



October 1984: Three drag queens in white at a pageant fundraiser. From ONE Archives.



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Trailblazers in Drag History

with Trevor Ladner a.k.a.
Miss Annie Thang
Pride Month 2023



About Me!

Education Programs Manager at ONE Archives Foundation

Taught U.S. History and Government; organized drag show Pride events for students

Studied Sociology, African American Studies, and Education at Harvard

Started performing in drag at age 16; became an LGBTQ activist in my conservative Mississippi community

Proud Gen Z & West Hollywood resident

Queerty

This Mississippi Teen Is A High Schooler By Day And A Drag Queen At Night

By day, Trevor Ladner is your typical Mississippi high-schooler. But by night, he's high-fashion drag queen Annie Thang.

Jun 2, 2016



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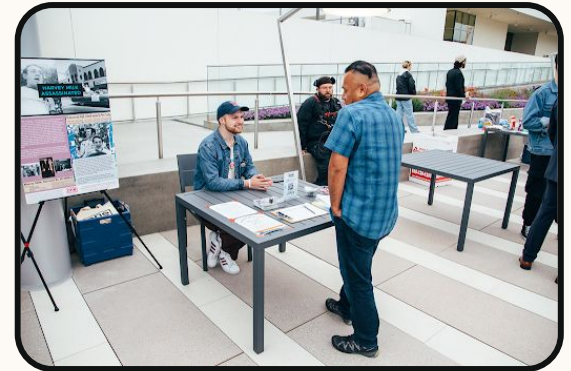
ONE Archives Foundation

1952: Founded as ONE Inc; now the **oldest active LGBTQ+ organization in the United States.**

1958: ONE Inc. v. Olesen, the Supreme Court of the United States ruled that LGBTQ+ Americans have **protected free speech rights** after the government confiscated issues of *ONE Magazine*.

2010: Deposited our **vast collection of LGBTQ historical materials** with the USC Libraries.

Today: Promoting **queer history and culture** through education and youth programs, public history, and the arts.





What is a “trailblazer”?

Who are some trailblazers from American history that you know?





What is “drag”?

Who are drag performers
that you know?

Understanding Gender Expression

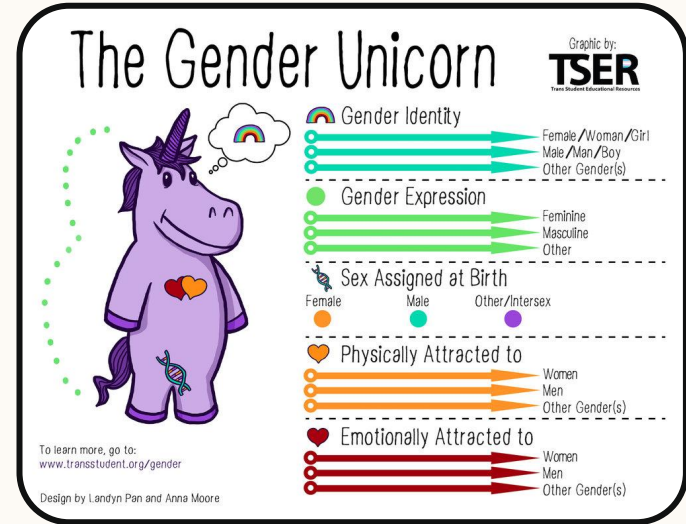
Gender expression is the many ways (such as behaviors or clothing) in which a person may choose to communicate gender to oneself or to others.

Gender is how cultures and individuals identify people based on characteristics associated with men or women, or masculinity and femininity.

Cisgender describes a person whose gender identity and expression align with the gender they were assigned at birth.

Transgender describes a person whose gender identity or expression are not aligned with the gender they were assigned at birth.

Non-binary describes people whose gender is not exclusively male or female.



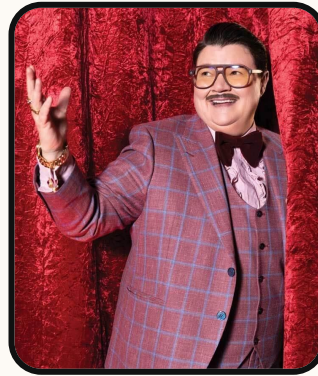
“Drag” and Gender Expression

Drag is an art form that channels **exaggerated gender expression** for entertainment. Drag performers typically *crossdress* by wearing **elaborate costumes or makeup**.

Drag was first used in the late 1800s to describe such performances in England. Men playing female characters in theatre would **drag their long dresses** across the stage.

Drag in the U.S. may have referenced the “**grand rags**,” a nickname for masquerade balls (costume parties). Drag became associated with queer people by the 1920s.

People of **all gender identities** do drag. Most drag performers identify as **drag queens** or **drag kings**. Some drag queens identify as female impersonators, though less common today. Others simply call themselves drag artists. Drag queens, and trans people, have only recently gained greater acceptance within the queer community.



Murray Hill is a trans man and drag king.



Kerri Colby is a trans woman and drag queen.



Sigourney Beaver is a cis woman and drag queen.



Coco Peru is a cis man and drag queen.



William Dorsey Swann

**Queen of the Drag Balls,
1860 - 1925**



January 1903: Charles Gregory (left) and Jack Brown (right, in drag) dancing the Cake-Walk in Paris.



William Dorsey Swann



- **Born into slavery** in Maryland in 1860, five years before the end of the Civil War.
- Black people flocked to Washington, D.C., to **take advantage of new social and economic opportunities**. Swann moved to D.C. in the 1880s and took a job as a janitor to help support his family.
- He organized “**drag balls**” (or “drags”) for African Americans, many of whom were formerly enslaved, in the 1880s and 1890s. Here, Black queer people, mostly men, could cross-dress and express same-sex romance.
- Drag balls combined the European tradition of masquerade balls with the African-American tradition of the **cakewalk**.



May 1903: Five African Americans perform a cakewalk.



Queen of the Drag

- Swann is the **earliest-documented person to be known as “queen” of a “drag,”** the name given to the crossdressing balls.
- Holding the title “queen” of the drag, or “drag queen,” signified Swann had an **honored position in the queer community.**
- When police raided a drag ball in 1888, the “House of Swann” **fought back.** Swann would go on to be arrested multiple times for putting on drag balls.
- In 1896, Swann wrote to President Grover Cleveland, requesting a pardon. This was the **first time a queer person advocated to the government for their community’s right to assemble.**

A “Drag Party” Raided.

This morning John Smith, Jacob Byard, William Dorsey, who by the way, was the “Queen,” Charles Myers, Jacob Lewis, John Lewis, Samuel Lewis, Samuel Jackson, James Waters, Laura Howard, James Taylor, Benjamin Moore and Lewis Jackson were charged in the Police Court with being suspicious characters.

Last night, attired in handsome silks and satins, each in complete feminine costume, they indulged in a “drag” in a quiet-looking house on the south side of F street, near Twelfth. The “party” was raided by Lieutenant Amiss and the officers of the First Precinct.

Nearly all of the “girls” succeeded in procuring bail, ex-Commissioner of Pensions Dudley becoming bond for William Dorsey, who is in his employ.

April 1888: A newspaper article on the raid of Swann’s drag ball.

To His Excellency
The President of the United States.

The petition of William Doysey Swan, respectfully represents:

That he is a resident of Washington City, District of Columbia, and has resided there in all his life; that by occupation he has been a house servant in the home of General Dudley, for the last eleven years; that he was tried, and convicted in the Police Court of the District of Columbia, on the 15th day of January A.D. 1896, for being the keeper of a disorderly house, and was sentenced to ten months in jail; the Honorable Thomas F. Miller, being the presiding Justice at said trial, and the United States, being represented by Alexander Mallowney Esq; and petitioner earnestly prays that a pardon may be granted him for the following reasons:

- 1st. Because he has always been a hard working, and industrious man, as is best evidenced by the fact, of his continuous employment by General Dudley, one of the well known citizens of the District of Columbia.
- 2nd. Because of the unusual severity of the sentence imposed in petitioner's case.
- 3rd. Because if pardoned he will hereafter live a proper and law abiding life; wherefore he prays that executive clemency may be extended to him, and in duty bound he will ever pray &c.

W. D. Swan
Petitioner

We the undersigned citizens of the District of Columbia, do respectfully ask that a pardon may be granted the above petitioner.

Richard Bunting

Executive Mansion,
July 29, 1896

Sir:

The representations made concerning the health of this Commissioner hardly help to justify in my opinion the view of the character of his offense and the big consideration of his sentence. He has had a bad health should be considered in his case.

D. C.

Trailblazer for Freedom of Assembly & Expression

March 1896: Signed pardon petition from William Dorsey Swann and 30 friends in D.C.

July 1896: Denial of Swann's pardon from President Grover Cleveland.



Gladys Bentley

King and Queen of the
Harlem Renaissance,
1907 - 1960

1940: Photograph of Gladys Bentley in her performance suit.

The Harlem Renaissance

- **Crossdressing in entertainment** became prominent in Harlem nightlife as it grew to become the country's largest Black urban neighborhood due to African American migration.
- As the “**pansy craze**” took place during prohibition, “**fairy balls**” involved competitions between drag performers in extravagant costumes.
- Blues singers **Ma Rainey** and **Bessie Smith** were rumored to have a romantic relationship; Rainey sang openly about her female attraction.
- Influential queer black male writers of the time included **Alain Locke**, **Countee Cullen**, and **Claude McKay**.



1920s and 1930s: Collage of Gladys Bentley and clubs of the Harlem Renaissance.

Gladys Bentley

- Born in 1907, Philadelphia, to a working class family. **Attracted to women and preferred wearing masculine clothing as a child**; parents sought doctors for “cure”.
- Moved to NYC at age 16 to pursue music career.
- Dressed in masculine clothing while **performing on piano at nightclubs**, such as Ubangi Club and the Clam House, and traveling the United States.
- Sang about her female lovers while **flirting with women in attendance** and performed with **flamboyant male dancers**.
- Finding work became harder after prohibition; she moved to Los Angeles in 1937, later denouncing crossdressing in the 1950s.



April 1943: Advertisement from Mona's lesbian bar in San Francisco, featuring Gladys Bentley.



Pop Quiz

How are **William Dorsey Swann** and **Gladys Bentley**
“trailblazers” in drag history?





Jose Sarria



**Empress of San Francisco,
1922 - 2013**

Early 1960s: Jose Sarria at Black Cat Bar in San Francisco. From ONE Archives.



José Julio Sarria

- Born in San Francisco in 1922 to a single mother from Colombia
- Put his plans to become a teacher on hold after high school and enlisted in the U.S. Army in WWII. Stationed in Berlin, he became **infatuated with queer arts culture**.
- Returned to SF in 1947; arrested for being homosexual and prohibited from teaching. Began **waiting tables and performing operas at the Black Cat Cafe**.
- Vowed **“to be the most notorious impersonator or homosexual or fairy or whatever you want to call me.”** Took to the streets in drag to challenge police discrimination against homosexuals and crossdressers.



Early 1960s:
Sarria performs at Black Cat Bar in San Francisco. From ONE Archives.



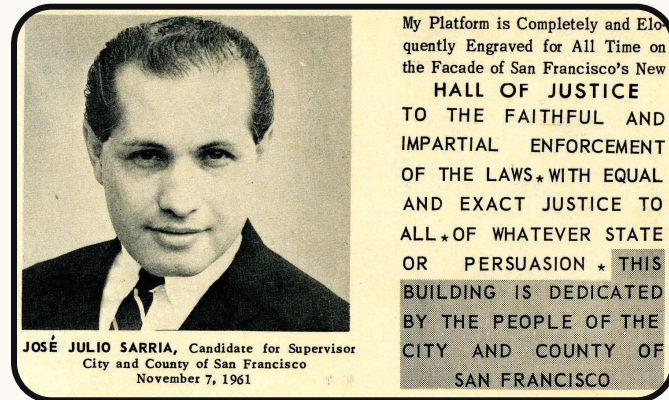
1963: Sarria performs at Black Cat Bar in San Francisco.



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Politician and Empress

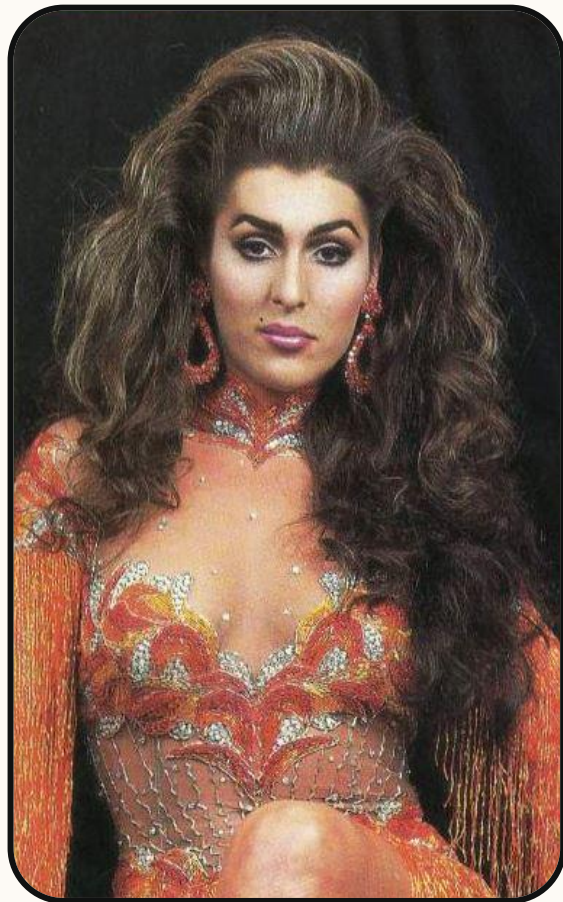
- Tired of anti-gay discrimination, he ran for the San Francisco Board of Supervisors in 1961, becoming the **first-openly gay person to run for elected office**.
- **Organized queer people into a powerful voting group** for the first time in U.S. history: “From that day on, nobody ran for anything in San Francisco without knocking on the door of the gay community.”
- In 1965, gave himself the drag name **Her Royal Majesty, Empress de San Francisco, Jose I** and began organizing the Imperial Court System, which crowns queens and kings from the LGBTQ+ community and raises money for community causes, including AIDS care, homelessness, and scholarships.



1961: Jose Sarría campaign postcard.



May 2009: Empress de San Francisco, Jose I, in Sacramento.



Tandi Andrews

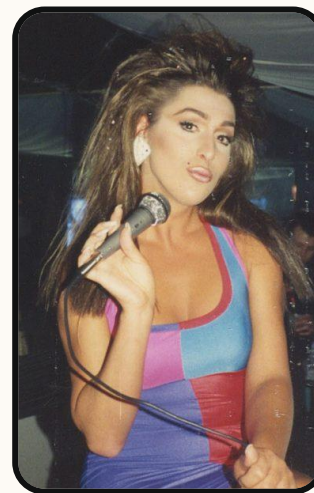
Queen of the Pageants,
1964 - 1995

Feb 1995: Tribute to Tandi Andrews
show advertisement.



Tandi Andrews

- In early 1970s, first national drag pageant– **Miss Gay America**– began in Nashville. In Chicago, 1980, more trans-inclusive pageant– **Miss Continental**– began.
- A transgender woman and drag performer from San Antonio, Texas, Andrews earned **several pageant titles**, including Miss Continental in 1986.
- Spoke about her trans identity on **popular daytime talk shows** throughout the 1990s, highlighting the humanity of transgender women.
- In 1992, she spoke on television about the **loving support she received from her family** throughout her transition.
- Died in 1995 of AIDS complications, one of many queer ancestors taken by the epidemic.



1993: Tandi Andrews in Creative Eveningwear for National Entertainer of the Year.

1990s: Photo of Tandi Andrews.



Pop Quiz

How are **Jose Sarria** and **Tandi Andrews**
“trailblazers” in drag history?





Joan Jett Blakk



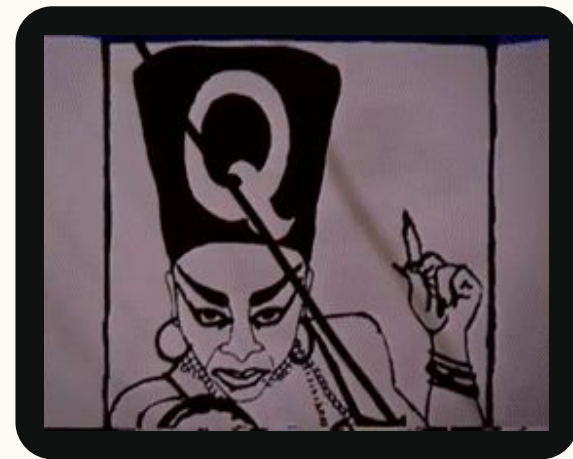
**America's First Drag President,
1957 - Present**

1990s: Joan Jett Black makes
a dramatic expression into a
mirror.

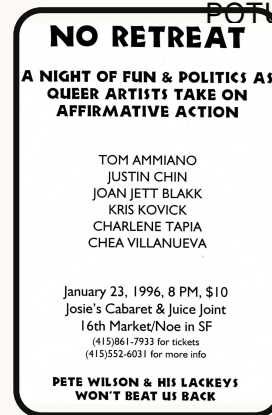


Joan Jett Blakk

- Born Terence Alan Smith in 1957 in Detroit. Began performing in drag in 1974.
- Part of **Queer Nation Chicago**, Blakk participated in direct action protests to advocate for anti-discrimination (i.e. police violence) and increased resources (i.e. AIDS care) from government and businesses.
- As Queer Nation Party candidate: ran for **Mayor of Chicago** in 1991, and **President of the United States** in 1992 and 1996.
- Moved to **San Francisco** in 1992 to continue performing.
- In 2019, *Ms. Blakk for President*, a play about her campaign, premiered in Chicago. In 2021, the *L.A. Times* published a documentary called *The Beauty Queen*, featuring interview footage with Smith.



January 1992: Blakk announces campaign for POTUS on her 35th birthday.



January 1996: SF political event flyer featuring Blakk. From ONE Archives.

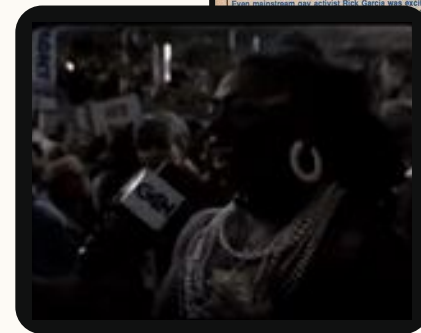


America's First Drag President

- “If a bad apple can be elected president, why not a good drag queen?” Intended not to win but to **bring attention to issues affecting queer people**, especially AIDS.
- Barred from attending the **1992 Democratic National Convention** in drag, Blakk snuck his drag into the men’s bathroom to dress; went to the convention floor to speak about her campaign and queer issues.
- Combined **campy queer humor** with **serious, progressive policy proposals**: put lesbian on motorcycles at the border, create a Fashion Bureau of Investigation, paint the White House lavender, provide healthcare to all Americans, eliminate student debt, root out corruption, fund public education, reform policing; and protect civil rights for women, people of color, and queer people.



January 1992: A newspaper article on Blakk's campaign.



July 1992: Blakk at the Democratic National Convention.



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Rupaul

Supermodel of the World,
1960 - Present

July 1993: RuPaul performs
at Club USA in New York.



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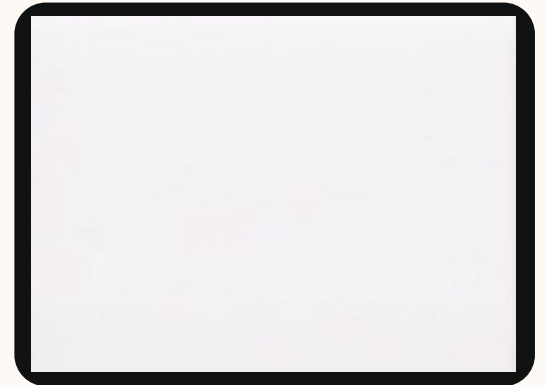


Rupaul Charles

- Born in 1960 in San Diego; moved with his sister to Atlanta, Georgia, at age 15, where his entertainment career began as a **dancer, singer, and actor**.
- Moved to NYC in 1987 to perform in clubs and with bands.
- In 1993, RuPaul performed “Supermodel” at the **March on Washington for LGBT Rights**. Two months later, the music video premiered on MTV, with international success, launching a new era for drag artists.
- In 1994, became the **spokesperson for MAC Cosmetics’ Viva Glam** collection, which raised funds for HIV/AIDS programs.
- From 1996 to 1998, hosted ***The RuPaul Show*** with Michelle Visage on VH1. Guest appearances in popular tv shows throughout 1990s and 2000s.



April 1993:
RuPaul at the
March on
Washington.
From ONE
Archives.



June 1993: RuPaul in
the “Supermodel”
music video.



Rupaul' Drag Race

- In 2009, RuPaul **revolutionized drag in American culture** with the creation of “RuPaul’s Drag Race,” a reality competition show to find “America’s next drag superstar.”
- “Drag Race” showcases the **talent** of drag performers while highlighting their **personal stories of joy and hardship** as queer people. RuPaul and contestants often make it a point to education the public about **queer culture and history**.
- RuPaul has been criticized for recent discriminatory statements towards trans contestants, and continues to evolve. At least **20 trans contestants** have competed in the U.S. series with four recent trans winners: Kylie Sonique Love (All Stars 6), Willow Pill (Season 14), Jinkx Monsoon (All Stars 7), and Sasha Colby (Season 15).



2020s: Collage of RuPaul's Drag Race winners.



2009: RuPaul's Drag Race Season 1 trailer.





Pop Quiz

How are **Joan Jett Blakk** and **RuPaul**
“trailblazers” in drag history?



Watch Later: Drag History Lesson from Sasha Colby, Season 15 Winner





Thanks!

Do you have any questions?



Follow me on Instagram! [@missanniethang](#)

Visit [onearchives.org](#) or [@onearchives](#) on Instagram to learn more about our LGBTQ+ history programs.

