

CHRISTOPHER STREET MEETS STATEN ISLAND

A Gay Struggles With the New Acceptance

BY ARNIE KANTROWITZ

I used to walk down Christopher Street with a special air, like a person of property. It was a magic place, invisible to everyone but its own citizens. We could cruise each other in front of passers-by who didn't know what we were about, and console ourselves with the thought that if we were unreal in their eyes, it was because they were unable to see. We had each other, and that was enough. To the people who lived in it, the gay world was a place where they could forget for a while that they were still niggers. Then gay liberation happened. We no longer wanted to forget; we wanted the truth, so we relinquished the safety of our magic and began to make ourselves seen. It was time for us to end our charming fantasy and become real. We thought we could make the gay world real with liberation, but instead, we were helping to kill it.

Some observers say the gay world is a state of mind. Others say it is a geographical fact, a series of "ghettos" designed by Bloomingdale's. The gay world can be housed in a single room or a street or an entire town. (Separatists once tried to take over Alpine County, California as a gay version of Israel.) Any exclusively gay place where homosexuals go to take off their masks is the gay world. But such places are getting harder to find every year. Homosexuality is here to stay, but the hothouse that once gave it shelter is beginning to crack.

Christopher Street is the center of the gay male world in Manhattan. Not only is the Village the largest of the city's gay enclaves, but the most permissive, and Christopher Street is where gays from the West Side meet gays from Brooklyn Heights and New Jersey.

'There will still be places for gays to meet each other, but more and more, the dancing and partying, even the sex will happen with straights present.'



Sheridan Square: "The gay world can be housed in a room, or a street or an entire town."

They wear their erotic fantasies on their sleeves, suggested with a carefully pocketed kerchief in a lumberjack's shirt or racer's shorts. On the afternoon of Saturday May 10, 1975, leaning out of my apartment window from 2 p.m. to 2:05, I counted on the north side of Christopher Street 104 people pass my window, four of them lesbians, 53 of them gay men, and 47 of them

straight. ("Straight" included anyone about whom homosexuality did not appear an absolute certainty, based on signals of costume and gesture clear to educated eyes, but invisible to most Village residents, except of course those who complain in The Village Voice every spring).

Once, tourists came to see the Beats. Now they come to see the homosexuals. On any Saturday night they can be found peering into storefront windows at a bunch of guys standing around with beer cans in their hands. Gay men visit some 20 or so bars in the vicinity of Christopher Street. They cruise on the sidewalks leading from one to another with a sense of relaxed guard that they can feel only on their own turf. They hold hands. They stop to talk. They eye each other with brazen intent to fuck. It is a rare sight, one of New York's sociological treasures, and it should be protected, because it is being squeezed into the Hudson River. Although very late at night, once the tourists have gone, it is almost totally homosexual. Christopher Street can be exclusively gay for fewer hours on fewer blocks. The gay world is shrinking.

Once, homosexual hamlets were the exclusive province of their denizens and a few plucky sociologists. Now the fringes of any self-respecting gay dance floor are dotted with straight people who are there for the good music or the exotic scenery. But their very presence alters what they have come to see. Take the Continental Baths for example. A few years ago, the

Continental was the reigning queen of gay society, a pleasure palace where for \$13.50 and a small tab of acid, 20 hours of Sodom's delight could be purchased, with doorway after doorway along its dimly lit halls open to the acting out of one's innermost erotic fantasies.

Then the Saturday night shows were discovered, and gay became chic. The Continental's entrepreneur, in the name of the new sexual freedom, invited everyone to see the site where Bette Midler's gutsiness had first been applauded. Of course, La Midler was nowhere in sight by then, unless you were willing to join the masses in line at The Palace. So what the customers found was a lot of gay men dancing in their towels, genitals flopping freely. It was all the rage. The

legacy of the '60s credo: "Do your own thing." Except no one was as free as everyone pretended. Gay women didn't come. Straight women felt ignored. Straight men felt threatened. (In New York Magazine in January, 1973, Richard Goldstein wrote of an evening at The Continental's floor show: "How can I ignore the yearning mixed with dread which comes watching someone spurn the very (heterosexual) status which I have had to struggle to attain?") The fun was getting to be work. The gay men at The Continental began to feel like wallpaper, as if we had paid admission to be the backdrop for somebody else's evening out. The people sitting next to us were laughing a little too hard. The Edenic innocence we were all losing seemed suddenly naive. Even while we spoke of their legitimacy, the erotic fantasies fostered by the sealed environment and the hundreds of willing bodies available to act them out in the darkness upstairs were all embarrassed by exposure, like a young man caught by his prospective mother-in-law in the toilet with his pants down.

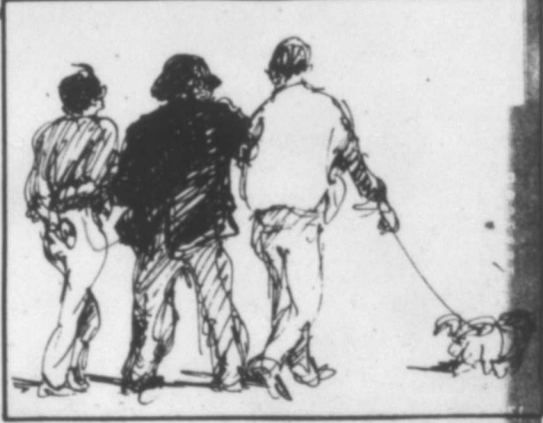
People drifted away. Gay men took their trade to other bars and houses. The beautiful people roamed on in their search for something newer and kinkier. The Continental fell into sad neglect and disrepair. Its latest attempt at comeback was to announce that its upstairs facilities are no longer restricted to men. Who knows what that will mean? A mixing of straight and gay? Bisexuality? Pansexuality? The largest brothel in town? Whatever, it is no longer the gay world.

Cherry Grove has been the gay world for nearly 30 years. Its population is more than 90 per cent gay, unlike its neighbor and rival The Fire Island Pines, which is half gay and more squeamish about it. Cherry Grove is unlike any town I know. It is a collection of pop-up cardboard-looking houses composed into the most decorated community on the coast. If you turned it upside down, it would probably snow. Gingerbread and pastel paints and flowers are everywhere. The houses have cute names instead of numbers: a purple one called "Catherine the Grape," a blithely blatant sadomasochist's leather and studs ensemble, "Spank You Very Much," a lesbians' walk-up, "No Boys in the Attic," a politico-sexual *entendre*, "Wounded Knees." Nude sunbathing, phantasmagoric costume parties, glimpses of women walking proudly topless along the

Continued on page 37



"Once tourists came to see Beats. Now they come to see gays."



"This was a magic place, invisible to everyone but its own."

Gay Acceptance

Continued from page 36

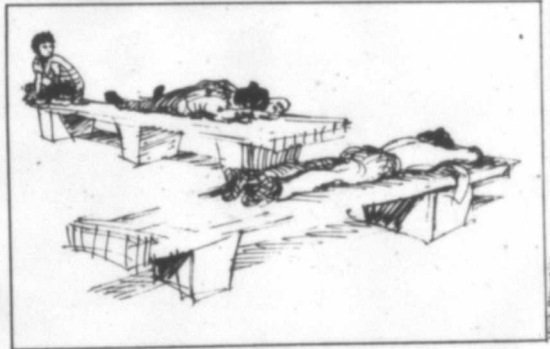
boardwalks, and daily and nightly orgies in the meat rack just outside of town. Fantasyland.

Cherry Grove, believes it is Shangri-La. It is protected from the outside world by a merciful ferry schedule that sends the last boat back to the mainland while the night is not too old for enchantment. The small straight community at the western end of town is tolerated like a small community of Jews in a Georgia backwater. No one dislikes them personally, but no one is sure why they want to be there. Now the ferry brings more and more tourists on its daily trips. I have seen heterosexual

spectators one step from the erotic. The married couple removed the audience one step further, rendering the whole thing not quite embarrassing, but a little desperate, and certainly no longer exclusively gay.

The gay world is succumbing to its own revolution. Once invisible, it is now being publicly examined as a curiosity. But the more it shows itself, the less reason it has to exist, because it was the creation of a people in hiding, a people who had to develop a private language and secret rit us and obscure places to survive. The laws haven't changed yet, but open gays are slowly being accepted into the life of the city.

The charm of the gay world is



Down by the piers: a place for gay people to meet.

couples touring the meat rack hand in hand. People come to use the beach for the day and to watch the gays dance at night and then catch the last boat home. One night, I waited by a beach taxi kissing my date when a man slapped my face for being myself in front of his wife. I slapped him back and reminded him where he was. After all, we were what he had come to see.

Each summer, most of the gays have waited later and later into 'he night before beginning their entertainment. Now it's almost as formal a tradition as eleven o'clock suppers. They wait until the last boat is gone. Then, like nervous elves whose forest glade is theirs only until dawn, they dance and hurry to the meat rack and then sleep much of the day away, perhaps on the beach. In the sunlit hours, Cherry Grove is not quite what it used to be. The gay world is changing.

Now even the inner sanctums of sex are being invaded. The Anvil is a bar that is about as close to never-never land as the gay world gets. Drinks in the front room, orgies in the back room, dancers and sex acts on stage: not so different from watching women wrestle in the mud of a Weimar Republic cabaret. Such places have traditionally been the secret and sacrosanct province of gay men, hidden and illicit. Now they are written about in slick magazines. Those with a voyeuristic streak or an appreciation of sex as a ballet can watch a sadomasochistic performance featuring men suspending heavy beer mugs from chains clamped onto their nipples or foreskins, sitting on rubber dildoes that would give the Lincoln Tunnel second thoughts, and merrily inserting fists and half a foot into each other's willing asses. The last time I went there, one woman was present. Along with her husband, she became part of the show, each of them greasing up with Crisco and fist-fucking a performer apiece. The stage removed the

fast becoming nostalgia. The characters who people it are yielding to a variety of forces. The drag queen and the diesel dyke are being transformed by women's liberation and its challenge to gender roles. The pathetic, lonely caricature called the auntie, who ages in a panic over each new wrinkle in his sexual desirability, is giving way to new respect for the sexuality of old people and new validation of the single life-style. The dizzy faggot is being challenged by the seriousness of gay liberation itself. The superstar is waiting for men's liberation, which is taking its own sweet time about abandoning male privilege. Hiding together in the confines of the gay world, these people convinced each other that they were not "queer," but "special," which served as compensation for having been excluded from the rest of the human race. If they were special, it is because they dared to manifest a part of themselves that most people suppress. Some, perhaps most, remain hidden in their daily lives, but as a group we are becoming visible. The gay world has begun to overcome both its fear of exposure and its fear of equality. Homosexuals remain different, but less mysterious to the public and less illicit to themselves.

Like the Old South, the charming myth of the gay world is being swept into history by the truth. Gay liberation had no Gettysburg, but it did stir up a couple of nifty riots back when rioting was the thing to do, and it did present America with an idea: Being "normal" is no more natural than being "queer." All of us studied to be what we are. Call it cooptation, call it victory. The gay world's fragile construct of make-believe, its sexual exploits, and its sociological charm are rightfully and inevitably giving way to the same facts of life everyone else lives with. There will still be places for gay people to go to meet each other, but more and more, the

Continued on page 40

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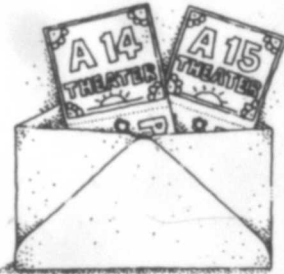
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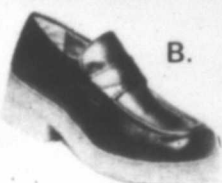
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Gay Acceptance

Continued from page 29

cruising, the dancing, the shopping and eating out and partying, and even the sex, will happen with straight people present. We will have to endure the awkwardness of parties where ideological attempts to mix the gay and straight worlds frequently result in separate camps on different sides of the living room and perplexed hosts relaying messages of goodwill back and forth. We will have to do without our protective bubble. Although I will mourn its passing, it has to go.

As a member of the movement generation, I was seduced into a ghettoized freedom in front of straight visitors, which is still not acceptable everywhere I go, not for example, in front of a crowd of ball-scratching construction workers. It was hard to maintain a sense of proportion on Christopher Street, hard to make the transition to the harsher realities of Staten Island or Herald Square, where I was in the minority as usual, often the minority of one. I ended the paranoia by moving uptown, where the traffic is a little more mixed and a lot less self-conscious.

For the time being, there remains a large group who still believe themselves inferior to straights, and to balance it a small group who consider themselves superior. But most of us fall somewhere in between and simply consider ourselves people. And so it remains before us to make ourselves real. From conservatives we still face some open hostility,

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but it is beginning to give way to bored tolerance. We should be able to maintain at least the liberal acceptance we have won, even if it is still socially uncomfortable. If repression does not force blacks back to the ghetto and women back to the kitchen, it probably will not force gays back into the closet.

For those of us who have unscrewed our doors from their hinges, there is no course but to go forward, continuing to sacrifice our privacy in favor of honesty, and to insist in public on our right to freedom of sexual choice. Whether the straight world abandons its marital family structure or resuscitates it, there ought to be enough room for homosexuals to lead their lives openly among the rest. But it means changes for both worlds. Like the gay world, the straight world is defined by whom it excludes, and the borders are blurring already. As the gay world dies, paying the price of its own honesty, the straight world, as the single framework admitted by society, must die as well, and acknowledge the validity of alternate ways of love. Gays may not be understood or loved in spite of themselves, but with enough exposure, they should soon cease to be treated as the pernicious threat to the community they were once thought to be. The memory of the gay world will be absorbed into the history of Western culture, probably with legends more glittering than the actual facts.

As for me, I'm moving on to plain reality. If we have to wake up from our nightmares, we have to wake up from our dreams as well.

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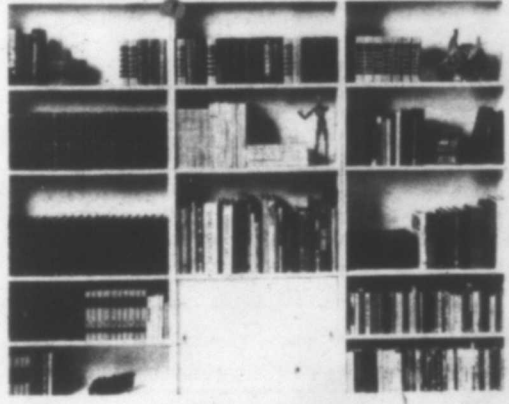
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