



## Detroit

by Tim Retzloff

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The automobile manufacturing capital of the world, the Arsenal of Democracy during World War II, Detroit in southeast Michigan has often been overlooked as a significant gay metropolis. Founded in 1701 and with a 2000 census population of 951,000 in the city, but a much larger population in the metropolitan area, Detroit's far-flung geography and racial divisions have shaped the city and have shaped the nature of regional queer life in the postwar years.

For as long as anyone can recall, bars have been central to Detroit's gay world. By the late 1940s, white gay men and lesbians traveled by car to the heart of the city to such bars as the Rio Grande, the Palais, the Silver Star, the Woodward, and the Brass Rail, the latter the site of singer Johnnie Ray's 1959 arrest for accosting and soliciting.

At the Blue Crest, white patrons gathered in the mid-1950s to watch flamboyant Black religious leader Prophet Jones broadcasting live on his short-lived Sunday night television program.

During these same decades, a distinctive local African-American gay culture emerged, including not only the daring Prophet Jones, who accumulated riches and attracted an entourage of male companions before Detroit police snared him on a morals charge, but also popular Black drag performances at many ostensibly heterosexual venues. Private house parties, such as those hosted by Ruth Ellis and her partner Babe Franklin, likewise served as crucial social outlets for African Americans typically excluded from white gay bars.

Against a backdrop of increased racial tension in the city, culminating in the 1967 riots, Detroit's lesbians and gay men made uneasy forays into activism before Stonewall. Except for a chapter of the Mattachine Society from 1958 to 1960 and the longer lasting ONE in Detroit from 1965 to 1977, queer organizing remained virtually non-existent in Detroit until the establishment in 1970 of the Gay Liberation Front at Wayne State University. The Detroit GLF gave birth to the *Gay Liberator*, one of the flagship gay lib publications in the country--a newspaper noted, as well, for its disdain of bar culture.

The Association of Suburban People, founded in 1975 to combat police harassment and push for legal reform, subsumed the liberation impulse in favor of mainstream, civil-rights-focused gay politics.

Important strides during this time included Brian McNaught's hunger strike following his firing from the *Michigan Catholic*, a Metropolitan Community Church of Detroit lawsuit over its exclusion from state prisons, and the inclusion of sexual orientation among the anti-discrimination clauses in the 1974 city charter, making Detroit the largest United States city at the time with legal protections for gays. (After much wrangling, the council enacted an omnibus human rights ordinance in 1979 to carry out the intent of the charter.)

The formation of the Association of Suburban People reflected a significant demographic shift of white lesbians and gay men residing on the other side of the city's northern Eight Mile Road boundary, part of a

larger white exodus from the city.

While white queers migrated to the suburbs, however, their queer water holes remained within Detroit. New lesbian bars, appealing to a discreet, middle class clientele, unobtrusively opened far from the city's nucleus. Gay male bars, in turn, clustered along and to the north of McNichols Avenue. Notable among these was Menjo's, where openly gay dance teacher Christopher Flynn took his protégée Madonna to disco in the mid-1970s.

Unable to cross into the suburbs, the growing number of white gay bars dispersed to other outlying areas of the city, away from the highest concentrations of African-American residents.

Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, while bars had a difficult time crossing into suburbia, gay organizations and businesses made incursions, often unwelcome, into ring cities. AIDS Partnership Michigan and Affirmations Community Center located in Ferndale. The statewide newspaper *Between The Lines* began publishing in Farmington. The hugely popular Pronto! restaurant opened in Royal Oak.

Despite increasing gay and lesbian presence in suburban towns, however, voters overturned gay rights ordinances in Ferndale and Royal Oak in the late 1990s and early 2000s.

Meanwhile, queer activism and culture within Detroit itself gained visibility and vibrancy in recent years. In addition to predominantly white organizations such as the Triangle Foundation, the Detroit Women's Coffee House, and glbtq employee groups at each of the Big Three automakers, local Black queers became increasingly mobilized through the A. Lorde Collective, the Men of Color Motivational Group, *Kick!* magazine, black-owned bars, the premier African-American celebration Hotter Than July, and a new community center named for late elder Ruth Ellis.

Despite continued conflict between city and suburb and between different racial groups, some spirit of queer community, unbounded by city limits, revealed itself as Detroit entered the millennium.

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