Gays take on cops: From rage to madness

The following is a report by Howard Blum in *The Village Voice* (Sept. 3, 1970) of a gay march/riot that took place in NYC on August 29, 1970. The march took place just months after the first Christopher Street Liberation Day, commemorating the anniversary of the Stonewall riots, and shows the deep connection to prisoner solidarity in early Gay Liberation-era actions.

Joel is a homosexual. Two nights before Saturday’s Gay Liberation March, I listened in his Upper West Side apartment as he articulated his despair: “I live in a culture that is not mine. I am afraid to hold my lover’s hand when we walk in the street. Afraid not because I think it is wrong or evil. I am proud to be gay. I am afraid because I don’t know who’ll be behind me. Maybe it’ll be a cop who will want to arrest me or maybe just some guy who will want to prove he’s a man.” Before the evenings march was over, I saw Joel crouched in a dark corner of the city near 31st Street, his head bleeding, the victim of a bottle thrown without warning through the city night. The look on his face was not so much pain as fear, a fear of not knowing who one’s enemies are and what one could do to escape them.

I do not know the cop’s name; he only had a number. While the march was starting against the neon backdrop of 42nd Street he explained, “I think they’re weird, but they have a right to march. I feel sorry for them.” Later that night as despair turned into rage and rage into madness I saw the same officer narrowly avoid being hit by a bottle thrown from the crowd that had now “liberated” 8th Street. The bottle shattered wildly and his face became distorted by a crazy anger, as if he were trying to muffle a scream. I watched as he charged across the Avenue of the Americas, truncheon raised, not knowing who to beat, yet not knowing what else to do.

Any city that is paved with concrete Desolation Road connecting two such citadels of contemporary anguish as 42nd Street and the Women’s House of Detention can only expect a journey along this route to be filled with madness. Saturday night’s nearly 400 strong Gay Liberation march started on 42nd Street as an honest scream by the homosexual community that they will no longer tolerate repressive police “clean-ups” and ended with a battle cry in front of the Women’s House of Detention as the march got caught up in the city’s rhythm of resentment. A riot raged around 8th Street and the Avenue of the Americas as 2000 people spilled around the streets, not dispersing until 18 individuals were arrested, six police injured, and two stores looted. The riot was spontaneous, inexplicable. And as Joel and the officer learned, there is no easy panacea for all this madness. Perhaps one can only respond as they did - with fear.
One cannot walk down 42nd Street without being aware that he is being watched. Leaning against storefronts or movie theatres or Pizza City, the eyes stare hard following you till you melt into the crowd. Last Saturday night there was more than the usual show for these eyes to follow. The city's homosexual community was on the march. The boys had joined a marching band. Groups such as the Gay Liberation Front, an organization believing that freedom for homosexuals can only occur through a revolution of all oppressed people, the Gay Activist Alliance, a militant, non-violent group of homosexual men and women, and the Radical Lesbians gathered on the corner of 42nd Street and Eighth Avenue. The purposes of the march were varied: to protest alleged police harassment of homosexuals in the city (the groups claim more than 300 homosexuals have been illegally arrested in the past three weeks); to demonstrate to the 42nd Street community that gay people can organize politically; and to instill a sense of gay pride, that being a homosexual is not a sickness or an evil and certainly no cause for shame.

A street queen, hair teased, eyes made up with mascara, held a sign: “We’re the People Our Parents Warned Us Against.” A girl in dungarees and a work shirt, her straight blond hair enclosing a plainly featured yet honestly pretty face, admitted, “Oh, I was pretty nervous about coming down here. It could be rough. But I guess I’m nervous before any demonstration.” A youth of about 18 wearing a black beret and carrying a sign promising “We Will Smash Your Heterosexual Culture” frowned at her comment. “I am never fearful about doing anything revolutionary,” he boasted. A bus pulled up to the corner as the march was beginning, the neon marqueses splashing against its windows and coloring the driver’s face. His head faced straight up 42nd Street, yet his eyes furtively followed the marchers. The driver was peeking, afraid to let anyone catch his moments of voyeurism.

The marchers circled 42nd Street, walking along the south side of the street from Eighth Avenue to Sixth Avenue, then back along the north side of the street to Times Square. Police, mostly TPF men, lined the streets. One mocked, “See you, fellahs.” Another, seeing a demonstrator’s sign stating “TPF - Hands Off Our Community,” posed with a limp wrist and loudly advised his fellow officers, “Listen, boys, they don’t want to be hurt by those mean TPFers.” As the demonstrators crossed near Times Square, one patrolman flexed his muscle in a parody of a beefcake pose. The other cops thought this was very funny. The UPI man looked at the whole scene, at the marchers, at the cops, at the city painted as uproariously with its neon mascara as any street queen, and uttered a simple “Oy.”

The demonstrators walked this circle around 42nd Street five times. Every time as they rounded the corner of 42nd and Eighth a verbal battle reminiscent of the French-German confrontation in the move “Casablanca” erupted. A little man wearing a hat proclaiming “God Is Love” would lead a chorus of “Oh How I Love Jesus.” He and his disciples sand fiercely into the night, hands cupped around their mouths, battle against the militant, rhythmic shouts of “Gay Power ... Gay Power.” Along the street, people paused to watch the marchers. Someone commented, “It’s a better show than the movies.” A hard-looking man in a T-shirt and bellbottoms, the nickname “Blue Eyes” tattooed on his forearm stated, “They have every right. Good for them. This is a free country and they should be left alone.” A lady exiting from a viewing of “The Filthy Five,” a film promising the engrossing drama of people “loving like animals and fighting like beasts to destroy one another,” shouted “You are going against God and everything you learned as children. You’ll find out someday when you die.” The marchers continued, passing in front of the Rialto II. The marquee announced, “Fear to Love.”

Still chanting “Power to the people” or “Hey, hey, try it once the other way,” the marchers proceeded to what was to be the end of the demonstration - the 14th Precinct station house. Three rows of police protected their sanctuary as the marchers filed past shouting, “End police harassment.” A cop turned and said to a friend, “I’m surprised those fags could accomplish even this. They’re fucked up, unnatural.” Yet the demonstrators planned to accomplish more. High with the success of what a member of the Gay Liberation Front described as a “beautiful, proud march,” a cry of “On to Christopher Street” was met with joyous approval. Spontaneously they were off.
Proceeding down Seventh Avenue toward the Village, the marchers relaxed. The chanting stopped. Some talked about a party at midnight. One couple argued: “Where were you last night? How dare you stand me up? I got drunk waiting for you.” A black boy, only in his teens, joined the march. I remembered him as one of the onlookers at 42nd Street. “Do you support the demonstration?” I asked. He just grinned: “I ain’t got anything better to do. Besides, it’s too early to go back home to Staten Island.” A cab driver lectured, “They should all be locked up. If they ever made a pass at one of my kids I’d kill them.”

Suddenly a bottle crashed into the crowd. Then another, glass splintering about the sidewalk. The police flashed their lights on the Penn Garden Hotel. Joel lay with his head cut. Someone started crying. Someone else cursed. Yet the march continued, now moving faster. At 21st Street another marcher was picked off, a rock cutting his skull. One of the police cars following the protestors, TPF 2007, was stopped to take the bleeding victim to the hospital. The officer refused. Still dazed and bleeding, the demonstrator was forced to wait for a passing cab.

Shaken but having nothing else to do but to proceed to the protection of the bright lights of the Village, the march continued. Reaching Greenwich Avenue, the protestors were greeted by the street queens like soldiers coming home from battle. They shouted at the marchers, “Hiyah fallahs” and “Right on.” Propelled by a new burst of energy and success, the marchers continued, now joined by the Village’s three biggest commodities - the concerned, the curious, and the bored. Almost by accident they bumped into the Women’s House of Detention. Now the crowd had a symbol. The building was circled and the night filled with shouts of “Free our sisters, free ourselves.” The noise, the soft flashing of the patrol car lights, and the presence of the police signaled that something was up. A Saturday night crowd gathered around the action. Suddenly, from high atop the House of Detention, a shrill plea echoed down to the crowd, “Power to the people.” The assemblage cheered and applauded this virtuoso performance. Yet, against inexplicably, they moved on.

Heading toward Sheridan Square, the numbers of the crowd swelled. Aimlessly following the lights, the crowd bumped into a “fire inspection” of the Haven, a hang-out at 1 Sheridan Square. The area was filled with pretty people with too much time and too much money to know they are not going to be pretty much longer. Kids being raped by lethargy. This mixture of militants and the bored was a volatile one. Push once more came to shove as the cops tried to clear the area in front of the Haven. But this time they were not pushing some druggie from Westchester, but a veteran of a long and tiring march. This kid pushed back. Immediately the cops attacked, truncheons swinging, clearing the area. An arrest was made. No longer able to proceed, the marchers now regrouped by the Women’s House of Detention. Unwittingly, the cops had created allies and forced them to take a stand.

Outside the House of Detention the chanting continued. Again they were joined by the inmates’ shouting from the towers,” Freedom. Freedom.” Instantly, almost magically, like a giant fiery tear from heaven, a flaming paper bag drifted down from a high, barred window. This was followed by three more, flames burning brightly against the clear summer night. The crowd cheered at the spectacle. Almost unnoticed, more police arrived on the scene.

Clothed in the dual masks of darkness and numbers, someone imagined himself a heroic street guerrilla. A bottle crashed into a group of police, cutting a patrolman on the knee. The police charged, forcing most of the crowd into 8th Street. Arrests were made. A press photographer’s camera was smashed as he took a picture of the action. Again another police charge. The police racing into 8th Street, bodies wildly in motion. A detective in hippie clothes drags out a street queen who allegedly punched and knifed a patrolman.

The battle lines are drawn. Eighth Street has been liberated. An army propelled by the relentless energy that thinks every battle is the dawning of the long awaited war has taken possession of the street. About
40 TPF men wait across the Avenue of the Americas. The air is filled with tension; everyone knows that this Maginot Line will also be crossed. A volley of bottles is shelled upon the police. That is their signal. They charge. One heroic (crazy?) streetfighter rushes out to meet them, picking his man and felling him with a karate kick to the chin. But he is a one-punch fighter, impotent like a bee after the initial sting. His bag of tricks emptied, he is dragged by his hair across the Avenue of the Americas and into a police car.

Eighth Street is cleared. Police station themselves every few feet along the block. A trash barrel is popping out of a record store window, the window's contents, like the demonstrators, are gone. Once again there is a nervous calm.

Now a crowd has gathered on Greenwich Avenue and Christopher Street. A boy in a work shirt prances on the hood of a parked car, his fist raised in defiance. Again a barrage of bottles is thrown. A victim is singled out by the police as they charge. He is dragged into a doorway and punched by three TPF men. His long hair is darting wildly about his head as he cries in pain as the punishment continues.

By 2 a.m. the streets are nearly empty. Couples are strolling obliviously into Howard Johnson's for coffee. Cars rushing uptown continue to splinter the remains of broken bottles that litter the streets. From a window near the top of the House of Detention a solitary voice cries, "Powah. Powah." Heading uptown, I run into the black boy who had joined the march earlier in the night. He complains, "That sure was heavy. But I wish it didn't end so soon. I sure don't feel like going home."

(Source: news.google.com)  
Taken from http://gayflames.tumblr.com/