

A Cute and Nice Oral History of Dave's Lesbian Bar Sound Journey

<https://daveshistory.nyc/>

Kae 00:05

Hello and welcome to the first update from A Cute and Nice Oral History of Dave's Lesbian Bar. My name is Kae Bara Kratcha, and I'll be your host and oral historian. This update is meant as a way to share some thoughts, experiences, and stories from people involved in Dave's Lesbian Bar here in Astoria, Queens. I've been recording oral history interviews with the folks involved in Dave's since spring 2022, and I'm so excited to release some of that audio into the world now.

Kae 00:37

But before we get into that, what is Dave's Lesbian Bar? Dave's is a lesbian bar that, as of January 2023, isn't open yet. It started as a passion project of Dave Dausch and quickly became a team effort that blossomed out of Astoria's various mutual aid projects. For a year and a half Dave's has existed as a series of monthly pop up parties in Astoria that raised money, hosted mutual aid events, and provided a venue for a burgeoning queer music scene. Based out of Astoria, Dave's Lesbian Bar is operated by, well, Dave, and cofounder Sarose Klein as well as Syry Mitchell, Benham Jones, and a gigantic crew of volunteers. Although the Dave's organizers have now met their fundraising goal and are looking for a brick and mortar space to lease, the bar has existed in a sort of quantum state for the duration of this oral history project. It's a speculative lesbian bar, a lesbian bar someday, a lesbian bar that could be anything we imagined it to be, because it doesn't exist yet.

Kae 01:50

Writer and organizing visionary adrienne maree brown tells us that all organizing is science fiction. This is because organizing for a better world requires us to first imagine that better world. I hope listening to this makes your Astoria a little more queer, a little more collective, a little more open to a present and future full of community support and joy. As I've heard from narrator's over and over, Dave's Lesbian Bar has two guiding principles rooted in joy and community. One is music, and the other is mutual aid.

Kae 02:32

In this audio journey, you'll hear from just a few of the people involved in the Dave's Lesbian Bar project. The audio clips you'll hear are parts of much longer conversations I had with each of the narrators you'll hear from them about their relationships with each other, the neighborhood, queerness, mutual aid, bars and more. You'll also hear interludes from me, adding my thoughts and experiences and asking you to think about some broader themes. I'd designed this audio program to be kind of a meandering journey. I hope you'll listen with that spirit and give your body or brain some way to meander through your experiences of the neighborhood while you listen. For me that would be taking a long walk with my headphones in. For you, it might be looking out your window while you fold your laundry, or sitting in your favorite park and having a snack. Up to you. But I invite you to allow what you hear in this hour to rewrite some part of Astoria for you through listening and physical grounding in the neighborhood. Go ahead and pause the audio if you need to put your shoes on or find a comfortable seat with a good view.

Kae 03:46

You're about to hear directly from our oral history narrators. But first, a word from one of our sponsors. Don't go away.

Kae the Ad Man 03:56

This program is brought to you in part by the People's Bodega. Sometimes you're at a protest, on the Open Streets, or at a hot hot mutual aid event and you realize you need a snack, some wate, or some PPE ASAP. Luckily, there's the People's Bodega, a mobile mutual aid mobile providing what you need right where you need it. Always 100% free. The Peoples Bodega: fueling the revolution since 2020.

Kae 04:25

Chapter One: Dave's. Patricia Ahn has been a queer bartender in Astoria for many years. In our oral history interview, they asked an essential question:

Kae and Patricia

Who is Dave?

Kae

My answer is Dave is a lot of people. Or maybe Dave's is a lot of people. You're about to hear a little bit more from Patricia and then from three of the core four organizers of Dave's Lesbian Bar. Those organizers are Dave Dausch, Sarose Klein, and Benham Jones. You won't hear from many more people, including Syry Mitchell, who's the fourth of the core four organizers, or other store of mutual aid organizers, or Dave's pop up volunteers, or general attendees of Dave's events. But I hope what you hear gives you a sense of who's involved and how they got to know each other. Okay, back to that bit of my interview with Patricia, and then on to the rest of the narrator's.

Kae the Interviewer

What about Dave's? What was your like, first introduction to Dave's as a project or a person or whatever?

Patricia 05:39

I can't call it a project of mine. But I don't even remember when I heard about Dave's for the first time, like in terms of like we're on the calendar. But I heard about Dave's from two friends of mine who no longer live in Astoria--or on and off in Astoria. And they knew more about who Dave was or what this passion project or whatever it was more than I did. And I was like, Who is Dave? Yeah. And also, a friend of mine, different friend of mine said it the best--it's like, what does Dave know about queer spaces? What does Dave--What did she say? She said, What does Dave know about lesbian bars or whatever? Because at the time, we didn't realize who Dave was.

Kae the Interviewer 06:46

And here I am with Dave. I'm, I'm curious to hear how you like met. You said that, like every time you realize you need need something, someone shows up? Like, how did that start? Who are those people?

Dave 07:01

Yeah, well, I guess it started--Margaret Horning, who's very active in a story of mutual aid here, and Benham Jones. And so I have a group of people--BDSM is what I affectionately call them. Benham. D, Dave, me, hi. Sarose Klein, and it was Margaret Horning, was M. That has changed now. Margaret is not really able to dedicate as much time to Dave's now because she's working on other brilliant, beautiful things. But that's Syry Mitchell now, who's in my band and who helps always run sound at the events. But these four people I kind of met randomly through--Not Margaret. I've known Margaret for a very long time And Margaret and Benham were working with People's Bodega, and I was protesting, and saw the People's Bodega, like handing out snacks for protesters. And I was like, you know, this is incredible. Like, you're amazing. And they're like, oh, yeah, we're out of Astoria. And I was like, I fucking live in Astoria. And I'm like, what, like, How did I not know about you? And then I just started getting more interested in them. Seeing them at action anytime that I was out, like they were always there, showing up with PPE and snacks and just really beautiful. And finding out that they were a subset of Astoria Mutual Aid. And like I had heard of other mutual aid organizations had volunteered and helped out with that, but like, knowing it was growing in my own neighborhood and learning about it that way, it just was so organic, and so like, beautiful, so I went to like help whenever I could. Before the--when we were at the other location--we have another location for the mutual aid and it has moved now but the first location of it--literally wrapping toys and sorting toys for Christmas and Hanukkah and the holidays. And I had asked for masks because I was taking the trains and a lot of people I knew weren't in 2020, obviously. And so I was like, can I have PPE to handle out on the trains? Because I was seeing a lot of houseless people out and about no protection whatsoever of course, of course, like hello, there's no infrastructure. We didn't have a fucking plan. So they would provide those to me and on the train you know, just little things like that but that make a big difference that like help. Like I know it's just my commute, but if I can make sure that you have a mask or some gloves so that you don't get this thing that could fucking kill you. We were so terrified to I remember just sanitizing every fucking doorknob every, you know. And they were there for that. Anyway, I'm getting sidetracked.

Dave 09:53

Well, Margaret, was a big connection there for me. Benham was a big connection there for me and they were some of the first people that I was like, hey, like, I want to open a lesbian bar. I remember sitting down with them and Miriam, who's also very active in mutual aid and being like, hey, I'm thinking about this idea, like, this is kind of what I want to do. And just only hearing--I mean, obviously, Benham was like, Hey, I have experience with opening bars that didn't go well, like, here are some tales of caution, like realistic tales of caution, but like, never like don't fucking do this. You know, always like, I'm telling you this because you should do it. Like let me help weaponize you, armor you to what it really is so that you can succeed, you know. And so instantly, I had support.

Dave 10:44

And then I was doing a mutual aid event in the park. One year celebration, the birthday of Astoria Mutual Aid, was at Socrates Sculpture Park, and I made the music for the event, like got all my queer buddies together to play music for everyone at the park that day. And someone came up to me that knew one of my friends that was a musician was like, Oh, you haven't met Sarose yet? And I was like, No, and Sarose came up to me. You know, like, when you're a DJ, and someone comes up and like,

play this song, you know, it felt like that kind of vibe. Like Sarose came up to me, like, can you sing Happy Birthday to Astoria Mutual Aid? And I was kind of like, oh ok. Like, umm sure. Sure, we could do that. You know? But we did. And it is a nice idea. And we were there to celebrate that. So like, it was beautiful. I hope that she doesn't--she's not like fuck you. But, um, but she's gorgeous. Obviously. She's the type of person that when you see her, you're like, hello. Yes, I'm listening. So I remembered her. And then I kept seeing her, just like in town. And that day, she had told me like, I'm thinking about starting like a queer branch of Astoria Mutual Aid, where we like, try to help with Queens Pride or some other things. And I was like, oh, yeah, like really cool person. And then for Queens Pride, she had organized a thing on the street, where she got a street permit and had a burlesque dancer out front, like some real gay shit. And I was like, hi. I'm--at this point, one of her good friends had just moved in with her. And they had come to see me on an open mic. And that person had said, I want to play music with you. And that's Syry Mitchell. So Sarose also introduced Syry Mitchell into my life, who is now like, a crucial core member. Is in my band, like in my heart, you know, and so like, the two of them, were kind of just in my orbit, you know, like, I was seeing them. It's queers in the neighborhood, we're gonna find each other, you know. But then I saw that she did this permit, and I was like, hey, listen, I'm trying to throw a pop up to start like raising awareness for this kind of like three year plan that I had--which is now expedited very rapidly. But I was like, I would love to get this permit. And I want to do bands on the street. So like a sound permit and like this permit, like, how did you do that, essentially, and Sarose was like--we had coffee, and I was like, will you show me how? And she did. And was going through it with me. But then she was like, you know, I could just do this for you. And I'm like, okay, cool. And then like little did I know, I was signing up for somebody that's just like, a rock star.

Kae 13:38

And here's Sarose talking about meeting Dave. Sarose was first introduced to Dave at the one year anniversary event for the Astoria Mutual Aid Network.

Sarose 13:47

They were on the mic hosting it with kind of a variety show that was happening. I was handing out socks that had been donated to AMAN and I was just going around to different picnic blankets handing out socks. As a, you know, volunteer, and I ran into someone actually from the queer nightlife scene in Brooklyn. And they were like, What are you doing here? And I was like, no, what are you doing? This is it was in Socrates Park, which is one of my favorite places in Astoria.

Kae 14:32

It turned out that Sarose's friend was there to support one of the performers, who was a friend of Dave's.

Sarose 14:38

And so my friend introduced me to the performer and they were like, you need to know Sarose. She is like, the like gay mayor of Astoria, of New York. You need to meet her. And then their friend was like, Oh, well then you need to meet my friend.

Kae 15:02

That friend was Dave.

Sarose 15:03

We met. It was really brief. And then, about an hour later, I was like, Oh, I really think that we should sing Happy Birthday. I really want to sing Happy Birthday to Astoria Mutual Aid. But I don't want to be the one to do it. Like, no, you couldn't--catch me anywhere but but on the microphone, usually. And so I went up to this mutual friend, I was like, Do you think maybe you could ask them to, if they would want to, like sing Happy Birthday to Astoria Mutual Aid? And so that was really our first interaction. They did. They sang Happy Birthday. It was very cute and nice.

Sarose 15:47

And later on-- I had come back to my apartment. I was like, you know--the were like, oh, you should come do whatever we do afterwards. Some we'll-- we'll do karaoke, or we'll go out, somewhere outside. It was a painfully windy day. I was like, Oh, well, you know, if you want to come over to my yard, I'd be happy to have you. And so then I'm back here thinking, you know, like, Oh, they're gonna do their own thing. I won't really hear. And then they were like, hey, we're coming over. What's your address? I was like, oh my goodness, do I have--I had a fire pit in the back. So I was like, I've gotta get firewood, I've gotta get some some drinks for everyone some blankets. So I went into to host mode pretty quick. And, and then in like, 30 minutes later, my yard was filled with maybe 10 or 15 people who I had never met before, any of them. Except for that one. One person. These are all folks at The Astoria Food Pantry and the People's Bodega, who now when I think back--it was it was Pi Day. It was March 14. When I think back to a year ago, March I would-- these people are now my some of my closest dearest friends. But I would have never-- I don't know if I would have ever met them in this way and become so close with with any of them or all of them. So that's how we all kind of met. And we couldn't get the fire started. It was so windy out there. But we kept each other warm. I was--it had also just been such a long time since we had socialized in groups and that I had met strangers before. So I was I was definitely nervous.

Kae 18:02

And finally, Benham. Benham first met Dave through his friend Margaret.

Benham 18:07

And Dave's I think of as a-- it is. It came out of that new neighborhood for me too. Yeah, Margaret, I just knew as the girl who would read tarot cards at the Queen's Comfort and someone who I liked but didn't know very well. But then next thing I know, I'm like, packing up 900 pounds of chickpeas with her and trying to get it out to people and stuff. And then it's like all the protests started happening. And then we were out there doing direct sort of service work for protesters and organizers.

Kae 18:43

And that was where Benham met Dave, out at a protest in the People's Bodega.

Benham 18:47

But for me, it is still mostly about-- this is something that this-- any neighborhood, but I can you know, I live here and I've loved this place. And I've seen it change. And I've never really seen it more primed for something like Dave's. And it continues to grow. The response has been so enthusiastic and so excited

that I really think that the neighborhood is ready for both a music venue, you know, a space of like, new queer representation. Because we do have places that have been in this neighborhood a long time that function as gay bars and they're amazing places and I don't want to--again--I don't want to make small, the work that they do in the legacies they've built. But there is something new, there is a new kind of place that Astoria needs. And also, I mean, this is like a smaller part of it, but just like I had been blown away. And I think I've maybe mentioned this too, previously, in just casual conversation, we're going to do these pop ups, and they're going to be 10 bands at every pop up. I was like, no fucking way. No thank you. Like, I have worked those shows before. I have done that. And that always--everyone leaves feeling burnt out after that shit. But I have been really impressed with sort of the development of what feels like a real, local, regional queer music scene around the project. And that, for me is a throwback to like being a high schooler. And because for me in New Haven, where we have really very little but the pizza and the university, the local music scene, which was like a network of bars, all ages, venues, VFW halls, was like, everything. For me, it was in early safe space. For me, when I did not even understand that term, it was a stage for me to perform on. It was everything for me. So to see the way that these different bands respect each other, and support each other, and continue to come back and bring new elements they because they know that Dave's is there for them. And this is a scene that they've dipped into and they'll probably get asked to do another one again, I see them upping their game and that is just so awesome.

Kae 21:46

And here's Dave again.

Dave 21:48

Dave's is a space to have mutual aid and music. To say, okay, like let's get together and listen to some music while we wrap the kids Christmas presents for the toy drive. Let's get together and listen to music and wash the clothes for the food pantry. Let's get together and paint the walls you know. Like or somebody's hurting right now in our community and we know about it. Let's set up to where one of us makes them dinner. You know, like just having a place to talk about that and to talk in general period. A place to commune is-- I know that the pantry fought really, really fucking hard for that space that we have now on Steinway. We need more?

Kae the Interviewer 22:41

Yeah.

Dave 22:41

I'm just trying to make one more like-- Because there are no lesbian bars in Queens, which is insane. People are like only lesbian bar in Queens [imitating echo] Queens, Queens, Queens. But like really, what like-- there need to be so many more.

Kae the Interviewer 22:57

Yeah

Dave 22:58

There need to be so many more spaces like this and they don't all have to be called lesbian bar or a food pantry or whatever. But they need to be comrade safe places that we know about. You know what I mean? Like that we can all like be like, this is a safe place for me. This is a safe place for me. And I think slapping a name that's so kind of recognizable, like every bar name, but also like lesbian bar, which has always been like, you know, hated? I don't know. I love it. But you know, for America? Yeah, um, I don't know. It just seems like it's getting attention because of that, which is cool. I am very much about queers being very fucking visible. Don't put us in the fucking shadows anymore. And if that gets more mutual aid conversations happening and more people seeing the activations that are happening in neighborhoods and, and maybe more funding being provided for those spaces, then cool. I'll love to be the person that doesn't shut up loud and flashy about it. Sure.

Kae 24:10

[upbeat music begins in the background] I've come to think of this project as being on a historical continuum with a new book by M.E. O'Brien and Eman Abdelhadi. The book is called Everything for Everyone: An Oral History of the New York Commune 2050 to 2072. To be clear, this book is fictional, set in the communized New York of the near future. The book chronicles the collapse of global racial capitalism, and the emergence of communist living arrangements through a series of fictional oral history interviews with New Yorkers. Their vision of the future is both bleak and hopeful. Ultimately, the book helps me to envision a world in which we human beings make it through the world-ending collapse that feels inevitable to me and come out on the other side without white supremacy, without homophobia, without transphobia, and without capitalism and colonialism.

Kae 24:14

I've come to think of the work of the people I've talked to in this project and their coconspirators as one of many precursors to O'Brien and Abdelhadi's fictional future. Considering that most of the Dave's organizing team is made up of white queers in one of the most financially privileged areas of Queens, the Dave's project isn't going to end racial capitalism in New York or the world. But I do see aspects of the queer future building I need to see keep going. When Dave tells me that Dave's Lesbian Bar is more of a commune than a bar, when Benham tells me about meeting the rest of the crew through food access work and protests, when Sarose tells me about her dream of seeing queer parents and their kids in the daytime at Dave's and Patricia tells me about their willingness to jump in and help out wherever they can for the sake of community, I see everyday people working to make their neighbors' live a little better, a little more collective. I see them actively creating a better world, being science fictional in their approach to shaping the neighborhood around them. It makes me think about how what we do today is the history of our queer descendants--whether those descendants are biological, or just logical.

Kae the Ad Man 26:44

This program is brought to you in part by The Rolling Library. The Rolling Library is a queer-led Queens-based mutual aid library that brings free books to New York City. Literacy should be accessible to all. Find the Rolling Library at a local community event or therollinglibrary.com. The Rolling Library: money is fake, but community is real.

Kae 27:13

Chapter Two, Lesbian. What does the word lesbian mean anyway? Here's Dave.

Dave 27:19

Dave's Lesbian Bar. I think language is so funny. But it's been used against queers for so long. But even as somebody that, like-- I call myself a lesbian to other queers. I've sucked dicks, though, you know. But it's like I think that's why I love it so much. Dave's Lesbian Bar is like this super masculine name next to this, like, super femme-- god, I don't even know how to describe the word lesbian. It's like I am a trans non binary person, but I feel at home at Dave's Lesbian Bar, you know? That--

Dave 28:26

I have only really felt comfortable in-- I'm trying to think of like spaces that I have felt comfortable in as somebody that's so queer, you know, and lesbian bars really are that space. Even even though they-- not all of them. You know, not every queer space that I've been in, have I been like, ooh, wow, home, you know? Like, that's not all of them. But like, generally, it's definitely going to be a lesbian bar for me, versus like, a club. You know, like, but the word lesbian to me is, is not so much like a vulva and another vulva, but as it is, like flagging a queer space. You know, it's me putting lesbian bar in the title is more like-- gives pause to those who probably shouldn't be in there and screams queer to the queers, you know, because I think if it was called Dave's queer bar--

Kae the Interviewer 29:40

What is that?

Dave 29:41

Yeah exactly. That's that's-- it's very clear who's welcome at Dave's Lesbian Bar. Which is everybody, you know what I mean? Like but for cis straight people, if they see lesbian bar on them, I hope that that gives pause. Like that, even if you are in the space, even if you came with some trans hottie, like, you still know what this space is for, who this space is for. Right? So if you're in there, it better be with respect, you know? And that's what I say like-- pronoun sometimes or like gendered slang with me. I use they/them pronouns. So like people will be like girl or like, sis sometimes, and I don't mind that. I don't mind gendered slang at all because I know it's said, with respect. You're loving me, you're being like sis like, let me tell you this tea, you know what I mean? Or whatever it is. But like, that doesn't bother me. Because it's said, with respect. Whatever you say, whatever comes out of your mouth, as long as it's said with love and respect, I don't care. That doesn't matter to me. And that's kind of how I feel about Dave's Lesbian Bar is like, those who say hmm I don't know if I'm belong in there--good. And people that say lesbian bar feels safe to me. Come in, you know, you absolutely belong here.

Benham 29:41

I mean, queer is like a very much--it's become like, also a popular-- as part of like, pop culture. You know, it's so funny because I used to think of it, it was such like an outdated term. But now, it's like, it has a whole, it does, it has a whole new energy around it. And there's a whole lot of people who maybe did not understand that they had queer thoughts or feelings inside of them, myself included, until later in life, who feel welcome into that community, into that space. And that is worth everything, you know. So Dave's as a space that is not even space yet. And one that is still forming an identity can make itself continually more welcoming and flexible and open ended for both those who already understand

themselves and their queer identity, and those who are still in a state of becoming. I mean, that's like, the bomb. That's like the best, you know. Yeah, I, yeah, I'm still--like I said, there's been a lot written about Dave's and I could give you an elevator pitch and pretty cleanly summarize it, but I'm still just excited to see what it becomes. Because I think that they're still-- it is still changing, and becoming, which I think is also reflexive of a lot of the people who are working on it. And to have that journey kind of dovetail with actually manifesting into a space is-- that's pretty gay.

Benham 31:23

You know, that's like every conservative's nightmare, that someone's non binary understanding is then graft upon a space and then it's like, the whole city changes, like Inception. Now it's becoming so gay. But for real, that's the dream.

Kae the Interviewer 33:28

Yeah.

Benham 33:30

Catch fire that way. Yeah.

Kae 33:35

That was Benham. And here I am with Patricia and then Sarose.

Kae the Interviewer 33:40

Yeah, what is what is like-- because you've kind of been saying like lesbian in an inclusive way. Like what does that mean?

Patricia 33:52

I think I-- I think I meant it in the way that people just generalize queer women as being lesbians, when that's has nothing to do with their own self identity, that that was just kind of more what that was, you know, like, in the most inclusive sense, like, if you're assigned female at birth, and you identify as gay people will see you as a lesbian. And if you identify as a lesbian, you're seen as lesbian. If you are bisexual and you're a woman then you might be seen as a lesbian because of who you're dating. As like sometimes has something to do with you, has something to do with who your partner is at the time. Like, I feel like lesbian is just sort of thrown around. Like I get referred to as a lesbian all the time. And I'm like, that's literally never how I've identified ever in my life. I have friends who identify as lesbians. Good for you. Amazing. But have I ever once for one second thought, I am a lesbian? Like, absolutely not. Like, it's just just not a word that resonates with me. But again, this is just how people put labels on other people, whether it's to help them understand or just put them in a box, or whatever it is. So like, for that reason, I just said like lesbian in, like the all encompassing way of using the word lesbian. You could be trans and you'd would be a lesbian. I don't know, like, I don't know how people decide to label others. But that's what I meant by that.

Kae 35:38

Yeah, that makes sense.

Patricia 35:42

Yeah.

Sarose 35:42

Well, you did get me thinking about the word lesbian. And we haven't really touched on that. And I was kind of explaining earlier how I try to give a context to people who don't understand the history of gay bars and spaces. And then I've also from within the queer community and outside of the queer community been asked, why is Dave's named what it's named? Both from it having the name Dave to it having the word lesbian. And so I was not the person that named it this. And so I have since thought about it a lot and how I would like to explain it. And I-- on a drop down menu, where they have all of the options in the world for how I identify, I put queer. I am not opposed, offended to being identified as a lesbian. I identify as a lesbian on a drop down menu that is maybe less-- that has less, you know, to select from. I identify as a lesbian when a comedian calls out me and my partner for being a lesbian couple in the audience. Yes, yes.

Sarose 37:31

I think that the word itself can be confusing in terms of creating a queer space that we see as a queer space, you know, made by a like femme lesbian and a trans non binary lesbian that also identifies as queer. And so, you know, we're not-- also we're not in the business of putting people in boxes. And I would say, most of my lesbian friends do not identify as lesbian. And they wouldn't. And I think that just also has to do with where we are right now in this cultural shift. And the word queer being reclaimed back into the community and it feeling like a way safer word. It feels like less of a box. And I think what I try to explain is like, Dave's is-- it's a place for everyone made by non-cis gay men, right-- which is predominantly what queer spaces-- who they are made by and then inherently for, so we are just creating a space that is made with everyone else at the forefront-- by everyone else, I mean everyone else in the queer community as like, kind of like that the overarching word kind of in mind, because there are more gay bars in the city than there are for queer women and gender non conforming people in the whole country.

Sarose 39:40

And for me, I love the kind of gender fuckery that happens when you put the word Dave's lesbian-- when you put those words together. I think it's great. I think the word lesbian, right? If it scares you away, if you're like, oh, that is definitely not a place for me, then think about it, and maybe it isn't the place for you. If you see that, and you're kind of intrigued, and you're thinking to yourself, like, oh, it's a queer bar, it has the word lesbian it. Like, then it most likely is a place for you. If you're even kind of thinking that far into the name, right? And so I also think it's for people who identify with lesbian culture, right. And that is for people who identify as bi, people who, you know, in their sexuality. People who identify as trans, in their gender, like, there are so many different combinations of right. That's also gonna be the same person. And so there are just so many variations that, you know, it's more like you could Dave's spin a wheel of all types of identities Bar. It really is, I think, there has been so much-- there's just been like an awakening of the loss of lesbian bars. And again, it's because we need more than-- in my opinion, it's because-- it's a bar that we're over here crying about losing, and there's so much more to our community and our interests than what can happen in a bar. But also, there's a reason that they existed in the first place as a lesbian bar. That was before we had the words to explain

every identity in our community. And so I think it's also just a nod to those spaces that couldn't put the word lesbian on their marquee. And now we can, and we feel safe here doing that. And so it's kind of just like, a powerful thing to be able to put out there in writing, you know, in all types of official paperwork. And I think that's-- I think that's why it's a great name for this space.

Kae the Ad Man 43:01

This program is brought to you in part by The Astoria Food Pantry. At The Astoria Food Pantry, neighbors help neighbors access free groceries and more. Visit the pantry at 2558 Steinway Street and check out astoriafoodpantry.com for hours, upcoming events and more information.

Kae 43:20

[dreamy music in the background] When I think about my relationship to lesbian bars, I think of two things. First, I think about how my first--and for a long time, only--contact with queerness in any form was through the internet and grew up in a pretty conservative German-American and Polish-American Midwestern Catholic family. And there was simply no way I was going to find queer people in real life in my youth. So my most formative early exposure to lesbians and lesbian bars came in the form of a fan fiction novel called *How the Mouth Changes Its Shape*. The story is a "gender swapped" Sherlock Holmes/John Watson queer coming of age story set in World War II London. It's honestly part of my personal canon of queer literature. But it is just that--literature, and niche online literature at that. For me, the lesbian bar has been more of a literary trope than a physical space you can actually go to.

Kae 44:37

The other thing I think about is a story I also first heard online somewhere, probably on Tumblr, and I was recently reminded of the story from a tweet from beauty writer and queer icon Arabelle Sicardi. Their tweet reads, "If you ever need to cry on cue, what works for me is thinking about the fact that a queer person once would call every gay bar they had a number to, just to hear the sound of other queers laughing somewhere. Just listen, say nothing as not to be alone, every week for 14 years." The story is from a book called *Baby You Are My Religion: Women, Gay Bars and Theology Before Stonewall* by Marie Cartier. And the interview is in the book as a preface. It's called Myrna's Story. And it's from the researcher talking about interviewing this woman named Myrna about her time in the 1940s after divorcing her husband and going to lesbian bars. And at the end of the interview, the interviewer asked Myrna, "Is there anything else you want to tell me about what gay bars mean to you?" And totally unexpectedly, since Cartier says she didn't know there was another story, but Myrna told the story of what Arabelle said. Of for 14 years being married to a psychiatrist whose job it was to try to correct queer sexualities and Myrna having insomnia, and having a list of gay bars that she would call at night in secret, and not say a word, but just listen, listen to what she could hear on the other side of the phone, until somebody on the other end would eventually hang up. And then she would call the next one.

Kae 46:25

And to me, that has always--ever since I've first read that--that's been what a lesbian bar means. It's been a place far away, or maybe a place in historical fiction that you know exists, or at least existed, but that maybe you don't go to. And as queer community has gone more online, and as lesbian bars become fewer and fewer across the United States, I wonder how many other introverted queers who

spent most of their free time online have similar feelings. I have never identified as a lesbian. But through talking to people about Dave's, I felt more and more connected to lesbian history and futures. For me, it's kind of surreal to have physical, lesbian oriented spaces in my neighborhood, and to go there and feel like it's a space for me. It feels really important to have physical, local spaces like that.

Kae 47:29

Chapter Three: Bar. What is a queer bar today? What has it been in the past? And what might it be for us now and in the future? Let's start with Patricia.

Kae the Interviewer 47:42

Why, why is it needed, compared to all the other spaces that we have in Astoria, or in New York City? Like, what-- what's missing?

Patricia 47:58

It's needed, because a lot of it, I think it is like a mutual aid angle. It's great to have a place that is going to function as a mutual aid consistently throughout the week, you know. But also, it's sort of combines-- if what I'm imagining is what's actually going to happen is like, it's gonna, it's going to combine a lot of things that people enjoy into one space, which is also very Queens, put all the things into one place. You know, whether--if they decide to go kind of divey, which like, who doesn't love a good dive bar that's a queer space? Could always-- could always use more of that. And again, like, so far, the three queer spaces in Astoria are still run by men like, so I think it's important to have people who are non binary or trans or, you know, or female to be-- I feel like it's important to recognize the difference there.

Kae 49:15

And here's Sarose and then Dave.

Kae the Interviewer 49:17

Would you like to tell me about the future of queer spaces?

Sarose 49:21

Yes. So I can see the future. No, but I'll go back for a minute. I feel like there are a lot of queer people who are so happy with the spaces that we have right now. Because, especially in New York, most people are not--that live here that I meet--aren't from here. And so the spaces that we have and the visibility that exists in general in this city is far greater than most other places. And so we kind of blindly accept, like, these are the spaces that we have, that are here, that have been here for us. And, you know, we'll take them, and we'll put them on rotation, and we'll support all of them. And we'll just kind of lean in to the fact that the spaces that we are given are bars, and that they are in these parts of Manhattan, and they are in these areas of Brooklyn--now.

Sarose 50:43

And I think it's not always common, unless I start the conversation myself, for, at least the people that I'm around, to think about the history of queer spaces, and that it also was not that long ago that these bars that we are really honoring as a safe place. You know, they were run by the mafia. And that was the only way to get a heads up on police raids. And that was the only way to make it somewhat safe.

And it still wasn't, it still wasn't a safe space, but it was what we had at the time. And so having worked in nightlife, and seeing all of the great beautiful art that comes out of feeling free in a space is only motivating to like kind of push it and see how far we can go because we've already created such a diverse, you know, kind of arts entertainment scene and the queer community. And that's just from having, you know, these events at night in a dark bar, like very, very alcohol infused. And I think substance abuse is--in the queer community is also something that isn't really brought up. And I strongly think that if there were more queer spaces that weren't centered around a bar, that weren't centered around alcohol, that we would be able to heal ourselves as a community a lot more efficiently. And it makes me really sad to think about, like, even the damage that I've seen, personally to friends, to performers, to people who work in the nightlife space and kind of like our regulars, if you will, because there's nowhere--there's no other option. Like, yes, I can say, you know, go to Blue Stockings, or like there's a bookshop that you would feel safe looking at, you know, queer erotica in like, you'd feel safe doing that, but there's no in between, in a lot of ways. And I don't mean that it doesn't exist out there. But it isn't the norm.

Kae the Interviewer 54:14

If someone else were doing this, and they were just making the perfect queer space for you and you could just walk in, what what would it be?

Dave 54:27

Have you been to Pier 17?

Kae the Interviewer 54:29

No.

Dave 54:30

Pier 17 in the city is like on a pier. And there's a concert stage venue on the roof and below is restaurants. It's like this huge space. So on the top, there's always music and downstairs, there's like bars and food. If I could turn those stalls into like, one room has, like clothing. And one room has food, and one room has, like, group therapy, and one room has like, medics, and--like, a commune. I realize what I'm describing to you is a commune. That would be it. Is like a space where you could just have your needs met like. And our needs are so simple. They're really-- like we think of them as these extravagant things because we work 40 fucking hours a week to have them, but they're so simple. What I want to be happy is food, is a kitchen table. And I know kitchen table polyamory is literally my dream, but like, but literally is a kitchen table with people around it. Everybody has enough food. Everybody is laughing. And there's the perfect playlist on in the background. That's what I want Dave's to feel like. That's what I want a queer space to feel like--a big lesbian kitchen table at a commune.

Dave 56:01

You know, like, that's, you know.

Kae the Interviewer 56:05

Yeah.

Dave 56:05

Like, I feel like I'm the type of person that's like, does everybody have a little treat? Does everybody have like a snack? Has your favorite song come on the jukebox yet? Like, that's like who I am as a person. I'm a natural nurturer. Which is why I've got these huge tits. Like, you know, like, I'm just supposed to be around, like, comforting. And that's what I would want. If somebody else was doing the space, and I walked in, and it was like, a bar with cushy like diner booth seats and big tables of laughing queers with, I don't know, fucking garlic bread on the table? Paradise. You know, some snacks, some music. Some people like playing board games. Dreams, you know.

Dave 57:03

One of my partner's birthdays is today actually. And I'm helping with one of her other partners, we've been planning her birthday. And we're doing bring your own game. So everybody's bringing like a different little board game for us to like-- and I love that, like pairing off and getting to meet someone new and like play them in a game and see how competitive they are. You know, it's so fun. Like, I love that safe, playful space. I want that.

Kae 57:33

Today, New York City only has three lesbian bars, and Queens doesn't have any. But it hasn't always been this way. In her Columbia University master's thesis, architect Gwendolyn Stegall chronicles lesbian spaces in New York City from 1910 to 2019. Stegall's thesis is a great read all the way through, and you can find it by googling "A Spatial History of Lesbian Bars in New York City." My big takeaway from Stegall's work was that in many ways, what Dave's is doing isn't new. For example, live music isn't a regular feature of New York's lesbian bars today. But Stegall writes that in the 1930s, a series of bars or clubs began featuring lesbian performers, and particularly gender bending drag, in their cabaret performances. These musical performances were staged for a mixed audience of both straight and queer people, because serving alcohol to quote unquote homosexuals was illegal. Gay bars and clubs were run by the mafia at this time, and they would continue to be for the next four decades. In another example, mutual aid, or at least pooling resources to make sure your people are housed and fed, is also not new to lesbian spaces in New York City. Stegall writes that rent parties were a notable aspect of lesbian Harlem nightlife that started in the Harlem Renaissance and lasted into the 1980s. These parties allowed hosts to charge a cover for parties in their homes as a way to pay their rent while avoiding the racism of the downtown lesbian bars and the homophobia of almost every other location in the city. Queer rent parties actually continue in contemporary New York City as well. For example, Autostraddle writer Bailey reports that the Black trans organization For the Gwolds started raising money through parties in August 2019, before mutual aid became a buzzword in 2020. Stegall also writes about Gianni's, a lesbian bar that was opened in Chelsea from 1966 to 1975. Gianni's is notable for becoming more welcoming and community friendly after the 1969 Stonewall Riots and therefore staying open longer than many other gay bars. What struck me about Gianni's is that they offered a free brunch every Sunday, a tradition that Stegall notes continued at other lesbian bars through the 1980s. I don't know whether the patrons of Gianni's and other lesbian bars thought of those free Sunday brunches as a form of mutual aid or politicized community support, but I do like to imagine lesbians showing up on Sundays, knowing they could eat surrounded by other queers no matter what, and knowing they had a community to rely on. Finally, Dave's is known for trying to open the only lesbian bar in Queens. As far as I can tell, it's true that as of 2022, there aren't any lesbian bars in Queens. But

Queens had a lesbian bar within recent memory. Stegall tells us that in the early 2000s, Woodside had enough Latina lesbians to support two lesbian bars--Bum Bum Bar and Chueca. Chueca closed in 2009. But Bum Bum Bar was open until 2018. According to the NYC LGBT Historic Sites Project, Bum Bum bar opened in 1993, and was one of the gay and lesbian bars that helped start Queens Pride. And that the bar hosted fundraisers for the Colombian Lesbian and Gay Association. I often feel like Brooklyn and Manhattan's gay reputations overshadow the gay reputation of Queens. But there are queer people in Queens. And of course, there have always been queer people in Queens. When I hear someone say that there aren't any lesbian bars in Queens, I have started to add on an "anymore." There aren't any lesbian bars in Queens anymore, but there used to be, and there will be again.

Kae the Ad Man 58:01

Astoria may not be known as a fashion destination, but the Free Store is here to change that. Come to the Free Store and update your wardrobe, one recirculated clothing item at a time. You can also donate your gently worn duds. Score clothes from hats to hot pants and coats to coulottes, and yes, it's really free. Find the Free Store on Instagram @freestoreastoria, no spaces no underscores, for shopping and donation hours.

Kae 1:02:24

Well, that's just about all I have for you this time. To be honest, this oral history project doesn't feel nearly done to me. I've talked to only four people when the Dave's pop ups have attracted 1000s of attendees and when Astoria is surely home to at least hundreds of queers with various and divergent experiences of queerness, mutual aid, music, community and lesbian spaces in the neighborhood. I'm planning to do more interviews, and if you would like to be one of them, please visit the project website, daveshistory.nyc to get in contact. You can also find more oral history audio and more information and historical resources on the site. I'd love it if you check those out and share this with a friend. And I'd love to hear from you.

Kae 1:03:12

Before I let you go, I also want to give a shout out to the Astoria Mutual Aid Network, the People's Bodega, the Rolling Library, the Astoria Food Pantry and the Free Store. None of these organizations actually gave me any money to run ads about them, but they do need your participation to keep running. Find them on Instagram or by searching their names online. I'll also include their links on the project website. I also want to credit Patricia Taxxon for all of the music in this piece. Find Patricia Taxxon--that's T A X X O N--on Bandcamp. And of course, thank you to all of the narrators who have participated in this oral history so far. Find Dave's on Instagram for updates on when and where the bar will open. I hope to see you there someday soon. Until then, this is Kae, signing off.