SCENE

HAVEN IN HOUSTON

by Bill Whiting

Houston, the burgeoning energy capital of the world, sits just inland from the Texas Gulf Coast, where the Great Southern Pine forest meets the rolling plains of the American West. It is a city almost without a history; a sleepy Southern town until oil was discovered at the turn of the century and the Houston Ship Channel was dredged from a small, muddy bayou 15 years later, Houston now boasts a metropolitan population well on its way to 3 million (an estimated 250,000 are gay) and growing at a rate of 6,000 a month.

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on aspects of the gay community's first media superstar, is a lecturer in the gay studies program, a group of non-credit courses (including Homosexual Reality for Police and Other Bureaucrats) at the University of Houston's Downtown College. Hill, whose name elicits reactions from gay people ranging from adoration to disgust, is credited with negotiating with the current sympathetic city administration for non-enforcement of anti-gay ordinances affecting crossdressing as well as the soon-to-be-announced administrative policy calling for non-discrimination in municipal employment, a matter greatly affected by the recent Supreme Court decision in Singer vs. the U.S. Civil Service Commission. Among his other attributes, Hill claims credit for the removal of the police pederasty squad from a lecture circuit including area secondary schools, where it was in-

was the first president of the GPC, which is credited with saving the mayor's political life with an endorsement in the last election, but has now handed control to another activist, Don Hrachovy, and expects the GPC will continue the successful tactics of the past—tight control, lack of demands, forethought and conservative dress, tactics that won access to the police chief and two of his top aides. In Van Ootegheim's words, "the organization must stand after we are gone and it will, because we have a strong group of lieutenants."

Other organizations spun off from the GPC are the Houston Human Rights Defense Fund, the Gay Caucus within the local ACLU and the Montrose Activity Center (MAC). The Defense Fund was originally a strike fund to provide a way of combatting police harassment but currently is being used as a vehicle to end racist and sexist discrimination in the local gay bar scene, a move unheard of elsewhere. To combat anti-gay discrimination, the Gay Caucus will come into reality next month, but the MAC has been around for over a year and is currently preparing **El Grande de Coca Cola**, a musical comedy farce, for presentation in March in the Reunion Theatre downtown. Last year they presented **P.S. Your Cat Is Dead** in the same location, but if all goes well in their negotiations, the MAC, Van Oot-

people reside, feels there is no hope of repealing the sodomy statute this term. Nevertheless, legislation to that effect has been introduced.

Political activity is not the only front on which gay rights are being pursued in Houston. There are two gay churches, the MCCR (out of Los Angeles) and the Christ's Communion Church, a charismatic congregation. Ray Hill's gay radio show has the largest audience of any program on the local Pacifica affiliate, and a gay television program should be on the air in the near future. Baseball and volleyball leagues have been formed for some time and there is even a gay scuba club. The city supports three gay publication, **The Week in Texas, Montrose Star,** and **Southwestern Courier.** Jim Cagle of **The Week**, for years the only successful gay paper in the state, welcomes the kind of honest, fair competition he knows the gay community is capable of producing and supporting. As he put it, "There are gays enough in Houston to support several quality magazines."

But enough of these facts and figures about the gay life in Houston. What would you do if you came to Houston to check out the city, as thousands are doing yearly? First of all you would have to find out where the gay people are. Generally speaking, gay life follows one street as it travels through the West Side of the city. Westheimer Road is the axis on which local gay activity turns. Called Elgin where it crosses Main Street just south of the congested downtown area. the street's gay nature becomes immediately apparent to the seasoned observer. Within easy walking distance of that intersec-

HAVEN

It is the fastest growing major city in the United States today due primarily to the highly charged economic climate. Thanks largely to the energy base on which its economy rides, the city has an unemployment rate half the national average and going down. Viewing the local version of lower Manhattan, the most interesting feature is the prominent place occupied by energy and related companies: Shell, Texaco, Gulf, Exxon, Conoco, Tenneco and Pennzoil, to name a few, have either major or national operations offices here.

Houston is not only an oil company town, however. In just the past 10 years, it has become a cultural and artistic mecca. Artists have realized the market and flock here to get their share. One prominent artist has been heard to say "I show my work in New York for the status, but I sell it in Houston for the money." During the past two years the biggest hits on Broadway have been touring companies of the Houston Grand Opera. **Treemonisha** and **Porgy and Bess** are due to be followed this year by another blockbuster as yet unannounced. The Houston Ballet, rumored to be the second wealthiest in the country, premiered the rock ballet **Caliban** and next season presents an uncut **Swan Lake**. Throughout the city gay people are active in business, the arts and academia.

The most important thing to remember about the gay lifestyle in Houston, 1977, is that it is unique to the city. Located in the heart of what federal pornography prosecutors term the Bible Belt, this most liberal of Southern cities is a haven of and for gay men and women lost in a sea of regional misunderstanding, intolerance and bigotry. To be sure it has not always been so. Despite the homosexual traditions of the American West, where the only females available for months at a time were four-footed, there was no up-front gay community residing in the city. Homosexual activity was always present but seldom admitted, much less persecuted. The most prestigious university in the city was, in fact, established in the will of a local turn-of-the-century businessman murdered by his valet and apparent lover, a matter quietly dropped then and ignored still. It was not until the radical politics of the '60s that local gay people began to awaken to what was present around them. Without realizing it, Houston had become home for thousands of gay people, predominantly well-educated professionals looking for a free lifestyle in a warm climate without the urban problems of the great gay centers of New York, Los Angeles and San Francisco. They found this and job security in Houston, a city as different from its rural hinterlands as night from day.

Late in this period there began to occur the first feeble efforts at vocal gay activity. Ray Hill, a Houston area native and frequently quoted gay activist, became one of the first to speak out. Today Hill, who appears so often in the area news that he has taken

ing with the current sympathetic city administration for non-enforcement of anti-gay ordinances affecting crossdressing as well as the soon-to-be-announced administrative policy calling for non-discrimination in municipal employment, a matter greatly affected by the recent Supreme Court decision in Singer vs. the U.S. Civil Service Commission. Among his other attributes, Hill claims credit for the removal of the police pederasty squad from a lecture circuit including area secondary schools, where it was involved in heavy anti-gay propaganda. This Chickenhawk Squad, as it was officially known, was the chief official response to the infamous Houston mass murders of several years ago in which 27 young men and boys were killed. Despite the sensationalism of the press and the suppression of evidence that would have cleared the gay community of the taint, the expected pogrom never developed. What did occur was the gradual mobilization of involved gay people throughout the city. Organizations such as Integrity and Dignity, both religiously based gay study groups, either became freshly active or formed anew.

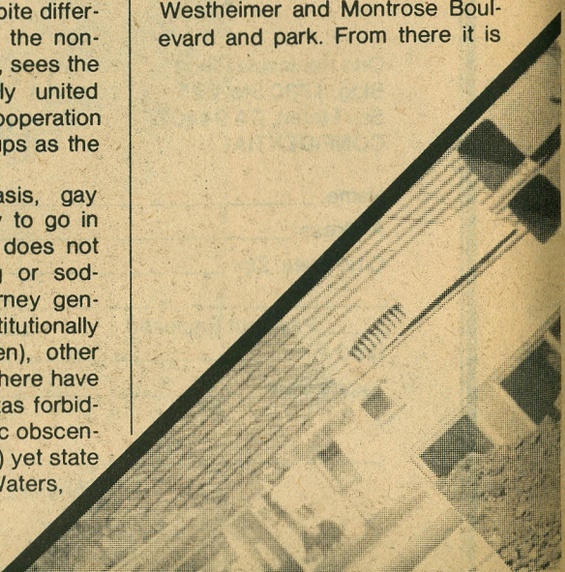
Fortunately for the gay movement in Houston, its gay organizations do not compete. Currently they are structured around the needs they can serve rather than the personalities in them. The Gay Political Caucus (GPC) formed to make broad political policy decisions affecting the movement as a whole. The event that actually spawned the GPC was the firing of Gary Van Ooteghem from the second highest paid county post in the state, Comptroller of Harris County (Houston), for asking the county fathers to enact gay rights legislation. At that time he came out publicly. The matter is still in the courts and Van Ooteghem expects a favorable judgment. He

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Other organizations working actively for the cause in Houston are the Gay Activist's Alliance (GAA) and the Gay Academic Union at the University of Houston Central and Clear Lake City campuses. The GAA sponsored last year's Gay Pride March, which drew only 300 (it was required to be held downtown, outside the gay community) and plans to repeat it again this year. Katie Feller, GAA president, reports no problems with university administrators and, despite differences in strategy with the non-academic organizations, sees the community as basically united with increased cooperation among the various groups as the most likely future.

On a statewide basis, gay rights have a long way to go in Texas. While Houston does not enforce cross-dressing or sodomy statutes (the attorney general feels it is unconstitutionally aimed at only gay men), other areas of the state do. There have never been laws in Texas forbidding solicitation or public obscenity (males kissing males) yet state Representative Ron Waters, in whose district many Houston gay

city, as thousands are doing yearly? First of all you would have to find out where the gay people are. Generally speaking, gay life follows one street as it travels through the West Side of the city. Westheimer Road is the axis on which local gay activity turns. Called Elgin where it crosses Main Street just south of the congested downtown area. the street's gay nature becomes immediately apparent to the seasoned observer. Within easy walking distance of that intersection are two baths; the Club Bath Chain is represented here and the posh Midtowne Spa will be opening in a matter of weeks. Also nearby are the city's two gay cinemas, the Mini-Park and the French Quarter, as well as numerous gay clubs and countless bookstores and movie arcades. Shortly after crossing Main, Elgin enters the Montrose and becomes Westheimer for the remainder of its trip through the affluent West Side, passing the glittering Galleria on its way to the suburbs. This is one of the primary thoroughfares for commuters in Houston, and the traffic can be unbearable, so until you are familiar with the city, your best bet is to drive to the corner of Westheimer and Montrose Boulevard and park. From there it is



possible to walk to many of the clubs and points of gay interest without fear of becoming lost or a statistic in a police report. A bit farther down Montrose you will find the fine old Plaza Hotel, voted the classiest in the state, an excellent place for the gay traveler to bunk—unless of course you intend to stay in the baths.

If Westheimer is the gay axis then the previously mentioned intersection is the pivot point for your stay here. Be careful: this is a unusual neighborhood; even though this is the bohemian area, it is also the only part of town where any real history has been preserved. Stop in for a walking tour at the Libran Bookstore; it is worth the dollar. Everyone from Clark Gable (he was a plumber then) and Howard Hughes to Lyndon Johnson has lived here. Once the bastion of wealth and power in a money-oriented city, there are many fine examples of antique architecture still existing and admired and treasured everywhere in the city. As a result, Houstonians of all sexual persuasions flock to the area to play, creating a situation unlike many other gay centers in the frequent side-by-side locations of both gay clubs and straight discos. Be careful and look around before you get too carried away, or you might be embarrassed to find that drag queen is a genuine article.

With that warning in mind, start walking. The first place most people hear about is Mary's, where Sunday afternoons are a not-to-be-forgotten experience. Home of one of the local motorcycle clubs, it is the essence of that explicit get-down raunchiness one expects from a biker club. Remember, however, everyone there is not a bike boy, so you will be safe. If raunch is not your bag, turn the other way and head for the newly opened Silver Bullet personalities and other aspects of its bartenders. This club is quite a phenomenon; though less than a month old, it sells more beer than any other bar in the city, gay or straight, so much so that Coors is reportedly sending a special truck in from Colorado to meet the increased demand. There is no sign but you should have no trouble spotting the place, since the front door is flanked by man-sized chrome bombs. Also in the area are Uncle Charlies eatery for disco dining, the Barn (bridge tournaments), the Midnight Sun for intimate disco evenings, Sally's cruise bar (in new quarters any day now) and the Pleasure Chest, a leather boutique. Also nearby is Just Marion's and Lynn's, one of the few women's bars in the city. Sadly most of the nightspots are aimed at men, but if you are willing to investigate, there are some fun places for women, too.

If you are not into bar-hopping or street-cruising, you might try the discoteques. The two largest, the Old Plantation and the Depository II, are on opposite ends of the Montrose, but from the way those two are shooting at each other one gets the idea "this town ain't big enough for both." The OP has "sensurround" and the comfortably plastic feel of a gay Disneyland, while the Depository has covered its mortuary walls with graphics that look like temple paintings of some cosmic Pharaoh. As if this Egyptian deco were not enough, they even installed a lighted plexiglas dance floor that smokes. Like Jim Cagle said, competition is good for everyone. Further down Westheimer you will find the Inside-Outside, if you want real cowboys, or the Locker if you do not. And everywhere you turn there are movie arcades that are packed from 2 a.m. until whenever.

During the day and on weekends try the Westheimer Flea Market for antiques of all sizes and descriptions, and the Galleria, a bit farther out, for chic purchases. Cruising is great in both spots. When you get hungry, gay people have plenty of choices with Uncle Charlies, Two Greek Brothers, Judes, Auntie Mame's and the Mug, all gay businesses. If you do not mind eating in a mixed crowd you will be welcomed at Zorba's or The Hobbit Hole, both friendly places that serve the best food in Houston.

If you still need something to do some evening, go to the Rice University area for a drink at the Briar Patch followed by dinner at Auntie Mame's next door. Then it is up Holcombe Boulevard to the Shamrock Hilton (this is the hotel James Dean was supposed to have built in **Giant**, where the Cabaret Theatre presents such camp classics as **Dames at Sea** and **The Ritz**. Afterwards, a drink at the HI-lite Ranch will get you ready for bed and, if you are lucky, one of the local cowhands will tuck you in.



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