

# Hay has awesome staying power

## Pioneer of gay lib shuns any form of conventional wisdom

by Brent Ingram

**Radically Gay: Gay Liberation in the Words of Its Founder** by Harry Hay (edited by Will Roscoe) Beacon Press

Every day we hear about gay men, lesbians, and transsexuals dying before they have had a chance to make full contributions to their communities. When it is not from AIDS or breast cancer, there are the various addictions and stresses of the postmodern condition.

Fortunately, there are plenty of people in cities like ours who remain active and work in their chosen networks decades after decades. Meetings of Vancouver's Prime Timers draw among the highest attendance figures of any lesbian and gay organization in the city. Harry Hay has been "out" for over 60 years and has been organizing and writing for over 50 years. In *Radically Gay*, Will Roscoe—editor of legendary pre-faerie journal *Vortex* and a figure in scholarship on gay spirituality—goes through Hay's old manuscripts.

Like any life-long learner, Hay changed his perspectives on gay activism every few years. His staying power is a result of his constant curiosity and scepticism of the dominant ideologies of the times. He began his political initiation in 1934 when he threw a brick at a policeman at a labour demonstration in Los Angeles and was hidden by a drag queen named Clarabelle. Hay began writing while teaching dialectics for the United States Communist Party in the 1930s. Just before he left "The Party" in 1951, Hay began organizing gay men on beaches and at private parties to start the first North American gay rights organization. The Mattachine Society. Soon pushed out of the inner circle of the Mattachine for being too radical, Hay bided his time for another

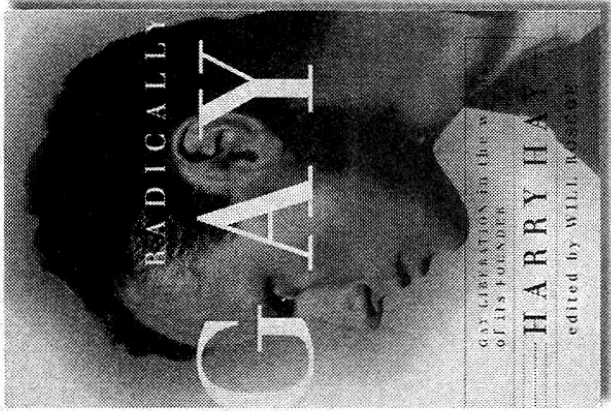
10 years until people started organizing against police harassment in cruisey Griffith Park as a dress rehearsal, without television cameras, to the Stonewall riots.

A few years later, Hay wrote much of the manifesto of the LA Gay Liberation Front. Through it all, he was an uncompromising "essentialist" arguing that there is an inherent spiritual link between sexual minorities—what he called "the gay window" in his New Age New Mexico days after the demise of gay liberation."

Roscoe argues that until well into the 1970s, Hay was still trying for an "inspiration of Marxism." There was, for example, a 1976 pre-faerie conference gathering entitled "Faggots and Class Struggle" in Wolf Creek, Oregon that involved a lot of people from Vancouver. That gathering saw drag queens trying on Maoist self-criticism and having "political struggles" over orgy etiquette.

By the first official "faerie gathering" in Arizona in 1979, Hay had moved from dialectics to his vehemently anti-assimilationist, "subject-subject" consciousness. His 1980s writings are not as exciting as those from when he first imagined the kind of communities that we see today. His ideas remain hampered by a preoccupation with the need to build what postmodern theoreticians call the "totalizing narrative"—one that never really comes together in his writings. Nobody these days, except Harry Hay, would be brave enough to try to make broad generalizations about gay men.

Hay, however, has stayed current. He continues to struggle for "queer" alliances between women and men—yes, he's over 80 and likes to use the "q" word—while working against censorship. Recently he has fought against the exclusion of the North American Man Boy Love Association (NAMBLA) from gay and lesbian coalitions.



If you plan on being on this earth for a few more decades or have lived several already, *Radically Gay* is worth checking out as a testament to staying power and is a charmed and quirky read. I "bought" less than half of what he said but loved reading it all.

For more background on Harry Hay, see Stuart Timmons' 1990 biography, *The Trouble with Harry Hay: Founder of the modern gay movement* (Alyson Publications).

*Brent Ingram is an aspiring queerscape architect based in Vancouver whose large anthology, Queers in Space: Landscapes of Marginalized Sexualities and Communities goes to press any day now.*