

Q Culture

Change of Seasons circuit party proceeds go to the dogs

ATLANTA — The "Change of Seasons" circuit party, marking its fourth year in Atlanta, has announced it will benefit the Atlanta Humane Society this year after several gay- and AIDS-advocacy groups declined the funds. The event's web site though, says the event's purpose is to "heighten awareness of problems that continue to face marginalized groups" and that the party will benefit groups with "sup-

pressed voices due to political and social injustices."

Change of Seasons had announced that YouthPride — a gay and lesbian youth organization in Decatur — would get a portion of the proceeds, but the group declined, citing the nature of the party. Linda Ellis, executive director of YouthPride, said the group hesitated to accept money from "events or establishments that wouldn't be a good place for a good number of our youth."

"We have in the past really struggled with taking money from bars and events, or things where YouthPride youth ... shouldn't be unless they have found an illegal way of getting there," Ellis told Atlanta's *Southern Voice*.

Jeff Bailey, organizer of the three-day party, said both AID Atlanta and Project Open Hand — a meals on wheels organization that provides food to people living with terminal illness — have declined gifts from the party in the past.

That hesitation is not limited to Change of Seasons. The Gay Men's Health Crisis in New York recently discontinued its association with the Fire Island Morning Party, which had been one of its biggest funding sources. In the last several years, controversy regarding alleged illegal activity and/or unsafe behavior at circuit parties has led numerous non-profits to distance themselves from the parties in order to avoid negative publicity and potential liability issues. ▾



GLBT 2-Step & Swing Lessons

Beginning Thursday, May 31, 2001

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627 S. Sharon Amity Road
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7:30 - 8:30 PM ~ \$6.00 per person

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Charlotte Gay & Lesbian Film Series 2001

PRESENTED BY OUTCHARLOTTE

History Lessons Meet filmmaker Barbara Hammer!



7:00pm — Barbara Hammer returns to Charlotte to introduce her latest film. *History Lessons* continues her ongoing exploration of lesbian images in society in this compelling, humorous, and empowering contribution to

lesbian history. Her visit is supported by Working Films.

9:15pm — FUN IN SHORTS #2 The final program includes "Life's a Butch". Other films will be announced on OutCharlotte's website by May 14.

Thursday, May 24

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Art

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between the covers

**Drag kings, drag queens,
mobsters, crooked cops and a
dead boy in the bathroom**

Under the Mink
by Lisa Davis
Alyson Publications \$12.95

Set in the underbelly of New York's cabaret scene of the 1940's, *Under the Mink* provides an extravagantly detailed picture of the drag clubs that flourished under mob protection in Greenwich Village in the days after World War II.

The wealthy and powerful of New York society were drawn by curiosity, fascination, and the thrill of forbidden sex to these clubs where gorgeously androgynous women dressed in top hat and tails, emceed the shows that featured chorus lines of beautiful men dressed and made up in the style of Marlene Dietrich and Jane Russell.

Constantly under fire from politicians and the police, they survived only through the bribery and blackmail of their mob owners.

In this world, where appearances only match reality when something goes wrong, Blackie Cole (aka Blanche Cohen) tries to solve the murder of a society boy before the killer returns to take out the witnesses. A cast of adversaries and allies are brought to crackling life, including Renee, a high-priced hooker and Blackie's sometime love; Titanic, the leader of the male chorus line; Stevie the Frenchmen, the head of the mob's downtown operation; and Didi, the beautiful daughter of New York's most powerful publisher.

For novelist Lisa Davis, *Under the Mink* is the culmination of a lifelong fascination with the Greenwich Village nightclub scene of the 1940s. Davis's exposure to this undocumented period of history is the stories told her by the women who experienced it first-hand. "None of this has been written down anywhere...It was all told to me by old friends. They were the butches in drag who worked the floor shows in those Village clubs."

Beginning in the 1960s Davis began creating oral histories of this period. Through conversations and research, Lisa Davis has re-created in an utterly authentic manner a fascinating period in gay and lesbian history, while penning a fast-paced and unabashedly fun mystery that honors both the style of the writers of the period and the men and women who lived the life of her characters.

We asked Lisa about the story, and the story behind the story.

Q: *Under the Mink* is a sharp and fun mystery set in a drag club in Greenwich Village in the '40s. An unusual setting — where did the idea come from?

A: Stories my friends told me. I started writing this book several years ago, out of love for older lesbians I knew when I was a kid. Most of them had worked as entertainers in white tie and tails in the underground bars of New York City during World War II and after, and had wonderful stories to tell.

So this is real history?

Oh yes. I've been faithful to their accounts

— in the story I tell and the characters I created. My heroine Blackie Cole is a combination of several women, beginning with her name. I knew of at least two women who went by the name "Blackie," and another who called herself "Cole." Blackie has scruples borrowed from two old friends of mine. While the underworld they lived and worked in was often tawdry and mean, they were generous, upstanding, and courageous. I wanted everyone to know that about Blackie.

It's interesting you chose to tell this history in the context of a novel. Was it easier to approach that way?

I think almost anything would've been easier than writing a novel. I'd initially dreamed of putting together a nonfiction history of lives much more exciting than mine. But when I pulled out the tape recorder and looked serious, nobody wanted to talk — not for publication at least. "It all happened so long ago," they said. They were afraid, perhaps ashamed of having worked for the mob, and didn't want their families to find out they were gay (at age 70). Besides, I was just a kid. What did I really know about their world? As gay people had done for decades, they decided it was better to keep quiet.

It would have been easy to just give up.

No, I knew this was important material. I'm a historian by predilection, with a strong belief that the past shapes us all. If we don't know what happened, we won't be able to interpret what's going on around us. And despite a lot of excellent research into the way gay people lived before Stonewall, our history is difficult to piece together. We generally must depend on negative sources — police records, scandal sheets, pseudoscientific texts. At least, here I had a few facts to go on, narrated by people who were there, making money, having a good time. I wanted to tell that story.

These were the foster parents who taught me how to live in the real world and have a few laughs. Nothing in my church-going, God-fearing home had prepared me to do that. Out of gratitude, I began to create a tribute that would become *Under the Mink*.

Once you made the determination to fictionalize this, was it a natural next step to create this sort of film noir feel?

Whenever my old friends would talk about the clubs, that's what I saw — a black and white film. When I started to write, I had to feel around for a way to tell that kind of story. I needed those smoky, shadowy landscapes where anything could happen, and I didn't know how to make it happen. But thanks to all those university degrees, I did know how to go to libraries and read any and everything related to the period, gangsters, the City, show business. From there, I rented old films and took screenwriting courses, looking for the kind of plot and language my characters demanded. I used everything I learned and borrowed a lot, especially from the movies. Even the title.

It's from a movie?

It's pure film noir, from a line spoken by notorious siren Gloria Grahame. In *The Big Heat*, she challenges a blackmailing vixen with the line, "You know, Bertha, we're sisters under the mink." Then she shoots her dead. It's very apropos of my novel, where the characters are driven by the same motives — greed, lust, fear. Rich, poor, black, Jewish, Italian, they're all pretty much alike *Under the Mink*. ▾

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