

Outright Radio

Series 2003

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Fringe Show

Music.

Host intro: From PRI, Public Radio International, it's Outright Radio, I'm David Gilmore. Today on Outright Radio we have stories of gay folks living on the Fringe – people for whom their passions and careers have led them off the well-worn path of gay life.

First up stories from the Gay Rodeo...

"... I won for the very first time, all around cowboy, and the most important thing about that to me was, one of my best friends was the person handing me the buckle, a man who represents the International Gay Rodeo, dressed as a woman, and standing beside me was the man I love..."

Later on in the show, we have the story of writer Jenny Worley and a peek into her life as the lesbian stripper in the glass box....

"hey sailor, this is Polly waiting for you in the Private Pleasures booth waiting to give you a one-on-one good old time."

And finally, the story of Tim Anderson a gay trucker in love with vanishing points on the open road...

"I've known too many gay men who jump into the driver's seat thinking its gonna be about hook ups. Within a few months they've lost those hard won gym bodies, they're sick of chicken-fried everything, and the allure of that huge Peterbilt Hood ain't provided the satiation they thought it would."

All true stories, and all on a theme of Living on the Fringe. We hope you'll join us for the next hour as we present the extraordinary stories from the heart of gay America.

Music.

One of the interesting things to note about living on the fringe – our theme today – is that for many gay folks, returning to **mainstream** activities is actually considered **fringe** behavior in the gay community. For example, in this show, we have stories of cowboys, cowgirls, and truckers. Now, to middle-America, these recreations and careers simply would not raise eyebrows. But if I went into a gay bar and found out that I was talking to a gay truck driver or a lesbian cowgirl, I'd be forced to reinvent the narrow stereotyping that has been handed to us by the dominant culture over the years.

The truth is, one cannot avoid finding gay folks in the most unlikely places and in service of shattering your illusions, let's start at the gay rodeo. Daniel Kraker is our tour guide in Albuquerque, New Mexico.

Gay Rodeo Piece.

Begin with Willie Nelson tune, My Heroes Have Always Been Cowboys, "I grew up dreaming, of being a cowboy, and loving the cowboy ways. Pursuing a life of my high riding heroes, I burned up my childhood days." (fade down low under trax)

Willie Nelson certainly isn't alone. For a lot of us, even today, our heroes are cowboys—or at least what cowboys represent in our collective imagination. Youth, bravery, strength, hard work, and above all, freedom—the freedom to roam wildly on the open range, excitement and danger all around. And in today's world of cell phones and Starbucks, when the cowboy way seems farther away than ever, it's that much more alluring.

Bring up chorus: “My heroes have always been cowboys, and they still are it seems. Sadly in search of...themselves and their slow moving dreams.” (Fade down low again under trax)

Over the past century the cowboy myth has slowly become the reality. Real cowboys of the late nineteenth century were overworked, underpaid, poorly dressed teenagers. More than a third of cowboys who led trail drives were black and Hispanic. And there were no doubt plenty of gay working cowhands. But today, when we think of cowboys, most of America pictures the Marlboro Man—very white, very handsome, and very straight.

So it’s fitting that early Saturday morning, the first day of the rodeo, the first cowboys I meet are actually cowgirls. (post horse whinny, then fade down some background sound and horse snorts under track) I find Mary Munger and Sheri Ralston behind the arena, scurrying around their horse trailer. Both women are small, wiry and strong, dressed in the rodeo cowboy’s—and cowgirl’s—uniform: tight fitting blue jeans, giant belt buckle, boots, long sleeve western shirt and hat. Sheri is brushing the mane and tail of her nine year old horse Rebel. She walks around him, talking soothingly. She seems as comfortable around the horse as if it were her longtime lover.

Sheri: “I was born and raised on horses. I was born down south, on a farm and a ranch. And so I pretty much was raised in the saddle and chasing cows and riding horses is all I’ve been doing all my life. My mother she shows quarter horses, and my sister she does reigning horses. It’s in the blood, it’s all in the family here.”

(Keep generator sound bedded under my short track here)

Like a true cowgirl, Sheri doesn’t lead a nine-to-five lifestyle. She makes her living as a ferrier—a professional horseshoer.

Sheri: “That’s all I know, is these horses. I’ve had real jobs before and I get real bored with them and I always find myself coming back to these horses, so I became a horseshoer, and hopefully down the road I can have a ranch and get back into my training and start training horses like I want to.”

When she’s not shoeing horses, Sheri’s usually riding them. She’s competed in rodeos for the past 25 years, ever since she was a kid. This weekend’s rodeo is an important one for her. She’s taken most of the year off to train her young filly, Hot Rod, and needs to score well to qualify for the national finals in Wichita.

(I brought this up a little earlier, under the end of the previous track. Bring up “So You Want to Be a Cowboy,” play first verse, fade down low under track, then out)

The Zia Rodeo is sponsored by the New Mexico Gay Rodeo Association, one of 20 member associations around the country and Canada that together make up the International Gay Rodeo Association, or IGRA. Contestants accumulate points in different events throughout the season. The top 20 in each event qualify for the IGRA finals rodeo.

(Bring up background rodeo sound here under trax)

Sheri’s first event is breakaway calf roping. She sits on Rebel, poised, with her left hand on the saddle horn and her right around the rope. In the chute next to her, a line of scared looking calves stand in single file. (Bring up sound of gate clanging open) The gate clangs open, and the first calf in line shoots out, making a beeline for the far end of the arena. Rebel’s on it in a heartbeat, and with an easy, deft toss Sheri throws the rope—but it just misses, and slides harmlessly off the calf’s neck. Undeterred, Sheri continues her pursuit, recoils the rope, throws again, and this time lassoes the calf’s head, pulls the rope tight, and then lets it go, exasperated. Her time—31 seconds, still good enough for fourth place in this difficult event.

(MUSIC: Garth Brooks, “Rodeo,” play chorus, fade down and out)

The IGRA is the second largest rodeo association in the country—only the PRCA, the Professional Rodeo Cowboys Association, is bigger. There are a number of huge differences between the two associations. The biggest, obviously, is that one has mostly gay competitors; the other, according to the gay cowboys who have competed in their rodeos, is one of the most homophobic organizations anywhere.

But an equally big difference is the presence of cowgirls like Sheri and her partner Mary. PRCA rodeos allow women to compete in only one event—barrel racing, where a cowgirl on horseback slaloms through a long row of barrels. In IGRA rodeos, women can compete in everything, even the rough stock events like bull and steer riding. But serious rodeo cowgirls like Sheri—who want a shot at big prize money—inevitably end up running barrels on the PRCA circuit.

Sheri: “Next year, I’m going to apply for my pro permit, and I’ll be running up in Colorado, and there’s a lot more opportunity for me up there in Colorado, there’s a lot more pro rodeos around, than what there is down here in New Mexico for me to run at. A couple of the girls that’s running pro rodeo right now I’ve competed against and I’ve beat them several occasions at several rodeos, so I’m ready to rock and roll.”

(bring up Marshall Tucker Band for about ten seconds, fade under trax, then crossfade with “Bunkhouse Theme”)

Sheri is moving up to Colorado to join her partner Mary. They celebrated their one-year anniversary a few days before the Zia rodeo—one of the many romances born on the IGRA circuit. But while Sheri was practically born in the saddle, Mary grew up in the city, in Denver.

(bed Dylan’s “BunkhouseTheme” under acx)

Mary: “I was born in Oklahoma, and my family moved to Colorado and I was a city girl for the longest time. And coming from a poor family we never had money for horses. But I always loved them and I listened to country music and I’d sit on my dad’s feet and danced to country music but didn’t get into horses until I was, let’s see, 27, 28 years old. I always loved them but never had the money to do it.”

(bring clear music for a few seconds, fade down under again)

“When I was introduced to rodeo it was kind of like the answer to my dreams and everything that I wanted to do. And my first rodeo I was hooked, that was all it took. I was quite inspired by it all.”

(bring up music again for a second, fade down again)

“The first rodeo that I competed on horseback I got in with a horse that I didn’t know was arena sour, the horse blew up in the arena, and threw me off and I hit my back on the top rail of the arena and I broke my back the first rodeo I ever competed in.”

That, incidentally, was the first time Sheri ever saw Mary. They didn’t actually meet until a few years later, at the Denver rodeo in 1997. Sheri has helped her get comfortable again on horseback. And so has Rebel, Sheri’s horse.

(Bring up spraypaint sound, fade and bring it up sporadically under acx)

As Mary talks she diligently spray-paints a wavy American Flag on Rebel’s rear haunches—her personal show of patriotism.

Mary: “Rebel, he’s teaching me a lot, he babysits me, and after coming back from a broken back, he’s really helped me overcome a lot of the fears. First time back was 1997 at Denver rodeo and I walked away with a chute dogging buckle, the first time back after a broken back, so, I don’t let fear and common sense slow me down, as Sheri says (laugh).”

Mary is competing in chute dogging again at this weekend’s rodeo. Chute dogging is one of the rough stock events, where cowboys and cowgirls typically get dirty, often bruised, sometimes seriously injured. Post rodeo sounds Mary stands inside the chute in front of a steer, gripping its horns, her face determined.

(post sound of whistle)

The whistle blows, the gate opens, and Mary drags the stubborn steer out past a line. Still holding its horns, Mary twists its head, trying to flip the steer over on its back. But the steer doesn’t go down. Instead, it rubber-necks, allowing its head to be twisted around, with Mary still hanging by its horns, refusing to go down.

(post sound of whistle again)

Mary walks out of the arena, dejected, the calf still standing defiantly. She won’t win a chute dogging buckle this weekend.

(more music, Jimmie Dale Gilmore, for ten seconds or so, fade under trax for a while)

New Mexico’s Zia Rodeo was the 13th IGRA rodeo of the 2002 season—and the 255th gay rodeo since it was born in Reno in 1976. From the beginning, it met with stiff resistance from the straight community. It took more than a year to find an arena that would host a gay rodeo, and just as long to find a local ranch that would rent their animals. Less than 200 people took part in that first rodeo—four years later, 40,000 people were flocking to Reno for the rodeo—and for the accompanying party.

By the early 1980s gay rodeo organizations and gay country western bars were springing up in cities across the west. In 1985 the International Gay Rodeo Association was formed. Its members devoted themselves to fostering and preserving the country western lifestyle within the gay community. Cowboy culture may have still been on the margins of gay culture, but it was growing in size and stature—at least out west.

Bring up rodeo sound, and I decided to bed this background sound under all my tracks in this section, because their actualities have so much of that sound already.

On Sunday morning I catch up with Ken Pool, president of the Colorado Gay Rodeo Association. He’s scarfing down breakfast with his partner Mark Larson next to the arena. The second and final day of the rodeo is just getting underway. I ask Ken if he thinks the country western lifestyle is still on the fringe of the gay community.

Ken: “I would have thought, “Out on the fringe?” you’re talking about fringe, it’s all about the show, you’ve got fringe on everything” (great laugh).

But he acknowledges him and his partner Mark aren’t living a stereotypical gay lifestyle.

Ken: “A lot of gay urban people, anyway, are much more about circuit parties and a certain type of lifestyle that appeals to them that is very fast and Mark and I both really aspire more to a simpler life that we wish to attain.

But there are a lot of urban cowboys as well. Mark lives in New York City—the only rodeo contestant I meet who doesn’t live west of the Mississippi. He says he often runs into closet cowboys.

“Even working out of New York City, I’ll run into people that are maybe from Oklahoma, they’ll say yeah I grew up on a horse farm, blah blah blah, we’ll get into a conversation, and I’ll say there’s a rodeo coming up in Washington D.C., so they come down and watch and maybe just because they happen to be there get involved in some of the camp events, and then eventually get back to the horse events, and it does bring a lot of people back kind of full circle.”

That's exactly what happened to his partner Ken. Handsome, strong, his hair flecked with gray, Ken looks like the Marlboro Man, like the mythic cowboy figure of American lore. He grew up riding horses on what he describes as a Texas "ranchette." ((omit--with cattle, chickens and horses.)) But like so many other folks on the gay rodeo circuit, as a teenager growing up he didn't think it was possible to be both (minor stumble on "gay"—I'll fix this when I track for real) gay and a cowboy. So he moved about as far away from Texas—culturally speaking—as possible—to southern California. And for the two decades he lived there, he had no idea gay rodeo existed.

Ken: "If I had known that this was available or even possible, my several years that I spent in West Hollywood and San Diego and sort of the gay ghettos of the world, which aren't bad places, but they weren't ever really for me, but I went there because I didn't know how to find my identity as a gay man and meld it with how much I loved horses. So I was away from it for almost twenty years before I came back, and went with some friends, we had been out dancing, and they said let's go to the rodeo over in Phoenix, and showed up and it was like, they were all inside dancing and I was sitting glued to the arena, and by the end of the day, I was like I've gotta find a way to do this. I can do this. And, here I am, several years later."

(Gene Autry, "Back in the Saddle Again")

Mark, on the other hand, has never completely abandoned his South Dakota roots, where he grew up on a small horse farm.

"I did grow up with horses, and we showed in 4-H. My sisters did high school rodeo, but by the time I was in high school it didn't exist anymore in my town which it does again. I moved away as soon as I graduated from high school, I was an exchange student and then went to the university in Minneapolis. And, I always went back, and my parents always remembered me saying (laugh) don't ever sell the farm because I'll come back, but I don't think they ever really believed that I would." (laugh)

"And even living in Europe for many years I always came back to ride, and when I moved back in '91 I started buying my own horses instead of just riding the horses that we always had. I still actually have my horse that I showed as a teenager. But as far as being away from my family and my roots, even though I was away, I always came back, so it wasn't like I really abandoned it, I didn't reject where I came from or reject the whole horse thing, that was always such an integral part of me and who I was that it was too important for me to leave completely."

Gay Rodeo associations have given many gay folks around the country a chance to reclaim a piece of their past, a past of horses and of rural values. They're a strong support (popped P—again, I'll fix this) to many people who live in a decidedly urban gay community. But for many people who Mark knows, it's still difficult to confront a past that they associate with small town homophobia and hatred.

"I think, where I come from people from the rural areas that realize that they're gay or that they're different tend to want to reject the culture that they come from and they move to the big cities, and even the problem that we're having with our rodeo organization in the Twin Cities is we've got a lot of people that are horse people growing up but they equate that with the hostility or the rejection in the rural areas, basically that right wing attitude that we're bad people and that we're evil and that this is a choice and we're all going to burn in hell."

Mark is a flight attendant, so he's able to commute between his work in New York, his horses in the upper Midwest, and Ken in Denver. He's also the reigning Mr. International Gay Rodeo Association—kind of like the Ms. America of gay rodeo, he says. He laughs at the idea that he leads what some of his colleagues see as dual lives.

"I work for the airlines so it's somewhat of a gay profession, it was never anything I wanted to do but it works for me it gives me the flexibility to do what I want and live where I want, and the people I work with really kind of get off on the idea that I ride bulls, and I serve cocktails on the side, it's kind of funny it's such a contrast."

Later that day in the arena, Mark mounts a half-ton steer in the chute, snot dripping from its nose, its eyes bloodshot, clearly not pleased a cowboy is sitting on its back. Mark won the national steer riding competition back in 1993, his first year on the IGRA circuit.

(sound of gate clanging open)

The gate opens, and the steer begins to buck wildly up and down, back and forth. Mark hangs on to a rope with one hand, his other hand above his head, his legs locked to the steer in a scissors grip. (introduce some cheering sound) Riding a steer isn't as dangerous as a bull, but it still requires a unique combination of balance, strength and agility. Mark's steer turns out to be relatively tame. He stays on for the full eight seconds, but loses out on style points. Still, it's enough to bring home the buckle.

"Bareback Jack," MUSIC let music linger a little longer under the text...

Gay cowboys and cowgirls confront stereotypes on two sides: from the urban gay community that tends to see cowboy culture as backward; and from the straight country western community, which sees the gay rodeo circuit as a kind of "play" rodeo. But there are some tough competitors on the gay rodeo circuit; cowboys who hold their own in PRCA rodeos. Later that day I see a cowboy get bucked and stepped on by a thousand pound steer. But that toughness isn't weighed down by the machismo you'd find at a straight rodeo. And above all, says Ken, it's a hell of a lot of fun.

Ken: “Gay rodeo’s sort of like an open horse show and a rodeo, also with a good helping of circus thrown in, we have a lot of fun, and it’s a show, and that’s fun too, but it’s also the camaraderie. One of my best moments this year, I’ve been competing for years in various events, finally adding horse events, this year Mark and I took a trip up to Canada together, long road trip, took the horses, and we competed all weekend together, as a team, and at the end of the weekend, I won for the very first time, all around cowboy, and the most important thing about that to me was, one of my best friends was the person handing me the buckle, a man who represents the International Gay Rodeo, dressed as a woman, and standing beside me was the man I love, who was also competing with me and against me, but we worked together also, and I could not have won that without his work. And to be able to do all of that, which is important in my life, but to also blend that in with how much I love rodeo, is very important and I think it will hopefully dispel a lot of those myths about what people conceive gay people to be.”

(Earl Scruggs bluegrass)

The circus Ken mentions is most evident in the Wild Drag Race, one of three so-called camp events unique to gay rodeo. A man and a woman drag a steer past a line and turn it around, where their teammate, in female drag, attempts to mount the steer and ride it back over the line. It’s the most colorful—and dangerous—rodeo event.

And David Westman is one of the most colorful competitors. A Martha’s Vineyard transplant now living in Denver, David is known as Pearlie Mae on the rodeo circuit for the string of pearls he wears around his battered hat. He’s also known for his creative costumes.

Westman: “One time I was Ms. Swan Lake, and I had a plastic swan on my head, and a big white dress and I ran out into the arena, flew around and flapped my wings and I sat down and I laid a big egg in the arena. People got a really big kick out of that.”

“Just recently, last year in Phoenix, I didn’t have anything planned for Sunday, and the hotel lobby just happened to have a very large, lovely floral display in one of the vases in the lobby. And I thought that would make a fabulous headdress. So sure enough, that night we were all in the hot tub and we were talking about it, and on the way back to the room we snagged the floral arrangement, it was probably like a \$300 floral arrangement, and snuck it to the room, took the whole thing apart, put pieces into luggage, took it down to the rodeo grounds, and then I rebuilt the whole thing the next morning into a headdress, and then I was out in the arena getting on the steer riding my steer when the announcer realized where he had last seen that floral arrangement, and announced to the entire arena that I was wearing the floral arrangement from the hotel on my head while I was riding a steer.”

On Sunday in Albuquerque Pearlie Mae emerges in a Judy Jetson like silver space girl outfit, complete with pink laser gun and a Lost in Space lunchbox looped around his arm. With prize money at stake for the best drag costume, David plays to the crowd, leading a rousing cheer.

(cheer and applause, then whistle)

The race begins, and David’s teammates drag the steer out by a rope. Pearlie Mae mounts, urging it back over the line, but the steer bucks him. (crowd cheering) The crowd goes wild as David grabs on to the trailing rope and the steer pulls him in a circle around the arena. Eventually he climbs back on, and this time crosses the finish line.

(more applause)

Pearlie Mae hops off his steer, curtsies to the crowd, and dramatically crumples in the dirt.

(Bring up Junior Brown, about ten seconds, fade down under final track)

Sheri Ralston finished fourth place in the all around cowgirl competition, including two gold buckles with the help of Rebel. Mark Larson placed fifth in all around cowboy. Mary and Sheri, Mark and Ken, and Pearlie Mae all went on to the International Gay Rodeo Association finals in Wichita, where Pearlie Mae’s team finished second in the wild drag race, and Mark, once again, brought home the gold buckle in steer riding.

DG: Daniel Kraker reporting from the Zia Regional Rodeo in Albuquerque, New Mexico. You can read more about the International Gay Rodeo Association on their website at IGRA.com.

Music

Coming up: Jenny Worley tells of her lesbian life behind glass in her PeepShow Diaries and Tim Anderson chases his freedom on the open road as a gay trucker. We’ll be back with more stories of Living on the Fringe when Outright Radio continues... from PRI Public Radio International.

Break

You're listening to Outright Radio, from PRI, Public Radio International, I'm David Gilmore. You can contact us at Comments@OutrightRadio.org or call us toll-free at 866-OUTRADIO. That's 866-688-7234.

Back to our theme of Living on the Fringe...

When I went to collect sound for our next piece, I found myself in a rather surreal world...the world of straight men seeking glimpses of naked ladies. As a gay man it's unusual for me to be in a space where men actively ignore each other – it's the women they're interested in. Anyhow, I walked into this modern-day bordello, the Lusty Lady in San Francisco, and made way through the dark maze of narrow doors and men pushing past each other on a mission to find the hottest babe to watch through a window. At the end of one of the halls is a big glass box – kind of like an aquarium, really. Only inside is blond woman dressed in a bikini, sitting on red pillows. She invites men over a loudspeaker system to come in and shove bills through a slot and in exchange, they get to ask her to do things or talk to them for their entertainment...That in itself really isn't all THAT unusual. What IS a bit unorthodox is that the woman inside is Jenny Worley, a lesbian writer and doctoral candidate in 20th century lesbian literature and culture. Over the years of working in the sex industry, Jenny has kept her memoirs about how she came up with her characters, her first day on the job and some of the clients that have touched her (metaphorically speaking) along the way. She calls it the PeepShow Diaries and we're happy to feature some of her stories here.

A little warning for our younger listeners: this piece has references to well...what people actually DO at peep shows – but there are no really **explicit** descriptions of sex. Here's Jenny's story...

Jenny Worley's piece:

When I was 23, I auditioned for a job as a "live nude girl" at a San Francisco peep show where 25 cents buys you a twenty-second peep into a pornographic alternate universe where naked women in high heels dance and strut.

This was an odd career move for a young lesbian with a degree in Women's Studies. But I was going back to school for my masters and needed a job that demanded less time and paid more money than my respectable job at the lesbian press.

Music

The audition consisted of a 10 minute stint in the mirror-lined room that serves as a stage at the Lusty Lady. Thankfully I was not all by myself, but in the company of 4 other dancers working that day. I took a deep breath, and shimmied on stage wearing nothing but 3 inch heels and a smile, waving at the bodiless man-heads peering at me from the windows. I bent over in front of them and shook my behind as I saw the other girls do.

And incredibly, I got the job. There was no checking of references or listing of work histories. The only criteria seemed to be that I had a vagina and was not afraid to use it.

Thus I joined the throngs of San Francisco hipster chicks who have passed through the hallowed doors of the Lusty Lady in response to its ads for flexible, part-time employment with a high hourly wage and without the hustle and hassle of the other strip clubs in town, where dancers deal with leering male bosses, competition for tips, and the groping of drunken customers. At the Lusty Lady I had a female boss there was no hustle and my pristine lesbianism could remain unsoiled by grabby masculine hands, safe behind glass.

With the job came a stage name – "Polly." I brought this new persona to life, fleshing out her personality on stage and in the private "talk-to-a-live-nude-girl" booth. [She became a smiling, not-too-quick-on-the-uptake blonde who spoke with a roving southern accent -- that placed her somewhere between Virginia and Texas.] As Polly's adventures in the demi-monde of San Francisco's sex-industry began to pile up, I started keeping my peep-show diary.

Music

"hey sailor, this is Polly waiting for you in the Private Pleasures booth waiting to give you a one-on-one good old time."

October 6, 1994

The dancers at the Lusty Lady keep surprising me. They're all make up and high-heels, but that doesn't seem to mean what I thought it meant. For example, today I danced with She-she, a busty, blonde dead-ringer for Marilyn Monroe. Her stage name sounds like the French word for "fancy" -- chi-chi. But when I looked on the dancers' schedule, I saw that it was spelled s-h-e, s-h-e. When I asked her today if it was a misspelling, she said, in her breathy voice, "No, it's not a misspelling; it's a pun." I looked at her blankly, and she said, "She-she, as in, not she-he? It's a lezzie name!" she said. I was surprised -- this bleach-blonde with the beauty mark and the fake eyelashes, a friend of Dorothy? But then I caught my own reflection in the mirrored wall of the stage and laughed out loud at my own blonde wig and platform shoes. How many more of us homos/ are trapped in this temple of heterosexuality, I wonder?

January 7, 1995

I was unlocking my bike in front of the theater after work this afternoon when I heard a voice say, "Excuse me . . . um . . . um." I looked up, immediately on my guard for a stalker or worse. At first I didn't recognize him. He looked paler, less robust out here in the sunlight. But then I saw that he was a customer who has been coming in each day and seeking me out on stage, moving to the window closest to me, and thanking me sincerely and profusely as soon as I approached his window.

Now he stood back several feet, either afraid of frightening me and attempting to signal that he was not a threat, or, more likely, just afraid of me. From the other side of the sidewalk he said, quietly, "I just wanted to say thank you. You always give so much to your performances, and you're really nice to me." My well-honed defenses stayed in place, leading me to answer in the over-cheery, over-public, distancing voice that always seems to come out when I encounter these men without the glass between us: "Well thanks, darlin'! You have a good weekend, now!" Big cruise-director smile, and off on my bike.

As I glided down the south slope of Telegraph Hill, I felt bad for distancing myself and treating him like some faceless fan. I smiled, if sadly, at the persistence of his need to thank me, at his eerie but rare and lovely gratitude,

One of the theories for why there are so many lesbians in the sex industry is that sex work so embitters women against men that it turns them gay. I assumed being already queer when I started would give me a leg up, so to speak, but still, when I started the job I braced myself to see men at their worst. What I wasn't prepared for were interactions like this one -- intimate, touching, profoundly human -- interactions that forged an understanding and compassion for these men.

Music

March 17, 1995

Today I went shopping for shoes and out of nowhere, Polly showed up. I was looking at a pair of ridiculous but seductively glimmering gold mules with a clear plastic heel, thinking, "I'll never wear them because I won't be able to ride my bike in them and they'll be too cold for San Francisco," when my alter-ego Polly sidled up next to me and urged, "Oh, go on. You can't turn up your nose at a Lucite heel, for god's sake! Anyway, if you don't wear them, I will, and let's not forget who the moneymaker is around here." So I bought Polly the shoes. I just hope she lets me borrow them, because I'm actually starting to like her style.

Though I've tried to maintain an impenetrable wall between my real self and Polly by keeping two sets of clothes -- hers frilly and sexy, mine practical and tough, recently I've noticed that the two sets of clothes are getting intermingled.

I don't know if this is because I'm becoming more like Polly, or because I'm getting involved in my first butch-femme relationship. Whatever the reason, my newfound gender identity and the sex-pot persona I've cultivated for Polly seem to be shaping each other profoundly.

When I used to date men, I shied away from high-heels and sexy clothes. They just seemed so . . . obvious. I couldn't stand the thought that if I wore fish-nets and a bustier on a date with a boy, that he wouldn't understand that I was reclaiming a degraded expression of female sexuality and power, that I was being ironic and political on some level. He would think I was the kind of girl who would wear fishnets and bustier.

In a queer context -- and with Polly, my sexy, confident alter-ego as my guide, this is all different. Taking my body, adorned in the stereotypical drag of feminine sexuality, out of heterosexual circulation, refusing to make it available to men, and instead offering openly and publicly to another woman, doesn't feel like an imitation of heterosexuality. It feels like a revolution.

Music

July 14, 1996

Wow- more lesbians. Today I saw a new girl in the dressing room. Her name was Vaseline. She wore tons of eye-liner and tight black pants, and had big, bleached hair with major roots, so she struck me as a rock-n-roll groupie with a boyfriend who plays in a metal band and works at Guitar Center. But a few minutes later another new girl, this one tall and androgynous with a flannel shirt and jeans, came into the dressing room, sat next to the blonde, and said, "Hi honey, I brought you your lunch!" They sat together, eating their lunch and making lovey-noises at each other. I just put on my makeup and watched them in the mirror. Later, on stage, the little one, Vaseline, stood up on the ledge in front of the windows -- -- and the big one, Tawdry, came up to her and began kissing her, lifting her up off the ledge. Vaseline wrapped her legs around Tawdry's hips and they made out happily, in the nude, for everyone to see -- customers, co-workers, even management's ever-watchful closed-circuit-camera. This is absolutely the most out I've ever seen anyone be at work.

P.S. Turns out they ARE rocker chicks, but not groupies. They front their own hard rock band and work in the strip clubs to support their music. I heard they met over at that lap-dancer club, Centerfolds, where they bonded in the dressing room over the secret flask of bourbon Tawdry kept in her locker. Rumor is that Vaseline got fired and publicly humiliated by the manager one night, and Tawdry ran out of the club after her in her g-string, yelling, "If you fire her, you fire me, too!" They went home together and have been together since.

October 27, 1996

Tonight the hottest woman was one of the patrons -- in the booth with her boyfriend. She looked just like Joan Jett, and kept nodding passionately as I danced for her. After a while, she elbowed her way in front of her boyfriend and started getting very enthusiastic about my performance, out-bumping and grinding even me! When I knelt down at eye-level with her, she held up a card with her hotel's name on it, and her room number written beneath. I shook my head, smiling regretfully. "Not allowed," I mouthed sadly through the glass, much less firmly than usual. Because really, she looked just like Joan Jett! She picked up on my wavering: pointing a thumb behind her without looking at the man, and yelled earnestly, "I can lose him! I can get rid of him!"

Music

December 10, 1996

Last night in the, "talk-to-a -live-nude-girl" booth, a guy came in and started asking me all kinds of personal questions. Most of the men just want to see me disrobe and assume various positions I've copped from the porn-video posters in the hallway, but this fellow seemed most interested in my life story. I told him little half-truths to protect my privacy while giving the illusion of intimate self-revelation that seemed to be his turn-on. He asked my real name, so I told him the fake real name I always use -- Elizabeth. He asked if I go to school and said yes, but I told him I go to Berkeley, not State, and that I'm in the History Department, not English. Following the advice of the girls in the dressing room, I also told him, as all the dancers tell the customers, that I am 19. I'll have to remember to use these same half-truths all the time, since I have a hard time remembering which men I've seen before and what I've said to each of them.

After a while, he asked, "Do you have a boyfriend?" Here again I told him a mix of truth and lies. I said, no, I don't have a boyfriend; I have a girlfriend. Unlike the men on streets who say "what a waste," "want to try a real man?" or just "dyke!" when they see me walking with my girlfriend, THIS frequenter of the peep-show, did not act hateful, homophobic or even surprised. Perhaps he sensed the absurdity of casting shame on another person's sexuality while standing in a dark room with his pants down, paying a naked stranger to give him the time of day. Or perhaps he felt proud to have swayed me from my Sapphic ways, if only for a few minutes, and if only for pay. Maybe he's just used to it, since about a third of the strippers here are dykes.

Mostly I think he found it titillating, because of the eagerness with which he moved on to the next question, "What does your girlfriend look like?" Here is where I began to lie again. I told him, "She looks just like me, but with dark hair."

This seemed to please him, and while I hated to validate his idea of my primary relationship as some kind of soft-focus, girl-girl wet dream put on for his enjoyment, my rent is nearly due, and I just didn't think the truth -- that my girlfriend is a tough, 200 lb. bull-dagger with a crew cut, work boots and the better part of a beard on her chin -- would keep the twenties flowing from his wallet.

To make myself feel better -- and I didn't feel all that bad to begin with -- I amended in my head a passage from Shakespeare as I watched him feed more money into the bill-acceptor: "And so I lie with him, and he with me, and in our love, by lies we flattered be."

Music

February 5, 1997

Today I sighted one of the rarest of many species found at the Lusty Lady, the female customer who approaches the place the men approach it: alone and with an erotic mission. This species I have seen just twice in my two year tenure (here, She arrived on a weekday morning, a time usually reserved for the most single-minded of men, those who have awakened in a state of early-morning desire that needs to be attended to quickly and efficiently on the way to work. The girl was young -- probably not twenty-one -- with shoulder-length curly hair, light brown. She stood as if transfixed in the booth, watching us dance.

As I approached her window, and slowly performed the back-to-front abdomen & hip rolling gyration from my limited repertoire of moves, her eyelids closed slightly, and she rocked backwards in the booth. I performed the second move in my rapidly emptying bag of tricks, the side-to-side undulation -- snakelike and slow, accentuating of the curves of waist, hip and thigh. This involves sliding down in front of the window, so that I ended up looking into the booth, face-to-face with this rare and exotic animal. As I completed the move, her eyes closed completely and her head tilted back, then came forward again, eyes opening weakly.

I continued my dance quietly, not alerting the other dancers to my prize lest they make a fuss and frighten her, or worse, steal her away. I look into her eyes and hold her gaze, and to my surprise, through lust-weighted lids, she holds mine, I blush to feel the power of my own desire as I watch her, just inches away, but untouchable through the glass window.

The girl smiled, and asked my name, and I hesitate a moment before telling her my stage name, Polly. Her window began to close, and she waved a last, regretful little wave. I sigh and finish out the shift dancing mechanically for man, after tedious man.

Music

The next day, among the customer evaluations on the dressing room wall I spy one with a plump little heart and arrow around the word "Polly." Neat and curly, clearly a girl's writing. It says: "Thank you so much for showing me how beautiful and sexy women can be. I left feeling better about myself, my body, and my sexuality. I had the most wonderful sexual energy flowing all around me. You have opened so many doors for me. I hope to see you perform again soon -- you cast a magic spell of sexuality. Life with my boyfriend will never be the same. I genuinely hope you had as much fun as I did. All my love and gratitude, Tracy."

My co-worker Tara views sex work as a sacred act. "Even in the most base context," she said in a documentary about the Lusty Lady, "like this pornographic peep-show, there is life force in it and it is healthy." I usually squirm at this kind of spiritual talk, but when I read Tracy's note, punctuated euphorically with the power of desires newly discovered in a dark, squalid little booth, desires made safe by anonymity and the distance created by monetary exchange, I know Tara is right.

What is sacred, if not this?

Music

DG: Writer and sex industry labor organizer Jenny Worley in San Francisco, who is currently at work on her dissertation, "*Beyond the Turkey Baster: Lesbian Writing and the (Re)production of Queer Identity.*"

Music

Now, being gay and having a career as a truck driver almost immediately places one in the margins of gay life in America. The imagery of trucking – the open road, always running, the big, shiny rig...it's imagery about which legions of gay folks are happy to invent all **sorts** of fantasies. I mean, from where I sit at my computer each day, trucking seems like a great escape fantasy. And what are gay men, afterall, without their fantasy lives? Alas, as writer Tim Anderson explains about his career in trucking, it's not as sexy as one might think...especially when you have to say goodbye to some of the more effete trappings of modern gay life...

Tim Anderson's Trucking piece:

I haven't had a shower in three days.

I'm sitting in a Colorado meat packing plant. My last meal came out of a rest area vending machine, mainly due-date expired Twinkies and a Ho Ho. I can't remember my last sit down meal. I've waited two days in a dusty, gravel lot to get loaded and now I'm late before I've turned a single mile. Driving non-stop, two days to get the freight to Boston, I'll break every log rule on the books trying to make a schedule that I didn't have a say in setting.

Second verse same as the first, this is just another repetition in the heroic efforts truckers endure every day to get those 48,000 lbs of Kansas Corn Fed T-bone loads to market or that Salinas lettuce to Seattle. When we get it there, we won't have slept. Showered. Or eaten. Five hours later we'll be sore as hell from fingerprinting, or unloading, all that Kansas beef into a Boston Warehouse. Oh yeah, and we got paid twenty-six cents a mile to make the run...Add up all the uncompensated hours, the time away from home and it equals a minimum wage sideshow. Its been four weeks since I've been home and it might be four more before I see my front door again.

Music

The fantasy of trucking lies far from off the road of from the reality. Gay folks love to glamorize and sexualize this existence. I've heard it all. The catty comments about 'butch' jobs, the raised eyebrows regarding the endless sex I must be having on the road. The roles we get locked into... Trucker and his sleeper compartment, the ultimate, fantasy ride. Too many of my gay brothers reduce truckers to highly sexualized road pigs. It's all about the famed libido of fast-talking, high horse-powered macho men. "Cowboy trucker stud" rides into the rest area... or the local boy bar. No ties. No strings attached. Then we ride out of town never to be seen again. Legends and porno lore aren't based on reality. Just like in the rest of the world, out here on the superslab-one size doesn't fit all.

For me trucking isn't about sex. It never has been. It's more about lonely.

Music

I've known too many gay men who jump into the driver's seat thinking its gonna be about hook ups. Within a few months they've lost those hard won gym bodies, they're sick of chicken-fried everything, and the allure of that huge Peterbilt Hood ain't provided the satiation they thought it would. Ironically, a big rig complicates the search for even short-term companionship. These days most companies monitor their equipment via satellite tracking. Remember, Big Brother in centralized dispatch IS watching and though numerous drivers have tried their darndest to disable those high-tech tattle tales, hiding most clandestine meetings is not so easy.

That large-car Kenworth is just a little too big to bobtail around the local gay neighborhood. Most truckstops are conveniently NOT convenient to the local scene. Our sleepers don't come equipped with maid, taxi, or take-out service. Try finding someplace safe and secure to drop a trailer loaded with half a million dollars worth of inventory. Where do you park 80 feet of truck in lower Manhattan or West Hollywood? Too high, too heavy, and too noisy, if nothing else, eighteen wheels and a dozen poses prove that honey, size ain't everything.

Music

It isn't just the sexualized identity that separates me from many of my gay friends. Rather, it's also the harsh economic realities of trucking.

Although college educated, I find myself at odds with white collar ideals that create black hole trucking realities. At many companies, I don't have a name. I am a six-digit number on a computer screen at some isolated call center. When I actually see my dispatcher face to face, it's always through bullet-proof glass. Often, it seems like management does its best to remove the last vestiges of my humanity. My partner might not fit the company's definition of immediate family so he might not be allowed on the truck. My home time might be considered expendable because I don't have kids and therefore nothing worthy to come home to. Bosses who have never set foot in a truck, assign me loads for just in time delivery. These insane, computer driven schedules compute my life based upon average speeds per mile rather than human, traffic, weather, or safety conditions. If I don't get the load there on time, an entire factory line goes down.

I've felt the effects of free trade policies and the huge consolidations of deregulation stagnating my wages. I now also compete in my own country against exploited developing nation labor.

Every hour of every day my freedom is compromised. My employment requires a ten year background check. I am legally mandated to fill out sheets of paper that account for all my activities. Where I drove. Where I stopped. Where I slept. I must account for all my time even when I'm not working. I provide bodily fluids, at random, to prove I am not drinking or using drugs. My home in the sleeper is subject to constant search without cause. Every time I cross a scale, every aspect of my life is held up for scrutiny. All of these experiences combine to reinforce the isolation of trucking.

Music

The cost of freedom on the road seems at times infinite, still, I find myself chasing that very freedom.

If you stay in it long enough, sure enough it ends up in your blood. When I'm home I dream about the road. When I'm on the road, I dream about home. For me, trucking is all about pushing my limits. It's about adversity. Getting dirty unloading. Getting slushed chaining up. Getting soaked walking for breakdown help. The challenge of keeping a good attitude is the toughest Ironman marathon.

We who run the large cars see it all, but we see it from the prison of our escape: Some long hooded, tall geared, high-powered big rig. Chromed up. Lit up. Sometimes, even cleaned up. You do see it all, this thing called life. But most of the time it's like no touch freight, you know life is there but you never get to handle it because you're just passing through.

In a way, that's the upside. I'm rarely stationary long enough to see humanity's faults. Time is so short, that when my wheels finally stop turning, everyone I know is on their best behavior. I don't get buried in day to day conflicts. The downside of that reality is that I never get the whole picture. Most relationships are superficial because my continuous absence makes it challenging to really get to know people. I lose touch with most of my old friends, because I am never home. I've become the outsider. I don't need to set up huge walls to keep people from being hurt. The trucking lifestyle does that for me. Trucking means you don't see Will and Grace or Queer as Folk every week. Say Goodbye to gardening, the bowling league, and even birthdays.

Say hello to one-street towns, culture shock and measuring the week by the odometer. You see, trucking is about perpetual motion. Making miles, you get your intimacy and your companionship in small doses over the counter at a truckstop. Or maybe by telling your life story over the CB radio to some faceless driver you're running down the road with. A driver you may never encounter again.

You might buy some abused, runaway kid dinner at the Flying J and then question humanity's conscience for the next month. You might fall in love with some rushed, accidental, one-night stand. That first human contact, or touch you've basked in for months. You connect and disconnect so rapidly that after awhile you wonder if anything or anyone can really touch you.

Music

So why do I love the job.

It's simple. I am a man in love with vanishing points. Of the heart. The windshield. And the mind. I'm in love with those Interstate Highways, that define parallel concrete lines framed by Bitterroot Range Sunsets. Places where you can just be. Be alone with your thoughts for hours. Wrestling with the future and dancing with the past. All spread out over your own version of a large Technicolor windshield.

Each day is different. Each character I meet seers their unique perspective on motion into my memory. My mind is a never ending kaliedescope of places I've seen, people I've met, experiences I've snatched up and hauled away at break neck speed.

Thanks to the freight Gods, I've been to the American Outback, the Big Sky, and the wide-open Texas Panhandle. My dispatcher is my travel agent and I shall not want. For I've felt the cool waters of the Great Lakes and the dusted sting of Mojave sands. I've been blinded by the Sun in the Palouse and seen the aqua blue miraged reflections of the Canadian Rockies.

Music

Trucking is not about instant gratification but unending patience. There is brotherhood on the big road. A wave, a nod, and the shared wisdom of drivers passed between drivers. The CB radio reflects this unique identity on 40 mile straight stretches. Anonymously announcing ourselves with nicknamed CB handles, we flirt with the prettier voices and go to battle against our headlight-scarred red eyes. Sexual orientation is usually absent from these interactions. Instead our overnight voyages are best defined as good natured lies, tall tales and eyebrow raising 'what do ya knows'.

Chasing taillights or chaining up, I've made friends for life. Waiting on a shower. Waiting for the highway to reopen. Waiting in the driver's lounge, we share our pictures of grandkids, step kids, and lost kids. Inhaling truckstop food, we share lonely glances, we take our chances, and sign our fatigue away with that last refill of coffee. We sing Santa's carols to each other over the radio and we sing heartbreak over the cold payphone receiver. Always looking for something better, we can boast that the grass is greener over the next interstate. Occasionally the honesty of those late night moonlit conversations is so real that complete strangers speak candidly. I've come out to men who have never talked about sexuality issues before. In turn, I've heard the confessions of drivers who came clean about their own secrets. Falling in love. Falling for the wrong mate. Falling in and out of substance abuse.

Music

Some people romanticize truckers. We reacquaint the lost traditions of the American Cowboy with real time. I don't know if such reflections truly categorize our legendary insatiable nomadic quest. But we are here.

Some of us live to grab gears.
And some even answer to queer.

Speeding traveler as you pass by, we're ever watchful for you. To catch your pride sticker out of the corner of our eyes. To share a lonesome wave, a precious smile or a simple thumbs up. . To know that alas, we may not be as isolated or distant as we sometimes feel.

Sometimes we share our hazardous highways iced, on the rocks, margarita style with salt on the edges. Sometimes we share them under the most amazing palette of sunset, dawn, or that natural brilliance of in between.

But please remember that out there on the interstates there is a community of us. Always rolling. Hauling our loads. Chasing freedom and running towards tomorrow. We're the 'good buddy' Truckers of the rainbow. Making our miles while wishing you safe travel mercies, dry highways, and a tremendously wonderful journey.

Wherever you're bound.

DG: Writer and trucker Tim Anderson in Newport, WA. Tim's stories appear regularly on Ruralgay.com and you can check out his own website at Highmountainranch.com where you can see a picture of Tim and the belt buckle that could stop a bullet.

That's all for today's show.

ORR is produced in collaboration with KXCI in Tucson, Arizona. Senior editor for our show is Jesse Rose DeRooy. Our business manager is John Brennan and our production assistant is Sandy Mauck. Thanks to Beth Ann Austein at KUFM in

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This is David Gilmore - thanks for joining us.

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