

TRANSADVOCATE

Interview With an Actual Stonewall Riot Veteran: The Ciswashing of Stonewall Must End!

By Cristan Williams

Published February 18, 2013 | Updated March 31, 2026

https://www.transadvocate.com/interview-with-an-actual-stonewall-riot-veteran-the-ciswashing-of-stonewall-must-end_n_8750.htm

Abstract

The POTUS noted Stonewall in his 2013 inaugural address: We the people declare today that the most evident of truth that all of us are created equal -- is the star that guides us still; just as it guided our forebears through Seneca Falls and Selma and Stonewall; just as it guided all those men and [...]

Article

The POTUS noted Stonewall in his 2013 inaugural address:

We the people declare today that the most evident of truth that all of us are created equal -- is the star that guides us still; just as it guided our forebears through Seneca Falls and Selma and Stonewall; just as it guided all those men and women, sung and unsung, who left footprints along this great mall, to hear a preacher say that we cannot walk alone; to hear a King proclaim that our individual freedom is inextricably bound to the freedom of every soul on Earth...

Our journey is not complete until our gay brothers and sisters are treated like anyone else under the law, for if we are truly created equal, then surely the love we commit to one another must be equal, as well.

Numerous media outlets recounted how the noble gays and lesbians fought that night - never mentioning trans folk... carrying on that long and painful tradition of ciswashing queer history - especially Stonewall history. I wrote about this phenomena over at TransAdvocate after NPR ran a piece recounting how middle-class white gay men were the real heroes of Stonewall. Kat has documented the ciswashing of Stonewall (and the equality movement which followed) well:

Not surprisingly, the white, gay, Mattachine Society member and author of *Homosexuality: A Research Guide* and the *Encyclopedia of Homosexuality* had the following to say about the role trans folk played at Stonewall:

A strange new myth has arisen about the origins of the gay movement. This myth, fervently endorsed by some trans activists, holds that the gay and lesbian movement was, essentially and pivotally, the work of their group, the transgender people. The transgender folk were in the vanguard, gay men and lesbians followed meekly after. This bizarre claim is the opposite of the truth.

Let us then be honest. If we are to speak of a “transgender” contribution we must restrict ourselves to drag queens. They were the only transgender folks around in those days. None of them in fact made a

major contribution to the movement.

- Wayne Dynes, 12/16/2009

Too often, the story of Stonewall is told by folks like Dynes (who was, incidentally, off touring Europe at the time of Stonewall). What follows is an interview given by an actual Stonewall veteran, Roy McCarthy.

I Survived Stonewall

To think that it has been 30 years since that night in June that all this has happened... We've made a lot of progress. but there's a lot more to be made. The fight continues on -- and I'm right out there!

Opening Night

I had a most unusual beginning -- an initiation to the riots. I was asleep! I was across the street... my childhood sweetheart was fixing to start his first year at Columbia University -- he was a psych major. I was spending the summer with him, and I was upstairs in his apartment - sound asleep; and his apartment was right across the street from Stonewall Inn. He comes running upstairs saying "Roy! Roy! The queens are rioting across the street! The queens are rioting!"

So I go running down, following him.... By the time we got down there, the paddy wagon had just pulled up. The queens were just starting to come out and someone had just thrown a high heel. There may have been coins or whatever, but I was there within a couple minutes after the festivities started. I did see high heels flying! The queens -- the transgenders or the crossdressers -- were yelling something from across the street by the paddy wagon; they were yelling at the cops. We were cheering on the transgenders -- the crossdressers -- it just sort of snowballed from there.

Setting the Stage...

You gotta understand... where everybody's head politically was at that time. We're talking late 60s -- 1969. We're talking about a period of time when it was not only okay, but fashionable to riot against authority thanks to the Vietnam War, and... to the Civil Rights riots a year before. [and when] Bobby Kennedy and Martin Luther King were assassinated -- we had rioting in the streets. We were rioting and protesting the Vietnam War all along, and we had Moratorium Day every October in the 60s -- I think it was around October 17, somewhere around the middle of October. We would have the anti-Vietnam War Moratorium march, which almost always turned into rioting. Later on in the summer of '69 we also had Woodstock.

In the gay community -- now when I talk about the gay community, people have to understand I'm not talking about male homosexuals. I am old school: and when I talk about gay community, the transgenders were a part of it. We never ever considered them not! Bisexuals, crossdressers, were never ever not considered a part of it! We were all gay! I'm kind of sad that all this division and fracturization is come about.

Back then in the gay community, we were kinda pissed off that everyone else was getting their civil rights and we weren't. We were tired of the police busting in and dragging us out just because we were out there to have a good time.

And even the crossdressers were pissed off because by law they had to have at least three articles of clothing on them that were according to their birth gender. That all these things set up to... guarantee that we would have a record. They would tell us to go across the street, and we would follow the police orders; and there would be another cop across the street waiting to give us a ticket for jaywalking. We were tired of gay people being locked up in psychiatric hospitals and getting tortured! We had our own Auschwitzes and Dachaus! And we were just pissed off about all of that! And it had to end!

It was obvious with the paddy wagon there they were just doing another one of their Saturday night raids. It was hot and it was humid that night, and none of us were really in the best of moods that night. We had just buried Judy Garland that day in Forest Lawn out in Hollywood -- our icon! We were kinda pissed off.

The First Acts

At first the cops cleared out Stonewall Inn. Those that weren't gonna get loaded up in the paddy wagons, the cops were telling them to go home. We started taunting the cops, and... they saw the crowd that was starting to gather. The crowd this time was getting bigger and bigger and we started pressing in on the police, and they got scared. They took refuge inside the Stonewall Inn, and barricaded themselves inside. It was after that that somebody had pulled up a parking meter outside there from Christopher Street and smashed in a window.

I got by one of the police cars -- the NYPD patrol cars -- and I was at the back and I start shaking up and down on the back. Then we started rocking it from side to side, up and down from the front and back, see-sawing the front and back and rocking it from side to side. Next thing... we ended up turning it over on its roof. We crushed its little 'bubble-gum machine' it had on top. By now there was a huge crowd, and somebody somewhere had tossed a Molotov cocktail, and I helped set the cop car on fire. By this time it was only 20 minutes from the time I first arrived down there... And there was a huge crowd!

The Emotion

Back then I wasn't as big as I am now -- I was 5'-7'', about 130 lbs. I was a 19-year-old male prostitute. In '69, I was a prostitute; because I'd been kicked out of home and I was living on the streets and I had to survive. The Stonewall Inn was made up of the dregs of the community. Transgenders and transsexuals were not allowed in many of the gay clubs. And the Stonewall Inn was mostly prostitutes and drug addicts, and drag queens and transgenders. It was not your respectable gay club.

But it was those of us who had nothing to lose, and stood up, and everybody joined in afterwards. We were all very tight-knit very tight-knit. It wasn't like we were giving verbal support to the queens who were getting locked up in the paddy wagon. It wasn't just some sort of spectator thing like at a football game -- this was something from our heart, deep down inside.

The Climactic Scene

By this time we could hear cop cars coming like crazy from every which direction, and riot police were showing up. I was looking around for my boyfriend, my lover. I saw there was this leather-jacketed, NYPD motorcycle cop who had my boyfriend in a headlock. Now my boyfriend was wearing these John

Lennon granny glasses which was very popular at the time. And [the cop] had him in a headlock with his baton hitting him in the face with the bottom end of the baton, and blood was coming from my boyfriend's face. He was my first love, puppy love, fierce love.

I lost my mental capacity for reason. I jumped on the back of that cop and I took the baton from that cop and - with some strength from somewhere - the adrenaline got me going where I was able to take the baton out of the cop's hand and I was beating cop. I know I got about three or four hits on the guy and the next thing I knew - bang, I'm seeing stars I'm on the ground! Then there's blood coming all down my face, on the left side! A cop on horseback came up behind me and whacked me in the head with his nightstick. That was one of the TPF - Tactical Patrol Force. This was before there was such thing as a SWAT unit. They used Tactical Patrol, and they were on horseback, and they used those police to disperse riots and...that's what they did on me, and I was really bloodied. A piece of my skull got chipped off and wound up on Christopher Street. To this day I've got a place in my head where a piece of my skull is missing - a little chip off the old block!

Salvation During Battle

It was four transgendered people who saved my butt! At the time they were called crossdressers as opposed to drag queens. Drag Queen was a regular guy - gay or straight - who dressed up as a woman to perform a show. Crossdressers - or transgenders as now - were 24 hrs. Transvestite would dress up to go out to a club, be they were not necessarily performers...they would just dress up to go out to a club,

There was like one on each arm. my arms and my legs, and then they carried me down to a basement place where they helped patch me up. There was some tear gas that had been shot at us, and in fact one of the canisters...I do remember the canister going off not five, six feet in front of me when I was out on the street. I got a full face, full throttle... I told the transgendered person "get a bucket of water... and just dump it on top of me." That's the best first aid [for tear gas]: a bucket of water.

The rioting went on for about three days. I never was able to find my boyfriend until after...later on the next week I found out that a piece of glass from his eyeglasses... got punctured in thought the eye and lodged in the brain. He is now in a psychiatric hospital up in Maine. [He's] beyond repair. His parents refused to bring charges against the police at the time because they said 'this was God's judgment upon us.'

In fact no charges were ever brought against any of the demonstrators. We were all originally arrested and charged with drunk, and rioting, and disorderly conduct and all that. But Mayor John Lindsay... stepped in and ordered that charges not be brought against any of us, and we were all released. When I say 'we,' I mean the other people - I was never in jail myself.

Antagonists Within

To this day I have no affection for Harry Hay and the Mattachine Society. To have us arrested, and to tell us to "Quiet down! Don't rock the boat!" I'm sorry! I try to be inclusive, and I know there are other issues that people care about. But basic fundamental of the right to be, and the right to love who I feel attracted to is basic and most important and overriding of everything else. The Mattachine Society was afraid that if we rioted, we were going to throw the clock back 20 years - if that was possible!

The Mattachine Society is equivalent to our modern-day Log Cabiners. The Mattachine Society was a group of self-hating, self-loathing gay folks who felt that we were all emotionally underdeveloped or something - sub-human in some way. These were a bunch of yellow-bellied cowards who were frightened in little comers, who didn't want us to upset the apple cart. Who thought at that time that if we didn't create any kind of a mess... if we just did things quietly and applied for disability - let the psychiatric people say we did not develop emotionally enough or psychologically, that there was something wrong with us mentally or emotionally because we loved people of the same sex or the same gender... or because someone who was a male and always identified as a female wanted to really pursue that. Obviously, that person was wacked-out. And it was just as strong with transsexual, transgender people.

Sexual [Reassignment] Surgery was started in the 50s or something, it was not new by the time the riot came around. However, there was a lot of kids who were sexually trying to [reassign] themselves in back rooms and hallways because of fear... and because there was just nowhere else for them to go. However, thanks to the Mattachine Society telling everybody we're sick, we're mentally ill - that was hard enough for gay people... but for transgendered and transsexuals, where could they turn to? Avenues of positive help were not open, even though they did exist. And guys who wanted to be female had nowhere to turn. They felt so disgusted with themselves, they tried to sexually [assign] themselves with a razor blade and clean towels and a needle and thread. It just did not work! This was the same period of time when abortions were still illegal, and many women were getting it in back alleys and the butcher shops. A lot of guys hemorrhaged to death in their bathrooms and died in back alleys...

And the Mattachine Society wanted us to stay that way. I think it's also important to understand that most of the people in the Mattachine Society were middle-class, and upper-middle and upper-class people economically. So they had a lot to lose, and they saw us as a threat. The Log Cabin is in essence, the modern day Mattachines. The Mattachine Society did not speak for the gay community. Just like the Log Cabin does not speak for the transgender community. They never have, and they never will.

The Closing Act

For the next two nights there was rioting going on. Yeah. I was there! I was out there. bandaged-up head and all... just screaming along with everyone else. We were just a big mob in the street... and there was this park - I think it was Washington Park... right there at the end of Christopher Street - right there at the end of three days was born the Gay Liberation Front. Of course, everything back in those days was called the Liberation Front! You know, we were all Liberation Fronts. And so, before there was a Gay Political Caucus there was a Gay Liberation Front.

And in those early days - I shouldn't just say transgender inclusive because nobody was excluded - the whole thing of Gay Pride Parade and everything... of that night... was started by, was all about the transgenders! Gay people - gay males - we joined in. But it was started by transgenders. Now even though we joined in within five or ten minutes. it was still five or ten minutes later! We joined in... it's important for people to understand. To join in means somebody else was already there. And that was the transgenders. Somebody said it was a brick - I say it was a high heeled shoe, who knows if it was a pump or a brick...or a pumped-up brick? It was called "The Hairpin Drop Heard 'Round The World." That's how CBS News covered it, and ABC News covered it, and it was in Time Magazine... "The Hairpin Drop Heard 'Round The World" - I guess that was the first Gay Pride slogan!

Final Memories

My favorite memory is the moment I first went out the door, and I saw the queens and the transgenders being loaded up in the paddy wagon and somebody - finally - threw a high heel! It was that moment - it was such a liberating moment inside, it was so freeing! It felt so good - finally, we're not taking this shit no more! Pardon my French! We weren't going to take it anymore! No more! Over! This is it! No Más!

I have heard. that people went around to a bunch of different gay clubs... saying "Out of the clubs, into the streets!" Or "Out of the bars, into the streets!" I think that's what somebody told me was being said. I mean. I don't know because I was already in the street! That was the defining moment.

It feels special in some ways, and in other ways, it feels like an accident of history. Thirty years later, I am so saddened by knowing where the community is at now; in which transgenders and transsexuals - in many cities - are excluded from the Pride Parade. Many transgendered and many gay people do not know the role that transgenders [played]; how important.... We would not have Gay Pride Parade if it was not for the transgenders. We would not have Gay Pride Week! We probably wouldn't have this show (After Hours Radio, 90.1 KPFT). Everything had its birth with transgenders and transsexuals finally standing up!

Some people call Harry Hay (founder of the Mattachine Society) one of the 'great founders.' He was the founder of nothing! If anything he held us back! And to tell us "Don't make waves...!" Well just remember this: if you don't make waves, you ain't going nowhere! And we had to go somewhere, because this could not continue. The hypocrisy of it all was really astounding. Which is why, for thirty years, I have always been there for the transgendered people because quite literally, you saved my butt! And helped patch me up!



Figure 1. Stonewall instigators Silvia Rivera (far left) and Marsha Johnson (with umbrella) protesting for 475 - a comprehensive LGBT rights bill - which followed the Stonewall Riot in 1971 and 1972.

By 1973, trans folk had been fighting the LGBT's legal battle in the courts for more than 3 years. After 475 failed to pass, the following occurred:

After a three-and-a-half-year battle, a bill to ban discrimination against homosexuals in employment, housing, and public accommodations was voted out of New York's City Council's General Welfare Committee.

The measure won approval of seven of the eight committee members on hand after an amendment was approved relating to transvestites. This was the fifth attempt to get the bill out of committee. The amendment stated that nothing in the definition of sexual orientation "shall be construed to bear upon the standards of attire or dress code." The amendment was key to committee passage and the wording had been worked out carefully by Theodor S. Weiss and Carter Burden.

Bebe Scarpie, Director of Queens Liberation Front, met at City Hall with the sponsors and QLF's attorney, Richard Levidow, a week prior to the voting on the bill. Ms. Scarpie and attorney Levidow submitted to the above wording as an alternative to getting the bill passed. The clause, according to Mr. Levidow is unconstitutional and won't hold up in court because of the "equal rights" protection of the US Constitution. "QLF gave in on being included in this piece of legislation because politicians were using the transvestite as a 'scapegoat' for not passing the bill," says Lee Brewster, former director and founder of QLF.

Queens Liberation Front won't issue a formal statement on the bill until it is either passed or defeated, which looks possible as we go to press.

- Drag Magazine, 1973

And thus did the trans community fall on its own sword so that the gay community could enjoy a little equality. And so began a long and painful tradition of the cisgender GLB community throwing trans folk (of any and all stripes) under the bus, year after painful year.

NOTES:

- Interview with Roy McCarthy by Vanessa Edwards Foster for the Texas Association for Transsexual Support (TATS), July 1999
- This interview comes from the Transgender Archives in Houston, Texas.

Suggested citation

Cristan Williams. "Interview With an Actual Stonewall Riot Veteran: The Ciswashing of Stonewall Must End!." TransAdvocate, February 18, 2013.

https://www.transadvocate.com/interview-with-an-actual-stonewall-riot-veteran-the-ciswashing-of-stonewall-must-end_n_8750.htm