

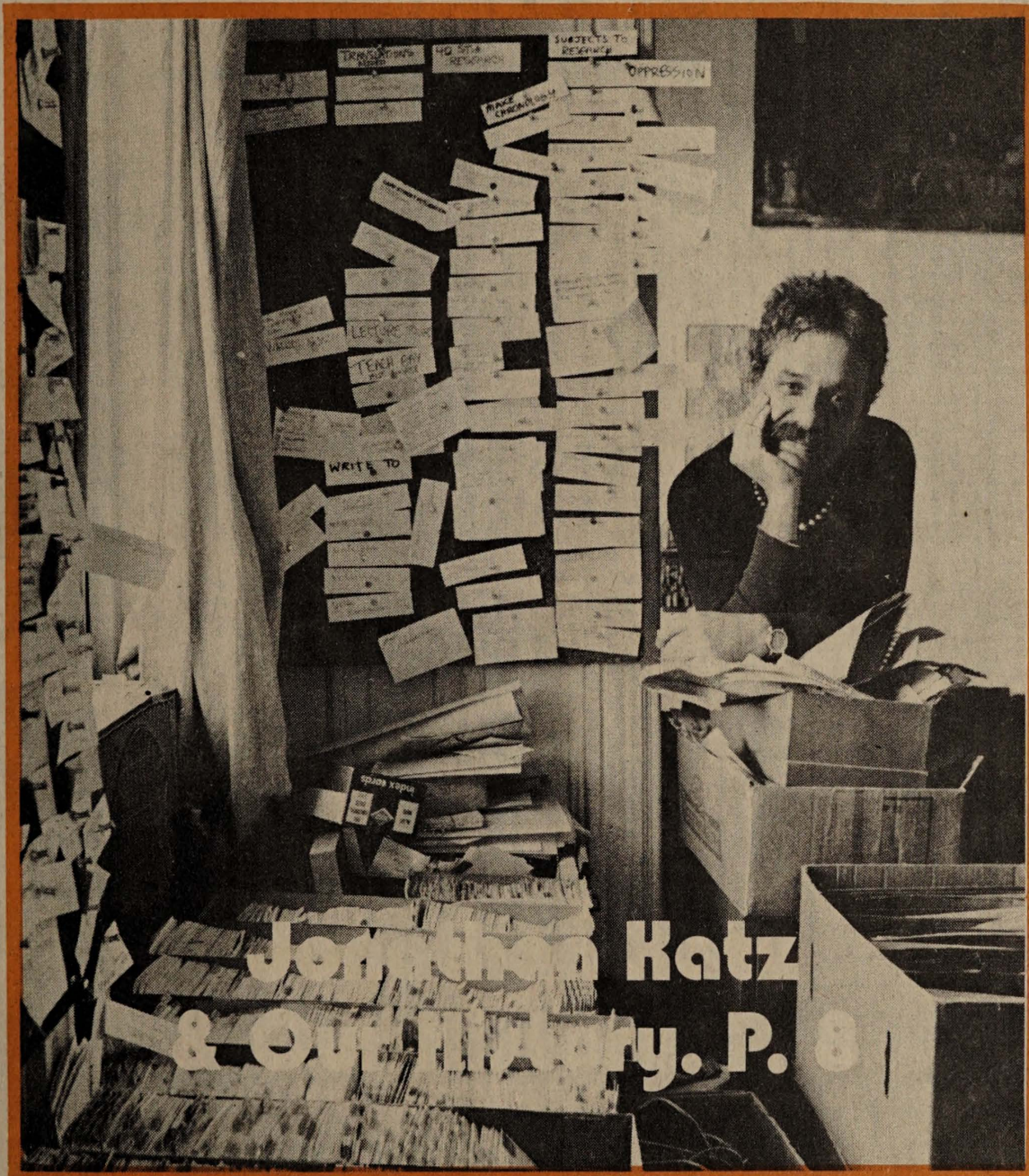
gay community news

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KATZ TO US: T

By Ron Schreiber

GAY AMERICAN HISTORY: Lesbians and Gay Men in the U.S.A. A Documentary by Jonathan Katz. (Thomas Y. Crowell). Paper, \$9.95; hard cover, \$19.95.

"I don't agree that males shouldn't do lesbian history at all." Having both the gay male and the lesbian experience in one book should "add a richness; both illuminate each other."

Mary Walker, (Wendell, Albany; New York Public Library)



By Allen Young

Working in a small apartment on Bank Street, without benefit of academic degrees, foundation grants, research assistants, or the proverbial "loyal, patient wife," Jonathan Katz has produced a pioneering work on what many will consider the unlikely topic of gay American history.

What is gay history anyway. To put it bluntly, I guess I'd say the essence of gay history is that there always were queers, even "way back then." How our antecedents lived and loved, suffered and struggled, is both relevant and important in the record of the human condition.

It was on the corner of Macdougall and Eighth Streets, Katz recalls, that a similar thought struck him, what he calls a "secular revelation":

"There is the entire invisible universe of same-sex relationships co-existing with the visible heterosexual universe," the 38-year-old author explained in a recent interview. "The amazing thing is how we've all had blinders on, how the heterosexual society has put blinders on. We know that gay people make up a huge minority in the present — the same thing exists in the past."

Katz embarked upon his journey into the gay past shortly after becoming involved with the gay liberation movement, but he was already pre-disposed toward the history of people in struggle. A drop-out from Antioch and City College, Katz became an independent scholar and "empathized from a distance with the black struggle." He did some documentary plays for WBAI and eventually produced a book, *Resistance at Christiana*, a documentary account of a fugitive slave rebellion. He also was co-author of *Black Woman*, a biography for youths about pioneer Lucy Terry Prince.

Like so many of us whose lives were transformed by the gay movement, Katz's earlier life as a gay person was characterized by "loneliness, alienation and angst."

"It was only when I got involved in the gay movement," he explains, "that I began to explore my gayness in a

creative way and see it as a source of community. Ever since, it's been a wonderful, adventurous, exciting, scary exploration of what it means to be gay in this society."

Greenwich Village is often referred to as a gay community or even a gay ghetto, but for Katz growing up in the Village really didn't make much difference. Katz has lived in the Village virtually his whole life, starting on 13th Street, moving to Jane Street, and since 1963 on Bank Street. He attended the Little Red School House and went uptown for the High School of Music and Art. However, he explains, "even though I grew up in an area where there are many gays, I was no more liberated than anyone else. The repressive forces — anti-gay attitudes that I heard from my family, the things kids said to each other in school — all made me repress any connection personally with gayness. Until I had to face it when I slept with somebody — the morning after, that's when it hit me in full force that I was gay."

For many years, Katz's gay identity remained separate from his identity as a person conscious of social change, aware of a world filled with people struggling for justice. This "atomization" came to an end in 1971 when he got involved with the gay movement, in particular the Arts Committee of the Gay Activists Alliance.

Involvement in the gay movement meant "political actions, consciousness-raising groups, millions of discussions with the straight people and gay people, and a lot of reading of gay liberation works. This historical exploration is part of that," Katz said.

The first result of Katz's research into gay history was a documentary play, "Coming Out!," first produced in 1972 on the occasion of the third anniversary of the Stonewall uprising. The play was performed with different casts in several cities and had a profoundly emotional impact on its audiences.

Encouraged, Katz doggedly pursued his research into gay history. In his workroom in his Bank Street apartment, boxes of index cards (really paper cut into index-card-size pieces to

The history we are taught in high schools is the history of the ruling classes. We are taught to memorize names and dates of kings (and occasional queens) and presidents; we learn about battles and wars. Sometimes we also learn about various systems of economy and slavery. But, unless we are descended from Jefferson or Dolly Madison, we do not learn about ourselves, or about ordinary people and their lives. Black people were slaves; Native Americans were slaughtered; workers were immigrants who became assimilated; women were housewives and mothers. And gay people simply did not exist at all.

The publication of Jonathan Katz' huge collection of documents, *Gay American History*, has changed that invisibility. It turns out — even when the words are written by those who "dare not speak the name" — that we have always been here: in places of honor among Native American tribes; in the pillory in New England towns; among Philadelphia society ladies and pioneer women couples; in Washington's army; in male drag in the Union army in the Civil War; in the New York City police force in the nineteenth century; or bedding down with Horatio Alger or Bessie Smith.

Gay American History is a big book: 562 pages of text, an additional 100 pages of notes and bibliography. It is mainly a collection of documents, which Katz groups under these headings: "Trouble"; "Treatment"; "Passing Women"; "Native Americans/Gay Americans"; "Resistance"; and "Love." Each section is in chronological order and is prefaced by an introduction. Then each particular document is introduced. Katz' commentary is set in clear bold face; the documents themselves are printed in lighter, slightly larger type. The collection is attractive and readable.

Moreover, one need not read the book straight through; it's appropriate to flit, for instance, from Emma Goldman's passionate defense of homosexuality in her lecture tours in the 1920s to the passionate letters Almeda Sperry wrote to Goldman; or from various accounts of cross-dressing "berdeches" (often holy men and healers) of various Indian tribes to the account of Murray Hill, the twice-married New York political organizer and "ladies' man" who turns out to have been a woman all the time.

Whenever possible, Katz chooses first-person accounts to publish. He has discovered an impressive 19th-century narrative by Lucy Ann Lobell, who rejected the traditional woman's role and lived as a man; he reprints an interview in *One Magazine* with a 35-year-old Mohave gay man; he interviews Henry Hay, the founder of Mattachine, who may have been ignored by the gay media because of his 18-year membership in the Communist Party. The last section, "Love," is composed almost entirely of first-person narratives, fictional excerpts (from Melville, for instance), poems, and letters. In that section Katz presents documents of same-sex friendship and loving; he does not try to prove "who was gay" or whether the lovers actually had sex with one another. Whether Emerson, for instance, was a

save money) and a wall filled with notes reminding him of items to be checked, plus shelves of books, indicate to the visitor that exploring the history of a forgotten people is no small task.

Playing devil's advocate, for despite my fascination with history I know that for many it's a bore, I asked Jonathan Katz if he didn't sometimes

think that history was "bullshit," that his labors might be a terrible waste of time. He didn't hesitate to answer:

"I'm not into this as an antiquarian. It's not nostalgia. When I find documents, they seem alive to me. It has to do with life and the present. I'm interested in greater knowledge of gay history not just for knowledge's sake but because I think this knowledge can

HISTORY LIVES!

sexual lover of Martin Gay when both were Harvard students, cannot be proved by the documents, but what Emerson writes about "the Indian doctrine of eye-fascination" is the best description of cruising that I've come across.

Often, though, first-person accounts are not possible. Even Whitman, whose correspondence with Symonds and Carpenter begins the section called "Resistance," was circumspect in his letters; later Stein and Toklas were careful not to call themselves lesbians. To be gay, after all, was dangerous, and our history is the history of persecution and repression. Lobell's strong narrative is followed by a physician's report from a hospital for the insane, where she died. Balboa killed the transvestite Indians he saw. The colonial punishment for sodomy was often death. When Jefferson and others attempted to change the Virginia laws, they recommended castration instead for men, and castration and the removal of ovaries were both practiced in order to prevent homosexuals — like chronic alcoholics and the criminally insane — from reproducing. The section on "treatment" includes accounts of aversion therapy through electric shock and the induction of nausea and recommendations for lobotomy. The "treatment" section begins in 1884, so much of the grisliness of our American history takes place in this century.

The majority of the documents as well are written by those who profess only loathing for homosexual practices. Katz includes writings from Christian missionaries and explorers; he includes court records. A 1939 document records a Georgia woman's courageous and successful appeal of a sodomy conviction; the court wrote that "sodomy cannot be accomplished between two women." To read through the section about "Native Americans/Gay Americans" is to realize that homosexuality was approved (not merely accepted) in nearly every Native American tribe. But the documents in this section are written by Christians and, later, anthropologists, who represent white homophobic culture. What they observe most notably are men dressed as women, though there are some records as well of same-sex friendship that does not involve cross-dressing. There are various lesbian legends, and there is one report of a Crow woman chief. We are beginning to learn that medieval and colonial "witches" were in fact midwives and healers. To read the documents of *Gay American History* is often to read between the lines; it is nearly always to read a history of white homophobia.

In his general introduction Katz seems somewhat modest; he does not claim that the documents he has collected are exhaustive or that he has begun to write a history of gay people of the United States. Looking at the impressive size of the volume, I thought he must be kidding. Here in one book is more historical information about us (gay people in this country) than I'd ever dreamed existed. Reading through the volume, though, convinces me that Katz' modesty is well taken. *Gay American History* is extremely valuable; it is the first book that lets us know that we are really not alone, that there were others before us, women and men, often persecuted, nearly always closeted, and Native Americans, gay and proud. But it is only a beginning. I finished this volume with the realization that there must be many, many more documents to discover. And that gay Americans have a history that is yet to be written. Katz presents an exciting beginning to writing that history.

be useful to lesbian and gay men in our current struggle against our oppression, and to re-define ourselves to re-make ourselves, to live our lives more humanly. I think, for instance, a history of gay resistance, a knowledge that there is a history, can help us resist gay oppression every day and help us survive."

Katz approaches his work not only

as a gay liberationist, but as a scholar and a socialist. It is significant that this book was not produced in academia — in fact the academic world has tended to discourage gay studies of any kind. "I'm not interested in perceiving the way things are in society," Katz explains, "but in changing it."

Katz recognizes his unique characteristics as a scholar. "There

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1891: "A Miner's Ball" from *Gay American History* — Love: 1779-1932.



aren't many people who don't have college degrees who do this kind of work," he said. "It's a comment on our education system," he adds, "that someone who loves scholarship, who loves research" can accomplish this outside of the formal university system.

Katz agreed with me that it is no coincidence that most of the research on gay history is being done by scholars with a socialist orientation, including Jim Steakley, co-author of *The Early Homosexual Rights Movement* and meticulous compiler of the 24-page index for Katz's tome.

Katz's background is socialist, and his earliest intellectual work was "background in social theory," including the writings of Karl Marx and C. Wright Mills. In the 1960s, Katz "went on peace marches before they were a big thing to do," but he was not affiliated with any left-wing groups. "I stayed in my room and read Marx and others — very carefully and several times," he noted.

The reason socialists are more inclined to study gay history, Katz said, is "we've all been interested in seeing it in its complex social milieu and in a temporal perspective." The point is to see homosexuality as historical, rather than "freakdom," he added. "I think one of the terrible things that the psychiatrists and psychologists have done to gay people is to reduce and perpetuate the idea that homosexuality is essentially a psychological phenomenon. As well as psychological, it's historical, political, economic. They've reduced us to less than human."

Katz is an active member in the Gay Socialist Action Project, a study group that combines theory and practice. It spearheaded one of 1976's major political confrontations by gay people in New York — showing up at a panel including several anti-gay shrinks at the New York Academy of Medicine. (Rather than engage in discussion, the shrinks closed up shop.)

"I think it's important to come out as a gay socialist," Katz said, "because there's another wing of the gay movement, a gay capitalist wing,

leading people into a kind of death, what they're calling 'liberation.' The gay capitalists are identifying the commoditization of homosexuality with liberation. But it's really putting gay people in strait jackets. I'm also aware that the word socialist immediately raises barriers to people hearing what a socialist is saying. It's more important to try to reach people with the substance of what you're saying. My political identity as a socialist, as a Marxist, is as important to me as my sexual identity as a gay person."

It was especially significant for Katz to deal with the radical background of Mattachine founder Harry Hay. "I've seen home movies of me marching for Henry A. Wallace Progressive Party candidate for President in 1948," Katz said. And Mattachine's origins are in a group formed by Hay called "Bachelors for Wallace."

"One of those special moments in my research was interviewing him," Katz recalled. "A friend who had access to a telephone line took me one Sunday to a small office, and I was able to tape an interview on the phone to New Mexico for nothing. I was very nervous. I warned Hay that I might have to use code words like 'our subject' in case someone came in — Hay loved that!"

Katz's feminist consciousness plays an important role in the compilation of lesbian material. He points out, for example, that women who passed as men are not "imitation men," but rather "real women, women who refused to accept the traditional, socially assigned fate of their sex, women whose particular revolt took the form of passing as men. A basic feminine protest is a recurring theme in all these lives, appearing sometimes as a conscious, explicit feminism, other times as an inchoate, individual frustration... In a most radical way, the women whose lives are recounted here rejected their socially assigned passive role; they affirmed themselves as self-determined, active, assertive, powerful — in the way they knew, the guise of men. These passing women can only be understood within the framework of a (Continued on page 12)

History

(Continued
from page 9)

feminist analysis."

Katz acknowledges that his dealing with lesbian history is a problem, especially since lesbian separatism is such a timely issue. Only last Thanksgiving, for example, lesbians quit the Gay Academic Union largely as a response to the sexism of the men in it. On the one hand, Katz is proud of the work he has done in researching lesbian history, and the lesbian documents are among the most important "original discoveries."

He adds: "On the other hand, the thing I'm most self-critical about is that although I intended to balance lesbian and gay male material, the book ended up with considerably more male material. This is partially a result of the fact that the lesbian material is hard to find, but essentially it's a result of my failure as a male researcher

to compensate for the difficulty by pursuing lesbian history research with more vigor. I think it's quite a comment on sexism that a male who is a feminist, as I am, who empathizes with the militant radical feminist position, finds his work is sexist in a sense."

This raises the whole problem of males doing lesbian research. Some male researchers, Katz pointed out, "are not aware of sexism. But even when the research is at its finest, there's the fact of the male doing the work of uncovering it, which is the same old way of males being in possession, in control of the definition of the lives of lesbians. The same problem arises in the work of whites doing black history," Katz went on. "I don't agree that males shouldn't do lesbian history at all," he said. Having both the gay male and the lesbian experience in one book should "add a richness; both illuminate each other," he

concluded.

Katz's goal, as stated in the introduction to his book, is the formation of a cooperative of lesbian and gay male historical researchers.

Katz wonders how academic historians will regard his work. Certainly some of the material may be considered "outrageous," Katz said — "you have Emerson cruising at Harvard, you have Alexander Hamilton writing love letters to another soldier in the Revolutionary Army, Willa Cather writing ecstatically about Sappho." The thing about gay history, Katz said, is that "straight people don't know it or care about it, and yet it's extremely relevant

to them. For instance, the history of the study of same-sex intimacy says a lot about the restrictions that have been put on heterosexuals as well as homosexuals — restrictions against loving. Just as the history of the treatment of blacks in America has had a huge influence on the character of this nation, it will slowly become clear that the history of heterosexual bigotry, the persecution of homosexuals, has had as great an impact on everyone, on the equality of our national life. It's sort of an intuition which the little bit of research I've done gives me. I feel I've just touched the surface of gay history in this large book."

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