
Tuesday Night Is HamBingo Night: a Glimpse of the Drag Queen Culture

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*I wasn't playing a drag queen— I was playing an extraordinary performer.
-John Lone*

This Isn't Your Mother's Dining Room

Nestled in the trendy part of downtown Orlando is a quaint little hamburger joint right next to the railroad tracks. It sits against the backdrop of restored brick buildings; it looks worn, but homey. The façade is charming and tasteful. The restaurant very much resembles the people it serves. What you see is definitely not what you get.

Hamburger Mary's (or Mary's as the regulars call it) is much quirkier on the inside. The vinyl booths line the walls in an array of different colors and cocktail tables clutter the room. There's a bar along the back wall littered with Magic posters and comfy barstools, which I'm sure is aimed at the more conservative clientele. A small stage in the corner sits covered in silver tinsel and outdated speakers. And just like the kitchens of your favorite 1960s sitcoms, Mary's is full of vibrant pastel colors and mismatched silverware. The only difference between this kitschy dining room and Mom's is that your mother's kitchen probably never held host to some of Florida's best female impersonators.

The vibe of Mary's is upbeat. It's hard not to smile just being inside, and everyone is friendly with everybody else. The waiter four tables over never stops singing along to the eccentric mix of techno, '90s, and show tunes that plays over the sound system, but no one seems to mind much anyways.

The pastel striped walls, vinyl booths, and flamboyant waiters that skip, sing, and flirt may entice you to stay, but the food is what keeps you coming back. No matter how much anyone wants to keep his or her "girlish" figure, it just isn't going to happen. But how could you expect that at a place that serves not only some of Orlando's best cheeseburgers, but also deep fried Twinkies and a "Screaming Orgasm" to wash it all down with.

However, I can't say I came here for the food, despite how good it all is. People are drawn to Mary's for the drag queens, and drag queens are what I came for. Saturdays are for the infamous female impersonator cabaret shows, and Tuesdays host HamBingo.

Mary's: The Drag Queen Mecca

Drag queens have always been a mysterious group of people. In some cultures they are embraced, and in others they cling to the French-seamed-hem of society. What is so interesting about Hamburger Mary's is that it is a place where all types of people can meet, come together, and be entertained. Especially the drag queens.

This is my goal: to make drag queens a little bit less mysterious. Who are they? Why do they do this? How long have they done it? And although I can't reach out to all the drag queens across the world, the U.S., or even the greater part of Orlando, perhaps I can get some insight into why they do what they do, and why they come to Mary's.

My first step was just a visit. I wanted to see what Mary's was all about. I called to make my reservation and was greeted from the other side of my telephone with gusto. I spoke to Kirk, a jubilant man with a hearty laugh and a real interest in what I was doing. When I explained to him my project he was eager to help me. "Of course you'll need to make a reservation," he said. "We fill up real fast. But I'll make sure I talk to Miss Sammy and Carol Lee for you. Ooh, they will be so excited to talk to you." He even offered advice on where I could find more people to interview. "Oh, and on Saturdays! Honey, have you heard about our Saturdays?" Of course I had. "Leigh Shannon does the best impression of Bette [Midler].

You know, she owns a shop on Mills you could go to. It's called Ritzy Rags," Kirk said. I was familiar. I had already looked Leigh up. "It's a place for drag queens to go buy all their stuff. Well, anyways I have you down for 6:30 hon. Just ask for me when you get here, and I'll introduce you to your very first drag queens." I think Kirk was the best informant I could have found. He was as helpful as they come, and as interested in my research as I was in drag queens.

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Drag Queens: Times of Yore

Since the beginning of time, society has been obsessed with the mystery and femininity that accompanies women. In some countries those qualities are worshipped and in others women are suppressed because of them. But throughout the years these qualities helped shape not only the way women were treated, but also the way gender roles were formed and how men behaved because of it.

When people think of men masquerading as women, they tend to associate it with some sort of homosexual tendency. However, the practice of men imitating women was not always limited to gay men. In England, during Shakespeare's time, women were not allowed to perform on stage. Plays laden with female roles forced men to play those parts. Egyptian boys would occasionally dress as girls in hopes that they could confuse the gods and ward off the evil eye. In southern India, women were highly oppressed, and when the time came to worship the female deity, men posed as women. They did this in hopes that the goddess would embody them and not the women they deemed unworthy. The Japanese had the art of Kabuki, a style of dramatization, which allowed only men to perform on stage. Gender transformations were even recorded in North America during the seventeenth century, when Native American men could sometimes become "two-spirits." This state of being was considered an embodiment of both male and female souls and was highly revered (Shaw and Ardener 11-5).

The All-American Drag Queen

In America, the idea of playing a woman for entertainment value began to show up during the nineteenth century. Southern white men would perform as minstrels in blackface or as mulatto women (Shaw and Ardener 16). This type of performance was made to emphasize the subjugation of slave women and make the white men feel superior. It was also the beginning of drag in American culture. It seems that, during the hundred years following these events, the practice shifted from that of a heterosexual man's power trip to that of a gay man's fulfillment of his inner femininity. However, homosexuality was not widely accepted and many of these drag queens sought refuge in smaller clubs and tucked away places (Doyle). Drag could not stay a quiet practice for long though. As the popularity of drag grew, America began to see it displayed in more places. Magazines such as *FemmeMimic* and *DRAG* displayed the newest talent and prettiest faces. America even saw drag personified on their television screen as Milton Berle often played a woman in his sketches (Williams), and movies like *Glen and Glenda* made drag the prominent story line.

As the homosexual community began to grow and become more prominent, they started to revolt at their lack of rights and sought fair treatment. There was not only a heavier influence from the gay community as a whole, but drag in particular became very common ("Drag Shows").

Despite their progress, there was still much tension between the heterosexual and homosexual community. On June 28, 1969, the police raided a club in Greenwich Village called the Stonewall Inn, which had a reputation for serving a predominantly gay crowd. Many people were arrested but it was the gay patrons (including drag queens and kings, colored or not) who were being taken away, not the heterosexual white man a few seats over. The outrage at this event snowballed into a massive riot that included both gay and straight supporters of equal rights. This event, now known as the Stonewall Riots, was a major turning point in the gay rights movement ("Stonewall Riots").

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Drag Today

Today, those involved in the drag subculture are making tremendous strides in their four-inch, size 16 pumps. Drag is being welcomed more into the community. Many people have begun to embrace the glitter and hairspray, and just as many straight people patronize drag shows as do gay. Drag has become a very popular form of entertainment, and drag queens such as RuPaul and Holly Woodlawn are just as common in the average person's vocabulary as Brad Pitt or Drew Barrymore.

Drag shows themselves are even becoming as mainstream as their performers. In Seattle, in the early 1990s, a woman named Judy Werle organized an event to help raise money in the fight against AIDS (Kiviat). The rest is history. Bingo, a game once played by your grandmother and single Aunt Karen, has now become a vulgar and rowdy form of entertainment. Drag bingo is taking place all across the United States and is rapidly becoming a new favorite pastime.

Tuesday night is HamBingo night at Hamburger Mary's in downtown Orlando. The smell of burgers and beer fills the air; so does the Bette Midler tune being sung off key by the gay waiter just a few tables over. And, although that person on stage may look like your mother-in-law, the figures under the dresses are far from similar. But that's what people love about Mary's. In a world where everything is so uptight, there is still a place where you can sit back, have a fried Twinkie, and be verbally assaulted by a man that's dressed like Mrs. Cleaver.

"I'm a Drag-tor": a Conversation with Carol Lee

HamBingo happens every Tuesday at Hamburger Mary's. A slew of bingo games are hosted by two very feisty drag queens, and this particular Tuesday I was going to be able to interview one

of these hosts. Carol Lee is a distinguished drag performer in the Orlando area. I spoke with her outside for nearly ten minutes after the show was over.

Carol Lee is not a person you would soon forget. A towering six-foot-two (not counting the heels), she embodies what it means to be a performer. The night I spoke to Carol Lee she was wearing a black and yellow mini-dress/kimono that barely covered the unmentionables. Her hair, short and platinum blonde, hung in loose waves around her perfectly done-up face and was tied back in a ribbon to match her dress (See Figure 1). There was an air about her that emoted the upmost confidence. Between photo opportunities with restaurant patrons, Carol Lee took drags on her Virginia Slims, held ever so carefully in her strong hands disguised with French tip press-ons.

“I Don’t Think Anyone Sets Out to Be a Drag Queen”

As soon as I asked Carol Lee how long she had been doing drag, I was greeted with an exasperated expression. “I’ve been doing it for ten, oh God,” she took a long pause, “fifteen years.” The pause was accompanied by a muffled groan. The same groan every woman lets out as soon as you ask her what her age is. Carol Lee’s mannerisms were perfectly feminine, and it didn’t come as much of a surprise when she said it had been fifteen years. She’s had practice. Lots and lots of practice. But the idea of drag was something that still resonated as strange and unfamiliar to me. I asked Carol Lee how a person would suddenly decide to become a drag queen. “I don’t think anyone like sets out to be a drag queen,” she said. “Like I didn’t set out to be a drag queen. Um, I was a Broadway lover. And as I got older my voice changed, but one Broadway diva didn’t. Carol Channing.” As Carol Lee made a wild pose, an obvious imitation of her iconic idol, she began to tell me how she got into drag, this time with significantly more gusto than when she told me how long she had been in the business:



Figure 1: Carol Lee (photo by author)

I could sing along with her and I found out I could impersonate her and then when I moved down here I wrote a show called *The Never-Before Told Life of Carol Channing* that I produced and starred in and did it at the Fringe Festival and I did it around Florida. And that kind of got me into drag. Like, I consider myself not a drag queen; I’m a ‘drag-tor,’ like an actor who performs in drag. I know that sounds like [she made a frilly motion with her hands and spoke in a faux French accent] ‘fwa, fwa, fwa’ and everything but I don’t mean it to be like that.

Carol ended abruptly, as if she was afraid that I found her story contrived. Au contraire. I was even more interested than when I began, and, as she took drags on her cigarette, I attempted to figure out who the real Carol Lee was.

As we continued, Carol Lee made an effort to clarify just what she meant by “drag-tor.” She let out a small laugh as if she was revealing the biggest secret in the world. “This all comes off and I am full boy at the end of the night. Like farting and whatever and everything.” I couldn’t help but laugh back. There was still part of me that just couldn’t imagine Carol Lee as anything other than Carol Lee. Obviously, there was more to her than met the eye, and even she said that “Carol” was nothing more than an act. But I still saw her as...her. Finally, I just had to ask what I think nearly all people wonder when they meet a drag queen: “When you’re talking about a drag queen would you refer to someone as he or she? Are some people particular about it?” I was hesitant as soon as the words slipped out of my mouth. I had no idea what the parameters of our conversation were. Was that an acceptable question? Fortunately, Carol Lee wasn’t the slightest bit phased and she answered without pause. “Some people are,” she replied. “I’m so lucky to work with Miss Sammy because we’re not. Like she, just whatever comes out of her mouth. Whether she calls me Carol or Matthew.” Matthew, eh? It was nice to have a separate name to place on the other facet of personality. Carol Lee was the feminine sophisticate with done up features. Matthew sat on the couch burping, farting, and being a man, even if being a “man” held different boundaries for different people.

Although it must be noted that throughout history not all drag queens were gay, it would be ridiculous to consider Carol Lee part of that group. Her bingo routine poked fun at the straight men she hoped to “poke” and she clearly expressed pride in her homosexuality. When I spoke to her outside, however, she was much more reserved than when performing. Her response to the question of her being gay was straightforward and sincere. “People always go through this, like, this coming out process. And I was...my coming out process—I was born. There was nothing else that needed to be said. My mother put me in baton twirling class when I was six so she had no right to be surprised.” This was a severe departure from the Carol Lee on-stage. At one point during HamBingo, Carol Lee said about her sexual orientation, “Of course I’m gay. It just makes so much more sense. I tried being a lesbian once, but I couldn’t get the taste out of my mouth.” I think that just further reinforces what Carol Lee meant by being a “drag-tor.” It really is just a big act.

What I still wanted to know was where did Carol Lee come from? Yes, I knew how she got into the business, but how did it blossom into Carol Lee? “That’s what I was going to be named if I were a girl,” she said. “That’s my grandmother’s name and really this character is my grandmother.” She made another grand gesture. This one was more reserved than that of her Carol Channing pose. It was sentimental, and Carol Lee held it a second longer, as if she was lingering in the memory of the woman she held so dear. After a moment she broke, and it seemed as if a wave of nostalgia came over her. “She’s the most important person in my life and if she hadn’t been stuck in Fort Wayne, Indiana she would have been Betty Grable. So...like it’s literally...I put this on and there are times when I wear a certain wig and I’m like, ‘Jesus Christ Carol. Ugh, you look just like Carol.’”

I could tell that family was an important part of Carol Lee’s life. I asked her what her family thought of her drag persona. She targeted her mother in particular:

You’re watching your high school son grow up listening to *Annie Get Your Gun*, discovering *Gypsy*. Oooh. And like all these Broadway shows. There was no real surprise coming for her. But, um, I think what she was surprised, because she still lives in Indiana, what she was surprised by was how supportive people can be. And how, like when she comes here to Hamburger

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Mary's, when she's down in town like she can't believe that 200 people are here to see her son dress up like a woman. You know? And it's a good thing.

Carol Lee paused and took another drag on her cigarette. She seemed so happy that her mother was supportive of her career, and even more so that 200 people come to see her in drag every Tuesday. It made me wonder. "Do you think that it has come a long way, like drag in general?" I asked. "That people are a lot more supportive of it than they used to be?" Carol Lee took another pause, thinking about how she was going to answer and then went into another tangent:

I think...Yeah! And, yeah, like I don't have any horrible stories about it. I don't have any horrible, like being gay bashed or anything, and partly because of the bubble that I put myself in. I work at Walt Disney World, and I work here. So nobody is going to be insulting about me being gay. So I imagine there are still challenges out there for people. I'm very lucky to be in this town and to be working where I work, so I imagine there are challenges, but I personally, as awful as that sounds, haven't experienced them here. Now, granted, living in Fort Wayne until I was seventeen was awful.

She went on to talk about how hard it was growing up gay in a small town and how there are now groups dedicated to letting teens know that it gets better. Carol Lee spoke passionately and forcefully and I could tell that much of that passion stemmed from personal experiences.

I had never met a drag queen before. The social stigmas surrounding that subculture led me to believe that any person who took part was loud, obnoxious, and perhaps quite vulgar. A drag queen would be a gay man who just liked to be the center of attention. When I finally did get the chance to go to HamBingo at Hamburger Mary's, I almost accepted those previous stereotypes. Carol Lee was very loud, and a little more outlandish than I had expected. She was obviously gay, and there was no doubt she liked the attention. However, when I stepped outside and spoke to Carol Lee one-on-one, I was surprised not only by the way she carried herself, but by the honesty with which she spoke. Matthew had been through a lot in his life, and the best way to share those experiences was to be a slightly more entertaining version of himself. Drag queens are not just fame whores. They are real people with colorful life experiences, a heck of a lot of talent, and just a little bit different of a way to express it. What you see is definitely not what you get.

"I Wasn't Sure How I Would Fit In": a Conversation with Jonathan Church

Jon was a pleasant man in his mid-fifties who sat in the booth next to me Tuesday evening. He was there with his wife, and, although Jon seemed out of his comfort zone, I noted that by the end of the evening he seemed to be enjoying himself. He was clean-shaven, with gray hair combed in a fashion to cover the balding spot on the back of his head. He and his wife sat down just a few minutes after I did. Hamburger Mary's runs at a much slower pace on Tuesday nights and I was able to squeeze in a quick interview with him while we waited for our food.

Jon was not the type of person I expected to see at drag queen bingo. He was clean-cut and obviously heterosexual. He was there with his wife, not a rambunctious group of friends celebrating some sort of milestone. So my first question was simple, "What made you decide to come here?" I could tell immediately it was his wife's idea as he wrapped his arm around the woman sitting next to him. "Well, Dana works downtown and her co-workers are crazy about this place. Tuesday night is date night, so here we are." Jon shrugged. I could tell this wasn't the atmosphere he was expecting:

I heard 'hamburger,' so that was fine with me. Dana gave me a bit of a synopsis of what this place was all about, so I wouldn't come in blind. Good thing too. I don't do well with surprises. I mean, I was expecting some of this. What she told me, but I didn't anticipate how crowded it would be on a

Tuesday night. I also wasn't sure how I would fit in with the crowd, being a straight male. There's a lot of colorful folks here.

Jon was uncomfortable. Not necessarily in a bad way, but it was clear that he wasn't usually exposed to things like this. I was curious what his impression of drag queens had been prior to coming here. "I never had a *bad* impression of them," Jon said, "but I just never thought I would get any enjoyment whatsoever out of one. I figured it would be a very uncomfortable experience being around them. But so far it's a hoot." I suppose Jon was enjoying himself more than I originally gave him credit for. But how could you not have even the slightest bit of fun at a place that serves single chicken breasts or the whole rack, drinks called "Zipper Rippers," or one that has waiters that bring you your check in a red high heel (See Figure 2). It's an atmosphere made to make you smile.

And Jon was doing just that as he got increasingly more comfortable. As we continued talking he began expressing his enjoyment of this new experience. "It's a great break from the stress and fast pace of the week," he said. "I've always liked bingo. This is a bit different, but I like it all the same I think." I asked him what he thought of Carol Lee and Miss Sammy. "They are both hilarious, and really know how to work the crowd. It's nice how welcoming they are towards everyone. A nice couple of..." Jon paused trying to think of the right word, "...gals? Would you say gals? If they're going to be in dresses then I guess that makes them ladies tonight. Either way, they seem pretty friendly."



Figure 2: The check (photo by author)

I found it amazing that Jon was so up for a new experience. Most people would probably scoff at the situation, but Jon was embracing the event despite all doubts. I was happy that this would be a positive occasion for him, and, after experiencing drag queens for the first time, I was curious if his opinion of them

they're people, too."

had changed. "Definitely! It really opened my mind about them. I know it's a little cliché, but

Final Thoughts

I feel confident in saying that most Americans have gone through their lives never being exposed to more than what they believe they are comfortable with. Drag has more often than not been looked upon with a negative eye. Why? Is there something that is morally or ethically wrong with it? Does it break any rules or regulations? No. It's just unfamiliar, and for some reason people are terrified of things that they are not familiar with.

I spoke to a few people after I had decided to research drag queens. Not only was I interested in people's opinions, but I was curious what their reactions would be as well. Most were enthused about what the outcome of my research would be, but some were hesitant at my beginning it at all. A friend of mine was concerned at the subject matter itself. I was told that drag queens are strange people, they lack composure, and they are vulgar and crude. I was also supposed to be weary because drag queens are the types of people to force their ideas at you. My friend wasn't to blame for his misconceptions. He had never met a drag queen before, and all of his statements were consequences of his conservative upbringing.

Despite the fact that I had convinced myself that my friend was misinformed, I could not help but enter my research with some of these ideas lingering in the back of my mind. I went to HamBingo for the first time and was not expecting any of what happened. The show was crude and the drag queens there were much different than any two people I had ever met. I would be lying to say that some of my friend's ideas didn't hold true, but I had to remember that this was also nothing more than a show. When I stepped outside to interview Carol Lee, all of those misconceptions were immediately blown out the window by her warmth and generosity. At the end of our interview, she even expressed a worry that her answers might not be good enough; she didn't want to cause me to receive a poor grade.

The ideas of not only my friend, but countless others, are so sorely mistaken. Drag isn't meant to be offensive. It's self-expression. A show. Drag queens are people who like to bring enjoyment to others. They are actors and comediennees who, although they have been chastised their whole lives, want to make the world a bit happier for everyone else.

After my experience talking to Carol Lee and the people at Hamburger Mary's I feel like I can finally see why drag is so appealing. Yes, it is self-expression, but it doesn't just benefit the person in drag. It brings a little humor and happiness to everyone who is around to be a part of it.

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