

PROFILE

Faerie godfather

Harry Hay, pioneer of the queer rights movement:
still radical after all these years

by Inga Sorensen

The evening before I spoke with Harry Hay, co-founder of the Mattachine Society, a gay organization established in 1950 that many feel represents the beginning of the modern organized gay and lesbian rights movement, I watched MTV's *Singled Out*—a dating game designed for twentysomething straights that, in honor of Pride, was giving us a one-time shot at on-the-air queer coupling. Contestants were encouraged to ask the same superficial questions (e.g., whether one prefers a partner's butt—the popular music channel's word, not mine—to be tight, or a lover's bosom to be profuse). The only difference was that in this episode a boy was allowed to pick a boy; ditto for the girls.

Some may view the same-sex *Singled Out* as a breakthrough, a sign of the queer movement's coming of age. Such folks probably feel similarly about same-sex marriage: Once we get that, we'll have reached a pinnacle.

Hay, an 84-year-old activist, educator, author and visionary does not subscribe to such beliefs. In fact, he believes the push by gay and lesbian people toward assimilation—via MTV or any other vehicle—will undermine a community and culture that is blessed with many gifts, including the proclivity for healing and artistic creation.

"Hell, that's what same-sex marriage will be," says the deep-voiced Hay, a man not known for mincing words. "Why do we want to change our beautiful domestic relationships? Marriage was created as a property relationship between heterosexuals and has traditionally been about control and restrictions. Why do we want that for us? It doesn't make any sense."

Hay's ideas can be found in a new book, *Radically Different: Gay Liberation in the Words of Its Founder*, the first collection of his speeches, papers and interviews. The book is published by Beacon Press and edited by Will Roscoe.

According to *Radically Gay*, during the past eight decades Hay has been involved with pursuits from "avant-garde theater and filmmaking to trade unionism and Marxism, Native American revivalism, and New Age spirituality."

But it is Hay's role in the lesbian and gay liberation movement that has "earned him a permanent place in history."

His most important contribution may be his insistence that there was indeed a "gay culture." That was back in the 1940s when, says Hay, the word homosexual was a verb, rather than a noun.

"Homosexuality was something someone did—not what someone was. We were considered to be straights performing nasty acts," he says. "We didn't even have a word for who we were. Back then people would say 'He's that way' or 'He's nervous.' It was inconceivable for a person to actually be a homosexual."

Not only was it inconceivable to many of that era, it was illegal. Additionally, if one exhibited

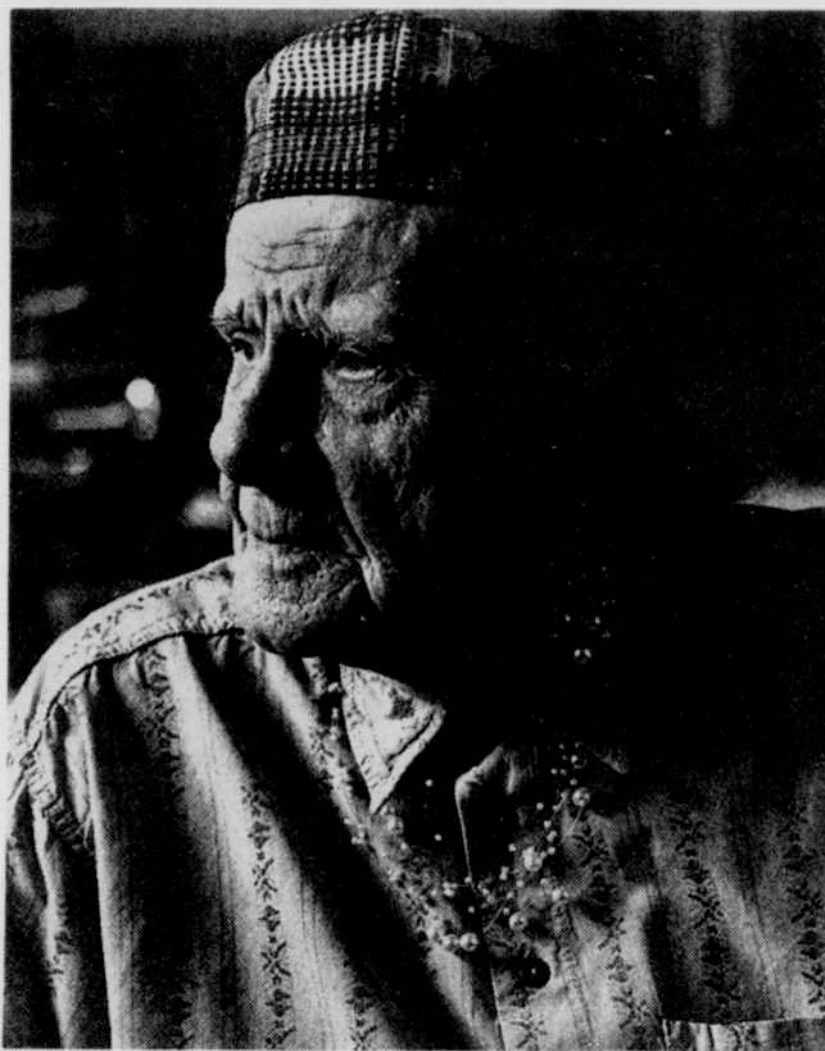
too much "that wayness" he or she could be carted off for some serious therapy or even a lobotomy.

Yet if the stakes were that high, how is it that Hay (and a group of other leftist gay men) were able to create the Mattachine Society, an organization devoted specifically to the welfare of gay people, as they did in 1950?

(According to *Radically Gay*, the Mattachine Society was named after a traditional European folk dance performed in Renaissance France by fraternities of clerics whose public performances satirized the rich, powerful, high and holy.)

Hay, who lives in Los Angeles (where Mattachine was founded) credits his work in other movements, notably the Communist Party and trade unionism, as well as his sustained interest in Native American cultures and spirituality, with giving him both the knowledge and courage.

"Members of the working class knew how to work together and protect each other, as well as form connections with other groups. That's because they may feel they have little to lose, so they can take risks and put themselves on the line," Hay tells *Just Out*. "The average middle-class person feels there is something to be lost, and may be immo-



Harry Hay

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bilized by that fear." He began seriously considering the theory that gays constituted a "cultural minority" due in part to the Communist Party's discussion (particularly in the 1930s and 1940s) around the question of African American cultural and political self-determination.

He used that as a model for his thesis that lesbians and gay men "differ from heterosexuals [as] much as African Americans, Latinos, Japanese Americans, and other ethnic groups differ from Euro-Americans—in terms of shared values, modes of communication, historical heritage, psychological orientations and behavioral patterns." The dramatic theory was embraced by other Mattachine Society organizers.

"In Mattachine, during those first years after we formed the organization, we talked about working for things like retirement homes for [gay] people and a home for gay street kids," writes Mattachine Society co-organizer Chuck Rowland in *Making History: The Struggle for Gay and Lesbian Equal Rights, 1945-1990*. "We wanted to provide job placement services and legal advice. And we wanted to go further."

Hay's concept allowed for an entirely new

way of viewing gays—as a culture and a movement—which was then a cutting-edge notion.

Over the years, Hay has held fast to that belief. Citing the role gay men played as spiritual healers in some Native American cultures, Hay even seems to take it a step further by maintaining there are inherent differences between straights and gays—an "imprint" made, and passed throughout the generations, upon queer consciousness.

"We are a Separate People with, in several measurable respects, a rather different window on the world, a different consciousness which may be triggered into being by our lovely sexuality," he said in 1983.

There is no other experience, he adds, like coming together as gay and lesbian people. "There is an undeniable bond among us," he says. "That's what Gay and Lesbian Pride is all about. Heteros can't grasp it."

Though Hay says he believes the bond still exists, he fears it is weakening because of a push toward assimilation.

"We don't belong with the mainstream," says Hay, who has also advanced the theory of a "Gay Window," which according to his book "is a communion of spirit in gay relationships—that is, relationships between social and sexual equals—that heterosexual relations currently lack because of the inequality and psychological differences that society fosters between women and men."

The Gay Window, we are told, is simply "a world view neither better nor inferior—but *athwart*" and thus has something to contribute to the broader community.

Hence Hay's opposition to same-sex marriage.

"We have something special to offer society. I wish more of us would recognize that. Our relationships, even the jobs we perform, should be models," says Hay. "For example, we allow women to look the way they think they want to look—as designers and hairdressers, we give them the opportunity, without being judgmental—to be who they want to be."

For the past 15 years or so, Hay has been involved in Radical Faeries, a loosely affiliated group of men around the country who celebrate what can be described as a pagan spirituality.

A faerie "sanctuary" exists in Wolf Creek, Ore., where faeries come to revel in one another and their shared spirituality.

"It is a lovely brotherhood of gay men," says Hay. "Of men who, as little sissies, secretly loved who they were. Now, as adults, they can come together to celebrate with all the wonderful sissies just like them."

Harry Hay will be speaking at Powell's City of Books, 1005 W Burnside in Portland, on Wednesday, July 24, at 7:30 pm.

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