



gay power comes to the village voice
by Claudia Dreifus

When hundreds of homosexuals made history last spring by participating in the Stonewall Inn riots, it was the VILLAGE VOICE, that alleged vanguard of avant garde and anti-establishment journalism, that wrote the event off as some kind of faggot grumblings due mostly to Judy Garland's death. But what happened at the Stonewall had nothing to do with the Wizard of Oz. It had to do with things the VOICE is supposed to be so liberally concerned with: freedom, justice and the rights of the individual.

To be a homosexual in New York State is a crime. Yes, folks, a crime! And gay people have for years accepted a life of police harassment, bar raids, blackmail, and paranoia. Rather than fight ludicrous laws banning homosexuality, the homophile has sat back and passively accepted his role as society's outcast. But on June 28th of this year, something happened that was astoundingly different. When a contingent of police began raiding the Stonewall Inn, a popular gay spot in the West Village, the gay folk shocked the world: They rioted.

It was an incredible evening. At first, the Stonewall's patrons began pelting their tormentors with coins. Later they escalated to beer bottles and rocks. As the tactical patrol force came in to reinforce a beleaguered and trapped police contingent inside the bar, they found themselves involved in hand-to-hand street fighting. Queens vs. Cops. One queen, all decked out in lipstick and a wig, picked off an isolated TPFer. When it was over, the policeman had to be hospitalized.

The VILLAGE VOICE is located right down the block from the Stonewall. At the first whiff of excitement, they promptly dispatched Howard Smith, that paper's Assistant Publisher, to cover the local event. When Smith arrived on the scene, he decided to perceive the event as nothing more than gay entertainment, not an outcry for justice. Having written off the rioters as mad faggots, he proceeded to cover the story by tagging along with the constabulary. "I had struck up a spontaneous relationship with Deputy Inspector Pine, who had marshalled the raid," Smith confessed in print the following week. Pine was described by the Assistant Publisher of the VILLAGE VOICE as a very friendly, paternal man. Yes, Inspector Pine is very paternal. He's the man who beat the holy shit out of Lennox Raphael after busting him on dozens of counts of "consensual sodomy" and "public lewdness" in connection with Lennox's play "Che!"

Smith and Pine were trapped inside the Stonewall for much of the evening. As the riot grew tense, it was Howard Smith who told the Deputy Inspector in charge of the Morals Squad that he wished he had a gun! Lacking that, our man from the VOICE grabbed a wrench and stuck it in his belt as protection. Mmmnnn.

Smith wrote up his impressions of the Stonewall Riot the following week. Never once did he question the morality of the raid. Never once did he ask how it was that the head of the Morals Squad was leading a raid on a gay bar for alleged "liquor licensing violations." He did, however, lace his report with suggestions that the whole thing was due to the full moon, to Judy Garland's death

and to Mafia skull-duggery. His prose was liberally laced with the word "faggot"—the gay equivalent of "nigger."

So, startled Greenwich Village housewives, curious tourists, and friendly passersby who happened through the Sheridan Square vicinity two Fridays ago found themselves reading a leaflet that said:

"GAY LIBERATION FRONT ASKS: WHERE HAS THE VILLAGE VOICE GONE?"

"Where once the Gay Village Community was able to relate to a literary voice, it now cannot..."

"Not only has the VILLAGE VOICE consistently displayed a contemptuous attitude towards the Gay Community, it has played a vigorous role in the attempt to force Gay People to think of themselves as sick, depraved, unworthy and inhuman...What else besides deprecation would explain a V.V. staff writer finding the singing of "We Shall Overcome" by 500 homosexuals 'curiously moving.'"

The GLF went on to ask the Greenwich Village community not to advertise in the VILLAGE VOICE any longer and to join in an all day demonstration in front of the VOICE's Christopher offices. An appeal was made to VOICE staffers to stop work in sympathy with the gay folk—an appeal that fell mostly on deaf ears.

Inside the tabloid's office, women were cackling, "What do those faggots want with us?" In the Advertising Department, the staff wore a fiendish smirk. Remembering my best Lois Lane tradition, I decided that I would make an attempt to see Ed Fancher, the psychologist who publishes the newspaper. It would be interesting to hear his explanations for the fact that he had refused earlier meetings with the Gay Liberation Front. I wondered how he, as a psychologist, felt about words like "faggot" and about his Ad Department's suggestion that the word "homosexual" somehow was obscene. I wondered how he might professionally consider Howard Smith's interesting grab for a wrench during the Stonewall Incident. But Publisher Fancher would not see the lady from the EAST VILLAGE OTHER. More respectable credentials from WBAI were of no help, either. Fancher was strictly non-communicative.

Returning to the street in failure, I noted that the demonstration had grown larger and more boisterous. One young man was leading a chant, "Gay Power to the Gay People." Several VOICE staffers were speaking amicably with GLF leaders, "The problem with the VOICE," said one, "is that we've got this fifty year old virgin running the Advertising Department. She's constantly pulling things like this. But, I don't think her attitude reflects VOICE editorial policy in any way."

It was Howard Smith's incredible report, coupled with continued anti-homosexual slurs, that brought thirty members of the Gay Liberation Front to the VILLAGE VOICE's door two Fridays ago. The GLF, a militant and radical organization that grew out of the Stonewall Inn incident, had attempted to place an ad with the VOICE for a forthcoming dance, but the Classified Advertising Department at the tabloid told the Front they would have

to delete the word "homosexual" from their copy. Homosexual, the GLF was informed, was as offensive a term as fuck and shit. No, the word "gay" could not be used either. It, too, was dirty.

"Wanna bet," retorted a rather cynical picketer. "They're just a bunch of people who were okay for the 1950's but who are out of step with it now. They think that everything is a joke. Something to sneer at. Something to write cute headlines about. Well, I'm not letting anybody get away with calling me a mad faggot anymore!"

Ralph Hall, a tall, intense young man, explained his reasons for demonstrating: "It's time that gay people stopped taking public abuse. The VILLAGE VOICE is supposed to be so anti-establishment, yet they have no respect for us as human beings. They even imply that we were as stupid as to riot because Judy Garland died and because the moon was full! That's crazy!"

While demonstrators chanted their distaste for the VOICE, a chunky school crossing guard stood on Seventh Avenue shaking her head. "This is a terrible thing," she said. "ya know, kids learn from this kind of stuff. They're very impressionable. They see these kinds of people out in the open like this and they wanna imitate them."

A balding man standing next to her agreed. "You know, these fags say they're 'The Community.' And what's more they'll never be 'The Community,' either. These people ought to be moved somewhere else, somewhere out in the country where we wouldn't have to see them. You know, if they want to do what they do, they ought to be hidden."

Most other observers proved to be more friendly to the gay cause. Several local residents, gay and straight, spontaneously joined the picket line. One man said he was marching because the VOICE had given him trouble when placing a classified ad, too. "I think it's just a rotten paper," he said, "and I don't care who's picketing them. I'll march along. Why, you can't even go into that Classified Ad office to take out an 'Apartment Wanted' ad without getting snooted at!"

Other passersby signed anti-VOICE petitions and made financial contributions to the GLF.

It had been planned that at 4:30 the picketers would hold some gay guerilla theatre by attempting to go into the VOICE office and place an uncensored ad. Attempts would also be made to speak with the elusive Mr. Fancher about his newspaper's policies towards homosexuals.

At 4:30 the advance guard strode into the VILLAGE VOICE's offices. As giddy newspaper staffers watched, a receptionist informed the group that yes, Mr. Fancher would see them after all. Some time later, Lois Hart, an activist from GLF, emerged from the conference and appeared before the demonstrators. "We won," she smiled. "They've agreed to take our ad and never again to use the word 'faggot!'"

On Christopher Street there was dancing that day. It was such a small victory. But it had been won.