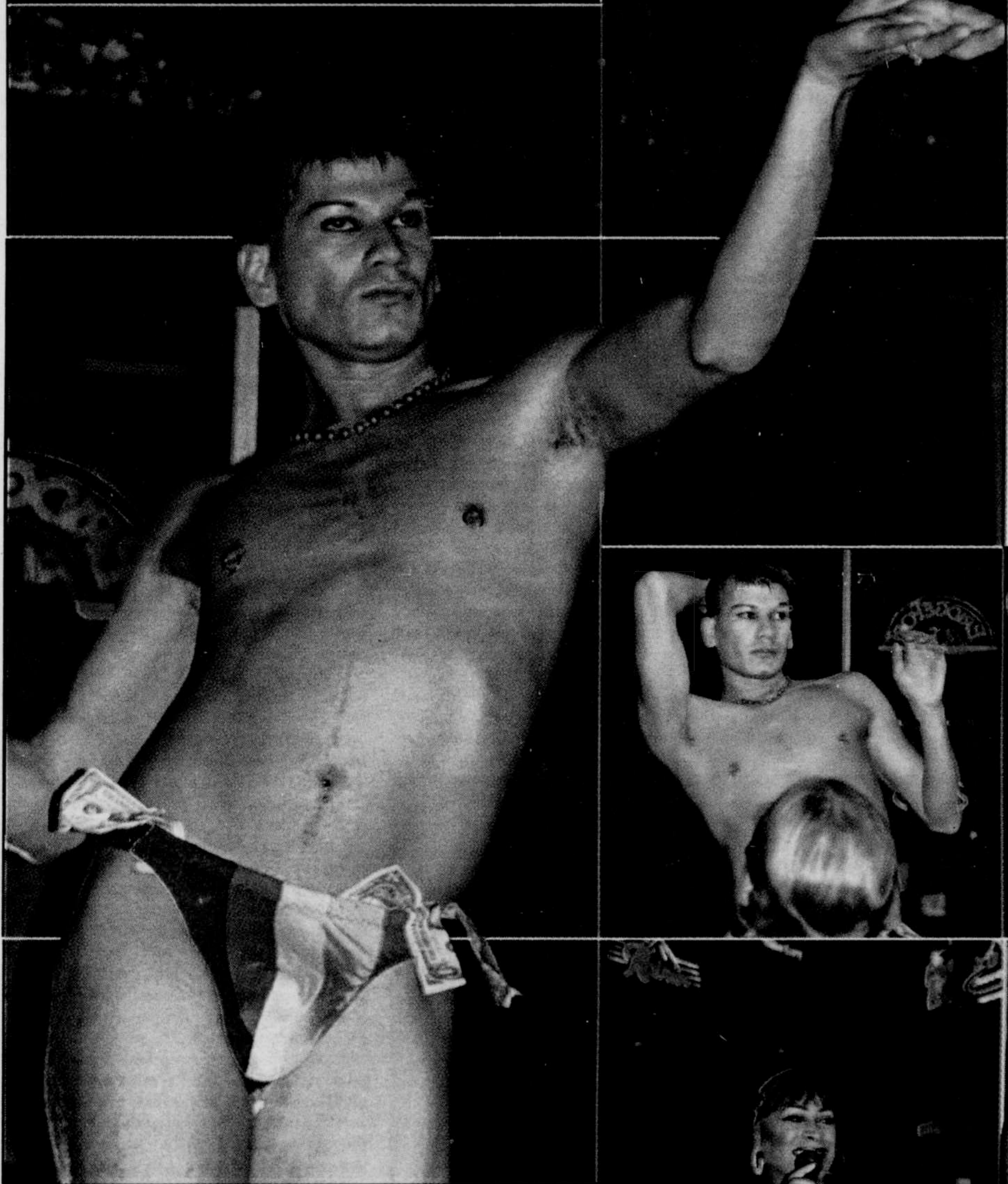


Jewell and Boy Toy (inset) are among the uninhibited dancers who take to the stage at Silverado; hostess Poison Waters works the crowd



Jewell, an openly gay Silverado stripper, adds, "A gay audience doesn't want that money to go into a straight guy's pants." The exotic, feline veteran has supported himself completely for the past eight years by dancing in gay clubs and recently was recognized by the *Seattle Gay News* as the "queen of all the strip bars."

It's the music that keeps the aspiring choreographer going. Experience has shown him "the guys who do it for the easy money based on their looks don't last more than six months."

I'm told, too, the straight ones don't last, or if they do, they don't stay straight. Now I wasn't aware that shucking your clothes in public was some kind of gay rite of passage, but for a number of hard-bodied guys apparently it is.

Take, for example, my future boyfriend Muscle Dennis, a 31-year-old engineer whose biceps are thicker than my neck. In a scene straight out of *Queer as Folk*, his mother first learned he was gay when he showed up at her office and was recognized by an enthusiastic fan who had seen him dancing on top of a box in a gay bar. For Dennis and other hotties like him, the shedding of inhibitions along with his clothing formed a significant and not unmeaningful part of the coming-out process.

The totally fabulous drag diva Poison Waters, who is the happenin' hostess for the Sunday happy hour, concurs and tells me the beefiest, most muscular guys oftentimes are the amateurs who just happen to be in the bar that day. "It's like, 'Hey, it's my birthday!' or 'Hey, I'm from Seattle!'" she says. "And the next minute they're on stage in their birthday suits."

Typically, though, the guys who do it as a lark only last for a few months, eventually giving it up when the fun wears off.

## Open Zippers, Open Minds

As far as I can see, lasting as a stripper requires a surprisingly evolved view of human behavior. Even the guys who might be going home at night to their girlfriends demonstrate an understanding of the fluidity of sexuality more sophisticated than a lot of gay men I know.

"Dancing here is the best thing that's ever happened to me," says Kurt, a big Dolph Lundgren type you wouldn't expect to say such a thing. "It's made me 100 percent open-minded." The bisexual psychology student and personal trainer thinks a lot about human nature when he works and doesn't see the relationship of the stripper to the patron as a power struggle but a mutually satisfying symbiotic arrangement.

Indeed, the only power struggle occurs between those dancers who feel competitive for tips. Longtime veteran Jewell concurs, saying he's seen dancers deliberately put their own money in their G-strings in order to brag about all the tips they've earned.

Stripping can put a strain on relationships outside the club, too. It should come as no surprise that strippers have little trouble finding boyfriends (JR reports receiving an average of four phone numbers a night—five if you include mine), but keeping a boyfriend is another matter.

Jewell tells me, for instance, despite the fact he usually meets the guys he dates while on the job, it's only a matter of time before a pattern of jealousy emerges. "They tell me they don't want me to dance, they don't like other men putting money in my G-string."

Jewell hopes to find someone who is mature enough to let him do his job. "Your tips go to shit if anyone knows your boyfriend is on the floor," he explains.

Family approval poses a similar problem, and the dancers' opinions on the issue are some of the most eloquent I've ever

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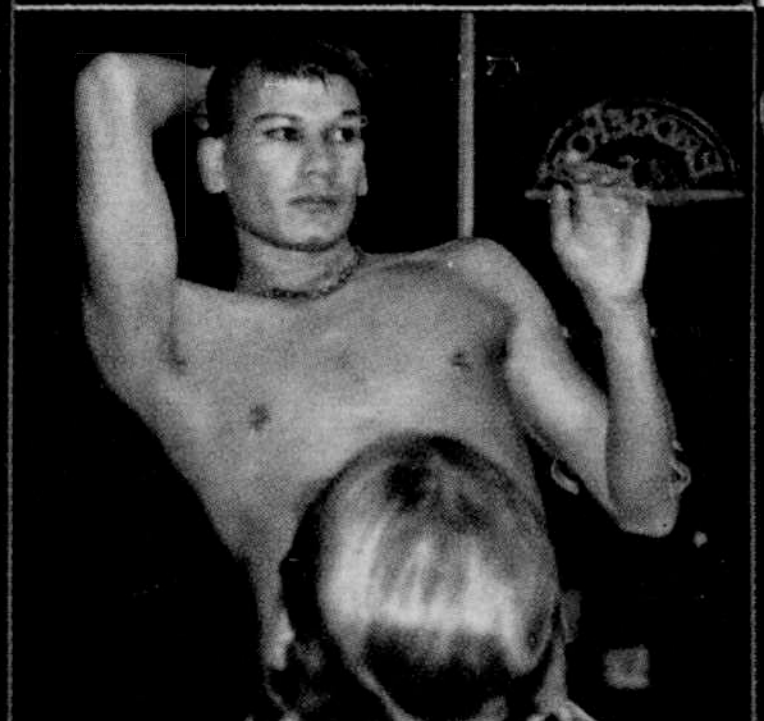
Silverado has a tanning bed in the basement available to all employees, which helps hide blemishes where you least want them, and the dancers trim their pubic hair with all the attention of a master gardener shaping topiary.

## Thong and Dance

Male strippers might let it all hang out as far as nudity is concerned, but they're much more circumspect when it comes to their sexuality. When asked about it, some of the guys give evasive, Ricky Martin-style answers like, "I consider myself a human being."

I, for one, delight in this dodge, because it's the reverse of they way it normally is used in the outside world. They want us to think they're gay. The smart ones know the possibility of a sexual encounter is part of the fantasy a stripper must maintain, so keeping the audience guessing adds to the intrigue.

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Down in the dressing room JR informs me he's bi, and we talk about the sexual mystique necessary for the job. Still naked, he takes one step too close to me and looks deep into my eyes. "You're having sexual thoughts right now, right?" he says.

I just gulp and nod.

"Yeah, well, if we act like dumbasses you won't," he says, his point made.