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Before Stonewall

How have homosexual men and women, condemned by church, state and medical science, managed to create community? Where did the gay and lesbian political movement come from? The new documentary *Before Stonewall* finds the answers in the social, cultural and political changes that transformed American life in the fifty years before the 1969 Stonewall rebellion, that outburst of rage and resistance in New York City which ushered in the modern movement for gay and lesbian liberation.

Inspired by John D'Emilio's important book, *Sexual Politics, Sexual Communities*, *Before Stonewall* hews to the historical materialism and time frame of its model, sometimes expanding and in a few cases attenuating the source material. (D'Emilio served as one of the film's three main historical consultants.) The filmmakers—executive producer John Scagliotti, director Greta Schiller and co-director Robert Rosenberg—have constructed their account of a community's evolution from archival footage, Hollywood film clips, home movies and interviews with the men and women who lived gay life in the decades before Stonewall. Snatches of campy old pop tunes and witty gay revampings of familiar folk songs add atmosphere to the evocations of homosexual history. Narrator Rita Mae Brown is a helpful but unobtrusive guide. Enlightening and entertaining,

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full of iconoclastic humor and a feisty, committed spirit, *Before Stonewall* embodies that elusive something known as gay sensibility.

The chronicle begins with the industrialization and urbanization of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In cities, men and women of homosexual inclination could escape stifling traditional patterns of life and meet one another. Denizens of the era's gay underground clustered in bohemian Greenwich Village and renaissance-era Harlem. Those days are recalled by writer Richard Bruce Nugent, a friend of Zora Neale Hurston and a contributor to Langston Hughes's journal, *Fire!*, and by former dancer Mabel Hampton. Hampton, a tiny octogenarian, tells of meeting Bessie Smith, Alberta Hunter and Ethel Waters, celebrated entertainers who she says were in "the life."

The homosexual subculture of the 1920s and 1930s produced such literati as Gertrude Stein, Natalie Barnet, Tennessee Williams, Margaret Anderson and Romaine Brooks. The censorship trials of the best-selling novel *The Well of Loneliness* and the Broadway play *The Captive* drew public attention to homosexuality. But in 1934, the motion picture code prohibited any depiction of same-sex eroticism in the movies. Although gay life was circumscribed by society's hostility, the end of Prohibition that same year permitted a gay bar subculture to take shape.

World War II created the conditions that would allow a demimonde to become a community. Millions of Americans were uprooted from their familiar surroundings and placed in sex-segregated environments which fostered intense emotional and sexual bonds. In the military, previously isolated homosexual men and women met others of their kind for the first time. "My Buddy" and "Gal From Kalamazoo" became their theme songs.

The recollections of gay and lesbian veterans provide some of *Before Stonewall's* most fascinating moments. A Navy man recalls friends and lovers killed in combat. Chuck Rowland, who would become a pioneer gay activist in the 1950s, says the Army induction center at Fort Snelling was a "seduction center" run by "all of the people I had known in the gay bars of Minneapolis." Johnnie Phelps relates a startling anecdote about a confrontation she and several other lesbian WACs had with their commanding officer. It seems that

General Eisenhower had planned to purge the battalion of lesbians until Sergeant Phelps and some other sisters in uniform explained that such a move would dangerously deplete the ranks of servicewomen.

After the war many gays and lesbians maintained their friendships, settling down in large cities where anonymity helped them to form enclaves. The extraordinary circumstances of the war years had made it easier for them to associate, but there had been no increase in social tolerance of homosexuality. The 1950s were the Dark Ages of gay American history. A mania for conformity and a fear of difference swept the land, assuming its political form in McCarthyism. The Red-baiting Senator from Wisconsin and his cohorts regarded political subversives and sexual perverts as twin threats to the American way. The McCarthyite purges of government and military personnel, however, affected more homosexuals than alleged Communists. Standing in front of Reagan's White House, Frank Kameny describes how he lost his job with the Federal government. In another sequence, Joe McCarthy banter with a friendly witness about "pixies" and "fairies," his sneering minion Roy Cohn hovering at his side.

But the 1950s were not unrelievedly grim. There were also significant strides toward liberation. The first gay political organizations came into being during those years. Three veteran Communist Party members—Harry Hay, Bob Hull and Chuck Rowland—founded the male-oriented Mattachine Society. Del Martin and Phyllis Lyon formed the Daughters of Bilitis for lesbians. (Neither woman, however, appears in the film.) The gay press was born with such publications as *ONE*, *Mattachine Review* and *The Ladder*. The Kinsey reports on male and female sexuality alarmed homophobes by documenting the high incidence of homosexual behavior in America. They also intensified public discourse on homosexuality and helped undermine the notion that gays and lesbians constitute some exotic subspecies of humanity. Repressive

cultural norms and antisexual morality were further challenged by the Beat movement. Gay self-expression won an important victory in 1956, when Allen Ginsberg's homoerotic *Howl* survived a censorship trial.

During the 1950s and early 1960s, Mattachine and Bilitis never claimed as members more than a tiny fraction of America's gay and lesbian population. It was simply too risky for most to engage in gay activism. In many cities cops routinely raided bars and private homes; postal inspectors monitored mail (a physique magazine or a copy of *ONE* could be seized and their intended recipients prosecuted); and blackmail of gays was a thriving racket. Numerous gays and lesbians did, however, commit themselves to other struggles.

"Many of us who went South with Dr. King in the sixties were gay," says a white minister. "A lot of gay people who could not come out for their own liberation could invest their energies in the liberation of blacks." The civil rights movement was, in fact, the prototype for the gay activism that developed in the 1960s. Footage of gays and lesbians picketing the State Department in 1965 indicates that the homosexual movement, which had been fearful of going public, was taking lessons from civil rights militants.

But the black influence went deeper than the choice of political tactics. Two black lesbians, poet Audre Lorde and educator Maua Adele Ajanaku, say that the rejection of racist stereotypes by blacks inspired gay people to question the terms of their oppression and the degree to which they had internalized heterosexual standards. The diversity of the men and women who appear in *Before Stonewall* belies the stereotypes of swish queens and mannish dykes, but for many years a butch/fem dichotomy structured gay culture. Society's gender codes were so ironclad, especially in the 1950s, that homosexual men and women were under pressure to adopt rigidly schematized roles. The process of liberation that took off in the 1960s under the inspiration of the black movement and the counterculture greatly expanded the possibilities for self-definition.

On a June night at the end of the decade, the young, mainly effeminate patrons of a Greenwich Village bar known as the Stonewall Inn violently resisted a police raid. This unheard-of defiance swelled into two nights of rioting on Christopher Street, which in-

involved more than 2,000 gays and lesbians and 400 police. Moving from the early days to that signal event, *Before Stonewall* covers a lot of ground in its eighty-seven minutes. Besides being remarkably comprehensive, the film is also "politically correct" in a nontendentious way. Men and women get equal time, and racial issues are dealt with.

There are some lapses, however. Mattachine founders Hay and Rowland brought years of Communist Party experience and a Marxist approach to their gay organizing in the 1950s, but the film fails to explore their leftism. It also overlooks the tensions that existed between pioneer gay and lesbian activists, which stemmed from different interests and political perspectives and from the sexism of some of the men. And why aren't the clips from Hollywood movies identified, especially the one with Ronald Reagan and the drag queens?

Although the liberation project remains unfinished, the post-Stonewall accomplishments of gays and lesbians have been amazing: Political action groups in virtually every major city, and in many lesser ones too. Campus organizations in the Deep South. An array of social, cultural and professional associations. Elected officials who are openly gay or lesbian. An explosion in community publishing, as well as films like the Oscar-winning *The Times of Harvey Milk*, and *Before Stonewall*. But will it last? Patrick Buchanan, in his earlier incarnation as a heavy-breathing pundit, predicted that AIDS will cause the "scattering" of the nation's gay communities, a catastrophe devoutly wished for by the White House communications director and others of his ilk.

The terrible epidemic and the resultant rise in overt homophobia are serious setbacks. (Some lesbians complain that with so much of the movement's energies focused on AIDS, their concerns have taken a back seat—a new form of lesbian invisibility.) But it's not Pollyanna-ish to say that the current calamities will neither put an end to what has been achieved nor dictate an entirely gloomy future. *Before Stonewall* makes a convincing case that the gay and lesbian community will survive, even flourish, because it is deeply embedded in the fabric of American life, born of profound social change and of a heroic, tenacious freedom struggle. □