



Sunset Folk: Florida's Transgender History

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Gender Transgression as Entertainment

Prior to the mid-twentieth century, gender nonconformity in Florida was most often seen in the realm of entertainment and performance. In this way, gender nonconformity was viewed as acceptable if it took place on stage.

In the nineteenth century this was most common in female impersonator role of the minstrel show. These performers were usually white men dressed in women's clothes and, at times, wearing blackface. These figures emasculated both black and female figures, while also being alluring to audiences.

The early twentieth century saw a decline in the blackface minstrel's popularity, but the female impersonator remained popular. These were similar to modern "drag" shows, where male-bodied figures dress in feminine clothes and makeup, often while dancing and singing.

The bill this week is a good one. Remember, when we say "refined vaudeville" we mean it. We offer the "Three Musical Cascads" and Sam Howard, blackface female impersonator.

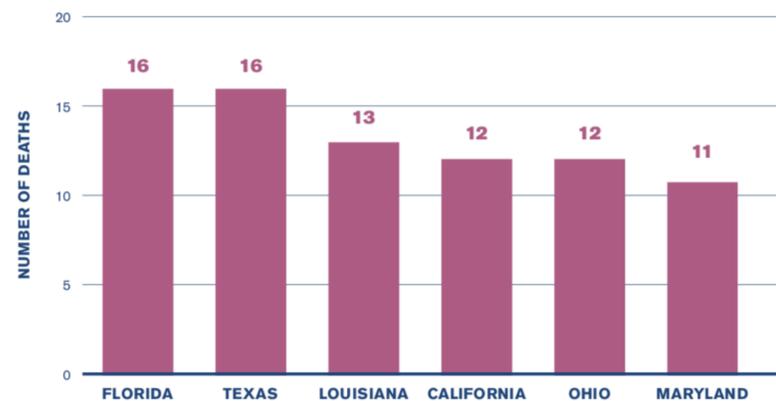
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Thesis

A great deal of transgender scholarship, particularly in regard to transgender history, focuses on urban populations in states such as New York and California. Furthermore, many scholars restrict themselves to the period after the Stonewall Riots and the beginning of the Gay Rights movement. However, neglect of states and populations outside of these areas results in a skewed, incomplete historical narrative of LGBT people. In my research I seek to examine transgender and gender nonconforming history in the state of Florida over a longer period of time, particularly discussing the move from gender nonconformity as an element of humor and performance to the emergence of a transgender identity. Late nineteenth and early twentieth-century Florida was an exotic paradise where tourists could go on "moral holidays". During this period, gender nonconformity was relatively acceptable as long as it was restricted to the stage. Vaudeville shows and early films demonstrate the critical intersection of race, gender, and entertainment in Florida. However, after World War II, boosters, politicians, and corporations transformed Florida into a family-friendly vacation destination, a metamorphosis which was accompanied by a new crackdown on gender and sexual transgression. Even after the watershed of the 1970s Gay Rights movement, Floridians who displayed gender nonconformity in their everyday lives suffered discrimination and violence.

STATES WITH THE MOST INSTANCES OF FATAL ANTI-TRANS VIOLENCE (2013 – 2019)



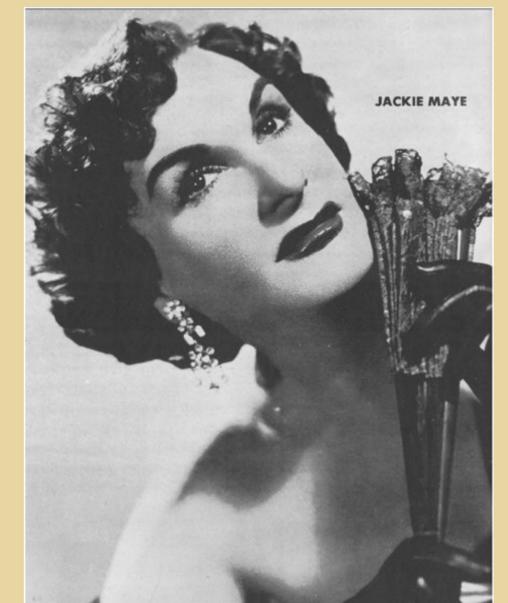
Violence and Discrimination

In the last few decades, transgender and gender nonconforming individuals face a great deal of discrimination and violence. This may come from a lack of access to medical care, transphobic responses from family, friends, and partners, and treatment by the legal system and police. As seen in a 2019 report by The Human Rights Campaign, Florida is tied with Texas for the most average deaths from anti-transgender violence between 2013 and 2019 (above). This information, it must be recognized, is skewed by the fact that transphobic violence often goes unreported or misreported.

Entertainment to Identity

Florida experienced a transformation into the vacation economy following the World War II period, aided by the influx of military money, the process of drainage, and the invention of air conditioning. Corporate interest and the high point of the Cold War brewed a perfect storm against gender nonconforming Floridians.

It was during this period that gender nonconformity seemed to move off stage. We see more individuals taking part in transgender behavior such as wearing gender atypical clothing and new pronouns. As it became synonymous with perversion, gender nonconformity was moving from a performance to an identity.



Jackie Maye, a popular female impersonator during the 1950s, who often performed with Doc Brenner and Danny Brown's drag group the *Jewel Box Revue*.