

CHAPTER 18

RIOTING FOR GAY LIBERATION

THE STONEWALL RIOTS, 1969



A contemporary photo of the Stonewall Inn in New York's Greenwich Village

A community forced to live in shadows proudly stands up to the police.

In the 1960s, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender people, and those questioning their sexual orientation or assigned gender (now known as the LGBTQ community but back then usually just called gay) faced severe legal and social discrimination.

Gay bars, gay parties, and gay sex were illegal in most states. Dressing in clothes not considered “correct” for a person’s assumed gender could lead to prison or shame on the front page of the local newspaper. If their identities were publicized, LGBTQ people could lose their careers and homes. Since homosexuality was officially classified as a mental disorder, the authorities (and sometimes their own families) sent many gay people to mental institutions. Believing gay people to be susceptible to blackmail and Communist influence, the US government had declared homosexuals a security risk in the 1950s and purged thousands of people from government jobs.

But a vibrant LGBTQ subculture existed. As with other minority communities, the subculture wanted recognition and social justice. Underground organizations such as the Mattachine Society in Los Angeles and the Daughters of Bilitis in San Francisco advocated for acceptance of homosexuals and eventually grew into national organizations. In April 1965, these two groups staged the first public gay and lesbian political demonstrations outside the White House and the United Nations, to call attention to the imprisonment of gay people in Cuba.

Hundreds of gay bars, nightclubs, theaters, and gathering places existed as well, in spite of being illegal. The Mafia operated many bars and clubs, especially in New York City. While the Mafia paid bribes and kickbacks to corrupt police officers to keep their illegal gathering places in business, police raids still happened.

Gay patrons, caught in these raids, were blackmailed and violently harassed. In August 1966 in San Francisco, a group of transgender women fought back against the police intimidation in what became the Compton’s Cafeteria riot. In 1967 in Los Angeles, patrons of the gay Black Cat tavern held a demonstration after police beat and arrested fourteen people there on New Year’s Eve. These events set the stage for the largest LGBTQ protest of the early gay civil rights era, the Stonewall Riots.

The Stonewall Inn in New York City’s Greenwich Village was a bar often targeted by police. It catered to a diverse, younger clientele, many of whom embraced the countercultural spirit of the 1960s and its emphasis on social justice and individual expression.

THE RIOTS

"Police! We're taking the place!" came the cry from the Stonewall Inn door at 1:20 a.m. on Saturday, June 28, 1969. The police burst into the crowded bar, and the lights came on, revealing more than two hundred people inside. Police barred their escape from the windows and doors, demanded identification from patrons, and separated transgender people into a group for officers to take into the bathroom to "confirm" their birth gender.

Unlike at previous raids, the Stonewall patrons refused to strip naked or to produce identification. In their confusion, police decided to arrest many of them and take them downtown to police headquarters. But a crowd had gathered outside to watch what was happening and heckle the officers. Witnesses say the atmosphere was a mixture of humor and hostility. But when a police officer hit a lesbian over the head as she was led out of Stonewall, she reportedly yelled to the crowd, "Why don't you guys do something?" The crowd, which had grown to more than five hundred people, began rioting, joined by more people from other gay bars in the area and bystanders on the street. Rioters chanted "gay power" and attempted to overturn police vehicles and slash tires.

Police officers try to push back protesters outside the Stonewall Inn on June 28, 1969.



The riots became a spectacle, lasting five more days. They attracted huge crowds that protested for gay rights and visibility, while showing what was then scandalous public affection and continuing to battle with police. The protests attracted all strata of gay New York society, from street prostitutes to famous writers—even tourists showed up. Like many such social actions, not everyone in the community approved. The outspokenness and diversity of Stonewall clashed with the clean-cut, more “acceptable” vision of homosexuals that older gay rights organizations hoped to project to win the public’s approval.

With their diversity and radical approach, the Stonewall riots are widely considered the flash point of the contemporary LGBTQ rights movement, which has brought everything from the decriminalization of sodomy laws to same-sex marriage. Immediately following the riots, several radical gay publications and organizations formed, including the Gay Liberation Front, the first organization with the word *gay* in its name. The next year, LGBTQ people gathered in cities across the country to commemorate the riots in Gay Freedom Day picnics and parties, which later became the huge, worldwide Gay Pride or LGBTQ Pride marches and celebrations.



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KICKING UP THEIR HEELS

Musical theater was a big part of gay culture at the time of Stonewall. Famous musical star Judy Garland had died just days earlier, and much of the crowd was in mourning. So the protest songs and chants during the riots were especially theatrical. LGBTQ people at the riots formed lines, linked arms, kicked up their legs in unison, and chanted, “*We are the Stonewall Girls / We wear our hair in curls. / We wear no underwear / We show our pubic hairs.*” It was a bawdy act of cultural defiance in the face of armed authority.

ON THE FRONT LINES

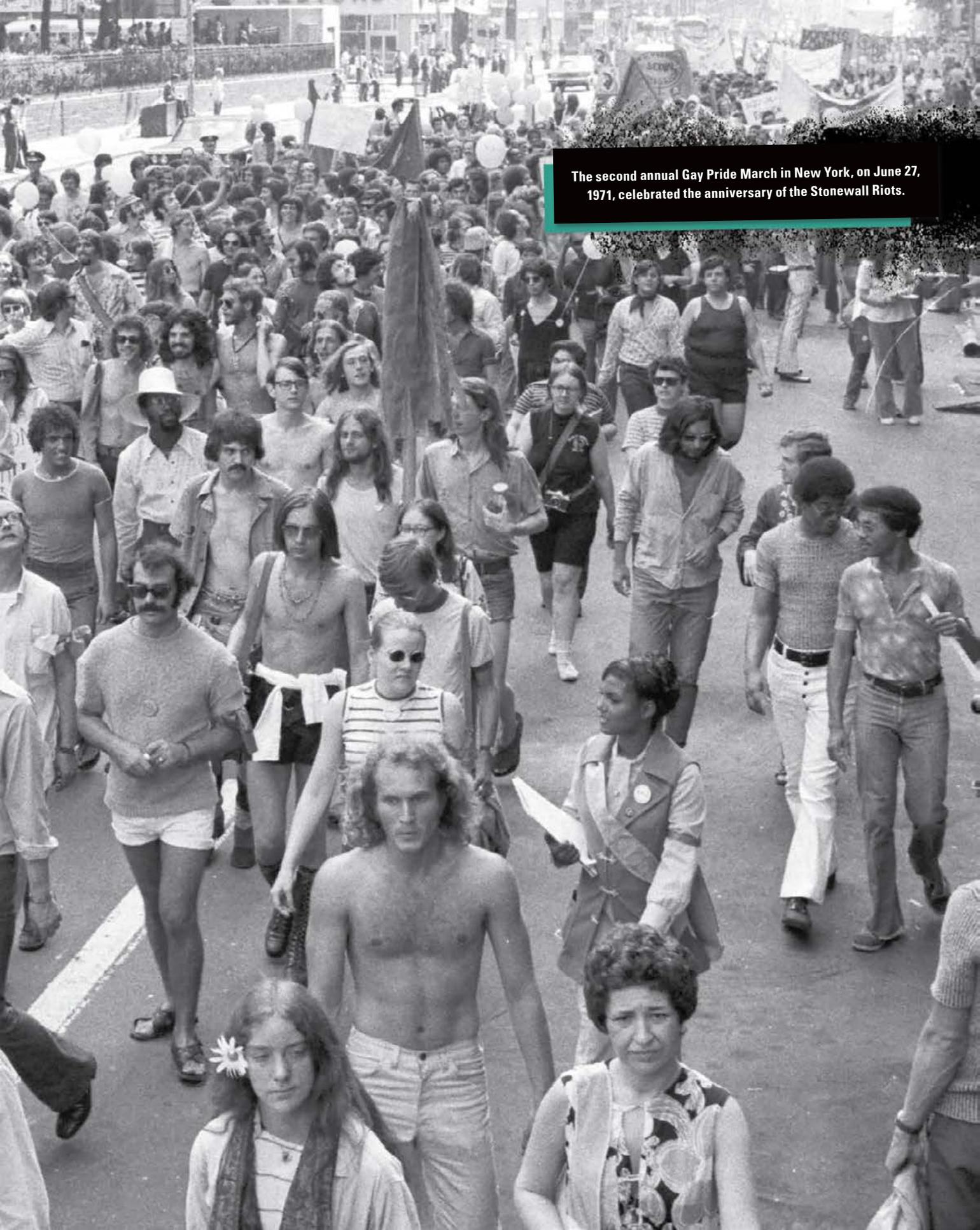
SYLVIA RIVERA (1951–2002)

Called the Rosa Parks of the transgender movement, Sylvia Rivera was a civil rights, anti-Vietnam War, and feminist activist who participated in the riots. Along with her friend Marsha P. Johnson, Rivera later became one of the most prominent voices for gay and transgender liberation, starting several organizations and advocating for diversity and tolerance.

MARSHA P. JOHNSON (1945–1992)

Outspoken transgender activist and model Marsha P. Johnson was known as the mayor of Christopher Street, the street where the Stonewall Inn stood. One of the most prominent participants in the riots, she cofounded the Gay Liberation Front gay rights organization immediately afterward. With Sylvia Rivera, Johnson formed the transgender advocacy group Street Transvestite Action Revolutionaries in 1970.





The second annual Gay Pride March in New York, on June 27, 1971, celebrated the anniversary of the Stonewall Riots.