



Photographs by Harvey Stein



Photographs by Alvin Baltrop

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On June 28, 1969, the phrase screaming queen was given literal expression by a few thousand gays in a five-day riot across downtown New York. The de facto pink army, gelled by a raid on the Stonewall Inn, sashayed throughout the city leaving blood and chaos in their wake.

These marauding Marys were fed up with being bullied, and probably also outraged that one Ms. Judy Garland had had the gall to die the previous day. The ensuing nights saw brutality and property destruction of Rabelaisian proportions: parking meters ripped out of the ground and thrown through windows, trannies hurling bottles at police, militant lesbians brawling in the streets. The friends of Dorothy who partook in this orgy of violence may not have expected it, but by the time the dust inside Stonewall settled, it was clear that they had given birth to orgies of an entirely different kind.

The riots were proof positive that the city's gay population had a nascent political consciousness hovering about them like steam in a bathhouse. Emboldened by the solidarity of Stonewall and the successes of other minority advocacy groups, namely those for blacks, Latinos, and women, and already without the hindrances of unwanted pregnancy or seemingly significant STDs, gays dragged their limitless sexual escapades out of the bedroom and into the streets—eventually flaunting homosexuality

like a drag queen with a new set of pearls. Their bacchanalia of consciousness would last for almost twelve years.

The focal point of these fever-pitch displays were the much-vaunted West Side piers. Largely ignored by the City, which at that point was poorer than a hustler with a harelip, the piers played host to enough and wild enough sex to make Kinsey look timid by comparison. *Straight to Hell* magazine, which published confessionals from readers (purportedly true), printed the following submission in the early 70s: just a taste of what actually transpired. As you may imagine, it has been, ahem, abridged.

One sunny summer afternoon, I was roaming the empty caverns of the piers, passing by groups and pairs of men in varying states of undress and sex play. As I walked from room to room, the sex fantasies grew more and more erotic.

Out on the roof, a group of men were standing in a circle around a man naked except for a pair of hiking boots. I walked to the side of the roof and looked down into the mostly empty street, where I saw a young black guy, about 5'6" with a muscular build, packed tightly into a pair of faded jeans and a tight white T-shirt. Just as I was beginning to fantasize about his smooth, dark skin against my body, he turned up to look at me and seemed to beckon me to follow him. I was so worked up that I ran down the stairs.

I walked behind him to the next street, which he turned up: where I had parked my car before going to the piers. I said, "This is my car if you'd like to hang out."

By the time we finished, I was so dizzy with pleasure that I hadn't noticed that the empty street had filled up

with about ten guys standing about the car, watching our every move towards climax.

Such licentious scenes were par for the piers, and just a few blocks east things got even more intense. The 70s were the decade when the Meatpacking District was perhaps most appropriately so called—next door to the plants where eager young men wrapped steaks for delivery, their hungry counterparts groped blindly through the pitch black back ends of the trucks parked outside, hoping to pack some meat of their own.

If one wasn't as inclined to back alley encounters, there were always the bathhouses. The bathhouses offered every amenity to their well-pampered clientele, though very few of them had to do with actual bathing. The most highly regarded of these establishments was Saint Mark's. Call me excommunicated, but the actual Saint Mark is believed to be the first patriarch of Alexandria—a city founded by the most important faggot in history—so the legacy of a famous homo hotspot is perhaps not as untoward as it may seem. Rumor has it that Bette Midler began her career there, and was dually appreciated for her show and the bucket full of poppers she would empty into the crowd.

Speaking of saints, to not mention The Saint itself would be a mortal sin. Although this gay disco technically opened in 1980, it was home to as much 70s salaciousness as any that preceded it, not to mention more pills than a library full of Jacqueline Susann. The 5,000-square foot dance floor played host to a saturnalia of casual sex and limitless drugs

until its "final evening" open—which lasted, as if had been summer in St. Petersburg, for over 48 hours. Across the country another White Night had already signaled the beginning of the end for the gay utopia of the 70s, with just as much force as when it had begun. The light sentencing returned for Dan White—an ex-San Francisco city supervisor who had murdered gay activist Harvey Milk and then-mayor George Moscone—again prompted the gay community to take their anger to the streets. Where Stonewall had given birth to the gay power movement, though, the White Night riots neatly ended it. A mob of flammers torched City Hall and several police cars in the early hours of the riot, but by the end the law was cracking skulls with impunity in bars across the Castro. The following day, Harvey Milk's birthday, bore witness to a demure celebration of the man's achievements in a section of the city completely encircled and closely monitored by authorities.

Their public persona turned persona non grata, gays began to withdraw—if not back into the closet, then at least back to their boudoirs. But on June 5, 1981, the Center for Disease Control declared that even bedrooms weren't safe for gays, when it officially recognized AIDS and its fatal implications. Since that time, as of this writing, an estimated 25 million people have died from complications of the disease. The 70s in New York, theretofore a consequence-free playground for horny homos, was over. ☐