

# NBC's 'Playboy Club' stirs controversy, but Detroit bunnies fondly recall their time in the spotlight

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At the end of a good night working Detroit's old Playboy Club, the former Union Lake schoolgirl known as Bunny Jill would unzip her corseted costume and clouds of money would fall from the satiny bosom.

"We used to put all of our tips in the top of the costume and we'd unzip our costume and there'd be money everywhere," recalls Joy Percival, a.k.a. Bunny Jill. "We'd all sit there and count our money and have a cup of coffee. It was a wild kind of padding."

Percival, who now lives in North Carolina, was hired when she was 18. She worked at the Detroit club from 1963 to 1971, eventually becoming a "Bunny Mother" who trained others in bunny protocol, and earned enough money to buy her own lakeside house in Oakland County in 1970. Her first car was a Corvette.

Nearly five decades after their heyday, the atmosphere and allure of the 1960s-era

hot spots are being resurrected in "The Playboy Club," a show set to debut this month on NBC. And the Playboy bunny -- whether you consider her the seductive clarion of the sexual liberation era or a scorned symbol of women as sex objects -- will get mainstream attention, both good and bad.

"This NBC show seems to signal that we're reverting to a vision of women that works against all the gains of the last half-century or so," says Meenakshi Gigi Durham, the author of the "The Lolita Effect" (Overlook Press, \$24.95) and professor of media and gender studies at the University of Iowa.

"The show, and its celebration of the Playboy bunny, falls in line with every other objectified, one-dimensional, ludicrously hypersexual representation of women out there," Durham says. "It certainly sends a powerful message to young girls: that parading around in stupid costumes to turn men on is a worthwhile occupation; that being viewed as a subservient sex object is

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the route to success; that 'hotness,' as defined by the media, matters more than anything."

But the women who worked at Detroit's Playboy Clubs -- there was one on East Jefferson at the edge of downtown and one in northwest Detroit -- say they were empowered by their jobs, not exploited.

The Detroit Playboy Bunny of 1970 still calls it a highlight of her 62 years.

No amount of feminist reasoning or argument will convince Renee Burton of Farmington Hills that she was exploited or objectified.

She was 19, just a year removed from graduating third in her class of 680 at Detroit's Cody High, when she was hired at the Detroit Playboy Club in 1968.

"It was fabulous. It was a great experience for a young person. It was very glamorous. We were the stars. We were the attractions," says Burton, who now owns a cleaning service. "It was like we were on stage. Everybody looked up to us. It was our 15 minutes of fame."

The stage was the restaurant/bar. The women performed in 3-inch heels and a corseted costume, a ladylike tease, former bunnies say. There were strict rules against fraternizing with the customers, although the uniform accentuated every body curve and amplified the sexual tension. Bunnies couldn't divulge their last names and customers couldn't touch them. "I saw a girl give her number out, and she was fired

immediately," Burton recalls.

Burton worked at the downtown club from 1968 to 1972 and she said she was treated "like royalty" -- albeit one who had to know how to mix more than 100 drinks, work for tips and serve boozy men. Burton does not think she was a victim of sexism. But age-ism, she says, was another story.

"They liked (women) 18 to 22. It wasn't a published thing. But I trained them. I knew the hiring practices," says Burton, who also worked for a time at a Playboy Club in Jamaica. "I was 24 when the club was almost closing down. And they were telling me I was getting old."

The NBC show, set in a Chicago Playboy Club, is already being decried by feminist Gloria Steinem, who famously wrote a 1963 magazine article about her undercover stint as a Playboy bunny. Groups such as Morality in Media and the Parents' Television Council also stepped in to say that the show will further glorify Hugh Hefner's creation of male sexual fantasies.

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Ingrid Rigney donned the bunny ears to put her husband through the University of Michigan-Dearborn where he was pursuing a bachelor's degree in electrical engineering. She shaved a couple years off her age, thinking it would help her get the job. She was 26, but said she was 24. She said she had just emigrated from Germany and was working as a dental assistant.

"I was not able to meet the bills, so I saw an ad in the paper," says Rigney, who applied without telling her husband. Unlike other bunnies who remember making big money, Rigney remembers the many hours she had to put in to win large tips.

"It was not an easy job if you wanted to make money," she says. She took two or three buses from Dearborn to get to the club. She'd work lunch and dinner, from 11 a.m. to 2 a.m., in the showroom to up her take. She remembers that diners could eat steak and salad for \$1.50 and add another buck-and-a-half for a drink -- not a big base from which to glean a tip.

But she says she enjoyed every minute. She didn't feel like a sex object, more like a "glorified waitress."

"I was never ashamed of telling people that I was a Playboy bunny," she says. "Hefner did a great job of creating an image."

Four years into the job, she was fired.

"I was a Playboy bunny until I got too old. They found out I was almost 30 and terminated me," says Rigney, 73, of Orchard Lake. "When they hire 18-year-

olds and you're almost 30, you do feel old."

There were some 30 Playboy Clubs around the U.S. from the 1960s through the '80s, with the clientele paying a membership fee for a symbolic bunny key and entry. Now, only three clubs remain in the world. The Playboy brand still includes the flagship magazine, pornographic movies and a cable-TV reality show -- "The Girls Next Door" -- that features octogenarian Hefner cavorting with live-in bleached blond girlfriends.

While the new show will juice up the drama by featuring a bunny's high heel as a weapon used to deter a sexual predator, the real life of the bunnies was a bit more structured.

The work of a Playboy bunny was grueling. Bunnies got one week of vacation after one year of employment. They got free copies of Playboy magazines -- available in the Bunny Mother's office two weeks before general availability. There were Bunny

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The advertisement features a dark background with a silhouette of a person looking through a doorway. The text is in white and yellow. The ADT logo is in the bottom left corner, and the call to action is in the bottom right corner.

Finder Fees for girls who hired talent.

Bunnies were not permitted to chew gum or eat while on duty, or drink alcoholic beverages. They could partake of lemonade and pop, but not in the view of guests.

They could earn extra cash by earning merit points for daily good service, or selling the most Playboy mugs to customers. They could earn demerit points -- and possible dismissal -- for unpolished fingernails, improperly centered bunny ears or an "unkept tail," as misspelled in a 1960s-era "Bunny Manual."

A room in Mandy Callahan's Livonia home pays tribute to her years as Bunny Mandy. There's a photo of her, with Hefner, just a few years out of Robichaud High School in Dearborn Heights. Her given name was Deborah, but she liked her bunny moniker so much that she had her name legally changed to Amanda. Her bunny tail is framed, and her bunny cuffs and collar are on display.

"It was all in a box, and then when I went through a divorce, part of my re-creation was pulling all of this out and celebrating it," says Callahan, who works as a Realtor and manages an investment sales office. She remembers competing with hundreds of other young women for the job.

"I knew it was about being the girl next door," she says. She wore a high-necked jumpsuit to her audition.

Callahan worked at the downtown Detroit

club, and then helped open the northwest Detroit club, then left after she was married and three months pregnant. She says she took the job, in part, because she hoped it would be a stepping stone to an acting career in New York or Los Angeles.

"I went to Playboy for the theater of it," Callahan says. "It would just feel like it was showtime. We walked into that room and we owned it."

Those who criticize the job, and the bunnies, are missing the point of it all, Callahan says.

"It implies that we're dumb and we were taken advantage of," Callahan says. "No one was conscripted into that job."

"We had power. Gloria Steinem was so wrong. We all had lots of fun. We worked real hard -- and we smiled and looked good doing it."

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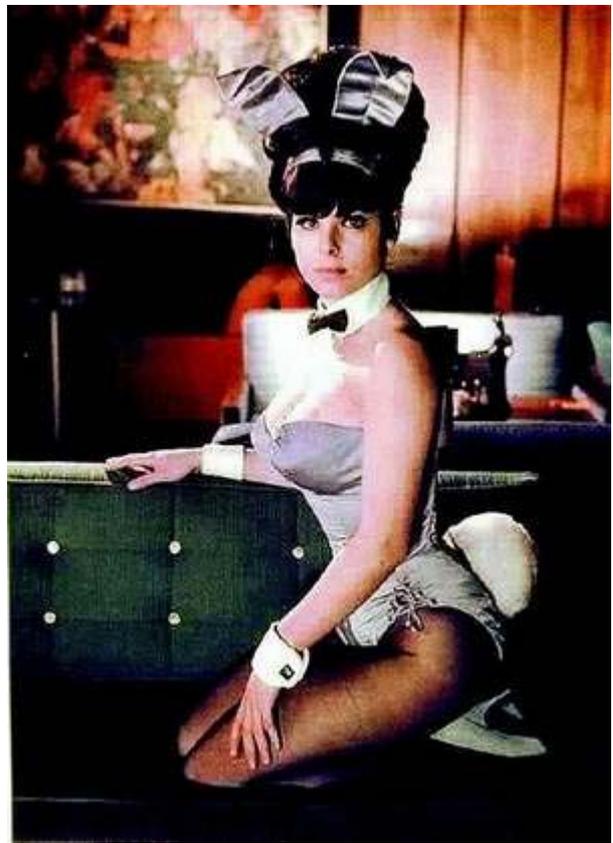
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Mandy Callahan, 61, of Livonia, a.k.a. Bunny Mandy, left, says, "Gloria Steinem was so wrong. We all had lots of fun." / KATHLEEN GALLIGAN/Detroit Free Press



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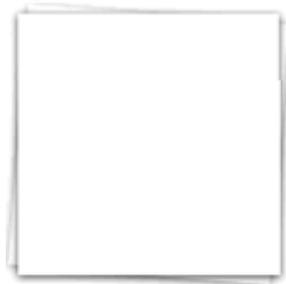


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Joy Percival, now of North Carolina, worked as Bunny Jill from 1963 to '71. She earned enough money to buy her own lakeside house in Oakland County in 1970.

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