

Average Joe: a phoenix rising

Bears in gay culture yearn for wider cultural change
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It was the spring of 2008. I'd just moved to Charlotte a few months prior, to take my role as editor at this publication. Through the fall of 2007 and the following winter, new friends introduced me to the area's nightlife scene: Scorpio and, at the time, Liaisons and Velocity.

But, I didn't dare venture to the Charlotte Eagle, and definitely not alone. On this night, all that changed: My friends dragged me nearly kicking and screaming into the club.

"My god," I exclaimed to my friends. "I'll get eaten alive."

My remark then, so obviously ignorant and overwhelmingly shallow, exposed my lack of knowledge of and exposure to many portions of my own community, in particular the bear, leather and Levi communities. Surprisingly, by the end of the night I'd adjusted, become more at ease and left feeling more comfortable there than I had in any other gay nightclub in town. I'd spend a great many nights at the Eagle. Simple trips out for fun. Southern Country Charlotte's monthly barn dances and the annual Queen City Stomp. Eventually, it became one of my favorite watering holes.

The Eagle is now closed, and my forays into the leather, Levi and bear communities are limited mostly to close friends who happen to identify as such or in interactions with their friends at cook outs, during my

their covers or businesses choose to put in their ads, and talk about what it means to be a bear or a leatherman is few and far between.

Tor Froland and Marc McFarland are the "unofficial, official" organizers of the Charlotte Bear Dinner group, a non-member social group that gets together at least once a month for dinner and sometimes more often for special hiking trips, outings to Carowinds or other around-town amusements.

McFarland says the group was formed out of frustration with the internal politics that can naturally develop inside any organized community group. There are plenty of bear organizations — the largest is the Carolina Bear Lodge; with chapters (or "dens") across both North and South Carolina. Dinner group member Jake Absher says he rarely gets involved in any community group, save the small part he played in volunteering for Hickory's Catawba Valley Pride in October.

Froland and McFarland explain that identifying as a bear is more than a mere classification of one's sexual identity, desires or attractions. Like race, gender or sexual orientation, identifying as a bear can also be symbolic of one's personality, social relationships and even world view. Froland and McFarland identify chiefly as "regular guys," or "the Average Joe."

But the stereotypes about bears — stereotypes, and dare I say prejudices, I once held — make it hard for people who identify as such to exist in the wider, so-called mainstream gay culture.

"Typically I think people associate the typical gay man as being fit, trim and boyish, which leaves a lot of people out," McFarland says. "You don't get looked as much as if you're a little overweight or have too much body hair."

The two say these preconceived notions plague bears,

including ideas that bears are lazy or unhealthy. Froland says some even consider bears uneducated.

"That exists because of our body type," Froland says, cautioning that it isn't always true. "I think we have more educated people at our dinners than a lot of other groups."

I asked Jeff Reeves, a former president of the Carolina Bear Lodge and owner of Hickory's Club Cabaret, if he thought the existence of a separate bear community constituted a counter- rather than a sub-culture or simple awareness of differences with the larger LGBT community.

"I think maybe a little of both," he says. "It's about being yourself. The fact that I'm a hairy man, and I'm not a twink by any means. I'm able to express myself with like-minded in-

dividuals, be able to be seen in public with the hair on my face or the way I carry myself."

Making commentary on mainstream gay culture, Reeves adds, "I think they could learn a huge lesson from the humility of leather and bear folks."

Froland and McFarland don't believe in that same "counter-culture" concept. Neither have ever experienced all that much rejection from larger gay society.

"You're only excluded if you put yourself into a situation where can feel excluded," McFarland says. "If you know where you like to hang out, who you like to hang out with, you're never going to feel like you're being excluded."

But when it comes to the larger American culture — specifically media culture — McFarland, Froland and Reeves all agree: something needs to change.

As a journalist, I'm constantly surrounded by media images. At times, it's too much to bear — no pun intended. There are too many "beautiful" cover models. Too many skinny boys and girls. Sometimes it begs the question, "Do real people look like that?" If your photographer has Photoshop, yes they do.

Froland welcomes the new trends in female modeling popping up in magazines and TV. "Something that's taken off most recently is plus-sized models," he says. "You're no longer looking at anorexic girls. Now you're getting plus-sized women models."

And while the same trend hasn't yet caught the same steam in male modeling, that too is changing bit-by-bit.

The New York Times recently profiled such changes in male modeling. Their October article, "From Boys to Men," gathered together the ideas and opinions of the male fashion world's top designers and trend-setters.

"It has been almost a decade since Hedi Slimane, then the designer for Dior men's wear, jump-started an aesthetic shift away from stiffly traditional male images that long dominated men's fashion," *Times* writer Guy Trebay reported in the paper's Oct. 17 Sunday edition. "Since then, season after season, designers, editors and photographers alike fell into unconscious lockstep with Mr. Slimane's tastes in men. ... On catwalks and in advertising campaigns the prevalent male image has long been that of skinny skate-rat, a juvenile with pipe-cleaner proportions. Designers as unlike as Raf Simons and Miuccia Prada developed so pronounced an appetite for the jailbait type that at some model castings in Milan and Paris the new faces often showed up chaperoned by Mom."

The article isn't Trebay's first profile on male modeling trends. In 2009, he delved into the same issue, practically blaming the



Bears are sometimes the epitome of 'blue collar' and 'Average Joe.' That traditional, rough-and-tumble look might just be seeing a comeback.

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V Man and *Details* are just two mags moving away from old modeling trends depicting young, slim boys to older, more mature and weathered men.

very rare visits to The Woodshed, in coffee houses, community gatherings or elsewhere. So, it was refreshing to have the opportunity to meet with three bears at Caribou Coffee on Charlotte's East Blvd. recently. Although no longer new to these particular communities, I readily admit I still don't know nearly enough about them as I should. It's one of the reasons I decided to undertake this feature and jotted it into our editorial calendar over a year ago. Secondly, I have a sense a great many gay folk also don't know much about leather, Levi or bear communities. They certainly aren't the trim, trendy guys most gay publications put on

skinny-boy modeling phenomenon for what authors Harrison Pope, Katharine Phillips and Roberto Olivardia call a "secret crisis of male body obsession" — the Adonis Complex.

That's not news to McFarland. In fact, it's quite obvious.

"A lot of people aren't comfortable with themselves in America," McFarland believes. "They hang on to these ideas — these really skinny or built or clean shaven images — because maybe they don't like how they look. If people were more comfortable with themselves maybe they could let that go."

But in his most recent article, Trebay reports fascinating changes.

"The twink thing seems over," *GQ* editor Jim Nelson told the *Times* fashion writer. "When people open *GQ*, I don't want them to feel like they're looking at clothes on 16-year-olds."

Male-targeted advertisers, movie producers and magazines are falling in line. *V Man*, which long played to the prevailing trends of youth and slenderness, has even broken out of the mold. Their latest issue — entitled "Coming of Age" — kicks the skinny skateboarder to the curb. In his place steps the slightly-weathered, mustache-and-goatee-clad, 44-year-old Josh Brolin.

For Reeves, it's a welcome change away from the day of the "pretty, twink runway model."

"All these years, we've been pushed aside and to the back corner," he says. "In 1984, I was a skinny man but I grew up and my body developed. My dad and my uncles, they are bears. They go hunting. They have beards and goatees. It's good to see we're being more appreciated now than we used to be." ::