Queer: The Stonewall Riots

Marcus Bourbeau

Senior Division

Historical Paper

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" I was a radical, a revolutionist. I am still a revolutionist...I am glad I was in the Stonewall riot. I remember when someone threw a Molotov cocktail, I thought, "My god, the revolution is here. The revolution is finally here!" "

- Sylvia Rivera[1]

Fifteen and Queer in New York- A Fictional Monologue

June 28th, 1969.[2]

A summer day like any other- sun setting over the skyline in an orange hue as I counted my coins, knowing the cost of home for the night wasn't out of reach. With a brief sigh, I approached the bar. Home. The Stonewall Inn, my only place of refuge. After all, what mother- moreso what father- would accept a queer son? Clearly not my own- since I'd been kicked out without a second thought when my 'fairy' nature was exposed. I had no choice but to go- into the streets alone- before I got hurt again. Letting the doorman count me up for the proper fee, I straightened up my dusty overcoat, hoping to fit in by more than sexual identity- as a gay bar wasn't the most ideal location. He stepped aside, and relief flooded my veins as exactly three pennies were dropped back into my palm.

¨Cause no trouble, kid,¨ nodding awkwardly at his directions, I found myself signing a booking ledger- my name hardly standing out on the page. After, I stepped through the door to finally enter my night's safety. Many like me were hiding out there, too- as the Stonewall was the only gay bar to allow anyone under eighteen inside. Of course, that was for legal reasons. But

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[1] Zeoli, Tony, editor. *17 Quotes from LGBTQ+ Trailblazers. Bookstr*
[2] History.com Editors. *1969 Stonewall Riots,* History.com

'legal reasons' were the least of my worries. After all, just to pay the three dollar tax, most my age swindled, shoplifted and stole for entry, as it was our only security from arrest as a beggar.[3]

I didn't get a seat. With no plans to drink, I didn't need one. A spot in a back corner was plenty suitable. Usually, the dancing and loudness tended to calm and mellow in the darker hours- meaning time for sleep had yet to come. Even if just for a little while. Although shakedowns weren't infrequent, nothing had been said of tonight. Normally, in exchange for the boss's cash- a payment I'd heard referred to as gayola by older men in the bar- a cop or two would tip off someone.[4] This gave minors and others a chance to flee before the whirlwind blew through. Unbeknownst to us- this was the calm before the storm. The doors were locked just as soon as they'd been opened up- and everyone knew these weren't just patrons. This was a shakedown. Within seconds- underage patrons were left scattering like wild animals. We all knew the trouble we'd face if caught- and none of us planned to be stuck in the back of a paddy wagon.

An Exhausting Past With Conflict

Almost since the very beginning of society as a whole- hatred has been a problem. From witch trials to entire world wars, conflict has been everywhere. But once again, an abusive dislike has slipped through the cracks of those who can't seem to care. Homosexuals, lesbians, transgenders and all falling under those umbrella terms were horribly treated for nothing more than a search for prosperity, love for themselves and love for another. From beatings and executions in some places to incarceration in others, some would say New York's gay

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[3] Franke-Ruta, Garance. *An Amazing Account of the Stonewall Uprising,* The Atlantic

[4] Sommerland, Joe. *Pride 2019: What Happened at the Stonewall Riots and How Did They Inspire the LGBT+ Rights Movement?* INDEPENDENT

community in the late 1960's had it made. But that didn't stop the humiliation- nor did it stop a rough rise of pride in it's furious, unbridled form.

Love Vs. Legalities

Love came with a harsh price. Those found guilty of being gay, lesbian, transgender or dressing in drag could face charges as hard as a life sentence in prison- or worse.. In California, a man found having gay intercourse with another man was punished with shock therapy, and was also castrated and lobotomized. Gay relations were completely illegal, as well as wearing less than three garments made for their sex. Although gender identity and sexuality was just love and self-acceptance, it was punished rather cruelly.[5]

Even if not charged, the names and faces of any gays, lesbians or transvestites caught had their name and face put in the local papers. This severe outing of sexual identity watched lives crash and burn. Friends, family and love were lost. They were usually fired from their job, and some kicked from home.[6] Entire lives were destroyed- all for love.

The Stonewall Inn- A Different Breed of Bar

Before the uprising- The Stonewall Inn was the "diamond in the rough" of gay bars. Unlike others, drag queens and minors were let in. Clientele was mixed in race, and dancing was permitted- including dancing with the opposite sex.[7] Truthfully, the Stonewall was a shabby little bar, with no running water, fire exits, and a lack of clean glasses.[8] Used glasses were simply

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[5] Grudo, Gideon. *The Stonewall Riots: What Really Happened, What Didn't, and What Became Myth.* The Daily Beast.
[6] Baumann, Jason, editor. *The Stonewall Reader.* Compiled by the New York Public Library.
[7] Franke-Ruta, Garance. *An Amazing Account of the Stonewall Uprising,* The Atlantic
[8] Baumann, Jason, editor. *The Stonewall Reader.* Compiled by The New York Public Library.

tossed in a sink full of water, soaked, and dried before reuse. Even so, it was extremely diverse and quickly became a popular bottle-bar. It stayed open on false exclusivity, and made some extra cash by charging an entrance fee- even if it was just three dollars per person.[9]

Owned by the Genovese Crime Family, it was- like most- an unlicensed bar. The gathering of gays was considered disorderly and even lewd at the time, so most gay bars were harrassed by police until they were finally shut down- raided time and time again. That mindset was pretty bad for queer bargoers, as anyone even suspected of homosexuality could be refused service at a normal bar.[10] Therefore, an exclusively gay bar was a complete turnaround to the other bars around New York- and The Stonewall Inn had allure.

Who Was the Bar Truly For?

Clearly, the Stonewall wasn't any modern support group for gays and drag queens to be safe in and feel accepted. The mafia saw an opportunity for quick, dirty- catering to the shunned gay community. For a mere monthly payment of one thousand two hundred dollars, the police strayed from the Genovese Crime Family's back- and their illegally run gay bar. Any raids that did take place were appearance only, so locals thought the gay bar would be taken care of- and were always tipped off. Alcohol- which would be confiscated in event of a raid- was hidden in nearby cars or even hidden wall panels. All in all, the only ones that lost in the raids were the bar occupants unfortunate enough to be taken in by police.[11] Of course, the Genovese Crime Family had everything figured out so it was all gains across the board- and a monopoly on gays began.

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[9] History.com Editors. *1969 Stonewall Riots,* History.com
[10] History.com Editors. *1969 Stonewall Riots,* History.com
[11] *Why Did the Mafia Own the Bar?* American Experience.

Although a popular bar, it definitely wasn't the most well-kept. Lacking proper facilities (fire exits, working sinks, fully functional toilets), the bar received complaints rather often. One complaint shone above the rest. The alcohol was miserable. Bootlegged and stolen, the off-brand drinks were watered down- and then sold for ridiculous prices commonly seen in top-shelf liquor.[12] "I never bought a drink from the Stonewall. Never, never, never," a patron noted, making disdain for the bar's drink options all too clear. "Mafia house beer? I mean, does anyone know what that is?"[13] Even after all that- alcohol wasn't the only bootlegged product. Cigarettes were off-brand, so even just getting a proper cig was a struggle for a gay bargoer- even if they had nowhere else to go.

Due to an unwarranted hatred for gays, the mafia got away with quite a lot. Patrons were rather often blackmailed at threat of being outed- even to the degree of being pimped by the mafia. Members with homosexual tendencies often got away with prostituting their bar clientele. Later on, an investigation was launched on this, however Assistant District Attorney Paul Flaxman had it shut down for an incredibly seedy reason. Some important, powerful political, business and social figures were indicted, and it seemed he didn't want it to spread that these people were dipping their fingers in the rainbow pool.[14] Once looked into, a harsh reality comes into sight. Simply because the bargoers were gay, deemed lewd, indecent and sinful- no one cared. No one wanted to save those locked into a life they couldn't control. All cheeks were turned when things got dirty- just because of sexuality.

Uprisings at a Symbol of Pride

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[12] *Why Did the Mafia Own the Bar?* American Experience.
[13] Kane, Michael. *How NYC's Gay Bars Thrived Because of the Mob.* New York Post
[14] Nianias, Helen. *How the Mafia Once Controlled the New York Gay Scene.* VICE

On that fateful June day, it was about one AM when the cops- four males and two females- demanded IDs be shown. At first, the two-hundred-some occupants complied. Naturally, mafia members found in the bar were arrested. Those released from the bar, though, didn't scurry off to safety. A crowd had begun to gather- and no one involved was very pleased to see gays being arrested as well. Soon, pennies were flying through the air- one of the first signs of rebellion. The crowd ignited, however, when a masculinely dressed woman was hit upside the head with a billy club- and yelled a memorable demand that pushed onlookers. "Do something!"[15]

Those deemed socially unacceptable were detained- including transvestites and drag queens. Of course, the crowd grew more and more rebellious. Anything possibly found was thrown. Pennies, stones, bricks, bottles and trash fires were among the flung items- and at one point, even a parking meter met the sky.[16] Chants began in rebellion, as well as singing and dancing. The rebellion everyone had been waiting for had finally begun, and it was exhilarating for those that stood against the shakedown.[17] Even so, this was only the beginning.

With five hundred to one thousand angry protesters, the six police soon found themselves overwhelmed- and retreated into the bar for safety. Backup arrived, and began to fight back the crowd, as well as beating some. A few arrests were made that night, and the crowd began to dissipate.[18] This wasn't the end.

In the nights that followed, crowds returned to the Stonewall. People were there to support their home, and their cause. Although the Stonewall Inn hadn't been the cleanest, or the

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[15] *New York City (NYC) Stonewall Inn Riot.* NYCdata, Baruch College.
[16] Baumann, Jason, editor. *The Stonewall Reader.* Compiled by the New York Public Library.
[17] *New York City (NYC) Stonewall Inn Riot.* NYCdata, Baruch College.
[18] Grudo, Gideon. *The Stonewall Riots: What Really Happened, What Didn't, and What Became Myth.* The Daily Beast.

best- it was home to youths, drag queens and gays alike and different. Even so, the bar was shut down- and remained dormant for decades onward.

The Press Raises Tension- and the Stonewall Gets Attention

Of course, newspapers didn't do much to make the straight population like gays any better. Police were given the upper hand- basically branded the victims, treated cruelly by 'hostile, criminal' queers. Not to mention, writers brought an uncomfortable focus to the appearance of drag queens- almost as if to fetishize them. To make matters worse, The New York's Sunday News described the bar as "a place to drink and dance and do whatever little girls do when they get together."[19] The statement was emasculating, rude, and all around an unnecessary jab. Other headlines didn't do much better. "Homo Nest Raided, Queen Bees Stinging Mad"[20] was enough of a headline to cause a stir- considering it heavily nodded towards homosexuals being insects or pests. The news, all in all, was only counterproductive, and caused more hatred to fester.

Who Started the Rebellion?

Really, it was never figured who exactly started the riots, who did what, and if certain things really even happened. Was there a starting brick? Who threw it? Who tossed the first coins?[21] Since news coverage was iffy- and would do anything possible to slander the name of GLBT (modernly named LGBTQIA+ to fit the rather large spectrum of gender identity and sexuality), there were many grey areas. Theories and speculations are everywhere, and there

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[19] Eastmond, Dean. *How the Press Reported the Stonewall Riots in 1969.* HISKIND
[20] Grinberg, Emanuella. How the Stonewall Riots Inspired Today's Pride Celebrations. CNN
[21] Grudo, Gideon. *The Stonewall Riots: What Really Happened, What Didn't, and What Became Myth.* The Daily Beast.

were occurrences confirmed to have happened- and to not have- but the blur that was the Stonewall Riots still, over fifty years later still raises brows, questions, and rainbow flags.

An Uprising Past

Even as the uprising itself was monumental, the aftermath proved that twenty one arrests weren't all in vain. Although GLBT organizations had existed before, they were just seeping through the floodwalls. But after the Stonewall- a barrier crumbled. The evolution from GLBT to LGBT, and eventually LGBTQIA+ began. Picket sign protests grew in popularity, most famously the Christopher Street Liberation March- hosted a year after the Stonewall Uprising.[22]

Closer to now, Bill Clinton dubbed June Gay Pride Month. Closer still, Barack Obama included the acronym LGBT, to represent Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender in that order. [23] In 2016, Obama went on, designating the Stonewall Inn, Christopher Street and the surrounding streets a pride monument. Clearly, the world isn't perfect, and prejudice is still somewhat common. But humanity has gotten better. Much, much better.

Today, picket signs and chants have been replaced by pride flags and laughter. Drag queens have taken stage with glory, and it isn't a challenge to feel at home in the midst of a pride festival- where sexuality and gender identity is celebrated and loved, not suppressed and villainized. Now, instead of the stereotypical angry butch lesbians and effeminate gays protesting, homophobia has taken the place of it- with anti-gay signs on the sidelines while the LGBTQIA+ community celebrates their likenesses and differences rather than living in fear and shame of their own identity.

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[22] Grinberg, Emanuella. How the Stonewall Riots Inspired Today's Pride Celebrations. CNN

[23] Sommerland, Joe. *Pride 2019: What Happened at the Stonewall Riots and How Did They Inspire the LGBT+ Rights Movement?* INDEPENDENT

Fifteen and Queer in New York- A Fictional Monologue Part Two

June 28, 2019.

A summer day like any other, with the sun rising along the skyline in a livid sunburst of brilliant gold. I locked my little finger with that of my partner's. That gesture alone stood as a sign of pride. The mere ability to hold my other half's hand was a blessing. Just two guys, holding pinkies in public, was something to be thankful for. Something gifted by those who came before me and fought a bigger fight, that I was more than happy to accept. On our way to a pride festival- both of us lacked fear, or shame, or insecurity. What resided in our hearts- and the hearts of those headed to the very same celebration- was an ethereal sense of warmth. A new day. To keep it short, the word was described as one thing. Pride.

Of course, walking along the sidewalk, passing strangers, people talk. Whispers and murmurs of disdain and distaste left behind by generations that stood before ours. But… People will always talk, and always have. But that's okay. Acceptance isn't everywhere- nor is hate. A world where the LGBTQIA+ community isn't called deviant, or mentally ill, or alphabet people might just be unreachable- just as perfection is. But things have changed. Miraculously, and by the hard work of those before us, things have changed and gotten better. Women are gaining equality. African Americans have reclaimed their humanity. Minorities have been suppressed, disagreements have been fought, and wars have been won. Although it's not all pretty- sunshine and rainbows- things have changed a million times before.

As more is learned, and knowledge evolves, things will continue to change. We can only do our best and hope to keep moving forward.

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