

REPUBLICAN CONVENTION

Sure, Stephen Baldwin is a celebrity. But in Cleveland this week, he's huge.

BY MONICA HESSE

CLEVELAND — Stephen Baldwin has discovered a truth about being Stephen Baldwin, which is that to a certain segment of the population he is the most famous and beloved of all the Baldwins, and that population segment has all come to the Republican National Convention.

"Mr. Baldwin," says a young star-struck campaign volunteer at the Westin, where Baldwin is breakfasting on Tuesday morning.

"My brother," Stephen greets him, clapping him gently on the arm.

"Mr. Baldwin!" says another fan. "Keep up the good work, Mr. Baldwin." And Stephen will, because Stephen was the very first celebrity to publicly endorse Donald Trump on television, he points out, way back before even the first Republican debate. This foresight has led Stephen — an actor one would most likely recognize from 1995's "The Usual Suspects," or 1996's "Bio-Dome," or from two seasons of "Celebrity Apprentice," to be booked for six interviews this morning. This number will end up more than doubling by noon. The attention of grateful Republicans and salivating jour-



RICKY CARIOTI/THE WASHINGTON POST

"I think he could breathe a breath of fresh air back into the country," Stephen Baldwin says of Donald Trump.

nalists has made it impossible for Stephen Baldwin to walk more than 10 paces without someone else wanting to know his thoughts on the 2016 race.

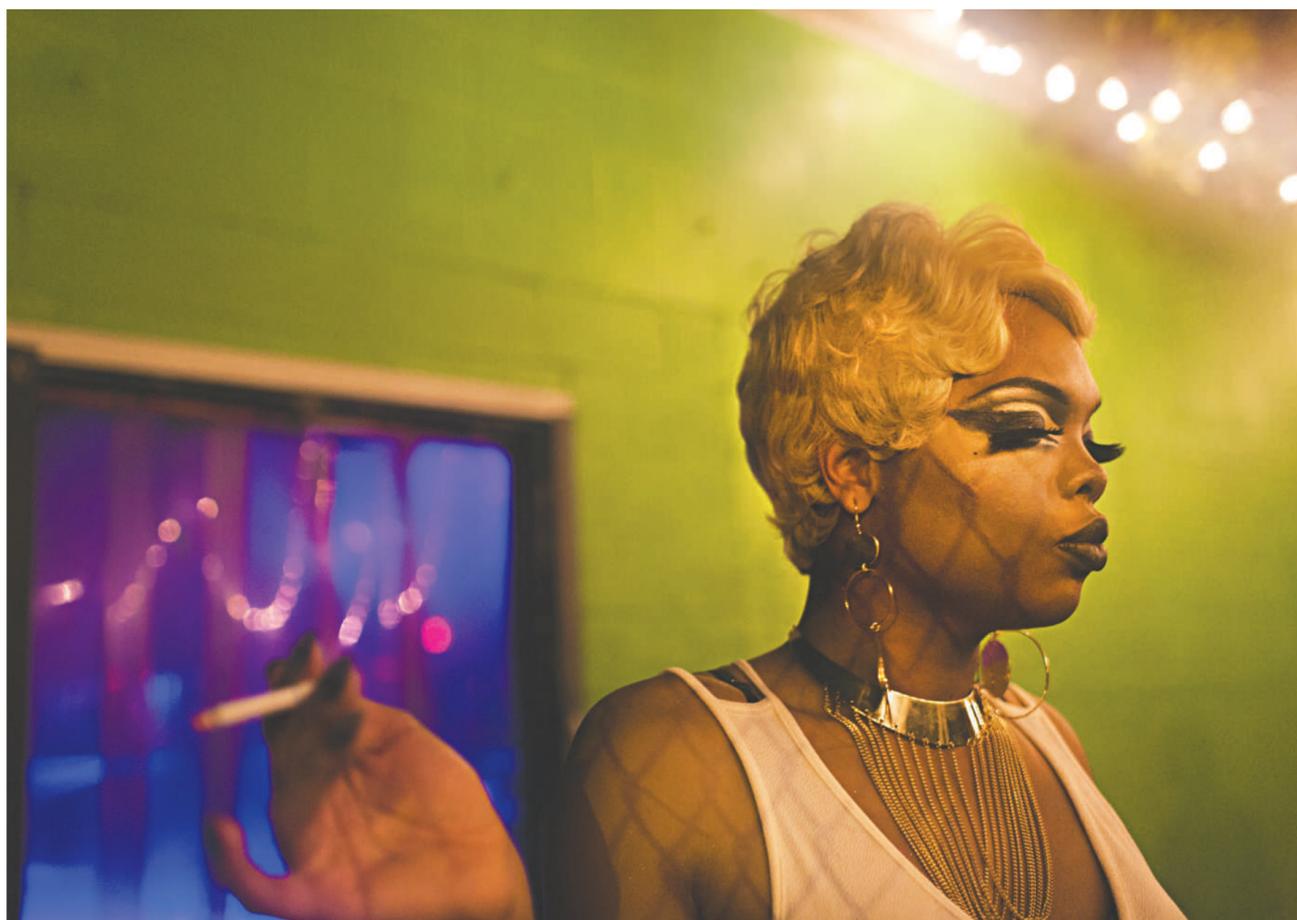
"People are more friendly around these parts," he says, acknowledging his popularity in this particular environment. "But I've always been an independent, rogue-thinking guy." Then his publicist comes over to say it's time to leave the hotel, and then Stephen excuses himself for the restroom, and while he is in there, we take the opportunity to visit his IMDB page to figure out just what Stephen (the youngest of the

storied Baldwin brothers, the blond of the bunch, eight years behind Alec — yeah, that one) has been up to lately.

In 2016 alone, Stephen Baldwin, 50, has nine film credits to his name. They are mostly, like Stephen himself, evangelical Christian in nature — movies that, like Stephen himself, find their own niche audience. The one currently filming, "Youth Group," is the first endeavor of his new faith-based production company, Stephen explains when he comes back from the loo. The production company is called Lightbeam Media, and

BALDWIN CONTINUED ON C3

Gay Mississippians, long targeted through laws and tradition, describe existing in 'an edited version of your life'



PHOTOS BY ANNIE FLANAGAN FOR THE WASHINGTON POST

Living in the shadows

BY NEELY TUCKER

JACKSON, MISS. — It was a big night for gay Mississippi.

House Bill 1523, the legislature's attempt to establish a sort of Southern-fried sharia over the state's LGBT population, had been demolished by a federal judge just hours earlier. It was the first state legislation to mimic an Indiana bill signed into law last year by Gov. Mike Pence (R), now Donald Trump's running mate, that let businesses refuse service to any group they considered heretical to their religion.

Now the clock was ticking toward midnight inside WonderLust, locally designated as the hottest and most "Vegas" gay bar in perhaps the most homophobic state in America.

Inside the spacious, purple-lit club are maybe 30 patrons. A few young women shoot pool. A couple of guys chat at the bar, so modest that it stocks only six brands of booze. The dance floor is deserted. There is no ironic disco ball of happiness on this auspicious evening, no party, no rocking celebration.

"It's kind of a time warp," says Jesse Pandolfo, the bar's owner, sitting in the back office, eyeing a monitor that displays security-camera feeds. She's 32, a mom and a lesbian. Boston native. Wound up here seven years ago. "You have to live kind of an edited version of your life."

Her year-old club testifies to that.

WonderLust is an unmarked, one-story concrete-block building on a side street in the north end of town, now open four nights a week, up from two. It is flanked by two empty lots and faces another. The Piggly Wiggly, the Dollar Tree and the Dollar General are just up the street.

Late at night, standing in the parking lot of chipped and broken asphalt, listening to

crickets in the trees, the actual Vegas Strip seems a million miles away.

Mississippi has long been the poorest and most religious state in America. It is staunchly conservative, evangelical Christian, rural, and it forever seems to bounce between its bipolar social features: hate and hospitality. The crueler irony for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people is that two of the cultural comforts against the age-old poverty and

JACKSON CONTINUED ON C9

ABOVE: Ke'Charra Illuminati, 23, prepares for a drag performance at WonderLust, a gay bar in Jackson, Miss. Out of the United States and the District of Columbia, Mississippi has the 49th-ranked percentage of same-sex couples among all households.

BELOW: The performer GiGi during a show. The club recently decided to open four nights a week, up from two.



THEATER REVIEW

A-list lips sing story of rival beauty empires

BY PETER MARKS

CHICAGO — Naturally, they look marvelous.

Swathed in dazzling mid-century couture to portray cosmetics empresses Helena Rubinstein and Elizabeth Arden, Patti LuPone and Christine Ebersole grandly evoke the divergent countenances and temperaments of a pair of pioneers who forged a consumer industry out of lipstick and lotion.

Even better, in "War Paint," the new, all-but-certainly Broadway-bound musical about the combustible rivalry of these extraordinary self-made women, LuPone and Ebersole wrap their prodigious voices around a score by Scott Frankel and Michael Korie that rings with the kind of exhilaratingly brassy notes that match the chutzpah of their characters' ambitions.

The show, which as a result of the matchup of LuPone and Ebersole is one of the most highly anticipated new productions of the year, had its official opening Monday night at Chicago's Goodman Theatre. Under Michael Greif's assured direction — bolstered by the soignée fashion

THEATER CONTINUED ON C3

ART REVIEW

The American print, from Revere to Guerrilla Girls

BY PHILIP KENNICOTT

In the last room of the National Gallery of Art's "Three Centuries of American Prints" exhibition is a curious wall label for a 1989 poster by the Guerrilla Girls, a feminist art group that addresses sexism and racism in the art world. The poster is a classic Guerrilla Girls provocation, showing a nude woman from behind, lounging on a sofa, with an oversize gorilla head. It asks: "Do women have to be naked to get into the Met. Museum?"

Since the Guerrilla Girls started challenging prominent museums to better represent female artists more than 30 years ago, posters such as this have taken on iconic status. As the wall label explains, this particular one, in fine condition, was "a gift of the Gallery Girls in support of the Guerrilla Girls."

ART REVIEW CONTINUED ON C2

THE RELIABLE SOURCE

Melania Trump's dress doesn't impress in D.C. c2



BOOK WORLD

The twists in an artifact's path to the museum. c4

MUSIC REVIEW

Margo Price's Nashville: Rocky, not rhinestone. c6

It's uphill for LGBT in Mississippi

JACKSON FROM C1

discrimination have been the church and family — both of which are often denied to them.

The 3,484 same-sex couples here represent just 3.14 of every 1,000 households, a ratio that ranks 49th in the nation, according to the Williams Institute, a think tank at the UCLA School of Law that tracks gay life. Most of the couples live in the larger cities and along the Gulf Coast. Two-thirds of those identifying as LGBT are women.

The true number is much higher, almost everyone agrees, but many choose not to come out. No state in America has passed more restrictive legislation on gay life, more emphatically supported anti-gay referendums, or featured such blistering condemnation from the pulpit or the political podium. Here's Gov. Phil Bryant (R), talking about his rejection of the U.S. Supreme Court's 2015 ruling that legalized same-sex marriage: "They don't know that if it takes crucifixion, we will stand in line before abandoning our faith and our belief in our Lord and savior."

Bryant promised an "aggressive appeal" of the U.S. District Court's decision on HB 1523. But last week, his attorney general decided against it. "Continuing this divisive and expensive litigation," Mississippi Attorney General Jim Hood said, "is not in the best interests of the state of Mississippi or its taxpayers." Indiana, it should be pointed out, later amended its law, too.

(Bryant has appealed the decision privately, with pro bono representation from national groups.)

Still, the demise of that bill — which enjoyed overwhelming support in the legislature — seems like a pretty hollow reason to celebrate.

"It's disappointing that once again the federal government has to stand up for justice and equality in our state," says Rob Hill, a former Methodist minister and now the state director of the Human Rights Campaign.

As a result, gay life here plays out mainly as a don't-ask-don't-tell echo of days gone by. As a group, Mississippi's LGBT residents draw remarkably little attention to themselves, either by preference or by a social necessity so long-standing that it seems as natural and casually oppressive as the humidity.

Sham Williams, 33, an African American banker, is sitting next to Pandolfo in WonderLust's small, fluorescent-lit back office. The air conditioner isn't working. Two floor fans beat the stale air. Williams and Pandolfo have been dating for nearly a year, an interracial lesbian couple, a yin and yang of Pandolfo's exuberance and Williams's seriousness, of Pandolfo's Yankee origins and Williams's been-here roots.

"Mississippi is home, even if it doesn't always feel like it," Williams says. "I don't want to go anywhere else. But we are in the most racist and bigoted state in America. When I walk out that door I have three strikes against me — I'm black, gay and a woman."

Fondren, the historic arts district that lies about four miles north of the state capitol building, is Jackson's "gayborhood," home to WonderLust and a low-intensity magnet for a good bit of openly LGBT life.

The Eudora Welty house is nearby. There's Walker's Drive-In (a cafe with stunning food), the Pig & Pint, some trendy shopping, and a lot of deep-discount stores and fast-food joints. Like the rest of the city, it is predominantly black.

Down a narrow side street — you turn right across from the BFGoodrich tire store and go past a strip mall with the Money Man check-cashing place — is a dark-hued, one-story building with "J.C.'s" across the front. It is set behind a sagging chain-link fence.

This is Jack's Construction Site, which was, until it closed two weeks ago, the bar and gathering spot for Jackson's LGBT crowd for a quarter-century.

It wasn't flashy, but if you are of a certain age it was something like Mississippi's Official Gay Bar. It didn't even have a liquor license. It just served beer and set-ups for your hard liquor. There were a couple of pool tables and some vintage Hollywood posters.

On a recent morning here sits owner Jack Myers, 71, the patron saint of Mississippi's gay scene. He has run one gay bar or another in this town for 50 years, starting



PHOTOS BY ANNIE FLANAGAN FOR THE WASHINGTON POST

back when even interracial marriage was illegal.

He's explaining that although J.C.'s always drew a steady crowd, you have to adjust for where you are: "A big crowd would be 70 or 80 people."

As evidence, he pulls out the cash register total for last night, a Friday: \$177. He shrugs. "It'll pay the light bill." But you can understand why, when the rent went up, he decided to finally shut the place down.

Myers grew up in tiny Pelahatchie. His dad was a sawmill worker, and his mother worked at a chicken processing plant. The ancestral estate is a mobile home.

He came out as gay in his early 20s. His parents were supportive. He worked as an X-ray technician during the days and ran gay bars at night.

"You have a lot of ignorant people here," he says. "They have this idea of what gay people do. They think gay people are all one way. They just don't realize gay people have all sorts of preferences and jobs and things, just like they do. They think if you're not limp-wristed or lisping, well, then, you're not gay."

The city council and state legislature left him alone, he says, because he ran quiet establishments off the beaten path. Police let him be, he says, because they realized a gay bar was the perfect place for married officers to take their mistresses.

"They'd say, 'Nobody'll ever say they saw me in here,'" he recalls with a laugh.

He looks around the bar. He doesn't think he'll open another one. He's ready to retire, maybe go back home to Pelahatchie and open a general store at a crossroads near his parents' old trailer. At his age, he says, there is a summing up.

"I just hate people won't have



this place to come to."

The great gay icon of Mississippi is one of the great gay icons of 20th-century America: Tennessee Williams, the Pulitzer Prize-winning playwright. Born in Columbus. Lived as a child in Clarksdale, the heart of the Delta.

In "Cat on a Hot Tin Roof," Williams focuses on a wealthy Delta planter and his mendacious family, torn apart by his closeted son, Brick, and his sex-starved wife, Maggie.

Maybe because "Cat" is a defining work of Southern gothic and a classic of American theater, people elsewhere always seem surprised that there are *any* openly gay people in Mississippi, like they're giraffes that fell off a truck on Interstate 55, on their way to brighter lights and bigger cities.

This is not totally unwarranted.

The air itself seems to breathe Southern Baptist. Driving across the state, from university towns to beachside condos, from Delta farms to hill country pastures,

TOP: Jack Myers, 71, owner of Jack's Construction Site (also known as J.C.'s) in Jackson, is a sort of patron saint of the gay scene, having run gay bars for 50 years. J.C.'s closed this month because Myers is retiring. "I just hate people won't have a place to come to," he says.

ABOVE: Jesse Pandolfo, left, 32, owner of WonderLust, the new gay bar in town. A lesbian and a Boston native, she says Mississippi is "kind of a time warp."

BELOW: Malaysia Ravor-Black, 38, before her show at WonderLust. She has been a drag queen for 20 years.

you'll see far more Confederate flags than gay-pride banners. Big gay personalities, such as Kevin Sessums, author of "Mississippi Sissy," seem to have left a long time ago.

There has never been an openly gay member of the state legislature or of statewide elected offices. Williams, the banker, and Sidney Harper, a disc jockey at WonderLust, both attended Mississippi College, a private Baptist institution. They and other gay students joked that it should be called "Mississippi's Closet" because so many gays and lesbians were there.

Gay Mississippians are not offered state-law protections from discrimination — a landlord can legally evict a tenant for being gay. And because the state's laws are skewed toward business owners, anyone, not just gay employees, can be fired from any private-industry job for almost any reason.

In the past year, federal judges (appointed by both Democrats and Republicans) have struck down a state law outlawing gay marriages, a ban on same-sex couples adopting children (the last such in the nation) and HB 1523, which would have allowed people who professed a handful of conservative Christian tenets to refuse business services to people whom they believed to be gay.

It's not a surprise then that in Mississippi, as in other areas with "religiously informed views that condemn homosexuality," there are greater numbers of LGBT people facing conflict and rejection from their own families, says Doug NeJaime, faculty director at the Williams Institute.

"This means the LGBT population has a higher rate of homelessness and lower rates of education," NeJaime says. "It means

LGBT people are more vulnerable, raising more children, are more likely to be low-income, are more likely to be unemployed and are more likely to face discrimination in the workplace. All these things make it difficult to politically organize and live their day-to-day lives."

Still, not all gay locals, particularly the ones under 40, think it is a terrible place.

Justin Kelly, 26, a sergeant in the U.S. Army Reserves, has filmed public service announcements for the Human Rights Campaign and says he has encountered very little negative feedback.

"It's pretty easy to be out as a gay in my experience," Kelly says. "But there is a certain expectation you're not going to be *that* gay person."

Down in Hattiesburg, Taylor Cross, 6-foot-2 and 230 pounds, most certainly *is* that gay person. A 23-year-old African American, he describes himself as "flamboyant."

"I swish," he says, referring to his walk.

This only matters, he says, to people over 35. After going on-stage to accept several awards at his high school graduation, he remembers the walk back to his seat.

"I'm strutting," he says. "The first two rows are parents and families, and everyone there was silent, just staring, while my classmates were jumping up and down, screaming for me. The president of my class met me halfway. My friends were excited, but the parents weren't — at all. Afterwards, my mom was rushing me out. She was obviously embarrassed."

One of the reasons that Mississippi seems to have changed so little is that many believe that its young liberals, both white and black, leave for more hospitable environs.

That tide might slowly be ebbing. The percentage of people identifying as gay is on the rise, from 2.6 percent to 3.3 percent, according to the Williams Institute. There were four lawsuits filed against HB 1523 — from gay and straight Mississippians, white and black, male and female.

"I stay here because I'm from here and I love it," says Hill, the Human Rights Campaign director. "I'm 41, and I want the best for this state and I fight for it. I think we're better than what our legislators have demonstrated."

He has a much younger ally in Bailey McDaniel, a junior at Mississippi State University.

She is president of the LG-BTQ+Union committee and was recognized with a student leadership award from the MSU President's Commission on the Status of Women.

But she's also nervous.

"I could keep my mouth shut, but I often don't," she says. "A lot of people are not comfortable doing that. We're in the South. We're in Mississippi. Students are walking around with Trump signs. It's not something you want to slap on your forehead. I feel vulnerable."

neely.tucker@washpost.com

