Lemmon played convincing performances in Drag, which led to critical acclaim and multiple Oscar nominations. The Drag Queen Vander Clyde Broadway, known as Barquette, played a key role in teaching Curtis and Lemmon how to act as women. The movie was a trailblazer in Drag representation at the time as the leading actors stayed in Drag for most part of the movie, which required approval under the Hays Code.⁷⁵

⁷² Nan Alamilla Boyd, *Wide-Open Town : A History of Queer San Francisco To 1965*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003. Accessed August 22, 2023. ProQuest Ebook Central.

⁷³ The Pasadena Playhouse is a historic performing arts venue located at 39 S. El Molino Avenue in Pasadena.

⁷⁴ Ernest Beyl, "Finocchio's: What a Drag." *Marina Times*, June, 2014.

⁷⁵ *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*, Directed by Howard Hawks, Performed by Jane Russell and Marilyn Monroe, 1953; *Some Like It Hot*, Directed by Billy Wilder, Performed by Marilyn Monroe, Jack Lemmon,

Stormé DeLarverie was an African American butch lesbian performer who often presented as a male impersonator. DeLarverie performed in clubs and bars, captivating audiences with her powerful presence and masculine portrayals. From 1955 to 1969, she was the master of ceremonies at Jewel Box Revue, which was presented in Los Angeles a couple of times. She played a crucial role in the development of Black LGBTQ+ Cultures with her male impersonation performances. She is also known for swinging the “first punch” at the Stonewall Rebellion.⁷⁶

In the early 1950s, Los Angeles experienced a crackdown on LGBTQ+ establishments due to police raids and increased societal scrutiny fueled by homophobic policies developed by the Board of police officers that required bar owners to get permission for any Drag performances, which would later be known as Rule 9. These raids and legal challenges created an atmosphere of secrecy and limited the visibility of Drag performances during this time. Most Drag shows in the era became part of hidden Los Angeles or private parties.⁷⁷

Despite the challenges, LGBTQ+ communities continued to find spaces to express themselves. Underground or private parties, bars, and clubs often served as venues for Drag shows and

Tony Curtis, 1959; Lindsey Clouse, “A Drag Queen Is the Reason ‘Some Like it Hot’ Is Such a Classic,” *Collider*, December 22, 2023; “The Motion Picture Production Code was a set of industry guidelines for the self-censorship of content that was applied to most motion pictures released by major studios in the United States from 1934 to 1968. It is also popularly known as the Hays Code.” Dan Luckenbill, “glbtq archives.” glbtq Los Angeles, 2006, Accessed October 5, 2023.
http://www.glbtqarchive.com/ssh/los_angeles_S.pdf.

⁷⁶ Meredith Heller, “Queering Drag: Redefining the Discourse of Gender-Bending,” Indiana University Press, 2020. ProQuest Ebook Central,
<http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/socal/detail.action?docID=6007440>. Accessed August 20, 2023.

⁷⁷ Lillian Faderman and Stuart Timmons, *GAY L.A. A History of Sexual Outlaws, Power Politics, and Lipstick Lesbians*, Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2006.

performances. These secret gatherings allowed Drag performers to entertain, express their creativity, and build supportive networks.

Karyl Norman, who billed himself as “The Creole Fashion Plate,” was another prominent female impersonator in Los Angeles during the mid-twentieth century. Born in 1900 as Harold Norman, Karyl Norman gained fame for her glam performances as a female impersonator in the 1930s and 1940s.⁷⁸

Norman began her career in Vaudeville and went on to perform in various nightclubs and theaters in Los Angeles and other cities. She became popular for her glamorous and exquisite impersonations of Hollywood actresses like Mae West and Marlene Dietrich.⁷⁹

In 1932, Norman started working as a hostess at La Boheme, a legendary nightclub in Los Angeles. La Boheme catered to Hollywood celebrities and their circles. La Boheme closed shortly after opening due to liquor violations. By 1933, Norman opened her own place: the Karyl Norman Supper Club, where he co-starred with Colette Convoy.⁸⁰

Karyl Norman pushed boundaries and challenged societal expectations of gender and sexuality in the first half of the twentieth century. She was celebrated in the entertainment world and gained recognition for her talent, poise, and style. Norman's performances are seen as groundbreaking and helped pave the way for future generations of female impersonators and Drag performers.

⁷⁸ Jon Ponder, “Drag Star the ‘Creole Fashion Plate’ Debuts on the Sunset Strip in 1932,” Nov 15, 2020, Accessed Oct 17, 2023. <https://www.westhollywoodhistory.org/galleries/drag-star-the-creole-fashion-plate-debuts-on-the-sunset-strip-in-1932/>.

⁷⁹ Brett Abrahams, *Hollywood Bohemians: Transgressive Sexuality and the Selling of the Movie Land Dream*, Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland, 2008, Accessed Aug 31, 2013.

⁸⁰ An Open Book, King of Queens: Karyl Norman, May 9, 2020, Accessed Aug 29, 2023. <http://brookspeters.blogspot.com/2020/05/king-of-queens-karyl-norman.html>.

Although she claimed crossdressing was only a job, she did not know much about women's clothing. She gave her old clothes to students at Ohio State University.⁸¹

1960-1980 Drag Los Angeles

The 1960s marked a significant period of cultural and social change, and the Drag scene in Los Angeles continued to evolve during this time. Virginia Prince founded the magazine *Transvestia* in 1960, publishing six times a year in Los Angeles; it provided a base for the Los Angeles Hose and Heels Club, the first peer support and advocacy group for male transvestites in the United States.⁸² Resistance started organizing, and Drag Queens fought against the police and discrimination across the country, in Los Angeles, specifically at Cooper's Doughnuts in 1959.⁸³

The 1960s were a time of societal unrest and LGBTQ+ activism, including the historic Stonewall uprising in 1969. These events contributed to the growing visibility and acceptance of Drag

⁸¹ "Collegians Get Frocks: Karyl Norman, Female Impersonator, Turns used Costumes Over to School Players." *The Sun* (1837-), Mar 31, 1929. 1, <http://libproxy.usc.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/collegians-get-frocks/docview/543509214/se-2>.

⁸² "In 1962, she formed the Hose & Heels Club, composed mainly of Crossdressers in the Los Angeles area, many of whom were subscribers to the magazine. The Club restricted itself to members who described themselves as heterosexual Crossdressers. This restriction (requirement) has been carried forward through its subsequent organizations to date. The Club changed its name to Freedom of Personality Expression (FPE) in late 1962 and launched a nationwide campaign to form affiliated groups or chapters with similar interests. The founding group called itself the Alpha Chapter of FPE." Kim Do, Hose & Heels Club, November 14, 2022, Tcne.org.; Transgender Archives Collections, University of Victoria, Virginia Prince and *Transvestia*, N.d., Accessed Aug 25, 2023. <https://www.uvic.ca/transgenderarchives/collections/virgina-prince/index.php> ; *The Pride Los Angeles*, "Social Groups and Sororities United the L.A. Trans Community of the 1960s," January 6, 2024, <https://thepridela.com/2018/10/social-groups-and-sororities-united-the-l-a-trans-community-of-the-1960s/>.

⁸³ Peter Drucker, *Warped: Gay Normality and Queer Anti-Capitalism*, Netherlands: Brill, 2015.

performers and LGBTQ+ individuals, paving the way for further progress in the following decades.

Jackie "Moms" Mabley, an African American comedian, often performed in Drag. Mabley's bold and irreverent humor made her a trailblazer in Drag and comedy scenes, and her impact on the development of Drag as an art and expression form is very significant. She launched her stand-up record "Live at the Greek Theater" in 1969 in Los Angeles.⁸⁴

Lynn Carter, an African American male impersonator, also performed touring with the Jewel Box Revue alongside Miss Storme De Laverie. Carter was known for her charismatic stage presence and talent for portraying male characters with humor and flair.⁸⁵

Beverly Shaw was an openly lesbian nightclub singer who often performed in male clothes. She was a regular Drag King at Moma's 44 in San Francisco and moved to Los Angeles in the early 1950s, where she performed at the Flamingo Club. Once settled in Los Angeles, she bought her own bar in North Hollywood, the Club Laurel, where she starred for almost fifteen years, making it one of the most popular venues in the city. Shaw occasionally sang at other Los Angeles-area venues, including Club Bayou, Linda's Little Log Cabin, Larry Potter's Supper Club, and Joani's Bar.⁸⁶

⁸⁴ Eleanor Russell, "Mom Voice/Moms' Voice: Jackie 'Moms' Mabley, the Comic Voice, and Refiguring Black Maternity." *Comedy Studies* 13, no. 2 (2022): 199–211, Accessed September 01, 2023.

⁸⁵ Encyclopedia of Lesbian and Gay Histories and Cultures, United Kingdom: Taylor & Francis, 2021; Bud Coleman. "Jewel Box Revue: America's Longest-Running Touring Drag show." *Theatre History Studies* 17, (1997): 79. <http://libproxy.usc.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/scholarly-journals/jewel-box-revue-americas-longest-running-touring/docview/1311934985/se-2>.

⁸⁶ Queer Music Heritage, Beverly Shaw, June, 2004, Accessed Oct 13, 2023. <https://www.queermusicheritage.com/jun2004bs.html>.

One of the most influential performers in Los Angeles during this era was Sir Lady Java. She was the first African American transgender woman to perform in the Los Angeles club scene. She was a regular performer at the Redd Foxx and Marla's Memory Lane Supper Club.⁸⁷ She played a significant role in challenging Rule 9, a discriminatory policy that targeted crossdressing and transgender performers in Los Angeles during the 1960s.⁸⁸ Rule 9 was a regulation enforced by the California Department of Alcoholic Beverage Control (ABC) that prohibited individuals assigned male at birth from wearing clothing traditionally associated with women in establishments that served alcohol.⁸⁹

Sir Lady Java fought against Rule 9 by continuing to perform in Los Angeles nightclubs and bars while defiantly coming out onto stage in Drag. She faced arrests and legal challenges but persisted in her advocacy for the rights of transgender and gender-nonconforming performers.⁹⁰

In 1967, two years before the Stonewall uprising, Sir Lady Java's case garnered significant attention when she filed a lawsuit against the city of Los Angeles with the backing of the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU), arguing that Rule 9 violated her constitutional rights. While Sir Lady Java's legal case did not lead to the overturning of Rule 9, her activism and resilience were instrumental in pushing for change and raising awareness about the need for LGBTQ+ rights and acceptance. Her efforts helped pave the way for future generations of Drag

⁸⁷ "Sir Lady Java -- The Lady is a Man." Ephemera, 1970. Digital Transgender Archive, <https://www.digitaltransgenderarchive.net/files/qn59q396v> , Accessed November 01, 2023.

⁸⁸ Caroline Thrasher, "Sir Lady Java - History and Legacy of a Trans Rights Hero." Los Angeles County Natural History Museum website. June 27, 2021, Accessed August 5, 2023. www.nhm.org/stories/sir-lady-java.

⁸⁹ Lillian Faderman and Stuart Timmons, *GAY L.A. A History of Sexual Outlaws, Power Politics, and Lipstick Lesbians*, Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2006.

⁹⁰ Harry James Hanson and Devin Antheus, *Legends of Drag: Queens of a Certain Age*, New York: Cernunnos, 2022.

performers and transgender individuals to express themselves authentically and challenge discriminatory policies in the Drag community and beyond. As Peppermint, actor and former *RuPaul's Drag Race* contestant, said to *TIME* magazine, “For some, beyond being a career, beyond being an artistic expression, Drag can be a means of the only way that they can access the gender expression that they desperately need.” In 2018, Peppermint became the first openly trans woman to perform a lead Broadway role.⁹¹

Jim Bailey was a renowned female impersonator and singer who became popular in the 1960s for accurate impersonations of Hollywood divas. Although primarily based in Las Vegas, Bailey also performed in Los Angeles and gained prominence for his uncanny impersonations of female celebrities, particularly Judy Garland and Barbra Streisand. Bailey's performances captivated audiences with his vocal prowess and ability to embody the essence of his chosen characters. Bailey continued his career in Los Angeles during the 1980s. In addition to his live performances, Bailey made several notable television appearances during his career. He appeared on numerous variety shows, talk shows, and late-night programs, showcasing his talent.⁹²

Jim Bailey's success as a female impersonator helped break down barriers and challenge conventional gender norms in the entertainment industry. He demonstrated that gender was not a limitation to talent and showcased the transformative power of Drag performance. His

⁹¹ Suyin Hanes, “How One Drag Performer's Overlooked Activism Helped Lay the Groundwork for Today's Fight for Transgender Rights.” *TIME Magazine*, June 25, 2021.

⁹² Mike Barnes, “Jim Bailey, Impersonator of Hollywood’s Female Icons, Dies at 77.” *The Hollywood Reporter*, June 2, 2015.

contributions to the world of Drag and his exceptional ability to embody female singers with precision and grace continue to inspire and influence Drag performers and artists today.

In the 1960s, Divine, also known as Harris Glenn Milstead, made appearances in Los Angeles and became an iconic figure in the Drag and underground film scene through her collaborations with filmmaker John Waters. Divine was the inspiration behind *The Little Mermaid's* Ursula, one of Disney's most iconic villains of all time.⁹³

Venues like The Cavern, Club Alabam, and various gay bars and nightclubs provided spaces for Drag performances, allowing Queens to express themselves and entertain audiences. These venues were important hubs for the LGBTQ+ community and contributed to the visibility and growth of Drag in Los Angeles.⁹⁴

The 1970s also saw the emergence of Drag pageants and competitions, providing opportunities for Drag Queens to showcase their talent and creativity. One notable pageant during this time was the Miss Gay America pageant, which began in 1972 and drew Drag performers from across the country.⁹⁵

Although primarily associated with San Francisco, the avant-garde Drag troupe known as The Cockettes presented in Los Angeles. The hippie group was founded by Hibiscus (George Edgerly Harris III). They were known for their outrageous and flamboyant performances, blending Drag,

⁹³ Divine Official Enterprises, Devine Legacy, 2023, Accessed September 5, 2023. www.divineofficial.com/legacy.

⁹⁴ Love Connie, interview by Jesus Barba, July 25, 2023.

⁹⁵ "Miss Gay America Pageant," *The Front Page (Carolinas)* 18, no. 23 (1997): 2–.

theater, and psychedelic counterculture. They were key players in the hippie scene and lived in a commune among other organized anti-capitalist collectives.⁹⁶

The Goddess Bunny, also known as Sandie Crisp, became an important figure in the Los Angeles Drag scene. She lived and paraded the streets of West Hollywood and Santa Monica in Drag, attracting everyone's attention. She also had a band of followers who called her their “Mother,” a clear reminiscence of East Coast Drag culture. She performed in numerous underground films and died of HIV in a shelter in Inglewood.⁹⁷

The 1980s marked the emergence of iconic Drag performers who made significant contributions to the Drag scene and LGBTQ+ culture in Los Angeles. Some of today's most renowned and acclaimed Drag performers made their way up during this period, leading to current mainstream Drag culture. During this decade, photographer John Simone captured Drag Queens and underground celebrities in the New York scene before they became famous, including David Bowie, Divine, Grace Jones, Keith Haring, Liza, Jayne County, Bianca Jagger, RuPaul, Lypsinka, and Lady Bunny.⁹⁸

West Hollywood emerged as a hub for LGBTQ+ nightlife, and Drag Queens played a significant role in shaping a cultural scene, attracting Drag artists from every corner of the country.

Alongside the mainstream Drag scene, underground and alternative venues continued to provide spaces for experimental and unconventional Drag performances. Themed nights were usual in

⁹⁶ Zeena Feldman, and Jamie Hakim, “From Paris Is Burning to #dragrace: Social Media and the Celebification of Drag Culture,” *Celebrity Studies* 11, no. 4 (2020): 386–401.

⁹⁷ Clay Risen, “Sandie Crisp, ‘Goddess Bunny’ of the Underground Scene, Dies at 61: Those We’ve Lost,” *New York Times* (Online). New York: *New York Times* Company, 2021.

⁹⁸ John Simone interview by Tom Rasmussen, Rarely Seen Photographs of a Young RuPaul for *Another Man Magazine*, May 28, 2019.

venues like Club Lingerie and the Anti-Club, providing a platform for edgier and subversive Drag styles such as the one of The Fabulous Wonder Twins.⁹⁹ Luis and Carlos, born in El Salvador, found a ground for self-expression in Southern California.¹⁰⁰

Numerous venues started hosting Drag performances and revues. Popular establishments like The Queen Mary, The Revue, and Jewel's Catch One provided spaces for Drag Queens to showcase their talent and entertain audiences. Important Drag Queen figures like RuPaul (before achieving global recognition), Jackie Beat, and Sherry Vine emerged from the Los Angeles Drag scene in the 1980s.

RuPaul was influential in the Los Angeles Drag scene in the 1980s, even though she only achieved global fame in the 1990s.¹⁰¹ RuPaul performed at various clubs and venues, captivating audiences. She also starred in an underground low-budget film series called *Starbooty* in 1986.¹⁰²

Jackie Beat, the Drag persona of Kent Fuher, rose in the Los Angeles Drag scene and is known for her razor-sharp wit and comedic talent. Jackie Beat's performances blended humor, music, and satire. She has performed at clubs throughout California, such as Martinis Above Fourth in San Diego, Executive Suites in Long Beach, Hamburger Mary's in West Hollywood, Cavern

⁹⁹ Jocelyn Isabel Aguilera, "'We Don't Need the English!'" Transforming and Reconstructing Punk Politics into Chicana Punk Social Activism 1977-1989."; Duncan Strauss, "DOLBY COVERS UP TO ASSURE A NICHE ON THE CLUB CIRCUIT: [ORANGE COUNTY EDITION]." *Los Angeles Times* (Pre-1997 Fulltext), Jun 19, 1987. <http://libproxy.usc.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/newspapers/dolby-covers-up-assure-niche-on-club-circuit/docview/292605344/se-2>.

¹⁰⁰ Harry James Hanson and Devin Antheus, *Legends of Drag: Queens of a Certain Age*, New York: Cernunnos, 2022.

¹⁰¹ Dennis Hunt, "A Witty RuPaul at the Palace," *Los Angeles Times* (1923-1995), Jul 19, 1993. <http://libproxy.usc.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/witty-rupaul-at-palace/docview/1851797187/se-2>.

¹⁰² Starbooty Inc, *Starbooty*, 2007, Accessed September 5, 2023. www.starbooty.com.

Club in Silver Lake, and Badlands in Sacramento.¹⁰³ Jackie Beat debuted in the late 1980s at Café Largo on Fairfax Ave.¹⁰⁴

Sherry Vine, the stage name of Keith Levy, gained recognition in the Los Angeles Drag scene before becoming famous in New York City. Originally from Florida, Sherry Vine studied at the University of Southern California (USC) and debuted in Drag in Los Angeles in a one-act play called “Sorry, Wrong Number.”¹⁰⁵ Known for her clever parodies of popular songs and her irreverent style, Sherry Vine's impact on the Drag community worldwide is undeniable.¹⁰⁶

Amid the AIDS epidemic, the 1980s witnessed the intersection of Drag with art, expression, and activism. Drag performers incorporated political and social commentary into their performances, addressing issues such as HIV/AIDS awareness, LGBTQ+ rights, and the fight against discrimination.

Miss Coco Peru, also known as Clinton Leupp, began her Drag career in the early 1990s but started non-Drag performances in Los Angeles during the late 1980s. Widely known for her flamboyant red hair and gravelly voice, Miss Coco Peru's monologues and storytelling made her an icon of the Drag and LGBTQ+ community. Her experiences during the AIDS epidemic in New York brought her to the front line in activism and advocacy for LGBTQ+ rights and the end

¹⁰³ Lina Lecxaro, “Scream Queen Superstar: Jackie Beat Gets Gruesome at the Cavern Club.” *LA Weekly*, October 27, 2008.

¹⁰⁴ Frank DeCaro, “The ‘Weird Al Yankovic of Drag’ Gets an Extreme Home Makeover: Related Slideshows.” *New York Times*, March 13, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/03/13/style/what-is-jackie-beats-real-name.html?auth=login-google1tap&login=google1tap>.

¹⁰⁵ Eric Caban, “Living for Sherry Vine.” Watermark Online, February 24, 2012.

¹⁰⁶ Sherry Vine interview by Amber Live, Drag Queen Legend Sherry Vine talks about The Sherry Vine Variety Show, YouTube. December 15, 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/live/gChHzLo0TXc?si=6NNjojLTP-PQUzLR>.

of HIV stigma. Since 2005, She has hosted a series of celebrity interviews, “Conversations with Coco,” at the Renberg Theater in Los Angeles.¹⁰⁷

The visibility and recognition of Drag Kings in the 1980s were less prominent than those of Drag Queens. There were certainly Drag Kings and gender-bending performers who contributed to the Los Angeles Drag scene during that time, however, because of gender discriminatory social context, the information is very limited. The Drag King scene as we know it today emerged and gained more visibility in subsequent decades. The 1980s served as a time of cultural transition and groundwork for the further development of Drag Kings as an integral part of the Drag culture in Los Angeles and beyond.

¹⁰⁷ Miss Coco Peru, 2022. Accessed September 5, 2023. www.misscoperu.com.

Chapter III – Drag Historic Enclaves and Their Significance

Historically, most places where Drag shows happened in Los Angeles are no longer in business and have been demolished. Drag shows usually occurred in venues that allowed Drag performers to express their artistic talents in ways nearly all other places would not. Often, these places would get into trouble for letting Drag performers act, facing police raids, fines, and all sorts of legal issues. Often, establishments that permitted LGBTQ+ individuals to express themselves were short-lived. Therefore, the information available is not complete. Still, traces of these places can be found through sparse historic documentation, and their significance is related specifically to the opportunities they provided to Drag culture and the LGBTQ+ community as a whole. Although performances are, by nature, intangible as artistic expressions, the sites where they took place became essential enclaves that paved the path for the development of the community, just as theatres or any other creative venue despite their humble architectural features.

The development of Drag Culture in Los Angeles reflects the shifts in the city's development itself; the different political and socioeconomic phases at a global, federal, and local level directly impacted how the culture developed through the twentieth century.

Los Angeles, with its multiple layers and development history, contributed to the creation of a rich Drag Culture. Drag development can be linked with the city's development phases. In this chapter, the twentieth century is divided into eight clusters of places that share similar social environments and correlate to the development phases of the city. The clusters are named after their socio-cultural similarities, and these are The Vaudeville Era, The Harlem of the West, The Pansy Craze, The Run, The War Era, The Gay Liberation and Human Rights Movement, The

Rise of Studio City, and the Pre-Mainstream Era. These clusters overlap in time in some instances.

The following maps show the primary Drag enclaves and the places that allowed for its development during the twentieth century and are divided into halves of the twentieth century only for ease of graphic representation.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁸ The maps only show the places found relevant to the Drag Culture development during my research; not all the LGBTQ+ places are included in these maps, and more places should be included provided further research.

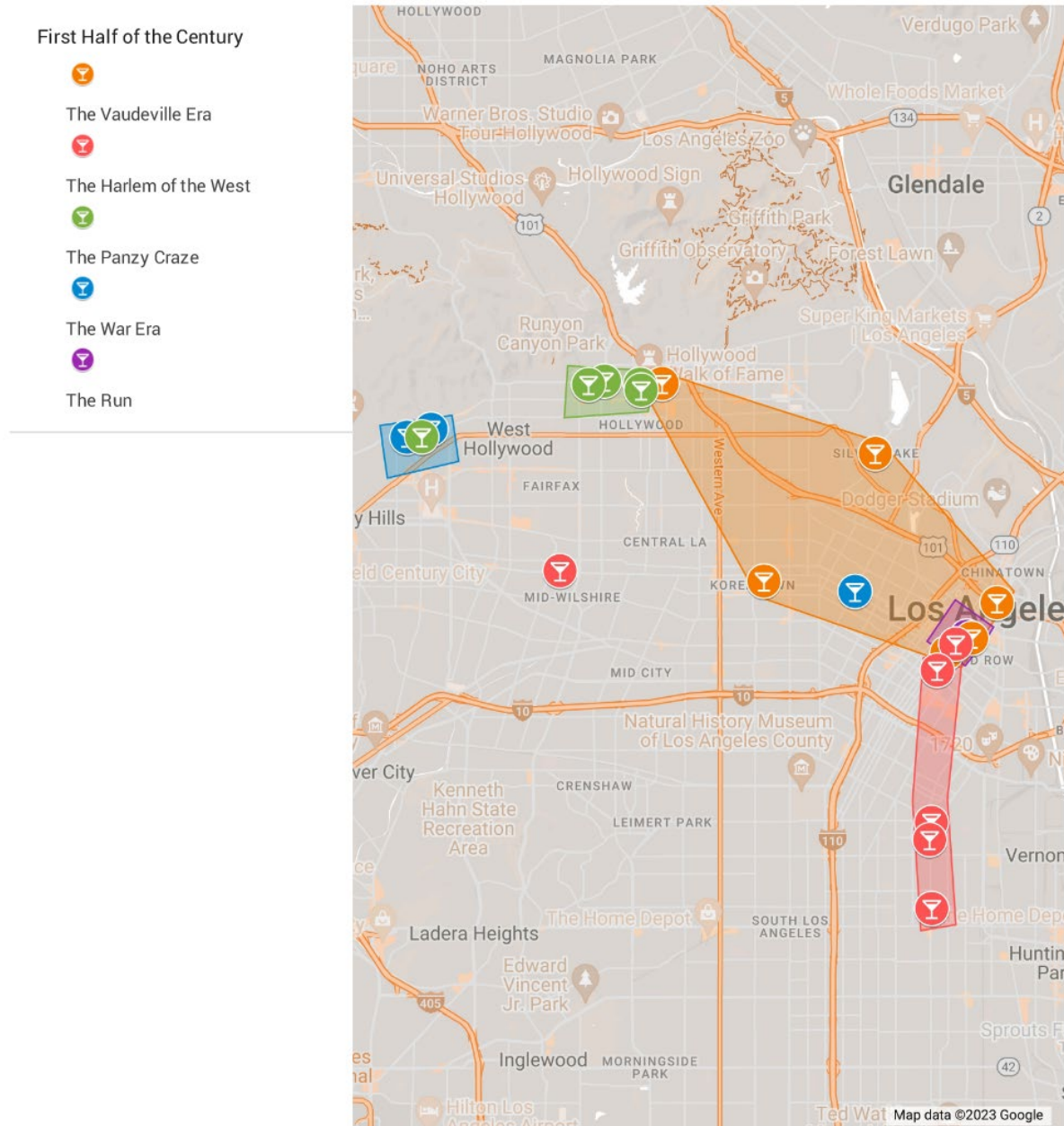



Figure 3.1- Drag Venues of the First Half of the Twentieth Century, created by author using Google Maps.

Second half of the Century

 The Gay Liberation and Human Rights Movement

 The Pre-Mainstream Era

 The Rise of Studio City

 The Rise of Studio City

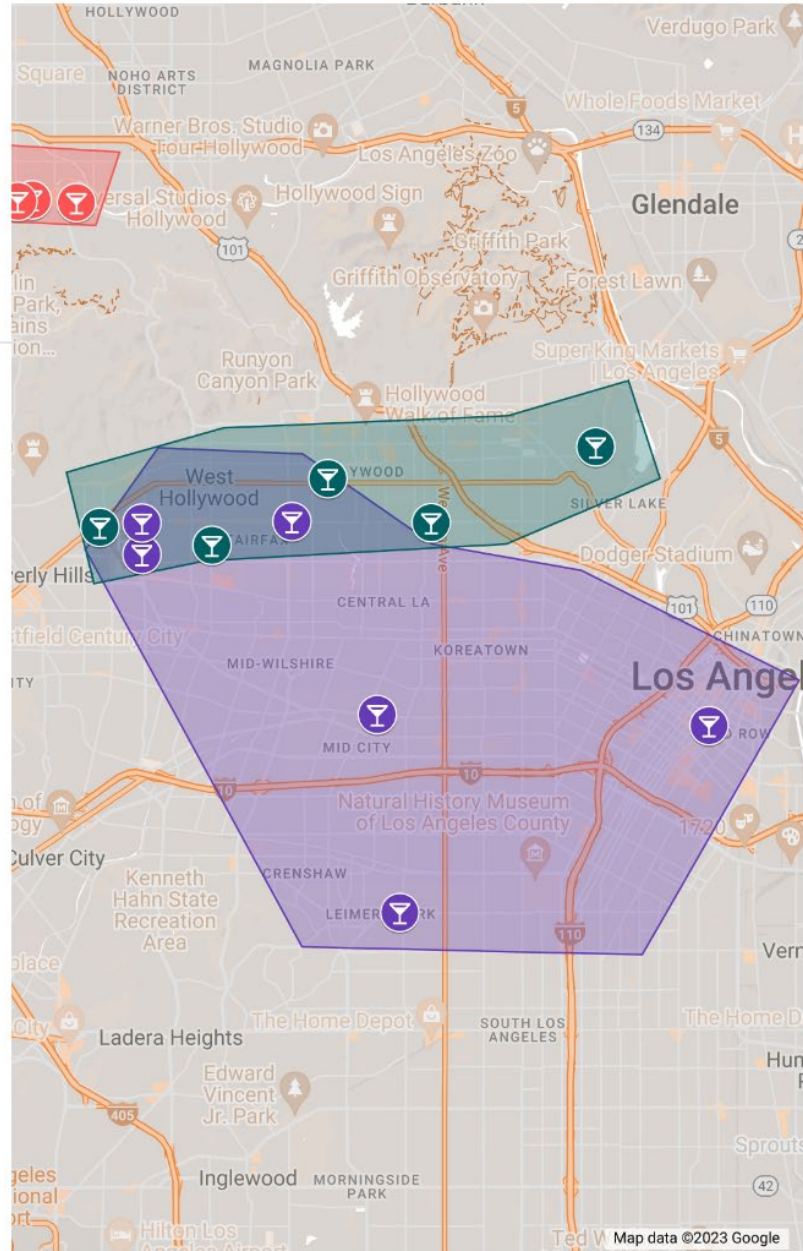


Figure 3.2 - Drag Venues of the Second Half of the Twentieth Century, created by author using Google Maps.

In the late nineteenth century and early decades of the twentieth century in downtown Los Angeles, various venues and establishments hosted Drag shows and balls, providing spaces for Drag performers to entertain audiences and express themselves. Although “Drag Balls” as a concept, is usually connected to New York’s Drag scene in the 1980s, Los Angeles was hosting earlier Drag Balls. Los Angeles's development history played a significant role in paving the path that allowed Drag culture to become what it is today.

The Vaudeville Era

During the first part of the twentieth century, Drag performers gained fame through the Vaudeville circuit. Important venues with high beaux arts and art-deco architectural styles provided a space for Drag throughout the country. Some of the most influential Drag venues that contributed to the development of Drag culture and LGBTQ+ communities were historic theaters in Downtown Los Angeles. The theater scene, the Vaudeville circuit, and the rapidly growing economy because of the film and oil industry made Los Angeles the perfect pot for Drag performances. Numerous theaters featured a variety of performances, including Drag shows. It attracted a diverse audience and provided a platform for Drag performers to entertain and challenge societal norms.

The Merced, at 420 N Main St., was the first building in Los Angeles built for theater performances. Designed by Ezra F. Kysor in an Italianate style as a complement to the Pico House next door, it closed in 1887 because of an outbreak of smallpox and then reopened as an

informal entertainment venue.¹⁰⁹ The Merced became famous for its masked balls, which made it a safe haven for the LGBTQ+ community at the beginning of the century. These masquerade balls provided a safe space for gender-bending individuals, self-expression, and Drag during the days of the masquerading law and served as precursors to Drag Balls.¹¹⁰

Victorian Sex Clubs were the only organizations that could afford the rent when it reopened at the end of the nineteenth century. The Merced hosted masked balls for male and female prostitutes who conducted "vile orgies," according to 1887 reports. The location was turned into a lodging house for queer men by Frederick Purssord.¹¹¹ The tolerance for this behavior ended in 1898 with the City's anti-masquerading ordinance in response to La Fiesta celebrations, a week-long celebration that drew attention from conservative parties because of participants dressing in drag, which they found disturbing. The ordinance marked the beginning of a dark period in Los

¹⁰⁹ B. Counter, Merced Theater, 2017, Accessed Oct 11, 2023.
<https://losangelestheatres.blogspot.com/2018/03/merced-theatre.html>.

¹¹⁰ Paula Kiley, 15 Places in L.A. Where LGBTQ History Was Made. June 9, 2022, Accessed Sep 13, 2023. <https://www.kcet.org/shows/la-queer-history/15-places-in-l-a-where-lgbtq-history-was-made>.; The masquerade law, more commonly known as the anti-masking law, was established in New York in 1845 and spread like wildfire across the country in the nineteenth century. It declared it a crime to have your "face painted, discolored, covered, or concealed, or [be] otherwise disguised... [while] in a road or public highway." The law was written to target rural farmers, who had taken to dressing like Native Americans to fight off tax collectors. However, by the beginning of the twentieth century, it was more often used to target "gender inappropriateness," according to William N Eskridge, Jr in his book *'Gaylaw: Challenging the Apartheid of the Closet.'* Neetha K, "HBO Max's 'Equal': What were 'Masquerade Law' and 'Three-Article Rule' used by cops to persecute trans community?" *MEAWW*, October 22, 2020, <https://meaww.com/equal-hbo-max-masquerade-law-three-article-rule-persecute-trans-community>.

¹¹¹ "Frederick Purssord was an outrageous queen who made the *L.A. Times* for his practice of nudism. He was later arrested as a "degenerate," and died in police custody in 1913. L.A. had numerous bathhouses, open for ladies for a few hours in the afternoon, open for men all night—with rooms for those who had no place else to sleep." Stuart Timmons and Karen Ocamb, "L.A. Gay Time Machine: Historic Sites in." *IN Magazine*, 2007,
https://web.archive.org/web/20070504040733/http://www.inlamagazine.com/915/features/915_gayla.html.

Angeles where LGBTQ+ individuals became prosecuted for expressing their gender identities.

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Constructed in 1911, The Orpheum Theatre, at 630 S. Broadway in downtown Los Angeles, was a renowned Vaudeville theater that showcased a variety of performances, including Drag shows. From 1911 to 1926, it offered Vaudeville that could compete with the best of the country, including that found in Harlem. It hosted traveling productions and local talent, allowing Drag performers to captivate audiences with their extravagant costumes, singing, and comedic acts. In 1926, the Orpheum Circuit was purchased and changed its location to the current theater on 9th and Broadway; the old theater was renamed the Palace.¹¹³

The Music Box Theater at 6126 Hollywood Blvd served multiple times as the stage for the touring Jewel Box Revue.¹¹⁴ Originally built as Carter De Haven's Music Box and then renamed the Fonda Theater, this historic venue is one of Hollywood's first legitimate theatres. The theater, designed by Morgan, Walls & Clements Architects opened in 1926 and is still operational.¹¹⁵

The Cocoon Grove, located at the Ambassador Hotel at 3400 Wilshire Boulevard, was one of the most important nightclubs and entertainment venues in Los Angeles during the early

¹¹² Victorian Sex Clubs were organizations that appeared first in England during the Victorian era after a century of sexual repression; the organizations hosted members-only underground events where attendees could freely express their sexuality. Kate Kelly, "PERVERSE RELICS – A HISTORY OF SEXY WITH TONY PERROTTET," *Untapped New York*, n.d., <https://untappedcities.com/2012/09/21/perverse-relics-a-history-of-sexy-with-tony-perrottet/>. ; Queer Maps, n.d. Accessed October 11, 2023. <https://www.queermaps.org/place/420-n-main-st.-los-angeles-ca-90012>.

¹¹³ Singer, Stan. "Vaudeville in Los Angeles, 1910-1926: Theaters, Management, and the Orpheum." *Pacific Historical Review* 61, no. 1 (1992): 103–13. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3640790>.

¹¹⁴ "Dick Gregory show Socko at Crescendo." *Los Angeles Sentinel* (1934-), Nov 09, 1961. <http://libproxy.usc.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/dick-gregory-show-socko-at-crescendo/docview/564583005/se-2>.

¹¹⁵ B. Counter, Music Box/Fonda Theater: History + exterior views, 2017, Accessed Sep 21, 2023. <https://losangelestheatres.blogspot.com/2017/02/music-box-theatre.html>.

twentieth century, a prime example of Art Deco and Spanish Revival style of Paul R. Williams architecture. While not exclusively a Drag venue, it occasionally featured Drag shows as part of its entertainment lineup, contributing to the visibility and acceptance of Drag performers. Drag Queens such as Miss Coco and Sir Lady Java performed here.¹¹⁶

The Follies Theater, originally built as The Belasco in 1904 and demolished in 1974, was at 337 S. Main St. It presented Vaudeville-style entertainment. It was known for its variety shows, which often included performances by Drag Queens. The Follies was raided, closed, and reopened many times in the 1940s.¹¹⁷

¹¹⁶ Online Archive of California, (female Impersonators) Flyer for event at the Cocoanut Grove, page from *The Daily Variety* 1969, Box-folder 11:8, Bruk (Margaret Tante) Papers Collection. William H. Hannon Library, Loyola Marymount University, 1969; "GERTRUDE GIPSON...CANDID COMMENTS: NOTES FROM A NEWSGIRL." *Los Angeles Sentinel* (1934-), May 20, 1965. <http://libproxy.usc.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/gertrude-gipson-candid-comments/docview/564755323/se-2>; "GERTRUDE GIPSON CANDID COMMENTS: JOHNNY COCHRAN PRAISED." *Los Angeles Sentinel* (1934-), Jun 02, 1966. <http://libproxy.usc.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/gertrude-gipson-candid-comments/docview/564792710/se-2>.

¹¹⁷ Andy Davis, History - LOS ANGELES BURLESQUE THEATRES – THE FOLLIES. August 8, 2013, Accessed Sep 12, 2023. <https://hollywoodburlesquefestival.com/history/los-angeles-burlesque-theatres>.

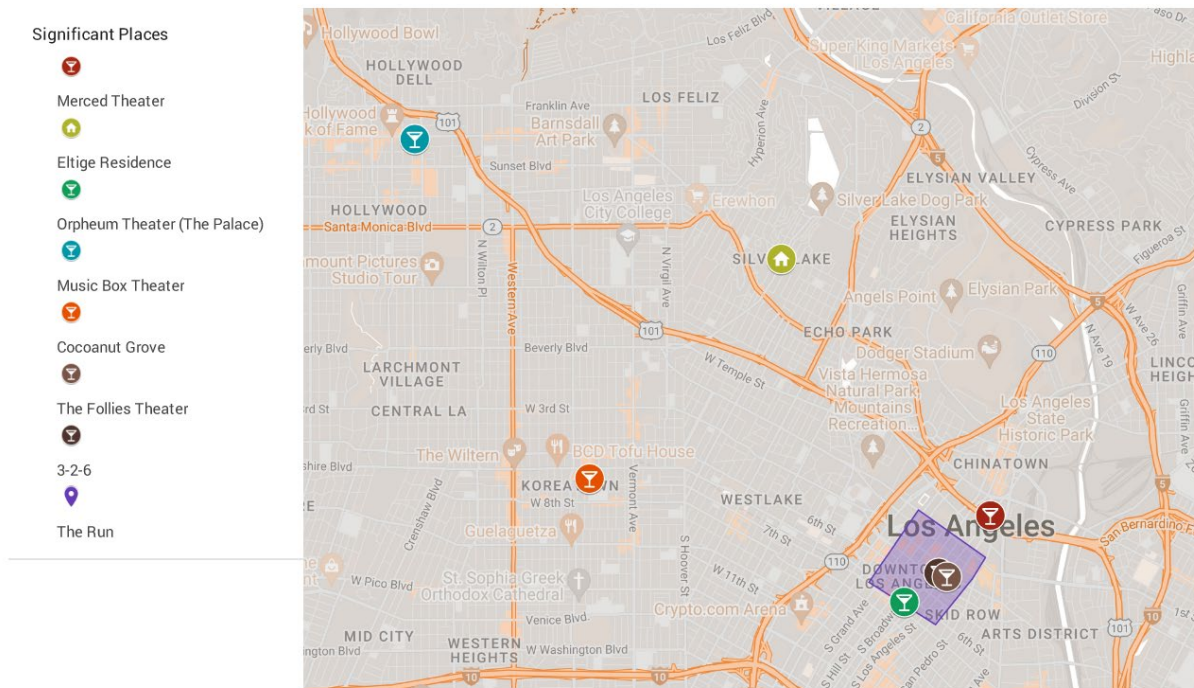


Figure 3.3 - The Vaudeville Era and the Run, created by author using Google Maps.

The Harlem of the West

Between the 1920s and 1950s, Central Ave became a hotspot for the African-American community and the jazz scene. It was often called the Harlem of the West. Many of the jazz bars along Central Ave were what we call today “gay friendly,” hosting Drag shows and offering a platform for Black Drag performers to showcase their talent and creativity.¹¹⁸ This scene created a new environment across Los Angeles that allowed Drag performances in different spots in the city, although not all of these happening in Central Ave they were fueled by the inspiring jazz climate in the city.

¹¹⁸ Hadley Meares, Curbed Los Angeles. Feb 28, 2018, Accessed Oct 5, 2023. <https://la.curbed.com/maps/central-avenue-history-jazz>.

Although not much information is available besides Drag Balls mentioned in the *Sentinel* newspaper, places like Club Araby on 55th and Central Ave, The Elks Temple, and Club Alabam hosted regular Drag Balls where African Americans were the main participants.¹¹⁹

Police constantly raided Drag Balls; people were arrested simply for dressing in attire that was not aligned with their gender. The Drag Ball at the Elks Temple on 4012 South Central Ave ended up with twelve men arrested. Among the incarcerated were Charles and James Alexander, Jack R. Henry, Robert Thomas, James L. Mayo, James Swing, and Joe Hava, all registered as “known Homosexuals” with the police department.¹²⁰

Club Alabam, located at 4215 S Central Ave, was a popular nightclub and theater that hosted a variety of performances, including Drag Balls. Bill Hefflin hosted an annual Drag Ball that would gather Queens of all backgrounds. The Black-owned Club became one of the hottest clubs in the Jazz scene in Los Angeles.¹²¹

¹¹⁹ Larry Harnisch, Black L.A. 1947: Drag Ball Planned for the Avodon Ballroom in DTLA, *The Daily Mirror*, August 16, 2018, Accessed Sep 10, 2023. <https://ladailymirror.com/2018/08/16/black-l-a-1947-drag-ball-planned-for-the-avodon-ballroom-in-dtla/>.

¹²⁰ "POLICE JAIL 12 IN RIOTOUS DRAG BALL: DRAG BALL REAL 'DRAG' TO EASTSIDE HALLOWEEN." *Los Angeles Sentinel* (1934-), Nov 03, 1949. <http://libproxy.usc.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/police-jail-12-riotous-drag-ball/docview/562151289/se-2>.

¹²¹ Drag contest, Club Alabam, Circa 1945, Los Angeles Public Library Photo Collection, Los Angeles Public Library, N.d., Source: Calisphere, Accessed Sep 19, 2023. <https://calisphere.org/item/7cba55579dae9470895a1f86cf696d33/>.

Other venues hosted Drag Balls in Los Angeles in the first part of the twentieth century. The Avodon on 843 S. Spring Street hosted a Drag Ball in 1947, including Jazz bands and the best of America's female impersonators.¹²²



Figure 3.4- Spring Street and Ninth Street, Avodon Ballroom, Garland Building at 117 West Ninth Street. Source USC Digital Library. Dick Whittington Photography Collection, 1924-1987.

The El Rey Theatre, located at 5515 Wilshire Boulevard, is a designated historic venue that hosted a range of entertainment, including Vaudeville shows and variety acts. It occasionally

¹²² Drag Ball to feature new style minstrels. (1947, Aug 14). *Los Angeles Sentinel* (1934-) Retrieved from <http://libproxy.usc.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/drag-ball-feature-new-style-minstrels/docview/562091136/se-2>.

featured Drag performances and female impersonators as part of its lineup. Ray Bourbon also performed here.¹²³

The Alexandria Hotel, a designated historic property at 210 W. Fifth St. in downtown Los Angeles, was known for its ballroom dances and cabaret-style entertainment. Designed by John Parkinson, it was a grand establishment that hosted various events, including an annual Mardi Gras ball where performances by Drag Queens took place at the iconic Palm Court.¹²⁴

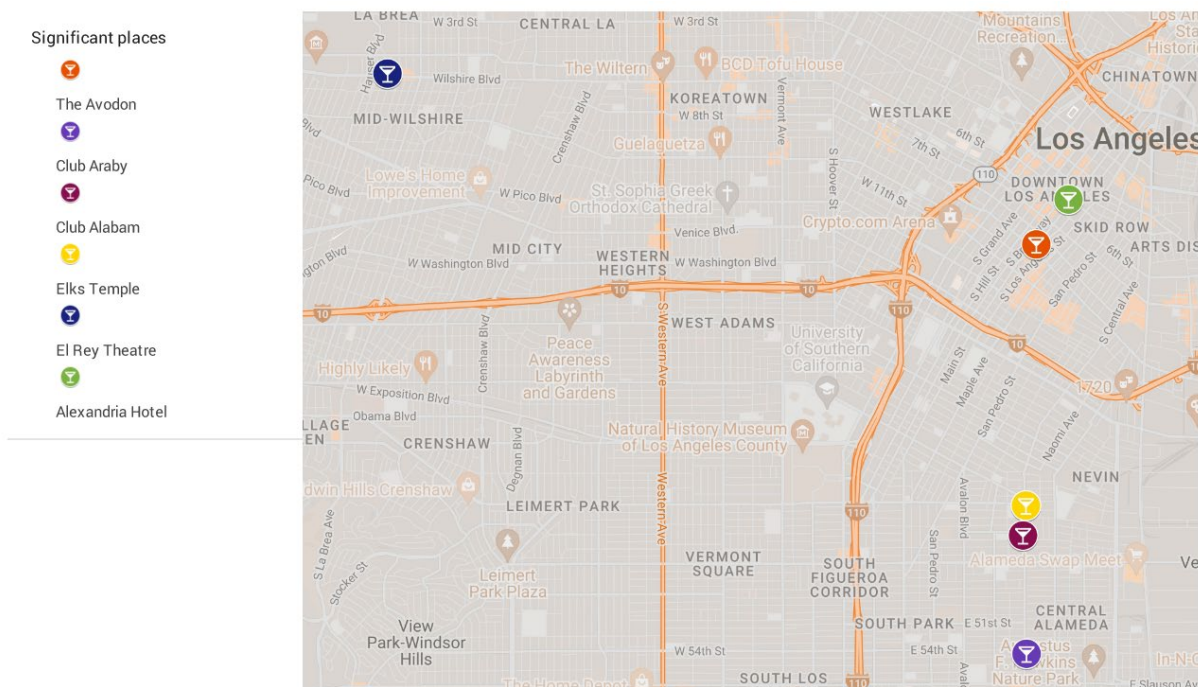


Figure 3.5 - The Harlem of the West, created by author using Google Maps.

¹²³ "Florence Cadrez... mostly 'Bout Musicians . . . Ella Tale," *Los Angeles Sentinel* (1934-), June 08, 1950. <http://libproxy.usc.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/florence-cadrez-mostly-bout-musicians-ella-tale/docview/562212086/se-2>.

¹²⁴ Gents set for Mardi Gras, *Los Angeles Sentinel* (1934-), February 25, 1954, Retrieved from <http://libproxy.usc.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/gents-set-mardi-gras/docview/562359409/se-2>.

The Pansy Craze

With its vibrant entertainment industry, Hollywood was a significant center for Drag culture. The area attracted performers, artists, and nightlife establishments that embraced and provided a platform for expression for Drag performances. Hollywood Boulevard and Sunset Strip were mainly known for their clubs and bars that hosted Drag shows catering to the most extravagant tastes of the country's bohemian circles.

Prohibition was enacted in 1920; however, the nightlife in Los Angeles stayed very active through an underground speakeasy culture, an already ongoing safe space for people with different sexual orientations that welcomed everyone else as alcohol became illegal. Drag Queens, referred to at the time as "pansy performers," became very popular in underground nightclubs, becoming some of the highest-paid performers in the United States during the 1930-1933 "Pansy Craze."¹²⁵ During Prohibition, many speakeasies popped up on the streets next to Hollywood Boulevard, such as Ivar, Cosmo, and Cahuenga. Drag entertainment became popular in Los Angeles during the "Pansy Craze." In 1929, the Motion Picture Production Code was also adopted, which brought a series of restrictions on performances and etiquette to the city.¹²⁶ The nightclubs that lasted longer were B.B.B.'s Cellar, the Café Montmartre, and Jimmy's Backyard.

B.B.B.'s Cellar at 1651 Cosmo Street in Hollywood had a revue of ten boys dressed as girls; it was a welcoming space to gay, straight, and bisexual people. The show was called "Boys Will

¹²⁵ GPA Consulting, Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender (LGBT) Context Statement, LOS ANGELES CITYWIDE HISTORIC CONTEXT STATEMENT, Los Angeles: Office of Historic Resources - City of Los Angeles Department of City Planning, 56-66, 2014.

¹²⁶ "The Motion Picture Production Code was a set of industry guidelines for the self-censorship of content that was applied to most motion pictures released by major studios in the United States from 1934 to 1968. It is also popularly known as the Hays Code." Dan Luckenbill, "glbtq archives." glbtq Los Angeles, 2006, Accessed October 5, 2023. http://www.glbtqarchive.com/ssh/los_angeles_S.pdf.

Be Girls.” Many Hollywood big-screen personalities frequented the place. Since homophobic legislation was already in place, the B.B.B. Cellar had an alarm system in place. Bobby Burns Berman, who was running the business at the time, provided patrons with a wood hammer at the entrance and instructed them to pound their table every time a new guest arrived. This system may have saved Drag performers and transgender individuals for a period of time. Still, in the end, police raids reached the venue in 1932, resulting in the incarceration of performers and patrons. Rae Bourbon, Fred Monroe, and Karyl Norman were regular performers here.¹²⁷

Jimmy’s Backyard on 1608 Cosmo St. opened its doors in 1929 by Thomas Gannon. Patronized by straight cisgender individuals, places like Jimmy’s Backyard were often referred to as "queer bars" and "pansy joints" because they featured female impersonator revues. The Drag performances became so accepted that magazines like *The Hollywood Reporter* and *Vanity* magazine wrote about them and the Hollywood stars that attended. During the 1930s, it was considered L.A.’s first openly gay bar, and it also hosted Rae Bourbon’s “Boys Will Be Girls” extravaganza.¹²⁸

In 1933, Prohibition was repealed, and law enforcement officers, afraid of losing control over Hollywood, started raiding clubs that welcomed sexual diversity more often. They began targeting clubs that allowed Drag performances where “men masqueraded as women, and

¹²⁷ Martin Turnbull, *Hollywood Places*, n.d., Accessed Oct 11, 2023, <https://martinturnbull.com/hollywood-places/>.

¹²⁸ Lindsay Mulcahy, *Half A Century of Protest - Pride to BLM Along Hollywood Boulevard*, n.d., Accessed Sep 15, 2023. <https://www.hhprc.org/pride-celebration.>; Queer Maps. n.d. Accessed Sep 13, 2023. www.queermapping.org.

women pose as men.” During Jimmy’s Backyard raid, they arrested the female impersonators and sentenced them to six months in jail.¹²⁹

Club Bali, situated at 8804 Sunset Blvd, was a sophisticated venue that hosted Drag shows and other LGBTQ+ events during the early twentieth century. It provided a space for Drag performers and queer individuals to socialize and express themselves freely. Bruz Fletcher was a headliner here during the Pansy Craze between 1935 and 1940. Fletcher's singing performance and his open sexuality provided the Los Angeles LGBTQ+ community with a space of freedom.¹³⁰

Aside from public venues, and especially during Prohibition, speakeasies, private clubs, and parties played a significant role in shaping the Drag culture of the time. Men and women held private parties alike to freely dress in Drag, express themselves, and avoid the scrutiny of the homophobic society and policies.¹³¹ These exclusive spaces allowed Drag performers and LGBTQ+ individuals to gather, socialize, and express themselves freely.¹³²

The Roosevelt Hotel on Hollywood Boulevard was a popular destination for entertainment and nightlife during the early twentieth century. Although the information is not very clear, it is

¹²⁹ Queer Maps. n.d. Accessed Sep 13, 2023. www.queermapping.org.

¹³⁰ Dan Avery, Logo TV, Oct 28, 2019, Accessed Oct 3, 2023. <https://www.logotv.com/news/zjvsv5/prohibition-launched-first-drag-craze-in-america>; Bruz Fletcher is one of the few openly gay singers in the midcentury era. Jon Ponder, 1935: Bruz Fletcher’s Camp Style, 2021, Accessed October 3, 2023. <http://www.playgroundtothestars.com/timeline/1935-bruz-fletcher-at-club-bali/#:~:text=Bruz%20Fletcher%20was%20a%20society,be%20known%20later%20as%20camp>.

¹³¹ Howard Ballew, "Posed as girls," Photograph, Digital Transgender Archive, 1944, <https://www.digitaltransgenderarchive.net/files/9k41zd63m>, Accessed September 13, 2023.

¹³² "Joe Harper party, view 1," Photograph, Digital Transgender Archive, 1920, <https://www.digitaltransgenderarchive.net/files/5h73pw162>.

likely it hosted events and shows that included Drag performances, attracting both locals and tourists.¹³³

Club Mona's 440, although in San Francisco, had some influence on the Drag King scene in Los Angeles. The Club featured male impersonators dressed in tuxedos that often replaced song lyrics with openly gay ones, which led to these performances being tagged as not respectable; the place was thought to cater to sex tourism and sex work. Gladys Bentley was a regular performer here and remained one of the main attractions before moving to Los Angeles to continue her career. Beverly Shaw also regularly performed here, among other Drag Kings.¹³⁴ Several San Francisco clubs advertised male and female impersonators well into the 1950s, despite bar raids and police harassment of those who were gender nonconforming.¹³⁵

Finocchio's Club in San Francisco, operating since the 1930s, continued to be a popular venue for Drag performances during the 1960s, attracting performers from various locations, including Los Angeles, most definitely defining a path for the Drag Culture of the city development.

¹³³ Jimmy James, "Jimmy James as MM Hollywood Roosevelt Hotel circa 1989. Live vocals," TikTok video, 3:10 min, December 21, 2022, <https://www.tiktok.com/@jimmyjamesfashionista/video/7179584736002592046>.

¹³⁴ Queer Music Heritage, Beverly Shaw, June, 2004, Accessed Oct 13, 2023. <https://www.queermusicheritage.com/jun2004bs.html>.

¹³⁵ Malinda Lo, A Brief History of Male Impersonation, Malinda Lo Blog, April 27, 2021, Accessed July 15, 2023. www.malindalo.com/blog/2021/4/27/a-brief-history-of-male-impersonation.

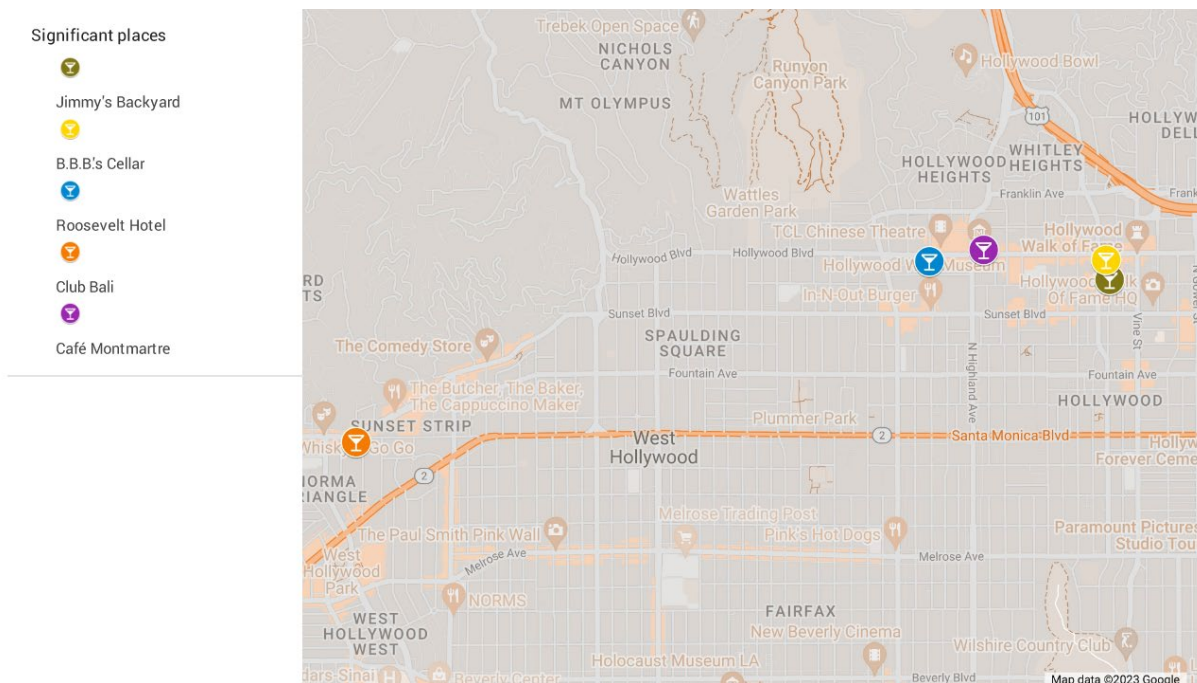


Figure 3.6 - The Pansy Craze, created by author using Google Maps.

The Run

Back in Los Angeles, Pershing Square played a crucial role in the development of Drag culture; it was at the heart of a circuit of gay-friendly establishments and cruising spots in the 1920s through the '80s known as "The Run." Some of the places that paid no heed to early Drag in the Run were the Central Library, the bar at the Biltmore Hotel, and the Subway Terminal Building's bathrooms. LGBTQ+ community members freely dressed in Drag in the area to express themselves or look for work, as depicted in Rechy's *City of Night*. Drag performers freely gathered here to plan events and shows. ¹³⁶

¹³⁶ Paula Kiley, 15 Places in L.A. Where LGBTQ History Was Made. June 9, 2022, Accessed Sep 13, 2023. <https://www.kcet.org/shows/la-queer-history/15-places-in-l-a-where-lgbtq-history-was-made>.

The Run was not the typical enclave where gay men freely interacted with each other. It was more of a secret network where clever gay men moved, fooling the restrictive policies of the city. Although there was no clear sense of a community, these pockets of homosexual activity became the way in Los Angeles between the 1920s through the 1940s.¹³⁷

In 1951, the park was renovated to add a parking garage underground; the removal of the dense foliage put an end to The Run era in the 1960s, as homosexual contact was illegal at this time. In 1992, the park was fully renovated under Mexican architect design Ricardo Legorreta.¹³⁸

The Run overlaps with the War Era, as during World War II, gay men and women found a place to be themselves in downtown Los Angeles despite most of the establishments being declared “out of bounds.” Many people ended up in custody, but most just quietly accepted the injustice of the time, fearing to be publicly outed. Executive Order 10450, signed in 1953, officially allowed for anyone found to be homosexual to be fired without explanation and for businesses catering to the LGBTQ+ community to lose their license. Savvy business owners found a way to still provide places where individuals could feel safe. The LAPD gathered around 10,000 files on suspected “sex offenders” at Pershing Square.¹³⁹

¹³⁷ Daniel Hurewitz, *Bohemian Los Angeles*, University of California Press, 2007.

¹³⁸ Los Angeles Conservancy, Historic Places in L.A, Pershing Square, n.d., Accessed Oct 12, 2023. <https://www.laconservancy.org/learn/historic-places/pershing-square/>.

¹³⁹ Glen Creason, Los Angeles Public Library, Jun 6, 2016, Accessed Sep 18, 2023. <https://www.lapl.org/collections-resources/blogs/lapl/gay-downtown-los-angeles>.

3-2-6 on 326 S Spring St, opened by World Heavyweight Boxing Champion Jim Jeffries in 1908. This bar attracted Drag Queens, including Destiny, a real person and a character in John Rechy's *City of Night*. The building was demolished in the 1960s.¹⁴⁰

The War Era

During World War II, a great flock of soldiers, marines, and airmen took their stateside leave in Los Angeles. The city's nightlife catered to all kinds of tastes, but in 1942, the navy decided to make more than thirty bars and nightclubs across Los Angeles off-limits to sailors. La Boheme, also known as Chez Boheme at 8950 Sunset Blvd in West Hollywood and Café Internationale at 8711 Sunset Blvd, offered crossdressing performers, usually women dressed in male drag or Drag Kings. U.S. forces frequented these places where they could have a meal while exploring their sexuality while "watching boy-girls kissing." Rae Bourbon was the main attraction at Chez Boheme, and Karyl Norman also performed under the guise of various Hollywood actresses here. In both places, liquor licenses were revoked due to the Navy ban.¹⁴¹

MacArthur Park was another gathering place for the early LGBTQ+ community and Drag performers. It served as a location for outdoor events, picnics, social gatherings, and cruising spots where Drag performers could express themselves and entertain the community.

¹⁴⁰ Queer Maps, n.d. Accessed Sep 13, 2023. www.queermaps.org; John Rechy, *City of Night*, New York: Grove Press, Chapter 3, 1963.

¹⁴¹ Jon Ponder, "1942: Navy Bans Gay Clubs," Playground to the Stars Blog, n.d., Accessed Oct 4, 2023. <http://www.playgroundtothestars.com/timeline/1942-military-declares-chez-boheme-cafe-internationale-off-limits/>.

It opened in 1890 under the name of Westlake Park and was renamed in 1942; it was part of a new development for wealthy citizens of Los Angeles.¹⁴² In 1926, the Park Theater, formerly the Westlake Theater, opened at 636 S Alvarado St, configured for both movies and Vaudeville productions, where in June of 1968, filmmaker Pat Rocco presented “A Most Unusual Film Festival.” Today, the building is an indoor swap meet.¹⁴³

¹⁴² *The Pride LA*, “MacArthur Park Was Cruisy in the Dark”, Oct 22, 2015, Accessed Sep 14, 2023. <https://thepridelatla.com/2015/10/macarthur-park-was-cruisy-in-the-dark/>.

¹⁴³ Pat Rocco contributed to a burgeoning public gay film culture in the United States when his films were exhibited at the Park Theatre in Los Angeles from 1968 to 1971. Bryan Wuest, "Defining Homosexual Love Stories: Pat Rocco, Categorization, and the Legitimation of Gay Narrative Film." *Film History* 29, no. 4 (2017): 59-88. doi:<https://doi.org/10.2979/filmhistory.29.4.03>. <http://libproxy.usc.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/scholarly-journals/defining-homosexual-love-stories-pat-rocco/docview/1992870643/se-2>.

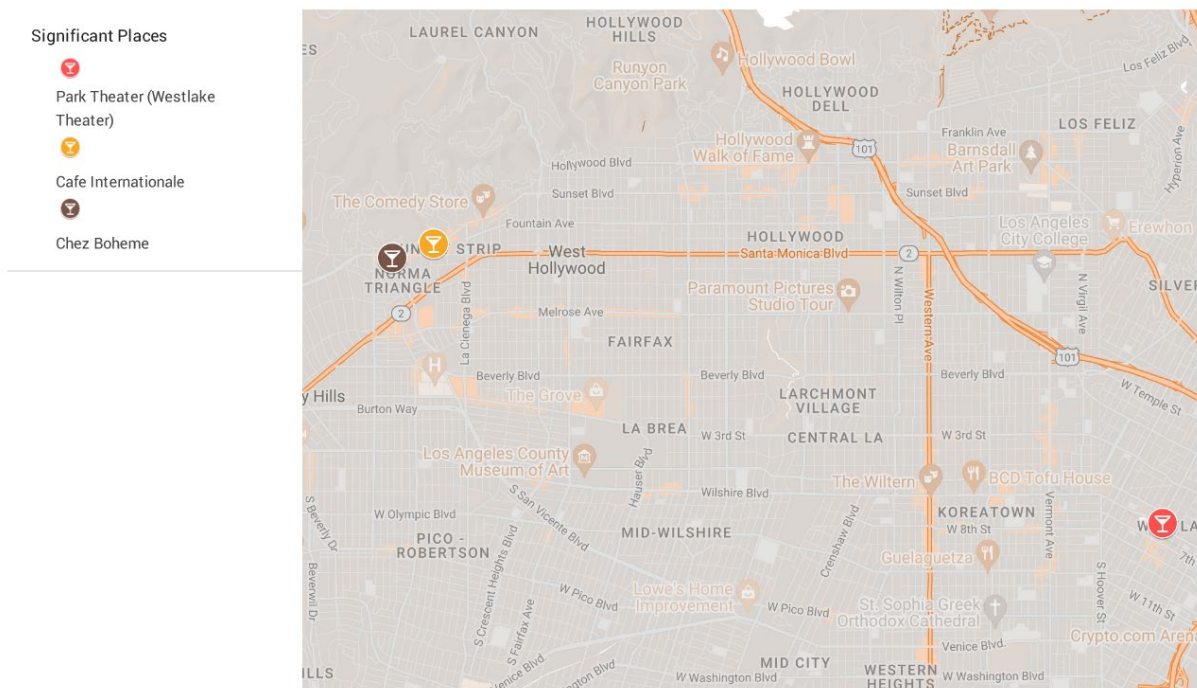


Figure 3.7 - The War Era, created by author using Google Maps.

The second half of the twentieth century played a crucial part in the acceptance of Drag culture and its significance as an artistic form. Several influential venues played a significant role in the Los Angeles Drag scene. These venues provided platforms for Drag performers, hosted Drag shows, and contributed to the development of the LGBTQ+ and Drag communities.

The Gay Liberation and Human Rights Movement

Some other neighborhoods and cities became LGBTQ+ enclaves before the 1950s; the Silver Lake neighborhood, previously known as Edendale, has long been associated with LGBTQ+ culture in Los Angeles. In the early to midcentury, it became a gathering place for LGBTQ+

individuals, including Drag Queens. Bars and venues in Silver Lake, such as The Black Cat Tavern, became important hubs for the community and are considered cornerstones of the Gay Liberation Movement on the West Coast.¹⁴⁴

Cooper Do-nuts on 547 S Main St was a 24-hour café coincidentally located in the middle of downtown's network gay hangouts known as "The Run."¹⁴⁵ It was popular among the LGBTQ+ community during the 1950s and 1960s because it was one of the few establishments in the city that would not turn down queer and Drag patrons, despite LAPD-sanctioning measures and harassment. The coffee shop became a gender-non-conforming safe haven and late-night Drag scene enclave after a sign was posted advising customers not to be alarmed by "sitting with people in full theatrical make-up."¹⁴⁶ LAPD entered bars asking patrons for identification; if their ID did not match their gender presentation, they would be arrested. In this manner, LAPD officers arrested five individuals for their LGBTQ+ association: two Drag Queens, two male sex workers, and one gay man in May 1959. This unfounded and discriminatory arrest prompted one of the (allegedly) first LGBTQ+ human rights riots in the country. John Rechy witnessed and documented the event in his novel *City of Night*, quoting, "The street was bustling with disobedience." A group of lesbians, transgender women, Drag Queens, and gay men rushed to the streets in resistance to the arrests, throwing donuts, paper plates, coffee cups, and anything

¹⁴⁴ Rafael Francisco Fontes, "GAINING A FOOTHOLD - CONSERVING LOS ANGELES' QUEER EDEN(DALE)," Master Thesis. Los Angeles: School of Architecture University of Southern California, December, 2020.

¹⁴⁵ Queer Maps. n.d. Accessed Sep 13, 2023. www.queermaps.org.

¹⁴⁶ Nan Alamilla Boyd, *Wide-Open Town : A History of Queer San Francisco To 1965*, University of California Press, 2003. ProQuest Ebook Central, <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/socal/detail.action?docID=224018>. Created from socal on 2023-08-22 16:05:58.

they could find at the policemen. But there is no news coverage or official reports of this event.¹⁴⁷



Figure 3.8 - Original site of Cooper Do-nuts inside Evans Cafeteria. Image courtesy of the Evans Family via www.cooperdonuts.com.

Additionally, the Black Cat Tavern, an LGBTQ+ bar in Los Angeles, became an important gathering place for the LGBTQ+ community during the 1960s; it was the bar where the Los Angeles liberation movement riots started even before Stonewall. While primarily a bar rather than a Drag venue, Drag Queens and performers often frequented the establishment, as it served as a focal point for the community's social and cultural life.¹⁴⁸

¹⁴⁷ Paula Kiley, "15 Places in L.A. Where LGBTQ History Was Made," June 9, 2022, Accessed Sep 13, 2023. <https://www.kcet.org/shows/la-queer-history/15-places-in-l-a-where-lgbtq-history-was-made>.

¹⁴⁸ Rafael Francisco Fontes, "GAINING A FOOTHOLD - CONSERVING LOS ANGELES' QUEER EDEN(DALE)," Master Thesis. Los Angeles: School of Architecture University of Southern California, December, 2020.

La Cage Au Folles on 643 N. La Cienega is, allegedly, the place where Drag brunches and dinners started. It opened in April 1981 by Lou Paciocco and featured Drag Queens impersonating Barbra Streisand, Diana Ross, Dolly Parton, Julie Andrews, Donna Summer, among others. The restaurant's success was so great that they planned to branch out to London, Chicago, Las Vegas, San Francisco, and Florida, all of these today's Drag show hubs worldwide.

¹⁴⁹ The Hollywood Roosevelt Hotel today presents a show inspired by the original venue on La Cienega.

¹⁴⁹ "La Cage Aux Folles," *Los Angeles Sentinel* (1934-), Sep 09, 1982.
<http://libproxy.usc.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/la-cage-aux-folles/docview/565441935/se-2>.

Redd Foxx was a Harlem nightclub comedian born in St. Louis who played the “Chitlin Circuit.” He was a very progressive mind for his time and a longtime ally to the LGBTQ+ community. He performed along with Drag Queens Lynn Carter and Jan Britton, Jewel Box Revue’s “Living Dolls.”¹⁵⁰ He opened an “Adults Only” comedy club during the height of his career, the Redd Foxx Club at 339 N. La Cienega Blvd in Los Angeles was the place to be.¹⁵¹



Figure 3.9 - Sir Lady Java and Redd Foxx standing in front of other protestors, holding a sign which reads, "Java vs. Right to Work" in front of the Redd Foxx club "Sir Lady Java with Redd Foxx." Photograph. 1967. Digital Transgender Archive, <https://www.digitaltransgenderarchive.net/files/vm40xr83g> (accessed October 05, 2023).

¹⁵⁰ "Peeping Redd," Clipping, Digital Transgender Archive, 1958, <https://www.digitaltransgenderarchive.net/files/qf85nb48n>, accessed October 05, 2023.

¹⁵¹ The Official Website of Redd Foxx, *Redd Foxx*, N.d., Accessed Oct 5, 2023. <http://reddfoxx.com/>.

Sir Lady Java, one of the most significant characters in Drag Culture and a transgender rights advocate, started waiting tables at the Redd Fox Club and then moved onto the stage to perform there in the 1960s. During her shows in October 1967, when Rule 9 was enacted, she was attacked by the police. The Redd Foxx Club and its owner stood up for her and their rights.¹⁵²

In 1965, Bob Damron partnered with Hal Call to publish the Address Book.¹⁵³ It was a listing unique in its kind in the United States, which included bars and places where people from the LGBTQ+ community could feel safe. Damron was in the alcohol industry, and during the 1950s, he ran the Red Raven on 7013 Melrose Ave, a well-known cabaret-style nightclub that hosted Drag shows and performances. It was a popular gathering place for LGBTQ+ individuals and featured a range of entertainment, including Drag Queens and female impersonators.¹⁵⁴

¹⁵² Suyin Haynes, "How One Drag Performer's Overlooked Activism Helped Lay the Groundwork for Today's Fight for Transgender Rights." *TIME Magazine*, Jun 25, 2021, Accessed Oct 5, 2023. <https://time.com/6074496/sir-lady-java-trans-rights-history/>; Caroline Thrasher, "Sir Lady Java - History and Legacy of a Trans Rights Hero." Los Angeles County Natural History Museum Website. June 27, 2021, Accessed August 5, 2023. <https://nhm.org/stories/sir-lady-java>.

¹⁵³ Hal Call was the long-time president of the Mattachine Society.

¹⁵⁴ Bob Damron, *Bob Damron's Address Book* 1969. San Francisco, CA: Calafra Enterprises, 1969. Accessed May 10, 2023

https://search.alexanderstreet.com/view/work/bibliographic_entity%7Cbibliographic_details%7C3235514.

The Damron Address Book became a very important document to the LGBTQ+ community in the country, acting in a manner as the “Green Book” for queers, and it reached the United States, Mexico, Canada, the Caribbean, and even Europe.¹⁵⁵ There was a big focus on the city of Los Angeles; in its 1968 publication, the entry begins, “L.A. is the nation’s largest city in area.” It divided the metropolitan area into four zones: Hollywood, the Metropolitan area, the San Fernando Valley, and the West and Southwest. The listing included a clever letter coding system that allowed users to identify what the place was about; for example, BA stands for “Bare Ass,”

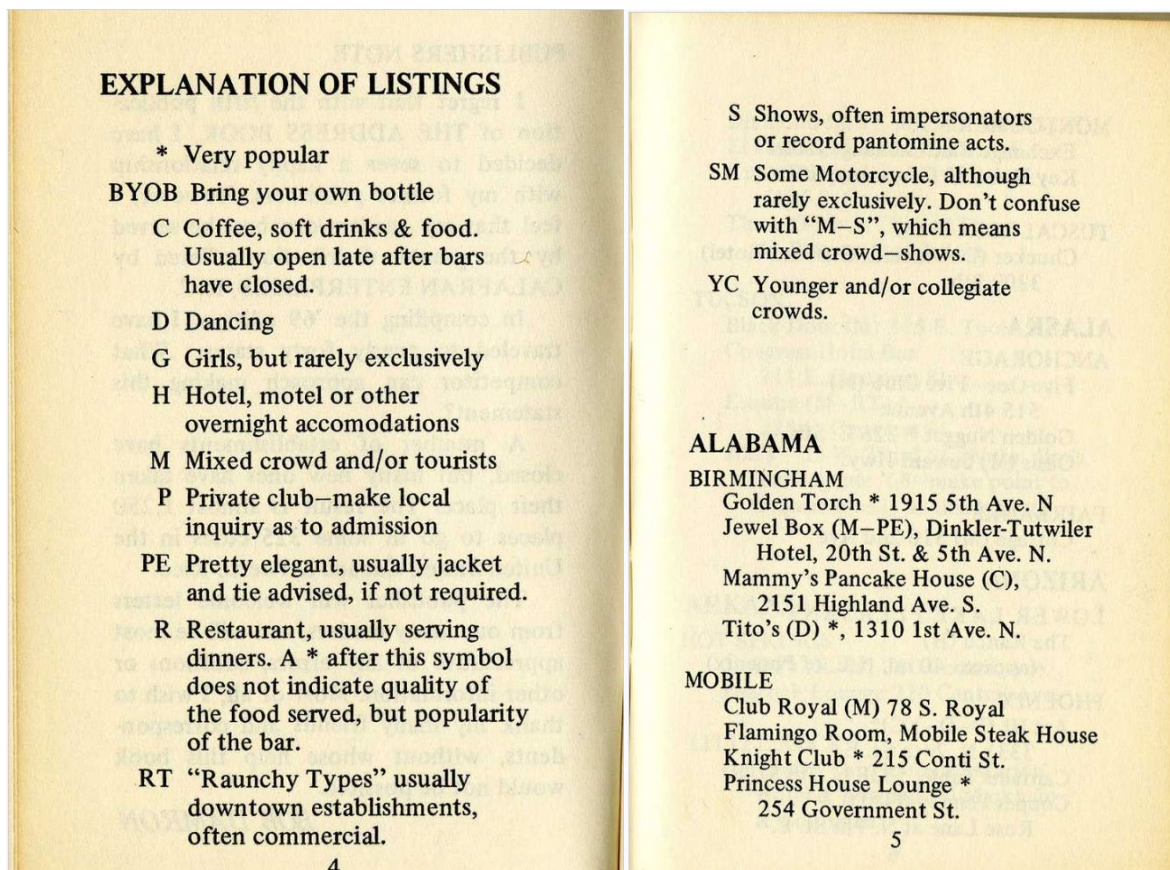


Figure 3.10 - excerpt of Damron's Address Book '69 - Bob Damron, *Bob Damron's Address Book* 1969, San Francisco, CA: Calafra Enterprises.,
https://search.alexanderstreet.com/view/work/bibliographic_entity%7Cbibliographic_details%7C3235514.

¹⁵⁵ "Damron Address Book," The Front Page 19, no. 1 (1998): 26. Archives of Sexuality and Gender accessed October 10, 2023. https://link-gale-com.libproxy1.usc.edu/apps/doc/FHOHEC029155806/AHSI?u=usocal_main&sid=bookmark-AHSI&xid=baffdb74.

which clued users about nudist beaches. The letter code for Drag performances was “S,” meaning the bar hosted shows.¹⁵⁶

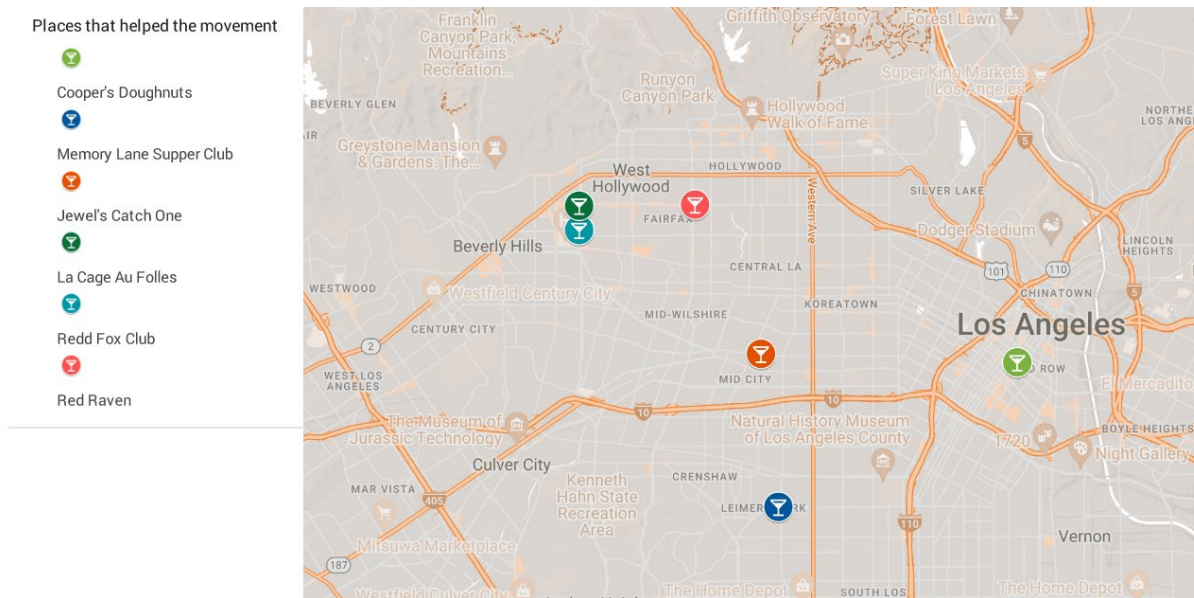


Figure 3.11- The Gay Liberation and Human Rights Movement, created by author using Google Maps.

The Rise of Studio City

During the 1960s, Studio City experienced a wave of open-mindedness and welcomed the LGBTQ+ community of the era. A couple of places opened catering for the community, and Drag performances were part of the usual repertoire.

¹⁵⁶ Myriam Gurba, *A Guide to Gay Los Angeles, 1965*. Nov 14, 2017, Accessed August 10, 2023. <https://www.pbssocal.org/shows/lost-la/a-guide-to-gay-los-angeles-1965>.

Owned by the then-famous within the lesbian community, Drag King Beverly Shaw, Club Laurel at 12319 Ventura Blvd was an upscale lesbian venue that catered to the film community. At its opening in 1957, it was one of the earliest lesbian nightclubs in the San Fernando Valley. Shaw used to perform wearing a suit with a bow tie while sitting on top of the piano, looking into the audience. Club Laurel became one of the most popular nightspots in the city. The place featured a photograph of the owner in the front window captioned "Miss Beverly Shaw, Sir!." Club Laurel closed in 1971.¹⁵⁷

The C'est La Vie Club on 11920 Ventura Blvd hosted Drag shows and queer performances on a regular basis. It was listed under Damron's Address Book '71 guide and closed its doors in 1981. Drag Performers like Rikki Summers and stars like Hadda Brooks took the stage here.¹⁵⁸

The Queen Mary, also known as King's Alley, King's Den, and King's Lounge, was a show bar featuring Drag performers at 12449 Ventura Blvd in Studio City. Drag Queens performed in feather boas and flamboyant gowns while lip-syncing era hits. Liza Minelli, Mae West, and Diana Ross were among the most recurring personalities recreated by the Queens. There was an adjacent entrance with a sign that read King's Lounge for those who did not feel comfortable using the Queen Mary entrance.¹⁵⁹ The Queen Mary hosted a four and a half hour show of Drag and male strippers and, by 1997, was one of the city's most reputable and well-established Drag

¹⁵⁷ Phillip Zonkel, "San Fernando Valley has a secret history of gay bars." *Q Voice News*, Aug 26, 2021, Accessed Oct 13, 2023. <https://qvoicenews.com/2021/08/26/san-fernando-valley-has-a-secret-history-of-gay-bars/>.

¹⁵⁸ USC Digital Libraries. C'est La Vie advertisement, n.d., Accessed Oct 10, 2023. <https://doi.org/10.25549/one-oUC12262011>.

¹⁵⁹ Phillip Zonkel, "San Fernando Valley has a secret history of gay bars." *Q Voice News*, Aug 26, 2021, Accessed Oct 13, 2023. <https://qvoicenews.com/2021/08/26/san-fernando-valley-has-a-secret-history-of-gay-bars/>.

Clubs for over thirty years. Opened and run in 1964 by actress Mickie Lee and her son after meeting the Drag trio “The Cashews,” it became a safe spot in the city for LGBTQ+ individuals. The place was accepted and embraced by the Studio City leadership. The venue's walls were adorned with paintings of Drag Queens by performer Bobby Carol. During the 1980s, the backdoor developed a bad reputation, and over seventy arrests were made under prostitution charges. The Queen Mary closed without reason in 2003 after 40 years of successful Drag shows. The Queen Mary became an enclave and one of the most significant places in Los Angeles for the Transgender community.¹⁶⁰

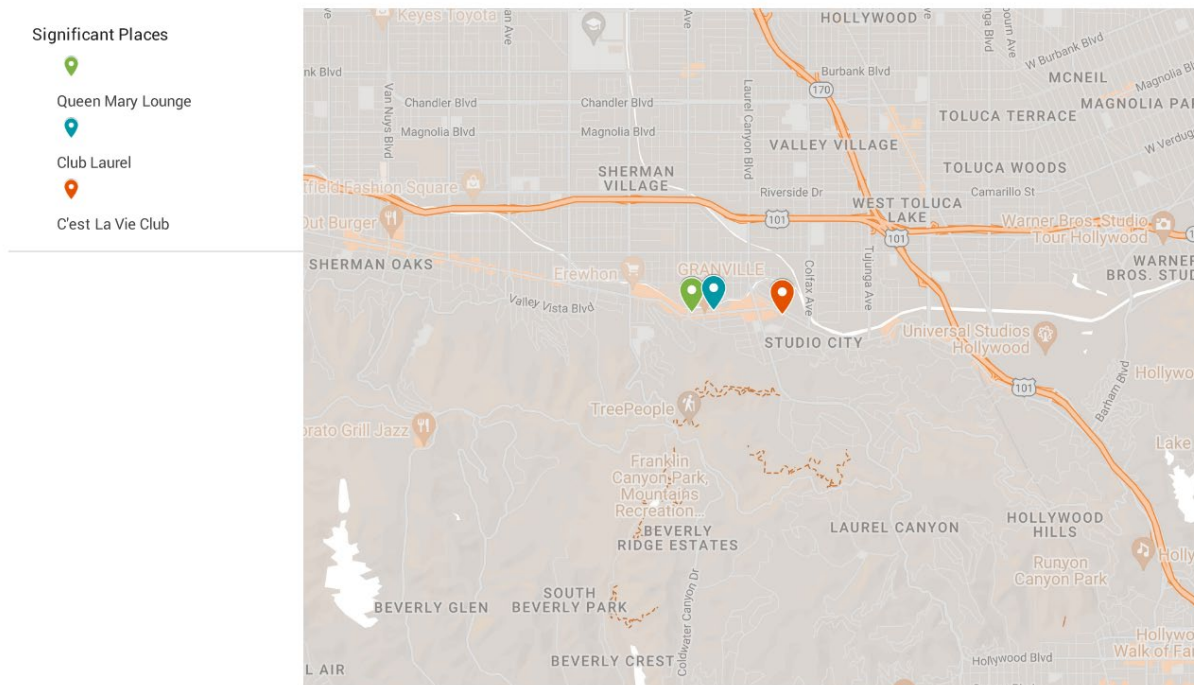


Figure 3.12 - The Rise of Studio City, created by author using Google Maps.

¹⁶⁰ Hadley Meares, "L.A.'S DRAG SCENE WAS BORN IN A NONDESCRIPT BAR IN STUDIO CITY." *LA Weekly*, May 22, 2017, Accessed Oct 16, 2023. <https://www.laweekly.com/l-a-s-drag-scene-was-born-in-a-nondescript-bar-in-studio-city/>.

The Pre-Mainstream Era

Before *RuPaul's Drag Race* phenomenon hit the country in the 1990s, Los Angeles had become a safe place for the Drag community. Drag Queens and Kings of all races and backgrounds arrived in the city looking to grow their careers and have freedom of self-expression in a welcoming environment. Many different Drag styles flourished in the city during this period, from the so-called “Monster” performances such as Dragula to the Chicano and Latinx-inspired Drag, which is very common in today’s performances.

Studio One, located at 652 LaPeer Drive in West Hollywood, was a popular gay nightclub during the 1960s and 1970s located in today’s historic building known as “The Factory.” In 2015, the building was slated for demolition but was saved through grassroots preservation advocacy efforts when it was placed on the National Trust’s 10 America’s 11 Most Endangered Historic Places List. The building is found significant for its association with different historic themes throughout history. However, its cultural significance to the LGBTQ+ community is one of the most essential reasons for its significance and listing in the National Register under Criterion A (association with significant patterns of events). The building was documented in its entirety, disassembled, and stored, and today, it awaits to be reconstructed in a different location.¹⁶¹ Originally a motion picture camera factory, it then became a popular nightclub widely known around the whole country. It was founded in the 1970s by Scott Forbes, known as the "Disco King." Studio One featured Drag shows and performances that attracted the LGBTQ+ crowd and

¹⁶¹ Ty Ginter, “One Building, Three Lives: Saving the LGBTQ Heritage of the Factory” Feb 5, 2021, Accessed Oct 16, 2023. <https://savingplaces.org/stories/one-building-three-lives-saving-the-lgbtq-heritage-of-the-factory>.

provided a space for Drag performers to showcase their talent and creativity.¹⁶² The Club is certainly associated with the Gay Liberation Movement; however, for most LGBTQ+ people living outside of West Hollywood in those years, it also represents racism and discrimination as their exclusivity policies usually favored cisgender White gay individuals. Black, Chicano and female patrons were kept at the door entrance with slight chances to go inside because of these policies and classist dress codes (for instance, bouncers were known to have asked for two forms of ID from Black attendees, and enforced a “no open-toed shoes” that would restrict many women from entrance). In 1975, the Gay Community Mobilization Committee fought against these policies by sending letters and organizing boycotts without much success.¹⁶³

Casita del Campo is a Mexican restaurant at 1920 Hyperion Ave in Silverlake. Inside the venue, there is the Cavern Club Theater, an alternative performance space that hosts Drag shows regularly. It was founded in 1962 by former Broadway dancer Rudy del Campo.¹⁶⁴ The Cavern Theater has been, for over twenty-five years, a welcoming venue to the Drag community. Run by Drag performer Mr. Dan, it provides a space for self-expression to upcoming Drag performers.¹⁶⁵ Love Connie, a well-established Drag Queen in Los Angeles, remembers the cavern as one of the first places she was able to perform after arriving from New York. The welcoming place and crowd helped her find a House in Los Angeles where she could develop her Drag persona.¹⁶⁶

¹⁶² ONE Archives at USC Libraries. n.d. Bette Midler with drag queens at Studio One. doi:<https://doi.org/10.25549/one-c4-5280>.

¹⁶³ ONE Archives at USC Libraries. n.d. Studio One. Accessed Oct 16, 2023. <https://one.usc.edu/archive-location/studio-one-1>.

¹⁶⁴ Casita del Campo. Our history. Accessed Oct 16, 2023 www.casitadelcampo.net.

¹⁶⁵ Frank DeCaro, "Long Before ‘Drag Race,’ There Was Mr. Dan." *The New York Times*, Jun 14, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/06/14/style/mr-dan-drag-los-angeles.html>.

¹⁶⁶ Love Connie Interview with Jesus Barba, Aug 2, 2023.

Jewel's Catch One, also known as "Catch One" or "the Catch," was a historic nightclub located in the West Adams neighborhood. It opened its doors in 1973 on 4067 West Pico Blvd., and it was one of the longest-running Black-owned LGBTQ+ clubs in the United States. Catch One provided a safe space for the LGBTQ+ community and hosted Drag shows, attracting a diverse crowd. Catch One closed in 2015.¹⁶⁷ Owned by Jewel Thais-Williams, an African-American lesbian who opened the club after facing discrimination at bars in West Hollywood for being a woman, it became one of the most important LGBTQ+ hubs in Los Angeles in the 1970s.¹⁶⁸

Circus Disco was a club located at 6655 Santa Monica Blvd. It played a crucial role in the Latinx LGBTQ community, being the oldest and longest-running LGBTQ Latinx nightclub in Hollywood and Los Angeles. It was opened in 1974 by Gene La Pietra and Ermilio "Ed" Lemos, catering mainly to the Latinx gay community of Los Angeles. In contrast to the other LGBTQ+ nightclubs of the era, Circus Disco did not have any classist or exclusionary policies, and people of all gender identities, races, and social classes were welcomed through the giant clown mouth at the main entrance. Circus Disco was an LGBTQ+ Latinx-committed establishment and was often involved in political and civil rights movements of the era. In 1983, civil rights and labor leader César Chávez took the stage at Circus to address a gay and lesbian coalition called Project Just Business, offering guidance about civil rights, protesting, and fundraising.¹⁶⁹ Fundraising nights, benefits, and galas were organized and common, raising money for organizations like the

¹⁶⁷ Moon-Ho Jung, ed. "The Rising Tide of Color : Race, State Violence, and Radical Movements Across the Pacific," Seattle, Washington :: The University of Washington Press, 2014.

¹⁶⁸ Karen Ocamb, "Pioneer: Jewel Thais-Williams." *The Pride*, Jun 9, 2016, Accessed Oct 10, 2023. <https://thepridelatino.com/2016/06/pioneer-jewel-thais-williams/>.

¹⁶⁹ Luis D. León. "Cesar Chavez in American Religious Politics: Mapping the New Global Spiritual Line." *American Quarterly* 59, no. 3 (2007): 857–81. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40068453>.

American Civil Liberties Union Foundation Gay Rights Chapter and the Norton Sound 8, and they also created a scholarship fund to benefit young gay men and women.¹⁷⁰

By 1977, Circus Disco was already organizing contests and talent shows that welcomed the gay community; this could be compared to the New York Ball scene of the time and as a direct predecessor of *RuPaul's Drag Race*. People used the Circus Disco stage to perform and showcase their dancing and singing talents for a prize.¹⁷¹

Circus Disco closed in 2016 after the owner sold the property, and new development apartments were planned to be built in its place after demolition. Conservation activists and Hollywood Heritage conducted protests to save the place after the LA Conservancy called for action, but the only outcome reached was a promise from the new owner to keep and preserve the clown entrance and place a disco ball at the new lobby when they turned the site into a 786-unit AVA housing complex in exchange for Hollywood Heritage to pull back from preservation efforts trying to save the place.¹⁷² The complex is open today, and no sign of the clown entrance or disco ball can be seen.

Circus Disco, along with the Black gay club Jewel's Catch One, became pioneer places in anti-discrimination, providing a community space for both Black and Latinx communities, going further than just crossing racial divides and also accepting sexual and gender expression barriers.

¹⁷⁰ Hollywood Heritage, "Recommendation Report." RECOMMENDATION REPORT, Los Angeles, 2015, Accessed Oct 18, 2023. https://planning.lacity.org/StaffRpt/CHC/12-3-15/10.Circus%20Disco_UC.pdf.

¹⁷¹ Pat Rocco, "Circus has 'Party of the Year,'" N.d., Accessed Oct 16, 2023, https://search.alexanderstreet.com/view/work/bibliographic_entity%7Cbibliographic_details%7C2776675.

¹⁷² Carman Tse, "Kooky Clown-Mouth Entrance Of Historic Gay Disco Saved From Demolition." *LAist*, Jan 22, 2016, <https://laist.com/news/entertainment/kooky-clown-mouth-entrance-of-historic-gay-disco-saved-from-demolition>.

Transgender pioneers, leather men, and Drag Queens paraded these places with confidence and directly shaped today's Los Angeles LGBTQ+ community.¹⁷³

The Anti-Club, at 5124 Melrose Ave, in Hollywood, was an underground music and performance venue that embraced alternative Drag shows during the 1980s. Perhaps one of the most active and diverse venues from 1979 through the mid-'80s, the Anti-Club was a collaborative venture, initially hosted at Helen's Place, allegedly and formerly the Windup, an established gay bar that prompted a gay-friendly climate for Drag performances and punk shows after the owner Helen passed on the business.¹⁷⁴

At the end of the 1980s, the nightclub Largo became a symbol of "cool culture" on Fairfax Avenue. When it opened in 1989, "Cafe Largo" (as it was originally known) received great positive publicity for its poetry readings, its cabaret shows, and its late-night dining. This is the place where Jackie Beat debuted her Drag persona. In 2008, the venue on 432 Fairfax Avenue closed, and Largo relocated to a larger space at 366 N La Cienega Boulevard.¹⁷⁵

By the 1990s, the Drag scene of Los Angeles had morphed into a characteristic form of the city, taking life on its own. The underground scene became a platform for alternative Drag in clubs such as Cherry and Makeup, and punk-rock legends in the making took over the stages, adding to the Drag entertainment plethora. Circus Disco established itself as a safe haven for the Latinx Drag community in the country, and Dragstrip 66 in Silverlake started to create a whole different

¹⁷³ Mark S King, "Feeling the Love for L.A.'s Dearly Departed Circus Disco." *The Advocate*, Feb 4, 2016, <https://www.advocate.com/commentary/2016/2/04/feeling-love-las-dearly-departed-circus-disco>.

¹⁷⁴ The Anti Club Los Angeles, n.d., Facebook. Accessed Aug 17, 2023.; ONE Archives at USC Libraries, *The Windup Bar*, N.d., Accessed Oct 17, 2023. <https://one.usc.edu/archive-location/windup-bar>.

¹⁷⁵ Max Baumgarten, In Search of Fairfax. Jan 17, 2018, Accessed Oct 4, 2023. <https://scalar.usc.edu/hc/fairmax-project/index>.

community based on the Drag culture of Los Angeles through pop-up parties. Los Angeles Drag culture then stood out in the world as a grungy scene.¹⁷⁶

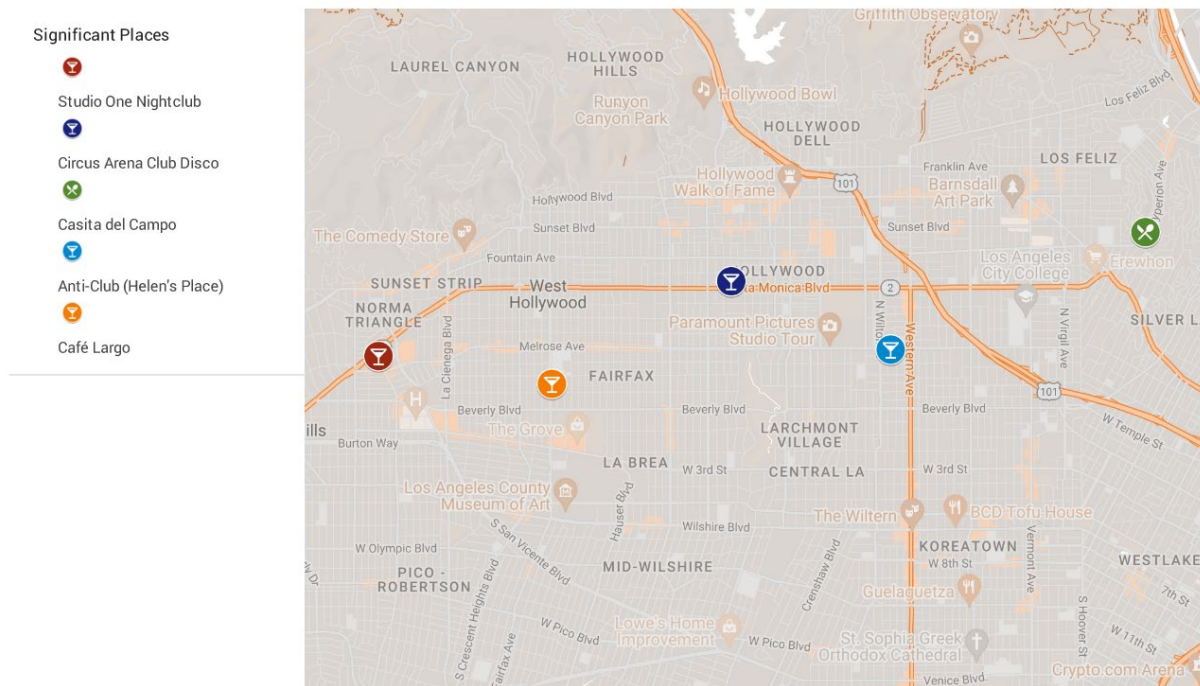


Figure 3.13 - The Pre-Mainstream Era, created by author using Google Maps.

¹⁷⁶ Sasha Urban, "L.A.'s drag scene is bigger than ever. But it'll take a 'rebellion' to keep it safe." *Los Angeles Times*, Jun 6, 2023, <https://www.latimes.com/lifestyle/story/2023-06-06/la-drag-scene-is-bigger-than-ever-but-it-will-take-rebellion-to-keep-it-safe>.

Conclusion

Drag as an LGBTQ+ Subculture

Drag Culture is an integral part of LGBTQ+ heritage. Its path of development runs in parallel to it, crossing LGBTQ+ history at specific turning points. Drag as a subculture developed parallel with LGBTQ+ culture, intermingling with the arts, cinema, theater, and fashion cultures, among others. It is all part of the same story.

Drag culture has faced over the years a great deal of discrimination, even within the LGBTQ+ realm, as it served as a protective wing for transgender and gender non-conforming individuals within the community, who were often marginalized and outcasted by the cisgender side of the community. Drag culture provided many early transgender individuals with a safe haven in which they could express their gender under the guise of artistic expression. Drag, and the places that allowed Drag performances throughout history, created the perfect environment to empower transgender people to fight for their rights as human beings; significant human rights advancements we see today are in great part because of the space created around Drag communities. It also served as a catapulting medium for many artists over the years, independently from their gender and sexuality. Many heterosexual performers gained fame by using Drag as their signature and continue to do so today.

Although Drag Kings remained the most obscure sector, the social advancements made by these performers have had a notable impact on the development of LGBTQ+ communities, and today, they are widely accepted, at least within the community.

Therefore, Drag has become part of the intangible heritage of many other cultures, including Vaudeville circuits, theater, cinema, and performance arts, not only the LGBTQ+, and it is

essential to recognize its significance and the many contributions of the performers, activists, and places to our society as a whole.

Endangered Heritage and Mainstream Culture

With today's rapidly growing number of homophobic legislations across the country, Drag performances must be recognized as an intangible heritage in our societies. At the time of this writing, anti-LGBTQ+ bills are appearing across the country: Tennessee has made it illegal to perform Drag in any public spaces, and Arkansas lawmakers are pushing for legislation that makes it unlawful for a trans person to use a public restroom at the same time as a minor.¹⁷⁷

Florida's discriminatory policies under Governor DeSantis's administration are also targeting and impacting underrepresented communities, specifically Drag performers within the LGBTQ+ community.¹⁷⁸ These discriminatory regulations affect conservation efforts both directly and indirectly. Miami has served as a hub for Drag shows in the last few years, bringing an important influx of tourism and, consequently, money to the city and state. The current policies are scaring away important conservation organizations from having events in the town; Latinos for Heritage Conservation recently moved their biennial conference from Miami to San Diego in response to the anti-immigration policies in the state. Docomomo US also issued a statement defending their decision to hold the National Symposium in Miami in 2024, addressing conservationists' and enthusiasts' reluctance to participate in a symposium in a state known to discriminate against the LGBTQ+ community. We also need to remember that the set of unraveling policies targets not

¹⁷⁷ *THEM Magazine* Instagram Account, www.them.us, Instagram @them March, 3, 2023.

¹⁷⁸ "Florida agency appeals ruling blocking anti-drag show law," *AP News*, Jun 29, 2023.

only underrepresented communities but also preservation efforts. A recently passed bill eases the demolition of miles of historic fabric along the coast.¹⁷⁹ DeSantis' strategy to divide and conquer can only be brought down by the affected groups and allies joining forces against it. Political environments directly affect the historic fabric when conservationists would rather stay out of the picture because of discriminatory policies.

It is essential to protect places that are significant for their association with Drag culture. One way of doing this is through historic designation, either under federal, state, and/or local programs. Most places where Drag performances happened could be assessed for eligibility under National Register Criterion A, which recognizes places important for their association with events that have significantly contributed to the broad patterns of our history. All these places provided the space for cultural development and, at different levels, are significant to milestones in the historic timeline. Studio One is an example of a building listed in the National Register under Criterion A for its significant association with LGBTQ+ heritage, and the Black Cat in Silverlake is an example of such a place that is designated under a local program (City of Los Angeles Historic-Cultural Monument).

One of the most well-documented places associated with Drag Culture is Julian Eltinge's residence. Although the place is directly connected to one of the most successful Drag performers in United States history, its significance is stated because of the contributions Eltinge made to the entertainment industry and its relevance to LGBTQ+ history. However, the

¹⁷⁹ Jesse Scheckner, "Bill easing replacement of coastal buildings in flood zones advances to Senate floor." *Florida Politics*, Apr 19, 2023, <https://floridapolitics.com/archives/604947-bill-easing-replacement-of-coastal-buildings-in-flood-zones-advances-to-senate-floor/>.

designated building is his residence, not where he advanced Drag culture directly through his performances. Drag performances happen primarily at bars and other types of public establishments. Eltinge claimed not to be gay and that his stage persona was only for business throughout his career. His former residence is one of the very few designated places that provides association with Drag culture as a reason for its significance (Studio One is another example of this), which is a terrific first step in cultural heritage and conservation efforts. Still, there is the need to understand that the cultural significance of Drag resides in the public realm, which is the focus of this thesis, rather than in private spaces.

Designated public spaces do not associate their significance with Drag heritage; little is mentioned even during tours. During my research, I came across a handful of places likely linked to Drag heritage; however, most traces are blurred and difficult to trace. I even found places where the traces disappeared at owners' statements denying the site's links to the LGBTQ+ history. This exposes that the huge systemic problem that prevents documentation and research of underrepresented communities is still alive today. It is our society's fault that stories are erased, and there is an urge for conservation professionals to start documenting the intangible to bring all stories to light and save important places for those who never had a voice.

Although Drag has become more accepted worldwide, Drag performers still face discrimination, even within the LGBTQ+ community. Transphobia is still very present, even among Drag performers. Many Drag entertainers still struggle to stay afloat and to make Drag their way of living and facing discrimination. The industry has become more competitive with the upcoming mainstreaming of the culture highly on account of *RuPaul's Drag Race*. Many BIPOC Drag performers still experience difficulties without the help of shows like *RuPaul's*.

During research, I realized that there are very few experts in Drag culture. Performers understand Drag within the individual self-expression and artistic forms, but not as heritage. Drag has become part of pop culture, and most performers do not know its history. The systemic discrimination and the temporal nature of the places significant to the culture have contributed to the reinvention of a longstanding culture where the collective history gets lost in the individual memory.

The Ephemerality of Place

Theaters and impromptu establishments contributed culturally to developing LGBTQ+ heritage and Drag entertainment to the same extent. On the one hand, theaters are preserved mostly because of architectural features and design, but this is rarely the case with underground venues, small shops, restaurants, and bars. In a formal assessment for the National Register of Historic Places, both theaters and vernacular sites could meet Criterion A of the National Register for their association with significant patterns of development, even if they are architecturally modest. The main problem is the lack of research and information available about LGBTQ+ history, a systemic issue that applies to all underrepresented communities in the United States.

If these places are significant, and given the proper research and evaluation, the possibility for designation poses a new challenge. Bars, restaurants, and small performance venues have a completely different lifespan compared to other monumental or public buildings and spaces. These are intrinsically bonded to their owner's and patrons' lives and fortune, making them frequently ephemeral.

This ephemerality is an essential characteristic of this type of venue, which may pop up out of nowhere after someone's great idea to make some extra cash; it can start as a "hole in the wall" place that caters to the local neighborhood until members of the community take over transforming it as a safe haven for a brief period, to then decay and disappear as new generations take the streets. This is a very unique lifecycle that applies specifically to this place typology and, arguably, one of its most important characteristics. The ephemerality of the place is a characteristic that should be acknowledged in traditional preservation mechanisms for designation.

Very few places have been able to transcend and outlive their owners and patrons, becoming legacy businesses, - a preservation form that presents a lot of nuances itself. But what happens to those who couldn't make the cut is most important in my thesis. In a Ruskinian philosophy, a place should be able to die naturally, but remnants should become part of the collective social history. Historically, there is one thing that society has failed to do to allow the nurturing of its cultural heritage: documentation.

The lack of documentation allows society to forget the stories of people, systemically erasing histories and promoting discrimination against underrecognized communities. The stories of people are important, and research and documentation, especially about underrecognized communities, are crucial to cultural heritage conservation. Therefore, the importance of the ephemeral place does not rely upon the actual site but on the social imaginary.

Places are important because they have meaning to people; people find meaning in their culture, so ephemeral places need better means for conservation that recognize their significance and contributions to today's society. The first step to acknowledge these places comes with visibility.

A significant portion of these buildings belong to our recent history; although it exists, the information is mainly in the form of oral histories or hidden sources. As historians, we are responsible for researching these histories and providing better base documentation that allows for their protection under federal, state, or local designation. These measurements, along with support of grassroots preservation movements, can help protect important places that hopefully won't suffer the same fate as Circus Disco.

Drag Culture as Intangible Heritage

Drag culture is perceived today as a social trend; however, it is deeply rooted in history. Drag performers have been present throughout history. The incredible art it is today results from these processes of de-demonizing human nature and the improvised claiming of spaces.

Some places described in this document, most of them theaters in the early twentieth-century Vaudeville circuit, are already part of the historic stock of Los Angeles; those that are already designated do not include any significance in relation to LGBTQ+ history or culture other than its architectural characteristics. It is essential to acknowledge that the places are significant because they are part of our society's development history, not only because of their aesthetics. In this case, these nominations should be amended to include Drag stories as part of their significance.

The Los Angeles Citywide Survey's LGBT Historic Context Statement and SurveyLA LGBT Historic Context Statement list only five bars and venues as designated places: B.B.B.'s Cellar, Café Montmartre, Club New Yorker, Merced Theater, and The Black Cat. Out of these five, only

The Black Cat has been designated for its association with LGBTQ+ community events; the rest are designated for other reasons or as contributors to Historic Districts. In these cases, amending the historic designation forms to include its association with LGBTQ+ history will provide visibility and reconciliation opportunities to their stories. The rest of the list are places known for their contributions to LGBTQ+ history, but these are not designated in part because the places do not exist anymore. Catch One, Cooper Do-nuts, Jimmy's Backyard, and Club Laurel are among the places listed as known extant resources whose eligibility can be associated with Drag Culture.¹⁸⁰ For those places where the historic designation is not an option due to demolition or change of use, other conservation practices can be taken, such as StoryMaps or other internet-based documentation tools, like the one Queermaps.org has been building. City guides can include self-guided tours of these places, including QR codes that tell the stories of these places.

Drag Culture is part of the LGBTQ+ heritage; however, it is largely intangible. The aim is not to try to preserve all the significant places for these histories but to acknowledge that they are part of our society's collective history and heritage. It is a matter of visibility, and its importance lies in the need for documentation and recognition of people in the LGBTQ+ community as contributors to our history. Community outreach and engagement should be part of the conservation efforts, helping a community unaware of its past rediscover its roots; sharing knowledge and education is crucial to protect these places and their cultural value as more

¹⁸⁰ GPA Consulting, Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender (LGBT) Context Statement, "LOS ANGELES CITYWIDE HISTORIC CONTEXT STATEMENT," Los Angeles: Office of Historic Resources - City of Los Angeles Department of City Planning, 56-66, 2014; Los Angeles City Planning. 2016. Los Angeles Historic Resource Survey (SurveyLA). Historic Districts, Planning Districts and Multi-Property Resources Survey, Los Angeles: Los Angeles City Planning, 16-18. https://planning.lacity.org/odocument/1844ca88-46f5-41fa-b658-71547672f2f2/CentralCity_HistoricDistricts.pdf.

people become aware of their importance and existence, they will be more likely to participate in grassroots preservation efforts.

We tend to forget that buildings are human-made and a place would not exist without people.

Sites are only meaningful if they are emotionally linked to people. Drag is a phenomenon that happens in particular places, often temporary, that should be recognized as part of our heritage.

Drag Culture is not just about show business and entertainment but about empowerment, visibility, and inclusivity.

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