

## ABOUT TIME TOO

*Alan Wakeman reflects on forty years since the London Gay Liberation Front*

For millennia humanity's sexual minorities submitted to religious, social, verbal and physical torture from an unconcerned heterosexual majority. In the Middle Ages this exact vocabulary might not yet have been invented but historic records contain countless examples of persecution directed at innocent but unorthodox women who could be and were branded as "witches" and innocent but unorthodox men who could be and were denounced as "faggots" – i.e. fit only as kindling for fires to burn "witches".

In 1951 I told my mother I was "one of those unfortunate people who are attracted to their own sex." I was 16 and had turned to her for help because she'd always shown me love. It simply didn't occur to me that she'd tell my father because I knew his reaction would be violent. Unfortunately she did tell him and I was right. He exploded into my bedroom and beat me up physically and verbally using blows, kicks, and words that scarred my psyche for years. He might have killed me but he didn't. Instead, he despatched me to a psychiatrist who, luckily, turned out to be a good man. Once a week until I was called up for National Service this gentle soul listened silently and compassionately to my gay teenage despair. My parents wanted "a cure" but he clearly thought there was nothing wrong with me. Looking back, I realise how lucky I was. A different doctor might have assaulted me with aversion therapy or any one of several other appalling "treatments" that, unknown to me, were routine then. My parents and I were fully reconciled before they died and it would be good to know such scenes no longer occur but, alas, too many of today's gay schoolchildren endure similar anguish before discovering the truth about the rich diversity of gay life.

How extraordinary then that, having accepted for centuries that we *deserved* the persecution we suffered in silence, by the late 1960s gay women and men were finally waking up to the gross injustice of it. We'd seen the much-proclaimed sexual liberation of the early 1960s and observed that *it didn't include us*. (When I told him he was beautiful, a sexy hippy in California with a banner reading "*Make Love Not War!*" snarled "*Faggot!*" at me.) This, for me, and I suspect for other GLF pioneers, was the tipping point and I personally believe that as our gay consciousness grew GLF was the only possible outcome, exploding as it did like a rocket scattering laughter and pride and sequins and stardust in a thousand trajectories across the western world. And in this fortieth year since those world-changing events, I hope no one will deny that they happened primarily due to the courage and determination of a handful of early gay heroes and heroines and I'm proud to say I knew – and still know – many of them.

So it came about that, one day in 1970, I overheard an outraged straight colleague in the teachers' room of the school where I taught English raging against "disgusting homosexual perverts" who, she said with distaste, were "brazenly" holding weekly meetings in a nearby art centre. I felt my soul come alive, discovered that the next meeting was that Wednesday and within a fortnight had given up my teaching job and joined GLF's *Office Collective*. We were a group of about a dozen volunteers who met in a tiny basement in the Caledonian Road to arrange weekly meetings, answer the single telephone and find GLF members who would be willing to speak to the many groups that asked – from Students' Unions to lavender-haired ladies at Rotary Clubs in suburbia. There's now a panel on that modest door near King's Cross listing GLF as one of the many radical groups that met there forty years ago, in those far off days long before our single telephone had evolved into *Gay Switchboard*.

Next I joined a GLF consciousness-raising group which met once a week to compare our personal experiences of how the majority's self-proclaimed superiority infects all those of us with unorthodox sexualities with corresponding feelings of inferiority. One result of our radical analysis of the majority's sexism was that I became unhappy with the badge we'd adopted (from Philadelphia GLF) which embodied the astrological symbols for Mars to represent gay men and Venus to represent gay women. The significance of these symbols is revealed by their adjectives: "martial" = "of or pertaining to war or battle" for men, and "venereal" = "of or pertaining to sexual desire or intercourse" for women. Did we really want ourselves portrayed like this? These reflections and doubts led to my designing a badge that combined GLF's initials with the symbol for Jupiter = "jovial" = "**gay**"! which seemed more apposite to me. At the next meeting, with considerable trepidation, I presented my designs for four two-colour versions of this new badge to several hundred gay activists and was astounded to hear them adopted by public acclaim.



At the time of joining GLF I was already working on an environmental protest album so I also immediately wrote two out-front gay protest songs to add to it and invited a group of GLF activists to a recording session where they joined in with gusto on the choruses. The band was called **Everyone Involved** and the album **Either/Or**. Last year a record-producer in Australia told me he was preparing a compilation album of early out-and-proud gay songs, provisionally entitled **Strong Love** and that my **A Gay Song** from **Either/Or** was among the earliest he'd been able to find anywhere in the world. So if this happens and if, as mooted, **A Gay Song** is played in Trafalgar Square at London Pride 2010, boy will I be proud to be gay on that day! In the meantime here's a link to the relevant track on my website:

<http://www.awakeman.co.uk/Soul/Either-Or/A%20Gay%20Song.htm>



So here we are in the twenty-first century, I've had my three score years and ten and am currently in the departure lounge – surely a good time to reflect on my life. It seems to me that humanity's greatest strength has always been our adaptability and diversity: that's *why* we became civilised; that's *how* we became civilised. And throughout human history, those of unorthodox sexualities have made a vital contribution to the evolution of all human cultures and societies. So let's hope the orthodox majority, having accepted that adaptability and diversity *are* social virtues, will continue its steady change of consciousness towards us, and that this change will gradually spread all over the world and put an end, finally, to persecution and injustice. And let's also hope that, now that we have out cabinet ministers, out film and television stars and even out rugby players in the daily mainstream media, any gay teenager faced with the dilemma I faced in 1951, will feel able to say to her or his mother: "I'm one of those fortunate people whose sexuality grants privileged insights into how human society works."