

# A brief history of the Gay Liberation Front, 1970-73



A short account of the GLF in the UK which, while we disagree with some of it, contains interesting historical information.

On the 27th June, 1969 as part of its policy of raiding and closing Gay Bars, the New York Police arrived at the Stonewall Inn to rough up the customers and make a few arrests. New York's finest encountered black and white drag queens, gay men and lesbians, sick of police brutality, and who on being physically provoked fought back. The fighting spread out of the doors and onto the streets and as police reinforcements were called in became a riot that spread throughout the West Village, and continued for three nights in a row. On the 4th July Lesbians and Gay Men from the Matachine Society New York, in response to the riots, staged a walk-out and moved to the Alternative University in Greenwich Village where they founded what became the Gay Liberation Front.

Aubrey Walter and Bob Mellor founded the Gay Liberation Front in London, on 13th October, 1970 at the L.S.E. where Bob was a student. Aubrey and Bob had independently been hanging out in New York GLF that summer and met for the first time at the "Revolutionary Peoples Constitutional Convention" in Philadelphia, called by the Black Panther Party. "Not only did liberationists go to Philadelphia to show solidarity with the black movement, but it was there that Huey Newton as leader of the Panthers, first gave clear support of the Gay Cause, saying that homosexuals were maybe the most oppressed people of American society, and could well be the most revolutionary."<sup>1</sup> Aubrey also visited San Francisco where, "I met Konstantin Berlandt who had dragged up (in a red sequin dress and

long blonde wig) to disrupt the American Psychiatrists Convention, and I stayed in his commune. The stuff around the Convention was seminal and it's important to remember that most of the ideology of GLF came from the West Coast Groups, not from New York".<sup>2</sup>

On 13th November, GLF made the first ever, public demonstration in the UK by lesbians and gay men at Highbury Fields, Islington, to protest the use of "pretty policemen" agent provocateurs used by the police to entrap gay men into attempting acts of gross indecency, a standard police practice and an easy way for them to increase the figures for crime detection and prosecution.

A Media Group was established which produced the GLF Newspaper 'Come Together', which ran to sixteen editions. An Anti-Psychiatry Group focused on analysing and attacking the Psychiatric Establishments wholesale acceptance of Judeo Christian prejudice, Biblical authority, and the use of electric shock/emetic drug programmes on gays and lesbians who did not fit in, or who were found guilty of breaking the law. Also formed were A Women's Group, a Street Theatre Group, a Communes Group, The Youth Group for the under 21s fighting for a reduction in the age of consent.

An Action Group organising public GLF dances held in local town halls, and later the Gay Days in the parks, an Office Collective, and the Steering Group, later the Co-ordinating Committee to run the Wednesday night General Meetings.

In December the GLF Demands & Principles were agreed on, and in October of '71 the publication of the GLF Manifesto. "Gay shows the way. In some ways we are already outside the family and we have already, in part at least, rejected the 'masculine' or 'feminine' role society has designed for us. In a society dominated by the sexist culture it is very difficult, if not impossible, for heterosexual men and women to escape their rigid gender-role structuring and the roles of oppressor and oppressed. But gay men don't need to oppress women in order to fulfil their own psycho-sexual needs, and gay women don't have to relate sexually to the male oppressor, so that at this moment in time, the freest and most equal relationships are most likely to be between homosexuals."<sup>3</sup>

In all about a hundred gay men and lesbians were active in the various GLF Groups, while by mid-January, '71 there were up to five hundred people a week attending the General Meeting, which suggests that many thousands of gay men and lesbians passed through the doors.

Think Ins, the first of which was held in January, established the structure or deliberate lack of structure and the aims of the movement. There were three rules made.

1. No-one could serve on the Steering Committee for more than two months.
2. Heterosexuals could not serve on the Steering Committee
3. No one could serve on the office collective for more than three months.

GLF marched with the protest against The Industrial Relations Bill and later with the Anti-Internment in Northern Ireland demos relegated by trade unionists and the straight left to the back of the marches.

The women demonstrated against the anti-Gay Lib policy of the 'Gateways Club' and Red Lesbians attacked the Stock Exchange. There was a long campaign against Pan Books, publishers of Dr. David Reuben's book, "Everything you wanted to know about sex – but were afraid to ask", which claimed to tell candid facts whilst avoiding moral judgement and in the sections on gays and lesbians contained references to light bulbs, cucumbers, and the use of wire coat hangers for abortions.

Another major campaign resulted in the defeat of the fundamentalist Christian group the Festival of Light, which disbanded after its inaugural rally was completely disrupted with the help of the Counter-Culture readers of the Underground Press, led and organised by GLF.

When GLF moved to All Saints Church Hall, Notting Hill Police warned Pub landlords in the area not to serve anyone wearing a GLF Badge. This led to confrontations with the police and a successful campaign of sit-ins involving the police having to individually read people their rights, before individually lifting them up and depositing them outside the public house. The police ceased their harassment.

In August there was a Gay Day in Hyde Park followed by a march to Trafalgar Square led by the Ginger Baker Band and organised by the Youth Group. In July '72 the first Gay Pride march left Trafalgar Square and marched to Hyde Park for the Gay Pride Party, with over a thousand in attendance, and accompanied by two thousand police. Consistent demonstrations against the psychiatric establishment and raids on their conferences where GLF took over the agenda eventually led to the overthrow of the idea that homosexuality was a medical condition.

The Women's Group after many attempts and rebuffs in trying to join women's liberation, in October '71 attended The Women's Liberation National Co-ordinating Conference in Skegness. The GLF lesbians were told, by the male dominated wing of women's lib, that they were a bourgeois deviation. The GLF women seized the microphone and led a grass roots revolt that transformed the whole conference and finally placed lesbianism on the agenda of feminists.

At the end of '71 serious splits were occurring between the men who saw 'coming out' as only the first step in the transformation of gay men and the second the confrontation with the social ideals of masculinity, and sexism, whilst following the Manifesto aim of moving toward communal living. They had also turned up the volume by appearing in drag as men in frock and being unmistakably gay.

Opposing them were the men who ignored the Manifesto, refused to acknowledge their heterosexist qualities, were learning to campaign on single issues, but needed, as straight men do, an organised structure in which to operate, one that gay lib was deliberately designed not to provide. These gay men were not interested in communal works, but in promoting their individual selves on the back of issues and campaigns that GLF either pursued or generated in its opponents. They were known as the 'straight gays.'

In November '71 Camden GLF was formed in response to the large unwieldy numbers and the cruising going on at the Wednesday meetings, and also as a process of localising GLF and bringing awareness into the local community as a whole. This new trend produced East London, South London and Notting Hill GLF Groups. In February '72 the women formally split from gay lib. Overwhelmed in numbers and ignored by gay men generally, they decided to work separately.

This event led to the movement becoming polarised between the two male factions. In June came the first issue of 'Gay News' published by a group containing many 'straight gays' from the GLF Action Group, and immediately laid down a format for saving the nation from the screaming red queens and faggots of gay lib.<sup>4</sup> The situation dominated the All London Weekly General Meetings to the exclusion of much else, so it was changed to a monthly affair, which petered out into an empty, sentimental attempt to regain its former glory.

The Office Collective had been neglected and had turned into an Administration by supporters of 'Gay News' and those who liked to be near the exchanges of information and money. Some of its members had never been to a General Meeting; didn't think that was of

any importance. Nobody could obtain the date, location or the correct telephone number of the weekly Office Collective Meeting, either to give out information or obtain it.

In October '73 the drag queens of the Bethnal Rouge Bookshop Collective put a stop to that by raiding the office and taking the files to their own premises. 'Gay News' responded with lies and vitriol based on the commonplace that drag queens equals violence.<sup>5</sup> At the last GLF Think In at Sussex in November '73 Bethnal Rouge was exonerated by GLF Manchester and GLF Leeds, for putting an end to the rule of the Office Collective.<sup>6</sup> By the end of the year GLF had collapsed.

Identified and stereotyped nationally by 'Gay News', Bethnal Rouge in February '74 appeared by invitation at Goldsmith College Gay Soc to give a Pre-Disco talk. They were dressed for the occasion in their best Disco Diva Drag. Whilst enjoying a pre-talk drink they were attacked by Group 4 Total Security and badly beaten up whilst Lewisham police were called and told by the same security guards that Bethnal Rouge had come to the disco to cause trouble. One queen needed hospital treatment; another who was head butted lost two front teeth. One was arrested and later that night thrown through a glass door in the police station. The rest escaped.

Out of London GLF came FAHR Paris, and through Mario Mieli, FUORI! in Italy. From the Anti-Psychiatry Group came Icebreakers. There was Gay Switchboard, Bethnal Rouge, The Brixton Faeries, Gay Men's Press from the Media Group, and the world-renowned theatre troupe 'Bloodlips' from the Street Theatre Group. The campaigning groups Stonewall and Outrage! developed from the same root. One of the great legacies of GLF was that when HIV/Aids was identified there already existed groups, and networks of individuals who had been part of, or been touched by, the forever ongoing sexual revolution begun by the Gay Liberation Front. By the example of GLF the new activists in HIV/Aids were able to immediately challenge the attitudes towards gays of the medical orthodoxy and quickly took over the entire culture surrounding the pandemic.

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### **Footnotes**

- [1.](#) Come Together – The Years of Gay Liberation 1970-73. Edited & Introduced by Aubrey Walter. Gay Men's Press, London, 1980. p10. Quoting "A letter from Huey." Len Richmond and Gary Noguera (eds). The Gay Liberation Book. San Francisco, 1973. pp42-45.
- [2.](#) No Bath but Plenty of Bubbles. Lisa Power. Cassell. 1995 p.7. (Aubrey Walter)
- [3.](#) GLF Manifesto. 1971
- [4.](#) Gay News # 2. Editorial.
- [5.](#) Gay News # 34. Editorial. Radical Fascism. Also, Coming Together~Coming To Blows. P.4
- [6.](#) Gay News # 35. Beside the Seaside. Discussion of the GLF London Office is not reported. The Manchester GLF Group led the discussion and accepted the Bethnal Rouge version of events. Gay News claims non-Londoners were irritated by the subject and states that "(as) someone from Leeds put it: "GLF isn't just about London GLF."