

## LU RIVERS' BARS TO BIZARRES

Barbara Ester<sup>1</sup>

Lu (Louise) Rivers was born in Miami Beach, FL. Her family lived all around South Miami and settled in Homestead, where her father bought a house and had his own business. Lu came out in 1964 after a coworker took her to one of Miami's gay bars, the Mug. Most of the people were working class, blue collar, like Lu. She went there to dance and drink and meet women. She also occasioned the Nook and the Night Owl in Miami Beach. She met some girls who had been arrested when the bars were raided, even though there was always someone watching out the window. It was part of the gay life. The bars felt dangerous. There were blue laws<sup>2</sup> in those days that the cops used as an excuse to come in and harass everybody. One gay lawyer was savvy enough, to get the women out of jail, so after a while they stopped arresting anyone.

Lu, a graphic artist, was working in a print shop when she met two women who owned the Coco Plum restaurant in Coconut Grove. They invited her to work for them. The "groovy grove" was a popular place for the alternative community. Occasionally, Maryanne and Louise would stop by while riding their bicycles. They were passing out notices to come to meetings where the Lesbian Task Force of NOW was organizing phone banks to counter Anita Bryant's "Save the Children" campaign. "Task Force Lesbians were political and more educated college types," Lu remembers. "It was hard to find a place to fit in. Bar dykes could be rowdy and underbelly. The girls had 'reputations' and couldn't always be trusted. Some were crooks and lived a rather low life." Lu, however, remained hopeful. She kept meeting women, but

most of the women she met in the bars were the "find someone, fuck them, and forget 'em type."

In the mid-1980s, Maryanne and Louise had flyers about their new restaurant, Something Special.<sup>3</sup> Lu found "the beauty of their diversity" attractive and welcoming. Lu was often there for lunches and had discussions about festivals and moneymaking. She began meeting artists and more interesting women at Something Special. Lu loved collecting things and had a warehouse full of art and pieces she made to sell. When businesses threw out scrap materials, Lu picked out good pieces of leather, wood, or anything else with some value for creative work. She was one of the earlier recyclers. Lu crafted various leather items, decorated hats, and made jewelry. She had a multitude of things she wanted to sell and a portfolio of art.



Lu Rivers and Maryanne Powers collaborated on the logo used in this flyer for the 1993 Lesbian Bizarre.

Photo courtesy of Barbara Ester

"How 'bout a yard sale or something like that at Something Special?" Lu proposed to Maryanne and Louise. "I could sell my stuff and you can sell food. We'll rent vendor space, have music, and make some money! Let's call it a Lesbian Bizarre!" Lu designed flyers, the word went out, and the weekend Bizarre was born in March 1990 and ran till 1993. There were homemade crafts, massage, several booths with products from women's businesses, food made by Louise, planned

1 From interviews on September 27, 2015 and May 10, 2017.

2 Blue laws prohibited the sale of alcohol and some other activities on Sundays or at certain times.

3 On Something Special, see "Outside the Box" in this issue.

entertainment, and always impromptu music making. It was fun and involved lots of women meeting, connecting, and creating community in Miami.

After Hurricane Andrew, in 1992, Lu's warehouse suffered, businesses closed, and Lu lost her job. She had some supportive customers and soon created her own delivery business. "I didn't do much creative work after that other than some art and graphics, and upgraded advertising for *She* magazine."<sup>4</sup> We all benefited from a more diverse, safe, and expanded lesbian community, and Lu met her best friends at Something Special.



Photo courtesy of Martha Ingalls

Lillie giving a massage at the Lesbian Bizarre, 1992.

## MERMAID INN, LESBIAN OASIS ON FORT LAUDERDALE BEACH

*Martha Ingalls and Bonnie Netherton*

### Martha Remembers

The Mermaid Inn was a lesbian owned and operated motel from 1989 to 1993, serving lesbians primarily, except for the first year, when it was open to the general public. Lesbians came from far and wide to soak in the sun, to stay a few days or months. I recall three lesbian couples who made the Mermaid Inn their primary residence and one gay male couple who lived there for a few months. Even though it was not lesbian or women-only space, lesbian culture was the dominant culture. Nancy Anderson (now Trey Anderson) and Bonnie Netherton (now caretaker at Sugarloaf's Women's Village) were gracious hosts and employers. My nine-month stay at the Mermaid Inn in 1991 is the closest to lesbian communal living that I have experienced.

There were nineteen rooms, one block from the pristine Atlantic Ocean on Fort Lauderdale Beach, painted in pink art deco, horseshoe shaped, with a pool in the center. Oleander and hibiscus bordered the property. Louise Griffin, from Something Special in Miami, referred me to the Mermaid Inn as a live-in caretaker. The job entailed cleaning rooms, maintaining the pool, which was a few steps away from my efficiency, and occasionally registering guests.

The Mermaid Inn was a laid-back, tropical oasis where a woman could swim topless, walk to the gorgeous turquoise Atlantic, and stroll down the waterfront to restaurants, bars, and shops. They hosted local lesbian and non-lesbian women performers at poolside. On those occasions, the Mermaid definitely created and expanded the culture we know as lesbian. If there were any non-lesbians at the motel, it was not obvious. Most concert nights, the Mermaid would be filled to capacity. I played bongos on several

<sup>4</sup> *She* is the longest running magazine for LGBT women in Florida.