

GAY POWER COMES TO SHERIDAN SQUARE

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The confrontation between police and gay men at the Stonewall Inn, a gay bar, on June 27, 1969, is considered the first public eruption of the movement for gay rights. The following assessment initially appeared in *The Village Voice*. Written on a three-hour deadline, it was only the third story Truscott had ever written for publication.

Sheridan Square this weekend looked like something from a William Burroughs novel as the sudden specter of "gay power" erected its brazen head and spat out a fairy tale the likes of which the area has never seen.

The forces of faggotry, spurred by a Friday night raid on one of the city's largest, most popular, and longest lived gay bars, the Stonewall Inn, rallied Saturday night in an unprecedented protest against the raid and continued Sunday night to assert presence, possibility, and pride until the early hours of Monday morning. "I'm a faggot, and I'm proud of it!" "Gay power!" "I like boys!"—these and many other slogans were heard all three nights as the show of force by the city's finery met the force of the city's finest. The result was a kind of liberation, as the gay brigade emerged from the bars, back rooms, and bedrooms of the Village and became street people.

It began as a small raid—only two patrolmen, two detectives, and two policewomen were involved. But as the patrons trapped inside were released one by one, a crowd started to gather on the street. It was initially a festive gathering, composed mostly of Stonewall boys who were waiting around for friends still inside. Cheers went up as favorites emerged from the door, striking a pose and swishing by the detective with a "Hello there, fella." Wrists were limp and hair was primped. The stars were in their element.

Suddenly a paddywagon arrived and the mood of the crowd changed. Three of the more blatant queens—in full drag—were loaded inside, along with the bartender and doorman, to a chorus of catcalls and boos from the crowd. A cry went up to push the paddywagon over, but it drove away before anything could happen. The next person to come out was a dyke, and she put up a struggle. At that moment, the scene became explosive. Limp wrists were forgotten. Beer cans and bottles were heaved at the windows, and a rain of coins descended on the cops. At the height of the action, a bearded figure was plucked from the crowd and dragged inside. It was Dave Van Ronk, who had come from the Lion's Head to see what was going on. He was charged with throwing an object at the police.

Almost by signal the crowd erupted into cobblestone and bottle heaving. The trashcan I was standing on was nearly yanked out from under me as a kid tried to grab it for use in the window smashing melee. From nowhere came an uprooted parking meter—used as a battering ram on the Stonewall door. I heard several cries of "Let's get some gas," and a blaze soon appeared in the window of the Stonewall. As the wood barrier behind the glass was beaten open, the cops inside turned a firehose on the crowd. By the time the fags were

able to regroup, several carloads of police reinforcements had arrived and the streets were cleared.

A visit to the 6th Precinct revealed that 13 people had been arrested on charges that ranged from Van Ronk's felonious assault of a police officer to the owners' illegal sale and storage of alcoholic beverages without a license. Two police officers had been injured in the battle with the crowd. By the time the last cop was off the street Saturday morning, a sign was going up announcing that the Stonewall would reopen that night. It did.

Protest set the tone for "gay power" activities on Saturday. The afternoon was spent boarding up the windows of the Stonewall and chalking them with signs of the new revolution: "We are Open," "There is all college boys and girls in here," "Support Gay Power—C'mon in, girls." Among the slogans were two carefully clipped and bordered copies of the *Daily News* story about the previous night's events, which was anything but kind to the gay cause. But the real action was in the street. Friday night's crowd had returned, led by a group of gay cheerleaders. "We are the Stonewall girls," they chanted. "We wear our hair in curls. We have no underwear. We show our pubic hairs!" The scene was a command-performance for queers. If Friday had been pick-up night, Saturday was date night. Hand-holding, kissing, and posing accented each of the cheers with a homosexual liberation that had appeared only fleetingly on the street before. Radio news announcements about the previous night's "gay power" chaos had brought half of Fire Island's Cherry Grove running back to see what they had left behind. The generation gap existed even here. Older boys had strained looks on their faces and talked in concerned whispers as they watched the up-and-coming generation take being gay and flaunt it.

As the chants on the street rose in frequency and volume, the crowd grew restless. "Let's go down the street and see what's happening, girls," someone yelled. And down the street went the crowd, smack into the Tactical Patrol Force. Formed in a line, the TPF swept the crowd back to the corner of Waverly Place where they stopped. A stagnant situation there brought on some gay tomfoolery in the form of a chorus line facing the helmeted and club-carrying cops. Just as the line got into a full kick routine, the TPF advanced again and cleared the crowd of screaming gay-powerites down Christopher to Seventh Avenue. The cops amused themselves by breaking up small groups of people, till the crowd finally dispersed around 3:30 A.M.

Sunday was a time for watching and rapping. Gone were the "gay power" chants of Saturday, but not the new and open brand of exhibitionism. Steps, curbs, and the park provided props for what amounted to the Sunday fag follies as returning stars from the previous night's performances stopped by to close the show for the weekend.

Around 1 A.M. a non-helmeted version of the TPF made a sweep of the

area. That put a damper on posing and primping, and as the last buses were leaving Jerseyward, the crowd grew thin. Allen Ginsberg and Taylor Mead walked by to see what was happening and were filled in by some of the gay activists. "Gay power! Isn't that great!" Allen said. He expressed a desire to visit the Stonewall—"You know, I've never been in there"—and ambled on down the street, flashing peace signs and helioing the TPF. It was a kind of joy to see him on the street, with his laughter and quiet commentary on consciousness, "gay power" as a new movement, and the implications of what had happened. I followed him into the Stonewall, where rock music blared from speakers all around a room that might have come right from a Hollywood set of a gay bar. He was immediately bouncing and dancing wherever he moved.

{Ginsberg left, and I walked east with him. Along the way, he described how things used to be. "You know, the guys there were so beautiful—they've lost that wounded look that fags all had 10 years ago." It was the first time I had heard this crowd described as beautiful.}

We reached Cooper Square, and as Ginsberg turned to head toward home, he waved and yelled, "Defend the fairies!" and bounced on across the square. He is probably working on a manifesto for the movement right now. Watch out. The liberation is under way.