LGBT →

COVID Didn't Kill the Gay Scene. But It May Change It.

BACK TO LIFE

The shuttering of gay bars and clubs during the pandemic has increased a sense of isolation felt by many queer people. The fun will resume once lockdowns end—but maybe differently.

Alex Reimer Updated Apr. 03, 2021 3:32AM ET
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I started reading about the demise of gay bars long before I uploaded my first torso pic onto Grindr. And yet, every weekend, the lines outside of my city's remaining gay spaces often extended for several blocks—leaving overzealous twinks to freeze in their cut-offs.

Gay men are social creatures. While <u>COVID</u> has presented extreme challenges to the nightlife industry, history shows we've always found ways to gather, no matter the circumstances. So why would this time be any different?

"We've gone through far worse as a community, whether it's HIV/AIDS, fighting for our rights, being discriminated against, the violence against LGBTQ people," said Erik Storholm, a licensed

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every reason to think our community is going to bounce right back."

LGBTQ Party Scene Confronts 'Devastating' Coronavirus Crisis



STAYING ALIVE

Nico Lang

There's no denying the current landscape for gay establishments is bleak. Yelp says 59 gay bars in America closed between March 2020 and August 2020, though that number seems low, considering 17 percent of restaurants have shut down permanently. "I would've thought it would be closer to that," said Greggor Mattson, a sociology professor at Oberlin College. His research shows 37 percent of gay bars closed nationwide from 2007 to 2019.

But the picture isn't entirely negative. While queer bars

to thrive in the form of standing parties and offthe-grid events. Places that have been able to invest in kitchens are also finding ways to stay afloat, creating new revenue streams in the process.

James Clements, co-owner of <u>Blend</u>, an LGBTQ lounge in Boston, took COVID as an opportunity to modernize his kitchen and patio space. The place was packed for drag brunch every Sunday. "It took off," Clements said. "I mean, we didn't make a ton of money, but we kept the business alive."

Whenever Boston lifts restrictions on nightlife, Clements expects to be there, and is confident business will thrive. But that might not be for a while, even with vaccination rates rising. There's still no timetable for when bars and clubs can operate again in Boston, and the city's Pride parade was recently postponed. "People get their hopes up, so I think people are just

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said.

While Storholm is sensing more optimism among his clients these days, there still aren't many social events on their calendars. Above all, there's a profound sense of loneliness in the community. "Pride events, summer parties, these are things that members of the community who might feel a little disconnected in their daily life look forward to," Storholm said. "And we just don't know when or if those things are coming back."

One study of 10,000 gay men in 20 countries aged 18-34 found those who only left their homes for essentials during the first COVID lockdowns were 37 percent more likely to feel anxious than those who didn't, and 36 percent more likely to feel lonely. While these struggles aren't unique to gay people, it's important to remember that gay men "come to this pandemic with disproportionate rates of

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associate professor of social welfare and the study's lead author.

Through the early months of lockdown, Jay represented those statistics. Entrapped in his studio apartment, the Los Angeles-based social worker was on the mental brink. All day long, he fielded calls from LA's most vulnerable residents, pleading for food and services. It is demanding work, and pre-COVID, Jay would find his nirvana on the dance floor.

So when Jay started reading about parties taking place outside of LA, he was tempted to go, and finally, he did. "I know people are like, 'You guys are so shallow. How could you consider nightlife so important?," he said. "But for someone like me, it is. People need me to be there for them. Going to parties, and going to gatherings have helped me be able to be at my 100 percent, and be able to help others through this difficult time."

attending raucous raves and beach parties, with the conflict bubbling over into an online gay civil war. At the start of the new year, #GaysOverCovid accounts started popping up all over social media, outing circuit queens and InstaThots for their drug-fueled rendezvous to tropical meccas like Puerto Vallarta and Rio de Janeiro.

There is an ugly element of privilege to this behavior, and even worse, it goes against every public health guideline. With restrictions prematurely loosening in many states, we're experiencing a resurgence in cases nationwide. Now is not the time to let up.

"Large in-person gatherings aren't going to be safe for some time," said Alex Keuroghlian, director of the National LGBTQIA+ Health Education Center at the Fenway Institute, a community health center in Boston where half of the patients are LGBTQ. "It sounds like gatherings like that realistically won't be

But there's more to these semi-clandestine circuit raves than reckless revelers. They speak to our desire for companionship. "There is a need for spaces to gather and to have community," said Justin Smith, director of the Campaign to End **AIDS at Positive Impact** Health Centers. "How do you do that in a pandemic in a way that doesn't put you in harm's way, or the ones that you care about and that you love in harm's way? I don't think anyone has figured out a great solution to that."



"If you're a drag queen, whether you get your tips by Venmo or crumpled up dollar bills, it's all the same to you."

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That's where harm reduction strategies come into play. The HIV/AIDS crisis taught us the futility of abstinence-only messaging, and the dangers of stigmatizing pleasure. With that in mind, Keuroghlian says it's important to focus on riskmitigation techniques, and recognize most people are going to negotiate their own rules. "There's a level of flexibility and cultural humility that we as clinicians need to have," he said.

Virtual raves and events are one way to keep the party safe, and throughout COVID, we've seen DJs take their sets to the digital space. On the positive side, online parties are far more accessible, allowing all members of the community to partake in the debauchery. Even when COVID subsides, it's possible venues could still stream their drag competitions and burlesque shows online--creating a hybrid model. The end result would be a more

everybody.

"There's been tremendous talk about how people with disabilities can now go to things they could never go to before," Mattson said. "If you're a drag queen, whether you get your tips by Venmo or crumpled up dollar bills, it's all the same to you."

While that may be true, from this twunk's perspective, there's nothing quite like the smell of poppers oozing throughout the sweat-soaked walls of A-House in Provincetown at 1:15 a.m. on the Fourth of July. Going out is about more than just hearing music. It's about the whole hedonistic dance.

"There's a whole culture that has its own sort of scripts and kind of how you show up and how you perform," Smith said. "I think those things can't really be translated into an online forum."

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been focused on staying safe from the virus, but what about the detrimental impact that social isolation and loneliness have on people?"

- Erik Storholm

As gay men, we've already been robbed years of social development, and COVID hasn't been helpful.

"Overall, I think it's been really detrimental to our community, which relies on the chosen family," said Storholm. "Everyone's been focused on staying safe from the virus, but what about the detrimental impact that social isolation

The good news is, with 90 percent of the U.S. population projected to be vaccinated by July 24, this summer promises to offer the chance for more connection. Joe Piro, the rare mid-twentysomething who was once ambivalent about going out, says he never realized how important the routine was to him. He can't wait to get his shot, and line up outside of a club again to pay an outrageous cover.

"I'm anticipating almost like a Roaring Twenties sense of freedom," Piro said. "People being locked away for so long, that first night out, I picture it being a cracking electric energy of pent-up sexual tension. I will not be surprised if people are fucking in the street."

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TRAVEL →

Why Las Vegas is the Ultimate Sports City: An Aces Player Makes the Case

VIVA LAS VEGAS

For WNBA champion Chelsea Gray, it doesn't get any better than this exciting, always-evolving city. She explains why—and where to go when you visit.

AD BY VISIT LAS VEGAS

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Las Vegas Aces

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JUSTIN BARAGONA

By Matt Villano

Most people know Las

Vegas as the entertainment
capital of the world, but in
recent years the destination
has earned another
moniker: The Greatest
Arena on EarthTM.

Las Vegas now has professional sports teams in hockey, football, and women's basketball; world-class arenas and a brand new, state-of-the-art stadium; competitive collegiate programs; minor league baseball and hockey squads; and dozens of sportsbooks. In short, over the last few years, Vegas has come of age as the best

This is one of the reasons WNBA champion Chelsea Gray was seriously pumped when she was signed as a free agent by the <u>Las Vegas Aces</u> in advance of the 2021 season. Gray previously spent four years playing for a pro team in Los Angeles, and a year in Connecticut.

For the five-foot, 11-inch guard, coming to <u>Las Vegas</u> was somewhat of a homecoming.

"I'm a West-Coast kid, born and raised," she said, referring to her childhood in Hayward, California. "Playing in Las Vegas, where I spent time as a kid playing in tournaments, it just feels like home."



Visit Las Vegas

Las Vegas as a Sports Town

One year into suiting up for

Las Vegas has "grown up" as a sports town. The way she sees it, the vibe is influenced by two distinct forces: the way locals have embraced the team, and the enthusiasm with which visitors turn out for their teams. Together, she added, this one-two punch creates a fervor that doesn't exist in many other sports markets.

"I like to think of <u>Las Vegas</u> as a big small-town," Gray said. "It's a big city, but it's also a small community where everyone supports each other. Fans know their stuff. They have pride. If you're wearing 'Las Vegas' across your chest, they're going to support you because they waited for so long to have teams of their own. Kids growing up now will never know Las Vegas as anything but a sports town."

Interestingly, the city's draw with vacationers is part of what makes it such an incredible city to play for. "Because Las Vegas is such a popular tourist destination, you have

people want to see sports in real-time. Now that there are local teams, unless [people are] in town to cheer on their own teams, they're gonna root for the hometown team every time."



Visit Las Vegas

Perks of Playing in Las Vegas

Perhaps the best thing about playing for a professional sports team in Las Vegas is the community, according to Gray. Young people regularly recognize her when she is out and about around the Vegas Valley. She added that when she interacts with fans before or after games at The Michelob Ultra Arena in the Mandalay Bay Resort and Casino, kids marvel at how they can interact with her.

Vegas is amazing food after the game.

Gray's favorite food is lamb chops, and she loves the ones that were recently on the menu at Zuma in The Cosmopolitan of Las Vegas. (If you're not into red meat, she also recommends the lobster.)

When Gray goes out for dinner with teammates, they like to hit the Brazilian/Japanese fusion Sushi Samba in the Grand Canal Shoppes at The Venetian Resort Hotel & Casino for the eclectic flavors on the menu: sushi, robata, and more.

"The truth is that you can't really go wrong with wherever you eat in Las Vegas," she said. "It's nice to be playing for a team in a city with so many great options."

Gray said she and her teammates love getting together to watch games on TV and drink adult beverages at the <u>Stage Door Casino</u>, an old-school dive bar on Ling Lane across the

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Visit Las Vegas

Hoops For All

Of course, Gray is a baller, which means she's always going to have opinions about where to shoot hoops.

While Gray admitted she isn't an expert on public outdoor courts, she has sampled several of Las Vegas' finest pop-a-shot hoops. One of her favorite places to play? Level Up, a sports lounge between Hakkasan nightclub and the BetMGM Sportsbook at MGM Grand. Gray also said she has heard "great things" about the pop-a-shot hoops inside Emporium at AREA 15, an arts and entertainment destination with virtual golf, axethrowing, and other diversions off the Strip.

"I love having a good time,"



places to do that."

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