

The Gold Key Club:

A Sixties Rural Drag Club and
Maryland's Forgotten Gay Getaway

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THE GOLD KEY GIRLS
at North Beach Maryland



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a gay extremely little history zine (#2.5)

These stories come from research I did for a statewide LGBTQ+ history study with the organization Preservation Maryland, and the presentations I've been doing with some amazing colleagues ever since. This **gay little history zine** is my attempt to provide an accessible way to read and learn about the history of LGBTQ+ people in Maryland and occasionally in other, less interesting places.

People in our community rarely get an opportunity to learn our history, so I want it to be as available as I can make it. I also want to make it fun, a lot of this history is really ridiculous in a sort of melodramatic, campy way.

If you want to get into the nitty-gritty, if you want nuance, and you don't mind reading something a little more serious and dry, you should check out my website at www.mdhistory.gay, it has longer, boringer, more academic articles I adapt these from. If you like it, please let me know! If you don't, well, you can't say I didn't warn you

If you have questions, I can be reached through my history Instagram:
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The Gold Key Club:

A Sixties Drag Club and Maryland's Forgotten Gay Getaway

by Ben Egerman

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IN the 1960s, publicly hosting a drag show in DC or Baltimore was a good way to get your liquor license pulled, or worse, your bar raided by police. But just down the road in tiny North Beach, Maryland, queer nightlife thrived. The Gold Key Club, a drag bar in a fading resort town, became the go-to summer escape for many LGBTQ+ people across the region. The story as to why includes a weird mix of gamblers, outlaw bikers, Cold War purges, and one legendary drag queen named Chunga.

To get why a drag bar opened in tiny North Beach, you have to understand the repression happening in DC and Baltimore in the 1960s.

In DC at this time, police were stepping up surveillance and sting ops in cruising areas, and police harassment outside gay bars was common. It could be brutal—DC drag queens remembered

getting beat by cops just for being in makeup. This was still the Lavender Scare, a moral panic around queer government employees, and Federal agencies were combing through arrest reports for the names of employees so they could be fired en masse. In Baltimore, after a lull following the botched Pepper Hill Club raid, authorities spent the late '60s trying to reassert control—raiding bars again, threatening liquor licenses, and shutting down any venue that hosted drag shows.

City bar owners, scared of losing their licenses, kept drag far away. As a result, gay and lesbian folks lost some of their nightlife. Performers lost income. Many trans women of the time found refuge in drag; for them it was worse, as these were some of the only places where they could present as they wanted.

But Why North Beach?

Back in the '50s, Southern Maryland was the East Coast's mini-Vegas—the only place in the country outside Nevada with legal slot machines. North Beach, about half an hour from DC and an hour from Baltimore, ran on gam-

bling and booze. But during the '60s, the state pulled the plug. Slot machines were outlawed and what remained of the town's tourist economy crashed.

As casinos, bars, and restaurants shut down, the town slid into a rough reputation. The only businesses bringing people in were a handful of biker bars. Newspapers reported on several all-out melees in town between outlaw motorcycle gangs. So despite the ongoing demonization and repression of LGBTQ+ people, when drag queens started showing up, it wasn't high on the local cops' priority list.

So at the time that the police department in Baltimore and multiple federal agencies in DC were actively hunting for homosexuals, when a *Sun* reporter asked North Beach's police chief about the "female impersonators mincing across the street," he said that his seven-man force had more pressing concerns.

Enter the Gold Key Club

We know the club existed by 1960—originally as the Gold Key Casino—because an article reports that some-

one stole its slot machines. By the mid-'60s, it was the Gold Key Club and was well-established as a queer destination. It showed up in gay travel guides and advertised regular drag shows in DC papers—something that would have gotten them shut down in Baltimore and harassed by police in DC.

DC and Baltimore queers came in droves. By the mid-60s, gay travel guides—crucial resources for queer folks looking for safety and fun on the road—listed the Gold Key as a standout destination. For the next decade, the club pops up here and there in DC newspapers focused on nightlife, in the guides, eventually in the DC gay press and in a 1973 magazine about drag queens. They described packed weekend drag shows, lesbian pool sharks, and a cruisy gay beach.

The Queen of North Beach

At the center of it all was a queen named Chunga. She hosted, emceed, and brought in talent to the club. In interviews with DC gays and drag queens about that time, Chunga is the first

name out of their mouth when someone brings up North Beach.

She may have been Chunga Ochoa of the Jewel Box Revue, a large touring drag show that evaded bans on drag by staging their acts and showing it in theatres. Coincidentally, another performer in that show was Stormé De Laverie, the Black drag king sometimes credited with kicking off the Stonewall Uprising. Around the time Chunga is in North Beach, Ochoa disappears from tour rosters. It could be a coincidence, but it mostly lines up.

And there were others. Bawdy singer Louise Potter performed there in the early '60s. Early gay activist Jack Nichols remembered her as a "bleach-blond butch" with a femme chorus girl always nearby. He described North Beach as "the Washington equivalent to Fire Island, except considerably less plush."

Peak and Decline

In the early 70s, things shifted. The Gold Key started advertising in the *Washington Blade*, and the owner apparently offered same-sex weddings as a



business draw. New queens took the stage. The magazine *Drag* ran a full photo spread of the club's shows in 1973 showing the big hair, Broadway numbers, and Hollywood glam of "old school" drag.

But it couldn't last forever. By the late '70s, the Gold Key disappeared from gay travel guides. Maybe it shut down, stopped hosting drag shows, or just stopped drawing the queer crowd.

Why? Queer life was changing: In the cultural "coming out" of the Post-

Stonewall period, DC and Baltimore each built their own thriving LGBTQ+ night-life scenes. By the late '70s, there were 50+ gay bars in DC and 30 in Baltimore, many offering regular drag shows. Why drive to a small beach town when the party was right in your neighborhood?

Part of the problem was regional. With slots gone, a "skid row image," and Ocean City booming thanks to the Bay Bridge, North Beach somewhat fell off the map. And there was competition coming from the bustling beaches of Delaware: Rehoboth Beach was becoming more and more popular, seeing a boom of new clubs, b&b's, and cafes oriented towards the community. A small town with one bar simply couldn't compete for LGBTQ+ tourists.

What the Gold Key Meant

The Gold Key Club was a unique club that helped make North Beach a unique town. For a generation of LGBTQ+ people in and around Maryland, it offered an escape from the fear and repression consuming D.C., Baltimore, and cities across the country. For North Beach, it offered an economic lifeline: a stable

group of visitors who didn't get into knife fights with rival gangs in the middle of town. Together it led to something that seems surprising today: that queer people from Baltimore and DC looking for that freedom and safety had to leave their cities and go to rural Southern Maryland in order to find it.

Now, there's a major caveat here: this acceptance was still within the context of an almost all-white town in the most culturally Southern part of Maryland in the 1960s, a time when racial violence was particularly common. And while it doesn't seem like the Gold Key was whites-only, it probably didn't really need to be: Black queers had every reason to fear the response of North Beach's residents and cops to their presence in town at night, and largely stayed away except as a part of a larger group of mostly white friends.

And I don't want to oversell this: even acknowledging that, it doesn't mean North Beach was a haven of tolerance for queer people. But it also wasn't just a town reluctantly tolerating the gays for their cash either. Like anywhere, some people disap-

proved, some didn't care, and some probably had their minds changed. What I do think is that the Gold Key forced the town to reckon with queer people as part of daily life. In a place that needed the business, turning away queers wasn't really an option. So people grew up in a town where girls asked their mothers why they can't have fancy shoes like those pretty ladies at the club, where teenagers gathered at the rear door and tried to sneak looks in at the drag shows. For everyone, it gave them the chance—whether they took it or not—to challenge some of the dominant beliefs about LGBTQ+ people.

What happened at the Gold Key was a rare overlap: the struggles of a rural former tourist town met the needs of mostly urban queer folks for safe places to congregate—and together, they created something unusual and special. It's not well documented. But the club still lives on in the memories of locals, who tell stories of growing up around "the ladies of the Gold Key." It became part of North Beach's story, and while it operated, it in some ways made the town more open than bigger, supposedly more progressive cities. That history is worth remembering.

