

# Being Gay and Hippie:

How Oral History Deconstructed My Fixed Ideas

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Don't let the past remind us of what we are not now.<sup>1</sup>

When I first considered attending Columbia's OHMA program, my reason seemed solid. I wanted professional guidance with my oral history project researching the "interface of gays and hippies" in the 1960s. My academic interest was intensely personal. Having been both gay and a latter-day hippie, I felt a sense of destiny when I learned there was historical evidence that the hippie movement positively impacted the gay liberation movement. I hoped I would be able to excavate this history and believed it was my duty to add to the canon of gay American history. The academic flowed seamlessly into the personal as I was convinced that this research would help place my sometimes-scrambled identity into a clear and uncontested historical context.

But then I lost my momentum. It's hard to say why but my guess is that I was lacking in the "next-steps" arena. As a result, numerous cassettes were interned to the bottom of a desk drawer to collect dust for several years. Though the interviews were out of sight, my project was not out of mind. I was unable to set myself free from this sense of mission so my several year lapse nagged at me as did my partner, David. When I found out about the oral history program in 2013, I was hopeful that I would receive the guidance I needed. I received excellent guidance, but in unexpected ways, as my approach to my work has changed the way I think

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<sup>1</sup> Crosby Stills Nash Young, *Suite: Judy Blue-Eyes*, (NY: Atlantic Records, 1969).

about history in general, my project, and thus my own life. But let's back up a bit to the project I originally had in mind.

### Bohemia, Hippiedom, and Gays:

Starting in the mid-late 1980s, I encountered several sources, both in print and film, which suggested that the hippie movement positively influenced the gay liberation movement. Here are a few examples:

In the documentary, *Before Stonewall*, one lesbian narrator, Red Jordan Arobateau, explains how the hippie movement affected gay people when she said "When the hippies came along it was a real liberating thing because they started wearing whatever they wanted to and that made gay people feel freer to do likewise."<sup>2</sup>

An African-American gay fellow named Jheri described how being a hippie changed how he expressed his sexuality. "The role playing wasn't as obvious – it wasn't important. Everybody was just sort of turning into being a guy. I think one of the things I realized in order to be a homosexual it didn't mean that I was women's replacement. It didn't mean that I had to beat them. It just meant that I was a guy that liked guys."<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> *Before Stonewall*. Greta Schiller. Perf: Red Jordan Arobateau. Before Stonewall Inc., 1985. Documentary.

<sup>3</sup> *Before Stonewall*. Greta Schiller. Perf: Jheri. Before Stonewall Inc., 1985. Documentary.

The most declarative statement I have come across crediting the hippie scene to being an openly gay person came from Vernita Gray, an African-American gay activist who said this:

“We were totally hippies. I had an afro and didn’t want to conform to a lifestyle that was uncomfortable, wearing high heels, being someone I wasn’t. It was also about getting in touch with my real self. We called it the counterculture. For me to be a hippie was to question my life—who I was, how I really felt. And it was about respecting differences. That was wonderful. To do your thing. To be who you are. If I had not been a hippie, I would not have been able to be a gay activist. Being a hippy allowed me to be free. And once I got in touch with who I was there was no closet for me.”<sup>4</sup>

In 1989 I read an article in *Outweek* magazine called “Present at the Creation: Charles Henri Ford, The Author of the First Gay Novel, Talks about the Village in the 20s, Paris in the 30s and Coming Out 40 Years Before Stonewall.” In the interview with Ford, Gabriel Rotello discusses Ford’s experience of being gay in Greenwich Village. Rotello asks Ford if he ever “ran into people who were anti-gay, who called you names?”

Ford responds, “No. Never. I have no unpleasant memories of that sort. There was a real freedom in the [Greenwich] Village. Because the Village then was an enclave that was anti-bourgeois anyway, and this was just one more manifestation of that generation, that generation in revolt...”<sup>5</sup>

I believed the hippie scene to be a direct descendant of earlier bohemian scenes, flouting convention, encouraging free-thinking and alternative lifestyles.

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<sup>4</sup> Gray, Vernita.

[http://www.focusfeatures.com/slideshow/of\\_hippies\\_and\\_homosexuals\\_being\\_gay\\_in\\_woodstock?film=taking\\_woodstock](http://www.focusfeatures.com/slideshow/of_hippies_and_homosexuals_being_gay_in_woodstock?film=taking_woodstock)

<sup>5</sup> Gabriel Rotello, “Present at the Creation”, *Outweek* No. 26 (December 17, 1989: 34-37).

These connections I made gave me the impetus that I needed to research this topic and support it with oral histories.

The above sources confirmed that the hippie movement positively impacted the gay liberation movement. This discovery was very satisfying, both in terms of my interest in gay history, and as a way to explain the unfolding of my own life even though I would not have made that connection on my own. It made me want to broaden and document the countercultural-gay connection. All I had to do was gather the chorus of voices that would proclaim, "YES!" I figured this part would be easy to come by when I started interviewing. At the macro level, there is plenty of evidence that the broader hippie movement encouraged the gay movement. So did the women's and black civil rights movement. But on the micro level – the level of gay individuals who were hippies in the sixties -- it turns out that the story is rather uneven. *My* slow crawl to a more complex and nuanced reality only came by when I started the Oral History program at Columbia.

Last year I took the thesis class with Mary Marshall Clark. I chose Benji de la Peidra as a co-advisor. Both Benji and Mary Marshall recommended I write about my experiences of being gay and hippie. It seems pretty obvious now that reflecting on my life story vis a vis the history I felt so profoundly informed mine would be a likely starting point. But even the suggestion that I write about myself was a challenge: It did not occur to me that my life story was a legitimate addition to the historical record. Given my treatment of my own experience, I now see how I

might've been dismissive of some of my narrator's stories that didn't reflect the conclusion I was after.

But I followed my advisors' advice and wrote about my experiences. Writing about being gay and hippie was eye opening AND sobering. On the one hand, the hippie world allowed me the flowery rebellion that successfully pitted me against the conservative home life I experienced. I suppose it's fair to conclude that fortifying myself with alternative thinking and style helped segue into gay acceptance even if the hip community I found myself in wasn't nurturing in that way. And even if the hip community had been accepting, it doesn't guarantee that *my* self-acceptance would easily follow. I wanted an exact equation. What I failed to see at first was that there *was* an equation to be made, but the formula could be long with several variables as in advanced calculus. Forcing my conclusion at the expense of other evidence was neither truthful nor faithful to the research. Once I started to recognize how even my own story failed to meet the conclusion I was after, I became more flexible to the complexities of my narrators. This was a work in progress.

Slowly it occurred to me that my lens, my subjectivity, was no less important to my topic than anyone else's and actually dovetailed with the experiences of some of my gay narrators who were hippies in the 1960s. In some cases they encountered homophobia in the hippie community, in other cases their self-acceptance of their homosexuality required more than the permissiveness of the hippie movement. The closer I realized I was to a subset of experiences in hippiedom, the more I

realized that I could not extricate myself from the research I was conducting. In his book, *Black Mountain, An Exploration in Community*, Martin Duberman discusses the fundamental importance of acknowledging the historian's "take" on the history being researched:

"My conviction is that when a historian allows more of himself to show – his feelings, fantasies and needs, not merely his skills at information-retrieval, organization and analysis – he is *less* likely to contaminate the data, simply because there is less pretense that he and it are one."<sup>6</sup>

There is one important difference between my work and Duberman's; that is, Duberman doesn't appear to conflate his own history with history writ large to imply he was a member of Black Mountain. I believe I have had a tendency to do that with hippie history.

From the start, I tried to gloss over some questions that arose when considering this subject matter. I did not question the idea that the hippie movement positively impacted the gay movement since that was the direct experience of both some gay hippies and some gays who were not part of the hippie movement. But there were a couple of questions that confounded, at least for me, the conclusion I was hoping to drive home.

1. Did gays in the hippie movement feel comfortable expressing their sexuality?
2. Did straight hippies feel comfortable with gays in their midst?

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<sup>6</sup> Duberman, Martin, *Black Mountain, An Exploration In Community* (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1972), XVII.

There are probably an infinite number of detours these questions could take when dealing with this topic. But I didn't like detours. Initially, when I conducted interviews that didn't hammer home my conclusion, I felt something had gone wrong. Perhaps the person I was interviewing just didn't get the truth of my angle. Perhaps it was the way I asked the questions. I suppose I ought to feel embarrassed for not recognizing that the myriad answers I got *were* totally legit. I began to recognize the inherent tensions in, and contradictions to my conclusion but forged ahead convincing myself that stray answers were disposable and that I just needed to get the right ones. It would take a while of being in the oral history program to realize that "getting to the bottom of something" never really happens. The more interviews we do, the more slices of life we encounter, and the aggregate of those stories doesn't necessarily shoot an arrow to one clear historical explanation. I found that very challenging.

#### Complexities and Nuances in the Hippie/Gay Paradigm:

In 2002 I interviewed Ralph Sauer, a former member of the gay/hippie drag troupe, the Cockettes. Ralph loved the Haight-Ashbury. He had been a lonely child. Living in the Haight made him feel like he was part of a loving family with lots of "brothers and sisters." But as with any family, sometimes siblings weren't all love and light. Ralph described this scene:

"Two women who were friends of us who didn't know we were gay. One night they came expecting to get laid or something. I brought out all this fruit and grapes and opulence. They said, 'this is a fag pad.' It's painful because



you know you're close but there was so much free love I guess they expected to be made love to as well. It was just casual. I'm sure they got it everywhere else -- they weren't getting it from us."

Though Ralph ultimately lived in the wildly flamboyant Cockettes commune, he remembered visiting another Haight commune where some guys were talking about "chicks." Ralph didn't participate. When he was seemingly out of earshot, Ralph heard one hippie refer to him as a "cocksucker." Ralph didn't respond. He endured it silently. Ralph's experience was reminiscent of a similar experience that I encountered on The Farm, a commune in Summertown, Tennessee.

I graduated high school in June 1979, bought a 30-day Greyhound bus ticket for \$200, and took off to see the country with a friend. I would finally get to see San Francisco though my interest was in the Haight Ashbury, not the Castro, San Francisco's gay district. Unknowingly, for me, there was a distinct split between the hippie culture that I was fascinated with and my sexual desires. I did **not** see those two cultures as overlapping. In fact I saw them almost in contrast to each other.

The last leg of my trip I went to visit The Farm in Tennessee. The Farm's spiritual teacher was an older Haight Ashbury psychedelic ranger named Stephen Gaskin. I enjoyed his writings and felt a deep spiritual connection to the Farm's communal ethos. I looked very much a hippie with long hair, rose-stenciled flare jeans, and sandals. One day I was working on the potato peeling crew when one "Farmie" turned to the other and asked, "Did you hear Stephen said we have to allow gays on The Farm?" The other "Farmie" shook his head and said, "Yeah man, I just

don't know." In that instant I went from being a fellow traveler to a closeted gay man. I didn't speak up. This was one of many clear examples of how hippiedom did not offer me the sort of liberation it did to Vernita Gray.

A few days later on The Farm, another "Farmie" castigated me for a conversation I was having with one of the Farm women at the gatehouse where people entered and exited the commune. It was an innocent conversation. I was interested in her life on The Farm and wanted to hear about her experience. Suddenly this "Farmie" approached me with his face screwed up.

"Hey man, I see you trying to steal the lady's juice," he said. "Juice" was a Farm term for energy. I was puzzled by and angry about his aggressive approach.

"I am not stealing her juice," I said.

"Don't be defensive, just cop to it," he responded. I was angry. He was suggesting I was hitting on some other fella's old lady.

"I'm gay," I snapped back, and that was the first time I ever self-identified that way. I can't claim that moment as being my big ah-hah moment. I was defending myself against his accusation. At the same time, I did not feel like I was on terra firma with my declaration. As my high school friend Bonnie confirmed to me, I would use the terms "androgynous" and "bisexual," any alternative term to mean NOT gay. But in this instance on The Farm, I literally had my back up against the wall and it just popped out of my mouth. I was surprised and not totally convinced by my admission. Was I that label? Was it just a self-defense measure? I

can't remember now, but it was clearly a self-identification I had yet to catch up with.

I *wanted* to believe that hippie culture positively influenced the gay movement but moreover, I wanted to claim that as my felt experience, too. I had identified as a hippie, albeit a latter-day hippie since I missed out on the original moment by a decade. Still, I was a very serious hippie, both in look and personal philosophy, an identification that helped distance me from a strict and conservative Catholic background, an act of self-preservation. Hippie came first as a self-identification, gay came later even though my sexual attractions were evident pre-hippie. My crush on David Cassidy from the Partridge Family is one such example.

As both of these identifications were so meaningful to me, I wanted to believe that they weren't disparate, that one flowed seamlessly into the other. It was an attempt, I now believe, to align these different life experiences in a way that would make me feel whole. In order to get there – in order to have this sense of wholeness and belonging – I simply, almost blindly, adopted the tenets of the hippie/gay paradigm that I cite above. It's one thing for me to consider – and agree with – the idea that the broader hippie movement encouraged the gay movement. It's another thing altogether to claim that I felt that effect in a clear and direct manner. In retrospect I did not. It wasn't until I wrote about my experiences and then *really* listened to my narrators that I realized this truth.

One interview in particular helped clarify a much more reasonable way for me to view my own place in this historical picture. Alwyn de Wally, a Haight

Ashbury hippie in the late 1960s, and a self-identified “queer” man now, wonderfully articulated the nuances that I had tried to gloss over. Caveat: I am not suggesting that my life experiences and Alwyn’s directly parallel one another. He is more than a decade older than I am so was a hippie when the counterculture was prominent. And though neither of us was born into a gay-positive atmosphere, Alwyn spent many more years absorbing the harsh and corrosive societal view of homosexuality. Also, by the time I was a hippie, the glam-rock movement, and then disco, were ascendant and probably much more gay-friendly than the counterculture that preceded them even though the hippie ethos most likely led to the cultural openness that those subsequent scenes offered.

The following section from my interview with Alwyn really helped sum up for me the inherent tensions I felt between these two subcultures a decade later. I had asked him directly about the influence of the hippie movement on gay sexual acceptance:

Alwyn: Now that’s not to say that *that* [hippie] opening up didn’t — in so many ways that didn’t include [gay] sexual liberation -- didn’t eventually contribute to opening up in those ways as well.

Steven: Sort of like a ripple effect?

Alwyn: Yeah. I think it did. Convention is very powerful. I think particularly when it’s unexamined convention. And there was, in my childhood, at least in my cultural realm, that the world where I grew up in, homosexuality was beyond contemptible, it was unspeakable, it was never mentioned. And that has a profound effect. I think for a long time, I just operated under a kind of visceral reaction that was founded upon the idea that that was just not acceptable territory to even think about. And, when I — the hippie movement, growing your hair long was perhaps the most remarkable external character of hippies was that men wore their hair long in a feminine

sort of way. And that announced -- the long hair proclaimed that they were disavowing machismo to a certain extent, but there were still a lot of machismo around. And to me, growing your hair long, growing my hair long, growing my beard was a statement about my fundamental nature, that I was presenting myself as I was naturally without having to try to make myself look a certain acceptable way...I didn't have to try to be the way society expected me to be.

And in that same paradigm, guys softened up -- the long hair, the colorful clothes, the beads, things like that softened up and presented themselves as less macho, more sensitive feeling type of creatures, but there was still a good deal of machismo. And in the heterosexual relationships around me, the guys very often expected to be deferred to, expected to be the decision makers, etcetera. It wasn't as if it was a complete sea change in concepts of masculinity and femininity. And the question of homosexuality as I said was so verboten, so not to be even mentioned that it took a lot of loosening up before I was capable of saying, "Oh, look at that. That's the way I am." It took — in my case it took decades in fact. It wasn't until I was in my late 30s that I fully came out as queer."

Alwyn's eloquent statement recognizes that the openness of the hippie movement might have encouraged gay liberation while noting that he wasn't an immediate recipient of that change. He takes the long view of historical change without making definitive conclusions. He suggests. Central to his overview is the way his own life proceeded after the hippie scene. He demonstrates how the hippie lifestyle may have ameliorated the rough edges of machismo while recognizing that it didn't guarantee the death knell for machismo. Yet that "softening" may have led to greater acceptance of those non-macho dimensions.

Alwyn's interview, and the above lines in particular, were both a relief and instructive to me. I finally came to see that this topic is multilayered. Some people can attest to a direct positive impact of the hippie movement on their gay identity. I wanted that to be *my* story. I wanted the oftentimes painful unfolding of my life to

follow a clear trajectory where all the pieces of the puzzle fit nicely, revealing a single unified being. I tried mightily to fit myself into this paradigm. I was fabricating a sense of belonging. I pretended that it worked. It didn't.

Once I started writing, my hippie-gay experiences collided with my desired story. At first I wondered what form of trickery I would have to do to navigate my story back into my fixed conclusion. It was impossible. I came to realize that my life story is also multilayered and that forcing a synthesis was both impossible and unfair to me. My need to feel "whole" frustrated my investigation into this topic. I tried to conflate my experiences with those who could attest to a positive linkage between their being gay and hippie. But the more I wrote about my own experiences, the more I recognized that I was railroading my topic and my own integrity.

By writing my stories, I demythologized my sense of self. It didn't undo that wondrous oral-history magic of recognizing the connections between all the elements of my life as they unfolded. That remains. What I lose is that need to force my life into an equation. It is not simple math. It is complex with several variables, not all of them obvious or explicable. With that comes a sense of freedom.