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Listen Up! Lighten Up! A singer's perspective on Sydney activism pre-1990

Paul van Reyk

Great social upheavals need a song to kick them along. British imperialism didn't have much going for it until Elgar pumped out 'Land of Hope and Glory'. (Actually, imperialism has never had anything going for it.) The French revolution was unsingable and unwinnable till someone came up with that catchy lullaby of the Marseille street Arabs. Trouble is, more often they've been tepid or turgid. Like, I'm Joni Mitchell's biggest fan, but her dirge-like 'Woodstock' ain't within cooe of Hendrix's coruscating 'Star-spangled Banner', so how come Joni gets the guernsey for the anthem of the 1960s?

The gay and lesbian movements worldwide have been no exception. Nothing has come out of the US (except maybe 'Ode to a Gym Teacher'). And had I been on the first Oz Mardi Gras I'd have been on the cops' side — anything rather than trudging coldly along to one more chorus of English bisexual Tom Robinson's 'Sing If You're Glad to Be Gay'. (Dingo knows we were too pc to boogie along William Street to the dance floor hit of the day — 'Shake Your Body Down' by the Jacksons.)

Yep, things were pretty dire in Oz when the fledgling movements here took to the streets. To the rescue came the Gay Liberation Quire (GLQ), a bunch of fags and dykes determined to put the gay back into the movement, with wit, haphazard dress sense and bad choreography. What follows is a look at community activism prior to the 1990s through their songs. It's partisan and shamelessly self-promoting. I was a founding member of the group and wordsmith of a number of Quire songs.

GLQ's first public performance was on Stonewall Day, 27 June 1981. Since its inception in 1978, the march on Stonewall Day had become the centrepiece of the annual public gay and lesbian rights demonstration through Sydney's central business district. Ironically, it was the first Gay Mardi Gras on that same night in 1978 that turned into our very own Stonewall. As the night parade reached its end in Kings Cross, the NSW police closed off side streets and ordered the crowd to disperse. In the riot which ensued 53 people were arrested under Summary Offences legislation of the time. Over the months, as the community demonstrated to demand the dropping of the charges, more than 200 people were arrested.

By 1981, the gay and lesbian movement in Sydney, in Australia as a whole, was a gawky, prepubescent 11-year-old. Its birth is generally taken to be the establishment of the Campaign Against Moral Persecution (CAMP) at a January 1970 public meeting in Sydney. In the intervening years to 1978, there had been considerable activism within the gay and lesbian communities in Australia on a number of fronts.

By the end of 1971, branches of CAMP had been established in all State capitals and on several university campuses. The first gay rights demonstration in Australia saw 70 people picket the headquarters of the NSW Liberal Party in support of the preselection for electoral candidacy of the former federal Attorney-General (who, in 1970, was among the first politicians anywhere in Australia to advocate law reform). In the years that followed,

demonstrations became sine qua non to our campaigns. The GLQ, however, was the first to articulate the real basis for this:

I was on a march when he caught my eye
Walking all alone, with his flag held high
I was feeling bold, thought I'd make a play
I'd try my luck and see what he would say

Walking with his Pink Triangle (la-la-la-la-la)
That's the flag he held (la-la-la-la-la)
Walking with his Pink Triangle
Oh, he looked so swell
A demo's not the place for cruising you might say
But I mightn't ever get it any other way
Blame it on the Pink Triangle
Not the stars above

Many of the demonstrations were in support of law reform. By 1981, Bills to decriminalise sex between men had been introduced in all State legislatures except New South Wales and the Northern Territory, though only in South Australia and Victoria had there been any success. With the election in 1976 of the Neville Wran Labor government in New South Wales, the pressure for reform was ratcheted up several notches. Street mobilisations now went hand in hand with Party room schmoozing. Left gay and lesbian community leaders (some Labor Party members among them) worked with government members, drafting Bills and lobbying for support, setting a pattern for community politics that was fundamental to formulating the later response to HIV/AIDS and that continued on into the 1990s campaigns on the broader gay and lesbian rights agenda.

The connection between Labor and the broad Left of Australian politics is long-standing. The roots of the gay and lesbian movements lay in the social movements of the 1960s — the new Left parties, feminism, the new wave of Aboriginal organising, incipient environmentalism, the peace movement, the student movements in high schools and on tertiary campuses and so on. Many of those in leadership roles in our communities had been activists for many years. The other source of leadership was the Sydney 'Push'. Many of the communities' straight supporters, including those who were to be crucial to the later law reforms, also came from these sources.

Let's face it, you analyse the lot of us fags and dykes as a function of the repressive apparatus of the state and you gotta go the Left and other activisms and libertarian/humanist groupings that are Left-escant. Some of the strongest support in the early days of the movement came from these areas. Humanist organisations in Queensland and Victoria established early law reform groups in those States. In 1972, the student handbook of the Australian National University carried positive information about homosexuality, earning the condemnation of the then (Liberal) federal minister for education. The NSW Builders Labourers Federation, a key construction union, placed a 'pink ban' on work on the campus of Macquarie University in Sydney in support of those campaigning for the reinstatement of Jeremy Fisher, expelled for being a gay activist from the Anglican Church-run Menzies College at the University.

Equally, gay and lesbian activists often took to the streets in support of other activisms. The GLQ did its bit, with a repertoire including the Peter Seeger classic 'The Union Maid', the 1848 Polish revolutionary song 'Whirlwinds of Danger' (first performed at the Sydney Marxist Summer School in 1982 accompanied by a frenzied exhibition of Salvationist tambourine drill — hey, we were postmodern before it was fashionable!), Randy Newman's 'Political Science' (an acidic take on US nuclear imperialism), El Salvadorean emigre group Yolocamba Ita's 'Canto a la Patria Revolucionaria', and 'Bayan Ko', a song from the Filipino resistance to US imperialism in the 1930s revived and sung during the anti-Marcos struggles of the 1980s. (The lyrical beauty of which remained unbruised at the Quire's hands). Every Quire performance was a mixture of broadly Left songs and songs

about being gay and lesbian. The Quire never compromised their repertoire, whether their audience was a basically heterosexual crowd or a bunch of guys at a sauna.

When the GLQ approached the Australian representatives of the African National Congress for an anti-apartheid song to include in the repertoire, they offered us:

Somewhere there's a black woman crying
 Fighting for freedom in South Africa
 Somewhere there are black students rioting
 Fighting for freedom in South Africa
 Somewhere there's a black man fighting
 Fighting for freedom in South Africa
 Somewhere there are black miners striking
 Fighting for freedom in South Africa
 They killed Steve Biko this morning
 He died for freedom in South Africa
 When will they free Nelson Mandela
 He fights for freedom in South Africa
 Fighting for freedom in South Africa

The GLQ was often asked to perform at fundraisers for these other activisms — strike rallies, Greenpeace fundraisers, celebrations of the Nicaraguan Revolution, the 'Black, White and Blue Cabaret' for Combined Unions Against Racism, benefits for People for Nuclear Disarmament. In 1985, the GLQ was invited to perform at the 'Rough End of the Pineapple' benefit for striking workers of the Queensland State electricity authority. They borrowed the tune of an old Queensland primary school song to pen lines such as:

Life is great in the Sunshine State
 Every Queensland heart swells with pride
 There's no commies stopping you earn your quid
 Now the right to strike's been denied

There's no way up by Moreton Bay
 We'll have marchers crowding the street
 Only thugs in blue walking two by two
 With an itch for something to beat

Decriminalisation was not the only aim of early activism. The history of the response to gay activism from the Christian churches in Australia has been contradictory. The Newcastle Anglican Synod voted in favour of law reform as early as 1970, as did the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church. In 1971, the Canberra, Goulburn and Melbourne Anglican Synods followed suit. At the same time, gay men and lesbians within churches were subject to virulent discrimination. In 1972 Peter Bonsall-Boone, then Secretary of CAMP (NSW) appeared together with his lover, Peter de Waal, Gaby Antolovich and her lover Sue Wills on the ABC-TV current affairs program 'Chequerboard'. Within days he was sacked from his position as the Secretary of the Mosman Anglican Church, St Clements. Demonstrations attracting over one hundred activists ensued. Jeremy Fisher's expulsion has been mentioned above. In 1976, Michael Clohesy was sacked from his position as a teacher in a Catholic school as a result of his public involvement with CAMP (NSW).

Then in September 1981, Fred Nile, leader of the Right-wing Christian organisation the Festival of Light was elected to the NSW Upper House, bringing more than a touch of the drama queen to religious bigotry, and a constant source of inspiration for Mardi Gras floats. Nile was inevitably the butt of many of the movement's songs, featuring most famously in lesbian singer/songwriter Judy Small's 'Festival of Light'. When the Quire turned to parodying the Christian Right, it did what the gay and lesbian movements had always done: it appropriated fundamentalism, its language and tenets to come up with the

anthem for the movement in the 1980s. (And hey, Tom, it's funny!) (The dance floor hit around then was Blondie's 'Rapture', which unfortunately wasn't a take on the similarly named hoped-for final worldly moment of fundamentalists.)

Thank you Lord for Gay Liberation
 Oh the closet was my darkest hour
 Brothers and sister will fight
 To live 'neath your light
 Thank you Lord for giving me gay power

Well I declare before you all (I'm homosexual/that I'm a leso)
 But don't blame my ma or my pa
 It's not hormones or genes
 That makes dykes and queens
 But the Lord above who makes us what we are

So thank you Lord for Gay Liberation
 Oh the closet was my darkest hour
 With baby Jesus' blessin'
 It's with queers I am messin'
 Thank you Lord for giving me gay power

Now my momma, she cried when I told her
 And my daddy did not understand
 He said 'What have we done
 To our darlin' one?'
 I said 'Daddy it's a part of God's plan'

So thank you Lord for Gay Liberation
 Oh the closet was my darkest hour
 Brothers and sisters will tan
 'Neath the light of God's plan
 Thank you Lord for giving me gay power

(Boys' verse)
 Well I left home and I work nights in a gay bar
 And I found me a truck-drivin' man
 We're just clean-livin' folks
 Who like fiddlin' with blokes
 And I know that our saviour understands

(Girls' verse)
 Well I left home and I work nights in a refuge
 And I've found me a bike-ridin' dyke
 We're just clean-livin' girls
 Who like leather and pearls
 And I'm sure that our saviour empathises

So thank you Lord for Gay Liberation
 Oh the closet was my darkest hour
 Brothers and sisters will fight
 To live 'neath your light
 Thank you Lord for giving me gay power.

Activists were also working for change within their trade unions (with significant victories on benefits and support for decriminalisation, particularly in the public sector and the teachers' union), the media (including at times the otherwise generally helpful Australian Broadcasting Corporation, Australia's public media organisation), the Aboriginal land

rights movement (fielding one of the largest contingents in the 1988 protests against the celebration of the bicentenary of the white invasion of Australia), the anti-nuclear movement (particularly through the group Enola Gay, named for the aeroplane that dropped the atom bomb on Hiroshima), young people (initially through the 1983 groundbreaking report *Young and Gay*, put together by the Twenty-Ten youth organisation) and the armed services. When in 1982 members of a short-lived Gay Ex-servicemen's Association attempted to lay a wreath at the Melbourne Shrine of Remembrance on Anzac Day — Australia's national day of remembrance — they were physically prevented by the State president of the Returned & Services League. Activists in Sydney did lay a wreath at the Cenotaph in the city's Martin Place on Stonewall Day, 1985. This time they laid a pink triangle wreath in memory of those who died in the concentration camps. They sang 'Peat Bog Soldiers', a song that deals with the hope for freedom, ascribed to two prisoners interned in Dachau or Boegermoor.

There had also been a long-running battle against psychiatric practices — lobotomies, deep-sleep therapy, aversion therapy and shock treatment, all of which were still being used in Sydney in the early 1970s. Significantly, in 1973, the Australian and New Zealand College of Psychiatrists was the first of similar professional bodies to remove homosexuality from its classification of mental illnesses. This didn't stop the promotion of 'cures' for homosexuality, of course, as the Quire reminded its audiences:

Hark the herald fairies shout
 Gay is good and gay is out
 Our of closets, out to say
 Liberation's on its way
 Told us we were weak and sad
 Monsters, perverts, sick or mad
 Told us we should know our place
 Strangers to the human race
 Turned out this was just a rumour
 Glad we kept our sense of humour
 Smashed the lies and learned to care
 Now there's love and life to share
 Hark the herald fairies shout
 Gay is good and — gays are out!

Lesbian activists took a leading role in the women's movement as well as taking their place in gay and lesbian activism. They were instrumental in the establishment and running of women's refuges (for victims/survivors of domestic violence), of which 'Elsie' was the first in Sydney, established in 1973, women's health centres (the first of these, Leichhardt Women's Health Centre, established in 1974, for many years operated Lesbian Line, a telephone counselling service) and rape crisis centres. Lesbians were active in campaigns for abortion law reform and in setting up and staffing clinics. They were leading figures in International Women's Day marches and actions and in the Reclaim the Night Marches (highlighting violence against women). They were also leaders in the anti-nuclear movement in Australia, particularly in activism against uranium mining, and in the women prisoners' action group Women Behind Bars.

Lesbians were also key figures in activism around immigration through the Gay and Lesbian Immigration Task Force (GLITF), established in Sydney in 1983. GLITF has been successful in achieving fundamental changes to the regulations by which partners of Australian gays and lesbians are able to emigrate and gain residency.

Electoral activism also has a long history in the Sydney gay and lesbian communities. As early as 1972, David Widdup (a member of CAMP) stood as a candidate for the federal seat of Lowe, in Sydney, against the then prime minister of Australia, William (Billy) McMahon. Widdup's slogan — 'I've got my eye on Billy's seat'. He was not successful. Subsequent attempts were made by Martin Smith (1973) as an openly gay candidate in the State seat of Waverley, Graeme Donkin (1976) in the State seat of Bligh, and Peter

Blazey (1978) in the State seat of Earlwood. None were successful. Nor was Max Pearce, preselected in 1980 as the first openly gay Labor Party candidate at local council level; in this case the Sydney City Council. He was, however, elected to Woollahra Council in 1983. In 1984, openly gay and lesbian candidates succeeded again at the local council level — Craig Johnston, Brian McGahen, and Bill Hunt were elected to Sydney City Council, and Marg Lyons to Leichhardt Council.

Over much of this time, activists met in annual carnival at the National Homosexual Conferences, of which the first was held in Melbourne in 1975, and the last in Sydney in 1986. These mass meetings (numbers varied between 500 and 1000 over the years) were events at which gripes, grand schemes and gritty realism collided with all the finesse and subtlety of sideshow alley at the Royal Easter Show. By gee they were fun! Roll up and take your partners for the coalitionism/separatism tango to the strains of dyke band Stray Dags! See the amazing clone — is he an edgy deconstructor of heterosexual masculinity or just a fool in flannel? Drop into the exotic world of leather and bondage or throw on a frock at the radical drag workshop next door! Take a look down the microscope and watch national activist coalitions be born, struggle for life, and then destroy each other in a feeding frenzy! But most importantly, come out, come out!

Whoops! Where was I? Oh, yeah, the push for law reform continued unabated. In 1978, the NSW Anti-Discrimination Board released a five-volume report into the discriminatory nature of a range of laws in New South Wales. One of its recommendations was the decriminalisation of male/male sex. This was followed in 1982 by the Board's benchmark report *Discrimination and Homosexuality*, in which it again called for decriminalisation and called also for anti-discrimination legislation to cover lesbians and gay men. The latter became law at the end of 1982, creating an embarrassing anomaly in NSW legislation neatly captured in a GLQ song:

Neville Wran's a lateral thinker
 (Fa la la la la la la la)
 Didn't want to seem a stinker
 The logic may be fairly minimal
 Civil rights but we're still criminal

The penalty for rape today
 Is seven years in old Long Bay
 But if you're really courting trouble
 Sleep with me — the term is double

Housing, schooling — treat me fair
 Jobs — as if I was a square
 Unions, clubs, accommodation
 But no sex please — abomination

Once I was beyond the pale
 Now when I get out of gaol
 Nifty says 'You're okay fella, but
 Can we keep it strictly celibate?'

What was Nifty Wran, Premier, to do? Over the next year he came in for a lot of stick. A caravan of gay and lesbian activists parked outside his house in the exclusive suburb of Woollahra for three weeks, singing, petitioning, holding meetings, inviting the heads of the embassies in the area to an afternoon soiree, launching records (*Hormones and Jeans*, *The Gay Liberation Quire Goes Down On Vinyl*, now a highly prized collectors' piece, on a par in some circles with the original 45 of Abba's 'Dancing Queen') and generally getting up the nose of the neighbours. In response to a particularly nasty and pointless raid on Club 80, a popular sex-on-premises venue, various members of the gay community declare themselves as couples who fuck each other regularly, and present these Statutory

Declarations to the NSW Vice Squad, daring the Squad to arrest them, and giving a new twist to that phrase about politics and bedfellows. He turn up at the 21st Anniversary dinner of the NSW Council for Civil Liberties and gets heckled by his lawyer and civil rights buddies for his failure to pass law reform.

Well, it don't take much more, and he tables his own Bill in May 1984, and decriminalisation becomes law in June 1984, appropriately enough on the Queen's Birthday weekend holiday. I like to think that as he put the Bill together, he and his good lady wife Jill boogied round their Woollahra garden to Chaka Khan's groove de jour, 'I Feel for You'.

Finally, there was HIV/AIDS. Sydney continues to be the epicentre of the epidemic in Australia and also the centre of AIDS activism in Australia. It's impossible now to capture the dreadful days of the early epidemic in Australia. It wasn't only the rapidly escalating numbers of the infected, the ill and the dead. AIDS presented an imminent threat to the very identity we were developing as gay men, and to the community we were developing. In its early days, it raised fundamental questions about sexual practices and the concomitant lifestyles we were in the middle of trying to have legitimated. Law reform was still a couple of years off. Those debates we had been having in the National Conferences suddenly were more urgent and more potentially destructive. But what is remarkable about the Australian gay communities' experience of and response to AIDS is that it was precisely through the reaffirmation of identity and community and the mobilisation of these concepts that our victories were won. They were then and continue to be stunning victories of public and personal health that stand as models of best practice in meeting challenging new illnesses.

Such a response could not have been possible had AIDS entered the Sydney gay male community as little as ten years prior to when it did — 1972 as opposed to 1982 — and the significant difference is in the nature of gay identity and community that had been formed over this time. All the talk about the success of the partnership developed in Australia between the gay communities, governments and medical professionals will be too glib, albeit true, if it fails to acknowledge the enormous effort we made to get the epidemic under control through mobilising our organisations and activisms to respond to it.

That response was swift, beginning with a demonstration called by the Gay Solidarity Group in May 1983 protesting the call by the then head of the NSW Blood Bank for gay men to stop donating blood. This was quickly followed by the establishment of the AIDS Action Committee in Sydney, which joined with medical specialists to call the first public meeting to discuss the crisis and begin implementing strategies for dealing with it. It was this meeting, in June 1983, which set the pattern for the partnership between the gay and lesbian communities, the health sector and the state and federal governments. The support organisations Ankali, Community Support Network and the Bobby Goldsmith Foundation were formed soon after. And in February 1985, the AIDS Council of New South Wales was established. That year, the main show at the Mardi Gras Dance Party gave us ten Diana Rosses at either end of the Royal Hall of Industries pumping out 'Chain Reaction'. Make of that what you will.

Sydney was to give birth to a second phase of militant HIV activism with the establishment of an Australian arm of the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power (ACTUP).

The GLQ took its part in the early activism against AIDS hysteria. Here's an excerpt from one of two songs about the subject, this one in response to the panic about transmission from physical contact:

Screws do it, cops do it
Rajneesh in their rainbow flocks do it
Let's do it, let's all wear gloves

Dentists with cold hands down throats do it
 Undertakers in frock coats do it
 Let's do it, let's all wear gloves

Afternoon tabloids scream out at us
 'AIDS is out to get you'
 'Mossies spread AIDS fear panic'
 Do they make rubber body-stockings?

Ita Buttrose we know does it
 Murdoch in the mirror we suppose does it
 Let's do it, let's all wear gloves

Health-conscious dingoes have changed diets
 It's a hazard, I guess
 Joh's tried to ban bleeding
 But without much success

Joh does it, Flo does it
 Pumpkin scones are great because of it
 Let's do it, let's all wear gloves

QANTAS air stewards with flair do it
 Dirty hand towels upset
 Popes refuse to kiss tarmac
 Who'll be wearing them next?

Bisexuals with each way bets do it
 Now it seems that even hets do it
 Let's do it, let's all wear gloves

On 14 November 1987, energies flagging, the Quire ended as it began, singing in a park, this time for a neighbourhood centre's community festival. Funds held by the Quire were distributed to a number of gay and lesbian groups. Members of the Quire went on to be co-founders of the community activist Solidarity Choir, the nuevo canci—n quartet Canto y Lucha, the country and western gospel group Eve and the Forbidden Fruits, and the Wollongong Gay and Lesbian Solidarity Choir (who still use songs from the GLQ repertoire).

Over its six years, the Quire gave over 300 performances, singing at every law reform rally, many a fundraiser and/or birthday and/or Christmas party for gay and lesbian organisations, conferences, seminars, community fairs, rallies against Right-wing Christianity, saunas, drag talent shows, street corners, private parties, dances — any place where people gathered to celebrate being part of our communities. You get some sense of the vibrancy and busyness of that time when you see that this means the Quire on average performed once a week. To trace their appearances is to trace the history of those times. Activism in the gay and lesbian communities continues unabated. The rest of this book takes up the story. But &\$151 why not — a last word from the Quire, from a song that always brought the house down. Like many of the Quire's songs, its underlying message to all us activists is — lighten up, otherwise the bastards will grind you down!

I am the very model of a Sydney homosexual
 My calves are well developed and my moustache is exceptional
 That puny Arnold Schwarzenegger's nothing to get stirred about
 I'm building muscles places straights have never even heard about
 I promenade in Paddo with an enigmatic smile for all
 I've a meaningful relationship that doesn't cramp my style at all

I've gentrified my squalid Darlo terrace just a bit too far
And now get my squalor in a squalid little backroom bar

And now he gets his squalor in a squalid little backroom bar
And now he gets his squalor in a squalid little backroom bar
And now he gets his squalor in a squalid little backroom bar

I never miss the opera — oh, the culture, oh, the glamour
I'm apr□s ski at Perisher and bronzed at Tamarama
I've got a little alligator here upon my pectoral
I am the very model of a Sydney homosexual

I am the very model of a Sydney homosexual
My flatmate's joined the nuns and his indulgence is perpetual
There's hassocks and there's cassocks and there's incense in the entrance hall
But a little dressing up and flagellation I don't mind at all
I've seven pairs of satin shorts and Adidas upon my feet
I've bought a farm at Nimbin but my heart belongs to Oxford Street
I march the streets for law reform, disarmament, ecology
I'm in the Liberation Quire, I'm sound in ideology

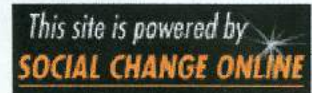
He's in the Liberation Quire he's sound in ideology
He's in the Liberation Quire he's sound in ideology
He's in the Liberation Quire he's sound in ideology

At Parliamentary demos I gesticulate and shout a lot
I sing and chant and wave my pink triangle flag about a lot
In short in things religious, and athletic, and electoral
I am the very model of a Sydney homosexual.

Paul Van Reyk was a member of Gay Solidarity Group and the Gay Liberation Choir, and worked for four years with the AIDS Council of NSW. He co-edits **Queer City** with Craig Johnston

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Phone +61 2 9692 5111, Fax +61 2 9692 5192

Mail: Locked Bag 199, Annandale NSW 2038, Sydney, Australia

Email: pluto@socialchange.net.au

Publisher: [Tony Moore](#). Managing Director: [Sean Kidney](#). On-line Editor: [Colin Hood](#)

URL: <http://www.media.socialchange.net.au/>

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