



UNHEARD VOICES

Stories of LGBT History



Interview Transcript



Michael Levine was at a popular gay bar in New York City in June 1969...when it was surrounded by police. At the time, the vice squad routinely raided and emptied gay bars. Patrons usually complied with the police—frightened at being identified publicly. But this particular Friday night was different because patrons at the Stonewall Inn stood their ground. They clashed—during what became known as the Stonewall Riots.

Here, Michael Levine reflects with his friend, Matt Merlin, on what happened that night.

Michael Levine: It was a Friday night and I had a date. I was at the bar getting drinks for both of us. We had just finished dancing. The music was blaring. It was a combination of beer and cigarettes and cologne. Suddenly, as I'm handing money to the bartender, a deafening silence occurred. The lights went up, the music went off and you could hear a pin drop, literally.

My boyfriend rushed in from the dance floor. He walked over and said, "Put the drinks down. Let's leave." We go out onto Christopher Street and there are what look like a hundred police cars all facing the entrance, and crowds of people looking at us. The kids coming out of the Stonewall, the onlookers, the police – everyone was just kind of standing there.

It was not a riot in the sense of people breaking furniture and police hitting people over the head. It was just an enormous crowd of people. And then the police started to say, okay, everyone leave. And the drag queens, they're the ones who said to the police, we're not leaving. And they formed a chorus line outside in front of the bar. And they stood there dancing in the street. They were all Puerto Rican drag queens and Irish cops. It was a funny, funny confrontation.

When we came back on Saturday night, we stood there on the street and held hands and kissed—something we would never have done three days earlier. It made me feel wonderful. I stood there with chills. It was like when you're watching a parade and the flag goes by and you see something you're so proud of and you see your troops and you get that chill inside of you. I got a chill. I got a chill seeing guys on the street holding hands and kissing.

In the week that followed I got phone calls from relatives—cousins, my brother, my aunt. We're just calling to find out if you're okay. We know you go to places like this. We want to make sure you're all right. That means they knew all along. It was like I was wearing a sign on my back. They knew. We never discussed it. I never had to once say to anyone in my family, I'm gay.

Interviewer: How did you feel about yourself between the beginning of Stonewall and after Stonewall? Did you feel that you were a different person?

Michael Levine: No, I didn't feel that I was a different person. I was the same me. I was a homosexual person coming from an old fashioned Jewish neighborhood living in Greenwich Village on my own. I felt the same, I felt comfortable. But I felt the world now is more comfortable with me. And Stonewall did that for me.