

**NORTHWESTnews**

**E**very year, large groups of men gather in remote areas seeking to commune with nature and explore the spiritual significance of being gay. Many of them dress in bizarre, fanciful drag—frilly dresses and flowered bonnets contrasting with beards and hairy chests—while others wear nothing at all, as they dance around a bonfire, invoking ancient gods and goddesses.

At first glance, the Radical Faeries seem to be holdovers from the counterculture of the '60s—although with a light-hearted camp sensibility that is unmistakably queer. But their central concern is serious: They believe gay people are a special tribe with a unique role to play in the evolution of human consciousness.

The roots of the movement date to the mid-1970s, when a number of men became frustrated with the urban gay community. They criticized the banality of a culture based in bars and bathhouses and saw the rise of the "clone" look—mustache, flannel shirt and tight jeans—as pandering to heterosexual ideas of masculinity.

Hoping to cultivate a community based on "gay values," some men left the cities to establish rural farming communes. In 1974, one of these groups launched *RFD: A Magazine for Country Faggots*, where readers could find idealistic meditations about bonding with nature.

Meanwhile, back in San Francisco, gay mystic Arthur Evans theorized in a series of 1976 lectures that the fairies of folklore were in fact allusions to gay male goddess worshippers suppressed by the new Christian authorities. "Their greatest 'crime' was that they experienced the highest manifestations of the divine in free practice of sexuality," he wrote in 1978's *Witchcraft and the Gay Counterculture*.

Fairies were also on the mind of Harry Hay,

**Portland Radical Faeries float down Stark Street during Portland Pride 2002**



PHOTO BY CHEYNE CUMMING

the pioneering activist who in 1950 founded the first major U.S. gay rights group. In 1970, he and his partner, John Burnside, moved from Los Angeles to northern New Mexico.

Around that time Hay began using the word "fairy"—the slur bullies had used against him as a child—to describe the peculiar "otherness" of gay men, the quality of being neither masculine nor feminine. He concluded gay men were uniquely endowed with a "subject-subject" mode of thinking, able to relate to both people and things not as objects to be consumed or manipulated but rather as "another self to be respected."

Homosexuality, Hay argued, was a necessary factor in human evolution, and gay people belonged to a special, separate "tribe." Rather than assimilate into heterosexual society, they were called to heal it.

**FAERIE TALES**

**Spiritual movement believes gay people are essential to human evolution**

by Rawley Grau

In 1978, Hay and Burnside became friends with two other men who thought along similar lines: Don Kilhefner, an activist from Los Angeles, and Mitch Walker, who was studying Jungian psychology at Berkeley. Together, the four men set about planning the first "spiritual conference for Radical Faeries."

More than 200 men came to that gathering, which took place during Labor Day weekend in 1979 at a Buddhist retreat center in the Arizona desert. As they grew comfortable with one another, they began to shed their inhibitions, as well as their clothes, donning feathers, bells, beads and body paint.

In one unplanned event, a group of about 50 men began covering each other in mud, chanting and dancing. "It evoked a sense of timelessness that I sometimes feel during especially satisfying lovemaking, that I am in touch with

something thousands and thousands of years old," one participant later recalled.

Inspired by the success of the gathering, a second was held a year later in a mountain meadow above Boulder, Colo. Here the culture developed further, with men adopting new Faerie names, such as Oak Leaf, Marvelous Pessimon and Ultra Violet Nova.

Since that time, several "sanctuaries" have been established, from Oregon to Ontario, where Faeries live off the land, play host to gatherings and welcome visitors. Circles can be found throughout the United States and Canada as well as in Europe and Australia—even Estonia.

As with any loosely organized group, there have been problems. In the early '80s, for example, Kilhefner and Walker left the Faeries because of what they considered Hay's domineering leadership style. And on another level, some complain gatherings have become more about style—who is wearing the most stunning outfit—than spiritual revelation.

Nevertheless, as gay men become more deeply enmeshed in mainstream consumer culture, the Faerie vision of an enlightened tribe, close to nature and endowed with special gifts for humanity, continues to offer an intriguing alternative model. **J**

PORTLAND RADICAL FAERIES welcome all men seeking alternative spiritual growth and community. They meet twice a month with potlucks and circles at the full moon and the new moon. Coffee hours start 9:30 a.m. Saturdays at 3 Friends, 201 S.E. 12th Ave. For more information call 503-235-0826 or e-mail otter@pcez.com.

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