

Noteworthy LGBT Americans of the Twentieth Century

Please note: This is not meant to be an exhaustive list, but rather a starting point to begin researching and exploring the many contributions LGBT people have made to history.

Baldwin, James (1924 – 1987) The author of 22 books and numerous essays, Baldwin used his writings to bring issues of sexuality, identity and social equality to light in a time when very few were openly discussing these ideas. His works and ideas live on today, furthered by organizations such as the National James Baldwin Literary Society.

Baldwin, Tammy (1968 -) A U.S. Congresswoman in Wisconsin's 2nd Congressional District, Tammy Baldwin made history in 1998 when she became the first openly gay non-incumbent to be elected to the House of Representatives. A fierce champion for LGBT equality, Baldwin was a co-sponsor of the original federal Employee Non-Discrimination Act (ENDA), a version of which is still being considered.

Charles, RuPaul (1960 -) The first drag queen supermodel, RuPaul has had a decades-long career as a singer, performer, actress, spokesperson and activist. Flying in the face of the catty attitudes that are often associated with drag queens, RuPaul has been an outspoken proponent of a “love one another” approach to life and activism.

Davis, Angela (1944 -) With a lifetime of activism under her belt, Angela Davis gained national notoriety in 1970 when she was imprisoned as an accomplice to a crime committed by some of her fellow Black Panthers. Today, she continues to speak out against racism, gender inequality, heterosexism and the U.S.'s criminal justice system.

DeGeneres, Ellen (1958 -) An award-winning comedian and actress, DeGeneres made coming out of the closet a lot easier for many young Americans when she (and her character) came out as a lesbian on her primetime sitcom in 1997. Her humor, likeable demeanor and trademark dancing attract more than three million viewers to her talk show every day.

Erickson, Reed (1917 – 1992) The founder of the Erickson Education Foundation (EEF), Erickson tended to channel his philanthropic efforts towards causes and ideas that were “new, controversial or imaginative”, as he put it. The EEF has been a major force in providing support, research and financial support to forwarding equal rights for transgender people.

Gerber, Henry (1892 – 1972) While serving with the U.S. Army in Germany after World War I, Henry Gerber was made aware of the growing homosexual emancipation movement there. Inspired by what he saw, he returned to the United States and formed the Society of Human Rights in 1924, the U.S.'s first gay rights organization.

Gittings, Barbara (1932 – 2007) An early activist in the gay rights movement, Gittings was instrumental in getting homosexuality removed from the American Psychiatric Association's Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of mental disorders. In 1956 she co-founded the east coast chapter of the Daughters of Bilitis.

Gomes, Reverend Peter (1942 -) A preacher and theologian at Harvard's Divinity School, Reverend Gomes is also a best-selling author of numerous books, sermons and articles. As an openly gay man, he has long advocated for LGBT equality. His most recent works focus on the often-intertwined relationship between Church and State.

Grahn, Judy Rae (1940 -) One of the founders of the lesbian-feminist movement, Grahn is an acclaimed poet, writer and cultural theorist. She was very active in the Gay Women's Liberation Group in the late 60's and early 70's, the group that was responsible for establishing the Women's Press Collective, an all-woman publishing firm.

Iwamoto, Kim Coco (1968 -) As a member of Hawaii's State Board of Education, Iwamoto is currently the highest-elected transgender person in the United States. Born on the island of Kauai, she has spent her life being advocating for civil rights, for education, and for the people of Hawaii.

Lorde, Audre (1934 – 1992) “Black, lesbian, mother, warrior, poet.” Those are the words that Audre Lorde regularly used to describe herself. She was also a librarian, a scholar, and a skilled orator whose words and accomplishments have gone on to inspire and motivate generations of activists.

Martin, Del (1921 – 2008) and **Lyon, Phyllis** (1924 -) The first same-sex couple to get legally married in California, Martin and Lyon's list of achievements is impressive: They founded the Daughters of Bilitis, the first lesbian rights organization in the U.S.; they served as co-president and editor of The Ladder, the first nationally distributed lesbian magazine; and they were the first lesbian couple to join the National Organization for Women.

Milk, Harvey (1930 – 1978) In 1977, Harvey Milk was elected to the San Francisco Board of Supervisors, setting a substantial milestone for openly gay individuals to achieve public office. A champion not only for LGBT rights, but for the rights of seniors, laborers and people of color, he was assassinated by a fellow city supervisor in 1978.

Navratilova, Martina (1956 -) Undoubtedly one of the best tennis players of all times, Prague-born Navratilova has made a name for herself not only due to her superb volleying skills and wicked left-handed serve, but also due to her commitment to activism. She has received awards from both the Human Rights Campaign and PETA.

Rainey, Ma (1886 – 1939) One of the earliest professional blues singer in the United States, Ma Rainey is often called the “Mother of Blues”, and her career influenced many of the blues singers that would follow in her footsteps. A bisexual woman, Rainey recorded what could be considered the first out lesbian song, “Prove It On Me Blues”.

Richards, Renée (1934 -) Originally denied entry in the U.S. Open because she was not born a biological female, Renée Richards took her case to the Supreme Court in New York and, in 1977, won the case. Richards continued her professional tennis career until the early 1980’s, when she refocused her talents to coaching.

Rivera, Sylvia (1951 – 2002) When asked about her experience at the Stonewall Riots in 1969, Sylvia Rivera replied, “I’m not missing a minute of this: It’s the revolution.” With her friend Marsha P. Johnson, she helped found STAR, an organization that served young drag queens and transgender youth experiencing homelessness.

Robinson, Reverend V. Gene (1947 -) Reverend Robinson is most known for being the first openly gay, non-celibate priest to be ordained a bishop in a major Christian denomination. His ordination as bishop has created much strife among the leadership of the Episcopal and Anglican Churches.

Rustin, Bayard (1912 – 1987) A key figure in the civil rights movement of the 1960’s, Rustin was a close personal friend and confidant to Martin Luther King, Jr. He was heavily involved in the formation of such organizations as the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), and worked on many civil and human rights issues throughout his lifetime.

Sarria, José (1922 -) The very first LGBT person to run for public office in the U.S., Sarria ran for the San Francisco Board of Supervisors in 1961. In addition to being very involved with various early gay rights organizations, Sarria was also a talented drag performer, which earned him the title “The Nightingale of Montgomery Street”.

Smith, Bessie (1892 – 1937) Many believe that Bessie Smith was the greatest singer of her time. One of the most popular blues vocalists of the 20’s and 30’s, she is best known for her hit single “Downhearted Blues”. Her life was tragically cut short by a car accident at the age of 45.

Stein, Gertrude (1874 – 1946) Born in Pennsylvania to German Jewish immigrants, Stein spent most of her life in Paris, collecting art and writing works of both fiction and nonfiction. Some claim that she was the first to publish a piece of writing that used the word “gay” to describe people in same-sex relationships.

Swoopes, Sheryl (1971 -) The first player to be signed into the WNBA, Sheryl Swoopes is also an NCAA champ and three-time Olympic gold medalist. One of the highest profile professional athletes to come out publicly, she was also the first women’s basketball player to have a Nike shoe named after her.

Tipton, Billy (1914 – 1989) Although he lead a very public life as a successful jazz musician, Billy Tipton was not without his secrets: It wasn’t until his death in 1989 that the world at large, including his three adopted sons, learned that he was, in fact, biologically female.

Vidal, Gore (1925 -) A man who has been surrounded by controversy since the 1940’s, Vidal was one of the first American writers to pen a novel that portrayed homosexuality in a frank and “unveiled” manner. In addition to a decades-long career as a writer, Vidal has also appeared in films, on T.V., and is heavily involved in politics.

Uribe, Virginia (1933 -) A teacher in the public school system in Los Angeles, Uribe recognized that schools were not doing enough to meet the needs of gay and lesbian students. In 1984, she launched “Project 10”, which has since provided support to thousands of students through the years.

Adapted from: “GLBT History Month”, a project of Equality Forum, www.glbthistorymonth.com; “An Encyclopedia of Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer Culture”, www.glbtc.com; and PBS online, www.pbs.org/outofthepast.

Hyperlinks:

Baldwin, James: <http://www.glbthistorymonth.com/glbthistorymonth/2006/PDF/1.pdf> or Queery Notes*

Baldwin, Tammy: <http://tammybaldwin.house.gov/>

Charles, RuPaul: <http://www.glbtc.com/arts/rupaul.html>

Davis, Angela: <http://www.glbthistorymonth.com/glbthistorymonth/2007/PDF/3.pdf>

DeGeneres, Ellen: <http://www.glbthistorymonth.com/glbthistorymonth/2006/PDF/3.pdf>

Erickson, Reed: http://www.glbtc.com/social-sciences/erickson_r.html

Gerber, Henry: <http://www.pbs.org/outofthepast/past/p3/gerber.html>

Gittings, Barbara: <http://www.glbthistorymonth.com/glbthistorymonth/2006/PDF/14.pdf>

Gomes, Reverend Peter: <http://www.glbthistorymonth.com/glbthistorymonth/2007/PDF/12.pdf>

Grahn, Judy Rae: http://www.glbtc.com/literature/grahn_j.html

Iwamoto, Kim Coco: <http://kimcoco.com/about.htm>

Lorde, Audre: <http://www.glbthistorymonth.com/glbthistorymonth/2007/PDF/19.pdf> or Queery Notes

Martin, Del and Lyon, Phyllis: http://www.glbtc.com/social-sciences/lyon_p.html

Milk, Harvey: <http://www.glbthistorymonth.com/glbthistorymonth/2006/PDF/10.pdf> or Queery Notes

Navratilova, Martina: <http://www.glbthistorymonth.com/glbthistorymonth/2006/PDF/18.pdf>

Rainey, Ma: http://www.glbtc.com/arts/rainey_g.html or Queery Notes

Richards, Renée: <http://www.glbthistorymonth.com/glbthistorymonth/2007/PDF/21.pdf>

Rivera, Sylvia: <http://www.glbthistorymonth.com/glbthistorymonth/2006/PDF/4.pdf>

Robinson, Reverend V. Gene: <http://www.nhepiscopal.org/bishop/bishop.html>

Rustin, Bayard: <http://www.glbthistorymonth.com/glbthistorymonth/2006/PDF/19.pdf> or Queery Notes

Sarria, José: http://www.glbtc.com/social-sciences/sarria_j.html

Smith, Bessie: <http://www.glbthistorymonth.com/glbthistorymonth/2007/PDF/7.pdf>

Stein, Gertrude: <http://www.glbthistorymonth.com/glbthistorymonth/2007/PDF/24.pdf> or Queery Notes

Swoopes, Sheryl: <http://www.glbthistorymonth.com/glbthistorymonth/2006/PDF/26.pdf>

Tipton, Billy: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Billy_Tipton or Queery Notes

Vidal, Gore: <http://www.glbthistorymonth.com/glbthistorymonth/2007/PDF/10.pdf>

Uribe, Virginia: <http://www.glbthistorymonth.com/glbthistorymonth/2007/PDF/15.pdf>

**Queery Notes are short narratives that Madison high school teacher Pat Calchina wrote for the program "Queery" on the public radio station "WORT". We plan to make these notes available to download on the GSA for Safe Schools website, www.gsaforsafeschools.org. If you are interested in researching these individuals further, another excellent source of material is A Room of One's Own bookstore, also located in Madison.*