



Bourbon, Ray (1892?-1971)

by Claude J. Summers

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Legendary drag performer and recording artist Ray (or Rae) Bourbon appeared in silent movies, vaudeville acts, Broadway plays, and, from the 1930s through the 1960s, performed across the United States in a gay nightclub circuit. Often arrested by the police for his "indecent" performances and for dressing in drag, Bourbon was ultimately convicted of conspiracy to commit murder and died in prison.

Bourbon deliberately obscured his origins, sometimes even claiming that he was "the last of the Hapsburg Bourbons," but he was probably born Hal Waddell in Texarkana, Texas sometime around 1892.

In the early 1920s, Bourbon worked as a stuntman in Hollywood and appeared in several silent films, sometimes in drag. He then teamed up with Bert Sherry in a successful vaudeville act, "Bourbon and Sherry," in which Sherry played the straight man to Bourbon's flamboyant drag persona.

He soon attracted the attention of Mae West, who in 1927 cast him in two of her plays--*Sex and Pleasure Man*. Both were raided by police who were attempting to "clean up" Broadway. Bourbon later appeared as an extra in West's movies and in supporting roles in productions of her plays.

In the early 1930s, Bourbon recorded the first of his many risqué records. He also began to appear in the "pansy clubs" that sprouted in Hollywood in an attempt to capitalize on the "pansy craze" in New York during the late 1920s. Bourbon created and starred in a drag revue called "Boys Will Be Girls." After the police shut down the Los Angeles establishments, he moved his show to San Francisco.

In the late 1930s and early 1940s, Bourbon managed his own club, The Rendezvous, in Los Angeles. His revue "Don't Call Me Madam" attracted celebrities such as Bob Hope and Bing Crosby. In addition, Bourbon also headlined at such venues as Finocchio's in San Francisco and continued to record albums issued by small record companies.

In 1934, Bourbon met the song-writing team Bob Wright and Chet Forrest. The young men, who would later write *Kismet* (1953) and *Grand Hotel* (1957), became life-long friends of Bourbon and often served as his accompanists and wrote songs for his shows.

In the 1940s, Bourbon appeared in a Los Angeles stage production of his own revue *Insults of 1944* and then with Mae West in New York and touring productions of her plays *Diamond Lil* and *Catherine the Great*. During this period, he also gained attention with a solo recital at New York's Carnegie Hall that attracted a sold-out audience of "very spectacular characters," as the reviewer for the New York *Daily News* noted.

From the late 1940s through the 1950s, Bourbon released a series of albums on the UTC (for Under the Counter) label. Many of these albums feature explicitly gay content, including one about a police raid of a gay wedding in a Chicago church. These albums, with titles such as *The Wedding*, *You're Stepping on My Eyelashes*, and *Around the World in 80 Ways*, were distributed as "party" or "adult" records, often by mail order or sold at Bourbon's appearances.

What is most remarkable about Bourbon's performances on these albums is not his raunchy humor and double entendres, but his air of defiance and his satirical gibes at the hypocrisy of the dominant culture, as well as his ability to laugh at himself. Moreover, although UTC records were by necessity distributed "sub rosa" or "under the counter," their production over such a long period indicates a continuing demand for them and the development and growth of a market for gay material.

One of Bourbon's UTC albums of the mid-1950s was entitled, *Take a Look at My Operation*, ostensibly about his own sex-change operation, which he claimed to have undergone in Mexico. The claim was undoubtedly a publicity stunt to capitalize on the widespread media attention aroused by Christine Jorgensen's sex-reassignment surgery in 1954, but it may have also been inspired by a real operation for cancer.

Another of the 1950s albums was entitled *One on the Aisle: An Intimate View of Grand Opera*. The album features spoofs of operas by Wagner, Bizet, and Verdi, among others.

In the 1950s and 1960s, Bourbon was a popular performer on a gay nightclub circuit that spanned the country. He also toured with the famous racially-mixed group of drag performers, the Jewel Box Revue.

Among the clubs, bars, and theaters in which Bourbon appeared were such large and small venues as Albuquerque's Silver Slipper, Idaho Falls' Cheerio Club, Central City, Colorado's Glory Hole, New Orleans' Dixie's Bar of Music, Atlanta's Imperial Lounge, Seattle's The Garden of Allah, Baltimore's Stacy's Bar, Portland's Clover Club, and St. Louis's Gaiety Theater, among many others.

The long list of gay clubs at which Bourbon appeared, and their impressive geographic diversity, is an instructive reminder that post-World War II gay culture flowered not merely in such cities as New York, Chicago, Los Angeles, and San Francisco, but also in medium-sized cities throughout the country.

Bourbon was noted particularly for his comic timing and camp humor, his deep Southern drawl, and his infectious, cackling laugh, as well as his inventive and witty ad libs. In his drag act, he did not impersonate divas. Rather, he created his own flamboyant (but not glamorous) persona, described by one audience member as "doyen drag." One of his most touching characterizations was that of a foul-mouthed cleaning lady.

The final years of Bourbon's life were sad ones. With the stirrings of a gay rights movement, Bourbon's career floundered. His humor may have seemed dated and retrograde. Certainly, his act, which at one time had seemed so daring, must in the 1960s have come to seem rather tame.

In early 1969, Bourbon was arrested and charged with hiring an accomplice to murder a kennel owner in Big Springs, Texas. Because Bourbon could not pay for the upkeep of dogs that he had boarded with the kennel owner in the summer of 1968, the latter had sold the animals to a research facility. Although Bourbon denied the charge, he was convicted and sentenced to life in prison.

Bourbon died in prison of a heart attack in July 1971. While in prison, he began an autobiography entitled "Daddy Was a Lady." The manuscript was lost for many years, but it has recently resurfaced and may soon be published.

Although Bourbon has been largely forgotten, there has recently been a resurgence of interest in his "sad and crazy life," as measured both by renewed interest in his albums and the appearance of an excellent website devoted to him. In many ways, his life and career are revealing of the status of gay culture in some crucial decades. He deserves recognition as an enormously talented comedian and a pioneering, openly gay entertainer.

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