

# GAY TIMES

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# MARC ALMOND

# *True Confessions*

+

**1967 & ALL THAT  
GAY RIGHTS  
THEN & NOW**

**BLOOMSBURY  
AT HOME**

**THE MALE NUDE  
IN FOCUS**

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FEATURE

# BEFORE

*Roger Baker  
remembers life  
before the*

## *1967 Sexual Offences Act*

**W**hen the Sexual Offences Act of 1967 was passed, I was 32. This means that I had already spent nearly 15 years of my life as a homosexual man—growing up, trying to sort myself out and evolving a view of the world in a social environment radically different from that experienced today. It is difficult to put across to younger people what life—which, of course, we took for granted—was actually like.

'No past, a dubious future, a rather tense present...' jacket detail from the 1961 paperback edition of Rodney Garland's 'THE HEART IN EXILE'



# THE ACT

It is easy to scan today's gay scene and make a list of what we didn't have: information networks, a gay press, means of communication, support and special interest groups, positive gay films, novels and plays, overtly gay pubs and exclusively gay discos (we didn't have discos: nobody had discos) and all the various spin-offs from the growth of gay consumerism in the 70s. Even the word 'gay' was unknown. We referred to ourselves as 'queer' without a second thought.

But itemizing missing things is no real help in trying to conjure the past. It is as futile as trying to imagine a world without motorcars or television. It is academic merely and doesn't lead to a discovery of the exact quality of life lived by homosexual people during those years. One has, rather, to try and think in probably rather off-putting terms like 'autonomy', 'self-respect', 'sense of self'; to think of a constant feeling of having no past, a dubious future, a rather tense background; of being invisible and, ever in the out of synch, with the world around.

## FACT OF LIFE

Living a double life was not a movie script. It was a reality. Many gay people do, I know, lead double lives today. But at least, all around them, they can see viable alternatives, find the issue debated and discussed so there is a definite element of choice about their lifestyle. But in the 50s and 60s it was simply accepted as the way we were. It wasn't seen as oppression, as an irritation or even as a cunning survival tactic. It was just a fact of life like rain, income tax and the civil service.

It would be totally dishonest of me (and a grave betrayal of good and generous friends) if I tried to suggest that day-to-day life was a living hell. It wasn't, of course. It had its moments and they remain vivid. But, then, I was in my mid-20s and when we are young life is immediate and fun, we have resilience and optimism and a wonderful ability to ignore discomfiting elements, or simply to convince ourselves that they don't exist.

I really did lead two separate lives. Looking back across 30 years, I am amazed at the fluency with which this was achieved considering I was living in a modestly-sized provincial city and had a job (newspaper

reporter) which inevitably made me known (if only by sight) to a great many different sections of the community. My working life, and the social life that extended from it, was enjoyed with people of roughly my own age and who shared the same terms of reference and similar ambitions. To an extent this was both fun and fulfilling.

And yet I had managed to live in that city for a whole year (1956 mainly) before I discovered that it contained *two* of what were then the most celebrated queer bars in the Midlands. Astonishing! My sex life had consisted of a series of brief, casual partners picked up while cottaging. And not one of them had mentioned the bars. They probably didn't know about them either! Eventually I did meet a young man who not only filled me in, but, actually *took* (escorted might be more accurate) to one. Subsequently I rapidly became socialised into what one would now call the gay community. But without that accidental meeting, without that kindly push, I could well have remained ignorant and sexually isolated for quite a long time. Many people did. I rarely met anyone in cottages I'd met or seen in the bars. Or vice versa. Though since I was doing both, others must have been, surely?

Although, as I've said, my social life through work was great, it certainly lacked a dimension which I was now discovering. I had thought that the missing factor was sex—like not being able to make a pass at any of those nice, but straight, chaps I'd been to the jazz club with. Instead I would make an excuse to walk back to my bed-sitter, calling on the way into a couple of cottages for a fumble, a fondle or—if I was damn lucky—a fuck.

## REFUGE

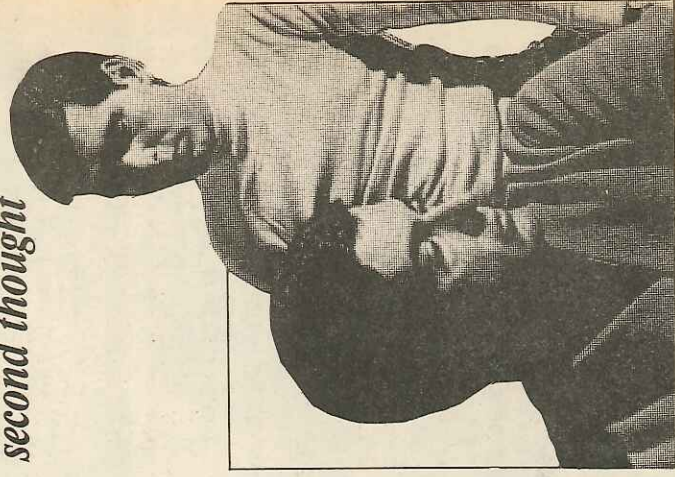
Sex was important, yes, but what I found I had really been hankering after was some seamless link between social life and sex life. So very quickly I found the queer enclaves and networks I was being introduced to comforting and reassuring. They were not for me—as they were for many—a refuge from an hostile environment exactly, but rather a way of constructing a valid world to which I belonged. And, yes, it was nice to find lovers who would spend the whole night *and* all of Sunday with you; to have friends with whom one might admire the male dancers in the Ballet Rambert; to

go to parties where you could dance closely with other men (this was before solo dancing in pairs came in) . . . and so on.

The various gay sets, or groupings would consist of a nucleus of men of roughly the same age, status and outlook but who attracted (or encouraged) a wider range of very different kinds of people, the only real common denominator being sexual preference. This has often been vaunted as a wonderful example of the queer world's ability to cut across barriers of race and class. But of course it did no such thing. I remember parties where some guests might be chatting knowledgeably about Stravinsky

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Jacket detail from the 1966 paperback edition of Rodney Garland's 'THE HEART IN EXILE'

# BEFORE THE ACT

▷ or Hermione Gingold while, neglected in a corner, an attractive bus driver or West Indian miner nursed an uneasy gin. And if one happened to get on his bus the following day, all that was exchanged was a covert wink. The gay community today cuts through those barriers far more effectively and realistically than ever it did in that distant past.

But it was fun, alright—parties, amusing people and plenty of sex—but, instinctively I think I knew it was sterile and repetitive, covert and often accompanied by a sense of indefinable panic. Gay life consisted of bars, parties and bed. We denizens of that twilight world rarely met each other outside those parameters, or for any reason which did not have some gay context. Which had, in turn, the effect of making gay men, outside the 'safe' gay areas, hostile and suspicious of each other. There was no seamless link, and little wonder that so many people (other social pressures aside) preferred to turn their backs on it completely, to live solitary lives or actually to get married.

The Homosexual Law Reform Society had, in the 50s at least, attracted very little grassroots support. I remember seeing a discreet classified advertisement for it in one of the weeklies, probably the *New Statesman* and someone saying: 'If we wrote off, do you think they'd send us a man?'—which probably sums up the degree of seriousness with which attempts to reform the lot of homosexuals were viewed.

## INVISIBLY

Those major social revolutions of the 60s—the emergence of a teenage consumer market, the growth of the pop music industry, the invention of the disco, swinging London, flower power and the increase in the recreational use of drugs—did not touch the gay scene at all. For us, life was conducted along much the same lines as before—secretly and invisibly. For those lucky enough to find groups of gay friends the gay world did, as I have suggested, represent a refuge from an environment which was hostile when it didn't actually ignore us; it represented a way of constructing a valid world in which to feel comfortable and wanted. So when the Sexual Offences Act was passed and when, a few years later, gay liberation in its various forms emerged, there is little wonder that these events were viewed by many with suspicion, horror and even fear.

These upheavals suggested that carefully erected barricades would be destroyed, lovingly tended armour torn away to leave gay

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men vulnerable, exposed and lost. It is a psychological truism that unhappy people will often prefer to remain in discomfort than risk the pain of change, even for something that might, in the long run, be better.

So the reaction was to romanticise or sentimentalise the recent past; to assert that life before the Act was much more fun, more exciting, sexier. The very restrictions which characterised that life somehow become regarded as precious assets now gone. The sense of living in a private world, of being invisible, of living a significant part of one's

life in secrecy (sometimes even, with its own language, symbols and codes) seemed to offer the same kind of reassurance that Freemasonry apparently does. To lose all this would mean losing too, a great deal of security.

## TRANSFORMED

The decriminalisation of homosexual acts between males, under certain circumstances, did not in 1967 seem to have any immediate effect. The gay world as we know it today did not spring up, fully active, overnight although the Act did pave the way for it. In London, the Homosexual Law Reform Society transformed itself into the Albany Trust but the northern branch, in Manchester, realised that the work had only just begun and formed what was then called the Committee for Homosexual Equality with ambitious plans for a chain of decent, non-commercial gay clubs as well as a dedication to further campaigning. Within eighteen months CHE (Committee becoming Campaign) had cells all over the country and several thousand members.

Those members were motivated in many different ways. Some really wanted to see a fairer, better world for gays; some wanted to make new friends; some seemed to see CHE as a new kind of sexual introduction service and so on. But that strong, immediate response indicated that no matter how comfortable and witty life before the Act had been for some, there was nevertheless a wide and genuine demand that things must change. And then the Gay Liberation Front burst onto the scene, radical in its demands, revolutionary in performance. Here, again, there was an immediate response—but from much younger generations who saw no reason why their futures should be those they saw lived by their older gay brothers and sisters.

All this is history now, but a significant moment in gay terms and the foundation for all that has been built and created since. Life before the Act is, in my memory, rather like a Hollywood version of Elizabethan England—fine weather, pretty frocks, nice scenery, elegant background music and attractive people, with all the real day-to-day horrors scripted out. It might have been fine if you were rich, famous and successful. But if you were a peasant, forget it.

Today the gay scene is incredibly diverse and incredibly rich in what it can offer, not just things like the list of facilities I made earlier, but in options, models and opportunities. What we take and what we choose to ignore are up to us, but above all it offers those things I somehow knew I was missing twenty years ago—autonomy, self respect and synchronicity.