

The Revolution Of The Clones: Talking With John Preston

Interview, in two parts, by Eric Rofes

I had admired the writings of John Preston since I began reading his stories and articles in *Drummer* magazine about four years ago. Preston's insight into gay male sexuality is reminiscent of several gay writers popular in the 1960's and 1970's. These writers, including Phil Andros (pen name of Sam Steward) and Larry Townsend, have created erotic fiction (pornography, if you will) that is distinct from much of the fiction produced in this genre. They depict gay men who are neither victims nor heroes, but relatively ordinary men who are making conscious and considered choices.

Preston has developed an attitude towards gay male sexuality that is currently being discussed under the rubric of "Sex-Positive Politics." It asserts that consensual sexuality between men is a positive experience. In his fiction, Preston's protagonists run the gamut from Jamie, the novice bottom man who finds himself entering an intense S&M relationship in *Mr. Benson*, to Franny, the Queen of Provincetown, the endearing and powerful drag queen in Preston's latest work of fiction. These characters relate in varied ways to issues of masculinity, power, and liberation, but they all share the ability to make difficult choices concerning their sexuality and their identities as gay men, and to feel strengthened by their decisions.

Born and raised in Medfield, a suburb of Boston, Preston left New England to go to college in Chicago. Since then, he has lived the life of gay nomad, moving from Chicago to Minneapolis to New York to Los Angeles to San Francisco and back to Manhattan. During his wandering days, Preston was a gay activist (Minneapolis, 1970-73, where he was founder and co-director of Gay House, the gay community center), an editor (at the *Advocate* and *Drummer*), and S&M "expert." Recently, he very deliberately returned to New England and settled in Portland, Maine, where he works as a writer. ("Life in the Provinces," Preston's article on non-urban gay life, appeared in *The Front Page*, Vol.4, No.10.)

Preston's "Goodbye, Sally Gearhart: Gay Men and Feminists Have Reached a Fork in the Road" (excerpts appeared in *TFP*, Vol.3, No.18), attracted considerable

attention. The article, which first appeared in *Christopher Street* and is reprinted in the recent *Christopher Street Reader*, focused on feminist response to pornography, adult bookstores, and gay male sexuality in Portland, Maine. While it is impossible to summarize this complex and lengthy article, its meaning emerges in this excerpt:

"The expression of gay male sexuality is evidently experienced by women as the expression of the same male sexuality which leads to rape. That misconception is not our problem. If women cannot distinguish among the elemental components of gay male sexuality—a force attempting to make men equals, a process dependent upon consent, a celebration of the male body which is not dependent upon the denigration of the female body—it is their perception that is at fault, not our behavior. If the viewing of gay male lust is repulsive to women because they cannot separate it from the lust of heterosexual males whose goal is the subjugation of women, it is not our responsibility to erase that view; it is women's responsibility to deal with the fears that entrap them."

I met with Preston shortly after the article appeared and discussed the basis for his analysis, which very much rests on his belief in the value of what he terms the "revolution of the clone."

ER:When you call the clone the "gay everyman," how are you defining the clone?

JP:The clone is any gay man who wears an identifiable costume for a majority of his day. The category obviously includes the resident of the West Village in New York or the Castro in San Francisco. It also includes men in smaller cities, including Portland. They aren't conscious of the costuming, necessarily. More, it's their attitude. It's the person who is living a gay life without a burden of guilt, and the primary arena of this man's life is gay life and he is conscious of it.

ER:A lot of men live a gay life, but how many are living this life without any guilt?

JP:I mean without the completely onerous burden of guilt that we had twenty years ago. I don't mean the perfect man, some kind of super gay man. I'm talking about the literally hundreds of gay men in Portland who are



Eric Rofes (left) talks with John Preston. Behind them is writer Michael McDowell.

going to gay bars and are not overly worried about being seen going through the doors.

Twenty years ago, when you walked into a bar, people were concerned about being seen there, and we didn't know whether we wanted to stay there. If I walk into a bar in Portland now, I would be shocked to find somebody who wasn't sure that he belonged there, and I would be concerned for him. There's a whole enormous shifting of communal self-concepts. **ER:**Is being a clone antithetical to being a gay male activist? Or is there an overlap?

JP:The overlap is minute. In Minnesota, I was a full-time gay activist. I learned that all the people who were activists—at that time, at least, which was 15 years ago—were using their activism as the primary area for their social lives. Many of the people were there because they could not make it in the late 1960's bar scene, which was much more vicious than it is today. Most activists I know are, to a certain extent, still doing that.

I also find people who try to be both activists and clones, but cannot make the integration. This is partly because the movement is anti-sexual, and the clone is sexual. In the late '60's, we in the movement were denying that we "did it." We wore coats and ties when we'd go out to speak. There were few elements of the movement where you didn't dress for the straights.

The movement is still other-directed, still looking for approval from other sources. The

clone is not other-directed. He is committed to a social life and to the beginning of a community, so his needs, his sources of approval, are from within the gay community.

ER:There's a parallel in the women's community. The mainstream women's movement—like the National Organization for Women—is very acceptance-oriented. But the movement as a whole, and so many lesbian-feminists, have their primary commitment within the community, rather than externally. Men have not done likewise, because there is no separate gay men's movement. Sex issues have been denied in the mixed gay movement; and, with no separate men's movement, there was no place to deal with these issues.

JP:That's right. Suppose a 21 year old, who hasn't gone to an intense liberal arts college, walks into a gay/lesbian movement meeting. If the entire meeting is taken up with why S&M isn't okay, but that 21 year old is trying to deal with S&M fantasies, then the movement is no longer an appropriate arena for him. I don't mean that you should have some kind of anarchistic sexual ethic, or that everyone has to say that everything is okay. But, when you mix the gay men's movement and the lesbian movement, you by definition have a situation where the two must be other-directed.

Part two of this interview will appear in our next issue.

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