Eighty-four-year-old Harry Hay is a gay original. He is well known as the founder of the modern North American gay liberation movement, and for the past five decades he has been one of the gay community's leading, most erudite and provocative thinkers. In 1950 the irrepressible Hay founded the original Mattachine society which was the first organized homosexual rights group in the United States. Hay wrote its credo entitled "Preliminary Concepts: International Bachelors Fraternal Order for Peace and Social Dignity, sometimes Referred to as Bachelor Anonymous" which has been recently republished in Radically Gay, a collection of Hay's essays, talks and position papers. Hay states that he "learned all [his] techniques and [his] ideas on how to organize from having been a member of the Communist Party and having worked underground." He and the other four members of the steering committee were all committed Leftists; most were Communist Party members. Hay explained how this helped them set up the Mattachine.

"We had a sense of a working class organization," says Hay. "We understood how you develop groups that can work in a mass situation and we had all of us agreed that we would take a fifth amendment position here in the United States before we would reveal any information about the people who used to come to these meetings. As a consequence people felt safe and secure perhaps for the first time in their lives. In the first Mattachine society we figured that the way we would come together and to confide in each other was to come out to each other. And this was absolutely unheard of, because most of us until that time had been so bothered, bedeviled by stool pigeons on the one hand, from the police or by black mailers [from] the other side...This was the life and terror under which we lived...learning who we were for the first time was something marvelous. We had a feeling of golden brotherhood. The whole movement began to develop by leaps and bounds...."

In using the word "mattachine" Hay was referring back to medieval urban French monks who helped rural peasants by performing pagan fertility rite dances after overlords had banned the practice. According to Hay, these mattachine people had been performing for workers in the countryside as masked people to help maintain their spirit and productivity in the fields. "Back in 1950 we didn't have the phrase 'in the closet' yet," says Hay. "'Closet' probably doesn't appear in print until about 1965 or 1966...We'll be doing the same kind of thing, and we are masked people too. So why don't we take their name."

The "we" as perceived by Harry Hay was gay men since in his view, gay men and lesbians come from different places and have a different approach to the world. Hay strongly feels that gay liberationists today hide these differences.

"...Women may be constituted differently than we are," says Hay. "For instance, in most tribes, the women were the core of the village, the core of the family. Who do you think were keeping the factory going when the men were away on the Crusades? It was the dykes who were running it all. And they were doing a marvelous job by the way...We were the priests; we were the seers. So if we were at the periphery of the village, then women were at the core. And the tribe knew that they couldn't exist without either one."

When I asked him his thoughts on the lesbian movement he said bluntly, "Honey, I don't know. I have never been a lesbian. That's why I say that the gay men and the lesbians have to come together and talk about our differences and learn to appreciate and respect those differences." Hay added that "gay men have a tendency to defer to the women because the women as women have been oppressed for a thousand years."

Hay is widely acknowledged today as the person who introduced the important concept that gays were a cultural minority in the United States just like Jews or Blacks. But the first Mattachine movement was undermined in 1953 when more Conservative gays narrowed the focus of the early American gay movement.

"As a cultural minority we were politicizing ourselves, grounding ourselves in the politics of the country in which we were working," says Hay. "This was a way we could defend ourselves politically...But these guys didn't care about any of this. All they wanted to do was to change the law just one little tiny bit, and we could all be the same as everyone else...And consequently they threw all of us radicals out of the Mattachine in 1953. The movement from 1953 until 1969 was simply individuals trying to persuade important people in politics to change the law. Of course they got nowhere."

One of the problems with the new group who took over the Mattachine in 1953 is that they used heterosexual imitative models.

"They thought of themselves as being entirely heterosexual except for this tiny digression in the law," says Hay. "All they wanted was to change the law and
live heterosexual lives like everyone else. The rest of us who had been living as sexual outlaws and thinking of ourselves as sexual outlaws on the Left, were thinking very much of ourselves as a minority with our own culture, with our own language, with our own society that we loved very much."

Hay believes to this day that "Marxism still goes on being the best illustration and understanding into how our modern capitalist world works." Marx's only failing, according to Hay, is that he had very little understanding of the human condition. Hay states: "My feeling is that because he was such a curious, interesting man looking over all possibilities, I think he would have jumped at the whole idea of incorporating the human condition if it had been developed in his time. So I took the liberty of adding it for him since he wasn't around. Okay?"

Today Harry Hay is still irrepressible and outspoken. He attacks those in the gay community who don't allow for consensual sex between men and teenage boys. "At this end of this century you are a child until you are seventeen years, eleven months and twenty-nine days old, for Christ's sake," snaps Hay. "What's going on? What's gone wrong? Why are gay community who don't allow for consensual sex between men and teenage boys. "At this end of this century you are a child until you are seventeen years, eleven months and twenty-nine days old, for Christ's sake," snaps Hay. "What's going on? What's gone wrong? Why are they children at this end of the century and adults at the other end of the century? They are the very same guy!"

Hay maintains that a teenage boy can often be the "seducer" of the older man who is often "caught up" by the "beauty and passion" of the teen. With the enthusiastic support of many in the gay community Hay is now attempting to launch a class-action lawsuit against the heterosexual community for using "sexual coercion" on gay and lesbian youth "to adopt heterosexual identities, behaviours, and values." Hay claims that this imposition of heterosexual values is "the major act of child molestation occurring today," and he has been getting a standing ovation from gay and lesbian audiences across the United States when he reads this section of Radically Gay.

Eschewing labels himself, Hay allowed prominent gay anthropologist and historian Will Roscoe who edited Radically Gay, to categorize him in the course of his introductory notes sprinkled throughout the book as a radical essentialist, anti-exclusionist, anti-assimilationist, Marxist Radical Faerie. But what Hay really is, is an incredible human being who embodies an indomitable gay spirit.

James R. Dubro: Who is Harry Hay?--I mean everything from your marriage to your membership in the Communist Party to your role as an actor in Hollywood, and coming out at an early age. How did all of this, your personal baggage, contribute to who you are today? Harry Hay: (Chuckle) What's very interesting is my grandfather's and great grandfather's Scottish background--they of course were part of the Hay clan in Scotland. Looking back over the generations I suddenly realize that in every one...there were always six or seven or eight sons all being involved with farming or cattle raising in Scotland or New Zealand. In every generation there were always a couple of brothers who never married, who usually formed a partnership, and sometimes took care of the old folks, who seemed possibly by all the things they did homosexually-inclined. Being in the eighteenth and nineteenth century in a very rigid Scottish Presbyterian or Christian brotherhood...I doubt that they really expressed themselves sexually. But I think that they were our people just the same. I think that we have had them in every generation. My guess in looking back at my family is that the reason I was estranged from them was not because I was a queer, but because I was a Red.

Yes, although it was very moving to read what you said about your father in that tribute to your heroes after you received an award. Yes, that was wonderful. You see, the thing was, he had treated me as a chattel; he had always beaten me in order to get me to comply. Of course, the fact is, that my father was a man of integrity and a man of his word, and apparently in his own way loved me and stood up for me.

He stood up for you during the blackmail incident. (An incident in the 1920's when, unbeknownst to Harry, the colleagues of his young lover who were living in a building owned by the senior Mr. Hay tried to extort free rent from him, after they found out about Harry's relationship with the boy.) Yes, he stood up for me against blackmail. He was about to lose a year's rent for a big house, but he preferred to lose that rent and throw the people out. He refused to give in to blackmail. He stood up for me--as a matter of fact I didn't tell this story in [my biography] The Trouble with Harry--the time he was suddenly confronted with my letters and the signet ring I had given to the young man. My father had been renting the house to a theatrical school which had this one young man who was their pride and joy. I had been acting, and I played the piano and I could sing and dance, so consequently I was helping to set up little performances for these kids. This was during the Depression. The only shows we could get were for Masonic clubs for whom we would do entertainment once a month. They would pay little companies a bit to come in and put on a show for them. We might have to go fifty or eighty miles out of town to do the show. So we often got back very late--two or three in the morning--and there were no buses then, so I couldn't get home. Consequently, I would sleep the night at the theatrical school. And of course I slept with this young man. He was marvelous--cute and attractive and just as gay as I was. Then apparently the theatrical school used him and his letters as a shill to entrap me. This was when they confronted my father with the relationship--the letters that I had sent the young man and the signet ring I had given him and so on. They presented my father with all of this material. On the way home--I drove for him--my father pulled out the letters and said to me, "You know some of this is beautifully and poetically written. How come you are sending it all to that trashy boy?" A little later while we were still driving home he pulled out the signet ring. He said, "This is the Hay signet. I thought you had respect for it. How could you give it to that awful person?" And he threw it in my lap. And then just as we were pulling in the driveway, he said, "Incidentally, your mother is going to take a little different attitude than I am, but I simply want you to know the [tenants] are moving on Friday." Now that was all I knew. I didn't
know about the blackmail and what they had done until my mother told me about this years later.

He didn't try to tell you that you should be straight?
No, he didn't do anything like that. He was a nineteenth-century tight Scottish autocrat-a self-made man. He had a little orange orchard and he always made me work for him for free. He had treated me as a chattel as most other men did to their sons in the early 1900's—this is 1929 when this was going on—and I hated his guts! Consequently, we had nothing in common. When he gave me all this material and gave it back that day I didn't register any of this until much, much later.

That's interesting. A friend of mine in the late '70s had a very wealthy but homophobic father. After my friend was caught in a police sting against homosexuals, his father stood behind him. But the quid pro quo was that he had to go to a psychiatrist to cure him of his homosexuality. My friend, of course played along and pretended to undertake the cure.
Yes. My lover John Burnside [for over thirty years] and I both being close to the same age are very fortunate because we came out...before psychiatrists were bothering us in our community.

Something strange has happened in this century. Because back in the 1920s when I was first active as a teenager and having my first marvelous affair with a sailor at fourteen—I am perfectly capable of being sexually mature in this regard and know what I am doing. Back in this time in the 1920s boys went to school until they were fourteen and then they quit and went to work as men.

So you were adults at an earlier age?
Yes, in that respect. My father was an engineer and he was going to send me off to college, but he put me to work in the summertime as a man when I was thirteen. By summertime I was a hardened adult. Working in the hay fields as I did with guys who were members of the IWW (Industrial Workers of the World)—they all worked in the pit mines in spring and fall, but in the summertime it was much too hot so they would work in the hay fields 'cause they made the same money. These guys are talking a look at me and listening to me and watching me work. I was able to hold my own with them at that time as far as being a worker was concerned. And they said, "Here's a nice bright kid. We should teach him the principles of Marxism. He'll make a good trade union leader when he grows up." In the night I would have to read their little pamphlets, "Value, Price and Profit" and "Wage, Labour, and Capital" and other famous, basic principles of Marx. And the next day they would push me on what I had read. So they saw to it that I learned what I was supposed to learn.

You were married at one point.
I was married at one time, but this is a period in the early '30s when we knew nothing about psychiatry. (Hay went to a psychiatrist.) I was just curious as to what he would say. And in the course of our conversation he said to me, "Maybe you are not looking for a girlish boy. Maybe you are looking for a boyish girl. Do you know one?" I said, "Yes, as a matter of fact I do." It was the one I ended up marrying. What's going on?
that. In my particular case, at the end of ten years, I knew that I had made a terrible mistake and that I had upset the lives of many other people besides myself for having followed his advice. And so there was only one thing I could do—I could start the Movement.

**How did you start the Movement?**

It all begins in 1947/48/49 when...many of us on the Left...felt that the country was beginning to move towards a police state. We had loyalty oaths in the country—all the teachers had to take loyalty oaths. The McCarthy and the House of UnAmerican Activities Committee was tearing at all the leaders of the trade unions attempting to destroy them. And I thought to myself at that moment, you know, this time the scapegoat they will use as an organizing tool to scare the populace will not be the Jews...because the Holocaust is much too fresh in every one's mind; they won't be using the Blacks, because the Blacks are now being organized by the trade unions and there are all kinds of community organizations beginning to start—the NAACP, ACLU are handling their cases with the Supreme Court and so on. It will be US. And we know nothing about ourselves...we have never come together...we have no way in which we can contact each other...We have to begin to organize.

**You were right, too, because McCarthy did go after homosexuals...**

As a matter of fact, he was already doing it...at that moment in 1948. In 1949 they were kicking gents out of the state department for having slept with so and so.

**In happened here too in the Canadian External Affairs Department.**

But in 1952 one of our steering committee members was entrapped by the police. And we decided we would go public in fighting it. And this was the first time in the United States that such a thing had actually happened. And because of the fact we didn't know anybody, and we were all sort of poor, working class people we developed and put out literature on park benches, streetcars and the buses. We took out the public literature on the buses and put our own literature in there and told people to get in touch with us. I used my mother's address as our connection, and we managed to raise $750 to pay for the defense of our brother who had been entrapped. I managed to get one of my labour/waterfront union organizing attorneys to fight the case for us. He said, "Yes, I owe you all kinds of things because you are one of the best Marxist teachers I have ever had. So yes, I will take the case, but I don't know a damn thing about homosexuality." So three nights a week we would trek three miles all the way to the waterfront from where we all worked. In effect, we came out to each other and to him, to let him know what it was like to grow up homosexual in our society.

**Is there a difference between the Stonewall riot reality and the myth? I was at Columbia University in New York at the time and I watched the riot for half an hour. I knew the type of people who were there participating—they were the outcasts of gay society even then. They were not the gay elite or the inner circle by any means. As all of us were outcasts in mainstream society.**

**What happened after Stonewall was that a group of people took over the movement and constructed a reality. That is what I am deducing.**

They took over the riot and constructed a reality out of that. This is tremendously important. I mean, up until now, up until that moment, we were still thinking of ourselves as individuals fighting, even though we came together in the Society and discussed things and talked about things, we were still thinking of ourselves as individuals. In other words, the consciousness changes from "I" to "we". Also something else, too. After the 1952 trial that I mentioned—up until the trial we were all very left of centre. After the trial was over, and we, in effect, had won, we were inundated with people who were coming from all directions politically with their own cases to be tried. These guys were not at all interested in trade unionism or working class people—they were all middle-class people—and they couldn't care less about a gay brotherhood. All they wanted was to have the law change. They were all right of center, and not at all interested in us as a cultural minority which is what I was teaching at that time.

**Why are the gay issues today spousal benefits and gays in the military?**

It's funny, every single one of those issues has always been the wrong one. For instance, as far as I am concerned it was never a question of gays and lesbians in the military. It was a question of first class citizenship of which many of the privileges of being a first class citizen would be my right to choose whether or not I want to even join their cotton-picking military. All these [Fundamentalist] ministers are talking about special rights. What they are simply hiding from the community that they are talking to, is that those special rights are rights which all of them take for granted each day and which we don't have. But we'd have fixed it up if we hadn't challenged them on that basis.
Instead we fought it on the question of gay and lesbians in the military. And if you take a look at the papers which were put out by the gay men throughout the country, you will discover that almost to a person they were against that. As far as the women were concerned this is something else.... [It was a career opportunity.]

New York Magazine just ran a cover story on the 'Mainstreaming of Queer Culture,' and it refers to the ACT-Up demos of a few years ago as the "last gasps of radical queer culture." Do you think that this is accurate?

Nope, I don't. "Queer Culture" again was one of those words that we picked because it seemed to include lesbians and gays, bisexuals, and transgendered and all these people. But I object to that myself completely, because I feel, as I have been saying recently, that I am delighted that we have been able to make space for these others—the bisexuals and the transgendered, the transsexuals—to come along and be a part of a general, shall we say, opposition. But it is time now for them to draw into themselves, and to set up their own very different parameters from ours. Then, once they discover who they are and what their parameters are, then we and they make coalitions on those points on which we agree, because there are many points on which we don't agree. And I think we have to recognize that their point of view and their outlook is really quite different from ours.... Bisexuals, after all, see themselves as a combination of hetero-man and hetero-woman. I see myself as a combination of neither hetero-man nor hetero-woman. So it is really quite different. I think myself, as far as bisexuals are concerned, that to the extent that they honour their gayness—the golden things we sissies have always loved—they come to us and take the Radical Faerie principles back to the hetero community of which they are also a part. And they are therefore the bridge people—taking our ideas back into the hetero community and finding ways by which the hetero community can benefit by them....

As far as the transgendered are concerned, here I have a problem. I have to say that as far as I am concerned Mother Nature does not make mistakes. I feel it is arrogant to assume that I knew better than she.

Do you think that there is a crisis in the gay and lesbian movement?

Crisis to the extent that they are stymied. Now what they have done is that they have made the mistake of concentrating on gay rights, civil rights. Consequently we have to redistribute and rethink. That is something that gay and lesbian people—I am not speaking for the lesbians because I never was one—I can only speak for the gay guys. I recognize the fact that as faeries when we look at ourselves, when we are self-affirming and self-loving as gay people, we really are very bright. And because we are bright, we can work out things like this.

How are gay people a "separate tribe" and a "separate gender" as you describe it in some of your papers and talks?

Well, you know a lot of people have been looking for that gene. My point is that there isn't a gene. Do you know what a syndrome is? I think that we are a whole syndrome of traits; we see differently than many other people do. One of the things that we do, that I think is tremendously important, is to recognize that we are by nature not competitive. By nature we do not like competitive sports. For instance the Gay Games that were held in 1994 were a flop, as you know. They were a flop because this simply isn't the way we relate. For instance, when I was in high school, I was a flop in sports. On the relay team, for example, I didn't want to compete. I didn't want to beat out that cute guy who was right behind me, I wanted to help him. That is the wrong attitude as far as competition is concerned. And because of the fact that we are not particularly competitive, we like very much to be a sort of non-judgmental people too. And being non-judgmental people, we like to live and let live, and let be however they want to be. I think we have many characteristics that are quite different from the others [e.g. transgendered, bisexuals], and because of that, I think that those different characteristics at this point now can be politicized and can be great gifts to the heteros around us. Politically we have much to gain and much to give. For example, [there are] the Radical Faeries that I have belonged to for the last seventeen years. People say who the hell are the Radical Faeries? I will tell you who they are. They are the little sissies— as I was a little sissy—who have felt that they had a beautiful golden secret inside. Someday when they found the words to tell other people about what a beautiful thing it was to love another boy who is exactly the same as you are, that it was such a beautiful thing that once you found the words for it they would listen. And this is how I ALWAYS FELT. We are now the sissies who have grown up and still love being the sissies we were; and still not being competitive and not beating each other up; not being aggressive towards one another. We have been ourselves as Radical Faeries. We don't operate by Robert's Rules of Order because with Robert's Rules of Order you are theoretically and intellectually beating each other up. We like consensus instead. Those people—the heteros—will say "we have consensus too", but then you can never do it in groups of over fifteen or twenty. Radical Faeries have been doing it in groups of fifty and a hundred over the last seventeen years...

This is natural to us. I would suggest that we have been carrying this with us for thousands of years until such time as the majority rule principle or the competition rule, by which as Maggie Mead said, "the hetero male has brought us out of the Ice Ages." But unfortunately, the Ice Ages are now 50,000 years out of date. And it is time that we moved away from that whole idea of competition and moved into consensus. We have been carrying it naturally, and now this is our time. ♦