



Radical Faeries

by John Harry Bonck

Encyclopedia Copyright © 2015, glbtq, Inc.

Entry Copyright © 2004, glbtq, inc.

Reprinted from <http://www.glbtq.com>

Rather than a group, the radical faeries are a movement. It emerged in the late 1970s, inspired by the thinking of several leaders in the gay consciousness movement including, among many others, psychologist Mitch Walker, philosopher Arthur Evans, and gay rights pioneer Harry Hay. The faeries of the 1970s reclaimed the traditionally pejorative name in order to identify with the gender variant sacred outsider that has appeared and reappeared in many cultures throughout human history.

Informed by a Marxist, feminist, anarchist political perspective, and a goddess oriented, earth energy, neo-pagan spiritual sensibility, radical faeries quite consciously rejected the growing gay assimilationism that developed in North American urban centers in the 1970s. The faeries appealed to those gay men who most decidedly did not feel "just like anyone else except for what we do in bed" to "come home" to gatherings of the tribe in rural settings. There they could find sanctuary, commune with nature away from the distortions of the urban environment, share feelings and ideas about the nature of the sexual "other," and wear dresses in the woods. The faeries celebrate the differences that separate gay people from heterosexuals.

This reclaiming of the radical notion that gay-identified men have a special place in culture dovetailed nicely with the experiments in communal living that had been continuing with varying degrees of success since the hippie movement of the 1960s.

While some faeries, borrowing from the separatist feminist sensibility, wanted to live as far as possible from the mainstream culture in order to nurture the spirit, study magical arcana such as witchcraft, and be free to "view the world askance," other faeries came from a tradition of fierce political activism and were determined to make the larger world safe for gender variance and sacred sexuality by challenging patriarchy and altering the consciousness, mores, and laws of the land.

Both styles of faeries coexisted and shared their influence at the gatherings that were organized during the 1980s, at first in rural settings in the Southwest, and then all around North America, sometimes at designated sanctuaries purchased and maintained communally by faerie communities in the United States and Canada.

Short Mountain

The Short Mountain Radical Faerie Sanctuary was established in the hills of central Tennessee, near several rural communes that were openly exploring alternative consciousness and lifestyles. Short Mountain became the home of *RFD*, the Rural Faerie Digest. This reader-generated "country journal for queer folk everywhere" has been exploring non-urban gay lifestyle and culture since 1975, and it has reflected as well as informed the development of faerie consciousness and culture.

Short Mountain Sanctuary's annual May Day gathering, known as "Beltane" in the druidic traditions, has become an international event, drawing more than 300 faeries and visitors from all over the world to celebrate a spectacular springtime fertility ritual.

Nomenus

In the late 1980s, on the West Coast, a San Francisco based group of faeries formed an organization called Nomenus, which applied for and received the tax exempt status of a "religious group" from the United States government. It purchased and maintains a beautiful ranch in southern Oregon known as Wolf Creek Sanctuary.

While the faeries of Nomenus are anything but a traditional religious organization, the application, written by Mica Kindman, brilliantly distilled the growing body of scholarly work and oral tradition about gay male spirituality throughout history. Not only did the application prove persuasive to officials of the United States Internal Revenue Service, but it also is itself a valuable contribution to our knowledge of gay male spirituality.

Faerie Gatherings

Since the 1980s, sanctuaries have sprung up in North America, Australia, and Mexico, some owned by individuals who invite faerie energy onto the land, some designated as official communities of faeries. Gatherings are held regularly in these and other spaces, such as resorts and public lands, throughout the year, usually planned around the pagan cycle of holy days and/or civic holidays.

It is difficult to describe a faerie gathering, but there are some features common to the experience. Gatherings are "called" by some group of organizers to celebrate a particular spiritual event, to focus on some theme or topic, to work on particular projects on the land, or just to provide a time and place for faeries to gather with fellow faeries. There is a strong tradition of "no one turned away for lack of funds" (NOTAFLOF).

Organizers, known as "queen registrars," attempt to plan for the basic needs of the 30 to 300 faeries who arrive with camping gear and finery, ready to help with the chores or not, participate in the rituals or not, sit for hours in the powerful heart circles or not, smoke pot, explore faerie sexuality, wear clothing...or not. As in any affinity group there are among the faeries strong cultural norms, but the strongest tradition of all is that of "anything goes." This attitude nurtures the gatherings' remarkable environment of creativity and healing, especially for those who find the dominant culture particularly inhospitable.

Not a gathering happens without the deeply moving experience of a new or first-time faerie standing in the center of a heart circle, declaring through tears of joy and relief that he or she has discovered the lost tribe and has finally "come home." Faeries sometimes assume faerie names, blending and borrowing from many traditions of tribal nicknames, magic practice, and covert culture (such as "drag names"). These names can be fantastical or mundane; and, as is typical of faerie style, they can change frequently in symbolic response to personal growth and change of circumstance, or just for the hell of it.

Growth and Evolution

The HIV epidemic has not, as was feared by some, brought about the demise of the faerie phenomenon. Indeed, the faerie movement continues to grow.

While it is true that some of the "founding faerie fathers" held gender specific and essentialist views that now seem exclusive and discriminatory, the faerie movement has actually been more inclusive than many people realize. People of all genders and orientations now find and identify themselves as faeries.

Finally, faerie culture is both evolving and evanescent. There are as many definitions of the faeries and their movement as there are faeries to ask. What is certain is that the faerie experience has enhanced and sometimes profoundly changed the lives of many glbtq people.

Bibliography

Connor, Randy P. *Blossom of Bone: Reclaiming the Connections between Homoeroticism and the Sacred*. San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1993.

Evans, Arthur. *Witchcraft and the Gay Counterculture*. Boston: Fag Rag Books, 1978.

_____, and Frank Pietronigro. *Critique of Patriarchal Reason*. New York: White Crane Press, 1997.

Hay, Harry. *Radically Gay: Gay Liberation in the Words of Its Founder*. Boston: Beacon, 1996.

Ramer, Andrew. *Two Flutes Playing: A Spiritual Journeybook for Gay Men*. San Francisco: Alamo Square Press, 1997.

Roscoe, Will. *Changing Ones: Third and Fourth Genders in Native North America*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998.

_____. *Queer Spirits: A Gay Men's Myth Book*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1995.

_____. *The Zuni Man-Woman*. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1991.

Rose, Bradley, ed. *A Radical Fairy's Seedbed: The Collected Series*. San Francisco: Vortex/Nomenus, 1997.

Thompson, Mark. *Gay Soul: Finding the Heart of Gay Spirit and Nature with Sixteen Writers, Healers, Teachers and Visionaries*. San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1995.

Timmons, Stuart. *The Trouble with Harry Hay: Founder of the Modern Gay Movement*. Boston: Alyson, 1990.

Walker, Mitch. *Men Loving Men: A Gay Sex Guide and Consciousness Book*. San Francisco: Gay Sunshine Press, 1985.

_____. *Visionary Love: A Spirit Book of Gay Mythology and Transmutational Faerie*. San Francisco: Treeroots Press, 1980.

About the Author

John Harry Bonck, whose faerie name is Cayenne, discovered the Radical Faeries in 1986, when Cleve Jones told him of this group of queens who frolic in the woods in dresses. Cayenne has taken a break from 20 years of service as an occupational therapist specializing in geriatric mental health in the San Francisco Bay Area to pursue an M.F.A. in technical theater with an emphasis on costume design at Tulane University in New Orleans.