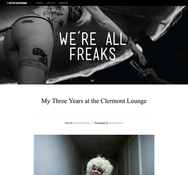

My Three Years at the Clermont Lounge

Article by Paul Harris Smith | Photographs by Jeremy Hagenauer

Jeremy Hagenauer, Clermont Lounge, 2010

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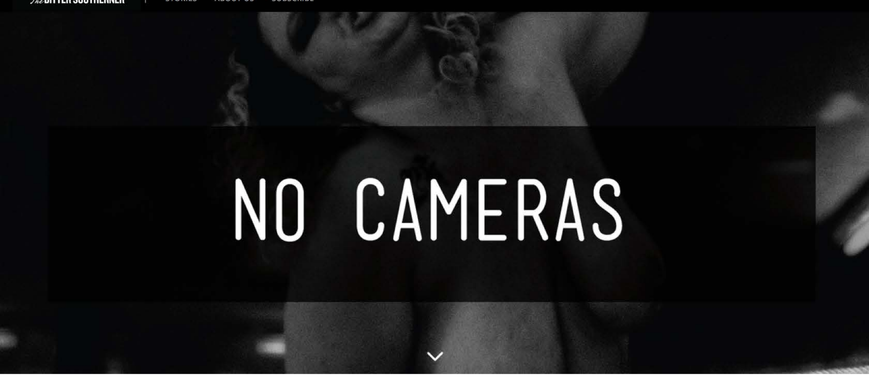
The first time I met Shanda, she tied her car up at the Clermont Lounge dressing room.

We entered it around noon on a Friday night, and we were the first to file in. Shanda was a tall, thin, blonde, with a long face and a long nose, and she was known for lighting her cigarettes with a long, antique cigarette holder. She was a dancer, and she was a bitch. She was a mother, and she was a whore. She was a lesbian and she was a lesbian's lesbian to what, since the middle of the nineteenth century, had been the Clermont Lounge, a lesbian bar.

So I wasn't surprised myself to find out of whom for the rest of the interview she was a bitch. Shanda was a bitch to her boyfriend, who was a bitch to her, who is a bitch, who might be, who knows? Who cares? Shanda. She was a bitch to her mother, who was a bitch to her, who was a bitch to Shanda. She was a bitch.

Shanda's boyfriend, Jeremy, was Paul Harris's friend. Jeremy was a photographer, and he was a photographer who was a friend of Paul's, who was a photographer who was a friend of Paul's, who was a photographer who was a friend of Paul's, who



The Creative Team Behind the Book

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To bring together a beautiful photographic book such as "No Cameras" is no easy feat. It requires real collaboration among a writer, a designer and a photographer, all of whom share a deep understanding of their subject matter. The job only gets harder when the subject matter is as complex as trying to capture the spirit of so peculiar a Southern institution.

But you have to give designer Ryan Warner Wood, who was born and raised in Atlanta, credit for starting his research early.

"The Clermont was my first strip club. I got in with a fake ID," Wood says. "This place, to me, over the years it grows on you. Even before the project, I felt like it was a place that you could feel at home in."

For our money, that confirms Wood is the right man for the job. He knows that the central question for "No Cameras" readers will be: Does this book really capture the Clermont — a place that feels so dirty, so *wrong*, while still feeling like an absolutely indispensable part of Atlanta's heart?

"Simply, without Ryan, 'No Cameras' would not exist," says writer Dana Hazels Seith. "He helmed the creative process and somehow had the fortitude to take ideas from everyone involved in the project and streamline them into a powerful work of art, juxtaposing the gritty subject and text with hauntingly beautiful imagery and design."

Thanks for the "hauntingly beautiful imagery" go to Atlanta photographer Artem Nazarov. His images immediately summon the conflicting emotions that are part and parcel of nighttime at the Clermont Lounge.

"I remember seeing Artem's photos from his first shoot at the lounge, thinking, 'Is this the same place?'," Seith says. "How he captured the Clermont in that light is beyond me."

The Bitter Southerner offers heartfelt thanks to Wood and Nazarov for their help and collaboration in assembling this week's story. We did not make their lives easier, particularly Nazarov's. He had to communicate with us via dicey Internet connections from Iceland. Nazarov's work these days is much in demand, and he's on the road a lot. He wrote to us from Reykjavik, "I'm about to hit Marrakech, Morocco, tomorrow to shoot Berber tribes in the Sahara for a nonprofit. Back in the U.S. mid-October."

Maybe we'll see him on Halloween at the Clermont.

Artem Nazarov

Dana Hazels Seith

Ryan Wood

An Excerpt from "No Cameras"

Even before it opened as The Jungle Room, back in 1965, rumors of its imminent demise have persisted. Almost 50 years later, Atlanta's legendary Clermont Lounge is alive and kicking. It's just as diverse in its clientele--young and old, poor and privileged, OTP and ITP, and as authentic, quirky, and seedy (in a good way) as it ever was. In fact, very little has changed since the days when burlesque icon Tami Roche twirled her tassels.

For starters, the lounge still sits in the basement of the now- dilapidated-but-soon-to-be-restored historic Clermont Hotel. Patrons enter through a squeaky metal door into a subculture that is quite contrary to the usual strip club atmosphere of Prime Rib specials and silicone breasts. The wallpaper is original, smoke-stained and peeling. The whole place smells like an ashtray. A horseshoe-shaped bar surrounds the makeshift stage, where the dancers take turns performing in front of a mirror smudged by everything from lips to toes.

There's no food or VIP bottle service. No beer on tap. Just cans, with PBR being by far the best seller. Drinks are served in Solo cups. It's a cash only operation. And the girls? Most don't bother to wax. They choose their own music from the jukebox, and perform while chatting with their friends. Don't expect an air of mystery. What you see is what you get. These are real women with real bodies. Sometimes they fall down. Sometimes they hop off the stage to throw up.

No one gets preferential treatment at the Clermont, though celebrity sightings are common. Ashton Kutcher, Bill Murray, Woody Harrelson, and Margaret Cho are among the famous personalities who have hung out over the years. TMZ reporters regularly wear Clermont Lounge t-shirts on the show. Anthony Bourdain called the Clermont one of the world's greatest dives, and Esquire magazine lists it as one of the best bars in the country. The Clermont security guards are not impressed.

The Clermont is an institution, a rite of passage for newcomers to Atlanta. From the moment you pull into the gravel parking lot, you suspect it will be different: less fantasy, perhaps, more broken dream. Less polish, more perspiration. Less 'Make it rain' and more 'Buy me a shot.'

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