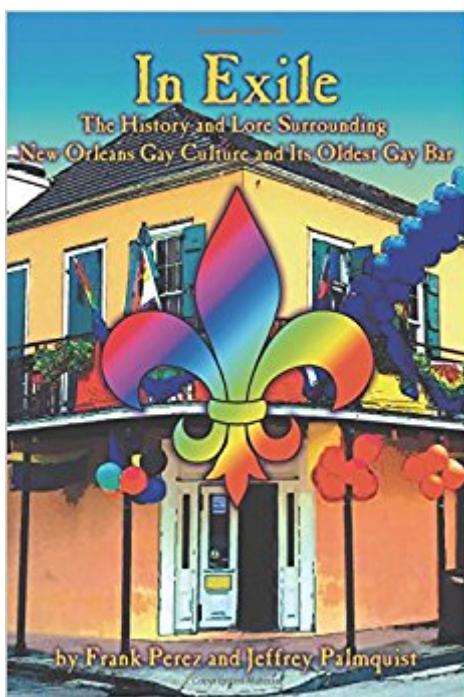


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# In Exile: The History And Lore Surrounding New Orleans Gay Culture And Its Oldest Bar (NoLa Gay) (Volume 1)



## **Synopsis**

In Exile: The History and Lore Surrounding New Orleans Gay Culture and Its Oldest Gay Bar is the first comprehensive treatment of the history of gay New Orleans. Drawn primarily on the recollections of dozens of gay men and women, Frank Perez and Jeffrey Palmquist weave a fascinating narrative of how gay New Orleans evolved throughout the twentieth century. In addition to showing the incredible and previously unrecognized contributions gay people have made to New Orleans culture, In Exile also illuminates the darkness in which ordinary gay people lived secret double-lives for decades and chronicles the social forces which ultimately enabled gay New Orleanians to live openly and honestly. Written with graceful insight and thoughtful perception, In Exile is not only a captivating history book, it is also a beautiful meditation on the intersection of place and identity.

## **Book Information**

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## **Customer Reviews**

This book helped me learn of events in gay New Orleans that followed my departure. In the late 1960s I was teaching at a Black university in New Orleans as news blared the latest information about District Attorney Jim Garrison's prosecution of local businessman Clay Shaw for partaking in a conspiracy that resulted in the assassination of Pres. John Kennedy. A colleague, Annette, dismissed the entire investigation, "How could Shaw be involved? He's a homosexual!" I was shocked that someone could be judged innocent of murder simply because he was gay. The implication was that a gay was too frilly, too frivolous to be involved in anything serious like an

assassination. As the legal maneuvering continued over months, Annette, who would later marry a psychiatrist, added that she had heard the reason for the prosecution was that Shaw would not let Garrison into Shaw's gay circle. One of the big issues nationally in the late 60s was the case of Garrison against Shaw. And it was not merely Shaw in the spotlight. Local attorney Dean Andrews claimed that Lee Oswald had come to his office in the early 1960s accompanied with a bunch of gay Latinos. Others suspected of being involved in the plot included David Ferrie, a pilot fired from Eastern Airlines after being convicted of sex with a male teen. Suddenly, there was so much gay gossip and allegations in the national news - news stemming from New Orleans. And this at a time even before the Stonewall riots in New York. Yet, all the attention to gay New Orleans barely makes a ripple in the Perez/Palmquist book. Their view is one heard in the 60s - Garrison, a closeted gay, persecuted the innocent Shaw for a variety of reasons, mostly which a psychiatrist might have to unravel. The anti-Garrison position was presented in the huge volume by James Kirkwood published in 1970, *American Grotesque*, a book quite sympathetic to homosexuals. Partisan, one-sided, the point was that Shaw was prosecuted for this crime only because he was gay, a one-sided view boiled down to some 3 pages *In Exile*. Of course, one would not expect the Kennedy assassination and the case against Shaw to consume a book on gays in New Orleans, but the authors downplay how New Orleans gay circles became the center of national attention. Worse, the authors assume that Shaw was innocent because the jury did not convict him. But the authors say nothing of the attempts by the Federal Government to obstruct the entire proceedings and derail the trial against Shaw. Indeed, shortly after Garrison announced his charges against Shaw, the US Attorney General, Ramsey Clark responded to the national TV reporters stating that the federal government had already investigated Shaw and he was not involved in any conspiracy. The feds cooperated with the media and friendly reporters to undermine the Garrison case, his witnesses, the use of hypnotism, and when witnesses fled Louisiana, other governors like California's Ronald Reagan, refused to extradite them back to New Orleans. I am a native New Orleanian and attempted to be as closeted as possible. Rather than a sexual deviant, I was a political deviant. My first year at Tulane, 1956-57, I excelled in my American History class. Some 80 students packed the classroom in the old barracks, and 2nd semester, I befriended two non-natives. Tom C., another A student in the class (there were only 4 of us), was from a posh Houston suburb, a fellow Unitarian, and a member of the Beta fraternity. The other non-native was Al C., who was not a A student, but the 3 of us began to hang out some. My parents had given me a car, and I took them like a tour guide to some places beyond the campus. Once we went to a public swimming pool in the spring of 1957, and I suddenly realized how scrawny my body was compared to Tom's big chest, muscular

arms, blond hair, and blue eyes. Al had black hair but he too had a barrel chest and strong arms. Al was a native of Central America, and knew Spanish. I did not see them at all during the summer of 1957. In September with the beginning of the new university year, I received a call from Al, who was back in town. "I would like to talk to you about something." "Go ahead." "Not on the phone." With that phrase, I guessed something, as it had happened before. I met Al and he told me in the summer he had stayed at Tom's home in Houston. They were visited by agents of the FBI to talk about me. By then I had a policy when this arose: if people wanted to break off from me, I would not try to stop them. They would have to call me again. Neither Tom nor Al did, so the friendships ended. I did hear that Al had found a new group, he had joined the Pikes fraternity. Months passed. In the spring of 1958 I chanced upon Al on campus. It was a Monday. I suddenly felt I had been wrong, that I should have made an effort to continue our friendship - after all, he had phoned me to tell me of the agency's investigation. I suddenly tried to make up for my mistake. "Oh Al, where are you going?" "To my dorm," he replied unenthusiastically. I was effusive, trying to be as friendly as possible. I kept chatting as we walked cross campus to his dorm. He was rather sullen. We arrived at his room and conversed only slightly when another student arrived, another Pike I assumed. Suddenly, I was left out of the conversation as Al and the frat brother went to a corner of his room to speak in whispers. I found this rude. After a short time, Al walked toward me and said, "Would you mind leaving?" Well, I thought, I had made an effort. Our friendship was over. I think it was the next day when I read of Al's arrest. He and other Pikes had gone to the French Quarter to "roll a queer." They went to Lafittes in Exile and other gay spots, enticed a 26-year-old Mexican to go with them, and then they beat, robbed, and killed him in Pirates Alley, near St. Louis Cathedral. Reading newspaper accounts, they met the next day in Al's room to discuss how to dispose of the victim's wallet. They were charged with murder. Months later, I was walking on Canal Street in January 1959 and heard a loud ruckus behind me in the distance. "Open season on queers!" "Kill all the queers!" In Exile notes that there was celebration inside the courtroom when the defendants were found not guilty. The celebration continued in a cavalcade of cars riding from the Quarter across Canal St. and thence probably to Tulane and the Pikes place. The book is good at describing this murder of Fernando Rios by Al Calvo and his fraternity buddies. It said something about the atmosphere of intolerance. I was living at home with my parents, and it was about this time that they became aware that the two ladies on the other side of the duplex house were "bull dykes." The women, Leah and Kitty, must have had some thoughts about me, too, for one suggested that I go to a bar in the Quarter, The Fencing Masters, and "I think you will like it." They never said explicitly what kind of bar, but I could guess. I might well have liked it, but I was too scared to go. In 1960

after I was arrested in the first lunch-counter sit-in in New Orleans (then, the largest city in the South), my name was plastered on page. 1 of the local papers. I moved out from my parents for their safety. But they were receiving threatening and nasty phone calls all through the night. My dad told me much later that my parents were relieved that the two women did not complain to the landlord about the phone's ringing because he might have evicted my parents. There is another weakness in this book - the authors center their volume on Lafitte's in Exile because it was the oldest, and the most prominent gay bar in New Orleans. I think this can be challenged, depending on your definition of gay bar. I think the best known homosexual outlet in the 1940s and 50s (and perhaps into the 60s and early 70s) was the Club My-O-My. Although it began in the French Quarter, there were so many hassles with police that the club moved out of New Orleans, to West End. Perez/Palmquist write that it was built on pilings above Lake Pontchartrain waters separating Orleans and Jefferson Parishes (counties). But the entrance was in Jefferson. The club's entertainment usually included burlesque, a comedian, a novelty act, but the main attractions were the beautiful women who performed, singing with their own voices (no lip sinking). There was a 4-piece band which on occasion included Al Hirt. Of course, all these beauties were men in drag. The club attracted natives and tourists, and in the audience there might be actors like Alec Guinness, Carmen Miranda, Robert Cummings, aviator Howard Hughes, northern Mafia figures like Frank Costello and the brother of Al Capone, or other celebrities visiting the Crescent City. Because the local newspapers refused ads from the club, news of attractions spread through word of mouth. Grayline busses transported loads of tourists. The club was so well known that in the touristy post-card racks at drug stores like Walgreens and K & B, one could purchase cards with pictures of about 6 beauties in drag advertising My-O-My. The club burnt in 1972 and was not rebuilt. (Of course, if the main image of homosexuals in New Orleans in the 1950s was men in drag, it made many less reluctant to be known as gay.) At the other end of the parish border between Orleans and Jefferson Parishes, quite near the Mississippi River, but on the Jefferson side of the line, stood the Beverly Country Club. In an era when gambling was illegal, the Beverly was considered the place to go. It was not far from the world-famous Ochsner Clinic. The word was that the Beverly was run by NO Mafia boss Carlos Marcello. Did he also run the Club My-O-My? And what about bars, straight and gay in the French Quarter? I don't think Perez/Palmquist sufficiently describe the Mafia's role - for good or evil - in protecting "vice" in its various forms from the authorities. It was Mardi Gras 1963 and as a native I was showing 2 friends from North Dakota the varied ways to celebrate America's most unique holiday. They were a married couple; he was a graduate student of history as was I, and she had recently had a baby. I led them first to uptown St. Charles Avenue where families lined

the neutral ground, and then to Jackson and Dryades to see some Mardi Gras Indians in full regalia. Next down town and Canal Street to view the Krewe of Rex and the unending floats that followed. Then over to Bourbon Street in the Quarter. After many blocks, we were engulfed in a crowd surrounding a stage on the street. I had never seen anything like this before, and wanted to move on, but Ramona preferred to stay and see what would happen. Suddenly on stage, it seemed like a Mardi Gras costume contest, with contestants competing in elaborate attire. I recall a handsome young man dressed as a Renaissance gentleman, reminiscent of a famous picture I had seen. These were not the simple costumes of the children of uptown St. Charles. Then there was a beauty contest for women. Ramona nudged me, "Look at the legs on that one." Then I became aware - those were the legs of a football player. Those were not women in the contest. In 1963 in the open street on a stage, before hundreds of spectators, gay men were showing their wares. Where else in America could such a contest be held in 1963? Perez/Palmquist mention the beginnings of the Bourbon Street Awards program (I assume this is what we saw then) but they do not elaborate or emphasize how unique this openness was. In the summer of that year my Dakota friends told me they heard the strangest radio program - a guy from New Orleans who was a Marxist and had lived in Russia was interviewed. I often listened to that current affairs program, but had missed the WDSU broadcast the night the guest was Lee Oswald. E.K. was a graduate student at Tulane in the business department who had been arrested when the new District Attorney, Jim Garrison, began his crusade against vice. Even the "naughty" pictures of scantily clad strippers at the straight clubs had to be covered. The clubs found an ingenious way to circumvent the anti-vice police; the nearly nude girlie pictures remained outside the clubs facing the sidewalk, but parts of the women's bodies were covered with a curtain of beads. Any passerby could see the full picture by using his hand to open the bead curtain. Years later, after I finally came out, I chanced upon E.K. in the Tulane cafeteria and we chatted. I asked about his arrest. He stated that any single male could be picked up in the French Quarter during Garrison's crusade. (I doubt this, because in the straight area of the Quarter, many men going to the strip joints would have been single men, and arresting them would have caused an outcry. But E.K. may have been walking in another part of the Quarter or near a gay bar.) E.K. told me what a disappointment that arrest was, because he had come to New Orleans in 1960 because he thought it was such a tolerant place for gays. I asked where he was coming from. He answered, San Francisco! Was New Orleans, as late as 1960, the premier city for gay freedom? (I do not use the word gay liberation because that has more political connotations.) From the mid-1950s on, I was active in the Unitarian Church. A teenage girl joined our youth group, and I have forgotten the details, but there was some kind of family troubles - perhaps her father had

died. Her father had owned a bar in the Quarter, Lafitte's something. And though I did not go, I did suggest it to others. A friend later commented that I had been outing myself without knowing it. It was not until the murder of Rios by Al Calvo and the Pikes that I learned that her dad's bar was gay, and it was Lafitte's in Exile. The daughter then told some other stories about residing in the Quarter. She was straight, married quite young, and stopped coming to the church. Reading this book, a straight man with the same last name as hers, is listed among the owners of Lafitte's in Exile. When Katrina struck near New Orleans in 2005 and the levees broke, the city sank below the waters. I recall listening in the North to a radio call-in program as a listener explained that the storm was God's punishment for all the homosexual activity and other vice. He compared it to the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. I called. I informed the listeners that the area least flooded, least devastated by Katrina was the French Quarter, the gayest part of New Orleans. Since the least gay areas of the city had been most devastated, perhaps God had changed his mind about gays since the days of Sodom, and was now saving the gayest part of the New Orleans. Most of those interviewed for this book were not native New Orleanians.(p. 141, 175) I think that that skews the book toward more recent residents and more recent times. Those were important times too, like the 1973 fire at the UpStairs Lounge in the Quarter in which over 30 people were burned to death, the development of gay Mardi Gras groups, and the acquisition of political rights. My review stresses the earlier periods. I left New Orleans in 1969 when a police helicopter followed my car and arrested the passenger when I stopped to let him out. He was to be deported. I decided it was time to go - into my own exile.

i enjoyed this rather quick read about the history of cafe lafitte in exile and of gay new orleans, but it left me wanting for more. the authors do not claim the book to be an all-encompassing lgbtq history of the city, which is a good thing, because it is not (sadly, no such book exists); but what it does do is offer a timeline of some of the highlights of gay (male) history in the city, an overview of sorts, and some interesting anecdotal fare about cafe lafitte's in exile and its patrons over the years. the authors were smart to use the history of the bar as a framework for discussing the greater history of gay (male) life in the city, and it works well. i've always loved lafitte's and knew some of the more recent history of the place, but this filled in the gaps. i do recommend it for anyone with an interest in the lgbtq history of new orleans and the french quarter, but just know that it's barely the tip of the iceberg. hopefully more will be published about the other aspects of queer history in the city.

I loved this book so much. I am taking the Professional Tour Guiding class at Delgado. We each

had to develop a concept for a tour we be interested in giving. My topic was the "Gay Contributions to the French Quarter." The bible for this topic was "In Exile". I read it, and I loved it. I contacted the author Frank Perez and he's graciously agreed to meet me Friday for drinks and talk! I'm really so excited!!! Has anyone here been able to say they contacted an author, and he's agree to meet for drinks!!! I'm a lucky girl:-)

Having been born and raised on the "Westbank", I truly appreciate the insight Mr. Perez conveys in his book. Although I am a straight female, I have many gay family members and friends. I know the troubles they have faced in their lives and hope someday that all homosexuals have the same rights and privileges that others enjoy. In addition to the difficulties of the past and the sometimes slow progression forward of homosexuals, Mr. Perez brilliantly describes what makes N`Awlins such a unique city.

If you have visited the French Quarter in New Orleans and longed to return, or if you have merely wondered about how this district has become a cultural icon of gay people in late 20th century USA, this is the book to read. Well-written, and filled with quotes following first-person interviews, the book speaks with integrity about a culture that is grossly misunderstood by many and even blatantly lied about by prominent religious leaders still today. Highly recommended in this context.

I loved this book. I read it over the course of a rainy Saturday. The history was terrific! Co-writer Jeffrey is one of the nicest bartenders you'll ever meet.

A fascinating story for anyone who has ever been to Lafitte's or ever plans to go there. Well written with lots of interesting history and lore about this very famous bar.

Great read, a must for locals and newcomers.

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