

## ADONIS: A LOOK BACK | Skylar Fein

A casual tourist to 1950s New Orleans might have missed the seedy second-floor bookstore on Rampart Street. But in the gay subculture of the time, Henkin's Adonis, with its cruisy magazine racks, private booths and tiny movie theater, was a place notorious and beloved.

When the city bulldozed the area to build a park in 1971, a treasure trove of gay history was lost.

But it wasn't lost forever.

In 2005, gay photographer Leonard Earl Johnson was clearing out a friend's garage just outside the Quarter — the friend was elderly and no longer had the strength to do hurricane cleanup — when he made a surprising find: a dusty old sign with a picture of a cowboy.

He wiped his hand across it, and as he made out the word "Henkin," he got a shiver of recognition. He looked around the garage. It was stacked with the original signs of Henkin's Adonis — three decades of them. When he showed them to me the next day, he was still shaking with excitement.

I told the manager of the local leather bar about the staggering find. She suggested an art show — right there in the bar. So on Saturday night, in the back room of the second sleaziest bar in New Orleans, we hung the signs of Henkin's Adonis. Crowds of gay men came to pay homage to the lost Atlantis of sleaze, sex and self-acceptance.

There's just one thing wrong with this story. I made it up.

Henkin's Adonis never existed. I painted the signs myself, lovingly sketching believable images (cowboys, farm hands) and tag lines ("Physique and body-building") — code words that gay men in the 1950s and 60s understood. I distressed the signs, sanding and rubbing them with dirt to simulate the passing of so many years.

But here's the weird part. (That was the *normal* part.) The men who came to the opening *remembered the Adonis in every detail.*

They recounted the flirtations among the magazines, the handjobs in the tiny theater, the time they were arrested coming out...of Henkin's Adonis. I had crafted bogus newspaper articles from the Adonis's last day (never happened), when patrons famously rioted against the cops sent to clear the building (completely false), when locals held a vigil and brought flowers as the bulldozers revved up (a fantasy), and I'd blown up the clippings and hung them on the wall, too. People remembered the coverage.

I would say that half the bar knew it was a lark, and the other half was absolutely convinced it was real and had the memories to prove it. If anyone asked me directly, I told the truth: it was my homage to the gay men of another time, whose fighting and loving made it possible for me to live openly today. But to the men who talked and talked without asking a question, I simply smiled and nodded along, a student of their sometimes unsteady eldership.

This probably says a lot about memory, its creation and fabrication. It may say a lot about gay men, or about New Orleans, which still provides the gutter for all America to lie in cheaply and conveniently. All I know for sure is what the Adonis sign says: "We never close."

