The Fierce Tribe

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Chapter 7

A History of Festive Homosexuality
1700–1969 CE

Queer balls, dances, and club spaces
offered a much more intense space for ritual
than many churches could—or can.

—Mark Jordan1

As a Gay festive movement that celebrates the forbidden, the Circuit has ancestors. The oldest Gay communities are remembered today because of parties and scandals that occurred 300 years ago. In fact, modern LGBTQ history revolves around Stonewall, the most notorious and publicized Gay party-scandal in history, a pivotal event in 1969 that involved dancing, liquor, cross-dressing, and three days of civil unrest mixed with street revelry.

In the trajectory of Gay festival history, tolerance of homosexuality is intimately linked to humor. Festive expression of same-sex attraction is usually encoded in comical and often spectacular gender-bending performance, both within and outside of Gay communities. Oppression arises when the outside world resists being dazzled and quits laughing, when what was hilarious and stunning is reinterpreted as dangerous.

As a chronicle of same-sex love, Gay history goes back thousands of years. But same-sex communities can only be said to exist if there is convincing evidence of distinctly homosexual culture. There is little in the historical record confirming the existence of groups whose

members defined themselves by their same-sex orientation before the eighteenth century.

Even today, there is no precise, standardized terminology for same-sex attraction, communities, and identities. Language has been severely imprecise for a couple of reasons. First, there has been a tradition of oppression in many countries that encouraged people not to publicly express same-sex erotic feelings. The language used for these feelings is often cryptic, damming, and insulting. Arrest records of people accused of violating social norms concerning homosexuality speak of the crimes committed as so heinous that they should not be expressed in words. Convoluted and obscure language was common in official documents in the process of legal inquiry and sentencing.

Second, it is possible to engage in same-sex romance for a lifetime, yet never identify oneself with others in the same situation. Participation in same-sex romance is not synonymous with public support for such romances.

Mangled language about homosexuality for the sake of moral propriety suggests fascinating dynamics of social anxiety, especially concerning manliness. Scholars can reduce the linguistic confusion by defining terms with more precision. For clarity’s sake, I will use “homosexual” 2 to refer to women and men in every age and society who feel same-sex romantic attraction. “Gay” will include those homosexuals who form their own communities and cultures based on acceptance, celebration of same-sex love, and undisciplined gender expression.

**Early 1700s: Molly Houses**

The earliest evidence of Gay communities goes back to eighteenth-century “molly houses” in England where homosexual men (called “mollies”) developed their own identity and festive culture in private clubs. Members could drink alcoholic beverages, sing, dance, dress up and behave like women, adopt girl names, and perform mock births. They would engage in marriages—which included serious ones based on lifetime commitment—and frivolous ones, temporary one-night stands called “wedding nights.” Sexual encounters with each other were conducted in back rooms called “chapels.”

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2. Originally, *homosexual* was a term coined in the mid-nineteenth century to describe same-sex sexual orientation in medical-physiological-psychological language. Today, it is slightly pejorative. Nevertheless, the word is useful in describing those with same-sex orientation but not necessarily the awareness or acceptance of the Gay community or culture. For my purposes, “homosexual love” and “same-sex romance” are synonymous.

3. “Molly” is a nickname for “Mary,” and “moll” was a slang term for a prostitute (Spencer 188). I do not know if “molly” was a name by which Gay men identified themselves, or if it was the equivalent of “faggot,” so it is not capitalized.
Once inside the molly house, Gay men would be free to cut loose with behavior that was unorthodox, scandalous, and hilarious. From accounts given by Samuel Stevens, an agent for the Societies for the Reformation of Manners who raided Margaret (Mother) Clap’s molly house in 1726, same-sex lovemaking between men went hand-in-hand with effeminate performance.

I found between 40 and 50 men making love to one another, as they called it. Sometimes they would sit in one another’s laps, kissing in a lewd manner and using their hands indecently. Then they would get up, dance and make curtsies, and mimic the voices of women.... Then they would hug, and play and toy, and go out by couples into another room on the same floor to be married, as they called it. (Norton 55)

Stevens’s description of male same-sex love as synonymous with effeminate behavior may have been an attempt to portray mollies as more gender-perverse than they really were. Mollies did not always dress up as women. In fact, feminine clothing was mostly reserved for special events such as a masquerade and a “lying-in” (mock birth). Feminine dress and/or mannerisms appeared to have no bearing on sexual roles of penetrator or penetrated. Mollies were not helpless weaklings, as police discovered on December 1725 when the men they arrested in a molly house decided to resist (Norton 96–101).

Stevens’s report reveals a fascination with the spectacle of the molly house, a fixation on gender-bending performance and same-sex attraction. Fascination and revulsion would be repeated in accounts of drag balls in the early twentieth century and Circuit parties at the end of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first.

Mollies had developed their own festive culture. They had their own slang, which included batersea’d (a term for sexually transmitted infection), back room (a private place for sex (Norton 62)), and maiden names that they gave each other.

Police records show that maiden names for mollies were often preceded with “Madam,” “Miss,” “Mrs.” or “Aunt.” Sometimes the names would indicate the real-life job of the molly, such as Orange Deb (Martin Macintosh, an orange seller), Dip-Candle Mary (candle maker), and

4. Molly houses would eventually lose their reputations as havens for male-to-female cross-dressing in the nineteenth century (Spencer 193), perhaps as a security measure to keep away the authorities that might view the presence of cross-dressing as a sign of depravity.

5. “Batersea’d” is a word used by mollies that probably means to have a penis infected with venereal disease and required treatment with special medicinal herbs grown in Battersea Park.

6. “Back room” is still used today. Some Gay bars have specially-designated back rooms for sex.
Nurse Mitchell (barber; in those days, barbers also did minor surgery). Sometimes the names did not: Kitty Cambric (coal merchant), Black-Eyed Lenora (drummer of the Guards), and Miss Sweet Lips (grocer). Well-built men received maiden names, such as Fanny Murray (a beefy bargeman) and Lucy Cooper (a muscular coal-heaver). Others preferred names that were grand as well as humorous, especially considering the occupation of the men holding the title: Aunt England (soap-boiler), Lady Godiva (waiter), the Duchess of Gloucester (butcher), Queen Irons (probably a blacksmith), and the fabulous Princess Seraphina (butcher). Molly, Margaret, and Mary were favorite first names (Norton 92–93). “Margaret Clap” appears to have been the legal name of the proprietor of Mother Clap’s molly house. I question, however, if that was her original name from birth. “Clap” also referred to a venereal disease in the early eighteenth century, just as it does today. Since mollies had a fondness for hilarious speech, they likely appreciated Mother Clap’s name for its sexual innuendo.

Once again, the names given to engagers in same-sex love were not descriptive of acts but part of the hilarious performance of molly identity. The importance of these names in marking mollies as feminine (the names were, after all, preserved in the legal proceedings) was arguably given more weight by the outside world than by the mollies themselves.

Molly houses disappeared from history in the nineteenth century, and for good reason. Men accused of being mollies were arrested, fined, beaten, pilloried, imprisoned, and executed. The situation forced the Gay community to go deeper underground where it was no longer as visible to the public eye (Norton 191–93).

Although hard evidence in the historical record for Gay communities would diminish with the successful persecution of molly-house culture, Gay society appears to have survived under different maiden names. At the beginning of the 1800s, molly became margery. By the end of the century, margery turned into Mary-ann (Norton 105). The change in names was probably inspired by the need for in-house secrecy as much as a shift in verbal fashions—once a name gained currency in the outside world, a new one would take its place.

Eighteenth-century raids on homosexual activity also give an account of an early public statement of Gay pride. When apprehended in 1726 by plainclothes police for putting an undercover agent’s hand

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7. These maiden names were taken from court records of men who were brought up on charges of sodomy. “Miss,” “Mary,” “princess,” and “queen” are still popular in the Gay male community.

8. Women could be arrested as well. Mother Clap was brought to court, fined, pilloried, and sent to prison for running a molly house. It is not known if she survived the ordeal.
on his penis in a public park, William Brown was reported to have said, “I think there is no Crime in making what use I please of my own body” (Norton 58).

1890s–1969: “Gay” Adoption

The history of Gay communities in the United States can be traced back to the nineteenth century. It was not until the 1930s, however, that these communities were called “gay.”

At the end of the 1800s, New York City became a hotspot for homosexual socializing, including communal dance. According to George Chauncey,

In the half-century between 1890 and the beginning of the Second World War, a highly visible, remarkably complex, and continually changing gay male world took shape in New York City. That world included several gay neighborhood enclaves, widely publicized dances and other social events, and a host of commercial establishments where gay men gathered, ranging from saloons, speakeasies, and bars to cheap cafeterias and elegant restaurants. (1)

But it was still necessary for homosexuals to be discreet about who they were, so the innocent word “gay” was used as a code to inform others about one’s sexual orientation.

Actually, gay was not that innocent of a word. Like molly, gay was initially associated with prostitution. The word “gay” became code for men and women who were homosexual in the early twentieth century (Hogan and Hudson 229). During that time, the outside world was not familiar with the term. People with same-sex desires were known as invert, degenerates, perverts, queers, homos, and deviants. Homosexual men were regularly called pansy, faggot, and fairy. Lesbians were called dykes, while bull dagger was used in the African American community.10

Initially used to describe bars rather than people, “gay” is a term that came from the homosexual community to describe itself. When one was a stranger in town, it was a subtle way to discover where the right bars were without necessarily giving away one’s sexual orientation (Chauncey 14–20). The popularity of the term also indicates how important fun and hilarity were as identity markers. Laughter was a

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9. There is ample evidence of homosexuality in Native American communities, and that homosexuals were tolerated, even revered, by certain Native peoples. See Living the Spirit: A Gay American Indian Anthology, Will Roscoe, coordinating editor (15–93); The Zuni Man-Woman, Roscoe; Gay American History, Jonathan Katz (Section 4: “Native Americans/Gay Americans: 1528–1976”).

10. Most of these terms are still current.
means of resistance, reflecting the refusal of the community to sink into utter despair in times of persecution.

Perhaps the first public use of “gay” to hit the media was in the 1938 film, *Bringing Up Baby*. There is a scene where famous actor and sex symbol Cary Grant is wearing a woman’s fur-trimmed nightgown. “I just went gay all of a sudden!” he gushes when asked why he dressed that way. The line was ad-libbed, suggesting that the term was current in actors’ circles (Chauncey 18, Hogan and Hudson 229). Not only were Gay folks participating in large numbers behind the scenes in the entertainment world, they were also represented in some of the productions. Cabarets and burlesque shows in Times Square regularly featured routines peppered with humorous homosexual innuendos. Drag performances called “pansy shows” were the rage in the early 1930s.

Theater was the first public institution in America to present LGBTQ people with sympathy. Two major theatrical productions with homosexual content came out in the 1920s; the media and the police censored both when they aimed for Broadway. The first was *The Captive*, which dealt with the so-called problem of Lesbianism. The second was *The Drag*, written by Mae West (with the help of some Gay friends), which defended Gay male culture and was performed by Gay men. *The Captive* raised eyebrows and provoked threats of censorship but succeeded to run for about a year before it was shut down. *The Drag*, however, never made it to Broadway. In February 1927, West and members of her cast were arrested for *The Drag* and other productions (including West’s controversial play, *Sex*) before *The Drag* reached the Great White Way. Mae West was sentenced to ten days in jail for “maintaining a public nuisance.” Productions such as *The Drag* that dealt frankly with homosexuality and/or presented openly Gay people were legally banned from the stage that same year (Chauncey 311–13).

*Drag Balls*

The growing visibility of Gays on stage was complemented by the public glamour of drag balls, extravagant productions where men, mostly men of color, dressed and carried themselves as women. Drag balls were popular in New York and other cities such as New Orleans, Chicago, and Baltimore during the 1910s, ‘20s and ‘30s.¹¹ They were magnificent playgrounds for breaking taboos: dazzling, cosmopolitan, witty, hilarious, and spectacular. Most prominent among them were the Harlem drag balls of New York City.

Homosexuality in men was still equated with effeminate behavior, just as it was in the days of molly houses. Many Gay men continued

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¹¹ Chauncey 1–7.
the tradition of giving each other girl names. What was different about
the drag balls was the public visibility of cross-dressing, and the ele-
vated status of the balls as glamorous, high-society functions rather
than secret, criminal gatherings of butchers, blacksmiths, and candle-
stick makers.\textsuperscript{12}

During the late 1920s and early 1930s, newspapers regularly reported
drag balls as part of the social calendar for the elite. The socialite mag-
zine \textit{Broadway Brevities} had various witty articles written about
Gay society by authors with names steeped in sexual innuendo, such
as “Stephen O’Ttoole,” “John Swallow Martin,” and “Connie Lingue.”
On March 14, 1932, \textit{Broadway Brevities} had an article entitled “FAG
BALLS EXPOSED: 6000 Crowd Huge Hall as Queer Men and Women
Dance at 64th Annual Masquerade,” which claimed that “Merrymakers
from 25 States” joined in the revelries (Chauncey 300). In addition to
the outrageous double-entendre of the article’s name, it confirms that
drag balls were more than simply pageants; they were also festivals
with communal dancing for both Gay men and Lesbians. The geograph-
ical diversity of attendees also suggests a regular circuit of drag balls
from city to city for \textit{aficionados}, performers, and party people.

Drag balls were modeled after debutante balls that officially pre-
sented young women to society. When a Gay man made his debut at a
ball, it was a celebration of public identity. He was not simply coming
out in front of other Gay men. He (or in this case, \textit{she}) came out in front
of \textit{everybody}. According to Chauncey,

\begin{quote}
The Baltimore debutantes, after all, came out in the presence of hun-
dreds of straight as well as gay and lesbian spectators at the public
hall of the fraternal order of Elks. Their sisters in New York were
likely to be presented to thousands of spectators, many of whom had
traveled from other cities, in some of the best-known ballrooms of the
city, including the Savoy and Rockland Palace in Harlem and the Astor
Hotel and Madison Square Garden in midtown. (7)
\end{quote}

Eventually, whatever elitist status the drag balls possessed was not
even to save them from prosecution by the morally outraged, and the
balls were banned for being subversive. Much of the crackdown was
the work of the New York YMCA’s Society for the Suppression of Vice,
founded in 1872. This anti-vice organization was dedicated to eliminat-
ing birth control, obscenity in the arts, prostitution, and race-mixing
(Chauncey 138–39). Colin Spencer theorizes that the higher ethics of

\textsuperscript{12} The glamour of the drag balls did not prevent men with low economic and social sta-
tus from grabbing the limelight. The most popular balls featured African American
queens whose fame depended on their beauty, outfits, and drag personas, not their
identities outside the magical world of the drag balls.
tolerance promoted by the Gay community toward women and Blacks was as great a threat to the establishment as the evils of sodomy:

What is significant is that equality between black and white, and male and female, appears to have been generated by homosexuality itself. It is one aspect of homosexuality that the rest of society unconsciously fears, that if it had the power it would enact legislation, not just to remove all stigma and injustice from itself, but from all other oppressed minorities as well. (345)

After World War I, social purity groups became more and more preoccupied with homosexuality. This was due in part, to a feeling of guilt its members had resulting from what they perceived as their success in reducing female prostitution. They reasoned that lack of female streetwalkers (and exposure to the French during the Great War) drove men, especially servicemen, into the arms of pansies (Chauncey 146–48).

The growing visibility of Gays in urban festive culture during the 1920s and ‘30s led to a crackdown on more explicit portrayals of homosexuality onstage. Theatrical drag balls, with their race-mixing as well as their homosexual content, would go underground but not truly die. The social forces, erotic desires, and aesthetic impulses that dated back to the days of molly houses would be resurrected again and again as drag balls transformed and diversified.

Away from the public eye, drag shows and contests continued. They became the drag queen and king performances and pageants that permeate Gay culture today. Two new drag traditions would appear many years later. The first is the Ballroom scene that began in the 1970s and continues today. These contests of realness (the ability to pass in society with whatever gender- and status-coded outfit one chooses to wear, be it rich, poor, masculine, or feminine, including military outfits) and competitive dance/posing that characterizes voguing and runway are direct descendants of drag ball culture. From Ball culture and drag queen pageantry came the second new tradition: fierce, semi-drag, lip-sync shows by performance artists like Kitty Meow, Power Infiniti, Jo-Jo Infiniti, Kevin Aviance, and Flava that originated in the Circuit during the ‘90s and continue to this day.

When the police started closing down legitimate venues for drag balls and other Gay functions, formal ballroom dances for Gay folk were downsized as they transformed into house parties and illegal dance clubs until

13. It is not always the case, however, that Gay organizations are racially tolerant. Mardi Gras krewes (festival clubs) made up of White Gay men have been legally chartered in New Orleans since 1961. They were not renowned for racial tolerance any more than Straight krewes (Loughery 276).
Stonewall. The Depression hit just about everyone, so rich and poor alike were throwing rent parties, private fundraisers where charity truly began at home. Many were small affairs, but some were large events thrown by formerly rich Gay folk who wanted to keep their fine houses. At their height in early 1940s New York, extravagant house parties formed a regular Saturday night circuit of their own (Chauncey 279). A feature of Gay African American house parties in Harlem was the presence of both men and women, in part as a strategy to avoid police raids. Couples composed of a man and a woman would arrive and leave the parties to preserve the appearance of being heterosexual. Once inside, women would dance with women, and men with men (Chauncey 279–80).

Prohibition allowed a brief space for Gay culture to flourish in the huge underground bar scene (Chauncey 148). Once liquor became legal, that space disappeared. At the same time, it became more difficult for the increasingly public drag ball scene to avoid scrutiny by the authorities, including the military. Public censure of the Gay community gained momentum just before the United States entered World War II. The inevitable backlash was intensified when the ominous threat of war sobered the nation. Being Gay was no longer considered a laughing matter because homosexuality was understood to be a threat to national security (Chauncey 331–54). The promotion of martial masculinity of America fostered intolerance for pansies as the country prepared for war against Nazi Germany and imperial Japan. This manly intolerance contributed to the general backlash that came with greater public visibility of drag balls, just as the rise of militant and hyper-masculine National Socialism in Germany snuffed out the thriving and increasingly visible Gay community in Berlin during the 1930s.

### World War II and Gay Awareness

On the other hand, World War II was also significant in the formation of Gay male communal awareness. The mobilization of men from across the country, separated from the usual constraints of family and friends, and exposed to the intimate day-to-day contact that barracks buddies had with each other, also led thousands of homosexual servicemen to furlough cities such as San Francisco and New York where they encountered discrete Gay communities (Chauncey 11–12).

Nevertheless, the military was committed, especially in the latter part of the war, to keeping these men from sleeping with each other. City ordinances against serving openly Gay men led to a proliferation of exclusively Gay bars in major urban centers. Many Gay bar owners bribed police on a regular basis so that their establishments
would remain open. Nevertheless, there was always the threat of vice squads and military police closing their bars in the 1940s, '50s, and well into the '60s (Boyd 108–47, Atkins 91).

In spite of oppression from both civil and military authorities, homosexual soldiers returning from the war came home with a stronger sense of their own manliness. The validation of masculinity and citizenship by means of military service during World War II was an important factor in the equal rights movement for Native, Asian, Hispanic, and African Americans. It also helped the emerging Gay community define itself, not as deviance from masculinity, but as potentially masculine for “butch” Gay men and even hyper-masculine forms, as in the Leather scene with its paramilitary attire. Their experiences in the field of battle certified many Gay male soldiers in the post-war era as legitimate men. For them, male sexual identity was no longer restricted to either being a real man or a pansy.

The tradition of military balls within Circuit party weekends is an expression of the eroticization of the Gay man in uniform that inspired private Gay-friendly events thrown by military men and their admirers after World War II. One of my fellow Marines (who wishes to remain anonymous) told me that such parties occur regularly today. Retired personnel who are no longer in danger of military dismissal for being homosexual usually frequent these gatherings. Attendees may also include men currently in uniform who are willing to take the risk of expulsion by socializing with other servicemen whose sexual orientation does not conform to regulations.

Large urban centers allowed masculine Gay men to fade into the masses. Even though big cities had certain areas with a more obvious Gay presence, the development and expression of a public Gay male masculinity was severely limited by socially imposed pressures on these men to remain invisible. Notions of being a real man would be mostly projected onto the Straight male as the only manly, and thus desirable, man (Bronski 103).

1930s–1960s: Fire Island

The geography of Gay America includes safe havens at beach resorts, such as Provincetown (Massachusetts), Key West, Saugatuck (Michigan), Rehoboth (Delaware), 12th Avenue access in South Beach (Florida), West Street access in Laguna Beach (California), 82nd

14. Nan Boyd’s book on San Francisco (Wide-Open Town) and Gary Atkins’s book on Seattle (Gay Seattle) go into detail about the importance of police bribery and consequential cooperation from law officers in the formation of Gay urban communities.
15. Military balls are parties in which the dress code is military and paramilitary gear.
Avenue access in Myrtle Beach (South Carolina), and Queen’s Beach in Honolulu. Yet none of these resorts and beaches has the notoriety of Fire Island.

Fire Island is a barrier island just off the coast from Long Island, New York, with approximately thirty small communities, including Cherry Grove. According to anthropologist Esther Newton, author of *Cherry Grove, Fire Island*, “The Grove” became a retreat for Gays as early as the 1930s. This was due primarily to its reputation as a resort for Manhattan theater people (*Cherry Grove* 13, 21–35). There were no churches or standing police force, and it is still this way today. *Grovers* (residents of Cherry Grove) conduct town business and religious services in their community theater.

There are good historical reasons why Cherry Grove, which Newton calls “America’s First Gay and Lesbian Town,” did not have a church but did invest in a theater. Newton points out the importance of theater for the Gay community:

> For centuries, homosexuals and theater have been silent partners in their conflict with churches. By saying that theater is gay anti-church, I point to its social functions of affiliation and solidarity, and to the way theater has provided an iconography and sensibility for homoeroticism, in opposition to the way churches have worked for reproductively oriented society. And I also mean this: because of the bibli-cally justified enmity toward sodomy, gays have been alienated from Christianity and persecuted by it; they have sought both alternatives and resistance in theatricality as an ethos, and theaters as institutions, which is why I call theater a gay “anti-church”—a queer Noah’s Ark against the flood of domination.... Life was experienced theatrical-ly by Grovers because underground gay culture had descended from the theater world and continued to find a haven from its enemies there in both the power of dramatic representation and in everyday theatrical life. (*Margaret Mead* 35–36)

Another Gay community, the Fire Island Pines, would develop just northeast of Cherry Grove. The Pines would also use its theater for town business and religious services, thus making theater more like Gay church than anti-church. Between the two communities is the Meat Rack, a wooded area that is popular as a place for men to have sex with men.

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16. Provincetown, Saugatuck, South Beach, and Laguna Beach have their own Circuit events.
17. To this day, neither community has a police station per se, but they do have police booths.
18. Rumor has it that the Meat Rack once had a section in it called the Donut Rack where women would have sex with women (Newton, *Cherry Grove* 231-32).
Fire Island was renowned decades before Gay liberation for its house parties and drag shows of both sexes. The custom of *tea dances* (social gatherings held in early afternoon) began there, which the Circuit keeps alive along with the Fire Island community. Even more so than the growing Gay enclaves in Manhattan and other large cities, Cherry Grove and the Pines were idyllic models of what life could be like for LGBTQ folk without police and religious persecution.

This did not mean, however, that Fire Island was completely immune to homophobic violence. Gay-bashers came over from Long Island in search of victims. So did the police, who would conduct the occasional raid in the clubs, on the beach, and in the Meat Rack.

In 1968, a year before the Stonewall awakening, police were forced to stop vice raids on the Meat Rack from adjacent Long Island. Lawyers from the Gay activist Mattachine Society helped end the practice by tying up the courts with jury trials for every defendant caught in a raid, accusing officials of harassing its Gay residents in an attempt to force them to sell their real estate at a loss, and arguing that public sex in the Meat Rack was not a criminal offense because, in a predominantly Gay community, such acts were not a public nuisance (Newton, *Cherry Grove* 197–201).

Because of the its fabulous parties, large Gay population, and reputation as a safe refuge, Fire Island became known across the nation as a Gay mecca in both Straight and Gay communities, right up there with San Francisco. Its notoriety was so widespread that I had heard of Queer Fire Island in Jacksonville, Alabama, during the 1970s when I was in high school, even though I had never met an openly Gay person.

1950s and 1960s: Pre-Stonewall Resistance across America

Although vitally important in LGBTQ history, Manhattan was not the only place that saw resistance to oppression against Gays.

The first group to successfully bring homosexuals out of the shadows was the Mattachine Society (initially called the Society of Fools), formed in 1950 in Los Angeles. It took its name from a secret fraternity of

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19. Both Lesbians and Gay men had been victimized (Ibid 204).
20. In addition to the efforts of the Mattachine Society, Newton also reports that fewer Fire Island residents were secretly calling the police to report public sex and instigating raids. As the Gay population grew and the Straight population got used to the antics of Gay men and Lesbians, amused tolerance rather than disgust became the prevailing reaction to the goings-on in the Meat Rack.
21. The Mattachine Society was not the first organization in the United States to advocate for Gays. In Chicago in 1924, the Society for Human Rights was formed to protect the rights of homosexuals. Although it was granted a charter by the state of Illinois, its members were arrested in 1925. The Society was swiftly shut down for being a “sex cult” (Katz 385–93).
bachelors in Renaissance France that would conduct dances during the Feast of Fools held on the spring equinox. Always masked when they danced, the fraternity would sometimes protest the oppression of the peasants. The founder of Mattachine, Harry Hay, saw the homosexual community in the same way: a masked people who were capable of bringing justice to the oppressed (Katz 412).

The government harassed the Mattachine Society during the McCarthy purges of the 1950s, and it officially disbanded in 1961. But homophile organizations in large cities continued to call themselves Mattachine societies (Hogan and Hudson 384). These groups helped set the stage for the Gay liberation movement.

It should be noted that the Mattachine Society and its spin-offs had a reputation for propriety despite the origin of the name as a carnival troupe. They did not appear to use the term “Gay” when referring to themselves, perhaps because of its association with the bar scene. In order to win acceptance from the public, Mattachine members were expected to follow standard conventions concerning dress and behavior appropriate for men and women. Since their proposal of equality for homosexuals was already radical in the eyes of most Americans, they did not want to aggravate the situation by looking too queer, especially when the government began to persecute its members. Women could not wear pants, and men had to wear conservative shirts and ties. The Society considered itself to be a respectable homophile (same-sex loving) organization, not a radical Gay activist group.

In San Francisco, the Society for Individual Rights (SIR) was founded in 1964. Not comfortable with the Straight-laced attitude and image requirements of the Mattachine Society, SIR was more community-oriented (Hogan and Hudson 512). SIR worked with city health officials and began a VD awareness campaign. The organization opened the first Gay community center in 1966 in an old union building on Sixth Street between Mission and Market. They also held dances, perhaps the first ones to mix activism with partying. The mix was not always successful in raising people’s awareness, however. Activists became disillusioned when the folks they were trying to convert into a politically-conscious community were more concerned with having a good time (Loughery 280–82), a complaint that would later be aimed at the Circuit.

San Francisco was also the home for the Daughters of Bilitis, the first Lesbian organization in the United States. Founded in 1955, the DOB was initially more like the Mattachine Society than SIR, with an emphasis on education, equal rights, and safe havens for meetings rather than festive culture.

This did not mean, however, that the Daughters of Bilitis were against having a party. When DOB and SIR teamed up with Christian
ministers in San Francisco to form the Counsel on Religion and the Homosexual (CRH) in 1964. The CRH sponsored a New Year’s costume ball at the end of that same year.

Perhaps only in San Francisco could dancing, revelry, religion, and Gays come together five years before Stonewall. Not amused by the idea of clergy partying with homosexuals, law enforcement officials met with the ministers and told them that they had better not go through with the ball. When the fundraiser proceeded anyway, paddy wagons lined up at the venue, photographers shamed the attendees by taking their pictures, and police arrested four people when they protested (Loughery 286). The public outcry against the police dramatically improved LGBTQ civil rights and galvanized the Bay Area Gay community (Loughery 287).

Gay activists such as the Reverend Troy Perry in Los Angeles became progressively more confrontational. Perry was a Pentecostal minister who was defrocked in the early 1960s for being homosexual. After years of soul searching, he decided to form a Gay-affirming Christian congregation and founded the Metropolitan Community Church in 1968 (Hogan and Hudson 387). The first venue for worship outside of Perry’s home was the Encore Theater in Hollywood, and the first service held outside of LA was in the back room of a Gay bar in Orange County (Clendinen and Nagourney 57), reflecting once again the importance of theater and bar culture for Gays.

Not to be left out, the South was bringing together a brotherhood of Gay men through the Emma Jones social network. It started in 1965 in the beach resort town of Pensacola on the Florida panhandle. A group of White Gay male friends wanted to avoid harassment from postal services when they ordered sexually explicit Gay movies, books, and magazines. They devised a fictitious identity, “Emma Jones,” who had “her” own post office box, and recruited a female friend to pick up mail from that address (Loughery 273–74).

It is likely that officials at the post office knew what was going on. Southern culture tends to put a high premium on public discretion when normally upstanding citizens are doing something they may consider wrong. This may be seen as an extension of the born-again sentiment of tolerance for personal weakness voiced by St. Paul when he said, “All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God” (Romans 3:23). More often than not, this sentiment is extended to sexual backsliders and closeted drinkers. To outsiders, it may seem hypocritical,

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22. Although nominally Christian, MCC congregations tend to accept people of all faiths. The LGBTQ Jewish movement had some of its first meetings in MCC church facilities. The MCC church in Toronto is multi-faith-oriented in its congregation and its approach to religion.
but to those of us who have lived in the region, it allows people with radically different social positions (often based on race, gender, and family background) to co-exist with at least the façade of decorum. It is in this space of public propriety, tempered with unspoken tolerance of private deviance, that Emma Jones was able to function in a society that officially did not accept such things as homosexuality.

This circle of friends sponsored a beach party on July 4, 1966, with 50 participants. In 1967, 200 showed up. By 1968, the event had doubled its size to 400. At this point, Emma’s beach party was large enough to catch the attention of the local police, who only required that the revelers be discreet and clean up the trash afterwards. Local businesses had noticed that Gay visitors brought in a lot of money, which in itself was a great means for promoting good public relations (Loughery 274–75).

Emma Jones was an early Circuit prototype, a working model for how Straights and Gays could work together in the spirit of discretion, respect, and mutual profit. Rather than being confrontational, the men and women of Emma Jones used festival to form social networks and create a climate of greater tolerance for Gays in a predominantly Straight Bible Belt community.

Gay liberation (and the Circuit) was much more than simply a movement that suddenly burst into existence in one place at one time. Things were happening across the United States and abroad that signaled the emergence of a new Gay awareness. However, none of these people, organizations, or incidents gained national and international attention the way that Stonewall did.

1969: Stonewall

Like much of LGBTQ culture today, the Circuit has its roots in Stonewall.

The Stonewall Inn on 53 Christopher Street was a seedy Gay men’s dance bar in Manhattan’s Greenwich Village. Owned by the Mafia, it was an illegal juke joint posing as a legitimate business. Drinks were watered down. There was no running water, so glasses were rinsed in tubs of stale water and used again. Drugs were available if the buyer had the right connections. As shady as it was, the Stonewall Inn was the most popular male Gay bar in the Village, perhaps because it was the only one in New York City that allowed people to dance to music from its jukebox (Duberman 181–82).

Although the clientele was predominantly male, Stonewall’s door staff admitted a very mixed crowd in terms of ethnicity, race, occupation, and gender (Straight men were turned away). All kinds frequented the inn: nelly flamers, working-class men, Wall Street types, chicken hawks
(older men in search of younger men and teenage boys), teenage boys, drag queens, some hippies, and a few women (Duberman 182–87).

The owners of Stonewall had a fairly comfortable relationship with the police of the Sixth Precinct. Once a week, an officer would stop by to pick up approximately $2,000 in cash. This permitted the management to maintain the illusion that the Stonewall Inn was a private bottle club, a loophole in the liquor laws for a bar in which the clientele could bring their own beverages so that no liquor license was required. The $2,000 also meant that the police would announce their raids in advance, and not during peak business hours. But just in case police did show up unannounced, a warning system of lights would notify customers to stop dancing. Bartenders would then grab the cash made from drink sales and melt into the crowd (Duberman 185, 194–95, Loughery 314).

On June 28, 1969, there was an unscheduled police raid on the Stonewall Inn at a little after 1:00 AM. A crowd gathered to taunt the police, who were filling their paddy wagon with Stonewall staff and cross-dressers. That same crowd booed the arresters, and cheered for the arrested as they posed for the crowd and waved like celebrities while being ushered out of the bar. Tradition has it that trouble broke out when a police officer pushed a Lesbian dressed in men’s clothing, and she pushed back (Hogan and Hudson 526, Loughery 316). Angry words led to rocks, bottles, and coins (symbolizing the bribes that police demanded from Gay establishments) thrown at the officers. According to Loughery, drag queen-turned-activist and Gay icon Sylvia Rivera, a Stonewall regular, yelled, “You already got the payoff, but here’s some more!” as the coins were flung. The police barricaded themselves in the bar until reinforcements arrived (Loughery 316–17, Hurewitz 6). Three days of civil insurrection ensued. Gay liberation, some 270 years in the making, had officially begun.

It was liberation, however, on Gay terms. Stonewall was a lesson in successful violence management. Nobody on either side was shot, and nobody was killed, although plenty of Gays (and some Straight allies) were beaten. Hilarity and silliness played an important role in keeping things from getting too far out of hand. In fact, Stonewall was just as much a street party as it was an insurrection.

Public resistance consisted of hitting the police in the ego with wit and humor as well as sticks and stones. Accounts of Stonewall describe Gay men23 taunting law enforcement officers with performances of

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23. Other than the notion that Stonewall started with a Lesbian’s resistance, there is little mention of women. This does not mean that women did not play a more substantial role in the insurgency. Their rare appearance on record could be due to erasure by the press or by men who wrote the history of Gay liberation.
camp and then running away (Kaiser 197–202). Riot police became unwitting cast members of street theater directed by drag queens, who were the stars of the show. A chorus line of queens danced in front of the police, high-kicking Rockettes-style in a row, while singing the following ditty:

We are the Stonewall Girls  
We wear our hair in curls  
We wear no underwear  
We show our pubic hair (Duberman 200–1)

City authorities reacted by decriminalizing Gay bars (at least in theory), and laws against cross-dressing were effectively abolished.

The success of Stonewall was a combination of minimum violence with maximum laughter. Some reporters in the mainstream press helped the cause immensely by portraying all of the insurgents as Stonewall Girls: saucy, limp-wristed pansies who relentlessly ridiculed the cops. They wrote up the incident as if it were the performance of a slapstick comedy routine. Police were portrayed as hapless “straight men” to the queeny comedians. The Daily News, the largest newspaper in the country at that time, printed an article, “Homo Nest Raided, Queen Bees Are Stinging Mad”:

Stonewall Inn ... was a mecca for the homosexual element in the Village who wanted nothing but a private little place where they could congregate, drink, dance, and do whatever little girls do when they get together.... Then, without warning, Queen Power exploded with all the fury of a gay atomic bomb. Queens, princesses, and ladies-in-waiting began hurling anything they could lay their polished, manicured fingernails on. Bobby pins, compacts, curlers, lipstick tubes and other femme fatale missiles were flying in the direction of the cops. The lilies of the valley had become carnivorous jungle plants.... There were some assorted scratches and bruises, but nothing serious was suffered by these honeys turned Madwomen of Chaillot.

Although it is easy to read the article as a put-down of Gay men and Transgender women, the exaggeration of feminine traits in the insurgents (“Bobby pins, compacts, curlers, lipstick tubes and other femme fatale missiles” instead of rocks, bottles, bricks, and coins) highlights the ineptitude of the police far more than the decadence of the

24. In “Gay Power Comes to Sheridan Square” published in The Village Voice (July 3, 1969), Lucian Truscott says that the unrest on Saturday was “led by a group of gay cheerleaders.... The scene was a command-performance for queers” (Bloom and Breines 598).

25. The article was written by Jerry Lisker and published on July 6, 1969. Reprinted from a photocopy of the article’s first page in Completely Queer (Hogan and Hudson 527).
protestors. The article also fails to mention the Gay men, Lesbians, and their Straight allies who the cops beat senseless. Portrayed as buffoons more so than bullies, the police were the butt of the joke.

Americans living in 1969 had been taught that cross-dressing was humorous, witty, and harmless. This was in the early days of television when there were only three channels to choose from: ABC, NBC, and CBS. The nation would watch Milton Berle in drag for laughs on the wildly popular *The Milton Berle Show*. Comedienne Lucille Ball would occasionally dress up like a man on *I Love Lucy*. Larry and Curly of The Three Stooges did drag, as did Bugs Bunny of cartoon fame. Speaking of cartoons, children would grow up laughing at Chip ‘n’ Dale, the effeminate male chipmunk couple, and the pink theatrical lion Snagglepuss, quite possibly the campiest queen on Saturday morning television. In all of these instances, cross-dressers and effeminate male characters were the heroes.

As angry as the riot police got when taunted, the absurdity of the situation did not escape them or their superiors. Had they not considered the protesters silly and basically harmless in their impunity and had the Stonewall Girls been perceived as a real threat, people would surely have been killed. Most likely, however, it would be years before many of those same officers would entertain the idea that just maybe the protesters were right.

Walking down Christopher Street in the days after the incident, poet Alan Ginsberg said that homosexuals had “lost that wounded look” that characterized traumatized souls (quoted in Truscott 599). The internal feelings of their own self-hatred that damaged LGBTQ folk could be just as damning and hurtful as the words and actions of their external oppressors. A Gay liberation march was organized a few weeks later. Exactly one year after Stonewall, the first official Gay pride parade was held in Greenwich Village, which was followed by a dance party, the precursor to Circuit parties thrown during Gay pride celebrations.

Stonewall is now enshrined as a pivotal moment in the LGBTQ community’s folk history. Lesbians and Gay men quickly went from being socially passive and invisible to politically active, outrageous, and humorous—public responses meant to shake up and undermine the stigma of homosexuality. As displays of self-worth, pride parades are street theater where many LGBTQ folks flaunt their sexuality in the tradition of one angry butch Lesbian, a motley coin-throwing mob, and a chorus line of Stonewall Girls.

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26. At least four Pride weekends are also full-fledged Circuit parties: the San Diego Zoo Party, Pensacola Memorial Day, Toronto Prism, and New York Pride. Most Pride celebrations in other major cities include dance parties that are patterned much like Circuit parties.
Growing up in Newfoundland, Canada, I never knew that “gays” lived among us. I remember seeing images of them in the media—drag queens and nearly naked twinks27 dancing on Church Street during Toronto's Pride weekend—and hearing jokes and utterances of disgust toward them, all of which were used to distance and isolate. Despite my same-sex desires, I quickly learned to fear and reject Gay identity. I might have been homosexual, but I certainly wasn’t “gay.” Years later when a friend took me to a Gay bar outside of Toledo, Ohio, I suddenly discovered the diversity of identities within the Gay community and began to learn the joy of dance. Dancing with men, for the first time in my life, allowed me to escape my phobias and finally enjoy and understand who I was and where I belonged. I felt, at least temporarily on Saturday nights, that I was part of a community, and that I could be myself, let go on the dance floor, and simply be happy. I also felt isolated, however, during the other six days of the week.

I moved to Philadelphia, and began working toward a PhD in folklore at the University of Pennsylvania. I immediately began going to Gay bars and dances in Philadelphia, and then nearby New York City, Washington, and Rehoboth Beach. Being Gay and dancing became a regular, open, and central part of my life.

I returned to Newfoundland in 2004 for a faculty position in folklore at Memorial University. While the Gay community is still small here, my partner, Stephen, and I continue to go out and dance from time to time. There is only one small Gay bar here, but it helps us deal with the isolation of living in a smaller city and feel like part of a greater community. We also travel whenever possible to larger centers—where we seek out other Gay bars to dance in, to help keep our spirits alive.

I’ve always been amazed by the many ways in which identity is performed on the dance floor—butch, femme, voyeur, machismo, working class, prissy, professional, confident, confused, narcissistic.... Of course, the images vary according to the context, but the performance of identity, whether it be the hyper-masculine leather daddy or the campiest princess in fairyland, is exactly that—a coded performance that marks insider/outsider status within a space that is open to exploration and negotiation of individual and group identity. It is a space that is often

27. A “twink” is a thin young man.
achieved through non-verbal communication, in an attempt to express feelings and desires that are otherwise difficult to describe and, for many, to understand.

Dance is a performance that takes us into the carnivalesque. It helps suspend time, to examine the extreme and, at times, the absurd, so that we can better understand and negotiate the real and the necessary. It is also a type of release, both for people who are closeted within professional or family settings and for people who are open, yet subject to rules and social expectations that run counter to core identity. The Stonewall riots themselves are often described as a type of release, where the playful performance of sexuality accidentally escaped the dance floor, thanks to the NYPD boys in blue. Through this release, rules are not merely broken, but they are transformed and they are owned.

Through the communal performance of identity, within spaces dedicated to Queer identities, we achieve a sense of communitas—a deeper sense of community that allows us to reenter the Straight world without the same level of fear of hatred, violence, or discrimination. It means that I can smile when someone says that I’m “queer.”

During research on Philadelphia’s Blue Ball and Gay space, I observed the role of dance and the Circuit in creating temporal Gay spaces within typically non-sexualized places and places perceived as potentially homophobic (30th Street Train Station, the Navy Yard in south Philly, Reading Terminal, all venues for the Blue Ball Main Event). Blue Ball helped transform Gay space from isolated and hidden subversive places into acceptable and integral parts of everyday life in Philadelphia. I saw how dance could be used to create Gay positive space that, although temporary, allowed Philadelphia’s Gay community to better establish itself as an open and explicit part of the city. Dance became a tool for making the Gay community more public, for increasing the sense of community within the city, and for connecting this community to the even larger Gay community of the Circuit.

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