

# Growing Up Gay At Wesleyan; Where Were You In '62?

(After graduating from Wesleyan in 1963, Stuart Byron spent most of the next decade as a motion picture publicist and critic in New York. His articles have appeared in the Village Voice, Variety, The New York Times, Film Comment, and elsewhere. He "came out" in print as an overt homosexual early in 1971, and occasionally writes on gay liberation. Since January 1973 he has been Film Editor of The Real Paper of Cambridge, Mass. He is a member of the National Society of Film Critics. The article is reprinted with the permission of The Real Paper.)

By Stuart Byron '63

Robert J. was not my best friend in high school; there were other guys, straight guys, who were on the same party circuit, with whom I discovered Beethoven or Joyce, to whom I showed the first drafts of my own poor scribbles. Nor was he yet my first lover, that honor belonging to a yahoo with whom I had nothing in common besides the fiery fulminations of adolescent flesh.

But Robert J.—like the others mentioned here, not his real name—was perhaps more important than these. He was my first gay friend, my first "sister," and our friendship, however non-carnal, kept us sane. It was with Robert that I discovered the secret zones of New York, the gay sub-culture, the bars and baths and parks of the "twilight world." It was with Robert that I could use, on a regular basis, such comforting language as "dish" and "trick" and "my dear." Certainly such was impossible with my lover, like so many teenagers convinced he was really straight and who referred to having sex as "getting completely undressed," and never mind what we did after reaching that naked stage. But Robert and I were mutually supportive, continual reminders that each of us had not, to paraphrase Sidney Abbott, "invented homosexuality," ballasts for one another in a world that was straight, strange, hostile—our almost daily telephone conversations reports of doings and discoveries that under no circumstances could be discussed with parents, colleagues, doctors, other friends. It was with Robert and only with Robert, that I shared the news of the first experiments in sex. I don't know how I would have survived those traumatic years without him.

In 1957, we were both seniors, I at a "selective" public high school, he at an exclusive private day school. And like all Jewish middle-class youngsters of that era, there was only one option in our immediate future, and that was college, hopefully the "best" college at which one could be accepted. Robert was bright if not brilliant, studious if not scholarly, imaginative if not creative—in any case, one who, his counselors assured him, would have no trouble being admitted to Oberlin, Dartmouth, or the other schools of like reputation to which he had applied.

But a policeman's flashlight changed all that. One night, as the first winds of winter whispered through the November air, a cop most rudely interrupted Robert as he was taking mutual pleasure with a new-found acquaintance in Central Park. And, naturally enough, a nightmare ensued: the hysterical mother insisting he see a psychiatrist, the proud father cashing in every political chip so that the case was stricken from the books, his private school informed by the police of the matter. Robert was never a very strong-willed person, and it wasn't hard for his parents to force out of him the names of his friends of like sexual persuasion. After one last, tearful conversation, he followed their orders and didn't speak to me again.

And then there was his school, which of course "had" to inform the colleges to which Robert had applied of this most scandalous incident. They all rejected him, and he ended up going to Clark, a college to which he had not originally applied. Of course, Clark is a good school, a fine school, a school of excellent academic standards—but not a school which, other things being equal, one would go to if one could get into Oberlin or Dartmouth. And it was getting into Oberlin or Dartmouth toward which his whole academic career had been steered. Laugh if you will at such a bourgeois goal, but to Robert J. a sociological perspective would have been an impossible suggestion. He had received a blow from which he was never to recover.

## SIMPLE OPTIONS

I mention this now because the "nostalgia boom" has at last reached my era, my adolescence, the time of my coming of age. In my own field, the movies, we had, last year, "Let the Good Times Roll," and, of course, George Lucas's "American Graffiti," the smash hit of the fall, doing for heterosexual high school life in 1962 what "The Last Picture Show" did in terms of 1952 and "Summer of '42" did in terms of the decade before that. And I have no quarrel with "American Graffiti" on the level of content, no quarrel with its story of girl-chasing, lindy-hopping and hot-rodding on a last night before two of its heroes go off to college in "the east." It is one of the great truths that America's gay history is one of its secret histories, and it is only to be expected that George Lucas can imagine no faggots or lesbians in a small California town in 1962.

But though his intentions are certainly more complex, Lucas's film, like its predecessors, drew forth those references to a "simpler era" when "options were clearer" than they are today. Well, fuck that. The Fifties and early Sixties were simple all right—simply anti-gay, simply prejudiced, simply dangerous, simply hell. And sure my option was clear: Get in the closet and stay there.

"Where were you in '62?" read the ads. Well, I was where I was for the four years



Byron at Wes Junior Prom, 1961.

before that (save for a half-year in Europe), and was to be for a year more—at Wesleyan University in Middletown, Conn., an all-male pillar of the "little Ivy League," a bastion of Eastern liberalism, a school which could cite chapter and verse (such as College Board scores) to prove that it competed successfully with Harvard for the best and the brightest. And it was liberal as those things go. Freshmen could have liquor in their rooms, could have cars! Liberal—for everyone except gays.

Of course there were happy moments—some of the happiest of my life, in fact. Friends, teachers and—though not on campus—occasional lovers. My interest in politics was kindled by the Maryland Freedom Rides of '62, my interest in the cinema by an inspiring professor (John Frazer) and an excellent film society. But there was a black diary, too, filled with the incidents which made me and my gay friends always make sure we had dates on party weekends and which convinced us that we would marry one day. Here are the key remembrances.

## THE GOLDEN YEARS

*The Freshman Follies.* Tommy E. is one of the few upperclassmen I have come to know well. Curley-haired and clever, dating a girl from Bennington, he is one of the few "independents" on the fraternity-ruled campus, and he tries to convince me to avoid the Greek societies.

One day I notice that I haven't seen him for a week. "Oh, haven't you heard?" says our mutual friend Barry N. "Tommy was getting serious with this girl, and he felt that to be fair to her he should tell her the truth, which is that he was a homosexual. She got so upset that she told the dean at Bennington. The dean at Bennington told the dean at Wesleyan, and Tommy was kicked out."

Two years later Barry N. discovers his own gayness. They have to pump out his stomach at Middlesex General Hospital.

*The Sophomore Slump.* Norris C. is from a small Border State town; unlike me, he didn't grow up with a newsstand on the corner which sold boy books, nor with gay bars a few subway stops away. The notion of his own homosexuality, therefore, creates an agony and confusion within him which is beyond my own experience: It mortifies him. Somehow we find out about each other and become friends but—totally unattracted to each other—never lovers.

He is shy and sensitive, given to crying jags, and a "virgin." I am naive, unable to comprehend his emotional instability. Like most big-cityites, I have already perfected a campy conversational style, as well as that well-known defense mechanism which dictates that a half-serious (and half-true) attempt be made to brush every straight man a closet queen. So I try to comfort Norris by showing him that he is not alone: In addition to the three or four Wesleyanites I know to be gay, I name a dozen more that I suspect, particularly focusing on one jock after whom I lust ("Oh her! Look at the way he wears those tight pants! Who's he kidding?").

Norris begins going slightly mad, pursuing this jock day and night—to such an extent that fellow students, and even faculty, begin to notice. Norris hovers menacingly outside the boy's dormitory room. Soon I am approached by Norris's faculty adviser: as his "best friend," what would I recommend? Scared shitless, I reply: "I don't think he can stay in this environment."

A week later a car pulls up, containing Norris's father. Norris is placed in an institution, where he is given shock treatments and other forms of aversion therapy.

If there is such a thing as an "end to innocence" in my life, it is this. To integrate the incident, I convince myself that I am totally evil, that I have "used" the vulnerable Norris to do my own dirty business. For five years thereafter, I lead a radically barren sex life, wracked by guilt.

A decade later, when we are both in the gay liberation movement in New York, Norris tells me that he has felt the same exact guilt towards me—that he had more sexual experience than he had let on, that he had played the *faux naïf*, that he had deliberately sought to involve me so as to provide a protective cover for himself. The ultimate oppression is not what straights do to gays, but what straight society forces gays to do to each other.

*The Junior Jollies:* Harry Y., a class above me, is without question the campus oddball, the only student at Wesleyan who wears a jacket and tie morning, noon, and night. The least jocky of personalities, he is nonetheless a star of the wrestling team—but in a gentleman-athlete, Victorian sort of way. To me there is always a desperation to his sports life: He seems the guy with a "turkey"

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"Boys, boys everywhere . . ."



# Gay '62

(Continued from page 3)

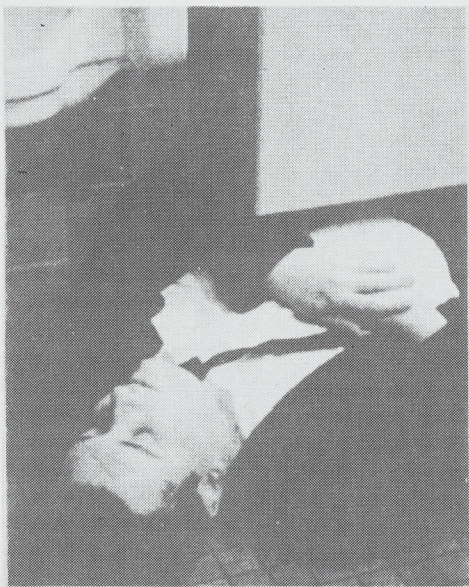
personality who is trying to prove his "manhood" at all costs. A genius of a scholar, his papers are considered publishable by his English professors.

The son of a military man, Harry gets extremely uptight in the presence of his parents, or when they are brought up in conversation. What thing, what suffering, what conflict is eating away at him? Nobody knows, but while I am in France I receive from him a letter which, while not explicit, is nonetheless the most campy, wittily Oscar Wildish I have ever seen, discussing the Norris affair in a tone whose "vibes" convince me that it is coming from a "sister." I resolve to have a frank discussion with Harry when I return to campus.

I never have the chance. A few weeks after my return, Harry wins a Wilson Fellowship. Apparently learning once and for all that scholarly accomplishment will not override his inner turmoil, one night he takes his car into the country, places a hose from the gas exhaust to the inside of the car, and dies. His last words, to a dormitory mate, were: "I'm going out for a few minutes."

*The Senior Sallies.* At a party in New York during Easter vacation, I discover that Mark R., with whom I had been close until he transferred to another school, is gay, and that all those weekends when he was supposedly seeing a girl in New York were actually spent with a dentist he had met in Provincetown. This experience—the knowledge that I had suffered in isolation while

some of those around me were doing the same—is to be repeated. After persistent reports that he has been seen in homosexual hangouts, one night a few years ago I run across Paul A., a Wesleyan roommate, in a New York gay bar. "Well, Paul," I say, "I knew this would happen one day." "What would happen?" he says. "That I would meet you in a place like this," I say. "Oh, it was the only place open around here," he said. This is on one of New York's most crowded bar streets, there being three or four straight establishments within 100 yards of where we are speaking.

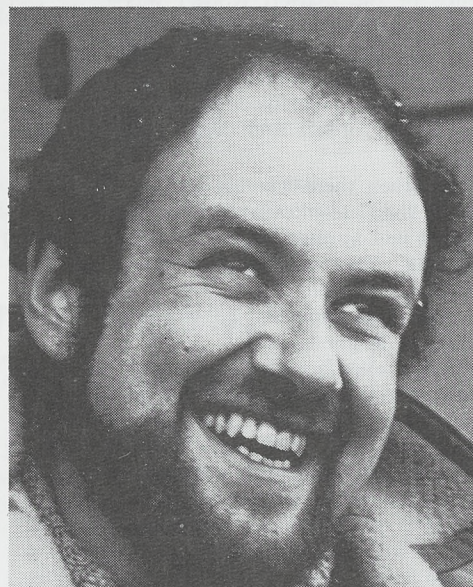


'62: Drunk in the John . . .

## TEN YEARS AFTER

I have told this history to various individuals and groups in recent years. Gay people in my generation usually nod sadly, and chime in with stories of their own (one, from Texas, has three friends who have become junkies as a consequence of a refusal to accept their homosexuality; two have died from overdoses).

Liberated types sometimes argue that such tales should not be told outside of the family, citing the old rule that we should emphasize the "happy" side of homosexual



. . . and Today.

life and refuse to promulgate the "Boys in the Band" image." This is an argument with which I have never agreed. Gayness has brought me far more happy moments in my life than sad ones—but if the homosexual situation in America was not oppressive there would be little need for gay liberation. It is time that the full force of the "daily violence" against gay people become widely known, with those incidents which have made everyday living for a tenth of a nation a cauldron of fear exposed to journalistic and moral light.

Gay people now in college tend to be stupefied by such details. Could these things have happened only a decade ago, and in such a prestigious place? It seems impossible to them that anyone today could be kicked out of that kind of school simply for being a homosexual; when I visited at Wesleyan last year there was a Gay Liberation Front, there was a gay bar in Middletown, and one estimate was that five percent of the campus was openly gay. For all the legislative and other failures, it is folly to say that the gay liberation movement hasn't accomplished anything. Indeed, inasmuch as gay liberation was an outgrowth of "the movement" in general, it can be said that something came out of it. Our arms may still be in Southeast Asia, we're still boycotting grapes, the poverty statistics haven't changed—but growing up gay in America has become a lot easier. As I contemplate the classes of '77 entering colleges this year, I am glad, very glad, that they aren't "where I was in '62."

GIVE A HOOT. DON'T POLLUTE

# Women's Weekend

March 1-3, 1974  
Wesleyan University  
Middletown, Connecticut

SCIENCE CENTER unless otherwise noted

### Friday, March 1

- Main Tent  
150 Science Ctr. 7:00 p.m. REGISTRATION. Weekend Ticket for All Events, \$2.00 (\$2.50 value) Weekend Ticket Guarantees Admission to all Events including Feminist Theater, Rock Band Concert and Film Series. Science Center Lobby.
- 7:30 p.m. HOW DO MEN LOOK AT WOMEN AND WOMEN LOOK AT THEMSELVES?  
Martha Kent, Psychology Department, University of Vermont "Humiliation Experiences for Women"  
Responding Panel: Jeanine Basinger, Marvin Williams, Riggie Asmundsen, Donald Meyer, Frances Harwood.  
Moderator: Denise Polivy, '74.
- 9:15 p.m. "Sexual Politics in the Classroom" Dick Lindgren, Norma Allewell, Frances Harwood.  
"Not Making It In a Man's World" Sheila Tobias and Barbara Eustace.  
"Liberated Relationships" Male-Female, Female-Female [Women only] Mallory Cacciutto, Charlotte Johnson. \*\*\*\*\*
- Side Tents  
184 Science Ctr. (Faculty Lounge)  
141 Science Ctr.  
149 Science Ctr.

### Sat., March 2

- Main Tent  
58 Science Ctr. 10:00 a.m. "Assertiveness Training for Women" Film and Discussion, Sheila Tobias and Others
- Side Tents  
137 Science Ctr. 11:00 a.m. "Children as People—Non Sexist Education, Alternative Education", Eileen Richmond.  
"What is Sexual Freedom and Who Is It For?" Rosalind Kenworthy, Counsellor, Planned Parenthood Unit, Cornell University; Alan Burry, and Others, plus Russ Walter, Math. Dept.
- Main Tent  
184 Science Ctr. (Faculty Lounge) 1:00 p.m. Career Panel—Women Banker, Publisher, Printer, Lab Director, Entrepreneurs. Moderators: Allison Heisch and Jennifer Malliet
- Side Tents  
184 Science Ctr. (Faculty Lounge) 2:00 p.m. "YES I CAN" Workshops (see also Saturday Film Schedule)
- 184 Science Ctr. (Faculty Lounge) 2:00 p.m. Marriage, Motherhood and Divorce: How to Plan When Everything Is Unpredictable (Allison Heisch)
- 137 Science Ctr. 3:00 p.m. Minority Women, Double Jeopardy and Double Responsibility. (Jennifer Malliet, Margot Benario)
- 139 Science Ctr. 3:00 p.m. Toward a Radical Feminist Theology. Dee Crabtree of Prudence Crandall Women's Center.
- 141 Science Ctr. 4:00 p.m. Professionalism and Feminism, Dealing with the Conflicts.
- 72 Science Ctr. 4:00 p.m. Women and Art, Music and Theatre: Shelley Richtmyer, Kyra Lober, Mary Lucier, Jacqueline Gourevitch, and Others.
- 149 Science Ctr. 5:00 p.m. Household Electrical Workshop
- Greenhouse Pk. 2:00 p.m. Auto Mechanics Workshop
- Lot 3:00 p.m.
- 184 Science Ctr. 3:30 p.m. Human Body Workout—exercise break with Sara

- (Faculty Lounge) 4:30 p.m. Yarrington
- 74 Science Ctr. 4:00 p.m. Plumbing Workshop
- 5:00 p.m.
- Main Tent  
'92 Theater 8:00 p.m. Providence Feminist Theater Performing "Taking It Off" a humorous skit \$1.00 ticket at the door, if available.
- '92 Theater 10:00 p.m. Women's Liberation Rock Band—Deadly Nightshade Concert and Dance \$1.00 ticket at the door, if available. \*\*\*\*\*

### Sun., March 3

- Main Tent  
184 Science Ctr. 9:00 a.m. Human Body Workout—exercise break with Sara Yarrington
- (Faculty Lounge)  
184 Science Ctr. 10:00 a.m. Our Bodies Our Health, Boston or New Britain Women's Health Group
- Planning Committee: Lisa Anderson, Norma Allewell, Mallory Cacciutto, Barbara Eustace, Allison Heisch, Charlotte Johnson, Jennifer Malliet, Renee Poirier, Denise Polivy, Shelley Richtmyer, Rudite Robinson, Barbara Strauss, Sheila Tobias. \*\*\*\*\*

### SATURDAY AND SUNDAY FILM FESTIVAL 58 SCIENCE CENTER

- (\$1.50 Admission Charge for whole series)
- Sat., March 2 12:00 Noon to 8:00 p.m.
- 12:00 noon GROWING UP FEMALE
- 1:00 p.m. ANYTHING YOU WANT TO BE
- 1:15 p.m. JOYCE AT 34
- 2:00 p.m. THREE LIVES (Millett)
- 3:00 p.m. GROWING UP FEMALE
- 4:00 p.m. ANYTHING YOU WANT TO BE
- 4:15 p.m. JOYCE AT 34
- 5:00 p.m. THREE LIVES (Millett)
- 6:00 p.m. ANYTHING YOU WANT TO BE
- 6:15 p.m. JOYCE AT 34
- 7:00 p.m. THREE LIVES (Millett) \*\*\*\*\*
- Sun., March 3 9:30 a.m. to 12:30 p.m.
- 9:30 a.m. GROWING UP FEMALE
- 10:30 a.m. ANYTHING YOU WANT TO BE
- 10:15 a.m. JOYCE AT 34
- 11:00 a.m. THREE LIVES (Millett)
- SUNDAY AFTERNOON FILM FESTIVAL  
Presented by: Jeanine Basinger  
AT THE CINEMA  
Center for the Arts
- (No Charge) 1:00 p.m. Man's Castle with Spencer Tracy and Loretta Young and a short feature
- 3:00 p.m. Discussion
- 3:30 p.m. Happy Ending with Jean Simmons and short feature
- 5:00 p.m. Discussion \*\*\*\*\*

RELATED EVENT: On Sunday, March 3 at 7:00 p.m. Mary Daly, Theologian and Author of BEYOND GOD THE FATHER: TOWARD A PHILOSOPHY OF WOMEN'S LIBERATION will give a lecture-discussion on SCAPEGOAT: Religion and the Sacrifice of Women at the University of Connecticut Law School Auditorium, 1800 Asylum Avenue, West Hartford. Co-sponsored by ALERT and the Women's Organization of University of Connecticut Law School. Tickets available from G. Fox, Htfd. Box Office and ALERT (233-3303). \$3.00.