

ONCE

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KIDDY!

ALWAYS

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KIDDY!

A brief and charming history of

The Charm City Kitty Club

By: Riya Suthar

Background: from Lucky's donations

Longing for a Queer Home

Jai Brooks, from Glen Burnie, Maryland right outside Baltimore:

"when I was 18, I left Glen Burnie, because I was like, I need to be in the

"city. I need to be around queers"

Lucky Baltimore, from Minneapolis:

The city was "missing a sense of queer art collective"

Rahne Alexander, from Santa Cruz, California:

"lesbians did not really talk to me"

Before the Charm City Kitty Club (CCKC), it seems like a common theme amongst the soon-to-be members was an aching- a calling- for something greater. The spaces they had occupied did not welcome queerness and community. Thankfully, they soon found that in Baltimore.

Baltimore
maryland

Enter: The Charm City Kitty Club, founded in 2002

The Club was formed out of necessity.

"We set out to create a space where queers could come together that was

organized around art rather than alcohol, and it was really effective,"

says longtime member Rahne Alexander (Claws Out)

Founder Lucky Baltimore wanted it to be a space for queer women to socially come

together outside of bars, saying "community should be more than just that."

About the Club:

Their aim: to create entertaining shows but also form a space for queer/lesbian people to gather.

Their vision: a variety show including avant-grande mixed with punk rock and spoken word and burlesque (the whole shebang).

They wanted to expose audience members to new things.

There was *always* a theme.

It was first discussed as being an all-women performance club, but quickly expanded to all queer people, including men.

It is a volunteer-based operation.

There is no formal leader, although people took turns leading different shows.

There have been 45 shows since the club started.

When they moved from Conkling Street to the Patterson theater their audience doubled, and they had to start turning people away because shows were getting sold out.

The longevity and lasting support of the CCKC has been incredible to witness!!

CHARM CITY KITTY CLUB

Background: from Lucky's donations

THE

CREATIVE

ALLIANCE

What is it?

A space for Baltimore artists to share their work and be in community with each other

And importantly, The Creative Alliance is home to the Charm City Kitty Club.

According to the Baltimore Sun, "Their mission long has been to present art as a grassroots

experience that invites people to become eager participants, not just casual observers."

(The Transformation at the Patterson)

First they were located above Margaret's Café in Fells Point...

...Then they moved to an old Pepboys

on Highlandtown's Conkling Street...



Figure 2: Patterson Theater



Figure 1: Margaret's Cafe

...which brings us to their space in

The Patterson theater on Eastern Avenue

(they are currently in the Baltimore theater)

The Red Room was a more male-centric space that showcased experimental art and performance.

Chet, who was involved with the Red Room, notes that they tried to do queer stuff there and there wasn't any space for it. Then they tried to introduce avant-garde themes in the CCKC which didn't work either.

So...the Creative Alliance was a much better fit for queerness and experimental performance to coexist.

Club Formation

Through discussions about getting more queer participation in the Creative Alliance, Lucky Baltimore met with Kristen Anchor, who worked there, and they got a group together including Megan McShea, Chet Pancake, and Gretchen Heilman and they started planning immediately.

Recruiting Members

They recruited using flyers and word of mouth (people knew people who seemed like a good fit). They also frequented bars to hand out postcards.

Jai Brooks was a member of the Lesbian Avengers: a direct-action group that focused on lesbian issues through protest, so Chet Pancake tried recruiting from them.

Chet saw Liz Downing perform and wanted to recruit her.

Organizing

It was a lot of work to find performers.

They had to curate physical space and tech for the shows.

They had to reach out to people in person which is much more difficult than it would be now through social media.



Figure 3: the Lesbian Avengers (from Jai Brooks’s collection). Taken by Tiffany Watson

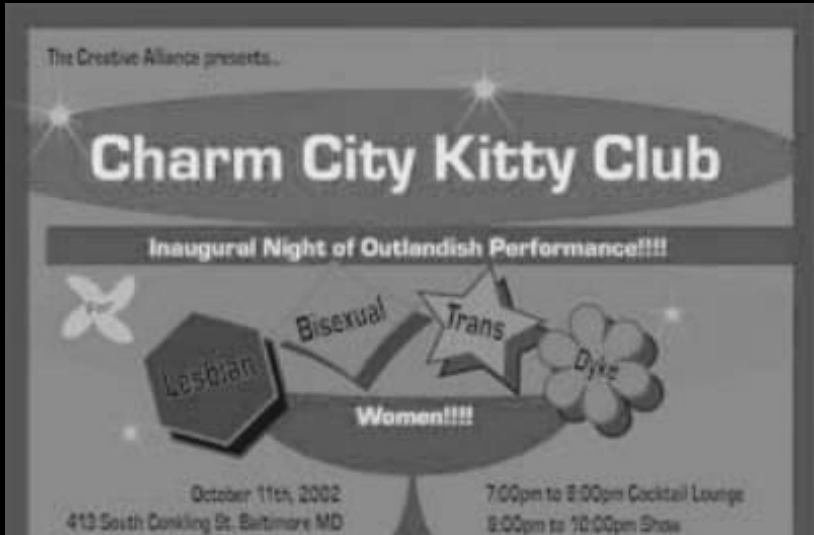


Figure 4: First show postcard, donated by Lucky Baltimore

FIRST SHOW!

Wide variety of performers

Liz Downing: “So I started developing a piece for the first show, which had a belly dancer, a poet, me, a few other women. I put together a few songs and stories, having to do with lost girlfriends and spaceships coming down and having sex with the water and stories from my childhood that were kind of weird involving Peeping Toms who watched women through the windows of my family’s motel.” (An Oral History of the Charm City Kitty Club’s First 10 Years)

Jai Brooks wrote a performance piece called “The Boy’s Life”

First show was very successful (over 200 people)

Although there was negative response from older queers, for the most part, Chet notes that “there was always something for everyone.”

INFLUENCE

OF

PUNK

Prior to the formation of the Charm City Kitty Club, many kitties were immersed in punk culture: a scene that predominantly focuses on subverting societal norms. I can see why the kitties would naturally find solace in punk spaces. Not only does punk embrace outsiders, it also integrates the DIY and often explicit nature of performance. The influence of this lifestyle is seen throughout the Kitty Club's shows.

Jai Brooks notes that the DC and Baltimore punk scenes were very queer.

Rahne Alexander was also involved in the punk scene and is in bands such as punk group 50 Foot Woman.

Punk inspired DIY and theatrics

Liz Downing: "One of the performances we did around this time was me giving a vaginal exam to a giant diagram of a vagina. So I had my purple glove on and I was palpating the labia and lifting the clitoral hood, and Megan McShea had decided she would help me with my prop if she could wear a gorilla costume. So all you could see were her gorilla feet and gorilla hands while she was holding this giant vagina, and it just seemed... right." (An Oral History of the Charm City Kitty Club's First 10 Years)



Figure 5: Rahne performing with 50 Foot Woman

THE STRUGGLE FOR INCLUSIVITY

Although Lucky Baltimore had expressed the desire for the club to be as diverse

as the city of Baltimore, the kitty club was primarily a femme, white space. Over

time there began to be talk about policing identities and recruiting more POC.

Many black and brown community members left due to experiencing racism and

becoming tired of explaining themselves to white members. Jai Brooks and Elle

Trusz worked tirelessly to recruit more POC by having raw conversations with

people and making sure they felt safe while holding people accountable when

they mess up. The Itty Bitty Kitty Equity Committee was subsequently formed as an

agreement to show up for each other (it's also fun to say). Talking, educating, and

Community organizing were important goals for this organization. Performance was also

used to address the backlash for the club being homonormative.

ABOUT

EARLY /

FOUNDING

KITTIES



Rahne Alexander:

Musical and visual artist

Partner of Kristen Anchor- they met through the CCKC!

"I want to burn patriarchy down at its fucking root"



Lucky Baltimore:

Artist and ICU nurse

The "original originator"

"We're all a bunch of freaks"



Kristen Anchor:

Works in UMBC's Media and Communication Studies department

Was creative director for Creative Alliance Movie Makers before CCKC formed



Chet Pancake:

Father, Filmmaker

Assistant professor at Temple University

"young people thriving and being happy, like

that's what older queer people want to see"

Jai Brooks:

Poet. Greatly values performance

A part of many queer spaces such

the Lesbian Avengers



Megan McShea:

Writer, Archivist, Poet

Was in the first couple kitty club shows and then moved to stage management

Notes that what's important is to "work on creating sanctuaries and making sure

everyone feels...that"



Figure 6: Performance. From Lucky's donations

Charm City Kitty Club makes nice

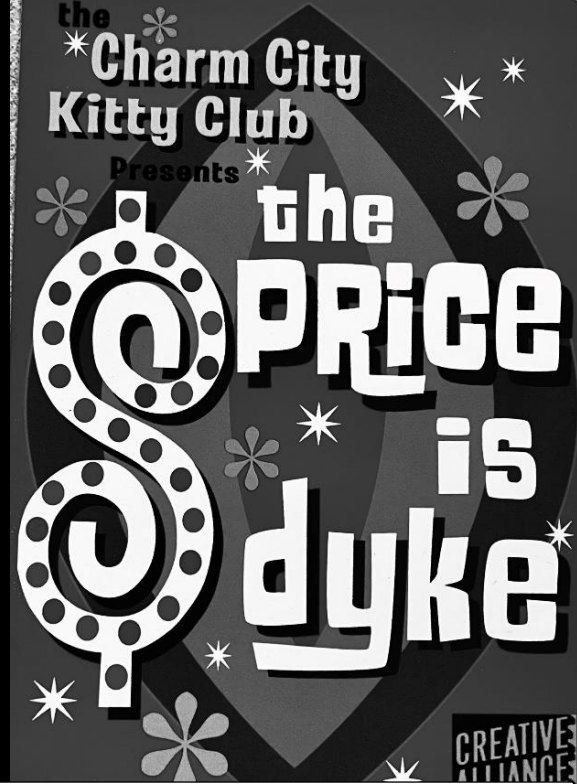


Figure 7: Postcard. From Lucky's donations



Figure 8: 2014 (from CCKC Facebook): Private Trails dancer in the HoliGays show



Figure 9: 2014 Performance: Taken from the Charm City Kitty Club Facebook page



The Charm City
Kitty Club
presents:
**and Into
the SHEETS!**

TWO NIGHTS!
Friday Oct. 10th
Saturday Oct. 11th

Creative Alliance
3134 Eastern Ave
Baltimore MD

Cocktails 7:00pm

Figure 10: Postcard. From Lucky's donations

THOUGHTS

ON

PERFORMANCE

Performance is fluid. It's movement, feeling, breathing, experiencing. The Charm City Kitty Club exemplifies this beautifully. Natalia Brusilovsky notes that

"whoever shows up is, and the show looks like we who show up."

There was no monolithic image that hung over the performers. The performers *made* the shows. They did not have to mold themselves into a preconceived notion of what the kitty club should be. Their visions were always shifting and moving and transforming over time as people flowed in and out of the club. The kitty club shows were consistently reflective of the people in them. Each member came from different backgrounds and provided a multiplicity of skillsets; Chet and Kristen are filmmakers, Megan is a writer and poet, Jai is a poet, and Rahne and Lucky are artists. The openness of a cabaret allowed each of these talents to be witnessed and celebrated. The fluidity of performance also closely mirrors the fluidity of identity. In Chet's interview, he reflects upon using the expansive and diverse nature of experimental music to speak across genders, allowing him to feel embodied. Similarly, Jai Brooks describes the message of visibility in his art and doing what he does so people can truly see him.

Art, therefore, is a testimony to the sacredness of queer bodies, expression, and life. It speaks for you when the simplicity of words may fail. It allows you to process grief and confusion and loneliness and anger through expression. Performance creates. It creates community. Rahne notes the proliferation of coalition building as people saw her as a trans woman on stage for the first time. Performance also heals. Natalia Brusilovsky addresses the policing of identities and the question of being "femme" enough which was problematic in the club. This conflict was resolved by putting on the show, Alphabet Soup. Using performance to resolve internal issue not only speaks to the community present within the club, but also to the freedom of expression and voice that members have. To be a kitty means creating with pride. Remaining unfiltered and unapologetic with your art. And as Lucky Baltimore said, "You're gonna give them what you give them, and you're gonna give it with good intent, and with your artistic creation, so fuck your audience, and then *fuck your audience.*"

HOES: (CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT) JAY BROOKS, RAHNE ALEXANDER, GRADY CHALLIS, AND JODY ANDRADE DIG DEEP INTO CONTRARIAN NOTIONS OF GENDER AND SEXUALITY VIA THE CHARM CITY KITT CLUB.



Background: from Lucky's donations

The stories from the CCKC members acknowledge their upbringing in spaces that were lonely and often unaccepting. There was no space for queerness. No room for expression to evolve and prosper. Community is therefore necessary. Moving to Baltimore has enabled CCKC members to find like-minded individuals with the same passions. Perhaps it was the tight-knit, creative nature of the city. Maybe it was luck that these people found each other. Maybe it was fate. Whatever it was has kept the sense of community alive to this day. Megan McShea talks about the importance of creating a sanctuary. A sanctuary for queer folk to love and sing and create and express. That's what the Charm City Kitty Club is.

But how do you find your people?

For Rahne, the answer was seeing other trans women around town and handing out flyers for the kitty club shows. She put herself out there in hopes of finding community and bringing people together. The club was a form of community care. It was a place to meet people, and those people ended up becoming life-long friends. As Lucky puts it, the club was "filling a gap" where she was previously lonely. And the sense of community not only benefited the kitties. Audience members could also flock to the Creative Alliance to be in community with each other. The audience needed this as much as the performers. In fact, this feeling reached people as young as 18 and as old as 70. This speaks to the intergenerational bond that the kitty club has constructed. And there's beauty and hope in the fact that the kitty club has prospered for over 20 years! The unexpected longevity and generational continuation of the club is magnificent to witness.

Being in community is a necessity. Megan McShea acknowledges using community to cope with the incessant horrors of systemic oppression, especially in a time where the community is receiving attack after attack. Chet Pancake notes the alienation and dysphoria of being trans in a cis world. Being a trans man and parenting a nonbinary child, he finds security in having trans teachers and trans neighbors and seeing trans people on the street everyday. He has also been guided by queer elders like Barbara Hammer who taught him to welcome everything that comes to and through the body. Being a professor, he is even able to find community amongst students through having conversations about identity. When Elle Trusz had reached what she described as one of the lowest points in her life, the first thing she did was go to a kitty club meeting. Although she was not active, the kitty club was her first point of contact for help, security, and community. The kitty club served as a pillar of support and strength, and I hope it will continue that for years to come.



Figure 11: From newspaper clippings donated by Lucky Baltimore

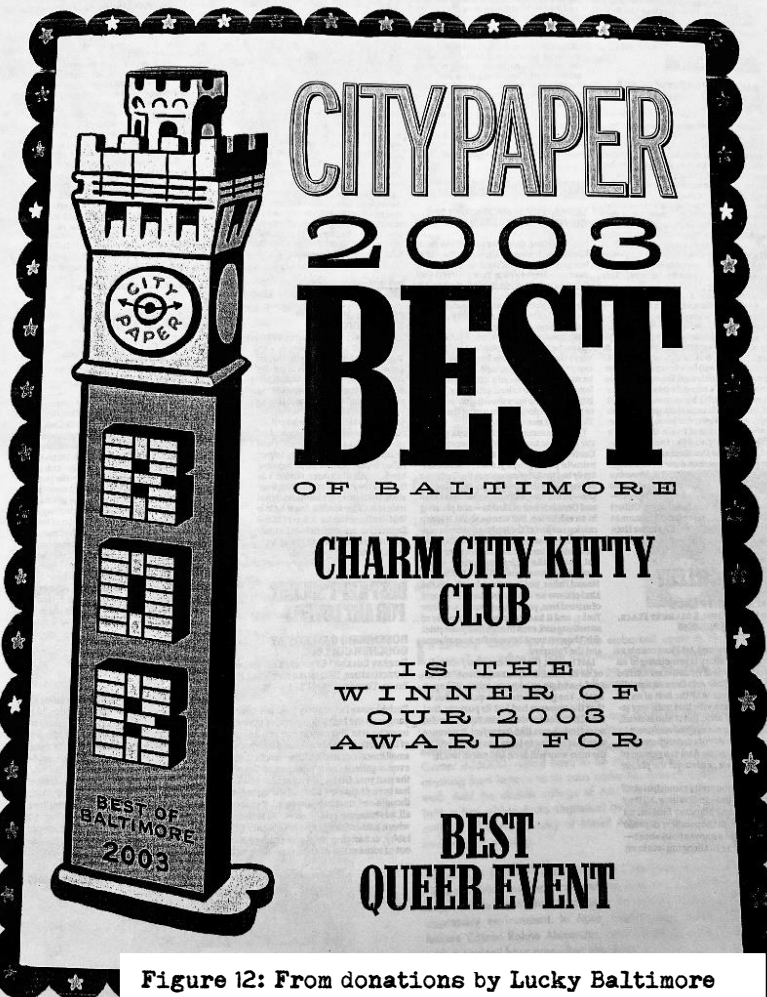


Figure 12: From donations by Lucky Baltimore



Figure 13: Jai Brooks's Kitty Club display. Taken by Tiffany Watson



Figure 14: Megan McShea's CCKC shirt and snowglobe. Taken by Riya Suthar

Sources

Pictures:

Baltimore Stock Photo: <https://www.istockphoto.com/vector/modern-city-map-baltimore-maryland-city-of-the-usa-with-neighborhoods-and-titles-gm959502230-262016010?phrase=baltimore>

Figure 1: <https://creativealliance.org/about/>

Figure 2: <https://creativealliance.org/creative-alliance-receives-grant-national-endowment-humanities/>

Figure 3: Tiffany Watson

Figure 4: <http://www.charmcitykittyclub.org/past-shows/>

Punk Stock Photo: <https://www.istockphoto.com/photo/the-great-singer-gm1167948013-322290520?phrase=punk>

Figure 5: <https://umbc.edu/stories/50-foot-woman-tells-all/>

Inclusivity page background: Tiffany Watson

Kristen headshot: <https://mcs.umbc.edu/faculty-directory/person/ax59725/>

Chet headshot: <http://www.filmfatales.org/directors/chetpancake>

Jai headshot: Tiffany Watson

Lucky Baltimore headshot: <https://pointfoundation.org/scholars/jody-andrade>

Megan headshot: <https://megan-mcshea.github.io/archivistbio.html> (Teresa Duggan)

Figure 8: <https://www.facebook.com/charmcitykittyclub/photos>

Figure 9: <https://www.facebook.com/charmcitykittyclub/photos>

Figure 13: Tiffany Watson

Figure 14: Riya Suthar

All other photos are from Lucky Baltimore's donations.

Information:

<https://www.baltimoresun.com/citypaper/bcp-cms-1-1328761-migrated-story-cp-20120613-featu-20120613-story.html>

<https://www.baltimoremagazine.com/section/artsentertainment/charm-city-kitty-club-unconventional-cabarets/>

<https://web.archive.org/web/20210624084531/https://www.baltimoresun.com/news/bs-xpm-2003-05-11-0305120654-story.html>

All other information was taken from the interviews themselves.

Produced by Riya Suthar

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