

R.I.P. Jewel Thais-Williams

The AIDS activist and nightlife legend was 86.

November 10, 2025 By Laura Schmidt

Jewel Thais-Williams, a trail-blazing AIDS activist and Los Angeles nightlife legend, died this past summer at age 86. She founded Jewel's Catch One, the first Black-owned LGBTQ nightclub in Los Angeles, and launched Rue's House, a shelter for women living with HIV and their children, as well as Village Health Foundation.

Thais-Williams was a "visionary, activist, healer and mother to many," read an Instagram tribute by Catch One LA. "Her legacy transcends nightlife, reverberating through community health, advocacy and the fight for acceptance and safety. She welcomed everyone under her roof and transformed our city. Today we honor her spirit and aim to carry forward her message of love, resilience and unity at Catch One."

"Jewel Thais-Williams was more than an icon; she was a guiding force for generations of Black LGBTQ+ people who longed to be seen, celebrated and safe. She was a tireless advocate, a revolutionary and the matriarch of a movement that has always depended on our ability to dance, love and survive," said David Johns, MA, CEO and executive director of the National Black Justice Collective, in a statement.

Thais-Williams was born in Indiana in 1939 and moved to San Diego as a child. She relocated to Los Angeles shortly after high school and became a fierce and dedicated advocate for LGBTQ folks and people living with HIV and AIDS.

In 1973, in the face of widespread LGBTQ and racial discrimination, Thais-Williams opened Jewel's Catch One, becoming the first Black woman to own a disco in the United States, according to Windy City Times. For several decades, the inclusive nightclub was one of the most iconic venues in Los Angeles.

Known as "The Catch" and "Studio 54 of the West," the club was a safe space for Black, queer and other marginalized people during a time of discrimination and hostility. The name, Thais-Williams

explained, stemmed from her queer male friends who would say they were going out on the prowl to “catch one,” as in a hookup or boyfriend.

“[Jewel’s] Catch One became a welcoming spot for the LGBTQ community and for many Hollywood stars and entertainers,” wrote California Congresswoman Maxine Waters on Facebook. “It became a safe haven for those who were not wanted in many places in our community. Not only did she provide a very hip and well-attended nightclub, but she also worked and created funding and resources to deal with HIV/AIDS when our country was in denial.”

Donna Summer, Whitney Houston, Ella Fitzgerald and Bette Midler all patronized Jewel’s Catch One. In 2000, Madonna hosted a release party there for her album *Music*.

In 1989, after witnessing the devastating impact of the AIDS epidemic, Thais-Williams and her wife, Rue, opened Rue’s House, the first shelter for women living with HIV and their children in South Los Angeles. She also founded Village Health Foundation, a nonprofit dedicated to educating lower-income communities on nutrition and healthy living. The nonprofit also offered alternative treatments for HIV.

The club was sold in 2015 and renamed simply Catch One. In 2019, LA City Council President Herb Wesson named the intersection outside the club Jewel Thais-Williams Square in honor of her contributions. The 2016 documentary *Jewel’s Catch One* by filmmaker C. Fitz chronicled Thais-Williams’s life and that of the nightclub.