

# How America's Last Lesbian Bars Survived the Pandemic

As the number of lesbian bars dwindles in U.S. cities, a new documentary and fundraising campaign are focusing attention on the challenges faced by LGBTQ spaces.



*Photographer: The Lesbian Bar Project*

By Kriston Capps

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In Washington, D.C., this year, Pride hit different.

Organizers for the city's annual Capital Pride Parade and Festival announced back in January that festivities would be canceled for the second year in a row due to the ongoing coronavirus pandemic. With the city easing restrictions on bars and restaurants in late May, though, and reopening fully as of June 11, owners of LGBTQ bars in the city were hoping to see a bump in crowds amid the mix of virtual and in-person Pride celebrations.

The surge of fans that greeted A League of Her Own, a lesbian sports bar in D.C.'s Adams Morgan neighborhood, beat any expectations: The first weekend after the city fully lifted its cap on bar and restaurant capacity was a grand slam. "We had a line down the block and down another block, which has never happened for us in the past," says bar manager Ally Spaulding. "We were at full capacity the entire weekend."

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A League of Her Own, or ALOHO, as patrons in this alphabet soup-loving town call it, is one of the last lesbian bars – not just in D.C. but anywhere in the country. According to a 2019 study from Oberlin College, more than 200 lesbian bars served customers in U.S. cities during the 1980s; today, no more than 21 may remain. These numbers were dwindling before the pandemic, but the effects of the Covid-19 lockdowns, which have hammered bars and restaurants nationwide, risk entirely wiping out spaces that have survived seismic shifts in social norms and real estate. To survive, lesbian bars have turned to their communities for support – but they are also thinking through what it means to be a lesbian bar to better support their communities.

*The Lesbian Bar Project*, a documentary by co-directors Erica Rose and Elina Street, showers these establishments with praise as the gathering places for patrons and their chosen families. Narrated by Lea DeLaria (of *Orange Is the New Black* fame), the movie got its start early into the pandemic as a public service announcement, when the filmmakers realized that the places they loved – like Ginger's, the only lesbian bar in Brooklyn, which is still closed indefinitely – might never reopen. *The Lesbian Bar Project* raised \$117,000 in the fall for these bars (including ALOHO) off the strength of that 90-second spot. The micro-doc has since blossomed into a 20-minute film. Before the end of the month, the filmmakers hope to raise \$200,000.

"We consider ourselves entrenched in the community," Rose says. "We didn't realize the numbers were so bad."

Among the bars spotlighted by *The Lesbian Bar Project* is Herz, a Black-woman-owned establishment in Mobile, Alabama, and one of just a handful of women's queer spaces across the entire South. This bar came to the filmmakers' attention through "Queer To Stay," a joint initiative by the Human Rights

Campaign and Showtime to support LGBTQ businesses. “They’re not always easy to find,” Street says of lesbian bars. “A lot of them are under the radar or don’t have social media.”

Queer To Stay has been another pandemic lifeline for these ventures. About 100 businesses applied for support through this initiative last year; 10 businesses received grants, including Herz as well as three other lesbian bars (Blush & Blu in Denver, My Sister’s Room in Atlanta and Pearl Bar in Houston). This year, Queer To Stay is doubling the number of grantees as well as the total purse for grants. (The full amount is undisclosed, but reports put the awards in the five figures.)

“We selected the first 10 based on the communities they serve, the impact their business had experienced during Covid, their commitment to serving multiply marginalized queer people, and looking holistically at what they provided their community,” says Zack Hasychak, director of membership outreach for the Human Rights Campaign.

Owners and regulars give many different reasons for why the number of lesbian bars is declining so sharply. Queer women now enjoy broader social approval than their foremothers did, for example, reducing the need to patronize specific kinds of establishments. Young people drink less overall. But more broadly, the ground is shifting for many kinds of LGBTQ spaces.



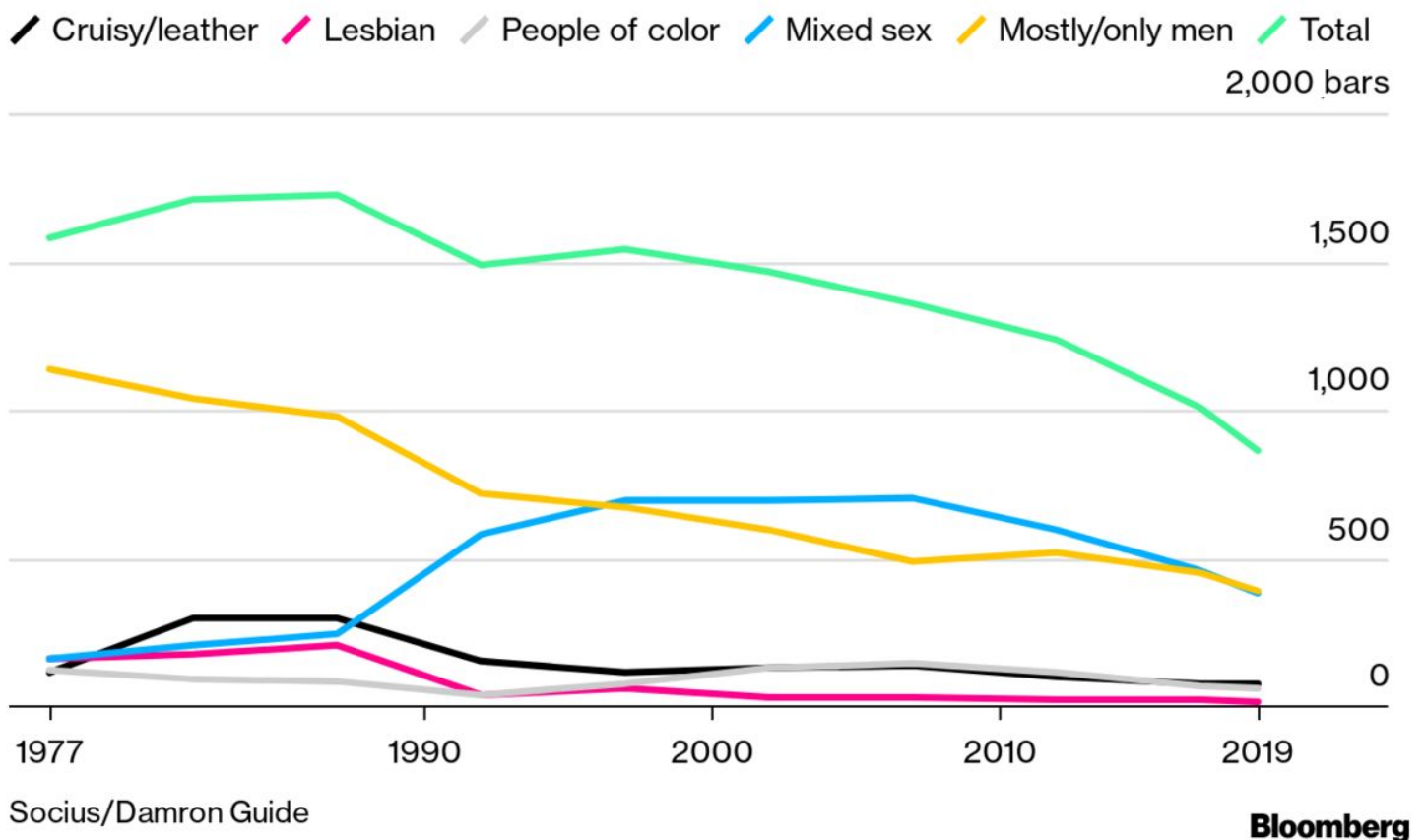
Seattle's Wildrose, which opened in 1984, in 2016. *Photographer: Genna Martin/San Francisco Chronicle via Getty Images*

Greggor Mattson, an associate professor at sociology at Oberlin, points to a steep decline in queer establishments in recent years. Using listings from the Damron Guide – a national travel guide of LGBT places published primarily between 1964-2017, something akin to the Green Book – Mattson found a 37% decline in listings between 2007 and 2019. That trend accelerated between 2012 and 2017, when gay bar listings declined by 19%, the largest five-year drop over the last half century. The fall-off has been far worse for places catering to more marginalized communities, namely cruisy men's bars (listings fell by 48% from 2007 to 2019), bars for women (52%) and bars serving people of color (59%).

The single largest decline in lesbian bar listings came years ago, between 1987 and 1992, which coincided with a surge in listings for bars serving a mixed crowd. Mattson offers a word of caution about the data: Before 1990, the Damron Guide was published by men, for men, so the listings may undercount the number of lesbian bars in their 1980s heyday.

## Closing Time

Damron Guide listings for gay bars at five-year intervals, 1977–2017 and 2019



Mattson shies away from any single explanation for the collapse of LGBT spaces. While the rise of dating apps is a popular explanation, the same anxiety attended the arrival of chatrooms and sites such as gay.com in the 1990s, a period of growth for gay bars overall. Listings for mixed-sex gay bars began to decline in the late 2000s, which coincided with the arrival of Grindr but also the Great Recession. Nobody ever says that Tinder is killing off bars for straight patrons, he notes.



“When people say apps killed gay bars, I always want to know: Which apps? Which gay bars?” says Mattson. “I don’t think the apps affected lesbian bars at all.”

As for the ongoing decline, Mattson points to both urban and rural geography as factors shaping women’s queer spaces today. There’s not enough capital in small cities and too much competition on the coasts. In large cities, real estate costs have skyrocketed, displacing establishments that cater to people who identify as women and blocking entrants who can’t compete for access to capital.

“Gayborhoods” in many cities are fading as they gentrify. For LGBTQ establishments in smaller cities or rural areas, the rule since the 1980s has generally been integration – they serve mixed crowds.

“Women business owners have a much tougher go at it,” says Christa Suppan, co-owner of Nashville’s Lipstick Lounge, which opened in 2002. “As someone in Nashville, it definitely would have been easier if I had been a male.”



The Lipstick Lounge in East Nashville was devastated by a March 2020 tornado, which struck just days before pandemic lockdowns arrived. *Photographer: Leah Epling*

In March 2020, the Lipstick Lounge was still reeling from a devastating tornado that struck Middle Tennessee when the pandemic arrived; they were crowdsourcing funds to cover tornado damage to the bar’s 1896 building. Suppan says she maxed out her personal credit cards to make it through the early months of the pandemic. Eventually she was able to secure support through the federal Paycheck Protection Program as well as *The Lesbian Bar Project*.

“Some of these people are regulars I’ve known for nearly 20 years,” Suppan says of her Nashville clientele. “They’re not the patrons who come in because you have a good margarita. My staff are not just employees. They’re my family.”

Julie Mabry, co-owner of Houston's Pearl Bar, says that she owed \$20,000 in sales and alcohol taxes three days after the city shut down last year. The bills didn't stop because her customers were forced to stay home. Mabry says she was turned down for a PPP loan (as were some other lesbian bar owners), but she had better luck through a GoFundMe drive (plus Queer To Stay).

Mabry says that she worried most about her community. Pearl Bar – one of only two lesbian bars in the entire state of Texas – doesn't serve just Houston. Customers might drive in from 45 miles away in Galveston or elsewhere along the Gulf Coast. Many come for a sense of family that they can't find in their home communities. "Virtual bars are never going to be a thing. People like to drink and be social," Mabry says. "In that sense, lesbian bars will survive. We have a niche."

Spaulding, who started working at ALOHO as a bartender when it opened in 2018, grew up in a conservative community on the Georgia-Tennessee border. She shares a story about visiting the local lesbian bar many miles away when she finally turned 21 and finding a sense of belonging. In her case, it happened in Nashville: "Lipstick Lounge was the first time I was never questioned," she says.

As the owner of that venerable Nashville bar is quick to point out, "the younger generation has never not had a place," Suppan says. "Kids who are 30 years old always had the Lipstick Lounge."

In lieu of brick-and-mortar establishments, underserved queer populations have mostly made do with special nights or monthly events at gay bars that are otherwise geared to host cisgender men. Virtual spaces also help people connect. Mattson says that it's an open question whether online meetups can provide the same cross-class, multi-generation, mixed-race community that the best gay bars facilitate. He wonders whether even high-profile pop-up nights can reach those populations in full.

"Something gets lost when we lose the 24-7, 365-days-a-year spaces," Mattson says, referring to the pre-pandemic normal. "I'm all for a queer pop-up. But so many queers go out on a Tuesday because they're working Saturday nights. On a random Tuesday, you meet people over 70, you meet people who are just out. Those kinds of things are less likely to happen in the pop-ups."

Lesbian bars are often harder to find, says filmmaker Street. Historically, they were speakeasies, hidden away, and many still keep low profiles. Lesbians never had their own neighborhood, she says. Women's queer spaces have long served transgender people, bisexuals, nonbinary people and more, even when these categories were not as well known. "It is absolutely crucial to have a space that caters to a marginalized community," Street says.



A League of Her Own, a lesbian bar in Washington, D.C., saw its strongest crowds ever as LGBTQ Pride Month began and coronavirus restrictions ended. *Photographer: Ally Spaulding*

In *The Lesbian Bar Project*, the filmmakers talk to Lisa Cannistraci, co-owner of Henrietta Hudson, the oldest lesbian bar in New York City, about the decision to change the bar’s sign from a femme-forward logo to a more gender-neutral design. “We have to break the cycle of being exclusionary within our own communities,” Cannistraci says in the doc, adding that her place is a “queer human bar built by lesbians.”

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Even as the number of lesbian bars continue to dwindle, the need for more inclusive spaces grows only greater. On June 12, video of security staff dragging a Black woman down the stairs of Nellie’s Sports Bar, a popular gay bar along D.C.’s U Street corridor, went viral. Nellie’s closed down for a week in the face of mounting protests over the treatment of the patron, 22-year-old Keisha Young. Activists

are calling for a boycott, noting that the bar has failed to address complaints from Black patrons for years. (The owner of Nellie's did not respond to a request for comment.)

The incident at Nellie's adds to a trenchant history of violence faced by Black and queer communities. More prosaically, it also points to a sheer lack of space in cities that serve queer women, nonbinary individuals and transgender people. Queer people of color have fewer inclusive spaces still. Spaulding admits that A League of Her Own has received complaints from Black patrons about their treatment by staff. She says the bar is now donating to monthly mutual-aid fundraisers and hiring Black staffers as a result: "It's about putting people of color in positions of power."

Washington, D.C., is the rare U.S. city with multiple lesbian bars – ALOHO, XX+ Crostino and, soon, As You Are – a sizable fraction of the national total. Spaulding herself says that she identifies as queer, while some on her staff identify as lesbian, bisexual, nonbinary, transgender. In the past, "lesbian" might have covered them all. So the bar is changing course – to expand its notion of community while it adjusts to budgeting for a long-haul recovery.

"It's a community bar," Spaulding says. At the end of the day, "it's for anyone."