

THE PANSY CRAZE:

The Jazz era drag balls of West Baltimore



a gay little history zine #4

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 about these stories or queer history in general, I can be reached through my history Instagram:

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**Photos in this zine courtesy of
the AFRO American Newspapers
Archive/Afro Charities**

THE PANSY CRAZE:

The 1920s and 1930s drag balls of West Baltimore

by Ben Eggerman

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*There are a few songs and a film clip mentioned in this zine.
Please scan this QR code for a youtube playlist containing them.*



INTRO: WHAT WAS THE PANSY CRAZE?

Over the past 15ish years, mostly thanks to the magic of reality TV, drag has exploded in popularity. Used to be, you'd mostly find drag shows in divey gay bars. Now, all you need to get into drag is a television or an annoying gay coworker.

It's not the first time that mainstream (which is to say, straight) American culture has been fascinated by the creativity of drag queens or with queer culture. During the 1920s and early 30s, 'female impersonators' headlined nightclubs and theatres across the country. This was a time of flappers, speakeasies, and yes, drag queens. In Hollywood, queens like Julian Eltinge and Jean Malin appeared in early films. On Broadway, Kar-

yl Norman wrote and starred in musicals to sold-out stages. This obsession was called the Pansy Craze.

Much more exciting was an entirely different side of the Pansy Craze happening. In the middle of the jazz and swing eras, nightlife was buzzing in Black entertainment districts like Lenox Ave in Harlem, U Street in DC, and Pennsylvania Ave in West Baltimore. There, 'pansies' frequently performed and emceed clubs, and groups of queens came together to throw massive annual Pansy Balls. In Baltimore, these balls were extensively covered by the *Baltimore Afro-American* (now the *AFRO*), who sent reporters and photographers. Their articles and photos show that Baltimore's legacy of brilliant Black queer and trans performers goes back over 100 years. So let's dive in!

KARYL NORMAN

As drag acts began drawing bigger and bigger crowds in theatres in the early 1920s, two breakout stars emerged: Julian Eltinge and Karyl Norman. Eltinge left the theater world and moved to LA to appear in films. This left Karyl Norman the undisputed queen of the stage.

Norman grew up in East Baltimore before becoming one of the most popular vaudeville entertainers of her time. She co-wrote songs for musicals where she performed male and female roles, and toured nationally, often starting in Baltimore. In 1927, she made it big when she starred in and designed costumes for a show called *Lady Do* on Broadway.

In 1934, Norman opened a "Pansy Club" in New York for nightly drag shows, but it was shut down by police after one night, citing pressure from the Catholic Church. The same story played out in Baltimore, where there were a series of short-lived Pansy clubs in Mount

Vernon (already seen as the gayborhood). Their ads weren't subtle: "The Melody Club: Where Boys Will Be Girls," reads one. Another is "Club Picadilly. The Place Where People Go Gay!" Anyway, those were shut down after a campaign by the Archdiocese of Baltimore.

Sadly, this was the story nationally. And in Hollywood, organized campaigns against violence and "immorality" in film led to the Hays code, which censored "any inference of sex perversion," ending pansy appearances in the movies. It was the Great Depression, and nightlife spots were struggling even before police started pressuring clubs not to book pansy acts. By the late 1930s, the Pansy Craze had faded in most of the country and locally.

But that's just a small part of the Pansy Craze in the city: in Jim Crow Baltimore, there were two distinct Pansy Crazes, one white, and one Black. And in the streets, nightclubs and dance halls of West Baltimore, pansies were a common sight, even appearing in a 1929 blues song by Bertha Idaho called "Down On Pennsylvania Avenue":

*"Let's take a trip down to the cabaret,
where they turn night into day,
Some freakish sights you'll surely see,
you can't tell the he's from the she's,
You'll find 'em every night on Pennsylvania Avenue"*

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The 20s and 30s were both difficult and exciting times for West Baltimore. The population swelled with Black families fleeing increasing racist violence further South. Despite businesses and institutions aimed at supporting the community like the *Afro-American* and Morgan State, the intense discrimination and dehumanizing Jim

Crow laws meant extreme poverty was widespread—especially after the Great Depression started.

At the same time, this was during the Harlem Renaissance and the jazz era, and Black culture and arts were thriving. The Black arts scenes of the time were notoriously queer. Harlem Renaissance writers like Langston Hughes and Countee Cullen were frequently seen at New York pansy balls and other queer events. There were many queer blues and jazz performers like Gladys Bentley, a butch lesbian who performed in a white tuxedo and top hat, and Baltimore's own Billie Holiday, who was open about having affairs with both men and women. In Black cultural centers across the country, queers were a common sight. A 1931 article in the *Afro-American* describes one end of Pennsylvania Ave and the nearby blocks as a place where women were "lured by a woman's affections," and where "pansies can be seen cruising for men." Blues musicians sang fairly openly about homosexuality, such as in Waymon "Sloppy" Henry (god I love that name) 1928 song, "Say I Do It":

*"Mose and Pete lived on Greenwillow street, in Northwest Baltimore,
Pete ran with Mose cause he powdered his nose, and even wore ladies hose,
Two could be seen walkin' hand in hand in all kinds of weather,
Til the neighbors, they began to signify 'bout the birds that flock together"*

So it's no surprise that in the 1920s, the *Afro-American* started publishing articles about a new sort of event where those pansies would don fabulous gowns, dance, and compete for the best dressed: the Pansy Balls.

During the 1920s, Pansy Balls started cropping up in Black neighborhoods across the country, with the largest in Harlem drawing thousands. Queens often traveled



Karyl Norman publicity photo, 1923



Queens at the 1937 ball in Washington. Photo courtesy of the AFRO American Newspapers Archive/Afro Charities

between cities to compete. But during the mid 1930s, many cities began cracking down. Police shut down venues that were to host balls in Atlantic City and Washington, DC. In Philadelphia and Chicago, balls were raided and attendees arrested.

But Baltimore's never were. Not for good reasons: in Philadelphia and Atlantic City, the balls were racially integrated, which was the pretext police used to block or raid them. Segregation was much stricter and legally mandated in Baltimore, so the balls here were entirely or almost entirely Black.

But a lot of the backlash came from more established members of the Black community. Howard University administrators demanded police shut down a U Street ball, which they did. In Philadelphia, the major Black newspaper demanded to know why police *didn't* break up an interracial ball, saying the city only allowed it because it was embarrassing to the *respectable* Black people of the city. They got their wish the next year.

Most Black newspapers condemned the balls as perverted and only wrote about them to denounce them. But the *Baltimore Afro-American*, particularly nightlife writer and editor Ralph Matthews, had a different approach. They sent reporters and photographers, and even published several pieces defending pansies.

That doesn't mean their coverage was at all supportive, because it wasn't. Articles had dehumanizing headlines like "Are Pansies People? Scientists Baffled as Fag Balls Increase" and "The Pansy Craze: Is it Entertainment or Pure Filth?" Slang terms and slurs like pansy, sissy, faggot, and fairy mixed with the more scientific and medical terms of the day like homosexual, "third sex," or "neutral gender."

Terms like those last two show that this was a time when sexuality and gender were not seen as different things. Heterosexuality was considered to be a core part of gender-if you were a man, you were interested in women and vice versa-so if someone was attracted to the same sex, they had the wrong gender's sexual desires. The most simplified way to say this is that they viewed what we'd now see as cis queers as people who were only slightly or partially trans.

And there was definitely a variety of gender expressions in these balls, from a man in a suit asking why no other men would dance with him, saying, "Don't slight me just because I don't wear a dress. You know what I am," to a queen named Miss Lizzie, who told a reporter she was a "pure dee (out and out) woman and no 'Pansy.'"

In general, the *Afro-American* seemed more willing to talk about queer life at the time, including an article from their Harlem correspondent that opened "The 'third sex' known as 'queers' now go in for nudism at their 'costume' and reefer parties in New York. One such reefer party was held recently in the swanky apartment of one of Sugar Hill's popular residents."

The rest of the article is a play-by-play of a party where a bunch of queer Harlemites drink a lot, smoke weed, take off their clothes, and make out while a lesbian opera singer and her girlfriend play some tunes. The writer never explains what *he* was doing there the whole time.

There was plenty of backlash. Ralph Matthews wrote about the hate mail he was receiving for publishing his articles. Although there were the usual letters to the



Madame White at the 1932 Baltimore ball. Photo courtesy of the AFRO American Newspapers Archive/Afro Charities



H. Neals, from DC, at the 1932 Baltimore ball. Photo courtesy of the AFRO American Newspapers Archive/Afro Charities

editor saying the articles were disgusting and would corrupt Black youth, unlike other papers, they also gave space for letters defending pansies, including one from one of the leading pansy performers herself. More on that later.

But hey, this isn't a zine about newspapers. I get carried away, I know. You probably want to look at the balls. I know I do. Pretty much always.

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The first Pansy Ball in Baltimore was thrown in 1922 or 1923 by a queer social club called *The Vagabonds*, later *The Art Club*—both the 1930 and 1931 balls were described as the eighth annual. In 1931, they had 42 members, though many more “rough and rowdies” were excluded for being too conspicuous or not being “perfect ladies.”

They were held in March, first at the New Albert Auditorium (which is long gone), but after a few years moved to the Monumental Elks Lodge #3 (which is still around). The featured a band, performances by nightclub entertainers, the competition, and plenty of time for dancing. Queens would generally walk in escorted by a gentleman, though often by the end of the night, many of the gentleman escorts were dancing with each other.

Attendance ranged from 150–250, with about 75 queens. Queens competed for who was best dressed and best embodied the female figures they were modeling themselves after. This was usually a Hollywood starlet, but contestants came as flappers, a telephone operator, Snow White, Martha Washington, or simply a “big mamma type.” Winners were usually queens who worked in nightclubs.

The club had one rule: no one could wear the same outfit twice. Pansies went all-out producing extravagant looks, some bought, some on loan from department stores "for demonstration purposes." Others designed their own looks, one telling a reporter, "oh, this? I made it all by my little self." The outfits would be described in detail, and I've included some of those descriptions at the end of this zine.

As for names, in those days, it was extremely common for drag queens to fully take the name of a star they were modeling themselves after. But this was a problem for Black queens: in the 1930s, there were no Black Hollywood stars. These queens would instead use the preferred showbusiness euphemism for Black—"sepia"—and call themselves things like "The Sepia Bette Davis," or "The Sepia Greta Garbo." A ball in Harlem one year had trouble distinguishing between three different Sepia Mae Wests.

Certain parts feel almost modern: queens called each other "Miss this and Miss that," called older queens "Mother" and had drag moms, and called themselves 'girls' or 'the girls.' Reporters marveled at the number of fans used as accessories. Reporters overheard plenty of shade - things like, "She must have saved the whole year for that outfit... It's a shame she doesn't know how to wear it."

One time, a reporter gets confronted by an angry queen telling him, "Now don't you dare write this affair up like the paper did last year with a lot of stuff about men in evening gowns and hard muscles. Look at me. My arms are as soft and smooth as any woman's." She then struck a pose "and sashayed across the floor."

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MEET THE PANSIES:

1 CARBERRY:

Most queens at the balls weren't professionals. J. Carberry—the queen sitting with the big Tina Turner hair—was an elevator operator by day, but at night wrote plays where he could act and sing in drag. These shows were performed in church basements, and featured Carberry's "fine falsetto voice that is keenly fitted for opera, blues, or ballads." Because of this, the paper compared him to Karyl Norman (remember her from earlier?) Carberry was a regular at most of the balls in Baltimore, and seems to have been a part of the Vagabonds club putting them on.

JOE SMOTHERS:

Others, especially those who frequently took home prizes, were nightclub entertainers like Joe "Mother" Smothers (also known as Lady Josephine). While most of the pansies put together high femme looks, Smothers took on an androgynous look modeled after OG bisexual icon Marlene Dietrich.

Joe wasn't inconspicuous: he often had bleach-blond hair, wore makeup during the day, and walked around town wearing tight pants and feminine silk shirts. Once a week, Joe hosted a show on the local Black radio station where he would sing the latest hits from popular jazz musicians. At night, he emceed at the Comedy Club, The Lenox, and other large clubs on Pennsylvania Avenue. He was known for his quick wit, incredible voice, and for singing filthy songs, such as *Hot Nuts* (*Get 'Em From the Peanut Man*), which is exactly what you think it is. Go to the playlist, you'll see.

Joe was probably the most successful pansy performer to come out of Baltimore, and had multiple stints working and living in Philadelphia and Harlem throughout the 30s.

He did get into trouble when his hotel room in Philly was raided during what sounded like one of those "nudist reefer parties" the *Afro* wrote about. He was arrested with another pansy performer along with five of their closest, partially clothed male friends.

LOUIS DIGGS:

Performing as "the Sepia Greta Garbo," Louis Diggs was the most popular pansy performer in DC and worked at many of the clubs on U Street. She was known as a dancer and for showing a lot of skin: for one of her popular acts, she wore only lingerie and gold body paint. She competed and won at the balls in DC, Baltimore, and Harlem.

As her stage name implied, she often modeled herself after the sultry, sexy Greta Garbo. At the 1934 ball, she wore a skimpy pink sequined outfit and recreated Garbo's sensual 'exotic' dance from the film, *Mata Hari*. The original dance is also on that youtube playlist. Basically Greta Garbo moves around slowly with a big sheer piece of fabric and rubs her body a few times, which was considered crazy sexy back then. The dance is supposed to be Indonesian, but the outfit looks Thai, the music sounds faux-Middle Eastern, and the actress is Scandinavian. Ah, old Hollywood.

After an article calling pansies "pure filth," Louis did something pretty surprising: he wrote a letter to Ralph Matthews defending herself, which was published in the next issue.



Photo captioned "Pansies at the 1931 Art Ball." Photo courtesy of the AFRO American Newspapers Archive/Afro Charities



"Mother" Joe Smothers, 1934 and 1936.

It reflects a lot of the thinking of the time, with Louis saying that queerness was a mental condition that people shouldn't judge others for having. He said that he had always been picked on for being effeminate, was always called a fairy, sissy, or pansy, and eventually decided that he would embrace it by becoming a drag performer. And he said that he wouldn't have it any other way. At the end of the article, he writes:

"Through the history of civilization, psychology tells us that there has always been homosexuality. No normal male -man or boy, would be influenced to become effeminate by viewing female impersonators unless he was already in a stage of developing into an invert. Why then, are we criticized as social menaces?"

To put this in modern terms, he is saying queerness has always existed, and that watching drag doesn't turn people gay. Depressingly, that's an argument that's again become much more relevant over the past decade or so.

The last time the Afro ran a picture of Diggs was in 1942, when they showed a picture of him in a beautiful black dress with the caption: "He's a Draftee, Believe it or Not?"

And that's what happened to the pansy balls, too: despite crackdowns, some cities' balls continued in the early 40s. But once World War II started, most of the queens were drafted into the army. Others, like Joe Smothers, went on USO tours. Some pansies had careers that continued for a few years after the war, but in the repressive 1950s, opportunities for drag performers were much harder to come by. The Lavender Scare, a moral panic around queer government employ-

ees, increased police harassment and drove much of queer nightlife further underground.

Once again, Ralph Matthews at the Afro-American had a different take than most. In 1950, the very start of the Lavender Scare, a reader wrote to him mockingly saying, "with your penchant for humor this drive against the queers should be right down your alley." Matthews' response is surprising, saying,

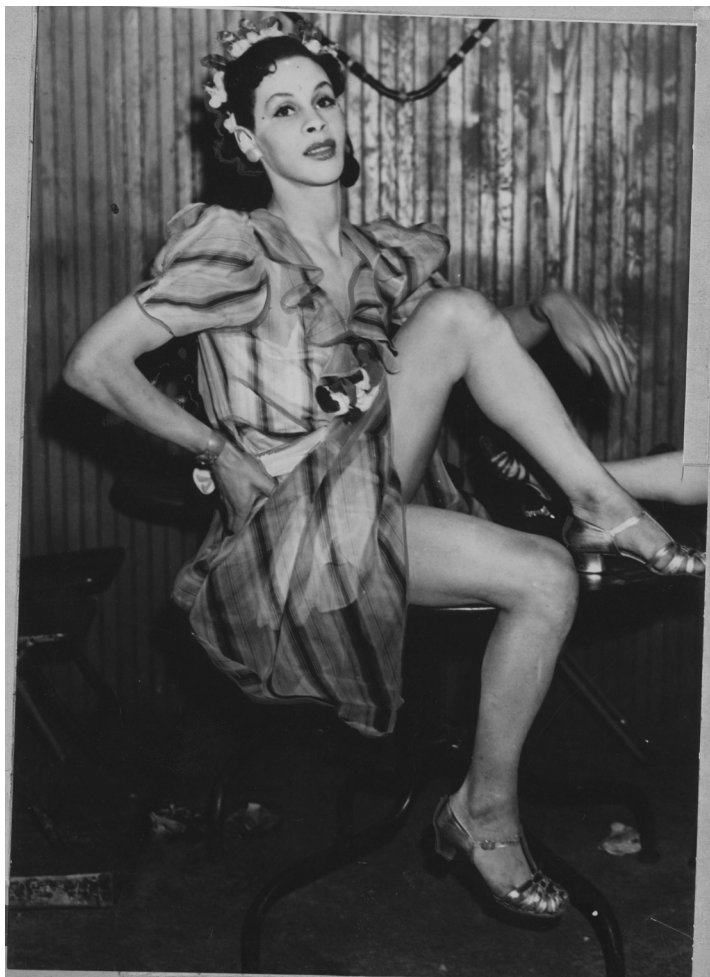
"Unfortunately, my hatred for prejudice in all its forms when directed against any group of people makes it impossible for me to see anything humorous even in a crusade against so-called perverts as a class."

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What can we take away from the history of the pansy balls? Two things stick out to me. First, the balls seem surprisingly modern in some ways: elements of language and slang, even the way the queens posed for the cameras all echo what we see in drag today. And just like now, the world of drag involved a range of different gender expressions.

The other is something that was as true then as it is now: when we're talking about the people in Baltimore moving queer cultures in exciting new directions, we are talking about Black Baltimoreans. From the pansy balls to dub music to queer hip hop, it's obvious that the city's queer culture is driven by the incredible talent and innovation of Black queer and trans folks.

I hope you've enjoyed finding out about this spectacular piece of Baltimore's past as much as I have. I hope these stories — of Joe Smothers' refusal to hide and Louis Diggs' courage to speak up — inspire you. Queer



Louis Diggs at the 1937 ball in Washington. Photo courtesy of the AFRO American Newspapers Archive/Afro Charities



Louis Diggs, 1939. Photo courtesy of
the AFRO American Newspapers Archive/Afro Charities

and trans people don't often get to see ourselves in history, especially queer and trans POC. This is just a bit of it—there's a far more complex story about all of this, one which I don't have the space here to tell. Also, I'm not sure I'm the right guy to be telling it.

As a fairly basic white cis queer, this zine is my love letter to drag and to the brilliant Black queer and trans artists who have made our city what it is, and to those who continue to do so. It's one more example of the Black leadership in culture and activism that runs throughout Maryland's LGBTQ+ history: activists in the state organized the first nationwide Black LGBTQ+ organization, the first conferences for LGBTQ+ POC, and first conferences on HIV/AIDS impact on Black communities. But those are stories for another zine. Probably with fewer pictures.

Written October, 2025, by Ben "Sloppy" Egerman

SOME OUTFITS FROM THE PANSY BALLS:

"Mary Pickford' wore a coat falling from the shoulders, three and a half yards long, four bracelets, silver and satin slippers with rhinestone heels, white silk hose, rhinestone necklace and pearl collar." 3-7-25

"Freddie, brocaded silver and gold gown, rope of pearls; James A., gold and red gown, old gold sleeves, rope of pearls, pearl Spanish comb. Ollie Thomas, Red Spanish shawl, shoes of black suede, rhinestone buckles. Spanish turban to match, body hand painted, hand painted fan." -3-7-25

"From Philadelphia came the fairy Queen who was dressed in an elaborate gown of peacock feathers, black satin slippers, a large fan hung closely on her arm and a headgear representing a peacock tail spread for two feet on either side of her head..." -3-19-27

"Never were so many fans in evidence. There were ostrich fans and imitation ostrich, and fans set with jewels." 3-15-30

"Miss Garrison reigned as the belle of the evening. Dainty and demure, with rouged lips and painted cheeks, a flowing gown of eggshell satin, studded with rhinestones, a tiara of similar crystals adorned a boyish bobbed head and a short evening wrap of scarlet velvet trimmed with ermine completed the costume." 3-21-31 (this look is on page 14)

"Diggs was adorned in a backless white satin gown trimmed in black lace, and carried an ermine wrap. Upon his feet he wore silver pumps. This young man appeared later in another exotic creation of pink crepe dotted with sequins. Dainty sandals revealed that even his toe nails were manicured and tinted with red. In this gown he did an imitation of Garbo's mati-hari satin dance, exposing shapely limbs to the audience." 3-3-34

If you have any questions about
these stories or queer history,
hit up my history insta,

@mdhistory.gay

The article this zine is based on and
other resources can be found at

www.mdhistory.gay/zines

about me,

Ben Eggerman is a librarian in Baltimore. That's it.
That's all you're getting.



Front cover, contestants at the
1937 Dancy Ball in Washington

Back cover, Lady Baltimore, H. Neals, and
Madame White, winners of the 1931 ball in Baltimore

Photos courtesy of The AFRO American Newspapers
Archive/Afro Charities