



## Gay and Lesbian Bars

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For more than three hundred years, public places where people could gather and socialize over drink have been central features of urban community life. For gay men and lesbians, the centrality of bars to community life has probably been truer than it has for any other group.

In addition to providing opportunities for glbtq people to socialize and to meet potential partners, gay and lesbian bars have offered members of a stigmatized social minority, often isolated from one another, an opportunity to inhabit space with like-minded folk. Until recently, they were often the only venues in which glbtq people could feel free to be openly gay.

Moreover, gay and lesbian bars occupy a significant place in gay literature and film. Many of the classic gay and lesbian novels--such as Radclyffe Hall's *The Well of Loneliness* (1928), Gore Vidal's *The City and the Pillar* (1948), James Baldwin's *Giovanni's Room* (1956), Ann Bannon's *I Am a Woman* (1959), and Rita Mae Brown's *Rubyfruit Jungle* (1973)--feature scenes set in gay bars. In literary works, especially those before the 1980s, the gay bar is often depicted as decidedly unappetizing, sometimes frightening--even demonic--and nearly always depressing. Such depictions may reflect a certain reality, but in real life these bars also often provided much needed shelter to people who faced ostracism in the larger community.

Historically, gay and lesbian bars have served as sites for the development of gay culture and for political foment. Though their centrality has been reduced in recent years, they continue to fulfill important functions; and, in many areas, they remain the most visible manifestation of glbtq presence.

### **Beginnings: Where Men Met**

Social networks of men who sought out male sexual contacts have been documented for Italian cities (notably Florence) as early as the fifteenth century. Such networks appeared later in northern Europe, developing over the course of the seventeenth century and achieving a level of public recognition in Britain and the Netherlands at the outset of the eighteenth century.

The growth of such networks in urban centers, especially in Britain, is generally attributed to sea-changes in agriculture and industry. The aggregation of smaller land parcels into larger, more efficient farms displaced many rural laborers. They in turn came to work in the mercantile economies of major cities, which burgeoned as a result of advances in technology and the growth of overseas empires.

As cities grew, new institutions evolved to support an urban culture that revolved around expanded industry and trade. In Britain, public houses came into use as meeting places and places of resort for working people. Coffee houses, which became increasingly popular as a result of overseas trade, filled a similar role for middle-class men. As such, these institutions displaced the church, the marketplace, and the street as the locus of erotic contacts between men.

Economic change was probably not the only force that drove men from public spaces into quasi-private,

consumer ones. Often frequented by single, itinerant male laborers, some saloons became places where prostitution (male and female) could be plied in relative security.

The public's increasing recognition of brothels and same-sex sexual networks (by the 1720s, the names and locations of such "bawdy houses" were being listed in London newspapers) prompted a spike in the number of sodomy prosecutions across northern Europe in the first quarter of the eighteenth century. While bars and coffeehouses did not remain unscathed by the inquiries of police and moral reformers, they provided a degree of shelter from scrutiny and intervention that more public spaces could not.

In Britain, particularly, this shelter afforded an opportunity for the elaboration of a particular subculture. "Mollies," as they were popularly known, were men who adopted effeminate mannerisms, modes of speech, and even dress, mimicking the female prostitutes who were a part of their social world. "Molly houses" were saloons in which these men congregated; they were often equipped with upstairs bedrooms, so that men could have sex on the premises in relative security.

While not all of London's men-loving men were mollies, this subculture came to epitomize men who had sex with men in the popular mind, and drew down upon it the greatest indignation of the moral reformers of the day.

### **The Emergence of Gay and Lesbian Bars**

The further development of such establishments from the mid-eighteenth to the mid-nineteenth century is little documented. It is clear, however, that a new efflorescence of gay and lesbian meeting places in European and North American urban centers began around 1880. This may in part be due to the intensification of industrial commerce during this period; it may also be due to a growing consciousness around homosexuality as a shared social identity. By 1900, London, Paris, Berlin, and New York could each count literally dozens of locales, many of them bars, where gay men and lesbians could meet.

The social composition of "gay and lesbian" bars of this period varied widely. Some catered exclusively to either lesbians or gay men; these were often styled along the lines of a private club, to which membership could be purchased. Some, more open bars were frequented by both men and women.

Many other bars were not exclusively gay but rather "straight" locales with a gay following. Among these were hotel bars, as well as establishments in which a bartender, manager, or owner known to be gay offered gay patrons a tacit welcome.

In mixed settings, the disposition of the patrons would be signaled by either formal or informal seating arrangements. Sometimes, gay men and lesbians would be served only at the bar; other times they were served only at tables, often in an adjoining back room.

Other allegedly "gay" bars, notably clubs with drag shows, catered to a principally heterosexual clientele, even if gay men and lesbians provided the entertainment. These bars were trumpeted to the middle-class public in special guidebooks to these cities' working-class and sexual underworlds; "slumming" in the bars that lined the Bowery or the Friedrichstrasse became a fashionable pastime.

Such prurient attentions inevitably also drew the attention of police. The decades before World War I saw the unfolding of high-profile homosexual scandals on both sides of the Atlantic. Many of these centered on bars, hotels, parks, or other meeting places where officials and public figures solicited companionship and sexual contacts with working-class men, or with one another. Bars were frequently closed by order of the police, only to reopen weeks or months later at a different address under a different name.

Even in the face of the most aggressive forms of state repression, gay male bars were particularly resilient. While most of Berlin's estimated 100 gay and lesbian establishments were closed by executive fiat and

street thuggery within weeks of the Nazis' coming to power in 1933, a few locales--perennially raided and forced to move-- nonetheless doggedly remained open through the end of World War II. At the same time as tens of thousands of men and women were being imprisoned and worked to death in Nazi concentration camps for being queer, a public queer culture still existed, if only barely, on the streets of Hitler's capital.

### **Prohibition and the Transformation of Bars in the United States**

A very different kind of state intervention transformed the culture of public drinking as well as gay and lesbian life in the United States between the world wars. Prohibition, in effect from 1918 to 1933, dismantled the homosocial domain of the saloon, which offered male laborers a free lunch with their beer in a space where, whether by custom or regulation, women were frequently not permitted. As social drinking was relegated to the private sphere of house parties or the quasi-public sphere of speakeasies, opportunities expanded for men and women to gather together exclusively around alcohol.

As the new social spaces that Prohibition created altered the conventions of heterosexual interaction, they similarly offered gay men and lesbians additional, more secluded places to meet. Since no speakeasy could be regarded as a respectable enterprise in the eyes of the law, many proprietors had no interest in barring queer customers from the premises. In neighborhoods like New York's Harlem and Greenwich Village, gay speakeasies flourished. In regional urban centers around the country, speakeasies became the primary sites for interactions among gay men and lesbians.

The institution of the speakeasy had an important legacy for gay and lesbian bars in the decades following the repeal of Prohibition in 1933. As states tightened their grip on the regulation of taverns, they passed injunctions against persons gathering in bars for "immoral purposes" in an effort to eradicate both prostitution and homosexuality. (In some areas of the United States, laws prohibiting the sale of alcohol to homosexuals were on the books as late as the 1970s.) As a result, bars that catered to gay and lesbian customers continued to operate under many of the same strictures that Prohibition had enforced on speakeasies.

Some post-Prohibition gay and lesbian bars were even housed in the same physical spaces that had housed speakeasies. These were often difficult for newcomers or strangers to the community to locate and access without the assistance of a sympathetic local in the know. Bar owners, meanwhile, were enjoined to pay protection money to the police or, in cities like New York, organized crime syndicates, in order to avoid all but the occasional police raid. In addition to raiding the bars, undercover police often infiltrated them, ready to arrest patrons who solicited them or who engaged in same-sex dancing or other "inappropriate" behavior, including dressing in the "wrong" attire, especially women who wore pants.

During World War II, which brought increased freedom for women to defy conventions of all kinds, many lesbian bars opened, and bar hopping became a favorite weekend activity, especially for working-class lesbians.

### **Gay and Lesbian Bars at Mid-Twentieth Century**

During the McCarthy era, when homosexuals were vilified and terrorized, the threshold to enter gay and lesbian bars was high, and the situation of the patrons frequently grim. Any number of them stood to lose livelihoods and the support of family if an arrest as a result of a raid or an undercover policeman's charge landed their names in the morning newspaper. In addition, they might be blackmailed by a casual pickup or bashed by someone intent on "rolling" queers. But the bars nonetheless remained a vital social world for many; indeed, a visit to a gay or lesbian bar was a rite-of-passage in the coming out process. Inside the walls of these bars an increasingly diversified culture of gendered and sexualized self-presentation was shaped.

Some gay men adopted the trappings of the nascent motorcycle culture, while a smaller number combined

it with a passion for sadomasochistic sex. They founded their own bike clubs, which established their home turf in what became the first leather bars.

Female and male impersonators began to find gay and lesbian audiences in mid-twentieth-century bars. The circuit of gay bars that featured drag performers in the 1940s and 1950s is surprisingly far-flung, and includes venues in medium-sized towns as well as large cities. Indeed, the long list of gay clubs that sprouted up after World War II, and their impressive geographic diversity, indicates that after the war gay culture flowered not merely in such cities as New York, Chicago, Los Angeles, and San Francisco, but also in medium-sized cities throughout the United States, from Albuquerque, New Mexico to Idaho Falls, Idaho.

Lesbian bars seem to have been crucial in the development of butch-femme culture, especially among working-class lesbians. Key to butch-femme culture was a particular style and a dress code as well as a code of conduct, which included the imperative for butches to defend the femmes they consorted with and the bars they all shared.

In addition, however, a smaller and more affluent lesbian bar culture also developed in the 1940s and 1950s in which butch-femme roles were not mandatory.

Historians have suggested that the formation of in-group solidarity, centered on bar life, in the face of social hostility encouraged the formation of a political consciousness around sexual difference during the 1950s and 1960s. Some bar owners of the time, such as Dixie Fasnacht, owner of Dixie's Bar of Music in New Orleans, were known for their support of their patrons, frequently dispatching attorneys and bail money when they were harassed by police during periodic "clean up" campaigns.

It is, thus, not coincidental that one of the first stirrings of gay and lesbian political activity in San Francisco was sparked by police harassment of gay bars. In response to such harassment, the San Francisco Tavern Guild was formed in 1959. In 1961, José Sarria, a drag performer at the Black Cat Cafe in North Beach, ran, with the Guild's endorsement, for a seat on the city's Board of Supervisors, thus becoming the first openly gay political candidate.

The emerging glbtq political consciousness that was fostered by gay and lesbian bars saw its most pointed manifestation in patrons' response to the police raid on New York's Stonewall Inn on June 27, 1969. After having been herded out onto the street, customers began to hurl bricks and bottles at police officers, who barricaded themselves inside the vacant bar in order to avoid being assaulted. This riot was followed by three successive days of conflict between police and neighborhood residents. Within weeks the Gay Liberation Front (GLF) had been formed, and "Stonewall" went up as a rallying cry across the United States and around the world.

### **Gay and Lesbian Bars in the Period of Gay Liberation**

Ironically, the Stonewall rebellion and its political consequences signaled the gradual decline of bars as the central institutional prop of gay and lesbian life, even as it also provided the impetus for a large explosion of gay and lesbian visibility and a large increase in the actual number of bars.

At the time of the gay liberation movement, many bars, including the Stonewall, were straight-owned and mob-controlled. The leaders of the homophile movement of the 1950s and 1960s had often criticized gay and (especially) lesbian bar culture for creating an unwholesome image of the homosexual as bar fly or alcoholic. In the wake of Stonewall, a new generation of gay activists also urged their fellows not to patronize bars, but for different reasons.

The early gay liberation movement placed a tremendous premium on creating safer, friendlier, non-commercial spaces for queer people. In New York, GLF held dances in community-controlled space above a storefront. Efforts were made in cities across North America and Europe to create lesbian and gay

community centers, which became both inspiration and locus for a new generation of volunteer-based organizations centered on common interests. Awareness of the ravages of alcoholism within the gay and lesbian community also prompted an attempt to create alcohol-free venues in which glbtq people could socialize.

During the 1970s, the scope of institutional gay and lesbian life in urban areas diversified to a hitherto unimaginable extent. Even in the commercial sector, enterprises were no longer restricted to bars but now included restaurants, bookstores, special events, and a vastly expanded press.

These developments led to a displacement of gay and lesbian bars as the central locale of glbtq cultural life, but it did not lead to a decrease in the number of people who patronized the bars. Indeed, far more people patronized gay and lesbian bars in the 1970s than ever participated in lesbian and gay community centers, gay pride marches, and other non-commercial activities. Moreover, many gay bars themselves became politicized, or at least more sensitive to the increased political sensitivities of their patrons, participating, for example, in boycotts against Coors beer and Florida orange juice.

In the 1970s gay male bars, in particular, reached their zenith of popularity and visibility.

Large dance clubs emerged to cater to the so-called "clones," gay men who adopted masculine affectations and dress--including workboots, tight Levis, plaid shirts, short hair cuts, and moustaches--and who embraced disco as their music of choice. At this period, the stereotype of gay men as obsessed with dance and with recreational drugs appeared. On weekends, in huge clubs in the major cities of North America and Europe, gay men danced the early mornings away to music that itself seemed to be inextricably connected with the gay experience.

In the 1970s, specialized bars catering to the leather community, particular ethnic groups, and specific styles also proliferated. Some bars became known as pickup bars, while others were noted for an elegance or sophistication lacking in earlier gay and lesbian bars. In large cities, some bars gained reputations as "hustler bars," where the services of sex workers could be negotiated, while others became known for their "back rooms," where sex acts could be consummated on the premises.

Because of their increased visibility in the 1970s, gay and lesbian bars also became more mainstream. Owners and patrons of gay and lesbian bars were less content to remain in the shadows; the establishments frequently advertised themselves openly as gay bars and, after 1979, often displayed the rainbow flag to signal their commitment to gay pride. In some cities, politicians even campaigned in gay bars, thus tacitly recognizing them as community institutions and acknowledging gay men and lesbians as a voting bloc.

### **Gradual Decline**

In the 1980s and since, however, gay and lesbian bars have suffered a relative decline, in absolute numbers, as well as in their centrality to glbtq culture. Part of this decline may be due to the increased politicization of gay and lesbian life in general, and in particular to the AIDS pandemic, which not only itself politicized gay culture to an unprecedented degree but also increased the health consciousness of a whole generation of gay people. The institutional infrastructure of gay and lesbian communities was greatly expanded in response to the AIDS crisis.

In many places, bars became simply one opportunity, one location among many, to live a gay life. As early as 1978, Joseph Harry and William B. DeVall were able to assert that the presence and number of bars in a community was not a strong predictor of the institutional completeness of the community.

The number and variety of women's bars especially declined, with many large cities no longer boasting any exclusively lesbian bars. In most places, lesbians now socialize mostly in mixed lesbian, gay male, and heterosexual bars or participate in "Women's nights" at bars that are ordinarily mixed or primarily gay male.

The reasons for the decline in the number of exclusively lesbian bars are not entirely clear. It may be that women have been more successful than men in recent decades in creating queer community in alternative spaces. Some bars that excluded men have been charged with sex discrimination and lost their licenses as a result.

Perhaps most important, economic factors, including the effects of gentrification on urban space, have also affected both gay and lesbian bars in recent years. Soaring rents and stiff competition have exacted a heavy toll on gay and lesbian bars even in neighborhoods with a high density of gay and lesbian inhabitants such as San Francisco's Castro district and New York's Greenwich Village.

In addition, competition from other recreational opportunities, such as circuit parties and gay and lesbian cruises, may also have contributed to this decline. The burgeoning of Internet communities and chat rooms, which serve some of the same functions that bars have traditionally served, including connecting people of shared interests and desires, may also have had an impact on gay and lesbian bars.

### **Continuing Vitality**

Although it is disturbing that women are increasingly excluded from participation in an important if diminished dimension of gay commercial and social life, women's bars have by no means disappeared from urban queer life. The institution of the lesbian bar is far from obsolete. Indeed, gay and lesbian bars continue to display an impressive vitality.

Since the 1980s, bars have continued to undergo a process of specialization, with different establishments catering to different ethnic subpopulations and communities of interest, such as leathermen or Bears or country music aficionados or transgendered individuals. Some bars especially cater to a younger crowd, while others cater to a predominantly older group; some attract a mixed clientele of men and women, while others cater to a single sex.

While nearly all the "back room bars" have been closed, bars that feature dancers or strippers abound, especially in resort areas, and many other bars are oriented around cruising and the pursuit of sex. Other bars, however, are neighborhood institutions that serve a core clientele who come principally to socialize with friends. Many bars perform more than one of these functions simultaneously or alternately.

Despite the decline in the centrality of bars to gay culture, in many places across the country, gay and lesbian bars remain the most (and sometimes only) visible manifestation of glbtq life. In such circumstances, the role bars continue to play in building community should not be underestimated.

Bars of all varieties fill an important role in glbtq communities by providing sponsorship and hosting space for dozens of community organizations, such as sports teams and choirs, and special events, such as Pride celebrations and contests. They also provide much needed advertising revenue and distribution points for the gay press. They are also a locus of efforts to combat the spread of HIV and STDs.

While bars no longer retain a monopoly on gay socialization, their financial wherewithal and symbolic power allow them to retain important functions in contemporary community life.

### **Queer Bars as Targets**

Because gay and lesbian bars are among the most visible manifestations of gay life, they are, sadly, also frequent targets of homophobic rage against the gay and lesbian community.

Examples of such rage include numerous cases of (often unsolved) vandalism, arson, and bombings of gay and lesbian bars all over the world. In 1973, for instance, 32 people burned to death in the Upstairs

Lounge, a New Orleans gay bar, in a fire set by an arsonist who has never been identified. In 1979, during Anita Bryant's anti-gay "Save Our Children" campaign, a lesbian bar in St. Louis, Mor or Les, was firebombed.

Other examples include such incidents as occurred in 1980 when a deranged man, Ronald Crumpley, claiming that he was acting under God's orders, walked into a gay bar in New York with a submachine gun and proceeded to kill two men and injure six others. In a similar incident in 2001, Ronald Edward Gay, a Vietnam-era veteran who described himself as a "Christian soldier," went on a shooting rampage in a Roanoke, Virginia gay bar, killing one person and injuring six others.

Another religiously-motivated attack on a gay bar is that committed by right-wing extremist Eric Rudolph, who, in addition to bombing Olympic Park in Atlanta in 1996 and an abortion clinic in Birmingham, Alabama in 1997, also bombed an Atlanta gay bar, injuring five people, in 1997.

Gay bashers, including serial killers and sexual predators, often target gay bars, selecting their victims from patrons who leave establishments catering to gay men and lesbians.

The frequency of attacks on gay and lesbian bars and their patrons is a measure of the vulnerability of glbtq people in a homophobic society. As symbols of gay and lesbian openness, and often of gay and lesbian pride, bars that cater to the glbtq community are regarded as particularly galling by those who hate and fear homosexuals.

Precisely because gay and lesbian bars remain the most visible manifestations of a gay and lesbian presence, attacks on these institutions are intended to intimidate and frighten the entire glbtq community. Conversely, the homophobia that the attacks represent makes the need for gay and lesbian bars all the more obvious. In such venues, gay men and lesbians find respite from the larger society's incessant assaults on our self-esteem.

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