# Chicago drag artist Charli Renken champions inclusivity and resilience amid mounting scrutiny



At nearly every drag and burlesque show, performers frequently encounter a common question: "How long have you been doing this?" For many, including Vicious Mockery, the drag persona of Charli Renken, the answer is complicated and layered with years of personal history and artistic evolution. Renken's debut in this vibrant art form occurred just this past January at the performance variety show Glamorama, but her journey into drag began long before that moment on stage.

Reflecting on her past, Renken recalls that her first experiences with drag-like expression were embedded in her childhood. Growing up, she immersed herself in various creative outlets, including cosplay and high school talent shows, often dressing up as male characters. These early ventures into performance not only served as a means of expression but also as a therapeutic outlet amidst challenging family circumstances, such as the trauma of a house fire and navigating her father's struggles with alcohol. Renken emphasises that drag, for her, has always been more than just performance: it has been a vital tool for processing her emotions and understanding her identity.

This perspective speaks to a broader narrative within the drag and burlesque communities, particularly as these art forms face increasing scrutiny and censorship under the guise of protecting children. Renken asserts that drag should be accessible to young audiences, not relegated to adult-only spaces. This sentiment resonates with initiatives like Drag Queen Story Hour, a programme started in 2015 by author and activist Michelle Tea, aimed at fostering early engagement with literature while promoting diversity through queer role models. Critics argue that such events risk inappropriate sexualisation, while supporters highlight their role in encouraging creativity and inclusivity among children.

The historical context of drag and burlesque reveals the cyclical nature of their acceptance and rejection within society. Once thriving in underground venues during Prohibition, these forms of performance offered safe havens for marginalised communities. Local institutions like the Baton Show Lounge, which gained fame for hosting prestigious events such as the Miss Continental pageant, have also weathered the storms of societal change—from police raids in their early days to a more mainstream acceptance today. Nevertheless, as Renken points out, the struggle persists against modern-day legislative attacks on drag performances, often framed as necessary measures to protect youth.

In her inaugural column for the Rhinestone Digest, Renken aims to highlight not only her experiences but also the vibrant local drag and burlesque scene in Chicago. She aspires to shine a light on diverse performers and the original productions that bring unique artistry to the stage. Additionally, each month, she plans to provide audiences with a curated list of noteworthy shows and events, inviting engagement with the local culture. This month, as Pride celebrations take centre stage, Renken encourages readers to support and participate in an array of festivities, signalling the importance of community and visibility during this celebratory time.

As the drag and burlesque communities navigate contemporary challenges, the resilience of artists like Renken serves as an inspiring reminder of the enduring power of performance as a tool for personal and collective expression. Whether it is in the comfort of their own homes or under the bright lights of a stage, the message remains clear: drag is for everyone, and its ability to save lives and foster connections is as vital today as it has ever been.

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* Paragraph 1 – [[1]](https://chicagoreader.com/performing-arts/rhinestone-digest/rhinestone-digest-june-2025-pride/), [[2]](https://chicagoreader.com/performing-arts/rhinestone-digest/rhinestone-digest-june-2025-pride/)
* Paragraph 2 – [[1]](https://chicagoreader.com/performing-arts/rhinestone-digest/rhinestone-digest-june-2025-pride/), [[4]](https://chicago.suntimes.com/lgbtq/pride/2024/06/01/pride-drag-banned-kids-queer-joy%20%28chicago%20sun-times%20-%20permalink%29)
* Paragraph 3 – [[3]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Drag_Queen_Story_Hour), [[5]](https://digitalchicagohistory.org/exhibits/show/drag/minstrel-to-politician), [[7]](https://www.wbez.org/curious-city/2023/03/30/whats-the-history-of-drag-performance-in-chicago)
* Paragraph 4 – [[6]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Baton_Show_Lounge)
* Paragraph 5 – [[1]](https://chicagoreader.com/performing-arts/rhinestone-digest/rhinestone-digest-june-2025-pride/), [[2]](https://chicagoreader.com/performing-arts/rhinestone-digest/rhinestone-digest-june-2025-pride/), [[6]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Baton_Show_Lounge)

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## Bibliography

1. <https://chicagoreader.com/performing-arts/rhinestone-digest/rhinestone-digest-june-2025-pride/> - Please view link - unable to able to access data
2. <https://chicagoreader.com/performing-arts/rhinestone-digest/rhinestone-digest-june-2025-pride/> - In this article, the author reflects on their journey into drag and burlesque, tracing their experiences from childhood performances to their recent debut as Vicious Mockery. They discuss the therapeutic role of drag in processing personal challenges and highlight the art forms' significance for children, emphasizing that drag is a form of expression accessible to all ages. The piece also touches upon the historical context of drag and burlesque, noting their evolution and the challenges faced due to censorship and legal issues, particularly in Chicago. The author introduces the 'Rhinestone Digest,' a monthly column aimed at exploring the local drag and burlesque scene, showcasing performers, and discussing the future of these art forms. The article concludes with a list of noteworthy drag, burlesque, and variety shows in Chicago, encouraging readers to engage with the vibrant local scene.
3. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Drag_Queen_Story_Hour> - Drag Queen Story Hour (DQSH) is a children's event that began in 2015 in San Francisco, founded by author and activist Michelle Tea. Aimed at children aged 3–11, these events feature drag queens reading children's books and engaging in learning activities at public libraries. The initiative seeks to promote reading and diversity, offering children positive, queer role models. As of June 2019, DQSH had expanded to 35 U.S. chapters and five international ones. The program has sparked debates over the appropriateness of drag performances for children, with critics expressing concerns about potential sexualization, while proponents argue that such events provide valuable exposure to gender fluidity and inclusivity.
4. <https://chicago.suntimes.com/lgbtq/pride/2024/06/01/pride-drag-banned-kids-queer-joy%20%28chicago%20sun-times%20-%20permalink%29> - This article discusses the role of drag queens in leading children's singalongs during Pride events. It highlights a specific instance where drag performers engaged children in a creative rendition of 'Old MacDonald,' encouraging imaginative responses like 'unicorn,' 'dinosaur,' and 'narwhal.' The piece underscores how drag performers, through their vibrant presence, inspire children to think beyond traditional norms and embrace creativity. The author advocates for the inclusion of drag performers in children's activities, emphasizing their ability to foster joy, inclusivity, and imaginative thinking among young audiences.
5. <https://digitalchicagohistory.org/exhibits/show/drag/minstrel-to-politician> - This exhibit explores the history of drag performance in Chicago, focusing on its evolution from minstrel shows to contemporary expressions. It delves into the intersections of queer and Black identities within the city's drag scene, highlighting how early performances often combined drag with blackface, reflecting complex racial dynamics. The exhibit also examines the role of drag in challenging societal norms and providing a platform for marginalized voices, illustrating the art form's resilience and adaptability in Chicago's diverse cultural landscape.
6. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Baton_Show_Lounge> - The Baton Show Lounge, established in 1969, is a renowned drag club in Chicago's Uptown neighbourhood. Initially located in River North, the venue relocated in 2018 due to rising rents. It is famed for hosting the Miss Continental pageant, a prestigious drag competition. The lounge has a history of resilience, having faced police raids in its early days, and continues to be a significant institution in Chicago's LGBTQ+ nightlife scene, offering performances that celebrate drag culture and artistry.
7. <https://www.wbez.org/curious-city/2023/03/30/whats-the-history-of-drag-performance-in-chicago> - This article provides an overview of the history of drag performance in Chicago, tracing its roots from the 1890s through the 1950s. It highlights venues like The Dill Pickle Club, a speakeasy that served as a safe haven for queer individuals and drag performers. The piece also discusses the emergence of Black queer nightlife on the South Side, with establishments such as Club DeLisa and The 'Cozy' Cabin Inn hosting significant drag balls. These venues were crucial in fostering community and providing spaces for self-expression amidst societal challenges.