

Last call for city's last lesbian bar

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People stand outside the Lexington Club, a neighborhood lesbian bar in San Francisco, Calif., on Thursday, April 2, 2014. The bar is closing after 18 years in the Mission. Preston Gannaway/Special to The Chronicle

The Lexington Club is packed, shoulder to shoulder. It's been this way for nearly an hour. All those bodies have made the Mission District bar warm and loud.

A pool table has been shoved into a corner and a microphone stand sits on top. A little after 8 p.m., Joey "Cupcake" Stevenson climbs up. She quiets the crowd and makes a few announcements, and the eulogies begin.

One after another, people come to the microphone to share their memories — of spin the bottle and bathroom fights, love stories and ghost stories. Stories about community and stories about loss. "I'm scared of how it's going to feel to miss you," somebody says.

And everybody gets it: The Lex is closing.

San Francisco is full of wakes these days. This one is for its only lesbian bar. At the end of the month, after 18 years, the club will close its doors, one last call for another casualty of a changing city. The closing parties are set for Friday and Saturday at the bar.

The Lex, as it's known, is more than a bar, though. For queer women and, as times changed, trans men, it's been a community center, a living room, a clubhouse, a refuge. For many people, it's been the only place in the city they can call their own.

To understand what it means to lose the Lex — a small place with deep-red walls, plastic chandeliers, Sharpie-covered bathrooms and a single pinball machine — it helps to know where it came from.

The neighborhood

Lila Thirkield moved to the Mission in 1994. She was 23 at the time. She had tattoos and spiky black hair, and she played the drums. She never even considered another neighborhood. “All the dykes lived in the Mission,” she says.

In some ways, it was a revolutionary time and place for queer people. Artists, musicians and writers had come to the area. People felt energized.

“I always compared the '90s in San Francisco for dykes and trans guys to being like Paris in the '20s,” says Lynn Breedlove, the founder and lead singer of the homocore band Tribe 8. “At the time, we were popping out all over Valencia. It was mohawks and spikes in our face, and everybody's name was Spike.”



(left to right) Erin Robinson, Xam Roberti, Dana Baker and Lindsay Dodge socialize at The Lexington Club in San Francisco, Calif., on Thursday, April 9, 2015. Scott Strazzante/The Chronicle

Despite all that, there hadn't been a lesbian bar in San Francisco since Maud's closed in 1989. "We were like sponges in the desert," Breedlove says.

There were one-off club nights and a cafe, but none of that was the same as a bar that stayed open late every day of the week, Thirkield says. "It really meant something to have a place that was always there, in a really functional way, not to mention a bigger sense."

When she found 3464 19th St., on the corner of 19th and Lexington, she was 25. The rent there was cheaper than what she was paying for her apartment. It would need some work. So would she — she didn't even know how to bartend (a friend would wind up training her in exchange "for covering some shifts nobody else would work" at a bar that's now a check-cashing place). None of that mattered.

On Jan. 31, 1997, Thirkield wore a rented tuxedo to the Lexington Club opening.

"It was such a big deal that you actually couldn't get in," says Michelle Tea, the writer, poet and performance artist. "It was crazy. I just remember thinking this is as close as we have gotten, or may ever get, to a sort of gala." Tea spent most of the night outside, smoking cigarettes with a girl she was trying to sleep with. She guesses they made it in the door right before last call.

“It was total madness.”

The newcomer

If you spend a few years behind the bar at the Lex, you start to notice a cycle repeat itself. Robin Akimbo, who worked at the bar from 2003 to 2006, says it goes like this: “A lonely little gay nugget” somehow makes it to San Francisco and lands at the Lex. She orders a beer. She doesn’t look up.

“They probably have long hair, an oversized white T-shirt, hoodie, ball cap, all of the above.”

Akimbo would chat with the newcomer, but never too much. “Just tiny efforts.” She’d commit her to memory.

“Not their name, really, but their face and their drink.”

That way, she’d know she wasn’t just a face in the crowd. One day, she’d look up from her beer, make eye contact with a regular and wind up playing pool. “The first friend was made.” The shyness would fall away. “They would get a crew.” Her style would change; she’d cut her hair, maybe talk about getting a new tattoo.

“And then, they would land the official rite of passage: the attention of a really hot girl. And the queer is born.”

“This would happen again and again before my eyes. It is just such a f— beautiful thing.”

From that first busy night, the Lex was the place to be. Thirkield hadn’t expected that.

“I expected it to be — I don’t know — a very gradual thing,” she says. “And it just wasn’t.” Part of it was probably all the years of pent-up want and going without. But a lot of it was Thirkield, the way she set it all up.

The bar was open every day, even holidays. There was never a cover, not even during Pride. She let promoters tape their flyers to the windows. People could use the Lex for fundraisers. They could cover the walls with their art and do lit readings on the pool table. She made sure the people behind the bar came from the community (even if she needed to train them first). At a certain point, there was no separating the bar from the people in it.

“It wasn’t only just getting drunk and having sex in the bathrooms. It was also people trying to make queer culture.” Tea says. “To have a space that’s actually yours is really powerful.”

“It’s more than a bar,” they all say. A mantra, a theme, a truth that’s persisted.

Five years ago, Kat Yoas showed up at the Lex, a fresh-faced 26-year-old, no job or place of her own yet, just couch surfing. She’d met somebody who worked there while she was touring with Sister Spit in Berlin. “You need to get to San Francisco, and when you do, you

need to go to the Lexington Club,” they told her. “We’ll hook you up.”

“I just assumed it was with drinks,” Yoas says. “But they hooked me up with the majority of my social life and queer family and a job and a place to live.”

She’s gone through it all at the Lex — even written some of her shows in the basement when she didn’t have her own computer. At the risk of being too dramatic about it, she’s grown up there.

“When I think about it, it kind of shocks me a bit. But I don’t think it should shock me. If you finally feel comfortable and at home somewhere, you inevitably, hopefully, start growing from the experience.”

The personality

Jenna Riot threw her “very first” party at the Lex with her then-girlfriend. They called it “Affection.” They played ’90s hip-hop — she remembers lots of Missy Elliott — and some house. “We didn’t even know what we were doing.” But they figured it out. It was a jumping-off point for the years of DJing that would follow.

“It’s an institution,” Riot says, “a place where many different people from many different walks of life have come together and made community. It’s hard to explain to somebody that might not understand.”



Chelsea Raymond (left) and Natasha Garrety of Sydney, Australia made a visit to The Lexington Club one of their priorities on their vacation to San Francisco, Calif., on Thursday, April 9, 2015.Scott Strazzante / The Chronicle

If the Lex were a person, “they’d be a genderqueer, old butch soul,” says Stevenson, the host of the storytelling night. Their arms would be full of tattoos. They’d have some wrinkles around their eyes. “A wizened butch.” Or maybe the Lex would be some hip, androgynous kid, says Elizabeth McGrath (who got engaged at the Lex; a story for some other time). Shining eyes, beautiful face. “Quiet but with a sassy attitude ... stylish but not too fancy.”

Maybe they’d be a little bit like everybody who’s ever had a drink at the Lex.

Almost definitely, though, they’d be a Pisces, says Yoas. “Pisces love to drink. They’re so good at social scenes. They get away with everything and they’re beloved for it.”

Over the years, things would change — slang and styles, a new set of cool kids at the end of the bar. Queer identities evolved and people in the community transitioned. So did the Lex. “Your Friendly Neighborhood Dyke Bar” was now “Your Friendly Neighborhood Queer Bar.”

“In some sense there wasn’t really a change at all,” Thirkield says. “We were still the same space.”

But the Mission wasn't. A few years back, the rent doubled. The bar made a few adjustments and worked it out. But rents were doubling for everyone. As the days and weeks and years crept on, "everybody moved out of the Mission," Thirkield says. And here's the thing: What's a community space without its community?

"It was a place to meet other people who wanted to have a more radical culture and live differently and not live for your job and not live for some sort of like weird social acceptance," Tea says. Those people are leaving.

The wistful ending

Late last year, Thirkield announced that the Lexington Club was closing. "It was very hard for me to put out," she says. The news traveled fast and it traveled far. Over the years, the Lex had built a reputation that reached well beyond the Mission. "The love that came back really bowled me over" — a salve to soothe the loss.

"How does it feel when you're one of those people who doesn't have that kind of access, doesn't have that kind of ability and movement in society and financial stability to have something? F— incredible. How does it feel to have it disappear? F— crushing."

She'll be OK, though. Thirkield's opened up a second bar with two others, Virgil's Sea Room. It's in the Mission, too, but they've cast a wider net. It's a bar for everybody. She's also planning to throw the occasional party under the Lexington Club name.

"I feel like there's a big part of me that wanted it to go on," she says, a slight pause, a moment to let it sink in. "But I also feel like I'm super proud of it." Nearly 20 years. That's a good run. "I feel great about this place. I love it. I still love it."

Back at the Lex, the eulogies have ended. A bartender steps up to the microphone while no one is looking. One last thing, she says. Everybody stops. We need to take a picture.

She holds her cell phone out so the whole room is in the frame, one giant selfie. Everybody ready?

"ONE, TWO, THREE," the crowd shouts. "LEX FOREVER."

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