

Compadre Media Group
presents

NO STRAIGHT LINES

The Rise of Queer Comics

A film by Vivian Kleiman

USA | 78 min. | 2021

OFFICIAL SELECTION

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"It wasn't until I discovered Alison Bechdel's 'Dykes to Watch Out For' that I really understood what I was looking for, a queer world with stories and characters that I could recognize, that I could laugh with and care about."

— Lana Wachowski, Filmmaker

LOGLINE

No Straight Lines chronicles the journeys of five scrappy queer artists from the margins of the underground comics scene to mainstream acceptance.

SYNOPSIS

The road for queer comics from the margins of the underground comics scene to mainstream acceptance was fraught with challenges. *No Straight Lines* chronicles the journeys of five scrappy LGBTQ artists — Alison Bechdel, Howard Cruse, Mary Wings, Rupert Kinnard, and Jennifer Camper — from their early DIY work to the international stage, and offers a fascinating window into everything from the AIDS crisis to the search for love and a good haircut.

LONG SYNOPSIS

The journey of queer comics to find their voice and mainstream acceptance was fraught with challenges. The restrictive Comics Code of 1954 censored same-sex images from mainstream comics, and even the comix underground that emerged in the 1960s, supposedly embracing "free love," initially excluded queerness. But in 1973, Mary Wings sat on her couch, grabbed a Rapidograph pen, and created *Come Out Comics*. Printed on an offset press in the basement of a women's martial-arts studio, it was the first comic book published about a gay subject and by an out queer artist in the United States. The door was flung open.

Working independently and liberated from the censorship of publishers, without any expectation of sales to the general public, queer artists began telling their stories and openly exploring queer identity. The first queer comics were filled with stories of coming out, identity politics, and finding love in a complex world. As the community broadened and deepened over the next several decades, artists grappled with the essential issues of the day: from homophobia, misogyny and racism to same-sex marriage and worker's rights, while still creating playful portraits of dating and bad hair days.

A vibrant community of gay bookstores, newspapers, magazines, and publishers enabled queer artists to earn enough money to sustain their passion. These artists analyzed their own communities and their relationship with American society in smart, funny, and profound ways, and provided a unique window into the hopes, fears, and fantasies of queer people.

But the rise of Amazon and chains like Barnes and Noble brought the publication and

distribution of queer comics to a grinding halt, as many of the gay community institutions went bankrupt. At the same time, a strong DIY movement rose to tell our stories through handmade, accessible zines that were heavily influenced by the punk scene. By the turn of the millennium, however, artists who managed to stitch together a modest livelihood saw their sources of revenue dry up, and were poised to abandon their art.

The film's narrative reaches its apex in 2006 with the overwhelming mainstream success of Alison Bechdel's graphic memoir *Fun Home*, which was featured on the cover of TIME magazine as its 2006 Book of the Year, hit the New York Times best-seller list for 49 weeks, and was later adapted into a Tony-winning Broadway musical.

The five artists profiled are: Alison Bechdel (*Fun Home* and *Dykes to Watch Out For*), Howard Cruse (*Stuck Rubber Baby*, *Gay Comix*, and *Wendel*), Mary Wings (*Come Out Comix*), Rupert Kinnard (*Brown Bomber and the Diva*), and Jennifer Camper (*Rude Girls and Dangerous Women*).

"I love our history being told from any perspective that draws more people into its power, and this film's perspective is vibrant, inventive, unexpected, and unique."

— Dustin Lance Black, Actor/Director/Writer

DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT, Vivian Kleiman

I became completely fascinated by the evolution of queer comics after I attended the first international gathering of queer comics artists in 2015 at the urging of Justin Hall and Greg Sirota. The Queers & Comics Conference was filled with people of all ages and identities, for two days of panels and discussion. Simply put, it was a casting director's dream. At its essence, it was the joy of connection and the celebration of creativity that gave me that familiar shiver down my spine.

What interested me most about these artists was their creative process in relation to both the political and the personal. Rupert Kinnard (whom I knew as a friend of Marlon Riggs in the late '80s) described his surprise realizing that he was drawing white people but not his own African-American community. Alison Bechdel made a similar remark during her keynote address, that it startled her to recognize she was drawing men, never women, although she was a lesbian. The parallels in their stories were uncanny.

I bring to the subject of queer comics the set of concerns established when I produced the Peabody Award-winning *Color Adjustment* (with Marlon Riggs), a film that examines the representation of African Americans in primetime TV. Similarly, in *No Straight Lines* I explore how queer comics at once helped mirror and shape perceptions of ourselves as LGBTQ people in the United States. While both are essay films, *No Straight Lines* is edited without voiceover narration. Instead, text on screen, which appears in comic-book word balloons along with visual representations of sound effects, fills in gaps to anchor the narrative.

I knew early on that I wanted to profile a small selection of artists. While there is a significant accrual of meaning in the range of voices and experiences, I wanted to explore the evolution of this queer art scene from multiple perspectives without abandoning the opportunity of more intimate storytelling. So, I decided to braid the stories of five artists together.

For some viewers, this film will be a nostalgic romp down memory lane. For most, however, I hope that the film will offer thoughtful commentary on notions of constructing identity and community, and that it will help inspire a new generation to form creative expressions of their own.

FEATURING

ALISON BECHDEL is a lesbian cartoonist known for the long-running comic strip *Dykes to Watch Out For*. Her graphic memoir *Fun Home* was named TIME magazine's 2006 Best Book of the Year and was adapted into a Broadway production that won the Tony Award for Best Musical. She was awarded a 2014 MacArthur "Genius" Grant.

JENNIFER CAMPER is a cartoonist and graphic designer whose work is inspired by her experiences as a Lebanese-American lesbian. She created the books *SubGURLZ*, *Rude Girls and Dangerous Women*, and *Juicy Mother*, and is the founder of the Queers & Comics Conference.

HOWARD CRUSE was a gay, underground cartoonist and the founding editor for the seminal underground comix anthology *Gay Comix*. He created the highly regarded, weekly comic strip *Wendel for The Advocate*, and his graphic novel *Stuck Rubber Baby* received the Eisner Award, the comics industry's highest accolade. He passed away in 2019.

RUPERT KINNARD is a Black cartoonist and graphic designer who, in 1977, created the first ongoing queer African-American comic characters: The Brown Bomber and Diva Touché Flambé. He became paraplegic because of a car accident in 1996.

MARY WINGS is a lesbian cartoonist, writer, artist, and accordion player. She made history in 1973 by releasing *Come Out Comix*, the first known lesbian comic book, from the basement of a radical women's karate cooperative in Oregon.

FILM TEAM BIOS

Vivian Kleiman, Director

Vivian Kleiman is a Peabody Award-winning filmmaker whose work is noted for its cultural and stylistic diversity. A longtime producer with storied Black gay filmmaker Marlon Riggs, her credits include additional cinematography on his landmark documentary *Tongues Untied*. Vivian was nominated for a National Emmy Award for Outstanding Individual Achievement for her work with Riggs on *Color Adjustment*.

Vivian's producer/director credits include: *Ein Stehaufmannchen*, *Families Are Forever*, *Always My Son*, and *My Body's My Business*. Her executive producer credits include the Academy Award-nominated documentary short *Last Day of Freedom*, *First Person Plural*, *Maquilapolis*, and *Strong!* Her story editor credits include *Wu-Tang Clan: Of Mics & Men* created by Sascha Jenkins and *Mass Appeal* for Showtime. An educator, Vivian taught at Stanford University's Graduate Program in Documentary Film & Video Production for nine years.

Justin Hall, Producer/Principal Consultant

Justin Hall is the first Fulbright Scholar of comics, a pioneer historian of LGBTQ comics, and a recognized artist in the field. He edited the first comprehensive anthology of queer comics, *No Straight Lines: Four Decades of Queer Comics*, which received a 2013 Lambda Literary Award and an Eisner Award nomination. He received the Xeric Award and the Prism Queer Press, and his work has appeared in *The Best American Comics*, *Best Erotic Comics*, and *SF Weekly*, among others. Justin is an Associate Professor of Comics and Writing-and-Literature at the California College of the Arts.

Christiane Badgley, Editor

Christiane Badgley was a close collaborator with the landmark Black gay filmmaker Marlon Riggs. She posthumously co-directed and edited his final film, *Black Is...Black Ain't* and edited his award-winning short, *Anthem*, and Vivian Kleiman's short, *My Body's My Business*.

Linda Peckham, Editor

Linda Peckham is a documentary film editor who is comfortable with a range of filmic approaches, from cinema verité and character-driven films to essay films. Her credits as editor include: *The Corridor* (Richard O'Connell and Annelise Wunderlich) and *Surname Viet Given Name Nam* (Trinh-T. Minh Ha).

Andrew Black, Director of Photography

Andrew Black has worked on numerous award-winning documentary films including: *Worlds of Ursula K. Le Guin* (Arwen Curry, PBS American Masters), *Scout's Honor* (Tom Shepard), *50 Children: The Rescue Mission of Mr. & Mrs. Kraus* (Steven Pressman), *Speaking in Tongues* (Marcia Jarmel/Ken Schneider), *Sicko* (Michael Moore), and *Weather Underground* (Sam Green). His work has been broadcast on MTV, BBC, PBS, Discovery Channel, and National Geographic Explorer.

Hillary Chute, Advisor

Hillary Chute, Distinguished Professor of English and Art + Design, Northeastern University, is an American literary scholar and an expert on comics and graphic narratives. She also is the associate editor of *Art Spiegelman's MetaMaus*.

Ramzi Fawaz, Advisor

Ramzi Fawaz, Associate Professor of English, University of Wisconsin-Madison, focuses on the relationship between literature and popular culture and 20th century social movements, with particular attention to the cultural politics of civil rights, black power, and women's and gay liberation.

Jason Cohn, Consulting Producer

Jason Cohn is a writer, producer and director who has worked in print, radio, television and film. He is the Peabody Award-winning director of *EAMES: The Architect and the Painter* and *The First Angry Man*, which traces the roots of the American Tax Revolt to a California ballot

initiative. His writing has appeared in the New York Times, The Los Angeles Times, and Rolling Stone magazine.

Vicky Funari, Consulting Producer

Vicky Funari is a documentary filmmaker, editor and teacher. She produced, directed and edited the documentaries *Maquilápolis* (Tribeca, 2006) and *Paulina* (1998), and she directed and edited *Live Nude Girls Unite!* (2000).

Jenni Olson, Consulting Producer

Jenni Olson is an internationally recognized queer media historian, activist and online pioneer. An accomplished filmmaker, Jenni's experimental documentary *The Royal Road* had its premiere at the Sundance Film Festival.

CREDITS

Director/Producer Vivian Kleiman

Producer Justin Hall

Edited by Christiane Badgley
Linda Peckham

Director of Photography Andrew Black

Original Music René-Marc Bini
Editions: ALTYNAÏ

Art Director & Animator Suzanne Slatcher

Executive Producer Gerald Herman
Cort Lane
Ellen M. Poss
Greg Sirota

FEATURING

Alison Bechdel (Vermont)
Jennifer Camper (Brooklyn)
Howard Cruse (deceased)
Rupert Kinnard (Portland)
Mary Wings (San Francisco)
and
Alex L. Combs
Dylan Edwards
Nicole Georges
Sina Grace
Emeric L. Kennard
Maia Kobabe
Lawrence Lindell
Ajuan Mance
MariNaomi
Breena Nuñez
Carlo Quispe
Meggie Ramm
Taneka Stotts
Anand Vedawala