

Online Clubbing and Digital Drag **Queer Nightlife in Pandemic Times**

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Article abstract

In this profile of Club Quarantine, a nightly online LGBTQ+ dance party, Hannah M. Brown writes of the challenges of creating a virtual safe space and ensuring privacy for participants, but also the potential for online events such as this to generate increased queer visibility and connect clubgoers with others around the globe.

Online Clubbing and Digital Drag: Queer Nightlife in Pandemic Times

Hannah M. Brown

Introduction

For many LGBTQ+ people, nightlife is a key part of their social and cultural lives. Performers and audiences alike flock nightly to their safe spaces—underground clubs, gay bars, and other queer venues—to socialize, dance, and celebrate. As the COVID-19 pandemic swept across the world and social distancing became the new normal, these vibrant community spaces were forced to close down, and with many of these venues already just scraping by, some of these closures will inevitably be permanent. Just weeks into the socially distanced era, however, queer performers and organizers were already finding new ways to connect, share, and survive. Drag queens began performing live from their kitchens on social media, queer venues and theatre companies introduced online programming, and a group of Toronto performers launched the highly successful *Club Quarantine*, a nightly dance party that grew from a handful of local club kids to an international party hosting thousands.

For this article, I interviewed (July 2020) three individuals who are involved in queer digital nightlife in very different ways—an audience member, a drag performer, and a co-founder of Club Quarantine. We discussed how performance, socialization, and spectatorship has changed in the digital realm; how accessibility and safety for queer people are navigated in online spaces; and, ultimately, how queer nightlife lives on in virtual space.

Interview with Michael

Michael Zoffranieri is a fashion designer based in Toronto who is an active participant and audience member in Toronto's queer scene. He began attending Club Quarantine early in the pandemic and has experienced a plethora of events since lockdown began.

Hannah: Before the pandemic, did you go to drag shows pretty regularly in person? How has your attendance changed?

Michael: I think I'm seeing less of it because I'm feeling so overwhelmed with so much content and so much availability. If I'm going to one show in person, I'm going to that show. I paid for my ticket, I'm rallying up my dollars to go to that performer. I'm not necessarily jumping between parties within a matter of minutes. Especially now, during Pride Month, I've been to four online events where typically I'll do like five or six events on pride weekend alone. So, it's a different experience and I don't enjoy it as much. I find I'm actually transitioning to doing, like, smaller in-person stuff with my friends as opposed to going to big events.

Hannah: When you were attending Club Quarantine, did you dress up, dance, or socialize like you would in person?

Michael: In the earlier days, it was mostly on my phone and just literally in bed, but eventually I transitioned to going on my computer and playing around with the virtual backgrounds. It was really fun to be identified as that person with the crazy background. I had Reese Witherspoon throwing an ice cream cone at Meryl Streep from *Pretty Little Lies* as my typical background. And it's those little details that allow you to stand out as a spectator in the crowd. It's similar to when you're in person and you have a crazy haircut, or you have a blinking piece of jewelry or cool shoes—little things for you to remember.

It was nice to have that space where I was going maybe three to five times a week in the earlier times and actually putting effort into it and scheduling it in my day. Now I'm noticing myself just experiencing it in the background, perhaps to fill the void.

Hannah: What have you noticed about how performers are getting paid and how organizers pay for this kind of thing compared to how they would in person?

Michael: What I've seen is two different types of models, and sometimes they're a combination of the two. The two models I've seen are paying the organizer through Paypal and then they distribute it to the performers, or using Venmo or Cash App for tipping performers directly. I went to one of my friend's events to support Black Queer artists and it was through Buddies in Bad Times Theatre. You would pay Buddies for the ticket, or you would pay by donations, and then it would go directly to the artists. I like that method better personally, just because I didn't have to constantly find the artist and tip them. I could give what I thought I would normally budget for that event.

Hannah: So, you have attended some other kinds of events like at Buddies. How are they doing things?

Michael: Buddies was using CBC Gem, so they did some live. So, they had a host actually at the theatre and they were doing pre-recorded videos. So, the actual event was live, but the videos were sent in.

Hannah: How did you find your experience as an audience member with that kind of format, how did you think that was compared to something that was happening in real time?

Michael: It was more like watching television. It was done in a theatre space, so they had tech people on site, the lighting and the sound were good, and the theatre had control and so the experience was consistent. The artists also had time to prepare and to edit, so it was more of a personal situation rather than performers just filming it and buffering and all of those technical difficulties that are often an issue on Zoom.

Hannah: Do you have any thoughts about issues of safety and security with LGBTQ+ events being held on platforms like Zoom?

Michael: Yeah, I think one of the first instances of people breaking Club Quarantine's rules was at one of the first big performers that Club Quarantine was able to get, Charli XCX. I just remember looking in the chat and just seeing so many transphobic and homophobic statements, and I just felt like the moderators weren't ready for that. I think that kind of pushed me into the space of not wanting to be there as much.

I know for a lot of friends that aren't necessarily out or comfortable with being in queer spaces, online recording or being on social media could be hazardous for their safety. They go to queer physical spaces because they know there's no safe places for them. In the earlier days of CQ, I had people send me Instagram stories being like, "Oh, hey, I see you on my friend's Instagram post on the Club Quarantine grid." I thought, "Oh, that's fun," but for those friends whose privacy is a big thing for them, that would have been scary, and it would deter them from being in these online spaces.

Hannah: Many queer spaces are very local and community based. How do you think huge online events like CQ have an effect on that "local" feeling?

Michael: It definitely changes my perspective completely. I remember there was a DJ performing around 11pm or so and it was 5am in England where they were performing, so they had to get up early to go to the club versus stay up late. Club Quarantine had a 24-hour event where they had an hour where a DJ from New York was performing and then another one from Toronto or Miami, and I thought that was a really cool way to use the 24-hour human experience. It was cool to see people everywhere interact with people at different times, but at the same time.

I think people will always want to connect. People will always want to gather. People will always want to celebrate, to mourn, to perform, to view. People will always want to do these things whether we have to stay inside our homes, whether we're able to go out to patios, whether we're able to go to performances all of a sudden, humans constantly just want to be with each other. It's beautiful and disheartening and scary to see how we're navigating through spaces, but at the same time, it's allowing me to stay creative and stay open minded.

Interview with Yovska

Yovska is a Toronto-based drag queen who achieved a worldwide following in 2019 after their appearance on the third season of the drag competition show *Dragula*. After their tours and regular local gigs were put on hold indefinitely, Yovska began to experiment with different online platforms and performance styles to continue presenting their art and make a living.

Hannah: What has been your experience with online pay models and organizers like Club Quarantine and Buddies in Bad Times Theatre?

Yovska: I think a lot of people are testing out a lot of different things. It's tricky to expect everyone to want to pay a show fee for something that's online, because someone can just go online and watch something else. I find digital drag show tips aren't as abundant as they would be in person unfortunately, so I really appreciate when organizers like Club Quarantine or Buddies are able to pay performance fees. I think it's a matter of finding different ways to engage with your audience and find ways to get support outside of just the people attending. So, I definitely appreciate it when organizations are able to help performers out and connect with other organizations to create funds for these kinds of events.

It's definitely a lot different now, but at least I can still take drag online, which I don't think is possible for every career type.

Hannah: How have you adjusted your performance style for online shows?

Yovska: I've had to really learn video editing skills really fast, because now everyone's starting to do online videos. And of course I want to be able to keep up and make quality content as well, even if I don't have much background experience. I have been doing some pre-recorded performances, and if I'm doing something pre-recorded I really want to tell a story with it, so there's that whole process of writing it down and thinking of scenes. It's fun in a way, but it's definitely more work than doing live performance in the long run because I'm spending extra time editing and changing into different costumes. You get to keep it for a while afterwards. It's already recorded, so it's something there you can have, but it is a lot more work in that aspect.

There are also online live performances, which are similar to in-person live performances where, if you don't attend the show, you're probably never going to see this performance again. It's definitely different as well because now you're stuck in a small box on the screen. You can't

walk around the venue with your camera. So, there's definitely some limitations, but also some new creative freedoms you can take.

Hannah: How is your engagement with your audience? Do you still feel like there's engagement when you're either livestreaming or pre-recording something?

Yovska: For me personally, I already have a large following online, so my followers are already following my stuff and a lot of my content was already online before. Now it's been different in the sense that I'm posting videos more often. I am finding that there's a greater reach for me now doing this video work, so I'm probably going to keep doing this outside of quarantine. It's great when I'm able to do shows with audiences that I'm not a part of usually. For example, I did a show online for a Mexican drag show with a Mexican audience. In a way, my work has become a little more accessible in that regard.

Hannah: Have you been attending any online shows as an audience member?

Yovska: I have lots of drag performer friends, so, from time to time I'll check out their shows. I feel like I've been going to more drag shows now online since it's more accessible. I don't really have to go outside or anything, I can just be sitting at home watching it while doing something else on the side.

Hannah: I was wondering also about some potential issues with performing on digital platforms, such as privacy and ownership. Do you have any thoughts about these issues?

Yovska: Some people have concerns with apps like Zoom, where there's privacy concerns about maybe not having the best place to keep your data safe. Then there are platforms like Twitch where people have been doing a lot of online drag shows, but then there's copyright law around using licensed music. You can't monetize videos on YouTube either if you include music from other things.

I think eventually more performers are going to start taking chances and seeing what they can do online. And maybe they won't necessarily be doing musical performances, but other things. For example, I've been using Twitch more, but for their gaming aspect. I've been thinking about maybe making videos around that instead, where I don't have to worry about copyright infringement.

Hannah: When you perform on online platforms, do you look at comments or chat feeds?

Yovska: I actually really do enjoy seeing comments when I'm performing. My drag style tends to be a little more out there, so I like seeing when I freak people out. On certain platforms like Twitch or Zoom, after the show closes, you don't see the comments anymore and you miss out on what people were saying.

Hannah: Can you share, like, a story or an anecdote from performing at this time that represents your experience with the pandemic?

Yovska: There was a Twitch show I was attending, and we were just waiting for the show to start. It started late, almost an hour had passed. It reminded me of the term "drag queen time," and to me it was funny how that was the thing that carried over from the in-person shows. Drag queens are keeping their genuine selves still, and they are able to keep carrying that over to these online platforms. I guess we're all reaching to keep a certain sense of normality or a

certain sense that things are still okay. It's hopeful, in a sense, to see that things haven't changed that much besides the fact that now everything's online.

I think once things open up again, it'll be exciting because now I feel like we're going to be able to still have online shows. I think people are going to keep doing those. But now we're also going to have in-person shows again. I'm really excited for that aspect whenever it comes and seeing how this online drag revolution is going to change forms in-person as well.

I think people are learning a lot of new skills. So, I think when I go back to performing live everyone's going to be doing green screen, people are going to do projection performances, or people are going to be doing more collaborations because they're meeting more people online. In that aspect, it's exciting for sure.

Interview with Ceréna

Ceréna (FKA Andrés) is a singer, dancer, actress, and co-founder of Club Quarantine. Before the pandemic, she was planning to release an album and perform during Pride month for the first time. For Ceréna, the pandemic has been a time of change and self-discovery as a trans woman. She aims to uplift and share queer voices around the world through club culture.

Hannah: What you were doing at the start of the pandemic and lockdown? Where did the impetus to start CQ come from?

Ceréna: Initially it was just a simple group chat on Instagram. Someone had mentioned Zoom because we were thinking that if we can see a lot more people, let's have a party, let's dress up, we'll turn up. It was just so much fun that first day, and then another DJ was like, "Me next, me next!" So, we're like, "Okay kids, come back tomorrow!" It just took off, and on that first night somebody drunkenly made the Club Quarantine Instagram, and it was over a thousand followers that night and the community really banded together. Club Quarantine has been an absolute whirlwind and then things sped up, slowed down, and now we're picking up again. It's been wild. It's our four-month anniversary today, which is just: wow. It feels like it's been four years.

Hannah: You mentioned a DJ reached out to you to perform, are these people that you knew or that the other organizers knew?

Ceréna: No, it's our community. I mean, we're all club kids. We all met or really blossomed through club culture—Toronto underground queer club culture, that's where it's at. People outside don't understand that for us it's church, it really is.

Hannah: How have you balanced accessibility and online security?

Ceréna: I mean, we are very much in the hands of Zoom as a company. It was really interesting and funny that we sort of appropriated this corporate culture software and made it into the queerest celebration of queerness.

Off the get go, as we got hit with moderating issues, we learned. You don't know until it happens, right? I remember troll bombings were happening in the beginning. Unlike everyone else, we were publicly putting out the code for people to come to parties. Zoom is also starting to implement security features that came out of that because they were getting a lot of flak. We always have our moderators "all-hands-on-deck," and we've got a system in place and we very

easily have control to kick people, pull them out, shut down the chat. For me, the biggest concern is just making sure that people feel safe, and then pushing for privacy regulations and more security online because the conversation is a lot bigger than just Zoom.

Hannah: I'm curious how you have structured your pay model for performers and how you made decisions about how to approach pay on your platform.

Ceréna: We put it all out into the community first before we paid ourselves. The core reasoning, why CQ even came about, was a need for community connection and safe space. So, with that at the forefront, we don't mind that we're the last ones to get paid, but that's why it's also important for us to amplify institutions that want to partner with us and help us as a community of queer artists. Everything in the world right now really depends on the ones who have the most money to be able to generate capital and to be able to provide, and because of the pandemic a lot of things have just stopped, especially for artists.

We all chose to continue to sacrifice ourselves to be able to provide CQ because we knew that it was bigger than us and, at the end of the day, we all felt that there was such a purpose in this and that it was serving the community. And when we would get comments like these:

"Death anxiety, depression, isolation, everything in between. We got this BBs. We will survive and party together when this is over, and then be stronger bad bitches together."

"You all have no idea how much I love club q. I'm sure this is all affecting everyone differently, but it's affecting everyone and I don't know in the morning I just cried because of all the anxiety related to what's happening in the world. This platform really helps you forget about what's happening in the world. I love you guys. And if anyone needs to talk or vent, I'm here for y'all."

"As a disabled [person] I had to quit clubbing because it was so hard on my body. I fucking love chatroom clubbing because I can party with y'all and still be comfortable and take care of myself."

We have people tuning in from countries where it's illegal to be queer and understand that if they're caught tuning in, that could mean something bad for that person. The fact that we are providing queer visibility to those that have none, and visibility is so important. Visibility saved my life.

Hannah: What is a positive change that we can continue moving forward? What could it mean for queer people to have more access to these online spaces?

Ceréna: I mean, a lot of queers have had to move back home, and what does that mean? I have a super amazing supportive family, but if it's difficult for me with my loving, supportive family who just have no idea how to even comprehend this, I can't even imagine what it'd be like for people who are in vocally anti-LGBT households that are a lot more toxic. If those queer people have a moment where they can, with headphones in, lock themselves in a closet and tune in and see a beautiful display of queerness, it is so inspiring.

Think about how the face of queerness that we have seen progress for so long is the white cis gays. It is such a limiting understanding of queer culture. In 2020, we're all waking up to that shame. We're like, "No more. We are here, we are queer, we are Black, we are Brown, we are everything, we are able-bodied, we are disabled, we're everywhere."

I have friends who were criticizing me for not paying myself yet for Club Quarantine. But with the privileges that I do have, I'm trying to use what I can throughout the pandemic. We're all together here and we're all doing this pandemic together and I'm not alone.

Hannah: How would you sum up your experience with the pandemic and starting CQ?

Ceréna: One of my favorite things about Club Quarantine is the exposure and the sharing of queer talent from all different scenes from all around the world. We know how to do it, the culture. Everything that's good in culture comes from queer people, comes from queer Black and Brown people, Black and Brown trans people. Without them there would be no industry. There would be no art as we know it without these people. To be able to dive in there, meet, and connect other queer artists from all around the world and give them a platform makes me feel so, so good. That's the fun part of curating these parties and seeing the reception of people and just how much they love the DJs that come through and the performers that come through. I want people to be celebrated. I want people to know their greatness. Come on, Hollywood is so stale! I want a celebrity culture where we're putting people on pedestals for the amazing work they have done and for what they contribute to the collective. I would say that is probably the best part of doing all this: connecting with fellow queerdos.