

# God save the Queen

If Diamond Lil is the grand dame of Atlanta drag, why can't she get a steady gig?

TRAY BUTLER — OCT. 9, 2003

"Who is she?" my friend asks. We're propped against the rail at the upstairs balcony at Burkhart's, surveying the Sunday night gospel drag show on the floor below. The performers so far have been mostly super-glam Angela Bassett look-alikes praising the Lord with CeCe Winans standards. But this diva is different. The buxom redhead in a black mesh body suit forgoes the Jesus songs and belts a twangy country ballad. She doesn't lip synch but actually sings. And she struts through the crowd, Easter basket in hand, dispensing drumsticks of fried chicken to confused onlookers.

"That's Diamond Lil," I answer.

"Is she famous?" my friend asks, and I have to chuckle. The answer is yes — but the irony of his question sums up the conundrum that is Diamond Lil.



**Diamond Lil at a show in the mid-'80s**

She's been doing drag in this town since before either my friend or I were born, and actually headlined Atlanta's first female impersonation show the cops didn't bust up, back in the pre-Stonewall era.

But these days, the celebrity of Diamond Lil has largely faded. Though she was introduced at Burkhart's as a "true Atlanta legend," the blank faces of the crowd show that she's performing for a room full of strangers. Thanks for the chicken, what was your name again?

But Diamond isn't about to slip into obscurity without a fight. Lately she's been booking her act in venues as varied as neighborhood festivals, church fundraisers and straight music clubs like the Star Bar and Eddie's Attic. She's reissued her 19-year-old LP, *The Queen of Diamonds*, on CD and added ample bonus material. After 35 years on stage, Diamond Lil is ready again for her close-up.

"I wouldn't call it a comeback," she quips. "Because the truth is I've never gone anywhere."

**The first thing** you notice about Diamond Lil is the voice. She speaks with a harmonious Southern lilt equal parts Minnie Pearl and Dixie Carter, a rarity in our age of indistinguishable accents.

When she's not performing, you'll most likely find her in more androgynous everyday attire — a pair of jeans, maybe, and a purple silk shirt — along with a faded blue lunch cooler she carries her CDs in.



**GIRLS ON FILM: Diamond Lil appears with Peg (left) on her "Mouth of the South Live" cable access show at the Armory. | JIM STAWNIAK**

When she speaks, her large, cartoonish eyes roll romantically around the room. Her language mingles an old-fashioned Southern wit with an off-the-wall vernacular both grandiose and obscure. She calls her hometown of Savannah "the Land of Famine" and her house in Virginia-Highland "the Temple of the Lonesome Oaks."

When she speaks of the good old days — which is often — Diamond stares melodramatically upward, like some tragic heroine from the silent film era. She laughs when I ask her age.

"A woman who tells her age, honey, she'll tell anything," she says. "Next question."

She respectfully asks that her given name not be revealed either, and she's equally dodgy about her history before the persona of Diamond Lil was born. What she will say is this: The boy who would become the city's drag godmother was already doing dress-up at age 5, playing in the yard wearing his sister's clothes, a practice his mother quickly stopped.

At 17 he found a like-minded friend in Sophie, an overweight drag princess in training. One Halloween night, the two Savannah teenagers got dolled up in evening gowns and crashed an exclusive party at the American Legion on Tybee Island. They drank and flirted with a table of rowdy Air Force men who didn't immediately realize they were guys. But after several drinks, Sophie admitted to the facade, forcing the duo to exit the party early. Driving home from the party, they were followed by two of the soldiers, who shot out a tire on their car. At gunpoint, one of the men forced Diamond to perform oral sex on him.

"It was so scary," Diamond says, "there's no words for it. But I made a decision that night that I was out. A real weird way to come out, though."

Being out had its drawbacks. Because of her sexual orientation, Diamond was eventually discharged from the Air National Guard and fired from a secretarial job at Seaboard Railroad. After a run-in with the Savannah police — she was arrested for a drummed-up loitering charge — she decided it was time to take her talents elsewhere.

The obvious choice: Atlanta. She arrived in 1965. The city as she describes it was then a charming, small Southern town of big porches and wicker chairs. She settled down with a husband for a while and started a small antiques business near the intersection of Peachtree and 11th streets. She dabbled in drag, performing under the name Leslie Diamond at a friend's show in Columbus, Ohio, and at a short-lived gay bar in Buckhead, which was quickly shut down by the cops.

But the city was in flux. The area around her shop became known as "the Strip," and the pioneers of the counterculture — hippies, artists, activists and runaways — migrated there. The Strip evolved into Atlanta's version of Haight-Ashbury, with headshops, flophouses and longhairs spilling over into Piedmont Park. The hippies scared away customers and led Diamond to close her fledgling store.

She soon learned that the dawn of the Sexual Revolution had its benefits, though. While drag shows were officially illegal, and any man caught wearing women's clothes could get hauled into jail, the burgeoning gay community was about to come into its own.

In 1968, Diamond's friend Chuck Cain asked her to headline a new drag show he was starting. Cain managed Mrs. P's, a small restaurant with a mixed-gay clientele in the basement of the Ponce de Leon Hotel, and had worked out an "arrangement" with the cops. He could host drag shows there, but only on weeknights and he couldn't advertise it.

Mrs. P's was an unlikely performance space. The tiny supper club, with wooden booths and a \$1.25 filet mignon dinner special, drew lunchtime crowds from the nearby Sears building (now City Hall East). At night it turned "sort of gay," Diamond



**Diamond Lil: Pre-glam military man**

says.

On opening night, Diamond was getting ready for her performance when she had a Gypsy Rose Lee moment. She hadn't thought about a stage name until the manager asked how to announce her just moments before she went on. People in town knew her as "Lil," so she just spat out the words without thinking: Diamond Lil.

The name — an unintentional crib from Mae West — stuck. The show drew a steady following, thanks to Diamond's heated renditions of R&B hits. She'd shimmy between the booths, mouthing the words to Motown records — mostly Aretha Franklin, her favorite. After the bar closed for the night, most of the clientele would move to someone's private house party. Diamond would usually put on an encore performance there — her "freelance work," as she calls it.

**In the early '70s**, Diamond moved her act to Sweet Gum Head on Cheshire Bridge Road, a cabaret/bar that became synonymous with Atlanta's burgeoning drag scene thanks to performers like Rachel Wells, Lavita Allen and Charlie Brown. The bar would be Diamond's off-again on-again home for the next decade.

But it was at the short-lived Club Centaur where Diamond developed her signature act. The Peachtree Street bar, now Touch of India restaurant, sat in the heart of the hippie district, and Diamond hired four of the longhairs to be her backup band. She'd tear through sweaty rock 'n' roll numbers with the flair of a white Tina Turner, but she also began to add her own songs to the mix, and eventually put out 45s of her most popular ditties. Among them was "Silver Grill Blues," which paid homage to the longstanding greasy spoon on Monroe Drive (hence the proclivity for dispensing chicken legs). Before long, it and other songs such as "Love Generator" and "Cabbagetown Katie" were playing on jukeboxes throughout the city. In 1984 she released a full LP of original material dubbed *The Queen of Diamonds*.

Though Club Centaur was only open six months, Diamond speaks of it as if she spent a lifetime there. She recalls the night a motorcycle gang descended on the bar, which drew a mixed straight and gay crowd. Everyone in the place held their breath

to see if a fight would break out. But Diamond decided to have some fun with the ruffians, stepping off stage onto their table and drinking beer from their pitcher before throwing her dress in the air. The bikers roared with laughter.

There was another night when a fight did break out, and cops sprayed tear gas on the crowd. It was police harassment plain and simple, she says, and she wrote a column about it for the alternative weekly *The Great Speckled Bird*.

Other than occasional problems with the police, though, the city was amazingly accepting of gays then, Diamond says. And Midtown was a more welcoming place in general.

"You'd walk down the street and see people just hanging out on their porches," she says. "You could yell up and go smoke a joint or have a drink. It's just not like that now. ... All the old Southern glamour is gone." **In her collection** of carefully preserved photos and newspaper clippings from the era, Diamond Lil looks a little like Elizabeth Taylor, with a lusty Jane Russell slant. She calls her aesthetic "Hollywood sexpot," though several shots show an explosive Ziggy Stardust sensibility.

"I was way before Hedwig," Lil says. "She copied it, my glam look."

Diamond Lil was a constant presence on the city's quickly growing gay scene of the '70s and early '80s, and soon her popularity extended beyond the bar scene. She began writing a human interest column for the gay newspaper *Sunset People*, which eventually led to a popular advice column in the nightlife magazine *Cruise*. No self-respecting homo in town didn't know the name Diamond Lil.

But in the mid-'80s, Diamond Lil's luster began to fade. She cut back on performing to focus on a new antiques business she'd opened in Buckhead. Meanwhile, the landscape of gay life began to change. When asked about the onset of the AIDS epidemic, Diamond visibly freezes up.

"It just got hold of a lot of people all of a sudden," she says. "It happened in just two or three years."

The bathhouses, gay bars and adult bookstores that had opened along the Strip began to shut down. Suddenly the promise of the Sexual Revolution seemed like a cruel joke as the circus-like atmosphere of the '70s gave way to an era of loss and insecurity.

For Diamond, the impact was twofold. Not only did she see her fanbase decrease, most notably the guys who'd followed her rise to local stardom, she also found herself in a social vacuum. When asked how many friends she lost, she tersely replies, "All of them."

Diamond's writing continued with a bittersweet assignment — penning obituaries for the bar magazine *Etcetera*. She recalls the mixed emotions she felt when friends asked her to write their obit — she was both flattered and distraught.

By then, Diamond had semi-retired from performing, only doing occasional gigs around town. Cabaret had fallen out of fashion and there weren't any marquees left in Midtown — no place for a true diva to see her name in lights. In 1995 she had a good run as the opening act for a local theater troupe's *Torch Song Trilogy*, followed by the short-lived "Diamond Lil Show" at the Metro. But securing good gigs became increasingly harder — especially ones that paid. Bar owners would pay for drag shows that lured in a steady audience, but Lil's act required a band, which cost more to hire.

In addition, Diamond lost her support system. "I used to have two or three queens who'd help me with everything: wigs, makeup, gowns. Well, they're dead," she says matter of factly.

She acknowledges that her audience changed. The guys who used to turn out to see her every week were by then most likely dead or partnered. She considered updating the act, she says, but still preferred the old-fashioned stuff.

"You know what ruined my career?" she asks without a trace of irony. "They took my records out of all the jukeboxes."

Last summer Diamond's friend Al Brock convinced her to re-release her LP on disc. The newly digital *Queen of Diamonds* showcases her live act at its best. Though several of the songs don't rise much above novelty tracks ("Jailhouse Jezebel," "Queen of the Dunk N' Dine"), they do give glimpse of her appeal. Her opening monologue for "Silver Grill," recorded live at The Bistro, is a rare gem of forgotten Atlanta folklore, a tale of cruising through Piedmont Park in the early '70s "when it used to be so nice to pick up something strange by the lake."

In the past year, Diamond's played venues as varied as Fuzzy's, the Star Bar and Eddie's Attic, as well as gigs at a fundraiser for the Atlanta Church of Religious Science and the Cabbagetown Festival, where she handed out wedges of cabbage. But Diamond's biggest challenge is finding good gigs, venues that'll give her a chance to do more than just a walk-on during someone else's show. She's able to secure guest appearances because her name still carries some weight in town, but she can't figure out what exactly caused her star to fall.

"You can't be a prophet in your own hometown," she says. "The town won't let you."

Perhaps it's because her act doesn't fit neatly in either the straight or gay worlds. DJs, not live bands, rule the gay bars, and drag shows in general are less common now than 20 years ago. Diamond calls straight music venues a better fit for her, even though the clubs don't always see it that way. She thinks they're afraid hosting a singing drag queen will turn the place gay.

"Maybe that's why I can't get a job," she says. "I'm too far out, which I figured a long time ago. I should have left this one-horse town."

Diamond would like to eventually write her memoirs, and she's joined a writing group at her church to that end. But her main focus is finding the next good gig, ideally playing a large venue like Variety Playhouse.

"Honestly, it's the same disappointment I felt in 1982 — trying to get gigs lined up at clubs," she says. "I just get worn out from all the drumming up."

Worn out to the point of retiring? Not just yet, she says. Performing gives her something to focus on, and it's a lot more engaging than running an antiques shop.

"It's like Pavlova said: 'It's a sin and crime to have talent and not give it to the public,'" Diamond tells me. "Do you know who Anna Pavlova was?"

Sadly, I don't.

"Is she famous?" I ask.

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Posted by Anonymous

Mar 20 2010 01:31

I was part of that exciting early times in the '60's. 'Lil and I, as well as a large number of other gays from Atlanta, charleston and Savannah went to jail in Savannah after the police raided a private Halloween party. After a night in jail, my mother drove over from Beaufort, SC and after bailing me out, we started bailing the other "party-goers" out of jail too. 'Lil convinced us to jointly hire an attorney and fight the trumped up charges in court in Savannah. We did and the judge dismissed the case and said the city of Savannah owed us an apology for the way the police treated us. There must have been 10-15 of us thrown in jail that night. Thanks to Diamond 'Lil, I became a gay activist and have been fighting for gay causes since. I would love to touch base with 'Lil again. I am Clark Bufkin and 'Lil can reach me at [santabearps@dc.rr.com](mailto:santabearps@dc.rr.com). Please help me say "Thanks!" to the person who made me who I am today! Thank you, Diamond 'Lil, I have always admired your dedication and strength and I hope I have made you proud!



Posted by Anonymous

Mar 20 2010 02:33

To my Jimmie. Thank you for your comments and I must apologize for being so remiss in my response. The Higher Power has deemed that I remain amongst you for a while longer and I must say I'm doing very well. I have a new CD out titled "Verve, Vigor And Vim" and I even have a new email address. Those wishing to contact me can write me at [diamondfrill@yahoo.com](mailto:diamondfrill@yahoo.com)

Love And much Joy

Diamond Lil

P.S. i can also be found in the new Gaydar Magazine writing my new Bi-Weekly advice column "Dear Diamond Lil".

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