

T-Notes

by Robbi Cohn . Contributing Writer
Déjà vu all over again

The "hairpin drop heard round the world" — that is how New York's Mattachine Society, and others, 40 years ago described the June 28, 1969, events at Stonewall, a gay and queen bar in the heart of Greenwich Village.

The name "Stonewall" has come to symbolize the beginning of gay activism and, in fact, spawned the Gay Liberation Front (GLF). In actuality, however, Stonewall was not the first encounter between persons we now describe as gender diverse and the authorities/status quo. Dewey's Lunch Counter in Philadelphia and Compton's Cafeteria in San Francisco both saw incidents wherein drag queens — or transvestites, as they were often termed in the vernacular of the '60s — were at odds with management and the local police. Dewey's occurred in 1965 and was more or less subdued; Compton's in 1966, on the other hand, has been described as more violent. Both predated Stonewall by better than three years. And, both were organized by individuals who violated normative gender presentation, as was the case with Stonewall.

There have been divergent accounts of what actually happened at Stonewall: who did what and who should be credited with the riots and their historic place as a "watershed" event?

Postulated as protagonists were queens, gays, lesbians, or, all the above. Because there has been "friction" between the trans commu-



nity and those who espouse a Human Rights Campaign paradigm, the record bears re-examination. This friction is not new. Seeds had been planted early on after assimilationist-oriented

Mattachine made efforts to marginalize Sylvia Rivera, Marsha Johnson and others during the first annual Christopher Street Reminders commemorating Stonewall.

The rest of the history has been marked by alternating carrots and sticks delivered from well-organized and well-funded gay activists to trans folk whose efforts to organize were never even modestly funded. The latest carrot was Joe Solmonese's address at the Southern Comfort Convention in September 2007. The latest stick was the subsequent ditching of trans inclusivity in ENDA voting in October 2007.

At the heart of the 1960s conflicts — Dewey's, Compton's and Stonewall — was the matter of gender transgression. At the heart of the friction between Mattachine and New York City queens, as well as between HRC and modern trans-activists, was and is the same issue. And, this was generally the modus operandus the authorities used to raid gay bars and attack non-normative gender expression back in the 1960s. Remember, this was a time of a burgeoning counter-culture, a loosening of sexual mores and the presentation of a new paradigm. Peace and Love. Drugs, Sex and Rock and Roll. And, Gender Diversity.

The predominantly conservative generation — the parents and grandparents of the Sexual Revolution's proponents — saw their

world crumbling around them. Laws were either enacted or resurrected to keep this groundswell from spreading and gender transgressors were summarily arrested and bullied by the police. One of these laws, extant in New York City, as well as similar ordinances in many other metropolitan centers, required persons to be wearing at least three garments common to their birth genders. Violation of this proviso meant arrest for disturbing the peace and a few other statutes, and a night in jail in the "transvestite" tank.

The summer of 1969 was one of social upheaval: Vietnam protests, racial tension; hippies, black panthers, weathermen and feminists all calling attention to societal inequities. Upon pressure from party heavies, and contrary to what the gay community expected, liberal Republican Mayor John Lindsay allowed police inspector Seymour Pine unfettered power to subdue the gay and queen community, specifically the mafia-run bars, using as pretext the so-called "three item clothing" ordinance, as well as the absence of liquor licenses by gangland owners.

Stonewall was raided more than once, as were other bars. Stonewall was a favorite, however, and a "perfect storm" was brewing: An era of dramatically changing values meets a stubborn status quo in a politically and culturally charged New York City during the extraordinary heat wave that had taken control that summer.

A Mattachine mindset which emphasized assimilation mirrored the cultural myopia espoused by the status quo. Both refused to rec-

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