

DC *is a city of drag queens and kings.*



“Talk to the drag queen!” says drag diva Ella Fitzgerald at Ziegfeld’s, and people do. And she reminds them, “It’s all an illusion!” They



Ella at Ziegfeld's
courtesy Donnell Robinson

come for the illusion, the art of impersonation. They come for the costumes, and they stay for the wit and the bitchy banter.

Enthusiastic audiences have supported drag performers here for decades with their tips and applause. Aspiring newcomers, eager to learn the art of impersonation, streamed here from drag’s earliest days.

By the late 1990s, DC clubs offered more than 40 scheduled weekly drag shows, more than any city other than Dallas or Atlanta. Crowds packed in on the weekends at Ziegfeld’s, Mondays at Omega, Tuesdays and Sundays at Mr. P’s, Wednesdays at the Bachelor’s Mill, Fridays at Escandalo and Saturdays at Chaos, Remington’s and Nob Hill. Annual club and city-wide drag pageants for titles such as Miss Ziegfeld’s, Miss Chaos, Miss Capital Pride, Miss Gay DC America, Miss Metropolitan, and others fill out the schedule.

Washington has long featured professional illusionists. The Crystal (later Bohemian) Caverns featured top local performers such as Louis “The Magnificent” Diggs in the 40s and 50s. The Redskin Lounge (nicknamed ‘The Foreskin’) on L St. featured the irrepressible Ray Bourbon in the mid-50s. The Jewel Box Review played the Casino Royale and the Dunbar theaters bringing Lynne Carter and male impersonator Stormé de Laviere to local audiences in the 50s and 60s. Bob’s Inn, across from the Tivoli in the late 60s, featured impersonators Peaches and Avis Pend’avis. National stars Craig Russell, Dame Edna, RuPaul and others followed.

Today drag performance in the city centers on club shows and the Washington Academy, gay Washington’s first (1961) social and support organization.



*Liz Taylor, 1985
courtesy Carl Rizzi*

In the late summer of 1961, Alan Kress, a.k.a. *Liz Taylor*, wanted to “mold an elite group of people whose social life would center around drag.” Four years before José Saria created the Imperial House system in San Francisco, Kress organized the first regularly scheduled annual drag awards and provided a safe haven, performance sites, mentoring, and standards for the city’s often ostracized drag queens. The contemporary Academy traces its oldest and top titles, such as Best Actress and Actor, to Taylor’s group.

In the fall of 1961, Bill Frye started a Masquerade Ball, the first city-wide pageant. In 1964 Jerry Buskirk, a.k.a. *Beulah Buskirk*, one of Washington’s leading female impersonators, took it over as the Miss Gaye America pageant. In 1986, the Academy established its separate



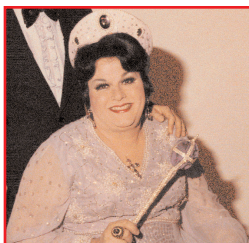
*Beulah Buskirk, 2004
courtesy Patsy Lynch*

members-only Miss Gaye America (DC) pageant, with points awarded in a variety of categories.

Opportunities were more limited for African-American drag artists in a segregated social scene. Performers depended on rented private spaces for their social events.

Ken White, a.k.a. *Black Pearl*, emerged as a leading African-American drag impresario in the late 60s. Black Pearl organized drag cruises on the Potomac and drag balls at the Cairo Hotel and the Palm Ballroom, providing opportunities for fellow African-American drag performers.

White's greatest achievement was to break the major hotels' ban on drag. In February 1968, Black Pearl staged the Black Pearl International Awards at the Washington Hilton. It was *the* drag event of the year.



Fanny Brice
courtesy Carl Rizzi

The modern drag training system emerged in the 60s as leading drag artists became 'mothers' to those wanting to learn the art of illusion. Emerging leaders in the mid-60s included Carl Rizzi, a.k.a. *Mame*

Dennis, and Alex Carlino, a.k.a. *Fanny Brice*. Drag mothers formed 'houses':

Mame Dennis led Beekman Place;

Liz Taylor led Butterfield 8;

Beulah Buskirk led Family Affair;

Fanny Brice led Henry Street;

Patty Duke led Maryland House; and

Kim Novak led Paramount Plaza.

Trainees often adopted the drag mother's name as their surname, creating drag lineages and family trees. In later years, headliners in the clubs (many of them trainees of the Academy) created club lineages as well. Well-known DC drag families include the Bloomingdales, the Blues, the Carreros, the Dennises, the Devereauxs, the Kanes, the Kazans, the Maharises, the O'Haras, the Santanas, the St. James, and many others.

An acrimonious split hit Kress's Academies group in the mid-60s. Mame Dennis' Beekman Place and Fanny Brice's Henry Street left the group and joined with Beulah Buskirk to form the rival Awards Club (which lasted until 1988). The Awards Club mounted its own contests, awarding the Emmy to its winners and staged the annual Miss Gaye America (DC) pageant. Taylor's group started the Miss Gaye Universe pageant in 1965, with winners selected by leaders of the group rather than by judges.

As the gay community emerged in the 70s, club owners saw audiences and profits in drag shows which were cheap to present (performers provided their own costumes, sets, and music). For performers, the explosion in drag clubs offered not only more chances to perform and earn tips but also new training grounds.

In 1973, club owner Bill Oates Jr. brokered creation of The Academy, a reconciliation of the Henry Street and Beekman Place houses with members of Liz Taylor's group.



*Mame Dennis , 1975
courtesy Carl Rizzi*

The new Academy, headed by Mame Dennis, led a major expansion in club shows and public visibility for female impersonators in the 1970s. The Academy has had as many as twelve drag houses and Academy members hosted shows and trained newcomers in clubs across the city. The annual

Showstoppers productions produced by Fanny Brice and her Henry Street house brought professional drag performances to an audience far beyond the gay community.

Today's club scene offers distinct ethnic circuits: African-American, Latino, Asian, and white. The ethnic circuits overlap where clubs offer a mix of all backgrounds. Performers are equally diverse in their styles and music with

some clubs featuring Latino sounds, country-western, pop music, hip-hop and rap. DC's leading drag performers are a unique ethnic mix.



Ken Las Vegas
courtesy Patsy Lynch

Genderversity has also come to drag. In 1996, as a fundraising effort, Cheryl Spector suggested that the Lesbian Avengers hold DC's first drag king competition at the Hung Jury. The contest was won by Kendra Kuliga, a.k.a. *Drag King Ken* (later known as *Ken Las Vegas*). The Puss N'Boots group was formed from the judges of that contest; they staged drag king shows from 1997 to 1999. In October 1999, Chaos held its first Drag King competition, produced by Drag King Ken. The DC Drag Kings formed in March 2000 at the inauguration of Chaos's monthly Drag King Show. The drag king performance scene continues to expand as more and more drag kings appear at the Academy and in the clubs.

Since the 70s, the city's pageants have grown with the emergence of club titles and city-wide titles. Washington, DC has contributed three national title holders to the Miss Gay America system: *Maya Montana*, *Linda Carrero*, and *Sabrina White*. Miss Gay America, Miss Black America, Miss Universo Latino, Miss USofA, and Miss Continental have preliminaries here.

There is diversity in our titles as well. African-



courtesy www.missgayamerica.com and
www.missgaydc.com

American and Latino pageant systems have emerged here.

Most pageants are judged and award contestants points for talent, evening gown, interview, and other categories. In 2000, 37 drag pageants were held in Washington, DC.

⇒ **1. 1919 Connecticut Ave NW - WASHINGTON HILTON** - In February 1968, Black Pearl's International Awards show was *the* drag event of the year and broke the main hotels' ban on drag events.



Sparkle, 1975
courtesy
Carl Rizzi

⇒ **2. 1520 Connecticut Ave NW - RASCALS** - From 1979 through 1992, Rascals was one of Dupont's premier drag show bars. Under the leadership of Sparkle Maharis, the club's drag shows and amateur hours drew a wide audience. Sparkle's amateur shows marked the beginning of a number of prominent drag careers.

⇒ **3. 2122 P St NW - ESCANDALO/DECO CABANA** - Latino drag often suffered a shortage of venues. Escandalo's opening in February 1994 offered one of the first regular performance sites for Latino drag performers. Shows drew enthusiastic crowds. Deco Cabana followed Escandalo in 1998 with shows hosted by Xavier Bloomingdale that showcased talented Latino drag performers.



Dominique Foxx
courtesy Mama Foxx

⇒ **4. 2122 P St NW rear - OMEGA** - Omega emerged in 1999 as the new home of Cobalt's drag show. As Monday night's *Diva Las Vegas* show, the Cobalt troupe took a new identity and provided a second Dupont home for those beginning drag performance careers. The popular show was led for many years by 'sex kitten' JC van Raine and Dominique Foxx.

⇒ **5. 1415 22nd St NW - BADLANDS/APEX** - Though not a drag performance club, Badlands hosted a number of drag pageants, most regularly the annual Miss Capital Pride contest. Badlands opened in the early 80s and was run for several years by Don Gilliken, a.k.a. *Sophie Tucker*, a member of the Awards Club. Badlands changed its name to Apex in 2002. The Miss Gay DC America pageant recently moved to Apex.

⇒ **6. 2147 P St Nw - Mr. P's** - For decades, the tiny stage in Mr. P's inner room served as one of Dupont's



*Stevi on stage,
Xavier hosting
courtesy Jan Knode*

top venues for drag and as an important training ground and performance space for up and coming female impersonators. The club was also an important intersection of Latin, white, and African-American performance circles. Show hostesses Erica Kane and Xavier Bloomingdale introduced a host of entertainers to

eager audiences four nights a week. The last show hostess was Stevi Starfire. Among featured artists were Dominique Foxx, Capri Bloomingdale, Gigi Couture, Gucci Goddamnit, Esmeralda Kane Jaymes, and Teena Marie Cromwell.

⇒ **7.** 1607 17th St NW - **CLUB CHAOS** - As one of DC's most diverse gay clubs, Chaos has presented drag shows since opening in 1998 and has been ever-willing to experiment. The club was the first to offer regularly scheduled drag king shows and has been one of the longest running venues for the Latino drag scene. Its Saturday evening drag shows are standing-room only. Show hostesses have included Jordan Taylor, the Two Tons of Fun: Lena Lett and Leona Hemsley, Ester Goldberg, Xavier Bloomingdale, Regina Joezette, and Gigi Couture.



*Gigi Couture, 1999
courtesy Jan Knode*

⇒ **8.** 1529 17th St NW - **JR's** - JR's is noted for originating the annual Halloween high heel drag races. Twenty-five contestants entered the first high heel drag race held outside JR's on Halloween 1986. The midnight dash went one and a half blocks to Annie's where the racers ran upstairs for a shot of schnapps, then down the stairs and back down the street to JR's. Clinton Winter won the race and a bottle of champagne.

⇒ **9.** 1846 Monroe St NW - **HOLLYWOOD HOUSE** - One of the homes of Liz Taylor, founder of the Academies, Hollywood House became a regular salon for female impersonators associated with Taylor and, later, the Academy. Taylor subsequently formed Butterfield 8, his own drag house among the Academy's houses.

⇒ **10.** 2504 14th St NW - **GOLDEN NUGGET** - Destroyed by fire in April 1968, Rosetta Minor's 'Black' Nugget, as the club was known, was a haven for African-American female impersonators and the transgendered. Though rough and wild at times, it was one of the few welcoming places for drag and transgendered youth.

⇒ **11.** 3316 14th St NW - **BOB'S INN** - A popular 60s venue for rock and roll, the club also featured drag shows. Shows were headlined by Dunbar graduate Avis Pend'avis and Peaches. Avis moved to New York City and founded the House of Pend'avis. The club was destroyed by fire in April 1968.

⇒ **12.** 1101 Kenyon St NW - **NOB HILL** - Nob Hill's drag shows featured many of the city's leading African-American female impersonators over the years. Adrienne Blackwell performed and led shows here through the 1990s. Other noted performers have been Stevi Starfire, Terri Lee Ross, Dominique Foxx, Arcadia Alexander, Gucci Blackwell, Lady Lace, and Regina Joezette. Drag shows ran Thursday through Sunday.



*Adrienne
courtesy Jan Knode*

⇒ **13.** 4211 9th St NW - **PALM BALLROOM** - In the 60s and 70s, the Palm Ballroom provided a venue for drag fashion and drag balls, African-American social clubs and was also used by the Awards Club. During segregation, the Palm and the Cairo Hotel welcomed African-Americans.

⇒ **14.** 811-13 13th St NW - **THE BRASS RAIL** - In the 70s and 80s, the Brass Rail was one of the pre-



*Barbara Macnair at the Brass Rail
courtesy of Andre Lindsay*

mier venues for African-American female impersonators. Among leading performers here were Barbara MacNair, whose Moms Mabley impersonation and fire dances were very popular.

The Railettes, the club's troupe of drag performers performed all around the city. The club moved to 5th & K St. NW in 1983.

⇒ **15.** 1215 New York Ave NW - **DOLLY'S** - Dolly's was a major part of the gay and drag scene around the bus terminals east of Franklin Sq. The club employed staff in drag and featured local stars such as Barbara MacNair. An August 1975 *Washingtonian* article chronicled the scene at Dolly's. The bartender was Rhonda Ray and the bouncer was Alicia B. Gay, both drag queens.

⇒ **16.** 1628 L St NW - **REDSKIN LOUNGE** - Through the mid-50s, the Redskin Lounge was a mixed lesbian and gay male hangout. Redskin's featured occasional drag performers, including nationally known female impersonator Ray Bourbon.



⇒ **17.** 1239 9th St NW - **FANTASIES** - The club only lasted about a year and a half in the mid-80s but featured extravagant drag shows and memorable parties. Shows

featured Kim Novak, Brandy Dover, and Lala Maharis.

⇒ **18.** 811 Pennsylvania Ave NW/309 9th St NW - **THE BARN, OSCAR'S EYE & THE ROGUE** - The complex at this location, a stack of gay clubs from the mid-60s, became notable for its drag connections in the 70s. The Hideaway was in the basement. Louie's (opened 1965) was on the ground floor. Above Louie's was The Barn (1971-1979), a country-western club which featured the Stardust Review drag show. Above Louie's dining room, next to the Barn, was The Rogue, one of DC's principal drag bars from 1975 to 1983 (when it moved to 5th & K NW). Customers at The Rogue used

the restrooms and bar at The Barn. Lainie Kazan, of the Academy, directed shows which featured Marlo Thomas, Susan St. James, Gwen Alexander, and Tina Santana. Diva Ella Fitzgerald performed here from 1980 to 1983. From 1973, the Academy met at Oscar's Eye (named by Fanny Brice) on the third floor.



*Dana Terrell
courtesy Andre Lindsay*

⇒ **19. 500 8th St SE - JOHNNIE'S/CLUB MADAME/BACHELOR'S MILL** - Since 1949, this building has been one gay-oriented club after another. As Johnnie's (1949 - 1974), it held monthly Zodiac drag contests. Johnnie's, known as the Tinsel Palace, was decorated for Christmas year round. Johnnie's drag events were run by Ray

'Ramona' Violette. In 1974, BB Gatch and her mother Louisette, opened a women's club, Club Madame, which featured weekend drag shows. In 1978, the club, still owned by BB, became a gay male-oriented club The Bachelor's Mill which featuring prominent drag artists including Dana Terrell. In 1984 The Bachelor's Mill moved down the street to 1104 8t St SE. At the new location, the Mill continued to offer a stage for African-American drag entertainers such as Lady Tawana, Tina Tuna Adams, Arcadia Alexander, and Tanelle Sanchez, as well as a site for drag pageants.

⇒ **20. 529 8th St SE - PLUS ONE** - One of the first major gay disco bars, the Plus One (1968 - 1975) also featured drag shows. Ella Fitzgerald started out at the Plus One in the mid-70s, where an early performance name was Fanny Brice. She recalls auditioning on a Tuesday, performing "Touch Me in the Morning".

⇒ **21. 713 8th St SE - SHERIDAN'S** - From 1999, Sandy Thompson's country-western club offered midweek drag bingo nights and weekend

drag shows hosted by Jymmye Jaymes, Terrie Santana, and others. The club also hosted several pageants including Miss Capitol City.



Courtney Lovelace
courtesy Sam
Marsh

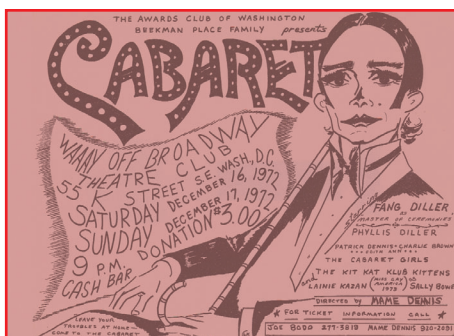
⇒ **22.** 639 Pennsylvania Ave SE - **LIFERAFT/ EQUUS/REMINGTON'S** - The site has a long history as a country-western gay bar featuring drag performances. In the early 70s, the Liferaft presented Billie Gold's revue show. Remington's, which opened in 1987, has consistently presented drag shows with a country-western flavor. Headliners here included Jymmye Jaymes, Blair Michaels, Vita Opulence, and Courtney Lovelace. Events at Remington's have solidified drag's association with the Atlantic States Gay Rodeo.

⇒ **23.** 1129 Pennsylvania Ave SE - **ELAN/ARDIENTE** - A lesbian bar in the late 90s, Elan featured midweek drag shows hosted by Courtney Lovelace and Michelle Michaels. Beginning in 2000, the Carrero sisters, Linda and Sophia, offered Latino drag performers a performance site late Saturday night in the ground floor restaurant area.

⇒ **24.** 55 K St SE - **WAAAY OFF BROADWAY /CLUB 55** - The theatre space managed by Jesse Kinison

and owned

by Donn Culver of the Lost and Found was closely involved with the drag community. The board of the theatre included the heads of major DC drag houses. The theatre opened with *Cabaret* featuring Lainie Kazan, directed by Mame Dennis. Academy events were held here until 1973 when Academy events moved to Oscar's Eye (see no.18). For several years, this was *the* gay theatre in DC. The site later became Club 55, to which Academy events returned in 1993.



courtesy Carl Rizzi

⇒ **25.** 1345 Half St SE - **OTHERSIDE/ ZIEGFELD'S** - Since 1978, this address has been the top spot for drag in DC. The Other Side, a women's bar that opened in 1978, brought regularly scheduled drag shows here. Ella Fitzgerald, demanding shaper of shows and talents, started here on July 4, 1980. Ziegfeld's, a landmark in DC's drag performance scene, opened in March 1988, with Ella Fitzgerald managing the shows. Ziegfeld's draws large audiences of all genders and orientations to its popular weekend shows, where Ella tells guests to "talk to the drag queen." The club serves also as one of the city's main pageant sites.



*Destiny, Jymmye & guest
courtesy Cheryl Spector*

⇒ **26.** 555 S 23rd St, Crystal City, VA - **FREDDIE'S** - Freddie's defines Northern Virginia's drag scene, especially country-western style drag performances. Academy members Jymmye Jaymes and Destiny B Childs host popular Sunday evening shows as well as charity benefits. Freddie's drag shows often play to stand-

ing-room-only audiences. The club is heir to earlier drag shows at the Hunt Club in Alexandria.

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