

Soulfully Yours, Ebony

by Sukie de la Croix

Nobody is really sure when the Halloween Balls started in Chicago, though we can certainly place the beginnings of the famous Finnie's Balls on the South Side. They started in 1935 when a Black gay street hustler called Alfred Finnie held a ball in the basement of a bar on the corner of 38th Street and Michigan Avenue. It cost 25 cents to get in and was attended by a mostly Black crowd.

Even though Finnie died in 1943—he was killed in a gambling brawl—Finnie's Balls continued up until the '60s, and were huge glamorous affairs, with upwards of 1,000 people attending. (For more information on Finnie's Balls read "Before Paris Burned: Race, Class, and Male Homosexuality on the Chicago South Side, 1935-1960," by Allen Drexel, an essay included in *Creating A Place For Ourselves*, edited by Brett Beemyn, Routledge \$16.99.)

Over the years, Finnie's Balls changed the lives of thousands of lesbians and gay men, and one of those men was Ebony [redacted] (AKA Morie [redacted]). He now lives in Phoenix, Ariz., but I spoke to him recently on one of his rare visits to Chicago—a city where he came of age.

[redacted] was born Sept. 6, 1936, in East St. Louis, in Southern Illinois, "My dad was a dentist and my mom was a homemak-er," he said. "I'm the oldest of four kids and my dad was a hard worker; he gave us a lot of things to believe in and hold on to.

"At school I was always very quiet, very studious and introverted. I went to the first integrated high school in Illinois. You see, that's back during seg-regation, but my dad was a strong believer that 'you're just as good as anyone else, but no

better,' and that you are seen by your deeds. He was strong and opinionated, and basically you danced to his music. That was another reason I was always quiet, because I was trying to be the little guy that



Above: Ebony today (photo by Sukie) and in performer days (opposite page).

he wanted.

"I think I always knew I was a little different. I used to like to draw and I was quite an artist. I would always tell my mother I wanted to be a fashion designer. Even when I was small I was always attracted to women's clothes. Not that they turned me on, but I thought they were pretty, and I knew how to take them and put them together. My dad and I used to have run-ins because I liked to play with paper dolls ... and that wasn't the masculine, or the boy thing to do.

"After I finished high school, I went off to Junior College, spent a year and a half at Junior College at Wayne State. I didn't get a deferment, because I was drafted in the Army. You take an IQ test when you first go in the Army, and they test you for what they think you would best fit. So I was placed in the medical corps. That was somewhere in the late-'50s. It

was after Korea and several years before Vietnam. I don't remember dates, only events.

"I'll tell you about my Army days. I had a wonderful military career, there have always been gays in the military. I had basic training at Fort Leonard Wood, Mo., then I was transferred ... and that was ASA, secret intelligence — just outside of Boston, and that's when I got a chance to meet other gay people.

"It was the year *A Summer Place* was a big hit ... (1959) ... and that was the movie with Sandra Dee. For my birthday I went to Provincetown, and I remember driving down the coast and having my first romantic feeling toward another per-

son, who was an officer. He asked me if I would like to go to P-town. I didn't know what P-town was. So we drove down and that was the first time I saw two guys kiss in the street. I walked into a post and almost knocked myself unconscious. I was very naive and gullible in those days.

"That's when I had my first male-to-male encounter, and that was with the officer. When I was in service I dated several officers. Being skinny and slightly feminine, I was always attracted to bisexual and straight men. But that's something I'll remember always, driving down the East Coast and hearing the theme from *A Summer Place*.

"I never got a chance to go overseas. I wondered why, because they say 'Join The Army, See The World.' Well, I didn't see much of the world, but I did see a part of the gay world. After getting out I went

back to Highland Park, Mich. My parents divorced when I was 16, and we moved to that suburb in Detroit. I remember going to a bar called the Woodward, it wasn't even integrated then, and a Black kid could stand at the bar and wait a good half hour before the bartender would come over and acknowledge him. So with this, and coming out, and not being sure of who I was, what I wanted to be, and what I wanted to do, I thought, 'I can't live here in Highland Park.' I wanted to fulfil my dream, but I wasn't sure what my dream was. So I told my mom that I would like to go to Chicago.

"And I did. I remember getting off the train and into a cab. Now, my aunt once told me, 'One of the main things you do when you leave home, you always go to the YMCA.' So I jumped in this cab with two suitcases and said to the cab driver, 'Lawson YMCA please.' And I looked in the mirror at the cab driver's face, which was a smirk, smile, a sort of a snicker. It dawned on me later, because in the '60s you can imagine how the Y was. Going to the Lawson YMCA opened a whole new world for Morie Carter.

"So I enrolled in nursing school. At the Y I made a good friend and he was a cosmetology student, and I was a nursing student. We also had a friend who worked for the *TRIBUNE*. So all three of us decided to get this little one-bedroom apartment in Old Town, and upstairs were two other students. We were all as poor as church mice. One was a dress designer, and Paul wrote a dog column, he wrote about dog shows, and Jimmy was going to beauty school. We were so poor we went to Lincoln Park and stole the picnic bench as our dining room table.

"So one day we were sitting in the kitchen and Paul looked at me and said, 'You know, you have a very unusual face.'

Then Jimmy said, 'Let me put some make-up on it.' So they painted my face and Jimmy had some wigs and pieces, and at that time, there was this yellow dress that Liz Taylor wore for the opening of her husband's theater here in Chicago. Laurence had bolts of this yellow chiffon and he made this gown. Then we had another friend who worked in a floral shop. So I was the Barbie doll of my entire group. They whipped all of this up with the hair, with the flowers, big huge bouquets and went to Finnie's Ball, and I won second place, a trophy and \$300. With that we were able to buy food for months and pay the rent.

"After the Ball, people took pictures, and one of the orderlies was there, and he took the pictures back to the hospital where I was a student, and was showing them around, 'This is Morie, don't you know who this is?' So the pictures were confiscated, and I was called into the Dean of Admissions and questioned, 'Are these pictures of you? Are you a transvestite?' I wanted to just die. I was going into my senior year in nursing, but I held my head up and just dropped out of nursing school. I couldn't dare phone my mother and tell her I'd been kicked out of school for wearing women's clothes. I had to go and find a job, and that's when I went back to Chuck [redacted] at Sparrows.

"I had met him one Halloween when I performed one song there, and I knew his manager, Johnny, who was a very nice guy. He had been impressed. I did Shirley Bassey's 'Something.' So when I went back and told them my plight, they said, 'Why don't you come on down?' and so I did, and after that I never looked back. Sparrows was quite a show bar, the ongoing place for female impersonation.

"That was Robey [redacted]'s show, and with Robey you

were a chorus boy until you really proved yourself. So for about two weeks I was a chorus boy, doing male lead with Wanda Lust (Steve Jones), and he and I would pull our wigs off and do boy parts with the other girls. The first big thing that I did by myself was a Tina Turner song called 'Funky Mosquito's Tweeter.'

"But you see, I wanted to be a Shirley Bassey, or a Dorothy Dandridge, and Robey told me, 'Ebony, you're elegant. You can wear those gorgeous gowns and all that, but that's not really you.' I think we were able to listen in those days, kids now—whether it's female impersonation or learning any kind of trade—they don't listen. She told all the kids in the cast, 'If you listen to me, you can go anywhere,' and Lord knows I've been all over the country and done drag.

"When Sparrows closed, I went to David's Place. That was a beautiful bar. By that time I had reinvented myself. I had audience appeal, but I wasn't that sensational. It was entertaining, it was nice, like 'Thank you, now go off.' But the moment I started doing Bluesy, uptempo songs like Big Mama Thornton's, 'You Aint Nothing But a Hounddog' ... that's when I really got popular. Every entertainer has to have hype. You have to have a legend, and back in those days, you had to have soul. My monogram was 'Soulfully Yours, Ebony.'

"And we did excerpts from shows like *The King and I*, *Pippin*, *Raisin' in the Sun*, *Cabaret*, *Godspell* and *Jesus Christ Superstar*, which was one of the most beautiful things I had ever seen on a small stage in drag, with smoke machines and capes that went across the entire stage."

After David's Place closed, [redacted] hung up his heels, "It was time for a reality check," he said. [redacted] went back to nursing and worked at St. Joseph's



hospital for the next ten years. Then, while taking some extended nursing courses at the University of Iowa, he met a man from Phoenix, "He would write nice love letters and he would come and visit. I'd never had a lover, someone who accepted everything that I was. He kept saying, 'Why don't you come to Arizona?' So one day I packed up and moved, and, along with nursing, I worked in my new lover's framing business.

"I didn't do drag, working shows can interfere with a relationship. He was a very shy, sensitive man ... I thought! Then I found Jack had been taking his love to town and after that I lost the respect. In the eight years we were together we had acquired four homes, the business had skyrocketed. So being very hurt I just let it all go.

"So you have to have something else in your life, and so I started back doing drag. This is in Phoenix, and Phoenix being a little Prairie town, they had never seen the likes of me. I wanted to make money, make money fast and be accepted because of my hurt ego from the relationship. I gave them Tony Midnite and Paul Brune

gowns, I did everything except turn cartwheels and set a wig on fire, and that went on for about five or six years, and with the bars closing at 1 o'clock, I was still able to maintain a straight job. I was still in nursing."

For several years [redacted] was an HIV nurse and coordinator at Phoenix Baptist Hospital and has worked with some of the leading HIV physicians in the Southwest. He tells many stories of his experience with AIDS patients.

"One guy said to me, 'You're just an old Black nigger drag queen, why aren't you HIV?' I had to walk away, because that really hurt. Near the end of the shift I went back and I told him, 'I don't know why I'm not HIV, because I've done everything, possibly more things than you've done. But I think somewhere in a big book all our lives are written down and that's the way it's supposed to be. Our lives are hour glasses and the sand pours through, sometimes a little faster and sometimes a little slower. That's our lot in life.' I put my arms around him and gave him a hug, he cried, I cried, and he told me he was sorry."

"You see, I've always been a token. In East St. Louis, at the first integrated high school, I was one of 16 Black kids at this all-white school. Even in the Army, there were quite a few Blacks that were drafted, but I was always a raisin in a bowl of buttermilk. I've always been a token.

"I've had a beautiful life. When I came out being gay was something special, now being gay is an attitude. That's why they relate being gay to 'fairies,' because fairies are mysterious. There was a mystique about it. Something magical and beautiful, and we kept it special. Once we lose that, we've lost the whole mystique of being gay."

This article also appeared in the Aug. 18 OUTLINES.

Leather Scene

by Cain Berlinger

It came as a recent shock to me that the adage "Knowledge is power" is attributed to Adolph Hitler, who commanded one of the most successful propaganda machines in our history.

A few weeks ago I sent out a review copy of *Black Men in Leather* to a publication whose name I can't recall at this time. I received an e-mail from a so-called reviewer who informed me that he found the Leather scene "objectionable, exploitive[sic], elitist" He went on to explain that there "... is enough suffering and sadness in this world without playing the same roles out in the bedroom"

Needless to say I was appalled not only at his immediate judgment as a so-called objective reviewer but he dismissed the book as just more Leather Community "propaganda!" The final correspondence came after this statement: "since the rise of neo-nazi skinhead, in the '80s and early '90s that the gay crowd has adopted the look and has even taken step to forge alliances with The National Front, Aryan nation and other racist organizations!" During this whole correspondence from someone who calls himself Laz, he refused to tell me the name of his publication.

The fear here is that if one person of color has this outrageous bigoted view of one facet of our community, not just the leather community but our role as People of Color in it, then that would go a long way to explaining why the mainstream POC community and the leather POC community remain at odds. This example of ignorance and adamant refusal to be burdened with opposing facts or ideas contributes in part to the splintering of the POC community.

Black Men in Leather focuses on what it is like to be a person of color in the Leather Community from those who live the lifestyle. It is not our place to discount anyone's lifestyle experiences, even if they are not for you.

This is just a small part of the fracturing of our community. We



are now living in a society where we are judged not only by the color of our skin but by the shade of our blackness within our own community, as well. We want the society at large to accept us on our merit yet we don't cut each other the same slack we demand from the white community. It's time that changed, and narrow-minded people like this Laz character should be educated or removed from any position where his words might matter to those of like mind.

This is a struggle that is internalized and should be dealt with as we would any form of bigotry. You don't have to like drag queens, nellys, those who prefer white lovers, or our brothers who choose to wear leather but we can be tolerant and accepting and make an effort to understand where we each are coming from in our private lives.

Coming from a Black man or a White man, bigotry is still ugly.

THY CUP RUNNETH OVER

The Saga Continues

by Lynnell
Stephani Long

This article was supposed to be about my experience at Camp Trans. Camp Trans is a peaceful demonstration against the women-born-women only policy at Michigan Womyn's Music Festival. Unfortunately, the day before I was scheduled to leave for Michigan, I got food poisoning and ended up in bed sick all weekend. I wasn't sure what I hoped to achieve at MWMF.

Change would be good, but what cost was I willing to pay for it?

For years women have been meeting in the woods in Michigan, feeling safe, protected & away from male influence.

Then one day a male-to-female transexual decides that she should be allowed to enter because she identifies as a woman.

These women that are born women object, telling the outsider that she doesn't belong there, and she can't possibly understand what "real" women endure from an early age. They told her she still has her male privileges. The transexual screams, "What male privileges?" She has lived her life as a woman for over 10 years. She works as a woman, lives as a woman and takes the bullshit most women take living day to day. But to the women in the woods this isn't enough. To enter their campground she must be 100% female. The transexual gets confused because as she looks at the women that are stopping her from entering, most of them are butch, masculine lesbians. She can see a few women yards away walking with a strap-on in a harness hanging over their shoulders. Proudly parading their sexual devices. Once again she finds herself angry, not fully understanding what is happening. She thinks, "This is a joke. These women refuse to allow me to enter and yet they parade their 'dicks' openly. What a double standard." This continues for years. Each year she returns to Michigan; each year she is denied entrance.

As the years go by more and more male-to-female transexuals try to acquire entrance to the festival—all proclaiming to be women. One day the group of transexuals thought they would trick the women at the gate by sending one of their prettiest girls to gain entrance. The girl agrees, but hesitantly. As the girl walks up to the gate she is greeted by smiling women. The women at the gate take her money, instruct her where she can set up camp, and allow the pretty girl to enter. The girl stands there for a moment, then asks the women if there is any other information they may need. They look at each other and say no. She stood at the gate, looking at the many women behind the gates, the many women that have been allowed to enter because they are women. She looked at all the beautiful



women, felt the enormous energy, and smelled sex in the air. But what cost would she have to pay to enter? She knew if she entered those gates her friends would have thought they won, but she would have lost her spirit.

This girl, the prettiest transexual of them all, had learned the secret to life and happiness a long time ago. To her it no longer mattered if she was allowed to enter, because she knew it was deceitfulness. It did matter that if she entered she would be denying the most precious gift she has ever received, her life. Yes, she identifies as a woman, calls herself a woman, and lives as a woman. But she knew in her heart that she could never experience what those women experienced, and they can never experience what she experienced.

The girl turned around to face the women at the gate with tears in her eyes. She looked at them all, walked back to the booth and said, "I have deceived you. I am not like you, and I'm not sure if I wish to be. You see my life hasn't been easy. It's been filled with potfioles, mountains and a lot of discrimination. Most of my life I lived as male because I was told to. When I was old enough to live differently I did. Because of that transition I am what you may call a male-to-female transexual.

"Deep in my heart I am woman, in my soul I am woman, and in my lovely spirit I am woman. I came to Michigan today because I wanted to experience what so many women brag about. I will leave here today proud because I didn't deny my spirit.

"I only hope that one day you women come to realize that this is a big campground, and there is room for us all."

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