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The State of the Lesbian Bar: San Francisco Toasts To The End Of An Era



Posted by Robin on November 11, 2014 at 5:00am PST

In Autostraddle's [The State of the Lesbian Bar](#), we're taking a look at lesbian bars around the country as the possibility of extinction looms ever closer.

If you're in the Bay Area or used to live there, you probably heard the news that The Lexington Club has recently been sold, and will be closing in a few months. When it closes, San Francisco will be left with exactly zero dedicated lesbian bars in its city limits. Which sounds impossible. No lesbian bars? In one of the gay-friendliest cities in the country? The same city where America's first lesbian bar, [Mona's 440 Club](#), opened in the mid-1930s? So I set out to investigate the State of the San Francisco Lesbian Bar.

The End of an Era



For many folks in the Bay Area, the Lex was almost a rite of passage. It was their baby queer refuge, the place where they met a community of people just like them, where they found their lovers and their families. They could grab a beer, flirt with the cute girl

next to them, and maybe get fisted in the graffiti-filled bathroom.

Even people who discovered their queerness in other places before they arrived in the Bay Area feel an attachment to it. The Lex has been around for eighteen years. It's grown beyond just a refuge for queer women in the city. It's an institution and a symbol, a place that we can point to and say, *Here we are, we queer women*. In a blog post, a woman remembers bringing her best friend from out of town to the Lex for the first time:

...when I looked over at her she was quiet and weeping. All she could say was, "I didn't know there could be this many lesbians in one place in public." And that was how we've all felt about the Lex. I never hung out there with much regularity, but the fact that it existed referenced something much larger about the San Francisco we were living in.

I spoke to one transplant, **Alex**, who arrived just over two years ago, who said, "I feel this urge to protect it, to preserve it, to save it. I have a hard time understanding how people can turn their backs, throw up their hands, and say, 'Well, that's all there is to it.' The history is about to disappear."

I also spoke with some people with less fond memories of the Lex. As documented a few times on Autostraddle, the place can be cliquey and territorial. Some nights, the vibe can be uncomfortably binary. "I used to think it was just me that always felt like an intruder when I came here," said one person, "but later I met people who used to feel the exact same way." Others weren't into the dive bar lifestyle anymore, if they ever had been. Actual personal experiences at the bar aside, though, most people I talked to were sad that we were losing such a landmark, even if it wasn't much of a landmark for them.

Memory's a tricky thing. It can be rooted in scent, in photos, in music, and yes, in geographical location and physical place. Once we lose a historical site, it's easy to lose our collective memories of it. As gloriously LGBT-friendly as the Bay Area can be, it

wasn't always like that. As my friend Claire put it, "We wouldn't have this luxury, this field day of queerness, if we didn't have the legacy of separatist spaces that came before us."

A Change in the Gayborhood



A few things contributed to the Lex's demise: the rising cost of rent on its building, the rising cost of rent in the neighborhood itself (San Francisco is now the most expensive place to live in the United States), economic gender inequality, *gentrification* — the bar's owner, Lila Thirkfield, outlines it pretty well in her announcement.

...my rent was raised to market rate, and though it was difficult, we seemed to weather it at first. But as the neighborhood continued to change, we began to see sales decline, and they continued to do so... When a business caters to about 5% of the population, it has tremendous impact when 1% of them leave. When 3% or 4% of them can no longer afford to live in the neighborhood, or the City, it makes the business model unsustainable.

Rising rent isn't the only contributor. Claire, who relocated across the bay, said, tongue-in-cheek, "Monogamy isn't good for the queer bar scene. People meet each other, settle down, and move to Oakland to raise chickens." Alex observed, "It's hard for our spaces to stay when we all have one foot out the door." The regulars may have one foot out the door for personal or socioeconomic reasons (or both plus more), but the bottom line is that a dive bar like the Lex needs regulars, and the regulars and semi-regulars are leaving.

It's also not as simple as saying that a meteoric rise in hipsters and tech bros has ruined San Francisco for lesbian bars. I'm a college graduate working in web design who's willing to spend more than three dollars on a cup of coffee. I have friends in the Mission who pay an outrageous rent to live in a brand new apartment complex that has its own gym and private party venue. I'm gentrified as fuck. I still seek out queer spaces, but I rarely go to the Lex, even though I spend most weekends in the neighborhood. Not only are the old neighborhood lesbians leaving, but the new influx of queer women aren't taking their places at the bar.

The older people I've talked to wonder about that. "Where will the baby queers go?" is a common concern. How are they going to find their own queer community? What rites of passage will they go through?



via Lily Monster
Bathroom graffiti at the Lexington Club

The second-to-last time I went to the Lex, I was with my friend Ari and her girlfriend. We're all in our early-to-mid 20s, which I think puts us at the tail end of baby queer. Ari wanted to go for the sake of going, since she'd lived in the Bay Area for over a year and had still never been. I tagged along for some beers. It was just a night out at a dive bar for us. The high percentage of queer women was cool, but we didn't tap into a larger community. We didn't feel any queerer for having gone. Ari pointed out that we could've connected with more people on Tinder (and then we all got on Tinder).

It's an incredible time to be queer in the Bay Area. When The Lexington Club opened in 1996, it provided a much-needed safe space for queer women. It was a place to Be Queer when you had to hide it from other parts of your life. Now, the parts of our lives that used to be de facto heteronormative have become more open. I don't have to go to the bar to make connections with queer folks, because I can find openly queer people in almost every activity and subculture I'm into. If I'm looking for a date outside those subcultures, there are apps for that. There are extended communities with activities that don't necessarily center around a bar (for example, Autostraddle meetups). On a

smaller scale, I can have a queer night out with my friends at a “straight” bar without downplaying our queerness.

The Bay Area hit critical mass; there’s no singular Queer Community. “We’re at a point where you can be surrounded by queers on an ongoing basis and in communities where there’s a predominance of queer people, but the communities themselves aren’t explicitly queer,” said Claire. Granted, we’re fortunate to live in such a queer-friendly town, and we do have the Lex to thank for that. Most of the country still needs places like it. However, in this corner of America, baby queers see the Lex as an important place to visit — but not necessarily to revisit.

Where Do We Go From Here?



UHAUL Pride Kickoff Party

A lot of articles about the Lex (including this one) call it San Francisco’s last lesbian bar.

This usually kicks up a comment or two about Wild Side West (Bernal Heights, “your welcoming neighborhood lesbian bar”), which was opened by two lesbians in 1962 and is still owned by lesbians after the original owners passed away, or El Rio (Mission, “a neighborhood bar with a heck of a lot to offer”), an LGBTQ+ bar with a back patio that often hosts events. Follow-up comments claim that both Wild Side West and El Rio have more of a mixed queer crowd these days, and El Rio even says on their website that they have a “diverse mixed clientele.”

I contacted El Rio to see if they had felt the same neighborhood pressure as the Lex. Owner **Dawn Huston** told me that Lila Thirkfield was exactly right, and they’re feeling the effects as well. She hopes to avoid the Lex’s fate while remaining true to their clientele. “We have always adapted to the changing landscape while keeping our queer mentality and a focus on safe space for queers, women, POC, disadvantaged communities.” It’s worth noting that El Rio also has the venue space to put on a variety of events for a diverse group of queer people, something the Lex lacked.



El Rio's patio

In an interview with [48 Hills](#), Thirkfield talked about her other bar, [Virgil's Sea Room](#), which opened next to El Rio last year. She describes it as “different in that it is an ‘everybody bar’ but it has a huge queer sense about it, many queer staff members, and some great crossover already.” She echoes Claire’s observation that queer spaces can exist in the city without being explicitly queer. It has, so far, been “amazing.”

Thirkfield also hopes to throw one-off events under the Lexington name. This might be the model moving forward: queer bars instead of strictly lesbian bars and event-based gatherings instead of gathering around a dedicated location. The queer women of the Bay Area can’t keep a dive bar open in the Mission, but they’ll line up around the block for Ships in the Night and other [monthly parties](#) like it. As hard as it is to say goodbye to the Lex, there are still places for queer women to go when they feel like just Being Queer.

As one last point, The Lexington Club [isn't the first last lesbian bar](#) in San Francisco. In 1989, that title went to Amelia’s, which was two blocks from where the Lex would be. In 1991, after thirteen years in operation, Amelia’s closed, leaving the Mission without a lesbian bar until the Lex opened. The explanations for it sound familiar: women aren’t paid as much as men, queer women even less, so they have less to invest in a lesbian bar; the old regulars aged out and settled down in other neighborhoods; and the monolithic lesbian community had diversified and splintered into subcommunities based on interests beyond sexual orientation. The bar currently occupying its space, Elbo Room, puts up the Amelia’s sign for Pride every year.



With some help from the city, we destroy and repeat our history in waves, which sometimes includes taking time to mourn our historical losses and then rallying to rise again. As Dawn wisely said, "We should be very upset with the loss of queer space, any queer space. We all need safe and welcoming community space. We should also be aggressive about creating that space, the city, the world we want to live in. Yell when necessary, support others and adapt all the time. I am hopeful. Queers are resilient, fabulous and the world's most logical party creators."



ROBIN

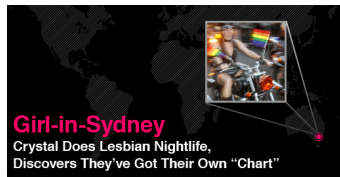
Robin doesn't lean in, she spreads out. Her skills include making up fake genres of electronic music and talking up the movie *Spice World* to strangers. In any situation, she would prefer to get campy. She's a hedonist, lady dandy, and lazy academic. She has a [twitter](#) and a [tumblr](#).

Robin has written 17 articles for us.

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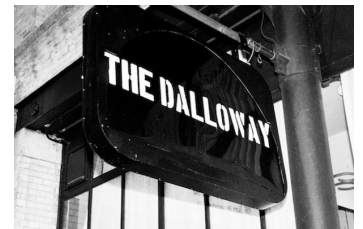
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